

Ut Victo Vado Spoilum
Season Four
Episode Twelve
By JennyF

Julian Whittaker prided himself upon many things. He had worked his whole life for this moment, the pinnacle of his career. The hours of study in his youth had been a joy and the status he now enjoyed as one of the leading historians in San Francisco was, he felt, only right and proper. Yes, his home life had suffered but his wife leaving had been an inevitable outcome of his obsession with Ancient Rome. But it was worth it, he thought, as he cast his eye around his oak dining table, studying each of his children in turn.

Two children. Two beautiful, intelligent, artistic children who knew their own minds, he reflected as he watched them arguing good-naturedly, trying to decide who should take the dirty dishes through to the kitchen.

It didn't surprise him that his daughter won and Antony, her junior by three years, huffed in surprised defeat as he gathered plates and cutlery to him. Portia smiled sweetly at him as she slid the gravy boat over to him.

Julian sat back contentedly. He'd given both children an education of which to be envious, Ivy League universities fighting over them just a few years ago. It hadn't surprised him when Portia had decided to stay closer to home or that Antony had eschewed college altogether to pursue his dream of setting up his own business in town. Which he had done. Highly successfully as it turned out, his art gallery being one of the few to go from strength to strength over the last twelve months.

Portia had chosen to follow in his footsteps, bringing him companionship and solidarity in the face of his wife's desertion. She lapped up the knowledge of ancient Rome he'd passed on to her with relish and sometimes he wondered who had the greater passion for the subject. It was mostly down to her persuasion that Antony had finally allowed them to stage an exhibition of Roman artifacts in his gallery at all. They had grown up to be close and Julian knew he was shameless at times in exploiting their relationship.

He listened to Antony clattering about in the kitchen, a sure sign of exaggerated suffering. Turning to his daughter he wondered again at her similarity to her mother. Black hair tumbling over her shoulders in waves, crystal clear brown eyes sparkling with humor at her brother's endeavors in the kitchen, and full lips smiling with shared understanding with her father.

"He'll get the hang of it one day," she assured him. "And then he'll make someone a great wife."

They laughed together as Antony reappeared at the door, a tray with cafetiere, cream jug and china cups balancing precariously on top of each other.

"Laugh it up," he retorted. "I'll be married before you will. You spend too long in dusty rooms with dusty antiques!"

"They're not that dusty," Portia replied. "Not when I'm done with them, anyway."

"And that's why you'll still be single when you're thirty. Who in their right mind wants to be dusted off constantly?" and he put the coffee cups and accoutrements on the table. He sat himself down opposite Portia and smiled at her.

"Oh, I'm sure I can find someone," she smirked, sobering quickly under her father's raised eyebrows.

Julian watched the discourse benevolently as he accepted the black coffee from his son. He sighed, knowing the time had come to bring up the subject he'd been avoiding all night.

"Antony," he began, his deep voice serious. "The exhibition's going well, son. Better than we'd imagined." He looked to Portia who had sunk back in her chair, cradling her own cup and watching her little brother keenly.

Antony straightened in his seat and glared at his father. "No."

"Antony," Portia interjected. "You don't know what we're going to say yet."

"I don't care," he replied. "I said you could have the gallery for four weeks. That's it. Four weeks, which ended yesterday."

"We've sold over a hundred tickets more than we'd anticipated," Julian continued, ignoring the interruption.

"No, Dad," Antony repeated. "I agreed to let you have the gallery for four weeks. You said – no, you promised – you'd be out at the end of that. I have clients who need the space. Paying clients."

"I put the deposit down on that place for you," Julian stated bluntly.

"Which I repaid over two years ago. How long are you going to hold that over me?"

"Surely your clients can wait another week?"

"No. They can't. And they shouldn't have to. Why should your exhibition take priority over theirs? You always do this."

"Antony," Portia interjected soothingly, "be reasonable about this."

"Reasonable? How can you sit there and talk about being reasonable? Reasonable is sticking to our agreement. I told you you could have the gallery and I also told you that if you weren't out in four weeks I would pack it up for you. Craig MacTear booked the gallery over six months ago. Do you have any idea how influential he is? If it goes well I could be looking at another gallery by the end of the year. If I turn him away at this short notice I'll probably not get another booking, from anyone, for years. It would ruin me."

"Two more weeks, Antony. That's all I'm asking, son. It's not much."

Antony pushed his chair back, gaining his feet in one swift, abrupt movement. "Yes, Dad," he hissed. "It is. I'm running a business, not a family charity. Now, are you going to pack it all up or am I?"

Julian sighed. "Surely Craig MacTear can wait? I'll call him myself if that helps."

"How would that help?" Antony snorted. "He's a highly respected artist and you're a fusty Roman fanatic." He threw his starched white napkin on the table and ran a hand through his short brown hair. "Thank you for dinner, Father. I have business to attend to back at the gallery." He turned to his sister and nodded at her. "Goodnight Portia. I hope you can sleep well tonight."

The two remaining members of the Whittaker family watched the youngest storm from the room, Portia flinching slightly at the crashing of the front door as it was slammed closed with a little more force than necessary. Silence reigned in the grand dining room for several minutes before Julian leant forward and reached for the coffee.

"Another cup, my dear?" he asked blithely, as though nothing had happened.

Portia nodded slowly and settled back in her seat. "He has a point you know, Dad. We did promise."

Julian closed his eyes briefly before nodding solemnly. "I know. But you of all people understand how important this exhibition is. You know how hard I had to work on Milo to get him to agree to letting his collection out of Italy. We can't stop now. The interest has been huge."

"I know, Dad. And I agree with you. Maybe Antony just needs to sleep on it and he'll come round to our way of thinking." Even as she spoke the words though, Portia didn't really believe them herself. She and Antony were too alike. Stubborn, determined and headstrong. She had no doubt he would carry out his threat to clear his gallery. She knew she would if their positions were reversed.

"I doubt it," Julian muttered. "Too much like your mother."

Portia fidgeted with her coffee cup before setting it down on the table in front of her. "Maybe I should go check on him," she suggested, unable to shake the feeling Antony was about to destroy a millennia of antiquities all because of a family argument.

Julian nodded and rose from his seat. With impeccable manners he stood behind his daughter and drew her chair out, allowing her to rise to her feet like a princess, and gave her a kiss. "You do that," he agreed. "Make sure he doesn't do anything silly, my love."

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Antony's gallery was still illuminated when Portia drew up in her Chevy Corvette convertible. Her brother's much simpler Toyota was in its customary place by the side entrance and Portia wondered how much damage he'd managed to do so far. She hurried to the front entrance, not bothering to lock her car, and pushed the door open, calling her brother's name as she entered the gallery.

She knew something was wrong the minute she stepped through the doorway. The precious artifacts for which she and her father had spent so many months negotiating were strewn recklessly around the main room. It was obvious Antony had made a start on clearing the exhibition. Many of the antiques were in packing cases, nestled in straw and occasionally in bubble wrap, but there were many lying discarded on the floor. It was all Portia could do not to weep as she surveyed the damage to clay drinking vessels and armor which had been flung onto the hard marble floor causing irreparable damage.

But the most terrifying thing she saw was the pool of blood trailing from one of the display podiums, now bereft of its exhibit, to the door leading to the second, smaller room of the gallery. Heart in her throat, Portia slowly and hesitantly advanced to the doorway. By the time she reached the second room, she was wishing she had just called the police and been done with it.

Antony, her brother, her beloved brother despite their differences, lay on the floor below a cabinet of Roman weaponry. She could smell the tang of copper in the air, could see the trail of blood widening and pooling beneath his body. She couldn't hold back the scream, even as she noticed the gash across his throat and the small Roman dagger lying abandoned by his head.

Antony was quite, quite dead.

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America's roads, Dean decided, were disintegrating. That, or he needed to seriously look at the Impala's suspension. He could have sworn the potholes were growing and the camber on that last bend? Definitely not natural. Or maybe it was just that he'd been driving for the last four hours and could do with a break. He cast his eyes to the right and relaxed when he confirmed Sam was sleeping. It might not be classified a restful sleep but it was better than nothing, and if anyone needed to relax, it was Sammy.

Reaching out, he flicked the switch on the Impala's trusty stereo, Metallica blasting the peace and quiet of an early morning. Sam twitched and jerked awake with a scowl.

"Dude!" he exclaimed. "What the hell?"

Dean raised an eyebrow and looked innocently at his little brother. "Oh, I'm sorry. Were you sleeping?"

Sam huffed and slouched down in his seat, glaring at the older Winchester. "Where are we?" he grunted, shielding his eyes from the rising sun.

"Dunno," Dean confessed. "But I could do with a break. What say we hit the next diner we come to?"

Sam couldn't think of a single reason not to agree and within a couple of minutes they were pulling into the parking lot of Bob's Diner, the sign promising the best breakfast they'd ever tasted. Feeling somewhat skeptical of the claim, Sam scrubbed a hand over his face and turned to Dean. Before he could mention his reservations about the promised feast his cell phone broke into life.

Digging in his pocket he pulled it out, ignoring Dean's puzzled gaze as he glanced at the caller display. A brief flare of panic skittered across his mind as he hit the answer button. "Sarah? You okay?"

Dean's head shot round at the mention of Sarah's name and gave his brother a searching look. Sam however, subtly climbed out of the car and wandered away, out of earshot, waving a reassuring hand at Dean as he settled himself on a bench by the side of the road.

Satisfied he wasn't needed as part of this conversation, Dean motioned to the diner, indicating he would be waiting inside for Sam. A distracted nod was the only response he got, so, shrugging his shoulders carelessly, Dean pushed open the door of the diner, stopping only briefly in the entrance to do a quick recon of the establishment.

The décor was dated, possibly pre-1970 Dean mused, but the waitress behind the counter more than made up for any crimes against style. She smiled at him as he slid into a booth in the corner, making sure he had the door in sight, along with a clear view of the kitchen and parking lot through the slightly grimy window. Old habits died hard and even though they were simply cruising for the next day or two, it never hurt to have all the exits covered. Dean couldn't help but smile at the paranoia in his thoughts. If anyone cared to analyze him he would like to bet they'd end up in therapy themselves.

His train of thought was broken by the arrival of a plain white mug and the slosh of coffee in the pot carried by the waitress he'd noticed as he arrived.

"Fill you up?" she asked with a bright smile.

Several answers popped into Dean's head, each more inappropriate than the one before, but he managed to restrain himself with a simple nod of the head and a return of that smile. She leaned over and poured the beverage carefully, watching Dean over her lashes the whole time.

"Anything else I can do for you?" she asked softly.

"Not right now, sugar," Dean replied, "but I'll be sure to give you a call if I think of something," and he watched admiringly as she sashayed back to the counter.

Sighing at opportunities not taken, Dean raised the mug to his lips and turned his attention back to the window and the parking lot beyond. He could see Sam leaning against the trunk of the Impala, shoulders hunched, one hand thrust deep in his pocket while the other held his cell phone tightly to his ear. He

seemed to be doing a lot of listening, occasionally nodding his head and glancing round to check if he was still alone. When he turned toward the diner, Dean could clearly see his expression was serious and he wondered what news Sarah had for his brother.

Sam and Sarah had always seemed a good match to Dean and he'd been a little surprised Sam hadn't wanted to head straight out to San Francisco after the events in Lawrence. Admittedly, they'd had other things on their mind at the time, like Dad, but he was pretty certain the phone calls between the two had increased since then.

He sighed to himself and slouched back a little further into the seat. He watched as Sam snapped his cell phone shut and pushed himself off the Impala. The younger Winchester rolled his head around, working out the kinks in his neck, and strolled toward the diner and Dean.

Not wanting to be caught spying on his brother, Dean drained his coffee and waved to the waitress, indicating he wanted another mug and a refill for himself. She obliged happily and was just setting the second mug on the table when Sam slid into the seat opposite, thanking her with a silent nod.

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Dean could take the suspense no longer.

"So," he started, "what did she want? Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's good." Sam seemed distracted and Dean couldn't help the unease that stole into his gut.

"But?" he pressed. "Demons aren't back, are they?"

"What? No. No, nothing like that. She's safe. She's happy."

"Soooo, why the long face?"

Sam took a deep breath and looked Dean in the eye. "One of her friends was murdered at the weekend."

"Damn." Understatement of the week, Dean chided himself. "What happened?"

"She wasn't very clear on that bit," Sam admitted. "She's a bit shaken up by it all. Especially after..." he trailed off, leaving Dean to fill in the gaps.

"You wanna head up there?" Dean offered. "We're not doing anything right now. Cali's nice and warm this time of year."

