

## Episode Ten: Suffocate

by Gaelicspirit

### Road outside Ellicott City, MD

Dean was humming.

Sam had been so engrossed in the words before him that he didn't realize what he was hearing at first. He looked up, the glow of the highway lights periodically illuminating the Impala's shiny hood as they grew closer to their destination. He had been reading by flashlight, trying to distract himself from the heavy quiet of the car, trying to ready himself for what they would find in Ellicott City. He narrowed his focus on the radio, James Hetfield's gruff voice as familiar to him as his brother's. *Metallica's Nothing Else Matters.*

Dean started singing, low, soft, as if he wasn't aware that the words were out loud. "...trust I seek, and I find in you... every day for us something new... and nothing else matters... never cared for what they say... never cared for games they played... never cared for what they do... never cared for what they know..."

Sam closed his eyes briefly, then looked back down at the papers laying in his lap. Dean used to sing a lot when they were younger. When the load he carried was lighter. He knew Dean was unaware of it, but his brother's suffering came through his quiet voice and Sam felt a stab of frustrated helplessness. There was nothing he could do... nothing. Because he was the cause, the catalyst.

Sam rubbed two fingers across the lid of his left eye, trying to stifle the dull ache there. It had never really stopped bothering him since the time they spent in Riverside, not that he'd admit that to Dean. It was good enough – he could see, that's all that mattered. He knew that despite Dean's automatic drive to follow John's orders, his brother's focus had been on one thing since the night when Sam had let exhaustion get the better of him and had broken his brother's heart with six words spoken without thought: *I had to make the deal.*

He shifted against the seat as Dean took the curve of the darkened road faster than the posted speed limited suggested. He was in complete control of the car, his fingers curled around the wheel, his shoulders squared and tense, his eyes pinned to the blacktop. Sam never worried about Dean losing control of his car. He worried about him losing control of everything else.

Melissa's death had hit Dean harder than Sam first realized. By the time Sam understood, really understood, it was too late. He'd discovered the phantom platoon and had pushed Dean onto another hunt. Keep them moving, keep them working, keep their minds off the inevitable...

Sam had watched as Dean had pulled the pain exposed by alcohol back inside, made it go away, once again effectively shoring up his internal defensive perimeter. Sifting through the myriad of information printed across the papers in his lap, Sam let a small sigh leak out. Dad's news last week had simply added another brick to Dean's wall.

Somehow, the knowledge that his abilities were a result of destiny working to balance itself had a calming, almost peaceful effect on Sam. Dean had taken the information in stride, used it to fuel his already white-hot drive to get Sam out of his deal. As usual, Dean preferred action: focusing on a solution to their current dilemma rather than musing about the mysteries of the universe. But, then, Dean was action.

And he would never be at peace unless he was able to keep denying evil what it so badly desired.

Dean stopped singing when the song ended and the Stones' *Paint It Black* began. The near-silence that filled the car in the wake of Dean's voice almost compelled Sam to dig through the CD collection and find something else his brother would sing to.

For Sam, going to Maryland on a new hunt was a welcome reprieve – a way to keep the demons at bay that couldn't be dispelled with holy water or an exorcism. The demons of time and truth. The demons of betrayal and sacrifice.

For Dean, he knew, it was just one more thing keeping him from his true mission: saving Sam. But an order was an order, no matter how it was delivered.

"There's the turn-off, man," Sam spoke up suddenly.

"I see it," Dean's low voice responded.

As the Impala angled down the exit ramp, Sam swallowed the sudden urge to snap at his brother. *How long, Dean? How long are you going to shut me out? How long are you going to make me pay?* He sank a bit deeper into his seat, knowing the answer. His birthday was less than two weeks away. Ten days to be exact.

Glancing quickly over at his brother, Sam could almost see Dean coil tighter before his eyes as if a digital countdown hovered above Dean's head, ticking away the time they had left together: *239 hours, 59 minutes, 60 seconds*. He wondered idly why he didn't feel the same sense of urgency.

"Okay, Sam. Whadaya got?"

Sam took a breath and began to roll up the sleeves of his denim shirt. Dad's note had effectively shut them out of one hunt and pushed them toward another. He knew which one Dean wanted to be on, but when he'd called the number Dad had left them, he'd reached Frank Jessup who said that he knew John from the Marines.

Dean said Frank sounded almost desperate when he asked them to come right away. The fact that he'd served with their dad made the note's implied order explicit. His brother would move heaven and earth to live up to the expectations he perceived their father had of him. Helping a fellow marine was not only expected, it was demanded.

"So, let's see... Frank said that the kid died last week—"

"Yeah, I got that part," Dean interrupted, glancing quickly down at the papers lit by Sam's flashlight. "Skip to the part I don't know."

Sam licked his lips. He was on shaky ground, covering old territory. He knew Dean would remember every word Frank said; Dean remembered pretty much everything he heard, from conversations, to music lyrics, to movie lines. He mentally shook off the strange hesitation he was feeling about how to talk to his brother, and plunged ahead.

"Well, looks like Ellicott City was pretty quiet until about three years ago. Then weird stuff started happening."

"Weird like three-headed cow weird, or weird like *28 Days Later* weird?"

"Weird like... well, here it says a half a dozen animals drowned in the river, and then three houses in one neighborhood sank one story into the earth overnight."

"Okay, random."

Sam nodded. "Guess things have been, um, escalating over the last month – library books flying from the shelves, the odd fire breaking out for no reason. That kinda stuff. Hey, Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you know that Baltimore is considered pretty much the most haunted place in the US?"

Dean lifted an eyebrow and glanced at him. "Who doesn't know that, Sam?"

"Jeeze, sorry," Sam rolled his eyes. He hid a smile. Talking was good. Talking eased the tension.

Dean cracked his neck. "You know the name of this place isn't really working in our favor."

"I promise not to shoot you." Sam pulled the corner of his mouth up in a small grin. "Again."

He glanced at his brother, noting how Dean's eyes crinkled slightly at the corners, betraying the humor that his mouth tried to hide.

"Dude, I think it's my turn to shoot you..."

Sam looked up and watched through the front window as Dean turned down the main street of Ellicott City. "I think Howie took your turn for you."

Dean bobbed his head once. "Howie freakin' Grumnik. Little bastard."

They stopped at a red light and Dean stretched an arm over the back of the seat, looking over at him. Sam was surprised at his own reaction to the sight of his brother's eyes. Recently, having Dean simply look at him was like winning the lottery. He missed his brother's often inappropriate humor, his natural tendency to parent him – even Dean's anger was better than the careful tread of pained uncertainty that had been tainting their conversation since John had left them in Nebraska.

"So, what you're saying is... we got some poltergeist running amuck in this here town," Dean drawled.

"Amuck?" Sam asked, grinning.

Dean nodded, his mouth bowed down in a mock frown. "Amuck. Causin' a ruckus even."

"Apparently," Sam chuckled, appreciating his attempt at levity. "You know... I wonder why Frank offered to pay us. If he knows Dad, he's gotta know we'd come, regardless."

Dean accelerated through the green light, his face a display of doubt. "Yeah... I don't know, Sam. Feels hinky, taking money from one of Dad's friends."

"Dad ever mention him to you before this?"

Dean shook his head. "Nah, but it's not like he talked about every guy he served with."

"Yeah..." Sam frowned, looking back down at the papers.

"What?"

"Nothing," Sam shook his head. "Guess I just think that... well, hinky or not, it's nice to be able to make some honest money for a change."

Dean shook his head. "Dude, you have one twisted idea of honesty."

Sam winced, looking over at him. "Dean, I—"

"Forget it." Dean's voice went hard, apparently realizing how layered such a statement was these days. "We're here anyway."

He pulled to a stop in front of the police station. Sam switched off his flashlight and stuffed it and the papers into the glove box. The familiar creak of the Impala's doors announced their arrival. Dean got out and Sam heard him whistle in admiration at the dark blue – or was it black? – vehicle he'd parked next to. Sam paused and leaned on the roof of the Impala, waiting while Dean slowly circled the other car.

"1970 Ford Falcon, Sam."

"Yeah? So?"

"This baby's a classic. Probably got a Mustang V8 under her hood."

"You want me to give you a minute alone?"

Dean finished his prowl around the car, his shoulders rolling under his leather jacket as he shrugged off the inevitable tension Sam knew driving across country always settled on him.

"Nah," Dean tossed him a crooked grin. "Wouldn't dream of cheating on my baby."

"Right. My bad," Sam said, shaking his head and following him up the stone steps to the heavy wooden doors of the police station.

As he was a bit behind, Sam was able to swiftly step out of the way when Dean crashed backwards and stumbled down one step, his arms splayed to keep from

falling, as a dark-haired girl with an armful of thick text books slammed directly into him.

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed as her books slid from her grasp. Sam grabbed the door before it could swing back and hit them as Dean struggled to both catch his balance and keep the girl from propelling them backwards down the stairs.

"Easy, whoa!" Dean grabbed the girl up against him, effectively stopping their possible plummet backwards. "Hey, you okay?"

She nodded, stepping back and looking up at him. From where he stood, Sam couldn't see her face – but he could see Dean's. His brother's large hazel eyes flashed once, pupils widening, and then they softened. He'd seen that flash before, many times... but rarely had he seen the almost pained smile that followed. That brief reveal of a bared soul had Sam remembering Cassie... and Melissa.

"I'm so sorry," the girl exclaimed, her voice deep. "I wasn't paying attention... I could have... I am so sorry."

Dean ducked his head so that he caught her eyes, his hands firmly but gently holding her upper arms. "Hey, it's okay. No one's broken. Lemme help you with—"

"No!"

Sam matched Dean's surprised expression at her swift denial.

"No," she repeated more softly, with an embarrassed laugh. "I've got it; it's okay." She shoved her hands into her close-cropped hair.

Sam crouched down and picked up a thick book, turning it over. *Ascension Magick: Ritual, Myth, and Healing for the New Aeon*. He stood, the book in his hand, and watched as the girl bent to pick up the others quickly. Dean turned and grabbed one that had tumbled down a couple of stairs. Sam watched as he looked at the title. He lifted it and flashed the cover at Sam. *Elemental Witch: Fire, Air, Water, Earth; Discover your Natural Affinity*. Sam lifted an eyebrow and showed Dean the book he held in his hand.

"Thank you, thanks," said the girl, turning to take the book from Sam. He caught his first look at her face. She was captivating – older than he'd first thought, with high cheekbones, a small mouth that quirked up naturally at the corners, even in her harried state, and large brown eyes framed by thick, dark lashes.

She turned back to Dean and met his eyes. Sam watched Dean pull his lips in, his brows gathering across the bridge of his nose. He handed her the last book.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," the girl's voice trembled slightly. "Yes. I'm fine. Thanks. Thanks again."

Her arms once again laden with the Wiccan books, the girl moved past Dean, tossing a quick smile back at him as she made her way down the stairs. Sam watched as Dean kept his eyes on her, turning his body as he watched her walk away. Sam flicked his eyes from the back of his brother's head to watch the girl unlock the back door of the Falcon, toss the books on the seat, then slide into the driver's seat. His brows shot up in surprised admiration.

Dean shook his head slowly as the car fired up with an eerily familiar rumble, and the girl backed out of the parking space, turned on the headlights, and drove away with strains of Don Henley's *Boys of Summer* echoing back to them through her opened windows.

When Dean turned back to look at him, the grin on his face had Sam shaking his head in bemusement. Some things never change, he thought. Dean nodded at him, motioning him to go in first. As Sam walked through the door, his eyes hit a large wall calendar next to the Most Wanted board. Today's date flashed up at him. April 22nd. *And some things do...*

"Can I help you?" The desk sergeant was a tired-looking Asian man whose expression told Sam that helping them was the absolute last thing he wanted to do.

"Yeah, uh, Officer... Kim," Dean replied with a friendly smile, ducking his eyes to read the sergeant's name badge. "We're looking for Frank Jessup."

"Seriously, Danny, I am *not* going to tell you again. Do your freakin' **job**, man!"

Sam blinked at the harsh bark from an opened doorway behind Officer Kim. He saw Dean straighten reflexively out of the corners of his eyes. Officer Kim jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"That's him," he muttered and dropped his gaze back down to the magazine he'd been reading before they walked in.

A young blond man in a light-blue officer's shirt stumbled out of the opened doorway, hurried through the bullpen and pushed through the swinging door next to Officer Kim, who didn't so much as raise his head. Sam and Dean separated quickly to allow the young man space to storm out of the station, watched him exit, then turned as one back to face the angry-looking Sheriff standing with his elbow propped in the doorway, fingers splayed through dark hair, a scowl looking at home on his face.

"Frank Jessup?" Dean asked.

"Who wants to know?" He grumbled.

"Name's Winchester. Dean Winchester," Dean tilted his head to the left. "This is my brother, Sam. You called us?"

Frank straightened quickly at the sound of their surname. He'd crossed the room in three quick, long-legged strides by the time Dean stopped talking.

"Hot *damn* it's good to see you boys!" Frank exclaimed. He reached out a hand and grabbed Sam's, pumping it enthusiastically. "Damn, I should have realized – you look just like your Daddy did at your age, Sam."

Sam blinked, carefully extracting his hand from Frank's exuberant greeting. He looked over at Dean and was momentarily surprised by the shadowed expression that brushed his brother's features. When Frank reached for his hand, Dean took it, shook once and stepped back from his grasp. Frank didn't seem to notice.

"You boys made good time," he said, a relieved smile nearly splitting his face in half. "You eat yet?"

Sam was still watching Dean and allowed himself to relax when at the mention of food, Dean smiled.

"No sir," Dean replied.

"Well, c'mon," Frank clapped a hand on Sam's shoulder, turning them toward the door. "Kim, hold down the fort."

Officer Kim didn't even look up. "Mhmm."

"There's a diner right across t'way," Frank said, stepping between them to jog ahead down the stone steps. He caught sight of the Impala and Sam saw him do a double-take. "Hot damn! She yours?"

He turned to look at Sam. Dean nodded, saying nothing. Frank looked back at the car.

"You wait 'til you meet my niece, Reed," Frank said, starting to reach out and run a finger along the hood of the Impala. Sam had to bite back a grin when Frank instinctively looked up to see Dean's stony expression warning him away. He pulled his hand back and continued. "Her Daddy had a thing for classic cars. Gave her his Ford Falcon when she turned twenty-one."

Sam's eyebrows went up. *His niece, huh?*

"We, uh, met," Dean said, following Frank across the street. "Sorta."

Sam walked in under the ringing bell behind Frank and Dean. The small diner looked like it had once been a railroad car. The sound of the bell caught the attention of a white-haired man, wearing a navy-blue baseball cap that was turned backwards on his head, wiping down the counter.

"Three coffees, Luke," Frank signaled with his fingers.

He led the way to a booth, sliding into the far side, facing the door. Sam slid in across from him, making room for Dean. Luke set three thick, white mugs down in the middle of the table and poured the coffee over them, filling each with an impressive circular motion. Dean hooked his elbow over the back of the booth between himself and Sam and rested his other arm on the Formica table top.

"Thanks, Luke," Frank nodded, picking up his coffee and gulping half the cup in what should have been a mouth-scalding swallow. He set it back down and Luke, who was apparently used to this behavior, filled it back up, then looked at the boys.

Dean shrugged and mimicked Frank, receiving an immediate refill. Sam waved his hand over the top of his still-steaming mug.

"I'm good, thanks," he said hurriedly, rewarded with narrowed eyes and a frown from the gregarious Luke.

"Uh, three specials, I think, Luke," Frank nodded at Dean, then Sam. "That good with you boys?"

Sam blinked, but Dean nodded. Surrendering to the inevitable, Sam smiled at Luke and nodded as well. After more than a thousand diners in more than a thousand small towns across America, Sam had learned that *the special* was pretty much the same anywhere they went.

Luke stepped away, and Dean leaned forward, resting both elbows on the table and wrapping his hands around his mug.

"Thank God," he mumbled sarcastically. "I thought he'd never shut up."

Frank grinned. "Luke's not much of a talker. He was a POW in the war. Prolly said about ten words in the last ten years."

Dean nodded and looked down.

"So, uh, Frank," Sam started. It was late, and he could feel the tension begin to build around Dean again.

"Yeah," Frank nodded. "You're probably ready to get down to business, ain'tcha?"

Dean kept his eyes down, seemingly content to let Sam handle the talking.

"We did some research on the way in..."

Frank shook his head. "Y'ain't gonna find out what you need to know from any book."

"Internet research," Sam corrected.

"Not there, neither," Frank said, glancing out of the diner window into the darkness.

"Why's that?"

"Nobody knows, is why."

"Knows what?" Dean asked, keeping his head lowered, but raising his eyes to look directly at Frank.

Frank pressed his lips down in a frown, looking back over at Dean, then shifting his eyes to Sam.

"That my brother is haunting this town."

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### **Wayside Inn B&B, night**

Dean lay on top of the red comforter covering one of the two double beds in the room Frank had secured for them. His leather jacket was draped across the back of the chair sitting opposite Sam, who was hunched over his laptop, staring intently at the screen. Dean tucked one arm behind his head, grateful for the grey T-shirt layered beneath the soft, thin fabric of his second-hand red plaid flannel shirt. April in Maryland was brisk, to say the least.

Mindlessly flipping through the five channels on the hotel TV, Dean thought about what Frank had told them less than an hour before. Frank had apparently been able to shrug off the weird occurrences that had happened in and around Ellicott City for the last three years until the teenager was found dead in a local abandoned house. He'd been missing for almost a week when an anonymous tip had led them to the house and they'd found the boy in a small broom closet. The coroner's report said he'd died from asphyxiation.

*Poor kid suffocated. That had to be scary as hell...*

Dean stopped flipping when he reached a rerun of *The X-files* and he dropped the remote onto the bed next to him. He looked over at Sam. His brother had handled the initial information-gathering part of the investigation with ease. He'd smoothly maneuvered around Frank's reluctance to relinquish many details as to why he was so certain of the spirit's identity, and got enough for them to do more research on their own. He had even managed to get Frank to give them half of the money offered now, with the promise of the second half when they'd taken care of the problem.

*Some problem. Vanquishing his dead brother's spirit...*

Shaking his head, Dean sat up on the bed, bending one leg in front of him and dropping the other to the floor. He didn't even like thinking the words 'brother' and 'spirit' in the same sentence. He lifted his eyes to the TV screen, watching without comprehension. He should be out there with his dad, finding that damn Seal, fixing this, saving Sam.

"Okay, so listen to this," Sam spoke up suddenly, breaking into his thoughts. "Lawrence Jessup died three years ago at the age of forty-five."

"You gotta be kidding me," Dean said, dropping his chin. "The dude's name was Lawrence?"

Sam glanced at him. "Yeah."

"What is it with this case? Next thing you're gonna tell me is that we have to walk into an attic full of bees."

Sam curved the corner of his mouth into a grin. "I don't think so," he said, glancing over at the TV. "But anything is possible."

*"Oh my God, Mulder. It smells like... I think it's bile."*

*"Uh, Scully... is there any way I can get it off my fingers quickly without betraying my cool exterior?"*

"What episode is this?" Sam asked.

"The one with that creepy little dude with the fingers... Tooms," Dean said, looking from Sam over to the TV.

"Oh, right," Sam nodded. "I think Dad likes this episode."

"Dad likes any of the episodes that don't have aliens in them," Dean said, pushing up from the bed and striding over to the duffel bag full of weapons.

Grabbing it up, he dropped it onto his bed, then sat on Sam's and began to pull the guns from the bag and lay them out on the bed. His fingers itched. His hands were aching. His arms hurt. He needed to move, to act, to do. He needed a purpose. Picking up one of the shotguns, he began to break it down and clean the barrels with an automatic flow of action.

*Ten days, Dad... Ten friggin' days and you send us on a ghost hunt. Town'll still be haunted after Sammy's safe... this couldn't have waited? Oh, right... dead kid... friend from the Marines... the **goddamn** family business. Won't be much of a business without the family...*

When Sam didn't continue with what he'd discovered about Lawrence Jessup, Dean glanced over at him. He was watching TV, his face serene, happy even. Dean pulled his eyebrows together, his hands continuing their ceaseless motion. Sam didn't look one bit concerned about the time they were losing dealing with Frank Jessup's haunted town. In fact, he didn't look concerned about much of anything.

"Sam!" He barked. Sam jumped, startled.

"What?"

"Focus. Or I'm turning off the TV."

Sam pouted, then turned back to the laptop. "Okay, where was I?"

"Freaking me out with the dude's name," Dean replied, looking down the barrel of the empty shotgun to check for any remaining residue.

"Right, okay, so... says here that Lawrence was a pillar of the community, big philanthropist—"

"Philawha?"

"Donated a lot of money to a lot of causes."

"Ah."

