

Episode Two: Overhaul

By BurstynOut & Tracer

Sam grimaced as the junked Impala plummeted across another gaping pot hole. Back roads were never his idea of a fun drive, but maneuvering across them in a severely damaged bucket of rust care of Possessed People of America was just asking for trouble.

Well, Sam blamed the wreck on the vision and the fact that he'd been half out of his mind with worry over Dean; Dean blamed Sam. No big surprise there. The younger brother had expected a fair amount of ribbing for the event that had transpired and left his brother's baby trashed. And he'd gotten more than he would've liked in the first forty minutes of their drive away from the hospital entrance.

What he hadn't expected was Dean's shift from merely being protective of the remnant of a former classic to showing full-blown obsessive interest in every single movement Sam made in or around the general vicinity of the Impala. Every touch of the dash, hood, or door was meticulously studied. Nothing went unnoticed, and god forbid the younger even attempt to merge or switch lanes without signaling, because Dean was barely letting him slide on legal traffic maneuvers, illegal ones would likely get him thrown out of the car. It didn't matter in the least that the blinker was on the fritz anyway or that it was pretty unlikely that anyone would be able to tell the difference even if the car did get hit again.

The whole situation was incredibly annoying and made Sam feel like he was four years old again. But he was trapped. It was Dean's idea of payback, and he deserved every minute of it. Deep down he believed it, but that didn't mean he agreed with the method of torture. Given a choice, he would have preferred loud, obnoxious singing and head banging. Of course, those were not even options at this point. Not with Dean and the car both broken.

Sam knew that the car was an extension of Dean. It defined his older brother in the same way the faded leather jacket he donned every morning defined him. It was a vivid representation of its owner and exuded an essence that could only be described as Dean. So, in a way, his brother was protecting himself and not just a mangled piece of metal and iron. Ironic, because Dean rarely thought to protect himself, at least not the parts that Sam could see. The rest, well, Dean protected those too well, and Sam had only learned to see those once he'd recognized the walls built around them, the walls that were now cracked and weathered to the point of imminent collapse.

The irony lay in that the midnight classic was now damaged, a shard of its former glory, and while the possibility of repair hung in the air, the process would prove to be slow and daunting. Tragedy's sting leaves nasty scars, not unlike the crumpled hood of the car, and it sickened Sam to think that even if the classic could be returned to a state of renewed brilliance, the former luster would never be restored. It amazed him though, that even in the darkest times, Dean's reflection radiated from the chipping black exterior, as though the reflection itself was the last light of a fading hope to simply survive another day.

Sam stole another glance in his brother's general direction, trying to make it look like as though he wasn't. His chest tightened, the constriction nearly cutting off his airway, as he took in Dean's state. The elder was huddled against the passenger door, body angled against it in what had to be the most uncomfortable position known to man. His right arm was positioned awkwardly behind him and Sam doubted there was any circulation left in the appendage. Dean's chin rested against his chest, and his head lay against his shoulder, eyes shut as though in sleep, but Sam knew otherwise.

He recognized that look. It was the same clamped shut expression that creased Dean's eyes when the elder was either concentrating or mentally talking himself

through something. Sam deduced it was the latter, simply because he could hear Dean's labored breathing echo through the car, rumbling over Metallica's rendition of "Turn the Page".

Sam initially figured the position was helping to ease the tightness in Dean's torso and relieve a bit of the strain that sitting upright and rigid in the leather interior would more than likely cause. The beaded sheen of sweat on his brother's forehead, however, told a different story, and the guilt Sam had entertained all those hours ago over kicking Dean out of the driver's seat abated.

Dean had made a valiant effort though--a stupid idiotic move, but a noble gamble all the same. Sam had been slightly stunned when his older brother had snatched the keys, clearly having every intention of driving all the way to Bobby's from the hospital on his own volition. It was all a mask. Just like the Demon had said, and the phrase ran its course repeatedly as the drive wore on. *Mask all that nasty pain. Mask the truth.*

That had become all the more obvious as the miles had built up though, and the pain meds flowing through Dean's system had finally started laying hold on him. Sam had allowed Dean to keep his 'I'm perfectly fine' mask in place throughout the entire nerve wracking experience of watching his strong hands shake through the task of trying to steady the steering wheel, through watching the growing stain of sweat drench every inch of his dark tee, and through hearing the short, pained hitches in his breath. But when the car had started swerving and the words had begun slurring, Sam hadn't been able to refrain from yelling. It must've been the meds because Dean had actually resigned, clearly defeated with far too little effort on Sam's part.

The younger brother drew in a sharp breath and snapped his attention back to the road when the car dipped deep into another asphalt trap, gritting his teeth and scrunching his eyes when the inevitable scrape of the car's undercarriage against the old road rasped in his ears. With a tight 'I swear I didn't do it on purpose, please don't kill me' smile, Sam shot a sideways glance at his older brother and let out a nervous laugh as he waited for what he knew was to come.

"Ten bucks says we lost something." Sam rolled his eyes at the remark, catching sight of Dean lifting his head and lolling it towards him out the corner of his eye.

"Shut up."

"Don't have to." Dean taunted, tone thick as he straightened up in the seat, and Sam tried his best to ignore the wincing sound that met in his ears.

"Yeah, well, you might want to." Sam threatened, his brown eyes meeting Dean's glazed jade ones for a brief moment before turning back to the road. His older brother was definitely not all there.

"Whatcha gonna do if I don't?" Dean challenged, "Destroy my car again?"

"Now, there's a thought." Sam quipped, his face pensive as though he really was contemplating the suggestion. "Although, I think this time I'll go for more of a side impact."

"Not funny, dude." Dean muttered, shifting to rest his head against the cracked window pane.

"I thought it was." Sam smiled, although it didn't meet his eyes.

"You would." Dean replied. Sam snuck a sideways glance again and frowned at Dean's rigid posture against the passenger door and the slow, steady blinking of his eyes.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping right now? The doctors said that stuff should knock you out for hours, and you need the rest," Sam chided, tightening his grip on the shaking steering wheel and steadying it to the left. *Damn alignment.*

"So do you, raccoon eyes," Dean shot back, waving a flimsy hand in front of his face.

"Raccoon eyes?" Sam repeated disbelievingly, "I don't have raccoon eyes."

"And you wonder why the girls always come to me. When are you gonna learn that this," Dean teased, spreading his arms out stiffly, his head drooping slightly, "is what the ladies want. Not some nerdy giant with black eyes."

"So they like 'em short," Sam countered, his eyes flickering mischievously.

"Ouch," Dean slurred to the Impala's roof, resting his head against the back of the seat. "You're lucky I'm drugged up, else I'd hurt you for that one."

"I'm sure you would, Dean," Sam placated, his white teeth peeking out from behind his lips.

"Oh, you know I would. Kick your ass to the next town." Dean rambled, rolling his head along the leather bench, his eyes unfocused but still locked onto the upholstered roof.

"Dude," Sam laughed, "go to sleep."

"Well, I would if someone was a better driver," Dean stated, his hazy eyes glancing pointedly at Sam.

"It's kind of hard seeing as I have to keep the wheel turned to the left just to make this thing go straight," Sam defended, letting out a deep sigh.

"You know, most people would be able to see a massive tree right in front of them," Dean continued smugly, completely ignoring Sam's defense and taking extreme enjoyment in the way his kid brother squirmed in the driver's seat at his remark.

"That tree saved your life, and don't you forget it." Sam watched Dean slump down a bit, as if mulling over his statement, and for a minute he let his mind imagine his older brother's eyes had finally slid shut.

"You're right, Sammy." Dean conceded, his tone oddly detached, and Sam was beginning to wonder just how big of a dosage Dean had swallowed.

"I am?" Sam asked, feigning surprise, a part of him feeling guilty for egging his chemically altered brother on.

"Uh huh. I think I'm gonna become a evniro—envi—uh..." Dean mumbled, his face scrunched and his right hand spread widely over it which of course, was an apparent sign of deep thinking.

"Environmentalist." The younger offered, biting his lip to stop himself from laughing openly.

"Yeah. That." Dean smiled lazily, dropping his hand with a smack against his leg.

"Dude, I hate to say it, but I don't think they'd take you." Sam joked, chuckling under his breath.

"Oh, they'd take me alright," Dean refuted defiantly, his tone almost bordering firm.

"You think so, huh?" Sam pressed, knowing he was taking advantage of Dean's current situation. It wasn't like he was leaving him in a seedy bar for the taking, and driving these roads were boring enough as it is.

"Yep. I have per-son-al-ity." Dean answered, annunciating and slurring every syllable of the word.

"You don't say." Sam breathed mockingly, not failing to note how his brother's form had gone heavy and completely slack against the seat. The younger mentally reminded himself to read the prescription again, because whatever the doctors had given Dean would probably come in handy later on down the hunting road.

"I do say," Dean countered, mimicking his younger brother's tone.

"Well, then, I guess they'd have no choice but to accept you."

"Damn right." Dean agreed, somehow managing to propel his body into a forward lean. He took to swatting at the shoebox containing his favorite plastic cassette, although his hands seemed to be having a hard time actually grabbing onto it.

"Need a hand there, bro?" Sam offered, stopping his laughter and quickly clearing his throat. Even high on meds, the pain of movement still laced Dean's face, and Sam silently berated himself for forgetting exactly why it was that Dean was high in the first place.

"Yeah, make it stop moving." Dean blinked in confusion and continued reaching for the box, but Sam's long arm stilled his pawing and slowly pushed him back into the seat.

"Let me get it okay?" Sam instructed gently, one eye half way watching the road and the other searching his brother for any sign he might need to pull the car over for Dean. Wrecking the car had earned him enough grief, but letting Dean puke in it would make him a dead man walking.

"Okay." Dean complied easily, his clouded eyes roaming Sam's face, and the younger briefly wished they would clear and offer a window into his brother's thoughts. Of course, they couldn't, but Sam could hope anyway.

"Here." Sam grunted, trying to keep his head above dash level and still watch the road as he reached to the floor for the box. He snapped up quickly once his hand encased the familiar cardboard and handed the treasure to Dean.

"What you wanna hear?" Dean asked, his voice bouncing like the voices of those freaky actors in musicals before they started into their huge number.

"You're asking me?" Sam questioned in disbelief. He couldn't help feeling slightly honored at the suggestion.

"Yee-ahhhh." Dean muttered, dragging the word thoughtfully as he nodded his head and squinted. "Good point. I'll pick."

"That's harsh, dude." Sam stated seriously, "That really hurts."

"Truth hurts." Dean replied off-handedly, distracted by the assortment of classic rock.

"Yeah, it does." Sam murmured, momentarily forgetting his brother was operating on a "higher" mental plain and let his mind wander back to that horrifying night.

Dean had never really been open with him. And that hurt at times, but the pain of revelation had been magnified ten-fold when it had been spun from the mouth of their loathed enemy, and enemy wearing their father's face. Demons lie. Sam knew that, but all lies, at least the good ones, stem from truth.

The terrifying and gut wrenching insight into his brother's mind and emotions had been revealed in the worst of ways. Although Sam had tried, at first, to chalk it all up to lies created for the purpose of inflicting pain, he couldn't deny that he'd seen the panic and anguish rise, uninhibited, to morph his brother's features and reduce him to nothing more than a shroud of a man begging for his life.

It was a sight he'd never seen before, and never wanted to witness again. His Dean was strong, always okay and able to take on anything. That Dean had been an emotional wreck, full of hurt and rejection. The problem now was that his Dean was becoming that Dean. Sam could just sense it. While he could blame the meds for making Dean loopy and out of his mind, his mental state had already obviously been debatable before the demonic encounter. There was still something missing.

Silence drifted its way back into the car, and Sam let the steady thump of tires on the road and the erratic clunking of the engine soothe his thoughts. His temporary haven was disturbed by the smacking of plastic cases as Dean's fingers fought with each one, opening and closing them repeatedly before setting them back in the box. The racket was worse than that of a two-year old who'd recently discovered the world of pots and pans.

"You uh...got one yet, Dean?" Sam inquired through gritted teeth. While the sound was thoroughly entertaining his brother, it was grating on Sam's nerves worse than having the pulsating rhythm of Black Sabbath vibrating through his skull during one of his more debilitating migraines.

"This one. No, wait...this one." Sam glanced at the selection and groaned audibly when he saw AC/DC's *Back in Black* album in Dean's hand.

"Dean, how about something else? We listened to that one already, remember?"

"So?"

"Fine." Sam huffed, hitting the eject button and hurling the Metallica tape in

Dean's general direction before snatching Dean's new selection from his hand and placing it in the deck.

"Quit acting like you hate them. I hear you singing it in the shower." The last part of the statement was muffled by a loud yawn and Sam really didn't think he wanted to know what Dean had said, so he chose wisely to simply ignore it.

"You tired?" Sam pressed, ducking down in the seat to catch a glimpse of the mud-crust road sign and thanking every deity with the reputation of being good that Bobby's house was less than ten miles away.

"No." Dean objected quietly, blinking his eyes rapidly to ward off the beckoning sleep.

"You look tired."

"You look dorky."

"Nice, Dean. Good one." Sam retorted sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

"I thought so." Dean returned, his mouth attempting an exhausted smile.

"You do know that you're gonna have to take more of those pills right? And when you do, they'll probably knock you on your ass," Sam reminded, in the all-knowing tone Dean loathed.

"Well, you won't be driving then," Dean sallied back smugly, turning to look out the window. "There it is. On the...right."

"Right, I see it." Sam lowered his foot a little more on the accelerator and smiled widely in relief when he turned the Impala off the worn down asphalt onto the gravel road. The rusted archway declared the entrance to Bobby's shop and home.

Bobby's Home

Sam eased the car up next to the beat up old Ford that sat eroding on the side of the house but then thought better of it and pulled up to the front of the porch, leaving only a few feet to cover between the car and the door as opposed to the good couple yards the former spot would've left.

He honestly didn't know if Dean would be able to stumble even that far, because those meds had left the elder incapacitated for the most part, and Dean was never one to just accept help without a fight. So, Sam was pretty sure that if he even looked like he was going to aid his brother's trek he would end up in worse condition than the patient.

Shifting into Park, Sam rested back in the seat and took a deep breath before turning his attention on whatever had locked Dean's. His older brother stared without wavering out the passenger window. A small smile graced Sam's face when he caught sight of Bobby, his faded jeans and tee covered with mud and grease, sporting his favorite camouflage cap and standing on full alert, rifle held loosely by his side, the barrel aiming sure for the Impala. His face bore the same calculating, suspicious glare he'd had all those weeks ago when he'd helped them with Meg. It warmed considerably the moment Sam exited the car, the worn lines on Bobby's face crinkling as he offered a welcoming smile.

"Hey, Bobby." Sam greeted, fiddling with the keys as he circled back to the trunk.

"Nice to see you boys, again. Would've liked to see that stubborn ass of a daddy you got too, but time's for everything." Bobby returned, setting the rifle to rest against the door jamb before coming down from the porch to help Sam with the bags.

"Well, he probably still thinks you'd shoot him." Sam quipped, lugging his timeworn duffle out of the trunk and dropping it to the ground heavily.

"And he'd be right too," Bobby shot back, laughing along side Sam. "A round of buck shot might teach that man a thing or two."

"You gonna join us, Dean?" Sam inquired expectantly to his brother's still slumped form in the passenger seat. He silently hoped Dean hadn't just decided to take him up on his "go to sleep" advice. Dean was a bitch to carry.

The younger could tell his loud tone startled his brother and smiled shakily at the elder's jumpy response. The expression faded quickly into one of concern though when he watched Dean's slow, hunched exit from the car. Everything in him screamed for him to steady his brother's steps as he saw Dean stagger towards the trunk, a new mask quickly slamming into place at his little brother's suggestion that he wasn't up to the challenge.

"Whoa, Dean." Bobby reacted instantaneously, taking Dean's arm when the sandy-haired boy swayed precariously, and Sam didn't doubt the seasoned hunter had picked up on his own apprehension. "What the hell they got you on?"

"I don't know," Dean shrugged with a smirk on his face. One look into his unclear green made Bobby smirk as well.

"I do, and it's got to be the strongest stuff I've ever seen," Sam muttered, sounding more than appreciative of that fact.

"Well, that's the best kind, ain't it, son?" Bobby asked, patting Dean's shoulder.

"Yep. Best kind," the stoned Winchester repeated, stretching out a hand and motioning for Sam to hand him a bag.

