

**Laura**  
**Episode Three**  
**By Kittsbud**

**Mason's Meats**  
**City of Big Bear Lake, California**

The thick leather cord twisted on the hook, its rough edges digging into his skin until dark red welts covered his wrists. There was little pain, only a sickening numbness interspersed with tingling spears of heat that filled his hands and fingers – hanging from a meat hook for hours, arms locked above you tended to have that effect. The sensation of pins and needles sticking into his limbs had long been replaced by a nothingness he couldn't even describe, but then, perhaps that was what his tormentor wanted. Nothingness.

The forty-eight-year-old exhaled, hearing the gurgling in his own throat as blood bubbled there. How much blood could he lose before he slipped into unconscious anyway?

Something sharp prodded him in the ribs, reminding him that there was still more meat on his body to cut, still more pain to inflict should the person before him so wish it. His frame convulsed, both from the jab and the frigid air in the meat locker.

"What have I ever done to you?" The words were raw, unclear, but the pleading in them was primal, as if the extremely well educated professional had forgotten all he'd been taught and slipped back to his most basic instinct – survival.

The black clad figure in front of him didn't speak, didn't move even, and he was forced to stare into eyes that held no depth, no compassion, no essence. Whoever was beyond the mask hated him, hated life itself to the point where anything was acceptable.

Julian Shepherd had seen those eyes before, had looked into the pits of despair they mirrored and had known what he had to do. Allowing this unspeakable evil to walk among innocents shouldn't even have been considered, much less sanctioned, and yet, against his wishes it had happened.

"You!" Shepherd's fractured tones echoed through the freezer room, his voice cracking with the agony of multiple knife wounds and the cold that bit into his near-naked body. "I told them...I warned them..."

The dark figure moved silently and swiftly, stuffing a greased-covered rag into Shepherd's open mouth. He gagged, almost choking as the cloth was pushed just a little too far down his throat.

Wide-eyed, Shepherd watched as his kidnapper moved to the ice-covered inner wall of the chamber, dodging through dangling beef carcasses to reach the thermostat controls for the unit.

Long, spindly, gloved fingers reached out, twisting further and further until the minimum temperature possible was selected. Then, the wraith-like tormentor turned and crossed both arms, waiting, watching.

Soon it would be too cold in the room for a mere mortal. Soon, the thick coagulating globules of Shepherd's blood, pooling beneath his slack form would turn into solid crimson stalagmites.

Shepherd squirmed, biting into the cloth in his mouth as he tried to let out a muffled cry. His hands feebly twisted, trying in desperation to pull free from the bonds that held him fast to the meat hook, but it was no use.

Fresh spatters of red adorned the floor like a newly laid ice-carpet with his every tussle for freedom – the unsightly liquid streaming from flaps of skin that had been neatly carved away from his side.

In the locker, the cold should have been his friend, the below zero temperature helping to constrict blood vessels and slow the hemorrhaging, but instead the extra exertion simply fuelled the bleeding, aiding his killer and providing perfect entertainment to a crazed psyche.

Eventually, Shepherd grew tired of the show, tired of the fight to live, and he succumbed, letting the cold embrace him. His glazed eyes locked on the figure that walked towards him, waiting patiently for the last cut of the knife that would end his days.

The large serrated blade whirled before his failing field of vision but then slid into a sheath on his executioner's belt.

The raven-attired fiend ran a gloved finger down Shepherd's chest, pausing at every wound that had been inflicted. As the digit reached the flails of tissue expertly carved earlier, it paused, circling in the fresh blood until Shepherd snorted down his nose in agony.

Pressing harder, the tormentor caused a fresh spurt of blood to spill onto the glove and then rubbed at it between thumb and forefinger, relishing its color, its potency as a life-giver.

Shepherd's head lolled back and to the side in total exhaustion. He was finished. He would either bleed to death or freeze here, but either way his sentence had been passed.

As vague memories of a warning given too late came back to plague him, Shepherd's failing eyes watched his killer walk to the closest wall and begin to write in *his* blood.

The message was not only for him, but for others too, because the killing would not end here. This was just the beginning. *I warned them...I told them it wasn't natural – not even human anymore...*

The killer ignored his raspy breathing, ignored the drip, drip, drip of blood splashing onto the hard flooring and simply continued to scrawl until the bloody message was complete.

Standing back to admire the note as if it were an art form, the lithe figure nodded and then jogged from the meat freezer, leaving behind a legacy that had begun almost a decade earlier.

*Feel The Death Chill...*

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### **On The Road...**

The incessant tapping of keyboard keys was almost as bad as the constant thrum of a hangover to Dean Winchester – in fact, given a choice, he'd take the hangover any day.

It wasn't really the noise from his brother's long fingers hammering away at the laptop that really bothered him, but more the *why* Sam was working like a madman scouring the net and every known source on demonology.

"You know, you're gonna wear a hole right through those plastic keys if you don't give that thing a break." Dean looked over from behind the Impala's wheel, his right brow raised questioningly.

The momentary blank stare he got back told him all he needed to know. Ever since hastily leaving Bobby's, Sam had been different, on edge, and Dean knew why, even if it annoyed the hell out of him.

Sam was scared. Scared that the demon within his brother would ultimately take control, would turn Dean into some pawn for Haris while he helplessly stood by and watched.

The younger Winchester had yet to sleep and seldom stopped to eat or drink, he considered his task so important. To Dean, though, it was like being baby-sat twenty-four hours of the day, and it was beginning to wear his already jangling nerves to breaking point.

Having Haris's kid in him was bad enough, feeling its constant attempts to push through, to force the ultimate power struggle - his mind and the amulet against the demonic creature. But for Sammy to even have the slightest doubt that he could control what was going on, well, that was just painful on a whole new level.

Dean squirmed in his seat and his eyes darted to the rear view mirror – not because there was any other traffic on the winding highway, but because he had to see his own reflection. The hunter had to see the comforting flash of hazel to reassure him that he *was* in control.

When his own cocky features glared back at him, eyes sparkling in all their human glory, he exhaled. Somehow, the amulet was still doing its job. The hunter had no idea of the hows, or the whys, but the tarnished bauble that hung around his neck was suppressing Haris's kid, keeping it at bay.

Keeping one hand on the wheel of the Chevy, he used the other to unconsciously touch the amulet, his skin sensing the power from the cold metal as it met his fingertips. *I swear it's stronger somehow...I've never 'felt' anything when I've touched it before...at least not since the first time...*

Sam's gaze strayed to the almost mechanical action from his brother and his fingers finally gave the laptop respite. "Dean? Is something wrong?" He watched carefully, somehow expecting Dean's eyes to cloud over to a black, oily haze.

"Dude, I swear if you don't quit watching me I'm gonna let this friggin' demon out to play!" The sentence was half quip, half vented frustration, and as his words trailed Dean realized

he'd sounded snappy. Voice softening, he smirked. "You know, I can tap into this thing's abilities, right? Man, I could make more money than David Copperfield..."

Dean reached out to click his fingers but Sam swatted his hand down, almost afraid to see what his brother might do. "So *not* funny, Dean. We need to find a way to get the damn thing out of you, not let it have *any* kind of control..."

"Dude just be thankful I'm not pukin' pea soup and my head isn't spinning around. Cos I tell you, driving would be a bitch if that happened..." The familiar grin appeared, a mask to appease his already nervous sibling. "Besides, isn't *possession* nine tenths of the law? I own its ass, not the other way around."

Sam opened his mouth to protest, to try and maybe knock some sense into his brother, but his cell phone began to warble, forcing the conversation to the back burner. He slipped a hand into his pocket, missing the horrified expression that crossed Dean's face as Isaac Slade began to belt out *How to Save a Life* from the phone's tiny speaker.

Sam hit the "talk" button and pressed the cell to his ear, his eyes closing for a second as he inwardly prayed for it to be their father with information on how to eradicate the demon safely.

When Bobby's voice greeted him instead, he let out a low, disappointed breath. "Hey, Bobby, how's it going?"

Dean watched as his brother's face darkened. Sammy had a "tell" the size of Mount Rushmore that would surely get him slaughtered in a poker game someday. Right now, the expression told Dean their old friend had no good news to share.

The conversation was a short one, and when Sam closed his phone he took a moment before even looking at Dean. "Bobby didn't find anything but dead ends. Nothing new since last time we spoke..."

"Yeah, well I heard something new with my super sharp demon hearing..." Dean pulled at the bottom of his earlobe mischievously.

"Huh?"

Dean nodded, feigning a look somewhere between disgust and despair. "Dude, since when did you have the freakin' *Fray* as your ringtone? Man, that is such a wuss ass song..." The elder hunter slowed the Chevy as he approached an intersection. "I knew I shoulda disowned you at birth..."

Sam's face dimpled despite his worry. While ever the snark flowed, he could be sure his brother was still himself. That didn't mean, however, that he was going to give up his crusade, not for one second.

Dean had been his protector for so long, and now it was Sam's chance to return that favor, even if it took him the rest of his life to succeed. "Dean, what about Kyle? Let's face it, who better to know any obscure exorcism rites we might have missed than a priest? Besides, he's fantastic at research..."

Dean glowered. "You want Moses in on this now too? Sheesh, if I'd known possession was going to make me this popular, I'd have tried it years ago." He rubbed at the stubble on his chin he'd been too lazy to shave off that morning and pondered something. "Hey, you think it might make me an even bigger chick magnet? Maybe if I could do the whole glowing eyes deal when..."

"Dean!" Sarcasm was one thing, but Sam definitely did *not* want to know if being possessed made his brother any better in bed. That was something he'd rather not even think about, even if Dean already had. *Doesn't he think of anything else but beer and getting laid?*

Sam scowled and flipped his cell back open, swiftly hitting speed dial for the church's number where Kyle was still in hiding. After a minute, the answering machine kicked in. Puzzled, Sam tried again, this time dialing Kyle's cell.

*"I'm sorry; I'm not available right now. If you leave a message, I'll get right back to you..."*

Sam held his own phone away from his ear, his brow creasing in sudden concern. Kyle Williams was nothing if not predictable. "That's odd. I can't get a reply at the church or his cell..."

"Dude, this is Moses. He's probably out parting a sea somewhere. You know what he's like. Mr. Do Gooder, I gotta save every sinner that walks into my church this month touchy feely crap..." Dean made a gesture to say he thought the priest was a little short of a full deck, but he pulled the Chevy over off the road and cut the engine anyway. Kyle Williams might be the perfect material for the hunter's humor, but when it came down to it, Dean actually liked the quirky little preacher. "Try Sarah..."

Sam nodded and thumbed through his address book until he found Sarah Blake. She'd been in hiding with Kyle since Haris's cult had almost killed her, and if anyone had any inkling of the priest's whereabouts, it would be her.

"Hey, Sarah, it's Sam...can I speak to Kyle?" There was a pause. "And you don't know where he's gone?" Sam shook his head, obviously unnerved by what he was being told. "Okay, Sarah, Dean and I are on our way." He twisted his wrist to glance at his watch. "We're only a few hours away. Just sit tight..."

Sam closed his phone and bit his lip. They had enough issues already with the demon inside Dean and the fact that several hunters now saw them as targets. To add any more problems to their load would be dumb – especially for Dean. And yet, they couldn't leave Kyle to whatever he was up to. He just wasn't experienced enough.

"Okay, so are you gonna tell me what that was all about, or do I have to turn freakin' psychic too?" Dean's annoyed tone broke through Sam's less than lucid moment and the younger brother started.

"Dean, something's wrong. Kyle saw something on the internet two days ago that bothered him. Sarah doesn't know what, but she says he was like a man poss...he was pretty upset. Anyway, he did some research and scooted off in his Ford with a bucket load of printouts and a forty-five..."

Dean balked, ignoring his brother's slip of the tongue and focusing more on the dysfunctional priest who had seemingly gone AWOL. "Are you kidding me? Moses with a gun? The guy will probably shoot his own foot off. What the hell does he think he's doing?"

"He believes this is a gig he can handle, Dean. Sarah says she thinks he's headed out for California – alone. We have to find out what he's gone after before he finds himself in a fight he can't win." Sam waited on the elder hunter's response, knowing the young priest may already be into something far more dangerous than he could handle.

Kyle had no real experience with the supernatural beyond demons. He had no weapons or hand to hand combat skills. Nothing save for his faith.

Dean cranked the Impala's ignition and spun the steering wheel, turning the car in a one-eighty. "Don't worry, Sammy, we'll find Moses before anything happens." He pushed down on the gas pedal, trying to hide his own concern. "I just hope he doesn't try tossing holy water on my ass when we finally find him..."

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## **Local Church South Dakota**

The stone-built church was like something straight from a Dickens novel. The interior had an aura that oozed of both age and wisdom which Sam Winchester found familiar, and somehow comforting.

To add to the effect, two large stained glass windows reflected a myriad of colors off the long wooden pews, bathing the building's interior in an almost holy effervescence. It was like stepping back in time to another era.

"Are you okay in here? I mean, with the ...um..." Sam shot a look of uncertainty at his brother as he stuffed his hands in his pockets and took a seat on the nearest pew. It had felt awkward talking to Dean since the whole possession fiasco, but here, in a church, it seemed even stranger.

It was like the air was filled with some weird electrical charge, ready to strike like a lightning bolt at just one wrong word. *Can he feel the thing inside him squirming because he's on holy ground? Is it harder to control here?* So much Sam wanted to ask, so many reassuring words he wanted to give, but couldn't for fear he'd hurt Dean's pride even more.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Dean shuffled onto the bench next to his brother and bounced down, finding the hard wood instantly uncomfortable. "Just don't ask me to start praying anytime soon. Okay?"

Sam smiled slightly, finding his sibling's "out of his depth" expression somewhat amusing. Dean had never been at ease in churches, not even before the demon had gotten onboard. He simply just couldn't accept that there was any divine force in the world. Maybe one day that would change, but for now, Sam would have to be content with his own beliefs.

Focusing towards the altar and pulpit at the front of the church, Sam lowered his head a little and closed his eyes. It was so peaceful here, so devoid of anything supernatural that the

young hunter suddenly felt like he could stay in the holy place forever. The silence was almost entrancing, lulling him into serenity.

This was how Sam *should* feel, not like he had back at the cabin. For Dean, just for a few hours, it had been like he'd become a completely different person – one who had slightly less morals than the usual Sam Winchester.

Sam didn't like that person, and he hoped to God he never had to tap into that part of his psyche ever again. The visions he suffered were bad enough, but lately he'd had one or two genuine nightmares about his actions with Zack Murzak. *It was all a front...I wouldn't have really hurt him.*

Sam prayed that was true. He prayed that the Winchester nightmare could be over. He prayed for Dean.

"Dude, tell me you're not...?" Sam broke from his reverie to find big brother grinning at him.

"So, what did you ask for, Pornmeister? Free skin channel for the rest of your days? A night with Sarah..?"

Sam's voice was so low, so muted it was almost inaudible. "I didn't ask for anything for myself..."

Dean took down a breath and found the church rafters were suddenly calling for his attention. It was better to look anywhere than at his brother right now. When he'd teased Sam about praying he hadn't expected Sam to really be making any holy requests, but now that he thought about it, it wasn't exactly hard to figure out just what Sam had asked for.

Sam wanted his brother back. He wanted Dean demon-free, and he was willing to put his trust in some unseen entity and ask for help to do it. In that instant, Dean realized there was one thing Sam had that he didn't – faith in something beyond the Winchester family. Maybe that was a good thing, maybe it wasn't. Dean just wasn't ready for that kind of blind reverence yet.

"Sam?" Sarah Blake's voice echoed through the church, reverberating on ancient stone until her gentle tones sounded angelic. "I'm so glad you made it..."

To Dean, the art dealer's arrival was a good thing because he sure as hell didn't want to have to discuss faith with his little brother anytime soon. Somehow, having a demon hitching a ride on his soul tended to dampen any trust in the divine being theories that so many relied on every day to get them through.

For Dean, there was only one thing he trusted outside his family and that was the silver forty-five tucked neatly into the back of his waistband.

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Kyle's sparse quarters were at the back of the aging holy house, and as Sarah led the brothers inside, Sam couldn't help but wonder how someone from such an affluent family could live in such meager conditions.

Kyle was rich beyond either Winchester's wildest dreams, and yet still he dedicated his life to something with little payback – save perhaps death. "You said you thought Kyle took off for California?" Sam raised a brow, sifting through mounds of documents piled on a small teak desk. "Did he say why? Anything, even small clues could be important."

Sarah shook her head and pointed to a computer in the corner of the room. The monitor flashed every few minutes with a church screensaver, signaling the machine was already booted. "He kept saying something about how could he have missed it, and that there would be more if he didn't go. When I asked him what was wrong he shrugged it off, saying it was a gig he could handle without troubling you two."

