

**Season Three**  
**Episode Fourteen: Hell Is For Children**  
**By SnSam**

**Culpeper, Virginia**  
**Five Years Ago**

Fifteen-year-old Brandon Rudd tried to swallow the lump in his throat as the pot-bellied judge turned in his chair to look at the boy through silver rimmed glasses. It was kind of hard to read the man's expression, but it seemed to Brandon to border somewhere on annoyance, tinged with a bit of sympathy. Maybe that boded well for the teen—maybe the judge was going to let him go with only a warning, with this being his first major offense.

Brandon glanced over his shoulder to see his mother staring straight ahead, her lips set in a firm line. *She thinks I'm nothing but a disgrace. She doesn't even want to be here. She's just here because I'm a minor and has to sign on the dotted line where they tell her to.*

A tap on his shoulder had Brandon turning around and trading a glance with his overly optimistic public defender. She smiled at him and he knew it was just to reassure him that everything was going to be okay. Brandon seriously doubted that, but he didn't tell that to Ms. Lee—she'd tried her best to represent him, even though Brandon figured it was a lost cause. The police caught him red-handed, after all.

It was pretty hard to win a case when you had more than enough witnesses placing you at the scene.

The judge cleared his throat. "Will the defendant please rise?"

Brandon glanced at Ms. Lee and she gave him an encouraging nod as she rose from her chair.

"It's okay, Brandon," she softly said.

The teen gave a barely perceptible nod as he slowly rose beside her, his bright green eyes on the judge.

Clearing his throat again, the judge removed his glasses, leveling his gaze on the boy. "It may have been many years ago, but I was a teenage boy once who acted out as well. And while I realize this may be your first offense, Brandon, it also cannot go unpunished. So you understand that, young man?"

"Yes sir," Brandon answered quietly.

"It is therefore my opinion that you should serve a six month sentence at the Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center on the charge of auto theft." He banged his gavel on the desk. "Court is adjourned."

Brandon desperately tried to push back the tears threatening to spill over. It wasn't fair—it's not like he meant to steal the car. Six months was an awfully long time to spend away from his home, family and friends. *Why can't they see I'm really a good kid?*

"Brandon, I'm really sorry," Ms. Lee said, squeezing his shoulder sympathetically. "I hoped Judge Leighton was going to let you off with a warning. I never expected this, but I think he's getting tired of all the teenage crime around here. Unfortunately, he decided to take out his frustration on you."

Brandon nodded as he wiped away a traitorous tear trailing down his cheek. "Thank you for trying."

Ms. Lee smiled softly as she gathered her papers and tucked them into her satchel. "I'll see what I can do about getting your sentence reviewed."

"Yeah, okay..." Brandon's voice trailed off as the bailiff came over to take him into custody.

"Let's go, son," the bailiff said as he snapped a pair of cuffs on the teen's wrists. Brandon allowed himself to be led away, all the while his eyes sought out his mother. She still remained seated, her expression stoic.

"Mom, I'm sorry," he pleaded with her. "You have to believe me, Mom! I'm so sorry!"

Stacey Rudd kept her eyes ahead, never once letting them stray to her son. Brandon felt as if a weight was crashing down on his shoulders as his mother refused to give him anything. Wasn't she supposed to be his protector? His nurturer? Now she acted as if he was no longer her responsibility.

This time, Brandon let the tears flow freely as he came to the simple realization his mother no longer wanted or loved him.

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center** **A few days later...**

"Are you ready to talk today, Brandon?"

Brandon glanced up at the staff psychologist, taking in her appearance. Doctor Susan Reece wasn't too bad to look at and he figured he could have had worse. She was petite, with short raven hair cropped closely to her head and bright icy blue eyes. She was dressed in a classic pinstriped suit with a turquoise blouse and black wedge shoes.

"We've been giving you your space, but I think it would be better if you talked to me."

"Will it help me get out of here sooner?" the teen asked.

Doctor Reece shrugged as she leaned forward in her chair, clasping her hands together on her desk. "Possibly, considering this is part of your rehabilitation. If we tell the judge you've been cooperative with us, he may let you go early."

Brandon considered that—it wasn't as if he really had a home to go back to. It was clear his mom no longer wanted him in her life, but maybe he could go live with his aunt down in Memphis. *Aunt Judy always loved having me around...*

"What do you want to know?" he finally asked.

Doctor Reece smiled as she pulled a yellow legal pad from her desk drawer. "Let's talk about your family."

Brandon barked out a bitter laugh. "You really go in for the kill, don't you?"

"Would you rather talk about something else?"

"Nah...we can talk about my family. If we don't do it now, you'll only grill me about it later, right?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it grilling. I like to think of it as a nice little chat."

Brandon shrugged. "So, what do you want to know about them?"

"Anything you care to share."

"Okay—well, my dad walked out on us a couple of years ago, my grades have been tanking, and my mom is remarrying a complete loser."

"I take it you don't like him?"

"Is it that obvious?" Brandon asked dryly.

"May I ask why not?"

"He doesn't like me," Brandon answered truthfully. "Ever since my mom met him, he's managed to convince her that I'm nothing but trouble. She won't even listen to what I have to say anymore."

"So, did you have a good relationship with your mom before?"

"The best."

Doctor Reece leaned forward in her chair. "Is there any truth to what your mom's fiancé has been saying?"

"About me being a troublemaker?"

"Yes."

"Not really." Brandon shrugged. "I mean, sure I've done some things like skip school, get into fights and things like that. But I've never done anything major...not until this, that is."

"Why did you steal the car, Brandon?"

"It's not like I meant to," the teen admitted quietly. "I was dared to do it by a couple of my friends, but they bailed on me when the police showed up. I was the only one who was caught."

"Are you sorry about what you did?"

Brandon nodded. "I never meant to hurt anyone, especially my mom. I just wish she could realize that instead of always thinking of me as a disappointment. It's just that lately..." his voice trailed off, afraid to go on.

"What is it, Brandon?"

"Lately I've been...afraid of my mom. I think she might want to hurt me."

"What makes you say that, Brandon?"

"I'm not sure...it's just a feeling I get from her, almost like she wants me dead or something."

"I just don't see why you would think that, Brandon," Doctor Reece said, frowning. "That's an awful accusation to make."

Brandon's eyes flashed angrily. "You think I'm lying."

"You're putting words into my mouth."

Brandon shook his head. "Forget I said anything at all. No one ever believes me, anyway."

Doctor Reece glanced down at her watch and stood up. "I think we should call it a day. We'll pick up again in a few days, okay?"

"Whatever." Brandon got up from his chair and without another word, headed back for his room. At least there he didn't have to answer any more stupid questions and constantly try to defend himself.

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A soft creak as the door opened could barely be heard over the snoring of the slumbering boy in the room. Two figures stealthily slipped inside and tiptoed to either side of the bed, looking down upon Brandon Rudd.

The first figure looked over at his partner, who nodded as he pulled out a knife from under his shirt, the moonlight reflecting menacingly off the blade.

Without warning, the sleeping boy's eyes popped open and locked onto the two figures. Just as he opened his mouth to scream for help, a rough hand was placed firmly over it. Brandon tried to struggle against the hold, but his captor pressed his weight against him, refusing to allow the boy escape.

Brandon's frightened eyes followed the other figure as he raised the knife above his head, trajectory of the long blade suddenly altering and slamming into his chest, ending his life.

## **Present Day**

*I'm always workin' slavin' every day  
Gotta get away from that same old same old  
I need a chance just to get away  
If you could hear me think this is what I'd say*

The throaty grumble of the black 1967 Chevrolet Impala tore through the silent stretch of the Virginia highway as Poison's *Nothin' but a Good Time* blasted through the speakers. The day was sunny and warm, not a single cloud in the azure sky. The windows of the classic were rolled down, allowing the fresh, country air in to cool the car's two occupants.

Sam had to admit the breeze felt good against his skin, even if Bret Michaels' vocals didn't do it for his ears. It wasn't that he didn't like the song—it just didn't help when your brother was belting it out along with him, completely off-key. Not that Sam was really one to be a critic of one's singing, considering he couldn't hold a note if his very life depended on it.

*American Idol* definitely wasn't in the brothers' foreseeable future.

Of course, nothing was in their foreseeable future if they didn't start catching a break soon. Their last gig took them to Philadelphia, the supposed city of brotherly love, only some people—or Egyptian curses—didn't quite get the memo. They were lucky to get out of that one alive, depending on your definition of the word.

*Don't need nothin' but a good time*

*How can I resist?*

*Ain't lookin' for nothin' but a good time*

*And it don't get better than this*

Add to that, they still had Mia Cameron, half bitch, half demon extraordinaire to contend with. The brothers had no idea where she was and it was rather unsettling. They were doing everything they could in order to watch out and protect themselves against her, but it was pretty hard when none of the old stand-bys worked. No salting the doors or windows, no Devil's Traps, no protective amulets—nothing.

Sam couldn't even bring up the girl's name to Dean without starting a fight with his sibling. Sam figured it had to do with Dean's fear that Sam was right about her all along and Dean couldn't stand the fact he'd refused to trust his brother. Either that or he didn't want to hear Sam say, "I told you so." Sam wasn't about to do that because it would be childish and it wouldn't accomplish anything prudent. Dean was having a hard enough time dealing and he'd immediately put up the walls he'd allowed Mia to knock down so easily.

Sam wished it could be different for Dean instead of him always getting the short end of the stick. Dean deserved something good, but it seemed The Powers That Be were dead against that from ever happening.

*Why the hell should you reward Dean for all the good he's done, right?*

"You do have a reason why we're driving through the sticks of Virginia, right?"

Dean asked as he turned down the radio.

"Would I ever steer you wrong, Dean?" Sam asked, glancing up from the papers in his lap.

"Hell yeah," Dean answered. "I'm sure you're just looking for a reason to pay me back for all the times I pulled crap on you growing up."

"Growing up?" Sam scoffed. "You still pull crap on me."

Dean nodded. "My point exactly."

Sam grinned. "As much fun as that may sound, we're actually heading towards a new gig."

"Yeah? What kind of gig?"

"Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center. For the past five years, there have been a series of deaths plaguing the place," Sam explained. "It's only centered there, though. The rest of the town seems to be pretty quiet."

"How do you know that?"

"I checked into the statistics. And a couple of days ago, a guard at the center was found in one of the bathrooms with his throat slashed."

"Sounds like murder to me," Dean commented as his eyes slid over to Sam. "How does that make it our gig? I mean, sure, the police aren't the best at what they do, but we can't keep going around cleaning up their messes."

"It makes it our gig because reports say for a day leading up to the guard's death he claimed a boy was following him around."

Dean frowned. "It's a juvie hall, Sam. Of course a boy is gonna follow him around. A lot of boys, as a matter of fact."

"This particular boy wouldn't," Sam argued. "Especially since the boy the guard was describing has been missing for several years now. Besides, it's not the first case of it happening."

"What do you mean?"

"Several people have claimed to see him. Dad even makes a little mention of it in his journal," Sam said, holding up the leather book.

"Then why didn't he come see about it and put an end to it?"

Sam shrugged. "Probably didn't see much potential in it."

"So, I take it he didn't have any ideas about what was going on there?"

"Nope."

Dean arched a brow at Sam. "Do you?"

Sam tucked his papers and the journal back into his messenger bag. "Could be your basic, garden-variety haunting. We won't know until we get there," he added with a smile.

Dean groaned. "I really hate it when you have that smile on your face. What did you do?"

"I may have called ahead and gotten us jobs at the center," the younger hunter replied nonchalantly.

"Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not, but I'll tell you anyway. I got on as a new counselor while you will be the center's newest security guard."

"Why can't I get on as a counselor? I have good counseling skills," Dean whined. "I don't want to stand around, watching a bunch of snot-nosed brats."

"Well, that would be one reason among many others," Sam said dryly. "Besides, you shouldn't have that hard of a time with them."

"And why's that?"

Sam smirked. "Well, I imagine some of them to be stubborn, foul-mouthed little jackasses. Sound familiar?"

"I'd hide that smirk before you find my boot up your ass, Sammy."

Sam shook his head, chuckling. "Nope, you'll have no problem fitting in at all."

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

A couple of hours later, the brothers were pulling into the gates of the center, after having secured a motel room not too far away. As Dean pulled into the entrance, he was directed to the East side of the four-story brick building to park in the employee lot.

Driving around, he was semi-impressed with the layout. A chain-length fence surrounded the perimeter and video cameras were placed every several yards or so. It didn't look imposing like a prison, since it lacked the razor wire along the top. A couple of guards were patrolling along the edge of the fence, but other than that, it seemed the kids were allowed to roam freely, made obvious by the cluster sitting on a couple of picnic tables.

"Security doesn't look too tight," Dean commented as he pulled into a spot.

"They're not out to scare the kids, Dean," Sam explained. "They want to rehabilitate them so they can go out into the world again and be productive. They try to make these kids feel at home."

"Let me guess—you did some research, didn't you?" Dean asked, amused.

"I figured one of us should have some knowledge so we don't come off as a couple of posers," Sam said as he got out of the car.

Dean frowned as he followed Sam. "But we are a couple of posers."

"No reason for the entire world to know that."

