

**Episode One: Guardian**  
**By Kittsbud & BurstynOut**  
**Part One**

The Impala tore through the black void of night, its tires screeching as Sam took a turn far too fast and then yanked back on the wheel. He straightened out the roaring classic just in time and then poured on more gas until the car could take no more. He was angry, angry at himself for not saving his brother from torment at the invisible hands of the demon, angry at his father for not showing compassion, and most of all, angry at the world for letting such evil creatures as demons ever exist.

Sam swerved again, realizing he was driving far too fast, but knowing he needed to make every second count. Music blared from the Chevy's ancient cassette deck, but he never even noticed as 'Bad Moon Rising' reached its crescendo.

John Winchester sat at his son's side and winced as the car leaned heavily with Sam's almost reckless driving.

Sam noticed, glancing over with a hint of urgency in his voice as he clutched the wheel just a little too tightly. "Look, just hold on, alright? The hospital's only ten minutes away."

John ignored his son's concern, ignored his own seeping wounds, ignored his oldest son bleeding to death in the backseat. The demon had escaped. The object of his obsession, the one thing he'd vowed to take down with him before going home to Mary, had slipped through his grasp, and that was the only thing for which he held any concern.

He inhaled, his breathing slightly elevated from the pain of the bullet wound to his leg. "I'm surprised at you, Sammy. Why didn't you kill it? I thought we saw eye-to-eye on this? Killing the demon comes first, before me, before everything." He glanced over to Sam almost angrily, never once checking on Dean in the back- despite the severity of his injuries.

Sam took the time, even if his father didn't. He checked in the rear view to see his brother huddled behind him. His superhero brother, whose strong hands were as sure with a gun as with healing first aid, had his bloody fingers fisted in his shirt, clenched tightly against his ravaged chest in a futile attempt to dull the pain. He was pale and still bleeding from his mouth. A thin, crimson trickle ran all the way down Dean's chin and joined the pool already on his shirt. There was red painted everywhere, and Sam knew there was much more that he couldn't see.

The worst visible injury by far, from a baby brother's perspective, was the blank, sunken stare that had replaced his brother's laughing hazel eyes. That injury was most likely mortal, and it had been inflicted by words. When the only kind words to come from John's mouth had belied the presence of the demon, how was Dean supposed to believe that the hateful diatribe that followed was anything less than truth? If the demon spoke kindness, then the hurt must have been John, or so it must have seemed. If Dean believed those words, believed that his family didn't need him, then Sam knew his brother was already dead. Dean was broken, possibly beyond repair, and their father was pissed about the friggin' demon.

Sam put his eyes back on the road, shaking his head. "No, sir, not before everything. Look, we've still got the Colt. We still have one bullet left. We just have to start over, alright? I mean, we already found the demon..."

The rest of his words suddenly became buried- buried by the cacophonous sound of metal pounding into metal. No time to see the headlights of the attacking truck, no time to evade its relentless onslaught.

The Peterbilt hit the Chevy at full throttle, impacting with its midsection in an explosion of glass, paint and Detroit steel. Black smoke belched from the

semi's twin exhausts as it revved hard, its wheels juddering as it ploughed the Impala forward, twisting its frame as it almost gouged the car into the ground. Eventually, the truck eased off, allowing the car to settle. Fragments of once proud, glimmering chrome groaned as they established a resting place in the dry earth.

And then, silence. The night belonged to the dead except for the timeless lyrics from Creedence Clearwater Revival still echoing from the Impala's speakers.

The scene remained that way for a time, neither the car nor truck moving. A breeze whipped a spine-chilling, dust-filled zephyr across the Impala, giving the illusion it was already time for a burial.

Then, without warning, the semi groaned as its demonic driver rammed the shift into reverse gear all-too quickly. The gearbox made a mechanical grinding wail, and the truck lurched backwards, its trailer skewing wildly as the driver paid it no heed.

Ultimately, the truck shuddered to a halt once more, water pouring from a rupture to its radiator caused by the ambush. Steam hissed as the liquid dripped onto hot metal and evaporated into the air, perfuming the night with the sickening sweet stench of antifreeze. The engine idled a moment, and then revved harder and harder, building to a climax of raw power.

The driver didn't hesitate once. He was sure he could ask no more from his beast. He released the brake pedal, dumped the clutch, and let that mechanical pony run.

The Peterbilt surged forward one last time, its huge front end bearing down on the already crumpled Impala like a behemoth from hell. The car stood no chance of evasion, no hope of escape...

Kyle Williams felt his whole body convulse in shock as he saw the truck impact with the car. Even though he was already waking when the moment came, the nightmare still felt all too real. He pulled his body up, flicking the flimsy sheet that covered him onto the bottom of his bed, still shaking with fear. He was sweating, as he always did after one of his dreams.

Kyle swallowed hard, feeling the dryness of his throat and suddenly needing water. He didn't move. He couldn't, not until his quivering body regained some composure.

It was always like this, had been for months now, and yet this time Kyle sensed something different. The nightmare, or whatever they could be called, had come again and again. He hadn't dreamed of the black Impala just once, but every night for a whole week.

Kyle inhaled hard and then tugged his body up to face the nearby mirror. He looked white, his pallid complexion contrasting starkly against his dark beard and shoulder length hair. "Get a grip, brother." He shook his head, trying desperately to push the horrific images he repeatedly saw to the back of his mind. It didn't work.

Kyle grabbed a shirt that hung at the base of his bed and paused to look at what sat beside it. His dog collar looked back at him innocently, taunting that a man of his vocation shouldn't be having such malevolent nightmares. He dismissed the idea. Perhaps such nightmares warranted such a vocation.

The dreams had to have a purpose. Each and every vision he'd had thus far had come true- painfully so for most of the people he had seen in them. The trainee priest put his shirt on and pulled out a chair, placing his head in his hands as despair washed over him.

If he ever let the bishop know about his 'ability,' it would probably cost him his chances of being ordained. It was not necessarily wrong to have visions- even the darker ones, but in the church's eyes he could be perceived as a

rogue or worse. And still, that was of little consequence if he could save a life, just one life after all the deaths he had foreseen and been powerless to prevent.

The Chevy hadn't been destroyed yet, of that he was certain, or the dreams would have stopped. There was still a chance to save the people in this vision, possibly even the young driver Sam who Kyle could sense was such a strong willed, loving brother and son.

Kyle shivered even though he'd been perspiring only moments earlier. He had seen the crash through Sam's eyes, felt what the young man had felt and seen. "I can change this..."

Kyle reached over to his desk and rummaged through various books until he found what he was looking for. An atlas. The book's edges were creased and faded and it was years out of date, but he suspected what he was searching for would still be listed.

Plucking a pair of over-large glasses from their case, he slipped them on to flick through the maps. The glasses and beard together made him look much older than his twenty-two years, but Kyle liked it that way. People tended to respect elder priests more.

He rubbed at the thick stubble on his chin in contemplation and then turned the page, still searching for his elusive highway. In his dream he had seen the road over and over again until every last detail had been implanted on his subconscious. He knew where to look, just not when.

After twenty minutes more, he tapped the book triumphantly with his forefinger. Now he would need to make an excuse to leave the seminary and pray to the Lord that he found the car before the truck did.

Kyle gulped. Was it a sin to tell his superiors someone he knew had been in an accident? Even though it was against all he stood for, Kyle didn't care if it was. He could ask for forgiveness later, once the Winchesters were safe.

The would-be priest grabbed his car keys from the aging desk and an overcoat from a hook on the back of the door. It was time to find out if his 'gift' had any real use.

### **Two Weeks Later...**

The Peterbilt hit the Chevy at full throttle, impacting with its midsection in an explosion of glass, paint and Detroit steel. Black smoke belched from the semi's twin exhausts as it revved hard, its wheels juddering as it ploughed the Impala forward, twisting its frame as it almost gouged the car into the ground.

Eventually, the truck eased off, allowing the car to settle. Fragments of once proud, glimmering chrome groaned as they established a resting place in the dry earth.

And then, silence. The night belonged to the dead except for the timeless lyrics from Credence Clearwater Revival still echoing from the Impala's speakers.

The scene remained that way for a time, neither the car nor truck moving. A breeze whipped a spine-chilling, dust-filled zephyr across the Impala, giving the illusion it was already time for a burial.

Then, without warning, the semi groaned as its demonic driver rammed the shift into reverse gear all-too quickly. The gearbox made a mechanical grinding wail, and the truck lurched backwards, its trailer skewing wildly as the driver paid it no heed.

In the Impala, all three Winchesters lay unconscious- each one sprayed with varying amounts of his own precious blood. John's head rested oddly against what was left of the shattered passenger window, his neck surely broken. Behind the wheel, Sam appeared to have fared no better. Luckily, appearances, in this case, were deceiving.

Sam swore he could hear Credence Clearwater Revival playing, but it sounded far away and muffled. *Dean(broken), I think one of your speakers is going, man.* The words formed in his throat, but he was still so tired and so heavy that they wouldn't come out. He felt like he'd been sleeping for hours. *Probably why I can't remember where we're going.*

His neck was throbbing and he could feel his sinuses draining thickly down his throat. He knew he should change positions. The last time he'd slept in this particular pose, he'd awakened with a plastic spoon in his mouth and his brother(*bleeding*) laughing at him from behind his camera phone.

The familiar rumble of a diesel engine seemed fairly close, but that didn't surprise him. His brother(*brokenbleeding*) often followed eighteen wheelers on long stretches of highway. Their father(*possessed*) had taught them that big trucks cut the wind resistance and saved gas mileage. The truck drivers were also connected by CB radio. They knew where all the cops and speed traps were so they knew where it was safe to put the pedal to the metal and when it was best to stay below the limit.

Sam was tempted to just lie there, wrapped in the heavy darkness that had settled thickly over him like perfume(*antifreeze*). Grinding gears and the crashing together of a tractor and trailer shook him, however. An engine revved well beyond the point where it should have blown, and Sam felt the seat jar beneath him.

*Dean(dying), what the hell?*

The truck extricated itself from the Impala's heavy frame and. . .*truck! Hospital! Car! Truck!*

And Sam remembered. *Dean(brokenbleedingdying)!*

As the truck revved in the distance, Sam began to stir. He blinked, free-flowing blood masking his vision on the right side. "Dad, Dean?" When no response came, the younger Winchester dared to turn his neck enough to see his father's crumpled form.

"Dad..." The words were wasted, falling on already long-dead ears. John had never really stood a chance in the passenger seat. Sam knew it and wanted to scream, to grab his father by the shoulders and shake life back into him, but something rang in his ears telling him no. It was the sound of the semi, snarling, waiting to pounce.

Sam tried not to shake as he twisted his aching body to check on his brother. Every sinew and muscle felt like it had been torn into shreds, but he moved anyway.

Dean still lay up against the rear window where he'd been before the collision. He didn't move, but Sam could at least see painfully shallow breaths as his lungs struggled to work.

"I'm coming, Dean! Just hold on!" Sam punched at the Impala door with his already bruised fist, but it refused to budge. The car's frame had twisted to the extent where the door hinges no longer had free space to move. "No!" Sam refused to accept his fate and kicked at the interior panel harder and harder until the dying Chevy gave in.

The door swung laboriously open with a metallic screech, and Sam almost fell out as his body carried forward with his momentum. He caught the remains of the door in time to avoid the ground and used it to gain some balance. His ears were still ringing from the impact, and his legs felt like Jello, but he kept moving.

With his good hand, he grabbed at the rear door handle, ignoring the glimmering headlights of the truck as it made ready for its final charge.

The rear door gave way more easily than the front, and Dean slumped outwards into Sam's awaiting arms. The harsh red stain of blood covered his entire chest and had leached down on to the top sections of his jeans. Even as Sam

watched, more of the salty red liquid oozed from his brother's lips, dribbling onto Sam's shirt. "Dean, we have to move!"

Sam put his hands under his brother's shoulders and tried to pull his legs free from the Impala, but Dean resisted with what little strength he had left.

"Sammy, get the hell out of...here..." With every word, a gasp for breath followed.

"I'm dying...damn it...leave me..." Dean looked up, what little glimmer of life remained in his eyes beseeching his sibling to let go, to save himself.

Sam shook his head. He hadn't killed John, and he wouldn't leave Dean here, not like this. "No!" He tried again tugging at his brother until Dean could take no more. He lay in Sam's arms, cold, unmoving.

"Sam, just kill that sonofabitch...just promise me you'll kill ...it." Dean's eyes were dark, cold, and resolved, something Sam had never seen before, not like this. Even when they'd faced the demon he hadn't backed down, not even under torture. Now he looked broken and lost.

"Don't talk like that. You've been through worse." Sam shook his brother lightly, trying to get a response, but Dean didn't have anything left to give.

"Sorry, Sammy, not this time..." Dean's eyelids gently closed as if he were about to drift off into slumber. "Dad...where's Dad, Sammy..?"

Sam opened his mouth, but found he couldn't tell the truth, couldn't tell his brother that the demon had still escaped and that their father had died anyways. And he never had to say it, because Dean could no longer hear it. The older brother's eyes were half-closed, and what light reflected out was just that, reflected. Nothing of Dean shone out of those hazel eyes at all. Death had come for him as well. Dean was dead. "No!" Sam screamed, the sound somewhere between a battle cry and a keening wail. "God, no!" Sam rocked his brother's body gently back and forth as his mind struggled to right itself in the gale of emotion that descended.

Mom was dead. Jess was dead. At least for them there had been years of light and love punctuated by only a few brief minutes of pain and anguish in the end. In that, there was some consolation.

John had known both love and suffering. If, in the end, the darkness had consumed him, at least there'd once been love, the peace before war, the promise of peace after.

But Dean. Dean had never had anything but the war, Dad, Sam, and too, too many things lost, too, too many never found. All there was left of Dean now was Sam. Sam without Dean. And Sam without Dean knew all too well that his brother had deserved better. Sam without Dean knew there was no one left to correct that injustice but himself, and Sam without Dean would be damned if he let his brother's killer walk away. Hell, he was probably damned anyway, but if ever he had wanted something to die a painful, slow death it was now. Could a demon die that way?

