

Episode Four: Devil Inside By Gaelicspirit & Sojourner

*"A reverence for life does not mean you have to respect nature's obvious mistakes."
-- Robert Heinlein, Have Space Suit Will Travel*

Boston, MA, Low-income housing, Night

The minute she stepped through the door to her apartment, a damp winter coat fell to the ground, and high-heels were flung across the room and into the far corner between the couch and the doorway to her bedroom, declaring an end to a day of plastic smiles and yes ma'ams. There were times that being the assistant to a 'big wig' wasn't worth the money it bequeathed. She leaned against the door, letting it shut with more force than necessary, but gaining satisfaction from the loud crack potentially disturbing the neighbor who had no qualms about playing his hippie music at four in the morning.

"I swear, Rex," she sighed, padding across the room in her nylon stockings and addressing the large goldfish circling the fat bowl. "Men invented women's clothes just to get back at us for being smarter."

She sprinkled a few flakes of food in Rex's bowl, then turned toward the kitchen, reaching back to unhook her bra strap with a languid sigh of end-of-the-day satisfaction. Shifting her shoulders and sliding the straps free through her sleeves in a clever maneuver that fascinated every boyfriend who'd witnessed such a trick, she tossed the lacy, white garment over a high-backed chair.

Opening the fridge, she pulled out a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale, popped off the cap with the bottle opener fixed to the underside of her countertop, catching the cap in her palm, taking a long drink before closing the door once more. A note, attached to the door with a Red Sox magnet and written in the ink of the green sharpie she saved for important things like grocery lists and phone numbers, caught her eye.

Meggin –

Couldn't fix the shower. Called plumber. He came, he saw, he kicked its ass. You should have hot water now. You owe me a beer.

Lock your door.

Jimmy

Plucking the note from the fridge, Meggin grinned.

"You my brother or my mother?" she muttered affectionately at the paper in the quiet of her small apartment, mind already on the hot shower she'd been looking forward to all day.

Jimmy's admonishment to lock her door went unheeded just as it had the other seven million times he cautioned her. She lived in an eclectic neighborhood where all were welcome and there were no strangers. That preference of freedom over safety never sat well with her big brother, but Meggin enjoyed the Bohemian lifestyle.

Except at four in the morning... Completely missing the swinging chain on the door she crossed from the kitchen to her bedroom, dropping the note and the bottle cap into the waste basket in the living room on her way. She flicked on the stereo in the corner before setting her beer bottle down on the dresser.

The opening beats of bass guitar and drums thrummed through the room and Meggin frowned. She picked up a CD case from the top of the stack next to her stereo and wrinkled her nose. *Filter* was definitely her brother's style of music. Setting the case back down on top of her collection of George Strait, she shook her head.

"Jimmy," she sighed, sliding the elastic of the cursed pantyhose free from her waist and rolled them down her legs, relishing the feel of air against her bare legs as *Hey Man, Nice Shot* shook through the small room. "Still can't keep yer hands offa my stuff..."

"They think that your early ending was all wrong; for the most part they're right, but look how they all got strong."

Large hands caught her from behind, fingers curling over her shoulder. She jumped, dropping the stockings to the floor as confusion skittered free from her brain and panic jabbed hard behind her eyes.

Jimmy? Who--

The hands turned her around roughly, the backs of her thighs bumping against the foot of her bed.

"What—" Meggin stuttered, fear slowing her tongue. *Strange man... in my room... touching... strange man touching me... move... gotta move... gotta...* A scream of denial stalled in her throat, choking her.

"Shoulda listened to him, Meggin." The voice was soft, almost sad. The eyes, though...the eyes were manic, strange, cold. "Now you won't get the chance."

A wide mouth grew into an exaggerated smile and Meggin could smell mint—strong and harsh, like a cleaning agent—on his skin. He slid his left hand from her shoulder, caressing her neck, cheek, hair.

"No," Meggin whimpered. His other hand splayed across her chest, fingertips touching each of her collarbones, palm between her breasts. "No, no, no." She shook her head roughly as the music built, lyrics screaming in her head.

"You'd fight and you were right - but, they were just too strong."

He pushed her back on the bed, grabbing her wrist before she could scramble away.

No no no... this isn't happening... this isn't happening... "This isn't happening!" Meggin closed her eyes, shaking her head in a rough denial as her own voice choked her.

"It's happening, honey," the man's soft voice slid through the air, thick with anticipation, and caressed her ear with sick dread. *"I'm happening. To you."*

For an instant, Meggin thought of fighting back. Thoughts of shoving her knee into his groin, her palm into his throat, her thumbs into his eyes flashed through her head with the speed of a heartbeat and were just as quickly dismissed. She was frozen; rendered helpless... and he knew it. *Oh God oh God...*

Don't fight and he'll go away...don't fight and it will be over soon...don't fight and he won't hurt you...he's not taking you...he's not doing this to you...it's your body, but it's not you...you aren't here...you're not here...you're not here... Her internal chant kept her from crying out as he climbed on top of her, tore her clothes free, destroyed any vestige of innocence she'd maintained throughout her twenty-five years.

His voice whispered dark promises as he moved over her. His breath hot with sin, and his hands...his hands were everywhere. Then he went silent and Meggin disappeared inside of herself. She closed her internal eyes against the image she knew she'd see if she opened up and saw what was happening to her.

The minute it was over, Meggin rolled to her side, tears choking her, burning her eyes, searing her face as they fell unheeded. She couldn't blink. Her eyes fixed on Rex circling his water bowl on the credenza between her bedroom and the living room as lazily as he had when she'd first stepped into the apartment.

Should have gotten a dog...

Suddenly, she realized he wasn't leaving. He stood at the foot of her bed, pants still undone, shirt bunched at his waist, hands caressing something...familiar. Turning her head a fraction of an inch, Meggin saw he was sliding her nylon stockings through his fingers, fingertips inching along the length of them. With a terrified thrust of air, Meggin began to crawl backwards on her bed, thinking only to get away from his hands.

"Now, where do ya think yer goin'?"

Her eyes shot up to his face and her terror was complete. Liquid pleasure hung heavy in his eyes as he knelt on the bed, scooting closer to her. Excitement missing

when he assaulted her danced across his features. He raised the stockings and leaned close to her throat.

As the nylon wrapped tightly around her throat, Meggin's brain sent signals scattering into her limbs that were ignored. Her thoughts tripped over each other as she tried to claw at the tightening noose. Life evacuated on a desperate denial that this wasn't happening to her...this happened to other people, but not to her...

The nylon tightened as his strong hands tore her future away. The last thing Meggin saw was the twisted, dark smile of delight spreading across his generous lips, and she died with the words, "It's good to be back," echoing in her ears.

Marlborough, MA, early evening, Two Days Later

As they passed the sidewalk musician nimbly plucking Zeppelin's *The Wanton Song* on an acoustic guitar, Dean was compelled to dump the last of his change into the open case at the player's feet.

"Thank ya, brother," the player nodded, continuing with the complicated dance of fingers across strings stretched taut against the sound.

Dean tipped him a two fingered salute, continuing down the sidewalk next to Sam. The Hoagie he'd purchased at the deli two blocks away was just beginning to fill the hole of hunger gnawing at him since they'd left Leicester. Stopping Armageddon apparently had that effect on him.

"You *really* don't think we should call Dad?" Sam asked him for the fiftieth time this hour alone, staring into the bottom of his latte as if it were tea leaves and would offer him all of the answers he was seeking.

For a brief moment, Dean felt a pang of empathy toward the kid. Since they'd taken out Haris, Sam had been through a lot with little time to process. And Sam was a processor. A thinker. A *wonder what this means* rather than a *this is what we have to do* kind of guy.

Instead of giving Sam the sympathy he sought and freaking him the hell out, Dean wadded up the wax paper from his Hoagie and tossed it into the trash can across from him with an exaggerated sigh. "For the last time, Sam, no."

"Yeah, but... why?"

"What are you, eight?"

"I just think that he should know about Ferinacci... about the whole thing in Leicester. I mean, that's a pretty big deal."

Dean rolled his neck, glancing askance at Sam's worried eyes, tightening his expression into one of disinterest. He was an expert at hiding the truth beneath a thin film of lies.

"Believe me, Sam," he said, licking his wind-chapped lips and shove his hands deep into his jacket pockets. "Dad knows. Or will soon enough. He has his ways of finding things out—or didn't you get that when he just showed up in the desert?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"But nothing." Dean cut him off eyeing the newspaper stand he could see in the distance. "He left us, right? We didn't leave him. If there's anything I've learned it's Dad can take care of himself. Plus, we're big boys. We can handle the little devil on our own." He paused, dropping his eyes in thought. "Besides," he said, the confession slipping out despite his cocky swagger. "Last time he came when I called, he almost got killed."

"Dean," Sam said softly, pulling Dean to a stop by the edge of his jacket sleeve. "You couldn't have known."

Dean waved a hand at him, dismissing the forgiving eyes. "Forget it," he said. "That's done. We're here in... Cigaretteville."

"Marlborough," Sam corrected.

“Like I said.”

“Spelled different.”

Dean raised an eyebrow at him, moving down the sidewalk. “You see words in your head when you talk, don’t you?”

Sam shot him a surprised glance, folded his lips down, then silently sipped his latte.

“Nice place, though,” Dean offered.

“Least it’s not raining locusts or flooded with frogs or something else...plagueish,” Sam commented. “Leicester was...”

“Weird.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed.

They continued to walk in companionable silence for a few beats, enjoying the peace of the quaint downtown, the cool of the night. The air was crisp, smelling of coffee and bread and soap. Dean found himself explicably thinking of neighborhood cookouts, pick-up basketball games, sitting on the front stoop with a beer in hand and a woman pressed close. Things that real people did. Things that happened on nights like this. Things that weren’t meant to be his.

He and Sam traveled in a different orbit from normal. He had to be okay with that. Especially now the Devil was in the world.

Demons and devils...it’s always something, Dean thought with a touch of melancholy, watching a red-headed woman approach, talking animatedly on her cell phone, blue eyes bouncing to his, lighting up momentarily, then drifting away as she walked past. Dean dropped his chin, rotating to follow her with his eyes and admire the rear view.

“Dean.”

“Hmm?”

“Eyes front.”

“Damn, Sammy,” Dean turned, grinning good-naturedly at his brother. “Always spoiling my fun.”

“Don’t need your *fun* getting us into trouble.”

Dean tapped Sam with his elbow. “So serious,” he teased as they approached the newsstand. “Guess I’ll have to find my fun elsewhere.”

Sam sighed as Dean approached the magazine section, selecting one covered with a brown wrapper. Only the eyes and the wind-blow red hair of the cover model and the word *Penthouse* were visible. Dean turned the magazine to face Sam, bouncing his eyebrows lasciviously then turned back to the racks when Sam simply rolled his eyes and turned away, watching the cars pass on the street.

Dean grabbed a Twix, two bags of Peanut M&Ms, and a Rollo for Sam, turned to get in line to pay when his eyes caught the large, bold letters of the Boston Times newspaper stacked on the ground at the base of the magazine rack.

Boston Strangler Copy Cat Killer Claims 5th Victim

Curiosity creasing his forehead, Dean bent down and picked up one of the thick papers, hefting it for balance, then stepped up to the cashier. Handing over his money, he tucked the candy into his pockets, rolled the *Penthouse* and shoved it into his waistband, then flipped the paper over to read the cover story.

Sam dragged his eyes from a blank observation of the traffic when he realized Dean started walking once more. Jogging to catch up, he started to talk, compelled to fill in the gaps left between them by his brother’s silence.

“You realize I’ve never been possessed, Dean? Not once. The...spirit...thing in Leicester tried, but...and I mean, you have—twice now. Dad has. But not me. And it was my blood that took out Haris. That has to mean something, right? That dog...he went after me. And Gudrun... I mean—Dean, are you even listening to me?”

Dean nodded. "Yeah, Sam. Possessed, blood, some deeper meaning in all of this..."

"You're such a jerk." Sam tossed his empty coffee cup away.

"Bitch," Dean answered automatically, eyes still on the paper.

"What are you reading?" Sam looked over Dean's shoulder.

Dean tilted the paper so Sam could see. "Boston Strangler's back."

"What?" Sam's voice was incredulous. "Didn't he die in the '60's?"

"'73 actually," Dean corrected, reading, "The historically conscious will recognize the pattern of these five murders as eerily similar to the murders allegedly committed by Albert DeSalvo—"

Dean stopped when Sam's arm prevented him from stepping into traffic as he read. The light changed and they crossed, then Dean continued.

"DeSalvo was sentenced to life in prison in 1967, subsequently escaped, was recaptured, and then murdered in 1973 while in custody."

"And now there is a copy cat?" Sam asked.

"Looks like," Dean flipped the paper over and pulled the magazine from his waistband, ripping off the brown paper and flipping open to the middle. "Nice," he grinned, nodding appreciatively.

"For God's sake," Sam shook his head, snagging Dean's sleeve and pulling him down the alley access to their motel. "You're impossible."

"Loosen up, Sammy." Dean bounced his elbow against Sam. "You're too tense. Here." He held out the magazine.

"I don't want your porn, Dean," Sam grumbled, pulling out the old-school motel key and unlocking their ground-floor room.

"You could get your own," Dean suggested, dropping the magazine and paper onto the table, shrugging out of his jacket. "I could...y'know, take a walk..."

"Shut up," Sam snapped, flopping on the bed and toeing off his boots. "What's with you, anyway?"

Dean shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just... restless, or something."

"Or something," Sam muttered, grabbing the remote and flipping through stations with the speed of an expert channel surfer.

"Ready to get out of these little towns," Dean dropped onto the chair, fidgeting with the folded up corner of the paper. "Too many freaky things happen in small towns no one's heard of."

"Freaky things happen in big cities, too," Sam said.

"Let's go to Boston."

Sam looked over at him. "Huh?"

"Boston! C'mon, Sam," Dean leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees, his hands tented with a steeple of fingers. "We could check out a game at Fenway, buy some tea..."

"Tea?!"

"Or... lager," Dean amended, sitting back and hooking an arm over the back of the chair. "What do you say?"

"Since when are you a tourist?"

"Since we killed that damn demon and turned the Devil loose."

"All the more reason we shouldn't be fooling around."

Dean pushed to his feet. "Oh, okay, Sam. You're right. We'll go look for Lucifer and—oh, wait... hmmm. We don't know where to find him."

Sam huffed, turning his attention back to the TV.

"Better yet," Dean continued, stepping forward until he blocked Sam's view of the TV. "If we did find him, we got no idea how to take out friggin' Satan."

"I got it, okay?" Sam mumbled.

"So how's about that ballgame at Fenway?"

Sighing, Sam flicked off the TV, tossing the remote onto the nightstand between the beds.

"Fine," he agreed, standing up and grabbing some sweats and a T-shirt from his bag before he headed to the bathroom. "Not like we know where Dad is...or what he's doing. We've got no hunt to speak of. And... you're right."

"Course I am," Dean replied. Then frowned. "About what?"

Sam paused in the bathroom doorway. "We don't know how to kill the Devil."

The worry that slipped out with those words rode shotgun on Dean's thoughts the rest of the evening, dogging him while they flipped stations, catching a rerun of *Simon & Simon* and laughing about the 1980's styles. Sam commented Dean would be right at home with the big pick-up and smelly dog while Dean returned Sam was just the type to wear a friggin' suit every day while driving a Trans-Am.

Soon, though, Sam's breathing slowed and Dean felt the tension in the air dissipate as his brother relaxed into oblivion. Unable to wind down, Dean continued to flip stations, the sound turned low to not disturb Sam. He ended up watching a special on the Discovery channel about Jack the Ripper and shook his head at the eerie timing of serial killer mania.

Turning off the TV, Dean looked over at Sam. Sprawled across his bed, one arm tucked above his head and under his pillow, the other draped casually over his chest, Sam looked about fifteen. One long leg was hanging off of the bed and Dean knew the chill in the air would wake him soon. Standing, Dean gently lifted Sam's leg onto the bed, tucking it carefully beneath the covers and switched off the lamp on Sam's side of the nightstand.

He glanced at his bed, contemplating sleep and dismissed the idea. His body was humming like an idling engine. He felt jazzed, high, like he did when he had a hunt, a purpose, an order. Worrying his bottom lip between his thumb and forefinger, he glanced around the room. There were ways to dispel this kind of energy, he knew.

He picked up the *Penthouse*, sat on his bed, and began to flip through the pictures. His lips quirked with appreciation, his eyebrows rose in surprise. At one picture, he was forced to not only tilt his head, but turn the magazine sideways to get the full effect of the pose.

"Useless," he muttered after awhile, tossing the magazine aside. The normal ways to release the pent up feeling of energy weren't going to work, apparently.

He stood again, wandering to the table where he'd discarded his jacket, and dug out one of the Twix bars. Sam mumbled unintelligibly in his sleep, rolling over and burying his head in the soft confines of his pillow. Unwrapping the Twix, Dean ate half of one before it started tasting like dust.

"Blech," he exclaimed softly, wadding up the rest and tossing it in the trash can.

Running his hands along the sides of his face and lacing his fingers behind his head, he twisted back and forth in place, quietly so as not to disturb Sam, but desperate to chill out, to come down from his amped up, on-the-hunt, ready-to-fight high.

"Gotta get out of here," he whispered to himself, reaching for his coat. As he did, his eyes hit the bold headlines of the newspaper once more.

Picking it up, Dean scanned the facts of the article, his eyes picking out phrases and words. *Eerily similar M.O.... almost as if DeSalvo had whispered facts to the killer...waiting for the next one...stockings...strangulation...rape...*

At an abbreviated snore from Sam, Dean glanced over, then set the paper down. Something was nagging at him. Something pushed him into suggesting Boston to Sam. Something was there... Dean looked at Sam again, and then at his laptop lying closed on the table, charged and ready to go.

He paced a few steps away from the computer, stealing surreptitious glances at his sleeping brother. Stepping back toward the computer, Dean traced a hesitant finger across the top. The feather-light caress was pensive, filled with curiosity and doubt. *Sam would flip if he caught me using his precious computer...but, what's the harm in just looking up a few things...as long as I don't get caught...*

As if shoplifting for the first time, Dean unplugged the computer and tucked it under his arm, grabbed a notebook and pen, then darted toward the bathroom. He glanced once more at Sam, ducked inside quietly, shutting the door after himself. Sitting on the cool, tile floor, he opened the laptop screen and booted up the machine.

When connection was verified, Dean typed *Boston Strangler* in the search window and began writing down facts in a scrawl only he had hope of reading. After about thirty minutes, he'd filled two pages with notes on the Strangler, and his boxer-shorts-clad legs were feeling the heat of the computer. He grabbed a towel from the rack above the toilet and slid it between his legs and the computer.

"Damn thing is like holding an oven," he muttered to himself, reaching back between his shoulders and pulling his T-shirt off, his back against the tile. "That's better."

From Albert DeSalvo and Boston, Dean began to search facts on copy cat killers. They were rarer than he'd first thought, especially this many years later. Suspicions ratcheting up, he started to search for other serial killers. What he found surprised him. *Patterns*. All killers followed patterns—supernatural or otherwise. It just took being able to see with the right eyes to find them. Only now, patterns previously played out in years past were spreading into the here and now.

"Boston, Chicago, New York..." Dean muttered, lips pressed out in thought, eyes darting from screen to paper, hand scurrying in quick notes. "Eat your heart out, Sam Winchester," he smirked. "You aren't the only one that can work Internet magic."

Time disappeared as he continued to search and the gray light of dawn was masked by the light from the computer monitor. When the bathroom door suddenly opened, Dean jumped, looking up hurriedly at Sam standing in the doorway, hand paused mid-rub at his sleep-heavy eyes.

"Dude!" Sam exclaimed.

Dean frowned, then understanding dawned quickly as he looked at himself, T-shirt wadded next to him, towel across his bare legs, computer on his lap.

"It's not what you think!" Dean hastened to protest.

"That's just sick," Sam shook his head, backing away.

Dean closed the computer, clamoring to his feet. "Seriously," he tried again, following Sam out into the bedroom. "I was working."

"I don't need to know what you call it," Sam waved a hand in the air, not looking back at Dean as he grabbed his jeans and long-sleeved shirt.

"I'm serious!"

"Whatever you say, man," Sam said.

"Hey, you're the one that just barged in," Dean pointed out.

Sam scratched the back of his head. "Well, I sure as hell promise to knock from now on."

Pressing his lips together in a frown, Dean set the laptop on the table, unable to let Sam's embarrassment go without one jab. "Your favorites have been upgraded, though, man. You can thank me later."

Sam spun around and looked at him, disbelief on his face.

Dean laughed. "I'm just kidding."

"You better be."

"Don't be such a wussy."

"I find one sticky key and you're buying me keyboard cleaner," Sam muttered, pushing past Dean toward the bathroom and the shower.

"Might not want to touch that towel on the floor in there," Dean teased.

"Dude, seriously!"

"I'm kidding!" Dean laughed. The bathroom door shut. "Sammy, Sammy, Sammy," Dean shook his head, looking down at the pad of notes he'd taken. "Wait until you see this."

Next Morning, Marlborough, MA

The noise of the morning crowd gradually rose and fell against them, gathering speed and volume with every body that packed into the small, popular diner. They were holed up in a corner booth, blending into the familiar drone of clinking dishes, and scattered conversation. The only thing that would have set them apart like Technicolor against black and white would be if anyone could hear their conversation.

“Would you stop whining about your stupid computer?” Dean sighed. “I didn’t do anything but my job, okay?”

He tapped the notebook in front of him with two fingers to drive the point home. He still hadn’t revealed the contents of his research as proof of his claims. It was too much fun to watch Sam squirm. Or, rather, had been fun. When every other subject change was back to Sam bemoaning his freakin’ lap top, it was starting to lose its humorous edge.

“I just...didn’t want to wake you up.”