"Named a wing of the library after him... umm, man, looks like the mayor even gave him the key to the city," Sam folded his lips down, shaking his head. "Maybe Frank's wrong. Why would a guy this well-liked turn into an angry spirit?"

Dean shrugged. "Maybe he's not the spirit."

"Frank seemed so sure, though," Sam frowned.

"Seem weird to you that Frank didn't tell us how he died?"

"Yeah. It did," Sam scrolled through a few more screens. "Looks like he, uh, drowned. A kid fell into the river, Jessup went in after him, fished him out, but his pants got snagged on something and he was pulled under. No one nearby was strong enough to get to him in time."

Dean set the shotgun aside and picked up another, breaking it down and started to oil it. "Man, that blows."

Sam nodded. "Doesn't seem like his spirit would kill that kid, though, Dean. Not when he died to save another kid..."

Dean shrugged, checking the barrel of the second gun. "Maybe the kid just wandered in on a dare... freaked himself out, got trapped."

"Maybe," Sam said, peering at the laptop screen again. "Huh."

"What?" Dean glanced over at his brother.

"Frank left out a few facts about that kid's death, too," Sam said, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

"Like what?" Dean asked, setting down the second shotgun and picking up his .45, ejecting the clip.

"Like the fact that the property the abandoned house is sitting on belongs to Reed Jessup."

Dean froze, thinking. He knew that name... "Holy shit, his niece? The chick with the Falcon?"

Sam nodded. "Lawrence's daughter."

"Well, that changes things a bit," Dean said, taking apart his gun.

Sam sat back in his chair and rubbed his face tiredly. "Man, this gets old, you know it?"

Dean's attention snapped to a narrowed focus and he looked hard at Sam's profile. "What are you talking about?"

"This..." Sam waved his hand around the room. "All... this. Different town, different motel room. Family tragedy, lies, secrets. Ghosts, pain, hauntings... all of it. I'm just gonna be glad when it's all over."

Dean went cold. He swallowed the sudden rush of bile to his throat at Sam's words. Working to pull a breath into his lungs, he licked his lips and carefully set down his .45.

"Why are you saying this stuff, Sam?"

If his distress echoed through his voice, Sam gave no notice. He simply tipped his chair back on its rear legs and rolled his neck.

"'Cause I'm ready for something different, man. I'm just ready... y'know, for it all to be... over."

Dean felt his heart thud once, hard, against his ribcage. He was standing before he was even conscious of pushing himself to his feet.

"Shut the hell up."

Sam's head snapped up in surprise at the cold dread in Dean's voice. Dean could feel himself shaking, but he didn't care. He knew his wall was becoming swiftly transparent, but he wanted, needed, Sam to see. He couldn't fight hard enough, he wasn't strong enough, to keep them both believing – Sam had to believe that they would find a way out of this deal. He had to believe or Dean would be lost.

"What? Dean, are you—"

Dean crossed the room in two strides and stood directly in front of Sam. He curled his hands into fists, resisting the almost overpowering urge to grab the front of Sam's denim shirt, haul him to his feet, and shake him, hard.

"You listen to me," Dean said, his voice low, hard. "It will never be over. This is our life. *Our* life. As long those evil sonsabitches are out there, it will *always* be our life."

He watched as Sam paled in reaction to his trembling anger. His fists tightened to the point where he heard his knuckles crack. Sam's expression shifted and his eyes suddenly swam with memories. Dean stared at him, willing him to come back from complacency, willing the warrior he'd raised to return... needing to see the fight in Sam's eyes.

"You can't give up on me, Sam," he whispered.

"I'm..." Sam looked away. "I'm not giving up."

"Don't lie to me."

Sam didn't meet his eyes. "I'm not lying, Dean." He looked over at the TV. "I just think that I'm... settled."

"Settled?" Dean pulled his head back, his brow furrowed in confusion. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Sam pushed his chair away from the table and stepped away from Dean's formidable presence. "That maybe Dad'll find the Seal of Solomon... and maybe we'll find a way to defeat Haris..." Sam looked at him then. "And maybe we won't."

"What, and you're just okay with that?" Dean yelled.

Sam nodded. "Yeah, Dean." He leaned on the dresser, his fingers stuffed into the front pockets of his jeans. "I am."

Dean slowly uncurled his fists. He felt his heartbeat in his head. He blinked as the edges around Sam blurred and he realized that he had forgotten to breathe. Turning away from Sam and staring down at the weapons spaced across the bed, Dean ran a hand through his short hair, then rubbed the back of his neck.

"Well, I'm not."

"What?"

Dean looked over at his brother. He took in the unlined face, the calm blue-grey eyes, the slight quirk of a brow in question. His brother, who had been his responsibility – his one job – since he could remember. His brother, whom he'd both taught and learned from, been both saved by and savior of, whom he'd protected, cursed at, laughed with, loved. His brother who had offered his soul to hell in one desperate, stupid act. His brother who stood there and told him that he was okay with losing, he was okay with giving in, he was okay with *dying*.

*Well, screw that,* Dean thought. He was not about to lose this fight.

"I said I'm not, Sam." Dean turned to face Sam, his arms at his sides, palms open and out, soul exposed. "No matter what, I will fight this. I will fight for you. I am not about to let you go, let him friggin' win. You got me?"

He put his heart into those words, his will as real as if he'd grabbed his brother up and shoved him against the wall. His memory echoed an image of a different Sam, a desperate Sam. *Don't you say that, not you... not after all this...*

Sam swallowed, looking down. He nodded. "I got you."

Dean was silent for a moment, weighing the sincerity of Sam's reply. When Sam looked up again, he nodded into Dean's eyes. "I got you, Dean," he repeated.

Dean wasn't certain if the fight was back in Sam, but he did know that Sam believed him and he was finally able to take a breath.

"Good. Now, we diggin' tonight or what?"

"Digging?"

Dean turned back to the weapons strewn across the bed. "Only way to find out for sure if Larry's haunting the town he apparently loved is to salt and burn his bones," he said, shoving a clip into the .45 and dropping it back into the duffel.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Course I'm right," Dean retorted, grabbing the remote and turning off the TV. "Now, where's this dude buried?"

Sam moved back over to the laptop. His fingers flew over the keys so quickly that Dean didn't bother trying to keep up. "Crest Lawns Memorial Gardens."

"Alright then, Sammy. Let's get it done."

Sam closed the lid of the lap top and reached for his jacket.

"Hey, Dean?"

"Yeah?" Dean answered, shrugging into his leather jacket. He didn't meet Sam's eyes, afraid that his earlier display of emotion would trigger one of Sam's unique chick-flick moments. He didn't think he could handle that right now.

"You know, if you're right... this could be the easiest hunt we've ever been on."

"Dude!" Dean pulled the hotel room door open and shook his head. "Do you not pay attention to movies?"

"What?" Sam asked innocently, stepping through the door and heading to the car.

"Famous last words, Sam."

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### **Crest Lawns Memorial Gardens, night**

"How many graves you think we've dug in our lifetime, man?" Sam asked as they retrieved the shovels from the trunk of the Impala. Lights from a nearby mausoleum conveniently shone along their path.

"I don't even want to think about it, Sammy."

"How old were you, first time you dug a grave?"

They started to walk across the wet grass toward the plot where Lawrence Jessup's earthly remains waited for them. Dean shook his head... *questions, questions, always with the questions... don't ever change, Sammy...*

"Uh, ten," he answered.

"What?" Sam pulled up short, his face twisted in disbelief. "No way you were ten."

"Fine. Don't believe me. You were there, though. Kinda."

Sam started walking again, narrowly missing one of the in-ground brass grave markers. Dean glanced down and over, watching Sam's path. His eyes caught on the name etched on one of the markers he stepped over: *Benjamin Reed Jessup*.

"We gotta be close," he said. "I think that's Frank's Dad."

"How do you know?"

"Years look about right."

Sam nodded, and started scanning the ground. "So... I was there?"

"Have I pissed you off more than usual?"

"I just want to know what happened."

Dean sighed. "Fine." He looked down and stopped cold. "Found 'im."

"Swell," Sam shrugged out of his jacket and moved to toss it over a tombstone, realizing his mistaken assumption and dropped it on the ground. "I'm not a fan of these flat tombstone things."

"You would be if you got thrown into more of the other kind," Dean pointed out, dropping his leather jacket on the ground.

"True," Sam dug the spade of his shovel into the earth at what would be the foot of the grave.

"Dad was teaching me a lesson," Dean said, digging in at the head of the grave, near the marker.

"A *you'll need to know this for later lesson? Or a I don't give orders to hear myself talk lesson?*"

"The second one."

"Figures. You always were a rebel."

"Tiger don't change its stripes, man."

Their conversation was soon punctuated by slight gasps for breath and grunts of exertion as shovels-full of dirt were flung over their shoulders.

"What was he hunting?"

"Spirit."

Sam paused, leaning on the handle of the shovel. "He took you with him?"

"Yep." Dean pulled off the red flannel shirt, balled it up and tossed it over on the grass near his jacket. Even in the cool of the East Coast night, digging graves worked up a sweat. He felt it gathering at his lower back and around his collar bones.

"What about me?"

"Hell, no," Dean panted. "You were six. He locked you in the car."

"Nice," Sam grinned. "Did you get the spirit?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Dad did?"

"Eventually."

"Dean..."

"The spirit found me first," Dean said, his shovel finally hitting something solid. "I was supposed to stay inside the salt circle, saw Dad get... y'know... flung, went over to him..."

He tossed the shovel up and out of the hole, then grabbed the dirt edge of the hole, scrambled up the side of the grave and hauled himself over the edge.

"What... happened?" Sam asked hesitantly.

"Nothing bad," Dean said as he sat for a moment on the edge of the grave, his feet dangling in the hole. "It was my first spirit, though. Gotta say... spooky the first time you see one."

"Hell, yeah it is," Sam exclaimed from down inside the grave. "I was fifteen and I was still freaked."

"Well, that's just 'cause you're such a girl," Dean clambered to his feet and turned to dig through their bag to retrieve the salt, lighter fluid and a box of wooden matches. He'd lost his Zippo trying to get away from Mordecai Murdock. Matches had been the order of the day until he found an Army/Navy surplus store where he could get another Zippo.

"You gonna break through that thing tonight, Sam? Or are you planning on waiting until there are more people around?" He called over his shoulder.

"Hey, you've been doing this longer, apparently," Sam shot back. "Why don't you break through?"

"Because this is your favorite part," Dean retorted with a grin.

"You're a friggin' jerk." Sam grunted as he slammed the face of the shovel through the wooden box at the bottom of the grave.

Dean straightened, balancing his burden and started to turn toward the grave.

"Uh, Dean?"

"I'm comin'," he muttered. "Keep your pantyhose on."

"Think you might wanna take a look at this," Sam continued. A shovel, followed by his brother's lanky form appeared over the edge of the grave.

Dean frowned at Sam, then looked down into the opened wooden box.

"Huh."

Inside rested the bones of one human leg from femur to foot. And nothing else.

Dean looked over at Sam. "I blame you for this, Mr. Famous Last Words," he said.

"You know, I thought it was weird that there was a wooden box for a guy that's been dead for only three years," Sam said, wiping at a smear of dirt across his nose. "So... a leg. A missing body. What do we do now, tell Frank to arrest David Copperfield?"

"Yes," Dean nodded. "But not for this."

Sam shot him a look, and Dean answered it with one of his own. He twisted the cap off of the old gas can that they used to contain their rock salt supply and dumped a good amount in the grave.

"What are you doing?"

"Salt and burn, Sammy," Dean said. "Think it's pretty obvious now that Larry's our spirit, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Sam nodded, taking the lighter fluid from Dean and pouring it over the leg bones.

Dean lit the match, held the flame in his hand for a brief moment, then dropped it in. The bones were consumed with very little heat and only a small glow from the fire reflecting on their faces. Dean looked up from the fire into the dark that surrounded them like a familiar enemy.

"Y'know," Dean said. "Larry didn't chop himself up before he was buried."

"Yeah, I was thinking that," Sam said, his gaze on the dying fire. When the flames were out, he started to shovel the dirt back into the grave. "We got someone else out there, Dean."

"Yep," Dean scratched the back of his head. "Problem is... are they controlling the spirit, or did they just... create it?"

"That's not the only problem," Sam said, pausing as Dean picked up his shovel to help refill the hole. "We still gotta get rid of Lawrence Jessup's body."

"Yeah," Dean nodded, shaking his head as he filled another shovel with dirt and dropped it into the hole. "So... how many pieces is he in?"

Sam looked out into the darkness. "And where are they?"

### **Wayside Inn B&B, early morning**

Dean was dreaming.

Sam lay staring at the ceiling of their hotel room, unsure as to what had awakened him. He could hear the rustle of restless legs against coarse sheets and the low, unintelligible mutterings of his brother as he struggled with his subconscious. Sam lay still for another moment, hoping Dean would pull himself out of the dream. It was unusual for Dean to have a nightmare – unusual enough that Sam wasn't sure exactly how to deal with it and keep all of his fingers. That Bowie knife was wicked sharp.

Shifting sideways, he looked over at Dean. His brother was on his stomach, arms shoved under his pillow, face half-buried between the white case and the crook of his elbow. Sam could see his right eye squinted tightly shut, see the brow furrowed in anger or frustration. As he watched, Dean's shoulder jerked as if he'd been hit and his legs shifted roughly against the sheets.

"Dean," Sam said, his voice low and heavy with the remnants of sleep.

Dean's head twitched slightly and his frown deepened.

"Dean. Wake up." Sam made sure to keep his voice a low command, not a plea.

Slowly, as if his lashes were woven together, Dean opened his eyes. Sam could barely make out the green of his brother's irises. Dean blinked twice, then carefully eased his right arm out from under his pillow. Sam saw the hilt of the Bowie knife secured in his brother's grip.

"Time is it?" Dean mumbled and rolled stiffly over to his back, the hand with the knife dropping down beside his sheet-covered leg.

"Uh," Sam craned his neck to check the red digital numbers on the clock radio sitting on the small nightstand between the two beds. "Six."

Dean rubbed his face with a clumsy hand and groaned. "We gotta be somewhere?"

"Not really." Sam sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Dean rolled his head against the pillow, working the muscles of his neck with his free hand. Sam noticed that he had yet to let go of the knife. Without looking over at Sam, he grumbled, "What'd you wake me up for, then?"

"You were dreaming," Sam answered honestly.

He watched as Dean stilled. He simply ceased moving, his eyes on the ceiling. His chest didn't even rise and fall with the rhythm of breathing. It was such an unnatural sight that Sam almost called out to him to make him blink, breathe, twitch... something.

Dean saved him from saying anything by folding himself forward into a sitting position, his black T-shirt bunching, the sheets pooling at his waist, covering the boxer-briefs he'd slept in. His hair stuck up in hap-hazard tufts and when he turned to look at Sam, his eyes were puffy and shadowed.

"You want the first shower?" Dean asked.

Sam shook his head in a silent answer, wondering what his brother had remembered in that frozen second. Dean blinked at him a moment more, then shifted his legs out from under the sheets and dropped his feet to the floor. It was only then that he noticed the knife in his hand.

"Huh," he bounced his head once.

Sam watched as he forcibly uncurled his fingers from the knife hilt and reached over to set it on the nightstand next to the clock radio.

"You okay, Dean?"

Dean slid hooded eyes over to him. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Sam lifted a shoulder. "Didn't look like a good dream, is all."

Dean repeated the rubbing motion across his face. Sam recognized pattern: fingers across the forehead, down to the temple, across the cheekbones, ending at the mouth. Dean was working to erase images that were still too vivid in his mind, images that danced across his vision and teased his perception of reality, images that blended and warped and frayed the edges of his heart. Sam knew these images; he'd seen his own version of them often enough over the last two years.

"I'm fine, Sam," Dean muttered, rising to his feet.

He shoved his comforter and blanket, kicked off the bed at some point during the night and now bunched in a pile between the beds, out of his way as he moved toward the bathroom. He reached behind his head, between his shoulders, and pulled the T-shirt off, throwing it on top of the duffel in the corner.

Sam watched him walk away and couldn't help but wince at the still-fading bruise across Dean's back from his struggle with the last spirit they'd had to salt and burn. With a sigh, Sam stood up and padded over to his laptop, pushing the image of Dean's face caught in a nightmare from his mind. He noticed that Dean had made some notes when they returned from the cemetery last night.

*Larry's spirit – where's the body?*

*Dead kid – Reed's property... find the chick.*

*Drowning animals, sinking houses, kid in closet – what's the connection?*

Sam smiled in silent wonder. His brother never ceased to surprise him. Sam always saw Dean as the action while he was the thought. Shoving a hand through his shaggy hair, Sam gazed up as the light from the morning began to slowly illuminate the dim hotel room. He knew these notes were a sign of Dean's struggle to do the job, to make sure it was done. He knew how badly Dean wanted to be elsewhere.

Sam just didn't feel the same. He was happy being on this hunt, being with his brother, doing what he'd been trained to do, what he knew how to do, what he was good at. He was happy doing the job. If he could block out the countdown that glared from Dean like a beacon, Sam might even be able to forget that he was a walking expiration date.

Glancing over his shoulder when he heard the water from the shower shut off, he knew the first thing Dean would want to do would be to talk to Frank. That conversation had better produce more results than their last one had, or Dean was going to start throwing punches. The knowns in this simple case were outweighed pretty significantly by the unknowns.

"Tell you one thing," Dean said, walking from the bathroom into the hotel room in a cloud of steam, a small white towel clutched in his hand and another wrapped around his waist. "Ol' Frank better shake loose with the facts, or..."

"Why don't you let me talk to him," Sam offered.

Dean reached up with the hand towel and began to rub the water vigorously from his hair. "You gonna use your Jedi powers on him or something, Sammy? You *will bring Leia and the Wookiee to me...*"

"No," Sam rolled his eyes. "I just think that I could... y'know... connect with him."

Dean tossed the towel toward the bathroom door and turned to his duffel with a look of mock hurt on his face. "What do you think I would do, huh?"

"Seriously?" Sam lifted an eyebrow. "You're not the... *connecting* type, Dean."

"What are you talking about?" Dropping the towel from his waist, Dean pulled on his boxers and jeans. "I can connect. I connect!"

"Uh-huh," Sam stood and stretched his arms over his shoulders.

Dean dug through the duffel for a clean shirt, pulled out a white T-shirt, smelled it and jerked his head back with a frown. Picking up the black one he'd discarded earlier, he shoved his arms in the sleeves and tucked his head through the hole. Watching him, Sam tried to remember the last time they'd stopped to do laundry. Coming up blank, he walked past Dean and headed to the bathroom, hoping he had some clean clothes in his own duffel.

"All right, Sammy," Dean said, grabbing a green long-sleeved shirt from the bag and shrugging it on. "You go and be Zen with Frank. I'll find the chick with the Falcon."

He reached for his .45, tucking it into his waistband, and flicked the tail of his shirt over the weapon to conceal it. Rolling his neck, he said, "Sooner we smoke this spirit, the sooner we..."

Dean looked up, meeting Sam's eyes. Sam waited, hand on the bathroom doorframe, watching his brother. He saw it – the barest flicker of a shadow, the darkness that had been as close to his brother as gravity since the moment Haris had grabbed Dean. Grabbed Dean and not Sam.

"Dean?" Sam prompted when he didn't continue.

"Forget it." Dean grabbed the Impala keys. "I'll be outside."

Before Sam could say another word, Dean opened the door, stepped through, and closed it behind him with a troubling air of finality.

\* \* \* \*

### **Sherriff's Station, morning**

"You were right."

"About?"

Frank's earlier enthusiasm at their arrival had apparently cooled overnight, leaving Sam to wonder if something had happened. He pushed the rolled cuffs of his white shirt up to his elbows and leaned forward.

"Looks like your brother's spirit is the thing that's causing the problems around town."

Frank sighed, resting his forehead on his tented hands. Sam waited. *It's not every day you hear that the spirit of your brother is killing people.*

"You take care of it?" Frank asked, his voice muffled by the position of his head.

"Not exactly," Sam replied, shifting uncomfortably in the hard wooden chair across from Frank's desk.

Frank jerked his head up. "What? You boys had all night!"

Sam raised his eyebrows in surprise. "It's not that easy, Frank. There are, uh... special circumstances."

Frank drew his brows together in angry confusion. "What circumstances? You dig up the body and burn it, right?"

Sam kept his face carefully blank, masking the utter surprise he felt that Frank knew what was involved in vanquishing a spirit. "Normally, yes," he said. "But, you see... your brother, uh..."

Frank pushed himself to his feet in an almost violent motion, the large chair he'd been sitting on rolling back and hitting the wall with a dull thud. "You just go take care of it. That's what you Winchesters do, right? Take care of things like this?"

Sam narrowed his eyes. "When was it you served with my dad again?"