Sam didn't know. All the rage and grief he had bottled after Jess's death came boiling to the surface in one surge of anger fuelled adrenalin that told him he needed to find out.

Diving for the Impala's trunk, Sam just had enough time to pop the release button before he saw the semi come barreling towards him. Still, he didn't balk or try to run. The demon died tonight. Mom and Jess had forced the quest, and for Dean, the quest would end.

Sam picked up the Colt as if it were made of solid gold- something so precious it had to be handled swiftly, but with utmost care. Clicking the barrel open he slipped in the one last silver slug and flicked the weapon closed.

The truck's air horns sounded, marking its imminent and deadly arrival. Sam welcomed it. He slammed the trunk lid back down and took the classic stance his father had taught him when aiming and firing a sidearm.

The Colt was old, less accurate than a modern weapon, and the demon would have to be close to insure a kill shot, so close in fact, that Sam would not even have the time to escape its onslaught. He didn't care. What did it matter if the Winchester bloodline ended here tonight? There was nothing left to live for. Nothing left to fight for.

The Peterbilt's air horns howled again like a banshee, and Sam found he had to wipe sweat and more blood from his eyes with his forearm. He blinked, losing focus, and for a second, the truck was gone.

Sam blinked again, expecting the illusion to right itself, but it didn't. The semi and the destructive path it had cut into the countryside had mysteriously vanished. He began to breathe heavily with confusion and displaced rage.

A pathetically ordinary horn sounded on the road in front of him- a road that had not existed only seconds earlier before the world and reality itself had shifted.

Sam shook his pounding head. There was a car, a car where the truck had been only seconds ago. *The demon, it's playing tricks with me.* Sam slid the Colt behind his back, wary of what may or may not happen next.

The car drew closer. It was a white Ford sedan, and from what Sam could tell a late eighties model in a reasonable state of disrepair. Even from here, he could see a rosary dangling from the rear view mirror, and it was probably the only intact item on the whole of the car. Still, that meant nothing. Demons just lately weren't what they used to be. They tended to be impervious to both holy water and holy ground. A rosary was like a toy to them.

He waited, his breathing becoming quicker as he became more anxious for answers. A thought struck him as he waited, precious seconds ticking by, and he dared to check the ground by the car.

Dean's body was gone, and the rear door was closed. Sam began to shake. *What the hell?*

Now, the approaching car meant nothing. Sam took two bounds back to the Chevy's side and stooped to gain entry via the driver's door he'd kicked open.

John stirred, looking at his son through bleary, concussed eyes. "Son, what the hell happe..?"

Sam's heart almost exploded in his chest. Was this real, or was it some demonic delusion? He ignored his father's question, daring to glance into the back to see Dean still sitting to one side. He still looked pale, dying. No matter which version of events was real, Dean's fate didn't appear to have changed.

Sam reversed his position and backed out of the Chevy in time to see the incoming car screech to a halt. It had been traveling fast for such a wreck, and the owner obviously wasn't used to driving so frantically.

As he watched, a man in dark clothes emerged. He wore a dog collar, although that again meant nothing. Sam tried to gather his thoughts. He needed to get Dean help- John too- and he couldn't take the Colt far. He needed the Devil's Trap and it was now immobile, right along with the Impala.

Taking a risk, Sam backed up further until he was level with the trunk, opened it, and tossed the Colt under a blanket. He closed the lid and then moved back towards the stranger. It was no time to be shy. If the new guy was a demon, then they were all out of luck anyway.

"I um...saw you needed help..." The priest seemed flustered, panicked even as he gestured towards the Impala.

Sam glanced back reflexively and only then realized the true extent of what may or may not be going on. The Impala was just off the main highway, and instead of ever taking any damage to its side from a truck, its front end was now clearly embedded into a tree. It was impossible, improbable, but it was fact- or was it? The radiator and front grille were crushed. The front windshield shattered into a myriad of glistening pieces, but the side that had taken the

truck's impact was virtually unmarked. It was as if there had never been a truck.

Sam rubbed at his brow, feeling a throbbing pain from the wound to his head. That, at least, appeared to still be real. "My dad, my brother," he managed to keep his voice level. "They need a hospital..."

Father Williams stutter stepped to a degree as he met Sam's desperate, plaintive gaze. It was the first time he'd seen Sam face to face when the image consisted of more than just what could be seen in a rearview mirror. And though the young man's eyes glistened with teary, raw emotion, Kyle couldn't shake the feeling that he should be looking at a dead man. Absently, he began fumbling in his pants for his cell phone, intending to call for help.

"No!" Sam insisted. "That'll take too long. Please. Can you drive us to the hospital?" The young priest approached the wreckage skeptically. "Sir, I'm no EMT. These men need first aid. I can't be responsible if. . ."

"I'm not asking you to be responsible for anything," Sam beseeched as he began tugging at the rear driver side door. "Just help us. My brother and my father are bleeding. We don't have time to wait for dispatch to get someone here. If we go now, we'll already be at the hospital in the time it would take for a medical crew to get out here."

Sam didn't wait for the stranger to respond. If he had to take the car by force, he would. There wasn't time for argument. "Help my Dad," he instructed. "I'll get Dean."

Kyle, whose understanding of reality up to that point had hinged on the fact that his vision showed three men dying, stumbled in shocked disbelief toward the passenger door, more than willing to accept Sam's authority. As for himself, he knew not which way was up and which way down. Sam seemed to have a plan, and a plan of any kind was better than inaction. After all, he'd come this far to do something, and do something he would, though it be not the something he'd planned. He'd carry live weight over dead, and he wouldn't lament his own inaccuracy. Apparently God had more ways of intervening than even Kyle knew.

Satisfied that the priest was willing to cooperate, Sam watched the stranger work the front door handle in his peripheral vision as he leaned forward and grasped the rear handle himself. Seconds later, he heard his father groan in protest as the Good Samaritan eased the door away from his broken body.

Dean, however, made no such vocalization as the rear driver door came away from the frame with a whining creak. He only slid in agonizing slow motion into Sam's waiting embrace. The older brother's skin was cold and wet against his sibling's neck as Sam folded him up, mimicking the hunched, defensive posture that Dean had assumed himself while he'd still been conscious.

Ordinarily, Sam would have been ill-pressed to even consider carrying his smaller, but more solidly built brother. Now there was no consideration involved. He was not Sammy, cowering second man, peering uncertainly from behind protective big brother pant legs. He was Sam, point man, last man standing, and he'd be damned if he wasted one more minute of his brother's or his father's lives waiting for his body to decide if it was willing to comply with what his mind knew must be done.

He lifted Dean with a groan, praying that he wasn't aggravating any injuries by doing so and began walking stiltedly toward the headlights of the waiting car. Halfway between their first mode of transportation and their second, Sam heard his brother force a strangled inhalation through what sounded like gallons of bubble solution and noticed a faint reflection of light between the shuttered eyelids. "That's it, Dean," he panted. "Wake up for me, big brother. We're gonna fix this, okay?"

Dean's throat worked convulsively as he tried to swallow the thick, half-congealed strings of blood that had pooled behind his tonsils. A gurgling noise that reminded Sam of bubbles blown in milk through a straw rumbled deep in Dean's chest, and it made the younger brother quicken his footsteps despite the pounding in his own head.

He reached the Ford sedan to find the back door already open and his father watching him approach from the shotgun position in the front. A large package was in the middle of the backseat, and the priest hurried to move it out of the way. As the clergyman placed it on the floor, Sam noted that it was a bag of diapers.

"Sorry," Kyle whispered, a slight tremble in his otherwise pleasant voice. "I had to pick up some things for the church day care center," he explained.

Sam didn't pay much attention as he slid inside the vehicle and laid Dean with his feet toward the passenger side of the car and his head against the younger brother's chest. With a nod of his head that moved his blood-streaked hair in sticky clumps, Sam gestured for the priest to close the door. As it slammed shut with a thud, Dean snapped farther into consciousness. "Dean. Hey, Dean, look at me," the young hunter instructed calmly. "Let me see your eyes, big brother."

Dean seemed unable to comply, however. His hazel eyes were all pupil, blown and unfocused, and they pulled to the right, fixing the older brother's gaze somewhere over Sam's shoulder. His breathing continued to be shallow and ragged as fresh blood trickled at the corners of his full lips. Sam could feel Dean's breath hitch in his battered chest, threatening to burst into convulsive, tearing coughs. He guessed the only thing keeping his brother from hacking up the clotted blood in his lungs was his shocked system shutting down the reflex to do so. The ghastly pallor of the elder's clammy complexion was more than enough evidence to suggest that Dean was going into shock.

"C'mon, man," Sam choked, his voice barely a whimper as he grasped Dean's chin and tried to turn the older brother's gaze upon himself. Even with Dean's head fixed firmly in Sam's line of sight, however, the elder's eyes strained off to the side as if searching the darkness for something only Dean could see.

"How's he doing back there?" It was John who asked, and his voice was gravelly and barely audible over the sound of the 4-cylinder engine revving probably farther than it had since its date of manufacture.

Sam almost didn't recognize the voice of his father, thick with pain and emotion, but Dean did. Sam knew his brother recognized the voice because of the way he flinched and drew in upon himself the second the words were spoken. In his broken condition, the older brother's walls had crumbled to rubble, and the terror of that night's brutal assault elicited a visceral response that Dean was powerless to mask. The fear was apparently great enough to pump a fresh dose of adrenaline into his shocky system, and a coughing fit began to gurgle up from his chest.

Sam just shot his father a glance that said, Like you care, and tightened his arms around his brother protectively, willing the fear and panic to dissipate. The coughing fit continued for several long moments until blood had sprayed across Sam's face and the upholstery of the car. As it raged on, the younger brother felt a fresh flood of warmth spreading beneath his fingertips.

"Oh, God," the younger brother choked, looking with horror at his sticky, red hand. "I gotta do something about this bleeding." He tried to feel out the source of the blood flow, but Dean's arms were wrapped so tightly around himself, that Sam couldn't palpate the origin. "Dean. . ." He slapped his brother's cheeks lightly and willed him to focus.

Dean wanted to see Sammy, wanted to comply, but he knew it was no use. In the fog of half-consciousness and blood loss, Dean saw two faces. One he knew was

Sam, because its eyes glistened the way only his baby brother's could. The other's eyes did not glisten. They were dark and black, and sunken into a face older than time. It was the face of Death. Can you feel the reaper? And Dean couldn't look at Sammy when he knew Death was there in the car with them, because he didn't know how to say goodbye. Instead, he just looked at the reaper, who was silent in his vigil, and wondered what it was waiting for. "Dean!" Sam said louder this time. He had his hands around his older brother's wrists and was trying to pull the elder's arms away from his wounded chest so that he could examine it more closely. "I gotta see it, big brother. C'mon. You gotta trust me, okay?"

And though his gaze didn't shift, Dean's resistance slackened enough for Sam to push his arms down to his sides. He pulled the blood-soaked tee up as far as he could get it and stifled a sob that clenched in his throat as he got his first glimpse of the bloody carnage beneath.

Sam's stomach flipped convulsively, and he felt his jaw tremble enough to shake the tears loose from his aching eyes. His brother's entire upper torso was painted in shades of red and black like a possessed kindergartener had been finger painting in blood. Pinching his lips together in determination, Sam focused on the brightest, wettest spot and put his hand over the wound. Dean groaned convulsively, the first real sound he'd made since leaving the cabin, and Sam couldn't help but think he was hurting him as much as the demon had. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he breathed through his gritted teeth. He could feel blood bubbling out of the wound and knew it was sucking air into Dean's chest. "Oh God!"

Sam leaned forward, getting close to the back of the driver's seat. "How much farther?" He asked of the priest.

"I don't know," Kyle ventured. "About five minutes, I'd say. Is he gonna make it?"

"Not if I don't do something," Sam stated. "Damn! We should've brought the first aid kit. Everything we had is back in the Impala."

Kyle could sense the urgency of the situation, and a glance in the rearview mirror sent shivers down his spine. The accident he'd foreseen may have been averted, somehow, but the emotional turmoil he saw on Sam's face told him that the crisis was far from over. He wracked his brain for any consolation he could offer, but finding none, happened upon a suggestion instead. "Can you use the diapers?"

"Diapers?" Sam asked incredulously, the fear in his voice bubbling up in a near hysterical laugh. Then the hysteria stilled momentarily, and something clicked in his own mind. "Yeah. Yeah, I can!"

Sam found himself explaining what he was doing aloud, as if the authoritative sound of his own voice would convince everyone, including himself, that he actually knew what he was doing. He rifled around on the floor by his seat, trying to jostle his brother as little as possible as he pulled the bag of diapers up and across Dean's legs.

"I saw this show one time where a woman happened upon a man who'd been shot in a carjacking. All she had to cover the wound was a garbage bag she found in the street. When the paramedics arrived, they discovered that the plastic had formed a seal over the wound so that air couldn't suck into the chest. She actually saved his life."

Sam pulled out one of the disposable diapers, and placed it so that the plastic outer layer was closest to the largest wound. "Dean," he said, calmly but deliberately. "Dean, I gotta press this down. It's gonna hurt like hell."

Somehow the words reached the older brother, and though he still felt compelled to look into the black eyes of the waiting reaper, he knew that Sam needed him to give the permission to go ahead. The events of that night, hell, of the last several months, had given Sam a much clearer understanding of how much

pain his brother already endured under all that snarky charm and sarcasm. He was more than a little reluctant to cause more, even when it was necessary. With a concerted effort, Dean rolled his eyes to lock on Sam's and nodded slowly.

Sam pressed, and even his large hands couldn't disperse the pressure and make the pain tolerable enough to stifle the scream of agony that crossed his brother's lips. They were both shaking as the vocalization disappeared into the darkness, Dean with his ragged, tortured breath, and Sam with sobs of guilt and empathy.

