

## Episode Seventeen: Judas

### By Tracer & Thru Terry's Eyes

"Damn, bro, this has got to be what? A ten-pointer?" The dark-haired young man exclaimed excitedly as he discarded his rifle and traded it for his favorite hunting knife. Gripping the knife firmly, he knelt in the leaves carpeting the ground around his kill to finish the job. "I mean, look at this thing, Josh!"

Josh sauntered into the small circular clearing, rested his rifle on his shoulder and crouched down next to the fallen animal, admiring his younger brother's handiwork and clapping him on the shoulder. "It's great, Seth. You did good, little bro."

The warm, pleased smile that appeared on the younger man's face in response to Josh's praise faded as the blood encrusted hand on his shoulder moved to the top of his head and began rubbing furiously over Seth's short spikes of hair. "Stop it!" Seth yelled, jerking his head away. "I hate it when you do that!"

Josh laughed heartily as Seth pulled away, a feigned look of disapproval clouding his face as he swept his hands over his hair repairing the damage his older brother had done. "I'm doing that 'til the day you die, little bro," Josh replied, getting to his feet. "Now quit whining and move your ass. The sun's setting and we need to get back before the rangers kick us out."

"It's open season." Seth protested, but mimicked his brother and began to stand. "They usually let you stay a little bit later."

"Yeah, well, I'm tired," Josh admitted.

Seth wrinkled his nose, "And smelly."

"You don't exactly smell like the Irish Springs yourself," Josh countered, grabbing the binding from Seth's pack and beginning to tie the fallen deer's limbs for better carrying, all the while keeping his body open to ensure his brother could see the proper way to do it. "Okay, all set. Let's go. The trucks about a half a mile back."

Tugging his camouflage jacket tighter against the encroaching chill of the evening air, Seth nodded and lifted the hindquarters of his trophy allowing Josh to lead the way back. The brothers walked in easy silence for a while, the steady crunch of leather boots against nature's floor comforting in its familiarity.

The rusted dark blue truck was barely visible through the dense green, but the small hint of color was enough to encourage Josh to pick up his pace and ignore the fiery burn in his muscles from the day's exertion. He nearly toppled back when Seth came to a dead halt behind him.

"What the hell?" Josh barked in surprise when his portion of the burden doubled due to Seth's complete release of the deer's dead weight. Josh's irritated blue eyes watched as Seth wandered a few steps away towards a small ravine nearly indistinguishable from the line of trees and rock. "Seth, c'mon man," he grouched. "Get back here!"

"Can't you smell that?" Seth asked, choking, his voice strained and mouth turned down in disgust as he reached to pull the neck of his t-shirt over his nose and mouth.

Josh snorted in annoyance but still sniffed the air once for good measure. "I don't smell anything."

"Seriously?" Seth questioned, his voice muffled by the layer of fabric, eyes widened in disbelief at Josh. With a confused shake of his head, Seth turned back toward the ravine.

"Seriously," Josh replied with a huff. "Now can we go?"

Seth ignored him as he climbed onto a large rock along the ravine's edge, eyes squinting against the blackened dark encompassing the crack in the earth's surface. "I think someone left a carcass or something, man."

"Who gives a damn, Seth?" Josh replied, irritated when his brother didn't even acknowledge him. With a heavy sigh, the older man dropped his share of the burden and stalked over to where his brother was leaning haphazardly over the edge of the ravine, slapping a firm hand onto the brunet's shoulder and pulling. "Let's go," he growled.

Seth yanked back from the contact, "I want to see wha--"

"I said we're going," Josh interrupted, grasping his brother's shoulder harder as he used his leverage to jerk Seth semi-upright without relinquishing his hold.

"Josh, you're hurting me!" Seth grit out, squirming under Josh's white-knuckled grip, but each movement seemed to only increase the pressure of the fingers digging into his shoulder. "Dude, stop!"

Whether it was the pathetic plea or Seth's pain-etched face, Josh suddenly released his grip but issued a firm push that sent Seth off the rock face and sprawling onto the ground with a resounding thud. "Seth, get up, for God's sake!"

A tight groan on his lips, Seth looked up at his brother with wide-eyed confusion as he fought to stand. "What the hell is your problem, man?"

"You," Josh snarled, gathering the crumpled material of his brother's shirt front in a fist and hauling Seth gracelessly to his feet. "I'm tired, and want to go home; not chaperone your stupid search for some friggin' rotted deer carcass."

The older brother punctuated his words with a sharp thrust of his finger into Seth's chest and Seth blinked rapidly, shifting nervously under his brother's new-found fury. "Dude, what crawled up your ass? Calm down."

"I don't need to calm down," Josh declared, the angry lines on his face deepening as his eyes lit with increasing rage. "Don't tell me what to do!" he ordered, spitting the words out through his teeth.

Seth gaped at him. "I'm not," he protested, raising his hands in surrender, his countenance pale with fear at his brother's inexplicable outrage.

"Like hell!" Josh stepped forward, and Seth automatically shuffled back. "What's the matter, bro? Scared? You always were the pansy of the family. Surprised Dad didn't ship you off to military school or something, put some man in you."

"J-Josh, what's wrong? What did I do?" Seth's hazel eyes frantically scanned his brother's face for an answer, but only the eerie ghost of a smirk graced his brother's features.

Josh pushed past Seth, ramming into his shoulder. Hard. "Nothing. Shut up and get in the truck."

"What about my deer?" Seth questioned, heading over to his kill.

"Leave it!" Josh commanded and grabbed the lapel of his brother's jacket, sending Seth stumbling toward the truck. Watching his brother's frantic hands search for balance, Josh scoffed a laugh and picked his rifle off of the forest floor.

Defiance and anger slammed into the younger brother. "No way! That's got to b--"

"Shut up, Seth, and leave it" Josh warned, his voice low with menace.

"No," Seth countered boldly, "I'm not leaving without it."

"I said shut up and come on!" Josh roared, spinning around to face Seth, his face twisted. "Just shut the hell up!"

"You go to hell," Seth shot back, fury in his voice as his long legs carried him back to the prized carcass.

The swift blow to the back of his knees sent Seth to the ground. This action had hardly registered before he found himself airborne. A blast of pain shot up his entire spine as he crashed onto the rocky ground, back near the ravine, heaved there by his furious older brother.

"You just can't listen, can you? Doesn't matter what it is, you just got to have it your own way." Josh sneered as he stalked up to Seth and stared down at the shaking form of his younger brother, pupils blown with rage. "Well, I'm sick of it, you whimpering little--"

“Josh, Josh, for God’s sake what’s wrong? What did I do? You’re not making any sense.” Seth’s voice was soft but desperate, quivering in shock as he tried to figure out what the hell was happening. His eyes searched his brother for a clue to the sudden outburst but landed on the hunting rifle gripped tightly at Josh’s side, alarm rising up in him as his heart thudded painfully in his chest.

“How the hell do you know what makes sense?” Josh spat, hatred evident. “You’re just another excuse for Mom and Dad to ride my ass and I. Am. Tired. Of. It.” Josh’s lips curled in contempt. “Tired of you.”

“You don’t mean that,” Seth gasped, emotion clouding his voice as genuine fear flooded his veins, making him shake under its intensity.

“Yeah,” Josh muttered, locking his brother’s gaze. “I do.”

The swift cock of the rifle smothered Seth’s shuddered gasp. Frantically, the dark-haired boy swatted at the earth beneath him, struggling to crawl away from his brother. His hands slipped frantically on the wet leaves and the deep muddy earth clinging to him, fastening him to the ground. A hard stomp of Josh’s boot to Seth’s ankle quelled any further attempts and Seth howled out in anguish. “Josh, stop! Please! Let me go! You can’t do this!”

Josh tilted his head, his forehead creased in thought. “Why?”

“What? Why?” Seth stuttered, shaking his head, holding out a hand. “Josh, please, I’m your brother...” he whispered dejectedly, horrified that this could mean so little in Josh’s mind.

Josh shrugged. “Didn’t matter before,” he countered frigidly, settling the butt of the rifle against his shoulder and lining up the sights. Seth lay three feet away, a perfect “T” shot, and little brother knew it. “Doesn’t matter now.”

Seth kicked out with his free foot to no avail, voice rising in a desperate panicked cry. “Josh---you can’t... Josh, no, I’m your brother! I’m your bro--”

A crack-fire report ripped through the incessant pleas, cutting off any attempt for more as the body arched, convulsing under the bullets Josh continued to pump in until the empty chamber clicked repeatedly. Thick red quickly smothered the entry wound and flooded Seth’s shirt front as his body jerked in its death throes among the golden leaves that were quickly becoming the deepest scarlet.

Josh tossed away his rifle, face fixed like stone as he stood looking down at the body of his younger brother. He reached down and grabbed the ankles of his kill and dragged it through the leaves a short distance. “You liked that ravine so much, lil’ bro, well, guess what? You get to rot in it.”

With a grunt, Josh hoisted his brother’s paling body over the edge, dumping it unceremoniously into the deep black. He waited until the sound of dull crashing ceased, then saluted at the darkness below him.

“See you in hell, little brother.”

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“We’re lost, Sam; just admit it,” Dean smirked following Sam’s lanky form up yet another rocky rise as they stumbled through the trees in the slowly failing light.

“We’re not lost, Dean. Stop saying that. I know exactly where we are.” Sam’s voice had a bit of an edge after hearing Dean chant “we’re lost, Sam” for the tenth or fiftieth time in the last half hour.

“I’m just saying, dude,” Dean continued as he followed Sam’s careful steps, his voice still holding a hint of humor, mostly because he just enjoyed rubbing Sam’s shortcomings in his face. Hell, if he was going to be stuck out here, he may as well have some fun. “It gets dark fast in the woods, we’re hell and gone from the car and all these friggin’ trees are starting to look the same to me. The Donner Party had a better chance, dude.”

“Well, don’t worry, bro. I promise to take a leg first.” Sam snarked, clambering up over the small roots overhead.

Dean eased himself up onto the higher ground, giving his brother an insinuating glance. "But which leg?"

"Shut up," Sam huffed, shaking his head as he turned to continue onward.

Their boots crunched through the avalanche of gold and red leaves littering the ground, sadistically hiding the twisted vines and brambles that occasionally leapt snarling from their hiding places to catch one of the unsuspecting brothers by surprise and send him sprawling.