Frank shifted his gaze to the side, then walked around the desk until he was close to Sam. Pulling at the leg of his uniform, he shifted a hip up on the edge of the desk, and leaned forward on his thigh with one arm.

"Look, Sam," Frank said in a conspirator's whisper. "I was up most of the night trying to keep my niece from, uh... doing something... well, something she'd regret."

Sam sat back, watching Frank with careful eyes.

"I'm sorry if I've been a bit... off," Frank rubbed a hand through his black hair. "I want to help you, I do. I just... I want this to be over."

Sam pressed his lips together. "Why didn't you tell us the abandoned house that kid was found in belonged to your niece?"

Frank blinked. "I, uh... I didn't think it was important."

Sam nodded once. "Well, if you really want to help, you should let us decide what's important."

Frank sat up a bit straighter, his eyes becoming hard at Sam's tone. Pushing himself away from the desk, he turned to walk over and stand in front of the office window, facing the railroad car diner. He cocked his head to the side.

"Is that your brother's car?"

"Yes," Sam replied, without looking. Dean had parked in front of the diner and headed in for coffee and to wait for him.

"What's he doing over at the diner?"

"Getting coffee," Sam said. "Tell me about the house, Frank."

Frank sighed, looked down and cupped the back of his neck. "It's my brother's house."

"Your brother's house," Sam repeated. "And you didn't think that might be important? You asked us to hunt your brother's spirit, man."

Frank shrugged, still facing away from him. "This isn't easy for me, Sam." He turned around and the look in his eyes when they met Sam's was wounded. "He's my brother."

Sam ignored the sharp, unexpected pain that sliced through his heart at those words, forcing himself to stay on target, stay focused. "He was your brother. He's an angry spirit now, Frank. And he's killing people."

Frank nodded, dropping his eyes. "Reed, uh... she lived there with Lawrence. After he died she... well, she never could go back in there. We locked it up."

"How'd the kid get in?"

Frank shrugged. "Dunno. Window maybe?"

*Or Lawrence's spirit dragged him in...*

Sam pushed his hands against his thighs and stood. "We gotta get in that house, Frank."

"Reed's the only one with the key," Frank said, looking back out the window.

"How do I find her?"

Frank gestured to the window with his head. "Looks like your brother already has."

\* \* \* \*

**Luke's Diner, morning**

Dean sat at the counter, the tips of his fingers tapping lightly on the thick rim of the white coffee cup. Luke walked by silently and refilled the half-empty mug for the third time. Dean lifted the corner of his mouth in thanks, appreciating Luke's taciturn personality after the restless night of disjointed, haunting images that plagued what he jokingly referred to as sleep.

Normally, when sleep claimed him it was a complete takeover. It was the one time he allowed himself to surrender. He gave in to the darkness and let his mind drift. But since Riverside – hell, since New Jersey – his mind had been working day and night trying to find his way out of the labyrinth Sam had inadvertently created inside Dean's soul when he sold his own to Haris. For Dean. It was hard to focus on the hunt – on any hunt, since he'd found out about Sam's deal. It was hard to remember why he was supposed to care about what happened if they didn't stop the spirits and the creatures of the night. It was hard to remember that he was supposed to care what happened to the people they were there to save.

He should have known... the thought echoed through him whenever he allowed himself to pause long enough to breathe. He should have known standing in that motel bathroom in New Jersey, seeing the gold amulet, *feeling* the silence inside of him. He should have known it wouldn't have been that easy. Nothing was that easy. The amulet was powerful, but if it had been able to get rid of the demon... Dean shook his head, his jaw tight.

*If we never go back to New Jersey it will be too soon...*

An age-spotted, time-worn hand suddenly rested on the counter under Dean's gaze. He lifted his eyes just as Zeppelin's *Nobody's Fault but Mine* started to play over the diner's stereo. He looked at Luke, feeling the silent man's eyes on him. Luke blinked, shot his eyes to the speakers in the ceiling, then back to Dean.

"Yeah, man," Dean said softly. "Zeppelin's an old friend."

Luke smiled, turned, and stepped through the swinging doors and into the back kitchen area just as the bell above the door jangled. Dean dropped his chin and looked over his shoulder as Reed Jessup walked in, sans Wiccan books.

"Luke?" she called, brushing her short, dark hair away from her face.

"He's in the back," Dean answered.

Reed rested her large brown eyes on him and Dean felt a familiar pull in his belly that he'd not felt in a long time. Something about this girl had part of his brain drifting to images of tangled sheets and salty kisses, and another part to thoughts of crosses and holy water. Dean held her eyes as Reed darted her tongue out to wet her lips, then walked up to him.

Swinging a long, slim leg over the red leather seat of the bar stool next to him, Reed rested her arms on the countertop and folded her hands as if in prayer. She never took her eyes off of him and Dean felt his skin heat up under her scrutiny. Keeping his eyes carefully empty, he waited.

"So," Reed said finally, breaking eye contact and looking down at the white tiled countertop. "You know anything about that beauty hauling your ass around?"

Dean stuck his tongue into the side of his cheek and suppressed a grin.

"A bit," he nodded, picking up his coffee and taking a sip.

"Good," Reed nodded and lifted her head, tilting it to the side and sliding her eyes to his face. "Kinda makes up for the fact that you're getting paid to desecrate my father's grave."

Dean choked on his coffee. "What?"

"Uncle Frank told me," Reed twisted around on the bar stool so that she faced him, putting her back to the door. "The idiot actually thinks that my father's ghost killed that kid."

Dean leaned on the counter with one arm, and rested his other hand on his thigh. "What do you think?" he asked.

Reed squared her jaw. "I think that anyone who even... flirts with the notion that my father could be a killer – spirit or otherwise – is insane."

"You believe in spirits?" Dean asked, his eyes taking in her face, the quick flash of her eyes, the severe set of her mouth.

"I think I'd be a fool not to," she replied.

Her eyes held him; they were full of thoughts yet empty of emotion. He'd become skilful at reading people over the years – knowing if they were lying, if he could trust them, if he could get more out of them, if he could con them, if he could have his way with them. But Reed, he noticed, hid inside her own eyes.

Dean offered her a grin, one that he'd used countless times on countless women. A grin that had gotten him exactly what he wanted – regardless of what that might be – more times than he could remember. Reed raised an eyebrow, quirking up the side of her mouth, and turned to face the counter.

Dean stayed where he was, enjoying the side view of her as much as the front. She wore a red T-shirt and dark jeans, and when she leaned forward, he could see the top of a tattoo at the base of her back when the T-shirt inched up. She knew he was studying her. He saw it in the subtle way she held herself still, shifting her body slowly as she breathed so that he could better appreciate the tapered waist and long legs.

Dean decided to change tactics. "You seem to recognize a classic when you see one," he said, his eyes trailing up to her face. "1970 Ford Falcon. A beauty."

Reed's shoulders dropped and she looked at him with a genuine smile that lit up her eyes. "Oh, yeah. I always loved that car – almost as much as Pop did."

*Not the connecting type my ass...*

Her eyes lost focus with memory. "I'd volunteer to wash it when I was younger. He had it ever since I could remember. Taught me all about the engine when I was twelve, taught me how to get it to perform for me when I was sixteen..."

She paused and looked down. "It was my gift when I graduated from college."

"Sounds like he loved you a lot," Dean said softly.

Reed smiled but didn't look up. "Yeah," she nodded. "Yeah, he did. He was a great man, my Pop. I really miss him, you know?"

Dean nodded. He may not have lost his father, but he was gone just the same. And not for the first time, he'd left when Dean needed him most.

"When he gave it to me," Reed chuckled, looking out the window toward the car. "You would have thought he was parting with a child. He was smiling at me and the car with tears in his eyes."

"Treat her well and she'll take care of you forever?" Dean said, his voice rough.

"Kinda, yeah," Reed met his eyes. "How'd you know?"

Dean lifted a shoulder and shifted his eyes behind her as the bell above the door announced Sam's arrival. "Heard something like that once before."

Sam met Dean's eyes. Dean nodded silently at him, *you okay?* Sam pulled the corner of his mouth up in a quirk of a smile, yeah. Sam shifted his eyes to Reed as he approached. Reed nodded at Sam as he walked past them and dropped down on the other side of Dean. Luke finally emerged from the kitchen and put a cup down in front of Reed first, then Sam. Pouring the coffee, Luke looked at Reed who asked for bacon, eggs, and toast. Luke shifted his eyes to Sam.

Sam looked over at Dean. "You eat?"

"I'm good," Dean glanced back at him.

Sam narrowed his eyes, his expression saying *that's not what I asked*. Sam looked back at Luke.

"We'll have the same," he said. Luke's eyes slid from Sam over to Dean and a small smile played around his mouth. He nodded and stepped back into the kitchen.

"I know you guys think my, uh... my Dad killed that boy," Reed said quietly. "But it's not possible."

Dean began to twist the silver ring on his right hand thoughtfully. "It's hard to say what death does to a soul, Reed." He felt Sam shift beside him, but didn't look at him.

"Funny, that coming from someone who makes a living destroying souls."

"Not souls," Dean snapped. "Spirits. There's a difference."

"If you say so."

Dean pulled his bottom lip in, biting off the sharp retort her words dug from inside of him. "We wouldn't even know they were around unless they did something... well, evil."

Reed turned on her stool and grabbed Dean's arm. He looked down quickly at the small hand with a surprisingly strong grip, then up at Reed's face. Her eyes were hot, her lips trembling.

"Listen," she said, her voice shaking. "My father never did an evil thing in his life. He gave everything... *everything* to this town, to these people. He died saving the mayor's son, for Christ's sake! Sacrificing himself for the sake of someone else should at *least* buy him some peace in the next life."

Dean stiffened. He felt rather than heard Sam hold his breath. Lowering his chin slightly, but keeping his eyes on hers, Dean covered her hand and said in a low voice, "I believe you."

She dropped her shoulders. "You do?"

Dean nodded. "Yeah, I do."

She stared at him a moment longer and he felt the pull in his belly spread outward. He was suddenly very aware of how his clothes felt against his skin. He could feel his heart beat against his ribs, feel the rush of blood in his veins. His chest felt tight and he realized he'd forgotten to breathe for a moment.

Luke stepped out of the kitchen, three plates balanced on his arms and Dean jumped slightly, startled. He released Reed's hand and she turned to face the counter. Following suit, Dean caught Sam's stare. His brother's eyes were shadowed with worry. Working to clear the foggy heat from his brain, Dean gave his brother what he thought was a reassuring grin and watched Sam's brow furrow further.

"Thanks, Luke," Reed said. Luke nodded and returned to the kitchen.

"Y'know," Dean said around a mouthful of eggs. "There's one way to find out if your Dad was involved in that kid's death."

Reed held a piece of bacon between two fingers and bit off the end. "How?"

"Check out your house."

"My house?"

"The house where the kid—"

"Oh," Reed dropped the bacon. "I haven't, um... I haven't been back in there since he..."

"You wouldn't have to go in," Dean assured her. "Just let us in."

"How would that help you determine anything?"

Dean glanced over at her. "We have ways. Y'know, special tools."

Reed lifted an eyebrow. "Like what?" she scoffed. "You hear ghosts on your walkman or something?"

Sam coughed. Dean glared at him. "Not exactly," he replied, his eyes still on Sam.

"I'll do it," Reed said suddenly. "I'll let you in."

Dean nodded at her. "Great—"

"But first," she interrupted. "I have to go meet with two clients. I handle the land survey for the county. I can meet you there in an hour... that work?"

"Sure," Dean smiled at her.

She smiled back, finished her breakfast and laid a five dollar bill on the counter. With a glance at Sam, she stood, looked at Dean, smiled, and left the diner.

"Okay," Sam said. "What the hell, Dean?"

Dean sipped his cooling coffee and glanced hopefully toward the kitchen door to see if Luke would make an appearance and refill his mug.

"What?" he asked innocently.

Sam pushed his empty plate away. "You got a thing for this girl?"

Dean pulled his eyebrows together. "No!"

"Then what was all that..."

Dean looked over at him. "I was connecting."

"Uh-huh," Sam sat back. "Seem weird to you that she changed her mind so suddenly?"

Yes. "No," Dean shook his head. "She just wants to prove that her dad's not evil."

"It's not her Dad anymore, Dean," Sam pointed out.

Dean pushed his plate back, looking at the two pots of hot coffee directly across from him. *Maybe I could just climb over the counter and get some. Luke won't even notice...*

"Well, *you* know that and *I* know that, but... y'know, normal people don't think like that."

"Frank said that he was up with her all night trying to stop her from doing something she'd regret."

Dean lifted an eyebrow. "Like what?"

"He didn't say." Sam shrugged. "Didn't say much of anything, really."

"That guy's really starting to piss me off," Dean grumbled. Hearing an odd noise, he looked back over at the coffee pots. *Did they just... move?*

"I think he's covering for someone," Sam said, standing and turning his back to the counter. He rested a hand on his hip and looked out the diner window at the police station.

"Like who?"

"Reed maybe?" Sam looked over at Dean.

Dean thought about the conflicting impressions he had of Reed. "I don't know, Sam."

"She did have those Wiccan books," Sam pointed out.

"Yeah, but..."

"What?"

"She seems like she just misses her dad, y'know?"

"You got a thing for her," Sam repeated, and this time, it wasn't a question.

Dean didn't reply.

"Something's not right about that girl, Dean," Sam turned to face him. "She's not like, y'know, Bambi the waitress."

"Bambi wasn't a waitress," Dean said, distractedly. "She was a bartender."

"Whatever. I'm just saying, you can't just have your usual kind of fun—"

Without warning, the coffee pots across from Dean exploded. Dean cried out in surprise and instinctively threw his right hand up in front of his face. The scalding liquid splashed across the back of his hand and tiny shards of glass from the pot slashed his cheek.

"Son of a *bitch!*"

"Dean!" Sam was at his side in an instant, pulling him away from the counter, pulling his arms down, trying to check his face, his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Get off me, Sam... ah!" Sam's searching grasp slid over the back of his burned hand. "*Shit.*"

"Sorry, sorry," Sam muttered, reaching for a napkin.

Luke materialized as if from nowhere and handed Sam a wet white towel.

"Thanks," Sam said and began to carefully wipe at the coffee dripping from Dean's hand and face.

"I got it, I got it," Dean said irritably, grabbing the towel from Sam and finished wiping the coffee. "What the hell was that?"

He blinked up at Sam, his face stinging, hand burning. Sam was looking over at the counter, horror etched on his face. Dean followed his brother's line of sight. The wall behind the coffee pots was splattered brown with coffee, the liquid running down the wall, clinging in the shape of two words: *I can't.*

"Dude, we have definitely crossed over into weird," Dean muttered. He felt something tugging at his arm and looked down. Luke was pulling his right hand to him, turning it over to inspect the angry reddening of his skin.

"I *can't*?" Sam read. "I *can't* what?"

"It's okay, Luke," Dean reassured the white-haired man. "We got some—" he hissed as Luke laid two cool fingers gently over the larger welts. "Easy, ah... thanks, thanks man, but really... it's okay." He pulled his hand away from Luke's attempted ministrations.

"Dean," Sam said, still looking at the wall. "We need to find the rest of Lawrence Jessup. Soon."

"Ya think?" Dean snapped, shaking his right hand. "Damn, that stings."

"C'mon," Sam took his upper arm and turned him away from Luke and toward the door. "There's some burn cream in the Impala."

"This is your fault you know," Dean grumbled as they walked out under the bell. "My fault?"

Dean's eyebrows met over the bridge of his nose as he paused next to the trunk of the car, waiting for Sam to retrieve the burn cream. "Let this be a lesson to you, Sammy," he said, raising his hand, the back of it facing Sam. "There are no easy hunts. There are hunts where we kick ass, there are the hunts that kick our asses, and there are the hunts that never end... but there are *no easy hunts*."

Sam twisted his mouth into a rueful grin as he carefully applied the cream to the back of Dean's hand. "Gotcha. No easy hunts."

"Here endeth the lesson."

\* \* \* \*

### **Jessup House, late morning**

The house looked old, but well-kept, Dean noticed. For not having been lived in for three years, someone was making sure that it didn't fall into ruin. As he shut off the Impala, he scanned the property and saw the dark blue Falcon parked on the other side of the lot.

"Your girlfriend made good time," Sam commented as he opened his door.

"Maybe her clients didn't show," Dean suggested, tugging at the stiffening sleeve of his green shirt. The coffee had dried on the way over and left a large brown stain on his right sleeve and splashed across the front. He reached over the back of the seat and snagged his leather jacket.

"Maybe there weren't any clients," Sam countered. "Maybe she just wanted an excuse to get here first."

Dean gave Sam a look. "To do what, Sam? Erase the EMF? Hide the ghost in her closet? Clean up the ectoplasm from the floor?"

Sam scowled at him. "I'm just saying I don't trust her."

"Yeah," Dean snapped, shutting the car door. "I got that."

Dean headed for the trunk of the Impala, pulled his .45 from its spot in the back of his jeans, and retrieved a rock-salt-filled shotgun. Dropping the .45 into the trunk, he tucked the shotgun into the inside of his jacket. As they walked toward the parked Falcon, Dean caught sight of Reed standing just outside of the back door, arms wrapped around her slim body, eyes fixed on the ground. He turned to shoot a look at Sam over his shoulder.

"Behave," he commanded in a whisper.

"Isn't that usually my line?" Sam whispered back.

"Hey, Reed," Dean greeted her with a swift grin and a salute-like wave.

"Dean! Oh, my God, what happened to your face?" Reed dropped her arms and stepped up to him, her hand reaching out for the tiny slices across his cheek.

Dean pulled his head back and away from her hand. "Nothing, really, I'm okay."

Reed's eyes shifted beyond him and rested on Sam. Dean was struck again by the dual impressions of light and dark that echoed in her eyes. He couldn't decide if

he wanted to kiss her breathless or tie her to a chair and throw Latin at her. He looked back at Sam and was surprised to see an answering challenge on his brother's face as he looked back at Reed.

"Okay, uh, yeah," Dean said, stepping smoothly in front of Sam. "You bring the key?"

Reed nodded. "Yeah, but, uh," she looked back at Dean and he felt himself melt a bit at the look of wounded fear that crossed her face. "If you don't mind... I think I'll just stay out here."

"Works for me," Sam muttered. Dean glared at him.

Reed unlocked the door and stepped back. Dean gave her a reassuring smile and stepped inside, followed closely by Sam. The minute Sam shut the door, Dean pressed a hand to his temple. The pressure inside the house seemed to suddenly increase, wrapping iron bands around his head.

"Damn. You feel that?" he asked, noticing Sam was holding his head as well.

Sam nodded. "Feels like... like the air right before a bad storm. Or a tornado."

Dean dropped his hand and looked around. "Yeah," he nodded. "Exactly like that."

"Let's get this over with, man," Sam muttered, pulling the EMF detector from his jacket pocket and flicking it on.

"Where did Frank say the boy was found?"

"Closet," Sam replied, his eyes intent on the red lights illuminating the small device in his hand. "Dean, this thing is wiggling out. There's something here, all right."

Dean slid the shotgun out into the opening. "Which closet?"

Sam looked up and shook his head, his face serious.

"Okay," Dean shifted his shoulders. "We'll just check them all."

One by one, they opened each closed door, Sam stepping behind the door, Dean holding the shotgun at the ready, Sam pulling the door open, Dean pointing the shotgun inside. They worked their way through the downstairs, and when they reached the top of the stairs, they encountered the first locked door.

Dean glanced over at Sam, shrugged and started to raise his foot.

"Wait, wait!" Sam brought his hand down swiftly, blocking Dean's entry kick.

"What? What?" Dean stepped back.

"Dude, the door opens out – toward you," Sam pointed to the hinges. "You'd probably just end up jamming your knee or something."

"Huh," Dean looked at the hinges, then over at his brother with a grin. "Eagle Eye Winchester."

Sam rolled his eyes and shook his head. Dean handed him the shotgun, then knelt down, pulling out his lock pick kit. He had the door open inside of a minute. Pulling the door to him, Dean stepped inside. The pastel quilt, school banners, and stuffed animals told them this had obviously once been Reed's room. The bed was in a corner with a window next to it and another window directly across the room from the bed. A dresser and desk were positioned between the two windows.

"Dean," Sam called as he crossed the room to the desk.

Dean stepped up next to him. There were two books left on the desk, one opened to an illustration of a pentagram. Dean narrowed his eyes and peered closer. Each of the pentagram's five points had a word: earth, air, fire, water, spirit.

"I'm thinking Frank's not the only one that's being less than truthful with us," Sam said in a low voice. "Look at this..." He flipped through the book. "There are spells in here, man... real spells."

"For what?" Dean asked.

Sam shook his head. "Glamours, protection... uh, here's one to remove warts..."

"Sounds harmless enough," Dean commented, stepping away from Sam and over to the window.

