

Episode Eleven: Selling My Soul By Irismay42 & Kittsbud

Don Pepe Restaurant Newark, New Jersey

Forced laughter drifted across the table making Erika Gudrun want to recoil in distaste at the company she was keeping. Her three well-dressed companions seemed eager to please one another – probably too eager, but then she knew their kind. With these people it was always about putting up fronts, making pleasantries while secretly planning to stab someone in the back.

Still, that was why Erika was here. She wanted, no *needed* their help to conclude a deal. In truth, she had hoped to meet with someone further up the food chain and it irked her to think Giovanni was all she was going to get tonight. He was a fat little Italian who definitely ate too much and partied more, and from the way his amorous eyes looked at her she was sure he wasn't a very faithful husband.

Giovanni's sidekicks were much the same. Since the beginning of the meeting they'd filled their faces with pasta and wine and stared at her as if she was on the menu along with the consumables.

Erika hated their rich mob culture and the way they naturally assumed all pretty women were provided for their taking. Nevertheless, if she could use her stunning looks to conclude the deal and finally get to meet Luciano Ferinacci, then it would be worth it.

She flicked her long blonde hair suggestively, deep blue eyes teasing Giovanni with her beauty. If she had to deal with these pathetic little soldiers to get to Ferinacci, she would.

"Whatsa matter, sugar? Music getting you all fired up?" Giovanni leaned forward, placing a huge paw over Erika's hand. She fought the urge to slap him and instead smiled as he continued to brag about his Italian ancestry. "You gotta love a little Verdi, huh? Nobody does opera like us *I-talians*." He winked and then looked to his "boys," knowing they wouldn't dare to not find his behavior amusing.

Erika winced as strains of "Celeste Aida" filtered through the restaurant. While classical music wasn't offensive to her ears, she had her own ideas about what could be considered acceptable. "Actually, I prefer Wagner." She pulled back her hand, a very unladylike smirk forming on her features for the briefest of moments. Perhaps a more offensive approach was needed after all.

The blonde's eyes narrowed and she fixed her sparkling blue orbs on Giovanni. "I had assumed we were here for more than a musical interlude. But then, I'd also assumed I wouldn't have to deal with second best."

The plump Italian's smile faded just enough for Erika to know she'd hit him where it hurt – his ego. With a slight huff, he pointed as the waiter began to bring more food over. "Maybe you'll warm up to us after you eat, sweetheart, because you don't get any higher up the chain of command than this no matter what deal you got to offer." He examined the meal placed before him, uncertain if he still had an appetite. *I swear this bitch is just asking to get capped...*

More platters were brought over and placed before each person at the table, including Erika. She eyed the meal, wondering just how the men had room for more after what they'd already eaten. Still, if they died of a coronary later it would mean less Mafia on the streets of Newark. "I'll stay and eat," she conceded. "But I still want guarantees. I want a meeting arranged with Ferinacci or the deal is off."

She picked up a fork and delicately scooped a small amount of food into her mouth, hating the rich aftertaste almost as much as she hated her companions. But then, it would all be worth it when she finally got to Ferinacci. No matter how much Giovanni fought it, no matter how sure he was he didn't take orders from women, he would agree to her terms eventually, everyone did.

Giovanni chortled as he shoveled in his own food so fast it would have been easier to use a spade. The more he laughed, the more his cohorts felt compelled to join in, until eventually all three seemed to mock the flaxen beauty in their midst. “Luciano is just about the biggest name in town, babe, and you think you can boss him around?” The goon wiped his mouth with a napkin, attempting to give the impression he actually had table manners. “It’s your funeral, sister...”

Erika’s lips parted and she flashed pearl-white, perfect teeth at Giovanni, her seductive, yet powerful voice mocking him back. “Oh, trust me, I don’t think my funeral is an option...” She took another petite mouthful of food, but didn’t elaborate on the comment, her striking smile never wavering as she watched the men.

Giovanni’s brow creased into a myriad of wrinkles as his expression turned from one of mirth to something more pained. At first, Erika suspected she had gone too far and the deal was off, but this was something more – something strange and deadly the blonde had seen before, but had not been expecting. Not here, tonight.

As she watched, the fat Italian began to gag, his throat bobbing reflexively as he clutched at it in agony. His cheeks began to redden, and a frothing white trickle of saliva began to dribble from his contorting mouth.

A concerned waiter rushed to the table, tossing down the meal he was carrying with more obvious concerns now at hand. He tried loosening Giovanni’s collar as he shouted a call for help, but the Italian seemed to writhe in agony in his grip. With one last pain-filled croak the mobster’s heart stopped beating and he slumped backwards in his chair, swollen tongue lolling from his mouth, bloodshot eyes bulging from their sockets.

Erika watched the scene play out as Giovanni’s companions began to mimic his death throes, but she didn’t attempt to help them. There was no time for that, and besides, they deserved to feel the pain they had inflicted on others. Her only remorse was the bitter-sweet fact that their demise so soon probably meant her meeting with Ferinacci was still no closer.

With a deep sigh she moved to grab her purse and leave. Since the mobsters’ sudden sickness the restaurant had become a hive of activity, and she hoped that would give her cover enough to escape. It wasn’t like she needed to worry about becoming sick herself. That, after all, was a physical impossibility.

“Miss, you shouldn’t leave. Didn’t you have the same meal?” The harried waiter’s facial expression knotted in fear as he half-expected the young woman to collapse like her dinner companions.

“Maybe it’s food poisoning!” Voices from other tables began to mingle together in mass panic as word of the deaths filtered through to other customers.

A man in a dark suit whom Erika could only presume was the manager appeared from a small office at the rear. He fidgeted with his cuff links as he approached her – a nervous habit no doubt, but then, perhaps he would have been even more edgy if he’d known just who he was about to address.

“Madame, I really must ask you to remain here until the police and paramedics arrive. It really is in your own interests...” His voice was high pitched and whiny and Erika couldn’t help but think he sounded like a girl.

The blonde pushed her hair back over her shoulder and glanced around the eatery. There were still ways to leave the restaurant undetected, but with so many people now watching her, pulling off that little magic trick might draw more attention than she wanted to receive in certain other circles.

With a sigh, she nodded, accepting that she would have to speak to the police. Not that the law worried her, after all, what could they do to her kind? Erika smiled again, bringing a scowl to the manager’s face as he totally misinterpreted her behavior.

Not that they’d ever believe in my kind, Erika reflected as the bright red and blue kaleidoscope of lights from an ambulance and police cruiser filtered through the restaurant’s frosted windows.

* * * *

At first, Sam wonders where the sound is coming from: tick, tick, tick; relentless, like waves on a beach; the sun's passage across the sky. The hands of a clock.

Tick, tick, tick.

Sam blinks and he's looking around a stark, high-ceilinged building, metal rafters criss-crossing the cobwebs and guttering strip light: on, off, on, off, in time with each tick, tick, tick of a clock he can't see. In the distance, he hears the low rumble of airplanes, too many and too frequent, as if he's standing directly beneath a busy flight path. But all he sees when he looks up is the flickering light.

Footsteps approach, and his nervous gaze slides down the ancient walls, old brick visible where plaster has cracked and fallen. Too many planes and too much vibration and pieces of building turning to dust as the clock ticks on.

His eyes light on a calendar, pages fluttering in the draft from the open door, a picture of a shiny airplane beneath the legend, "Ross Air Freight, Newark, N.J." in bold, heavy typeface that has faded over time.

The pages still as the door closes and the footsteps draw closer, finally settling back on the month of May.

"Happy birthday, Sammy."

A voice as smooth as pebbles on a beach, worn with time, floats across the room and Sam turns, gazing at a non-descript man in an expensively-tailored suit who looks at him with naked hunger in his eyes, like a wolf appraising his next meal.

Sam doesn't even recognize the man at first; not from his confident gait or the self-assured way he holds his head; not even from the familiar expression on his face. It's almost lustful, and Sam shudders.

The man's lips twist into an ungodly approximation of a smile, and he stops, mere feet away. But not close enough to touch.

"What's the matter, Sam?" he asks, eyes widening in feigned offense. "Don't you recognize me?"

His eyes flash gold, the color of flame and of destruction, and Sam can't breathe.

"Time's up, Sammy. I'm here to collect on our little deal."

Haris.

Haris is here and it's all over.

Sam doesn't say anything; just looks into amber eyes and waits.

Waits for it to be over.

The demon takes a step toward him, and Sam can smell his cologne, cloying and sickly; and in that second, when he knows what's coming, when he knows his time is up and his world is about to come crashing down around him in a maelstrom of inevitable destiny, he suddenly realizes why Dean hates to be alone.

And even though he doesn't want Dean to see this, doesn't want him anywhere near when his baby brother finally sells his soul to the thing that took their lives so long ago, he realizes he would give anything to see Dean come charging through that door, guns a-blazing: Big brother, come to save him one last time.

"He's not coming, is he?" Haris says suddenly. "Time's up for you, Sammy, and big brother's late for the party."

Another step closer, a hand closing on his shoulder, and Sam can hear Haris' expensive wristwatch thudding loud in his ear.

Tick, tick, tick.

"Time's up, Sam."

And he looks up into amber eyes, ready.

He's not ready for the gunfire though.

Sudden and sharp.

There's smoke all around him now; voices yelling; dark shapes moving around in the even darker shadows.

Haris is clinging to his shoulder, eyes wide as a crimson flower blossoms against the white of his shirt, and he's falling to his knees, taking Sam with him.

The world tilts on its axis as Haris collapses, black smoke billowing from a screaming mouth.

But Sam doesn't hear the screaming; doesn't hear the gunfire.

Just hears a voice, calling his name.

But the world has lurched sideways and all he can see is smoke and dirty floor and a man whose dead eyes stare only at the ceiling.

And then suddenly he sees himself.

Reflected in hazel irises of eyes wide with fear as another hand grips his shoulder where Haris' hand had been.

Dean.

Dean is here.

Dean came for him.

He's yelling, mouth opening and closing, but Sam can't hear what he's saying, can only *feel* the single word, repeated over and over.

Sam.

He gazes up into Dean's terrified eyes, unable to understand the expression on his brother's waxy face, unable to understand the tears on his brother's pale cheeks.

He wants to say his brother's name; wants to tell him it's okay, I'm okay. Don't be scared.

But he sees the anguish in Dean's eyes and looking deeper sees the anguish in his own reflected there, and he realizes he's not breathing and Dean's tears taste salty on his lips as they fall.

"No, Sammy! No. Please. Please Sammy!"

He hears the plea fall from Dean's mouth. Hears his brother's choked sobs.

And realizes that's all he can hear.

The clock has stopped ticking.

* * * *

Sam started awake, brow cold with trickling sweat while his mouth felt as dry as a desert and his heart hammered relentlessly in his chest: thud, thud, thud. Like the hands of a clock.

He took a breath, eyes scanning feverishly about him, picking out the gray details of the motel room as the early morning light seeped below the edges of the faded curtains and pooled in ghostly hollows of light and shade across his bed.

Nightmare.

Vision.

Death vision.

His death vision.

Sam had had a vision of his own death.

His eyes darted sideways as the realization hit him, following the direction of his brother's rhythmic breathing until the gray light revealed Dean sprawled out on his stomach, one hand trailing on the floor while the other disappeared beneath his pillow, and Sam wondered fleetingly whether Dean kept his fingers permanently curled around the knife secreted there, even while he slept.

He took another breath, tried to relax as his heart continued to thud against his ribs, closing his eyes in an effort to recall the vivid details of the dream.

Well the *when* was easy – the calendar on the wall had been displaying the month of May, so it didn't take a genius to figure out the truth of it. Ironic. Sam was going to die on his birthday. Just like Shakespeare.

He shook his head, wondering how the hell he knew that and suddenly realizing he also knew that Shakespeare's parents were called John and Mary. Who'd have thought he could have had so much in common with the Bard?

Amazing the amount of crap one head could hold.

Jeez, I've got the attention span of – of Dean lately! he admonished himself, trying to get his brain back on track long enough to concentrate on the *where*. Ross Air Freight, Newark, NJ. That's what the calendar had said.

Sam was going to die in New Jersey.

Well, there were worse places to go out, he reasoned. Although he'd been secretly hoping for somewhere warm and sunny, like California maybe. Near Jessica.

And he already knew the *who*. He'd never doubted that Haris would collect on the deal he'd made to save Dean from the demon inside him. Never doubted it for a second. It was just a matter of *how*.

Which was when the vision had stopped making any sense whatsoever.

Haris' host had been shot, of that Sam was pretty sure. But by whom? Dean? And what of Sam himself? Had he collapsed because Haris had completed whatever the hell he was planning on doing to him before the inconvenient loss of his host? Or had Sam merely fallen victim to whoever – or *whatever* – had attacked Haris? If that was the case, then it couldn't have been Dean who fired the fatal shots. Sure, Sam had seen his brother kill an innocent host before, back in Jefferson City, and when push came to shove he knew there was nothing Dean wouldn't do to protect his little brother. But then, Dean would never have taken a shot at Haris if there was even the slightest chance of Sam getting caught in the crossfire.

He glanced over at his brother again, just as the older boy twitched in his sleep and mumbled something barely intelligible that sounded suspiciously like "Sammy," brows drawn together in that perpetual expression of worry that seemed to have descended on him the moment he found out about the deal Sam had made with Haris.

Dean was always worried now. Not for himself; not for the war he knew was upon them. Not even for Dad.

All Dean worried about now was Sam: How he could protect him, how he could save him. How he could get him out of this stupid, stupid deal he'd made with that yellow-eyed sonofabitch.

At first, Sam thought it was guilt that drove his brother; that somehow Dean blamed himself for Sam's predicament. But he'd gradually come to realize that it was much more than that. Sure, Dean blamed himself, as he always did, even though he never asked to be possessed, never asked Sam to sacrifice himself to Haris so that he might be saved.

But then, that wasn't what Dean was beating himself up about.

It had taken Sam a while, but eventually he had realized that Dean was blaming himself for failing to keep Sam safe in the first place, for failing to protect him from the evils of the world, the monsters in the closet; the things Dean had been protecting Sam from since he was four years old. It was something that was now so hard-wired into him, so much an integral part of the person he was that Sam knew, he knew that if he came clean, told Dean they had to go to New Jersey and face Haris, face his destiny, Dean would more than likely do nothing less than bundle his kid brother into the Impala and drive as far and as fast in the opposite direction as he possibly could.

But Sam also knew that lying to Dean wasn't an option either, and neither was merely omitting the details. He'd tried that before, and look what had happened.

He cast his eyes back towards his brother, worry line still etched between the older boy's brows, and this time when he mumbled in his sleep, there was no mistaking the words he said.

"Sammy – no!"

Sam bit his lip. This was his battle, his fight. He wasn't going to run away from it, from his destiny. There was no escaping Fate. He'd tried. He'd run all the way to California. Almost thought he'd gotten away with it, too. But Fate had found him, as he had known it would; as it would again.

The only question was did he want his big brother by his side when it happened this time? Sam wasn't the chubby kid in the schoolyard who needed protecting from the bullies any more. Yet he knew that was how Dean would always see him, no matter how big he got.

He sighed, running a hand across his tired features.

He'd gotten himself into this predicament to save his brother, not to put him in further danger.

No. He had to fight this battle alone.

But that didn't mean he couldn't have a little company along the way.

Swinging his long legs out of the bed, he padded over to the worn Formica table wedged into the tiny kitchenette, settling himself on one of the uncomfortable metal chairs before pulling his laptop noiselessly towards him.

Opening the lid, blue light bathed his determined features.

Right now, what Dean didn't know couldn't hurt him.

He needed a distraction, that was all...

* * * *

"Hey."

Dean almost fell out of bed at the sudden proximity of Sam's blue-green eyes, fingers spasming against the hunting knife beneath his pillow as his brain took a second to catch up with his body.

"Sam, what the hell -?"

"I brought coffee!" Sam waved a Styrofoam cup and a suspiciously aromatic white paper bag a few inches above his brother's head. "And bagels."

Dean considered that for a second, closing his eyes and pushing his head back against his pillow. "If you tell me its any time before eight a.m. I'm going to shove this alarm clock so far down your throat you'll be ticking like that alligator in *Peter Pan*."

"That was a crocodile," Sam corrected him, dumping the food and the coffee on the nightstand. "And it's six-thirty, Wendy."

Dean opened one eye. "Hey, don't mess with the protocols, Tinkerbell," he muttered. "Anyone gets referred to by a chick's name in this relationship it's you." He opened the other eye experimentally. "*Six-thirty?*"

"Rise and shine!" Sam sang, way too cheerfully. "Your breakfast's getting cold."

Dean sat up, glancing first at the coffee and then at his brother. "Did I forget my birthday again?" he asked uncertainly.

Sam shook his head. "Does it have to be a special occasion for me to do something nice for my only brother?"

Dean squinted at him, suddenly wide awake. "What d'you want, Sam?" he demanded, arms folded suspiciously across his chest. "Last time you were this nice to me you wanted me to tell Dad you got a part in the school play."

Sam laughed, and for the first time in a long time it sounded genuine. "I thought his head was gonna explode! Almost believed him when he threatened to lock us both in the trunk of the Impala!"

"Sam." Dean's voice was deadly serious and verging on homicidally impatient.

"Okay, okay!" Sam held up his hands in surrender, backing up towards his bed, where his laptop hummed inoffensively. "I think I found us a new gig."

"Sam," Dean sighed, running a hand through his spiky hair. "We talked about this. The only hunt we should be getting ourselves involved with right now is the one that ends with Haris cleaning out Satan's toilet bowl for all eternity and you looking at another fifty years and a gaggle of grandkids."

"Gaggle?"

"Flock. Slew. Herd. Take your pick."

Sam smiled weakly, pointedly avoiding meeting his brother's gaze. "Yeah well," he said resignedly, sinking bonelessly onto the edge of his bed, fingers combing through

his long hair before his jaw clenched and he was suddenly yanking open the laptop, all business and fake bravado. "See what you make of this –"

He spun the laptop toward his brother, who never took his eyes off Sam's face.

"Sam –"

"Look, Dean." Sam gestured pointedly at the screen, finally steeling himself to look his older brother in the eye before abruptly averting his gaze again. "Just look."

Dean continued to appraise him for a good few seconds longer before finally allowing him to show him the computer screen.

He blinked tiredly, trying to focus on the front page of the New Jersey Star-Ledger, which shouted a banner headline from the screen: "Four dead, one survivor in restaurant poisoning."

Dean blinked again, blank expression virtually screaming "WTF?" at his brother. "You woke me up at six-thirty in *the morning* to tell me about some guys choking on their meatballs?"

"Four guys, Dean," Sam explained, almost verging on over-enthusiastic. "The cops found lethal doses of cyanide in their food. Yet the fifth person at their table – a woman called Erika Gudrun – walked outta there without so much as a stomach cramp."

"So her food wasn't poisoned," Dean hazarded flatly. "Must have been a set-up..."

Sam nodded. "Yeah, you'd think," he agreed. "I guess that's what the cops thought too, especially as she took off before they could question her."

"And this interests us why exactly?"

"Because the cops tested this Gudrun woman's food, and it had just as much poison in it as the meals of the men who died –"

"So she didn't eat any –"

"Other witnesses in the restaurant saw her eating."

Dean cocked an eyebrow, finally interested enough to swing his legs out of bed. "So she has a cast iron constitution –"

"And apparently a cast iron body." Sam pushed a couple of buttons on the laptop, revealing another newspaper article, this time from the Buffalo News. "Two months ago, two cars collided on a railroad crossing just as the 0830 to New York happened along. Both cars were flattened. As were the two men in the first car. But the driver of the second car walked away without a scratch on her." Sam hit another button and a grainy photograph of a rather stunning blonde filled the screen. "Wanna guess who?"

