

## LET GO

### PART ONE

#### Clifton, Connecticut

"I *hate* you!" Ashleigh Newton threw the framed photograph at her younger sister's head with such venom that when Caitlin ducked out of the way it flew right through the open door and into her bedroom, smashing into the far wall and raining down onto her bed in twenty jagged shards.

"Now look what you did!" Caitlin whined. "Mom – !"

"She's not here, remember?" Ashleigh spat, anger, hatred and every other emotion a teenager ever feels at one time or another towards an annoying younger sibling boiling like hot lava behind her pale blue eyes. "She's *never* here! She's never *been* here! And I'm tired of it! I'm tired of taking care of you!"

Caitlin backed into her bedroom sullenly, glancing at the pieces of broken glass on her bed. "I'm thirteen," she asserted quietly. "I can take care of myself."

Ashleigh stared at her, before tossing her long blonde hair over one shoulder. "Yeah, well tell that to Mom, geek!" she spat. "*Take care of your little sister while I'm at work, Ashleigh!*" she mimicked her parent sullenly. "Do you know how many years I've been hearing that? Well I'm *sick* of it! And I'm *going* to that party tonight, I don't care what Mom says!"

"You'll get in trouble."

Ashleigh narrowed her eyes. "Only if you tell, freak." It was a warning, and Caitlin recognized that only too well. Ashleigh took a breath, closing her eyes dramatically, before adding, "Do you know who's going to *be* at that party?"

"Justin Ross?" Caitlin hazarded an informed guess. That was, after all, the only name she'd heard out of her sister's mouth for the last two weeks. *And Justin said this to me in English class... And Justin has the coolest car... And Justin says he's getting a tattoo – maybe I should get a tattoo...* Caitlin shook her head in exasperation.

Ashleigh nodded, not picking up on her little sister's sardonic tone. "Yes he is," she confirmed, hands on hips, lips pouting. "And *I'm* going to be there. Bad enough I've got a geeky little sister following me around everywhere I go, ruining my credibility." She set her jaw, and through gritted teeth added, "And if I don't get Justin to ask me out tonight, it'll be *all your fault!*"

She turned on her heel in that dramatic daytime soap style she'd perfected and started to head for the stairs, before suddenly stopping and turning back to face her sister. "You know what?" she said, eyes narrowed.

"What?" Caitlin was almost afraid to ask.

Ashleigh's overly lip-glossed pouting lips had compressed into a thin line. "I wish you'd never been born. Then I wouldn't have had my life *ruined* having to look after you all the time!"

Caitlin stared after her big sister for a long moment as she stormed off down the stairs, wincing as she heard the front door slam shut behind her and secretly wishing that there had been some sign in Ashleigh's eyes that she hadn't meant what she'd just said.

But there hadn't been. And she *had* meant it. Every word. Caitlin just knew it.

Fighting back the tears stinging her eyes, Caitlin quietly closed her bedroom door, turning to look at the pieces of shattered picture frame strewn across her bed.

Reaching between the shards of broken glass, she carefully withdrew the photograph, staring at it through the tears blurring her vision.

She and Ashleigh when Mom had taken them to Disneyworld.

Ashleigh had been twelve, Caitlin eight. Ashleigh had her arm around her little sister's shoulders, and a big toothy Mickey Mouse smile lit up both their faces.

Caitlin had adored her big sister so much at that moment.

She'd been holding a balloon nearly as big as she was, but had fumbled the string when Mom had presented her with an ice cream cone, too klutzy even at that age to be able to handle two different operations at the same time. "Don't let go!" Mom had cried too late, the balloon already having started to drift away.

But then Ashleigh had chased after it, all the way back to the ice cream stand and beyond, until finally she'd jumped up and caught the string, proudly returning the balloon to her sobbing kid sister's clumsy fingers.

'Cause that's what big sisters did.

Mom had taken a photo then, as soon as Ashleigh had wiped the tears from Caitlin's cheeks, and the younger girl had treasured it ever since: a moment caught in time that she would never get back, but a memory that transported her to happier days whenever the world got to be too much for her.

She might not have been pretty; she might not have been popular; she might not have had lots of friends and a cool dad who took her camping.

But she had Ashleigh. She'd always have Ashleigh.

"She hates you, you know," a small voice said from behind her.

Caitlin ran her fingers over the photograph, for once ignoring the voice.

"She's always hated you. You're a burden to her. You're ruining her life."

Caitlin spared a tearful glance for the young girl standing behind the door. She was unnaturally pale, long lank blonde hair hanging down in tangles to her waist, long black dress down to her ankles that made no sound as she glided towards the bed.

"Were you there all the time?" Caitlin asked quietly.

The girl nodded, dark, dark eyes as black and as hard as coal glinting as they swept the scene before them. "She wishes you were dead," she said, her voice as cold and as dead as her black-rimmed eyes. "You're ruining her life."

Caitlin nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks and landing on the photograph she still clutched in her trembling hands.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something glinting.

"She wishes you were dead," the little girl repeated, holding up a piece of the broken glass, sharp edges grasped between long, thin fingers. "You're such a burden."

She held out the glass towards Caitlin, jet black gaze boring into the young girl's eyes.

Caitlin stared at the glass in the deathly white hand, sobbing silently, but knowing deep down what she needed to do.

"Ease her burden, Caitlin," the child in black said. "Show your sister how much you love her. Let her go..."

Caitlin nodded. "I do," she whispered through the salty tears dripping from her lips. "I'll always love her."

"Ease her burden. Let go."

Caitlin reached out and took the piece of glass.

"Ash? Catie? I'm home!"

Gina Newton tossed her house keys into the pot she kept by the front door. Ugly little brown ceramic thing Vince had given her as a present from the girls on the last Mother's Day before the accident.

"Catie? Where are you?"

She shrugged off her jacket, absently smoothing down the blue nurse's uniform she wore underneath.

"Ashleigh?"

She climbed the stairs tiredly, aching limbs yearning for the imminent bathtub.

"Catie?"

Caitlin's door was closed, which wasn't unusual in itself: Catie had become quite withdrawn over the past year or so, which Gina put down to puberty. She'd get over it. Ashleigh had been a handful at that age too. Still was, in fact.

"Caitlin?"

She pushed open the door, her attention drawn to a piece of broken glass lying incongruously on the fluffy pink carpet. "Honey, you break something?"

She looked up from the piece of glass, frowning. There was something dark staining the candy pink quilt cover. Something running down the lace frill and dripping onto the carpet.

Her eyes followed the stain up onto the bed.

To where her youngest daughter lay, ashen face staring sightlessly up at the ceiling, blue lips wet with tears. She held a photograph of herself and her sister clutched to her chest, as the gashes to her wrists oozed her lifeblood away like cheap red wine.

The scream never made it to Gina's lips before she collapsed to the floor, her baby girl's name trapped in her throat as her world shattered around her like the shards of a broken picture frame.

The young girl in the black dress emerged from behind the door, smiled at her handiwork, and moved on to the next house.

*"Daddy, the baby's crying!"*

*Daddy wasn't listening. Daddy was clutching the picture and staring out the window.*

*He did that a lot now.*

*"Daddy? Daddy, the baby's crying!"*

*But Daddy was crying too.*

"The baby's crying."

Dean Winchester glanced sideways at his kid brother, head lolled back against the car seat, eyes closed shut, long gangly limbs twitching.

Dean had heard Sam talk in his sleep before. Hell, Sam was *always* talking in his sleep. Especially when the nightmares took hold of him, creeping into his head and exploding behind his eyes when he least expected them.

But usually, he cried out for Jessica. Or for Mom. Occasionally for Dad, although that was rare these days. More often than not, Sam cried out for Dean himself, like he used to when they were kids.

But this was new.

"Daddy, the baby's crying," Sam repeated, his voice high-pitched, almost frightened, eyes bouncing around beneath tightly closed eyelids.

Something pulled at the back of Dean's mind, something painful and almost familiar, and his stomach lurched for some reason he couldn't seem to put his finger on.

"Sam?" he reached over, tugging gently at Sam's jacket.

"The baby's crying," Sam repeated, stubbornly refusing to wake up.

*Stop saying that... Please, Sam...*

"Sam!" Dean barked his brother's name a little louder than he'd intended, and Sam sat bolt upright, eyes wild and unfocused.

He glanced about himself uncertainly, Bambi caught in the headlights of a semi, taking in the details of his surroundings piece by piece until the pieces started to fit together.

Road. Car. Dean.  
All as it should be.

Sam took a deep breath, releasing it slowly as he drew a tired hand across his sweat-sheened forehead.

Dean spared him a brief “you okay?” look before that practiced air of being more interested in the road than his brother’s freaky nightmares quickly fell across his features.

“Nightmare?” he asked, trying not to sound overly concerned. He knew if Sam got wind of just how much his nightmare visions freaked his big brother out, then he himself would be ten times more freaked out than he already was.

And Dean couldn’t have that.

Sam shook his head, forehead crumpling into an uncertain frown. “I don’t think so,” he said quietly.

Dean spared him another sidelong glance. “Sure looked like it from over here,” he commented. “You were doing that whole demented windmill thing.”

The corners of Sam’s mouth lifted in a grudging smile. “I do *not* ‘windmill,’” he protested, the smile reaching his eyes and pushing away some of the ache.

“Oh yeah you do,” Dean insisted, trying to keep a straight face. “Like a giraffe on roller skates.”

“You’re getting dangerously close to a mixed metaphor there, dude,” Sam admonished, turning back to the road as a large sign reading “Connecticut’s finest apple pie” drifted past, closely followed by another that simply read “Hungry?” and a third directing the famished traveler to Ma Baker’s Pantry, next right.

Sam ignored the growling in his stomach, not for the first time wondering how Dean survived on a diet of M&Ms and coffee.

“Pardon me, Mr. Shakespeare,” Dean muttered, for once forgetting to play the dumb card. “But I’m telling you, you kick the crap outta my car one more time and I’m tying you up next time you go to sleep in here.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, pseudo-psychic panic almost forgotten. “Never had you down as the kinky type,” he said, grinning.

Dean shrugged, object of the exercise successfully achieved: Sam’s hands had stopped shaking and the color had returned to his pale cheeks. “It was just that one time,” he protested, flashing that naughty schoolboy grin of his. “And she was possessed by the spirit of a psycho machete-wielding mass murderer...”

Sam sniggered, and it was Dean’s turn to take a deep breath.

Generally speaking, talking was Sam’s thing, but Dean figured some talking was probably called for right now. “So...” he said, Serious Face returning with an almost audible *clunk*. “Not a nightmare?”

Sam shook his head. “Just words,” he said enigmatically, as if that made any more sense.

It took all of Dean’s self-control to keep his eyes on the road. “So you were just talking in your sleep?” he clarified tentatively. “Like regular folks?”

Sam looked a little fazed. “I guess,” he said. Then, glancing uncertainly at Dean out of the corner of his eye, he asked, “What did I say, anyway?”

Dean’s fingers tensed on the steering wheel. “You don’t remember?” he asked.

Sam shook his head.

Dean shrugged, trying to lighten his tone. “Something about a baby crying,” he said, deliberately vague.

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Huh,” he said. “Pretty weird.”

Dean nodded. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Seems to be a lot of that going around these parts: Clifton Connecticut, Capital of Weird.”

Sam shrugged, picking up a sheaf of motel notepaper he'd discarded on the seat next to him and frowning thoughtfully. "This month's Capital of Weird, at any rate," he agreed.

*Bingo!* Dean thought. *Subject successfully changed...* "So," he continued aloud. "How many folks have offed themselves in this little burg?" He knew the answer, but was eager to keep Sam's mind occupied.

"Eight," Sam replied instantly, eyeing his notes carefully. "In two months."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "That's a pretty high suicide rate for a town this size," he observed, frowning as the brake lights of the car ahead of them suddenly lit up red. "What...?" He slowed to match the Camry's deceleration, as both cars found themselves joining the back of a line of slowly moving vehicles.

"Yeah," Sam agreed absently, craning his long neck to try and see what was causing the snarl-up.

A truck was skewed at an odd angle on the opposite side of the road, a big burly guy in a red checkered shirt and ball cap leaning heavily against the cab door. A lady traffic cop put her hand on his arm as he leaned over and threw up all over the tarmac.

Sam frowned, not for the first time reflecting that if he had Spidey Senses, they'd be tingling the hell out of him right now.

Dean slowly pulled the car up level with the truck, matching the tortoise-like crawl of the line of traffic. The big trucker seemed to have lost all sense of composure – probably at the same time as he lost his breakfast all over the black top – and was trying desperately to look anywhere but at the yellow tarpaulin stretched across something caught between his front and rear axles.

Dean was used to the sight of blood. But even he clenched his jaw and tried not to look at the dark stains oozing out from beneath the tarpaulin, or the glistening substance that he was pretty sure was brain matter adorning the truck's front grille.

"I don't understand! I don't understand!" A middle-aged black lady sat sideways in the back seat of the police cruiser which was parked to the rear of the truck, leaning against the open door as she tugged hysterically at her hair. Another woman, of similar build and features to the first, leaned into the car, trying to pull the older woman's hands away from her thick curls.

"Lily –" the younger woman began, but got no further as the older woman's wailing increased in volume.

"Our baby brother, Connie!" she cried, grabbing one of the younger woman's hands and pressing it to her own cheek. "Our baby brother! Why? *Why?*"

Dean averted his gaze awkwardly as the younger woman suddenly turned to stare blankly in his direction, a look so empty in her dark brown eyes that he almost felt like he hadn't the heart to take another breath.

"...Opened the passenger door and rolled right out, right in front of the truck," one of the traffic cops was telling a guy in oily blue overalls who had just jumped out of a nearby orange tow truck. The mechanic turned his attention to a dark red Chrysler which was parked astride the lines in the middle of the road, three doors standing open, as if it had been hurriedly abandoned. He shook his head sadly, running a hand over the rear driver's side passenger door.

"No damage here," he announced with a sigh, almost as if he wished there had been. "Definitely not a fault with the door mechanism." He drew himself up to his full height and sighed again. "Marvyn Hayes. Jeez, I known him since he was ten years old..."

The tow truck guy's voice faded into the distance as Dean and Sam passed out of earshot, moving alongside two more police cruisers blocking the opposite side of the road, as various officers milled about, eyes downcast and voices subdued.

Dean squinted into his driver's side mirror, where he saw the two women seeming to collapse in on each other, the younger one falling to her knees on the tarmac as she clutched her sister's hands to her face.

He swallowed hard before muttering, "Victim number nine?"

Sam glanced away from the morbid scene, eyes straying to the sign at the side of the road: *Welcome to Clifton, Connecticut!*

"Maybe," he said quietly.

The clerk at the Clifton Motor Lodge was kind of pretty in an undemanding way, Dean thought idly, as he and Sam approached the front desk. She was a little tall for his tastes – probably only a couple of inches shorter than he was – unless she was standing on a box back there. Her gingery-blond hair was scraped back into country-girl pigtailed, and her big blue eyes were magnified to owl-like proportions by pink wire-rimmed spectacles.

She glanced at Dean briefly before her eyes shifted to Sam and practically lit up like a pink-rimmed blue neon sign.

*No accounting for taste*, Dean thought to himself, chalking this one up to another chick into tall, dark and geeky.

"Hey," the girl said, more to Sam than Dean, a big smile lighting up her features as she leant much further across the counter than was strictly necessary. "Welcome to Clifton Motor Lodge."

Sam smiled weakly, before suddenly glancing behind him, a frown creasing his brow. He stared briefly at the candy machine propped up against the rear wall of the office, before shaking his head and returning his attention to the desk clerk. "Hi –" he squinted at the girl's name tag. "– Cindy," he finished, trying to put a bit of effort into his words.