Looking out, he saw Reed standing at the edge of the property, looking up at the house with a worried expression on her pale face. She had one arm wrapped around her middle and the other tugging on a necklace or charm around her neck. He heard

Sam behind him flipping through more pages of the book. Without being really conscious of doing it, Dean began to trace a finger along one of the rectangular pieces of glass in the window.

Content to let Sam dig deeper, Dean continued to watch Reed, trying to figure out what compartment she fit into inside his head. He traced his finger down and to the left. Sam was right, she wasn't like the Saturday night specials he picked up in a bar. He brought his finger back up and to the right. She wasn't an innocent, someone they needed to protect, shelter.

He dragged his finger across the pane and back to the left, then down to the lower right. She wasn't like Cassie, not real, not someone he wanted to let inside of him. He slowly brought his finger back up to where he'd started, his eyes pulling focus from Reed to his hand. She was nothing like Melissa, a kindred spirit. She was beautiful and dangerous. He suspected she could hurt him. And he wanted to let her.

Dropping his hand, he stared at the shape in fingerprint smudges on the window pane: a pentagram.

"Dean!"

Jumping slightly at the sound of Sam's voice. "What?" he asked, turning.

"There's more in this book," Sam looked at him, his eyes serious and scared. "I think that Reed might've—"

Before Sam could finish, he was jerked from his feet and thrown across the room, hitting the wall with a vicious thud.

"Sam!" Dean brought the shotgun up and darted his eyes around the empty room.

"De—" Sam was pulled roughly from the wall before he could complete his plea and ejected from the room, the door slamming shut on Dean's surprised face as he launched himself after his brother.

"Sam! SAMMY!" Dean pounded on the door with the flat of his hand.

He heard a crash and then Sam cried out.

"You son of a bitch," Dean looked up, yelling at the emptiness. "Leave him alone—ah!"

The pressure in the room spiked and Dean dropped the shotgun and grabbed his head. He felt like hands were on either side of his skull, pressing hard in a vice-like grip. "Friggin' spirit..." he groaned, blinking at the door. *Opens the right way now...* He released his head and with a powerful thrust, slammed his foot into the door.

He bounced back forcefully, landing in an unceremonious heap on the bedroom floor. He felt like he'd jammed his hip up into his shoulder.

"Sammy!" he called when he heard his brother yelling unintelligibly from the other side of the door.

Scrambling to his feet, he rushed the door again, this time throwing his body against it, shoulder first. As he made contact, music blared throughout the room. Dean clapped his hands over his ears, trying to find the source of the noise as the words of the song screamed through his head.

*I'm not gifted... Slightly twisted... Try hard try hard... To see if I can push you any further...*

He knew this song: Staind's *Suffocate*.

"What the hell?"

Finding the source – a stereo sitting on top of Reed's old dresser – he swiped at it, knocking it from its perch and silencing it as it broke into pieces on the floor. Bending down and picking up the shotgun, he straightened and whirled to face the door, chambering a round as he did so. Praying Sam wasn't directly on the other side of the door, but knowing the even if he was, the shot wouldn't kill him, Dean blasted the handle of the door off. Seeing a small opening, he rushed the door again, only to be slammed back by a sudden, vicious blast of cold that pinned him against the desk and ripped the shotgun from his hand.

Blinking as the cold pulled tears from his eyes and crystallized his breath, he looked at the door with confusion. Words began to form on the door in tiny rivulets of water: *I can't breathe...*

Dean pulled in an instinctive breath, the icy-cold of the air stinging his lungs. He heard Sam cry out again, and this time he could tell what he was saying. Sam was calling him, saying his name... *Dean! Dean, get out of there... DEAN!*

"I know you can't breathe, you freak!" Dean yelled into the icy air. "You're dead!"

As if someone had pressed a mute button in his head, all sound ceased. He couldn't even hear his own heartbeat. *Wrong answer*, Dean chided himself seconds before he felt his body lifted into the air as if in slow motion, felt dull pain as the glass of the window gave against the force of his back as it hit, felt the dizzying weightlessness of falling through the shattered glass. He desperately reached out a hand and grasped the window ledge, shards of glass cutting into his palm.

"Ahh!" He screamed in pain, flinging his other hand up and finding a glass-free hold. He looked desperately over his shoulder and saw Reed standing in the same place, in the same position, staring in his direction, but not reacting.

"Reed!" he yelled. He had to turn his head back toward the house. Looking over his shoulder put too much pressure on his right hand; the glass dug further into his already abused palm. "Reed... *please.*"

He heard the outside door slam shut. He glanced quickly over his shoulder. Reed was gone. He heard Sam's voice, then Reed's voice answering him. Feet pounded against the floor inside of the house and Dean closed his eyes. *C'mon c'mon c'mon...*

"Dean!" Sam's voice was closer, frantic, and the sweetest sound he'd ever heard.

"Sam..." he breathed out his thanks. Lifting his head, he met his brother's anxious eyes. Blood ran down the left side of Sam's face and dripped from his chin. Sam reached out through the window, grasped Dean's upper arms, and began to pull him back inside to safety.

"Easy... I got you," Sam ground out through clenched teeth.

As soon as Sam got him half way through the window, Dean was able to hook his leg over the window sill and haul himself the rest of the way. Sam stumbled backwards, his arms still grasping Dean's upper body, and Dean tumbled forward, reaching blindly out to keep a hold of Sam. They ended up in a heap of tangled limbs on the floor of Reed's old room.

"You okay?" Sam panted.

"Yeah, you okay?" Dean replied, his eyes scanning Sam's bloody face.

"Yeah..." Sam picked up Dean's right hand. "Dean, this looks bad."

"So does that," Dean nodded at Sam's head, wincing when Sam's grip pressed against the burns on the back of his hand.

Reed stepped into the room, her face pale, her hands trembling. Dean pushed against Sam, who pushed back. They managed to untangle themselves and stand up, facing her, waiting. Reed looked around her old room, her face a display of shock and sorrow.

She looked back at the boys. "He... he did this?"

"Think so," Dean nodded.

He felt a tickling sensation on the tip of his finger and looked down. Blood dripped from his middle finger onto Reed's floor. She followed his gaze and stepped forward. Digging into the upper drawer of her dresser, Reed pulled out a light blue cloth scarf and stepped up to Dean. She had it wrapped around his hand before he could protest.

"Reed," Sam said softly. "You know we have to take care of... of your father's spirit."

Holding Dean's hand carefully in hers, Reed kept her head lowered, refusing to meet their eyes. "You don't know it's him. Not for sure."

"We're pretty sure," Dean said, watching her, waiting for her to raise her eyes.

"But the boy..."

"You saw what happened in here," Sam argued. "Your dad's spirit trapped him, killed the boy like he died – made it so he couldn't breathe."

Reed shook her head. "But how did he get in?"

"Doesn't much matter how he got in," Dean said. "It's how he left that's the problem."

Reed raised her eyes at that and Dean felt like he'd been punched in the gut. Hatred, pure and real, flashed through her eyes. The look was quickly erased by one of sorrow, but Dean knew what he'd seen. He knew Sam was right: Reed wasn't an innocent orphan. His eyes cut over to the books on her desk. She knew more than she was letting on.

"What do I have to do?" she asked, her voice low, wary.

"Well," Sam glanced over at Dean. "You're a land surveyor, right?"

She nodded.

"We need a map."

\* \* \* \*

### **Wayside Inn B&B, early afternoon**

"We're wasting time. We should just get over there, Sam."

"We should clean the glass out of that hand."

"Reed wrapped it."

"Dude, does the word 'infection' mean anything to you?"

"Fine, but you're going first."

"What? Why?"

"Head wounds trump hand cuts, Sammy."

"Fine, but – ah! Easy," Sam pushed Dean's hand away, glaring at him as Dean began to clean the blood from the cut on his scalp. "What are you mad at me for?"

Dean looked at him. "What makes you think I'm mad at you?"

Sam glared at him a moment longer. Dean didn't blink, simply looked back at him. Sighing, Sam relaxed back on the chair as Dean finished cleaning his head, then began to stitch up the cut.

"What did he hit you with?" Dean asked, his mouth tight.

"The stairs," Sam growled. He hated stitches. Hated the hot pinch followed by the tight pull, hated the fevered flush of his skin when they were done. "I think Reed knows."

"What? That her dad's a jigsaw puzzle?"

"Yeah," Sam nodded.

"Hold still, dammit."

"Sorry," Sam gripped the arms of the chair. "I think she might've done it."

Dean shook his head once. "I don't think so, Sam."

"Dean—"

"Total gross factor aside, she's not big enough to chop up a full-grown man, then dig multiple graves."

Sam was silent for a moment. "I still think she knows."

"She sure knows something," Dean muttered. "What did you find in that book back there?"

Sam threw out the bloody rags and gathered the supplies to clean Dean's hand. "It was a necromancer spell."

Dean pulled his brows together. "There's a spell for having sex with dead people?"

Sam shot him a look. "That's necrophilia."

"I thought that was when you fall asleep all the time."

Shaking his head and unwrapping Dean's hand, Sam said, "That's narcolepsy. Just shut up and listen."

"Sorry," Dean rolled his eyes and sat back on the bed, holding his hand still for Sam to clean and wrap. He hissed when the hydrogen peroxide hit the open wound and bubbled around the tiny piece of glass that Sam removed with tweezers.

"Think a couple of stitches should do it," Sam said. "Keep your hand flat."

"I know the drill, Sam," Dean grumbled tiredly.

"The necromancer spell brings back the dead," Sam explained. "But... not like... like this. Not a spirit. More like..."

"What, full-on zombie action?"

Sam nodded, then glanced up once at Dean's face, watching the shadowed expression hover in his brother's eyes. For a moment, Sam vividly recalled the actual shadows that he'd once been able to see wrapping around and clinging to his brother like a smothering blanket of doubt and fear. As he stitched Dean's hand, he felt a pit dig into his stomach. Just because he couldn't see them anymore didn't mean they weren't there.

"Why do you think he's doing it?" he asked, needing the conversation to pull his thoughts away from those of darkness and shadows.

"Who, Larry?"

Sam nodded. "He was such a good guy, you know? Loved the town, loved his daughter... and for three years, y'know, nothing really bad and now suddenly..."

Dean sighed, his shoulders bowing a bit as Sam applied more burn cream on the back of his hand and then wrapped clean, white gauze around it.

"Maybe he just got tired of being a spirit."

"Come again?" Sam glanced at him, not really aware that he was still holding his brother's hand.

Dean kept his eyes down. "Maybe doing the same damn thing every day, not able to affect the outcome, or to make a difference, having to watch people he loves suffer... maybe that just finally drove him crazy..."

Sam swallowed. "Dean, I—"

Dean's cell rang, startling them both. Pulling his hand away from Sam and digging the phone out of his pocket, Dean looked at the number. "It's Frank," he said. Flipping it open he barked a quick, "This is Dean," into the receiver.

Sam watched as Dean nodded, his jaw tightening. "Sorry to hear that, man." He paused again, and Sam watched his green eyes turn flinty. "Yeah, well... maybe you should have thought of that when you withheld infor—" Dean's lips pressed thin, and without another word, he clapped the phone closed with one hand, fisting his fingers around the phone and pounding it once against his forehead.

"What was that all about?"

"Larry's been at it again," Dean said, standing up. "There's a railroad museum in town. Bunch of tourists got stuck in a boxcar, couldn't get the doors open..." He pulled off his coffee-stained green shirt and exchanged it for a black and tan flannel. "By the time they did, three people had died."

"What... they suffocated?"

Dean nodded. Turning to regard Sam with guarded eyes he asked, "You think Reed is controlling the spirit?"

Sam lifted a shoulder. "Maybe. She had the necromancer spell. Not like she isn't open to the idea." He chewed on his lower lip, shifting his eyes rapidly in thought.

"Sammy, you're gonna sprain something," Dean said. "Spill it."

"I got an idea."

\* \* \* \*

### **Surveyor's Office, late afternoon**

"I still don't see why a map is going to do us any good," Dean said, pulling up in front of Reed's office and shutting off the engine.

"Just, trust me on this, okay?" Sam shut the car door and hurried up to the office. There was a sign turned to 'closed' in the window, but he ignored it and slapped his hand on the doorframe, yelling for Reed. "Open up, it's Sam and Dean!"

In moments, Reed's pale face and dark eyes peered out at them. Dean heard the lock click and she opened the door, stepping back to let them in. Dean followed Sam inside and looked down at Reed as he passed. She met his eyes and held them a moment. He wasn't able to interpret her expression; she had once again pulled inside of herself.

"I have to go help my uncle with the situation at the museum," she said by way of greeting. Closing the door behind them, she flicked the lock once more. "You can poke around as long as you want."

"You okay?" Dean asked.

She shook her head. "I... I just can't believe it's him. I can't believe he's doing this. I—"

"What?" Dean prompted when she didn't continue.

"Nothing, I guess..." Reed rubbed trembling fingers over her mouth, shifting her eyes between Dean and Sam. "It's just that... I was supposed to be with that group. I run tours at the museum, too. I just wasn't because I was with you guys."

Dean looked over at Sam, who returned his look with a raised eyebrow.

"Go help Frank," Sam said. "We'll be okay."

Reed nodded her thanks, grabbed a bag and her keys, and left via the back door. The door had barely closed when Sam was turning to the long, flat drawers full of maps. Dean watched him for a moment. Sam with an idea of how to solve the unsolvable was always fun to watch. And usually, there wasn't much for Dean to do that wouldn't get in the way.

He began to canvas the office, running his fingers along the spines of books lining the shelves, poking in desk drawers and through stacks of papers. After a moment, he realized he was humming. He stopped when he recognized the tune: *Suffocate*. Dean shook himself. *Creepy, Larry, downright creepy. Stay outta my head...* Sam was moving again, and Dean watched as his brother grabbed a ruler and a pencil, then returned to the map he'd pulled from the top drawer. As Dean wandered closer to Sam, his eyes caught on the books that Reed had carried from the police station the night before.

He picked up the one on top: *Elemental Witch: Fire, Air, Water, Earth; Discover your Natural Affinity*. Thumbing through the text, he paused at a familiar illustration of a pentagram. Tracing his finger over the lines, he remembered the window back at the Jessup house. He blinked... a pentagram... elements... a spirit haunting a town, and not just a house... Wiccan books...

"Holy shit," he breathed, hearing Sam's voice saying the same thing. He turned to face his brother, seeing Sam had spun to face him. "Sam..."

"Dude, you gotta look at this," Sam said, pointing behind him. Dean crossed over to look down at the map.

It was a topographical map of Ellicott City. Surrounding the town was a pentagram, and connecting each point of the star was either a geographical or man-made symbol of the elements of earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. Sam swallowed audibly, then pointed to the center of the pentagram.

"That's Crest Lawns Memorial Garden, Dean."

Dean's eyes roamed the map. He shook his head. The points of the geographical pentagram were separated by at least five miles each.

"Well," Dean breathed. "I think we might've found the pieces of the Larry jigsaw puzzle."

\* \* \* \*

**Surveyor's Office, early evening**

Dean was scowling.

The implications of what they discovered triggered a palpable anger in Dean. It rolled off of him in slow waves that buffeted Sam and caused him to calm down in an almost instinctive defense to Dean's reaction. He watched as his brother's eyes roamed the five points of the pentagram, his jaw tightening by increments.

"What the hell," Dean growled, his voice low. Sam knew it wasn't a question. "He knew about this... you know he friggin' knew about this."

"I told you Frank was protecting something," Sam said, his eyes still on Dean.

When Dean didn't look up at him, Sam shifted his eyes back to the map. *This is serious witchcraft*, he realized. Someone knew exactly what they were doing when they buried the pieces of Lawrence Jessup's body. In order to vanquish the spirit, they would have to locate, salt, and burn each piece. Without being caught.

"So how do we know where to look in each of these... areas?" Dean asked waving a hand around the map.

"Well," Sam said on an exhale of thought. "I can cross reference the topographical map with a street map... gonna take some time, though."

Frown still in place, Dean looked up. "Something tells me we're running out of that, Sam."

"Yeah, I know," Sam nodded. He lifted a shoulder. "We could get a good idea of where the grave might be, mark up a map... problem is if we're wrong..."

"Divide and conquer," Dean said flexing his wounded right hand.

"Come again?"

"Gimme a street map, tell me where to go," Dean's green eyes were hard with resolve.

"What?" Sam shook his head. "No way. You aren't digging with that hand."

Dean didn't drop his eyes. "Yes, I am," he said. "You know I can't figure out these... spirit element signs," he gestured to the map with his bandaged hand.

"But, Dean," Sam shifted his weight, his hands opened and pleading. "What if the spirit comes after you?"

Dean lifted a shoulder. "I'll dig faster. Not like it would be the first time."

Sam thought of Grayson... of how Dean had to burn Grayson's body alone—with a grenade—not knowing if he had been in time, not knowing what he would return to. He chewed his bottom lip, dropping his eyes. Dean was right: separating was the most efficient way to handle this hunt, to get it done. He just didn't... want Dean to go.

"I don't like it, Dean," Sam grumbled. "Things never go well when we split up."

Dean chuckled. Sam looked up at the sound. There was actual mirth in his brother's eyes.

"Aw, Sammy," Dean pushed against his shoulder. "You're gonna miss me."

Sam pouted and shoved Dean's shoulder back. "Shut up. Jerk."

"Bitch." Dean lifted an eyebrow. "Now, gimme a map."

Sam narrowed his eyes at Dean a moment longer, but when Dean simply looked back, he gave in and started to pull open the drawers in the tall filing cabinets around them. Finding a simple road map of Ellicott City, he thrust it at Dean.

"Here," Sam said. "The one place I can identify on this map is St. Thomas' Church."

Dean looked at the brown and beige circles and ridges scattered across the topographical map. "How the hell—"

"It was on the highest rise in the town," Sam said. He lifted a shoulder, "I read about it in one of the pamphlets in the hotel room. They built it there, so, you know... it was closer to God."

Dean looked at Sam out of the corner of his eyes. "You're serious?"

Sam folded his lips. "Yep."

"I said it before, and I'll say it again," Dean muttered, turning to head out the door. "Demons I get. People are crazy."

"Dean," Sam called after him.

Pausing in the doorway, Dean turned to look over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"What if Frank or Reed come back before we've found them all?"

Dean flicked his eyes behind Sam to the door Reed has exited from earlier, then wrapped his hand around the knob of the front door. "Just lock the door," he said with a lift of his shoulder. "Shove a chair under the knob or something. Should stall them for a while."

Dean pulled the door to him and moved to step through.

"Dean," Sam called again.

Dean paused and without looking at him said, "What, Sam?"

Sam swallowed. "Just, uh..." he licked his lips. "Just be careful, okay?"

Dean did look at him then. His mouth curled in a slightly crazy grin that usually either made Sam worry, or filled him with confidence, depending on how close he was standing to Dean.

"Dude," he said, grin still firmly in place. "It's me."

He stepped out of the office and pulled the door closed behind him, walking toward the Impala with a quick glance in either direction. Sam watched him through the window, a cold feeling of dread slowly filling the empty spaces inside of him.

"Yeah," he whispered. "That's what worries me."

\* \* \* \*

### **Impala, outside St. Thomas' Church, *Spirit*, 6:00pm**

Dean sat for a moment surveying the ancient looking cemetery behind St. Thomas' Church. White tombstones, some tilted and sunken with age, were scattered across a half-acre of lush, green grass. Large oak trees dotted the area, throwing shadows across the land from the dying sunlight. Dean wondered if he had ever been spooked in a cemetery; he could never remember being afraid around graves. Not the way most people were, anyway. For him, a cemetery provided a potential solution to a problem.

The only thing that got to him was the idea of actually being buried. Dead or not, the idea of being planted in the ground like a human seed waiting to decompose and fertilize the grass and trees he saw around him caused gooseflesh to rise on his arms. *When it's my time they'd better burn my ass*, he thought. Unless... unless he was the last one standing.

Dean blinked and shook his head, working to banish that thought. He flipped open his phone and dialed Sam.

"Sam," he barked into the receiver.

"I'm working on it," Sam replied. His voice was tight, focused.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Sam mumbled. "You're at the church?"

"Yeah," Dean shifted the phone so that the cell mouthpiece was under his chin and leaned forward to look around. "And, uh... it's not dark enough, man."

"It's gonna have to be," Sam said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dean pulled his eyebrows together.

"You're in the right place, Dean. Just... you gotta look for a grave or marker that would be about three years old."

"Dude," Dean's eyes ran over the tombstones. "We're talking Civil War era here."

"That's the best I can do," Sam snapped.

"Sam?"

He heard his brother sigh on the other side. "Sorry," Sam said. "I just... I can't match a couple of these up."

"Well, chill out for a minute," Dean climbed out of the car and shut the door. He moved around to the back, balancing the phone on his shoulder with the tilt of his head as he unlocked the trunk. "I got me a grave to dig... that ought to buy you a good... fifteen minutes."

