

**Season Two**  
**Episode Six: Devil Game**  
**by Gaelicspirit**

**Raleigh, NC, wooded area, night**

She was beautiful. Her long legs were stretched out in the moonlight, her shorts bunched near her waist from the struggle, her slim ankles encircled by the leather straps. He decided he liked her legs. His eyes traveled slowly up the smooth, pale skin, over the slight bend at her knee, up the smooth thigh to where the skin disappeared beneath the shorts.

He thought momentarily about cutting the shorts from her, but changed his mind. It had never been about that. It had never been pleasure he was after – it had been power. The pleasure he experienced was simply an afterthought, a happy accident.

Stepping closer to her, his eyes continued their trek up her torso, her flat belly exposed at the navel, her ribs extended slightly by the arch of her back. Her arms were raised over her head, extending in a V, the leather straps around her wrists contrasting sharply with her skin. He let his eyes shift from her fisted hands to her wide blue eyes. She lay silently staring at him, twin trails of tears sliding from the corners of her eyes to matte her long blonde hair at her temples.

He smiled. She whimpered. He was sure she wanted to scream, but the clear glue he'd applied held her lips fast and she'd realized quickly that her muffled pleas reached no one's ears but his. He saw her throat bob as she swallowed.

He was almost shaking with anticipation. She would be delicious; he'd known that for a while. She would be satisfying like none of the others had been. He'd planned this one, studied her, made sure she was right for the first of this cycle. Made sure she was worthy. Made sure she would please him.

He began to mutter the words that bound him to her for this moment. He watched her eyes widen more. His smile widened, turned feral. She understood him. He'd known she was smart, but Latin? He didn't realize she knew Latin. She blinked and shook her head. He nodded and leaned forward, the short, thin blade of the knife pressed against her right wrist.

She whimpered again. He whispered close to her ear, enjoying the way she tried to twist away from him.

"This sacrifice brings power."

She shot her eyes over to him and he pulled away as he saw hate replacing the look of fear that had thrilled him. That was his cue. He slid the knife along her wrist as if through butter and watched with delight as the fear returned to her eyes while her life spilled from her wrist, over his blade and down her arm. She twisted her hands helplessly, trying unsuccessfully to stem the flow of blood.

Her whimpering grew frantic through her sealed lips and the tears flowed freely. As he stepped around the flat stone altar where he'd stretched her out, arms above her head, legs to the opposite edges, he began to chant. "*Vestri cruor mos purgo mihi, vestri cruor mos solvo mihi...*"

Closing his eyes, he slid the knife across her left wrist and this time allowed her blood to flow over the fingers gripping the hilt of the knife. He shuddered as her muffled screams beat a soft tempo against his ears. He opened his eyes and watched for a moment, watched as the horror of reality flooded her eyes, as the denial skittered across her features, as she looked to him, pleading with her eyes for him to stop, to free her.

He smiled, leaning close so that his lips were hovering close to hers, whispering to her. "*Vestri cruor meus vox.*"

He pressed the knife point to the beat of her pulse in the softness of her neck. Lifting his eyes to hers, watching as the moonlight reflected in the luminous pools of

tears, he pressed the tip in. She barely made a sound, but the defeat in her eyes was all he needed to know that he had won. As the light left her eyes, he leaned close to her neck, pressed his lips against her warm skin, and drank deeply.

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### **Impala, outside Bethlehem, PA, evening**

Dean never liked the quiet. There was too much noise in his head when it was quiet. Especially now. It hadn't been that long since the demon's voice was his constant companion. Now, the absence of that sound allowed his thoughts to once again clamor for attention. Rolling his neck, he reached for the volume control, letting the music fill the space between his tired body and that of his sleeping brother, who at the moment had his arms wrapped tightly around himself in an almost unconscious gesture of protection, allowing the grating, rhythmic beat of The Showdown's *Death Finds Us Breathing* to quiet the echo of doubt that still dogged his heels from Haris' taunts.

Sam stirred restlessly in his sleep. Dean pulled his eyes briefly from the road to look closely at his brother. Sam had been through a lot lately. Hell, they both had. He looked back to the darkening road. *Friggin' mind control...* Give him classic cars and cassette tapes any day. Technology had a way of screwing with normal.

Sam jerked, his arms loosening, his hands starting to reach out. Dean looked over at him worriedly.

"Gah!" Sam curled forward suddenly, his hands pressing hard against his face, his palms at his temples.

"Sam?" Dean jerked his head from the road.

"No!" Sam gasped, rocking his head back against the seat, his eyes closed tight.

He pressed the heel of his hand into the curve between his nose and forehead. Dean slowed the Impala, his arm automatically shooting out to stop Sam from cracking his head on the dash as the car decelerated. Sam didn't seem to notice as the motion of the car ceased. He was pressing his body, his face, his hands, against the door as if trying to force it from its hinges. His desperation to get out of the car was palpable and Dean couldn't get out and around to his brother's side fast enough. Dean opened the door and caught Sam as he tumbled forward into the sudden space.

"Sam!" Dean crouched low on the gravel-strewn shoulder of the thankfully deserted road, his hands gripping Sam's arms near the shoulders, his face pulled into a fierce frown of concern. "Easy... just give it a second... hang on, I got you..."

He didn't know what else to do but keep Sam from falling face-first to the ground and wait for the vision to end. It had gripped his brother so suddenly, so viciously that Dean felt his heart tighten in his chest watching helplessly as Sam's face echoed the pain slamming through his head. Beads of sweat formed on Sam's forehead as Dean held him upright. Dean felt Sam begin to tremble beneath his hands and then start to slump forward. He tried to keep Sam up, but teetered and ended up on his rear, Sam in front of him on his knees outside of the opened doorway.

Sam was gasping, his hand trembling as it passed across his closed eyes. He blinked up at Dean, working to focus. Dean tightened his jaw, gripping Sam's arms.

"You okay, man?"

"God, Dean," Sam whispered, his voice shaking with residual pain and something close to terror. "She's dead... he killed her..."

"Who, Sam?"

"She's dead, Dean... she's dead," Sam swallowed hard and his face paled. Dean gave serious thought to rolling out of the way, but Sam slid from his knees to sit in the gravel, leaning against the closed back door.

"Hey," Dean said softly, acutely aware of the fragile look in Sam's eyes. "It's okay, Sammy, we'll figure it out. What did you see?"

Sam just shook his head. He was staring past Dean, seeing nothing. He licked his lips and muttered again, "She's dead, Dean... he killed her."

*Okay, now you're starting to scare me a little.* "Hey! Sam, snap out of it, man!"

Sam blinked at his harsh tone, lifting his eyes to meet Dean's. Dean was relieved to see a glimmer of reality begin to seep back into his brother's expression. He rocked forward so that he was once again crouched in front of Sam, balanced carefully on the balls of his feet, his left hand gripping his right, fingers unconsciously worrying the silver ring on his right hand.

"What did you see?" Dean repeated.

"A girl," Sam swallowed. "She was... she was, uh, tied to a... a rock or something."

"Lying down or sitting up?"

"Lying down."

"Like, what, an altar or something?"

Sam shuddered, "God, Dean, so much blood."

"Sam, hey!" Dean snapped his fingers close to Sam's face as his brother's eyes started to drift from him. "Look at me. Hey! Look at me." Sam met his eyes again. "We're gonna figure this out, okay?"

Sam's visions had been bad before. In Salvation, Iowa, they had damn near knocked him out. But it rattled Dean slightly to see Sam so shaken by what he'd seen. He had to get Sam to focus, to explain the vision, to tell Dean what to do.

"Where was she?"

"In... in a woods."

*Well, that's specific.* "What else, Sam?"

Sam took a breath, rubbing a shaking hand over his face. Dean watched him work to gather himself, to pull his scattered thoughts together, to get a grip. He waited, letting Sam settle himself.

"I, uh... I saw a man, in a robe – a hooded robe – with a knife. Short, thin blade."

Dean narrowed his eyes, tilting his head forward to try to catch Sam's eyes.

"Robe, huh? We dealin' with a dark Jedi or something, Sammy?"

Sam blinked, lifting his head to look at Dean. His eyes were clearer, Dean noticed with relief. "It's gotta be some kind of... creature. What he did... no... no person could have done..." Sam swallowed.

"Sam," Dean ducked his chin, looking at his brother out of the top of his eyes. "We both know you get these visions for a reason."

Sam pulled his eyebrows together, focusing on Dean's face.

"You think we can... save this girl?" Sam asked.

"Well, we can sure as hell try," Dean ticked his head to the left. "Now, think. What else you got on location besides woods and rock?"

Sam's face pulled together in a wince, and he gripped the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes tight. "Ah, she was, uh, she was wearing a T-shirt... a... a red one."

Dean nodded. *Yeah, and...*

"Wolfpack."

"Wolfpack?"

Sam's head shot up. "Wolfpack... I know that... I've seen that... NC State! NC State Wolfpack. North Carolina, man. She's in Raleigh."

Sam pushed himself to his feet and climbed into the Impala on shaky legs. Dean stood slowly, regarding Sam with narrowed eyes. *What if we're too late? Hell, what if she's not even there? What if she was wearing someone else's shirt?*

"You comin' or what?" Sam snapped at him.

Dean pressed his lips together and sprinted around the front of the car, sliding silently behind the wheel. He glanced surreptitiously at Sam as he drove down the dark road. Sam was leaning forward slightly as if trying to propel the car through the

night with the force of his will. Dean felt a subtle shift in how the Impala responded to him and looked down. They were on empty. He searched the side of the road for an exit sign, breathing a sigh of relief when one appeared not more than two miles down the road.

He veered off the road, heading down the exit.

"Dean, what the hell?" Sam looked over at him.

"You wanna walk to North Carolina? No? Didn't think so." Dean didn't bother to look over at Sam. He pulled into the station, stopping next to a pump.

"Well, hurry up," Sam grumbled.

Dean opened the door, metal creaking with a comforting familiarity that somehow calmed his instant desire to snap back at Sam. He was tired, Sam was tired. They needed a break. Hell, they needed sleep. He glanced once at his brother as he stepped out of the car, seeing from the look on Sam's face that there would be no rest for them tonight.

"Make yourself useful," Dean said, ducking his head back into the car. "Go grab a map and figure out how far it is to wherever your Dead Zone is sending us this time."

Sam glanced at him, a retort clearly balanced on the edge of his tongue, then apparently thought better of it and did as Dean asked. While Sam was in the convenience store, Dean filled up the Impala, leaning heavily against the sleek black skin of the only real home he'd ever known. His eyes were cast down at the stained blacktop, but he was seeing Sam's face revert back to a twelve-year-old kid's when he'd gasped *she's dead, Dean... he killed her*.

"Five hundred miles," Sam's voice broke into his thoughts, making him jump slightly.

"Come again?"

"Give or take. Five hundred. Miles," Sam was staring hard at him, his jaw set, the neatly folded map of North Carolina clutched in his right hand, two cups of coffee balanced on top of each other in his left. Without waiting for Dean's response, Sam moved around to the other side of the car, favoring his tender left leg, and climbed into the passenger seat.

Suppressing a groan, Dean nodded once and topped off the car, holstering the fuel hose and grabbing his receipt. He crumbled it out of habit and tossed it into the trash can before climbing into the car. He paused before turning the key in the ignition, looking over at Sam.

"Five hundred miles?"

Sam pressed his lips together, then looked back at him. "He slit her wrists while she watched. She knew she was going to die, man. I saw it in her eyes. She knew and she couldn't do a damn thing."

The hollow ache in Sam's voice reverberated through Dean's head. He turned the key. The car roared to life and without another word, Dean shifted to drive, and pulled back onto the highway. He hadn't gone more than two miles before he took one of the coffees from Sam and downed it in several mouth-scalding gulps.

Sam said nothing, simply held on to the second cup, staring straight ahead. As the miles wore on, Dean finished the second cup, flipped through a half a dozen radio stations until he found one for awhile that played his music, and pulled over once more to fill up the Impala with fuel and himself with more coffee. Through it all, Sam remained silent, staring ahead, his jaw muscle dancing with tension whenever Dean looked his way.

As his fifth cup of coffee hummed through his system, Dean realized that his hands had started shaking. Even he had a caffeine limit. He rolled the window down, letting the cool air of the early dawn sweep in and wash over him. He blinked his eyes wide, then started singing along with Zeppelin's Black Dog. His glance over at Sam revealed that even his unintentional attempts to rouse his brother from his focused stupor weren't working.

"We're gonna figure this out, Sammy," he said softly.

"We're already too late." Sam's voice was low, gravelly from lack of use. "It's almost morning."

Dean closed his burning eyes for a moment, then forced them open, concentrating on the road. "How do you know it happened tonight? Maybe it was..."

"I just know, okay? I know," Sam slouched slightly against the door. "We're too late."

Dean sighed, rubbing his eyes with the tips of his fingers. He needed to wake up, shake this off, if he was going to help his brother get through this. "Sam," he started, glancing over to the passenger seat and then back to the road. "We can't save them all."

"Why the hell do I get these damn visions then, huh?" Sam snapped. His sudden vehemence made Dean jump slightly. "I mean, you said it yourself. I get them so we can save these people. I was able to save you, why not her?"

"That's different, Sam..."

"Yeah? Why?" Sam rotated to face him, his back against the passenger door. "You wanna tell me how it is we're left deciding which life is more important? Who lives and who dies?"

Dean pulled his eyebrows together, looking over at Sam angrily. "We didn't decide that, Sam. That freak in the robe decided that. *Evil* decides that."

Behind Sam, the sky began to brighten as the sun journeyed toward the horizon. Dean blinked back at the road, waiting for Sam's reply, feeling Sam wind himself up for an all out battle of words. It had been brewing in his brother for awhile, but fear and worry and uncertainty of their collective future had dampened Sam's drive to argue.

"We let evil win when we don't do anything," Sam muttered, his eyes on the dash.

Dean's anger ticked hot in him once and he let it flash out at his brother. "What the hell do you call this, man? Driving five hundred freakin' miles to stop this bastard when we haven't slept or eaten... hell, you're still limping!"

"Not what I meant," Sam said, turning his body to face front.

"Well you'd damn well better..." Dean stopped, catching sight of the exit for Raleigh. He turned off at the sign indicating the direction to campus, and they drove the rest of the way in silence.

Glancing at the clock, he realized it was way too early for any students to be out on the quad. He drove slowly through the campus, resting a bent elbow on the open window. Sam reached over and turned down the radio, rolling his own window down, looking around.

"Getting any hinky vibes, there, College Boy?"

Sam shook his head silently.

Dean sighed, resisting the urge to rub the back of his neck. "Any idea which direction I should head?"

"I don't know, Dean," Sam snapped. "All I got was... a woods at night."

Pressing his lips together, Dean nodded. "Roger. Drive around until I see a woods..." He blinked. "Kinda like that one..."

As he turned the corner he saw a copse of trees in the distance and a collection of Raleigh's finest pulled to the side of the road, red and blue lights flashing. He saw Sam sit forward, tension radiating from him in waves. Dean pulled over behind a small Mexican restaurant claiming to make burritos as big as your head, and shut off the car. Sam was out before he'd shifted into park. Dean let himself sink in his seat a moment, his body ticking in time with the cooling Impala engine.

"Dean!"

"I'm comin'!" His reply was shot back in a matching urgent whisper. He got out of the car, then followed Sam as they walked cautiously down the length of the road toward the police.

Not too terribly worried that the police in Raleigh would have memorized the face of a supposedly dead serial killer from St. Louis, Dean wandered slowly away from

Sam, working his way through the small crowd of the early morning curious. He caught Sam out of the corner of his eyes doing the same.

"What happened here?" he asked an elderly lady who held a small white poodle under one arm, her morning coffee in the other hand. She still had curlers in her hair.

"Heard the call on the scanner," she shrugged. Dean looked down at her with a surprised grin. "Some jogger came across a body of a girl."

"Oh, that's, um, awful," Dean said, trying for the right level of horror and curiosity to match her tone.

"'Tis," she nodded. "Bet them cops are busy kickin' themselves in the ass, though."

Dean lifted an eyebrow. "Why you say that?"

"They thought it was over, is why," she took a sip of her coffee. "Don't know why. Never caught the bastard."

Dean opened his mouth to question her further when a general rustle went through the small crowd. He looked over the shoulder of the man in front of him and saw three cops carrying out a black body bag heavy with its gruesome burden. Dean shot his eyes over to Sam and worked back through the crowd to get to his brother. Sam wasn't looking at the bag, yet. He was watching a young cop who had his arm around an attractive blonde girl.

Dean shifted his eyes between Sam and the girl as he approached. She was pretty, shoulder-length dark blonde hair, large blue eyes, and the tear streaks on her face did nothing to detract from the smooth coloring of her skin. Sam walked toward them slowly, Dean close behind.

"You ready?" the young cop was asking her. The girl nodded.

The cop nodded to one of the others carrying the body bag. They lay the body bag on the ground and unzipped the top, laying the flap to the side. The girl let out a strangled sound that drew Dean's eyes.

"That's her," she said, her voice thick with tears, but low and solid. "That's Jaynie."

Dean saw Sam turn from the girl to look at the black bag. He was close enough that he actually felt the breath leave Sam as he stared at the body in horror. Dean searched Sam's profile worriedly for a second, then looked down. Her neck was stained red with blood, her hair was matted on the sides with it, but her face was unmarked – almost as if it had been cleaned. But it wasn't the gore that had caught Sam's attention, Dean realized. It was her face.

She looked like Jessica.

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### **Motel, Raleigh, NC, later that morning**

"It was a coincidence, Sam."

"I know that."

"This is a hunt, man, like any other."

"No it isn't."

Dean sighed. Sam was right – it wasn't like any other hunt. This one hit home, and as Dean sat at the small hotel table, the laptop open in front of him, he watched Sam's face, watched the memories slide across his features, chased by a pain Dean couldn't understand.

Sam lay across the bed, one arm above his head, the other across his stomach. He was absentmindedly twisting the long strands of his hair around his index finger. The motion tugged at Dean's gut, reminding him acutely of Sam at five, at twelve, at fifteen. Whenever he was troubled or stuck on a problem of any kind, he'd twist his hair.

"I'm sorry, Sam," Dean said softly.

This drew Sam's eyes from their scrutiny of the ceiling above his bed. He looked at Dean in honest surprise. "For what?"

Dean shrugged, looking away, uncomfortable with exposing a piece of his heart even to Sam. "I've been... caught up in my own crap for awhile..."