"Uh...Dean, why don't you come inside with me and leave those bags to your little brother. That's what he's for, right?" Bobby hinted, shooting Sam a hard look when the younger snorted at his manipulative suggestion.

"Yeah, but he's not as strong as me." Dean argued, reaching down to grab the duffle from the ground, only to almost end up lying next to it, his fall only prevented by Bobby's strong arms.

"Of course you are." Bobby concurred, ignoring Sam's astonished and somewhat offended 'But I'm taller' remark, "I got some questions about that poltergeist you and your Daddy took care of in Mississippi, 'cause I think there's a similar one happening over near Jackson."

"Sam won't know about that." Dean reasoned foggily, alternating his attention from Bobby to his brother, clearly torn by the decision he was going to have to make, even though it would seem a minor one.

"Right, 'cause he wasn't there, see? That's why I'm asking you." Bobby coaxed, slowly placing a hand on Dean's back, watching the boy's response carefully before starting to usher him into the house.

"You gonna be okay, Sammy?" Dean questioned, and if Sam didn't know better he'd say his brother sounded almost panicked.

"I'll be fine Dean," Sam assured, shouldering two of the bags and grabbing the other ones in his hands.

"Okay." Dean mumbled, craning his neck over his shoulder and holding his brother's gaze until Bobby led him completely out of eye sight.

Twenty minutes later found Sam with a horribly sore back and aching arms and Dean settled in a beat-up old chair watching Bobby with unfixed eyes. The older man rambled on about the effects of the poltergeist and flipped through another one of his ancient texts. The image vaguely resembled many that had taken place when Sam and Dean were kids, and Sam could remember many a time when their father had cracked open a book of rituals or demons and they'd sat side by side thumbing through it. It had been those times when the youngest Winchester had almost felt normal, aside from the fact that he'd been learning about terrestrial demons as opposed to the Whos of Whoville.

"You guys getting somewhere?" Sam interrupted, placing his nervous hands in his pockets and leaning against the article-laden walls.

"Yeah." Dean breathed, continuing to turn the pages idly.

"Good. Uh...Bobby, I went ahead and dumped the bags and gear in the back room, is that okay?" Sam questioned hopefully. There was no way he was moving that stuff again.

"Oh yeah. That's good. I got the side room fixed up real nice for y'all. Went out an' bought a second bed and everything," Bobby stated proudly, and Sam couldn't help but think he'd have been a cool dad minus the proverbial hunting expeditions.

"Great 'cause I'm exhausted, how about you Dean?" Sam wandered over to where his brother was sitting, not failing to notice how the elder's movements had nearly ceased completely.

"No," Dean whispered, raising his head and meeting Sam's eyes. The fading, residual effect of the pills could no longer cover the pained lines across his brother's face, and Sam had to use every method imaginable to stay rooted in his spot instead of sprinting back into the other room and ripping apart the bags until he found Dean's source of relief.

"But you gotta be hungry, right?" Bobby interjected, giving Sam a knowing glance and Dean a sympathetic one. "I can have some dinner made in less than thirty minutes thanks to Stouffer's."

"Sounds great, Bobby. Thanks," Sam replied gratefully, although tightly, and watched Dean nod tentatively in the affirmative.

"Not a problem. Anything for John's boys." Bobby nodded his head and then retreated into the kitchen. The sound of the freezer door slamming and the clatter of frozen entrees met the brother's ears moments later.

"Alright, Dean," Sam started, breaking the silence, "How about we move this stuff over to the couch and you can fill me in?"

"I'm fine here, Sam." Dean grumbled, giving Sam an irritated glance.

"I know, I just thought that--"

"Well, stop thinking. I'm fine." Dean snapped heatedly.

"Alright. I'll go see if Bobby needs any help then," Sam muttered dejectedly and wished more than ever that the pills weren't losing their hold so quickly. A loopy Dean he could deal with, but a hurt, bitter Dean was going to prove the challenge of a lifetime.

A scant hour later, and Sam's feet were as heavy as his satisfyingly full stomach. Even the contented drowsiness of a starch-heavy meal couldn't dull the apprehension that pulsed through him as he approached the door to the back bedroom. Had they been able to assure the doctors that they'd remain under medical supervision, they wouldn't have had to sign Dean out against medical advice. He was glad to have his brother out of the hospital, but he understood all too well that medical professionals were invaluable when it came to carrying out such tasks as the ones they'd been ordered to complete if Dean was to recover fully. Since they had agreed to go that route, however, Sam was now the closest thing to a medical professional on hand, and the job was all his. Joy of joys.

He rubbed his hand through his too long hair in an attempt to dissipate some of the nervous energy that tingled in his scalp and placed an expression on his face that he hoped looked understanding and helpful, not totally freaked out. In times like these, he was appreciative of the plays he'd done in high school, whether that made him a drama geek or not.

Sam felt rather than saw Dean look away as he entered the room. The meds had pretty much relinquished any control they'd had over his brother's pain, and Sam knew that Dean would fight tooth and nail to keep it under control by sheer force of will if that would just let him maintain a shred of pride. That there was any pride left to maintain was questionable at best, but if there was a chance it existed, then Sam would do his best to honor it.

Dean sat on the corner of the twin bed Bobby had made up for him, the bed closest to the bathroom, not the door or the window. He was wearing a white wife beater and grey sweatpants, his idea of workout gear, though the proposed activity would hardly have constituted a workout just a month or so ago. The shirt had been sliced halfway down the back because it was too tight-fitting for Dean to get over his

head with his limited mobility, and slicing it down the front would have defeated the purpose of wearing one at all. They'd have to buy new t-shirts once Dean was better.

"So, you ready for this?" Sam asked, noting the beaded perspiration on his brother's forehead. Even changing clothes appeared to be a daunting task. "And did you take the muscle relaxer, cuz this is gonna be a real bitch without it?"

"It's not gonna be a bitch, Sam," Dean asserted weakly. "We're gonna skip it."

"Nuh-uh," Sam argued, vehemently shaking his shaggy head. "You agreed that if I helped you sign out of the hospital early you'd keep up with the therapy and that you'd let me help you."

"And I will," Dean said, "just not tonight."

The pitch of his voice rose to something that disturbingly resembled whining. It could've been funny, but it wasn't. The fact that this was the best front Dean could present was so not funny that Sam couldn't even look him in the eye as he crossed the room, coming to stand in front of his brother, refusing to honor the last comment with a response. He held out his hands, palms up, and assumed a slightly spread, bent-kneed stance.

"C'mon, let's just get this over with, huh? I'm not any happier about it than you are," he assuaged. "Let's start with shoulder stretches."

Dean reached out reluctantly as though summoning the constitution to comply, but as soon as his own clammy palms brushed Sam's, he drew them back and shook his head defiantly.

"Not tonight, Sam," Dean asserted once more. He lifted his eyes stubbornly, and Sam noted that they were pain-bright and tired-looking. "It's been a long day. . ."

"Yeah, a long day spent hunched over in the car, Dean," Sam conceded, "all the more reason why we can't skip the stretches. You're not going to heal if you can't breathe, and you won't be able to breathe if your chest muscles mend together in giant knots."

Dean kept his hands in his lap, and looked pointedly at the floor on the far side of the bed. "I know that, and I said I'd do the friggin' stretches. Just lay off!" He breathed out loudly, an exhalation that was somewhere between a sigh and a shouted whisper.

"I know this is painful," Sam acknowledged, "but it's not going to get better on its own."

Dean blatantly ignored him.

"Okay, so this is about me, isn't it?" Sam asked. It was a rhetorical question. Dean had insisted that Sam make himself scarce during every therapy session that he'd undergone at the hospital. The therapist had warned Sam that he would balk when he'd gone to see her about continuing Dean's exercise regimen outside of the hospital. "I thought that might be an issue, and so did your therapist," he said, going to his duffel bag and rifling through it.

After a few seconds of frustrated plundering, Sam pulled out several pamphlets and books and tossed them on the bed beside Dean. He watched guardedly as his older brother turned his head just enough to take in the titles through his peripheral vision, then turned away crisply as Dean's eyes shot up at him accusingly.

"Yoga?!! You gotta be kidding me, dude!" Dean shouted. "No friggin' way. I may not be up to snuff right now, but I'm not some girlie boy who does yoga!!"

"It's not girlie, Dean!" Sam argued rubbing the back of his neck distractedly. "Men practice yoga in lots of cultures all over the world. In most countries, it's regarded as a martial art form, and you can do the stretches yourself, so you can have all the privacy you want if you insist on not having me around. But FYI, this stuff really works. Downward facing dog can be modified to use a wall, and it stretches and opens the entire upper body. Triangle pose has been proven to open up the chest and increase lung volume and circulation. Plus, it's been proven to release endorphins that dull pain."

"And how the hell do you know all this?" Dean asked, his eyes squinting suspiciously.

Sam turned away, but not before Dean caught the flash of awkwardness he recognized as Sam's 'trying to make up a viable lie and failing miserably' look.

"Jess was into it. . ." the younger brother finally admitted tiredly.

"So why is it, little brother, that every time you try to convince me something isn't girlie, you use an argument you learned from a girl?" Dean snapped.

Sam met his brother's gaze slowly, his dark eyes sinking tiredly into his skull. "Look, I was just suggesting a couple of stretches, not telling you to take up wind relieving poses, sun salutations, and meditation."

Dean's mouth opened, a snarky protest already in mind, then snapped shut again as a more urgent realization played into mind. "Dude, wind relieving poses?" His face scrunched up in mock distaste and faint amusement. "Please tell me that's not what it sounds like."

Sam grinned broadly. "Yup. It's exactly what it sounds like."

"You slept with a girl who broke wind in unison with a room full of people in leotards?" Dean asked incredulously. "And you were afraid to tell her that ghosts are real? Bro, I think the *ghosts* would've run screaming from *that* scene," he laughed weakly, absently putting a hand over his chest to keep his ribs from moving too much.

Sam laughed, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head. "Say what you want, but she was wicked flexible," he retorted, eyes twinkling with lewd insinuation.

"Ooh," Dean exclaimed, face pinching comically. "So not goin' there."

Sam's face softened noticeably, becoming more serious. "And you're not goin' there anytime soon if you keep skipping out on your therapy. You do what you want. You're a big boy. I'm getting ready for bed," he dismissed and moved into the bathroom. "Yell if you need anything," he offered before shutting the door.

Dean looked at the stack of information beside him and thumbed through it noncommittally.

When Sam emerged from the bathroom twenty minutes later, he said nothing to suggest that he'd inadvertently walked in on his brother actually heeding his advice. Dean didn't startle or jump as the door hit the wall with a thump, proclaiming with no uncertainty that Sam had entered. Sam knew that Dean doing nothing to hide his actions was the closest the older brother would come to asking for help.

Wordlessly, Sam moved across the room to where Dean had his hands pressed into the wall, legs braced several feet behind him, head hanging down between his arms. The sound of Dean's hitched breathing drowned out the creaking of Sam's feet across the ancient hardwood floor.

Sam place his hand flat on Dean's back, directly between his shoulder blades, recognizing the modified downward dog facing pose that he'd suggested earlier. He pressed slightly, instructing without demanding, until he felt his brother's back straighten from its nearly perpetually hunched posture. "Just breathe," he whispered, and when Dean did, the muscles lengthened beneath Sam's large hand.

After several long minutes spent holding the stretch, Dean walked his feet forward and stood slowly. He didn't speak but turned his head and met Sam's gaze head on. It was all the thanks Sam wanted or needed.

Sam went to bed and waited for Dean to finish cleaning up and settle in himself.

Dean shuffled to his bed glad that the silent treaty they'd reached seemed to still be in effect as he climbed beneath the covers. If Sam had asked him right then whether he'd taken all his meds, including the painkiller that was sure to knock him out, he might've felt obligated to answer truthfully. He hadn't. And though his body screamed in agony, he couldn't.

* * * *

Pain flares mercilessly in his chest, refusing to abate. The pulsating beat thumps against the flesh and bone that keeps it captive. Radiating darkness surrounds him, enveloping him and swallowing each breath he takes in time to the throbbing cadence.

A command reaches his ears and panic courses through his body as the utterance demands his compliance to the simple act. He won't. He can't. And the soul that wields the voice knows this.

Crushing. Flesh shifts and bones groan beneath the invisible force that is wielded against them. A hollow cry burns through his chest and rends itself to the shadow land. It is all that is needed, all his tormentor awaits.

A surge of red and a waft of copper flood his senses, and he is propelled from black to sharpest light. Restless churning quakes the confines of his stomach, stirring, convulsing, and threatening violent exodus. Orbs of deep brown and the face that holds them are all he sees, the tainted words all he hears.

"You know, you fight and you fight for this family, but the truth is they don't need you."

'You're not him. You're not him,' his mind screams, and he stares hard into the eyes that hold the beast's taunt. They should be the sickest yellow. They should bear a sinister flicker within their evil stare. He knows this, and yet he sees they are brown; the deepest, richest, most familiar brown.

"You're pathetic, useless."

"I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry. Please stop." He's begging. He can feel the shredding of skin, the ripping of sinew, and the rich dampness that spills from his battered body. Darkness creeps into the corners of his sight. One last plea pours from his thick, stained lips--it is all he has.

"Dad, please. . ."

A guttural scream. He hears it, but it is not his own, and it fades, vanishing behind the deep whisper that drums in his ears

"I'm not your father. You are not my son."

** * * **

Dean's eyes flashed open seconds before his straining lungs managed to catch enough breath to make a sound, but it was long enough for his mouth to clamp shut over the scream that threatened to erupt. Biting his lip desperately, Dean pressed the heels of his hands as deep into his eye sockets as he could and willed the images behind them to dissipate. He was unwilling to trust himself to breathe without screaming until the last flicker of the nightmare was snubbed into nothingness.

As the last demonic picture faded to black, and the final hateful whisper disappeared in the sound of his brother's soft snoring, Dean let the spent breath escape in a whoosh that puffed the sweat-soaked sheet tenting beneath his chin. He shoved the sheet down and willed cooler room air to flood over him. He seriously contemplated making his way to the bathroom to take some of the meds he'd skipped earlier. If omitting them hadn't prevented the nightmares, maybe taking a few more than the recommended dosage. . .

He rolled over painfully, turned his eyes to the far wall, and set about the task of counting and classifying every last knot that painted the slats of cedar paneling.

** * * **

Dean didn't know if it was a feeling that Sam was on the edge of awakening, or if it was just the overwhelming weight of feeling nothing that made him close his eyes after he'd spent half the night forcing them open. He was just so damned tired.

Dawn's break signaled the ushering in of a new day and with it the busy schedule they'd planned of catching up on what had been going on in the world during their

unplanned hiatus, fixing the Impala, and just moving on, moving forward, taking tiny steps. That demanded action on Dean's part and maybe it was just the knowing of what was to come that made him too tired even to fear what might be found etched across the back of his eyelids.

Sam arose shortly after sunrise to find Dean's eyes lidded, his breathing even, and looking for the entire world like he was comfortably asleep. The absence of sleep, however, could make it so easy to fake, and if Sam hadn't been so eager to get on with the catching up, fixing, and moving forward, he'd have realized that Dean heard him moving, heard him fumbling through his bags, heard him start the day with hope. He should've known because Sam, of all people, should've been an expert on sleepless nights himself.

Hope had a funny way of masking the truth, and the fact that Sam didn't notice Dean only pretending to sleep as he slipped into the bathroom for his morning shower ritual was a testament to it. Hope allowed little brother to see Dean as strong, brave, and always fine. And because Dean wanted Sam to have hope, he made it his goal to smile bigger and brighter than anyone either brother knew.

But today, Dean didn't know what he wanted to do less. He was sure getting out of bed right then was pretty low on the list though. He wanted Sam to know he was all those things the younger wanted him to be, he just didn't know if he could play the role with as much fervor as he once had. Although, he'd be damned not to try.

As soon as the bathroom door clicked shut, and the ancient latch snapped into place with a metallic ping, Dean opened his eyes but made no motion to move. He could tell that his muscles had stiffened considerably overnight, and there was no lingering painkiller haze to dull the throbbing he expected to commence the moment he changed positions.

The position he was in was fine, he decided. So what if he'd already counted every knot on the wall. They looked different in the filtered sunlight of the morning, so they warranted studying again. Besides, if he didn't busy his mind with something, then it would busy itself, and lately, Dean wasn't much for the introspection. He didn't really like the guy he spent time with when he was alone.