Sam was hunched over the table, looking down at his empty place mat once again like he expected the solution to appear in one of the coffee stains. “Maybe I can get keyboard cleaner at Office Depot.”

“Dude! Enough. Look, you don’t want to know? Fine.”

Dean shoved the notebook to the side, and watched Sam’s eyes follow it to its resting place alongside the ketchup and hot sauce. He could see the curiosity pique and knew his brother was hooked. Dean’s smile tipped up at one corner before he set back in the booth with a contented sigh, waiting to hear Sam relent. He didn’t have to wait long.

“You’re not gonna tell me?” Sam asked.

“Oh, gee, I don’t know, Sam. Hey, maybe Office Depot has a two for one special running.”

Sam grabbed up the notebook, flipping through it quickly, his expression building from confusion to awe. “Did you—?”

“Research? Uh, yeah, that’s kind of the point I’ve been driving home, genius.”

“How can you read this?” Sam asked, still flipping through Dean’s scrawl. “Maybe Dad could read this...” Sam said, turning the notebook in his hand and canting his head to the right, then the left. “No. He’d probably give up...What the—is that the Impala?” He flipped through again. “Did you make a flip book animation of the Impala?”

“I got bored around three a.m...Took a study break,” Dean started, sounding defensive. His smile returned however with a hint of pride. “Pretty good, huh?”

Sam raised his eyebrow. “It looks like a box on wheels, Dean.”

“Give me that!” Dean said indignantly, reaching across the table and ripping the notebook out of Sam’s hands, grumbling. “Wouldn’t know brilliance if it bit you in the ass.”

Sam’s face lit up, a prelude to a sputtered laugh as he tried to keep a straight face. Dean grumbled to himself as he flipped open to the first page of notes he’d created.

“Laugh it up, Sammy. This is quality research right here. I designed it to be...unreadable. Cryptic. My eyes only. Oh, would you *cut it out* already?”

“Sorry,” Sam laughed, coughing and coming back with a more stoic expression. “Sorry, Dean. So let’s hear what you have.”

Dean dove in, settling into a mode like he owned the research scribbled out in his nobody-can-read, physician-like scratch. He knew Sam was the one to look at the details, but he was proud he’d been able to see the patterns, look past what other, including Sam yesterday, only saw as coincidental occurrences.

"That paper the other day, on the fifth murder in Boston, got me thinkin'," Dean started. "Led me to look for similar events, copy-cat murders, and found the Strangler isn't the only one making a comeback. I was able to find murder cases recently which look a whole hell of a lot like John Wayne Gacy's work. He killed thirty-three people in Chicago in the 70's..."

Sam shifted, visibly uncomfortable, his mouth folding down. "Wait, isn't that the guy known as the Killer Clown?"

Dean gave Sam a *don't turn into a girl on me, Samantha* look, his mouth quirking. "I almost forgot how you feel about clowns, Sammy."

That response was returned with a *yeah, right* look from Sam, and Dean held up his hands in defense.

"I know you hate the happy bastards; run screaming like a girl in the other direction every time one's standing outside the carwash, but don't start freaking out on me."

Sam huffed shaking his head. "Like I'm the only one with an *'irrational'* fear."

Dean gave him an innocent look. Sam rolled his eyes. Before any talk of their recent adventures in flying could be brought up, the waitress returned with breakfast balanced on one arm, coffee for warm-ups in the other hand. She slid the plates in front of them first. The aroma of bacon and eggs, short stacks, and fresh coffee curled up into their nostrils and forced a brief armistice between the two.

Not more than two bites of scrambled eggs made passage down Dean's throat before Sam started back in again.

"You want to know why I never liked clowns, Dean?"

Dean muffled a 'this ought to be good' into his coffee.

"Because of that guy. Because of Gacy," Sam continued. "Because clowns are creepy as hell to begin with, but to have someone like Gacy dressing up like them at neighborhood block parties, claiming that apparently, 'A clown can get away with murder,' and yeah, I hate the 'happy bastards'." He violently jammed his fork into his pancakes, before shoving a forkful into his mouth while his eyes darted around the restaurant warily. "Was there a point to all this?"

Dean pointed listlessly at his notes. "Trying to get there."

"Fine."

"So, Pogo," Dean started, another smirk inevitable as Sam's eyes narrowed.

"Dean."

"What? His clown name was Pogo."

Sam ran a hand down his face, distorting and hiding the fratricide that would be written there. "Please. Don't call him...Pogo..."

"Noted. Sorry. Pog-er-Gacy, as you know, went after boys and young men, and in Chicago over this last month there have been six disappearances of boys between the ages of twelve and twenty-four. All were at neighborhood parties before they went MIA, and all of those started about the same time as the Boston killings. Two of the bodies were found in the river..."

"Matching Gacy's modus operandi?" Sam said, a hint of skepticism plain in his voice. "How is this our kind of gig again?" He bit into a piece of bacon, ticking off points on his fingertips. "First of all, Gacy was given something like twenty-one consecutive life sentences and twelve death sentences. They made sure he bit the big one in '94. Second, if these are copy cat killers, that's the cops' jurisdiction, not ours. You can't—"

"I'm not finished," Dean butted in, flipping through more of the worn notebook. "You're gonna love this one."

Sam sighed and leaned back in the both, one arm hooked over the back of the seat. "I don't see how I can *love* something about people being killed, Dean."

Dean frowned a little, wishing Sam would just cut him a break. He'd researched this—alone—and there was a connection, a reason, a concluding point. But, Dean was a showman. He liked to build to the climax of the reveal, not just throw it out

there. Then again, it might have fared out less painful if he'd just come right out and said what he was thinking. He could have avoided a pissy Sam and his eggs wouldn't be getting cold and soggy.

Clearing his throat as he found what he was looking for, Dean pointed to his chicken-scratch. "New York, the .44 Caliber Killer."

Sam's eyes rocked up before closing, disbelief exuding from his expression before the words even left his lips. "You gotta be kidding me... *Son of Sam?*"

Dean pointed the pen he'd started tapping against the table at his brother. "Bingo." "Greeaat. The 'devil in my neighbor's dog made me do it' killer. David Berkowitz."

"In the last month, there have been five bodies found in New York shot with a .44 caliber pistol in their cars or on their front stoops. No apparent motive, not in a gang-related area, just bam, dead."

"I don't know Dean..."

"You're telling me this isn't even remotely reeking of our kind of job?" Dean asked in disbelief. "In the last month, there have been sixteen deaths, all exactly like said serial killers, all in big cities where the killers used to live, and no one has seen a pattern. Well, no one except me, *Weekly World News* and various other tabloids, who are claiming the spirits of serial killers have returned for revenge."

"Some credible sources there, Dean."

"Your faith in me is staggering," Dean said flatly.

"Well, what do you think it is, then?" Sam asked, leaning into the table.

Dean shook his head. "I don't know. But I don't believe in coincidences. Something is going on."

"Or maybe," Sam started in, pushing his half eaten breakfast aside. "You're looking for a hunt because Haris is dead, Gudrun is dead, Dad is gone, and the Devil sure as hell didn't go down to Georgia, but decided to play a gig here in Massachusetts, right in our backyard."

"And your point is?" Dean asked, opening his hands.

"You're scared Dean, and you don't know what else to do right now, but hunt."

Dean hardened his gaze and closed his notes. "You know, Sam, the simple fact the Devil is in the world is enough to believe this is a hunt."

He watched Sam regard him silently for a moment, could sense him holding back in acquiesce. Sam eventually nodded.

"Alright. We'll check it out. Boston's like what? Less than an hour away? Maybe you could call in these patterns anonymously...just in case this isn't our thing."

Dean threw down some cash, not waiting for the bill. Neither one of them looked like they were interested in finishing their food. "That wouldn't be a bad idea, as long as it doesn't get our asses caught at the next crime scene. And hey, if I'm wrong," Dean shrugged. "Fenway."

"You're brain moves on a looped tape or something," Sam groaned as he slid out of the booth.

"Yeah, yeah, wonder if there's an *Office Depot* on the way."

"Shut up."

Early Afternoon, Boston, MA

"Well, one out of five isn't so bad," Dean stated, fiddling with the tie around his neck as they walked away from their last interview. He eventually gave up the fight, slipping his finger through the knot and pulling the thing apart, letting it hang lazily about his neck, finally able to breathe again.

He looked out past the docks, across the water, and toward downtown Boston. The low sun glinted off the almost metallic surface, and reflected off the towers in the distance. The view drew him in for a beat before the invisible rope between him and

Sam pulled taut and he realized he was falling behind Sam's enormous stride. He jogged to catch up and skipped a little back into step.

"You pissed at me or something?" He asked innocently.

"No." The tone didn't exactly fall in sync with the answer.

"You only go Greta Garbo on me when you're pissed," Dean muttered.

Sam halted his almost exaggerated trudge and shrugged. "I don't know. Just talking with Jimmy, hearing about his sister Meggin...I know we weren't able to get a hold of the families of the other victims, but there was nothing supernatural about his story. No traces of ectoplasm, sulfur, ether, et cetera at his sister's apartment. No violent family history...I want to help him out, Dean. I do..."

"But?"

"But—the more I hear, the more I don't think this is our thing. The world's a pretty twisted place, Dean. This stuff happens all the time. This was the kind of stuff I wanted to fight back when I was at school, just in a different way."

"You mean through becoming a lawyer?" Dean asked. He flipped Sam's tie up. "A suit? So what if this doesn't look like our thing. We need to make damn sure it isn't."

"We're not vigilantes, Dean."

"Come on, I'm so Batman. You don't have to be Robin...you can be... Nightwing." Dean's grin caught at the edge, the humor a forced attempt to capture Sam's buy in.

"This could be humans attacking humans. That makes it the job of the police."

Dean raised a brow. "Were you even there when a family of sociopaths kidnapped you and tried to hunt you down to eat you? Or was that just my imagination on a bad *bender*?"

"We fell into that one, Dean. We didn't go looking for it. Look, we get too deep into this and we'll..."

Dean smirked, a crazy, half-cocked look in his eye. "We'll have no choice but to get involved."

He gave a short nod to show he'd reached his concluding statement and walked back toward the Impala again. Sliding behind the wheel, he loosened his shirt some more by popping down the top buttons, then reached for the glove box and he grabbed their ID box. Sam sank into the car, throwing his ID into the open box before leaning back against the seat.

Dean dropped his *Officer Jeff Neal* badge on top of Sam's *Officer Doug Huffman* and shook his head.

"Can't believe Jimmy's not a fan of *Boston*."

"Probably had an older brother who made him listen to *Boston* on the way to Boston," Sam said with a quick flash of a smile.

Dean reached over and turned up the tape currently in the deck. *Don't Look Back* rushed through the speakers, quickly joined after the opening guitar by Dean's voice in falsetto.

Sam should have known better.

Cap'n Fry, Boston, MA, Afternoon

The afternoon cooled off quickly, the winds coming off the water forcing Sam to reach for an extra hoodie from the trunk to layer up. Dean insisted they find out what Bean Town had to offer in the way of food, and their quest led them to the thankfully warm, but regretfully sea-side eclectic diner they were now inside. Nets, wheels from old ships, and portholes littered the room as décor. Sam had even had to duck a few low-hanging plastic seagulls before careening into a flock of them. It hadn't taken long to discover what the attraction to this place was for Dean. Deep-fat fried fish and chips for starters. That, and it was like Captain Jack Sparrow's *Hooters*.

Dean was burying one of the greasy filets in a mound of tarter sauce like a shovel before bringing it up to his mouth. The waitress returned with their drink refills and

Sam watched his brother's eyes take in every curve, both hidden and not under her red and black striped blouse.

"Get you guys anything else?" She asked, head tilted in Dean's direction, causing her long blond hair to obstruct Sam's view of her face.

Since she was really asking Dean, Sam didn't even bother a return response. Instead, he unfolded the map they'd picked up at a news stand along the way and started to mark off the locations of the murders, waiting for her to leave. When she did, Sam found it hard to grab the attention of his brother who was determined to memorize exactly what her backside looked like.

"You done?"

"Hmm?" Dean relaxed his lower lip, his eyes coming back to rest on the map. "What did you find?"

Sam shrugged and tossed the sharpie down onto the table. "We have five points...not a whole lot to go on. I thought, maybe a pentagram, but the points are too far off and that seemed too easy. There's no clear center...but maybe there isn't a connection with the proximity. Which means we'll have to try a different approach..."

Sam watched his brother frown and tilt his head to study the map. He'd seen that look before. Chicago. Meredith's apartment. Dean somehow managed to pull the Zoroastrian symbol from blood splotches, and now maybe he was seeing something Sam couldn't see.

"You got something?" Sam asked, leaning into the map.

"Maybe..." Dean replied, taking up the black marker. He started to connect the dots, making an A when he was finished. He pursed his lips in thought, tilting his head back in the other direction. "A?"

"Okaaay," Sam said, scrunching up his brow. "And 'A' stands for what exactly?"

Dean shook his head. "I can think of a lot of things, none of which are really relevant. And I highly doubt the killer is this big of a Steven Tyler fan." Sam watched Dean mull over it for a beat, eyes lighting up before he dismissed the idea. "Nah."

"What?" Sam prompted.

"Anarchy?"

Sam let that wash over him for a moment. He remembered their conversation in Leicester about the chaos happening around town, what would happen if that spread. Dean had said it would be Anarchy, with a capital A. It made sense, but other than speculation there was no way right now to assign a meaning to the A or to tell if there was even an A there on purpose.

"Beats the hell outta me." He sighed and started to fold up the map. "We should check out the area along the letter at least. Get a feel for where the killer is pulling his victims from."

Dean finished shoveling the last of his fries through some ketchup and then threw down some cash. Sam followed Dean toward the front of the restaurant, wary of the seagulls this time, vowing never again to eat at a place where he had to duck plastic birds to exit the building.

Westwood Apartment Complex, Boston, MA, Late Afternoon

"Hate to say this," Dean grumbled, slowing the Impala after he turned down the street acting as one leg of the A, "but I think we may be onto something."

Sam shook his head ruefully. "Ya think?"

The flashing lights of the ambulance, paramedic truck, and police cars were bright in the misty gloom of the East Coast afternoon. Dean narrowed his eyes against the glare, pulling his bottom lip against his teeth as he searched for an inconspicuous place to pull the distinctive Chevy over.

"Turn around," Sam instructed.

“Why?”

“Saw a carpool lot about a block back.”

“Ah,” Dean nodded, pressing the heel of his right hand against the wheel and rotating the steering wheel sharply, the tires of the big black car squealing slightly as they changed direction in the narrow street.

Sam lifted a brow, shaking his head slightly. “Way to blend.”

Dean simply slid him a look. The lot was to the left and Dean pulled in, shut the car off, and exited, flipping the keys into the palm of his hand before burying his fists deep into his coat.

“Cold as a witch’s ti—”

“Dude, seriously,” Sam cut him off.

“When exactly did you become such a saint, there, Theresa?” Dean shivered.

Sam started walking toward the lights and gathering crowd. “One of us has gotta have some class.”

Dean stopped, watching Sam’s back as his brother moved away from him. “I’ve got class.”

Sam didn’t reply, simply shot Dean a look over his shoulder.

“I’ve got your class right here,” Dean grumbled, following at a distance.

The low drone of the crowd reached them as they drew closer to the paramedic unit, exchanging a knowing glance. Dean tipped two fingers one direction, then shifted his thumb the other. Sam lifted his chin, signaling his understanding, then ducked around the opposite side of the truck from Dean.

Even as he worked to meld into the crowd, Dean found himself aware of Sam, seeing his brother’s shaggy brown head moving between the cluster of people, his shoulders hunched against the cool, damp air, his eyes searching out an easy mark. Dean followed suit, the scent of Chanel No. 5 drifting to his nostrils.

Middle aged woman, wearing powder blue, he guessed, turning to find the wearer of the perfume. Bet she’s holding a dog.

The yip caught his attention and he stepped close to a blonde woman in a black trench coat, her smooth face folded into a grimace of horrified worry.

“What happened here?” He asked softly.

She turned to him and he saw a light blue scarf knotted at the base of her throat, a small terrier tucked under her arm.

“It’s another murder,” she whispered, manicured nails flitting up to press gently at painted lips.

“Here?” Dean asked, feigning incredulity.

“Right there,” she nodded. “Look.”

Dean stepped closer to her until her shoulder was tucked against his chest, leaning around the wide body of a man who smelled like sweet onions and was holding a bag of groceries, and saw the sad, sprawled tangle of bare female legs jutting out from an opened doorway.

Something about the position—dead just this side of freedom—caused his chest to feel suddenly hollow, as if all of the air had been vacuumed out.

“Stella saw it,” Ms. Chanel continued.

“Stella?” Dean didn’t look away from the legs. He could see a small tattoo of a vine starting at the woman’s toes and twisting up around her ankle.

“Stella Reese. 435? She was just coming home.”

“And she saw it?”

Ms. Chanel nodded and the terrier in her arms yipped again, its growl a low, amusingly unthreatening sound. “She’s talking to the police now.”

Dean looked in the direction Chanel pointed, seeing Sam standing close to Stella and the cops, appearing for all the world like a shell-shocked observer. Dean bit the inside of his cheek. He could practically see Sam taking notes in his head.

“You gonna be okay?” He asked Chanel, touching her bent elbow in a gesture of concern.

She offered him a trembling smile. "Yes. Eventually."

Nodding at her, Dean turned and melted into the crowd, working his way toward Sam. They met on the other side of the paramedic unit, away from the crowd.

"What'd Stella have to say?" Dean asked in a hushed whisper.

Sam pulled his head back, surprised. "How'd you know her name was Stella?"

Dean drew his brows together. "What do you think I was doing?"

Sam shrugged. "Looked like your type from here."

"I'm no cougar hound, Sammy. Spill it."

"You were right," Sam whispered, reluctantly. "It's our kind of gig." He hurried on before Dean's self-satisfied grin became too wide. "Stella Reese was coming home and about to put her code in the main door when she heard a struggling sound."

"Hey!" A man in a gray and yellow uniform started toward them. "You two can't be near here."

"Uh, right, officer, or, uh, Mr. Fireman, sir," Dean stuttered, grabbing Sam's arm and turning him.

They walked quickly away before they could get caught in a net of questions, quiet until they reached the Impala. Dean unlocked the door, climbed in, then reached across to unlock Sam's side. Sam slid in and they shut their doors in unison, turning to face each other on the bench seat.

"So," Sam continued without missing a beat. "Stella opens the door and Cat Stewart—"

"The dead chick?"

"The dead chick," Sam nodded. "Cat Stewart is on the ground in the entrance and is fighting for her life."

"This Stella didn't do anything about it?"

"Well," Sam tipped his hands up in a shrug. "She claims she saw the guy who did it but was so scared by what she saw, she couldn't move."

"Don't keep me in suspense," Dean said, smacking the back of his hand on Sam's shoulder.

"Apparently the man had crazy black eyes—like tar, no white at all. She said it was like looking into Hell."

"Demon," Dean concluded.

"Demon," Sam agreed.

Dean twisted around to face the steering wheel, taking a breath. "Well, at least we know what to do." He rolled his head slowly to the right, his eyebrows making inverted V's as he looked at his brother. "A Devil's Trap and some latinating and it's toast."

Frowning, Sam grabbed the folded map from his pocket. He dug the Sharpie from his shoulder bag and pulled the cap off with his teeth, marking where Cat Stewart breathed her last. Dean watched as he ran a long finger to the one empty cross hatch on the figure of the A.

"Well," Sam said around the pen cap. "We've got a good idea where he's going to be next. We just don't know when."

Dean ticked his head to the left. "Gimme my book."

Sam capped the Sharpie. "Your *book*?"

Rolling his eyes, Dean bounced his head in a nod. "Yeah, dude, the notebook."

"Oh," Sam lifted his eyebrows and dug through the pack. "Your flipbook for classic cars."

Glaring at Sam, Dean grabbed the notebook offered, then turned to the page that showed the Impala's wheels spinning impressively. "Look," he said, pointing to a bulleted list of facts he'd collected. "There have been about two days between each murder."

Sam pressed his lips together. "So, we got a deadline."

Liberty Inn, Boston, MA, early evening

"You're going to wear a hole in the carpet."

"Yeah, well, lemme at that thing and I'll find some stuff out."

"You hate research."

"I like it better than doing *nothing*," Dean snapped. "I'm not just the muscle, here, Sam. I *can* research."

Sam sighed, sitting back in the creaking wooden chair, one hand on his knee, the other resting on the keyboard of his laptop. "I'm not saying you can't," he soothed. "I'm just faster at it, is all."

Dean glared at him, continuing to pace, his fingers laced behind his neck. "Fine, Nightwing. Let's hear what you have."

Ignoring the barb, Sam scrolled through his well-ordered, typed out notes to find what he'd wanted to read off to Dean. "Okay, so, DeSalvo—or whatever we want to call this Strangler—was able to get into the homes of his victims with no forced entry."

"Meaning they knew him," Dean supposed.

"Or they trusted him," Sam nodded. "Or he'd been in the house or apartment before."

Pausing in his twentieth trek across the tiny motel room, Dean dropped his hands from his neck, and rested them on his hips. "So, who do you trust? Who do you just let into your house? Who does a *woman*...a single woman, living alone let into her house?"

"Anyone she needed help from," Sam leaned further back in the chair, tipping it off its front legs and balancing on the spindly rear legs. "Cable guy, phone guy..."

"Yeah, but," Dean shook his head. "Cat was in the entranceway of her building."

"Breaks pattern," Sam frowned. "Unless..." He lifted a shoulder, looking at Dean.

"She got away?"

"Maybe...I mean it's possible. She got away from him, got all the way to the entrance when he caught her and finished the job."

"Makes sense," Dean nodded.

Sam leaned forward with a sigh. "Now we just need to figure out if there's anything common linking the five—"

"Six," Dean corrected, thinking of the tattooed ankle.

"Six victims."

Brows furrowed in concentration, Sam began to tap furiously on the keyboard. Dean watched for a full minute before becoming aware his legs were growing numb and his fingers were tingling from inactivity.