Dean didn't say anything as he followed Sam to the front entrance of the building. Upon entering, they were blasted by a waft of cool air, welcoming them in its

refreshing embrace. They'd barely taken a few steps when a tall, slender man with longish, brown hair, stepped out to greet them. He was casually dressed in khakis and an olive green polo shirt.

"Are you two our latest hires?" he asked, eyeing the two.

"That would be us," Dean answered.

The man's face broke into a smile. "I'm Thomas Jacobs, captain of this little ship."

"I'm Sam Carver," Sam said, holding out his hand. He nodded towards Dean.

"This is my brother, Dean."

"It's very nice to meet the both of you," Jacobs said, warmly shaking their hands.

"I've got to say, it's strange to find siblings who want to work at the same place."

"Why do you say that?" Dean asked.

Jacobs waved a dismissive hand. "No reason—just an observation. We're relieved we could find some help, considering new hires are hard to find around here these days. You really couldn't have come at a better time."

"Yeah, we've heard about the run of bad luck you've been having," Sam admitted.

Jacobs was about to comment when the group of detainees they'd seen outside earlier came in. "How about we go into my office and talk?"

Sam and Dean said nothing as they followed the director down the long, narrow hallway to the right of the entrance. Walking past a few closed doors, they came to an open doorway towards the end.

It was rather modest, with gray filing cabinets taking up one wall. A standard office desk sat in the middle, where an older computer monitor and keyboard took most of the surface. What little space was left was littered with papers, a Rolodex, and other office necessities.

"You'll have to excuse the mess," Jacobs apologized with a laugh. "I was never one to embrace organization."

"Yeah, we never really saw much eye to eye, either," Dean said as he and Sam took a seat in front of the desk.

Jacobs smiled, but then became somber as he took his own chair. "I hope our bad luck around here won't run you off. We really could use some help."

"You just had a guard that was murdered, didn't you?" Sam asked.

"Yes, such a terribly tragedy."

"Have you found the killer yet?"

Jacobs shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. The boys here are really worried, and I can't say that I blame them. We've been doing everything we can to keep it under wraps and not cause any more unnecessary stress for them."

"The guard—he wasn't your first death around here, was he?" Dean asked as Sam shot him a look. Sam may have wanted to take things slow, especially when they were stepping into a potential situation that could get them both killed if they weren't careful, but Dean didn't seem to have gotten the memo.

"I mean...well, sure, we may have had a few incidents—" Jacobs said, becoming slightly flustered.

Dean arched a brow. "A few?"

"Every facility is going to have its run of bad luck..."

"Dean, I think maybe you should ease up a little," Sam warned softly.

Jacobs eyed the two of them curiously. "How did you know about the other deaths? We haven't exactly been publicizing them."

Dean gave a casual shrug. "We like to do our homework. We're not about to step into something without making sure our asses are covered."

Jacobs smiled tightly. "I can certainly admire that, but I can assure you, we are doing everything in our power to find out what's going on here. This institution's safety is our number one priority." He flipped through a sheaf of papers. "Now, I see here, Dean, that you worked at another facility back in Tulsa?"

Dean nodded. "I needed a change of scenery."

"I'm not sure how much of a change you're going to get here, but we're glad to have you either way. It will make it that much easier to transition you into your job with the experience you've had."

A knock at the door had all three men looking up to see a stocky man with thick, black hair, wearing a guard's uniform standing there.

"Stu—perfect timing," Jacobs said, smiling.

"Are these our newest additions?" Stu asked in a deep voice that would make James Earl Jones proud.

Dean exchanged a quick glance with Sam, hoping his brother was getting the message loud and clear: *You are so dead, Sammy.*

Jacobs stood up. "This is Dean and Sam Carver. Boys, this is our head of security, Stu Tyler. You'll be tagging along with Stu, Dean. He'll show you the ropes."

Dean grinned tightly, almost grimacing as he looked back at the bulging mass of a man. "I can hardly wait."

He'd much rather stay behind with Sam so they could continue to grill Jacobs, but Dean also knew he would blow their cover if he did that. Besides, Sam would fill him in later if he learned anything.

"Right this way," Tyler said, gruffly. He didn't wait for Dean as he walked out of the office.

"Guess I should get going then." Dean traded one last look with his brother, telling him to be careful. Sam gave an almost imperceptible nod in understanding and the older Winchester reluctantly left.

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As Dean followed Stu Tyler, he became convinced the bulky man was the Incredible Hulk, sans being green. He'd barely uttered two words since they left Jacobs' office, those being grunts that vaguely sounded like, "Follow me."

After walking around for what seemed like forever to Dean, they finally came to a set of unmarked double doors. Pushing one open, Tyler stepped back to allow Dean passage. "This is the guards' locker room. Your locker is number seven."

"What do you know? My lucky number," Dean quipped.

Tyler grunted as he opened it up. "There's your uniform—put it on."

"Do I at least get a little privacy?"

Tyler ignored him. "When you get finished, you'll find a nightstick and pepper spray on the top shelf. Guards ain't allowed to carry guns at any time. Got it?"

Dean stopped himself from giving Mr. Personality a salute. "Loud and clear."

"I'll be right outside the door." Tyler left without another word.

"That dude is totally out of the running for Ms. Congeniality at the company Christmas party this year," Dean muttered as he grabbed his uniform—*God, kill me now*—out of his locker. *Sam would get me the gig that requires playing dress up.*

The hunter made quick work of getting dressed, but it took longer for him to part ways with his trusty Desert Eagle. *I'm so sorry, baby. You know I wouldn't leave you if I had a choice...*

"I ain't got time for you to get dolled up in there, princess!" Tyler's voice boomed through the locker room, followed by the door slamming shut.

"I'm about to make time to shove this nightstick up your ass," Dean mumbled under his breath.

Giving his gun one last look, he reluctantly placed it at the bottom of his locker, underneath his pile of clothes. He felt completely naked going without it, but he knew he couldn't afford to get tossed out. Not before he and Sam figured out what the hell was going on around there.

"Took you long enough," Tyler grumbled as soon as Dean walked out.

Dean flashed a cheeky smile. "I had to make sure I looked my best for you."

"Great. Another smartass to deal with." Tyler rolled his eyes and began walking.

Dean jogged to catch up with him. "So, how long have you been sharing your cheery disposition around here?"

"Seven years."

"You must like it then."

"It's a job. I don't give a crap about what happens here as long as I have a paycheck at the end of the week."

*Oh, yeah—a total ass and apparently one who doesn't like to talk. Sorry there, Stu, but I was never one to take a hint.*

"Did you know the guard that was murdered?"

Tyler glared back at him as they began to climb the staircase. "What are you? Nancy Drew?"

"I personally preferred the Hardy Boys growing up," Dean answered smartly. "So, did you know him?"

"What if I did?"

Dean shrugged. "Has to be hard to lose a friend like that."

"Who said he was my friend?"

"Well, I just assumed since you worked together..."

"You know what they say about assuming, Dean?"

"Something about an ass, I think."

"Look, he was a decent guy, I guess," Tyler replied as they came out of the third floor landing. "But apparently he didn't know how to watch his back."

"You're saying someone on the inside killed him?"

"I'm not saying nothin'."

They finally came to a stop towards the middle of the long hallway. "This wing is your post. Keep your eyes open and stay alert. You'll be relieved in a few hours."

Giving Dean one final glare, Tyler left the way he came.

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Watching as Dean left with the head of security, Sam could feel Jacobs' eyes on his back. Turning back to face the director, Sam offered an apologetic smile.

"Sorry about my brother. Dean's usually not like that." *When he's asleep, at least,* Sam mentally added.

"No harm done," Jacobs said with an easy smile.

"It's just that he never wanted me to take this job in the first place, with everything that's been happening here," Sam explained with as much sincerity as he could muster. "The only way he would let me take it was if he could get hired on as well. I'm just lucky you had another position open."

"It's quite all right, Sam. There's no need to explain." Jacobs nodded his head towards the open doorway. "You're very lucky to have someone watch out for you like Dean does. It's the one thing these kids here seriously lack."

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I am lucky," he admitted. Dean had gotten him out of more tight spots than Sam cared to admit and he was thankful for that, each and every day.

Jacobs stood up and walked to the door. "How about I show you to your office and get you settled in?"

Sam smiled. "Sounds great."

Following Jacobs the way he and Dean originally came, they went past a couple of doors, coming to a stop in front of one right off the entranceway. Unlocking the door, Jacobs opened it up and stepped back to allow Sam to enter first.

"As you can see, there's really not much to it," Jacobs said, following Sam in. "This position has been vacant for a while now."

That's an understatement, Sam thought as he took in his sparse surroundings. The only furniture that seemed to dominate the small room was a desk and a couple

of chairs, sitting in the middle. A set of dingy blinds covered the lone window and the cinder block walls were a faded white, while dust littered everything in sight.

"You can do anything to make it feel a little more inviting if you please to do so," Jacobs said.

"No, it's fine." *Not like I'm going to be here long enough to make myself at home.*

"We, uh...we always have a counselor on duty—you'll strictly be on day shift for the time being."

"Sounds good," Sam said as he went around to sit behind the desk.

"We have an open door policy around here. The boys are free to come talk to you whenever they feel the need."

"Okay."

"Also, you'll have a computer within the next hour or so. It will allow you access to all the files on the boys so you know who you're dealing with."

"Great." He glanced up at Jacobs. "How long have you worked here, Mr. Jacobs? I mean, if you don't mind me asking."

Jacobs took a seat across from Sam. "It's Thomas and I don't mind at all. I've been here for about ten years now," he answered, smiling proudly.

"You must really enjoy your work."

"I really do."

"I imagine it has to be hard sometimes though."

The director's smile turned into a frown as he nodded somberly. "It is, but I do what I can to help these boys. Someone has to offer them a second chance at a life and I'm happy to oblige."

Sam smiled warmly as he found himself slowly liking the man before him.

"Is there anything else before you get to work?"

Sam hesitated, really wanting to ask about the guard's death, but also not wanting to step on any toes. *Oh, what the hell...go for it. You're not going to get any answers keeping your mouth shut.*

"The guard that was murdered—"

Jacobs held up a hand, stopping Sam. "I think I already know where this is headed, Sam."

Sam frowned. "You do?"

"Yes, and I can assure you that you and your brother will be perfectly safe. It's not your job to worry about that. We're letting the police handle everything."

"But—"

Jacobs stood up. "I should let you get started. If you have any other questions about your job, you know where to find me." He placed a key on Sam's desk, stirring up a cloud of dust. "Make sure you lock up at the end of your shift, okay?"

Sam nodded as he watched the director leave. "Sure."

*He sure was in a hurry to get out of here as soon as I began asking questions...*

One thing Sam knew for sure: He and Dean were definitely going to have to keep a watchful eye on everyone here.

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*This is almost as boring as doing research with Sammy,* Dean thought as he made another trek down the seemingly unending hallway. Nothing had happened within the last few hours or so. No arguments, no fighting, not even any good gossip. He was seriously considering finding some wet paint just to watch it dry.

*And the uniform...let's not even get started on that.*

There was a reason Dean Winchester refused to wear polyester. The obvious was that it was hot, but the most uncomfortable reason was that it itched in places Dean wasn't comfortable scratching unless he had complete privacy. And let's face it—even if the halls happened to be vacant right now, as soon as he scratched, every door would pop open. He wasn't about to fall for that one.

Not again, anyway...

Coming to the very end of the wing, Dean spotted a door cordoned off with yellow police tape. "Now, how the hell did I miss this earlier?"

Making sure no one was watching, Dean tried the knob and was surprised when it turned easily in his hand. *They really are lax with their security around here...*

Quickly slipping inside, Dean was again surprised to see he was in the bathroom where the guard was murdered. The outline of the body was still marked on the floor with tape and the smell of blood remained in the stale air.

Pulling out his EMF meter, the hunter slowly walked around, searching for any trace of a supernatural entity. The meter remained obstinately quiet, the lights at the top not even giving the tiniest of flickers.

"That's strange. I thought Sammy said there was something..."

Turning it off, he shoved it in his pocket just as the door opened, revealing a boy with curly red hair of about thirteen or fourteen.

"Who are you?" the boy asked.

"Dean—the new guard." The hunter tilted his head to the side. "Who are you?"

"Wyatt. You're not supposed to be in here, you know. No one is."

"You are," Dean returned.

Wyatt shrugged. "I'm no one."

"That's a little harsh, isn't it?"

Wyatt shrugged again. "So, what are you doing in here?"

"Taking a break," Dean casually replied. "What are you doing in here?"

"Getting away from everyone. I come in here to think."

"Isn't this place a little creepy now that someone died in here?"

Wyatt walked past Dean to peer down at the body outline. "Why would it be? I was the one who found him, so it doesn't bother me."

Dean perked up at that. *Finally, something interesting!*

"Really?" Dean asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Did you see what happened?"

The young teen eyed him suspiciously. "Why are you so interested?"

"Just curious."

"Oh." Wyatt relaxed a little. "I didn't see what happened. I just came in here to use the bathroom that night and I found him on the floor, gurgling up blood. I called for help, but by the time they got here, he was dead."

"That must have been awful," Dean offered sympathetically. It was hard enough for him to face death on a daily basis sometimes, but for a kid to witness it was ten times worse in Dean's book. It had a way of changing them for the rest of their lives.