They had been following up a rumor of this forest being inhabited by Tree Sprites. Not their usual kind of gig, but those things were nasty little buggers, not capable of causing direct fatalities but definitely responsible for causing the momentary distraction that could lead to a serious injury if not a fatality. And with it being hunting season, when everyone from experienced to inexperienced hunters alike took to the woods in the joyous pursuit and annihilation of woodland creatures, it seemed to be a good alternative to the pig farm in Rock Hollow.

Dean couldn't get into hunting something that didn't have a chance in hell of fighting back. It just didn't strike him as fair unless the deer got guns too. At least the ghosts and nightmare inducers were asking for it.

"The car is a mile that way," Sam declared, pointing in a vaguely northwesterly direction. "We have plenty of time to get back before it's dark."

"Whatever you say, Hawkeye," Dean replied, saluting. "I just don't want to get my ass blown off in the dark by some good ole boy gunning for Bambi or Thumper."

Sam turned, rolling his eyes. "Fine, Dean, have it your way. We'll head back. I haven't seen a single thing that points to Tree Sprites anyway. I think this was just a wild goose chase." The dark haired brother sighed and brushed his hair out of his eyes. Even though it was cool, he had still worked up a sweat hiking.

Dean shouldered his shotgun, muttering a 'thank god' to the sky, and shoved his free hand in his pocket. He was hungry and it was getting colder as evening crept through the woods and right now his hopes of getting back to the car and civilization anytime soon were swiftly waning.

Sam started heading back the way they had just come, his own shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm, muzzle pointed at the ground. Dean followed in his wake, content to watch the back of Sam's boots rather than the trail. After all, Sam said he knew where they were going and truthfully Dean really hadn't been paying much attention. He hadn't been that thrilled at hunting Tree Sprites anyway; kind of beneath them in his opinion.

Sam paused up ahead, frowning at the compass in his hand and turning left only to about face right a second later.

Dean rolled his eyes, irritation creeping into his face, as his lips formed a tight line and he strode forward stiffly. "Jesus, Sam, if you don't know how to use a compass--"

The toe of his boot caught in yet another vine snaking through the leaves and he was down before he knew what was happening, the shotgun sailing off to one side. His hands and knees were gouged by rocks hidden beneath the wet leaves and he fell heavily on his right hip as he tried to avoid another jagged stone. "Shit! Dammit, Sam!"

Sam rushed to his flailing brother, but knew he was too late. "Are you okay?" he asked anxiously, reaching out a hand, and then laughing despite his better judgment when he caught sight of Dean's mud-splattered face.

Dean jerked back out of his reach. "It's not funny!" He leaned forward to try to work the vine off his ankle, whipping his left arm across his face to clear the gunk off it.

"I'm sorry," Sam apologized, sounding damn near sincere. "You just looked funny. Are you hurt?" He kept his hand out for aid, but Dean slapped it away.

"Never mind! Just figure out where the hell we are and let's get outta here," Dean snapped, pulling out his pocketknife and starting to cut through the tangle of vines.

Sam straightened up, hurt clouding his features, and looked around. "I don't understand it." He pulled out the compass once again and held it away from himself, walking a few feet from Dean as he watched the little needle rock back and forth but never really settle. "Maybe there's a lot of magnetic ore in the ground. That might explain it."

"Explain what?" Dean growled, relocating his rifle and carrying the shotgun by the stock as he shuffled to join his brother.

"Why the compass is screwing up," Sam replied, shooting Dean a dirty look.

"There's nothing wrong with that compass, Sam." Dean studied his muddied, gouged palms and carefully brushed his hands against his pant legs. "You're the college boy, figure out the problem and let's get the hell out of here." There was no humor in his voice this time. In fact, he could feel the frustration building with each passing moment.

Sam shoved the compass at Dean. "You take it if you think you can do so much better!"

Dean glared at Sam but made no attempt to take the compass. Instead, he crossed his arms over the shotgun and braced his feet further apart, continuing to stare at Sam through lidded eyes, brows drawn together. "You're supposed to be so damned smart, don't look at me."

Sam turned, making an exasperated noise. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Keep throwing the fact that I went to college and you didn't in my face? You're not stupid, Dean. You could have gone to college." Sam was honestly sick to death of this subject and couldn't understand why it had come up now of all times.

Dean snorted, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, right!"

"Dean, it's not my fault you wouldn't let yourself go!" Sam yelled back, gasping shortly after the words left his mouth as if that would draw them back in. He knew better than to go there.

Dean's arms dropped, and he barked out a laugh in disbelief. "Let myself go? You mean just walk away? Like you did? Like I was the only one who mattered?"

Sam's eyes lingered on his brother's agitated form. "What the hell, Dean? Why are we having this conversation?"

A sharp, rank smell flooded Sam's nostrils and the younger brother cocked his head, taking in the cloying stench of rotting flesh being carried to him in the breeze. With a sound of disgust and utter repulsion, Sam turned and followed the direction of the scent. His curiosity won out every time.

"Hey!" Dean barked angrily. "Don't walk away from me when I'm talking to you!"

The sandy-haired brother dropped his gun on the ground again and set off after Sam, grabbing his arm and jerking him around. Sam yanked his arm free, a look of surprise and rage on his face. "Back off, Dean!" he exclaimed, sweeping his arm across his body, turning away again. "I want to see where that smell is coming from."

Sam's stomach lurched as he approached the source of the smell, which was getting stronger with each step he took. He literally gagged as he stepped onto a large flat rock and looked down into the shadows.

Dean saw his brother reach out into the darkness and grabbed him once again. "I told you not to walk away when I'm talking to you!" he snarled.

Sam jolted from the shock of Dean's furious timbre, and would've lost his balance had it been for the way Dean's hands were fisted in his shirt front.

"Dean? What's wrong with you?" Sam demanded and pulled ineffectively at Dean's grip.

Sam may have been taller and heavier, but Dean was incredibly strong, always had been, and Sam felt himself being pushed before he could brace himself. His hands instinctively gripped Dean's arms tightly as Sam tried to climb back up to a secure position.

"Dean, c'mon man! What are you doing?" Sam's voice contained pure panic as he locked his widened eyes with Dean's blown pupils.

“You drag us out here for nothing, get us lost, it’s getting dark, we don’t know where the hell we are, let alone where the car is, I’m tired, I’m thirsty and I’m hungry and all because you can’t read a friggin’ compass and you wanna know why I’m mad? God, you are an idiot!” Dean was yelling now. The muscles of his arms bunched as he heaved Sam away from him with all his strength.

Sam cried out as he felt himself thrown backwards and clawed the empty air for any chance to stop or break his impending fall. The shadow below the rock he had been standing on wasn’t empty ground, but a deep ravine half filled with leaves that did nothing to soften the crunching blow as he hit the rocky side and went rolling out of control down the steep embankment.

A sharp cry of pain escaped the younger brother’s lips as hidden rocks and broken tree limbs battered his flailing body as he tumbled steadily downwards, coming to an abrupt stop as he slammed into a jutting piece of stone. Sam laid still for a moment, gasping and groaning but still warily conscious as he took a mental assessment of himself and his surroundings.

The stench was thicker here, engulfing every inch of the darkened landscape and Sam lurched forward, his mouth open as he gagged jerkily under the putrid odor. Tilting his head back up to where he knew must be cleaner air, Sam worked to steady his shaky breathing and quell the churning nausea in his stomach.

It didn’t work, and within an instant, Sam had braced himself on shaking arms, expelling every piece of the Quickie Mart’s Mexican Burrito Special onto the damp, sticky ravine floor.

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A far off cry and resounding thud shook Dean from his stupor and the older Winchester blinked slowly as cloudy jade searched the forgotten forest area as if for the first time. A sense of familiarity and then overriding panic snapped the hunter into full fledged horror as his mind cleared and the knowledge of what he had just done pounded into his memory.

“Oh my God! Sam! Sammy, are you hurt?” Dean screamed, not caring that his voice sounded incredibly frantic as he leaned over the rock’s edge only to be repulsed back by the wafting stench flooding his senses. “Sam! Answer me!”

When no reply met his waiting ears, Dean grabbed the flashlight out of his jacket hurriedly fumbling it on and carefully slid from the rock face into the ravine, landing knee deep in leaves. ‘Relief’ didn’t even begin to describe how he felt when he entered the repulsive hole and heard Sam coughing, the sound of brushing movements below him.

Dean balanced himself on a tiny ledge, bracing his upper body against the ravine’s wall and shone the flashlight’s beam in the direction of the shuffle. A shaky smile crossed his face when Sam’s quivering body filled the yellow beam, half buried in leaves floundering at the bottom of the ravine. “I’m coming, Sam! Hang on!”

Expertly, Dean shimmied down the rest of the rock wall, the flashlight beam bouncing erratically as he rushed to his brother’s position on the covered earth floor. Sam’s eyes widened suddenly and a yell flew from his lips as Dean approached, startling the older brother as he reached Sam’s side.

“What? Sammy? What? I’m not—god, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Dean’s statement went seemingly unheard as Sam’s glassed eyes were fixed past the older man, staring at something Dean couldn’t see. Turning around, Dean followed Sam’s gaze, flicking the flashlight beam in that direction.

A pale, stained object literally dangling from behind a small crevice caught Dean’s eye and he shot a look back to Sam who had made his body as small as he possibly could, his clouded eyes far from trusting. Dean sighed and reached out towards the curious object aware that his younger brother had moved closer in to study the sight as well.

A sharp crack was heard as the older brother made contact and Dean recoiled back as a miasma of decay rolled over him causing him to slam against Sam, and sending both brothers back and floundering into the space Sam had just vacated.

The flashlight hit the ground, illuminating the area right in front of Dean, who found himself face to face with a human head glaring out at him through the leaves. Rotted flesh curled and dangled from the bones, the decaying skin crawling with buzzing flies and maggots as they gnawed new holes into the stiff flesh expanding from every orifice and behind the remnants of empty eyes.

Gasping in shocked surprise, Dean leapt back and fell against Sam. "Holy shit!"

Gagging against the smell, Dean twisted himself around and tried to see Sam in the dimming light. "Are you all right?"

"Banged up a little, but nothing permanent, no thanks to you!" Sam snapped, pushing Dean away. "What the hell, Dean?!?"

At the moment, Sam wasn't sure if he meant their altercation or the body at Dean's feet. He had landed right against it, just as shocked as Dean, and could smell the stench of it on his clothes as well as his brother's, a sickening odor that nothing but a burning would cure.