His chest tightened to the point of asphyxiation when a buzzing noise shattered the silence of early morning. Before his brain managed to pull enough oxygen from his constricted blood vessels to form a coherent thought, the sound brought a thousand possibilities to mind that made breathing an increasing difficulty.

Bullets. Bullets fired from a distance could sound like giant bumble bees when they whizzed by, and since they traveled faster than the speed of sound, the bees usually stung before the shot was heard. He knew he hadn't heard any gunfire, but that didn't mean he wasn't being shot at.

Or...or...there were several charms they kept in their bags vibrated loudly when a demonic presence was in the vicinity. He wasn't going to relive that experience.

Oh God, he so had to get up now.

Stifling a groan, Dean raised himself slowly onto one elbow and came face to face with the source of his disturbance, neither demon nor open fire, but equally as terrifying. Three rings already. . .

He reached out across his body as quickly as he could given his stiffness, and snatched his cell phone off the end table, flipping it open and glancing at the caller ID before the fourth ring. He dropped it back onto the table without answering and didn't even stop to consider why. Bullets would have been preferable.

After the fifth ring, the phone fell silent, and Dean knew the voice mail had picked up. He also knew there'd be no message. Dad had a thing about voice mail. He hated it; didn't like for anything he said to be recorded. John had used the background noise from recorded messages to decipher a caller's secret location enough times to know that even talking in code couldn't protect him from being discovered. Sometimes it was what wasn't said that gave a person away. Hence, no voice recordings. The last time he'd recorded the message for his own voice mail

system, he'd done it from a soundproof booth in a recording studio. John was nothing if not thorough.

So, when Dean left the phone on the end table and forced himself to rise stiffly, he told himself it wasn't to get away from the thing. It wasn't to escape any possibility of having to hear his nightmare voice in true-to-life, state-of-the-art, top-of-the-line, wireless reality, because there was no message, no voice. It wasn't to escape before John could call back, either. No, it definitely had nothing to do with that.

He was just giving himself an alibi, a disguise that let him maintain the façade of general okay-ness that he knew Sam needed him to wear. Dean went into the living room and settled onto the couch for Sam, because what Sam didn't know couldn't hurt him. Wouldn't hurt Dean either, for that matter, but Dean was the least of Dean's concerns.

He intended to lie on the couch until Sam came out of the bathroom and pretend to listen to the radio, which, to his dismay, seemed to be all Paul Harvey, all the time. After he sat on the sunken davenport, however, he realized that getting out would be a bitch, so he just balanced precariously on the edge, elbows propped on his knees and concentrated on breathing. Each breath burned as he forced it to expand his chest just a little farther than the last. He resisted the urge to rock back and forth, because God, how sissy was that, but he could completely understand how the repetitious motion would be soothing in its monotony.

The floor creaked under his feet, and Dean looked up to see Bobby glaring at him disapprovingly, his heavy booted foot braced against a loose floorboard. With a forced smile, Dean straightened and wiggled his eyebrows at the older hunter.

"Dude, your place is falling apart. Maybe I should pack up my little brother and find us a place to stay that isn't teetering on the brink of the Hellmouth," he sassed, mildly put off by the tinny quality of his voice.

"Well, I'd like to see you try seein' as I already got the hood off the Impala and drove it up on blocks so's Sam can get underneath to fix the alignment. Not to mention the fact that you gettin' up off that couch is gonna take an act of God by the looks of you," Bobby stated flatly, pulling no punches now that Dean was obviously not under the influence of any medications. Though, he probably should be, Bobby knew. "Didn't they give you enough of that happy dust to get you through the night? Cuz there's a clinic here in town, and I got an in with one of the fine, full-figured ladies that work in the meds lock-up."

"What? Oh, uh, no," Dean stammered, struggling to find that internal banter rhythm he'd been able to take for granted before. . .well, before. "The stuff they gave me is fine. I'm just waiting for Sam to get out of the bathroom. Shouldn't have had that last glass of water before bed," he lied. He twisted his pain lined mouth into a charming grin. "And way to go, old man. Trips to the supply closet with a full-figured medical assistant, huh?" He wiggled his eyebrows lewdly. "Didn't know you had it in you."

Bobby cocked his head knowingly, "Cut the crap, boy. That baby brother of yours ain't in hearing distance, not that he could hear anything from under that god awful long hair of his anyway." He reached in his pocket and produced the familiar silver flask. He considered tossing it to Dean, but realized it would probably end up hitting the boy, judging by the hunched over slouch of his torso. Instead, he took the two steps it required to cover his meager living room floor and handed Dean the flask.

"You may be set on sufferin' in silence, son, but I ain't set on watchin' it. If you're really all that intent on pulling the wool over your brother's eyes, then you're gonna need at least a couple hits off this. And for God's sake, stop wiggling your damned eyebrows at me. With those bags under your eyes, you look like one of those freaky Goth SOB's that hang out downtown with black eyeliner and face paint smeared all over 'em." He shook his head wearily. "Demons I get. . ."

"People are just crazy," Dean finished, his throat burning in a much more pleasant fashion with the warmth of the whiskey radiating through his chest. Bobby didn't do

the cheap booze. His was always the good stuff, and it worked as fast as any morphine drip the quacks at that hospital had infused into Dean's veins. "Thanks," Dean sighed, relief washing over him.

"Well, you look like you slept good," Sam observed as he stepped into the room, rubbing a towel through his hair.

"Like a log," Dean lied, watching Bobby's expression from the corner of his eye as he stood stiffly.

"Figured you'd sleep all morning," Sam noted. "That stuff the docs prescribed is supposed to work for like twelve hours."

Dean caught Bobby's disapproving glare, but didn't justify it with one of his own. "How do you expect a guy to sleep when his baby's in pieces all over the front lawn, little brother?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "I don't know what planet you're from, but last time I checked there was nothing outside this house that even remotely resembled a lawn," he teased. "That, my educationally challenged big brother, is a junkyard."

"Oh, I beg to differ there, smartass," Bobby snapped, though without any real heat to his voice. He walked to the front window and drew open the blinds with a rustle, and gestured grandly toward his cluttered property. "What you see before you, my friends, is not a junkyard. This is a fine collection of authentic, hard-to-find, and greatly sought after classic automobiles that give of themselves to keep their memories alive long after they've guzzled their last gallon of fully-leaded gasoline."

"Amen, my newly adopted, much, much older brother," Dean grinned. He moved his elbow with the intention of clapping the old hunter on the back, but jerked it back against his ribcage as the muscles reached the end of their stretching point. Neither Sam nor Bobby missed the pained grunt that pinched his last word, but they both elected to ignore it.

"Well, no one's setting foot in my lawn-slash-junkyard-slash-organ recovery center for classic automobiles without a decent breakfast," Bobby announced, rubbing the fingers of his right hand through his mustache, around his mouth and across his short beard. "I'll fry us up some sausage and eggs. Sam can help me with the coffee, and Dean, you get your ass in that bathroom and get rid of that last glass of water you had before bed," he suggested, carefully choosing his words.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Dean agreed, his voice tinged with relief.

"Yeah, of course it does to you," Sam teased. "He didn't put you on KP duty."

"That's because he remembers the last time he put me on KP duty," Dean smirked, walking as smoothly as possible toward the back room by taking much smaller steps than usual.

"You almost burned the house down," Bobby accused.

"I was twelve," Dean said over his shoulder. "And you were the one who put your homemade brew under the cupboard in a Crisco bottle. Besides, I always wanted to try blackened Spam. I hear it's a regular Cajun delicacy, right up there with Winchester flambé."

Sam laughed in amusement. "I totally forgot about that," he snickered. "The funniest damned thing I ever saw was the look on Dad's face when Bobby had to explain to him why his son had no eyebrows."

Bobby scoffed from the kitchen as pots and pans began to clatter. "Thought I was gonna have to put some lead in the old buzzard, then," he recalled. "He never did take kindly to anyone or anything that messed with one of you boys."

Sam nodded. "No, that he didn't," he agreed. "Isn't that right, Dean?"

The bathroom door clicked shut, and Sam shrugged as he tossed his towel aside and set about making the coffee.

Within a few short minutes, the entire house was perfumed with hearty aroma of a good home-cooked breakfast that Sam knew was not anything at all like the made to order spatula scrapings they usually had to endure. He'd never realized it before, but Bobby's was probably the closest thing to a homestead they'd ever had. For Dean

and Sam, going to Bobby's was like other kids going to visit their grandparents. It just always was what it was, and the atmosphere was the same no matter where they were coming from or where they were going. Sam liked it there.

As the grease began to splatter around the cook top in the older hunter's tiny kitchen, Sam realized that he really needed long sleeves if he wanted to make it to breakfast without first degree burns painting his arms. He made his way back into the bedroom and rifled around for the bag that had his button down shirts inside, making a mental note that they'd probably better unpack before the day was through.

Having found a suitable shirt, he turned to leave. He spied Dean's phone on the end table and remembered that he'd wanted to call and set up a meeting with Zack. He picked up the phone and flipped it open. A missed call prompt on the screen made him purse his lips in curiosity, just as Dean emerged from the bathroom.

"Hey," Sam said pointing to the phone, "Dad called a little while ago. You didn't answer?"

"Oh, I went in the other room right after you got up. I must not have heard it," Dean lied convincingly as Sam dialed the phone in an attempt to return the call.

Sam put the phone to his ear and waited expectantly as Dean pointedly busied himself with putting on and lacing up his boots. When Sam didn't speak, he unconsciously breathed a little easier.

"Hmm," Sam said absently. "Just got his voice mail." He left a quick message saying that he and Dean had arrived at Bobby's the night before and that they were fine if needed to contact them. Then he closed the phone and tossed it on the bed beside Dean. "Guess he must've turned it off again. He'll call back if it's important."

"Yeah," Dean agreed, rising from the foot of the bed. He took a couple of steps toward the door when Sam stopped him.

"Dean."

"What, geek boy?" He asked, turning indignantly.

"You forgot your phone," Sam said, sliding the cell into his hand as he walked past him into the living room.

Dean took it without a word, though really, he hadn't forgotten it at all.

* * * *

It was obscene. There was just no other word for it, not that Dean could think of. She was just sitting there, topless, all of her . . . parts . . . exposed. Some things were for his eyes only. It was just an understanding the two of them shared. To see her stripped and laid open like an exotic dancer made him want to throw himself over her to protect her from prying eyes.

Instead, Sam and Bobby were both ogling her like a cheap trick. Dean knew they didn't respect her in the way that he did, that they didn't know the right touches to make her purr like a kitten, or all the secret places she needed to be rubbed before she growled like the predator she was. They didn't know her, and Dean didn't want them knowing her, but then, he really had no choice in the matter. Because what she needed he couldn't give her anymore than he could give himself what it was he needed.

"Well," Sam interrupted, facing Dean with his arms crossed speculatively, "where do you think we should start?"

Dean moved closer to the wreck, almost afraid to look, but he wasn't about to skimp, not when it came to his baby. He needed to go over every inch, find all her hidden hurts and injuries, before he could formulate a proper plan of attack.

He mentally noted the broken grille, thankful that Bobby had already scrounged up another along with another hood. The car was raised off the ground on blocks, and Dean crouched down slowly and took a long, painful look at the undercarriage.

"That oil on the ground," he said, pointing to a fresh-looking slick, "was it already there, or is it hers?"

"It's hers," Bobby noted, tossing Sam a threatening scowl at the way the younger brother snickered at the other two's usage of the female pronoun. "The oil pan's cracked, and there was spray under the hood when I took it off, probably a cracked head."

"I was afraid of that," Dean sighed. "Gonna need a complete overhaul. I'm surprised she got us all the way back from St. Louis."

"Never ceases to amaze me how far some of them can go with the guts ripped out of 'em," Bobby said appreciatively. "A good honest soul goes a long, long way."

Sam gawped at them both like they were raving lunatics. First, with the female pronoun calling, and now with the soul endowing . . . There was such a thing as too attached to an inanimate object, and Bobby and Dean were prime examples of that fact. Still, if working on the Impala gave Dean something to do during his recuperation, then Sam would entertain the obsession. Just lately, he hadn't really liked the look Dean got on his face when he didn't have anything to do.

"Well, I guess we get a winch and a hoist in here, pull the engine and get it in the shop," Dean said slowly, thinking carefully through his plan of attack as though it were a hunt. "Then," he ducked his head down and looked at the ground, his hands shoved into his pockets, "uh, I know we should do the body work last, but I'd kinda like to at least get the hood on. Freak rainstorms this time of year. . ." he suggested, clearing his throat nervously, "I just don't like the idea of throwing a tarp over her. Doesn't seem right, ya know, to just rip her heart out and cover the hole with some flimsy plastic sheet."

"Sounds like a plan, then," Bobby agreed. He raised one of his gnarled, calloused hands and patted Dean on the back, keeping his own eyes on the ground as he did so. "I'll bring the winch around. Sam can help me get it hooked up, then you two can work on sanding and painting the hood I got for ya while I climb see about getting the engine out."

"I can start on the sanding," Dean suggested, looking up suddenly with a flick of determination in his eyes. "Just show me where I can get set up."

"Dean," Sam said skeptically, "Are you sure you want to try that . . .?"

"Yes, Mom," Dean snapped. "They do make power tools for sanding. I think I can manage to push a little button, and move my arms in little circles. It's not like I'm taking on a whole day of wax-on, wax-off, Mr. Miyagi. We'll just set the hood on a couple of sawhorses, and I'll be set to go."

"I just thought. . ."

"Well, don't. It hurts my ears when you start thinking so damn loud." Without waiting for a response, because he could hear the hurt expression on Sam's face, Dean stalked off behind the shop to look for some sawhorses.

Bobby and Sam just watched him go, and when Sam looked at the old man nervously, Bobby just waved for him to go off and help his brother. The winch would be awhile in fetching anyway.

"Best make sure he don't try something stupid," Bobby prompted.

Sam smiled gratefully and hurried off after Dean, breaking into a jog as the elder disappeared around the corner.

As Sam came around the back of the shed where the Impala's new hood was leaning, Dean found the sawhorse he was looking for and bent over to hook an arm beneath it. Before he could begin to straighten, Sam was at his side.

"I got it, dude," Dean assured him.

"Yeah, I can see that," Sam returned, noticing the scowl of determination his brother had locked in place. He hurried around to the other side of the wooden contraption and looped his own long arm around it. When Dean started to lift, Sam made sure to lift just a little bit higher, ensuring that he carried the brunt of the weight. He was relieved when Dean didn't call him on the gesture.

"So, uh, I was thinking of calling Zack tonight," Sam said, breaking the strained silence as he levered the hood onto the sawhorse table they'd constructed. "We can

find out if he knows anything about what the demon's been up to in the last month, if he's got any ideas, you know, about what it wants, what it's planning."

"Yeah," Dean answered noncommittally as he laid out a heavy duty extension cord and plugged it into the outside outlet. "I guess if anyone knows anything about it. . . Hey! Don't dent it. You just got a thing for putting irreparable creases in other people's metal, don't you?"

"I'm being as careful as I can," Sam huffed, refraining from mentioning that the thing probably weighed a couple hundred pounds. As the heavy sheet of metal finally settled into place, Sam rubbed his hands against his pant legs. "After dinner, then?"

"Hmm?" Dean asked, lowering one eyebrow quizzically.

"After dinner, we'll call Zack?" Sam explained. "Bobby agrees that Zack is the man to go to when it comes to anything demon. He called me when you were still in the hospital, and I told him we'd get in touch."

"Fine," Dean clipped. He appeared to be engrossed in choosing just the right grit of sandpaper to use. Finally, he chose a sheet and fastened it onto the handheld sander he'd found in the shop. Satisfied, he lifted the sander in one hand to chest height, quirked an eyebrow as he pointed at it, and smiled his biggest, most charming Dean Winchester grin. "Hah?" He suggested. "Chicks dig dudes with power tools," he nodded approvingly.

Sam bit his lower lip to keep from returning the expression, determined not to let Dean change the subject, despite the difficulty involved in ignoring that whole-face smile Dean did so well. "We need to be doing some research," he reminded. "The demon isn't waiting around for us to plan our next move."

"And Bobby's place isn't exactly the World Trade Center, Sam," Dean countered. "We're safe here. Every inch of this place is consecrated ground, and after what happened to Meg, I don't think any demon would be stupid enough to try to take us inside the house."

