

Season Three
Episode Seventeen: Work of Art
By Tree

University of Washington

Kelli Mattingly sat down on the edge of her bed with a loud sigh. She glanced around her dorm room as she tried to decide what to do with her free night. Under normal circumstances, the plain-looking brunette would have been content to bury her face in one of her textbooks. But tonight was different. Tonight, Kelly had finished all the required work, had studied for upcoming finals, and had even managed to finish doing some research for Mr. Brannock at the firm.

Besides, it was Friday night. Didn't that mean it was time to kick back, hang out with her friends, have a few beers, and generally cut loose?

Kelli laughed at the thought. For her, Friday night was just another night in the week. She could count her friends on one hand, had no clue what it meant to "hang out" unless it involved a study group, and as for drinking ... the one and only beer she'd ever had in her life had left her puking into a toilet for nearly an hour.

Still, despite the fact that her version of college life wasn't exactly *Animal House*, didn't mean she wasn't happy or enjoying her life at school. Considering where she'd come from, how she'd grown up, her time at UW had been wonderful.

And next year, I'll be a senior... she thought to herself, a smile spreading across her face as she remembered the letter reporting her LSAT score. At one seventy two, her academic advisor had all but guaranteed that she would have her pick of law schools.

Next year would be a breeze; finish some last undergraduate courses and sit back and decide where she wanted to go. Mr. Brannock had assured her that he would put in a good word for her at Columbia if she wanted, not to mention that she'd already spoken with a representative from UC Berkeley that was likewise encouraging. Yet, while it was tempting to think about escaping to New York or California, Seattle was her home. She knew she could stay at UW and be certain of a place at the law school here.

It made her happy to think about how well things were turning out for her. So what if she didn't have a life? She studied hard, worked harder and it was all paying off. So what if she didn't have a boyfriend or partied with the cool kids? She knew that someday when she was sitting on the Supreme Court bench, she'd have no skeletons in her closet to worry about.

Kelli looked at her watch. It was nearly eight. She could still go to a movie, maybe even see if Dana, her roommate, wanted to go out for some pizza and a Coke. Maybe they could even cruise by the Husky's Den and listen to the live band that played there on the weekends.

She brushed that thought from her mind, knowing all too well that she didn't fit in with the Husky's Den crowd. While it was "the spot" for all the kids on campus, Kelli knew that she'd stick out like a sore thumb.

She wasn't pretty enough, not fun enough, didn't drink enough, and most certainly was too smart for the crowd that made the Den the most popular bar near campus. She was as effectively ostracized from the place as she had been as an entering freshman. Worse in fact, since even freshmen could eventually climb the social ladder to acceptance.

But brainiacs like her... well they were never really accepted among all the jocks, homecoming queens and rich kids. The only time any of those people even noticed her was if they were looking for a tutor to get them through some remedial class.

Disheartened, Kelli moved over toward the closet and was about to kick off her shoes and settle in with a good book when an itch in the center of her back made her pause. Lifting her shirt slightly, she started to scratch at her lower back just at the line

of her waist. But even as her fingernails made contact with her skin, she jerked them away.

"Dammit," she groaned. "Gotta remember not to scratch."

She twisted around, lifting her shirt up further as she stared at the reflection of her skin in the mirror. Smiling again, she looked on with satisfaction and pride at the colorful butterfly tattoo that graced the small of her back.

She loved the tattoo, her one act of defiance, the one "in thing" that she'd ever done. The butterfly was truly beautiful, with vibrant reds, blues and yellows glowing out from her skin as though the insect was ready and able to take flight straight off her flesh. To say that the tattoo looked real was an understatement. In her opinion, it was hard to tell the difference between the ink and a real butterfly resting gently against her back.

"Worth every dime," she admitted, even though the two hundred dollars had been a brutal sting to her checking account.

Still, to her it was more than just an impulsive act. The butterfly symbolized her own "rebirth," the change that had occurred, taking her from her ugly childhood to this moment where she was finally living something more wonderful and free. To her, it was her family crest, and she wore it like a badge of honor just as she did the scar that ran from the side of her left eye and faded into her hairline.

People always said how painful it was to get a tattoo, but to Kelli, it was the finest pain she'd ever endured; and she certainly was no stranger to pain.

Moving away from the mirror, she walked into the shared bathroom and grabbed Dana's lotion from the edge of the sink. Squirting some into her hand, she was just about to slather it over the healing part of the tattoo when a wave of vertigo stopped her dead in her tracks.

She reached out for the edge of the sink, steadying herself until the dizziness passed.

"Should have had more for dinner than an apple I guess," she chastised herself.

Determined now to go out and at least grab a burger or some other fast food, Kelli moved back to the closet to retrieve her jacket. Her hand was on the handle when another surge of lightheadedness caused her to tilt into the door.

She gasped, one hand reaching out to grab anything to prevent her fall, while her other hand flew to her stomach. Suddenly feeling ill, she sucked in a deep breath and slowly stumbled over to her bed.

Must be a virus or something... she thought as she collapsed limply onto the mattress a sudden sweat washing over her body.

Her eyelids began to flutter as she fought to keep them open, her limbs also becoming heavy as though she was suffocating under a heavy blanket. She strained to reach for the cell phone on the nightstand to her right, panic filling her as she pushed back against the cloying fog that threatened to pull her down.

"Gotta... call... Dana," she commanded herself. But her body refused.

Yet even as her vision faded and her senses began to fail her, Kelli heard a voice. Soft at first, it whispered in her ear like a sensuous lover.

Don't be alone...

Kelli stirred to the noise, coming slightly more alert as she focused on the voice. At first she ignored it, convincing herself that it was nothing more than delirium brought on by whatever virus had chosen to invade her body. But as she lay there, the voice became louder, clearer, more insistent.

They hate you... they'll never accept you...

She shook her head, weakly reaching up to run a trembling hand across her forehead. It silenced the voice for a moment but as quickly as her hand moved away, the whisper returned.

You're nothing to them... invisible... less than worthless...

Kelli groaned. She rolled to her side, facing the nightstand, even more desperate to reach the cellular and call for help. Her body was shaking, as though her muscles were fighting against any movement even as she stretched toward the table.

Her fingers brushed the shining plastic, desperately seeking to close around the phone when a tearing sensation made Kelli cry out in pain. She recoiled, her hand flying to her back even as her breathing was reduced to a shallow panting. The skin over her spine was on fire, the agony of it feeling as though someone was flaying the flesh from her body.

The tattoo!

She probed carefully, half expecting her fingertips to come back bloody. Yet as she forced herself to look at her hands, they were clean and free of any red stain.

Why do you put up with them? You're smarter... you're better than they'll ever be...

The pain abruptly stopped as the voice resumed. Dazed, her harsh respirations easing slightly, Kelli opened her eyes to follow the sound. At the foot of the bed, a butterfly fluttered lazily, its beautiful wings flashing vibrant reds and yellows as it hovered before her.

It was *her* butterfly!

Larger than the one that had been immortalized on her flesh, it was still an exact copy.

It's just like with him... they think you're worthless... something to be used and thrown away... garbage...

Kelli stared at the insect as it flitted closer, stopping just before her face. It spoke again, the tone and pitch of its voice hauntingly similar to her own. The young co-ed swatted at the butterfly, some portion of her mind telling her that it wasn't real... it couldn't be real.

"Drugged... Oh my God, someone's slipped me something," she groaned.

But how or even why? She had no enemies and as the voice had said, she was essentially invisible to everyone but a select few close friends and professors.

"I'm losing my mind," Kelli then surmised.

They're out there now... laughing at you...

"No, hold it together, Kelli," she encouraged herself.

Laughing... can't you hear them laughing at you?

Yet as the voice continued, the young woman slowly succumbed to the powerful suggestion. Her eyes began to glaze over as she numbly watched the butterfly's feather-light dance.

You know what you must do...

She nodded, her face now blank and devoid of emotion. Mesmerized, Kelli sat up on the bed, swinging her feet over the side and planting them firmly on the floor.

Make them pay...

"Yes..." she murmured.

Purposefully, Kelli strode across the small dorm room, snagging the keys to her Jeep Wrangler from the desk near the door. Heading out, she walked the deserted hallway, taking the staircase down to the first floor and the main exit.

Passing through the lobby, Kelli walked as though she were a mindless zombie, ignoring the calls from her friend Dana who was seated at a table studying with other students. Even when her roommate darted over, reaching out to grab at her arm, Kelli pulled roughly away and continued out the double door and into the damp night air.

She reached the waiting Jeep, firing the engine and pushing the stick shift up into drive. On auto-pilot, Kelli pulled out onto Montlake Boulevard, heading away from the dorms and toward the edge of the campus and the nearby area referred to as The Village.

Zooming through traffic, she was doing well over seventy miles per hour by the time her Jeep reached the intersection at N.E. 45th Street. Blowing through a red light, the

front of her car glanced off an approaching Chevy Caliber, the heavier Wrangler smashing the smaller vehicle and knocking it backward out of the intersection.

Kelli corrected for the impact, steering the Jeep back into the proper lane, ignoring the screams of metal from the collision or the angry honks of other motorists who swerved to avoid the oblivious young student.

“Close now...” she whispered as the giant marquee for University Village Shopping Center loomed in the distance.

The hub of off-campus activity, the center was booming with students shopping, dining or hanging out at one of the several bars. Tonight being Friday, the place was even more packed as Husky undergraduates sought to celebrate the end to another week of classes.

Music spilled out from the clubs; live bands tuning as they prepared for their first sets, karaoke blaring out as wannabe singers tried their hand at Top Forty songs. But if Kelli heard anything, it didn't show as her foot pressed even harder against the gas pedal.

Make them pay... they'll never forget your name again... MAKE THEM PAY!

Focused, she drove the car through the parking lot like a spike being slammed through a rail. Shopping carts were tossed aside as though they were made of tinfoil, customers diving out of the way as the Wrangler careened through the lot, metal screeching in defiance as fenders and bumpers were crumpled and glass shattered.

Mere yards in front of the speeding Jeep, the Husky's Den was filled with dozens of fun-seeking UW students all looking to put the academic rigors behind them for the weekend. Absorbed in their social life, the young men and women never saw the vehicle as it careened toward them. But as the glass and drywall blew inward, the screams of panic, fear and pain drowned out all other sounds of revelry.

It was over in just a few seconds as the Jeep came to a brutal stop up against an interior column, mere inches from the stage. As the engine finally died, smoke billowing up from the damaged front end, only the hiss of the fractured radiator could be heard within the settling dust and debris.

As the weak whimpers and groans of the injured began to rise, the cries of disbelief from those who were still able to move about began to echo among the rubble; Kelli lifted her head from where it had impacted the hard form of the steering wheel. Blood trailed down the bridge of her nose joining the flow that was pouring from the corner of her mouth.

Looking through the broken glass of the windshield the brunette took in the death and destruction she'd just caused. Her ears were assaulted with pleas for help but the determined voice from earlier was now gone.

Her brown eyes glazed over as her heart began to fade. But before her brain was deprived of life-sustaining oxygen, Kelli managed to focus on one last object.

Fluttering, its wings beating back and forth slowly as it came to rest on the crumpled dash, the butterfly – her butterfly – sat before her as though it was standing guard over Kelli's dying form. She reached toward it weakly, even as her heart beat out its last contraction, but her fingers never made contact.

Kelli Mattingly died, her eyes closing one final time as the red and yellow wings before her simultaneously faded away.

Tuscarora, Nevada

Dean groaned loudly, on purpose, and tossed the April issue of Penthouse down on the bed beside him. To say that he was bored was an understatement. He was well beyond the Webster definition of boredom and had crossed over into the realm of restless desperation.

They'd only been in the northern Nevada town for two days, but it had been long enough to find out that the report of a black dog had been "slightly exaggerated." Not that Dean was totally disappointed in the lack of a substantial hunt, but if he had his choice of where to be stuck, surely Tuscarora wouldn't have topped his list.

The town was a case-study in tedium; one store, one motel, one restaurant, one gas station, one bar. In Dean's opinion, Tuscarora was a place whose only purpose since the end of the silver rush appeared to be the production of pottery and to be the butt of "my town is sooooo small" jokes. No wonder no self-respecting black dog would have gotten caught here, it simply didn't warrant the attention or effort.

Wiping the back of his hand across his parched mouth, Dean glanced at his brother and then looked at his watch.

Sam sat across from him, his long legs propped up on the small motel room table as his lanky frame twisted at an odd angle. The laptop, and source of his brother's strange physical position, rested on Sam's legs, teetering precariously as the younger Winchester fought to maintain the signal on his broadband card.

That his brother was even trying to surf the web annoyed Dean. Technology was great and while it had its uses, sometimes there was nothing better than the direct approach. Certainly Dad had never relied on computers to find his next hunt. The Winchester patriarch always managed to zero in on whatever supernatural phenomenon required his attention simply by "old-fashioned" methods like newspapers, television and his myriads of contacts.

"Come on, Sammy. Let's just pack it up and head out. We'll come across something but this is a massive waste of our time here," Dean pleaded.

"And where do you suggest we go?" Sam asked, looking up from the laptop in annoyance. "Not like we should be wasting gas just aimlessly cruising around the countryside. Or maybe you haven't noticed that it's over four dollars a gallon and the Impala chugs it like a man caught out in the desert?"

Dean groaned, his eyes rolling in exasperation. "Dude, have you taken a good look around this town? There's nothing here and I'm not just talking about the supernatural. The closest thing to a black dog we've seen is the clerk's Chihuahua and unless that damn thing suddenly grows horns and an extra head, I think the town is pretty safe. Hell, there's only two cops in the whole place, I think that about sums up the threat matrix for Tuscarora."

"Look Dean, if you want to go out to the bar or something, don't let me stop you,"

"Yeah, right," the elder brother answered grumpily. "Even if I could stand the endless cry-in-your-beer, my woman left me for another man, county music, there's no one there that I can hustle in pool. I'm tellin' ya Sammy, if we don't get out of here soon, not only will I not be able to restock our cash reserves, but *I'm* gonna turn into one helluva restless spirit."

"That's not even funny, Dean," Sam chastised him, the memory of seeing his brother lying deathly still underneath the bloody remains of Luke Fraser was an all-too-fresh memory.

"Seriously, Sam, Let's just hit the road. We can head down towards Vegas or something. I can win us some more cash and you'll at least have a better internet connection," Dean tempted.

Dean's eyebrows knitted as Sam's sudden outburst of laughter boomed across the small room.

"Need I remind you what happened the last time we were in Vegas, Dean? I mean, dude, some ghost nearly made you his bitch," Sam teased

"Laugh it up, Samantha. At least I never got a supernatural swirly. Besides, it wasn't all that bad. The bottomless glass of tequila was pretty awesome, dude."

He watched Sam's head shake and then drop back down to stare at the computer screen. Dean shook his own head and settled back against the headboard. He briefly considered suffering through the *atmosphere* at the nearby Jimmy's Place, but

decided that he wasn't desperate enough, bored enough or dry enough to want a beer at that bar ever again.

Quickly flipping through the meager offerings of the four channels that actually came through the television, Dean snapped the set back off and flung the remote across the room, sending it into the wall with a soft crack of plastic against drywall. Staring at Sam, it annoyed him even more that his brother didn't even look up at the disturbance.

"That's it..." Dean huffed, rising up and crossing the space between the bed and his brother in two wide strides. "Gimme the laptop, Sammy."

His brother recoiled, pulling the computer away even as Dean approached.

"Back off, Dean," Sam yelled.

In an instant, they were wrestling, hands scrabbling to take possession of the laptop while arms and elbows flew about wildly. It wasn't a true fight, more the type of childish scraps the brothers had engaged in when they were younger.

Still, even though it was classic juvenile behavior, neither was about to submit.

"Get off, Dean..." Sam grunted, hugging the computer protectively against his chest even as he threw his left arm back toward his brother's head.

"Come on, I just want to pull up the shortest route to Vegas or even Reno, dude. Anywhere where the women are hot and the beer is cold will do. Don't be such a selfish jackass," Dean snapped back, his own hands clawing at his brother's arm.

They struggled on the threadbare carpeting, Sam's longer body an equal match to Dean's compact muscular form as they fought over the laptop. Legs kicked and fists flew, none of them causing any real damage during their immature game of "keep-away."

"It's mine..." Sam whined.

"My God, can you sound any more like a four-year-old? Give it to me," Dean threw back as he tugged on Sam's arm.

"Look who's talking..."

In the end, it was Sam that halted the almost comical tussle as he inadvertently reared back, his elbow catching Dean solidly in the eye. The older sibling cried out, slumping backwards into the wall, his hand flying up to his injured face.

"Dean?" Sam called out, spinning around to check on his brother, concern flashing across his face.

"...I'm fine, Sam," Dean snapped, the heel of his hand pressed hard against his left eye.

He knew his baby brother wouldn't take that as a final answer, but as he fought to reopen the burning and tearing eye, he knew he'd never escape Sam's guilt-driven concern.

"Let me look, you big baby," Sam teased as he tugged at Dean's interfering hand.

Having it pried away, Dean could tell from the look on his brother's face that the result of Sam's inadvertent elbow must not have been good.

"Damn, dude. I got you really good," Sam chuckled. "It's already turning colors."

The comment spurred Dean to his feet. Ignoring the blurred vision in his injured orb, he quickly darted off to the bathroom. Once inside, he stared at his reflection, grimacing as the area just above his cheekbone blossomed with reds and blues.

"Sonofabitch, Sam," he exclaimed, tentatively touching the discolored skin with the tips of his fingers.

"Sorry dude, but you started it. I just ended it. Guess you won't have to worry about attracting any hot *women* now," Sam mocked from the other room. "Maybe we ought to stay here where you'll have a better chance with the less-discerning locals?"

"Funny, Sam. Real friggin' funny. Let's see how much you're laughing when you wake up with a Mohawk tomorrow morning," Dean threatened. "We'll see if the ladies still fall for you when that shaggy mop of yours is history."

"Don't start, Dean," Sam warned. "Remember who won last time?"

"Oh I remember, Samantha. I remember that I seriously owe you for the damage you caused to my shooting hand. Now this? Dude, you better start sleeping with one eye open and check your shampoo."

Silence consumed the small motel room as Dean gently probed at his injury. He muttered several epithets directed at his brother stopping only when he noticed that Sam had not responded to his last comment.

Peeking out around the bathroom's doorjamb, he saw that his brother had once again assumed his contorted position and was busily working the built-in mousepad on the laptop. Completely engrossed, Dean well knew the look on Sam's face.

"Found something?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think I have. Listen to this," Sam started. "A University of Washington student walks out of her dorm room last Friday night, gets in her Jeep and drives it down to the local campus hangout where she plows the thing into the building, killing herself and a half dozen others."

"Yeah? So what? Not like that doesn't happen all the time. She was probably gunning for some two-timing boyfriend or something," Dean answered shrugging.

"No, it doesn't sound like it was a cheating boyfriend," Sam offered.

"Ewww, cheating girlfriend?" Dean asked, wrinkling his nose and wincing as the motion pulled against the swelling skin on his cheekbone.

"Dean... this is more likely possession than Penthouse Forum," Sam chastised him.

"Possession? Why do you think that?"

"Bystanders that tried to rescue her said she was muttering something about hearing voices right before she died."

"And again I say, so what? She's dead, end of possession, end of story," Dean replied dismissing his brother's "find" with a wave of his hand.

"Yeah, I might agree except this is the third report of a student going nuts on the campus in the past month. Two weeks ago, a tight-end from the football team walked into a liquor store, robbed it at gunpoint, shot the clerk and then just went back to the frat house. When they caught him a few hours later, he was still sitting there, covered in the clerk's blood, but claiming he couldn't remember a thing about it."

"Steroids, dude. You juice up and it cooks the brain. All those anger management issues come boiling to the surface and before you know it, you're making a beer run with a 9mm," the older man joked.

Sam threw him a look of annoyance. "Okay then, how about this? Laurel Burlinson, a twenty-three year old elementary ed major is student teaching at a local school when the kids come screaming out of the classroom, yelling that their teacher has gone crazy. They go in and find that Laurel has some of the students locked in a closet, others tied to their chairs and she's standing on top of her desk throwing books, pencils, crayons, whatever, at anyone that comes close. Oh and she's screaming that the 'monsters' are trying to kill her."

"Monsters? Oh you're right, Sam. She was definitely possessed. I mean how could anyone possibly think of a room full of snot-nosed brats as monsters?" Dean mocked. "Come on, Jeep Girl might have just lost control of the car, Frat Boy might have just been on the ragged-edge and Teacher Wannabe, hell maybe she finally realized she picked the wrong major?"

"Do you really believe any of that crap, Dean?" Sam challenged, not swayed by his brother's casual dismissal of the evidence.

Dean remained silent for a minute, staring at Sam through one open and one slightly squinted eye. He knew his brother had enough hunter's instincts to feel out when something supernatural was going down. He just hated to admit that Sam was finally on to something. Still, anywhere was better than here in Nowhere, Nevada.

"Come on, Dean. Seattle isn't that far away and they say it's beautiful this time of year," Sam tempted as though he was reading his sibling's mind.

“Seattle, huh? Capital of rain, grunge music and suicides? Sounds lovely,” Dean groused.

“Seattle, home of Starbucks, Dean...”

“That foofoo crap? Dude, that’s *your* girly coffee. Give me strong and black any day over that latte and venti nonsense. I mean really, what demon spawned from hell comes up with coffee you have to order in a foreign language?” he mused as he moved over to the side of his bed and grabbed his duffel to begin packing.

He didn’t look back to see Sam’s face, knowing full well his baby brother would be sitting there with a smug smile of satisfaction at having won this particular battle.

Laugh it up, Sammy. Seven hundred miles is a long way to stay awake... Dean thought to himself, a devilish smile creasing his face as his mind began to plot.

Seattle

It was late afternoon by the time the Impala passed the downtown portion of the city on its way up toward the University of Washington campus. The drive, much to Sam’s chagrin, had been far too long; starting with Dean mixing liquid soap in his Coke at the first convenience store and cumulating with his brother’s laughter when he doused Sam with a super large cup of icewater over the top of a restroom stall door.

Sam was angry, to be sure, but as they reached the bustling northwest metropolis, he found himself more interested in the fresh smelling sea breeze and the beautiful skyline set against the stunning backdrop of Mt. Rainier.

It was a stark contrast to the landscape in Nevada, not to mention significantly cooler and Sam found himself rolling up the window to block the penetrating chill.

“What’s the matter, Samantha? Too cold for your delicate skin?” Dean taunted with a snicker as he purposely rolled his own window down further and allowed the brisk air to sweep into the old Chevy.

“All right, enough dude. We’re here and we’re on a case. No more screwing around? Agreed?” Sam demanded, offering his most serious, no-nonsense look.

Dean sighed and rolled up the window. “Yeah, okay,” he acquiesced. “So, where to first?”

Sam lifted some papers that he’d earlier tossed on the dash. Scanning through them, he found the address of Kelli Mattingly’s shocking attack on the other UW students.

“The Husky’s Den, 2631 Northeast University Village Street. It’s just out from the campus,” he stated.

“Do you really think we’ll find anything there now?” Dean asked as he expertly steered the Impala across four lanes of traffic and onto the off-ramp for Northeast Forty-Fifth Street that lead into the heart of the campus.

“I dunno,” Sam shrugged. “But it might be worth hitting the area for EMF or see if there’s any residual sulfur.”

“You’re still thinking possession?”

