

STRANGER WITHIN

PART 1:

It's dark and he's lying on the floor.

He can't seem to get his breath or remember how he got here; why he's lying on the floor; why he's cold and he can't breathe.

Why there are hands around his throat, squeezing.

He blinks, and the darkness shifts above him, a glint of light on something even darker, midnight black and hard as flint and cold as winter ground.

There's someone here, someone hovering above him; someone with their hands around his neck.

He begins to choke, scrabbling at the fingers digging into his windpipe, trying to draw in enough air to ask, "Why?" but only managing a confused whimper.

No one answers the unasked question and the darkness shifts again, a tiny sliver of illumination glancing off green eyes.

"Sorry about this, little brother," the voice says, and he recognizes the sound, recognizes the voice. Familiar as a brother, alien as a stranger.

The hands squeeze harder and his vision blurs, just as the darkness shifts once again and a face as familiar as his own reflection bleeds languidly into view.

"Dean," he manages to gasp out, and a smile ghosts over his brother's face.

"It's gotta be this way Sammy," Dean says, blinking.

The green disappears and as Sam's vision grays out, the last thing he sees are his brother's eyes, midnight black and hard as flint and cold as winter ground.

Bonham Inn Bonham, TX

Sam sat up with a start, gasping for air and scrabbling at the phantom presence of his brother's fingers about his throat.

His t-shirt was plastered to his back and his chest, cold sweat making him shiver as he fought for air, fought to control his wildly hammering heart, fought to remember where he was and *it was just a nightmare.*

Dean was flat on his stomach on the other bed, right hand buried between the pillow and the lumpy motel mattress, fingers no doubt wrapped around the hunting knife he'd hidden there every night for as long as Sam could remember.

He snored softly, his left hand scraping the off-blue carpet, blankets twisted around his legs in an arrangement Sam would have found decidedly uncomfortable.

Sam smiled fondly, finally getting a handle on his jackhammer heart and uneven breathing.

Just a nightmare, he told himself again, running his fingers through his hair before ghosting them down over his neck and the bruises he swore he could feel even though they only ever existed in his subconscious.

Nightmare. Just a nightmare.

He swallowed as another thought hit him hard and winded him almost as badly as the feeling of Dean's fingers squeezing the life out of him.

Vision?

It had been a long time since Sam had had a vision, so long he couldn't even remember the last one.

And if this was a vision...

If this was a vision and not a nightmare...

Then this was the second time he'd foreseen his own death.

He shuddered, remembering the hangar in New Jersey, the ticking of Haris' watch as Sam's time trickled away to nothing.

Just a nightmare, he told himself more forcefully, jamming his fists against his thighs through the ugly comforter and thin blankets, glancing once again at his brother draped across the other bed, sound asleep and oblivious to the thoughts racing through Sam's head.

Dean would *never* hurt him.

Sam knew that.

Even possessed, Dean would fight to his last breath if it meant protecting Sam. *Had* fought to his last breath. Even when Haris' spawn had tried to possess him. He'd fought so hard. That was Dean's "job" after all.

Dean shifted slightly and his amulet caught the light from the orange streetlight slithering in between a gap in the curtains, and Sam almost laughed in chagrined relief. Dean couldn't be possessed. Not completely. Not while he wore the amulet.

So it *couldn't* have been a vision.

Nightmare. It was just a stupid nightmare.

So why was he even considering this? Why was he even imagining Dean possessed, his hands around his little brother's throat? He *couldn't* be possessed. Sam *knew* that. Not with the amulet around his neck. And even if he could, no way he'd ever kill Sam, even with a demonic passenger urging him to do it.

He and his brother were in a motel in Texas. They were safe. They were together. Dean's amulet was where it was supposed to be. It was just a nightmare.

Sam took a deep breath, willing himself to calm down, willing himself to breathe slowly, breathe in time with his brother. *Just breathe.*

He shook his head, chiding himself wordlessly—and with Dean’s voice—for being such a freakin’ wuss.

Over on the other bed, Dean stirred slightly as if in agreement, and although his eyes remained steadfastly closed, he mumbled, “You okay, Sammy?”, as if even half asleep, looking out for his little brother was still his number one priority.

Sam chuckled a little in relief, flopping back on his mattress on a shaky exhale. “Yeah,” he reassured his brother, who he was pretty sure had already fallen back to sleep, if he’d even woken up properly in the first place. “I’m fine. Just a nightmare.”

Bonham Inn
Bonham, TX
Later that day

Dean’s pacing was seriously starting to grate on Sam’s nerves.

Backwards and forwards, up and down, round and round in circles. And it wasn’t as if the motel room was exactly large to begin with.

“Dude, I’m tryin’ to concentrate here,” he chided his brother, inclining his head at the laptop screen irritably. “Can you go wear a hole in the carpet someplace else?”

Dean grunted, rubbing his hands down the front of his jeans, pretty much exactly as he did when he was nervous and his palms were too sweaty to grip his shotgun or handgun or whatever weapon happened to be within his reach.

Sam frowned minutely, forcing himself to look back at the computer screen and deliberately *not* stare at his brother.

“Seriously?” Dean asked, biting at his thumbnail. “A convent? Nuns give me the creeps, man.”

“Since when?” Sam demanded, squinting up at his brother, who merely shrugged.

“Since forever.”

“Dean, six nuns slitting their wrists at the same convent in two weeks is not exactly normal, you gotta admit.”

Dean sighed, his palms once again rubbing against his thighs. “Yeah, okay,” he admitted reluctantly. “But do we *have* to go check out the convent?”

He sounded all of six years old, and Sam realized he couldn’t even remember Dean at six years old. “You got a better way of us figuring out what’s going on?” he asked, looking up from his computer screen.

Sam knew he’d not exactly been paying his brother much attention these last couple of hours, engrossed as he was in his research, but he was surprised to find Dean sweating and fidgeting nervously, the fingers of his left hand rubbing his right wrist raw.

“Dean?” Sam asked, more than a little alarmed. “What’s wrong with you?”

Dean stopped his pacing long enough to cast a quizzical look Sam’s way. “What? Nothing,”

he said, resuming his pacing as he continued to rub at his wrist.

“Dean?” Sam was half out of his seat, alarmed by the size of Dean’s pupils and his general jitteriness. “Seriously. What’s wrong?”

Dean stopped again, looking down at his red wrist and immediately shoving his hands in his jeans pockets. “Nothin’,” he insisted, still examining the carpet as he added, “It’s just...hallowed ground kinda...freaks me out a little these days.”

That got Sam all the way out of his seat. “At the risk of repeating myself,” he said, “since when?”

Dean shook his head, angling his face away from the sunlight streaming in through the window. He looked pale and drawn, freckles standing out dark against pallid skin, and just for a second...

No, it was a trick of the light. Sunlight glinting off his enlarged pupils as he turned.

Sam closed his eyes and shook his head.

His brother’s eyes did *not* just turn black.

He swallowed, before finally daring to once again meet Dean’s gaze.

He took a breath and let it out slowly.

Dean’s eyes are green. His eyes are green. Not black.

Dean was looking at him. His eyes were slightly downcast, but undeniably green.

The older brother blinked, before shrugging abashedly. “Since always,” he said, averting his gaze again and shrugging before adding, “Since Stull, maybe.”

Stull! Of course! It would make sense that Dean would be wary of hallowed ground since their all-too-recent encounter at the spectral church.

Sam was losing it.

And he was being an idiot. Dean was *not* possessed and his eyes had most definitely *not* turned black.

He smiled weakly, and returned to his seat and his computer.

Just a nightmare, he told himself, only then releasing the grip he hadn’t even realized he had on the Glock secreted in his waistband. *Just a nightmare...*

Our Lady of Sorrows Convent, Kemp, OK

“So,” Dean said slowly, guiding the Impala past a tiny gas station that looked as if it hadn’t seen a customer in thirty years, and up a dirt road with more potholes than actual road. “Where’s the town?”

Sam shrugged, glancing briefly over his shoulder and raking his gaze over the dusty cluster

of dilapidated buildings crouching in the middle distance. "I think we just passed it," he observed, returning his attention to the GPS on his cell phone.

"That was it?" Dean burst out, turning his head slightly askew as he tried to read the screen of Sam's new iPhone. "No wonder the nuns are offing themselves."

Sam shook his head, feeling kind of relieved Dean seemed to be back to his usual tactful self.

That whole thing back at the motel? Just Sam's imagination. He was certain of it.

Well, pretty sure anyway.

Although when Dean had shucked out of his suit jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves, his wrist had still been red from where he'd been rubbing at it.

Sam tried not to look at the injury as his brother deftly guided the big Chevy over the uneven road surface, instead concentrating on the little screen in front of him and the big blue pin with the legend "Our Lady of Sorrows" hovering over it, which seemed to be the only thing within miles on the map of Nowheresville, Oklahoma.

"We should be about—"

"Here?" Dean finished for him, pulling the Impala to a sudden halt, which caused Sam to look up sharply.

At the small convent right in front of them.

"Oh," he said, tucking away his phone and shrugging. "We're here."

"Your powers of observation continue to astound me, Sammy," Dean said dryly, shoving open the driver's side door and peeling himself off the sticky-hot bench seat.

Sam followed suit, scoping out the high red brick wall surrounding the convent and the collection of single storey buildings just visible through the imposing wrought iron gate. A small chapel was set back in the center of well-tended gardens, half-obscured by beautifully tended trees which seemed almost too perfect to be stuck out here in the middle of this dustbowl.

Retrieving his suit jacket from the Impala's backseat, Sam shrugged into it and straightened his tie, before turning his attention almost unconsciously to his brother, who was tugging at his shirt collar irritably.

"Dean?"

"Friggin' stupid FBI and their friggin' stupid monkey suits..." Dean growled under his breath as he tugged at the knot around his neck, his nervous fidgeting threatening to turn to full-on violence any second.

Not wishing to see an innocent tie fall victim to Dean's rapidly increasing frustration, Sam grabbed his brother's hands and pulled them away from the offending material, straightening the knot for him before smoothing down the lapels of his jacket.

Dean just looked at him for a second. "I'm not six, Sam," he hissed irritably, pushing Sam's hands away before shoving past him and stalking off in the direction of the convent.

Sam sighed.

Yes, Dean was definitely back to his old self.

Except... He'd stopped a few feet away from the high gate, staring into the convent grounds between ornate curls of wrought iron, a desperately forlorn look on his face.

"You *sure* we gotta do this, Sammy?" he asked plaintively, once again beginning to worry at the red patch on his wrist.

"I thought you said you *weren't* six?" Sam returned, frowning as his brother continued to claw his flesh raw. "'Cause you kinda sound six right now."

Dean shot him a withering glare before clenching his jaw and marching on up to the gate, shoving it open a little too roughly and coughing as it slammed back against the wall with a nerve-jangling clang.

"Dean!" Sam hissed. "Quit it, dude! You want me to leave you in the car?"

Dean glanced longingly over his shoulder for a second, back at the black Chevy parked a little conspicuously just off the dirt track, before setting his shoulders and shaking his head mutely, and right then, Sam couldn't help thinking he actually *looked* as if he was all of six years old.

Sam shook his head and tried to smooth the frown from off his forehead. "Alright then," he said, leading the way through the gate and into the convent gardens with a hugely put-upon sigh.

Dean followed, at first hesitantly, then suddenly speeding up until he was right at Sam's shoulder, so ridiculously close he almost bumped into him on several occasions as the two of them made their way up the incredibly neat path between the incredibly neat shrubbery to the wooden chapel door.

Sam threw a concerned look back at his brother, who was casting nervous, jittery glances all around him, but especially at the nuns walking through the grounds and tending the gardens.

He paused when they reached the chapel door, looking up at the building and swallowing hard.

"You *sure* you're okay, man?" Sam asked, frowning, and Dean just looked at him, pale and sweaty and obviously in a real state of discomfort, if not actual distress. "Dean?"

Dean shrugged, rammed his hands in his trouser pockets before pulling them out again and pushing on the bell set into the chapel wall.

A young novice nun answered almost immediately, as if she'd been waiting there all morning for two hunters pretending to be FBI agents to come a-calling.

"Can I help you?" the girl asked, cheeks coloring visibly when Sam stepped forward and treated her to his most dazzling smile.

"Always with the dimples," Dean muttered under his breath, as Sam elbowed him in the ribs before pulling out his FBI credentials.

“Agents Benedict and Schultz,” he intoned seriously. “We have an appointment with Sister Mary Emmanuel?”

“Oh, of course.” The young nun lowered her eyes and opened the door wider, motioning them to step inside. “This way please.”

Sam smiled again, waiting for Dean to take point, as he usually did in these situations. When Dean didn’t move, Sam frowned at him before following the nun into the chapel.

He’d been in a lot of churches and holy places in his life, as well as a lot of abandoned and ruined ones, and he was always amazed how different consecrated ground felt to unconsecrated ground.

He breathed in the cool, calming air for a second before glancing back at Dean, who was still hesitating on the stone steps outside.

“Uh. Agent Benedict?”

Dean blinked at him, swallowing again before finally stepping over the threshold and into the chapel, his right leg wobbling slightly as his foot connected with holy ground.

Sam blew out the breath he’d been holding, knowing he should feel more relieved than he did.

Just a nightmare... he told himself.

If he thought that often enough, maybe he might start to believe it.

The young novice had stopped and turned toward them, a quizzical expression on her face.

Sam smiled awkwardly, glancing back to check Dean was following—albeit reluctantly—before striding to catch up with the young woman.

Turning on her heel, the novice led them through the modest little chapel to a small office just off from the chancel, opening a huge wooden door and motioning for them to enter.

An older nun looked up from her position behind a rather battered oak desk at their arrival, warm blue eyes welcoming them into her office, even as her lips offered a rather sad smile.

“Please,” she said, indicating two chairs placed in front of the desk. “Thank you, Bernadette,” she offered to the young novice, who ducked her head, cast another embarrassed look Sam’s way, and exited the room silently.

Sam performed his usual assessment of the room, noting the single exit and the lack of locks on the small, leaded window before realizing with a shudder that the office reminded him a little of the one in the disappearing church at Stull, the one where he had been trapped at Halloween before being thrown into that whole alternate reality nightmare; the one his brother had dragged him into at Spring Equinox when they’d finally busted their dad back out again.

He *really* didn’t want to think about that right now. Even when Stull church had been visible, it most certainly had *not* felt like holy ground.

Strange that Dean should be more freaked out here, in a convent in Oklahoma in the

presence of a woman of God, than in a dimension-hopping Hellgate rammed full of demons.

“Thank you for coming Agents...?” the nun enquired, causing Sam to pull out his fake FBI credentials once again.

“Agent Schultz,” he supplied, taking the woman’s proffered hand. “My partner, Agent Benedict.”

Dean hesitated for just a fraction of a second before following his brother’s lead, grimacing slightly when the nun shook his hand.

“You must be Sister Mary Emmanuel?” Sam hazarded.

The nun nodded, before once again indicating the chairs. “Please, sit.”

As the boys took the offered seats, the nun ran a hand over her forehead, suddenly looking incredibly tired.

“You don’t know how glad I am to see you gentlemen,” she said, smiling thinly. “I didn’t think the police were *ever* going to take me seriously.” She looked from Sam to Dean and back again, holding the younger brother’s gaze solemnly. “I *know* something unnatural is going on here.”

Sam nodded sympathetically. “So there have been six deaths altogether?” he began, flipping open his notebook and pulling a pen from his jacket pocket.

Sister Mary Emmanuel nodded. “Yes. Six of my sisters. In the past two weeks alone.” She continued to hold Sam’s gaze, almost as if Dean weren’t even in the room. “Believe me when I say this to you, Agent: my sisters would *not* have taken their own lives. Suicide is mortal sin, *why* would they willingly sacrifice their only opportunity to enter Paradise? It makes no sense.”

Sam shifted slightly in his seat. “I’m sorry for asking this, Sister,” he said carefully. “But were any of them suffering from depression, or delusions, anything that might suggest they were suicidal?”

The nun shook her head vehemently. “No, no of course not,” she said, her eyes drifting distractedly to the sunlight slanting in through the window. “They were all happy, content with their lives here. And their bodies... how they were displayed...”

Sam consulted his notebook. “I understand each of them was found on the altar with no sign of any kind of blade or weapon?” he said.

Sister Mary Emmanuel nodded. “It was... just horrible,” she said. “As if someone—*something*—had laid them out there on display for all to see; arranged as if—as if...” She had to stop for a second, clenching her jaw before continuing. “In a mockery of Our Lord Christ crucified.”

“And the local cops didn’t think that was odd?” Dean put in suddenly, the nun looking at him as if only just remembering he was there. “The posing of the bodies? The lack of any weapon that could have inflicted the injuries?”

“They dismissed it as some kind of hysterical religious suicide pact,” she told him, more than a trace of bitterness in her voice. “Said one of them could have removed the knife and hidden it until it was their turn to use it. Which is just patently ridiculous. These were women

who had devoted their lives to the service of Christ, devout servants of God. Not a sorority house full of teenaged girls who had seen one too many vampire movies and decided to join the ranks of the beautiful Undead.”

Dean snorted a little, and Sam kicked him none-too-subtly.

Turning his attention back to the nun, Sam smoothed out his expression before asking, “Would it be possible to see where the deceased women lived, some of their possessions, perhaps?”

Sister Mary Emmanuel frowned slightly. “Nuns don’t require much in the way of personal belongings,” she told him. “But if you believe it will help with your investigation, I can show you to their sleeping quarters?”

Sam nodded, pulling himself to his feet and making sure Dean followed suit. “That would be very helpful, Sister,” he said neutrally. “If it’s not too much of an imposition.”

The nun inclined her head slightly, herself rising. “Not at all. This way please.”

She led them out of the office, Dean parroting, “*If it’s not too much of an imposition*,” in a nasal whine he obviously believed to be a stunningly accurate impersonation of his brother.

Sam spared him only the most dismissive of glances before following the nun out into the chapel.

She led them to a small, unobtrusive doorway at the side of the building, across a beautifully maintained quadrangle of lawns and gardens, and finally into another wing of the convent, the warm sunshine outside contrasting markedly with the chilly interior of the small dormitory in which the boys now found themselves.

There were several beds lined up in two neat rows on either side of the room, none of them appearing to have been slept in for some time, while dust motes danced in the hazy sunlight slanting down through the tiny windows spaced equally along the length of the room.

“Did all of the women who passed away sleep in the same dormitory?” Sam asked, carefully examining a shelf of books above one of the empty beds. Bible. Prayer books. Hymnals. Sheet music.

Sister Mary Emmanuel nodded. “Yes,” she confirmed. “Although we only have three dormitories, so I don’t know whether that’s particularly relevant.”

Sam shrugged. “Anything could be relevant at this point, Sister,” he told the nun, pausing for a second before adding, “Would it be possible for us to take a moment to examine the room?”

He figured the nun understood what he was actually asking when she ducked her head slightly and nodded. “I’ll be down the hall,” she said, backing toward the door through which they’d entered. “If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you, Sister.”

Sam smiled again as the nun retreated, closing the door behind her.

“We *need* to get the hell outta here,” Dean muttered through clenched teeth, causing Sam to shoot an annoyed grimace in his direction.

But the rejoinder he had on the tip of his tongue died the instant he noted the sheen of sweat on his brother's forehead and the way he was once again worrying the red patch on his wrist.

"Dude, what is *with* you?" Sam demanded, grabbing his brother's hand and pulling it away from his wrist. "Seriously, you're acting—" *possessed*—"—really weird, man."

Dean blinked at him, yanking his hand out of Sam's grasp before tugging at his collar. "It's just really hot in here," he offered by way of explanation.

"Dude, it's like minus ninety. It's a convent."

Dean nodded. "Exactly!" he burst out. "We're not gonna find anything in a convent, Sam."

Sam squinted at him. "This is where the dead women *lived*, Dean, why wouldn't we find—?"

But Dean had turned his back on him, heading for the door with his hands thrown into the air. "I'm outta here," he declared shortly. "I'm not wastin' another second nosin' around a bunch of nuns' habits in a musty old convent that's hotter than the Devil's ass in July when I could be—"

"Dean, I need more time to—"

"—outside in the sunshine driving my baby along a deserted highway."

He yanked open the dormitory door, taking a startled step back when an elderly woman almost fell on him.

"Uh."

The woman didn't seem to respond to Dean's oratory, instead just squinted wild, frantic eyes at him before taking a step into the room even as he took another step back.

She didn't appear to be a nun, clad only in a nightdress, her long white hair sticking out at odd angles all over her head.

"Ma'am—" Dean began, retreating another couple of steps until he was almost standing on Sam's feet. "Can we help you with—?"

The woman cut him off by crooking a long, bony finger in the boys' direction, narrowing her eyes and hissing, "*You!*" before jabbing her finger at them accusingly. "*You* bear the mark of *Satan!*"

Dean blinked dumbly at her, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly a couple of times before Sam caught hold of his sleeve, pulling him another precautionary step back.

"Dean—"

"Sorry lady," Dean grimaced nervously, ignoring Sam completely. "You're confusing me with—"

But the woman suddenly lurched forward, apparently not the slightest bit interested in who she was confusing him with, reaching out for Dean with her bony claw and almost pulling him over as her fingers yanked at the fabric of his jacket.

“Lucifer!” she shrieked, clawing at Dean while he endeavored to stop her gouging his eyes out. “Lucifer’s reek oozes from your soul! Spawn of Satan!”

Again she shoved at him, either intent on pushing him over or pushing him out of the way.

But she was tiny and Dean wasn’t.

“Lady, just calm down—” Dean began, trying to grab a hold of the old broad’s wrists as one of her nails took a chunk out of his earlobe, her hands clawing at the air beyond his shoulder. “Ow! Dammit!” he yelped, grabbing at his ear before bringing his hand away bloody.

Figuring maybe his six foot one inch brother might need a hand restraining a five foot nothing elderly lady in a nightie, Sam made a move to help him, grabbing at one of the woman’s hands over Dean’s shoulder.

Unfortunately that only made her shriek even louder.

“Spawn of Satan! Brimstone will rain down upon your head!”

“Ooohkay, lady, thanks for the warning but, y’know, kinda been there, done that,” Sam explained, gently trying to extricate the woman’s flailing limbs from the vicinity of his brother’s face.

“Sam,” Dean ground out. “I think the bitch ripped off my ear!”

“Don’t be such a baby, Dean,” Sam returned over the woman’s screaming. “I thought you said chicks dig scars?”

Thankfully, at this point Sister Mary Emmanuel appeared in the doorway, two other nuns in tow who quickly moved past her into the dormitory and gently began to pry the woman off Dean, speaking calmly and soothingly to her as they carefully lead her from the room.