"I don't know. Okay. It was like...like an Ellicot mind meld," Dean answered, a half-smirk on his face, although Sam's expression came more in the jutting finger and hard stare variety. Dean shrugged and turned back to the corpse, kicking the leaves away from the body he had nearly come to kissing. His flashlight revealed the entire body, clothing still relatively intact but the body was in a fair state of decay. Dean held his hand over his mouth and nose as he tried to breathe.

"This body hasn't been here that long," Dean commented, coughing. "Few weeks maybe." he guessed gently toeing the stiff form with his boot. "Maybe he fell and broke his neck or something."

Sam, still brushing himself down, made a face and joined Dean, staring down at the ragged mess of humanity. "You should check for ID."

Dean blanched. "You look for ID if you're so interested in who he is," he countered, squinting into the shadows and shifting the flashlight a few feet beyond the body. The light expanded as Sam's search for his own flashlight ended in success and the newly-added beam increased the illumination.

Both lights fastened on the same item sticking up out of the leaves, a human arm, only more bone than skin this time, skeletal fingers stretched outwards, about five feet beyond their first discovery.

"Jesus..." Sam murmured as they both moved forward. Another short leaf excavation with their boots revealed the second body was older, almost all the fabric gone from the bony frame, just a few dried shreds of muscles and skin remaining.

Stepping back, Sam tripped and fell back into the cushion of leaves, sending them fluttering. He felt objects crunching beneath him as he went down and rolled away, shining his light behind him.

"You okay?" Dean called from several feet away, continuing to swish through the leaves.

"There's another one!" Sam exclaimed, pushing back to his feet, disturbed bones and another skull appearing around his feet. He stumbled backwards, every step kicking up more grayed remains.

"There's more over here..." Dean said grimly, going to his knee and brushing more leaves away. His eyes ran over the ground, his eyes becoming accustomed to the light and seeing more and more flashes of what at first looked liked twisted limbs and twigs but he now realized were anything but that. Here and there eye sockets stared emptily at him as half buried skulls reflected his shaking light.

"What is this?" Sam asked, disgusted and horrified by the number of human remains surrounding them. "Some kind of killing ground?" he questioned, looking around as if the answer could be found in the surrounding area.

"I dunno," Dean replied, getting to his feet. "But it ain't Tree Sprites. There's at least ten or twelve bodies here. Wherever they came from, they didn't all get here at the same time. Some of these are really old, although that guy we found first looks as if he's only been here a few weeks." Dean rubbed a hand over his face. "Some of these have gunshot wounds to the head. There's one over there with a knife buried in its chest." He gestured with his flash, and Sam could see the dull glint of metal sticking up out of the leaves.

"Dean, what the hell is going on?"

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Sam outstretched a hand, fingers slipping on the damp mud lacing every jutting rock and scrap of wood along the ravine's walls. Readjusting his stance on the pit's rocky floor, Sam tightened his grip on the protruding stone an arm's length above his head, and pulled himself up, kicking his feet against the slippery wall as he waited for them to contact anything substantial.

A relieved, tired breath escaped his lips when his boots connected with a twisted wooden vine a few feet up. The younger brother scrambled to get his footing and took a moment to straighten out his hunched form, testing his weight on the dry timber.

Satisfied that the bark would hold him, Sam tilted his head back, peering over his shoulder and doing his best to ignore the roll of sickness at the recently uncovered carnage as he searched for his brother. Dean was still kicking his way through the leaves, crouching down each time a dismembered body part or rotted corpse was discovered and studying it with grossed-out intensity.

"Dean, c'mon man," Sam grit out, turning his attention back to his arduous climb. For all they knew this was a serial killer's dumping ground and Sam sure as hell wasn't getting caught standing still when the psychotic came back to admire his trophies. "Stop bothering the crime scene and let's get the hell out of here."

"Crime scene?" Dean repeated incredulously, moving towards his brother's ascending form.

Sam grunted in annoyance as he stretched for another hand hold. "Yeah, Dean, crime scene. You haven't noticed the sea of dead, rotting bodies lying around, Sherlock?"

Dean muttered a curse under his breath, "You want to get the cops in on this?"

"Uh...yeah," Sam shot back, and smirked when the ravine's edge was highlighted by the dimming sun.

Dean stared up angrily at his brother's shadowed body as Sam reached his goal and slid back onto the forest floor completely out of older brother's line of sight. "Sam? Sam!"

"What?" the younger asked heatedly, his head peeking back over the edge.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dean demanded, and waited impatiently for an answer.

"Calling the cops," Sam replied matter-of-factly.

The smug reply had Dean latching hold of the ravine wall and frantically beginning to climb. A smirk planted on his face when he found Sam's fumbling footfalls made his trek drastically easier. "Are you friggen' nuts?"

"Dean, we just stumbled onto at least a dozen bodies!" Sam yelled down. It wasn't like anyone could hear him declare the mass murders anyway. Huffing a breath when Dean grunted in reply, Sam took to pacing in search of a cell signal. "We can't just walk away."

"Yeah, Sam, we *accidentally* found a dozen bodies." Dean's sarcastic tone echoed from the stone tomb a brief minute later and Sam halted his pacing steps. "You want to explain to the cops just how we happened to fall into Buffalo Bill's fun house?"

Sam stepped back from the crevice to allow his brother to ease over the ledge and shuffle onto the forest floor. The younger brother took a deep, calming breath as he waited for

Dean to finish swiping at the wet mud caked on his faded jeans and meet his gaze. "Does that make you Jodie Foster?"

"Oh, good one, geek," Dean snarked, hands furiously rubbing at the slime plastered on the denim. "God, Sam, I'm gonna kick your ass you know that?"

"It's called Tide, Dean," Sam muttered exasperated, and smirked when he lifted his phone to find two small bars in the left of the screen. "Thank God."

"No!" Dean ordered, reaching out to swipe the object from Sam's hand, but younger brother had been to the School of Winchester as well and easily dodged the attempt.

"I'm not just leaving those there," Sam argued, groaning angrily when he saw the movement had removed him from cell range. "Dammit!"

"For once, you're going to listen to me here!" Dean snapped, approaching his brother with furious intensity. "We have a new case, and we can't do it if there are hundreds of nosy townies poking around."

"Yeah, no thanks to you," Sam spat bitterly, rubbing idly at his arm.

Dean's eyes widened and lit with rage. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You pushed me over the damn edge, dumbass." Sam's fists were clenched at his side, his search for cell service became all but forgotten as he stared back at his brother completely livid. Dean could have friggen' killed him and at the moment could care less.

"Cause you were dumb enough to hang over it," Dean retorted, barreling past Sam in the supposed direction of the car. "If you're so hell bent on calling the damn police, I'm not going to jail for it."

Sam watched his brother's tense form disappear behind a tree line and quickly the younger brother found himself damn near sprinting after Dean. "Okay, okay. I get the point."

"Bout damn time," Dean murmured, halting his stride to allow Sam to catch up.

The dark-haired Winchester scoffed lightly and shook his head firmly. "But I'm calling the cops as soon as we hit the car."

"Whatever," Dean assuaged, his attention fixed on the mass of foliage as he stalked through the brush. Last thing he needed right now was another damn stick poking out the damn ground.

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By the time Dean's revered Chevy appeared as nothing more than a black speck in the distance, Sam was shivering uncontrollably in his thin jacket, even the sweaty exertion of trying to keep up with Dean's angry strides were doing nothing to bring heat to his weary body. The dark-haired Winchester shuddered as a chill ran down his spine and he cast a glance at Dean's taut shoulders and back.

For the life of him, Sam couldn't figure out what had happened back at the clearing. He didn't want to believe Dean had deliberately thrown him over the edge. This was Dean after all: little brother's personal human shield.

The look of fury in Dean's eyes at that moment though however, not to mention the burning agony of his sore joints and bloody gashes from a terrifying fall, cuts and scratches he knew he would see when he took off his clothes to shower, all told a different story. There had been literal fire in Dean's furious glare and Sam couldn't help but wonder if that's how he'd looked when he'd held a gun to Dean's head all those months ago.

Absently, Sam rubbed an especially sore spot on his arm, eyes trailing the uneven bob of Dean's flashlight over the ground as they walked along, half tempted to inform his brother that it wasn't that dark to begin with and wasting batteries wasn't going to benefit them in the long run. But judging by the overpowering silence between them, Sam decided to keep his mouth shut.

He chose rather to semi-admire how Dean seemed to know exactly where he was going. Knowing Dean the way he did, the guy probably had a built in radar detector installed in the car the day their Dad handed him the keys to his prized possession. A small smirk tugged at the corner of Sam's lips at the plausibility of that particular thought, but the situation being what it was at the moment, he couldn't bring himself to smile.

Dean threw a searching glance over his shoulder when the steady crunching of leaves from behind fell quiet in the night air, inhaling a shuddering breath when he saw that Sam hadn't been snatched by some wild animal or vanished into oblivion. The younger had simply stopped in thought. "Dude! C'mon."

Sam jerked at the sharpness of his tone, and Dean instantly felt the pang of guilt suffocating him. He didn't know what was making him so tense. Usually, initial hunting searches took a long time and grated on him mainly because patience wasn't his forte. But never in a million years had he considered throwing Sam off a damn cliff. Okay so it was a baby cliff, but still an edge and a fall that ended with a bunch of jarring stones for a net. And all courtesy of older brother, whose sole job since the wizened age of four had been to protect the one he tossed so carelessly into that damn ravine.

His thoughts were racing at a speed that would make Indy drivers recoil in fear, and the horror of his actions had him angry all over again. For the life of him, Dean couldn't figure out how he could be so friggen' pissed, wracked with guilt, confused as hell, and monumentally grateful that Sam was keeping quiet because he wasn't sure what his reaction would be if he heard one word come out of his mouth during the next decade. It was as if he were the epitome of six Lifetime Original Movies balled into one at the moment, and Dean was frantically searching for the damn remote.

He found it in the shape of a classic automobile, as the waxing hint of moonlight glinted on the black metal. "Oh, baby, I missed you so much. We're never giving college boy a compass again, I promise."

Sam watched in baffled amusement as Dean stroked the hood of the Impala, a hint of a smile on his face but relief and bone weariness marred the sandy-haired man's features. "Not my fault evolution chose this spot to create an iron field."

"Whatever, geek," Dean sighed, easing into the driver's seat and closing the door with a creaking slam.