“I guess. I mean something had to have set these kids off. From everything I’ve dug up, they were all fairly model students. Even Steve Washburn, the football player, wasn’t the stereotypical bad-boy jock. He was studying economics, not exactly a ‘blow-off’ major,” Sam explained.

“I still think these are all just random, unrelated occurrences. You know, the academic version of *Girl’s Gone Wild*? You’re always saying how hard you worked when you were at Stanford. Maybe these kids just couldn’t hack it and snapped?”

“Yeah, maybe. But that’s just not the vibe I’m getting here, Dean. There’s something going on, I can just feel it,” Sam insisted with an imploring look at his brother.

“Okay, okay, John Edward. I’m not saying there’s nothing here, I’m just thinking it sounds kinda weak is all,” Dean threw back.

“Hey, it’s not Tuscarora,” Sam reminded him with a grin.

“Good point,” his brother admitted. “And I’m supposed to assume that this whole ‘college scene’ had nothing to do with grabbing your interest?”

Sam remained silent as he considered his sibling’s remark. Did he miss school? In all honesty, he hadn’t really thought about Stanford or law school in nearly a year. Not since his near brush with death in New Jersey and then their entanglement with the vampires in Pennsylvania, had he even thought about finishing his education, much less returning to the California university.

But as they approached the sprawling campus, Sam had to admit that it stirred warm memories for him. While he couldn’t avoid thinking about Jess, the sting of her violent death slightly paled next to the wonderful life they had shared at Stanford. Times spent together at the library, not all of it studying. Texting each other while in class and trying not to get caught when the messages leaned toward the risqué. And even though they had only ever shared one class together, both readily jumped in to help the other prep for upcoming tests. But the best times of all were when they simply relaxed together. Thinking about it, some of Sam’s favorite moments with the beautiful blonde were when he and Jessica would curl up on the couch to watch Saturday morning cartoons.

Yet, despite being nearly glued at the hip to Jess, Sam also managed to make other friends as well. And while he’d never consider himself to be one of the most popular students on campus, he was never at a loss for people to hang out with.

Sam’s smile faded when he realized that like Jess, most of his Stanford friends had now slipped away. Even Rebecca and Zach hadn’t stayed in touch following the incident in St. Louis. And who could blame them really? Like Dean had said, once they found out the “real” Sam Winchester, they had freaked.

“Sam?” Dean’s voice broke through Sam’s silent reverie.

“Yeah, sorry, what’s up?” he stammered.

“Husky’s Den at twelve o’clock,” Dean replied jabbing a finger ahead of him even as the Impala slowed.

The remnants of the bar loomed at the end of the shopping center, freshly hung boards covering the open hole of the front window like a wooden bandage. But like putting a BandAid on an amputation, the boards couldn’t cover the wound that the Jeep left behind. Broken glass littered the sidewalk and the dark brown stain of dried blood was dabbled on the concrete outside the building.

As his brother pulled the black car into a nearby parking slot, Sam spotted the crowd of students gathering around the site. Their demeanor was quiet and solemn and he could see that each carried a small taper as they prepared for some sort of candlelit vigil.

It wasn’t a foreign concept to Sam, he and Jess had attended one once for a professor who had died in a car accident. This tragedy somehow seemed ten times worse by comparison.

Following Dean out of the car, they strode up to the assembled group, his brother singling out a pretty, petite blonde who was placing flowers on a makeshift memorial in front of the boarded up building. The remnants of the police tape fluttered in the evening breeze while small offerings of flowers and stuffed Huskies adorned the ground below.

Sam rushed ahead, hoping to intervene before Dean tried hitting on the girl. She was just Dean’s type; young, well-endowed and - well - breathing.

“Sad isn’t it?” Dean offered pulling up beside the young co-ed.

“Excuse... me?” she asked looking up, sobs wracking her slight frame.

“Such a horrible tragedy, I mean. What a sad waste of life,” the elder Winchester commented.

“Yeah...” the blonde cried as tears began streaming down her face.

Sam watched Dean's reaction as the waterworks began. He smiled, the corner of his mouth curling up as he saw his brother try to hide his discomfort in dealing with the crying young woman. She might have been pretty, but the minute she became emotional, she was an instant "turn-off" to his sibling. Dean might love women, and he undoubtedly knew his fair share of them, but when it came to investing himself in comforting the distraught, Dean ran full force in the opposite direction.

Stepping in, Sam rescued his brother. "Did you know any of the victims?" he asked, reaching out to place a gentle hand on her shoulder.

She sobbed louder and nodded. "My best friend, Gayle, and her boyfriend were in there."

"I'm really sorry," Sam sympathized.

"I had just left to go back to the dorm. Otherwise, I would have been sitting... right... there... too," she answered, her voice cracking as she cried even harder.

Sam slid an arm further around her shoulders. "And the girl that was driving, did you know her?"

"No. I mean, I heard her name, but I didn't really know her. She was pre-law or something. I don't know, it's a big campus and I don't normally hang out with her type," the blonde replied.

Sam unconsciously flinched at the young woman's blatant comment. He was all-too-familiar with the social structure in college and the resulting cliques that developed.

"They said she was crazy," the girl continued. "How could she do something like that? I saw her face as she drove past me. She looked normal enough."

"Do you think she had some motive for doing this? Like maybe she was out for revenge on some ex-boyfriend or something?" Dean interrupted.

Sam glared at his brother's stark question.

"How do I know?" the blonde snapped. "She killed a lot of decent people. She never even slowed down ya know? She actually sped up and plowed right into the building. What would make her do that?"

Sam shrugged. He really had no explanation to offer the blonde, certainly not one that wouldn't seem completely insane itself. Thanking her, he led Dean towards the destroyed bar even as the young co-ed returned to the group of students.

"Did you hear what she said?" he asked as they snuck around to the back entrance.

"Yeah, Sam, I did. Did you? She didn't exactly tell us anything to make it seem like your pre-law chick was possessed," Dean answered.

The younger Winchester couldn't miss his brother's inflection as he said "pre-law" and if Sam had wondered whether Dean had picked up on that little tidbit of information, he now knew for sure. He'd read that Kelli was a Poli-Sci student headed for law school, but contrary to what his brother was probably thinking, it hadn't had any bearing on why he decided to come and investigate.

A half hour of them sifting through the scene revealed nothing more than the expected debris and cast off bloody bandages from the rescue squads. Even EMF didn't turn up anything more than a random blip.

"Satisfied now?" Dean asked sarcastically.

Sam sighed, tossing down a piece of plastic from the Jeep's headlights as he looked around the destruction.

"I didn't really expect to find anything here anyway," he admitted. "But I think we need to check out Kelli's dorm room. Maybe talk to her roommate. She might be able to tell us if Kelli was acting normally before this all happened."

Dean groaned loudly and even in the dim light of the bar, Sam knew his brother was rolling his eyes in derision.

"Dude, look. I'm not saying there isn't a hunt here, but it's not looking real encouraging right now. And let's face it, this whole college scene, it's your gig more than mine," he admitted.

When Sam didn't immediately respond, Dean continued. "So, why don't you go check out Jeep Girls digs and I'm gonna go talk to the folks at the liquor store that our jock held up. That's more my style anyway."

Sam nodded, knowing that his brother was right. While he hated splitting up, he likewise knew that it was probably the best use of their time and talents. He was more cut out for the role of sympathetic, caring grief counselor whereas Dean would be right at home pretending to be a detective investigating the brutal crime. In the end, getting to the bottom of whatever was going on here was what was most important.

"All right," Sam agreed. "I'll call you when I'm done and you can come pick me back up. Do you know where you're going?"

Dean loosed a loud laugh simultaneously shaking his head in mock disbelief. "Sammy, Sammy, Sammy... when have I ever had a hard time finding the beer?"

Sam joined him with a quick chuckle. "Just be careful and don't go asking for samples."

State Liquor Store # 182 2307 East Union Street

Dean was regretting the cocky assurance he'd given to his brother. But then, who would have thought that every liquor store in the city of Seattle was known by nothing more than their state regulated number?

So he set off looking for store number one-eighty-two, finding the location east of the downtown area. The neighborhood wasn't seedy, but then it was exactly Medina with Bill Gates' "shack" either.

The store itself was well-lit and open as Dean pulled up to the curb in front. He could see movement within the establishment as a couple of customers scanned the aisles of alcoholic offerings.

Fishing for the fake badge and ID out of the box in the glove compartment, Dean tucked the smaller wallet into the back pocket of his jeans. Completing the disguise and more importantly because he wanted the familiar comfort of the weapon tucked against his back, he stuffed the .45 behind his waistband.

Strolling into the store, the veteran hunter quickly took in the entire interior, checking for security cameras as well as assessing the current occupants. Other than the clerk, an older Asian woman, the two other patrons seemed to be nothing more than the local winos looking to get their evening started.

Keeping a nonchalant eye from the first aisle, Dean casually perused a rack of Scotch, his mouth watering slightly when he spotted a bottle of *Glenlivet* sitting alone on the shelf. Normally a whiskey man, the rare occasion that he splurged for something of quality, he had to admit that twelve year old Scotch had few equals. Tempted to purchase the import, he reluctantly moved his hand away and forced himself to turn his attention back to the job.

Watching as the last of the two customers walked to the checkout to pay for their purchases, Dean noted that the counter was new as was the freshly painted drywall behind it. Obviously when Frat Boy had shot the clerk, he must have sprayed a few extra rounds into the décor. While there was no sign of blood, having read the newspaper's account Dean could only imagine what the place probably looked like following the robbery.

Sauntering up toward the counter, Dean spotted another security camera mounted overtly above the cash register. Concerned, but not overly, he felt confident the false badge and ID would cover him. It always had before.

"Hey there," he began, moving closer and reaching for the wallet tucked into the back pocket of his jeans.

The slightly built woman behind the counter looked up and smiled but then just as quickly a look of fear overtook her previously pleasant expression.

Unbeknownst to Dean, his reach for the badge had lifted the tail of his jacket, briefly exposing the shining metal of the .45's stainless steel muzzle.

A shout from behind him made Dean whirl around instantly on guard. Unseen before, now a older-looking Asian man stood several feet away, a shotgun leveled at the hunter even as a string of unintelligible words were flung at the elder Winchester.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Dean said quietly, his hands held empty before him. "Settle down there Jet Li. Just ease your finger off that trigger."

More foreign words were shouted from behind the counter and Dean's head swiveled around to spot the clerk aiming a monstrous-looking .357 Magnum directly at him.

Both the woman and the newcomer, most likely the clerk's husband, continued to yell at him in a language he had no way of understanding. Caught between the two, Dean fought to hold down the fear that was prickling into his spine as he lowered his voice and tried to calm the two panicked shopkeepers.

"Listen," he pleaded. "I'm a detective with the King County Sheriff's Department. Just chill out and lower your weapons."

The woman wavered slightly, but the older man remained determined, his hand shaking slightly as he held the shotgun. His eyes were wide as he stared back at the perceived robber.

Dean knew that look. Fear, panic and obviously the history of what had happened here were combining into a dangerous emotional mix. People did irrational things when confronting their fears, something Dean knew firsthand.

Crap, after what happened, they think I'm here to rob them again... he thought to himself as his mind raced for some way out of the precarious situation.

"Calm down, calm down. I'm not here to hurt anyone. I just wanted to ask a few questions. Police... do you understand?" he asked, speaking as slowly and gently as he could.

"We call police... you not move..." the man hissed back, his English broken and with a heavy accent.

Dammit... Dean thought to himself. The last thing I need is for the cops to show up. Where the hell is Sammy when I need him the most? He'd just flash those freaking puppy eyes and these two would probably hand him the keys to the store.

"No call police...me police," Dean replied, tapping his chest.

I've gotta get out of here...

With his left hand still held out in front of him, he slowly reached for the fake ID in his back pocket. "Police ID, police badge, don't shoot..." he pleaded.

His eyes darting back and forth between the couple, Dean saw that the woman had lowered the long-barreled Smith and Wesson, but the older man held his position.

The leather case was in his hand, he had only to pull it around to the front, flip it open and display the counterfeit identification and badge. So close... just one more second...

Dean held the thin, dark wallet before him, his hand slowly preparing to open it when he felt more than saw the man's movement. The blast from the shotgun reverberated throughout the shop, and Dean was pretty sure he could see the brief flash of flame as the gunpowder ignited.

Vaguely, he heard the woman scream, could still hear the man yelling in that foreign language, he could even hear the sound of his own heartbeat hammering in his ears.

Then, as his body slammed into a nearby rack, Dean heard nothing more.

Kelli Mattingly's Dorm Room University of Washington

Sam shifted nervously on the edge of the bed. A sudden chill swept over his body causing him to shudder but he ignored the sensation as he listened intently to the young redhead seated across from him.

Watching as Dana Severson wiped at the stubborn tears that trickled from her eyes, he reached over and patted her shoulder tenderly. Posing as a representative from the university's Student Affairs, he'd easily won the young woman's trust as she opened up and told him everything about her former roommate's life.

"I just don't understand what happened," the redhead bemoaned as she stood abruptly and angrily tossed a light blue sweater into an open box. "She had everything going her way. Why would she do this?"

"How long were you roommates?" Sam asked.

"Just the past two years. I transferred over from Seattle Community College. But we hit it off really well. We knew everything about each other."

"Was Kelli happy? You said everything was going so well for her. Did she ever mention feeling bad, strange maybe?" the hunter queried.

"Kelli was the perpetual optimist. Nothing ever got her down. I guess after how she grew up, everything else was better," Dana replied.

"How's that? She had a bad childhood?"

"Bad? That's an understatement. She never told me all the gory details, but from what I gather, Kelli's dad was a real bastard. Abused her, beat her something awful, and I'm not entirely sure he didn't sexually assault her, but she never told me that for sure."

"What about her mom?"

"Left her with her dad. Just took off and never came back, never called or nothing. I can't imagine what that's like. I know Kelli said she understood why her mom left, but deep down, I think it made her feel worthless or something. Like her mom didn't love her enough to save her from that ass. Can you even imagine what it must feel like to know that your mother didn't give a damn about you and all your dad wanted you for was... well, you know?"

Sam grimaced. "How awful," he murmured. "Is that why she was studying law?"

Dana nodded. "Yeah. She was determined to go after justice for everybody she could. She used to say that no one ever spoke up for her, she wanted to make sure that never happened to anyone else."

"What ever happened to her dad?"

"She never said. I think he drank himself to death. She let it slip one time that she wouldn't drink because she didn't want to end up like him."

Sam rose and casually strolled over to look at the mound of books stacked silently on the small wood desk. Picking up the copy of Henry Abraham's *The [i]Judicial Process[/i]*, he couldn't avoid the sudden onslaught of memories the textbook brought rushing back.

Poli-Sci 404... a class he would have taken the following semester if...

"I guess that makes sense," he quickly added, pushing away the sad memory. "So she was pretty happy here then? Doing well in classes and all?"

"Oh God yes! She was like this sponge. Got here on a scholarship, was Dean's list nearly every semester. Dude, she like aced the LSAT's with a one seventy-two. Do you have any idea how hard that is? How smart she had to be to pull that off?" Dana asked proudly.

Sam nodded with a smile. Did he know about LSAT's and high scores? Yeah, a thing or two, considering his result had been one seventy-four. It had been his above average score that had earned him the possibility of a full ride at Stanford's Law School.

A fading memory... another lifetime... a different Sam Winchester.

"That's really impressive," Sam agreed, a tinge of sadness to his voice that he couldn't quite mask. "I bet she had her choice of law schools."

"She did. As a matter of fact, her boss at work had pretty much guaranteed her a spot at Columbia if she wanted. I guess he had connections with the selections council. That's what makes this all so hard to believe," Dana cried, shaking her head sadly.

"Yeah, that doesn't sound like someone who's suicidal."

"Suicidal? That's such a joke. If Kelli was suicidal or disturbed, then I'm Paris Hilton," the short redhead said sarcastically. "The night before she died, we were watching Grey's reruns and pigging out on popcorn. She was laughing her ass off about Izzy and Denny. Thought they looked so silly together. But then, she had a thing for the dude that played Denny, so I think that was just wishful thinking on her part."

"So tell me, the night she died. Was there anything different about her then?" Sam asked.

"I hadn't really seen her other than that morning. She seemed perfectly normal to me then, but later..." The redhead's voice trailed off as she turned away and resumed packing the scattered belongings of her former friend.

"Dana? What? What happened later?" Sam questioned, turning to look back at the young woman.

She ceased her packing and sighed loudly as she rubbed the back of her neck. "It was weird really." Dana began. "I was downstairs in the lobby that night, copying notes for a class I'd missed when I saw her walk through. I called out to her, several times, but it was like she was in her own little world."

"She didn't respond at all?" Sam asked.

"No, she just kept right on going like I wasn't even there. It was like she was on a mission and everything else around her had just ceased to exist."

"Could you see her face, more specifically her eyes? Did she look okay?"

"I could see her face just fine. I even ran right up to her before she went out the door. Her eyes seemed normal to me. Why do you ask? If you think Kelli was on drugs or something, you're way off base, mister," the young woman insisted angrily.

"No, no, no," Sam hastily replied. "I didn't mean to imply anything. It was just curiosity. I was thinking there are a lot of reasons why someone can act abnormally. Things like head injuries, problems with their blood sugar, all sorts of medical problems."

Yeah, and let's not forget demon possession... he added silently.

"Kelli was healthy as a horse. I'm the one that never seems to make it through a week without coming down with something, but not Kelli," the redhead answered.

Sam turned back to the deceased girl's desk, casually sifting through a stack of perfectly labeled file folders. Spotting one marked "Law School Application," he pulled it out of the pile. Yet, as his fingers teased at the edge, he couldn't seem to make himself open it.

"She had so much ahead of her, why would she do something like this if there wasn't something wrong? Something forcing her" he mused.

"Why did you toss it all away? You had so much going for you. Law School, a beautiful girlfriend, a chance for a normal life," his inner voice demanded.

"I didn't toss it away. I was forced into this life. I lost everything the night Jess died," Sam silently threw back.

"Did you? Did you really, Sam?"

"You know, there was one other thing that night," the auburn-haired woman stated, interrupting Sam's inner dialogue.

"Oh?" he asked, jerking back around to face her and dropping the folder.

"Well, I didn't say anything at first, but I do remember her mumbling something as she walked past me. I would have told the cops but I just didn't want people to get the wrong impression of Kelli."

"What did she say, Dana?"

The girl grimaced as though she was still unsure of what she was about to divulge. "She said something about 'making them pay'," she finally informed him. "It didn't faze me then, but after, I just had to wonder."

Sam's brows pinched together. "Make who pay?"

"I don't know. She didn't have any enemies and the people that knew her, loved her. Like I said, Kelli was all about helping people, never hurting them. What could ever possess her to do what she did?"

Possess her? Sam thought. *If you only knew...*

He talked with the girl for a few more minutes, eventually excusing himself after assuring that the young woman was "coping okay" with the tragedy. He completed the ruse by giving her his cell number and insisting she call him if she needed someone to talk to.

Stepping outside, the night air grabbed him in a bear hug, a shiver not unlike the one that had swept over him in Kelli's room, coursing through him again. Pulling the edges of his jacket closer, he began walking away from the dorm.

Around him, several other students were out and about. Eavesdropping on their conversations as he passed them, Sam couldn't help but let his memories of Stanford overtake him.

"Can you believe the damn questions on that test?"

"Yeah, the asshole swore it was only going to cover chapter sixteen but what the hell was all that stuff on the Angeli Dynasty?"

"I'm sooo gonna fail that freakin' class..."

Smiling, the younger Winchester could recall making similar statements. He often thought that his Western Civ professor was either possessed or merely in the early stages of Alzheimer's. The man rarely if ever tested the class on any of the material they'd recently covered.

Still, Sam had survived. Not just survived, he'd excelled. Determined to dig his way out of a life of hunting not so grossly different than how Kelli Mattingly had tried to dig her way out of a childhood that similarly haunted her.

Neither one of us escaped...

A soft mist began to hang in the air and Sam withdrew the cellphone from the pocket of his jacket before buttoning it up.

While he was enthralled by Seattle and the UW campus, he had to admit that the daily quota of rain the northwestern town received was not high on the list of things he enjoyed, especially if he was caught outside in it while waiting on his brother.

Hitting the speed dial for Dean, he listened as the ring on the other end sounded once, twice and then two more times before his brother's voicemail finally picked up.

"This is Dean. If you're smart enough to use a cellphone then you're smart enough to know what to do at the tone."

Dean... ever the smartass, Sam thought to himself with a wry smirk.

"Hey Dean, I'm ready to go. Had an interesting conversation with Kelli's roommate. Come pick me up and I'll fill you in."

Sam ended the call and found a bench beside the sidewalk. Sitting down in the illumination of the nearby lamp, he glanced at his watch and waited for the black Impala to pull up. Ignoring the earlier admonition to his brother about ceasing the "one-up-on-you" game they'd been playing, he began to silently plot a fitting revenge to the ice-cold water shower Dean had so kindly provided him.

He shivered one more time, assumed it was from the memory of Dean's frozen practical joke, and drew his arms in around his chest. But the chill refused to abate and deep down, that little voice in Sam's head began to whisper.

Potato chips flew outward as though someone had set off a bomb in a Frito Lay plant as the older man fired the shotgun a second time. Dean could smell the combination of salt and oil as he dove for cover to the opposite side of the aisle. His first leap had carried him out of the open and behind the relative safety of the potato chip rack just an instant before the Asian man pulled the trigger on the pump-action Mossberg.

Another blast sounded and the pungent odor of aged Tennessee whiskey assailed his nostrils as the shower of liquor rained down on him from the shattered bottles above his head. Under normal circumstances, the smell would have set his mouth to watering, but considering he was on the receiving end of a shotgun, indulging in Jack's and Jim's finest was the farthest thing from his mind.

"STOP!" Dean shouted when there was a pause in the gunfire. "PLEASE... STOP... SHOOTING... AT ME!"

He tucked in tighter against the perceived sanctuary of the shelving unit as another bullet whistled above him.

"Great, now Lucy Liu's taking potshots," Dean grumbled sarcastically.

Another break in the raucous noise and Dean chanced a look to his left. Just a few feet beyond his reach the wallet containing his fake police badge and ID lay splayed open on the floor. Taunting him like a raven-skinned temptress clad in silver it represented his salvation but remained well out of reach.

Story of my life...

Dean shrunk as he heard the telltale solid click of the shotgun being pumped. Glancing nervously up to the security mirror hanging from the corner of the store, he spotted the movement of the man as he stalked down the next aisle. Slowly moving to come up from the other side, Dean knew he would soon be trapped between the couple.

Caught between a rock and a hard place... or in this case a shotgun and a .357...

Gotta move... I'm a sitting duck if I stay here! But if I break my cover, the old woman will have a clean shot that not even she could miss with that big friggin' gun...

From his cramped position, Dean could feel the muzzle of his Colt pressing against the small of his spine. His fingers twitched as though they had a mind and will of their own.

The gun... grab the gun... they beckoned.

"Tempting, but no," Dean refuted aloud. "Can't exactly justify shooting my way out of a liquor store just because the owners think I'm here to rob and kill them."

While he had no intention of harming the innocent couple, Dean knew he was fast running out of options. He glanced again at the counterfeit badge and then shot a look at the front door. Calculating the distance, he reluctantly admitted that despite his usual "act-first, think about the risks later" M.O., there was no way he was cocky enough to try and outrun a bullet.

"Momch'uda! Namp'yon, momch'uda!" The woman's higher-pitched voice broke the temporary silence of the store.