Sister Mary Emmanuel shook her head, her attention following the woman down the corridor, as she continued to punctuate the sudden silence with yells of, “Satan! He has the Devil in him! Hellfire and brimstone!”

“That’s Beatrice,” Sister Mary Emmanuel explained, sighing. “She’s lived here for years—lost her mind when her husband and baby daughter were killed in a house fire.”

Sam and Dean exchanged a glance.

“We took her in and we’ve cared for her ever since,” the nun continued, shrugging sadly. “She sees demons everywhere,” she added.

“I know the feeling,” Dean murmured, throwing a loaded look in Sam’s direction.

But Sam barely noticed, his insides having turned to ice.

Demon. Beatrice saw a *demon*. She looked at Dean and saw a *demon*.

“It’s all part of the poor woman’s delusion,” Sister Mary Emmanuel went on, apparently not having heard Dean’s comment or noticed the way Sam’s complexion had paled visibly. “She

claims a demon came for her baby and burnt her house down when her husband tried to intervene.”

Sam blinked at her.

What did she just say?

“It—what?” he mumbled, Dean deftly stepping in before Sam could ruin his cool FBI demeanor.

“That’s a common delusion,” the older brother said smoothly. “Demons. People see ’em everywhere.”

The nun nodded. “It certainly seems that way of late,” she agreed cryptically, before suddenly seeming to shake herself mentally. “Well, if you gentlemen have finished here, perhaps I should show you the altar?”

Sam nodded, swallowing the ball of questions that had suddenly risen up into his throat and attempting to focus on the case at hand.

Whether Beatrice’s family had fallen victim to Haris’ machinations was something they could investigate another time.

“Yes, that would be helpful,” he managed to croak out, having to clear his throat at the end of his sentence.

Dean looked up at him, something unrecognizable flooding his eyes, before he followed the nun as she led the way out of the room.

Sam trailed to the rear, reluctantly following Sister Mary Emmanuel and his brother back toward the chapel.

They stopped at the ornate stone altar, and he shivered involuntarily at the sudden chill enveloping his body, his breath coming out as a white mist in front of his face.

“Cold in here,” he observed, even as the sister rubbed at her arms, and he realized he could see her breath too.

But not Dean’s.

He frowned, trying to ignore the pit yawning in his stomach as he followed the nun toward the altar, Dean hanging back and examining his feet, his face inclined away from the large image of the crucified Christ to the rear of the chancel.

No, no, no, just a nightmare, he tried to tell himself, even as Dean shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably, obviously wanting to be anywhere but where he was standing.

Surely the amulet would protect Dean from possession like it did before? What if a demon’s got in him but can’t get full control, like Haris’ spawn?

Would Sam be able to tell? Would Dean? Surely Sam would know if a demon was in his brother? He knew Dean better than he knew himself, after all. Didn’t he?

Trying to remember to breathe, he once again tried to focus on what the nun was telling him, as she pointed out where her sisters' bodies had been displayed, the position in which they'd been posed, arms outstretched and faces toward the crucifix.

But while Sam was trying to listen, was trying to concentrate, he kept finding his attention slipping back to Dean, who was still lingering toward the door of the chapel, seemingly unwilling or perhaps *unable* to come any closer, his fingers once again prying at the sore on his wrist.

"So do you think you can help?" Sister Mary Emmanuel asked suddenly, and Sam abruptly shifted his attention back to the nun, trying to remember what she'd just been telling him.

"I hope so," he said with what he prayed was a confident smile. "There's obviously something not right here."

"Then you don't believe my sisters took their own lives?"

Sam shook his head slightly. "It seems unlikely to me, Sister," he confided, sighing as he fished in his jacket pocket for one of the business cards Dean had made up at the Kinkos back in Bonham. "This is my cell number," he explained as he offered the card to the nun. "If anything else—uh—unusual happens, don't hesitate to call me."

"Something unusual like another of my sisters apparently committing suicide?" the nun asked archly.

Sam swallowed, his eyes flicking from the nun, to the altar, to Dean, and finally back to Sister Mary Emmanuel. "I hope it won't come to that," he said solemnly. "I really do."

* * * *

"Boy, am I glad to be the hell outta *that* place," Dean declared, ripping off his tie and shucking out of his jacket before tossing both of them onto the back seat of the Impala. "Now all I need is to be out of this monkey suit and into some *real* clothes and I'll be all set."

Sam cast his brother an uncertain look as he loosened his own neckwear, joining him in the hotbox that was the old Chevy as Dean stretched out behind the wheel like a cat on a sunny garden wall.

"There's no place like home," Dean murmured contentedly, opening his eyes and taking a long look at the convent before finally gunning the V8. "I hate these creepy ass places," he declared, shifting into reverse and deftly turning the car around despite the road's yawning potholes.

"Since when?" Sam asked, shifting uncomfortably on the sticky leather seat and trying not to eye his brother suspiciously. "You've never had a problem with churches before."

"Not a *church*, Sammy," Dean pointed out, aiming the Impala back toward Kemp while noticeably not looking in the rearview. "*Convent*."

Sam shrugged. "So?" he prodded. "It's holy ground. You've never been creeped out by holy ground before."

"*Convent*, Sammy!" Dean reiterated. When Sam didn't respond to that, he sighed heavily and rolled his eyes. "Like in Mobile?"

Sam's brow furrowed. "Mobile?"

"Alabama," Dean prodded. "Convent school. Remember? We spent a month there when we were kids." He shook his head, visibly shuddering at the recollection. "Nuns kept rapping my knuckles and telling me I was destined for Hellfire. Hell, like they knew the half of it." He smiled bleakly, and Sam tried not to think about Mia being torn to pieces by hellhounds in a reality that may or may not have been the actual Underworld.

Blocking that image out of his head for a second, he cast his mind back through the myriad of schools he and Dean had attended throughout their childhood, suddenly vaguely remembering classes taught by stern-looking nuns and prayers at the beginning and end of each day.

Wow, why hadn't he remembered that until now?

"I... I guess I'd have been six or seven?" he hazarded.

Dean nodded. "Yeah. The penguins were nice to *you*. You were *adorable*."

"Don't call them that."

Dean grinned, and Sam just knew he thought the *Blues Brothers* reference had gone over his little brother's head. "C'mon, Sammy, those women hated me. It's a wonder I don't got a complex."

Sam's forehead creased as he tried to remember the place and the time more clearly. "Boarding school, right?" he offered. "Dad was away...?"

Dean nodded again. "Some Big Hunt he had goin' on," he confirmed. "Couldn't leave us with Bobby or Pastor Jim because they were goin' with him, and he didn't want to leave us on our own for the amount of time he thought the job would take."

"He needed someplace safe to ditch us."

"He didn't *ditch* us, Sam," Dean corrected him. "But it was..." he broke off for a second, shifting awkwardly in his seat. "It was just after that thing with the Shtriga. I guess... I guess he wanted to make sure we were safe. Protected." A sheepish half-smile that wasn't much off a pained grimace tugged at his lips, turning suddenly bitter. "I thought Dad was punishing me at the time," he admitted on a sigh. "And it was only years later I realized a boarding school on holy ground where we were surrounded by priests and nuns twenty-four seven was probably the safest place Dad could have left us short of locking us in the Impala's trunk for a month."

"And you hated every second of it?" Sam asked.

Dean steadfastly kept his gaze fixed on the road ahead. "Pretty much," he said. "And... And I guess, yeah, at the time it felt like Dad had ditched us. Although he hadn't."

"No," Sam agreed, keeping his voice neutral. "Because Dad would *never* ditch us."

"Sam," Dean ground out by way of warning.

"Okay, Dad didn't ditch us. He abandoned us for our own protection."

Dean sighed again. “Whatever, dude,” he conceded. “All I know is I spent a month gettin’ treated like an idiot, shoved from one ‘remedial’ class to another, told I’d never amount to anything and the Devil would one day lay claim to my soul—”

“Which, y’know. Kinda accurate.”

“And all the time you just kept askin’ me, ‘When’s Dad coming to get us?’ and all I could tell you was, ‘Soon, Sammy,’ while hopin’ I wasn’t lyin’ to you.”

Sam swallowed. “Because you thought he’d ditched us.”

It wasn’t a question, and Sam didn’t really expect an answer.

So he wasn’t disappointed when Dean cleared his throat and snapped on the radio.

All he could get was a country rock station and he swore softly under his breath as Sam considered the very real possibility that Dean’s experience in Mobile might have left him with a phobia of convents, and could quite possibly explain some of today’s odd behavior.

Didn’t explain Beatrice though.

He was almost relieved when his cell started to buzz in his pocket because it meant he didn’t have to think too deeply about what the nutty old woman had said to his brother.

Finger deftly touching the phone’s screen, he switched the cell to loudspeaker, offering a cheerful, “Hey, Bobby,” which he hoped didn’t sound too much like, “Oh thank God you called I think my brother’s possessed because a mad old woman said so.”

“Hey yourself,” Bobby returned, gruff voice surprisingly clear despite the spotty signal around here. “You boys still dicking around with that convent thing in Oklahoma?”

“Investigating, Bobby,” Dean chipped in. “We’re *investigating*.”

“Uh-huh,” Bobby returned skeptically.

“We’re on our way to the library in Durant,” Sam added. “See if we can check out the convent’s history. Maybe there’s something we’re missing.”

“Plenty libraries in Ardmore, boys,” Bobby told them.

Sam glanced briefly at his brother. “What’s in Ardmore?” he asked a little uncertainly.

“You idjits seen the local news today?” Bobby asked.

“We’re in Nowhere, Oklahoma’s slightly less interesting suburb Pointless, right now, Bobby,” Dean informed the older hunter. “We don’t exactly get Fox News in our motel room.”

“Well shut your yap, smartass, and you might learn somethin’,” Bobby snapped.

“Ooh, touchy,” Dean commented.

“There’s been a fire in Ardmore,” Bobby continued, as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “A fire in a church.”

"A church?" Sam echoed. "First nuns apparently killing themselves and now a church burns down not—"

"Seventy miles," Dean supplied off the top of his head.

Sam squinted at him. "Not seventy miles away. There's gotta be some kind of connection there."

"Ya think?" Bobby returned. "Apparently the local priest locked his congregation in the church at evening service yesterday before burning the place to the ground."

Sam paused for a long moment. "You think maybe he was—uh—possessed?" he asked cautiously, deliberately not looking in his brother's direction.

Bobby sighed. "At this point, I'm ready to believe anything," he said. "But if it *is* demons out there? You boys need to take precautions. Don't want you getting possessed too."

"You know, maybe we ought to look into some kind of permanent anti-possession thing," Sam ventured. "Charms are all well and good, but maybe something like—I dunno—a tattoo or something might work better as a more long-term solution?"

He glanced sidelong at Dean, who frowned at him.

"Hello? Magic amulet?" the older brother reminded him, looking down at his necklace. "I already got protection, dude. And after that thing with the warlock in Seattle? I'd have thought a tattoo would be the *last* thing you'd wanna get."

Sam smiled weakly, reassuring himself that Dean's amulet was glinting gold around his neck, the little charm having turned black when Dean had been almost-possessed before.

He nearly laughed, but didn't, his nightmare and Dean's odd behavior today still nagging at the back of his mind.

"So are you two gonna go check it out?" Bobby reminded them he was still on the end of Sam's phone. "Or should I see if one o' the grown-ups can swing by?"

"No," Sam said quickly, waving his brother's no-doubt pithy rejoinder into silence. "No, we're, like, ninety minutes away, Bobby. And this has to be connected to the convent somehow. Only thing is, I gave my number to Sister Mary Emmanuel, so what if she needs help and we're not around?"

"Dude," Dean reminded him. "You just said. Its ninety minutes away. If the penguins need us, we'll come back."

"You been watching Jake and Elwood again, boy?" Bobby asked on a barely-disguised chuckle.

"It's seventy miles to Ardmore," Dean said. "We got a full tank of gas, a trunk full of weapons, it's dark and we're wearing sunglasses."

"It's the middle of the day, Dean."

Both Dean and Bobby huffed in unison, and Sam was pretty sure he heard Bobby's eye roll.

"Boy, you got no soul if you don't love that movie."

Sam shook his head. "I got a little tired of watching it *every night for six months* when I was ten, Bobby."

Dean snickered. "Yeah, I guess you didn't get to see *My Little Pony*, huh?"

Sam scowled at him.

"Well this has been fun and all, boys," Bobby interjected. "But there's only so much o' you two bitchin' at each other I can stomach in one day."

"Okay, stay safe, Bobby," Dean chirped brightly.

"Yeah, bye Bobby," Sam echoed, ending the call.

Dean took a breath, eyes still fixed on the road, before suddenly asking, "What was with the tattoo crap, anyway?"

Sam shrugged. "Nothing. Just thinking out loud."

"I can hear you thinking from over here," Dean informed him.

Sam had no reply to that.

If Dean really *could* hear him thinking, he was pretty sure he wouldn't like what he heard.

"So," Dean continued. "Ardmore, huh?"

Sam nodded. "We should check it out."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "Definitely somethin' goin' on around here."

Sam stole a sideways look at his brother, before quietly agreeing. "Yeah," he said. "Something's going on all right."

St. James' Church Ardmore, OK

Yellow police tape fluttered in the light breeze gently caressing the burnt-out remains of St. James' Church.

The whole place looked like a bombsite, blackened ceiling tiles scattered across pitted concrete littered with chunks of masonry, charred timber and shards of broken stained glass.

Sam surveyed the scene cautiously, wary of other interested onlookers who might find it odd that two young men would want to sift through the ruins of a burnt out church in the middle of the night.

Fortunately, time itself was on their side; it was well after midnight, the police and the fire department investigators having left hours ago, while the only other living things in the immediate vicinity were a drunk passed out on a bench at the bus stop and his dog, who was more interested in the contents of a nearby trashcan than two guys skulking around a crime scene.

They were good to go.

The place had been pretty much razed to the ground, Sam realized, as he made his way toward the police cordon, and he couldn't help wondering what could have caused the building to burn so quickly and so completely. Earlier enquiries—Sam at the library and Dean in the nearest bar—had revealed the fire department got there within five minutes of a passerby calling 911, but still there was virtually nothing left of the place.

Twenty people were dead, including the priest, a Father Bonney, who, according to parishioners and non-attending locals alike, had faithfully served the parish of St. James for the last forty years, never having shown any signs of mental illness or depression, nothing that would make him act in such an uncharacteristically heinous way.

Just like the nuns back at the convent in Kemp.

Ducking under the police tape, Sam began to pick his way through the scattered debris and into what little was left of the church itself, casting a surreptitious glance over his shoulder at his brother as he did so. Dean didn't appear half as nervous and fidgety as he had at the convent, and Sam had to admit he was more than a little relieved about that.

Sure, Dean seemed pretty disturbed by the scale of the destruction, and Sam knew the fact that four of the dead had been kids wasn't sitting too well with his brother, but his pallor was much improved, he wasn't sweating or clawing at his wrist, and there was absolutely no hesitation when he crossed over onto holy ground.

Sam blew out a breath he seemed to have been holding since this morning.

Sniffing the air cautiously, it didn't take him long to identify the powerful odor assaulting his senses as he picked his way between blackened chunks of timber that had been pews only the day before. "Accelerant," he observed.

"Gasoline most likely," Dean agreed, heading off toward the chancel end of the church.

Sam lingered to the rear, carefully examining the debris for signs of sulfur, and flipping on his EMF meter just in case, even though he was already pretty positive restless spirits hadn't been responsible for what had happened here.

Unsurprisingly, the EMF remained stonily silent, and Sam switched it back off again, just as he heard Dean curse rather colorfully from the other end of the church.

"Sonofa—"

"Dean, you okay?" Sam called to him. Receiving no response, he glanced up from his examination of the pieces of a shattered window which had been blasted across the rear flagstones.

There was no sign of his brother.

Unconsciously, he began to hold his breath again.

"Dean?"

Still there was no response, and Sam instantly dropped what he was doing, striding off in the direction he'd last seen his brother.

"Dean?" he repeated, rounding the pulpit and abruptly coming across the older Winchester bending over the font while wrapping his hand in a handkerchief.

Almost choking down a relieved breath, Sam asked, "Dean, you okay? What happened?"

Dean motioned to the font, which was miraculously still intact. "Saw something glinting at the bottom," he explained. "Put my damn fool hand in to find out what it was. Y'know, thinking it might be some kind of summoning charm used to conjure up a demon? A demon who then decided to torch the place while taking the padre out for a test drive."

"Holy ground, Dean," Sam put in. "How would a demon get in, even if it was summoned?"

Dean frowned at him. "Remember Pastor Jim, Sherlock?" he chided his brother. "His little run-in with your buckets of crazy girlfriend Meg? She ganked him in the basement of his church, dude."

Sam nodded, a little abashed, and a little bit freaked that he'd not thought of that.

Maybe he was too busy trying to convince himself his brother wasn't possessed because he just walked into what was left of a church without flinching.

"Anyway," Dean continued, sighing theatrically. "I didn't find out the thing at the bottom of the font was just a piece of broken glass till I cut my hand open on it."

Sam snorted. "Dude, you're such a magpie!" he burst out, laughing for the first time in what felt like millennia. "Aww, did Dean want the shiny?"

Dean glared at him. "Ass monkey," he returned, before stalking off in the direction Sam had just come from.

Sam grinned to himself, before glancing briefly down into the font.

There was still holy water in it.

Bloodied holy water.

And no pieces of glass anywhere in sight.

Sam swallowed, the smile instantly melting from his face.

Oddly, his brain appeared to be trying to distract him from the fact that Dean may have lied to him, may have put his hand into holy water and burned it, rather than having cut it on a piece of broken glass like he'd said. Instead, Sam found himself wondering how the water had avoided evaporating in the fire and why Dean would have put his hand in there in the first place if he was possessed.

Dean's not possessed.

He's not.

"Sammy, I don't think we're gonna find anything here," he heard Dean observe, and it sounded as if his brother was standing a hundred miles away and under water. "Sam?"

Sam shook himself mentally, nodding his agreement with his brother. "No," he said slowly. "I don't think we are."

Not anything I want to find, anyway.

“You know, I hate to say this,” Dean continued, as Sam approached his position. “But maybe this is just what it looks like: a human being taking his own life.” He shrugged, scrubbing his uninjured hand over his face. “Although, admittedly, Father Bonney took nineteen other lives with him.”

Sam nodded again, trying to regain his voice from somewhere in the vicinity of his knees. “There doesn’t seem any obvious connection to the convent, either,” he observed. “None of the bodies were posed like the dead nuns. And self-immolation isn’t exactly the same MO.”

Dean sighed heavily. “Maybe we should get out of here,” he suggested. “Leave the dead be. At least for tonight.”

Sam shrugged his agreement. “I guess,” he admitted reluctantly.

But as he followed his brother back out toward the waiting Chevy, pondering what the hell could have happened here, and why Dean may be lying to him about the nature of his injury, he couldn’t help thinking he was missing something...

Chief Motel Ardmore, OK

Sam was beat. And frustrated. And just a little bit uneasy.

Dean had insisted on driving home from the church, despite the injury to his hand, and Sam couldn’t help but notice the lack of blood on the handkerchief knotted about his palm.

Surely there’d be more than just a little blood in the font if he’d cut his hand open?

Not that Dean would actually let Sam take a look at his injury; the second Sam had opened the door to their room, Dean had shoved past him and disappeared into the bathroom without a word, locking the door behind him.

“Its fine, Sam,” was all he could get out of his brother, and that had been filtered through a couple of inches of plywood.

Sam knew he was being ridiculous. Of course Dean had cut his hand. Why would he lie? But a tiny part of him still wanted to check to make sure that wasn’t a burn hiding under his big brother’s handkerchief.

Gritting his teeth together, he starting yanking stuff out of his duffel, throwing clothes, his wash bag, a couple rounds of silver bullets, onto the bed with a violence that suggested either Sam was really pissed off with his possessions or he wanted to shove someone through the nearest wall.

Whether that someone was Dean or himself he wasn’t sure.

Finally, he located the large canister of salt buried at the bottom of his bag, crossing over to the doorway and beginning to lay a line of the stuff across the threshold of the room, just as he or Dean had done every night for as long as he could remember.

“Sam, what are you doing?”

Sam spun around to find Dean standing in the bathroom doorway, shrugging out of his jacket and frowning at his little brother's handiwork.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Sam returned, frowning right on back, before continuing to lay the salt line. "What we always do. What we've always done since we were kids."

Dean shifted minutely, his expression morphing from angry disbelief to awkward discomfort in a matter of seconds. "I—I was going to go get a soda from the machine in the office," he stammered, and for some reason he really couldn't explain, Sam totally didn't believe him.

"Yeah, okay," Sam responded neutrally. "It's a salt line, Dean. I don't think it's going to stop you going to fetch soda."

Dean paused almost imperceptibly—almost imperceptibly to anyone who wasn't Sam and didn't know Dean's every nuance. "It's okay," he finally said with a dismissive shrug, flopping down on the bed furthest from the door and flipping on the TV. "I'm not that thirsty."

*Not possessed. **Not** possessed...*

* * * *

There are hands around Sam's throat and he can't breathe.

Dean's looking down at him, eyes jet black and sparkling, a grossly misplaced smile tugging at his lips.

"Don't fight me, little brother," he says softly, fingers almost a caress as they crush Sam's trachea. "Gotta do this. You know I do."

Sam's struggling this time, putting up a fight, fingers scrabbling at Dean's hands. There's a burn across his brother's palm.

Sam's bigger than his brother, and he knows he should be able to fight him off. But he's not just fighting Dean. He's fighting the demon inside Dean too.

The amulet's dangling from Dean's neck. It's black. Black like Dean's eyes, black like Dean's smile, black like it was when Haris' spawn had tried to possess him before.

Sam wants to scream, to run, to rail at the world for its unfairness; for doing this to him, to his brother. For taking Dean away.

But all he can manage is a choked, "Dean, please..." and Dean just laughs and squeezes harder.

"Just go to sleep, Sammy."

And Sam slips into unconsciousness.

* * * *

Once again, Sam woke with a start, drenched in sweat, his heart hammering at a hundred miles an hour. He couldn't breathe, fingers scrabbling at his throat, at the place where his brother's hands had wrapped around his windpipe.

“Just go to sleep, Sammy.”

He froze as he felt his brother’s gentle hand on his shoulder, and when Sam looked up, just for a split second he could have sworn Dean’s eyes were black.

Sam blinked, the light flickering, and Dean was looking down at him with concerned green eyes, and Sam realized he was trembling.

“It was just a nightmare, Sam,” Dean murmured. “Go back to sleep.”

Just a nightmare.