"Dean, you couldn't help it. You were... possessed," Sam tightened his stomach muscles and sat up, looking at Dean. "Kind of warrants a get out of jail free card for dealing with your own crap."

*Huh... yeah, like the song says... every single one of us has a devil inside...* Dean shook his head once. "Doesn't matter. I'm sorry I didn't... pay closer attention."

"Dean..."

"But," Dean interrupted, holding up a hand, palm out, stopping Sam. "I am paying attention now, okay? We'll get this thing."

Sam swallowed and looked down at his hands, his forearms resting on his knees. "I trust you."

Dean blinked at him. "What?"

Sam lifted his head. "I said I trust you."

Dean pressed his lips together, looking away. Sam would have no idea what those words meant to him. Taking a breath, he clapped a hand on his knee and stood up, rotating the laptop out to face Sam as he did so.

"Well, before this gets to Lifetime TV, I'm gonna take a shower," he said, moving past Sam towards the bathroom at the back of the motel room. "Check out that link. Apparently the dog lady was right... this isn't the first of these murders around campus."

He glanced over his shoulder as he stepped into the bathroom, watching as Sam gravitated toward the computer. He was showered and shaved inside of ten minutes, never really one for lingering. The water had shocked his system alert, and helped settle his hands from the infusion of caffeine. He stepped out of the bathroom to see Sam scrolling through the information on the laptop.

"You're up, Sparky," he said.

"Dean, there have been three murders a month for the last five months," Sam looked up at him, his tired-looking eyes alight with the thought of a lead. "Except for last month."

Dean nodded. "Yeah, the old lady said the cops thought it was done."

Sam stood up and made his way to the bathroom, limping slightly on his left leg. He pulled his shirts over his head in a tangle, his voice muffled inside the fabric as he talked.

"Why a vision now, though, huh?"

Dean turned his head, then rotated his body as Sam finished pulling his shirts off and dropped them in a pile next to his duffel.

"I mean, if it's been going on for months, why didn't I see this before? You think it's because it's maybe a new killer? Or maybe because this time it was Jess..."

Sam stopped, stumbling slightly in the doorway of the bathroom. Dean bit the inside of his cheek, saying nothing.

"I mean, because she looked like Jessica," Sam finished quietly.

"Sam..." Dean started, but Sam ignored him and stepped into the bathroom, shutting the door.

Dean sighed and sat down on the chair, leaning forward and rubbing his hands roughly through his short, still-wet hair. He couldn't decide which was better: being alone forever and never knowing the pain Sam was feeling now, or knowing the pain Sam was feeling now just to have the memory of connecting to someone that deeply once in his life.

He sat still and waited for Sam to get out of the shower. He knew it was a mistake, felt his body begin to shut down by increments, felt his eyes grow heavy. He should be looking for more information, for something that might explain Sam's vision, explain why they had hauled ass five hundred miles just to be too late to do anything.

Sam stepped from the bathroom, clad in only the white motel towel. Dean straightened suddenly, blinking his eyes wide to wake himself up. Sam didn't even spare him a glance as he dug through his duffel for clean clothes. Dean stood and worked his shoulder muscles, rotating his neck. He needed more coffee like a hole in the head, but he couldn't think of anything else that might help him get his head on straight...

"We need to get more information," Sam was saying. "I think we should split up, check out the library and see what we can get from the cops."

Dean blinked. Action Sammy was slightly unexpected. After the look on Sam's face when he stepped into the bathroom, Dean thought there'd be more... angst. "Uh..."

Sam stood, dropping his towel and pulling on his boxers and jeans. He looked over at Dean when no further response came. Pulling his T-shirt over his head, he shook his wet hair from his eyes, then frowned.

"Dean?"

Dean scratched the back of his head in thought. "Sam, uh, don't make this out to be more than it is, okay?"

Sam cocked his head to the side, his hand on his hip. "What are you talking about?"

Dean chewed his bottom lip, then shook his head. "I just mean... it's not her."

"Don't you think I know that?" Sam snapped.

"Maybe..." Dean paused, weighing his words. He looked at Sam, saw the lines of tension around his blue-gray eyes, the exhaustion that pulled at his body even now. "Maybe you should sit this one out, Sam. Maybe you should... y'know, stay here."

Sam narrowed his eyes, and shook his head with a look of disbelief on his face. He opened his mouth and Dean braced himself for the words that would match the suddenly angry look in Sam's eyes. Silently, Sam grabbed his jacket, moving past Dean with an angry stride.

"I'll take the police station, you take the library."

"Sam..."

Sam opened the motel door. "Station's not far. I'll walk."

"Sam!"

But Sam was out the door and heading down the street without looking back.

"Dammit," Dean muttered, heading to the car. "I got a bad feeling about this."

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## Raleigh Police Station, noon

"Nick, you know I'm right – you *know* it!"

Her voice hit Sam before he pushed through the doors of the police station. She was angry. And as he stepped into the bull pen area of the police station, he felt almost sorry for Nick. The blond police officer from the crime scene had his arms crossed over his chest, his jaw set, eyes narrowed, and was leaning slightly back from the shorter blonde woman in front of him. She was poking him in the chest to punctuate her sentences.

"I don't know that," Nick replied. His eyes were on the girl's face, serious, searching. Boyfriend? Sam wondered. "And you need to calm down. Right now."

Not boyfriend... brother.

"Don't tell me to calm down, dammit," she stepped away from him and turned around, halting just short of slamming into Sam.

She looked up, surprised, and met his eyes. Sam felt a little dizzy – like the air had been sucked out of the room – when he locked eyes with her. She blinked, pulled her head back, then subtly shook herself, turning back to Nick.

"There's gonna be two more, Nicky," she said.

Nick shook his head. "You don't know that," he said forcefully.

"Yes, I do. And I sure as hell can prove it to you," she pushed past Sam and started for the door. Sam's instincts caused him to turn and reach out in an attempt to stop her, but Nick was one stride ahead of him. He'd crossed the space between where he'd been standing and his sister's retreating form in two heartbeats.

"No," he said, grabbing her arm. "You go home. You go home and take care of Addy. She's gonna need someone to keep her together after Jaynie..."

"I'm not gonna just go home and hand my friend tissues, Nick," she interrupted, pulling her arm roughly out of his grasp. "I know how to work a crime scene."

"Okay, *Cagney*," Nick shook his head. "You're a criminal justice student, not a cop. You stay away."

She cut her eyes from her brother and over to Sam. Free of her brother's grip, she started for the door.

"Hey," Nick barked, startling Sam with how much he sounded like Dean. She stopped at the door, looking back over her shoulder. "You stay away. I mean it. Don't make me lock you up, Grace."

Pushing the door open, Grace shot a finger over her shoulder at her brother, letting him know exactly what she thought about that idea.

Nick sighed when the door closed behind him, then turned to face Sam. "Help you?"

Sam was still staring at the door Grace had exited, unable to get those large, blue eyes out of his mind.

"Hey kid," Nick snapped his fingers in Sam's face. "You okay?"

Sam blinked. "Uh, yeah. Sure," he looked at Nick. "Why?"

Nick shrugged and circled around back behind the desk. "You looked a little sick there for a second." He picked up a pen and tapped it twice on a clipboard. "What can I do for you?"

"I, uh," Sam's thoughts were scattered. He wished desperately for Dean in that moment. No matter the situation, Dean always had a line, a story, a grin, or a glare that got them what they needed. "I'm transferring here from, uh, Stanford..."

Nick looked up with a slight grin. "Stanford, huh? Things just not work out for you there?"

Sam lifted the corner of his mouth in an insincere grin. "Yeah, you could say that. My, uh, car was stolen yesterday, but, uh, I wasn't on campus and..."

"Just fill out this paperwork," Nick grabbed a sheet and thrust it and the pen he'd been holding in front of Sam.

"What was all that about?" Sam asked, jerking his head over his shoulder while he filled out bogus information.

Nick sighed, "Not exactly a story you want to hear, just getting on campus and all."

Sam wrote *1967 Chevy Impala* on the line asking for his home address. "What did she mean about there being two more?"

Nick looked over Sam's shoulder to the doors Grace had exited through. "She was just upset. Her roommate was killed last night."

"Oh, that's terrible," Sam said, frustrated that he wasn't getting more out of the young cop. He finished filling out the form, and dropped the pen. He knew who he needed to talk to. "Thanks, I'll, uh, check back," he said, sprinting out of the station and ignoring Nick's call of *hey, wait!*

He expected to have to search for her. He practically ran her down as he stepped through the doors.

"Took you long enough," she said, her arms crossed, head tilted to the side, her eyes flashing. "You following me?"

"What?" Sam pulled his head back. "No! Why would you say that?"

"I saw you this morning. In the woods," she said, narrowing her eyes. "You were with another guy."

Sam blinked, surprised, thinking about how distraught she'd been. She missed nothing. "My, uh, my brother."

"So?"

"So..."

"What are you doing here?" Her stance didn't change, her eyes were cool, calculating.

Sam decided to try a different tactic. Honesty. Or as close to it as he could come to it, anyway. "I was trying to find out more about the, uh, murder."

Her eyes softened slightly. "Her name was Jaynie. Jaynie Tyler."

"Your roommate, right?"

"Yeah. I've lived with Jaynie and her sister Addison for the last two years."

"You said there were going to be two more," Sam said. Grace's eyes dropped to the ground, then she lifted them slowly to look at him through her lashes. Sam felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

"There are. He kills in threes. An idiot could see this pattern, uh..."

"Sam," he supplied. "Sam Beckett."

"Like the playwright?"

Sam grinned, his cheeks folding into dimples. He was impressed that she knew that. "Yeah, like the playwright."

"Grace Brookes. That was my older brother, Nick. My best friend and the bane of my existence."

Sam nodded, looking down. "Yeah, I got one of those."

"You hungry, Sam?"

Sam met her eyes. "I could eat."

"C'mon," she casually hooked her arm through his. "You're buying me lunch. We can talk about blind police officers."

Sam nodded, liking the feel of her hand on his arm, the touch of her shoulder against him. "Lead on."

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### **Raleigh Public Library, mid-afternoon**

Dean rubbed his fingers over his tired eyes for the tenth time that hour, then looked back down at the notes he'd taken. *Lunar cycle, three nights of the full moon, three deaths, exsanguinated, but no organs missing, not mutilated, no werewolf, slices in neck, not bite marks, no vampire, victims displayed, Vitruvian Man, demonic? human sacrifice? occult?*

*Damn, I hate microfiche...* Searching through the newspapers from the past five months had left him slightly nauseous from spinning through the words. He'd arrived about three hours ago, charmed the librarian into relinquishing files to him that he would have otherwise needed a student pass to obtain, and had spent the better part of that time alternating between searching for something – anything – that would help him understand why Sam would get visions about a girl they had no hope in hell to save. The librarian, a fifty-ish woman with bottle-red hair and a wide, friendly smile, had been back several times to check on him since feeling the impact of his slow grin.

"Thought you could use some fuel," said a quiet voice from behind him.

Dean leaned back in his chair, looking over his shoulder at the red-haired woman who'd set him up at the viewer over two hours ago. She held a sandwich and a cup of coffee in her hand. His eyes lit up and she smiled back at him in reaction.

"Oh, God, I could kiss you right now," he groaned, taking both from her greedily and shoving the sandwich into his mouth.

"Honey, I'm old enough to be your mama," she said, the smile growing wider as she watched him inhale the food. "But even mamas need a little sugar." She winked.

Dean grinned back as he chewed, then watched as her eyes lit on the article he'd left up on the viewer, then dropped to his notes. She paled slightly then looked back at him. He swallowed loudly, watching her closely.

"You know," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper, "the police are afraid. I think they're afraid because they suspect."

"S'pect wha?" Dean asked around another mouthful of sandwich.

"That whatever is killing these girls ain't human." She nodded toward the viewer and its picture of the first victim, covered with a sheet, but still strapped to a stone. "No human could do that to another."

Dean blinked in surprise. The people in this town amazed him. *A grandma with a police scanner, a librarian who believes in the supernatural... what was next – Elvis?* "You think it's... what?"

She looked down at his notes, taking in the comments. "From what I see here, I think that you can tell me more than I can tell you, honey." She met his eyes, and shook her head. "But they're scared because they don't know how to catch it or cage it, and when it stopped last month... I think everyone just hoped that it had gone away."

"But it didn't," Dean said softly, sipping the hot, black coffee.

"Poor, Jaynie," the librarian sighed. "She had a sister, too, did you know that?"

Dean shook his head.

"This is going to destroy Addison. They were everything to each other."

Dean pulled his bottom lip into his mouth, nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

The ringtone of his cell phone caught them both off-guard. The music caused the librarian's eyebrow to rise and Dean to grin sheepishly as he scrambled to pull it from his coat pocket. He looked at the caller ID, then flipped it open.

"Sam?"

"Is this Dean Beckett?" came a shaky female voice.

Dean stood, his face pulled into a fierce frown. Beckett was their code name for when they were separated and one had discovered something rather unbelievable. Dean thought it fitting, considering his obsession with *Quantum Leap* and the idea of always having to solve other people's problems, but not being seen, not living a life other than the job.

"Yeah, who the hell is this?" He knew his voice had an angry edge to it based on the librarian's hasty step back, but he didn't care. Some random chick was calling him on *Sam's* phone, which could mean... "Where is my brother?"

"This is Grace Brookes," she said, tears heavy in her voice. "Your brother told me to call you. You need to get to the M T Cup, now."

"Where the hell is Sam?!" Dean demanded, already beginning to move from the microfiche room, his notes stuffed in his jacket pocket.

"He's here, with me, but..."

Dean suddenly heard Sam through the phone, heard him cry out with pain, heard him gasp *not her, God... stop*.

"Dean – hurry," Grace's voice turned frantic. "He's having some kind of... attack or something."

"I'm on my way," Dean said. "You stay with him, you hear me?"

"Yeah."

"Grace?"

"I hear you," she said, her voice stronger.

Dean clicked his phone shut and turned to face the librarian. "Tell me how to get to the M T Cup."

"Take a left out of our lot, two blocks, turn right. Can't miss it."

"Thanks," Dean stalked toward the door of the library, ignoring the surprised stares of the students, and missing the worried look the librarian divided between his retreating back and the article he'd left up on the viewer.

Dean had the Impala started before he'd pulled the driver's door shut. "Hang on, Sammy..."

\* \* \* \*

### **M T Cup Coffee Shop, mid-afternoon**

The low rumble of the Impala drew the attention of several patrons of the coffee shop as Dean pulled to a harsh stop against the curb. He immediately saw Sam sitting on the ground, his back against the outside of the brick building, his head lowered, and his hands gripping his temples. Dean jumped from the car, swung around the front of the Impala and headed toward Sam, his eyes taking in the cute blonde crouched in front of his brother, one hand resting on his bent knee, the other holding a glass of water.

"Just take it easy, Sam," she was saying. "I think your brother is here."

"Sammy?" Dean crouched down on Sam's other side, his green eyes darting over his brother's hands, trying to see his face. He looked up at Grace, then quickly around, surprised that there weren't more people lurking. Grace seemed to read his mind.

"I told them to give him some air," she said.

"He did it again, Dean," Sam said, his voice weak and muffled, his breath coming in short bursts.

Dean shot his eyes back to his brother. "It's okay, Sam. Let's just get you out of here." He clutched Sam under his shoulder and grabbed his arm at the wrist, noting how Sam's hand automatically tightened around his own wrist in response. He did *not* want Sam to go into the details of his vision in front of Grace.

Shifting his weight and tightening his grip, Dean managed to pull Sam to his feet, Sam's free hand still gripping his head. Dean staggered back once as Sam swayed forward, and put his shoulder into Sam's chest to keep him upright. Grace stayed close, the glass of water forgotten on the ground, her hands open and waiting. Dean shook his head wondering how she expected to catch his brother if he fell; Sam was twice her size.

"C'mon," Dean said in a low voice to Sam, hoping his brother was with it enough to keep quiet until they were alone.

Sam didn't say anything; he just let Dean shift his weight so that his arm was over Dean's shoulder. Dean felt him shaking against him as he led him to the Impala. Grace sprinted ahead and opened the passenger side door for them.

Dean shot her a grateful look, then eased Sam's lanky form down into the seat, keeping his hand on Sam's shoulder as his brother immediately curled forward, clutching his head. When Sam was in the car, Dean shut the door and turned to face Grace's worried expression. She was looking through the glass at Sam. As if feeling Dean's eyes, she looked up at him expectantly.

"Uh," Dean flipped the Impala's keys into the palm of his hand from his jacket pocket. "Thanks."

He turned and moved quickly around the front of the car, slid behind the wheel and engaged the engine. He looked over at Sam worriedly, his glance catching Grace's irritated gaze. As he looked out of his window over his shoulder checking for traffic, he heard her shout after him.

"Don't mention it!"

Sam didn't say a word on the drive to the motel, and Dean felt his jaw growing tighter with each rotation of the wheel. Sam's visions usually hit him hard, but had never left him with such a psychic hangover before. And he'd never seen Sam shake so badly as a result, either. He pulled to a stop in the parking spot directly in front of their room and Sam was out of the car before Dean had slid the gear into park. Dean jumped out and followed, tracking his brother with his eyes.

Sam slammed into the motel door, kicking the base of it in fury when he couldn't get it open.

"Easy there, Fezzik," Dean hurried up to him, surprised at Sam's frustrated attempts to pound the locked door down. "I got the key."

Dean shouldered Sam out of the way, opened the door and stumbled back when Sam pushed past him, heading directly to the table and the laptop. Dean stepped into the room slowly, his face pulled into a frown, and closed the door behind him. He shrugged out of his jacket, laying it across the back of the chair opposite from the one Sam had dropped into, then, seeing the fine sheen of sweat on Sam's face, went into the bathroom to fill a glass with cool water. Snagging three ibuprofen's, he returned to Sam.

"Here," he said, grasping Sam's shoulder and attempting to pull him back from the laptop screen to hand him the painkillers and water.

Sam shrugged out of his grip, muttering, "He tied her that way on purpose... I've seen it somewhere..."

"Hey!" Dean barked when Sam resisted him.

Worry and fear manifested itself differently in the Winchesters. Dean reacted in anger, much like John. Sam reacted in compassion, as Dean imagined their mother might have. Therefore, he regretted the bite of his tone the minute the word shot from his lips, but it elicited the desired reaction: Sam looked up.

"She was tied to the stone, man," he was saying, his eyes large, his face damp with perspiration, a line of pain bisecting his eyebrows and pulling his normally boyish face into a grimace. "Like this," he turned the laptop to face Dean.

