

## Nocturne By Tracer

Dean groaned in disgust when the mysterious stickiness plastered onto the cheap mica table top clung mercilessly to his prized leather jacket. A rolling broken sound close to that of removing day old duct tape was heard as he jerked his arm away from the offending substance only to discover the grime had formed a filmy layer on the sleeve anyway. With a miserable sigh, the sandy-haired Winchester sat further up in the seat knowing full well that the booth's slimy crust had to be ten times worse.

Averting his attention lest he call Health Services, Dean garnered a look over at his brother. The last string of hunts had left behind slightly sunken features for the both of them, but that didn't mean he was used to seeing them on Sam; because little brother's were always ten times worse than his own.

It seemed the more they found out, the more confusion came into play. And Dean was beginning to find out that it took a lot more manipulation and coercion than he was willing to give to pry Sam off the laptop during "free time" after everything that had happened. All his brother wanted to do was research until he was blue in the face. As if Google held the magical answer to 'what to do when ancient demons are on your ass' he was looking for.

At the current moment, Sam's insanely long brown locks were nearly touching the luminescent screen and Dean had to smirk at his intense rapture in whatever the hell he was reading, although all that searching made his younger brother a horrible roommate. Sam wasn't giving him any material whatsoever and Dean was running out of geek jokes faster than he could piece new ones together. Not to mention the silence and steady click clack of the computer keys were about to drive him damn near crazy.

Normally, he'd find the uber-wannabe librarian routine humorous but he couldn't help worry a bit at the constant vigil Sam was holding in Wikipedia's honor. The dark circles under Sam's eyes and the paled features were only the beginning of the list. It was unnatural for anyone to have such an undying love for search engines, plus Sam hadn't even commented on the resident deep coating of filth covering every inch of Dave's Truck Stop Diner, something he was more than ready to do whenever they usually entered equally fine establishments. His brother was simply zoned out, had been for days, clearly enamored with the hunt for a change.

Dean was about to comment on the shift too, until a greasy plate was shoved with a loud thud in front of him, the smell combined with the presentation causing him to slam his open trap shut. He couldn't help but wonder if the plate weighed more due to the small yellow-brown pool of indeterminate liquid encircling his meal. His face clouded with a grimace and he looked helplessly back towards Sam who returned the look after seeing his own wilted salad.

"You gonna eat that?" Sam asked curiously and eyed the lumpy potatoes and what had to be beef reheated ten times over.

Dean let his eyes linger on the swollen reddish brown littering Sam's salad and offered his challenge. "Only if you eat yours, veggie boy."

Sam stabbed his fork into one of the reddish circles spearing it and bringing it up to Dean's eye level. "No way in hell that's a tomato."

"Dude, c'mon, this is supposed to be a steak." Dean laughed, pointing accusingly at the shriveled meat. "I say we stick to places that have the words Burger and King in the name from now on."

"Right, cause who needs arteries." Sam scoffed and pushed his plate further off to the side to resituate the laptop, turning it towards Dean. "Okay, I think I got something."

"You mean all this time you haven't been scouring for porn? I'm disappointed, Sammy. I thought I taught you better than that." Dean appeared chagrined, but a smirk broke on his face when Sam huffed in irritation.

Maximizing two windows on the screen, Sam almost pushed the laptop into his brother. "You know, not everything is about sex, Dean. Some people actually think of, oh hell, I don't know, *work* maybe..."

"But do those people get laid?" Dean shot back, as close to serious as he could muster, cocking his head as if daring Sam to defy his reasoning. "Probably not."

Sam rolled his eyes at his older brother's insistence, and tapped the keyboard to redirect Dean's attention. "Read."

"Yes, sir," Dean snarked, but he acquiesced anyway, albeit grudgingly. "Couldn't you just tell me?"

"And deprive you of that big successful feeling knowing *Hooked on Phonics* worked for you?" Sam mocked, acting nothing short of appalled by the suggestion.

"You're just mad 'cause they failed you the first time, O king of the reading circle," Dean retorted without peeling his eyes away from the screen.

"You can't fail *Hooked on Phonics*, Dean." Sam protested unnecessarily.

Dean's eyes shone mischievously as he flicked his sight toward his brother quickly.

"Well, that says something about you, don't it, Sammy?"

Sam sighed heavily, "God help me."

"Can't right now. I'm busy...reading."

The silver fork slammed into a wrinkled cucumber this time as Sam tried to ignore the fact that his brother had just likened himself to God and shook his head in disbelieving bewilderment. He noticed Dean's cooling lunch had acquired a putrid smell as the minutes ticked on, and Sam waited rather impatiently for his brother to finish the articles he'd pulled up just so they could leave. Dean, however, was dragging out the process, he was sure, and his steady stream of 'huhs' and 'okays' were becoming more and more grating by the second.

"Are you done yet?" Sam crossed his arms over his chest, and offered a 'you'd better be' look for added measure.

"Yeah," Dean drawled, his boredom with the articles more than evident. "Dude, what are you smoking? This is so not our kind of thing."

Sam's hands gripped the edge of the table. "Well, I think it is."

"Want to know what I think?" Dean chirped but didn't wait for an answer, "I think that you're focusing too much on those "personal" calls. All that heavy breathing is messing up your brain, dude."

"No thanks to you," Sam muttered bitterly, spinning the laptop back to face him and reviewing his find.

"Whatever, dude, that Risa chick sounded pretty cool," Dean joked and began to saw into the stiff meat prepared on his plate.

Sam's eyes widened and his stomach lurched at what his older brother seemed ready to attempt. "Ugh, don't, Dean. Just don't."

"I can't get her number if it doesn't look like I actually ate the damn thing," Dean replied smugly and proceeded to spread the gooey white mess over the chipped plate.

"Someone dropped you when you were a baby didn't they?" Sam asked with mock concern as he watched Dean's apparently mastered process of looking like he'd eaten a full meal. "Would it kill you to focus for a second and actually concentrate on our next job?"

Dean snapped his head up, his eyes lit with resistance. "I already told you, Sam, that's not our kind of thing."

With a deep breath, Sam chose to blatantly ignore Dean and began reading aloud. "Dr. Larry Mills, a professor of Microbiology at Britannia College in Dale, Pennsylvania, was found paralyzed in his bed after attending a staff party the night before."

"Dude," the sandy-haired Winchester interrupted, his hands gesturing for Sam to fall silent. "Paralysis sucks, but that's more like Dr. Quinn's thing right?"

"Yeah, but how many 5K runners in perfect health just wake up paralyzed?" Sam asked incredulously, his forehead creased in thought.

Dean shrugged. "I don't know. But it's probably some freak medical thing."

"Or some freak supernatural thing," Sam offered with a grunt as he reached across the table and snatched their father's journal. "It's been almost three days and, according to this, the doctors have nothing."

Dean surveyed his brother's quick flipping of the journal's well worn pages. "I've never heard of anything that could do something like that though."

"Me either," Sam agreed absently, and damn if he didn't sound intrigued when he brought his head up from the binding. "All the more reason to go, Dean. Dad hasn't called or left a message in a while, and it's either this or a rumored-to-be-haunted chicken farm in Ohio."

"I like chicken," Dean assuaged with a smirk.

Sam closed the journal and gathered his stuff. "You never eat it."

"Why would I eat something I like, Sammy?" Dean questioned openly, refusing to move from his seat.

"Oh, there's logic for you," Sam rolled his eyes and heaved an exasperated breath causing the long bangs adorning his forehead to lift slightly. "C'mon, you have to admit this is a little bit interesting."

"Okay, maybe. But if this turns out to be an episode of Quincy M.D. you have to detail the Impala," Dean bargained but it was to empty air because Sam was already halfway out the door before he even finished. Annoyed, Dean pursed his lips and dragged himself out of the booth's bench, grumbling under his breath. "Paralysis. Yep, you officially lost it psychic boy."

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The morning sunlight bathed the Impala in a harsh glow, turning the back of Sam's eyelids from darkest black to deep, bright red as his head lay propped against the car door. With a slow yawn, the dark haired passenger blinked his eyes open, chancing a glance at the dash clock, the time shone by the dim numbers making him jolt up quickly in the seat.

"Good morning, princess," Dean quipped, finishing off the rest of his coffee and setting the empty cup in the holder.

Sam stared dumbly at the blur of green outside the car window dotted with the occasional road sign. "Where are we?"

"Just entering good ole Pennsylvania."

Sam rubbed the grit out of his eyes and groaned when Dean turned the volume on the stereo as high as it would go. "Do you have to do that?" he rasped, his voice thick with lost sleep.

"It's Zeppelin, Sammy." Dean replied, beginning his rendition of the Immigrant Song complete with drawn out scream. "I already have to turn it down when you sleep."

And for that Sam was incredibly grateful, because in his mind good sleep consisted of minimum noise and no visions. If he couldn't have one, at least he could get the other.

Leaning forward awkwardly in the front seat, Sam twisted his back and arched it until the desired trailing series of pops could be heard. With the lingering feeling of shifting bone along his spine, the younger man brought a hand to his jaw line and pushed, smiling when the same satisfying pop could be heard.

"That's disgusting," Dean muttered, his features furled in distaste, which Sam merely ignored.

Long legs curled up onto the seat, Sam maneuvered his body to rest against the passenger door frame to accommodate his gangly limbs. Fire burned in his knee joints, a reminder that he'd slept most of the way in what had to be the worse position imaginable, and he winced as he tried to situate himself comfortably.

"So how much longer we got?" Sam inquired, his long arms outstretched as he worked out his shoulders. "You want me to drive?"

"Close to two hours, I think," Dean offered, shifting in the driver's seat as if evaluating his condition. "Nope, I'm good for now. Maybe when we stop in Chesterfield."

Sam raised an eyebrow in question. "What's in Chesterfield?"

"Shane's Photo Emporium," Dean replied with a mocking laugh, but the expression shifted a little more to the serious side when he turned his sight to Sam. "You still got your student ID right?"

