

Episode Nine: Writhe

By Thru Terry's Eyes

Heavy, rhythmic music throbbed through the dimly lit room. Shafts of blue and red laser pierced the intimate darkness and starbursts of spot lightning swept over the crowded dance floor in time to the deep trembles of music so loud it consumed the twisting figures locked in its embrace.

Bass vibrated the walls, floor and furniture, shifted the glasses on the bar and tables ever so slightly and thrummed across the skin of the dancers pressed against each other in the limited space allotted for public sex.

With each passing second the beat grew in intensity and speed, the friction of heated flesh against heated flesh as the dancers wound around each other, offering a teasing promise that only time and luck might see fulfilled.

Matt had lost himself in the pulsing sounds. His tall, leanly muscled body, dark hair and slightly exotic looks that hinted at a mixed parentage, assured he would always have a willing partner. He was especially pleased with tonight's choice. His eyes closed, enjoying the feel of his body against hers, holding them both clasped together at the hips with his hands. His partner, a slim creature with long blonde hair and fingertips that were dancing and drifting across the skin of his arms in time with the music, likewise had her eyes closed. The drag of her nails on his arms sped up his breathing as the music built to a slow crescendo.

Across the floor, body draped languidly against the bar, dark, up slanted eyes were watching as Matt shifted and swayed with his blonde trophy, their bodies moving as one. Elana's tongue drifted across her red lips as she studied him. Her chosen prize for the night.

A diamond sparked and glinted at the corner of each eye. Silver dust shimmered across her olive skin, almost nakedly on display in a low cut, high rise dress with no back, composed of tiny sparkling silver discs that hugged the fullness of the body contained within it. Thin ropes of silver serpentine chain dangled from her ears and strands of it wound around her wrists. Her full lips, high slanted cheekbones and mane of long dark red hair caused a sensation with every man who looked at her while pretending he wasn't. She gave none of them a second glance. Her eyes were for Matt alone and hunger stirred her body the longer she watched.

Elana stretched out long fingers tipped in chrome polish and plucked the cherry out of her drink. She slid it between her lips, caressing the juice off of it then slipped it back out of the prison of her mouth and began to move toward Matt and his partner, cherry dangling from her fingers. The eyes of several of the males at the bar followed her movements with open mouths after watching the cherry disappear and reappear. She undulated through the dancers with surprising ease, adjusting her body easily to accommodate the shifting crowd, every movement a study of sinuous grace.

Matt and his partner had separated and were momentarily facing away from each other. Moving closer, Elana insinuated herself into the small space between the two dancers and with a gentle pressure and the touch of her free hand against his waist, used her body to move Matt away from his partner.

Matt, enjoying the warm contact, turned and was surprised to see a dark beauty in place of the blonde whose name he didn't know anyway. His confusion was short lived and he smiled at this definite step up in the evening's plans, taking in the slow roll of her body as she moved against him, brushing her lips with the cherry as she watched him from under her lashes. Her lips parted against the cherry's flesh, revealing small white teeth and she smiled back. His hands brushed against her hips and they start to move with the music.

Matt's eyes were locked on that cherry as she parted her lips enough to slide it in halfway between her teeth and she stretched her face upwards to tease his lips with the stem. Matt's breathing quickened with every tickle across his mouth and her eyes never left his face.

Finally, he caught the stem between his teeth, as close to the cherry as he could get, their lips not quite touching, looking at each other over the red fruit. As the song ended she bit into the cherry and pressed her lips against his, the sweet juice mingling with their kiss. She pulled back from him, taking the rest of the cherry with her and leaving him tonguing the stem. Her head tilted slightly and she watched him from the corners of her sparkling eyes. Chewing on the cherry slowly, tongue lazily collecting juice from her lips, looking up at him.

Matt swallowed and after two efforts, choked out. "Hi..."

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Moonlight lessened the darkness in Matt's bedroom as he lay shirtless on the bed, scarcely believing the sight of this silver goddess straddling him, her hands moving over his body with a skill and touch unlike anything he had ever experienced. The trace of her nails on his skin shot fire through his body. She leaned closer and he drank in her scent, his body aching with need. He didn't know how much more of this he could stand. She took his mouth with hers and he couldn't stop the groan that came out of him. His hands tangled in her long auburn tresses and he pulled her tightly against him as she undulated her body over his.

"Do you want me?" her throaty voice a purr in his ear. "I want you."

"Oh, God....please..." he moaned the words brokenly as she brushed her lips against his ear, tongue flicking.

"Do you love me?" she whispered in his ear, her hot breath against his skin a maddening sensation, teasing him on. "Do you love me?" she whispered hoarsely, over and over, more intensely with each repetition, driving her own desire on, her hunger...

Matt writhed helplessly beneath her, teetering on the edge of insanity, gasping for breath. "God, yes I love you!" he finally cried out, clutching desperately at her body.

Elana cried out in return, her body arching back away from him even as he sought to grasp it. Her head was thrown back, arms crossed over her chest, hands grasping opposite shoulders. Her breath rushed out as a deep shuddering groan, drawing back in as a sizzling hiss.

Matt's eyes snapped open at her sudden movement away and he gaped in horrified disbelief at what he saw before him. His mind was screaming but no sound passed his lips. He no longer commanded his body and lay there, paralyzed, as his body was squeezed tightly with a slow, upwardly rolling persistence that caused the blood in his body to pound in his skull and the breath to rush from his lungs, leaving no room to draw in more.

He could do nothing but lie there as the greenish drops of liquid dripped onto his face, burning into his skin like acid, with no way to vent the searing agony.

Through a superhuman effort he somehow managed to get his mouth open and was trying to summon the strength to scream. It was a mistake.

To Elana, hunger burning, the hot softness of Matt's open mouth was an invitation. She took it.

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Athens, Georgia

Sam idly flipped through the seven channels on the TV with the sound off, looking for anything interesting to watch. It was six a.m. and he had been awake for the last hour and a half. Sleep was successfully remaining out of his reach and he finally tired of trying to capture it.

The room was airless, the A/C working spasmodically. Sam had complained repeatedly but the unit simply refused to respond to the manager's clumsy repair efforts. Sam was sweaty and uncomfortable and so tired of laying in the bed he wanted to scream.

Two runs of channel surfing made it clear he would find no relief there unless he wanted to watch infomercials for exercise equipment for every specific part of the human body or cartoons with cavorting dinosaurs. He clicked it off.

Rubbing a hand over his face, sighing, he toyed with getting on the laptop to do a little research but didn't want the tapping of the keyboard to disturb Dean, although Sam doubted a solar flare blasting their room would have awakened his brother at the moment.

He glanced over at Dean, out cold, face down on the bed next to him, one arm dangling down, fingers touching the carpet, covers kicked down over his feet. His pale face sparkled with a fine sheen of sweat even though he wore nothing but his boxers. There was a frown line between his eyebrows but otherwise, he seemed to be sleeping fairly peacefully. It had been a rough couple of days, especially for Dean.

They had intended to pass through Athens, Georgia two days earlier, when Dean had become violently ill. The sickness had come over him so suddenly they both assumed it was some type of food poisoning. Considering the type of places they generally ate, it was a wonder it didn't happen more often.

Continuing the journey was out of the question, so Sam had located a suitably cheap motel as quickly as possible, bundled Dean into one of the beds and hovered anxiously over him. After more hours than he cared to think about and just before he was ready to stuff Dean back in the car and haul him to the hospital, Dean had finally stopped throwing up, the fluids Sam coaxed into him started to stay down and Dean had fallen into a restless sleep.

Sam was almost as exhausted as Dean and had ordered some food delivered, eaten it and fallen into a dead sleep, waking only to check on Dean from time to time. Dean seemed to be doing better so he figured it was a fair trade.

Dean shifted, groaning, as Sam watched. Dean's eyes blinked open and stared blearily at Sam. Drawing in a deep breath, he lifted his hand to rub his eyes.

"Why you awake...?" Dean drawled in a thick, hoarse voice. He yawned, which turned into a stretch as he rolled onto his back.

"Woke up and couldn't go back to sleep," Sam replied, tossing the remote to the end of his bed. He flipped on the small bedside lamp. "How you feelin'?" he asked, swinging his legs off the bed and sitting up.

"What time is it?" Dean's eyes drifted shut again. He coughed a little and cleared his throat, a hand brushing across his stomach.

"Little after six." Sam moved to sit on the edge of Dean's bed. He rested the back of his hand on Dean's forehead. "How's your stomach? Still feel queasy?"

Dean knocked Sam's hand away, rolling his head to the side. He swallowed and took a quick stock of himself. "Maybe a little...feel better than I did." He made a soft humming noise, looking up at Sam through narrowed eyes. "Did I ask you to shoot me?" he asked, recalling a vague memory.

Sam laughed softly and nodded. "Yeah," he shrugged. "I figured you really didn't mean it, though."

Dean moved his head in a negative, grimacing. "Trust me, I meant it at the time." He rubbed his hands over his face. He felt sticky and uncomfortable. "I hope it's really hot in here and not just me."

"A/C's bad. Works off and on. Sorry." Sam shrugged again. "Didn't have a lot of motel choices at the time." Sam got up and ran a fresh glass of water for Dean, tossing the remaining ice into it.

Dean pushed himself up, leaning against the headboard, and gratefully took the glass. "Thanks." He took a few small sips, relishing the cooling sensation in his throat but mindful of his

still edgy stomach. "How long have we been here?" Dean looked around the little room. He held the sweating water glass to his temple. "Speaking of which. Where is here?" He had no memory whatsoever of where they had been at the time he became ill.

"Two days. Athens, Georgia," Sam replied. "We'd just hit town when you got sick."

"Oh, yeah," Dean grunted. He ruffled his sweaty hair, making a face. "God, I feel gross, I need to take a shower." He took another sip of water and gave Sam a small push to get him off the bed.

Sam eyed Dean suspiciously but got to his feet. "You sure you're up to it?" he asked. "You were really sick, Dean. Maybe you should take it easy today."

Dean moved his legs off the bed, sitting the rest of the way up. The room swayed a little and he pressed his hands to his eyes until it stopped. Sam reached out a hand, Dean smacked it away.

"I feel better, Sam." Dean snapped impatiently. "Seriously, dude. Just give me a minute." Dean was surprised at how weak he was, and his stomach muscles were very sore, but he felt better over all. He got to his feet and moved carefully toward the bathroom, using the wall as support, aware that Sam's eyes followed him every step of the way.

The hot shower worked wonders and he stepped out of the bathroom feeling better than he had for a while. He had been disgusted to find his hands were shaking too much to shave so he blew that off and slowly pulled on his clothes. He sat quietly on the bed to rest a few minutes before he pulled his boots on but Sam wisely let him be. Just cast a watchful eye Dean's way from time to time.

By the time Dean was dressed and Sam had also taken a quick shower and dressed it was 7:30a.m. Dean had lain back on the bed while Sam got ready and was surprised when Sam shook his leg gently to waken him.

"Hey," Sam said. "Do you think you can eat something? You could stay here and I'll go get something and bring it back." Sam had the Impala keys in one hand.

Dean shook his head, trying to clear the fog. "No, I'm okay. Let's go. I could use some air, it's too hot in here." He sat up after a brief struggle to get his bearings, opened his mouth and reached for the keys.

Sam pulled them out of reach, cutting him off. "Don't even think about it. Not until you're a lot steadier on your feet." Sam fisted the keys and opened the door.

Dean groused under his breath but gave in just because he did feel really shaky. He followed Sam out to the car and slid into the passenger side of the Impala.

It was a brightly sunny day with a light breeze, much cooler outside than the stifling room.

"Do you care if we drive down by the University?" Sam asked a trifle reluctantly as he started the car.

Inwardly, Dean groaned but he owed Sam for the last couple of days, which couldn't have been much fun for Sam either.

"Wherever you want, bro." Dean replied magnanimously. He rolled down the window to get the wind in his face, leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes.