Sam hustled over to the passenger side because he wasn't entirely sure Dean wouldn't just leave his ass, nursing his sore arm the best he could. "Man..."

"What's the matter, Samantha?" Dean jibed, throwing his brother a mock-pity glance, but his heart clenched when he heard an audible wince as Sam shut the passenger door.

"You are." Sam stated bitterly, furrowing his brow as he tried miserably to calm his fraying nerves. "Do I have to use a payphone or can I use my cell phone? Because I really don't think I have thirty-five cents."

"What?" Dean questioned, face scrunched in confusion before smoothing out to one of understanding and sarcasm. "Well, after seeing the last phone bill I think you need to start using the payphones in town. You think money grows on trees, young man?"

"Funny," Sam muttered sarcastically, and arched up in the seat to retrieve his phone from the back pocket of his jeans. "I'm going to call the police now, Stalin. And before you try to kill me for it, you were the one who said to wait 'til we got to the car."

"What? You want to be peeing next to a guy named Slash?" Dean snapped, and Sam jerked at the sudden reappearance of heat in his brother's tone. "I'm just trying to make sure we don't get our asses handed to us by the damn cops of all things. Don't make it seem like this is some sort of dictatorship, we all know how well you deal with those."

"What? Dean--" Sam heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose before beginning to dial. "Never mind. I'm not arguing over this. It's stupid."

"No, calling the cops is stupid," Dean retorted, knuckles white around the steering wheel as the dispatcher's voice cracked across the phone.

"911. *What's your emergency?*"

Sam gave Dean a 'shut up because you know I'm right in the long run' stare, and in his best calm and collected voice began the retelling of his findings. "I want to report at least a dozen bodies we found in the southwestern part of the preserve while we were hunting. Some of them have been there for a wh--"

Dean jerked his attention to his brother when the dark-haired man's voice faded out and nothing but irritation crept onto Sam's features.

"No, this isn't a damn joke."

Dean smirked, raising his eyebrows when a pregnant pause filled the car as Sam listened to dispatcher's anger-filled words.

"What do you mean someone called before? Look, I swear, lady, we found them maybe four miles from the main road at the bottom of a ridge with a big black rock at the top."

Dean's eyes were as wide as Sam's as he listened to the one-sided conversation, his mind reeling with the past phone call. It could have been something else, but his gut told him otherwise.

"Why the hell would you need my name? It's called an anonymous tip. Just check it out, okay? I swear, you'll find them."

The light beep of the end button was heard no more than a second later and Dean clenched his jaw, deciding not to rub in the fact that law officials usually don't buy into anonymous mass murder tips, opting instead for more of a calmer route hoping that the choice would make the churning, lingering hints of anger and frustration all but dissipate. "What was that all about?"

"They said they already had a report about a body in the woods about a couple weeks ago. They think it's a prank!" Sam exclaimed disbelievingly, and tossed his phone onto the duffel at his feet. "Can you believe that?"

"Are they gonna check it out?" Dean questioned, although fearing he already knew the answer to that one as he maneuvered the Impala into the motel parking lot.

"I dunno. This is weird. I mean, why would they react like that?" Sam thought out loud, his mouth in a pensive frown. "What the hell is going on out there, Dean?"

Dean's eyes flicked up, taking in Sam's scratched face and the absent rubbing on his little brother's arm. "Don't ask me."

The older brother eased the car into park and nearly bolted out of the Impala. He had enough guilt and all other volatile emotions to deal with at the moment and really didn't want the Spanish Inquisition courtesy of Sam. Little brother, however, was like a damn god with a new chew toy and Sam was hot on his heels, reaching out a hand to stop the slamming motel door and quickly step inside behind Dean.

"Don't ask me'?" Sam repeated sardonically, "Are you kidding me? Dean, you threw me over the damn edge. Something happened out there and it happened to you. So, talk to me here man. I think you owe me that much."

"Owe you?" Dean questioned furiously, "I owe you?"

"That's not--" Sam started, bringing his hands to rest behind his head and lacing his tense fingers, "God, you're a friggen' double standard you know that? Always asking me what's up but hell if anyone can ask the great Dean Winchester the same damn question. Just...we need to talk about this sometime, okay? Dean? You here or out in space somewhere?"

"I'm gonna take a shower," Dean stated, as though informing the empty air instead of Sam's angry form. As if to prove his point, the older brother hurriedly stripped off his jacket and kicked his boots off, the footwear connecting hard with the chipping walls leaving a black mark along the paint. Sam opened his mouth to avert the ever familiar 'escape and evade' game plan

of his brother's, but Dean slammed the bathroom door and clicked the lock shut before a single word could be formed.

Sam sunk down on the farthest bed, his usual designated sleeping quarters, and shook his head in both hurt and confusion. It was like Dean was in pieces, only parts of him coming back into what could be described as 'normal' Winchester behavior, if there was such a thing. But something had replaced the rest of his older brother and for the life of him Sam couldn't even begin to come up with a reason why. Sure, the find had been disturbing, but it wasn't like they didn't see decaying corpses on a regular basis anyway.

Exhausted, Sam flopped back on the bed, waiting solemnly for his brother to exit the bathroom and bracing himself should another bout of fighting accompany Dean's return.

\* \* \* \*

Sam rubbed at his eyes and blinked heavily as he stared at the glowing laptop screen filled with search windows and old articles. He had been right about an impending knock-down drag out, and Dean had rose to the occasion in a big way. They'd gotten past it right about the time Sam's hand closed in on itself and threatened to implant itself in Dean's nose, the shower saving them again as the younger brother quickly sought refuge in the one piece of unclaimed, neutral territory they had access to.

To Dean's credit, the older brother had offered some semblance of an apology, but it was as half-hearted as they come and Sam was at a loss to figure out why his brother seemed so eager to fight. He had always hated when they had argued as kids, and now it was like all the good aspects of their relationship were quickly morphing into terrible ones that bred disaster. Walking barefoot on glass didn't begin to describe how Sam was coping with this version of Dean.

Running his fingers through his too-long locks, Sam sighed and shifted in the motel chair, wincing at the creaking wood. He shot a nervous glance to his sleeping brother but Dean merely shimmed further under the sheets. Satisfied that his last 'girlfriend dying on ceiling' nightmare and hordes of research weren't going to keep his brother up as well, Sam focused his attention back on the results of his internet searches.

The ravine, he found, was part of Senter's Ridge and was a very popular hunting site, as deer frequented the area. Within minutes, Sam found himself searching the hunting schedule and comparing weeks to reported disappearances. A chill ran up the younger brother's spine as he continued reading and his head jerked back to stare at Dean's snoozing form, willing him to wake, and he couldn't help but wonder if alerting the cops had been a bad idea. This was totally shaping up to be their kind of thing.

\* \* \* \*

The wood slammed hard against the jamb as Dean kicked the entrance shut, balancing two steaming coffee cups and laughing loudly when Sam's body jolted from his hunched position over the table into a startled rigid half stand. Dean sauntered over to the table, setting his brother's drink down and could almost swear those were the imprints of computer keys on his brother's forehead.

"Rough night?" the sandy-haired boy questioned as he eyed Sam carefully. He knew what a nightmare and sleepless night looked like. "Couldn't sleep?"

Sam instantly picked up the code words for 'vision or nightmare?' and found Dean's sudden shift back to worried big brother grating, so he lied. "No."

Dean pursed his lips, his features giving away that he didn't believe Sam for a second, but he let the issue drop because there were bigger elephants in the room. "Okay, well...uh, about yesterday...you know, I wouldn't--. How's the arm?"

"It's fine." Sam interjected the bumbling apology, after all he'd actually shot Dean so they were probably even at this point, and nodded towards the laptop. "Besides I think I found something that might explain it."

"Oh, yeah? What's that, Gates?" Dean questioned, pulling up the adjacent chair next to Sam's so they could scroll through the articles together.

"Well, the place we were at—Senter's Ridge—it's a really popular hunting ground. So, I did a cross check with the police reports and came up with this." Sam opened another window revealing a list of names and dates.

Dean scrunched his forehead. "And what's that, exactly?"

"It's a list of all the missing person reports filed within weeks of the opening season." Sam answered and waved towards the screen absently, "There are eleven missing persons filed over the past eight years."

"We found at least that many," Dean reasoned, nodding his head as he considered the implications. "Is there any mention of the cops' findings?"

"No," Sam replied through a yawn. "Just uh...seems like the report was filed, but no one found anything. The reports are spread out so it seems like no one figured out a pattern either."

Dean leaned back in the chair and scratched at the patch of hair behind his ear. "So, what you thinking? Vengeful spirit?"

"Maybe," Sam drawled, glancing back at his research, eyes heavy with missed sleep. "They all seemed like violent deaths. We should go back see if we can find something on the EMF."

"Sounds like a plan," Dean retorted loudly, smacking his hands together causing Sam to jolt again. "After you sleep though, Dopey. You look like yesterday's frat boy."

"I'm fine," Sam argued, standing once again and moving towards his duffel. "Just need some food."

Dean's eyebrows raised in suspicion. "You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah...I'm good," Sam answered, hardly convincing but knowing that Dean wasn't going to push it, not if he wanted to avoid a reoccurrence of yesterday's fun day.

"Alright, well, there's a family diner about a mile down the road," the older brother offered, palming his keys. "Who knows? Maybe they'll put a smiley face on your pancakes, Samantha."

"You're the one who eats pancakes," Sam pointed out with a winning smirk as he followed his brother out of the motel room and towards the Impala. Maybe it was all just a one-time thing; Dean seemed better today—more like himself. A terrifying gnawing in the pit of the dark-haired man's stomach had Sam wishing he could simply allow himself to believe that. Nothing in there life was that simple.

\* \* \* \*

Martha's Home Cookin' could have earned a spot in Hell Hole Diners of America: The Grease Edition. Sam grimaced as he settled down on the bar stool, hands placed gingerly in his lap as he gave his brother a pitiful look.

"Dean, couldn't we hit a McDonalds?" the younger brother asked hopefully, but recalling that there was no food chain dumb enough to put a restaurant in this Podunk town.

Dean missed the question entirely, his attention focused on the small, blurry TV picture resting across the diner's bar. Nudging Sam with his elbow, he nodded in the direction of the muted screen. "Seems like we were wrong about the police not following up on your call."

"Huh?" Sam squinted his eyes and tried to make out the fuzzy picture of cops and forest. "Now what?"

