

FORGET ME NOT

PART ONE

Dora's Diner, Sulphur, LA

"Who the hell names a place *Sulphur* anyway?" Dean demanded, glancing suspiciously over the rim of his coffee cup at the bored-looking bottle-redheaded waitress currently flirting her ample ass off at the two burly cops hunched over the counter of Dora's Diner. "Surely that's just asking for trouble? You know – *our* kind of trouble?"

His over-caffeinated gaze flitted skittishly to Sam, who was currently dividing his time between the local morning newspaper and the laptop, slice of toast poised halfway between his plate and his mouth as something on the computer screen suddenly seemed to demand his complete attention. "Um-hmm," he muttered distractedly, eyes narrowing as he zeroed in on certain telling key phrases within the article he was reading.

Dean drummed his fingers on the heavily coffee-stained tabletop impatiently. "I mean, not like Louisiana doesn't have enough of the old black magic vibe going for it already..."

Sam took a bite of his toast, eyes never straying from the screen. "Mmm..."

"And hell, they even spelt it wrong," Dean added, figuring challenging Sam to a spelling bee might at least get his little brother's attention. "Maybe this is where illiterate demons come to score their brimstone fix."

"It's the European spelling," Sam muttered, just to prove he was actually listening to at least some of the string of non-sequiturs and inanities that had been spewing out of Dean's mouth all morning. Suddenly his attention snapped to his older brother, whose wide eyes were skittering around the room like two moths in a closet full of flashlights. "How much coffee did you drink so far this morning?" he demanded, grabbing Dean's raised cup and pushing it back down onto the table with a wet thunk that sloshed dark liquid all over the Formica.

Dean gave Sam his most affronted scowl. "Not that it's any business of yours, *Mom* –"

"And did you eat anything?" Sam continued shortly, gesturing at Dean's still-full plate of blueberry pancakes with his half-eaten slice of toast. "Huh?"

Dean's expression melted from annoyance to discomfort, eyes cast down toward the little tub of sugar packets now forming an island at the center of his spilled coffee.

Sam sighed. "Dean, you gotta eat something."

"I'm not that hungry –"

"Look, I know this vacation kinda sucked a little bit –"

"What, with that whole voodoo mojo let's-drown-a-Winchester thing going on?"

Dean interjected. "Really, I hadn't noticed –"

"Dean."

"Sam."

Sam studied the dark circles still lurking beneath his brother's eyes, his pale complexion making his freckles stand out almost as harshly as they had in the summer when they were kids. "That whole thing with the Alp," he said slowly. "Well, I know it must be hard to get over something like that –"

"Sam –"

"But if you don't eat –"

"I eat –"

"Mostly you just drink coffee."

Dean didn't reply to that.

Sam sighed again.

"I feel a lot better, okay?" Dean managed finally, eyes once more averted to the sugar packets. "Really. Believe it or not, this vacation thing actually kinda helped –" he met Sam's disbelieving grin with a wry smile, "– eventually."

"Vacation Winchester style," Sam agreed. "Wouldn't be complete without a voodoo curse and some floating coffins."

"Now you're talking," Dean concurred. "Who needs dancing girls and coconut oil, huh?"

"Refill?"

The bottle-red waitress thrust the coffee pot between them, and Sam instinctively shoved his hand over Dean's cup. "No."

"Yes," Dean snapped, smile turning to a rapid scowl.

Sam inclined his head towards Dean's plate. "Not unless you eat your pancakes."

Dean's scowl deepened. "Dude, I'm not *four* –"

"Pancakes."

Dean huffed, glanced up at the waitress, who was looking at him like he was maybe on day release from the nearest psych ward, before spearing a wedge of pancake with his fork and shoving it into his mouth sullenly.

Sam grinned brightly. "Good boy," he said, removing his hand from Dean's cup and motioning for the waitress to pour. She shook her head and shrugged, pouring more coffee before sashaying back toward the two cops at the counter.

Dean continued to scowl at his brother as he reached stubbornly for his coffee cup.

"Uh-uh-uh." Sam wagged his finger as he grabbed Dean's wrist. "Show me," he added in his best kindergarten teacher voice. "I wouldn't want to think you were faking."

"Sam," Dean hissed through gritted teeth, "if you don't quit it you're gonna be spending the rest of the day wondering whether that girlie shampoo of yours can get maple syrup out of you hair. I mean it man." When Sam continued to grip his wrist, smiling placidly at him, he sighed theatrically before opening his mouth as wide as he could get it, just to prove he'd swallowed the pancake.

Sam sniggered, removing his hand from Dean's wrist and holding his palms out in a gesture of surrender when Dean virtually growled at him. "Ooh, little Deany's grouchy when he doesn't get his nap."

"Dean's grouchy when his pain in the ass kid brother gets between him and his coffee," Dean amended, finally tipping the scalding contents of the cup down his throat. "And a little less of the 'little,' giraffe boy," he added.

Sam shook his head, grinning widely as his attention drifted back to the laptop. "On the plus side, I think I might have found us a new gig."

"As long as it's somewhere I'm not likely to drown," Dean muttered, spearing another piece of pancake and eating it with more relish than he'd expected. Maybe he was hungry after all...

"How does Phoenix grab you?" Sam offered, grin widening.

Dean's interest level rose a notch. "I could do desert," he said, snatching a piece of toast from Sam's plate.

Pleased to see his brother eating, Sam pretended not to have noticed, instead drawing Dean's attention to the front page of a local Phoenix newspaper displayed on the laptop. "Couple slaughtered in locked room mystery" ran the slightly sensationalized headline. "Only daughter survives carnage."

"Locked room mystery?" Dean echoed. "What the –?"

"Vincent and Flora Medina," Sam began to explain. "Unremarkable middle-aged couple – he's an accountant, she's a dental hygienist. Two weeks ago their daughter Alyssa stops by on her way home from work – finds them both butchered in their upstairs bedroom – no signs of forced entry, all the doors and windows locked, no fingerprints, fibers, DNA; no evidence of any kind that anyone else was in the house."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Yikes. Couldn't have offed each other?"

"Dismembered and eviscerated," Sam informed him. "Not likely."

"I knew this girl with PMS once –" Dean stopped when he noted the expression on Sam's face. "Alright, Miss Politically Correct, what makes you think there's something –" he paused as the waitress passed the table, "– *our* kind of something going on?"

"Their surname," Sam replied slowly, not meeting Dean's inquisitive gaze.

"Their surname?" Dean repeated. "That's what tripped your Weirdometer?"

Sam seemed a little uncertain, chewing on his bottom lip as one long finger toyed with the laptop's keyboard absently. "Medina," he said. "Like Ernest Medina, the commanding officer of the soldiers responsible for the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam in 1968." Sam finally returned Dean's gaze. "The Medinas' daughter is the same age as I am."

Dean shifted in his seat. "You think maybe they're one of the cursed families?" he hazarded. "Like us?"

Sam shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe they're related to Ernest Medina somehow. Maybe Haris – well, maybe Haris is after their daughter. Maybe she's – maybe she's one of us."

"By 'us' you mean –?"

"The psychic kids. Like Max Miller or Matthew Ismay. Matthew Teller. Kyle."

Dean took another sip of his coffee thoughtfully. "That's a lot of 'maybes,' Sam," he mused.

Sam nodded. "I know," he admitted. "It's a stretch. But Alyssa Medina could be in trouble. She might need our help. What if Haris is after her?"

"Huh." Dean considered that for a second. "Damsel in distress. Never could resist one of those." He grinned lecherously. "She hot?"

Sam frowned at him before shrugging. "Couldn't find a picture," he admitted finally, before asking, "If she wasn't, would you still want to go save her?"

Dean considered that for even longer. "Of course I would," he said, an expression of mock offence twisting his features. "I'm a professional, Sammy."

"Uh-huh," Sam agreed, signaling the waitress for the check. "Well that's one word for it..."

Medina house, Phoenix, AZ

"So this is it?" Dean squinted up through the bright afternoon sun, eyes quickly assessing the unremarkable two-story building in front of him. Unremarkable. Just like its former occupants.

Sam checked the house number on the mailbox at the end of the drive, noting how the lawn was rebelling against its former perfectly-manicured glory and the flowers in the baskets arranged around the front door seemed to be wilting a little, as if they hadn't been watered in a while.

"This is it," he confirmed, taking a couple of curious steps up the driveway as Dean headed off across the lawn, obviously looking for a way to get in around the back of the house.

"You would have thought the place would still be sealed off," Dean commented, checking one of the first floor windows for locks and security sensors. "Unsolved double murder and all." He glanced sideways at Sam, who was heading for the front door.

"Mmm." Sam nodded his agreement as he navigated around a pristine bright red Mini Cooper parked slightly askew in front of a reasonably new Chevy that was covered in a thin layer of dust. He smirked at the vehicle, inclining his head in Dean's direction. "New Impala," he remarked with a grin, knowing, as always, the very best way to push his brother's buttons.

Dean grunted derisively, not even sparing the Chevy a glance. "Wash your mouth out, Sam. That ain't no Impala."

Sam sniggered before marching right up to the front door and knocking loudly.

"Dude!" Dean jumped away from the window he'd been trying to pry open, turning disbelieving eyes on his brother. "What the hell are you –?"

Sam beamed at him triumphantly as the sound of a lock being drawn back preceded the door being pulled open to reveal a young woman scowling at them from the hallway beyond.

"I already told you leeches," she hissed, preparing to slam the door in Sam's face, "you are *not* getting in here to take any pictures for that so-called newspaper of yours!"

Sam caught the door expertly as the girl attempted to slam it shut, giving the inescapable impression that he was more than used to having doors slammed in his face.

"We're not reporters," he told the girl, flashing his most perfectly dimpled smile, and for a second Dean actually thought he might puke all over his kid brother's back.

The girl considered them skeptically, twirling a long, curly lock of chestnut brown hair around her finger, dark brown eyes brim full of naked distrust. "So who are you?" she demanded, holding off trying to slam the door again until she at least had a little more information.

"We're consultants," Sam lied smoothly. "With the Phoenix PD. We've been asked to take a look at the Medina crime scene."

The girl raked a still-skeptical eye over Sam before turning her attention to Dean, who was still standing slightly behind his brother. "Let me see some ID," she barked, putting out her hand and clicking her fingers impatiently.

Dean raised an eyebrow before producing an immaculately presented business card and photo ID identifying him as Dean Ramone, Security Analyst.

The girl snatched the ID, checking it over carefully before glancing at the equally perfect photocard being held out to her by Sam. Her shoulders relaxed a little as she returned the cards to Dean. "So what do you guys consult about?" she asked, still showing no signs of allowing them into the house any time soon.

Dean stepped forward, retrieving his beautifully faked ID, looking the young girl right in the eye and affecting the most serious tone of voice he could muster. "Breaking and entering," he told her shortly.

Sam made a little squeak that he managed to cover by clearing his throat, and the young woman just looked from one to the other of them in disbelief.

"Breaking and entering?" she echoed, hand moving to one jean-clad hip. "You're kidding, right?"

"I never kid about my work, ma'am," Dean said, still convincingly serious. "We're here to try and figure out how the Medinas' assailants could have gained entry to their home."

Sam glanced sideways at his brother, almost convinced of Dean's legitimacy himself.

“And in that capacity,” Dean continued authoritatively, “I have a couple of questions. First, why isn’t this crime scene sealed? And second, who the hell are you?”

The girl drew herself up to her full height. “To answer your first question,” she said with an equal amount of authority. “Hecked if I know. They kept the – the room where it happened sealed off, but released the house back to Alyssa a couple of days ago.”

“You’re a friend of their daughter?” Dean pressed.

The girl nodded. “Yes, to answer your second question,” she confirmed. “Maisie. Maisie Malone. Alyssa and I went to high school together, then both we wound up at Arizona State.”

“And where’s Alyssa now?” Sam asked casually.

Maisie looked at him for a second. “Why would you need to know that?” she asked suspiciously, eyes narrowing.

Sam shrugged. “We need to talk to her. We understand she found the – found her parents, and we need to ask her about the condition of the house when she got here.”

Maisie rolled her eyes in exasperation. “She’s already been through that a hundred times with *real* cops,” she pointed out.

Sam remained completely unruffled. “Still, we might have different questions.” He smiled disarmingly, dimples coming into play. “It never hurts to get an alternative point of view.”

Maisie sighed, finally giving in. “She’s staying with her aunt in New Mexico,” she admitted. “I’m house-sitting for her – keeping all the scumbag newshounds out of her garden.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Kinda grizzly living at the scene of a double murder, don’t you think?”

Maisie shrugged. “Hey, I’m a grad student,” she told them. “Free rent’s free rent, right?”

Dean tried his damndest not to laugh, smoothing out his features as he inclined his head in the direction of the hallway behind the girl. “So,” he said, trying to regain Serious Face. “You want us to stand out here all day or are you going to let us in?”

Maisie considered them for a second longer, frosty exterior finally seeming to melt just a little bit. “All right,” she said with an exaggerated sigh, opening the door wider and motioning for them to come in. “If it’ll help catch whoever killed Alyssa’s parents.” She held the door as they moved towards her, shaking her head and adding under her breath, “It’s a good thing you guys are hot.”

Sam smiled awkwardly at her as he passed, shuddering slightly at the sudden dip in temperature as he crossed the threshold into the house, Dean following with an amused grin plastered to his face.

Glancing back once at his brother, Sam moved toward the lounge which branched off the hallway to the right, ostensibly checking the locks on the big sash windows while Maisie’s eyes were on him, and surreptitiously pulling his EMF meter out of his jacket pocket when she turned back toward Dean, who was looking toward the staircase at the far end of the hall.

“I can take you up if you want,” Maisie offered, following the direction of the older brother’s gaze.

“Yeah,” he began, “that’d be –”

“You know, if you need someone to hold your hand.”

Dean tried to ignore the rather unsubtle snigger that emanated from the direction of the lounge, instead treating Maisie to his most innocent smile. “Aw, honey, sorry to disappoint, but I haven’t done hand-holding since grade school,” he told her. He grinned

rakishly. “If you’ve got anything a little more adventurous in mind, though, I’d be more than happy to oblige.”

He kept his face purposely neutral, and for a second Maisie just looked at him before bursting into a wicked chortle. “Are you *sure* you guys work for the cops?” she asked, turning and beginning to make her way up the stairs.

“Scout’s honor,” Dean insisted, following the girl a little more closely than was strictly necessary – or polite. “To protect and to serve.”

“You’d better not be checking out my ass,” Maisie warned him, a definite wiggle to her hips as she continued to climb the stairs.

Dean didn’t alter the direction of his appreciative gaze for a millisecond. “No ma’am,” he assured the girl. “I’m a complete professional.”

Maisie snorted. “I’ll just bet you are,” she commented, finally making it to the landing at the top of the stairs.

“Good thing you’re hot though,” Dean added, to which Maisie glanced back at him with one raised eyebrow and he grinned flirtatiously.

“No way you guys work for the cops,” Maisie muttered, taking the hallway off to her right, Dean following her until she came to a dead stop at a doorway sealed with garish yellow crime scene tape.

“There,” Maisie said, pointing, expression sobering considerably. “That’s where – that’s where Alyssa found them.”

Dean nodded, approaching the doorway and pulling out a pocketknife which he used to carefully cut through the yellow tape. “She was on her way home from work?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder at Maisie, who nodded, folding her arms across her chest as the temperature seemed to dip still further.

“Her mom always calls her when she’s on break, so when she didn’t call that night, and didn’t answer Alyssa’s calls either, she figured she’d swing by and check everything was okay.”

“Which it wasn’t,” Dean observed, carefully pushing open the door and taking in the scene before him.

“No, it wasn’t,” Maisie agreed, averting her eyes from the dimly-lit room.

Dean swallowed, for a second vividly reminded of Meredith McDonell’s apartment back in Chicago after the innocent waitress had been eviscerated by Daevas just so that Haris could get their attention.

He pushed down the horrible thought that suddenly occurred to him amidst the sense of horrific *déjà vu*, cautiously stepping into the room and taking a deep breath as the coppersy smell of dried blood assaulted his nostrils.

The room was a mess, furniture upended and ornaments broken, the carpet thick with bloodstains and darkened by the Luminol applied by the CSI team in what had amounted to a futile attempt to reveal hidden footprints in the sticky liquid.

There was more dried blood splattered liberally up the walls and all over the furniture, and although the bed had been stripped of its bedclothes, blood spatters covered the headboard and the base, and also the nightstands on either side, one of which had been pushed over and currently rested at a crazy angle against the adjoining wall. The drapes had also been removed from the windows, which were peppered with dark red streaks and splatters, a coating of fingerprint dust causing smoky sunlight to filter through the glass onto an area of carpet thick and rigid with heavy bloodstaining.

“That’s where she found her dad,” Maisie commented from the doorway, not having crossed the threshold into the room. “Her mom was on the bed.” She swallowed. “Well, most of her was, anyway.”

Dean nodded, navigating around an overturned table as he made for the nearest window, dead flowers and a broken vase scattered at his feet in the muted sunlight.

"And they didn't find any DNA? Fingerprints?"

Maisie shook her head. "Nothing," she confirmed, as Dean's attention was drawn back to the wreckage surrounding the upturned table.

A glint of silver caught his eye, and he took a step closer, crouching to look at a broken picture frame sticking up from behind one of the larger pieces of the shattered vase.

He inclined his head to one side, grimacing at the trail of blood smeared across the broken glass which had fallen from the frame, the photograph inside skewed slightly to one side. Three smiling faces beamed up at him, and he immediately recognized the man and the older woman as Vincent and Flora Medina from their picture in the newspaper he'd seen on Sam's laptop.

Bending further, he squinted at the dark-haired young woman standing between the couple, a prickle of dread beginning to creep up his spine as realization hit. "Wait a second –" He began to turn, but was prevented from saying anything more by a blinding white flash that suddenly bleached all color from the room, scorching his retinas and driving all thought and all sensation from every corner of his brain.

He knew nothing else as darkness claimed him.

* * * *

There was nothing here.

No EMF. No residual signs of a haunting. Nothing to indicate any supernatural presence or phenomena of any kind.

Nothing.

And Sam was beginning to wonder whether maybe humans had been responsible for the brutal slaughter of Vincent and Flora Medina. It was a horrible thought, but not unheard of.

He swept the kitchen one last time with the EMF meter, preparing to report his findings – or lack thereof – to Dean, who was still upstairs at the crime scene, when a loud thud reverberated through the ceiling above him and he instinctively looked up, just as a piercing scream rent the chilly air all around him.

Unsurprisingly, Sam's first thought was "Dean," and he was halfway up the stairs before he'd even realized he'd moved, taking the last three steps in one bound before skidding down the hall toward Maisie, who was standing in the doorway of the unsealed crime scene, shaking hands drawn to her pasty face as she stared into the room before her.

"Maisie?" Sam quickly drew level with the girl, who continued to stare into the bedroom, barely breathing. "Maisie, what's wrong?"

"There – there was a bright light," she mumbled, clearly shaken. "And your partner –" She pointed vaguely into the bedroom, and Sam followed the direction of her trembling finger, stomach plummeting when he saw Dean collapsed onto the bloodstained carpet, hands raised in front of his eyes as if to protect his head.

"Dean!"

Sam shoved Maisie none-too-gently out of his way, diving across the bloodied carpet and falling to his knees next to his brother. "Dean! Dean!" Sam shook Dean's shoulder urgently, but was met with no response, releasing a breath when he felt the strong pulse at his brother's neck, then moving on to check him over for injuries: No holes, lumps or bruises. *What the hell...?*

He glanced back at Maisie who was chewing on her fingernails, clearly distraught, hopping from foot to foot anxiously. "Is he okay?" she asked frantically.