Sam smiled and headed toward the buildings he could see in the distance that had to be the school.

They had driven for a short while to look around a little. This early in the morning, on a Saturday, the sidewalks were fairly empty. The streets along the old down town area were spilled over with bars, small cafes and restaurants. They passed several cafés with tables on the sidewalk and a few solitary early risers drinking coffee, eating rolls and doing their laptop magic.

Sam enjoyed the charm of the old sprawling houses that had been converted into apartments, frat and sorority houses, the shady, tree lined streets and the general scholarly feel. Dean wasn't impressed with the atmosphere, but wasn't surprised that Sam had gravitated to it.

Sam parked the car in a central lot and they walked the short distance to one of the sidewalk tables with large maple trees shading it.

"This okay?" Sam asked, resting a hand on the back of one of the wrought iron chairs.

Dean grinned to himself. Frankly, the short walk had done him in and he just wanted to sit down anywhere. "It's fine, Sam." He sank gratefully onto the chair and sighed. Sam sat down across from him and picked up the menu on the table.

"You all right?" Sam asked, as Dean rested his head in his hands.

"Nothing coffee and a sugar hit won't fix," Dean grumbled.

"You guys are out early!" A pert voice said at Dean's elbow. They both looked up to see a young woman with an order pad and large blue eyes standing beside their table. Her dark hair was tied into a long, bouncy ponytail and she wore tight black shorts that showed off long tanned legs. Sam took one look at her and knew her bust size was larger than her IQ. Just the way Dean liked 'em. A walking, talking, blow up doll.

Dean's eyes moved up and down her long form appreciatively, lighting up for the first time in days, and he managed to pull a brilliant smile out of his trick bag and offer it to her.

"Well, hi there..." he said, eyeing her ID badge, "...Ashley. I'm Dean and if I'd known you were here, I would've been here sooner."

Ashley laughed, tapping her pen against her lips. "You know, that's not much of a line."

Dean shrugged with an eyebrow, looking down briefly. "Sorry, I've been sick. I'm outta practice. You know anyone that could help me with that?" He traced his fingertip across the top of the table and rolled his eyes up at her without raising his head.

Ashley laughed again.

Sam rolled his eyes.

Dean opened his mouth to say something else to make her laugh, but a shrill scream from down the street turned them all to stare in the direction of the sound as a girl came shrieking down the steps of one of the old homes and ran straight into the street, right into the path of an approaching truck.

Sam and Dean both jumped up before they heard the thud of the girl's body as the pickup struck her, brakes screeching. The vehicle wasn't going that fast and it was a glancing blow but it still knocked her sideways onto the pavement. Sam ran toward her followed by Dean and the waitress he'd been flirting with. Sam stopped the girl from getting up. She was crying and shrieking in hysterics. She didn't appear to be badly hurt but he knew she needed to stay quiet until help came.

"My God! Oh, my God!!" was all she kept screaming.

The driver, a young kid, eighteen or so, stood horrified, wringing his hands. "I didn't see her!" he cried. "She ran right in front of me!"

Dean, breathing heavily after the run, caught the kid's shoulder. "Chill, man, it wasn't your fault. It's okay. It was an accident."

Sam was trying to calm the girl. Her hysterics were starting to draw the interest of the few people around. Ashley knelt next to her with an arm around her and began to talk soothingly. Sam's opinion of her rose as he realized he might have misjudged her.

Sam got to his feet and eased over to Dean. "Something in that house scared the crap out of her." Sam commented softly.

"No argument there," Dean agreed.

He and Sam exchanged looks and quickly crossed over to the house the girl had run out of. They walked up the wide steps and across the porch, pausing on either side of the open front door.

"What are we looking for?" Sam hissed, hand in his jacket for the .45 he kept there.

Dean shrugged. "Damned if I know. I guess we'll know it when we see it." He palmed his own gun and stepped through the doorway. The adrenaline rush wasn't doing his stomach any good, but he tried to ignore it as he moved into the foyer and looked left and right.

Several people were standing at the top of the stairs in robes and various stages of dress.

"What's going on?" a heavy set blonde girl demanded, as Dean hastily shoved his gun back into his jacket.

"There was an accident," Sam replied smoothly. "Some girl came out of the house and a truck hit her as she was crossing the street."

There was a chorus of gasps and some of the watchers thudded down the stairs and out the front door. The remainder shuffled back toward their apartments, curiosity satisfied.

Sam glanced at Dean and shook his head. Dean moved on down the short hallway to the right of the staircase where he saw an open door, Sam following on his heels. He paused at the door, then followed as Sam cautiously entered the open apartment.

It was neatly furnished, not opulently, but pleasant. A pair of boots had been kicked across the floor, a blue shirt lay on the ground between them, leading to what Sam assumed was the bedroom.

It was a few short steps across the combination living area/kitchen to the next room. Sam glanced at Dean, who nodded, gun at ready, as they flanked the door.

Sam crossed the threshold into the bedroom, looked around swiftly, and stopped dead. He couldn't help the soft noise he made, the gun falling slowly to his side.

Dean blundered into Sam as he stopped.

"What are you doing, man--" Dean broke off as he pushed past Sam and saw into the bedroom.

Sam, at a loss for words, gestured loosely with his gun. "I think we found what we were looking for."

"What the hell?" Dean murmured, looking past Sam. He gagged suddenly, making a face.

Sam leaned in and very gently touched the muzzle of his gun to the shriveled figure on the bed. It made a sound like paper rubbing together. His lips curled back in distaste as he took a really long look at what lay on the bed.

The discolored, twisted body was half covered by a blanket. Whatever had happened had to have been terrible. The body was arched upwards, frozen in a position that suggested great agony, arms splayed tautly out to the sides, hands clawed so tightly into the sheets the fingers had torn through the fabric and were buried to the knuckles in the mattress. The body's head was thrown as far back as was possible, mouth open widely, exposing all the teeth, a withered tongue curled over the lips.

Even this wasn't as strange as the fact that the body appeared so desiccated, every muscle, sinew and piece of skin had shrunk into the bones to the point it seemed as though the papery thin skin was just a casing that held it all together. A mummy would have retained more humanity in it's final form than this piece of human jerky before them.

"You ever see anything like this before?" Sam asked. He put the gun away and pulled out his cell phone, opening it up to take some photos. Dean didn't reply. Sam turned to look at him. Dean's eyes were closed, the back of his hand pressed over his mouth. Sam grabbed him as he swayed on his feet, Dean grabbing back to break his fall. Sam kicked a chair over and clumsily settled Dean in it.

"Put your head down." Sam ordered pushing Dean's head to his knees. Dean was far from squeamish but Sam had to admit that after the last two days even Dean was entitled to a momentary weak stomach.

Dean hung there, head buried in his arms, waiting for the nausea to pass. "Man..." He groaned. "This is not how I wanted to start my day..."

"You really shoulda stayed in bed," Sam agreed. "Sit tight and let me get these shots and then we need to get the hell outta here before someone else comes or the cops show up." He went back to getting shots from different angles and close-ups.

As the dizziness passed, Dean straightened slightly and reached out, moving some of the papers on the desk with a pen from his pocket. Mostly unopened mail with the same name, Matt Lewis. There were several matchbooks with iridescent covers. He pulled one to the edge of the desk. It fell before he could grab it and he leaned forward to pick it up off the floor where it lay sparkling in a shaft of sunlight.

Dean's eyes followed the streak of sunlight shooting across the floor as he snagged the matchbook. He squinted at several shiny spots near the edge of the floor register under the desk that looked like thin bits of plastic. He was puzzled by the fact that the cover for the floor vent itself had been pulled out of the opening and pushed to one side.

Frowning, he leaned forward out of the chair, getting on his hands and knees and reaching under the desk for one of the tiny flashy bits. It stuck to his finger and he brought it into the light for a closer look.

"Dean? Are you okay?" Sam's anxious voice startled Dean as his brother knelt beside him.

Dean held out the small flake, balanced on his fingertip. "Yeah, I'm fine. Whadaya make of that? There's a bunch of them by the vent down here."

Sam studied the small object with puzzlement. It was sort of triangular in shape, translucent, delicately tipped in black. There was a reflective sparkle to it where the light hit it.

Sam's head jerked toward the door as he heard a siren in the distance. He grabbed an envelope off the desk and shoved it at Dean. "Put 'em in there. It's time to go!"

Dean brushed the other flakes into the envelope and backed out from under the desk.

The siren screamed to a halt out front and Sam and Dean shot back through the apartment door and down the short hall to the next apartment where there was an opening under the stairs.

They could see the flash of a paramedic van in the street and two police cruisers sliding up next to it. A fair sized crowd had assembled. After speaking with the injured girl briefly two police officers came through the front door, moving quickly into the living room of the apartment Sam and Dean had just vacated.

It was easy to mingle into the small crowd that had accompanied the cops inside and work their way out of the building.

Dean turned as they walked away, catching a glimpse of Ashley. She was standing next to the girl as the paramedic treated her. He was disappointed when she didn't look their way.

"What the hell would cause something like that?" Sam exclaimed, reclaiming Dean's attention.

"Huh?" Dean replied.

"That body? What could do something like that?" Sam repeated, looking over his shoulder to see where Dean had been looking. He saw the waitress's dark pony tail bobbing as she spoke with the paramedic. Sam grinned. Dean was definitely feeling better. "You want to get her number?" Sam nudged him. "After what we just saw, I think we'll be around for a few days."

Dean glanced back again, surprised to see Ashley raise herself up to look over the heads of the people around her. She was obviously looking for something. He tightened his lips and shook his head. "Nah, I can always find a girl if I want one. Unlike some people I know," he added, with a small grin, giving Sam a push.

"Very funny. Ha ha," Sam said woodenly. "Well, I want to get on the laptop and see what I can find about this." He waved his cell phone. "Let's grab some food and go back to the room. I think you've had enough excitement this morning. You can rest after you get some food into you."

"I'm not five, Sam. I don't need a nap." God, the walk back to the car seemed to be taking forever.

Just before he got back into the Impala, Dean looked back down the street to see Ashley walking toward the café where she worked. He lingered by the door, watching her, drawing in a small breath as she suddenly stopped and looked straight at him. She smiled and raised her hand slightly in a small wave. Dean felt his fingers straighten in an answering wave before he realized what he was doing.

"C'mon, Dean, get in!" Sam's voice drew his eyes and when he looked back up, she was gone.

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By the time they returned to the motel Dean was sick to his stomach again and not even slightly interested in the food Sam had gotten on the way back.

The heat in the room was a physical blow as they entered. Dean groaned, jerked off his shirt and fell on the bed, rolling onto his side, burying his face in the hot pillow. Extreme heat and nausea did not mix well.

Sam left the door open and jerked up the phone on the table, dialing the front desk.

"Yeah, this is Sam Carlton, room...yeah, it's me again." Sam rolled his eyes. "Listen, we have no air conditioning, my brother is sick and it's stifling in here. If you don't get someone to fix this NOW I'm coming to the office and I'm gonna kick the—" He paused at the frantic whining over the line. "Another room is available? Yeah, that'd be great. I'll be right there." Sam slammed the phone down. "Jackass. Dean, we're changing rooms, I'll be right back."

"Thank God," Dean moaned into the pillow. "I'll get our stuff together..."

Sam shook his head. "No, stay there, I won't be long," he said, slamming the door behind him.

The A/C in the new room was so cold it left icicles on the vent. When Sam saw the room also included a small fridge and a microwave, he decided there was some truth to the squeaking wheel theory. He turned the A/C up full blast then went back to their old room, managing to get a befuddled Dean resettled in the new room before returning to gather up their scattered belongings and move them to their new location.

In less than an hour he was seated at the table rattling the keys of the laptop, eating his late breakfast. Dean was asleep, the room was freezing and -joy!- the TV had eight channels!

He pulled the lamp closer and carefully examined the shiny flakes Dean had found on the floor. There were eight of them, the edges on one side ragged, as though they had been torn free. He frowned and replaced them in the little envelope, before fingering the matchbook Dean had picked up, turning it this way and that as it picked up the light. It was for a place called The Inside Club.