Just a nightmare.

Sam didn’t need sleep.

Sam needed *help*.

If Dean was possessed, Sam needed help.

Sam needed to get *Dean* some help.

But he needed to get away from him first.

PART 2:

So okay, maybe Sam shouldn’t have taken the Impala.

But this was *urgent*, dammit! And Dean would understand.

The Dean currently relegated to the backseat of his own body while some goddamn demon took the wheel, that is.

Because if Dean really *was* possessed—and at this point, Sam was ninety-nine percent convinced Dean was possessed—then time was of the essence. And while he would have liked nothing better than to have picked up his brother, tossed him into the trunk, and driven him to Bobby’s for a quick exorcism, right now he wasn’t even sure an exorcism would work. After all, twice now Dean had stood on holy ground, and the second time he hadn’t even flinched.

As Dean himself had pointed out, only pretty powerful demons—like Meg, for example—could do something like that. And while Sam was fairly certain it wasn’t Meg they were dealing with here, preferring to trust she was still safely tucked away in the bowels of Hell after their last encounter, whatever was currently occupying his brother’s meatsuit had not only walked across holy ground, it had also taken control of Dean while he was still wearing the amulet. Even Haris’ offspring hadn’t been able to pull off that little trick.

So while Sam wasn’t entirely sure where he was going, and didn’t entirely have a plan, he did know he had to get away from the demon possessing Dean before he got the chance to murder Sam in his sleep.

Because if that happened? There’d be no one to save his brother.

Regardless, Sam still felt guilty about leaving Dean stranded in Ardmore. Stranded and *possessed*.

Shouldn't have left him, Sam chided himself for the hundredth time since waiting for Dean to fall asleep, snaking the keys to the Impala, sneaking out of their motel room and driving away into the dead of night without him.

Like Dean didn't already have enough abandonment issues.

Bobby's, of course, was the obvious destination, and while Sam was still trying to formulate some kind of plan, some way to save his brother from a demon who could possess him while he still had a chunk of Solomon's Sword hanging around his neck, he'd pointed the Impala north and just *gone*.

He needed time to *think*.

And he couldn't do that if he was constantly waiting for the demon in his brother's skin to hack off his head or shoot him in the face or drown him in the bathtub.

The steady rhythm of the road was soothing, and Sam thought he finally understood why so often when they'd been growing up, when he and Dad had been arguing and when Dean couldn't take it anymore, his big brother had just jumped into the Impala and *driven*.

It was hypnotic, the yellow line that had bisected Route 177 for the last forty minutes, and as he approached the outer limits of Sulphur, he gradually found his shoulders relaxing and his mind clearing, and he realized he hadn't seen a soul since peeling out of Ardmore, the road deserted, only the Impala for company.

Unconsciously, he reached over to the stereo, plugging in his iPhone and selecting the playlist he'd made for Dean.

Led Zeppelin thundered out of the speakers and he glanced at the empty passenger seat, something clenching deep inside.

Which was when Robert Plant's vocals suddenly cut out as Sam's phone started to ring.

Sam froze, his eyes skittering between the road and the words, "Dean's cell" flashing insistently on his cell phone's screen.

For a second, he wasn't sure what to do. Ignore it? Answer it? Explain to Dean why he ditched him? That he *knew*?

Taking a shaky breath, he gingerly removed the phone from the jack, touching the screen and bringing the device up to his ear.

He could hear Dean breathing.

Swallowing hard, Sam finally managed to grind out, "I know what's going on, Dean."

There was a second's pause, followed by Dean's more-than-a-little pissed off reply. "Oh really, Sam? Then maybe you can tell *me*?"

Sam gasped in another breath, his lungs apparently refusing to cooperate with the rest of his body's need for oxygen. "I *know*," he clarified shortly.

"Yeah?" Dean replied, his voice measured and—and *cold*. "Whaddya *know*, Sammy?"

Sam cleared his throat, the uncharacteristic iciness of his brother's tone chilling him in so many more ways than just the literal. "I know you're not him," he said slowly. "I know you're not Dean."

There was a long pause, when all Sam could hear was the sound of tires on pavement.

Followed by the last sound he expected to hear.

Dean was laughing.

"Sammy, what the hell was in that salad you had for dinner?"

"I'm not delusional—" Sam began, "—*Dean*. I saw your eyes go black."

"You think I'm *possessed*?"

"I know it. And in my vision, I saw you kill me."

"Wait. You had a vision? Sammy, when did you have a vision?"

"I won't let it happen," Sam continued as if Dean hadn't spoken. "I *won't*. You're not killing me, and you're not keeping Dean." He tried to swallow but couldn't, his mouth suddenly dirt road dry. "Dean, if you can hear me," he continued. "I'm gonna get help, okay? I'm gonna get you outta this. Just hang on in there, you hear me? I'm not abandoning you—"

"Sam, where are you?"

"Dean? Hang on in there, I'm gonna get you back, I promise!"

"Sam, just tell me where you are. And why did you take my—"

Sam hung up the phone.

Tightening his grip on the wheel, he clamped shut his jaw and did his damndest to focus on the road and the road alone.

He was getting Dean some help.

And he was sure as *hell* not leaving him alone with that goddamned demon any longer than he had to.

Outside Arkansas City, KS

Sam yawned.

Glancing at his wristwatch, he realized he'd been driving for over four hours straight after having lain awake till one-thirty a.m. that morning waiting for Dean—the demon within Dean—to fall asleep.

He was tired. And hungry. And wired. And it was slowly starting to dawn on him that if he didn't stop soon he was going to wrap the Impala around a tree.

And Dean would be pissed as all hell if that happened.

Bobby's was still nine hours away, and if he was being honest with himself he felt as if he could really use a friendly face just then.

Glancing at a passing road sign, he did the math in his head, figuring out he could maybe be in Lawrence—and on Missouri's doorstep—in a little over three hours.

Last time they'd seen her, when Mia had shown up in her kitchen, she'd chided them for not coming to her when John had gotten trapped in Stull, reminding them that her door was always open if they ever needed some help.

Well Sam sure needed help now.

And breakfast.

Sam could sure as hell go for some breakfast.

Glancing again at his watch, he figured he could maybe make it to Lawrence a little before nine a.m. if he got the lead out.

And Missouri would know what to do, right? How to get Dean back?

And if she didn't, then Addie Roberts, the friendly—or, at least, *cooperative*—demon who had helped the boys save their friends from Mia's minions, might have some idea, and she only lived a few blocks away from Missouri.

Yes. Lawrence was the place to go. Rest. Food. *Help*.

Sam took a relieved breathe, pressing on the gas pedal a little harder. He still had no clue how he was going to help Dean, but at least he now had some direction, the first inklings of a plan.

Then his cell rang.

Sam's gaze skittered instantly to the little screen, already knowing "Dean's cell" would be blinking at him.

His hand hovered over the phone for a fraction of a second, before he lifted it to his ear.

"Sam."

"Not-Dean," Sam replied, shortly.

"Aw, c'mon, Sammy, this is stupid!" Dean's voice burst out. "I'm *not* possessed, dude!"

"Like hell."

"Sammy. C'mon, don't be like that. Where are you? And where the hell's my car?"

"I told you," Sam said slowly, as if he was speaking to a preschooler. "I'm going to get Dean some help."

"Sam, just tell me where you are. I'll come get you. We can talk."

"We can talk *after* I get Dean some help."

"It'll take you another three hours to get to Missouri's."

Sam was pretty sure his heart stopped beating right there.

Shifting in his seat, he deliberately made no sound, didn't even breathe, just held the phone between trembling fingertips and wondered whether the demon could read his mind down the phone line.

"Sammy? You still there?"

Sam's finger hovered over the "end call" button, lips clamped tightly shut.

"Sammy? Three hours, man. That's a lifetime." Another pause. Then, "How much you wanna bet I get there first?"

Sam slammed his foot against the brake, the big old Chevy fishtailing to the side of the road and almost winding up in a ditch.

"Don't you even *think* about..." Sam took a breath, trying not to sound too desperate, trying to sound calm and in control. "Dean, just stay in Ardmore, okay? I'm going for help."

"I'm comin' to get you, Sammy," Dean's voice told him coldly. "I'll find you. You know I will. Wherever you go. You know I'll find you."

Sam ended the call.

And threw his phone onto the opposite end of the bench seat.

Glancing up at the road sign above his head, he decided right then and there he needed to get off the 177. If Dean expected him to come this way, if he expected him to go to Missouri's, then he had to get off this road.

And he had to warn Missouri to expect company of the demonic kind some time soon.

Pulling out onto the highway with little regard for any traffic already on the road—luckily, at this time of the morning, there wasn't a whole lot—Sam floored the gas pedal until he finally spotted an intersection up ahead, making a violent left and heading west onto the 166, figuring he could pick up on the I-35 and head north toward Wichita, and, beyond that, toward Sioux Falls.

If Dean was expecting him to go to Missouri's, then he'd go to Bobby's. Bobby would know what to do.

Keeping one hand on the wheel, he leaned sideways, scrabbling for his cell, which had landed at the far end of the bench seat.

Retrieving the phone, he scrolled impatiently through his address book, finally locating Missouri's number.

"Sam?" the psychic said, before Sam even introduced himself.

"Missouri. Hey. How did you...?"

"Caller I.D., sugar," Missouri replied on a chuckle. "Don't need to be psychic these days to know who you've got on the end of your phone line."

Sam actually found himself smiling, despite the dire circumstances.

“You—uh—don’t sound surprised to hear from me?” he said carefully, the thought crossing his mind that perhaps Dean had already called her, told her that it was *Sam* who was acting irrationally, who had taken off in the middle of the night without any warning.

“Well technology doesn’t quite render all psychics redundant, Sam,” she told him. “I figured you’d need to call me sooner or later.”

Sam swallowed. He needed to ask... “Has Dean been in touch?”

“Not recently. Why? You two need some help? Sam, you sound kind of stressed, honey.”

“Stressed doesn’t even begin to cover it,” Sam returned.

“Okay sweetie, well, you just take a breath, take a second, calm yourself down a little bit and tell me what’s got you all riled up like a debutante at her first ball.”

Sam frowned at that. “You’re kidding, right?”

Missouri snickered. “Don’t worry, baby, I’m sure your corsage looks just fine.”

“Missouri—”

“Okay, sugar, no more teasin’. You go ahead and tell me what’s on your mind.”

Sam sucked in a breath. “It’s Dean,” he said shortly. “I think... I think he might be headed in your direction.”

“Well he does love my cookies.”

“And I think he might be possessed.”

“Oh.” Missouri paused for a second. “Well that would sure explain why you’re so upset.”

“And—” Sam continued breathlessly, “—I think he might be dangerous.”

“Sam—”

“Salt lines, Missouri. You need to lay salt lines. Everywhere.”

“Honey, this ain’t my first rodeo,” Missouri returned. “Remember who caught your little friend Mia in her devil’s trap?”

Sam nodded, even though he knew the psychic couldn’t see him. Although, knowing Missouri, she probably could. “I know you can take care of yourself, Missouri,” he said. “I just—I think Dean thinks I’m heading to you, and he’s determined to head me off at the pass. I just didn’t want—”

“You didn’t want him fooling me into thinking he was really him?” Missouri offered. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, I know possessed when I see it.” She paused once more, and when her voice returned, she sounded as if she was treading on eggshells. “Sam, honey,” she began slowly. “Are you absolutely *sure* Dean’s possessed?”

“Yes,” Sam assured her, suddenly realizing that he really, really was. “He’s been acting weird for a couple of days. Suddenly afraid to go into a convent, a little skittish about holy ground. And I think he burnt his hand in holy water, but he wouldn’t show me. Then last night, he wouldn’t—or maybe *couldn’t*—step over a salt line.”

“Okay,” Missouri said, apparently turning over Sam’s evidence. “That’s all pretty circumstantial, Sam.”

“And I had a vision.”

“A vision?”

“A couple of visions, actually. Dean was trying to kill me. And his eyes were black.”

“Honey, you sure those were visions, not just nightmares?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m sure. Missouri, Dean’s going to kill me. Or he’s going to try.”

“Sam, where are you?”

Sam paused. “Missouri, are you *sure* Dean hasn’t already called you?”

“No, sugar, I swear.”

She was lying. Missouri was *lying* to him. Dean *had* already called her, lied to her, told her Sam was having paranoid delusions. He just *knew* it.

He couldn’t trust her. If Dean had convinced her it was *Sam* who’d gone off the deep end, then anything he told her could find its way back to the demon parading around in his brother.

“I’m headed for Louisiana,” he lied, hoping if Dean *had* spun her some untruths, if she was, indeed, reporting back to him, then she’d at least send him in the opposite direction to where Sam was actually headed. “One of our mom’s relatives had a place down there where I can crash. Get my head together.” Sam shuddered at the thought of putting his head down anywhere near Shadrack Mann’s old shack. But he hoped Dean would understand where he was talking about—and that the demon would therefore understand where he was talking about, too.

“Sweetie,” Missouri said slowly, as if she were attempting to bribe a little kid with the promise of chocolate. “Why don’t you come here? I can help you, I’m sure of it.”

Sam liked to think he wasn’t a particularly paranoid person, but right now? Right now he didn’t trust Missouri as far as he could throw her, and not because he didn’t trust *Missouri*, but because he didn’t trust what *Dean* may have told her.

Everyone would believe *Dean* over *Sam* after all. If Dean said it was Sam acting like a flake? Then Sam must be the one acting like a flake.

“It’s okay, Missouri,” he said instead, his voice perfectly neutral. “I’ve put you in enough danger. I just need to go figure out my next move is all. Somewhere Dean won’t think of looking for me. Until I’ve figured out a way to get that demon bastard the hell outta him.”

“Oh, honey, you don’t have to do this alone. Please let me help you.”

“Help me by promising me you’ll stay safe, Missouri,” Sam said. “Bad things happen to too many people who help us.”

“Sam—”

“Be careful, Missouri.”

“Sam—!”

Disconnecting the call, Sam put his head down and continued to head west.

Bessie’s Bestest Diner Hutchinson, KS

The diner was like any of the other hundreds, thousands of diners Sam had eaten in over the course of his lifetime; specials scrawled on a chalkboard over the counter where a line of truckers sat with their backs to the rest of the customers, flirting with the waitresses; rows of laminated tables with laminated menus and little metal holders for napkins; salt, pepper, ketchup on the tables and questionable stains on the floor; the overpowering odor of coffee and oil and people who had been traveling for miles and miles and just wanted a good, home-cooked meal. Or the closest they were likely to get to it any time soon.

Sam had chosen a booth near the back, with a clear view of the door and an unobstructed path to the rear fire exit. There weren’t that many customers in, considering they were in the middle of the breakfast rush, and Sam was somehow grateful for that. Despite the tinny local radio station playing over the speakers and the occasional bangs and crashes emanating from the kitchen, noise and chatter was pretty much kept to a minimum, which meant Sam could sit and think—worry—without too many distractions.

The diner was located on the outskirts of Hutchinson, the first decent-sized place he’d passed through since skirting around Wichita. The food was reasonable, his waitress friendly, and the coffee damn good, but still, all he could do was toy with the plate of bacon and eggs set on the table in front of him.

An hour ago he could have eaten his own arm. But since the phone call to Missouri? Suddenly he wasn’t hungry anymore.

He glanced up as the waitress approached with the coffee pot, smiling tiredly at her.

“You want a refill, hon?” she asked brightly, and Sam nodded, allowing the woman to pour him a cup of the aromatic stuff. “Somethin’ up with your eggs, sweetie?”

Sam blinked at her, for a second doubting she’d actually spoken English. His sluggish brain finally managing to decode what she’d said, he merely shrugged at her. “Lost my appetite,” he told her lamely. “Guess I’ll just stick with the coffee.”

The waitress—her nametag proclaimed her as Wanda—nodded, but didn’t offer to take away his food. “You want cream and sugar?”

Sam shook his head. “Black’s fine,” he told her, smiling again and hoping she’d go away.

She did, and Sam was left to his bitter black coffee, no cream and no sugar, just the way Dean liked it.

Rubbing tiredly at the spot between his eyes, he pulled his phone from his pocket and began scrolling through the numbers distractedly.

His vision was swimming a little—from lack of sleep or lack of food, Sam wasn't sure, and he had to squint to see the names as he searched for Bobby's number. He needed to let the older hunter know what was going on, give him a heads up that Sam—or Dean—was on his way so Bobby would be ready.

He wasn't going to go about this half-assed. Not anymore. Not after his initial knee-jerk reaction of *Run!*

Dean's life was at stake after all, and Sam needed to be smart about this.

As his thumb hovered over Bobby's number, his phone suddenly started to ring, the display shifting to "Dean's cell" like some bleak harbinger of doom.

Sam bit his lip, hesitating for just a second before picking up the call.

"So where are ya, Sammy?" Dean's voice was in Sam's ear before he could really prepare himself for it; Dean's voice, but off somehow. Cold. Indifferent. Calculating. "You're not in Lawrence, little bro. Missouri's missing you."

Sam shuddered despite his determination not to allow himself to be baited, unconsciously glancing about himself, as if he expected Dean to be sitting at one of the other tables, watching him.

He didn't reply.

Dean—the thing wearing Dean—sighed loudly. "It's gonna take you a while to get to Bobby's, Sammy," he said, his voice slow and languid, as if he wasn't in any hurry, even if Sam was. "You know I'll get there before you, right? And then me 'n Bobby are gonna have us a little chat."

Sam's whole body went rigid.

The demon knew *everything* Dean knew.

And Dean knew everything about *Sam*.

There was nowhere he could go. Nothing he could do.

Dean would know.

The *demon* would know.

Probably before Sam even knew himself.

"I can meet you there if you'd like," Dean continued casually. "I figure Bobby's place is a hell of a lot nicer than old Shadrack's shack in Louisiana."

Sam bit his lip again, refusing to speak, refusing to acknowledge Dean was right about anything, knew anything. Refusing to react at all.

So he'd spoken to Missouri. So what? He couldn't have made it to Lawrence this fast, so he was pretty sure he hadn't hurt her.

"It's okay, Sammy," Dean intoned, as if reading Sam's mind. "Missouri's fine. She's worried about you though. We all are."

Sam's finger hovered over the "end call" icon, but somehow he just couldn't bring himself to hit the button.

"Don't be like that, Sammy," Dean continued. "Talk to me! C'mon! Make it easy on us both. Just tell me where you are and we can end this."

Sam swallowed, his jaw tightening.

"You know I'm going to find you eventually."

Sam ended the call.

Jumping to his feet, he threw a couple of bills on the table before racing out the door toward the waiting Impala.

* * * *

Sam had no idea where he was or where he was going.

He was just driving.

West. Just head west. Don't go north.

He knew he couldn't go to Bobby's now. Dean would know. Dean would be waiting. And he needed time to come up with a plan. He couldn't just expect Bobby to exorcise his brother the second he landed on the porch. Sam wouldn't put the older hunter in that kind of danger. Not again. Not after what happened with Meg that time. Bobby could have been killed.

He just had to... to think of something else. Something Dean wouldn't be expecting.

But right there was Sam's problem.

Dean would be expecting *everything*.

He had to think outside of the box. Outside of himself. Do something Dean couldn't anticipate.

But what?

His phone began to chirp, and he jumped a good couple of inches off the bench seat, heart leaping up into his throat until he shakily picked up the cell and read Bobby's name on the screen.

Pushing out a breath, he picked up the call a little warily, the same thoughts going through his head as when he'd spoken to Missouri earlier: Had Dean already called? Did Bobby already think *Sam* was the one who'd gone crazy?

"Boy, where the hell's bells *are* you?" Bobby demanded by way of greeting, and Sam flinched.

“Bobby—”

“Look, I know, okay? About Dean.”

“Bobby, I don’t—”

“Missouri called me,” Bobby cut him off. “She’s worried about you, Sam. Hell, *I’m* worried about you. Just get your ass up here, boy, and we can work this thing out.”

Sam shook his head. “Bobby, I can’t. If Dean follows me—”

“Sam, I’ve spoken to Dean.”

Sam didn’t reply, merely compressed his lips into a line and clamped his jaw shut.

“Sam? Sam, what makes you think he’s possessed?”

“I *know* it, Bobby!” Sam burst out, all pretence at calm thrown out the window. “I saw his eyes!”

“And you had a vision?”

“Yes. Bobby, he’s going to kill me.”

“He’s *worried* about you—”

“He’s *possessed*, Bobby! He’s *lying* to you!”

“Sam, where are you?”

“Bobby—”

“Just get yourself up here. Please. Let me help you.”

Sam dragged a hand through his shaggy hair, shaking his head and trying to ignore the saltwater suddenly stinging his eyes.

“Bobby, I *can’t*. I have to—”

“To *what*, Sam?”

“I gotta help Dean. And I can’t do that if I’m worrying about you.”

“Sam, you know I can help you.”

“No.” Sam wiped at his eyes furiously, fighting down the almost overwhelming urge to just say, *Yes, yes, please Bobby, please just help me*. “Bobby, if Dean shows, don’t let him in,” he said instead. “Salt *everything*. You hear me? Don’t let him in, Bobby. He’ll hurt you to get to me.”

“Sam—”

“Don’t worry, Bobby. It’s gonna be okay.”

Sam ended the call, hoping to God he was right.

But in the meantime, every plan he'd come up with so far had been a bust. Couldn't go to Missouri's. Couldn't go to Bobby's. Couldn't even go hide out at Shadrack Mann's old place.

Where the hell could he go now? Who would help him?

He didn't have a plan, he had no idea how to help Dean.

Hell, Bobby was the plan.

Sure, maybe he could lure Dean somewhere, try to exorcise him alone. But if he had a demon inside him powerful enough to enter holy ground, Sam didn't think there was much hope. For either of them.

What was he supposed to do now?

Pulling the Impala onto the shoulder, Sam sat looking at his phone for a good few minutes.

He had to do something Dean wouldn't expect.

He had to go somewhere Dean wouldn't expect.

He had to go to *someone* Dean wouldn't expect.

And suddenly it dawned on Sam that there was only one other person in the world who could help him right now.

And he was the last person Dean would expect him to call.

Sucking in a breath, he began to scroll through his contacts, swallowing hard before finally hitting "Dad's cell."

**Daily Bread Diner,
Scott City, KS**

Voicemail. Go figure.

Sam glanced at his watch, drumming his fingers on the laminate tabletop and wondering how long he was going to have to wait for Dad to finally answer the frantic message he'd left on his voicemail *three hours* ago.

"Dad, you have to help me, please! It's Dean, Dad. He's in trouble. I don't know what to do. Please, Dad. If you get this... Please."