"Great, just great! Moses can't handle any kind of gig period. The guy might be a wonderful priest, but trust me he sucks out loud as a hunter." Dean ran a hand through his hair disconsolately. "Sam, can you pull anything off that thing?"

"I can try..." Sam eased onto the small leather chair Kyle used at his computer and brought up the desktop. Hitting the documents folder he swiftly scanned through several files only to find them full of schedules for the next two weeks' sermons. "He hasn't saved anything to file." Sam clicked on the internet icon. "Maybe I can trace what he's been viewing through the history tab. Let's see..."

Dean and Sarah watched as Sam hit key after key, rapidly moving the mouse pointer every few seconds until he had four windows open at once.

“So, what do you see, geekboy?” Dean leaned over his brother’s shoulder, trying to read the top window as Sam scrolled.

“It looks like Kyle has been looking into a spate of recent murders. The last two were pretty gruesome.” Sam hit enter and another square popped up with crime scene photos that made Sarah cringe and back away. “Sorry,” he apologized, tapping another key. “According to this newspaper report, the second victim was a psychiatrist named Julian Shepherd. He was hung in a meat locker, cut up pretty badly and then left to freeze to death. The third guy was a research scientist who also froze to death after a canister of liquid nitrogen spilled in his lab...”

Dean’s face contorted uncertainly and he shook his head. “So, if the third guy was an unfortunate spill, why was Moses looking at him as a possible victim? And even if he was a victim, this is still just a murder case...”

Sam whirled around on the chair like a businessman addressing a stock meeting, twirling a pencil between his fingers absently. “Because the cops investigating the case soon found evidence the spill was no accident. And get this: at the scene of every crime the killer uses the victim’s blood to leave a message.”

Dean perched himself on the edge of the desk and poked a finger at a lone piece of pizza sitting idly in an open tray. There was no telling how long it had sat there collecting dust, but Dean dared to pick it up and take a bite anyway. “Okay, you got me, what’s the message? You say buy two get one free I’m gonna kick your college boy ass...” He munched on the double cheese and pepperoni, stuffing in a second mouthful after deciding it was still very edible – at least by his standards.

“The killer always daubs ‘Feel the Death Chill’ on a nearby wall.” Sam shrugged, returning his attention to the computer after cringing at his brother’s distasteful habit of eating copious amounts of outdated food. “Why Kyle thought this was something we should look at, I don’t know yet. Both the latest fatalities were pretty prominent in their fields, though. Maybe I can dig up a connection...”

Dean swallowed down the last of the pizza and looked at his watch with a sigh. Sammy digging up a connection often meant sitting around for hours while his brother surfed the net. It was boring as hell.

The hunter looked to Sarah hopefully, needing something wet to lubricate his throat after ramming so much over-dry crust in. “I don’t suppose preachers keep beer handy, huh?”

Sarah laughed but turned, heading for the door. “I’ll see what I can dig up.”

“Dean...you better look at this...” Sam’s eyes were fixated on another article on the screen, but this time the color seemed to have drained from his features seconds after the item had popped up. His voice caught in his throat as he explained the reason for his new ashen complexion. “Dean...both dead men worked on the Laura Mitchell case...”

“Laura who?” Dean’s look of confusion lasted two seconds. “Miss freakin’ Ice Cube? You gotta be kidding me? I thought she was still popsicle pie?”

“No, don’t you remember? We caused a coolant leak the night we fought her. The next day it was on the radio the local hospital had no choice but to try and revive some of the patients because they’d begun to thaw...”

Dean rubbed at his brow. “Okay, so I need that drink right about now...” He scowled, recalling the frigid floating outline of Laura Mitchell as she’d appeared to them in her ethereal form. “Can you pull up what happened to her? I mean, she has to have died right? There’s been nothing on the news and something *that* big woulda been major league.”

Sam cleared the screen and brought up a new search with Laura’s name and several keywords. At first, there was nothing beyond the initial report of the CryoGen leak. “This is way too low key, Dean. I can’t find anything...” The young hunter tried again, focusing this time on the actual cryogenics facility rather than Laura.

“You thinking some kind of cover up?”

Sam didn’t answer at first, seemingly mesmerized by his task to the point where Dean had to wave a hand in front of his face to get him to look up. “Huh?” He squirmed apologetically. “Right...from what I can find, Laura Mitchell was the only cryo-patient to undergo surgery and be successfully revived. Despite the transplant working, Laura remained in a coma for months. The doctors gave up hope that she’d ever wake up...”

“Yeah, but she did, the Ice Bitch part deux, right?” Dean spotted a rubber band on Kyle’s desk and began flicking safety clips at his brother with it until Sam shot an annoyed scowl in his direction.

"When Laura awoke the hospital psychiatrist considered her mentally unstable. It was thought there was most likely brain damage due to the experimental freezing process. He advised Laura be kept in an institution and CryoGen agreed. I'm guessing they kept their first retrieval pretty hush hush because of Laura's mental state." Sam picked up one of the paperclip projectiles and propelled it back across the desk with the edge of a hastily located ruler.

"So, Laura is still in some whacko hospital?" Dean dodged the clip with a smirk.

Sam shook his head, giving up on the desktop warfare to bring up another piece of classified CryoGen data he'd managed to illegally retrieve. "It says here Laura's parents managed to get her released recently. Money talks, man. She lives in some expensive but secluded cabin up near Big Bear Lake.

Dean whistled. "Didn't one of those newspaper articles you brought up say one of the dead guys died out there?"

Sam bobbed his head, the pieces of the conundrum all falling into place. "Julian Shepherd, the meat locker guy was the shrink who tried to stop Laura being released. The last guy, the scientist? He was former CryoGen too. Was one of the top guys on Laura's case at the time of her body's preservation."

"So our old friend the freeze queen is back for a little revenge and Kyle worked it out." Dean kinked his head to one side, raising a brow in admiration. Maybe the priest wasn't a great hunter, but he really was good at puzzles.

Sam's expression was much dourer than his sibling's. Kyle was in danger because of them. Men had died, because of them. "Dean, this is all our fault. When we banished Laura's spirit it didn't come back when her body was revived." His brows knitted in dejection. "We caused this!"

Dean wrinkled his nose in disbelief and plucked the Chevy's keys from his pocket, tossing them in the air and then catching them backhanded. "Dude, you read the report. Laura is most probably not firing on all cylinders because of being frozen, not our gris gris bag attack. You can't do your guilt trip thing on this one." He pointed to the door. "The only thing we can be sure of is the bitch is back, and Kyle might be the next one to get his butt frozen if we don't shag ass."

Sam nodded, but inside the blame had already settled. The very thing he had been worried about all those months ago had come true, and now they had to deal with Laura in her human form. If it hadn't been for Kyle, maybe he could have walked away and let the police handle it.

After all, what they were dealing with was murder pure and simple. No shades of grey. *But she wouldn't have been soulless if we hadn't exorcized her spirit...*

"C'mon, Sammy, it's not exactly a short trip to Big Bear Lake from here..."

Sam scooped up any loose relevant paperwork he could find and quickly stuffed the sheets into a folder from Kyle's filing cabinet. Slipping the folder under his arm he scurried after Dean who was already halfway across the church's small parking area.

"Hey, guys, what about your beer?"

Sam and Dean both turned at the same instant to see Sarah Blake in the church doorway holding two Coors.

"Sorry, sweetheart, duty calls." Dean winked and then stole a glance to Sam, wondering if his brother would go back across the yard and kiss the girl goodbye.

When Sam simply climbed into the Impala instead, deep in thought, Dean followed him and cranked the growling Chevy to life.

Sarah watched as the car grumbled down the potholed driveway and rolled her eyes. After a brief moment of thought, she took a swig from one of the bottles. "What the hell." She shrugged. "Men..."

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## **Laura's Cabin Somewhere in the Big Bear Lake Area**

Dean brought the Impala to a stop about a mile down the dirt track and quietly slipped out his automatic. His face reflected in the sheen from its perfect silver surface and he looked

quickly away, afraid of the two black voids he might see. It was hard to keep up the charade, hard to not let Sammy see his fear, his weakness.

*'Hold on, stay strong!'*

The familiar message played in his subconscious, and he took comfort from it. The inner voice had yet to fail him. It kept him in control. It kept him human.

"You sure this is it, Groucho?" Dean asked with a fake impish grin, looking to his brother as he cocked a brow and checked his weapon's clip.

"Dude, I didn't stick that damn moustache back on my face to come away empty handed! Laura's parents were pretty quick to hand over her address. They remembered 'Detective Sergeant Jagger' from his visit last year..." A small smile crept across the younger Winchester's features.

The moustache was pretty damned uncomfortable, and he hated being called Groucho, but he could at least see the funny side of it. It had been a disguise that had worked well on the original Mitchell case, and right now, anything that got his mind away from the word "demon" for more than two seconds had to earn extra points.

Dean nodded. "Okay, so if we hike a few hundred yards through those trees Laura's cabin should be down the embankment the other side. As long as dear mommy and daddy haven't forewarned her, we should be okay..."

"Should be," Sam stated doubtfully as he climbed from the car and began to head for the tree-line, Glock held carefully under his tan jacket. "What if she's not home? In fact, what if she is home, Dean? It's not like she's just a spirit we can fill full of rock salt anymore."

Dean dodged through three tightly grouped shrubs and hunkered down as he hit open space. Below him, smoke spiraled from a newly built cabin's tiny chimney. He pointed silently with his forefinger to the rear of the structure, where a battered blue Ford had been hastily parked knocking down several planters. "That's Kyle's car..."

Sam's grip increased on his weapon and his pulse picked up speed, racing through his veins until he could hear the thrum in his ears. "Back window?" He asked, scanning the property for possible entry points.

Dean bobbed his head in agreement and carefully began to clamber down the slope, his forty-five kept as close to his upper body as he could manage. Never once did he attempt to answer Sam's earlier question about how to handle their prey. Maybe there was only one true choice this time.

Once at the bottom of the incline, he quickly forced his back up against the cabin's rear wall and gestured for Sam to join him.

From inside the wooden structure, the hunter could already hear voices, or was it just one voice? He strained his ears, trying to push away all other sounds and concentrate on the words.

*"You love your job, priest? Maybe you should think about it more. Think about how futile your prayers are...you know, he doesn't really care about you? If he did, he wouldn't have let me have you, now would he? Maybe you love him so much you'd like to join him? I can arrange that too..."*

Sam stumbled as his boot caught on a protruding vine and he thrust out a hand, catching himself on the cabin and steadying his balance as he joined his brother. "See anything?" he whispered, eyes darting to the surrounding wilderness as his father's training kicked in.

Dean shook his head but pointed to the rear door of the log chalet. "She's in there with Kyle. I heard her taunting him. I don't think we have time to make a plan. It's full frontal assault time, Sammy." The hunter didn't say more, but positioned his body ready to kick out at the heavy wooden door.

Sam moved to the other side, gun poised for action the minute he had access. "On three..." He nodded.

The brothers silently mouthed the numbers in unison, and as they hit one, Dean's heavy CAT boot impacted on the door with his full weight behind it. The timber frame cracked, almost allowing the hinges to break away along with the heavy duty lock.

As the door burst inwards, Dean and Sam followed, racing through the cabin corridor and clearing each room they came to until a muted cry made them both falter and look around.

"This way!" Dean snapped out the order as he shouldered an inner door, ramming it open with more rage than Sam had ever seen. Again, the force of the wood being slammed back almost tore it from its housing, and again Dean ignored his own strength.

Instead, the barrel of the hunter's silver automatic spun around the room, locking on a figure kneeling over a bloodied mass that had once been a friend.

Even for Dean, the horrific sight made him baulk, just for an instant.

Laura was sitting on her knees, her body hunkered forward over Kyle Williams' splayed out form. From what Dean could tell, the girl had subdued and tied the priest somehow before using him as some kind of human slicing board.

The priest's chest and upper body had been intricately carved into with the tip of a blade as if the girl had been whittling with a human subject. Each cut had made a specific shape or mark in his flesh – some were clearly crosses and other religious symbols, while others appeared more satanic in nature. Trickling blood from the wounds had coalesced together until Kyle appeared one huge mass of scarlet.

But the horror didn't end there.

Laura now had her weapon of choice buried in the priest's gut, and Dean could hear a tearing noise like hide being sliced as she oh-so-slowly tugged it upwards through the pale skin of Kyle's abdomen. "Hey! Don't move another inch or I'll blow your damn head off, you freaky bitch!" The forty-five jerked up a touch until it was aimed perfectly at Laura's skull.

In the same instant, Laura pulled back on her knife, forgetting her intended task in favor of using the blade as a distraction. With a controlled flick of her wrist the perfectly balanced weapon flew through the air and bounced from Dean's forearm just as he pulled back on his trigger.

The blow from the knife's hilt jarred a muscle, making it reflexively relax, and his automatic slipped from his fingers and bounced to the floor, the discharged bullet boring into the wall harmlessly.

Using the respite for her escape, Laura dove for an open window and tossed her body head first through it.

"Jesus, Sammy, shoot the bitch!" Dean dropped to his knees, retrieving his weapon and spinning it in an arc around the room, but Laura was already free from the confines of the cabin. "Shit!"

Dean jogged to the window and briefly looked out, his eyes locking on Laura's fleeing figure. She was damn fast, but he knew he could catch her. *Kyle...*

Dean spun around and dropped back to his knees, suddenly realizing the priest was still conscious. Dropping his weapon again and pulling his own knife from his ankle holster, he cut the injured man's bonds. "It's okay, buddy, we're here now. She's gone." He looked down, knowing what he would see before his gaze met the garish hole in Kyle's stomach.

Laura's knife had made a clean slice and thanks to the brother's intervention the hole she'd made wasn't that wide. That didn't mean that she hadn't done enough damage to have almost gutted the priest like a wild animal.

Dean cringed as he realized he was looking at a good two inches of Kyle's intestines pushing through his flesh. Blood, intermixed with a pungent odor, the hunter guessed was bile made him want to look away, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth.

Kyle caught the reaction, his wide, panicked eyes desperate to see what damage had been inflicted on his body. He could feel the pain, the immeasurable pain, but his mind simply hadn't assimilated what had caused it yet.

"Hey, no!" Dean gently stopped the priest dropping his chin enough to see the wound. "C'mon, don't look at that, look at me, Moses. We got you, you're gonna be okay now..."

Kyle shook his head, his hand suddenly gripping Dean's tightly. "No...I'm dying. I'm...not stupid..." He paused, taking a long breath. "Leave me...find Laura...before she does this again..." His pupils fixed on the man who he had once saved, pleading, beseeching Dean to give his word. "Promise...me...you'll stop her..?"

Dean squeezed back, sensing the tension in the priest's grip begin to fade. "You know me, Moses, but you gotta promise me something back..."

Kyle took another long breath and closed his eyes, a small smile spreading at last over his agonized features. "I can't make *that* promise..."

Dean felt Kyle's hand go limp in his own, the shy priest's fingers sliding from his palm and gently thudding onto the kitchen's pine floor – a floor awash with blood until very little of its true surface remained on view.

Inside, the hunter burned until his stomach churned. His muscles tensed with a temper he'd never felt before, aching, wanting, needing revenge. *What kind of God let's one of his emissaries die this way?*

*'Stay strong..!'*

Dean clenched his fists, breathing hard, but the more he tried to control the rage, to listen to his protecting inner voice, the more the darkness seemed to envelop him. He reached out,

fingers grabbing his forty-five so hard his knuckles drained of color. "You should have fired, Sam..."

The words were cold, angry, and even though part of Sam felt the same way he shook his head. This wasn't his brother talking. "She's still a human being, Dean, I can't just..." He shrugged, words failing him.

Dean clicked the safety back on his weapon and slid it back in his waistband. His hands shook and his muscles screamed from pent up aggression as he pushed up from where he'd squatted on the floor. "Tell that to Kyle..." Even Dean's voice sounded different, on edge, strained.

Sam wanted to answer. He wanted to justify not pulling the trigger, but then, he needn't have used a kill shot just to drop the girl, need he? *I let her go. I hesitated and now she could kill again.* Realizing his own worries about the demon within his brother may have clouded his judgement, he looked up, but all that his eyes met was the cold, hard stare of two abyss-like black orbs instead of the familiar hazel glint.

\* \* \* \*

### **Bear Valley Community Hospital Big Bear Lake, California**

The waiting room was an unusually pleasant area considering its purpose, just like the hospital it belonged to. Even the chairs seemed more comfortable than usual to Sam as he sat quietly across from his brother.