"So what," Sam prodded, "we just hang out here, pretend like Missouri never happened, and wait for Dad to give us the heads up?"

"No, we fix what happened in Missouri," Dean smirked, "starting with my baby."

"Fine, Dean," Sam agreed, "but we're calling Zack."

"Whatever, dude," Dean dismissed.

He turned to the hood of the car with a focused determination and switched on the sander.

"Damn!" he cursed, dropping the power tool onto the sheet of metal where it just vibrated its way ineffectually across the surface.

He'd forgotten how powerful the vibrations of a power sander could be. The sudden movements had sent currents of pain shooting up his arms and into his damaged chest with ferocity he hadn't expected, causing every little thing inside his ribcage that hadn't fully mended to grate jarringly against one another.

Catching the worried glare and reach Sam made in his direction, Dean gritted his teeth and latched onto the sander, biting back a grimace as he forced himself to move the appliance in circles over the metal surface. Sam allowed this charade to continue for all of about thirty seconds before he put an end to it by pulling the plug out of the outlet.

"Dumbass," Sam huffed.

"I can do it," Dean asserted.

"No, Dean, you can't," Sam said with a glare of disapproval.

Bobby came around the corner, and motioned that the winch was ready to go. Sam nodded that he was coming and coiled the extension cord around his arm, taking it with him.

"So you don't do anything stupid," he explained, and stomped off after Bobby, leaving Dean to fume in silence.

* * * *

Sam wiped the grimy beads of sweat from his forehead and scrunched his face at the smell of salty perspiration. Rubbing his freshly damp hands off on his greasy pants, the younger bent low to the ground and gripped the edges of the blackened silver oil pan. With a tired grunt, Sam pulled the container, brimming with slick oil, up to waist level before shuffling over to the makeshift, slightly off-balance work table where he dropped it down with a thud.

"Dammit!" The irritated, weary cry filled the early evening air as the deep brown liquid sloshed over the edge of the pan. It rose menacingly over the metal lip and toward Sam like a tidal wave in the Pacific before it turned back on itself and broke with a resounding splash.

"Ha, gotcha good there, didn't it Sammy?" Bobby laughed, patting Sam's shoulder while juggling the box of nuts and bolts he'd scrounged up from the back shed.

"Apparently," Sam grumbled, tilting his head to see just how badly he'd ruined his jeans. "Great...not like I can buy a new pair."

"Quit whining and take these," Bobby ordered, thrusting the large cardboard box full of rusting metal into Sam's chest.

"Take them where?" The youngest Winchester implored wearily, smacking his hands against the box's sides and letting out a deep sigh.

"Over by the trunk. On the ground is fine." The older man instructed, taking off his hat and running his fingers through his scraggly damp hair pensively. "I'd say we did good today."

"Does that mean we're done?" Sam questioned, not even trying to mask the excitement in his voice. Cars were not his thing, not by a long shot, and working, more like slaving, over one all day had turned out to be a hell of a lot more than he'd bargained for.

"Whoa, hold on there for a minute, boy." A deep chuckle met Sam's ears, and his grease-stained cheeks reddened at Bobby's laughter.

"What?" Sam snapped, clearly irritated. He was tired, dirty, and smelly. The last thing he needed was for some car obsessed, junk yard loving, seasoned demon hunter toying with him about quitting time.

"Your brother finished with that hood yet?" Sam visibly stiffened at Bobby's question, and met the older man's raised eyebrows with a frustrated glare.

"No, he's not." Sam replied sharply, circling back around the car towards Bobby and jerking his head towards the work table where the long yellow extension cord lay.

"You shouldn't have done that, Sam." Bobby reprimanded; his tone low and thoughtful as he ran his dirty fingers over the power cord.

"I was just trying to help." Sam defended angrily, failing to see how Bobby just couldn't understand that there was no way in hell his brother could sand a hood in his current condition.

"You really want to help?" Bobby asked pointedly albeit gently, although Sam knew the question was rhetorical and simply nodded curtly, "Then you can cook dinner tonight."

"What?" The stunned question didn't faze the older hunter in the least; he merely allowed a wide smile to cross his face in opposition to the raised eyebrows and scowl he was receiving from Sam.

"Cook, --you know, what you do to food before you eat it." Bobby clarified smugly, shouldering the wrapped cord and walking back to where Dean was supposed to be working, both men knowing before they arrived that they'd probably find him sulking.

"Bobby, I don't think that's a good idea. I'm what you could call 'culinary challenged'," Sam protested futilely to his friends retreating figure, dropping his head in defeat. He wanted a nice long hot shower, not an hour long terrifying ordeal that involved watching water boil and scald whatever mass substance he'd find to dump into it.

"Which is P.C. for what, spoiled baby brother?" Bobby dismissed. "Don't give me that crap, boy. John done told me you went to college. Don't they teach you anything?" Bobby joked over his shoulder, paying Sam little heed as he continued towards Dean's location.

"Fine, but you're eating whatever crap I come up with," Sam yelled back, a small smile tugging at his lips as he started up the slanted porch steps. He allowed himself to take solace in the fact that Bobby would never ask him to do this again after tonight.

* * * *

Repetitive, high-pitched beeping shrilled in Dean's ears as he trudged into the cabin, Bobby about a foot behind watching with ready hands lest something unexpected should deter Dean's forward shuffle. As hard as he tried, the family friend couldn't keep the tight line of disapproval off his face when Dean stopped short, leaning to brace himself against the kitchen's entrance with a grunt, arms hanging limply at his sides.

Dean rolled his eyes and pushed off the splintering paneling the instant he caught Bobby's swift movement towards him. He blatantly ignored the disgruntled huff coming from his host and didn't even offer a snarky reply to it, choosing rather to merely sink bonelessly into the nearest chair he could find that was in close vicinity to the table.

"Hey good lookin', what you got cookin'?" Dean teased, leaning back in the chair and taking in his little brother's frazzled appearance as the younger frantically lifted the lid off the steaming pot and placed it back down anxiously.

"Shut up," Sam clipped, flicking the stove top off and placing both hands on the pot handle in preparation for a hopefully spill free transfer to the sink. "Like to see you do this."

"Dude, I used to all the time. I mean, your growth definitely wasn't stunted by malnutrition was it?" Dean stated slowly, shifting his gaze away from his brother and the hissing steam that was liberated from the cookware to Bobby who was still hovering in the doorway watching the exchange quietly. The expression he fixed on the old hunter begged silently for interference, distraction, anything.

"I think we already covered what happened back then." Bobby smiled tightly, catching Dean's less than subtle hint, although it didn't really meet his eyes. He could clearly see the pain of a long day's work etching its imprint deeper into Dean's features and the struggle it was taking on the older brother's part to maintain his façade of indifference.

Bobby knew that Dean was only slightly amused at the show of ineptitude his brother was putting on. The big brother in him was mostly likely begging him to rush to Sam's aid and make sure the kid didn't scald himself. Dean's wary, watchfulness was apparent even in his pained state, and Bobby was certain that the young man's ingrained need to constantly watch over his sibling was a major factor in his suffering. The pain meds had made him loopy and helpless. It was little surprise that Dean was fighting against the need to take more.

But Bobby could tell that Dean was losing that battle by leaps and bounds, and instinct commanded him to take action, to be the good friend and force feed the stubborn Winchester boy his damned pills. Sympathy and wisdom won out, however, and he took his seat across from Dean at the table, smirking at the neatly folded napkin adorned with fork and knife in front of the place setting that was complete with a clean, empty plate and glass.

"So, Sam, whatcha made for us? 'Cause I'm sure Dean is just as starvin' as me." Dean nodded his agreement to Bobby's statement and looked damn near excited when Sam brought two pots and set them in the middle of the table. The men's

stomachs growled appreciatively when Sam pulled the tops off and exposed their meal, the smell flooding their nostrils.

"Uh...well," Sam laughed breathily, "We have macaroni and cheese with uh...little, little hot dogs."

"Sounds great!" Bobby exclaimed, the praise eliciting a beaming grin from Sam as he plunked a heaping spoonful of the cheesy noodles down on their host's plate.

"Dude, you made beanie weenies," Dean complained, shaking his head when Sam just smirked and dumped a more than adequate amount of the tiny sauce covered dogs on his plate. "Four years in college, living with a girl on top of it all, and you still can't cook?"

"Hey, I make a mean Ramen," Sam countered, finally settling down in the vacant chair and serving his own food. "And I had Jess. Why cook when you have a woman to do it for you?"

"Amen." Bobby agreed thankfully.

"You're single, man." Dean pointed out, smirk in place.

"Which is exactly why I empathize with Sam on this one," Bobby clarified, placing his hand over his heart solemnly. "All I need is a good woman, who'll ignore the guns, holy water, and salt lines, and I'd never set foot in the kitchen again."

"I'm with you, brother." The reply came from Sam as he stretched his long arm out and placed his hand supportively on Bobby's shoulder, giving it a firm shake as Dean laughed deeply.

"Hey, boy, don't laugh at what you can't appreciate. We all know you ain't capable of keeping a woman." Bobby chided lightly, waving his finger at Dean.

"That's not true," Dean shot back convincingly. "I just have a 24 hour policy."

"I can vouch for that." Sam chimed in, giving each man's plate a look, "Come on, less talking, more eating. I spent an hour in there."

"Wasn't long enough." Sam jerked his head over to his brother upon hearing that statement and didn't find the grimace or slow, drawn out chew Dean was emphasizing to be the least bit humorous.

"Dean," Bobby reprimanded, his face firm.

"What? Is something wrong with it?" Sam pleaded desperately, alternating looks between the two men.

"Dude, did you boil the water then add the mac or did you just dump the whole box in and light the burner?" Dean's eyes were dancing with delight at the mistake he just knew his brother had made.

"Dumped it in . . . why?" Sam's face was contorted with utter confusion and Dean couldn't help but smile easily at him.

"It's like rubber, dude, and some of it's hard, that's why." Dean leaned back in his chair, and crossed his arms over his chest taking pleasure in the fact that his cooking skills surpassed his college boy's.

"It's fine, Sam." Bobby encouraged, shoveling a huge portion into his mouth and swallowing it down without a flinch. He'd tasted much, much worse in his long career.

"No, it's not." Sam sulked, after working to swallow his first bite, "I'm sorry."

"It's an easy mistake, son. One I'm sure your brother has made on more than one occasion in his cooking excursions." Bobby issued a warning glance when Dean's trap flung open to refute, effectively silencing him, "Which is exactly why he is going to finish every last bite."

"What?" Dean gaped, ignoring the stern eyes fixated on him.

"We were out there all day working ourselves to the bone. You, more than any of us, need the food, and your brother made it. That's all you need to know. So eat!" Bobby ordered, obeying his own command and finishing off his helping of the undercooked noodles.

"You mean torture myself," Dean grouched under his breath, but picked up his fork anyway. He was too tired to argue, and Bobby already had enough on him to sic Sam on his ass for years at the moment.

"You sure?" Sam queried nervously, fiddling with his fork, "Cause we have cereal."

"Nope, we're fine." Bobby answered quickly, giving Sam an appreciative smile, "Now, Dean, thank your brother."

"It's better than Dad's," Dean offered, shrugging his shoulders.

"You're welcome," Sam nodded happily, the worried lines that had been creasing his face relaxing noticeably as his brother complied and started eating.

The rest of the meal passed quickly amidst the moments of varied sarcastic commentary that switched back and forth between just how bad it was to swallow the hardened shells and rubbery processed meat to the staining effects of grease on jeans. Soon, the brothers found themselves elbows deep in soapy water, scouring pads and towels in hand while Bobby turned in for the night.

Sam had instructed Dean to do the drying, because he'd assumed it'd be easier on his brother's sore muscles not to have to scrub too hard at the glued on pasta remnants. He'd have to have been an idiot not to notice how slowly his brother had eaten and risen from the table. With the meds Dean was supposed to be taking, nothing should hurt too badly, and Sam hoped his brother was just stiff and tired. He was pretty much both of those things himself after the day they'd just spent. Yet his older brother looked like he'd battled the Demon alone this past afternoon and lost.

"So, uh...I'm gonna go ahead and call Zack tonight like we discussed," Sam started, handing Dean a sopping dish.

"Okay," Dean muttered, wiping the towel across the soapy plate and placing the semi-dry dish in the rack.

"Anything you want me to ask him?" Sam pressed, stopping his scrubbing and giving Dean a skeptical glance.

"No, you just uh...he gave the number to you. You know how to use a phone, right? Or do you need me to dial for you?" Dean joked, elbowing Sam slightly in the ribs.

"I'm serious, man." Sam exasperated, turning to face his brother head on. "This guy, he's supposed to be a demon expert, you know? I mean, what if he knows what the Demon is after? He could help us get to the damn thing and send it back to hell where it belongs."

"Yeah, I get that, Sammy. I just don't know why you have to call him tonight. It's not like we're going anywhere for awhile," Dean disputed, his face exhibiting a weariness Sam wasn't sure he'd ever witnessed before.

"In case you forgot, Dean, the bastard said he wanted me. That he had plans for me. I really don't know how the hell I held off calling this long, and why you don't even seem interested in finding out what he meant." Sam's fists were clenched at his sides, and his face twisted in concentration as he battled against the rising rage that threatened to surface in response to his brother's attitude.

"I know what he said Sam. I was there." Dean threw the towel down on the cluttered counter, more than ready to fight this one out.

"Well why don't you act like it? Any other time you'd be climbing the walls here, man. You're seriously okay with just waiting here until something happens?" Sam flung the questions out at rapid speed, the words woven in exhaustion and indignation.

"Til my baby's fixed, yeah. We're stuck here 'til then," Dean replied, and Sam was stunned by his sudden shift from mad to calm. "If you're going to call him, do it now, 'cuz I ain't waiting up forever."

"Since when do you have a bedtime?" Sam asked, raising his eyebrows in disbelief as Dean brushed past him.

"It's more of a preferred start time. You think you can look this good on just a couple hours? I don't think so." Dean stated smugly, issuing Sam a huge grin before turning and heading back to their room.

* * * *

The humble abode of Zack Murzak

"Sam?" Zack shouted into his phone. "Sam, you'll have to speak up. I can't hear you. There's some kind static on the line tonight."

The agitation in the man's voice was nearly muffled by the insulating walls of heavy, ancient texts that he kept stacked around him like a child's fortress. The uneven piles of dusty books that curved and wavered toward the ceiling of the den seemed almost to dance in the light of the flickering fireplace that kept the air dry despite the damp winter air that seeped into the rest of his ancient home.

"Yes, Sam, I've been conducting some heavy research of my own using the information you gave me when I contacted you at the hospital, and I think I may have some answers." The middle-aged demonologist pushed his round-rimmed spectacles up onto his forehead, shoving his thick, dark hair back, and let the glasses rest on top of his head as his shoulders slumped studiously forward over the massive text he was studying.

He'd obviously been at it for some time. His outfit looked to have once been properly fastened and pressed, but now his white button-down was half unbuttoned and wrinkled, and his sleeves were rolled up almost to the edges of his suit-vest, exposing surprisingly heavily muscled upper arms.

A dark shadow spread like an oil slick across the polished hardwood floor. It was unique in that, unlike the other shadows in the room, it did not waver in the light of the flickering flames. It slid silently, snaking amongst the stacks of books toward the sound of Zack's voice.

"I think I may know what the demon wants from you, Sam," he explained. Then he sighed heavily, exhausted by the shouting. "No, Sam, what it wants!" He clarified, repeating himself for the hundredth time since the conversation had begun.

"Look," he finally huffed, defeated, "we can't do this now. I can barely hear you, and I'm not sure this is a secure line."

As if on cue, the lights in the room, already dim because Zack preferred a certain Masterpiece Theatre ambience to his study, flickered on and off, accompanied by an electronic hum.

Zack's head snapped around suspiciously as he half-stood from his padded, leather chair, the wheels rolling loudly across the floor as it slid away. "Sam, I'll be in touch with you. Before you leave Bobby's, I'll come see you. Just call me if you don't hear from me before you leave." He looked at his phone questioningly. "Sam?! Are you there?"

He looked at his phone again in frustration. "Damn!" He cursed. He stared at the display as though he could will the connection to re-establish himself, a more profane stream of curses coming to mind. "Friggin' computerized crap!"

He was completely enraptured by the green glow of the phone's screen, and didn't see the suspicious shadow slinking silently up behind him.