Dean squinted at the computer. "So you think we gotta decapitate her with a Scottish broadsword or something?"

Sam frowned. "So not funny," he said. "I'm serious, Dean. We could be looking at an honest to God immortal here!"

"Honest to something, anyway." Dean's eyes slid back to the computer screen. "At least she's hotter than Sean Connery."

"Dean," Sam chastised him. "Six dead guys, remember? At least. Can we focus here?"

Dean frowned at him. "I'm focused," he protested, a lecherous grin inching across his face. "I've just never seen a really hot immortal chick before."

"Possibly immortal," Sam amended. "It could be nothing. She could just be lucky."

"Damn lucky –"

"Which is why we should go check it out."

Dean's eyes lingered on the computer screen a second longer before returning to Sam. "Look, Sam," he said, suddenly all serious again. "I get it, okay?"

Sam frowned. "Get what?"

"I get that its only two days to your birthday. I get that you're trying to act like nothing's wrong, that everything's normal, everything's okay. And I don't know whether that's for my benefit or not." Dean reached out a tentative hand, resting his fingers lightly against Sam's wrist. "But you acting all Captain Denial ain't gonna

change the facts or the way I feel, Sammy.” He met Sam’s gaze steadily. “This is all my fault –”

“Dean –”

“Sammy.” Dean waved a hand to silence his brother’s protests. “Whichever way you look at it, this is my fault. You’re gonna die in two days if we don’t come up with something pretty damn fast. And that’s on me.”

Sam sighed. “You didn’t ask to be possessed, Dean –”

“No,” Dean’s eyes flashed briefly. “And I didn’t asked for you to sell yourself to Haris for me either. But I still gotta deal with it, Sam. You think I could live with myself if that yellow-eyed bastard makes good on this deal? Huh?”

Sam just looked at him.

“Cause I’m serious, man. If Haris takes you, then I’m not gonna be far behind.”

“Dean, don’t talk like that,” Sam admonished him, catching sight of the earnest expression in his brother’s eyes and faltering slightly. “If you die, then I’ll have died for nothing.”

“Exactly,” Dean agreed. “Which is why we gotta come up with something. To save both of us. Because I can’t – I don’t think I can –” it was Dean’s turn to falter, eyes downcast, long lashes blinking furiously. He looked up suddenly, the moment of uncertainty solidifying into a mask of determination. “This Seal of Solomon thing. We need to find it. We do that and –”

“Dean, it’s a *legend*,” Sam sighed in exasperation. “Which you were quick enough to point out to Dad as I recall! And as I think I said to Dad when he first suggested it, finding the Seal of Solomon is about as likely as us finding the Ark of the Covenant. Or the Holy Grail. Or – or – hell, the Easter Bunny! It’s just not gonna happen, Dean! If the thing existed, don’t you think someone would have found it by now?”

“How do you know someone hasn’t?” Dean asked.

“Dean,” Sam rested his own hand on top of his brother’s. “You just gotta face it. We’re never gonna find it. It’s just not gonna happen.”

Dean’s jaw tightened. “We still got time,” he insisted stubbornly. “We could still find it –”

“In two days?” Sam shook his head. “It’s pointless us deluding ourselves, man. Way I see it, we can spend the little time I have left on some hopeless quest to find the Seal of Solomon, or I can go out fighting; kill as many evil things as I can between here and there.”

“Dammit, Sammy!” Dean jumped to his feet abruptly, snatching his hand away from his brother’s as he began to pace the room like some caged animal. “Will you stop talking like that? Going out? You’re not going anywhere. I’m not gonna let you. I let you go before and I’ll be damned if –”

“Dean –”

“It’s not like you’re going away to *school*, Sam!” Dean was suddenly at Sam’s side, face bent towards him. “Sammy, this is – this – you’re – he’s gonna –” He straightened, suddenly backing away toward the motel room door. “No,” he reiterated, shaking his head determinedly. “No. I’m not gonna let it happen. He’s not just *taking* you, Sam. Not without a fight. Not without –”

“Dean.” Sam stood, approaching his brother slowly, hand outstretched towards him. “Just listen to me.”

Dean ran a shaky hand across his face, eyes suddenly lighting on the car keys tossed on the little table by the door. “We can go to Bobby’s,” he said, desperation and near-panic creeping into his voice as he snatched up the fob. “Or Bearwalker’s. Someone’s got to know something. Someone’s got to know where we can look –”

“Dean.” Sam put a steady hand on his brother’s shoulder, immediately stilling his frantic movements, although his eyes continued to dart about the room maniacally, as if he didn’t quite know where to look if he wasn’t looking at Sam. “Hey, look at me man.”

Dean took a breath before slowly bringing his eyes to rest on his brother.

"It's okay, Dean," Sam said slowly. "It's okay. I want to do this. I don't want to die. But if I have to, then this is how I want to spend the time I've got left. Saving people, hunting things." He quirked the corner of his mouth. "The family business, right?"

Dean held his brother's gaze reluctantly. "This is what you want?" he asked at length, voice subdued.

Sam nodded emphatically, trying not to let it show that he was slowly crumbling from the inside out. "This is what I want," he confirmed, nodding decisively before a lop-sided grin stole across his face. "And you might want to put some pants on before you go running off to save the world, bro."

Dean glanced down at himself, a tiny smile flickering at the corners of his mouth. "I save any damsels in distress, at least they'll have something hot to look at," he muttered, before slowly taking in a breath and blowing it out again a little shakily. "Okay," he continued, a firm hand on Sam's shoulder as he mirrored his brother's position. "Then let's blow this popsicle stand. New Jersey's got a hot immortal chick and I've got a bullet with her name on it. After all, we're the Winchesters of the Clan Winchester, and there can be only – uh –" he frowned slightly. "Two."

Sam quirked an eyebrow. "Always, bro," he said with a somber smile. "Always."

* * * *

Erika Gudrun's Home

8.29a.m.

15hrs 31mins...

Sam glanced down at the pale gray coveralls he was wearing and wondered just how many times they'd actually gotten away with this ruse. A few simple words embroidered onto work clothes, a hastily produced I.D. and people tended to take the Winchester boys at their word.

It was a sad fact, but both brothers could easily have adapted to a life of crime and been damn good at it. Sam was the whiz kid who could effortlessly take out a phone or cable line to give a valid reason for their presence – as he had today, taking out Erika's cable.

Dean on the other hand, Dean was the smart-mouth who could worm his way into any property with just that smile of his – especially if said property belonged to a beautiful female like today.

Sam sighed readjusting the bag of "tools" in his hand. "Man, are you sure she's going to buy this? I mean, if she looks on the street there's no cable van..."

"Yeah, well, the overalls cost enough of our hard earned cashola, not exactly gonna hire a van too." Dean lengthened his gait, already impatient to get the gig over with. If they could finish this quick and fast there was still time. Time for what he wasn't sure, but he'd sure as hell try. "Did we really have to leave the Impala two blocks away, though, dude? I hate walking around in these monkey suits. I feel like some Disneyland washout..."

Sam smiled, suddenly envisioning his brother in a Mickey Mouse outfit with kids tugging at him – a Mickey Mouse that just happened to have a Desert Eagle stuffed in the back of its belt and a rock salt-filled shotgun instead of balloons. *So not gonna happen...* Dean hated dressing up for any occasion. If he couldn't have jeans, a tee and a scruffy jacket he was NOT happy.

Sam knew Dean hated leaving his "baby" anywhere not within his range of vision too, although he'd never admit that was why he'd been casting looks back towards the main road ever since they'd walked away from the raven black classic.

"Dean, you know that thing sticks out like a sore thumb. Not exactly stakeout car material." Sam let a long finger press Erika's doorbell and made a mental note that the chime sounded far too much like "Stairway to Heaven" for comfort. Damn if Dean wasn't going to like this chick. She had the looks. She apparently had an affinity for classic rock – pity she was also probably something they usually killed rather than

dated or it would be a match made in heaven – or maybe somewhere in between, seeing as Dean still refused to believe in the existence of an actual “heaven.”

“Yeah, well I didn’t see you complaining about my wheels the night you staked out Meg and got a little hot window action.” Dean wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Only you would get the hots for a possessed chick...”

The white UPVC door opened just a crack and Erika Gudrun’s pale blue eyes peered out, scrutinizing both brothers and the name on their coveralls. Luscious red lips curved into a smile, and she let a hand slowly flick back a long lock of hair. “I was wondering when you’d arrive. My TV’s been out for almost an hour.”

Sam watched as his brother’s eyes took in every inch of the perfectly proportioned woman before him, noting the amorous “Dean grin” as it spread across his face.

“You were saying?” Sam jiggled his own brows, tempted to laugh at how quickly Dean could let the opposite sex get to him. Still, the girl didn’t exactly look like zombie material. Maybe he’d been looking for a hunt so badly he gotten it wrong this time.

Erika’s brow scrunched in confusion, uncertain who Sam was talking to, but after Dean managed to unglue his eyes long enough to flash her a phony badge, she stepped back, allowing them inside her home.

The house was sparsely furnished and not at all what Sam had been expecting. It was clean and organized, but there was no hint of personality – as if Erika used the place out of practicality rather than as somewhere she liked to relax after a hard day at work. It was something as hunters both he and Dean were used to. Somewhere to crash and clean guns, somewhere to eat, to sleep before moving on to the next gig, but it was not the quarters he’d expect for a beauty like Erika Gudrun. *What are we missing here?*

“The cable box is this way...” Erika walked across the lounge, long shapely legs traversing the room in only a few steps.

Dean watched her moves appreciatively, but Sam could tell that he was already repressing any sexual desires in favor of his job. The hunt. The kill.

Dean wanted this over. Wanted it all over, and he’d made it quite clear if that meant going out at some point right along with Sam then he’d do it. *He’s going to get reckless, angry, losing the perception of what’s right and wrong anymore...*

And Sam knew that was his fault. Knew that from his brother’s expression Erika was about to feel Dean’s temper far more than most unearthly creatures ever had. *Because he blames every supernatural thing, evil or not, for the deal I made.* And just because Erika might be immortal, did that really make her evil?

Sam grabbed at his brother’s arm and tried to twist him away from the young blonde girl. Maybe if he talked to her first, maybe if...

Dean’s eyes glowed with rage and he pulled away, locking an arm around Erika’s neck as she unsuspectingly kneeled in front of the dead cable box. Surprisingly, as he dragged her back to the dining room table she didn’t squirm, didn’t even try to fight him.

Dean moved to place a hand over her mouth then realized she hadn’t any intention of screaming. He dropped her down roughly on the chair and yanked her arms behind her back with brute force, securing them there with two yellow cable ties.

Sam’s jaw ticked as he was forced to watch Dean at his coldest. It was like watching a replay of events from Bobby’s when Dean had interrogated Meg. That time it had been their father’s soul that needed saving, but the effects on Dean’s personality were the same.

“Dean...”

“No going soft on me now, Sammy. This gig was your idea, remember?” The elder Winchester stooped, retrieving his favorite Bowie knife from the tool sack they’d brought in. The serrated edge glimmered in the light from the window, and he used the effect, twisting the blade in front of Erika’s face as if daring her to try something.

The blonde watched the knife's movement, her cobalt orbs never leaving its pointed tip. "Take anything you want. I don't have much money or jewelry, just please don't hurt me..." There was a slight quiver to her voice, just enough to make Sam feel guilty.

Dealing with the spirit of a long-dead woman was one thing, killing some female revenant was too, but Erika appeared all too human. A living, breathing being who might just have been damn lucky to have survived a couple of nasty incidents.

Dean didn't feel so forgiving. He didn't see the tremble in the girl's voice as anything but a ploy, a defense mechanism because she knew they were onto her. "If I cut you with this puppy what's gonna happen?" He stalked around the chair, again mirroring his actions with Meg. "Hell, I'm betting nothing's gonna happen, right? Maybe if I threatened to cut your damn head off we might get somewhere!"

"Dean!" Sam wanted to pull the knife from his brother's hand. Wanted to stop things, but there was just enough uncertainty for him to waver. "No more bad movie jokes," he seethed through clenched teeth.

"Pretty awesome friggin' soundtrack, though, huh?" Dean shrugged his shoulders. "*Don't Lose Your Head* is a classic. What do ya say, Miss Immortal?" He leaned close, unexpectedly letting the blade slice along Erika's forearm.

The knife sunk deep into the flesh until Dean was sure he felt its edge hit bone, but there was no blood, no open wound, and as he drew back the blade, Erika's skin appeared to knit back together seamlessly, like he had never touched her.

"Ever see Nick Cage cut himself in *City of Angels*, Sammy?" Dean's eyebrow ticked up a notch. "Pretty much the same effect, except this chick is no angel. She goes around killing guys."

"Mafia guys," Sam pointed out, "And isn't that movie kinda too 'chick flick' for you?"

"Murder is murder, mafia or not." Dean tossed the knife back into his holdall. "And the movie was purely research, dude." He kinked his neck. "Course, Meg Ryan wasn't half bad to look at either..."

Erika listened to the conversation, taking in every nuance of their voices, every expression that gave away what they were really feeling. The men before her seemed to have two personalities, a hard exterior borne of tragedy, and a softer, almost gentle inner that she was not supposed to see.

Of the two, the shorter man carried the most mental weight until he was almost bursting with the load of his own failures. It was that weight that was now manifesting itself in anger, in pain, and she was feeling the brunt of it.

The younger man – brother? – carried a burden too, but he had made peace with it, accepted it as inevitable until his only concern was the effect it was having on his sibling.

Erika found that endearing; a quality often missing in the humans she had known during her lifespan. Perhaps some good could come from this meeting after all. She shifted on the chair and yanked at her bonds, not caring that both her captors could see her attempts at freedom.

"You don't understand what you'll be doing if you try to hurt me. I don't want to hurt innocent people, but there are other forces, things you haven't encountered yet – things you won't want to encounter..." She jerked at the cable ties again with such force the plastic should have cut into her wrists, but Erika's flesh remained unblemished.

Dean hunched over until his face was millimeters from Erika's. He was so close she could feel his breath on her cheeks and almost hear the thud of his rapidly beating heart. "Oh, but we do want to encounter them," he spat, eyes dancing as he watched her reaction. "Me and Sammy are gonna kill every last evil sonofabitch out there...it's what we do. But don't worry, I promise you're first..."

Erika jarred her head sideways needing to keep her focus elsewhere. Sam was the one she could influence most. He was the one she should concentrate on.

"Please," she begged. "You of all people should know that being different doesn't automatically make a person evil."

Sam felt a burning sensation in his stomach and his mind screamed as if it had somehow been molested on some psychic level. He didn't know how, but Erika knew about him, knew his thoughts, his weaknesses, as if she was inside his head.

The strange thing was he sensed a connection back, as if concentrating would allow him to read her too. Perhaps it was a part of his gifts that needed practice and nurturing to master. Or maybe, it was simply some kind of feedback from whatever power Erika could tap into. Either way it didn't matter. *I don't have enough time left to find out. To learn...*

Haris...

Sam stepped back, the reminder of his impending mortality making him forget the girl's possible innocence. She had hit a nerve, and it had left him mentally shaken.

"Boy, you sure know how to kick a guy in the jewels, don't you?" Dean fumed, wanting suddenly to hurt Erika, make her pay for her wrongdoings. She had hurt Sammy, cut him deep when he was already mentally bleeding like a stuck sow, and if Sam was hurt, then Dean was too.

The hunter clenched and unclenched his fists over and over, a physical manifestation of how hard he was struggling not to slap the girl like he once had Meg. "I might not be able to take you out with a knife or a gun, but I swear I'm gonna find out just what kind of freak you are and send your immortal ass straight back to Hades. Hell, I'll kill every evil thing on this planet..." *if only that would be enough to save Sam.*

We shouldn't be here. We should be finding the damn Seal...

Dean moved back from Erika and took a calming breath. She was staring at him, holding his gaze – just like she had Sam's before her revelation about him being different.

The sensation was unnerving, and he almost turned his back to her – almost.

"What if I could offer you a deal?" Erika noted the flare of anger at the mention of the word "deal" but it didn't dissuade her from making her proposition. Her voice was level, showing no panic, no fear of the situation she was in. "The man I was trying to arrange a meeting with the night of the poisonings, Luciano Ferinacci? I think he has something you boys desperately want...no, *need...*"

"I think the Winchesters are done making deals with your kind." Dean shot his brother a look, realizing Sam had said very little since Erika's commentary about being different. "Oh, and you think we're stupid enough to get tangled up with a mob boss like Ferinacci? I think you've been watching way too many episodes of *The Sopranos*."

Erika flipped back her head and began to laugh as if she was controlling the situation and not the brothers. "I'm more of a *Godfather* fan," she sassed. "But then, they're all quite laughable. Hollywood has no real idea how to portray men like Ferinacci. They simply have no clue of the power the man can wield."

"And this can help me and Dean how?" Sam sensed the connection again, like Erika had channeled Dean's anger and seen its origins. She was feeding them what they wanted to hear, but was it the truth?

"I know about Ferinacci. I know his hobbies. The man has a fascination with the occult and demonolatry – even has a fetish for collecting unusual, sometimes historic artifacts pertaining to the subject." Erika saw the brothers share a look and knew she had caught their attention. "I know how badly you need the Seal of Solomon for your brother." Her ice-blue eyes settled on Dean. "Wouldn't that be worth making a deal for? No soul selling...simply an exchange. I give you the information about where Ferinacci keeps his collection, and you give me my freedom."

"You're good," Dean admitted, cocking his head as a sarcastic grin crossed his features. "Real good...but I think Alec Guinness and Ewan McGregor were way

better..." He folded his arms across his chest. "So, we can add Jedi Mindreading 101 to your rep. What does that make you?" He cocked a brow. "M.I.B. maybe?"

Erika's smile faded. She had thought these were two intelligent people. Men who she could perhaps deal with at a semi-honest level, but was it possible she'd given them too much credit? "Oh, Agents Mulder and Scully think they've found a real live alien?" She jibed, looking to each brother in turn.

Dean shrugged. "I was thinking more Manipulative Immortal Bitch, but hey, if you wanna confess..." The hunter saw a spark of amusement in his captive's eyes and part of him wanted to warm to her again. She definitely was a fiery, overconfident, and very beautiful *something*. He just wasn't sure what.

He began to lean close, but then pulled back, realizing her rich perfume seemed to draw him like an aromatic dose of pheromones. And damn those brazen eyes with oh so long lashes that rivaled his own.

Down boy, thinking with the downstairs brain again.

"How could a mob boss end up with something as ancient as the Seal?" Sam's almost waxen face begged Erika for answers even though his voice remained neutral. He was too afraid to think she might be telling the truth, too afraid to believe in something and then for it all to be a lie.

Demons lie. But Erika wasn't a demon.

"You'd be amazed at the things Ferinacci has in his collection," Erika offered cryptically. "Things that haven't been seen for millennia."

Dean watched as the subdued, defeated look on Sam's face began to change for the first time in days. It wasn't just a trick of the sunlight through the window. It was real color flushing his brother's features.

It didn't matter if Erika was telling the truth or not. It didn't matter that Erika Gudrun may be a cold blooded murderer. Sam *believed* she knew where the Seal of Solomon was, and that belief had given him hope that Haris may yet be thwarted.

In that moment, Dean knew beyond a doubt that he would make the deal. Erika could always be found again later. If Sam died on his birthday there could be no second chance for him, no resurrection.