"Yeah," Dean nodded, sitting on the bed, the water and aspirin still clutched in his hands. "I know, Sam. The Vitruvian Man."

Sam's eyebrows went up. "How the hell do you know that?"

"What do you think I've been doing all this time?"

"No, I mean, how do you know what the Vitruvian Man is?"

Dean narrowed his eyes and tilted his head to the side. "What? I *can* read you know." He handed the meds and glass to Sam.

Sam took them, swallowing the ibuprofen and gulping down the rest of the water. Dean watched him closely, noting that his eyes were starting to come back from the vision, come back to the now. He braced his hands on his knees and waited.

"He glued her lips together," Sam said, rubbing a trembling hand over his eyes, then down his face. "She couldn't call out, she couldn't move... she just had to watch him kill her." He pulled in a breath. "I had to watch him kill her," he said, dropping his head, looking at the floor. "Again."

Dean leaned forward, scratching the back of his head, then lifted his eyes to Sam. "We're gonna figure this out, Sam."

Sam suddenly shot to his feet, moving away from Dean and stalking to the small window that faced the parking lot. "You know, you keep saying that, but I've watched Jess die twice now and I wasn't able to stop it the first time. I don't know what makes you think there's anything we can do about this."

Dean froze when Sam said her name. He straightened his shoulders slowly, bracing his hands on his thighs, pulling in a breath through his nose. "Sammy..."

Sam reached up and rubbed at the back of his neck with his right hand. "He sacrificed her, Dean. I mean... how many times does she have to die because I can't—"

"Sam!" Dean stood, his voice low, commanding. "Stop it."

Sam dropped his hand and turned slowly to look at him. Dean clenched his jaw, refusing to react to the raw heartache he saw brimming in his brother's eyes. He dropped his chin and pressed his lips together, pulling his strength from deep inside of him and pushing it toward Sam through his eyes.

"We're gonna figure this out, you and me, okay? You hear me?"

Sam didn't reply.

“Sam!”

“What?”

“You need to think back through this vision,” Dean said, his chest hitching at the look of pain that flashed across Sam’s face at his words. “You need to think about what is different.”

Sam shook his head. “No,” he whispered. “No, man, I can’t.”

Dean sighed and half turned away from him, his eyes lighting on the opened laptop. “Vitruvian Man, a dagger, the location of the cuts, bleeding out the victims,” he said, spreading an arm out toward Sam, the fingers of his opened hand flicking closed as he called out the facts. “We’re talking occult here, Sam. We’re talking human sacrifice. We’re talking *demon*, man.”

Sam shook his head again. “I don’t care, Dean. I can’t watch Jess die again.”

“Dammit, Sam, it’s *not* Jessica!” Dean whirled to face him. Sam flinched and backed up a step, his back against the wall of the motel. Dean pressed his advantage, watching as his words slammed into his brother. “You have to shake this off, okay? You have to let her go, man. I know you miss her, but this is killing you.”

“Dean...” Sam folded his lips, his eyes darting away from Dean.

“You have to focus, Sam. Or someone else is going to die.”

“It was the same, Dean.” Sam shook his head. “You don’t get it... it was the same, okay? The exact same damn woods, at night, Jess—the girl—tied to a stone, a man in a hood, the blade cutting her wrists...” Sam shoved his hands into his hair, sliding down the wall to sit in a heap next to the door of the room.

Dean stepped toward him, crouching in front of him, balanced on the balls of his feet. “Think, man. Something is different. Maybe you’re seeing the same girl, but...” he shook his head, looking down, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Something’s gotta be different.”

A silence fell between them, heavy with memories, with pain. Then Dean heard Sam take a breath.

“Wait,” he whispered, pulling his hands from his head. Dean looked at him. Sam’s eyes darted in thought. “Wait...”

“What is it?”

“Her shirt...” Sam swallowed, then looked at Dean, his eyes clearing noticeably. “Her shirt, Dean. She was wearing a white tank top.”

“Different girl,” Dean nodded.

“Different girl,” Sam echoed. “Different night,” his eyes shot over Dean’s shoulder, and Dean turned his head to see the clock. It was not yet five p.m. “We still got a chance.”

“Atta boy,” Dean clapped a hand on Sam’s bent knee, then pushed himself to his feet. The sudden change in elevation made his vision swim for a moment, but he steadied himself. He knew even his body had limits, but he was willing to push them for this case. He would push them for Sam. He reached down and hauled Sam to his feet.

“So,” Sam said, stepping back over to the laptop. “You really think it’s a demon?”

Dean sighed, turning to the duffel of weapons sitting on his bed. “One way to find out,” he said. “Head to the crime scene... check for sulfur.”

He pulled out his .45, ejected the clip, checked the chamber, then slid the clip back into the gun and flipped the safety on. He tucked it into the back waistband of his jeans, then reached into the bag for his flask of holy water and his EMF walkman. He grabbed his jacket and stuffed the remaining supplies into the pockets.

“We go into the woods now, there’s bound to be cops all over the place,” Sam said.

“Then we’ll do it real quiet like,” Dean looked up at him with a half grin. “Besides, you see any cops in your vision?”

Sam shook his head. Dean shrugged. They both jumped slightly at the sudden knock at the door. Dean shot a look to Sam who lifted a shoulder. Dean peeked

through the peephole, but saw nothing. Pulling his gun from his waistband, he motioned with his head for Sam to stand behind the door, lifted his gun with his right hand and opened the door with his left enough to look out.

Grace stood off to the side of the door, her arms crossed over her chest.

"How the hell did you find us?" Dean exclaimed in surprise, the door opening slightly wider in his shock.

She lifted an eyebrow. "Criminal justice major raised by cops," she said. "Besides," she looked over her shoulder at the Impala. "You guys don't exactly blend with that baby."

Dean couldn't help it. He grinned at her. He heard Sam step up behind him and practically felt his brother's eyes roll at his reaction to her comment. Grace saw Sam and her expression immediately softened, her eyes lighting up.

"Sam!" she said with relief plain in her voice. "You okay? You really scared me."

Sam put a hand on Dean's shoulder and gently moved him to the side, letting Grace into the motel room. Dean hurriedly flicked the safety back onto the .45 and shoved it back into his waistband. He watched as Sam stepped back, his head lowered, his eyes on Grace.

"Hey, Gracie," Sam said softly. "I'm okay."

Dean blinked at Sam's tone. His voice held that hint of familiarity coupled with warmth Dean had only heard his brother use with him.

Grace stepped toward Sam, reaching for his face and Dean's eyebrows raised as Sam let her lay a gentle hand on his cheek. "You sure you're okay?"

Sam nodded into the palm of her hand. "I get migraines sometimes," he said, then seemed to remember that Dean was not only still in the room, but was staring directly at him with open surprise. Sam stepped away from Grace, deftly turning the laptop away from her eyes and closing the screen.

"That was one hell of a migraine," she said, sounding doubtful. She crossed her arms over her chest again, shifting her eyes to Dean. Dean immediately dropped his eyebrows and tipped his chin up at her, silent.

"Fine," she said, chewing on her bottom lip, her eyes scanning the room. Dean saw the minute she realized that the duffel on the bed contained weapons. Her shoulders stiffened and she tilted her head to the side.

Sam looked from Grace to Dean and back. Grace dropped her arms, lifted an eyebrow, and met Sam's eye. "I'm coming with you."

"How do you know where we're going?" Dean asked, but she didn't look at him.

"You're PIs, right?" she asked Sam.

"Uh," Sam glanced from her face to his brother. "I guess you could say that."

"You're going to the crime scene," she concluded. "And I'm coming with you."

"Grace, I, uh, don't think your brother would like that very much," Sam shook his head.

She narrowed her eyes at Sam, then turned toward the door. "What my brother doesn't know won't hurt him," she said. "And besides," she paused with her hand on the doorknob, her shoulders dropping a little. "He wasn't the one that had to tell Addison that Jaynie..."

Sam looked at Dean. "Addison is Jaynie's..."

"Sister, yeah, I got that," Dean said. But then a thought occurred to him. He tilted his head to the side. "Hey, Grace?"

She looked up at him, her hand still on the doorknob. "Yeah?"

"Were Addison and Jaynie twins?"

Grace looked surprised by the question. "Yeah, why?"

Dean looked at Sam, watched as the blood drained from his face. Sam blinked rapidly and Dean held his breath, hoping his exhausted brother wouldn't choose now to keel over. Sam swallowed, shifted his eyes down and then back up to Dean.

"She might see something we don't, man," Sam said. "Couldn't hurt to bring her."

*Hell, yeah, it could,* Dean thought, biting his tongue on his retort. Bringing anyone else in on a hunt had always been a liability to Dean... but it wasn't like they hadn't done it before. And it wasn't like they hadn't needed the help before. He sighed, looking at his brother. Sam was obviously hurting, and something about this girl calmed him down. Dean figured he could risk it... once.

"You do what I say when I say it," Dean said to Grace. "Got it?"

Grace looked over at Sam as she opened the door. "Are all older brothers such a pain in the ass?"

Sam grinned at her, following her to the car. Dean watched them go, watched Sam open the back door for her, then slide into the passenger seat. He grabbed his jacket, shaking his head, then closed and locked the motel room door behind him. Something felt wrong, felt off. The job, the demon, Sam's visions... *Something's not right...*

\* \* \* \*

### **Crime Scene, early evening**

The woods were empty. Not a boy in blue in sight. Dean had to admit that he was slightly surprised. With the number of killings this town had seen over the last several months, he would have staked out the place a long time ago. *'Course I'm not a cop,* he mused, working his way through the trees. Police weren't hunters. They didn't think the same, didn't have the same instincts. And truth be told, Dean was grateful for their absence. It made his job easier.

"Grace, stay back," Dean said in a low voice, approaching the yellow tape that wrapped around the small clearing with apprehension.

It wasn't so much the task that was making him edgy as it was the company. Sam had talked amicably with Grace on the drive to the crime scene, had seemed relaxed, happy even, as they walked slowly through the wooded area, and as Dean ducked under the yellow tape, he saw that Sam had allowed Grace to slide her hand into his, lacing their fingers. Sam stayed next to her while Dean walked into the clearing.

Tightening his jaw, Dean moved toward the blood-covered, flat stone altar. It wasn't that he begrudged Sam the female attention. Hell, he knew how good it felt to escape into the arms of a woman when the life they led grew too dark for him to see his way through. He had encouraged Sam to that same end several times over the last year, particularly with Sarah Blake.

As he walked around the altar, he glanced up at Sam and Grace, standing just outside of the yellow police tape. Sam was doing exactly what Dean had always encouraged him to do. And Dean realized he'd been wrong. This wasn't Sam. And Dean wasn't blind; he knew why Sam was allowing himself to fall so quickly for this girl.

"See anything?" Sam called.

"Bloodstains," Dean called back, his eyes darting over the ground at the base of the altar. "Spikes in the ground... guessing for the leather straps."

"Leather straps?" Grace asked, her voice thin. Dean looked up and was slightly surprised after her bravado in the motel room to see her face so pale, her eyes scared.

"Yeah, uh," Sam ducked his head down to address her. "He uses leather straps to, um... tie them down."

Grace shook her head and looked away. "God, I didn't... I didn't know."

Dean watched her, his fingers tucked into his jacket pocket, tapping on the EMF reader. *Don't think this is standard PI equipment...*

"Hey, Grace," Dean said. "You live close by, right?"

She nodded.

"Close enough to walk?"

She looked at him, then nodded to the west. “Two blocks that way, left on Maine, big red house on the corner. Can’t miss it.”

“Sam,” Dean said, causing his brother to look up. “Why don’t you walk Grace home?”

Sam pulled his eyebrows together. “What?”

Dean nodded, motioning to her. “Walk her home, I’ll check out a few more things, then meet you there later.”

“Dean, I...”

“Sam,” Dean leveled his eyes on Sam’s. “She doesn’t need to be here.” *You don’t need to be here.*

“Dean, it’s getting late,” Sam said, his eyes shooting over to the darkening horizon.

“We’ve got time,” Dean said. “It’s not night yet.”

“What if you need help?” Sam protested, but Dean could see him wavering.

“I won’t need help,” Dean shook his head once.

“But...”

“I’ll meet you there, Sam.” Dean dropped both hands into his jacket pockets, watching his brother.

Sam looked at him for another moment, then seemed to sag a little and nodded, letting Grace pull him back and away from the yellow police tape. He looked back over his shoulder at Dean once more before stepping into the shadows between the trees. Dean sighed and pulled out the EMF, fitting the headphones over his head, and poising his finger on the power button.

“Here goes nothin’,” he whispered.

\* \* \* \*

### **Grace’s house, evening**

“Who was she, Sam?” Grace asked as they rounded the corner and Sam saw the large red house.

“Who?”

Grace squeezed his hand once before she released it to climb the steps that led to the wide front porch. “The girl who put that look in your eyes.”

Sam blinked, shoved his hands into his pockets and looked away. “She was, uh... she was going to be my fiancée.”

It was the first time since the demon had revealed the truth to Dean back in that cabin in Missouri that Sam had said the words out loud. It cost him. His head swam a little and he felt his knees tremble with the effort of bearing his weight.

“I’m sorry, Sam,” Grace murmured, stopping at the top of the stairs to look down at him. “Did she... leave you?”

Sam pressed his lips together. “Yeah,” he nodded. “Yeah, she left.”

Grace was silent for a moment. Then she reached out her hand to him. “C’mon,” she smiled at him. “Come have a beer while we wait for your brother.”

Part of Sam knew that he should decline – he should sit down on the steps to wait for Dean so that they could stake out the crime scene and wait for the demon or devil or whatever the hell it was to show. But a larger part, the part of Sam that had been screaming for attention since he’d gotten Dean back, since he’d made the deal that had freed his brother from the demon and had sealed his own fate, wanted nothing more than to go inside with Grace and lose himself inside of her normal life, if only for a moment.

He took her hand and allowed her to lead him into the house and to the kitchen. As they rounded the corner, Sam saw someone bent over, leaning on the door of the

refrigerator, staring at the shelves full of food. At the sound of their entrance, the figure straightened and turned to face them.

"Oh, hey, Lucien," Grace greeted. "I didn't think we were going to see you this week."

Lucien smiled at Grace, then shifted pale blue eyes to Sam's face. He had a slight cleft in his upper lip, giving Sam the impression that he was snarling. Sam tipped his chin up by way of a greeting and Lucien's glance took him in, weighing him, judging him. Sam lifted a brow at the challenge he saw there.

"Yeah, well," Lucien said, his voice deep and a bit raspy. "I had a jury this morning and thought I'd take a couple of days off. I swear I could sleep for a week."

Grace stepped around him and ducked into the fridge to retrieve two beers, looking at Sam as she twisted the tops off and tossed them into the trash under the sink.

"Lucien, this is Sam," she said. "He's a friend of mine. Sam, this is my third roommate."

"How's it goin'?" Sam asked.

"Lucien's an architecture student, so we don't see much of him," Grace walked back over to Sam, handing him one of the beers, then turned back to her roommate. "You seen Addison tonight?"

Lucien shook his head. "Her mom's been here," he said. "Just left, actually."

Grace nodded. She looked over at Sam. "I'm going to check on her really quick," she said. "Wait here?"

"Sure," Sam nodded. He leaned against the counter, watching Lucien watch him.

"You dating Grace?" Lucien asked the minute she was out of earshot.

"Not exactly," Sam hedged.

"Sleeping with her?"

Awkward... "No, man, we're just friends."

Lucien huffed out an insincere laugh. "Nobody is just friends with a girl like Grace."

Sam lifted an eyebrow. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up as Lucien's pale eyes raked over him once again. There was something almost... predatory in his gaze. He looked to Sam like he was preparing to pounce. Sam tightened his jaw.

"You guys getting along okay?" Grace's voice broke the tension.

"Sure thing," Lucien said. "I'll leave you two alone," he said, smiling again at Grace, then flicked his eyes once more to Sam. Sam held his gaze steady as Lucien left the kitchen. Soon they could hear Nirvana's *All Apologies* from a stereo somewhere nearby.

Grace was watching his face. "Don't let him get to you, Sam," she said. "He's a little creepy, but he's got a good heart."

"If you say so," Sam said in a low voice.

"C'mon," she took his hand and led him to the living room.

Sam stepped away from her and up to the old brick fireplace across from the couch. Framed photographs covered the mantelpiece. He took a drink of his beer and walked over to look. They were of Grace, Jaynie, and Addison, although Sam had no way of knowing who was who between the sisters. There were also several of Grace and Nick.

"This one is my favorite," Grace said, picking up one with Grace on Nick's back, her cheek pressed close to his, both laughing. "He practically raised me when our dad died. Our mom... she couldn't really deal with it, and that left Nicky."

Sam swallowed, thinking of Dean. "How old were you?"

"I was four, Nick was ten."

"He took good care of you," Sam said. It wasn't a question. Nick's devotion to his sister's wellbeing had been obvious to Sam in the police station that morning.

Grace smiled at the picture, then set it back on the mantel. "Yeah," she said. "He still does."

Sam rubbed his head, the ache behind his eyes still very much present. He needed to get back to Dean, needed to stop this monster from killing Addison. At least he knew where she was right now...

"...see the rest of the house?"

Belatedly, Sam realized that Grace was talking to him. "Sorry, what?"

"You okay, Sam?"

She was peering closely at him, her gaze seeming to penetrate the veneer he'd worked over the last year to build around him. He'd never be as good as Dean at building walls; Dean had over twenty years of experience. But since returning to this life after experiencing normal, Sam had become a quick study.

And Grace was getting through with just a look. He swallowed and nodded in answer to her question. He watched her eyes soften, and her chin trembled once. Without saying another word, she reached for his hand and wrapped her fingers around his, tugging gently on him and leading him through the living room and down a hall.

The door of her bedroom opened out into the hall rather than back into her room, he noted. There were two chairs and a long, thin table across the hall. Another bedroom was a little distance down the hall from them. Sam stepped back as she opened the door to her room, then allowed her to usher him in. It was large with several different sloping angles in the ceiling and two large windows flanking either side of the room. He heard her pull the door closed behind him and he turned to face her.

What the hell am I doing here... he rubbed the back of his neck, setting his beer down on her dresser next to a stereo. Dean could be there any minute, and he could just hear his brother's lecherous taunts about finding Sam in Grace's room.

"Grace, I should..."