"Hi yourself," the girl was still grinning at Sam inanely, which Dean would have found amusing if he wasn't still puzzling over what Sam had just turned to look at.

"We'd like a room," Sam managed, trying not to act all cold and standoffish. The locals, after all, were going to be the key to their cracking this whole thing.

"Um –" Cindy faltered. "Two singles?" she asked tentatively, briefly eyeing Dean, who, rather than roll his eyes at the all-too-familiar insinuation, merely flashed her his broadest grin.

Sam nudged him, shooting him a "play nice" look before nodding. "Please."

The girl relaxed visibly, smile broadening as she readied the paperwork.

It was Dean's turn to nudge Sam, inclining his head in Cindy's direction and mouthing the words, "Go on!" insistently.

Sam glared at him for a second, before sighing and turning back to Cindy.

"So..." he began, never much good at this part of the job.

The girl returned his gaze enthusiastically as she slid a piece of paper and a pen across the counter at him. "Sign please," she said brightly.

Sam nodded, for a second at a loss as to what name was printed on the credit card he'd placed on the desk. Remembering, he scrawled "Sam Williams" on the bottom of the form before continuing, "So what was going on out on the highway when we came in? Bad accident?"

Cindy's big smile died a little. "Just been on the news," she said, nodding towards a beat-up old radio on the window sill. "Marvyn Hayes," she confirmed sadly, eyes downcast for a second. "He and his sisters run the hardware store in town." She shook her head. "Such a nice guy..."

Sam glanced sideways at Dean. "Been a few – uh – incidents round here lately, huh?" he said.

Cindy looked at him carefully as she swiped his card. "Yeah," she said at length. "Too many."

When she didn't add anything else, Dean gave Sam another "what are you waiting for?" look. Sam scowled at him. "Anyone have any idea what's going on?" he asked tentatively, turning his attention back to the desk clerk.

The girl just looked at him before shaking her head. After a beat, she returned her smile to its rightful place, shrugged her shoulders and handed him back his credit card. "But hey," she said resignedly. "Life goes on, huh?"

Sam smiled as engagingly as he was able. "I guess," he agreed, as Cindy slid him a couple of room keys.

"Room four," she said, pointing towards the office door. "Turn right, next to the soda machine."

Sam smiled again. "Thanks, Cindy," he said, turning to leave as quickly as possible.

"Have a nice stay, Sam," Cindy returned, staring after him dreamily.

It took Dean's entire reserve of self-control not to laugh out loud as he followed Sam back out into the courtyard. "*Have a nice stay, Sam,*" he mimicked Cindy cruelly, gazing up at Sam and batting his eyelashes adoringly.

"Shut up," Sam returned, squinting back at him with stormy eyes. He jammed his hands into his pockets and scowled menacingly as Dean breezed past him with a derisive snort. "And I've told you before about trying to pimp me out," he added, matching his brother's stride angrily.

"Worked out okay with Sarah though, right?" Dean pointed out, grinning. He stopped suddenly, causing Sam to pull up short behind him. Turning and putting a hand on his kid brother's shoulder, an earnest expression on his face that had absolutely no business being there, he added, "Dude, sometimes you just gotta take one for the team."

Dean's grin widened as Sam shot him a disgruntled scowl, and he turned and slid his key into the lock of the door next to which he found himself standing, pushing it open and surveying the room beyond thoughtfully.

His only concern was that the beds were a little too close together. Sam had a habit of starfishing in bed which tended to transform him into a mass of dangling arms and legs, and this, coupled with his Pete Townsend-style nightmare windmilling, could more than likely prove hazardous to Dean's health if there wasn't at least a three foot gap between him and his brother's gangly limbs.

Other than that, the room was virtually identical to a million others they'd stayed in over the years, and Dean merely shrugged and dumped his duffel bag down on the bed closest to the door.

Sam sighed loudly as he pushed the door closed behind him. "Just our luck," he said resignedly, shuffling over to the far bed and sitting down heavily, hands massaging his temples.

Dean glanced over at him. "Huh?"

Sam looked up, inclining his head towards the adjoining wall. "Next door to that," he said, as if that were an adequate explanation.

Dean frowned at him, cocking his head to one side as he listened out for whatever it was Sam was referring to. He shook his head after a couple of seconds of listening to nothing but the distant roar of cars on the nearby highway. "I don't hear anything," he admitted finally, his frown turning into that look of big brotherly concern that always irritated the hell out of Sam.

It was the younger brother's turn to frown. "What, you don't hear that?" he asked incredulously.

Dean just looked at him. "I don't know," he said carefully. "What do *you* hear,

Sammy?"

Sam raised his eyebrows as if it was patently obvious. "Baby crying," he said blankly, blinking hard as he tried to fathom his brother's darkening expression.

"Like in the car?" Dean asked at length.

It was Sam's turn to look blank. "Huh?"

Dean kept his expression purposefully neutral. "When you were talking in your sleep," he prodded gently. "You said something about a baby crying, remember?"

Sam put a weary hand to his forehead. "God, is that kid *never* going to shut up?" he muttered, as if Dean hadn't even spoken.

Dean bit his lip anxiously, caught between two conflicting responses: concern for Little Brother Sammy and fear for – of? – Freaky Psychic Sam. "What did you see back there?" he demanded suddenly, the question eliciting a raised eyebrow from his brother. "In the office," he clarified.

Sam just looked up at him, that blank look still seemingly nailed to his face. "Huh? I didn't –"

"Don't give me that whole 'I don't know what you're talking about, Dean' crap, Sam," Dean snapped. "'Cause I don't wanna hear it, not this time."

Dean's expression was enough to convince Sam that his big brother wasn't kidding. "I don't know if it was anything," he managed with a resigned shrug. "I just –" he stumbled over the words, the noise of the screaming baby making it hard for him to concentrate. "I just felt like someone was standing behind me, that's all."

Dean raised an eyebrow noncommittally. "That's all?"

"Yeah," Sam confirmed, resisting the urge to put his hands over his ears. "Listen, I need to get out of here. I think I saw a diner across the street..." Although he'd suddenly lost his appetite, Sam needed to get the hell out of the motel room and this was the only excuse he thought Dean might actually buy.

Dean, however, didn't seem completely convinced, but was also vaguely aware that they hadn't eaten in a while. "All right," he agreed slowly. "Maybe a good helping of cholesterol and caffeine is what you need."

Sam smiled weakly, following his brother from the room gratefully...only to have the noise of the baby's wailing stop abruptly the instant he stepped over the threshold.

"Huh," he muttered, glancing behind him, back into the motel room, before returning his attention to Dean, who had stopped and was just standing there watching him. He had that expression on his face that he used to get when they were kids and Sam was getting picked on by the school bully.

It always ended in tears.

And they were never Dean's.

"What?" Dean asked carefully, shuffling his feet and trying not to look too worried.

"Baby's stopped," Sam said shortly, closing the motel room door and shrugging mentally as he headed off across the parking lot. Dean paused for a second, before turning and following.

Behind them, a deathly pale little girl emerged silently from behind the soda machine, thin fingers twisting at the ribbons adorning her long black dress as a satisfied smile played lopsidedly across her lips.

## PART TWO

"So," Dean said, cautiously lifting the bun off the top of his grease burger, as if he expected a pickle to jump out at him, guns a-blazing. When it didn't, he shrugged, picked up the sandwich and vaguely considered taking a bite. He glanced across at



Sam, who was gazing distractedly out the diner window, a solitary French fry poised helplessly between mouth and plate. "Victim number nine," the older brother continued, still amazed Sam had taken the junk food option when the diner actually had *green stuff* on the menu. "Hardware store guy."

When Sam continued to stare out the window, completely oblivious to the fact that his brother had even spoken, Dean reached across the table, snatched the French fry out of his kid brother's fingers and swallowed it whole.

"Hey – !" Sam protested, attention snapping back to his brother, a dazed scowl crumpling his face.

Dean wasn't grinning like he should have been. "What were you looking at?" he demanded, Sammy Defense Mode firing on all cylinders. "Sam?"

Sam shrugged, sighing. "Nothing," he admitted, glancing one more time across the street to the soda machine outside their motel room. He could have sworn...

"Nothing," he repeated, shaking his head.

Dean glanced involuntarily in the direction Sam had been staring, but all he saw was a chick in a purple Civic trying to reverse into the parking space next to the Impala. As he watched, he found himself squeezing his burger so tightly the slice of suspicious-looking pickle shot straight across the table, where it landed with a splat on the lid of Sam's laptop.

"Nice," Sam muttered, lifting the offending vegetable pincer-like between thumb and forefinger before depositing it back on Dean's plate.

He opened the laptop absently, just to give himself something to focus on.

Dean shrugged, relaxing as the chick in the Civic disembarked from her vehicle without incident. "Hey, man, my baby's been through a lot lately," he explained, eyes lingering over the Chevy. "Don't want her messing up again."

"Uh-huh," Sam wasn't even listening, having heard it all a thousand times.

"Victim number nine," he said instead, just to prove to Dean that he *had* been listening earlier. "Hardware store guy. Ran the business with his two older sisters, just like Cindy said."

Dean raised an eyebrow, grinning. "Chicks in glasses," he said, shaking his head. "Always dig you, man."

"Shut up," Sam replied, more out of habit than anything else, picking at another fry as he perused the screen in front of him.

Dean shrugged again. "So, the victims have *anything* in common?"

"Not really. Twenty-four-year-old waitress; fifty-two-year-old accountant; gas station clerk. The last victim was a lawyer – "

"So not all bad news then. "

Sam just gave him a look over the top of the computer screen.

"Sammy," Dean announced, his voice as serious as he could make it. "You need glasses."

Sam frowned at the non-sequitur. "Huh?" he said.

"So you can glare at me disapprovingly over the top of them," Dean explained.

"Like the schoolmarm you were born to be."

Sam didn't even dignify that comment with a response. "Joseph McKenzie," he began reading. "Older brother of the deceased, stated 'My sister had everything to live for...'. Yada yada yada... Jason Vasquez, 34, took his own life last night by jumping into the path of an oncoming freight train..."

"Ouch," Dean commented.

"...He leaves behind two older brothers and an older sister..." Sam continued searching the Clifton Chronicle website almost lethargically, chin resting on the heel of his hand. "Emile Tannenbaum, 42, survived only by his sister Eloise, 54..."

Again, a fry was poised midway between plate and mouth, and Dean could have sworn he saw a light bulb go on above Sam's head.

For a second Sam just stared at the screen, before turning his stare on his brother.

"What?" Dean asked.

"Younger siblings," Sam said slowly, eyes widening.

Dean dropped his burger. "Wait..." he said, catching on to what Sam was saying. "No way!" he burst out. "All of them?"

Sam was tapping on the keyboard feverishly, lunch completely forgotten.

"Younger sister, younger brother, youngest of six, youngest of three..." He looked up at Dean, expression half way between triumphant and... something else. "All of them," he confirmed finally.

The expression on Dean's face didn't seem to alter, but Sam knew his brother well enough to notice that little muscle tighten in his cheek, and half expected him to just grab hold of him, throw him in the Impala and drive the hell out of Clifton as fast as the old Chevy could take them.

But for once, Dean didn't move, didn't say a word, just nodded his head and tensed his jaw.

Not for the first time, Sam found himself wishing he could read his big brother's mind.

"So...?" Sam tried to coax something – anything – from his brother. He wanted – needed – to know what Dean thinking right now.

Dean took a half-hearted bite out of his burger, obviously still considering his response, before eventually announcing with a degree of chilling finality, "We need to get this thing. Quickly. Before it kills anyone else."

And Sam didn't need to be able to read Dean's mind to know exactly what he meant.

"So – victim number seven, right?" Dean confirmed, pulling the Impala into the pump area of a decrepit-looking gas station and expertly maneuvering the big car into a space beside one of the pumps.

Sam nodded absently, fingers pressed into his temple with one hand as he juggled his rough notes with the other. "Craig Carter," he replied, screwing up his eyes as his headache made the notes swim in and out of focus.

Dean frowned, door half open, one foot out of the car. He paused, carefully examining the pained expression on his brother's face before asking tentatively, "Baby's back, huh?"

Sam didn't look at him, just nodded ever-so-slightly, the infant's incessant wailing reverberating in his ear drums.

Sam knew Dean wasn't stupid, no matter what image he often tried to project to the outside world. And he also knew that he'd probably cottoned on to the fact that this baby thing *wasn't* his kid brother demonstrating superhuman hearing abilities, even before Sam himself had figured it out. Dean was just like that. The slightest thing going on with Sammy, Dean knew about it. Usually before Sam did. "I'm okay," Sam said quietly, inadvertently glancing in the back seat as he caught a suggestion of blackness moving in the rearview mirror.

There was nothing there. There'd been nothing there all day.

"You wanna sit this one out?" Dean asked, resisting the temptation to follow Sam's glance over his shoulder. If Sam was seeing freaky vision stuff, Dean didn't think he wanted to know...

Sam shook his head and instantly regretted it, wincing as his brain seemed to

rattle in his skull. He swung his legs out of the car reluctantly, pulling himself up to his full height just as, once again, the screaming in his head stopped abruptly.

He glanced behind him.

Across the roof of the car, to where Dean was standing watching him.

Back into the rear seat.

Back at Dean.

The older Winchester frowned. "No baby?" he hazarded, seeing the pain lift visibly from Sam's eyes.

Sam tried to smile reassuringly, but only succeeded in a weak grimace. "No baby," he confirmed.

Dean nodded, like that was perfectly normal. "So," he recapped slowly. "Car. Motel room."

Sam nodded right back.

Dean returned his brother's grimace. Sure, what was one more bit of weirdness in their already weird lives? Who'd even notice? "That could be awkward," he pointed out. "You know. If you want to go anywhere; sleep anywhere..."

Sam nodded again. "Yeah," he agreed. "Awkward. One way to describe it."

Recognizing Dean's "you're not freaking me out one bit, little brother" face, which was about as convincing as his "no really, I don't mind you driving" face, Sam tried again for the reassuring smile, and this time he almost nailed it.

Dean relaxed slightly. "We actually need gas," was one of his less subtle changes of subject, but he headed off towards the pump regardless.

"Okay," Sam tried to keep his tone light. The last thing he needed right now was Dean all skittish and over-protective. "I'll be inside."

Screaming baby or not, there was some über-weirdness going on in this little town, and that had to be Sam's top priority. So what if all the victims of – whatever the hell this thing was – were younger siblings? Didn't mean a thing. Didn't make a scrap of difference. Probably had nothing to do with his auditory wailing rug-rat hallucinations anyway.

*Keep telling yourself that, Sammy,* he heard Dean's voice echoing in his head, and glanced backwards to where his brother stood pumping gas.

Watching him.

Sam turned back quickly, like he'd not even seen, shoving open the convenience store door with a tinkle of bells that for some unaccountable reason irritated the hell out of him.

He headed for the register, where a stocky youth in a bright orange vest that made his pale complexion seem positively deathly was staring fixedly at something to the side of the register, an odd look of fascinated wonder on his face.

Figuring he was probably just watching some crappy daytime soap, Sam followed the guy's gaze to a couple of monochrome CCTV monitors, one showing a grainy view of the pump area outside, where Sam could see Dean finishing up refueling, while the other showed a slightly clearer image of the blindspot to the rear of the store.

Shrugging at what passed for entertainment in these parts, Sam found his most winning smile and strode on up to the counter. "Hey," he said brightly, slightly perturbed by the clerk's delay at registering his presence.

The youth turned to look at him, mouth slightly agape and a dazed expression clouding his big brown eyes. "I help you with somethin'?" he asked, seeming to come back to himself at Sam's second attempt at a smile.