For long, intolerable seconds, they waited for the tremors to pass. When they did, Sam's chest began to hitch anew. Dean thought at first, that it was more of his brother's nervous, hysterical laughter, but searching the younger hunter's face, the elder thought he saw genuine amusement.

Sam caught Dean's questioning scowl. "I'm sorry," he breathed through a tired grin. He let his head fall forward in exasperation, shaking it back and forth in disbelief. "It's just. . . Well, I was thinking the plastic on the backs of these diapers would work like the plastic trash bag to seal the wound. Only now I can kinda see the bag, and I can read what it says." He laughed again tiredly. "Well, these new diapers are all breathable nowadays, big brother. You know what that means?"

When Dean only looked at him blankly, Sam continued, "It means you might suffocate on your own blood between here and the hospital, but at least you won't get a diaper rash."

For a second, Sam thought he'd gone insane, but when those hazel eyes flickered up at him, sparking back to some semblance of their treasured gleam, he knew he'd finally broken through the fog that had threatened to steal his brother away.

"Bitch," Dean spat weakly. And he didn't look at the reaper again. *Should've taken me when he had the chance.*

### **St. Mary's Health Center, Missouri 2.42a.m.**

Sam leaned forward, pinching the bridge of his nose with two fingers as he squeezed both eyes shut. He was tired, hell, he was exhausted, but he couldn't rest. The pounding in his head had grown in intensity since they'd arrived at the hospital. He wasn't sure if it was from the bump he'd taken or just another symptom of the worry that was eating away at him over Dean.

At one point, a nurse had even stopped and asked if he was alright. He'd apparently looked gaunt enough to raise concern. Alright. Such a small word for something so monumentally elusive, something he'd not felt in a very long time. He'd told her he was fine and shooed her away, but it was anyone's guess as to how long he could keep up that pretense. He peered around the waiting room, noticing he'd been here far longer than most already and knew it would probably go on like this until the early hours.

Sam let his head drop as he leaned forward, trying to force away the inner anguish by concentrating on what he should do next. Every minute, every second, though, his mind flashed back to arriving at the hospital. It seemed so long ago now that he had carried Dean from the car into the ER, blood dripping behind them like a breadcrumb trail.

Raw memories erupted at the very thought of his brother lying limp in his arms. Dean shouldn't be the weak one. He should never need to be carried. Fragility had never been acceptable when it came to Dean.

Blurry, half focused visions of the medical team taking his brother away filled Sam's head. Had it been an illusion, a trick of the light, or had Dean looked at him

one last time through those cheeky eyes of his as if to say 'goodbye, bro' as he'd been wheeled away into the white oblivion?

Sam recoiled from the thought. It was better to stay optimistic. When the doctor had first emerged she hadn't said things were hopeless, although her bleak expression had at least suggested it. Critical, that was the word she had used.

Apparently, Dean was in hypovolemic shock, but Sam had expected as much. The priest's car now had a new color scheme for its rear seat, purely thanks to Dean's injuries.

Of course, loss of blood volume wasn't the end of his problems. To add to that were the gaping, ragged tears left by the demon's unseen hand. The doctors wouldn't know what damage lay beyond those until they opened Dean up.

Sam checked his watch. Dean had been in surgery over an hour. Was that good or bad?

"It won't go any quicker."

Sam took a second to compose himself before looking up into the pale blue eyes of the priest. The holy man had stayed with him since their arrival, only leaving once to go to the bathroom. Until now, he hadn't spoken a word. Perhaps somehow he'd sensed Sam didn't like talking about his family to strangers. Or, perhaps he was simply trying to be polite.

"I can't help it," Sam reluctantly admitted. "He's always been there for me..." There was a hint of apprehension to his timbre- just enough to indicate he believed he might not have given as much as he'd gotten. Why hadn't he been able to stop the demon with his gifts? Was it too much to ask for a family who had given so much of their lives to fight darkness to have something supernatural working in their favor for a change?

The priest slowly nodded, cupping his hands in front of him. "And you're here for him. I'm sure he knows that." He took a breath and then turned towards another area of the hospital, indicating the next wing with his head. "What about your father? Did the doctors give you any news?"

Father. Sam wasn't sure he liked that word right now. John had shown very little concern for Dean in the car, or when they were both being admitted, and Sam was sure it wasn't just because his dad had a concussion. "The leg wound isn't too serious, but they've taken him down for a scan just to make sure the concussion diagnosis was right."

"You sound a little..." The priest found himself lost for the right description and instead of continuing, moved from the opposite bench to sit next to his newfound friend. "Don't be too harsh on your father, Sam. There are reasons for everything in this world if you look hard enough."

It was easy for the newcomer to say, but not so easy for Sam to accept. John had never been there for them, not even when he'd called to say Dean was dying that time after he'd been electrocuted. Dad even admitted as much when Dean confronted him with it.

Sam felt water begin to rise in his eyes and swell until he began to blink. It wasn't right for a family to be like this. He turned away from the priest, trying to stifle the already free flowing liquid from ebbing down his face. When he couldn't control the tears with his emotions, he wiped them away with his jacket sleeve and then turned back, face reddened slightly. *Dean would call me a wuss...*

The idea that his brother wouldn't appreciate his current behavior spurred him into some kind of emotional doldrums and he calmed his nerves. He had to stay decisive and cautious for all their sakes. He was the only uninjured Winchester, and he had to make sure their dark foes didn't follow them here and finish the job they had started. With that thought in mind, he turned his attention back to the unnamed priest.

"How do you know my name?" Sam caught Kyle so off guard with his question the priest simply stared at him. "My name," Sam pushed harder for a response, his eyebrows furrowing just a touch. "How do you know me? And why do I get the feeling you weren't on that highway by accident?"

"I...I saw you hit the tru...the tree," Kyle stammered, almost forgetting himself. "I knew you needed help." He paused. "You're father must have mentioned your name back in the car."

Sam knew John hadn't. Who was this stranger who had come into their lives just at the right time? Was he a savior or a ploy by forces from some dark netherworld? "My dad never mentioned my name. Not once." Of that Sam was sure. In fact, he was convinced John had been so taken up with their defeat at the hands of the demon that he hadn't really paid anything any heed. He was a man without emotions, driven by one deep-seated mission to kill what couldn't be killed.

Kyle felt his throat grow dry as the young man's stare bored into him. It wasn't that he didn't want to tell the truth, but to do so might be dangerous. His vision hadn't ended as he had expected, and he sensed the events of the night were far from over. Something was happening here in Missouri that even he couldn't comprehend- at least not yet.

Inside his jacket pocket he fingered the rosary he had brought in from the car. In times like these its humble shape and texture gave him solace that normal men usually only found at the bottom of a bourbon bottle. When his nerves were somewhat sated, he nodded to Sam, indicating he was going to confess, if not everything.

"I see things, Sam. Horrible things, mostly, and they always come true. Well, almost always." He waited for a reaction.

Sam's eyes showed surprise and he eased back on his seat as if he needed more room to take in the truth. The last thing he had expected was to be gazing at the face of a fellow 'visionary,' "You saw the accident?"

Kyle nodded apologetically. "In a way, yes." He began touching the rosary again, some inner part of his psyche asking for guidance from his heavenly master. "I know you see things too, Sam. I think that's why I'm here. You and I, we're connected. I don't know how, or why, but we are. I know what you've been through."

The priest began to shift uneasily on his seat as if he'd parked himself on an ants nest. This was not going how he had planned. It would be better if he could distance himself from the Winchesters until he knew more. And yet, could he leave this young man when there was obviously more going on in his head than just thoughts of concern for his injured dad and brother?

Sam put a palm to his head, feeling the blood pulsing through it like a nail gun. Of all the times for this to happen, it had to be now while Dean lay at death's door. He couldn't cope with it all, not now. "Do you?" He snapped unintentionally. "Did your mother burn while you lay in your crib? Did your girlfriend burn above you while you lay sleeping?"

"No," Kyle confessed in a quiet, sorrowful voice, his eyes glimmering with despair. "But, I have seen far worse." He swallowed hard, choking back bile as jaded, brutal imagery played across his mind like some Tarantino movie. "I've seen what the dark forces of this world can really do to our kind, Sam. If they cannot take us, control us, then eventually, you and I will succumb to their idea of death just like the others have. It's not pretty."

Sam's head cocked to one side in uncertainty. "Others? You mean babies and their mothers?"

"Sometimes," Kyle conceded with a tiny bob of his head. "Sometimes I have seen more. Be careful, Sam. Just because we are different, they can and will control us if we are weak."

The demon's oratory abruptly reverberated inside Sam's head, bouncing around until it almost physically hurt. *'My plans for you, Sammy. You... and all the children like you.'* "Control us how?" Sam suddenly believed the priest had more answers than anyone. If only they had met sooner. He shrugged it off. Better late than never.

When Dean recovered they could perhaps finish the demon after all, with the help of the newcomer. If Dean recovered. Despite his efforts, the morose thought just had to creep back in, undermining all his determination to the contrary.

"Sam Osbourne?"

Sam recognized the tone as that of the female ER doctor. She was standing with a clipboard at the end of the waiting room, searching for him through the late night crowd of usual drunks and drug addicts that frequented the place. He stood up, his tall frame easily allowing the physician to spot him.

The priest looked taken aback as he rose, and then mouthed the name Osbourne in confusion.

Sam allowed himself a small smile. It had been Dean's idea for the latest batch of fake I.D.'s "Ozzy," he mouthed with a bemused look as he headed towards the awaiting doctor.

Sam didn't like doctors, not even when they were as pretty as the one standing before him now. Doctors meant illness, and illness reminded him of death all-too much. Death- well, that was something he dealt with every day, at least the ethereal remnants Death left behind.

"I'm Doctor Fletcher." The physician, still in surgical greens, offered a free hand. "I dealt with your brother's case when he was first brought into the ER."

Sam nodded, reading her hospital nametag to see her first name was Helen. He remembered speaking to her just over an hour earlier, although on that occasion she hadn't introduced herself. In Sam's experience, formal introductions from medical staff usually preceded bad news, and her dour expression seemed to confirm his worst fears. Was that pity in her eyes?

"How is he?" Sam dared to ask in an almost whispery voice.

"I'm sorry..."

Sam's stomach felt like he'd suddenly leapt from the summit of Everest in a kamikaze dive. He put a hand to his mouth but found he couldn't speak. It couldn't be happening again, not like last time. It wasn't fair that Dean took the brunt of everything this way. *It should be me in there. Why isn't it ever me?*

The doctor flinched apologetically, knowing Sam had taken too much already, but continued her painful explanation. Telling families their loved ones were dying was never an easy task, and it was one Helen had performed too many times in her, thus far short, career at St. Mary's. "Dr. McKenzie is one of our best surgeons. He did everything he could to stop the internal bleeding the accident caused. He did manage to find and repair most of the major injuries, but there is still some significant diffuse bleeding. Your brother's heartbeat has become erratic due to the continued blood loss and shock, and we couldn't risk keeping him under anesthesia any longer. He's simply too unstable. We'd have lost him there and then if we'd proceeded any further."

Sam felt a lump form at the back of his throat, and no matter how many times he swallowed, or how hard, it wouldn't budge. "You're telling me he might die?" The words came out in a half-choke, and he unexpectedly had the urge to sit down before his weakening legs let him drop. He knew it was worse than 'might,' but he refused to let his lips say it.

The doctor noticed he appeared unsteady and pulled out a plastic chair for him to sit down. It was a rickety old thing that had long since seen better days, but it did the job. "At this point, it's more likely when," she clarified softly. "Dean is still losing blood, albeit more slowly, but there's nothing more we can do to stop it

at this point. We're continuing to transfuse him, but if the bleeding isn't stopped, he won't make it. Again, I'm sorry."

"What if it stopped on its own?" Sam shook his head, unable to accept that this was the end. He would clutch at any straw, any last vestige of hope until nothing remained. "Tell me it's not possible?" He challenged. Every gig they had done and every life they had saved couldn't culminate in this. Dean was too young, too full of life to have it wasted in one night.

"Possible, yes, but unlikely. He's unable to maintain his blood pressure, and his system is shutting down." Helen conceded with a slight sigh. "We're not expecting any miracles, Mr. Osbourne. You have to be ready to accept that he isn't going to stabilize enough for us to finish repairing the damage." She shifted the clipboard under her arm uneasily.

For some reason, this family was different to Helen. There was something she couldn't put her finger on but definitely something at once tragic, endearing, somehow hopeful, and undeniably mysterious. The doctor could not even fathom a guess as to what could possibly explain the strange nature of both injured men's wounds. Had the young man before her been in better shape, she would probably have questioned him about them, but from his pallor and the cut to his head she thought better of her interrogation.

"There has to be something..." Tears began to well in Sam's eyes, but this time he willfully stifled them back. He'd been told it was hopeless before, but he hadn't given in then. He wouldn't give in now, either.

The conversation from all those months ago floated back to him through the fog of despair, and he welcomed the distraction.

*We've done all we can. We can try and keep him comfortable at this point. But, I'd give him a couple weeks, at most, maybe a month.*

*No, no. There's—there's gotta be something you can do, some kind of treatment. We can't work miracles. I really am sorry.*

Miracles could happen. Just because Roy Le Grange had been a fake didn't mean he should give up on Dean yet.

"Does my father know?" Sam had no doubt John would shrug it off, just like he had before. Perhaps that one dark thought bothered Sam the most. A father should nurture his children, watch over them, love them. John had once done those things, those things and so much more, but since Mary's death, that had changed.

"There was a police officer taking his statement when I last checked in the treatment room. We have to report all gun shot wounds, as I'm sure you're aware." Helen leaned over, tentatively probing Sam's head wound through his blood-matted hair even though he hadn't complained about it. The cut was quite deep, biting into his scalp almost to his skull. It needed suturing, and she would have seen that even if she hadn't been a doctor. "You need to get that looked at," she offered, showing the younger brother a concerned scowl.