"I've never seen a dead body before," Grace confessed, her voice soft. She was leaning against the closed door, her hands behind her. "Nick deals with death every day, y'know?" She looked up at Sam.

He nodded, waiting.

"My Dad was a cop, so Nick became a cop, so I'm gonna be a cop," she said, looking down. "But I'd never seen... I guess I didn't really get how – how quick it can all go away."

"It's never easy," Sam whispered.

"I kept thinking... what if that were Nick, or my mom..." she stepped away from the door, walking up to Sam, but not touching him. "But not me. I didn't think *what if that were me*... do you think that's weird?"

Sam shook his head. His worst fear was of something happening to Dean. Of losing Dean. He thought he could handle anything else in his life except for that. Grace reached up and laid her hand flat against his chest, over his heart. He felt his pulse increase noticeably at her touch. She looked up at him.

"I don't do this," she whispered.

"Don't do what?" Sam asked softly, his eyes on her mouth.

"I don't do this," she repeated, then reached up and cupped the back of Sam's neck with her hand, pulling his mouth down on hers.

Sam reacted instinctively. He gathered her up against him, closing his eyes. She pressed forward, knocking him slightly off balance and he hit the dresser with his hip, reaching blindly back with one hand to balance himself. His fingers hit a button on her stereo and 311's *Beautiful Disaster* filled the empty places in the room.

Catching his balance, he wrapped his arms around her slim waist, picked her slightly up off of the floor and moved back toward the bed. He was lost in her. Her mouth covered his, capturing his breath, his tongue, his will. Grace felt different, tasted different, smelled different from Jessica, but in that moment, Sam didn't care. He caught them with his knee and one hand on her bed, lifting her and moving her up

toward the pillows with his other arm. He rolled to his side, then his back, taking her with him, pulling her on top of him.

Grace tangled with him willingly. Their clothes were shed quickly, their hands roaming, their lips exploring. He let her move her mouth and dropped his head back as he felt her teeth on his ear, teasing the tender flesh there. He knew what he *should* do. He knew this wasn't taking care of the hunt, the job. But he didn't care. He was tired. His soul was tired. And she felt so good against him. His mind went blank and he just let himself feel...

He felt her curves and the softness of her skin and the heat of her breath and the fullness of her lips. He heard the harsh beats of her breathing mingling with his and the sound of the bed under them as they moved and the rhythm of the music as it matched them. He tasted the salt from her skin and the sweetness of her mouth. He saw... nothing. He kept his eyes closed and let his hands move and let his body react and then he was drowning in an escape he'd not felt in a long time.

Grace lay against him, her head on his shoulder, her leg over his belly, her arm tucked against his chest. He knew she was sleeping – her body was completely relaxed, her breathing soft and even. He should be in blissful oblivion with her. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. But he couldn't let himself go that far.

Dean was out there somewhere, and so was a killer. Sam shifted slightly in the bed and opened his eyes for the first time since her kiss. Grace looked young, innocent, vulnerable lying in his arms. Risking a moment of true intimacy, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead.

The scream cut through the stillness of the air and Grace jerked violently in reaction. Sam was out of bed before she could finish her startled gasp. He pulled on his boxers, jeans, and boots, cursing himself for not bringing a weapon. Another scream shook the house and he saw Grace scrambling out of the bed, illuminated only by the moonlight shining through her large window. His eyes darted quickly around the room and caught on a Louisville Slugger propped in the corner of the room.

"Stay here," he barked at Grace as she pulled his shirt on to cover herself.

"Sam, what..."

"Grace," he opened the door, stepped out, then looked at her, his eyes hard.

"Stay. Here."

He shut the door in her surprised face, then for good measure, slid one of the chairs from across the hall over and propped it up under the door handle, locking her in.

He ignored her shouted protests and pounding on the door and hurried down the hall to the other door he'd seen earlier. He could hear distinct sounds of a struggle in the room. He shouldered the bat, then pulled the door open. The sight that met his eyes was so surreal, he almost didn't move in time. He knew it was Addison in that room. He knew... but he saw Jessica. Jessica's wide blue eyes, her mouth pulled down in sorrow. *Why Sam...*

A hooded man held Addison against him, her long blonde hair wrapped around his hand, a small dagger – the blade Sam had seen in his visions – held to her throat. Addison was bucking and kicking, seemingly ignoring the danger she was putting herself in, simply desperate to get away. Sam shook himself.

"Let her go!" Sam bellowed, charging into the room with the bat braced on his shoulder.

The hooded man's head snapped up, but Sam couldn't see his face. He roughly shoved Addison aside and she bounced against the floor and landed in a boneless heap beneath the opened window, unconscious. Sam took one step forward and swung the bat at the man's head. Impossibly, the hooded man brought his arm up at the exact right moment and caught the bat at the apex of the swing just before it slammed against his head.

He jerked the bat toward him and Sam stumbled with it. The punch caught Sam on the jaw, stunning him, and pissing him off at the same time. With a growl, Sam charged forward and caught the hooded man at the waist, lifting him off the ground and slamming him into the opposite wall. Pressing his advantage, Sam pulled his right arm back and pounded his fist twice into the man's face. The man's head cracked harshly against the wall and Sam followed his punches up with a shot to the throat. Sam expected the man to fall forward gasping. He didn't expect the knee to his crotch.

The pain was blinding, white-hot and all consuming. Sam's knees disappeared and he found himself on the ground, staring up at the shadowed face of the hooded man as he straddled him, grabbing his hair and returning the favor with interest. The hooded man's fists were like mallets as they slammed repeatedly into Sam's face. Sam could taste blood in his mouth – *slam* - could only hear blood rushing in his ears - *slam*. He had to get him off – *slam* - had to push him away - *slam*... Dean would shoot him, right? Isn't that what was supposed to happen?

The hooded man stood and Sam curled forward as he felt the impact of a foot in his side. His last thought as his consciousness grayed out was *Where the hell is Dean?*

\* \* \* \*

### **Crime Scene, night**

Dean was shivering. It was his first clue that he'd actually fallen asleep. He was freezing, and, he realized belatedly, slightly damp from sitting on the grass propped against a tree. He pulled his head up, blinking in the moonlight that was suddenly illuminating the empty clearing like a beacon.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, stretching his stiff limbs to work feeling back into his extremities. He looked at his watch in the moonlight. "Son of a *bitch*."

Three hours. Sam had left three hours ago. Dean pushed himself to his feet, lurching a bit in his exhausted stupor, and stuffed the silent EMF walkman back into his pocket. It hadn't so much as hiccupped the whole time he'd been there.

He'd sat down to rest – just for a minute – and to watch and see if anyone would wander by, cop or criminal. He should never have stopped moving. His last memory was of leaning his head back against the tree to watch the moon begin to rise, large and orange as it reflected the light of the dying sun.

He sprinted back to the Impala, sliding behind the wheel and roaring the car to life. Turning a tight U-turn in the middle of the road, he headed in the direction Grace had pointed earlier, wondering idly if Sam had even missed him over the last three hours. He certainly had enough to keep him busy.

The house was dark when he arrived, but Dean could tell instantly that something was wrong. It just... *felt* wrong. He tucked his gun in his jeans and jogged up the porch steps. He pounded on the door once, waiting. Then he heard her. Grace's terrified voice. Screaming Sam's name.

Dean took one step back and with a mighty heave, slammed his foot into the lock of the door, blasting it open.

"Sam!" He bellowed, moving through the house, following the sound of Grace's voice.

"Sam!" He called again, then realized Grace heard him when she switched to yelling his name. He pulled his gun out and rounded the corner, facing the hallway.

"Dean!"

Dean heard her voice coming from a room locked with a chair under the doorknob. He kicked it away and before he could open the door, Grace flung the door open, glanced up and down the hall, saw him, then took off in the opposite direction.

When Dean saw the second bedroom door, he realized where she was heading. He was down the hall and to the second door before Grace. He stepped through the doorway, gun raised, to see Sam on the floor, his face covered in blood, and a hooded man with a blonde girl in a white tank top clutched in his arms, climbing out of the window.

Dean rushed forward, gun pointed at the hooded man. He shot his eyes down to Sam as he passed, then focused on the disappearing figures of the man and the girl. He couldn't get a clean shot – the girl was limp in his arms and was draped across the man. Desperately, he reached for the man's sleeve, but the fabric slipped through his fingers.

"Shit!"

"No!" Grace screamed. Dean caught her around the waist just as she was about to go out of the window. "Let me go, dammit!"

"Stop it," Dean snapped in her ear.

"He's gonna kill her!" Grace shrieked, pushing against his arms, causing him to tighten his grip. The heels of her bare feet beat harshly against his shins.

"Stop it!" Dean growled, dropping her roughly on the ground, shocking her into stillness. "Dammit, we didn't come all this way just to let that bastard win, okay? But I sure as *hell* am not gonna have your blood on my hands."

"Dean..." Sam's voice was a weak whisper of breath.

Dean turned immediately from Grace's pale, shocked face and dropped down beside his brother.

"Sammy, hey." He carefully turned Sam's head to face him, wincing in empathy at the cuts on his brother's face.

"Sam?" Grace's voice shook and she crawled over to Sam's other side. Dean spared her a glance, noting suddenly that she was wearing Sam's shirt. She was shaking, but not crying, and for that Dean was glad. He was pretty much at his limit at the moment.

Sam groaned and shifted slightly.

"Take it easy, Sam," Dean said, using his thumbs to wipe some of the blood from Sam's face.

"Dean?"

"Yeah, man, I'm here."

"Where were you?"

Dean's chest hitched painfully. "I'm sorry, Sam," he whispered, continuing to wipe the blood from around Sam's eyes.

"D'jou get the bastard?" Sam asked through swollen lips.

Dean shook his head. "No, Sam."

"Dammit," Sam said, working to open his eyes. His left eye was swollen and cut, reminding Dean acutely of his injuries when they were in the cabin in Missouri. "Saw 'im, Dean."

"You saw him?"

"Saw 'is eyes," Sam blinked hard, reaching up to grasp Dean's shoulder, his fingers sliding, then gripping Dean's coat. "Saw 'is eyes."

Dean leaned forward as Sam's grip tightened. "You saw his eyes? Were they... black?"

"No, man," Sam shook his head, his jaw muscle clenching. His pain-filled gaze met Dean's squarely. "They were insane."

\* \* \* \*

### **Grace's house, night**

Dean swallowed, watching Sam's face, seeing the blood, the bruising, and the resolve in his brother's eyes. "What do you mean... insane?"

"I don't know what we're dealing with," Sam said, his voice growing stronger, "but whatever it is, it's...ah... it's crazy."

Sam winced, gripping Dean's arm tighter, trying to pull himself up.

"Hey, take it easy, Sam," Dean put a hand behind Sam's bare shoulders, easing him into a sitting position. Sam curled over, wrapping an arm around his middle.

"Dean, we gotta go after her," Sam whispered.

"We will," Dean said, shrugging out of his jacket and wrapping it around Sam. His head jerked up at the sound of the sirens. Sam looked over at him, then they both looked at Grace.

She was still staring at Sam, her hand on his leg, her fingers visibly trembling. She looked at Dean, then back down to Sam. "What? I called my brother."

"Your brother's a cop?" Dean asked, surprised.

"When?" Sam said at the same time.

She raised an eyebrow, ignoring Dean's question, and addressed Sam. "After you locked me in and before he let me out."

Dean shook his head and wrapped his arm tighter across Sam's back. "C'mon, man, we need to get out of here."

"What?!" Grace shot to her feet as Dean carefully eased Sam to his, pulling Sam's arm across his shoulders. "He needs a doctor, Dean."

"I'll take care of him," Dean muttered, turning Sam toward the bedroom door.

Grace sprinted around them to block the doorway. "Look at him..."

"I said I'll take care of him," Dean snapped. He knew she was trying to do what was best for Sam, but he didn't have the energy to explain what he didn't think she needed to know.

"It's okay, Gracie," Sam said softly, leaning heavily on Dean.

"No it's not okay," she spat, refusing to budge. "You're beat to hell, Sam, let my brother..."

"Listen," Dean said, his voice strained. Sam was getting heavier and Dean could feel the muscles in his back protesting. "We don't have time, okay? Sam and I know how to take this guy out, but we have to go *now* or your friend back there? She doesn't stand a chance."

"Grace!" The bellow caused Sam to jump slightly against him.

"Nick's here," Grace said softly.

*No kidding*, Dean thought, realizing what the busted in door would have looked like to her brother. *Her brother the freakin' COP*. He started to move forward again, forcing Grace to back up. She frowned, but rotated away, allowing him room to move through the bedroom door and into the hall.

"Grace!" Nick called again, and Dean could hear that he was moving through the living room toward them. He knew Nick would round the corner in a matter of seconds.

"There a back door to this place?" He whispered to Grace.

She was chewing on her lip, glancing over her shoulder toward the living room. *Stalling*, Dean realized.

"Gracie," Sam whispered, drawing her eyes back to them. "I'll be okay. We can't deal with the cops right now... not if we want to save Addison."

Dean gripped Sam's wrist, his arm around his brother's waist, the tired muscles in his back clenching viciously with the effort of keeping them both upright. Releasing her lip and nodding, Grace gestured for Dean to follow her and led him down the hall away from the living room. Dean felt Sam pull slightly away from him as they walked down the hall, but the limp in his left leg was more pronounced and he kept his arm across Dean's shoulders.

Grace pointed to a small back door and Dean nodded at her. She shot anxious eyes to Sam, her chin quivering slightly.

"I'll come back," Sam whispered. "I promise."

Dean opened the door and helped Sam through, hearing the near-panic in Nick's voice when he shouted for his sister a third time.

"I'm here!" She finally called back. "I'm right here, Nick."

Dean pulled Sam up close to the outside wall when he heard Nick's feet echo a beat of fear as he rushed down the hall to his sister. Holding Sam upright against the house with his right arm, Dean reached over with his left to push the door closed. He closed his eyes, listening, waiting for Grace to maneuver Nick away from the windows so that he could get Sam to the car.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just a little shaken up. He got Addison, Nicky."

"It's okay, it's okay, we'll get him... Jesus, Gracie, you scared the shit outta me – hey, what the hell are you wearing? Is that a *guy's* shirt?"

Dean didn't hear Grace's reply as their voices faded away down the hall and he opened his eyes, breathing out a sigh of relief. He turned back toward Sam. Sam's eyes were open, staring vacantly at a spot on the ground, his face pale and bloody. Silently, Dean gripped his brother's chin and shifted Sam's face until his eyes slowly blinked up to meet his. Leveling his eyes, Dean asked without words if Sam was with him. Sam nodded tiredly and pushed himself away from the house. Shoving his shoulder under Sam's arm, Dean hauled him to the Impala.

\* \* \* \*

## **Motel, night**

"She said that the killings haven't all happened in the same place, but that the pattern of three pointed to a serial killer. She couldn't figure out --- ah, easy, man..." Sam sat on the edge of the motel bed, Dean's jacket beside him, a towel full of ice pressed against his jaw with one hand, and the other gripping the edge of the bed while Dean stitched up a deep cut just above his left eyebrow.

"Hey, you're the one that decided it would be a good idea to use your face to stop his fist," Dean said, focusing on the final stitch. Sam's gaze started to lose focus. "You with me, Sam?"

"Huh?"

"You okay?"

Sam blinked, then nodded. Dean finished the last stitch, putting the suture kit back into their first aid pack, then handed Sam a glass of water and three ibuprofen. Sam took them obediently, his eyes on a spot on the carpet near the door of the room. Dean dipped his chin, looking at Sam's beaten face, thinking.

"So, you were saying?" he asked, trying to help Sam focus.

Sam blinked up at him.

"She couldn't figure out... what?" Dean prompted.

"What?"

"You were telling me what amazing pillow talk Grace has," Dean commented in a wry voice, his eyes roaming expertly over the bruising on Sam's chest, his fingers carefully checking for broken ribs.

Sam winced a bit, but Dean could tell nothing was broken. His words, though, cut through Sam's fog and his eyes cleared, looking down and away.

"Y-you know what we... what I..."

Dean sat back, looking at Sam. "Are you kidding me with this?"

He glanced pointedly at Sam's bare chest, then with a raised eyebrow met Sam's sheepish eyes again. Sam shifted the ice to his left eye and slumped a little, cradling his arm around his bruised side.

"You know it was so... I didn't really even think about it. I don't really even know... why."

Dean clapped his hands on his thighs, shoving himself to his feet and flipping the chair he had been sitting on back around to face the small table. "Well," he said, going to their duffel full of weapons. "That's where I come in. 'Cause I just happen to have the answer."

"Oh, really?" Sam asked dryly, his voice steadier.

Dean pulled his lips down in a slight frown, looking over his shoulder at Sam as he checked the clip of his .45. "Yeah, really."

He turned back to the weapons so that he didn't have to look at Sam's bruised face and wounded eyes. He ejected the full clip of bullets, tossed it back in the bag, and started to fill an empty clip with silver bullets. He heard Sam shift on the bed behind him, felt his brother's eyes drilling into the back of his head, waiting.

"You miss Jessica," he stated matter-of-factly. "Your visions are screwing with your head. And Grace is..."

"What, convenient?" Sam asked, his voice hard.

Dean turned back around, forcing himself to face Sam. "I wasn't gonna say that."

Sam stood up, dropping the towel of ice on the bed. He swayed a moment and Dean tensed to catch him, but he was able to balance himself.

"So it's okay if you get laid by the cute waitress in whatever town we're in because it's fun, but if I sleep with someone, I have to be emotionally troubled, is that it?" Sam's voice held an edge that wasn't quite anger, wasn't quite pain. He almost sounded like he was truly asking Dean if that might be right, if he might be that screwed up.

Dean brought his eyebrows together in a frown, unconsciously pulling his head back and away. "No, Sam."

"'Cause it wasn't about that, man." Sam moved around Dean gingerly, holding a hand against his bruised side. He leaned over and dug into his duffel bag, pulling out two clean shirts.

"I know it wasn't, Sam, I just meant that—" Dean shoved the clip of silver bullets into the .45, flicked the safety on, and set the gun on the table, "-there's something hinky about this hunt. Nothing about it has been... well, normal, especially for you. And I..."

Sam was gingerly pulling the T-shirt over his head. "What?"

"Well, look at you. Grace is right, you're beat to hell, and these visions," Dean rubbed his fingers along his right eyebrow in an unconscious gesture of frustrated thought. "These visions are taking a lot out of you – more than usual, Sam."

Sam pulled on his outer shirt, shrugging. "So?"