Sam hesitated. He felt guilty at not having been to check on Sarah but at the same time he wasn't sure he was ready to see her either. The longer he left it, the harder it seemed to be. He shook his head.

"You sure?" Dean pressed.

"I don't know," Sam sighed eventually. "Maybe we should take a look at this death. She said the police couldn't find evidence of a break in or any motive. Maybe... I don't know, Dean. Should we go?"

Unused to the uncertainty in Sam's voice, Dean set his mug on the tabletop and studied his brother closely. Resting his elbows on the table and leaning forward, he cocked his head to one side.

"Doesn't seem to be anything for us there," he started, pausing when Sam's face fell a little. "These things happen all the time, especially in big cities. No real reason for us to head out there, unless you're just looking for an excuse to see Sarah without feeling guilty? 'Cause, y'know, I don't think she blames you for the whole demon hostage thing and Jess wouldn't want you to mope about for the rest of your life. It's okay to want to get together with her, Sammy."

Sam closed his eyes briefly and then turned his head away from Dean's prying eyes, gazing out of the window instead. "It's not about being with her, Dean," he protested, knowing even as he said it Dean would see it for the lie it was. "She thought it important enough to mention, knowing what we do. I just think we shouldn't pass on it so readily."

"What else did she tell you about this murder, then?"

"Not a lot, to be honest. The guy was killed in his gallery..."

"Oh God," Dean interrupted. "Is this going to be some high culture thing?"

"...after an argument with his dad and sister," Sam continued, ignoring Dean's outburst. "The cops don't figure the family for the murder though. But Sarah wouldn't have mentioned it if she didn't think something was hinky."

"Hinky?"

"You know what I mean," Sam continued, calmly. "Anyway, don't you want to know what the argument was about?"

"Not really," Dean admitted, "but I'm sure you're gonna tell me."

"The exhibition this guy was staging was a favor for his dad. Roman artifacts. Ancient Roman artifacts."

"So?"

"So, he was killed with an ancient Roman dagger." He sat back and watched for a reaction from his brother. "And Sarah did ask us to come," he concluded sheepishly.

"Fine, Sam. You wanna go? We'll go." Dean slid out of his seat and threw a couple of bills down on the table. "I still think you just wanna see Sarah, though," he muttered under his breath with a smirk.

Antony Whittaker, Dean decided, may have been on the artistic side but his imagination clearly failed him when he named his studio. Whittaker's Gallery turned out to be a smart, almost clinical, gallery conveniently located in the heart of a thriving bohemian neighborhood. The remains of police tape fluttered in the evening breeze and the front window of the gallery was bereft of any display other than a couple of somber black and white photographs of the deceased owner. A few tourists and students still milled around but the area was generally quiet and peaceful, studios, galleries and boutiques all closed for the night.

Stepping out of the Impala into the balmy evening air, Sam stretched his arms, waiting for Dean to join him on the sidewalk. He watched the aimless wanderings of the few pedestrians still around and finally turned to Dean who was now resting his arms on the roof of the Chevy.

"That's the place," he commented, pointing to the gallery rather needlessly.

Dean gave a careless glance round. "Really?" he asked. "What gave it away?"

"Jerk," Sam muttered, then stepped to the front of the car. "So, we should check out round the side. There might be a way in out back."

"Woah," Dean exclaimed. "We just got here. I've been driving for hours. Can't we at least get something to eat first? Or drink?"

"It's gonna be night soon," Sam pointed out. "We're not going to see much in the dark."

"This place will still be here in a couple of hours, Sam. We don't know what we're walking into here. Let's find a bar, get some food and take it from there." Dean stopped and waved his hand in Sam's general direction. "Why don't you give Sarah a call? Let her know we're here."

Sam ducked his head, kicking himself for not thinking of calling Sarah first. He ignored the grin Dean was trying, and failing, to hide and pulled his phone out of his pocket.

The call connected on the second ring and Sarah's delight at hearing Sam's voice, and the news they were in town, lightened Sam's mood considerably. He turned his back on his brother after the third suggestive eyebrow raise and continued the conversation in muted tones, much to Dean's amusement. Although he strained to hear what Sam was saying, he could only catch the odd word, predominant among which was the phrase "you're sure you're okay though?"

By the time Sam had finished, Dean had lost interest and had wandered over the road to Whittaker's Gallery where he was studying the photographs of the deceased owner. He looked up briefly when he felt Sam at his shoulder.

"So?" he asked.

"She'll meet us at..." he trailed off and looked at a piece of scrap paper he'd obviously found in the recesses of a pocket, "Rocky's Tavern. It's not far from here. She said we could walk it easily enough."

Dean glanced up and down the street at the mention of walking, more out of concern for the security of his baby than the thought of actually walking. Deciding it was safe enough, he nodded his head.

"Lead on, then," he commanded, not once questioning his brother's orienteering skills. He was pretty sure Sarah would have given him comprehensive directions.

He wasn't wrong as the bar loomed into view after just five minutes and two blocks. It looked a step up from their normal seedy haunts and part of him secretly longed to just sink into a cushioned seat, down a few beers and forget the woes of the world for an hour or two.

As soon as he spotted Sarah's face from the doorway, he knew his plans were destined to be thwarted. Nudging Sam in the ribs, he pointed to where she was hovering by the bar. Sam broke into a slow smile and elbowed his way through the early evening crowd, not bothering to check if Dean was following.

Sarah looked just as he remembered her. Her recent ordeal at the hands of Mia's minions had left no visible trace although he didn't doubt for one minute her sleep was plagued by nightmares at times. She was scanning the bar discreetly and Sam had to admire the tact with which she appeared to reject the attentions of the local barfly.

He managed to make it half way across the room before she noticed him. Her reaction was immediate. She hopped off the stool she was perched on and opened her arms to him. Giving him a quick once over, she proceeded to give him a hug.

"You're actually here," she exclaimed, nodding at Dean who was hovering just behind Sam.

"Well, yeah," Sam agreed. "Here we are."

"I got a couple of beers in," she continued, waving at two bottles waiting to be drunk and Dean could have kissed her on the spot. Instead, he murmured his thanks and, picking both up, wandered over to a free table at the edge of the room, settling himself in prime position for people watching. Sam and Sarah followed and made themselves comfortable.

"So," Sam began, hesitantly, "how've you been?"

"Good," she replied, looking only at Sam. "I've been good, Sam. I can't say it's all been easy, or fun, but I'm okay."

"How did you end up here?" the younger Winchester continued, watching the art dealer and deciding that yes, she really was okay.

"Long story short? I came here about eighteen months, two years ago. Dad thought it about time I struck out on my own, lent me some cash and I decided to head West. This is where I ended up and this is where I stayed." She paused and took a sip of her drink. "I wasn't sure you'd come," she confessed.

"Why?" Sam sounded genuinely surprised and Dean couldn't help echo the sentiment.

"I just thought, after..." she stopped and glanced from one brother to another, struggling to find the right words.

"After what happened?" Sam prompted gently, reaching out and resting his hand over hers, ignoring the knowing look he just knew Dean was throwing his way.

Sarah swallowed, memories still fresh in her mind. "Yes. I just thought maybe you had more important things to worry about." She met Sam's gaze and held it.

"Well," Dean finally huffed, "this is all very touching and I hate to break up the party, but why do you think this is our kind of problem?"

Sarah started. She'd almost forgotten the older hunter was there. Extricating her hand from Sam's hold she turned to Dean. "It might not be," she admitted, "but Portia – that's the sister – she's got it into her head that Antony was killed by a Roman."

Dean snorted. "A killer Italian? In San Francisco?" he laughed. "Like the Mafia?" He knew he was being facetious but he couldn't help himself. The opportunity was far too good to pass on.

Sam glared and a well aimed kick under the table put an end to Dean's humor. Sarah looked serious and it reminded Sam how long it was since they'd seen her. She'd obviously forgotten his brother's dubious sense of humor.

"No," she told the boys. "An Ancient Roman. A warrior, not a tourist."

"You're gonna have to explain that one to me." Dean sobered up quickly and leant forward, elbows propped on the table and his head resting in his hands.

"Antony was killed by a puglio. It's a Roman dagger that formed part of the exhibition."

"Not that surprising then, really," Dean observed. "Any opportunist could have been responsible."

"But you say there was no break-in?" Sam double-checked.

"No, nothing to indicate anything out of the ordinary."

"Other than a dead body," Dean muttered, more to himself than to be heard.

"So why is your friend so convinced there's something supernatural going on?" Sam asked.

Sarah laughed soundlessly and raised her eyebrows. "The whole family's open to the existence of other-worldly things," she explained. "They always have been. It surprised me when I first met them but now..." She paused for effect before continuing. "That, and there was a footprint next to Antony's body."

"So there was something out of the ordinary." Dean picked up on the inconsistency immediately.

"Well, yes and no," Sarah agreed. "There was no sign of forced entry and whoever left the footprint had been wearing sandals."

"It's warm out there," Dean pointed out. "Everyone's wearing them."

"Thing is, this sandal? The print looked like it was a Roman sandal. That and the puglio and the lack of evidence for a break-in... Portia doesn't know what else to think."

"I think it was some freak dressed up as a Roman," Dean stated bluntly. "Most likely someone obsessed with the Romans. Like the family."

"No!" Sarah exclaimed forcibly. "It couldn't have been the family. They're devoted to each other. And who goes around killing their own son or brother anyway?"

"Expression 'still waters' mean anything to you?" the older brother asked.

She looked to Sam for support and the silence that followed, although brief, was uncomfortable. He glared at Dean and despite his gut feeling that Dean was merely playing devil's advocate, he had to admit his brother's version of events was making more sense than the alternative offered by Portia Whittaker.

But when he looked back at Sarah, he couldn't bring himself to be the bearer of bad news, not after all she'd been through because of him. "It wouldn't hurt to look into it," he offered, passing a meaningful glance at Dean who picked up on it with an imperceptible tilt of his head and shrug of his shoulders. "Can you get us into the gallery?"

The relief on Sarah's face was palpable and seeped through into her voice. "Yes. Portia's got the keys and I'm sure I won't have much trouble getting her to let me have a look around." Her face dropped slightly as she continued, "Antony was my friend too. I'll just tell her I want to say goodbye to him properly."

Finding a reasonable motel in San Francisco proved to be a pleasantly enjoyable experience. Sarah had given Sam a couple of suggestions but the first was more than adequate, especially by Winchester standards. Located on the riverfront, the Kingfisher Motel was clean and unassuming. The desk clerk

hadn't batted an eyelid at their late arrival, nor had he seemed in the least concerned at their request that no cleaning be done till they'd checked out.

The room itself was surprisingly spacious and within five minutes of opening the door, Sam was seated at the small table by the window, laptop out and connected to the web.

"What'cha looking for, Sammy?" Dean enquired, scrubbing a hand over his face.

"Roman customs," he replied briefly. "It might help to know what we're up against."

"We're up against a family argument." Dean hovered over his brother's shoulder, squinting at the site he'd brought up. "If you wanna research anything, research that!"

"Dean, why are you so determined to make the family the bad guys here?"

"Why are you so determined not to? It's obvious, Sam. They had an agreement, Dad broke it, they argued, Antony's dead. Where's the mystery?"

"Were you at the same bar as me?" Sam pushed his laptop away from him and turned in his chair to study his brother. "Did you listen to a word Sarah said?"

"Yes, I listened. And what I heard was a classic case of a domestic incident. Whatever Sarah thinks, I've seen too many families turn on each other. We've not met these people, Sam. They might be the perfect family Sarah says, or they might be the family from hell."

"Families argue all the time, Dean," Sam interjected quietly. "They don't all go around killing each other."

"But sometimes they do. I just need more proof than the word of a pretty girl."

"Sarah's not just a pretty girl. She's an art dealer. She knows what she's talking about."

"No, Sammy. You just said it yourself. She's an art dealer, not a Roman historian or family therapist." He let out a long sigh and dropped down on the nearest bed. "I just need to be sure, dude."

"Fine," Sam huffed, pushing himself up from his seat, not caring when it fell backwards to the floor. "You're so bothered about this family, you look them up!" Not taking a backward glance, he stormed into the small bathroom, slamming the door behind him with enough force to rattle the picture hanging on the wall.

Dean dropped his head into his hands. He hadn't meant this to turn into a fight. He was fully aware of the turmoil Sam had suffered recently, the memory of Jessica fresh in his mind again after the incident in Georgia. They were both tired, although that felt like a permanent state to Dean over the last couple of years.

Pushing himself wearily up and slouching over to where his brother had abandoned the laptop, Dean settled down to see what he could find about the Whittakers. Entering the name Julian Whittaker into the search engine turned up over three hundred thousand results and it took Dean a good fifteen minutes to narrow the search down sufficiently before he found a website devoted to Roman research and one particular historian, detailing not only his theories and research but also a comprehensive biography of the man.