Sam flinched back. He didn't want pampering. He didn't have time to worry about superficial cuts and bleeding that had already stopped. He needed to be the one to tell his father about Dean. That kind of news shouldn't come from some well-meaning doctor who'd mince words and try to put the man at ease. John didn't deserve to be offered comfort while Dean lay dying. John, it seemed, had lost the ability to feel compassion, and as far as Sam was concerned, he didn't deserve to receive it either.

"I'd like to tell my father," he said, pushing up from the seat he'd been given with a little more strength than he'd had moments earlier. Funny, how temper tended to revitalize a weary body.

The doctor nodded and gestured to a side room. After John's scan had come back clear he'd been taken to have his leg cleaned up and dressed, and his head wound sutured.

As they neared, a local uniformed cop flipped back the curtain and exited. He flicked his notebook closed and waved to the doctor with a smile. Apparently, he'd gotten what he'd come for and was satisfied.

Sam watched as the cop sauntered away down the corridor. What Winchester lie had been weaved this time? After all, John was the master both he and Dean had studied under- not even Dean could spin a yarn like his dad. Sam turned back abruptly when he heard Helen address his father.

"Mr. Osbourne, your son is here."

John sat waiting patiently on a gurney, his thickly dressed leg propped up to help ease any swelling. He looked distant, unfocused. And when Sam took a step closer he almost balked. For just a second, Sam could have sworn he saw the evil, yellow stained hue in his father's eyes that signified the demon.

The flash of deep-set color was there only briefly, perhaps even an invention of Sam's fatigued and tormented mind, but it was enough to raise suspicion.

Sam stepped back, his eyes darting from the doctor and back to John with both fear and determination. If the thing was here, he would finish it for Dean. He had no Colt, no exorcism rites, but he would choke the life from it with his bare hands if he had too.

John watched his son's actions with a slow, almost painful gaze. His mind was clouded by both his head injury and the medications he'd been given.

"Sammy?" He peered at the doctor, unsure why his own flesh and blood should suddenly back away from him. "Son, it's gone. You know that..."

Helen pulled a face that said she'd had enough from both men. John had been stubborn and unhelpful since his admission, and Sam was now acting like he had a day release from the psyche ward. "What's gone?" She demanded, tossing the clipboard onto the gurney perilously close to John's wounded leg.

"Nothing." John's deep tones filled the treatment room with a one-word statement that clearly said 'butt out' even if it came over a lot politer.

Sam still hovered by the entrance, undecided if he should speak or attack. He rubbed at his brow but finally accepted that his emotions had probably just gotten the better of him. Something had gotten the better of him, and at this point, there were far too many somethings to blame any single one.

"Dad, we have to talk. It's Dean." He finally struggled to say through gritted teeth.

Talking to John had always been difficult, but now, like this, it was near on impossible.

John swallowed, still looking unconcerned despite Sam's severe expression. "He'll be alright, Sam."

"No, no he won't. Don't you see that?" The tension was just too much. Sam didn't care anymore how he came across in front of the doctor. For all he knew he could still be talking to a demon, anyway. "Dad, Dean is dying! And even if he weren't, there's no way in hell that you can honestly believe he'll ever be alright after what happened back there tonight!"

Again, Sam perceived the unmistakable flick of yellow color in his father's eyes as his words sank it. It couldn't be his imagination twice, could it?

Sam blinked and then realized with a hint of shame that perhaps it could just be his eyes playing tricks. An overhead fluorescent tube was blinking intermittently as its useful life almost came to an end. The light and shadows it cast in the already glum hospital room made even the doctor's eyes seem suddenly sallow. Still, he wasn't convinced. Shouldn't John now be barking for answers about Dean?

Instead, the injured father simply looked at Sam with a confused expression. His eyes twinkled for a second with something that Sam could only describe as mirth. Funny. How the hell could it be funny to think your eldest child was dying? Unless, of course, John was still not truly John.

*You're looking into the eyes of the demon. You should leave here. Get the Colt...*

Sam ignored the taunting voice in his head and simply stared at his father with his mouth slightly agape.

*Get the Colt. Finish it...*

"A- hem," Helen cleared her throat and then put her attention on John. She'd seen many a parent look this way after an accident involving their kids. Shock made them say lots of things, and that's all she could credit John's behavior to right now. Either that or he was the most heartless bastard she'd ever met. "Mr. Osbourne, I'm so sorry, but your son is right. We've done all we can for now, but Dean will most likely not come out of this." She came out with it, cold and blunt- it was possibly the only way it might hit home hard enough to shock John to his senses.

John's expression changed. More surprise, but still no compassion. For a moment, Helen thought he was going to argue with her and tell her she didn't know her own job. He didn't but instead swung his legs off the gurney in an attempt to stand.

The move cost him dearly. White-hot tendrils of pain pulsed through his leg, threatening to make his muscles give way and let him fall. Each step was like walking through a thick quagmire whilst having an alligator munching on his thigh.

John inhaled sharply and grabbed the side rail of the gurney, but he didn't try to sit back down.

The doctor glanced over to Sam, expecting the younger son to hold out a hand to steady his father, but he didn't. He simply stared like a man who truly hated his own parent.

John struggled to the front of the cubicle and let his gaze fall upon Helen. "I'd like to see my boy." His voice remained neutral, not even a minute glimmer of love flickered in his eyes.

"We don't normally allow visitors," Helen hesitated. Perhaps the only way to prove how hopeless the situation was meant letting John see Dean. "Since this might be the last time you might see him to say your goodbyes, however..."

John nodded his thanks and patiently waited for the doctor to turn tail towards the room in the surgical recovery bay where Dean was being tended. He didn't look at Sam, not until Sam quietly began to follow.

"No, Sammy. I want to be alone with him." It was an order, not a request. The commanding tone left nothing open to interpretation. There would be no last family goodbyes, no last apologies from John to his sons before Dean died.

The order was just one small step too far. Sam shook his head in derision and whirled about, tears of anger swelling in his eyes as he stormed away from his father. Had it not been for Dean, he would have left the hospital and found the nearest train back to Kansas- or worse, he would have punched his dad out in front of the whole ER staff.

Maybe that was what John needed. Maybe after all this time he'd come to see Dean and Sam as soldiers so much that the thought of them being zipped up in some body bag was just like another day at the office. Sam rubbed at his eyes, willing the moisture to leave them as he realized he and his brother were merely pawns in their father's grand plan against the demon. *Guess you should have had more kids, Dad. Your army's running out of foot soldiers...*

*Get the Colt...*

The idea wouldn't go away. Sam wasn't sure if it was his innermost psyche goading him for not shooting his dad and the demon when he had the chance or if it was simply common sense.

He looked down at his hands and realized for the first time that they were trembling uncontrollably. Even if he had the Colt he wouldn't be able to aim it and actually hit a target. Dean would have laughed and said he looked like some

rookie after his first hunt. Dean, the one thing that kept him sane. The one thing he would never be prepared to lose.

Sam took a deep breath and decided he needed coffee- lots of it. He ruffled a hand through his hair and winced as he scraped over his forgotten head injury. Blood came away on his palm, but he ignored it in favor of the beckoning vending machine in the adjoining corridor.

Shakily, he slipped in some loose change and selected 'black, no sugar.' The machine clicked as a Styrofoam cup dropped into place, and then hissed as Sam's piping hot drink was dispensed. He took the cup carefully, trying to steady his still quivering hand enough not to spill the beverage.

As an afterthought, he looked up, searching the lessening crowd for his priest friend. Guiltily, he realized he had left the man who had come to their aid in favour of bawling John out.

Sam frowned. Unless the priest had stepped out to stretch his legs or use the bathroom, he'd gone without even introducing himself.

Setting his coffee down, Sam circled the room a couple of times to be sure, but the Winchester's savior was nowhere to be seen. Tiredly, he took a seat next to his cooling drink and put his head in his hands. Without Dean's ever-present confidence, Sam suddenly felt deflated. He was alone. His own father shunned him. The priest had vanished. Mom and Jess were dead.

*No one wants to be around you. No one can be around you and be safe. You're a pariah. A bad luck symbol to all who befriend you. Your father hates you...*

Sam banged his fist into his temple as the miasma of words in his head became harsher, stinging like a hornet's tail.

*Don't you see the only person who has shown an interest in you all your life is the demon? You belong with him. You're not like ordinary men. Haven't you ever wondered why? You're a freak- a freak who belongs with his own kind...*

"No!" Sam yelled out so loudly that half the waiting patients stopped their conversations and turned to gawk at him. When he offered no explanation for the outburst, most returned to their busy nattering, while others continued to gape as if security needed to be called.

Sam could understand their worry. Looking down at his clothes, he appreciated the fact that he probably looked like a blood-covered vagrant. Add to that his very odd behaviour and he was definitely a case for the men in the white coats. He took a sip of his drink and slowly swallowed, hoping the caffeine would kick start his rambling mind into some sense of normalcy. It didn't. The voice still tempted him, thrashing around in his subconscious like a shark that had smelled the sweet aroma of blood.

*Why fight it Sam? Embrace what you are. Accept that your family is gone and your father hates you. The demon thought more of his children than your father does. Even now do you really think he's in there telling Dean how much love and respect he has for him?*

Sam knew his thoughts were dark, wrong even, but the nagging truth was, some of those thoughts were right on the money. Just why had it taken him so long to realize?

### **St. Mary's Health Center Surgical Recovery 3.24a.m.**

Helen Fletcher guided John into the hospital's surgical area and wondered if she shouldn't insist on staying with him throughout his visit. The Osbournes were clearly an unstable family, and she seriously didn't know what to expect next from them.

"It's this way," she gestured to the second door on the left side of the hallway and paused outside it. John hobbled painfully along at his best pace behind and appeared surprised when she stopped. "Dean's been unconscious almost since he was brought in, and at this stage, it's doubtful he'll wake again. That doesn't mean he can't hear you. There's plenty of research that suggests unconscious or comatose patients know they're being spoken to." Helen sighed, from John's expression she would just have to come right out with what she was trying to convey. "Just make your last words count," she raised a brow. "I get the feeling your family usually lacks in the sympathy department."

John looked up into the doctor's eyes and she half expected a deep, grumbling retort. Instead, for the first time she heard his voice crack with emotion. It was as if bringing him here to face the door between life and death had finally broken through his titanium-armored mental defenses. "How long?" He asked resignedly.

Helen noted he couldn't look her in the eye as he asked the question. His eyes darted to the stark, sterile walls- anywhere but face her and the facts. "A few hours at most."

John nodded in understanding and put his weight into swinging open the door. He didn't look back at the doctor, and she didn't follow him as he shuffled inside. Once the door clicked back into place, John let his full gaze fall on Dean's immobile, failing form. It was strange, but apart from his ashen complexion and dark-rimmed eyes, he appeared to be sleeping peacefully. It had been a long time since John had seen his son that way. Memories jogged back to better times, when a tiny Dean had been gurgling in his crib demanding fatherly attention and John had readily given it.

John licked his parched lips and limped closer. Each move caused immeasurable physical and mental pain. When he was close enough, he tugged at a chair placed by the wall for visitors and quickly parked himself at Dean's bedside.

For a time, he remained silent, watching as Dean's blue hospital gown rose and fell pitifully slowly with his ragged, laborious breathing. The obedient little soldier was hurt. No more could he carry out orders and protect his brother like a good sergeant. No more could he be Sam's ever-watchful guardian. And no more would he be able to give himself to save another. He'd finally given all there was to give.

John rubbed at his beard with his left hand wondering how he had let things come to this. In his quest for revenge he had left things unspoken, kept the door to his feelings closed, and now it was probably too late to ever reopen it.

He sniffed, coughing back in an attempt to quell any tears that may be surfacing. He needed to be strong. He needed to show Dean a Winchester never gave up on anything. Dean could live, if he wanted to. John just hoped his words, twisted by the demon and spat hatefully at his son, hadn't removed any desire Dean still had to go on.

"Dean, if you can hear me, I want you to know that this is my fault. My fault entirely, not your brother's." John sniffled again. He could no longer quell long overdue sentiments. "I don't expect you to understand this, but the demon killed your mother because of me. I had no idea, you have to believe that, but now that I do I can't drag you into the fight anymore. I've done enough to you and Sam."

John tugged a small plastic bag from his pocket and ruffled through its contents until he found the item he was looking for. He slipped the item into his hand and then laid the remaining contents on Dean's bedside table.

The nurse who had dressed his leg had easily gotten Dean's personal items that were removed when he was rushed into the ER. John was now returning them with the hope his son would one day use them again. Dean's ring glistened under the soft opal lighting, reminding the father of better times, as

did the small silver flask Bobby had once given him. They were so few and insignificant, these items, not nearly enough to show for an entire life, but then a life on the road was a harsh one. So much of it was lost to the dust and endless miles, so much that could never be recovered.

John felt a surge of remorse as he realized the kind of young man he had fashioned. Dean was a good son, a son to be proud of, but he had never really lived; hunting was all he'd been allowed to know. *I deprived him of a home, of love, of a family... God, he deserved so much better.*

"You have to live, Dean. You have to get away from here. Take Sammy, protect him..." John began to cry, and for the first time in front of either of his sons, he held nothing back. He wept freely, taking the burden of his wife's death and his sons' unfair upbringing on his shoulders. Life wasn't fair, but he'd bend the rules to make it so if he had to. It wouldn't be the first time.

John strangled back his feelings enough to watch Dean for any signs of a reaction. Just one movement, one twitch of an eyelid to show his son was still in the dying shell before him, but Dean remained unresponsive. The monitor he was hooked to continued to chart his struggling heartbeat, and the IVs continued to feed his failing system with vital fluids.

John nodded to himself. What had he expected? A miracle? He opened his palm and looked down at the thing in his hand. The thing he had long ago given Dean as a charm for protection. The ancient face in its design smiled back up at him mockingly, daring him to chide it for his son's current condition.

John smiled wanly and let the amulet dangle in front of him on the leather twine that held it. It glistened almost playfully in the light. Of course, the gods would be laughing at this pathetic mortal weakness.