The lights flickered again, drawing him out of his frustrated stupor. Muscles tensing, he noted the chill that crept down his spine, despite the roaring fire, and silently bemused his impending doom. With a mask of horrified resignation paling his distinguished features, Zack spun on his heel, mouth slightly agape and eyes wide with terror, as the first wall of his textbook fortress caved in toward him, revealing the murderous intruder.

A scream ripped through the night and was cut eerily short. The cell phone crashed to the floor, its hard plastic clicking an oddly inappropriate punctuation to the preceding raucous as the room fell still and silent.

* * * *

Dean sat, perched against the headboard, eyes fixed on the bedroom door waiting. He'd taken a shower. That was his major accomplishment of the day. His sandy spikes were plastered to his head because of it, and it'd had hurt entirely too much to try and run a towel much less his fingers through it.

He could feel the tightness clenching his chest again and his breathing was growing irregular and strained because of it. However, Dean decided to opt out of his stretching routine for the night. He'd done enough today. Well, not really enough, Sam had babied him yet again, but still he'd lifted, twisted, and breathed heavily in good measure to qualify in the stretching department, at least in his mind.

It wasn't like he was going to get anything done anyway. Every inch of him ached and groaned with each movement. Dean had experienced pain in a thousand different ways, but at the moment, the current pulsating throbs coursing through his jumbled muscles took the prize.

More than likely it had to do with the absence of prescribed relief, but Dean was a Winchester and decided he could handle his own testing in the pain department without aid from some quack. Plus, physical pain proved you were alive and inhabited every avenue of your mind so that you could think of nothing else. Dean liked that.

"Hey," Dean greeted to Sam's entering form, and judged by the protruding lip and scrunched forehead his little brother didn't get the information he was hoping for.

"Hey," Sam returned, hoisting his duffle onto his bed and pilfering through it for clean clothes.

"So?" Dean pressed, consciously making an effort to sound interested.

"So the reception in his area must be bad 'cause the dude was breaking up all over the place. I could barely make out what he was saying." Sam rambled, and Dean gathered he was merely trying to sound upset over that but if only Sam knew how badly he was failing in that department. Helen Keller couldn't even miss the excited undertone.

"And?" Dean prompted, widening his eyes in mock suspense.

"And he'd coming to see us. Says he knows what the demon wants with the kids like me and our family." Sam offered, sounding a bit apprehensive.

"When?" The question flew out of Dean's mouth before he could really stop it, or alter the method of delivery. He sounded almost frantic, and not in a good way. *Too soon. Too fast. Not yet!*

"Well, I was hoping he'd tell me tonight, but with the reception like it was . . . freaky. . . and he didn't want to talk on an unprotected line. Must be big, so I told him we were fixing the car and that it'd probably take us a few weeks. We'll be here 'til then, and he said that he'd drop by before we left but to call if we haven't heard from him in awhile," Sam recounted, selecting a pair of boxers and a white tee and yanking them from the bag.

"Good to know." Dean muttered, sinking down hesitantly beneath the covers unable to stifle the groans accompanying the daunting task.

"Are you okay?" Sam demanded urgently, crossing the room in all of one single bound and hovering over Dean's shifting form. "Did you take your meds?"

"Yes." Dean lied forcefully, "I'm fine. Go away so I can sleep. And take a shower you reek."

"Okay...you sure?" Sam asked haltingly, concerned eyes scanning his brother.

"Yeah, Sammy, I'm sure," Dean mumbled into the pillow. He closed his eyes and waited for the retreating foot steps of his brother and the clicking of the bathroom door before opening them once again to study the wooden slats.

* * * *

Dean didn't care one bit for the shoddy tarp that hung over the Impala's lifeless skeleton. He couldn't even reap satisfaction from knowing that he'd been right about the rain. It was winter. Rain wasn't all that big a surprise, but one hell of a letdown.

And there was the glaring, blue plastic, amplifying the sound of the pelting raindrops and crinkling raucously with every waft of icy wind reminding him that he'd failed his baby. The new hood was still propped on the sawhorses behind the workshop, not even sanded let alone painted and fitted into place. Beneath the tented structure, Bobby was working, unfazed, as he had probably every day of his life. Dean wished nothing more but to accompany the man, but Sam had shooed his big brother into the workshop to help him work on the engine.

"You should probably just stay in the house today, don't you think?" Sam asked, indicating the chill dampness that hung in the air by drawing his arms into his sleeves and shivering violently.

"Hell, no," Dean argued vehemently. "I'm not letting you do any kind of surgery on the old girl unassisted. I'm still considering filing malpractice charges for driving her all the way from St. Louis with a cracked head after running her into a tree."

Sam sighed loudly. He didn't know how many more times he could listen to that particular jab, but he knew there was no point arguing or taking offense. Strangely, the heated comments Dean made about the car were a welcome change from the generally empty, bland tone he seemed to use now when addressing just about anything else.

"But the doctor said you should avoid cold, damp conditions. The risk of pneumonia..."

"I'm not splashing around in my Paddington Bear getup with big yellow galoshes and a little red umbrella, Sam," Dean snapped. "It's nice and dry in the workshop, and there's even a great big heater."

Dean noted thankfully that the engine was on a stand in the corner of the shop far from the drafty door. Pneumonia wasn't his only concern. The way the cold seemed to seep into his bones and just take up residence in the marrow made him feel about a hundred years old. But the engine was set up perfectly within ten yards of the massive kerosene heater, and it was at chest height so he could reach just about everything himself.

Dean grabbed a flashlight off the workbench and tossed it to Sam. "Make yourself useful, Betty Crocker, or does holding a flashlight use the same part of the brain as cooking macaroni?" Dean pulled a couple of ratchets and sockets off the stand and motioned as if to begin loosening a nut, then looked back at his stunned brother. "Hey! A little light over here. . ."

"I thought you were gonna let me do the work," Sam reminded reluctantly.

"And I thought you knew how to cook macaroni," Dean teased. He decided not to wait for his brother to stop stalling, squinted up his eyes in concentration, and went to work.

"Bobby said it was fine," Sam pouted, flicking on the flashlight and raising it to just the right angle to illuminate the spot Dean was working in.

"He said the same thing about my Cajun Blackened Spam."

Sam chuckled despite himself. "Yeah, he did. I forgot about that, too." His momentary amusement faded quickly as he watched Dean fumble with the ratchet. He tried three different sockets, cursing under his breath as he failed to loosen the nut.

Sam knew for a fact that Dean knew exactly what size those nuts were. He'd rebuilt the car with John years ago and done all the upkeep on it himself since it'd been given to him at sixteen. He wondered if the socket wasn't the problem. Dean really didn't need to be reaching into those awkward little spaces, but Sam knew better than to say anything.

He bit the inside of his lip and did his best to keep the light focused where it needed to be. The last thing he needed was for his brother to take offense to any of

his well-intentioned suggestions and decide to go back to working on the hood just for spite.

Sam wouldn't put it past Dean to get pneumonia just to keep him from having the satisfaction of being helpful. Hell, hadn't that one president refused to wear a jacket to his own inauguration and died of pneumonia as a result? That dude probably had a wife or a little brother of his own waiting in the wings with a warm coat; he'd refused to wear out of sheer pride and stubbornness. Sam wondered if he was a relation. Maybe on their mother's side.

"You still with me there, space cadet?" Dean asked over his shoulder.

Sam startled out of his thoughts and realized he'd let the light slip. Dean had apparently managed to get one nut loose anyway, because they both heard it clank unceremoniously to the concrete floor.

"Damn it," Dean cursed, though it sounded more tired than really angry. "Aziz! Light!" He demanded, quoting one of their favorite movies.

It was jobs like this one that Sam was pretty sure got a lot of people labeled ADD. He was starting to feel a lot like he had in school when he'd come to class having read and practically memorized three chapters ahead only to have the lecture stalled out by the one kid in the class who continually raised her hand and whined, "I don't get it."

Sam was pretty sure he'd be asleep in all of about fifteen minutes if he didn't find something to occupy his mind while his brother fumbled his way through a task Sam was probably going to end up redoing himself anyway. Granted, he'd have to whip out *Engines for Dummies*, but at least it would be better than mimicking a lamp for the better part of an hour.

"So, what do you think Zack really knows about the Demon?" Sam asked, shifting his stance.

"I don't know, Sam. Why don't we just let him tell us when he gets here?" Dean muttered, refusing to take the bait.

"But aren't you even a little curious?" Sam asked, the flashlight trembling in his grasp. "It said it had plans for me. Me and all the children like me. Don't you want to know what they are? And what other children?"

"I heard him. I was there," Dean reminded him, a bead of sweat forming on his brow as he struggled with the offending ratchets awkwardly.

"So, don't you want to know what he meant?"

"Sure I do, but first things first. I'm fixing the car. Zack is coming to clue us in. What more do you want?"

Sam recognized a shutdown when he heard one, and he wasn't about to let it go. "Well, I kinda want you to actually fix the car instead of just tinkering around in there as though you haven't done it a thousand times before. If you need help, then let me help, but don't make me stand here all day getting a stiff arm so you can accomplish nothing at all."

"Sam . . ." Dean's voice had taken on an edgy tone that should have warned Sam he was getting closer to pushing the proverbial meltdown button.

"What? Light?" Sam snapped, not heeding the warning. The younger shook the flashlight furiously back and forth, the small, glaring beam of white light dancing all over the work area coming to a stop in Dean's reddening face. "How's that?"

"Fine!" Dean snarled, dropping his ratchet to the floor. "You do it! I sure wouldn't want to slow you down or anything." His face was tight with anger, but Sam recognized the fact that his pupils weren't dilated as Dean snatched the flashlight from his hand, a sure sign that the anger was only a side effect of some other affliction. There was no real fury behind the words, and Sam was immediately sorry that he'd forced the issue.

He reminded himself that the first priority in coming to Bobby's had been to give Dean a chance to recover. Pushing for his own agenda was probably not helping that

cause, but ignoring the primary cause of Dean's injury was probably not the best m.o. either. Perhaps there was a happy medium.

Or there was always the old standby. A little trick he'd learned from his big brother. . . Sam relinquished the flashlight and strolled nonchalantly over to the workbench, discretely sinking a hand deep into the open tub of bearing grease partially hidden amongst the tools.

"You think this'll work?" Sam asked, keeping his greased hand out of sight and lofting one of the wrenches for Dean to inspect with his other.

Dean came closer, squinting up at the item in question. "I don't know, let me get my beanstalk, jolly green giant," he sighed, the tension melting to a more tolerable level.

"Dude, what'd you do to your head?" Sam gasped, scrunching up his forehead curiously and turning around to face his brother, keeping the one hand tucked behind him as he lowered the tool to Dean's eye level.

"What?" Dean asked; eyes wide. He raised his chin for Sam's inspection. "Do I have something on me? Where?"

"Right there," Sam said with a twinkle in his eyes that Dean recognized a second too late. The handful of grease was planted directly on the top of his head before he could even duck out of the way.

Sam raised his eyebrows and half-crouched, expecting to see a mischievous grin spread across Dean's face followed immediately by a lunge for the grease container and a shot at retaliation.

Instead, he got blind rage. Dean's eyes ballooned to all pupil and bloodshot whites in the fraction of a second it took for the older brother to realize what had just happened. A second after that, Sam couldn't see those terrifying eyes anymore, just the back of one very pissed off Winchester as Dean stormed out of the shop without a word.

Sam started to follow him but stopped. "Jerk!" He spat to the empty air, and the word bore none of the sentiment he usually reserved for it. In this instance, he meant it just exactly the way Merriam-Webster defined it. "Can't even take a friggin' joke!"

He wiped his hand on his jeans hastily. Hell, they were already ruined to begin with. He picked up the socket wrench and set about tearing apart the engine. He didn't have a clue how to fix a cracked head, but he'd be damned to let his brother's little hissy fit set them back another day.

After about twenty minutes of loosening every nut and bolt on the contraption, Sam heard the front door of the house slam and moved to the front of the shop to see what was up. Dean had stormed out of the house, as much as he could storm considering he still hadn't mastered standing straight up without rounding his shoulders, and was sloshing through the mud to the side of the Impala.

Sam watched as Dean exchanged a few words with Bobby that he couldn't make out, and after a few minutes, Bobby tossed his brother the keys to his truck. As the older hunter slid back under the twisted Impala, Dean hauled himself stiffly into the driver's seat of the old GMC pickup and roared out of the yard.

Sam couldn't control his curiosity. Most of his anger had burned off after the first few times he'd rapped his knuckles against the engine block. Still, if Dean was joyriding around while he was stuck doing all the work then a tantrum of nursery school performance was warranted in his mind. Forget the fact that he'd offered to do the work in the first place. It was the principle of the matter.

"Where's Dean going?" Sam questioned loudly, stalking over and crouching down beside the car.

"To town to get his hair washed," Bobby said flatly without coming out of his cave.

"What for? Is the hot water heater broken again?"

"No, son, ain't nothing broken. Not the water heater anyway." Bobby explained tersely.

"So why can't he wash his hair here?" Sam inquired, his confusion evident.

"Says he can't lift his arms that high." Bobby said bluntly.

"Crap!" Sam breathed, almost falling back into the mud on his backside at the revelation, "I knew that. His chest muscles are still too tight."

"It was kind of a dumb ass thing to do," Bobby agreed, "for a college boy, I mean. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I was just trying to make him smile a little," he admitted softly, running his hands over his head agitatedly.

"I think that boy's got enough going on in his head without you trying to make him do anything," Bobby pointed out.

Sam's face scrunched up contemplatively. "Maybe. I guess. It's just. . . Well, he hasn't really been the same since. . . you know, and he really needs to smile a little."

Bobby slid slowly out from under the car, meeting Sam's gaze solidly. "So, is it him that needs to smile, or you that needs to see it?" He asked pointedly, and without waiting for an answer, slid back under the car and the sounds of metal scraping metal indicated that he'd resumed his work. *Here endeth the lesson.*

Sam stood with an odd sensation of having just talked to Dean rather than to Bobby. There was just something about the two that was strangely similar. Slowly, he turned to go back to work himself, supposing that Dean and Bobby must have had the same shop teacher. They both had an uncanny knack for hitting the nail. Right. On. The. Head.

* * * *

Sam forced himself to swallow another chunk of the stringy chicken, washing the dry poultry down quickly with a long gulp of lukewarm milk. Disgusted, he stared down at his plate and debated whether or not to abandon the musty meat for the side of clumpy mashed potatoes. The multitude of salt crystals glistening in the butter yellow mass suggested that choice would probably render consequences his stomach was not about to endure. Thus completed the destruction of another dinner by the hands of one Samuel Winchester.

It was in times like these that he was almost grateful Dean wasn't around to tease him about his lack in the culinary department. His brother's absence on this occasion, however, was not something he wanted to dwell on. But how could he not? Lately, it seemed he could never seem to do right by Dean. If he tried to help, he got shut down. If he wanted to lighten the mood, he drove Dean away. It was getting to be frustrating as hell.

Sam knew he was trapped in a lose/lose situation; he had been since the night of the crash. From his perspective, there didn't seem to be a way out of it, either. Usually, it was Dean's job to pick up the pieces and save *his* ass; rarely was there ever a turnabout. Granted, there was the occasional over zealous hunting venture that backfired, but the difference between those times and the present situation lay in their ease of resolution. In the battlefield, accidents could be corrected with a single, quick reload or a resounding call for cover. Even if the monster managed to lay hold of its attempted murderer, the cuts would heal and the scars would blend into the tan skin it had once marred, leaving nothing more than a repressed memory and an elaborate lie to charm the bar girls.

Physical scarring was something they tolerated, embraced, and mended, but emotional turmoil was usually cast aside, disregarded, replaced with a valiant face, and dismissed as weakness. Sam was fairly certain the other members of his family considered him the most sensitive, i.e., the weakest. A part of him wondered, though, if within all of Dean's ribbing and questions about Sam's time of the month, the elder was partially, dare he say, jealous of his younger brother's ability to just allow himself the release.

Unlike his father and brother, Sam would open himself up just for the simple luxury of feeling human, to indulge the aching empathy when he witnessed what the

unexplainable could do to render to a helpless family shattered. It wasn't that he doubted Dean didn't experience the same ache for the people they helped, that his brother didn't hold himself accountable for every job gone wrong; Sam saw it on Dean's countenance every day.