Dean became so engrossed in his work he didn't realize Sam had emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of steam until he felt his brother's presence at his back. He could feel the tension in the air and it didn't take a rocket scientist to work out that Sam still felt a little pissed at Dean. The older brother rolled his shoulders and, taking a deep breath, turned to face his sibling.

"I found him," he stated, pointlessly, as Sam was studying the computer screen to the exclusion of all else.

"So I see," Sam observed. "And what revelations did you find?"

"Sam..." It was a feeble attempt at an apology but the look on Sam's face didn't encourage him to proceed down that road. Instead he licked his lower lip and began to outline what he'd discovered. "Julian Whittaker, born 1958, happy childhood, married his high school sweetheart and had two kids with her. She left when she realized she'd always come second to his studies and research. Couldn't take being at the bottom of the pile..."

"I know the feeling," Sam muttered, darkly.

"...so she upped sticks and left him with the kids. Portia was eight, Antony was five. His obsession seems to have rubbed off on Portia but not Antony. Reading between the lines, he set up the art gallery as a way to get away from his father." Dean stopped and gave Sam a loaded look. "I still think he's the most likely culprit here, Sammy, but if you wanna hang around for a few days, check it out properly, then we can do that."

It was a pathetic attempt at reconciliation but Sam recognized it for the olive branch it was. Dean was trying to make amends for the earlier argument, smooth over troubled waters. He smiled gratefully and nodded.

"Let's do that," he said.

The following morning was damp and foggy. The mist rolled in off the bay and swept down the streets, almost hiding the Impala from view. Dean sauntered out of their room, eyes darting everywhere, though if pressed he couldn't say what he was looking for. Grabbing a paper from a newsstand conveniently located just outside the motel office, he casually tossed the keys to the Impala to Sam.

Sam eyed the gift suspiciously, wondering what he'd done to warrant such a rare occurrence.

"I'm driving?" he queried. Dean simply nodded and waved the paper at him.

"You complaining?"

"No. No, just curious as to what brought this on."

"Fine," Dean huffed. "You don't wanna drive, I'll do it." He stretched his hand out to grab the keys back off Sam.

Sam laughed at the petulance in his brother's voice and jerked his arm out of Dean's reach, closing his fist round the keys, jogging round to the driver's door before Dean could muster up much of a reaction.

Pulling out of the motel parking lot, Sam concentrated hard on the traffic while Dean immersed himself in the paper. Other than the occasional grunt or interested "huh" from Dean, the journey passed in amiable silence as Sam negotiated the twists and turns of San Francisco's avenues.

Just as they were pulling into the arts area where Antony's gallery was located, Dean suddenly pulled the paper closer to his face and from where Sam was sitting it looked as though he was studying a section with great interest.

"What've you got?" Sam enquired.

"Seems the news isn't done with Antony yet. They've picked up on the murder weapon."

"Well that's hardly surprising considering what it was. It's an unusual thing. It's bound to attract attention, especially from the press."

"Yeah, I guess," Dean agreed. "There's nothing about the footprint here."

"Sarah said that information hadn't been released so it's hardly surprising." Sam pulled the Impala neatly into a parking spot about three doors down from Whittaker's Gallery and nodded. "There's Sarah," he announced.

Throwing the paper down on the seat next to him, Dean exited the car with equal grace and turned his head in the direction Sam indicated. Sarah was leaning against the doorway of the gallery, dressed simply in jeans and a black jacket. Opposite her stood another woman, tall and dark, the epitome of elegance and high class style.

The brothers exchanged puzzled glances but any chance of discussing this development was scuppered when Sarah waved at them and pushed herself away from the studio. The woman with her followed, confidence oozing from every pore.

"Sam, Dean, this is Portia," Sarah introduced the girl with her, slipping Sam an almost apologetic smile as she spoke. "She wanted to meet you guys."

"Sarah told me so much about you I just had to meet you," the girl acknowledged. "I know you won't laugh at me."

"Oh, honey. I'd never do that," Dean returned, a totally inappropriate smirk on his face. He gave her a long, appraising stare, taking in her long black hair, perfectly manicured nails, and wondered where she hid her grief.

Portia, in her turn, took her time surveying the two men in front of her. Turning her gaze from Dean to Sam, she made no attempt to hide the fact she liked what she saw.

Scrutiny over, she turned abruptly away from the boys and strode over to the gallery. "I assume you'll be wanting to take a look around?" she suggested.

"Dude, she's so not what I was expecting," Dean hissed to Sam as they watched Portia fish around in her expensive-looking handbag, pulling out a set of keys that looked like they would be more at home in Alcatraz.

She turned back to them, door swinging slowly open up her hand, beckoning to them all, but eyes only on Sam. It was a little disconcerting, Sam decided, and unconsciously found himself stepping slightly behind Dean with Sarah to his side.

"You're not scared of a girl, are you?" Dean chortled, enjoying Sam's discomfort a little too much for the younger brother's liking.

Entering the gallery was like stepping through the threshold to another world as far as Dean was concerned. The floor and surfaces had been sanitized by the City and the brothers weren't sure anything of import could possibly have been left behind. There had been an attempt to clear the artifacts and Sam wondered who had been responsible for the effort. Whoever had tried, had apparently lost interest in a very short time and there were several display items scattered across the tiled floor.

Portia had stopped by a glass cabinet displaying an array of gold jewelry and was watching Sam and Dean with undisguised curiosity.

"Sarah told you what happened, didn't she?" she finally asked and for the first time, Dean detected a little hesitancy in her whole demeanor.

"Yeah."

"I'm not crazy, you know," she continued, hesitancy having given way to defensiveness, and Sam could feel the tension rising in the room.

"We know you're not," he soothed, moving smoothly to where she was standing. "We deal with this stuff every day and, trust me, we've heard crazy. This? This isn't it."

Portia relaxed and nodded slowly. "So, you believe me?" she asked, tilting her head and eyeing Sam seductively from lowered lashes.

"Yes, we do." Sam glared at Dean before his brother could get out a sarcastic response, or reveal what he really thought about the whole affair. "Why do you think a Roman would kill your brother, though?"

The girl sniffed, and casually wiped her eye. "I don't know," she confessed. "Antony wasn't interested in Rome, or any history, come to that. He was an art dealer, nothing more."

Dean raised his eyebrows and mouthed "Nothing more?" to Sam in disbelief. The more Portia opened her mouth, the less he liked her. Yes, she was beautiful, elegant and poised, but the way she talked about her family and her brother in particular grated on his nerves.

"Maybe your dad could help us?" he suggested, trying to keep the hard edge out of his voice.

"I doubt it," she replied. "He and Antony had their differences but he's been devastated by this. He's pretty much good for nothing at the moment. I'm having to handle everything myself right now." She turned to Sam, and Dean could have sworn she batted her eyelids at him. "It's tough, you know? Suddenly I have no one to turn to."

"I'm sure you'll be fine, Portia," Sarah suddenly cut in. "You always manage somehow," and she smiled sweetly at her friend.

Portia started slightly, almost as if she'd forgotten the other woman's presence. "Thank you, Sarah. You always make things seem a little more bearable."

"So," Sam interjected, "where might this Roman have gone?"

"I have no idea. I don't know what he was doing here in the first place, let alone where he might be now."

"The best thing is if we can have a look around then?" Sam gestured vaguely at Dean, including him in the statement.

"I can wait," Portia offered and this time Dean knew he hadn't imagined the glare Sarah cast at her. He idly wondered if there was about to be a catfight for his brother's attentions and decided he would happily hang around to see that. He could see it in his head...

"Dean!" Sam snapped, possibly for the second or third time, and Dean suddenly realized the two girls had left and he and Sam had the run of the gallery. "Stay with it, dude," Sam commanded.

"Sorry. What are we looking for?"

Sam sighed. "Don't know yet. Just...look around. There might be something in here to indicate why this Roman is still here."

"Or it might be a colossal waste of time."

"Maybe," Sam shrugged. "We won't know till we look." He turned away from Dean and scanned the studio with a skilled eye.

The gallery was littered with artfully placed display cabinets and stands, designed to aid the free flow of visitors round the exhibition. Most of the enclosed cases were still as they had been before the murder. Of the other artifacts, most were either intact or on the floor.

Dean watched Sam become quickly engrossed in the labels describing each exhibit and wondered if this is what his brother was like at college. His geekiness seemed to be rearing its head and he was lost in Ancient Rome.

Heaving a weary sigh, wishing there was some other way to do this – museums really didn't do it for him – Dean turned his attention to the door and windows. Sammy could study the artifacts to his heart's content but Dean was still of the opinion whatever they were dealing with wasn't supernatural. And if it wasn't supernatural, it probably came in in the traditional way.

He was just concluding his examination of the main window, blowing away the residual fingerprint dust applied by the local cops, when Sam let out a little exclamation of triumph.

"Sam?" he prompted, when nothing further was forthcoming, and he twisted his head to see what the root of Sam's outburst was.

Sam was only just visible, crouching down by an open display stand. Dean couldn't be entirely sure but from where he was standing it looked like Sam was scrutinizing an array of daggers.

"What'cha got?" he asked again and took a step forward, halting almost immediately when the stand behind which Sam was in rapt concentration began to rattle and vibrate ominously.

Sam's head popped up almost comically at the disruption and he eyed the display warily, gaze darting to where Dean was frozen to the spot. Later, Sam was never quite able to say in what order events took place over the next few seconds. One minute he was studying some exquisite jewelry, reading its provenance, next the daggers in the stand above him rose out of their housing and, one by one, began to fly across the open space of the gallery.

He saw Dean's eyes widen in shocked surprise, watched him raise his arms in self defense even as he scoured the room for suitable cover, averted his own eyes as he scabbled in his pocket for the sachet of salt he always carried. And just as his fingers scraped the top of the plastic bag he heard the sound that always put his stomach in his throat, no matter how many times he heard it.

As he flung the salt in an arc at the hovering daggers, all he could focus on was the pained grunt from his brother, accompanied by the sound of a body hitting the floor.

Part Two

Sam flung his arm in a wide sweeping curve, watching as the flotilla of daggers dropped to the floor like leaden balloons. Crouched behind the display stand he could hear Dean's labored breathing, interspersed by the odd involuntary groan.

Satisfied there were no more flying objects, Sam crawled out from his hiding place, quickly locating Dean. His brother was lying on the ground, hands clutching at his abdomen, eyes screwed tightly closed and sweat shining on his brow. He had drawn his knees up as close to his chest as he could and he was rocking ever so slightly from side to side.

"Dean!" Sam was at his side in a heartbeat, hands hovering uselessly over his brother's trembling body. Dean's fingers were stained with blood and were wrapped tightly around his torso.

"Sam?" he gasped.

"S okay," Sam soothed, gently prizing Dean's hands away from his body. Dean's eyes flew open at the touch and he grasped Sam's wrists, trying to stop his ministrations.

"No, Dean," Sam remonstrated, pulling out of Dean's frighteningly weak grip. "I need to see the damage," and he pushed the edge of Dean's jacket to one side, trying to hold back the sharp intake of breath the sight of Dean's blood-soaked tee shirt elicited. Biting his lower lip, he glanced up to check how Dean was doing. The older hunter had closed his eyes again and was breathing heavily through his nose. Sam could see how hard he was trying to control himself and hated himself for causing even more discomfort as he gingerly peeled the fabric away from Dean's torso.

Dean could feel his brother's fingers, cool and gentle against his burning skin, and he tried to relax into his touch. And then he couldn't get far away enough as Sam brushed the open wound, sending shards of pain spiking along his nerves until the cry of pain escaped from his lips and he flung his arm across Sam's chest, trying to push him away.

"Sorry, dude," Sam whispered, pulling Dean's arm back to the floor. He looked around the studio for anything he could use to staunch the flow of blood from the stab wound he'd discovered lurking just below his brother's ribcage. Finding nothing of any use in the vicinity, he balled up the edges of Dean's tee shirt and carefully pressed against the gash, pushing down as carefully as he could while still applying enough pressure to stem the blood.

"Here," he said, taking Dean's hand and placing it on the fabric. "Keep that there. I'm going to see if Antony had a first aid kit round here somewhere."

"S not that bad, Sammy," Dean muttered, even as his forehead creased in pain. "It can wait till we get back to the motel."

Sam straightened his long legs and cast a disbelieving look down at the fallen man at his feet. "Dean, you're bleeding. A lot. It'll take me two minutes to find something to clean you up with. Just, stay there."