Tossing the matchbook next to the envelope he went back to the internet.

Dean slept for five solid hours. Sam woke him once to drink something, but after draining the glass Dean had immediately gone back to sleep. Sam left him be, figuring that sleep was probably the best thing for him.

As a result of all the uninterrupted research, Sam's notepad was covered with copious notes, web site addresses and the occasional sketch. He shook the envelope again, hearing the contents rattle. They needed to pay a visit to the university. Whatever the hell those things were, maybe someone there could identify them. He also wanted to pay a visit to the morgue. He had learned a lot of interesting things that afternoon and he wanted to get some evidence to support his burgeoning theory.

He grabbed the phone book and his cell phone to make the call, jerking back as Dean suddenly leaned over him.

"Crap, Dean!" Sam snapped, sending the cell phone flying. "You gave me a freakin' heart attack!"

"Dude, where in the hell are we?" Dean's voice was thick with sleep and confusion. "Because I am positive, this is not where I went to sleep." He sank into the other chair with a deep sigh, hands working over his face.

Sam stared at him. "We changed rooms, don't you remember? The broken A/C?"

Dean looked around. "Oh. Yeah." His eyebrows rose. "It *is* cooler in here." He snorted. "I dreamed I was trapped in a refrigerator. That explains that." Massaging the back of his neck, he chuckled softly and added. "Man, you were right, I guess I did need a nap."

Sam got up and retrieved his phone. "You feel better?"

Dean nodded, taking a deep breath. "For now, anyway. Who were you calling?"

"Since you were occupied," Sam said, sitting back down. "I did some hunting on the computer about that body we saw this morning." Sam held the phone out with one of the pictures he had taken on the screen.

Dean made a face, closing his eyes and waving it away. "Not that much better, Sam. Save it for later." He swallowed thickly.

"Oh, sorry," Sam closed the phone and set it back down. "Anyway, after I did some digging, it turns out, this is the second body that's been found in this condition." Sam typed in an address and turned the laptop toward Dean, who drew away. "There's no pictures. It's a news article I found from two weeks ago."

Dean squinted at the screen. "Mysterious Death of Student at Local Apartment Complex" He frowned and rubbed his eyes. "Tell me what it says."

Sam turned the screen back to himself and began reading aloud, condensing as he read. "'Two weeks ago, the body of Daniel Burton was found in a state of extreme desiccation by a fellow student who said the sophomore had been missing from class for over a week. Authorities claim Mr. Burton had to have been dead for much longer than that in order for the body to have been found in such a state. Witnesses swear to have seen Mr. Burton alive no more than a week before the body was discovered.'"

Sam tapped a few keys. "I started doing some random back checking and it turns out that there have been a lot of bodies found in the same condition as that one. All over. And I do mean all over."

Dean leaned over to see the screen, interest piqued.

"Never more than two or three over an extended period of time, random locations with no discernible pattern. But the descriptions all match about the body's condition, and no cause was ever determined. The records I've been checking go back for years. Decades." Sam gave Dean a pointed look. "Maybe centuries."

Dean licked his lips. "Whadaya think it is?" He rose from the table and grabbed his shirt from the end of the bed, tugging it on. Sitting on the bed he slowly began to pull on his boots.

Sam shook his head. "No idea, I need to talk to a few people." He turned off the laptop and closed it. "I was gonna call the science department at the university and see if someone there might be able to help us identify what these are." He shook the envelope with the flakes in it. "Then I think we need to visit the morgue. If you don't feel up to it I don't mind checking this out on my own."

Dean raked a hand through his hair, yawning. "No, I'm good. Can we grab some food first? Man, I gotta eat something." He was so empty he felt hollow.

"Sure," Sam agreed quickly, pleased Dean finally had an appetite. "Now that you mention it, I'm hungry too. Let me call the University and then we can go."

* * * *

After eating at a Denny's because Dean wanted eggs even though it was close to 5 pm they found their way back to the campus. A Saturday afternoon lecture had meant a Professor Horton of the Natural Sciences department would be around.

The lecture ended at 6:30 pm, so after parking and managing to get lost twice they finally found themselves quietly looking for seats in the back of the lecture hall. There was

scattering of about thirty disinterested looking students snoozing through the last 20 minutes of a lecture on the prey/predator relationship.

Sam settled happily into a seat, drinking in the scent of old wood and books. Sometimes he forgot how much he missed this atmosphere.

Next to him, stuffed full of eggs, toast and coffee and already yawning in boredom, Dean, Sam realized, would be asleep in minutes. Sam sometimes wondered how Dean had managed to graduate from High School, considering he found the whole learning process so tedious.

Sam knew it had nothing to do with intelligence. Dean was so smart about some things it was scary, and he possessed natural instincts Sam had had to work damned hard to acquire, but Dean had a notoriously short attention span and bored easily if things weren't moving fast enough to suit him.

Sam, on the other hand, liked to explore ideas and concepts, learn everything he could about things. The same skills that had earned him Dean's Geek Boy nickname also made his aptitude for research and ability to draw sound conclusions from that research, indispensable to their work.

He was so lost in his thoughts he didn't realize the lecture had ended until someone's seat folded back up with a snap as the students rose stiffly and started to leave.

He nudged Dean, who woke with a grunt. "C'mon the lecture's over."

He slid out of his seat and hurried down the aisle to catch Professor Horton before the teacher could leave. Dean followed along more slowly, hands in his pockets.

Sam stepped up on the stage. "Sir? Professor Horton?"

Horton, a tall, white haired man with a severe looking face, glanced up at Sam from putting papers in his briefcase. "Yes, young man, what is it?"

"I was wondering if I could ask you a question? I won't take much of your time."

Horton laughed, changing his entire visage to one of mirthful placidity. "Well, as much as I'd like to think it's relating to the lecture I just gave, somehow I suspect that's not the case."

"No sir. My name's Sam Carlton. Actually, I'm a student at Stanford," *What the hell*, Sam thought, "I'm here visiting my brother." He gestured at Dean's slouched figure. "I have something I was hoping you might be able to identify for me," he said, pulling the envelope out of his pocket. "Or tell me where to go to get it identified."

Horton cocked an eyebrow at Sam, dismissing Dean with a look. "Stanford, eh?" He held out his hand. "What is it? And what makes you think I can help you?"

Taking the envelope from Sam's outstretched hand, Horton moved over to the podium, and turning on the light before shaking out the contents onto a paper lying there. Frowning, he drew a pair of glasses out of his pocket and slipped them on, carefully picking up one of the translucent bits and holding it up to the light.

"Where did you get these?" he asked.

Sam glanced back at Dean who was leaning on the stage with his arms crossed. "We found them. I thought they looked, well, I thought they looked like scales."

Dean seemed surprised at this revelation.

Horton nodded. "These are scales," he confirmed. "Snake scales. Although, I've never seen any quite like this." He picked up another and compared the two.

"You know about snakes?" Dean put in.

Horton looked at Dean over the rim of his glasses. "Young man, I specialize in the study of reptiles. I have written two books on herpetology. Trust me, these are snake scales." He went back to studying the flakes.

Sam forced himself not to laugh as he watched Dean mouth the word, *herpetology* cluelessly.

Horton gestured at Sam to come over. From somewhere on his person, he produced a magnifying glass and proceeded to show Sam the magnified scale.

"One," he said, "Snake scales are transparent. Except for the blue and green, ones, they have no color, like this one, except that this one is tipped black. Also, if you look at the edge, here," he pointed with the tip of a pen to the ragged edges on one end. "This, and I would assume the others, were torn from their position, like they caught on something. Snake skin is one solid piece, not individual scales like these. Judging from the size of this scale, I would say it came from the central section of the body and a pretty good sized one." He straightened and stood looking at the scale on his finger in puzzlement.

"This," he began. "Is a snake scale. I'd stake my reputation on it. But what kind of snake?" He shook his head. "Son, I don't have a clue. I've never seen anything like it." He looked at Sam curiously. "Where did you say you found these?"

Behind them, someone cleared their throat and said, "Excuse me?"

All three men turned.

Dean's eyes widened as he took in the dark haired girl standing behind him, holding a sack in her hand. "Ashley?" he said in surprise. He hoped, on reflection, that his voice hadn't sounded as excited to her as it had to him.

Ashley looked equally surprised. "Dean? Well, hi there! Where did you guys go this morning?"

Dean looked uncomfortable. "We...uh, we had an appointment, sorry about that. That girl okay?"

Ashley walked towards him, nodding. "Just real shook up. She found some friend of hers dead in his apartment. That's what set her off."

Dean managed to look surprised. "Really? Wow. What happened to the guy?"

Ashley shrugged one lovely shoulder. "Didn't hear."

"So..." Dean asked casually. "What are you doing here?"

She lifted the sack. "Making a delivery. Then I'm going home." She addressed the professor. "Are you Professor Horton?"

"Yes, indeed," The professor pulled out his wallet. "My one indulgence." He explained sorting through his money. "Hiding out in my office with a roast beef sandwich and a beer."

He held some bills out to Ashley. "Keep the change, my dear." He took the sack and turned back to Sam who had gathered up the rest of the scales and replaced the envelope in his pocket. "Young man if you find out where those came from I'd be very interested in knowing." He held out a card. "That's my phone number."

Sam took the card and slipped it in his pocket. "Thanks for your help, Professor."

Horton nodded. "No problem," he replied, grabbing his dinner and heading out of the auditorium. "And good luck."

Sam climbed down off the stage and joined Dean and Ashley. "Hi," he said holding out his hand. "I'm Sam. I don't think we got to introduce ourselves this morning."

Ashley smiled and shook his hand. "Nice to meet you. You going to school here?"

Sam frowned and then laughed. "Oh, yeah, taking a few classes. I had some research I needed to follow up on with Professor Horton. Hey, listen," he said turning to Dean. "I can finish up the rest of this on my own if you have anything you want to do."

Dean stared at him. "Huh? Oh." A beat. "You sure?"

Ashley grinned and looked away.

"Yeah, Dean, I can ask questions on my own." Sam rolled his eyes.

Dean's outward manner changed instantly, like a chameleon. He looked at Ashley with a devastating smile. "In that case, can I interest you in some company since you're going home anyway? If you don't have any plans, that is." He traced a finger across his lips.

Ashley smiled back. "As it happens, I have no plans. So, yeah, some company might be nice."

"Great." Dean took her arm. "I'll find my own way home, Sam." he called over his shoulder as they walked back down the aisle.

Sam grinned, shaking his head. He glanced at his watch, on to the morgue, for an evening of frolic.

He took some bills out of his wallet and put them where he could get to them easily, experience having taught him that when all else fails, grease the skids with green. Especially with evening shift morgue attendants.

* * * *

"God, I am so sorry." Dean groaned. He sat on Ashley's couch, elbows on his knees, head in his hands. A wet cloth was draped over the back of his neck. The only light came from the kitchen where he could hear her moving around.

"It's okay. Really," Ashley called back. "It's not like you have a choice with stuff like that." She drifted back out of the kitchen with a fizzing glass in one hand, flipping off the kitchen light and turning on a small table lamp. She set the glass down in front of Dean and sat next to him. "Most guys wait until the second or third date to throw up. It's kind of sweet. Puts you on a more intimate footing right off the bat." She smiled as he rolled his head to look at her in disbelief. She nudged the glass. "Go on, drink that. It'll make you feel better. When you said you'd been sick this morning, I thought you were kidding."

Dean sighed and picked up the glass, making a face at the chalky fizz as he swallowed. "I just can't shake this crap," he complained. "This is *not* how I meant to spend the evening."

She rubbed his knee. "Do you want to go out on the balcony?" she asked, eyes gently amused. "Maybe some fresh air will help."

"Sure, why not?" He sighed, dragging himself to his feet to follow her through the living room and out onto the small balcony. The cooler night air did feel nice on his hot skin. He leaned on the rail and looked out over the lights spreading below them.