Wyatt nodded. "I've been having trouble sleeping the past few nights."

"Have you tried talking to any of the counselors?"

"Nah. Mr. Jacobs has been trying to get me to see them, but they wouldn't be able to help me." He hesitated before glancing at Dean nervously. "They wouldn't believe me, anyway."

"Believe you about what?"

Wyatt shook his head as he walked towards the door. "Forget I said anything."

"What is it, Wyatt?" Dean asked, getting the boy to stop. "You can tell me. I promise I won't judge you."

"No, but you'll laugh at me."

"Try me."

Wyatt sighed. "I think I've been seeing things, but I don't know if it's really real or if it's all in my head."

"What are you seeing?"

"I've been seeing a boy follow me around."

Dean leaned down so he was eye-level with the teen. "What did he look like, Wyatt?"

“Um...he was kinda tall. A little older than me, I guess. He had longish, blond hair and green eyes.”

Dean frowned, wondering if it was the same boy the guard had seen before he died. “Did this boy ever say anything to you?”

Wyatt nodded. “He kept saying my name over and over again. He said something else, but I couldn’t understand him.”

Dean was about to inquire further when the door behind Wyatt opened and Stu Tyler walked in.

“What are you doing in here?” he asked the both of them gruffly, but his gaze was on Wyatt.

Dean stepped in front of the kid and offered the guard an apologetic smile. “Wyatt saw me come in here so he came in to tell me I needed to get out.”

Tyler glared at Dean, and then turned his attention back to Wyatt. “Is that true, Wyatt?”

Dean glanced down at Wyatt, giving him a slight wink.

“Yes, sir. I didn’t want Dean to get in trouble,” the boy answered quietly.

Tyler seemed as if he didn’t believe Wyatt for a second, but finally he opened the door and nodded. “Get back to your room, kid.”

“Yes, sir.” Wyatt traded one last look with Dean before scurrying out of the bathroom.

Tyler approached Dean, seriously violating the hunter’s personal space. “Do you not know how to read, Dean?”

Dean smiled easily. “You mean, the police tape on the door?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure, I know how to read. I was just curious—you can’t blame a man for that.”

“You know what they say about curiosity?”

Dean smirked. “You really like those sayings, don’t you?”

Tyler’s lips twitched as he took another step towards Dean. “I would suggest you keep your curiosity to yourself. You never know when it could land you in some serious trouble.”

Dean arched a brow. “Is that a threat, Stuey?”

Tyler shrugged. “Consider it a friendly little warning.” He stepped back and pointed at the door. “Shift’s over. Get out of here.”

Dean held the guard’s gaze for a few moments before smiling. “Whatever you say, boss.”

Tyler didn’t say anything, but as Dean walked past the bulky man, he had the distinct feeling if looks could kill, he would have been nothing but a pile of smoldering ash.

*Oh, yeah...I am definitely pissing off the locals.*

## **Colonial Motel**

“Dude, you seriously had to go and piss him off?” Sam asked, looking at Dean like he had grown two heads. There were just some times when Dean amazed him with his arrogance and stupidity.

The brothers had returned to their motel only a few minutes ago and Dean didn’t waste any time telling Sam about Stu Tyler.

“It’s not my fault the guy walks around with a stick shoved up his ass the entire time. I think if he were to crack a smile, he’d fall over dead,” Dean said around a mouthful of his double cheeseburger.

Sam shoved a couple of fries into his mouth. “Yeah, but you could have found someone else to get on their bad side. Why did you have to choose Thing from *Fantastic Four*?”

Dean glared at his sibling. "I didn't choose my gig, remember? That was you who paired me with him."

Sam shook his head as he took a sip of his soda. "You're seriously blaming me for that?"

"I'm sure as hell not blaming myself." Dean shoved the rest of his burger into his mouth. "I can't help it that he didn't fall for my charm."

"Can you really blame the guy?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Sam pushed away his remaining meal and leaned back in his chair. "Did Tyler at least tell you anything when he wasn't contemplating smashing your face into a wall?"

Dean snagged the rest of Sam's burger and bit into it. "He knew the guard that was killed."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, but he didn't tell me anything except the dude should have been watching his back."

"So, he thinks it was an inside job?"

Dean shrugged. "He wouldn't say. I swept the bathroom with the EMF, but came up with nada." Dean polished off the burger and threw the wrapper at the trashcan across the room, where it bounced off the rim and landed on the floor.

Sam shook his head as he grinned. "Did you find anything?"

"Nope. There were no traces of a spirit anywhere to be found."

"So, we're back at square one?"

"Not necessarily. I did talk to the boy who found the guard's body," Dean said proudly.

"Really?" Sam asked, impressed.

"Yep. He didn't actually see it happen, but he did tell me something interesting."

"What's that?"

"He's claiming to see the same boy that was following the guard around. It could just be a coincidence or like you were saying—a simple haunting. It could be nothing."

"But we don't believe that, do we?" Sam asked.

"Not a chance." Dean got up from the table and collapsed on his bed with a groan. "I told you all about my day. What about you?"

Sam grimaced as he scratched the back of his head. "Not as eventful as yours, I'm afraid. I got the silent treatment from a couple of teens with major chips on their shoulders." He let out a weary sigh. "It made talking to you about feelings seem like a walk in the park."

Dean frowned. "I'm not that bad."

Sam rolled his eyes and didn't warrant that with a response. "I tried talking to Jacobs, but he didn't seem to want to talk about the murder."

"You think he's hiding anything?"

"Nah. He just seems really concerned about the kids and keeping them safe."

Dean sat up on the bed. "So, basically, all we have so far is a dead guard, among other deaths within the past five years, and some spook boy."

"Yeah." Sam reached for his laptop and booted it up. "I figure we should start with the center and see if there were any mysterious deaths that match our boy's description."

"Yell at me when you find something," Dean muttered as he once again lay back down and closed his eyes.

Sam shook his head in amusement as he focused on his task at hand. Heading to the local paper's website, he typed in his search query. He clicked on article after article, but turned up empty.

Deciding to try another approach, he typed in "Disappearances from the Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center" and smiled when an article from about five years ago

came up. He quickly perused it and when he clicked on the picture, Sam knew he had found what they were looking for.

"I think I found something."

Dean didn't respond.

Sam turned in his chair to see his brother was still snoozing. "Dean!"

Dean jerked awake, bolting upright. "Dude, what the hell is your deal?"

"I said I may have found something."

"Oh, well, why didn't you say so?"

Sam sighed and bit back a retort as Dean walked behind him to peer at the computer screen.

"What did you find?"

"The disappearance of Brandon Rudd. He was a fifteen-year-old kid who was sent to Culpeper when he stole a car. After serving about a week of his six month sentence, he vanished without a trace. Everyone chalked him up as a runaway."

"So, why do you think this is our Casper?" Dean asked, confused.

"Because of this," Sam said as he clicked on a link, pulling up Brandon's picture.

"Son of a bitch..."

The picture that stared back at the brothers was of a young teen with shaggy, blond hair and bright green eyes that seemed to pierce through the screen.

"This is who everyone's been seeing," Sam said.

"That's who Wyatt was describing."

"Dean, I've been thinking about this." Sam tapped on the screen. "Everyone who's seen this kid has turned up dead."

Dean's eyes widened as he realized what Sam was getting at. "Sammy, if that's true, then Wyatt's going to be next."

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

Wyatt Sinclair enjoyed the quiet of the night as he strolled around the grounds of the center. It allowed him to gather his thoughts and get away from everyone. He had to admit, after talking to Dean, he felt a little bit better because he finally felt someone here understood him and didn't think he was crazy. He was grateful he finally found someone he could trust in this place, especially after Dean didn't rat him out to Stu.

Turning on his MP3 player, the young teen smiled as Fall Out Boy's *Beat It* blasted through his headphones.

Wyatt was so engrossed in his music, he didn't hear the sound of footsteps approaching behind him. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he noticed the long shadow in the security light.

Whirling around, his music player fell out of his hands and he let out a relieved sigh when he saw who was there. "I didn't know you were behind me!"

The person said nothing as he barely lifted his hand.

Wyatt squinted and gasped when he noticed the knife. Swallowing nervously, the boy took a few steps backwards. "What are you doing with that?"

Silence was the only thing to answer Wyatt.

*I have to get out of here! I have to get some help!*

Turning on his heel, Wyatt began to run away, glancing behind him frantically to see if he was being followed. Not paying attention to what was ahead of him, he fell to the ground after crashing into a hard surface. Looking up, he saw that his silent pleas were answered.

"Please! You have to help me! He's trying to kill me!"

The other man leaned down as if to help him. Instead, he jerked the boy to his feet in an iron grip.

"Wait, what are you doing?" Wyatt cried, struggling in his captor's grip. He kicked back, his foot connecting with something, but the grip didn't ease up.

"Please, let me go!" Wyatt pleaded.

Instead of letting go, his captor put a hand over his mouth, silencing any more pleas. Wyatt watched with tear-filled eyes as the other person approached, the knife raised above his head.

*I can't believe I trusted him*, the teen thought before the knife was plunged into his chest.

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

"We're too late," Sam murmured softly as Dean pulled the Impala onto the road leading to the center.

The intermittent flashing of red and blue lights stood out in stark contrast to the inky blackness of the night. An ambulance was pulling out just as a coroner's van was pulling in and the police were trying their best to hold off the crowd of inquisitive onlookers. None of the detainees seemed to be outside and, looking up at the looming building, the brothers could see curious faces framed in the windows.

"We should have gotten here sooner, Sammy," Dean said guiltily as he pulled up to the curb and parked. There was no way they were getting into the employee lot with the police blocking all of the entrances.

"Dean, we can't jump to any conclusions. We don't know for sure what happened yet," Sam said as he followed his brother out of the car.

Dean turned back to glare at Sam. "No? Was I the only one who saw the coroner's van pull in? I don't need anyone to tell me, Sam. I know."

Sam sighed as he continued to follow Dean, and the older Winchester was glad Sam wasn't going to push him on this. Dean knew they were too late and there wasn't anything Sam could say that would make it better.

Walking up to the main entrance, the two hunters were stopped by an officer as soon as they tried to get in.

"Sorry, boys, but you're going to have to stay back," he said, placing a hand on Dean's chest.

Dean looked down at the officer's hand and Sam stepped in before his brother could say—or do—anything.

"We work here," Sam said, offering the man a sincere smile.

The officer shifted his eyes to glance up at Sam. "ID?"

"Not yet. We just started today," Sam explained.

"Sorry, guys. Without ID, you're not getting in here."

"Do you seriously think we're lying?" Dean asked, exploding. "Why the hell would we do that, especially now? We're not friggin' idiots!"

"Sir—"

"Dean, ease up or they'll arrest us," Sam cautioned, a hand on his brother's arm.

"You better listen to your friend," the officer said, smirking, as his beefy hands moved to the handcuffs on his belt.

Dean's eyes clouded over and Sam tightened his grip on his arm before he could do anything stupid. Dean was slightly grateful for Sam's restraint because he was seriously considering wiping that smirk right off the cop's face. If Sam hadn't been there, Dean was pretty sure he would have done it, damn the consequences.

"Sam! Dean!"

The Winchesters looked up at the sound of Thomas Jacobs' voice, seeing the center director striding towards them, his face flushed.

"Do you know these two, Mr. Jacobs?" the officer asked dubiously.

"Yes, yes. They're employees of mine." Jacobs waved them in. "Boys, please come with me."

Dean grinned smugly at the officer, giving him a small wave as he and Sam passed. As the chubby man bristled at Dean's total lack of respect, the hunter couldn't help but feel a little satisfied. *That'll show Inspector Gadget...*

"Dude, you seriously need to watch out who you're trying to piss off," Sam hissed as he dragged Dean with him.

"Oh, like you weren't getting tired of his righteous attitude," Dean said with a scowl.

Sam was saved from answering when Jacobs stopped and whirled on them. "What are you two doing here?"

"We were passing through and we noticed the circus," Dean answered. "Thought we would see what was going on."

"Thomas, what happened?" Sam asked.

The man wrung his hands nervously as his gaze turned to the side of the building where the investigators were working. "One of our boys...he's dead."

"Murdered?"

Jacobs nodded, focusing his attention on Sam. "He was stabbed in the heart. I found his body as I was leaving for the night."

"Who was it?" Dean demanded a little too harshly.

Jacobs looked at him in surprise. "Sinclair. It was Wyatt Sinclair."

"Dammit!" Dean turned away angrily and rubbed a hand over his face.

"Sonofabitch!"

"Is he okay?" Jacobs asked softly, glancing at Dean's back.

Sam looked at his brother in concern. "Yeah—he just met Wyatt today. He liked the kid."

Jacobs nodded. "Yes...Wyatt was a very likeable boy." He let out a weary sigh as a detective beckoned for him. "I better go see what they want."

Sam said nothing as he watched the director jog away before focusing his attention on Dean. "It's not your fault, Dean."

"Yeah? Try telling that to Wyatt," Dean said as he watched the coroner load the teen's body into the van. "He trusted me, Sammy."

"We had no idea what was going to happen, Dean."

Dean stubbornly shook his head. "We should have figured it out sooner. I should have realized it as soon as Wyatt told me he saw Brandon."