Pity then, that the inviting surroundings did little to allay the churning sensation in his stomach. It was like Laura had stuck him with the knife too, twisting and turning it until he admitted his guilt. *I shouldn't have let her get away. A shoulder shot would have been enough to stop her.* He rubbed at the middle of his palm absently – anything to focus on rather than Dean. *We caused this, we banished her soul...*

"I don't think I've ever seen so much blood..." Dean broke the awkward silence, swallowing hard as Sam's gaze at last locked with his. *He can finally look at me again. Can finally dare to see my eyes and hope they're not the demon's.*

"It was our fault, Dean. This whole mess is." Sam kept his voice level, knowing his brother wouldn't appreciate the suggestion. "We exorcized Laura's soul without even thinking there might be implications if she ever woke up."

"Dude, you're telling me you actually thought the whole *freeze me, defrost me* crap would ever work? Cos I'm telling you I kinda had the whole deal pegged as some guy's get rich quick scheme..." Dean crossed his arms and glanced around the waiting room impatiently, fidgeting with his jacket as if it would somehow bring news of Kyle all the more quickly.

Sam took in every movement, every staggered breath his brother made, knowing Dean was still struggling with the unnatural anger he'd exhibited in the cabin. It had only been a brief slip, but Sam had seen the demon's presence in all its glory, and it had scared him.

Every time Dean got angry, every time he became agitated, it seemed to fuel Haris's child and give it a stronger grip on his brother's consciousness. *How long can he stay in control, even if the amulet's helping?* "It doesn't matter what we thought. The retrieval process worked, and we never factored that into our thinking. Kyle is our fault...all the deaths are our fault..."

"Moses isn't gonna die, Sammy." The glare that crossed the room may not have come from raven-black eyes, but it was just as intense, just as scary. As he spoke, Dean's hands trembled as they rested on his lap, the dried blood that still covered them the only proof of just how hard he'd tried to save the young priest's life on their hasty journey to the nearest medical facility.

Sam took down a breath, unsure how to respond. It was always hard to lose a friend, but Kyle was just that little bit more. In a way, he'd almost become like family to the Winchesters. "Dean, you saw the wound...you have to admit the odds aren't stacked in his favor. And the blood loss...the chances of infection..."

"Sam, *don't.*"

The statement was short, final, and for the briefest of moments Sam could have sworn he saw a glimmer of darkness tinge his brother's eyes. Maybe it was his imagination after Laura's cabin. Maybe it was even a trick of light as the overhead fluorescent tube flickered.

But one thing he was sure of, Dean inwardly felt the blame for Kyle's injuries as much as he did.

"If we'd only thought that night back at CryoGen..."

Dean pushed up from his seat, the same muscle-tensing anger abruptly attacking his body like it had back at Laura's home. "Laura's spirit was going around killing people for revenge, Sammy." He turned his back to his brother, trying to hide the uncharacteristic tremors in his limbs as he fought for control of them. "Even if we hadn't exorcized it and it had gotten back in her body, do you really think this chick would be a nice gal?"

Sam rubbed a hand across his brow. It was hard to know anything anymore with any certainty, but they had records to trust, statements to listen to, and they'd all said the same thing. "Laura's parents and friends all said what a wonderful person she was. Man, why would someone who wanted to be a marine biologist suddenly turn into something out of a Stephen King novel?"

Dean took a calming breath and noted his quivering body was back under some semblance of control. Turning, he faced Sam in an attempt to sound rational. "Dude, this bitch's doctors didn't want her released. You think they gave a shit about her career choice once they saw what she'd become? I dunno, maybe it's the whole freezing process. I mean, c'mon, Sammy, you said it yourself, why wasn't this whole deal high profile? Laura is the first person to ever be full on thawed. I'm telling you, the only reason it's not in the papers is because CryoGen know they created a monster!"

*No, we did...* Sam huffed and shook his head. "Maybe we all have a monster inside us somewhere..."

The remark wasn't meant to hurt. It wasn't meant to bite into his brother's heart as if he'd plunged a knife there, but still, Sam knew from Dean's reaction that his words had done just that.

How could he ever explain that he wasn't talking about the demon within Dean, but about his own gifts? How could he ever tell Dean that it was his own torment he spoke of? Every minute, every hour he constantly thought of Haris and his veiled threats. *Am I the monster? Am I to become evil, using the abilities I was given to hurt or worse?*

Still, his own petty qualms were of little significance now. He could fight his own destiny far more easily than Dean could with Haris's child inside him. "Dean, I didn't mean..."

The elder hunter turned away again, this time more out of hurt feelings than rage. Sam just didn't understand the pressure he was under, Sam didn't know the constant torment from the thing inside his sibling, but worst of all, Sam didn't realize the psychological burn his lack of confidence caused. *He'll never trust me like this...*

Dean's now steady hands slid into his jacket pockets and he stole a glance at the duty station in the corner. He'd been there six times already to ask if there was any news on Kyle's condition, but what the hell, what was one more time, right? Enquiring about the injured priest was far more productive than having Sam try to convince him they'd been wrong to once exorcize Laura, not to mention have his brother's puppy dog eyes glance at him one more time to make sure he was "still really Dean."

"Dude, I'm going to ask about Kyle." He pushed his shirt sleeve back and checked the time. "Feels like hours already..."

Sam watched as his brother swaggered up to the pretty brown haired girl at the desk and start to flirt. It was his mask, his façade to push away all the hurt in his life, and maybe Dean deserved that one guilty pleasure after all he'd suffered. *I need to back off. He's had enough already.*

"I'll go get coffee." Sam raised his voice just loud enough to be sure Dean heard him over the top of his best pick up lines, and then the younger Winchester turned and headed for the drinks machine in the outer corridor. Lots of disturbingly black, caffeine enriched pleasure sounded like an awfully good plan, suddenly.

\* \* \* \*

Sam padded down the brightly lit passageway, his left hand slipping into his jeans pocket to rummage for spare change. He wasn't really sure how long it had been since he and Dean had earned a real wage from a paying gig, and actual cash was in short supply.

They always had their phony credit cards to fall back on, but they weren't much use when it came down to coins for occasions like this. After sifting through several more pockets, Sam eventually mustered up enough to buy two black coffees.

"So need to get a real job and retire from hunting," he mumbled to no one in particular as he slid the coins into the awaiting slot and pressed "black, no sugar."

The machine buzzed and a Styrofoam cup dropped, the hot water seeming to take forever to start to pour as Sam waited impatiently. *I should never have argued with Dean about Laura while he's...while he's so upset...* An image of eyes black and malevolent watching him made the young hunter shiver and he abruptly wished the hospital he now stood in could surgically remove the hellish thing inside his brother. *If only it were that simple...*

A short beep indicated the first coffee was ready and Sam slid it out, selecting another for Dean. While he waited again he looked around, hoping he wasn't holding anyone up with the long-winded contraption before him.

Luckily, it seemed like not many people were getting hurt in Big Bear today, leaving the waiting room and adjoining corridor free for the Winchesters to argue and mope in – at least, almost free.

As Sam juggled to grab the second cup of coffee, he caught movement to his right. It was only a fleeting swatch of color in an otherwise blandly decorated area, and could easily have been a simple visitor or worker. But still, he was compelled by some sixth sense to look up and get a better view of the newcomer.

Sam sighed as he realized the girl was just a nurse scurrying away from him and into the next section of the building. She was a medium-sized blonde, not exceptionally pretty, but not unpleasing to the eye, either. Dean would have loved to work his charms on her, no doubt.

Sam frowned, quickly settling the two coffees down to jog to the end of the hallway and take another look. The nurse was familiar – too familiar in fact. The uniform had been a distraction, taking his focus away from her features, but the more he thought about it, the more she reminded him of Laura Mitchell. *What if she followed us here somehow to finish off Kyle?*

It was an impossible, crazy notion, but then Laura *had* been certified insane at one point after her "retrieval."

Forgetting the much-needed caffeine break, Sam began to cautiously follow the girl. If it really was Laura, he had to get closer. He had to be sure before he approached her that he wasn't accusing a totally innocent young nurse.

Keeping a safe distance, Sam tailed the girl until she turned into a second corridor. At the intersection, he waited a few seconds, back to the wall, not wanting her to hear his soft footfalls on the linoleum and turn to catch him.

After counting under his breath, he swung his overly-tall body out into the passageway and scanned its length for the nurse. "Crap!"

The blonde had somehow vanished as if she'd hit superspeed.

Sam chided himself for the miscalculation and checked out the arrows on the walls displaying different sections of the hospital. According to the markers, there were four rooms or areas off of the corridor. To complicate things, there was no one around to ask if they'd seen the girl.

Sam paused, wondering if he should return to the waiting area and get his brother. *Yeah right, and he'll cream my ass if this is just some poor nurse and my overactive imagination...*

Sam didn't want to go there. He didn't want to aggravate Dean more with the possible presence of Laura, only for it to turn out to be a real nurse.

Slipping a hand under his jacket, Sam let his fingers ease over his Glock and pull it free. With a flick of his forefinger, he levered the safety off and walked forward, keeping the weapon hidden from view as he approached the first room off the passageway and stepped inside. *Where the hell is everybody?*

Sam's gaze fell on the long metal wall of drawers and instantly realized he was in the hospital morgue. How many bodies lay in front of him, hidden from view?

The hunter felt a small chill run down his back, despite having dug up more corpses than he could remember. He hated these places, he hated the empty hollow feeling he got every time he walked into one. Perhaps it was the clinical, almost cold environment that made death seem so hollow and unfeeling, so pointless, maybe that was what he hated.

Sam gritted his teeth and tugged the Glock from its hiding place, fully intending sweeping the room for his target.

This time, though, the hunter had become the hunted far more quickly than he could ever have imagined. A short creak from the door hinges was the only warning sound Sam heard, but it was all too late to save him.

The hunter tried to whirl around and take aim, but before his gun even made it to chest height, he felt something sharp digging into the flesh of his neck.

Sam panicked, his Glock clattering to the floor as he frantically grabbed at the needle Laura had stuck into him. He could see her eyes glistening, enjoying, savoring his fear.

As he tried to turn, she smiled, pressing hard on the plunger to release the syringe's contents into his bloodstream. Only moments later, Sam Winchester felt every muscle in his body begin to relax, and even though he struggled against it, he quickly joined his weapon face first on the recently mopped morgue floor.

\* \* \* \*

Dean sauntered from the enquiry desk, carefully slipping the girl on duty's number into his top pocket as he looked around for Sam. He'd been talking for over fifteen minutes and that meant Sammy should already have been back with the coffees, and yet, there was no sign of him.

*He's still pissed at me...*

Dean shrugged, a niggling feeling of unease quickly growing into out and out concern. Even if Sam was angry about what had happened with the Mitchell girl, he wouldn't do anything about it – not here, not now.

If Sam was one thing it was dependable. He wouldn't argue until they were back at the motel and they had answers about Kyle. *Maybe he's madder than I thought? Hell, I guess he has a right to be. Maybe I don't know anything anymore. Maybe the damn thing inside me has more control than I do...*

Dean pushed off the idea that this was about the demon. If Sam was mad, it was about exorcizing the Mitchell girl's spirit in the first place, and the demon hadn't been around back then.

"So where the hell did you go, Sammy boy?"

The elder hunter let a hand slide to his jacket pocket to feel for the Impala's keys through the material. When his fingers felt the bulge from the metal he frowned. If Sam had taken the car, he'd have had to hotwire it. *He definitely wasn't THAT mad!*

Ignoring the fact that it was without doubt inconsiderate to run in a hospital corridor, Dean broke into a sprint, heading for the main double doors of the facility.

Once his eyes met the full glass partition that made up the main entrance, he slowed, realizing he could already see the familiar bulky frame of the Impala where he'd haphazardly parked it in his haste to get Kyle inside. *He hasn't taken the car...*

Dean felt the butterflies in his stomach turn into full fledged dragons that were trying to burn their way out at any cost. Something was wrong, so very wrong.

*No matter how pissed Sammy is at me, he wouldn't leave mid-gig like this, not with Kyle so badly hurt...*

\* \* \* \*

## **Bear Valley Community Hospital Morgue**

Sam could sense the cold metal of the morgue drawer touching his naked back, but he couldn't flinch. It was as if every part of his body had turned numb, unfeeling - paralyzed by whatever had been in Laura's syringe.

At first, he'd been afraid she had out and out poisoned him, but then, that wasn't her style. She was a tormentor, a teaser who liked to make her victims suffer prolonged misery before they died.

Just what method of torture she had planned next was anybody's guess, but from his current position, Sam didn't like the possibilities. The morgue held an abundance of tools and instruments for cutting into a human body, including a variety of saws he was glad were not presently in his field of vision.

"It's nice to see you again, Sam..." Laura hovered over the hunter's paralyzed form, running her forefinger tantalizingly down his bare chest until her nail began to dig into his

flesh, forming a deep weal. She kept her face close to his, letting his frozen gaze keep her in view. "Did you get a kick out of bursting into my cabin, guns blazing? I know you did..."

Laura stepped back, flicking strands of her blonde hair over her shoulders defiantly. "Now it's my turn to get the kick, hunter. My turn to watch as you feel the same thing I did all those years ago. You're going to feel the cold, the chill of being alone, entombed with no chance of any kind of escape..."

Sam watched as her soulless eyes seemed to darken further, but he was helpless. He wanted to close his eyelids, to will his muscles to work using his gifts if he had to, but his whole body had been anaesthetized to the point where any kind of movement was simply impossible.

To add to the indignity, Laura had removed his clothes and merely covered his lower half with a sheet. *If I get out of this, Dean is so going to make my life hell...*

"Can you imagine what it was like for me? My spirit watching over my body as those butchers at CryoGen drilled my skull, pumped my body full of insidious chemicals..." Laura edged closer again, grabbing Sam's chin and yanking his head hard over until he was staring directly into her cavernous eyes. "CAN YOU!?" She almost screamed. "Can you imagine what it's like to be frozen, your soul trapped with no chance to pass over?"

Sam couldn't, but then, perhaps if help didn't arrive soon, Laura would show him. *Dean! He'll know I'm missing. He'll come looking for me.* All Sam could do was think, hope, and pray, because his crippled body would allow nothing more. But would Dean ever look here? Voices of uncertainty began to hover at the edges of his subconscious, questioning what little chance he had of being rescued. Voices Laura wanted him to hear, wanted him to listen to, just like she had. *Dean won't look in the morgue...not until it's too late...*

"Time for you to take a nice ice-cold nap, Winchester." Laura moved to the wall, and although Sam couldn't see what she was doing, he guessed she was altering the thermostat that controlled the drawers. *Do they get cold enough to freeze?* Sam really didn't know, and didn't want to know.

"Now who shall we make you today?" The blonde slid open another drawer and carefully removed something from the cadaver inside. She looked at the item in her grasp and nodded, satisfied with her selection.

Moving back to Sam, she tugged back the sheet covering his feet and hastily tied a toe tag to his right foot, essentially giving him a new identity when the coroner or morgue staff came to collect.

Laura smirked as she pulled the sheet back over his feet and then folded the remaining cloth over his head, enshrouding him in its full length. "Bye bye, Sam, or should I say Mr. Richards..."

Sam felt the metal he was laid out on begin to move as Laura pushed on it, making it glide into position inside the cooler. Cold air met his body, and he absently wondered if the hairs on his skin were sticking up, or were they paralyzed too?

As the drawer came to rest, the metal door at his feet slammed closed with a tinny thump that somehow sounded final to the hunter. It was dark, it was cold, but most of all, beneath the sheet in the tiny confines of the drawer, it was claustrophobic.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

In the silence of the morgue wall, Sam could hear the rapid beat of his own heart thudding in his chest. *I have to stay calm. Dean will find me...*

And Dean did always rescue his little brother, didn't he? Even when his mind had been attacked and invaded by the demon, he had cut the bonds that had held Sam to the altar in Haris hideout. But then, Dean couldn't always play the hero. He had no way of knowing Sam's whereabouts this time. No way to ever dream Sammy would be impersonating a dead guy. *I should never have doubted him because of the damn demon.*

But Sam *had* doubted Dean, and now as the last few months of his life began to flash before him, he was regretting it. What if he died here? What if the last words Dean had heard from his brother's mouth were that he was some kind of monster?

Sam tried to take a calming deep breath, he tried to mollify the depression and fear that were overwhelming him, but nothing seemed to work, just like the limbs of his tranquilized body.

A new sound ricocheted off the tiny compartment's metal walls, grating on his ears until he was forced to focus on it. With a sudden realization Sam knew he recognized the horrific sound of an electric saw cutting its way through bone. *I'm hearing the coroner work on a body...*

If Sam could have screamed out, he would have, because his next thought brought a sickening awareness that this was why Laura had left him here. *I'm probably next on the autopsy list...*

\* \* \* \*

## Waiting Area

Dean fidgeted on his chair, every few minutes glancing around the now half full waiting room in the hopes that his brother appeared with two coffees and a lame excuse for where he'd been.

If it were any other guy, Dean would have surmised the young hunter had probably been sweet talking a pretty nurse somewhere, but this was Sammy. Sammy didn't do sweet talk very well. Hell, Sammy didn't use pick up lines on girls period, lately.