Dean licked his lips. Instinctively he knew he was about to step into dangerous territory, but this time he was unable to ignore the incessant voice inside his head that had been screaming at him for weeks... since the Jersey Devil... since the demon inside of him had just... disappeared. The voice that taunted him with a nagging doubt... *you're gonna lose him... you won't be able to stop what's coming...*

"So, I think you should..." he took a breath, his eyes on Sam's profile. "I want you to stay here."

At that Sam turned to face him. "What did you just say?"

"I don't want you on this one with me, Sam." Dean leveled his eyes on his brother's bruised face, noting the heat in Sam's blue-gray eyes.

"Whatever, man." Sam shook his head. "I'm coming with you." He took a step toward Dean.

Dean squared his shoulders, balancing his body in a gesture he knew Sam would recognize from endless hours of sparring practice. "I *can* keep you here."

Sam's eyes grew hard, his lips thinning, the bruising on his cheek and forehead standing out vividly in stark contrast to the angry paleness of his features. "You can try."

He moved toward Dean, challenging him to make good on his stance. Dean reached up and caught him, fisting his hands in the front of Sam's opened shirt, pushing him back a step. Sam's brows pulled together and he reached back

instinctively to grab Dean's arms, gripping him for balance as Dean pressed forward again, forcing Sam back another step.

"You're not going, Sam," Dean said, his voice low, commanding. "I can't risk it."

"You can't take this guy by yourself, Dean," Sam protested, gritting his teeth and shoving back, forcing Dean to brace himself.

Sam's height gave him the advantage of balance, but he was hurting, and tired, and sore, and Dean knew it, and he hated himself, but he used Sam's weakness for his benefit. He shoved again on Sam's chest, once, causing Sam to sit hard on the bed directly behind them. Leaning close so that Sam had no choice but to look in his eyes, Dean shook his fistful of Sam's shirt gently against his chest.

"I'll get the job done, Sam." *And I won't lose you in the process...*

Looking at Sam, Dean felt a brief pull of memory, felt the devastating emptiness that had filled him when Harris had convinced him that Sam was dead – that he had killed Sam. He had gone through hell in that moment, and he knew he would do anything to prevent that from ever happening... he would do anything to keep Sam safe...

Sam dropped his hands, staring right at Dean, his eyes twin pools of misery. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Dean winced. Sam could cut right to the core of him.

*Dammit, I'm doing it for you, Sammy...* He released Sam's shirt and straightened up. "Sam... please. Just... just go with me on this one."

His voice held a slight tremor that he wasn't able to quell. Sam's eyes flickered once at Dean's tone, his head cocking to the side.

"Why, Dean?"

*You're gonna lose him... you won't be able to stop what's coming...* "Because you're not thinking clearly." Dean clenched his jaw, his hands opening and closing into fists. "You aren't seeing this for what it is."

Sam narrowed his eyes, leaning forward. Dean took a step back, reaching behind him for the chair, for something to lean against, for something to hold onto.

"And what is it, Dean? What do you think this is?" Sam's voice was angry, challenging.

Dean pulled his lips in against his teeth, biting off the instant retort of *I think it's you looking for the impossible -- a way to save Jessica...* "I think we're dealing with a... a possession."

"Why? You find any sulfur at the crime scene?"

"No, but –"

"You think I was lying to you about the guy's eyes back at Grace's house?"

"No, Sam." Dean snapped, irritated. "You got a better explanation? I'm all ears." He spread his arms wide, inviting Sam to correct him. "We've got a serial killer that the cops aren't even going after, who is killing with methods pulled from a dozen different satanic rituals, on a lunar cycle." He shook his head. "What the hell is it if it's not demonic?"

"But why? What is the reason, huh?" Sam pushed himself to his feet, turning away from Dean and resting a hand on his hip.

"Since when do demons need a reason?" Dean argued.

"Since I started having visions of girls being slaughtered," Sam said softly. "Girls who look just like Jessica."

Dean dropped his head, staring blankly at the worn motel room carpet. He couldn't put into words why he was so sure Sam needed to stay away from the woods tonight. He knew nothing he could say would be compelling enough. All he had was a nagging fear deep in his stomach that there was something very wrong. Something bad that was going to pull his brother down if he didn't hold on tight, didn't keep Sam from the edge.

With a sudden fierceness that almost made him gasp, Dean wished for John in that moment. He hadn't felt a need for his father's presence this sharply since they'd

returned to Lawrence. Sam wouldn't listen to John any better than he was listening to Dean, but there was a quiet strength about his dad that Dean had always been able to draw from. Whether from the need to not let John down, or the complete focus on keeping Sam safe, Dean felt stronger when his father was present. He knew, though, that calling John wasn't an option. Not without risking the rest of the hunters finding them.

Dean pulled in a breath and lifted his head. "Sam," he said, surprised to hear how raspy his voice sounded. He cleared his throat. "I'm tired, man."

Sam looked over his shoulder at him, waiting.

"I can't get this guy and make sure you're okay at the same time," Dean met Sam's eyes. "Not tonight."

"I can take care of myself, Dean," Sam argued, turning to face him.

Dean lifted a brow, looking pointedly at the fresh stitches on Sam's forehead. Sam swallowed hard, shook his head once, and stared at Dean. His eyes filled with tears.

"I gotta do this, man," Sam whispered, emotion choking the volume of his voice. "I can't just... sit here and wait."

Dean turned away, leaning both hands on the table, his head dropping low between his shoulders.

"Dean," Sam continued. "I need you to let me do this. I need you to help me do this. We're... we're better off together, man, you know that. And I... I have to finish this."

*I know*, Dean thought. He felt the weight of the passing of time. Addison's life was hanging on what he said next.

"Well, if we're gonna do this," he muttered, "we're gonna have to do it now." He looked over his shoulder at Sam, seeing him sag visibly with relief. "We go get Addison. That's it."

"Right," Sam nodded.

"We get her out of there and then," Dean looked toward the dark window. "Then we figure out how to get this... whatever the hell it is."

Sam swallowed, nodding again silently. Dean looked back over at his brother.

"But I swear to God, Sam..." Dean shook his head. He couldn't finish.

"Nothing's gonna happen to me tonight, Dean," Sam said, his eyes serious, answering the unspoken words that rested in the silence.

Dean regarded him for a moment, then turned toward the bag full of weapons. Sam stepped up next to him and watched as Dean began to pull weapons from the bag: extra bullets, holy water, and his Bowie knife. Sam lifted one of the silver bullets, raising his eyebrows in question at Dean. Dean shrugged, *Why not?* He looked sideways at Sam, then handed him the knife. He grabbed his jacket off of the bed, tucked the extra clip of bullets into one pocket and the flask of holy water into the other.

They turned as one and headed out of the motel room toward the Impala. As Dean started the engine, he looked over quickly at Sam. The muscle in Sam's jaw was twitching with an obvious mix of pain and tension. Dean looked forward, shifting the car into reverse. He hooked his elbow over the back of the seat to check his rear view.

"Y'know, it's okay to care about Grace, Sammy," he said in a low voice. He saw Sam flinch, then turn his face away from him to look out of the passenger window. Dean pulled out onto the road.

"Yeah," Sam whispered. "Maybe."

\* \* \* \*

**Woods, near midnight**

Sam was hurting, inside and out. His face throbbed from the beating he'd taken at the hands of the hooded man. His heart ached for someone that would be forever gone and always right beside him. On the short drive to the woods outside of campus, he had tried to flip that switch – the one that turned him off inside so that he could do the job, move forward, breathe without thinking about what he'd once had.

He had been able to shut down so easily before... before he'd seen a demon stare out of his father's eyes. Before he'd seen Dean work to hold up his walls while his heart was being ripped from his chest. Before they'd found their father only to have to let him go again. Before Haris had taken his brother and turned him inside out...

"You ready?"

Dean's voice broke into Sam's thoughts and he pulled himself upright, realizing that they'd stopped. He felt Dean's eyes on him and nodded stiffly, opening the door and gritting his teeth against the ache in his side as he stood. He had temporarily lost control of the switch. But if he let Dean see... if he gave his brother any indication that he was not even close to ready, that he was nothing more than a raw wound, Dean would stuff him in the trunk and close the lid faster than Sam could say "demon."

"Can't believe this friggin' town," Dean was muttering, pulling his gun from his waistband and flicking the safety off.

"What do you mean?" Sam whispered back, mirroring Dean's crouched stance, his measured steps as they crept through the trees toward the clearing.

"Not one cop, man." Dean shook his head. "Even if they didn't believe it was the same guy, you'd think they would be at least staking out the place to make sure."

"Maybe they're scared," Sam offered. He heard Dean huff as they moved in unison through the darkness.

"Wonder how many girls have to die before they find their spines," he almost growled.

Sam looked over in the direction of his voice, saw the glint of his gun barrel reflecting in the moonlight, and realized Dean had raised it level with his head, barrel up. At the sound of a low murmur, Sam shot his eyes forward, narrowly avoiding walking into a tree.

*"Vestri cruor mos purgo mihi, vestri cruor mos solvo mihi..."*

"Shit," he heard Dean mutter and saw immediately why.

Addison was strapped to the stone altar, her white tank gleaming in the moonlight. She wasn't struggling like her sister; she looked dazed, barely conscious. Sam couldn't immediately tell if her lips were glued as he'd seen in his vision. The hooded man had slit her left wrist and was moving around to her right side.

"Hey!" Dean barked.

The hooded man's head shot up. Dean didn't hesitate. The harsh report of his gun echoed through the night and the hooded man dropped out of sight on the other side of the altar from Sam.

"Sam," Dean's voice was a harsh command of action. Sam nodded and moved from the shadows, Dean's Bowie knife out, as Dean advanced on the altar, his gun trained on the spot where the hooded man had been standing.

Sam stepped up to Addison, pulling off his outer shirt and wrapping it tightly around her wounded wrist. She blinked dazedly up at him. Her lips were sealed with a thin layer of clear glue. There was a large, red welt across her left temple.

"You're gonna be okay," Sam soothed. "We're getting you outta here."

He cut the leather strap from her wrist, then leaned down and cut the strap from the ankle closest to him. He saw Dean moving around the end of the altar, his gun focused on the ground, his mouth pursed in concentration.

Sam quickly reached across Addison, cutting the leather strap from her other wrist and ankle and was about to lift her when he saw Dean's expression change. Dean's

eyebrows pulled together and his eyes darted quickly from the base of the stone to the empty ground around him, turned silver by the light of the moon.

"What the f---" Dean's eyes shot up, fear plainly etched across his face. "Sam, down!"

Sam immediately ducked over Addison's limp body; he could feel the rush of air as the bullet passed over his head. He didn't hear it hit, but the sharp silver blade of the dagger used to cut Addison's wrists landed with a clatter next to Sam's outstretched arm. Before he could pull Addison off of the altar, he felt the pressure of hands on his back as the hooded man used his body for leverage, vaulting over the altar and launching himself at Dean with an inhuman growl.

Sam's head snapped up and he saw that Dean had actually reached up and caught the man, his hand fisting in the front of the man's robe in a frightening mirror of their earlier position. Dean's gun had been knocked from his hand, and he was stumbling backwards trying to keep his feet. Sam looked down at Addison, rolling her into his arms and crouching behind the altar to adjust the bandage on her wrist, tightening it as best he could.

"Sam, get her outta here!" Dean yelled.

He was struggling, Sam realized. He tucked an arm under Addison's legs and cupped her head against his shoulder, rising to a crouch. He saw Dean then.

He was on the ground, on the other side of the altar from Sam, his hands on the wrists of the hooded man, working to push him away even as the man pressed the advantage of his position and reached for Dean's throat. Sam stumbled slightly under Addison's weight. He looked from his brother down to the girl in his arms. She was pale, the shirt bandage already turning a deep red.

"Sam..." Dean ground out. "G-get the hell outta here!"

Sam hesitated a moment longer, then as Dean brought his knee up into the hooded man's midsection, forcing him away and immediately turning to grip the man by the front of his robe, Sam took off through the trees. His breath beat out a harsh rhythm as he tried to hurry with Addison to the car, but also keep an ear out for Dean.

"Son of a bitch!"

When Sam heard Dean's curse, he stopped and turned back. He could barely see Dean in the wan light provided by the moon high over head. Sam paused briefly; the growl of pain that followed Dean's words the deciding factor. He set Addison down carefully against a tree and turned, running back to the clearing. The hooded man had Dean by the front of his leather jacket and was slamming him back against the stone altar. Dean was gripping the front of the man's robe, but was unable to get enough leverage to push him away.

Sam thought for one instant about throwing Dean's knife, but the possibility of missing his target and impaling his brother was too great. He reached down and grabbed a fallen stick from the ground, standing and hurling it at the hooded man's head with all of his strength. It struck a glancing blow, but it was enough to throw the man off balance. Dean shoved him roughly away, stumbling once to his knees, then scrambling up and running directly at Sam.

"Go go go!" Dean's voice was frantic.

Sam whirled and matched Dean's stride. They both ducked instinctively when the first shot rang out. Sam stole a quick look over his shoulder, seeing the hooded man standing on the altar, Dean's gun gripped in his fist. Sam looked forward and felt Dean's hand on his shoulder, inexplicably shoving him slightly to the right, toward the trees, as a second and third shot rang out. Sam lowered his head and saw Dean jerk at the sounds.

They reached Addison.

"Get her, Sam," Dean panted, bent forward at the waist, his hands braced on his knees. Sam bent over and scooped the unconscious girl up in his arms. He stood with a wince as her weight pulled at his bruised side.

"This is so not good," Dean said, swallowing and trying to catch his breath. "Psychotic bastard has my gun."

As if to prove Dean's point, a harsh cry echoed toward them from the clearing. The guttural explosion of impotent rage and then the quick succession of gunfire shook both of them. Sam hurried forward, heading to the car, compelling Dean to follow.

Dean rushed ahead of him and opened the passenger door. Sam climbed in, Addison on his lap. Dean slammed the door shut and Sam watched as he hurried around the front of the car, sliding partially across the hood of the car. He dropped behind the wheel, fired up the engine, and rotated the wheel, leaving rubber in their wake.

"You know where you're going?" Sam asked, checking the wrap on Addison's wrist.

"Hospital," Dean replied in a tight voice.

"You know where it is?" Sam looked over at his profile.

"Saw it on the way in," Dean replied. Sam could see a muscle jump in his cheek.

"You okay, man?" Sam leaned forward, peering closer.

"Fine," Dean looked over at Addison. "She hangin' in there?"

Sam pressed his free hand against her throat. "Drive faster, Dean."

His head bounced back slightly as Dean immediately pressed on the gas. They were pulling to a screeching stop in front of the ER in minutes, their arrival eliciting a flurry of action. Sam's door was pulled open and Sam climbed out of the car, easing Addison into the waiting arms of two men dressed in scrubs.

"We found her," he hurried to explain, "at that spot in the woods where her sister..."

"Holy shit, this is Addison Tyler," one of the men exclaimed as they laid her on a stretcher and shoved her through the opened doors.

"He cut her wrist," Sam attempted to explain. "And her lips are glued together."

A third man in scrubs nodded at him. "They'll take care of her," the man peered closer at Sam. "You okay, kid?"

Sam nodded, looking beyond the man to the figures moving in synchronized motion around Addison's still form through the glass doors.

"You need to come in and fill out some paperwork."

"Right, uh, can you call Grace Brookes? Here's her number," Sam dug his cell phone from his pocket. He gave the man Grace's number, saying, "She's Addison's roommate. She'll be able to help."

"Will do," the man said. "The police will probably have some questions for you."

"Grace knows where to find me."

Sam dropped back into the car, closing the door and leaning his head back against the seat as Dean pulled away. He reached up to gingerly rub the stitched cut above his eye. The adrenaline was starting to evaporate from his system, leaving him sore and shaking. He looked over at Dean.

"It's not a demon," Sam said.

Dean nodded, his lips pressed into a tight line. Sam looked back toward the front window, not really seeing it, just resting his eyes on the darkness beyond illuminated only by the Impala's headlights.

"I think it's a... person."

"Should have known," Dean's voice was thin, and Sam looked back at him.

"Whole thing's way too screwed up to be supernatural."

"You okay, Dean?"

"Bastard was damn strong, though," Dean continued as if Sam hadn't spoken. Sam sat up a little straighter, turning to look more fully at his brother. "I know I hit him. Saw him get hit. He's hopped up on something... PCP, maybe."

The end of Dean's sentence was punctuated with a grimace and his eyes closed briefly against an obvious flash of pain. Sam felt the car swerve and reached out to

brace himself against the dashboard. He looked forward, noticing for the first time that they weren't heading back to the crime scene.

"Where are you going, man?"

"Motel."

"We need to track this guy, Dean," Sam protested as Dean turned into the lot of the motel. "We seriously pissed him off."

Sam bounced forward slightly as the Impala's front wheels hit the parking curb before Dean shoved the gear into park directly in front of their room.

"Just... just gimme a minute, Sam," Dean breathed out.

Sam was instantly focused, suddenly very aware that something was wrong, that he'd missed something. Dean reached over with his right hand to pull the door handle, clumsily pushing the door open with his left elbow. He slowly rotated his body and dropped his booted feet from the car to the ground outside with twin thumps. Sam realized that he was holding his breath.

"Dean?"

Ignoring him, Dean grasped the opened car door and used it to pull himself up. As he did so, his jacket shifted away from him and Sam gaped in horror at the growing red stain now visible on his brother's left side. He scrambled out of the car and started around the front to help Dean. Dean didn't even look at him. Sam could see his brother's whole focus was the motel room door. He didn't even shut the car door behind him, simply moved forward, one foot in front of the other, wavering slightly, but propelling himself toward the motel room.

Sam reached for him, his fingers closing around Dean's arm. Dean pulled his arm roughly from Sam's grasp. Sam reached again and Dean leaned on the door jam.

"Just open the door, Sam," Dean said wearily. Sam turned the key and the door swung wide. Dean rolled out of the doorway and began making his way toward the bathroom at the back of the motel room slowly.

"I-I thought he missed," Sam whispered. Dean heard him.

"Well, he didn't," he muttered. "Bastard shot me with my own gun and it hurts like hell."

Sam blinked off his paralyzing stupor and closed the door of the motel room behind him, following Dean toward the bathroom. He didn't know how bad, didn't know where. Dean had moved okay through the woods... had slid across the hood of the car... had driven to the hospital...

"Dean, why didn't you say anything when we dropped off Addison?"

Dean shook his head, waving his right hand clumsily. "M'okay, Sam. Just need a little water's all."