"I'm going for food," he announced, grabbing his jacket.

"Dean!"

"What?"

"Get me a salad."

"Sure thing, Princess."

When Dean returned, tossing the Impala keys on the table, Sam could smell the French fries and cheeseburgers.

"Dude, I asked you for *one* thing—"

"Untwist your boxers already," Dean snapped. He set a plastic bag with a salad, fork, and dressing packet inside next to the laptop.

"Oh." Sam dropped his hands in his lap, chagrined. "Sorry, man."

"I'm watching out for your girlish figure, Sammy." Dean pulled a six pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon from under his arm and clinked the cans on the table.

Sam opened his salad, shaking his head at Dean's often inappropriate, but purely-big-brother humor. "Wanna hear what I found?" Sam asked around a mouthful of lettuce.

"Mmmhmm," Dean nodded as he stuffed fries into his mouth.

“Kay, so,” Sam swallowed, reaching for a beer, then paused, lifting a brow at his brother. “PBR, Dean?”

“Hey,” Dean shrugged, taking a swig. “They don’t just hand out those blue ribbons, you know.”

“Anyway,” Sam dug his fork back into his salad. “Turns out each victim called a plumber from Pipe Cleaners the day before they died.”

“Heh, that’d be a crappy job,” Dean chuckled, then paused, blinking up at Sam. “Oh!”

“Yeah, *oh*,” Sam nodded.

“Same guy?”

“Haven’t gotten that far, yet,” Sam said. “But I did find out there’s an apartment building at the last intersection of the A. Here at Providence and Berkeley.”

“Yeah?” Dean wiped his mouth with a napkin, then drained his beer, crumpling the can and tossing it into the wastebasket.

Sam nodded. “Providence Apartments.”

“Got a number?”

Sam ripped off a piece of paper and handed it to Dean. Clearing his throat, Dean pulled out his cell phone, then settled himself on his chair with a crack of his neck, a shift of his shoulders, and a hitch of his hip.

“Hi, can I speak to the apartment manager, please,” Dean said into the phone, his voice smooth, deep, professional...seductive. “Absolutely, this is... Howard Hunt from Pipe Cleaners plumbing service. Hi, Susan.” Dean grinned into the phone and gave Sam a thumbs up.

Sam rolled his eyes mouthing *Watergate*, Dean?

Dean lifted a shoulder lobbing back a *what?* before returning his attention to Susan. “Yeah, I’m so embarrassed to tell you this, but, it seems we had an...information leak and I need to confirm some appointments in your building coming up over the next several days. Can you help me with that? Fantastic!”

Sam watched Dean work, his charm slipping across the phone lines through his smile and teasing up the necessary information. As Dean closed the call with a *thank you, absolutely, you’ve saved my life, seriously*, Sam could practically see Susan melting on the other end of the phone.

Snapping the phone shut, Dean tossed it on the table next to his keys with a sigh. “Well, we’ve got two possibilities. The day after tomorrow, same building, different floors. Apparently they’re doing maintenance checks or something.”

“Well, I don’t think we can sneak into both apartments and paint Devil’s Traps on the ceiling,” Sam said, rubbing his chin with the tips of his fingers.

“We gotta catch this bastard before he goes in.”

Two days later...

Providence Apartments, Boston, MA, Evening

The last light of the day was disappearing down the street behind them, lengthening the shadows that served as coverage for their stakeout. The Impala was tucked in a small lot with a clear view of the front of Providence Apartments. They’d spent the day there, waiting for someone who fit the description the witness at the last crime scene had given the police. Not one non-resident had stepped up to the door.

“I want to change the channel,” Dean exhaled, wadding up the empty bag of chips he’d just inhaled and throwing it behind him. “You sure there was no other way in?”

“Not without forced entry, and if this demon likes to play the roll of the Strangler, then he’ll just waltz in there with the knowledge these women know him and will just let him in.”

Dean reached over the seat, rifling through the duffel in the back to double check their supplies. With the last hint of evening dying off and the street lamps crackling to life, they'd have the dark they needed to set up their trap in the alley.

"Great idea with the *Clearneon*," Dean said, holding up an aerosol can before shoving it in the bag. "Means no one will see my box-on-wheels artwork."

Sam shook his head. "You're right. Sure you don't want me to draw the trap?"

Dean grabbed the whole duffel and pulled it into the front seat between the two of them, glaring. "I can handle it. Thanks."

Metallica's *Sad But True* was playing and Dean listened to the lyrics for a beat. Something about them was forming a question in his mind.

You, You're my mask

You're the one who's blamed

Do, Do my work

Do my dirty work, scapegoat

Do, Do my deeds

For you're the one who's shamed

"Why would a demon even bother killing humans like this?" Dean asked suddenly. He rubbed at the light scruff starting to show around his mouth.

"I was just wondering that," Sam replied, shifting in his seat. "I mean, what's up with playing serial killer when we know they are capable of so much more on their own power? And is it just me, or does it seem like they are at every turn now?"

"Feels that way and yeah, you've got me..." Dean trailed off. "Keep thinking about Ferenacci's operation in Leicester. He was letting all of those tortured souls out, and who knows, maybe some demons got out too. Then again, Bobby did say a long time ago more and more of those freaks were out taking joy rides." Dean shrugged. "Devil in the world isn't exactly helping things out either."

There was a silence that rushed in at that moment, even though Hetfield's voice slid through their ears. They both felt the gravity of Dean's last statement, but there was no solution in sight, nothing to grasp at to relieve it in any way. There was no surface to the water it felt like they'd been forced into.

I'm your dreams

I'm your eyes

I'm your pain

You know it's sad but true, sad but true

Dean turned off the tape deck and slipped his hand through the straps of the duffel. "Let's go ask this freak ourselves."

Utilizing the coverage of the dark and the alley dumpster, Dean set to work drawing the Devil's Trap with the invisible black-light spray paint. He kept his eyes moving between the trap and the ends of the passage, the muscles in his limbs twitching with anticipation of the demon finding them too early.

That would be just what we'd need... Dean finished up the outer edge of the sigil quickly, shifting his weight between feet in his couched position. He could hear music coming from one of the apartments above, and he knew it would take just one person looking down to catch him 'defacing' city property. *Now **that** would be just what we'd need.*

He could feel Sam's eyes urging him to move faster, and when he looked back at his brother who was supposed to be watching the front of the apartment, he could see his nervous expression illuminated by the streetlamps above. Dean shot him a *little faith here* look, and Sam reluctantly went back to his vigil.

Dean finished, clicking off the light he was using and capping the paint. He stood up from behind the dumpster, lifting the duffel he had with him to his shoulder and started back toward Sam.

The man seemed to materialize out of the darkness behind his brother, and before Dean could get a warning past his lips Sam was sent flying, limbs pin-wheeling, into a row of garbage cans.

Dean dropped the duffel and punched into a full sprint, pushing to get to Sam before the demon did. He couldn't cross the space between them fast enough. A thin, nylon rope dropped from the man's black-gloved hand, slipped into the other, and came back around Sam's throat, biting into the soft tissue of his neck.

Time seemed to slow down and speed up at a disorienting pace. Dean's feet were twisted out from under him, his whole body slammed into the wall, where the air was ejected from his lungs, taking him temporarily out of the fight. He recovered as quickly as he could, his shoulder throbbing, lungs aching as he stumbled back to his feet.

Sam's fingers were tearing at the rope, digging at his own neck, unable to get a hold because of how deeply it was buried in his throat. The man lifted his obsidian black eyes to Dean, his cruel smile growing as Sam's struggles lessened, challenging Dean to make a move.

Alley outside apartment building, Providence and Berkeley, Night

Dean felt as though he were moving through quicksand toward Sam: the harder he tried to move, the slower he advanced.

Tightening the muscles in his stomach, pulling away from the wall, Dean saw Sam's fingers gradually slow their desperate digging into the flesh of his own neck, stop trying to slip up under the rope buried so deeply that his skin around the nylon was bloodless white. Sam's eyes stayed with Dean's, a silent plea there, accompanying the wheeze of a word bubbling up almost incoherently past his parted lips.

Dean caught it, though. He heard his name. The whole world plunged into red hues as Sam's hands fell to his side, his eyes rolling back into his head behind fluttering lashes.

"SAM!" The bellow came from his gut, a scream of denial that caught the attention of the man choking the life from his brother.

The man, who was impossibly larger than Sam, turned his tar-black eyes on Dean, waiting for a response, a move, silently taunting Dean with the malicious question: *Are you just going to watch him die?* His body language was a challenge to Dean to rescue Sam, telling him he was running out of time. The twisted curvature of the man's lips became more excited as the last bit of resistance was leached from Sam, as his body weakly bucked back against his attacker only a few more times.

Dean snapped into an auto-response, despite knowing in the back of his mind he was going to end up paying for it, and charged the demon again with another growl. This time he was allowed to get a little closer before he was sent spiraling back into the opposite wall. The pain shock-waved through his shoulders and looped up and down through his spine, making his legs buckle at first when he tried to stand. Being thrown into walls was starting to get old fast. He ignored the sharp pull along his lower back as he stood and tried a different approach.

"Least we were right about it being a demon," Dean grunted to himself as he straightened. Once again, he faced the demon his lip curled back in defiant anger, turning the challenge back at the figure before him. "Didn't think he was your type."

The demon tilted its head.

"Unless you've decided to swing that way. Which, hell, your choice, man. Whatever trips your trigger."

The demon dropped Sam, who folded into a heap at his feet, grabbing at his damaged neck, coughing in wet gasps to try to bring in more air through his bruised windpipe. Dean focused on his brother the second the rope dropped and Sam curled in on himself. He knew the demon was rushing toward him, but he was more concerned with seeing if Sam could breathe again. Taunting the demon had served

its purpose, he just wished that it wasn't about to hurt like a bitch in the next few blinks of an eye.

The entire mass of the possessed man slammed into Dean low in his gut, the demon's shoulder connecting with his abdomen, once again expelling the contents of his lungs in an audible *umpf*. Dean felt his body lifted into the air, felt the air *whoosh* past his face as the demon ran them backwards, crashing him bodily into the ground, his back once again radiating tendrils of pain throughout his jarred bones and muscle. The leather kept him from being cut up against the abrasive concrete.

Dean twisted on impact, bringing up his foot to greet the man's torso, keeping them rolling, using that momentum, so he didn't end up underneath the weight of the demon, trapped. They both reeled further down the alley until Dean came to a stop against the dumpster, the demon sprawled out a few feet away.

The man was up unnaturally fast, faster than the time it would take Dean to recover completely and Dean was forced into crab-walking backward along the side of the dumpster; trying to stay away from the advancing demon. It saw him crawling and seemed amused, slowing its powerful strides long enough to watch Dean skitter backwards.

"Maybe we'll see if *you're* my type," the demon smirked, his voice eerily calm and hoarse.

Another nylon rope dropped in a slowly unrolling coil from his hand and Dean's eyes bounced from it back to the man's face.

"Sorry to disappoint kinky demon perverts, but I *definitely* don't swing that way."

"Won't have much of a choice," the demon replied. He looked back over his shoulder at Sam who was still gasping in thick, rough rasps of air. "Make your brother watch you go out this way. Then I'll have my fun with him. Change up the game a little."

*The game? Murder and rape were a **game** to this freak? Dean's jaw set in vehemence at that thought. This ends now.*

Dean moved back further until his back was against the wall. He tilted his head a little in mock thought. "Not if I change it up first."

The demon started for him again, but quickly found it couldn't move much more than a couple of inches toward Dean. As he watched the expression on the demon's face swiftly shift from confusion to horror then anger, Dean smiled. He got to his feet casually, dusting off his jacket and tugging it straight, a laugh dancing up from the back of his throat.

"Well, that was easy," he said with a nod to the demon, his lips curling up in a sneer as the demon twisted around, trying to see what was holding him in place.

Ignoring the fire that radiated along the abused muscles in his back, Dean raised his eyes past the being seething before him to his brother who had rolled flat, his breathing slowly returning to normal.

"Sammy? You gonna live?"

His brother flipped an arm in the air to signal he needed a moment. Dean nodded once, knowing that was Sam's way of telling him that if he was going to ask half-assed questions, then he was going to get half-assed answers. Dean knew Sam's neck would be sore, but he'd live.

From where Dean was standing, he could make out the rising and falling of Sam's chest evening out, heard the ragged gasps lessening. Dean felt his heart begin to slow down, his senses calming now that Sam was all right and the demon was trapped.

The fire behind his anger, however, was still pulsing strong through him. No one. No. One. Hurt Sam. Or threatened the things this being had threatened.

Dean brought out the rosary and the exorcism book from his jacket pocket, thinking for a moment that memorizing this would probably be a good idea now that demons seemed to be holding reunion tours in the world. Reading in the dim lights of

the alley was going to be a bitch. At the sight of the items, he heard an unnatural growl build and rattle in the demon's throat.

"Aw, now, don't be like that," Dean said derisively. "You knew this was coming."

Curses and obscenities spewed from the demon's mouth in an almost visible stream of black filth. Dean raised his brow at the variety and selection of words that echoed through the narrow alleyway. Sailors wouldn't be blushing, they'd be wincing.

"Jesus, and I thought *I* was bad. Come on, don't be such a sore loser."

A sharp huff came from the demon, black eyes glistening. "You don't get it."

"What? That you had to copy a serial killer to get your jollies?"

"That's just it," the demon laughed his dark eyes alight with pride. "I'm not *copying* the Strangler, boy. I **am** the Strangler."

The arrogance oozing from this demon's face was enough to make Dean itch to cross the sigil and take him on again. He lowered the exorcism book, narrowing his eyes.

"You expect me to believe..."

"I don't expect a basal, *waste of flesh*, like yourself to *believe* anything."

"Aw, you're gonna hurt my feelings," Dean replied. "Trust me, I've heard the demon mantra; the whole *you're worthless* speech. Sticks and stones. Your kind should know that by now."

The demon sneered. "Ah, but we both know what kind of glass walls you in particular have, Dean Winchester."

Dean knew he shouldn't be surprised it knew him, but the use of his name forced him to pause longer, to listen to what it had to say a moment more than he knew he should.

"*Waste of flesh* has such a different meaning when attached to your stunt in Wyoming, when dear old Dad asked you to die so Sam could live. *Waste of flesh* has more of a barb to it, if you ask me, when Daddy doesn't even trust you enough to tell you where he's going. But then again...sticks and stones," the demon ended with a cocky shrug of the shoulder.

"I swear..." Dean sighed, trying to let the words fall away inside of him, to make sure they didn't take hold. "Every time I trap one of you bastards it's like Freudian amateur hour. Are you done, or would you like another jab at my psyche?"

The demon laughed, piercing, short.

"So you are the *Strangler*, huh?" Dean continued with a lifted brow. He walked the outer edge of the trap, feigning being impressed. "Bundy? Dahmer? You taking credit for them?"

"No. But I knew them. I was possessing DeSalvo back in the sixties. Hell, he wasn't even the only one—he was just the last one. The meat puppet the police finally caught." The demon smirked. "He had glass walls, too."

Dean's jaw muscle ticked. He angled the exorcism book toward the light from the entrance of the alley where Sam still lay and started reading. He was finished listening to this demon talk. He wanted to see how arrogant the guy was while the threat of being ripped back to Hell loomed over his head. Dean dove into the rite, ignoring gurgled cries as the demon struggled to hold on to his host.

"There's a reason behind the evil in people, Dean. There is always a reason!" The demon yelled out over the rite before howling in pain and dropping to one knee. "It doesn't end with me. My brothers have returned!"

As he read, Dean watched the man's throat and torso move unnaturally against the beast inside, the being pushing out beneath the flesh and bone of the throat and chest. It was more of a diversionary tactic than anything, but Dean never got used to seeing it. And what it had just said about brothers...Dean halted again against his better judgment.

"Come again?" Dean asked. He squatted beside the trap so that he was at eye level with the man on his knees. "Brothers?"

The demon, panting, managed a smirk at Dean's sudden interest. "The *Cruor Frater*, my brotherhood. We've been around for a long, long time, Dean. Since the beginning of time..."

It moved to the very edge of the trap, moving in as close as it could to Dean's face. Dean could feel the hot moisture of its breath against his skin and had to resist the urge to move back.

"Searching inside of humans for that special little spark that set them just to the left of normal."

"So you picked up whomever you deemed worthy and ruined them?" Dean asked.

"Aw, now, Dean, don't feel bad for these 'innocents.'" The demon crawled, hand over hand, foot crossing foot, around the edge of the circle, its feral eyes on Dean, eyeing him as a predator sizes up its next meal. "Ever the protector of humanity and all the virtue your kind has to offer, aren't you, Dean? I see you're concerned. Don't. Be." Lips curled with satisfaction. "These men weren't saints. They would have gone over the edge all on their lonesome. But the game was to see how *far*. And trust me," it sneered, "there was something, that *spark*, in each of them. They weren't so hard to manipulate. My brothers possessed them, slaughtered with their hands, and watched them embrace insanity like a cheap whore."

"Brothers," Dean scoffed again. "Your brotherhood... Like any of you black-eyed freaks know what that word means." The demon's only response was a laugh and Dean pushed up on his knees to stand. "I forgot. This is some kind of *game* to you."

"You're more than welcome to play along," the demons taunted. "You've already figured out the new rules this round, and I'd be careful if I were you. Careful with your casualness about the game. That spark we look for..."

The demon cast a glance over his shoulder in the direction of Sam and Dean followed his gaze. Sam was leaning against the wall near the trashcans he'd toppled, holding a hand to his rope-burned neck, watching the exchange. Dean wanted to go to him, make sure he was really okay.

The demon licked its lips as it looked at Sam, then turned dark eyes back up to Dean. "Everyone has a little bit of it..."

Dean felt the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stand up as the demon insinuated that the spark they looked for might be found inside of his brother. His taunts did nothing but succeed in pissing Dean off more.

"Yeah, well, after tonight, there'll be one less of you joy-riding bastards exploiting it," Dean growled.

The rite poured from his lips quickly, fluidly, and much faster than he'd ever read one of the exorcisms. There was a part of Dean that needed to get away, needed to shut this thing up and end its killing spree so he could find the rest of its *brothers*, so he could rid himself of the dirty feeling he got from just being in this thing's presence.

The word *brother* twisted inside Dean's gut like razor wire. The demon had taunted Dean to play the game, and Dean was going to figure out what exactly the game was as soon as this player was sent packing.

Loose papers from the alleyway trash were kicked up as wind started to curl around them, pouring from the power of the rite and picking up in speed and ferocity. The man's body and face contorted with pain, as the demon's black eyes seared into Dean's with hatred. It wasn't going to leave easily, but it wouldn't have a choice once he reached the end of the rite.

"At least I had a good run," it yelled above Dean's steady timbre, above the raucous movement of the metallic cans as they rolled into one another and the walls. "Say hello to the boys for me. Be seeing you around, Winchester!"

The man's head snapped back, the black cloud form of the demon ejected from his throat in a guttural cry, his body purged of the lecherous presence. Dean slammed the book shut as the man's body connected with the concrete, unconscious. Panting with anger, staring at the man with an unforgiving heat behind his eyes, Dean stood still for a moment digesting what had been said. He could see

from where he stood the man was breathing and he made a wide arc around him to get to Sam, not bothering to check on the fallen man.

Sam was sitting up, his back pressed against the brick and mortar of the alley wall, chest lifting and sinking in deep heaves. His face was turned toward the man slumped in the invisible Devil's Trap, who was starting to mutter nonsensically as he curled in on himself. Dean knelt down beside his brother seeing, now that he was closer, the raw flesh, the angry red line, the bruising where both the rope and Sam's fingers had dug into his neck.

"Hey, Sammy. You doin' all right?" Dean said softly, moving his hand under his brother's jaw so he could bring his face back toward his. The air moving through his brother's throat rattled up into a cough as he tried to respond. "Just go easy. I take it you heard all that..."

Sam's head rolled forward in a halfhearted nod as he reached up and fisted his hand in Dean's shirt for support. Sensing Sam wanted help up, Dean slid his arm around Sam's back and gently lifted him to his feet. Dean's own throat hurt at the wheezing sound coming from Sam and as he caught once more the irritated line along his jugular.

"There you go," Dean encouraged, shifting his weight to support Sam's when he stumbled a little.

As the two of them moved away from the wall, Dean heard the previously possessed whimper. He was crawling backward until his back was flush with the dumpster, wild eyes wide and darting the space between them and the other side of the alley. Dean couldn't even imagine what memories had to be flooding his mind now. Rapes, murders, attacks and fear, blood on his hands, light leaving eyes, innocence destroyed. Things that had splintered his psyche.

The man, who was bleating out terrified incoherence, seemed to be receiving Sam's sympathy. Dean felt his brother lean in that direction, felt the words forming in his brother's throat before they were even spoken, and he knew Sam wanted to check on him.

"Gotta get you to the car first," Dean took opposition. In his gut, Dean knew there was nothing anyone could really do for this guy.

"Help him," Sam whispered.

By now the man had pulled himself into a ball and was mumbling while playing with his hair. Dean caught utterance of devils, something about angels with pretty legs and long hair.

"...want to see the angels again, touch their pretty legs...wanna see them smile for me..."

There truly was nothing Dean could do. The DeSalvo demon—or whatever the hell it was—had taken this man past a mental breaking point. Dean turned away from the sight. The words *he would have been like this on his own* returned like a gut check. He'd never been this torn.

"Can't help this one, Sam," Dean said as he tried to guide Sam's lanky form back toward the car. Sam was dragging his feet and Dean couldn't tell if it was because he wouldn't accept that this one was too far gone, or the fact that the demon had practically crushed the poor kid's larynx.

Somehow he managed to get Sam back to the Impala, helping him fold into the passenger seat. Dean knelt down beside him once more to check his neck, glad to hear his breathing was becoming less labored.