Dean let his head drop to the ground and closed his eyes in silent submission. He could hear Sam moving around the studio but his attention was distracted by the throbbing in his side. He held on to the bunched fabric as best he could but his concentration was waning and every couple of seconds he found his hand slipping down to the side and he had to jerk it back into place.

On the fourth or fifth time this happened, Dean decided he was too tired to fight gravity anymore and he let his hand drop. He could feel the damp stickiness of his blood pooling beneath him but he didn't have the energy left to do more than slide his hand away from his body. Where he felt something cold and metallic. His fingers instinctively closed around the object, all his hunter's training telling him he'd found the weapon and he knew, without doubt, it was a dagger.

When Sam returned from his search of the premises, the first aid kit he'd retrieved from the back office clutched in his hands, he found Dean lying on his back, face pale and drawn, turning the dagger round so it caught the light above his head. The older hunter turned his head slightly as soon as he became aware of Sam's presence.

"I found a knife," he stated and waved it at Sam. "I think this might be the one that got me," and he offered Sam a weak smile.

"Yeah, I think so too," Sam agreed, dropping to his knees at Dean's side and taking the dagger out of his grasp. "The blood kinda gives it away." He looked to the injury and, taking an alcoholic wipe from the kit, swiftly began to clean the skin around the stab wound. Ignoring the hisses emanating from his brother, he worked quickly and efficiently until he had exposed the hole in his brother's flesh made by the dagger he'd placed on the floor next to him.

"It looks clean," he told Dean. "You're lucky it caught you the way it did. The way those knives were flying through the air..." He trailed off, not quite able to finish the thought. Taking a dressing out of the kit, he placed it gently on his brother. He was so intent on the job at hand he almost didn't hear Dean's next statement.

"It wasn't flying, Sammy."

"What?"

"The dagger. It wasn't flying. Someone stuck that thing in me and pulled it out again. Nothing accidental about where that one landed."

"Dean..." Sam felt confused. The daggers and knives he'd seen had been flying around haphazardly. Admittedly they had all been heading in Dean's general direction, but there had been too many of them to have had any real focus.

Dean could sense the hesitation in Sam's response. But he knew what he was talking about. He'd been on the receiving end of more than one accidental knife wound, and several deliberate ones. He knew the difference and this was definitely a deliberate stab wound.

He levered himself up on one elbow, pausing as the studio tilted to the left slightly, swallowing heavily. Looking Sam in the eye he took a deep breath. "Whatever caused those knives to..." he waved a hand aimlessly, searching for the right word and giving up with a sigh. "It wasn't a lucky shot."

Sam stopped his ministrations. "What d'you mean?" he queried, looking confused.

"Someone stabbed me, Sam. Pushed the knife in and pulled it out again."

"You think it was our ancient Roman?" Sam taped the gauze into place and pulled Dean's tee shirt back down over it. He held a hand out to Dean, who took hold of it. Sam tried not to notice the lack of strength in Dean's grip as he helped his brother gain his feet.

Dean swayed and blinked several times once upright, holding onto Sam for support while he regained his equilibrium. Gingerly taking one step forward, he shrugged in answer to Sam's question.

"I guess," he agreed. "I can't think of a better answer and there's definitely something here that shouldn't be." He looked to Sam who was studying his stomach with disconcerting interest. "What?" he demanded, shuffling forward away from Sam's line of vision.

"Bleeding's stopped," was the reply. "We should go. You lost a bit of blood. You should probably be resting."

"Mmm," Dean agreed and Sam decided not to fret over the ease with which Dean had agreed to that suggestion.

"Car's out front," he reminded Dean and shoved him into action with one hand in the small of his back, pulling out his cell phone with the other. Settling Dean in the car with instructions to stay alert, Sam dialed and stepped away from the car, out of earshot but still in sight of his now slumbering brother.

"Sarah?"

"Sam? Are you done yet?" Sarah's reply was fast, as though she'd been waiting on his call for a while. "Did you find anything? Where should we meet you?"

Running a hand through his hair, Sam laughed at her enthusiastic torrent of questions. His smile faded as he looked across at Dean though. "We've got a couple of leads to follow up on," he replied evasively. He trusted Sarah completely but he knew the company she was in at the moment and, as far as he was concerned, Portia was still an unknown quantity, no matter how much she claimed to understand.

"Oh, okay." She sounded disappointed but Sam knew it wouldn't last long and he really did have other priorities at the moment. "Should we wait for you?"

"No," Sam frowned. He needed to make sure the gallery remained closed until he and Dean had dealt with Portia's ancient Roman, or whatever was in there, but he didn't want to cause any undue alarm or panic. He didn't want to put Sarah in the position of having to lie to her friend or come up with excuses. The best course of action was to tell her nothing. "Sarah, listen," he continued, mind made up. "Can you make sure the gallery stays shut for a few more days? We might need to go back there, and if it's all been disturbed we might never get to the bottom of this."

There was a long pause at the other end of the phone and Sam could almost hear the cogs whirring in Sarah's head. Then she huffed out a small sigh. "Sure, Sam. Anything." She paused again and Sam could hear Portia in the background demanding information. He could imagine Sarah shaking an annoyed head at her and smiled to himself. The art dealer's voice brought him back to reality. "Is everything okay?" she asked somberly and then, more quietly, "Are you okay?"

"Everything's fine," he lied, the image of Dean's blood-soaked tee shirt imprinted on his brain.

"Sam? Really?" She had dropped her voice and Sam guessed Portia was either out of earshot or Sarah had turned her back on her briefly.

"Sarah," he began, tentatively.

"There is something there, isn't there?" she demanded and Sam really couldn't think of a reason not to tell her.

"Yes," he told her. "But keep it to yourself for now, okay? And stay away from the gallery too." He closed his eyes briefly, feeling the morning sun warming his face. "Please?"

Dean slouched against the passenger door, eyes at half mast as the painkillers Sam had found in their meager first aid supplies stowed in the trunk slowly worked their magic. He let the sounds of the passing traffic wash over him and the emo college rock coming from the radio didn't even elicit a single curse, which Sam found particularly worrying.

Glancing across at his brother, Sam could see the dark stain on Dean's tee shirt, a constant reminder of the pain he must be in, and he knew when they got back to the motel he would need to do something a little more permanent to remedy that.

He sighed quietly and turned his attention back to the road. "So," he said, breaking through the daze Dean had sunk into, "what do you think that was?"

Dean tilted his head wearily to one side until he could see Sam with minimum effort. "I thought we had this conversation?" he muttered.

"So you're ready to accept this is a job then?" Sam would have reveled in his victory if the proof hadn't come at the cost of his brother's safety.

"If you say 'I told you so,' I'm gonna kick your ass." Dean rolled his shoulders, wincing at the pull and the irritation it caused to the dull ache he was just about getting used to. He let his head drop back on the seat of the car and closed his eyes.

For several minutes neither Winchester spoke, Sam busy negotiating a particularly complicated junction and Dean breathing steadily through a bout of clashing nerve endings.

"It's tied to the exhibition," Sam suddenly stated, breaking the silence in the Impala.

"What?"

"This entity, manifestation, poltergeist, whatever it is," Sam rambled on. "It must be connected to the exhibition."

"And that means what? Exactly?" Dean rolled his head till he could see Sam's face.

"Well, it means we have a place to start," Sam pointed out. He eyed Dean surreptitiously under cover of making another turn. "The exhibition."

Dean gave a tired smile and a little puff of air escaped from his lips. "Whatever, Sam. I just wanna sleep." He let his eyes drift shut. "How much further?" he asked, sounding for all the world like a petulant five-year-old. Sam was almost tempted to ask him if he needed the bathroom.

"Nearly there. You okay?"

"I'm fine, Sam. Quit your worrying and just get us back to the motel."

"Don't go to sleep," Sam nagged. "Not yet." He paused, checking his words had sunk in before attempting to engage his brother in conversation again. "What d'you think is keeping this Centurion here?"

"Who knows," Dean mumbled, a slight frown creasing his brow, and Sam tried to ignore the way he held one hand to the knife wound in his side. "Maybe old Julian knows more than he's letting on. Or maybe Portia's up to her pretty little neck in it. Or maybe both of them are. Maybe it was a family vendetta against poor old Ant. Or maybe..." Dean's vague ramblings trailed off into silence just as Sam pulled the Impala into the last space in the parking lot.

"Maybe we should just get you sorted out, man," Sam suggested, switching the ignition off and studying Dean closely. He had his eyes firmly closed and his breathing had evened out. His face was relaxed and peaceful and Sam was convinced he'd fallen asleep, against his orders. He smiled at that thought. When did Dean ever follow his orders?

"Maybe we should talk to Portia." Dean's soft statement startled the younger Winchester. He raised his eyebrows as Dean prized his eyelids open and slightly glazed eyes fixed on his face.

"What?"

"Portia," Dean repeated. "Perhaps Daddy dearest knows something. She could probably get us in to see him. 'Cause it was, like, his exhibition and he is apparently the leading authority on these things round here." He sank back into

his seat, exhausted from his momentary burst of clarity, a smug half-grin on his face.

Sam shook his head. Dean never failed to surprise him. He could be at death's door and still have his head in the game. Then he looked to where Dean's hand was resting on his body and realized the wound had reopened, blood seeping through his brother's fingers, staining his skin and fingernails. He glanced around, assessing their chances of getting to the motel room unnoticed. Any attention right now would only cause problems they could happily do without.

He cursed as he spotted a lone figure hovering by the soda machine a couple of doors down from theirs. There was no way they were going to get to their room unobserved, especially since Dean refused point blank to oil the hinges on the Impala's doors. There was no avoiding it – Dean was going to have to manage the few short steps to the door by himself.

"Okay," he sighed, more to himself than to his brother. "We've got an audience. Can you make it by yourself?"

Dean's lips curled up into a smile and Sam could have sworn that was a snort he heard. Cranking open his eyes, Dean simply glared at his little brother. Reaching over to the door handle, he shoved the door open, giving Sam a cocky told-you-so head tilt. Then he turned his head away so Sam wouldn't see how much effort it was actually taking in his current condition. He could feel the warmth of fresh blood on his shirt and hand and knew he must look like a horror movie reject. The dull ache was throbbing in time with his heartbeat and he was desperate to get cleaned up.

Swinging his legs out, he was vaguely aware Sam had already exited the car and was now standing stock still. Assuming he was waiting for him, Dean grasped the top of the door and heaved himself upright, pausing to let the ensuing head rush settle down. Pulling himself together, readying himself to put on a front for whoever might be in the vicinity, he slammed the door shut with a little extra vigor, the sound of metal on metal echoing round the parking lot.

And attracting the attention of the figure at the soda machine.

Sam spared a second to glare at Dean and then dropped his head, rummaging in his pocket for the room key while stepping away from the car.

"Sam? Is that you?"

The person was now only a couple of yards away and the distinctly feminine voice sounded familiar. Holding back a grimace, Sam turned to face the interloper.

"Portia." He ground out the greeting, conscious Dean had halted in his progress to the room. "What are you doing here?"

Portia stepped forward, sparing Dean only a cursory glance, eyes fixed on Sam, sliding over his body in a way that made him feel like a bug on a microscope. Dean's head shot up and he couldn't help the groan that escaped from his lips as he moved automatically to his brother's side.

Portia's attention, momentarily distracted from Sam, slid over to the older Winchester, eyes settling on the bloodstained shirt, and she gasped as her gaze shot back to Sam.

"Oh my God," she exclaimed. "What happened? Are you alright, Sam?" She stepped forward, up in Sam's personal space, hand outstretched to check for herself. Sam stumbled back, keen to avoid any unnecessary contact with the woman.

Dean, in the meantime, had opened his eyes wide in disbelief. He waved his free hand fruitlessly in the air. "Hello? In pain here, Sammy."

"Right," Sam agreed, grateful for an excuse to get rid of Portia. Unfortunately for Sam, she was a determined woman and, like a dog with a bone, she refused to be dismissed so easily. Looking past Sam to his brother, she wrinkled her nose in what Dean could only describe as distaste, whether it be directed at him personally or the bloodstained image he presented, he neither knew nor cared. The motel room was looking more and more inviting to him and he just wanted to collapse on a bed.

"I can help," she announced with confidence and, ignoring the slump of Sam's shoulders and the glare Dean cast at his brother, she marched past both boys toward their room. Arriving at the threshold, she stopped abruptly and turned to see the Winchesters watching her with a blend of annoyance and amazement.

"Come on then," she commanded. "Or did you want to bleed to death there?"

Sam sighed and took hold of Dean's elbow, gently steering his somewhat shell shocked sibling in Portia's direction. "Sorry, dude," he whispered, although he wasn't clear what he was apologizing for.