"I hope so," Sam replied in as friendly a tone as he could manage. The clerk continued to gaze at him a little vacantly, and Sam found himself uncomfortably shifting from foot to foot. "My name's Sam –" he stumbled over the alias again. "– Williams,"

he managed. "I'm a Psych student at NYU."

The clerk continued to stare at him unblinkingly, and if it hadn't been for his initial greeting, Sam might have wondered if he even spoke English.

He cleared his throat before plowing on. "I – uh – we're here researching the string of suicides you've had in town," he said slowly. "You know, to see if there's some kind of environmental cause, or an outside influence at work..." He trailed off at the blank look on the clerk's face.

"Yeah," the guy said eventually, tapping short fingernails with just a trace of black nail polish still clinging to them on the counter top. "Bad stuff going down around here..." He broke off, eyes drifting to the door, where the bell tinkled to signal Dean's entrance.

Slightly encouraged by the fact that the clerk actually did seem to possess some language skills, Sam briefly nodded an acknowledgement in Dean's direction, as his brother scuttled off down one of the aisles, no doubt scavenging for sugar and carbohydrate.

"He with you?" the clerk asked suddenly, causing Sam to glance back in his direction, the young man looking more animated than he had throughout this whole sorry excuse for a conversation.

If Sam hadn't known better... He brushed off the idea, merely answering, "Uh. Yeah. My brother. He's helping me research..." he trailed off again, as the clerk leaned an elbow on a stack of National Enquirers piled on the counter top, balancing his stubby chin in the palm of his upturned hand and inclining his head to better follow Dean's progress down the aisle.

"Brother, huh?" the clerk echoed, a rather inane smile breaking out on his face as he finally turned his attention back to Sam with glittering eyes. "He's kinda – wow," he finished the sentence with an embarrassed snort, and Sam had to fight to keep a straight face, forcing down the guffaw of laughter trying to escape his throat.

Payback could so be a bitch sometimes...

Failing miserably to suppress a wicked grin, Sam nodded his head in agreement. "Yeah," he said, not entirely untruthfully. "He gets that a lot."

The clerk's eyes darted quickly back to Sam, an almost apologetic look on his face. "Not that you're chopped liver or anything," he added, almost as an afterthought. "But he's..." he trailed off again, eyes sliding back in Dean's direction.

"'Wow'?" Sam supplied, the wicked grin growing steadily more wicked by the second.

"Exactly," the clerk agreed, nodding.

Sam cleared his throat again. "So," he said, trying to take advantage of his brother's unintentionally distracting presence. "These people who died...?" The clerk's gaze returned somewhat reluctantly to Sam. "One of them worked here?"

The youth's face scrunched up, although Sam couldn't quite figure the emotion displayed there. "Mmm..." he mumbled noncommittally.

"Craig Carter, right?" Sam added, eyes finally locating the clerk's name tag, which seemed to have come loose and was currently hanging sideways off his vest. "Huh, Pete?"

Pete seemed surprised at Sam's use of his name, eyes darkening suspiciously. "Yeah," he said slowly, breaking eye contact to glance down at his well-bitten nails. "Threw himself off of North Road Bridge."

Sam nodded sympathetically, sensing Dean's approach from the crinkling sound of the family-sized packet of M&Ms he had clutched to his chest, and the way Pete's gaze had suddenly shifted to a point a couple of feet behind Sam's shoulder. "So. Craig," Sam pressed on. "Was he depressed? Upset about something? Any major life

changes recently, or...?"

Pete fidgeted nervously. "You know," he said, suddenly very interested in his fingernails once again. "I'm not really comfortable discussing this with strangers..."

Sam continued the sympathetic nodding, turning briefly to Dean as he juggled the M&Ms with two bottles of Coke, a pack of Twinkies and enough chocolate bars to keep an entire school on a sugar high for days. He grinned broadly at his brother, who froze in his tracks, so attuned to Sam's facial expressions that he knew instantly that the kid was up to something.

"What?" he demanded, tacitly insisting to be let in on whatever it was Sam had going on.

"Pete, this is my brother Dean," Sam said, turning his grin back to Pete, who just stared at the both of them, before smiling goofily at Dean.

To his credit, Dean's expression didn't falter, and his voice was low enough that only Sam heard him growl, "Sammy, you're a dead man," through clenched teeth.

"Pete doesn't feel comfortable discussing the suicides with strangers," Sam explained, clapping his brother on the shoulder gleefully.

Dean squinted sideways at him, not insensible to the fact that the little squirt was enjoying this. "That so?" he muttered, before turning a lighthouse-bright smile on Pete and heading for the counter, making a point of stepping on Sam's foot on the way.

Sam managed to hide a grimace of pain beneath his own amused grin, intrigued as to how Dean was going to handle the situation. After all, Dean was nothing if not an expert at charming information out of people. Granted, usually *female* people. But it wasn't as if he'd never had a guy hit on him before. It was just... Well, this was going to be *entertaining*. And Sam felt a little guilty for taking pleasure in his big brother's well-disguised discomfort.

But only a little guilty.

And it wasn't as if Pete looked like he was going to need a whole hell of a lot of charming.

Trying his best to ignore Sam's increasingly irritating grin, Dean sauntered up to the register and unceremoniously dumped his sugar fix in front of the dazed-looking clerk. "So Pete," he said evenly, leaning on the counter as casually as a guy making rude hand gestures at his brother behind his back was able. "There's some freaky stuff happening around here, huh?"

Pete nodded his agreement, eyes never leaving Dean's as he fiddled absently with his dangling name tag. "Craig was a good guy," he said, obviously more comfortable opening up to Dean than your average stranger. Like Sam, for instance. He leaned forwards slightly, and Sam could swear he saw Dean fight the urge to take a step back. "Craig was real understanding," Pete continued, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Didn't judge."

Dean nodded, smile still plastered across his face. "You and he were friends then?"

Pete inclined his head sadly, an odd shadow passing across his features. "He was always nice to me," he insisted.

"So not the sort to – you know – kill himself?"

"No way. Happiest guy I ever met. Just got engaged. To – to a girl," Pete clarified quickly, and Dean nodded, aiming for sympathetic-yet-encouraging.

"You know any of the others? The other people who've died?"

"Mr. Tannenbaum," Pete admitted, eyes sliding back to Dean's almost shyly. "We lived opposite him and his sister over on Chestnut when I was a kid. And I went to school with Krista Page. And everyone knew Marvyn Hayes..."

Dean continued to nod encouragingly. Although he hoped not *too* encouragingly.

“And then there’s that poor kid from last night…”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up at that. “What kid from last night?” he asked, forgetting for a second to let Dean’s “Wow” Factor handle the situation.

Pete looked uncomfortable, as if only just remembering Sam was there. “Gina Newton’s youngest, Catie,” he said.

“A kid?” Dean asked, genuine concern etched into his features.

Pete nodded. “Yeah. She’s, like, twelve I think. Maybe thirteen. Slashed her wrists up good.”

Dean swallowed hard. Always had trouble with jobs where there were kids involved. “Is she – ?” he left the question hanging, as if unable to complete it.

Pete shook his head. “Gina’s a nurse at Clifton General,” he explained. “Got to her quick enough. But I think she’s supposed to be in a coma or something.”

Dean nodded. “We hadn’t heard about her. A survivor, huh?”

“Don’t know if I’d call her that. She’s gonna be pretty messed up if she ever comes round. Nice little kid too. Idolized that big sister of hers.” Pete said, finally remembering to ring up Dean’s purchases. He was so distracted he almost forgot to charge him for the gas, and still undercharged him by five dollars. Dean could feel Sam’s eyes boring into the back of his head, but didn’t turn around, instead digging in his pocket for a few crumpled bills that he tossed over the counter at Pete.

Pete dug some change out of the register, pressing the coins into Dean’s hand with a little more contact than was strictly necessary, causing Dean to shudder involuntarily.

Although not the most sensitive person in the world, Dean forced another smile in Pete’s direction, figuring the least he could do was not leave the kid feeling used. “Well,” he began, picking up the Cokes and shoving them at Sam a lot harder than he’d meant. “Thanks for your help, Pete,” he said, digging back into the recesses of his brain in an attempt to drag out the cover story Sam had cooked up for them. “You know, this paper’s a third of Sam’s grade, so, you know. Wouldn’t want the kid to fall on his ass or anything.” He tossed Sam a look that suggested this was *exactly* what he wanted, before turning back to the counter and gathering up the food. Pete was still staring at him. “So. Um. Bye then.”

Dean turned, more than grateful for his chance to escape what was rapidly turning into one of the most excruciating encounters of his life, briefly pausing mid-stride as Pete called out after him, “Maybe see you around?”

Dean gritted his teeth, again trying to ignore the smirk on Sam’s face. “Maybe,” he said brightly, shoving the door with his shoulder and muttering under his breath, “Over my dead body.”

Sam followed him out of the store, tossing Pete a nod of thanks before breaking into a wide grin followed by a snort of derisive laughter.

Dean was halfway to the car before he growled, “You *ever* do that to me again and this town’s gonna have another dead younger sibling to add to its scoresheet.”

Sam put a placating hand on Dean’s shoulder, turning him around to face him, a mock-earnest expression on his face. “Dude,” he said, seriously. “Sometimes you just gotta take one for the team.”

Dean scowled at him, causing Sam’s grin to widen.

“Hey,” he added. “It could have been worse. I could have given him your number…”

A brief look of panic passed across Dean’s face, before he realized that even Sam wouldn’t do that to him. He slapped the kid across the back of the head, before grumbling, “Get in the car, Matilda…”

“Okay then,” Dean said, sparing Sam a quick glance as he negotiated a particularly evil bend in the highway, where the road just seemed to twist away from him like a ball of string that had just come through an encounter with an overly-energetic kitten. “Hospital?”

Sam nodded, once again sifting through his notes. “Looks like Marvyn Hayes was actually victim number ten. We need to talk to that little girl. If anyone can tell us what’s going on around here, she can.”

“Not if she’s in a coma, or catatonic, or whatever,” Dean pointed out. “But I guess we might get lucky. Her Mom or her sister might know something.” He shrugged, fixing his eyes back on the twisty road just as Sam let out a sudden gasp of pain.

“Sam – ”

“The baby won’t stop crying,” Sam said, again in that weird, strangled voice he’d used earlier when he’d been talking in his sleep.

But this time, he was wide awake.

“Make the baby stop! Make him stop!” Sam’s voice was high-pitched and urgent, laced with a sheer terror that turned Dean’s blood to ice water. He was clutching at his head with both hands, face completely obscured by his long fingers.

“Sam!” Dean grabbed Sam’s arm, shaking him none-too-gently as he tried to pry his hands from his face.

Slowly removing his shaking fingers to reveal ashen skin, Sam’s eyes stared wildly out the windshield, before suddenly widening in alarm.

“Dean, look out!”

Dean’s attention snapped instantly back to the road, where the back end of a black SUV was skewed across their path, hood facing downwards into the ditch running by the side of yet another treacherous bend in the road.

Heart doing a tango against his ribcage, Dean slammed on the brakes with both feet, yanking at the wheel and sending the Impala into a skid that threw it right across the road and straight into the ditch opposite the stricken SUV, driver’s side tilting down at a crazy angle, causing Sam to slide down the seat and smash into his brother.

“Son of a…” Dean growled, tasting blood in his mouth where his jaw had smacked against the steering wheel. “Sammy – ?”

“I’m fine,” Sam said quickly, massaging the back of his neck as he twisted to look over at the SUV. “But I’ll bet that guy’s not.”

He crawled back up towards the passenger door, wrestled it open and jumped up onto the road, sprinting across to the SUV before Dean even had the chance to climb out of the ditch.

“Sam!”

Sam tugged at the driver’s door of the SUV, eyes landing on a pale, blond-haired guy who sat staring out of the front windshield and straight down into the ditch. He clutched at something small and silver in his right hand, which was raised awkwardly away from the dashboard.

The man blinked once, as if that were the only way he had of acknowledging Sam’s presence.

“Hey man,” Sam said cautiously, doing a visual check of the guy for injuries. A bruise was starting to purple its way across his forehead, made more visible by the receding blond hairline, and his head seemed scrunched down in the collar of his jacket, inexplicably reminding Sam of a turtle. “You okay?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Dean appear at the edge of the ditch behind him, but waved him back. *I got it.*

Dean balled his hands into fists, but stayed where he was, figuring Sam had the driver covered and he’d call if he needed help.

He dug his cellphone out of his jeans pocket and busied himself calling 911, wrinkling his nose at the almost overpowering smell of gas emanating from the SUV.

Sam turned his attention back to the sandy-haired driver who still hadn't returned his concerned gaze. "Listen man," he said slowly, recognizing that the guy was most likely in shock. "We need to get you out of there. I think your gas tank might be cracked –"

"I know," the man said suddenly, still staring fixedly ahead of him as he slowly opened the fingers of his right hand. "It's what I deserve."

Sam glanced from the man's distressed face to the silver object glinting in his hand, heart missing several beats as he realized what the guy was holding.

A lighter.

"Hey," Sam's tone became more urgent, and he glanced back at Dean, who was pacing back and forth at the top of the ditch, cellphone pressed to his ear. "Hey, you don't want to do that," Sam said quickly, eyes sliding back to the guy in the car as he made a sudden grab for the lighter.

But the driver was too fast, snatching his hand away and sliding easily down into the passenger seat thanks to the vehicle's severe list.

"Don't!" he warned, thumb hovering over the flint as his startled blue eyes finally met Sam's. "Don't," he repeated, a little more softly. "It's what I deserve. It's what I have to do."

Sam held up his hands placatingly, clearing his face of anything resembling guile. "Okay, okay," he said. "Listen," he continued, eyes drawn to the lighter. "My name's Sam. What's yours?"

"I don't wanna talk," the man insisted, waving the lighter in Sam's direction threateningly, the gas fumes almost overpowering them both.

"Okay," Sam agreed. "How about / talk? Okay? You wanna tell me your name first?" He repeated the question, left hand moving slowly towards the open door as he lifted one foot onto the running board.

The man sighed, running his left hand over his tired-looking face, the stubble on his chin sounding rough as sand paper under his fingers. The whites of his eyes were tinged with red, dark circles marring the skin below. "Adrian," he admitted eventually, holding Sam's gaze and not flinching as the younger man eased himself further into the vehicle.

"Hey Adrian," Sam tried to smile, but only grimaced as sudden pain flared right between his eyes and the unmistakable howl of an infant began to reverberate in the back of his head.

"You hear her too, huh?" Adrian said, a trace of desperation in his voice.

Sam managed to regain the use of his vocal cords long enough to ask, "Hear what?" in a slightly startled voice. Could this guy hear the baby too? Were they sharing an hallucination? Was that even possible?

"*Her*," Adrian said bitterly. "You hear *her*."

He glanced briefly into the back seat, where Sam *almost* saw a smudge of black in his peripheral vision.

But there was nothing there.

Just like the Impala.

Just like the motel.

"Who do you hear, Adrian?" Sam asked, trying to ignore the empty back seat and the crackle of static suddenly bursting from the radio. He inched himself up slowly into the driver's seat, making no sudden movements apart from one involuntary shake of the head, as if that could dislodge the incessant wailing echoing around in there.

Adrian wiped at the cold sweat on his brow with the sleeve of his denim jacket,



gaze once more sliding to the empty back seat. "She's right," was all he said. "She's right. I have to do this!"

He brought his thumb down against the flint, just as Sam blurted, "Why? What did you do that was so terrible?"

Adrian paused at the question, biting his pale lip nervously, eyes tearing up as he thought about the answer. "I never meant to be a burden," he said, voice thick and tearful. "I never meant to hurt her. But he says it's him or me, so I have to go."