The problem was Dean wouldn't dream of just letting the dam break. Emotions weren't something to be shared in his mind. The very nanosecond those dreaded tears or truth-laden words started to surface a wall would appear faster than Sam could blink.

Really, Sam wanted nothing more than to offer Dean the same comfort he experienced every time he woke up, sweaty and panicked, only to find worried yet strong eyes meeting his frightened ones. The flickering hazel accompanied by the deep, assuring voice that muttered everything was okay and only a nightmare were consolations Sam gratefully accepted and Dean only gave.

This time, though, the nightmare had been real. The horrible words had been spoken aloud, and pained cries had escaped at their utterance. Sam cringed inwardly at the knowledge that Dean needed more than simple encouragement and comfort. The two things that helped him through his own struggles would likely only intensify his brother's. Dean would no doubt fight the cure of his pain as much as its cause.

Sam sighed heavily and jabbed his fork deep into the cooling chicken before glancing at the, oh-so-green John Deere tractor clock hanging above the small cabinet. An hour had passed from the time he'd resorted to mimicking Susie Homemaker yet again. Two hours since Bobby had informed him that he had used the wrong nuts to secure the side bolts, making Sam come to the realization that mechanics truly were the most underestimated genius' in the world. And three hours had faded past since his brother had left, leaving the residual guilt of Sam's momentary stupidity in his wake.

"Staring at 'dem numbers ain't gonna make him come back any faster," Sam jerked as Bobby's straightforward tone pierced his thoughtful silence.

"I know." The youngest Winchester conceded, "It's just...three hours is a long time to just get your hair washed. Don't you think?"

"Says the boy who looks like he ain't never visited the barber's in his life." Bobby pointed out, flicking the back of Sam's head before sinking down in the adjacent chair and selecting his book on demonic hierarchies from the nearest floor pile. "How the hell do you see anyways?"

"I can see," Sam protested, self consciously pulling on his bangs. "And I'm betting better than you."

"What's that s'posed to mean?" Bobby challenged, shifting his eyes from the worn pages to Sam's lighted eyes.

"Nothing," Sam replied innocently, turning his attention back to the meager supper.

"Don't give me that crap," Bobby sassed, giving Sam a skeptical look, "You trying to say I'm old, son?"

"Oh, no, I would never do that." Sam gasped, although fighting the smirk playing across his lips.

"Cause maybe your Daddy didn't tell you that I'm the sharpest shooter this side of hunting," Bobby stated, banging his fist against the table for added emphasis.

"Maybe so. But it's been what? Seven? Ten years since you've hunted with my Dad? That's an awful long time," Sam teased, cocking his eyebrows and smiling smugly.

"Not that long," Bobby refuted ominously.

"Still, like Pastor Jim always said, 'age impairs'," Sam grabbed his plate and bolted out of his seat when he saw the look of 'entering dangerous territory' flash across Bobby's face.

"You mighty cocky. Anyone ever told you that?" Bobby drawled, rising from the chair and making his way over to the kitchen.

"On occasion," Sam smarted, resisting the urge of smacking his hand over his mouth. He really needed to stop spending every waking moment with Dean.

"Well, Sammy, I got a whole range set up on the back mile behind the shed. Got lights, targets, everything. So whattya say we put that little assumption of yours to the test?" Bobby dared, straightening up his posture and crossing his arms over his chest. Initially, Sam thought the man was joking, but one look at his stance and the younger hunter knew otherwise.

"Okay," Sam nodded. It had been a while since he'd done anything he'd place under the heading of normal, not by hunting standards anyway. Still, he wasn't going to do it for nothing, and Bobby didn't mean for him to. "And if you don't live up to your former glory?"

"You can sleep in tomorrow, and I'll finish the engine myself." Bobby bargained quickly.

Sam issued a low whistle under his breath. "That's some nice size stakes there, Bobby."

"Well, I'm feeling pretty confident." Bobby sallied assuredly. "College can't beat God-given talent."

"Whatever you say, man," Sam scoffed, scraping the stuck-on leftovers off his dish, "but I don't want to hear any grumbling about how bad you lost until after noon tomorrow."

"You won't have to be worrying about that, boy. I'm waking up your losing ass at the crack of dawn," Bobby shot back, retreating back into the living room to get his gear.

"Hey," Sam shouted, dumping his dishes recklessly in the rack as the ingenious idea hit him and hurrying around the corner to face his challenger once again, "you think Dean would join us? I mean, I don't know if he could really shoot because of his chest, but still hang out, you know?"

Bobby crinkled his forehead pensively as he studied the desperate expression and hopeful eyes. "Maybe, if you asked him."

"Asked him what?" Both Bobby and Sam snapped their heads to the now open front door where their former escaped member rested against the jamb.

"Hey, Dean," Sam startled, smiling tightly. "You hungry? I...well, I...uh cooked again."

"I recommend the cereal," Bobby chimed up, laughing when Sam's face reddened considerably.

"No...I ate." Dean replied, although neither Sam nor Bobby bought it. "So, ask him what?"

"Bobby has a shooting range out back, and I was just wondering if you wanted to come out while we fired off a couple rounds. Maybe give Bobby here some pointers," Sam proposed hastily, bearing an optimistic grin and ignoring Bobby's heated retort that he needed no such thing.

"Uh...it's kind of dark out," Dean muttered, jerking his head toward the nighttime black that was visible through the frame.

"Yeah, but he has lights and everything," Sam responded quickly, then abruptly turned and headed back to their room.

The older brother could almost swear the kid was running, and his excitement was palatable. Not more than a minute later, Sam emerged back into the living room, rolled the heavy, artillery-filled pack from his shoulders, and rummaged through it for his preferred rifle while Bobby taunted that it wouldn't matter what he picked.

Dean flinched as the blackened metal clattered against the wooden floor and swallowed visibly when Sam thrust his revered silver handgun towards him, waving it around as he waited for him to take it, just in case he decided to venture off a couple shots. With trembling hands, Dean reached out and wrapped his fingers around the cool steel. His heart pounded as he turned the metal in his hands, the brisk chill of

the gun receding and morphing into an intensifying heat that seared his flesh as it lingered in his hold.

He didn't have time to throw the burning weapon aside or offer a final protest to the men before him. Sam and Bobby were joking and bounding out of the house before he even registered the fact that they both had taken up rifles. Silently, Dean stared at the agent of death encompassed in his palm, his eyes drifting over every line and mark that graced the brilliant silver.

They expected this of him. Sam needed him to be able to pick up the gun again and let the bullets punctuate the proclamation that he was, with no uncertainty, brother, hunter, protector. Dean licked his dry, cracked lips and turned slowly to follow his brother out to the range. He didn't really have a choice. To decline would be to admit weakness.

* * * *

Dean decided that Bobby's lighting system surpassed that of the Superdome. The rows of phosphorescent beams could've created the illusion of daylight if not for the surrounding darkness growing blacker by the minute.

Four targets were arranged haphazardly through the tall grass and weeds along with smaller ones that were only partially visible through the mass of foliage. The larger ones bore Latin words scrawled in red, one of which Dean recognized as a supposed third tier demon. Other words or pictures graced the outermost targets, and Dean smirked at the one that held his dad's image that neighbored another holding Caleb's. He couldn't really blame Bobby for that one.

Sam and Bobby took their places on the makeshift starting point almost instantly upon hitting the field. Dean paid little attention to the bickering that ensued over which type of rules their bet would follow. He didn't really care how they laid them down, because either way, Sam was in for the surprise of his life. The last time they had visited Bobby, Sam hadn't even been a teenager, and Dean doubted his little brother remembered the schooling Dad's friend had given his big brother.

Dean hunkered down on an overturned five gallon bucket and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and allowed his once favored weapon to hang limply in his fingers. He nearly shot himself in the foot when the first shot resounded, the report throbbing in his ears. His heart raced into lightning speed as he watched his little brother, who he'd always think of as little Sammy, cock the rifle, aim at the Latin stained target, and pull the trigger masterfully, obviously not a little boy anymore.

"Ha! Beat that!" Sam challenged, stepping back and admiring his shot. The mark was slightly off center but damn near bulls-eye. Bobby shrugged and took his place at the line, aiming and firing in rapid succession.

"Just did," the elder hunter boasted smugly. Neither Bobby nor Dean were able to keep from laughing at Sam's stunned expression and complete state of denial as he stumbled towards the target, mouth agape with astonishment.

"The man's good," Dean commented to no one in particular.

"Yeah, he is." Sam clapped Bobby on the back and challenged him to another round.

"Why torture yourself, son? You ain't gonna win a single one," Bobby stated matter-of-factly, winking at Dean. "You're brother's almost as stubborn as you."

"You think so, huh?" Dean mumbled curiously.

"Yep, I think I went twenty rounds with you before you admitted defeat," Bobby recalled, eyes twinkling at the memory.

"Somehow you were moving those targets," Dean defended.

"Nah, you were just a lousy shot."

"Hey, now, you're messing with the Winchesters. We're legendary in the rifle department," Sam countered, sliding two more bullets into the hunting rifle's chamber.

“That ain’t *your* family.” Bobby huffed. “If it was, I’d be living in a nice house, courtesy of your Daddy. Not that it makes a difference. You boys can’t shoot worth a lick.”

“Wanna bet?” The chirping of crickets was deafening compared to the overwhelming silence that enveloped the back yard when the confident retort hit the air. It didn’t come from Sam; instead it flew from Dean’s mouth like a punch.

Dean, himself, was stunned at his snarky reply. He hadn’t intended to shoot. Hell, the kick back from the gun was more than likely going to send the most wonderful fiery sensation of the worst pain imaginable through his healing chest. But this was what he knew, and maybe, just maybe, if he got back to it like Sam wanted him to, then everything would shift to normal.

“D-dean, are you sure? You’re chest--,” Sam started, nervous eyes flying furiously between his brother’s trudging form and Bobby’s fixed one.

“I’m fine, Sammy. Been worse,” Dean clipped, fighting back a grimace as he took his position on the line. “Plus, can’t let this old guy get away with making fun of the family name, right?”

“I was doing no such thing,” Bobby argued lightly, stepping up along side Dean, “You sure you want to do this?”

“I don’t know, Bobby. I’ve only been firing one of these things since I was eight,” Dean affronted, biting hard on his lip as he raised his gun to fire at the side target, the image of a hunter he didn’t know plastered on it.

Dean set his aim, bracing his shooting arm up with his left arm, elbow locked at his side to absorb as much of the kick as possible. He locked his eyes with the waxy blacks that belonged to the target image. The man-made light flittered across the glistening picture, creating a flickering effect that shifted the eyes from undistinguishable black to shimmering white and back again as the beams wavered in the evening’s cool breeze. A simple trick of light, he knew, but the effect was too familiar, and too real.

The more he stared, the more those eyes changed, and he steadied his aim against them. But the eyes he fixed his expert line of sight on became familiar, known. They were his own eyes that looked back at him as he cocked the gun, his own eyes that widened in terror at the impending doom. It should’ve really mattered more that, when the light changed, the eyes wouldn’t be his any longer. But it hadn’t mattered in St. Louis, and it didn’t matter now.

He blinked, merely blinked, and the picture changed again. And for a moment, Dean thought the skinwalker was there, that Thing, the It that had worn a skin like his and had known him better than anyone; better than his father, better than his brother, and sometimes, Dean thought, better than he knew himself.

But that monster had fallen, and this one, whether real or imagined, would fall as well. For there are some secrets no one can live to tell.

“Dean?” A sharp tug to his arm elicited a groan, and Dean hoped that would quell the concerned interference, but it only made the interferer more persistent. “Dean?”

“What?” Dean breathed, breaking from his trance and realizing he had been literally frozen with his body set in aim. As if on cue, his arms acknowledged the realization, throbbing mercilessly to the point of forcing Dean to let them drop painfully to his side.

“Are you okay?” The elder blinked rapidly and shifted his gaze toward the voice, the eyes, his brother.

“Yeah, just uh...I think I need my meds. My chest is killing me. I’m—I’m gonna go back inside.” Dean let the gun swing down his finger and pressed his hand gingerly over the scarring flesh underneath his cotton tee.

“Oh, uh...” Sam hesitated, unsure of this sudden, honest shift in his brother’s behavior, “want me to help you?”

"No!" Dean replied sharply, mentally berating himself for his unnecessary abruptness when Sam's face twisted further into worry. "I'm just going to turn in. You stay and beat Bobby for me."

"Like I said, ain't gonna happen," Bobby joked, although his face was etched with seriousness, and his eyes studied Dean's fragile, taped-together mask skeptically.

"Okay..." Sam mumbled, irritated that he was being shut down yet again. "Just um...call me if you need something."

"I won't," Dean yelled over his shoulder, willing his legs to move faster as he covered the distance back to the cabin. Nightmares were a silent struggle, one that could be hidden. This...reliving...Sam could witness, and that was unacceptable.

It took every ounce of restraint he owned not to break into a run as he rounded the corner and disappeared from Sam's direct line of sight. He hastened his step, gritting his teeth as he clamored up the porch stairs, jerked the front door open, and let it slam behind him.

The instant the resound of wood on wood met his ears, Dean fell back against the grain and ran his trembling hands over his face furiously. He grimaced at the thick sheen of sweat that poured from his tense face and trickled down, staining the ring of his dark tee. Steady, deep breaths pounded through the eerie, thick silence of the vacant homestead, but became rapid gasps when the zipping whiz of another loud report punctuated the night air.

His eyes fell to the barrel of the gun growing colder within his slackened grip, and with a flick of his fingers, he released the clip, swallowed slowly as it clacked against the wood, and took solace in the barren state of the chamber. Stretching out his arm, Dean's gaze hardened at the shining metal and watched the lazy swing of the extended barrel.

A sharp cry fell on the night air, accompanied by the smack of hand on flesh and followed quickly by another report.

He'd always been surprised at how readily his brother accepted the weapons thrust in his path. For a person claiming to hate all that hunting had to offer, the younger didn't really hesitate to grab the steel. He hadn't hesitated in the asylum.

Dean tilted his head and let the silver claim his entire sight. He flinched back when a movement from behind the object caught his eye and snatched the gun away. Dean jerked his head up and found that the wooden slats, adorned with ancient text, had been replaced in his mind's eye by the coldest, dirtiest stone. The one before him—the perceived attacker was none other than Sam, whose nose trickled with blood.

The cold that had formerly enveloped Dean's hand, moved through his bruised, throbbing chest, and settled in his heart.

For a moment after his hand fell away, the gun having been accepted too readily when offered, his eyes remained fixed on the empty cavern of the barrel. Only for a moment though, because a darker abyss had replaced his brother's once-shining eyes and drew him in with a force that defied even light.

"Do you hate me that much?"

The finger moved without hesitation. Once, twice, four times. Apparently, the answer was yes, and it didn't matter that the chamber was empty.

Another report slammed the night air, and Dean catapulted from the confines of his memory into the throws of jarring reality. Palms pressing firmly into his temples, Dean drew blood as he bit down on his cracked lips. Sleep. Sleep would fix this. He couldn't remember in slumber. Nightmares weren't real, or most of them weren't.

With unsteady footsteps, the elder brother stumbled to his refuge, his hurried breathing threatening to crush his wounded chest. A loud, uninhibited grunt flew from his mouth as he ripped off his dampened tee and threw it unceremoniously to the floor. Shaking legs brought him to the porcelain sink. One sharp turn of the iron faucet released a flood of relief that Dean splashed liberally onto his face.

His fingers grabbed desperately at the basin, and using what little strength remained in his arms, Dean steadied himself and raised his head to meet his reflection. The face, the man before him, became different as once again his eyes and his mind failed to agree upon reality. Streams of water that merged with sweat laced down his contorted features as he stared at what he'd become. What he'd embraced in the name of family. The murderer.

It was a man, Dean knew, an innocent bound to a demon. It was still a man when he raised the ancient handgun to bear upon it, but all he saw was the demon who pummeled his brother, intent upon splitting his head against the pavement. It was the demon he saw when he pulled the trigger. But it was the man that died.

Dean pushed himself off the sink forcefully, banging his battered body against the opposite wall. He couldn't handle this—this remembering. The small reserve of control over his mind and body he possessed was spent completely on the journey to bed. Clawing his way toward the pillows, Dean dropped his head deep within the down cushion and shut his eyes tightly, welcoming whatever terrors of the night awaited him.

Unknown terror was preferable to the terror he'd known, the terror he'd lived.

