

Sins of the Father Episode Twenty

Sam jerked his head back as another tightly wadded paper missile connected with the side of his face, letting a steady exhale from his nose be his only response to his brother's childish behavior. Little brother had learned a long time ago that no reaction usually worked in his favor, but ignoring Dean was a feat of mammoth proportions, especially when big brother was bored out of his mind.

They had been cramped up in the same dirty motel room for the past week after their last hunt had left them worse for wear, and the cabin fever had set in after the first two days. Sam had found more productive uses of his time by scouring the internet for anything remotely resembling a potential hunt, but the quest was to no avail. There was absolutely nothing that needed killing, banishing, or saving this week as far as he could tell.

Soon, his search had taken him across the world web and into a gaming site where those damn numbered boxes had now perplexed him for the past four days. Easy levels were for amateurs and he'd gone to Stanford: seriously how hard could the Expert level be?

Dean, on the other hand, had taken to collecting up the mass amount of burger and convenience store wrappers littering the room, ripping them and rolling them into perfect bullets, the discarded straws scattered around meeting the standard air rifle criteria for paper wads and spitballs, serving its purpose to stellar effect.

Sam's palm connected with the wooden tabletop, the fierce contact creating a painful, burning sensation which automatically traveled its way up his arm as another launched annoyance tactic slapped into his jaw, its spit-laden cover sticking to the protruding, clenched bone. The younger brother lifted his stinging hand amidst his brother's uproarious laughter and slowly swiped the damp paper off his face with a grimace.

"Can't you watch TV?" Sam suggested tersely, turning towards his brother, desperation for Dean to take him up on the idea more than evident in his weary expression.

Dean shrugged his shoulders and swatted his fingers through his rolled arsenal. "Nope, don't want to, and even if I did, there's nothing on."

"Why don't you look?" Sam grit out and fixed a pointed glare at Dean. "There's got to be something."

"Yea, for dirty old men and chicks," Dean stated, loading another paper wad into his McDonald's-provided launcher, "And unlike someone who shall remain nameless, I don't have to watch porn, because I actually get action."

"It doesn't count if you pay for it," Sam quipped, a smirk on his lips as he turned back to the computer screen, groaning as he realized he'd placed the same number twice in one box.

"Oh, to those girls, Sammy, I'm worth every penny," Dean bragged and taking a deep inhale placed his lips on the end of his firing straw and exhaled, propelling another wad directly into his brother's temple.

Sam whirled around in the chair, his face beet red as he worked to quell the desire to lunge out of the chair and place his hands around his brother's neck. Composure semi-reached, the younger brother cleared his throat and offered a smug reply. "Is that what they pay you with? No wonder we're broke."

"Hey!" Dean exclaimed loudly, mocking offence. "Mick Jones made a sizeable donation to the Winchester Credit Fund last month. According to Visa, we still got around two thousand dollars."

Sam shook his head in disbelief, stifling a laugh at Dean's expense. "One of these days, someone's gonna catch on to that naming scheme you got there."

"Nothing like the classics," Dean replied reverently, reloading the straw and preparing to fire.

"Don't," Sam ordered, hand outstretched in a warning for Dean to stop when he caught sight of his brother's move to shoot. "I mean it."

"What you gonna do, Sasquatch?" Dean taunted, eyes lit with mischief. "Look down at me?"

"I'm gonna kick your ass," Sam threatened, rising from his chair and standing at full height. The promise held no value to Dean and the older brother fired at will, sending the small paper bullet sailing into Sam's chest. "Alright, that's it."

Dean was off the ratted comforter before Sam's hastened footsteps brought him to it, and the older brother quickly leaped off the bed, scrambling over Sam's, narrowly avoiding the long arm swinging out at him. The younger brother wasn't deterred by his premature miss, and quickly recovered, grabbing a good bit of Dean's jeans around the older man's ankle and jerking him onto his stomach across the bed.

A resounding knock at the door prevented Sam from acting off his current advantage as both brothers fell instantly still in waiting. The sound repeated itself and Dean turned his head back to meet Sam's questioning stare.

"I know you're in there," a deep voice groused from behind the door. "Your stupid car is the only one in the lot that's been double parked for the past week."

Sam rolled his eyes and gave his brother an annoyed look. Dean shrugged sheepishly, "Hick town, Sammy. Don't want any of those trucks dinging my baby."

"C'mon, I ain't got all day," their visitor yelled gruffly, resorting to banging on the door incessantly until he got an answer.

Sam and Dean exchanged irritated glances and Dean cocked his head toward the door. "You're closer."

"And you're an ass," Sam retorted, releasing his hold on his brother's pants.

Dean smirked, taking pleasure in his win. "But a cute ass."

The dark-haired brother groaned at the comment and turned toward the door. "Alright, alright, I'm coming. Give me a second."

No sooner had the knocking stopped than Sam cracked open the room door, the sliver of exposed daylight revealing a scruffy bearded elderly man clothed in a dirty wife-beater and wrinkled dress pants. Sam instantly recognized him as the motel manager and knowing this guy wouldn't even pose a threat if he tried, opened the door wider.

"How the hell didn't you hear me? I been banging on the damn door for--" the man snapped angrily, his head poking around Sam, breath catching when he saw Dean's prostrate form on the bed, a purposefully lewd grin on the older brother's face. "Oh. Well, uh...I can come back."

"No, it's not like that. He's my brother," Sam protested, face flushed at the insinuation. He gave his brother a 'please, just this once help me out here' look before turning back to the manager. "We were just messing around."

Dean didn't even attempt to smother his loud guffaw and the manager nodded shortly, "Right. Sure."

Sam let out a calming breath, seeking control over the situation, and cleared his throat to recapture their visitor's attention. "You knocked because?"

"Yeah," the old man replied quickly, his composure shifting from stunned to businesslike in the blink of an eye. "A man came in around ten minutes ago. Told me your room number and to give you this."

Sam waited for the manager to retrieve the 'this' to which he was referring, and surprise coupled with confusion played across his face as the man withdrew a folded newspaper and extended it toward him. "Uh...thanks."

"Not a problem," the gray-haired man returned hastily. "Let me know if you're staying another night."

"Oh we will," Dean called out from the bed, loud laughter following his statement as Sam turned apologetically to the manager, but the sympathetic look was to the

retreating man's back. The younger brother really couldn't blame him for wanting to quickly escape the situation. Hell, he wanted to join him.

Sam tucked the paper under his arm and shut the door, before stalking over to the bed and hitting his brother's foot. "You're a jerk."

"I thought you said I was an ass," Dean retorted, interlocking his hands under his head.

"Some days, man, I swear," Sam muttered, settling in on the opposite bed and unfolding the paper. "Huh..."

"Is that an 'I'm confused' huh or a 'wow, that's interesting' huh?" Dean questioned, raising himself to a sit as he studied Sam's form hunched over the newspaper.

"More like how the hell did someone know we are here, and why," Sam laid the paper out on the bed, tapping his finger against the print, "is that circled?"

Dean leaned over, tilting his head to get a better view of what Sam was talking about. Sure enough, a small article, barely noticeable, was circled in blank ink. The older brother scanned the article quickly, a grin on his face as he realized this was just their kind of thing. "A series of beatings?"

"This is weird," Sam breathed, rereading the article, his eyes locked on the names of the past victims.

"Sure, it's weird." Dean returned cockily. "How many pissed off biker dudes can there be in one Midwest state?"

Sam scratched his head, his face pensive. "The supernatural part would be the whole 'it happens on the same property', Dean. This whole thing is weird. What's the significance of this case? I mean, I haven't been able to find anything the last week. Why does this show up today? And from the manager of this crappy place no less, all because some stranger gave it to him?"

"I bet you were that kid in class who made the damn thing run late every time with all your questions," Dean joked, nudging his brother's arm before snatching the paper off the bed. "There's your answer," he stated, closing the paper and tapping the title. "You really think something called the Haroldian Gazette is a massive publishing? My bet is its local, as in you got to live in the town to even know it exists."

"Then how'd it get here?" Sam questioned, rubbing a hand across his face. "The town's in Iowa. We're in Virginia."

"I don't know," Dean replied honestly, setting the paper down. "But I think we should check it out all the same."

"Why?" Sam asked in baffled irritation. "For all we know it could be a trap, and don't you think we have been caught in enough of those?"