"We ask around, maybe head back there late tonight so we don't run into the officers and if we do, at least it'll be dark," Dean answered, picking up the menu then dropping it to wipe his now greased fingers on his jeans. "I'll bet Food Services loves coming here."

Sam groaned in disgust, and turned his attention to the approaching salt-and-pepper, plump waitress and gestured toward the TV. "Do you think you could turn the volume on?"

"What I look like? They been playing the same damn story all friggen' day anyway, go home and watch it," the gnarled woman snapped, slapping down her order pad and giving Sam a hard look, "Now, you eating or loitering?"

"Eating," Dean replied with a smile that usually melted the heart of any woman, save Ice Woman, Queen of Runny Eggs and Minimum Wage.

"Good," the woman replied tersely. "Now, what'll have?"

The boys ordered quickly, and let out nervous breaths as the waitress disappeared into her wake of pissed off workers of the world, shooting each other cautious looks before redirecting their attention back to the screen.

"Who or what would do that?" Sam asked after a moment of silent watching, swiveling his seat around to face Dean.

"It's Tanner," a deep, gruff voice replied, and both brothers turned around quickly in their seats to face their eavesdropper.

A gray haired man rested in against the far booth's wall, his dark eyes staring straight ahead at the boys. Dean sized the man up instantly, not failing to note the sea of tattoos accented by the man's bulging arms and thick neck. A long scar jagged its way along the stranger's jaw line and for a moment all Dean could do was stare right back at him.

Finding his voice, the older brother cleared his throat and asked his burning question. "Who?"

"Tanner Ellis," the man replied, his voice carrying a bearish quality to it that Sam instantly associated with their father.

"Oh, shut up, Mac," the waitress's clipped tone interrupted, followed quickly by the thud of plates on Formica. "Don't listen to that man. He's just old and bored. Stuck in the past with no way out."

"You know the truth, Lara," Mac snapped heatedly, rising from the bench seat and approaching the boys. "You brothers?"

"Uh...n- no, colleagues actually," Dean stammered in reply, giving Sam a nervous look when the young man just smiled and nodded.

"Right," Mac drawled, stepping out of the boys' space and studying them before pointing a finger toward Sam, his eyes filled with turmoil and something akin to pity. "You should be careful. The older always betrays the younger."

Dean's eyes widened in disbelief and panic, and big brother instinct kicked in full force as he clamored to a stand and placed himself between Sam and Mac, his heart hammering with the knowledge that somehow Mac knew and the possibility that this job could be more than they bargained for.

"That's enough," Lara ordered firmly, banging a hand against the bar. "Get out of here, Mac. We got actual paying customers today."

The brothers watched cautiously as the older man grunted, but nodded all the same and trudged out of the diner. Dean let out a small breath of air, Mac's words replaying on overdrive in his mind coupling with the past day's events as he shot a small worried glance to his brother who merely shrugged.

Lara sensed the apprehension and tapped her fingers in front of the boys' plates. "Eat up. It's better than it looks."

Both brothers gave the waitress a small smirk, but neither ventured to eat the mass compiled on the chipped plates. Mac's words had quenched any form of an appetite they had

and the implication of them nearly sending Dean sprinting to the bathroom to expel whatever he's consumed in the past three days.

\* \* \* \*

Sam hustled out of the restaurant, Dean close behind. "Dude, where are you going?"

"Just got to look something up," Sam tossed over his shoulder, never breaking his long strides toward the Impala.

"Sam. Sammy!" Dean called after his brother, dropping his head in annoyance when Sam refused to respond. Sam was half hanging out of the Impala when Dean approached, papers flying everywhere as the younger brother sought out whatever the hell he was trying to find.

"Got it!" Sam exclaimed, retrieving a piece of crumpled paper bearing his scrawled handwriting.

"Got what?" Dean questioned, leaning against the car and crossing his arms across his chest as he waited for Sam's answer.

"The last guy who was reported missing...Seth Callahan—he had an older brother," Sam replied, scanning the page before thrusting it towards Dean. "Yeah, see, right here. Joshua Callahan."

Dean sighed, rubbing at his temples. "You got to help me out here, Sam. What the hell are you talking about?"

"Mac said the older would betray the younger. One of those bodies could be Seth's, and Josh still lives in town. Maybe he knows something about this," Sam reasoned, his voice lit with excitement at the fact that his research was paying off. But Dean's skeptical glance at his suggestion crushed his enthusiasm. "What?"

"Nothing," Dean replied shortly. "But you're trusting Mac here? The man said Seth's disappearance was due to Tanner," he stated, pursing his lips. "Unless, Tanner's a spirit and he latched onto Josh. Made him do it, you know?"

"Yeah," Sam agreed and ran a hand through his desperately in need of a wash hair as he settled down into the passenger seat.

Dean quickly circled the car and took his place behind the wheel. "Still doesn't explain the other corpses, but who knows, maybe this Josh guy can help."

"Hope so," Sam muttered, his eyes taking to studying the world whizzing by the Impala's windows, his thoughts clouded with the possible outcomes of their impending interrogation with Seth's older brother. "I think the official report said Lincoln Avenue."

"Alright then, Sparky," Dean retorted, peeling out of the parking lot, "Lincoln it is."

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Dean spared a look at Sam, watching as the younger man's face twisted in thought. Lincoln Avenue had turned out to be a bust, nothing more than nice two-stories with quiet, not-so-inclined-to-talk-to-strangers neighbors. The sandy-haired brother braked for the four-way stop, opening his mouth to break the silence when the wail of sirens punctuated the afternoon air and a flurry of police cruisers and ambulances barreled through the intersection.

Sam turned to Dean, eyes wide with suggestion. Dean nodded knowingly, and waited for the parade of white and blue to pass before edging out of the intersection and following the mass of cars to the scene.

The paved road soon turned to gravel and dirt, the cruisers coming to a stop in a forested clearing not more than ten miles past Lincoln Avenue, and the shift from suburban to backwoods was almost startling. Dean pulled the Impala off the main road, parking out of the way in case a cop happened upon it, before grabbing his badge from the dash.

Sam smiled, yanking his own badge from his backpack and exiting the car in his brother's wake. His eyes widened as they neared the clearing, the rustic hunting cabin surrounded by cops and curious civilians such as themselves.

"Behind the line!" A harsh voice screamed and the brothers found themselves face to face with a short, uniformed officer with an army issue buzz-cut, looking no more than twenty, standing toe to toe with them.

"I'm Detective Bret Michaels and this is my partner, Cord Walker." Sam's eyes turned to mere slits and he gave his brother a harsh glare at Dean's idea of a comical alias which big brother merely ignored, his face all business as he stared down the younger cop. "We're from the neighboring county, we heard that you'd found Joshua Callahan and, well, let's just say we've been looking for him for a long time."

"Then you should know he's dead," the officer replied smugly.

"Dead?" Sam repeated, trying to keep the disappointment from his voice.

"Yeah, the owner who rents the cabin out to Josh and Seth Callahan stopped by to get his money in person when it didn't show up in the mail. Instead of a check he found Josh Callahan covered in his own blood, yelling that he was sorry for what he did to Seth—that's Josh's younger brother. Poor kid disappeared about a month ago. They were pretty tight so that wasn't the weird part."

Sam raised his brow questioningly. "So, what's the weird part?"

"Oh, Josh was rambling about some guy named Tanner apologizing for hurting him too. Now, we ain't got a Tanner here, but I take it that's why you guys were looking for Josh as well. Josh doesn't seem the type though. He must've been really out of it 'cause I've seen him with Seth and I don't think that boy would lay a wrong hand on his little brother." The officer shook his head in pity and glanced back at the house. "That boy knifed himself. Repeatedly. Made one hell of a mess."

"God..." Sam breathed sympathetically.

Dean cleared his throat. "Thanks for your time, officer. We'll be in contact if we need anything further."

"No problem," the young man replied and then turned to take his place along the tape line.

Sam waited until the man was out of earshot before he met Dean's knowing glance. "Looks like Mac was right after all."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, that was awkward," Dean muttered, flinging the motel room door closed behind him and turning to stare at Sam's hunched form on the bed.

"I saw your face when the officer was talking, Dean. God, Josh confessed to killing his own brother," Sam stated disbelievingly, raising his head to meet his brother's gaze.

Dean tossed his jacket onto the nearest chair and flopped down onto his bed. "Actually I was checking out his baby blues. Got to love a man in uniform."

Sam clenched his jaw, his teeth grit tightly. "Look, Dean, in case you hadn't noticed, I'm the younger here. Okay? So if you could try to take this seriously so you don't throw me in a damn death hole again I'd appreciate it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dean snapped angrily, eyes growing hot at whatever the hell his brother was insinuating. "You think I'm going to kill you? Is that it?"

"No! Of course not!" Sam defended quickly, hands raised in surrender as he made his way to the coffee table and the mound of research spread all over the wooden top. "But, damn, Dean, something happened to you out there, man."

"Whatever," Dean muttered, settling down at the other end of the table, "So, what do you want me to do, Adolf?"

Sam shifted under the insult, but chose not to succumb to it. "Check the names of the past victims in the missing persons reports. See if you find any kind of connection. I'm going to search for this Tanner guy."

"How come you get the aid of Google and I get paper and fine print?" Dean complained, shifting through the pages. Sam grunted in reply and continued his search, although it was cut short when Dean suddenly flicked his head. "I think I got something."

"What?" Sam asked, rubbing at his hurting forehead.

"Well, for starters, all the missing people are guys. There are notes on the bottom saying that missing person's reports were filed by the family a couple days or even weeks later," Dean continued, squinting at the type at the bottom of one of the pages. "Yeah, see here," he motioned, tapping the page to guide Sam's eyes. "This guy, Ryan Phillips, he had an older brother who disappeared shortly after Ryan did. Cops found the guy three days later with a bullet in his head and a suicide note that said he was sorry. There are others too."

"That makes sense," Sam muttered, hurriedly maximizing a window and turning the laptop toward his brother.

"It does?" Dean questioned skeptically, following Sam's direction and beginning to read the article. "Wow, so Tanner Ellis disappeared in the late '70s and his older brother Michael was found hanging from the rafters of his house four days later. Tanner's body was never found." Dean and Sam exchanged a knowing glance. "Based on the reports, none of the missing people were ever found."