"Water?" Sam stepped up behind his brother, reaching out a hand instinctively as Dean paused.

Dean turned in the doorway of the bathroom and Sam was shocked at how pale he was in the light of the motel room. His pupils were huge; there was barely any green around the edges. The freckles across his nose stood out like neon.

"On second thought," Dean muttered. "Y-you might wanna call... call Dad, S-Sam."

Sam didn't have time to form the question of *why*. Dean's eyes fluttered closed and his knees buckled. If Sam hadn't been standing so close, he would have crashed bonelessly to the floor. Sam lunged forward and managed to break Dean's fall, going to his knees with his brother bleeding in his arms.

"God dammit, Dean," Sam muttered, shifting Dean's limp form so that he could get a look at his left side. The red flannel shirt and white T-shirt beneath were soaked through, and blood was starting to seep into the waistband of his jeans. "You stupid, stubborn..."

Sam tried to shift Dean into his arms to stand, but his left leg began to tremble. He knew it wouldn't hold both of them. His side pounded a sharp protest as he stood, bending at the waist, his arms under Dean's shoulders, his hands clasped across the

front of Dean's chest. He pulled Dean to the nearest bed, then with a growl of pain, he heaved Dean's inert form up on the bed so that he would have easy access to his wounded left side.

Panting and trembling from exhaustion, Sam steadied himself against the nightstand as a wave of vertigo threatened to engulf him. He couldn't lose it now. Not now. He blinked hard, his eyes landing on Dean's pale face. He hated to see Dean still. Dean was motion. Propelled by the need to see Dean's eyes again, to be comforted by his constant action, Sam went to the bathroom and grabbed all of the towels, soaking two in cool water.

Returning to the bed, he grabbed the first aid pack and set it next to Dean. Carefully, he pulled Dean's leather jacket from his right arm, then his left. When he rolled Dean to his left side to remove the jacket, he heard a low moan of protest, but Dean didn't wake. Sam looked quickly at the jacket; though smeared with blood, there were no holes puncturing the leather. *He must have been hit on the run*, he thought. Once the jacket was gone, Sam could see the wound better. He pulled the bloody shirts up to just under Dean's shoulders, exposing Dean's chest and the wounded side.

It was a graze, but a bad one. The bullet had cut a deep, three-inch furrow along his left side, just below his ribcage. From what Sam could tell, it hadn't hit anything vital; but the gouge was still bleeding freely, and stitches were going to be tough due to the length and width of the wound. Sam used one of the wet towels and gently cleaned the blood away. He winced in sympathy as his motions caused Dean to jerk away, even unconscious.

"Sorry, man," Sam whispered. "I hope you stay out for this... 'cause it's gonna hurt."

He reached into the first aid pack and grabbed the disinfectant. Folding a towel and easing it under Dean's side, he twisted off the cap and set it aside. He put one hand on Dean's chest as much for his own balance as to comfort him. Taking a breath, he counted silently in his head *one... two... three...* then poured the disinfectant over the open wound.

Dean almost came off of the bed with a guttural scream that sounded as though it was ripped from him.

"Easy, easy, whoa, hey," Sam soothed as Dean's cry of pain began to taper off. His green eyes shot around the room, his breath coming in harsh, raspy pants. "Dean, hey, hey, it's okay. Look at me. Hey, look at me."

Dean's eyes tracked over to Sam's voice.

"That's it, you're okay," Sam nodded, moving his hand up to grip Dean's shoulder. Dean's hand came up and grabbed clumsily onto the top of Sam's arm. Sam had a sudden flash of memory... Dean's hand, on his arm, in the woods, pushing him toward the tree...

"Holy, shit, Sam," Dean's voice trembled, thick with pain.

"I'm sorry," Sam swallowed. "But you're bleeding pretty badly. We, uh, we gotta stitch this up."

Dean nodded.

"You want me to give you something?"

"Like w-what?" Dean muttered, closing his eyes tight. "A stick to bite on?"

"We got some painkillers," Sam offered, knowing that was like offering to spit on a fire to put it out.

"After," Dean said, gritting his teeth.

Sam nodded, though he knew Dean couldn't see him. His eyes were pressed so tightly closed that his eyebrows almost met his lashes. Sam quickly gathered the bandages and suture kit so that everything was in easy reach. Taking another deep breath, and wishing desperately that he didn't feel so dizzy, he grasp the needle, preparing to stitch Dean's side.

"S-Sam," Dean gasped out.

Sam looked at him and saw that Dean's eyes were open, staring at him. Sam could see more green now, but they were glassy, and the pain in them caused Sam's heart to clench. As he reached out for Sam, Dean's hand shook in reaction to the pain in his side.

"Yeah, Dean," Sam said, setting the needle down on Dean's chest and reaching for his brother's hand. He caught it and gripped it in his, trying to quiet the tremors of pain and exhaustion that ran through both of them with the strength of that connection.

"D-don't call Dad," Dean whispered. "I know I said..."

"I'm not gonna call him."

"Good," Dean licked his lips, and rolled his head slightly away. "Good, keep him away. Keep him safe."

Safe, Sam thought. He knew without a doubt that if someone gave Dean Winchester one wish, it would be that his family was safe. Sam felt his chin tremble once, his eyes burning as he looked at his brother. Dean rolled his head back, his eyes resting on Sam's face.

"You okay, Sammy?" Dean asked, his voice weak.

Sam sniffed, shaking his head. "You stubborn bastard," he whispered, releasing Dean's hand. "You were gonna make me stay behind... and then you go and get yourself shot."

"Not like I planned on this," Dean lifted an eyebrow. Sam noticed his hand hadn't quit shaking.

"You pushed me out of the way."

"Couldn't let anything happen to you," Dean closed his eyes, reaching down to grip the quilt, his stomach muscles tightening along with his jaw in a spasm of pain. "Enough with the chick-flick moment, dude."

Sam rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth. "Yeah, well, you might change your mind when we're done here."

Dean shook his head. "No p-possible way."

Sam took a breath. "Ready?"

Dean nodded once. Sam blotted more blood away from Dean's side, then, pressing the sides of the wound close, he began to sew his brother up. Dean clenched his teeth, his breath huffing out in painful bursts. As Sam worked, he heard Dean intermittently growl and groan through the pain.

Sam stayed silent, remembering from years of battle wounds and bandages that any outside noise would distract Dean from his internal mantra of music lyrics. Each of them – John, Sam, and Dean – had their own way to pull themselves away from the pain and fear of the moment. Dean's, he knew, was Metallica songs. Sometimes, they were the only thing that worked.

As he reached the end of the wound, the trembling in Dean's hand had spread to his body and Sam had to lean an arm across Dean's chest to steady him for the last few stitches. When he was done he sat up and Dean opened his eyes, gasping with relief that it was over. He was covered in sweat, his hair was wet with it, his white T-shirt soaked through.

"G-good job, Sammy," he breathed, looking down at his side.

Sam didn't trust his voice. He nodded, then carefully laid a large square gauze pad over the wound, taping all four edges.

"Help me up," Dean said, motioning Sam toward him with a clumsy hand.

"What! Are you high?"

Dean tilted his head, as if pausing to consider the question.

"You're not going anywhere, Dean. You could have bled to death." Sam stood up, gathering the bloody towels and the first aid pack and turned away from the bed.

He went into the bathroom and dumped the towels in the tub, then set the pack on the floor. He leaned over the sink to splash water on his face. He pulled in a shaky breath, looking at his reflection in the mirror. His face was nearly as pale as Dean's,

the bruising around his eye had turned a deep purple and the cut on his mouth was still an angry red. He shook his head, trying to ignore the desolate look he saw in his own eyes.

He heard his cell phone ring, followed by a muffled groan escaping from Dean. He hurried back out into the room to see that Dean had managed to get himself into a sitting position, but was leaning heavily on his right arm, his head dropped low. Sam shook his head at his brother as he grabbed his phone on the third ring.

"Hello?"

Dean's head came up at his voice. Sam waved at him to lie down. Dean lifted an eyebrow.

"Grace?" Sam turned his attention to the phone, listening. He saw Dean reach for the painkillers and water that he'd left on the nightstand. "That's good, Gracie, that's real good."

He watched Dean set the empty glass back on the nightstand and then use the furniture to try to pull himself to his feet. In three quick strides, Sam was next to him and had pushed him back down on the bed.

"You stay with her, Grace, okay? No, no, just stay there. We, uh, we didn't get him... no, Dean's... Dean's hurt." Dean shot Sam a look of irritation. Sam glared back. "He'll be fine, I think. Just stay with Addison. Don't go home. Grace? I'm serious. You're safer at the hospital."

Dean was watching him, a fevered flush on his face. Sam nodded once into the phone, his eyes dropping to the still-white bandage on Dean's side. "We'll be careful. I promise."

He hung up the phone, then dropped down on the bed opposite Dean.

"Addison's stable. She's not talking..."

"Could be 'cause a psycho glued her lips shut," Dean said with a wince as he pressed his hand to his side.

"... but they think she's gonna be okay. Grace is gonna stay with her. I hope."

Dean nodded, and Sam saw him working up to the effort of attempting once more to stand.

"I think we need to call the police on this, Dean."

Dean's eyes shot up to his and he lifted an eyebrow. "That'll do a helluva lot of good, Sam."

"It's not our kind of problem anymore, Dean," Sam argued. He stood up and went to the duffel of clothes, fishing out a gray Henley for Dean.

"Well, you're right, Sam. They've done a bang up job so far," Dean said, slowly pulling his red flannel shirt off. "I'm sure what we have to say will just seal the deal."

"Stow the sarcasm, dude," Sam grumbled, leaning over Dean and helping him roll the bloody white T-shirt up over his wound and then lift it over his head. "It's not a demon... it's not even a possession. There's nothing we can do."

"We can waste the bastard, Sam."

Sam sat down across from Dean once more, looking at him with surprise.

"We can't kill a person, Dean."

Dean's eyes met his and Sam felt like he'd been gutted by the look he saw there. Dean was visibly trembling, pale, and the muscles in his jaw were working overtime. But his eyes were hard, and deadly. Sam had seen that look before. In the cabin, when Haris had been staring at Dean through their father's eyes. Dean had the same look on his face then as he did now.

"This is no person, Sam. You said it yourself. He's insane."

"Insanity is a defense, Dean, not a reason to kill someone."

"I can't believe you're saying this, Sam." Dean clenched his jaw, his eyes on Sam, a line of sweat trickling down the side of his face. "You saw what he did to those girls."

Sam swallowed, flashes of his vision slamming with quick succession through his head. He looked down, pulling his bottom lip in. "I know what I saw. Doesn't change the fact that he's a human being..."

Dean pushed his hands into the bed, finally able to gain his feet, reaching out with an unsteady hand to the wall between the beds for support. Sam held still, waiting to catch him if he fell, but didn't move to help. Frustrated anger was rolling off of Dean in almost physical waves; Sam knew enough to stay clear of it. He moved away from Sam, toward the small table on the other side of the room. Sam held his breath; he was sure that Dean was seconds from collapse.

"Sam," he said, his voice carrying a weight of responsibility far beyond his years. "We have to do this. We are the only ones who can."

"No, Dean," Sam shook his head, even though Dean's back was to him. "We do this... there's no going back. You're talking about taking someone's life. It's not worth what it will do to us."

Dean turned slightly and looked at Sam over his shoulder. "Not like it's the first time."

Sam swallowed, remembering the man in the alley, remembering Dean's hollow voice... *for you and Dad, the things I'm willing to do or kill... scares me sometimes.*

"It would be for me."

Dean looked away again. "Told you before, you can stay here."

"Don't be an idiot. You're barely on your feet." Sam stood up and walked around to the side of the table so that he could see Dean's profile. "We'll go after him, but when we find him, we call Grace's brother. We let the police handle this."

He kept his voice low, but firm, pulling as much of John Winchester into his tone as he could. Dean shifted his eyes to look at Sam.

"We can't kill a human, Dean," Sam repeated, firmly. "Nothing's worth that."

Dean sighed, closing his eyes, and Sam saw him tip forward to lean a hand on the table. He pressed his other hand against the bandage on his side, and Sam knew by the droop of Dean's shoulders that he had won this round. Sam handed him the gray shirt and Dean pulled it carefully over his head, easing it down over his wounded side.

"Freaky-assed human, anyway," he grumbled. "No wonder he wears that hood."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

Dean sat slowly in the chair next to the table. "Had those creepy blue eyes and this weird fold in his lip. Made him look like that dude from *Gladiator*."

"What did you just say?" Sam felt himself go cold. He leaned on the table, looking hard at Dean.

Dean pulled his head back from Sam slightly, his brows folding into a frown. "You know, the Caesar from the movie—"

"You said he had a cleft in his lip?"

Dean nodded. "What is it, Sam?"

Sam grabbed his cell phone. "You just described Grace's roommate."

\* \* \* \*

## **Motel, night**

"I thought you told Grace to stay at the hospital?" Dean said as Sam scrolled down his cell phone list for Grace's number.

"I did," Sam answered, finding the number and dialing.

"So what are you worried about?"

Sam shot his eyes over to Dean's. "Why do you think I had to put the chair under her doorknob, man?"

Dean's eyebrows went up, then he sat back, a hand pressed to the wound in his side. Sam scowled when he got Grace's voicemail.

“Grace, this is Sam. Listen to me. Don’t go home, okay? It’s Lucien, Grace. He’s the killer.”

“The guy’s name is *Lucien*?” Dean muttered, closing his eyes and leaning his head back to rest against the wall behind him. “This just gets better and better.”

Sam started to pace, dialing another number.

“Now who are you calling?” Dean asked, opening one eye.

“Nick,” Sam answered tersely. He stopped when Nick picked up on the second ring. “Nick, it’s Sam Win-uh, Beckett. I’m a friend of Grace’s... no, no I don’t know where she is, that’s why I’m calling you... Listen, man, she could be in trouble, okay? Yeah, yeah, just don’t let her go to her house alone... I think, uh... I think her roommate might be, um, dangerous... I’m heading there now, but... yeah, okay, great. Thanks.”

Sam closed his phone and looked over at Dean. “You gonna be okay?”

Dean opened his eyes, pulling his head away from the wall. “Okay doing what?”

“Just want to make sure you’re not gonna bleed to death while I’m gone.”

Dean leaned forward, his hands on his knees. “I’m not gonna bleed to death, period. And no way you’re going anywhere without me, Sam.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. He opened his mouth to argue with Dean, seeing how pale his brother was, how his hands still trembled. The look in Dean’s eyes stopped him. Dean wasn’t ready to be left behind now anymore than Sam had been earlier. His own words echoed back to him *we’re better when we’re together, man, you know that...*

“Fine,” Sam huffed, picking up Dean’s jacket and handing it to him.

Dean blinked, obviously surprised that Sam had given in so easily. He pushed himself to his feet and reached out for his jacket. Sam watched him look at the left side of the jacket and snarl.

“Man, I got blood on it,” he grumbled.

“Hate to tell you this, but you got blood on your car, too,” Sam said, one eyebrow raised.

Dean’s head shot up. “Are you serious?”

Sam nodded, biting the inside of his cheek.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean muttered, then pulled his jacket on.

They left the motel room and Dean gravitated toward the driver’s side. Sam put a gentle hand on his shoulder and steered him to the passenger side. Dean frowned, but didn’t put up a fight. Sam got in the car, avoiding the blood drying on the side of the bench seat, and Dean leaned his head back with a sigh.

“We’re lucky she wasn’t stolen,” he said in a low voice.

Sam realized then that the keys had been left in the ignition. “Guess someone’s watching out for us.”

Dean huffed. “Too bad they’re usually looking the other way.”

\* \* \* \*

### **Grace’s house, just before dawn**

When Sam pulled the Impala to a stop, Dean lifted his head. He felt a strange weightlessness – as if he were an observer of his body, and not the controller of it. He watched his hand lift the door handle, watched his arm push the door open, watched his legs rotate out of the car, but he wasn’t really able to feel any sensation beyond hot pain in his side.

He stood and shut the door, closing his eyes and leaning back against the car for a moment. He felt her solid form behind him, reassuring in its familiarity. He couldn’t clearly remember a time when the Impala hadn’t been a part of his life. This car was as much his family as Sam. As John. And it was the one part of his life that had yet to

leave him. *Maybe it's because I take care of her... maybe if I took better care of the other two...*

There was a buzzing in his ears, constant and low-pitched. He tilted his head to the side, trying to listen. Sounded almost like words... something about... his gun... *need to make sure to get that, no matter what... it can tie you to too many things... are you listening to...*

"... me Dean?"

Dean opened his eyes, realizing that it was Sam he was hearing. He blinked, pushed away from the car's support, and breathed through his nose to still the spinning of his head and keep from keeling over.

"Course I'm listening," he muttered.

"You okay?" Sam was peering at him. He started to reach out to Dean.

"Enough with the worried eyes, Sam," Dean said, pushing Sam's hand away. "Let's go."

Sam checked the clip in the Glock, then stuffed it into the back of his jeans. Dean let Sam lead the way, knowing that his bravado would only carry him so far. It wasn't until they reached the porch that he realized his only weapon was a small throwing knife attached to his ankle. He cursed himself silently; he didn't think he could even reach his ankle at this point.

"Careful, Sam," he whispered as his brother pushed open the broken door.

As they stepped through the doorway, Dean knew immediately that if Grace were here, she was in trouble. The living room looked like a war zone. The TV was tipped over, broken, pictures from the mantel on the floor, shattered, the coffee table was divided in two.

"Grace!" Sam bellowed, pulling his gun out and flicking off the safety. "Gracie?"

Dean followed Sam through the living room, watching as he swung the gun around the corner into the kitchen, which was basically intact. They made their way to the hall, and Dean's eyes lit on a hand print smeared in blood on the wall. Dean felt his whole body tense.

"Grace!" Sam yelled again, and Dean's stomach jumped at the angry desperation rolling off of Sam with that one word.

Instinctively, Dean tried to move in front of Sam as they made their way down the hall toward Grace's room, but Sam was too fast. Dean held his breath as Sam pulled the bedroom door toward him and swung around the corner, gun first. Sam's expression told Dean all he needed to know.

He stepped past Sam, his throat constricting painfully. Nick Brookes lay on the floor of Grace's bedroom, a small silver dagger sticking out of the side of his neck, blood pooling on the floor beneath him. Grace was nowhere to be seen, but her bed was stripped, and her room was in shambles. Dean carefully knelt next to Grace's brother, knowing he wouldn't find one, but reaching out and checking for a pulse anyway.