"Or one of Dad's contacts doing a favor for the man," Dean offered with a shrug, "He hasn't called in a while."

"Maybe," Sam conceded, dropping his hands in his lap and popping his knuckles idly. "Okay, at least we won't be cooped up in here."

"Ain't that the truth," Dean muttered, lifting his head and raising his eyebrows at Sam.

Sam's brow furrowed at his brother's glance. "What?"

"Nothing," the sandy-haired brother replied, "I was just thinking that you should probably go tell the nice man that we won't be staying the night."

"Oh hell no," Sam protested vehemently. "If anyone should, you should."

"Why me?" Dean gaped, hand splayed against his chest.

"Because you're the one who...you know what? I think our not being here is going to give it away," Sam reasoned, sliding off the bed and grabbing his duffel.

Dean copied the movement, shuffling over to his own bed and retrieving his bag. "That's a little rude, don't you think, Romeo? The man's been so tolerant."

"Dean," Sam warned tightly, not amused at all by Dean's bad idea of humor. "You'd better stop or you're going to regret it."

"Ha, bring it on, Sammy," Dean challenged, cramming his less than clean clothes into the bag.

This day was getting more interesting by the second.

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Dean's knuckles were whiter than any albino's skin as his fingers wrapped tighter around his baby's steering wheel. Why big brother had so easily forgotten that little brothers were known for their ability to annoy with their stellar ability he didn't know. But for the last three hours, Dean had heard every anecdote Sam could dredge up from their twisted life stories and just when it would seem that the dark-haired man had run out of new topics to ramble about, he would go off on another tangent without even pausing to breathe.

With another twelve hours to go, Dean seriously regretted that he hadn't just opted for another prank war instead of good ole' brotherly annoyance; and that he hadn't picked up a pack of sleeping pills at the last gas station.

"And then that thing got you right in the ass. You remember that?" Sam asked, clearly rhetorically because Dean didn't even get a chance to answer before the younger brother plowed on. "Man, I think even Dad was laughing at you. He told Caleb that story at the cabin in we stayed at in Tennessee that one summer. That was a cool place--"

"Sam!" Dean interjected loudly, swallowing back the overflowing exasperation and waning patience. "I know. I was there, remember?"

"It's not nice to interrupt when people are talking, Dean," Sam chided, a smug smirk on his face. "Now, where was I? Right, the cabin."

Dean dropped his head in defeat, his teeth grit painfully against the onslaught of another venture down memory lane. A few well-aimed spitballs didn't deserve this kind of torment, of that he was sure. His desperate hazel found solace in the quiet music console and wordlessly Dean stretched out a hand to connect with that blessed button that would issue a flood of screaming metal over his brother's continuous prattle.

A triumphant grin spread across the older brother's face as his fingers graced the deck, only to become a window on a crushed spirit as Sam knocked his hand away, ejecting the beloved music quickly and tossing it in the back seat. "You're not getting off that easy."

"C'mon, man, this is ridiculous," Dean whined, hands twisting on the steering wheel. "I mean, I shot those things at you for like ten minutes."

"Fine, Dean," Sam complied far too easily. "I'll stop rehashing family memories."

Dean gave his brother a wary glance but nodded. "Thank you."

"Can I drive?"

"What?"

"You heard me," Sam replied, crossing his arms, "Pull over."

"No," Dean objected, and pressed his foot down on the gas pedal just for spite.

Sam heaved a sigh and tapped his brother's shoulder. "Let me drive."

"Get your hand off me, Sam," Dean warned, his eyes drifting to the offending appendage draped on his shoulder.

"What's the matter, Dean?" Sam questioned innocently, although far from innocent in his refusal to remove his hand. "Does that bother you?"

"Dammit, Sam!" Dean cursed, pulling the car off onto the shoulder and grabbing his brother's wrist in a death grip. "If, and I mean, IF, you drive, you don't talk or touch me for the rest of this damn trip, you hear me? Calling big brother law here, the game is off until we reach Iowa and I get my chance to get your ass back. You got me?"

Sam scoffed, but nodded in agreement all the same because all signs told him he'd won this round. "Deal."

“Good, now get out so I can slide over,” Dean ordered and Sam complied quickly, circling around the car and sinking into the driver’s seat within seconds.

Dean reached over the bench seat and retrieved his music stash from the back, carefully bringing the old battered box to rest on his lap. True to his word, Sam stayed silent as Dean selected a tape and popped it in the deck. Sinking back into the seat, Dean shut his eyes and let the lead in riff soothe his frazzled nerves.

His bliss was cut short when a deafening click resounded through the car and Dean’s eyes flew open when the radio announced some band named The Killers and Sam started singing along.

If he hadn’t wanted to kill Sam two minutes ago, Dean sure as hell wanted to now, especially when Sam gave him a smug look and threw his big brother’s words right back at him.

“Driver picks the music, shotgun shuts his cakehole.”

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Haroldian turned out to be the smallest damn town either brother had ever stepped foot in. The painted sign welcoming visitors bore the number four hundred and twenty five, and Dean wondered if just because they were here, some townie would run out and tack the total up two more.

Sam seemed to be pleased with the Victorian style town as he eased the Impala down the street. Not that something like that startled Dean in the least. The town reeked normal, sheltered existence and came complete with a literal Main Street hosting a diner, post office and corner store.

Dean rolled his eyes at the suburban dream and turned his attention back the paper in his lap. “Okay, so these attacks started in the summer and have become more frequent now. So what? Some kind of creature? A werewolf, that kind of thing?”

“Do the words ‘lunar’ and ‘cycle’ mean anything to you?” Sam asked pointedly, scrunching his forehead in thought.

“I don’t know. Do the words ‘jack’ and ‘ass’ mean anything to you?” Dean returned, and Sam comforted himself in the fact that he was pretty sure that was meant as a joke.

“Well, I was just saying werewolf doesn’t fit.” Sam clarified, clearing his throat, “And we crossed the town line. So the game is afoot, Watson.”

Dean’s eyes widened and he laughed openly. “What?”

“Sherlock Holmes,” Sam informed, shaking his head. “Never mind. Its on, bro.”

“To your terror,” Dean quipped, straightening in the seat.

“You wish,” Sam laughed, pulling off the main street and following the signs to the town’s hotel.

Both brothers gaped in something akin to horror when they saw their only choice for accommodations for the week. Sally’s Bed and Breakfast Inn was the picture of frills and lace with a touch of a passionate love for gardening. Dean nearly retched at the sight of it all, and Sam smirked at his discomfort before exiting the car.

“Great, we’re staying at the Betty Crocker Inn,” Dean griped, grabbing his bag out of the trunk and shouldering it.

“Beats the Roach Motel,” Sam replied to his brother’s back, silently grinning at what had to be a shoe-in at bettering his chances at getting on Dean’s nerves. Dean always trumped him in pranks. This was his area of expertise and if he weighed out the times their father had to break them up from this versus prank wars, he’d be hard-pressed to find a winner.

The inside of the quaint establishment was no disappointment. Lace decorated every patch of wood, the patterns covered with figurines ranging from frogs to painted people. Dean picked up a glass dolphin jumping a wave and scoffed, showing it to Sam who merely rolled his eyes at his brother’s lack of attention span.

“You like that?”

The sweet voice nearly shocked Dean out of his skin, and the figurine dropped out of his hands as a woman appeared at his side. For an elderly lady, she was quick and she easily saved the precious figurine from meeting a shattering end.

"Grandchildren. Helps you stay alert," she explained lightly, her voice carrying a bouncing quality Dean found grating. No one was ever that happy. "I'm Anna. I own this place with my sister Sally. You gentlemen need a room?"

"Yes, that'd be great," Sam answered respectfully as Anna circled behind the desk, retrieving a reservation book.

"Just need you to sign here and then pay. It's forty-five a night and breakfast starts at six thirty every morning. Runs 'til eight," the woman informed them, her eyes lingering on Dean as the older boy hovered over her precious trove of porcelain.

"Credit okay?" Sam asked, snapping the woman out of her staring and back to him.

"Yes, that'd be fine," Anna answered, looking down at the ledger. "You only want one room? They're all singles with queen beds."

Sam opened his mouth to reply but Dean seized the opportunity first. "Well, ma'am you see, Sammy, he has some problems and it's just easier for me to keep an eye on him if we're together. Can I bother you for some spare sheets, just in case? I wouldn't want to inconvenience you."