She joined him, her shoulder just touching his. She sighed softly and brushed her hair out of her eyes. She had changed into a backless, soft cotton sundress just the right shade of blue to set off her tanned skin. "I took this apartment just for the view. I move around a lot so I always try to find a nice place to stay. Sometimes it's just the atmosphere. Makes me feel like I'm part of something."

"Why do you move so much?" Dean asked, turning to look at her profile.

Ashley shrugged, clasping her hands. "I don't know. I can't seem to find what I'm looking for, I guess. I feel like I've been searching forever sometimes."

"Yeah, I know what that's like." Dean replied softly, surprised at himself. Normally, his small talk with women involved more basic information gathered as quickly as possible. For some reason, maybe because he felt sick, his interest in Ashley had climbed higher than his belt buckle.

She turned to look at him. "You do?" she asked in surprise.

He shrugged. "Yeah, I mean...after my Mom—" He cut himself off with a snap. For God's sake, what was he doing? He looked back out over the lights.

After a moment of silence, Ashley's hand was warm on his arm. "It's okay, Dean." She reached out and turned his face back toward her. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to." She smiled. "We don't have to talk, we can just look at the view."

Dean regarded her with a combination of longing and reluctance. The green of his eyes was shadowed as he searched her face and found no expectation there. Simply a gentle smile and the warmth of her eyes. He swallowed uneasily, feeling suddenly awkward and inexplicably embarrassed to be here. He took a step back, a hand over his stomach, eyes down.

"Uh, look. I really oughta go." He glanced up at her. "It's still early, you don't want to waste the night with a guy who can't stop puking." He couldn't believe how stupid he sounded or understand what was compelling him to act this way. It was so *unDean*. "I'll catch a cab back to my motel or call my brother. There's still plenty of time for someone like you to go out and have

some fun..." His voice trailed off as she moved closer and slid her hand under the one resting against his stomach, pulling his arm toward herself.

"I don't want to go out and I am having fun," Ashley replied, rubbing her thumb over the back of his hand. "This is nice. You're nice." She lifted his hand and kissed his fingertips lightly. "Why do you want to leave so soon?"

Dean swallowed again, eyes closing briefly. He lifted his other hand to his temple. "I think I need to sit down..." He shifted his hand to the railing. He was breathing to fast.

"C'mon'." Ashley pulled his arm gently. "Why don't you lie down for a while? I'm sure you'll feel better. There's nowhere to go and lots of time to get there."

Dean let her pull him back into the apartment and across the thick, mismatched rugs on the floor. She led him to her rather Bohemian bedroom, all scarves, beads and pillows and gently pushed him down on the bed. He felt her tug his boots off and heard the thud as they hit the floor. Then she walked around the bed and climbed in, fitting herself against him, her body soft and warm. She draped one arm across his chest and rested her head against his shoulder. Then she lay quietly, her eyes closed.

Dean felt himself relaxing and slowly curled his arm around her shoulders as he lay there, fingers lightly stroking her skin. It was...nice.

* * * *

Sam smiled down at the morgue attendant, a girl with thick glasses and large brown eyes. Her curly blonde hair hung around her face in a way that reminded Sam of a cocker spaniel's ears. She was cute as hell in a stuffed toy sort of way,

Sam wished fervently that Dean were there to handle this. Sam could scam with the best of them but he wasn't comfortable with the flirting aspects of their jobs. It felt like betrayal even knowing it was just a means to an end.

She smiled back up at Sam in all his shaggy-haired, 6' 5" glory, slipped off her glasses and said with more than casual courtesy. "Hi, I'm Clarice, can I help you?"

"Well, I hope so." Sam leaned down, elbows on the desk to bring himself to her eye level. He deepened his voice slightly and licked his lips. "I'm Sam Bennett, I'm doing a follow up for the university paper on Matt Lewis's death. The guy who was found dead in is apartment yesterday."

Her eyes widened slightly and she made a small face. "Oh, him." She shook her head. "Man, talk about weird. You see a lot around here, but that..." she trailed off, still shaking her head.

"Yeah?"

Clarice looked around conspiratorially and Sam couldn't resist doing the same. "Do you want to see? The family can't claim the body yet."

Good grief, this was going to be a lot easier than Sam had thought. *Take that, Dean!*

"Sure, if it's okay." Sam stood back up as Clarice got out of her chair. She couldn't have been more than 5' 2" and Sam felt like a giant next to her.

"There's no one here but me. I gotta tell you, most nights it's pretty boring." She gestured for him to follow and pushed through the heavy glass doors behind her.

Morgues were always so cold, Sam thought, as they walked down the short passageway to another pair of doors. He held one open for Clarice and followed her in.

There were several gurneys around the room, which was obviously for performing autopsies. Sam didn't look too closely.

Clarice walked over to a desk and thumbed through a file, pulling out one labeled, *Lewis, Matthew*. She flipped it open and checked the locker number, leaving the file open on the desk.

"He's in A4." She strode to the wall where about a dozen doors were mounted in the wall.. She unlocked it then paused looking appraisingly at Sam. "You're not squeamish are you? 'Cause you're cute, but I don't do vomit."

Sam laughed. "I think I'll be okay," he assured her. "What does the Coroner say about this?" he asked as she pulled the tray out, the humor leaving his face as he saw the twisted arch of the body under the sheet.

Clarice pulled back the sheet, her face reflecting her thoughts. "Poor bastard. I can't imagine what happened to him. Blew the Coroner's mind, two bodies like this in less than a month."

Sam glanced at Clarice. "Were you here when the other guy came in?"

"Yeah, really creepy to see it twice. It's like a mummy; there isn't a drop of moisture, blood, bile, brain fluid- nothing, left in this body. It's basically been turned into a rawhide bone." She shook her head. "There isn't much to work with. There were similarities between the two bodies though," she added, rolling her eyes, "I mean, other than the obvious."

She pulled the sheet up and shoved Matt's body back into it's alcove.

Sam followed her back to the desk where she picked up the file and looked up a page before showing it to Sam. The words meant nothing to him, chemical terms. "Both bodies had two wounds, side by side, punctures made by two smooth, very sharp objects, long and tapering. The channels they left were longer than your fingers." She drew a finger along Sam's hand and rolled her eyes up at him.

Sam reached over to point to a place on the paper, smoothly removing his hand from hers. "What's this?"

Clarice glanced at the paragraph, slipping her glasses back on. "Now this was weird," she commented. "There were traces of some kind of toxin. Almost acidic. What little they could get was sent off for testing to see if the lab could identify it."

Sam frowned. "Could a poison do that?" He gestured over his shoulder with his thumb at the bank of drawers behind them.

Clarice shook her head. "I'm no expert, but I can't think of anything that would do that to someone, at least not in the period of time since he was last seen alive." She closed the file and stuffed it back in the drawer. "And according to the police, that was less than five hours." She frowned and took her glasses off again, chewing on the earpiece. "The Coroner tested the sample we had of the toxin," she said biting her lip thoughtfully. "You know I really shouldn't be telling you all this..." She added looking up at him again and lifting an eyebrow.

Sam smiled. "I won't put any of the stuff you told me in the article. My wife proofreads everything to make sure I don't screw up on stuff like that."

At the word "wife", Clarice's face fell. She snorted. "Now I *definitely* know I shouldn't be telling you this."

Sam extended a hand and gently clasped hers with it, he lifted it to his lips and kissed it lightly on the back, to Clarice's obvious delight. "I won't tell if you don't. What did the Coroner say about the toxin?"

When Clarice withdrew her hand she felt the unmistakable touch of paper. A quick glance revealed two folded twenties as she slid her hand into her pocket. What the hell, she still came out ahead.

"He said the initial test showed that the toxin was very powerful and was suspended in a solution very similar to human saliva."

Sam stepped back and stared at her. "What?"

Clarice folded her arms. "Spit. The toxin was delivered in human spit."

Dean slowly opened his eyes, feeling the lids pull apart, staring blearily over his surroundings, willing them to at least try to work in unison and focus. He groaned. Not again... He was getting tired of waking every day up in a different place from where he thought he was,

and this definitely was not their hotel room. He slowly stretched out a hand and curiously fingered the blue fringe on the scarf hanging from the bed canopy over his head. His fingers, when he brought them back, were scented with rose.

Eyes widening in a rush of memory, he twisted around on the bed. The other side had been pulled up and there was a note lying on the pillow. He snatched it up and squinted at it with still uncooperative eyes, rubbing them reflexively.

Dean,

I tried to wake you up but you were really out of it. I hope you feel better today. Had to go to work. I get off at 5:00. (That's a hint). If I don't hear from you, no problem. I just want you to know I had a great time last night. I enjoyed our 'talk'. I've never met anyone like you. There's stuff to eat in the kitchen and coffee in the pot.

Ashley

Dean ruffled a hand through his hair and pulled back the sheets. He was clad in his boxers, which meant nothing. Stretching his neck he could see his clothes pooled by the side of the bed. The last thing he remembered was going to sleep, dressed, with Ashley's warmth beside him.

Crap!! Of all the damned things not to remember! Feeling like ten kinds of a jerk, he made a disgusted sound and sat up. Pushing himself off the bed, he grabbed his clothes and began jerking them on, hopping clumsily as he pulled on his boots. His cell phone buzzed suddenly, drawing a startled curse as he fumbled for it. Snapping it open, he barked, "Yeah!"

"What's wrong?" Sam's voice snapped.

Dean made a face, knuckling his eyes again. "Nothing. Nothing. I just woke up, I'm just a little groggy." He crossed into the front room and sank down in one of the overstuffed chairs. The whole damn place smelled like roses. He didn't know why he was so agitated.

"Are you okay? I was just checking to see if you needed a ride or anything." Sam sounded amused now. "I got some information from the morgue attendant I think'll interest you."

"I'm fine." Dean groused. "And I do need a ride. Ashley went to work earlier, I guess I didn't wake up." He shook his head, feeling slightly hung, over but he knew the strongest thing he'd had to drink last night was Alka Seltzer. *That* memory brought heat to his face.

"Gimme the address and I'll come pick you up."

Dean frowned. *Where the hell was he?* "Hang on." He got up and rummaged in the litter of papers on the coffee table, managing to find an envelope with an address on it which he read off to Sam.

"It'll take me a few minutes to get there," Sam said as he wrote the information down. "You're still downtown, by the university."

"S okay. I'm gonna grab some coffee. I'll be downstairs in twenty minutes." He closed the phone and stuffed it back into his pocket.

Tossing the envelope back on the table, something shiny caught his eye as he tried to neaten the mess he had made, and he pulled the little square out from under the other papers. It was an iridescent matchbook from a place called The Inside Club. He frowned. Where had he seen that before?

His stomach growled suddenly, and he dropped the matchbook back on the table, opting for food over curiosity. Scrounging in Ashley's tiny kitchen he blessed her for the coffee and located a bagel which he sliced and toasted. Maybe he could keep that down. He put the bagel between his teeth and picked up the cup he had decided to take and headed out the door, locking it behind him and moving down the stairs to wait for Sam.

* * * *

Sam cruised slowly down the street looking for Dean's familiar slouching figure, finally spotting him leaning against a raised flowerbed, eating something. Dean saw the Impala at the same time and started walking toward it as Sam pulled up.

"So, how was your evening?" Sam cut his eyes toward Dean and grinned as Dean jerked open the door.

Dean slid into the passenger seat and slammed the door. "None of your business," he snarled. He chucked the rest of the bagel at the pigeons and drank the last of the coffee.

Sam blinked in hurt surprise. "I'm sorry, do you want me to stop?"

Dean glared at him. "What? Why?"

"So you can get your tail out of the door, man. What's your problem?" Sam jerked the car forward.

Dean rolled his eyes and banged his head on the window. "I'm sorry."

Sam shot a look at him and then back to the road.