“Should I call 911?”

“Maisie, what happened?” Sam demanded, turning his attention back to Dean and gently prizing open his eyelids, checking his pupils for a reaction to the sudden influx of light.

“I –” Maisie faltered. “We were just talking. And then – then there was this blinding flash of light that – that I think came from the other side of the window.” She gestured vaguely beyond Sam’s shoulder, and he turned toward the dusty glass.

“From outside?” he queried.

“I think so,” Maisie confirmed. She shifted uncomfortably. “You think this is what got Alyssa’s parents?”

Sam opened his mouth to reply just as Dean suddenly began to moan, mumbling incoherently under his breath. Sam leaned closer to him, trying to make out what he was saying – odd, disjointed words and phrases that Sam could only just catch. “Too bright. Too hot. Fire. Where is she? Dad –?”

“I really think I ought to call an ambulance,” Maisie began to insist, fishing her cell phone from her jeans pocket and sliding it open.

“No.” Sam held up a hand, tone softening slightly at the frightened look on Maisie’s face. “It’s okay. I’ll get him to the hospital myself.”

Maisie raised an eyebrow. “But he’s unconscious,” she pointed out. “And he looks kinda heavy.”

There was no denying the truth of either of Maisie’s observations, but something about this just didn’t feel right to Sam. He needed more information before he was prepared to trust Dean to the care of strangers.

He looked to his brother, whose eyes were moving rapidly beneath his tightly-closed eyelids, odd words still mumbled in a barely audible stream of randomness. “I got him, Dad. I got the baby. It’s okay, Sammy...”

Sam swallowed. “Can you help me get him to our car?” he asked gently, and Maisie nodded, instantly at Sam’s side as he struggled to get one arm beneath Dean’s shoulder and haul him to his feet.

Maisie positioned herself on the opposite side of the unconscious Winchester, wrapping an arm about his waist as Sam tried to take the majority of his weight.

“Hot,” Dean mumbled. “Something’s burning...”

“What’s wrong with him?” Maisie asked, as Sam began to maneuver his brother toward the door.

Sam would have shrugged if he’d been able. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I just need to get him out of here.”

With Maisie’s help, Sam somehow managed to half-drag, half-carry his unconscious brother from the house, struggling a little at the threshold, but eventually able to get him out to the waiting Impala, where he gently laid him on the back seat before turning back to the ashen-faced girl behind him.

“That’s your car?” Maisie asked, as if trying to distract herself from what had just happened in front of her. “Not the usual PD-issue.”

Sam smiled weakly. “My brother’s pride and joy,” he muttered, indicating Dean with a jerk of his thumb.

“He’s your brother?” Maisie asked. “Wow, I’m so sorry. I wish I knew – I wish I could help.” She chewed on her lip. “I mean, do you think – do you think that whatever did this to Alyssa’s parents is the same thing that did this to your brother?”

Sam frowned slightly, head tipped slightly to one side. “*Whatever?*” he echoed uncertainly. “Don’t you mean *whoever?*”

Maisie laughed nervously, covering her face in embarrassment. “I’m sorry,” she said, voice incongruously high-pitched and almost giggly. “I’m studying local legends

and urban folklore and sometimes – well sometimes I just get carried away.”

Sam’s frown deepened. “You know of any local legends that could explain what happened to the Medinas – to my brother?” he asked hesitantly.

Maisie seemed somewhat taken aback at the question. “N-no,” she admitted. “Not really. It’s just –” she sighed. “Sometimes it’s easier to believe in monsters than to believe a person could do something like this to another person.”

Sam nodded, reluctant to admit he’d had the same thought. “Will you be okay?” he asked eventually, opening the driver’s door with a creak. “In there I mean.” He indicated the Medina house, and Maisie glanced back over her shoulder up the driveway.

“Maybe I’ll stay with friends tonight,” she conceded, once more meeting Sam’s concerned gaze. “Don’t want to push my luck too far in one day.”

Sam agreed silently, pulling a battered card from his pocket and quickly writing down his cell phone number on it. “Listen,” he said, holding the card out for Maisie to take. “If you think of anything – or if – if you just need to talk, call me, okay?”

Maisie nodded. “Thanks,” she said, taking the card awkwardly. “I will.”

Sam smiled briefly, before making to slide into the Impala.

“Hey,” Maisie added, causing Sam to pop his head back out over the roof of the car. “I hope your brother’s gonna be okay.”

Sam nodded, swallowing. “Me too,” he agreed, again smiling just a fraction before getting into the car and starting the powerful engine.

Maisie took one last look at the little card in her hand as the big Chevy pulled away from the curb and rumbled out of sight down the street.

Rest Stop Motel, Phoenix, AZ

Sam stood in the bathroom doorway of the tiny motel room, watching his brother as he lay on one of the uncomfortable-looking beds, tossing and turning as if in the throes of some terrible nightmare.

Dean still hadn’t regained consciousness, and it had been almost three hours since Sam had gotten him back here from the Medina house, dropped him onto the bed and begun this long, nerve-wracking vigil. He’d pulled off his brother’s jacket and boots and placed a cool washcloth on his forehead. But there was little else he could do but wait; wait and wonder and worry that his brother might never wake up.

His fingers felt the solid shape of his cell phone through the denim of his jeans, and for the sixtieth time in the last hour he wondered whether he ought to follow Maisie’s advice and call 911.

But it just didn’t seem right. He couldn’t abandon Dean to strangers, to faceless people in white coats who would shake their heads sympathetically but ultimately have no clue what to do for his brother.

Because this wasn’t some sudden-onset illness that had befallen Dean. Sam was sure of that. No. This was something else. Something a doctor wouldn’t have any idea how to deal with.

“Fire. There’s a fire,” Dean mumbled, and Sam moved over to him, bending down and repositioning the washcloth on his forehead before settling himself on the edge of the bed and trying to resist the urge to grab Dean’s hand.

He would never hear the end of it if his big brother woke up to find Sam hanging on to him like he used to when he was four.

“It’s okay, Dean,” he said soothingly. “It’s okay, you’re okay, you’re safe.”

"Fire. She's on fire."

"Dean –"

"She's burning. He's burning her."

Sam blinked. "Dean?"

"He's burning her."

"Who –?"

"Yellow eyes."

Sam stopped dead, hand still hovering over the washcloth. "Dean?" He paused, barely daring to breathe, barely daring to hear what else would slip from Dean's mouth when he had no control over his memories. He sat forward slightly, edged closer, could almost feel the heat radiating from his brother's fevered brow...

"No!"

Sam jumped to his feet with a start as Dean's eyes suddenly snapped open and he sat bolt upright on the bed like a jack-in-the-box whose spring had been coiled too tightly.

"Dean?"

Dean blinked at him, looking at him, looking about him, blinking furiously, clearly disoriented and uncertain where he was. "What –" he muttered, voice scratchy and rough with unsettled sleep. "Where am I?" He grabbed at the comforter atop the bed, hands curled into tight fists as he scrambled back against the headboard, chest heaving with panicked breaths.

"It's okay." Sam again fought the urge to grab Dean's hand. "It's okay." He held up his hands, hoping he sounded reassuring. "You collapsed. I brought you back to the motel. Everything's okay."

Dean continued to stare at him as if not quite seeing him, eyes huge and blinking continuously, breaths coming quick and ragged.

"Just breathe. It's okay. You were – you were dreaming."

Dean met his gaze uncertainly. "There was a woman," he said slowly, breathing gradually beginning to even out a little. "Something was burning." His eyes locked with Sam's for a second before he looked away again skittishly. "Someone was burning. There – there was a woman in a white nightdress. And... And there was a man. And a baby." He looked up at Sam again. "I had to save the baby."

Sam gulped down air like it was going out of fashion. Dean didn't talk about this stuff. Not ever. "It's okay," he repeated hollowly, although he knew deep down inside of him that it was no such thing. "It's okay. The fire. You were dreaming about the fire. About Mom."

Dean just looked at him. "What fire?" he asked.

The shadow of a concerned frown ghosted across Sam's face. "The fire," he said slowly. "The one that took Mom..."

Dean's mouth opened and closed soundlessly. "It's – I don't..." He trailed off, examining Sam's face closely and squinting as if into a bright light.

"Dean –"

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

Sam's frown twisted still deeper. "Dean –"

"Stop," Dean shook his head, eyes beginning to dart around the room frantically. "I don't – where the hell am I?"

Sam reached out to place a calming hand on Dean's shoulder, but his brother shook it off, pulling away suddenly and scrunching himself back against the headboard as if he was truly afraid of Sam's touch.

"Get away from me!"

"Dean –"

“Don’t touch me!” Dean insisted, shooting Sam a warning scowl of such feral intensity that the younger brother actually retreated a stunned step. “I mean it.”

“Dean, take it easy –” Sam reached out again, causing Dean to scramble further backwards, almost falling off the opposite side of the bed in his haste to get to his feet.

“Stay away!” Dean repeated, forehead crumpling into a confused frown as he backed up against the far wall, warily keeping the bed between himself and his brother, one hand held out in front of him as if that would keep Sam away. “Don’t – I don’t –” He shook his head, swallowing hard as his eyes darted to the motel room door, and Sam actually began to wonder whether his brother was going to try and make a run for it. Then, all of a sudden, Dean’s eyes locked with Sam’s again, his shoulders squaring as he raised himself up to his full height and set his jaw defiantly before demanding, “Who the hell *are* you?”

Sam stepped back as if slapped, grabbing hold of the footboard of his own bed to steady himself, the world tilting precariously, as if someone had just pulled a rug right out from under his feet. “Dean – I – what do you...?”

Dean shook his head, pressing his palms into his eyes before suddenly pulling both hands away and staring at them as if he’d never seen them before.

Slowly he looked back up into Sam’s concerned blue-green eyes, a terrified look of desperation stealing the color from his face. He took a breath, exhaled slowly, before finally asking, “Who the hell am *I*?”

PART TWO

Rest Stop Motel, Phoenix, AZ

"Who the hell am I?"

"Dean –" Sam froze, worst fears suddenly realized, the confused, angry, *frightened* look on his older brother's face so out of place there that he felt suddenly lightheaded. He held up his hands toward Dean and took a cautious step forward, as if approaching an injured animal, cornered and afraid.

Dean certainly had that air about him right now.

When Dean didn't back away or try to bolt for the door, Sam took a breath and another step forward. "Dean, it's okay –"

Dean's brow scrunched in confusion. "Why d'you keep calling me that?" he asked, voice small and more than a little bewildered.

"You – you really don't remember?" Sam swallowed hard. "That's your name," he assured his brother gently. "Dean Winchester."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Like the rifle?"

It was Sam's turn to frown. "Uh. Yeah. You remember that?"

Dean shrugged. "Apparently. So if – if I'm Dean Winchester...who the hell are you?"

"I – I'm your brother – Sam."

Dean blinked at him. "You're my brother?"

Sam nodded. "Kid brother, yeah." He tried to smile reassuringly, but didn't quite manage it.

"Why don't I remember you?" Dean asked, posture relaxing slightly as he allowed Sam to take another step toward him. "Hell, why don't I remember *me*?"

"You were injured," Sam explained. "Knocked unconscious. I think maybe – something happened – something –"

"That made me forget who I am?"

Sam nodded again. "Yeah, maybe."

"Well that sucks," Dean muttered, swallowing, eyes beginning to dart around the room. "How – how did I get injured?"

Sam paused. How did he explain this? *Dude, we think a demon murdered two people to get to their daughter because she's a psychic from a cursed family, just like me.* Sam thought not, somehow. "You were injured on – on a job," he finally managed with an apologetic little smile.

Dean suspended his nervous examination of the motel room long enough to meet Sam's gaze. "A job?"

Sam nodded.

"So – so what do I do? For a job?"

Sam sighed. "Dean, you might wanna sit down for this. It could take some time."

Dean shook his head impatiently. "I don't wanna sit down!" he burst out, and Sam could see he was shifting rapidly from frightened to frustrated. "I don't know who I am!"

Sam put out a tentative hand toward him, but Dean shook it away before it even connected.

"How do I even know you're telling me the truth?" the older brother demanded. "You could be lying to me! Hell, you could be the one who *did* this to me!"

"Dean –"

"Stop calling me that!"

"It's your name!"

"How do I *know* that? Huh?" Dean looked up into Sam's eyes, almost as

bewildered and freaked out as his own. His tone softened slightly at the concern he read in the younger man's face. "How do I *know* that?" he repeated, raking trembling fingers through his hair. "For all I know, you – you could be some sick freak who – who I picked up hitch-hiking and – and the next thing I know there's gonna be a severed finger in my French fries..."

Sam actually chuckled a little at that. "It's *Sam*, not *Rutger*, dude!" he protested, before suddenly scrunching his forehead and looking hard at his brother. "You remember that movie?"

Dean paused for a second mid-freak, the look of confusion deepening on his face. "Huh?" he muttered. "I – what? Uh. Yeah, I guess."

Sam's face lit up. "Dean, this is good!" he burst out. "This means you've not forgotten everything!" He reached out and put a hand on Dean's shoulder, but his brother jumped back as if Sam's fingers were electrified.

"Don't –" he began, shaking his head. "I don't know you. You – you could have kidnapped me! You could be holding me prisoner! There –" He stopped suddenly, eyes lighting up. "There could be people looking for me! Somebody's gonna be missing me –"

He made a sudden lunge for the door, grabbing the handle and tugging it open just a fraction before Sam managed to get a shoulder between his brother and freedom, roughly shouldering the door shut with a loud thud. "Dean," he burst out, a hint of desperation in his voice, "right now I'm pretty much the only 'somebody' you got!"

Dean stopped dead, eyes locking with his brother's, one hand still braced against the door.

Sam winced. "I'm sorry, man," he said, tone softening. "I didn't mean – I didn't mean that to come out – like that..." He trailed off, leaning hard against the door and shaking his head.

Dean backed away a step, just staring up into Sam's face. "You're really my brother?" he asked quietly.

Sam met his gaze, nodding. "The one and only."

Dean took a breath. "Where – where are we?"

Sam straightened, relieved that Dean had asked him a question he could actually answer with some confidence. "Arizona," he replied emphatically.

A mirthless laugh escaped Dean's lips. "Great," he muttered, dragging a hand through his hair. "We can visit the Grand Canyon while we're here."

Sam frowned at him, and he merely shrugged.

"I have no idea what I just said," he admitted, shaking his head.

"You know what Dean knows," Sam said, slowly formulating a theory. "Deep down. It's all still there. I know it. We just gotta get it back out."

Dean looked at him. "How?" he asked, slumping back onto his bed in defeat. "And how do you know that?"

It was Sam's turn to shrug, settling himself onto his own bed, facing his brother. "I just know," he said, features hardening. "We've been through so much...together. I'm not losing my brother to something like this. Amnesia? Seriously. How soap opera is that?"

Dean chuckled a tad hysterically as he reclined a little on the bed, hands sliding behind him to brace himself upright. His expression changed rapidly to alarm as he snatched his right hand back from where it had slipped beneath his pillow, a large, wickedly-sharp hunting knife inexplicably grasped in his fingers. "What the...?"

"Ah," Sam said, wincing apologetically. "About that..."

* * * *

All things considered, Dean took the story of his and Sam's lives pretty well. At least, he didn't scream and go lock himself in the bathroom. Which was reassuring. And only on a couple of occasions did he blanch or incline his head slightly to one side as if he didn't quite believe what Sam was telling him.

"A demon?" was the first real comment he made throughout Sam's narration, an unnervingly neutral expression on his face as he took in all that his brother had told him. "A demon burnt our mother on the ceiling because she got in the way of some evil plan he'd concocted involving kids from families who are cursed due to the previous misdeeds of their ancestors, resulting in our dad going a little psycho and raising us to be demon hunters, leaving you with death visions and me with nightmares about fire. Right?"

Sam nodded mutely.

"And we're in Phoenix because another of this demon's 'kids' might be in danger due to his having escaped from a scuttled ship where we imprisoned him using a magic ring just after a mob boss had you shot with a poisoned bullet."

Sam nodded again.

"And meanwhile, our dad's off doing...what exactly?"

Sam shrugged and Dean nodded.

"But that's okay because he's always taking off on his own, has done ever since we were little kids, but he always shows up again sooner or later, usually to save you from being choked and me from being thrown into a wall, because that's pretty much what we do for a job – saving people, hunting things –"

"Family business," Sam interjected helpfully.

Dean raised an eyebrow, nodding calmly. "Sure," he acquiesced hollowly. "Because we hunt evil. And I have amnesia because I got whammied while we were checking out the possible damsel in distress's parents' murder scene, but, even though I can't remember my own name or my own brother, I can still remember the French fry scene from *The Hitcher*, that Winchester is a type of rifle, and the fact that the Grand Canyon's in Arizona."

Sam positively beamed at him.

"I miss anything?"

Sam shook his head. "Not perfect, bro."

Dean scratched the back of his neck, a high-pitched, near-hysterical laugh escaping his lips. "Well that makes everything so much clearer," he muttered sarcastically, eyes and fingers lingering on the hunting knife still nestled atop the motel bed's dingy brown comforter.

"I know it's a lot to take in," Sam observed sympathetically, causing another hysterical laugh to emanate from his brother.

"Sure," Dean agreed. "It's not every day you discover you're whole life is completely whacked and you belong to a family of freaks."

"Hey!" Sam objected. "We're not freaks! We're just –" he searched for an adequate description, "– differently oriented is all."

Dean snorted. "Oh you can say that again," he agreed readily.

"Anyway," Sam continued, trying to move things along a little. "Now you know who you are, where you are and what you are –"

"– A freak."

"– Then maybe you can try to remember what happened at the Medina house."

Dean's brow furrowed at that, trying to sort through the odd jumble of images and half-memories swirling around in his muddled brain. "There was a –" he began,

screwing up his eyes in concentration, “– a bright light like – like a hundred camera flashes going off at once.”

Sam nodded a little too enthusiastically. “That’s good!” he encouraged his brother. “That’s *really* good, Dean! And it confirms what Maisie said too.”

Dean arched an eyebrow. “Maisie?”

“The girl who’s house-sitting at the Medinas’.”

“She was there? When it happened?”

“Yeah. She said there was a bright flash and then you collapsed...”

“So what I remembered gave us exactly zero new information?” Dean virtually growled, knuckles whitening around the hilt of the hunting knife. “Goddamnit I’m about as much use as – as fake art in a crappy motel room!”

Suddenly Dean’s arm became a blur of motion, the hunting knife whistling through the air past Sam’s ear and embedding itself with a soft thunk into something behind him.

Sam blinked at his surprised-looking brother for a second before cautiously turning to assess the damage Dean had done.

“Wow,” he muttered, eyes lighting on the knife, which was buried up to its hilt in a poster-print reproduction of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* hung clumsily on the wall behind him; the blade was lodged dead center between the screaming man’s eyes. “Nice shot.”

He turned slowly back toward Dean, who was staring at his handiwork a little dumbfounded.

“Don’t tell me,” the older brother sighed. “I ran off to become a circus knife-thrower when I was ten.”

Sam shook his head, the ghost of a smile playing with the corners of his mouth. “No. But I’d never play you at darts for money.”

Dean chuckled slightly, glancing from his brother to his hand and back to the knife. “Good to know,” he murmured.

Sam bit his lip uncertainly, the droop of Dean’s head as he gazed back down at his hand causing something to shift inside of him. “Maybe I oughta take you to the hospital,” he said slowly, mentally cringing as Dean looked up sharply.

“No,” the older brother stated emphatically, spine straightening as he sat bolt upright on the bed. “No hospitals! I *hate* those friggin’ places...”