Dean listened, still not comprehending the foreign language other than to acknowledge that it sounded like something from a late night martial arts flick. Didn't they have to speak English of some sort in order to operate the business? But then, he supposed that words like beer, whiskey and tequila were relatively universal. At least he always managed to make himself understood no matter how intoxicated he was or how slurred his speech had become.

"Momch'uda, namp'yon. Namja han kyongch'algwan," she spoke again.

"Policeman?" the man answered in heavily-accented English.

Dean sucked in a breath and held it as his hopes were instantly lifted by that one word.

"Yes, policeman," he repeated frantically while still maintaining his cover.

Tentatively peeking around the corner of the rack, Dean saw that the woman had moved from behind the counter and was now standing in the center of the floor, the

dark wallet lay open in her hand as she stared at the badge and ID. He saw the look of realization sweep across her face and couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief.

"You... policeman... sorry, so sorry..." the man stammered. "Not mean to shoot at you."

Sorry? Didn't mean to shoot at me? Well that makes it all better...

Dean closed his eyes as the adrenalin began to ebb out of his system. His heart was slowly returning to a normal rate as he pushed himself up from the floor with a groan.

"Policeman?" the old man called out again.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay. Just lower your weapons all right?" he answered, cautiously rising up and slowly edging from his hiding spot.

Taking a stiff-legged step forward, Dean was met by the woman. She handed him the wallet containing the bogus badge with a nervous smile and an apology in her eyes.

"Yu gamsuron. Yongsohada naege," she begged, her head humbly dipping low.

"My wife, she say she sorry," the man translated as he drew in closer. "I sorry as well."

Dean carefully marked that both the shotgun and the Smith & Wesson were no longer in either of the couple's hands. He relaxed slightly and nodded his acceptance.

"It's okay. No hard feelings. I understand," he offered. "You understand English now?"

"Yes. My English not so good. My son..." the man stopped abruptly and Dean saw his eyes mist over as his head lowered.

It became brutally clear to the hunter what had happened here. The storekeeper's son must have been the victim of Frat Boy's mindless attack. What other reason could the older couple have had for reacting so violently?

The man continued. "Chin Hwa was good son. He speak English good. He speak for me. But..."

"He was killed?" Dean asked.

"He not hurt anyone. But other boy come in store and shoot him. No reason."

The man's grief was palpable and interlaced with a yearning to understand the senseless act that had claimed the life of his child. Dean recognized the overwhelming need for justification all too well. He'd been seeking the same understanding of his mother's death for over two decades.

"Can I ask you a couple of questions about what happened?" he requested solemnly.

Every instinct told him to just leave these people in peace, but inwardly, he knew he had to find out if there was more to the shooting and Frat Boy's involvement than what the media had implied.

Speaking slowly and concisely, Dean began. "Were you here that night? Did you see the man that shot your son?"

The man looked at him carefully as he absorbed the words. He slowly shook his head and pointed to his wife.

"No. But Hae, she see."

Dean turned to look at the woman. She remained quiet and withdrawn, nothing like the fiery-eyed attacker from earlier.

"What did you see?" he asked gently.

"So nyon, kun so nyon, oda ui ane, chwi da manun pyong. Namja oda ui ane uro kyesangi. So nyon yogu hada kum jon. Chin Hwa malhada chogumdo nahida. So nyon koyohan utda onje kununga ssoda Chin Hwa manun sigan."

Dean listened as the woman spoke, her voice cracking with emotion, tears flowing freely from her eyes. He glanced back to the man, hoping her husband would translate.

"She say big boy come in and take many bottles. He come to counter. Boy demands money but Chin Hwa say 'no.' He still laughing when he shoot Chin Hwa many times."

"Big boy huh? I guess that's Frat Boy for sure. Mister... uh..."

"Lee. Kwan Lee," the man introduced himself, offering his hand.

"Mr. Lee, can you ask your wife if she remembers seeing the big boy's eyes?"

"Eyes?"

"Yes," Dean repeated, pointing at his own hazel orbs. "What color?"

"Nabbun so nyon, oddon pitggal kuui nun?"

"Ko dong saek," the woman answered.

"She say brown. Why important? They catch boy at school," Lee stated.

"Yes. They did," Dean assured. *So much for possession, Sammy.*

Relatively sure that this case was just as he'd suspected, Dean was about to excuse himself and leave when he spotted the security camera again.

"That camera. Do you have a tape?" he asked pointing at the device.

The man seemed perplexed at first but understanding quickly dawned on him as Dean moved closer to the counter and pointed at the apparatus.

"Disc. It on disc. You want copy too?" Lee asked.

Dean nodded as the man trotted behind the counter and began processing the request. While he moved away, his wife took Dean's arm and began chattering away, her language still foreign but flowing off her tongue rapidly as she relayed significant information.

Unable to understand her, but seeing the importance in her face, the magnitude of emotion held in her voice, Dean remained still and listened.

"Hae say there more. She say that boy not act right. Like he not really see Chin Hwa. Like he shoot something else. When he done, he take money from register, but then still pay for liquor he take like he never know what he done," the husband informed him.

Dean's brows pressed together as he considered the woman's information. If it wasn't possession, then Frat Boy must have truly been off his rocker. Robbing the liquor store was one thing, even killing the Lees' son in cold blood was demented but explainable, but to do both and then still pay for the merchandise after the murder was just bizarre.

"I'm really sorry," he offered, gently patting the woman on the shoulder in consolation.

Still, Dean wasn't sold on the idea of something supernatural being involved, but he knew he'd have to appease Sam's insistence of this being a hunt. Hopefully the security tape would clear that up once and for all and they could move on to something more promising.

Mr. Lee came back around the counter and handed him the disc. "I sorry again. Never mean to hurt police," he apologized fervently. "We in trouble?"

Yeah, 'cause I can so haul your asses in for unlawful discharge of a firearm... or better still... assault with a deadly weapon on a fake law enforcement officer.

Dean smiled and shook his head. "No. I understand. No trouble, okay? No hard feelings," he assured the man once more.

The Lees' showered him with offers of merchandise as he headed for the door as they repeatedly apologized. All in all, they seemed like a truly nice couple and his heart went out to them for the needless loss of their son. He didn't harbor any bad feelings towards them for all their attempts to kill him. On a level, he kind of understood.

Stepping outside into the quiet of the night, Dean finally acknowledged the insistent ping of his cell alerting him to a waiting voicemail. Pulling the phone from his pocket as he reached the waiting Impala, he tapped the button and replayed the message.

Leaning against the side of the car, he quickly dialed Sam.

“Dude, where the hell are you?” his brother’s voice demanded as the call was picked up. “I’ve been waiting for nearly an hour and it’s raining.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Are you melting?” Dean snapped back absently grimacing as the muscles in the lower right side of his back protested the earlier abuse.

“Not funny, Dean. Seriously, if you’ve been jerking around at a bar or something while I’ve been waiting, I’m gonna kick your ass again. I know you don’t think there’s any hunt here, but I need you to take this seriously.”

“Back off, ass-munch, I *am* taking this seriously. You don’t know how *serious* things just were for me,” he retorted.

“Well, good...” Sam continued, his irritation diffused, “‘cause I have some interesting information from Kelli’s roommate about the night she died.”

“Yeah, well I got a security tape from the night Frat Boy stormed the liquor store.”

“Seems Kelli was perfectly normal up until that night. Then she just seemed to zone out. Her roommate says she kept repeating ‘make them pay,’” Sam rambled on.

Dean groaned. Sammy was on a hunt-high. Like a dog with a bone, whatever he’d learned had been enough to convince the younger sibling and Dean could tell that his brother was even more determined to investigate what he perceived to be some sort of demonic interference.

“Sammy, that doesn’t mean she was possessed. Maybe she was just really pissed off.”

“No, Dean. You didn’t hear about this girl. She didn’t just snap, there was something else going on. Now how far away are you? When are you gonna get here so I can fill you in?” his brother questioned insatiably.

“Could really use a beer right now, Sammy,” Dean suggested with an exhausted sigh. The night’s events were starting to catch up with him and he shifted uncomfortably against the cold metal of the Chevy’s door.

“Work, Dean. We’re on a case, remember?”

Sam was starting to sound pissy and Dean wasn’t in the mood for a pissy Sam.

“On my way, Sam,” Dean conceded with a groan and ended the call.

There was no point in trying to argue with his brother over the phone, not when it would be so much more entertaining to do it in the flesh. Maybe he could find a Spencer’s on the way back to the university. Nothing said “game on” like sneezing powder. And besides, if Sam was insisting on preventing Dean from having any relaxation of the female or beer variety, then Dean was equally determined to create some fun of his own.

Pulling open the door, he dropped into the seat, wincing as another strong feeling of discomfort tugged at his lower back.

Pressing his hand inside his jacket, he was about to withdraw the unused .45 from behind the waistband of his jeans when his hand met another sensation.

Warmth... wetness... sticky, warm wetness to be precise.

Dean groaned, not from pain as much as from utter resignation to what had happened, his red-stained hand mocking him as he stared blankly at it in the soft glow of the streetlamp.

Blood...

“Guess I didn’t dive out of the way of that shotgun fast enough after all,” he bemoaned with a nervous chuckle. “Sam’s really gonna be pissed now.”

Puget Sound Inn

Dean had pulled up to the curb outside of the room of dormitories and waited for Sam to climb into the car, never moving from his position in the driver’s seat. He shifted gingerly, successfully managing to hide the pain by silently grinding his teeth together.

He could feel the annoying trickle of blood still flowing down his side and collecting underneath the right cheek of his ass. Wanting nothing more than to scratch at the irritation, he knew better than to twist around realizing that the resulting movement would likely cause him to let loose with a string of obscenities that would undoubtedly alert Sam to his injury.

It wasn't that he didn't want his brother to know he'd been shot; it was just more the case that he wasn't in the mood for full-on worried Sam. In fact, what Dean really wanted the most was a hot shower, a soft bed and a healthy slug from the bottle of *Booker's Small Batch* bourbon, courtesy of the Lees, that was sitting in the back seat.

Still, by the time they pulled into the parking lot of the Puget Sound Inn, Dean knew that the brief time sitting in one position had served to tighten up the already tense and abused flesh and muscles in his back. While Sam bounded out of the car and into the office to check them in, Dean remained behind, his knuckles tightly gripping the steering wheel as he summoned up the energy to pull himself from the car.

The adrenaline gone from his body, he had nothing to call on but sheer determination and the desire to move before he ended up just saying "to hell with it all" and sleeping in the Impala. The gunshot, coupled by the long drive up from Nevada had taken their toll and Dean knew he still needed to debrief with Sam before his brother was likely to allow him to call it a night.

"After a shower, food, and a stiff belt," he added aloud.

He had just made it out of the driver's side and was listing/resting against the cool metal of the door when Sam returned.

Unknowingly, the younger sibling tossed the key to Dean causing him to inadvertently jerk around to catch it. He ended up missing, groaning as the key continued to the pavement with a jingle of metal on concrete.

Dean looked down at the ground and then back up at his brother. He saw Sam's eyes narrow in return, watching with growing suspicion as Dean slowly bent down to retrieve the key.

With his back exposed, Dean had no way of knowing that the blood from the gunshot wound had now seeped through the heavy material of his green jacket staining it with an incriminating dark red blot. But he quickly figured it out at Sam's loud huff of air from the other side of the Impala.

"Dammit, Dean! What the hell happened?" his brother exclaimed.

He considered his reply, toying with sarcasm or denial. In the end, pain and exhaustion demanded honesty as Dean managed to scoop up the dropped room key and force himself upright again.

"I sorta got shot, Sammy," he admitted, leaning heavily once more against the Chevy.

Sam was by his side in an instant and for a moment Dean wondered if his brother had suddenly added teleportation to his repertoire of mysterious powers.

"Sorta shot?" Sam repeated, his hands already tugging up the tail of Dean's jacket to explore the wound. "Sorta shot? How exactly does one get sorta shot, Dean? It's like being pregnant, either you are or you aren't."

Dean shot him a weak smirk. "Well, I can guarantee I'm not pregnant and as for the gunshot wound, I guess I sorta didn't jump out of the way fast enough."

"Who was shooting at you, Dean? I mean, all you had to do was go check out a crime scene. How in the world did you end up in a gunfight?"

The elder sibling was about to reply, but was cut off with a wave of a hand and the rough grab of his wrist as Sam pulled his arm over his shoulders. Supporting Dean's failing form his brother moved them toward the motel room door.

"Nevermind, just don't say anything," Sam continued. "Hold tight and let me get you inside so I can get a decent look at this."

Once inside, Sam's irritation had apparently lapsed, much to Dean's relief. His brother gently lowered him down to the nearest bed then turned and headed back

outside. In a flurry of activity that only Sam could pull off and make look coordinated, Dean watched out of half-closed eyes as his brother brought in their gear.

"Okay, roll over and let me take a look," Sam ordered when he was finished.

"Aw, Sammy. You're so not the person I want to hear say that to me," Dean replied with a chuckle as he struggled to peel off the layers of clothing.

In the end, it was his brother that managed to pull off his jacket and dual shirts as Dean collapsed face down against the worn fabric of the bedspread. He vaguely heard Sam's hiss of breath as his brother examined the wound. Yet even as exhaustion threatened to claim his lucidity there was no denying when his younger brother began to probe at the injury.

"Stop..." he gasped breathlessly. "Stop a second, Sam."

"Dean, there's at least a half dozen holes in your back. What was it? Shotgun?"

"Yeah..." Dean replied, biting down on his lower lip as his brother started digging at the round pellets that peppered the area above his right hip. "Sam, hang on ... hang on."

"They gotta come out, Dean,"

"Yeah, Roger that, but how 'bout a little bedside manner there Florence? Back seat of the car, grab the bottle, would ya?"

Sam complied, quickly returning with the bottle of one hundred twenty-five proof whiskey.

Dean uncapped it and took a long pull straight from the mouth of the bottle. It was smooth, even better than some of the premium bourbons he'd treated himself to in the past. He had to hand it to Mr. Lee, the man had certainly gifted him with a fine bottle of alcohol. It was almost worth getting shot over.

Almost ...

"So, mind telling me where you picked up a bottle of seventy dollar bourbon?"

Sam asked as he went to work on Dean's back.

"Kwan Lee. Nice old man...that's when he's not wielding a pump-action Mossberg," Dean answered from between gritted teeth.

"Liquor store?"

"Yeah, father of the clerk that Frat Boy killed."

"His name is Steve Washburn," Sam informed him.

There was a clinking of metal on glass as his brother withdrew the first of the shot and dropped it into an empty ashtray.

"That's one," the younger Winchester announced. "So what else did you find out?"

Dean sucked in a ragged breath, hoping to settle his empty stomach and clear his head enough to remain coherent.

"Well, after all the gunfire ceased and with the help of Mr. Lee's translation, his wife said that this Washburn dude just strolled into the place, grabbed a couple bottles off the shelf and basically walked up to the counter and demanded all the money from their son."

"And then?" Sam beckoned him on, knowingly keeping Dean's mind on the hunt and off of the pain that was being inflicted on him.

"Their son refused and Frat Boy unloaded a clip into him. Completely cold blooded about it," Dean answered, stifling a grunt as Sam withdrew another piece of metal.

"Did she see his eyes?"

"Yeah, they were normal, Sammy," he answered before tilting the bottle of bourbon toward his mouth for another drink.

He heard Sam sigh from behind him. "But here's the part that doesn't sit right with me," Dean continued. "Before he leaves, Frat Boy reaches into his pocket and leaves a handful of twenties to pay for the booze. Takes the money from the register, kills the Lees' son, but decides to pay for the liquor he could just as easily taken."

"Yeah, that's kinda bizarre," Sam agreed. "Hold still a second."

Dean grunted loudly as his brother probed for a deeper remnant. "Sammy," he breathed out. "Mrs. Lee said that Washburn acted like he didn't even see their son."

Like it wasn't even a human he was killing. She said he was laughing like it was a joke."

"That's not too different from what Kelli's roommate said about how she was acting that night," Sam added in. "She said Kelli was out of it. Didn't recognize her, didn't speak to her, almost as if she was in another world."

"But no black eyes?" Dean asked.

"Nope," his brother answered as he plucked out a third bit of shot. "What do you think, Dean? If not possession, then what?"

"Drugs?" Dean mumbled. "I've said it before, not every whacked out murderer has to be the result of a demon's handiwork."

"Yeah, maybe, but it wasn't drugs, dude. Not for Kelli. No way. You didn't see this girl's room, you didn't hear about her life. She was going to law school, Dean. She had everything ahead of her. No way she throws that all away," Sam insisted as he pulled free another pellet.

"Law school, huh?"

"Don't go there, Dean. I know what you're thinking."

"You do? Cause all I'm thinking, Sam, is that you can identify with this dead chick. She lost everything, you lost everything. Seems easier to think it was all because of a demon than to admit in her case she just snapped," Dean proposed.

"And what about Washburn and Laurel Brown? Am I identifying with them too?" Sam snapped back.

Dean cried out as his brother's anger was taken out on his flesh. He felt Sam dig deeper with the forceps into the muscle of his back, knowing it had to be done but likewise knowing that his brother wasn't expending any extra effort on being gentle.

"Hold still, I almost have it," Sam brusquely admonished.

Dean held his breath as his brother removed the final remaining shot. He felt the room spinning like a sick carnival ride and the emptiness of his stomach suddenly seemed like a good thing.

"Looks like a couple more went straight through. Just took the meat out of your side. Let me clean these up a bit," his brother ordered.

There was the noise of movement as Sam stepped away from the bed and began rummaging through one of their duffle bags. Dean felt more than saw him return and in the next instant he bellowed as the cold burn of alcohol washed over his lower back.

"SONOFABITCH!" Dean shouted, rolling protectively over on his side and curling in tightly. "What the hell did you do?"

"Alcohol. Had to clean out those wounds. Can't risk infection," Sam replied coldly.

"Dammit, Sam. Just because I haven't bought into this whole demon-possession thing, doesn't mean you have to go all Nurse Ratched on my ass," he cried out.

Dean watched as Sam became quiet, simply standing there with the empty bottle of rubbing alcohol in his hand. He saw his brother's expression soften, his eyes glancing downward even as the shaggy brown mop of hair fell forward to obscure them even more.

Dean knew that look.

Guilt!

Pure, unadulterated, Sammy size, guilt.

"Dean..."

"S all right, bro. How 'bout we call this round a draw? Matter of fact, let's just call the entire match a draw and get down to business. Okay?" he offered.

"Yeah..."

Apology offered and accepted as Sam bent over the side of the bed and began to gently clean up the dried blood on Dean's back. He finished in silence as Dean remained still.

"So, about this Kelli? Law student huh? Was she smart?" Dean asked.

“Scored a one seventy-two on her LSAT’s,” his brother answered as he taped a heavy bandage in place.

“Is that good?”

“Is the Impala fast?”

“Better than you did?”

“Not quite.”

“So, you’re not thinking she just woke up and got tired of being a geekgirl? I’m only asking just in case I need to keep an eye out for you doing the same?” Dean teased.

He relaxed when he heard Sam’s soft snicker.

“No, I don’t think she did. Her roommate said she’d been perfectly normal right up until that night. Hell, she didn’t even know any of the people in the bar. She was all about saving the world, Dean. No way this chick just randomly goes on a rampage.”

“Then what, Sammy?” Dean pressed, rolling back onto his side as Sam finished. He took another long gulp of the bourbon before setting the half empty bottle on the nightstand.

“I just don’t know, Dean. But whatever it is, it’s gotta be pretty powerful to control people like that without even possessing them,” Sam replied as he washed his hands in the bathroom sink.

Dean yawned wide as he carefully squirmed into the mushy mattress trying to find a comfortable position for his aching body. All thoughts about the shower, food or even getting out of his jeans, forgotten as the pain from Sam’s makeshift surgery took its toll.

“We’ll figure it out, dude,” he offered, his eyes blinking slowly as he succumbed to the all-over warming effect of the alcohol.

He barely saw Sam’s nod as his brother settled into the chair next to a small table and flipped open the familiar laptop.

“Yeah, you can count on it,” Sam answered as Dean drifted off to the rhythmic tapping of his brother’s fingers on the keyboard.

The Dockside Bar SW Klickitat Way, Seattle

Cal Brauer ambled into the bar, his head hanging low, eyes focused on the pavement beneath his feet. He’d been coming to The Dockside for so long that his body was on permanent autopilot as he made his way inside. Locating an empty stool, he straddled the seat and pulled a wad of bills from the pocket of his work pants.

All around him the familiar faces of his coworkers abounded, most of them already reasonably intoxicated if their loud voices were any indication. He knew most of these men, having spent the last forty years working alongside them on the docks, loading and unloading cargo from the massive ocean-going ships. They were a rambunctious group, playing as hard as they worked, one day blending into the next.

Any other night, Cal would have been with them, drinking beer, shooting pool, and generally being obnoxious until the bartender chased them out. But not tonight. Tonight was more about drowning his sorrows than washing away the day’s sweat and grime.

“Thirty years,” he mumbled. “Thirty years and for what?”

“What’s up, Cal?” the blonde bartender, Julie asked as she wiped down the countertop in front of him. “What can I get ya?”

He glanced up at her, sadly realizing that he’d watched this woman age over all the years he’d been coming into the bar. She was never what he’d considered beautiful, but there was a time when he would have given his right arm to have called her his own.

Instead, she was now haggard looking, wrinkles creasing the once-smooth features of her face, her voice deep and croaking from years of exposure to the thick cigarette smoke that hung heavily in the place.

Like him, she had aged. Time had moved on for both of them, leaving them behind, weary and worn. What did either of them have to show for it? Certainly he had nothing, not after today.

"Beer... whiskey chaser. Keep 'em coming till that's all gone," he ordered, pushing the cash toward her. "Matter of fact, just leave the bottle."

"Wow, what are you celebrating?" Julie asked as she pulled the tap and drew a beer.

Cal laughed. "Celebrating? I guess you could say I'm celebrating my retirement."

She looked at him perplexed as she poured the first shot of Jim Beam. Like her, he was still too young to be signing up for McDonald's senior discount.

"What's going on, Cal?" she asked worriedly.

He threw back the first shot, barely tasting it, and quickly poured another. Looking up, he smiled at her as he considered his answer. Why bring her down with his problems? What could she really do? It wasn't like she could go down to the docks and kick his foreman's ass. It wasn't like she could make him younger or stronger so that he could do as much work as the fresh meat working the containers. And after all, it wasn't like she could get his job back for him... or his dignity.

"Ah, nothing Jules. Just a bad day at work," he answered before chugging back the beer, emptying the glass in one long gulp.

He could feel her staring at him, knew she was concerned, but at the moment he just couldn't bring himself to do anything more than submit to raging self-pity that was sitting in the center of his chest.

Eventually, she walked away and Cal breathed a sigh of relief as he poured yet another shot of whiskey, guzzling it as he had the ones before.

He stared at the loose bills spread out across the counter in front of him. Six hundred dollars, a week's pay with overtime included. Not even enough to make the rent on the tiny little shack he called home, much less pay for food, gas for the truck or any other of life's basic necessities.

"Thirty years and what do I have to show for it?" Cal bemoaned. "No family, no life, just a friggin' bad back and a pink slip."

Another drink, an empty stomach and he was well on his way to the goal of blissful intoxication.

An hour passed and then another as Cal sank further into his despair. It was almost midnight when he finished off his fourth beer, his eyes straining to focus on the nearly empty bottle of Beam sitting within the protective circle of his arm.