* * * * *

With muted, hurried footsteps, Sam made his way to the back room he and Dean were sharing. He needed a shower and as many hours of sleep he could get seeing as Bobby had reigned victorious for six consecutive shootouts. Tomorrow was going to be the worst work day of his life, he imagined. Well, okay, not even close to the worst, but downright miserable, no doubt. Sam had already prepared himself to act as personal servant to one Bobby Singer. The seasoned hunter couldn't be that demanding, right?

The bedroom door was shut, but he could make out a thin sliver of light where it didn't quite meet the floor. Taking a deep breath, Sam grasped the silver knob and turned it gradually before pushing forward and easing the door open.

He grimaced at the creaking of the old wood. Dean had already seemed jumpy and the last thing he wanted to do was startle his brother at this particular point in time. Sam was surprised to see the main bedroom was shrouded in darkness but grateful because that meant his brother was more than likely snoozing. The dim rays escaping from the bathroom captivated Sam's attention and he moved toward them, but a sound to his right halted his steps.

"Sam?" the groggy voice cut through the blackened room, and Sam cursed under his breath thinking he'd awakened his brother. A flick of the switch on the table lamp revealed Dean, half-sitting against the pillows and very much awake.

"I thought you were sleeping." Sam stated, sounding rather disappointed. "Guess not."

"Really? I'm not?" Dean gasped, looking down and patting his hands against his arms and legs in mockdisbelief.

Sam rolled his eyes and contemplated smacking the back of his brother's head but thought the better of it. "I don't get it."

"What?" Dean prompted, although appearing completely uninterested in the response.

"That stuff they gave you has a sleep aid. You should be dead to the world," Sam explained, realizing the error in his choice of words as Dean visibly paled. "Well, you know what I mean," he added somewhat sheepishly.

"I know." Dean muttered, averting his gaze to his now beloved paneled walls.

"So..." Sam drawled in desperate need of a change in subject matter, "I was thinking of maybe trying to get a hold of Dad tonight. It's not that late, you know. Not like he ever sleeps."

Sam waited for a response, meandering over to his pack and digging through it for some relatively clean clothes, unnerved by Dean's silent contemplation of the woodwork. "Hey, Beav, you got any thoughts on that?"

"Huh?" Dean turned his attention away from the wall and back to his brother, a look of complete passivity on his face, and Sam wondered if that was just another mask as well.

"I said I'm calling Dad tonight." Sam reiterated firmly, making sure that it came out as a statement. Dean had already forfeited his chance to voice an opinion either way.

"He doesn't need you to bother him, Sammy," Dean stated bluntly, meeting his brother's stubborn gaze.

"Well, apparently, *he* wants to talk to *us*. I mean, he called first this time." Sam reasoned, his voice holding hopefulness and longing that Dean really didn't want to hear. If Sam asked him again, he knew he'd cave. He could never deny Sam anything.

"No."

"Why?"

"It's my phone," Dean shot back, and even as the words left he knew it was weak.

Sam stared at this brother, completely dumbfounded. "Are you kidding me?"

"Not really, no." Dean snapped, crinkling his nose in disgust when Sam drew closer, "Dude, go take a shower."

"Dean, I really think--"

"Stop thinking, start scrubbing." Dean cut in and sunk down the rest of the way on the bed, pulling the covers up toward his chin and shutting his eyes against whatever opposition Sam was preparing.

Sam sighed heavily, and snatched a shirt and a pair of athletic pants from his bag. "Fine. Whatever. But I am calling him before we leave." Dean didn't grant him a response, and really, little brother hadn't expected one. No one could shift subjects or completely shut them down faster than Dean. With one last contemplative look, Sam turned sharply on his heels, defeated yet again by the wall that was his brother, and headed for the shower.

* * * *

A frigid wind thunders through the wooden refuge carrying upon its wake a sharp, threatening buzz. The chill penetrates his being, freezing bone and marrow so that he must stand fixed, unmoving, and unprotected against the encroaching enemy.

He waits, palms damp with apprehension, and clings to the comforting ebb that flows from standing along side the man he trusts. The tide is different. He feels its shift with every breath he draws of the darkening essence.

"It's found us. It's here."

Orders. Commands. He refuses them all, shakes his head in question, and backs away from the raging waves of fury plunging against his chest as the man turns slowly to face him. The man he swears to know tosses familiarity and comfort into his tormented confusion.

"Son, please."

The word taunts him, waving its familiar cloak of love before him, but betraying its intent with the tone in which it is delivered. Forceful, demanding. Its utterance still leaves him spellbound, and his heart cringes beneath the affectionate word that his ears crave to hear. Yet still, it lacks, and he knows that it isn't the same. He knows.

"You're not my Dad."

The precious, invaluable silver glimmers in his hand, the cool deadly steel burning his hand with the power it wields. Electricity surges from the weapon into him with a steady rhythm that is his link, his courage to stand his ground against the interrogation offered by the one he's sworn to protect.

"Your brother's lost his mind."

"No I haven't. I haven't. Please, Sammy, believe me." He's begging, and if the situation didn't demand his stance, he'd have his knees to the ground. Hesitation proves to be his adversary as his brother shakes his head and moves to stand behind the evil claiming to be his father.

"You've always hated me, haven't you, son?"

He falters, his heart crushing beneath the weight of betrayal and truth. For a brief instant everything is still. The sound of bated breath and scent of wafting sulfur are all that is tangible to him. He meets the chocolate eyes, and hope flickers in those of jade for but a moment before it is crushed to the wayside. Shivers crawl their course along his body in sync with the faintest yellow flickering rapidly before him.

"Do it. We both know you want to. We both know who you really are."

He swallows haltingly, the word dances along the tip of his tongue, replaying itself over and over in his mind. It burns, and the fear of hearing it stain the lips of the man before him grips his heart and compresses his chest until the act of breathing has stilled completely. The only response his body gives is the encroaching wetness pooling in his eyes.

"Murderer."

The air that's been held captive is released in the darkest of rage. He has no right. That...thing...has no right! A single click and a hollow snap collide with the rigid sphere. The eyes that hold the golden stare flicker and fade into deepest purple bolts, contorting and jerking the man it possesses.

"What have you done?"

Red soils the cracking brown beneath it, a swirling black mist dances from his pooling essence, materializing before him before vanishing instantly, escaping once more, less one hunter to pursue it.

He doesn't understand. He thought...it wasn't his Dad. It used him. He only tried to save his brother. The sounds of agony and cries to awaken hardly jar him from his detachment, from the knowledge of what he has truly done.

"He was right."

The vengeful words are thrown to the air, and he feels he is falling. A loud thud accompanies his stunned arrival to a place where his brother looks down upon him, the weapon he once held tight now clenched in the younger's as his finger graces the trigger.

"Murderer!"

** * * **

Sam emerged from the bathroom, smelling like he'd just dipped in the Irish Springs themselves, and surrounded by a cloud of steam. The second he crossed the threshold, however, he was met by a painfully recognizable shuffle of sheets and the frantic brushing of skin across damp cloth. The sounds forced all thoughts of relishing in his freshly clean state to the wayside.

The younger edged closer to his brother's bed and squinted to make out Dean's shape. The elder twisted around violently, oblivious to his body's limitations until he'd surpassed them in his panicked turmoil. A crushing pressure squeezed the air from his lungs in a shuddering scream.

"NO!"

Sam was running, fumbling to get one long leg in front of the other in his haste to protect his brother from the unseen attacker. Years of living in fear of the dark and what lurked there compelled him to reach first for the Glock he'd stashed in the drawer of the end table and then wonder what it was he might actually have to shoot. By the time his hand formed around the wooden grip and the safety clicked off beneath his thumb, his eyes, sharpened by the rush of adrenaline in his blood, focused enough for him to see his brother and the nonexistent attacker.

"Dean!" He yelled, long arms wrestling with the sheets as he tried to grab hold

and steady his brother's frantic jerks.

Dean turned toward him, eyes wide and glistening, a sheen of sweat highlighting his brow. Sam put a hand on the elder's forehead and grimaced when Dean didn't so much as blink defensively. Obviously not fully awake, despite appearances, the older brother's hands were fisted in the sheet that was drawn up tightly under his chin. His entire body was curled inward on itself, knees tightly clenched to his chest, and his breath was ragged and short.

Sam fumbled with his hands, searching for an uninjured place to grip in order to shake gently and rouse Dean from his nightmare.

"Dean, c'mon. Wake up, okay. It's just a dream," Sam whispered. *Just a dream. As if there is any such thing as JUST a dream.*

He finally half-stood, hunched over the bed, and hooked his left hand gently under his brother's right arm as though he were a baby that Sam intended to lift from a cradle. The gentle brush of his fingertips against Dean's ribcage elicited a strangled, choking moan, and he flinched away from the touch, snapping into full blown consciousness.

Sam jerked his hand away, afraid that he'd be confused for an attacker. "Dean, hey," Sam soothed, "it's alright."

"Sam?" He asked, confused in his half-awake state.

Sam reached out again reassuringly, but when he replaced his hand along Dean's ribcage, the elder flinched away again, even more violently without the numb of sleep to delay the response. Sam jerked his hand back.

"God, Dean, does that hurt?" *Stupid question. Of course, it hurts Captain Obvious.*

Sam rocked back on his haunches, staying crouched to his brother's eye level as Dean made no attempt to move from his curled position. The hazel eyes met his own, and Sam knew that he was recognized and, though Dean would never admit it, appreciated. He just felt so helpless, unable to offer even a soft touch for reassurance.

As Dean's breathing evened out some, Sam ventured to speak.

"You ready to talk about it, *now*?" He asked. "I'm thinking it's time for us to sell our stock in lollipops and candy canes, huh?"

Dean shook his head awkwardly against the pillow and closed his eyes for a long moment as though he could push Sam away just by pretending he wasn't there. The last flickers of the nightmare played across his retinas, and he snapped them open again, hissing in a breath against the throb of his compressed chest.

"I'm fine, Sam," he lied so weakly that even he didn't believe it. "Go to sleep."

Sam shook his head in disbelief. "You are not fine! Look at yourself! You're covered in sweat, breathing like you've just completed a marathon, and you can barely move! Would you just," he paused, biting back his anger, "ahh . . . just, cut the crap already?! I'm tired of walking on eggshells around here, and since we're both awake, we might just as well get everything out in the open now."

Dean tried to turn away, but the movement forced all the hard-earned air from his burning lungs in a stifled grunt that Sam couldn't miss, even if Dean had been in any condition to hide it, which of course, he wasn't.

The younger brother's conviction faded momentarily. Hell, Dean couldn't talk about anything if he couldn't even breathe. He stood with a huff and snatched his brother's duffel bag from under the bed, toting it into the bathroom with him. He flipped on the light switch and began rifling through Dean's possessions, finding the prescription bottles buried all the way at the bottom of the bag.

Sam pressed his fingers into his closed eyes, willing them to adjust to the glaring bathroom light, and squinted at each of the plastic bottles. He finally found the pain medication and popped the top off.

His left hand was on the faucet, preparing to run a glass of water to chase the pills, when a suspicious expression pinched his forehead. He set the pills down on the countertop and picked up the bottle from which he'd just taken them. Clenching

his jaw, he emptied the contents of the bottle out onto the opposite side of the sink and counted them out quickly.

"Damn it!" he cursed, snatching the glass off the sink, filling it hastily, and palming the two pills he'd taken out first.

Striding into the bedroom with renewed conviction, he held the cup and the medicine out, straight-armed, with enough force to send some of the water sloshing out onto the bed.

"You haven't been taking your medicine, have you?" He accused rhetorically. "What the hell's the matter with you?! I mean, aside from the obvious, what the hell makes you think you can get better if you don't follow doctor's orders, Dean?"

Dean struggled into a sitting position and just gazed back at Sam, his eyes still glassy with pain and fear. There was no anger, no guilt, no apology anywhere in them.

Sighing, Sam met his brother's gaze and sat back on his own bed, setting the pills and water on the end table. His face softened with realization. "That's the point, isn't it?" He pushed his hands over his bed-mussed hair in frustration. "You don't want to get better."

"Sam. . ."

"No! Don't even try to deny it!" He stood abruptly and paced between the two beds, as though looking for something to kick. "God, it all makes sense now! You hardly look at the car. You won't let me help you with your therapy. You don't want to talk about anything that has to do with the demon, or research, or hunting in general, won't talk to Dad. . ." He stopped abruptly. His face softened as Dean looked away, swallowing hard.

"Dean, if you're scared. . ."

Dean's face spun back toward him, eyes dark with anger. "*If* I'm scared. . ." He chuckled darkly, wincing. "Hell yeah I'm scared, Sam. I've been scared for twenty-three years now. Since when does that matter? That has nothing to do with this. It's not about me. It's never *been* about me."

"Then what are you doing sitting around here, feeling sorry for yourself, and pretending like life will just stop if you ignore it long enough?"

"I'm not."

"Prove it," Sam said. He grabbed Dean's cell phone off the end table, flipped it open, and held it out to his brother. "Call Dad, then. Ask him what he wants us to do, where he wants us to go. Ask him if he's found anything out about the demon."

Challenged, Dean was hard-pressed to respond in kind. He huffed despondently and reached for the phone. Flipping it open, he took what Sam knew was entirely too long to find the speed dial button for his father's cell and pushed it with a trembling finger. He swallowed hard and placed the phone to his ear.

One ring. . .

Dean clenched his jaw.

Two rings. . .

His gaze faltered, and his eyes darted back and forth across the room.

Three rings. . .

Dean closed his fingers on the device, snapping it shut hard, and tossed it to the end of the bed where it landed with a soft thud between his covered feet. His chin trembled, and his eyes became glassy once more. "Later. . ." he suggested, unable to control the quiver in his voice.

Sam melted onto the edge of his brother's bed, drawing the elder's gaze to his. "God, Dean, what is this about? Is it the nightmares? Is Dad in them?"

Dean dropped his chin, confirmation enough of Sam's suspicions. He looked toward the wall, not trusting his voice to answer.

Sam placed his hand on the other side of his brother's legs and leaned across the bed in an effort to recapture his attention. "You've been dreaming about that night; about Dad being possessed. You've been avoiding the pain meds because they

make you sleep." He leaned more forcibly across the bed. "Dean, talk to me. Let me help you. . . Please."

And there it was, the dreaded 'please'. Dean was so screwed.

Dean blinked several times in rapid succession, and cleared his throat roughly, his Adam's apple bobbing convulsively beneath the moist skin of his throat. "It's just. . ." His voice failed momentarily, and he swallowed again.

"Just what?"

"It's just. . . I mean, I know that wasn't him, Sam," Dean finally said, lifting his eyes. "I know that wasn't Dad in the cabin that night, but it was still his voice. And when I'm dreaming, that's all I hear, just the things he said. I know it's not him on the phone, but my brain just tells me that as soon as I hear him on the other end of the line, he's just going to repeat all of those things. I just. . . don't think I can listen to him tell me what a bad son I am again. That I'm a murderer. . ."

Sam looked confused. "Dean." He waited for his brother to focus on him completely before continuing. "Dean, he never said those things. I was there, too, remember. I heard what he said. And he never said you were a murderer. That never happened. You know that."

Dean's face pinched in at the corners of his glassy eyes.

"You do know that, don't you?" Sam pressed. *God, how have things gotten that bad right under my nose? My brother's losing his mind, and I'm worried about hunting a demon.*

Dean worked his mouth silently for several long seconds as he searched for the answer to his brother's question. "Yeah. . . no. . . I guess." He shook his head and pressed the heel of his right hand to his forehead, right over the bridge of his nose. "I don't know anymore, Sam. I don't know what I know and what I don't know. . . Everything's different now."

"Different how, Dean?" He shifted to a more upright position, but thought twice about it. He didn't want to seem confrontational now that he was finally starting to get somewhere. He got up and moved to the edge of his own bed and sat with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped in front of him. "I thought this was what you wanted, what you lived for. Saving people, hunting things. . ."

"No." Dean let his head fall back against the wall with a thud, then lifted it and snapped it back a second time for good measure, frustration apparent in the way his hands fisted and pounded into the mattress beside him. "That's the way it used to be. When we started hunting this thing, the Demon, it was for Mom, and then it was for Jess, but it was still us hunting it. We didn't know what it really wanted was you. Now we do. It as much as said so. It's hunting *us*, Sam." He breathed in and out with guarded resignation. "I just don't see the point in throwing ourselves at it."