That sparked a laugh on the other end of the phone. "You wish," Sam said.

Dean snapped the phone shut, stuffed it in his pocket, then retrieved a shovel, a box of wooden matches, the gas can they kept rock salt in for these very reasons, and a can of lighter fluid. As he was about to shut the lid, his eyes caught on the silver of his .45. It was loaded with actual rounds—useless against a spirit—but something tickled the back of his mind. He reached in, grabbed the gun, and tucked it into the waistband of his jeans.

Sticking the matches into his pants pocket, Dean hefted the shovel and began to wander the cemetery, trying to look as inconspicuous to any possible passersby as he could... walking in a cemetery... carrying a shovel. He glanced up at the golden edge of the horizon, wishing for possibly the first time in his life that darkness would just fall already.

The white cross was nestled against one of the large oaks about twenty feet behind the church. Dean nearly walked past it before he realized what it was he was seeing. It looked like the kind of cross people put alongside the highway when a loved one dies in a car accident. He paused, tilting his head as he regarded it.

*Nah...really?*

Glancing over his shoulder at the church, he set down the salt and lighter fluid, shrugged out of his leather jacket, took a deep breath and jammed the shovel into the earth.

\* \* \* \*

### **Surveyor's Office, 6:30pm**

Sam chewed on his lip, flipping a pencil around his finger in distracted thought. His eyes darted from the map to his phone, lying silent and still on the desk next to him. It had been nearly thirty minutes since he last heard from Dean. He knew from experience that if the grave was six feet deep, it would take Dean at least—

He jumped when the ring tone jarred the phone in a dance of sound across the desk. Picking it up, he hit 'talk' and pressed the phone to his ear.

"Dean?"

"I got an arm," Dean said, panting.

"That was quick."

"Wasn't buried six feet down." Sam heard Dean's voice change in pitch as he moved.

"Did you burn it?"

"As we speak, Sammy," he replied.

"Dean, I found some stuff," Sam said in a rush, reaching over to pull a couple of books toward him. He heard Dean huff on the other end and knew that he was starting to shovel dirt back into the hole. "Are you..."

"People in the church," Dean panted.

"Call me back," Sam shut his phone, set it down and stared at it some more.

He'd found all but one location, and in cross referencing the possibilities, he'd stumbled across more Wiccan books, hidden in a drawer that he had to stand on a chair to get to. Unless Reed had a ladder, he didn't think they were hers, and his suspicions were confirmed when he opened the front cover and saw Lawrence Jessup's name written in the corner in tiny, block letters.

The spells contained in that book were ancient – and he'd recognized more than a few from his father's journal and from Bobby. There was an explanation of the

significance of the Key of Solomon, a warning about using a devil's trap properly, and instructions on how to protect property and persons against possession.

It was when Sam saw the spell for binding a soul to a location by the use of a pentagram that he started to worry and stopped looking for the fifth grave. His phone rang again and he grabbed it quickly.

"Dean?"

"I ever tell you how much I friggin' *hate* cemeteries?"

"Well, you won't have to go into another one for awhile," Sam said, running his finger along the line of the pentagram from St. Thomas' Church.

"Yeah, well... graves are just as bad," Dean sighed. Sam heard the Impala's trunk open and something crash inside. He waited. The creak of the driver's side door sounded and he heard Dean groan slightly as he sank into the seat.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Dean muttered. "What did you find?"

Sam heard the lie, but let it drop.

"Dean, I think Lawrence Jessup was into witchcraft," Sam said, pulling the map to him, focusing on getting Dean on his way to the next grave. "You see Thomas Isaac's Log Cabin on your map?"

"Uh... yeah," Dean answered. "Who the hell is Thomas Isaac?"

"Dunno, founding father or something. Not important," Sam said. "There's a windmill there."

"Lemme guess – air?" Sam could hear Dean shift the phone to his shoulder as the stubble on his chin rubbed against the mouthpiece of the phone. He heard the Impala roar to life and then grabbed the book of spells.

"Yeah," Sam replied. "Listen, I found this book... there's a spell and instructions here on binding a spirit to a place using a pentagram."

"What?" Dean's voice sounded incredulous.

"The book has Lawrence Jessup's name in it, Dean."

"You think Larry designed all of this?"

"It's possible," Sam argued, standing up and pacing the room. "I mean, what if... what if he dabbled, you know? He could have told Frank about it, or even Reed."

"Like a supernatural living will?" Dean scoffed. "Why would he do that?"

"To stick around, man," Sam reached the end of the room, turned and walked back toward the desk and stacks of maps. "People don't want to let go..."

He heard a dry, mirthless laugh on the other line.

"What?" Sam asked, wary.

"Guess that depends on the person," Dean said.

Sam swallowed. "Dean..." he paused, unsure how to continue, how to tell Dean that he didn't want to die, but he couldn't live another day watching his brother, his protector, his only friend suffer as he had been. He couldn't live and let the demon eat away everything that made Dean Dean. He'd had to do it – to save him.

Dean was silent on the other end of the line. Sam felt the heaviness of his brother's heart. He felt the burden of unspoken words. He felt... *like something was standing behind him*.

Sam turned, his eyes searching the empty room. He stepped sideways toward the desk, darting his eyes to the side, trying to see if he could catch a glimpse out of the corners of his eyes.

"Dean," Sam's tone was urgent. In his mind's eye, he could see Dean sit straighter in his seat. "I think there's something here..."

"What?" Dean's voice was a harsh bark of worry.

"I think I'm being watched."

\* \* \* \*

**Thomas Isaac's Log Cabin, Air, 7:00pm**

"You see someone? Reed or maybe Frank?"

"No," Sam shook his head against the phone. "No one."

"Get some salt, Sammy," Dean barked into the phone, throwing the car into park and jumping out.

"You got the car, Dean."

Dean frowned and opened the trunk, grabbing the shovel, salt, and lighter fluid. The matches were still in his pocket. "Check around the office. There's gotta be a break room or a secret stash or something."

He heard Sam rummaging around and kept the phone pressed to his ear as he started toward the windmill that stood about fifty feet from the cabin. The terrain was rough, rocky, and tufts of grass grew in mottled lumps. The sun had disappeared below the horizon and a dim gray light stole over the landscape. Dean squinted. In the half-light of dusk, it was hard for him to see at a distance, so he kept his scan of the area to his left, right, and center.

"Packets... from a fast food restaurant," Sam finally said.

"Better than nothing," Dean muttered. "Make a circle."

"Gonna be the smallest salt ring in the history of hunting," Sam grumbled.

"Aw, Sammy." Dean forced a grin, "You know size doesn't matter. It's all in how you use it."

"Bite me," Sam's voice was muffled as Dean assumed he was tearing packets and creating a circle.

Dean shifted the salt container under his arm and gripped the shovel tightly in one hand so that he could hold onto the phone. He would have to hang up when he found the grave, but something, some childlike part of him that he rarely recognized and never admitted to, was reluctant to let Sam go. He clamped down on the irrational fear of not being able to get him back.

"You find it yet?" Sam asked after a bit of silence. Dean allowed himself a small smile. Sam didn't seem to want to sever their connection anytime soon either.

"No," Dean said, eyes still scanning the swiftly darkening landscape. "At least it's dark this time... I was like two seconds from being caught back at the church."

"Yeah, but..."

"What?"

He heard the shrug in Sam's voice. "You can't see what's coming after you in the dark."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Dude, spirit, remember? Can't see it coming after me half the time anyway." He stumbled and almost dropped the shovel in an attempt to catch his balance. Looking down, he saw that he'd actually knocked over the small, white cross. "Yahtzee."

"Diggin' again?" Sam asked, his voice sounding strained.

"Yeah, you okay?"

"Just hurry, man," Sam said, and Dean heard a crash. "You got three more after this one."

"What was that?"

"Books... flying off of... shelves—uh!"

"Sam!"

"I gotta find the last grave," Sam yelled into the phone over what was starting to sound like a tornado in the background. "Just hurry, okay?"

The line went silent. Dean had to bite his lip to keep from calling his brother's name into the phone again. Instead, he stuffed it in his pocket, kicked the white cross out of the way. Digging the first grave had torn open the stitches in his hand, and the white gauze Sam had carefully wrapped was bright red now. Ignoring it, Dean gripped the shovel handle.

Despite the cool of the night air, he was soon sweating once again, and paused long enough to shrug out of the coffee-stained green shirt. Hoping that this box would

also be buried in a shallow grave, Dean blanked his mind to everything but digging, focusing only on shoving the spade into the earth, stamping his foot on the end, and heaving the dirt over his shoulder.

After about ten repetitions of this motion, his right hand started to slip along the wooden handle of the shovel, the blood flowing freely. Frowning, Dean pulled off the sodden bandage, and shook his hand. Blood splattered across the white of the cross lying on the ground next to his shirt. Lifting an eyebrow, he reached down for his shirt, and using his teeth and fingers tore one of the sleeves free. Wrapping the sleeve firmly around his hand, he picked the shovel up and continued to dig.

Nearly four feet down, the blade hit the edge of the box, and Dean felt along the edge.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, realizing that he was about two feet off of center. "I swear to fuckin' *God*," he continued to grumble as he dug the hole larger to get to a space that he could break open the box. "When I find out who the hell planted Larry pieces all over this town..." He stumbled slightly forward and he tried to heave more dirt than the shovel could hold out of the hole. "I'm gonna kick some ass..."

Three planks of the box were now exposed. Deciding that enough was enough, Dean broke through. A *leg*... Wiping sweat from his forehead with a dirt-smeared forearm, Dean climbed out of the hole and retrieved the salt and lighter fluid. The match lit the darkness that had descended with an eerily comforting glow. Dean dropped the fire into the hole, grabbed his shovel and supplies and turned to jog through the black to the Impala.

He didn't even put the shovel back in the trunk this time. He was filthy, covered in dirt from head to toe, blood smeared on his hand, arm, and pant leg. He slid behind the wheel and tossed the shovel across the seat next to him. Digging out his cell phone as he started the car, he dialed Sam's number.

The stress in his brother's voice when he answered spiked Dean's heartbeat.

"Dean!"

"Sam? You okay?"

"He's here... Lawrence is here," Sam was yelling into the phone over a cacophony of noises in the background.

*Shit... why is he going after Sam and not me?*

"You okay?" A large crash followed by Sam's gasp was his answer. "Sam!"

"I'm here."

"What was that?"

"Cash register." Sam swore. "And a chair."

"Let's get this done, man," Dean yelled into the phone.

"You have to go to a rock quarry," Sam instructed. "There's one – ah – one to the, uh... south of you."

"Rock quarry..." Dean gripped the map, leaving bloody fingerprints along the edges. His eyes blurred for a moment and he blinked, focusing. "I see it..."

Sam groaned.

"Sam!"

"I'm here," Sam said again.

"Stay in that circle, man!"

Dean clicked the phone shut, threw the gear into reverse, floored the accelerator, and turned the wheel roughly to the left. The Impala flipped around like she road on air, rocking only slightly when Dean shifted into drive and demanded that she haul ass to the quarry.

\* \* \* \*

**Rock Quarry, *Earth*, 7:45pm**

Dean dug out a flashlight from the glove box, grabbed the shovel, salt, and lighter fluid, and headed toward the large hole in the earth. He stopped at the edge, shining his light around the edge, in the trees, peering into the darkness. The quarry was absent of any construction machinery, and a small pond of water was beginning to collect at the bottom. Dean narrowed his eyes and looked closer at the bottom of the quarry. About twenty feet away from the pond, he saw another cross.

"Oh, you gotta be kidding me," he muttered. Licking his lips, he threw the shovel and salt over the edge, tucked the lighter fluid into his jeans pocket, and began to climb down grasping at tree roots and rock edges.

His hand was on fire by the time he reached the bottom. His arms trembled as he picked up the shovel and when he shoved the blade into the earth, the heat from his wound shot electric currents of pain up his arm and into his shoulder. He clenched his jaw, working to keep from crying out—even here, even now, with nothing and no one around. He couldn't give in even a little bit, he knew, or he would tumble over an edge deeper and darker than this quarry... and he didn't know if he'd be able to climb out of that hole.

Dean ignored the shaking of his hand as nearly forty minutes later he dropped the match in and burned Lawrence Jessup's other arm. His chest was heaving with exertion and when he bent over to pick up the shovel, his right hand wouldn't close around it. Stubbornly refusing to consider this a problem, Dean shifted his grip on the supplies to his left arm and started the laborious climb up and out of the quarry, forced to use his forearms, chin, knees and legs as his right hand wouldn't cooperate. Half-way there, he heaved the shovel and salt over the edge, pausing to grip a tree root with his left hand.

He clung to the side of the dirt wall, his body trembling, his mind numb, his hand aching to the bone. He had to move. Had to. He had two more graves... Fire and water, Dean, he told himself. *You've got fire and water... climb, dammit...*

"Climb," he growled at his own weakness. "You freakin' wuss, get your ass out of this hole!"

Reaching over his head he pulled himself up, hand over hand, ignoring the fresh blood that ran down his arm, the near-cold pain that had begun to shoot through his joints. When he breeched the top, he used his arms and pulled himself over the edge, laying face-down in the dirt for a moment, pulling in air and feeling his body radiate weariness. He could see the familiar outline of the Impala's in the starlight. Dragging himself to his knees, he grabbed the shovel and supplies, pushed himself to his feet and stumbled to the car.

He was retrieving his cell phone before he'd thrown the shovel across the already muddy seat. His hand left smears of dirt and blood on the keypad.

"Sam!" He barked into the phone when he heard it connect.

"Dean—" Sam's voice was strained. Dean heard the pain laced through the sound of his name, the plea to *just make it stop*.

"Sammy, I'm coming back," Dean yelled, throwing the car into reverse and allowing the motion of the Impala to swing the door shut.

"No!" Sam gasped. "No, Dean... you gotta... you gotta finish it!"

"Sam, what is it?"

"God, Dean... pressure... ah!"

"Are you inside the circle?"

"Circle's..." Sam panted. "Circle's gone."

"Shit, Sam..." Dean clenched his jaw. "Where do I go, man?"

"There's... there's a — a river and a foundry..."

Dean shouldered the phone, flipped on the dome light, and grabbed the map. He was heading back toward the surveyor's office and realized that he had no idea where either of those things were. He pulled over to the side of the road.

"Where, Sam?"

"River's to the west," Sam yelled. "Foundry's...ah!"

"Sam!"

"Foundry's north of you."

Looking at the map, he saw the foundry Sam was talking about. Dropping the map, he turned the car around.

"He knows, Dean," Sam yelled.

"Sam, get out of there!"

"C-can't—"

The line went dead. Dean grabbed the phone from his shoulder with his wounded hand and with a guttural growl of rage threw it across the car. It landed, open, on the passenger seat. He pressed the accelerator to the floor, his lip curling in perverse pleasure as the kick of the car thrust him back against the seat. He didn't allow himself to think about the spirit attacking Sam. He didn't allow himself to think about Frank hiding information. He didn't allow himself to think about the distraction Reed's coy little body had offered him.

He didn't allow himself to think about losing his brother nine days from now.

\* \* \* \*

### **Foundry, *Fire*, 8:40pm**

Dean just drove. He reached the foundry, shut off the car, and grabbed the blood-stained shovel. The lights from the foundry illuminated the surrounding area, and he could feel the heat from the melting steel seep through the thick brick walls and soak into his body through his thin, black T-shirt. His eyes darted, looking for the white cross. He could feel himself shaking from the inside out, tension riding through him like waves.

"Where is it..." he muttered, turning when he reached the end of the building and letting the soft orange glow from the furnaces guide his eyes. *C'mon c'mon c'mon...* "Where *is it?*" He screamed into the uncaring, silent night.

He wanted to throw something, to hit something, to get bloody, to cause pain, to hurt. He clenched his teeth, unaware that he was actually growling. He was about to turn and walk to the other side of the building, when his eyes caught sight of a white cross, shifted sideways and partially buried in the loose earth.

Squaring his shoulders, Dean marched over to the cross, kicked it out of the way, and started attacking the earth. He huffed out ragged growls of pain and anger with each thrust of the shovel, focusing only on getting to the box with whatever piece of Lawrence Jessup it contained.

Time ceased, sound stilled, and the only thing Dean felt was the burn of the muscles across his back and in his arms, the trail of sweat down his face and along the curve of his spine, and the drip of blood as it ran down his arm and fell from his elbow. The earth was almost sandy and soon his shovel hit something hard. Digging faster, Dean uncovered the curved, mahogany top of a coffin.

"What the hell?"

Dropping the shovel, Dean jumped down into the hole, using the back of his left arm to clear off the rest of the coffin lid. There was a nickel-plated latch on one side, and the lid was one long piece of wood.

"A friggin' *coffin?*"

He reached down and turned the latch, lifting the lid. Inside rested Lawrence Jessup's skull. Dean rubbed a weary hand over his face. *Hey, Larry...* As he turned to climb out of the hole, he caught a brief glimpse of the legs of a person standing on the dirt ledge above him. Before Dean could raise his eyes to see who the legs belonged to, he felt a blinding pain in his head.

And then all he knew was darkness.

\* \* \* \*

## Surveyor's Office, 9:15pm

Sam strained helplessly against the invisible force of bone-chillingly cold air that held him prisoner against the filing cabinets. Lawrence's attack had grown in ferocity with each of Dean's phone calls. Sam had stayed inside the salt circle as long as he could, until a vicious wind wiped away all traces of the salt.

Groaning, Sam shot his eyes desperately over to his cell phone lying discarded on the floor. His jaw trembled as chills wracked his body from the spirit's attack. The noise in the small office was like a thousand voices screaming at once, but Sam couldn't cover his ears: Lawrence had pinned his arms against his side.

And then suddenly, everything stopped. Sam dropped to the ground in a heap, his body still shaking. He reached up with a tentative hand and wiped at the blood that was once again running down the side of his face, and now from both his nose and his bottom lip. *Thank God, Dean...* As he pressed his hand to the floor, trying to push himself up, he heard his name.

"Sam?"

Small, strong hands pulled at his arm, helping him sit up the rest of the way. Sam blinked bleary, dazed eyes at Reed. She looked exhausted, her face pale, her large eyes searching his.

"Sam, what happened?"

Sam wiped at the blood on his lip with the back of his hand. "Your dad's spirit," he croaked, shaking his head to try to stop the ringing in his ears.

Reed dropped his arm. "What?"

"I'm sorry, Reed," Sam rasped. "Your father's spirit... it's gone."

Reed sat back on her heels. "What?" she whispered again.

"My brother..." Sam used the cabinet behind him to help push himself to his feet. "My brother found all the graves."

Reed stayed where she was, her eyes following his lanky form as he suddenly towered above her. Her brows pulled together. "I – I don't understand..."

"Dean burned the bones, Reed," Sam tried again, pressing the heel of his hand against his temple. His eyes shot over to the cell phone on the floor. *He'll be calling any minute...*

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, kid," said another voice off to Sam's left.

Sam whipped his head over, watching as Frank walked in through the back door left open by Reed. Sam's face folded into confusion. Frank reached a hand down and offered it to Reed, helping her up. Sam watched. Frank's hand had smears of blood on it. Blood... and dirt.

*Oh, shit...*

"Frank?" *No no no no...*

"I'm sorry, Sam," Frank turned to him, and Sam could see dirt on his pant legs. His eyes dropped to the floor and he saw the sandy footprints tracked in from the doorway. "I'm really sorry."

"Uncle Frank?" Reed's face was pulled into a tight question. "What did you do?"

"Where's my brother?" Sam stepped forward on unsteady legs.

Frank glanced down, then lifted his eyes. Sam searched his face, looking for a glimmer of hope, for a sign that Dean was okay. Frank looked over at Reed.

"We need to talk," he said.

Sam launched forward, but Frank caught his fist and shoved him roughly back against the cabinets.

"Where is my **brother**?" Sam yelled, arms sprawled against the cabinets to try to maintain a semblance of balance. He was focused on Frank's face and missed the swift movement of the cop's hand to his sidearm.

"I'm afraid your brother got buried in his work," Frank said. Reed gasped. Sam lunged, and Frank brought his gun up, connecting solidly with Sam's jaw.

Sam didn't even feel the impact of his body against the office floor.

\* \* \* \*

### **Foundry, 9:45pm**

The first thing he was always aware of upon waking was the smell. It was how he knew if he was safe – if he was in a motel with Sam, if he was in a hospital, if he was in the Impala. He could smell dirt, and something nauseatingly sweet. It was a smell he was familiar with after digging countless graves. It was the smell of death.