A slightly wounded look flickered across Sam’s face. “What, you remember *that* but you don’t remember *me*?”

Dean shrugged. “I just – I just get the feeling bad things have happened to me in hospitals.”

Sam couldn’t really argue with that. “Yeah,” he said softly, eyes downcast. “I don’t think you’d even really got over the whole thing with the Alp before this happened...”

“Alp?”

Sam nodded distractedly. “Kidnapped you when I left you in hospital with a dislocated shoulder. Locked you up in a nuthouse and fed off of your worst memories.”

“Worst memories?” Dean echoed, frowning. “So first I get forced to remember crap I don’t wanna remember, and then I get forced to forget everything?”

“Yeah, well, we’re not the luckiest family in the world,” Sam muttered. “That is pretty weird though, even by our standards.”

“Apparently ‘Weird’ is my middle name, dude,” Dean observed, rubbing a hand across his face tiredly.

Sam didn’t fail to notice the fatigue reflected in his brother’s eyes or the defeated slump to his shoulders. “Maybe you just need to rest a little –”

"No," Dean disagreed firmly. "I need to be *doing* something – something to fix this. I can't just sit here hoping it's gonna go away – that I'll wake up tomorrow and it'll all have been a bad dream."

"What do you suggest?" Sam asked gently. "Other than getting you to a doctor and seeing if there's a medical solution."

"There's no medical solution to this," Dean stated shortly, eyes straying to the knife still embedded in the wall. "Maybe..." he continued, voice rapidly losing the confidence it had held seconds earlier. "Maybe if we went out – drove around – maybe go back to the Medina house; maybe something will jog my memory...?"

Sam abruptly jumped to his feet, causing Dean to shrink back a little on the bed in surprise. "I'm *such* an idiot!" the younger brother exclaimed, slapping his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"If you say so, dude."

"Your car! Sam continued excitedly, as if Dean hadn't spoken, grabbing his brother's arm and yanking him to his feet none-too-gently. "If you don't remember me, you're *sure* to remember your car...!"

* * * *

Dean stood staring at the Impala for a full thirty seconds before finally exclaiming, "I drive *that* old bucket of bolts?" an expression of pure disbelief twisting his features.

Sam stepped closer to the old Chevy, inexplicably affronted on the vehicle's behalf. Gently patting her shiny black hood, he bent slightly toward one of her headlights and softly crooned, "Don't listen, baby. He doesn't know what he's saying."

Dean frowned. "You two need to get a room?" he asked, Sam returning his frown triple-fold as his hand still lingered on the Chevy's immaculate paintwork. He straightened awkwardly, shaking his head in disbelief.

"No!" he blurted, his cheeks coloring bright pink in flustered embarrassment. "I didn't – I don't – I mean – you *love* this car, Dean! And I mean *love* it! I was so sure if you remembered anything it'd be her..."

"Her?" Dean echoed, frown deepening. "It's a *car*, Sam!"

Sam almost flinched at that, tugging open the driver's door with the customary creak that made Dean wince.

"And an *old* car at that!" the older brother continued. "Maybe would could trade this old rust bucket in for something a little newer?"

Sam shook his head and gritted his teeth, fondly patting the Chevy's dash as he curled himself into the driver's seat. "It's okay, sweetheart," he muttered. "Don't hold it against him. I'll get him back to you, don't you worry..."

* * * *

"Any of this looking familiar?"

They'd been driving around for a good hour now, early evening shadows beginning to lengthen as Dean gazed hopelessly out of the Impala's windows, expression flickering from blank to frustrated and back again in the space of a heartbeat.

"No," Dean murmured softly for what felt like the hundredth time. "Nothing."

Even the Medina house hadn't elicited much of a response, shades drawn and

Maisie's Mini no longer in the driveway, leaving the new Impala to collect dust alone.

Dean had merely grunted, shaken his head and continued humming this weird little sing-song tune that Sam had noticed he'd been singing softly to himself since they'd first gotten into the car. Sam hadn't asked about it – Dean singing in the car was one of those habits Sam had thought he hated until this moment, when it suddenly felt comforting, as if the brother sitting next to him was his usual self and everything was fine.

Of course, Sam was only too aware that everything was very far from fine, if only by virtue of the fact that Dean hadn't asked to drive once on this little jaunt. Sam had no doubt Dean would know *how* to drive; he just didn't seem to want to.

So Sam left him to his thoughts, let him hum that weird little nursery rhyme tune unchallenged, and contented himself with pointing out any sights that Dean might recognize.

"Oh, hey!" Sam exclaimed suddenly, startling Dean out of his reverie. "That school!" He pointed to a large white building off to their left, Stars and Stripes hanging limply from the flagpole out front as the stiflingly still air failed to muster up even the slightest breeze to ruffle the fabric.

Dean followed the direction of Sam's excited finger. "Yeah?"

"We went to that school!" Sam exclaimed. "I think you would have been fifteen, maybe sixteen. Dad let us ride out a whole semester here while he investigated something that was killing tourists out in the desert nearby. Think it was a chupacabra or something." He shrugged. "Can't remember."

"No," Dean agreed darkly, gazing up at the anonymous-looking school. "Me neither."

Sam flinched, inwardly kicking himself, before plastering an over-enthusiastic grin on his face in a valiant attempt to cover his thoughtless stumble. "Think this is where you had that enormous crush on your English teacher – what was her name? Miss Onizuka? You kept trying to learn Shakespeare to impress her..."

Dean cast him a sidelong glance. "You're making that up."

Sam shook his head vehemently. "Nuh-uh!" he insisted, screwing his face up to accurately mimic that of a lovelorn teenager while placing one hand over his heart. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day, Miss Onizuka...?"

"You know Shakespeare wrote that about a guy, right?" Dean informed his brother flatly, frowning in mild surprise at himself that he would know something like that.

Sam seemed equally shocked. "Ye-ah," he said slowly. "I know that. Can't believe *you* know that though..."

Dean squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. "That must have been some crush I had on that English teacher," he muttered, watching the school disappear down the street in the side mirror.

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "Who knew that's all it took to make you study?"

The silence that followed remained unbroken for several blocks while Sam tried desperately to think of alternative ways to phrase the question, "Anything look familiar yet?" while Dean took to tracing his finger in little spirals on the seat next to him, not even bothering to look out the window anymore.

"It'll come back," Sam said eventually, casting a lingering sidelong glance in his brother's direction.

Dean didn't look up. "What if it doesn't?"

Sam turned back to face the road. "It will," he insisted. "We'll find a way. We always do. I promise."

Dean nodded slightly, finger still drawing invisible patterns on the Impala's upholstery, the subdued rhythm of that little tune he'd been humming eventually

returning as an accompaniment to the Chevy's throaty rumble.

Sam listened to his brother's distracted voice for several more blocks before finally asking, "Dude, what the hell *is* that you're singing?"

Dean looked up, startled, as if he'd not realized he was humming out loud. He blinked a couple of times before shrugging one shoulder dismissively. "Can't get that friggin' tune out of my head," he mumbled, finally reaching out and snapping on the radio just to drown it out. Bad English's *Forget Me Not* instantly began to crackle out of the speakers, and within seconds Dean was drumming his fingers against his thighs in perfect time with Deen Castronovo.

"*I will be your shadow when you walk away. Forget me not, forget me not...*"

Dean began singing along to the chorus, and again Sam cast a bemused look in his direction. So the lyrics to the chorus weren't exactly hard to pick up, he reasoned, but then Dean started in on the next verse, note and lyric perfect, fingers still beating out the rhythm against his leg, and there was no way Sam could explain that.

"Dude, that's just freaky, you know that?" Sam burst out eventually, causing Dean to desist immediately from belting out the rest of his homage to John Waite.

"Freaky how?" Dean demanded defensively, bottom lip pushed out in what on anyone else but Dean would have definitely been classed as a pout.

"That you remember that song!" Sam replied. "Just like you remembered that movie; how to throw a knife; that Winchester was a type of rifle. Dean, you're remembering everything but your actual life!"

Dean looked away, eyes fixing absently on the radio.

Sam felt an immediate surge of guilt that he'd been the cause of that little-boy-lost expression on his brother's face. "Dean —" he began, before switching tracks in an attempt to alleviate the tension. "I'll tell you what else is freaky." He grinned, looking back over at his brother, who met his gaze uncertainly.

"What?"

Sam's grin widened. "You never told me you were into Big Hair Rock."

Dean's cheeks reddened, eyes skittering back to the radio. "It has a great guitar riff!" he protested defensively. "And besides, it's not like I'm listening to *Bon Jovi* or anything!"

Sam's mouth opened and closed a couple of times before he managed to choke out, "Okay, you don't remember *me*, your own *brother*, but you remember *Bon Jovi*?" He shook his head, pretending to be affronted. "Okay I take it all back. You *are* a freak!"

Unfortunately, what Sam had intended as lighthearted ribbing didn't quite have the desired effect on Dean.

Straightening considerably before twisting right round to face Sam, Dean suddenly burst out, "Well maybe you're not really my brother! Maybe that's why I can't remember you!" before clenching his jaw as if he was afraid his teeth might spontaneously fall out, cheeks almost as red as the encroaching sunset.

Sam sucked down a breath as if he was drowning, finally managing to choke out, "You really think that? You really think I'm some sicko who likes to kidnap amnesiacs for kicks? Huh?"

Dean didn't answer, merely snapped off the radio and turned back to face the road, arms crossed sullenly over his chest.

Sam shook his head in disbelief, patience beginning to wear extremely thin despite his best efforts. "I'm not even gonna dignify that with a response."

"You just did, Sam," Dean retorted between clenched teeth.

The two of them fumed in silence for a while, the only sound besides the growl of the Impala being the occasional impatient tap of Sam's fingers against the steering wheel.

Determined he wasn't going to be the first to cave, Sam squinted furtively at his brother, who had never been able to hold a grudge for long, even when they were kids. Of course, *this* Dean might be able to hold a grudge until Doomsday for all Sam knew...

"Do we always argue like an old married couple?" Dean asked suddenly.

Sam tried not to let his relief show too much in the tiny chuckle that escaped his lips. "Yeah, pretty much." He glanced sideways at Dean, who was fighting a sheepish smile. "Listen," Sam continued. "You hungry?"

"No," Dean replied, still trying to keep Pissed Off Face in place but failing miserably. "Yes."

"Okay then." Sam smiled slightly to himself, casting his eyes about in the hopes of finding a nearby source of nourishment. "Aha!" he said suddenly, spotting a convenience store on the next corner and hurriedly pulling the Impala up into the four-space parking lot to the side of the low white building.

Switching off the engine, he turned to face his brother, who was squinting at the store almost as if he recognized it. "You okay?" Sam asked uncertainly.

Dean nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Despite not having a clue who I am and being driven around a place I don't know by a brother I don't recognize in a car that's probably older than I am."

"It's twelve years older than you are," Sam said meekly, "and you should look so good when you're her age."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Seriously, dude, what's *with* you and this car? I'll bet you almost *never* get laid..."

Sam opened his mouth as if to refute that accusation, but instead thought better of it, loathe to dislodge the almost-familiar twinkle in Dean's eyes. Instead he settled for sighing dramatically and asking, "So what do you want to eat?"

Without even thinking about it, Dean replied, "Anything as long as it's not green and has lots of onions. And M&Ms. The peanut ones."

Sam smiled to himself as he shoved open the driver's door. "Lost your memory my ass," he muttered. "You're just faking so I spring for dinner."

Dean returned his smile ruefully, as if he dearly wished that were true. "You want me to come with?" he asked as Sam unfolded himself from the car.

"Nah," the younger brother said, shaking his head. "I'll only be a second." He made to stride off across the parking lot before pausing and leaning back into the car. "I don't need to handcuff you or anything do I?"

Dean raised an eyebrow. "I'm into that kinda stuff...?" he asked hesitantly.

Sam chuckled. "I meant in case you decided to make a break for freedom," he said, shaking his head.

Dean didn't reply to that, just shrugged a little.

"So you don't think I'm an evil amnesic-kidnapping psycho anymore?"

Dean glanced sideways at him. "M&Ms," he said. "Peanut."

Sam grinned down at him before withdrawing his head from the car window and heading over toward the entrance to the store.

Dean watched him go thoughtfully, trying to wrap his head around how the hell he could have a little brother who was at least four inches taller than he was. That was just so *wrong* on so many levels. And the kid was built, too. Could probably wipe the floor with Dean without breaking a sweat... But then he remembered how he'd thrown that knife and, glancing around to check no one was watching him, he flexed his left arm experimentally, grinning like a kid in a candy store when he felt his biceps tauten. *Wipe the floor with me, my ass! Hell, I'm some kinda goddamn Adonis over here!*

The euphoria was all too brief however, as he suddenly realized he had no clue

how he'd built up his admittedly impressive musculature. Did he work out? Did he play sports? Was he one of those guys who hung out at the gym for hours on end just admiring himself in the mirror? God he hoped not. Maybe this whole hunting thing was what kept him in shape... Why couldn't he remember?

This amnesia thing was seriously starting to piss him off.

Frustrated, he slammed his right elbow into the car door, yelping as he discovered that the Impala was actually a hell of a lot better built than he was. He sighed again, and decided to pass the time by exploring the unfamiliar space he found himself in.

The first thing that caught his attention was the old shoebox full of CDs and worn tapes that was lodged at his feet. Metallica... AC/DC... *Led Zeppelin*? Wow, Sam sure had odd taste in music... Or maybe that was *his* taste in music. Did he like Led Zeppelin? He had no idea.

His attention wandered next to the glove box, pulling it open warily, not entirely sure what he was going to find in there.

He certainly hadn't expected to find a stash of fake IDs. There were dozens of them – Homeland Security, FBI, Wildlife Service, CDC – all with either his or Sam's photo staring up out of them, and all with ridiculous-sounding aliases that, even in his befuddled state, Dean didn't think anyone in their right mind would fall for... Joey Ramone, Robert Plant, Dr. James Hendrix... *Reverend Judas Priest*? *Seriously*?

He was about to give up on delving deeper into the glove box, pretty sure he didn't want to know what else was buried in there, when he came across another ID card, this one bearing a photograph of someone who was neither Sam nor Dean, an older guy who looked somehow familiar.

Dean stared at the photo for a long moment, willing himself to remember, minutely studying every detail of the unknown man's dark hair, graying beard and dark inscrutable eyes. The card was emblazoned with the logo for the Pittsburgh Fire Department, the name "Fire Marshal John Entwistle" printed in neat little letters beneath the photograph. Somehow Dean doubted that was this man's *real* name.

Think, dammit! You know this guy!

Then it hit him.

The dream.

This was the guy from the dream.

This was the guy from the *fire* dream. The guy who handed him the baby...

Take your brother outside as fast as you can...

A single loud bang followed by a woman's anguished scream drew Dean's attention away from the ID card still clutched in his trembling fingers.

Sam?

* * * *

Sam stood with his hands raised nervously above his head, eyes skittering to the middle-aged woman standing behind the counter who was valiantly trying to do the same, despite every instinct within her telling her to tend to her husband, who was currently slumped on the floor, back to the counter, blood seeping from the bullet wound to his upper arm.

"Just give me the goddamn money, lady!"

"Take it easy!" Sam advised the young man currently hopping from foot to foot in front of him, 9mm raised in two shaking hands pointed directly at the woman clerk.

The kid's red-rimmed owl eyes cut to Sam nervously, skin sweaty and pale beneath the black hoodie pulled up over his messy blond hair. "Don't be a hero, pal!" the guy advised right back. "I just want the money!"

"Don't give the punk a dime, Anna!" the storeowner growled defiantly from his position on the floor. "Not one cent!"

"Shut up old man!" the would-be robber yelled at the guy on the floor, adjusting the trajectory of the 9mm so that it was pointing at his forehead. "Next shot splatters your brain across the counter!"

"Hey, hey! Just calm down!" Sam tried to placate the kid. "No one needs to get hurt here!"

He raised his hands in front of him and took a hesitant step forward, instantly regretting the action when he abruptly found himself looking down the barrel of the handgun.

"Shut up! Just shut up!" the kid yelled, hand trembling almost uncontrollably around the gun's grip as he brought it around in a wide arc from Sam's head to the storekeeper's chest. "For the last time, gimme the goddamn money or I –"

The remainder of the robber's sentence was bit off as the storekeeper's wife – Anna – suddenly lobbed a can of bug spray at him which bounced off his head, eliciting a string of muffled curses and causing the gun to abruptly swing around until it was pointing right between her eyes. "You bitch! You'll pay for that!" the kid screamed, finger tightening on the trigger just as Sam decided to take advantage of the distraction and made a grab for the weapon. But he wasn't quite fast enough, suddenly finding the still-warm barrel pressed right up against his forehead.

"I told you –" the kid burst out, finger tightening on the 9mm's trigger, "– *not* to be a hero!"

There then followed one of those moments where time seems to slow down to a crawl while simultaneously speeding up to such a speed that Sam wasn't entirely sure what happened next.

He was pretty sure he closed his eyes as the sweaty-palmed would-be robber's face twisted into an angry grimace, his finger squeezing the 9mm's trigger in a kind of slo-mo haze of inevitability.

Next thing Sam was aware of was a gunshot ringing out through the store and the unmistakable sound of a bullet whizzing past his ear.

Quite surprised not to have a gaping bullet hole in his forehead, Sam opened his eyes in what felt like the space of a single heartbeat, only to be met by a sight that he would never be able to rationalize as something that could have happened in the time it took him to blink his eyes.

The robber was lying face-down on the black and white tiled floor, Dean inexplicably sitting on top of him, left hand yanking the youth's wrists halfway up his back while his right expertly ejected the clip from the kid's 9mm, rendering the weapon harmless and ensuring that no more stray bullets were going to be heading in his baby brother's direction any time soon.

"First mistake?" Dean said, carefully examining the 9mm one more time as the pasty-faced youth squirmed underneath him. "Being stupid enough to come in here and point a gun at someone." He leaned down towards the punk menacingly, his mouth right next to the kid's ear. "Second mistake?" he continued, voice as low and threatening as Sam had ever heard it. "Being stupid enough to come in here and point a gun at *my little brother*. Now that was *really* stupid."

The kid groaned, still weakly attempting to twist out of Dean's grip while Sam just stared at his big brother open-mouthed.

"How – how did you know?" he managed to stutter out. "To come in here – and

to – how did you know what to do? How to disarm the guy? What to do with the gun?” Sam swallowed, a hopeful glint in his eye. “Maybe it’s coming back? Your memory?”

Dean looked up at him blankly for a second, before shrugging his shoulders and casually bringing the robber’s gun down on the back of the kid’s head. The kid grunted, before lapsing into unconsciousness, and Dean proceeded to toss the 9mm up onto the shop counter where it landed with a hard thunk in front of the startled lady clerk. He screwed his face up into a disapproving grimace, shaking his head and muttering, “I *hate* guns!”

Sam frowned down at him. “Or not.”

“Anna! Dial 911!” the storeowner suddenly ordered weakly from his position on the ground, his wife snatching up the phone and doing exactly that, hands still shaking.

“Third time this month we’ve been robbed,” the storeowner explained, turning his attention first to Sam and then to Dean. “I can’t thank you boys enough. Don’t get too many heroes around here –”

Sam laughed nervously, glancing at his brother. “We’re not heroes,” he said modestly, before adding, “And Dean, I think we really better be going. Y’know. Before the cops arrive.”

The storeowner mirrored Dean’s raised eyebrow, and Sam laughed even more nervously.

“Don’t wanna spend all night making statements,” he added with an awkward smile.