He let his head slide into his hands, too tired to examine the diner in which he found himself. He knew what to expect. Knew it by heart. It was a carbon copy of the one he'd been sitting in at breakfast, the one he'd been sitting in all his life, only this time there was a sandwich on his plate he couldn't eat, a waitress who barely smiled and the coffee wasn't half as good.

And Dean wasn't sitting opposite him.

He missed his brother. Missed his goofy smile and his craptastic sense of humor. Missed his insatiable appetite and his questionable taste in TV, women and booze.

Missed having someone to tell him what to do.

It was ironic. All those times he'd railed at Dad for treating him like a conscript, railed at Dean for bossing him around; right now all he wanted was someone to tell him what to *do*, how to fix this.

He glared at his phone helplessly, willing it to ring.

Please, Dad. Please...

And it did.

Snatching up the phone, Sam could have cried when he read the words on the screen.

Dean's cell.

He couldn't do this. Couldn't *keep* doing this. This game or whatever this was the demon was playing with him.

Dance with the devil.

It was toying with him.

Torturing him.

And he wasn't sure he could take much more.

"How's it goin', Sammy?" his brother's voice slipped into his ear, smooth and gentle and insidious. "You got where you're goin' yet?"

"I'm going to get help," Sam snarled down the phone. "I *won't* let you keep my brother as your meatsuit!"

"That's good, Sammy," Dean's voice honeyed. "But you know what? You look a little pale. Maybe you should try eatin' that sandwich instead of playin' with it. The waitress is givin' you funny looks."

Sam's head snapped up and he almost dropped the phone.

Heart hammering and head spinning, he turned to look at the tables around him, at the ordinary people going about their ordinary business eating their ordinary food.

There was a guy with a couple of young boys at the table next to him. The older boy was maybe nine, the younger five or six. The older boy had green eyes and freckles and Sam felt bile rise in his throat.

The woman on the table next to them was looking at him. "You okay, hon?" she asked.

Sam didn't reply, his gaze raking the rest of the room, but Dean wasn't there.

Dean wasn't anywhere.

And then he looked out of the window.

At the Impala in the parking lot.

At Dean leaning against the Impala in the parking lot. Looking at him. And waving.

Once again, Sam threw money onto the table, and it could have been a twenty, a fifty or a hundred for all he knew.

He had to get out of there.

Right the hell *now*.

But unlike last time, back in Hutchinson, he wasn't going out the front door.

Instead, he sprinted for the bathroom in back, locking the door behind him before jimmying open a window set high into the wall above a conveniently-located radiator and squeezing his way outside.

Landing awkwardly on a pile of moldy cardboard boxes, he quickly took stock of his surroundings, realizing he was in a little parking area tucked in behind the restaurant that was obviously used for deliveries and staff parking.

Which explained why the only vehicles parked there were a rusty old Jetta and an even more ancient Buick.

The Jetta was locked up tight, but when Sam tried the door to the Buick, it swung open easily, and he ducked inside, reaching under the dash and yanking out a couple of wires which he proceeded to try and hotwire, no easy feat considering his fingers felt six times their normal size.

His cell started to ring insistently, and, despite his better judgment he reached into his pocket, tossing the phone onto the passenger seat as "Dean's cell" flashed repeatedly on the screen.

"Come *on*, you piece of crap!" he yelled at the Buick, just as the engine finally caught, turning over with a cough and a splutter as he stomped on the gas feverishly.

Slamming the shifter into reverse, Sam backed the old car out of the parking slot with little consideration for its age or the dumpster lurking behind, the back fender slamming into the dumpster with a teeth-jarring crunch, before Sam shifted into drive and floored the gas pedal, tires screeching as the Buick shot out into the main parking lot.

For a second, he was so intent on getting out of the lot and onto the highway that he didn't hear the rumble of a powerful V8 engine behind him, and it was only on glancing into the rearview that he saw it.

The Impala was right behind him, Dean at the wheel.

"Dammit," Sam swore through gritted teeth, more than a little aware that, firstly, the heap of junk he was currently driving could never outrun the Impala, and, secondly, *he* could never outrun *Dean*.

Even with his foot jammed to the floorboard, the needle on the Buick's speedometer was barely registering fifty, the Impala nearly on the dented back fender.

Sam smiled grimly as an idea occurred to him. Dean's extensive knowledge of his little brother may have been what had gotten Sam into this mess in the first place, but that same fraternal knowledge was a two-way street, and Sam figured he needed to get off the highway or Dean was going to simply overtake him and block the road. Anticipating his brother's next move, he waited patiently for Dean to start to make the maneuver before suddenly swerving off to his right just before the next intersection, bouncing the Buick over the corner of a rutted field before finally skidding back up onto the blacktop and once again flooring the gas.

Cutting the corner may have only bought him a few extra seconds, but the crowd of buildings up ahead suggested Sam was heading into the center of Scott City, and he figured his only hope was to lose Dean in the maze of unfamiliar streets crisscrossing their path.

Glancing into the rearview, Sam saw that the Impala had only just negotiated the intersection, Dean not risking his baby's undercarriage on the rutted field, and he took a quick left, slewing the Buick into what looked like an industrial area, warehouses and factories rising up on either side of the two-lane street.

Quickly, he hung a right and another left, glancing in the rearview once again for any sign of the pursuing Chevy.

All he saw was a messed up old pickup and a guy trying to reverse a sixteen-wheeler into a loading dock that was obviously too small for the task.

There was no sign of the Impala, and Sam sucked in a short breath, swerving the Buick into an alleyway squashed between two warehouses and finally bringing the old car to an abrupt stop behind a pile of old truck tires.

Chest heaving and heart slamming against his ribs, he just sat there for a second, fingers white around the steering wheel and eyes never leaving the rearview.

There was still no sign of the Impala, and Sam didn't think he'd ever been so pleased about that in his life.

Finally daring to drag his gaze away from the mirror, he turned his attention instead to the gas needle, which was currently hovering on empty.

He needed to ditch this car.

Shutting off the engine, he snatched up his phone, threw open the door and jumped out, starting to run in the same direction he'd been driving. He didn't have the first clue where he was, but figured he could find another vehicle to appropriate easily enough, if only he could avoid running into Dean.

Keeping his eyes peeled for that familiar black muscle car, he began weaving his way through the backstreets of Scott City, finally finding himself jogging down an alley toward the back of a strip mall.

Winded, he let himself slow as he neared the mouth of the alleyway, skidding to an abrupt halt when a figure stepped out of the shadows in front of him.

"Hey, Sammy. Told you I'd find you."

Dean.

He wasn't even out of breath, and Sam figured he must have parked the Impala somewhere nearby.

But how the hell had he found him?

Dean used to joke about his "Sammy Radar" all the time when they were kids, but Sam had never really believed in it. Well, not since he was seven, anyway.

Perhaps he'd been mistaken.

He took a step back as Dean took a step forward, the smile never slipping from his big brother's face.

"C'mon, Sammy. Just wanna talk."

Sam turned.

And *ran*.

He still didn't have the first clue where the hell he was or where the hell he was going, he just knew he had to keep on moving.

Dodging into an old warehouse, the change in lighting conditions temporarily blinded him, bright sunlight giving way to a dingy interior and a wide open space piled high with packing crates, boxes, and odd bits of machinery whose function Sam couldn't even begin to guess at.

Sprinting deeper into the warehouse, he ducked between two huge lines of crates piled almost to the ceiling, Dean's voice slicing through the musty air behind him.

"C'mon, Sammy!" his brother taunted him. "This is getting boring. C'mon, man! Let's talk about this! I won't even kick your ass for stealing my car!"

Sam hesitated as he attempted to catch his breath, scanning the area around him for some avenue of escape.

Then he saw it, a rickety-looking ladder leading up to a walkway above his head, and Sam made a dash for it, figuring if it didn't lead to a way out, at least he might be able to see where Dean was hiding.

Or not.

Because suddenly Dean was right there in front of him on the walkway, blocking Sam's path completely.

"Gotcha, little bro," he said with a lopsided grin. "Had enough of this game yet? You always did suck at hide and seek."

Not really thinking about what he was doing or considering the ramifications of his actions, Sam launched himself at the demon in his brother's meatsuit, shoving him back and against the railing lining the walkway, a maneuver Dean clearly wasn't expecting.

His eyes going wide, Dean overbalanced, almost toppling over the railing before managing to grab a fistful of Sam's jacket to steady himself.

Which probably wasn't the best move he'd ever made, as Sam seized his brother's wrist and twisted mercilessly, yanking Dean's arm halfway up his back and causing the older brother to yelp in surprise and pain.

"Never thought you had it in you, Sammy," Dean ground out breathlessly, holding completely still in Sam's grasp for a second, before suddenly bringing a booted foot down hard on Sam's shin.

It was Sam's turn to yelp, his grip on his brother faltering as Dean spun in his grasp, his fist connecting squarely with Sam's jaw.

Reeling from the blow, Sam fell back a step, shaking his head to clear the ringing in his ears and give his vision time to quit showing him double.

Dean was grinning at him.

The thing *inside* Dean was grinning at him.

And something inside Sam snapped.

Running at his brother full force, he planted both hands against Dean's chest and shoved as hard as he could.

For a split second, the world seemed to stop, Dean just looking at him in shocked surprise as his lower back slammed against the railing.

And then he was falling backwards, toppling over the railing, his eyes still locked onto Sam's as he fell.

Sam froze, not quite able to believe what he'd just done, a thud and a bone-breaking crack echoing around the cavernous warehouse.

He almost didn't dare look, inching his way to the edge of the walkway and turning his gaze downward, to where his brother was lying atop a pile of broken crates, pale and unmoving.

"Dean?" he found himself whispering, and his legs felt as if they were welded to the metal beneath his feet.

Should he go down there? Should he check Dean was okay? He had a demon in him, right? So, super strength?

He *had* to be okay.

He moved one foot toward the ladder, intent on checking his brother was at least breathing, the panic that had been festering somewhere in his stomach since yesterday starting to bloom out toward his extremities, choking his heart and his lungs and his head.

"Dean?"

"Sammy, that freakin' *hurt!*" Dean yelled suddenly.

And once again Sam *ran*.

Value Lodge Motel,

Grand Junction, CO

Sam sat in yet another dingy motel room, his head in his hands.

His phone was lying on the table next to him, ominously silent, and part of him wanted to scream and throw the little device against the wall.

He'd not heard from Dean once since Scott City, since Sam had hurled him fifteen feet off a walkway, taken off at a sprint without looking back, stolen the first car he could find where the owner had been stupid enough to leave the door open, slammed the accelerator to the floorboards and driven for ten hours straight until he could barely see the road anymore and he'd found himself *here*. Grand Junction, Colorado.

And what a fabulous motel he'd discovered. Peeling paint and moldy carpet, a whole biology experiment growing in the bathroom, and a lady entertaining next door who obviously got paid by the hour.

Dean would have found it hilarious.

If Dean were here.

He'd not heard from Dad either.

Like *that* was a surprise.

Rubbing the heel of his hand against his forehead, he thought about just lying down on the bed, ignoring what might be sharing the mattress with him, and going to sleep.

But how could he sleep when something had his brother?

What if Dean was really hurt?

What if *Sam* had really hurt him?

He thought back to Chicago, to Meg getting thrown out of a sixth storey window and carrying on with her murder spree as if nothing had happened.

Had the demon inside Dean done the same to his brother? Was he, even now, walking him around like a broken doll as he tried to hunt Sam down?

Or maybe Dean was beyond fixing.

Maybe Sam had *really* hurt him.

He shook his head, his fingers tightening in his hair.

He couldn't think about that anymore. He just *couldn't*.

God, what the hell should he do now?

His phone began to ring, vibrating across the uneven tabletop, and for a brief instant he couldn't understand where the noise was coming from.

Finally his brain caught up with his ears and he opened his eyes to look at the screen, half of him willing the words "Dean's cell" to be flashing at him.

Instead, “unknown number” appeared on the screen, and Sam picked up the cell a little warily, almost afraid of who would be on the other end of the line.

Hitting the “answer call” icon, he waited for a good couple of seconds before offering a tentative, “Hello?”

“Sammy.”

Sam was almost twenty-seven years old, but right that second, he felt all of three, his shoulders drooping in relief as he gulped in what must have sounded like a sob on the other end of the phone line and, if Sam was being honest, sounded like a sob to him too.

“Dad?”

Thank you! Thank you! He cried out silently to anyone who was listening.

Dad would know what to do.

“Sammy,” John repeated, his voice low and ponderous. “What’s the emergency, son?” he asked. “What’s wrong with Dean?”

“Dad...” Sam couldn’t remember being this close to crying in his father’s presence since he was ten years old. “Dean’s possessed. I don’t know how. Dad, I had a vision and he’s going to kill me. I saw it. And I don’t know what to do.”

“Sam—”

“Maybe it’s Lucifer. Could it be Lucifer? Could Lucifer be possessing Dean? Dad? Is that even possible? Can fallen angels possess people? Wait. Wait, Missouri said Ferinacci was just his meatsuit, so maybe—maybe—”

“Sam, slow down for a second,” John ordered. “You’re not making a whole lot of sense here, son.”

Sam sniffed, wiping his nose on the back of his hand as he fought back the tears prickling his eyes. “None of it makes sense, Dad,” he said. “I don’t—I don’t understand what’s happening.”

“Sammy,” John’s voice was softer, gentler, and Sam felt as if someone had thrown a warm blanket around his shoulders. “Are you *sure* Dean’s possessed, son?”

“I’m sure, Dad. He’s been chasing me. I got away from him back in Oklahoma but he almost caught up with me in Kansas and I didn’t dare go to Missouri’s or Bobby’s ’cause he said he’d get to them first and I didn’t know what he’d do to them and I—I don’t know what to do, Dad. I need help.”

“Sammy, it’s gonna be okay—”

“No, Dad, it’s not. I threw him off a walkway and I don’t even know—I don’t even know if he’s okay, if he’s hurt, what that demon’s doing to him. I left him, Dad. I just left him. And I didn’t even check if—”

“Sammy, just breathe, son,” John murmured soothingly. “Just breathe. Dean’s tough, kiddo. He’ll be okay.”

Sam wiped the tears from his cheeks with the sleeve of his hoodie. "Dad. What if I hurt him?"

"We'll work it out, Sam."

"You gotta help me, Dad. You gotta help *Dean*."

"I will. I'm gonna help, Sam."

"Where are you? Dad? *Please*. Tell me where you are."

John paused for a long moment, and Sam counted every heartbeat in the meantime.

His father hadn't exactly made himself available to his boys since he got out of Stull, and, despite Dean and Sam asking him several times where he was, he'd always remained ridiculously cagey about his whereabouts.

"Please, Dad."

If Dean were here, he'd be accusing Sam of doing his whole puppy dog thing over the phone.

Sam almost laughed at that, but it came out as a wet hiccup.

He heard his dad sigh, long and hard.

"Beaver, Utah," John admitted at length.

"Beaver?" Sam echoed, absurdly relieved. "What's in Beaver?"

"Old hunting buddy o' mine's letting me use his cabin," John explained. "Give me time to get my head together a little."

Sam took in a shuddering breath. "Can I...? Is it okay if I...?"

"It's a little hard to find," John explained softly. "Let me give you directions."

Beaver, UT

Sam couldn't believe his luck as he turned the old Ford he'd "borrowed" back in Scott City onto Beaver's main street. Dad had only been a four hour drive away from Grand Junction, and he couldn't help wondering if he'd somehow sensed where his old man was and subconsciously been heading in his direction all along without even knowing it.

Double checking the scrap of paper onto which he'd hurriedly scrawled John's directions, he searched the street for road signs, finally locating North Creek Road and pulling a sharp right. Dad was staying out in some remote cabin up in the woods on the edge of Fishlake National Forest, about a half hour's drive away from his current location.

Sam didn't think he'd ever been so relieved.

Not long now.

Not long until he got Dean the help he needed.

Dad would know what to do.

Fishlake Park National Forest, UT

John Winchester stared thoughtfully at the little cell phone nestled in his large hand. Sam had sounded...off, not his usual calm, collected self, and, to be honest, that had freaked John out even more than hearing his eldest son was possessed.

How could Dean be possessed with the amulet around his neck? John didn't understand it.

Glancing again at his phone, he began scrolling through his contacts, finally stopping on "Dean's Cell."

Maybe he should just call him, check out Sam's story. Maybe the boys had had a falling out and Sam was just overreacting.

He ran a tired hand through his hair.

He knew he'd been distant since Stull, that his boys needed him, needed an explanation. But he still had a lot to process, a lot to get straight in his head before he could even attempt to explain it to his sons.

And if he was being really honest with himself, he had to admit he was still a little bit wary of believing he was really home, that these were really his boys.

Closing his eyes, he could still feel the dead weight of his eldest boy's broken body in his arms, could still remember looking up into his youngest's unapologetic yellow eyes and wanting to kill him. Wanting to kill *Sam*. His own son.

He shuddered involuntarily.

No, not his own son. Not *his* Sam.

Of course, there had been a whole litany of nightmare alternate reality scenarios since then, none of which John yet felt comfortable discussing with his sons; Dean going to Hell and coming back utterly broken; Sam drinking demon blood and kick-starting the Apocalypse; Sam possessed by Lucifer and Dean... John still couldn't think about that reality without losing his hold on his own. Archangels. *Michael*. He'd seen what Michael and Dean had done together. And it hadn't been pretty.

He shuddered again.

He didn't want to think about Dean possessed, Dean trying to kill his brother in his sleep, not after the things he'd seen in the last six months.

But Sammy was bringing it to his door, and he had no choice.

His boys needed his help. Both of them. If he could help Sam save Dean from whatever was using him as a meatsuit, then he couldn't deny either of them his assistance, no matter how much he himself was currently struggling to hang on to reality.

His thumb continued to hover over Dean's number, until suddenly there was a knock at the door.

John cursed himself. He'd never even heard a car pull up outside.

Standing a little shakily, he crossed the modest cabin he'd been sacking out in the past couple of weeks and headed over to the door, yanking it open with one hand on the butt of the gun in his waistband.

Sam stood on the doorstep, a look of desperate relief plastered all over his face.

He looked pale and drawn, his hair messy, even for Sam, dark circles under his eyes and uncharacteristic hollows in his cheeks.

"Dad," he said slowly, leaning against the doorjamb as if it was the only thing keeping him from faceplanting on the floor.

"Hey, Sammy," John returned, his voice sounding rough after weeks of little use. "Good to see you, son."

"Likewise, Dad," Sam said, his expression of abject misery suddenly morphing into a sunny smile. "We really need to talk..."

And as he stepped casually over the salt line at the door, his eyes flashed ruby red.

PART 3:

**Chief Motel,
Ardmore, OK
24 hours earlier**

Dean woke with a start, his eyes snapping open as he sucked in an almost panicked breath.

"Sam?"

He wasn't sure what had woken him. Maybe it was the fuzzy feeling in his head, like he was about to get a monster headache; or the fact his Sammy-Senses were tingling out of all proportion.

"Sammy?"

He blinked at the beat-up old clock on the nightstand, the numbers swimming lazily across his field of vision. It was a little after two a.m.

Somehow he managed to lever himself up into a sitting position, snapping on the bedside light as his gaze slid to the bed nearest the door.

It was empty.

"Sam?"

The bedclothes were puddled at the foot of the mattress, and Dean's foggy brain tried to tell him his brother must be in the bathroom, because no way would he go anywhere without making his bed. Sam just didn't *do* that sort of thing.

A growing sliver of panic began to agitate Dean's stomach as he turned his attention to the bathroom. The door was open and the light switched off, and Dean noted Sam's running shoes had disappeared from their position on the floor between the two beds.

Sam had been acting weird all day. Barely taking his eyes off his brother. Constantly asking him if he was okay.

Of course Dean was okay, it was *Sam* who was being a freak.

He'd even insisted on taking the bed nearest the door, which had always been Dean's thing, ever since he was ten years old and the thing with the Shtriga.

"S-Sammy?"

Swinging his legs off the bed, he managed to pull himself to his feet, but had to grab the headboard to avoid collapsing backwards as vertigo took hold of him, causing the room to spin around him languidly.

Holding completely still for a second as he waited for the dizziness to abate, he eventually managed to stumble to the bathroom, switching on the light in the forlorn hope that Sam had, for some reason best known to himself, decided to sleep in the tub.

He hadn't, and the awful truth slowly began to sink in.

Sam's stuff was gone.

All of it.

His stuff in the bathroom. His duffel. The clothes he'd left on the chair by the table.

Everything was gone.

Including Sam.

Dean felt sick, his chest constricting as real panic began to take hold while the room continued to spin frantically around him.

"Sam?"

He knew calling his brother's name wasn't going to help, but the sound of his own voice was preferable to the unnatural silence.

And the heaviness of his own breathing.

He blinked at the empty motel room, before somehow managing to stagger to the window, trying to shake the dizziness out of his head along the way. Which, of course, only succeeded in making him feel dizzier.

Pulling back the flimsy curtain, he squinted out into the poorly-lit parking lot, trying to remember where he'd left the car.

It came to him just as another terrible realization hit.

The Impala was gone too.

Sonofabitch.

“Sam, what did you *do*?” he mumbled, backing up a step before losing his balance and winding up flat on his back on Sam’s bed.

The world continued to spin above his head in a lazy kaleidoscope, and his hand slid unconsciously to his chest.

There was nothing there.

He sat bolt upright, looking down at his t-shirt and patting the place where his amulet ought to be.

Just like Sam, just like the Impala, it was gone.

Crap.

No wonder he felt like death on toast.

Blinking hard, he managed to crawl across Sam’s bed and reach out toward the nightstand, where his trembling fingers tightened around his cell phone.

Flopping back down on the bed, he pulled the phone close to his face, squinting as he tried to focus on the characters swirling across the screen.

Luckily, he’d finally managed to work out how to put Sam on speed dial a couple of days ago, still not completely sure how to work everything on the new phone his brother had bought for him only a few weeks earlier.

Stabbing at the touchscreen, he gazed up at the ceiling as he brought the phone to his ear, not even getting the chance to say hello before Sam snapped, “I know what’s going on, Dean.”

Dean swallowed. The icy tone in his little brother’s voice really wasn’t all that encouraging. “Oh really, Sam?” he said slowly. “Then maybe you can tell *me*?”

“I *know*,” Sam snapped, and that didn’t explain anything at all.

“Yeah?” Dean replied, his head starting to pound as he screwed his eyes shut against the rapidly rotating motel room. “Whaddya *know*, Sammy?”

“I know you’re not him,” Sam said, his voice so cold it caused a chill to run the length of Dean’s spine. “I know you’re not Dean.”

The world seemed to tip even further on its axis, and for some reason, Dean found himself laughing, even though he knew this wasn’t even remotely funny. “Sammy, what the hell was in that salad you had for dinner?”