"From Stanford?" Sam asked, sounding more around thirteen than twenty-three. "Yeah."

Dean nodded shortly. "Good."

"What do you need that for?" The question held his nervousness. That ID was it, the last small piece of school he had, and Dean wasn't going to cut it up. He just wasn't ready to see that yet.

"We're gonna need it." Dean shrugged, ignoring his brother's scrunched look of disbelief and turning the volume up to what big brother jokingly referred to as 'eleven' which nearly destroyed any chance of Sam hearing his last comment. "It's a small school, they'll know if we're not in the professor's class."

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"Professor Johnson? Are you crazy?" Sam whispered heatedly, glancing back at the innocent gray-haired receptionist his idiotic brother had conned and fingering his old school ID, adamantly refusing to look at the forged copy in Dean's possession. "You don't know the first thing about Micro. Did you even take a science class? No way this is going to work."

The fact that his concerns went completely unnoticed furthered Sam's irritation. For starters, Dean looked nothing like a science professor. His tattered jeans and tight tee gave off the frat-boy grunge air, not the educated, lost within one's own mind and benzene ring structure element that all science lovers conveyed.

At least the long car ride had succeeded in making his older brother's hair slightly askew in the back, a staple of every professor in college science departments. They had that going for them. As well as the interrogation Dean had instigated about what Stanford's rules and requirements for student TA's were.

Sam had lots of things he wanted to confide about his college experience to his brother, but TA jobs weren't even on the list, and had he not been born into the family Winchester, he'd have been disappointed in the strictly business, no fun time stories rundown.

Dean was fearless, he'd give him that. The cocky swagger that usually checked itself out at the door in any overtly educational setting was in full swing, and Sam couldn't help but shuffle behind it. He had been a law student, not a science major and there was no way he could help his brother should the questions of legitimacy arise.

In fact, he could barely recall the one required Biology class he had been forced to take, and that was as general as a class could come. If Dean's posture was due to little brother's college experience, he was in for the let down of the century.

But the reality of the situation was that Dean had been right. The campus was nothing more than six buildings encircling a huge lawn littered by a few small study circles and text books. If Sam had to guess, he'd estimate that the student population couldn't be more than a couple thousand seeing as they only had one dorm building, probably co-ed, and it stood all of about three stories.

Small campuses were notorious for that 'everyone knows your name' advertising and it'd be stupid to doubt it, especially in a case like this considering the amount of digging they had coming their way. Sam was beginning to wonder if he'd bitten off more than he could chew by

bringing up this particular case, and Dean's gung ho attitude wasn't doing anything to quell the nervous churning in the pit of his stomach. This was so going to backfire.

"This is it," Dean announced, halting his conquering pace in front of a small door leading into the department offices, and Sam had to lean back to avoid ramming into him. "And its student professor, okay?"

"Whatever," Sam muttered, and scanned the office numbers grinning when he found their guy. "Dr. Mills. 205."

Their entrance to the office area was signaled by the old door's creak and a flood of chirping birds, why people couldn't stick with the damn jingle bells, Dean would never know. Neither brother could escape the thick recycled air that reeked of stale cologne and the aesthetically displeasing aroma of formaldehyde due to the office's great location next to the biology labs.

Both brothers were relieved to find nothing but wide space where a secretary usually lurked, and took off down the first hall they came to, Sam directing their path. Halfway down, Dean was cursing under his breath at the campus numbering system as the brothers were forced to turn around and choose another avenue. What idiot puts all the even numbers on the same damn hallway?

"Way to lead, Sammy," Dean drawled, smacking his brother lightly on the back of the head as they proceeded in the opposite direction. "There. On the right. It should be empty, yeah?"

"Should be." Sam agreed but took a long precautionary look down the hallway nonetheless.

Dean fumbled through his jacket pockets, smirking coyly when he found the object he was searching for and crouched down in front of the lock. He hadn't even inserted the metal before Sam was hitting his shoulder, a panicked look on his face. "Dean, get up."

Older brother was about to inform Sam of how many ways he could lose that hand when a firm, sultry voice rang in his ears. "Can I help you, gentlemen?"

"In more ways than one," Dean quipped, the corners of his mouth creeping up in Cheshire fashion.

"I bet," The girl replied with an equally suggestive smile. Dean took a good long look at as he took her outstretched hand in greeting, loving every inch of the fit body, every curve accentuated beautifully by her tight jeans and golden colored, skin-hugging sweater that complemented her assets in the best possible way. "I'm Kinsey Martin, by the way. And you are?"

"You're one of Dr. Mills' TA's?" Sam inquired, avoiding the question for the moment, and stepping forward. The motion officially startled Dean because hell if he knew the boy was still in the room.

Kinsey's blue eyes flickered akin with amusement. "In case you haven't noticed, this school isn't that big. I'm more of a--oh...abused intern."

"The doctor's that bad, huh?" Dean questioned, taking to leaning against the wall in a position close enough to feel Kinsey's body heat as the girl fumbled for the office keys.

"Oh, no." Kinsey shook her head. "Just, well, science guys can get kind of testy when you deal with the research side of things."

Dean smirked, pushing off the wall smoothly. "Well, not all of us."

"I'm sure," Kinsey laughed, finally shoving the correct key into the lock, and Sam had to bite his lip to fight the urge to join her.

Kinsey cracked the door open and took a step into the office. The brothers moved to follow, but as soon as she'd crossed the threshold, the blonde turned back around to face Sam and Dean, her thin frame resting slightly against the jamb. Sam and Dean instantly halted their steps. "I can't let you in. Not until you tell me who you are."

Sam's lips parted and he fumbled slightly before beginning the introduction--well, lie--they were using this time. However, a deep-baritone interrupted the exchange before he had even revealed their aliases. Three sets of eyes immediately turned towards the source of the interruption. They were met with a muscled, had to be a former lineman figure approaching with hurried, long strides.

The man looked less than happy to see a crowd outside Dr. Mills' door, and more than furious about Kinsey's fraternizing with the brothers. "Who the hell are you? If you're reporters get the hell out."

Kinsey hummed a sigh, turning a hard glare towards the man. "We were just getting to that part." She shifted her attention to Sam and Dean, raising an eyebrow in warning. They got the hint.

Sam outstretched his hand in greeting towards the lineman, a tight smile on his face, "I'm Sam Walker. I'm a student in the Micro. Program at Stanford, and this is Dean Johnson. He's the TA for my upper level class."

"Stanford?" Kinsey breathed, clearly impressed. "I spent a summer there working at Baxter Labs there working on the immunology project. It was amaz--"

"That's great, Kins, really. We're all happy for you." The recent addition to their discussion interrupted tersely, his teeth grit tightly. "But that doesn't explain why these guys are here."

"We read about Dr. Mills' condition," Dean offered, doing his absolute best to maintain eye contact with his newly formed enemy. "I thought this would be an interesting case study seeing as I've done some work with sleep attributed disorders. Thought maybe I could help or be another set of eyes."

Sam tried not to look shocked at the fact his brother sounded completely legitimate a brief instant ago, but he got the feeling he was failing miserably when scrutinizing brown eyes latched onto him. "Don't look at me, man. He's the professor. I'm here for the ride."

"Actually, he has a term paper overdue," Dean quipped, a classic annoyed authoritative tone every teacher in the world could convey with ease clouding his voice. And if Sam had to guess, he'd assume Dean did it so well because big brother had heard it more times than he could count.

"You should see my stack." The brothers watched in slight amazement as the red fury faded from the man's face, replaced by a calm, approachable smile, "I'm Nick. Sorry, 'bout before. Just with all this...whatever it is, we've got a lot of people asking questions you know?"

The boys nodded sympathetically and Kinsey gestured for them to come into the office space, "We don't have much."

The statement could have been construed as true had it not been for the mass of papers, medical journals and articles sprawled haphazardly over every inch of the office. Dean whistled under his breath as he drew near the far wall, unable to help the instant connection his brain made between Nick and Kinsey's idea of research and his father's.

"So all this?" Sam mumbled, waving a hand around.

"Everything I could find on sleep disorders, deprivation...just everything. But they either don't cover all the symptoms or don't explain why the rest of his body is just shutting down. Initially we thought sleep paralysis, you know?" Nick rambled, wide fingers shifting absently through the mounds.

"His body's shutting down?" Sam questioned, cocking his head in interest.

"Yeah, it's weird," Nick mumbled. "I mean, when I found him, it mimicked sleep paralysis in every way. But then, he never came out of it, and now, well...His organ systems are just shutting down one right after the other and he's completely unresponsive. No talking, blinking—just almost, well, dead."

Dean raised his eyebrows in thought. "And the doctors don't have any idea what this is?"

"It's not a virus, or bacterial infection," Kinsey chimed in, shrugging her shoulders, "They don't have a text book answer for this one. Unless it's all in his head, which I don't think it is."

"Was he sick or anything before this happened?" Sam asked, taking a seat at the small side table and riffling through the documents there.

"No," Nick replied, "We were at a staff party the night before. Everyone seemed fine. Basic party stuff—small talk, alcohol. Dr. Mills seemed good. Hell, I don't think the man was even buzzed when he left which was why it was so strange that he didn't show up to work in the morning. And when I went to check on him...well, you know."

Sam nodded and sighed. This was turning out to be a 'maybe Dean was right' kind of job, and by the way his brother kept glancing at him with eyes screaming 'what I'd tell you', they both knew it. "Right."

"Weird thing," Kinsey noted, coming over to stand along side Nick, struggling to balance the stack of folders she'd accumulated, "is that you would think the doctors would have some clue, seeing as this has happened before."

Dean's smug look crumpled. "There are more?"

"Yeah," Nick sighed, "I guess the doctor said he had a couple cases similar to this a few months back. They didn't make it. But still, I mean, those guys, we looked them up, and didn't even know them. Dr. Mills definitely didn't know them."