"Who says?" Sam asked, eyeing the lighter warily as the baby's screams became even more insistent.

"Luke," Adrian returned, as if Sam should know who that was. "He says he'll leave her if I don't move out."

"Leave who?" Sam managed to ask, barely able to hear his own voice over the howl of the baby, but figuring he needed to keep the guy talking, at least until the cops got here.

He silently prayed that Dean *had* actually *called* the cops...

"Nicki," Adrian replied blankly.

"And Nicki's...?"

"My sister," Adrian frowned, as if not understanding why Sam should need this explaining to him.

Sister.

Suddenly Sam got a cold feeling the length of his spine. "And Luke's going to leave her?"

Adrian nodded. "Unless I leave first. Says he can't stand me in his house any more. And with Nicki pregnant, I can't..."

"You live with your sister and her husband, huh?" Sam asked, eyes still lingering over the lighter as the smell of gas became even stronger.

Adrian nodded. "Since the accident," he said, eyes downcast. "Since I couldn't take care of myself."

"Your big sister asked you to move in?" Sam ventured. "So she could take care of you?"

Adrian nodded again. "Nicki's always taken care of me," he said sadly. "Even when we were kids."

"Yeah," Sam said softly. "I understand."

Adrian met his gaze hopefully. "You do?" he said, and he could tell from Sam's expression that he did.

Sam nodded, causing the man in front of him to go momentarily out of focus. Maybe it was the fumes... "I got a big brother," he explained, blinking.

"And you wouldn't want to be a burden to him, right?" Adrian sounded almost eager. Desperate.

Sam thought about it for a second. Plenty of times, especially in his teens, Sam had felt like he'd been a burden to Dean. Especially when Sam had gotten to that age where he'd started answering Dad's orders with questions, questions that always seemed to end up with John yelling at Dean for some reason, when he should have been yelling at Sam.

"No," he answered truthfully. "I wouldn't want to be a burden to my brother."

The baby's screams seemed to rise several decibels at that point, and it was all Sam could do to stay upright.

Adrian was nodding. "Which is why I need to do this..." An odd strangled laugh escaped his lips as the radio suddenly burst back into life, the old theme tune from *MASH* crackling its way into the car. ...*Suicide is painless*... "I hope that's true," he muttered, wiping at his eyes again. "I really do..."

"Wait!" Sam burst out. "You said there was an accident?"

Adrian seemed to have changed his mind about not wanting to talk, suddenly in the mood to bare his soul to a total stranger.

Maybe it was like going to confession, Sam thought. Unburdening himself of his guilt before he passed on.

"Seven years ago now," Adrian said wistfully. "Though I can still see his face."

"Whose face?"

"His name was Vince," Adrian said softly. "Vince Newton. It was late. It was dark. It was raining. I'd been driving for twelve hours straight, and this road's so damn twisted..."

"Here?" Sam pointed vaguely towards his feet. "It happened here?"

Adrian nodded, tears finally leaking from his reddening eyes. "He was changing a flat by the side of the road," he explained. "I didn't even see him until I caught his face in my headlights. He looked so surprised. Like, 'How can it end here? How can this be the way I go out?' He had two little girls." He met Sam's gaze evenly. "One of them slit her wrists last night."

Sam nodded. Catie Newton.

"I did that," Adrian said. "That happened because of me."

"No –"

"Just like Luke's going to leave Nicki."

"It's not your fault –"

"Because he can't stand me moping around his house any more."

"No. Adrian, you can't –"

"And she's right. I have to let go. I have to end it."

The baby's screams became so loud just then, so pitiful, so demanding, that Sam had to cover his ears, head swimming as he began to slide sideways in the seat.

*Let go, Sam. Just let go. You've caused enough pain...*

"Sam? Sam!"

Someone was calling him. He could just make out his name above the helplessly heartbreaking screams of the baby.

*"Daddy, the baby's crying. Daddy, I don't know what to do..."*

*Let go, Sam. Just let go.*

"Sam? Sam! SAM!"

*"Sam, I'm sorry."*

"Sam, I'm sorry." Adrian's thumb struck the flint.

And all Sam saw was fire.

### **PART THREE**

The sky had been blue a few minutes ago.

Dean was sure of it.

Where had all these black clouds come from? Why was the air so hot it hurt to breathe?

And why was he was lying flat on his back in the middle of the road staring up at the sky in the first place?

He blinked, taking in the fact that he was, at least, still breathing. Even if it hurt. And his heart was beating. Which, in his experience, was usually a good thing.

He tried to move, but couldn't seem to get his body to co-operate, wincing as pain shot through his left shoulder and down his arm, his left leg seeming to scream, *Try that again and you're a dead man!*

So maybe moving wasn't such a good idea.

He settled instead for continuing to stare up at the black clouds, concentrating on breathing the hot, acrid air, and finally realizing he wasn't looking at clouds at all.

He was looking at smoke.

Thick, black, gasoline-filled smoke.

There'd been a car in a ditch.

And a guy with a lighter.

And Sam.

Sam.

*Sam!*

"Sam!" Dean yelled the name so hard it hurt his throat, already raw and scratchy from the smoke he'd inhaled. "Sam!" he yelled again, flailing around wildly before realizing there was something heavy on top of him, crushing his left side, and that he had his right hand wrapped impossibly tightly around someone else's wrist.

"Sammy?"

Dean managed to raise his head all of an inch, relief flooding him when he realized the dead weight on top of him didn't seem actually... dead.

"Sam?"

The asphalt was hot against Dean's shoulder blades and he could feel the heat from the burning SUV even from this distance, the force of the explosion having sent him – and apparently Sam – flying halfway into the road, landing in a muddled heap with Dean half trapped underneath his brother's lanky form.

At least Sam had landed on something softer than the blacktop.

Sam was lying awkwardly and Dean was scared to try and get out from under him in case the kid was more injured than he looked. He tried to move his right side a little, but gasped at the sharp pain shooting up his leg. "Son of a..." he hissed, taking a breath. "Okay, nap time's over, Sammy," he grunted through gritted teeth. "You gotta get off of me now."

"Dean?"

Sam's head moved ever-so-slightly, eyes dulled and confused as he tried to figure out why the world had shifted on its axis and everything was suddenly more horizontal than it had been.

"It's about time, Sleeping Beauty!" Dean tried unsuccessfully to hide his relief at the sound of Sam's voice.

"What happened?" Sam asked, going for the obvious question when nothing else seemed able to penetrate his addled brain.

"I pulled you out of an exploding car, dumbass," was Dean's just as obvious reply, as he tried to push Sam off him with a little more success than his previous attempt. Managing to free his arm and shoulder, he sat up carefully, the world spinning as his eyes homed in on the burning SUV and the dark shape huddled in the front passenger seat.

"Adrian!" Sam twisted suddenly, as if the events of the past few minutes had suddenly rushed back into his head the second Dean saw the burning body. Dean winced as Sam pushed roughly away from him, the younger Winchester managing to get to his knees before the world took another lurch for the horizontal.

Sam closed his eyes momentarily, attempting to regain his equilibrium as Dean tried to steady him with a hand against his shoulder.

It was then that Sam realized he'd lost all sensation in his left hand. He glanced down before looking back up at his brother. "You can let go of me now, Dean," he announced calmly, indicating the death grip the older Winchester still had around his wrist.

Dean returned Sam's stare blankly before following his gaze downwards, a

slightly abashed look briefly clouding his features as he released his brother abruptly. Figuring sometimes a good offense really was the best defense, he indicated the steadily burning SUV with a nod of his head before demanding, "Dude, what were you *thinking?*"

Sam shifted painfully into a sitting position, shoulder to shoulder with his brother in the middle of the road. "I wasn't," he admitted at length, staring at the burning corpse just visible through the clouds of thick smoke enveloping the SUV. "I wasn't thinking at all."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "You're telling me!" he burst out. "Why in *hell* would you get into a car leaking fuel with a guy waving around a lighter? Oh yeah, and let's not forget the 'in a town full of suicidal maniacs' part!"

Sam dragged a hand through his shaggy hair. "It was pretty dumb, I admit." His tone became wistful as he continued to stare at the SUV. "I thought I could save him."

Dean put a hand on his brother's shoulder then, his own tone softening. "We can't save everyone, Sammy," he said. "I think *you* told *me* that once."

"I could have saved him," Sam returned, not meeting his brother's concerned gaze. "If it hadn't been for – for..." he broke off suddenly, lacing his fingers at the back of his neck and leaning his forehead on his knees.

"You heard the baby again, right?"

Sam looked up at that, locking eyes with Dean's head-on. "I think he heard it too," he said, indicating Adrian with a tiny movement of his chin. "He certainly heard something..."

"Well right now, I hear sirens," Dean said, trying to shrug off Sam's words. He managed to get shakily to his feet, feeling like an eighty-year-old who'd misplaced his walker.

He straightened, offering Sam his hand, which the younger brother took almost absently, pulling himself up off the asphalt with a groan, so engrossed by the flames dancing before his eyes that he almost missed the fact that Dean held on to him slightly longer than was absolutely necessary.

Surprised, he just looked at his older brother for a second, before the words, "I'm fine," tumbled automatically from his mouth, closely followed by a slightly less defensive, "And thanks." When Dean continued to gaze at him levelly without saying a word, he added, "For saving my ass and everything."

"Again," Dean observed, before adding, "But hey, how bored would I be without something trying to possess, choke or blow my little brother up every other day, huh?"

"Yeah, you'd miss me if I was gone," Sam said, absently trying to match Dean's lighter tone as his gaze drifted off in the direction of the multitude of approaching blue lights.

Dean continued to look at him thoughtfully, an almost pained expression crossing his face. *Yeah, I did*, he thought. *And I'm damned if I'm going to let that happen again...*

"Ow!" Dean bit back a flood of curses as the ER nurse dabbed carefully at the cut above his eye before applying a couple of butterfly bandages.

Male nurses. Surely a crime against nature.

"Don't be such a baby," Sam admonished from the next bed, flexing his elbow as his cute blonde *female* nurse finished up dressing the burn to his right arm.

"Don't be such a pain in the ass," Dean retorted, scowling at the guy nurse, who stood back to admire his handiwork.

"Superficial really," the nurse said, smiling reassuringly.

"Yeah, he gets that a lot," Sam interjected with a wry grin, eliciting another scowl

from his brother.

"Shouldn't even scar," the nurse added.

Although tempted to trot out the tried and tested "chicks dig scars" line, Dean bit it back, instead nodding over at his kid brother. "And how about the human briquette over there?" he asked. "He gonna live to see another barbecue?"

"He's going to be just fine," the cute blonde nurse assured him, oblivious to Sam's irritated grimace. "You guys were pretty lucky."

Sam met Dean's gaze, a serious look in his eyes, and for once Dean didn't look away. "Yeah," Sam agreed, quietly. "Damn lucky."

"So you really think this is – you know – appropriate?" Sam asked awkwardly, following Dean into the hospital elevator without failing to notice his big brother's slight limp.

"Sammy," Dean said, pushing the button for floor six. "How often do we get survivors, huh? Caitlin Newton might be our one and only lead."

"Maybe," he agreed reluctantly, glancing at the floor guide pinned to the elevator wall. "You think they'll even let us in to talk to her?"

Dean shrugged. "Who can resist two guys who just narrowly avoided getting their eyebrows burnt off by an exploding car, huh?" he arched his uninjured brow. "That nurse was right: We're damn lucky we're still this pretty."

"Not to mention modest."

"Modesty's for wallflowers, geeks and Oscar acceptance speeches," Dean announced, stepping off the elevator and exchanging his trademarked grin with Sam's patented long-suffering head shake.

As Dean approached the big Hispanic lady at the nurses' station, Sam cast an uncertain glance down the antiseptic white corridor to his right, a chill suddenly overcoming him.

He shuddered, pulling his jacket tighter around him as Dean turned back from the nurse, who appeared to have just finished up giving him directions.

Sam frowned. "We got in?" he asked skeptically.

Dean nodded. "Course we did," he said, heading off past Sam, down the corridor that had so chilled his brother seconds before. "She's in the Long Term Care Unit," he added. "Not so tight on visiting restrictions."

Sam seemed a little surprised by this but let it slide, figuring Dean had probably told the nurse they were relatives of the poor kid or something equally untrue. He followed his brother down the hallway, noting how it seemed to be growing colder by the second, each breath becoming more painful than the last.

Dean was heading for a room at the end of the corridor, where a teenaged girl with long blonde hair was perched on the edge of an uncomfortable-looking bright red plastic chair, blue tennis shoes scuffing anxiously against the grey and white tiled floor.

The girl looked up as Dean approached, wiping at tear-stained cheeks awkwardly. Dean smiled gently, and was about to introduce himself when he realized Sam was no longer behind him. He didn't need to turn to confirm this; he just *knew* it.

Finally glancing over his shoulder, Dean was surprised to see Sam standing in the doorway of the next room down the hall, gazing inside as if whatever was in there was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

"Don't tell me," Dean offered, pulling up behind his brother and peering over his shoulder. "Keira Knightley in one of those backless hospital gowns, right? You always did go for the willowy English rose types..."

"Guess again," Sam corrected him, staring fixedly at the occupant of the room's only bed as Dean suddenly realized his kid brother was shivering.

"Whoa," Dean burst out, following Sam's gaze. "Grandma, what big eyes you have."

It was hard to tell how old the lady in the hospital bed actually was. Late eighties if Sam had to guess. Her long white hair hung over her shoulder in a single thick braid, thin white lips pursed together in a sleep that looked anything but peaceful.

But what really stood out about her were her eyes – completely white as they stared sightlessly up at the ceiling.

"Cataracts?" Dean asked, taking a step closer to the old woman before hesitating, suddenly remembering the old crone in Fitchburg. *I sleep with my peepers open*. He stopped dead, glancing back at Sam, who shrugged, but came no further into the room than the doorway, an uncomfortable expression on his face.

"What?" Dean asked immediately, hand jerking reflexively to the 9mm stuck in the waistband of his jeans. "Sam?"

"I don't know," Sam tried to explain, frowning. "There's something – not right – with her..."

"Not right how?" Dean asked, glancing to the old lady before fixing his attention back on Sam. "Sam? Something made you come in here, right? Tremor in the Force or what?"

"When I passed her door," Sam admitted slowly. "I felt as if I'd walked into a meat locker."

Dean frowned, gaze sliding back to the old woman before he carefully inched over to the end of her bed where he plucked her chart off the rail. "Esther Haywood," he read, flipping through the notes without understanding a whole lot of what was written there. He was able to guess that the old lady had been here for some time from the sheer number of pages attached to the clipboard, but he finally found a note that confirmed this. "Transferred here from Cedar View Rest Home two months ago."

"She's in a coma?" Sam asked.

"Pretty much," Dean confirmed.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's old, dude," Dean replied simply. "Getting near her time." He shrugged, replacing the old lady's chart before pushing past his brother and back out into the hallway, obviously having decided that Esther Haywood didn't warrant any more of their attention.

"C'mon, Sam," he urged, when Sam continued to linger on the threshold of the old lady's room. "We've got living – well, nearly living – people to talk to."

Sam nodded, tearing himself from Esther Haywood's doorway grudgingly, and following his brother back out towards the blonde girl, who sat waiting, watching them.

"Hey," Dean was already in full charm offensive, smiling at the girl, who looked up at him uncertainly. "I'm Dean, this is my brother Sam," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "Is this Caitlin Newton's room?"

The girl nodded, inclining her head towards the open door in front of where she sat. "She's in there," she said, voice thick, as if she'd been crying for hours, which, from the look of her face, Dean figured she probably had.