The dark-haired Winchester's mouth dropped open in shock. "Spare-?"

"Don't be embarrassed, Sammy," Dean stated sweetly, patting his brother's shoulder, and turning his attention to Anna, his voice lowered to a whisper. "He hasn't been the same since the accident. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, sweetie," Anna replied, handing the key to Dean on top of a pile of sheets, then the credit card to Sam, a warm smile on her face. "I think you'll like it here."

"Oh, I think so too," Dean said, giving the woman a killer smile before turning back to Sam. "Alright, bro, lets get you to the room."

Sam picked up his bag and trudged after his brother, waiting until he was completely out of Anna's eye and ear shot before kicking the back of Dean's shin and using the older man's stumble to his advantage as he turned Dean around to face him. "Problems, Dean? Problems?"

"Looks like little Sammy doesn't like the game anymore," Dean shot back, entering their room and grimacing at just how small the bed really was. Not that it mattered. Sam was sleeping on the floor anyway. "Or maybe he just needs his nap."

"Shut up," Sam spat out, letting his bag drop to the floor when he realized there was no way Dean was letting him have the bed. "I'm hungry."

"Yeah, me too." Dean stated, his stomach growling in agreement. "You saw that diner right?"

"Yeah, it's about a block away," Sam answered pitifully. He so was getting Dean back for that little display downstairs.

"Great, let's go."

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Freddie's Family Diner was just as quaint as the Inn, and just as empty. Only a few patrons littered the small establishment and the brothers gave them each the once over, but only one caught and locked their attention.

A dark-haired man sat in the farthest booth, his leather jacket wrapped tightly around his plaid shirt. He stared hard at the brothers, and his dark eyes and warm smile as their gazes met nearly cut off the boys' air supply.

Dean found his shaking voice first, the word he uttered full of disbelief but brimming with hope.

"Dad?"

A smirk crossed John Winchester's face as the father rose from his seat, eyeing his stunned boys. Dean gaped, clearly in disbelief but relief evident in his expression. That didn't surprise John at all: Dean usually was happy to see him. After Mary had died, Dean had clung to him, and Sam had clung to Dean, which explained the less than thrilled, near skeptical look Sam's face held.

That boy could be sensitive when it came to emotional scars his older brother bore, and seeing as Sam usually blamed John for most of them that had created a rift. Add in the fact that he had just left them months back without so much as a good bye to the mix and John wasn't sure where to tread with his youngest some days.

"Y'all gonna stand there all day, or come tell your old man hi?" John's whiskey deep voice echoed through the small diner, landing on the Winchester sons who might as well have been statues as the father's question stirred neither one of them to react. "I don't look that old, do I? Tell me you can still recognize this face through all the gray?"

The joke proved its worth and a laugh punctuated the air as Dean started down the narrow aisle toward the back table. "Well, Sam uses *Just for Men*. You might want to try that one."

Sam scoffed as his long legs conquered the tile behind Dean. He watched in silence as the son and father embraced fiercely and waited until Dean sunk down in the booth, before hugging his father and then proceeding to rub Dean's hair playfully, "It smells better than the Rogaine you use."

John barked a laugh, settling down across from his sons and motioning for the waitress to bring coffee and lots of it. "So I take it you two are getting along as usual?"

"When Dean acts his age," Sam quipped, giving his brother's shin a loving kick under the table.

The father's eyes sparkled in amusement and he seized the opportunity Sam had given him. Yeah, their relationship was alright. "So, almost never then."

"HEY!" Dean interjected through his family's laughter, turning a glare that would make Satan cower to Sam then his father and back to Sam.

"No need to get upset, son," John patronized, nodding to the waitress's confused look as she studied the family and dropped off the coffee.

Dean gave the lady a winning come-hither smile, although the sound of John overly clearing his throat brought his focus back to the issue at hand. Making Sam pay for the little remark. "Besides, Sam's the one that put up a personal ad. He got lots of phone calls too. I tell ya, dad. I don't know what I'm gonna do with him."

Sam's face adopted a fish out of water expression, his eyes blown wide. He seemed to remember that the ad was Dean's idea of payback after their last little prank war, not his own search for love. His father's patient, questioning glance wasn't helping either. "Dean put that in! He was trying to get me back!"

John raised his hands in mock surrender. "Now, Sammy, I know every man has needs, but we're not gonna have to go through another one of those 'talks' are we?"

Sam's jaw looked like it had come positively unhinged and Dean's loud guffaw had all two other people in the small diner twisting in their seats to stare menacingly at the three Winchester men. The older son ducked down a bit in the seat, shifting his eyes toward Sam. "See, you got us in trouble. Way to go college boy."

"Shut up," the dark-haired brother clipped, sulking in his seat. "Don't we have anything business related to talk about?"

"Very true there, son," John answered, reaching a hand under the table and bringing a fraying manila folder filled to the max with loose papers from the bench seat into view and letting it fall to the table with a thud. "The Tucker house, everything you'd ever want to know and nothing that helps us."

Dean pulled the file toward him, flipping it open and staring at the top article, a picture of an old dilapidated house filling the first page. "Then that paper—you sent that right?"

"Yeah," John drawled lazily, rubbing his stubble-laden jaw.

Sam shifted in the seat, tilting his head to peer over Dean's shoulder only to have his older brother smirk at him and bow his body further over the folder, effectively shutting down Sam's rubbernecking. Sighing in irritation, Sam locked eyes with his father. "Why didn't you just call?"

John cleared his throat. He wasn't stupid, and knew without a doubt that question was in reference to the weeks, not just the hotel. "I lost my phone."

"Really," Sam stated in a monotone, and Dean visibly bristled.

"What happened?" the older brother questioned, his eyes still scanning the pages sprawled out before him.

"Poltergeist threw me up against a wall," John replied with a chuckle, hand unconsciously moving to his neck as if rubbing a sore spot. Both boys' heads jerked upward in concern, but the father waved them off. "Note to the wise, never put your phone in your back pocket."

Dean scoffed and Sam returned the sentiment, although raising his eyebrows curiously as his father sipped his coffee. "Was there a payphone in your pocket too?"

John semi-choked on the hot brew, recovering quickly under Dean's amused glance and Sam's expectant one. "No, uh...I'm sorry I didn't call, Sammy. I know I said I would," the father apologized softly, taking the brothers aback a bit, but his tone quickly turned back to the military one they held so dear. "But there are a lot of things going down now, and I've been tied up which is why I had Nathan get you guys up here."

"So what do you think is going on?" Dean questioned slowly, his gaze scrutinizing as he held up a piece of paper for his father to study. "Beatings? That seems more--"

"Human? Yeah." John stated with a sigh, snatching the paper from Dean. "Cept they were more like bashings. Insides turned to mush, like they got hit by a truck."

"We read the article. Ten people so far?" Sam asked curiously, resting his elbows on the mica table top and yanking the folder out from under Dean with a smug smile when the older man leaned forward, ignoring the silently mouthed comment from his brother's lips.

John nodded, placing the paper down on the table and tapping his finger on the picture over the upper level of the house. "Supposedly, the locals have a legend about what happened up there, but I interviewed a few people and got nothing."

"But the attacks were in the back forest right?" Sam clarified, his brow scrunched in thought as he read through the mass of papers.

"Well, four of them," Dean chimed in, reaching over and pulling out a page he'd scanned earlier. "Two were in the house, and the others were in or around the porch."

"What?" Sam slammed his hand on the table, shaking his head. "Dad, this is insane."

"I know, I know," John muttered with a clench of his jaw. "Spirits have patterns and this doesn't seem to fit. But something is killing these people, boys, and I can't stay and figure it out, so who better but my sons."

"Yeah, Sam," Dean replied, taunting slightly, although his face fell when all his father's words registered. "Wait...you're not staying?"

John bowed his head, taking in a calming breath before facing his sons' questioning and anxious stares. "No."

"Unbelievable," Sam muttered, sinking down in the seat and rubbing his jaw as he mulled the situation over. "Friggen' unbelievable."

Dean shifted nervously, preparing to chide his brother into silence. "Sam--."

"No, c'mon, Dean," Sam responded angrily. "If some crazy ass case that doesn't make any sense isn't making Dad stay then something else is up and he doesn't want us in it."