The storeowner’s face split into a pained grin. “*Unsung* heroes, huh?” he said, nodding his head as if he understood completely. “Wanna maintain your secret identities?” He winked, forcing even more nervous laughter from Sam. “I get it.”

Looking about himself, Sam spied a display of cheap kids’ toys and, grabbing a fluorescent pink skipping rope, he knelt down next to Dean, taking hold of the robber’s wrists and tying them firmly together.

Satisfied that the offender was now secured, Dean got off him, allowing Sam to drag the kid back against the wall where he knotted the remaining length of rope around a conveniently located water pipe.

Without really thinking about it, Dean moved over toward the wounded storeowner, kneeling down in front of him and gently moving aside the tattered fabric of his shirt sleeve to assess the damage to the man’s arm.

Sam glanced over at him, slightly unnerved by the look of absolute trust in the storeowner’s eyes engendered, Sam had no doubt, by the air of complete confidence Dean was currently exuding.

Dean smiled reassuringly at the injured man. “Hey, Mr. –?”

“Jorge,” the storeowner replied with a wan smile. “No ‘Mr.’ necessary for you boys.”

Dean’s smile widened. “Well – Jorge,” he continued, “I had worse than this when I was in grade school. Seriously, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Just a little flesh wound is all –”

Sam shuddered involuntarily, vivid memories of a hangar and Dean saying those exact same words to him suddenly exploding in his brain.

The words held no such resonance for Dean, and he merely grabbed a nearby pack of diapers, ripped them open with his teeth, extracted one and carefully positioned it over Jorge’s wound before taking hold of the storeowner’s good hand and placing it firmly on top. “Keep pressure on it like this,” he instructed the man. “By the time the paramedics get here, you’ll be well on the way to having a cool new scar.”

Jorge grinned lopsidedly. “Scars I got,” he said, glancing back at his wife before lowering his voice conspiratorially. “Just don’t have any pretty ladies to show ‘em off to.”

Dean's attention drifted to Anna, who was still clutching the phone to her chest, face the color of Christmas morning snow, seemingly too terrified to approach her stricken husband in case he should suddenly stop breathing.

"Jorge," Dean said, looking back at the storeowner. "I think you have one pretty lady right here who's more than interested in just your scars, man."

He beckoned to Anna, who hesitantly approached after finally releasing her hold on the telephone, carefully kneeling down in front of her husband before pressing her forehead against his.

"You die on me, I'll kill you, you stupid old man," she muttered through the tears suddenly streaming down her waxy cheeks.

Jorge chuckled, kissing his wife a little self-consciously on the cheek. "You don't get no insurance if you kill me, old woman," he replied, stroking his wife's hair tenderly.

When Dean merely smiled at the couple rather than announcing his sudden need to vomit, Sam was tempted to repeat a line he'd tossed at him many, many hunts ago: "Who are you, and what have you done with my brother?" But right now he figured that would be in pretty poor taste, so settled for grabbing Dean's arm, pulling him to his feet and beginning to tug him insistently toward the exit.

"We gotta go," he whispered urgently in Dean's ear. "Now. Before the cops get here."

"Why?" Dean asked uncertainly. "We're the good guys!"

Sam shook his head at that. "Yeah, well, they find us here and – and – well, it would be *bad*. *Very bad*."

"But we didn't even get the food you came in here for!" Dean protested, eyeing the provisions Sam had dropped onto the counter at the appearance of the pasty-faced would-be robber.

Jorge, hearing Dean's last comment, nodded his head towards the counter. "Take it," he said, beaming at them. "It's on the house."

* * * *

Sam tapped his fingers against the Impala's steering wheel, unconsciously in time with that odd little nursery rhyme tune Dean had resumed humming the minute they got back into the car.

"So you really don't know how you knew how to disarm that kid or empty his gun?" he asked for maybe the third time since they'd shagged ass out of Jorge and Anna's store.

Dean looked up from his examination of the contents of the brown paper grocery bag slung on the seat between them, merely shrugging again, a blank look on his face.

Sam nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe it's like muscle memory," he hazarded. "Maybe Dad's training is so ingrained in us it was just instinct." He paused, eyes skittering briefly sideways. "Instinct to protect me."

"You make me sound like a pitbull, Sam," Dean observed, grinning at the family-sized pack of peanut M&Ms he'd found at the bottom of the grocery bag.

Sam sighed. "Sometimes I think that was Dad's intention."

Dean looked up again. "Huh?"

Sam shook his head dismissively. "Never mind."

"Look," Dean said with a blasé shrug of his shoulders. "I heard a gunshot and a scream come outta the store my kid brother had just gone into. I just did what anyone would have done, Sammy."

Sam's attention snapped instantly to his brother, his foot slamming against the Impala's brake as he nearly missed a red light. "What did you just call me?"

Dean, hand still braced against the dash after Sam's sudden maneuver had caused him to have serious issues with inertia, blinked blankly at his kid brother, who was staring at him as if he'd sprouted a second nose. "Huh?"

"You called me 'Sammy'!" Sam pointed out, a goofy grin lighting up his face. "Why'd you call me that?"

Dean's face contorted into a mask of concentration as he tried to remember the answer Sam was obviously expecting to that question. Finally, he had to admit defeat. "I don't know," he sighed, quirking an eyebrow and casting a sidelong glance in his brother's direction. "I don't call you Sammy?" He sounded surprised, slowly turning back to face the road as the light changed to green. "Well I should. It suits you. You look like a Sammy."

Sam's grin widened, and for the first time in a long, long time he was actually happy to have his brother call him by that hated old nickname.

Rest Stop Motel, Phoenix, AZ

"Goddammit!"

Dean opened his eyes as the pencil Sam had launched across the room bounced off the wall above his brother's head and landed, point downward, in the pillow about an inch to the left of Dean's eye.

He raised his head slightly off the bed to check Sam wasn't about to launch any more projectile stationery at him before observing, "You know the lead's gonna be broke all the way through that now, right? Is that any way to treat your school supplies, Junior?"

Sam scowled at him over the screen of the laptop. "It's like the Medina family never existed!" he growled in frustration, gesturing wildly at the computer. "I can't seem to dig up anything on them other than what we already know – they were murdered!"

"You said they were 'unremarkable,' right?" Dean raised himself up onto his elbows. "Maybe 'unremarkable' doesn't get splattered all over the internet."

Sam sighed heavily. "Yeah, I guess you're right," he conceded, turning to face Dean, away from the computer and the rusty metal motel table. "It'd make sense though," he continued, eyes downcast as he rubbed his hands together uncomfortably. "If their daughter were like me. One of the cursed kids –"

Dean raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were *psychic* kids?" he pointed out. "From cursed families."

Sam scrubbed at the back of his neck tiredly. "Yeah. Well. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference."

His gaze flitted back to the newspaper picture of Alyssa Medina's murdered parents displayed on his computer screen. "Sins of the fathers..." he muttered. "We're all cursed."

Dean sat up straighter, brow furrowing. "What's that?"

Sam's attention snapped back to his brother. "Huh?" he said.

"Sins of the fathers," Dean repeated.

"The family curse," Sam said. "We're all supposedly cursed for some terrible thing one of our ancestors did. I explained that to you, right?"

"No," Dean said, before instantly adding, "Yes. I mean – well, yeah, you explained about the family curse, but you didn't use those exact words."

“Sins of the fathers?”

Dean nodded slightly, fingers sliding unconsciously to the amulet around his neck, eyes distant. Remembering. “Someone’s said that to me before.”

Sam eyed Dean’s toying with the amulet before agreeing. “Sure. Ryan Grayson.”

Dean’s focus shifted back to the present, to his brother. “He was a –”
“Soldier.”

Confusion clouded Dean’s features, and his fingers closed tightly around the little gold charm. “Not a –” he paused, as if embarrassed to ask, “not a – a cowboy?”

Sam just looked at him. “Cowboy?” he repeated, inclining his head to one side. “No. Don’t meet too many of those in our line of work.”

Dean grit his teeth in frustration, banging his head back down against the pillow angrily. “Stupid raggedy-ass memory!” he cursed. “I’m never gonna get it back!”

“Dean –”

“I need some sleep. That’s all. I just need some sleep.”

Sam turned his attention back to the laptop when Dean turned onto his side and closed his eyes, a surefire sign that he was done talking.

Sam sighed, picking up where he’d left off his fruitless research, even dipping into some of those old schoolfriend network sites in the hopes of turning up something – *anything* – on the Medinas.

But he found precisely nothing.

Nada.

Zipola.

He sighed, placing his chin in the palm of his hand and glancing over at Dean, whose breathing had evened out, announcing that he’d reached the Land of Nod without incident.

Sam fought the urge to go cover him with a blanket, figuring if Dean woke up with Sam hovering over him in full-on Mother Hen Mode he’d never hear the end of it.

So he turned back to the computer again, barely even touching the keys before Dean began to shift restlessly on the bed, moaning softly and distracting Sam’s attention back toward his brother.

Sam stood, cautiously approaching Dean’s bed, trying not to wake him. What was that? His lips were moving and the moaning wasn’t – it wasn’t just *moaning*. It was – it was *tuneful*. Dean wasn’t moaning; he was *singing*. Dean was singing in his sleep!

Sam leant down closer to his brother, trying to catch the mumbled words issuing from his barely-parted lips. It was the same tune he’d been humming all afternoon, but now there were definitely lyrics. Sam just couldn’t make out what they were.

Suddenly Dean’s singing stopped, and Sam straightened, retreating a step as his brother became agitated, head thrown from side to side, eyes doing a crazy tango beneath his eyelids.

“No, no please!” Dean muttered, voice so full of complete and utter anguish that Sam almost reached out a hand to shake him awake. “Please! Where is she? Where *is* she? It’s – it’s all burning. It’s all burning! *Do something!* Please do something! She’s in there and it’s burning! Where *is* she?”

Sam bit his lip, unaccustomed to the almost childlike look of terror on his brother’s face. “Dean –”

Sam jumped back another step as Dean suddenly jerked bolt upright, eyes wide and staring up at Sam as if he was the only other person on the planet, chest heaving as he tried to suck in air.

“Sammy?”

Sam approached his brother once more, hand held out toward him. “It’s okay,

Dean,” he said softly. “You’re okay. You’re safe.” He sat down gingerly on the edge of Dean’s bed, a little unnerved by the way Dean was staring at him, barely blinking.

“Dean? You with me?”

Dean continued to gaze at him, short, hard breaths slowing slightly, but fear and disorientation still obvious in the unnatural size of his unblinking eyes.

“You were singing in your sleep,” Sam told him, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. “You were singing that song again.”

Dean blinked just once, finally seeming to focus on his brother. “I think – I think Mom used to sing that song to me...”

Undetermined location

The dark red substance swirled in the ornate bronze chalice, one long slender finger stirring at the contents as they began to recede, revealing only blackness in its truest form.

“You’re right of course,” the woman’s voice broke the unearthly silence. “Yes. He’s remembering too much... I see that now. The memory – I know – the memories you wanted him to forget – and more. They’re coming back to him. Yes, yes I understand. But...it would be easier just to wipe his mind completely. Yes, it will be simple. I can do it. Trust me. It will be done, fear not.”

The long finger withdrew slowly from the bowl, languidly drawn across ruby red lips and a lazily curled tongue. She sighed contentedly.

“By the time I’m finished with Dean Winchester,” she said, licking the last exquisite drops of blood from her full lower lip, “he won’t even be able to tie his own shoelaces...”

PART THREE

Rest Stop Motel, Phoenix, AZ

She was burning.
Up on the ceiling, looking down at him.
“Don’t be scared, baby.”
“Take your brother outside as fast as you can.”
Looking up at the man holding the baby.
The man with the yellow eyes, looking down at him.
Contempt. Hatred.
Pinning him to the cabin wall. Hurting him.
“What, you’re the only one that can have a family?”
“They don’t need you. Not like you need them.”
The same eyes, but a different man.
Women dying.
So many of them.
Dying because of him.
He was killing them.
Because of *him*.
Give in. Let go. Have peace.
Resist. Hold on. Stay strong.
“Don’t be scared, baby.”
Yellow eyes everywhere... Everyone dead... All his fault...
“They don’t need you...”
“NO!”

He could hear the shower running.

Dean took three short, shuddering breaths before he was finally able to gasp out the word, “Sammy?”

It sounded more like a plea than a name.

He cast about himself, blinking cold sweat out of his eyes, slowly adjusting to the early morning sunlight filtering in through the narrow chink between the badly-fitted curtains over the grimy window.

Heart hammering, he reminded himself that he could hear the shower, could see the open duffel and some of its contents strewn across Sam’s empty bed.

Rationally, Dean knew that Sam was only a few scant feet away taking a shower, but that didn’t stop him repeating his brother’s name like an early morning benediction.

Not alone. You’re not alone. He hasn’t left you here...

He rested his elbows on his knees for a second, leaning forward as he tried to catch his panicked breath.

Just a nightmare...

The words sounded familiar, as if he’d had cause to repeat them too many times to himself of late.

Just a nightmare...

So many dead.

The woman on the ceiling was his mom, Sam had told him that. But the others... And always that yellow-eyed freak laughing out of different faces.

Why did that face at the cabin, the one looking down at him with undisguised hatred and contempt in his yellow eyes, the one looking down at him as if he was nothing, worthless; why did *that* one hurt so much?

"Sam? He's clearly John's favorite. Even when they fight it's more concern than he's ever shown you..."

Hurting him. Making him bleed...

...Holding the baby out to him, flames behind him. "Take your brother outside as fast as you can."

Dean fisted his hands against his eyes, gritting his teeth as he prayed to remember... And ached to forget.

At the edge of his hearing he suddenly began to hear music, and for a second he wondered whether that stupid nursery rhyme song was actually causing him to have aural hallucinations.

Then – somehow – he realized he recognized the guitar riff – Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Child (Slight Return)* – and noticed an accompanying buzz was vibrating through the chair next to his bed on which his jacket had been hastily slung the night before.

Jimi's wailing axe got steadily louder as Dean fished about in his jacket pocket, eventually pulling out a juddering cell phone whose front cover was currently illuminated with the word "Dad."

He hesitated for a second, fairly sure that this was his cell phone, and, by extension, his dad calling – the crazy almost-psycho demon hunter Sam had told him so very little about – but he wasn't entirely sure how to answer. *"Hey, Dad, I don't remember you but Sam tells me we have some DNA in common, so thanks for that..."*

He glanced nervously at the bathroom door, the sound of running water still audible over the screeching ringtone, realized he wasn't getting out of it that way, took a deep breath and flipped open the phone.

"H – Hello?" he said tentatively, not realizing he was holding his breath until his chest began to hurt.

"Dean? Dean, is that you?"

The voice – *that* voice.

Dean felt icy fingers play a concerto up his spine.

It was the voice from his nightmares.

The voice of the yellow-eyed man.

"They don't need you. Not like you need them..."

Unable to take another breath due to the sudden constriction in his chest, as if invisible hands were squeezing him from the inside out just as they had when he'd been pinned up against that cabin wall in Missouri, ears buzzing and heart hammering so loud he could swear he heard the blood circulating in his veins, Dean could do nothing but open and close his mouth mutely, not a single sound escaping his lips as that voice – that same voice – resounded insidiously in his head.

"...Not like you need them."

The phone bounced when it hit the murky carpet, but Dean could still hear it – still hear that voice, the voice of the yellow-eyed man as he gazed down at him, pinning him to the wall.

"What, you're the only one that can have a family?"

"Dean? Dean! Are you alright...?"

The tinny voice issued from the phone's speaker, and Dean could still hear it, even from six feet away with one hand unconsciously covering his right ear.

"Dean! Dean, answer me, boy!"

Dean started as the bathroom door opened, Sam entering the room scrubbing at his hair with a limp gray towel that looked like it had seen several hundred too many washes.

He stopped when he caught the terrified expression on his brother's face; saw the cell phone abandoned on the carpet; heard his father's agitated voice, *"Dean! Son,*

are you hurt? Talk to me, dammit!

Sam met Dean's wide-eyed stare uncertainly. "Dean, it's okay. It's just –"
"That's him!" Dean cut him off, pointing urgently at the phone with a shaking hand. "That's the – the yellow-eyed guy. The one from the cabin. The one who – who –"

Suddenly, Sam understood completely.
He held out a placating hand to Dean, reaching down for the phone and putting it cautiously to his ear.

"Dean! Dean!"

"Dad, it's okay. It's Sam."

Dean looked up at his brother, the confusion obvious in his eyes.

His brother was talking to the *demon*...

"Yeah, Dad," Sam continued, not breaking eye contact with Dean. "It's okay. Dean's fine. We're both fine. Dean's just having some – uh – memory issues. No, it's okay, we're handling it. No, we're – Dad it's fine. Really. I'll – I'll call you back later. I swear, I'll explain everything. But right now I gotta go okay? Okay. Yeah."

Sam closed the phone, for a second just standing there, eyes locked with Dean's.

"That was him," Dean reiterated finally, scooting back a little on the bed, as if to put some distance between himself and Sam. Or between himself and the voice on the other end of the phone. "From the cabin. From my dream –"

"Dean." Sam took a breath. "Listen to me. Back at the cabin – what happened... It wasn't just a bad dream, okay? That really happened. And, yeah, that was the yellow-eyed demon – Haris – doing that to us. But the form he took – when he was – when he was hurting you? That was our dad. That was our dad *possessed* by Haris. You understand the difference? He kidnapped him – drugged him. Waited for us to rescue him while all the time he was inside of him, just waiting for his chance. Waiting for his chance to get to us. You understand what I'm saying?"

Dean just blinked at him.

"That was our *dad* on the phone just now."

"He – he's the *demon*?"

Sam shook his head, momentarily wrong-footed by Dean's confused question. "God, no!" he burst out. "Haris got out of Dad when I shot him with the Colt. Remember?"

Dean frowned, clearly not remembering at all. "You shot our *dad*?"

Sam shrugged. "Coulda been worse. Dad wanted me to kill him."

"Confused" didn't even begin to describe the expression on Dean's face. "So – so it wasn't really our dad," he said slowly, as if trying to work the whole story out for himself. "It wasn't our dad who – who said that stuff to – to us? Who hurt us? It wasn't him. It was the demon inside of him?"

Sam nodded.

"So – so he wasn't a demon when you were a baby? When he told me to take you outside, to get you away from the fire?"

Sam shook his head. "No. He was just our dad then."

"He was different."

"Before he was possessed? Well, yeah, of course he was –"

"No." Dean shook his head, eyes drifting off into the middle-distance. "Before the fire."

Sam hung his head a little and stared at his uncomfortably shuffling feet. "I don't know, Dean. I never knew him before the fire."

Their eyes met, and a difficult silence followed.

"I need to remember that," Dean said finally. "For both of us."

Sam nodded slightly.

"I –" Dean continued awkwardly. "I dreamed that that yellow-eyed bastard – Haris? I dreamed he killed women – lots of women – because of me. Because I wouldn't do something maybe...?"

"Yea-ah," Sam said slowly, lowering himself down onto Dean's bed until he was sitting shoulder to shoulder with his brother. "You kinda got possessed too."

Dean's eyes widened to such an extent he wouldn't have looked out of place in a Japanese cartoon. "By Haris?"

"No," Sam shook his head. "By one of his 'kids.' But it couldn't possess you. Not completely."

"Why not?"

Sam inclined his head toward Dean's amulet. "Because of that thing. It protected you. Haris wanted you to give it to him but you wouldn't."

Dean looked down at the charm hanging unassumingly around his neck. "What's so special about this thing?"