The Dockside was booming with business now, the jukebox blaring Kenny Chesney's *Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven* while a group of burly longshoreman played eightball at the pool table. Cal looked around the crowded bar, taking in all the revelry through blurred vision as his retinas struggled to work against the effects of the alcohol.

Feeling his stomach churn, the beer and whiskey refusing to mix with the building acid, he rose unsteadily from the barstool and began to stagger off in the direction of the restrooms.

Nearing the pool table, he lurched, reaching out in desperation to grab anything to prevent his fall. Instead, he stumbled into Jacobs, one of the young, towering longshoremen that worked the docks. Like most, Jacobs was a mound of flesh stretched tautly over thick bulging muscles.

Cal stammered an apology as he swayed.

"Watch where you're going, old man," Jacobs snarled, pushing him backwards with the end of his pool cue.

Brauer staggered, falling into another of the workers who roughly shoved him away.

It quickly degraded into a game of human hot-potato as the younger men pushed Cal from one to another until he ended up back in front of Jacobs. The big man caught Brauer by the shirt and stopped his momentum, holding him steady an arm's length away.

"Come on, guys. This is no way to treat good ole Cal," Jacobs teased. "He can't help it he's washed up and useless. Maybe we ought to put him out of his misery?"

Cal saw the bigger man swing the cue backwards, but even as it sliced through the air, he couldn't force his alcohol-deadened body to react in time. Instead, he caught the stick solidly against his ribcage, pain firing throughout his chest as he gasped for breath and collapsed to his knees.

The men walked away leaving a chorus of humiliating taunts and laughter in their wake. Cal ignored them as he struggled back to his feet, a hand pressed tightly to his injured side. Once he was able, he completed the trek to the restroom, stumbling inside and leaning backwards against the door as the noise from the bar diminished.

After a moment, Cal moved to the wash basin, twisting on the tap and splashing cold water over his face. The icy wetness served to clear his head slightly, allowing him the ability to lift his shirt to check the damage.

His skin was mottling at the point where the cue stick had impacted his rib cage, but as he stared at the injury, the flash of another blue and green mark caught his attention.

His mermaid...

Her turquoise body flowed down the outside of his arm, the tips of her tailfin twisting in and nestling within the crook of his elbow. Pulling up his sleeve, Cal twisted so he could see the entire tattoo within the mirror's reflection.

A work of art in his opinion, the colorful rendition of the woman was so beautiful, so real, that Cal thought he could almost see her breathing. He had other tattoos, but none as striking or as cherished as his mermaid. Her flowing dark hair, seafoam green eyes, all served to make her precious, to make her *his*.

Tenderly, he caressed the flesh where the ink covered his arm, delicately running his fingertips across the edge of the mermaid's face.

If only...

What? If only she were real? If only I had someone like her in my life? If only I hadn't spent three hundred dollars on getting the damn thing? Especially now, when I have no idea where the next paycheck is coming from...

Cal turned abruptly away from the mirror as his current predicament overshadowed the draw of the artwork adorning his skin. Pulling the shirt back down, he splashed more water on his face as he prepared to head back out to the bar.

Protect me!

Cal spun around, seeking out the source of the haunting voice.

"Hello?" he called out, his eyes scanning the restroom.

They want to hurt me... protect me...

A woman's voice, he was sure of it, but where was she? He was alone in the restroom, so where was the sound coming from? Had he had too much to drink? Was he somehow losing his mind?

He turned for the door, assuring himself that it was the Beam and beer, not a woman that was calling out to him, begging him for assistance.

Protect me...

He spun back around and came face to face with a vision. She stood before him, brown hair flowing, green eyes sparkling. His mermaid! It couldn't be! Yet there she was, flesh, blood and solid bone.

Cal rubbed his eyes, trying to deny what he was seeing, but feeling the need to reach out and touch her.

Protect me ... they want to hurt me... don't let them hurt me... she pleaded.

He nodded, straining to touch her even as she pulled away.

If you love me...

"I do. I really do," Cal insisted.

... don't let them hurt me...

"Don't worry, I won't," he promised her.

Storming toward the door, Cal flung it open wide and strode purposefully out into the crowd. Nearing the pool table he saw that the throng of young men was still there. He ignored their laughter when they spotted him, disregarded the insults that they slung his way.

... hurt them...

"Yes..." Cal murmured, reaching for an unused cue stick from the rack.

Blindly, he started swinging, the stick connecting with flesh as he cut a deadly swathe through the assembled men. Blood sprayed everywhere as he swung over and over, red droplets splattering against the walls as well as Cal's face and upper body.

Even as the men crumbled before him, he never relented. As their groans rose from the floor, he continued on, brutally clubbing anything that stood before him. Dully, he could hear Julie's scream of horror from behind the bar, but it was nothing more than a whisper compared to the voice of the mermaid beckoning within his head.

And then, when the bar was nearly silent, he came upon Jacobs. The massive man held his ground, a cue in his own hand as he waited for Cal.

He wants to hurt me... protect me...

"I am," Cal replied.

He rushed forward, meeting the larger longshoreman with a flurry of vicious hits. Over and over, Cal struck, beating down the young man until he laid on the floor a bloody, whimpering mess.

"Please... stop... I'm sorry..." Jacobs begged, his arm held out protectively

"You'll never hurt her. She's mine..." Cal snarled as he brought the pool stick down on Jacobs' head.

Amid the relative silence that had settled in over The Dockside, only the sickening sound of a skull being crushed could be heard. Even as the cue in his hand disintegrated from the abuse of wood against bone, Brauer didn't stop. Even as Jacobs sucked in a last, gurgling breath, Cal blindly continued his murderous rampage.

"For you, darlin'," he whispered a short time later as he stood complacently looking over the scene. "You're safe now."

But she didn't hear him. His mermaid was gone...

Puget Sound Inn

Late morning

Dean struggled to a seated position before rubbing the heels of his hands against both eyes. The room was quiet, too quiet and it was actually the stillness that roused him from the deep sleep he'd been enjoying.

So rarely did he ever sleep that soundly, he woke up instantly irritated his slumber had been disturbed. His irritation grew when a quick scan of the room revealed an empty second bed, his brother no longer occupying it.

"Sammy!" he called out, forcing himself to his feet with a grimace.

His back immediately protested, sending daggers of pain throughout his side and making him hunch over as he fought to remain upright. Waiting until he could bear standing straight, he took a stiff step towards the closed bathroom door.

"Sammy? Where the hell are you?" Dean called once again as he slowly made his way across the floor.

Stopping as he reached the bathroom, Dean was about to pound on the marred wood when he spotted the white piece of paper jammed between the door and the trim.

“Sammy, you in there?”

When there was no answer, he twisted the knob, opening the door just enough so that the note was freed, barely snatching it before it fell to the floor.

He groaned as he strained to catch it, silently cursing his brother for putting it there in the first place. Leaning back against the wall, he unfolded the paper, recognizing the chicken scratch that was Sam’s handwriting from the first word.

Dean,

Went back to the university to check out Washburn. Won’t be long... Get some rest.

Sam

“Great,” Dean groaned. “Now who am I gonna send out for coffee?”

With his free hand, he tentatively touched the bandaged wound on his back, scowling when his fingertips felt the small patch of wetness seeping out from the gauze. He continued into the bathroom and turned so that he could see his injured side in the mirror.

Glancing up, he spotted another note taped to the glass. Tearing it off, he casually flipped it open to reveal more of his brother’s writing.

Congrats!

You made it this far, now go lay your ass back down! Don’t get the bandage wet till I get there and I’ll help change it. I checked your wound while you were sleeping, so I better not come back and find you tore anything open.

And quit bitching about the coffee, I’ll bring some with me.

-S.

Dean laughed and then nearly doubled over as the movement jarred his injured side.

Part of him despised his brother’s incessant watchfulness, but another part inwardly appreciated it. It was good having his brother around again. The few years Sam had been at Stanford had been some of the worst years of Dean’s life. And that said a lot, considering the rather bizarre life Dean had lead up to this point.

Crumpling the note and tossing it into the small trashcan, he stared at the shower longingly, anticipating how good the hot water would feel sluicing down his stiff and sore body. Ignoring his brother’s admonition, he moved to turn on the tap.

As he bent down, the paisley wallpaper covering the bathroom walls began to spin with gut-wrenching speed, Dean felt his stomach revolt. Silently giving thanks that it was empty, he barely managed to reach a hand out to the side of the shower stall and keep himself from face-planting on the disgusting tile.

“You win, Sammy,” he muttered with disgust as he slowly headed back towards the waiting bed.

Once there, he eased himself down to the mattress, his teeth clenched tightly together to stifle the groan that was forming at the back of his throat. Gradually propping himself up, he found a comfortable enough position and let out a relieved sigh.

Glancing over to the nightstand, Dean found the third piece of paper tucked underneath a wrapped granola bar.

“Good God, Sam. You’re worse than a woman leaving love notes all over the friggin’ place,” he grumbled.

Still, he picked up the paper and opened it.

Good, you went back to bed (or maybe you never made it out) Either way, stay there.

The remote’s on the table, eat the granola – sorry it’s all I had – and drink some of the water too!

-S.

"Yes, Mom," Dean replied to the note before wadding it up and shooting it across the room towards Sam's open gear bag. The paper ball found its mark, disappearing into the void of his brother's duffle.

"He shoots, he scores," Dean shouted triumphantly before his face screwed up in pain. "Okay, so maybe I won't be *scoring* much anytime soon," he then added.

Looking back at the table, he spotted the granola. Grabbing it, he tore open the wrapper even as his stomach growled loudly. Ripping off nearly half of the bar in the first bite, Dean chewed the thick, dry offering in disgust.

"We so have to start staying in places that offer room service," he complained as he finished off the chewy raisins and oats.

Running his tongue across his teeth, he realized how dry his mouth had suddenly become. Flashing back to the nightstand, he spotted the bottle of water sitting stoically next to the remainder of the bourbon. The bourbon was definitely the more tempting of the two beverages, but Dean doubted that the mix of Kentucky rye and Nature Valley's best would sit very well in his already churning stomach.

"Bitch," he sneered as he opened the bottle of water. He hated admitting when his younger brother was right, but in all honesty, the water tasted good, refreshing even.

Fully awake, but still not desperate enough to want to move, Dean snagged the television remote from the stand. Snapping on the set, he started flipping through the channels as he sought out some form of mindless diversion.

He stopped briefly on a rerun of *The Munsters*, laughing out loud as Herman accidentally set his sleeve on fire. Grabbing his side, the laughter nearly turned to tears as the shotgun wounds pulled violently.

"Okay, so no comedies today," Dean acknowledged, thumbing the channel key until a woman's voice caught his attention.

"In overnight news, police apprehended a man who went on a rampage at a local bar. Fifty-five-year-old Calvin Brauer of Tukwila allegedly attacked a crowd at The Docks Bar, injuring several patrons and killing thirty-year-old, Robert Jacobs.

"Sources tell King 5 news that Brauer had just been laid off earlier that day from his job as a longshoreman at the Port of Seattle. While there appears to be no apparent motive for Brauer's attack, witnesses say that the man was a regular at the bar and generally well-liked.

"Longtime Docks bartender, Julie Robbins, told King 5's Mark Herrera that Brauer had always been a quiet man. She said his actions last night were bizarre and shocking, his attack one of a possessed man.

"Police have remanded Brauer to the Harborview Medical Center's psychiatric ward for further evaluation."

Dean's eyes narrowed as the newscast replayed in his head.

Well-liked... quiet man... bizarre and shocking... possessed man...

"Now why does that sound familiar?" Dean asked aloud. "What the hell is going on in this town?"

Still, while there were similarities to the random, brutal acts of Kelli Mattingly and Steve Washburn, at face value, Calvin Brauer didn't seem to have anything in common with the two UW students. There was no way the two co-eds and a middle-aged longshoreman ran in the same circles or knew each other in any way.

"So, what's the connection?" he mused. "Why the hell would a demon possess these people, make them carry out these brutal attacks and then ditch its meat-ride? It doesn't make sense."

Dean absently rubbed the back of his neck as his mind chewed through the news. First, Kelli Mattingly goes off the reservation and rams her car into a crowded bar full of people she didn't even know. Then, Steve Washburn, not two days later, strolls into an out of the way liquor store, shooting the clerk in cold blood but paying for the booze. Now, a seemingly, mild-mannered dockworker, goes on an ass-kicking rampage at his favorite hangout.

"No connection whatsoever," Dean repeated.

His eyes fell on the laptop sitting on the table across the room. Maybe if he looked into each of the victims' background, he might find some common thread that tied them together. But as the computer sat there, mocking him and his inability to just jump up and grab the device, Dean gauged the effort required to retrieve it.

"Sonofabitch," Dean grumbled as he leaned forward in an attempt to stand again and go after the laptop. "Fine, forget it. Sam's probably already researched everything there is to know about the students."

Instead, he grabbed his cellphone from the nightstand, grateful that Sam had thought to take it out of his jacket pocket last night and leave it within reach.

He clicked on Sam's number and waited for his brother's voice.

"Dean? Dean, is everything okay? Are you all right?" the younger man asked in a flurry when he answered.

"Yes, Mother. Why do you have to automatically assume that something's wrong?"

"Because I basically left you unconscious about two hours ago. And, because it's nearly noon. You were out for nearly twelve hours," Sam replied.

Dean glanced at his watch.

Damn... I can't remember the last time I slept this late... or that long...nothing like a fifth of whiskey and blood loss to knock me off my ass

"Did you find the notes I left you? I hope the hell you've been laying low like I told you to. I swear dude, if you tore your back open, I'm gonna kick your ass," his brother ranted on.

"I'm fine, dude. Now will you shut up for a minute so I can tell you why I called?"

Dean waited for Sam's silence, smiling to himself when he heard his brother's exasperated sigh.

"Have you seen any news today?" he asked finally.

"No, why? I've been at the university all morning," Sam answered.

The university... figures!

"Well, I think there was another attack last night. I mean, the dude went off on a bar full of his buddies, beat their asses with a cue stick and turned some other dude's head into a bucketful of bloody goo," Dean informed him.

"And you think this is connected to the students here?"

"Yeah, well that's the part I'm not totally sure about. I mean, this dude couldn't possibly have anything in common with a bunch of college kids. But according to the bartender, he was a generally nice guy that last night seemed possessed. Her words, not mine."

"Possessed?" *That got Sam's attention.*

"Hey, I'm just saying. You were thinking that there was a demon on the loose here, I'm maybe starting to agree," Dean admitted. "If it's not a demon, there's at least something going on that's making these people wig out and go violent."

"Well, I've been thinking too," Sam began.

"... That's why I keep you around..." Dean interjected. He smiled, picturing the eye roll and smirk that were undoubtedly crossing Sam's face.

"Seriously, Dean. None of this makes any sense."

"No argument there..."

"No, listen, dammit..."

Alrighty then, Sammy's getting pissy again.

Dean quieted, removing the sarcasm from his voice. "Okay, Sam. What's up?"

"I talked to Laurel Brown's roommate and her boyfriend. The worst thing she ever did in her life was get a parking ticket, Dean. She was spotless, just like Kelli. She loved kids, couldn't wait to get married so she could have a brood of them. Yet, she goes to her student teaching assignment on Monday and within a half hour, she's terrorizing the entire class. Then, once security drags her out of the classroom, she acts like she has no idea what she's done. Like she was out of control of her body for the entire time."

"So, maybe like I said, she just snapped?"

“Dude, she loved kids. Spent her free time volunteering at an afterschool program for underprivileged children almost every day. And Dean, get this. She worked every Saturday at the pediatric cancer wing at UW’s hospital, tutoring the kids that were there so they didn’t get behind in school.”

“Okay, so she was Mother freakin’ Teresa. So, what? We’re back to thinking demon again? A demon that gets his rocks off on tormenting these nice, innocent people? People that wouldn’t normally hurt a fly? ’Cause there’s still no real evidence of possession, Sammy. No black eyes and no black smoke. This Brauer dude has been under observation since they caught him. Don’t you think someone would have noticed a thick, black mass of fog pouring out of his mouth?”

He heard Sam grunt on the other end of the phone.

“I don’t have any answers, Dean. I spent the entire night looking through every resource I could find that might explain what’s happening to these people; biological as well as supernatural. And while there are plenty of causes for this type of behavior, none of them affect people so randomly.”

“There’s a connection, Sam. We’re just not seeing it,” Dean insisted. “When are you coming back? I wanna go check out this Brauer dude.”

“Yeah, well sit tight a little longer. I’m already out here on campus and I want to find out whatever I can on Steve Washburn. Besides, I’m guessing you could use a little more rest,” Sam suggested.

“I’m fine, Sam. Ready to go,” Dean replied. “Extra sleep did me good.”

Buy that, Sammy. Please, I really need you to buy that... maybe then I will too!
Dean silently pleaded. He hated feeling weak and now, with this hunt really seeming to be a hunt, he was itching to get into it.

“Just take it easy for a bit longer. Honestly, there’s no point in coming all the way back to the motel since I’m already here. It won’t take me long,” Sam reiterated.

“But dude, you already promised to bring the coffee. Seeing that it’s almost lunch time and I haven’t had any sustenance, you realize you’re impairing my healing process?” Dean joked.

Sam’s laugh poured from the receiver. “Sustenance? Impairing the healing process? What the hell? Did you pass out with a thesaurus under your pillow?”

“Hey. I just figured you were out there in the land of higher education. I thought I could show you that I might be lacking the letters behind my name, but I *am* smarter than the average bear.”

“Dude, can you even spell ‘sustenance’?” Sam teased.

“Sure I can. F...O...O...D. As in my stomach’s growling.”

“Eat the granola bar...”

“Already did. After that, the woodwork is starting to look appetizing, dude.”

“You’re not gonna starve to death, Dean. Now quit whining and sit tight. I’ll be back shortly and we can grab some lunch,” Sam insisted as he hung up.

Dean looked at the phone in his hand and groaned even as his stomach bellowed about its current condition. “Bitch!” he hissed at the silent cellular. “Probably cruising around the campus in my car. Chicks diggin’ the Impala... and he’ll never even notice. What a waste!”

His stomach rumbled once more and Dean’s scowl quickly turned to a smirk as a plan formed in his mind.

In a flurry of fingertip movement, he dialed 411 and waited to be connected.

“*City and state...*” the voice queried.

“Seattle, Washington,” he answered.

“Yes...”

“Can you get me the number of Pizza Hut delivery near Ranier Avenue ...”

You’re not the smartest monkey at the zoo after all, Sammy, Dean thought as a wide grin spread across his face.

Delta Tau Delta House

Sam parked in front of the stately-looking two story nestled amongst a row of similar-looking structures. The well manicured lawn, creeping ivy and long line of Green Ash trees, all helped to complete the look of a quiet, residential neighborhood.

Except, Sam knew it wasn't, not exactly. The large Greek letters that adorned the space above the main door clearly told a different story.

Sam barely remembered Greek row back at Stanford. The mix of sororities and fraternities that dotted either side of Campus Drive near Lake Lagunita weren't generally on the way to any of his classes. Considering that he'd never pledged a house as a Freshman and then he and Jess had taken an apartment together out past Escondido Village, he'd never had a reason to venture near any of the frats that graced the prestigious campus.

The one time he'd been invited to a Phi Alpha Phi party, courtesy of a pre-Jess fling by the name of Belinda Marks, had been less than appealing. While the party wasn't anything close to *Animal House*, it wasn't Sam's style either. He left that night thinking how clueless those young men and women were when it came to knowing what was really waiting for them out in the real world. So absorbed in popularity, money or careers, the students at the party would have crapped in their pants if they'd ever seen half the things that Sam had in his pre-Stanford life. In retrospect, even then he should have known how much he didn't fit in.

Would never fit in...

Shaking the memories from his head, Sam continued up the steps to the front door. Knocking loudly on the thick oak, he patiently waited for an answer as his thoughts turned to the information he'd just received from Dean.

So many questions, so many incongruities in this case were making his head spin. It was bad enough trying to figure out why three relatively unrelated students would all go off on killing sprees, but if Dean was correct and the murderous longshoreman was somehow related, then finding a commonality might be impossible. He hadn't been able to find a connection between Kelli, Steve and Laurel thus far other than their attendance at the university; surely adding Calvin Brauer into the mix wasn't going to make it any easier?

Still, if there was one bright spot to it all, it was that his brother at least now seemed to agree that whatever was happening here was truly a hunt. Sam knew Dean was suspicious that his only interest was because of Kelli being a law major. He also knew that one of Dean's greatest fears was that he would go back to school again. He'd heard it verbalized back in Chicago and again during the vampire case in Pennsylvania.

Did he want to go back and finish his education?

Some days...yes. Days that involved pain and injury, either his own or his brother's. Days when he felt like he couldn't take one more ghost or demon. Days when he wished for the *safe* monotony of classes, term papers and tests.

But then memories of the Phi Alpha party, of Rebecca Warren's reaction when she learned about what he dealt with on a daily basis, even of the people that he and Dean had saved, all reinforced how much he could never go back, would never be normal.

The large door creaked upon opening, startling Sam from his inner thoughts. He looked up only to have to look down as his eyes landed on the short, young man who had answered his knocking.

"Can I help you?" the diminutive man asked.

Smiling genuinely, Sam flashed a fake ID and introduced himself.

"Hi, I'm Sam Duquesne from Delta Tau headquarters in Indiana. I'm here to conduct a formal investigation into one of your members, Steve Washburn. May I come in?"

“Uh... sure. I guess you can, although there isn't really anyone around right now but me.”

Sam smiled again and followed the sandy-haired boy inside.

The interior was impeccably decorated, the house seal proudly displayed above an ornate trophy case filled with pictures and awards. Tasteful chairs were placed inside the foyer along with remarkably healthy-looking plants and for a moment, Sam felt like he'd walked into a funeral home instead of a frat house.

“Wow. You guys certainly keep the place tidy,” he remarked.

“Yeah, well you should have seen it last night,” the young man grimly replied. “I'm Kevin. Kevin Fagan,” he added, extending his hand.

Sam shook it eagerly, thankful that his ruse was being so easily accepted. “So, what went on last night?” he asked.

Fagan paled, glancing at his feet as he nervously shuffled in place.

“It's all right, Kevin. I'm not here to bust your chops about a party. I'm here to find out more about Steve.”

The young man visibly relaxed. “Honestly, I didn't know him all that well. As you can see, I'm sorta low man on the totem pole around here, just pledged in last semester. I'm virtually invisible to the upper classmen unless they need their clothes washed, room service or a maid to clean up after them.”

“Is that what you're doing today?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Fagan answered with a grumble. “But hey, I'm not complaining. There's only a couple weeks of school left and next semester, it'll be my turn.”

Sam smiled knowingly. *Another reason I never pledged a house ...*

“So, about Steve. What can you tell me about him?”

“Not much. He was on the football team, played defensive end or something. I'm not much into football so I'm not sure. He was the chapter Sergeant at Arms, but you probably knew that. Beyond that, he seemed like a nice guy. Not at all what you'd consider a jock,” Fagan answered.

“Were you around the night that Steve allegedly shot the liquor store clerk?” Sam queried.

“I saw him earlier. He was just hanging out with Justin, Greg and some of the others. They were watching a Mariner's game on T.V.”

“Did he seem okay? Acting normally and all?”

“I guess, why do you ask?”