"So Michael kills Tanner for whatever reason or accident, maybe, and that's why Tanner's spirit is latching onto older brothers. He's re-enacting his death with these siblings," Sam stated, nodding at his own logic and chewing his bottom lip as he turned the computer back towards him and clicked on a link at the bottom of the open page. "What d'you know? Seems there's a local legend that says if two brothers wander into Senter's Ridge only the older one survives. Story goes just like Mac said—the older will betray the younger--basically kills him only to kill himself days later."

Sam stopped, feeling his blood chill at the realization of what could have happened when Dean had thrown him into the ravine. Only dumb luck and possibly his brother's stubborn streak had saved him, but still that had been too close. The dark-haired brother lifted his eyes away from the screen to Dean. From Dean's ashen pallor and averted gaze, Sam concluded he wasn't the only one thinking about the possible repercussions the other night had held.

"Dean," Sam ventured cautiously, reaching out a hand toward his brother.

"Don't, Sammy," Dean grit, jerking to a stand and taking in a shuddering breath to regain his composure. They needed to go back, he knew that, and judging by the damn wide eyes of Sam gauging his every move, Dean figured little brother also knew that fact all too well. "Alright, then. When do you want to leave?"

Sam sat in shocked silence for a brief second, watching as Dean carefully heaved the duffle bags onto the bed and began his ritual preparation of their tools of the trade. "We should go tonight, but--"

"But what, Sam?" Dean asked impatiently, closing the chamber of the gun and setting it on the bed.

"You think—I mean, we know what happened last time," Sam stated off-handedly, trying not to engage in another Winchester war of words but rather ease his brother into his suggestion. "Maybe I should take care of this. I can torch the bodies and get the hell out of there. We've had worse jobs."

"What? No!" Dean barked harshly. "It's too dangerous, Sam!"

Sam took in a shaky breath and silently battled over what reply to give—either way, Dean wasn't going to like his reasoning. He figured it best to just jump right into the fire. "Look, we were lucky last time that I didn't get anything worse than a little banged up when you tossed

me into the ravine. We can't take a chance that you—This isn't just about me, okay? It's about you too."

"There is no friggin' way I'm letting you go back out there by yourself!" Dean stated firmly, raking his hair with tense fingers. "That death hole is filled with victims of violent deaths and who's to say there aren't others like Tanner out there."

The dark-haired brother scrunched his forehead contemplatively. He'd be damned if Dean didn't have a point and Winchester Rule Number 2 was pretty clear in the 'always have back up' department.

"Okay...so..." Sam murmured thoughtfully. "Did you feel anything before you--was the anger gradual or did it just hit you from out of nowhere?"

"What?" Dean shot back incredulously.

"Hey, you're the one who's so hell bent on coming out there, okay?" Sam replied hastily, hands raised in surrender. After an eerily silent face off against Dean's stoic features, Sam lowered his hands and slowly tried to explain in a less anger-tinged tone. "I just think that if you're going to come, we need to know what to look for in case Tanner strikes again."

Dean nodded, resigned, and forced his mind back over yesterday's incident. "It was kind of gradual," he stated slowly, thinking carefully. "I was getting pissed off over you and that damned compass...and it just got worse from there. It was like everything you did just made me angrier and angrier."

Sam ran his fingers through his long brown locks. "Ok, so if you tell me if you feel like you're getting ready to go all Hulk action on me before, you know, you actually do, we should be okay. And besides, I can warn you if you seem to be getting...testy."

Dean stared at his brother in annoyance. "Testy?"

"You know what I mean," Sam drawled, rolling his eyes. When he focused back on his brother, Sam made certain to lock Dean's gaze and cleared his throat before revealing the rest of his 'let's not off Sammy tonight' plan. "I don't think you should carry a weapon. And if I tell you to go, Dean, you have to go back."

Dean blinked rapidly in surprise. His brother wasn't stupid enough to suggest hunting without armed back up--certainly not college boy. The sandy-haired man flicked his eyes toward Sam who was waiting impatiently for a reply. Okay, so maybe Stanford took in a few charity cases. "I don't like it."

"You don't have to," Sam replied with a smirk, shouldering the packed duffel.

"Fine," Dean muttered, snatching the keys from the side table. "But if you're screaming bloody murder because some pissed spirit's on your ass, I'm not having a heart to heart with the rifle. I'm picking the damn thing up."

"Whatever you say, bro," Sam obliged, tossing a final glance around the room before following Dean's heavy footsteps outside.

\* \* \* \* \*

The whites of Dean's knuckles stood out harshly in the dim lighting of the Impala's interior. Between the sideways glances and steady shuffling of cotton against the leather interior as both brothers shifted under the tense silence, Sam figured they could take out Dean's Marine Raider and literally cut the uncomfortable air with it. Just for the sake of proving that stupid theory.

Sam wasn't one for unnecessary quiet and cleared his throat loudly before breaking the silence. "Are you sure you can find this place again?"

Dean nodded grimly, lips pursed in thought. "Yeah, I think so. We're about where we were parked the other day. Then it's about a four mile walk southeast. Hey, you think that it being night is going to affect the compass, Lewis?"

"Funny. You're hilarious," Sam murmured sarcastically, shining his small flashlight on the map again because obsessive compulsive disorder was his middle name when it came to these kinds of things. "Let's just get this over with as fast as we can."

"With you there," Dean agreed, easing the Impala off into a clearing and killing the engine. "You ready?"

Sam's eyes widened at the question. That kind of inquiry should be headed in the opposite direction, mainly the one behind the driver's seat, so that's exactly where Sam pointed it. "Are you?"

Dean gave his brother a hard glare and opened the driver's door with a creaking moan as he stepped out of the car, heading for the trunk. Sam was quickly by his side, pushing the familiar metal up and bracing the secret hatch with the nearby rifle. Dean's eyes lit up when he took in his cache, they always did and he unconsciously reached in for the fox hole shovel since it was easier to carry and God only knew what they'd have to root through before they found Tanner's body.

Sam caught the movement instantly and grabbed his brother's wrist firmly. "No, nothing remotely resembling a weapon."

"Yeah, yeah...and world peace to all." Dean straightened reluctantly, and snatched the small gas can, holding it up for Sam's inspection. "Is this okay? I mean, if I hurled it at your head, we might be able to fix the damage already up there."

"Dean," Sam chided, a frown on his face as he worked to shrug off his brother's mask of indifference because he knew worry and concern lay beneath it. Those emotions always did. "I know we agreed on what we would do if anything...happened...but you could, I mean, I--"

"Can it, Andre," Dean snapped bitterly. "We went over this already. I think I got the whole reverse chain of command thing."

"Okay," Sam assuaged, shouldering his rifle and nodding in the direction of the ravine. "Let's go."

Dean led the excursion as they entered the tree line, their boots crunching over the fallen twigs and leaves. The criss-crossed beams of their flashlights lit the way and Dean took each step cautiously, his ears tuned to any sound hitting the chilly night air.

Sam trudged behind his brother, the weight of the packs and artillery not helping his feat, and the slight twinge of guilt at his ordering Dean around made the ability to stay slightly behind Dean easier.

The light whirl of the EMF aided their trek and Dean stopped short, staring down at the flickering machine before turning back to Sam, face contorted in concentration. "Hey, geek boy, how the hell are we gonna know which of those bodies is Tanner Ellis's? I mean, they're all falling apart."

"Well, there's a pattern of decay. Some of those were fresh," Sam offered with a grimace at his brother's back, as Dean stared into the abyss of forestry.

The older man growled in disgust, turning swiftly back to look at Sam, who didn't quite hide his flinch at the sudden movement. "What's the matter? Making you a little nervous there, Sam?"

"No, you just startled me," Sam replied gingerly, swallowing the nervousness down audibly. "Maybe there'll be some identification on the bodies. There's got to be something. We'll burn them all if we have to."

"There's a thought, Einstein," Dean snarked, narrowing his eyes in annoyance at Sam's condescending tone as the younger brother brushed past him.

"You doin' okay?" Sam asked, casting a sideways glance at Dean as he eased himself up onto the familiar black outcropping that hung over the ravine and gazed down into the shadows.

Dean clambered up beside him and nodded without returning the look. "Just fine, Sammy. Let's go find this son of a bitch."

Sam braced his brother as Dean kneeled down carefully and slid over the edge of the rock, slowly making his way down the side of the ravine to the light of Sam's flash beam. He managed about half-way before coming to a pause and looked back towards the light's source. "C'mon, Sam, shag ass. Be careful coming down, it's slippery. Wouldn't want you to fall and break that pretty neck all those ghosts seem so fond of."

Sam's mouth tightened imperceptibly at Dean's not-even-close-to-humorous remark, calling out an 'all clear' before dropping the bag unceremoniously into the earth below. Within minutes, both brothers had reached the burial ground and were sifting through the muck and decay for any sign of their hunted.

Dean squatted down next to an arm waving from the leaves, his face twisted in distaste as he scrounged through the deteriorating jean pocket of one of the victims. "God, you'd think someone would smell this crap. Hey, got a wallet on this one."

Sam shuffled over, peering over Dean's shoulder. "Daniel Holcomb."

"Well, one down." Dean sighed, placing a piece of black tape on the corpse's shell before moving on to another pile of bones.

"Hey!" Sam yelled excitedly, "Dean, c'mere, I think I got something."

"What?" Dean questioned, hustling over to his brother's crouched form, his attention fixing on the small glimmering silver bracelet hooked on Sam's fingers.

"T. E.," Sam breathed, his eyes focusing back on the marred remains of their enemy.

"Put that down, Sam," Dean ordered, his steely voice firm.

Sam whipped around on his heels, looking up at his brother in indignation and concern. "Why? Dean, c'mon, just go get the salt."

"No," Dean replied coolly. "Put it back!"

"Dean..." Sam studied his brother for a minute, the once-clear jade now darkly cast.

"Okay, that's it, you're getting out of here," he ordered, standing at full height and grabbing his brother's arm.

Dean jerked back instinctively, his voice full of venom. "It's not yours. Put it back."

Sam moved past his brother cautiously, palming the bracelet and grabbing the salt can. "I'm ending this now, before you do something stupid."

"It's not yours. It's Tanner's—I gave it to him you son of a bitch!" Dean yelled, thrusting a hand out and shoving Sam back, nearly toppling the taller man.

"Dean--" Sam choked, bracing himself against the ravine wall. "You've been fine, what..."

Dean laughed shortly. "You know for a college boy you'll believe anything."