"I didn't mean to bite your head off. I'm sorry." Dean actually looked at him this time. "Really, dude. I just—" Dean cut off, shaking his head. He just what?

"What's wrong?" Sam asked, concerned now. Temper tantrums he could deal with, but this didn't feel like that. "You and Ashley not get along? I figured since you were there this morning... what happened?" He paused. "Or didn't happen?"

Dean squirmed. Sam stared at him.

"What happened, Dean?" Sam repeated more gently.

In a small voice, Dean replied, "Before or after I hurled?"

Sam almost ran into the curb. "Oh, my God!" he yelped. "Dean, you didn't?" he choked, torn between horror and laughter.

"It's not funny!"

"I know, I know! I'm sorry!" Sam clamped his teeth down firmly on the inside of his cheek. "Dean, if you were still sick you shouldn't have—"

"I wasn't!" Dean exclaimed. "I felt fine. We walked back to her place. Man, I hadn't been there thirty minutes and..." He made a tossing away gesture and covered his eyes.

"What did she do?" Sam turned the wheel and headed them back in the direction of the motel.

Dean looked confused then. "She was totally cool. Like no big deal. She even got me some stomach junk to take." He stared at the floor, remembering how comfortable she had made him feel. How warm the touch of her skin was...

"She sounds nice, Dean. What happened then?"

Dean shrugged. "I was kinda dizzy, she had me lie down on her bed. She got on there with me and..."

"And what?"

"I don't know!" Dean spread his hands. "I woke up this morning with no clothes and she was gone."

"Well, it seems to me—" Sam began as delicately as possible.

"We didn't have sex, Sam!" A beat. "At least, I don't think we did." Dean massaged the back of his neck.

"Well, what's the big deal, either way? It's not like you're gonna see her again," Sam commented, pulling into the motel parking lot.

Dean's silence was louder than yelling and a lot more informative. Sam stopped the car and stared at Dean, who, in turn, was staring at the dashboard.

"Dean?" Dean moved his head slightly to look at Sam whose eyes widened in disbelief. "Oh, my God," Sam breathed. "You *are* gonna see her again!" His mouth fell open. "You *like* her!"

Dean actually blushed, or it may have been anger judging from the way he jerked open the door and threw himself out of the car, stalking toward their room.

Sam immediately felt bad and scrambled out after him. "Dean, I'm sorry! I didn't mean that the way it came out." He caught up with Dean and grabbed his arm, holding on even though Dean tried to jerk away. "Dean, really. I'm sorry. You just never—"

Dean had the grace to look chagrined. He knew what Sam was trying not to say. Dean was the king of the one night stand. Hit and run Winchester. Rock and roll. Hello, goodbye, exit the handsome stranger. Well...just 'cause he maybe wanted to see Ashley again didn't make this any different.

Dean's voice was a trifle on the defensive side. "I know, Sam. Don't make a big deal out of it. We'll be outta here in a few days and she'll just be another notch on my gun." He slipped the key into the lock.

"Dean, she doesn't have to be, there nothing wrong with liking someone—" Sam followed him in.

"God, kill me now," Dean groaned. "I don't want to talk about it anymore." He sat on the bed and pulled his boots off. "I'm gonna take a shower and when I get out you can tell me what you found out at the morgue." He grabbed a pair of boxers and some clean jeans out of his bag and headed into the bathroom.

Sam watched him go, lips in a tight line and a sad look in his eyes.

* * * *

Sam found a place that delivered while Dean was showering and had some breakfast sandwiches and coffee sent over. They were waiting when Dean got out of the shower, in a cloud of steam, a towel around his neck.

"Hey, is that food?" Dean asked, sniffing sausage. God, he was starving. Half a bagel just wasn't cutting it. He ruffed his hair with the towel and grabbed a clean shirt. Shoving his arms down the sleeves, he left it hanging and sat down at the table taking one of the sandwiches Sam pushed at him. He popped the top off his coffee and dumped in two packets of sugar for the hit and gulped some of the scalding liquid down.

He had three bites of the sandwich swallowed by the time Sam had the laptop fired up.

"Take it easy," Sam advised, eyeing him. "It'd be nice if something you ate stayed in your body."

Dean grunted. "I feel okay." He pulled some of Sam's notes over and scanned them. "So what did the morgue guy know?"

Sam cocked an eyebrow. "It was a morgue girl, actually. And she knew a lot."

Dean smirked. "Did she give it up without a fight?" At Sam's dirty look he added, "The information, Sam! God, get your mind out of the gutter," concluding with a self righteous sniff before taking another bite of sandwich, eyes sparkling for the first time in days.

Sam forgave him in exchange for that look he had missed since Dean had been ill.

He pulled his notes back and flipped through them, taking a bite of his own sandwich.

"Turns out the same attendant was there when the other body was brought in. She remembered him. Both bodies were in the same condition: Sucked almost bone dry of every body fluid." Sam held out the copy of the preliminary Coroner's report, which he had managed to wrangle after a brief struggle over the terms of surrender. "*Taking one for the team*", Dean would have called it.

"Here's the strange part—"

"Stranger than what you just said?" Dean snorted. "I can't wait." He stuffed the last of the sandwich in his mouth and brushed his hands on his jeans.

"The attendant said both bodies showed identical entry wounds. Puncture wounds made by a pair of very long, sharp, tapering objects." Sam held up his forefinger. "She said the base was at least as big as my finger, and curved."

Dean made a face, curling his lip. "What? Like fangs?"

Sam widened his eyes a little and cocked his head slightly. "The first body had the wounds in at the base of the neck, where it joins at the shoulder. Matt Lewis's body, they were in the back of his throat, just past his tongue." Dean blanched as Sam went on. "Okay, the morgue girl said the Coroner found traces of a toxin in the wounds, suspended in a fluid very similar to human saliva but with trace elements they haven't identified yet. It appeared to be

almost a venom, but with qualities that would paralyze and break down tissue, liquefying it, almost like stomach acid. That may be what allows whatever this is to suck the victims dry. Maybe it paralyzes them by injecting the toxin and then literally drinks them alive.”

“You saying you think this is some kind of giant vampire thing or something? Or a leech?” The tone of Dean’s voice was skeptical to say the least.

Sam shook his head and punched some keys on the laptop. “I did a lot of digging last night and I found some interesting stuff about snake demons and myths. You know those scales you found, right?”

Dean nodded, sipping his coffee, listening intently now.

“There are several possibilities, but I ran across one that seems to fit the bill better than the rest.” Sam worked his way through several web pages until he found the one he wanted. “It’s a fairly obscure Greek myth, about a girl who steals a young man promised to a goddess in a yearly ritual celebrating the city’s good fortune. The goddess swears to destroy the city in return for the woman’s betrayal. She kills the young man by sucking him dry of his life fluids and leaving him as dust. The girl begs the goddess to take her vengeance out on her not the city, since the sin is hers. The goddess agrees to the terms and curses the girl.

“She’s doomed to live through eternity in a never ending search for real love, seducing men and then turning into a serpent and killing her lover by feeding on him until he’s sucked dry. It’s a Catch 22. She’s compelled to seduce these men in an effort to find true love, even though she’ll only end up killing them. Even if she finds true love, she’ll just end up losing it.” Sam sat back, glancing over at Dean.

Dean stared at him, round eyed. “Wow,” he finally said. “Sounds like somebody you want to avoid. Jeez.” He rubbed his nose. “I’m impressed, Sam,” he said with total honesty. “I can’t believe you plowed through all this and found that.”

Sam shrugged nonchalantly, but was pleased at Dean’s praise nonetheless. “It’s just a theory, and it’s set on a story that may or may not have really happened. But based on what I’ve been able to find out about the past deaths, it fits the pattern.”

“So, assuming this is what we’re dealing with, what do we do now?”

Sam sighed and rocked back in his chair. “I need to keep researching. Like I said, this is a very obscure myth. What I told you is what I pieced together from what I managed to find.”

“We need to find out where this Matt Lewis went and who he was with the night he died.” Dean quickly buttoned his shirt. “Someone must have seen him.”

“I picked up a paper this morning that has a decent picture of him.” Sam added, shutting off the laptop. “We could use that to show to people.” He finished his sandwich and coffee and tossed the trash away before picking up the paper with the head shot of Matt Lewis and carefully tearing it away from the page.

Dean rolled up his sleeves and grabbed the car keys. “Where do we start, Sherlock?”

Sam held up a shiny book of matches. “How about here?”

Dean frowned at the little packet. “What is that place?”

Sam tucked the photo in his pocket. “I checked out their website. It’s a pretty popular club in the newer part of town. Indy rock, Alternative, that kind of thing. They have a restaurant and bar that runs during the day and then they open the club about 9 pm. It’s strictly Membership Only to the club but members can be accompanied by up to three three guests, so all you have to do is know someone who has a membership there to get in. They have a Members Only webcam section of the website, but all that you can download without a password is a set of demonstrator clips. It might be worth a membership to be able to see it.”

Dean made a face accompanied by a gagging sound. “Sounds like my kinda place. Will there be anyone there this time of day? It’s barely noon.”

“Restaurant, remember? There might be someone from the club there this early or someone that can tell us who we need to ask for. It can’t hurt to check, we can always go back later-“ Sam caught Dean’s hesitation, remembering Dean maybe, possibly, was thinking about

considering the idea of having plans for the evening. "Or I can, if you're gonna be tied up. So to speak." Sam couldn't bite back the grin.

Dean hit him. "Just get in the damned car, Sam!"

* * * *

The Inside Club was located in a newer, trendy part of town. Lots of glass and steel buildings with landscaped quads and walkways. The club was on the bottom floor and basement of a twelve story office building and had a steady stream of people going in and out of the door. Apparently it was a popular lunch spot as well as night spot.

Sam felt a little out of place in his worn clothes compared to the sharply dressed clientele but Dean didn't seem bothered and went blithely in and up to the girl at the greeting station.

She had large gray eyes and her dark blonde hair was pulled back into a cascading waterfall of curls. Her black shirt and short pencil skirt accentuated the fact that she was so thin Sam could have snapped her in half with one hand. Huge silver loops dangled from her ears. Her badge identified her as Megan.

She looked them up and down, taking in the shabby clothes, rather aggressive attitudes, the twin bad boy looks and, *oh my God, the eyes!* and smiled. She had long ago learned that the best presents didn't always come with the fanciest wrappers. You had to take the wrapping off to get to the goodies inside.

"Can I help you gentlemen? A table perhaps?" Megan said, addressing the shorter one, who was still over six feet tall and was giving her a much more thorough once over than she had given them. She experienced a bizarre urge to cover herself with one of the large menus.

"I hope so," Dean began, his voice a rough purr, green eyes slightly lidded. "We wanted to talk to someone about a membership in the club. Would that be you?" He reached out and drew a finger lightly down her hand. "Megan."

Sam mentally rolled his eyes but let Dean work his magic.

Megan swallowed. "Well, actually, you would need to come by the club and fill out an application after opening time, which is 10 pm."

Dean leaned on the podium, looking disappointed. "That's too bad, my brother here wanted to have a look at the Members Only site. See if this is our kind of place. We're only in town for a few days and were looking for somewhere to spend a little quality time, if you know what I mean." He blasted her with his full gaze and she crumbled like a reed before a wildfire.

"Well...I'm only supposed to do this for special clientele. But if you're only gonna be around for a couple of days..." She glanced around and held up a finger. "Hang on."

She disappeared around a glass screen. Dean looked at Sam and shrugged with his eyebrow. Another girl, an almost exact duplicate of Megan except that she had dark hair, took her place. Her name was Regan. She smiled in the face of their stares and went to assist a new group of diners.

Megan reappeared with two gold cards in her hands. "You didn't get these from me," she said, holding them out. "They're VIP memberships. We use them for special guests who don't have a membership but would like to come to the club and have a good time."

Sam and Dean accepted the cards. Sam flipped his over. There was an e-mail address and a website address followed by a series of letters and numbers.