*Something is wrong...*

Dean pulled his cell from his jacket pocket and hit "dial" for Sam's number. Even as he pressed the phone to his ear he could already hear the voicemail kicking in.

"I'm sorry, but you can't use that in here..." The hunter looked up and scowled as a rather plump nurse pointed at his cell and then the main entrance doors. "If you want to talk on that thing, sonny, you better go outside. Hospital rules..."

Dean flipped his phone closed and quickly rose from his seat, cursing under his breath as he headed for the door. Halfway across the room, he turned to see if the nurse from hell was watching him vacate the building, and when she wasn't, he quickly slipped down the nearest corridor fully intent on finding a quiet spot to try Sam's cell again.

The long passageway was empty and Dean sighed with relief, flipping his phone back open. "C'mon, Sammy, where the hell are you hiding?" He waited, listening as the tone changed and Sam's voicemail kicked in once again. "Shit!"

Dean stuffed his cell in his back pocket and turned, considering actually going back to the duty station and asking if a message could be put out on the hospital public address system. *Jeez, it's like I've lost a little kid instead of a damn adult Sasquatch here...*

The hunter hadn't made it more than two strides, however, when something new caught his eye. There was a pretty blonde nurse just turning into the next corridor and she seemed far too familiar for his mind to be playing tricks on him. *Laura!*

Quickening his gait, Dean almost broke into a sprint as he gave chase to the elusive, fake nurse. The very idea that she was in the hospital only fuelled his suspicions that Sam was way more than pissed at him, he was missing, and not of his own accord.

If Laura remembered even half of what had happened back at CryoGen, the elder hunter suspected both Winchesters would be on her "to do" list – and not in a good way. Maybe she'd decided if they were in town she may as well kill them next. *Sammy!*

Skidding to a halt at the next intersection, Dean glanced both ways, considering which way the girl might have headed. There was no sign of her in either direction, but somehow he suspected she hadn't gone far.

A prickling sensation began to build all the way along his spine, heightening his reasoning and sharpening his senses. Dean didn't try to push the feeling away, even though he knew its source was the thing within him.

The demon had its uses, and right now if it meant saving Sam's life, he was going to utilize them.

Dean's hand unconsciously slid to his waistband, and despite the multitude of security cameras placed around the hospital, he carefully pulled out his favorite forty-five, keeping it covered by his jacket. Laura was here somewhere close, the demon sensed it. *He sensed it. / use you, you sonofabitch, just you remember that...*

Something metallic clattered in the nearest room, and Dean's ears honed in on it, some inner part of his psyche, or maybe the demon's, warning him that this was wrong, so very wrong. *She's trying to trap me...*

His fingers tensed over his automatic's trigger and he slid it free from the confines of his coat as he followed the rattling sound. The area appeared empty, but then Dean knew that appearances were often deceptive. He spun around, checking behind the door, but there was nothing.

A cabinet hung from the wall, its mirrored doors tossing Dean's reflection back at him as he scanned the room. *Don't look...you might not like what you see...*

The taunt came from the demon, mocking him, urging him to look for the flash of black that signaled its dominant presence. Dean ignored the voice, ignored the jibe and pressed further into the room.

The hunter's hazel eyes locked on a screen on the far corner. It was the only place left for someone to be hiding, waiting for their moment. "Okay, Laura, come on out, the gig's up..." He watched, aiming his weapon at the partition in anticipation that the girl might try a full frontal attack if she was cornered.

The screen moved and Laura walked calmly out from her hideaway. She smiled, flicking her blonde hair over her shoulder in a habit that had stayed with her from beyond the grave. "You won't hurt me, Winchester. You can't. Not if you want to save your brother from the death chill..."

"You're insane..." Dean's lips puckered in disgust and he reaffirmed his grip on the forty-five. He could feel the fine beads of sweat forming on his palms, he could feel the anger within him wanting, needing to take control.

"Maybe I am, but if you want little Sammy to live, you'll put the gun down..." Laura reached out and the hunter flinched. His instinctive recoil brought another small smirk from her and she let her hand continue on its way, caressing the barrel of his weapon and then moving along to his hand.

Dean swallowed hard, his body quivering with pent up rage as he was torn between pulling the trigger and saving his brother's life. Laura's touch was abhorrent. It was cold, as if her fingers were still somehow frozen in the liquid nitrogen that had preserved her for almost a decade.

"Put the gun down, Dean..."

Dean backed up slightly and glanced to the still empty corridor. If he placed the forty-five on the floor, Laura would surely grab it and shoot him. If he didn't at least feign compliance he may never know where Sam was, at least not in time to save him. *If he isn't already...*

Dean whirled the gun around with its trigger guard and tossed it out into the open corridor behind him. Its clatter on the linoleum told him it was well out of Laura's reach unless she managed to somehow pass him.

"Okay, Ice Maiden, now what? Cos I'm telling you, gun or not, you so ain't getting out of this room..." The hunter held his arms open, blocking the insane girl's path to the door.

Laura nodded. This was going to be fun. Freezing people was the ultimate revenge, but she was quickly finding it held little pleasure for her – not like the blood.

Seeing her victims cut open, bleeding, pleading for their miserable lives was so much more satisfying. She noted a covered tray and quickly knocked it over, clamoring with her icy fingers for something that might do damage. Anything with a blade she could enjoy twisting into Winchester's gut like she had the priest.

Laura's hand locked on a scalpel and she tossed it savagely at Dean. It was too small, too insignificant for her kind of sadistic torture.

Dean bobbed, dodging the flying blade with much more agility than the girl would have given him credit for. He was faster than she last remembered, but then little did she know he had still been recovering from life-threatening injuries that time, or that he had a very powerful demon onboard this.

Laura snarled like a wildcat as Dean dived forward and caught her wrist, twisting it behind her back. He was good, so very good, but she wasn't done for yet. Thrusting her elbow in his stomach, she simultaneously whirled, yanking her hand free from his grasp.

For the briefest of seconds as she moved, their eyes locked, and Laura instantly froze. Gone were the sparkling hazel spheres filled with their cocky glint, replaced by some unfathomable black void that mimicked her own empty, soulless psyche. It was like looking into a mirror, and for the first time since her retrieval, Laura felt fear.

Dean seized the moment, regaining his grip on her forearm and pinning it behind her back. Before she could use her extraordinary strength to pull free again, he tugged a cable tie from his pocket and secured her wrists together. Once she was secure, he pushed her down onto a small chair in the corner.

"Bastard!" Laura spat out the word like a seasoned biker rather than a young college girl, her eyes glowing with a sudden hatred that hid the empty abyss behind them.

Dean hunkered down until he was level with her, his own eyes returning to their usual mirthful glint. "So they tell me," his smile never faltered. "But at least I'm a human bastard, sweetheart. You, I don't consider any better than some whacked out zombie from a Romero movie. So if I were you, I'd start talking..."

Laura turned her head until she was staring at the white painted walls. "I already died once, Winchester. What are you going to do? Kill me again? Kind of redundant, don't you think?"

Dean grabbed the bottom of her chin and twisted, forcing her to look at him again. "Do you want to go back? Because I can arrange it. Pretty cold there I hear. Lots of time to reflect..." He let go, standing to his full height. "Now what have you done with my brother?"

"Oh...I think *he's* already there. Maybe our souls will party together on the other side." Laura licked her lips, making sure Dean watched every last sensuous movement of her tongue. "But then, you already got rid of my soul, didn't you? Pity then I can't feel sorry for your little brother..."

"Bitch..." Dean felt his hands clench and unclench, even though he was sure his brain hadn't given the order. He was tempted to look in the cabinet mirror, just to be sure, but then he couldn't know how he'd react if his eyes belonged to some damn demon again.

Instead, he slowly ambled out into the corridor, looking left to right to make sure the area was clear. Once he was certain they were still alone, he retrieved his discarded weapon and took a moment to think.

Laura was determined not to tell where Sam was, but in the short time she'd had to hurt or hide him, he couldn't be that far away. *If he's even alive...*

On a whim, Dean once again plucked his cell from his back pocket. Hitting speed dial for the last time he listened intently, expecting the same laborious voicemail to assault his ears.

*Lay down a list of what is wrong  
The things you've told him all along  
And pray to God he hears you  
And pray to God he hears you*

The song he had chided his brother over filled the long passageway with its tinny resonance, and Dean's head snapped up, instantly following the sound of Sam's cell.

*How to save a life...*

Maybe he didn't hate the ringtone after all. Maybe its words held a special significance he'd never appreciated before.

*How to save a life...*

Dean's frenetic gaze stopped on a sole gurney sitting idle outside an area clearly marked as the morgue. *Morgue as in for dead people...*

Pulling the sheet back from the trolley he felt the contents of his stomach almost leap into his throat. There were discarded clothes strewn haphazardly, and sitting on top of the very familiar garb was Sam's phone.

*Morgue...*

Dean ignored the bile that was burning his gullet and spun around, diving into the mortuary without even caring to look for an attendant. The room appeared empty, save for the wall of shiny silver drawers mocking him as his reflection bounced back off them.

"Sammy!" Dean began to tug on every handle, pulling out drawers and the bodies they held indiscriminately as he scoured the morgue for his brother. "Sammy!"

Each new body, each new empty drawer only brought further frustration until he slammed a fist down on a nearby instrument tray, smashing its contents to the floor with his unrestrained strength.

"Hey, you can't do that in here! I'm calling security!" A small, dark-skinned man wearing hospital attire froze in the doorway, amazed that anyone would want to trash a morgue.

Dean held up a hand. "Hey, no, wait!" He moved his palm slowly to his top jacket pocket. "It's not what you think. I can explain..." Pulling out a small leather badge holder, he flipped it open to show a completely fake set of credentials. "I'm on a case. I need to find a specific body and fast. Young guy, tall as hell. I'm thinking he hasn't been here that long..."

The little man who Dean guessed was probably Mexican leaned forward, scanning the fake badge for a moment until his dark, beady eyes were tiny pin pricks. Eventually, he rubbed a hand across his mouth absently. "I don't think we've had any new cases in this morning..."

"Will you JUST LOOK!" Dean's last words were loud and harsh, his facial expression a veil that only allowed half of the panic he was feeling to show.

"Okay, okay, but I'm telling you, next time you cops trash my morgue like this I'm filing an official complaint!" The worker began methodically checking down a list of bodies and the

names associated with them. When none fit Dean's description, he shrugged and carefully popped open the remaining drawers the "cop" hadn't already left undone. "See, no young dude, no tall dude, and no young, tall dude..."

\* \* \* \*

### **Coroner's Table The Next Room...**

Sam didn't know how long he'd been in the cooler drawer, or how long he'd waited on the table once he'd been moved. He was still covered by the sheet as someone worked around him, their slightest movements making him want to flinch as he heard the clatter of metal instruments being prepared.

Maybe the passage of time didn't matter anyway, because the young hunter was well aware of where he'd been taken. This was the place he'd heard the sawing noises coming from – this was the place where human bodies were taken apart. *I'm in the morgue and I can't even blink!*

As a hunter, he'd heard tales of such things happening in darker, earlier times. People who had been thought dead and who had been taken, buried, and years later found to have been interred alive. *Cry...I need to cry, anything to make them see...*

Sam tried to force his eyes to water, tried to make those oh so heavy lids move and blink just once, ready for when the sheet was removed, but his muscles simply wouldn't work. It was a kind of living death Laura had planned well, and if he didn't find a solution soon, a plan so perfect it would prove fatal.

The white sheet was abruptly pulled back and the overhead lights made Sam's eyes want to smart. He wanted, needed to shield his face with a hand to stop the brilliant glow bombarding his senses, but instead, all he could do was look on as the coroner chose his instrument of choice.

The saw he'd heard earlier waited along with a plethora of other vile looking tools, goading him, needing him to see its harsh cutting edge, but still, that wouldn't be the first thing he felt bite into his flesh. He knew enough about autopsies to realize that.

Sam tried to blink again, and this time his eyelids almost obeyed. He felt the briefest of flutters and relief washed over him. There was still a chance, still time for the medical examiner to realize his next patient was far from ready for the cemetery. *Please look up! Please! Look me in the eye before you cut! PLEASE!*

The coroner didn't hear the silent pleas and continued, choosing a scalpel to make his first incision in Sam's chest.

The gloved hand moved forward, the owner's gaze so focused on performing the autopsy that he didn't see the panicked, tear-filled eyes that watched him – eyes that were forced to see the acutely sharp blade as it sliced into his flesh, blood beginning to pool around its tip as Sam screamed silently in his head.

\* \* \* \*

Dean looked at the attendant and then back at the rows of still-open drawers before him. Cold, harsh drawers, devoid of any heat.

*Not if you want to save your brother from the death chill...*

Laura's voice in the hunter's head was like a slap across the cheek – it awakened senses momentarily numbed by his panic, and realization hit home. "Where are the bodies moved after here?"

The little Mexican shrugged. "Next room, man. In fact a colleague just took one through not ten minutes ago..."

"Shit!" Dean bounded for the nearby door, his silver automatic still firmly in his grasp. As he burst into the autopsy room, he skidded to a halt, his eyes locking on the coroner and the body he was hovering over. "Move away from the table..." Dean tugged his weapon up with both hands, settling its barrel in line with the surprised medical examiner. "NOW!"

The coroner dropped the bloodied scalpel in his grasp and raised both palms towards Dean. "There's nothing in here of value. No drugs..."

Dean's gaze moved between the M.E. and the table as he carefully walked forward. Once he was close enough to get a good view of the body, he took down a sharp breath and momentarily closed his eyes. It was Sam, and he was bleeding from a small incision the doctor had just begun to make. *Please say he's not dead. Wait, corpses don't bleed like that...*

Dean's eyes snapped back open just in time to see the terrified coroner make a dive for the door, instruments clattering in his wake as he clumsily barged into the trolley that held them in blind panic.

The elder Winchester spun around to give chase, but then thought better of it. Sam needed his attention right now. By the time their M.E. friend returned with security they could be long gone. *If Sammy is...*

"Sam!" Dean stuffed his forty-five into his belt and quickly pressed a hand to his brother's neck. He exhaled deeply again, taut muscles suddenly relaxing a touch when the throb of blood he felt beneath his fingers was good and strong. "What the hell did she do to you, little brother?"

Sam's moisture-filled eyes looked back in relief and he at last managed to gurgle out his first words since being paralyzed. "Druggge...eed mee..."

Dean's expression changed, but he didn't dwell on his anger. That would only allow the demon within to manipulate him again, and he didn't want Sam seeing that right now. "Just hold on..."

Dean began to rummage through nearby cabinets until he found a roll of gauze. Tearing off a sizable piece, he returned to his brother and pulled Sam into a sitting position, pressing the makeshift bandage over the cut to his chest.

As he held his brother upright, Sam's skin felt cold to Dean's touch, and he shuddered as he imagined what his sibling must have gone through. If he'd been the kind of guy that bear hugged, he would have, but that just wasn't Dean's style.

"Can you hold this in place while I fetch your clothes?" Dean raised a brow, noting his brother was gaining some movement back in his hands.

"Lau...ra..."

Dean nodded, not quite understanding the meaning behind Sam's slurred warning. "Yeah, I know, don't worry about her. I have the Ice Maiden all tied up and no place to go..."

Sam's eyes widened more and their direction shifted just enough for Dean to understand that he wasn't simply stating facts; he was sending out an alarm signal that his disjointed voice box couldn't manage.

"Shit!" Dean let go of Sam just in time to duck as a metal tray was slammed down where his head would have been.

Spinning on the balls of his feet he managed to grab his assailant's forearm and twist. A yelp of anger in response signaled that Laura was back, and she was pissed even more than before. In her right hand, she had somehow acquired yet another syringe full of the unknown paralytic drug, and had every intention of Dean feeling its effects.

The elder hunter squeezed the girl's arm, utilizing the extra strength at his disposal in the hope that Laura would drop the needle. Instead, she screamed out, yanking back her arm even though the pressure was almost enough to break her bones.

Surprised at the strength her crazed psyche could muster, Dean almost let go as Laura attempted to jar free. Sensing his fleeting lapse of concentration, Laura made a wild jab for the hunter's neck with the syringe but missed as he sidestepped the attack and quickly turned the needle back on its owner.

"Sleepy time, bitch..." Dean emptied the syringe into Laura's neck and hoped it contained the same substance she'd given Sam. He might be a hunter, but poisoning someone – even Laura, was not something he wanted on his resume.

Laura's eyes flared in a wild show of their natural color and she groaned, realizing she had been entrapped with her own snare. "Bastard..." Before she could finish her barrage of insults, her knees buckled and she hit the floor at least as hard as Sam had earlier.