The sandy-haired Winchester pondered the accusation for a second, but quickly intervened with a defense. "Sam, I don't think--"

"Is this about the demon? It is isn't it?" Sam pressed, leaning forwards, long body half over the table as he stared down his father. "What, you think you can give us some little job to entertain us?"

"Stop!" Dean ordered with a yell, placing a firm hand on his brother's shoulder and yanking Sam back into a sit on the bench before turning to John. "Dad?"

"That's not it," John replied, shaking his head. "I thought you knew me better than that. I got another case up further north. I owe this guy one. He kind of saved my ass once."

"Kind of?" Dean repeated, trying his best not to sound skeptical, and keep Sam seated at the same time.

"Job went bad. He took a good couple hits for me," John clarified, staring off at the large restaurant window and the people scattered beyond the pane. "Look, I just really need you two to handle this for me," he turned back to face his sons, his gaze locked on Sam. "And you will handle it, understood?"

Sam grit his teeth and let out a slow breath. "Fine, but Dad...this demon," he paused, head already reaching a bass drum rhythm and the events of the past few weeks rushing back. "I need to be a part of that. He's toyed with me enough. Dean too."

"I get that, Sammy," John responded softly, "Don't worry. I'll call and wait if it comes to it. But this job has nothing to do with the demon. Not in the least."

"Okay," Sam breathed, face adopting a smile as he sought to ease the tension. "So when are you heading out?"

"Yeah," Dean cut in, closing the folder. "Got time to find a seedy establishment in the wonderful city of Mayberry?"

"Sorry, son," John replied with a laugh. "As much as I would love to watch you hit on cheap woman and Sam here nurse a beer, I told my contact I'd be there by tomorrow."

Sam nodded in understanding. "It was nice to see you, Dad."

"Good to see you too," John returned with a sad smile and internally braced himself for the response to the bomb he was about to drop next. "You know it's going to be a while before I can contact you, right?"

"Have Johnny Halen buy a phone," Sam assuaged easily.

"Or get change for a dollar." Dean quipped, fighting the reestablishing tension. "It is still less than a dollar ain't it?"

John pursed his lips. "I would hope so, and it's not--"

"Yeah, Dad," Dean intervened with a reassuring smile to John's grateful one. "We get it." He rolled his head toward Sam with a smirk. "Guess it's you and me tonight, Tonto."

"Yeah," Sam sighed, taking the folder off the table and gesturing for Dean to move so he could exit the booth. Dean nodded, moving out to further his brother's escape, and John rose to a stand as well. Sam gave a small smile and met his father's eyes. "Be careful."

"Don't worry 'bout me, kiddo," John stated, reaching out a hand and ruffling Sam's hair playfully to which the boy—man—narrowed his eyes and tried to stifle the smile tugging at his lips. "Damn. Dean, your new assignment is to buzz cut that mop."

"Lucky he can still see, ain't it?" Dean teased, tilting his head as if studying the brown locks. "I'll have to do it while he sleeps though, else he might lose an ear."

Sam placed a hand protectively over his hair. "No! I like my hair thank you. You wish yours looked this good."

Dean and John burst out in laughter and Sam joined in after realizing just how lame his comeback really was. "Alright, alright, fine, laugh it up, but I'm not responsible for what I do if Dean makes any move toward me with clippers."

"I'm okay with that," John answered, grabbing his jacket off the bench.

John rubbed the back of his neck, his gaze lingering on his oldest son. Dean and Sam exchanged glances and the older brother waited for Sam to get the hint. When

the dark-haired brother's eyes widened, Dean nodded silently and Sam swiped the check off the table. "I got this. Well, Sam Jackson does anyway. Meet you at the car, Dean, and Dad, hopefully see you soon."

"Back at ya," John returned, watching his youngest son retreat to the counter before focusing his attention on Dean. "I need you to make sure you finish this job. No matter how long it takes. It's important."

"Yeah, we always do. But why this?" Dean side-stepped coyly although taking to clearing his throat when John merely issued a fatherly 'I know everything' stare.

John's stare pierced through his son, and if Dean hadn't been trained under it for so long, he would've lost his nerve. "What?"

"Why this? Why now?" Dean repeated tersely.

"I already told you," John snapped, face taking on a reddish tint as anger at being questioned took its hold.

Dean swallowed thickly, clenching his hands nervously. He had to know, he just had to. "And that's the only reason?"

John sighed, nearly kicking himself for not seeing Dean's desperation sooner. But then again he was out of practice. "Yeah, son, the only reason."

"I—okay," Dean resigned, straightening his shoulders and meeting his dad's eye line again.

"What?"

Dean shifted anxiously, "Why, uh...why a fake bullet, dad?"

"It was my call," the father replied bluntly. "And I thought it was a good one at the time."

Dean scratched the back of his head, casting a look toward Sam as the diner's bells signaled his exit. "Still think so?"

"Yeah," John answered without hesitation, patting his son's back as they moved toward the door. "Yeah, I do."

* * * *

Sam wondered if the phrase 'silent as the grave' would be adequate to describe the current state of the Impala's interior, discarding, of course, the fact that their jobs revolved around very loud and destructive graves. But with that out of the picture, it made sense. No loud metal blared from the speakers, the steady hum of the tires seemed to have faded—to Sam it was as if the car itself was dying under the silent pressure and one glance over at Dean determined that the older man looked as if he wanted to play in afternoon traffic, the sooner the better.

"So," the dark-haired brother drawled, cracking his knuckles anxiously as he was about to tread dangerous territory. "What, uh, did you and Dad talk about?"

Dean's knuckles turned stark white as tightened his grip on the wheel. "Nothing. Just told me he was serious about your Farrah Fawcett hair style."

Sam rolled his eyes, tugging idly at the flipped strands of hair behind his ears. "You know if this hunting thing ever comes to an end, you should get a job where they pay you to deflect the issue. I think it's your hidden talent, bro."

"Sam," Dean warned, tone steady and ominous. "Just because you want to talk about something doesn't mean I have to. You got that?"

"Just 'cause you don't doesn't mean you shouldn't," Sam shot back, his gaze lingering on his brother for a bit longer as the silence took hold again and the younger brother turned his head to stare dully at the passing suburbia. "We're in this together you know."

"God!" Dean exclaimed, twisting to lock eyes with his startled brother. "Is this your new idea of payback or something? You're gonna guilt trip me now?"

Sam sighed, rubbing his eyes before answering. "No, but talking to Dad, hell, seeing the man in general, has me on edge but you, dude, you look like you're about

to take something out. I thought we covered the whole 'I'm your brother, trust me to be honest' thing, so what'd he say to you?"

"Sam, just drop it," Dean stated authoritatively, although the resonating plea behind the words was not lost on the younger brother.

Sam shook his head vehemently. "No, I'm not going to just drop it, Dean. I almost...well I thought I was gonna end up killing you last time because I thought you were holding out on me. It's not happening. Spill."

Dean straightened in the seat, jaw set firm as he blatantly ignored Sam's command. Sam's eyes bugged wide at his brother's disregard and slammed his hand against the passenger door in irritation, letting out a startled and bewildered puff of air when he saw the familiar Victorian Bed and Breakfast fly by his window.

"Dean," Sam stated firmly, but big brother merely clenched his jaw, although Sam wasn't sure how much tighter he could get the bone. "DEAN!"

"What?!?"

"You passed the Bed and Breakfast," Sam clarified, his tone losing its harshness.

"That's cause we're not going back yet, Oprah," Dean replied with a smirk. "We're going to the house."

"Alright," Sam muttered, crossing his arms with a sigh. "Dean...c'mon man, what did Dad want?"

"It's not..." Dean breathed. "I don't get why he thinks he has to pull rank on me. I swear, the man could be bleeding to death and we wouldn't be able to staunch the flow 'cause he'd order us to clean the guns or something."

A smirk flicked across Sam's lips before he wisely blanked his face. "Dad has his reasons right? That's what you always say. Oh...Christ."

Dean snapped his attention to Sam. "What?"

"You asked about the bullet, didn't you?" Sam pressed, eye narrowing as he waited for Dean's nervous roll of the shoulders and shift in the driver's seat to produce an answer to his question. "Dean, I thought you were okay with th--"

"I am." Dean interjected, his voice so low Sam had to strain to hear it. "I just wanted to know if there was another reason he came back."

Sam frowned sympathetically, knowing exactly what his brother wanted from their father, hell, he wanted it to. "I don't think it's ever gonna be just for us, Dean. Not for a while anyways."