Megan pointed. "That's the website address and the password to get you into the webcam. It's really just for fun, but you can go through the different nights and see who was there and what was going on or just watch it scan through the evening crowd. It's promotional really." She eyed Dean speculatively. "I hope you come tonight."

Dean blinked. "Well, darlin', I'll do my best," he finally replied. He leaned down and brushed her lips lightly with his. "Thanks for the help. We really appreciate it."

Sam leaned closer. "You work here at night?"

Megan nodded. "Couple of nights a week, but I'm here a lot of other nights, too. Just for fun," she added, eyes on Dean. Dean smiled in return.

Sam pulled the newspaper photo out and held it up. "You ever see this guy before?"

Megan took the clipping and actually looked at the photo. "Yeah, I do know him."

Sam and Dean exchanged a look.

"Well, I mean I've seen him here, I think his name's Mike or something." She handed the paper back. "Why?"

Sam pocketed the clipping. "He's a friend. He recommended this place."

Megan smiled, unperturbed by the non-answer. "Well, I'm glad he did." She grabbed some menus as a new group came in. "I gotta get back to work guys. Maybe I'll see you tonight." She broadened her smile and went to greet the new guests.

"Man," Dean grunted as they returned to the car. "Talk about a hole in one." He glanced at his watch. "What now?"

Sam was fingering the gold card he'd been given. "I'd really like to take a look at the webcam stuff on the site. This is our best lead; actually our only lead. There's no pattern to these killings. They're totally random, nothing for months then three in a row, then one, then nothing again." Sam sighed and tapped his fingers on the car top. "It's almost like whoever's doing this is doing it when they feel like it, so it doesn't seem to have anything to do with actual hunger. God knows what kind of a criteria she uses to choose a victim." He jerked open the passenger door and slid in.

Dean climbed in to drive. "So back to the motel?"

Sam pursed his lips. "Yeah, I guess so. Maybe I can find something useful on the tapes." He turned to Dean. "How are you feeling?"

Dean shrugged. "I'm fine, Sam. Do you want me to help you with your research?" He started the car and pulled out into traffic. "I mean, I know you're way better at it than I am, but I wanta help if I can."

Sam cocked an eyebrow at him. "You want go see Ashley don't you?"

Dean bobbed his head. "No, Sam. That's not it at all!"

Sam smirked. "It's okay, Dean. It's dumb for both of us to sit there for hours staring at a computer screen. How about this?" he offered. "I'll do the laptop research, you go spend some time with Ashley, and then we can meet at the club tonight around ten thirty or eleven. Ask around about Matt, who he was seen with lately. Judging from the number of matchbooks he had, he was there a lot."

Dean was honest enough with himself to realize Sam was handing him an out. And he was shameless enough to take it. It wasn't like Sam would be in any danger from his laptop. "Good idea. But how'll you get to the club? I can pick you up."

Sam shook his head. "Nah. I'll get a cab. That way you won't have to worry about it. Take her to dinner or something. I'll meet you there. Maybe by then I'll have something worthwhile."

Dean nodded. "I'll drop you off at the motel." He frowned. "I guess I need some better clothes, I don't think that club is a torn jeans and ratty t-shirt kinda place." He gave his battered clothing a quick look. By the same token, he had to admit, he wasn't a dress pants and evening shirt kinda guy. He wasn't a dance club kinda guy either, come to think of it.

Sam smiled.

* * * *

Dean drove them back to the motel and dug around for some decent clothes. To Sam's astonishment he even took the time to run the motel provided iron over his chosen shirt and pants.

Dean paused as he was getting dressed, "Are you sure you don't want some help?"

Sam watched Dean quietly for a moment. "Dean, for once *I'm pimping you out*. I don't need you. I want you to go out with an actual nice girl and have an actual date. Not a hit and run. Try it. You might like it."

Dean had looked so uncomfortable at that, Sam was almost sorry he'd said it.

Dean's expression was a study in mixed emotions and he was obviously at a loss for a smartass comeback. Instead, he grabbed his jacket and headed for the door, turning back at the last second.

His "Thanks, man," was almost too soft for Sam to hear.

Sam had laughed softly, feeling a little bit like he was sending Dean off on his first date. Dean threw himself completely into whatever he did, if he put half the effort into his attempts at actual romance, Ashley didn't stand a chance.

Sam powered up the laptop, ordered a pizza and then settled in for a long session, deciding to do more follow up on his myth theory. It was shooting in the dark, but somehow it just felt right. By the time an hour had passed he was writing furiously, eyes jumping from the screen to his notepad, a line drawn between his eyebrows.

* * * *

It was just before five when Dean walked up to the café where Ashley worked. He sat at an empty table and watched her move among the patrons. He was amused when she bustled up to his table with a menu.

"Hi! I'm Ashley, what can I get –Oh, it's you!!" She sounded both surprised and pleased. She stepped back as he stood, her eyes looking him over. "Wow, I didn't recognize you. You look...great. You must be feeling better."

Dean shoved his hands in his pockets. He hadn't had a lot to choose from, settling on a pair of black dress pants that were only a little worn, a black t-shirt and a long sleeved charcoal shirt thrown over it. He had stolen Sam's dress belt with the silver buckle. His amulet hung around his neck as usual. He glanced away, mouth quirking. "Yeah, I'm good, thanks."

Ashley smiled, pen to her lips again. "You, uh...you going out tonight?"

Dean looked back at her, head cocked, returning her smile. He scratched his head. "Yeah, well, I was thinking about it." His smile broadened into a grin. "You know someone that could help me with that?"

Ashley's eyes sparkled as she grinned. "Do you promise not to throw up on me?"

Dean had gone back to Ashley's apartment with her so she could shower and change for the evening. He sat in the same overstuffed chair he had that morning and listened to the shower running.

She had returned in a surprisingly short time, trying to fasten a necklace. The deep blue halter dress she wore was made of some silky, clinging fabric that caressed every part of her when she moved and left Dean breathlessly in doubt as to whether she had anything on underneath it. It was devoid of decoration, accented only by her silver earrings and bracelets. Her sneakers had been replaced with high heels and her hair was tumbling around her shoulders in soft waves.

Dean stood without thought when she entered this time, staring at her.

She paused and smiled at him. "Well, aren't you the gentleman." Her words were amused, but her tone did not imply she thought it was funny. "Can you help me fasten this?" she added, holding out the chain.

"Sure," Dean said, as she stood in front of him, facing away, drawing her hair into a soft bundle to get it out of the way. He took the delicate chain and carefully put it around her neck, his large fingers fumbling with the clasp. The scent of roses wafted over him. He swallowed and

finally got the necklace fastened. "There," he forced out, helping her resettle her hair, enjoying the silky touch against the roughness of his fingertips.

She turned, eyes wide, looking up at him. "Thank you," she said, reaching out and straightened his collar.

Dean closed his eyes briefly, wetting his lips. "You look beautiful," he finally murmured.

Ashley gave a tiny, surprised smile. "Thank you," she said again, more softly. She tilted her head to the side. "For you to say that to me means a lot."

A small line appeared between Dean's eyebrows. "What? I meant it. You are beautiful." He found his constant confusion around her incredibly...confusing.

Ashley placed a hand against Dean's face. The touch of her fingers against his cheek was soft and warm. "I know you mean it. Something tells me those kinds of words are hard for you to say when you really mean them. When it's more than just a means to an end." She raised herself slightly and touched her lips gently to his. "And I thank you for them."

Dean floundered mentally, the brush of her lips like an electrical shock, not sure, for one of the very few times in his life, what to say. He reached up to rub his forehead. "Do you want to go? To dinner I mean? If you're hungry." *Good grief...he had been smoother when he was fourteen.*

She studied him for a long moment — to the point of discomfort for Dean.

She smiled again, turned away and scooped her bag off the table. "Where do you want to go?"

* * * *

Sam straightened stiffly, stretching his arms out, yawning, giving up trying to focus on his notes.

After staring at the computer for hours and gorged on pizza, he was having trouble staying awake.

He finally heaved to his feet and shuffled into the bathroom to splash some water on his face and try to wake up. He still had some time to kill before he had to meet Dean at the club. Grabbing a towel he dried his face, slinging the towel over his shoulder as he moved back into the main room. Sinking back into his chair, he reached out and called up the website for the club, keying in the password for the webcam. He could scan some of the videos until it was time to go. He maximized the window on the player and sat back, idly surveying the items he had assembled on the table based on what his research had told him.

The iron stiletto he had found in the bottom of the trunk buried under a box of books and a collection of assorted hand weapons. He remembered having it, but was surprised to actually find it. It had been blessed countless times but Sam had carefully and generously re-blessed it with fresh holy water and wound the black rosary from their stash around the grip, kissing the cross before tying it in place. The leather-bound book of rituals lay open to the needed page, a few notes scribbled here and there in the margins.

Next to the ash was an ashtray filled with the burned remains of ever-present salt, along with several small bottles of herbs and oils and including, as Sam's bandaged finger attested, ten drops of human blood. He reached out for the stiletto and dipped his fingers into the greasy ash, carefully wiping down every inch of the blade, rubbing in the ash and taking up more, murmuring soft words as he did so, binding the blade with their power.

Blood rituals were serious. Taking out this ancient evil would be tricky and dangerous and the one item that was apparently required to seal its effectiveness was the one thing that would be the most difficult to find and control. Only a blessed blade of iron, properly anointed and wielded in an act of love could destroy the creature.

They had the blade, so all they had to do was figure out who the next victim was going to be and convince him to knife the woman he was making love to before she turned into a giant snake and killed him first.

No problem, Sam thought. Yeah, he'd take care of it right after he sprouted wings and flew off the roof. He shook his head disgustedly and went back to anointing the blade, better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it. They'd work out the fine details as they went, just like always.

His eyes drifted to the computer screen to watch revelers from past evenings at the Inside Club as his fingers continued to work the blade.

* * * *

Dean toyed with the steak he had ordered. He had been starving when he ordered it, but after a few bites had lost interest. He hoped he wasn't getting sick again. He had a feeling it had more to do with the intimate classiness of the restaurant Ashley had taken them to. It was all small tables, white tablecloths, candles, soft music and a wine list thicker than his Dad's journal. Dean was well out of his element and knew it.

Ashley, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice Dean's awkwardness with the atmosphere and the surroundings. She was so casually confident about it all, he tried his best to relax and enjoy her company. Two and a half glasses of wine had done nothing to lessen the tension he was feeling.

"Is your steak all right?" Ashley asked, watching Dean pushing the food around his plate. Their conversation had become a little stilted after they were seated, and she had realized how uncomfortable he actually was in the rather elegant surroundings.

She found the fact that he was obviously self-conscious to have a certain charm. He seemed younger, more innocent. The rakish bravado he had displayed earlier had vanished, replaced by an endearing uncertainty about his behavior and words.

His eyes flicked upwards at her question, and he nodded. "It's great. Really." He looked down again. "I guess I'm not as hungry as I thought." He picked up his glass and downed the remainder of the wine in it, warmth spread through him as it hit his stomach. It was a little too sweet for his taste and surprisingly strong. He rarely drank wine. It had a tendency to sneak up on him before he realized he'd had too much and always left him with a killer hangover.

"Are you okay? You seem a little...uncomfortable." She took a bite of her chicken and chewed delicately, her tongue drifting over her lips to collect stray drops of the reddish sauce.

Dean watched her mouth as she chewed, finally tearing his eyes away and rolling the stem of the goblet back and forth between his fingers. He gave a small laugh. "I guess I'm just a little nervous," he confessed.

Ashley laughed in return. "Am I that scary?"

He shook his head. "No. No. Not at all." He laughed again. "It's just..." He swallowed and rubbed his hand across the lower half of his face, glancing around for inspiration. His other hand flopped as he tried to find the right words, the trouble being that the wrong words came so easily to him. "I go out with a lot of girls-" He bit that off the instant he said it. *Don't tell her that!* "I mean, this is the first time I've been on an actual *date* date since I can't even remember. When I wanted it to be more than-" he closed his eyes and covered them with his hand. "God, I don't know what I'm saying..." He hadn't thought it was possible to feel more stupid than he already did. Wrong again.