Dean shook his head, looking down at her now docile form with a look of revulsion. Maybe CryoGen had made the girl crazy, but somehow, he doubted it. The world managed to spawn enough killers without science's intervention, and he suspected Laura had always been right up there with the best of them. She'd just needed a little push for her dark side to surface, that was all.

The hunter nudged Laura gently with the front of his boot, checking to make sure that she wasn't faking unconsciousness. "Ghosts I get..." he shrugged.

"Dea...n, we need to get out of her...e." Sam seemed to rock back and forth a little as his body still struggled to stay upright by itself. "Security..."

Dean nodded, realizing they had a new problem. "Yeah, and we can't just drag Miss. Freaky here through the hospital while she's out cold. Not to mention your scalpel happy buddy *Quincy* got a pretty good look at me and what I was wearing."

"We need new clothes. Something that will help us go unnoticed." Sam wriggled on the metal slab, testing just how much control he had over his muscles. His voice was getting stronger and less garbled, maybe his limbs would soon follow in their recovery.

"Yeah, right, there's a whole bunch of fashion houses for us to choose from, Sammy. If only I'd brought my credit card..." Dean eyed an empty gurney in the middle of the room and considered putting his brother on it to wheel him out. For that ruse to work he'd need an orderly's uniform, though.

The elder hunter measured up the possibilities and was about to check out the other rooms along the corridor for something to wear when a thought hit him. "Sammy, you think you can walk?"

Sam carefully moved his legs over the side of the slab and let them take his weight. Amazingly, his knees managed to hold his lanky form, despite the trembling in his muscles. "I'm not ready for any marathons but I think I can make it outside. What's your plan?"

"Profession change." Dean quirkily raised a brow and then leaned over Laura, pulling her limp body into his arms with just one tug. She seemed so innocent, so demure while she was sleeping, but that didn't fool the hunter about what was really inside. *She has the devil in her...just like me...*

"Huh?" Sam watched as his brother laid the girl onto the gurney and quickly covered her paralyzed figure with one of the sheets used to swathe cadavers.

"We need to get Laura out, and we need to get out. Easiest way is to act like a couple of orderlies or something. We can wheel this bitch right out of here and non one will ask questions..." Dean shrugged. "Course, we gotta find the right clothes first. It's not like I can go mug the staff around here..."

Sam looked at the white-faced clock on the wall. It had been one of the only things he could see while he'd been paralyzed – that and the scalpel coming towards him. He pushed the latter thought from his mind, concentrating on the time. "Dean, just how long does it take to get security in a place like this, because the doc's been gone ten minutes already..." He looked down at his naked body, wondering just where they could get any clothes in time for an escape, let alone hospital uniforms, then, it hit him. "Dean, over there!"

Dean eyes followed the direction of Sam's tremulous hand as it pointed to a bin. The yellow container was clearly marked up for the disposal of clothes from the bodies should they not be required again. "You want me to wear some stiff's gear? Are you nuts? No way, man!" The sideways glance that was meant to be one of disgust simply brought a smile to his brother's face.

"We don't have time to be choosy, Dean." Sam took a tentative step towards the bin; keeping a shaky grip on the metal slab should his legs suddenly decide not to cooperate with his brain.

Once he reached the container, he used one hand to steady himself, and the other to toss over the items in the tub, searching for something to put on. If there was something they could use as a disguise, then all the better, but right now he'd settle for anything.

After a moment, the hunter found a couple of suits. One looked a perfect match for Dean's size, the other would probably be a little short on the arms for his freakily tall frame, but he could make do. He plucked the first black jacket out and offered it up to his brother. "We could use these to pass as a couple of guys from the local funeral director's. Even on the security cameras it won't look out of place..."

"Dude, suits I hate. Dead guys' suits, I just don't *do!*" Dean backed up, waving a hand negatively as the jacket was tossed his way. When he realized Sam wasn't joking, his face puckered even more in disgust, but he retrieved the suit from where it had landed. "Probably came off some guy with a contagious disease, knowing my luck..."

"Dean, will you just hurry!" Sam slipped on a white shirt and began to struggle to button it. His fingers were still unsteady from Laura's concoction, and to make matters worse he suspected the shirt was a size too small. "Talk about vain..." He watched as Dean reluctantly pulled off his favorite jacket and slid on the clothing he'd been given, checking himself out in the reflection of one of the metal cabinets nearby.

Dean huffed, fumbling to hastily knot a matching tie he'd found. "Monkey suits," he grumbled, re-stuffing his automatic into the pants he'd been given. "Worse still, a stiff's monkey suit..." He turned, finally facing Sam for the first time since they'd begun to change their clothes and his dour expression changed to an ear to ear grin. "Maybe monkey suit is right, cos, man, you sure do got arms like an orangutan. You look like Clyde from those Eastwood movies!"

Sam's eyes rolled so that he could see his reflection in the metal like Dean had moments earlier. The jacket sleeves were almost up to his elbows, but at least the pants weren't too short. That really would have made him look like something out of a thirties slapstick movie. "Can we just go? You can find time to make fun later..."

Dean grinned, his mirth hiding the relief he was feeling at having his brother back in the land of the living – if not exactly wearing the living's attire. "Oh, don't worry, little brother, I will. I owe you big time for makin' me wear the wardrobe from hell..."

He grabbed the edge of Laura's gurney and began to push. When Sam grabbed the other end, the load seemed to triple and Dean realized his sibling was still far from recovered from being drugged. Saying nothing, he continued to shove Laura along, hoping that Sam's slithering gait didn't draw attention to them.

Laura might be a crazed killer, but they might have a hard time proving it to the authorities when they were the ones running around with weapons tucked into their waistbands.

There would already be awkward questions about how Kyle had become injured. If they got caught effectively kidnapping Laura against her will, it might prove difficult to actually bear out any claims they made about the girl. *Especially when her parents had money on their side. Especially when I'm a friggin' wanted man for what that shapeshifter's sorry ass did...*

Dean pushed harder, wanting, needing to escape the confines of the hospital and deal with Laura. Exactly what they could do with the girl eluded him, but there was no way she could be left as part of society. If the law wouldn't or couldn't deal with her, then the Winchesters would have to, one way or another.

"Hurry! He has a gun!" The high-pitched, frenetic timbre of the coroner filled the corridor, echoing down the long hallway along with the staccato thuds of heavy footfalls.

Dean didn't look up, keeping his head low as the entourage of security and hospital staff thundered towards them. He felt the gurney he was pushing falter and realized Sam was slowing. *C'mon, man, don't go giddy on me now...*

He stole a glance up, noting Sam had let go of the gurney to press a hand over his chest. The cut wasn't bad, but maybe it had bled just enough to come through the shirt, and if the guards saw it, it might draw far too much attention.

The sound of racing footsteps changed, signaling the group had begun to slow. Was security on to them?

"Hey, have you two seen a guy in a blue jacket and jeans heading this way? He'd be my height? Kinda looks like some junkie looking to score a fix..." The first uniformed guard came to a halt in front of Sam, his burly frame and already drawn sidearm making it quite clear he thought he was some kind of die hard macho man ready to take down anyone who messed with him.

Sam didn't waver, still keeping his hand over his shirt to hide the bloodstain. "No, sir. Truth is we haven't seen anyone since we picked up the body. Is something going on?" He asked innocently, shooting the brawny man a scared rabbit expression. "Only our boss, he kinda wants this one back before this afternoon is up. Running late with the whole embalming thing, you know?"

The security guard eyed the gurney, considering whether to check on the corpse beneath. But then again, after some of the garish sights he'd seen brought into the ER, he wasn't really sure if he'd be prepared for what he might see. Whether he'd ever admit it or not, blood and death just weren't his thing.

"Nothing going on I can't handle." The guard let the coroner and his partner squeeze by, heading back to the morgue in search of their quarry. "Guess you can move it along." He jerked a thumb to the exit as if his word was God in the building. "Hate to see you boys get into trouble for your stiff being late to the party." He laughed at his own lame joke then began to jog after his companions.

Dean looked up as the man vanished down the corridor. "What a jerk...I mean, come on, do I really look like some friggin' junkie?"

Sam just smiled back, savoring the expression of obvious pain on his brother's face his silence caused. Sometimes, Dean was just so easy to rib. Pity there would be payback later.

\* \* \* \*

## **Impala Sometime Later...**

The droning from the tires as the Chevy hurtled along the blacktop was almost hypnotic – almost. But then, Sam didn't have time for the luxury of sleep, nor did he wish to, not after his interment in the morgue drawer. Feeling the sensation that Laura had after death had probably put him off slumber for life.

Sleeping was something everyone took for granted, something the human body needed to function correctly, and yet, when death came and sleep was offered for eternity, well, it wasn't such a welcome thing.

Maybe that was why Sam now felt as if he understood the young girl tied up on the Impala's rear seat. She'd given him a look at what she'd been through, and even though he didn't want to go there again anytime soon, it had been an eye opening experience. *What must it have been like to see her own body being frozen? What did she go through, knowing she was dead, and being forced to watch, to somehow feel everything? And then the seeming infinity of being preserved at CryoGen...*

Sam rubbed absently at the wound under his shirt as he looked in the rear view at Laura. Whatever he had felt back at the hospital, whatever she had felt after being revived, they had caused. *We sent her soul to oblivion. We caused this...*

"Something on your mind, Sasquatch?" Dean stole his gaze from the never-ending road ahead and shot his brother a questioning glance. It wasn't hard to read Sam, and right now he was hurting, and not physically. Sammy was always the one with the conscience, the one who had enough self-derogation for both of them, and then some.

"Dean, what are we going to do with Laura?" Sam didn't look at his brother as he spoke, but instead kept his eyes on the mirror. The girl was still asleep, or at least paralyzed into appearing so, but if his experience was anything to go by, she wouldn't stay that way much longer. What then? It wasn't as if they could slap her on the wrist, tell her to be a good girl and leave her at the side of the road.

Dean licked his lips and then tapped the Chevy's brakes, carefully pulling it onto a small area of dirt track just off the blacktop. When the car settled to a halt he killed the ignition with a deep sigh. "I was afraid you were gonna ask that, Sammy, and I really don't have an answer." He looked up, his own hazel eyes locking with his brother's. "But I'm telling you, just having her in the car is freaking me out. I'm having some seriously bad vibes about this chick. If she's alive, she's a serious threat to the public..."

Sam felt himself go into defense mode without even thinking, and he spun to face his brother with more anger than he'd intended. Maybe it was still the fear that this wasn't Dean talking, but the demon, even though he knew that really wasn't the case.

"So what are you saying? We just take her into some woodland clearing and smoke her, Dean? Is that what we've suddenly become? Cold hearted killers? Because from where I'm sitting we caused this..."

Dean glanced out of the car's side window before answering. Sam was always the voice of reason between them, the one who rationalized things, but this time he was giving Laura way too much leeway because of his own guilt trip.

"Dude, you're looking at things through one big ass pair of rosy-colored glasses, because the only cold-hearted killer around here is the bitch on the back seat." Dean jerked a thumb at Laura, but refused to look at her – he didn't want to see her as human, because she just wasn't anymore. "Have you forgotten Kyle? Have you forgotten how Moses' guts were splayed out all over her cabin, just so she could get a kick?"

Sam dropped his eyes to the Impala's floor in uncertainty. "No," he offered flatly. "But being in that morgue drawer made me see this from both sides. I've felt the things she has, at least, some of them. And I'm telling you, Dean, even for just half an hour holed up in the cold, I was freaking big time."

"So now you're out you're gonna go on a rampage killing everyone and everything for a little revenge? C'mon, dude, she had to be warped to begin with." Dean waited for a reaction, but none came. Eventually, he dared to ask, "So, I'm listening. What the hell do you think we can do with the Ice Maiden seeing as you want to redeem her somehow?" *Is this whole soul*

*saving crap because of what happened to me? He can't save me from the friggin demon so he has to save Laura somehow?*

"I think I have an idea." Sam reached for his cell and realized it had gotten left behind along with his clothes at the hospital. "Can I borrow your phone?"

Dean smirked slightly but dug around in his pocket until he'd retrieved his latest credit card acquisition. He tended to get through more cells than hot meals to keep anonymity, but then, the kind of food he ate that wasn't difficult. "Lost your sissy ring tone along with your phone, huh?" He teased. "So come on, you gonna tell me who you're gonna call?"

Sam took the sleek cell and was tempted to respond "Ghostbusters" but thought better of it. Dean had issues with Laura and he probably wouldn't agree easily to Sam's next plan of attack to try and save her. In the end, he simply answered with a name before dialing. "Joe Bearwalker..."

"Joe "diss my tribe and I'll shoot yer ass off" Bearwalker?" Dean hadn't heard the name in at least five years, but he still held respect for the man it belonged to.

Bearwalker was a Native American spook hunter with attitude. What he knew about the spirit world in his own culture could probably fill half a library. He was also considered a pretty mean shaman to his people, not to mention he was one of only a handful of men who had ever drunk Dean Winchester under the table.

"Sam nodded, waiting for the cell to connect as he pressed it to his ear. "I think we should ask him to try and perform a soul retrieval on Laura. The worst that can happen is that it won't work."

Dean considered it. He'd heard of the procedure before, but never really given it much thought. Some legends he believed in, some tended to just be folklore with nothing to back them up – a sugar coating to make people feel good with no real substance behind them.

*If a shaman **could** retrieve a soul from the other side, could he send one away too? Could he banish the damn thing inside me?* Dean doubted it, but still, the hope, the idea was there. He wouldn't mention it to Sam, there was no point, but the sudden thought at least gave him a chance, a possibility of being saved before the thing within took over him.

*Stay strong*

The constant inner-voice reappeared, reaffirming his yearning to be free. There was a way out, there was a way to send away the demon, and one day he would find it.

*Yeah, right. One day...*

Looking sulkily across the car's interior as Sam babbled hastily into the cell, Dean realized it was getting cold – unnaturally so. To confirm Dean's suspicions, Sam raised a brow back at him as he continued to talk and looked at the Impala's vents for the source of the chilly blast.

*You only see what your eyes want to see*

*How can life be what you want it to be*

*You're frozen*

*When your heart's not open*

Without warning, Madonna's *Frozen* began to reverberate inside the classic, the singer's voice resonating with a bizarre quality that seemed to heighten the temperature drop.

Instantly, Dean's eyes darted to the Impala's possessed radio and then the rear view, knowing what he would see. He'd been through this once before outside CryoGen, and it could only mean Laura was over her little drug-induced interval.

"Hello again, Dean..." Laura's pallid lips mocked him even though she remained bound. "Do your eyes only see what you want them to?" She laughed, tossing her hair back as he unconsciously cringed. "Oh, but wait, they're not always *your* eyes anymore, are they?"

*You're frozen*

*When your heart's not open...*

Dean switched off the radio with a quick twist of his wrist, and when it jerked back into the "on" position he cranked the Impala's engine and revved until the music was drowned out by the screaming V8 engine. *Shit! At least last time she took control of the stereo it was AC/DC not some friggin' sissy pop tune...*

"You know," Dean finally addressed Laura, a slightly awkward grin spreading as Madonna died to a mere hum. "You had better taste in music when you were a stiff..."

\* \* \* \*

## Cabin Somewhere in Big Bear Lake area...

Sam stepped from the Impala with a look of satisfaction spreading broadly across his features. It had taken them over two hours to find the cabin Joe Bearwalker had directed them to, but now they were here, a familiar red 1950 Indian Scout signaled the Tlingit shaman had already arrived. There was still a chance for Laura, still a chance for absolution for the Winchesters.

"Now that's a classic!" Dean slammed the Chevy's creaking door to a close and kneeled carefully to examine the perfect paintwork on the Indian motorcycle leaning outside the lodge.

It was a sleek machine, perfectly restored by the Native American hunter who owned it. Chrome glistened in the California sunlight, reflecting both brothers' shapes and distorting them into something akin to a fairground hall of mirrors.

"So, I wonder where Joe got to?" Sam stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked up onto the cabin's small porch, his eyes scanning the surrounding shrubbery for their father's old time friend.

Dean smiled at his brother's innocent search, knowing it had been a long time since Sam had met the shaman. He'd been an even ganglier teenager back then. *He has a lot to learn about Joe...*

Still grinning, Dean pushed open the cabin's unlocked door and gestured for Sam to go first. Seeing no danger, the younger Winchester stepped inside into the gloom.

The place was spacious for such a structure, with a small pine table and chairs in the center of the room. Joe had picked the perfect place to keep Laura – or rather he'd "borrowed" the perfect place. Bearwalker was a hunter in every essence of the word, preferring the road and his bike to any kind of fixed abode. If he needed a shelter for something like this, he simply found one that was currently uninhabited. Some people might see it as breaking and entering, but to Joe, it was merely putting the building to good use.

"Someone say you boys could come inside?" Sam found the double barrel of a Remington pushed into the middle of his back just enough to feel its shape, and he instantly raised his hands.