"What will it be, boys?"

Sam met Dean's gaze and their eyes locked.

Is this too much of a coincidence? The Seal here in New Jersey right where this all started? And right when I need it? Is Haris playing with me? Using one of his pawns for one last laugh? Sam's mind asked the unspoken questions, and as always, Dean managed to read them in the depths of his brother's eyes.

He could *always* read Sammy's eyes.

The elder hunter turned to Erika, about to yield to her demands. It didn't matter if it was all a set up, another game from the yellow-eyed demon. All that mattered was Sam was given one last chance, no matter how small. And Dean would fight for that chance, through mafia, through demons, through hell itself if he had to.

"This is the police..."

"What the..." Erika suddenly forgotten, Dean whirled and nodded for Sam to check the window as a disembodied voice boomed from the sidewalk.

The gangly hunter moved sideways until he could carefully peek behind a curtain, prying it up at the edge just enough to get a view with his thumb and forefinger. What he saw made him draw in a breath through clenched teeth. "Dean, there are at least two police cruisers out there..."

As Sam watched and listened, a burly sergeant gave the brothers an ultimatum via megaphone to give up their weapons and exit the building, hands on heads. "It looks like a neighbor is talking to the cops. Maybe she called them? I mean, no cable van, two suspicious guys, Dean..." Sam hunched his shoulders as if to say "I told you so."

"Yeah, or maybe Deputy Dawg was coming to the party to ask our M.I.B. how the hell she survived a fatal poisoning?" Dean scowled and began checking out the



house for possible exits. As he dodged adroitly from room to room he chided himself for ever allowing himself to be dragged back to New Jersey. “Hey, visit New Jersey, have a few laughs, make a few demonic deals...”

“Dean...” Sam joined his brother back in the kitchen after sweeping his side of the house. It didn’t look good. Besides the two cop cars at the front, a SWAT van had parked across the rear alley, effectively sealing it off. No doubt the black-clad officers from inside said van would be making their presence known shortly.

“I saw it from the side window,” Dean admitted. “SWAT team at the rear, Deputy Dawg up front, and evil Jedi girl inside. Dude, we need new jobs...”

“I can help...if you just untie me...” Erika’s voice was soft now, almost beseeching.

“We’re surrounded by cops. What ya gonna do? Use a magic carpet? Maybe some smoke and mirrors?” Dean began to edge towards the window again, needing to see what was going on in the street.

Before he’d taken a stride, something cylindrical and metallic smashed through the large glass panes in front of him, shattering them into innumerable spiky shards that flew outwards like tiny daggers.

The hunter threw up both hands defensively and then tossed his body at the kitchen table, lugging the pine top over with him as he rolled to effectively make temporary cover.

Dean landed shoulder first on the hard wooden floor and felt his muscles jar with the impact. Then, a billowing gray-white smog began to fill the room as the police smoke canister evacuated its contents into the atmosphere.

From somewhere behind he heard Sam cough out, “Great, why did you have to mention *smoke*...?” and he couldn’t help smile at the irony.

There was nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide from the SWAT team that would soon barrel into the house, weapons drawn. And with the police usually came questions about certain attacks on young girls in St. Louis. Attacks that often saw the victim tied to a chair and cut, just like Erika had been.

As usual, the evidence would tell a lie. A lie that would probably land Dean in a jail cell while his brother lost his soul.

Just when it seemed like they had a chance to save Sam, things had come full circle for Dean Winchester. He was right back where it seemed he belonged – and from where he was sitting, that place sucked out loud.

Erika Gudrun’s Home

8.52 a.m.

15hrs 8mins...

The ominous rumbling of a helicopter hovering overhead and the crackle of multiple police radios, not to mention the tear gas rapidly filling Erika Gudrun’s kitchen with acrid smoke, was more than enough to convince Dean that his and Sam’s time was most definitely up.

Peering cautiously out through the broken kitchen window, he gulped in a lungful of fresh air and frowned at the sea of flashing blue and red lights and the virtual army of blue uniforms now blocking Erika’s street from end to end.

“Jeez, must be a slow morning in Copville,” he coughed out, noting the glint of a rifle and a brief glimpse of a black-clad figure on the roof of the building opposite. “Either that or the local coffee shop ran out of donuts. I think we got the whole of New Jersey’s Finest out here.”

He turned and glanced back at Sam, rubbing at his watery eyes as his kid brother kicked the tear gas canister out into the hall, slamming the kitchen door shut behind it.

“That’s not going to help a whole lot,” Dean muttered.

“It’ll give us a couple extra minutes,” Sam insisted, snatching up a towel and stuffing it the length of the gap at the bottom of the door. He turned back to Erika,

wide eyed and desperate. "Are they here for us or for you?" he demanded, clenching his jaw as he re-established his grip on the .45 in his hand.

Erika looked up at him, batting her eyelashes innocently, and Sam frowned as he wiped tears from his eyes, noting that Erika's were as dry as they had been before the tear gas. "I don't know what you mean –" she began, but bit off the rest of her sentence as Sam abruptly bent down toward her until his face was mere inches from her own.

"They never caught up to you after the restaurant did they? Maybe it's you they're after?"

Erika continued to gaze at him appraisingly, completely unruffled and unhurried, just as a not-too-distant tinkle of glass and an ominous hissing sounded from somewhere down the hall.

"Sam, we gotta go!" Dean choked, moving away from the window and back towards his brother. "Sam!"

Sam looked over at him, covering his mouth as another fit of coughing wracked his body. "And go where?" he croaked hopelessly. "I thought you said the cops had us surrounded."

"I can get you out of here," Erika put in suddenly, sitting as far forward in the chair as her bonds would allow.

Sam blinked at her through teary eyes, struggling to catch his breath. Dean had stumbled over to him, one hand fisted in his jacket at the shoulder, trying to pull him away.

"Sam, come on! Let's just leave her!"

Sam stood his ground, blinking rapidly as Dean broke down into a fit of hacking coughs. "How?" he managed to choke out. "How can you get us out of here?" He blinked through the tears, the image of the girl in the chair swimming slightly.

More breaking glass and militaristic shouting in the distance, and Dean was literally trying to drag him back to the door.

"I have another way out," Erika told him, sitting up straighter in the chair. "I'll show you if you promise to let me go once we're clear."

Sam hesitated, glancing over at Dean as the shouting voices of the approaching cops came ever nearer.

"I can help you." Erika looked Sam straight in the eye, gaze never faltering, chin pushed out ever-so-slightly. "Let me help you."

Sam wiped his streaming eyes with the back of his hand, coughing anew as he held out one hand toward Dean. He didn't need to say anything for his brother to understand what he wanted.

"Sam –"

"We're out of options, Dean."

Dean took a shallow breath before handing his knife to his brother.

Erika didn't even flinch as Sam brought the blade down toward her wrist, slicing through the ropes binding her to the chair before making quick work of those restraining her other arm.

She sprang instantly to her feet, grabbing the chair on which she'd been sitting and tossing it aside before yanking back the rug spread across the wooden floor to reveal a square door set into the floorboards.

"Trapdoor?" Dean burst out between coughing fits. "You were sitting on that all the time and didn't tell us?"

Erika shrugged. "Always have an escape plan," she advised him, wrenching open the door to reveal a rickety-looking ladder that disappeared into a dark hole beneath. "It's a philosophy that's kept me alive for –" she seemed to perform a mental calculation before merely shrugging again. "– A lot of years."

"No kidding," Dean said, grabbing the discarded chair and wedging it under the door handle. "And there I was thinking you just used one helluva good moisturizer..."

“That’s not going to hold a SWAT team for very long,” Erika observed placidly, gesturing at the chair as she pointedly ignored his comment.

“Then you’d better get a move on with this escape plan of yours,” Dean returned, inclining his head toward the hole in the floor. “Ladies first.”

Erika cocked an eyebrow. “Afraid of the dark, huh?” she asked as she lowered herself onto the ladder.

Dean scowled at her. “Lady, the dark’s afraid of me,” he told her emphatically. “Now can we *please* get the hell out of here?”

Another loud crash resounded from the hall behind them, followed by the heavy thud of booted feet, and Dean virtually trod on Sam’s hands in his haste to follow his kid brother through the trapdoor.

“Dude!” Sam snapped, as Dean tugged the trapdoor down over their heads just as the sound of splintering wood indicated the cops had kicked their way into the room where they’d just been standing.

Sam jumped down onto the concrete at the bottom of the ladder, taking in the dank brick basement in one sweeping glance as Dean descended the rest of the way before landing next to him with a thud.

They both looked back up the way they’d just come, eyes finally beginning to clear, although their lungs still burned all the way to their tongues.

“We have to go,” Sam said suddenly, voice still scratchy. “They’re gonna have that trapdoor open any second –”

“No,” Erika said calmly, turning away from them and heading toward the dim distant corner of the small basement room. “They won’t find it.”

Dean blinked through the gloom at her. “But its right there in front of them!” he protested. “How are they not gonna find it?”

Erika turned back to them suddenly, fair features momentarily bathed in the room’s only source of illumination as pale fingers of light felt their way in through a grille set high into the wall. She smiled enigmatically. “They can’t find what they can’t see,” she told them. “And they only see what I want them to see.”

Dean glanced over at Sam, who shrugged uncertainly, before the rusty squeal of metal on metal drew their attention back to Erika, who was levering something out of the concrete floor with a metal pole.

Sam approached first, Dean on his heels. “What are you –?”

A loud clunk and a further screech of metal stopped Sam’s question cold, as Erika shoved a rusty manhole cover across the floor as if it weighed next to nothing.

“Basement under the basement?” Dean hazarded, glancing at the circular hole in the floor a little uncertainly.

Erika looked up at him and grinned brightly. “Sewer access,” she told him, lowering herself into the hole without a second thought. “Hope you boys didn’t wear your best shoes!”

Dean wrinkled his nose in disgust. “You gotta be kidding me!” he burst out. “No way I’m going down in no freakin’ sewer –”

“I thought you *weren’t* afraid of the dark?” Erika’s voice drifted up from below them, echoing oddly.

Dean bit his lip as Sam shrugged again and made to follow Erika, hesitating as he suddenly flashed back to a coffin and a skull and – and darkness. He shuddered. *Not buried*, he told himself. *It’s just a sewer. Not buried...*

He took a deep breath before following his brother down through the manhole. “Sweetheart, you’re looking at one helluva dry cleaning bill if we get outta this in one piece...”

* * * *

The trip through the sewer tunnels was mercifully brief, as Dean spent most of the journey bitching about the sewers not looking anything like this on Angel, while Sam spent the entire time trying not to bang his head on the low ceilings.

"Are we there yet?" Dean demanded, just as Erika stopped at the bottom of a slime-covered ladder and looked up thoughtfully.

"This should be about where you boys parked your car. Two blocks away, right?"

Dean's mouth opened wordlessly in surprise, while Sam managed, "How'd you know that?"

Erika shrugged. "Call it a gift," she said, beginning to clamber up the ladder. "Good thing you boys are kinda paranoid. I never would have believed you were cable guys if you'd pulled up outside my house in that thing. Plus, right now you'd be parked smack in the middle of a police cordon."

Sam tossed a look over his shoulder at Dean, who frowned uncomfortably.

"Okay, this chick is officially starting to creep me out," he muttered, following Sam to the foot of the ladder.

A shaft of bright sunlight speared down at them from above their heads as another scrape of metal suggested Erika hadn't had much trouble shifting this manhole cover either.

Sam glanced back once before hauling himself up onto the ladder, climbing quickly until he suddenly found himself standing in the very alleyway where Dean had parked the Impala earlier.

"That's yours, right?" Erika asked, jerking her thumb toward the jet black Chevy.

"That she is," Dean confirmed, unable to keep a little spark of pride out of his voice as he pulled himself out of the sewer. He moved over to stand behind Sam, frowning as he caught sight of the grungy gunk clinging to his boots and the cuffs of his coveralls as he wiped slime off his hands and onto his thighs. He turned his disgusted gaze in Erika's direction, not entirely surprised to note that her shoes and her jeans didn't appear to have a single smear of dirt on them anywhere. "That's some trick," he told her. "Bet you're real fun at parties."

A none-too-distant police siren caused all three of them to glance nervously up the alley as a couple of cop cars sped past the entrance, lights flashing.

"We have to go," Sam reminded them suddenly. "Right now."

"Wait," Dean reached out to grab hold of Erika's arm. "A deal's a deal. You said you'd give us information..." He trailed off, unable to quite bring himself to finish the sentence.

Erika gazed at him appraisingly, not resisting the insistent tug on her arm, just looking at him as if she had all the time in the world and there weren't a hundred cops swarming all over the area looking for them.

For a second, Dean almost looked away, vaguely disconcerted by the feeling that the girl could look right into his head and see his almost overwhelming desire to just stuff her into the Impala and make a run for it.

But a deal was a deal.

And Dean somehow got the impression Erika already knew they'd hold up their end of the bargain.

"Luciano Ferinacci," Erika said at length. "He has a –" she smiled mirthlessly, "– a little house just north of the city, out towards Branch Brook Park. That's where he keeps his – uh – collection. That's where you'll find the Seal of Solomon."

Dean blinked at her. "Then the thing actually exists?"

Erika nodded. "I already told you. It's the pride of his collection."

Sam just stared at her, still vaguely stunned that the Seal even existed, much less that it was here, in New Jersey, right where his vision had told him he would die. He shook his head slightly. "That guy's house is gonna be locked up tighter than Fort Knox," he observed. "How the hell are we meant to get inside and get the thing?"

Erika turned disinterested eyes in his direction. "That's your problem," she told him flatly. "I told you where to find it; the rest's up to you."

She attempted to tug her arm out of Dean's grasp, but he didn't release her right away, still considering the fact that she had some kind of supernatural mojo going on that he couldn't quite pin down, while the iciness of her blue eyes only served to remind him that she was also more than likely a multiple murderer.

"Dean," Sam's quiet voice broke in on his brother's contemplation. "Let her go." He fixed Dean with a meaningful gaze. "A deal's a deal."

Dean returned his look for a long moment before reluctantly releasing the young woman's arm. "Yeah well," he muttered, eyes sliding to the uneven pavement beneath his feet. "Some deals are meant to be broken." He looked back up again to find Sam's eyes fixed on him and Erika glancing thoughtfully between the two of them.

"You should go," she said suddenly, both brothers abruptly turning their attention to her, as if only just remembering she was there. "You don't have much time, Sam."

Sam met her searching gaze, wanting to ask how she knew; wanting to ask who she was, what she was. But all that he could manage was a grateful nod of thanks as he caught hold of Dean's arm and began pulling him toward the waiting Impala.

"Good luck, Sam," he heard her say as he turned away from her.

When he looked back over his shoulder, she was gone.

Sleep EZ Motel, Newark NJ

10.14 a.m.

13hrs 46mins...

"So what the hell was *that*?"

Dean dumped the weapons bag on his bed with a shake of his head, confusion warring with anger for control of his face.

Sam strode across the room to his own bed, grabbing the laptop and opening it with an economy of movement that betrayed the ticking clock threatening to split his brain in two. "I don't know, Dean," he sighed, resting his forehead against his palm for a second.

"I mean," Dean continued as if Sam hadn't even spoken, "sure, we've had hunts go sideways on us before, but *that*—" he gestured wildly toward the door and what lay beyond, "—well *that* was just weird. Even for us. I mean — that chick? Seriously, what the hell?" He stopped talking for a second when he realized Sam hadn't said anything and was staring fixedly at the computer screen. "Earth to Sammy? Jeez, that better not be porn you're lookin' at dude, 'cause I'd hate to think I was playing second fiddle to free wireless..."

"Huh?" Sam looked up at him distractedly, as if only just remembering he was in the room.

Dean raised his eyebrows. "That Erika chick," he repeated. "What the hell?"

Sam shrugged, a line forming between his brows as he returned to scanning the computer screen.

"Sam?" Dean prodded. "Dude, you see her with that tear gas? Not even crocodile tears, man! And when I cut her? That was just unreal." He took a step closer to his brother when he still got no response. "We shoulda hung onto her a little longer —"

"No," Sam said finally, still not taking his eyes off the laptop. "A deal's a deal."

"I wish you'd stop saying that, dude."

Sam finally dragged his attention from the screen long enough to look up at his brother. "That's different," he said, immediately averting his gaze back to the laptop when he saw the anguished look in Dean's eyes.

"Damn straight," Dean agreed, circling around until he was standing at Sam's shoulder. "So what *are* you looking at, Sam?"

"Ferinacci's house," Sam replied, before thinking better of the description. "Or — mansion," he amended, indicating the computer screen. "Its right where Erika said it was."

Dean frowned. "You found Ferinacci's house on the *internet*? Dude, what site are you lookin' at, Mobster Homes of America.com?"

Sam shook his head. "The house was bought by one of his shell companies."

"And you know this how...?"

"Because I did a little research on him when I read he owned the restaurant where those guys –"

"Bit the big calzone?"

"Something like that."

"And why'd he spike on your Geekometer?"

Sam shrugged. "I dunno," he mused. "Something about the name..."

Dean frowned at him. "The name?"

Sam shrugged again. "I dunno..." His finger tapped out an impatient rhythm against the rim of the laptop and he blew out a slow breath. "I don't think we can do this," he said finally, shaking his head.

"C'mon, Sammy," Dean encouraged. "So he's a mob boss. We've faced off against scarier things –"

"Really?" Sam interrupted. "When? Dean, the guy's a *mobster*! We can't take care of him with salt, lighter fluid and a few choice phrases of Latin, man! You think we're gonna just waltz on up to his front door, invite ourselves in and put our hands straight on the Seal of Solomon before waltzing back out again? You know the kind of security this place is gonna have?"

Dean straightened, trying to muster his usual cocky grin. "Ain't a place been built we can't break into!"

Sam considered him for a second, frown deepening. "I'm not so sure that's something we should be bragging about, Dean," he said solemnly.

"Sorry Mr. Law Society," Dean returned. "But right now this is all we got. This is our last chance, our last hope. We gotta get in that mansion; we gotta get the Seal. There's no other option. We gotta get it man, we gotta do this. This is it. It's this or –" he broke off, all fake bravado gone as he shook his head uncertainly. When his voice returned it was stronger, confidence and determination oozing from every syllable. "It's *this*." He put a firm hand on Sam's shoulder, leaning down toward him and looking him right in the eye. "It's *this*, man. This is it. We gotta do this. We've got to do this."

Sam returned his brother's steely gaze, desperately trying to convince himself that this wasn't just for his benefit; that Dean really was this confident, really believed they could do this. He blinked up at his brother, at the rigid set of his jaw, the flinty sparkle in his eyes. Dean meant it. Sam could see it. Dean was going to do this. If it was the last thing he ever did. If it was the last thing either of them ever did.

"So." Dean drew himself up to his full height, reaching for his Desert Eagle and checking the clip before shoving it into its usual place against the small of his back. "You coming or what?"

Somewhere Near Ferinacci's Mansion

11.46a.m.

12hrs 14mins...

Dean slammed the stick shift over so hard the gears begged for mercy, making a metallic grinding scream that signaled the catering van had just about had enough of his driving technique.

The white-painted Ford E450 had been acquired rather hastily from Klein's Caterers, and neither brother had realized it had been parked separately because it was in desperate need of repair. They were paying for that mistake now as the van lurched rabbit-style every time Dean attempted to change gear.

"Dude, you need me to show you what gear you should be in?" Sam smirked, creases forming on his face as he teased his brother. "And you say I drive like a girl..."