"Something's always trying to kill us. That's nothing new," Sam pointed out. "I don't see how being prepared for it is the same as throwing ourselves at it."

"But if it's hunting you, and we go looking for it, we might just as well be serving you up on a silver platter." Dean tossed the blankets to one side and slowly slid his feet onto the floor, meeting his brother's gaze deliberately.

"This is big, Sam. Way bigger than anything we've hunted in the last twenty-three years. Way bigger than we ever expected." He twisted his head from side to side until his neck cracked loudly, and he exhaled slowly. "I don't know if I can protect you from this." He dropped his eyes to the floor in shame, failure apparent in his posture.

Sam didn't let that expression linger. He dropped to his knees on the wood floor and slid forward to look up into his brother's eyes oblivious to the splinter he picked up on the way. "First of all," he said, "I don't need you to protect me, Dean. I'm all grown up. I'm a big boy. I don't need you to stand before me. I don't need you to stand behind me." He put an arm across his brother's knees, and put his other hand under the elder's chin, pulling his head firmly around. "I need you to stand beside me. Let me be your partner, not your responsibility."

"And second, you're not serving me up to anything. We can beat this thing. Dad

still has the Colt, and we still have the one bullet."

"And we had it the last two times we met this thing, Sam," Dean asserted, scooting to the side a bit to escape his brother's overpowering closeness. "We had it in Salvation when the demon up and vanished. We had it back at the cabin, and something tells me, if you had used it, you would've killed Dad, and the thing would've just vanished again. It's toying with us."

"I know things have changed for you now," Dean continued, his tongue finally loose after being held for so long. "I know that was...what...your Gethsemane back there, and now you're all ready to run off and martyr yourself for this cause." He lowered his head and ran his hand over his face with a sniff to clear the emotion from the back of his throat, then lifted his hazel eyes to stare pointedly into Sam's. "But I'm not following your ass into Jerusalem so I can carry your cross out."

Sam fell back on his haunches, his feet pinned painfully beneath him, and his mouth worked spasmodically as he struggled to find words that were nowhere near the tip of his tongue.

Dean used Sam's indecisiveness to continue with his own thought process. "This isn't like some game of chess, Sam," he ascertained. "There aren't any pawns left to sacrifice. The Queen is dead, the King is awol, and there's just us, the friggin' princes of the universe, Sammy. And I don't know the rules to this game. I don't know how to play. I don't know if we should anymore."

Sam's entire body felt heavy, defeated, and he didn't have an ounce of desire left to confront his brother. Besides, Dean didn't need to be confronted. He needed to be consoled. So, Sam slid around next to his brother's knees and turned his back against the bed, slouching down contemplatively, legs sprawled out in front of him like the tangled limbs of a newborn foal.

"We're already playing, big brother, by whatever right, be it birth or because we were chosen for some reason," he sighed, head lolling back onto the bed as he gazed at the ceiling. "We're in the game, and if we don't play, someone else is going to make the rules. Then we're gonna end up forfeiting a whole lot more than a couple of decades worth of lost time."

He breathed in and out decisively, reaching some sort of conclusion in his mind to which Dean wasn't privy. "Maybe the demon does want me. Maybe he has some plan for me. And yeah, I wanna know what it is, but that doesn't mean I'm sacrificing myself," he surmised. "I'd like to think that, whenever that demon catches up with me, or I catch up with it, it's going to have the two of us to deal with, and it won't have a contingency plan for that."

He let his head roll toward Dean, and looked up at his brother's hunched form as Dean looked down at him. "Look," he said, rolling sideways and bracing an arm against the bed frame. "I can't make you do this. And I wouldn't want to. You once let me go my own way and told me you wanted me to be happy. I once told you that, when all this was over, you'd have to let me go again. So, I'll understand if you want to cut your losses and let me go now."

Dean shook his head and looked away.

Sam pulled his knees up beneath him and placed his right hand on his brother's bicep. "I'm just letting you know. . . Dean, I have to find this demon. I have to know what it wants, why it picked us, and, if I have to, I'll go after it alone. But I'd be lying if I told I'd be happy doing it. Not on my own."

Dean laughed, his entire countenance melting to abject amusement, as his head slumped between his shoulders and shook slowly back and forth. "You say that like I have a choice, Sam. Like saying that I can go my way somehow gives me the power to do it."

Sam sat back, a look of confusion crinkling his features.

Dean looked in his direction, his head still tilted downward. "You can tell me 'til you're blue in the face that you don't need me to protect you; that you can take care of yourself and make your own decisions. But I don't know how to stop being your big

brother, Sam. . . . As your brother, there's no way in hell I could ever let you face this thing alone."

"So, no," Dean sighed, his eyebrows raised thoughtfully, "I don't have a choice in this. I don't have a way to go. Telling me I can only reminds me that I can't. Where you go, I go. And I 'm just saying that I don't like where we're going."

Sam leaned in slightly, mimicking his brother's lopsided, conflicted, smile. "And I have to go there, after the demon."

"You don't have to," Dean argued plaintively. "Let Dad handle the demon," he suggested. "You and I make a good team. We could do a lot of good taking out everything else." He leaned down closer to Sam's soulful eyes. "We don't have to go after the demon."

"I need to," Sam returned, unflinching in his intensity. "Dean, . . . I have to do this."

And Dean could never deny his baby brother anything. He swallowed again, took a deep breath, and nodded decisively. "If that's the way it has to be," he conceded.

Sam grinned broadly, his grip tightening on his brother's bicep, mimicking the hug he knew Dean would never allow. "It's the way I want it to be."

Dean looked at the floor contemplatively for several long seconds. He could feel the apprehension rising in his brother, but he was too tired to address it with words. Instead, he reached over to the bedside table, palmed the pills Sam had left there earlier, and swallowed them without hesitation. Taking a swallow from the glass and placing it back on the table, he sighed. "Go to sleep, Sam. We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

And Sam didn't ask what work Dean was referring to. The fact that his brother was looking ahead for the first time in weeks was enough reassurance for him. Still, as his head settled back into his pillow, he waited silently for Dean's breathing to even out as the much-needed sleep overtook his broken body. Dean might hate chick flick moments, but Sam knew his brother would breathe much easier with all that extra weight off his chest. Sam would too.

Three Weeks Later. . .

Nothing compared to the blinding shine that radiated from the midnight black classic. The three coats of wax Sam had applied proved their worth against the sun's glare, and the young man couldn't help but beam proudly at the finished product. For the first time, Sam felt the same pride and love for the Impala that Dean exuded every time he approached it. The ideal machine was no longer just a loud, growling clunker, but a piece of art. It truly was a beautiful, captivating in its own right.

It had been worth it. The crash, the breakdown, the painful recovery, all of it had been worthwhile, and never had the dividends of their invested blood, sweat, and tears been as apparent as when Dean had applied the finishing touches to the car. Sam was a bit startled, though, when his brother had delayed the big reveal, stating that there was something special, important, that he needed to add. And it was a secret.

Sam didn't do secrets. At least, not the part that involved knowing someone else had a secret they weren't sharing. It had taken a good bit of persuading on Dean's part to get his overly curious baby brother to stay put in the house while he finished. Luckily, Dean had been able to rope Bobby into playing babysitter-slash-bouncer.

On the plus side of being the homebound prisoner, Sam got the chance to call Zack again, although he only reached the voice message. Again. That made like ten times in the last three days, and they couldn't delay their departure any longer. He couldn't help the look of disappointment that graced his features despite every good thing that the past month had given them. With slow, thoughtful intensity Sam set about gathering the rest of their packed stuff and dropping it down in the living room. At least that was one less thing they'd have to take care of before they could set off. And he was more than ready to leave.

"Easy there, boy," Bobby laughed, following behind Sam's thudding steps when the young man flew towards the door upon catching sight of Dean maneuvering out of the car.

"So?" Sam exclaimed excitedly, shifting from foot to foot on the porch.

"Well, I may need a couple more hours, 'cause I think something's still off." Dean breathed, his tone feigning exasperation, but his eyes alight with playfulness.

"Dean," Sam warned, taking a step towards his brother.

"Hey, now, Sammy, don't get your panties in a knot, ok? Let's get the bags in the trunk and--" A sharp ringing resounded from his pants pocket, and Dean riffled through it, pulled out the phone, and stared at the caller ID. There was no mistaking the guarded way that he peered at Sam as he said, "It's Dad."

Sam stopped his shifting and twisted his face pensively, "You got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," Dean replied lightly. His voice was void of the trembling fear it had once held at the sound of their father's name, but Sam thought he still detected a small tremble in his finger tips as he flipped the phone open. It was a moment of truth for them all, and Dean started to head over to the side of the house, anxious to escape his brother's prying eyes.

"Don't let Sam near the car until I say so," he added distractedly as he disappeared around the corner.

"Got it," Bobby nodded sharply, setting a firm hand on the younger brother's shoulder.

"I worked just as hard on that car as he did," Sam whined unconvincingly, his interest no longer held by the car and its secret. He humored Bobby by pretending to be on the verge of bolting for the door, but his eyes kept darting toward the side of the house, his mind consumed with concern for his brother.

"I know," Bobby appeased, a smile on his face, "But it's a surprise, and I've been on the bad side of the Winchesters before. I ain't aiming for a repeat performance."

"Fine." Sam muttered, resting against the porch railing. After a couple minutes of uncomfortable silence, Sam sighed and focused on his more than gracious host, "Bobby...uh, I just wanted to say thanks. You know for everything."

"Not a problem," the older hunter replied, looking at the ground humbly. "Like I said, anything for John's boys."

Before either man could be overwhelmed by the very unmanly display of emotion that threatened, another succession of rings, this time from inside the house, pierced the air. Bobby shot him an irritated look and rolled his eyes before retreating to answer the phone, all the while thinking that 'saved by the bell' was not such a bad cliché after all.

Sam let out a deep breath, and turned to rest his elbows against the chipping railing. He let his eyes drift to the far corner of the house and willed Dean to come into view. If his brother could cross this one last obstacle, then Sam felt sure they'd be okay.

"Hey, college boy, look alive." Sam jumped at the sound of Dean's voice and barely had time to catch the flying projectile that almost collided with his head. Sam glanced down at the phone tentatively, struggling to grasp why his brother would launch it at him. Oh yeah, Dean was his brother. "Don't lose that, Francis."

Dean cleared his throat and ducked his head to his shoulder, as he stooped to pick up his bags, but not before Sam glimpsed the flush of emotion that colored his brother's cheeks.

"What are you doing?" Sam gasped, watching as Dean gripped the strap of his pack and hoisted it up with a grunt. "Let me do that."

Dean balanced the bag over one shoulder and fiddled with the keys. "I can handle it."

"I know," Sam mumbled in concession, grabbing his own bag off the porch, "Just habit, I guess."

"Yeah, one you need to break," Dean reprimanded, trying to force humor into a voice that was being overpowered by some other emotion that he was less comfortable expressing.

"So, uh," Sam stammered, "what'd Dad have to say?" He feigned nonchalance by craning his neck and peering into the passenger window for a small glimpse of whatever Dean had been working on, hoping his brother would appreciate his valiant effort not to pry.

"Merry Christmas."

"Huh?"

"That's what Dad had to say," Dean clarified, a sad smile replacing his indifferent smirk, as he went around to the driver's side.

The winter they'd recognized. The rainstorms that pummeled the area in December had been easily predicted. Yet, somehow, they'd completely forgotten that winter and rain also signaled the arrival of Christmas. How the hell had that happened?

The shocked, contemplative silence that enveloped them was broken seconds later.

"You boys ain't about to leave without a goodbye, huh?" Bobby asked, surveying the scene before him. His face bore a twinge of sadness that Sam immediately picked up on.

"What's wrong?" Dread was apparent on both brothers' faces, though Sam was the first to dare speak it.

"The phone call was from Joshua. Zack's been missing for a few days now, hasn't called for the usual check-ins." Bobby paused and studied the tense lines creasing Sam's forehead for a bit before continuing, "When they went to the house, they couldn't find him."

"Maybe 'cause he's on his way here," Sam offered hopefully, though his face was clearly weighted with something that suspiciously resembled guilt.

Dean leaned back against his car and crossed his arms over his chest, watching Bobby's eyes soften at Sam's explanation, "I don't think so, son. They...there was blood along the floor and surrounding the outside."

Sam swallowed slowly. The information sunk into his consciousness gradually, as the quicksand of blame and burden swirled around him. He'd been the one to call Zack. The man had been helping *him* get the answers *he* needed. If anything happened to Zack, how could it not be Sam's fault? How was it not the same as Mom, Jess, Pastor Jim, and Caleb. . . Dean. . .almost, God, Dean? "Oh," was all he managed to choke out around the constriction in his throat.

Dean took one look at the oh-so-familiar pallor of self-recrimination that painted over his brother's formerly smiling face and cursed silently to himself. He pushed off of the car and stepped to Sam's side, clapping him on the shoulder.

"What do we need a demon expert for anyway?" He laughed, as was his chosen method of consolation. No way in hell was he gonna let his baby brother go all broody on Christmas, not even if the situation warranted it. "I got me a trusty geek boy sidekick," he suggested, tightening his hand on the back of Sam's neck and shaking him lightly. "He went to Stanford and everything. All that book learnin's gotta be worth somethin'," he teased half-heartedly.

Sam dismissed the quip with a grin, "Yeah, somethin'," he agreed. He thought about but decided against including the fact that the heading of 'something' might possibly encompass attracting the demon in the first place. Instead, he sighed heavily, resolving to look into Zack's disappearance as soon as they managed to wade out of the mire that nearly two months of being out of commission had made of their lives.

Sam shrugged off Dean's hand and followed his brother's lead in telling Bobby goodbye, then turned and headed back to the car.

Upon entering, a shiny new addition to the dash caught Sam's eye and his face morphed into one of shock and extreme excitement. Presents had a way of snapping any kid out of their woe-is-me doldrums. Sam was no exception, especially on Christmas. Yup, he'd always be the baby brother where Dean was concerned.

"Dude, you got a CD player. All right!" He gaped, his disappointment at not finding the answers he so desperately needed forgotten in an instant. "Just please tell me you got some decent music to play in it," Sam rambled, twisting around in his seat and searching for something remotely resembling a CD case.

"Well, let's call it a gesture commemorating our new partnership," he smiled, pleased with his brother's change in attitude. "And what would be the point of installing a state of the art sound system without great music?" Dean stated smugly, his choice already secured in place. With a flick of the wrist, Dean switched on the stereo and sat back contently in the driver's seat as "Princes of the Universe," by Queen blared out of the speakers.

Seeing Sam put his face in his hands and shake it mournfully, Dean reached over and smacked the back of his head for the second time in all of about thirty minutes. "Hey!"

Big brother's hand lingered in Sam's long locks, and for a second Sam began to think that maybe Dean would go for one of those one-armed, head to shoulder hugs, which would be so un-Dean; either that or give him a noogie. Sam readied himself to deflect either gesture but noticed Dean pulling at his hair with a grimace.

"Dude, you really need a haircut," Dean informed him seriously, "We can stop at the Cost Cutters in town," he suggested, wiggling his eyebrows. "There's this cute little shampoo girl named Carlie . . ."

Sam smacked Dean's hand away and half-teased, "Well, it looks like you've got most of your range of motion back in your arms. Those yoga stretches I suggested must really work after all," he pointed out, gesturing toward Dean's raised arm.

"I have *not* been doing *yoga*, Sam." Dean argued, turning the volume up a little louder. He really didn't want to start that discussion.

"Whatever you say, Dean." Sam assuaged cockily.

A snarky grin worked its way onto Dean's face. "Although, those wind relieving poses might come in handy before too long..." He looked at Sam's questioning smirk with a sideways tilt to his head. "I'm just saying. . . Bobby's cooking being what it is. . ."

The Impala rumbled to a start, and all Sam could do was laugh as Dean pulled the car out. "Oh God, just tell me we remembered to fix the window mechanisms so that we can at least get some air in here."

"Damn, I knew we were forgetting something." Dean muttered, slamming his palm against the steering wheel for good measure.

Sam looked less than bleakly amused and flashed Dean a 'god, no' look. "Hey, don't look at me. You're the one who ran the car into a tree in the first place, remember?"

"You're never gonna let that go." Sam shook his head sullenly, a hint of a smile on his lips. He could deal with the torment of Dean's ribbing, because that was normal. And after all they'd been through, normal was warmly welcomed.

The End