Sam grabbed Dean's arm and whirled him around to face him. "Stop it, Dean! I won't let you do this to yourself. It's not going to get you anywhere."

Dean shrugged off Sam's hand and started back for the car. "We're not sitting on our asses anymore, Sammy. We're gonna get some answers before another kid has to die."

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

### **The next morning**

Sam was a man on a mission when he walked into his office. He refused to let Dean continue to blame himself for Wyatt's death and Sam was going to find out who was responsible, once and for all.

Dean had barely said two words after they'd returned to the motel and every time Sam tried to talk to him about it, Dean shut him down and closed Sam out. Dean liked to say Sam was bad when it came to the art of guilt trips. Sam was tempted to find a mirror and hold it up to Dean so he could see himself. Dean was ten times worse at carrying around guilt, hands down.

Opening his messenger bag as he sat down at his desk, Sam pulled out a notepad. Next, he booted up the computer Jacobs had promised. It never arrived before his shift ended yesterday, so Sam figured it must have been set up before all the excitement last night.

"Let's see what we can find..."

Sam didn't know for sure if Brandon Rudd's file was still in the system, but he prayed luck was on his side this time since the teenager had technically been classified as a runaway.

It took a couple of minutes of searching, but finally Sam found the file he was looking for. "I take back any bad thing I ever said about Dean...for the past hour, anyway," he mumbled, grinning.

Browsing through the file, Sam jotted down a few notes about Brandon: He came from a troubled home. His dad left when he was thirteen. He was busted at fifteen for stealing a car. He was never in trouble before, except for a few problems at school. Typical teenaged behavior.

Looking at the last page of the file, Sam spotted a name, Doctor Susan Reece, and she was identified as the last person to speak with Brandon before he disappeared. *Maybe she can tell me a little more about him*, Sam thought as he picked up the desk phone and dialed the number listed for her. He didn't know for sure if the number was still current, but Sam was willing to take the chance.

"Hello?" said a female voice after three rings.

"Doctor Susan Reece?"

"Yes. *Who is this?*"

"My name is Sam Craven—I'm a private investigator and I was approached to re-open the case of Brandon Rudd at the request of his aunt. I've been going over all the files and everything, and there were just too many things that didn't make sense to me."

"No, I don't think—"

"You were a psychologist assigned to his case when he was sent to Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center. It would have been five years ago."

"He was the boy who ran away, right?"

"Yes—that's what the police are saying, anyway. But like I said earlier, there are too many things that don't make sense to me."

"What kind of things?"

"Well, it seems a little too open-ended and convenient to me," Sam explained. "When you spoke with Brandon, did he give any indication he wanted to run away?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Craven, but I shouldn't be discussing my clients with you," Doctor Reece said.

"I understand that. Believe me, I do," Sam said quickly. "But anything you may provide me may help in finding out what happened to him."

Doctor Reece sighed. "I could lose my license."

"I can assure you, Doctor, your name will never be brought up in my report. I just want to be able to bring this case to a close."

Doctor Reece remained silent and Sam was afraid she hung up on him.

"Brandon didn't seem to be the type to run away," she finally admitted. "He was distant, sure, but I could tell he wanted to make a change. He was finally beginning to open up the day he went missing."

"Opening up about what?"

"Everything, but we were really focusing on his family."

"Did he say anything in particular?"

"Well..." Doctor Reece hesitated.

Sam frowned. "What is it, Doctor?"

"He seemed afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"His mother. He was under the impression she wanted him dead."

"Why would Brandon think that?"

"Brandon never would elaborate, but he mentioned something about his mother remarrying," the doctor explained. "He said her new fiancé didn't like him."

"Did you believe him?"

Doctor Reece sighed. *“No...I just put it off to teenage delusions. Teens are so wrapped up in their own world, they have a tendency to think everyone is out to get them. I don’t know...maybe I should have listened to him. If I had, maybe he would still be here and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”*

“You couldn’t have known, Doctor Reece.” God, why am I saying that so much lately? “Thank you for your time.”

*“Good luck with your investigation, Sam. I really hope you find the answers you’re looking for. Please let me know if you find Brandon.”*

“I will,” Sam promised as he hung up the phone. He sat there, tapping his pen against his tablet, lost in thought.

Was there something to Brandon’s fears about his mother? Would a mother really kill her child in cold blood? Sam already knew the answer to that—the Woman in White back in Jericho, California taught him that. But still, if that was the case and Brandon really was murdered by his mother, how did she get on the premises to get it done?

“Am I interrupting something?”

Sam jumped in his chair at the sound of Jacobs’ voice. Smiling shakily, the young hunter shook his head. “No, I was just thinking. Have you been there long?”

“Just a minute or two.” Jacobs came further into the office and glanced down at the notepad. “What are you working on?”

Sam leaned forward and covered his notes up with his arms. “I was just going over some notes I made about a couple of kids I saw yesterday. I’m trying to familiarize myself with their cases.”

Jacobs smiled. “Very good. I really admire your work ethic, Sam.”

Sam shrugged. “I really want to help these kids.”

Jacobs nodded his head. “Listen, I wanted to make sure you and your brother were okay after last night. The two of you seemed really upset.”

“We’re fine. I think we were just surprised with something happening since it was our first day on the job,” Sam lied smoothly. “But we’re good now.”

“I would understand if you decided to quit.” Jacobs smiled ruefully. “I can’t say I would blame you one bit. Hell, it’s got me wanting to get away as fast as I can.”

“You’d be surprised at what it would take to get me and Dean to quit,” Sam said. “We want to know what’s going on around here just as badly as you do, Thomas.” *Even more than you do.*

Jacobs made his way back to the door. “Well, if it gets too much for you, let me know. I’ll be willing to give you a glowing recommendation wherever you may choose to go.”

“I appreciate that, Thomas.”

Jacobs gave Sam a small smile and left the hunter to himself. Gathering up his notes, Sam decided to go find Dean and tell him what he’d learned.

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Dean was feeling pretty miserable and it didn’t help any that he was once again doing nothing but walking the very quiet third floor of the center. What he really wanted to do was to work his frustration out, but unfortunately there was nothing for him to kick, punch, shoot, stab or exorcise. Dean was willing to give just about anything for a demon to pop out, just so he could send its ass straight back to Hell—after a nice, drag-out fight to the death, anyway.

Vanquishing evil always made him feel better. Who needed chicken noodle soup or depressing poetry when you had that?

“Wyatt said something bad was gonna happen.”

Dean stopped dead in his tracks as the kid’s voice reached his ears. Taking a couple of quiet steps forward, he spied a group of three boys talking in a stairwell.

Being careful to keep himself to the shadows, Dean strained to listen to what they were saying.

"What? Was he psychic or something?" Boy Two asked.

"No, it was nothing like that," Boy One said defensively. "He just told me about this feeling he had."

"That sounds like a bunch of crap to me," Boy Two said, laughing.

"Yeah," Boy Three chimed in. "Wyatt was a big freak, always saying something crazy just to get attention."

It took everything Dean had not to burst into the stairwell and knock that kid's head against the wall. He figured *that* would work out some of his pent-up frustration.

"Wyatt's dead and you have to talk about him like that?" Boy One asked.

"Dude, he was your roommate and you couldn't even stand him," Boy Three argued.

"Yeah, but you don't hear me insulting him." Boy One lowered his voice. "He was really scared."

Boy Two scoffed. "Of what? His shadow?"

"No, jackass. He was scared of his parents. Wyatt told me he thought his parents wanted him dead," Boy One explained.

"Why would he say that?" Boy Three asked.

"I don't know—he never said." Boy One hesitated. "Do you think there could be some truth to it?"

Dean felt dust begin to tickle his nostrils and he tried in vain to hold back the sneeze threatening to erupt. He failed miserably in his attempt and let out a massive sneeze, alerting the boys to his position.

"Come on—let's get out of here," Boy One said and three pairs of feet scurried away.

"Hey! I've been looking all over for you."

Dean turned at the sound of Sam's voice and saw his brother hurrying towards him, an excited look on his face.

"What's got you in such a damned good mood?" Dean asked, scowling.

"What's got you in such a pissy ass mood?" Sam returned.

Dean let out an irritated sigh as he walked past his sibling. "Sam, I'm not in the mood."

Sam caught up with him. "I read up on Brandon's file."

"Did you find anything interesting?" Dean asked as he continued to walk.

"Typical teenage angst stuff—family split up, mom was getting remarried to a guy who hated him, trouble at school."

"How does this help us?"

"That doesn't, but I talked to the last person to speak with Brandon before he disappeared. Doctor Susan Reece—she was a staff psychologist here up until about three years ago. She told me she didn't think Brandon was the type to run away and he had this fear his mother wanted him dead."

Dean stopped walking so abruptly Sam almost mowed him over in his haste to stop. "What did you just say?"

Sam frowned at his brother's sharp voice. "Uh...Brandon thought his mother wanted him dead?"

Dean shook his head in thought. "Son of a bitch. Wyatt thought the same thing."

"What? Did he tell you that yesterday?"

"No. I just overheard a conversation with a group of kids—one of them was Wyatt's roommate. He said Wyatt told him he thought his parents wanted him dead."

"Wow," Sam said, shocked.

"Yeah." Dean glanced at his brother. "So, what do you think we're dealing with here?"

Sam shrugged. "I can't be entirely sure, but I think we may have a Radiant Boy on our hands."

Dean frowned. "Radiant Boy? That would mean Brandon would have to be dead—not missing."

"Exactly." Sam ran a hand through his hair, pushing his bangs away from his face. "I'm gonna head to the library during my lunch break and make sure before we come up with something concrete."

Dean nodded. "Sounds good to me. We need to find something fast before any more crap happens around here."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "What are you gonna do?"

"Stick around here and keep my eyes and ears open for anything." Dean dug into his pocket and pulled out the Impala keys, handing them to Sam. "Be careful."

"You too," Sam said, fingering the key ring. "I'll call you as soon as I find anything."

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The guards' locker room was shrouded in silence as the lone figure slipped inside unnoticed. Just to make sure he was alone, he made a quick sweep of the room, checking between the lockers and the showers. Satisfied that it was completely vacant, he made his way to locker number seven and smiled when he saw that it was unlocked.

*Idiot...he didn't even bother to lock it up...*

Popping it open, he pulled a cloth-wrapped package out of his pocket and smiled. Clearing off a space on the top shelf, he nestled it there knowing it would only be a matter of time before it was discovered.

Smiling in satisfaction, he softly closed the locker and left.

## **Culpeper Public Library**

Luckily for Sam, the town's library happened to be only a five-minute drive from the center. By fifteen after noon, he was already settled, his mind in research mode with forty-five minutes left. Well, forty, if he wanted to get back to his office before his lunch break was up.

Unfortunately, the library was seriously lacking in its supernatural materials. In fact, when Sam asked the librarian if she could point him the way to the section, he was certain she was ready to call the loony bin to come pick him up. Sam hadn't missed the way her hand surreptitiously moved towards the phone, while her other one reached for her cross around her neck.

It would figure they would come to a town that was afraid to delve into the unnatural world. Sometimes, it made Sam want to grab up these people and force them to see what was really out there. Then again, it also made him envious of them because there were times when he wished he didn't know about what lurked in the shadows.

Seeing as he wasn't going to get any help from books, Sam turned his attention to the computers at the back of the library, figuring the Internet was going to be his best bet. It was a whole hell of a lot faster to browse and he wouldn't get the strange looks. Worst case scenario was that the government was tracking the library's Internet history and red flags would go up. He'd be long gone before they decided to swoop in though, and it made him grin that the librarian would have to try to explain it.

*Yep, to see the look on her face if that happened...*

Since Sam had a pretty good idea of what they were dealing with, he typed in "Radiant Boy" and the search engine popped up several sites that mentioned it. Clicking on the first one, he was relatively surprised when it seemed to give him almost all the information he needed on the subject.

Thinking it would be best if he jotted down some notes instead of printing it out since the printer was up at the circulation desk, Sam pulled out his notepad and pen from his messenger bag.

*“The glowing ghost of a boy who has been murdered by his mother and whose appearance portends ill luck and violent death. First appeared in the folklore of England and Europe. Possibly originated with the Kindermorderinn—children murdered by their mothers in Germanic folklore.”*

Sam hoped his dad had some mention of the Radiant Boy in his journal, since the site he was on didn't mention how to put the spirit to rest, nor did any of the other sites Sam clicked on. *Dad usually has a way of finding answers that don't want to be found.*

Glancing at his watch, Sam saw he had about twenty minutes before he had to return to the center. The hunter closed out his current search and opened up the page for the local newspaper. He didn't really get a chance to read up on everything about Brandon last night and he wanted to see if he could dig up anymore on the boy. Typing in the missing teen's name, several articles popped up.

Sam started at the earliest one from several years ago. It mentioned how Brandon had led his Little League baseball team to win the state championship, after he had hit a homerun to break the tie in the bottom of the ninth inning. Sam skimmed a few more articles that mentioned Brandon's accomplishments, ranging from science fairs, spelling bees, and the Boy Scouts.

*How did a kid who was doing this well manage to have everything go to hell in such a short time?*

Sam finally came to an article about Brandon's trial. It was a short blurb reporting he'd been sentenced to six months at the Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center for stealing a car. The next article a week later after that was about his disappearance. The police were reluctant to call it a kidnapping and were instead declaring Brandon a runaway, but promised to look at every angle before they reached a conclusive decision.