Dean smiled again, peering through the open door to where a young girl lay on a standard hospital bed, open, unseeing eyes gazing up at the ceiling much as Esther Haywood's had.

A frazzled-looking woman in a nurse's uniform sat in another of the hard plastic chairs next to the girl's bed, hand clutching at her daughter's fingers, every now and then straying to the bandages about her wrist.

Dean glanced back at Sam, motioning him into the room before taking up the chair next to the blonde kid in the hallway. "She your sister?" he asked carefully,

acknowledging Sam's entering Caitlin's room with a slight nod of his head.

The girl nodded, brushing at the tears on her cheeks with the sleeve of a sparkly white cardigan that was half on, half off her hunched shoulders. "Catie," she said quietly.

Dean nodded. "And that would make you...?"

The girl didn't answer, just looked at him, suspicion clouding her already darkened features. "That depends who *you* are," she said, sniffing back her tears as she fumbled around for her usual surfeit of sass.

Dean smiled lopsidedly. "Good point," he said. "My brother and I are checking out the – uh – the people who have tried to hurt themselves around here. Sam's a student at NYU..."

"So you're trying to find a reason?" the girl seized on his words. "A cause?"

Dean nodded. "Yeah. We – "

"Don't bother," the girl cut him off abruptly, folding her arms sullenly across her chest. "*I'm* the cause."

Dean bit his lip, considering his next move. "What did you say your name was again?" he tried.

"I didn't," the girl responded, gaze now on Sam as he pulled up a chair next to her Mom. "Ashleigh," she admitted finally, tone softening, almost in resignation.

Dean smiled at her. "Nice to meet you, Ashleigh," he said. "Wish we could have met under better circumstances." Ashleigh cast him an uncertain glance, and he seized his opportunity. "So why's this your fault?"

Ashleigh continued to gaze at him. "I was mean to her," she said simply. "I was mean to my little sister."

"Mean how?"

Ashleigh looked away. "I – I told her I wished she'd never been born," she admitted. "All because I wanted to go to a stupid party with a stupid boy who just wanted to..." She broke off, leaning her elbows against her knees and covering her eyes with her hands. She took a deep breath, before looking up at Dean again. "That's why she hurt herself. Because of me. Because I said that to her." Fresh tears began to slide down her cheeks, and Dean put a tentative hand on her shoulder.

"I said that to my little brother once," he admitted, nodding in Sam's direction.

Ashleigh didn't respond straight away, just glanced from Dean to Sam and back again. "You – did?" she said eventually, almost as if she didn't believe him.

Dean nodded. "He was only a baby, though," he said. "I could have been reading him Dr. Seuss for all he knew about it."

Ashleigh frowned. "Then that's not the same thing," she said, almost sounding betrayed.

"No it's not," Dean agreed. "But I felt pretty bad after I said it. And I swore I'd never say it again, no matter how mad I got at him."

"Were you mad at him when you said it?"

Dean cocked his head to one side, trying to remember. "No," he said finally. "Not at him. But he was closest. Which was worse."

Ashleigh nodded slowly. "Yeah," she agreed. "Catie was closest too."

"Is that why you're out here and she's in there?"

Ashleigh's eyes slipped to examine her shoes. "I can't go in," she admitted. "I can't face her. Not after this. Not after what I said."

"Why d'you think she did this?" Dean asked. "Because she was mad at *you*?"

Ashleigh just looked at him. "Maybe."

"If she was mad at you," Dean said, "don't you think she would have taken her anger out on *you* rather than herself, just like you took your anger out on her?"

"I guess..."

"Then maybe she didn't do this because she was mad at you."

"Why else would she have done it?" Ashleigh didn't understand what Dean was getting at.

Dean put a hand on her arm. "Maybe she did this because she *loves* you. Ever think of that?"

"...So it's a coma?" Sam asked, leaning forward slightly in his chair.

Gina Newton looked haggard as hell, curly brown hair all over the place and mascara blackening her pale cheeks.

Sam had a knack of getting information out of people, and Gina felt like he was the first person she'd spoken to all day who understood. Who she could trust. She wasn't sure why. He just had nice eyes. Sincere. Trustworthy.

"Not really," she answered, eyes straying from Sam's to Catie's. "The doctors say she can probably hear everything we're saying. She just – she just doesn't want to come back to us. Not just yet."

Sam studied Caitlin's waxy face thoughtfully, eerily reminded of that doll Dean had had to torch to off the kid in the evil portrait. Her blue eyes were open, gazing up at the ceiling, and she even blinked every once in a while. But Sam didn't have a clue what the girl was looking at... Maybe just the ceiling tiles, like everyone else. "So it's shock?" he asked. "Like post-traumatic stress?"

Gina shrugged. "Maybe. To be honest, I don't think the doctors really know. Wait and see. That's all they can advise..." She trailed off, gaze slipping back to her youngest daughter as her fingers caressed her hand.

"We're – " Sam tried to figure out how to phrase what he was about to say next. "Me and my brother. We're trying to find a – a cause for all of this..." Gina's eyes returned to his in surprise. "For all of these people – hurting themselves."

Gina nodded then. "Catie would never have done this," she said quietly. "Never. But lately..."

"It's that girl," Ashleigh's voice broke in on her mother's thoughts, the nurse turning in surprise to see her oldest daughter enter the room, closely followed by a young man she guessed was Sam's brother.

Ashleigh seemed almost afraid to enter the room, never mind look at her sister. Her eyes trailed the tubes in Caitlin's arms, the monitor attached to her finger, the beeping heart machine over on the other side of the bed.

She could feel Dean standing close behind her, and wondered at first whether he was waiting to stop her if she lost her nerve and tried to bolt. But one glance over her shoulder told her otherwise. He was standing there just to *be* there, and Ashleigh realized that here was someone who actually understood exactly what she was feeling.

*I wish you'd never been born. Then Mommy would still be here...*

Dean remembered saying those words as clearly as if he'd said them yesterday, five years old and trying to get his baby brother to go to sleep in a strange room in a strange motel with Daddy reading strange books that seemed to make him deaf to Sam's frightened sobs.

Dean had been frightened too, but hadn't known what to do about that. Daddy didn't seem to hear Dean any more than he heard Sammy just lately.

He hadn't meant to say it. The words had just come tumbling out of his mouth of their own accord because Dean was mad that Mommy wasn't here to make Sammy quiet the way she used to, and Daddy just wasn't listening.

Eventually, after several minutes of covering his ears and glaring at his baby brother sullenly, Dean had hefted Sammy up onto his shoulder like Mom used to, and to



his amazement he had been rewarded almost immediately with a cessation of the wailing, followed eventually by a satisfied gurgle and little hands hugging his neck.

And suddenly Dean wasn't as frightened any more.

In that moment, Dean had sworn he would never ever wish his little brother away again. And he would certainly never blame him for Mom not being there. Because that was just plain stupid.

"What girl?"

Grown-up Sam's voice startled Dean out of his less-than-pleasant reverie, the younger Winchester swiveling in his chair to better question Ashleigh.

The teenager glanced uncertainly at her Mom, as if somehow seeking her permission to be in Caitlin's room. Gina held out a weary hand to her eldest, which Ashleigh took gratefully, and Sam, ever the gentleman, vacated his chair so that the family could sit together at long last.

Ashleigh was eyeing Caitlin nervously, as if expecting her wide-open eyes to suddenly turn on her accusingly.

But they didn't, and Catie continued to stare up at the ceiling as if Ashleigh wasn't even there.

"What girl, Ashleigh?" Gina prodded then, echoing Sam's question.

Ashleigh took a big, shuddering sigh. "I thought she was just an imaginary friend at first," she explained. "I know Catie's a little old for that kind of thing, but – you know – she *is* kinda –" she fumbled for the right word. " – *Odd* like that. She said this girl had started visiting her in her bedroom – talking to her." She met her mother's uncertain gaze. "Catie said she was a ghost," she finished finally.

"A ghost?" Gina echoed, trying to keep the cynicism out of her voice. "You're kidding, right?"

Ashleigh shook her head. "Catie said she just appeared and disappeared out of thin air."

Gina shook her head and drew an exhausted hand across her forehead, while Sam and Dean just glanced briefly at each other to confirm they were on the same page.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" Gina demanded, reminding Dean uncomfortably of the way Dad had chewed him out for not telling him about Sam's visions earlier.

"Like you'd have believed me!" Ashleigh returned. "A ghost in Catie's bedroom? Get serious, Mom." Her gaze shifted again to her sister, voice lowering in bewilderment. "I just thought she was making it up."

Dean shot Sam a glance before asking, "So. This ghost girl. She have a name?"

Ashleigh shook her head slowly. "If she did, Catie never mentioned it."

"You – uh – you ever see her?" Sam asked tentatively.

Ashleigh seemed to look at him properly for the first time. "Like I said," she reiterated with an exasperated sigh. "I thought Catie was making the whole thing up. Little sisters sometimes do stupid stuff to get attention."

A wry smile lifted the corners of Dean's mouth, and he leaned against the wall, arms folded across his chest. "Yeah," he agreed, looking pointedly at Sam. "Little brothers too."

"C'mon, Doris, you can't *still* be mad," Dean wheedled, sticking a cup of Starbucks' finest in front of the microfiche reader.

Sam picked up the hot cup, moving it away from the old machine with a glare that wordlessly chided Dean for his gross breach in library etiquette.

Dean pulled up a heavy wooden chair with an exaggerated sigh, the squeak of legs on old-fashioned parquet floor causing the three middle-aged women using the

room's other fiche readers to look up and shake their heads at him disapprovingly.

Dean grinned winningly at them before leaning in close to Sam and whispering, "Take a good long look, Sammy. That's your future, dude."

Sam did his best *I'm not listening* jaw clench, eyes staring fixedly at the screen in front of him, scrolling through page after page of the Clifton Chronicle's newspaper archive a little too fast to be actually reading any of it.

"I never did anything stupid to get your attention," he growled finally, still not looking at Dean.

*I knew it*, Dean thought to himself, before instantly replying, "Transformer in the microwave," and beginning to count on his fingers. "Jumping off a second story balcony to illustrate the laws of gravity. Trying to convince me you knew how to drive because you'd watched a *Knight Rider* marathon. Oh, and let's not forget that whole dog food lasagna incident..."

"Shut up," Sam returned, an irritated grin pulling at the corners of his mouth despite his best efforts. "And besides, I think you're forgetting that department store Santa."

Dean didn't miss a beat. "The guy had it coming," he said. "Shouldn't have promised you an Optimus Prime if he couldn't deliver."

"You set fire to his beard."

"Could have been worse. He'd have been ho-ho-ing down the barrel of a .38 if Dad hadn't shown up."

Sam snorted. "Yeah," he said, shaking his head. "What was I thinking putting Optimus Prime in the microwave?"

"You were one twisted six-year-old, dude," Dean commented, eyes straying to the fiche screen as Sam took a sip of the coffee. "So any luck tracking down our suicide whisperer?"

"Always supposing that's what she is..." Sam pointed out distractedly, eyes lighting on a front page spread with the headline, "Child death stuns local community."

He read carefully, scrolling down the screen and finally landing on a photograph of two little girls sitting on the steps of a big blue house that could easily have belonged on any street in Clifton. The girls were virtual mirror images of each other, one maybe a few years older than the other, but both so alike that it was actually quite eerie.

Sam squinted at the caption beneath the photograph, reading it twice, three times, before zooming back up to the top of the page and muttering, "No. Way," in disbelief.

"What?" Dean asked, also squinting at the screen.

"May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1933," Sam said. "Eight-year-old Emily Haywood takes her own life by hanging."

Dean grimaced. "Eight?" he echoed. "What would make an eight-year-old hang herself?"

Sam continued to read the article before giving Dean the edited highlights. "Dad loses his job at the local textile factory in 1931 – near the beginning of the Great Depression. He goes off to New York City to find work, leaving his two daughters, then aged six and eleven, in the care of their elderly grandmother – their Mom died in childbirth. Grandma gets sick, leaving big sister to care for her and for the younger girl. Little sister hangs herself when food gets scarce and money even scarcer, and she starts believing she's too much of a burden to her sister..."

"Younger sibling commits suicide," Dean muttered. "Jeez, and I thought we had a crappy childhood."

"You've not heard the best part."

Dean arched an eyebrow expectantly. "Oh do tell, Geek Wonder, the suspense

is killing me.”

“Older sister’s name. Esther Haywood.”

Dean frowned. “Where’ve I heard that name...?”

“Old gal in the next hospital room to Catie Newton.”

“Coma Granny? ‘I got chills they’re multiplying’ Coma Granny?”

Sam nodded. “The very same.”

“Huh,” Dean commented, looking back at the picture of the two little girls smiling broadly on the blue house’s front porch. “Little Emily look familiar?” he asked carefully.

Sam didn’t look at him. “Maybe,” he replied quietly, the closest he was going to get to admitting he’d seen – or *thought* he’d seen – anything at all to his brother. He too studied the grainy, sepia-toned photograph, eyes lingering on the girls’ long blonde hair braided under identical straw hats, their big dark eyes seeming to swallow the camera lens.

“So little sister Emily’s persuading younger siblings everywhere to follow her lead, huh?” Dean theorized.

Sam shrugged. “Stranger things have happened,” he said. “Violent death. Pissed off spirit.”

Dean nodded. “That thing say where Emily’s buried?”

“Just tell me one thing,” Sam said sullenly, leaning on the handle of the shovel and wiping sweat from his forehead. “Why do we *always* have to come to creepy graveyards in the middle of the night?”

Dean looked up from digging just long enough to shoot Sam a “well, duh!” look. “You wanna sell front row tickets to this little salt n’ burn party, be my guest,” he said, continuing to dig, despite the gravestone above him seeming to glare at him.

*Emily Louise Haywood, 1925 – 1933. Beloved daughter and sister.*

Dean *hated* kid jobs.

“Speaking of interested onlookers,” Sam said suddenly, turning his attention to a spot several rows of graves beyond Dean’s shoulder. “I think your boyfriend’s back.”

Dean stopped what he was doing instantly, dread creeping up his spine as he turned slowly, eyes finally lighting on a darkly dressed figure propped up against a distant gravestone.

Watching them.

“Aw, man!” he muttered, sinking the shovel into the dirt as he turned back to Sam.

“You got a stalker, bro,” Sam had that highly amused grin on his face again, and Dean was seriously tempted to wipe it off with a well-placed blow from the shovel.

“What’s *he* doing here?” Dean asked, not really expecting Sam to answer, but hoping if he pretended the guy wasn’t there, he might magically disappear.

Sam shrugged. “Go ask him.”

“*You* go ask him!” Dean returned. “*You’re* the sensitive sympathetic one, remember? I just do the driving and dig the holes!”

Sam tossed him an exasperated frown. “Go *talk* to him.”

“You’re not hearing me, Sammy! *You* talk, *I* dig. Them’s the rules.”

“Not this time, Romeo,” Sam replied, snatching the shovel out of his brother’s hand. “This time *I* dig, *you* talk. Now go.”

Dean did his best to replicate Sam’s *Do I have to?* look, but he’d never managed to get it down to a science the way Sam had.

“Go,” Sam insisted, shooing Dean away with a flick of the hand. “I mean it.”

Dean’s scowl darkened. “Man,” he muttered under his breath. “There aren’t enough M&Ms in the world to make up for this...”

He hopped up out of the as yet quite shallow hole, and trudged across several final resting places before coming to a halt in front of the young man who had served them earlier at the gas station. "So, Pete, right?" he said.

The clerk looked up at him uncertainly, eyes a little muddled by the contents of the three-quarters-empty beer bottle clutched in his hand. The white headphone cord of his MP3 player stood out starkly against his black clothing, and Dean noted the fresh coat of black nail polish and thick black eyeliner ringing his sunken eyes.