"Yeah, well, maybe if you'd picked us a better cover, Sammy," Dean groaned struggling with the van's clutch as it slipped yet again. "This thing is so fried even McDonald's would reject it." He glanced over, rolling his eyes at his brother as he pulled the white Ford onto a private lane. "Caterers, Sammy, why'd it have to be caterers..."

"Maybe because you're a walking food encyclopedia?" Sam countered, his smirk widening. "I mean, you *do* have every burger joint and junk food dive memorized this side of the equator. Forget Sat Nav, you just hone in on the nearest diner."

Dean scowled, almost stalling the van as he lost his concentration for a second. "Yeah, well, just don't expect me to play waiter to these guys when we get inside. I already look like a friggin' penguin in this outfit..."

"You resemble that remark," Sam mimicked Burgess Meredith's cackle from *Batman*. "Just no hiding any weapons under *the penguin*, okay?" He grew more serious, his brow knitting and his eyes searching Dean's for any sign of duplicity. "No knives in ankle holsters either, Dean. Ferinacci's men are bound to frisk us, regular caterers or not."

"No knives," Dean conceded. "Just as long as you're sure this will get us in? 'Cause, dude, I was so ready to go with the C4 option. You know, if we're going out, do it with a big bang..."

Sam took down a breath, but didn't respond. Dean had been joking, but for the first time he'd actually acknowledged that 'going out' could actually be an option. To Dean, dying in a blaze of glory at Ferinacci's would always be a better death than simply to be taken by some demon. And yet, Sam wasn't so sure.

They'd come here for the Seal, for a way to prevent a deal Sam had willingly agreed to, but something was just off about the whole thing.

Sam couldn't help but to keep going back in his mind to that niggling feeling he'd had at the motel. Ferinacci was familiar to him somehow, and it wasn't just because he was a high profile mobster.

"Whoa, talk about Munster Mansion, this place looks like something out of the dark ages." Dean slowed the Ford as he approached a double iron gate that led onto a spiraling paved driveway.

At the entrance, several men that could easily have played for the New York Giants stood on guard, their black garb and ear mikes making it transparently obvious they were security at its tightest. Dean had no doubt each man's perfectly tailored jacket was also host to a concealed automatic, maybe two.

Beyond the men, and the driveway, loomed a house that could have been built during medieval times. Harsh stone turrets jutted from its corner extensions and ornate arched windows gave away its European heritage.

"Why the hell would an Italian mobster have something like this ferried over stone by stone from England, dude?" Dean surveyed the house and the surrounding gardens with distaste. People who had this much money to throw around usually annoyed him anyway, but when the money came from the kinds of nefarious deals Ferinacci made, he sometimes wondered if he actually hunted the wrong kind of devil.

"It's a status thing." Sam clarified. "You know, show who's at the top of the pecking order. Besides, don't forget, this guy collects occult items. Maybe he's into a little black magic."

"Yeah, and maybe he's just a greedy-assed sonofabitch." Dean took down a breath as he finally dipped the clutch and brought the van to a halt. Putting on his best fake smile he wound down the window. "Got a further delivery for Mr. Ferinacci's party..."

"Where's Hector?" The middle goon walked forward, his shaven head shining in the sunlight as if he'd actually polished it. "You're not the regular guy from Klein's..." He kept a hand under his jacket just enough to indicate he had a weapon nestled there, ready and waiting.

Dean cocked his head, taking note of the move. "Way I heard it, Hector is already out here. I just got told Mr. F. had upped the order and to bring out the extra. 'Course, I could always take it back, but when the guests run out of pretzels and reach for their Uzis, don't blame me..."

The head guard's eyes narrowed and he studied Dean hesitantly. "Both of you out of the van, *now*." As he gestured for Sam to climb down too, the remaining suits surrounded the delivery truck, making any kind of escape a physical impossibility.

"Don't tell me, this is where you guys get a little hands on action, right?" Dean's mouth creased into a smirk as he was spun around by two of the men and slammed into the side of the van.

While one guard held his face flush to the metal, the other began to shake him down for weapons.

"Dude, I heard about what you guys get up to in the county jail, but lemme tell you I so don't swing that way." Dean heard a second thud and just managed to see Sam being held in a similar position. From the look on his face, Sammy wanted his big brother to shut up, big time.

Dean's hazel eyes glinted his usual 'sorry, man' message and he continued unabashed. "C'mon, guys, you should know not to upset the waiter...I mean, didn't four of your hard asses get whacked in a restaurant recently?"

"Bruno, can I take this guy and teach him a few manners?" The 'frisker' looked to the bald goon almost pleadingly.

"Maybe later." Bruno tapped his earpiece sounding almost disappointed. "Hector just sent a message from the kitchen asking if the extra supplies have arrived yet. I guess these guys are legit. Let them on through." He peered at Dean with cold, distrusting green eyes. "Stefan, go with them..."

"Gee, Mr. Wandering Hands gets to come to the party." Dean brushed down his jacket as if it had somehow been sullied by the guard's contact. "Just no touching the goods from now on, Capone, or I might have to show you how caterers take care of business."

Stefan's eyes flashed with anger, but he'd been trained well enough not to rise to the bait. Climbing into the catering van, he waited patiently for Sam and Dean to join him.

Dean grimaced as he clambered back in the cab and remembered the wayward clutch he had to deal with. No doubt their newfound 'friend' would find it amusing – or worse – suspicious.

Trying hard not to grate the gears, Dean restarted the Ford and exhaled as the mammoth electric gates began to peel back. Once he was through, he steered towards the rear of the stone-built building where Sam had instructed him Klein's usually delivered their foodstuffs.

"You know, that headache has got to be a bitch. You really should take something for it." Dean looked off-handedly at Stefan and then raised a brow when the man stared back at him as if he'd gone insane.

"You pair got a death wish or something?" Stefan sneered. "'Cause you gotta know nobody walks in here and smart mouths like you pair did back there and gets away with it." He jerked a thumb towards the rapidly vanishing gates and his companions.

Dean shrugged, ramming at the stick shift again when it refused to slip into gear. "Nah, no death wish. We just make deals with devils. Right, Sammy?" He looked behind Stefan to his brother, half-joking, half-deadly serious.

Stefan huffed, but reflexively turned to the younger caterer just in time to see the butt of a Glock descending towards his skull. He yelped, pushing out a hand in defense, but by then the metal had already impacted and he was slumping forward in his seat.

Dean leaned over as if the mobster could still hear him. "See, told you that headache was gonna be a bitch..."

“Dean, there will be more security inside, and it won’t take Bruno long to figure out his buddy here is missing.” Sam pulled Stefan’s limp form backwards and dragged the unconscious guard back through the cabin into the rear of the van. The Ford had a cooled but not refrigerated compartment, so it was safe to bind and gag their prisoner without worry of imminent death, even if he probably did deserve it on some level.

“You got the plans to Ferinacci’s security, though, right?” Dean whipped the van into a parking space reserved for the service entrance and took a look around the grounds. The place was huge, and it reminded him of some French court back in the time of Louis’ reign. If a group wearing feathered masks and ball gowns had wandered in front of the van, Dean wouldn’t have even been fazed in the least.

The place was just bizarre on every level, even for a mob boss. And why the hell was Ferinacci having some big bash so early in the day? It wasn’t like some cool dinner party for the Cosa Nostra, it was some strange all-day event with a guest list that had no gangland connections – at least, it looked that way from what Sam had managed to hack into.

“I’ve got the plans,” Sam confirmed, stuffing a cloth gag into Stefan’s mouth. “And if you cut the sarcasm we just might get inside without being noticed long enough to use them.”

“Dude, they’re the mob, they expect nothing less.” Dean hopped from the cab, still unhappy that his Desert Eagle had been forced to stay ‘home’ in the Impala. Sam had his Glock secured under the van’s front seat, but he had insisted Dean had hid no weapons, knowing the elder hunter just wouldn’t be able to resist carrying one when he shouldn’t.

The back door of the van clanked and Sam jumped from the footplate, landing with a thud on the meticulously patterned block paved drive. “Ready to gatecrash the ball, Mr. Ness?” he asked, at last feeling like there was a chance – a way to stop Haris.

Dean grinned, twirling a ladle in his hand like it was his favorite hunting knife. “I thought you’d never ask, Cinderella.”

“Dean -”

“Just don’t go making the Impala turn into a pumpkin anytime soon, Princess...”

* * * *

Sam edged through the service entrance to the mansion and abruptly felt uncomfortable. If it had been the starched shirt collar jabbing into his throat that was causing the distress, he could have lived with it, but the pang of insecurity was coming from a far more deep seated sense of *deja vu*. Dean had been right to think the place was weird. And if the house was strange, what did that make the owner?

Erika had warned them Ferinacci was dangerous, but right now, Sam was actually considering whether the mobster was insane or not.

The old English manor had been decked out in bright party regalia and the kitchen area was a flurry of activity – nothing actually unusual while such festivities were going on, it was true, but then, who normally held a *costume* party this early in the day?

From the itinerary Sam had managed to get a hold of, the masquerade had started at 11a.m. and was scheduled to continue all day and into the night. Hardly the normal goings on at a mafia stronghold. *Aren’t these guys supposed to sit around tables eating and talking about who they’ve tortured lately?*

Sam envisioned scenes from every mob movie he’d seen all rolled into one and decided that real life was often stranger than fiction. Fidgeting with his lapel as it continued to jab into the flesh of his neck, he looked at his watch, careful to keep to the sides of the room away from unwanted attention. It was already 12.15p.m. *Only half a day left...*

“Aren’t you supposed to serve the food, not eat it?”

Sam spun on his heels to see a tall, almost skeletally thin man in a suit staring at his brother as Dean stuffed some unrecognizable food item into his mouth.

Dean tried to smirk, but his cheeks simply bulged out like the face of an overstuffed squirrel. "I'm Mr. Ferinacci's food taster." He winked impudently. "Can't be too careful these days, don't you know?" the hunter crammed in something that resembled a King prawn filo and continued to munch as the taller, gaunt featured man gawked at him.

Great. Real subtle, Dean. We're supposed to be on the catering staff, not acting like jerks! Sam grabbed a silver tray that contained three champagne flutes and hastily strode across to his brother before any more insulting comments decided to leave Dean's rebellious mouth.

"Hector asked you to take these through to the hall." Sam thrust the tray at the elder Winchester just before Dean could grab one of the drinks for himself. "Now, would be a good time."

Sam's scowl and the flicker of irritation in his voice told Dean that maybe 'taunt the butler' could wait awhile, and he grudgingly took the tray he was offered. Sam quickly retrieved a second tray and pushed his brother forward with a quick slam from his palm before any more damage was done to their cover. "Food taster, Dean? Are you having *fun* jerking mob guys around? Because I can tell you, I so don't see the funny side."

Dean cocked a brow, amused at the disdain in his brother's voice. "Aw, not even a little? C'mon, Sammy...?"

"Not even a little." Sam stopped dead in his tracks and his panicked, somewhat annoyed countenance changed to one of incredulity. "What the..?"

The mansion's main hall they had just entered was already thriving with masses of people – if they could be called that. Each and every guest wore an outfit or costume, and each costume or mask appeared to match one theme.

"Dude, we walked into a hunter's nightmare." Dean gawked as a furry-faced female creature he could only assume was meant to be a werewolf walked up and plucked a drink from him. Underneath the fuzz, she appeared more than his type. Perfectly formed features and an hourglass figure most models would die for wiggled suggestively in front of him before vanishing back into the throng. He gulped, turning to Sam as a second guest with two large descending fangs took a glass from his brother's tray. "Man, imagine the amount of rock salt and silver slugs we'd need if these puppies were real..."

Sam leaned over, his voice low, his eyes ever-watching the crowds and security dotted about the room. "Ferinacci and his friends must be into some dark crap, Dean. I mean, bizarre collections, occult parties like this..."

"You think they do the whole wild sex orgy deal after the party too?" Dean's eyes twinkled just a little too much for his brother's liking as he edged back, watching as the would-be lycanthrope sashayed into view again. "But then again," he shrugged. "I'm not sure getting it on with a werewolf is my kinda thing. Too much hair in all the wrong places..."

Sam's gaze locked on an oak door almost concealed in the left corner of the hall. If the plans he had were correct, it led to a secure stairwell, Ferinacci's 'collection' and *the Seal!*

"C'mon, you can play pet the guest later." Sam gestured with his eyes towards the doorway. "I think we've found what we came for." *So close. So close.* He couldn't resist the urge to check his watch again. Less than twelve hours to Haris' deadline.

So damn close.

"Yeah, well I wasn't planning on *petting*," Dean retorted, reluctantly pulling his gaze from the girl and her outfit to follow his brother across the hall. "Gotta tell you, though, to say these guys got money, their costumes suck out loud. Lon Chaney Jr. was more believable and he looked like a friggin' poodle!"

"Dean- "

“Yeah?”

“Shut up...”

Ferinacci's Personal Collection

12.47p.m.

11hrs 13mins...

Sam's eyes scrutinized the small security panel before him and he took down a long, drawn out breath. Breaking into this kind of system wasn't a first, but it required a steady hand and a certain level of concentration. Right now, he didn't think he had either. It was one thing to know you were breaking the law to kill a spook, like he had back at Blake's Auction House when he'd 'circumvented the alarm,' but here, one mistake could mean no Seal, and no Seal meant no life.

“Dude, you want me to take care of it? 'Cause you're shaking like it's your first date.” Dean watched his brother glance at him stubbornly and shake his head before continuing to fit tiny crocodile clips to a set of recently exposed wires.

Once the clips were in place, Sam tapped in a key code from memory and waited. After a short pause, the red flashing LED on the panel changed to green and the door's multiple alarms clicked into their inactive positions.

“Open Sesame,” Sam whispered, gingerly stepping through the threshold into a darkened room, bathed only in a faint red glow from two down-lights. “Now just remember, don't touch anything unless I say so. I've deactivated the door sensors, but some of the displays have extra security.”

Dean's mouth moved silently as he mimicked his brother's warning behind Sam's back. Sometimes Sammy was just way over cautious for his own good. “Can we just get the ring and shag ass, dude? This room is pretty creepy, even for us...I mean, red light?” He rolled his eyes mockingly. “You think the guy has a pitchfork in his collection?”

Sam glanced over his shoulder to find his brother scowling in bewilderment at a cylindrical glass case that enclosed a very old, carefully shaped piece of metal that may or may not have once been a spear tip. *It couldn't be...*

Sam shook his head, dismissing the thought and moved on, checking out further cases. Some held bizarre daggers and occult chalices, others ancient texts that even Sam couldn't translate. Each text seemed to have been written on parchment, though, rather than paper, and that gave a clue to their true age.

“It's like being in a museum of demonology.” Sam walked from case to case, realizing he was seeing items that had probably been lost to the Christian world for millennia – just like the Seal. “In fact, some of this stuff may actually belong to the church rather than the dark arts...”

“Yeah, well, just like every other museum I've ever been in, this place is stuffy and I can't wait to get out.” Dean paused as a smaller case inset into a cabinet caught his attention. Whatever was inside was pocket-sized, maybe even small enough to be what they were looking for.

Striding closer, he placed a hand on the sliding Plexiglas panel and was surprised to find no lock. Slipping back the toughened glass he plucked the tiny, yet priceless item from its stand and took a slow breath.

The ring was smaller than he'd expected, and from what he could tell, it was made from at least two different metals. Most of the upper half has a polished yellow hue that may have deceived many into thinking it was gold. Dean though, knew better.

The circular section of the Seal was actually brass, and inset into the metal was a very familiar design. To some it was a pentagram, to others, like Dean, it was a 'Devil's Trap.' A symbol that used in the right way could hold a demon with its power. In this case, though, it was said to do more than just 'hold' it was said to control – if the legends were true.

This is it. This is the thing that's gonna save Sammy.

Dean looked at the signet ring in awe, swallowing hard as his throat suddenly felt like he'd traversed a desert without water. "Sammy, I found it..." He could hear the hasty footsteps of his brother across the marble flooring, but he dare not look up. One glance away and the mirage that was the ring might vanish, might leave them with no options save one Dean didn't want to think about.

Dean sensed Sam behind him, looking over his shoulder, wanting, needing the thing to be real as much as he did. "Are we sure?" Sam dared to finally ask. "I mean, how can we tell if it's real and not some high class fake?"

"It's real, Sammy. Don't ask me how, I just *know*." And Dean did. It was like the ring had called him over. Like it knew him, wanted him to find it even. Dean had felt that sensation once before in a Louisiana swamp. "I told you we were gonna fix things, Sammy."

Sam wanted to believe it was true, but Winchester luck never ran that way. As he stared, transfixed at the ring, he realized there was a small flashing diode on the velvet plinth Dean had plucked the Seal from. "Dean, tell me you didn't just take it off the stand..?"

Dean's features turned into a sheepish, lopsided grin and he hunched his shoulders, admitting his guilt. "Ugh, Cinderella? Now might be a good time to leave the ball before the ugly sisters appear."

Footfalls outside the room rapidly followed his confession and both brothers turned to see their exit blocked by Bruno and a scarlet-faced Stefan, the latter obviously more than a little angry at his early incarceration in a catering truck.

Both men had automatics drawn and pointed in the general direction of the Winchesters. "Now why would two wise-assed waiters be interested in Mr. Ferinacci's collection?" Bruno stepped into the room, his gun wavering from Dean to Sam and back again. "Guess you boys intended serving up more than just dessert, huh?"

Dean facetiously cocked a brow. "Oops, too late, the ugly sisters are here and they're pissed they missed the party."

Something clicked and the chamber was abruptly illuminated in white light as overhead fluorescents built into the low ceiling kicked in.

Bruno appeared to appreciate the extra lighting and cautiously walked up to Dean, arm outstretched until the barrel of his silver Smith and Wesson was pressed against the hunter's temple. "Missed the party? Lemme tell ya, for me, the party is just about to begin..." His finger ticked hesitantly on the trigger, his desire to obliterate brain matter only outweighed by loyalty to Ferinacci.

"Okay, sensing some serious desire to ventilate my skull here." Dean slowly raised his hands, keeping the Seal tucked into the palm of his left fist.

"Bruno?" The voice was impressive, a slight accent that neither brother could pinpoint highlighting his timbre. "Should I be concerned?"

Bruno moved back just enough to look his boss in the eye. It was a requirement of the job that all employees faced the mob lord without showing cowardice. Any sign of weakness was never tolerated in his dominion and had brought death to many unsuspecting rookies.

Ferinacci was standing in the doorway, his sharp, beady orbs taking in every part of the room as if his stare could actually pierce whatever – or whoever – he looked at. His beard twitched as his gaze settled on the Winchesters. "Tripping a silent alarm like that wasn't very smart, boys." He strolled into the center of the chamber, hands clasped behind his back as if he believed he were a god, not a mere mortal. "But then trying to rip off Luciano Ferinacci has to be the dumbest scam every attempted in New Jersey."

Sam waited. Ferinacci was going to want to know why they were here. He was going to take the Seal back, kill them both and bury them in some dark pit under a building site. *And then Haris still wins. Except...except I'll have taken Dean with me!*

If Dean sensed his brother's fear, he didn't show it. It was game face time, except he'd never tried it on anyone as powerful as a mafia boss before. "I've been called dumb a whole bunch of times," he confessed off-handedly. "But hey, sure must take one to find one, 'cause your boys let us right on in through the gates." He looked at Stefan purposely. "Didn't you, Capone?"

Stefan gritted his teeth, stealing a wary look at his boss for permission to act. When Ferinacci's head moved in a slight nod, Stefan stowed his weapon in a shoulder holster and launched himself forward, grabbing Dean's hair and yanking his head back until he was practically gagging for breath.