Sam scratched his head, shrugging. "Dad was never too clear on that," he said. "But he – uh – 'volunteered' you to this old geezer by the name of Shadrack Mann to be the amulet's 'Guardian'. Crazy old coot. He said he kept an eye on artifacts like the amulet. Made sure they were protected, that they didn't fall into the wrong hands." He looked up from the amulet to Dean's slightly disbelievingly face. "He said as long as you protected the amulet, the amulet would protect you."

"Protect me from what?"

Sam shrugged again. "Possession. I guess. For starters. Although you almost died once when someone tried to steal it."

"This thing?" Dean glanced down again, the look of disbelief on his face in danger of becoming permanent. "Why would anyone want to steal *this* ugly ass thing?"

Another shrug. "You got me. Never really did get to the bottom of that one."

"And I nearly *died*?"

"Er, yeah." Sam looked up quickly. "So – uh – don't take it off. Like *ever*, okay? That would be bad."

Dean nodded earnestly, fingers unconsciously straying to the amulet, and it was one of the few times Sam could ever remember his brother speechless.

"All I know," Sam continued, "is that Shadrack Mann chose you to be Guardian of the amulet, and it was a really big deal as far as he was concerned." His brow furrowed slightly. "It's kind of unusual, I guess. From what I've read, artifacts like this usually get passed down within families, although the old codger did make some comment about your 'lineage' which didn't really seem to make much sense at the time..."

"Family heirloom," Dean suddenly muttered, his eyes unfocused and distant, almost as if he was looking at something inside of himself, fingers still wrapped tightly around the amulet.

Sam arched an eyebrow quizzically. "No," he began to explain slowly. "Not from our family anyway..."

"That's not what I mean." Dean shook his head. "That's not –" He frowned, gazing so intently at the carpet Sam thought it might instantaneously burst into flames right there in front of him. "I remember..." He trailed off, wiping the back of his hand across his eyes uncertainly.

Sam edged a little closer. "What? What do you remember, Dean?"

Dean looked up. "I'm not sure," he admitted, focus returning to the here and now, to his brother. "A voice. In my head, maybe? Someone – *something* – complaining. About 'that damned family heirloom'..." He looked down at the amulet, fingers still clutching at the warm metal. "I think maybe – maybe it was talking about this

thing.”

Sam frowned, inclining his head slightly so that he could better look at his brother. “Who was talking about it?”

“I – I don’t know.” Dean rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand in frustration. “In my head. It was a voice in my head. Wouldn’t leave me alone. Kept telling me to give in, to give up, to let go. And I – I wouldn’t.” It was suddenly as if a lightbulb came on behind his eyes. “That’s why that yellow-eyed freak was killing those women. Wasn’t it?” Dean fixed Sam with a hard stare. “Wasn’t it?”

Sam swallowed, nodding reluctantly. “That was when you were possessed. Half-possessed.” He shrugged. “That must be the demon’s voice you’re remembering. What it was thinking maybe.” He met Dean’s uncertain gaze, intrigued. “It was pissed off with you. You wouldn’t give it what it wanted – you wouldn’t give it control. It could hear what you were thinking, but probably didn’t realize it was a two-way street.” He put an encouraging hand on Dean’s shoulder, squeezing slightly. “This could be it, man. This could be the whole reason this is happening.”

Dean squinted sideways at him. “How d’you figure that?”

“Well,” Sam reasoned, “you’ve always said you don’t believe in random coincidences. What are the odds of Haris *not* being responsible for your losing your memory just as we’re investigating two people who were possibly killed by him or one of his minions? What if Haris *planned* this? What if this was a set up all along? What if he *wanted* you to lose your memory? Wanted you to forget something?”

“About the amulet? What the demon let slip when it didn’t think I could hear it?”

Sam shrugged. “Who knows?”

“But – ‘family heirloom.’ What the hell does that mean anyway?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. Maybe that’s not what he wanted you to forget. But it’s significant. Somehow. I know it is. I’m almost positive of it.”

Dean sighed heavily, rising to his feet and beginning to pace restlessly. “You’re reaching, Sammy,” he said at length. “And don’t think I don’t appreciate it ‘cause I do –”

“Dean –”

“But you can’t always make sense out of everything. Not everything happens for a reason. Maybe this *was* just random bad luck on my part and I’m gonna be Mr. Swiss Cheese Memory for the rest of my life –”

“No.” Sam jumped purposefully to his feet, stilling Dean’s pacing by placing a firm hand on either of his brother’s shoulders. “This is progress. I’m sure of it. You’re getting somewhere. It’s just a matter of time –”

“– Until I Leap outta here?” Dean grinned sheepishly and Sam raised an eyebrow.

“Sam *Beckett*. You remember *Sam Beckett* and you don’t remember *Sam Winchester*?”

Dean matched Sam’s expression perfectly. “Captain of the Starship Enterprise, right?”

Sam sniggered, slapping the back of Dean’s head as he pulled away. “Ass.”

“Hey I’m pretty sure that little maneuver’s a patented Big Brother Only privilege, kiddo,” Dean grouched, batting Sam’s hand away playfully.

Sam turned, suddenly snagging his jacket from over the back of the chair near the door. “I lied,” he said, a definite glint in his eye. “*I’m* actually the older brother.”

“Bull,” Dean replied shortly. “These boyish good looks might fool most people, but no way you changed my diapers, Junior.”

Sam wrinkled his nose. “Okay, you got me,” he admitted. “And – ew! Thanks so much for *that* mental image. I think I’m scarred for life.”

He began shrugging into his jacket and Dean frowned. “We going somewhere?”

“Library,” Sam replied decisively. “Can’t find squat on the Medinas here. And if Haris really was involved in all of this somehow – killing them, zapping you – then I’m starting to get a really bad feeling about Alyssa’s involvement in all of this.”

Dean nodded. “Like maybe she’s *not* the damsel in distress we initially thought she was?”

“Exactly,” Sam agreed. “Haris has turned his ‘kids’ before.” He dipped his head slightly. “I think that’s kinda the plan, actually.”

He averted his eyes from his brother’s, and Dean returned Sam’s earlier gesture, placing an encouraging hand on each of the younger boy’s shoulders. “Your head starts spinning any time soon I’ll be sure to let you know.”

Sam laughed hollowly. “Gee, thanks man.”

“That’s what big brothers are for, right?”

* * * *

“So what’s wrong?” Sam asked as he pointed the Impala in the general direction of Phoenix’s main public library and hit the gas.

Dean glanced sideways at him. “You mean aside from not knowing who the hell I am and what I’m supposed to be doing with my life?”

Sam sniggered caustically. “Some might say you had that problem before you lost your memory, dude.”

“Hilarious,” Dean grit out. “I’d obviously forgotten my geek kid brother was a comedian.”

Sam grinned brightly before continuing. “What I actually meant was that every time we’ve gotten in the car since your – er – mishap, you’ve been singing that weird song. But not this time. So what’s wrong?”

Dean shrugged. “I dunno. Weird dream I guess.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

The look on Dean’s face clearly indicated that no, he did *not* want to talk about it, but the look on Sam’s face clearly indicated he *did*.

Dean might not remember much about Sam, but he had enough of an autonomic response to the puppy dog eyes currently blinking appealingly in his direction to know that there was no way he *wasn’t* talking about this right now.

Dean sighed – loudly and obviously. “Some of the dreams I’ve been having – y’know, *since*? They’ve been kinda whacked.”

“Whacked how?”

“Pretty lady on the ceiling on fire whacked.”

“Yeah. Kind of a running theme in our family.”

“Well, in the middle of all that, there’s been the yellow-eyed guy at the cabin –”

“Dad.”

“– And the same guy, only younger, giving me a baby and telling me to run away from the fire.”

“Me.”

“And then her.”

Sam cast Dean a sidelong glance. “Her?”

Dean swallowed. “Mom, I guess.”

“On – on the ceiling?”

Dean looked down at his hands. “Did I see her like that?” he asked awkwardly, studiously looking anywhere but at Sam. “Did I see her on the ceiling?”

“I don’t – I don’t think so. At least, you never said...”

“But I’m dreaming it,” Dean insisted. “And then – when she’s looking down at me

– from the ceiling – she’s – she’s *singing*.”

“Singing?”

“That song. Like – like a lullaby.”

“So that’s what you meant before? When you said you thought she used to sing that to you?”

Dean nodded minutely. “I think maybe she used to sing me to sleep with it.”

Sam stared straight ahead for a good few seconds, barely even aware of the road in front of him. “Sometimes I forget,” he murmured eventually. “That you were just a kid once.”

“I don’t remember.”

“No,” Sam said, a trace of regret in his voice. “I don’t think you ever did.”

Dean just looked at him, not sure what to make of that.

“Anyway,” Sam seemed to mentally shake himself. “The lullaby. You remember any of the lyrics? I mean, I thought I heard you singing it in your sleep earlier, but I couldn’t make out any of the words.”

“I *sing* in my sleep?” Dean asked incredulously.

Sam nodded. “Oh yeah. Even before all this happened.”

Dean shook his head. “I must be one weird puppy.”

“No argument here. So. The lyrics?”

Dean scratched his head thoughtfully, closing his eyes for a second as he tried to remember. “I dunno. Something – something about a – a cowboy. Maybe. Riding off into the sunset or the night or something.”

“You know,” Sam began, suddenly breaking off to swear under his breath as he almost missed the turn for the library, “that’s the second time you’ve mentioned a cowboy since you – since you got –”

“Whammied?” Dean supplied.

“Exactly,” Sam agreed. “You said something about a cowboy yesterday too.”

Dean frowned. “Maybe I just watched one too many John Wayne movies when I was a kid.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Sam smiled slightly, a sudden nagging memory beginning to tug at the edges of his consciousness.

“I think this is it,” Dean said suddenly, indicating the large copper-colored building helpfully labeled “Phoenix Public Library” that Sam had just driven straight by.

Sam swore again, abruptly swerving the Impala into a nearby parking space, much to the annoyance of the guy in the white van behind him who chose to make some rather obscene hand gestures out of his window to register his protest at Sam’s lack of signaling.

“Wow, people are testy around here,” Dean observed as Sam threw the car into park and shut off the engine.

“I think you’ll find that’s pretty much a global phenomenon,” Sam replied, snagging his laptop bag and notebook from off the back seat and shoving open his door. One long leg was out onto the pavement before he noticed Dean wasn’t moving.

“Hey,” he said, gently nudging his brother with a bony elbow. “You with me?”

Dean shifted uncomfortably, glancing over at the bustling edifice of the library, at the steady stream of people flowing in and out of the main doors. “Mind if I sit this one out?” he asked. “Feeling kinda claustrophobic. Or anti-social. Or some damn thing.”

Sam nodded understandingly. “No problem. I could be a while though. Think you’ll be okay?”

Dean shrugged, inclining his head down toward the radio. “I got entertainment.”

Sam nodded again, making sure he left the keys in the ignition. “Don’t drain the battery,” he instructed his brother, before laughing at himself ironically. “Jeez, I sound

more like you than you do right now.”

Dean threw him a sideways grin. “That’s a bad thing?” he asked, mock offence in his tone.

Sam snorted as he hauled himself up out of the car. “You have no idea.” He straightened, before suddenly bending down again and looking back in at his brother. “Listen, you call me if you need anything, huh?”

Dean smirked. “Don’t forget to wind down the window a crack, Mom.”

“Wind down your own damn window,” Sam returned, slamming the door shut and casting one last look back over his shoulder at his brother before making for the library, the strains of Hawkwind’s *Silver Machine* blasting from the Impala’s radio before he’d even made it to the doors.

It hadn’t taken Dean long to reacquaint himself with his music, Sam thought to himself, shaking his head in something akin to relief. Maybe everything else would come back soon too. Dean just needed time. Everything would be fine. *Dean* would be fine. It was just a matter of time.

He smiled as he entered the cool, blessedly air conditioned library, pausing for a second just to breathe in the familiar smell of old books and wood polish that always seemed to permeate such places.

Glancing about himself to get a lay of the land, he made quick work of using the library’s signage to guide him around the building, in next to no time settling himself at a computer terminal in the Arizona Room, old family records displayed on the screen in front of him and a pencil hovering above an open notebook lying next to the keyboard.

The Medinas were, in every way, unremarkable, and although Sam could find no direct link to confirm they were related to Captain Ernest Medina, their respective relatives had enough places of births, deaths and marriages in common for it not to be the reach he had initially thought it might be.

Flora and Vincent Medina had been childhood sweethearts, both born in Phoenix, both attending the same schools, the same local college. They had married at twenty-two, right after graduation, and Alyssa had been born three years later, their only child.

Sam had often wondered about that: about how most of Haris’ “Special Kids” they had so far encountered had been only children, Sam himself being the exception.

Of course, that was always assuming Alyssa was one of Haris’ little science projects. Even if the Medinas were from one of the cursed families, it didn’t necessarily follow that she had popped up on the yellow-eyed scumbag’s radar.

But the more Sam thought about it, the more it seemed to make sense.

Alyssa had been first on the scene of her parents’ murder; she had access; she had opportunity. But did she have motive? Why kill her own parents? Or had it been Haris who wanted them dead? But for what possible reason?

Unremarkable.

The story of Vincent and Flora Medina’s lives.

Sam’s eyes drifted tiredly away from the computer and he found himself gazing at shelves filled with various local high school yearbooks going back several years. Suddenly it occurred to him that in all of his research – even after having visited the Medinas’ house – he had yet to see a single photograph of Alyssa Medina.

He stood, stretching his legs and his back as he ambled over to the stack, easily locating Alyssa’s high school and running his fingers over the spines of the books until he found the correct year.

So far so good.

He pulled the book from the shelf and carried it back to the desk he’d been using, wincing slightly as his phone chose that moment to belt out Switchfoot’s *This Is Your Life*

and cursing himself for forgetting to switch it to vibrate when he first entered the library.

He ducked his head in mute apology as several pairs of eyes suddenly bored holes into his skull, abruptly picking up the call with a quick flick of his finger.

"Dean?" he half-whispered, reclaiming his seat and hunkering down over Alyssa's high school yearbook. "You okay?"

"Dude, I am so bored!" Dean's voice sounded halfway between his usual non-amnesiac self and an antsy ten-year-old. "I know you said you'd be a while, but *man*—!"

"I've been here less than an hour, Dean," Sam cut him off, beginning to flip idly through the yearbook. "And if you think you're bored out there, you'd have been fifty times as bored in here... Although I guess I could have always stuck you in the corner with a nice picture book to keep you occupied. I think I even saw a poster for storytime in the kids' section..."

"Oh, that's funny, Sam," Dean huffed. "Make fun of the amnesiac's mental capacity."

"Dude, your mental capacity is exactly the same as it's always been."

There was a slight pause while Dean tried to figure out whether he'd just been insulted or not. "College boy," he finally muttered under his breath, as if that were the ultimate rejoinder, and Sam couldn't help grinning, if only because Dean had actually *remembered* he'd been a college boy once.

"You think you can occupy yourself a little longer?" Sam asked at length.

"Aw man, the radio reception here *sucks*," Dean whined. "I've played every dumb game on my cell phone until my eyes feel like they're bleeding, and people keep *looking* at me like maybe I'm a perv watching little girls going in and out of the library."

"Are you?"

"Watching or a perv?"

"Either."

"I think they were university students."

"Nice to see you've remembered some of your favorite pastimes there, Dean."

"Saaaaaam! C'mon, man! You nearly finished or what?"

Sam smiled to himself, trying not to let himself get too hopeful as more little pieces of Dean gradually began to surface. His big brother had *always* been the impatient one, even when they were kids. "Yeah, yeah. I'm nearly done."

"Thank God, 'cause I think I'm gonna die of boredom if you leave me out here much longer, I swear!"

"Um-hmm." Sam was only half-listening to his brother's ceaseless chatter now that he had assured himself he was alright, flipping through the photographs of hopeful, smiling teenagers, all gazing into the camera with their whole lives laid out in front of them like a Sunday picnic.

Sam had never gotten to see his yearbook photo...

"Oh hey, it's Maisie!" Dean said suddenly, drawing at least a little of Sam's attention back to his brother. "I wonder what she's doing here? Maisie! Hey, Maisie!"

Sam pulled the phone away from his ear as his brother shouted the girl's name, shaking his head as he reflected that even without his memory Dean was still just a little bit slutty. "How do you even remember what she looks like?" he asked casually, flipping through another couple of pages.

"I don't know," Dean replied, sounding genuinely nonplussed. "Maybe because she was the last thing I saw before... And, y'know, 'cause she's hot... Hey Maisie!"

Sam yanked the phone away from his ear again, pleased that Dean had a distraction, even as his eyes lit on the name beneath a photograph of a rather plump blonde girl wearing big purple glasses and a smile containing more metal than Metallica's tour bus.

Maisie Malone.

"Wait a second..." Sam double checked, triple checked, suddenly sitting bolt upright, his phone jammed right up against his ear. "Dean, is Maisie with you right now?" he demanded, voice trembling in time with the sudden loud thudding in his chest. "Dean!"

Maybe Dean hadn't caught the urgency in his brother's voice over the tinny phone line, or maybe he was just too busy flirting. Whatever the reason, he merely murmured, "Yeah, she's right here," before directing his attention to the girl in question. "Hey Maisie! Remember me? 'Cause I actually seem to remember you for some reason..."

"Dean, stay in the car," Sam ordered firmly, as he feverishly continued searching the pages of the yearbook. "Dean? You hear me?"

"Huh?" Dean replied, obviously distracted, the unmistakable creak of the Impala's passenger door swinging open squeaking down the phone line.

"Dean, stay in the car, okay?" Sam was half-yelling now, oblivious to the disapproving glares of the library's other users.

"Sam, it's just Maisie –"

"She's not Maisie."

Sam stared down at the photograph, eyes locked with those of the girl looking back up at him from the page, dark brown curls falling around her shoulders, full lips drawn into an alluring smile.

Alyssa Medina.

Sam felt simultaneously hot and cold all over, gooseflesh prickling up his bare forearms. Alyssa wasn't staying with relatives in New Mexico: Alyssa had never left Phoenix.

Means and opportunity: there were no signs of forced entry into the Medina house because Alyssa had been there all the time, already inside when her parents had been killed. Alyssa had been right there because it had been Alyssa who had killed them – Alyssa who had slaughtered them – Alyssa who had attacked Dean.

Alyssa who was outside with Sam's unsuspecting big brother right now.

"Dean, stay in the car and lock the doors!" Sam yelled, forgetting the yearbook, forgetting his notes, forgetting his laptop as he almost knocked the desk over in his urgency to get to his brother. "Dean!" Running for the stairs, boots pounding on metal and concrete. "Dean! Don't let her in the car!" Two flights down and running for the exit. "Dean! You hear me? Don't let her touch you, Dean! Don't let her near you! She's Alyssa! Dean, she's Alyssa, she's the one who hurt you! And I think she's come back to finish the job! Dean! You hear me? DEAN!"

PART FOUR

Sam's fists slammed into the glass door, his feet pounding on concrete as he abruptly exited the coolness of the library and emerged into the full glare of Phoenix's merciless sun.

He blinked in the bright sunlight, slightly disoriented by the sudden change in brightness and temperature, his cell phone still pressed to his ear to an almost painful degree as he continued to scream, "Dean! Stay in the car! Don't let her near you!" over and over with no hint of a response from his brother.

Eyes frantically scanning the parking spaces in front the library, unable to get his brain to remember where the hell he'd left the Impala in his panicked state, his eyes suddenly lit upon the big black Chevy parked on the opposite side of the street, exactly where he'd left it.

"Dean...!"