A few days later, another short blurb appeared saying the police had no evidence to suggest the boy was kidnapped or a victim of foul play, but the case would still remain open.

“Looks like everyone gave up on you, didn't they, Brandon?” Sam whispered. “Well, I'm not about to. You deserve more than that.”

Sam was about to sign off when another article caught his eyes. Clicking on it, he saw it was a write up about a wedding for Brandon's mom, Stacey, and the fiancé Brandon had mentioned to Doctor Reece. Scanning it quickly, Sam shook his head in disgust as he read a quote from Stacey: *“This was very difficult with Brandon still being missing, but I know this is what he would have wanted in the end. He would want me to be happy.”*

“She talks about him as if he was already dead. She couldn't wait two weeks before she gave up on Brandon to start a new life without him.” Sam wasn't normally one to condemn a person before speaking with them, but he couldn't help it with Stacey. It all just seemed too staged to him.

Stealing another glance at his watch, Sam saw he'd stayed way past his welcome. Gathering up his things quickly and shutting down the computer, he regretted that he couldn't check more into Brandon's mother right then.

*I have a feeling she plays into this a lot deeper than anyone realizes and we're going to find out just how far...*

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

*This food tastes like crap...or what I would imagine crap to taste like, Dean thought*

sourly as he threw down his napkin on his tray. *How can they expect these kids to eat this garbage?*

*The higher-ups may claim these detention centers are supposed to make the kids feel at home, but if mama cooked like this, then they were in more trouble than anyone realized. No wonder they're getting into trouble. Probably had to in order to get some money to get their hands on some decent grub.*

Dean had barely touched his so-called roast beef and mashed potatoes and for him that was bad, considering he could pretty much stomach anything placed before him. It made him glad that he got out of here in a few hours so he could find a diner or bar—definitely a bar. He almost wished he could sneak something back for all of the boys here.

Glancing at his watch, he saw that it should be close to time for Sam to check in with him. He was curious as to what his brother may have found because he was seriously ready to put this place in his rearview mirror.

Gathering up his tray, Dean deposited it in the garbage can where it belonged and headed for the locker room so he could get his cell phone. Stu had made it abundantly clear cell phones were prohibited while on duty, along with their freedom and dignity. Dean had been tempted to carry it just to piss the behemoth of a man off. But Sam had warned him against aggravating Stu any further than he had already.

Dean was smart—he knew when to stop pushing, especially against people who would have no problem rearranging his face. Let somebody else be karma's bitch for one—Dean wanted no part in it.

Pushing through the double doors of the locker room, Dean headed straight for his locker. Opening it up, he was reaching for his phone on the shelf when he noticed a strange bundle next to it. Ignoring his phone for now, Dean gingerly lifted the cloth package out and opened it up.

"What the hell?" he muttered, frowning.

A bloody dagger sat nestled inside and Dean could tell by the condition of it, the blood was fresh. Only one thought flashed across the hunter's mind: *This was the knife used to kill Wyatt and who knows who else.*

"But how the hell did it end up in my locker?" he wondered, utterly confused. Did someone want to help him by leaving it for him or was there something much more sinister going on, like a possible frame?

Dean didn't get any more time to dwell on it as the locker room door swung open, revealing Stu Tyler in all his inconvenient glory.

"Son of a bitch..." Dean muttered, knowing exactly what was about to happen.

"Dean, you're supposed to be back on duty, not—" Tyler stopped when he noticed the blade in Dean's hand. Immediately, the bulky guard reached behind him, pulling out his pepper spray while his other grabbed the nightstick on the left side of his belt. "Put the knife down, Dean."

*Yep, that's what I thought.*

"This isn't what it looks like," Dean tried, holding up his hands.

"Drop it!"

"Okay! Okay!" Dean didn't want to cause any more trouble, considering it all seemed to be going to the crapper for him anyway. While keeping one hand up, he slowly bent down and placed the knife on the floor.

"Step back!"

Dean took a few steps back and watched as Tyler made a beeline for him, trading his nightstick for the pair of handcuffs on his belt. Grabbing Dean's hands, he forced them behind his back and cuffed him before shoving the hunter down on the bench in front of the lockers.

Dean merely sighed in frustration as Tyler pulled out his walkie talkie and summoned Jacobs. "Yeah, we got a problem in the locker room."

*"What kind of problem?"*

"You need to get down here now."

"I'm on my way."

"I knew you were trouble as soon as I met you," Tyler said bitterly as he put away his walkie talkie.

Dean rolled his eyes. *God, the situations I get myself into. Sammy's gonna have a field day when he finds out about this.*

"What? You don't have any smart ass comments for me now?"

Dean shrugged a shoulder. "I usually like to have a bigger audience if I'm gonna waste my breath."

Tyler bristled and reared back as if to hit Dean, but he was stopped as Jacobs came into the locker room. The director's eyes fell to the bloody knife on the floor and he instantly reached the same conclusion Tyler had already.

"You hit him, Stu, and we're going to have to explain it when the police come pick Dean up," Jacobs said, glaring at Dean.

"I can cover it up," Tyler argued. "I'll say he got violent when I tried to subdue him."

Dean smirked. "A little police brutality never hurt anyone, right?"

"You little—"

"I don't think you understand the amount of trouble you're in, Dean," Jacobs said before Tyler could launch himself at Dean.

"I'd have to say none because I've never seen that knife before in my life."

"Then how do you explain it getting into your locker?" Tyler demanded.

"Well, for one—it doesn't stay locked. Anyone could get in there. And two, it wasn't there when I got in this morning."

"Why should I believe you?" Jacobs asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Have the damn thing dusted for prints," Dean said in exasperation. "I can guarantee you won't find mine anywhere on there. Hell, you probably won't find anyone's because if they were smart, they wore gloves."

Dean hoped Jacobs wouldn't actually get it printed just to see if he was right, considering Dean was technically dead. It would be a hard one to explain to the cops when they discovered he was very much alive and kicking.

"Look, I don't get my kicks killing innocent kids!" Dean said, his voice rising in anger when the director said nothing.

"How exactly is it you get your kicks?" Tyler asked, grinning.

Dean grimaced. "Dude, I so don't swing that way."

Tyler's smile quickly turned into a snarl. "You're a punk ass little bitch, you know that? Maybe you should do some time in here."

"Why? So I can get my ass murdered in my sleep because you can't do your job and protect these kids?"

"We can't be expected to keep a constant watch on them all hours of the day."

"No, but you *can* be expected to do everything in your power to see that they stay safe, instead of accusing innocent people of murder."

"You think you're innocent?"

"Yeah, I do, considering I just got here yesterday and you can't pin all the other deaths on me!" Dean's voice kept rising in anger.

"Maybe you're working with a partner," Tyler argued.

"Are you goddamned kidding me?"

"That's enough!" Jacobs yelled to be heard over the arguing. Dean and Tyler looked up at the director in surprise. "We're not getting anything accomplished by carrying on like children!"

"Well, if you'd gotten all your facts straight *before* accusing me of anything, then we wouldn't be doing this at *all*," Dean said, annoyed as he struggled against the cuffs holding him.

"You're right, Dean."

Dean arched a brow. "I am? That's a new one for me."

Jacobs nodded. "This center can't afford to have any more bad publicity on its shoulders and I won't let it." He let out a weary sigh. "I don't know how that knife got into your locker and I'm sure you wouldn't be stupid enough to leave it there."

"Damn straight."

"The way I see it, you have two options, Dean."

Dean eyed the director suspiciously. "And what are those?"

"It's simple: You either get out of here now and never step foot into this facility again or I turn you over to the police, evidence and bad publicity be damned."

Dean swallowed hard as he weighed his options. He really didn't want to get turned over to the cops but he didn't want to leave Sam alone, either. Not when he couldn't continue to watch his back. He knew his stubborn ass brother wouldn't leave with him; Sam would insist on staying until they put an end to this.

"We're waiting, Dean. What's your choice going to be?"

### **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

When Sam arrived back at the center, he grabbed his bag and set out to find Dean. He wanted his brother to know what he found and to see if they could formulate a plan and figure out where to go next.

Sam knew what *he* wanted to do—he wanted to get some answers from Brandon's mother. The only reason the Radiant Boy lore would hold true would be if she had something to do with Brandon's disappearance and obvious death—whether directly or indirectly. If he and Dean could just corner her, she may be able to shed a lot more light on everything so they could get Brandon the justice he deserved and put his spirit to rest.

Sam didn't believe for a second Brandon's spirit was responsible for the deaths. It was like the lore said—the teen was trying to warn people of their impending death, but so far, no one was getting the message.

Going up to the third floor, Sam searched for Dean but he was nowhere to be found. Checking his watch, he saw Dean's lunch break should have ended ten minutes ago.

*Maybe he's in the locker room*, Sam mused as he took the steps down to the first level. Heading directly for the locker room, he pushed the door open and stopped dead in his tracks at the sight before him.

"What the hell's going on here?" Sam demanded as Stu Tyler removed a pair of handcuffs from Dean's wrists.

"It's nothing, Sam," Dean replied as he rubbed at his wrists.

"Nothing? It sure as hell didn't look like nothing to me," Sam argued as he stepped forward.

Jacobs held out a calming hand to Sam. "A knife was found in your brother's locker. A bloody knife, to be more precise."

"Excuse me?"

"He's been asked to vacate the premises and if you don't agree with my decision, Sam, you can follow him out," Jacobs continued.

Sam shook his head as he glanced quickly at his brother. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Sam—" Dean began, but Sam sent him a glare that told him to zip it.

Jacobs smiled. "Great to hear. It would have been a shame to see you go, Sam. You show great potential." The director turned to Dean. "As for you, Dean, I would suggest you be gone in fifteen minutes or I make a call to the police."

"I got it," Dean muttered, his eyes never straying away from Sam.

"Good." Jacobs leaned down and picked up the knife from the floor, being careful not to smudge any evidence that may be on it. He nodded at Tyler. "Come on, Stu. We'll see about getting this to the police."

Dean didn't wait a full second before they were gone to go at Sam. "What the hell are you thinking, Sammy? There's no way I'm letting you stay here alone."

"Dean, you know I can't leave. If I do that, then we'll never find out what's going on around here. The best way for us to find some answers is if I stay on the inside."

Dean let out a long sigh as he sank down onto the bench. "You're right. I hate it and I think it sucks out loud, but you're right."

Sam sat down next to Dean. "How did the knife get in your locker, Dean?"

"I don't know, Sam." Dean rubbed the back of his neck. "It had to have been planted there while I was patrolling or at lunch. It wasn't there when I came in this morning."

"Why would someone risk putting the possible murder weapon in your locker?" Sam asked, confused. "They had to know it would be found."

Dean shrugged. "Beats me. The only thing I can figure is someone is trying to warn us off. Maybe they don't like us digging around so they decided to turn the tables on us."

"That's still stupid. It was too much of a risk."

"Yeah. What worries me most is that it seems we're dealing with a human perp and not our usual playmates," Dean said. "We know how that's turned out for us before."

Sam chuckled sardonically. "How can I forget?" He shook his head. "You're right, though."

"Hey, two times today," Dean said, smiling.

Sam frowned in confusion. "What?"

"Nothing." Dean stood up and took off his uniform top. Reaching into his locker for his civvie clothes, he glanced back at Sam. "What am I right about?"

"Our monster of the week being human," Sam said. "Brandon definitely has the makings of a Radiant Boy."

"You found proof he was dead?"

"Not exactly, but it sure seems that way. Think about it, Dean—the only way everyone would be seeing him would be if he was dead."

"That's true." Dean slammed his locker shut and again sat down on the bench to put on his boots. "What did you find on your library excursion?"

"Not too much." Sam smiled. "But I did manage to scare the crap out of the librarian when I asked to see her supernatural section. I thought she was ready to perform an exorcism on me."

Dean chuckled. "It still amazes me how sheltered these people are."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "Before Brandon got into trouble, he was a good kid. He played Little League baseball, won science fairs and spelling bees. It just seemed a year or so before he was arrested, he started acting out."

"That's about the time his dad left him, right?"

Sam nodded. "The newspaper didn't go too crazy about his disappearance. The cops eventually claimed him a runaway because there wasn't any evidence to suggest otherwise. What pisses me off is how his mother was able to remarry while the investigation was still ongoing."

"Did you find anything else about Mommy Dearest?"

"No, I ran out of time. She had to have something to do with his disappearance, though."

"Why do you say that?"

"In order for Brandon to be a Radiant Boy, he had to have been murdered by his mother," Sam explained.

Dean frowned. "But Brandon was found missing in the middle of the night. How the hell did she get in?"

"Maybe she didn't have to," Sam suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe she got someone on the inside to do it for her."

“That would make sense.” Dean stood up. “How about I go have a talk with the Mother of the Year? Do you have an address?”

“No, I just know she goes by Stacey King.”

Dean glanced at his watch and sighed. “I better get out of here before Jacobs comes back with the Hulk. I’m sure Tyler would give anything to toss me out on my ass and I’m not about to give him the pleasure. I’ll go see if I can locate Stacey and find out something.”

Sam nodded as he stood up. “I’ll hang around and see if I can dig up anything.”