Goth kid. Just his luck.

Pete pulled one of the headphones from his ear, head still jerking slightly in time to something loud that Dean didn't recognize.

"Sorry," the kid shrugged, glancing at the headphone. "Muse," he explained. "They're English. Craig liked them."

Dean nodded, noting the three empty beer bottles nestled around Pete's black-booted feet before moving on up to the name etched on the gravestone against which he was leaning. *Craig James Carter, 1981 – 2006. Only the good die young.*

Dean admired the sentiments, sighing as he sat himself down on the damp grass next to Pete. "So," he began, wishing for the hundredth time that Sam was taking care of this touchy-feely crap. "You and Craig...?"

"Completely one-sided," Pete said instantly, his speech slightly slurred as his eyes slid in and out of focus as he tried to fix his attention on Dean. Not that having to look at Dean was a chore or anything. But he just couldn't shake the feeling that Craig might be watching somehow; like he was being unfaithful or something. "He was engaged," he said quietly. "I told you that, right?"

Dean nodded, his attention drawn to a blue-green tub with yellow writing on it which had been discarded with the empty beer bottles. It looked somehow familiar, but he couldn't quite identify it in the gloom. "Yeah," he agreed. "That pretty much sucks."

Pete raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"The unrequited thing," Dean clarified. "Not the engaged thing."

Pete nodded. "Yeah," he agreed. "Unrequited sucks." His distracted gaze had briefly shifted back to Sam. "So your brother's digging up someone's grave," he observed, his voice devoid of emotion.

"Yeah," Dean said slowly, shrugging. "Kid's gotta have a hobby."

Pete nodded, beginning to stare at him again, like he had at the gas station earlier, and Dean found himself shifting uncomfortably.

"We're kinda trying to – to fix what's going on around here," he managed to explain lamely. "We don't want to see anyone else die..."

"Then you should go," Pete interrupted abruptly, popping his headphone back in his ear, just as the repeated refrain, "When will this loneliness be over...?" caught the edge of Dean's hearing.

"Wait –" Dean grabbed hold of Pete's wrist, pulling out the headphone just as he realized why the blue-green tub at the kid's feet had seemed familiar.

Advil.

He snatched up the bottle with his free hand, shaking it silently. Empty.

"Pete," he said slowly. "What did you do?"

*When will this loneliness be over...?*

Pete smiled sadly. "Soon..." he said, finally keeling over sideways.

"Dammit!" Dean swore, catching hold of the front of the kid's shirt. "Pete!" He shook him slightly until his eyes fluttered back open. "Pete, you got a car?" he demanded urgently. "Pete?"

Pete nodded, voice distant. "Silver Jetta."

"Keys?"

“Pocket.”

Dean rifled through Pete’s jacket pocket, finally pulling out a set of keys on a rabbit’s foot fob. “I guess this *is* your lucky night after all, Pete,” he muttered, resting the kid against Craig’s gravestone and pulling himself to his feet. “Don’t go anywhere!”

He sprinted over to Sam, skidding to a halt next to the now slightly deeper hole in front of Emily Haywood’s gravestone. “Sam!”

Sam looked up, alarmed by the desperate expression on his brother’s face.

“What’s wrong?”

Dean winced as he tossed Sam the keys to the Impala, which Sam caught one-handed. “Dude, you gotta get this done,” he said urgently. “I think Emily’s up to her tricks again.” He indicated Pete with a jerk of his thumb. “Pete’s just decided to try out this new cocktail he’s invented: Bud versus Advil.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “He *what?*”

“Burn her,” Dean ordered, sounding way too much like his Dad for his own liking. “I gotta get him to the hospital. In a Jetta. So it might take a while.”

Sam nodded, understanding. “I’ll meet you there when it’s done.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed. “But be quick about it. This chick’s really starting to piss me off.” He turned as if to go, but stopped suddenly, glancing back at Sam with a torn look on his face. “You’re okay with this, right?” he said cautiously, not sure himself whether he meant salting and burning the bones of a mean dead girl intent on sabotaging his kid brother’s sanity, or the fact that he was leaving his kid brother *alone* to salt n’ burn the bones of a mean dead girl intent on sabotaging his sanity.

“I’m fine, Dean,” Sam insisted, for what felt like the fiftieth time that day. “Once she’s burned, she’s gone, right? No problem.”

Dean nodded uncertainly, acutely aware that every second he stood here deliberating about whether to leave Sam alone was one second less he had to try and save Pete’s life. “All right,” he agreed. “But if you see anything – and I mean *anything* – you call me and I’ll be back here so fast that Jetta won’t know what hit it.”

Sam nodded. “Count on it.”

Dean turned tail then, sprinting back to Pete, who looked as if he was sleeping against the gravestone. “Oh no you don’t,” Dean said, grabbing the kid’s wrists and hauling him up.

Pete’s eyes fluttered open, and he smiled dazedly at Dean, before muttering, “Saved by an angel.”

Dean frowned at him. “Dude,” he said, hoisting the kid to his feet and sliding an arm around his waist. “If I’m your idea of an angel, no way do I wanna see your version of Hell...”

Sam leaned on the shovel, watching Dean disappear towards the road, dragging the stocky gas station kid along with him awkwardly.

He took a slow breath, the thought, “There but for the grace of God...” surfacing in his head as he remembered how he’d felt those first few weeks after Jessica’s death; when the anger had started to wane a little, only to be replaced by a dull, empty ache.

He shook his head, focusing on the task at hand. Wallowing in grief wasn’t going to get the job done. “You’re not getting this one, Emily,” he muttered, starting to dig again.

“Don’t do that, Sam.”

Sam looked up, startled, dropping the shovel at the sound of the little girl’s voice. And the screams of the baby.

He covered his ears involuntarily, the infant’s screeching reaching new levels of intensity as he raised his eyes to look at the little girl standing at the edge of the grave.

Her long, lank blonde hair fell about her shoulders as she put her hands on her hips and stuck out her lower lip in a perfect pout. Despite the fact that she was standing on newly-dug dirt, the hem of her black dress was spotless, as were her black lace-up boots.

“Don’t, Sam,” she repeated, her voice like a blast of icy air down the back of Sam’s neck. He could barely hear her over the noise of the baby. “It won’t help. It won’t help your brother.”

She leaned down slightly, ghostly hair brushing against the back of Sam’s hand with a crackle of static. “And you want to help your brother, don’t you, Sam?”

Sam just stared up at her, eyes barely able to focus as his head felt like it was being split in two.

The little girl straightened, smiling ever-so-slightly. “You’d do anything for him, wouldn’t you, Sam?” she said.

Sam winced, the continued assault on his eardrums making him feel faint and nauseous. “Yes,” he said a little too loudly. “Anything.”

The little girl frowned quizzically. “Anything?” she echoed, as if double-checking.

Sam nodded. “Anything,” he confirmed.

The little girl raised her chin, expression completely serious now. “Would you die for him?” she asked.

“Yes,” Sam replied without hesitation, standing up straight and meeting the girl’s ghostly gaze evenly. “Yes. I’d die for him.”

The little girl’s lips twitched into a satisfied smile. “That’s what I thought you’d say.”

## **PART FOUR**

It may have been an unfair comparison, but after years of feeling the Impala’s mighty V8 engine beneath him, Dean couldn’t help thinking that Pete’s ancient little Jetta seemed to have all the power of a hairdryer.

Still, time was of the essence, and he realized that he needed to get Pete to hospital as fast as he could if the kid was to have any hope of avoiding becoming the next statistic on Emily’s score card.

He cursed as he tried to overtake a tortoise-paced RV, barely able to draw alongside even with the gas pedal floored, finally ducking in front just in time to avoid a potentially life-altering encounter with an approaching truck.

The RV and truck drivers honked at him simultaneously as Pete slid sideways in his seat, head slumping against Dean’s shoulder.

Rather less delicately than he’d intended, Dean shoved the kid back towards the passenger door, shaking him slightly until his eyes fluttered open.

“You still with me, kid?”

“Mmm...” Pete moaned. “Tired.”

Dean shook him a little harder. “Don’t you go to sleep on me, man,” he ordered. “You think this is what Craig would have wanted?”

Pete managed to keep his eyes vaguely focused on the luminous green rubber alien dangling from the rearview mirror, words slurring slightly. “Craig was nice to me...”

“Sure he was,” Dean agreed. “Which is why if I were him, I’d be mighty pissed off at you for doing something as dumb as this.”

“Not my fault,” Pete slurred softly. “Had to...”

“That little bitch,” Dean muttered, grinding his teeth together as he tried to focus on the fact that Sam should be burning Emily’s bones right about now. That’d teach her. At least Pete would be the last of her victims.

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out his cellphone and hitting Sam's speed-dial number.

The phone rang once, twice, three times, before Sam's recorded voice sounded in Dean's ear, "Hi, this is Sam. I can't get to my phone..."

Dean snapped his cell shut distractedly, figuring Sam was probably too busy with the fire to pick up.

"Hey, Pete?" he glanced sideways, to where Pete had slumped back against the door. "Pete?" Dean grabbed the kid's jacket, pulling him upright again.

"What...?"

"Pete?" Dean barked. "Hey, work with me here, buddy. We're almost there."

Swinging the Jetta into the hospital parking lot, Dean tried to ignore the little twinge of concern in the part of his brain labeled *Sam*. "Pete?" he turned to his passenger. "Are you seeing her? Are you seeing that little bitch?"

Pete frowned. "Huh?"

Dean brought the car to an abrupt halt across two parking spaces, yanking the keys out of the ignition. "The little girl," he clarified. "You're not seeing her, right?"

Pete continued to stare at him vacantly, before finally confirming, "No. No I'm not."

"Good," Dean said, jumping out of the car and hurrying around to the passenger door. "Consider yourself out of business, Emily."

He hauled Pete to his feet, one arm hooked around the kid's waist as he grabbed his wrist and slung his arm over his shoulder, desperately trying to convince himself that the clerk's blissful smile was all to do with the drugs and absolutely nothing to do with his being manhandled by Dean.

*Sometimes you just gotta take one for the team...*

"Shut up, Sam," he muttered, somewhere in the back of his head figuring he'd call his annoying kid brother later, just to check everything went down okay.

After all, if Pete wasn't seeing Emily, then the salt n' burn must have worked, right?

The same male nurse who had treated Dean earlier met them at the ER's entrance, frowning at Pete as he noted the drooping eyelids and the way his head hung limply against Dean's shoulder. "Back again, huh?" he said to Dean, lifting Pete's chin and peering into his eyes, before muttering, "Aw, Pete, what did you do?"

"Can't stay away from the place," Dean said weakly, shifting Pete's weight to relieve some of the strain on his own battered body. He nodded in the kid's direction. "He took a bottle of Advil washed down with a six pack," he explained. "Found him half passed out in – in the park." For some reason, telling the nurse he'd found Pete in the graveyard didn't seem such a great idea.

The nurse took some of Pete's weight then, managing to maneuver him onto a nearby gurney where he went down like a sack of potatoes. "Pete, you promised me," he muttered, motioning for a bored-looking orderly to come help him move the clerk into the treatment room down the hall.

"Sorry," Pete mumbled, as the orderly started to move the gurney. "Mike, I'm sorry..."

"You know him?" Dean asked, rubbing at his sore shoulder as he began to follow the nurse towards the treatment room.

Mike looked up briefly. "Went to school with my kid sister, Krista," he explained, a brief shadow passing over his startlingly blue eyes.

Krista... Krista Page. Victim Number Four.

Dean nodded his understanding, tossing Mike Pete's car keys. "He gonna be okay?"

"Looks like it," Mike replied with a shrug. "Thanks to you."

"Hey, I figure one good deed's not gonna ruin my reputation."

Mike smiled slightly as he wheeled the gurney into the treatment room, the double doors swinging back after him with a thud, a big sign stating, "Authorized Personnel Only" barring Dean's entrance.

Dean shrugged, figuring this was as far as he went. He stood looking at the doors thoughtfully for a second, before digging his cellphone back out of his pocket. "C'mon, Sammy..."

Ring, ring, ring, voicemail.

"Dammit." He shook his head, trying to ignore the tightening in the pit of his stomach and the voice in the back of his brain instinctively urging him to *Go find Sammy. Right now.* Sam was fine. Probably on his way over here. Would chew Dean out for mother-henning him if he kept calling...

Devoid of transportation for the time being, Dean ambled back out into the hospital lobby, glancing over at the elevators. Wouldn't hurt to check in on Caitlin and Ashleigh while he was here.

Tuning out the elevator muzak, he glanced again at the cellphone still clutched in his hand, opening it up and letting his finger hover over Sam's speed-dial for a couple of seconds before closing it and stuffing it back in his pocket with a shake of his head. Sam was twenty-three for crying out loud. Didn't need Dean babying him now any more than he had when he was thirteen. He was fine. Dean was sure of it.

Bur he *wasn't* sure of it. He wasn't sure of it at all. And therein lay the problem...

The elevator doors opened at floor six, and Dean stepped off absently as he concentrated on trying to ignore that annoying little voice: *Go find Sammy.*

Dean may not have been psychic, but when it came to his baby brother, he had a sixth sense for knowing when he was in trouble. And right now, he just *knew* something was... off.

Gritting his teeth, he barely noticed that there was a different nurse at the nurses' station. She eyed him warily, and he caught the look just in time to flash her one of his most dazzlingly disarming smiles before heading down the hall toward Caitlin's room, noting with relief that Ashleigh wasn't sitting out in the corridor this time.

He shuddered as he passed Esther Haywood's room, unsure whether he was picking up on Sam's vibes from earlier, or whether he genuinely felt the chill himself. He glanced briefly inside, noting with a start that the old lady's eyes were closed, eyelids fluttering furiously as if she were in the throes of some graphic nightmare.

Dean didn't know enough about comas to fathom whether this was normal behavior, but he was pretty sure if Sam were here he'd be freaking out right now. Although he couldn't help feeling some sympathy for Esther Haywood now that he knew her history – he couldn't imagine how the hell he could have kept it together had Sam ever done what Emily had done to herself – he had to agree with his kid brother on this one: There really *was* something "not right" about the old gal. And he couldn't put his finger on exactly what that was any more than Sam had been able to.

Turning hesitantly away from the old lady, Dean absently fingered his cellphone again, drawing it half out of his pocket before letting it go.

"Hey," he said quietly, poking his head through the door of Caitlin's room.

Ashleigh and Gina were still sitting exactly where Dean and Sam had left them earlier, Ashleigh's head resting lightly against her mother's shoulder. They looked up as Dean entered the room, smiling politely but not convincingly.

"Any change?" Dean asked, moving hesitantly into the room.

Gina shook her head. "Not yet," she said, the forlornly hopeful tone of her voice



tearing at Dean's insides. "Maybe soon."

"Where's your brother?" Ashleigh asked, glancing over Dean's shoulder expectantly.

Dean smiled awkwardly. "He's – uh – finishing up something. Something that should stop this from happening again."

Ashleigh's eyes lit up. "You – you found a cause?"

"Lady next door," Dean said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "Her little sister killed herself way back when. Thought she was a burden and her big sister would be better off without her. We figure she's been trying to convince little brothers and sisters everywhere of the same thing. You know – to punish her big sister. Or to punish herself, maybe. Who knows? Spooks aren't exactly big in the logic department."

Gina's eyes briefly flitted to Caitlin. "Why would she think herself a burden?" she asked softly, and Dean wasn't entirely sure whether she was talking about Emily or her daughter.

Ashleigh's cheeks colored. *She* knew who her mother was talking about.

"Because I told her she was," she admitted, voice thickening again.