Sam wasn't sure whether to yell into the phone or across the street to where he could clearly see his brother standing with one foot out of the Impala, leaning casually on the open door, his cell phone nowhere in sight as he grinned suggestively at the shapely brunette approaching him on the sidewalk, like a tiger stalking her unwitting prey.

Maisie – no, Alyssa – was barely six feet away from him.

Sam's heart almost stopped beating right there as he caught the flirtatious timbre of his brother's voice, even though he couldn't make out exactly what he was saying, the approaching girl smiling coyly in response to whatever line Dean had used on her.

"Dean!" Sam yelled, tearing straight into the road without a single thought for traffic as Alyssa reached out and began to close the narrowing gap between herself and his brother. "Dean, don't let her touch you!"

A squeal of brakes and a furiously honked horn had Sam stopping in his tracks inches from the front bumper of a shiny silver Chrysler PT Cruiser, and Dean finally turning in his brother's direction, equal amounts of confusion and concern etched onto his face.

"Sam...?"

Something altered ever-so-slightly in Alyssa's eyes, her expression twitching at the sight of the younger Winchester, hand reaching for Dean's arm even as Sam charged toward them, narrowly avoiding several more exasperated motorists as he weaved between the inexorably moving lines of traffic.

"Dean, get away from her!" Sam fairly screamed, reaching behind him to grab his concealed 9mm even as Alyssa's fingers grazed the fabric of Dean's shirt sleeve.

Covering the last few feet to his brother's side at a flat out sprint, Sam brought the gun up to shoulder height whilst still running, aiming it right between Alyssa's eyes and fairly growling, "Get away from him you bitch!"

Alyssa's face smoothed consciously from a grimace to a triumphant leer as she made to clasp her hand around Dean's wrist, but her moment of glory was snatched away from her as Sam skidded to a stop between them, grabbing his brother's arm and yanking him right out of the Impala and almost completely off his feet as he tugged him backwards, shoved him roughly behind him and raised himself up to his full more-than-imposing height in front of Alyssa, the Glock still pointed right between her eyes.

"Sam, what the *hell*...?" Dean began to protest, but was silenced by Sam's thrusting the gun even closer to Alyssa's forehead and quite literally baring his teeth at her.

"You touch my brother again and I'll drop you so fast you'll be on the express elevator to hell before your brain even finishes splattering across the sidewalk," Sam

promised, the 9mm rock steady in his right hand as he tightened his grip on Dean's upper arm with his left.

"Jeez, no need to go all Ripley on me, Sam," Alyssa said, hands raised in apparent surrender as her eyes flooded with calculated mock innocence. "What the hell did I do to get you so riled up anyway?"

She took a half-step toward him, but Sam merely pressed the muzzle of the handgun right up against her forehead.

"I swear to God, you take one step closer to him and I'll end you."

And Sam meant it. Alyssa had little doubt about that.

The girl smiled sweetly, artfully turning a helplessly pleading glance in the direction of the growing number of alarmed-looking passersby, a couple of whom, although they carried on walking, heads down, eyes to the sidewalk, at least pulled out their cell phones, presumably to dial 911.

Sam's attention never even wavered, the Glock still steady in his hand as Alyssa, satisfied someone was at least calling the cops, turned a sickly sweet smile in his direction.

"Sam...?" Dean spoke the name as a question, frozen by the icy determination of Sam's protective stance.

"Did you kill them?" Sam demanded suddenly, eyes boring right into Alyssa's. "Your own parents? Huh? Alyssa?"

The girl's smile faltered ever-so-slightly.

"Alyssa?" Dean echoed. "*She's* Alyssa?"

"Sam, I don't know what you're talking about!" The girl was all innocent confusion, hands still raised helplessly as she glanced again to the various shocked passersby for help. "I'm not Alyssa! I told you! I'm *Maisie!*"

There was a spark in her eyes that totally ruined her feigned sincerity gig, and Sam merely ground out, "I saw your picture. In your high school yearbook? You're not Maisie Malone, you're Alyssa Medina."

The girl giggled nervously, Sam suspected for the benefit of the bystanders dialing the cops on anxiously-held cell phones, as she already knew Sam could see straight through her. "Oh *that!*" she burst out, for all the world sounding as casual as she would discussing her new manicure with her girlfriends. "That was a joke! Alyssa and I were on the yearbook committee – we switched photographs just to see whether anyone would notice!"

"Miss?" One of the cell phone heroes had mustered up the courage to take a hesitant step toward her, holding up the handset as if it might magically protect him should Sam decide to aim any bullets in his direction. "Do – do you need help?" He chanced a quick glance at Sam, squaring his shoulders slightly. "I already called the cops."

Alyssa didn't even look at the man, eyes still fixed intently on Sam's. "It's okay," she assured him calmly. "It's all a big misunderstanding. Right Sam?"

Sam took a breath, finally breaking away from his intense staring match with Alyssa to sweep his gaze around the growing number of concerned onlookers, many of whom had now stopped and appeared to be moving to stand behind the guy with the cell phone.

"All a misunderstanding," Alyssa – Maisie? – repeated soothingly.

The Glock dropped a couple of inches as Sam began to realize the magnitude of the situation he'd fallen into here. What if it really was all a misunderstanding? What if she really was Maisie? He heard distant sirens and swallowed hard, moving to put the safety back on the 9mm just as Dean suddenly burst out,

"You were in the picture."

Alyssa blinked at him, and Sam inclined his head slightly. "What picture?"
"There was a picture – a photograph," Dean began to explain, voice trembling slightly. "Before the – the flash of light." He smoothed his palm over his hair, thinking hard, trying, *willing* himself to remember.

"*Before?*" Sam repeated.

Dean nodded. "The dead couple. The Medinas. They were in the picture. With – with –" he jerked his head at the girl opposite. "With *her*. That's the last thing I remember: thinking she wasn't who she said she was. Thinking she was *Alyssa* –"

The sound of sarcastic applause drew the brothers' attention back to the brunette in front of them, who was smirking derisively. "Well done, boys!" she said. "Score one to the Winchesters!"

Sam twitched his neck. "You knew who we were all along didn't you?" he accused her. "This was a set up from the start."

Alyssa shrugged dismissively. "Had to get you boys here somehow."

"By killing you *parents?*"

"Hey, I knew you two would never be able to resist a locked room mystery with a supernatural twist to keep you occupied."

Sam shook his head in disgusted disbelief. "That's why you killed your own parents?" he reiterated. "Just to lure us here?"

"Seemed the easiest way," Alyssa explained casually. "And I'm all for easy. They were expendable. Your old friend Haris? *He's* my father now."

Sam felt his knees weaken at the girl's casual reference to the demon; at her casual acceptance of him as her master; at her casual slaughter of her own parents as *bait*. Just to get the Winchesters to Phoenix. "What does he want?" he demanded, trying to collect his thoughts, trying not to sound as completely freaked out as he felt. "What does he want with *Dean*? Why destroy his memory?"

Alyssa laughed coldly. "You think this is the part where I pull off my mask and divulge to you my evil plan? *And I would have gotten away with it too, if it hadn't been for you meddling kids...*" She snorted. "This ain't *Scooby-Doo*, Sam. All I know is I had a job to do. And I'm going to finish it." She looked pointedly at Dean. "I got my orders, just like you boys."

Sam grimaced, his abhorrence of Alyssa's thoughtless actions for a second clouding his judgment. Was this Haris' plan? For all of his "special" children? To turn them into murderous, unfeeling monsters?

Was this his plan for *Sam*?

"You're coming with us," he said decisively, lowering the gun and making a grab for Alyssa's arm.

But the girl was fast.

Before Sam quite knew what had happened, she had somehow sidestepped him and was making a lunge for Dean, long fingers grabbing for his arm just as Sam regained his senses, merely shoving his brother out of the way before again placing himself firmly between the two of them, gun again aimed at Alyssa's head.

"Don't make me do this," he warned her, unprepared for the sudden malicious grin she turned up toward him as her hand clamped down hard on his forearm.

"Say goodnight, Sam," she hissed, as Sam staggered back slightly, steeling himself for the inevitable flash of light and unconscious oblivion. "You should have given in to him. You should have let him have his wicked way." Her fingers tightened on his arm and her eyes flashed pure malevolence; hatred; *death*. "Now neither of you will live to regret it!"

She closed her eyes, fingers digging into Sam's flesh, and for a moment, he found himself almost relieved. Maybe this was it. Maybe this was how he was

supposed to go out, protecting his brother...

But nothing happened.

Alyssa opened her eyes, her initial frown of confusion rapidly hardening into a scowl of outrage.

And Sam found himself laughing.

"What's the matter, hon?" he asked, grabbing hold of Alyssa's arms and pulling her toward him. "Performance anxiety? Battery needs a recharge?" He lowered his face so that their eyes were level. "Or maybe it just doesn't work on another of Haris' freaks, huh?"

"No," Alyssa hissed through gritted teeth. "This can't be! *You* can't be —!"

"Save it for *Daddy*, sweetheart," Sam spat, sounding unnervingly like Dean at that moment. "'Cause it looks like maybe he made us immune to one another."

For a second the two of them just scowled at each other, until Sam finally realized he could now use his size advantage and began trying to tug the girl toward the Impala.

Which was when Alyssa started screaming.

"Help! Someone help me!"

In the distance, Sam heard sirens and squealing tires, just as Alyssa's theatrical screams of abject terror rapidly changed to desperate cries for assistance and protection as she played to the crowd like a pro.

"Oh God! Someone please help me! He's got a gun! He's going to kill me!"

Glancing over his shoulder as a blue and white rounded the corner, lights flashing and tires screeching, Sam abruptly let go of Alyssa, stuffing the Glock into his front waistband in the hope his shirt would conceal it from the cops as the patrol car skidded to a halt several feet away.

Taking a firm hold on Dean's arm, he began shoving him roughly toward the Impala, urgently hissing, "We gotta go! *Now!*" into his brother's ear as he bundled him into the car.

"Dude!" Dean protested, almost falling into the passenger seat. "Enough with the manhandling! Why don't we just tell the cops what happened? She's a murderer!"

Sam glanced briefly at the two tank-sized police officers currently disembarking their vehicle as if they had all the time in the world, before slamming the Impala's passenger door and sprinting around to the driver's side, virtually throwing himself behind the wheel and tugging his own door shut with a resounding *clang* that almost drowned out the cops' cries of "Stop right there!" and the obligatory "Freeze!"

"Because you're kinda wanted for murder yourself, Dean," Sam finally replied to Dean's question, gunning the engine and throwing the Impala into reverse before hastily slamming his foot against the accelerator.

Dean blinked at him, a slow grin breaking out on his face. "No way! Cool!" he burst out, bracing himself against the dashboard as the Impala's tires protested Sam's sudden shift into drive, squealing as they left most of their rubber behind on the pavement when Sam hit the gas and took off down the street like the proverbial bat out of hell.

"Please don't follow us," Sam muttered a silent prayer through clenched teeth, eyes flicking to the rearview mirror as the cops scrambled back to their vehicle, obviously having decided that discharging their weapons in the middle of a crowded street might not win them too many friends back at the station house.

Sam swerved around a sudden corner before the lumbering police officers had even gotten back into their car, speeding down a side street and praying he could find somewhere big enough to hide a rather conspicuous jet black 1967 Chevrolet Impala in the middle of downtown Phoenix.

"There!" Dean burst out suddenly, pointing to an underground parking garage not far ahead of them.

Sam followed Dean's direction gratefully, breathing an unconsciously-held sigh of relief as he skidded the big car slightly in his efforts to hide it as quickly as possible.

He took the car down three floors before finally daring to park, the sudden silence as he killed the engine almost deafening.

"Hear any sirens?" he asked nervously.

Dean shook his head before clarifying, "So I'm a wanted murdered and you're – what? A part-time Nascar driver?"

"You didn't kill anyone Dean," Sam assured him. "It was a shapeshifter who just looked like you."

Dean nodded calmly. "Of course it was," he commented with a dismissive shrug. "Why would I think anything different?"

"And if it helps any, you're also legally dead."

Dean just looked at him. "I'm starting to get the impression we're not exactly normal, Sam."

"That would be a pretty fair assessment," Sam confirmed, nodding slowly.

"Anything else you'd like to share? Maybe you were Marilyn Monroe in a former life?"

Sam snorted. "Not that I know of. White never was my color."

Dean shook his head, for a moment wondering when he was going to wake up and this would all turn out to be an incredibly vivid nightmare.

"Crap!" Sam suddenly spat, causing Dean to jump a couple of inches off the bench seat.

"What?"

"I gotta go back to the library."

Dean's eyebrows almost shot off his head. "You *what?*"

"I left my computer. And all my notes. And –" Sam faltered, patting down his pockets as the color drained from his face. "My wallet and ID."

Dean shook his head. "I thought you were supposed to be the smart one?"

"And I thought you were about to be brain-fried again."

They both sighed simultaneously, neither one looking at the other until Dean finally said, "I'll go."

Sam turned stunned eyes onto him. "What? No way!"

"Dude, I get that you're trying to look out for me –"

"I'm just trying to protect you, Dean –"

"Oh really, 'cause I hadn't noticed the way you kept shoving me out of the way like a little girl while you got all Rambo in Alyssa's face."

Sam sunk into his seat, arms across his chest sullenly. "Yeah, well I learned from the best," he muttered.

"Look," Dean continued. "You're the girlie-haired giant with the big gun the cops are gonna be looking for. You stay here with this oh-so-inconspicuous ride of yours –"

"Yours. She's your car."

"Whatever," Dean said dismissively. "I'll go back to the library, grab your stuff and be back here in twenty minutes."

"What if someone recognizes you?"

"Dude, I'll blend into the crowd."

"You're kidding right?"

"I can blend!"

"Dean, in case you haven't noticed you're about as inconspicuous as your car," Sam told him. "One thing you do not do is blend into a crowd."

“But I’m not six foot nineteen and don’t look like I could leap tall buildings in a single bound,” Dean returned. “Although I’d seriously have to kick your ass if you started wearing your underwear on the outside.” He frowned slightly. “You don’t, do you? Huh, Clark?”

“If I’m Clark Kent then you’re Lois Lane,” Sam grouched, although a tiny glimmer of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Now go get my laptop already.”

* * * *

So. This could be a good thing, Dean told himself, edging around the corner of the street and scanning the activity around the library. No cop cars. No crowd of interested onlookers. No patrol officers canvassing for witnesses.

Huh.

A little street drama and life goes on.

Keeping a wary eye out for enthusiastic cops – or, more importantly, Alyssa – Dean crossed the street as nonchalantly as he was able, considering he’d just been involved in what may, to the casual observer, have looked like an attempted kidnapping, entering the library and gazing up at about three million different signs all pointing him in three million different directions.

How the hell was he supposed to find the freakin’ Arizona Room in amongst all that information overload?

“Excuse me?”

The pretty redhead behind the information desk looked up, welcoming smile broadening considerably when she beheld the person addressing her.

“Oh hi. Can I help you?” She straightened her black-framed glasses and unconsciously tugged at the hem of her shirt.

“Er, yeah,” Dean replied, wondering whether he always had this effect on women. “Arizona Room?”

The girl pointed up the nearby flight of stairs with a pencil she’d magically plucked from the back of her hair. “Second floor,” she informed him, smiling a little more at him.

Okay. Obviously this strange power he apparently had over women might come in useful.

“Thanks,” he said, flashing the million dollar smile, before adding casually, “So, what was going on outside earlier? Some guy with a gun...?”

“Oh,” the girl drew in a breath, wilting slightly. “It was all some big hoax apparently.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “A hoax?”

“Yeah. I heard it was a group of kids from the university. Some kind of sociology experiment.”

“With cops involved?”

“Yeah, apparently this guy pretended to threaten a girl with a fake gun in the middle of a crowded street just to see whether anyone would help her or whether they’d all just walk on by –”

“My boyfriend called the cops,” a blonde girl standing further down the desk browsing the floor guide on the wall suddenly put in proudly. “The girl told him she’d include his name in their paper.”

“Oh she did, huh?” Dean said. “The girl who had the gun pointed at her?”

The girlfriend nodded. “She told the cops the same thing.”

“Oh yeah?” Dean raised an eyebrow. “And what did the cops say?”

The girlfriend looked slightly crestfallen. “I think they arrested her. Wasting police time or something.”

Dean tried to hide the smile tugging at his lips. “Really?”

Girlfriend nodded. “Uh-huh,” she confirmed. “Can’t believe her classmate just drove off and left her —”

“I heard there were two of them,” the library girl interjected. “Boys, I mean. One lady who came in here said they were kinda hot —” She giggled a little, and Girlfriend nodded enthusiastically.

“Oh yeah!” she agreed excitedly, stepping a little closer to Library Girl. “Although I only really saw the tall one. He was dreamy! Didn’t really see the short one.”

Dean bit back the instinct to yell, “Hey, I’m six foot and freakin’ change, lady!”, instead opting to take the opportunity of escaping the conversation while Girlfriend was still expanding on the really tall guy’s gorgeous eyes.

Eesh.

Even when Sam was waving a gun around at seemingly innocent young ladies he could attract the chicks.

Maybe it was the “bad boy” thing, Dean mused. Although, even with his admittedly almost non-existent memory of his kid brother, he was pretty sure Sam couldn’t really be described as a “bad boy.” Even holding a 9mm pointed at the head of a memory-stealing bitch like Alyssa.

Slipping away and up the stairs, it didn’t take him long to locate the Arizona Room, Sam’s computer, bag, notes and jacket all, miraculously, exactly where he’d described leaving them.

Either the residents of Phoenix were an incredibly scrupulous bunch or Sam had just been very, very lucky.

Scooping Sam’s stuff into the laptop bag, he paused at the sight of Alyssa’s face smiling up at him from the still-open yearbook, shuddering slightly as that half-memory of the shattered picture frame on the Medinas’ floor swam slowly into focus behind his eyes.

“*Wait a second,*” he’d said, turning to confront the girl he’d thought was Maisie Malone with the fact that she was in a photograph with the Medinas, just as a bright light sapped every thought in his head and he’d woken up not knowing who he was.

Goddamn. He should have learned his lesson never to trust hot chicks.

But she’d pay. He’d make her pay.

And he’d make her fix him.

Somehow...

Rest Stop Motel, Phoenix, AZ

“So Alyssa got arrested?” Sam didn’t even attempt to smother an evil snicker. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer person.”

Dean silently nodded his agreement, leaning back against his headboard and closing his eyes as if he was going to sleep. But instead he asked, “But why? Why didn’t she turn us in? Why make up that whole ‘school experiment’ story?”

Sam looked across from the table where he was going over the notes he’d made at the library. “Beats me,” he said, trying to resist the urge to approach Dean’s bed and check for the hundredth time that day that he was okay, the little scowl of frustrated concentration twisting his brother’s face creating a knot of concern in the pit of Sam’s stomach.

Dean was trying to remember something.

Anything.

"Maybe she's not done with us," Dean said calmly, eyes still closed, oblivious to Sam's sudden urge to mother hen him. "You heard what she said: she's not finished the job yet."

"Whatever her 'job' might be."

Sam continued to watch his brother in silence, the older boy's foot unconsciously beginning to tap out a distinct rhythm against the bed.

Sam frowned. "Dean?"

Dean didn't seem to hear him, foot still tapping against the mattress.

"Dean?" Sam repeated a little louder, and his brother's rhythmic movement stilled abruptly.

"Huh?" Dean's eyes snapped open, and for a second Sam wasn't entirely sure he was seeing the motel room at all. He blinked a couple of times, his eyes gradually becoming clearer, more focused. Focused on Sam. "You okay?" he asked suddenly, and Sam nearly laughed at that, at the *Dean-ness* of the question.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, forcing back a grin. "Just plowing through the notes I took at the library."