Carefully, John rolled the twine and amulet into a ball and then leaned forward, opening Dean's lifeless hand to place the charm in his palm.

Once safely placed, he gently curled Dean's fingers back around it. "Son, didn't I tell you never to take this off?" John smiled again through bleary eyes, remembering the boy's face as he'd watched his dad produce the charm. Though it had been only a little over a year ago, Dean had seemed so much younger then, so much more trusting and hopeful, and John knew that he'd been the one to break that trust, crushing that hope when he walked away. Yet he couldn't be sorry for doing what he'd known then was what had to be done. At least he'd left the amulet in his place.

John wanted to tell his son just how much he loved him, how much he loved both boys, had always done what he believed to be in their best interest, but it didn't feel right to be thinking such final thoughts. There would be another day, another time. Today, John had to be the strength of the family, the leader with no emotion once more. "Live, Dean, that's an order," he commanded quietly.

Dean was bored. For the past few hours his mind had done nothing but float from one reminiscence to the next, and he'd had enough of it. He should be out kicking demon ass, or at least chatting up some hot chick. Exactly what was going on eluded him, but right now he was making the assumption that he was dreaming.

At least, that was what it felt like. His mind was bogged down in some ethereal fog he couldn't seem to escape or wake from. Memories came thick and fast from both recent events and his childhood. *Dreaming, more like a frickin' nightmare!*

Then, his father's voice had come, weak, upset, and foreign- not the voice of the man Dean had come to follow without question, but a shadow of him, a weaker shadow that showed emotions and had the time to shed a tear for his dying son.

Dean heard his father's confessions as if he were swimming deep under water. The sounds of John's voice were muted, fuzzy, but still discernable.

*"Son, didn't I tell you never to take this off?"*

The sentence glued itself in Dean's subconscious, refusing to budge even though his mind wanted to recall other events. In an instant, the twenty-seven year old found his unconscious world turn upside down in a kaleidoscope effect, scenes from the present quickly melding into a memory from the past.

*"Oh, you gotta be kiddin' me," Dean said, his hands and his head shaking simultaneously in a gesture that could only mean, 'nuh-uh, no friggin' way.' "A necklace? We drove all the way out here to Steambath, USA, home of Wile E. Alligator and giant pterodactyl mosquitoes for jewelry?"*

*His father took the pendant from the long-fingered, weathered hand of the twisted old codger who apparently owned this fine hovel. The place was so far back in the swamp that the atmosphere was alive with the incessant wailing of whatever slimy, creepy-crawlies thrived in air so heavy it was practically devoid of oxygen.*

*Normally, Dean was not one to question his father's actions. Blind trust and obedience were the glue that made their relationship work. But the stifling swamp afternoon had a way of stifling free thought and inhibitions. It was easy to understand why the crime rate was markedly higher in the hottest summer months.*

*John looked at the old man, (priest, shaman, witch doctor, Dean couldn't remember which), and made eye contact as he spoke. His son didn't really see the point of that gesture, other than deeply engrained courtesy and mannerisms, as the man to whom he was speaking appeared to be completely blind, staring blankly through white cataracts. It was probably good that he couldn't see, or he would most likely have been bothered by the long strings of matching white hair that hung greasily over his haggard features.*

*"The ritual's been completed?" John asked of their host.*

*"It is done," the holy man answered. "He is the firstborn, is he not?"*

*"Yes," John replied. "You're certain this is authentic?"*

*"This, John Winchester, is more ancient than your Christian God. If it is not authentic, then much energy has been expended preserving a worthless trinket," the man assured.*

*"Oh, old jewelry," Dean snarked, "that changes everything." He reached out toward the dangling amulet with a smirk on his face. "If nothing else, I can pawn it for gas money." His fingers touched the necklace, and a charge went through him that reminded him of the time the coffee pot had shorted out on the stainless steel countertop. "Ow!" He snapped, drawing back quickly.*

*Their host laughed dryly, revealing a toothless mouth between thin, wrinkled lips.*

*"Ah, it knows you, firstborn. It is truly meant for you."*

*Dean's eyebrows lowered, and he pulled his head back without stepping to follow.*

*"No offense, dude, but I don't do jewelry."*

*"Dean," his father said sternly.*

*"Yes, sir?"*

*"Shut up, son."*

*"Yes, sir," Dean relented, dropping his eyes submissively.*

*John took the necklace and let the pendant unwind gradually on the leather string as the loop opened. When it had fully extended, he took the rope in both hands and lifted it over his son's head. Dean felt himself cringe in anticipation, expecting to be shocked again as the horned figure made contact with his chest, and he flushed slightly in embarrassment when the charge didn't come.*

*"Dean," John explained, staring deeply into his eldest son's hazel eyes, "I went to a lot of trouble to find this for you. It's extremely powerful, and that's all you*

*need to know. If you have ever trusted me on anything, I want you to trust me on this, son. You wear this, and never take it off."*

*Dean raised one eyebrow in surprise, and ran his fingers under the twisted leather string uncomfortably as he twisted his head sideways. "But it itches. And like, I'm even supposed to wear it in the shower? Even during. . . well, what if I meet a hot chick?"*

*"What part of NEVER don't' you understand?" John asked, his eyes livid with impatience.*

*Dean looked down at the charm skeptically, and back up at his father through his long eyelashes. "Well, all right. But if the other little boys beat me up for wearing girlie jewelry, you're gonna owe me way more than the extra cookie."*

*His efforts to lighten the mood failed dismally, however.*

*"Never, Dean."*

*Dean wrapped his hand firmly around the pendant, allowing the cool metal to dig into his palm and waited for his father to turn away before his smirk faltered. He didn't know what had just happened, but he had a feeling it was important. And that scared the hell out of him.*

\* \* \* \*

John exited Dean's room only when his tears had abated enough to leave no evidence they had ever existed. He knew Sam would already be angry with him, but that didn't matter. To show weakness now was to show defeat, and the battle with the demon, he knew, was far from over.

As he had suspected, Sam wasn't far down the corridor when he emerged, and from the dour look on his face and reddening cheeks the young man was not in a good mood. John had often seen his son this way, and had long since accepted his own responsibility as the primary root of the youngest Winchester's temper tantrums. Sam was a placid kid who usually never raised his voice to anyone. Somewhere along the line, he'd made an exception for John and had taken to raising his voice more often than restraining himself from doing so.

The beleaguered father knew he deserved his son's contempt, but that didn't mean he would ever bow down to it. He would never second guess himself because of it. He was the master in the Winchester family, even if they didn't have a home for him to rule over.

"Did it give you absolution? Going in there, seeing Dean like that?" Sam didn't wait for his limping father to get closer. He had wanted to see his brother, wanted one last time for all three Winchesters to be together, but he'd been denied even that wish. "Are you satisfied with what you've done to this family?"

John looked up, searching Sam's eyes for the mild-mannered son he knew lay within. Tonight, he saw someone else, someone he didn't even recognize anymore. Was that what years of military style training and fighting the un-dead had caused? Was that what he had caused? "Sam," he swallowed, trying to find the right words. He would like nothing better than to offer an explanation that would make all of this acceptable somehow, but in the end, no such words existed..

"What could be so important I had to wait outside? You're still thinking of that damn demon and the hunt, aren't you? Even while Dean lies dying you can't let it go!" Sam spun around and threw the remnants of his coffee into a waste bin so hard the dregs of liquid splashed up the wall.

John looked to the floor, stuffing one hand into his long overcoat pocket and steadying himself with the other. "Someone has to think clearly through all this, son. One day you'll understand."

“Understand? Tell me what I don’t understand, Dad?” Sam whirled back and shook his head, watching his father for further explanation. When none came, a sudden realization hit him. “You’re leaving again, aren’t you? You’re not even going to wait for...” Further words failed him. It was unthinkable to believe that the man Dean had respected, had indeed worshipped, would just desert him now, and yet it was true.

“I have to, Sam.” John began to walk away, ignoring his son’s inconsolable gaze. “There’s something I have to do to make sure you and Dean are safe...” The last cryptic sentence was all that he would give, but he hoped that Sam had at least heard the ‘and Dean.’ His oldest son would be safe. John had to believe it. Sam might believe that he was abandoning Dean and leaving him to die, but John believed with all his inner fortitude that he was leaving his eldest to live. Leaving so Dean could live, he hobbled out into the hospital lobby and vanished into the milling crowd.

Sam wanted to follow and drag him back screaming if he had to. Wanted to make the uncaring father sit by his son’s bedside until, until...

Sam crumpled back down on the seat he had occupied before and began to feel dizzy. It was as if some unseen force was draining the oxygen from his lungs until his brain could no longer function at a natural level. He felt asphyxiated by life itself. *Nothing to live for...*

Then it came, unexpectedly and cruelly like always. A sharp, steely sting, forcing its way from the center of his head outwards until it felt like his brain was being pressed hard against the bone of his skull.

The pain intensified until his ears began to ring with a strange dissonance, and he was compelled to place his hands over them to quell the grating disharmony. The sound ebbed and was abruptly replaced by an array of colors so bright Sam had to close his eyes for fear of being blinded. When the colors began to dissipate, images started to materialize behind them. Flashing, incomplete, but still images he knew he was meant to see. Meant to see whether he wanted to or not, like the commercials in the middle of a good documentary.

The pain came again, so concentrated that Sam rocked back and forth on his seat, cradling his head in a futile effort to push it away. The throbbing refused to subside, however, as did the vision that came with it, because he’d never been able to switch channels once the commercial began. Somehow the TV stations always managed to go to advertisement at the same friggin’ time.

A flare of light, and Sam found he was looking down on a cemetery. Another flash, and his field of vision changed, bringing him close enough to see the tombstones. Even though he wasn’t in his own ‘dream,’ he could somehow feel the cold tactile sense of touching the granite monuments.

Sam shivered involuntarily, despite the fact his body was perspiring heavily. He screwed his eyes so tightly closed he thought they would pop in their sockets, but still he was forced to look at the names so expertly carved into the two brand new stones next to Jess and Mary.

Sam couldn’t help but choke as he read Dean’s name. Knowing his brother was dying was one thing, but abandoning all hope and accepting it was quite another. He’d seen many grim futures in his twilight zone head before but, somehow, having Dean’s death foretold in his own mind made Sam feel like a traitor to all that his brother stood for. All that he’d hoped for and sacrificed to keep their family together. It was as if Sam himself was saying, in no uncertain terms, that Dean’s dreams had all been for naught, that they would never come true. And though he couldn’t control what he foresaw, he felt as though he’d killed his brother himself.

He recoiled, trying to back away from something that wasn’t even truly there, but even as he did so, he couldn’t help but squint against the darkness. When? He had to know. Reaching forward against his body’s physical repulsion to

the image, he forced his eyes to focus on the carved granite. The date was today's. The atmosphere that surrounded him took on an air of harsh, inescapable destiny that vacuumed every ounce of hope from within him, leaving him more hollow and empty than he'd ever been. Even Jess hadn't left this big a void.

The headstone bore no epitaph from their father. No lasting words of remembrance from the man who had brought Dean into the world twenty-seven years prior. Most likely the extra engraving had been too expensive, Sam thought with bile rising in his throat. He doubted that, in this near and dire future, John would even go to the service. Some pressing engagement with a demon would no doubt demand his undivided, expert attention.

Sam pinched at his nose, still keeping his eyes closed. He was desperate to erase the broken and yet all too clear pictures in his mind.

The image was unrelenting, and apparently not finished. In an instant, it flashed to the next tombstone. Loving father...

Sam felt nauseous to the point where he had to gag in order to stop himself from actually being sick in the corridor. *Loving father? Was Dad ever a loving father?* And yet still, he didn't want to see the date inscribed so painstakingly on John's tomb. It was too close. He sensed it with every fiber of his being. Sometimes knowledge of the future was more unwelcome than ignorance.

*Two weeks...*

The minute the date settled in his mind, Sam's headache began to recede to the nether region from which it had sprung. He sat back, his body turning limp after minutes of mental torture. He had two weeks to change history- two weeks to save his dad.

There was no hope for Dean, the vision had shown that, but John had fourteen days left to live on the earth unless Sam could catch up with him and stop him chasing the demon.

*The Colt! If I get the Colt, if I kill the demon...*

Sam jumped from his perch like a world class sprinter, and even though he still felt compelled to clutch his head, he jogged across the lobby making his way for the double entrance doors.

"Sam Osbourne?" It was a question.

Sam slowed his pace and forced his hand away from his temple. It was the duty nurse shouting at him from the main desk. No doubt she was going to reprimand him for running in the hospital, just like Dad used to cuss when he and Dean ran around the house playing cowboys and Indians.

"I'm sorry, I needed some fresh air in a hurry," he apologized before the nurse could speak, hoping to escape her clutches all the faster. *Unless its bad news. What if it's Dean?*

The nurse's brow creased in incomprehension, and she held up a small white envelope with hastily scrawled lettering. "A gentleman left this for you earlier. He said to make sure you received it before you left the hospital."

Sam's eyes widened slightly. The only person he could think of was the priest, but what could he want so urgently that he couldn't stay and say it in person? Sam took the envelope and nodded, grateful at least that he hadn't been given the news he was dreading.

*Forget the letter. Get the Colt...*

The inner voice was back, demanding his attention focus on nothing but the gun. Sam hesitated, unsure whether to still head for the door or to sit back down while he read the note. In the end, he chose to compromise and read the letter while heading outside.

As the automatic doors swished open, he slipped a thumb under the lip of the envelope and tore the top section off. Feeling suddenly nervous for no good reason, Sam paused as he neared the ambulance bay. He looked around,

sensing that maybe someone could be watching, but that was a foolish thought, wasn't it?

He tugged out the letter and unfolded it, leaning against a concrete support beam while he read the message:

*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.*

Sam re-read the note several times, mouthing the words the priest had carefully written down. Finally, he began to understand what was happening. As realization hit, he let the note float from his fingers and land in the gutter. Could he really be so naive?