“Be careful, Sammy. We don’t know who we’re dealing with here. The first sign of trouble, you call me. Got it?”

“Yeah, let me know if you find out anything.”

Dean traded one last glance with Sam and left just as footsteps approached the locker room.

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Dean hated wild goose chases and looking for Stacey King was turning out to be just that. He’d been trying to locate her for the past hour and so far had come up with nothing. She was nowhere to be found in the Culpeper area, so Dean had to broaden his search and hope she was in one of the nearby towns.

Taking a bite of his chili dog, he dialed up Information and waited for the operator to pick up.

*“What city and state?”*

“Orange, Virginia.”

*“What listing?”*

“Stacey King,” Dean said in a bored voice. There really were only so many times he could repeat the name and fake interest.

*“Would you like the phone number or address?”*

Dean started—he finally found her. “Both.”

*“Okay, her phone number is 555-5743 and she lives at 124 Willow Drive. Would you like me to connect you?”*

“You’ve done enough,” Dean replied as he hung up. Tossing his phone onto the passenger seat and stuffing the rest of his chili dog in his mouth, Dean started up the Impala and headed in the direction of Orange.

It was at least a good forty-five minute drive from Culpeper, which made Dean a little nervous—he felt as if he was abandoning Sam. How was he supposed to have Sam’s back when he was so far away? Sure, he could cut that driving time in half if he needed to, but who’s to say that extra time would make any difference if his brother got into any trouble?

When Dean finally drove into the city limits, he pulled up to a convenience store and asked for directions to Willow Drive. The clerk was surprisingly helpful and Dean was easily able to find Stacey King’s home.

Turning into a subdivision, he found a modest, two-story home with light blue vinyl siding and black shutters on either side of the windows. A burgundy minivan sat in front of a two-car garage while toys lay scattered on the front lawn and Dean couldn’t help but feel a little disgusted by them.

*How can a woman give up on one child so easily and create a new family? It just doesn’t make sense...*

Pulling up to the curb, Dean pushed out of the Impala and strode purposefully to the front door. Ringing the doorbell, he glanced around the neighborhood as he waited for it to be answered. It didn’t take long for a woman with long, brown wavy hair and a bright smile to greet him.

“Can I help you?” she asked perkily.

“Stacey King?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“My name is Dean Jones. I’m a detective with the Culpeper Police Department.” Dean flashed a badge at her and had it back in his pocket before she could get a good look at it.

Stacey frowned. “You’re a good drive from Culpeper, Detective. Is there something wrong?”

“I’m looking into some cold cases and I came across one for your son—Brandon,” Dean said, gauging her reaction.

Stacey visibly paled as she shook her head. “You must be mistaken, Detective. I don’t have a son named Brandon.” She started to close the door, but Dean stopped it.

“I don’t think I am because if I was, then you wouldn’t be trying to shut me out,” Dean said, fixing her with a hard stare.

“I-I don’t know what to tell you,” Stacey stammered.

“How about ‘Come on in and let me tell you everything you want to know about Brandon?’”

Stacey swallowed nervously and kept her eyes anywhere but on Dean.

“Mrs. King, we can do this the easy way, which would be you letting me come in and talk to you, or I can call you down to the station,” Dean said. He wasn’t entirely sure if that was true or not, but he would use any excuse he could pull out of his ass at this point.

“Come in,” Stacey finally said as she opened the door to let him in.

As Dean followed her in, he marveled at what people would do when you put a little fear in them.

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

After Dean had left, Sam went straight for his office, frustrated with how everything was going. How in the world did Jacobs think Dean would be stupid enough to leave a bloody knife in his locker, especially knowing it could easily be found? It just didn’t make any sense. Why would someone risk framing Dean now, so late in the game? That usually spelled sloppiness and fear; there was no telling what the killer would do now.

Well, that could wait until later. Sam was worried about Brandon now. It was obvious the spirit boy was afraid, especially with the sightings becoming more frequent. He was desperately trying to get everyone’s attention but so far, no one was paying the boy any heed.

Sam was determined to listen and put a stop to everything. He wasn’t about to let Brandon be ignored any longer. If no one was going to take the time to help the teen, then he and Dean would. Sam knew Dean wouldn’t stop until he got some answers out of Stacey King.

The youngest Winchester was still under the impression that the woman knew what had happened to her son. He wished he could be with Dean when his brother finally managed to track her down, if for nothing more that to see the woman crack. Sam usually wasn’t a vindictive person, but if she was behind Brandon’s mysterious disappearance, then she deserved whatever was coming to her. If that meant a pissed off Dean, then so be it.

Stacey King didn’t deserve the title of “mother” in Sam’s eyes.

Booting up his office computer, Sam once again pulled up the local newspaper website. He wanted to get a list of names of the boys who had either disappeared or were found dead within the last few years. Sam could have easily asked Jacobs, he was sure, but he didn’t want it getting out just how suspicious he was of everything and risk getting tossed out like Dean.

Sam was curious if the boys had claimed to see Brandon before they died. If so, that meant Brandon had been trying to warn everyone for years and no one had

listened. It also made Sam fearful that all this time, more and more boys had been sent here while a killer was running free.

*How was this place still in operation?*

Sam quickly found the names he was looking for on the website. Clicking off the Internet, he accessed the center's database. Typing in the first name on his list, he frowned when he was met with no results.

"That's weird..."

Sam tried the next three names on the list, but still nothing popped up.

"Let's try this then..." Sam said as he typed in Brandon's name. *Maybe it was just the other files I couldn't get access to...*

"Huh?" Sam was met with the same result as his previous attempts. He was being blocked from viewing the old files. "What in the world is going on around here?"

"I'm glad to see I'm not the only one who talks to himself."

Sam looked up to see Jacobs standing in the doorway. *I must be getting really rusty if I've managed to let him sneak up on me twice now.*

"Thomas—hey." Sam smiled sheepishly. "I'm afraid it's a bad habit of mine. Most of the time, I don't realize I'm doing it."

"It's quite all right," Jacobs said. "You know, they say it's a sign of an intelligent man."

"Is that so?"

"Mm-hmm." Jacobs nodded towards Sam's littered desk. "You hard at work?"

"Not really," Sam lied.

Jacobs didn't push it. "I just wanted to come by and apologize about what happened with Dean."

Sam fixed the director with a level gaze. "Dean isn't responsible for Wyatt's death or anything that's going on around here."

"I admit we may have overreacted, but you have to understand my position and the pressure I'm under, Sam. I couldn't, in good conscience, allow your brother to stay here," Jacobs explained.

"I mean no disrespect, but you did overreact, Thomas. Dean would never hurt anyone," Sam said earnestly. "He wants nothing more than to find out who's responsible for what's going on here."

Jacobs nodded. "That may be, but I'm here to look out for the safety of these boys. Their parents trust me to guide them and keep them safe."

"Did the police find anything on the knife you found in Dean's locker?"

"They never got back to me," Jacobs sighed as he glanced at his watch. "I'm going to go ahead and call it a day. Are you going to stick around for a while longer?"

"Maybe another hour or so," Sam said.

"If anything comes up, give me a call on my cell."

Sam nodded as he watched Jacobs leave. Sitting back in his chair, he glanced at the computer screen in frustration. Eventually, a slow smile crept on the hunter's face as he realized just what Jacobs leaving meant.

If Sam couldn't find anything on his computer, then he knew where he could.

*I think it's about time I take a look in Jacobs' office...*

## **King Residence**

Dean strolled around the living room, taking in everything as Stacey went into the kitchen to fix them some tea. Coming to the fireplace mantel, he saw a cluster of photographs in wooden frames, showing a smiling, happy family—Stacey, her husband, and two small children—a boy and a girl. Dean felt that anger washing over him once again as he found no evidence of Brandon. It seemed as if Stacey was content to pretend that part of her life never existed.

"You won't find any photos of Brandon up there, if that's what you're looking for," Stacey said as she handed Dean his glass of tea.

"Why is that?" Dean asked, taking a sip. *My God...that's a little too sweet, even by my standards.*

"Phillip doesn't want any up. Our children have no knowledge of Brandon and that's the way he wants it." Stacey sat down on a cushioned chair and looked up at Dean.

Dean's brows furrowed. "Are you okay with that?"

"It doesn't matter if I am or not. I'll do whatever it takes to make my husband happy."

Dean held his tongue, not bothering to say what he really wanted to. "So, where is your family?" he asked instead as he took a seat on the sofa.

"Phillip is out of town on business and the kids are at my mother's for the night." She tilted her head. "I know you didn't come all this way to ask about my family, Detective."

Dean placed his tea on the coffee table and rested his elbows on his knees as he looked at her sternly. "Tell me about Brandon."

"I'm sure the file you have on him tells you everything you need to know."

Dean grinned slightly. "I tend not to believe everything I read. I want *you* to tell me about your son."

Stacey sighed. "Brandon was a great kid up until his father left us. After that, he became rebellious and withdrawn. I think he blamed me for his father leaving."

"Why would he do that?"

"Jason and I used to fight constantly. We tried to keep it away from Brandon as best as we could. After Jason left, he looked for someone to blame and I guess it fell on me since I had full custody of him."

"Did you think to get him any help?"

Stacey shrugged. "I thought about it, but I never went through with it. I hoped things would work out on their own, and for the most part they did. Until I met Phillip."

"Brandon started acting out again?"

"Yeah. He became increasingly troubled."

"How so?"

"He got into some fights at school. Started skipping school altogether and began hanging out with a bad crowd."

Dean chuckled. "That sounds like typical teenage behavior to me. Hell, I did some things in my youth that would make you blush."

Stacey wasn't amused. "That wasn't Brandon."

"Isn't it a little strange that you keep saying your son was troubled, yet when he went into juvie, it was his first offense?"

Stacey swallowed nervously. "He'd been building up to that."

Dean nodded as he leaned back on the sofa. "What do you think happened to Brandon, Mrs. King?"

The brunette slowly shrugged. "I think he ran away, like the police said. Brandon had always threatened to do it."

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

"Excuse me?"

"I think that's just an excuse and I think there's a lot more to the story." Dean never took his eyes off the woman.

Stacey squirmed in her chair. "I don't know what you mean."

Dean leaned forward once again. "Brandon has been spotted by several people in the last few years and up until two nights ago."

Stacey paled and brought a hand up to her mouth. "But...that's not possible," she said in a strained whisper.

Dean arched a brow. "I thought that would make you happy to hear the news, Mrs. King. But if I'm not wrong, then I would say you look as if you've just seen a ghost."

Stacey just kept shaking her head in denial, not saying anything. Dean didn't know if it was because she couldn't speak or if she was afraid to say anything at that point.

"But it wouldn't be too far from what they've described seeing. Your son has been seen right before a person turns up dead," the hunter said, not bothering to hold anything back. "Brandon has been seen as a spirit, which can only mean one thing."

The distraught woman just stared at him with wide, tear filled eyes.

*It's time to hit this ball right out of the park...*

"Brandon is dead."

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

As Sam slipped into the hallway, he was relieved to find it was deserted. But knowing that looks could be deceiving, especially in his line of work, Sam quietly checked each doorway, making sure he was by himself. The last thing he needed was to be caught—he did that, he would pretty much blow any chance he and Dean had to get to the bottom of things.

Besides, he would disgrace the Winchester name if he allowed himself to be caught. Sam never told Dean how easily he let his guard down with Jacobs and if his sibling found out, he would ride Sam about it for a good long while. John Winchester didn't train his sons all their lives for nothing, and failure was never an option.

Not even a little.

Coming to Jacobs' office, Sam twisted the knob to find it was predictably locked. Sighing, he reached into back pocket and pulled out his trusty lock pick set. Again checking the hallway for possible wanderers, Sam made quick work of the lock and ducked inside in under a minute.

Sam didn't bother to turn on the overhead light for fear that someone would notice, so he pulled out his small flashlight and shined it around the small space. The beam fell on the row of filing cabinets so Sam made his way there.

The files were in alphabetical order, and Sam pulled out his list of names he'd retrieved earlier. As he skimmed through the files, it quickly became obvious he wasn't going to find the ones he needed there. His hazel eyes alighted on the last cabinet and he dropped to his knees for the bottom drawer. Pulling it open, a slow smile formed on Sam's face as he found what he was looking for.

Taking out the small bundle, Sam brought the files over to the desk and turned on the desk lamp so he could better read them. He laid out his list of names next to the folders and as he came across a file that matched a name, he checked it off.

Sam noticed a growing trend as he perused each manila folder. The boys all visited a therapist before they died or disappeared and all said the same thing: *they saw Brandon*.

"Why would Jacobs keep these files separate from the others?" Sam wondered.

Maybe it was so he wouldn't get them mixed with the others. After all, there were only four cabinets stuffed full of files. *I bet he's just trying to keep himself straight.*

"Still doesn't mean he can't be hiding something though..." Sam admitted.

Forgetting the files for now, Sam moved to the other side of the desk, checking each of the drawers in turn. He found the typical office supplies—plain copy paper, a stapler, paper clips, highlighters and pens, not to mention a couple of bags of chips and other various snacks.

Coming to the last drawer, Sam was a little surprised to find it was locked. Frowning, he tried to pull it open thinking maybe it was just stuck, but it still wouldn't budge. Pulling out his lock pick set again, Sam popped it open with no trouble.