Dean groaned, clumsily pushing his hand under his chest and trying to shove himself to his knees. He got about a foot off the material that he was resting face-first on before his back came in contact with something. *What the hell?*

He blinked in the complete darkness. He could feel soft, almost silky material against his face. Not motel sheets, that was for sure. He tried to remember what happened before he'd apparently decided to take a nap. A sharp throb across his forehead brought it back to him. He wriggled a hand up to his head and felt gingerly along his temple and forehead. His fingers came away wet and sticky and he winced as his touch glanced across a good-sized gash.

Continuing with his blind, face-down exploration of his environment, Dean reached to his side and felt the edges of the silk roll up to meet a ceiling of silk. *Oh God... Larry's coffin.* Which meant that Larry's head was in there somewhere with him. The thought sent an odd shiver down Dean's spine. Curling his shoulders in, he managed to slowly turn himself until he was lying on his back.

He could feel the hard edge of his .45 digging into his back. He'd completely forgotten he'd put that there. It was such a part of him that it wasn't until he was actually laying on it that he even felt it tucked into his jeans.

He felt something next to his face shift. Closing his eyes out of instinct as the pitch blackness didn't allow him to see anything, Dean reached over tentatively and felt the smooth, cool bone of Lawrence Jessup's skull.

"Man, that's just gross," he groaned aloud. The sound of his own voice was muffled back to him, but was oddly comforting. "You were that lonely for some company you decided to trap me in here with you?"

Dean reached down into his pocket and dug out his matches. Lighting one with his thumbnail, he took stock quickly. The coffin was lined with white silk. He was stretched out length-wise. He shifted his eyes to one side and saw the red stain of his blood covering a swath of silk near his head. Looking the other way, he met the empty, hollowed eye sockets of Ellicott City's favorite son.

The match burned down to his fingers and he shook it out. As the darkness swallowed him once more, he immediately wanted to light another match, but he knew it was probably not the smartest thing to do. He didn't know how much oxygen he had left and he certainly wasn't sharing any with fire.

"You might think that this is a bad situation," Dean said to the skull. "But you'd be wrong."

He reached up and wiped some blood out of his eye. "I've been in plenty worse situations than this," he winced as a sharp pain sliced through his head. "I do wish I had about four aspirin right about now, though."

Thinking, Dean tapped the toes of his boots against the bottom and lid of the coffin. He remembered that the coffin had a latch, but he couldn't tell which side it was on. He lit another match and felt with one hand along the seam of the white silk. *There... there it is.*

Blowing the match out, he wondered if whoever stuck him in here had dumped that sandy dirt back on top.

"Who was it, Larry, huh?" he shifted, digging his fingers into the silk and pulling it away from the latch. "Reed? She doing your dirty work for you? Or Frank? My

money's on Frank... or, well, I guess it's his money. Since he paid us and all..." He grunted with exertion as he pulled more silk away from the latch.

Lighting another match he saw that the latch was secured from the outside. *Of course it is...* He shifted again, and felt the smooth bone of the skull against his cheek.

"Eh, easy, there, man," Dean shoved the skull up and away from his face with his shoulder. "Stay on your side of the coffin."

His head pounded, and his hand burned. It felt too large for his arm. He tried to make a fist and gritted his teeth against the pain. *Think, Winchester... you've been in worse situations than this...*

"You don't believe me?" he asked Larry, not realizing that he was starting to pant for air. "How about being grabbed and strung up by a wendigo, huh? Sucker's got some freakin' nasty claws, too... 'course Sammy saved my ass that day." Dean dropped his hands on his chest and closed his eyes. *Just lay here for a second... just a second... just until my head stops pounding...*

"That's not enough for you, huh? Well, I guess we can't all be witchcraft studying philanthropists. Maybe you're rich... is that it? You found some buried treasure and your daughter and your brother are trying to keep you around... to, uh... to find it."

*Damn, it's hot in here.*

"Got stuck on a plane once... with a possessed pilot. Tell me that isn't worse. Metallica didn't even get me, uh... get me outta that one. Sammy came through with the Latin... and don't even get me started on those damn bees. 'Course none of that beats having your own brother shoot you... possessed... mind-controlled, whatever, the dude still shot me. And it friggin' hurt, I'll tell you that."

He slid his head to the side, in the direction he'd shoved Larry's skull. "I can tell you that, can't I, Larry? You won't say anything, will ya? It hurt. For days. Lots of them."

His head swam and he blinked in the darkness. He felt the blood drip down in his eyes once more and reached up with the back of his hand to wipe it away. *How long until Sam realizes I'm not coming back... unless...*

"Sammy..." he whispered. "I hope you're leaving him alone, Larry... y-you can't hurt him, okay?"

He tried to pull in a deep breath to stop the spinning in his head.

"He took me to a faith healer once... I was stupid, got myself zapped trying to fry a Rawhead. Messed up my heart. But he saved me. He tricked me, but he saved me. It was the worst moment of my life when I couldn't find him... when those backwoods, redneck, cannibals grabbed him... then I get him back only to let him walk away from me again, like an idiot..."

He licked his lips, his throat dry, his chest rising and falling rapidly with the need for air. His voice was low and hoarse, but he didn't stop talking... he couldn't stop. If he stopped, it was over.

"We, uh... we fought vamps, and uh... a demon... that just happened to be in my dad... tell me that's not worse than this... no, forget it. I'll tell you. That's worse. That's worse... seeing those freakin' yellow eyes in his face... he tore me up, Larry." Dean swallowed, remembering.

"He didn't even have to touch me. He tore me up. And then he left us... left me and Sammy. Again. And the things we've fought... the things we've killed... demons and spirits... spirits a lot worse than you, Larry. Hell, I even faced a spirit that looked like me in a... an old-west shoot out."

He felt his eyes droop, and reached up to wipe the blood from his eye again, brushing his hand across his amulet. "You think this is bad... try having a demon trapped inside of you..." He swallowed. "Try having to listen to it when you're awake and, uh... and try to keep it away from you when you sleep... hell, sleep... like that's even... even possible anymore..."

*We should just leave... just run away, Sammy. Go to Canada, or Amsterdam... go where Haris can't find you.*

"See, man? Lot worse than this... lot... lot worse... Man, it's, uh... hard to breathe in here. Quit using up all the air, Larry..."

But where could they hide in a world constantly caught up in a war between good and evil?

Dean shifted again, trying to work the .45 into the hollow of his back and keep the skull away from himself at the same time. *Shit, Dean... the .45!* He groaned as he strained his already abused muscles and twisted until he could grasp the .45 with his left hand. He knew there was no way he could fire it at the latch inside of the coffin and not deafen himself.

Laying the gun on his stomach, he worked his fingers into the silk around the latch and began to tear. He ripped off two pieces, wadded them up, and one at a time and shoved them into his ears. Lighting a match to make sure he knew where to fire, he shook the match out, pulled his T-shirt up over his nose and mouth, aimed the gun, then turned his face in the opposite direction.

He pulled the trigger.

The acrid smoke from the gun filled the small space quickly and Dean started coughing through his shirt. His ears were ringing through the silk plugs like he'd been standing too close to the speakers during a Metallica concert. He was afraid to light another match, unsure about the gunpowder residue in such close quarters. Coughing, he reached up with his left hand and felt for the latch. His bullet had blasted through the latch and left a sizable hold in the wood.

A hole that was quickly filling with the loose, sandy earth the coffin had been buried in.

"Son of a bitch," Dean growled.

He reached up and grabbed the skull. "Listen, Larry, you gotta let Sam go, okay? He's..." Dean coughed. "He's my only shot, man."

Shoving the skull up toward the top of the coffin, Dean began to shove against the lid, hoping the dirt that was falling into the hole had been simply knocked down by his bullet. He felt the lid shift slightly, but as it did, more dirt fell in on him.

He felt his panting increase, felt his chest hitch with the speed of it. *Keep it together, Dean... you're not gonna help Sam this way... you're not gonna help yourself this way... keep it together...*

"Goddammit, Sam!" Dean punched the lid of the coffin with his right hand, crying out as the pain shot from his wounded palm through his arm and into his shoulder. "You freakin' selfish idiot!"

He punched the lid again, then followed that punch with one from his left. The pain was harsh, slicing, complete. The pain was the only thing in that moment that was real, the only thing he could control. He slammed his fists into the lid again in rapid succession.

"Why did you do it?! *Why?*" He was panting, bleeding, hurting, but he couldn't stop.

"I gave *everything* for you... I gave all I had... I survived everything he threw at me... everything he wanted me to believe... I did it for you, Sam! And you just threw... it... away."

Blood ran into his eye and this time he ignored it.

"Why didn't you just kill me, Sam?! You should... have... just... **KILLED** me..."

He began to kick the lid, the bottom, the walls. The gun slid from his chest to rest next to the hollow of his body. He slammed his shoulders, fists, and elbows against the sides.

"You didn't save anything..." **punch...** "You didn't save anyone..." kick, **slam, punch...** "I won't survive without you, you asshole... I won't do it!" **PUNCH...** "If he takes you... if he takes you... he takes me, too..."

With a vicious, final thrust, Dean's right hand went through the brittle wood near the edge of the latch and buried into the side of the earth wall. The jagged edges of the coffin dug grooves into his arm. Panting, dizzy, shaking, Dean slowly pulled his arm back toward him and brought with him more dirt from the grave wall.

He started coughing again, unable to find any air, unable to fill his lungs. His shoulders shook and he tried to turn on his side, using the width of his body to push the lid up and open. He groaned, teeth clenched as he pressed his wounded, bleeding hand against the bottom of the coffin. He felt the lid give slightly, but as it did, more dirt fell in.

*No...*

He was breathing shallowly, barely panting. His lips began to tingle, his arms were heavy. He tried again to push the lid, but his arms were shaking too badly. He collapsed against the silk liner of the coffin. His body was twisted slightly around the dirt that spilled in. His knuckles, knees, and shoulders throbbed. His hand bled freely, the gouges in his arm ached, and blood from his head began to fill his eye.

He reached blindly up for Larry's skull, pulling it toward him almost drunkenly. He couldn't see anything, so he felt along the bone until his fingers dipped into the eye sockets, turning the skull to face him.

"L-listen... Larry," he gasped. "I g-get it... I do." He swallowed. "I get why a g-good person becomes an angry... angry spirit. Y-you're alone. Nobody..." he gasped in a breath, his lips numb. His voice was barely above a whisper. "Nobody wants to be a-alone..."

He closed his eyes as his head spun viciously. His lungs ached and he turned his face up in an instinctive move to grab for more air. The skull sank down against his cheek.

"S-Sammy... and Dad..." he whispered, his eyelids fluttering. "They're it, Larry. I-if I lose Sam... He's my job... he's my one j-job."

He arched his back, his mouth open, desperate for air.

*You're it, Sammy... and you killed me the day you saved me.*

In a flash faster than the time it takes for lightning to connect the earth and the sky, Dean saw his life as a hunter, a son, and a brother. He blinked rapidly, trying to slow down the images, trying to hold one... just one. He saw John's hands, his eyes, his anger, his smile, his tears. He heard Mary's voice, saw her spirit disappear in flames. He saw demons and vampires, werewolves and spirits. He saw blasts from the ends of shotguns and felt the impacts of knives into flesh. And he saw Sam.

Sam in Dean's arms as their lives were burned away from them, Sam lying under a burning ceiling, his eyes bleeding before a mirror, his face contorted in rage as he pulled the trigger of a shotgun aimed at Dean. He saw Sam collapsing under the weight of a vision, fighting with him, fighting for him. He saw Sam holding Dad with a tearful smile. He saw Sam coming for him, appearing when it was impossible to appear, pulling him from the clutches of hell itself, pulling him to safety.

Sam would come. He had to. Dean didn't have any fight left. He didn't have anything left. He gasped once more, falling back, his arms lax, his eyes blinking shut.

On his last breath, Dean pleaded, "H-hurry up, Sam."

And then the air was gone.

\* \* \* \*

### **Surveyor's Office, 9:30pm**

Dean was dying.

It was Sam's first thought as consciousness slowly returned. *Dean's dying...* Sam's hands were bound behind him with some sort of thick, coarse rope. His fingers tingled as circulation was restricted. He realized that he was sitting up, propped

against the filing cabinets. He could feel a handle digging into his spine. His head hung low, his chin nearly touching his chest. He could hear voices nearby.

Slowly blinking his eyes open, Sam raised his aching head to see Reed pacing the length of the office directly across from him, and Frank standing in the center of the room, his back toward Sam. They were arguing, but Sam's ears were ringing too loudly to separate the sounds into actual words. He flexed his jaw, sticking his tongue against the cut on his lip.

He tried to focus his eyes on Reed, separate her voice. She slid in and out of focus. Sam shook his head, dropping his eyes, and listened for Frank instead.

"...couldn't let you try it, Reed. Now do you see?"

"You cut him up, Uncle Frank," Reed's voice was brittle. "Your own brother. I could have brought him back... I was so close..."

Sam blinked again, looking up and watching as she wrapped her arms tightly around her middle, looking like she was trying to disappear inside of herself.

"What you were going to bring back wasn't your father, Reed," Frank's voice was low, steady. "I kept him with us."

"And didn't *tell* me about it!"

"I—"

"What? You were going to? When?" Reed interrupted. She stopped pacing, and turned to face her uncle, her hands fisted at her sides. "Three years, Frank. *Three years* I've been working on that spell... that research. What if that boy hadn't followed me in the house, huh? I didn't even know Pop was a spirit until he stopped that kid. What if I had been able to get the necromancer spell to work?"

"You wouldn't have," Frank shook his head.

"I was damn close, Frank," Reed narrowed her eyes. "If you hadn't taken those books from me, I would have. And then what?" Reed raised her arms in a question. "You would have had to send someone after my father's revenant... oh, wait... I mean *pieces* of him."

"I told you before," Frank roared. "I didn't send them after his spirit! They were just... a means to an end."

"You're such a friggin' liar, Frank," Reed growled, her voice cold. "You don't know what the truth is anymore."

"Where..." Sam croaked, licking his dry lips and trying again. "Where's my brother?"

Frank jerked around, startled, and stared at Sam.

"Damn, kid," he muttered. "You got a cast-iron head or what?"

"How long?" Sam demanded, blinking as his vision slid.

"How long what?"

"Has he been... been buried?" Sam's voice caught on the last word, and he clenched his jaw.

Frank dropped his eyes, running a hand through his hair. "Long enough, Sam."

"Let me go," Sam twisted his hands against the taut bindings. He felt his balance settling, felt the ringing fade. His head throbbed, but one thought overpowered any pain... *Dean's dying...*

"I can't do that, Sam," Frank said, sounding genuinely sorry.

"Why the hell not?" Reed demanded. "You think you get the luxury of buyer's remorse in this, Frank?"

Sam twisted his arms, shaking his right sleeve until the small knife that Dean insisted he always carry with him jarred loose and he felt the pinprick of the scalpel-sized blade hit the heel of his hand. Watching Reed confront her uncle, Sam worked his arm slowly, carefully maneuvering the knife down from his sleeve and into his hand.

"Listen, Reed," Frank dropped his hands to his waist, his head angled down as he stared at his niece. "I didn't want this... I wanted to keep him with us, but... Lawrence just got... out of control."

Reed pulled her eyebrows together. "Out of whose control – yours?"

"I get it, Reed, okay... I got scared, I wanted it to stop."

"You can't have it both ways, Frank," Reed shook her head. "You can't try to harness that kind of power and then just... let it go."

"I wasn't thinking clearly when Lawrence died," Frank said, rubbing his forehead. "And then... he was just... here. And no one needed to know. But then you started in with those books... started trying to bring something back that wouldn't be Lawrence."

"What?!" Reed shoved her hands in her hair. "I can't believe I'm hearing this." She dropped her hands and stepped back once. "You've lost it, Frank."

Sam kept his eyes on the feuding family, working the knife down to his fingers, then turning the blade away from his flesh and toward the bindings.

"I've lost it?" Frank snapped. "You were going to turn my brother into a *zombie!*"

Reed tilted her head, her eyebrow arched. "That's a bit of a pot and kettle argument, Uncle Frank."

"I just did what Lawrence wanted me to do," Frank argued, turning from Reed and facing Sam.

Sam froze, staring at Frank. He darted his tongue out to dab the cut on his lip, willing Frank to turn around. But Frank stared at him with unseeing eyes.

"What are you talking about?" Reed demanded.

"He believed... I didn't know until it was too late, but when he died I realized that he believed there was something else... something beyond death..."

Frank closed his eyes, but Sam didn't move. He kept his eyes on Frank's face, afraid for the moment that Frank would see that his arms were looser, that his hands were almost free.

"You don't get it... Lawrence was my brother. I didn't want him to go..." Frank's voice dropped and he shook his head slowly. "So I found a way to keep him around, keep him close to me. I just never thought that he would..."

"What, Frank? What?" Reed marched over to him, grabbing his arm and turning him around to face her.

Sam breathed a silent sigh of relief when Frank's back was once again facing him and continued to work at his bonds.

"You never thought he'd *what?*"

"Kill people, Reed. Good people... innocent people!"

"What about him, huh? He was innocent... he was a good person... and you just let him die!" Reed shook her uncle's arm once, hard.

Sam felt the pressure inside of his head build as the temperature in the room plummeted. He stopped his attempt to cut through his ropes and looked anxiously around. Reed and Frank seemed oblivious.

"Don't give me that! I did everything I could to save him, Reed," Frank grabbed her arms, gripping them tightly. "You were there... you know. I almost died trying to get him out of that river. What more do you want?"

"I want my *father* back, you son of a bitch!" Reed exploded, and pounded on Frank's chest, hard.

The noise in the room was instantaneous. The dissonance of voices that Sam had heard earlier returned with a vengeance. No words, no meaning, just noise. Sam winced and tried to tuck in on himself, working harder at the bonds around his wrists.

"What the hell?" Sam heard Frank mutter.

One rope snapped free. Sam continued his slow, patient slicing.

"Pop?" Reed's voice was young, hopeful.

The pressure grew in Sam's head and he bit his lip, hard, to keep from crying out.

"Lawrence, what... is that you?" Frank's voice was hushed, afraid.

Sam brought his head up, his concentration focused on cutting through the remaining ropes, his eyes on the Jessups. Reed was standing in the center of the

room, her back to Sam. Frank was against the far wall, staring at his niece in shock as next to her stood the transparent image of a man.

Sam blinked. So this was Lawrence Jessup, pillar of the community, and current bane of the Winchester existence. The final rope snapped free and Sam pushed himself slowly to his feet, trying to figure out how to break into this little family reunion and beat the location of his brother out of Frank. Lawrence's spirit shimmered silently in the chaos of sound that surrounded Reed and Frank.

"Lawrence..." Frank pleaded. "I just... I couldn't lose you... you left the books... you showed me the way."

"Those were my books, Uncle Frank," Reed said, standing next to the image of her father, her arms wrapped around her middle once more. "Pop thought he was protecting me from them... from their power."

"No... no that can't be right," Frank shook his head as the office grew colder. "His name was in the books – they were here... here in his office. There were parts underlined and..."

Sam took an unsteady step forward, reaching out to balance himself against the nearest wall.

"He thought he was protecting me," Reed repeated. "That's why he hid the books." Reed dropped her hands to her sides and curled them into fists. "He's my father, Frank. He protected me all of his life... and I guess... even in death. He kept that kid from finding out what I was trying to do..."

She continued to close the gap between herself and Frank, the noise in the room growing in volume. Papers and maps began to swirl and shoot across the room, plastering themselves against the window of the office and preventing anyone on the exterior from seeing what was happening inside.

"You should have just told me, Uncle Frank. You should have *told* me what you did. But you didn't and one boy died... and so did those people in the railcar... and now Dean." Frank shook his head in silent denial, but Reed continued. "You took my father from me... you denied me the ability to bring him back to me... and then you sent *ghost hunters* after him."

Frank held his hand open, pleading for understanding. "No, see, that's where you're wrong... that wasn't me... I didn't send them."

Sam knew as he watched Reed advance on Frank that he wasn't going to get any information from them about Dean. His eyes darted around the room, desperate for a solution, a way to get to Dean, a way to determine where he was buried. As the noise and the wind continued to build, Sam saw one of the maps drop from the window. He could see Frank's police cruiser sitting just outside the office. *Thank God...*

"You *paid* them." Reed's voice was a shrill allegation of disbelief.

Sam shot his eyes back toward the Jessups. Keeping his eyes on them, he began to edge himself sideways toward the back door.

"I know... I know," Frank dropped his gaze. "I didn't call them, Reed, I swear... but, once they knew, well... I needed a reason, something to show that we were doing everything we could to find out what happened to that boy..." Frank turned away from his niece and the after-image of his brother, shoving his shaking hands into his hair. "I knew what Lawrence had done... and I thought if the guys could stop it... I didn't want anyone else to die..."

"You can't tell me you didn't send them, Frank. You knew them," Reed accused, taking another step closer. "You knew their *father*."