Whether or not there was anything they could do about the man's sanity, someone still had to pick up the guy they'd left in the alley, and Dean pulled out his cell to call the police. He watched Sam eye the phone, expression grim. Dean could tell Sam would have had something to say in protest if he could find what was left of his voice.

"Dean..."

"I don't know what else to do...I'm sorry, Sam."

Dean made sure Sam was secure before he walked to the back of the Impala, out of sight and earshot of his brother, to make the call, leaving the man in the alley to take the fall for the demons deeds...

Liberty Inn, Boston, MA

"Dammit, would you hold still?" Dean growled, not really beseeching Sam so much as giving the order. Every time Dean moved to treat the rope burn along Sam's neck, Sam would bring up his shoulder and scrunch away in irritation. "You haven't wiggled this much since you were five."

"S fine, Dean," Sam's gravel-like voice protested. "Hurts. But 'm fine."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't *look* fine, Sam. Bastard tore up the sides of your throat pretty good." Dean had cleaned out the places where the skin had been roughed raw, making sure they were treated with ointment and covered with patches of gauze.

Sam's hand went up to feel the side Dean had finished, pressing into the gauze carefully and clearing his throat. "Surprised, you haven't said anything yet..."

"Bout what?" Dean asked with a hint of a smile, knowing exactly what Sam was talking about. Dean had been saving it for later. He finished taping the last piece of gauze into place and eyed Sam sympathetically. He looked rough; the patchwork Dean had completed not helping Sam's image necessarily fall in line with his insistence that he was okay. "Bout how the Strangler came after you?"

Sam rolled his eyes and leaned back against the headboard. Dean's smile broadened. Sam should have known better.

"I can't help it if your neck attracts psychopaths and supernatural beings, Sam. Gonna have to keep you away from rope, lamp-cords, vampires... Good thing you weren't wearing stockings, huh?"

Sam wheezed, his voice like sandpaper. "Bet that brick wall was real soft."

"Yeah, yeah," Dean groaned, twisting up from the bed to go have a look at the damage done to his back in the bathroom mirror. "The universe has us pegged with its sadistic sense of humor."

Dean shrugged his way out of his jacket, ignoring the tight pop and pull he felt in his shoulders and back, and dropped it in a listless heap on the other bed. The shirt followed, taking a little more time as Dean's shoulder burned bright with pain when he tried to rotate it loose from the cloth. He kept the grimace from Sam, swearing inwardly. Being tossed into walls as much as he was, he wouldn't be surprised the day something inside of him snapped in half. He kept the bathroom door open, making sure both Sam and the mirror were in his line of sight then gave himself a once over.

He probed the flesh around the base of his skull gingerly, turning his head so he could see his back in the mirror, despite how craning his neck elicited another series of sharp spikes radiating straight down his vertebrae. The bruising wasn't too bad, and there weren't any open wounds or cuts. Dean knew he had his leather to thank for that. The marks ghosting beneath the skin would be full blown bruises in a few hours.

"So...that went well," Dean sighed, turning from the mirror to look at Sam. "Let's just hope the others don't already know we're coming."

"I don't know if I believe what I heard..." Sam rasped.

Dean dropped a hotel cup under the faucet and brought some water back to Sam. "What part? The demon's brotherhood or that *everyone's got a twisted side* shit?"

Sam turned tired eyes, framed by the dark bruising beneath them, up to Dean's face. He took the water with a muted *thank you*, and took a drink. After a few beats of silence he sighed.

"All of it...I mean I guess I believe that demons would mess with people like that...but that the original serial killers were demon-possessed... that this is some game to a society of demons known as *Cruor Frater*... I mean, shit, Dean, *Blood Brother*?"

Dean, lifted a shoulder, dropping down on the bed across from Sam and watching his brother work through his frustrated thoughts.

"I just... the idea that the man in the alley would have done all of this by himself without his hand being forced. I mean, alone he had a choice, right? But that thing possessed him and *made* him do all of those... all of that... And now because of demons, he has to take the fall. And why go back to the ways of serial killers past, why not start with new MO's, new motives..."

"Whoa, whoa, okay. Holy shit, have you been holding that in since we left the alley?"

Sam looked down at the water in his glass. He cleared his throat. "Demons lie, Dean."

Dean dropped his chin, running fingers along his lips in thought. "Yeah, but...they also tell the truth," he said sadly.

Dean knew that one all too well. If it worked in their favor, if the truth would tear someone apart more than a lie, then demons would tell truths.

The quiet space between them grew heavy after his statement, and Dean could sense Sam's busy mind working backward through all their experiences with demons. Memories of Haris bombarded Dean and he switched tasks to keep his mind from going to Wyoming, rising up from the bed to walk over and find another shirt in his open duffel.

Damn DeSalvo demon...bastard just had to bring that up...

"I have no idea how we're gonna track a friggin' brotherhood of demons all over the U.S. How do we even know how many there are?" Sam finally spoke up.

"We know that there are at least two more," Dean responded, pausing to work a new shirt over his head. "Assuming the demon we met tonight is telling the truth. The Gacy and Berkowitz demons are chilling out in Chicago and New York. We go there, throw together a pattern like we did here, 'cause the demon told us we already knew it, *play the game*, and stop them before they can kill anyone else."

"Well, when you put it that way," Sam scoffed. He rested his hand on his throat, wincing a little. "You're serious about this? What if we get deeper into this, Dean, and discover there's not just three of them, but one or two in every state?"

"Then we keep going. What else do we have to do right now?" Dean turned around, pulling his shirt over his belly, and dropping his hands down to his sides as he leaned against the small table in the room. "Sam, these things look inside of you for something that is *off* and exploit it. I don't care if these men were a few fries short of a Happy Meal, the fact that these demons are out there playing around with people's heads...It's the worst form of rape I can imagine."

He pulled his bottom lip against his teeth, pausing for a moment to breathe, then lifted his eyes to meet his brother's purposefully. "People are dying in heinous, unthinkable ways, so a few demons can have some laughs? No way. We're gonna end it."

Sam nodded slowly. "Alright, then. Hand me my laptop and let's get started."

Dean slid the computer across the table toward him. "I could—"

"Keep your sticky fingers offa my keyboard," Sam croaked. "Hand it over."

"Fine," Dean grumbled.

Left with nothing to do but ponder and pace, Dean chewed his lower lip, shooting his eyes to Sam at regular intervals as his brother's quick fingers clicked across the keys.

"Anything?" Dean asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

Sam lifted an eyebrow, sliding hazel eyes over the top of the screen. "Sure, Dean. I just did a search for *demonically possessed serial killers* and found out exactly where we should go next."

"I'm starting to see why the bad guys go for your neck so often, smart ass."

Sam chuckled, then winced as the sound worked against his abused throat. Taking pity on his anxious brother, Sam sighed. "Okay, so... I was thinking that the demon said we knew the rules to the game, right?"

Dean tilted his head to the side. "Right..."

"So... I was thinking about how we found that guy. The A. You said that there were murders in New York and Chicago... I was just trying to see if the A fit those murders."

"Not bad, College Boy," Dean sat on the end of Sam's bed, drawing one knee up onto the mattress, his other leg braced on the floor. "What?" He prompted at Sam's frown.

"Well... I mean, I can see a pattern, but..."

"But what, Sammy, jeeze? You know pausing for dramatic effect drives me friggin' crazy."

"Well, Gacy and Berkowitz didn't go out and kill people in any discernable pattern." Sam said, resting his right wrist on the edge of his laptop screen.

"That we know of," Dean pointed out, dropping his chin and raising his eyebrows.

Sam shook his head. "It would take me forever to find a pattern to those deaths that the cops didn't even find."

"Even with your super special Sammy powers?" Dean teased.

Sam drew his brows together, his frown instantaneous. That one had hit a little close to home.

"Sorry," Dean offered sincerely.

"S okay."

"Seriously, Sam," Dean said, resting a hand briefly on Sam's outstretched leg. "I didn't mean to—"

"Hey," Sam interrupted.

Dean drew his hand away. "You got something?"

"New York Times. Another body was found today. In a car, shot by a .44 caliber pistol. Police are starting a full-scale search for a Son of Sam copy cat killer."

Dean slapped his hands on his thighs, pushing to his feet. "That settles it."

Sam snapped his head up. "What?"

"We're going to New York."

"Dean, we can't just go off half-cocked."

Dean raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth ticking up in a smirk.

"Shut up," Sam grumbled, looking back at his computer. "You know what I mean."

Dean ran a hand through his short, spiky hair, then shook his hand in Sam's direction. "Dude, seriously, you *just said*—"

"I said the police thought it was a copy cat killer. I'm not so sure we should go running around the country on the word of a demon," Sam snapped at him, rubbing at his raw throat. He reached over for the cup of water Dean had handed him earlier. "There's just no way all serial killers were possessed humans," he continued after draining the cup.

Dean took the empty cup from him and silently went into the bathroom to refill it. Handing it back to Sam, he watched as his brother drank deeply.

"There were too many reasons why the people caught did what they did," Sam said. "Too many... random facts."

"What, like my dog made me do it?" Dean pointed out.

Sam lifted a shoulder. "Dahmer, Bundy, the Zodiac killer—"

"They never caught that one."

Sam sighed. "All I'm saying is that we gotta be sure."

Dean rubbed his face. "Okay, I'll give you that. Maybe it's not all of them. Maybe it's..."

Sam lifted an eyebrow. "Now who's all about the dramatic effect?"

"Maybe it's just certain ones, Sam," Dean said softly, sliding his eyes up to his brother, his jaw tight. "Maybe it's the ones with that... *spark* that DeSalvo was talking about."

Sam pulled at his lower lip, looking to the side. "You know... I think he was talking about me."

"No," Dean stated immediately. "He was screwing with us."

"Yeah, but Dean—"

"He was screwing with us, Sam. End of story."

They stared at each other a moment, an unspoken challenge hovering between them. Dean squared his stance. Sam settled his shoulders. Neither blinked. Neither looked away.

After a moment, Sam audibly swallowed.

"You need some aspirin?" Dean asked softly.

"Nah."

"Well," Dean rolled his neck. "I need food."

Sam nodded.

"You want a... shake or something?"

Sam's smile was shyly appreciative. "Yeah, man, that would be great."

"You keep that up," Dean gestured to the laptop, grabbing up his coat from his bed. "I'll be back." He winked at Sam, pulled the door open and stepped out.

Boston, MA, city streets

The night was frosty, but Dean rolled the window down. He needed space. And air. He needed to remember that breathing was natural and to convince himself the ache in his chest was a by product of meeting an immovable object with the soft tissues of his body, not the claustrophobic sense of walls closing in around him.

In the background, the local classic rock station touted an acoustic set and he heard Layne Staley's voice begin to croon softly.

We chase misprinted lies

We face the path of time

And yet I fight

And yet I fight

This battle all alone

No one to cry to

No place to call home

Leaning his elbow on the window sill, Dean watched a man in an overcoat approach a woman holding a baby. He turned *Nutshell* down, his eyes sharp on the man, watching his quick eyes take the woman in as they passed each other on the sidewalk.

The demon's taunting voice echoed in his memory. *Trust me there was something, that spark, in each of them.*

"How did they know?" Dean wondered softly to himself. "What did they see?"

The man in the overcoat continued on, as did the woman and the baby, unmolested. Dean saw a fast food restaurant a few blocks up and turned the radio up, listening to an acoustic version of Van Morrison's *Crazy Love* as he pulled into the pick-up lane and ordered food for him and a chocolate shake for Sam.

Taking the sack of food and drinks, Dean regarded the bored-looking clerk with cautious eyes. *Anyone? Could anyone have that spark? That trigger that turns them evil? Could the line between right and wrong disappear so easily?*

"Have a good night," the clerk said automatically.

"You, too, man," Dean returned, rolling up his window as he drove away. He refused to believe that given a choice, humankind would take the dark path. Otherwise, why would Lucifer consider the world a challenge? One preacher defeated the End of Days... there was hope for humanity. *There has to be, or else... what the hell are we fighting so hard for?*

Returning to the motel, Dean steadied himself before he exited the Impala. He hadn't been gone that long, but he hoped the time had been long enough for Sam to have found something. Anything that would give them a path, a point to follow. A direction to focus his anger. Because he could feel it building like bile in his throat.

Liberty Inn, Boston, MA

"There you are!" Sam exclaimed as soon as Dean opened the motel room door.

Dean kicked the door shut behind him, holding up a white bag with two large grease spots on the outside and one paper cup.

"Not like the food was out in the parking lot, Sam."

Sam took the cup gratefully, letting the cool ice cream concoction slide soothingly down his throat. "You were just gone awhile..."

"Question is," Dean shrugged out of his jacket, then dug into the bag. "Was I gone long enough?"

Sam nodded, drinking more. "I think we're onto something with this *A* theory."

"Good," Dean said, his mouth full of cheeseburger. "Least that's somethin'."

"Dude," Sam pulled his head back. "Cover your mouth or something."

Dean took a bigger bite, chewing noisily.

With a put-upon sigh, Sam drank more, then nodded at the screen of his laptop, now resting on the small table in the corner of the room. "So... not all the killings in New York and Chicago happened on the *A* like here, but—" he sucked down more shake, "in Chicago, the victims were taken from each of the points on the *A*, see?"

He pointed to an image from Mapquest, indicating streets, then sliding his finger to a different window that listed the last known location of each victim. Dean nodded, unwrapping his second cheeseburger.

"And in New York, the victims were left at each point of the *A*."

"Okay, so..."

"So, maybe," Sam finished his shake, tossing the cup over Dean's head and rimming the trashcan. "Last time was about body count and this time... it's symbolic."

"Last time?" Dean quirked a brow. "You buying into the Blood Brothers theory now?"

"Well, there's more."

"Course there is," Dean dropped into the hard-backed chair, watching as Sam geared up for the big reveal.

Rubbing unconsciously at the bandages on his wounded throat, Sam sat across from his brother, watching the green of Dean's eyes widen as his pupils narrowed in concentration.

"Turns out this brotherhood is...international."

"Come again?" Dean's eyebrows darted up in an inverted V as he leaned forward.

"Ever hear of Jack the Ripper?"

"Get out," Dean sat back, his shoulders thumping against the edge of the chair. "You're shitting me."

"Nope," Sam shook his head regretfully. "According to The Times in London, not only has the Ripper returned, but—"

"He's killing his victims on the *A*."

"You got it, brother," Sam pointed at Dean, resting a hand on his thigh.

"We can't get them all, Sam." Dean's voice was soft with worry. "There's no way we can get them all."

"And they know it," Sam concluded.

"Son of a *bitch*," Dean stood, wadding the white paper bag into a ball, and slamming it into the trash can. "More people are going to die."

"Well..."

Dean turned around quickly, facing Sam, his eyes dark with fury. "What?"

"We could get help." Sam offered.

"From who?"

Sam opened his mouth, the word *Dad* hovering there like a flag of truce.

"No, Sam," Dean shook his head.

Sam wasn't surprised Dean had known what he was going to say. When it came to John, Dean had always seemed to have a sixth sense.

"Why not?" Sam asked, genuinely curious.

"Because he left. If he wanted our help, he'd have told us. So..." Dean shrugged, his face a mask of nonchalance, his eyes wounded. "I say we do the same thing."

"Uhh... you mean..."

"I mean, do it without his help."

Sam licked his lips. "Dean, if he knew about—"

"No, Sam," Dean shook his head once.

Sam knew he'd never understand the line Dean drew in the sand when it came to their father. The line he was quick to step across when John needed them, but stood steadfastly on this side of asking him for assistance.

"Okay, then... what about Bobby?" Sam suggested.

Dean licked his lips. "Yeah. Yeah, Bobby'll help."

Dad could have, too, Sam wanted to say, but he held his tongue as he watched the tension he hadn't noticed before leak from Dean's shoulders.

Sam dialed Bobby, turning his phone to speaker, and set it on the table.

"You boys better have a damn good reason for calling me this late," Bobby said by way of greeting.

Dean pulled his lips down in a *whoops* frown, glancing at the clock. Sam didn't bother to look.

"We do," he answered. "You ever hear of the *Cruor Frater*?"

Bobby was quiet, causing Dean to lean forward.

"Bobby?"

"Where are you boys?" Bobby replied.

"Boston."

"Dammit," Bobby muttered. "I was hoping I was wrong."

"You've heard of this brotherhood?" Sam asked, frowning.

Bobby's sigh filled the phone and seemed to drift between the brothers. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I've heard of them."

"We just took one out," Dean announced.

"You boys okay?" Bobby asked, worry clear in his voice.

Dean's face softened. "Yeah. Sam sounds a bit like Steven Segal, but we're fine."

"You been keeping up with the papers?"

Dean nodded, but Sam spoke up. "We think Gacy and Berkowitz are back."

Bobby was quiet again.

"Bobby?" Dean prompted.

"You boys okay to head to New York?"

Sam met Dean's eyes with a sigh. "Yeah," he said, trying to hide his reluctance. He'd wanted Bobby there with them, but realized what the man was saying: divide and conquer.

"I know some guys," Bobby continued. "We'll meet you in Chicago."

"Hey, Bobby?" Dean said, then cleared his throat as his next words seemed to get caught on emotion.

"Hey," Bobby returned. "These demons aren't the only ones with a brotherhood."

Sam smiled ruefully.

"You remember that," Bobby admonished.

"Yeah, okay," Sam replied. "Be careful, Bobby."

"I'll see you boys soon," Bobby replied, hanging up.

Sam felt his brother's eyes as he turned off the phone. Dean's gaze was heavy, his body visibly tired.

"One at a time, bro," Sam said softly. "It's all we can do."

"Yeah, I know," Dean sighed, then stood quickly, motion masking his worry. "Let's get some shut eye," he said, his voice thinning as he stretched his arms over his head. "Tomorrow, the Big Apple."

Sam shuffled to his bed, shucking his jeans, and climbing beneath the covers without bothering to shower. It was too much of an effort at this point and he felt like hammered shit. Dean flicked off the light by the switch next to the bathroom door, and Sam felt his bed shift as his brother bumped into it in the dark with a soft curse.

Soon the bed nearest the door creaked with Dean's weight and Dean groaned as he stretched out.

"I'm getting too old for this shit," Dean breathed.

"Okay, Murtaugh," Sam teased, closing his eyes and listening to the sounds of night. Water in the pipes through the walls around them, cars on the highway outside, muted voices with meaningless words, his brother's breath.

"Whatever, dude. I'm Riggs, *you're* Murtaugh."

"Uh-huh," Sam mumbled, willing sleep to claim him.

"Hey, Sam?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you think we'd still be hunting after... y'know?"

"After Haris was dead, you mean?" Sam asked, opening his eyes to watch the dark chew on the edges of his vision.

"Yeah."

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I guess I thought... well, that we might get a shot at... normal."

Sam huffed out a breath through his nose. "What's normal for us, man?"

"Dunno," Dean yawned. "Guess the Devil had different ideas for the Winchesters, since we're chasing friggin' serial killers all over the eastern seaboard."

"Killers that were caught and killed or jailed before our time."

"Mmhmm."

"I guess I..."

"What?" Dean spoke up.

"Well," Sam shifted to his side, propping his head up on the flat of his hand. "I guess I did think I might go back to school someday."

"I figured."

"What about you?" Sam asked.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you, Dean. What's normal for you?"

Dean was quiet for a moment. It was only his pattern of breathing that told Sam his brother was thinking over the question. "Guess... finding someone. Maybe getting a job at a garage or something. Settling down."

"Really?"

"I don't know..." Dean yawned again. "Pipe dream, really."

"You don't think that'll ever happen?"

Dean shifted and Sam felt his brother's eyes in the dark. "Do you?" he asked.

"Nah," Sam said with a soft grin.

"Me neither."

"Night, Dean."

"Night, John Boy."

New York City, mid-afternoon

"I friggin' *hate* New York," Dean grumbled, turning down another tight, car-lined, one-way street. "I hate rain, too."

"You're joking," Sam dead-panned, peering through the sheet of water coating the front windshield of the Impala.

They'd reached New York City limits four hours ago, searching for the intersection of Peyton and Gamble, the cross street of the A Sam had guessed was the place Demon Berkowitz was planning to claim his next victim. They'd succeeded in getting turned around three times, narrowly missing removing the spotlight from the Impala's passenger side with the rear-view mirror of a double-parked cab, and turning the wrong way down two one-way streets.

"This *sucks out loud!*" Dean bellowed.

And *pissing Dean off*, Sam mentally added to the list.

"Calm down, Dean."

"Don't friggin' tell me to calm down," Dean growled. "I'm pulling over. I don't even think we're in New York anymore."

Sam was forced to grab the dash as Dean whipped a harsh left into an empty lot flanked by several tall, run-down apartment buildings. The Impala rocked roughly as Dean slammed the gear into park, then sat back with a huff.

"You done?" Sam asked.

"Shut up," Dean grumbled, crossing his arms, then uncrossing them, and pounding the flat of his palm against the steering wheel. "This is juts a friggin' *waste of time, man.*"

"Take a breath, Dean," Sam commanded. "Listen to this." He pulled a paper from his messenger bag.

"What's that?"

"Some stuff I printed up on the motel printer while you were checking out."

Still disgruntled, Dean shifted in his seat, putting his back against the doorframe, hissing slightly as the bruises there made contact with the handle, and adjusted his body to a more comfortable position.

"Shoot," he requested.

"Bad pun," Sam grinned, drawing a chuckle from Dean's stormy face. "Okay, so get this. *Berkowitz emerged from the building shortly before 10.00 p.m., carrying a .44 Bulldog in a paper sack. Police arrested Berkowitz as he was starting the car outside his apartment on Pine Street in Yonkers, New York on August 10, 1977. His first words upon arrest were reported to be, "You got me. What took you so long?" Police searched his apartment, and found it in disarray, with Satanic graffiti on the walls. They also found a diary wherein Berkowitz took credit for dozens of arsons throughout the New York area.*"

The background hum of Metallica's *Ecstasy of Gold* thrummed as Sam waited for Dean's reaction.