At the very top, Sam spied a small leather-bound book with no markings on the front cover. Curious, the young man pulled it out and flipped through it. His heart nearly burst out of his chest as he realized what he was looking at.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered.

It was a ledger divided into three separate columns. The first column listed a date—from five years ago up until recently. In the second column was a name and in the third column was a monetary value, ranging anywhere from one thousand to ten thousand dollars. To the average eye, it would have looked perfectly normal—a ledger for funds coming into the center.

To Sam, it sent icy tendrils down his spine.

The very first name listed was “Rudd” and it didn’t take a genius to figure out that it was Brandon since the date beside the name was the same day Brandon disappeared. Sam didn’t even have to look at his list to see the names listed in the ledger would match what he’d found earlier.

The pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place and it painted a very scary picture to Sam.

Jacobs was getting paid out of the wazoo to kill certain boys here and it had been going on for years now.

Flipping to the last name in the ledger, Sam felt his blood boil as he spotted Wyatt’s name with last night’s date next to a hefty sum of \$10,000.

“That bastard’s been behind it all along,” Sam muttered in disgust. “And he’s been playing me every step of the way.”

Sam wanted to be wrong about this. He didn’t want Jacobs to be behind all the deaths. In fact, if anyone was the more likely suspect it would be Tyler. But the evidence here didn’t lie.

*Well, we’ll see who gets the last laugh now,* Sam thought as he tucked the ledger into the inside pocket of his jacket. All Sam had to do was drop off the ledger and the files to the police and pray they could actually connect the dots and put Jacobs away for good.

Grabbing his flashlight and the files, Sam was reaching to turn off the lamp when the temperature suddenly dropped in the small room. The hunter’s breath fogged in front of his face and Sam darted his gaze around, already knowing what he was looking for.

“Brandon?” Sam called softly.

The teen appeared in front of Sam, his face somber. “You shouldn’t be here, Sam.”

“What do you mean, Brandon?” Sam asked as he put down the files and slowly made his way around the desk.

Brandon stepped back towards the door as he glanced nervously behind him. “It’s too dangerous, Sam. You’re gonna get caught.”

Without another word, the boy disappeared from the office.

Sam rushed to the door and pulled it open. He stepped out into the hallway, glancing frantically down both ends, seeking the spirit.

“Brandon?”

The hallway remained eerily silent, making Sam uneasy. It was obvious he wasn’t going to find Brandon unless the boy wanted to be found. Giving up, Sam turned back towards the office to gather the files he’d left in his haste.

Sam failed to hear the footsteps behind him.

What he didn’t miss though was the sudden whoosh of air near his ear or the blinding pain in his head as something crashed against it.

Sam was unconscious before he fell to the floor in a boneless heap.

## **King Residence**

“Who the hell do you think you are, coming into my home and telling me my son is dead?” Stacey King demanded as she walked past Dean to open the front door.

Dean didn’t budge from his spot on the sofa. “Am I lying?”

"Who are you? And don't give me that crap about you being a detective," Stacey said angrily. "I bet if I call the Culpeper Police Department, they'll tell me you don't exist."

Dean stood up so he could face her. "I'm someone who wants to know the truth about what happened to Brandon. I want to give him the justice he deserves." Dean narrowed his eyes. "Isn't that what you want?"

Stacey stared at him for a few tense moments before opening the door. "Get out of my home," she said coldly.

Dean shook his head in disbelief. "You know, it really sickens me to know a mother can care so little about her child."

"You know nothing about me," Stacey said defiantly, eyes blazing.

"No? I do know you'd rather go on with your life and pretend Brandon was never a part of it. I also know you'd rather shoot down the only chance you may have to get some answers. It's amazing how a complete stranger cares more about your son than his own mother does."

Stacey stared up at the hunter in shock as Dean's words tore into her. It surprised Dean how little he cared about the hurt he was inflicting on the woman. Even as a couple of tears trailed down her cheeks, Dean found himself not being bothered by it.

He was hitting low, yes, but it needed to be done if he was going to get answers out of Stacey. She knew what happened to Brandon and Dean would be damned if he was going to leave empty-handed.

Dean was pretty sure he was about to get the Scum of the Earth Award for what he was about to say next.

"It would be a damn shame for social services to catch wind of this and take away your other children, wouldn't it?" Dean didn't know if that was true, but if it scared her enough to tell him what he wanted to know, then, by God, he was going to use it.

Dean had no time to duck out of the way before Stacey slapped him across the face.

"How dare you!" she said bitterly as tears continued to streak down her face.

Dean's face stung where she'd slapped it but he'd felt worse pain throughout his hunting excursions. "I think you should direct those words at yourself, Mrs. King. I'm not the one you should be angry with."

Turning away from the angry woman, Dean headed for the door. Sure, his visit could be chalked up as a complete failure since he didn't get the answers he'd hoped for, but at least he'd tried.

It looked like it was back to some good old-fashioned research for him and his trusty Geekboy.

"You don't understand," Stacey said so softly Dean almost didn't hear her.

Dean stopped in the doorway but didn't turn around. "What is it I don't understand, Mrs. King?"

"I was about to lose everything. Phillip threatened to leave me if I didn't do something about Brandon."

Dean turned around slowly to face her. "Brandon was going away for six months. Surely that would have done something for you."

Stacey shook her head. "After Jason left, I was devastated. I mean, who would honestly want to hook up with a single mother of a teenage son? But then I met Phillip and he made me happy when I didn't think it would ever happen again."

She sniffed and Dean remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

"At first, Brandon and Phillip really seemed to like each other. Phillip would take him to all of his baseball practices and they would do things together on the weekends. But I think Brandon got scared when he saw how serious Phillip and I were about a future together. I think he was scared that Phillip was going to replace his father so he began acting out, trying to push Phillip away." Stacey smiled sadly. "Phillip wouldn't budge."

Dean leaned against the doorframe, still saying nothing.

"Finally, after Brandon stole that car, Phillip couldn't take it anymore. He was tired of going out of his way to make Brandon happy and he said he wasn't going to do it any longer." She glanced up at Dean. "He told me something had to be done about Brandon or he was gone."

"What did you think your husband meant?" Dean finally asked, breaking his silence.

"I don't know. All I do know is that I panicked. I couldn't lose Phillip." Stacey took a deep breath. "After Brandon was sentenced to juvie, I still felt as if it wasn't enough, that something else needed to be done."

Dean clenched his jaw. "What did you do? Stacey?"

Stacey sobbed. "I did the one thing a mother should never do to her child."

"What?" Dean tried to make his voice sound gentle like Sam would under these circumstances, but he didn't achieve it as it came out sounding more like a bark.

"I had a friend at the center. I told him about my problem and he told me he would take care of it if I paid him well enough."

"What did you give him?"

Stacey licked her lips nervously as she peered at Dean through damp lashes. "Five thousand." She laughed bitterly. "I paid him five thousand dollars to end my son's life."

"Does your husband know what you did?"

Stacey shook her head. "No...Phillip really does think that Brandon just ran away."

"Who was it, Stacey? Who did you pay to murder your son?" Dean asked in an oddly quiet voice.

Stacey didn't say anything.

Dean pushed away from the doorframe and grabbed the woman by the shoulders, giving her a firm shake. "Tell me!"

Stacey looked up at him fearfully. "It was Thomas Jacobs. I paid Jacobs to get rid of my son."

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

*God, Dean...do you always have to have your radio playing on full blast?*

Sam's head pounded as John Bonham waged war with his drum set inside his skull. He didn't know what he did to piss off Dean or the legendary drummer, but he would do anything to make it up to them if it got the music turned down. Sam reached over to turn down the radio, knowing Dean would slap his hand away, but his arm refused to work.

*I must be sleeping on it or something, Sam thought groggily as he tried to move the limb again.*

Still it refused to budge.

*What the hell?*

Sam finally jerked awake as he felt cold steel biting into his flesh. The reason he couldn't move his arms was because they were secured behind him, maybe wrapped around a post or something.

*And again I ask—what the hell?*

No sooner was the question asked, than Sam remembered all too well in Technicolor clarity: He'd been snooping around in Jacobs' office when Brandon materialized with his warning before disappearing again. Sam had raced to the hallway to search for the boy but he was nowhere to be found. Just as he'd turned back to Jacobs' office, he'd been hit from behind.

*Great, now I have that figured out. It still doesn't explain where the hell I am, though.*

Glancing around, Sam would hazard a guess he was in a basement of some kind. Gray cinder blocks made up the walls and boxes were stacked floor to ceiling everywhere. A pile of cleaning supplies and various tools were lined up against the

far wall and not a single window was visible in the vast room. A bare light bulb above Sam's head was the only light source.

*Wait—was that a telltale drip of water? Seriously, could this get anymore Hollywood clichéd?*

*Yep, I'm definitely in the basement.*

"Okay, so let's see about getting out of here before Jacobs or whoever else decides to show up for this little shindig."

Sam pulled against the cuffs holding him in place but they were tight, giving him very little room to work with. He couldn't even dislocate his thumb to pop his way out of them. What I wouldn't give for one of Dean's trusty paperclips right about now.

*Oh, crap! Dean!*

Dean was going to be beside himself when he didn't hear from Sam. The young hunter wasn't too sure how long he'd been out, but it had to be at least a good thirty minutes or so. Had Dean tried to call?

As if in answer to that question, Sam's cellular began to vibrate in his jacket pocket.

"Oh, that's just friggin' great," Sam griped as he tried to maneuver himself to reach his phone. But as Winchester luck would have it, he couldn't reach it. Hell, he couldn't even push the talk button if he wanted to.

The phone finally quieted just as the door to the basement opened and heavy footsteps echoed on the staircase. Sam looked up as Jacobs and Tyler approached him, smiles on their faces.

*Well, at least I was right about Tyler being behind it as well. That's comforting to know.*

"Am I doing something to amuse the two of you?" Sam asked, tilting his head to look up at the two men.

"Tell me, Sam—do you and your brother always use humor when you realize you're screwed to hell?" Jacobs asked.

"Who said I was screwed?" Sam asked, smugly. "Wow, you've got me tied to a post. Can't handle me any other way? Oh, yeah...you're definitely some big, bad criminals." *And there's my inner Dean making his daily appearance.*

Jacobs nodded at Tyler and the big guard backhanded Sam. The young hunter stifled his grunt of pain and looked up at Tyler cockily.

"Is that the best you got?" he asked as he felt blood ooze from the corner of his mouth.

Jacobs leaned down until he was eye-level with Sam. "You should have left with your brother, Sammy."

Sam smirked. "Yeah? Why's that?"

Jacobs grinned, but it held no amusement. "Because now you're in some deep shit."

## **King Residence**

Dean slowly let go of Stacey King, staring at the woman in disbelief. Surely he'd heard her wrong. "Did you just say Thomas Jacobs?"

Stacey nodded her head shakily. "Y-yes."

"God dammit!" Dean put a hand to his head and pulled at his hair in frustration.

"Is something wrong?"

Dean whirled back to face the startled woman. "Are you sure? Stacey, you're sure it was Jacobs you paid to murder your son?" Dean's voice was just under a yell, but he had to know.

He needed to know for Sam's sake.

"Yes, I'm sure."

Dean grabbed her arm and tightened his grip when she tried to pull away. “I want you to listen to me, okay?”

Stacey nodded with wide eyes.

“You need to get to the police and tell them what you just told me,” Dean said.

“But I—”

“Look, just forget about what will happen to you if you go to the police. When things start to go down, I can guarantee Jacobs is going to do everything in his power to bring you down with him. If you get your story out first, the police may be a little more lenient with you.”

“I’m—”

“I’m not gonna stay here and argue with you. Just do what I said.” Dean let go of her and headed towards the door.

“Wait, where are you going?”

Dean didn’t stop long enough to look back at her. “I’ve got something to take care of.”

Practically sprinting to the Impala, Dean jumped in and tore out of the neighborhood with a squeal of tires. He felt as if the rug had been pulled from under his feet.

Jacobs had killed Brandon.

Jacobs had killed them all.

It kind of came as a shock to Dean because Jacobs didn’t seem the type. Then again, it came back to the hunter’s personal motto: *“Demons I get—people are just crazy.”* It just went to show you never knew the true nature of a person. Even your best friend could turn out to be a stone cold killer.

*But Jacobs?*

Tyler, yes—it was just obvious. The guard didn’t give a crap about those kids at the center and Dean was pretty sure if Tyler had his way, he’d blow the place sky high with everyone in it.

What really scared Dean though, was that he’d left Sam there with them even after everything inside of him was screaming not to do it. *Damn Sammy and his stubborn ass... why couldn’t he just listen to me?*

Yanking out his cell phone, Dean hit the speed dial for Sam. He hoped he was overreacting. He hoped Sam was tucked away in his office or better yet, up to his eyeballs in research back at the motel. Dean really wanted to be wrong.

*“Hey, this is Sam—”*

Dean hung up the phone in frustration, his heart almost beating out of his chest. There was only one reason Sam wasn’t answering his phone.

“Damn, damn, damn!” Dean hit the steering wheel as he put on even more speed.