“I’m not delusional, *Dean*,” Sam returned, his voice dripping sarcasm. “I saw your eyes go black.”

Wait. *What?*

“You think I’m *possessed*?” Dean choked out, his very green, completely not-black eyes snapping open again.

"I know it," Sam insisted. "And in my vision, I saw you kill me."

"Wait. You had a vision? Sammy, when did you have a vision?"

Dean hadn't even realized Sam still *had* visions. He thought all of that had died with Haris.

"I won't let it happen," Sam continued, his voice sounding oddly strangled. "I *won't*. You're not killing me, and you're not keeping Dean."

"Sam—"

"Dean, if you can hear me," his brother continued as if he'd not even spoken, the timbre of his voice changing, as if he was addressing a completely different person to the one he had on the phone. "I'm gonna get help, okay? I'm gonna get you outta this. Just hang on in there, you hear me? I'm not abandoning you—"

"Sam, where are you?" Dean asked, not liking the sound of the desperation creeping into his own voice one bit.

"Dean? Hang on in there," Sam replied, not even attempting to answer his question. "I'm gonna get you back, I promise!"

"Sam, just tell me where you are," Dean tried again. "And why did you take my—"

Sam hung up.

"—amulet?"

He listened to the dial tone for a couple of heartbeats, cursing himself thoroughly.

Dammit, he *knew* Sam had been acting weird.

So it was a vision. Sam had been acting weird since he'd had a vision.

And then there was the thing at the convent, when that mad old broad had pointed at his little brother and declared he smelled like the Devil, or whatever the hell she'd said.

Dean had thought she was talking about *him* at first, had thought she was trying to scratch his eyes out because she thought *he* was the Son of Satan. Or something. But then he'd realized she wasn't trying to get to him at all, she was trying to get *past* him, to *Sam*, and he'd pretty much had to put a football tackle on her to stop her going for him.

He'd dismissed it, of course. This was *Sam* after all. And she was just some crazy old broad with a demon fixation.

Or so he'd thought.

Of course, Dean hadn't really been thinking very clearly himself at the convent. The memories that place had dredged up—of Mobile, of the first time he'd been absolutely convinced Dad had ditched him and Sammy for good—had really done a number on him, and he'd just wanted to get out of there, get *Sam* out of there.

Consequently, maybe he'd not been paying Sam as much attention as he should have.

And then there was the whole thing at the church.

Sam had looked at him like he was a goddamn *alien* when Dean had told him he'd cut his hand on that sliver of glass in the font.

Sure, he'd been pretty stupid to make a grab at it, thinking maybe it was a summoning charm. But it had seemed like a fairly plausible explanation at the time, someone using a charm to summon a demon to possess poor old Father Bonney and slaughter the entire congregation.

He sucked in a breath, carefully examining the Band Aid fixed to the palm of his hand.

Maybe Sam had looked at him that way because he hadn't believed Dean had really cut himself. After all, he'd just dunked his hand in a font full of holy water, so if Sam really believed Dean was possessed...

Maybe he thought Dean's hand was burned.

Well that explained why Sam had almost broken Dean's fingers trying to get a look at the injury.

He scratched distractedly at the dressing on his palm, his fingers moving on up to the red patch on his wrist. *Stupid poison oak*. And what an idiot he'd been to go stomping into a patch of *that* on their last hunt.

Sam would have teased him unmercifully if he'd told him.

Which was why he'd been a little embarrassed about jumping over Sam's neatly laid salt lines to go get some ice to ease the itching last night.

Salt lines. Aw, dammit!

And that explained why Sam had gotten all weird about salting the motel doorway. He'd thought Dean couldn't step over the salt line.

Was that what this was all about? A dream and a stupid *salt line*?

After all, he'd walked right on into two churches—okay, a church and a *convent*—yesterday, and if he'd been a demon...

"Remember Pastor Jim, Sherlock? His little run-in with your buckets of crazy girlfriend Meg? She ganked him in the basement of his church, dude."

He wanted to stuff a sock in his mouth. A dirty one. One of *Sam's* dirty ones.

He was an idiot. He'd practically talked his brother into believing he was possessed *himself*.

Wiping a hand over his face despairingly, he finally managed to get himself upright, dragging himself to his feet as he punched angrily at his cell phone, locating Bobby's number with a grimace.

The phone rang twice before the older hunter's grizzled voice growled down the line. "Dean, you know what time it is, boy?"

"Bobby, I'm sorry man," Dean stammered, once again grabbing hold of the bed's headboard as the world started to tilt. "Something's wrong. With Sam."

There was a slight pause, then Bobby's voice returned, and he suddenly sounded instantly awake. "What happened?"

"He's *gone*, Bobby," Dean said, his voice cracking slightly on his friend's name. "He—he took his stuff, and the Impala and—and my *amulet*."

"He did *what*?"

"He thinks—he thinks I'm *possessed*."

"Why—why would he think that?"

"I don't know! He said he had a vision. And—and there was some other stuff."

"What kind of 'stuff?'"

"I dunno, Bobby. Just. Stuff." Dean ran a hand over his forehead, the skin cold and clammy to the touch. "Have you spoken to him? Since earlier? When you told us about the church in Ardmore?"

"No," Bobby replied. "And he sounded okay then. Dean, why would he take your amulet? He knows what that'll do to you."

"Honestly, Bobby, I have no idea. But I do know I don't have a whole lot of time here until—well, you know. Best not to think about it, right? But while I've still got my wits about me—sort of—and my strength's not deserted me completely, I need to find my brother."

"On your own? In your condition?"

"What else can I do, Bobby?" Dean asked, helplessly. "He's my brother. I gotta find him."

Bobby sighed softly. "So where d'you think he's headed?"

"Well, your place'd be my first guess," Dean replied instantly. "Although he's closer to—"

Then he stopped.

And thought about it.

And the sense of dread lurking in the back of his brain began to build into a crescendo.

"Bobby, I gotta go," he announced abruptly.

"Wait, Dean—"

"I'll call you."

"Dean—"

Ending the call, he grabbed his jeans and his boots and set about pulling them on as the world continued to wobble all around him.

Once he was dressed, he packed as quickly as he was able, considering he could see two of everything and someone had decided to turn the motel room into a carnival cake walk.

Taking one last look around him at the now-empty room, he drew in a deep breath before turning and heading for the door.

* * * *

Piece of crap foreign heap, Dean muttered to himself, flooring the gas and causing the old Datsun to judder ominously.

Just his luck the only car gassed up and easy to “liberate” in the whole damn motel parking lot was this pile of rusty old trash.

He glanced nervously at his watch—it was a little after six a.m.—before wiping sweat out of his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket and glancing at his cell, abandoned on the passenger seat beside him.

He was pretty sure his kid brother didn’t have much more than a half hour head start on him, but he was only guessing that Sam would have headed north out of Ardmore because that’s what *Dean* would have done. Realistically, he could have gone in any direction, in which case he could be miles away, with Dean only putting more and more distance between the two of them.

Shaking his head in an attempt to get his eyes to focus properly, he snatched up his phone and dialed Sam’s number one-handed, this time managing to bark into the phone before Sam could say anything.

“Sam.”

“Not-Dean,” Sam snapped, causing Dean to roll his eyes in disbelief.

“Aw, c’mon, Sammy, this is stupid!” he burst out. “I’m *not* possessed, dude!”

“Like hell.”

“Sammy. C’mon, don’t be like that. Where are you? And where the hell’s my car?”

“I told you,” Sam said, his voice oozing contempt. “I’m going to get Dean some help.”

“Sam, just tell me where you are,” Dean pleaded. “I’ll come get you. We can talk.”

“We can talk *after* I get Dean some help.”

What the hell, Sammy? I don’t need any help!

What was Sam thinking?

Although he knew he was probably tipping his hand, warning Sam where he thought the kid was headed, Dean couldn’t in all conscience put a friend in danger, not even to help him catch up with his delusional brother. “It’ll take you another three hours to get to Missouri’s,” he blurted.

When Sam didn’t reply, Dean instantly began to feel guilty. What if his brother was really sick? Delusional? Maybe Missouri would be able to help him?

But if he was dangerous, if something had gotten to him, made him act this way... then he just couldn't risk the psychic getting caught in the crossfire.

"Sammy? You still there?"

Sam still didn't answer, and Dean would have given anything just to hear his brother laugh and tell him this was all some big practical joke, a return to the Prank Wars.

But Sam wasn't laughing, and neither was Dean.

"Sammy? Three hours, man. That's a lifetime," he told his brother. "How much you wanna bet I get there first?"

"Don't you even *think* about..." Sam virtually growled at him, and Dean blinked at the savage tone in his baby brother's usually calm, controlled voice. "Dean, just stay in Ardmore, okay? I'm going for help."

"I'm comin' to get you, Sammy," Dean assured him, trying to sound comforting and confident but not quite managing it. "I'll find you. You know I will. Wherever you go. You know I'll find you. You know I'm—"

Sam once again hung up on him.

"—here to help you."

Jabbing at the phone to disconnect the call, he rubbed at his eyes tiredly before dialing Missouri's number. The busy signal beeped in his ear, causing him to frown suspiciously.

He waited another couple of minutes before trying again, and this time the call connected, Missouri immediately answering the phone with a concerned, "Dean? That you?"

Dean blinked. "How did you know it was me?"

"Psychic," Missouri replied shortly. "Plus, Sam just called."

Dean sighed heavily. "He told you I'm possessed, right?"

"He did," Missouri confirmed.

"And?"

"And *are* you?"

"Missouri, do I sound possessed to you?"

"I don't know, sugar, how does a possessed person sound?"

Dean clutched at his head for a second. "Not like this!"

"Then maybe I should take your word for it, huh?"

"Maybe you should." Dean paused briefly, before adding, "Missouri, something's really wrong. He took my amulet."

Missouri drew in a surprised breath. “But I thought—without that thing—”

“I die, yeah, that’s about the size of it.”

Missouri hesitated, and Dean could hear her breathing. “Dean, honey, I think there’s definitely someone possessed here, but I don’t think it’s you.”

Dean didn’t comment at first, not wanting to believe what Missouri was suggesting. Not wanting to entertain the possibility because... because the same thought had crossed *his* mind too.

“You think Sam’s...?”

“When I was speaking with him,” Missouri explained softly, “it was almost as if I was talking to two people: Sam and—and something else, something that was messing with Sam’s head, making him believe things that weren’t happening.”

“Like me being possessed?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And the amulet?”

“Sam never mentioned it,” Missouri confirmed. “And I never saw any trace of it in the thoughts I was picking up off of him.”

“So... what? Sam doesn’t know he’s taken it?”

“Maybe,” Missouri agreed. “Maybe whatever has him took it.”

Dean’s head hurt. “How—how is that even possible?”

“Sam might not even know he’s possessed, honey,” the psychic explained. “That thing, that demon? Could be sitting at the back of his mind just waiting, whispering in his ear. Making him see things. Maybe even making him do things when he’s not aware of it.”

“Like, in his sleep?”

“Something like that.”

Dean drew in a deep, tremulous breath, trying to pluck up the courage to ask his next question.

“Missouri? There was a church in Ardmore. It—someone set it on fire, killed twenty people. You don’t think... you don’t think *Sam*...?”

“Honey, I honestly don’t know.”

“And there were nuns. In a convent. Their wrists had been cut.”

“You think Sam—the thing inside Sam—might have done that?”

“It was before Sam started acting weird,” Dean noted. “Maybe... maybe the demon took the nuns first. Possessed them. Made them slit their own wrists.”

"Why would a demon have done that?"

"To get our attention, maybe?" Dean hazarded. "To lure us here? Meg did something similar in Chicago way back when. Killed a couple of people just because they were from Lawrence."

Dean was pretty sure he could hear Missouri shuddering down the phone. "Demons," she muttered, before adding, "But why did this one want to get your attention, sugar? To get its claws into Sam?"

"I don't know," Dean shook his head. "Why would it want Sam?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Missouri said. "But I know one thing. You need to go find your baby brother and get him to Bobby's as quick as you can. If you think I can help you find him, you could always swing by here? See if I get any vibes off of somethin' Sam's touched?"

"Thanks, Missouri," Dean said, genuinely. "But I think I got a better chance of finding him on my own."

"He said he was going to Louisiana," the psychic told him. "But, honestly? I don't think he was being one hundred percent truthful with me."

"Knew you'd tell me," Dean suggested, nodding. "Smart."

"Hmm, a little disinformation, huh?"

"Definitely," Dean agreed. "If Sam really thinks I'm in trouble he'll head for Bobby's, maybe hoping I'll follow him and he can ambush me there. Get me the 'help' he thinks I need."

"I don't know about that, Dean," Missouri countered. "Sam's not exactly thinking straight right now. In fact, it might not be Sam doin' the thinking at all. He doesn't seem to be wanting to lure you anywhere. He just seems to want to get away from you."

Dean swallowed. "Because he knows he's left me to die without the amulet?"

"It's not Sam, baby," Missouri reminded him. "Just remember that."

Dean sighed, trying to hold onto that. "I don't know where else to go, Missouri," he admitted finally. "I just gotta hope Sam's heading for Bobby's."

"I sure hope you're right, hon," the psychic said. "But if anyone can find your brother, it's you."

"Yeah, well I hope *you're* right, too," Dean returned, glancing at the clock on the dash a little hopelessly.

"You be careful now, boy," Missouri instructed him.

"I will," Dean promised. "You too."

Disconnecting the call, Dean didn't even put down the cell, just went straight to Bobby's number in his contacts and hit "call."

"I think he's coming to you," he said without preamble, before Bobby had even managed to say hello.

"Well, if Sam shows up, I'm ready, son," Bobby informed him shortly. "You know what's up with him yet? Or we gotta go with 'nuttiness of unknown origin' for a while longer?"

"Missouri thinks maybe it's *Sam* who's possessed," Dean blurted, not liking the sound of it any better this time around. "And he might not even know it."

"Well I hate to say this," Bobby said, regardless, "but that sounds kind of plausible to me." Dean heard a scritch-scratch noise and could just picture Bobby scrubbing at his beard. "So what's the demon after? Why take Sam?"

Dean shrugged. At this point he was a pretty long way past trying to come up with the "why" of it. "Maybe it's after the both of us," he suggested. "It's got Sam, and it thinks it's left me for dead."

"It *has* left you for dead, Dean."

"Yeah, well thanks for the reminder, Bobby," Dean returned a little short-temperedly. He took a breath, tried to calm himself a little before continuing. "Listen, Bobby, just promise me you'll be careful, okay? Sam may look like a giant puppy but he has one hell of a bite when he wants to. And if he has a passenger onboard..."

"I know, Dean. I'll be careful. You stay safe. And find Sam."

"I'm on it," Dean assured him, pressing a little harder on the accelerator.

Ronetta's Truck Stop, Yoder, KS

Dean stared at the coffee stain on the laminated tabletop, trying to figure out what the abstract shape reminded him of.

Devil's trap, he realized, wondering what significance a shrink would assign to that.

He sighed, resting his chin in the palm of his hand and closing his eyes for a second before taking another sip of his coffee.

He knew he didn't have time to stop, but it was this—a low-rent truck stop in a place with a funny name—or winding up in a ditch. His head was still spinning, and he'd had to pull over twice so far in order to barf his guts up at the roadside.

If only he had the energy to eat something.

He turned his gaze distractedly to the diner he was sitting in. *Yoder*. He'd only stopped here because the name had reminded him of the little green guy in *Star Wars* and he remembered Sam begging him for a Yoda mask one Halloween when he was maybe four or five. He'd looked awesome. Dean had made him a Jedi cloak out of a sheet he'd purloined from the last fleapit of a motel they'd been staying in, and painted an old baseball bat he found in a dumpster luminous green. Best lightsaber *ever*, Sam had told him.

He smiled softly to himself, remembering the little boy in the green mask fondly. But his smile soon faded, replaced by a bitter grimace that was almost as bitter as the black coffee he was chugging like it was going out of fashion.

His fingers fumbled unconsciously for the cell phone in his pocket. He needed to find Sam. *Now.* If the kid got hurt, then that was on Dean, especially if some demon was using his kid brother as an unwitting meatsuit.

Hitting the speed dial, he counted two rings before Sam picked up, and he sighed in relief when he heard his brother breathing, even though Sam didn't say a word.

"So where are ya, Sammy?" he asked brightly. "You're not in Lawrence, little bro. Missouri's missing you."

He tried to keep his tone light, as if this was all some big joke to him, which, granted, was pretty much his default setting.

Sam stubbornly refused to reply, and Dean pushed on as if he had no idea his brother might be carrying a passenger.

"It's gonna take you a while to get to Bobby's, Sammy," he observed evenly. "You know I'll get there before you, right? And then me 'n Bobby are gonna have us a little chat."

Please, Sammy. Just say you're going to Bobby's...

Dean figured if Sam really *did* think his big brother was possessed, the implied threat to Bobby might light a fire under the kid and get him moving his ass in the direction of Sioux Falls.

"I can meet you there if you'd like," he added, hoping to press home his point. "I figure Bobby's place is a hell of a lot nicer than old Shadrack's shack in Louisiana."

Sam still didn't reply, but Dean could hear him breathing, so he knew he'd not hung up on him.

"It's okay, Sammy," he continued, suddenly realizing he may have gotten Sam thinking he was still after Missouri, and figuring he didn't want to go sending him off in the direction of Lawrence again. "Missouri's fine. She's worried about you though. We all are."

Still Sam steadfastly refused to speak, and Dean almost growled in frustration. This was one stubborn bastard of a demon. Or one stubborn bastard of a little brother.

"Don't be like that, Sammy," he wheedled on a sigh. "Talk to me! C'mon! Make it easy on us both. Just tell me where you are and we can end this."

Dean was pretty sure he heard Sam's teeth grinding together.

Sammy, just get your ass to Bobby's, dammit!

"You know I'm going to find you eventually."

Come on, Sam. Talk to me.

The line went dead, and all Dean could think about was that little boy in the Yoda mask with the messed up baseball bat looking up at his big brother as if he was the seventh wonder of the world.

Just talk to me, Sammy...

Bessie's Bestest Diner Hutchinson, KS

"So he was here?"

The waitress—whose nametag proclaimed her to be Wanda, although she looked more like a Dolores in Dean's opinion—took another look at Dean's phone, at the photo of Sam on the screen Dean had been waving in her face for the last two minutes.

"Yeah," she confirmed thoughtfully. "About a half hour ago. Left in a hurry. Didn't touch his eggs. Was all about the coffee."

Yes! Dean could have kissed her. At least this meant he was heading in the right direction.

"Did he look—y'know—okay?" he asked tentatively, not wanting to sound like a complete girl, but anxious to know his kid brother was still in one piece.

The waitress raised an eyebrow. "Boyfriend?" she asked sympathetically, and Dean just blinked at her for a second.

"Brother," he corrected her almost automatically.

She giggled—actually *giggled*—at her faux pas, putting a hand over her mouth before shaking her head. "Oops. Sorry, hon. I figured you boys were too pretty to be straight."

If Dean hadn't been so elated to find out he was only a half hour behind his brother, he might have felt affronted. But right now, being mistaken for Gigantor's bitch for the hundredth time since he and Sam had been back hunting together was the least of his problems.

"Yeah, we get that a lot," he told her honestly, before sticking a couple of bills in her tip jar. "Thanks for your help."

Spinning on the spot, he virtually sprinted back to the parking lot, jumping into the piece of crap Datsun and giving the wires dangling down beneath the dash a savage twist.

Thankfully, the engine caught with barely a splutter, and Dean was soon zooming off after his brother, the tires screeching in protest as he swerved back onto the highway, a new determination taking hold of him and refusing to let him go without a fight.

If he had to check every damned rest stop and every damned diner from here to—wherever Sam was going, then he'd do it, damn it. This was *Sam* after all.

Dean just needed to drive a little faster...

Daily Bread Diner, Scott City, KS

Dean was pretty sure he'd broken every speed limit on every road from Oklahoma to west Kansas. And probably the land speed record too.

A couple of places he'd stopped, folks had reported seeing a big black Chevy pass through, but the more times he stopped, the further he dropped behind his brother and he couldn't afford to give Sam any more of a head start.

Rubbing distractedly at his aching neck, he spotted a diner in the distance just off the highway, and glancing at his watch, decided maybe he should give this one a miss. Sam couldn't have stopped at every diner along the way after all. He'd just skip to the next one...

Which was when he caught sight of a familiar shape hunkered in a corner of the parking lot.

Oh, thank God!

Swerving into the Daily Bread Diner's modestly-sized lot, he slammed on the brakes as he pulled into a parking space a couple of rows over from the Impala.

Gratefully abandoning the piece of crap Datsun, Dean approached his baby warily, careful to stay out of the side mirror's line of sight until he could determine whether Sam was inside.

He didn't want to spook his brother into doing something stupid. Like running, for example.

Approaching the driver's side door at a crouch, he gingerly reached out for the handle before pulling hard, only to discover the car was locked and Sam was nowhere to be seen.

"Dammit," he muttered under his breath, pulling himself up to his full height and nearly falling over as the world began to tilt alarmingly.

Leaning his full bodyweight against the car for a second, he fought down a wave of nausea before turning his attention to the area around him. Sam couldn't have gone far. All he could see nearby besides the diner was a kids' clothing store across the street, and he doubted his brother would have gone in there.

"Sammy, where the hell—"

And then he saw it, that shaggy-haired head in the diner window.

Dean thanked God for the second time in as many minutes, tugging his phone out of his pocket and hitting Sam's speed dial. If Sam was dead set on outrunning his possessed brother, then the last thing Dean wanted to do was jump out at him in a crowded diner, especially when he considered Sam's state of mind and the fact that he had a handgun tucked into his waistband.

"How's it goin', Sammy?" he greeted his brother cheerfully when he picked up. "You got where you're goin' yet?"

Even at that distance, Dean could see Sam's posture stiffen, his back suddenly ramrod straight. "I'm going to get help," his brother growled at him. "I *won't* let you keep my brother as your meatsuit!"

"That's good, Sammy," Dean told him, deciding that now would be a good time to get his brother out of the diner and away from the civvies. "But you know what? You look a little pale. Maybe you should try eatin' that sandwich instead of playin' with it. The waitress is givin' you funny looks."

His taunt appeared to have the desired effect, as Sam's head suddenly snapped up, scanning the diner around him frantically before finally turning to look out of the window.

Sam was looking right at him.

And all Dean could think to do was smile and wave.

Sam virtually vaulted out of his seat, instantly disappearing from his place by the window, and Dean took a step toward the door, hoping, *expecting*, his brother to come barreling out at him any minute, relieved he didn't have to take him down inside in front of a room full of innocents.