"Well, that's just friggin' *fantastic* Sam, but we're no closer to finding the sonuvabitch and someone else is going to die if we don't!"

Balling the piece of paper up, Sam juttied his chin out. "I don't know why you're mad at *me.*"

Dean sighed. "I'm not mad I'm... frustrated."

Sam waited. Dean looked out into the rain, worrying his bottom lip.

"This *brotherhood* is playing us and I don't like it," Dean continued. "I want to find this demon and send his black-eyed ass back to Hell in the most painful way possible."

"I know," Sam sighed, dragging his computer out of his messenger bag.

"What are you doing?" Dean asked, confusion crinkling the corners of his eyes.

"Looking up that map," Sam explained, his fingers flying over the keys.

"Here? In the *car?*"

Sam lifted a brow, but didn't look away from the screen. "Dude, these buildings all have wireless... just gotta... there. Found one."

"You're joking," Dean breathed out in disbelief.

"Nope," Sam looked up, peering into the gloom at the surrounding area. "All I have to do is... holy shit!"

"Uhh..." Dean chuckled. "Care to share with the class?"

"There's a reason people believe in divine intervention," Sam whispered, peering closer at the street sign on the edge of the parking lot Dean had chosen to swing into.

"What are you talking about?"

"Where did that article say Berkowitz lived?" Sam asked.

Dean peered out of the window, obviously searching for whatever Sam was seeing. "Uhh... it was a nut or a tree or something."

Sam looked down, smoothing out the paper he'd crumpled. "Pine Street in Yonkers, New York."

"Told ya."

"Do you know where we are?"

Dean looked at him out of the corner of his eyes. "Yonkers?"

Sam pointed to the brown street sign. "Pine Street."

"Holy shit," Dean echoed Sam's burst of realization. "Think his old apartment is around here?"

"Gimme two minutes."

"Take 'em, brother."

Five minutes later, Sam had closed and stashed his computer and they were standing in the rain at the Impala's trunk, retrieving rock salt-filled shotguns, flasks of holy water, the exorcism book, and a rosary.

"Think we should bring the *Cleaneon*?"

"For a Devil's Trap?" Sam asked.

Dean shrugged. "Couldn't hurt."

"Gotta find him first."

"True," Dean said, closing the trunk. "Did I mention I hate rain?"

"Only about twelve times," Sam flipped the collar of his jacket up ineffectually against the deluge.

"Well, just so you know," Dean muttered, water skipping off the edges of his lips and turning his lashes into tee-pees.

"Alley?" Sam yelled at him over the rain as they faced Berkowitz's old apartment building.

"Why not?" Dean returned.

They sprinted across the street, legs splashing through ankle-deep water as they approached the alley next to the apartment building.

"How the hell are we going to trap this one, Dean?"

"You're the one that said we had to find him first," Dean fired back.

"We don't have the plumber angle working for us this time," Sam pointed out as they moved into the relative protection of the nearly-empty alleyway. "All we know is that he grabbed his victims from the A and shot them."

"Well, let's case the joint, see what we see, come back," Dean said, wiping water from his face.

"Case the joint?" Sam smirked.

"What? It's a perfectly legitimate term."

"No more late night crime drama for you."

"Okay," Dean shrugged. "I'll switch back to porn."

"On second thought—"

"Shh." Dean grabbed Sam's sleeve. "You hear that?"

"What?" Sam asked, amazed Dean heard anything over the sound of the pounding water.

“Sounds like someone running,” Dean muttered, pivoting slowly to his left to look over his shoulder toward the opening of the alley.

Sam had one heartbeat to follow his brother’s line of sight, one heartbeat to register the figure of a man approaching at a run, and then his heart stopped with fear as a shot rang out, echoing off the alley walls and silencing any sounds of protest.

Unknown Location, New York, NY

Awareness broke over him slowly like water retreating from a beachhead. Slowly, ever so slowly, he opened his eyes, feeling his lashes lift from his cheekbones. The bones in his face ached. Uncurling his fingers, he pressed the tips to his cheeks, feeling the unnatural stiffness of his skin brought on by extreme cold.

“Dean,” Sam croaked, unable to do much more.

Silence met his call.

Blinking, Sam realized despite the fact that his eyes were open, he was completely surrounded by black—darkness so deep he lost all sense of space. Reaching an arm out, his cold fingers painfully impacted the edge of his prison. Shifting his feet, Sam realized that his legs were bent, his knees close to his chest, the opposite wall just beyond the edge of his toes.

Rolling his head back, Sam met the ceiling with his forehead, feeling an instant of panic shock his system into complete comprehension: he was in a box. A cold box. A shove upwards with the flat of his hand revealed that a lock was firmly in place.

“Oh, God,” Sam breathed, shivering.

It was a freezer.

His rain-soaked clothes were crispy as they froze to him, his breath retreated and returned in tiny shuddering gasps as his lungs fought the compression of his knees and the cloistering of space.

“Oh, God, Dean...”

Alley on Pine, Yonkers, NY, late afternoon

His elbow lay in a cold puddle of water. Frowning, eyes closed, Dean shifted, wondering for a bleary moment how water had gotten into their room. Unless... had he fallen asleep in the shower?

Rolling his lips against his teeth, Dean tasted dirt, copper, and rain. Prying his eyes open carefully, he immediately shut them as water filled his sockets. Pain like nails under his skin shook through him.

The hell?

Slowly, as if his body were made of glass, Dean rolled to his back, letting the rain pool in the hollows under his eyes, run down his cheeks, and creep into the corners of his mouth. The pain that slid across the flat of his forehead like a hot knife rocked him with its ferocity. He didn’t even have air to groan.

Water began to run down into his nose, choking him.

“Aw, Jesus,” Dean gasped as he turned his head to allow the water to run out of his nose, across his lips and down his chin.

Reaching a trembling hand to his forehead, Dean drew away fingers covered with blood that was quickly washed away by the downpour.

Sounds like someone running...

Splashing, boot falls, someone approaching, an explosion, darkness...

“Sam?” Dean called softly.

The only sound meeting his ears was the steady cadence of the rain hitting the alley floor. It was wrong. It all felt wrong. Sam should be here.

Where is he?

Taking a wet breath, Dean rolled to his side, sliding his arm under him and leveraging himself up to his elbow. Needles worked on the backs of his eyes while knives stabbed through his temple, pulling at his bullet-torn skin, and running down the side of his face in a small river of red.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, grabbing the slim edge of a brick in the wall behind him for balance. *Get up... find Sam... get up... get to car... find Sam...*

With the mantra of a drill sergeant in his head, Dean gained his knees, shivering from the cold of the rain and the pain of the bullet graze. He allowed his eyes to fall closed, breathing shallowly through his open mouth as he pressed his face against the brick wall, reaching above himself for another hand-hold.

Easing his fingers along the edges of the brick, he pulled himself carefully to his feet, groaning pitifully when he got there. *Move your ass, Dean... find Sam... find Sam... FIND SAM...*

“Okay,” Dean exhaled, rotating until his back was to the wall. Pressing his hands flat against the bricks for balance, he parted his lashes, lifting his lids to survey his surroundings. “Okay...”

He was alone in the alley. The only blood he could see was pooled and washing away from where he'd been lying. No weapons in sight. No rosary. No sigil—that he could see.

No Sam.

“Okay,” Dean moved his hand from the wall, wiping the flat of his fingers across his lips, then tucked his knuckles into the curve of his eye, wiping away the rain and blood.

“Move, Dean,” he muttered, pushing away from the wall.

The world tilted sideways and he crashed into an empty silver trashcan with a curse. Thrusting out a hand, Dean caught his balance against the wall once more, shuffling through puddles, kicking the lid of the trash can away in a cacophony of noise, and staggered to the opening of the alley.

The rain blurred the streets, spreading the light of the streetlamps and turning everything into a twisted Thomas Kincaid painting. Dean glanced in both directions, slowly, pressing the heel of his hand to his forehead, then splashed across the street toward the lot where the Impala sat waiting.

Slumping over the hood of the car, willing the world to stop its crazy spin, Dean tried to figure out the series of events that had ended in his losing Sam. The more he thought, the harder his head pounded until, sweating beneath the soaking rain, he slid to his knees and heaved, emptying his stomach of its fast food contents as the blood in his head slammed against his eyes.

“Uh, God,” Dean breathed, pressing the back of his hand against his mouth. He hated getting sick, especially when there wasn't a night of fun preceding it. Using the grille of the Chevy to pull himself along, Dean crept around the car, his knees grinding into the gravel of the sloppy parking lot, and reached the handle of the driver's side door.

Unlocking the car, Dean used the steering wheel to pull himself into the protection of the car, ignoring the water from his body soaking the interior of the car, and faded into black as he slumped across the seat.

Darkness turned to gray and images became ghosts behind closed eyes. Words surfaced and muffled and sank, then surfaced again. He shook with chills, moaned with pain, ached from his teeth. He rolled through the gray, searching for solace in the center of the pain.

She said it was like looking into Hell...

Black eyes, yellow eyes, unnatural, unforgiving.

I'm not copying the Strangler, boy. I am the Strangler...

No way to hide, nowhere to go.

You're more than welcome to play along...

A game he couldn't win, a deck stacked against him.

What's normal for us, man...

Nothing to look forward to, only a future of his past, no hope for peace.

This brotherhood is playing us and I don't like it...

Doing the job, saving people, hunting things. Forget the pain, Ignore the pain. Find Sam.

Wake up, Dean.

At the unmistakable sound of his father's voice, Dean jerked awake, a groan tailing the motion like a shadow. Though logic and memory told him he was alone, Dean still slid his eyes around the interior of the car with a slash of hope, looking for a tangible source to the voice in his head.

The thunder was no longer outside. It was crashing around the confines of his skull like WWF wrestlers. Blinking slowly, Dean reached up to scratch at the now-drying blood on his face, registering the fact the rain had stopped and his clothes, while still damp, had started to dry.

"Oh, shit," he muttered, knowing he'd just lost precious time to find Sam. Grabbing the steering wheel, Dean pulled himself up, closing his eyes as lights began to dance to the staccato beat of *Thriller* in his periphery. "Gonna find that sonuvabitch..." Dean muttered, "tear his arm off and beat him to death with it..." His threat was finished on a breathy gasp.

Wiping sweat from his upper lip, Dean dug his cell phone from the pocket of his jeans.

"Suck it up, Dean," he admonished himself. "You need to find Sam."

He needed help. He could barely focus on the silver phone in his hand; he wasn't going to be able to find Sam on his own. It didn't matter that he'd left, it didn't matter that he was never there, it didn't matter that he didn't understand that when Dean said "Yes, sir" what he meant was "I need you." Flipping the phone open, he scrolled down through the names until he reached the one that pained him the most: Dad.

"This is John Winchester..."

"*Goddammit!*" Dean flipped the phone shut. "Of all the damn times for freakin' voicemail!"

A flutter of fear crawled from his gut to beat against his heart. *Take your brother outside as fast as you can...* Doubt tickled the edge of his conscious. *For you and Dad... things I'm willing to do or kill... scares me sometimes...* Hesitation was as good as death and he had no clear idea how much time had passed since footsteps splashed through the rain behind them. *Find me, Dean...*

Closing his eyes, he pushed fear down like a physical thrust, deep into his gut. Sam was *not* dead. He was *not* gone. He simply wasn't here. Dean would find him. He always found him. It's what he did. Took care of Sam.

"Bobby," Dean whispered. No matter what, Bobby had always been there. Bobby knew about these Blood Brothers. Bobby would help.

"If you're listening to this, you better know what to do." Bobby's voice was a warm growl against his ear.

Silently cursing voicemail once more, Dean swallowed, then left Bobby a message, "Bobby, it's Dean." He heard the shake in his voice and closed his eyes against the pain corkscrewing through his head. "We're in New York. I don't... I, uh... listen, just call me, okay?"

Closing the phone, Dean rested it against his lips, pulling in a lungful of air. Glancing to the side, he saw Sam's messenger bag on the floor of the passenger side. A quick, sharp pang having nothing to do with a bullet graze sliced through him.

"Sam..."

Suddenly, the cell phone in his hand seemed to feel heavy.

"Dammit, Dean," he cursed, "*think!*"

Sam's cell phone! Flipping the phone open, Dean scrolled down until he saw his brother's name, then pressed dial.

And heard Sam's ringtone...

...from the trunk of the Impala.

"No..." Dean breathed, the phone pressed to his ear as he listened to the tune that had been fertilizer for a field of jokes until this moment.

Panic struck him like a wave. He felt cold shoot through him chased by a bone-numbing heat that left his limbs weak. As Sam's voice droned through the message on his voicemail, Dean pressed the phone closer to his ear, drinking in the tones that were akin to life for him.

As if his hand belonged to someone else, Dean reached out and pushed open the Impala's door, keeping the phone pressed to his ear, though the beep ending Sam's message had already sounded. Rotating his legs from the seat, Dean planted his boots firmly in the middle of a puddle, using the door to help him rise into the gathering darkness of the evening.

Swallowing, Dean moved in a determined, rolling gait to the trunk, staring at the silver lock with a block of ice where his heart used to be.

"Do it," Dean breathed. "Just do it."

Taking a breath, Dean shoved his key in the lock and lifted the trunk as if pulling off a band aid. Inside, Dean saw Sam's wet jacket laying crumpled on top of their packed duffels. His cell phone stuck out of the inner pocket.

But no Sam.

Relief erased Dean's knees and he clicked the phone shut as he sank down to a crouch, his back against the bumper, his rear-end just above a puddle of water. Allowing his head to fall forward into the palm of his hand, Dean closed his eyes with a trembling sigh.

No body meant there was hope for Sam. He didn't know how Sam's jacket got into the trunk, but no body meant there was still a chance.

"I'm gonna find you, brother," Dean muttered to the weak night. He tried to think, trying to piece together the scattered puzzle of the evening, tried to find the pattern he'd lost when the shot rang out in the alley.

The more he thought, though, the harder the pounding in his head reverberated through his skull.

"Christ," Dean breathed. "I am seriously gonna skin that sonuvabitch."

The only logical conclusion was that the demon Berkowitz, Son of Sam, had been the figure running toward them in the alley. Gingerly touching the seeping groove across his forehead, Dean was willing to bet that it was a .44 caliber wound. What he didn't understand was why Sam was gone... it wasn't Berkowitz's M.O. to take his victims from the place of killing. Something else was going on here...

Straightening, Dean turned to face the opened trunk, reaching up to shut the lid, then pausing and grabbing Sam's jacket from the depths of the body-sized storage space. Clutching the garment to his chest, Dean breathed in the scent of his brother, the scent of home, before slamming the trunk closed.

"I'm gonna find you, Sammy," he promised, lips against the wet folds of canvas. Turning, Dean started for the car door once more when his eyes caught on something.

A body-shaped something, crumpled against the base of a tree just behind the Impala.

Unknown Location, New York, NY

"...gonna find me...he's gonna find me...always has...just knows..."

The chattering of his teeth seemed to echo in the small vacuum of space that surrounded Sam. He was shivering so hard his knuckles bounced against the confines of his metal coffin as he worked to keep blood flowing to his limbs. Scenes

from his childhood with Dean flashed around him like a movie projector in his mind come to life.

He could see a tricycle. Red, with white tassels on the handle bars. He remembered the feel of the plastic tassels sliding through his fingers. He remembered shifting his hips from side to side to reach the pedals and follow Dean down the sidewalk, his brother acting like he didn't notice Sam was back there.

"You knew... you knew..."

He remembered a pier and a pond and the sudden shock of the cold water as it closed over his head, the panic of not being able to find the surface, the reassurance of his brother's warm hands on his arms, pulling him up, telling him to breathe slowly, telling him that he was safe.

"Always s-safe with y-you..."

He remembered claws and teeth and shouts and shots and pain and blood and laughter and anger and punches and shoves and tears and pleading and fear... total and complete fear that Dean was gone, that Dean was dead, that he was seeing his brother for the last time.

"...s-still had f-fight in you, b-brother..."

He remembered the weightless feeling of death as it crept close, as it reached out its hand for him, stopped only by Gudrun and her power, her might, her tolerance. He remembered the relief of seeing Dean again. Of seeing their dad. Of breathing.

"We don't get normal, Dean..."

He remembered the sound of his brother's voice asking if he'd go back to school, saying that it would never be over, saying that he might want to settle down, saying that he wanted to be a family again. Dean. Strong, stubborn, impossible, invincible. Falling, bleeding, drowning in the rain.

Pulling in a breath, Sam's memory bounced from childhood to present. To the rain. To the alley. To the gunshot.

"Sounds like someone running..."

Sam turned, mirroring his brother, and had one heartbeat of time to register the presence of the person approaching when the crack of the gun shook the air around him and Dean jerked, head snapping back, knees disappearing, body crashing to the wet ground, unmoving.

"Dean!"

Sam reached, stepping forward, and was halted by the hot muzzle of the snub-nosed .44 shoved under his chin, pushing him back against the opposite wall.

"He said you were good, but I didn't believe him."

"What?" Sam gasped, the rain soaking through the bandages on his neck, loosening the tape holding them in place. He tried to dart his eyes around the dark, beady eyes of the Italian-looking man in front of him, tried to check on Dean, but the muzzle of the gun clicked his teeth shut, the demon's heavy hand weighted against Sam's chest.

*"Told us you'd figured out the game...thought, no way... no way some pansy-assed **humans** could be onto us...and yet here you are..."*

Sam shot his eyes back to the man in front of him. Dean had taken care of the demon before checking on him back at the Providence Apartments. He needed to do the same thing. Fumbling stiff fingers into his wet pocket, he gripped the rosary and started to recite the exorcism rite from the book stuffed in Dean's pocket.

"Shut up," Demon Berkowitz growled, clicking the hammer back on the pistol.

Sam kept muttering, grunting as the demon's hand slid from his chest to wrap around his wounded neck.

"Just friggin' shoot him already," came a foreign voice from the entrance to the alley. "You CruorFratres are always all about the damn pattern."

Sam darted his frantic eyes to the side, pausing in his recitation, his hands clutching at the strong fingers at his throat. Standing in the entrance to the alley was a mild looking man, dressed in a circa 1980's burgundy Messengers jacket and dark

blue jeans. His thinning hair was combed back away from his face and his calm eyes regarded the demon pinning Sam to the wall with mocking disdain.

"What are you doing here?" Demon Berkowitz growled. "You were sent away."

"I was sent **here**, smart ass," the man retorted. "I was sent to live among these...vermin. Without power. Without prestige. Without recognition. Because I wasn't good enough to be a Blood Brother."

Demon Berkowitz released Sam, turning to face the man. "Don't blame me," he smirked. "I just work here."

Sam took the opportunity of distraction to drop low, scuttling across the alley toward his fallen brother. Dean was breathing, blood pouring from a deep slash on his forehead.

"Dean," Sam whispered, cupping his brother's limp neck in his palm, fear spiking through him as Dean's head rested without protest in Sam's hand.

"I'm taking over, Dog-man," said the newcomer.

Sam drew his head up, curving his body over Dean's limp form to try to protect his brother from the rain, frantically working out how he was going to get Dean out past two demons.

"This isn't how it works," Demon Berkowitz shouted. "You stick to the pattern!"

"Screw the pattern," the man growled and Sam watched his eyes go dark, his face stone. A shiver shot through Sam and he couldn't be sure if it was from the rain or the sight of the evil insanity before him.

Demon Berkowitz fired at the man and Sam watched the bullets hit, the man flinching ever-so-slightly, then grinning with sadistic pleasure as he rocketed forward, grabbing up Berkowitz and slamming him into the opposite wall. Turning away, Sam bent low over Dean, gathering his brother up close to him.

"It's okay, man, I got you, I got you," Sam whispered distractedly.

Dean was heavy when he was helping, nearly impossible when he was completely unconscious, and Sam was worried about the shallow pattern of his brother's breathing. Trying to slide one of Dean's arms over his shoulder, Sam gripped Dean's wrist, working to pull them both to their feet, when he was crashed into from behind.

He sprawled in the wet alley, Dean falling away from him, his arm landing in a deep puddle, his body sprawled against the brick wall.

"Not good enough... I'm **ten times** better than you morons... I'm more worthy of the brotherhood than you'll ever be..." The newcomer shook Demon Berkowitz roughly, rolling his head smoothly to absorb the punches swung his way. The two demons crashed once more against the wall between Sam and Dean, growling feral words in a combination of Latin and English.

Sam thought quickly. He wasn't going to be able to get Dean out of there unnoticed. He needed to get rid of at least one of these demons. Dean had the exorcism book and the holy water. Sam's gun barrel was full of water, the salt ruined. He cast a look over his shoulder to the Impala. He needed a weapon. He had to get to her.

Closing his mind to the idea he was leaving Dean behind, Sam pushed himself to his feet, closing the wet distance between himself and the Impala in a time that would turn a track star pea green with envy. Shoving his spare key into the lock, he opened the trunk, struggled quickly out of his coat and pulled the rosary from his pocket. Dropping his coat on top of the duffels, he started to reach for the hidden latch that sprang the hidden floor of the trunk loose when he heard the growl.

It wasn't human. It wasn't wild. It was wicked.

Sam snapped his head up, seeing Demon Berkowitz rushing toward him, empty .44 outstretched, black eyes wild.

"You're mine!" He screamed. "I picked you! You're MINE! He doesn't get you!"

Sam lifted his hands and caught the man as he rushed forward, his back crashing against the Impala, the motion slamming the trunk closed. Anger, the image of

Dean's limp, bloody face, the fact that they were not allowed normal, ratcheted through Sam with the force of a freight train and he pushed back, slamming Demon Berkowitz against the nearest tree in the lot.

Lips moving rapidly, Sam completed the exorcism, rosary gripped in his hand, rain falling on both of them, and Demon Berkowitz screamed with pain and fury, his body shaking and writhing in Sam's grasp, resistance pushing against the possessed man's skin, blood pooling in the dark eyes and running down the man's face as the demon defied the inevitable.