Propping Dean against the door jamb, Sam reached into his pocket for the key while Portia took the opportunity to assess Dean's injuries visually herself.

"This happened at the studio, didn't it?" she finally ventured.

Sam turned to her, trying to gauge if she knew that for a fact or if she was digging for information. Key still held in his hand, he shook his head briefly. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

"It's fairly obvious," she replied haughtily. "You haven't been anywhere else. And with what happened to Antony..." she trailed off and Dean swore he could see the glint of crocodile tears in her eyes. He just hoped Sam wasn't going to fall for it.

"There is something there," Sam admitted, a little reluctantly. "We just don't know what. We didn't have time to get to the bottom of it before..." he waved a hand in Dean's direction, as though that would answer all the girl's questions.

Portia leant forward, a hand snaking out to rest on Sam's bicep. "Did you see it?" she whispered. "How did you get away?"

"No, no, we didn't see anything," Sam replied, getting caught up in the conversation. "But usually there are signs, little things that happen when a spirit is around."

"Like what?" she pressed. "Tell me. Please?"

Dean groaned and closed his eyes. "Can we take this inside? Please?" he muttered, just loud enough for Sam to hear him. Mortified that he'd forgotten about his brother's predicament, Sam spun on his heel till he was facing Dean, shaking Portia's hand off and reaching out to Dean to offer support.

"You okay?" he asked, searching Dean's face for the lie he knew was about to be delivered.

"I'm good, Sammy." Dean never disappointed.

Sam turned away, hurriedly opening the door and ushering his older sibling through, watching till he was settled on the nearest bed and leaving Portia in their wake. True to form, she followed like a lost puppy without a home. An admittedly irritating lost puppy.

Ignoring her and hoping she would take the hint and leave, Sam crouched down in front of Dean, gently pulling his shirt away and examining the crude dressing he'd managed to apply before leaving the studio. Blood had seeped through the bandage and the wound had clearly reopened. There was no option other than to stitch Dean back together. No words were needed as Sam conveyed his intentions in a single look.

Acknowledging the need for a more permanent medical solution, Dean grimaced and gave a slight nod. Closing his eyes, he submitted to his brother's ministrations, letting Sam take control, cleaning and stitching and redressing his injury. The occasional moan slipped through his lips when the pain got the better of him but each time he stifled it before he could be accused of being a girl.

Sam smiled wryly, knowing exactly what was going through Dean's head. He mumbled apologies and worked as fast as he could, acutely aware of Portia hovering in the background, examining the motel room with an air of disdain for her surroundings. Taping the new gauze into place, he reached into the first aid supplies, digging out a couple of painkillers which he handed to Dean, who accepted them wordlessly.

Pushing himself to his feet, Dean stiffly shuffled toward the bathroom, throwing Sam a significant look on his way past and nodding imperceptibly at Portia. His meaning was clear – get rid of the woman – but Sam wasn't entirely sure how that was going to happen. Knowing Sam was going to have his work cut out for him and that he simply couldn't be bothered with Portia at the moment, Dean yanked the bathroom door open in a blatant display of bad temper and locked it noisily behind him.

Sam sat on the bed his brother had just vacated and set to clearing up the scattered first aid supplies. Portia moved forward, stopping just short of the discarded bandages which she turned her nose up at. Waiting till Sam had sanitized the area for her, she folded her arms and Sam grit his teeth against the invasion of his personal space, expecting her to start tapping her foot when he took his time with the task at hand.

"Will he be alright?" she finally asked.

"He'll be fine," Sam replied. "He's had worse."

"I don't doubt," Portia replied caustically.

Sam shot her a sharp glare. "What does that mean?"

Portia hesitated, realizing she'd crossed a line she hadn't known was there. "I just meant he seems the heroic type," she stuttered.

"Yeah, kind of," Sam admitted. There was a slight, awkward pause in the conversation. "Where's Sarah?" Sam finally asked.

Portia looked slightly surprised at the sudden change of subject and shrugged her shoulders in a noncommittal fashion. "I don't know," she told him. "We

went our separate ways. She's probably gone home. Or to her boyfriend's place."

"Boyfriend?" Sam couldn't help the surprise that filtered through to his voice. Or the disappointment that settled in the pit of his stomach which he didn't quite understand. "She didn't mention a boyfriend."

"Didn't she? Well, it's not a surprise really." Portia smiled, a tight, emotionless smile. "She's very secretive about him. And, be honest Sam, did you really think she'd wait for you?" She inched closer to Sam and sat down next to him on the bed. "She's a very attractive girl. She's never going to be short of attention and, between you and me, she's never going to be alone for long either. If you know what I mean."

She reached out a hand to Sam, unable to hide the frustration when Sam recoiled slightly from her touch. Part of him hoped she was lying but another part of him had to acknowledge the truth in what she was saying. No, he hadn't ever expected Sarah to wait for him, for something that he couldn't promise would ever happen, but he had hoped she would at least share things with him.

Standing up abruptly, he made his way over to the small table where his laptop lay. "This exhibition," he started, deciding to make the most of Portia's presence. "What was in it?"

Sighing, Portia stood and sauntered over to Sam, looking over his shoulder at the screen he'd brought up. "You won't find anything about it on there," she told him. "My father took everything down when Antony died. He thought it would show more respect to him." She stifled a small laugh. "It's about the most concern he's ever shown."

Sam frowned, the girl's attitude to her family grating on him. "So, what was on show?" he repeated, unwilling to get drawn into a discussion on family politics.

"My father organized most of it – it was his baby. And, I have to admit, it was fun. Have you ever wondered how people lived all those years ago, Sam? How the Romans managed to conquer the world? Do you have any idea how much we've learnt from them and how much knowledge has been lost over the centuries? Just a little more funding, a little more interest and we could still learn so many things."

Sam couldn't fault her for her enthusiasm and he couldn't help feeling a little interested. She sounded so much like a lecturer he found himself reminiscing over his Stanford days. Her eyes had lit up and her whole posture had changed. She no longer resembled the ice maiden Dean had her pegged as, an obvious love of her subject shining through her every word and movement.

"But what about the artifacts?" he pressed. "What were they?"

"Mainly military artifacts dating from around 100 BC. They were discovered just outside Rome about forty years ago on a privately funded dig. The Italian government agreed to let the financier keep the collection. I expect there was some sort of deal struck – he was a very rich and influential character at the time. When he died the collection passed to his son. It took my father nearly fifteen years to track him down and another three to persuade him to allow the collection out of the country."

She paused and looked at Sam who seemed as captivated by the story as she had been herself at the time.

"How much is known about the weapons?" he asked.

"They were examined at the time by leading archeologists and Roman experts. They generally agreed the weapons were from a march led by General Sulla and his army returning from the East. We don't know much about the individuals but some documentation survived. Enough to know that Sulla had a couple of loyal soldiers."

"Every general needs back up," Dean commented from where he was leaning against the bathroom door. He looked slightly fresher but still too pale for Sam's liking.

Portia turned and gave him a cool, appraising stare. "Yes," she finally agreed. "And General Sulla's right hand man seems to have been a centurion called Ovidius." She turned her attention back to Sam. "But Sulla misjudged his enemies and a lot of soldiers were slaughtered. Including Ovidius. Most of the dead were either left to rot or buried. But Sulla valued Ovidius and as a mark of respect he had him cremated."

"Cremated?" Dean raised his eyebrows and exchanged a discreet look with his brother. "As in, no mortal remains anywhere?"

Portia frowned at the seemingly bizarre question. "No," she shook her head. "Not once he'd been cremated. That usually disposes of bodies."

"Thank you. I know that," Dean responded, narrowing his eyes at the girl, at the same time wondering why Sam hadn't got rid of her by now.

But Sam was frowning, digging in the back of his mind for what little information he remembered from high school about the Romans. "Why did he do that?" he enquired. "Cremation wasn't generally practiced."

"No," Portia smiled at Sam. "But Sulla didn't want their enemies to dig him up and scatter his body in pieces. It was a huge honor to be cremated."

"Huh." Dean pushed himself away from the doorframe, waving Sam away when his little brother made to help him. He shuffled forward with exaggerated care until he reached his bed and perched gingerly on the edge of the mattress. "So what made Ovidius so special? How come he gets a name check of his own when nobody else does?"

Portia tilted her head to one side, hair covering half of her face. "Life in the Roman army was hard. Comforts were few and far between. Maybe Ovidius was more than just a soldier. The ancient Romans took their pleasure as and when." She paused and glanced briefly at Dean before gazing at Sam again. "It wasn't uncommon for generals to use their legionnaires for more than just fighting. Whatever the reason," she continued, "it was Ovidius' knife that killed Antony."

Dean raised his eyes to meet Sam's and he knew his brother was thinking exactly the same thing. Portia's presence, while never having been welcome had, at least, proved useful. But her usefulness had been exhausted and all Dean wanted was for her to leave. Now.

Sam stood and, moving over to the door, smiled at Portia. "Thank you," he said. "I think we can take it from here."

"But I've got lots more I could tell you," she objected, looking up at Sam flirtatiously through long lashes.

"I'm sure you could, honey," Dean interjected quietly, ignoring the glare Sam threw in his direction.

Portia hesitated, her eyes sliding over Dean, halting when they reached his chest where his hand was resting over the bandages Sam had so expertly applied. It was almost as if she hadn't registered his presence before and she seemed genuinely surprised to realize he was in discomfort, although Sam suspected his brother was putting on a show for the girl.

"Perhaps I should go," she conceded finally. "You really don't look too good. At all."

"We'll call you, I promise," Sam offered, holding the door open. Portia glanced from Sam to Dean and back to Sam before finally taking the hint. She reluctantly nodded and slid past Sam to get through the door. Just as she was face to face with him, she looked up.

"Make sure you do," she whispered, voice seductively husky, and made her way out into the parking lot.

She was hardly through the door before Sam had it closed and Dean wouldn't have been surprised if he'd got out the salt to lay lines behind her. He smirked and lay back on the bed.

"Don't," Sam commanded, knowing his protestations were going to fall on deaf ears.

"She likes you, Sammy," Dean teased.

"Shut up," Sam retorted. "It got us information. I didn't see you doing any work there."

"No point," Dean declared. "She hates me. Which is strange. Why do you think that is, Sammy? Women love me," and for a moment he sounded genuinely confused.

Sam hovered at the threshold to the door and eyed his brother's supine figure and closed eyes. Although he was looking considerably better than when they'd arrived, he still wasn't presenting a picture of rude health.

"She has a point, though," he declared, continuing when Dean's brow creased into a puzzled frown. "You don't look too good. You need anything?"

Dean shook his head. "I'm good." He paused and raised himself up on his elbows. "So, you think Ovidius is our spook?"

"I'd say it's a safe bet," he agreed. "But I don't see why he's here now. And why Antony?"

"Wrong time, wrong place," Dean suggested quietly.

"Maybe," Sam acknowledged.

"More to the point," Dean continued, "how? If Sulla had him cremated, how come he's still around?"

Sam shrugged and moved over to the small kitchenette. He opened the small fridge and, after studying its meager contents, settled on a bottle of soda for himself. Grabbing a glass, he filled it with water for Dean, digging out a couple more painkillers to go with the beverage. "Maybe Antony disturbed something while he was clearing the artifacts away," he mused. "He must be linked to one

of the exhibits, maybe even the dagger that killed Antony? I can't see any other reason for Ovidius to kill him."

His only answer was a soft snore and when he looked over at his brother he noted that Dean had sunk down on the bed and was fast asleep. He grinned to himself, glad that nature had decided to prevail, preventing him from having to force the issue over the very real possibility of a fight.

Putting his soda back down on the counter, he set the water and painkillers on the nightstand next to Dean's bed. Moving to his brother's side, he pulled the comforter off his own bed and lay it gently over Dean. Placing a cool hand against the older Winchester's forehead, he satisfied himself there was no fever in evidence. Dean had, apparently, got off relatively lightly.

Feeling like a mother hen for tucking in his older brother, Sam smirked at the reaction he would have got if Dean had been awake to witness the little bedtime routine he'd just endured. Unable to resist giving Dean a pat on the head, he made his way over to the rickety table which his laptop rested on.

Preparing to take advantage of some peace and quiet, Sam settled down in front of the screen, waiting patiently while it searched for information about General Sulla and Ovidius. After bringing up a choice of thousands of sites, mostly heavy, academic tomes, Sam decided to skim the top listings.

After half an hour of fruitless research, listening to the soothing sound of Dean's breathing in the background, Sam found his attention wavering. He couldn't help but think back to what Portia had said about Sarah, "did you really think she'd wait for you?" Shaking his head, Sam looked back to the screen, trying to clear his head and concentrate on the matter at hand.