Dean folded his hands behind his head and gazed up at the moldy ceiling. "Find anything interesting?"

Sam shrugged. "Not really. I couldn't find anything to prove the Medinas actually *were* related to the Captain involved in the My Lai Massacre. But then, I couldn't find anything to prove they *weren't* either. I guess just because Alyssa's one of Haris' 'kids' it doesn't necessarily follow that she has to come from one of the cursed families, right?"

"You're asking me?" Dean's focus drifted back to Sam. "Mr. I Can't Even Remember My Own Brother?"

Sam smiled sadly to himself. "Yeah, okay."

"But if I had to guess," Dean continued, settling back to examine a particularly fascinating patch of greenish-brown mold as if the ceiling were one big Rorschach Test, "I'd think it's a safe bet the Medinas were pretty damned cursed. They got themselves pounded into hamburger meat by their loving daughter, after all."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, absently twirling a pencil around his fingers. "They're certainly unlucky at the very least. That whole 'sins of the fathers' thing would definitely explain them dying the way they did –"

Dean sat up suddenly, all traces of sleepiness or distance gone from his wide eyes. "Sins of the fathers," he repeated intensely. "Someone said that to me –"

"I know, you said earlier –" Sam broke off as Dean suddenly started humming that same freaky lullaby tune, foot tapping out the rhythm against the bed as it had earlier, forehead lined in concentration. "Dean?"

Then there were words. Distinct. Complete.

Remembered.

*Sweet dreams, my love, you've naught to fear,
I'll see you again as the sun appears.
But the moon's alight, and it's time for bed,
Pull the blanket close and lay down your head.*

*A cowboy rides into the night,
In lasting struggle to end his plight.
Charm 'round his neck is safety's hand,
Shielding him from Evil's plans*

Sweet dreams, my love, good night to you,

*And hope aplenty but nightmares few.
Remember now as you close your eyes,
Trust your heart, for it never lies.*

When he'd finished, Dean ducked his head sheepishly, rubbing awkwardly at the back of his neck even as his cheeks colored an unsubtle shade of crimson.

For a frozen second, Sam just stared at him, time spinning out between them until he finally managed to croak out, "You remembered," barely keeping the astonished awe from his voice.

"I told you," Dean said, voice subdued, studiously not looking up, as if the pattern on the carpet was suddenly as interesting as the mold on the ceiling. "Mom used to sing it to me. At night when she put me to bed. Said her – her Gramma Eliza used to sing it to her when she was little."

Sam, still kind of stunned by Dean's even remembering the lullaby, never mind his actually *singing* it, mumbled, "What – what made you remember –?"

"Sins of the fathers," Dean explained, suddenly looking up at Sam with piercing clarity sparkling in his hazel eyes. "Claviger. It was *Claviger* who said that to me before!"

"Claviger?" Sam repeated. "Emmanuel Claviger? The spook who tried to kill you back in Redemption? The –" he stopped suddenly, and the brothers' eyes locked.

"Cowboy," they said in unison.

Dean scooted forward on the bed excitedly, until he was perched right on the edge, leaning forward as he held Sam's confounded gaze. "Sam, he had an amulet like this one!" He looped a finger through the leather necklace. "The 'charm 'round his neck'? Dude! He's the guy in the lullaby! He's the cowboy Mom used to sing to me about!"

"But – but how is that even possible?" Sam stammered, still reeling from Dean's remembering the lullaby *now*, when he couldn't even remember his own name, to fully process how the hell he was able to remember meeting Claviger all those months ago.

"Layla said I was in Redemption for a reason," Dean continued, the faraway look back in his eyes. "Maybe *Claviger* was the reason – not just to – to end him. Maybe I was destined to meet him, y'know? Guardian to Guardian, past to present –"

"Wait," Sam shook his head in non-comprehension. "*Layla*? From Nebraska Layla? The Layla Roy Le Grange couldn't heal?"

Dean met his brother's gaze absently. "Yeah, Layla," he confirmed. "You know another Layla?"

"You *met* her? In *Redemption*?"

Dean blinked. "She was my – my guide, I guess. I think she was destined to be there too – waiting for me. Waiting to help me find Claviger before she could move on. She said everything happens for a reason –"

"Dude. Seriously. *Layla*? Why the hell didn't you tell me about that?"

"I didn't tell you I saw her in Redemption?" Dean sounded genuinely surprised.

"No," Sam confirmed. "Never."

"Why wouldn't I have told you about her?"

"That's a damn good question! And what the hell did she have to do with Claviger?"

"Nothing." Dean twirled the amulet absently. "He was there for me. He was there because of *this*. He called it a 'family heirloom' – just like that demon brat did, the one who tried to possess me but couldn't."

"Like I said," Sam put in, "this kind of artifact is usually handed down from father to son –"

"No," Dean interjected. "Claviger said it was from his mother's side of the family. And when I asked him who he was, he said –" Dean swallowed. "– he said I should ask Mom."

Sam just stared at him for a second. "Mom?"

"Uh-huh."

"And you never thought to tell me any of this?"

"Hey, I only just remembered –"

"Dean."

"Okay, but I don't remember why I wouldn't have told you, man. Okay?"

They sat there in silence for a few seconds, before Sam finally muttered, "You think Mom knew? About the amulet? Seems a pretty big coincidence she happened to sing you a lullaby about the amulet's previous Guardian when you were a kid if she didn't know anything about it."

Dean shrugged. "I dunno, man. She just said her Gramma taught her the song." He stared at Sam for a long moment, as if he wasn't actually seeing him, but was looking at something beyond him. "But that demon... Those same words. 'Damned family heirloom.' I can – I can remember it," he continued, the look in his eyes not quite here and not quite there. "I can remember feeling it inside of me; looking in the mirror and not knowing who was going to be looking back. One day it was beginning to realize it was losing the battle to control me – was beginning to realize it would never completely possess me – and it was becoming more and more furious, more and more pissed off at me, and that's when it let that thought burst out of it – that if it wasn't for that 'damned family heirloom' it would be in charge right now and I'd be doing Haris' bidding like I was supposed to be. Like a good little host. Then the demon had gone quiet – real quiet – just clammed up, as if even thinking what it had just thought was a big mistake, dangerous." He looked up at Sam then. "You were right. I think it let something slip it really shouldn't have let slip."

"The amulet," Sam said breathlessly. "I think maybe it's a little more important than we've given it credit for, even after it stopped you getting possessed."

"And Haris didn't want us to start digging, maybe? Didn't want us to know any more than we already knew? That's why he wanted my memory erased, so I wouldn't remember Claviger, wouldn't remember what the demon let slip. Wouldn't put two and two together."

"And they're the very things you're remembering first," Sam observed. "Almost like – like maybe the amulet *wants* you to remember – Claviger, the demon. The lullaby. I don't think you even knew you still had that buried in your memory somewhere before all this happened, did you? Or it would have come back to you in Redemption, the first time you saw the gunslinger who was wearing your necklace."

Dean frowned. "Wait. The amulet *wants* me to remember?"

Sam shrugged. "Stranger things have happened, man. There's obviously a hell of a lot more to it than a simple protection charm."

"I guess it's a little weird that the only things I'm remembering are the things Haris seems to want me to forget," Dean agreed. "Claviger, some dumb lullaby, what some pansy-ass demon thought about my taste in jewelry. And yet I still don't remember my own name, don't remember Dad, don't remember *you*. Don't remember *Mom* yet I remember her singing me to sleep... I mean, what the hell does *she* have to do with all of this?"

Sam sighed, scratching his hand through his hair. "That I don't know," he admitted, toying with the pencil and glancing back at his laptop. "You know, I did a little research on Claviger back at Black Creek."

"And?"

"He was hanged for murdering some apparently innocent farmer. Maintained right up until his death that the guy was a skinwalker who murdered his wife. Left him with two little boys to raise by himself."

"Sounds familiar," Dean observed, before suddenly asking, "What happened to his kids?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted a little sheepishly. "I guess I got a little sidetracked after Wisconsin – with Haris, his plans. Kidnapping us. Trying to possess you. Trying to kill me... Kinda felt like the End of the World for a while there. Never really did get to the bottom of the whole Claviger deal."

He pulled out the laptop, opened a browser window and began tapping on the keyboard thoughtfully.

Dean stood, moving over to stand behind his brother. "What are you looking for?"

"Claviger," Sam replied shortly, clicking and scrolling through page after page of text faster than Dean could even register what he was looking at. "His family. I had some sites bookmarked but never really got the chance to come back and look at them properly..." He tapped a finger against pursed lips as he settled on one site for longer than a nanosecond.

Dean squinted, recognizing the grainy, sepia-toned photograph at the top of the page. "That's him," he said. "That's Emmanuel Claviger."

Sam nodded, clicking a couple more links before inclining his head slightly. "He had two sons," he said. "John and James. After Claviger was executed they were brought up in the county orphanage. Looks like John pretty much dropped off the map at sixteen – maybe joined the military. James went on to become the town doctor. He had a daughter..." He trailed off, clicking a link which brought up another hazy photograph. "Holy crap." He sat back, causing the metal chair to creak ominously.

"What?" Dean asked, leaning in.

"You recognize this guy?" Sam was pointing at the image of a small middle-aged man with thinning hair who was standing next to an elderly lady with large kind eyes and an enigmatic half-smile that wouldn't have looked out of place on a Da Vinci.

The woman drew Dean's attention for some reason, something about her, something *familiar*, and it was only Sam's finger repeatedly pointing that forced him to turn his attention to the man. "No," he said finally. "*She* looks more familiar than he does –"

"Dean, that's Shadrack Mann!" Sam burst out. "That's the guy who gave you the amulet!" He looked up at his brother, as if wanting to hammer his next revelation home. "Dean, he was Emmanuel Claviger's great-grandson!"

"Holy crap!" Dean echoed Sam's earlier exclamation. "You sure?"

Sam pointed at the lady in the photograph. "That's his mother – Patience Mann. She was James Claviger's daughter."

"So you think maybe the amulet got passed from Claviger to Mann? That's what the cowboy and the demon meant by 'family heirloom'?"

"Maybe not directly," Sam said, absently clicking on a few more bookmarked websites. "They were separated by a lot of years after all..." He trailed off again, face paling considerably and his eyes widening as he stared unblinkingly at the screen.

"What?" Dean asked, instinctively reading Sam's body language even if he couldn't remember where that instinct came from.

Sam shook his head. "You're not going to believe this," he said. "I'm not sure / believe it..."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "I dunno, you've asked me to believe a whole lot of crazy-ass stuff in the last couple of days and I think I've been pretty accommodating..."

Come on. Lay it on me.”

Sam was still staring at the computer screen as if it might fizz out of existence if he looked away. “You know I said John Claviger, the older son, just dropped off the paper trail radar? Well I think I just picked him up again – in a census report from a small town in Kansas...” He paused for a second, finally looking away from the computer screen to glance up at his brother. “You remember...?”

“We’re from Kansas,” Dean nodded. “Lawrence. Yeah, you told me yesterday, Sam.”

Sam turned back to the screen. “It looks like John Claviger became the local lawman. He had a son, Robert, who in turn had three daughters, Eliza, Victoria and Mary.”

“Eliza?” Dean echoed. “That was –”

Sam nodded, Dean not even having to finish his sentence. “Yeah. Eliza Claviger married an attorney called Stephen Belmont. They had two sons and two daughters, the oldest son being a Samuel Belmont.” Sam actually swiveled around in his chair to fix Dean with a meaningful stare. “Dean, Belmont was Mom’s maiden name...”

“Gramma Eliza...” Dean straightened, hand fumbling for the back of Sam’s chair, as if he suddenly couldn’t support his own weight anymore. “I remember,” he said softly, eyes drifting to the records displayed on Sam’s computer screen. “You were named after Mom’s dad,” he murmured. “Mom said he died when she was really young and it was a way for her to remember him, a way for her to honor his memory.”

“Samuel Belmont,” Sam nodded his agreement. “He was our grandfather, Dean.”

The boys just looked at each other, neither exactly sure what they were supposed to do with this new information.

“Dean,” Sam said slowly. “You realize what this means? Emmanuel Claviger was our great-great-great-grandfather. And – and Shadrack Mann’s like a distant cousin or something.”

“Family heirloom,” Dean said slowly. “That’s why Claviger said I should ask Mom who he was...”

“But she didn’t know, right?” Sam said. “You said she didn’t know who the cowboy in the song was. If she’d known anything about the amulet or Claviger, surely she would have told you – or – or told *Dad* at least? And he certainly didn’t seem to know that Mann was related to us in any way.”

“So how did Mann get a hold of the amulet?” Dean asked.

Sam shrugged. “The Guardian has to be the firstborn, right?” he hazarded. “A *male* firstborn. If – if the amulet was passed down the male line from Claviger to John to Robert, skipping Eliza’s generation because there were no sons...”

“Making Grandpa Sammy the last Guardian,” Dean put in.

Sam nodded. “Mom was an only child – no brothers. Maybe when her father died, she was too young to be entrusted with the amulet’s safekeeping so Mann took possession of it until another heir could be found.”

“Me.”

“You.”

“Ah man, I know you’ve told me about some damn creepy stuff these last couple of days, but this has got to out-creepy everything. I mean, Shadrack Mann must have been waiting for me to be *born*, dude! That’s just –”

“Destiny,” Sam said, eyes drifting to the amulet.

“Well I was gonna say ‘creepy’ –”

“Dean, man, this is *big*,” Sam continued as if Dean hadn’t spoken. “I mean this is *huge*! For Haris to go to all this trouble to stop us finding out about it – about the amulet’s history. About its importance to our family. And it’s obviously a hell of a lot

more important to *him* that we originally thought. I mean, we always assumed he just wanted to get it off of you so one of his hellspawn could possess you, but –” he met Dean’s edgy gaze once more. “What if he wanted to get it off of you just because he *wanted* it? Being able to possess you was just an added bonus.”

“Why?” Dean asked. “Why would *he* want the amulet?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t want it for him. Maybe he just doesn’t want *us* to have it. But whatever he wants it for, he must be pretty desperate to stop us finding out to go to these lengths.” Sam shook his head. “God, this thing... It’s been right under our noses this whole time. Hell, even Baron Samedi called you ‘Guardian,’ right? It has to mean something. This whole thing with Alyssa – Haris sending her to wipe memories you didn’t even know you still had just to stop us finding out what you had buried in there... He didn’t want us to put the pieces together; didn’t want us to know how significant the amulet really is – to us, to him. And to who knows who else.”

Dean swallowed, the amulet suddenly feeling heavy around his neck. “We need to find Alyssa,” he said, a cold determination creeping into his voice.

“What? No!” Sam stood, alarmed. “That’s the *last* thing we should do! She said she wants to finish the job, Dean. I think she wants to wipe your memory completely!”

“Exactly,” Dean agreed. “Why? We already know everything Haris wanted me to forget. Right...?” He trailed off, waiting for Sam to catch on to his line of thinking.

Sam nodded slowly, understanding. “Or maybe we don’t...”

“Maybe there’s something *else* in here,” Dean tapped his temple. “Maybe something about the amulet. Maybe something about Haris. Maybe something about why the amulet is so damned important to him.”

“And maybe Alyssa knows what that is.”

“Yahtzee.”

Sam frowned, unsure whether Dean remembered that word or – *remembered* – that word. “We need to find Alyssa.”

“And I think I know where she’ll be...”

Medina House, Phoenix, AZ

“Scene of the crime.” Dean drew a breath as he gazed up at the shuttered edifice of the Medina house, the afternoon sun seeming to bleach the color out of everything until he felt like he was looking at another of those sepia-toned photographs he’d been staring at on Sam’s computer earlier. “This house. This house is as significant to Alyssa as the amulet is to us, whether she wants to admit it or not. Killing her own parents here? That’s gonna have made a lasting impression on her, even if she doesn’t realize it.”

Sam nodded his agreement, following his brother’s gaze. “Maybe,” he said. “But I don’t like this.”

Dean grinned lopsidedly. “Hey, she tries anything, I’ll just hide behind you, Rambo Sam –”

“Like last time?” Sam quirked a teasing eyebrow.

“Dude, you took me by surprise is all!” Dean protested. “No way I’d let you shove me around like that again.”

“Uh-huh,” Sam continued to stare up at the house, unmoving, the playful smile gradually fading from his worried features.

“What is it?” Dean asked, still uncertain how he was able to pick up on Sam’s vibes so accurately when he barely even remembered the kid.

“I dunno,” Sam said. “A thought.”

"Phew, careful Sam. Don't wanna be having too many of *those* things."
Sam shot him a sidelong glance. "About this house."
Dean sobered a little. "Okay. Think away, Einstein."
"What if –" Sam stopped short, wondering how to phrase such a crazy notion as had just occurred to him. "Okay, Alyssa whammied you and her parents in there, right?"
"Right."
"But when she tried it on me outside the library –"
"It didn't work. You figured maybe you were immune to her."
Sam nodded minutely. "What if – if it wasn't *me* that stopped her powers from working? What if it was the location? What if her powers only work *here*?"
Dean blew out a breath. "Wow, that's some pep talk, Sam. Just as we're about to face off against Ms. Anti-Memory-Demon-Chick and all." He shook his head in exasperation. "You know, I was kinda counting on you being our invulnerable ace in the hole here!"
Sam shrugged. "Just thinking out loud, man."
"I told you thinking was bad for you."
They both looked up at the house again, only this time a little more uncertainly.
"Nah," Dean said eventually. "That's crazy. Just nerves talking."
"No more crazy than Alyssa being here in the first place."
"That's not crazy. That's deductive reasoning. One crazy person to another."
Dean glanced back up at the shuttered windows and wondered which room Alyssa was in, just lying in wait for them... "Okay, this is getting us nowhere," he snapped. "I say we go in, we find her, we stay the hell away from those grabby hands of hers and – and – we get her to talk."
"How?"
Dean pulled out his .45 and grinned. "Favorite toy, Sam."
Sam rolled his eyes. "Okay, that's it. You remember your *gun* but you don't remember me?"
Dean shrugged. "She's prettier than you. C'mon. Time's a-wastin', dude."

* * * *

Breaking in to the Medina house was actually a whole lot easier than it had been getting past Maisie – Alyssa – the first time around, Sam mused as he climbed through the sash window and into the living room, Dean following close on his heels.
Disturbed dust motes danced in the sunlight slanting through the window as Sam blinked to adjust his eyes to the dingy interior of the house.
"So I guess Alyssa's given up pretending she's house-sitting," Dean muttered, drawing his .45 even as Sam pulled out his 9mm.
"So where d'you think she'll be?" Sam whispered, glancing around nervously.
Dean inclined his head toward the ceiling. "Told you. Scene of the crime."
But – wait – you think she's *waiting* for us up there?"
"That's where I'd be."
"But she's a little – y'know – nuts."
Dean raised an eyebrow. "Takes one to know one."
"Point taken," Sam acquiesced. "Although," he added as an afterthought, following Dean toward the stairs, "I'm sorry if I made you sound kinda crazy when I – described you. To you." A small frown creased his forehead as he tried to work out what the hell he'd just said. "Y'know?"
Dean glanced back at him as he began to climb the stairs. "Hey, we get to be

this good-looking, I figure there's gotta be a trade-off somewhere in the Winchester DNA." He grinned roguishly and Sam shook his head.

"This is pretty weird amnesia, man," he muttered. "You don't remember who you are but you still remember how to be *you*."

Dean wasn't sure what that meant, but as he'd reached the top of the stairs at that point, he figured a response would probably have to wait.

Reaffirming his grip on his handgun, he spun into the hallway, weapon at the ready in front of him, Sam mirroring his stance at his shoulder.