"How can you be sure?" Sam leaned forward in the chair, confusion written all over his face. This whole thing was weird—no other word for it.

"One of the guys didn't even go to this school, and the one that did, wasn't in any of Dr. Mills' classes," Nick informed and wiped a splayed hand over his face before his eyes flicked to the wall clock. "Dammit! Kins, we got class in ten."

Instead of following a bolting Nick out the door, Kinsey lingered in front of the work table, her focus entirely on Dean. "I'm doing the lecture today. It's on the organism groupings and Nick always thinks I do well. But I'd really love an outside opinion. If you wouldn't mind..."

Dean's eyes widened and he cleared his throat a few times. "Uh...well, Sam--"

"Oh, it's okay," Kinsey interrupted quickly. "You said you were here to help with the research, so he can stay here and do that. The computer lab is downstairs, and well, you see all the stuff we have all over."

"I'm okay with that," Sam spoke up, eyes sparkling with laughter, his mouth shut tightly to prevent indulging the emotion.

"Great!" Kinsey exclaimed with a Crest-worthy smile plastered on her face, "The class is an hour and a half so it'll be a while."

Sam could barely contain himself when a small audible groan from Dean met his ears but managed a response. "That's fine."

The blonde turned sharply back to Dean. "So, you ready?"

"Sure," Dean replied. "Just give me a minute with Sam, here, and I'll be right there."

"I'll be in the office lobby," Kinsey informed them before exiting the room, and Dean heaved a relieved sigh once she'd cleared the door.

"An hour and a half?" The sandy haired brother whined, although it was smothered by Sam's roar of laughter at his expense. "Shut up."

"Hey, you wanted to be the professor, Lussac," Sam shot back, regaining some sense of composure. "You might learn something."

"Whatever, dude," Dean mumbled grumpily. "You better figure out what this thing is 'cause I ain't sitting through days' worth of this geek crap."

Sam chewed his bottom lip and darted a glance at the piles of loose papers. "It's not going to be easy. I've never heard of something like this."

"Yeah, me either," Dean conceded, dropping his head in defeat but lifted it quickly with feigned resolve. "Okay, I'm going to go try to stay awake through Boring 101. You think maybe if I behave in class, the teacher will reward me?"

Sam groaned, shaking his head, and stretched out a gangly arm to give his brother a not so gentle push towards the office door. Dean feigned a stumble and begrudgingly left to follow Kinsey into the torture that was a lecture class leaving Sam alone with the mountain of inconclusive research.

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Thirty minutes into Kinsey's exhilarating lecture on risk grouping systems, Dean was convinced that the rambling spew of scientific facts was directly proportional to the amount of sleep one would acquire during class no matter how hot the professor. As it was, the sandy-haired Winchester was struggling to keep his eyes open even after determining that Kinsey was smoking.

Letting out a small puff of air, Dean leaned forward in his small desk, resting his elbows against the faux wooden desktop, and allowed his bored eyes to wander around the small room. The classroom itself held about thirty people, most of whom looked vaguely interested in the topic, save the dark haired Nike wearing guy in the far back corner who at the moment was out cold, head resting against the back wall.

Dean considered chucking the outline Kinsey had so graciously passed out at the beginning of class at the kid simply because he could, and dammit if he wouldn't give anything to be that guy right about now. But no way in hell he could with the rate Kinsey kept glancing his way, making eye contact before turning back to her notes.

At first, he'd offered a small smile and affirming nod, but now the constant attention was bordering on annoying, the wall offering a more intriguing game of count the painted cinderblocks. Dean reached a grand total of forty when the muffled notes of Back in Black rang out.

The sound was unmistakable and every head in the place began looking around for the source, laughing because Kinsey had stressed the cell phone rule at the beginning of lecture. As irony would have it, it was the TA's blushing face and frantic search for the singing phone that brought the class into moderate hysterics.

A quick order for silence and a sharp look later, and everyone in class fell eerily silent as Kinsey flipped her phone open and took the call. While the class fidgeted in their seats, Dean studied the way Kinsey's face looked all but drained of color, her eyes wide, and lips parted in muted horror.

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A light tapping on the door preceded its slow opening of it and Sam jolted out of the creaky office chair, scattering the slew of Nick's research over the mythology texts he'd snagged from the library. Clearing his throat as he waited for the intruder, he nervously ran his hands over his crumpled shirt and jeans. Last thing he needed right now was office personnel questioning his presence.

"C-can I help you?" Sam asked, leaning a bit to catch a glimpse of his visitor and urging the person to move slightly faster than their current snail's pace.

A homely looking girl stepped cautiously into the office space, her frizzy curls twisting around her loose ponytail. Sam smiled at her, and was rewarded with a nervous laugh and immediate loss of eye contact as the girl's pale, freckled face ducked to the floor. "I—I was looking for Nick."

Sam nodded, resting against the desk's edge. "Well, he's in class right now."

"No," The girl exclaimed, a little louder than Sam had anticipated, and if the younger Winchester didn't know better he'd swear tears were forming in the girl's eyes. "We were dismissed early."

"Oh," Sam muttered, racking his brain for a reason why his brother had yet to return. Oh yeah, Kinsey. "Did they say why?"

"No, but I think it's bad," the girl replied softly, her dark eyes studying the blue carpet again.

Silence crept into the room, with Sam opening and closing his mouth to interrogate the issue further, but stopping himself each time because the girl had said she didn't know anything and seemed to have taken a certain liking to the far wall, staring at it with dead intensity. The younger brother was never more thankful than when loud voices from the hallway met his ears, and he jumped up from the table, grabbing his books from their hiding spot, and crossing the length of the room to get a glimpse of the group.

A smile crept on his face when he saw his brother and Nick approaching, but the expression faded when he looked past the two men to the tear-stained face of Kinsey following behind. "What happened?"

Dean looked up in Sam's direction, but Nick beat him to an answer. "Dr. Mills died an hour ago. We just got notified."

"What?" The small crowd startled as the shrill question rang out, and Sam turned back to see his visitor leaning heavily against the door jamb.

"Megan? What the hell are you doing here? Office hours aren't until four," Nick stated firmly, his face tense as he brushed past Sam towards the upset girl.

"Nick," Kinsey reprimanded, her voice shaky. "It's okay."

"I-I just needed help with that problem set, an-and was worried about--" Megan stumbled, nervous eyes glancing back and forth between Kinsey and Nick. "Did he—is he really?"

"Yes," Nick took a breath, his tone switching from weary to fully authoritative but tolerant. "Look, the problem set isn't due for another week and a half. Can this wait until tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I know..." Megan stammered, sniffing back the emotions stealing her soft voice. "I just thought you could help me get a head start. I'm sorry."

Kinsey sighed sympathetically. "It's okay, we just—we just have a lot to take care of now," she offered to her student, then turned and gave Dean a wondering glance. "Maybe, if you aren't too busy—you could take a look at the problems? This isn't Stanford so there's no supplemental instruction, you know?"

Dean swallowed thickly, chancing a look over to a smirking Sam and overly pleased Megan with Kinsey's hopeful suggestion, before stuttering an answer. "Uh...well, I don't—uh..."

"It's okay," Nick interrupted, and Dean struggled to hide his relief. "I got a study block at eight tonight anyway. You can stop by then."

"Thank you so much," Megan gushed, wiping at the wetness in the corners of her eyes. "This is all so crazy."

The group simply nodded their agreement as Megan started to leave, although she stopped in front of Dean. "Are you going to be at the study session?"

"Actually, no," Dean responded, not sounding remotely sorry for that fact at all.

"Oh, okay," the girl muttered, her disappointment audible as she turned back towards Nick. "I'll see you at eight, okay?"

"Okay," Nick replied, and both brothers noticed the slightly annoyed glance the TA shared with Kinsey.

Sam waited until Megan had vanished out of the hallway before offering his condolences, "I'm sorry about what happened to Dr. Mills. Did they tell you anything when they called?"

"It's okay," Kinsey returned, her voice conveying it was anything but, although neither brother was prepared to bring up that point, "We'll figure it out. And no, they didn't."

Sam nodded and offered a small reassuring smile. "I'm sure you will and we'll do anything we can to help."

Dean's face bore a similar expression as he agreed. "Yeah, if you need anything just give us a call."

"Thanks," Nick breathed, relief washing over his face as he set his focus on Sam. "Did you find anything today?"

"No," Sam offered, but cast a glance at Dean that suggested otherwise the instant Nick nodded resignedly. "Just a couple literature books I've been searching for."

"Oh...okay," Nick muttered, his disappointment evident. "Well, Kins and I have to do some grading and call some people. Pretty boring stuff. I mean, you're welcome to stay, but I think we--"

Dean held up a hand in interruption. "It's fine. We got to check into a hotel anyways."

"The Milton on 8th is a good one," Kinsey chimed up as she disappeared into the office.

Nick shook his head, "Yeah, if you're Bill Gates." He scoffed, flashing the brothers a smirking grin. "Women."

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A crowd of concerned students had already gathered outside the office building and Dean was surprised that Megan wasn't in the middle of the worried mob revealing her new found information to her classmates. Sam shook his head in sympathy at the impending grief coming to the undergrads.

The brothers walked in pensive silence as they reached the far parking lot, familiar black awaiting its passengers. Dean patted his jacket pockets and yanked out his keys as Sam circled around the back of the car.

"So?" Dean questioned expectantly, opening the creaking driver's door of his baby and giving little brother his full attention as he leaned against the car top, arms crossed over the door jamb.

Sam's face scrunched in puzzlement. "So?"

"What? You gonna tell me that you didn't find a damn thing about what's going on here?" Dean accused, eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"No, I did, I think..." Sam replied, sinking into the passenger seat and waiting for his brother to enter the car before continuing. "I found a couple of books that might help."

"Good," Dean returned, placing the keys into the ignition. "So, what you got?"