In a moment, Sam realized all was silent save the rain and he released the man in his grasp, stepping back, panting, as the no-longer-possessed man fell into a heap at the base of the tree, the demon returning to hell on a ride of black smoke.

"Dean..."

"Don't think so."

Sam spun around, staring incredulously at the man standing serenely behind him, leaning against the Chevy. Flicking his wet hair from his eyes, Sam looked from the new demon to the alley where he could see his brother's out-flung hand in the fading light.

"I've been...dying... to see how long it takes the human body to freeze," the demon said, his lips twisting into a pleased smirk.

Before Sam could react, the demon was upon him and darkness was once more his companion.

"Two..." Sam shivered, coming back to himself. "Dean... two..."

He knew Dean would find the body by the tree. He knew he would see the .44.

Sam's mouth worked against emotion, pressing tightly to his teeth as the cold shook him with fierce shudders.

"Dean... there's two... there's two..."

Pine Street, Yonkers, NY

Blinking through the dried blood collected along his eyelashes, Dean moved his shaking fingers over the man's sodden jacket sleeve, grasping his arm and rolling the body over slightly. Eyes that no longer saw stared back at him, wide and lifeless. The man's face was frozen in an expression of horror, the last struggles of his life etched in his inert mouth, open in a silent scream. Blood had trailed along his cheek, streaming in a dried up river from his eyes. Dean tried to ignore the way the man's tongue lolled slightly from his parted lips as he turned him back onto his side.

"Shit..."

Besides the blood near his eyes, Dean couldn't find the cause of death. There were no bullet wounds, no other origin of bleeding.

"Who the hell are you?"

He patted down the body, looking for a wallet, the muscles in his legs ticking with forced pulses of blood and the exertion of crouching in the wet night. Dizziness was exciting more bouts of nausea, forcing small pauses in his search.

The wallet was in a back pants pocket, and Dean flipped through it in frustration, checking over his shoulder for any more beings that could leap from the shadows and take him by surprise. The retorting bang of the .44 still bombarded his skull in piercing echoes, making it hard to concentrate.

He also knew that hovering above a dead body and looking through their wallet wasn't exactly a good way to be found by anyone, supernatural or otherwise.

The victim's name was on every card. It held no meaning to Dean. It hadn't been what he was looking for. The pictures in the wallet matched the man, but Dean had been hoping for something more, an address, maybe...an exact location of Sam and his current status...

A few drops of blood ran down Dean's nose dripping onto the plastic photo cover. He wiped at them, narrowing his eyes at the picture below. The man and his dog.

"Sonuvabitch."

In the weak light of the lot, beneath the waterlogged plastic the name *Sam* was scrawled on the photo underneath the black lab's paws.

"The devil in my dog made me do it..." Dean muttered, grabbing onto the man's arm roughly this time, rotating him onto his back. The .44 that was tucked under his side glinted in the street-lamp light and Dean pushed away, staggering to his feet.

"You son of a *bitch!*"

Dead. The *.44 caliber killer* was dead. The demon gone. And Sam...

"Okay, okay," Dean grasped the truck of the Impala, anchoring to something before he once again found himself horizontal, breathing in asphalt. "C'mon, Dean. He's here...somewhere...he's...few hours...not even, you weren't out that long..."

He practically dug the flat of his palm into his eyes to clear the blood this time, swearing as another shift of vertigo thrust into him and twisted his perception.

Sam being possessed crossed his mind, and was quickly pushed away. The .44 was still with the deceased... but, Sam had reminded him that he'd never been possessed... That fact did little to quell his fear, however...

That spark we look for...

Dean fumbled with the lock on the trunk, grabbing out the medical kit and splaying its content out, rummaging through them with unsteady hands. They were out of tape, bandages, gauze, Dean remembering too late that he'd wanted to pick up more after his work on Sam's neck had used up the last of their supplies.

"Bea-friggin-utiful!" Dean yelled, slamming the trunk shut. He winced as his own voice ricocheted around his ears.

He took up his brother's jacket from where he'd stashed it on the roof of the car and returned to the open driver's side door. Placing the jacket in Sam's seat, Dean paused for a moment to stare at it, mind starting up again like a tilt-o-whirl.

Someone else. There had to have been someone else that had taken Sam. He wouldn't have left, and with the condition he'd found the Berkowitz demon's last host, combined with where he found Sam's jacket, he knew the kid had put up a fight, had exorcised the bastard before he was taken down by someone—something—else.

There were sirens whooping in the distance and Dean didn't know if they were coming his way. It was hard to tell with New York City as his current backdrop. He wasn't going to stick around and find out. With a final glance in the rearview mirror to the body beneath the tree, Dean started the engine, swinging out onto the street with the fury and near unstable bearings of a bat out of hell.

Gas Station, Yonkers, NY

Dean pulled into the closest gas station and mini-mart. He was sick, his stomach knotting itself with panic over losing Sam; his head wound only amplifying his dread and the internal verbal abuse looping through his mind. He had no leads, no direction, no way of finding Sam and the suffocating way his heart constricted mercilessly within his chest at that thought did nothing but push him to a point of physical instability.

He folded out of the car, staggering to the back of the store toward the bathroom doors, shoulder connecting with a passerby who told him to go to hell. Dean thought he heard a few other choice words run alongside *stupid drunk*, but he ignored them. The man had no idea he didn't need to go to hell, he was already there...

Dean's hands mechanically grasped hold of a pack of band-aids, knocking some of the boxes from the shelf with the sloppy, weak motion. He could feel the eyes of the gas station attendant follow him from the door to the back, but he focused on

pumping uncooperative limbs toward the bathroom, locking the door behind him when he'd reached his destination.

The smell of waste and antiseptic played games within his already *screwed to hell* skull. He spit up in the sink, then ran his hands beneath the water, splashing the cold liquid onto his fevered cheeks. It did nothing to satiate the fear, the guilt, the unrelenting leaping of his pulse as *Sam lost, Sam hurt, Sam dying* tripped across his synapses. It did, however, clear away the blood, cool his face, dispel the dizzying blur from his eyes and bring around some semblance of lucidity.

Find Sam...

"Where?" Dean sputtered through another hand full of water.

He looked up into the mirror, the bullet graze deep red against his ashen complexion. For a brief instant he mused at how he fit in with the graffiti laden cesspool around him. The wound was seeping a little, and he pressed a paper towel to it until it ceased. The band-aids were torn into smaller strips and used to hold the skin of the gash together. He didn't have time for stitches, and he didn't even feel he had time for this, not with Sam out there, God knew where...

Eat something before you fall down...

Sam's voice reprimanded him in his mind and he shot out an arm over the sink to steady himself against the mirror, eyes clamped shut.

"Goddammit, Sam, I can't...gotta find you..."

You lost a lot of blood, Dean. Put something in your system. You'll pass out again.

Dean groaned, knowing the tremors, the pounding reverberating through every strand of his being would only get worse. He was no use to Sam like this, knowing whatever had Sam would take advantage of the fact that Dean could barely stand.

Swearing, he pushed out of the bathroom and traversed the space to the drink coolers with the gracefulness of a man three times his age. Dean managed to grab a bottle of Gatorade and a protein bar, disregarding the shock on a few of the customers' faces at his blood-stained shirt, the shoddy patchwork along his temple, and the way he swayed instead of walked into line.

A conversation between the gas station attendant and the man in front of Dean fluttered back against his ear as irritating noise, another obstacle keeping Dean from getting to Sam.

Hurry up, hurry up. Save it for your mom or someone who cares, buddy.

The word murder ran sideways along his brain, and Dean's eyes bounded back toward the two of them, suddenly interested in their conversation. He was having trouble focusing, the words muting out with the almost erratic thrumming of blood through his head. The attendant's gaze settled on Dean for a moment, and Dean knew he was staring hard, trying to register and catch up on their conversation, but he didn't care. The attendant eventually returned full attention to the customer.

"Where was that? Somewhere in Hell's Kitchen, right?" The attendant asked.

"Yeah, yeah. Strange that it's starting back up again right along with the copycat *Son of Sam* murders."

"I know, weird, huh? Creepy as hell. These disappearances remind me of what happened back in the eighties. And you know how that ended..."

"Did they ever catch that guy?"

"No, but they found the bodies in the walls of that apartment building, remember?"

"Jesus, yeah, I do. Never caught the guy? Mary mother of God, what a sick sad world we live in..."

There's a reason people believe in divine intervention, Sam's voice rocked back through Dean's conscious again.

"Where?" Dean stepped forward, setting his things on the counter, slurring a little as he pushed his way into the conversation. God, he knew he had to look like a pathetic drunk, but he didn't care. He needed to know a location, desperation pooling into his timbre. "Where in Hell's Kitchen did these disappearances take place? I need to know."

The attendant, who'd been wary of Dean the second he'd tripped into the store, backed away a little. The man next to him, however, turned to Dean, noticing him for the first time, taking in his disheveled appearance and bruised face.

"Christ, what happened to you? Do you need help?"

"No," Dean barked. "I don't—*look*, I just need to know where they found the bodies in the eighties."

"You're blee—"

"I don't give a shit! *Where* were they found?"

Dean moved forward, hands rising like he meant to fist them in the man's jacket and slam him back against the counter. However, he held himself back at the startled expression that the man gave, noting that the attendant probably had any number of weapons underneath that register, and probably had already hit some hidden emergency button.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Dean said, hands up in defense. "Just tell me and I'll leave."

His hand went to his jacket pocket slowly, removing the wallet and throwing more cash than what the drink and food would have cost before the attendant, eyes never leaving the man who knew about what had happened in Hell's Kitchen.

"Between T-Tenth and Eleventh I think...long Forty-Seventh somewhere...place had to be taken apart inside..."

Dean took up the sustenance on the counter and made his way toward the door before either of them could stop him or say another word. He had a destination. The thudding of his heart into his ribs propelled him forward, as doubts of being wrong tried to trip up his steps.

What if he was wrong? What if he drove out there and Sam wasn't there? It wasn't like he had a lot of options at the moment, however. Sam's cell wasn't on him, he couldn't trace it. As far as he knew, these disappearances in Hell's Kitchen were somehow linked to the *Cruor Frater*. Had to be...

Dean dug a map out of the glove box, turning on the dome light and tried to read the street names. They all blurred together like oil in water and he swore, squinting to try to decipher them despite the way it pulled at his makeshift stitches.

Guitar riffs suddenly poured from his jacket pocket as his cell phone ringtone burst to life, sending Dean's senses skittering again. He shifted his weight against the door, digging out the cell desperately, not bothering to check the caller I.D. For some reason he thought he knew who it was, or at least a part of him was hoping...

"Dad—" his voice tumbled out in a shaky breath.

"*Dean?*" Bobby's concern was almost as concentrated as Dean's desperation.

"Bobby..." Dean felt an ounce of calm relief return, but it didn't stop the screaming in his head. *Find Sam. Find Sam. Find Sam now!* "I—I need to know how to get to Hell's Kitchen. Can't see to read the *damn* map."

"*Dean...*"

"I lost him, Bobby. I lost Sam."

"*Dean.*"

"It knew we were here, it knew that Sam and I were trailing it. I can't remember anything after the gunshot—"

"*Dean!*"

Bobby's voice held in it a command, a command for Dean to come back, to lock onto something and calm down.

"*Are you hurt, Dean?*"

"I have to find him, Bobby," Dean's voice cracked.

"*You will. We will. But I can't help you if I don't know where you are. What happened to you, boy?*"

It started to rain again, the heavy staccato beat drilled out along the roof of the Impala matching the noise in his head. Dean leaned forward, his head against the steering wheel, taking in a few deep, slow breaths.

"Yonkers...We were checking out the killer's old place, there was...someone running, a gunshot...I woke up and Sam was gone. Head's killing me, but 'm okay."

"Bullshit."

"M okay, Bobby."

"And the killer?"

"Dead. Demon's gone. Think Sam exorcised it...before something else stepped in..."

"You don't think Sam's poss—"

"No," Dean returned sharply. Not because the thought hadn't already crossed his mind, but because he refused to believe Sam was out there, being forced to kill. Not his Sam. He didn't care what the demon in Boston had said. The damn things lied...

"You know what the address is, Dean? I can get you there, I just need to know where you're at, where you're going."

"Don't really know...somewhere along Forty-Seventh between Tenth and Eleventh. Guy said there were bodies found there in the eighties, building had to be torn up inside...Probably something else entirely now, but that's all I've got, Bobby."

"Think the Cruor Frater is involved?"

"I don't know. Yes. Who else would—"

"Dean."

"Yeah?"

"I'll guide you there. You'll find Sam, all right? You'll need to stay with me, you understand?"

You'll find, Sam...Bobby's words were a promise.

I have to find Sam...I messed this up...my responsibility...

"Dean."

"Okay," Dean said with a nod. "Hold on."

He set the phone down on the seat beside him, switching on the speaker button. His thirst overwhelmed him suddenly, his pausing giving him a second for his mind to catch up with his body, to a point where he had to reach for the Gatorade and guzzle the cold liquid, let it sooth over the rawness that had settled into his throat. Afterward, steadying his fingers around the wheel, Dean turned over the engine.

"Glenwood," Dean told Bobby as he pulled to the edge of the gas station lot, seeing the street sign nearby. His head pounded back through his eyes as he focused his gaze through the rain and windshield wipers. Navigation was about to become a real bitch.

"Turn right and head for Nine, Dean. I know this is asking a lot but take it slow," Bobby tried.

Dean didn't reply. He couldn't make any promises as his foot pressed down into the accelerator. Not with everything resting on how he used whatever adrenaline he had left, whatever strength the bottle of Gatorade could provide, and the minutes slipping through his fingers like sand.

Abandoned Apartment Building, New York, NY, Night

It had taken too long in Dean's mind to get to Forty-Seventh, and yet, now that he was parked alongside the building Bobby had told him about, he was finding it hard to move. The scenarios of what he'd find inside were enough to make him feel claustrophobic in the car that had served as his home for thousands of miles, years stacked on end.

He cast a sidelong glance at Sam's jacket, wishing he was there instead, the twisting inside that he'd made a mistake, that maybe Sam was still in Yonkers, was threatening to drag up the contents of his weak stomach.

The phone remained open on Dean's seat, Bobby's voice no longer coming as a tether to sanity from the speakers. He'd found out where the murders had happened,

told Dean that the apartments were under renovation, bought by someone in the early nineties and neglected.

Dean had mentally lost Bobby somewhere around there, focusing more on the road signs, and listening to his friend only as a way to keep at bay the demons that were playing racket-ball with his psyche.

Bobby had always provided a sense of composure, an anchoring. Bobby had been the one to call him back...

Now, staring at the phone, Dean wished he hadn't hung up. Bobby had told Dean to call him as soon as he found Sam, and Dean had promised him he would. Alive. Well. Sound. Sam would be with him when he made that call. Dean would make sure of that.

Talk to you soon, Dean. Be careful.

Both men knew he could be going in against a demon, wounded, alone, racing against time. For as much as Dean was grateful for Bobby's concern, Dean was also grateful for Bobby's faith in him.

Pocketing the phone, Dean opened the door to the Impala, wary of the loud groan of its hinges. Again, he used it as a sort of crutch to raise himself and he stood, staring at the large mess of a building before him. From the front, it hadn't looked this bad, but from the alley he could see the broken glass, and boarded up windows.

Knowing the Colt 1911 A1 .45 in his hands would do little against a demon, it did nothing to stop him from taking it from the trunk, along with some holy water. He needed the weight of the gun in his hands now, needed the reassurance that the weapon brought him.

Sam alive, well, sound was what he focused on, not *Sam lost, hurt, dying, dead*, as he made his way toward one of the doors. The lock on the door had already been sawed through, the chain coming loose in Dean's hand effortlessly. Disconcerting as it was, he was free from having to pick a lock.

Let's just hope the others don't know we're coming...

Using the wall to guide him inside, Dean's fingers sensed out the grooves along the brick for some form of light switch. Unable to find one just inside the door, he followed the blinking light at the end of the hall, moving slowly, gun in one hand leading the way, the other hand trailing the wall as if letting go would cause him to plunge into some unknown pit.

His hand disappeared into a hole in the wall for a brief second before his fingers found the edge again. They'd slipped against something wet and cold.

...they found the bodies in the walls of that apartment building, remember?

"Just a leak in some pipe," Dean reassured himself as he crawled along in the dark. "Damn demon brotherhood with their serial killer fetishes."

He finally came to a hallway where the overhead fluorescent lights hummed with electric current, their bare bulbs sputtering in and out, plunging the hallway into occasional beats of black.

There was a stairwell that led from the front of the building up toward the top floor. Dean stood at the base, craning his neck, using the railing to steady himself, to look up through the almost Escher-esque way the stairs moved through the successive floors.

He started to climb, sticking to the outer wall, eyes blurring and focusing with the hum of the florescent lights as they browned in and out. Broken beer bottles, cigarettes, and filth-soaked garments littered the stairway like almost purposeful carpeting. Dean had to blink to focus, eyes shifting from the walls riddled with graffiti, to the ground to avoid breaking something beneath his boots, giving away his location.

An urge to call out for Sam, to scream his name and hear it echo off the foul walls built at the back of his throat. Knowing it would only give away where he was, he choked it down the best he could, pausing a moment to focus, to not let panic run away and take him with it.

You can't help Sam like this!

Dean's head shot up as music spilled over the railing a few floors up. The soothing bound and roll of violins, and an airy, almost eerie, female soprano voice. *Ave Maria* cascaded through the stairwell and wrapped through Dean's aching skull, causing every muscle to wind up in presumption that this was being played for him. That someone—something—knew that he was there now. He moved faster, losing some of his stealth in the process.

The fifth floor, and origin of the haunting melody, was only partially lit. Dean moved to place a foot down the hall and stopped, noting the scattered glass all the way from one end to the next. This member of the brotherhood wanted to know when someone was coming, and Dean had no choice but to move forward toward the music coming from a door on the left.

The grating crush of glass against linoleum sounded like a cymbal crash in Dean's ears, and for a moment he debated running forward, getting to the door and Sam or whatever was in that room, but he continued on with his careful pace, like no one knew he was there, like no one could hear the sound of his approach as the melody permeating the air warbled on a crescendo.

Then all was quiet. The music ceasing. The sound of breaking glass as well, as Dean halted, gun trained on the room.

What game was it playing now? Was it even playing a game?

Get to Sam. Get to Sam. This demon freak likes theatrics, there's nothing else to this, Winchester.

The glass behind him shattered beneath a booted gait, and Dean spun on his heel, gun at the ready. He thought for a moment he'd seen a shadow fade into one of the rooms by the stairs. It would be possible, given how the walls were knocked out in sporadic and convenient places. The killer could be anywhere now...

Dean moved against the wall, looking through one of the holes into the room where the shadow had disappeared moments before. There was nothing there, and he pulled away, back flush with the wall so he could listen for movement, see what was coming from both directions.

Just hold on Sam...

"Sam, Sam, Sam," a voice echoed off the deteriorating walls, leading Dean's eyes to the far end of the hall, to an open door. How could the demon move that fast in a human host? "You really are a single minded creature. What about you, Dean? Who's gonna save *you*?"

Dean squinted through the dark, but couldn't see anyone. Every hair on the back of his neck was standing at attention, every muscle so tightly wound it could snap in half.

Where are you?

"I'll give you a hint," the demon cooed. This time the sound slithered out from a door right across from Dean, causing him to sink his shoulder blades deeper, his back pressed tight against the wall, eyes down the sight of the semi-auto.

"Close enough to hear you breathing."

Dean heard the voice from behind too late, unaware that the killer and he had been pressed against the same wall, back to back. Dean turned in the next breath, spotting black eyes through the hole in the wall.

Plaster and wood exploded out toward him before he could get a shot off and Dean was sent reeling into the opposite wall, body denting in the rotting wood and peeling wall paper like memory foam.

He groaned as he pushed up on his forearms, making sure not to touch the glass with his hands, his denim and leather keeping his legs and arms from being shred into thin bloody ribbons.

"Where's my brother?" Dean ground out, eyes wild, body shaking in rage.

The killer casually turned his gaze back toward room 513, slick smile oozing. "Sam? Sure he's cold as hell by now."

Hell's Kitchen, abandoned apartment building

There was no stopping the vicious tilt of the floor beneath Dean. Holding as still as he could, closing his eyes, cognizant that it was neither the hallway nor him moving, just his garbled senses, Dean anchored again at his core. Tightening the muscles along his stomach into unyielding coils, he started to rise away from the tiny blades of glass scattered along the floor, using the wall as a support.

Dean was aware that the demon was watching him move, moreover, *allowing him* to move. The dreaded anticipation of being thrown back against the wall and pinned or dragged further down the glass-encrusted hallway floor twitched through Dean's every muscle. He had to get to Sam, but he knew there was little chance of making a clean break, which only heightened the sluice of adrenaline.

Sure he's cold as hell by now.

The demon's words about Sam pushed around barbs of ice in Dean's gut. What had happened to Sam? What had this *son of a bitch* done? All Dean knew about this killer's M.O. was that it holed up its victims in walls. What happened to them before that, Dean didn't even want to venture a sliver of a guess.

What he wanted was Sam out of this hellhole, miles away, unharmed.

"I know what you're thinking," the demon's voice melted through the air, soft, calm, eerily at ease.

"Of course you do," Dean groaned, sinking his body against the wall for a moment to reclaim his bearings. His eyes instinctively sought out room five thirteen from where he was, the door closed, maddeningly out of reach.

The demon was pacing, slow and casual, hands dug deep within his pants pockets. "You're asking yourself: Who the hell is this guy? You've probably never heard of me, have you?"

"Actually," Dean replied, easing away from the wall, moving the opposite way from his attacker, backing toward the room the demon had nodded to earlier. "I was asking myself why is it demons always feel the need to talk me to death. Do I honestly look like I give a rat's ass?"