While Bruno kept his Smith and Wesson trained on Sam, Stefan dispatched two short, sharp punches to Dean's gut until the remaining air in the hunter's lungs was knocked from him and he was nearly forced onto his knees.

"Man, not...exactly, the Godfather, are you?" Dean stammered, still struggling to suck down air as he glared at Ferinacci defiantly. "I mean, nice suit, but Brando was way cooler."

"Dean —" Sam hissed his brother's name through clenched teeth as Bruno forced him down onto the floor, hands locked behind his head. Bravado was one thing, but out and out stupidity in the face of the mafia was suicide.

But then, so was making deals with Haris.

In their own way, each brother had had a death wish since the day their mother had died. Since the day they had become hunters and embraced their destinies. Maybe today was the day that wish came to fruition. There was no way for Sam to know, but he wasn't sure if he cared anymore.

Searching for the Seal, being here at Ferinacci's, it was all simply just going through the motions for his big brother. Because no matter how much he denied it, Sam had given up any real hope the last time he'd been in New Jersey.

The day he'd made the deal for Dean's freedom.

Ferinacci appeared to notice the younger man's silence and circled him, evaluating the people who had broken into his fortress before acting to remove them. "I sense your friend has a sense of humor," he nodded to Dean, a brief flash of amusement crossing his normally stoic façade. "Tell me, why would two punks like you break into my home? I know you must realize who I am, and you're certainly not classy enough to be from a rival gang."

Sam cocked his head back to look up at Ferinacci. The man was just as imposing as his reputation, but what did it matter anymore? The mafia was the least of his worries, and in less than half a day he'd be dead anyway. *But Dean...*

"We heard there was a kick ass view of the city from up here," Dean interceded, trying to draw the mobster's attention from his little brother. *Sam already has one bad guy after his butt. No need to attract another.* "Oh, and the ghoulish party you got going? Dude, that werewolf chick has the cutest..."

Dean found his voice suddenly restricted by long bony fingers digging into his larynx. A thought crossed his mind that perhaps the girl was Ferinacci's daughter, or even girlfriend. There had to be some connection for the mobster to go nuclear so easily, surely?

Ferinacci squeezed just enough to make Dean begin to choke, but not enough to actually finish the task. He watched, wanting to see the fear in the young hunter's eyes, but was given no such satisfaction. "Maybe I should teach you some respect for my kind?" The words were hissed so low they were almost serpentine.

"I'll...never respect...you." Dean managed to gag his throat bobbing desperately.

Ferinacci grinned. "If only you knew how many had said that and then knelt to serve me." He released his grip on the hunter's neck, instead forcing Dean's chin up with his thumb and forefinger so the elder Winchester was compelled to look at him. As he pushed back, something glinted, catching the mobster's eye.

Ferinacci paused, his full attention now taken by Dean's amulet. He reached out tentatively but didn't touch it, as if he held a strange reverence for the golden bauble.

It was familiar to him, and yet he didn't know how. Over the years he had put together some of the rarest items pertaining to the church and indeed demonology, and yet this thing's nature, its origins evaded him.

Even without its true origins, one thing he was certain of: The amulet was powerful. Dangerous even, in the wrong hands.

Ferinacci eyed the gleaming trinket again, backing up just enough to get a better view of it. For a moment he had considered killing the two men outright, but now, now he wasn't so sure. Perhaps he should let his people 'question' them for answers first. Knowledge in his position was a powerful thing, and knowledge about the amulet may prove even more interesting.

"Where did you get that trinket around your neck?" he demanded.

Dean shrugged. "Free gift in my *Lucky Charms*, dude."

The mob boss raised a hand to slap his captive but jerked back as he noticed the way Dean's palm was curled around something. "Hiding your spoils?" Ferinacci asked, nodding to Bruno to punch Dean in the stomach for a third time.

Dean took the blow, trying not to crumple in front of the hoods, but his body refused his brain's pleas. Falling forward, his palm automatically opened to break his fall and the Seal tumbled out onto the marble floor.

"You came for the Seal?" Ferinacci's beard ticked again as his anger bubbled to the surface. These men were no mere thieves, and they weren't from another family. Worse still, they had entered his home, breached his security and almost gotten away with it. This wasn't something he could be seen to allow and still keep his standing among his fellow Cosa Nostra. Justice would need to be swift among his men, no matter how much he wanted to question the interlopers for his own pursuits. *But the Seal...the amulet...*

Ferinacci didn't expect Dean or Sam to answer. He didn't expect they'd respond even to torture. In a way he felt like he already knew them. Spinning around, hands still interlocked behind his back he barked new orders as he stormed from the room, unsure if he had made the right decision. "I want no trace of them left on the planet, Bruno...no trace..."

Bruno Moretti exhaled, savoring the feeling of utmost pleasure the order gave him. Killing was his life, garnering instant gratification from every body he destroyed, every limb he maimed.

Delicately pulling a pair of expensive leather gloves from his trouser pockets his scarred upper lip curled into a snarl of satisfaction. "Now it's time for the real festivities," he enlightened the two brothers, jarring on the tight black gauntlets with glee and then carefully retrieving the Seal from where it had fallen.

"Don't tell me you're a magician," Dean still snarked fearlessly. "And for you're party trick you're going to make both of us disappear?"

Bruno pursed his lips, grabbing Sam's shaggy hair from behind and jerking his head back as he had done Dean's earlier. He may only be a pawn in Ferinacci's army, but people had 'tells' and Dean's weak spot was obviously the kid he had with him. Bruno intended to exploit that before he put the intruders finally to rest.

"Oh you'll disappear alright," Bruno taunted. "See, I got a nice acid bath waiting to liven you two boys up. It'll eat the flesh off your bones first, burning, searing till there's nothing left of you but a thick glop I can flush down the toilet." He yanked on Sam's hair again, watching the hatred burn in Dean's eyes and relishing it. "Oh, and ya know what? I'm gonna make you watch while stilts here goes first..."

Dean blinked, stemming the compunction to lash out only because Stefan now had his right arm twisted behind his back. The young mobster squeezed hard to hold him there, pressing fingers into the fresh scar tissue on the hunter's hand until barbs of pain exploded through his wrist and up his arm.

It was too soon after Maryland for his still-knitting wound to be taking such punishment, but it was the last thing on Dean's mind.

"You touch my brother, and I swear I'll friggin' drag your ass to hell myself," Dean spat out the promise, the agony he was enduring fuelling his hatred even further.

Bruno let go of Sam's hair and shoved the hunter forward enough to snap two large cable ties over his wrists, joining them with a harsh tug so that they dug cruelly into his prisoner's flesh. "Really?" He asked, his tone laced with scorn. "What makes you think that's something I'd be afraid of? Maybe what you call hell, I call home."

"Dude, you watched way too many Stallone movies." Dean's face twisted into a grimace as Stefan mimicked his boss's actions and tied the elder hunter's wrists behind his back.

Once both captives were secured, Bruno seized Sam's hair again and hoisted him up with a rough jerk. Taking point, he led the small procession outside the mansion via a service stairwell that had so many cobwebs it looked like they'd been strategically placed there.

"I think your maid needs firing," Sam noted as he was brutally propelled through an arched oak door at the base of the stairs.

"No maids here," Bruno clarified. "This is me and the boys' little private place. No servants allowed, 'cause, hell, they might just see too much and end up in my favorite bath tub too." He grinned even wider than before, revealing a gap in his teeth that did nothing to improve his already marred looks. "After you, gents..."

Bruno jerked a thumb towards a small wooden shack that had definitely seen better days. The roof needed two sections replaced that were hanging limply from where they should have been nailed, and the door dangled loose from its top hinge as if it had been slammed into once too often – probably by a prisoner's body.

Sam looked to Dean. There was nowhere to escape to. No way they could run while still bound.

And inside, there was no doubt the promised acid bath awaited them.

Dean nodded back, still fearless to the end. If this was where they both met their maker, then at least it would be together. No Haris, no soul taking.

With the unspoken assurance, Sam turned and nudged open the hut's door with his boot, Bruno close on his heels to prod him onwards should he balk from his impending doom.

Inside the shack was just as Dean and Sam had expected. The place had been used as an impromptu torture chamber on so many occasions the smell of coppery, human blood had saturated into the woodwork. It was a constant reminder of the butchery that had been committed, and would continue here, until Ferinacci was knocked from his mafia throne.

The smell wasn't the only remnant of previous victims, either. Down the south-facing wall, long, blood-encrusted fingernail marks ran deep into the laths as if someone had literally torn their fingers up attempting to escape.

The blood stains swathed the bare planks of the floor, too, large swatches of wood discolored where it had pooled and then dried in. To complete the effect, an ornate, freestanding cast iron tub filled the far corner, a thick garish glop tarnishing the sides where it hadn't been scrubbed clean.

"I see you can appreciate our little place here," Bruno beamed, enjoying the looks on both brothers' faces as they took in their surroundings. "Maybe you'd like a closer look at your new home?"

Balling his gloved fist, Bruno punched Dean in the stomach again so unexpectedly that the hunter doubled over, but to his credit didn't collapse. The fact that he didn't yield easily to physical punishment annoyed his captor further, and Bruno considered more 'hands on' castigation before his *pièce de résistance* with the acid bath.

"You really do think you're some kind of tough guy, don't you?" Bruno dragged Dean forward, wanting him to see, to smell, to *know* what happened in the iron tub. "See that?" He pointed to some unknown but nefarious liquid clinging to the metal. "That's sulfuric acid, and boy does it burn."

Dean hacked, still gagging from the stomach blow, but he hadn't given in yet. Not when Sam's life depended on it.

As Bruno tried to drag him forward, Dean didn't resist. Instead, he added suddenly to the momentum by slamming the weight of his body at the mobster like a human battering ram. Even with his hands tied, the force of his charging mass was enough to unbalance his captor.

Bruno yelped, caught off guard by the totally wild maneuver. His body toppled forward, arms flailing outwards as his stocky frame floundered over his own torture device. He tried desperately to regain his stability using his hands to grab at the edges of the tub.

The Seal he'd held in his gloved palm tumbled to the floorboards as he discarded it in favor of saving his own hide, but it was of little use.

His center of balance lost, Bruno Moretti teetered for a second at the edge of the grimy tub before falling face first into the corrosive acid. Sudden, agonized screams bubbled from the liquid as Moretti grabbed at his features with already melting hands, his flesh peeling as the caustic solution bit into his skin, his muscles, and eventually bone.

Sam turned away, repulsed by the image as Bruno thrashed frenziedly, splashing the acid as he made a vain attempt to escape its effects. The writhing increased along with the screams until the mobster's back finally arched and his head jerked in a spate of convulsive spasms.

To his credit, Stefan only faltered seconds before rushing forward to help his stricken boss, but as he reached the tub he realized there was little he could do without sticking his own hands into the acid.

He wavered momentarily, unsure if he had the stomach to let his own flesh burn to save another, and it was then that it happened.

Raven eyes flashed in front of him, the normal color of Bruno's irises transformed by the hidden demon within's panicked escape throes. Bruno's mouth opened; a huge maw that belched out some strange black smog that oozed across the shack like a blanket of absolute evil.

As the cloud dissipated through the loose roof timbers, Bruno's sizzling body toppled forward again, taking its final resting place in the acid that had taken its life force.

Stefan blinked, looking up through the roof and then back to his very dead boss. During his employment with Ferinacci he'd seen some unbelievable things, horrid, gory things, but nothing to match this.

The Italian thought about all the fables his grandmother had told him back in Sicily, all the ghost stories and tall tales that had fed his imagination as a child – except now, Stefan had to wonder if there had been more truth to them than he would ever have believed.

Something had just vacated his boss's body, and that something just might come back for a new host. Spirit, demon, devil, Stefan didn't care – no way was it getting the chance to use him as it had Bruno.

Sweat trickled down the mobster's brow and he absently wiped it off as he turned tail and headed for the door, pulling out his automatic as if he could somehow defend himself with it.

He noticed the two brothers watching him, but they didn't move, didn't try to escape. Even if they had, he wouldn't have cared. The only thing that Stefan was concerned with right now was his own getaway from the Ferinacci mansion before the thing that had possessed his boss returned.

"Nice knowing you!" Dean watched as the terrified goon ran from the shack in total fear of his life. In a way, the hunter couldn't blame him. It wasn't exactly every day you got to see a full on demon – unless your name happened to be Winchester.

"Dean –" Sam cocked a brow and wriggled his arms, indicating they should focus their attention on their own predicament rather than Stefan's.

“Yeah, well, it’s time guys like these realize *they’re* not the scary shit out there in the dark. Not even close.” The elder hunter spun around, quickly scanning the shed for something to cut the ties.

Given that the place had been used as a mini-torture chamber, it didn’t take long. Set out neatly on the floor on the far side of the tub was a row of knives and various other implements that looked like they belonged in a dungeon. A dark rust-colored patina coated most of their edges where they’d been used to slice into various victims’ limbs and organs.

Dean chose the sharpest, easiest to handle blade he could find and worked it with his fingers until it was sitting against the plastic ties that bound him. Moving the knife as carefully as he could so as to not to nick his own flesh, he began to urgently saw at his manacles. Each movement tugged at the muscles in his right hand, flesh and sinew screaming that it was too soon to punish them like this again.

Eventually, the plastic gave way, snapping back from his wrists as he yanked hard against the restraints. Without thinking about Ferinacci and his men, Dean hunkered down beside Bruno’s still twitching cadaver and scooped up the Seal.

Nothing else mattered but the ring. The ring and Sammy.

“Are you going to cut me free or do I have to enjoy the view a little longer?” Sam nodded towards Bruno with an expression of distaste. The sooner he got away from the sight and smell of frying flesh, the better.

“Quit bitching, Cinderella. I’m on it!” Dean scowled and scooted behind his brother with the blood-smeared death tool, quickly cutting through the ties to release him. “So, I’m thinking Haris sent demon boy to keep tabs on us. The deal is getting pretty close and he doesn’t want anything happening to his merchandise.”

“Great, you make me sound like a piece of meat.” Sam pulled loose. “Maybe he knows we’re trying to find a way out.”

“We’ve *found* a way out,” Dean corrected, spinning the Seal in his fingers in the spiraling shafts of light from the damaged rafters. “C’mon, Stefan might have got the jitters but I doubt some of his brethren are so easily scared. Especially when they didn’t see Bruno here go Regan MacNeil on us.”

He leaned down, cautiously frisking the dead man’s upper body until he found a holster. Being careful not to touch any acid-soaked areas, Dean pulled the Smith and Wesson free and checked the clip. It was almost full. *Bruno either did a little recent target practice or this wasn’t someone’s lucky day.*

Dean tapped the clip back into place with his palm, checked the safety and then slid it into his jeans. “My bad earlier, dude,” he apologized to the corpse. “I guess you really *do* call hell home.”

Sam checked his watch again. It was getting a hard habit to break given his circumstances. “Dean, can we forget the theatrics and get the hell out of here?” Striding to the loose-hanging door he peered between the gaps. “I don’t think anyone knows we’re free yet. Stefan can’t have raised the alarm.”

“Stefan’s probably feeling the need to change his pants right about now.” Dean joined his brother, eyes appraising the mansion grounds as he talked. “Dude, did you see the look on his face when Bruno puked out Haris’ brat?” His gaze paused on a wide, brick outbuilding with large, white electric roller doors. “I think I just found our carriage out of here, Cinderella...”

Sam took down a breath, realizing Dean had honed in on Ferinacci’s personal garage – not exactly a bad idea – except this particular garage was in the center of a courtyard and had several black-clad mafiosa on sentry around it.

Heavily armed mafiosa, Sam convinced himself.

“Let’s just hope the carriage doesn’t turn into that pumpkin you were so eager to talk about earlier.” The younger hunter pointed out. “Because, dude, those guys have guns, and they won’t care if they use us for a little target practice. We’ve got no way in.”

Dean smiled mysteriously and began to pull open his shirt, feeling for something he'd rolled relatively flat to conceal there before their little "mission impossible."

Sam wasn't impressed with his brother's striptease. "Dude, I don't think streaking is gonna cut it..."

"Yeah? C'mon, man, you gotta admit it would be pretty distracting." Dean grinned coyly. "Not as distracting as this, though," he winked, finally removing the ace almost literally up his sleeve. "Plan B, Sammy. Guess I get to go out in a bang after all." He thought about the werewolf girl and was tempted to make a second more lewd comment on the subject, but when Sam's face puckered he controlled the urge, focusing instead on the mob guards in the yard.

"You brought C4 in knowing we'd be frisked? Are you nuts?"

Dean shrugged. "Mostly," he conceded, hastily rolling the compressed explosive back into a more healthy shape and then molding it onto a splintered support beam with his good hand. "I figure this place will go up in about a minute, so once we're outside take cover till those goons come running. Last one to Mr. F's collection buys the beers tonight..."

Sam nodded reluctantly.

Tonight.

Dean was actually thinking it would all be over and he'd be free from the deal. If only life ever went to plan so easily. Even if the C4 worked, even if they escaped Ferinacci with their lives, they still had no clue how to use the ring.

It was one thing to know the legend's core principles, but without any instructions how to actually implement them, it would still be as good as over for Sam once the clock struck midnight.

"Okay, lil' brother, let's shag ass and pray!" Dean bolted through the limp door, almost knocking it from its one good hinge. As soon as he hit daylight, he tucked his body and rolled, landing unobtrusively in a short hedge that circled the shed and led to the edge of the courtyard.

Sam followed, silently counting the seconds in his head until the explosion. Halfway through the sixty second rundown, the shed erupted, cascading segments of wood and half-rotten timber on the surrounding area.

"You call that good timing?" The younger hunter barked as he was roughly thrown forwards by the force of the explosion. "No wonder you have such weird taste in music."

"Yeah, well, that's pretty cute coming from a guy who listens to *The Fray*." Dean ducked down, squinting as a haze of smoke covered his view of the courtyard and the hastily approaching goons.

"It was just a ring tone," Sam defended, suddenly unsure why he needed to justify his tastes considering his brother had *no taste*.

"Wuss ass ringtone," Dean corrected, an unwanted image of a past gig coming back to haunt him. "C'mon, dude, they're buying it." He scrambled forward, sliding the Smith and Wesson from his beltline just in case any stragglers were left behind.

Sam flinched at the sight of the weapon but didn't argue. Crawling from his hiding place he turned, momentarily watching the ruckus as Ferinacci's men tried to extinguish the flames. Once they had the fire under control, it wouldn't take long to discover Bruno among the ashes.

Ferinacci wouldn't buy any demon stories. He would assume the brothers had killed his head henchman.

And then, he would want blood in return.

Something popped in front of Sam and he broke from his daze. Someone was repeatedly firing a weapon, and it was at pretty close range. He looked up, seeing Dean in what seemed like a slow motion scene from a John Woo movie.

The Smith and Wesson let off round after round, empty casings clattering to the floor as almost every slug bounced from the lock on Ferinacci's garage like it was

made from some alien ore. Just when it appeared the building was impenetrable, something gave.

The unit buckled under the final slug, plastic and metal splinters blasting outwards as the remote control console disintegrated. Sparks sizzled from the blackened innards that now hung in a tangle of wires, tiny flames burning at the outer sheathing until only the copper core remained.

“Yahtzee!” Dean continued running across the enclosure until he slammed his back hard into the garage wall. He tossed down the now-empty automatic and was thankful to see Sam right behind him. “Time to work your magic, geekboy.”