Their eyes met silently when they realized there was as yet no sign of Alyssa, Dean taking point as they inched their way toward the door still marked with now broken yellow crime scene tape.

Dean paused at the door, and Sam made to push him behind him again, but Dean stood his ground this time, scowling up at his brother as he shook his head in determination.

Brute force having failed him this time, Sam went for the puppy dog look, but Dean was immovable, pointedly ignoring his brother's silent pleas as he took hold of the door handle and slowly opened the door.

The same scene greeted him as the last time he'd been here, and as he eyes carefully moved around the empty room, he began to imagine he remembered being here before.

"She's not here," Sam observed, voice back to its usual volume as he, too, examined the crime scene, having had neither the time nor the inclination to take much of it in on his last visit, what with his big brother collapsed unconscious on the floor and everything.

Dean lowered his weapon but didn't put it away, slowly edging toward the shuttered window as if he didn't quite believe the room was empty.

After all, they'd met an invisible man once.

He shook his head a little as that particular memory surfaced, an image of him and Sam handcuffed to a tree suddenly assaulting his senses.

He blinked a couple of times before his eyes focused on the broken photo frame lying amongst the debris.

Crouching down, he pulled the picture from the frame and showed it to Sam. "The Medina family," he said. "In happier times."

Sam examined the photo – Vincent, Flora and Alyssa all smiling happily at the camera, blissfully oblivious of the fate that was about to befall them – and was eerily reminded of another picture, another family; the picture Jenny had given them back in Lawrence: The Winchesters. John, Mary, Dean and Little Sammy...

Sometimes he wished that instead of crummy death visions he'd been gifted with the ability to time travel.

The sudden slamming of the door behind Sam's shoulder caused both brothers to start, Dean on his feet almost as fast as Sam stepped in front of him, gun drawn.

"Surprise!" Alyssa smiled sweetly at them, seemingly unruffled by finding herself staring down the barrels of two guns pointed at her head. "Or not. Anyone would think you were expecting me."

"Y'know, I kept telling Dean you wouldn't be stupid enough to come back here," Sam said, sarcastic disappointment dripping from his words. "I guess I over-estimated you."

"Well ditto," Alyssa returned with a nasty little smirk, twirling a lock of her dark hair around one finger. "I thought you boys were smarter than that. You certainly *think* you're really clever, don't you? Think you've put all the pieces together? Got it all worked out?"

"All we need to know from you, bitch," Dean growled, stepping stubbornly out of Sam's considerable shadow, "is what the hell else is in my head? What's the big secret your boss is so scared we're gonna find out about? Huh?" He caught hold of the amulet and held it out towards her. "Why's he so scared of this thing? What's he afraid we're gonna do with it?"

Alyssa continued to smile placidly. "How should I know? Looks like it fell out of a cheap Christmas cracker, if you ask me."

Dean gritted his teeth, taking another step toward her, the gun still pointed at her head. "Wrong answer, sweetheart," he snarled. "You'd better wise up before I put a bullet between those pretty eyes of yours –"

"Dean –" Sam began to warn him.

"Yeah, Dean," Alyssa mocked. "Come on. Put your money where your mouth is. You gonna shoot me? You gonna shoot an unarmed *human*?"

"Oh honey, you're not unarmed," Dean observed. "And I'm not entirely convinced you're human either."

Alyssa laughed derisively. "I'm as human as Sammy," she said, nodding toward the younger Winchester. "You willing to put a bullet in *his* brain someday?"

Dean froze, and Sam saw the end of the .45 tremble, even as his brother tightened his grip.

Alyssa laughed again. "Thought not. Can't off one of Haris' Psychic Kids till you know what you're dealing with, can you Dean? Till you know what you're *living* with –"

"Shut the hell up!" Dean growled as Alyssa's gaze slid meaningfully to Sam.

"You come here 'cause you thought I couldn't hurt you, Sammy?" she asked, taking a languid step towards him. "Taking a bit of a risk. Especially with your brother in such a fragile state right now –"

Dean matched her slow forward motion, gun still out in front of him. "This look *fragile* to you, sister?" he demanded.

The corner of Alyssa's ruby red lips twitched upwards. "Oh baby, you're so weak right now my kitten could kick your ass."

Dean's scowl intensified and he took another angry step towards her, pausing only when Sam placed a hand on his chest and stopped any further ideas he had about forward momentum.

"Why did you come back here?" Sam demanded, feeling the disgruntled rage thrumming through Dean's body. "To finish the job? You wanna wipe some more of my brother's memory in the hopes you'll get it right this time?"

Alyssa's smile faltered a little, a hand going to her hip as she tossed her hair over one shoulder.

"Cause you screwed up royally before, didn't you?" Sam continued. "Your whole plan backfired. The memory Haris wanted you to erase – his demon rugrat's little slip about the 'family heirloom'? That was one of the first things Dean remembered – along with a whole lot of other useful memories he didn't know he still had."

Dean grinned sunnily. "Even better than hypnotic regression therapy," he put in.

Alyssa's half-smile became a grimace. "You don't know anything," she told them. "Not a thing –"

"About Emmanuel Claviger? About our connection to the amulet?" Sam said.

"No, we don't know anything about that."

"Half-memories and guesswork," Alyssa retorted, the evilly over-confident smile returning to her full lips. "You'll never figure out the *real* secret –"

"So there *is* something else?" Sam stepped forward, and Alyssa's smile slipped again.

"I'm going to wipe your brother's slate totally clean," she hissed, abruptly

changing the subject. "By the time I'm done with him he'll be drooling in front of re-runs of *The Teletubbies* –"

"God, that Tinky Winky creeps me out," Dean shuddered. "Even half brain dead I'd still have better taste in TV than that!"

"You think you're funny, huh?" Alyssa said. "We'll see how funny you are when you need help going to the bathroom!"

"You offering?" Dean raised a suggestive eyebrow. "Kinda kinky but I'm always up for new experiences."

"I'm going to wipe that smug smile so far off your face –"

"– That I won't be a threat anymore?" Dean hazarded, suddenly completely serious. "And if I'm no threat, then neither is the amulet, right?"

Alyssa's grimace hardened. She'd said too much. Just like that stupid demon. "Enough talking!" she spat. "I've got work to do."

With that, she lunged at Dean, grabbing his right wrist and twisting hard until the .45 fell from his startled grip. His eyes widened in shock and surprised pain as the gun hit the floor with a muffled *whump* just as Sam stepped toward him, grabbing Alyssa's upper arm and yanking her around to face him.

"I said stay the hell away from him!" he growled, bringing his own gun up toward the girl's face. "I *mean* it!"

Suddenly Alyssa's attention was all on Sam, Dean seemingly forgotten as the hand that wasn't clutching the older brother's wrist caught hold of Sam's forearm. As her eyes widened to unnatural proportions, a blinding white light began to emanate from behind her eyeballs and leak out of her eye sockets until her eyes themselves were glowing brighter than anything Sam could ever remember seeing, even brighter than the explosion that had temporarily blinded him back in Riverside.

Sam's own gun slid from his hand and suddenly he was gripping both Alyssa's forearms, even as her fingers began to dig even harder into his and Dean's flesh.

Gritting his teeth, Sam looked directly into Alyssa's eyes, somehow knowing he would not be blinded as the overwhelming brightness seemed to reflect back off his own blue-green orbs until they appeared to be glowing too.

"Close your eyes, Dean," Sam ordered, and Dean didn't even hesitate, didn't question, merely complied with his brother's instruction instantly. "C'mon, bitch," Sam continued, the intense light seeming to coalesce at a point somewhere between his eyes and Alyssa's. "Let's see whatcha got."

Alyssa grimaced, beginning to tremble as she abruptly tried to pull away from Sam's iron grip. "No," she mumbled, trying to blink, trying to break eye contact, but unable to do either, unable to move at all. "You shouldn't be able to do that! How are you doing that?"

"Beats me," Sam said lightly, the brightness reflecting off his eyes becoming more and more intense even as the light in Alyssa's began to dim.

"No!" Alyssa screamed, suddenly releasing her hold on Dean, who collapsed to the floor with a thud as the girl grabbed at her head. "No!"

A violent scream was torn from her throat that would have shocked Sam had he realized he was the one responsible for causing it.

"You shouldn't be able to –"

The light abruptly snapped off in Alyssa's eyes as if someone had thrown a switch, and suddenly she was falling to the floor, Sam letting her go rather than making any move to catch her.

"I told you to stay the hell away from my brother," he repeated, eyes still glowing an eerie white until he blinked hard and, just as it had with Alyssa, the light disappeared.

Sam just stood there for a second, just breathing, just blinking, looking down at

the crumpled heap that was Alyssa and trying not to think at all about what had just happened. About what he'd just done.

Before he could ponder too deeply, he became aware of a groan from the direction of his brother, and was instantly crouching by Dean's side, hand on the back of the older boy's neck as he cautiously raised him into a sitting position. "Hey, Dean. Hey. It's okay. You're okay. Dean?"

Dean's dazed eyes swept about the room uncertainly until they finally found his little brother, gazing up at him, wide and unfocused, almost as if they'd never seen him before.

"Dean?" Sam repeated, not liking the spaced-out expression on his brother's face. "You with me?"

Dean blinked and Sam thought he saw something – some little spark of *something* – that had been noticeably absent from Dean's eyes for the past couple of days.

"Sammy?" Dean croaked slowly, the nickname coming as naturally to his lips as breathing. "What the hell just happened?"

Arizona State Psychiatric Institute Chronic Care Ward

Nancy Russo cooed encouragingly as she raised the spoonful of oatmeal to her patient's pale lips, the girl taking a small amount into her mouth and swallowing before blinking owlishly, blank vacant eyes directed vaguely in the direction of the television set switched off in the corner of the day room.

"Good girl, Alyssa," the nurse said, smiling broadly and patting her patient gently on the hand before turning to the two visitors sitting awkwardly on the other side of the table.

"All things considered," Nancy said, a sympathetic smile directed at the two handsome young men in front of her, "your cousin's doing remarkably well. The brain can be a very strange thing sometimes. You say she fell?"

The taller of the two young men, the one with the empathetic gaze and endearingly rebellious hair, nodded sadly, leaning further forward in his seat. "She collapsed after she had some kind of seizure," he confirmed. "It's a good thing we were visiting or she could have been lying there for days..."

Nancy shook her head, gaze returning to her patient. "Such a shame. So young. And so soon after her parents passed on. She's lucky to have relatives like you to take an interest in her."

The two young men glanced at each other quickly, before the other man, shorter haired and with unnaturally long eyelashes that Nancy couldn't seem to stop looking at, suddenly blurted out, "So she'll be like this for the rest of her life?" his expression becoming strangely unreadable.

The nurse nodded sadly. "The doctors aren't holding out much hope," she said. "Although they can't find any actual damage to Alyssa's brain." She turned to face the unresponsive girl, another spoonful of the oatmeal held out toward her, but not before catching another odd little look pass between the girl's cousins. Shrugging, she continued, "The doctors think it might be some kind of hysterical amnesia brought on by severe emotional trauma," she said. "Poor little thing. Can't even remember how to speak much less who she is. Considering what she's been through, maybe that's a blessing..."

Nancy continued to feed her patient diligently, her two cousins sitting in

uncomfortable silence as they watched her ministrations.

“Still,” she said with another encouraging smile. “Hope springs eternal. If Alyssa wants to come back to us, then she will, I’m sure. Whatever the doctors say.”

Another furtive glance was exchanged between the two young men, before the taller one clapped his hands on his knees and said, “Well, we should go. Leave Alyssa to eat in peace.”

The other one took his cue from that, both rising to their feet as Nancy took Alyssa’s limp hand and gave it a little squeeze. “Say goodbye to your cousins, honey,” she said, although she knew there was no way the girl would ever do such a thing again.

The shorter cousin offered Alyssa a strange little smile, and Nancy wondered whether the girl was even aware he was there.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Goodbye Alyssa.”

* * * *

“Well that was just *weird*,” Dean commented, glancing once back over his shoulder at the insensible form of Alyssa Medina as he jabbed impatiently at the elevator call button.

“She got what she deserved.” Sam’s voice was oddly cold and he didn’t look back at the girl once. “She was planning on doing that to you.”

Dean didn’t comment immediately, preferring to wait until they were alone on the elevator and safely out of anyone else’s earshot.

“Sammy, what the hell did you *do* to her?” he demanded the second the doors closed, and Sam merely looked at him before his face split into an incongruous grin.

“I never thought I’d be happy to hear you call me ‘Sammy’ again,” he admitted wryly.

“Huh?” Dean grunted. “I always call you Sammy –”

“Not when you’d lost your memory you didn’t,” Sam told him. “Hardly at all. Yet as soon as you’re *you* again –”

“You mean I wasn’t me when I didn’t remember who me was?” Dean frowned at himself the second the words left his mouth and Sam arched an eyebrow.

“You were...” The younger brother thought about it for a second, “...different. When you didn’t remember.”

“Maybe,” Dean conceded. “But now that I *am* me again, I suddenly remember how ‘Sammy’ likes to avoid answering awkward questions.”

Sam’s smile faded, and he found himself scrutinizing his reflection in the elevator doors.

“Sam?” Dean prodded. “One minute Alyssa’s trying to Swiss cheese the both of us, next minute she’s a gibbering wreck on the floor and I can suddenly remember every birthday present you ever got – including that little surprise poison bullet you got this year.” He paused, looking up at his brother while Sam steadfastly refused to return his gaze. “C’mon man,” he prodded. “What gives?”

Sam sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair and opening his mouth to speak just as the elevator hit the lobby and the doors slid jerkily open.

Sam ducked out hurriedly, Dean pausing before reluctantly following his brother out of the hospital.

“Sam.”

Sam was already striding purposefully across the parking lot to where the Impala stood waiting, the big Chevy seemingly already eager to be moving on to their next destination – wherever *that* might be.

Dean caught up to Sam, instinctively unlocking the passenger door first so that

Sam could get inside. It was as hot as hell out in the bright sunlight, but even hotter in the black car's non-air-conditioned interior, and yet Dean got the distinct impression that what Sam wanted to get off his chest he wanted to get off his chest in private.

"Okay, Dorothy," Dean said, sliding into his rightful place behind the wheel beside his brother and immediately winding down the window with very little appreciable effect. "Spill it. What happened. Did *you* fix me? Did you break Alyssa to fix me? Or – or did Alyssa break herself...?"

Sam blew out a low breath. "Honestly?" he said, for the first time since they'd entered the hospital really meeting Dean's gaze. "I don't know. I don't know what happened. I didn't do anything. Not consciously anyway. All I knew was that Alyssa was trying to hurt you; and then it was like Max Miller's house all over again, when all of a sudden I was telekinetic, able to use Max's powers to get to you, to save you from him."

Dean rubbed at his chin thoughtfully. "You think it was the same deal with Alyssa?" he asked slowly, not entirely sure he wanted to know Sam's answer. "You think you somehow used her powers to save me, like at Max's house? By turning them back on her? I mean, it's pretty weird I should get my memory back at the exact same second she loses hers..."

Sam shook his head, eyes rolling momentarily upward. "I don't know," he repeated. "It didn't feel like – it didn't feel like I'd *taken* her powers. More like – more like I was *reflecting* them back onto her. Somehow. Kind of like a mirror, I guess. Like *I* was the mirror. That's – that's how it felt at Max's house too."

Dean found himself gazing wistfully back at the hospital, wondering which window Alyssa would spend the rest of her life not seeing out of.

Somehow, he couldn't bring himself not to care.

"Well," he said at length. "I guess at least we won't have to worry about her coming after us again. She's about as much of a threat as Max Miller now."

"Dean, Max Miller's dead."

"Exactly. And I don't know how you did it either, but I want you to know I'm grateful."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "You are?"

Dean grinned. "Happy to be me again, Sammy! Amnesia Dean was a pain-in-the-ass girlie wuss hiding behind his little brother all the time –"

Sam snorted. "Now you know how *I* feel every time you try to take a bullet for me."

Dean's expression sobered. "Okay, I get it. You're all grown up now and don't need me fighting your battles for you –"

"No," Sam put in. "But I do need you fighting them *with* me, Dean." Dean shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and Sam smiled slightly. "And I'm glad you're 'you' again, too."

"Thanks to you," Dean said. "Whatever the hell you did to fix me."

Sam's eyes trailed to the amulet around Dean's neck. "What if it wasn't me?" he mused thoughtfully. "That fixed you, I mean."

Dean followed the direction of Sam's gaze. "Sam, you kicked that psychic psycho bitch's ass, dude!"

"Maybe," Sam was still considering the amulet. "Maybe I had some help."

"What, you think the *amulet* whammied Alyssa?" Dean snorted derisively. "Gimme a break. That was all you, kiddo."

"Maybe," Sam said again, sounding less than convinced. "Maybe I *did* reflect Alyssa's powers back onto her somehow, took her out of the game. But what if it wasn't me that fixed you? That gave you back your memory?"

Dean's attention slid back to the amulet, a hesitant look of wonder on his face that slowly altered to one of skeptical disbelief. "When the chips were down," he said finally, "this thing didn't do much for Emmanuel Claviger, did it? He still got executed with everyone thinking he was one bullet short of a full cylinder." He sighed, leaning back in the seat. "No. It wasn't the amulet. It was *you*, Sammy. Your freaky-ass Shining fixed me. I'm sure of it."

Sam smiled weakly. "Thanks," he allowed sheepishly. "Any time." He shifted awkwardly on the Impala's hot upholstery before adding, "You think she knew? Mom? About Claviger? About the 'charm 'round his neck'?"

Dean somehow managed to shrug and shake his head at the same time. "You know I remember that stupid song now," he said, eyes faraway for a second. "Hadn't thought about it in years. But I remember asking Mom who the song was about, who the cowboy was. And she said she didn't know. She just remembered Gramma Eliza singing it to her." He scratched his head absently. "And besides, if she'd known about the amulet, about her family's connection to it, I think she would have been the one to give it to me. Or she would at least have told Dad about it. You know, before the fire? Someone gave the thing to Shadrack Mann for safe-keeping and I'm thinking it had to have been Grandpa Sammy, Sam."

Sam nodded his agreement. "You really think he was the previous Guardian? He died when Mom was, like, six or something didn't he? So it would only make sense that he'd pass it on to someone who understood its significance. Someone like ol' Cousin Shadrack."

"Can't believe we're related to that crazy old coot."

"More importantly," Sam continued, eyes locking with Dean's. "Did Dad know?"

"About Shadrack?" Dean asked. "Or about Mom's family?"

"Either," Sam said. "Both. Maybe Shadrack told him a little more than he told you..."

Dean sighed, just looking at Sam for a second. "Yeah," he said, voice resigned as he reached for his cell phone. "Maybe it's time we call the old man..."

He stared at the cell hesitantly, finger poised over Dad's speed-dial number, before suddenly closing the phone and putting it back in his pocket.

Sam arched an eyebrow. "You're not gonna call him?" He sounded surprised.

"I just got over one trauma," Dean said, voice sounding light but completely failing to fool his brother. "Could do without another."

"He may have answers," Sam pointed out carefully, feeling like he was treading on eggshells.

Dean glanced over at him. "Which means he lied to me, Sammy," he explained.

Sam nodded his understanding. "Just like the old family curse, huh? Keeping secrets to protect us."

"Secrets, lies," Dean muttered. "Potato, potaaato..." He took a breath, collecting his thoughts, before reaching out and twisting the Impala's ignition, feeling the V8 roar to life beneath him. "C'mon, Sam," he said on an exhale. "Let's shake some dust before I forget where we're supposed to be headed..."