Dean blinked rapidly, swallowing visibly and shook his head. "That's not what I meant, Sammy."

"Right," Sam murmured, clearing his throat and grabbing the discarded file off the Impala floor. "So, this job is gonna be a bitch, huh?"

A small laugh from Dean brought a smile to Sam's face. "Yeah, well, they usually are. But Sam? No getting choked this time, okay?"

Sam laughed and shook his head. "Only if you don't drown."

"Deal."

* * * *

John watched his boys get into the Impala, returning Sam and Dean's goodbye wave. The tires spun out a nice cloud of dirt and dust and the father waited until the unmistakable black peeled out of the parking lot, completely leaving his view, before stalking over to his mammoth truck.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, the older hunter pulled out a battered cell phone, punching in the seven digits he'd memorized over the past few months and waiting for the signifying three rings before the ringing stopped and a deep voice came across the line.

"Yeah," John answered, scratching his chin. "Don't worry, there's nothing to postpone me anymore...Doesn't matter what it was, I took care of it...I'll be there by morning. Yeah...yeah, I know the danger."

With a heavy heart and a lingering glance over his shoulder to the tarmac his sons had cruised down moments before, John ended his call and climbed into his truck, taking solace in the fact that he was doing what he had to do. The boys would understand. They had to, there was no other choice.

"Yikes," Sam murmured as the midnight black Impala eased to a stop on the gravelly drive. It was overrun with broken branches and leaves, circling in front of the remains of the two-story Tucker house. "You'd think this place would be condemned or closed...*something*."

"Like *that* ever stops anybody," Dean commented as he reached down to grab their father's assembled notes from the floor by Sam's feet, "We should probably start on the top floor, work our way down."

Sam waited for Dean to resituate himself in the driver's seat before leaning over the front bench and grabbing their supply duffel off the back seat, grunting as he hoisted the heavy bag into his lap. "Works for me. At least we'll have gravity working with us, which is more than we usually get."

The brother's vacated the car with a slam of the creaky doors, both boys finding themselves covered in the long, dark shadow that was cast by the run-down house. Sam's attention fell almost immediately to the wrap around porch, the wood splintered, painted in chipped white, and filled with cracks that propagated into pot holes.

He shot a wary glance to his brother as he took the first step and adjusted the duffel over his shoulder, the old wood groaning in protest against the added weight. Dean chuckled, shaking his head, "You break a floorboard and no more fries for you, Sammy."

"I'm not that one whose system goes into shock when a raw veggie is eaten," Sam countered, a grimace appearing on his face as he ventured cautiously onto the deck of the porch. This was going to suck if they couldn't even get into the damned house. "If *anyone* needs to cut down on the grease, it's *you*."

"I'll have you know I'm on an All-Carb diet," Dean shot back, straightening up and patting his stomach. "It helps me maintain my girlish figure."

"While it clogs your arteries," Sam muttered with a roll of the eyes, putting up a halting hand when Dean moved to follow him onto the porch. "Wait 'til I get inside. I don't know how much of your Carbs this thing can take."

"What you trying to say?" Dean gasped jokingly, his eyes studying the wood, "We don't have time for your baby steps, princess. Besides, I think it will hold."

Sam sighed in irritation, preparing himself to take a giant, evasive stride once Dean's booted foot hit the porch. He really didn't think the construction could take it. His theory was proved when a sharp snap accompanied his stride, and the younger brother nearly toppled over from the shift of weight. "Dammit, I told you to wait!"

"I don't do 'wait', Sammy," Dean argued, now firmly planted on the top porch step, his hand waving for Sam to just get inside the damn house.

Sam shifted the duffel, carefully sidestepping the new crack in the wooden beams. "Yeah, that's cause you never understood the word 'no'."

"Well, it never really worked in my favor," Dean responded with a smirk, waiting until Sam had cracked the front door open and stepped across the threshold before clearing the distance from ledge to door in three quick steps. "Now, 'yes'—that I can hear all night long."

Sam groaned at Dean's comment, and the older brother nudged him playfully in the ribs as he pushed past the dark-haired man and into the entry way. The younger brother let his eyes roam over the bare interior lit only by the sparse sunlight that peeked from between the broken shudders, dust displacing throughout the air and settling on the floor as well as the one small desk at the end of the hallway, which was the only other thing visible from their current position.

Dean toed the dust-white floorboards, his brow furrowed in thought as he cocked his neck to look behind him then back at the floor again. "Huh."

The dark-haired brother watched in amused interest as his brother repeated the movement. "Yeah, Dean, it really is that big. Told you to eighty-six the carbs."

"Oh, shut up." Dean snapped, finger pointing at the floor, "Tell me, college boy, how can all these people have been through here in the past few months and yet, the floors still look like they haven't been walked on in ages?"

Sam's face scrunched pensively as he studied the floor, the thick layer of dust laid out before them looking as freshly fallen snow, the slats behind them uncovered and bearing the imprint of Dean's size thirteens. "Huh." *Oh yeah, **we're** eloquent today.*

"Maybe they have an in-ghost maid," Dean suggested with a short bark of laughter at his own joke, retrieving his EMF from his jacket pocket, the tiny machine whirring to life as Dean flipped it on.

"Or maybe it's residual," Sam offered, dropping the duffel to the floor and crouching down to dig through it.

"Wow, Sam, dust is residue and therefore, residual. Did you develop that startlingly crisp sense of logic in college?"

Grunting and rolling his eyes as he struggled to recapture the articles he'd read earlier from the menagerie of miscellaneous junk they somehow just couldn't function without, lips poised to clarify. "What I meant was, maybe the house wasn't lived in when whatever events caused these...whatever *baddies* these are, to kill people occurred."

"So, it was a dust farm *before* Casper took it over? And it's sorta frozen in whatever state it was in when the supernatural element moved in." Dean questioned rhetorically, nodding to himself as he mulled Sam's reasoning over. "Maybe. I mean, we know they don't like to be disturbed. If they found it this way, maybe they like it this way. No accounting for taste."

"You ready?" Sam asked over his back, checking his rifle before resting the long barrel over his shoulder and standing. "Lead the way, Atkins."

Dean rolled his eyes and began the painfully slow process of climbing the main staircase, sneezing repeatedly as each step released a cloud of dust up towards him. "God, did these people ever hear of Pledge?"

"You alright?" Sam questioned lightly from the main floor, a hint of amusement in his voice as he watched Dean swing his right arm across his face and sneeze again. "Need a Kleenex?"

"Shut up," Dean groaned pitifully, pinching the bridge of his nose before sniffing loudly and proceeding up the rest of the flight of stairs, motioning for Sam 'all clear' once he made it to the top level.

Sam hustled up the stairs, glad that he'd watched Dean tread them first so he knew exactly where to step. "So, what we got?"

"Looks like three rooms," Dean answered, leaning back to glance further down the hall. "Two to the left, one to the right."

"I'll take the right then," Sam replied, already heading down the short hallway before Dean could offer a protest.

The dark-haired brother found himself in a small and completely vacant room, no bigger than their last motel room. He entered the room carefully, his body attune to any sign of colder temperature, ears pricked for the slightest sound. Sam scanned the room for a good five minutes before resolving himself to the conclusion that there just wasn't anything there.

"Dean?" Sam yelled, poking his head out the doorway and waiting for his brother to exit whatever room he had ventured into. "You got anything?"

"Little EMF. But um...you might want to come see this," Dean's voice rang out down the barren hallway.

Sam quickly moved to follow the sound. He arrived in the room farthest from the stairs to find his brother hunched over what had to be the only piece of furniture in the entire damn house—a worn, old desk clear from any sign of the white nuisance

that covered every other inch of the place, a leather book placed smack in the middle of it.

"What is that?" the younger brother asked, stepping next to Dean and reaching out a hand toward the faded book and running his fingers over the twisted leather before cracking the cover open and revealing a series of black and white pictures glued to the crumbling yellow page. "A photo album—think these are the spirits we're hunting?"

"Maybe," Dean muttered, squinting at the neat cursive script that was scrawled below the pictures. "Par—Parce? Parce?"

"Yeah," Sam agreed, brow scrunching pensively, "But what about the Tuckers?"

Dean closed the album, removing it from the table and holding it in his arms. "I don't know. Could be a family that moved in." He tapped the top of the book. "We'll find out."