“Well, chapter headquarters is concerned that there could be a lawsuit. You know, if what Steve did was part of a prank or some sort of hazing, we need to know. You heard what happened at the University of Maryland chapter? We can't afford any more publicity of that sort,” Sam explained. “So if Steve was drinking, doing drugs or involved in some sort of dare that got out of hand, we need to know now to avoid any embarrassing repercussions on the fraternity.”

Fagan nodded thoughtfully and Sam could tell that the young man was suitably concerned about the story he was weaving.

“Honestly, Mr. Duquesne, Steve seemed perfectly fine that night when I saw him. And I gotta be honest, I wouldn't have ever thought him to be the type to shoot someone in cold blood. He truly was a decent guy.”

“Hmmm. Well, people do have their secrets. Kevin, do you think I could take a look at Steve's room? Maybe there'll be something there that can help us show people Steve's best side, you know?”

The young man nodded eagerly, motioning Sam to follow him up the curving hardwood staircase. At the top, he guided the young hunter toward a closed door at the end of the hallway. Remnants of police tape were still attached to the frame, but it was clear that no one had ventured near the place since the football player had been apprehended.

A quick scan of the room revealed a space that was as orderly as the rest of the house. A backpack was tossed haphazardly on the floor and several copies of Sports

Illustrated were strewn across the bed and nightstand, but otherwise the place appeared as though Martha Stewart came in every day to keep it organized.

"Steve didn't have a roommate?" Sam asked, spotting only one bed.

"No. His roommate graduated this past winter. Him being an upperclassman, he got dibs on a single. Look if there's nothing else you need from me, I better get finished downstairs," Fagan excused himself.

Sam nodded his permission as he continued strolling around the small room. He'd been hoping to talk to someone that knew Washburn better and could tell him about the man's behavior leading up to that fateful night. But instead, he was going to have to satisfy his need for information by checking out the room and Washburn's belongings.

A quick canvas of the chest of drawers revealed nothing more than the requisite clothing, the nightstand, nothing more than an iPod, a football playbook and an open package of condoms.

Typical contents, he supposed.

Moving toward Washburn's desk, Sam looked through the mound of books that were carefully stacked to one side. Economics, business management, definitely not slough off classes.

Beneath the texts, a desktop calendar lay partially obscured. Moving aside the books, Sam looked at the notes jotted on the schedule. Most of them involved classes, but one in particular caught the younger Winchester's eye. Saturday the tenth, circled with eight-thirty in bold red numbers stood out amongst the other appointments. Below the time, the words "Wicked Ink" were equally written in large block letters.

Accidentally pushing the calendar to the side revealed a colorful flyer. Sam yanked it free from underneath the blotter and opened it fully. Like many of the advertisements found around a college campus, this one was a promotion for a new tattoo shop down by the Marketplace that was offering discounts to UW students.

"Tattoos," Sam mumbled as he looked over the flyer, shuddering involuntarily at the thought of the needlework.

He'd never considered getting one, despite the growing popularity among the co-eds at Stanford. It wasn't that he was afraid of the pain involved, it was more that he just never thought of a design he wanted plastered on his skin for the rest of his life.

The closest he'd ever come to considering it was following the celebration of his and Jess's six month anniversary. She had tried to talk him into getting matching hearts and while the prospect of seeing where the beautiful blonde had offered to place hers was exciting, thankfully for both of them the champagne-induced euphoria waned after a good night's sleep.

He tossed the advertisement back onto the desk and was about to look through the closet when the sound of someone clearing their throat startled him. Spinning around toward the door, Sam's eyes spotted a mass of human flesh filling in the open entry.

"Can I help you?" the nearest man asked suspiciously.

Well over six foot and seriously outweighing the tall hunter, the huge frat boy towered over Sam. Beyond him, three other equally large males stood shoulder to shoulder, their faces glowering with barely masked antagonism.

"Uh, I'm just taking a look around," Sam stammered as he nervously glanced about for an alternate escape route.

"Actually, I think you're just leaving," the blond threatened, accenting his point by punching his fist into his open palm. "What shape you're in when you hit the sidewalk is entirely up to you."

For the first time in his life, Sam Winchester wished he'd heeded his brother's advice and travelled armed. Swallowing hard as the men poured into the room, Sam wondered exactly how far away the nearest ER was located.

Puget Sound Inn

Dean slowly settled into the chair as he impatiently waited for his brother's arrival. Freshly showered, his day-old and bloodstained jeans traded for a clean pair, he was ready to get back out there.

Well, almost maybe... he admitted with a slight grimace as he cast a pained look down at the untied boots he'd just jammed his feet into.

They needed to be tied because he needed to be ready once Sam walked through that door. He didn't want to give his baby brother any excuse to keep him from joining the hunt, especially now that he honestly thought there was one. Without a doubt, if Sam came in and found him sitting there like a four-year-old waiting for someone to tie his shoes, there'd be no end to the concerned nagging that his brother was likely to heap on him.

Sucking in a deep breath, Dean leaned forward, his vision wavering slightly as the wounds in his back protested the stretching he was demanding of his body.

His fingers skimmed over the thick cord of the laces to his boots, barely grabbing the ends as he hastily pulled them snug and formed the requisite loops. Finishing the right, he twisted slightly to complete the left when something pulled on his lower right side.

Grimacing, he knew something had popped open, could even feel the sudden trickle of fresh blood seeping underneath the thick gauze.

"Dammit!" he complained, his right hand flashing to hold pressure on his side even as he stared down at the undone boot.

"Guess I might as well go for broke," he convinced himself as he leaned forward once more and completed the knots on the other cord.

Finally finished, Dean groaned as he returned upright. Thankful that he'd managed to accomplish the task without his brother's watchful eye or assistance.

"Where the hell are you, Sammy?" he grumbled, staring at his watch once more.

It had been over two hours since he'd talked to his brother, relaying the info on Cal Brauer's attack at the bar. Surely by now, Sam would have completed his investigation at the frat house and been on his way back? What else could be keeping him?

But as quick as he posed that question, Dean's subconscious delivered the answer.

It's the university... Sammy's all caught up in being back on a campus. You saw the gleam in his eye when he first mentioned this hunt, the excited chatter when he was telling you about Kelli Mattingly and law school.

He wants to go back, who are you trying to kid? You can take Sammy out of college but you can't make him hunt.

A rush of buried emotions slammed into Dean as he sat there waiting. Sure it had been nearly a year since the last time Sam had talked about giving up hunting and going back to school but Dean knew the desire was always just below the surface, waiting for some small breeze to fan it back to life. He saw that passion reignite in his baby brother nearly every time that a hunt went south, every time some innocent life was lost.

Sam wasn't cut out for losing. Like Kelly Mattingly, he had a deep-seated need to help people, and while in Dean's estimation, hunting did help, it wasn't the same as the good Sam might have accomplished had he remained at Stanford.

Look what you drug him back into... think about what he might have become... he was meant for greater things.

"But what if he had died in the fire that claimed Jessica? How could I protect him if he would have stayed at Stanford or become some high-powered lawyer?" Dean mused out loud. "At least by my side, I can keep an eye on him, keep him safe."

He hates you for that... resents that you took him away from the life he could have had. Your need to have the family together ruined Sam's chance for happiness...

"That's not true..." he shouted in denial.

But deep down, he knew there was some semblance of truth in what his conscience was telling him. He only had to look as far as Sam's eyes.

Vibrant blue-green sparkled with eagerness whenever his brother was knee-deep into research or glowed with pride when he found some obscure tidbit of information that pertained to a hunt. There was no denying that Sam was at his best when he was in full geek-glory, no denying that his brother had the brains to be so much more than just a hunter.

But he's not "just" a hunter... like you... he's much more!

Dean was about to continue the internal dialogue when the sound of the key turning in the lock grabbed his attention. He remained seated, waiting for Sam's barrage of chastisement, when the door flung open to reveal his brother's downcast face.

Alarm bells went off in Dean's head and he vaulted to his feet much more nimbly than he thought he could have when he spotted the darkening bruise on the side of his brother's jaw that accompanied a split and swollen lip.

"Sammy? You okay? What the hell happened?" he asked as he rushed forward, his hand's tilting Sam's head to the side so he could get a closer look.

His brother pulled away with an irritated grunt, tossing his backpack on the nearest bed as he dropped down to the mattress behind it.

"Let's just say I ran into a door," Sam replied, gingerly rubbing the purpled area.

"Can I assume this *door* got a good beat-down in return?" Dean questioned.

"Uh, not exactly," Sam answered sheepishly. "Cause there were three more doors behind him."

Dean could feel the anger boiling up inside him, his earlier conversation with himself coming back to haunt him.

Sam didn't get hurt when he was a student at Stanford... See what you brought him back to?

"What's the guy's name, Sammy? Where's he at? The frat house?" Dean demanded, springing into motion, all thoughts about his wounded back forgotten as he dropped into protector mode.

"Stop!" Sam ordered, reaching a hand out to grasp Dean's forearm. "It's all okay. Just a misunderstanding."

"Helluva misunderstanding. How 'bout I just go back there and clear up any confusion?"

"Seriously, Dean, it's okay. A bunch of Steve Washburn's Delta Tau brothers caught me snooping around his room. Before I could give them my cover story, they jumped me. Honestly, they were just trying to protect Steve. They thought I was there to find something bad on the guy to bury him during the trial," Sam explained.

"And did you?"

"What? Find anything to incriminate the guy other than the fact that he was covered in the Lees' son's blood? No, not really. I didn't find too much at all in his room. Just typical college stuff. But once Kevin Fagan came to my rescue and told them I was with Delta Tau's home office, they backed off and were actually pretty informative."

"What did you find out?" Dean asked, feeling the anger suddenly overshadowed by the nagging attention demanded from his injured back.

"Well, like Kelli, they said Steve had been perfectly normal right up until he took off to the liquor store. The bunch of them had been watching a baseball game on T.V. when Washburn suddenly stood up and grabbed his car keys. When they asked him where he was going, he said something cryptic like 'the wolf is howling'."

"The wolf is howling? What the hell?"

"Yeah, they didn't get it either. They thought maybe he was talking about taking a leak or something. It wasn't till they saw him headed for the front door that they realized something more was up. One of the guys, Justin Tomlin, even tried to stop him, but Washburn tossed him off like a ragdoll."

"Well, you said the dude was a defensive tackle. Not like he's small," Dean suggested.

"No, he isn't. But dude, you didn't see Justin Tomlin – aka 'The door'," Sam joked, absently rubbing the side of his face.

"Ah, I see. So we're talking super strength? Like demon strength?"

"I don't know. I mean, Justin's no slouch, but he said Washburn caught him off-guard. Still, all of the guys said that Steve was perfectly normal both before he left and when he came back. They said he scared the hell out them, just walked back into the house, blood splattered all over his shirt and acting like he'd only been gone for a minute or two."

"He had no idea or he was just faking it?" Dean posed.

"He wasn't a theater major, Dean. There was no acting. The guys said he was screaming that he was innocent when the cops came to get him. Said it wasn't him that shot the Lees' son," Sam stated.

"They all say that, Sammy. Whaddya expect?"

"Dean, think about it. If he'd really been in control of himself, why would he have just come back to the frat house? He could have taken off, anything to avoid being caught. But Washburn just strolled back in, said he had a headache and went upstairs to bed. He was asleep when they came for him. Now I don't know about you, but unless he suddenly turned into a sociopathic killer, I don't think he murders someone in cold blood then comes home and hits the sack for a good night's sleep."

Dean considered his brother's explanation, his brows furrowed pensively.

"So, lemme guess. Nobody saw black eyes, nobody saw a thick cloud of black smoke come spewing out of his mouth?" he asked.

"You got it," Sam answered. "The only thing out of the ordinary was Washburn rambling about the wolf talking to him."

"So, no demon that we can tell, no drugs I assume?"

"Nope. The dude was a poster child for abstinence. Total jock, nothing bad going into his body kinda guy."

"Health nut like you?" Dean taunted. He laughed as Sam threw him a dirty look. "Okay. So what do we know about all these people?" the older sibling challenged.

"Well, it would have been the university until you told me about the dockworker."

"Did the three students know each other at all? Have any classes in common? Run in the same circles?"

"Not that I can tell. Three totally different majors, three different living arrangements. I spoke with Academic Affairs and Marybeth is supposed to give me copies of their transcripts later today. Maybe there'll be something in there."

"Marybeth?" Dean asked with a grin.

"Dude, she's like fifty or something. Works as the administrative assistant to the Dean of Admissions. I told her I needed the information because of a lawsuit against the school by the victims of all three attacks," Sam explained.

"Fifty huh? Slow enough for you to catch her," Dean teased.

"Bite me!"

"Not my type, bro. But I bet Marybeth would."

"Listen jerkwad, can we concentrate here? Whatever is happening, we need to figure it out before someone else is affected. These are decent kids whose entire lives are now ruined."

"Yeah, not to mention the people they killed," Dean added.

He watched Sam's expression soften with sadness as the impact of innocent deaths took on its usual personal note to the young hunter.

"So, you're going back to check in with the cougar? I think I'll drop you off on my way to the hospital," Dean offered.

"Can you handle that?" Sam asked suspiciously as Dean moved stiffly to his feet.

"Got showered and dressed all by myself, Mom. Aren't you proud?" he answered sarcastically.

"Don't be an ass, Dean!"

"Don't be a girl, Sam!" Dean threw back as he pulled open the door and stepped outside.

Harborview Medical Center

Dean strolled confidently into the hospital, the voice in the back of his mind telling him that he ought to be *pretending* to be a patient more than his current plan of cover. Reaching the nursing station, he casually pulled out his wallet, flipping it open so the freshly made U.S. Customs I.D. was visible.

Hopefully this goes off better than the last time...

"Hi there," he spoke, his smooth grin and piercing glance at full power as he took in the pretty brunette sitting across the counter.

"How can I help you?" she responded, with a careless toss of her long hair.

Dean smiled and took in a long breath.

Focus, Dean...on the job, his conscience warned him.

Get her number for later, Dean, his libido added in.

"Er... um, yes. I'm with U.S. Customs. I need to speak with one of the patients on this wing," he stammered through.

"Well, who are you looking for, uh, Agent Hetfield?" she asked back demurely. Yet, Dean didn't miss the way she unconsciously thrust her ample bosom forward.

"I'm, uh... looking for Calvin Brauer. He was brought in late last night."

Her expression immediately changed. "Oh yes, him. He's in room three nineteen. But he's under psychiatric watch right now. There's even an officer outside his room."

"Well, we need to speak with him about a recently docked vessel that he helped unload. There's reason to believe there was contraband on that ship and we're thinking that Mr. Brauer might have had something to do with it," Dean lied. "It could be a matter of national security."

"Oh, I see," she answered nervously. "But I'm not sure how coherent he'll be for you. The doctors have him sedated. Of course, considering what he did to that poor guy at the bar, I think he ought to be sedated in jail rather than here. I'd feel safer to be perfectly honest."

Dean reached out to gently stroke her arm. "Don't worry, darlin'. You've got my personal guarantee of protection."

She blushed, ducking sheepishly behind her cascading hair. "I feel safer already," she cooed, looking up at him from beneath fluttering eyelashes.

It was an act and Dean well knew the game that was being played out between them. She was interested and hell... so was he.

"When do you get off? I'm sure I could teach you some basic hand to hand moves that would make you feel a lot more secure," he offered.

"Seven..." she quickly answered.

"Hmm, it just so happens that I'm officially off duty around the same time..."

Focus, Dean! A voice eerily sounding like Sam's cautioned him.

"Shut up, Sam," he whispered under his breath.

"Excuse me?" the brunette asked.

"Nothing. I'm sorry. What was that room number again?"

Dean followed her outstretched finger as she repeated Brauer's room. As he turned to head down the hall, she reached out and grabbed his hand, nonchalantly slipping him a piece of paper before spinning away and back to her duties.

Dean unfolded the paper as he walked down the hall. As he guessed, it was her name and phone number... and something more.

Julie 206-555-3326

You bring the leather and I'll bring the feathers...

He swallowed hard as he read the last line, quickly glancing back over his shoulder to see that Nurse Julie was likewise looking back at him. She smiled, winked and then continued away from him down the hallway.

Dean could feel his face heat up as he watched her walk away. Stuffing the note in his pocket, he made a mental note to give Julie a call once this job was over.

Yeah... and once I'm well enough to keep up with her. Seattle is sooo looking up!

Reaching three nineteen, he found an empty chair outside the door to the room.

"Must be donut time," he joked.

Opening the door, he moved quietly inside, quickly taking in the pallid complexion and deepening bruises that marked Calvin Brauer's face. If Brauer looked like that, he hated to think about how the other guys looked.

"Calvin Brauer?" he called out softly, approaching the side of the gurney.

The man stirred slightly, his eyes rolling rapidly beneath his lids as though he was caught in some nightmare. Brauer moaned lowly, mumbled something incomprehensible and seemed to awake as his eyes flashed open.

"Mr. Brauer, I need to ask you a couple of questions."

Dean watched the burly man twitch, his eyes darting back and forth as he looked at him, and yet through him.

"You can't have her," Brauer shouted, twisting violently against the restraints on his wrists and ankles.

"I'm sorry? Who are you talking about?" Dean repeated.

"You bastard, you can't have her. She's mine. Do you hear me?"

"It's okay, dude. I don't want her. She's all yours. Now can you tell me what happened last night at The Dockside?"

Brauer thrashed like a penned bull ready to burst from the gate, yanking so hard that the entire bed shook from the motion.

Dean reached instinctively for the flask of Holy Water concealed within his jacket, fearful that if the man was truly possessed, those leather straps weren't about to hold him.

"I have to protect her... she's mine and I have to protect her..." Brauer repeated over and over.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Okay then... guess nobody's home in there, huh?"

"You!" Brauer shouted, his eyes flashing wide as he glared up at Dean. "You want her. You want to take her from me don't you?"

Dean cautiously backed off a step, his fingers unscrewing the cap on the flask.

"Listen, dude. I don't want her at all. She's yours okay? I swear!"

In a flash, the longshoreman went berserk, his muscular body launching off the bed despite the padded cuffs that were meant to keep him tied to it. Jerking spasmodically, Brauer bounced up and down on the thin mattress as though he were having a seizure.

Dean watched warily, yelling out for the nurse when the older man's eyes suddenly rolled back in his head. With his head turned toward the door, he didn't see Brauer's arm snake out of the wrist restraint until he spun back and saw that the demented man was sitting up and working on freeing his other arm.

"Sonofabitch," Dean groaned. "Hey! I need help in here!"

The door was thrown open as Julie and a tall orderly stormed into the room. The white smocked man immediately flung himself on top of a screaming Brauer, their hands a flurry of movement as each fought for supremacy.

Dean watched as the pretty brunette purged the air from a syringe in her hand, waiting for an opportunity to administer the medication.

With a grunt, the orderly was thrown into the nearby wall, his head slamming backwards with a loud crack. He slumped to the floor unconscious even as the nurse was moving in to administer the sedative.

She was no match for Brauer's strength, and he caught her coming at him with a bone-crushing grip on her wrist. She screamed in pain and looked frantically to Dean.

"You can't have her," Brauer yelled as he wrapped a thick arm around her neck. "She's mine! I won't let you hurt her."

Dean charged in, determined to save the young woman from the maniac's grasp.

"You're hurting her!" he shouted back, hoping to snap the deluded man to some semblance of reality. "I'm not going to hurt her, but you are right now."

Julie gurgled a soft whimper as her windpipe collapsed underneath Brauer's muscular grip.

Left with no other choice, Dean surged forward, barreling headfirst into the longshoreman's chest. He heard the whoosh of air escape Brauer's mouth and felt the brunette slide limply out of the man's grasp.

But with the girl out of the way, Brauer's full attention was now focused on the young hunter. With a loud bellow, the older man pulled free of the final restraints even as Dean rained several hard punches into his abdomen. Unfazed, Brauer backfisted Dean, catching him across the temple and knocking him to the floor.

His body screamed out in agony as his back twisted off the bed and landed hard on the linoleum. Breathless, he blinked against the pain, his mind screaming at him to get back to his feet.

Brauer was on him again in an instant, dragging him up to his feet before slamming him backwards into the far wall. Dean grabbed at the man's flimsy hospital gown as he tried to use the material to keep Brauer at bay.

As the man forced his arms up underneath Dean's grasp, the thin fabric tore away revealing the ornate tattoo on his upper arm. It immediately caught Dean's attention and despite the direness of the situation, he found himself staring at the colorful mermaid.

Brauer followed Dean's eyes down to the tattoo, his rage climaxing as he saw the mermaid being ogled by another man.

"YOU CAN'T HAVE HER!" he screamed, tearing away from Dean's grasp and jamming a gnarled fist into Dean's gut, doubling him over.

Under normal circumstances, Dean would have taken the hit with relative ease. But Brauer was a dockworker and despite his age, the man had spent years building up the muscle mass that he now used expertly on the elder Winchester.

Thankfully, the psychotic man backed away after his latest attack. Still mumbling incoherently about "protecting her," Brauer gently caressed the tattoo with a lover's touch.

Dean spotted his opening and despite the absolute torture in his back, he dove for the large man's knees, collapsing them as ligaments gave way under the surprise tackle.

Brauer crashed to the floor with a loud grunt as Dean grabbed the top to an overturned Mayo stand and brought it solidly down on the longshoreman's head. Sitting up, he looked for any sign of consciousness on the older man's part. Still not completely satisfied, he slammed the metal tray downward once more for good measure.

It was over nearly as fast as it had begun, the small hospital room looking more like a set from World Championship Wrestling than a place to care for the sick or injured. A rush of more bodies quickly entered the room; another nurse, two more orderlies and the AWOL cop.

They quickly injected the big man with more medication as he was placed back on the bed, restraints encasing his wrists, ankles *and* chest this time around.

Julie pushed up on a shaky elbow, looking over at Dean who had crawled away from the action and slumped against the far wall. She edged over toward him, a grateful smile pressed across her face.

"Are you okay?" she asked genuinely.

"I'm fine," Dean replied with the stock answer.

In truth, he was far from it. His back was calling him names that he generally reserved for those moments when he was beyond angry or upset and he could feel the telltale wet warmth that indicated that some of the wounds had torn open. He knew the blood seeping into the fabric of his shirts and it was only a matter of time before the red stain would become apparent on his jacket or worse.

He had to get out of there before anyone started asking questions, but damned if it wasn't tempting to just pass out and wake up in a nice soft bed with Nurse Julie taking care of his battered body.

"I guess I'm not gonna get any more out of him?" he stated matter-of-factly.

"Doubtful. That was a healthy dose of Haloperidol. He'll be a zombie for hours now."

"Good," Dean mumbled, looking back at the quieted man as he struggled to a standing position.

"Are you sure you're all right?" the brunette asked again as Dean tried to hide his grimace and the slight sway in his stance.

"I'm fine. Really," he assured her as he moved slowly toward the hallway.

She followed him, both of them stopping briefly at the door to cast a parting glance at Calvin Brauer. "What was he talking about in there? Who was he trying to protect? It was like he thought there was someone else in the room with us."

Dean shook his head. "I dunno, but his satellite dish definitely ain't picking up all the channels," he snarked.

She laughed and moved away, but Dean remained a moment longer staring at the silent man.

It was the tattoo... he was talking to the mermaid.

Puget Sound Inn

This time it was Sam who waited impatiently for his brother's return, his fingers drumming nervously across the top of the wood laminate table.

Dean was late. No, not late, missing. Dean hadn't shown at all to pick him up at the university and thus far hadn't answered his cellphone.

Angry, frustrated and admittedly worried, Sam took a cab back to the motel, expecting to find his brother passed out on the bed. But the room was empty. No sign of Dean since they'd departed earlier.