But the door never opened and no one, no *Sam*, came out into the parking lot.

Okay, so maybe Dean had miscalculated a tad.

Diving down, he ran his hand frantically around the inside of the Impala's rear wheel well, finally yanking out the spare key he'd duct taped there a while back, even as he fumbled with his phone in a possibly misguided attempt to call Sam's cell.

Rather unsurprisingly, Sam didn't pick up, and Dean jumped into the Impala, gunning the engine just as a messed up old Buick came screeching out of the back parking lot.

"Sam?"

Dammit.

It was clearly his brother in the ancient car, swerving all over the parking lot in his haste to get to the highway.

Tossing his phone onto the seat next to him, Dean floored the gas, spinning the Impala's wheels before shooting out of the parking lot after his brother.

Considering the state of the ramshackle old Buick, Dean didn't think catching up with Sam should prove too insurmountable a task, but that was before Sam suddenly swerved off the highway and across the corner of a field before rejoining the road which seemed to be heading into town.

Not wanting to risk the Impala's undercarriage on the uneven ground, Dean instead shot toward the intersection, taking the corner on two wheels before once again slamming his foot against the gas pedal.

And then immediately slamming his foot against the brake.

The Impala fishtailed all over the road, before abruptly coming to a halt mere inches from a little kid on a pink bike that had just appeared out of nowhere.

"Dammit!" he growled, the kid just blinking up at him before continuing on her way across the road, leaving Dean swearing a blue streak as he attempted to restart the Chevy's stalled engine.

The old girl didn't seem to want to cooperate, and Dean figured maybe swearing at her wasn't the way to go.

“C’mon, sweetheart,” he crooned instead, fingers caressing the wheel as he once again turned the key in the ignition. “You wanna start for me, right baby? I promise I’ll never do that to you again! Just didn’t want kid splattered all over your chrome!”

The Impala spluttered in reply before finally springing back to life, and Dean once again floored the gas, heading for town and praying he’d be able to find his brother again once he got there.

The first couple of streets he passed were fairly empty, through routes to the industrial area, and there was no sign of the Buick Sam had been driving.

Dean swallowed a breath that seemed to have become lodged in his throat, fighting back the wellspring of panic gurgling in his stomach.

He’d find him.

He *would*.

He’d come too close to lose him now.

He slowed as he passed the entrance to a barely noticeable alleyway, almost jumping out of his seat when he spotted the Buick abandoned behind a pile of old tires. There was no sign of Sam, but he couldn’t have gone far, so Dean pulled the Impala into a parking lot across the street and to the rear of a small strip mall.

He did a quick recon of the area before his eyes suddenly lit on a familiar mop of shaggy hair cutting through an alley running down the side of the parking lot.

Yes!

Launching himself out of the Impala, he sprinted for the far end of the alley, hoping to cut Sam off where there were no civvies around to get caught in the crossfire if things didn’t go to plan.

Which Dean was pretty sure they wouldn’t.

Skidding to a stop in the mouth of the alley, Dean had to take a couple of short breaths to dispel the spots dancing in front of his eyes before he managed to gasp out, “Hey, Sammy. Told you I’d find you.”

Sam stopped dead in front of him, his eyes wide.

And, for the briefest of instants, blood red.

Dean faltered, the non-threatening smile plastered to his face slipping at the sight of his baby brother looking out at him through demonic eyes.

He took a cautious step forward as Sam stepped back, holding out his arms in a gesture of truce.

“C’mon, Sammy. Just wanna talk,” he told his brother softly, taking another step forward.

Which was when Sam turned and rabbited in the opposite direction.

“Dammit, Sam,” Dean growled, his legs feeling like lead weights as he made a move to follow his brother.

But his body had other ideas, and he had to grab onto the fence running between the alley and the parking lot for a second, his head once again trying to convince him the world was spinning a little bit faster than it ought to be.

He sucked in a lungful of air, his brain telling him he needed to lie down while his heart told him he needed to find Sam.

His heart won, galvanizing him back into action with the thought of Sam—whatever was *in* Sam—giving him the slip again, and he forced himself to blink back the dizziness and swallow down the nausea as he took off in the direction Sam had headed.

It took him a couple of minutes to reacquire his target, only just rounding a corner in time to see Sam disappearing through the entrance to what looked like a large warehouse.

Forcing himself to put one foot in front of the other, it took his eyes a few seconds to readjust to the abrupt change in lighting as he ducked inside the building Sam had entered and immediately found himself standing in the middle of a huge room stacked full of packing crates.

“Aw, man,” he sighed, running a shaky hand through his hair. “I could o’ done without the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* set right now, thanks.”

Stumbling toward the nearest pile of crates, he peered cautiously around them and down a long aisle of boxes, hoping Sam wouldn’t have disappeared too far into this maze of a building.

When there was no sign of his brother, he found himself calling out, “C’mon, Sammy! This is getting boring.”

Sam didn’t reply, and Dean was starting to see double, triple, the whole world a dull brown miasma of packing crates and dirty skylights.

“C’mon, man!” he tried again, hoping to appeal to his brother rather than the demon inside of him. “Let’s talk about this! I won’t even kick your ass for stealing my car!”

He couldn’t seem to catch his breath, and Sam was still nowhere in sight and this building was so *big* and he really needed to lie down for a second. Just for a second...

He shook himself as he found himself slumping over the nearest crate, for one wild moment completely unable to remember where he was or what the hell he was doing.

Sammy. With red eyes.

Dammit, that thing was getting the hell out of his brother *now*.

Glancing around himself in barely-controlled desperation, he spotted a walkway suspended above his head, and, hoping a bird’s eye view of the warehouse would help him find Sam, he somehow managed to haul himself up a rickety-looking ladder and onto the wooden platform, breathing hard as his feet connected with the planks.

He straightened, grabbing onto the safety railing in an effort to stay upright, screwing up his eyes against the spinning room and praying when he opened them again he'd be able to see Sam.

Oddly, when he finally dared take another peek out from behind his eyelids, Sam was standing right in front of him.

He could have cried in relief. If he'd been a girl.

"Gotcha, little bro," he gasped out, fingers white as he clung on to the railing. "Had enough of this game yet? You always did suck at hide and seek."

Sam's reply consisted of suddenly launching himself at his brother and shoving him against the railing so hard Dean's spine made a horrible cracking sound that really couldn't signify anything good.

His vision shorted out, pain shooting up and down his back and radiating into his arms and legs, and for a second he lost all sense of up and down, scrabbling at anything within reach to stop himself going backwards over the railing.

When the world finally resolved itself into something vaguely resembling stable, he discovered he'd got a fistful of Sam's jacket, which, all things considered, probably wasn't the best thing Dean could have grabbed hold of under the circumstances, especially as it made it really easy for Sam to grab hold of his wrist, spin him around and slam him into the railing again, his arm pinned halfway up his back.

"Never thought you had it in you, Sammy," he managed to gasp out, struggling to free himself from his brother's iron grip, but not in any way succeeding.

His knees chose that second to go out from under him, and he found himself sagging against his little brother, Sam's grip on his arm the only thing keeping him upright.

His ears began to buzz, and Sam might have said something to him, but everything sounded as if it was underwater and his vision began to tunnel and all he could think about was how his demon-possessed brother could probably snap him in half right now without even breaking into a sweat.

Dimly, he was aware of Sam's hand reaching around his throat, pulling him off his feet, away from the railing, and suddenly he felt something like an electric shock shoot right through him, and he was able to open his eyes and not see the world multiplied and spinning, strength returning to his arms and his legs and his brain deciding to get with the program and actually tell his body to *do* something.

What his brain told his body to do was slide his boot down Sam's shin and stomp on his foot like they taught chicks to do in self defense class.

It was obviously good advice, as Sam let out a started yelp, his grip on Dean's wrist loosening enough for him to spin around and land a wicked left hook to Sam's jaw.

He grinned for a second, before remembering he'd just slugged *Sammy*.

Sam fell back in surprise, releasing his hold on Dean as he shook his head and blinked repeatedly.

Dean blinked right on back at him, suddenly realizing what had got him back on his feet when he'd been up close and personal with his brother.

The *amulet*.

Sam had his amulet.

And even though Dean wasn't wearing the thing, it had still managed to save his bacon.

"Sammy—" he began, not above begging if he could get through to his little brother and get him to give him back the damn necklace.

But his plea didn't make it any further, Sam's eyes flashing scarlet and fiery as he suddenly ran at him, planting his hands against Dean's chest and just *shoving*.

Once again the world began to spin at crazy angles, but this time it wasn't an illusion brought on by vertigo: Dean was actually falling, his back having slammed into the railing with so much force that he was thrown backwards and over, Sam's eyes on fire the last thing he saw before the ground came up to meet him.

He landed hard, a stack of crates breaking his fall but flying apart with the impact, and as he hit the concrete floor the air was knocked right out of him and everything went dark.

He couldn't say how long he was out, and he had no idea where his brother had gone in the meantime.

"Dean?" he heard Sam murmur from somewhere above him, and, finally able to focus, he looked up to see him standing at the edge of the walkway, peering down at him with something approaching real concern in his eyes.

His hazel eyes.

Gulping down oxygen as if he hadn't breathed in a month, Dean coughed hard, his chest and his back spiking with pain. He couldn't move, could only stare up at his brother gazing down at him from the walkway above his head.

"Sammy, that freakin' *hurt!*" he managed to yell, and the next thing Dean knew his brother was once again running away from him.

Chaparral Inn Motel, Scott City, KS

Dean freakin' *hated* Kansas.

All he could do was stare up at the cracked and water-stained ceiling of the motel, trying to breathe, trying not to pass out again. Everything hurt and he could barely even remember how he got here, somehow managing to crawl out of that warehouse and stumble over to the Impala, inching her to the first motel he found.

He just needed to rest, he told himself.

He just needed to figure out where the hell Sam was going.

At least he knew for sure now that his brother was possessed. Even if Sam didn't appear to know it himself.

That hadn't been a trick of the light when his eyes turned red.

But *red eyes*? Dean had never encountered a demon with red eyes before, although he vaguely remembered Bobby telling him and Sam some legend about crossroads demons one night when they were little and still got a kick out of the old guy's bedtime ghost stories.

Of course, every horrible thing Bobby had ever told them had turned out to be true.

He sighed.

He needed to figure out the demon's game plan or he was never getting Sam back.

So, what? Offing Dean had been the demon's diabolical scheme all along? By possessing Sam, taking Dean's amulet and leaving him for dead? Seemed a little complicated when it could just have put a bullet in Dean's brain or a knife in his heart the first time he fell asleep while it was wearing Sam.

And why was the thing still in Sam's meat if its only goal had been to kill Dean? Unless it was planning on offing as many Winchesters as it could in as short a time as possible, and its next trick would be to drive Sam off a cliff somewhere—

Dean sat up suddenly and wished he hadn't.

Dad.

He screwed his eyes shut and waited for the nausea to pass, his brain rattling along without him for a second.

What if that was the demon's plan all along? What if it was after *Dad*, but suddenly realized it had the chance to gank three Winchesters for the price of one?

When he was able to see straight again, he snatched up his cell and feverishly began dialing John's number.

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon...

As usual he got voicemail.

"Dad? Where are you?" he barked, screwing his free hand into a fist against his thigh. "I need to know where you are, Dad! Pick up, dammit! It's Sammy, he's..."

He trailed off, shaking his head.

There was no response, and Dean wasn't sure why that should surprise him.

Disconnecting the call, he threw the cell onto the other bed in disgust, and it only then dawned on him that he'd got a twin room, despite being very much on his own. Force of habit, he rationalized. And besides, Sam would need somewhere to sleep when Dean got him back.

And he *would* get him back, red-eyed demon or no red-eyed demon.

But what if the demon used Sam to do something to Dad before Dean could find him? Because Dean now had little doubt about the demon's endgame: use Sam to find Dad. It was the only thing that made sense.

So where the hell was Dad?

Think, Dean!

He began to systematically examine the mental road map in his head. Sam was heading west. Was that accidental? Or was there a purpose behind it? Did he somehow know where Dad was and had just neglected to tell Dean? Dean doubted that. Sure, Sam liked his secrets, but he'd never keep something like that from his big brother. And how would he have found out Dad's location without Dean finding out too?

He threw himself back on the bed, closing his eyes and trying to remember what Dad had said last time he'd spoken to him. Something about sacking out at Marley's old place, maybe?

Marley...

Dean cast his mind back, trying to remember something—*anything*—about the grizzled old hunter.

He remembered the first time he'd met him like it happened yesterday. He'd been maybe twelve or thirteen, and the guy had just looked him up and down before telling him he'd better butch up if he wanted to be a hunter like his dad, because no monster was gonna take some short, skinny, pretty boy seriously, even if he *did* have a twelve gauge and a flask of holy water.

Dean had been mortified, and vividly remembered running laps around the old geezer's cabin for *hours* until he puked his guts up on the porch and Sam had laughed at him and...

Cabin.

Where the hell was Marley's cabin?

Wracking his brain with absolutely zero success, he somehow managed to crawl off the bed and over to the other one, retrieving his cell and punching in Bobby's number.

Without even waiting for Bobby to say hello, he demanded, "Abe Marley. Where's his cabin?"

"Hello to you too, Dean," Bobby replied caustically. "Glad you're not dead yet." His tone softened slightly as he added, "Where the hell are you, boy? You need me to come get you?"

"I'm fine, man," Dean insisted, hoping to bat off Bobby's concern. He really couldn't spare the time. "But I really need to know. Marley's cabin. Where is it?"

"Why d'you need to know, kid?" Bobby asked. "Marley's been retired over a decade."

"I think maybe that's where Sam's headed," Dean explained shortly.

"And why would you think that?"

Dean sighed. “Bobby—”

“Dean.”

Dean rolled his eyes. Sometimes having someone give a damn about you could be a real pain in the ass. “I think maybe the demon might be using Sam to find Dad,” he explained. “And Dad mentioned something about Marley’s cabin last time I spoke to him.”

Bobby grunted. “Makes a sick kind o’ sense,” he agreed. “Your daddy’s been makin’ himself pretty scarce since Stull.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed. “And he’s been kinda—*off* since then. Like something’s bothering him but, as usual, he won’t tell us what.”

“He’s probably just got a lot on his mind is all,” Bobby sighed. “You know. Stuff to process. After what he saw.”

“I know, Bobby,” Dean said slowly. “And it’s not like I expect him to care and share. It’s just... sometimes I wish he’d let us *help* him with whatever it is he’s got goin’ on.”

“He’s always been a solitary one, Dean. You know that.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed softly. “Doesn’t make it any easier though.”

Bobby paused briefly. “Utah,” he said after a beat. “Marley’s cabin. It’s in Utah, a little outside of Beaver.”

Beaver! It was all coming back to him now. He knew it was somewhere with a stupid name.

“Thanks, man,” he said, earnestly. “I appreciate it.”

“You better, boy.”

“Stay safe, huh?”

“Yeah. You too. Go find your family, kid.”

“I will,” he assured the older hunter, ending the call and taking a breath before jumping to his feet.

And swaying quite alarmingly.

He could see three of everything, and wasn’t entirely sure he’d even be able to see the Impala, much less drive her, but it was *Sam* and it was *Dad* and he had to find them.

Unfortunately his body had other ideas, and before he could offer a word in protest, he crumpled unconscious to the floor.

Part Four

***Abe Marley’s cabin,
Beaver, UT***

John Winchester took a step back, eyeing his youngest son warily.

The thing *inside* his youngest son.

It had stepped over the salt line at the threshold to the cabin as if it wasn't even there, and from the way its eyes flashed ruby red, John could see this was no ordinary demon.

"Who are you?" he demanded, backing up another step as the thing inside Sam advanced. "What do you want with me? With my son?"

And where the hell is Dean?

There had been a couple of voicemails from his eldest on his phone, but he'd just not had the time to give them his full attention.

Not for the first time, he wondered whether perhaps he ought to rethink his priorities.

Sam—the demon inside Sam—merely laughed at him.

"This hardly seems the time for introductions, John," the demon drawled, taking another step toward him. "Or are you just playing for time? Delaying the inevitable?" Sam sighed and rolled his eyes and John was unaccountably reminded of Mia. "Procrastination's such a *human* trait," the demon continued.

"Seems to me you're the one procrastinating," John put in. "You gonna just kill me or you wanna talk me to death first?"

"What makes you think I want to *kill* you, John?" the demon asked, raising one eyebrow in an affectation that was disturbingly feminine.

John shrugged. "Oh, I dunno. Never met a demon who didn't, I guess."

The demon laughed again. "Such a popular boy. What's it like to be Hell's Most Wanted?"

"So that's why you're here?" John pushed. "There's a bounty?"

"Let's just say I'm a big fan of Lucifer," the demon replied. "And the big man has put a big price on the heads of all you pesky Winchesters." It smiled lopsidedly. "I'd say one down, two to go, but I already have Sam, so with you, I'm three for three."

John swallowed.

*Where the **hell** is Dean?*

"What are you talking about?" he spat, his voice sounding oddly flat and controlled considering the way his stomach had just lurched right over.

"Dean?" the demon reminded him with a grin. "Your waste of skin eldest whelp? Remember him?"

John's jaw tightened. "What did you *do*?"

The demon snorted. "Such a pretty boy. But such terrible taste in jewelry."

John's lip curled, and he took a step toward the demon, fingers balling into fists. "What did you do?" he repeated a little more forcefully, closing the distance between himself and his youngest son menacingly.

Sam's face contorted into a smug grin. "I understand your boy doesn't do so good when he's separated from that god-awful ugly-ass necklace of his," the demon observed. "And, y'know, it's been—" it looked at Sam's watch, shaking Sam's head in mock-concern, "—a good few hours now. A whole day, even."

"You took his amulet?" John demanded through gritted teeth.

"Not because I thought it was pretty, sugar," the demon sneered. "Unlike your boy. Although I doubt he's gonna be looking so pretty by now. If he's not dead yet, then I'm thinking he's fairly darn close to it."

The demon in Sam's skin took another step toward him, so close John could feel his boy's body heat, and he found himself retreating once again.

But for every step John took back, the demon took a step forward.

"Oh, come on, Johnny! You're not scared of little ol' me are you?"

John didn't reply, just continued to back away, the demon stalking him right across the cabin until his back was pressed up against the wooden dining table, his face purposefully neutral as Sam raised his foot to advance one more step toward him... and then stopped.

The demon laughed sardonically, looking down at Sam's large feet for a second before suddenly kicking aside the rug laid out over the center of the cabin floor and revealing the devil's trap painted underneath.

"How stupid do you think I am?" it asked.

John shrugged off-handedly. "I dunno, you look pretty stupid to me," he commented.

"That's your son you're talking about."

"I'm sure Sam would understand. And besides, this ain't my cabin. I had no idea that was painted under there."

"John," the demon sighed. "Seriously. Don't insult my intelligence and I won't insult yours."

"Maybe you think I'm smarter than I am."

"Maybe you just don't know how to hide a devil's trap."

"Maybe," John admitted with a cold smile.

"Or maybe you were in a hurry," the demon suggested. "Did Dean call you? Huh? Warn you I—*Sam*—was on my way over here?"

John shrugged noncommittally. "I've not spoken to Dean," he admitted. "But he left me a couple of pretty freaked out voicemails. Figured something was wrong. I like to be prepared."

“Always the Boy Scout, huh, Johnny?”

“You should see my knots.”

The demon snorted. “Oh I’d love to, honey, but in this body? I think that might be a little too freaky, even for me.” It stepped cautiously around the devil’s trap, once again advancing on John. “But you were right about one thing, John. Something really *is* wrong. Shame you couldn’t find the time to give your ‘freaked out’ eldest boy a call back to find out what.” It laughed hollowly, and John did his best not to let the self-recrimination he’d been feeling since this thing showed up on his doorstep reveal itself on his face. “Oh yeah, John. I know all about you and the way you treat your boys. Sammy’s got a whole library on the subject filed away in his noggin.” It tapped Sam’s head, grinning broadly. “But you don’t expect me to stand here monologuing about it all night, do you?”

It blinked hard, its eyes once again turning blood red, and without warning it suddenly launched itself in John’s direction, the look of pure hatred on Sam’s face so alien that it took John a second to think to lurch backwards; which was a second too long, as his son’s hands were already gripping his throat and squeezing so hard John actually saw spots starting to dance before his eyes.

“You owe me, John!” the demon screeched, slamming John against the table before bouncing the back of his head off the scarred wood. “Your boys owe me!”

“I—” John gasped, scrabbling at Sam’s huge hands about his throat. “I don’t—know what—you’re talking about! I don’t—even know who the hell—you are!”

The demon smirked lopsidedly, ramming John’s head against the tabletop again for good measure. “Let’s just say because of *you* and your precious *boys* I’m not where I’m supposed to be, Johnny. And I don’t have the same kudos here I have back home. Not in this world. So let’s just say I need to rack up some points in the win column over here, and right now you and your boys are the biggest score in town.”

John once again felt his head bounce off the tabletop, his vision swimming until he could see at least six blood red eyes glaring down at him as the demon used Sam’s hands to squeeze the life out of his father.

This is an inelegant way to off an enemy, he found himself thinking. But from the look on the demon’s—*Sam’s*—face, as long as John was offed, it didn’t seem to care a whole hell of a lot.

Somehow turning his head to one side, something glinting way over on the other side of the table caught his eye, and he remembered what he’d been doing before Sam knocked at the cabin door.

Weapons. He’d been cleaning the weapons. Specifically the hunting knife shimmering in the periphery of his hazy vision.

He tried to reach for it, his fingers scrabbling ineffectually against the pitted wood, but Sam’s reach was longer, and the demon grabbed it first, bringing it swiftly to John’s throat with an economy of motion that John would have found pretty darn impressive if he didn’t have a wickedly sharp blade shoved against his jugular.

"Oh I like this game, Johnny," the demon crooned from above him, nicking his skin just enough to draw blood. "Have some laughs. Spill a little Winchester blood. And you know what? 'Cause I'm such a saint, I'll let you choose whose. Yours or Sam's, John? Whose vein should I open? 'Cause I really couldn't give a crap, either works for me."

John grunted a reply, grabbing Sam's wrist and managing to push the knife slightly away from his neck before bringing his knee up hard into his youngest's stomach.

The demon sucked in a surprised gasp, momentarily distracted enough to allow John to shove Sam's bulk off of him and make a scramble for the door. But the demon was fast, unnaturally so, and John felt a large hand grab the back of his neck before he was thrown at the wall so hard the impact with his head caused his vision to fritz and splutter like a bad cable TV feed.