"Well," Sam began, his attention wavering between flipping through the dog-eared pages and observing his brother's backing out technique, which he knew Dean hated, but hey, another set of watching eyes never hurt a damn thing. Finally satisfied that no unsuspecting student was going to get hit in the parking lot, Sam focused back on the exposed pages. "It's not sleeping sickness," he said, "And the fact that its only guys that are affected made me think it could be some kind of curse or something."

"Like a cursed object?" Dean offered, merging onto the highway with racing driver speed.

Sam rubbed his temples in thought. "Yeah, but then they'd all have to be in contact with it somehow."

"The campus?" Dean tried again, shrugging his shoulders.

"See that's what I thought." The brunet yanked out a few loose copied sheets crammed in between the book's pages. "But more guys would've been affected right? And then, I found that this isn't the *only* town where this has happened."

Dean shot his brother a baffled expression. "Huh?"

"Redding, Massachusetts," Sam read, re-scanning the article he'd printed. "Four years ago."

"Did Dad mention it?" Dean asked offhandedly as he maneuvered the Impala onto the exit ramp.

"Nope," Sam shook his head and grabbed another book from the car's floor, "I did fin--"

"Hold that thought, Sammy," Dean instructed, turning into the lot of a run down motel, it's half-lit sign declaring "vacancy".

"This place looks like it violates every health code, Dean," Sam complained, grimacing at the rusted metal railings and chipped doors starkly visible in the early evening sun.

Dean shifted into Park and shot Sam a 'deal with it' glance. "We've stayed in worse."

With that Sam couldn't argue, and he watched in muted frustration as his brother sauntered into the motel office to check them in, only to return moments later triumphantly sporting keys to their new living quarters, compliments of one Mr. Kirk Hammett, a smirk on his face.

"We're in lucky 13," Dean boasted with a loud laugh, gunning the Impala and squealing into the parking space provided directly in front of their room door.

"Wonderful," Sam groaned, gathering his books and struggling to open the car door.

Dean snickered at his younger brother's predicament. "Need any help there, Sammy?"

"Nope," Sam responded firmly, yanking the door open and stumbling out of the car to the sound of Dean's open laughter. Regaining his balance, Sam raised a foot to kick the passenger door shut, grinning satisfactorily when the retaliating gesture succeeded in pissing his brother off.

"Dude!" Dean screeched, damn near sprinting over to the opposite side of the car and kneeling down to study the door panel. "If there is one scratch, I swear to God--"

"Yeah, whatever," Sam shot back unfazed, setting his load on the car's roof before extending a grasping hand in impatience in his brother's direction. "Keys."

Dean tossed the room keys over to Sam with more force than was really necessary and brushed past the younger brother in an irritated huff to retrieve their bags. Sam couldn't help but revel a bit in his moment of inspired genius as he stalked over to the badly painted door. The key stuck in the lock but what else was new? Sam got his answer the instant he flung the door open.

His mouth gaped in abject horror and immediately the brunet averted his gaze in disgust. The Sunrise Motel hadn't been joking when they'd advertised 'where the sun always shines' on their tacky road sign, and the bright, neon yellow paint accented so wonderfully by the burnt orange trim attested to that.

"Well, I feel happier already," Dean snarked, hurling Sam's bag onto the far bed and setting his own down on the coarse orange wool comforter gracing the bed he'd designated for himself.

"I can't stay here," Sam protested, waving an arm towards the monstrosity that was the walls. "I'm already getting a headache."

"You always have a headache," Dean replied cockily, unzipping his bag and yanking out a fresh tee and sweats.

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "You, for starters."

Dean's head snapped up at the insult, a look of feigned offense clouding his features. "Oh, now that hurts."

"I bet," Sam huffed, rubbing at his eyes as he sunk down onto the bed and cracked open an old text he'd snagged from the campus library. "So, I got an idea of what this could be."

"Really?" Dean asked, grabbing his bundle of clothes and settling down on his bed facing Sam.

"Yeah." The younger brother quickly flipped through the pages, finding the correct one and handing the book to Dean. "I think it's a Mara."

"Mara?" Dean repeated incredulously. "Isn't that a nightmare demon or something?"

Sam nodded, scratching his head. "In some legends, yeah."

"Okay, so what makes you think this is what we're dealing with?" Dean inquired, studying the illustration of a sleeping man with a woman's spirit hovering above him alongside the text.

"Well," Sam began, rubbing his hands on his jeans, "One of the legends mentioned that Maras were once thought to be free floating spirits that paralyzed men in their sleep."

"Sounds about right," Dean commented absently, and began reading the opened page. "So, if it's a spirit then it should come from somewhere right? It's got to have an origin."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, letting out a breath, "But another article said that Maras were thought to be spirits of cursed women that attack while the girl is sleeping."

"So like its part of the curse?" Dean questioned, tearing his eyes from the book and meeting Sam's.

"I don't know, I guess," Sam offered, taking to biting his lip as he retreated into a thoughtful silence.

"That's just weird." Sam shot his brother an annoyed glance and Dean's eyes widened, "What? I mean, usually a curse affects the cursed right?"

"It still does," Sam argued, locating his laptop and turning the machine on. "I mean, if the people are related to the cursed girl in some way, their slow paralyzing deaths affect her too."

"Yeah, but if she knows she's cursed why doesn't she just avoid any situation that would kill these guys?" Dean reasoned, tossing the book back over to Sam.

Sam pursed his lips in thought. "Maybe she doesn't know she *is* cursed."

"What?" Dean scoffed, shaking his head. "How do you not know you're cursed, Sammy? Even people who don't believe in curses think some people are cursed."

"Well, if the Mara spirit attacks while the girl is sleeping, she may not even realize it's her."

Dean scrunched his forehead at his brother's take on the whole thing, running his fingers through his spiky hair. "Maybe," he acquiesced over Sam's fingers clicking against the computer keys. "But you know even if the girl doesn't know she's cursed, there's not much we can do to help her."

Sam heaved a sigh, defeated. "Yeah, I know. But we have to at least try. This Mara, or whatever--it's killing these guys."

"Yeah, you're right," the sandy-haired Winchester nodded in agreement. "Did any of your research say why this thing paralyzes its victims? Got to have a reason, yeah?"

"No," Sam pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to quell the headache forming behind his eyes. "My best guess is we figure out who's cursed, and what the curse is exactly and go from there."

"Walk in the park," Dean joked, pushing off of the bed, clean clothes in hand, as he headed to the bathroom. "What are you looking for?"

"Those other victims," Sam answered, his eyes never leaving the screen. "There's got to be a connection."

"Well, let me know if you find anything, Sherlock. I'm going take a shower then crash. Been a long day."

"Yeah," Sam agreed sarcastically. "Oh, and by the way, how was class today, professor?"

"Bite me," Dean shot back, slamming the bathroom door behind him.

\* \* \* \*

Dean emerged from the shower smelling as Zestfully clean as one could get, only to find Sam already curled up on the far bed, a mound of paper serving as the younger brother's

pillow. A wry smile graced the elder's face as he repositioned his brother, throwing a blanket over him after yanking the free pages out from under the thick mass of hair.

Several names scrawled out in Sam's messy penmanship marked the copied sheets and Dean settled in the provided motel chair, and opened the laptop. He found the first couple of Sam's bookmarked pages with no problem, and then began his own Google inquiry.

Soon, the older brother came to the same conclusion Sam had no doubt come to earlier: There was nothing to connect these other two Dale victims with Dr. Mills. They were from completely different backgrounds and educations. Only one of the guys was a student at Britannia, although none of his classes even remotely resembled science in any way. The other victim hailed from a Starbucks two miles west of the campus.

Even if they had just run into each other on campus that still wouldn't explain why a cursed girl would have it in for them, or unknowingly hurt them.

Dean resigned himself to momentary failure and crossed the room in search of his rifle, setting the gun against the nightstand separating the two beds. His trusty Marine Raider wasn't going to do a damn thing against a spirit, but Dean eased into his normal sleeping position, clutching the knife's handle anyway. It sure as hell made him feel better.

\* \* \* \*

A steady buzz echoed in the small room, causing the two exhausted lumps covered in blankets to merely stir, forcing the intruding noise into the background of welcome darkness. It worked because the sound dissipated seconds later, and both brothers gladly settled back into the mass of bedclothes.

The annoying resonance returned only seconds after it had left, eliciting an irritated groan from Dean as he cracked an eye open, raising his head slightly off the pillow.

"Sammy...get that."

Dean let his head plop back onto the feather head rest and waited for Sam to offer the buzzing a hello, but got a mumbled reply of "your phone" in return.

Sighing tiredly, Dean propped himself up onto his elbows and reached out for the offending object, which lay just out of reach on the nightstand, quickly flipping it open.

"Hello," the elder brother greeted groggily, his voice thick from sleep.

"Dean?" a frantic voice from the other end asked.

Scratching his head absently, Dean rolled his eyes. "Yeah?"

"It's Kinsey," the female voice revealed, and Dean instantly snapped out of his haze.

"Kinsey? What's wrong?" Dean pressed, leaning over to swat Sam into awakening.

"Huh?" The younger mumbled, giving his brother a less than happy glare which intensified when Dean shushed him.

"You there, Kins?" Dean repeated anxiously, almost certain he'd heard the blonde crying.

Kinsey hesitated, taking a breath to calm herself. "I-it's Nick."

"What about Nick?" The older brother swallowed thickly when a choking sob flooded from the line.

"He hasn't come to work, and—and he's not answering his phone. I think...first, Dr. Mills—god, it's happening again."

\* \* \* \*

If it were possible for a person to have lead feet, Sam was fairly sure his brother would have an amazing pair. The younger brother gripped the bucket seat's edge with deathly tight intensity as Dean whipped the classic black around another sharp turn. Sam's attention rested solely on the blur of green and suburban dwellings, but the scenery was doing nothing for his frazzled nerves and he decided to change his game plan.