"You really think we should take that?" Sam asked gingerly, chewing his bottom lip, "I mean, if it is a residual haunting, the spirits may not want it moved."

"The spirits will have to get over it," Dean quipped, clutching the book tighter. "Besides, we're gonna toast 'em anyways."

"Good point," the younger brother commented, adjusting his rifle. "You want to cover the grounds next?"

"Nah," Dean shook his head, "I think it's gonna be a bust. We need to look over Dad's notes more. Talk to a few people. 'Cause whatever it is, it's not the Tuckers."

"Wait," Sam laughed loudly, "You, Dean Winchester, are suggesting research?"

Dean scoffed, mocking offense. "Yea, and I'm not even a damn Cardinal."

"Cardinal?" Sam asked, curiously studying his older brother for a moment before his brain made the connection and his mouth opened in disbelief. "How the hell?"

"Had to know just how girlie of a school my little brother planned on attending," Dean answered with a smirk. "Nothing scarier than a red bird eh, Sammy?"

"It's a college mascot, Dean," Sam replied, rolling his eyes. "What'd you expect?"

"If all those geeks are as tall as you..." Dean muttered thoughtfully, "Sasquatches would be a good one."

"The Stanford Sasquatches," Sam repeated sarcastically, shaking his head.

"Yeah," Dean shot back, seemingly pleased with his suggestion, "that's a hell of a lot scarier than something pecking you to death."

Sam's chance to rebut was lost to Dean's back as the older man left the room and headed back down the hall to the stairs. The dark-haired brother rested the rifle barrel over his shoulder and moved to follow, shivering slightly as he waited on the top landing for Dean to clear the stairwell, his skin raising with the frigid decrease in temperature.

"Dean," the younger brother whispered. He darted a look around, clearing his throat and issuing a warning to his brother. "Dean."

"What?" The sandy-haired brother bellowed from below, and Sam realized that Dean had vanished from sight as he set off to dump the photo album in the duffel.

Dean's question was answered by a startled yell from the top of the stairs, and he jerked out of the teetering crouch he'd been hunched in. Before he could get his legs to carry him the distance between the bag and the first step, Sam's lanky form came tumbling down the rotting wooden steps. The older brother barely registered the sickening thuds of his younger brother's body as it slammed and slid its way down to the main floor, or the rock salt misfire that resounded, rending the top of the banister into nothing but dust and shards.

"Sammy!" Dean hollered, rushing to where his brother's body lay in a heap at the base of the stairs. With only a foot to go, Dean dropped to his knees, the denim allowing him to slide up to Sam's body. "You okay?"

"Ugh..." Sam moaned, shifting slowly as he repositioned himself, untangling his legs from the gun and easing into a sit. "Told you about the damn book!"

“Whatever,” Dean assuaged, half-helping, half-pulling, Sam to a stand, giving him a once over before clasping his younger brother’s shoulder. “You good?” He waited until Sam nodded albeit slowly. “Good, let’s go.”

Dean rushed back to their pack, shouldering it quickly. and was eternally grateful when he found Sam already at the front door. The dark-haired man’s eyes widened in disbelief as the door gave way easily and didn’t even pause to wonder why as he stumbled across the porch and toward the blessed classic refuge parked outside, Dean close on his heels.

With a loud bark of a laugh, Dean threw open the driver’s door, tossing the pack over the seat and sliding behind the wheel. “Well, you don’t see that everyday.”

Sam rubbed his arm gingerly as the squealing of tires peeling out against the drive echoed in his ears. “Shut up.”

Dean woke to the strong, familiar smell of dark-roasted coffee wafting through the Lace Shop of Horrors they were staying in. The savory aroma nearly washed away any remaining remnants of the Garden Fresh Salad with vinaigrette dressing he’d been coerced into eating the night before. He’d let Sam pick the meal, well, more was forced to than actually let, but it wasn’t happening again.

His stomach growled in agreement, and Dean realized quickly how famished he really was. Blinking tiredly, the older brother yawned wide and sat up in the bed, noticing the empty extra-blanket assembled sleeping bag Sam had designed. The hunger gnawing at his insides by the scent of sizzling bacon and sweet syrup left him unable to even feel remotely sorry for Sam’s sleeping conditions and had Dean padding into the kitchen, his mouth watering as he approached the full table spread.

“G’morning!”

Dean jerked at the loud greeting and offered a weary smile in return. “G’morning.”

“You ready for breakfast, love?” Anna chirped happily, setting down a basket full of warm, buttered biscuits and motioning to the far chair as she sat down. “Your brother is quite a help in the kitchen, by the way.”

“We talking about the same Sammy?” Dean questioned with a short laugh that grew louder when his little brother came through the kitchen door with a plate of ham and sausage. “Well, if it ain’t Betty Crocker in all his giant glory.”

Sam rolled his eyes, setting the plate down and taking a seat next to Anna, across from Dean. “Just thought since they are going all out, I might as well help.”

“And we appreciate it, suga,” Anna returned, lightly placing her hand over Sam’s. “We really do.”

The kitchen door banged open again and a short, pudgy, gray-haired woman Dean didn’t know plowed through, a plate of fresh fruit and wheat muffins in her hands. “Now, who’s the health nut?”

“Oh, that’d this gentlemen right here, Sally,” Anna answered, and it took Dean until the time the plate covered with melon slices and bran to get the fact that was for his enjoyment only.

Dean’s eyes narrowed as he shot Sam a glance across the table and he quickly began his protest. “No, uh...this--”

“It’s alright, dear,” Anna placated, nodding toward his plate. “Sam explained all about your health issues and we want to do whatever we can to make it work for you here. Lord knows I couldn’t sleep at night knowing we were causing you harm.”

“Is that right?” Dean asked tersely, playing idly with his fork as he eyed the crispy bacon ravenously.

“She even called the diner to let them know about your dietary restrictions,” Sally chimed in with a roll of her eyes. “Damned nosy if you ask me. But small towns you know?”

Dean groaned and stabbed his fork into the honeydew with enough force to crack the plate, ignoring Sam's snicker as the younger man piled a stack of bacon and eggs onto his own plate. "It does have its perks. Huh, Dean?"

Anna smiled sweetly, passing Sam a platter of pancakes. "That it does."

Dean couldn't take it, not anymore. And with the lightning reflexes, honed over years of hunting, struck out at the stack of fluffy buttermilk circles, swiping two off the top and plopping them down on his plate amidst the horrified gasps of Anna.

Sally intervened and slapped the man's hand, eyeballing him with a glare that would make his own father cringe. "Don't you think your brother needs you around?"

"Yeah, Dean," Sam chimed in with a laugh, barely swallowing his mouth full of breakfast, "I need you."

"What you need to do is hurry up so we can get back to work," Dean chastised, resorting to nibble on a few pieces of fruit out of starvation alone. Sam was so paying for this one.

"Oh, what do you boys do?" Anna asked curiously, sitting up straighter as if the topic of the boys' employment really was the highlight of her day.

"We're reporters from Iowa Central News," Dean answered with a grimace as he brought the napkin up to cover his mouth so he could discard the chunk of pineapple he had no plans on swallowing. "Working a story about the recent beatings at the old Tucker house."

"Tucker house?" Sally questioned incredulously, rising from the table and heading back into the kitchen. "All you gonna find there is a bunch of bored teenagers looking to cause trouble."

"You don't know that," Anna chided her sister, shaking her head. "That house has been empty for so long. It's quite a find, or was, I guess, in its day. Too bad it's getting the reputation that it is."

Sam gave his brother a questioning look and Dean nodded, giving him the go ahead. "Did you know the Tucker family?"

"Oh, heavens, no," Anna chuckled, her hand slapping her knee as she laughed, "I'm not that old. My father, *he* knew them. Good people, he always said."

"So nothing strange happened when they lived there?" Dean pressed, pushing his plate to the center of the table, and giving his brother a death glare before shooting Anna an encouraging smile.

"Strange?" Sally barked, re-entering the room with a new bottle of syrup, eyebrows raised in suspicion, "What kind of question is that?"

"They're reporters," Anna stated firmly, pursing her lips in disapproval of her sister's rashness. "What my sister is trying to say, is no, nothing that we know of when the Tuckers were around."

The clang of silver against Correll permeated through the conversation as Sam was hit by a new idea. "What about the Parces?"

Sally and Anna exchanged quiet glances, and Anna nervously wiped a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "Now those were strange people."