And then the hand was back around his throat and the knife was once again pressed against his jugular, and Sam's face was so close he could see the tiny flecks of gold in his boy's eyes.

"You think I wanna be here, John?" the demon hissed, spittle flying from Sam's lips and splattering against John's cheek. "In *this* piss-ant reality? Got dragged through with you when your boys yanked you outta Stull, didn't I? Outta *my* reality. And you know what? I'd really like to go home now. But I *can't*. Thanks to you and your boys."

John frowned but made no reply, simply tried to blink the stars out of his vision and push the knife away from his throat. He wasn't entirely successful in either endeavor.

The demon sighed, and for a second John almost forgot it wasn't Sam he was talking to.

"So all I can do," the demon continued, reaffirming its grasp on John's neck, "is make the best of it here. Suck it up. Learn some new skills. 'Cause in *this* reality? You Winchesters don't seem quite so hell bent on sacrificing your souls for one another. Which leaves me out of a job."

John blinked, suddenly realizing he knew exactly which reality this whiny bitch originated from.

The demon leaned one hand against the wall above John's head, and although he was only a couple of inches shorter than his youngest, Sam's tall frame seemed to tower over him threateningly.

And something jangled inside of him. Some brief splinter of memory.

Dean thrown against a cabin wall. Haris in John's skin looming over him.

He swallowed, trying not to remember what it had been like, trapped in his own meatsuit with the demon.

Trying not to imagine what Sam was going through right now.

"This reality *sucks*," the demon continued, huffing. And suddenly John was reminded of Mia again, Haris once again a distant, painful memory. "No deals to be made. No souls to be bartered. No Winchesters going to Hell. No poor little Dean like a lost puppy willing to give me everything to save his brother's miserable life."

John remembered that reality. Remembered Dean going to Hell. Sam falling apart.

There'd been a demon called Ruby and an Apocalypse on the horizon.

John had been so glad he hadn't had to stay there long.

The demon's fingers tightened in the front of John's shirt, yanking him closer. "You know what my reward was for *that* one, Johnny? Huh? Brokering the deal that sent your boy to Hell? Broke the First Seal? Kickstarted the Apocalypse? I was freakin' demon *royalty*! Everyone knew my name! People cowered when I passed them by. But here? *Here*, John? I'm *nothing*. No one." The demon shoved him back against the wall, an uneven grin creeping across Sam's face. "But if I kill you, all that's gonna change, right?"

"Wrong," a voice piped up suddenly from beyond Sam's shoulder. "And I thought you said you *weren't* going to monologue?"

The demon spun toward the cabin door, and John took advantage of the distraction, grabbing the knife and knocking it out of Sam's hand as his gaze followed the demon's.

To the doorway.

To Dean.

John's eldest son had a shotgun in his hands and he looked like hell, his face ashen and sweaty, clothes rumpled, and John could have been mistaken, God knows, he'd taken some head trauma himself in the last five minutes, but he was pretty sure his boy was swaying a little.

But he was upright, and he was conscious, and the shotgun in his hands was aimed right at his little brother's chest, as steady as a rock.

For a second, the demon didn't react at all.

Then it started to laugh. Hysterically.

"Well whaddya know!" it burst out, one hand still planted firmly around John's throat. "The Guardian's got some moxie after all! Even without his ugly little necklace! You know I wish that stupid thing had the same effect as it does here where I come from. Would have been so much easier to bring you to your knees. Just steal your necklace and *blam!* But hey," it shrugged Sam's broad shoulders. "I did pretty good without it. All it took was a dead little brother and you couldn't wait for me to get my tongue down your throat."

Dean grimaced faintly. "You done running your yap?" he asked, shifting the shotgun a little in sweaty palms. "'Cause I'm gettin' bored and when I get bored I like to shoot the crap outta stuff."

The demon raised Sam's brow. "Yeah?" it scoffed. "You gonna shoot *me*, Dean? You gonna shoot *Sammy*? Can't risk hurting Sammy, now can we? No, no, never little Sammy. So what the hell use is a shotgun, Dean?"

Dean shrugged. "Oh, I dunno," he said, before letting fly two barrels of rock salt. "It's pretty good for this."

The look of surprise on Sam's face was almost comical as the demon flew backwards, the force of the blast knocking it off its feet and right into the devil's trap, where it landed with a painful-sounding thud.

Dean took a step into the room, lowering the shotgun as he loomed over his brother and his unwanted passenger. The demon looked up at him out of Sam's wide eyes and Dean took a slow breath.

"I guess payback's a bitch," he ground out, grinning faintly. "That's for the friggin' asylum, Sammy."

And with that he collapsed into a heap on the floor.

* * * *

Dean was looking up at the ceiling again.

But this time, instead of cheap, water-stained polystyrene ceiling tiles, he found himself gazing at wooden beams and muted light, and his dad suddenly looming over him like a distant memory.

"Dad?" he murmured faintly, as a firm hand planted itself in the center of his chest.

"You okay, dude?"

Dean didn't remember the last time he felt this *not* okay, but he merely nodded, rasping out the expected, "Yessir," before allowing John to help him to his feet.

"Good boy," John commended him, before suddenly pushing him onto the rickety-looking bed behind him.

Dean opened his mouth to protest, landing hard on the ancient mattress, which caused the world to do its spinning thing again. But John had already turned away from him, his attention back on the demon, which was still flat on its back in the middle of the devil's trap.

"Exorcizámus te, omnis immúndus spíritus, omnis satánica potéstas," John surged into the exorcism ritual before Dean had even had time to register the sound of Sam—the demon inside Sam—growling threateningly.

He struggled to his feet even as the Latin started to wash over him, somehow comforting in its familiarity.

"Omnis incúrsio infernális adversárii," John continued. "Omnis légio, omnis congregátio et secta diabólica —"

"Wait! Wait!" the demon screamed, for the first time seeming to lose its cool.

"In nómini et virtúte Dómini nostri Jesu Christi—"

"Exorcise me and you'll never find your boy's little trinket!"

John stopped dead.

The demon pulled Sam to his feet, a cold smile on his face and his eyes flashing the same color as the blood staining the front of his shirt where the rock salt had peppered his chest.

John took a step closer to the devil's trap, a look of flinty determination hardening his features.

Dean knew that look.

"Tell me where it is," John ordered, his voice deceptively cool and disinterested.

The demon laughed hollowly. "You're hardly in a position to make demands, sugar," it crowed.

"And you're stuck in a devil's trap," John returned. "I'd say that makes us even."

The demon cocked Sam's head to one side. "Maybe we can come to some kind of arrangement?" it suggested. "A deal. That's what I do, after all. Make deals."

"You're a crossroads demon?" Dean burst out suddenly, the truth of it staring him starkly in the face.

The demon flicked scarlet eyes briefly in Dean's direction. "Not just a pretty face, huh, baby?" it honeyed. "You know, where I come from you couldn't wait to sell me your tainted gutter soul. And you tasted so damn good."

Dean swallowed, but didn't reply, and the demon just laughed.

"But you remember that, don't you, Johnny?" it said, turning its attention back to the older Winchester. "You were there, after all. Saw the consequences. John Winchester sells his soul to Azazel—" it paused, before correcting itself, "—or *Haris* as I believe he's better known over here, to save his eldest boy from certain death after that little run-in with the semi. And then what does your eldest boy do? Within a year, he's following in Daddy's footsteps, selling his soul to me to save precious little Sammy. Because it's always about Sammy, isn't it?"

Dean glanced at his father, whose expression was as neutral as Dean had ever seen it.

The demon laughed again. "Pity you didn't get to see the Hellhounds tear your boy apart, Johnny. Because *that* was a show! You would have been so proud. But I guess you only saw the mess he was in when he got back from the Pit, huh?"

John still didn't reply, although his posture stiffened. "I saw a lot of things," he said simply. "None of it was real."

"Not to you, maybe," the demon observed. "But it sure was to everyone you met Over There. Should have introduced yourself to your boys, John. Dean, fresh outta Hell, I'm sure he'd have loved to see his daddy back from the dead too." It turned back to Dean, winking at him as it grinned. "Such a needy little boy, that one. Can't survive without Daddy and Sammy. I'm guessing this version's the same? Co-dependent as all hell, right?"

"Don't talk to him," John spat, suddenly planting himself between Dean and the demon's line of sight. "You deal with me."

Dean shifted. Trying to get closer to his father, trying to get back into the conversation, but the room decided to lurch unhelpfully to his left and his legs went out from under him, dumping him unceremoniously back onto the bed.

“Deal?” the demon echoed, ignoring Dean completely. “So you wanna make a deal, hon? Okay, I’ve got a deal for you. I take you to your precious amulet, save your worthless little boy’s life, and in return, you let me go. No questions, no exorcisms. And I won’t even ask for your soul.” It smirked, coyly. “Although I might still ask for a kiss. Just to make sure Sam needs a whole lifetime of therapy afterwards.”

John grimaced in disgust. “Think I’m stupid enough to go kissing a crossroads demon?” he demanded. “Even if there’s no deal on the table, there’s no way in hell I’d ever trust you not to try and get your claws into my soul.”

“Oh, Johnny, that really hurts!” the demon informed him sarcastically. “Don’t I look completely trustworthy to you?” It shrugged dismissively. “Anyway, you can’t blame a girl for trying.” It glanced down at its current meatsuit and raised one eyebrow thoughtfully. “Guy. Whatever.” It pursed Sam’s lips for a second before adding, “So, do we have a deal? I don’t take your soul. You don’t send me to Hell.”

Dean managed to struggle to his feet at this point, inching his way carefully across the cabin floor until he was standing at his father’s shoulder.

“No deal,” he insisted stubbornly, causing John to turn and look at him quizzically. “Screw the amulet,” he added. “You’re getting your ass exorcised, and you’re letting my brother go.”

The demon shrugged. “Then you die.”

“Better me than him.”

The demon laughed sardonically. “Same old Dean in any universe,” she observed. “Can’t wait to sacrifice himself for little brother.”

Dean wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know what she meant by that. Had he really sold his soul in exchange for Sam’s life where she came from? He’d have to ask Dad later...

“Tell you what,” John put in suddenly. “Take us to the amulet, and we’ll talk. Maybe I won’t send your ass back to Hell.”

“Dad, don’t—”

“I want assurances.”

“And I want world peace, an endless supply of beer, free gas and Megan Fox in the back seat of the Impala,” Dean put in. “But I guess we’re both the hell outta luck, asshat. Ain’t no assurances in this life.”

“I think I preferred it when you called me ‘bitch,’” the demon replied with a smirk. “But alright. Deal, I suppose.” She folded Sam’s arms across his chest and gazed stonily at the Winchesters. “I’ll show you where I hid the amulet. Better ’n sitting here waiting to get exorcised.”

John nodded, shifting slightly. "Try anything and you're straight on the freight elevator to Hell," he said, before adding, "*bitch*."

***Crossroads,
Outside Sulphur, OK***

Well that was a twenty-one hour drive Dean could have done without.

And for the very first time in his life, he was glad he wasn't the one doing the driving.

John had been behind the wheel of the Impala the whole time, Dean stuffed in the back seat like some invalid, while Sam's body occupied his little brother's customary shotgun position up front.

But if Dean needed anything to remind him that wasn't Sam sitting next to his dad, it was the blood red eyes reflecting off the windshield as they drove on through the night.

Daylight had come and gone, and it was already creeping up toward midnight by the time they reached the outskirts of Sulphur. Dean wasn't entirely sure how his dad had kept going all this time. Unless he really was Batman. Or Superman. But—y'know—without the tights.

Admittedly, they'd stopped a couple of times along the way. For gas. A quick burger. The bathroom. Lots and lots of coffee. And at least Dean had been able to grab a nap every couple of hundred miles. But John? He didn't even look tired, his face set into that habitual mask of grim determination that Dean knew only too well.

His boys' lives were on the line. Nothing else mattered.

Sam—the crossroads bitch inside Sam—had never left the Impala the whole journey, thanks to the hastily improvised devil's trap on the ceiling of the Chevy. She didn't eat, didn't drink. Never asked to go to the bathroom. And Dean couldn't help wondering what the hell effect any of that was having on his little brother's body.

But now, finally, they had apparently reached their destination: Sulphur, Oklahoma. Almost back where they started, two days ago.

"Stop here," she'd ordered, and John had duly obeyed, bringing the Impala to a smooth halt in the middle of nowhere.

In the middle of a crossroads.

Which was the only thing out here.

And kind of poetic.

A freakin' crossroads.

Well the bitch was a crossroads demon, right? In a weird sort of way, it kind of made sense she'd hide the amulet here. If that was really what she'd done.

"You'd better not be yankin' our chain," Dean growled menacingly—as menacingly as he could manage considering he couldn't even drag himself out of the Impala's rear seat.

Red eyes blinked innocently at him in the windshield. "Would I lie to you, sugar?" the demon said, fluttering Sam's eyelashes in a way Dean found all kinds of disturbing.

"Yes," he said shortly, lacking the energy for any other kind of witty comeback.

Jeez, he felt like crap. And he sure as hell didn't think he had time to deal with another wild goose chase. If the amulet wasn't here, if the demon bitch wasn't telling the truth, then he was well and truly screwed, and so was Sammy.

Trying to lever himself up into a semi-upright position, his fingers grazed the back of Sam's collar as he pulled against the rear of the front seat, and it was just like it had been back in Scott City, when the closer he'd gotten to Sam the better he'd felt.

At the time, he'd put it down to the amulet, in hindsight almost certain it had been secreted away on his brother's person somewhere.

But if the demon had hidden the little charm here on her way through town, then Sam couldn't have had the amulet on him when Dean caught up with him in Scott City.

And that was a weird thought in itself because although Dean felt like crap on a cracker right now, he didn't feel half as bad as he'd felt yesterday when he'd hauled himself back to his motel room after being thrown off that walkway. After Sam had left him. Alone.

So maybe it wasn't the proximity of the amulet keeping his symptoms at bay. Maybe it was the proximity of *Sam*.

He almost laughed at that.

Sometimes he was every bit the girl Sam could be.

But whatever was going on, Dean didn't feel anywhere near as lousy as he had when he'd been separated from the amulet for this long before.

Which could only be a good sign. Right?

"You okay, kiddo?" John suddenly asked from the driver's seat, turning slightly and causing the shadows to deepen beneath his eyes until he unaccountably looked twenty years older than he had last night.

Dean nodded. "Yessir," he replied, and he almost meant it; just like he'd meant it last night when, standing in Abe Marley's cabin back in Utah, he'd promised his dad he could last the course, make it back to Oklahoma before the separation from the amulet became too much for him.

Had Sam not been only a few feet away from him throughout the journey, he wasn't at all sure he'd have been able to keep that promise.

"Alright then," John intoned, reaching up to the devil's trap on the ceiling and rubbing away a section of the outer circle. "Time for you to hold up your end of the bargain, princess."

The demon smiled brightly at him out of Sam's face before exiting the car, John mere inches behind her.

Determined not to be left behind like somebody's sick grandma, Dean shoved open the passenger door and swung his legs out onto the uneven road surface, grabbing hold of the Impala's frame and finally pushing himself up onto his feet.

Oklahoma spun around him disconcertingly, and he had to blink several times before he could focus on what his dad and the demon were doing in the center of the crossroads.

At the moment, they were just standing there.

"Okay, bitch, we're here," Dean ground out. "Now where the hell's my damn necklace?"

The demon laughed tauntingly, inclining her head toward the ground at dead center of the crossroads. "Maybe you should try digging."

Dean exchanged an uncertain glance with his father. "That's asphalt," he pointed out. "You didn't bury anything there two days ago."

The demon continued to hold his gaze, an infuriating grin plastered across Sam's face. But she didn't confirm or deny Dean's accusation, just shrugged dismissively.

Finally, John shook his head tiredly. "It's not here, is it?" he said, the defeat deadening his voice as he tapped his foot against the obviously intact blacktop. "It never was. You were just stalling. Playing for time."

"I never stall, John," the demon replied archly. "I always have a plan."

"This was your plan?" Dean asked, his voice breaking slightly as the stars around him began to gather speed until they were just streaks across the sky, reminding him of that planetarium in Nebraska Sammy had begged Dean to take him to when he was six.

Somehow, he wasn't at all surprised the bitch had double-crossed them.

"Well it wasn't my original plan," the demon admitted, winking unnervingly at him. "My original plan was to leave you for dead, find your daddy and off him, then throw your brother off a tall building. But hey, if life gives you lemons—"

"Go drown in some lemonade," Dean commented.

"Now, now, baby," the demon cooed. "I only want to help you."

"Like hell," Dean spat.

"Look, I'm not a monster." The demon chuckled before correcting herself. "Well obviously I *am* a monster. But I'm willing to compromise."

"What do you want?" John demanded, his patience obviously wearing thin.

The demon turned Sam's sunniest smile on his father. "Your souls," she said. "Both of them." When John shifted slightly, his expression becoming even more frosty, she added, "Well don't look so surprised, John. What else did you think I was going to ask for?"

John set his jaw and made no response, instead demanding, "And?" shortly.

"And then I let Sammy go," the demon replied. "The *soul* survivor." She snickered at her own joke, and Dean had never wanted to punch Sam's lights out as much as he did right then.

Not Sam. Not Sam.

John shook his head. "Not good enough," he said shortly. "You gotta sweeten the pot."

"Oh I do?" the demon replied. "From where I'm standing, I'm holding all the aces, sugar. I got your youngest boy's body. Your oldest boy's life. You don't have a whole lot of cards left to play, Johnny."

"Give Dean the amulet," John ordered. "Let my boys go. And you can have my soul."

Dean blinked. Wait. *What?*

"Dad, no—" he began to argue.

"Well that's certainly tempting," the demon commented. "But I'm not sure one measly soul's gonna rack up enough points in the win column to get me out of this bind I'm in."

"You're not getting either of my sons."

"John, you don't seem to understand, I already *have* your sons."

"Then let *Sam* go," Dean butted in, pushing himself away from the Impala, and managing to stagger a couple of steps closer to his father. "Let Sam go and you can have both of us."

"Dean, get back in the car," John ordered sternly, and Dean just squinted at him.

"I'm not eight, Dad," he pointed out. "I can make my own decisions."

"Not when it comes to your soul, Dean," John replied, something dark and shadowy flitting across his face. "You and your brother—you're *my* responsibility, son. Mine to save. Mine to protect. Let me do this."

Dean shook his head. "She's not just gonna let me 'n Sammy walk away, Dad, you *know* that! Let me do this."

John looked as if he was about to argue, but suddenly the demon started screaming.

Both Dean's and his father's head whipped back in the direction of the crossroads, only to find Sam's eyes flickering unnervingly between red and hazel, his fingers clutching at his head as his vocal cords did their damndest to yell themselves hoarse.

But it wasn't the demon screaming, Dean suddenly realized.

It was *Sam*.

"Dean!" his little brother managed to yell, and Dean had no doubt it was Sam he was talking to. "Dean, don't do it! Don't deal with her! She's going to—"

And as quickly as that, his eyes once again flooded with red and the demon was laughing.

"Poor Sammy," she crowed coldly. "Thought he'd gotten the better of me for a second there. You Winchesters have such a high opinion of yourselves." But she was breathing hard, Sam's face a little paler than it had been before.

"He *did* get the better of you," Dean pointed out, taking a shaky step closer to his brother. "And Sam's worth a high opinion."

"Aw, that's sweet," the demon drawled. "So I guess you're not gonna be very happy when I start to rip baby brother to shreds from the inside out, right?"

Dean swallowed.

"Just like those poor nuns. And that unfortunate priest."

"That was you?" Dean growled. "All those people in that church? *Kids? You* did that to them? For what? Kicks?"

The demon shrugged. "Collateral damage," she returned dismissively. "Had to get your attention somehow."

"By killing nuns? Children? People you knew wouldn't fight back?"

"Way of the world, honey. Soft targets. Cannon fodder."

"They were *people*, dammit! With *families!*"

"Well you know family's everything, Dean."

"*Goddammit!*" Dean burst out, making a stumbling lunge toward the demon, which only resulted in John having to grab hold of his jacket and haul him upright again.

"Easy, tiger. Don't forget, you didn't get your Weetos this morning."

"Okay, enough of this," John interjected, pulling Dean slightly behind him and squaring his shoulders as he faced the demon. "Give me Dean's amulet. Let Sam go. You take me right now. No waiting. No ten years. Right here, right now."

"Dad, *no!*"

"Now *this* is more like the Winchesters I know and—well—know! Falling over yourselves to save each other from the Pit. It really is quite sickening."

"Shut up," Dean growled at her, entwining his fingers in John's jacket and refusing to let go, like he used to when he was four years old. "You're not doing this, Dad," he insisted, tugging his father away from the crossroads. "I won't let you. There's gotta be another way. There's gotta be..."

His fingers tightened in his dad's jacket as his legs started to tremble beneath him, and he felt like he was falling, head spinning, ears buzzing, blood pounding through his veins like a bullet train. Lightheaded and vision tunneling, he tried to pull in a breath but couldn't manage it, as the world split in two and two dads were looking down at him, shaking him, saying something to him that he couldn't quite hear over the hammering of his heart and the

pounding of his blood and the voice in his head screaming, *Can't do this. Can't lose Dad and Sammy. Can't...*

"Dad? Can't..."

"Dean? Dean, suck it up, son!"

Dad was shaking him, pulling him back up onto his feet by the lapels of his jacket.

And the demon was laughing.

Not much time left...

"Dad..."

Dean dropped to his knees as John abruptly released his hold on him and took a step closer to the demon.

"Amulet," he growled menacingly. "*Now.*"

The demon put one hand on Sam's hip and inclined his head to one side. "Gotta kiss me first," she said with a wink.

John virtually snarled at her.

"Oh Johnny, you're such a sourpuss," she drawled. "Alright, alright, I guess we could just shake hands."

"Dad, *don't!*" Dean wasn't above begging. "Please, Dad, please! It's not worth it! *I'm not—*"

"Don't you even say that, boy!" John suddenly burst out, and somehow he was right there, right in front of Dean, in Dean's face, crouched at Dean's level, one hand on Dean's shoulder. "Don't you *ever* say that! You hear me?"

Dean blinked at his father's sudden proximity and the familiar smell of sweat and motor oil and leather. "Please don't do this," he repeated. "Dad. We'll find another way."

John shook his head sadly. "There *is* no other way, son. I have to protect you. Have to save you. You and Sammy." His hand was on the back of Dean's neck and he was gazing into his eyes like his life—both their lives—depended on it. "I have to save you, Dean. *Both* of you."

Dean shook his head, desperation flooding his eyes. "Not like this. Dad, there has to be another way."

John put a gentle hand on Dean's cheek, before pulling himself to his feet and turning back toward the demon.