Smoothed out the crumpled motel-issued paper on his lap, Sam tried his best not to make the motion frantic as he attempted to read the scrawled print marring the page. "You might want to slow down so we can actually see the damn house when we get to it."

Dean didn't offer a reply and Sam's huff of irritation faded into a startled yelp when he found himself propelled forward to the sound of an ear-shattering screech. The brunet made a mental note to thank his father for emphasizing the importance of fast reflexes as he threw out his hands to prevent a head on with the dash.

Once his hammering heart had settled into more of a thud, Sam looked around warily to find what exactly had caused his brother to slam on the brakes. His eyes were met with nothing but blank asphalt. "You're a jerk!"

"What? Sam! Ant crossing, okay? I yield!" Dean shot back, laughter muffling the words. After all, Sam had kicked his baby earlier. The little geek deserved it.

"I told you that you might want to slow down," Sam argued, rubbing at his reddening hand. If he had a bruise in the morning he was so going to hurt Dean.

"Same difference," Dean replied absently, his eyes fixed on the passing street signs. "Kinsey said Huntley right?"

"You're the one who answered the phone," Sam answered, his lips tugging upward in a smirk. "What's the matter, bro? Age catching up to you?"

"Shut up," Dean snapped and reached out faster than Sam could react, snatching the wrinkled paper from Sam's grasp and glancing at the message written there. "See I was right—Huntley it is. And I'm not old."

"Whatever you say, man," Sam placated, hands raised in mock surrender. "But the mind's the first thing to go."

"How the hell would you know?" Dean shot back and veered the Impala onto the correct street.

Sam stared at the gold address markers on each of the small campus houses. "Just an observation."

"Yeah, well stop it," Dean ordered, glancing down at the numbers once again and then back at the window. Odds were on the left side of the street right? Or was it right?

"That doesn't make sense. How can you stop observing, Dean?" Sam asked unnecessarily, and sat up straighter in the passenger seat when he caught sight of Nick's building. "That's it, right there! Flight Apartments."

"Thank you, Lewis," Dean quipped, his eyes following Sam's point to the bricked five story building.

Sam rolled his eyes as his brother eased the car into the parking lot marked as "Residents Only." "You're welcome, Clark."

Dean issued an 'oh, you're hilarious' look in Sam's direction before exiting the car with a creaking slam. "We're at the end of the road, dude. You got everything?"

"If by 'everything' you mean your assembled walkman and a gun full of salt, yeah," Sam snarked, holding the duffle out and shaking it once for good measure.

"Okay, smart ass," Dean muttered, circling to the rear of the car. "Let's go."

Roughly five cars occupied the parking lot and Sam wondered if that was a testament to the number of residents living in the off-campus housing. The brothers made their way quickly through the paved lot and easily found the back entrance to the facility.

A frown crossed Dean's face when he noticed the key guard entrance. Kinsey hadn't mentioned it and seeing as neither brother had access to a card key this was turning out to be a bitch. Luck was on their side for once as Sam turned back to see an elderly woman struggling with a load of groceries. The gentlemen and the conman within him fought a brief battle before he hurriedly jumped into action, and although both Sam and Dean ended up with an arm's load, their payment was precious access to the complex.

The brothers waited until the quiet 'thank you' and mass of salt-and-pepper disappeared behind the woman's door before speedily climbing the next two floors and finding 35 E—Nick's place.

Dean knelt down in front of the chipping door and began the effortless process of picking the old lock. "You know, Sammy, I always knew you had a thing for older woman but..."

"Dean," Sam warned, although lacking heat. "Shut it."

"You're one of those 'age brings experience' kind of people ain't you?" Dean continued with an insinuating smirk.

Sam flicked the back of his brother's head. "Just open the door."

"As you wish," the sandy-haired brother announced sarcastically, twisting the door knob and flinging the door open widely.

Sam stepped across the threshold, Dean close on his heels.

To say that Nick's apartment was a bachelor pad was all too short an understatement. A sparse amount of furniture littered the cramped space, a sea of clothing and papers serving as carpeting and half-empty glasses and bags of chips the interior design.

Setting the duffle among the piles of discarded wear, Sam unzipped the bag and threw Dean his trusty EMF before removing his own rifle. "So, bedroom first?"

Dean straightened abruptly, turning to his brother, concern clouding his features, "There something you want to tell me, Sammy? I mean...you know, 'cause if you are—we'd, well, not Dad—but I'd understand."

Sam gaped dumbfounded by his brother's insinuation. "You're insane."

"I'm not the one struggling with my sexual orientation, Sammy," Dean joked, ignoring Sam's reddening cheeks and shaking his head slightly. Clearing his throat, the older Winchester switched into business since Sam refused to give him any more material to work from other than the lax jaw. "I think we should check the other rooms first, just in case the things still here and Nick—he could be anywhere."

"Alright," Sam agreed, shouldering his rifle and heading off in the direction of stacked dirty dishes and an overloaded dishwasher.

Dean searched the living room, or what he guessed passed as one. The small green sofa and big screen TV declared it as such, as well as the small square foot rest/coffee table. But who actually used those things anyway?

Satisfied that nothing else lingered in the two side rooms or Nick for that matter, the brothers headed to the back of the apartment and to whatever lay behind the closed wooden door. Dean placed a hand on the door knob, his eyes determining Sam's readiness. The younger brother nodded, raising his rifle. With one fluid motion Dean flung the door open, stepping to the side and allowing Sam to enter, gun cocked and ready.

Sam scanned the room quickly. "All clear—of pissed off Caspers anyway."

Dean shuffled into the room, studying his loudly whirring meter and then the prone form of the TA displayed on the bed that had captivated all of his little brother's attention. "Looks like someone had a bad night."

"Not funny," Sam reprimanded and approached the bed cautiously, studying Nick's lax form. "Something definitely was here though."

"You think?" Dean scoffed, coming to stand along side his brother.

Nick's body lay face down in a clutter of blankets and sheets, his lower limbs twisted between the bedclothes as if fighting off a nightmare. His short hair was matted and the gray tee he was wearing smothered in a sweaty wetness that added to the stale smell encompassing the room.

Sam gingerly placed the rifle down on the bed, sauntering into the open bathroom. "Must've happened really quick," he called out from behind the side room's door, and Dean ducked down to Nick's eye level, grimacing at the blank irises staring back at him. "There's no towel, or anything. He must've just come home and crashed."

"Yeah," Dean agreed nonchalantly, and Sam almost lunged for his older brother when he exited the bathroom to find Dean's index finger poking Nick's shoulder.

"Don't touch him!" Sam ordered, clearing the distance to Dean in one long stride.

"We got to make sure," Dean responded authoritatively, and placed the back of his hand underneath the TA's nose, satisfied when warm air brushed across the skin. "He's still breathing."

"Good," Sam sighed, relief in his voice, "I'm going to call the paramedics."

Dean straightened up and shook his head. "Not yet."

"He needs help, Dean," Sam argued, his jaw flexing in confusion and irritation.

"I know," the older brother said, exasperated. "But do you really want to explain a break-in? And we haven't shifted through the crap lying around here—we can't do that with people around."

"But if we--" Sam's protest flew to Dean's back as the older man left the bedroom in search of something only God knew. Snatching up his discarded weapon, the younger brother moved to follow.

Sam's hastening footsteps caught up to his brother's, and both found themselves in the kitchen. Dean settled into a folding chair and Sam hovered above the stack of ungraded tests and lecture notes scattered there. "Dean! He could die!"

"I know that, Sammy." Dean placated with a sharp look in the younger man's direction, "You said it was the spirit of a cursed woman, right?" he questioned, head tilting as he studied the mess of pages.

"Yeah," Sam nodded, blowing out a puff of air and picking up a torn off notebook page to read the scribbled note. "An ex-girlfriend maybe?"

"Maybe," Dean offered, opening a manila folder and pursing his lips.

Sam cracked open a small brown notebook, and hesitated. "Or maybe a sexy TA."

Dean brought his head up from the notes. "What?"

Sam closed the notebook and handed it to Dean who immediately began thumbing through it. "Think about it. The only girl who knew both Dr. Mills and Nick was Kinsey."

"Yeah, her and a ton of other students," Dean pointed out, forehead creasing as he continued to read the flowing cursive covering the page.

Sam shook his head. "Maybe, but she's the only one that knew them both on a personal level. Maybe even had a relationship with one of them."

"Like sleeping with 'em?" Dean breathed dramatically, seemingly appalled at the notion.

"Or dating one of them." Sam continued, rolling his eyes. "Some people do that first you know?"

"This is because she has the hots for me isn't it?" Dean accused lightly, his eyes squinting.

Sam laughed breathily. "Not hardly."

"What about those other victims?" Dean questioned, flopping the folder back onto the faux wooden table. "What's the connection there?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted, furrowing his brow in thought. "If we knew the type of curse this was, or what it is about Kinsey that's cursed...maybe..."

"Hey, what happened to innocent until proven guilty, Matlock?" Dean quipped, rising from the chair and meeting Sam's thoughtful stare.

"I just think she's the best guess we have right now," Sam explained slowly. "I mean, she's the one who called us and told us about the other victims."

Dean groaned in protest. "It would be the hot chic."

"Well, it would explain a lot about your taste in women," Sam jibed, taking a precautionary step back when Dean moved toward him.

"I'll check it out," Dean informed, brushing past his brother and heading for the door.

"Sure, you will," Sam drawled knowingly. "And what am I supposed to do while you fl—interrogate?"

"You get the privilege of talking to the students and figuring out what kind of curse we're dealing with," Dean enlightened him with a grin.

"That shouldn't take long," Sam murmured bitterly, and gathered his gear back up, zipping it into the duffle and shouldering the pack.

"Nope, not at all," Dean smirked, extracting his keys from his pocket. "Alright, Frances, you call, I'll drive."