Dean ignored the weapon and his brother's cringe and instead faced the man wielding the shotgun. Beady, twinkling eyes peered back at him as the stocky, long-haired hunter emerged from the shadows of his hiding place.

"I thought there were no real Tlingit shamans left in the world, old man..." Dean teased Bearwalker. "You sure you're not just one of those fakes trying to make a buck outta the tourists?"

Joe swung the Remington away from Sam's back and onto the elder brother, his face so stoic Sam wasn't sure what was going on between the two other men in the room. *Macho game, or past argument? Or worse still, maybe Bearwalker has heard from the hunters on our tails and decided to join them...*

"You shouldn't believe everything you read on the internet, Winchester..." Joe waited patiently, finger poised on his Remington's trigger.

"Yeah? You mean that you Chilkat people really *aren't* all raggedy ass drunks?" Dean didn't flinch, but shrugged dismissively.

"You *dissing* my tribe, white man?"

Dean finally laughed. "Dude, never! At least, not while you have a shotgun pointed at my ass!"

Bearwalker's face cracked into an ear to ear grin and he swiftly jerked the shotgun back with his trigger hand until it rested on his shoulder. With his free hand, he tugged out a bottle of bourbon that had been hiding in the shadows with him and tossed it over to Dean. "I saved you a few dregs." He turned to Sam, looking him over as if he was scrutinizing his latest kill. "The last time we met, I swear you were shorter," he eventually offered, shaking his head at what several years of growth could do.

"It's been a long time," Sam admitted. "And I wish we could meet again in better circumstances but..."

"But you have some crazy chick you think I can help you with," Joe finished for him, pointing to the door. "You want to introduce me?"

Dean huffed, taking a slug of the bourbon before leading the way back onto the porch. From their vantage point, they could see Laura huddled on the back seat of the Impala where the brothers had left her bound, but not gagged.

"She just looks like an ordinary gal," Joe noted. "That little thing really cut people up? I mean, she really has no soul?"

Dean nodded, taking a second drink from the bottle. Somehow, the burning liquid gliding down the back of his throat seemed to help mask the fact that while Laura was short of her inner, true being, he had an extra soul hitching a ride. At least, if he drank enough of it, it might.

"She sliced and diced a good friend." He squirmed, moving a hand to his temple as he thought of Kyle lying bloodied at his feet, intestines hanging from his body in a grotesque display of what the human psyche was capable of. "Not to mention she shut Sammy here in a morgue drawer for awhile..."

Joe's brow crinkled in surprise and he looked at Sam before slapping him on the back with a huge hand just a little harder than needed. "So gotta learn you some Tlingit stealth moves sometime...especially as I'm not the only visionary here anymore." The hunter grinned as he spoke, reminding Sam far too much of his brother. Bearwalker might be in his early forties, but he'd never lost his youthful antics.

*God, it's like they're twins...I don't know if I can stand two of them. Please tell me he doesn't like rock music...*

Sam tried not to think about Bearwalker's tastes, and instead focused on their reason for being at the cabin. "Can you help her? I mean, do you think a soul retrieval might work?"

Bearwalker inhaled, slowly letting out the deep breath as he weighed up the situation. Laura was a unique case, totally unlike any other retrieval he'd attempted. She was the first person to ever medically come back from the dead, and the first to have been exorcized quite the way she had. "I don't know," he eventually answered, his mirthful expression now tinged with a sad honesty. "All we can do is try..."

"And what exactly does 'try' entail here? I mean, c'mon, how the hell to you get a soul back from...from where ever the hell it is we banish 'em to?" Dean didn't want to sound disrespectful, but accepting anything so on the fringe wasn't easy – even belief in the supernatural had to end somewhere.

Joe looked at his two companions, sensing Dean's mistrust. The elder hunter might be one heck of a hunter, but he lacked the hope and faith Sam oozed with every sentence.

"To retrieve a lost soul, the shaman must journey to the spirit world and bring it back, piece by piece. It can take weeks." The native hunter slid a hand into his vest pocket and tugged out what looked like a small trinket. He offered the charm to Dean, dropping it into his palm with a wry smile. "It's a soul catcher," he explained. "Hollow animal leg bones carved at each end to resemble the open mouth of an animal, with cedar bark plugs to trap the captured soul. I'd use a larger one for Laura..."

Dean whistled. "You gotta be shitting me, right? You really expect me to believe this might work?" He looked incredulously at Bearwalker, amazed that Sam could actually have confidence in such a ceremony. "Dude, the only spirit world I ever see you traveling to is the bottom of a bottle of Jim Beam!"

"Like I said, more than one journey, lots of risk it might not work." Joe let his deep eyes rest back on Laura, evaluating her as she squirmed inside the Chevy, attempting to loosen her bonds. "And, guys, her soul? It's got to *want* to come back with me..."

"But you'll try?" Sam's pleading little boy expression settled on the seasoned hunter and shaman. "We have to set this wrong right..."

"I'll try," Bearwalker agreed, taking the bottle back from Dean to take one long swig until it was empty. "Gotta keep up my reputation as the best goddamn ixht that *doesn't* exist." He nodded towards the Impala. "Guess you better bring her on up. I've prepared the back room."

"What, no sweat lodge?" Dean feigned shock and ducked as the burly native took a playful swipe at him. "No totem pole or wigwams either?"

Sam sighed and jogged down the porch steps heading for his brother's car. Being around Dean and Bearwalker was almost unbearable, except for the fact that since they'd met with Joe there had been no signs of the demon within his brother. *Is he trying to hide it somehow because he thinks Joe might sense it in him?*

Sam reached out for the Impala's door handle but hesitated. The mirthful wordplay on the wooden loggia had changed to a more reserved, quieter conversation since he'd left. Straining his ears, he attempted to pick out parts of the discussion.

*"So, you can really bring back a soul to an empty shell, huh? Does that mean say, if you had two souls in one body, you could remove one?"*

*"Two souls in one body?" Joe laughed. "You been watching way too much "Star Trek," white boy..."*

Sam's hand recoiled from the metal of the Impala as he realized what Dean was subtly asking the shaman. While on the outside he dismissed Bearwalker's skills, deep down, he was hoping the native could perform a miracle. *He's wondering if Joe can send the demon back to hell, even though we couldn't with the exorcism at Bobby's.*

Maybe it wasn't such a leap of faith, perhaps even Joe could help, but Sam doubted it. The amulet seemed to have bound the demon within Dean so indisputably that he had to wonder if there was a way to ever break the link that now held them together. It was like they had become conjoined twins, inseparable to the end.

And still, he couldn't help but feel Dean's pain, his torment, as if it were his own. Shaking his head, he reached back to the rear door of the Chevy and gently pulled Laura from the seat. She grunted, trying to spit in the face of her captor, but he remained totally unaware.

Instead, Sam's eyes remained on her soulless countenance as they marched up to the chalet, and inside, all he could think of was his brother's plight and how it paralleled Laura's. *We've found a way to help Laura, and we'll find one for you, Dean. I promise...*

\* \* \* \*

Smoke filled the darkened room, curling in gray wisps as it eddied towards the ceiling. Total silence and a strange, almost hypnotic aura made the moment seem mystical – surreal almost.

In the center of the cleared floor, Bearwalker sat with his legs crossed, palms resting on his knees in an upturned, open pose. His eyes were closed, and he appeared to be meditating, a large soul catcher laid out on the woven rug before him, one end open.

Either side of the shirtless, sweat-drenched shaman were two other figures, both seated on a wooden chair, their hands bound behind their backs.

To the left, Laura's delicate, innocent looking form sat meekly, her head bowed in apparent submission. And to the right, Dean Winchester filled the second seat, his head cocked back in defiance.

Sam watched, transfixed as he realized just what he was looking at. This wasn't just Laura's first "retrieval." It was something more. Something so frightening he wanted to steal his eyes away and stare into the shadows.

*"Look into my eyes and tell me what you see, Sammy..."*

Sam's head jerked back and he automatically was forced to lock eyes with Laura, even though he didn't want to. *Nobody calls me that; only Dean.*

Black bottomless pits instead of pupils stared back at him, and the girl leered, her facial contortions reminding him just how much hate she held inside.

*"Better still, why not look into your brother's eyes? Why not see the truth, that he and I are no different? What's hidden inside always comes out in the end, Sammy..."*

Sam screwed his eyes tightly shut and balled both fists, banging them repeatedly into his temple as if it would push away the voice taunting him. The voice, however, continued, goading, insisting, until he had to look. He had to see the truth for himself.

Sam dared to open his eyelids and stare across beyond the meditating shaman to his brother. Laura was wrong, she had to be. Dean was still Dean.

The younger Winchester took a breath as Dean's head abruptly jarred backwards, and in that instant they stared into one another's souls, only darkness reflecting back to Sam from his brother's demonic, raven orbs.

*"NO!"*

*"Dude, if you're gonna freak out you can do it outside!"* Dean punched his brother lightly until Sam jerked upright in the Impala's passenger seat, the remnants of his nightmare still playing vividly through his mind. *"Just tell me that wasn't a vision, cos I'm all out of hero crap right now."*

Sam blinked, slowly letting his spinning head refocus on reality. *"I...it was just a regular nightmare..."*

“Wanna tell me what kind of nightmare makes a spook hunter scream out like a baby?” Dean took his eyes from the bumpy country lane just for a second to look at his shaken sibling.

“It was about Laura’s retrieval...” *Not a lie, more of a half-truth.*

“Yeah, well, if you were yelling like a girl I’m guessing it wasn’t going too well.” Dean raised a brow, remembering the last two days at the cabin.

The brothers had stayed for Joe’s first visit to the spirit world, and when it had passed pretty uneventfully had decided to head back to town to check on Kyle. There was little or no cell reception so far out in the boonies, and whether he admitted it or not, Dean liked the priest enough to be getting antsy that there was no news of his condition.

“It was nothing,” Sam lied, fidgeting as he realized sleeping in the Chevy in such a cramped position had made his neck ache. “Want me to see if I can get through to the hospital now?” *Misdirection. Can’t tell him the damn dream was more about the demon in him than Laura...*

Dean nodded, reading the lie as easily as he read the inner pages of a top shelf magazine. “Here.” He plucked his cell from the glove box while driving one handed. “Just don’t add any sissy ring tones to that baby or I’ll put you back in the morgue drawer myself!”

Sam smirked, a list of Dean’s most hated pop tunes instantly appearing in his head for later amusement. Then, he thumbed the keys, about to dial the community hospital’s reception when the phone began to vibrate and wail in his hand.

Frowning at the caller I.D. and AC/DC’s *Hellraiser* blurring at him, Sam quickly hit talk and put the cell to his ear. “Joe, is everything alright? We weren’t expecting to hear from you so soon...”

The normally jovial, calm voice of Bearwalker was so high pitched Dean could almost hear what he was saying across the car. It was bad news, of that he was certain. *I told Sam the bitch wasn’t saveable...* He bit into his lip, needing to know the details before his brother even had them.

Eventually, Sam closed the cell, the color draining from his face as he realized what his pity may have already cost. “Laura got loose and slugged Joe. Almost drowned him in a water butt outside the cabin...”

Dean cringed, his face warping into a look of pity for the Native American. “Dude, you know that’s pretty freaky for the guy? Tlingit Indians are mostly scared of water. It’s part of their folklore.” The hunter slowed the car, about to turn a one-eighty. “How far does he think she could have gotten?”

Sam put a hand out towards the steering wheel, making it clear his brother shouldn’t turn back. “Dean, it’s worse than that. Laura took Joe’s motorcycle. He has a tracker on it and thinks she went overland.”

“Sonofabitch!” Dean mouthed a sentence full of verbal expletives before taking a breath. “Which direction is she headed?”

“It looks like she’s making for Barstow, and there’s only one thing there she could be after...” Sam couldn’t look at his brother, but this time not because of the demon that inhabited him, but because Dean had been right and he hadn’t listened. “Dean, I think she’s going to kill Tammy Sheckley...”

\* \* \* \*

### **1255 Elm, Barstow Tammy Sheckley’s Home**

The house was just as Sam had remembered it as he walked through the extensive grounds and onto the driveway – imposing, overbearing, and most of all out of his and Dean’s league. The trailing green ivy vines and pristine white paintwork smacked of someone who was used to having everything faultless to perfection. *No, it smacks of someone who is so spoiled she’s never known the true value of money...*

Still, it didn’t matter if Tammy lived in a mansion, or that she was a spoiled brat. She needed their help, and that meant Detectives Jagger and Le Roth would have to give it to her. Laura wouldn’t care about Tammy’s wealth, after all. All that Laura wanted was cold, heartless revenge – emphasis on the cold.

"Sammy, I'm not liking this." Dean had paused at the edge of the driveway, his eyes darting to the huge house and then back to the sweeping, carefully nurtured gardens that surrounded it. "Something's...off..." The hunter reached to his belt and drew his Desert Eagle, flicking off the safety without giving a reason why.

"You see something?" Sam squinted, but in the soft California sunlight all he could catch sight of were a few intermittent shadows dancing on the ground as a small zephyr whipped the overhanging trees, blowing the branches and leaves and causing a natural mosaic carpet of light.

Dean crouched, rubbing his fingertips along the graveled drive as if the tactile sensation revealed some secret encoded message. "I don't see anything, but I *feel* it," he admitted in a low voice. "She's been here, Sam..."

Sam flinched, suddenly realizing what was going on. Dean was channeling the demon again, letting it augment his senses until he could feel almost everything it felt, know everything it knew, want everything it wanted. "Dean should you..?" *This is so wrong. He shouldn't give it that much control.*

The elder hunter stood from his hunkered position, eyes flashing towards the side of the main house in a silent direction. "We should take the side entrance," he stated flatly, ignoring his brother's unfinished question.

Sam squirmed but nodded his affirmation, drawing his Glock and taking point before Dean could steal the position. *He thinks the damn thing is actually helping.*

Thoughts, fears began to blind the younger sibling's sense of logic, urging him to make Dean turn back, to make his brother stop using the damn demon, because it was happening all too often, wasn't it?

Sam's expression turned stoic, and as he pressed his back lightly against the house's brickwork he realized the thing within his brother could easily become like a drug. What if Dean got so used to using its powers that he couldn't give them up? What if he was becoming a junkie of sorts?

The guard at the hospital's words came back to plague the hunter like a psychic distress signal, and he dared to steal a quick glance to where Dean now awaited, using the wall for cover as they approached the inset doorway. The eyes were hazel, but they looked sunken, hollow somehow.

*Kinda looks like some junkie looking to score a fix...*

Sam jerked his pained gaze away before his brother caught the look. Maybe it was just a trick of the light. Hell, maybe Dean looked gaunt because of what he'd been through recently. *He was possessed, tortured, shot, beaten. What the hell am I thinking!*

"Dude, are you okay? Because I tell you, from where I'm standing you look like some Wendigo decided to make you its bitch." Dean raised a brow, expressions of amusement and concern merging across his features. "Seriously, Sammy, you look like you got some kinda bug up your ass."

"Yeah, well I wasn't the one the Wendigo in Colorado tried to turn into a Happy Meal..." Sam scowled, the vague and very unpleasant memory of finding his brother hanging like a piece of meat pushing away his current woes, if only momentarily.

Dean's trademark wry smile appeared, only vaguely marred by the weight he carried and tried to hide every waking moment. "Hey, that freaky bastard had great taste in white meat! Guess he was saving the best for last..." He winked, almost tempted to add "I notice it didn't take your scrawny butt". But from the expression on Sam's face, he wouldn't have found the little pun very amusing.

"So, if you're tapped into that thing, can you tell if Laura's still here?" Sam pushed the current topic aside, focusing back on his brother and the hunt.

Dean's eyes instantly hit the floor, his mask of un-readability broken by his sibling's insight. He hadn't said anything to Sam about the demon sensing Laura. Or that it seemed drawn to her evil presence like a magnet, because evil really did beget evil, didn't it?

"I can't feel anything now. Maybe she's gone." Dean took a breath, scooting quickly around his brother before Sam could ask any more questions. Questions caused too much discomfort, too many reminders of what he was host to. "C'mon, shag ass, little brother!"

Dean shouldered the side entrance door hard and it bowed easily to the excess pressure. *Was that demon strength or my own?*

He straightened as he barreled through into the kitchen, arms outstretched, gun poised ready to fire off a shot should he be attacked.

"Sweet Jeez..." The Desert Eagle dropped a notch in his grasp and he resisted the urge to gag. "I sure hope you didn't have breakfast."

"Aww, man..." Sam put the back of his hand over his mouth and found he was forced to look away before he heaved, because, yeah, he had had a pretty damn large breakfast.

Splayed out across the kitchen floor tiles were the remains of what he could only assume had once been a man. It was hard to tell for sure, because the skin had been expertly removed as if the perpetrator had flayed the victim.