Dean turned his body slightly, the flask of holy water surreptitiously slipping from his pocket to his hands when he rose from the floor, the wall he'd been using for support doubling as cover. If this thing could read his moves, then it would have done something about it by now, Dean knew. He could tell the demon was more involved with its own ego-stroking. His fingers moved as steadily as he could manage to remove the cap, trying to hide the movement as the tremors played up his arm.

"What did you do to Sam?" Dean asked. "I swear to God if you've..."

"If I've what?" The demon snapped. He moved closer to Dean in simple fluid movements, without fear or hesitation. "Drawn out his intestines like fishing line? Taken off his fingers at the knuckle? Deformed him in some heinous way? Maybe touched him, left my mark on him for the rest of his life? Which," the demon paused, looking at his watch. "Well, hell, I'd be surprised if there was much of that left."

Anger blazed back through Dean with the recoil of a magnum, his body following after like a spring cut loose. The holy water sliced through the air in a scythe-like arc, deeply searing the demon upon impact. Dean didn't stop, lashing out again with another powerful swing of his arm. The demon wailed in anguish, bringing up his hands to try to lessen the blows. Thick steam covered him like fog, and his hands and face blistered instantly under the power of the blessed liquid.

Dean threw himself toward the demon, running him down until he ground its back, shoulders, and limbs into the broken glass on the floor. The shock of his own attack, of hitting flesh and bone and hard wood, kicked up what little was left in Dean's stomach, tunneling out his vision to nothing before images flew back in with splotches like birds' wings crisscrossing his sight.

Unwilling to allow pain to be his weakness, Dean rolled away from the demon, scrambling for the gun he'd dropped earlier. Lowering his shoulder, hand wrapping around the grip, Dean rolled onto his back, bringing the gun up to point.

Dean paused, his vision beyond the nose of the gun wavering. He knew shooting the demon wouldn't stop it, but maybe he could force it to focus on either repairing or rejecting the body it possessed.

These men weren't saints...

Innocent until proven otherwise, whether or not this man was chosen because of his nature, Dean didn't know, and he hesitated. Pulling the trigger was admitting the demons were telling the truth. Pulling the trigger meant playing judge and jury on a potential innocent's life...

Not pulling the trigger meant his life ended, along with Sam's...

Two shots made it into the holy water-weakened demon's host, embedding in the chest with brilliant blossoms of blood. The demon bucked, stumbling back, seemingly deciding to give up the host, falling through one of the open doors, black smoke leeching away in thick plumes from the gaping mouth of the man.

Dean moved through the sludge in his limbs, the thick fog of his mind, and managed a few sloppy steps toward room five thirteen. He missed the dark cloud return, the living mist claw its way forcefully back inside the wounded man. Dean *didn't* miss the way time suddenly ceased to exist as he was slammed into the door he was reaching for, propelled forward without breath into the dark confines of suite five thirteen.

"Where are you going?" The sickeningly sweet tone of the being enjoying the game returned to Dean's ears. "Sam could have waited for you on the other side. I wasn't done talking with you."

Dean finally pulled in a wet, labored gasp, coughing as he sagged onto his side, positioning himself so he could see the killer. Scenarios of how he could have done things differently screamed through his skull, tearing it apart. He'd screwed up. He should have tried to exorcise the demon first, then find Sam, but desperation had been a blinding companion, and pain a disorienting catalyst.

"Screw you," Dean spat. "I'm done listening to some wannabe serial killer who couldn't hack it." He inwardly winced at the bad and completely unconscious pun.

Mind and limbs scrambling for control again, Dean backed away at a crawl. It was then he registered the smell saturating the apartment, assaulting his nostrils, and threatening a repeat of the digestive pyrotechnics from earlier that evening. Through the haze of dust and dim lighting, Dean could see the places where the walls had been torn out, the acrid smell of rot, decay, and death coming from that direction strong enough to be visible. It smelled like someone had peeled back the lid on the coffin of a freshly buried, dewy corpse.

The demon shrugged. "Not all are welcome in the so-called *brotherhood*. You can do exactly *what* they want, exactly *how* they want, and just because you pick the wrong guy or deviate from the pattern one *time*, you're out."

Dean's anger was growing with his increasing weakness. *Stay with it. Stay alert. Get to your feet and find a way out of this. Fight your way to Sam or you both die. Move. Be stronger than this or you fail him.* Thoughts of losing now, after everything they'd been through, helped Dean find his knees, forcing him stand.

"They were my brothers," the demon seemed to lament. "Now they won't even look at me..."

Dean dropped his chin, eyes void of anything other than fire. "*Brothers,*" He shook his head. "You have no idea what that word means! I want my brother back, you twisted sonuvabitch!"

The demon didn't even flinch. He retained his smooth persona.

"I have *no idea*?" He said almost absently, lip quirking for a beat. "You're here for your brother, I'm here for mine. You took out two of my brothers, I took out yours. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, et cetera, et cetera. Let the vicious cycle continue

until everyone's in Hell for all I care. I kill you...Maybe they'll let me in. Maybe I finally get my chance to *prove* what I can do." He bobbed his head toward the living room. "Stay for while, won't you?"

Like in the alley the night before, Dean's legs were twisted out from under him, and he was pulled by some unseen force into the next room. Limbs leadened as pressure pushed into him, all too familiar, leaving him helpless to lift his head, his arms, or his legs. He was pinned to the ground like he'd been tied down with railroad spikes.

The speakers in the adjacent room came to life again playing an aria Dean didn't recognize. The same soprano accompanied by melancholy violins. Dean grimaced, and then tried again to break his invisible bonds. It only left him more dizzy, panting, becoming more desperate with every minute that ticked by...and he was utterly useless to Sam.

The demon knelt next to Dean, roughly taking hold of his jaw. "You want to know where Sam is so bad? Let me show you."

Inside of Dean's next breath, he was plunged into cold black, his eyes open but unseeing, searing against the biting air that crackled along the surface of his corneas. He couldn't feel anything but ice burning through his skin, his lungs, his bones, settling into his core, removing life from his flesh through the heat bleeding into the greedy dark.

And then he was back, gasping and writhing as warmth returned to what his mind had perceived as cold. Sensation returned, crawling along in sporadic bursts, splinters of pain driving beneath his skin.

"S-Sam...oh, God," Dean broke words past shivering lips. "Oh sh..." Expletives poured out of every lungful Dean could manage, chest heaving in powerful surges as he let the demon know what he thought about him with a ferocity he wished he could put into his fists. Every stuttered breath held a promise.

Dean would *kill* the son of a bitch.

"My brothers are proud of the ones that never get caught," the demon kept orating as though Dean was a house guest over for Sunday dinner. Its eyes held an entirely different story. Leaning over Dean, the demon studied him with the skilled gaze of a hunter ready to gut a deer. "I was never caught, but I never finished my run. They're very proud of Jack and the Zodiac. I could have been so much better..."

Dean was starting to get that this demon wasn't just buckets of crazy *because* he was a demon. He wasn't all there *even* for a demon.

"The Zodiac killer believed those who died by his hand became his slaves in the after-life," the demon continued, running a hand down Dean's chest, along the sternum. "What do you think, Dean? Will you serve me in the afterlife? Is Sam waiting for me *there*?"

Muscles jumped along Dean's jaw, clamped so tight his teeth hurt. There were no words, only anger manifesting in place of the hopelessness that would consume him if he hadn't sworn his entire life, even in death, to fight until there was nothing left. More terrified than he'd ever admit, he traded his fear in for rage and let that fill him; making him numb, making him deadly if given the opportunity.

He just needed one damn shot.

"I've been curious. How long would it take for a man to suffocate in there, do you think?" The demon asked, nodding up toward the holes in the walls. "Wonder what they'd think? I mean it's not exactly...bloody..."

"Screw your brotherhood," Dean spat. "You're still going to Hell."

The demon sighed like he was bored, but his eyes remained dancing. "You first."

He fisted his hands in Dean's jacket, ripping him up from the floor. Before Dean could try to twist out of his grip, try to stop himself from being thrust backward, he found himself inside the wall, back scraping along brick and mortar, lungs becoming heavy from air that was nauseatingly thick with decay.

It wasn't long before Dean found the source of the gut twisting fumes. Beneath

him, like a pile of macabre marionette pieces, were the bodies of the killer's victims in various stages of decay. Dean tried to move, to get away from the limbs his own were becoming entangled in, but struggling only caused him to slip deeper into the pile of viscera and rot. There was something pushing against him every time he gained ground, forcing him back.

Weak from his wounds, head spinning with blood loss and fear for Sam, Dean stopped struggling, and tried to focus on another way out. Fingers digging into his jacket pocket, wrapping around cool, etched metal, Dean took hold of the rosary, his last lifeline, and closed his eyes. Physically he couldn't win this. Not with the demon able to turn his own body against him, to trap him inside it like a prison.

The exorcism rite. How many times had the Latin passed his lips, had his eyes scanned the text? His encounter with the Strangler had caused him to re-read the exorcism a few more times between Boston and New York, in anticipation of future dark alleyway encounters. If ever there was a time Dean wished for the almost photographic memory Sam possessed, it was now.

Dean started into the rite, slow and choppy, his whispers pensive and calculated despite how fast his mind was moving; He tripped up halfway through, clamping the corners of his eyes down tight in frustration. He started over, tongue thick, throat working against bile.

A shadow slipped over him and his eyes fluttered open for a brief moment to see what had taken away what little light there was pouring into the small broom closet-like encasement. The demon stood at the opening, humming with the melody of the music filling the empty spaces of the abandoned apartment, sliding a brick back into place. Dean knew, without question, if he didn't hurry he would be walled in, *Cask of Amontillado* style.

Crawling up from the darkest recesses of Dean's mind were thoughts of being buried alive again. Lungs tightening with memories of suffocation, his heart gathered again at the base of his throat. No one would come for him this time. The one that had pulled him out of the grave was suffering a similar hell somewhere and Dean couldn't break free long enough to get to him. Somewhere dark, enclosed, freezing...

Like hell it ends like this! Not for Sam. Not for me. Not again. No damn way!

Retreating again inside his mind, away from closing-in walls, from crawling skin, from the sadistic hum creeping through his ears, Dean focused on every time Sam had said the rite, every time he'd heard the words pour from his brother's lips with confident intent. He remembered each word in Sam's voice, heard it echo through his mind and leave his mouth as if his brother were reciting it there with him.

As if a jolt of electricity had passed through the host, the demon jerked a little, confusion making its way slowly down every crease in his face. Another tick in his shoulder sent a quick spasm radiating throughout its torso.

"What are you doing?" The question was posed softly, childlike, filled with the awareness of his error.

Dean felt the demon reach for him, felt invisible tendrils wrap around his throat to silence him, but it was too late. Dean's whispers rasped to an end, overcoming the demon before it could stop him. With a look of shock, the demon stumbled back, the two bullet holes in his chest re-opening and pushing out fresh crimson, spreading the dark stains already there.

Before the body could hit the floor, the demon was drawn out of its dying host. The man's screams tapered off to a death rattle, the darkness scattering from his nostrils and mouth like insects fleeing from light, until there was nothing left.

Reeling, Dean attempted again to lift his battered body from the pile of cadavers he'd almost joined. Grasping for the exit while gagging, Dean took hold of the rough brick edges of the hole and lifted himself from the tomb. Sliding to the ground, Dean ended up on his elbows and knees, forehead pressed into the carpet as he heaved in gulps of air.

A breath gurgled up in a bubble of blood from the fallen man's lips, drawing Dean's attention. There was no way to save him and Dean knew Sam's location would disappear along with the man's last breath. Dean crawled to the man, looking down at the damage he'd caused.

"Where is he?" Dean started, his voice pulling the wide eyes of the dying man toward him. "Please...do you remember where my brother is?"

The man's head lulled to the side and Dean grasped his chin, bringing his face back. "Hey, hey. What did the demon do with Sam?"

Unfocused eyes, staring down nothing, seemed to shine nonetheless above a crooked, bloody smile.

"Cold...as hell," he repeated, drifting.

"No! *Dammit!* Look at me!" Dean barked. "Tell me *where* he is!"

"Freezer," the man croaked, a burbled laugh accompanying the word. "It told me he belongs...to me...now...own...his soul..."

The adrenaline kept his knees from disappearing when Dean pushed to his feet, the blood-rush ignored even though it sent pinpricks of light sparking across his vision. The man's glee at what he'd done, what the demon had promised him, drove spikes of cold through Dean's already panic-shocked system. He had to find a freezer, a freezer in a building this large...

"Sam!"

Dean tore through the abandoned rooms, bellowing his brother's name, pausing only long enough to reclaim his weapon and listen for movement, for some indication of life. The smell in some of them forced Dean to cover his mouth with the back of his hand and press through the rooms more quickly, eyes ripping through their contents for a freezer, avoiding the holes in the walls.

Sam wasn't in the walls. Sam wasn't dead. He refused to let that thought ride shotgun to his search, to slow him down.

Toward the end of the hallway was what looked like a storage locker, gated off and padlocked. A large meat freezer, locked as well, hummed with life at the back of a dank cinderblock room. Rushing forward, Dean shot off the lock, ripping back the chain-link door to get to what hopefully hadn't become his brother's coffin. Heart hollowing out his chest, he removed the second lock with another bullet, hauling up the lid of the freezer.

Sam, barely breathing, barely shivering, didn't respond to the lid being pried back, to warmer air filtering out the cold. Folded up cruelly within the confines of the five-by-three foot space, skin an almost-blue pallor, clothes and hair stiff with ice, Sam looked dead at first glance, obliterating Dean inside.

"Sam..."

Pulling in a breath, Dean moved without hesitation, dropping his gun and grabbing hold of Sam, lifting him with grunts of effort from the icy prison. Sam's clothing had frozen and was caught on the ice below him, snapping free as Dean gathered Sam's almost lifeless form into his arms. Awkwardly and with strength waning, Dean somehow managed to pull Sam with him to the concrete floor.

Resting his back against the freezer, Dean tore off his jacket and drew Sam against him, knees tented at Sam's sides. Dean draped his jacket over Sam's torso and shoulders, cradling him against his chest, and rubbing at his arms, trying to get some kind of life back into them. Sam's head rested against Dean's neck, his cheek so cold that Dean's own flesh burned with the contact.

"Come on, Sam," Dean tried, voice wavering. "You're safe. You're okay now."

Dean could see tears frozen in lines from Sam's eyes starting to thaw on his brother's cheeks. How long had he been in there? Had he drifted as the cold took him under, thinking that this was it, that there was no way he'd make it out of this alive? Had he thought Dean wouldn't come for him?

Stubbornly, Dean shook his head, chin rustling across icy tendrils of frozen brown hair. Sam would have known better.

Measuring his breaths, waiting for Sam's to deepen, Dean continued to use his hands to generate heat, willing his own body's warmth to be enough. The cold of Sam's back against Dean's stomach and chest started to take on a heat of its own, the chill finally ebbing away, taking from Dean.

"Sammy, come on, give me something here," Dean pleaded, taking Sam's hands between his and rubbing them. "This...this is nothing..." he continued. "Don't tell me you survived crashing in some arctic wasteland just to freeze your ass to death in New York City."

Nothing.

Dean's throat tightened. This time not against bile, but against the burning that began as a crowding weight behind his eyes, causing his vision to blur. Sam's ribs were rising against Dean in breaths too shallow. Pushing Sam's now-damp bangs back from his face, Dean dropped his chin onto Sam's shoulder, wrapping him closer.

Memories of shattered ice, breath-stealing cold, and freezing water broke over Dean. He'd held his brother like this before when they were younger. Dean could remember him crying, could remember how scared he'd been, how he had to talk him through breathing.

"Breathe slowly...you're safe...It's okay. You're okay now." Dean replayed his words from that day.

Sam's shivering increased, his breaths coming in more normalized huffs. Dean felt his brother's weight shift, a groan finally breaking the silence.

"D-Dean..."

"Yeah," Dean replied, the constricting bands around his heart loosening.

"Kn-knew y-you'd come..." Sam breathed.

Dean turned his head, bringing up his shoulder to destroy the moisture gathered along his lashes. "Dammit, what else would I have done?"

"Knew y-you wer-weren't dead..."

Dean ignored the few hot tears he felt slip down Sam's face, shifting away the frosty remnants of his recent frozen moments. After this, his brother was entitled. Dean wouldn't say anything.

"I don't go down that easy," Dean reassured him.

"Are you...c-cuddling w-with me?" Sam asked.

Dean smirked, laughing lightly in spite of everything. "I swear to God if you tell anyone about this..." He didn't let go. Wasn't going to until Sam's color came back. "My brother the freakin' popsicle." Dean muttered, getting a small laugh from Sam in return.

Managing to get Sam back to the Impala, both of them struggling to stay standing, Dean folded Sam into the back seat. Dean gathered everything they had from hoodies to jackets to hotel room towels and blankets they'd swiped, wrapping Sam in a cocoon of warmth, protection and worry. His brother couldn't move by the time Dean was done.

Reassured when Sam's shivering lessened, Dean collapsed across the front seat, back against the passenger side door, legs spread out. The heat from the vents in the front poured over him, making him sweat. Finally able to come down from his adrenalin high now that Sam was safe, seeing for himself that Sam was alive, Dean recognized that he was hurting. Bad.

His phone was blinking on the dash. Bobby had tried to call. Listlessly, Dean grabbed the phone, dialing their friend who was no doubt frantic by this point.

"Dean... thank God." Bobby's voice held no reservations from his fears for them. "I was about to head out there, had everything ready to go."

"We're okay." Dean shrugged, trying to keep the weariness from his voice. "Sam's a little frosty, and I've got one more scar. We'll live."

"It's gone?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah," Dean left out the details about how he'd taken care of the second serial killing-demon in New York. Although Sam's eyes drifted Dean's way carrying the question, Dean, barely holding himself together, wasn't in the mood to discuss the fact that he'd shot a man.

"We'll be a while getting to Chicago," Dean added, wondering himself if going was the best idea. Their track record thus far wasn't exactly in Sam's favor.

"Don't," Bobby sighed. "We can handle Gacy's demon. You two need to rest. Dean, I don't know what injury you're feeding me bull to cover up, but you take care of yourself and your brother."

Dean looked at Sam, saw the way his eyes had narrowed down to determined slits.

"Okay, Bobby. Hey, hold on, I'll call you back..." Dean shut the phone, curious about Sam's darkened expression.

"No," Sam spoke up, lifting his eyes. "I want to go to Chicago."

"Sam..."

"We have to see this through, Dean."

"You've been strangled and thrown in a freezer, Sam. You want to try that kind of luck against the Killer Clown? I won't risk it."

"It's not up to you. Jesus, Dean, look at you! You've been shot, and don't tell me the demon didn't find a few walls to throw you into."

Dean scoffed, shaking his head. "It was a graze."

"You look like crap."

"Is that so, Iceman?"

"This is within our reach, Dean. Boston, New York, *and* Chicago. I won't do nothing."

"You know me, Sam. Point me in the direction of a fight and I'm there, but..."

"Dean, I'm going. No one else should have to suffer."

Dean nodded slowly in understanding, jaw taut. He wanted to see an end to this too. The *Cruor Frater* needed to know it didn't get to screw with people's lives.

"Time for me to face my coulrophobia," Sam smiled weakly in an attempt to put Dean's mind at ease.

Dean smirked before closing his eyes and leaning his head back into the window. "God, we're masochists. Maybe after this we'll at least be able to go *inside* a McDonalds."

Chicago, Des Plaines Community Park, two days later

"Y'know, I read that some lady doctor named Morrison actually took Gacy's brain... tried to find something in it that made him... different."

Sam cracked the shell of a salted peanut between his fingers, blinking his eyes to the side to study his brother. Dean was pale. The dark, crusted-over gash on his forehead was flanked by purple and yellow bruises, and his hands trembled slightly as he reached into the peanut bag on the bench between them.

"You okay?" Sam asked softly.

Dean frowned, his eyes on the sidewalk crack that slid through the concrete to bisect the ground beneath his feet.

"You don't think that's weird?" Dean pressed.

"Sure, it's weird," Sam allowed.

"She didn't find anything, though," Dean sighed, lifting his head and allowing his eyes to fall closed as he rolled his neck, exhaustion rolling from him in near-visible waves. "Maybe he didn't have that...spark."

The air around them pressed close with unseasonable warmth. Indian summer took hold of the river-sour air and made one last gasp at dominance before winter's chill could capture the city. Bobby had strategically positioned them at the entrance to

the park; easy access to the road and a good vantage point for the birthday party they were scoping.

"Also read where it took eighteen minutes by lethal injection to kill him—didn't work the first time," Dean shook his head. "That's messed up, man."

"Think it's fitting," Sam shrugged.

Dean raised an eyebrow in Sam's direction.

"The guy raped young boys, tortured them, then buried them in his backyard, man. He said that his house was an...unofficial cemetery, for Christ's sake. Shoulda killed him three times."

"Bloodthirsty little bastard, aren't you?" Dean said appreciatively.

"You try being folded up in a mini-coffin for a few hours and tell me how generous you feel."

"No thanks," Dean sighed, a slight tremor snaking through his shoulders. "Been there, done that."

"You up for this, Dean?" Sam let the concern filter through his gruff voice, the marks on his neck from the Strangler receding to yellowish bruises, the internal wounds slower to heal.

Dean tilted his chin in Sam's direction, but didn't rest his eyes on his brother, choosing instead to scan the crowded picnic area across from them. "Hey, you're the one that wanted to come to Chicago," he said, not really answering.

Not at your expense... Sam shifted, popping a peanut into his mouth and rolling his tongue over the smooth surface, sucking away the remnants of salt. Dean felt...thin to him. As though too little of him were trying to cover too much space. Watching his brother's jaw muscle bounce in concentration, Sam felt reality tip with vertigo as he imagined Dean simply fading away in front of him.

A squeal of delight brought his head around and Sam watched the group of children and adults cluster around a large sheet cake.

"Six candles?"

Dean nodded. "Looks like."