Sam balled up the four blankets that served as his mattress, dumping them on the bed and fumbling through them in an attempt to separate the materials. Anna had been quite helpful, and it only seemed right that they make their stay easier on her because of it. The former Stanford man knew how to fold, and it was the least he could do seeing as Dean's stuff looked like a hurricane whipped through it all.

"So, these Parces moved in around the late seventies, stayed until the mid-80s," Dean summarized, looking up from the laptop and scrutinizing Sam's task. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Picking up after myself," Sam responded quickly, placing a neatly folded blanket at the foot of the bed. "You should try it sometime."

"Then what would I need *you* for?" Dean shot back, glancing back at the screen. "Says that all six of them were found dead, the bodies scattered all over the house and outside."

"Yeah, Anna said the father was suspected," Sam offered, settling down on the edge of the bed and semi-admiring his job well done, although he never would admit it. "But his body was found further from the rest. Sally says they were messed up in the head and did a whole Davidian style thing."

"Her theory is mass suicide?" Dean asked thoughtfully. "It works, just...damn. I'll never get that."

"Well, it's the whole 'one goes, we all go' concept, I guess," Sam reasoned, shrugging his shoulders.

Dean rubbed his temples, his fingers moving in a circular motion over the bone. "So why are the victims bashed and got Jell-O for intestines?"

The younger brother twisted his features pensively. "Maybe they drank some kind of poison. I don't know—rotted from the inside out."

"Well, one of the bodies was found at the bottom of the stairs. That would explain your little trip. One of the sons broke his neck. The others had no other injuries externally," Dean read aloud, body hunched over the small computer. "So says this report."

"How many reports have you read?" Sam questioned curiously.

"Five," Dean replied sullenly. "Not one of them agree either or offer a correct cause. It's like no one documented anything. We're gonna have to go through that photo album again, check the house."

"Anna said that the town thought the Parces were nuts, so maybe they just kept people away and figured they got their due," Sam suggested, the idea sounding weak even to his own ears.

Dean sighed, closing the laptop and taking to rubbing the back of his neck, the tension there refusing to abate. "I just don't get it."

"Get what?" Sam asked, crossing over toward his brother and swiping the laptop off the desk.

"Well, this all has to tie in somehow, but everything says something different so how are we supposed to know what's right and which ones the bad guy?" Dean questioned, his irritation jarringly apparent.

Sam tapped his fingers lightly against the laptop. "Maybe...maybe that's the point."

Dean rolled his eyes and straightened in his seat. "What the hell are you talking about, Sammy?"

"I'm just saying maybe Da--"

"Don't, Sammy," Dean warned, his jaw flexing in frustration. "We are going to finish this job, no matter how long it takes. Dad already told you whatever you wanted to hear, so drop it."

Sam clenched his fists. "I just think that he could be hiding something, and you said it yourself, none of this makes sense."

"So, what, that whole tumble down the stairs was just you losing your balance?" Dean challenged, pushing off from the chair and glaring harshly at his brother. "There was something in that house, Sammy, and it'd help us all out a bit more if you'd actually admit that sometimes and stop trying to prove Dad wrong and find fault in the man!"

"D-dean, I—that's not what--"

"Save it," Dean snapped, and Sam watched with shocked expression as his brother walked out the room, slamming the door behind him.

Sam glanced down at his watch, chewing his bottom lip anxiously and silently willing the room door to open. At the moment, a pissed Dean barging into the room would suffice instead of no Dean at all. Three hours had passed and Sam had done

nothing but shift through his older brother's research and saved computer links because he just knew Dean would come back soon.

But soon wasn't looking to be Dean's idea of a return and Sam was quickly beginning to get worried. His focus had shifted from the mass of papers to the closed door about an hour ago, his legs crossed and his elbows resting against his knees in wait. It had been too long.

The reality was anything could happen when they were separated and while there were times Sam really wanted his space or to follow his own path, a nagging fear always consumed him whenever there was more than a room's distance between Dean and himself.

It wasn't the kind that made him jump at every noise. He wasn't some scared little kid, hell, he'd faced demons, but it was the 'what if' in their line of work that stole his breath in the weirdest of circumstances. They'd had too many close calls. Dean had suffered way past his quota and most of those injuries had either been separation or by saving his little brother's ass.

Sam jolted off the bed, grabbing his jacket off the side chair and shouldering it on as he opened the door. He turned back and grabbed the photo album off the coffee table, unsure what its meaning truly was but knowing it was their only physical link to the Parce family. With long strides, Sam clamored down the Bed and Breakfast's stairs, his stretched pace taking him out the front door in record time.

He wasn't surprised to see the Impala gone, and the fact that Dean's baby wasn't soaking up the mid-afternoon sun in the parking lot meant that he either went for a leisurely drive or back to the hunt. Sam didn't even have to debate which one it was.

"Dammit," Sam cursed under his breath, gritting his teeth as he reluctantly resigned to walk the whole way to the Tucker house if it came to it. He was so kicking his brother's ass, although Sam knew his own stubbornness had attributed to a mess of stupid, idiotic things to do that Dean had endured so then again, maybe he'd cut the older man a break. Maybe.

"Hey!" Sam about-faced as the sharp voice resounded from behind him, finding Sally standing on the porch, leaning against the railing, a lit cigarette in her hand. She watched Sam for a minute, smirking as she followed his lingering gaze to the rolled tobacco in her hand. "Wouldn't quit if I you paid me, besides you look like you could use one."

"He left," Sam stated tersely, watching as Sally brought the cigarette to her lips and inhaled. "Do you know where he went?"

The older woman pursed her lips and puffed out a cloud of white smoke. "No. But he took the car too. Good for him. You deserved that."

Sam bristled at her blatantly honest opinion, indignation flickering in his eyes. "What?"

"I know a meat-eater when I see one," Sally responded, her lips forming a tight smile, "That was a good one though."

The younger man ducked his head in a mixture of guilt and pleasure bestowed by his little payback gesture. "Thanks."

"Out back is an old Ford," the elderly woman stated, sliding a hand into the side pocket of her knitted jacket withdrawing a set of keys. "It's the one with the blue cover on it."

"You don't have to do that," Sam replied, reaching out rapidly to grasp the flying keys Sally had tossed in his direction and finding the correctly labeled key.

The gray-haired woman chuckled, nodding in agreement. "Didn't say that I did. Just bring it back in one piece okay?"

"Not a problem," Sam returned with a disbelieving smile on his face. He'd almost forgotten how kind some people really could be. The dark-haired Winchester boy yelled out a quick 'thanks' and rushed around the side of the Bed and Breakfast, nearly stopping dead in his tracks when he saw the Ford Festiva waiting for him.

With a liturgy of ill tempered words toward his brother, Sam unlocked the car, hurling the photo album onto the passenger seat before leaning over and adjusting the driver's seat as far back as it would go. Groaning, the tall Winchester hunched his form and worked his way into the cramped car, his knees colliding with the wheel and his back arched to avoid head contact with the car roof.

He started the car, a wry laugh escaping his lips. Good thing comfort never truly was on his most important list. Truth was he barely fit in the Impala. *Ah, the life of a Stanford Sasquatch.*

* * * *

It was a ten minute drive to the former Tucker home and Sam could make out the Impala's sharp, sleek outline from the bottom of the drive. Relief overcame him and he almost forgot just how uncomfortable he really was cooped up in the tiny excuse for an automobile. Really, what were those people thinking?

Sam tapped the brakes, or rather he thought he had only rested his foot on the peddle. The forward lurch of his frame and the sharp squeak from the car signaled otherwise, and Sam grimaced at the whining sound as he set the car in park. He realized, however, once he had pried open the driver's door, getting out of the torture trap was going to be as fun of an adventure as getting into it.

With a determined grunt, Sam wrapped a hand around the door and pulled himself slowly out of the car, taking a quick second to stretch out every single inch of him that was throbbing in sore, cramped agony as he surveyed the grounds. He immediately noticed the open front door and on unsteady legs, Sam started his brisk walk to the house.

He paused carefully as he neared the front porch they'd nearly cracked to pieces the day before, his mouth dropping open when he noticed that the crevice they'd put into the wood no longer existed. Sam glanced up through the open door way, swallowing thickly when he saw his brother standing a few feet away.