He knew his brother wasn't one hundred percent, the shotgun wound to his back, while not life-threatening, had to be pure agony when he moved. Sam likewise knew that Dean would never admit it and had been covering his injury-induced weakness, just like he always did.

It pissed Sam off to no end. He'd never understand why Dean felt it necessary to act that way, to refuse to ask for help or God forbid, acknowledge that he was hurt or hurting.

Still, Dean was nowhere to be found, and that fact scared Sam the most.

He was about to dial his brother's cell once again when the deep rumble of the Impala's engine seeped through the paper thin walls of the motel room.

Sam rushed to his feet, meeting Dean at the door as his elder sibling staggered inside.

"Dean!" he exclaimed, his voice a mixture of apprehension and mild irritation.

"Where the hell have you been? Why didn't you answer your cell? Are you okay? You look like crap."

His brother waved him off with a weak flash of his hand before gingerly continuing on toward the nearest bed.

Sam watched as his brother slowly lowered himself down to the mattress, his right arm pressed tightly against his side. But still, Dean hadn't spoken a word.

From experience, Sam knew that wasn't a good sign. If Dean wasn't talking, that meant he was either trying to avoid a conversation or he didn't want his voice to betray his condition.

"What the hell, Dean. What happened to you?" Sam demanded, trying to reach in and check his suspiciously quiet sibling.

"Got info..." Dean breathed out, even as he tried to shrug out of his jacket.

"Looks more like you got your ass kicked," Sam observed.

"It's a dirty job, dude..."

"Yeah, and you always seem to spend a good deal of time in the muck. Let me see what you've done," the younger man ordered.

Dean obliged. *Too easily...* Sam thought as he pulled the jacket off his brother's arms.

Another bad sign...

"You realize you're bleeding again?" he sniped.

"Wow, good to see that college education paid off for you, Sam," Dean snarked back.

"Aren't you even curious why I'm here and not at the uni?" Sam asked as he lifted the tail of his brother's shirt.

Dean leaned slightly forward to expose his injured back to his brother. "You're here because you're not there. I went by the uni, you were gone."

"I've been calling you for over an hour and a half dude," Sam complained as he peeled away the saturated gauze pad. "Didn't you hear your cellphone?"

He watched his brother's hand fumble in his jeans pocket, withdrawing the Motorola and flipping it toward Sam. "It got broke when I was trying to keep Brauer from smashing my skull in. Sorry, man," he replied.

"They still have payphones, Dean."

"Dude, enough with the badgering. You're worse than a wife and my head really can't take it right now. Just patch me up and let me tell you what I found out at the hospital before I face plant onto this bed," Dean snapped.

Sam relented, ignoring his brother's sarcastic jibe and moving to retrieve some fresh bandages.

"So, what did you find out?" he asked. "Other than the fact that you should have given those wounds more chance to heal before you took off to play Superman," he added under his breath.

"Look smartass, this Brauer guy, aside from being built like a friggin' tank, was completely whacked out of his mind. But he wasn't demon possessed, that much is for sure. He kept going on and on about protecting some chick. Over and over, he's shouting, 'you can't have her, I wont let you hurt her,' like he was a broken record," Dean began.

"Yeah, so he thought someone was gonna hurt his wife or girlfriend of something?"

"You might think, except..."

"Except what?" Sam asked as he finished cleaning the seeping blood from his brother's back and prepared to tape down the clean gauze.

He heard Dean suck in a sharp breath before he continued, his brother seeming to be unsure of what he was about to say next.

"While I was playing 'keep away' with Brauer, his hospital gown ripped and I spotted this huge tattoo of a mermaid that covered most of his arm," Dean explained.

"Yeah, so? He worked the docks, I'd think something like that would be pretty common," Sam commented.

“Exactly, but it wasn’t that the dude had this freakin’ hot looking woman drawn on him, it was the fact that he was treating it like it was alive; like it was real and he was talking to it.”

“Hmm, are you sure? I mean he could just be delusional; a paranoid schizophrenic? Like you said, maybe he was on something? He certainly gave you a run for your money. ”

The younger hunter recoiled when Dean exploded. “God Sam, first you’re the one that thinks this is a demon possession case, you give me crap when I try to explain it with drugs or mental problems and now you’re questioning what I saw? Dude, you didn’t see how this guy acted. Sure he nearly beat my ass, but it wasn’t demonic strength. And I’m telling you, at the end, he stood there stroking that damn tattoo like he was gonna make out with it or something. He looked at it like it was ...”

“What?”

“Like she was right there in the room with him.”

Sam sat back, looking at Dean as the implication rushed through his mind.

“Tattoos huh?” he mumbled finally.

“Pretty sure that’s what I just said,” Dean mouthed back.

Sam stood and began pacing around the narrow confines of the room, absently rubbing the back of his neck as he did.

“I found this brochure on Washburn’s desk for a place called Wicked Ink. It’s a tattoo shop down near the Marketplace,” Sam explained.

“Yeah so? What are you thinking? Lucifer is doing the whole Mark of the Beast thing? Found a new way to control people?” Dean asked as he palmed a handful of ibuprofen from the bottle on the nightstand. “Funny, I wouldn’t have expected Satan to use pictures of beautiful mermaids as his calling card. Always thought it was supposed to be a 666 or maybe even a barcode?”

“I dunno. It does sound pretty absurd when you say it that way,” Sam agreed. “But what if that’s the connection? I mean, Washburn had a new tattoo, a husky done on his calf. Kelli’s roommate said that she had just got some butterfly done a few weeks back. I’m betting that if I check, Laurel Brown has one as well.”

Dean shook his head as he carefully leaned back against the pillows. “Hmm, that’s weak at best dude. And come on, mermaids, huskies and butterflies? Again, not exactly what I’d call demonic symbols, although considering the Diefenbaker we tangled with up north, I might give you that one.”

“It’s the only connection we have between all four suspects, Dean. Granted it’s lame, but it’s worth checking out this Wicked Ink place. We could see if all four of them had their work done there,” Sam suggested.

“And you’re gonna say what? ‘Excuse me, I’m just wondering if any of your artists are putting demonic ink on people to get them to do Hell’s bidding?’ Yeah, let me call ahead to Harborview and see if they can reserve a room next to Calvin Brauer for you,” Dean teased as he reached for the remainder of the bourbon.

“Give me more credit than that. We’ll just poke around a bit. See if there’s any obvious signs of demons or summoning. Sulfur or something... maybe,” Sam offered with a shrug.

“Aw, Sammy. Is this just a cover for you checking out getting that Thundercats tattoo you always wanted?” Dean yawned and took another long pull from the bottle of liquor. “Tell ya what, Kolchak. It’s early yet. Most tattoo parlors don’t exactly keep banker’s hours. Let check it out later, after I catch a few winks.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed as he saw Dean slide deeper down onto the mattress.

His brother was hurting, no doubt about it. The excuse was nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt to cover the fact that Dean wasn’t in any shape to investigate much besides the inside of his eyelids.

“Okay, bro,” Sam agreed. Looking at his watch, it was nearly six-thirty. Too early for anyone to go to bed except little old ladies ... *and injured, headstrong brothers.*

“I’m going to grab something to eat? You want something?” Sam suggested.

Eat something, Dean. At least then I'll know there's nothing really wrong with you...

"Nah, thanks man. I just want to sleep a bit. I'll get something when I get up," Dean drowsily answered, rolling over to his uninjured side and closing his eyes.

So, not the answer I was looking for... Sam thought to himself as he sagged dejectedly into the spare chair and watched his brother with concern.

Surely the injury, while painful, wasn't enough to keep Dean down? It was clean, dressed and bandaged with no sign of infection. He knew enough field medicine to know the wound itself was bad, but not that bad.

Sighing, he opened the laptop as Dean's soft snoring filtered across the room.

"Quit being paranoid, Sam," he chastised himself. "Dean isn't a Timex no matter how much he thinks he is. Be glad he's taking it easy for a change."

But in the back of his head, he couldn't shake the nagging feeling about Dean. His big brother was invincible, always bouncing back from any injury, strong and dependable to the end. The rare instances that Dean had been seriously injured had been some of the darkest days Sam had ever faced. The prospect of losing his elder sibling scared him worse than any demon, so when Dean acted in any manner other than his usual indestructible self, Sam couldn't help but flash back to those memories.

"Dean's okay. You're overreacting. Just focus on the job," he rebuked himself.

Turning back to the laptop, he went to work, his mind already made up to check out Wicked Ink. Googling for a physical address, he quickly jotted it down on a loose piece of paper. After skimming over the shop's website, Sam didn't find anything more suspicious than the ominous tag line that blatantly promised "artwork to die for..."

"Nice..." he snarked, trying not to let his suspicions run out of control.

It was still a pretty weak lead, but considering that nothing else made any better sense, he figured they had nothing to lose by investigating it.

Pulling out his cell, he dialed the number to Laurel Brown's roommate, tapping nervously on the corner of the laptop as he waited for an answer.

"Hello..."

"Uh, hi Felicia, this is Sam Duquesne again. I was wondering if I could ask you just one more question about Laurel? Did she by chance get a tattoo recently?" he asked.

There was a pause as the co-ed answered.

Sam shook his head in response to her question. "No, I don't think the tattoo was bad or anything. I'm sure she didn't get sick from a dirty needle. I know it's a bizarre question, but I'm just following up on something I heard from another student. I'm sorry to bother you and I appreciate your help."

The girl asked him to keep her posted, telling him that Laurel was still in custody awaiting an independent psychiatric evaluation. She was sad to see her best friend so hopelessly lost, her future likely damaged beyond repair, her dreams crushed and irreplaceable.

Sam hung up the phone, saddened by the news but even more determined to get to the bottom of the case.

Glancing over at his fitfully sleeping brother, he looked down at his watch.

Seven-thirty. Dean would likely sleep for a few hours, courtesy of the meds and the alcohol.

And not that Sam minded that at all. If Dean could be pig-headed enough to push his body well beyond its physical limits, then Sam didn't have any regrets about taking advantage of the rare occasions when he could spare his brother a minute's rest.

Standing, he quietly grabbed Dean's jacket from the back of the second chair. Reaching inside the outer pocket, he stealthily snaked the car keys, casting a panicked glance at his brother when the metal jingled together.

He considered leaving Dean another note, similar to the ones he'd left earlier this morning, but figured with luck, he'd be back before the elder man even fluttered an eye.

Besides, he thought to himself as silently opened the motel room door, I'm just gonna check the place out. What harm could there be in that?

Wicked Ink Tattoo and Piercing Shop

Sam wandered among the still-bustling streets that bordered the Marketplace. While many of the trinket shops had already closed, the fish markets silent and the flower brokers gone, the nightlife was just beginning to heat up.

Music was starting to filter out of the smaller clubs as local bands set up and did their sound checks. People just finishing dinner or heading out for a party casually strolled about the rain-dampened avenues.

It didn't take him long to find Wicked Ink, the shop was nestled along a side street just off of Blanchard.

At first glance, the place looked like any other tattoo parlor; the walls covered in sample pieces, music blaring from a stereo and several customers already seated in reclined chairs as they acquired their "work of body art." Sam walked inside, silently taking in the offerings that were plastered all over the wall.

Pictures of skulls, hideous looking monsters, angels and crosses, Japanese characters and Polynesian tribal symbols were intermixed like an art appreciation class gone wrong. He even spotted a couple of protection symbols, used to ward off evil spirits or demons, which surprised him with their accuracy.

Still, nothing was overtly incriminating. There weren't any black altars, no chalices filled with blood, not even a whiff of sulfur in the air.

What did you expect? Full-on Satan worshipping right out front with the customers?

In fact, about the only thing that was churning his stomach was the continuous post-grunge rock that was pouring from the speakers. Never a huge fan of Nirvana, he'd pretty much steered clear of that genre, tolerating Dean's penchant for Alice in Chains and even the occasional Soundgarden, but despising the fact that in general, he could never tell what the hell the singers were saying.

"Can I help you?"

Sam looked up to see a young man with scraggly dark hair standing behind the counter.

"You see anything you like? Mike over there can sketch you a mean koi," the heavily-tattooed man offered with a grin.

"Uh, no," Sam hastily replied. "I'm uh, looking for something unique. Some friends of mine from UW said they got some work done here. Said I should check you guys out. I saw the flyer circulating the campus, figured I see what you guys could do for me."

"Well, we don't work miracles," the man teased with a soft chuckle. "Seriously, that was probably Nash. He owns the joint. Started plastering those stupid flyers all over the campus cause he wanted to attract the rich kids' money. Now if it was up to me, I say stick to the regulars, the purists, not these wannabe kids that think getting a tattoo is thumbing their nose at their parents."

Sam's eyebrows rose even as he shrugged. "So, this Nash. He around?"

"Not yet. He's a real night owl. Freakin' vampire if you ask me. He doesn't even start to wake up until midnight. But if you want, you can take a look at his portfolio. The guy's a genius with the ink. Despite his questionable business decisions, he can certainly create some beautiful skin work. Makes the stuff look like it could just jump off the skin and come to life."

“Um, sure then. I’ll check it out,” Sam agreed as the man pulled a large photo album from under the counter.

“Take a look. If you see something you like, come back after midnight. We’re open till three a.m. You could talk to Nash then.”

Sam nodded and opened the book.

Flipping pages, he was shocked to see the caliber of work displayed inside. Elaborate designs that rivaled M.C. Escher were interspersed with simpler but no less beautiful pieces. Turning a couple more pages, he came across several butterflies. Of different sizes and colors, each was a near perfect representation of the real insect.

Kelli Mattingly had a butterfly...

He turned another page and found himself staring at a picture of Steve Washburn, proudly displaying his snarling wolf-like Husky. On the opposite side, was a older, muscular man showing off a gorgeous mermaid, his smile beaming from ear to ear as he gave a “thumbs up” to the photographer.

“Calvin Brauer...” Sam murmured.

All in all, there were dozens of pictures. Men and woman, students and bikers, animals, tribals, and portraits; Nash’s work was displayed on people from every walk of life.

Sam felt a chill course down his spine. While he still had no idea what was going on, it was plainly evident that this Nash and the tattoos were at the center of it. He needed more information, and he needed to talk to Dean.

Telling the man he’d be back later, Sam left the shop and walked back out into the cooling night air. Heading back down towards the Marketplace where he’d parked the Impala, his mind was racing with theories.

If Nash wasn’t using some sort of demonic control, then what was he doing? And why? What did he have to gain from making people commit murder?

Reaching a park bench that overlooked the Sound, Sam dropped onto the wood seat. He wasn’t ready to go back to the motel and the night breeze seemed to give him some semblance of peacefulness.

He sat there for several minutes, staring blankly out across the water at the twinkling lights reflected from the channel markers and passing boats. The earlier pedestrian traffic had subsided, everyone occupying the boisterous clubs and bars. He was alone, it was quiet and yet the voices in his head were shouting loudly.

“It just doesn’t make any sense,” he grumbled in frustration.

He pulled the cell from his pocket and considered calling Dean to see if his brother was awake yet and wanted anything to eat. Huffing air, he replaced the phone as he remembered Dean’s broken cellular.

“Probably should get back and check on him,” he ordered himself.

But before he could rise up to walk back to the waiting Chevy, something hard and heavy smashed down on the back of his head.

The lights flickering on the water exploded in colorful brilliance as night turned to a false day and then back to night again. With a groan, Sam crumpled to the ground, his eyes sliding closed as darkness sucked him into unconsciousness.

Puget Sound Inn

Dean awoke groggily to the sound of the motel room door creaking open. It was still dark within the room as he struggled awake, his hand automatically snaking underneath the pillow for the ominous looking Bowie that resided there.

His hand gripped tightly around the hilt, he feigned slumber as he waited for the intruder to move inside. With a silent grimace, he sprung from the bed, knife held in an offensive position even as the lights flicked on in the room.

Instantly relaxing, Dean's eyes fell on Sam as the younger Winchester continued into the room, dropping his jacket on the chair as he made a bee-line toward the open bathroom.

Dean rubbed sleep-encrusted eyes with the back of his free hand, allowing the Bowie to drop to his side.

"Where ya been, Sammy?" he asked, his eyes tracking his younger brother as Sam crossed the floor.

Squinting, Dean looked at the small digital clock on the nightstand. Red glowing lights flashed four forty-five back at him.

Almost dawn... where the hell has he been?

"Where'd you go, Sam? Back to the uni?" he asked suspiciously. "Going for a little hot co-ed action?"

Sam didn't answer but continued into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. Dean twitched when he heard the lock click into place.

"Oh, I get it. You hooked up with the cougar didn't ya? Bet you're in there now trying to wash the stench of her Ben-Gay off you?" he nervously teased.

"I went to check out Wicked Ink, Dean," Sam's voice seeped out from behind the closed door.

"You did what?" Dean exclaimed, stiffly limping over toward the bathroom. "Why the hell did you do that without me?"

"You were sleeping."

"Yeah, and I told you we'd go when I got up. What the hell, Sammy, it could've waited or you coulda woke me," Dean insisted, even as worry began to overshadow his irritation at being left behind.

He went alone...because you were too weak to be there to go with him...

And then it struck Dean; the time. Too much time had passed. Why had Sam been gone so long?

"Dude, it's nearly morning. When did you leave? Where the hell have you been all night?" he demanded.

There was a moment's worth of silence before the bathroom door inched open and Sam's head peeked around the corner.

He looked like crap, his eyes sluggish and pupils far too dilated for Dean's liking. Instantly, he reached up to touch Sam's face, but his brother jerked away.

"I'm all right, Dean," Sam insisted grumpily. "I just got knocked out or something."

Dean's eyes widened with panic. "What do you mean you got knocked out or *something*? I thought you said you just went to check out the tattoo shop? You better start telling me what the hell went down or I'm seriously going loaded for bear on someone's ass down there."

He watched as Sam sucked in a deep breath, swaying slightly and reaching out to place a steadying hand on the frame of the door. The motion only served to make Dean more concerned, more determined to extract a pound of flesh from whoever had hurt his baby brother.

"I went to the shop, took a look around and talked with one of the artists. He told me that the owner, a guy by the name of Nash Meyers, was the one that catered to the kids at the university. He even showed me the dude's portfolio," Sam explained.

"And?" Dean urged him on, fighting back the temptation to barge past the half-opened door and grab his brother before he collapsed.

"Dude, its gotta be him. I mean, I don't know what he's doing, but there were pictures in his portfolio of Steve Washburn, of Kelli's butterfly, even of your mermaid guy. And what's worse..."

"Worse? It can get worse?" Dean interrupted.

Sam nodded slowly. "Yeah, maybe it can. Dean, there were dozens of other pictures of people that Meyers had worked on. If he does have some way of controlling them through the tattoos, then potentially there are others out there that

might start killing; people whose lives will be ruined if we can't figure this out and stop it."

"But how is he doing it? Spellwork? Does he have some demon helping him out?" Dean asked. "Did you see anything at the shop that looked suspicious?"

"No. But I only got a look at the front area where they were working. There looked to be a couple of other rooms beyond the main shop."

"So then what happened to you, Sammy? That still doesn't answer where you've been all night or who knocked you out," Dean challenged, his concern for Sam unwavering.

His brother shrugged. "I'm not sure. I left the shop around nine-ish, walked back down to the Marketplace. I was just sitting there on a bench trying to put it all together when something drilled me in the back of the head."

"You didn't see who it was?"

"Back of the head, dude. Implies it was from behind. Sorry, haven't grown a third eye back there yet," Sam snapped.

"Easy, Sammy. I'm just asking," Dean soothed. "Lemme take a look."

Sam pushed him away with a firm hand on his chest. "I'm all right. I just want to take a hot shower," he grumbled.

Dean eyed him warily, the look of exhaustion and pain still masking something else. But he wasn't sure quite what. He nodded and stepped back away from the door, allowing Sam to close it with a resounding thud. Pausing, he listened intently until he heard the loud rush of water pouring from the shower head.

He's hurt... worse than he admits...

It's your fault if he is. You should have been there to watch his back... his conscience blasted him.

"Sam," Dean called out above the din of the water and the solidly closed door. "Sammy?"

"Yeah?" the soft reply eked from inside.

"Uh, you need anything?" *Bandages, stitches, a trauma surgeon?* "I was thinking about grabbing some coffee. You want something to eat too?" Dean offered.

"Nah. I'm good!"

Liar! "Okay then. I'll be right back in a few."

"Yeah, okay, Dean," Sam answered slowly.

Dean waited a pregnant moment, listening for any noise that might indicate that his brother needed help, resisting the urge to kick down the door just to see for himself.

Still clad in the clothes he'd fallen asleep in, he pulled on a clean shirt and stuffed his feet into the boots that his brother must have removed before he left for his little recon mission. Ignoring the dangling laces, Dean grabbed the keys to the car that Sam had dropped on the edge of the table.

Looking back over his shoulder as he reached the door, he couldn't help the nagging feeling that Sam wasn't telling him the whole story of what had happened last night.

Now you know how it feels... the Sam voice of his subconscious accused him.

"Bite me," he snarked back to the unseen voice, pulling the door behind him as he stepped out into the barely breaking morning.

Hearing the door to the motel room slam shut as Dean left, Sam sagged against the cool wood of the bathroom door. His stomach churning, the niggling discomfort that was spread across his upper back was starting to get the better of him.

Stepping in front of the mirror, he gingerly fingered the spot at the base of his hairline. The crusted bump on the back of his head confirmed what he already knew.

Someone had hit him with something solid, knocking him unconscious for several hours.

The fact that he'd woken up on the same park bench that he'd been accosted on didn't help settle the nagging voice that shouted that something more had happened while he was out. Stranger still, his wallet, the keys to the Impala, anything of any value had been left on him, intact. He'd carefully neglected to share with Dean that little tidbit of information, knowing his brother would have surely gone into protective overload with the potential mystery.

"Guess that rules out a mugging," he quipped to the reflection in the mirror.

But deep down, he'd known that all along.

As the water from the shower continued to flow, the heat starting to steam up the tiny space, Sam reached to wipe the fog from the mirror. The motion tugged painfully at his upper right shoulder and he halted in mid-wipe at the strange discomfort that had been on the periphery of his attention since he'd regained consciousness.

Like the worst case of road rash he'd ever felt, his upper back and shoulder were on fire. Even the light touch of the fabric from his shirt was beginning to be more of a torment than he could ignore.

Peeling up his sleeve, he couldn't reach the affected area. Frustrated, he yanked the outer shirt and thinner t-shirt over his head in one motion.

Twisting around so he could see the area, Sam's eyes went wide with shock.

Glaring back at him from the mirror was a gigantic golden cobra, colorfully inked on his skin. Coiled, it reared upward from his shoulder blade extending to the top of his shoulder, its hood fanned outward as though it was ready to strike.

Sam shuddered involuntarily. The tattoo looked so real, so vivid, that he couldn't help be taken aback by its threatening appearance. He wasn't afraid of snakes, but the cobra looked as if it was ready to jump off his flesh and sink its poison-filled fangs into anyone nearby.

Oh my God... "He got me," Sam exclaimed as the realization sunk in.

I wasn't mugged, it wasn't random. Meyers must have seen me at Wicked Ink... must have followed me. Maybe he knew we were on to him...

Frantically, Sam tore the washcloth from the nearby bar. Twisting on the sink's tap, he soaked the fabric and began scrubbing at the offending mark on his skin. Rubbing with all his might, the colorful blemish wouldn't budge. The tattoo was permanent.