A passing old woman picked up the crumpled paper and held it out to him. "Dropped something, sonny," she smiled, reminding Sam of a kindly grandmother. "Thanks," Sam offered his appreciation and quickly stuffed the letter in his jacket pocket. It might be of some use later, but right now he wasn't even sure if it was real.

The whole night or at least parts of it hadn't been, and now he didn't know what to believe.

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

Sam heard the words over and over even though the priest had never spoken them aloud. The truck crashing into the Impala had been an illusion, the yellowing tinge to John's eyes, had that been an illusion too?

Sam felt the pain begin to surge back into his head, and this time he wondered if the sensation was actually the effects of being possessed. He'd read enough books and articles to know he should be feeling more than that, but still the thought remained. Something was controlling him- something was manipulating almost everything he saw and did.

*Get the Colt...*

Instead of hailing a taxi back to the wreck of the Chevy, Sam turned tail and headed back into St. Mary's. He didn't know if he was safe there, but the last place he needed to be right now was be within a hundred miles of the Colt and its last slug, not as long as whatever was in his head wanted it that badly.

“Mr. Osbourne.” As Sam re-entered the building the nurse on reception called him again. This time, her soft green eyes and sorrowful look told him it was definitely bad news. People had a way of turning anything they said into an apology at times like these- even by simply calling his name she had divulged her message. “Dr. Fletcher would like to see you.” She pointed in the direction of surgical wing from which John had exited earlier.

“Thanks.” It was all Sam could say. He settled into a slow gait, not really wanting to reach Dean’s room anytime soon- if ever. If he didn’t get there, if he didn’t speak to the doctor, then it wouldn’t be real, would it?

Sam felt his hands begin to shake again and he knew he couldn’t take much more.

As he approached the door to Dean’s room, all thoughts of the priest’s letter were extinguished- replaced by a sickening dread that tore at every fiber of his heart.

He knocked gently, and Helen was waiting inside to summon him in.

As Sam entered, the doctor moved from Dean’s bedside to meet him in the center of the room. Her face was neutral, but then Sam guessed she’d practiced that plenty of times. “Sam, is your father around?”

Sam shook his head, letting his gaze fall not on the doctor but on Dean. His brother still lay on the bed, unmoving as before, but now there wasn’t even the shallow rise and fall of his chest to give hope that he would beat the odds. The monitors he’d been hooked to had been turned off, the black void of their screens leaving nothing to the imagination. “Dad’s not here...”

Helen nodded and reached out, putting a hand on Sam’s forearm in support. “I’m so sorry, Sam, but Dean died a few minutes ago. We did everything we could, but it just wasn’t enough.”

Sam backed away, seizing his head again like he was about to have a new revelation- except this time the revelation wasn’t coming from any vision. “No! This isn’t happening!” He felt his back bump against the still open door, and he paused. Was the doctor in on it? “Who are you? Who are you really?” He screamed out the challenge, already guessing to what not whom he was addressing.

Helen’s brow furrowed and she stared at Sam as if he’d gone crazy. She had no clue that what she had just told him had not been the words he had actually heard. She moved forward, thinking the stress of the day, along with the head wound had just been too much for the young man, but she would soon learn differently.

No sooner had Sam made his demands than a dense black mist began to emerge from the room’s air conditioning vents. The mass moved until it was pulsing in front of her like a throbbing haze. It moved like it had purpose, will, thought.

“Move away from it!” Sam yelled to the doctor to back away, but she couldn’t. She was mesmerized by the swirling bulk that appeared to be coming for her, beckoning her even.

The demon didn’t waste time. The doctor was suddenly scared, vulnerable- ripe for possession. Its attack was swift and easy. Within a millisecond, it had entered her mouth and nose and taken over her subconscious, subduing any free thought or control.

Helen blinked involuntarily, and her eyes turned a shade of raven black that gleamed under the fluorescent lighting.

Sam didn’t move. He swallowed hard, unable to shift his gaze from the thing before him- the thing that had undoubtedly manipulated him for the past several hours. “Why? Why make me see things? Why not just possess me and get it over with?”

The doctor smiled mockingly, reminding Sam of Meg while she had been possessed. “You have no idea of your own gifts, do you? Let’s just say, with your kind,

possession is not an option...We have other ways of breaking our pretty toys."

"You can't possess me, but you can manipulate," Sam licked his lips and edged forward just a touch. He had to understand what the demon's motives were, how it was controlling him. And he had to find a way to fight it. Its black eyes indicated it wasn't the 'master' demon, and that meant he at least had some chance against it. "How?" He demanded. "How can you have power over me?"

The demon within Helen pondered the question. Should it give up its answers easily, or make its quarry suffer the fate of never knowing? Whatever it chose to offer, it could be too much in the eyes of the master. "You were touched by my father as a child. The mark of the master has lasting effects, even now," it admitted smugly.

Sam cocked his head in confusion. The demon was obviously speaking of the fire when he was six months old, but what kind of mark could have been left? He had no physical scars from the encounter, and that meant it was something more unworldly- something bad, something he couldn't wash off or cut out. "Why control me? It's obvious you have the power to kill whoever you choose, why this charade?" There was anger in his voice now, anger at being sold a lie and falling for it so easily. He was a Winchester, he should have known better.

Helen looked to Dean, still lying prone, his heart monitor silently plotting his condition. He was the bait, and Sam was quarry. "There were things my father wanted...you didn't really think he would let you escape the cabin so easily, did you?"

Sam felt his head spinning again. This demon had been there all along, watching and waiting to do its father's dirty work. "The truck, the crash... none of it was ever real...I just hit a tree..."

Helen chuckled, and it was the wry chuckle of someone who had all the answers, all the cards to play in the game. "You're no good to us dead. If you hadn't been in the car, the crash might actually have been an option. Your father and Dean have been thorns in our sides for entirely too long already..."

"But you couldn't risk damaging me, so you made the whole thing an illusion." Sam was starting to understand. "You thought I would be so angry at Dad and Dean's supposed death that I'd get the Colt out of the trunk for you. Away from the Devil's Trap...and I almost did..."

"If it hadn't been for that damn priest," Helen spat out the words, obvious anger in her tone. "But that's of no matter now..."

Sam inhaled and braced himself. He had no idea why the fiery demon would want him, but one thing he was certain of, he would not help it get the Colt. "I won't fetch the gun. No matter what, it stays in the car."

"I'm not here for the Colt, Samuel...I'm here for you..." Helen sauntered up to her prey and ran a hand seductively down his chest. "The Colt would have been a bonus," she conceded. "But not the real goal."

Sam felt his heart rate go up a notch. He had known all along that he and the other children like him had been stalked by the yellowy-eyed demon, but to be told it like this and not know why was beyond frustrating- no terrifying. "What's so special about me?" *I have to buy time.*

The doctor's abyss-like eyes narrowed as if she somehow sensed he was trying some kind of stall or subterfuge. She nodded, and backed up, smirking. "Nice try, Sam, but I think I've told you far more than you need to know. All that you need to concentrate on is this. The things I showed you today? They may not have been genuine, but I have the power to make them turn to reality as easy as this." She snapped her fingers and then moved to Dean's bedside. "I can crush what's left of his pitiful chest with another click of my fingers."

Sam's voice dropped an octave as he saw defeat looming. Dean would do anything for him, and he would do the same. If giving his brother a million to one shot at life meant succumbing to the devil, then he would do it. Hell, he was pretty sure there was no longer anything he wouldn't do when it came to Dean. His brother wasn't the only one who could give until there was nothing left. "What do you want?" He asked submissively.

"Come with me. Embrace your destiny alongside my father and his legions. Or..."

She let her left hand tease along Dean's chest. "Or I make the gravestone you saw earlier become very real. It shouldn't be too hard to finish what my father started." Helen waited, some part of the demon within hoping Sam said no. If he refused, there would be the sweet pleasure of extinguishing Dean Winchester's life- and it would be bloody.

Sam faltered. Giving in would be the easy option, the option no Winchester should take. His father wouldn't do it; Dean wouldn't do it. How could Sam even consider letting them down now? Besides, she'd kill his brother anyway. Deception was kind of a given when it came to deals with demons.

He sensed his muscles tighten in anticipation of what was to come. Every sinew tensed for battle. It wasn't going to be pretty. "Dean would rather die than have me go with you willingly." Sam spoke the words hastily, and sprang to action, not allowing her the chance to act first.

In one calculated movement, the younger Winchester made a dive for his enemy. He knew the demon would ultimately have more strength and agility, but if he could just catch it off guard long enough to force it away from Dean, that wouldn't matter.

Helen half saw the move coming and lifted a hand in defense, sending a demonic bolt of energy across the room to deflect her attacker. Sam was pushed sideways, but not entirely off target, and the pair crumpled to the ground in flailing mass of struggling limbs.

The demon recovered first, intent on settling the score after its initial oversight. Helen leapt to her feet, black eyes leering as she dragged Sam with her by his neck.

Sam heaved as her long, spidery fingers dug into his throat and larynx, but she continued to squeeze, pinning him halfway up the wall. "Defiance won't be tolerated, Sam. Now your brother has to die slowly...while you watch..."

The possessed doctor let go of her captive's neck, but Sam still found his body glued to the wall by some unseen force. He was effectively paralyzed while Helen did whatever she pleased to his unconscious brother. He wanted to scream out, to yell a warning, but then Dean wouldn't hear him. Sam tried anyway, but discovered the thing that held him wouldn't allow even that. And damn if he wasn't getting tired of that little scenario.

Helen liked what she saw in Sam's eyes. To demoralize someone so much they had no hope left was a craft she truly appreciated and had mastered many millennia ago. Helen saw a glimpse of such a defeat now, but a glimpse was not nearly enough to satisfy her after the recent loss of her own sister and brother. She would make Sam suffer the death of his brother. It was only fair after what the Winchesters had done to her inhuman family.

She ambled to Dean's side as if she had hours to spare, watching Sam's horrified expression as she pulled back the sheet to reveal a chest tube protruding from his brother's gown. "Do you know what that is, Sam? Do you know what will happen if I remove it?" She paused, a wide sneer crossing her features. When Sam became even more agitated, she nodded. "I see that you do know..." With a harsh yank, she pulled the drain away from where it had been inserted, and a red patch of blood began to soak through the dressing that had covered it. "Now we wait. I'm sure you'll enjoy this..."

"No, Dean!" Sam screamed out. Every ounce of pent-up frustration, denial, and self-recrimination that had been boiling up inside him since that S.O.B. had up

and vanished on him in Salvation came churning to the surface and, this time, his anger bit through the demon's hold enough for the words to be heard. Well, whattya know? He did have strength, hidden strength, if only he knew how to use and control it.

Helen's head cocked to one side, knowing her prisoner had managed to break her hold, or at least part of it. "Ooh...those powers are getting stronger, aren't they, psychic boy?" She left Dean's side to move back in front of her prisoner. It was interesting to see what he would try next.

Sam ignored her. He could already hear the shallow burbling noises coming from Dean's chest every time his brother took a strained breath, and he knew that blood was being trapped inside the chest wall, compressing the lungs. It was a slow and painful way to die. Nothing else mattered now, only Dean.

Sam closed his eyes and tried to channel the anger he was feeling into pure adrenalin-fuelled energy. He had gifts, he had the power to move things, but until now he had never be able to do so at will. Moving a cabinet by pure accident had been the most he'd ever mustered and that had been to save Dean.

The demon watched in amusement at his efforts. "You think you can shake my hold on you so easily?"

Sam fleetingly opened his hate-filled eyes. "No," he spat, then grinned one of Dean's trademark 'bite me' smirks. "But then, that was never my intention..."

Helen frowned, but didn't get the chance to interrogate Sam further. Without warning, she found her legs torn from under her and her body slammed into the far wall of the room. It was a trick she often played on mere mortals, but this was the first time she had been on the receiving end. In surprise, she momentarily let go of her mental hold on Sam, and he fell from his position on the wall with a grunt.

Helen shrieked with uncontrolled rage as she realized she had totally misjudged Sam's abilities. He was so much more powerful than her kind had been led to believe, and she'd unwittingly nudged him into gaining some fledgling control over what gifts he possessed. She shook herself, pushing locks of disheveled, loose-hanging hair from her eyes. She rubbed a hand against her bottom lip at the taste of iron, and noticed it came away bloody. "Nice move," she conceded testily.

Sam stood feet apart, glancing at Dean's monitors and then back to the demon. Why wasn't someone coming to his brother's aid? What had Helen switched off?

Of one thing he could be certain, time was running out. He squinted, trying to focus his raw energy on the thing before him, but this time it was to no avail. What little control he'd managed to seize had slipped away once more.

He had no concept of his own power, but he knew that the demon he toyed with had thousands of years of experience at manipulating psychokinetic forces. Sam figured he had no chance at beating it while he was still so green.

The pair faced off like two gun fighters. Except, in this room, the only weapon was the mind.

Sam moved closer to Dean, putting his own body between that of his brother and the demon protectively. Then, it came as he knew it would- another blast of sheer power from Helen as she stretched out her hand mocking him.

Sam's body was thrown back as if he were weightless, and he landed just a few short feet from his brother's bedside. He scrambled to get up, suddenly thankful that the demon wanted him alive. Had it not, both Winchesters would surely be dead by now.

On a nearby table he spotted a penknife, Dean's penknife, and he grabbed it.

Weapons were of little use against the creature, but sentimentality was its own kind of power, even if, he knew, Dad would have considered it a weakness. Sam had given Dean the knife a long time ago when they were

still just kids, even then not innocent, and holding it was like establishing a physical and mental bond between himself and his brother. It gave him an inner strength, almost as if Dean still fought the powers of darkness beside him.

“What are you going to do with that? Give me a manicure?” Helen asked just a little too sarcastically. “Maybe you should try throwing it. I’ve heard you ghost hunters throw like girls. Just like Pastor Jim...” The remark was meant to anger her opponent and it worked. The demon within Helen was enjoying putting its father’s ‘mark’ to the test.