\* \* \* \*

Dean straightened his jacket and shifted uncomfortably under the secretary's scrutiny. It figured that the relic would show up today and question his right to be on the premises. Her clipped tone and harsh tongue had vanquished all smoothness from Dean's approach, and he'd actually fumbled for the forged Stanford ID and a legitimate reason for wanting in Dr. Mills' office, regardless of the TA's residence there.

The sandy-haired man cleared his throat and donned a mega-smile. "Look, ma'am. I was here yesterday. If you could just--"

"Dean?" The clear, sweet ring of a familiar woman's voice brought a cocky grin onto Dean's face as he turned to see Kinsey approaching the front desk.

"You know this man?" the secretary inquired, her features marred by what Dean assumed had to be a permanent frown.

Kinsey nodded with a tight smile. "Yes, Laura. He's here as a research consultant."

"Visitors have to be cleared by the college," Laura scolded, shooting Dean a cold look that would have killed him on the spot had Kinsey not been there as his human shield.

"I know, but with all that's been happening it honestly slipped my mind," Kinsey apologized, her eyes glistening, and damn if Laura wasn't eating right out of the girl's hand.

Laura smiled sympathetically. "Just don't let it happen again. You know how campus security gets."

"Oh it won't," Kinsey promised sincerely, and turned to Dean, doing her best to smother a smile as she led Dean away from Laura's sight and down the hall.

The two walked in silence until reaching the office door, and Dean couldn't hide his admiration any longer, "You should've pursued acting."

Kinsey chuckled at the compliment and handed Dean her bag so she could search out the keys. "Yeah, well, what can I say—it's a gift."

"I don't think she liked me," Dean stated, mocking offense and leaning against the supporting wall.

"Oh, Laura's not so bad...once you get to know her that is." Kinsey faded into a worried frown when she grasped the knob and the door creaked open without even needing the withdrawn key. "That's odd."

"What is?" Dean straightened his posture and followed the blonde's line of sight.

"The office is always locked," Kinsey stated softly. "I'm sure I locked it when I left for class this morning. Oh god, this morning...did you find Nick? Was he--?"

"Yeah, we did," Dean admitted quietly, placing a comforting hand on Kinsey's shoulder when the woman ducked her head down and sniffed loudly. "We called for help though, stayed until we were sure the paramedics had him."

"I'm sorry," Kinsey apologized weakly, wiping at her eyes. "Just kind of crashing down on me, you know?"

Kinsey stepped back from under Dean's touch and moved to open the door, gingerly placing a hand on the knob. Dean gently brushed her hand away. "Let me do that—just in case."

Kinsey nodded and shuffled back to allow Dean to enter first. Stepping into the room, Dean immediately noticed the back lights were on and a shadow occupying the back wall. "What the--?"

"Who's there?" Kinsey demanded, stepping past Dean and barreling toward the back storage closet. "I said, who's there?"

Dean waited for an answer, all energy on full alert. A gasp garnered his attention and within a second, the older Winchester appeared at Kinsey's side, his eyes widening at the girl standing, face red, files clutched in her hand.

"Megan? What are you doing here?" Kinsey inquired, her tone abrupt as she approached the girl.

Deep, crystalline green lifted to meet the two adults, "I-I, Nick—he told me to stop by today so we could finish my work. The door was open...a-and well, I thought I'd get the stuff ready."

"Nick's not here," Kinsey stated firmly, lips tight in a disapproving stare.

"Where is he?" Megan inquired softly, glancing around, eyes widening in something akin to fear when she only saw Dean standing behind Kinsey. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine," Kinsey lied, giving Dean a 'back me here please' glance.

Dean nodded his agreement, meeting Megan's skeptical glare with a Crest-Ad smile. "He went to pick something up for me. I still don't know my way around Dale."

"Oh," Megan breathed, her face warming under the Winchester charm although her eyes revealed her lingering suspicion. "Well—maybe you could help me. You're probably really good at all this, going to Stanford and all."

There was no missing the admiration in the student's voice and Dean gulped down the rising nerves. He so should have made Sam do this. "Well, I really—uh, I need to talk to Kins--"

"She's got a lunch date with Jeremy," Megan informed sweetly, clearly happy to have Dean cornered.

Kinsey's eyes widened at the girl's knowledge. "How do you know that?"

"Nick mentioned it," the brunette offered quickly, barely heeding the TA's inquiry as her eyes never left Dean's shifting form.

Dean cleared his throat and turned to face Kinsey. "Who's Jeremy?"

"My fiancée," Kinsey admitted, a slight blush gracing her face, "Well, we've been talking about it."

The revelation startled Dean for a moment. Well, that answered his burning question. "That's great."

"Thanks," Kinsey returned, eyes darting nervously around the room as she busied herself with paper work almost immediately.

"Well—uh, I should probably go, if you're leaving soon anyway," Dean excused himself, his gaze shifting to Megan's clearly disappointed one.

The girl's mouth turned into a pout. "You're not go--"

"Another time." Dean assuaged, practically sprinting out of the room under Megan's hurt jade.

\* \* \* \*

Sam rubbed his temples, desperately trying to quell the throbbing behind them. Dean studied his brother's hunched position over the hotel table and settled down in the provided side chair with a huff. Wordlessly, the older brother swiped the laptop from under the younger's hands and shut it with a sharp click.

"Dean, what the hell?" Sam protested, his eyes squinted as he shot up in the seat.

"You look like you're going to fall over," Dean commented with a sigh, extending a hand to steady his brother.

Sam skirted away from the supportive gesture. "Well, I was staring at a screen all day while you were flirting."

"Wasn't flirting," Dean defended, scratching the back of his head. "Kinsey's engaged. Sort of."

"Shot you down, didn't she?" Sam chuckled, taking to a lean against the small table and crossing his arms over his chest.

"No," Dean defended, feigning offense, "But she definitely wasn't crashing in the professor's or Nick's bed."

"Yeah," Sam muttered thoughtfully and began a round of pensive pacing. "But if she's not the one..."

"Blew your theory to hell didn't?" Dean joked, reveling in the death glare Sam issued at his snide remark.

"Then who else is there?" Sam questioned, sinking onto his bed and flopping down to stare at the ceiling. Not his favored view, but one that would do for now.

"Not sure. Maybe that Megan girl. She seems awful friendly when it comes to Nick and looked freaked about Dr. Mills." Dean reasoned, pursing his lips in thought. "Gonna have to search a little more because we still have those other victims to account for. You get anything on the curse?"

Sam eased himself onto his elbows and nodded. "Yeah, best I can figure it's related to who the girl's in love with. Only one that makes sense really."

"Okay, so the Mara takes out the guy she loves because of the curse?" Dean offered, scouring through Sam's notes.

"Well, I guess. But with Dr. Mills and Nick both...I mean, the chick is falling in love at a rapid rate," Sam muttered, although scoffed a laugh his statement moments later.

"Black and white," Dean muttered, re-reading the list of victims.

"What?" Sam asked, settling back down on the bed and wriggling up to rest his head on the pillows.

"Spirits don't see shades of gray," Dean clarified. "Maybe this Mara can't tell the difference between a crush and love."

"Nice theory, Romeo," Sam quipped, shutting his eyes.

"I thought so," Dean shot back cockily, grinning when Sam gave a lion's yawn. "Go to sleep, dude."

"I'm trying, but you keep talking," Sam murmured, shifting over to his side. "Wake me up when it's time to eat."

Dean smirked, flipping the laptop back open. "I'll think about it."

\* \* \* \*

Sam wasn't sure exactly how long he'd been out, but judging by the dimness of the room and chill in the air, he guessed it was a long while past dinner time. Shuffling beneath the sheets, the younger propped himself up against the headboard. A rustling at his feet garnered his attention and he pawed his hands limply in the direction of the sound, smirking when a paper bag damp with grease met his fingers.

Grinning in thanks, Sam twisted in bed to the other side of the room where he knew Dean had more than likely crashed. Dean was sleeping as he always had, face down, and hand poised over his favored knife—on alert.

But it was the pale white apparition clothed in shreds of milky gray hovering above his brother's prone form that had the bag of fast food dropping like a fifty pound weight from his hands. Frantically, Sam grappled for the salt-loaded gun between the two beds.

"Hey!" Sam screamed, clutching the rifle tightly and setting his aim as the spirit turned its ghostly face, shriveled as it was steely, towards the young man.

Strands of darkened hair covered the ashen face and the transparent body flickered ominously as it waited for Sam to act. A rushing chill flooded the small room, blowing the matted brown away from the pale face and Sam's eyes widened as every feature of his enemy came into view.

The sound of gun fire radiated through the merciless shrieking of the spirit as precious salt slammed into the hotel wall and the apparition, unharmed, swept down onto Dean's still body.

\* \* \* \*

Bare feet fought against the entangled sea of sheets and Sam let out a guttural, panicked scream as he kicked off the linens, soles connecting hard with the coarse carpet as he fired again at the surging spirit.

A low growl punctured the air as the salt connected, the corporeal form flickering statically beneath the bullet's sting, but didn't vanish. Instead, the apparition pulled back from her victim only to charge a second time at Dean with renewed speed.

"Shit!" Sam cursed, hand flying to the bed table and nearly hurling the small drawer across the room in a rabid search for spare ammo. His sleep-crusted eyes blurred with emotion at each passing second of wasted time and the younger found himself unable to revel in the smooth cool metal finally clutched in his hands. "Shit!"

Quickly, the young man reloaded, firing two shots straight into the head of his brother's attacker narrowly missing Dean's own by a centimeter fraction. The spirit reared its contorted head back in agony, a searing howl escaping the cracked lips as the ashen form seized and misted into air, disappearing from sight.

Sam heaved in short rapid breaths, swallowing back adrenaline-charged trepidation, and took a shuffled step towards his unmoving brother. "D-dean?"

The sound of his name did nothing to warrant a movement from the older brother, and Sam wasn't sure Dean had even registered that rock salt had been fired at point blank range directly above him. Sam stretched out a trembling hand, placing it gently on Dean's shoulder and nudging him lightly. "Dean? You o-okay?"