Ashley rested her warm hand on his cold one, feeling the muscles tighten as he almost drew away. She kept it there, looking at him until he met her gaze, and she knew he was really seeing her. "I like you, too, Dean. Don't be afraid of me, I don't expect anything more than what the evening gives us."

Dean sighed. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

He shifted uncomfortably, then just spit it out. "Did we have sex the other night?"

* * * *

Sam finished wrapping the stiletto in a clean cloth and slipped it carefully into his jacket pocket, more to know where it was than anything. He had laid out some clothes and after a futile search through both his and Dean's bags for his dress belt with the silver buckle, he had given up and used his regular belt, worn as it was.

Sitting down in the chair by the laptop to pull on his shoes and socks, he idly watched the screen as the club webcam swept over the shifting crowd. He stopped as a sudden close up brought him face to face with Matt Lewis. He hit the stop button and ran it back, checking the date stamp. It corresponded with the evening Matt had died.

"I can't believe this," he whispered when the camera caught a woman with dark red hair from behind as she slipped between Matt and the girl he had been dancing with, a small object dangling from her fingers. Sam watched breathlessly as the scene played out before him, cursing when the camera moved on. "Go back!" he barked at it.

The camera failed to listen, and for several nerve-wracking minutes Sam stared at the screen as it panned back and forth over the crowd. The song in the background came to an end and the lens resettled itself in its former position just as Matt swung his partner around, his lips inches from hers as the camera pulled in for a close up.

Sam's eyes widened and a look of horror swept over his face. "Oh my God..." He frantically finished jerking on his shoes and grabbed up the motel phone to call a cab.

* * * *

It was just past 10p.m. when they arrived at the club, and there was a crowd milling around outside already.

"Wow," Dean said as he surveyed the gathering, relieved to see his choice of attire would pass muster. Casually trendy for the men and anything went for the women. "This must be quite a place." He pulled out his wallet and fished for the gold card he had been given earlier.

"How did you get a VIP card? I thought you'd never been here." Ashley whispered as they walked through the door.

"Low friends in high places," he replied. "Have you ever been here?" He took in the glass floor, light show, already crowded dance floor and music that was so not his type, although he did like the heavy bass vibrating in the air.

Ashley shrugged. "Once or twice, as someone's guest. I don't have a card."

They moved down a shallow set of steps and Dean guided her over to a table away from the floor. Once they were seated a waitress came over immediately and took their drink order. A beer for Dean and a glass of Riesling for Ashley.

"This doesn't strike me as your kind of place either." Ashley raised her voice to be heard over the throbbing music.

Dean was searching the crowd for Sam but he obviously wasn't there yet. "Well, you're right there. I like bars with pool tables, frankly. But like I said, Sam wanted to check it out." He glanced at her. "If you don't like it we can leave, but I need to wait for Sam."

Ashley shook her head. "No, I think this place is great. So full of life, and honestly, I love the music they play."

Dean made a face. "Really?" He lifted his eyebrows. "No accounting for taste, I guess." He eyed his watch, hoping Sam showed up soon. He'd give him another fifteen minutes and then call him in case he'd fallen asleep over the computer again. He felt a little guilty that Sam had been doing the bulk of the work between Dean's illness and Dean's interests.

Their drinks came and Dean gratefully gulped some beer. Ashley sipped her wine, watching the dancers. Dean found the constant and frequently subtle changes in the lighting to

be distracting, but he also began concentrating on the dancers, feeling himself getting caught up in the sway and roll of the packed bodies.

He jumped when he felt Ashley's hand cup over his and her lips brushed his ear, sending a tingle down his right side.

"Will you dance with me?" she asked, sending a jolt of horror through Dean.

* * * *

Sam bounced impatiently in the backseat of the cab, dialing and redialing his phone, desperately trying to get Dean to pick up. He finally admitted to himself that in all probability, unless Dean had the phone on vibrate, if they were already at the club, he couldn't hear it ringing.

"Can you hurry it up, please?" Sam requested anxiously.

The driver eyed him in the rearview mirror. "A couple more minutes, buddy. Chill."

Sam rolled his eyes and forced himself to sit back. Nervously tapping his fingers on his leg.

* * * *

"Dance?" Dean choked. *Ask me to take on a full grown werewolf barehanded, but please, God, don't ask me to dance...*

Ashley grinned and shifted her body in a way that sent more jolts through Dean. "Yeah. Dance. I'll bet you're a great dancer. You move so gracefully. C'mon." She moved her head in the direction of the dance floor and tugged his hand.

Dean's eyes roved over the undulating crowd with something akin to panic racing his pulse. "I don't know how...like that..." he floundered verbally, feeling his I.Q. dropping by tens.

The song changed and Ashley became even more insistent. "Please, I love this song. You'll enjoy it. No one pays any attention to anyone else. Pleeese?"

Dean very reluctantly allowed himself to be drawn to his feet and onto the floor. He normally didn't give a damn what people thought about him, but accidentally making a fool of himself and doing it deliberately were two different things. He tried to pull back at the last second but Ashley hauled him into the crowd with surprising determination.

* * * *

Sam threw some bills at the driver and leaped from the cab, bounding up the steps to the bouncer at the door. The tallest bouncer stopped Sam with a hand to his chest.

"I'm sorry, sir. This is members only-" polite but insistent.

Sam jerked the magic gold card out of his pocket and flashed it. "I *am* a member, I'm meeting my brother here!"

The bouncer backed off instantly and opened the door for Sam. "Have a pleasant evening, sir. Sorry for the misunderstanding."

"Thanks," Sam spat, stuffing the card back in his pocket and moving into the foyer. He could see the strobing lights and feel the music from the dance floor and started scanning the crowd for Dean's face. He had to traverse most of the surrounding area and peer into the shadowed tables at the fringe but had no luck spotting Dean. He *HAD* to be here.

* * * *

Dean felt himself breaking out in a sweat as he tried to take Ashley in his arms. She shook her head and patiently placed his hands on her hips, pushing herself close to him. She put her hands on his upper arms. Dean couldn't help it and flinched away when she rolled her pelvis against him. She hauled him back.

"It's okay," she encouraged. "Listen to the music. Feel it. Let it become part of you."

Dean eyed the other dancers, watching the smoothness of their movement, the way their bodies answered the rhythms playing over them. This was not his kind of music, but there was a primal feel to it and, added to the heat of Ashley pressing against him, using her body and hands to urge him to move this way and that, it wasn't really that hard to get the feel of it. She was right. No one paid them the slightest attention and a few of the couples he saw looked as though they should be in a hotel room rather than on a dance floor.

Wanting to please her, he began to move with her, against her, searching out the slower beats of the song. He did have a natural grace and years of martial arts training had given him a fine sense of timing.

As the music progressed he felt himself anticipating the next move, the next throb of bass, and gradually he started controlling the movement of her body with his. Pulling her closer, bodies melted together from shoulder to crotch, hips rolling in a slow, grinding figure eight. His muscular body took them lower to the ground and lifted them up again. Leg sliding between hers, he braced her as he bent her backwards, lips tracing down the flesh from her throat to where the deep plunge of her neckline ended. Every breath he drew flooded his senses with the scent of roses.

It may not have been exactly what everyone else was doing, but Ashley wasn't complaining.

Her eyes never left his as she allowed him to shift her as he willed, her body his to command. She could feel the swell and contraction of the muscles in his arms and legs as he moved them about the floor, the pound of his heart as he held her against him, her own heart responding.

The song ended. Another began, the sound of it beating in time with Dean's pulse. One of his hands dug into the small of her back, the other cupped the back of her head, crushing her mouth to his in a blast furnace combination of lips, tongues and teeth. He couldn't block the moan that boiled from his chest or the shudder of his body as sensation after sensation ripped through him at the feel of her lips on his.

* * * *

Frustrated, Sam turned and stared over the group of dancers. All the effect lighting made it difficult to see anything clearly, but a dark clad figure on the floor caught his eye, and he moved closer, mouth open, staring.

It was Dean, beyond a shadow of a doubt. But...he was dancing. With other people. On a dance floor.

To the best of Sam's knowledge, Dean had a rudimentary grasp of the waltz but that was it.

Sam continued to gape as he watched Dean dancing with Ashley as though he had been doing it all his life. Their bodies synchronized and moving in the same sinuous, graceful steps as everyone else on the floor. Their rhythm took on a familiar look, but was executed in such a slow, languid manner, Sam felt heat on his cheeks as he watched. If this was how Dean moved on a dance floor...

Sam brought himself back to reality with a jerk. This was not why he was here.

* * * *

Ashley and Dean pulled apart when the need for air became too much, Dean breathing heavily and Ashley panting in small gasps. Dean kept one hand tangled in her hair, his gaze burning with its intensity.

Ashley's eyes darted over Dean's face. She almost looked frightened.

"Let's get outta here..." he growled, pulling her closer but not quite kissing her. A quick dip of his head in her direction.

She moved her head in a short nod and followed him as he left the floor, their hands locked together.

Sam pushed his way over to Dean as he swept through the crowd. It was almost as though Dean didn't see him.

"Dean!" Sam exclaimed, grabbing Dean's arm. Dean whirled, jerking Ashley behind him.

Sam took an uncertain step backward. "Dean...I've been trying to call you. We need to talk." He glanced over Dean's shoulder at Ashley who was staring at the floor. "Alone," he added.

Dean frowned at him. "Can't it wait?" he snapped, tuning away.

Sam caught his arm again. "No! It can't. Where are you going?"

Dean yanked his arm free. "None of your damned business, Sam. I'm an adult, I don't have to account for my whereabouts to you."

"I've got to talk to you!" Sam insisted. "Please! Let's go outside." He took a step toward the foyer and turned, clearly expecting Dean to follow.

Dean sighed and rolled his eyes. "Fine!" He pulled Ashley to him. "I need to talk to my brother for a minute. It won't take long."

Ashley nodded, "Sure, I'll wait in the foyer for you until you're ready." She suddenly seemed very nervous.

"Are you all right?" Dean asked, watching her.

She nodded and smiled. "I'm fine. Go talk to Sam." She crossed the foyer and sat down on one of the plush couches.

Dean grabbed Sam's arm and practically dragged him out the door onto the sidewalk, walking him a short distance away from the waiting people.

"Man, what's wrong with you?" Sam demanded.

"What's wrong with me? What the hell's wrong with you? Is this how you're getting back at me for not being more help on this?" Dean braced his feet apart, arms crossed over his chest, radiating pissed off.

Sam stared at him. "Are you nuts?" he laughed in disbelief. "Have you totally forgotten why we were meeting here in the first place?" Sam grabbed his hair with both hands. "Never mind, never mind! Dean, I think it's Ashley!"

Dean dropped his arms. "You think *what* is Ashley? Dude, you're not making sense!" He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. A headache suddenly spiked him behind his eyes. His body felt like it was coming down from an adrenaline rush. He sank down on one of the raised flowerbeds behind him.

Sam crouched down by Dean. "Dean, listen to me!" He was gratified when Dean's gaze rolled to him. "I was watching footage from the club the night Matt Lewis was killed. Dean, he was with Ashley! She looked...different, but it was her!"

"Whadaya mean *different*? If she was different, it wasn't her..." Dean struggled to pull his mind from the morass of feelings assaulting him to try to listen to what Sam was saying.

Sam bit his lip. "Dean, I think she's seducing you. I think that's why you're acting this way-"

"What way? Why?" Dean snarled. "Is it so hard to believe I could actually want to be with a girl for more than sex? That she might want to be with *me* for more than that?"

Sam's mouth shut with a snap. "No...Dean, I didn't mean it like that..." Sam sighed. The last thing he intended to do was hurt Dean, but there was no way around this. "Dean, this isn't like you...Deep down you know it. I'd think it was great if you could find some girl you could-" Sam groaned mentally.