"You take me, you let my boys go," he repeated, jaw set and hands balled into fists at his thighs. "Deal?"

The demon paused just long enough for Dean to believe she was going to say no.

Finally, she responded, "Deal," a tiny smile creeping across Sam's face as she stuck out one hand toward her meatsuit's father. "Shake on it, Johnny."

John seemed to consider his youngest boy's outstretched hand for a second, one brief glance over his shoulder at Dean only seeming to strengthen his resolve.

He took another step toward the demon, his hand moving up to meet Sam's.

"Dad, *please!*"

And just as John's fingers touched his son's, Sam's hand was abruptly snatched away, the red once again bleeding out of his eyes and his expression altering from disdain to desperation.

"Dad..." Sam gasped, his throat sounding raw, as if he'd been screaming for hours and hours and no one had been able to hear him. "Don't... It's... you don't..."

His eyes flashed back to red, his hand once again inches from John's as the demon fought for control of his body. But again Sam gritted his teeth and seemed to force his hand back down, hazel eyes looking first at John and then at Dean.

"Dean!" he rasped out, his hand spasming as if he was trying to point to something. "Here... Dean... it's—it's here. Always been here." He managed to bring his hand up to his chest, fingers clawing ineffectually at the fabric of his jacket, but his eyes kept flickering alarmingly between scarlet and hazel, and it was clear Sam was losing the battle for control he was fighting with the demon.

But John appeared to understand what his youngest son was trying to tell them.

Lurching forward, he yanked open Sam's jacket and rammed his hand into the inside pocket.

"Dad!" Dean yelled, as once again Sam's eyes blazed blood red, the expression on his face hardening as the demon regained control, grabbing John's shoulders and shoving him violently away.

But she was too late.

John stood looking at his youngest son, a grin splitting his face from ear to ear as he dangled Dean's amulet from his fingers in triumph.

"Well looky what we have here!" he burst out, turning to Dean. "Guess she didn't bury it after all!"

Unfortunately, John's triumph was short-lived, the demon moving so fast, Sam's large hand was a complete blur as it locked around his father's wrist.

The oldest Winchester grunted in pain, and Dean was sure he heard bones crunching as the demon fumbled for the amulet.

"You think I'm gonna let you just *take* it, Winchester?" the demon shrieked, a maniacal gleam in Sam's dark red eyes. "Not without something in return! A deal's a deal, Johnny. Shake on it!"

And suddenly Sam's hand slid from John's wrist to grab hold of his hand, amulet and all, fingers clasping tightly as the demon tried to shake on the deal.

"No!"

Without a second's hesitation, Dean drew his Colt and fired.

It was a miracle he didn't take his dad's head off, the bullet striking Sam in the upper arm, causing the demon to yelp in surprise and immediately release her death grip on John's hand.

John fell back, cradling his hand for a second before throwing the amulet in Dean's general direction. "Dean!" he grunted. "Take it!"

Although he could see three of his father and about ten of the amulet, Dean somehow managed to catch the little charm in his left hand, stringing it over his head while simultaneously trying to stow his Colt away and once again begin chanting the exorcism that his father had so abruptly bitten off.

The second the necklace was back in place, the charm once again nestled against his chest, he felt as if someone had plugged him into a mains socket, energy flooding into him and radiating through his body from his fingertips to his toes, and he was pretty sure if he'd looked in a mirror his hair would have been standing on end.

"Uh..." he grunted, tripping over the Latin as the little piece of Solomon's Sword made his head buzz and his hair itch and his limbs feel like they were on fire.

Dragging himself to his feet, he closed his eyes for a second, and when he opened them again, Oklahoma had stopped spinning around him and there was only one of his dad, only one of the Impala, and only one of Sam... who looked as if he was about to faceplant in the middle of the crossroads.

Approaching his brother cautiously, Dean continued to recite the exorcism at breakneck speed, Sam's eyes once again flashing between red and hazel as the demon's now unmistakable intonation hissed, "You do this, I'll *kill* little brother, Dean! I'll rip him apart! I'll—"

"Can it, sweetheart," Dean returned, breaking off with the Latin only briefly. "Right now I don't think you could rip your way out of a paper bag."

The demon lunged at him, but Dean stepped easily away, picking up the exorcism again while marveling at the renewed steadiness in his limbs and the smoothness of his movements.

The demon screamed, Sam's knees going out from under her, but Dean was there before his brother could hit the ground, catching hold of him and gently lowering him to the asphalt, yanking a handkerchief out of his back pocket and applying pressure to the bullet wound to his arm. It was a flesh wound, a clean through and through, as Dean had intended, but nevertheless he didn't particularly relish the idea of his brother bleeding to death from a wound he'd inflicted.

"Don't fight me, little brother," he murmured between lines of Latin, hovering over his brother as he tied off the makeshift bandage before gingerly feeling the thready pulse at Sam's throat. "Gotta do this. You know I do."

The younger Winchester's body was wracked with shudders, and he was looking up at Dean out of unseeing hazel eyes as Dean tried to hold him steady, hold him close, stroking his hair out of his eyes and off his clammy forehead as he finished the last few lines of the exorcism.

"It's gonna be okay, Sammy. Just hold on."

"Don't think this is the last you're going to see of me, boy!" Sam's voice suddenly snarled up at him, eyes once again scarlet, arms and legs flailing to shove Dean away. "You'll pay for this! You'll all pay! When I'm done with your family—"

"I said *can it*, bitch!" Dean growled, before finally spitting out, "Te rogamus, audi nos!" and hanging on to Sam for dear life.

His brother threw back his head, screaming out black smoke as it billowed from his mouth, his entire body spasming and jerking while Dean just held onto him, whispering, "It's gonna be okay, Sammy, just hold on," until it was finally over, and Sam's frame wilted against him, limbs limp and muscles finally relaxed. "It's okay, Sammy."

Sam blinked hazel eyes at his brother, sucking in a labored breath and immediately choking it back out again.

"Just breathe, kiddo," Dean intoned. "You've had kind of a busy day."

Sam squinted up at him, working his way through the coughing fit that had taken hold of him as Dean continued to hang on.

"Sammy? You okay?"

Sam blinked. "You shot me, Dean," he managed to croak out, his voice ragged and wrecked. He coughed once more, fixing his older brother with an accusing squint before finally adding, "Twice."

Dean grinned at him, finally allowing the tension to leech out of his muscles. "But it was meant with love, little bro," he assured him, patting him fondly on the chest. "It was meant with love."

Super 8 Motel, Sulphur, OK

As Dean had figured back out at the crossroads, the damage to Sam's arm was pretty superficial as far as bullet holes went; through and through, straight through the meat with a minimum of fuss.

Of course, Dean was pretty sure Sam didn't see it that way, his little brother being particularly whiny while Dean cleaned and dressed the wound.

Although Dean was also pretty sure Sam was only putting on a front for Dean's benefit.

For one thing, Sam kept leaning into him when he thought he wasn't paying attention, and didn't seem to mind Dean mother-henning him to within an inch of his life while he looked for any other injuries that bitch of a crossroads demon might have inflicted while she was wearing Sam like a cocktail dress.

"So when did you know?" the younger brother asked eventually, his eyes not quite coming up to meet Dean's.

Dean shrugged dismissively, finishing off the dressing and helping Sam into a clean shirt. "When did *you* know?"

Sam scrubbed at his hair and blew out a long breath as his shoulders drooped. "Didn't figure it out till the cabin in Beaver," he admitted abashedly. "She hid herself pretty good up till then."

Dean raised a brow. "I saw your eyes go red back in Scott City," he told his brother. "You didn't even feel it then?"

Sam shook his head. "Nope. Guess she'd got me so convinced *you* were the one possessed, I never even considered *I* might have a passenger. Not till Dad answered the cabin door and I finally felt it inside of me."

He glanced up at John, who was sitting on the other bed, nursing his bruised hand with his dark eyes fixed solidly on the threadbare carpet.

Dean was pretty sure Sam and their dad were trying to out-macho each other, both of them refusing point blank to go to the hospital, which left Dean to Florence Nightingale the testosterone out of the both of them.

Sam sighed at John's lack of acknowledgement, once again running the fingers of his good hand through his shaggy hair. "Anyway," he plowed on, "that was the first time I felt it—felt its triumph." He glanced sideways at his father. "It had been after you all along, Dad. Used me to find you. Knew I was one of only two people you'd ever trust with your location." His eyes flicked back to Dean. "Getting your amulet and screwing with my head were just bonuses. It was only when it—she—whatever—realized I'd led her right to Dad's front door that I finally felt her manifest completely."

Dean shuddered, memories of his own partial possession by Haris' spawn surfacing uncomfortably. "That's when she took the wheel, huh?"

Sam nodded. "Shoved me to the back of my mind so I couldn't do a thing to stop her. Could only watch while she—she tried to kill Dad."

"Good thing big brother showed up to save the day, huh?" Dean grinned.

"Weak as a kitten and barely able to string two words together," Sam pointed out with a wry smile.

"Managed to get you in a devil's trap, pal," Dean returned.

"Yeah, I guess you did," Sam allowed.

Dean paused for a second, before finally asking, "Did you *really* think I was the one who was possessed?"

Sam met his uncertain gaze and shrugged. "Like I said," he replied, "messing with my head was a bonus. I'm pretty sure that's where the vision came from too. The bitch used my own powers against me."

Dean frowned. "Wait. She used your mirroring power to...*to mirror your vision thing* back onto you?"

"Pretty much," Sam confirmed. "I kept seeing you killing me, over and over, but what I was *actually* seeing was you *saving* me." Sam inclined his head to one side thoughtfully. "I guess she made me see what was actually going to happen in the future through demon-tinted glasses. She had me so convinced you were possessed and trying to kill me that it was the only way I could interpret what was happening in the vision she was putting in my head."

"You actually thought I could kill you?" Dean did his best not to sound like a wounded six-year-old, but from the pained expression suddenly mirrored on Sam's face, he was pretty sure his efforts sucked ass.

Sam shrugged awkwardly, eyes averted to the murky carpet. "I thought you were possessed." He looked back up abruptly. "I thought it wasn't you."

"Amulet, Sam."

"I told you, Dean. She was messing with my head. "

Dean nodded. "Yeah," he said slowly. "I get that."

"And I think she might have taken control of me a couple of times without my even knowing it too."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "You got missing time?"

Sam shrugged. "I know I must have taken your amulet," he admitted, the shame obvious in his voice. "I guess I had it with me the whole time—"

"Which is why I sensed it on you in Scott City."

"But I honestly don't remember taking it, Dean."

"Because she took it," Dean concluded. "When she was taking you out for a test drive."

Sam nodded. "I guess," he agreed. "I remember leaving. I remember taking the Impala. But that's all." He paused for a second, his eyes drawn perhaps unconsciously to the little lump of Solomon's Sword strung around Dean's neck. "You didn't answer my question," he added at length. "When did you know I wasn't me?"

Dean shrugged. "When you ran off with my car," he said shortly, looking up at Sam and grinning incongruously. "Honestly?" he continued, his expression sobering a little. "You were acting pretty wacky, Sammy. Even for you. But at first I just figured it was your time of the month or somethin'."

Sam offered him a long-suffering scowl. "You know I could still kill you, demon or not, right?"

"Like to see you try, little brother."

Obviously forgetting about his injury for a second, Sam reached out with his damaged arm to swat ineffectually at Dean's shoulder, wincing at the apparent pain the movement caused. "Ow," he said dryly.

"Yeah, you better be careful with that," Dean advised him. "It hurts when you get shot. With bullets *or* rock salt."

"Thanks for that."

"Payback for throwing me off that walkway."

Sam's eyes once again averted themselves to study the carpet. "Yeah. Dean, I'm—I'm sorry. About that. And—"

"Not your fault, Sammy," Dean cut him off with a raised hand. "And I *did* shoot you a couple of times, after all."

"Can't believe you're still sore about that asylum thing," Sam shot back, grinning slyly.

"I got a long memory," Dean informed him. "Like an elephant."

"And the appetite to match," Sam observed with a smirk.

"Hey, man, you don't get to look as good as this eating tofu and green stuff."

"You just keep telling yourself that when you're arteries are all choked up by the time you hit forty. Which. Y'know. Not that far away."

Dean scowled at him. "Hilarious, Sammy. No really."

Sam chuckled softly, before glancing at his phone on the nightstand. "Maybe we should call Bobby and Missouri," he suggested at length. "Let them know that we're not, y'know, dead or anything."

Dean glanced at his watch, squinting when he realized he was so damn tired he could barely make out the numbers. "I'm not sure they'd appreciate the call at two in the morning," he commented. "Although we sure as hell owe them both an apology."

"You two aren't the only ones owe an apology," John said suddenly, his voice rumbling from the other side of the room like distant thunder.

Dean and Sam fell silent, their attention drawn immediately to their father, who was still steadfastly not looking at them, thick fingers picking at loose threads on the bedspread beneath him. He sighed heavily, dark eyes hidden beneath even darker lashes.

"Should o' been here for you two," he said slowly, still not looking up. "When you called. When *both* of you called."

Dean raised a not-entirely-surprised eyebrow. “You got the voicemails, huh?” he asked casually.

John flicked his gaze up to him for a nanosecond before resuming his contemplation of the bedspread. “Yeah, I got ‘em,” he admitted. “All of ‘em. Listened to every one. Always listen to ‘em. If only to hear your voices.”

“Dad, if you want to hear our voices, you could actually pick up and *talk* to us once in a while,” Sam observed.

John nodded. “Yeah,” he agreed a little reluctantly. “Yeah. I could. I should. I should—we need to—I needed to—I needed...”

“Dad?” Dean prodded.

John shrugged, finally looking up at his boys for more than a microsecond. “I needed time,” he managed shortly. “Just. I just. I just needed time.”

“After Stull?” Sam asked gently.

John nodded, once again looking away. “I’m still not—still not sure that—that I’m—that I’m *home*...”

Dean instinctively moved toward his father, reaching out for him, fingers clasping around his wrist, stilling his nervous movements and forcing him to look up at him. “You’re home, Dad,” he said forcefully, the certainty in his voice brooking no argument. “You’re really home and it’s really us.”

John’s whole face seemed to collapse in on itself, his head hanging beneath his shoulder blades. “But how do I know?” he breathed helplessly, his voice barely audible. “How do I *know*?”

Dean squeezed his wrist tightly, once again causing his father to look up at him. “Because I’m *telling* you, Dad.” He glanced briefly at Sam. “*We’re* telling you. I don’t know what they tried to make you believe—over there. But you can believe this, Dad. It’s really us.” His fingers moved down to clasp his father’s hand, something he couldn’t remember doing since he was a little boy. “You’re really home.”

John gazed at him hollowly, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, and Dean knew what he was doing; knew he was trying to summon some of that Winchester true grit and failing miserably.

“Dad—”

John squeezed Dean’s hand. “But am I still me, son?” he asked brokenly. “Am I still *me*?”

Dean blinked at him mutely.

“Dad,” Sam said softly, shifting on the other bed. “You’re really you. We’re really us. You’re home.”

John nodded slowly, tears suddenly slipping from his darkened eyes, and that hurt more than anything he'd said previously. John Winchester didn't cry. John Winchester didn't break. John Winchester was a superhero.

"Is—is that why you've been avoiding us?" Sam asked carefully. "Because you thought—because you thought we weren't really *yours*?"

"Never mine to protect or save," John murmured, eyes once again downcast. "Never mine at all."

"Dad," Dean prodded, a little more sternly than he'd meant. "I don't know where you heard that, but it's bullcrap. You hear me? Dad? Who told you that?"

John looked up at him a little reluctantly, eyes shiny and dark and red-rimmed. "It was—" he began, before seeming to think better of it. "It was nothing," he shrugged, wiping a hand across his face. "Nothing."

"Dad," Sam's voice was equally as harsh as Dean's had been. "It's *not* nothing. You've said that before. '*Never yours to protect, never yours to save.*' You said it when we were on the other side. When we'd fallen through the—the Gateway—"

"Nexus," John murmured, but offered no further explanation.

"Dad? Dad!" Dean urged, anxious to build on where Sam had been trying to take their father. "Who told you we weren't yours?"

John took a shuddering breath. "Lucifer," he admitted at length. "It was Lucifer."

Dean glanced over at his brother, who frowned and shrugged. Obviously Sam had no idea what Dad was talking about either. "When, Dad? When did he say this to you?"

"Wyoming," John told them. "When—when we you used the amulet to kill Haris. I thought—I thought you were both dead and—and he just showed up. Lucifer. He just showed up."

Sam nodded, frowning a little uncertainly. "I—I remember that," he said uncertainly. "I think. After Dean shot me—"

"History repeating, huh?" Dean murmured, and Sam flicked a tiny smile at him.

"I guess. I came to, and I heard a voice and—and I knew it was *him*. Knew it was Lucifer. But—"

"It was him," John confirmed. "I was—I was distraught. I thought I'd lost you both. *Failed* you. I told him I just wanted to protect you, save you and he—that's when he said it. '*They were never yours to protect or save. They were never yours at all.*' I—I didn't know what it meant. What he meant. Not then."

Dean frowned minutely. "And now? You know what it means now?"

John shook his head. "It doesn't mean *anything*," he assured his sons. "I know that now. It's the same as the crossroads demon. Lucifer was just messing with my head. He *knew*. Somehow he knew I'd end up falling through the Gateway at Stull. He knew this was going to happen. He knew I wouldn't be sure—"

"That we were yours," Sam finished for him. "That this was real. That this was *home*."

Dean shifted uncomfortably. "How could he know that?" he asked uncertainly. "He can see the future?"

John once again shook his head, massaging the back of his neck tiredly. "It's more complicated than that," he began to explain. "This is all—this is just *one* reality. In the others I saw—Lucifer was there. In all of them. He... I saw some things I guess I shouldn't have seen. Some possible futures that might happen *here*. He—he learns from his mistakes. When his plans don't work out in one reality, he moves on to the next. Tries something else—"

"Wait," Dean held up a hand, scrunching his forehead in confusion. "He can move between realities? That's what Mia said, right?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah. She was borrowing his power when she got us in to find Dad."

"So—so how can he be trying out different plans in different realities? Wouldn't—wouldn't there be one of him in each reality like there's one of us? If he's moving between realities, surely he'd—like—bump into himself or something."

Sam just looked at him like he was completely whacked, but he really didn't know how to explain what he was thinking any better than he already had.

"Lucifer was an angel once," John interposed softly. "He may be fallen now, little more than a demon. But he used to be an angel. It's different for them. They're not—split apart like we are."

"So there's only one of him?" Sam asked uncertainly. "Across all the different realities?"

Dean nodded, suddenly getting it. "Like Castiel. That crazy-ass angel we bumped into in Mexico? He said his kind could walk across different planes of existence."

"You met an angel?" John put in suddenly, sounding more animated than he had since they got back from the crossroads.

"Said he was an angel," Dean said with a shrug. "And he did some stuff that... Well let's just say we don't have any reason *not* to believe him." He unconsciously ran his hand over his jacket pocket, where Castiel's feather still lay safely hidden.

"So..." Sam said slowly. "So what did he do? Lucifer. What did you see him do in the other realities that you maybe shouldn't have seen?"

John didn't answer for the longest time, just looked from one son to the other, unimaginable pain twisting his features into something almost unrecognizable as the John Winchester Dean had known since he was four years old. "It..." He swallowed hard. "You died. Both of you. Over and over and I can't—I can't... I need to—to figure things out. He could—he could try again and you could both... I can't let it happen. Need to protect you. Need to *save* you—"

"Dad." Dean took John's shoulders in firm hands. "You need to *tell* us."

John looked up at him, eyes threatening to well over once again. "I can't, son," he said softly. "Not until I know what it means. That I can prevent it. That it can't happen in *this* reality. That he can't make it *work*..."

"Make *what* work?" Sam asked.

John shook his head, shrinking away from Dean's touch. "I just need to think," he said. "Just need to figure out what's going on. What my next move should be—"

"*Our* next move," Dean reminded him. "Dad. We're in this together, right? Family business. Whatever we need to do to stop Lucifer, we do it *together*. We're stronger as a family."

John looked up at him again, nodding ever-so-slightly. "When the time comes," he agreed. "When I know what we're dealing with."

Sam sighed heavily. "Dad, enough with the 'need to know' crap, okay? It didn't work with Haris, what makes you think it's going to work now? We're not really going to do that dance again, are we?"

"Sammy," John said softly. "When I know what we're dealing with, I'll tell you. Believe me, son. I—" he blinked up at first Sam, then Dean. "I can't do this alone. I know that. I know we need to do this together. It's too big, and I've seen what happens if I—if... I—I won't let it happen. I won't let it happen *here*. But I need to know what I'm looking at, what's going on."

Dean blew out an exhausted breath. "You're taking off again, aren't you?" he said resignedly, sitting heavily on the bed at his father's side.

John was back to examining the bedspread. "For now," he admitted quietly. "It's the safest thing. I know—I know you boys will take care of each other. For right now, I need time to think. To research. To plan."

"Let us help you, Dad," Sam urged. "Let us help you figure this out."

John looked at Sam sorrowfully. "Don't you think I'd like nothing better than to have you boys with me?" he asked. "Have you by my side?" He turned his attention to Dean. "I know we're stronger as a family, son," he assured his eldest. "I do. But I'd feel a whole lot better knowing you boys are out here fighting the good fight while I'm sidelined. Something big's going down. I need to know what's coming so we're ready for it. It's just the way it has to be."

Some of the steel had returned to his voice, to the set of his shoulders, the straightness of his back.

"Are you goin' back to Marley's cabin?" Dean asked uncertainly.

John shook his head. "No. If that crossroads demon could find me there, so could others."

"So you're not going to tell us where you're going?" Sam hazarded.

John met his youngest boy's accusing gaze. "Safer if I don't, Sammy," he said. "I don't want this happening again. Demons using you boys to get to me. You're too important."

Dean frowned at him. "Important?" he asked. "How? To who?"

John smiled a little sadly, running his hand over Dean's hair. "To me, for one," he said. "I can't lose you boys. You're all I've got left."

Dean was suddenly transported back five years. To a hotel in Chicago. To an alleyway. To his dad and his brother torn up by Daevas.

"Stay," he pleaded softly. "Just for tonight. Tomorrow...tomorrow you can take off. We won't even try to stop you. Just—just stay. Just for one night." He blinked up at his dad. "We can be a family for just one night, can't we?"

John smiled indulgently, Stull, the terrible things Dean could only imagine he'd seen through the Gateway, all of it seeming to fall away from him.

If only for one night.

"Alright, son," he said quietly. "I'll stay. Just for tonight. Tonight we can be a family again."

Just for one night.

The End