Sam bristled at Dean's mocking tone, and pushed off the rock face, moving toward the remains of Tanner and staring at his brother dead on. "You're not going to hurt me. We already prepared for that."

"You always were so trusting. It's your weakness you know? It's what makes everyone around you hate to even be in the same room with you. So damn dependent. Surprised you wipe your own ass," Dean taunted, stepping aside to block Sam's path.

Sam's eyes filled with something akin to pity and resignation. "Dean, move. Don't make me hurt you."

"I'd like to see you try," Dean spat viciously, splaying a forceful hand on his brother's chest and shoving Sam back to the rock wall, the salt canister thudding to the ground from impact.

"You're so going to regret this in the morning," Sam mumbled, pushing off the natural wall and launching himself at his brother, successfully pinning Dean to the ground.

Dean kicked his legs out, fighting against Sam's hold with angered fervor. Sam did his best to hang on, but soon found himself tossed aside, Dean scrambling on top of him and holding him down powerfully with one arm as the other snaked behind his back.

The deadly gleam of sharpened steel shone in the dim moonlight, illuminating Dean's face twisted in rage as the older brother brought the blade to Sam's throat, stilling any movement from the younger. "Like I said, you'll believe anything. No weapons? Sammy this is me! And you're wrong, little brother. I'm not the one who's going to be regretting his actions in the morning—you are."

A small gasp escaped Sam's lips, the blade digging deeper into the tight flesh of his neck. "Dean—please."

The haunting smirk of cold intention ghosted across Dean's face as he dug the steel edge into the skin, crimson spilling onto the favored knife.

"Goodbye, Sammy."

\* \* \* \*

Sam gasped as the blade sliced into his skin, wielded slowly and with meticulous care as Dean began to trace a shallow, thin line across his brother's throat, gracing the blade along the width of his neck but drawing no blood, merely leaving a long white scratch across the taut skin. Dean was playing with him, turning his imminent death at the hand of his older brother into nothing but a joke.

"Dean-!" Sam's cry choked off as the slight movement only succeeded in digging the blade in deeper.

"Lay still, little brother," Dean growled, tightening his grip on Sam. "Otherwise you're just going to make it worse than it has to be."

Sam gaped at Dean, his brother's face so close to his own that he could smell the salt from his sweat, the anger almost palpable. "Dean, please..."

His begging became a pained cry when Dean moved the blade to his collarbone and with a jerk of his wrist sliced through Sam's tee and tanned skin like scissors to paper.

"I told you not to move," Dean reiterated, his steely reply detached in every way as the sandy-haired man heaved a sigh and shook his head before placing the knife back down on his brother's throat. "Now, where were we?"

With a terrified grunt, Sam's body convulsed as he snapped his free arm across himself and struck out at Dean's knife hand. The risky movement jerked the blade away from his neck, and using the force of the unexpected defensive move, Sam knocked Dean sideways, rolling frantically out from under his older brother's weight.

Dean pushed himself off the ground, swiftly rising to his feet and clutching the knife tightly before lunging for Sam's half-standing form. Sam counter-blocked the attack with all the strength he had, balancing his weight and bracing his arms out in front of him to ward off Dean's frontal motion, the crack of bone to bone impact driving Sam to a fist flying frenzy as he tried to force his brother back and rid Dean of the deadly weapon.

Dean continued his rush, grunting as he warred against Sam's blows, seeking to topple the younger man over. Sam struck down again, only to find himself pushed, Dean stepping back quickly. With a startled gasp, Sam ducked rapidly just as the arc of the blade slashed past above him, missing him by a fraction.

Sam jolted up quickly, capitalizing on Dean's motion and slamming his elbow into the side of Dean's face. Dean staggered sideways, swearing, going down on one knee, but still managing to retain his grip on the knife. Sam stepped forward cautiously, concern for his brother temporarily overriding his survival instinct and was rewarded with a breath-stealing kick to the stomach as Dean uncoiled his body from the ground in a move that would have had Sam in awe of at any other time.

The dark-haired brother flew backwards into the leaves, his body slamming into the ravine floor with a resounding thud, jutting bone spearing his flesh as he landed with a crackling pop on one of the rotting skeletons scattered over the ground.

Sam scrambled to his hands and knees, straightening slowly, hands out in an attempt to bargain—or perhaps surrender. “Dean, Dean...I know you don’t want to hurt me, man, c’mon, this isn’t you. Just let me burn those bones and everything will be okay.”

Dean turned to face him, chest heaving as he gasped for breath, his face marred with trickling scarlet blood from the split in his cheek, no doubt courtesy of Sam’s elbow, and shook his head, “You’re wrong, Sammy boy, this is me, every friggin’ bit! And what’s it matter anyway? His body’s scattered all over the place. You could miss something.”

The younger brother rose to his full height, shaking his head to rid himself of the blurry vision that was plaguing him. “Then I’ll have to burn it all.”

“Won’t your precious cop friends get a little suspicious when they come back to find their crime scene gone?” Dean snickered, his gaze hard as he tilted the blade in his hand.

Sam straightened, his confidence gradually returning as he sought control over the situation. “You saw the news...they didn’t even go down here. Doesn’t matter, Tanner’s bones will be enough and we’ll be long gone by then.”

“I will. You won’t,” Dean stated firmly, before kicked out at Sam again.

But Sam was prepared this time and tightened his body, holding his ground as Dean collided with him. He allowed Dean’s momentum to carry them both down, rolling through the decaying leaves, kicking and cursing.

Sam fought desperately to keep that shining bade away from him and was finally gratified to see it go sailing into the distance as his foot connected with Dean’s hand.

Sensing an instant’s hesitation in Dean, with a determined grunt Sam arched up and swung his free leg up, bringing his knee into solid contact with Dean’s chin. Dean’s head flew back with an audible crack that scared the hell out of Sam as Dean’s body relaxed instantly.

Sam hastily disentangled himself from Dean and frantically felt for a pulse, panic seizing him in the few tense seconds it took to find it. He blew out his breath in a mighty sigh of relief as the steady thump pulsed beneath his fingers, fast but steady and strong.

Sam took a deep breath and gently patted Dean’s shoulder. His eyes scanned the darkened area for the necessary tools he’d need to finish the job. “Sorry about that Dean,” he murmured. “You can kick my ass later, okay? Gotta get rid of Tanner first, though.”

Sam stood shakily, brushing his dirty hands on his equally dirty jeans, and stumbled back to where the salt and gas can lay. They had stirred up the ground so much he had to cast his eyes all around the burial ground to relocate Tanner Ellis’s body. With grim determination, the dark haired Winchester liberally poured the white crystals out over the body, dropping the bracelet to lie with the decaying bone.

Sam walked a few steps away, sank down cross legged, exhausted, flicked his lighter into life and hurled it into the ragged collection of bones that had once been Tanner Ellis.

He covered his ears against the sharp wailing that fell and rose with the wind shifting through the trees and kept them there until the pile of bones was reduced to nothing but ash and the only sound was the crinkled whisper of leaves in the early winter trees.

\* \* \* \*

Once the bones became ash, Sam, too weary to walk, crawled back to where Dean lay and gently tried to rouse him. He was fairly certain Dean would be okay now that Tanner’s hold had been vanquished, but wariness was the better part of valor and Dean might launch out of his involuntary rest all Marine on Sam’s ass just on principle alone.

He pulled Dean’s upper body into his lap and lightly slapped Dean’s face with the back of his hand. “C’mon, Dean...it’s over now. You can come back. Dean? Dean!”

Concern gripped Sam and his adrenaline surged, only to drop just as suddenly as Dean shifted and moaned, hands rising to his head. Sam closed his eyes, relief evident through his shaky exhale.

"Wh...what happened...?" Dean groaned, his head falling back into Sam's lap, one hand over his eyes, the other feeling along his chin. He rolled his head, producing a series of unsettling pops that made Sam cringe.

Dean's eyes shifted back toward the spot where Tanner Ellis's bones still smoldered slightly. Sam watched his gaze shift, but kept his eyes firm on his brother, worry over Dean's silence creeping into him. The younger brother felt Dean stiffen beneath him and heard him draw in a sudden breath. "Holy crap..."

Sam followed Dean's look and actually jerked them both back.

Standing before them, soft and shimmering were no less than a dozen misty forms. The faces were all different, the ages, but the look each one wore was the same. Sam, keeping his eyes on them, helped push Dean up and they both dragged their legs under them. Sam managed to get to his feet albeit, crouching, but Dean remained swaying on his knees, one hand stretched toward the ground until Sam snaked his arm around his brother, helping him to a stand.

Heart racing, Sam ransacked his mind for an idea that would give them some protection from whatever the hell was about to happen, but nothing presented itself. Salt wasn't really an option, the canister was empty, and even then Sam didn't think he could get it done with Dean's weight on him.

After a few seconds, one of the wraiths shifted its gaze from Sam and Dean and raised it skyward, followed by the others. In a sudden movement, as graceful as a flight of birds, they swirled upward and were gone in a rush of wind that swept the leaves from the hollow and laid bare the grotesque remains that had been hidden beneath them.

Sam's mouth fell open as he watched, dumfounded. He turned to look at Dean, whose gaze moved from the bodies scattered through the hollow to Sam, eyes wide and horrified, knowing that had the fight gone another way, Sam would have been lying there with them. Dean shuddered, slumping sideways on his hip as the events of the past few hours swept over him.

Sam didn't need to be psychic to read Dean's mind. His hand rose to the blood soaking his brother's shirt from the gash on his chin, touching the damp material lightly. "Dean...it's okay. Just a little fix up is all. I'm alright and you're---you're going to be alright. It's over."

"I'm gonna be sick..." Dean wheezed, his knees buckling, and Sam hurriedly lowered him to the ground the rest of the way, watching helplessly as he buried his head in his arms.

"You okay?" Sam questioned anxiously, before patting Dean's shoulder and leaving the older brother to gather himself together while he finished retrieving their stuff and crammed it back into the duffle bags. He cast a glance over the graveyard, pity in his eyes. These men had been forgotten here long enough, and Sam resolved to see that rectified.

When he was done collecting everything, Sam crossed back over to Dean, only to find his brother's jaw behind closed lids. "Dean, wake up, man. You can't sleep, not yet."