He read through a couple more paragraphs of convoluted phrasing and highbrow posturing about the ancient Roman army and its various maneuvers and marches but it was only a matter of time before Portia was echoing in his head again. "She's never going to be short of attention."

Sighing, he slapped the lid of his laptop down and stood up from his seat. He looked across to where Dean was still fast asleep, the painkillers waiting for him on the nightstand. Scrubbing his hand through his hair, he gazed out of the window, lost in thought. Did he really care that Sarah had a boyfriend? Portia was right, Sarah was a very attractive girl and he had never, could never, make her any promises. Why would she wait for something he could never give her? Stability, security, a home life – those weren't things that came with the Winchester lifestyle.

Besides, he told himself sternly, he was still in love with Jessica.

"Are you?" Dean's voice rattled round his head. "Would Jessica really expect you to be alone and pining for the rest of your life? Is that what she would've wanted?"

Sam spun to look at Dean, just to check he hadn't actually spoken the words that had been so vivid in his mind. But Dean slept on, shifting position and pulling the comforter over his shoulders.

Unable to settle, Sam made a decision. He slipped his jacket on and, casting an apologetic glance in Dean's direction, whispered, "I'll be back soon," before grabbing the keys to the Impala and heading out of the door.

Once he was in the car, Sam realized he didn't really have a plan. He knew he wanted to see Sarah, to find out for himself what Portia had been alluding to, but he hadn't actually thought it through any further than that. He had no idea where she lived and he didn't really want to call her, it would make him sound desperate and pathetic. Although what showing up unannounced made him he didn't really know, he thought ruefully.

Starting the engine he decided his best bet would be to head back to Antony's studio. From what he had observed of the area, it appeared to be the local art quarter. It was a fairly safe bet she worked in the vicinity, and if she didn't, maybe he'd find someone who knew her place of work. Feeling like a jilted boyfriend and not really understanding why, Sam pointed the Impala toward the parking lot exit and peeled into the traffic, destination decided.

Traffic was kind to Sam and he had reached Antony's studio far quicker than they had managed to return to the motel earlier that day. Parking, on the other hand, proved to be more of a challenge and he had to slow the car right down in order to scour the bays for a free spot. Cruising down the street at such a low speed however, turned out to be advantageous to him.

Passing Antony's studio for the third time, he spotted Sarah waving frantically to him, a beaming smile on her face. Pulling in to the side of the road, she flung the passenger door open and jumped in.

"What are you doing here?" she queried, surprise and delight evident in her voice.

Feeling his mood lift, Sam smiled back at her. "Looking for a parking spot, actually," he replied.

"Ha! You could be driving round for a while. It's tourist season and too many of them bring cars these days," Sarah observed. "But you're in luck. I have a dedicated parking spot outside my studio and you're welcome to use it."

Leaning back in her seat, she gave Sam clear, precise directions and within ten minutes, five of which were spent waiting for an elderly couple to cross the road in front of them, he was pulling up in front of a neatly presented and tastefully decorated art studio.

"This is it," Sarah remarked as she climbed out. "It's not much but it's all mine." She fumbled in her pocket and pulled out a small set of keys. "C'mon."

She led Sam inside, bending down to pick up a pile of mail, depositing it on a minimalist desk facing the entrance. Turning back to her guest, she smiled.

"Mostly junk but there might be something important," she commented and then paused, her expression turning to one of curiosity. "Where's Dean?"

Sam gave a deep sigh. He'd known she would ask this but he hadn't really prepared an answer. "He's back at the motel," he admitted.

"Is he okay?"

"No. Not really." Sam glanced round the studio, trying to ignore the concern that had settled on Sarah's face while unconsciously comparing her reaction to the news with Portia's.

"What happened to him?" Sarah demanded and Sam found himself telling her everything, from searching Whittaker's gallery, the attack on Dean, finding Portia at the motel, and the information she had been able to give them. He left out the rest of the conversation he had had with the woman and repeatedly assured Sarah that Dean would be fine.

Sarah took it all in with remarkable calmness, paling slightly when Sam described Dean's injury and frowning when he got to the part about Portia.

"How did she know where to find you?" she asked, when Sam had finished his tale. "I don't know where you're staying so how did she?"

"She probably looked through all the local places," Sam told her. "I wouldn't worry about it. There probably aren't many places here we could afford so it wouldn't have taken too much work."

Sarah nodded, reluctantly. "I suppose," she agreed and moved over to the small kitchen area at the back of the studio. "So, what are you doing now?"

She threw the question over her shoulder, sensing Sam still hovering by the desk. "Shouldn't you be home, looking after Dean?"

"Maybe," Sam laughed, relaxing slightly now they were off the subject of Ovidius and Portia. "But he's sleeping. He doesn't need me to help him with that. Besides, he's not the type to appreciate being mother-henned. I'm sure he can take care of himself till I get back."

Sarah nodded. "I'm sure he can," she agreed. "He certainly gives that impression. But I also think you're avoiding the question." She moved forward and handed Sam a steaming mug of coffee. "So, what are you doing now?" and she looked up at him expectantly.

Sam accepted the mug, fingers brushing Sarah's as he gripped the handle. He coughed and muttered a quiet "Thank you."

Sarah tilted her head to one side and gave Sam a mischievous look. "It's only coffee, Sam," she teased. "Not a lifelong commitment."

Sam froze and averted his gaze from the girl in front of him. He could feel the heat rising on his face and his heart had apparently decided to speed up. Whether it was her words or proximity that was provoking this reaction he didn't know and didn't care to analyze it.

Sarah frowned, aware she'd hit a nerve.

"Sam? Are you okay?"

Sam closed his eyes briefly, and when he looked at Sarah again, she was studying him with a mix of concern and something else he couldn't quite identify. He'd seen that look from Dean, and on occasion from John, but usually when he was hurt or sick. It didn't look out of place on Sarah's face and for some reason it gave him the confidence to tell Sarah the rest of what Portia had shared with him. About Sarah. About a boyfriend.

"Because, you know, if you do ... have a boyfriend that is... that's okay," he stumbled on. "It's just you, you never mentioned him and, you know, I call you often enough. It's not like I have any claim on you or anything," he finished, wondering when it had got so hot in the small studio.

Sarah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. Listening to Sam's slightly disjointed ramblings, she felt herself slowly becoming more and more annoyed at what her supposed friend had been saying. Finally, she stepped forward to Sam and placed a soft finger on his lips to stop him talking.

"Sam." Her voice brooked no argument and she gazed steadily into his eyes, daring him to look away. "I don't have a boyfriend. I haven't had a boyfriend for a long, long time. And Portia damned well knows that." She let her finger fall away from Sam's lips and he felt the loss in the pit of his stomach. "I know you don't have any claim on me and I'm not waiting for you, Sam. I know where that road leads and it's not a happy ending. But you know what? You set the bar high. You're a hard act to follow." She shrugged and let her hand slip round to the back of Sam's head, fingers stroking his hair and sending thrills down his spine.

"Portia's obviously got her eye on you," she continued. "I guess that's why she came up with such an out and out lie."

Sam smiled, relief sweeping over him in inexplicable waves. Putting his coffee down, feeling like a fourteen-year-old on his first serious date, he pulled Sarah into his arms, accepting her warmth and softness, and drew her to him.

Part Three

Dean woke gradually, turning slowly from his side to his back, the pull of stitches and the sight of the painkillers on the nightstand a clear, yet unnecessary, reminder of why he was in bed in the middle of the day. He groaned and gingerly rubbed his eyes clear of sleep, slowly acknowledging the total silence in the room – no tapping of fingers on keyboards, no shuffling of socks on dubious carpets, no running water from behind closed doors. Only silence. Which could only mean one thing.

Sam had bailed on him.

Gritting his teeth and reeling off a string of curses aimed either at his brother for abandoning him, or at the injury slowing him down – he wasn't quite sure which – Dean rolled cautiously to the edge of the bed, pausing only when the ache in his side spiked in a peak of righteous indignation. Swinging his feet to the side and trying not to think about the way they seemed to stick to the carpet, he forced himself upright, giving himself a couple of seconds to regain his equilibrium.

Outside, the light was starting to fade, the sun dipping just below the horizon. But Dean wasn't especially interested in the view, he was more concerned with the fact his car was no longer sitting in the parking lot where he was sure Sam had left it earlier. He knew he'd been a little out of it, but there were some things he never, ever lost track of. Like Sam. And his car. But right now both were missing and Dean wasn't a happy camper.

He carefully pulled on his jacket and scanned the room for his car keys. It was an automatic reaction – he knew they weren't going to be there. It did, however, confirm one fact for him. Wherever Sam was, he'd taken the Impala. Which meant Dean might just have to beat the crap out of him later.

His cursory examination of the room also failed to reveal any sort of communication from his brother. There was no scrap of paper on the nightstand, no flashing from his cell indicating a text message, no scrawled note in the condensation on the window. Nothing.

Which in Dean's head meant one of two things. Either Sam was in trouble or he'd left in a rush with no plan of action in mind. Dean wasn't sure which outcome was most favorable and he didn't intend to sit on his laurels, waiting for Sam to return.

Sinking back down on his bed, he grabbed his annoyingly silent phone from the night stand and scrolled through the list of names, jabbing at it irritably when Sam's number flashed up on the screen. Settling back against the headboard and letting his eyes slide shut, he listened to the tinny ring coming through the earpiece.

Just as the tension in his gut was about to bubble over into all out fear for his brother, the call connected and Dean shot upright on the bed.

"Sam?" he blurted out. "Where the hell are you?"

There was a long pause on the other end and Dean thought he could hear rustling of some description but couldn't decide what it was. Then Sam's voice filtered through the rush of blood in his ears.

"Dean?"

"Well, duh! What's going on, Sammy? Where are you?" Dean felt the relief fading, being replaced by fear-fuelled anger. "Are you okay?"

"Dean. Um, yeah, I'm fine." Sam's reply was disjointed and more than a little distracted. Dean heard the sound of a hand being put over the phone, followed by a muffled conversation.

"Sam? Who are you talking to?" he enquired, his curiosity piqued.

There was more mumbling and then Sam was back, sounding more alert and Dean could almost picture him snapping to attention. "I'm fine, Dean. I didn't mean to worry you. I thought you'd sleep for longer. I'm on my way back now."

"Back from where, Sammy?" Dean was slowly beginning to put the pieces together and his vivid imagination was filling in the remaining gaps. "Who exactly are you with, dude?"

"I won't be long." Sam chose to ignore the question. "D'you need anything?"

"No, but..." Dean was left staring stupidly at his cell phone, not quite believing Sam had had the audacity to hang up on him.

Shaking his head in exasperation, Dean tossed the phone onto the mattress and absently rubbed his side, thanking Sam for his foresight in leaving a good supply of painkillers within easy reach. Taking two pills, he contemplated swallowing them dry, eyeing the glass of water and wondering how long it had been sitting there.

Biting the bullet and downing the pills with the liquid, Dean was surprised to discover he was actually quite dehydrated. Emptying the glass had little effect on his thirst and he stood to refill his drink, reflecting that blood loss, even minor blood loss, tended to do that to a person. As he passed by the table on his way to the sink, he spotted Sam's laptop sitting there, lonely and neglected.

Settling himself down in front of the computer, Dean felt almost guilty about studying his brother's browser history but, he told himself, it was all in the line of duty and had absolutely nothing to do with the desire to know what Sam had been up to for the last couple of hours.

Glancing through the list of sites, Dean quickly established that Sam had been busy researching Ovidius, but all he seemed to have come up with was a variety of academic sites which meant absolutely nothing to Dean, even if he had been able to get beyond the first few paragraphs. He sighed and muttered something unintelligible about fusty old historians.

Scrolling down through Sam's finds he finally found a website that looked as if he might be able to get something useful out of it. For a start, it was written in plain English, using simple words that a layman like Dean should easily be able to comprehend.

Rubbing a hand over his forehead, Dean sighed again and began to read.

The key being slotted in the lock jolted Dean out of his intense study of the computer screen. Automatically reaching for his gun before remembering it was safely tucked away in his duffel, he tensed, knowing he wouldn't be able to put up much of a fight but could still kick ass with the best of them if necessary.

Sam sauntered casually into the room, seeming surprised to see Dean out of bed and at the computer. He raised an eyebrow and waved at the laptop.

"Couldn't sleep, huh?" he commented with a lopsided grin.

Dean relaxed and wondered how effective his glare was, concluding it had probably fallen flat by the look on Sam's face.

"Where've you been?" he demanded. "You can't just go wanderin' off like that!"

"I didn't 'wander off' anywhere, Dean," Sam replied, not dropping the half-grin.