Sam entered cautiously. His brother's back was to him, Dean's stance militarily stiff. "Dean?" he called out, approaching his older brother and coming to stand at his side, his eyes staring out the same broken window Dean seemed so fascinated with. "What the hell are you doing?"

"You were right," The younger brother tensed at Dean's soft admission, and the sandy-haired brother turned his head toward Sam, "About all this, you know?"

"Not entirely sure what you mean by that," Sam said slowly, meeting his brother's gaze for a brief moment, before noticing the EMF meter held loosely in Dean's right hand, and rolled pages nearly crushed in his left. "Dean, let me see those."

Sam reached out a hand for the pages, and Dean handed them over willingly. The younger brother's eyes widened as he scanned the print outs and Dean's small voice snapped him out of his reverie. "There's nothing here. I mean, well, there is. They all are here."

"Then why are you just standing here waiting to be killed?" Sam asked bluntly, although the condescending tone didn't even warrant a flinch out of Dean. "We should get out of here and come back with at least a gun. Dude, what the hell is the matter with you?"

"We can leave, but we're not coming back," Dean answered as if Sam should have gotten that fact to begin with.

"Okay, man," Sam cut in, raising a hand to signal for his brother to stop, "I know you probably know what you're trying to say, but I'm missing something here."

"After I left, I went to the library to finish up," Dean explained ignoring Sam's widening eyes and the smile that he was pathetically trying to stifle. "I found another source that said the son, Michael was murdered." He motioned to the pages in Sam's hands, "thrown down the stairs. They had it dubbed as an accident—family feud kind

of thing. I'm telling you man, there are more legends about what happened here than there are about the boogeyman."

"Well, the neck injury was in another report," Sam recalled, his forehead creased in thought, "So, what happened here?"

"The mass suicide theory I guess. Maybe because of Michael. You know, spirits replaying their death," Dean murmured, his eyes finding the window again. "I think the whole family is here, and the bodies of the recent victims lay where that particular member curled up to die."

"You think?" Sam asked incredulously, "It makes sense, kind of. But...what do you want to do? Find the graves?"

"They aren't buried here," Dean stated patiently, turning around and heading back toward the front door.

Sam followed quickly at his heels, arms outstretched in question, "Well, usually, they'd be in a cemetery not the backyard."

Dean sighed, stopping on the top porch step, pocketing the EMF, and turning around to face his brother, "No, smart ass. They aren't buried here. I checked. Not in this town, hell, their corpses aren't even in this friggen' state, Sam!"

The younger brother gaped, momentarily taken aback by the older brother's growing anger. "So this was all--"

"Pointless. Stupid. A friggen' insult." Dean snapped, raking his fingers through his short spikes furiously. "We can burn the house down, or that stupid photo album. But it's just a guess, we haven't really solved anything. We can't really finish the job! People could still die. I can't believe he'd do that to us, Sammy. I just--"

"Dean," Sam interjected, clearing the distance between him and his brother and giving him a sympathetic gaze, "Dad's not really the honest type. You got to stop blindly following him. One of these days..."

"Since when are you the calm, cool, collected one?" Dean asked angrily, stepping onto the drive and heading toward his car. "Aren't you pissed that dad just threw us some junk case? The locals can't even make up their mind about this place, man."

"Yeah, I am pissed. Alright, I'm pissed," Sam replied honestly and eerily calm. "But whatever dad is doing, he doesn't want us there which means it's exactly where we need to be. We got to find him."

Dean scoffed, shaking his head as he dug in his pocket for the car keys. "Right, 'cause that'll be easy."

"What else is there?" Sam responded quietly, "We deserve answers, Dean, and right now, Dad's the only one who seems to have them."

"Doesn't mean he'll give 'em to us," Dean replied, smirking at Sam's roll of the eyes, "But okay, yeah, we'll look. And um, you got that book with you?"

Sam tilted his head at the question. "The album you mean?"

"Yeah," the older brother drawled, a dangerous smile creeping onto his face.

"Yeah, I got it," Sam laughed, racing off to the Ford to retrieve the worn book from the passenger seat.

"Good, I got the salt and matches," Dean declared and Sam could have sworn excitement enveloped the words.

"Well, let's torch it, Pyro."

* * * *

Dean sunk down into the driver's seat, watching with muted interest as Sam bid Sally and Anna good bye. The boy always did have a way with people; they trusted him so easily it almost made big brother's head spin. Trust was something hunters couldn't really afford themselves and that's why for the past day Dean had done nothing but beat himself up over just believing a bust case could really be a John Winchester hand picked assignment.

The older brother had no doubt that his father had checked the vast amounts of research before shipping them this task, and the sting of knowing it was just put there to distract and delay him from whatever their Dad didn't want them around for was a direct blow to everything he held onto regarding his family.

Dean couldn't remember the last time he'd 'blindly' trusted someone as much as he did his father, and the man had lied to him more times than he could count. Blood would always be thicker, the sandy-haired boy decided, no matter what, he just couldn't deny his father. Not even at Sam's bidding. But Sam was his equal, Dad was not.

A sharp smack against the passenger window caused Dean to jerk visibly, his hand connection with the horn, Sam's booming laugh at his reaction punctuated by the loud beep.

"Laugh all you want, Stilts," Dean stated, watching Sam slide into the passenger seat and started the ignition.

"Oh, don't worry, I will," Sam replied, his words coming out in breathy gasps as he continued to laugh.

"Not for long, you won't." Dean threatened, and Sam's loud laughter faded to a few muffled chuckles.

The younger brother straightened up anxiously in the seat, studying his brother skeptically. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Dean raised his eyebrows, a sly grin on his face. "Don't play, dumb, college boy. You got yours coming."

"Oh, so is Dean finally gonna enter the major leagues?" Sam taunted, smacking his older brother lightly on the arm.

"I'm already there, Sammy." Dean replied smugly, reaching over and giving Sam's shoulder a push, "You're the one who needs to come up from the minors."

"Think so, huh?" Sam watched in amused interest as his older brother guided the Impala down the road with one hand, his body leaning over the bench seat, his free arm reaching for something Sam couldn't see.

Dean let out a triumphant grunt when he found the unknown object in question and tossed the thin plastic case into his brother's lap. Sam looked over the vibrant colored label, his bottom lip curling beneath his front teeth.

"Where did you get this?" Sam's voice held a tinge of fear, and Dean barked out a sharp laugh.

"The library." The older brother replied, leaning forward in his seat and double checking the other lane before making a highly illegal left turn when the sign clearly said not to.

"So not only do you drive like a bat out of hell, but you stole this," Sam held the case up, his tone disapproving and completely way too high pitched for a man his age. "This, Dean?"

"What's wrong with it?" Dean asked innocently, ejecting the disc already in play and setting it on the dash, beckoning for Sam to hand him the newly stolen case.

"No," Sam snapped defiantly, shaking his head, "Just no."

"Oh, quitting already huh?" Dean teased, cuffing the back of Sam's head, "That makes me the winner, doesn't it?"

"Like hell," Sam protested, crossing his arms and taking to a sulk.

Dean laughed at the pitiful expression. "Then put it in."

Sam didn't budge an inch, the command falling on deaf ears.

"Sam."

The younger brother decided the blur of green outside the window was infinitely more interesting than anything his brother had to say.

"Sammy."

Dean rolled his eyes when his brother showed him the extent of his sign language.

"Put it in, Sammy."

After a long moment, Sam's eyes, not more than mere slits, met his brother's, his resistance visible, but fading.

Dean capitalized on his little brother's waning resilience. "C'mon, either do it now or bow to the master."

"You're a jerk," Sam spat, cracking open the case and shoving the CD into the player, and leaning back into the seat, body tense.

"Relax, I hear this guy is good," Dean commented lightly, his victorious laugh nearly smothering the announcer's voice.

Welcome to A Time to Laugh: How to Find the Inner Clown in You...

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The mammoth black truck came to a stop along the large brick wall, the entrance hidden quite well and only known by those who had put this place into being. John exited the car slowly, grabbing his .45 from the seat and stealthily storing it in the back of his jeans as he closed the truck door with a slam.

"Nice to see you again, Winchester," a harsh, gravelly voice whispered from behind and John turned, slightly startled, to face the approaching man.

"Yeah, that's one way to put it," John drawled, extending a hand which the stranger took in his own and shook it firmly.

"You've come just in time." The man revealed, a smile creeping onto his face, "It's about to begin."

To be continued in *When The War Comes...*