Gina opened her mouth as if to speak, but Dean cut her off. "This isn't your fault, Ashleigh," he assured her. "Siblings fight. It happens." He shrugged. "Hell, maybe it's genetic. Caitlin might have been upset after what you said to her – you might have hurt her feelings – but do you really think she would have done – " he gestured vaguely to the young girl on the hospital bed, " – *this* if it hadn't been for Emily? Emily's the one who's responsible, Ashleigh. Not you."

"Emily?" Gina said, brow furrowing. "She's the one – ?"

"The girl who killed herself, yeah," Dean confirmed. "Back in the '30s."

"Her name's not Emily."

The unexpected sound of a fourth voice in the room startled Gina and Ashleigh enough to make them jump, while Dean's eyes darted instantly in the direction of the hospital bed.

Caitlin was still looking up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly, fingers tightening convulsively on the bedclothes.

"Catie?" Gina was on her feet, hand pressed against her younger daughter's pale cheek, while Ashleigh stood a little more slowly, unsteadily clutching the back of her chair for support.

Dean took a step forward, his relief at the sound of the girl's voice for the moment secondary to her actual words.

"Catie?" Gina repeated, head buzzing as Caitlin's eyes finally found her face.

"Mom?"

The rest of the girl's words were lost in a tangle of her mother's hair and soft arms hugging her neck.

Mom was crying. Caitlin didn't like to see Mom crying.

She noticed Ashleigh for the first time then, peering out over Gina's hair to see a look of shamed terror frozen on her big sister's ashen face. Gingerly, she held out a hand towards her, and Ashleigh took hold of it with a strangled gulp that may have been a relieved laugh but may equally have been a sob.

"Catie," she whispered. "I'm so, so sorry. Don't ever think..."

Gina had pulled away from her youngest, giving her room to breathe as she smiled tearfully at Ashleigh.

"I know," she said. "It wasn't your fault." She managed to glance at Dean then, almost as if she knew who he was.

Maybe she *had* been listening earlier...

"It was *her*," Caitlin said. "*She* made me do it."

Dean took another step towards the bed.  
“But her name’s not Emily. Her name’s Esther.”  
Dean felt as if all the breath had been knocked from his body, his fingers closing unconsciously around the cool metal of his cellphone.  
Sam...  
He’d left Sam alone. Left him alone to burn Emily’s bones. Alone and unprotected.  
But if Emily wasn’t the one... If Emily wasn’t the one doing this...  
Then it didn’t make a scrap of difference whether Sam had burned her bones or not.  
Esther would still be at large.  
And Sam would still be in danger.  
Dean stood rooted to the spot, white spots popping in front of his eyes while his heart seemed to hammer loud enough to wake the dead.  
His first instinct was to run next door and salt n’ burn the old woman in her bed. But he couldn’t kill a person. And whatever Esther had done, she was still living, still breathing. Dean wasn’t sure how she could be doing what she was doing – maybe she’d found a way to “wander” while her body was dormant. He really didn’t care: the *how* and the *why* had always been Sam’s territory.  
All that mattered was stopping her hurting Sam.  
“I have to go.” Dean exited the room so fast he skidded as he took the corner out into the hallway.  
Glancing into Esther’s room, he could see her eyes moving rapidly beneath closed eyelids, and now he knew this could only mean one thing: Esther was stalking someone.  
Hightailing it down the corridor, Dean ignored the startled look from the nurse as he pounded on the button to summon the elevator – once, twice, seven times – but the digits above the metal doors seemed resolutely stuck on twelve.  
Looking around in desperation, his eyes lighted on the stairway opposite, and he was through the badly painted green door like a shot, taking the stairs two, three at a time, heart continuing to hammer in time with the pounding in his head.  
*Stupid!* How could he have been so stupid? How could he have left Sam so exposed, so unprotected? So *vulnerable*.  
Snatching his phone back out of his pocket as he barreled into the door at the bottom of the stairs, he dialed Sam urgently, praying for his little brother to pick up.  
“Please, Sam, please...”  
Ring, ring, ring. “Hi, this is Sam...”  
“Dammit!” Dean almost threw the cellphone against the lobby wall, but stopped suddenly as he caught sight of a familiar black shape in the parking lot beyond the hospital’s glass doors. Tentatively, he took a step forwards, to where bright yellow lights illuminated the Impala, abandoned and askew in a disabled parking zone.  
“Sam...”  
Sam wasn’t there. He knew it. He didn’t need to go out there and check.  
He spun on his heel, racing down towards the ER, his mind almost completely blank but for the all-important imperative, *Protect Sam*, which seemed to be stuck on perpetual repeat in his brain.  
“You’re back *again?*” Nurse Mike seemed truly surprised as Dean slammed through the glass doors and back into the ER.  
“Need to speak to Pete,” Dean explained breathlessly. Then, almost as an afterthought, “He’s okay, right?”  
“Sure, yeah,” Mike replied. “He’s sleeping though.”

"This is important."

Mike could tell from the wild look in Dean's eyes that he wasn't lying. "This way."

He led Dean to one of the curtained cubicles to the left of the ER's reception desk, where Pete was curled up on a narrow bed.

Not quite asleep, he looked up as Dean entered the cubicle. "Hey," he said, smiling sheepishly. "Didn't expect to see you back here." His voice sounded raw and scratchy, no doubt from the tube he'd just had down his throat.

Dean tried to smile back at him, but didn't quite get there. "Pete, I gotta ask you something."

"Okay..."

Dean ran a hand through his hair, still unable to process the fact that what he was thinking might actually be true. "When I asked you earlier if you were seeing the little girl any more," he said slowly. "Did – did you ever see her? Or was this – did you – did you just take a truckload of pills because..." he trailed off, unable to finish the question.

Pete just lay there blinking at him.

"Pete? This is kinda urgent, man..."

"You asked me if I saw a little girl," Pete replied. "And I said 'no.'"

"And you *never* saw her?"

"Dude," Pete said, voice lowering in what was either embarrassment or shame.

"I made a mistake. I did something really dumb, just like you said. No little girl involved. Just me and my stupid unrequited broken heart."

Dean felt as if a tablecloth had just been pulled out from underneath his world and his head started to ache. "You don't have any older siblings, do you?"

Pete shook his head.

*See? This is why I leave the thinking to Sammy...*

Dean screwed up his eyes and rubbed at his forehead as the little tumblers in his brain slowly began to click into place.

Pete had never seen Esther. So the fact that he wasn't seeing her during the car ride to the hospital was not, as Dean had assumed, an indication that Sam's salt n' burn had successfully neutralized the threat.

Dean continued to rub at his temples as he let the implications of that sink in: Esther's soul, spirit, consciousness – *whatever* – was still on the loose and still hell bent on cleansing Clifton of the scourge of younger siblings everywhere.

Which meant that Sam was still in danger.

And Dean *really* had to go.

"Pete, you've been a great help," he said, spinning to leave and nearly slamming straight into Nurse Mike, who was just then re-entering the cubicle.

"Everything okay?" the nurse asked dubiously, frowning at the dazed and confused expression etched onto Pete's features.

"Everything is so far from okay..." Dean muttered, pushing past him.

"Did you see your brother?"

Dean froze, turning back slowly. "My – you've – ?"

"Yeah," Mike nodded in the direction of the glass doors leading back into the main hospital lobby. "Saw him through there a couple minutes before you arrived.

Figured he was looking for you, but he seemed real spaced out. More-or-less abandoned that cool car of his. I'll be amazed if he doesn't get a ticket..."

"My car," Dean muttered, distractedly.

"Huh?"

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't – "

"Where. Did. He. Go?"

Dean hadn't realized he'd grabbed hold of the front of Mike's blue scrub top until out of the corner of his eye he caught a nearby security guard moving towards them, hand hovering instinctively over the handgun at his hip.

Letting go of the hapless nurse instantly, Dean took a breath.

Eyes wide, Mike mumbled, "Elevator."

That didn't help a whole hell of a lot.

"You see where to?"

"Up."

That helped even less.

Another deep breath.

"Thanks for your help."

And with that, he was off, haring out towards the lobby, almost colliding with a bike messenger clutching at least twenty ridiculously garish balloons before skidding to a halt in front of the bank of elevators.

Hammering the call button, Dean glanced over at a little buck-toothed kid with his leg in plaster, sitting in a wheelchair and looking bored to death. He was almost through a huge packet of Skittles, and had a beautiful purple tongue to show for it.

"Hey kid," Dean said. The kid looked at him warily, pulling his bag of Skittles to his chest protectively. "You been here long?"

The boy sighed. "Since birth," he said seriously, resting his chin in his hand. "Or it feels like it anyway."

Dean's eyes lit up. "You see a guy get on the elevator just now – freakishly tall, crazy hair...?"

The kid nodded slowly. "He got a real cool black car?"

Dean gritted his teeth. *Sammy in danger, Sammy in danger...* "You see where he went?" he asked, pointing vaguely in the direction of the elevators.

"Up," the kid replied, shrugging. When Dean scowled at him, he added, "All the way up, I think. Only one in the car, and it went right up to floor twelve, so..."

Dean glanced up at the floor indicators above the elevators... which all seemed stuck on twelve, just like when he'd come from Caitlin's room.

"I think they're busted," the kid commented. "All been stuck on twelve ever since."

Dean glanced back at the kid, back to the frozen elevators, back to the kid. "I owe you a pack of Skittles," he said, heading for the stairs. "Though you should really try switching to M&Ms..."

"Hey, don't think I won't collect!" Dean heard the kid yell after him as he took the first four steps in one leap. "I'll probably still be here when I'm old enough to get my driver's license anyway..."

Trying to ignore the pain in his leg, Dean began to struggle up the stairs.

By the third floor, he'd decided that ignoring the pain probably wasn't an option after all.

By the fifth floor, concentrating on breathing helped him forget the pain in his leg.

By the eighth floor, he was reaching for his cellphone.

By the tenth floor, he'd hit Sam's speed-dial.

By the twelfth floor ...

...He could hear Sam's cellphone ringing in the distance.

"Sam!"

Shouldering the emergency exit door, Dean charged out onto the hospital roof with no regard for the pain in his leg, the burning in his lungs, or the cellphone hanging limply from his fingers.

*Hi, this is Sam...*

"Sam?"

Even from behind, there was no mistaking the gangly figure standing opposite him.

On the wrong side of the three-foot security railing running along the edge of the roof.

With his sneakers hanging half off the edge of a twelve story building.

And a little girl in a black dress standing next to him, smiling as she whispered into his ear.

And Dean without a salt gun.

Not bothering to wonder how the hell he could see her, Dean barreled across the roof as if his life – or a life infinitely more important – depended on it. "Esther, I swear to God, you *touch* my brother – "

"I don't *need* to touch him – "

"Make it stop!" Sam's anguished cry cut her off, hand grabbing at his head as he swayed precariously. "Please make it stop!"

"No! Sam!"

"Please, I just want it to stop!"

"SAM!"

Dean wasn't entirely sure how he covered the last eight feet separating him from his brother in a single lunge.

All he knew was that all of a sudden he had a fistful of Sam's jacket, and was yanking his kid brother back against the railing.

"Make it stop. Please. I just want it to stop."

Dean's head swam for a second as he found himself suddenly looking straight down at a twelve-story drop.

Bracing himself against the railing, Dean convulsively tightened his grip on the back of Sam's jacket, regaining his own balance before fastening an arm around Sam's waist.

Taking a deep breath before releasing it very slowly, Dean's voice came out much louder than he intended. "Sam, you *really* don't need to be showing me how gravity works again 'cause I got it the first time!"

"Dean?" Sam was staring straight forward, as if completely oblivious to the fact that he was inches from plummeting to his death. His hands hovered over his ears, eyes screwing up suddenly in obvious pain. "I'm sorry!" he yelled. "Dean, I'm so sorry! Dean..."

"I'm right here, Sammy," Dean said, glancing sideways at Esther, who continued to glare at him, but made no move to interfere. "I gotcha. I'm not letting you go..."

"You've got to, Dean," Sam's voice was suddenly calm, stoic, almost emotionless, but the tears escaping his dark glassy eyes told a different story. "You've got to let me go, Dean," he whispered. "You've got to let go."

Dean tightened his hold on his brother, screwing his eyes shut as he tried to slow his rapid breathing. "Not like this. Never like this."

"You're gonna have to let me go my own way."

Dean's eyes opened at the words, those words he'd heard his brother say months before, back in Chicago, but which still cut him like the sharpest of knives. "Back to school," he said quietly. "Maybe. Maybe I could handle that – better – this time. But not like this..."

"I'm not a kid any more." Sam blinked rapidly. "I don't need you to protect me. I don't need you to make my decisions for me – "

"This *isn't* your decision, Sam," Dean spat, glaring at the spectral little girl who was grinning malevolently at him. "It's *hers!*"

"I have to do this. It's the only way. The only way I can save you."

"I don't need saving, Sammy." Dean tightened his grip again, as Sam started to pull away.

"Yes," Sam insisted, trembling hands returning to cover his ears. "You *do*. I can hear it. It's *all* I can hear..."

*Daddy, the baby's crying. Daddy, I don't know what to do...*

Sam shook his head, trying to dislodge the noise, the anguish, the *fear*.

Dean was there. He knew Dean was there, standing behind him, hanging on to him as if the very fabric of the universe would somehow unravel if he let go.

But all he could hear was a scared little boy and a terrified infant who didn't know any better.

"The baby? You're hearing the baby again, right?"

Sam heard grown-up Dean's voice, but he wasn't sure which Dean was real.

There was a hand gripping the front of his shirt. That was real. And an arm wrapped around his waist. That was real too. But the voices... The voices were all jumbled up in his head and he didn't know which he was supposed to be listening to.

*Daddy, the baby's crying...*

"*She's* doing that to you, Sam," grown-up Dean's voice broke in on the sound of his younger self echoing in Sam's head. "It's not Emily. It's Esther. She's punishing her little sister, over and over. She's punishing her for leaving her..."

"It's the only way to make it stop," Sam breathed, trying to open his eyes, trying to see as hard as he was trying not to *hear*. "I have to go. I have to. It's the only way I can make it stop..."

"The baby?"

"It's the only way I can make it stop. For you."

"For *me*?"

It was then that Dean realized his mistake. He'd gotten it all wrong. He'd gotten *Esther* all wrong. She wasn't punishing Emily. She wasn't punishing Sam...

He glanced over at her, standing scuffing her foot against the loose gravel covering the rooftop, placid features completely devoid of anything approaching emotion.

"Sam, I can't hear the baby..."

"I do. I hear it all," Sam said, as if all he heard now were the sounds reverberating through his skull. Sounds from so long ago that it shouldn't have mattered. Water under the bridge. Ancient history.

But it did. It mattered. It mattered too much for Sam to ignore it any more. "You shouldn't have had to do it, Dean," he said. "You were too young. You shouldn't have had to do it."

Dean took another breath, resting his temple against Sam's shoulder blade with a sigh. He knew what Esther was doing. He knew exactly who she was trying to punish. And he knew the answer to his question before he even asked it. "Do what, Sam?"

"You gave up everything for me. I can hear it. I can hear the baby crying. It's *me*. I can hear *me*, Dean. I get it now. I get it. It's your memory. I'm hearing your memory..."

"You didn't cry that often, Sam," Dean said, trying to go for the literal in the forlorn hope that that was really all that Sam was talking about.

"No," Sam started to pull away, teetering forward as Dean's feet skidded on the gravel beneath him. "That's not it. That's not it, Dean. It just took me this long to see it. To *hear* it. You gave up everything. You gave up everything for me. To protect me. To keep me safe."