"I never met John Winchester before in my life," Frank turned back to face Reed, raising a hand in denial and defense. "I saw his picture at Luke's – back in the kitchen. I knew what he did because of Luke! If I wasn't always answering his phone—"

The noise and wind inside the office suddenly increased, silencing Frank. Sam had almost made it to the opening when Lawrence Jessup's spirit jerked, then turned and faced him.

Sam froze, his eyes locking on the empty, cavernous holes that had once been Lawrence's eyes. *Please*, he pleaded silently. *Please let me get to my brother... please let me save him.*

As if he'd heard him, Lawrence began to fade and the noise and wind inside the office spiked, causing Reed and Frank to duck as books flew from shelves and more papers spun in blurred tornadoes around the office. Sam hurried out of the office under the cover of swirling maps, running in a low crouch to Frank's cruiser. Praying it was unlocked, he pulled on the handle and breathed a sigh of relief as it swung out toward him.

He slid across the seat, and ducked under the wheel, pulling down the wires from the undercarriage of the car. He'd never hot-wired a cop car before, but Dean had made sure he knew the basic principle behind crossing the correct wires in any vehicle. The car roared to life and Sam shifted into reverse before he was even sitting up in the driver's seat.

*Hang on, Dean...*

The maps still covered the window of the surveyor's office, and Sam buried the accelerator in the floor mat as the car screamed away from the building. Eyes darting rapidly in thought, he tried to figure out where Frank might have caught up with Dean. He remembered telling Dean to go to the river and the foundry. He'd been staring at the maps of Ellicott City for the better part of three hours; he knew where both locations were.

Hoping that he was right – that Dean had gone to the first location he'd told him – he headed to the river.

\* \* \* \*

### **Patapsco River, *Water*, 10:00pm**

He should have realized when he didn't see the Impala, but it took until he had thrust the car into park, launched himself from the driver's seat, and sprinted to the white cross grave marker for him to realize that Dean was at the foundry. It was evident the land around the marker had not been disturbed in several years.

"SHIT!" Sam screamed, shoving his hands into his unkempt hair, then turned on his heel and ran back to the cop car. Shoving the gear into reverse, Sam slid the car around in a spray of grass and dirt.

*How long... how long...* Sam couldn't even bring himself to complete the question. He couldn't bring himself to contemplate the reality of Dean trapped in a box underground. Dean buried. *Buried*. Dean didn't even want to be buried when... Sam shook his head, banishing the thought as he flattened the accelerator and drove the five miles to the foundry with a white-knuckled grip on the wheel.

\* \* \* \*

### **Foundry, *Fire*, 10:15pm**

The lights from the foundry reflected back from the midnight hue of the Impala. Sam felt an odd rush of relief followed by a bone-chilling fear flood him at the sight of their home sitting alone and vacant in the empty lot next to the brick building. Eyes scanning the location, he quickly spotted a small mound of earth and ran over to the partially filled hole next to a broken, semi-buried white cross. Their shovel was gone.

"Dean!" he yelled into the night. "Dean, hang on! I'm here! I'm gonna get you out of there."

He thought quickly, then ran back to the cop car, jerked the door open and grabbed the rifle from its rack behind the seat. Back at the loose, sandy earth of the grave, Sam used the butt of the rifle to dig through. Panting, sweat rolling down the

sides of his face and into his eyes from exertion, Sam climbed down into the hole that Dean had dug not long ago, sifting through the earth for the box that contained his brother.

*Please... please don't let me be too late... don't let it all have been for nothing... he deserves more... he deserves **more** than this...*

The rifle butt struck something solid.

"Dean!"

Tossing the rifle out of the grave, Sam began to dig frantically with his hands, shocked when he could see the mahogany lid of a coffin.

"A coffin?" He breathed in question.

As he continued to clear the top, his fingers desperately searching for the edge, he detected the unmistakable smell of gunpowder.

"Oh, God..." he swallowed, and dug faster. "God, Dean... No no no no no..."

He found the edge of the coffin, then felt along the ridge until his fingers dipped unexpectedly into a hole. Peering down in the darkness, he saw what appeared to have once been a lock. *Please, please, let this have been why he fired his gun...* Tucking his fingers into the hole and clenching his jaw, Sam heaved upward, using the motion of the opening coffin lid to clear away the remaining dirt.

Dean lay inside, pale in the shadowed light of the foundry, twisted slightly on his side, his neck at an awkward angle, his eyes closed, and blood everywhere.

"Oh, Jesus, Dean," Sam breathed, then reached for his brother with trembling hands.

Blood covered one side of Dean's face, including his eye. His right arm was black with it, the inside lining of the coffin was gory with it. Sam touched Dean's face and was relieved to feel the heat radiating from Dean's cheek. He pressed his fingers against Dean's throat. Nothing. No pulse.

"Shit!" Sam growled, grabbing Dean awkwardly at the shoulders and pulling his brother's limp body up against him.

Feeling quickly, Sam determined that none of the blood was from a bullet wound—self-inflicted or otherwise—on Dean's body. He stumbled backwards, keeping Dean close, and tried to climb out of the hole. Stumbling, Dean slipping from his arms, Sam realized quickly that it was impossible to do so and hold onto his brother. Propping him against the shattered side of the coffin, Sam clambered out, then leaned over and grabbed Dean under the shoulders.

"Guuuhhhh!" Sam growled aloud as he hauled Dean's inert, muscular body from the coffin and dropped him in a heap on the ground next to the hole.

"C'mon c'mon c'mon," Sam panted, beginning CPR reps against his brother's chest.

*One, two, three, four, five...fourteen, fifteen... breathe...* The chant was steady in his head. He tipped Dean's head back and blew air into his brother's lax mouth. *One, two, three, four, five...fourteen, fifteen... breathe...* He leaned over to listen for breath sounds. Nothing. *One, two, three, four, five...fourteen, fifteen... breathe...* Again, nothing.

"Goddammit, Dean," Sam panted as he pressed harder against Dean's ribcage, massaging his brother's heart. "*Don't... don't do this to me...*"

*Breathe...* No breath sounds. Sam belatedly checked Dean's airway as best he could for dirt or debris. Nothing. *One, two, three, four, five...fourteen, fifteen... breathe...*

Sam started shaking. There was no slow build-up, no warning. He was suddenly trembling violently, unable to steady his breathing, unable to still his hands. He kept them clasped, fingers laced, pressing as hard as he could against Dean's chest. He forced another lungful of breath into Dean's mouth.

He refused to think about how long Dean might have been buried... refused to think that this could be it. That this could be the end... of everything. The end of their

fight, their struggle, their resistance. The end of the search for Haris, the end of their life together, their friendship... the end of his brother.

"NO!" Sam yelled, oblivious of the tears that ran unchecked down his face. "No, you don't do this, Dean, you **don't!**"

*One, two, three, four, five...fourteen, fifteen... breathe...* Nothing.

"Dean, you bastard!" Sam screamed, grabbing Dean's bloody, limp body at the shoulders and shaking him. "You can't leave me like this... you *can't* give in now..."

Sam dropped Dean against the ground and started to repeat the CPR motion when something inside of him snapped. He growled, low, wounded, pained. He curled his hand into a fist, pounding it, hard, against Dean's sternum.

"I gave in to him... I gave in to save you..." He pounded again. "You are the best of us, Dean..." He pounded harder. "I gave up everything for you, man!" He punched Dean's chest hard enough that he could easily have cracked a rib. "You can't... you can't go now... you can't leave me, Dean!"

Tears choked him, anger suffocated him, pain lanced through him. He was going to lose his brother. Shaking his head, Sam began CPR again.

*One, two, three, four, five...fourteen, fifteen... breathe...* Nothing.

Sam began to swear. Latin mixed with English, spells with promises. He felt like his brain was short-circuiting. He felt like he was coming apart. He was shaking from the inside out; tears dropped from his chin and turned the dirt and blood on Dean's shirt to paste.

Sam put both hands on Dean's face, lifting it to his until he could see Dean's closed eyes in the dim light from the foundry.

"I won't let you go, Dean," Sam whispered on a trembling breath. "Do you hear me? I won't let you go..." He shook Dean's head. "Do you hear me, Dean?" He yelled. "I won't let you go. I **won't let you go.**"

Laying Dean's head back carefully, Sam began CPR again. As he finished his fifth rep, he leaned forward to breathe into Dean's mouth and heard a wheeze, a slow, laborious rattle of air. Sam froze. *Oh, God... please...* He felt a soft, barely perceptible exhale against his cheek.

"Yes! Yeah, that's it, that's it, Dean," Sam encouraged, turning Dean slightly on his side. He slapped the flat of his hand against Dean's back. "C'mon, man, gimme another one like that."

Dean coughed. Sam whimpered, tears threatening to spill once more. He continued to clap Dean on the back. Dean coughed again, and at the tail-end of the cough, he dragged in a desperate lungful of air.

"That's it! That's it, Dean... slow and easy, just breathe, man... just breathe..." Sam sniffed, nodding in the darkness. As Dean began to drag in breaths and cough them out, Sam felt his head spin, weak with relief. Dean still hadn't opened his eyes, but he was breathing. He was breathing.

Sam gripped Dean's shoulders, pulling his brother's limp body toward him in an embrace he knew Dean would never allow were he conscious. Holding Dean against him, his forehead resting on Sam's collarbone, Sam willed his tremors to still, his breathing to even out. He willed the tears to abate. He told himself that he would hold on to Dean for a minute... just a minute.

He rocked forward, gripping his brother to him like an anchor as he rode out the wave of relief to an exhausted end. Nine days... he had nine days until Haris came for him. Until Dean, he knew, would do whatever it took to keep him safe – even if that meant death. Sam felt Dean stir weakly against him. *It can't happen... I can't let it happen...* He had to get himself out of this deal, or pay the price he agreed upon. His sacrifice *for* Dean's life could not *take* Dean's life.

Feeling Dean's hand clumsily push on his arm, Sam laid him back down against the earth. Dean's eyes weren't open, but he was breathing a bit more evenly. Sam tried to wipe some of the blood off of Dean's face and out of his eye with the edge of his shirt sleeve. Dean turned his head sluggishly toward Sam's hand, coughing

weakly. Sam rolled him slightly to his left side. The blood from his head wound collected more dirt in that position, but it seemed easier for Dean to pull in air.

"Sam?" It was a whisper more than anything. A plea for reassurance.

"I'm here, Dean," Sam's hand rested on the nape of Dean's neck. He watched his brother's shadowed face, waiting for his eyes to open.

"m I out?" Dean rasped.

"Yeah, man," Sam replied, picking up Dean's right hand and inspecting the damage as best he could by the light of the foundry. He could see that the wound on his palm had torn open and his knuckles were split and bleeding. "Just take it easy, okay?"

"You came," Dean whispered. "You found me." Sam watched as Dean's eyes rolled under his closed lids.

"Course I came," Sam said, wiping the last of the tears from his face with the back of his hand.

"Told Larry," Dean said, and as Sam watched he blinked his eyes open to slits, resting them on Sam. "Told him..."

"Who?"

"Coffin," Dean breathed, then coughed again, his body shaking with the force of it.

Sam looked over to the hole. Shifting to his knees he crawled the short distance to the edge and looked down into the coffin. Resting in the hollow where Dean's body had been was a human skull. Sam looked over his shoulder at Dean.

"We finish this?" he asked.

Dean closed his eyes and nodded. Sam glanced around, saw where Dean had dropped the supplies, then gathered up the salt and lighter fluid. He searched the ground for the matches.

"Dean?"

Dean's eyes were closed and for a moment Sam felt panic slice through him. But as he looked closer, he could see Dean's chest rising and falling. He moved back over to where his brother lay and began to pat down his pockets.

"Dude," Dean mumbled. "'S called personal space."

Sam's face relaxed in a quick grin. "Matches," he said.

Dean's eyes fluttered open and he looked up at Sam as if trying to remember what image connected to that word. Then he dug his left hand into his pocket and pulled out the box of wooden matches.

"Sam," he rasped, rolling weakly to his back and dragging one leg up so that his knee was at a right angle to his body.

"Yeah, Dean."

"Get my gun first."

Sam went cold. The image of Dean, bloody and still, lying in the bottom of the coffin, surrounded by the smell of gunpowder swam across his vision and he had to press his hand into the ground to keep from keeling over. He closed his eyes and breathed through his nose.

"Sam? You okay?" Dean's voice was barely a whisper, but Sam heard him, heard the ever-present concern.

"Dean... I thought... when I saw you, I thought..."

Sam opened his eyes. Dean was staring at him, silent.

"I thought I'd lost you," Sam confessed.

"You almost did," Dean replied, blinking his eyes up at Sam.

Sam swallowed. "I can't handle feeling like that again," he whispered.

"Neither can I," Dean whispered back.

Sam was floored when he saw Dean's chin tremble. Dean never cried. Sam couldn't even remember the last time he'd seen him this close to tears.

When Harris had tried to rip his heart from his body wearing their father's face, Dean hadn't cried. When Sam had found him, beat to hell and broken in that compound, he hadn't cried. When Melissa had died silent and bloody in his embrace,

he hadn't cried. But as he looked at Dean now, Sam saw that his brother had been pushed to his limit—physically and mentally. Being trapped in that coffin, fighting to get out... Sam couldn't—didn't *want* to—imagine what that had been like.

"It's no different," Dean said, clearing his throat, working to make his voice louder, stronger. Working to clear the emotion from his eyes, and failing. "It's no different for me, Sam."

Sam looked down, then away. *It is different*, he argued silently with Dean. He couldn't explain how sacrificing his soul to save Dean was different... he couldn't put it into words that Dean would accept... but it was. It just... it just *was*.

He climbed down into the hole, grabbed up the .45, then climbed out and tossed the match in. As the small, bright glow of the fire consuming Lawrence Jessup's skull illuminated a tiny portion of the landscape, Sam knelt beside Dean.

"We got one more, Dean," he said.

"Course we do," Dean muttered, rubbing his chest with his left hand. "Damn, Sammy... what did you... do to me?"

*Beat you to life...*

"You need a doctor," Sam said, not answering him. He picked up Dean's right hand again, wincing at the angry red gash now swollen and smeared with dirt and blood.

"After."

"Your hand is—"

"I said after, Sam," Dean rolled to his side, but seemed unable to move beyond that. "We gotta finish this job..."

"Why?" Sam laid a gentle hand on Dean's shoulder. "You didn't even want to go on this hunt in the first place."

"Exactly."

Sam tilted his head to the side, his brows pulled together in confusion. "What?"

Dean rolled his head in the dirt, pressing his forehead down into the sand. His voice, when he replied, was low and muffled. "He's lonely, Sam. He's not a vengeful spirit... he's just... he's just lonely. We can't leave him like this."

He turned his head and looked up at Sam. "I wanted to... I didn't care. What's one more spirit, right? I mean, we had our own problems."

Sam nodded silently.

"But... he was a person once, Sam. He was a person and he lived... and he had people he... people he loved... and it's all gone now."

Sam thought about Lawrence Jessup's spirit releasing him from the chaos in the surveyor's office, allowing him to leave to find Dean. He felt Dean's muscles tense under his hand as his brother tried to sit up. He wrapped his hand around Dean's arm, helping him shift into a sitting position.

"Okay," he said. "We finish this. Then you go get checked out."

Dean was staring at the dirt, swaying a little. "Deal," he breathed.

"Don't move," Sam said, standing.

He grabbed the .45, salt, lighter fluid, matches, and rifle and ran to the Impala. The keys were still in the ignition, which surprised Sam. As he leaned over to retrieve them he saw the condition of the interior of the car and his mouth fell open. Mud was smeared across the seat and dirt had collected on the floor of the passenger side. Dean's phone was lying discarded and open near the passenger door. Blood and dirt smeared the steering wheel and gear shift.

Still ducked inside of the car, Sam raised his eyes and looked at Dean's blood-smeared, dirty figure sitting alone next to the grave, his head hanging low. The meaning behind the condition of Dean's car was not lost on Sam. Moving quickly, he grabbed the keys, then reached behind the driver's seat for a spare towel and wiped down the seat and steering wheel as best he could. He moved to the trunk, opened it, and tossed the supplies and rifle in, noting with wry humor that there was an extra shovel in there.

Grabbing a water bottle and clean towel, he went back to Dean.

"Here," he said, uncapping the bottle and handing it to his brother. Dean took several long pulls on the bottle, rinsing his mouth with the first mouthful, then swallowing the rest. He nodded his thanks to Sam, then tried to push himself to his feet.

"Wait," Sam commanded, easily able to stop his forward motion. He wet the towel with some of the remaining water, and crouched down in front of Dean. Dean saw the towel and jerked his head back. Sam clapped a hand on the back of Dean's neck. "Humor me."

"It's fine, Sam." Dean tried to twist his head away.

"Shut up," Sam said, holding Dean still with the grip on the back of his neck. He wiped the blood from Dean's cheek and jaw, turning the towel as he moved up to his eye and forehead so that he was continuously using a clean piece of cloth. "Your eye's red."

"Red?" Dean lifted an eyebrow, tensing as Sam worked around the gash on his forehead.

"Yeah," Sam nodded. Blood had run from the cut into his eye turning the white a painful-looking pink that contrasted sharply with the green of Dean's iris.

"Huh," Dean said. He huffed out a laugh. "At least it's not yellow."

Or *black*, Sam thought.

He finished cleaning Dean's face, trying to get as much dirt out of the cut as he could, then lifted his right hand. He winced at the swelling he could see and feel. *Definitely need a doctor on this one...* He didn't have any clean space left on the towel, so he poured the rest of the water over the cut, trying to get the dirt out of it. Dean hissed as the cool water soaked into the open wound.

"Happy now, Florence?" Dean said.

"No," Sam replied. "But it will have to do."

"How 'bout you... you okay?" Dean asked, and Sam saw him peering at the cut on his lip, the bruise on his jaw.

"Yeah, man," Sam nodded, flexing his sore jaw. "I'm fine."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "Who hit you?"

Sam leveled his eyes on Dean's. "It's fine, Dean."

He rocked back on his heels and grasped Dean's left hand at the wrist, shoving himself to his feet and pulling Dean with him. Once vertical, Dean's swaying increased and he stumbled a few steps to keep his balance.

"Here," Sam said softly.

He bent and pulled Dean's arm across his shoulder, hooking his other arm in Dean's belt loops. Concerned when Dean didn't protest, Sam moved them toward the car, then dropped Dean into the passenger seat. He frowned when Dean simply lay his head back against the seat, cradling his right arm across his lap, and closed his eyes.

Sam headed around to the driver's side, glancing once at the police cruiser, then slid behind the wheel. He looked over curiously at Dean as his brother rolled the window down and rested his head on the open window sill.

"It's Frank," Sam said as he backed away from the foundry, then turned the Impala toward the river.

"Figured," Dean said tiredly. "Knew something was hinky when he paid us..."

"But... it's also Reed," Sam said, recounting the argument he'd overheard between Frank and Reed while cutting his ropes, from Reed's accusations, to Frank's reveal that he'd seen John's picture in Luke's kitchen.

"So... Frank doesn't even know Dad?" Dean asked, pulling his head from the sill and looking over at Sam.

Sam shook his head.

"Then why did he answer the number I called? The number *Dad* gave us?"

Sam shook his head again. "Dunno, man. I didn't wait around to find out."

Dean dropped his head back. "Yeah, well," he cleared his throat. "I'm okay with that."

"You still have that number?" Sam slid his eyes over to Dean.

Dean nodded. "Put it in my phone."

Sam gripped the blood-stained steering wheel with one hand, then leaned over and grabbed Dean's phone from the CD box where he'd dropped it during his hasty cleaning job. He handed it to Dean.

"Maybe we should find out who we're really working for," Sam said.

Dean looked at him, then at his phone. "Huh," he said, bouncing his head once. "I always knew you were the brains of this outfit."

He scrolled down through the menu until he found 410-341-2667. He hit dial, pressed the phone to his ear, and waited. When the line picked up, Dean's eyes widened and he looked at Sam.

"Hey," he said into the receiver. "We, uh... we need your help."

\* \* \* \*

### **Patapsco River, *Water*, 10:50pm**

Sam parked at the edge of the clearing, parallel with the river. Shutting off the headlights, he peered at the swiftly flowing water as it capped white over hidden rocks and reflected blackness back to the bright starlight that illuminated the clearing. He could see the cross he'd found before reflecting in the silvery light.

"Wait here," he said to Dean.

"Like hell," was the immediate reply.

"Dean," Sam started. "You can barely—"

"Sam, forget it," Dean interrupted, pushing himself up from his slumped position against the opened window. "I'm not sitting this one out. Not after..." He looked at Sam once, then reached across his body to open the door with his functioning left hand.

Opening with his leg, Dean stepped out, then leaned against the black body of the car and waited. Sam cursed his brother's stubbornness, then exited the car and went to the trunk. He grabbed the supplies, his eyes catching on Dean's .45. He paused, shifted his eyes to Dean, then closed the trunk. *Why do we always cut these things so damn close...*

"Ready?"