Dean groaned, but his eyes flickered open at Sam's touch, and slowly the older brother raised himself into a sitting position, watching Sam with half-interest as the dark-haired man moved around him. It was a struggle but Sam managed to get Dean to his feet. The pull and ache of his own muscles and the fiery burn of the gash Dean had given him were clear reminders of the ferocity of their fight and Sam's stomach clenched as he gave his older brother a look over, realizing Dean had come out the worse.

As soon as Dean's feet were under him, Sam slid his own jacket off and balled it up. "Put this on your chin. You're still bleeding."

Dean nodded wordlessly and obeyed as Sam led them to the ravine wall. Sam glanced upward with slight trepidation before beginning his climb up. He stopped mid-way, beckoning for Dean to follow and offering a helping hand that merely got swatted away, as were Sam's efforts to initiate conversation. Dean's eyes went solely to the task at hand, his teeth grit with stumbling determination, and once back on the forest floor, they locked on the ground and stayed there.

To Sam's great relief, a scant hour later of silent trudging brought the car finally into view. To his surprise, Dean circled around to the passenger side and climbed in, dropping the keys on the driver's seat.

Sam entered the car, a frown of irritation and concern on his face as Dean closed his eyes and rested his head against the window, arms trailing loosely over mud-caked jeans. The younger brother inhaled deeply and placed a firm hand on Dean's shoulder, giving it a firm shake. "No."

Dean groaned in protest, but straightened a bit in the seat, his cloudy eyes fixed on the dash. "Dude, I'm fine."

"Yeah," Sam muttered, "I get it."

\* \* \* \*

The drive back to the motel passed in silence, and Sam had never been more relieved to pull into a parking lot and kill the Impala's rumbling engine. Rubbing his hand gently along the knife wound gracing his shoulder, he shot a look to Dean before grabbing the keys and exiting the car. The gear could wait until later.

He was halfway to the room door when he realized he'd not heard a second creaking car door and he turned back to see his brother still leaning against the passenger door. "You comin' in or sleeping outside? 'Cause lemme tell you, Jet Li, that's gonna hurt like a bitch in the morning."

Dean looked over at him, face tightening at the sight of Sam's blood-soaked collar. He swallowed thickly then turned away, slowly opening his door and moving stiffly against the fire enveloping his neck and jaw. He flicked a hand in gesture to Sam's own bloody clothing and grappled to take hold and be big brother again. "We need to do some mutual first aid, dude. But this time you're wearing the nurse's outfit, Florence."

Sam smirked in response, his fingernails chipping at the caked blood on his neck as Dean placed the key in the door and flung it open, "Only if you wear the wig."

Both brothers were grateful for the dip in conversation and the tense silence became slightly more comfortable as they entered the room that was uncomfortably warm after the chill of outdoors. Dean stepped inside and instantly stripped off his jacket with a grunt, sinking down on the nearest bed, head down and elbows on his knees.

"Are you still dizzy?" Sam questioned worriedly, removing his own jacket and discovering an interesting twinge in his shoulder from the force of Dean's assault. He tried not to grimace as he eased the sleeve down.

"I'm fine," Dean replied stiffly, not lifting his head. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Sam offered, examining his filthy hands. The survey of the rest of his clothing brought him to the same dirty conclusion. "Maybe we ought to get cleaned up before we try and work on these cuts."

Dean looked up momentarily, nodding. "Good idea...you go ahead, I'll wait."

Hesitating only a second, Sam nodded back and rummaged in his duffel for some clean clothes before heading off into the small bathroom. The rush of hot water against his aching body was welcome, but the fine line of pink that ran down his skin from the cuts and abrasions served as a jarring reminder of what was waiting for him outside the closed door.

Sam didn't doubt Dean was eating himself alive over what had happened; if he were completely honest Sam could barely stand to look at the gash on Dean's chin when he'd been the one fighting for his life. They had enough baggage to sink a cruiser and it seemed the more their hunts continued the more boxes upon boxes were added to their already heavy load.

Sam was more than prepared to deal with it, to clear out the clutter. Dean, on the other hand, always put up a front and Sam feared the day when his brother's façade of careless bravado was going to shatter into a million pieces. If anything, Dean's heightened anger over

the last few days was enough to clue Sam in a little to their current underlying issues, and he just hoped Dean would discuss them with him, although deep down he knew this was futile.

Wearily, Sam turned the creaking handles to shut off the water and dragged one of the worn motel towels over his body to dry it before pulling on a pair of sweat pants, leaving the T-shirt so that the cuts on his throat and shoulder could be bandaged properly. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door, and stepped back into the room.

Unsurprisingly, Dean was still hunched on the bed, exactly where Sam had left him. He glanced up as Sam came back into the room, jerking his head in the direction of the other bed. Sam followed his gaze and found the first aid kit open, the gauze and peroxide lying out on the comforter.

Sam opened his mouth to speak but wasn't given the chance as he turned back to see an empty bed and Dean shuffling his way to the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

\* \* \* \*

"If you'd rather I didn't, I understand," Dean stated softly, entering the room amidst a cloud of steam and staring at Sam's form hunched over the first aid kit.

"I could use the help," Sam responded, his mouth forming a tight line at Dean's disbelieving glance. There was no mistaking the fact that they both knew Sam could fix his own wounds. Hell, he'd sewn up worse on a number of occasions; compared to that, dealing with a gash or two was nothing. The cuts were shallow at best.

Dean tossed his dirty clothes off to the side of the room and walked over to his bed, easing himself down and shifting until he was directly across from Sam, hands outstretched. "Give it here, you baby."

"Baby?" Sam repeated, eyes wide at the childish insult.

"Oh, sorry," Dean apologized placatingly. "I meant big boy."

"Whatever," Sam muttered with an eye roll, but winced aloud when Dean pressed the cotton against his neck.

"That hurt?" Dean questioned, his eyes scanning Sam's face nervously as he placed the stained cotton down on the bed.

"Nah," Sam assured him, a smirk tugging at his lips. "But you are so not Nightingale."

Dean offered a small, pained smile at the remark, the gash at the base of his chin cracking and filling with fresh blood. Sam's eyes widened at the new crimson. "I think you need a couple of stitches, Dean."

"It's okay, Sam," Dean mumbled, bringing a hand to his chin to quell the bleeding.

"No, its not," Sam argued, his fist clenching at his side. "Now, I can do this, or the hospital can."

Dean straightened stiffly, his gaze hard. "C'mon you can't be serious. Are you serious?"

"Yes," Sam replied, beginning his hunt for the second kit containing the suture wire.

"Don't talk. You'll make it worse than it has to be."

Dean's breath caught in his throat and Sam mentally kicked himself for literally almost quoting his brother's killing words from earlier. "Sam--"

"Stop the guilt trip, Dean. I mean it!" Sam snapped, spinning around and meeting his brother's eyes. "It's not your fault. Hell, I friggen' shot you back in Roosevelt. This--" he yelled, waving a hand over his collarbone and neck, "-is a hell of a lot better than rock salt."

"That wasn't you're fault. Ellicot..."

"Yeah, and Tanner did the same to you!"

"You're awful bossy you know that?" Dean joked half-heartedly, rolling his eyes toward Sam.

The younger brother heaved a sigh and stalked back over to the bed, kit in hand. "Well, I learned from the best."

"'Stalin' I think you called me," Dean recalled, the whites of his teeth showing briefly behind his tight lips.

"You called me 'Adolf'." Sam reminded him, cupping his brother's chin and turning Dean's face toward him. "I didn't mean it."

"Yeah, you did," Dean replied, letting his brother clean the wound without so much as a grimace. "Guess I can be a little 'over-protective'."

"A little?" Sam laughed, tilting his head to get a better look at the gash.

"You're lucky I still have my teeth, dork," Dean stated, knocking Sam's hand away and fingering the gash. "You got some bony elbows. Worse than a damn chick. Going to have to feed you more or something."

"You'd eat it all anyway," Sam commented lightly, coming to the realization Dean wasn't letting him near big brother with a needle. "And hey, I seem to remember you throwing a good elbow at me once in a while."

"Dad kicked my ass for those," Dean replied with a smug half-grin.

Sam returned the grin, "I think that was more on the verbal warfare side of things. He praised us for kicking the crap out of each other. Sparring, right?"

"Yeah, well, bruises the man could handle. Chick stuff he couldn't," Dean stated reminiscing.

"There's nothing wrong with chick stuff," Sam commented, bunching up the used cotton and capping the peroxide.

"Yes there is." Dean returned with a laugh. "And we're not having an Oprah 'I'm sorry I said those mean things and tried to kill you' moment."

"Don't have to," Sam replied, sliding off the bed and walking to the trash can. "I know you are. So am I."

"Yeah," Dean murmured, scratching the back of his head. "So, uh...you want to see if cable's re-running Dr. Phil's special on sibling rivalry 'cause you so could use some pointers on your reconciliation technique."

"I knew it," Sam shot back with a laugh. "I knew you watched that crap!"

"Hey, he helps me heal," Dean joked, placing a hand on his chest and bowing his head in mock hurt.

"Right," Sam drawled, a wide grin on his face, dropping heavily on his own bed and grabbing the remote. "There's got to be one of those sad horror remakes on."

"You mean accurate retellings of bedtime nightmares?" Dean smirked, grimacing at the pull of broken skin on his chin. "Dude, you are so lucky I still have my teeth!"

"Don't worry, I'm sure Crest would've let you keep their contract. You could've done the ads for their Podunk department," Sam joked, finally stopping his channel flipping and settling on a channel. "Hell yeah, Mothman. You can't beat that."

"Yes you can," Dean grumbled, sinking back into the musty motel pillows, his eyes on Sam and not the snowy TV screen. "So, uh...we should probably head out first thing right? I mean the cops..."

"Don't worry about that. They are going to have their hands full." Sam said off-handedly, his eyes never leaving the screen. "Ugh, that's disgusting."

"What did you do, geek?" Dean asked curiously, propping himself up on his elbows.

"Just going to call them once we cross the town line. I mean, corpses trump us any day of the week," Sam replied, turning to give Dean a smirk before returning to his program.

"Yeah, but I'm still hotter than any dead guy," Dean bragged, the smile on his face fading to a tight frown at the light mood that had replaced the tense air that had occupied the small space not more than half a day ago. It always surprised Dean how he and Sam could be at each other's throats and then reconcile the instant the situation became dire.

If he had to guess, big brother would think for all their faults their bond as brothers could withstand anything—anger, bickering, attempted killings—at least, he hoped it could because the days looked darker each time the sun signaled the rise of a new one.

The End