“Yeah, now that you’ve obliterated anything I might have had to work with!” Sam pulled off his jacket and swatted out the smoldering console, ever mindful that the weapons fire would undoubtedly bring Ferinacci’s men back into the mix.

Cursing under his breath, he pulled at the red hot wiring and then jerked away when the heat threatened to sear his flesh. After two more attempts, he managed to twist two sections of copper core together and closed his eyes in silent prayer.

The huge white roller door groaned and juddered, its motor unsure whether to react to the current or not. With a clatter, it began to rise, vibrating as it moved in painful slow motion.

As soon as the gap at the bottom was big enough, Dean dropped onto his stomach and rolled underneath, hoping there were no surprises waiting for him on the other side.

Sam breathlessly followed, finding his brother in dumbstruck awe as he clambered to his feet inside the white painted building. “Will you stop acting like you’re in love and pick one?” He whacked Dean, but for a second the hunter still couldn’t pull his eyes from the row of sports and collectors cars that called to him like a burning beacon on a stormy night.

“Man, I take it all back —” Dean ran a hand appreciatively across the hood of a 1955 Porsche Spyder as he jogged past it. “There is a heaven, and I just walked right on in...”

“Yeah, dude, and we’ll be sticking around to play harps here if you don’t hurry!” Sam watched impatiently as his brother chose a car, oblivious of the yelling coming from outside that was undoubtedly Ferinacci’s goons.

Cars and girls – the only two things that seemed to melt Dean Winchester’s brain to the point where he lost all sense.

Sam rolled his eyes as Dean made a beeline for a silver gull wing at the end of the row of cars. Tugging up the futuristic style door, the hunter was inside and pulling at the dash cowling within seconds. He grinned like a kid in a toy shop as his brother joined him in the passenger side.

“Man, I always wanted to try out a De Lorean.” He pulled down a section of wiring loom, selecting two colors from the plethora on offer and then yanked them from the connector block. Touching the stripped ends together, he waited until the starter began to turn and then twisted the copper core into a makeshift joint.

Sam blinked, wondering just when Dean had learned to hotwire such expensive cars so easily.

“Easy as pie,” Dean bragged, slipping the car into gear and ramming his foot down on the gas pedal just as two of Ferinacci’s men bounded into the garage.

Two bullets tore into the car’s hood, opening up the brushed stainless steel like a tin can. Dean pouted at the sacrilege, pulling the steering wheel hard over to make the unappreciative goons jump from his path or be mowed down. The car screamed in protest at the sudden move, its stressed tires leaving black rubber trails on the concrete in its wake.

Sam exhaled in relief as the De Lorean exited from the garage like a silver bullet, his brother guiding it like a professional racing driver toward the mansion’s main gates.

Dean heard his brother's sigh and dared to take his eyes from the paved drive for a second. He smiled impishly, trying to reassure his little brother that they'd won. It was over. "Wonder what would happen if I took this puppy to eighty eight miles an hour," he teased, adding just a little more gas as the gates loomed.

Sam didn't answer. He couldn't.

If only...

If only he could go back in time so easily as in the movies and change the past, but deep inside, Sam knew that the past and the future were a lot harder to alter than his brother believed. They'd got the Seal, it was true, but as Dean headed the De Lorean back to where the Impala was parked, all Sam could hear in his head was the steady ticking of a clock.

Tick, tick, tick.

"Time's up, Sam..."

Sleep EZ Motel

5.04 p.m.

6hrs 56mins...

Dean glanced into the rearview one last time before pulling into the parking lot of the Sleep EZ Motel. So far so good. Despite their rather pressing timetable, he'd taken a tortuously circuitous route from the industrial area where they'd left the Impala back to the motel; "Just in case," he'd assured Sam.

Just because he hadn't seen any evidence of a tail, didn't mean there wasn't one.

He was more than relieved to have ditched that stupid monkey suit – although Sam had insisted it go in the trunk rather than the trash. But despite their success at Ferinacci's mansion he was tired right down to his bones and he could see the same weariness reflected in the slump of Sam's shoulders. He knew the kid was close to giving up and Dean couldn't have that.

He parked the Impala and shut off the engine, pausing when Sam made no effort to get out of the car.

"Hey," he said, nudging his brother gently. "You with me, Stretch?"

Sam flicked his gaze briefly in Dean's direction before resuming staring through the front windshield.

"Sammy, we got the Seal!" Dean pointed out, voice as upbeat as he could make it. "You should be celebrating, not emo-ing me to death!"

Sam huffed. "We also just seriously pissed off a guy who makes Tony Soprano look like an elementary school teacher." He turned to face his brother. "Those guys have *long* memories, Dean."

Dean shrugged. "Yeah, well better you're around to be worrying about him for a long time than – than the alternative." He reached into his pocket, triumphantly pulling out the small brass ring, eyes lit up with hope for the first time in weeks as the realization finally began to sink in. "We got the *Seal*, dude!" he burst out. "You know what this means? We can –"

"What?" Sam cut him off. "Save me? How? We don't even know how to use the thing!"

Dean took a breath before deliberately flashing Sam his most over-confident grin. "That's why I got my trusty geekboy sidekick research nerd with me, right? You'll figure it out, Sammy. If anyone can, you can." When Sam didn't respond, Dean put a hand on his arm. "Hey." Sam looked up at him reluctantly. "We got time, man." Sam nodded a little less enthusiastically than Dean would have liked. "Maybe it's as simple as just putting the thing on and telling Haris to take a hike."

One corner of Sam's mouth quirked up just a little. "Wouldn't that just be a kick in the pants?"

Dean's grin widened, becoming something a little closer to genuine as his brother's mood lightened. "Sometimes the simplest solutions are the ones that actually work, right?"

He clambered out of the car, skewing his gaze to his right to make sure Sam was following him. Satisfied by the sight of his brother slowly uncurling himself from the Impala, he began to make a move toward their room, thinking only of taking a long hot shower and finally getting the remainder of the sewer slime off of him.

Shoving open the door without a second thought, the first thing he noticed was their gear tossed all over their beds as if someone had been looking for something.

The second thing he noticed was the room going real dark real fast...

"Dean!"

Sam sprung into the room, reaching up to grab the wrist of the black-clad figure currently threatening his already-fallen brother with another blow to the back of the head from the 9mm clutched in his hand.

Dean's assailant twisted in Sam's grip just enough to reveal the familiar tattoo worn by Haris' human cult flunkies, Sam managing to keep him from landing another blow to Dean's head more out of sheer willpower than any physical superiority. He slammed the guy into the wall with every bit of strength he had left as he desperately tried to gauge the condition of his brother, who had dropped like a stone into an unconscious heap in the doorway.

This guy may be human, but he was big; *real* big. He even had an inch or two on Sam, and would have made two of Dean.

Sam gritted his teeth as he tried to smash the guy's wrist hard enough against the wall to make him drop the .45 he was gripping, but the flunky just grinned at him maniacally before suddenly grabbing his arm with his free hand and spinning him around so fast he wasn't even entirely sure how he wound up with his face pressed against the wall where the big guy had just been standing and his arm twisted into a half-nelson up his back.

"Get off me, dammit!" Sam ground out, struggling to squirm out of his attacker's not inconsiderable grip.

The goon shoved him harder against the wall for his trouble, leaning down towards him menacingly. "No point fighting it, boy," he growled, voice deeper than the Grand Canyon and colder than the North Pole. "Time's up. Your bill's come due."

Sam took a breath, flattening his free hand against the wall in an effort to gain some leverage. "I got time yet!" he protested. "I got *hours*—!"

"Boss is tired of waiting," the flunky grunted. "Time to go."

"Then why's he not here himself, huh?" Sam demanded, desperately trying to play for time as he tried to think of a way out of this. Time, however, was the one thing he apparently didn't have. "Why send an errand boy to collect?"

He blew out a surprised breath when the goon's knee suddenly connected with the small of his back, the hand not twisting his arm behind him abruptly grabbing a fistful of his hair and yanking back his head so that he was once again pulled off balance.

He managed to avoid yelping by force of will alone, the big guy's mouth suddenly pressed right up to his ear.

"Not just here for you anymore, kid," he rumbled. "Word is, you got something else my boss wants."

Sam gritted his teeth. How the hell had Haris found out about the Seal so fast? Then he remembered Ferinacci's head wiseguy – the black eyes and the smoke – and Dean's insistence that Haris must have been spying on them this whole time.

"I don't know what you mean," he protested as convincingly as he was able.

"Oh, I think you do," the cult guy growled. "Pretty little ring, star in a circle, made of brass... I don't think you could miss it."

"I don't—"

"Don't play dumb with me boy!"

Sam grunted as his captor yanked simultaneously on his hair and his twisted arm. "I think my brother's rubbing off on me," he muttered, trying one of Dean's most infuriating grins on for size.

The cult guy was not amused. “Yeah?” he ground out. “Well maybe he’s the one I should be searching, huh? You think he’d be dumb enough to keep the thing on him? Maybe I should flay every inch of skin off his body just to find out –”

“Wait! No!” Sam’s eyes widened in alarm. “Wait –”

The goon sighed theatrically. “Look, I’m kind of on a schedule here, kid. I don’t have all day to be playing around with you boys. My boss wants you now, before Ferinacci has a chance to stop him claiming what’s rightfully his.”

Sam swallowed. “I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Guess you’re just unlucky then,” the big guy hissed. “Cause he’s sure as hell heard of you two – put a contract out on your pretty little heads the second you took off with something that didn’t belong to you...”

Sam tried not to let the full horror of that little revelation show on his already agitated face. “Mistaken identity?” he offered weakly.

Haris’ flunky grinned horribly before twisting Sam’s arm further up his back. “I’m sure,” he agreed. Then, “You know, I’m really in a win-win situation here. There’s nothing to stop me getting into my boss’s good books by handing him you and the Seal *and* earning myself a tidy bit of extra cash on the side by whacking your brother and claiming half of Ferinacci’s contract money –”

“No!” Sam protested again, wilting slightly in the big guy’s incessant grip. “No, listen. Listen. I’ll come with you. I’ll – I’ll give you the Seal. Just – just leave my brother out of this. He doesn’t – he doesn’t need to die just because I screwed up. Please.”

Sam closed his eyes briefly, trying not to think too much about what he was about to do. He couldn’t let Dean die. He couldn’t. Otherwise, what was the point? What had been the point of Sam selling himself to Haris to save his big brother if his big brother was just going to get killed in the process?

Not gonna happen.

Sam wouldn’t let it happen.

This was just the way it had to be.

“Please,” he repeated beseechingly, all the fight gone out of him as he gave himself over to the goon’s iron grip. “Just let my brother live and I’ll go wherever you want me to go: that was the deal I made with your boss after all.”

The cult heavy’s mouth twisted into an ugly sneer. “Aw,” he crooned mockingly. “Well that’s kinda cute and all, but you still haven’t told me what you’ve done with the Seal. And you see, I have this big ole knife in my pocket, and there’s your brother, lying all unconscious and vulnerable and everything, looking like his flesh might taste kinda nice medium rare with some mashed potatoes.” He grinned extra-wide. “Nice ’n bloody, just the way I like it...”

“No!” Sam swallowed hard as the big guy shoved him pitilessly against the wall once more.

“So tell me where you’ve hidden the Seal and I’ll consider letting your brother keep that pretty face of his.”

“I –”

The next sound Sam heard was a bone-shattering crunch followed by the goon’s entire weight suddenly crushing against his shoulder blades before sliding off of him completely.

Sam snatched back his twisted arm, spinning around just in time to catch sight of Haris’ heavy crumpling into a boneless heap on the floor while Dean stood over him clutching his Desert Eagle in one hand and the back of his head in the other.

“Anyone’s eating my face it’ll be Eliza Dushku, Hannibal,” he muttered, pulling his hand from the back of his head to inspect the amount of blood it came away with. He winced before turning his attention to Sam, who was grinning at him sheepishly. “You okay?” he asked instantly.

Sam nodded. “I am now you’ve gotten Doctor Lector off of me,” he confirmed, nudging the cult guy with his toe, just to make sure he was out cold.

“Good,” Dean said, taking a step toward him. “Cause now I’m gonna kill you.”

Sam raised his eyebrows in surprise. “What did I do?”

“What did you *do*?” Dean repeated, stepping over the fallen flunky and getting right up in Sam’s face. “Sam, I heard you – you were gonna go running off to Haris without even putting up a fight!”

“To save you,” Sam mumbled quietly, eyes cast down toward the carpet. “Dean, I don’t want you getting yourself killed because of me –”

Dean surprised him then by putting a firm hand on the back of his neck and forcing him to look him right in the eye. “And I don’t want *you* getting yourself killed because of *me*!” he echoed somberly. “Sammy, we can beat this! We got the Seal!”

“Dean –”

“And we got time to figure out what the hell we’re supposed to do with it.”

“Dean, you probably didn’t hear in all the unconsciousness and everything, but Haris is coming for me *now*! And Ferinacci’s put a hit out on us –!”

Dean shrugged. “Nice to be so popular.”

“Dean –”

“Listen, Sammy.” Dean slid his hand to Sam’s cheek. “We can do this. You and me. We can beat this thing. Just have a little faith, man!”

“Faith?” Sam echoed incredulously. “*You’re* telling *me* to have faith?”

Dean shrugged. “One of us has to. Sam, we can do this. We can get you out of this.”

Sam looked up at him sullenly. “How?”

“Well for starters you’re gonna get researching while I get rid of our little uninvited guest here –”

Sam looked vaguely alarmed. “Dean, you’re not –?”

Dean rolled his eyes. “No, Sam,” he said. “I’m just gonna tie him up, drive him out to the middle of nowhere and dump his ass. We just need to keep him out of the game until midnight, right? I doubt he’s told that yellow-eyed freak where we are.”

“You hope.”

Dean grinned up at him. “Hope springs eternal, dude.”

“So you’ve got faith *and* hope now?” Sam shook his head disbelievingly. “What’s next, charity?”

“Nah, already done Charity,” Dean replied with a wicked grin. “That little nurse in Phoenix, remember?”

Sam pulled a face. “That’s disgusting, you know that right?”

“Only if you say so, Junior,” Dean said, inclining his head down toward the cult guy. “Now help me get this sonofabitch in the trunk. He looks kinda heavy.”

The boys made quick work of trussing up Haris’ heavy like a Christmas turkey before hefting him into the trunk of the Impala, Dean following Sam back into the motel room to retrieve his gun and some ammo while Sam deposited Bobby’s hefty copy of the Key of Solomon onto his bed with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. Dean frowned when Sam didn’t make a move toward the laptop.

“Look alive, dude,” he said, wincing slightly at his poor choice of words. “C’mon, Sammy. We got a deal to get your sorry ass out of and a bastard demon to kill.”

Sam shook his head dejectedly, slowly sinking onto his bed, fingers rubbing absently at his temple. “Dean,” he said tiredly, taking a deep breath as if preparing to tell his brother something he really should have told him earlier.

Which, it transpired, was exactly what he was about to do.

“Dean, we can’t win this one,” he said slowly, pausing to ensure Dean understood what he was saying. “At midnight I’m going to die, and there’s nothing we can do to stop that.”

Dean just looked at him for a second, mouth pulled into a tight grimace, before slowly shaking his head and collapsing onto the bed next to him. "Don't talk like that, man," he said. "It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings, and I'll gag her if I have to!" He took a short breath. "Look, we don't even really know *what* Haris has planned for you – maybe he just wants those freaky superpowers of yours? Maybe once he's taken those, he'll leave you the hell alone –"

"Body and soul, Dean. That's what he said," Sam interrupted. "He said he was going to take me body and soul..."

"Still doesn't mean you're going to *die*, Sam –"

"No," Sam agreed, sighing heavily. "No it doesn't. But – but there's something else." He faltered slightly, shoulders slumping heavily as he fought the urge to lean against Dean like he had all those times when he was a kid. He took a deep breath, finally trying to muster the courage to tell Dean the truth. "Dean, listen to me," he said carefully. "There's – there's something I should have told you before; something that happened..."

Dean frowned as his brother struggled to say whatever the hell it was he was trying to say.

"I – I –" Sam bowed his head, unable to meet Dean's questioning gaze a second longer. "I had a vision," he managed finally, voice subdued.

"Okay," Dean said, seeming to take that in his stride. "It's not exactly the first time."

"No, this was different." Sam took another deep breath before finally raising his eyes back to his brother's. "I saw – I saw *myself* die, Dean. Here. In New Jersey. On my birthday. That's why – that's why –"

"That's why you brought us here? That's why you were so keen to hunt this Erika chick?" Dean's voice was deceptively calm, and Sam cringed inwardly as he waited for the inevitable explosion. But it never came, Dean's voice remaining low and even as he asked, "Then why did we come here, Sam? If you knew you were gonna die here – if you knew you were gonna die here *tomorrow* – then why the hell did we come here?"

Sam shrugged. "Because..." he scrubbed a weary hand across his face. "Just because," he finished lamely. "You know my visions nearly *always* come true, Dean..."

"And you just wanted to help this one along a little?" Dean asked tersely, barely keeping a lid on the emotions bubbling up inside of him.

"No," Sam sighed. "That wasn't – it wasn't..." he trailed off, and it was Dean's turn to sigh.

"So what did you see this time?" he asked, voice still deceptively calm.

"A calendar for some New Jersey air freight company," Sam replied, still waiting for Dean's placid questioning to flare up into something incandescent. "Ross Air Freight. And I heard airplanes overhead. The calendar was turned to May, and Haris was there. He wished me 'happy birthday.' And then – I died." Dean shuddered slightly, and Sam felt the vibration right through the bed. "Doesn't leave a whole lot of room for misinterpretation."

Dean turned away from him, cheeks reddening, as if he was only just managing to rein in his anger. "Then why walk straight into Haris' clutches, huh Sam?" he asked, the inklings of a glare beginning to form in his steadily darkening eyes. "Why didn't we head for Alaska? Or Hawaii? Or the friggin' *moon*...? Why the hell did you bring us here?"

"Dean."

"*What*, Sam?" Dean was breathing hard, hands beginning to shake as he fisted his fingers into the threadbare comforter which was already half pulled off the bed thanks to Haris' cult goon's haphazard search. He winced, again remembering the injury to his hand from his day of desperate digging in Maryland too late to avoid the sharp pain that shot up his arm.

"Because it's Fate, Dean," Sam replied steadily, refusing to back down under Dean's increasingly furious stare. "It's destiny. *My* destiny. I'm going to die tonight because I've already seen it happen. And there's nothing we can do about it."

"You know I don't believe in that destiny crap, Sam," Dean returned, fixing him with a hopeless glare. "Did you even consider that this – this *power* of yours is gift, not a curse? That maybe the whole point of you getting these damn visions is to *save* the people who die in them? Like you saved me at Max Miller's house? Maybe the whole point of you getting a vision of your own death was so that you could *stop it happening?*"

Sam shook his head. "No," he said emphatically. "No it's not my life I'm supposed to save here, Dean. At least if it plays out this way, the way I saw it in my vision, then at least *you* make it out alive –"

"You think that matters to me, Sam?" Dean sprung to his feet at that, all attempts at self-control abandoned as he began to pace the room in a burst of desperate, impotent fury. "Look, either we both make it out, or – or we both go out fighting. It's as simple as that."

"No!" Sam jumped to his own feet, abruptly grabbing Dean's shoulders, effectively stopping him in his tracks before squaring up to him defiantly. "*No*, Dean. That's *not* what I want! That's why I didn't tell you about the vision in the first place! That's why –"

"That's why you didn't trust me?" The hurt in Dean's voice was unmistakable, even as he tried to disguise it with barely suppressed anger. He fixed Sam with a glare that was more desperate than furious. "What did you think I was gonna do, Sam? Throw you in the trunk and drive you off to Never Never Land?"