"Thought Gacy liked 'em older," Sam mused, glancing at his brother.

Dean's sharp eyes caught on something in the melee of celebrating family across from them. Frowning, Sam followed his eye line. A dark-haired boy of about eighteen stepped up behind the six-year-old, picked him up and tossed him in the air to the child's delight. Sam felt ice form around his stomach and he shivered.

The slight motion pulled Dean's attention.

"You warm enough?"

Sam sighed softly. "I'm fine, Dean."

"Don't get all...huffy," Dean grumbled, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, fingers peeling away the peanut shell and tossing it to the pile on the ground. "You were like two minutes from extinction a couple days ago."

Sam ran his tongue across his bottom lip, dark images of those hours trapped in the freezer rolling behind his eyes. "Yeah, well, I'm okay now," he replied, looking at the still-red tips of his nearly frostbitten fingers. He'd never been that cold. That...trapped.

"Hey, Dean?"

"Hmm?"

"Is that what it was like for you?" Sam couldn't look at his brother, couldn't tear his eyes from the smiling faces full of innocent unknowing.

He felt Dean shift with the weight of his frown. "What what was like?"

"Being... being trapped... in that, uh, coffin."

Dean's air vacated his body through his nose and he stood, pressing the backs of his legs against the bench. "Wondered how long it would be until you brought that up."

"Can't really blame me."

"No," Dean shook his head slowly, his eyes wandering the open space between the parking lot and the covered picnic area. "I guess not."

"You were, uh... well, we both were..."

Dean pivoted, his eyes a balm on Sam's anxiety. "I always knew you'd come for me, just like you knew I'd come for you."

Sam simply nodded.

"It's what brothers do, Sammy," Dean shrugged, his voice dancing on the current of breeze that shifted Sam's bangs across his forehead. "You gotta be a little...twisted to do this job. Live right on the edge..."

"No kidding," Sam chuckled ruefully, glancing down. Dean's voice pulled his eyes back up.

"But you're never alone on that edge, man. I'm always right there with you."

"Goes both ways, brother."

Dean reached up and reflexively rubbed at the back of his neck. "I know," he replied.

He dropped his hand from his neck as if it weighed a hundred pounds, and Sam handed him the can of Red Bull that was resting on the bench behind the bag of peanuts. Dean took it, nodding his thanks, then gulped half the contents. Sam shook his head. Dean was running on empty but refused to stop. Because of him. Because he had to prove that they could get this last one.

The drive from New York to Chicago should have taken over twelve hours. Dean had made it in ten fueled on caffeine, music, and nightmares. Sam had slept for most of it, unable to keep his beaten body from searching for the recuperative power of oblivion.

But once they'd found Bobby, Sam had expected Dean to drop, to rest, to allow someone else to be in charge. He should have known better. Dean was on a mission of vengeance and nothing or no one was going to get in his way. Not even his own trembling body.

A slide of a rain slicker against the privacy fence behind them caught Sam's attention. He shifted on the bench, looking over his shoulder.

"You boys hanging in there?" Bobby's voice came at them from the other side of the fence. Sam couldn't see him, but simply knowing he was nearby was reassuring.

"We're fine," Dean answered for them. "Everyone else in place?"

"Yep," Bobby replied, a question on the edge of his voice. "Dean?"

"We're fine, Bobby," Dean repeated, sitting heavily on the bench next to Sam.

Bobby didn't reply and soon Sam felt him move away, back to the perimeter walk he'd assigned himself. Bobby had narrowed the Gacy copycat down to one possibility: a man who worked birthday parties as a clown. Since the incident with the sicko wall killer, two more bodies of young men had been found partially decomposed in the Des Plaines River, showing evidence of rape and torture.

Dean had given Bobby everything they had on the A pattern, hoping it would help the older hunter narrow down the search before they arrived in the Windy City. They'd been greeted with a gruff smile, warm eyes searching their battered bodies, a swig of whiskey, and two security uniforms.

"*We have one day,*" Sam recalled Bobby's prediction. "*One day before he strikes again, if he sticks to pattern.*"

"*Pattern is key with these guys,*" Dean replied. "*You break pattern, you're out of the gang.*"

"*You call anyone about the bodies in the apartment building?*" Bobby asked.

"*Left an anonymous tip,*" Sam answered. "*Not much else we could do.*"

"*How many were there?*"

"*Too many,*" Dean replied, a shiver of horror coursing through his tight shoulders. "*Too damn many...*"

Two other hunters had appeared at Bobby's side in the small space of the dingy motel room, surprising Sam and putting Dean on instant alert. He had stepped

slightly in front of his still-frosty brother, his wavering stance hardly a threat to the imposing figures, but his action nonetheless recognized and respected.

"Sam, Dean," Bobby calmed them. "This is Tucker Hawkins and Seth Walker."

Sam waited until Dean reacted, unconsciously following his brother's cues. Dean simply looked back at them.

"They're gonna help us trap Gacy."

"Why?" Dean demanded.

Bobby's smile had been dangerous but encompassing. "Demons aren't the only ones with a brotherhood, boy."

"Sam. Earth to Sam. Sam Winchester wears women's underwear."

"Only on Christmas," Sam replied, pulling his eyes from the middle distance to his brother's face.

"Funny."

"Can you believe he actually works as a clown?" Sam said, standing and arching his back, hands pressed to the hollow space created by the curve of his spine. He ached.

"Don't give these guys many points for originality, dude," Dean sighed, adding more peanut shells to the pile at his feet.

"I wonder if..." Sam paused, chewing his lip, looking down at Dean, thinking.

"I thought we already had this 'dramatic pauses' conversation?"

Sam took a breath. "What if whatever a demon does when it possesses you... what if it doesn't leave a mark? I mean, what if there's no way to know?"

Dean glanced up at him with narrowed eyes. "What are you getting at?"

Sam shrugged. "Just that... I mean, there are all kinds of freaks out there, man. Child molesters, cannibals, people that could kill five ways from Sunday without blinking an eye."

"Great, Sam, now I'll never sleep at night."

"It's more than just the monsters we know about, Dean."

"And your point is..."

"What if they're all demons?"

Dean shook his head. "No way."

Sam sat down, shifting to the side for a better view of Dean's stubborn profile. "You're telling me you'd rather believe that people actually do this crap to each other than believe that they are possessed when it all occurs?"

Dean threw his peanut down, tenting a hand on his knee and jerked his chin toward Sam, his green eyes hot. "No, Sam. I'd rather believe that humans are good. That they are the reason we fight all this (shit) day in and day out. That they deserve to be saved."

Sam blinked, swallowing.

Dean waved his hand toward the family picnic and Sam glanced over, watching the birthday boy chase a dark-haired girl in pigtails, trailing a red balloon behind her. She shrieked with laughter, slowing just enough to let him get close, then speeding up to circle the legs of a tall, smiling woman.

"I want to believe that people are accountable. That they make choices and stand by them and pay for them...that humans are different from demons. That they matter, dammit. Because if they don't..." Dean's lips pulled tight across his teeth in a reflexive motion of pain. "If they don't then all that we've done is... it's for nothing, Sam. And I can't handle that. I can't live with that."

"Okay," Sam said softly.

"I mean it, man," Dean turned away, breathing a bit rapidly.

"I know," Sam started to reach out, wanted to touch his brother's shoulder, to reassure him with contact that his desperate words hadn't fallen on deaf ears, but he froze, his hand in mid-air, his breath stilled on the cusp of his lips. "God," he whispered. "He's here."

Dean reacted instantly, squaring his shoulders, his chin tucking low to his chest, keeping his eyes up and tracking the entrance of the clown that had stilled Sam so completely next to him. *Sam's got a point... anyone who covers their face with a false smile is hiding something...*

"Tell me that's not creepy as hell," Sam whispered beside him.

"Take it easy, Sammy." Dean kept his voice measured, his eyes on the clown. "Take it easy."

Sam mumbled something that sounded a bit like *you take it easy*, but Dean ignored him. He darted his eyes to the fence line of the picnic area, searching for Bobby, Tucker, and Seth. He saw Tucker's large, Lou Ferrigno-esque physique lounging on a bench to their left, a paper opened and unread in his meaty hands. Seth was pacing on the other side of the park, puffing a cigarette like it was oxygen, and looking toward the parking lot as if he were waiting on someone.

The clown proceeded to set up a table of magic tricks, delighting the children with flowers pulled from sleeves, balloon-shaped animals, and coins found behind ears. Dean could feel Sam's tension building with each passing moment and found himself reacting to it. Dean's weary body coiled tightly as he absorbed the panic rolling from his brother's exhales and he felt his heartbeat behind his eyes where it had resided since the .44 caliber bullet had added to his already impressive resume of battle scars.

Only when he caught Bobby's dark blue eyes on the other side of the fence near Tucker did Dean begin to breathe easier. They were ready.

"What the hell is he doing?" Sam muttered.

Dean shot his eyes back to the clown. A woman with close-cropped dark hair was handing him a check, smiling her thanks and herding children out of his way. The clown turned, tucking the check into his loose pockets, and grabbed the arm of the eighteen-year-old, obviously asking for help with his supplies back to the parking lot.

"He found his mark," Dean whispered, tensing to move forward.

Sam caught his arm. "Wait."

Dean glared at his brother, heat rolling down the back of his neck, chilling him with almost-blind rage. "What the f—"

"A public exorcism doesn't exactly work in our favor, Dean," Sam hissed. "Just, wait."

Dean took a breath, wrenching his arm from his brother's grasp, knowing he was right. And hating it. He watched in disbelief as the boy nodded naively and helped the clown lift the supplies he'd very easily carried to the picnic area alone not thirty minutes ago. Sam stood as they approached the opening to the lot, and as soon as the duo passed them, Dean joined him, ignoring the warning sign flickering at the corners of his eyes, the tell-tale tremble in his hands, the skip of his heart.

His body was weakening. Failing him. His last line of defense against the darkness of the world was backsliding. *No...not yet... just one more... we've got one more.*

"Dean?" Sam's worry was evident in his voice and the gentle way his fingers closed over Dean's arm.

"C'mon," Dean stepped forward, compelling Sam to follow. "They'll get too far ahead."

The van was hiding out of sight from the street and the park. It was so stereotypical that Dean almost laughed. Black, non-descript, windowless except for the very front, it screamed *suspect me*. Dean and Sam followed at a distance, their eyes never leaving the boy, watching as the clown slid the door open, then turned, reaching greedy hands for the boy's shirt.

"Bobby!" Dean called, sprinting forward, mindless of the superior strength he was about to encounter.

"Dean! Dammit!" Sam cursed. "Bobby!" He echoed the plea for help.

The boy, for his part, realized a fraction of a second too late he was in trouble and had slapped his hands against the opening of the van, trying to resist the thrust of the clown's forward motion.

"Get your hands off of him, you son of a bitch," Dean growled, filling his hands with the loose folds of material the clown wore. He pulled back and wrenched the killer away from the boy, who slumped to the ground outside the van, dark eyes wide and scared.

The clown stumbled, turning, then smiled. Dean went cold, seeing the complete blackness in the clown's blue-rimmed eyes.

"You can't have him," Dean spat, pushing the demon roughly, backing him away from the van, herding him.

"Who needs him," the demon cooed, his voice like spoiled syrup. "When I have you?"

Dean blinked in surprise. He had expected platitudes and curses. He had expected an escape attempt. He'd expected a fight. He didn't expect to be pulled close to the clown, strong arms wrapping tightly around him, a hand at the back of his head, sliding around to cup his jaw, a painted mouth descending to caress his cheek and chin with fetid breath.

"Oh, you gotta be kidding me," Dean gasped.

"You're much more my type anyway," the clown literally growled, evil turning his voice into one of death.

Dean twisted his head away, working to get his hands between his body and the soft folds of cloth encasing the demon-possessed clown. *Where the hell is Sam?*

"Go," he heard Sam gasp. "Go on, get out of here."

"I'm gonna call the cops!" The boy's voice wavered with disbelief and panic.

"Whatever, fine," Sam encouraged and Dean heard scuffing on the cement near him. "Just go!"

The clown gripped Dean's shoulders, spinning him around, and pressed him close so that the gloved hands were clasped across Dean's chest and he could see his brother's frantic eyes asking him to fight him, *Dean, fight him, get away!*

"I'm gonna...freakin'... kill you..." Dean breathed, but the clown's grip was too strong, too tight, and his body was shaking, quaking with the need to breathe, to survive, to win.

Dean felt the slick smear of grease paint slide down the side of his cheek as Gacy's copycat stroked him with his jaw. His skin literally crawled as the embrace tightened. He could feel the length of the clown's body beneath the loose-fitting clothes, and what he discerned there made him want to gag.

Gacy took a step back toward the van, pulling Dean with him. Dean shifted, lifting heavy hands to try to push the clown's arms away, but was only held tighter.

"I knew you would find me soon enough," the clown chuckled, mania edging out reason. "My brothers have a network, you know."

"Swell," Sam stepped forward, his eyes never leaving Dean's. "A demonic chat room."

Gacy nodded, his cheekbone rubbing against Dean's temple, smearing more paint.

"So why did you even try?" Sam said, moving forward again, forcing Gacy back another step.

"The thirst is stronger than caution," Gacy replied. "And I always get what I need," he informed Sam, keeping his eyes on the younger hunter as he turned his lips toward Dean's face, running the tip of his tongue along Dean's cheek.

"Sam—" Dean wheezed. "Waste the sonuvabitch..."

Sam's eyes turned frantic and Dean tried one last time to surge forward. "Kill. Him."

Gacy reached for the handle of the van door and jerked in surprise when the vehicle screeched away down the block, Seth at the wheel. The departing van

revealed Tucker standing in the middle of the street watching, thumbs hooked in the leather of a silver-adorned belt.

Sam pulled a handgun from its hiding place in his waistband and pointed it at Gacy.

"You're not gonna shoot," Gacy stated.

"Wanna bet?"

Dean would have grinned at the cocky attitude sparking from Sam's eyes if he weren't having such a problem focusing. The world wavered, clarity once a companion, now an ex. He felt his lips start to grow numb as oxygen, too, seeped away and the buzzing in his ears began to drown out the taunting comments of the clown currently breaking him in half with the strength of his grip.

Okay, you're right, Sammy. Clowns kill...

"You're not gonna shoot with your brother right here," Gacy mocked, shifting Dean's shaking form directly in front of him. The clown bucked against Dean once and Dean bit the inside of his cheek to keep from groaning in pain and denial, knowing it would only fuel the demon's fire.

"Let him go," Sam demanded, cocking the gun.

"That won't kill me," Gacy laughed, twisting his hips against Dean's backside, his lips rolling up into a sick smile. Dean focused on Sam. Pulling his brother's determination close to him, keeping tendrils of air from escaping, keeping on the razor's edge of alertness.

"No," Sam lifted a shoulder. "But it'll hurt like hell."

"Tell you what, boy," Gacy said, and slid a hand from his grip around Dean's chest to grab his throat at the base of his chin. "You tell your bodyguard there to back off and I'll let you *watch* what I do to your brother here."

"Let. Him. Go," Sam repeated, stepping forward.

"I'll let you watch as I strip him," Gacy continued. "Let you hear him scream as I take him, maybe even let you see the light leave his eyes..."

"You aren't going anywhere."

Dean almost sagged against the clown as he heard Bobby's declaration behind them. Gacy whipped around, dragging Dean's limp form with him, forcing Dean to stand or feel more of the clown than he'd ever want to again.

"Who's gonna stop me, old man?" Gacy cackled.

Bobby met Dean's eyes, then blinked back up to stare at the clown. The buzzing in Dean's ears spiked as Gacy held him tight enough to crack bones in his chest. Bobby smirked, then raised a small, hand-held black light to reveal the Devil's Trap painted in *Cleaneon* on the sidewalk beneath Gacy's feet.

"No," Gacy breathed.

"Told...you..." Dean wheezed, unable to catch himself as Gacy suddenly shoved him away.

As he slammed against the cement, several things happened at once, all glancing off of Dean's muted senses like bugs on a windshield. Large hands grabbed him and dragged him across the cement. Sam's voice echoed through the sound of bees trapped against glass that filled his head. And above all, a hate-filled growl permeated the late afternoon air.

"Don't ignore the spark, boy!" Gacy yelled.

Sam's voice rose, the exorcism rite ringing true in his hard-edged tones.

"Everyone has it!"

Like hell... Dean thought blearily, grabbing the legs in front of him and allowing the same large hands that had pulled him to safety to help him stand. He swayed, shaking the fuzz from the edges of his vision, and looked at his brother. Tucker's hand rested on his shoulder, steadying him as Dean drank in the freedom of breathing without constriction.

"The brotherhood will know what you've done!" Gacy shrieked, writhing as he fell to his knees inside the invisible trap. "The brotherhood always knows."

Sam ignored him. Dean felt his lip curl in contempt, closing the space between himself and Sam until he could feel the heat from his brother's anger seep into him. Seth materialized next to Bobby.

"There's...too many! We are too...powerful!"

Gacy fell to his side, screaming insanity. Bobby stepped forward, into the Devil's Trap, kicking at the clown's trembling form to turn it over onto its back.

"You don't know what a brotherhood is," Bobby spat as the plume of black smoke expelled from the possessed man's mouth, darkening the skies above them for a moment before flashing a lightning of purple and blue and cracking into nothing with an ozone-filled pop of finality.

In the silence that followed, sirens could be heard in the distance.

Dean realized he was gasping for breath, that Sam was panting, that even Bobby's shoulders moved with the rapid-fire breath brought on by battle. He started to turn and realized that his knees had disappeared. Sam seemed to feel him sag and turned quickly, catching him mid-collapse and holding him gently against him.

"Hang onto me, Dean," Sam said softly, pulling Dean's limp arm over his shoulder. "I got you."

Dean nodded, reaching up with his free hand as he used his brother's strength. He clumsily wiped at the white grease paint that cast a memory like a bad taste in his mouth. He wanted to get clean, to scrub himself until he could feel his skin hum like the buzz that was fading in his ears. He wanted to be rid of this hunt, to be free of the stench of ruined humanity.

He wanted to sleep.

"You still with me, Dean?"

"You did good, Sammy," Dean muttered, trying to pull his remaining strength into his voice, trying to reassure his brother they were okay. "You did good."

"We better get outta here, boys," Bobby said, stepping over the babbling form of the exorcised man playing with the puffs of red tassels on his white clown costume and giggling to himself. "Five-oh is on the way."

"Right," Sam nodded, shifting Dean against him, trying to turn him. Dean attempted to take back his own weight, but he was still shaking too badly.

"Here," said Tucker, uttering the first word either brother had heard from him since Bobby had introduced them. "Let me help."

Sam nodded gratefully and Dean allowed him to sling his other arm across his sturdy shoulders, leading the way back to the lot and the waiting Impala. Bobby and Seth followed closely behind, barely missing being seen by the boy leading the cops to the site where he'd almost been kidnapped.

"Gacy had a point, Bobby," Sam said as Bobby opened the passenger door of the Impala. He ducked his head from under Dean's arm as he and Tucker lowered the wounded hunter to the dark leather seat.

"Yeah?"

Sam nodded, crouching down in front of Dean, meeting his brother's weary, knowing eyes. "If this brotherhood is worldwide..."

"We got it covered, Sam," Bobby assured him.

Sam mirrored Dean's confused expression as the brothers searched Bobby's face. Bobby nodded in the direction of the two quiet hunters that had helped trap Gacy. Both were on cell phones. Both speaking different languages. Sam blinked.

"Wow," he said appreciatively.

"You two are coming with me," Bobby said. "No arguments."

"Bobby," Dean rasped, his voice barely audible, his eyes hooded. "You hear from Dad?"

Bobby pressed his lips together and looked away. "Not in awhile."

"Kay."

"Sam," Bobby instructed. "You follow me."

"I will," Sam nodded, still watching Tucker and Seth inform their contacts about the serial killers' return.

Pulling his attention from the hunters, Sam closed the passenger door, smiled quietly as Bobby squeezed his shoulder, then headed around the car to the driver's side.

"Hang in there for a little longer, man," Sam said, starting the car. "We're almost..."

"Almost what?" Dean asked.

Sam tried to laugh. It came out sounding like a sob. "I was going to say *home*."

Dean closed his eyes. "We are home, Sam."

Sam looked over, the feeling of watching Dean fade lingering in the silence. He turned on the radio, spinning the dial in search of distraction as he followed Bobby's rusted blue and orange Camero past the picnic area and out onto the main highway. A familiar, rugged voice spilled through the speakers and Sam sat back, listening to the music mingle with the reassuring sound of Dean's breathing.

"We gotta call him," Dean said finally.

"Who, Dad?"

"With the Devil in the world... evil's got an upper hand," Dean said, pulling the edge of his shirt sleeve over his hand and rubbing at his paint-stained face.

"But we beat it," Sam pointed out, rocking forward with the heartbeat of the music.

I only know that I can change

Everything else just stays the same

So now I step out of the darkness

That my life became 'cause

"This time."

"We'll keep beating it," Sam predicted.

"For how long, Sam?" Dean closed his eyes, leaning his head back. "How long until we're... tainted?"

"We just... we keep our karma close," Sam said helplessly. "We remember..."

So where were you

When all this I was going through

You never took the time to ask me

Just what you could do

He sighed. "You want to call him, or should I?"

"You call him," Dean said. "You call him, Sam."

"We won, Dean, don't forget that, okay?" Sam glanced at his brother. "We saved that kid today."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yeah, Sam," Dean sighed. "I'm just..."

But I never meant to fade - away

I never meant to fade

"I'm tired."

"I know," Sam whispered. He heard the weight of weariness. The need to have made a difference, to have sought out this hunt and put them both at risk having been worth it was overpowered by the reality they were only human and therefore vulnerable, breakable, fallible.

"One at a time, man," Sam said.

Dean nodded, agreeing. "One at a time."

They followed Bobby into the night, searching together for a moment of peace, and hoping for the balance of karma to swing back in their favor.

The End