Sam hesitated. In truth, he had no real clue what he was about to do. “Try me,” he offered vaguely, but instead of tossing the small blade, he lunged forward, putting all his weight into the charge.

The demon expected him to target the body of the shell it inhabited and attempted to deflect the blow accordingly, but Sam had other ideas. He plunged the small, but carefully crafted blade straight through Helen’s extended palm with such force it pinned her momentarily to the wall.

She howled with rage, not pain, and wrenched hard at her blood-smeared hand in an effort to pull free. Plaster crumbled from the wall and fell in a small dusty pile on the floor as she continued to jar at the weapon, but it didn’t budge.

Momentarily stunned, Helen looked up, refusing to believe that something so small could hold fast against her otherworldly strength. As her eyes fell on her opponent, she realized that what held her was more substantial than it appeared, backed by an ethereal force of its own.

Sam’s eyes were mere pinpricks as he screwed them tight in concentration, willing his brother’s blade to hold the demon as she had held him.

The penknife quivered in the wall as the psychic tug of war occurred around its meager shaft. Slowly, the cutting edge began to creep from its place of anchor, and Sam knew time was again running out.

Letting his mind stay focused on the weapon, he dared to let his eyes stray to the head of Dean’s bed. The elusive emergency call button beckoned to him, and he knew if he could just reach it, help would race to his brother’s rescue.

Helen traced his gaze, knowing she could not fight several hospital staff and remain undiscovered. She had to stop him. She shrieked again, this time in fear of failing her father. With her embittered cry, the penknife tore free from its perch and flew back across the room, seemingly under the demon’s complete control.

The knife turned in midair, its small but heavy hilt catching Sam on his already bleeding scalp. The action had the desired effect, and he fell between the small table and Dean’s bedside, stunned.

Helen looked down at her still bleeding palm and sighed. The Winchesters were such a troublesome family she wondered why her father still persisted with them. Was this one child so important to their ultimate goals?

She leaned over, gazing at Sam’s bleary eyes as he tried to focus on her. “Such a persistent little creep, aren’t you?” She grinned, mopping her hand with a tissue from her pocket. “Time for a trip with the doc...” She paused. Dean’s wheezing at her side was becoming annoying. The sound of his chest bubbling as it filled with blood was almost grating to her ears. *Better finish him and remove the annoyance...*

Helen turned, picking up the penknife from Sam’s side with the full intention of plunging it straight into Dean’s heart.

The sound of the struggle was disturbing on so many mental and physical levels. As a hunter, Dean was used to going without sleep for days while he was on a gig. So, when he could get it, he liked nothing better than complete silence in which to surrender the aches and worries of his harrowing existence. This was so far beyond silent, and he wanted so desperately to continue sleeping,

that he would have lashed out in anger if his every muscle hadn't been made of lead. Instead, he was paralyzed in that place between awake and asleep, forced to bear witness to an unseen battle.

A woman's voice launched yet another assault on his senses. *Huh? Sammy actually brought a girl back to the motel. Way to go Sammy! She's not all buckets of crazy like that Meg chick, right? But, nah, Sammy wouldn't do that. Would he? No way...*

His mind was unfocused and confused, and he felt vaguely like he was walking through a dense fog without even a flashlight. He concentrated harder, searching for an explanation that he knew must be buried deep in the sleeping portion of his brain, the part that had yet to realize the rest of him was awake. The last thing that both the unconscious and the conscious parts of him recalled was a ride in a strange car, lots of blood, and Sam. Yes, Sam had been there, scared but desperate to help him, unaware of the other who'd hovered beside him. A reaper...

*"Do you know what that is, Sam? Do you know what will happen if I remove it?"* The woman's voice came again, and it wasn't pleasant. Neither was the pain of what came next.

Dean felt a sharp tug at his side like someone had skewered him with a red hot poker and then quickly removed it, tearing at his flesh with the curved metal end. Had he been fully alert, he would have had no choice but to scream out in agony. As it was, the searing sting prodded him that much closer to waking. Something was wrong, very wrong, and Sammy, the baby brother he'd dedicated his life to protecting, was right in the middle of it.

More sounds punctuated the invisible skirmish, accompanied by Sam's voice, angry and confrontational. *I have to wake up. I have to help Sammy. Protect...*

Dean tried to force his weary eyelids open, ignoring the burning sensation that had begun to creep through his chest as he struggled harder and harder to breathe. As his eyes disobeyed the orders from his brain, he thought that Christ was lucky that he hadn't had to roll the friggin' stone away himself. If he had, he'd probably have just stayed inside the nice, quiet crypt.

He pushed harder, hearing the woman's belligerent tone and knowing somehow with all his hunter instincts, that she was inherently evil. *Sam needs me! Wake up!*

Something crashed by his bedside, knocking the small table closer, and Dean knew from the familiar grunt that accompanied the sound, that it had most likely been caused by Sam hitting the cold hospital floor.

The sound of his baby brother smacking down hard on the linoleum was the final straw, the final blow that brought him fully awake. As his eyes flicked open, he inhaled raggedly and wished he hadn't. The effort that was required to draw every raspy, agonizing breath was nearly enough to send him careening back into the realm of unconsciousness; almost, that is, if it hadn't been for Sam.

Dean needed to know that Sam was safe. He needed to know it more than he needed to know whether there would be a next breath to cross his lips. He let his eyes roll sideways dazedly, searching for answers as to what was occurring, and it was then that he saw the doctor standing over his brother. He reflexively wheezed again but didn't let the pain win out over his faltering control. Even in his condition, there had to be something he could do. Doing nothing was not an option he was prepared to exercise.

Just a short distance away, the small table drew his attention. He had no memory of how they had gotten there, but a few of his personal possessions lay piled together on top of it. There was a reason that Dean always kept such things close at hand, why they'd been on him when he'd been brought into the hospital. He was not the kind of guy who just stuffed his pockets with useless junk. Everything he owned had a purpose and existed under the veil of

necessity. He needed them. Every one of his meager possessions could mean the difference between living and dying.

Dean knew the table would normally have easily been within his reach, but did he have the strength now to stretch out an arm for the item he had spotted? He watched as the demon leaned down, intent on picking up a penknife from the floor, his penknife, and Dean knew he had only once chance to make a stand against the black-eyed demon.

With every fiber of his being, Dean pushed the pain away, defying his own wounded body to reach out for the flask. His arm shook with the concerted effort, and he felt his head begin to spin as lack of oxygen started to disorientate his mind. Picking his body up from his pillows even this short distance was to him, the equivalent of running a marathon.

As his struggling fingers grasped the flask and tugged it back to his chest, the demon-possessed doctor turned. Even though Dean knew there was a person inside the body, an innocent who had no control, he saw only a living mercenary of death hell bent on killing him.

With a last gasp, Dean flicked the top off the flask and jerked it forward, splashing its holy contents in Fletcher's face as she tried to lunge at him with the knife.

The water hissed as it hit the ungodly creature right in the eyes and began to burn with a white-hot consecrated fire.

Helen screamed and dropped the penknife, clutching at her face. The divine liquid cut into her like acid eating away at her flesh. She whirled around, tears of pain streaming down her pitted cheeks as she searched blindly for the doorway.

As she struggled to dash forward, Sam managed to pull himself from the floor using Dean's bed as leverage. He was still dizzy from the blow to his already gashed head, but love for his brother continued to spur him on where his normal strength would have failed him. He waited guardedly, expecting the demon to turn back once the burning stopped, but she didn't. Fletcher kept running, her footfalls reverberating dully down the hallway as she made good her escape.

"Follow the sonofabitch...Finish it." Dean's croaking wheeze broke Sam's dazed stare, and he just managed to catch his brother before he collapsed back down on the bed. "Finish it, for me...Sammy." More hacking erupted, followed by such a wrenching cough that Sam expected to be sprayed with blood again like in the priest's car. Amazingly, none came.

Sam clung to Dean with one arm and slapped the emergency buzzer with the other. "Hey, I need some help in here!" For good measure, he hollered for any nearby staff with a yell so loud he could probably have been heard two blocks away.

Dean moved in his brother's embrace. His neck tensed to steady his lolling head as he struggled against the pain and pressure that squeezed at his lungs. "Will you just...go?"

Sam shook his head, steadying Dean's heavy head against his own shoulder. "I'm not leaving you. The damn thing can get away. Some things are more important, remember?" John may have deserted his dying son, but Sam would not leave his brother's side, no matter what. Not for a demon, and not for the benefit of preserving Dean's pride. If this was the end, then they would face it together. Dean wouldn't die alone. "Besides, I don't have anything to go after it with anyway," he added, realizing he once again needed to keep Dean focused, centered- awake. "Everything we had was in the Impala..."

Dean's hazel eyes sparkled with recognition at the mention of his beloved Chevy. The car had once been John's, and now it was his. It had been a gift, but to Dean it was more than that. It embodied everything he needed to be in the eyes of his father. Stocky, strong, dependable and trustworthy. "Was?" He

choked. His dismayed voice disclosed his comprehension of the 'past tense' in which Sam had referred to his baby.

"I had an accident. Nothing I can't fix." Sam paused, watching the peaks and troughs of Dean's heart monitor in fear. *Where the hell is all the help?* He pushed the call button again several times almost frenziedly. "*We can fix it, together,*" he added tearfully, still supporting Dean as if he were a child who needed rocking.

"Dude, you're so not...touching my car...again...ever." Dean's expression changed to his trademark impish smile and then he blinked, suddenly becoming far too tired to continue the conversation. He needed to go back, back to his peaceful slumber and dreams of intact cars and hot chicks. *Roll that stone back over the friggin' cave. I'm trying to sleep in here.*

As his eyes slowly rolled back under his eyelids, he saw a flicker of panic cross Sam's face, and he managed to wink before whispering, "Don't worry, Sammy, I already told the reaper to go to hell once today." And then he drifted away, a slight smile still playing cheekily across his features.

### **St. Mary's Health Center, Missouri Forty Minutes later...**

Sam sat with his head in his hands for so long that he thought his tired muscles had frozen that way. What was the old saying? If you keep making that face, it'll stay that way? He wondered if it applied to other muscles as well, but he honestly wasn't sure if he cared either way.

Eventually, help had come for Dean, and Sam had been hastily ushered from his brother's room out into the hallway. He was technically not supposed to be perched on a chair outside either, but as a medical team had bustled to and fro over the past minutes, no one had stopped to call him on it.

At first, he had waited for the shout for a crash cart, sure that Dean's already weary heart would give out after his ordeal, but as far as he could tell, no such call had been issued. Perhaps Dean had simply quietly slipped away, and they'd let him go peacefully.

Sam didn't buy into that train of thought for one single second, however. No way in hell did it go down like that. Dean never let anything go peacefully; he fought everything, just like their dad. But then, he had fought long and hard, had he not? Even as he lay dying he'd managed to use Bobby's flask to repel the demon. Maybe that had been the last ounce of Dean's fight, his last great stand against the forces that had consumed his life. And maybe the fight had gone out of him at last.

The door to Dean's room swung open, and Sam found himself looking up into the eyes of a man in his mid-forties. He wore a simple white shirt, small bow tie, and jeans- no doctor's jacket or surgical greens. His features were lean, and he had a growth of beard that suggested he hadn't shaved yet.

"Dean's brother, I presume?" The doctor's eyes narrowed as if he was sizing Sam up. "I'm Dr. McKenzie, the surgeon in charge of this case."

Sam recalled the name. Before her 'possession', Dr. Fletcher had informed him McKenzie was one of the best. Although looking into the man's eyes now, Sam wasn't so sure. There was something very 'un-medical' about him, and the younger Winchester suddenly found himself at a loss for words.

McKenzie appeared to take this speechlessness for ignorance. "We've replaced the chest tube and your brother is stable, no thanks to that little stunt, whatever it was. Do you mind telling me what the hell happened in there?"

Sam abruptly realized just who McKenzie reminded him of, not in features, but definitely in mannerisms and attitude. *Oh God, I'm dealing with Gregory House!* McKenzie had no limp and no cane, but his tone was as rude and

acerbic as the renowned TV doc's. Of course, Sam would never have admitted even watching 'House' to Dean, but right now he didn't have to.

"Dean...Dean woke up," Sam stammered his excuse, unsure what else to say. *Oh, well, a demon was in there and pulled out his chest drain. Yeah, telling him that would really work...*"You said he's stable?" He questioned, attempting to redirect the conversation in a direction that would lead to answers about his brother's condition.

"Next you'll be telling me he was boogying around his room and caught the chest tube," the surgeon huffed sarcastically. Helen Fletcher had warned him earlier that the Osbournes were a strange bunch, but this was ridiculous. "Didn't Dr. Fletcher speak with you already?" He looked somewhat impatiently to Sam.

Sam shook his head. "She had to run. I think maybe she got paged."

McKenzie frowned, and his right eyebrow shot up enquiringly. Helen wasn't the type to walk off a case like this, and he'd heard of no new, more pressing problem. Still, Sam deserved to know what was happening to his brother, even if he was slightly out of his mind. "Your brother's blood pressure stabilized, and his heart rate steadied into a regular sinus rhythm. I ordered a scan because, in my opinion, the bleeding had either stopped or slowed enough to cause the improvement."

"And?" Sam asked, daring to hope for the impossible.

"And as always, I was right." McKenzie smirked with such self confidence Sam wasn't sure if he liked or loathed the man. "The hemorrhaging has slowed significantly, though I'm hard pressed to understand how or why. In fact, I'm prepared to attempt finishing the surgery to repair the rest of the damage and close up his chest with more permanent sutures."

Sam opened his mouth but found no words would come out. McKenzie didn't speak or act anything like a regular doctor, but if he was half the genius of the fictional character he reminded Sam of, he didn't care. "Thanks." He eventually mustered.

McKenzie inhaled and began to walk away. He had surgery to scrub for and a luncheon afterwards with one of the hospital administrators. It was going to be another hectic day.