He scrubbed a moment longer, tearing at the flesh on his upper back until the area surrounding the cobra was violently red from the abuse. But it was no use...

Call Dean, he'll know what to do...

"No, I can't," he refuted his own reflection. "Dean will freak..."

Gee, you think? Look what happened to Kelli Mattingly, Steve Washburn... Calvin Brauer...

"What if it happens to me? What if the tattoo can make me do something like they did?" Sam questioned, his heart pounding with panic deep within his chest.

He looked back into the mirror, fear and disgust filling him as he looked at the cobra once again. His mind was swirling, partially from uncertainty, but more from the splitting headache that was throbbing behind his eyes.

"What am I gonna do?" he moaned.

Buck up... quit being such a whiner...

"Huh?" Sam replied, looking around the small space in confusion. *Where had that voice come from? "Dean?"*

Sam pulled open the door, his eyes quickly scanning the empty room.

No Dean. His brother hadn't returned.

Slipping back into the steaming confines of the bathroom, a flash of movement startled him as he passed by the mirror once again.

The cobra...

Were his eyes playing tricks on him? Did he actually see the thing move?

"No...no...no..." he murmured, spinning back around to look at the damning tattoo. "Concussion... it's just a concussion. It can't move. Right?"

Yet, even as he tried to convince himself, Sam knew what he'd seen.

"Gotta tell Dean. Gotta warn him," Sam insisted, turning off the shower and preparing to pull back on his shirt.

Why? What's big brother gonna do? Kiss it and make it all better...? the cobra hissed at him.

"He's gotta look out for me, watch me..."

God, you're pathetic. Always running to Dean to take care of everything. Have you ever managed to handle anything on your own?

"Dean will know what to do..."

Sure, run to Dean then. Poor little Sammy, always in Dean's shadow, not strong enough or smart enough to deal with anything on your own...

"That's not true. I made it to Stanford. I could've had a full ride to law school," Sam argued back.

Woulda, coulda, shoulda... and Dean came and took you away from that. You were happy there and he ruined it all...

"He didn't ruin anything. I went because he needed my help looking for Dad. I went because I wanted to."

Whatever... if believing that helps you sleep better at night. But you know deep down what the truth is...

Sam slammed his fist into the mirror in denial. "Shut up!" he shouted.

You're such a weakling, Sammy... And Dean... he wants to keep you that way...

"No! Nonononono! Dean's my brother, my flesh and blood. He watches out for me, he'd die for me."

Are you a man or a mouse? Dean needs to learn that he's not the big chief. He's just a pitiful copy of your dad. Didn't you have enough of your dad bossing you around?

"Dad... yeah..." Sam slowly replied, memories of John's dictatorial parenting rushing back to mind.

Dean's no different... he learned from the best...

"Dean's just like Dad. Always telling me what to do, where we're gonna go, what we're gonna hunt," Sam admitted. "He hardly ever listens to me."

So, what're you gonna do then?

Sam's face spread into a sadistic smile, his eyes narrowing as he stared back into the mirror. "I'll show him who the baby brother is..."

Dean returned to their room, sweeping inside with a smile on his face and generally feeling better since he wolfed down two sausage and egg biscuits on the way back to the motel. With additional sandwiches and hash browns tucked away in the bag under his arm and two large coffees in a carrier, he sauntered through the door with a wide grin on his face.

"Come and get it, Sammy. I cooked breakfast..." he teased.

Setting the food on the small table, Dean pulled off his jacket and tossed it on his bed before dropping into a chair and tearing into the food. He paused after the first bite, mildly curious that Sam hadn't appeared.

"Sammy? What are you up to in there? Decide to take a long, hot bubble bath or something?" he quipped, noticing that the sound of water pouring from the shower was no longer present. "Come on dude. Drag your sorry ass out here and eat something while it's hot."

The door to the bathroom creaked slowly open and Dean looked up to see Sam standing in the entry. Spotting that his brother was still wearing the same clothing as when he'd left, Dean's eyed him suspiciously.

"What's up, bro? Run out of hot water before you even got in there? Or were you just waiting for Marybeth to come scrub your back?" he teased.

Watching as Sam stepped further into the main room, Dean's worry kicked up a notch as his younger sibling remained ominously silent.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked, concern taking over.

Was Sammy hurt worse than he let on? Maybe the hit to the head did more damage than he'd thought. Or... was Sam hurt elsewhere?

Dumbass, Dean. How could you take off and leave him here alone? You should have made him let you look at that head wound.

"Hey, dude. How 'bout I take a look at your head?" he offered.

"It's fine!" Sam grumbled as he neared.

"Yeah, probably, but why not let me look?" Dean pressed as he rose from the chair and closed the distance separating them.

"Why? Do you think I'm too stupid to take care of myself?" Sam demanded angrily.

Dean stopped, stunned by his brother's vehement response. "No. I just thought it might be hard for you to check it out on your own, being on the back of that thick skull of yours and all."

"I'm not a baby, Dean. I can manage just fine by myself. And I'm not some soldier under your command. You're not Dad. You can't order me around," his brother hissed back, his voice filled with fury.

Dean backed off a half step, his hands held out submissively. *What the hell, Sam? What's wrong with you? Head injury? Concussion?*

"No problem, Sam. Just thought I could help you. Come and eat, okay?" he offered quietly, his eyes still warily watching his brother's every move.

"Eat Sam, sit Sam, do this Sam. You're just as bad as Dad, always telling me what to do. I'm not a kid anymore, and I'm damn tired of you acting like you're in charge of me."

Dean recoiled, not comprehending why his brother was talking to him this way. He reached out to pull Sam closer, determined to check out that head wound for his own satisfaction.

But as his fingers skimmed the fabric of Sam's shirt, his brother lashed out and slammed both fists against Dean's chest, staggering him backwards.

"Sam?" Dean gasped, his chest robbed of air from the suddenness of the attack.

"SHUT UP!" Sam screamed back, his eyes flashing with a wildness that Dean had never seen before.

Before he had a chance to question it, Sam rushed forward, driving his shoulder into Dean's chest, knocking him backward into the nearby wall. As Dean struggled to protect himself, Sam's hands closed around his neck with a suffocating grip.

"I'll shut you up... one way or another," Sam hissed, as Dean's vision began to darken. "We'll see how well you can boss me around when you're dead!"

Wicked Ink

Nash Meyers sat before a long table, the room around him eerily illuminated by the light from dozens of candles that encircled the space. The pungent smell of dried Vervain and Nightshade filled the air as smoke curled up from the nearby brazier where the herbs were burning.

Spread out in a meticulous fashion, several syringes with grim looking needles and smaller vials of colored ink covered one side of the altar. But for all that the medical equipment looked threatening, they were nothing compared to the lone two objects that lay directly in front of the tattoo artist.

As decorated as the man that hovered over the dark altar, a silver secespita and large silver bowl, sat silently on the black cloth waiting for their owner to employ them in the supernatural ritual he was preparing.

Meyers fingers glazed over the ornate silver blade, carefully avoiding its edge until his hand reached the intricately carved hilt. Grasping the secespita firmly, he lifted it heavenward, the irony of that movement lost on the dark mage as he began to quietly chant.

... coram ipso submissum...

The candles flickered as though some unseen wind had coursed through the back room, yet Nash did not react. He continued the Latin spell, his grip on the ceremonial blade unwavering.

... devoveo hac sacrificum...

Nash moved the blade toward his left arm, his flesh bared for the oncoming bite of the blade. He slowly pulled the edge across the skin just above his wrist, opening a small gash but carefully avoiding the intricate tattoos that began just slightly above the self-inflicted wound.

Blood instantly welled to the surface, thickly coating his lower arm as it crept toward his hand. Unfazed, Nash calmly ran the marred surface of the blade through the nearest candle, watching with fascination as the flame consumed the thickening red serum with an audible hiss. Once the secespita was clean, its shining surface once again restored, the tattooed man respectfully placed it back on the black cloth covering the altar.

Without any sense of urgency, Nash then grasped the accompanying silver bowl, serenely ignoring the thick wash of blood cascading down his hand. Bringing the mouth of the small basin up to the edge of his palm, he watched as the fluid trickled down the inside and began to collect at the bottom.

... minuo tempero... incursio terreo... he began to chant once again.

Patiently waiting as the bowl filled, he didn't flinch as the flames from the numerous candles began to dance wildly, the result of the strong wind that seemed to emanate from out of Nash himself. It tore at his long, dark hair, whipping around him as though he were caught in a ghostly zephyr.

... quando progredietur discordiarum...

Once the silver bowl was filled, he placed it reverently on the altar before him, taking only a moment to apply a clean piece of cloth to bind up his injured wrist before turning back to his spellwork.

Reaching into a nondescript basket, Meyers pulled out a handful of dried herbs, spreading them across a square piece of granite and murmuring more of the incantation. Hefting a solid-looking pestle, he slowly ground the aromatic plants until only a fine powder remained.

With the tips of his fingers, he pinched off a tiny amount of the mixture and tossed it into the silver chalice.

... accipio hac, validus Unus, e dominus barathrum...

The blood within the bowl hissed ominously as Nash gently stirred the macabre concoction. The odor from the coagulating fluid and the strange herbs wafted in the air and masked the thick smoke of the burning brazier.

When he was satisfied that it was thoroughly mixed, the heavily tattooed man lifted one of the new syringes and dipped the end of the needle into the bowl. Pulling back the plunger, he drew the blood into the hypodermic.

... ingredietur mox...

One by one, he added a tiny amount to each of the vials of colorful ink, the tiny drops of blood falling into the various hues and spreading out as they stealthily blended into the apparently harmless fluid.

... bellorum, rixarum et mendaciorum...

Once he was finished with each bottle of ink, Meyers tossed the contaminated syringe into the silver bowl with the remaining blood mixture. Taking the large black candle in the center of the altar, he plunged the flame into the basin.

... submissus Huic obedient... multus dominus, annuo tui famulus potentia.

The bowl erupted into a brilliant red flame, the fire as hot as the pits of Hell that originated it. Consuming the contents instantly, when it died away, nothing remained behind but the unmarred gleam of the silver. Blood, plastic and even the thin metal of the needle were gone, Meyers' black magic destroying all evidence of his evil work.

He rose up from his kneeling position by the altar, a satisfied smile spreading across his thin face. He systematically blew out the candles and gathered up the bottles of ink before respectfully covering the various tools of his trade.

As he walked toward the door that led to the rest of the tattoo parlor, Nash glanced back over his shoulder.

The wild rush of power he felt after every incantation always left him energized and hyperactive. He knew it was a fleeting sensation, while his strength as a warlock was continuing to grow, the residual toll it took from him physically was one of the reasons he offered his blood in the ritual.

It sealed the people he tattooed to his magic and enabled him to offer them to his master. Nothing was sweeter than the sacrifice of an innocent, nothing more greatly rewarded than to have that innocent commit some unspeakable act of violence.

Meyers closed his eyes, enjoying the dark energy as it spread throughout every fiber of his being.

"Time to pay the Master," he spoke aloud as he walked out to the main shop. "Let's see what sort of havoc that shaggy-haired, pretty-boy can cause."

Puget Sound Inn

Dean struggled underneath the larger frame of his younger brother. His head was pounding as Sam's hands closed tighter around his throat, slowly crushing his windpipe and effectively cutting off the air to his lungs.

Worse than the physical pain was the confusion and shock that Sam's attack generated in Dean's mind. His brother looked normal enough, his pupils the appropriate size, no evident blood seeping from his scalp or anywhere else Dean could see.

Even a head injury wouldn't account for this behavior...

Still, whatever was wrong with Sam, right now all Dean could focus on was staying alive.

As much as he hated doing it, he slammed the heels of his hands against Sam's temples. Sucking in a huge gasp of air as his brother fell backwards to the floor, he rebounded, scrambling to his knees as he prepared to fend off his sibling.

"Sammy," he called out. "What's wrong with you?"

It wasn't possession; that much Dean knew for certain. From just three feet away, he could plainly see that his brother's eyes were their normal blue-green hue, not the incriminating black of a demon inside of him.

"You gotta snap out of this," he begged as Sam crawled back to his feet and glared at him, a low snarl escaping the youngest Winchester's throat.

"I'm perfectly fine, Dean," Sam snarled. "For once, I'm taking control."

Control? The single word struck a chord deep within Dean's scrambling brain.

Sam's bizarre behavior was eerily similar to how the others had acted. Seemingly quiet and complacent individuals suddenly filled with a rage strong enough to cause them to lash out violently.

But how... and why?

Before Dean could work out the answers, Sam dove at him again, feigning a right hook but landing a solid left jab that split his lip open. Even though Dean countered

with a punishing right uppercut of his own, the move caused him to turn slightly, exposing his injured side and lower back.

With an insane glint to his eyes, Sam landed two vicious punches to Dean's back. The elder sibling grunted from the explosive pain that enveloped his flank, fighting the urge to drop to the floor.

"I'm a man..." Sam hissed as he delivered yet another blow to the fresh gunshot wounds.

"I know you are, Sammy..." Dean replied through teeth clenched in pain as he unsuccessfully blocked several more punches.

He could feel the blood beginning to pour from the reopened wounds, the warmth spreading across his back and augmenting the fiery heat that was enveloping his abused flesh. As much as he hated it, he knew if he didn't put his brother down, and right now, the chance of him staying conscious much longer was dwindling as rapidly as the precious red fluid that was gathering at the waist of his jeans.

With a surge of energy, Dean grabbed his brother by the shirt, throwing his head forward and slamming the front of his skull into Sam's nose. The force of the blow staggered Sam back once more, blood blossoming from each nostril. A portion of Sam's shirt tore free as he fell backwards, remaining in Dean's clenched hand as the elder sibling fought his brother.

While Sam struggled to clear his vision, Dean's sight was twenty-twenty. There was no mistaking what the elder sibling saw as his brother's upper body was exposed.

A cobra tattoo, vividly colored and stretching from the lower portion of Sam's scapula, up and over his shoulder, glared back at Dean from its place on his brother's flesh. In that instant, Dean's fears were confirmed. Somehow, Sam had fallen prey to their mind-controlling tattoo artist.

"Sammy, you gotta listen to me..." Dean pleaded. "This isn't you. That tattoo guy, he got hold of you... he's controlling you somehow."

Watching his brother rise to his feet and prepare to attack him again, Dean's mind scrambled for some way to snap his brother out of his strange psychotic behavior. He was reluctantly reminded of how it turned out for the others; Steve Washburn and Laurel Brown, likely to be locked away for the rest of their lives, Calvin Brauer, committed to a psychiatric ward, and Kelli Mattingly, dead along with the rest of the innocent people that became her targets.

No matter how he considered it, there wasn't a happy ending for any of the tattooed victims.

"No way," he stated steadfastly. "No way are you getting Sammy."

Diving for his cast off jacket, his hand had barely closed on the silver flask tucked away in the inside pocket. His fingers brushed against the grip of his .45, his mind screaming at him to go for the more lethal form of protection.

Ignoring the voice, Dean rolled to his feet just as Sam grabbed him by the shoulders and delivered a brutal knee to his kidney. He cried out, unable to stifle the vocal response to the absolute agony that tore through him as he arched his back.

Lashing out, the pain pumping adrenaline throughout his system and making him choose between fight and flight, Dean spun around to meet Sam head on. Ignoring the blows that his brother delivered to his abdomen, he managed to unscrew the cap and toss the sacred liquid at his brother.

A small portion of the Holy Water splattered onto the cobra tattoo, releasing an immediate puff of steam as the skin beneath the ink hissed angrily. Sam recoiled as well, screeching out a pain-filled gasp as the fluid splattered over him.

Not missing the opportunity and encouraged by the results, Dean grabbed his brother by the shaggy mop of perspiration-soaked hair that clung to his head, pulling him closer and controlling him. With the cobra exposed, Dean poured the rest of the flask directly onto the lifelike tattoo.

Sam instantly ceased his struggle and collapsed to the floor, screaming and writhing in pain. He rolled back and forth as though he were on fire, his hands scrabbling wildly at the place where the tattoo marred his flesh.

The sight and sound of his brother suffering shook Dean to his core. He dropped back on his heels, breathing raggedly as he watched Sam, torn between wanting to help his brother yet maintaining a wary distance.

But as Sam's cries continued, Dean acknowledged there was really only one thing to do to attempt to protect his brother from the effects of the tattoo. Crawling closer, he delivered a bone-jarring right that landed on Sam's jaw, splitting Dean's knuckles and knocking his sibling unconscious.

With no time to waste, he pulled the top sheet from his bed, tearing off a long, thin strip which he used to secure his brother's wrists. Satisfied that Sam was relatively incapacitated, Dean began the arduous task of dragging his taller brother towards the bathroom. Once there, he jammed the plug into the drain and turned the tap wide open, filling the tub as fast as he could.

Leaving Sam on the cool floor, Dean then gathered his journal and plain-looking crucifix from his gear bag. Returning to the bathroom, he stepped over Sam's silent form and knelt beside the tub.

"Exorcizo te, creatura aquæ, in nomine Dei Patris omnipotentis," he began, dangling the cross by the gold chain into the water. "Et in nomine Jesu Christi, Filii ejus Domini nostri, et in virtute Spiritus Sancti."

Glancing over his shoulder as Sam twitched behind him, Dean knew he needed to finish the blessing quickly. It was his best guess for how to control his brother, and admittedly, he knew it was a chancy one.

"...ut fias aqua exorcizata ad effugandam omnem potestatem inimici, et ipsum inimicum eradicare et explantare valeas cum angelis suis apostaticis, per virtutem ejusdem Domini nostri Jesu Christ..."

Sam had always teased him about his poor annunciation of Latin, but as necessity demanded, the words came fluidly from Dean's mouth. Finishing the prayer, he dropped the cross into the nearly filled tub. Tossing the journal to the side, he twisted around and grabbed his brother underneath the arms.

With a loud grunt, Dean tugged Sam to the side of the tub. With a yell that combined exertion and determination, he unceremoniously pushed his brother's lanky frame up over and into the bath, ignoring the resulting wave of water that was displaced onto the floor.

There was an instant hiss as the Holy Water enveloped Sam. The younger sibling's eyes flew open and an unearthly scream tore from his throat.

Dean was immediately back to the edge of the tub, one hand holding Sam's thrashing body beneath the surface, the other grasping his brother's hand in silent, unwavering transference of strength and support.

"Easy, Sammy. I gotcha, I gotcha," he whispered. "It's gonna be all right."

Sam tossed and bucked against Dean's hold and for a split-second, the elder hunter thought he actually saw the cobra twist and turn on his brother's back as it reacted to the Holy Water. He involuntarily jerked backwards as the thing seemed to leap off Sam's skin in an effort to strike at him.

"Holy crap!" he shouted, disbelieving his eyes.

But as Sam began to still, Dean saw that the fierce-looking tattoo was in its original position, quietly adorning his brother's flesh and mocking him with its lethal connection.

"Dammit, Sammy. Why couldn't you have gotten a tat of a puppy or something?" he grumbled, letting loose of the breath he'd been holding while wrestling with his out-of-control brother.

"Dean?" Sam weakly replied as he stirred back to reality, his eyes blinking rapidly as he looked up at a soaked and weary Dean.

Dean sprang back to his knees, rushing to the side of the tub once again as he quickly surveyed Sam for any further signs of aggressive behavior. The younger sibling lifted his bound hands to his head and pressed them to his forehead.

"Sammy... how are you doin'?" Dean asked, trying to hide the fear and uncertainty from his voice.

"I guess okay, other than being trussed up and soaking wet. What happened?"

"You don't remember?" Dean questioned.

He watched as Sam's eyes narrowed and Dean could tell that his brother was at a loss for the morning's activities.

"I remember coming back to the motel and getting ready to take a shower, but then nothing after that. I guess that might explain why I'm sitting in here, although I don't recall tying myself up," Sam quipped. "Dean, are *you* okay?"

The older sibling sat back and leaned wearily against the wall. Was he okay? Not by a long shot. His back felt as though someone had taken a crowbar to it, repeatedly, and he was fairly certain that whatever repair work Sam had done the day before was pretty much ruined. Not to mention that the earlier eaten breakfast was threatening to reappear as the adrenaline waned from his body.

"I'll manage," he replied shakily. "But what about you, Sam? Are you sure that you don't remember anything else?"

He watched his brother's gaze go distant as Sam considered the question.

"Yeah, maybe something more. I remember starting to get undressed, and... and spotting that cobra tattoo in the mirror," Sam recalled. His eyes went wide a second later as he burst up out of the water, contorting his body so he could see the upper part of his right shoulder.

"Oh my God, Dean. The tattoo, he got me. That bastard Meyers put a tattoo on me," Sam shouted in a panic.

"Easy, easy. It's okay," Dean soothed.

"No dammit, it's not. I remember this voice in my head. It's vague, but I can remember someone talking to me."

"Someone? Who, Sam?" Dean questioned.

"I don't know," Sam replied in frustration. "It was a man's voice... but then it was my voice. I couldn't stop it; it just kept digging at me, screaming at me."

"What was it saying?" the elder Winchester asked curiously.

"It was telling me to fight, like it was egging me on." Sam quieted, crimping his eyes tightly shut as though he were ashamed to make eye contact with his brother.

"Sammy, it's all right," Dean assured him. He hated seeing the silent agony playing across his brother's sullen face.

"Dean, it was controlling me. I couldn't help it. I couldn't stop it."

"What? Like Roosevelt Asylum, Dr. Ellicott mind control?" Dean asked.

"No. Worse," Sam admitted.

Dean remained quiet, part of him wanting to know more details yet another part wanting to spare his baby brother the knowledge of what he'd done, of what he'd almost done.

"All I could feel was hate," Sam continued, "Like the entire world was against me. And all I could think... all I wanted to do was to kill someone."

Stillness settled in the small bathroom as both brothers absorbed the significance of Sam's confession.

"And now?" Dean asked, breaking the silence. "Can you hear the voice now?"

There was a pause before Sam answered, the time lapse not reassuring the elder sibling despite the answer.

"No..."

Eyeing Sam carefully, Dean considered the truthfulness of the response. As much as he wanted to believe that Sam was all right now, considering the actions of Meyers' other victims, he wasn't willing to take that chance, especially when it was Sam's life on the line too.

"Dean, how do you think he's doing this?"

"I don't know. Black magic is my guess, but I'm damned if I know how he's using the tattoos. I could see if they were some sort of sigil or demonic symbol, but friggin' butterflies, mermaids and snakes?"

"We gotta stop him, Dean. However he's doing it, there could be others out there. Hell, who knows how many more tattoos he might have done."

Dean nodded thoughtfully. "And how do we stop him, Sam? Are we even sure it's him?"

"We have to check him out. Confront him if necessary. I don't know." Sam pleaded.

And then what, Sam? Kill him? In cold blood? Dean let the thought remain unspoken, his mind spinning with more questions than he could formulate answers for.

"Well, this much I know. For now, that Holy Water bath you're enjoying is keeping you relatively sane. You chill out there and I'll go see what I can dig up on this Nash Meyers creep," Dean suggested pushing up from his seated position on the floor.

"Dean, no!" Sam shouted, not missing Dean's slow, pain-filled movements or the grimace that seemed permanently plastered on his face. "We should go together. You're in no condition to take that sonofabitch on alone."

The older man waved off the concern. "I managed to get your freakishly huge ass into the tub didn't I? I think I can handle some warlock wannabe. Just stay in that water, Sam. Please?"