*Hold on, Sammy. I’m on my way.*

## **Culpeper Juvenile Detention Center**

“You know, Sam, I really did like you,” Jacobs said as he made a slow circle around the hunter.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Aren’t I the lucky one?”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that.” Jacobs stopped in front of Sam and looked down at him. “I think your luck just ran out.”

“Guess I won’t be getting that recommendation you promised me,” Sam muttered. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I was never one to have luck on my side. But I wouldn’t keep counting on yours, either.”

Jacobs smirked. “Yeah? And why’s that?”

“Because that ledger in your office ties you to everything. All the police have to do is get their hands on it and you’ll go down.”

Jacobs actually laughed at that as he walked away from Sam and picked up something. When he turned around, Sam saw it was the ledger. “You mean this

ledger right here?" He flipped through it nonchalantly. "No one's ever going to see this. It will stay safely hidden away and no one will ever be the wiser."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

The director stared hard at him. "Because the only other person who has knowledge of it will soon no longer be a problem."

Sam swallowed nervously as Jacobs' words sank in. He knew what that was code for—he'd seen enough mob movies in his day. He'd soon be dead.

*You can't let him win, Sam. You're a Winchester for God's sake—you don't know the meaning of "giving up." You keep him talking and you stay alive. Dean has to know something's up by now. He has to be on his way, riding to the rescue as usual. You just keep Jacobs talking and give Dean the chance to get here.*

"There has to be at least thirty names in your book," Sam said.

Jacobs shrugged. "Give or take a few."

"How can you live with yourself?" Sam asked in disgust.

"It's not as hard as you may think," Jacobs admitted. "Especially when I have more than enough money keeping my pockets warm."

"You're supposed to be watching out for those kids! You're supposed to help them have a second chance!" Sam shouted, pulling against his cuffs as anger coursed through him.

"Oh, don't go getting sappy on me," Jacobs said with an over-exaggerated roll of his eyes. "You and I both know that most of these kids will never amount to anything. And the others will just be reintroduced into a world full of disappointment."

"So, you're helping them? Is that it?"

"Exactly."

Sam literally felt sick to his stomach at how callous Jacobs really was. He was talking as if this was another day at the office, which Sam figured it was. Still, it didn't give him the right to play God with a kid's life.

"How did you find out I was on to you?" Sam inquired.

"Did you know every time you logged onto your computer it showed me exactly what you were accessing? As soon as I realized what you were doing, I blocked everything. But then I got the most fascinating phone call this afternoon. Doctor Susan Reece called and told me how wonderful it was the Brandon Rudd case was being reopened. Imagine my surprise at that because I was sure the police declared him a runaway five years ago."

Sam narrowed his eyes. "You and I both know that's not true."

Jacobs went on as if he didn't hear Sam. "When I asked who it was she spoke with, she told me it was a very nice man by the name of Sam Craven." Jacobs arched a brow. "Now, I may not be the most intelligent man around, but it wasn't hard to figure out it was you. That wasn't very smart of you, Sam."

"I guess we're both doing some pretty stupid things lately," Sam remarked.

Jacobs smiled. "But my stupidity pays me very well."

"Did you put the knife in Dean's locker?"

"Actually, no." Jacobs nodded towards Tyler, who'd been leaning against the staircase, watching, the entire time. "That was my colleague."

"We were trying to get you to leave," Tyler admitted. "Too bad Dean was the only one to take the hint."

"Dean's gonna come looking for me when he doesn't hear from me," Sam said.

"I imagine that he will and I imagine that Stu would love to be the one who stops him," Jacobs said.

Tyler smiled, but there was no amusement behind it. "You got that right."

Sam shook his head. "What's two more deaths on your hands, right? You were able to put down Brandon and Wyatt and countless others so uncaringly."

Jacobs shrugged. "Their parents were willing to shell out the money so it was my obligation to provide my services. But don't look so sad, Sammy. You're about to join them all and I'm doing this one free of charge."

*Okay, now he's obviously ready to skip right to the big death scene. Sorry, buddy...I've still got to get some answers from you.* "What about the guard that was murdered?"

"What about him?" Jacobs asked, clearly bored.

"It broke pattern. Up until then, you only went after the kids. Why him?"

The director exchanged a look with the guard. "He threatened to turn Stu and me in and we couldn't let him do that. We stopped him."

*Just another one to add to the tally,* Sam thought bitterly. "Where did you bury Brandon?"

"In the back of the center. Don't worry—we've got two nice plots for you and your brother, too. Brandon's going to have company very soon." Jacobs nodded towards Tyler.

Sam tensed as Tyler pulled out a knife and approached him. The hunter shot a quick look at Jacobs before focusing his attention on Tyler again. "What, you can't handle me yourself?" he asked the director.

"Why should I have all of the fun?" Jacobs asked. "Besides, Stu likes to get a little blood on his hands every now and then."

Sam tried to move away from the guard, but it was impossible since he was restrained to the post. He gritted his teeth as Tyler wrenched his head back and put the knife to his throat.

*I'm sorry, Dean. I tried to keep them going as long as I could. We deal with demons and monsters every day and I let some psycho in a sweater vest and his psychotic minion kill me...*

Sam swallowed hard, a thin trickle of blood running down his neck as the blade pierced his tender skin. Just as Tyler was about to make the fatal cut, the temperature in the room dropped considerably.

"What the hell?" Tyler asked, lifting the knife so it was now hovering just above Sam's neck.

Jacobs waved dismissively. "It's the A/C unit. I keep telling maintenance it's acting up, but they still haven't done anything about it. Now, kill him before his brother gets here."

Tyler hesitated and it gave Sam a surge of hope.

"Do it, Stu, or I will!" Jacobs yelled.

Tyler didn't get the chance as Brandon suddenly appeared, anger coming off the spirit in waves. Tyler abruptly let go of Sam and fell back on his ass as he tried to scurry away. Sam watched in morbid fascination as the teen grabbed Jacobs and Tyler in turn and easily tossed them across the room, where they crashed noisily into the stacks of boxes.

Brandon didn't give the two men time to recover before he tossed them around again, clearly enjoying the hurt he was causing them. Tyler fell to the ground in a heap, unmoving, as Jacobs held up a shaky hand to ward off the boy.

"You-you're supposed to be d-dead," he stammered fearfully.

Brandon said nothing as a cruel smile played on his lips. Picking up the knife Tyler had dropped earlier, he approached Jacobs with it.

"N-no...p-please," Jacobs begged.

"Brandon, don't do it!" Sam yelled desperately.

Just then, the door to the basement burst open, startling everyone. "Sammy!"

Sam was relieved to hear his brother's voice, but he kept his focus on the spirit. "Brandon, you can't kill them!"

Dean ran down the stairs and stepped in front of Sam, his shotgun pointed at Brandon.

"No, Dean! Don't!" Sam yelled, trying to see past his angry sibling.

"We can't let him kill them, Sammy, even though the bastards deserve it," Dean said, his gun never wavering.

"Just let me talk to him, Dean. Please."

Dean looked down at Sam, seeing the pleading look in the younger man's eyes. "Dammit, Sammy—we don't have time for your *Ghost Whisperer* act," he muttered as he reluctantly took a couple of steps back and lowered the gun.

Brandon looked back at Sam. "Your brother's right, Sam. They deserve to die."

Sam nodded. "They do, but if you do this, you'll be no better than they are. This won't help you, Brandon. I know you don't want to kill anyone. You've been trying to warn everyone, but they wouldn't listen to you."

"They were going to kill you and your brother tonight, Sam," the boy argued.

"I know, but you stopped them. You did good, Brandon. You saved me before they could do it."

"But I didn't save the others," the spirit said sadly.

Sam looked at him sympathetically. "But now you're saving countless others, Brandon. Dean and I will make sure these two pay for what they did."

Brandon eyed Jacobs and Tyler, his hand tightening on the knife before looking at Sam again. "You promise?"

"We promise, Brandon," Dean said sincerely.

Sam nodded. "You have our word."

Brandon was silent for a few moments before finally nodding his head. "Okay. But there's something I need for you to do for me."

"Name it," Sam said.

"I want you to help me move on. I want to finally rest and I want everyone to know what's been happening here."

"You've got a deal," Sam said affirmatively.

Dean nodded his agreement. "Now, what do you say we get these clowns bundled up for the cops?"

Sam shuddered. "You had to say clowns?"

Dean only smiled as he approached the downed men. Looking at Jacobs, he shook his head in disgust. "You are one sick bastard and you deserve to rot in Hell."

Not giving Jacobs the chance for rebuttal, Dean punched him, knocking the director out cold. At around that time, Tyler began to stir.

"Oh, no you don't. It's not wakey time yet." Dean reared back and clocked the guard with more force than was probably necessary.

"Hey, Dean? When you're done chatting them up, do you think you can come over and let me out of these things?" Sam asked, lifting up his arms as best as he could.

Dean grabbed the keys from Tyler's belt. "Do you always have to be so damn impatient? I mean, it's not enough that I always have to come in and save the day. You want to rush me, too." He stepped behind Sam and released his brother. Dean then grabbed Sam's arm and pulled him to his feet. "Are you okay?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I just got a headache from where they clocked me." He tilted his head towards the two unconscious men. "What are you going to do with them?"

Dean smirked. "I'm gonna bundle them up nice and tidy for the cops and pray they can do their job for once."

Sam grinned as Dean set off about his task. Turning to Brandon, the young hunter became somber. "Thank you for saving me, Brandon."

Brandon smiled sadly. "I'm just glad someone finally listened to me."

Sam glanced over his shoulder as Dean finished up and joined them, then looked at the boy again. "Let's go put you to rest, Brandon."

## **The next morning Colonial Motel**

Putting a quarter into the machine, Dean pulled down the door and grabbed a newspaper out of the bin as he let out a huge sigh. He was exhausted from the previous night, only running on a couple of hours of sleep and coffee.

Lots and lots of coffee.

Sleep hadn't come easily for him as his thoughts kept drifting back to the detention center. It amazed him how all of this shady business could have been going on for the past five years and no one ever said anything. No conscience-laden parents, a concerned employee or a scared kid. No one. How was that even possible? How could thirty or so deaths go unnoticed? Was everyone really that jaded?

After making sure Jacobs and Tyler stayed put where they left them, Dean and Sam had followed Brandon and unearthed his carelessly discarded bones. An unnamed plot for a boy who had so much to offer the world.

Once they'd finished releasing Brandon's spirit, Sam had written out a very detailed report of everything and they had left it, along with the ledger, on Jacobs' desk where the police could find it with help from an anonymous tip.

After that, they'd high-tailed it back to the motel before they could be spotted.

Dean, for one, was glad it was all over. He was ready to put Culpeper in his rearview mirror, once and for all. He didn't want to think about what could have happened if he'd gotten to Sam only a couple of minutes later. He'd seen the blood on Sam's neck, though his brother tried to play it off as nothing.

Pushing open the door to their room, Dean saw Sam was packing up his bag.

"Hey, where did you go?" Sam asked, glancing up.

Dean threw the newspaper onto Sam's bag. "Grabbed a paper. Wanted to see if they got our story."

Sam smiled as he read the big, bold headline. "Director taken down—mysterious deaths and disappearances finally solved." Sam quickly scanned the rest of the article. "It says Brandon's mom had already given her statement and they were about to act when the tip came in. At least now, Brandon and the others will get the justice they deserve."

"Yeah, good for them," Dean said unenthusiastically as he picked up a T-shirt from the floor.

Sam frowned. "Are you okay? I thought you'd be happy about this."

Dean sighed as he sat down heavily on his bed. "Don't get me wrong, man—I'm very happy we brought those bastards down."

"Then what is it?" Sam asked, sitting across from Dean.

Dean looked up at Sam. "These parents—I mean, how could they sacrifice their children like that? How could they not give a damn?"

"Dean, we can't sit here and try to figure them out. If we did that, we'd only drive ourselves insane. There's evil in this world that even you and I will never understand."

"Do you wanna know what scares me the most?"

"What?"

Dean looked away from Sam. "I could have easily been one of those kids in there. Lord knows, I pulled a lot of crap when I was growing up."

Sam shook his head. "Dad never would have allowed that to happen. You know that."

"Yeah..."

"And even if he did, Dad would never give up on you like that. I mean, yeah, he had some weird ways of showing it, but Dad loved us in his own way and he did everything he could think of to keep us safe."

Dean frowned. "This is weird."

"What is?" Sam asked, clearly confused.

"You sticking up for Dad like that."

Sam shrugged. "We may have always butted heads, but I still knew what he was doing."

Dean smiled slightly. "I still can't help but wonder, dude."

"Dean, you always had one thing that kept you grounded if you got into trouble," Sam said softly.

Dean looked up at him expectantly.

"Me. You'd never stray too far off the path because you knew you had me back at home. You were so damn intent on protecting me from everything and the last thing you were going to do was turn into something you wanted to keep me safe from."

Dean groaned. "Could this possibly get any sappier?"

Sam ignored him. "I was grateful for that, Dean." He stood up and shrugged. "I still am."

Yep, Sam could get sappier but it didn't stop the lump from rising in Dean's throat. He quickly pushed it down before Sam could see it.

He knew his brother was right. Dad would never give up on him like that and Dean would never allow it, either. Not when he had Sam.

Still, as he watched Sam zip up his duffel and carry it out of the room, Dean still couldn't help but wonder.

The End