"He's dead, Sam," Dean said softly. Sam didn't reply.

Dean tried to turn and look over his shoulder at his brother, but his side kicked him viciously and he gasped, pressing his hand to his wound. He felt wetness there. As he looked down at the slight smear of red on the palm of his hand, he heard a strangled cry from Sam. Dean shifted painfully back to balance on his heels, turning from the body to his brother.

Sam had reached up to clutch at his head, wavering a bit on his feet. He dropped to his knees and Dean reached out to catch him. As his hands closed over the tops of Sam's shoulders, trying to grip him, trying to offer support, Sam's head suddenly snapped back and the Glock clattered to the ground. Sam cried out in pain, fisting his hands over his eyes and leaning forward.

"Easy, Sammy," Dean tried, but his voice trembled. "I got you, man."

But he didn't have him. He couldn't hold on. Sam fell forward and Dean couldn't stop him. With one last cry of pain, Sam sprawled on the floor next to Nick's body,

unconscious. Dean rocked forward to his knees, reaching for Sam's shoulder, trying to roll him over.

"Jesus, don't do this to me, Sam," Dean whispered.

His vision wavered and he felt the hot-cold flash of pain from his side slice through him. He ignored it, shifted to sit against the wall, pulling Sam's limp form awkwardly with him. Breathing heavily, he rolled Sam over, then dropped his head back against the wall. Sam's head ended up on his right thigh, his right arm draped across his chest. His brows were furrowed in pain or concentration, and his eyes were rolling rapidly beneath his closed lids.

"C'mon, Sammy," Dean said, fisting his hand in the loose material of Sam's shirt. "Wake up, okay?"

Dean's vision swam again and he knew he wasn't going to be able to fight off the darkness much longer.

"You, uh," Dean licked his lips, closing his eyes as the room tilted. "You gotta open your eyes, Sam." He shook Sam once more, working to make his voice steady. "Sam. Open your eyes. Right now, man."

Sam's head shifted slightly, his hands twitching, but he didn't wake. Dean gritted his teeth as numbing cold and electric heat clashed violently in his side.

"Dammit," he growled, pulling in a breath.

He opened his eyes a crack and saw Nick's body sprawled just beyond Sam. He knew they needed to move. They needed to call someone about Nick. They needed to get out of there before that someone came. They needed to find Grace... they needed to stop this killer... they needed to rest...

Holding tightly to Sam's shirt so that when he fell off the edge of the earth he would be able to find his way back, Dean gave in to the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

*"He's not pleased. He wants you to pay."*

*"No one's even here, man. You're talking to the wall."*

*"Dean—"*

*"HE IS NOT PLEASED. I am not going down for this. You stopped the cycle. YOU STOPPED THE CYCLE. I am not going down for this."*

*"That's what you think."*

The sound of Dean chambering a round in the shotgun made Sam jump.

He blinked, filling his aching lungs. Pressing his hand on his sternum, he realized that he was looking at the ceiling of Grace's room. As he shifted slightly, he noticed two things: his head was propped up on something, and it didn't hurt. His other visions had left him with a wicked psychic hangover. But his head was blissfully pain-free. Rolling his head slightly to the right, he saw Dean's hand loosely fisted in his shirt. He looked up to see that he was lying on Dean's right leg. Dean's head was back against the wall and his eyes were closed.

"Dean?" Sam croaked out. He cleared his throat and tried again.

Dean didn't move. Sam shifted to his side, using his elbow to push himself to a sitting position, and gently detached his brother's hand from his shirt. He reached forward and took Dean's chin in his fingers, tilting his brother's face to him.

"Dean, hey," he said, tapping Dean's cheek. "Hey, man, open your eyes."

He saw Dean pull his eyebrows together in a frown, saw his lashes flutter slightly.

"There you go," Sam encouraged. "Come on, Dean."

"M'okay," Dean slurred, his eyes still closed.

"Yeah, I know... you're always okay," Sam muttered, releasing Dean's face and watching him closely as he fought to get his eyes open.

When he could see the green of Dean's irises, he leaned over and pulled the edge of Dean's jacket away to look at his left side.

"You're bleeding again," Sam said softly.

"It's not bad," Dean blinked at him. "You okay?"

"Head doesn't hurt this time," Sam said, meeting his eyes.

"You passed out, Sam," Dean reminded him.

"Yeah, well," Sam looked down. "It doesn't hurt now. Not like before."

"What did you see?"

"He's got Grace," Sam looked over his shoulder at Nick. "At the motel. And he's waiting for us."

"Swell," Dean took a shaky breath.

"I don't think he plans on killing her. Not like the other girls," Sam said, looking back at Dean. "I think he wants me."

"Well, that just makes it all better then."

Sam nodded back toward Nick. "We gotta call someone."

"I know," Dean said, his voice rough.

Sam pushed himself to his feet and pulled out his cell phone. He called 911 and reported an officer down, giving them the address of Grace's house. He flipped the phone closed, then turned and looked at Dean. Dean was still staring at Nick.

"Dean?"

"You know she had to have seen that, Sam," Dean said, his eyes hollow.

Sam swallowed. "Yeah," he said.

He watched Dean blink, then saw his lips move as he whispered something.

"What was that?" Sam ducked his head, trying to catch Dean's eyes.

Dean shook his head once, then looked up at Sam. "Nothing."

Sam cocked his head to the side, knowing it was more than nothing, much more, but Dean's eyes were carefully blank. He reached up his right hand and Sam clasped it at the wrist, hauling him carefully to his feet. Sam noticed his quick intake of breath, his automatic gesture to cover his wounded side. He released Dean's arm, but reached out again quickly when Dean swayed.

"Let's go get this bastard," Dean said, his voice like sandpaper on rock.

"Can you?"

Dean's hazel eyes met his, the deadly determination reflecting there shooting straight through Sam. "Try to stop me."

\* \* \* \*

### **Motel, early morning**

Sam pulled to a stop in a parking spot across the lot from their room, close enough for a quick getaway, far enough away to arm up out of sight. He was out of the car and heading to the trunk before Dean had lifted his head from the back of the seat. Dean held his left arm tight against his side. He knew the stitches were solid, but the wound had been deep and he could feel the blood seeping through the bandage. He opened the passenger door, stepped out as quickly as his wound would allow, and made his way to Sam. Sam had the trunk open and was propping up the false bottom with a shotgun.

"Use the ramrod," Dean said. "I'm taking that."

"You're taking what?" Sam didn't look at him as he checked the clip in his Glock.

"The shotgun," Dean answered, reaching into the back for his Bowie knife.

"The hell for?"

Dean tipped his chin, giving Sam an incredulous look. "What, did you miss the first half of the show, Sam?" He pulled his eyebrows together, stuffing the sheathed knife in the waistband of his jeans. "We've discussed this."

Sam flicked the safety on the Glock and tucked it into the back of his jeans. "We need to switch you from Oprah to Dr. Phil, Dean. That wasn't a discussion. It was an argument."

"You watch Dr. Phil?" Dean's eyebrows quirked up in the middle.

Sam reached for the shotgun and started to shut the false bottom. "So not the point."

Dean shoved his right hand under the floor, preventing Sam from shutting it. "Gimme the gun, Sam."

"So you can kill someone with it?" Sam snapped at him, turning with the shotgun in his hand to face his brother. The floor dropped down when Dean pulled his hand free.

Dean spread his arms wide, palms out. "You act like I'm talking about killing an altar boy, Sam. This guy killed at least two people that we know of, and he has your girl in there right now."

"I know that, man. I saw it, remember?" Sam's lips twitched and he looked over the top of the opened trunk toward the motel room.

"Yeah, I do remember. Which is why I'm taking the gun." He reached for it, but Sam pulled the gun back.

"It's not worth it, Dean," Sam repeated, softly. "Nothing is worth that. We do that, we're no different from him."

"Is that right?" Dean said, his voice purposefully low and dangerous.

Sam nodded.

"If that's the case, leave the Glock."

"What?"

"You heard me," Dean nodded to Sam's waistband and the hidden gun. "Drop it right back in the trunk."

"You want me to go in there unarmed?"

"No, Sam," Dean snapped. "I want you to give me the freakin' shotgun. But since you seem to think I'm gonna go all *Boondock Saints* on his ass, I think you should leave the gun."

Sam stared at him.

Dean pulled the Bowie knife from his waistband and waved it in Sam's face. "Better yet," he said, his voice rising slightly. "Let's leave *all* the weapons and just go *talk* to the guy."

"Enough, Dean," Sam said quietly.

"I mean, he's obviously a very level-headed killer," Dean continued, ignoring Sam's low voice. "We'll just, y'know, *reason* with—"

Sam grabbed the Bowie knife from him. "I get it, all right! Enough already."

Dean bounced his head back once, dropping his hands to his sides. His vision wavered a moment, but he refused to lean against the car, refused to allow the pain to grab hold, refused to give in. He watched Sam turn to face the trunk and lift the false bottom once more, revealing their arsenal. He broke the barrel of the shotgun, emptied the shells, and began to load rock salt into the chamber.

"What the hell, Sam?"

Sam remained silent.

"He's not a spirit," Dean said, completely confused. "That won't kill him."

"No," Sam snapped the shotgun closed and handed it to Dean. "But it will hurt like hell."

Dean grabbed the shotgun from Sam roughly, shaking his head. "I don't get you, man."

"So I don't want you to kill someone," Sam growled at him. "What's not to get?"

"We. Hunt. Evil," Dean fisted his hands and stepped forward, leaning close to Sam, his eyes angry and intense, his whole body rigid. "End of story. I thought by now you would have learned that evil comes in many forms. Even *human*."

"Yeah and sometimes what we think is evil is just... misunderstood," Sam growled back, his lips thin.

"Oh, gimme a break, Sam..."

"I don't want to lose you, Dean," Sam interjected fiercely. "Not now. Not after I--"

"What?" Dean's eyebrows lifted in question, his voice low, confused. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"If you do this, if you go in there to kill this guy," Sam's finger jabbed in the direction of the motel, "it will be like the demon never left you."

Dean pulled back abruptly, feeling the blood drain from his face. He clenched his jaw. Sam was watching him, and he had to look away, toward the motel, unable to meet his brother's open, vulnerable eyes. Afraid of what Sam would see in his. It wasn't the same... feeling the demon inside of him hadn't been the same as this need to stop a killer that even the police weren't willing to face. This man was evil. And if there was one thing that Dean knew, it was how to stop evil.

"I'm sorry, man," Sam whispered. "I didn't mean—"

"We're wasting time," Dean interrupted, turning from the trunk and walking to the hood of the car. He paused, waiting for Sam. He heard the trunk close, heard his brother's footsteps, and when Sam was next to him, he began walking in beat with him toward the motel.

They reached the door of their room and Dean noticed that it wasn't latched. He looked sideways at Sam, who looked back at him, his jaw muscle twitching. Sam still held the sheathed Bowie knife in his grip and used the leather tip to push the door open. Dean brought the shotgun up, ready to point it over Sam's shoulder.

They saw Grace immediately. She stood on a chair, her hands bound behind her, a towel in her mouth, tied behind her head, sheets from her bed twisted in a noose around her neck and tied off at the ceiling fan. A rope was tied to the base of the chair and strung across the room, disappearing behind the wall into the bathroom.

Blood matted one side of her blonde hair, but her eyes were more angry than scared. They shot over to the door the minute it creaked open and when they hit Sam, Dean was struck by the utter relief he saw there. In that one look, he saw that she knew Sam. She knew his brother would do everything in his power to save her.

Sam stepped fully into the room, Dean directly behind him. Closing the door, Dean's quick eyes searched the room, but could not immediately see Lucien. He leveled the shotgun at the opening to the bathroom where the rope disappeared.

"Gracie," Sam said in a low, soothing voice. "You're doing great, okay? You just hang in there."

"Nice pun," came a slightly manic-sounding voice from the recesses of the bathroom. "He thought you were going to disappoint us."

*He?* Dean swallowed, looking over at Sam. Sam's eyes were on Grace. Grace looked back at Sam, then shifted her eyes nervously to the doorway where the voice echoed again, this time in Latin.

*"Illa es gentilitas quisnam denied vos..."*

"Hey!" Dean protested loudly. "Who are you calling *heathens*, pal?"

His outburst produced the desired effect. Lucien stepped into the room, the end of the rope wrapped around one hand, Dean's .45 gripped in the other.

"You understand Latin?"

Dean lifted a brow. "I understand that you're a psycho. Now drop the rope."

Lucien's wild eyes darted to the corner of the room, empty but for shadows. He shook his head rapidly muttering, "No, no it wasn't me..."

Dean exchanged a look with Sam. Sam slipped the leather sheath from the Bowie knife with one hand, holding the knife carefully at his side. He stepped toward Grace's chair.

"Stop!"

"Hey, Caesar," Dean called, working to pull Lucien's attention from Sam and Grace and focus it on him. "How 'bout you and I get to know each other, huh? So... you're a psycho that kills women for kicks..."

"YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT IT!" Lucien's voice deepened and his roar caused Grace to jump.

Dean saw Sam instinctively reach for her, but she caught her balance. Lucien brought Dean's gun to bear on Sam when he saw him reach for Grace. Dean's heart stopped once, then resumed in double-time. He kept the shotgun level on Lucien.

"No, no, maybe I don't," Dean said. "Why don't you explain it to me?"

"Move again, and you kill her," Lucien said to Sam, holding the rope that was attached to Grace's chair leg aloft.

Sam raised his hands in mock surrender. "Not moving."

Dean shot his eyes to Sam and watched as his brother turned his attention away from Lucien and focused on Grace. Sam didn't seem to care that Lucien held a gun on him, or that Lucien was quite obviously teetering on the edge of sanity and control. His whole focus in that moment was Grace. Dean swallowed, working to absorb Sam's calm, working to absorb Sam's strength. He had one job right now: stay alert and protect Sam. *With a damn shotgun full of rock salt*, he groaned internally.

"Grace," Sam was saying softly. "You have to trust me on this, okay?"

Grace kept her eyes on Sam, blinking once when Sam dipped his head toward her. Sam looked quickly over at Dean.

"He's not pleased. He wants you to pay." Lucien was still focused on Sam.

"No one's even here, man. You're talking to the wall." Dean shook his head.

"Dean—" Sam started, but Lucien interrupted him with another roar.

"HE IS NOT PLEASED. I am not going down for this. You stopped the cycle. YOU STOPPED THE CYCLE. I am not going down for this."

Lucien's hands began to waver, the rope pulled taut and Grace's chair tipped. Dean had had enough. Shooting a quick glance to see how close Sam was to Grace, Dean lifted the shotgun.

"That's what you think." He rounded a chamber, pulling Lucien's attention to him, and fired.

At the same time that Lucien flew back against the wall, Sam lunged forward. The rope followed Lucien's descent to the ground, pulled the chair Grace stood on from its legs, and Grace fell forward off of her precarious perch directly into Sam's arms. Reaching up with Dean's Bowie knife, Sam cut through the rope made of sheets and collapsed on the ground, Grace bound in his arms.

"Sam?" Dean called.

"We're okay, she's okay," Sam was saying, holding Grace to him, her head tucked under his chin.

As Dean walked past him, the gun trained on Lucien's still form, he could see Sam visibly trembling, his eyes closed, his hand protectively holding Grace's head against his chest. Dean pulled his lips in, swallowing his reaction, and moved forward to Lucien's unconscious body. He heard Sam talking in a low voice to Grace. He couldn't understand what he was saying, but it didn't matter. They'd saved her. Sam didn't have to helplessly watch someone he had feelings for die. Dean had done his job.

He stepped close to Lucien, feeling a momentary stab of pity for the man. He moved to kick his .45 clear of Lucien's outstretched hand when Lucien's legs suddenly struck out and swept Dean's legs out from under him. He hit the ground with a jarring thud that drove the air from his lungs and sliced white-hot pain through his side.

Dean blinked dazedly as Lucien jumped to his feet and placed two well-aimed kicks to Dean's wounded side. Dean cried out as he felt Sam's careful stitches tear, felt his side open, and the haze of pain became his world. He instinctively curled in

on his side, protecting it, unable to reach forward and stop Lucien, knowing he was going after Sam.

He couldn't see anything but white. He struggled to breathe, but the heat from his side was spreading through his body like rapid fire, and the room was beginning to tilt. He heard Sam cry out – a tangle of words that meant nothing to Dean's numb ears. The only thing he knew was that Sam was in trouble... Sam was in trouble and he had to move... he had to move... he had to move *now*.

Sam was swearing. Dean clutched at air with a gaping mouth, working to bring it into his starved lungs, working to focus his vision. He suddenly realized that he was looking at the barrel of his .45. It was lying next to his head. He blinked, working to move his hand up and grab the gun, demanding that his body obey.

With a strange sense of detachment, he watched his own hand tremble as it reached up to grab the gun. He wrapped his fingers around the familiar grip, then lifted his blurry eyes to see Lucien astride Sam, his hands wrapped around his brother's throat. Sam's face was red from straining for air, his hands clawing at Lucien's fingers, fresh blood streaming down his forehead.

As Dean worked to force his body to still, to stop shaking, he saw Grace. She had been working to pull her arms under her body and curl her legs through her bound hands so that she could get them in front of her. The minute she did so, she lunged forward toward Lucien and Sam, but almost effortlessly, Lucien kicked out and caught her in the stomach. She dropped like a rock and didn't move.

"Arrrrrgggghhhh!!!" Dean screamed as Sam's desperate flailing weakened.

Dean gripped the .45 with both hands, bringing his unsteady hands up to point the gun at Lucien. Not caring if he had the perfect shot, Dean rolled to his wounded side and fired twice. He watched the first bullet miss and the second one hit. Lucien jerked up, his back arching, his hands falling from Sam's neck. Dean held his breath, keeping his gun up. Lucien stumbled off of Sam, turned to face Dean, still on his knees, his arms outstretched as though he was crucified.

His eyes were insane. Dean saw what Sam must have seen last night. There wasn't even a glimmer of rational thought echoing in the eerie blue depths. Keeping his eyes trained on Lucien's odd posture, Dean rasped out a desperate, "Sam?"