The dark-haired brother bit his lip hard, ignoring the tinge of copper appearing on his tongue, and mentally kicked himself for asking something so stupid when apparently Dean was anything but. How could he be?

Wordlessly, Sam sunk down on the bed, grabbing hold of Dean's shoulder and waist to ease his brother over onto his back. A sharp yell flew from Sam's lips and he startled back, falling off the bed's edge and landing hard on the floor when Dean's eyes shot wide open, the whites piercing through the darkness of the room.

A low terror-stricken groan pulsated in Sam's ears as the younger fumbled for the small lamp, flicking it on to find Dean's eyes roaming in the sockets as the older brother sought to put his current agony into words unable to be formed.

"Dean! Look at me! Look at me!" Sam ordered, coming to grab hold of his brother's useless arms and staring down into the searching, frightened eyes blown wide searching the air.

Sam waited for what seemed an eternity for Dean's gaze to lock onto his own, but couldn't breathe any easier once they had. There was no sense of calm in the deep jade, only indescribable fear. Sam felt his heart plummet to his stomach. "It's—hell, it's not okay. But I'm gonna figure this out. I think---I got her before she could finish whatever the hell she does, but--"

Dean groaned helplessly, interrupting Sam, the veins in his neck jarringly apparent as he strained to move his unresponsive body. The younger brother swallowed thickly, his tongue thick under the pressure of the situation. "Dean, I promise, I'm going to fix this. Okay? I'm going to fix this."

Sam released his hold on his brother, easing off the bed and turning back towards the motel table covered in pages and his laptop—his last hope. An unintelligible scream from behind Dean's sealed lips had Sam equally as frozen in place.

"Sorry. I'll be right back...sorry." Sam muttered a liturgy of apologies as he realized that by continuing forward he was completely out of Dean's eye shot, which at the moment consisted of the ceiling, leaving his relentlessly protesting brother sprawled helplessly on the bed. Dean's tight incoherent grumble grated Sam's ears causing his shaking hands to intensify their quivering spasms as he gathered the multitude of pages and computer into his trembling arms.

Hastened, careful footsteps brought him back to his brother's bed, and Sam dumped the load unceremoniously onto the comforter. Dean's eyes widened at the gentle thud, and his limp body shifted with the bed's change of weight. Sam crawled up on the bed, careful not to jar his brother and settled in against the headboard, looking down and reestablishing eye contact with Dean.

"I should take you to the hospital." Sam resolved firmly, shuffling back only for Dean to give off a deep wail of objection. "Dean--"

Dean repeated the protest and Sam knew deep down he could just pick his brother up and haul him to the Impala; but Dean was responsive at least now, and there really wasn't time to waste. The face of the Mara lingered fast in his mind and Sam wanted this over, not a life support nightmare to keep him up for the next year.

"Okay then. You want to sit up?" Sam posed the question tentatively, and could have sworn Dean's eyes rolled at the suggestion. Little brother didn't care, in all honesty, and he took to propping his older brother up in a half sit against the pillows, Dean's body slumping in on itself despite the adjustments.

Dean wasn't meant to be so friggen' still. Hell, he'd never been this still, save for hospital stays and that was a trip down memory lane Sam sure as hell wasn't taking now. A grunt in his ear let Sam know Dean was sliding and he situated himself to facilitate Dean's sit.

Okay, so he was all up in his brother's personal space, but Dean couldn't really protest—well, the muffled groan kind of qualified as one, but it wasn't like big brother could pull away either. Sam figured it was for the best anyway. If the Mara's effect was the same as with Dr. Mills then the process would be slow, eventually shutting down everything—breathing included.

Sam glanced at the digital clock, the blaring red declaring it half past eleven. "Okay, so let's see what you found."

Leaning forward, Sam grabbed the stack of papers bearing Dean's unmistakable scrawl and their father's journal, aware that his brother's eyes fixed on his every move. At least Dean seemed a bit calmer now; or maybe that was just powerless. The brunet studied the pages, flicking through them quickly, registering the one common thread in all of his brother's scribbled notes.

"Megan," Sam breathed, working his way through an old obit Dean had saved on the computer. "She's from Redding? She knew the other victims..."

Dean's eyes shifted in Sam's direction and Sam huffed in irritation. "You could've woken me up, you know? We could've taken care of this hours ago."

A sharp intake of breath resonated in Sam's ears and instantly guilt bore down on the younger man's shoulder. "I know, I know...we still don't know how."

Dean looked back at the far wall forlornly and Sam flipped open their father's journal idly. "So Megan either fell in love or crushed on Dr. Mills and Nick, not to mention those guys back in Redding. But how the hell did you get involved in this?"

Sam waited for the 'cause I'm smoking hot' retort to come, but knew it wouldn't. "Guess nobody can resist the Winchester charm," he smirked, memories taking him back to Jess and, guiltily, Sarah without his consent. He quickly shook them away. "At least, your brand of it."

Pages flapped against each other in steady rhythm as Sam sought out an answer, humming something that could be construed as Metallica's Harvester of Sorrow. He knew the only part he got right were the chorus bars, but it seemed to be helping Dean out, as was the plan, calming Sam as well.

“What about a binding spell?” Sam interjected, breaking off in mid-note. Shifting up straighter in the bed, the younger brother studied the journal entry before him and shot a questioning look at Dean.

Dean grunted softly and Sam took that as a ‘good idea, Sammy...keep going’. So he did. “Well, the book I found at the library said that Maras were free spirits, separated from the women they’ve latched on to. So, if Megan’s curse latched the Mara to her, couldn’t we bind the Mara to Megan and give Megan power over it?”

Sam scrunched his forehead. “I don’t know if it’ll work that way or not though.”

A moan from Dean elicited Sam’s attention and the younger brother noticed that the jade was turned downward to the open journal page. “What? Dean—what?”

Following the stiff glare, Sam began to read the long definitions and requirements of the listed spells. One in particular caught his attention. “This one...Dad says it’s meant to stop people from doing harm to themselves and others. We can’t stop Megan’s curse, but maybe we can stop the Mara’s leeching from it, right?”

Dean didn’t give a form of reinforcement to the idea, and Sam nudged him to encourage a response. The younger’s eyes widened when no sound came and he jolted forward, turning to lean towards his brother’s slack face. Dean’s limp body slumped sideways at Sam’s abrupt movement and little brother caught him, dark brown never leaving the unblinking, dull green.

“Dean?” Sam whispered gently, noticing the painfully slow swallow sinking in his brother’s throat. Not good. “Dammit! Okay, so uh...we’re going. Now!”

Dean’s eyes remained vacant as Sam hustled to pull on his jeans, grab his jacket, the journal, their packs, and their phones so they could get the hell out of the motel room. The younger couldn’t help the mental comparison Dean’s body held to that of the numerous corpses he’d seen and the thought of setting his own brother down into a pine box was enough to fuel Sam’s adrenaline.

Hurriedly, the dark-haired boy dashed out of the room, nearly tearing the Impala’s door off its hinges as he hurled the journal into the backseat, and turned the key in the ignition. The classic black surged to life and Sam leaned across the driver’s bench, swinging the passenger door open.

Taking a ragged breath, Sam re-entered the small room, and chewed his lip as he worked to figure out the best way to transfer Dean to the car. He sure as hell wasn’t leaving his older brother alone in some painter’s nightmare of a motel when the man probably wouldn’t be able to breathe properly in the coming hours. That coupled with the knowledge that binding spells got messy and getting the hell out of Dodge didn’t even begin to cover the escape plan they were going to need, urged Sam into adopting a fireman’s carry and he quickly supported Dean’s neck and knees.

With a grunt, Sam took on his brother’s weight, stumbling back a bit under it. “Oh, you are so eating salads from now on, bro.”

It took a lot of work and readjustment, but Sam got Dean situated in the passenger seat, body propped completely against the door. The younger brother sprinted back to the driver’s seat, sliding in and slamming the door shut. Instinct and experience forced his head to snap in Dean’s direction and brace for a cuff to the neck, and Sam convulsively gulped down the reality that nothing would come of his action.

Sam shifted the car in reverse, and peeled out of the parking lot, his eyes on everything but the road as he tried to listen to Dean’s haggard breathing and fumble for his brother’s phone. The search ended moments after he’d begun, and Sam flipped the gray phone open, frantically searching through Dean’s received calls.

Luckily, the number he was looking for was first on the list and Sam pressed down on the call button, unaware how his arm shook as the succession of rings droned on in his ear.

“C’mo! C’mo! Pick up the da--”

“H-hello?”

"Kinsey!" Sam exclaimed, louder than intended, but hell if his nerves weren't frayed to the point of breaking with desperation.

The line went eerily still for a moment and Sam clenched his jaw anxiously as the woman's wary voice filtered through. "Who is this?"

"It's Sam," the brunet announced, flicking a gaze back to his brother, eyes squinting in gnawing fear.

"Oh, hi, Sam," Kinsey greeted sweetly. "You're calling awful late. It's almost midnight. Good thing you ca--"

"Kinsey!" Sam interjected urgently. And here he was thinking patience was his brother's problem. "I need you to tell me where Megan lives."

"What?" the TA startled, suspicion creeping into her voice. "Why would you need to know that?"

"Look, I can't explain right now. I just--" Sam cut off, his eyes drifting to take in Dean's still body and empty stare. "Please, I need to know. It's important."

"I'm sure it is," Kinsey placated tersely. "But I don't have access to that information."

"Like hell!" Sam snapped, all sense of calm demeanor whipping out of him replaced with stewing rage. "I want to know now!"

Kinsey's shock at his outburst was audible from across the phone lines. "Sam, I...uh..."

"God," Sam heaved, shuddering in an attempted calming breath as anger morphed into bargaining. "Look, I know what's happening with Nick and what killed Dr. Mills. I can stop it. I can. You just have to tell me where Megan is."

"What does this have to do with Megan?" the TA questioned, but Sam could hear the nervous break in her voice.