Dean squinted and intensified his glare. After a moment's contemplation, long enough to make Sam feel officially uncomfortable, he returned the half-grin with a lewd smirk of his own.

"Why Sammy," he drawled, "I do believe you've been... busy."

Sam huffed, the grin swiftly disappearing from his face to be replaced by a serious frown and a brisk gesture at the computer screen.

"What've you found?" he asked, bringing the conversation decisively back to their current gig.

But Dean just grinned, realizing Sam was deliberately avoiding the subject. "Aw, c'mon Sammy," he whined. "You know you want to tell me what you've been up to. And, you know, I could always help you, a little brotherly advice. I am, after all, a man of experience."

Sam sighed, dropping the keys on the table next to Dean. He'd been Dean's brother long enough to know that when Dean wanted information, no matter how trivial, he was like a dog with a bone.

"I was with Sarah, okay?" and he steeled himself for the retort he just knew was going to come from the older hunter.

But there was no comment forthcoming and when Sam looked up Dean was simply gazing at him with a mixture of awe and pride. Which was worse than a lewd comment or sarcastic rejoinder.

"Aw, Sammy," he eventually replied, head tilted to one side. "I knew you had it in you. This is a proud day for me." He paused, dramatically putting his hand on his chin and creasing his brow in thought. "But what's the fair Portia going to say? She's going to be devastated."

"Shut up, Dean," Sam snapped and Dean was a little taken aback. Sam knew he had been a bit sharp with his brother, but Portia's lies had left a bitter taste which he didn't need reminding of.

Surprised at the tone of Sam's reply, Dean frowned and put aside the teasing, silently resolving to find out what was bothering Sam later. He turned back to the computer screen and showed Sam the website he'd found.

"Seems love is in the air all around," he said, scrolling down to a section titled "Family and Home."

Looking over Dean's shoulder, Sam squinted at the miniscule typeface glowing at him. "You bothered to read that?" he asked in surprise.

Dean glared and ignored the jibe. "Ovidius was a happily married man," he summarized for Sam. "And a devoted one at that. He had a big family, four boys and two girls. And another one on the way when he died." He stopped, a look of vague admiration on his face. "Busy man," he muttered.

"Who was his wife?" Sam asked, wondering where Dean was going with this.

"Some chick called Jocasta," Dean answered. "Ovi doted on her, and the kids."

"Okay. But how does that help us?" Sam queried.

Dean sat back in his chair and Sam didn't miss the minute wince he gave as his stitches pulled slightly. "Seems Ovi was the giving type. He was in the habit of bringing back the spoils of war and showering gifts on his family." He stopped and looked up at Sam. "You realize what this means?"

Sam nodded slowly. "Yeah. He could be attached to something in the exhibition."

"Exactly," Dean agreed. "Which brings us to another problem. That exhibition had, what? A hundred exhibits? How are we gonna narrow it down? Even assuming we're on the right lines."

Sam looked thoughtful. Dean was right, there must be a link to something at the studio. Ovidius had been cremated so there were no remains to be destroyed, but in their experience, human remains weren't the only thing to keep spirits around. He thought back to the studio and the events leading up to the attack. Dean hadn't been looking at anything specific, but Sam?

"Maybe it's jewelry?" he suggested, continuing when Dean looked puzzled. "Just before you got, y'know, knifed, I was looking at some jewelry. Maybe Ovidius was taking it home for his wife. If he was that devoted and he thought someone was going to stop him from doing that..." He trailed off and Dean nodded.

"So he takes matters into his own hands," Dean finished off for him. "That could happen."

"So we need to find out which pieces of jewelry were destined for Jocasta." Sam ran a hand through his hair. "How the hell do we do that?"

"We need to go back to the studio," Dean decided after a moment's thought. "I guess whatever you were doing pissed off Ovi enough for him to want to stop us somehow." He grimaced at the memory and unconsciously moved his hand over his dressing, as though protecting it from a phantom attack which was all in his mind. "Although he could've used another method." He stood slowly and rolled his head, working out the kinks which were the result of sitting too long at the laptop. "Do you still have the keys to the place?"

Sam shook his head and shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, reminding Dean of an errant ten-year-old expecting a telling off.

"Portia?" he asked, raising his eyebrows and hiding his smirk at Sam's discomfort. Taking his brother's uncharacteristic silence for a "yes," he heaved an overly dramatic sigh. "Well then, do you want to call her, or shall I?" and he held out his cell phone.

Sam stared at the proffered phone and chewed on his lower lip. "We don't need to call," he decided and cast a hopeful look toward his brother. Who had already known what the answer would be.

"You got the lock picks?" Dean laughed. "'Cause, y'know, you're getting a little rusty in that area – you could do with the practice."

The car ride back to the studio was a serious affair. After a little complaining on Dean's part he had finally handed over the keys to the Impala. He'd attempted some gentle ribbing of Sam with regards to his meeting with Sarah, but after meeting if not a stony silence, at least a muted indifference, he had switched tactics, reverting to concerned older brother worried about his little brother's current state of mind.

"C'mon dude," he finally cajoled. "Something's obviously eating you. What went down with Sarah? And don't tell me 'nothing,' 'cause I won't believe you."

Relenting, Sam realized Dean was trying his best to be compassionate and he appreciated the effort it took to put the humor to one side when the subject matter was clearly a gift to him. He took a deep breath and in as few words as possible he outlined the conversation with Portia and the imaginary boyfriend she had invented for Sarah, ending his story with Sarah's denial of any current romantic interest.

"So, you're pissed that she lied to you? Or am I missing something?" Dean tried to understand Sam's train of thought. "Is it the lie she told you?"

"I don't know, Dean," Sam confessed, studiously keeping his eyes on the road so as to avoid what he knew would be Dean's attempt at sympathy. "I mean, yeah, it bothered me that Sarah might have someone, but it's none of my business. I made that decision a long time ago, but..."

He trailed off, not really any clearer as to what he was trying to say, and Dean didn't seem to be any the wiser either.

"If truth be told," he suddenly piped up again, "I'm more bothered about what Portia had to gain from telling me that. What's in it for her?"

Dean raised his eyebrows in amazement. "Seriously, dude? You really can't see it?"

"See what?" Sam responded bitterly, irritation gnawing at his gut. "That she thought she'd be able to turn me against Sarah? Make me think Sarah's keeping secrets, make me lose my trust in her?"

At this point, Dean actually burst out laughing.

"You really are clueless, aren't you?" he gasped between guffaws. "She's not trying to turn you against Sarah, she's trying to clear her path." He shook his head, despairing at his brother's occasional innocence and naivety. "She wants you, Sammy. Haven't you figured that one out yet?"

The look on Sam's face, Dean decided, was priceless. It looked as though he really hadn't considered the possibility that Portia may have had her own self-

interest at heart while spinning her lies. His brow creased in confusion as his brain processed what Dean had just said, eyebrows shooting skyward when he acknowledged the truth behind it, his face flushing an interesting shade of pink.

Finally regaining control of himself, Dean decided to put Sam out of his misery. "Whatever the reason, I really wouldn't worry about it, man," he instructed his little brother. "She doesn't strike me as the sort to play by the rules."

Sam muttered an unintelligible reply and turned his attention back to the road, surprised to find they were almost at Whittaker's studio. Sliding the Impala gracefully down the blissfully empty street, he found a spot convenient to the building and turned off the engine.

The studio was bathed in an eerie silence and Sam made short work of the simple lock on the main entrance. Easing the door open, the Winchesters were greeted by the unmistakable beeping of the alarm system. Exchanging a glance, Dean quickly located the keypad and, with a speed and skill that spoke of a misspent childhood, disabled the system.

Scanning the main room quickly, Dean paused when his gaze fell back to his little brother. Sam hadn't moved from the doorway and was staring at the alarm keypad as though he could burn it off the wall.

"What?" he asked, wondering what Sam could possibly have against an inanimate object.

"The alarm was on," Sam stated, rather obviously. "Who turned it on?"

Dean shrugged. "Does it matter?" he asked.

"It might do," Sam commented enigmatically, waiting for a response from Dean. Which wasn't forthcoming, other than a wrinkled nose and brief shake of the head. "Who's been here since we were?" Sam continued. "And, more importantly, why? The only person I can think of is Portia, but why would she come back here when she knows what's going on?"

"Maybe she doesn't have as much sense as we thought." Dean's reply was disparaging.

"But why?" Sam insisted.

"I don't know, Sam," Dean sighed. "And honestly? I don't care. Let's just get what we came here for and beat it." He cautiously made his way over to what remained of the jewelry display, eyeing the antiquities with a combination of admiration and suspicion. "What were you looking at? Exactly?" he called over to where Sam still hadn't moved.

Shaking himself down mentally, Sam made his way to where Dean was examining the lock on the display case. He cast his eyes over the exhibited items, gaze coming to rest on an exquisite hairpin, gold teeth gleaming in the little remaining daylight. He pointed to it, finger jabbing at the glass.

Dean looked up at him. "You sure?" he questioned.

Sam nodded. "I'm sure."

"Okay." Dean didn't argue, simply pulled his own lock pick set from his jacket pocket and within a minute the glass enclosure was breached and Dean's hand was inside, pulling out the hairpin. The piece felt cold in his fingers and the decorative gems were sharply cut, scratching at the palm of his hand as he closed his fist round it.

He slipped the artifact into his pocket and nodded in satisfaction, before turning away from Sam and beginning to make his way back to the doorway. Halfway there, he realized Sam hadn't followed him. Spinning on his heel, he opened his mouth to hurry his brother up but stopped mid breath when he saw Sam picking up each piece of jewelry in turn, sliding his fingers over each one before putting it back and moving on to the next one.

"Sam?" Dean frowned. "What'cha doing?"

"Look at these, Dean," Sam replied, beckoning the older hunter over to him. "These are all sets. Matching necklaces and bracelets," he pointed at what was clearly a pair, "brooches, earrings. They all match at least one other piece."

"And?" Dean was standing beside Sam, waiting for what he just knew was going to be another complication.

"Let me see that hairpin again," Sam ordered, holding out his hand.

Taking the proffered piece from Dean, he held it up at eye level and his eyes flicked from the hairpin to the remaining items in the display case. Dean watched with fascination as Sam's pupils darted left to right and back again at the speed of light. Finally he jabbed his finger at a comb.

"That one's got the same pattern of jewels," he commented and turned to face Dean. "They're a pair. Or part of a set."

"Fine," Dean sighed and reached into the cabinet. Removing the comb he wrapped it carefully in a handkerchief and slipped it into his pocket. "All we need to do now is burn them both."

"What? No!" Sam was on his feet and blocking Dean's way out of the studio before the older Winchester had even registered his movement.

"Why not?" Dean asked, bemused by the sudden passion Sam was showing for a couple of pieces of junk.

"Because, because...we don't know for sure this is what Ovidius is linked to," Sam floundered.

"We don't know it's not," Dean countered. "C'mon Sammy, we're wastin' time here."

"We might be about to destroy a priceless antique, Dean." Sam held out his arm, stopping Dean's attempt to leave the studio, which, on reflection, was worryingly easy to do.

"Sam," Dean drawled, "are we seriously going to have this conversation? Here? Now?"

"We can't just destroy an irreplaceable part of history," Sam argued.

"It's hardly irreplaceable, Sam," Dean insisted. "Have you seen all the stuff in here? Once you've seen one hairpin, you've seen 'em all." He waved his arm behind him at the plethora of Roman jewelry sitting on the glass shelves of the display stands. "If you ask me," he continued, confidentially, "nobody's gonna miss them. We're doing the world a favor."

"No, Dean. We need to be sure." Sam's gaze burned into Dean, pleading in full force now.

"We're just wasting time, Sam," Dean huffed. "If it's not the right piece, we'll just come back and try again."

"No," Sam repeated and then relaxed his shoulders as a thought occurred to him. "Anyway, there's no furnace here. You're not going to manage to smelt the gold with a little bonfire out back."

"Fine!" Dean pushed past Sam, stopping at the door. "What do you suggest we do then?"

Sam chewed on his lower lip, hating the proposal he was about to share with his brother. Shuffling from foot to foot like a nine-year old needing a bathroom break, he turned the suggestion round in his head, just to be sure it really was a good idea before risking Dean's ridicule.

"Portia," he finally mumbled, ignoring the shocked surprise on Dean's face.

"Portia?" Dean snorted. "Really?"

"Yeah," Sam sighed reluctantly. "She would know what's what."

"Well, she certainly gives that impression," Dean agreed, a smile creeping onto his face.

"Antique-wise, smart ass," Sam snapped, trying to ignore the rising temperature in the room. "Maybe you should go," he suggested.