Dean nodded, stepping away from the car. Sam watched him carefully, but although his walk was unsteady, Dean stayed on course. Sam stopped at the white cross, then looked over at Dean.

"Dude, sit down," Sam frowned as Dean swayed on his feet.

"Huh?"

"Sit down, I got this."

Nodding, Dean stumbled back and dropped to the ground, staring at the cross. Sam watched him a moment longer, then began to dig. It was never easy, digging graves. He was sweating in minutes. He thought of Dean digging four graves earlier this evening and he clenched his jaw. Casting quick glances up to his brother as he worked, Sam's frown deepened when Dean didn't pull his eyes from the cross.

The noise-canceling rush of the river was broken with the sound of a gunshot the same moment that the blade of Sam's shovel struck the box beneath. He jerked his head up at the sound and saw that Dean had whipped around, looking behind him. Sam tracked his eyes with Dean's line of sight and saw Frank standing on the edge of the clearing, pistol directed at them, Reed's Ford Falcon several feet behind him.

"Gonna have to ask you to get out of there, Sam."

"Frank..." Sam breathed, gripping the shovel. "Where's Reed?"

Frank shook his head. "Doesn't matter to you right now. All that matters is that you get out of that hole." Frank shifted the aim of his gun to Dean. "Or I shoot your brother."

"You son of a bitch," Dean said, his voice low and dangerous.

Sam looked at him nervously. "Dean," he protested.

Dean ignored him, pushing himself to an unsteady stance. Frank stepped forward, his gun trained on Dean's chest. As if he didn't see the weapon, Dean strode toward him, his left hand curling into a fist, his right hanging bloody, swollen, and useless.

"Dean!" Sam cried again, vaulting from the grave and launching to his feet to chase after his brother.

"You freakin' coward," Dean spat, never slowing his advance.

"Stop," Frank commanded, thrusting the gun forward.

"Why don't you make me, you bastard," Dean growled, fury returning to him the strength that time and circumstance had taken away.

He swung his arm, slapping his left hand across the muzzle of Frank's gun as if it were made of plastic. Shocked, Frank dropped the gun, taking a step back. Dean didn't stop until he was nearly chest-to-chest with the cop, his face inches from Frank's, forcing him to stare into his mismatched, wounded eyes.

"You trapped him here," Dean growled. "You trapped him here; you made him what he is."

"W-what?" Frank sputtered.

Sam skidded to a halt, watching in silent awe as the force of Dean's rage pushed Frank back toward the river.

"Why'd you even let us start, huh? Why even let us—"

"I thought you'd be finished with it already!" Frank yelled, finally finding his spine and stopping his backward escape. "I thought it would be done by now! You're John Winchester's sons... I thought it would be over!"

"Over?" Dean demanded, once again in Frank's face. "What? You just got tired of having your brother around, that it? Decide that Larry's spirit was more trouble that it was worth?"

"No!" Frank shook his head. "No, I didn't want him to leave – why do you think I kept him here?!"

Dean spread his arms wide. Sam watched in horror as behind them the river began to churn and swell.

"Dean," he called. He wanted his brother beside him, away from Frank, away from the river.

"You tell me, Frank!" Dean demanded, not hearing Sam's plea.

"I couldn't... without Lawrence... nothing made sense..." Frank said, looking down and away from Dean's accusing eyes. "He was my best friend. He protected me from everything – all our lives. He was my... my *brother*. I couldn't let him go... I just... I couldn't..."

"So you trapped him here?" Dean yelled. "You forced him to stay when he couldn't do anything, interact with anything, change *anything*."

"I needed him to be around," Frank spat. The water behind him began to grow into a funnel.

"Dean..." Sam repeated his warning.

"You put him in that freakin' pentagram, Frank," Dean yelled. "You knew what would happen if we burned the bones. And you let us do it..."

"He *killed* people..." Frank yelled back. "I had to stop it... I had to make it go away."

"In case it was traced back to you, huh? Covering your own ass," Dean spat. "How were you going to explain me? You think about that?"

Frank shot his eyes over to Sam, his expression suddenly cold, his eyes hard. "The only people that know about you are so far off the grid they would never be found. I wouldn't have had to explain anything."

The water funnel grew until it was taller than Frank. Sam yelled Dean's name again and saw his brother step back, finally seeing the water. Frank reacted to Dean's expression, and turned around.

"Holy shit," Frank breathed.

"Dean," Sam yelled. "Get away from there!"

Frank stumbled back, away from the water. His shoulder hit Dean and knocked him off balance. Dean fell to one knee.

"Pop!"

Reed's voice was clear, cutting through the roar of the river. Sam looked back and saw her standing at the edge of the clearing. He searched behind her, around her. He couldn't see a car and more importantly, he couldn't see anyone with her. *Where is he... he said he'd come, now where is he?* He blinked and looked back at Frank's retreating form.

"Sam," Dean yelled over his shoulder from his position on the ground. "Sam, finish it!"

Sam turned back to the grave, picked up the shovel and with as much strength as he could gather, thrust the blade through the slats on the wooden box.

"No!" Reed cried, running toward Sam. She slammed into him, knocking the shovel from his hand. He cried out, stumbling and landing hard on his back.

"I won't let you... I won't let you..." Reed was screaming, pounding at Sam's face and chest with small, furious fists.

Sam shook off his surprise and grabbed at her hands, rolling her to her back. He stood up, pulling her with him. He gripped her slim wrists, keeping her hands away from him and she lit into him with her feet, bruising his shins with her anger.

"I want him back, you hear me?" she screamed. "I want him **back**."

"Reed!" Sam heard Dean cry out her name and suddenly his brother was there, standing behind her, arms wrapped around her body. He pulled Reed away from Sam, backing away, toward the river.

"Finish it, Sam," Dean panted, stumbling back with an armful of angry woman. Sam scrambled for the shovel, intent on breaking the rest of the way through the box.

"No!" Reed screeched bucking against Dean.

Sam saw Dean's pained expression as Reed pulled at his wounded hand, hitting the bruises on his abused body.

"Reed, you have... have to let him go..." Dean ground out through clenched teeth, trying to hold her still, trying to get through to her.

Sam raised the shovel, shooting his eyes to his brother's struggling form. He saw Frank step toward them, hand outstretched toward his niece.

"I won't," Reed panted, arching her back, her face next to Dean's, her mouth at his neck. "I won't... I'll find a way, Dean. I'll find a way to be with him again."

"You can't... it's over, Reed." Dean tightened his grip, and Sam heard him groan in pain and frustration. "Stop... stop it, Reed. Don't do this. It's over!"

"No, it's not!"

Reed flipped around in Dean's arms and swiped a hand at his face, slashing across his blood-red eye. Dean stumbled backwards, directly into Frank, and dropped her. Reed dove toward Sam and the grave.

The water funnel crashed down, turning the river into a torrential, unnatural sideways flow. The furthest from the river, Sam watched in horror as the water slammed into Dean, folding him and propelling him forcefully backwards into Frank. Reed dove toward the rush of water, directly into her father's grave. And then the water hit Sam.

It was a surge of frigid force, the weight of the water sending him tumbling away from the grave, gasping and clawing for purchase. His hands hit a tree and he gripped tightly, stopping his rush of motion. Coughing, he fought against the twisted flow of water and raised his head.

"De—" he tried, water rushing into his mouth and nose, cutting off his air. He coughed again, gagging, pulling his head up once more. "DEAN!"

He couldn't see anything, couldn't hear anything. His world had tilted. Up was down, down was up. His head spun and he gasped desperately for air.

"Dean!" he screamed again.

"ENOUGH!" he heard suddenly over the din. It was a voice he'd never heard before, but he knew instantly. "Enough... you won! Lawrence, it's over... she's yours."

The voice stopped the chaos, stilled the water, and calmed the spirit. The river simply stopped. Sam dropped to the ground beside the tree and hung his head limply, coughing out river and pulling in air. *Dean...*

Sam lifted his head and looked around. The brilliance of the stars lit up the wet land around him. The grave had filled with water. The bank of the now normally-flowing river was a churning mass of mud and bodies. Reed lay motionless next to the grave, her fingers buried deep in the earth, gripping the edge as if she were anchoring herself there. Sam turned his head and saw Frank against another tree. He had one arm wrapped around Dean's limp body as if he were holding him up.

Sam trembled with relief. Dean was there, he was still there and he was alive. Then he saw the gun.

"No..." he croaked.

He pushed himself to his feet, water dripping from his sodden clothes and running from his hair into his eyes, and stumbled toward them.

"Let him go," he rasped at Frank, curling his hands into fists.

Frank cocked the gun, pressing it against Dean's side. "Save my brother, first."

"What?"

"Take what's left," Frank said, blinking river water out of his eyes. "Bury it again. Save him."

Sam shook his head. "It won't work, man."

Frank shoved the barrel of the gun roughly into Dean's side. Dean groaned and jerked, bringing his head up, his eyes dazed, his face twisted in pain.

"It *has* to!"

"No, Frank," said the voice. Breathing hard, Sam turned and saw Luke standing next to the grave, Reed in his arms.

"Luke?" Frank's voice was confused.

Sam pulled his attention back to the cop. He watched as Dean blinked, sagging in Frank's grip, his face pulled into a grimace of pain. He was so pale the freckles across his nose stood out like beacons in the starlight.

"It's enough, Frank," Luke said. "It's enough."

"What..."

"I wanted to stop this," Luke continued, his voice heavy with sorrow, his eyes pinned to Reed's pale features. "I tried... but, I should have known she would find a way to be with him."

It hit Sam then. Luke had allowed Reed her obsession, had watched out for her, had protected her in lieu of her father. Then he realized that her obsession was going to get her—or someone else—killed. Luke knew what Frank had done to her father's body, but because he loved Reed, he'd never said anything... until he knew it was out of control. Until he knew that having her father's spirit close by could kill her. Then, he'd called John. To save her.

Taking a closer look at Reed's still face, Sam felt himself go cold. Luke had been too late. Luke's voice hadn't stopped the river. Reed had. She gave herself to the river that had taken her father. As soon as she took her last breath, Lawrence Jessup's spirit had been at rest. Lonely no longer, he had released the river, had released them.

"Reed?" Frank dropped his gun.

Seeing his opening, Sam hurried forward, grabbing Dean's upper arms and pulling his brother from Frank's grasp with little effort. Dean slumped against him, his knees buckling. He gripped the back of Sam's wet shirt with his left hand, trying to keep his feet under him. Sam shot his eyes back to Luke as he wrapped Dean's left arm over his shoulder, hoisting his brother up. He felt Dean lift his head slowly.

"When I called your dad," Luke said, looking at Sam. "I was trying to save her." Sam nodded, silent, aware that Dean's posture pulled straighter when Luke mentioned their dad. "He saved my life once, a long time ago. I kept tabs on him, knew what happened to your mama, knew what his life had been like. I knew..." Luke looked down at Reed. "I knew if anyone could save her, it would be John."

"I'm sorry he couldn't come," Sam croaked. "I'm sorry we weren't... enough."

Luke shook his head. "Lawrence had told me about her witchcraft books a long time ago. When she lost her father... I thought she was going to go crazy. She wanted to bring him back, keep him with her. I didn't know she'd finally had the means to do it until..." He looked over at Frank, his eyes hardening. "I found out that Frank had... had done what he did the same night as Reed."

"Why didn't..." Dean rasped. Sam felt his brother trembling against him from exhaustion and cold. The weight of their wet clothes pulled against Sam. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Luke kept his eyes on Frank. "He begged me, and I gave in." He closed his eyes, shaking his head in regret. "I shoulda... I know I shoulda said something, shoulda told you boys... but, I thought that maybe... maybe you would figure it out and Frank could be spared. Lawrence and Frank," Luke looked back at Sam and Dean. "They were everything to each other. I shoulda known..." He dropped his eyes back to Reed. "We lost all of them that day in this river. We just didn't realize it."

"Reed..." Frank stepped toward Luke.

"No," Luke tightened his grip on Reed's body. "You don't touch her."

Frank blinked at Luke. "I just... I just didn't want my brother to go, Luke."

"That's how it may have started," Luke said softly. "But that's not why this happened. That's not why Lawrence's spirit became a killer, what made you try to kill Dean. That's not what... what took our girl."

Dean shifted against Sam and started to pull away. Sam kept a grip on his arm, unwilling to break their connection.

"I called John Winchester to set Lawrence's spirit at peace," Luke said, looking down at Reed. "We were both wrong here, Frank. We should have told the truth from the start... hell... we could have finished it ourselves... but we didn't. And now... we've both lost. We've lost... everything."

Frank was silent. He stepped closer to Reed, reaching out to run a finger down her face. Sam swallowed, tightening his hold on Dean.

"I wanted her to leave," Luke said, watching Frank's finger travel down Reed's face. "I wanted her to go, to get away from this, to find a new life... but..."

"The world is too small," Frank said in a choked voice. "Sometimes you can't run far enough."

Sam swallowed, shifting his eyes from Reed's face to Dean's profile. The eerie stillness he saw echoed on his brother's features made him shiver.

"We have to finish this, Sam," Dean said.

"The grave is filled with water," Sam protested.

Dean looked at him, his eyes once again green, the blood washed away by the force of the river. "We gotta pull him up."

Sam nodded, then slowly released Dean's arm. He stepped over to the grave, jumping down inside the hole. The water came up to his shoulders. Holding his breath, he ducked under and found the edge of the wooden box. It was heavy—too heavy. He surfaced and blinked in surprise as he saw Frank and Luke joining him in the water-filled grave. He shot his eyes over to the side. Dean stood where he'd left him, his eyes never leaving Sam. Reed lay off to his right, her face serene.

Sam looked back to Luke, who nodded. As one, they ducked under the water and pulled the wooden box up from its swampy depths. Struggling over the edge of the muddy grave, they set the box on the ground, water pouring out from the slats and running along the river bank. Sam sat still for a moment, gasping. The salt and lighter fluid that he'd retrieved from the trunk were nowhere to be found.

Sam sprinted to the Impala, hoping they had spare supplies. He was able to find salt, but came up empty on the lighter fluid. He grabbed a book of matches. Looking back at the group standing silently around the box, he thought quickly. Reed's car was nearby. On the off chance that she had something in her car to help him finish the job, Sam jogged over quickly, grabbed the keys from the ignition and opened the trunk. A can of gasoline was secured against the side.

"This was the first one," Frank said softly as Sam pulled the planks off of the box. "This was the first place I buried him."

Lawrence Jessup's torso lay in the box, ribs in pieces, pelvic bone intact, spine bent and twisted from the force of the water. Sam glanced at Dean, concerned that his brother hadn't spoken, hadn't moved, had barely blinked since Luke's confession.

Dean was shivering, his eyes pinned to the bones jumbled inside the wet box. His left hand opened and closed in a trembling rhythm and Sam felt a pain shoot through him as he watched Dean work to square his shoulders, to bear it, to see that the job was done.

Sam dumped salt on the bones, watching as the water soaked into the crystals, then poured the gasoline over the bones.

"Hope this works," he said, setting the gas can away from the box, and lighting a match.

"Bye, Larry," Dean whispered just before Sam dropped the match in.

The rush of flame as it caught the fumes of the gasoline made everyone but Dean jump back. Sam grabbed Dean's arm gently and pulled him away from the flames. Lawrence Jessup's earthy remains disintegrated in an anticlimactic crackle of wet flame.

Sam looked over as Frank sank to his knees, his eyes on the fire. Luke turned and gathered Reed up in his arms, and with one backward glance at Sam, he carried her to the Falcon. Sam didn't worry about how Frank would get back. It was a mere five miles to the surveyor's office and town. Frank could take care of himself that far.

"Dean," Sam said softly. "Let's go."

Dean didn't reply, he simply allowed Sam to pull him to the Impala. Sam opened the passenger door and Dean dropped into the seat, shivering violently and staring back toward the burning bones with empty eyes. Sam frowned at him then went to the trunk and dug out two towels. He walked back up to Dean.

"Here," he said, handing his brother a towel. "We'll have to get our stuff from the hotel before we head to a clinic... or whatever they have around here."

Dean nodded silently, then reached between his shoulders with his left hand and pulled off his wet T-shirt. He dropped it on the muddy floor and wrapped the towel around his bare shoulders.

"We'll get the car cleaned out tomorrow," Sam offered, hoping to draw Dean's attention to the mess inside his beloved Impala.

Dean nodded again.

*C'mon, Dean, give me something here...*

"Let's just go, Sam," Dean said. "It's done." His eyes flicked past Sam and rested on the bent figure of Frank Jessup kneeling before his brother's burning bones. "It's over."

Sam moved around to the driver's side, a towel wrapped around his own shoulders, climbed in, and headed for the hotel.

\* \* \* \*

## Road outside of Ellicott City, 12:01 am

Eight days. Sam had eight days left.

Dean shivered. Sam had insisted that he change out of his wet clothes and Dean had been too tired to argue. Though his jeans were dry, and the long-sleeved gray Henley was layered with Sam's green hoodie and his own leather jacket, he didn't think he'd ever be warm. He leaned his head against the open window, letting the cool air wash over him, stinging the open gash on his forehead, pulling moisture from his eyes, rushing air into his still-bruised lungs.

The music was a balm in the tense silence filled with unspoken words. Dean blinked slowly and listened as the radio station switched from Billy Squire's *Lonely is the Night* to Breaking Benjamin's *Breath*. His lips folded down in a frown at the universe's idea of irony.

"Roll up your window, Dean," Sam instructed suddenly.

"It's okay," Dean replied.

"You're shivering," Sam pointed out.

"Leave it, Sam," Dean pleaded. He was having enough trouble breathing as it was; he needed the wind. He needed the air. He needed the space.

*So sacrifice yourself*

*And let me have what's left*

*I know that I can find*

*A fire in your eyes*

*I'm goin' all the way*

*Get away, please*

"I called the county sheriff's station with an anonymous tip about the boy's killer, like Luke suggested," Sam said. "They should be by to question Frank in the morning."

"K."

"I know it was really Lawrence's spirit... but, it still seems like Frank's getting off easy," Sam mumbled quietly.

Dean's body shook once. "Nothing about what Frank's going through is easy, Sam."

"I guess not," Sam sighed. "Especially now... with Reed..."

"Loneliness does weird things to your head," Dean said, shifting against the open window.

He clenched his jaw against the bone-deep ache in his hand, and relished with perverse pleasure the cut of pain that shot up his arm and through his body when he tried unsuccessfully to close his fingers. The pain was real, the pain was now. The pain reminded him that he had time... he had eight days.

"We'll be at the ER in about 10 minutes," Sam said, worry plain in his voice.

"Fine," Dean closed his eyes.

He knew the cut on his hand was infected. He knew his head was going to require stitches. He knew the ER would ask questions. He knew Sam could have handled one wound, but not the other. He knew that they were doing what they needed to do to keep going, to get the job done.

He knew the logic, but he didn't care. He wanted to tell Sam to head south to Mexico. North to Canada. He wanted to keep his brother away from Haris at all costs. He wanted to lay low, play it safe, keep away from evil, from people in need, from daughters meddling with forces they didn't understand, from spirits of brothers who had once been good.

He wanted just for a moment to forget that there were bad things in the world, to forget that they knew how to fight them, to stop them. But Frank was right. The world was too small. There was nowhere for Winchesters to hide.

*This will be all over soon*

*Pour the salt into the open wound*

*Is it over yet?*

*Let me in*

"We did the right thing here, Dean," Sam tried to reassure him. "We did what Dad wanted us to do."

"I know," Dean said, a chill wracking through him and causing him to wrap his arms as tight around him as his wounds would allow. "I know, Sam," he repeated.

He saw Sam move out of the corner of his eyes and felt a blanket that they'd taken from the hotel settle over him. He tried to shift upright, to fight the weakness in his body, the heavy pull of his heart, but Sam lay a restraining hand on his shoulder.

*You take the breath right out of me*

*And left a hole where my heart should be*

*You've gotta fight just to make it through*

*Cause I will be the death of you.*

"Lay still, Dean," Sam commanded. "Just for a bit, okay?"

He saw Sam cut his eyes over to him and pulled away, the need in Sam's eyes to make things okay, to make Dean believe that Sam had done the right thing, was suffocating him. He faced the wind of the open window, pulling in the swiftly flowing air into his lungs, letting it steady the rush of his heart. He heard Sam roll his own window down and felt the bands around his chest ease a bit.

"Just breathe, Dean," Sam said softly. "We'll keep the windows open as long as you need."

Dean closed his eyes. *The world is too small...*

"What?" Sam asked, looking over. Dean didn't realize he'd spoken aloud.

"The world is just too damn small, Sammy."

Sam rested his hand back on Dean's shoulder and drove.

**The End**