“And I’d do it again too.” The words were out of Dean’s mouth before he even knew he’d said them. “Don’t think I wouldn’t.” He jammed one foot against the lowest bar of the railing, leaning back so that Sam was pulled back with him. “Don’t think I won’t. Don’t think I won’t do it again, Sam. You jump off this building, don’t think I won’t follow you, because I will. I mean it, Sam. ‘Cause I meant what I said. I can’t do this alone. I *won’t*.”

“Dean – “ Sam was still staring straight ahead, but his hand had moved to cling to the one his brother had wrapped around his waist. “You sacrificed so much for me. Now I have to do the same for you.” He tried to pry Dean’s fingers away from him, but the older brother wouldn’t let go.

“Don’t, Sam,” Dean’s voice was decisive. “You won’t save me by throwing yourself off this building. ‘Cause that’d kill me as sure as if I jumped off after you.”

“I didn’t mean to be a burden,” Sam whispered. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You never hurt me,” Dean insisted. “And you were never a burden. If there was ever a reason I was put on this earth, Sam, it’s you. You’re the reason. From the minute Dad put you in my arms and told me to get you away from the fire, you became my responsibility. And I never regretted that for one second. Not ever. Because *that was what I was meant to do*. You understand that, right? Because you could go off to Stanford – hell, you could go off to the *Moon* – and I’d still be right there with you. Always. So don’t think I’m letting you go. Not as long as I’m breathing. Not as long as *you’re* breathing. You got that?”

“But it’s not right. What happened. It’s not right – ”

“No it’s not,” Dean agreed. “Life sucks. Get over it. The universe may have dealt us a crappy hand, little brother, but we gotta do the best we can with what we got. And what we got is each other. And Dad. And a kickass set of wheels that you’re gonna put one helluva dent in if you step off this roof right now – ”

Sam surprised Dean by laughing then, a shaky, watery laugh that almost made him sound like his old self.

“ – ‘Cause I’m not kidding, my car’s right underneath you, Sammy.”

Sam half-turned, smiling awkwardly as he tried to pretend there weren’t tears escaping down his cheeks. His hand covered the one Dean had gripping the railing, and Dean relaxed for just a second...

...Which was when Esther saw her opening, and Sam’s world suddenly lurched sideways, the incessant bawl of the baby’s screams – his screams – reaching a level of intensity so great that without realizing what he was doing his hands jerked instinctively to protect his ears, one hand letting go of the railing...

...While the other let go of Dean.

“No! Sam!”

Dean found himself slammed into the metal fencing, the impact knocking all the air from his lungs as his brother lurched away from him, all Sam’s sense of up and down lost in the excruciating cacophony splitting open his head and blurring the world into a swirling mass of formless color.

“Sam!”

Dean felt himself skidding, feet sliding under the railing and fingers beginning to lose purchase on Sam’s shirt as the younger brother toppled forward. Even as he fought to keep his balance, fought to keep *Sam’s* balance, Dean could see Esther grinning.

“Make it stop!” Sam cried plaintively. “Please just make it stop...”

“Let him go, Dean,” Esther whispered. “It’s what he wants. It’s what he needs. It’s what *you* need. Just let him go.”

“No!” Dean gritted his teeth, wedging his knee against the railing as he leaned out and caught hold of Sam’s shoulder. “That’s what *you* want. Not what *he* wants. And

it's sure as hell not what *I* want! Just because you lost Emily, it doesn't give you the right to take Sam. He's not yours to take. And *I'm* not yours to punish. I'm not you, Esther! Because that's it, isn't it? You're not out to hurt the people you kill. You're not trying to punish them. It's the ones they leave behind. The older ones. You're punishing *them* because you don't know how to punish *yourself*. And you're doing it over and over. Because you didn't save Emily. Because you didn't protect her. Because you let her think she was a burden to you. Because you let her think you'd be better off without her..."

"Shut up!" Esther yelled suddenly, stamping her ghostly foot and causing a plume of dirt to rise up off the concrete beneath her. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Sam cried out anew, the pain, the noise, the anger and the anguish threatening to rip his consciousness away from him as Dean tightened his grip and just held on to him for dear life.

*Daddy the baby's crying... Daddy the baby's crying...*

"Make it stop! Dean, please...!"

"Esther. Please stop."

The voice was as calm and as unexpected as Caitlin's had been earlier. Dean's attention was drawn momentarily away from the dizzying plummet looming beneath his kid brother to the small figure suddenly standing in front of Esther.

She was remarkably similar in appearance to the taller girl, the same long blonde hair, the same waxy pallor. But, despite having been dead for over seventy years, Emily's eyes held something Esther's didn't: Life.

"Emily?" Esther's voice was small and, for the first time in Dean's hearing, she actually sounded like a lost little girl. "Emmy?"

Sam blinked once, twice, shaking his head and suddenly grabbing hold of the railing as his world once again became vertical and the baby's wailing stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Turning to stare at Emily, his gaze briefly met Dean's, concern obvious in his big brother's wide eyes. A sluggish realization dawned on him that the older man still had one hand wrapped around his waist, while the other gripped his shoulder so hard it might actually have hurt if Sam hadn't felt so completely numb. He nodded slightly, trying to assure Dean that he was okay, but making no effort to push him away or loosen his grip. It was somehow comforting that Dean was still hanging on to him.

Esther was staring at her little sister, big blue eyes brimming with tears unshed for some seventy years. "Em?" she whispered. "You came back."

The younger girl nodded. "I had to," she said quietly. "I couldn't let you do this any more. To them. To yourself."

"I'm so sorry, Em," Esther shook her head, hands clutching at the folds of her skirt. "I'm so sorry I made you – I made you –"

"You didn't *make* me do anything," Emily countered. "Not like all of the people you..." she trailed off, and Esther just gazed at her, clearly not seeing any difference. Emily sighed. "Remember Grandma's favorite book?" she asked.

Esther looked taken aback by the question. "*Jude the Obscure*," she replied instantly.

"Done because we are too many," Emily quoted sadly. "Remember that? The oldest child killed his siblings and then hanged himself because he thought that might save his parents from poverty. Remember?"

Esther nodded, a single tear sliding down her marble cheek.

"But in the book, the deaths of the children destroyed the parents," Emily continued. She sighed again. "I was too young to understand that then," she said. "I



thought I was making your life easier. I thought I was helping you to live. But I killed you as surely as I killed myself, didn't I?"

"I shouldn't have let you..." Esther muttered through muffled sobs. "I should have protected you better... I was supposed to look out for you. You were my responsibility..."

"Es," Emily took a step towards her sister, holding out a ghostly hand towards her. "Please forgive me," she whispered. "Forgive me for leaving you alone."

Esther looked away, not even able to meet her sister's gaze.

But Emily wasn't to be deterred, slender translucent fingers catching the hand hanging limply at her sister's side. "Please forgive me."

Esther merely shook her head, still not looking up. "There's nothing to forgive. It was *my* fault."

"No," Emily said, catching hold of Esther's other hand. "It wasn't your fault. You have to let go of that guilt or this will never be over. You can't go on making other people suffer, making other people feel your pain, sacrificing innocent lives to teach people a lesson they never needed to learn in the first place. Because forgiving me is only the first step, Es. You have to forgive yourself too."

"It hurt so much to lose you. You were all I had. When you left, I died inside."

"I'm sorry it took me so long to see that." Emily placed a hand on her sister's tearstained cheek. "And I'm sorry it took me so long to come back. I never expected you to hold on to me for so long. I never expected..."

"I couldn't let you go."

"And you don't have to." Emily tightened her hold on Esther's hand. "We've got forever now. Come on." She tugged at the older girl's hand. "I want to show you something."

Esther took a tentative step after her little sister. "What do you want me to see?"

Emily turned back, grinning broadly. "What comes after," she said. "Come on. It's time. You don't want to miss it."

Emily squeezed her sister's hand, and Esther followed, her face lighting up as she caught sight of something neither Sam nor Dean could see.

"That's for me?"

"That's for *us*."

Hand in hand, the two girls took a step towards the railing. Emily looked briefly up at Sam and Dean, smiling as she and her sister took another step – straight through the railing and right off the roof.

And then they were gone.

No fireworks. No tunnel. No bright light.

Just like that, they were gone, and all Sam could hear was the faint hum of air conditioning units, loud in his suddenly quiet head as he stared at the spot where the ghostly sisters had just been standing.

He hesitated before meeting Dean's gaze, an awkward silence stretching out to fill the space between them as he finally began to feel his brother's fingers digging into his shoulder.

Sam would never tell Dean what else he'd heard besides the baby's wailing, how Esther had forced him to play unwitting spy amidst his big brother's earliest memories.

Baby Sammy's pitiful sobs had been the least of it.

Dean started to fidget under Sam's intense scrutiny. "Sammy," he said. "Not that you'd make a lousy gargoyle or anything. But are you planning on getting off of this roof any time soon or are we here until Doomsday?"

Sam mustered up a tiny flicker of a smile. "I'd climb on over this fence if you'd let go of me..."

Dean released his death grip on Sam's shoulder instantly. But didn't let go of the fistful he still had of his kid brother's jacket. Just in case.

Sam clambered over the railing, leaning back against it for a second, luxuriating in the solid feel of the metal, the quiet in his brain, and the comfort of his big brother standing right there in front of him.

Dean just looked back at him for a second. "Baby's stopped, huh?"

"You knew all along, didn't you?" Sam said. "You knew what – who – I was hearing."

Dean averted his gaze. "Car. Motel room. Not *that* hard to figure out."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Sam, you really didn't cry that much. Esther was just trying to guilt you..."

"And she did a pretty bang-up job." Sam straightened, brushing at the wet patch lingering on his cheek. He took a step towards his brother, who looked up at him with that skittish expression he got when Sam was about to do the unthinkable.

"Sam –"

"Dean, I know you don't like this *emotion* stuff –"

"Okay, that's it," Dean turned as if to leave, but Sam caught the collar of his jacket, pulling him backwards. "Hey –!"

"Thanks, big brother."

Dean turned and just looked at him. "Sam, all this saccharin's starting to make my teeth hurt."

"I'm serious, Dean." Sam still couldn't bring himself to tell his brother what he'd heard – the little boy's voice whispering, *I'm here, Sammy. Don't cry. I won't let anything hurt you. Ever.*

Some things were best left unsaid.

But some things weren't.

"You sacrificed a hell of a lot for me, Dean. I just want you to know that – that it's appreciated."

Dean held Sam's gaze for a brief instant, before rolling his eyes. "You are *such* a girl sometimes," he said, trying to shrug Sam's hand off his shoulder.

But Sam wouldn't be shrugged.

"Sam," Dean warned. "I swear to God, you try and hug me and I'm throwing you off this building myself."

Sam nodded, making as if to let Dean go before suddenly pulling him into what Dean would definitely avoid describing later as anything approaching the dreaded 'h' word.

"Aw Sam, would you just quit it –?"

"Thanks, man," Sam said, despite Dean's protests and his squirming to get away. "I mean it."

For one fleeting moment, Dean stopped trying to push his little brother off. "Yeah, well," he muttered, examining his feet intently. "That's what I'm here for, right?"

The door to Esther Haywood's room was conspicuously closed when Sam and Dean passed by on their way back to see Caitlin.

Sam didn't shudder as he passed the threshold, didn't feel a chill in the hallway. Something had changed almost imperceptibly since the last time they were here. He glanced sideways at Dean, who was pretending not to have noticed. But Sam could tell he felt it too.

"So how's Sleeping Beauty?" Dean forced some lightness into his tone as he entered Caitlin's room.

She was sitting up now, still pale and drawn, but smiling. Smiling at her sister, who was perched on the edge of her bed, one hand gripping the younger girl's fingers as the other jabbed at her constantly vibrating cellphone.

"Justin Ross," Ashleigh muttered. "Honestly, I don't know what I ever saw in that loser."

"He has a Porsche," Caitlin pointed out succinctly.

"Porsches are over-rated," Dean commented. "You can't beat the classics."

Caitlin grinned at him, and once again he got the eerie feeling that she had heard every word he and Sam had said to her mom and her sister while she was still supposedly unconscious.

"You found your brother," Ashleigh said, nodding in Sam's direction.

"Yeah," Sam said. "I had some – stuff – I had to deal with."

"But you got her, right?" Ashleigh cut him off. "That girl? You got her?"

"We did," Sam confirmed. "We got her."

"So it was the old lady next door?"

Dean and Sam shared a look. "Sort of," Dean replied cryptically.

"Yeah, that's how we knew," Ashleigh said.

"Knew what?" Sam asked.

"You'd got her."

"Huh?"

"She died," Gina put in suddenly, realizing her daughter wasn't explaining too well.

"She – who died?" Dean asked.

"Esther Haywood," Gina replied. "About ten minutes ago. Nurse went in to check on her, and she'd gone."

Dean was almost tempted to say "good", but refrained. He could kind of see what had driven the old gal to do the things she'd done. Hell, hadn't *he* killed for Sam? Who was he to judge her?

Sam's brows drew together pensively, and Dean could tell that he wasn't in any mood to be as forgiving. "She killed a lot of people," he commented, glancing briefly at Catie. "And hurt a lot more."

"It's going to take a long time for those families to come to terms with this," Gina said, shaking her head. "If they ever do. They'll never see anyone punished for taking their loved ones away from them."

"Esther's been punished plenty, believe me," Dean put in suddenly. "She's spent the last seventy years being punished. Talk about a life sentence."

Sam just looked at his brother appraisingly for a second, surprised to hear him say something so unexpected.

Dean picked up on Sam's scrutiny immediately, staring right back at him before finally caving. "What?"

Sam shrugged in that way he had. "Nothing," he said, the shrug saying just the opposite.

Dean frowned at him before turning his attention back to the Newtons. "Well, I guess we should be going..." he said awkwardly, trying to cover the fact that spending so much time in this goddamn hospital was finally starting to get to him.

Ashleigh stood suddenly. "Thanks," she said simply, still clutching Caitlin's hand. "For everything."

Dean smiled, nodding. "Take care of your sister."

Ashleigh understood the import of that sentence. "I will."

And Dean had no doubt she meant it.

Dean plucked the parking citation off the Impala's windshield as he and Sam finally returned to the car. Sliding in behind the wheel while his brother slumped into the passenger side, he shoved the ticket over at him with a grin. "Memento of Clifton, Connecticut," he said.

Sam took the proffered piece of paper, but didn't return Dean's smile. "I don't even remember getting here," he said quietly, shaking his head. "Last thing I remember was the graveyard..."

"Yeah," Dean said, Led Zeppelin's *Kashmir* blaring from the Impala's speakers as he gunned the engine. "You must have been really out of it to leave Zeppelin playing..."

Sam ran his fingers through his hair. "You're not kidding."

Dean adjusted the volume to a less ear-shattering level, before glancing over at the ER entrance thoughtfully. "Guess I really oughtta have gone and checked Pete out before we left..."

"Yeah, give him another chance to check *you* out, you mean," Sam sniggered.

"Hey, don't hate me 'cause I'm beautiful," Dean said, wincing as he bounced the Impala off the sidewalk where Sam had abandoned it. "Sammy, I swear to God, if you screwed up my car –"

"I know, I know," Sam said, having heard the threat a million times before. "You'll kill me."

Dean turned to look at him, for a second deadly serious. "Not in this lifetime," he said quietly.

Sam didn't know how to respond to that. Another uncomfortable silence followed, before he ventured, "Would you really have jumped off that roof after me?"

Dean considered. "Not in this jacket," he said, guiding the Impala out towards the exit of the parking lot.

Sam snorted despite himself. "And not onto the car, yeah I get it."

"Hey," Dean said, not quite managing to hide the wistful look in his eyes as his gaze lingered on his kid brother. "At least I got my priorities straight."

Because, as far as Dean Winchester was concerned, some things would always come first.