Looking down at the raw muscle and sinew corpse that lay in a pile of its own blood, Sam could only think of the way a hunter would skin his kills. He shook his head, still not wanting to believe a girl – Laura – could do this. "Skinning a body isn't easy. It needs a lot of skill..."

Dean's face screwed up in disgust. "Yeah, well, looks like the creepy bitch has it in abundance, huh?" He glanced around the trashed room, noting the array of utensils strewn about the floor and worktops. His gaze settled on a toppled knife block, and he counted the blades, noting one of the larger carvers was missing. "Who do you think the guy is? Cook maybe?" He considered as he quietly approached a second door that led into a sizeable pantry.

Sam moved to the side of the same door, Glock held in a tight grip. "Maybe," he agreed, nodding that he was ready for whatever may be hiding.

Dean nodded back that he was ready, and then lashed out with his foot to expertly cave in the small interior door. The wood splintered first, and the hunter almost expected his CAT boot to smash through to the other side leaving his ankle stuck in the hole. At the last moment, however, the latch gave, and the door slammed backwards into the darkened interior of the store room.

"Please, don't...do..n't hurt me..." The words were shaking and low.

Sam flicked the button on his penlight and shone the thin beam into the gloom. In the corner of the pantry, a young woman sat uncontrollably shaking. Blood covered most of her clothing and features, but from what he could tell, she didn't have any injuries. *I remember her from when we visited Tammy before...*

"It's okay, you're safe now." Sam held out a reassuring hand and smiled softly. "We're here to help..."

The maid's wide eyes darted between the brothers, sizing them up, assessing what dangers they might bring. Where they with the crazy girl? Were they going to finish off what she had started when she'd killed Carlos, the cook?

"She took Miss Sheckley..." The maid still shook, her body seeming to convulse with every haggard breath she drew. She didn't attempt to move. She didn't attempt to think, even. What she'd been forced to witness through the crack in the door had been enough to send her insane. Maybe she'd never be the same again. "She was so angry...so very, very angry..."

Dean ran a hand along the wall until his fingers met the light switch. Tapping it to the "on" position he knelt, weapon still in hand and at the ready. "Listen, I know you're scared, but we need to stop Laura hurting Tammy. We need to stop her ever doing this again." He tried to sound gentle, soothing, caring, but inside he was already boiling until he was sure he could hear his blood bubbling in his ears. *I should have listened to my instincts. I should have never allowed the retrieval attempt.* "Do you know where the girl took Tammy?" He eventually asked, raising a brow to look at Sam.

The maid tried to snuffle back tears, but they still flowed freely, running down her face like a cascading weir of sorrow. She shook her head, fresh, unhinged sobbing muffling her staggered words. "No...she just kept saying Tammy had to pay, over and over again. She took a knife from the kitchen and dragged Tammy outside. The last thing I heard was something about Tammy needing to feel everything she had. To suffer everything she had..."

Dean abruptly stood and spun around so that his back was to the pantry and Sam. The thing within him was writhing, pushing, eating away at him because it felt his anger. It *knew* his weakness and was trying to exploit it.

*If I had a mirror right now...*

Dean blinked several times and rubbed at his eye sockets with his free hand. He needed control, but his rage was getting the better of him. Ultimately, he gave in, letting out the emotions he'd bottled for so long. It wasn't Sam he was really angry with, but he needed the release, the rush of adrenalin as his temper finally blew.

"Dammit, Sam we caused all this!" The hunter whirled back around, his hand that encased the automatic jerking out towards the hideous body on the kitchen floor. "If we'd dealt with

Laura, or hell, even called the cops instead of trying the whole soul retrieval deal, none of this would have happened!”

Sam wanted to argue, he wanted to ignore the brief flash of charcoal in his brother’s eyes as he spat out the harsh oratory, but he couldn’t. Dean was right. In his guilt, he’d been blinded by the harsh facts.

Laura was evil. She’d always been evil. Nothing was going to change that.

*I pushed to get Joe involved and not the cops. I pushed the blame onto our exorcism, when all along the blame belonged with Laura...*

Sam’s lips felt dry, and his heart felt heavy. In trying to save a soul, they had caused even more deaths. Now, he would carry those deaths on his shoulders as surely as he carried Jess’s.

“Sammy, we have to find her. We have to finish this, no matter what it takes...” Dean fingered his precisely crafted forty-five, knowing what that might mean. If it came to that and Sam wouldn’t do it, then he would.

“I think she’s going back to CryoGen,” Sam looked at the shaking maid and plucked the handset off of a nearby wall phone using a handkerchief. While he waited for the line to connect to the emergency services, he cupped a hand over the mike. “Laura told Tammy she wanted her to feel what she had. That’s exactly the reason she put me in the morgue drawer too. I’m thinking she’d go back to the facility, make Tammy go through the whole freezing thing...”

Dean cocked his head. It wasn’t exactly a lead, and his “inner friend” had suddenly begun to give him the silent treatment on the Ice Maiden. Maybe it had finally realized who was really in control and didn’t want to pass any more information along to the enemy. *Too late, demon boy...*

“Okay, I’ll buy that,” Dean answered, checking his clip out of habit even though he hadn’t fired off a single shot. “Let’s just hope Laura is slower at making popsicle people than she is at skinning hides, or we may have a second Ice Age by the time we get there.” He poked his head out of the kitchen door warily and realized something shiny and metallic was poking out from the bushes under the overhanging trees. “Aww, man...that is just freaking inhuman. It’s just gross...makes me want to be sick to my stomach...what kind of sick puppy...”

Sam scurried to the smashed in doorway and followed his brother’s horrified expression to the bushes. When he finally grasped what he was looking at he cracked into his “you’re *unbelievable* expression” and spun his eyes. “Dean, it’s just a motorbike. Metal. Replaceable...”

Dean’s annoyed scowl didn’t falter. It could have been his “baby” trashed and lying in the hedgerow. “Yeah, well, you tell that to Bearwalker.” He pushed on the safety and stuffed his Desert Eagle back in his pants, springing into a fast jog towards the Impala to confirm that it was still in good health. “I’m telling you, dude, Joe ever gets his hands on her he’ll toss that freaky chick back in the deep freeze single handed...”

For some reason, Sam believed him.

\* \* \* \*

## **CryoGen Facility Mohave Desert**

The visitors’ parking lot held one solitary vehicle, a 2007 registered Mercedes Sports, the condition of which told a frightening tale about its most recent driver.

The car was a pearlescent shade of blue – or at least it had been when it left the factory in Germany. Now, the precisely crafted metalwork was dented, holed and sprained from numerous prangs until it resembled a sieve. To add to the “breakers yard” effect, the Mercedes appeared to have been driven through a field at high speed.

Clumps of rapidly drying earth clung to its wheel arches and coachwork like mud limpets. At the rear, the license plate “Tam 1” dangled at an odd angle as if it had almost been torn off in one of the car’s recent skirmishes.

“Dude, I think it’s safe to say Laura beat us to the party...” Dean pulled the Impala level with the sports car and wound down his window, slowly peering across at the empty Mercedes with a frown. “Where the hell did that chick find mud out here anyway, we’re in the middle of a freakin’ desert!”

“Dean...” Sam ignored Tammy’s empty car and pointed to the entrance to CryoGen.

The last time the brothers had been here, the place had been a tight ship. At their very presence in the lot, a guard had appeared to question them. And yet, tonight, the main entrance's electronic glass doors were wide open.

"I hear ya." Dean leaned over, pulling a holdall from the rear seat that he'd prepared at Tammy's house. The bag held what he hoped was all they would need, but right now, he wasn't even sure what that might be. "Look alive, little brother, cos there are already enough stiff's out here tonight." He winked, pulling a short barreled, pump action shotgun from the bag and passing it over.

Sam took the weapon and found himself checking the kind of shells he'd been given, despite the fact that he knew it would annoy his brother. *I can't kill her...*

It did.

"Dude, its rock salt, alright? It'll knock the chick down hard enough. Hell, you should know that..." Dean rubbed at his chest and the way his voice raised just a touch indicated he was more than a little irritated that Sam wouldn't trust him. *Is it me he doesn't trust, or the damn demon?*

The elder hunter shook his head and quickly exited the Chevy. The faster this gig was over, the faster he could get back to eradicating the thing inside him – although right now, he wasn't sure what was aggravating him more, the demon, or Sam's constant reminders about it. *He doesn't mean to, but...*

Dean pulled out his silver Desert Eagle and looked down at it, his throat bobbing as he swallowed hard. If they didn't hurry, Laura would kill here tonight, if she hadn't already. Perhaps Sam could go inside with only rock salt in all good conscience, but he couldn't.

Without turning to look back at his brother, Dean jogged across the lot to the awaiting open doors. As he reached the entrance, he slowed, hazel eyes darting to security cameras both inside and outside the structure. Was anyone watching? Was there anyone left to watch?

Dean raised his automatic, palms suddenly sweating as he entered CryoGen's reception. This was like no other hunt, and if he was honest, he was getting goosebumps just being back at the facility.

It was unnaturally cold here, as if the air conditioning had been set to mimic the chambers hidden deep within the labyrinth of corridors.

"I think we're clear in here," Dean eventually spoke, moving to Sam's side as he began to check out the empty desk and security console that should be manned twenty-four hours a day. "So, where the hell is everyone?"

Sam looked up to the corner of the ceiling where a small red square was flashing intermittently. "Someone tripped the silent alarm about twenty minutes ago..."

"And?" Dean prodded, becoming impatient for answers. "Like I said, where the hell is everyone? There should be at least one guard here. And if the alarm was triggered, doesn't that mean the cops should be doing their cavalry routine right about now?"

"Someone circumvented the system. The alarm is active, but the emergency call isn't going anywhere." Sam cringed, knowing it probably meant Laura had taken care of any staff that might be on duty. And that was only the half of it. "This screen is also showing a coolant leak in preservation room two..."

Dean's eyes paused in their scan of the room and refocused on his brother, a brow raised questioningly. "You think Mr. Freeze is in the house?" He shook his head, thinking of Schwarzenegger. "You're so gonna suggest we go take a look, aren't you? Man, I hate the cold almost as much as I hate flying..."

Sam picked up his shotgun and took a breath. Taking a look might not be so easy. If the leak was bad, all the oxygen could already have been sucked from the room. If Laura had taken Tammy inside, both girls might already be dead. "Just don't go inside if the room is full of vapor. And don't touch anything that's leaking!"

"Dude, do you think I'm some full on *Forrest Gump* here?" Dean began to mumble grumpily as he navigated the first set of corridors. "I mean, c'mon, I saw T2, I know what liquid nitrogen does..." He stopped mid grouch, eyebrows furrowing as he spotted a slow trickle of white mist ebbing from beneath a storage locker door.

Keeping his weapon aimed at the door, he moved cautiously forward. Technically speaking, the locker was a cupboard where cleaning materials should be kept. There shouldn't be anything capable of making the curling miasma that was now seeping like a fog towards them at ankle level.

Using one hand to hold his automatic, the hunter warily grabbed the bottom of his shirt and used it to wrap around the door handle with the other. Whatever was within the cupboard was freezing, and he didn't like the idea of his palm stuck to the door any time soon.

Carefully twisting, he let the brass knob click off the latch, and then he tugged back hard, unsure what sight might greet him. Was Laura inside, waiting to pounce?

"Sweet Jeez!" Dean squeezed off a shot reflexively just as a huge body came hurtling towards him. With nowhere to go, the body pushed him backwards and the pair landed hard on the tiled floor, Dean grunting as the wind was knocked out of him.

Taking a second to regain his breath, the hunter looked up, realizing the form now lying across him was frozen almost solid. Cold, dead eyes looked into his, a pleading expression of shock captured forever in their pupils.

Dean groaned in disgust and pushed the guard's rigid cadaver away from him, his features curling in revulsion, not at the corpse, but at the fact he'd actually been jittery enough to put a bullet into it. "Man, I can't believe I just shot a stiff!" He brushed loose white flakes of ice that resembled snow from his blue jacket, already feeling the chill where the flecks had melted and seeped in.

Sam grinned at his brother's discomfort. Occasionally, just occasionally, it was good to see Dean squirm – especially now, because it reminded the younger Winchester that big brother was still the one in control. Demons didn't tend to balk at the dead. "Yeah, well stupid is as stupid does..."

"Shut up, Groucho, or I'll make your old friend the moustache a permanent fixture while you're asleep one night." Dean smirked back at Sam, threatening to rekindle the infamous "prank wars." "You're not the only one who knows how to use a tube of Super Glue, dude..."

"No," Sam admitted, stopping to hunker over the guard's steaming form. "But I am the only one who remembers we can't just walk into the preservation rooms." He teased away a keychain that held a small plastic card, avoiding the blank stare that glared back at him from the body. "C'mon...Forrest..."

"Ha freakin ha..."

\* \* \* \*

Laura liked the cold. Laura wanted to feel it, to embrace it, to *love* it. It was part of her now, just as heat was part of those who were sent to the eternal damnations of hell. If she could stay in the cryo-rooms forever, maybe she would.

Laura huffed and looked down at the terrified girl she had tied to the table. Panic-stricken, tear filled eyes looked back up at her. Eyes that held the fear she once had, but not anymore. Since her "rebirth" Laura felt nothing – not for herself, not for anyone. The only motivation she had in life was for revenge. And even that held no satisfaction.

No matter how many she killed, how much vengeance she took out on those who had wronged her, it still didn't take away the hollow, empty feeling in her tortured mind. Perhaps she should have let the Native American finish his ritual, perhaps it would have at least given her peace.

Laura pushed aside the insane idea and focused on Tammy Sheckley. It had been no mean task to drag the conference table inside the preservation room, but it had been worth it.

Now that she had Tammy incapacitated and terrified, she could show her old friend just what it was like to go through the freezing process. She brushed a hand along the gagged girl's head, making her flinch. "You know, they cut you open...fill you full of chemicals that are supposed to preserve you..."

Laura pulled the carving knife from the back of her belt, eyes sparkling with pleasure at the dried blood that coated it.

"This isn't quite as accurate as a scalpel, but I'm sure I can do the procedure justice." She smiled, but there was nothing left inside of her old friend for Tammy to see. "Should we go for the chest incision first? Or maybe I should tell you more? You see, that isn't the end, oh no..." Laura circled the table, her expression becoming pained as she retrieved memories from her little out of body experience – memories she shouldn't technically even have. "They drill holes in your head. Two lovely little shafts so they can watch your brain marinate. All I was to them was some new toy..."

Laura paused, her oratory cut short by something outside the room – voices distinct and familiar. Someone else was approaching, someone she wanted to hurt almost as much as Tammy.

Carefully slipping the carver back in her belt she pressed a forefinger to her lips, indicating Tammy should be quiet, even though she was gagged. It was her way of psychologically taunting the girl, her way of adding to the punishment. “Shhh,” she mouthed with a wry smirk. “I’ll be right back...”

\* \* \* \*

“Are you sure this is the right corridor? Because, dude, I don’t see anything leaking out from under any doors...” Dean Winchester looked at his brother and unconsciously began to hum *Cold as Ice*. It wasn’t even intentional, but ever since their first encounter with Laura he’d somehow associated the song with her.

“Dean, are you *real*?” Sam frowned but could tell the humming was because his brother was getting edgy. That didn’t happen very often, and it worried the younger man more than he cared to admit. Of course, he preferred Foreigner to Metallica anyway, so instead of pushing the point he lowered his shotgun and began examining the access panel on the doors at either side of the ridiculously long passageway.

“A whole lot realer than most of the stiffs in this joint,” Dean countered, eyes darting between the doorways for signs of Laura as he spoke. “And besides, anything beats the crap outta that wuss ass ringtone of yours.” He nodded towards the “port hole” inset into the door on the left. “You sure it’s not that one. Looks kinda misty in there...”

Sam shook his head, continuing to concentrate on the right hand door panel. “No, that’s for neuro patients only.” He slid in the dead guard’s keycard and frowned when the reader beeped and flashed red.

“Neuro what?” Dean joined his brother, both hands still tightly clasped around his automatic.

“Neuro patients only have their head stored, Dean. It’s supposed to be the better procedure as whole body vitrification is still pretty experimental...” Sam’s brow furrowed and he began tapping the tiny keypad on the access panel. The entry card wasn’t working, and that meant more outside, or maybe inside tampering by Laura.

“You gotta be friggin’ kidding me! They cut peoples heads off and get paid for it? Man, that is just gross.” Dean’s nose puckered in distaste. “Just don’t go getting any ideas about pickling any of me when I’m gone, Sammy, or I’ll haunt your ass...”

Sam finally took his eyes triumphantly from the keypad as the light flickered green and the door buzzed open. “Dude, the amount of crap you drink you’re already “pickled”...”