Sam sighed. "I thought you'd do what you always do," he said truthfully, still gripping Dean's shoulders. "Take a bullet for me; jump in front of a speeding train for me. Sacrifice yourself for me."

Dean looked away uncomfortably.

"That's the way it's always been," Sam continued. "Ever since we were kids. Fighting my battles for me; trying to protect me. But now it's *my* turn. It's my turn to protect *you*, Dean; to save *you*. Because it's not that I didn't trust you. I've always trusted you – even when you were *possessed* I trusted you! I trust you with my life, man, you know that. I just – I just don't trust you with yours."

Dean stilled immediately, no answer for that.

"You've got to realize your life is just as important as mine is, Dean. And you can't protect me forever."

"That's my *job*, Sam –"

"No, Dean, it's *not* your job, not anymore. Maybe when we were kids... And – and don't think I'm blaming Dad, because I'm not. He always did his best for us. But it wasn't fair of him to lay that on you – to make you think you had to protect me above everything else – above yourself. Because it's just – it's just so much a part of you now – *instinct* – that you don't know how to stop, man! You need to realize that I'm a grown-up – I can take care of myself! You've got to let me fight my own battles, make my own decisions."

Dean recoiled as if slapped, momentarily caught off guard before the shutters swiftly slammed shut in front of his eyes again. "Not this time," he said, jaw set.

The two of them just looked at each other, equally determined expressions etched onto their faces.

Unsurprisingly, Dean caved first. "Please, Sam." His voice was small, pleading. "You gotta fight. You can't just give in."

Sam sighed. "I'm not giving in," he said. "I'm just being realistic. We have six hours at best – and that's always supposing Haris doesn't send another of his goons to move up his schedule, or Ferinacci doesn't figure out where we are first. How the hell are we supposed to work out what to do with the Seal in six hours?"

"That's why you need to get researching," Dean insisted. "Call Bobby. Or Bearwalker. Hell, even Jefferson might have some ideas!"

Sam just looked at him for a long moment, utter defeat in his eyes. "But not Dad, huh?"

Dean didn't answer that immediately. "He doesn't need to know about this," he said at length, shifting his weight uncomfortably. "Sammy?" He was pleading again. "Please. It's bad enough that I got you into this mess in the first place – at least let me try and get you out of it. Don't shut me out."

Sam met and held his gaze for a long moment, before finally nodding slightly. "Alright," he said slowly. "Go get rid of Hannibal and I'll see what I can dig up."

A hesitant grin broke out on Dean's face that gradually grew into something infinitely brighter. "That's my boy," he burst out, clapping Sam on the shoulder. "Ain't a bad guy alive, dead or undead can stand up to the Winchesters, huh?"

Sam smiled weakly. "You know it bro."

Dean reluctantly released his grip on Sam's shoulder, briefly looking up into his tired eyes before finally turning and heading for the door, ensuring his gun was where it was supposed to be before pausing and turning back toward Sam. "It's gonna be okay, Sammy," he said solemnly. "I promise."

Sam nodded, holding Dean's gaze for a second longer before the older brother flashed one last encouraging smile and swiftly left the room.

Sam stared after him, once again wishing he had a time machine. When he was a kid and Dean had made that same promise, "*Everything's going to be okay, Sammy,*" that was all Sam would need to hear. Because he had always believed him then.

He wished it still worked that way.

With a deep shuddering sigh his attention slipped to the grungy carpet beneath his feet, staring at the swirling greens and browns until he heard the Impala's throaty growl rumbling off into the distance.

Scratching his head thoughtfully, he looked over at the still-closed laptop and the weighty tome that had once been Bobby's.

And sighed again.

He really didn't have a choice.

He didn't want to do it. He knew Dean would be devastated. He knew he might never forgive him.

But he also knew it was necessary.

He wasn't going to be responsible for getting Dean killed and he wasn't going to risk his getting caught in the crossfire either. Haris didn't give a damn about Dean – never had, other than as a bargaining chip to get what he wanted from Sam. And Sam still wasn't even completely clear what *that* was: His powers? His potential? Was he supposed to become some kind of leader of the forces of good?

Or the forces of evil?

Body and soul...

Whatever. It didn't matter anymore.

He thought about writing Dean a letter – sending him an email – but it felt wrong somehow; cowardly, like leaving a suicide note for his big brother to find hours later when it was all over and it was too late for him to do anything about it. He couldn't pile even more guilt onto him like that – he was already buckling under the weight of what he already felt and Sam couldn't bring himself to add more.

And besides, he'd already said everything he had to say.

Except maybe, *I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I love you. Thanks for being there when no one else was...*

Things he'd never say to Dean and Dean would never say to him.

No. It had to be this way. No long drawn out goodbye.

No goodbye at all.

Because he knew Dean would never let him go.

So this was it, and there was only one thing left for Sam to do.

He picked up his phone and hit the speed dial, not entirely sure what he was going to say when she answered.

"Hi, this is Sarah. Sucks for you, but you've got my voicemail. Doesn't mean I don't want to talk to you, so leave me a message and I'll get back to you..."

Sam sighed. Voicemail. While in some respects that made it easier, it also made it a whole lot harder at the same time.

"Hi, Sarah," he said, trying to inject some forced levity into his voice to disguise the trembling. "It's Sam. Like you'd not already guessed that, huh? I – er – I just wanted to –" What? Say goodbye? When he didn't even have the guts to say goodbye to Dean? "I just wanted to check in. Make sure you're okay. And Kyle. Hope he's looking after himself after that close call he had. Um –" What else was there to say? Why the hell had he decided to do this? "I just – I just wanted to hear your voice, I guess. But your voicemail's gonna have to do." He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing the palm of his hand against his forehead. "Listen. I – I'm just – I just wanted to say I'm sorry. For – for messing things up the way I have. Your life and everything. I do that. In case you'd not noticed. Mess up people's lives." *Just like Dean's...* "I'm sorry, Sarah. And I just wanted you to know that. I just wanted you to know..." He pressed the phone against his brow for a second while he tried to summon up the courage to say the things he *really* wanted to say. "I just wanted to say – goodbye, I guess. And – and – I –"

The voicemail beeped loud in his ear. *"End of message."*

"– I love you."

He kept the phone pressed to his ear a few moments longer, blinking back tears as he dwelt on how much Sarah had had to give up for him: home, career, family. Life.

Just like Dean.

If it hadn't been for me, Haris would never even have known he was alive...

Sam had tried not to think about it. Tried not to let his own guilt fester the more he saw his brother lose himself to this war not of his choosing.

If it hadn't been for Sam, Dean wouldn't even have been a blip on Haris' radar. He could have had a normal childhood; grown up a normal kid; had a normal life. Could have had a real life, not this soul-destroyingly lonely excuse for an existence that seemed the only thing Dean knew how to do. He could have been anything he wanted to be: mechanic, cop, fireman... He smiled ruefully at that. Dean had wanted to be a fireman...

He shook his head and in a fit of blind anger threw his phone across the room where it hit the wall before landing with a soft thud on the carpet.

Not even broken.

His phone had better luck than he did.

God, this was all his fault. All of it.

He should have died in the fire with Mom.

At least Dean would have grown up safe. Protected. *Normal*: The very thing Sam craved so badly for himself but was only now beginning to acknowledge he could never have.

So now it was time for him to make things right. To make things right for his brother. Dean had given enough, lost enough.

Sam wasn't going to let him lose his life.

A new determination informing his suddenly purposeful movements, Sam rose steadily to his feet.

Taking nothing with him – not his phone, not his backpack, not even his Glock – he made for the motel room door, glancing back only once, much as Dean had.

"Take care big brother," he murmured, finally stepping out into the late afternoon sunshine and closing the door softly behind him.

He took a deep breath before striding out of the parking lot and heading for the highway.

Toward Haris.
Toward his destiny.
Alone.

Sleep EZ Motel

5.29 p.m.

6hrs 31mins...

Dean didn't know how long it had taken to dump the cult freak. What he did know was it had taken far too long. When every minute, every second mattered to Sam, then every menial task like this was a waste.

Waste.

Now there was a word that truly should have been the Winchesters' family dictum. Except maybe now just for once they could do something useful. Maybe they could finally finish Haris.

Maybe they could save Sam.

Maybe...

Dean pulled the Impala into a vacant spot in the meager lot and killed the ignition. There was no way he could find information on the Seal in time, but hopefully Sam and his Stanford brain already had. Sammy could find anything. He was the Winchester geek.

Dean? Well, Dean was the Winchester muscle.

The hunter absently let a hand run over the bump to his head and he winced.

Yeah, the Winchester crash test dummy too!

Still, Dean didn't mind taking the blows. He didn't mind being the brawn – not as long as Sam was there to back him up, to be his kid brother – to be his best friend on their long, perilous trips across the highways.

Dean smiled and pushed open the heavy Chevy door with a grunt of satisfaction, for once truly believing he could save Sam. Hell no, *Sam* could save Sam with his gift for finding obscure information.

Double timing it across the yard, Dean slid a hand to the motel door and pushed it inwards, forcing a grin just to convince his brother he'd stopped freaking out over the deal. *Fat chance, not until midnight...*

"Hey, Cinderella..." Dean paused in the doorway, the sight of the empty room making him catch his breath in fear. Maybe Haris had sent more goons?

Quickly glancing around for signs of a struggle, Dean noted his brother's discarded phone on the floor. It lay innocently on the carpet as if it had slipped from the lanky hunter's pocket. Except, Dean knew different.

After so many months on the road together, so many hunts together, it wasn't so hard to read his little brother and know what he was going through.

Sam was angry, upset – desperate, and in that desperation he had done the only thing he could to protect his family, his brother. Sam had run.

Not just run, though: he'd run to *Haris*.

Dean checked the room again as he stooped to pick up Sam's cell. There was nothing amiss. No toppled tables, no broken glass.

Nothing.

To add to the evidence, Sam's over-large phone blinked intermittently, signaling there were two new voice messages. Dean scrolled until he brought up the missed numbers, instantly recognizing one as his father's, and one as Sarah Blake's.

"Sammy, you stupid, stupid sonofa..." Dean almost lobbed the phone back at the wall it had hit earlier. But he couldn't. He needed to know what the messages said first, because if he was right, Sam had as good as committed suicide.

Taking a long breath, Dean hit the screen to hear the first message. After a brief pause, John Winchester's grumbling tones crackled across the line.

“Sam, I had a lead on the Seal but someone beat me to it. Call me, I need to know where you are...”

There was a hiss as if the voicemail had come in on a long distance line, then a click as John hit the ‘end call’ button. As always, the message had been short, to the point, and with little affection in the father’s tone.

Still, Dean knew the message was more than just a simple communication of facts. Their dad had been trying in his own way to check in on Sam, to make sure the deal hadn’t yet come to fruition. He may not be a man of many words, or a man who showed his feelings often, but there was no doubt in Dean’s mind that John wouldn’t stop searching for a way to save Sam any more than he’d stopped chasing Haris.

Not that it made Dean feel any better.

Their father wasn’t here, now. He wasn’t standing by Dean’s side, ready to help him drag Sam back from whatever fate he’d given in to.

A fate I caused. Not anyone else...

Dean’s bottom lip quivered, and he fought the urge to punch the nearest wall. There was another message yet – one that might help him find Sam.

Tapping the screen again, Dean listened, already half-guessing what he was about to hear.

“Sam? It’s Sarah...is everything alright? Is Dean okay? You scared me with your message earlier. Please call me back as soon as you get this. I’m worried about you!”

Dean let the cell slip through his fingers and bounce back on the carpet without waiting for the customary beep that announced the message was over. Sam had called Sarah, and he’d said something to scare her. Something he hadn’t had the stomach to face Dean and say.

A sharp pain welled in the hunter’s chest, but it wasn’t physical. It was the sting caused by the knowledge his little brother had deserted him to face his destiny – alone.

Sammy had said goodbye...but not to his big brother.

“NO!” Dean howled angrily, his right fist striking a nearby table lamp and knocking it onto the floor. The move tore at his recovering hand making it throb, and he thrived on the pain, channeling it. NEEDING it.

“I swear I’m never gonna let your sorry ass outta my sight ever again...” The hunter began to scour the small room looking for clues, his mind not really thinking straight, not functioning correctly without the surety of his brother’s presence.

After three sweeps of the paltry area he almost gave in. He was wasting precious time that he could be using to scour the streets and back lanes for Sammy.

Time.

Dean balked, thinking what it must have been like for his brother to see his own fate, to witness his own last breath knowing it was inevitable. *You can change the future and I’m gonna prove it!*

Dean grabbed the Impala’s keys from the table he’d dropped them on and was headed back out the door when a small wall calendar snagged his attention.

Calendar.

Sam had spoken of a calendar in his dream. He hadn’t been specific, but the elder hunter distinctly recalled the mention of some New Jersey Airfreight company and low flying aircraft. That meant Sammy was going to die in or near an airport.

Not die. I’m gonna save him!

Dean felt his face begin to redden and his eyes ached from fighting the urge to tear up. There was no time for sentiment. No time to act anything less than a one hundred percent tough, heartless son of a bitch.

A shadow moved past the motel door and the hunter instinctively reached for his gun. Just because Sam wasn’t here didn’t mean Haris hadn’t sent another cult goon after him. When the stranger walked on by, stopping to unlock the next room, Dean exhaled and let his hand drop to his side.

On impulse, he backed out of the motel and approached his unknown neighbor, a confident smile hiding the terror inside he was feeling for his brother. "Hi, there," he offered flashing a friendly, yet not too familiar grin. "I was wondering if you were from around these parts? I'm kinda looking for an airport big enough to carry freight planes? Ross Air Freight ring any bells?"

The woman in her twenties shrugged, the brown paper shopping bags in her arms hiding most of her features with their overflowing contents. "Teterboro carries freight, if you're looking for something smaller than Newark International..."

Dean bit into his bottom lip, torn between which airport to head for. "You sure they carry freight? Any abandoned buildings?"

The petite redhead set down her bags and looked the hunter up and down as if she was suddenly concerned for her safety. Her hands trembled just a little as she slid her room key into the lock while nodding. "Lots of hangars out there. That's all I know..."

"Okay, thanks..." Dean turned and felt his own hands begin to shake. The girl might be in fear of her life, but he was in fear for his brother's, and right now Sammy was the only one in any real danger.

Jogging the short distance to his beloved Chevy, Dean didn't even return to lock the swinging motel door he'd recently vacated. Instead, he cranked the Impala and made an educated guess as to where Sam had headed.

If Teterboro was the wrong choice, it would be a decision Dean regretted for the rest of his life.

But then, if anything happened to Sammy, that wouldn't be all that long a time to lament.

Abandoned Hangar Teterboro Airport, NJ 00hrs 04mins

Sam can hear it. The clock ticking.

Tick, tick, tick.

His final moments counting down in rhythmic staccato bursts that echo around the cavernous hangar.

It hadn't been hard to find this place. Ross Air Freight, NJ. Airplanes overhead. Didn't take a genius to work out he was looking for somewhere near an airport.

Although in his experience, Teterboro could only loosely be described as such.

Still, at least security around here wasn't as tight as it would have been had Sam's vision taken him to Newark International, which he guessed was something of a blessing.

He didn't feel very blessed right now though, standing amidst the debris of a company that had gone out of business months earlier in a hangar haunted more by the absence of the living than the presence of the dead. The only objects strewn around were empty packing cases and random pieces of broken metal, twisted and unidentifiable, and even the light breeze outside howled through the broken skylights above his head.

Sam wondered who'd been changing the calendar.

Because there it was on the wall, May page fluttering as a slight draft from the doorway stirred the musty air; just as he'd seen it in his vision.

He almost laughed out loud at the irony of it all.

The quiet library where the big trucker had dropped him off had given up its secrets so easily, and it hadn't taken him long to discover that this dead place now belonged to one Luciano Ferinacci.

Fate.

That's what it was.

Fate makes bitches of us all...

That made Sam smile too because he heard his own thought in Dean's voice, even though he knew it was something Dean would never say.

Dean didn't believe in Fate. Didn't believe in Destiny. Sam wasn't even sure Dean believed in himself.

Dean believed in Sam.

And he believed in Dad.

And he believed in Family.

Because in the end that was all Dean had left to believe in.

Sam felt his legs begin to tremble, almost buckling beneath his weight, and right then – right *then* – he would have given anything to have seen Dean come bursting through the door, pissed off scowl on his face. *You ditched me, Sammy...*

Because in the end, Family was all Sam had left to believe in too.

But when the door opened, it wasn't Dean who entered.

"Happy birthday, Sammy."

Sam could hear the clock ticking, the sound magnified to thunderous proportions, and somewhere in the distance he heard the sound of another clock striking midnight.

Happy birthday, Sam...

Sam had never liked that prickly sensation of déjà vu his visions were wont to invoke in him whenever he watched them play out before his eyes. He blinked as the strip light guttered overhead, memories of Max Miller, a gun, and his brother's brain matter splattered across a suburban bedroom wall ghosting behind his retinas.

He recognized Haris without prompting this time as he strode purposefully into the building: his expensively-tailored suit, polished shoes, loudly ticking wristwatch. Sam could hear it even from this distance, ticking down the last few beats of his heart.

"I admire punctuality in young people these days," Haris was saying, tapping his watch casually as he sauntered toward Sam's position, a crooked sneer curling his current host's lips. "It's a pity that tiresome brother of yours doesn't share your sense of good time-keeping."

Sam's jaw clenched unconsciously, and he looked straight ahead – at the clock, the calendar, the crumbling wall; all exactly as they had appeared in his vision. "Why here?" he asked hollowly. "Why do we have to do this here?"

Haris arched a dark eyebrow. "I didn't choose this place, Sam," he said. "You did. I merely followed you here. I thought this must simply be where you'd chosen to be when your time was up."

Sam glanced at him uncertainly. "Why the hell would I choose to die *here*?" he demanded, wondering fleetingly whether his vision had led him here or whether he had led his vision.

Straight to a property owned by Luciano Ferinacci...

Fate?

Destiny?

Random coincidence?

He knew Dean would favor the latter, but he himself wasn't so sure.

"Death's a relative concept, Sam," Haris informed him. "There are many ways to die that don't require your heart stops beating."

Sam shook his head impatiently. "I don't have the time or the inclination to listen to your existential bull right now," he snapped. "Or had you forgotten? A deal's a deal, right?" He straightened. "So let's get this over with."

"You're right, of course," Haris agreed, blinking yellow eyes in gleeful anticipation. "A deal is indeed a deal. And here I am to collect. You don't need to remind me, Sam. I've had this day circled in big red Sharpie on my calendar for quite some time now..."

Sam squinted at him. "Why?" he demanded. "What's so damned important about me? What the hell do you plan on doing with me?"

“Damned? Hell?” Haris frowned. “I hope you’re not damned yet, Sam, or this would all be rather pointless. As for Hell... Well, that’s all a matter of perspective I suppose, isn’t it? Perspective and time... They say time heals, but in my experience time can only hurt you. Eternities of it, stretching out in front of you, filled with fire and with pain and with something so much worse than death.” He met Sam’s defiant gaze with a sneer. “Don’t worry, Sam, I’m not going to blow the ending for you. Suffice it to say that that was *not* how I intended to spend *my* Eternity. I have far better things to do with my time up here than I ever could have down there...”

“Like raising an army?” Sam asked, gritting his teeth and praying that wasn’t how he was going to be spending *his* Eternity.