"Please, Kinsey," Sam muttered, blinking away the stinging wetness building in his eyes.

"Okay—Okay. Just give me a second," Kinsey stammered, the flicking of papers taking hold of the waiting silence. "Yeah, okay, she's in the Emerson dorm. Third floor, number 20. But Sam, they close the doors at 11 and she's probably asleep by now."

"Good," the dark-haired Winchester replied, his past research coming to mind as he hung up. *Maras were thought to be spirits of cursed women that attack while the girl is sleeping.* If that bitch was around, Sam was going to waste her.

\* \* \* \*

Tires squealed against the pavement as Sam jerked the Impala's steering wheel hard to the right, bringing the car surging into the small dormitory parking lot. There were no spaces available, but hell, the fire lane was wide open and Sam sped up along the yellow curb, the car jerking as the wheels lifted on to it.

Sam reached for the journal in the back seat, face bearing sheer agony and urgency as his eyes never left Dean's body, frozen in the same position he'd been placed in minutes before. "Okay, bro." he murmured, shifting through their father's journal. "I'll be right back."

Little brother wasn't sure Dean had actually registered what was said, but he waited for a second after the promise hit the air and then exited the car with a frantic slam. A few students were lounging in the reception area, and apparently his parking job had garnered their attention. Or maybe that was the incessant banging on the locked glass doors.

"Open the damn door!"

A nervous student watched his tirade in horrified silence, but guys always wanted to protect and a huge man stepped up to the door, opening it, arms crossing and feet planted to take Sam on. Sam scoffed at the sight, barreling past the naïve moron without so much as a flinch.

The handful of students took to clamoring the stairs behind Sam's hustled climb as he sought to outrace them and the vague, frightened voice calling campus security could be heard

from his position. It faded once he bypassed the second floor, the scream of curses from the angry students behind him making him move at lightening pace.

A painted blue “three” marked the right door and Sam flung it open, slamming it shut behind him as he sprinted out down the hallway. Turning back, the younger Winchester saw the door ease open and before his brain even registered what was happening the blue wood slammed shut as if opposite magnetic poles suddenly met.

He could hear the banging and threats muffled behind the wood and ignored that along with the grating ‘You know why that happened you freak’ sensation building in his gut. Clutching the journal tightly and adopting a slower pace, Sam found Megan’s room without much of a problem and was surprised to find the dorm unlocked. So much for small town security.

Stepping across the threshold, Sam’s breath caught in his throat and his fingers gripped the worn leather tightly as he closed the door silently behind him, his gaze fixed on the sleeping girl clearly oblivious to the corporeal form hovering above her in identical likeness.

Sam stealthily dumped the books and computer off the small desk on the adjacent wall, sliding it in front of the dorm door and clicking the lock shut. He hesitated momentarily, ears tuned for even the slightest sign the Mara and its host victim were awakened by his movements, but nothing could be heard.

His eyes swept the room for other entrances, aside from the main one, and Sam couldn’t help but thank the gods that Megan was a single room kind of gal with nothing but a window three stories up. Stepping closer to the bed and the resting spirit, Sam cracked open his father’s book, swallowing thickly before beginning to read.

*Ego redimio vos ex effectus vulnero*

Sam shivered as the warm air surrounding the room was swept into a frigid burst of raging wind as the Mara’s head snapped towards him, coal black eyes flung wide in fury.

*Vulnero obviam alius populus quod vulnero obviam vestri*

An ear shattering shriek pulsed through the room, and Sam winced at the torture pounding in his ears.

*Ego redimio vos ex periculosus vos gero*

The crash behind him caught Sam’s attention, and the dark-haired man spun back, ducking just in time to miss the hurling books and personal objects being sucked into the whirlwind of surging power encompassing the furious entity.

*Periculosus ut alius quod periculosus ut vestri*

The room shook, the intense shuddering of foundation bringing Sam to his knees. A sharp, piercing cry forged through the steely air and Sam let the book fall from his grasp, painstakingly raising curling fingers over his ears and groaning at the pain building in his head.

A dull pulse thudded, throwing Sam to the ground and then dissipating into nothing. Sam breathed heavily, willing the growing shock away, and shuffled to a stand. A short, scoffing laugh flew from his lips when he turned his searching gaze back to Megan. The brown-haired girl crashed out on the bed, sleeping undisturbed.

Sam shook his head, registering for the first time the slamming on Megan’s dorm door and hurriedly grabbed the journal from where it had landed on the floor, rushing to the side window. Turning the latch, Sam folded his body as small as he could and eased through the small opening, skittering down the fire escape stairwell with relative ease.

\* \* \* \*

Half-sprinting around the building, Sam bypassed the campus police car, heading dead straight for the haphazardly parked Impala. The empty Impala.

The younger brother’s eyes blew wide and launched into a panicked run his brother’s name on his lips as he swept alongside the passenger door, peering inside to find the bucket seat empty. “Dean?!?”

“I’m going to kill you!”

Sam jolted at the gravelly voice coming from what seemed to be the underneath of the black classic, a choking sigh of relief flying from his lips. His first instinct was to rush to the other side of the car and lovingly tackle the growling man, but he knew better than to indulge in the chick-flick gesture and held his ground. "You're alright. It worked, and you're alright!"

Dean's white T, boxer clad persona straightened from its hunched, hidden place along the driver's side door. "No, I'm not alright. If the undercarriage is busted in any way, Sammy. I'm going to kill you."

Sam laughed tightly at his brother's threat, the tense worried lines fading into oblivion as he encircled the car. "We'd better get out of here."

"Oh, hell, no. You're not driving. Ever again," Dean protested, opening the driver's door with an authoritative glance so reminiscent of their father Sam stopped in his tracks.

"Well, you're definitely not," the younger brother countered, taking the keys from his pants pocket and shaking them. "Besides, you don't even have shoes on."

Dean glanced down at his bare feet as if just realizing they existed and then back at his precious keys held tauntingly in his brother's grasp. "No thanks to you."

"Yeah, well hurry up and get in," Sam ordered, skirting the whole protector issue all together. "The cops are gonna figure out I'm not in there."

"How'd you hold them off so long anyways?" Dean questioned, sliding across the front bench and easing into the passenger seat.

Sam's face scrunched as he sunk down into the driver's seat and placed the key in the ignition, "Uh...well..."

"Dude, you sure you can't bend spoons?" Dean asked his tone joking, but serious.

"Yes, dumbass," Sam snapped, jaw clenched tight as he eased out of the parking lot, the scraping of metal to painted curb doing little to quell his darkening mood.

"God..." Dean drawled, placing a hand over his face at the grating noise, eyes shifting to Sam beneath spread fingers. "You know, I'm so enlisting you in Driver's Ed next town we come to."

"Whatever," Sam returned, casting a concerned look in Dean's direction when the older brother let out a puff of breath, sinking down into the seat. "You sure you're okay? I mean, no numbness or anything?"

"I'm fine, dude," the sandy-haired Winchester replied, wiggling his fingers for good measure. "See? Whatever mojo you worked did the trick. By the way...what exactly did you do?"

"Used a binding spell from Dad's journal," Sam answered, never more grateful to see a highway exit sign.

"Oh," Dean muttered. "How'd Megan take that one?"

"She didn't even flinch," Sam replied offhandedly, his mind replaying the incident. "I mean, it's like she didn't even know the thing existed."

Dean's face twisted in confusion. "How do you not know you're--"

"Dean," Sam interrupted patiently. "She didn't know. Hard to reason with though, seeing as by being cursed you're killing a lot of people you know."

"We're not going there, Sam," Dean replied forcefully, shifting in the seat to face his younger brother, "We're not."

"What are you talking about?" Sam questioned, sounding genuinely clueless although heart pounded in his chest.

"This whole 'oh I'm cursed and everyone around me dies' thing' you got up your ass," Dean clarified bluntly.

"At least I don't ignore it and pretend none of this bothers me!" Sam snapped heatedly, knuckles white around the steering wheel.

Dean's hands wrapped into clenched fists in his lap. "What happened to Sar--"

"Don't," Sam grit, eyes fixed straight ahead at the open tarmac.

"Sam."

"I said don't," the younger brother repeated, shooting his brother a warning glance, before averting back to the highway stretch.

Dean heaved a sigh, closing his eyes briefly to find that patient, older brother center he kept for such times as this as a tense silence drifted into the car. Restlessly, Dean sought to move every single inch of himself simply because he could.

"Could you stop?" Sam asked tightly with a sideways glance.

"Nope," Dean replied with a smile. "It was like Ice Man got a hold of me, dude."

"Well, the lack of smartass remarks was nice," Sam quipped, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Actually got some work done."

"Whatever," the older brother returned, staring down at his bare legs and plaid boxers. "Hey, Sam."

"Yeah."

"Next time you drag my ass out in public, you better give me some pants," Dean stated, picking at the light cotton. "I mean, dude, I never let you go to school in your Transformers."

"It was Spiderman," Sam corrected. "And Mrs. Turner's class, third grade."

Dean let out a loud laugh at the memory. "Oh, yeah."

"It's not funny," Sam said, although a large grin was already on his face. Dean shifted down in the seat, resting his head against the bench seat, and the dark-haired brother stared worriedly over at him. "You should probably get some sleep. Rough night."

"Hell no, you're driving," Dean argued through a yawn to which Sam gave a pointed look. "Okay, fine. But you're waking me up in exactly two hundred miles."

"What?" Sam startled. "Why?"

"Cause that's all you're getting for the next two months," Dean muttered, closing his eyes and letting the lull of rubber against road beckon him to sleep.

"Right," Sam drawled, letting out a breath and leaning forward in the seat, successfully popping his back before resting against the leather once again and casting another glance at his brother. They'd made it through this hunt, but damages were piling up and no matter what Dean said to try and make the reality of it easier to swallow, Sam couldn't help but think things were going to get worse, way before better was even a passing thought.

The End