Dean listened as Sam protested more heartily, but his mind was made up, even if his body was less than willing. Bending down to check the fabric ropes used to bind his brother, he wasn't expecting the water or Sam's thrashing to have loosened them enough to allow his brother's hands to wiggle free.

Seeing the fist that was aimed at his head, he tried to duck away, but Sam had a longer reach, not to mention he was a bit more agile than Dean was in his current condition. He felt his brother's knuckles collide with his jaw, water splashing at his face but not enough to grant him any clarity. Dropping hard, he fell backwards, the collision of his head striking the wall finishing what Sam's fist had started.

Lifting himself up out of the water and stooping down to check on his unconscious brother, Sam apologized. "Sorry, bro. But there's no way you're fighting this battle for me. Maybe I can give Meyers a taste of his own medicine."

Wicked Ink

Sam pulled the Impala up to the curb about a block down from the storefront of the tattoo parlor. It was still early morning and this section of Seattle's club district was still buried under the cloak of sleep.

The steady beat of raindrops pattered on the Chevy's roof and windshield strangely in time with the pounding of the heart within Sam's chest. He wasn't fearful, not of the task at hand. What bothered him was the potential he had to fall prey to Meyers' strange control.

What if he hurt someone? What if he killed someone?

What if you had killed Dean?

There was no mistaking what had occurred at the motel. Even if he hadn't seen his handiwork starkly displayed in the reopened wounds on Dean's back, then the condition of the room would have been a dead giveaway.

That he had fought against his brother, had apparently attacked and even hurt him, was eating at his soul. It was too similar to Rockford, and no matter that a couple of years had passed since their hunt at Roosevelt Asylum, Sam felt no less guilty for having shot Dean then.

This was the only way he could see to make things remotely right. Keeping Dean safe and out of harm's way should he succumb to Meyers' magic was the only thing Sam could think to do. Besides, perhaps since he was already marked, maybe the tattooist wouldn't be as tempted to work his evil mojo on him while he was in the man's presence.

In his head, it all sounded logical. Yet Sam knew that his older brother would probably repay him with an equally adamant amount of physical and verbal abuse when he got back.

... If he got back!

Sam cleared those thoughts from his mind, determined to focus on the problem at hand. Stepping out of the car, he pulled the collar of his jacket up around his neck as the cool rain immediately soaked him.

He carefully canvassed the front of the tattoo parlor, watching to see if there was any movement inside. By all appearances, the shop looked quiet, the interior dark and the raucous music from the previous evening giving way to the cries of the overhead seagulls.

Sam watched a moment longer, noticing the lack of pedestrian traffic in this section of the city.

Good... he thought silently. Maybe Meyers isn't even here. The other guy said he was a regular night owl. With any luck, he's still asleep somewhere.

Cutting across the street, Sam worked his way to the back alley, finding the rear door to the shop and cautiously picking the lock. He was inside within seconds and facing a long hallway that ended at the main portion of the business.

There were only two doors off the hallway; one standing open and revealing a makeshift breakroom with several chairs, a table, refrigerator and microwave. Leftover wrappers finished the look with an overflowing trashcan that was attracting several noisy flies.

The second entry was closed, and on further inspection, locked. The door was marked "office," yet the prickling at the back of his neck told Sam that there was very little tattoo business being managed within the sealed room.

The speed he'd employed on the lock at the back door, he now duplicated on this one, gaining access to the dark, windowless room. Reaching inside, his hand skimmed the switch, flipping it up and illuminating the space.

Cautiously, he scanned the room, not missing the black altar, the equally black candles or the brazier that still held the remnants of Meyers' last ritual. To the left of the altar, Sam spotted a weathered-looking leather binder. Turning the first page, he immediately recognized the handwritten spells and mystical designs as being part of the man's grimoire.

He spotted a few symbols he recognized from the *Lemegeton*, and still others that he recalled from a copy of the book of Abra-Mein. Without a doubt, Nash Meyers was involved in some heavy duty black magic.

Moving over toward a small cabinet, Sam opened the door to reveal several small bottles of colored fluid. He knew they must be ink, but his stomach twisted spastically when he spotted the dried blood spattered on the outside of each vial.

"Blood," he murmured. "He's controlling people by using blood?"

It all became clear. Meyers was adding his own blood to the ink, likely casting some sort of dark spellwork over it that allowed him to bind himself to the people he used it on to create the lifelike tattoos. It was insidious and ingenious at the same time and while Sam couldn't fathom the rationale for why the man was doing this, he knew it took a fairly well-versed and powerful person, skilled in the black arts and with some heavy connections, to pull off a spell of this magnitude.

Carefully looking over the remainder of the room, he didn't hear the dark figure that pulled into the room behind him. In a flash of motion, Sam felt himself spun around by his jacket, his head jerking sideways awkwardly as a hard right hook landed on his jaw and sent him staggering backward toward the altar.

When his vision cleared, he looked up to see Dean standing in front of him, his hand held out in an offer to pull Sam to his feet.

"I owed you that one. Honestly, what were you thinking, Sammy? Taking off without me again," he asked as he jerked Sam upward.

"How did you get here?" Sam asked surprised.

"Dude, remember who taught you how to hotwire a car, huh? You probably weren't gone five minutes before I jacked some pickup out of the IHOP parking lot. Jeesh, Sam, you're slipping. What if I had been Meyers?" Dean teased.

"I knew you weren't," Sam covered.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I could smell you from a mile off," Sam snarked, moving back to the altar and picking up the grimoire.

Dean started to reply, but sucked in a quick whiff of his shirt and shrugged. "So, what have you got here?"

"Well, I figured out the how, just not the why," Sam answered, opening the book and showing it to Dean.

He watched as his brother scanned through several pages, his face wrinkling with disgust as he looked through the book.

"Who cares about the why, Sammy? This bastard is getting stronger. He's sold his soul to some major demon in exchange for power. He's sacrificing these people just as effectively as if he put a blade to their throat."

"I found these too," Sam added, grabbing a couple of the tainted bottles of ink from the shelf and holding them out for his brother to see.

"Holy Hell, is that what I think it is?" Dean asked as he cringed.

"Yeah... blood. He's using blood, probably his own, to bind the victims."

"Man, don't these people realize how nasty that is? I mean, what's the point of having protected sex if some nutjob goes and puts his freakin' body fluids in the tattoo ink?" Dean asked as his face curled with distaste.

"Dude, can you not go there? Remember, I got one of those friggin' things plastered on my back," Sam pleaded.

"Oh yeah, that's right," Dean chuckled. "Just think, Sam, you could get your first STD and not even have touched a chick. Kinda like all the pain and no gain. Like being in the back row of a strip club, paying the cover but not getting to touch. Like..."

"Dean..." Sam's voice warned.

"Yeah, yeah. Just screwing with ya. Look Sammy, I promised I'd get you out of this and I will. Now let's find a way to break that spell and then we'll deal with Meyers," Dean suggested.

"Okay, so where do we start?" Sam asked.

"Uh, well, let's start by destroying that altar. You take care of that and I'll salt and burn what's left of the ink and the grimoire," Dean ordered.

Sam agreed, pulling everything from atop the black cloth and tossing it into a nearby metal trashcan. Beside him, Dean was busily dumping the contents of the small bottles into the container, finishing by tossing in the heavy book and dousing the entire contents with salt he pulled from his backpack.

Sam caught the bottle of lighter fluid that Dean tossed his way, plucking it out of the air and pulling open the top before pouring the flammable liquid into the trash. He stepped back when Dean coaxed a flame from an entire book of matches.

Both siblings stood there as the trashcan erupted in flames. The blood sizzled within the container, screeching as though it refused to be consumed. A heavy smoke rose up from the container, but quickly died off as the contents burned away to nothingness.

Satisfied they had destroyed everything significant, they each took one more pass around the small room before heading out to check the main shop.

"I think that's everything," Sam suggested as he took a careful look around the work area.

"Hell, dude. Let's just torch the entire place to be sure." Dean countered, his face looking more serious than the tone of his voice implied.

"We can't do that," Sam refuted. "What if it gets out of control and damages an adjacent building or worse yet, injures some innocent bystander or firefighter?"

"Acceptable casualties."

"Dean..."

"All right!" Dean whined. "I was only kidding anyway. Besides, we still have the problem about what to do with Meyers. How do we keep him from setting up shop again?"

"Kill him..."

"Yeah, wish it was an option bro, but you said it yourself, that's not our style. Still, I wouldn't mind beating him within an inch of his pathetic life. 'Specially after all he's done to you and everyone else," Dean commented as he continued to check out the other bottles of ink that were lined up at the other artist's stations.

When Sam didn't respond, he turned to look for his brother, thinking that Sam had wandered off back down the hall. Instead, he spotted him, standing deathly still, his face a blank mask as he stared off into space.

"Sammy? You with me, bro?" Dean called out.

He wasn't sure his brother heard him, considering that Sam didn't so much as blink in response. In that moment, Dean knew his brother was hearing the voices again, once more succumbing to the murderous suggestions.

Yet as he stood there, waiting to see if his brother made a move, Dean could hear the voices as well, except the voice he heard was chanting in Latin.

... quando progredietur discordiarum...

It was Meyers! Tucked away just at the rear of the hallway, the would-be warlock had his eyes focused on Sam as he continued the sinister invocation.

... bellorum, rixarum & mendaciorum...

Uncaring anymore about the sanctity of life, in particular Nash Meyers', Dean drew the .45 from his jacket and took aim on the long-haired man. His finger twitched on the trigger as he began to pull it back.

The weapon exploded as it discharged, but the shot went wild as Sam crashed into Dean's side, tackling him to the ground. Grabbing Dean's wrist, Sam wrestled the gun from his hand, tossing it away and following through with a solid left to Dean's gut.

Dazed, Dean struggled to put up a fight, but as he drew back his arm to level a punch at his younger sibling's head, Sam's weight was suddenly lifted from his chest. He looked up to see that Sam had turned his attention back on the warlock, walking towards the man with a slow, deliberate and utterly lethal saunter.

"Submissus Huic obedient!" Meyers shouted as Sam approached.

Instead, the young hunter barreled into the tattooed man, driving him into the edge of the doorway and landing subsequent blows to Meyers head and abdomen.

As Dean watched, the two went at each other like cage fighters, trading blows that left each bloody and instantly bruised. He'd rarely seen his brother fight with such vehemence and at a certain level, it scared Dean.

Sam wasn't exactly a pacifist, but he was generally slow to anger and reserved physical solutions for those times when intelligence or smooth-talking couldn't get him out of a situation. Sam was the brains, Dean the brawn, and generally, those were the roles that they accepted and fell into.

But seeing Sam now, fighting with anger, with blind, uncontrolled rage, Dean realized that even his sometimes meek brother could be a formidable opponent if he chose to be.

With an almost primal yell, Sam slammed Meyers' head down on his lifted knee, the blow snapping the man's head back and dropping him limply to the shop floor. Breathless, the younger Winchester stood over the unconscious man, staring down on him even as blood trickled from his split lip and splattered on the hardwood.

With his attention focused on the downed sorcerer, he didn't notice Dean creep up from behind and pour the fresh contents of his flask down Sam's shoulder. Spinning around, his skin once more hissing in anger, Sam barely refrained from striking out at Dean.

Catching himself, his fist drawn back, he sheepishly lowered his arm as he regained control.

"Sammy? You back with me?" Dean asked, as he watched his brother's eyes.

"Yeah," Sam croaked hoarsely as he moved forward, seeking Dean's shoulder to steady himself. He didn't miss the hesitant step that his older brother took away from him, Dean still wary about Sam's state of mind. "Dean, honestly, I'm okay. The voice is gone."

"You went after Meyers instead of me... why?" Dean asked even as he helped Sam over to a nearby chair.

Sam laughed, slowly shaking his head. "It was all his fault. His spell, it only made me want to hurt someone, it wasn't specific who. Somehow, in my mind, he was just the bigger threat."

"Hmmpf," Dean grumbled. "I'm not sure whether that makes me feel better or not."

"So what are we gonna do with him now?" Sam asked, looking down on the unconscious man.

"Tie him up, hold him somewhere. Maybe call Dad or Bobby. One of them is bound to know something or someone that can bind his magic," Dean suggested.

"Yeah, I guess we don't have many choices. Not like we could turn him over to the cops for what he's done." Sam agreed.

"Okay, you sit tight. I'll grab some rope from the car."

Dean darted off, disappearing out the back door and into the steady downpour.

Sam sat there, staring at Meyers and gingerly rubbing his bruised and bloodied jaw. The pounding of the rain seeped into his consciousness, mesmerizing him as he felt himself drifting from alertness.

...pareo meus nuntium...

The Latin combined with the soothing rhythm of the rain, lulling Sam as he felt his eyes becoming heavy.

"You know, you're pretty stupid, trying to take me on in my own house. Do you realize what I can do to you here?" Meyers taunted as he rose up on an elbow.

Instantly, Sam screamed, the sound so primal that it filled the small shop. Dropping to his knees, the young hunter tore at the fabric of his shirt, ripping it free of his skin as he twisted to see his upper right shoulder. The pain was excruciating as he watched in horror while the cobra pulled itself free of his flesh.

Rising from his body, the snake slid down his back and slithered across the floor to sit in a tight coil facing him. In fear, Sam froze as the deadly serpent fanned its hood and reared back as it prepared to strike.

"Don't you see? I'm far more powerful than you could possibly imagine," Meyers sneered confidently. "You are mine to command, a sacrifice that I shall take great pleasure in offering to my master."

Sam could hear the taunt, but transfixed by the cobra, he couldn't find the impetus to breathe, much less reply.

"And such a worthy sacrifice you'll make, one that will surely elevate my power to an entirely different magnitude. I'd almost enjoy killing you right here and now, let the snake destroy your mind with fear as easily as if I plunged a blade into your heart, but where would be the fun in that?"

Meyers stood, pacing around Sam not unlike a hungry lion circling its dying prey.

"Why?" Sam finally managed, his voice barely more than a whisper as he remained frozen in place.

The tattooed man laughed heartily. "Why? For the power. Practice only gets you so far. If you want to rise to the next level, you have to be willing to offer the proper

sacrifices. My master, he truly appreciates the innocent blood I've brought to him. And honestly, wasn't that bit with the Jeep at the Husky's Den just inspirational?"

"You're a sick bastard," Sam snarled, his eyes ever watchful on the menacing snake.

"It's in the blood," Meyers replied cryptically. "Figuratively and literally. The greater the blood sacrifice, the more power I can attain. And get this, I hit the jackpot with you."

"How's that?" Sam demanded.

"What could be better than spilling the blood of your own family? When your brother walks back through that door, you're gonna tear him limb from limb until you're bathing in his blood," Meyers assured him.

"Never," Sam refused. "You can't make me kill Dean."

"Wanna bet?"

In his heart, Sam refused to believe that he could willingly harm his brother, yet as the back door creaked open, he could hear the soft whispers of the voice rising in his head.

... iuguolo tui frater...pareo me... trucido tui frater nunc... kill your brother... obey me... slaughter your brother now...

Fighting against the intense commands in his head, Sam shook as he struggled to remain in control of his body and mind. Vaguely, he saw Dean enter the main shop, dropping the rope to the ground even as he drew the stainless steel Colt out of his pocket.

"Sam! Move out of the way!" his brother shouted.

"I can't... the snake...if I move, it'll strike," Sam called back.

"Snake? What freakin' snake are you talking about?" Dean demanded, his eyes flashing over the room to search for his brother's source of panic.

"It's right there," Sam insisted with the slightest nod of his head.

"Dude, he's screwing with your head. There's no snake. I swear! Now move the hell out of the way."

Before Dean could move, Nash drew up closer to Sam, brandishing the silver *secespita* threateningly in his hand.

"Sammy! NO!" Dean screamed as he tried to aim around his brother.

"I'll have my blood, one way or another!" Meyers screamed as he lunged toward Sam.

His shot blocked, Dean didn't hesitate; he dove forward, plowing into both Sam and Meyers at the same time. The three men collapsed in a tangle of bodies and limbs, each fighting to gain control as they scrambled to their feet.

Meyers and Dean stood first, seeking each other out. Dean had lost the Colt in the tackle but the warlock had managed to maintain his hold on the ceremonial dagger. Thrusting forward, the blade barely missed connecting with Dean's chest.

The older sibling arched backwards out of the way, but that move left him open to Meyers follow through. In a flash of metal, the blade cut back from the opposite direction, biting the edge of Dean's forearm and drawing blood.

Dean cursed, grabbing the laceration with his free hand and backpedalling as Meyers came at him again. Stumbling into one of the chairs, he landed on his injured side, the impact stunning him as it stole his breath.

Meyers was on him instantly, the blade held high above his head as he prepared to plunge it into Dean's chest.

But before the knife could find its target, the long-haired man was propelled sideways as Sam crashed into him and drove him off Dean. His legs churned as he lifted Meyers up onto his shoulder and threw him forward.

Their momentum carried them towards the plate glass window that framed the side of the shop and provided a stunning view of the far off mountains. The sun was barely peeking through the overcast sky and a stray beam cut through and poured

into Wicked Ink almost as if it were trying to breach the darkness that had settled over the place.

The quiet of the early morning was broken, the brilliant prism of light from the lone ray of sunlight disrupted as Sam's attack tossed Meyers into the clear pane.

The window gave under the man's weight, shattering as he crashed through it, tiny shards littering the sidewalk while larger, jagged pieces speared outward like crystalline daggers. Bloodied by dozens of cuts from the broken glass, Meyers lay across the sill like a broken mannequin, his eyes staring upward as the rain pelted his face.

Sam walked cautiously over to the opening, his mind clear of the earlier voice, the cobra thankfully absent. He'd just known it was going to strike when he jumped up to save Dean, but he couldn't let his fear paralyze him. Not when his brother's life was at stake.

He felt more than saw Dean walk up alongside him, the older sibling also staring down blankly at the man sprawled across the broken pane, as the final gush of blood spurted outward.

"I didn't mean..." Sam started, his voice going quiet as he watched the blood pour from the gaping wound at Meyers' torn throat.

"He never knew what hit him dude. That glass cut clean through his jugular," Dean stated.

"Should we call someone?"

"What? Like 911? Sammy, he's way past any help now, man or magic."

Sam nodded slowly, unable to tear his eyes away from the dead man's body, transfixed as Meyers' blood mixed with the rain and was swept into the nearby storm drain.

"Sam? You okay?" Dean asked.

"Yeah," Sam replied slowly. "I guess I will be now."

Puget Sound Inn

Dean watched with interest as the evening news reported the death of a local tattoo artist. The reporter standing out front of the Wicked Ink shop described the grisly murder of the owner, found dead, his throat slashed as he was thrown through the store window.

"...while the police have found no motive for the murder, drugs or robbery have not been ruled out..."

"Yeah, or maybe black magic, not that the cops would ever consider that," Dean grumbled. "Easier to just assume that drugs and tattoos go hand in hand."

Settling back against the headboard, he stretched tentatively, finding the newly patched up wounds were slightly less painful despite the added abuse.

He hated asking Sam to help clean up his back, not wanting to torture his already sullen and guilt-ridden sibling by making him view his handiwork once more. But in the end, it was his brother that forced the issue, ordering Dean to abide his ministrations.

Dean acquiesced, if for no other reason that it seemed to help Sam, allowing him to make peace with his unprovoked attack by affording him the opportunity to help put his brother back together. Dean knew that despite both siblings avoidance of the subject Sam's actions while under Meyers' control were weighing heavily on him.

Hence, why Sam was now hiding out in the bathroom under the guise of needing a shower.

Sammy will talk when he's ready... Dean convinced himself as he listened to the water from the shower stop.

A few quiet minutes passed as the elder brother stared blankly at the television. When the door finally opened, Dean looked up to see Sam standing at the edge of

the room. Clad in nothing more than a towel, his younger sibling looked dazed and for a moment, Dean felt his apprehension peak as he waited for Sam to speak or move.

"You all right, dude?" Dean chanced.

But still, Sam remained silent, his expression almost stunned. Dean tensed, his muscles bunching as he prepared for another attack.

"It's gone..." Sam finally mumbled making eye contact with Dean.

"Yeah? Good!" Dean replied, relaxing visibly and feeling lousy that he had doubted Sam at all. "Cause I so don't have the energy to kick your ass again right now," he added with a broad smile.

"No, that's not what I meant," Sam reiterated.

"Oh? What then?"

"The tattoo. It's gone. I got out of the shower and it just wasn't there anymore," his brother informed him.

Dean tried to hide the worry from his face, replacing it instead with a look of relief. "Well, that's good isn't it? I never figured you for a cobra man anyway. You're more of the heart with some chicks initials in it type," he teased.

Sam managed to throw him a patented smirk that set Dean's mind more at ease. "So how do you think that happened? I mean, it was tattoo ink. Those things are supposed to be basically permanent right?"

Dean watched Sam shrug. "I dunno, but it's like it was never there at all," his brother replied, moving towards his bag and pulling out a clean pair of jeans. "Do you think that maybe when Meyers' bled out, since the blood was the link that once it was gone the spell was broken?"

Dean rubbed his temples, he knew just enough about black magic to know that like most supernatural phenomena, it sometimes defied any rational explanation. Complicating matters further, inwardly Dean wondered if any of Sam's special abilities had helped eradicate the evil markings.

Sammy did manage to fight back against Meyers... he managed to pull him off me even while under the warlock's control...

Sam had certainly fought to save him before, battling against much greater forces to keep Dean among the land of the living. Would this situation be any different?

"I don't know, Sam," he responded finally. "He's dead and gone. I say let's crack a cold one and celebrate. At least he can't hurt anyone anymore."

But even as he said that, Dean watched Sam's face darken, his eyes darting downward in that sorrowful way that made his younger brother look so forlorn and innocent.

"Yeah... I guess... I just wish..." Sam's voice trailed off.

"No!" Dean raised his voice. "You're not gonna feel guilty because you couldn't save all those others. This falls on that sick bastard. Not you!" Dean stated forcefully.

"I know that, but what a waste. All those lives ruined."

"Yeah, and there could have been a lot more if we hadn't intervened. Dude, you were the one smart enough to spot this for what it was. Even when I was trying to talk you out of it, you knew. You saw the signs."

Sam shrugged again before pulling on a thick sweatshirt.

"All right, come on. Pizza's been ordered, there's cold beer in the cooler. How 'bout we just sit back and enjoy something on the tube?" Dean offered with a smile.

Sam snorted and returned the smile. "Okay, so long as it's not porn. I'm so not gonna sit here and watch you drool over some naked chick. It'll ruin my appetite."

"Aw Sammy, you drive a hard bargain. Alright then, no porn. How 'bout Baywatch?" Dean joked as he grabbed the remote.

As he was about to flip through the channels the anchorman on the news reappeared, his words catching the brothers' attention.

"... this just in... there's been a tragic shooting on the campus of Seattle Central Community College. Reporters on the scene say that a twenty-two year old student

walked into his dorm and opened fire with an automatic weapon before turning the gun on himself. Preliminary reports say several were wounded and three other students have been confirmed dead, including the young shooter. Other students living in the dorm stated that the young man was generally easy going and well-liked by all. We'll have more details on this bizarre and unprovoked attack as they are available. In other news..."

Dean looked over at Sam, both young hunters suddenly becoming silent as similar thoughts coursed through their minds.

"Dean, you don't think..."

"Nah," Dean answered with forced reassurance. "He's dead, Sam. It's all over."

But as he went back to surfing channels, the elder Winchester couldn't help but wonder if perhaps the real power behind what had happened in Seattle hadn't been Meyers at all?

The End