His only reassurance that his weakness had not cost his brother's life was a vicious wheezing from Sam. Lucien stumbled toward Dean, muttering. Dean tilted his head to the side once. Sam's words bounced in his head, as loudly as if they were being screamed at him: *you kill this guy; it will be like the demon never left you...*

Lucien advanced again, his muttering becoming louder, but no more coherent. Dean fired. His bullet found its mark in Lucien's chest, but still Lucien advanced. Dean had one brief moment to wonder if they had been wrong -- if there indeed was a demon in this man -- before Lucien literally pounced on him. The rapid-fire impacts of Lucien's fists rattled Dean's head, his coherent thoughts scattering like dried leaves in an autumn wind.

Amidst the ringing in his ears, Dean realized he still had the .45 in his grip. Growling with rage and pain as Lucien's knee pressed painfully against his blood-soaked side, Dean shoved the .45 against Lucien's chest and fired. The hammer hit on an empty chamber. Dean pulled the trigger again. Nothing.

"Son of a bitch!" Dean growled, reaching up and pushing at Lucien's face, digging his fingers into Lucien's eyes, trying to push him away. Lucien's fist caught him on the side of the head and his hand loosened a moment, but he was able to release his grip on the .45 and bring his other hand into the struggle. As he fought to overpower Lucien, Dean felt a glimmer of regret that he was only human, that he no longer had the amp of dark power to call upon, that he could be so easily defeated.

Lucien was screaming. Dean knew it was Latin, but he'd lost the ability to separate words into meaning. He had been reduced to the instinct to survive. Lucien's screaming was simply the soundtrack to the chaos in his head. His only thought was

*keep breathing...* He growled a low, guttural sound, pulled from the fire in his belly, the pain in his side that was wrapping around his whole body.

Using the power of that cry, he gripped Lucien's throat, forcing his remaining strength into his fingers and attempting to crush his windpipe. Lucien's screams began to fade as air was denied him. Unexpectedly, Lucien shoved hard against Dean's chest, pushing himself away. Dean was unable to maintain his grip. Lucien shot to his feet, grabbing the front of Dean's jacket as he did so, and with inhuman strength hauled Dean up from the floor and slammed him, hard, against the wall.

Dean's vision grayed. Lucien slammed him again, this time holding him there with one hand pressed hard against his throat. Dean felt his body leave him. He was awake, but not really aware. His eyes were open, but he couldn't see. He had felt this before. And the last thing he'd seen then were yellow eyes taunting him from his father's face...

The roar that cut through the shadows in his head wasn't an insane Latin ramble from the mouth of a killer. It was a cry of outrage from his brother. It was a denial of what was happening. It was resistance. Something slammed into Lucien, and his iron-like fingers were immediately gone. Dean felt his body fall. His knees vanished into the floor, the impact of his side against the ground jarred through the rest of the shadows so that he was able to once again see from his horizontal vantage point.

Sam was wrestling with Lucien. With Dean's Bowie knife gripped in his hand, he had slammed the killer to the ground, releasing Dean, and was working to subdue him. Dean wanted to call out to him, wanted to end it for him... he wanted to save Sam, to spare him from doing what he had worked so hard to prevent... but he couldn't move... he could barely breathe. Lucien's inhuman strength continued as he held Sam's arm away, held the knife away, and Dean saw him reach to Sam's waistband and pull out the Glock.

"No..." Dean whispered. "Sammy, no."

As though he heard Dean's whispered warning, Sam's efforts increased when the Glock came between his body and Lucien's. With a cry of rage and denial, Sam pressed the Bowie knife forward, the tip hovering above the base of Lucien's throat. Dean saw Lucien shove the barrel of the gun into Sam's face. He gritted his teeth, reaching for the personification of light and dark struggling for dominance before him. With his last ounce of energy, Dean gripped Lucien's sleeve, pulling it toward him.

Lucien fired. Sam surged forward. The bullet grazed Sam's ear. The knife plunged into Lucien's throat. And then there was silence.

Dean closed his eyes. He felt the hungry fingers pulling at his beaten body. He wanted so badly to give in, to let the darkness take him. Then he wouldn't have to open his eyes and see in Sam's the same look he saw in the mirror every day since he'd killed the man in the alley.

"Dean?"

Sam's voice trembled. Dean felt his brother's hands on his face, felt Sam's fingers lightly tapping his cheeks.

"Dean, you with me?"

*Yeah, Sammy, I'm with you...*

"Dean, please... open your eyes."

*They're not open?* He blinked hard, working to pry the lids open, working to see Sam. He was so tired. He couldn't... they were too heavy...

"Dean... I need you to open your eyes," Sam said. Dean heard tears in his brother's voice. "I can't do this by myself."

"Yes, you can," Dean whispered, finally winning the battle with his eyelids. He blinked up at Sam's battered face.

"Yeah, well," Sam sniffed. "I don't want to."

*Not going anywhere, Sammy...*

"Grace?" Dean managed.

"She's okay," Sam nodded. "We have to get out of here."

"I know," Dean said, thinking of the gunshots, the screams... *no way that went unnoticed.*

"Don't move, okay?" Sam was saying. Dean simply blinked at him.

Sam stood on unsteady legs, lifting a hand to his bleeding ear. He grabbed their duffels and started stuffing anything that belonged to them into the bags. He kicked the Glock loose from Lucien's fingers, then picked it and the empty .45 up, dropping them into the bag. Dean saw him turn to face the knife.

"I'll do it," Dean said, surprised at how weak his voice was.

Sam looked down at him. Something flickered across Sam's face when he met Dean's eyes that he couldn't pin down. Surprise? Irritation?

"I'll do it, Sam," Dean repeated. "Just help me up."

Sam crouched down, and then Dean realized what he was seeing. Gratitude. Dean blinked. Sam's lips turned up in a sad smile. "Thanks, Dean," he said in a low voice. "I got this one."

Sam wrapped his fingers around the knife hilt and yanked. It reluctantly gave way to the pressure and slid from Lucien's throat with a wet sucking sound. Looking at the crimson blade, Sam stood slowly, then went into the bathroom.

Dean watched him until he couldn't keep his eyes open anymore. He knew what Sam would do. He would clean the blade, and he would get sick, and he would come back for what else had to be done. At the end of the day, Sam was a Winchester, and their family did what had to be done – what no one else wanted to do.

"...yet, okay? Just a little longer..."

Dean pulled his eyebrows together. That was Sam's voice. But he'd just walked into the bathroom. Dean rolled his eyes under his closed lids, forcing them open. Sam was peering at him, crouched low, his hand gripping Dean's shoulder. Dean could see Grace crouched next to him, the ropes removed from her wrists. Her head was bloody, but her eyes were on his.

"What happened?" Dean asked, confused. He had the distinct impression he'd missed something.

"The cops are on their way, Dean," Sam said. "The manager called them. We need to move, okay?"

Dean nodded, "Kay."

He reached out his hand to clasp Sam's outstretched arm. Sam rocked back on his heels and pulled Dean up and toward him. Dean tried to get his feet under him, but they didn't seem to want to obey him. Sam's arm wrapped around his side and Dean bit back a cry of pain.

"Sorry," Sam breathed, pulling his hand back. "Jesus, Dean, you're bleeding all over the place."

"You can stitch me up when we get back to the motel," Dean muttered, still working to get his feet under him.

Sam sat him down, gripping his shoulders. "Dean... we *are* at the motel."

Dean looked at Sam, wondering why he was so fuzzy around the edges. "We are?"

Sam nodded, looking worriedly at someone next to him, then back at Dean. Dean shivered. Sam was always turning the damn air conditioner on... said he needed the noise to sleep.

"Dude, turn the air down," Dean muttered, feeling the heaviness of his eyes, wanting to lie back down, unable to do so because of Sam's grip.

"The air?"

"It's freezing in here." Dean tried to say more, but his tongue suddenly seemed too big for his mouth. And the room was spinning. Funny, he didn't remember drinking... but he couldn't remember much... he couldn't remember how they got to the motel... why he was sitting on the floor... why his side was on fire while the rest of him was freezing...

"Let them in," Sam was saying. "Just... just let them in, Grace."

*Who the hell is Grace?* He just wanted to lie down. He pushed against Sam's hands and almost sighed with relief when Sam finally gave in and lowered him to the ground. He blinked. He could hear a tumble of voices in the background. They all blended into a hum in his ears. Sam's voice was the only one that was clear, even if what he was saying didn't make any sense.

"...private detectives hired by Mrs. Tyler. Call her at the hospital and you'll find out pretty fast. This is the man you should have been looking for... prove he was responsible for at least two murders... partner needs medical attention..."

Dean turned to look at Sam, but Sam was looking up at someone that Dean couldn't see. *Maybe it's Dad... maybe Dad found us. Sam's acting like he's talking to Dad...*

"Dad?" Dean whispered. Sam turned to him and Dean saw his eyebrows pull together.

"Dean, it's gonna be okay. Just hold on..."

*Sure Sammy...* Dean thought before he felt his body give in, felt the darkness win, felt himself fall into nothing.

\* \* \* \*

### **Wake Medical Center, early evening**

Sam stood at the foot of his brother's hospital bed, watching him. Dean wasn't exactly sleeping... he'd not regained consciousness since lying in a pool of his own blood in the motel room, next to the dead body of a serial killer. A man Sam had killed.

Sam had been told to sit down, to get some rest, but he knew that the moment he did, he would be out, and he needed to be standing here when Dean woke up. They'd bandaged the bullet graze on his ear, stitched his head, checked his bruised neck, face, and ribs, and had given him an MRI, calling him lucky. They hadn't understood when he'd started laughing. He would have probably scared them if he'd allowed his laughter to dissolve into tears, so he'd made his way to Dean's room.

Dean had been given a transfusion until his blood pressure, dangerously low when they were brought in, registered within a normal range. They'd stitched his side again, treated the bruises on his face from Lucien's fists, and hooked him up to a saline IV. Both had been given a bolus of antibiotics, and Sam had managed to talk one of Dean's nurses out of an extra dose of painkillers. He'd pocketed them for later, knowing his stubborn brother would insist on leaving well before he should.

The door behind him was quietly opened and out of the corner of his eyes Sam saw Grace enter the room. He didn't move from his guardian-like perch at the end of the bed, but he opened his arms to her when she stepped up close to him. She carefully wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her bandaged head on his chest. He draped his arm down her back, resting his hand comfortably on her hips.

"Nick's dead," she said in a small voice.

"I know," Sam whispered. "I'm sorry, Gracie."

She nodded and cleared her throat quietly, trying not to disturb Dean, Sam knew. He almost wanted her to be louder. He wanted Dean to wake up. Now. He was as close to complete exhaustion as he'd ever been, but he couldn't give in now. Not until Dean was awake. Not until he knew Dean was there, really *there*.

"They, uh," Grace shifted against him, and he absentmindedly started to rub her back in a gentle circle. "They told me that Lucien was on something... that's how he was so strong."

"Yeah," Sam said. "Dean figured PCP."

She nodded against his chest.

"They gonna be able to tie him to the other murders?" Sam asked.

"I think so," Grace said. "They found a lot of weird stuff in his room when they searched the house after they found Ni—after..."

Sam pulled her close for a moment, then asked. "Weird like what?"

She sighed. "Oh, like... pictures of yellow eyes on his wall, and Latin phrases in permanent marker on his doors."

Sam froze. He literally went cold. Grace pulled away from him, peering up into his face.

"Sam?"

He shook his head, unable to trust his voice.

"You okay, Sam?"

He nodded, working to get a grip on himself. "Just tired." Yellow eyes? *Haris, you bastard...* "Did anyone figure out why the killings stopped last month?"

Grace huffed out a laugh. "Yeah. His mom was sick and he went home to be with her."

Sam looked down at her. "Seriously?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Weird thing is... I have a hard time thinking about him actually having parents. Seems like someone that evil shouldn't have a family."

*That little exorcism of yours? That was my daughter... the one in the alley? That was my son...*

Dean shifted slightly in the bed, and Sam blinked, alert. He saw Dean frown slightly, then roll his head to the side. When he didn't move again, Sam looked down at Grace. She was looking back at him.

"Thanks for getting Mrs. Tyler to cover for us," he said. She nodded with a small smile.

"Least she could do. You guys caught her daughter's killer." She looked over at Dean, then back up at Sam. "You're gonna leave, aren't you?"

Sam nodded.

She shook her head. "I don't even know your real name," she whispered.

"You know enough," Sam said, lowering his head and cupping hers at the same time.

He pressed his lips to hers, gently at first and then as she gripped his shoulders, he pressed deeper, tasting her, forgetting for one moment anything but the feel of her mouth on his. After a beat, he stepped back, watching her pull her lips in. She blinked her eyes open, then smiled sadly at him.

"Am I ever gonna see you again?"

Sam looked at the floor, the corner of his mouth pulling up in a small grin.

"Anything is possible."

Grace touched his face, then looked over at Dean. "I'm glad your brother is gonna be okay, Sam."

The pain that laced through her voice cut into Sam. He'd come to his senses in that motel room, able only to breathe, focusing only on the air, and realized that the sight that met his blurry eyes was of his brother dying. Lucien had been this close to taking Dean from him. If he'd been out of it for one moment longer... if he hadn't grabbed Lucien when he did...

He looked at Grace's stricken eyes. He never wanted to feel what she was feeling now. And he closed off the part of his mind that told him that by saving Dean from the demon, by making that deal with Haris, Sam had damned his brother to this very fate, to feeling the empty heartbreak that was staring back at him through Grace's blue eyes.

"I'm so sorry about Nick," Sam said.

Grace frowned, pressing her lips together in a futile attempt to keep the tears at bay. "Thanks," she managed. "I can't even think about him not... not being there..."

Sam nodded, holding her close to him. She felt tiny in his arms, and he remembered how easily he'd been able to forget reality while with her, if only for a

moment. She had allowed him to feel good, to feel *normal* for just a few hours. But it was enough to remind him that normal was possible.

Reaching up to touch Sam's face, Grace stepped up on her toes and kissed him again briefly. "Take care of yourself, Sam Beckett."

"You, too," Sam said, folding her into his eyes with one look.

He watched her turn from him and quickly walk away through the hospital door. Sighing, he turned to face Dean's bed again. A quick flutter of lashes met his eyes.

"How long have you been awake?"

Dean opened one eye. "Long enough, Sam," he said, his voice a weak rasp.

"You hear what she said about the yellow eyes on the wall of Lucien's bedroom?"

Dean opened his other eye, frowning at the IV in his arm. "No, but it makes sense, doesn't it?"

"How you figure?"

"Seems like your visions always have something to do with that bastard... one way or another."

Dean reached over and started to pull at the tape from around his IV.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Getting out of here," Dean said matter-of-factly. "Don't act so surprised, Frances."

"You do realize that you left about two gallons of blood back in that motel room?"

Sam said, stepping forward and helping Dean remove the IV.

"Looks like I got it back," Dean said. "You got my clothes?"

Sam silently helped Dean out of the hospital gown and into his jeans, shirts, and shoes. He ignored Dean's occasional hisses of breath, but was unable to turn away from the weak sway once Dean was dressed and standing. He wordlessly draped Dean's right arm across his shoulders and grabbed whatever supplies were lying in the room that he could use to replenish the first aid kit.

"Grace will be okay, Sam," Dean said softly as they made their way from the room. "You'll probably see her again... you saw Sara again..."

"Not exactly the best example," Sam muttered.

"Yeah, you're right," Dean nodded as they maneuvered down the empty hall and out into the fading light of the day.

"You don't have to make me feel better, Dean."

"I don't?"

Sam shook his head, opening the back door on the driver's side. "I'm gonna be okay."

He shifted Dean's arm from his shoulder, slightly alarmed that his brother didn't even protest at being relegated to the back seat. He helped Dean ease back on to the seat, closed the door, then slid behind the wheel. When the Impala roared to life, he heard Dean sigh in contentment.

As they pulled out of the hospital parking lot, Dean said. "You don't have to be, you know."

"I don't have to be, what?"

"Okay."

Sam shot his eyes up to the rear view mirror, looking at Dean slumped against the opposite door, his face pale, his eyes shadowed.

"Why? You always are," Sam said.

"That's different," Dean muttered.

"Why?"

"Because, Sam, it just is."

Sam drove away from Raleigh, the radio playing softly in the background. Kansas' *The Devil Game* teased him.

*I've got books that say the good man's golden  
And more that say the bad will fall,  
Take a look at what the future's holdin',*

*Won't be yours if you don't heed this call,  
Life is a game, and the stakes will remain the same.  
Now you've gotta choose, is the devil gonna win or lose again.*

"You didn't have a choice, Sam," Dean said suddenly.

Sam looked at him again in the rear view mirror. He looked like Sam felt – hollowed out and exhausted. Watching the signs on the side of the road, Sam pulled off at the first exit claiming to have gas, food, and lodging. Leaving Dean lying across the back seat of the Impala, Sam went in to the motel office and got them a room for a week. He planned on sleeping for most of that time.

He drove to the room, unloaded their bags, then came back for Dean. He hadn't moved, which told Sam all he needed to know. Dean was at his limit. He was against his wall. Sam opened the door and eased Dean out, helping him find his footing and slinging his arm across his shoulder.

Apparently not done trying to reassure Sam, Dean gripped him with, "I would have done the same thing."

Sam eased him down on the nearest bed. "I know, Dean. You have."

"What?"

"You *have* done it. For me. You killed for me," Sam pulled Dean's boots off, then handed him two painkillers and a bottle of water. "You've sacrificed for all of us, man."

Dean swallowed the pills and shook his head, dismissing Sam's words. "You weren't wrong."

"About what?"

"About killing that guy. You weren't wrong..." Dean shifted on the bed, wincing slightly. "But what happened isn't the same thing."

"Guy's still dead," Sam pointed out, helping Dean adjust his pillow so that there was the least amount of pressure on his wounded side. He pulled the blankets up to Dean's shoulders.

"You saved my life, Sam," Dean said, his eyes closing slowly, then opening with obvious effort. "Just wanted... you to know... some things are worth it."

"Worth what?"

Dean blinked once, twice, his lashes shadowing the purple circles of exhaustion under his hazel eyes. "Worth the sacrifice..." Dean breathed, his body relaxing into the bed as real sleep finally claimed him.

Sam sat heavily on the bed opposite his brother, the one furthest from the door as always. He stared at Dean's face, the bruising, the lines of pain that were still present even in sleep. For a moment, Dean actually looked young. When he was awake, Sam was acutely aware of the wary, watchful gaze ever-present in Dean's eyes. His eyes were old. Sam watched his brother breathe and knew that he had done the right thing. He'd had to do it to save Dean, just as Dean had saved him.

"Yeah, man," he whispered as he lay back on the bed, closing his eyes. "Some things are worth it."

**The End**