Dean crooked his neck and scowled. “Just don’t mention any ‘stiff’ drinks after this gig, Sammy, or I swear ...” The hunter moved to enter the chamber and was only stopped by the strong grip of his brother pulling him back.

“Remember, we don’t know the size of the leak in here. If you feel lightheaded get out fast...” Any humor had drained from Sam’s voice to be replaced by deadly sincerity.

Dean nodded, aware of the change of tone. “I hear ya, little brother...c’mon, let’s go find this chick and put an end to this mess.” *Somehow...*

Without waiting for further instructions from his brother, Dean moved inside preservation room four, automatic at the ready. His finger itched on the trigger, his eyes carefully locked on the same ethereal mist that had covered the floor on his last visit to the facility.

Was Laura waiting once again somewhere below the several inches of smog?

Dean closed his eyes, tapping into the demon and its heightened awareness of the girl. The thing squirmed at his prompt, but couldn’t disobey his commands. Laura was here, it sensed her, wanted to help her even. “Not today you don’t, buddy. I’m the master of this skin...”

As Dean moved to the left, Sam took the right, skirting several of the huge silver cryo-units, his shotgun braced against his body. Some part of the young hunter wanted, needed to find Laura first. It was as if he believed salvation for the girl would prove there was a chance for Dean, for himself even.

Maybe that was asking Mother Nature for too much.

Something began to hiss at ground level and Sam instantly paused, his eyes searching for what he presumed was the coolant leak. If he inadvertently stepped into the spraying liquid under the swirling vapor he could lose a foot or worse.

"Feeling a little chilly?"

Sam looked up, realizing all too late that he had walked into a trap. He'd wanted to find Laura, but she had found him first.

Steely, soulless eyes that reminded him of Dean's when they flashed their raven hues met his, and within a second his weapon had been knocked from his hands and Laura had taken a stranglehold around his neck.

She was strong, so very strong, and Sam could feel her fingers digging into his flesh, cutting off his air supply as easily as if he'd been grabbed by a fully-grown gorilla. Maybe this was how she'd overcome her other male victims so easily. The hunter had heard it said mental patients sometimes had twice the strength, but this was the first time he'd put that little myth to the test.

"Laura, we can help you, we can make it alright. Just like it was before..." The words were strained. It was hard to inhale, let alone try to reason with the girl, and yet he had to try. He had to make her understand that the old Laura was still reachable.

Laura tugged back with her arm, twisting his body around to look at a table she'd prepared. Lying on it, bound and gagged, eyes wild with fear, was Tammy Sheckley.

"Oh, Sammy, Sammy, you don't get it do you? This is the real me, just like before..." Laura retrieved the carver from her belt, ignoring the fact that its razor-sharp edge had actually cut into her where she'd wedged it. "People always saw the cute college girl, but it wasn't who I truly was. It wasn't who I *wanted* to be. You didn't hurt me with your little exorcism, you helped me..." She shrugged, keeping one arm around his neck while she used the blade to cut a thin gouge along Tammy's arm. "Pity you couldn't leave me alone afterwards..."

Sam frowned and tried to swallow. He needed oxygen to think, to reason, to understand what he'd just been told, but Laura's grip and the leaking nitrogen were making that impossible.

Dean had been right all along. There was no saving Laura, no making a wrong right. Sam writhed in her grip, fighting the inevitable, fighting to save the girl that had been laid out like some heathen sacrifice on a makeshift altar.

Laura felt his struggle and laughed. Killing Tammy had been a fun idea, but killing her with an audience that felt responsible for the action would be even more sensational.

"I think its time to start Tammy's procedure, don't you, Sammy?"

Sam perceived Laura's grip change. She was putting her strength into something else other than her vice-like hold on him. *Can I break free before she uses the knife on me or Tammy?*

Laura didn't give him time to work out the equation. Raising the carver above her head she savored the last pleading look on Tammy Sheckley's face before making a downward thrust that would surely send the honed blade straight through the restrained girl's heart and out the other side.

"Hey, bitch!"

Laura's gaze jarred up just in time to see Dean standing in front of her, the tiny jolt of his weapon signaling he'd fired off a shot. The next instant, she felt the burn as the slug tore through her, forcing her backwards with the weight of its impact. Her eyes widened, hateful, intense. She wouldn't be denied her trophy this way.

Dean watched, his face a mask of intensity as Laura let go of his brother and tumbled backwards. He saw the look of horror on Sam's face and read it for exactly what it was. Sam had never wanted to hurt the girl, he'd wanted to help her. *He thinks I let the demon cloud my judgment...but it was just a shoulder shot...*

A new hissing sound caught his attention and his head jerked to look past his brother. There was no time for explanations, no time to make Sam realize Laura wasn't dead.

The bullet had gone straight through her, clean entry and exit, and had ruptured one of the tanks that supplied the cryo-chambers. If the small leak before had been draining the room of air, this one would surely add to it and make the atmosphere unbreathable.

"Sam, get Tammy outside, NOW! I'll find Laura..." Maybe he wasn't thinking straight, but maybe, just maybe the demon onboard would afford him some protection against the nitrogen and its oxygen-sucking properties; protection Sam and Tammy didn't have.

Sam seemed shaken, unsure of what had just happened as he reached to untie Tammy. Everything was moving so fast and his mind felt heavy, thick like the smog hovering over the floor above his ankles. Had Dean killed Laura? Had the demon pressured him into it?

The hissing grew louder and he turned in time to see the bullet hole-sized rupture in the tank expand, spraying a mist in a wider arc until it was nearly raining down onto his flesh. *Gotta work faster, move faster*, but his fingers somehow didn't want to obey those commands.

"No..!" The screech was primal, and before either Sam or Dean could react, its owner pounced.

Laura was like an animal – a hurt, enraged thing that despite being wounded would never stop going for the kill. She lunged forward, the blade still wrapped carefully in her hand plunging into Tammy's chest before her rescuers could protect her.

Laura screamed again, this time in pleasure as dark red blood oozed from the hole she had made and Tammy's head sagged limply to the side. Blood was like an elixir, as was seeing Tammy Sheckley, dead or dying.

CRACK!

"Sammy, move! NOW, dammit!"

Sam's still foggy mind took painful seconds to react. The nitrogen tank's seam had given way and its contents were now shooting towards Laura, himself and Tammy. *Cold, freezing, deadly...*

Finally, realization dawned and with little time to spare Sam dived forward, shielding Tammy's bleeding form with his own.

Laura screamed, her own body stuck between her enemies and the lethal, spurting liquid. She loved the cold, embraced it, but she didn't want to return to it, not yet. It wasn't fair.

*Not again...*

Laura's last fleeting thought vanished as her body solidified into a huge ice block from which there would be no second retrieval. Her features turned pale, encapsulated in a thin film of white crystalline frost.

Sam rolled from atop Tammy and glanced up at the ice statue that had once been a woman. In this form she looked so beautiful, so innocent. If she'd been made from stone, she would have been the work of a craftsman.

"Sammy, wanna move before you look like you've seen medusa too?" Dean wiggled a brow and indicated the still-spraying nitrogen that was spewing from the burst tank.

Sam nodded wearily, carefully scooping Tammy into his arms. She was motionless, her features drained of color as her life's blood ebbed from her chest. Even now Sam doubted they could save her. He'd seen lesser wounds kill during his incarceration and subsequent rescue from Haris's chambers. "

"GO, Sam!" Dean didn't turn to look at his brother, but quickly aimed his automatic's barrel at Laura's rigid form. With one tug of the trigger, he let off a single shot that sent Laura's remains into oblivion. A myriad of fragmented, icy pieces showered the floor and surrounding area, putting Laura to rest once and for all. Dean crooked his neck, at last satisfied. "Nobody but me calls him Sammy, bitch," he spoke to the shattered remains on the floor, hoping that somewhere in hell Laura heard him.

"Dean, hurry..." Sam was already outside in the corridor, heading for safety.

Dean ignored the heartfelt plea. There was unfinished business here yet, and he couldn't leave until he'd accomplished the task. "I'll follow...just shag ass, dude!"

\* \* \* \*

Sam lay Tammy down beside the Impala and pressed one of his huge hands over the bubbling hole in her chest. She wasn't dead yet, there was still hope, but every second he wasted, every second they waited for an ambulance lessened her chances. *My fault, I should have listened to Dean. Demon or not, he was right...*

Sam's head dropped and he tried to focus on the girl, tried to will the ambulance sirens to begin wailing in the distance. Instead, the only noise he heard was the dull thud as a block of C4 exploded somewhere within CryoGen.

Instantly, Sam looked up. He hadn't been thinking. Dean was still inside.

Another blast echoed through the California desert sky, and this time Dean's rapidly running form came with it, barging from the collapsing structure like he was trying for a touchdown.

Panting, his face reddening with exertion, the hunter finally joined his brother.

"Dean, what the...?"

Dean glanced over his shoulder, a third and final thud confirming the explosives he'd set had all detonated. Red, angry flames licked through the night, reflecting on his eyes as they flicked over black, just for a second.

"They were dead, Sam. All of them. Who gave Cryogen the right to play God?"

Sam's eyes slipped to Tammy, her blood seeping through his fingers, tarnishing his hands, making the guilt all the more real. "What if they could have been revived in the future? What if it was me, or Kyle that was a patient in there?"

Dean licked his lips and turned his back to the blazing building that had once held hope for long dead souls. Maybe Sam would never understand, maybe deep down he already did.

"Tell that to Tammy's parents. Tell it to all the parents whose kids are gone because of Laura..."

\* \* \* \*

### **Bear Valley Community Hospital Big Bear Lake, California**

"And the girl?" Kyle Williams' innocent eyes peered over the huge rims of his glasses expectantly as he sat propped in his hospital bed, pale, but at least very much alive.

Sam shrugged, his saddened expression saying what his words did not. "We don't know yet..."

"Yeah, we do." Dean pulled out a seat left for visitors and sat down next to the priest's bed.

"Laura stuck Tammy in the chest, just like she had been all those years ago...I've never known anyone with a wound like that live. And trust me, dude, I've seen some pretty gross injuries in my time." *And felt some first hand...*

Kyle shook his head. "So sad for it to end like this..." His eyes seemed to go distant, and it was obvious he was blaming. He moved to cross his arms and suddenly thought better of it as it pulled at the stomach wound Laura had graced him with. "I should never have gone on my own. My actions..."

"You wouldn't have stopped her, Moses, so I don't want to hear any of that self pity, "all my fault" crap. I get enough of that from Sammy here, okay?" Dean shot the priest a playful look that brought a slight smile to Kyle's beleaguered face. "Although, I'm telling you, no more gigs on your own, or I'll personally whup your ass, dude!"

Kyle's beard twitched and he winced at the expression. Being around Dean was infectious, but sometimes the hunter just had a way with words the holy man would rather not start to emulate. "Don't worry," he assured him. "I've had enough hospital food and daytime TV to have learned my lesson." His lips curled into something akin to Dean's rogue look. "And I don't think I can ever watch *Braveheart* again..."

"Well whatya know? Moses got him a sense of humor hiding under that collar..." Dean grinned back. He would never tell the little priest, but Kyle was the nearest thing he would ever have to a second brother. Seeing him gutted at Laura's cabin had been one of the hardest things he'd ever had to deal with.

"Occasionally," Kyle admitted. "But mostly I stick to more important matters..." his voice trailed, unsure how to approach the very tricky subject he needed to address. "Like you, Dean..."

"Me?" Dean feigned surprise. "Dude, I'm beyond saving. Don't try stuffing me in any confession box, it would probably explode if I told you all my sins..."

"Dean..." Sam pulled a face. Sometimes his brother's humor mask could be just plain embarrassing. "He means the demon..."

Dean's eyes shot to the floor. "There's nothing to say," he mumbled, fidgeting with his hands now he was cornered. "It's in there to stay. We've already covered all our bases. Even Moses here doesn't know how to get it out. So can we just forget it? It's not going anywhere. I'm not going anywhere. And all you two need to know is that I'm the boss of this daring duo." He let a hand slide under the tarnished amulet. "This little puppy has seen to that..." *Will they ever trust me? Really?*

"We know," Kyle said matter-of-factly. "But if you ever need to talk, I'm here." The little priest smiled so softly even Dean couldn't find the words to snark back. If it hadn't been for the demon, Dean could have seen Kyle making it big in the church one day.

Sam shook his head, answering for the elder hunter. "Are you kidding? Dean Winchester talk? And talk honestly?" His face dimpled as Dean glowered. "I'm not sure he knows what the word 'honest' means..."

"Yeah, I do actually..." Dean winked at Kyle. "Although telling that lapdancer in Fort Worth that I was a descendant of Van Helsing might have been a slight exaggeration..."

Sam and Kyle couldn't help but laugh at the totally innocent expression that crossed the hunter's features.

"I don't know what was worse," Sam considered. "Your lie, or the fact she was so dumb she believed you..."

Dean shrugged. "Hey, I'm a class act...and I *do* occasionally hunt vampires..."

"You're definitely something," Kyle chuckled, trying hard not to pull at his stitches and failing.

"I'm just not sure I'll ever know what..."

"Definitely a jerk..." Sam offered.

Another grin spread across Dean's features. "Oh yeah? At least *I* don't have wuss ass ring tones. Checked your new cell lately? I think I found something right up your alley, dude..."

Sam's smile abruptly faded and he quickly fumbled for the new Nokia he'd acquired not hours earlier. "Man, if you've put any of that rock crap on here..."

"I wouldn't ever subject a non-believer." Dean shrugged, knowing full well he would, and often did in the confines of the Impala. "But anyway, I found something much more girlie for you.

So, goes with that feminine side of yours..."

Sam slid up the screen to access the Nokia's controls so that he could listen to the horrors that had been placed upon it. Even he wasn't ready for what assaulted his ears. Man, you didn't..?"

Dean looked at Kyle then back to his brother nodding impishly. "Oh, I did, Sammy...I so did..."

*Laura, can't you give me some time,  
I got to give myself one more chance.  
To be the man that I know I am.  
To be the man that I know I am...*

\* \* \* \* \*

Dean sauntered down the hospital corridor, suddenly feeling free after the confines of Kyle's room. It was good to see the priest was doing better, but being given the third degree about the demon within him was not up on his list of things to do anytime soon. Kyle meant well, Sam meant well, but their lack of trust was tearing him apart as surely as the hellish thing that shared his body. For now, he had it under control. *Can I keep it that way? Really?* That was one question he hadn't thought to ask Bearwalker. But then, could the Native even know? Only the maker of the trinket around his neck was probably privy to that kind of information, and whoever that had been, Dean suspected had long since passed on. The thing was old, probably "Dawn of Time" kind of old; would they ever be able to unlock its secrets? Hell, would they ever even be able to unlock their own family's secrets?

Dean shrugged it off. The more he thought about it, the more he had to admit that it wasn't a dream, *just like mom's death, just like the demon and his taunts...*

"Dean, isn't that Tammy's parents over there?" Sam paused as the brothers headed for the hospital's rear entrance. They were trying not to draw attention to themselves after their last visit had gotten them in hot water with security - but that was nothing new for the Winchesters.

"Dude, since when did I ever meet the Sheckleys?"

"I guess I must have seen their pictures online somewhere..." Sam conceded. "But I'm sure that's them talking to the doctor..."

Dean elbowed his brother. "C'mon, let's get a little closer and see if there's any news..." he pulled a few coins from his pocket and ambled over to a coffee machine that sat adjacent to the couple and the white-coated doctor. Sam followed, keeping his head low even though there was no way the Sheckleys could know him.

"I'm so sorry there was nothing more we could do, but the damage was just too severe..." Sam snuck a glance over, fascinated by the fact that Tammy's mother didn't seem to hear the bad news. Instead, she squeezed her husband's hand and smiled. "It's alright," she offered. "We understand. In fact, a friend of ours has suggested something...if it's not too late to try?"

Tammy's father took over the conversation. "The Mitchells, a couple we know...they had their daughter frozen. Unfortunately the facility they used had an accident recently, but I've found another place offering cryonic suspension. Have you heard of the Markus Foundation? It's in Nevada..." He questioned the doctor as if nothing had happened to his only child. "I've heard the procedure has to take place soon after death for there to be any chance..."

"You gotta be freakin' kidding me!" Dean whirled to face Sam so fast, his voice so astounded, that he earned a glower from both Tammy's parents, even though they had no clue it was their conversation that had sparked his outburst.

Sam gaped, and suddenly found himself speechless. Dean had been right about Laura. Could they really let it start all over again? It wasn't fair to Tammy, it wasn't fair to all the other people who were being frozen, and who may return someday, soulless, evil...undead. The younger Winchester swallowed and nodded towards the exit they'd been heading for. "I have a whole new batch of C4 in the trunk. We can be at the Foundation by nightfall..."

It was time to stop another abomination before it happened, as only the Winchesters could.

The End