As he reached the exit, he turned back and looked to Sam with a glint in his eye the young hunter couldn't quite decipher. "Young man, your brother has been near death since he was brought in. I don't care how much he's improved, there's no way he could have regained consciousness. I suggest you get yourself down to ER and get that head wound looked at. You're obviously delusional, and I don't want to see you on one of my colleagues' tables any time soon."

Sam nodded submissively. He had no real intention of going anywhere yet, but if it satisfied the insensitive doctor, he'd agree to it.

Once McKenzie left the corridor, Sam let his head loll backwards on his chair and closed his gritty eyes. He would get cleaned up and the wound looked at later. For now, he simply needed to sleep. In his mind, there was no doubt now that Dean would live. He didn't need a vision to tell him that. He had faith, faith in his brother, his brother the superhero, and damn if it wasn't nice to have something to believe in. But then, Dean, well he'd always believed in Dean.

Within minutes, Sam's head slipped to the side at an odd angle, and a tiny snore escaped his mouth. He was back in the Impala, dozing unawares as a mischievous Dean placed a plastic spoon in his mouth. He could almost hear Blue Oyster Cult blaring from the speakers...

**Four Weeks Later...**

Sam walked at Dean's side, watching his brother carefully as he took a slow, unsteady amble out of the entrance to St. Mary's ambulance bay. He knew that Dean hated to be mother-henned, but he was pretty sure his big bro would hate falling flat on his ass even more. So, Sam followed closely, ready to offer a hand if needed.

It was the first time Dean had seen true daylight for weeks. Had the doctors gotten their way, he'd still be climbing the walls of that stark prison. Dean, being Dean, had become bored and restless after just a few days in the hospital. Four weeks of forced R&R, though much less than the prescribed amount, had pushed him to breaking, and he'd signed himself out. Dr. McKenzie had, of course, argued that he wasn't ready to go, but both brothers thought McKenzie just liked to argue regardless. That was one man they were happy to leave behind.

Part of Sam worried that his brother was still too careless with his own well-being. The other part, however, was very glad to have his quirky sidekick back. And where Dean might be careless, Sam vowed to be careful enough to compensate. "You're sure you're ready? I mean..." Sam began crossing the marked out area where normally only ambulances were allowed to park.

Dean shot his brother a dirty look at the very suggestion that he wasn't recovered enough to be leaving. "Dude, you try to get me back in there one more time and I'll shoot your ass full of rock salt."

Sam winced. From Dean's tone, he knew he wasn't joking. Very little put his brother in a genuinely bad mood, but being cooped up for days on end, bedridden most of that time, had taken its toll. He was eager for the hunt, impatient for the freedom living precariously outside social paradigms gave him. Some might consider their secretive lifestyle a tortuous burden, but Dean relished the independence and self-reliance; relished it a little too much, in Sam's opinion. "Okay, just promise me you'll take it easy for a few days? Bobby said we could chill out at his place while we fix the Impala up, but you gotta let me do most of the work, all right?"

"Like the work you did running it into a tree in the first place?" Dean wasn't committing himself until he actually saw what kind of shape his beloved Chevy was in. He waited for an ambulance to pull out of its resting place and then followed Sam across to an area in the corner where he'd left the Impala, quite illegally parked.

As he moved closer, Dean grimaced. The front end of the car had obviously impacted with something. Hard. Although the fender and hood had taken most of the collision, the front panels and headlights had been damaged as well. From the looks of things, the whole front end would need a paint job after everything had been straightened out.

Dean let his palm caress the aged, dented metalwork and actually felt sorry for the car. Himself he could never feel sorry for. Self-pity wasn't allowed any more than pity from another. When it came to Dean and his problems, he had an 'it is what it is' kind of attitude. The car on the other hand, deserved much better. In a way, it was an extension of himself, the only part he allowed to be coddled and cared for. And if he couldn't mourn the physical and mental damage that life inflicted upon him, he could sure as hell lament the mistreatment of his baby. "I think the first thing we need to do is get you some driving lessons," he snarked with a grin.

Sam saw the funny side. "As long as you're paying," he quipped back, pointing to the front end. "I already changed out the busted radiator, and Bobby has a replacement grille and hood. It's the wrong color, but that's no problem, right?"

Dean nodded slowly, evaluating the work he needed to do. Having a dad who'd once owned a garage had provided its distinct advantages over the years. Both Dean and Sam were pretty handy with a wrench, and Dean wasn't half bad with body work either. That was a good thing, too, because the old girl was gonna need plenty of TLC in that department. "It's doable," he finally admitted reluctantly, some part of him still wanting to torment Sam some more.

Sam let out a breath he'd been subconsciously holding and grabbed the front door handle. It was time to hit the road. He waited until Dean had cautiously climbed behind the wheel and then joined him in the car.

"What the hell happened that night, Sammy? I mean, what really happened?" If Sam had not known that his brother had been withholding that question the entire time he'd been in the hospital, it would have seem random, but Dean had wanted to ask from the moment he'd been well enough. Inside the hospital had just not been the appropriate place for that particular discussion. Somehow, after the Fletcher incident, he hadn't felt compelled to trust any of the staff or their wandering eyes and ears.

Sam shook his head, still unsure about some parts himself. Reality and the demon-induced visions seemed to blur at the edges and mingle until he just didn't know what it was he didn't know. After thinking for a moment, he decided there was one thing he knew for certain. "That night, at the cabin, we weren't alone..."

Dean rolled his eyes playfully. "Yeah, I kinda gathered. The whole big, bad, chest-crushing demon with yellow eyes kind of gave that one away."

Sam huffed. "Will you let me finish? I mean besides our main bad guy." He gestured toward the hospital. "The demon inside the doc, the one you tossed the holy water on? It was in the cabin with us too. It took control of me somehow. Made me see things that weren't entirely real..." Sam cringed at the memory of the truck, the blood, and the deaths. "The possession of the doctor was just its little supernatural temper tantrum from not being able to get me to do what it wanted."

"You mean like possession?"

Sam shook his head slowly. "No, this was different. It was like it was controlling my actions and thoughts part of the time, but it wasn't inside me." He stopped, brows furrowing at a memory. "Dean, it told me something in your room. It told me because of my gifts it can't possess me. How is that possible?"

Dean shrugged and found the motion hurt. He still wasn't completely healed, although he'd never admit it to Sam. "Honestly, I have no clue. We should just be thankful. What I don't get is why the thing made you see that crap. Come on, its 'dad' almost killed me. Why didn't it just finish us?"

Sam glanced down at the Impala's dusty floor mats before he answered. It was hard for Sam to accept that the demons wanted him for some dark reason and were willing to try almost any trick or mind game to carry out their plan. It scared him that evil forces were willing to go through John and Dean by any means possible to get to him. "They wanted the Colt...and me..."

Dean banged a clenched fist on the Chevy's steering wheel so hard it almost hurt. "That damn gun again? I swear that thing has brought this family more bad luck..." He rambled on, not paying any heed to his brother's last two words. If it was hard for Sam to accept that he was the demons' true target, it would be harder for his adoring big brother to accept. The last thing Dean needed at the moment was to feel compelled to slip into protector mode while he was still so damaged himself.

Sam was thankful Dean still thought the gun was the key. Right now, he didn't want his brother thinking he was anymore a freak than he was already thinking himself. He still recalled Dean's face after he'd originally explained about the visions. Dean had pretended not to care, but part of him was scared by them.

Sam knew, because Sam was scared by them too, and though he and Dean expressed their feelings differently, he knew they felt the same in a lot more ways than either cared to acknowledge. In any case, the Colt problem did need addressing, because he had more bad news about it that he knew Dean wasn't going to want to hear.

"Dean, it's gone," Sam confessed flatly. "Dad took it. At least, I hope it was Dad. He took off from the hospital saying there was something he had to do. When I got back to the Impala the next night, the trunk was empty save for this." He fumbled in his jacket pocket and brought out the last silver bullet.

Dean wasn't happy. "Man, Dad's timing sucks. What if we'd needed that thing to kill the demon inside the doc?"

"Not to mention, it might have been nice if he'd stuck around for his dying son." If Dean wouldn't say it, then Sam would. Their dad may be a great hunter, but sometimes he could be one insensitive parent, even when his motives were noble. Sam knew that John's absence over the last weeks had prevented Dean from gaining any closure over what happened in that cabin, and that whole fiasco was bound to bite them in the ass again, sooner or later. Most likely, as was par for the course, it would be at the worst possible time.

"Yeah," Dean looked at Sam, but didn't want to get into that argument. It still hurt every time he thought about what John had said to him in the cabin. He knew the scathing words had come from the demon, but they still pained him more than the scars from his physical injuries. Not that he'd ever admit it.

*'You know, you fight and you fight for this family, but the truth is they don't need you. Not like you need them. Sam – he's clearly John's favorite. Even when they fight, it's more concern than he's ever shown you.'*

Dean pushed away the memory, trying to mask the heartache it caused. The thing had simply wanted to hit where it hurt, and its ploy had worked. Hell, it had probably been practicing for millennia. Mentally he'd been cut to the core, and physically he should have died. Should have, but hadn't, and that was something else on a growing list of something elses that was gnawing into his psyche with every waking hour. *I should have died. Even McKenzie said the way the bleeding stopped was nothing short of a miracle...*

Sam noticed his brother's uncharacteristic silence. "Something's been eating at you for days. What's wrong, Dean?" He didn't expect an answer. Dean rarely shared his inner thoughts and demons with anyone, not matter how bad they were. Sam didn't know how he could possibly carry that load alone.

Dean looked up, and the twinkling sparkle in those hazel eyes vanished, just for a second. "Just thinking about life," he offered, just a little too thoughtfully. "Twice now I should have died, Sam. Things like that, they kinda make you think. You know?" He glanced downwards, letting his eyes settle on the necklace that now dangled on his chest. It sat innocently on his shirt, right over the hidden wounds that had nearly taken him from this world. *Son. You wear this, and never take it off.*

Sam noticed his brother's gaze. When Dean looked at the trinket that way, it was almost scary. He treated the thing with a blind respect just because John had given it to him, of that Sam was sure. That didn't explain why he was almost mesmerized by it right now, and Sam guessed correctly that Dean wasn't about to give any kind of explanation. "Are you sure you don't need to go back to the hospital?" Sam quipped, hoping to jar his brother from his melancholy thoughts. "Because no way would the Dean Winchester I know go all philosophical on me."

Dean shook himself. Now wasn't the time or place to worry why or how he'd survived. Maybe it was God's will. He was one of the good guys after all. The only problem with that scenario was that he wasn't really sure he believed in any God. Heck, that didn't mean somebody somewhere wasn't watching over his

ass though, right? “So, Dad’s missing with the Colt yet again, the demon escaped, and all I got out of the deal was a trashed car and a chest wound that sucked, literally. Where do we go from here?”

Sam nodded. Dean was back, even if he did have a few battle scars to show for his ordeal. “We go to Bobby’s and pick up the car parts, and then we go see Zack.”

Dean raised a brow and began rifling through his ancient and very large cassette collection. “Zack Murzak?” He plucked out a tape and checked its track listing, then tossed it back, not quite satisfied with the contents.

“Yeah, I figure if anyone knows about a kind of demon that prefers controlling its victims to out and out possession, it’s probably Zack.” Sam joined in the cassette hunt, eager to find something a little mellower than he knew Dean’s choice would be.

Dean couldn’t help but smile. “Just because Zack is the best damn demon hunter Dad knows doesn’t change the fact that he’s also the biggest fruit cake. The guy’s nuts.”

“But,” Sam pointed out, “he’s our kind of nuts. He’ll know what we’re dealing with here, I’m sure of it.”

Dean gave in. “Okay, first we fix the Impala, then we head out to Zack’s and hope he doesn’t fill us full of buckshot before he recognizes us.” He leaned forward, intending to crank the ignition, but someone tapped lightly on his window.

Dean looked up and groaned out loud. A blonde, female traffic cop wearing shades was standing, hands on hips, beside the Impala, and she didn’t look amused. It was time for a little acting. He rolled down the window and looked out innocently.

The cop ignored his ‘puppy dog’ expression. “You do realize parking here is prohibited?” She jerked a thumb towards St. Mary’s. “By leaving your vehicle here you could be costing a life if a rig can’t get through.”

“Officer,” Sam pleaded. “It was my fault. My brother’s been seriously ill, and the hospital lot was full. I didn’t want him to have to walk too far.”

Dean glanced at Sam and scowled, realizing he was telling the truth. Sammy thought he was some kind of invalid. If the cop hadn’t been there, Sam would have gotten a cuff around the ear. As it was, Dean played the story to its fullest. “It’s true. I almost died.” He carefully pulled open his shirt to reveal the evidence the demon and the surgeon had left behind. It wasn’t pretty. *Chicks dig scars...*

The cop’s face didn’t change, although it was hard to tell what she was thinking while her eyes were obscured by the sunglasses. “Sir, should you be driving in your condition?” She questioned authoritatively.

“Hell ma’am, uh, no disrespect, but he ain’t touching my car again! Did you see what he did to it?” Dean pointed towards the horrifically crumpled hood with such a pained expression the cop couldn’t help a small smile. “This thing is a classic, it deserves better,” Dean continued.

The cop took a hand from her hip and looked to the highway. “Get this hunk of junk out of my sight in the next minute and I’ll forget I saw you. Good enough?”

Dean grinned and cranked the Impala. Despite its recent tussle, it roared to life, bringing an extra wide grin to his face. “Good enough. Unless you want my cell number?” He winked roguishly.

The cop just managed to stifle a laugh and waved Dean on. “Just go will you?” She ushered him out of the exit, watching as the injured Chevy headed for the freeway, coughing out the odd plume of black smoke from its muffler as Dean skillfully guided it on its way. As it took a left and vanished from view, the sound of Thin Lizzy’s ‘The Boys Are Back in Town’ could just be heard over the traffic, thudding from the Impala’s speakers.

The cop put a hand to her forehead, shielding out the evening sun as she at last removed her shades. With a smirk, she nodded, her totally black, demon-fuelled eyes glinting.

The Winchesters may have won the battle, but they had not won the war.

The End