Haris smiled malevolently. “It’s not as simple as my offering you a job, Sam,” he said. “Of course, that’s one way this could play out.”

“What do you want from me?” Sam snapped, his patience wearing extremely thin.

Haris laughed mirthlessly. “Body and soul, Sam,” he said. “Body and soul. For now, all I want is to take that big neon ‘kick me’ sign from off of your back. You don’t even realize you’re wearing it, do you? So much power and you have absolutely no idea you have it, much less what to do with it.” He took a step closer, gingerly lifting a hand toward his prey as Sam fought the urge to take a step back. “But your daddy knows, Sammy. You should ask him about it someday. Oh wait. Silly me. You’re never going to see Daddy again, are you?”

Sam swallowed. “What – what do you mean?” he stammered. “What does he know?”

“Not everything,” Haris admitted. “Bits and pieces. Theories. Gut instinct. He always knew you were – *tainted* – somehow, Sam. He knew there were things out here in the dark that would come looking for you... Why do you think he risked sacrificing your big brother’s entire sense of self worth by drilling it into him that he had to protect your life even above his own? Why do you think he was so adamant you shouldn’t strike out by yourself to attend Stanford? Because he *knew*, Sam. He knew how much danger you would be in alone and unprotected. He knew how important you were going to be someday, the part you would one day have to play in all of this...”

Sam tried to remember to breathe. “What – what part?” he forced himself to ask, although he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“Right now?” Haris asked. “A hypothetical one. The things you could have done – the things you could have been if only you’d submitted to my will. But you had your chance, Sam, and you blew it. That was a one time only offer and I’m afraid I’m the jealous possessive type: If I can’t have you, no one can. It’s a shame, as I do so hate to see potential wasted.” He shrugged dismissively. “But hey, life’s a bitch, huh?” He took another step toward Sam, palm raised until it was hovering near the taller man’s forehead. “Actually, death’s pretty much a bitch too, but you’ll find that out for yourself soon enough.”

Sam swallowed. “So are you finished now?” he asked, mock-boredom in his voice. “Or are you gonna talk me to death? Because if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather we just got this over with.”

Haris smiled, wide as a Cheshire cat. “Not much for foreplay, are we Sammy?” His hand continued to hover over Sam’s forehead, the palm beginning to glow a sickly yellow. “But far be it from me too keep you from your next appointment.” He sighed contentedly. “Alrighty then. Happy death day, Sam...”

Get away from him you yellow eyed freak!

Dean wanted to scream the words across the hangar as he shoved open the door of what had once been Ross Air Freight and froze at the sight of Haris’ latest incarnation standing with a glowing hand raised toward his kid brother’s head.

But the words wouldn’t come out, the pounding in his head and his chest drowning out all rational thought but the one instinctual drive to run.

And Dean ran.

Straight out into the hangar, heedless of his own safety, able to think only of getting to his brother before Haris could take him away.

Just as two loud bangs brought him skidding to an abrupt halt.

Haris' host didn't move for a second, a look of almost amused surprise seemingly flash frozen on his pale face as the bullet sliced clean through him, front to back, lodging somewhere near his spine.

He glanced down, hand still hovering near Sam's face, and when he glanced back up he noticed the boy appeared almost as shocked as he was.

"Well would you look at that," he murmured, crimson blood beginning to seep through his immaculate white shirt as his knees buckled beneath him.

He snatched out a hand to grip Sam's shoulder in an attempt to remain on his feet.

But Sam was falling too.

"Sam!"

The single word tore from Dean's throat, and he was off running again, heedless of the bullets pinging off the concrete near his feet and whipping past his head, able to concentrate on one thing and one thing only: Sam, collapsing to the ground, injured. But to what extent, Dean couldn't tell.

"Sammy!"

Dean slid to an unceremonious crumple as a bullet whizzed past his ear, coming to a stop on his knees at Sam's side. "Sam, talk to me!"

Sam's eyes blinked wide, not looking at Dean, but rather at Haris' host, who was stretched out flat on his back at Sam's feet, spine suddenly arching up off the ground as a billowing cloud of black vapor erupted from his mouth, tearing a scream of panic from deep within him.

"Goddammit!" Dean growled, following his brother's gaze angrily. "One of these days that sonofabitch is gonna stick around long enough for me to waste his ass."

As the cloud of blackness made its escape through a broken skylight way up in the high ceiling, Dean returned his attention to his brother, grabbing him by the shoulder. "Sam?"

Sam winced, clutching at his upper arm where a scarlet stain was slowly darkening the sleeve of his shirt.

Dean tried to get a look at the wound just as another bullet pinged off the concrete near Sam's leg, and he was instantly on his feet, grabbing the back of Sam's collar and dragging him bodily the couple of feet they needed to make it to a pile of sturdy old packing crates.

Ducking down, Dean pulled Sam in next to him, the younger brother looking too stunned to protest at the manhandling, instead fixing Dean with a befuddled stare as he drew his Desert Eagle and began squinting off into the distance over the top of the crates.

"What the *hell*?" Dean ground out. "Sniper attack? Well that's just peachy. Like we've not got enough to deal with right now..."

Another round blew up a plume of dust an inch from Haris' former host's head, and Dean glanced back to see him staring up at the ceiling, breathing labored and shallow.

Dean hesitated for the briefest of instants before breaking cover, dashing over to where the host lay sprawled out in the open and grabbing him by the arm.

"Dean!" he heard Sam yell in alarm, but was already dragging the stricken man back toward the cover of the packing crates, much as he had Sam.

He glanced back at his brother once he was sure the three of them were relatively protected. "You okay Sammy?"

Sam squeezed at his bleeding bicep, even in his dazed state knowing enough to keep pressure on the wound. "Just winged me," he assured his brother, the shock of still being here, still breathing, fogging his already befuddled thought processes.

Dean grinned at him. "So it's your birthday and you're not dead yet." he pointed out. "So much for Fate." The relief flooding his eyes was almost too much for Sam to bear right then, and he nearly flinched when his brother reached out and patted his cheek affectionately. "Happy birthday, Sammy!"

A choked laugh escaped Sam's lips. "Thanks man," he said quietly.

"Savor it while you can, dude," Dean added. "Cause you *ever* try and ditch me like that again, you won't be seeing another one."

Sam frowned briefly. "Dean, I —"

Dean shook his head at him and held up a hand. "Angst me later, man," he said. "We got more pressing problems —"

As if in response, another volley of gunfire ripped through the air above their heads, just as Dean ducked down to check on the status of Haris' host.

He peered carefully at the bloodstains blossoming across the man's chest, felt his weak and thready pulse. This guy wasn't long for this world.

And he knew it.

His breathing was becoming more erratic and labored, as if he simply couldn't get any air into his lungs, and as Dean leaned over him, he suddenly darted out a hand, grabbing the younger man's t-shirt and pulling him down toward him with a strength he really shouldn't still have possessed.

"Whoa, take it easy there, champ!" Dean stammered in mild surprise, trying to prize the man's desperate grip from off of his shirt. "It's gonna be okay," he added, trying to soften his voice. "We'll get you some help —"

"I'm — beyond help," the man whispered through bloodied lips. "I was dead the moment that thing —" he tried to take down another rattling breath, "— took me!"

"It's okay," Dean repeated, trying to calm the guy down, trying to make his voice as soothing as he could while all the time trying not to compare the way this man was looking at him to the way Meg had looked at him — *after*. "*It was a nightmare...*" He swallowed. "You're gonna be okay," he assured the man. "We'll get you out of here —"

"*Listen* to me, hunter!" The man burst out, blood bubbling on his lips as he somehow managed to yank Dean even closer.

Dean blinked in surprise, his silence seeming to calm Haris' former host, who took several short breaths before continuing.

"I have a message for you," he wheezed. "From that — that *creature*. He — he may not have taken your brother as he wished — may not have extinguished his light — but — but — he has still defeated you!"

Dean frowned. "How?" he demanded, all attempts at comforting the man forgotten. "He's gone and Sammy's still —" he waved a hand in his brother's direction, who was now leaning hard against the packing crate, skin pale and clammy. Dean blinked again, this time in concern at Sam's unnatural pallor. "Sammy?" he burst out. "You good?"

Sam groaned, leaning his forehead against the wooden crate. "Don't — feel so good —" he mumbled.

"You — you're just — it's the blood loss," Dean stated confidently, denial always coming easily to him when it came to Sam. "When we get you to a doctor —"

"No doctor can help him," Haris' former host ground out, dragging back Dean's attention.

"What — what do you mean?" Dean barely dared ask.

"Haris has won. You and your brother are defeated. And — and he never even had to lay a hand on him — didn't need to strip him of his powers — take his life — or — or cast him into Hell: A mere mortal has done that for him... Achieved what he could not."

Dean glanced up as another couple of rounds impacted the concrete floor a few feet beyond their position. A glint of metal caught his eye, up near the ceiling, up on a steel gantry running the width of the hangar. "It's just a flesh wound," he mumbled,

never taking his eyes off the gantry. "Sam's gonna be fine –"

A gurgling noise refocused Dean's attention back to the rigid figure of the man splayed out in front of him, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling as the light left his eyes as surely as the Demon had left his body.

"Hey!" He shook the man's shoulders, more out of desperation than any hope he was still alive. "I don't understand! It's – it's just a flesh wound –"

Another bullet ripped through one of the packing crates just to the left of Dean's head, and he actually felt the heat of it graze his cheekbone.

He swore profusely before crawling back over to Sam, whose color didn't seem to be improving.

"Sammy –?"

"Just a little dizzy," Sam assured him with a wave of his hand. "I think – I think there's a bad guy needs taking care of..."

Another round took out a corner of the crate nearest Sam, and Dean nodded his agreement. "Yeah, you could be right, dude." He put a hand on Sam's shoulder, pinning him with his most authoritative stare. "Stay down, okay? I don't need you getting your head blown off trying to play hero."

Sam smiled weakly. "Cause if anyone's gonna get to play hero, it's gonna be you, right?"

Dean grinned big and wide. "You bet your skinny ass! Big brother's prerogative."

Sliding out his Desert Eagle, he gingerly inched backwards toward a twisted hunk of heavily listing metal that he suspected had once upon a time been a shelving unit.

Ducking behind the makeshift shelter as another couple of rounds pinged off the floor between himself and Sam, he drew in a breath before diving for the shadows in a dark corner of the hangar, clinging to the wall as he carefully backed up until he was standing at the foot of a ladder leading up to the metal gantry.

Another bullet impacted one of the crates with a thud, and, satisfied that meant he'd not yet been detected, he scooted up the ladder as fast as his injured hand would allow, pulling himself up onto the metal walkway and crouching for a second as he again tried to gauge whether the sniper had seen him.

Yet another round whizzed over Sam's head, and Dean took that as his cue, jumping to his feet and virtually sprinting along the narrow walkway until he neared the position of a black-clad figure lying flat on his stomach across the gantry, one eye pressed to the scope of a high-powered rifle, a carton of what looked like custom-made rounds lying close to his left hand.

Moving as stealthily as he was able, Dean carefully edged toward him, hoping to hell the guy didn't choose that moment to look away from the scope. When he was within striking distance, he took a short breath before carefully bending down and pressing the cool steel of his handgun against the exposed flesh at the back of the sniper's neck.

The sniper tensed, drawing back from the rifle as he half turned toward Dean.

"Uh-uh-uh," Dean chided him. "Just you lie still there dude or we're gonna have a serious falling out."

The sniper froze, hands relinquishing their grip on the rifle as he raised them carefully above his head.

"That's better," Dean said, distractedly eyeing a couple of fresh rounds that had spilled out of the carton. He squinted, more taken with the odd designs etched into the shell casing than the fact that they looked hollow-tipped, and he had no idea why a sniper would be using hollow-tipped rounds.

Come to think of it, he had no idea why this particular sniper was here at all.

"You here for us or for him?" he asked, nodding in the direction of Haris' fallen host.

An odd smile played across the sniper's wide lips, and he turned ever-so-slightly, big brown eyes narrowed. "You have no idea who you're dealing with, do you kid?" he sneered. "How d'you know I'm not here for all of you?"

Dean smiled icily before planting a booted foot squarely between the guy's shoulder blades.

The sniper grunted and blew out a breath.

"If that's true," Dean said, game face virtually nailed in place, "then who the hell would be after us *and* that yellow-eyed freakshow?" He dug the heel of his boot in a little harder.

The sniper sucked in a breath. "You made an enemy today, boy," he said. "My boss doesn't like being made a fool of."

The penny suddenly dropping, Dean burst out, "Ferinacci? You're one of *his* bitches?" He shrugged, chuckling gleefully. "Yeah well, we *did* kinda make his goon squad look like Amateur Hour with the Keystone Cops..."

"You really don't have a clue what you've gotten yourself into, do you?" the sniper grunted.

"All I know is the Big Bad Demon just turned tail and ran – or – or billowed," he frowned before shrugging, dismissively. "Whatever. My brother's still in one piece, and if that demonic piece o' crap comes anywhere near him again I got a means of kicking his scaly ass all the way back to Hell. And then some. And all thanks to your boss."

"I wouldn't be popping open the champagne and celebrating your brother's birthday just yet, Dean," the sniper said, causing Dean to draw his brows together uncertainly and redistribute his weight onto his back foot. "I told you, you made an enemy today," the sniper continued. "When you make an enemy of Luciano Ferinacci, it's for life." He sneered. "So at least Sammy won't have too long to worry about it."

Dean blanched, for a second forgetting altogether to grind his foot into the sniper's back. "What – what are you talking about?" he snapped. "Sam's fine. It's a flesh wound. No biggie. I stitched up worse tons of times. Doesn't even really need a doctor..."

"No human doctor can save your brother, Dean Winchester."

Dean was pretty sure his heart stopped beating right there, the words of Haris' host still ringing loud in his ears. *No doctor can help him...*

His attention drifted to the carton of rifle shells and he bent to retrieve one, turning it over in his fingers as he again began to wonder about the odd engravings on the casing. Familiar yet – not.

"Hollow-tipped rounds," the sniper confirmed his earlier suspicions helpfully. "They got a little extra sting inside of 'em. My boss's own special recipe." He twisted, leering up at Dean horribly. "Almost as good as his spaghetti sauce. But a hell of a lot more deadly."

A cold heat began to stir in Dean's stomach, fingers of ice creeping up his spine. "What did you –?"

"Not the nicest way to go, I'm afraid," the sniper continued conversationally. "And there's no cure. I'd give your brother a few hours at most."

Dean almost choked on his own air supply.

"He'd have been better off if the Demon had taken him –"

That was the last thing the sniper got to say, as Dean abruptly brought his gun down on the back of the guy's head with a resounding thunk.

For a second he just stood there frozen, rooted to the spot, eyes lingering on the bullet still clutched in his hand before drifting back to the unconscious sniper at his feet.

Just a flesh wound, he told himself, a mantra stuck on permanent repeat in his head. *Just a flesh wound...*

He gulped down a breath, yanking one of those oh-so-convenient cable ties out of the black canvas duffel containing the sniper's gear before grabbing the guy's wrists and binding them none-too-gently to the railing of the gantry.

Just a flesh wound...

And then he was running again, feet thudding hard against the metal walkway, not even noticing the pain lancing through his hand as he swung himself down onto the ladder and virtually threw himself at the concrete floor.

"Sam!"

He raced toward the packing crates, to the place where he'd left his brother, heart beating a deafening tattoo in his chest. "Sam!"

"*What?*" Sam looked up startled, an eyebrow raised in exasperation as Dean skidded to a kneeling position in front of him. "I'm still here, Dean. Right were you left me...!"

Dean nodded, frowning slightly as he examined his brother, trying not to let the panic show on his face although his fingers trembled uncontrollably.

"You look – better," he managed, sounding too surprised for Sam's liking.

Sam arched an eyebrow at that. "It's only a flesh wound, Dean," he said, repeating the words circling around in Dean's head. "I've had worse."

"I know, kiddo," Dean said, and the tender use of that particular nickname alarmed Sam even more than the naked terror he suddenly detected in his brother's wide eyes.

"Dean? Dean, what's wrong?" When his brother didn't answer, he added, "You got the bad guy, right?"

Dean nodded distractedly, his eyes skittering over to Haris' former host. "Sure I did," he said, his voice lacking its usual cocky bravado. "When we're ready to go, I'll drop the cops an anonymous tip – hopefully even New Jersey's Finest will be able to connect the dots between a gunshot victim and a guy with a high-powered rifle."

He didn't look back at Sam as, without really knowing why he was doing it, he slowly moved toward Haris' host, crouching down next to him and gingerly peeling back the man's blood-soaked shirt to get a better look at the wound.

"Dean, what are you –?" Sam stopped short when he saw the network of tiny purple lines almost like thread veins spider-webbing out from the wound and discoloring the area surrounding the bullet hole. "What the hell is that?" he breathed, eyes widening as he recoiled part in revulsion and part in dread.

Again Dean didn't answer, couldn't even look at Sam, face ashen.

"Dean?" And suddenly Sam sounded all of six again and Dean felt like his heart was breaking into a million pieces.

Just a flesh wound...

"Dean?" Sam repeated. When Dean still didn't look at him, just stared at the host's chest while he chewed on his lower lip, more to stop it from trembling than anything else, Sam began to realize that something was wrong.

Very wrong.

"Those weren't ordinary bullets were they?"

Dean looked up at him very slowly, shaking his head the tiniest fraction.

Sam swallowed, painfully hauling himself up onto his knees and making a grab for the sleeve of Dean's jacket, just as a wave of dizziness caused him to sway dangerously.

Dean was instantly at his side, catching his uninjured arm to keep him from falling.

Sam wasn't sure which of them was shaking more.

He forced open his eyes again, willing the nausea to pass. "Dean?" he repeated.

The older brother blinked several times, and Sam was shocked to see moisture gathering on his eyelashes. Dean didn't cry. Dean *never* cried. Not without a damn good reason. Not unless...

"What is it?"

Dean adjusted his position so that he was looking right in Sam's eyes, opened his mouth to say something, then abruptly closed it again with an audible click.

How do I do this? How the hell do I do this? I can't...

Sam noted the way Dean's focus dipped to his wounded arm and didn't protest when his brother gently opened up the ragged tear in his shirt, pulling the fabric away so that he could better examine the strafe mark and the hole the bullet had left as it impacted his arm. It looked as if the round had passed right through, and Sam wasn't wrong when he said he'd had worse.

However, looking down as Dean probed the injury with hesitant fingers, Sam's breath caught in his throat as he realized his own flesh bore the same unnatural discoloring that marred Haris' dead host's chest. Gritting his teeth, he managed to hiss, "Just tell me, Dean."

Dean took a deep shuddering breath, finally managing to meet Sam's gaze and for a long moment just holding it.

After everything. After all they'd been through.

It couldn't end like this.

It *couldn't*.

"It's poison, Sam," he said at length, the undisguised tremor in his voice almost as unnerving to Sam as the way it cracked on his name.

Sam blinked. "P – poison?" he repeated. "What – what kind of –?" He never got to finish the sentence as Dean suddenly placed a firm hand on each of his shoulders, before pulling back slightly and looking him unflinchingly in the eye.

"It's bad, Sam," he said quietly, not letting his brother's gaze wander for a second.

Sam took a breath. "How – how bad?"

"He said – he said no doctor could help you." Dean's voice was thick with fear, with regret, with loss and with the terror of that loss. "He said –"

"Dean?"

Dean wrapped his hand around the back of Sam's neck and pulled him close, breathing his next words right into his brother's ear.

"He said you're gonna die, Sammy."

To Be continued in *Valhalla*