"So what are you telling me?" Dean demanded. "What am I supposed to do?" Despite himself, he knew something wasn't right, the wild need to be with Ashley was fading in the night air, the intoxicating scent and feel of her body against him. But still... He made a frustrated noise. "Dammit, Sam." He raked his hair angrily. "What if you're wrong?"

"Then I'm wrong and I owe you a major apology. Dean, you saw Matt Lewis. What if I'm right?" Sam continued to stare into Dean's desperate eyes, willing him to believe.

Dean let out the breath he was holding. "If what you're saying is true, then what now?"

Sam felt his body relax with relief. "Take this." He held out the wrapped iron stiletto.

Dean recognized it by the feel. "And do what with it?"

"Go home with her," Sam replied, ignoring Dean's cocked eyebrow. "If it *is* her, we have to try to end this. The only way to destroy her is by using a knife like this in an act of love."

Dean's other eyebrow shot up to join its partner. "Wait one friggin' minute," He exclaimed. "You think Ashley is the creature we're looking for, you want me to take her home, have sex...and then while...are you out of your mind?" Dean stood up, outraged. "Even *I* can't do *that!*" He shoved the knife back at Sam. "Figure out another way!" He started off back down the sidewalk, seriously rattled.

Sam raced after him, forcing the knife back into Dean's unwilling grip. "It's the only way. You think I haven't tried? It's how it started, it's how it has to end."

Sam was deadly serious, Dean could see it.

Eyes flicking uncertainly, Dean chewed on his bottom lip. "What if nothing happens? I mean...you know what I mean."

"Then we haven't lost anything. We keep looking. It's too much of a coincidence, Dean. You know it is."

Dean nodded, blowing his breath out in a sharp blast. "Yeah. Yeah, I know. So where will you be? Playing voyeur?" There was no humor in the statement.

Sam shrugged. "I'll be around. I won't let anything happen to you."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Just what I always wanted. A freakin' chaperone." He stuffed the blade at an angle into the waistband of his pants under his t-shirt. Carrying knives like that was dangerous, but he didn't have much of a choice. There was nothing else to say, so he stalked back to the club and sought out Ashley, a feeling of dread flooding his belly.

* * * * *

The ride back to Ashley's apartment was quiet. Ashley kept glancing sidelong at Dean as he brooded silently, grappling with his thoughts.

"What did Sam say to you?" She finally ventured hesitantly. "You seem upset."

Dean shot a look at her, then back at the road. He shrugged. "It's nothin'." feeling the handle of the dagger dig into his stomach, "We just had a stupid argument. I really don't want to talk about it." He shifted uncomfortably, swinging the big car into the parking space by her building.

He got out, opened her door and accompanied her in silence up to the door of her apartment.

She unlocked the door and he followed her in, pausing as she closed the door, looking out at the lights through the balcony doors.

"Dean..." Ashley began.

He sighed, turning to look at her.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea." She toyed with the necklace he had fastened for her earlier.

"Why? What's wrong?"

Ashley shook her head. "Nothing. I really like you Dean." Her eyes drifted to the floor and then across the room.

Dean closed his eyes, reached out and touched her arm, feeling that electric spark as he did so. Sam had to be out of his mind. "I...I like you, too. A lot."

He lifted his hand and used it to raise her face to him. To his surprise tears filled her eyes, one spilling over the dam of her lashes and rolling slowly down her cheek. "Tell me what's wrong." He spoke so softly he wasn't sure she heard him.

Ashley shook her head again. She put the flat of her hand against his chest and gazed up at him. The contact sent heat through Dean's body and set his heart racing, causing his breath to hitch. She opened her mouth to speak, obviously torn over what to say.

"I think," she began in a low controlled voice, "that you have such an old soul. That you are so sad and so lonely..." Dean's brows drew together as she spoke. "I think you are so beautiful inside, and I can feel how much pain you're in and I want to make it all be better for you." She lowered her head, voice breaking. "I don't want to add to that pain, to hurt you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm so lonely," she whispered, almost to herself. "I've been alone for so long." The pressure from her hand against his chest grew stronger and began to feel very much as though she was pushing him away. She abruptly shook her head. "You need to go, Dean. I want you to go. Please."

"Not until you tell me what's wrong," Dean insisted, catching her face between his hands and forcing her to look at him.

Her eyes implored him. "Please..." Then before he could move she was up against him, her fingers digging painfully into the back of his head, forcing him to her.

It was so unexpected and strong, Dean felt his teeth cut into the inside of his lip, bringing the taste of blood.

Ashley moaned as she tasted it too.

Dean, startled, tried to push her away, but she clung to him like skin. His eyes went wide and a strangled cry tore out of his throat as liquid fire suddenly seared his mouth and throat. Panicked and agonized, he found the strength to shove her away from him, losing his balance and falling heavily to his side, spitting and gagging, his hands burning where they wiped frantically at his face and mouth.

Heedless of Ashley's whereabouts, he scrambled desperately to his feet, stumbling into the kitchen, turning on the faucet. He put his mouth under the stream of water, trying to rinse the burn away, gasping and spitting blood into the sink.

"Stupid bitch,"

Dean spun at the sound of the rough voice behind him, one hand hovering over his mouth, the other supporting him against the sink.

The body that now wore Ashley's dress was more round, fleshier, womanly in a way you didn't see much anymore. It was Ashley's face too, but the lips were fuller, the eyes more heavy lidded, altered from her bright blue to a glittering silvery gray. The silky brown hair had thickened into deep red curls that hung halfway down her back.

She undulated slowly into the room, hands tracing over her curves, watching him.

Dean coughed, grimacing, spraying his hand with fine drops of blood, the fire on his tongue and palate making his eyes water. "What did you do to me?" his words slurred from trying to talk without causing himself more pain.

"I told her she didn't have a chance. But she never listens, does she? Thinks it'll be different next time." She shook her head, reaching out to Dean, who tried to pull away. His legs didn't want to hold him and he felt himself sliding down the cabinet, her fingers pressed to his face following him down.

"You're very strong," she murmured, hiking her skirt to allow her to comfortably straddle him as he lay there. "I just gave you a little taste, but that's usually enough to bring them down. Ashley does have a good eye. I'll give her that. But she's getting too soft."

"You *are* Ashley!" Dean rasped, as if reasoning with her would help.

"No, sweetie, you have it backwards, I'm Elana. Ashley helps me survive, day to day, I needed someone like her, a buffer, and suddenly one day, there she was. Sometimes I even use her as bait." Elana leaned close, dragging her tongue up the side of Dean's face. "She keeps thinking with each one it'll be different, I won't come out to play." She whispered in Dean's ear, "but I'll always be here."

Dean fumbled for the blade in his belt but it was gone.

"Here's your little toy, darling," Elana crooned, twirling the black knife in her fingers, admiring it. "Very clever. You and your brother. Maybe I'll take him next."

Dean flailed madly, forcing his body to move.

Not expecting it, Elana was thrown sideways, the blade flying out of her hand and skittering across the living room floor.

Dean tried to pull himself toward the knife, but Elana stepped in front of him. She knelt, rolling him roughly onto his back, staring down at him.

"Play times over." She spat. "I'm hungry." She writhed against him. "You loved pretty little Ashley. Do you love me?"

Dean watched in growing horror as Elana clasped her arms over her chest and threw her head back, her skin taking on a dusty grey color, scales forming in delicate ridges.



Her body shuddered and twisted as it reformed itself, her eyes still locked on his. She laughed, a hiss of air through lips that thinned and drew back almost to her ears as they sank into her head, hair disappearing into the skin of her skull as it flattened and grew broader. Her legs melted together, arms vanishing into her shoulders and she sank to the floor in a graceful roll of elongated flesh covered with sparkling silver skin, each fine piece tipped in black. Her writhing body as thick as Dean's thigh and at least three times his height.

Where in the hell is Sam!!!! Dean's mind screamed as Elana's now serpentine head dipped low to brush his face with her long forked tongue. Dean shuddered inwardly but his body refused to obey him.

Elana's head bobbed a few inches above his face, mouth slowly opening, a pair of long curved fangs unfolded from the roof of her mouth. A green droplet fell from one fang and sizzled as it hit his t-shirt and burned through.

Both the serpent and Dean jerked as the door was suddenly kicked in and Sam burst through. His shirt was torn and blood streaked one side of his face and clumped in his hair.

With an ear piercing hiss, Elana's body rose half its length, still hovering over Dean's helpless form.

Sam spied the iron stiletto lying halfway between himself and Dean and threw himself at it in a rolling dive, scooping it up even as Elana struck at him. He ended up at the far side of the living room, out of Elana's strike range.

She pulled back, her body curling around Dean, constricting as she swung back over him.

Sam yelled as he realized she was choosing Dean over him, leaping forward even as she drew back to strike. His body landed on top of Dean, blocking Elana's lunge, the knife slashing upward, entering the slick body and slicing upwards into the throat.

Sam twisted to shield Dean as hot blood spewed over them both and the heavy weight of Elana's body slammed into them.

Frantically, Sam kicked the still writhing body away. In horrified fascination, he stared as the twisting form changed and morphed back into a semblance of a human body, still covered with the silvery scales, but recognizable as a combination of both Ashley and Elana.

Sam crept over to her as she choked on her own blood, her hand grasping toward him.

Tears welled from her eyes but she was smiling, her bloodstained teeth still retaining small fangs. "Thank you...." She coughed, chest heaving. "Thank you..." her head fell back and she was still.

Unable to tear his eyes away, he continued to watch as her body crumbled into dust.

Snapping himself out of it, Sam scabbled back to Dean, who was watching him but couldn't do more than roll his head, his hands jerking impotently on the floor as he tried to move them.

"It's okay, Dean. It'll be okay." Sam breathed.
"What...took...you...so...long?" Dean managed to force out.

* * * *

"Here you go," Sam said, sliding back into the car and handing Dean the milkshake he had requested.

Repeated rinsing with multiple doses of the alka seltzer Sam remembered Dean saying Ashley had given him, had nullified the acid Elana used to burn Dean's mouth. Sam had forced him to drink the last one just in case.

Dean's mouth, tongue and throat were incredibly raw, but would heal in time, although he couldn't eat anything solid and talking was almost impossible.

The paralyzing affect of the toxin had worn off after a few hours since Elana had not injected it into Dean's bloodstream.

Sam's delay in reaching Dean in a timely manner had been caused by Sam's cab being involved in a head-on collision on the way to Ashley's apartment.

He had come to while an ambulance attendant was trying to clean the gash on his forehead, at which point Sam had insisted he was fine and a short argument had ensued. The ambulance attendant had lost, awakening a short time later in the ambulance into which he had tried to load Sam.

Dean smiled a weak "thank you", and took the straw out of the cup, opting to use the spoon. He had been using ice chips and throat sprays to try to numb the pain. He knew his taste buds were fried when he could only tell the flavor of the milkshake by the color. It was icy cold though, melting in his mouth and chilling his throat. He closed his eyes and took what pleasure he could from the slight relief.

As Sam started the engine Dean touched his arm.

Sam glanced at him. "Yeah, Dean?"

Dean scribbled on the notepad he was using to communicate and held it out for Sam to read. "You killed her."

Sam frowned. "Yeah Dean, I did. I know how much you liked Ashley. If there'd been another way—"

Dean shook his head and began scribbling again. "How? You said I had to do it. Killing had to be an act of love."

Sam took the pad and read it slowly.

Dean tapped the pad with his finger for emphasis, closing his eyes in a grimace as he swallowed, before putting the back of his hand against his lips and returning his eyes to Sam.

Sam handed the pad back. "I think I was being too literal with the legend," he finally said, putting the car in gear and backing up.

Dean drew a large question mark and held the pad up, shaking it. Eyes angry.

Sam sighed and gazed at Dean for a long moment. "Dean...it was an act of love." He shifted into drive and hit the gas. Keeping his eyes ahead as they gunned down the road, he added. "Just not yours."

The End