But Dean was enjoying Sam's discomfort far too much to give his little brother that get out. "No, no, no," he smirked. "She doesn't like me, remember? I'd be lucky to get the time of day out of her. You on the other hand..."

"But you have a way with women," Sam objected. "Or have you lost your touch? Because if that's case, then you need all the practice you can get."

"Sam," Dean opened the door with dramatic flair, ushering his reluctant brother over the threshold, "if anyone here needs the practice, it's not me."

"Fine!" Sam huffed, stepping out into the freshness of the fallen night. "But you're coming with me," and he stomped off in the direction of the Impala.

"Aw, c'mon Sammy," Dean called after him, jogging along gently behind. "You know she's going to bend over backwards to help you. Why do I need to be there?"

"Because I say so," Sam snapped, deciding there was no way on earth he was facing Portia by himself. He could deal with demons and ghosts and poltergeists. But predatory women? That was something he could happily do without.

Reflecting on the injustice of attracting the interest of altogether the wrong woman, Sam was pulled from his morose thoughts by the shrill tones of his cell phone demanding attention from his jacket pocket. Glancing up at Dean, he found his brother already ensconced safely in the driver's seat of his baby.

Without looking at the caller ID Sam hit the answer button, greeting the caller with a cautious "Hello?"

"Sam? Are you busy?" Sarah's voice was almost as cautious as Sam's had been and he thought he could detect a hint of nervousness in her question.

"No," he assured her hurriedly. "What's wrong?" Because he knew something was wrong. He stopped walking in order to concentrate fully on what Sarah was about to tell him. Dean had noticed the absence of his brother and was watching him curiously from the car, head tilted to one side with the unspoken question.

Sam lifted a hand in Dean's direction, mouthing Sarah's name at him. Dean nodded once and slid his head back inside.

"Is Portia with you?" Sarah was asking, sounding more concerned by the minute.

"No. Should she be?"

"No," Sarah replied, sounding relieved. "I need to show you something. Where are you?"

"We're just outside the studio. We were about to head over to Portia's. We think she might be able to give us some information we need."

"Do you have to go now?" Sarah was sounding more and more agitated and Sam was beginning to feel the worry gnawing at the pit of his stomach.

"Dean can handle it," he told her, wondering how the older Winchester was going to take the news. "What is it you need to show me?"

"I'd rather just show it to you." Sam could hear the hesitation in her voice. Then he heard her take a breath, releasing it in one shuddering sigh. "There's a bar two streets east of there – Crane's Bar and Grill. I'll meet you there in twenty minutes?" Although she phrased it as a question there was obviously no doubt in either her mind or Sam's that he wouldn't be there.

Sam snapped his phone closed and pulled his jacket tighter around his body. He made his way to the Impala, but instead of getting in, he leaned his arms on the roof just behind Dean's shoulder. Frowning when he realized Sam wasn't getting in, Dean wound down the window.

"What's going on?" he queried, although he had already guessed Sam wasn't going to be accompanying him to the Whittaker residence.

Sam quickly filled him in on the conversation he'd just had with Sarah, ending somewhat smugly with the news that Dean would be flying solo on the trip to Portia's place. Dean's groan of misery simply produced more smirking on Sam's part as he dug in his pocket and handed over a slip of paper with an address written on it in bold, swirly handwriting.

"What's this?" Dean examined the piece of paper, squinting exaggeratedly at it, then lifting it to his nose and sniffing loudly. He dropped his hand back in his lap and turned his face back to his brother. "Why Sammy," he exclaimed, "it's scented!"

"Shut up," Sam growled. "That's Portia's address. You should be there and back in less than an hour. I'll meet you at the bar with Sarah." He turned and started walking away from the car.

"How d'you get this Sam?" Dean called after him, the humor evident for anyone to hear.

Turning, Sam glared at Dean. "She gave it to me, okay?"

"Woah, dude!" Dean grinned. "You sure you don't wanna take this one? She's obviously got plans for you. I could talk to Sarah if you want." But by then Dean was talking to Sam's rapidly disappearing back as he ignored his older brother's taunts.

* * * * *

Crane's Bar and Grill was a typical establishment, buzzing with the sounds of chatter and laughter, jazz music pulsating from a stylish four piece ensemble on the small stage in the corner. In years gone by the place would have been described as atmospherically smoky but those days were long gone. The clientele seemed to be an equal mix of locals, tourists and students.

Assessing the place for secure exits and escape routes, Sam mused how messed up his life was that the first thing he looked for on coming into a place was how to get out of it again.

Sarah was sitting at the bar, nursing what looked like a Bloody Mary. She was

sitting on a stool, back ramrod straight and Sam didn't think for one minute she looked comfortable. As he pushed his way through the mingling crowd toward her he noticed she was staring at an envelope lying on the bar in front of her. She was so absorbed in her thoughts she didn't even notice when Sam slid onto the stool next to her.

"Buy you a drink?" he murmured softly.

Sarah stiffened, ready to repel unwanted advances before she realized who was next to her. She turned to Sam with a smile and leant over to place a chaste kiss on his cheek.

"Got one, thanks," she smiled. "Buy you a drink?" She waved at the barkeep who was instantly at her beck and call. Sam decided wryly that he might have a thing for Sarah too. Turning to the guy he ordered a beer, waiting for it to be put in front of him and the tender to leave, before indicating the envelope that had Sarah so entranced.

"What's in there?" he asked, watching carefully for Sarah's reaction.

The art dealer picked up the item in question and turned it over in her hand a couple of times. She seemed reluctant to do anything with it, worrying her lower lip with her teeth in a way that made Sam wish they were anywhere other than a crowded bar.

Eventually she put it back on the bar and slid it over to Sam, resting her hand on it for a few more seconds before meeting his eye.

"Sarah?" he prompted, waiting for her to make the next move.

She lifted her hand off the paper and took a deep breath. "Open it," she instructed.

Sam picked up the envelope and, mirroring Sarah's actions of a few minutes ago, turned it over a couple of times. The envelope was of good quality paper, weighty and smooth. There were no distinguishing marks on it.

"Sam," Sarah piped up, "it's what's in the envelope I wanted you to see."

"Right." Sam flipped the envelope open and pulled out the contents. The paper inside was slightly less weighty but equally smooth. Sam's first reaction was that it was a page from a magazine. He unfolded it and smoothed it out on the bar.

The page he was looking at had photographs of Roman jewelry, each frame accompanied by a short description, and at the bottom of the sheet he read the footer "Antony Whittaker Studios."

"It's from the catalogue from Julian Whittaker's exhibition," Sarah explained.

"Yeah, yeah. I can see that," Sam agreed. "But I don't understand. Why is it important?"

"It might not be," Sarah agreed, "but after you told me what happened to Dean, I got to thinking. Remember back in New York it was the doll's hair that kept the little girl's spirit here?"

Sam nodded, casting his mind back to the seemingly tenuous link they'd had to find to end the haunted picture's reign of terror.

"Well," Sarah continued, "I thought maybe this might be a bit like that, so when I got home I dug out the catalogue to just, y'know, have a look. I wasn't expecting to find anything." She stopped and licked her lips, taking a sip of her drink.

"But?" Sam prompted.

She set her glass down and looked back Sam, running a hand through her hair. "I was just flicking through it and these pictures caught my eye. Something looked familiar about them even though I didn't go to the actual exhibition." She pointed at the picture of a set of hair accessories. "I'd seen that before. The week before Antony died, there was some fancy cocktail party at Julian's house. Portia had one of the combs in her hair."

Sam redirected his gaze back to the page in front of him and the jewelry Sarah was pointing at. He felt the chill start in his chest and spread through his body till it settled like a leaden balloon in his gut. The set Sarah had picked out was the one comprising the pieces Dean had in his pocket. The ones he was going to Portia with.

He started slightly when Sarah's hand fell on his shoulder.

"Sam? Are you okay?" She sounded worried and Sam realized he must have zoned out for a couple of seconds, long enough for her to be concerned.

Mentally shaking himself down, he gave her a reassuring nod. "I'm fine."

"Do you think Portia took part of the exhibit?"

"I wouldn't put it past her," Sam mused, bitterly.

"Did I do the right thing, calling you?" Sarah asked anxiously.

Closing his eyes, Sam nodded again. "Yes, you did." He briefly explained what he and Dean had discovered that evening and where Dean was headed right now. "In fact," Sam concluded, "he should just be about there."

He pulled out his cell phone, dialing Dean's number from memory, hardly looking at the keypad. The phone rang three, four times before clicking through to Dean's less than courteous voicemail. Frowning, Sam closed his phone and put it back in his pocket, chewing the side of his thumb.

His sense of foreboding was beginning to grow. He turned to Sarah. "If Portia took the comb," he began, "would she own up to it?"

Sarah thought about it for a few minutes before shaking her head. "I don't know," she admitted. "I guess it would depend who she was talking to. She'd probably tell her dad but anyone else? I doubt it. Is it important?"

"I think so." Sam didn't want to let on, but he was worried. He briefly outlined the theory he and Dean were currently working on. "If Portia has taken something that belonged to Ovidius he's gonna want it back. Dean doesn't realize she has anything and if Ovidius decides to show his face...well, Dean needs to know."

He yanked his phone back out of his pocket, hitting redial as he did so. Again the call went unanswered, clicking through to voicemail. Sam frowned and tried one more time, with the same result.

"How long would it take to get from the studio to Portia's place?" he fretted.

"Less than twenty minutes at this time of night," Sarah replied, confirming what Sam already suspected.

Dean should have reached his destination by now. There was no good reason for him not to be picking up his calls, even if he'd got stuck in some random traffic jam. The only time Dean's phone went unanswered was when he physically couldn't answer it.

With a cloud of dread settling over him, Sam slid off the bar stool, holding out his hand to Sarah. "Do you have a car near here?"

Sarah nodded wordlessly and, accepting Sam's hand, they made their way through the bar, heading toward the exit.

Portia's home was located in a smart residential street and Dean felt decidedly uncomfortable with the regularity of the houses and similarity of the cars parked outside in neat, uniform rows. Finding a parking spot was easier said than done but Dean had never been defeated by a parking issue in his life and he wasn't about to start now.

The front door to the house was a pristine white affair with an ornate bell pull that wouldn't have looked out of place in a gothic horror. It was polished to a brilliant sheen and the chime Dean could hear reverberating round the inside of the house sounded a little tinny to his ears.

After a wait long enough to make Dean wonder if the hour was so late Portia was already in bed, the door swung open to reveal a spacious vestibule decorated, unsurprisingly, with a variety of antiquities from various periods in history.

Portia stood uninvitingly, hand on door, glaring at Dean. She made a great show of looking over his shoulder and down the street until her eyes settled on the Impala.

"What do you want?" she finally asked, still making no move to allow Dean into the house. "Where's Sam?"

Dean bit back a caustic reply, reminding himself that he needed information from the woman and she wasn't going to be inclined to help him if he wound her up the wrong way to start with. But he also wasn't going to indulge her little crush on his brother.

"He's busy," he answered, pushing past Portia into the hallway. "I need to know more about Ovidius."

Portia stepped back, her poise faltering slightly as she narrowed her eyes at Dean. "Oh, do you?"

"Yes. We do."

"Why?" Portia's dislike of the older Winchester was oozing out of every pore and she was clearly going to make Dean work for the information. "What's he got to do with Antony's murder?"

Dean, however, was too focused to let her disdain put him off. He could still feel the after effects of Ovidius' attack and Portia's attitude wasn't helping.

"How many of the items in the exhibition belonged to him?" Dean demanded, striding into a luxuriously appointed lounge. When he realized Portia wasn't following him but was still standing in the entrance hall, gawping at him in stunned amazement, he spun round and fixed a cold stare on the woman. "Well? Do you know, or not?"

Portia shook her head, clearly unused to being spoken to in such a manner. "Of course I know," she spat back at him. She spun on her heels, hair flying out behind her, and Dean couldn't help but be reminded of a shampoo commercial and smirked as she clicked her way across the vestibule and flung open a door to what appeared to be a study.

"Wait there," she hissed back at Dean, and disappeared through the doorway.

Dean shook his head in bemusement and glanced round the room he found himself in, settling finally by an elegant fireplace. He shoved his hands into his pockets, feeling decidedly out of place. His fingers brushed the cold, hard metal of the jewelry he'd buried under a plethora of obscure items he habitually carried around in case of emergency.

He pulled the handkerchief-wrapped objects out of his pocket and freed them from their covering. The gold seemed slightly tarnished but the jewels caught the light and reflected off the walls and furnishings like a rainbow in the sunlight. Briefly in awe of their beauty, Dean set them reverentially down on the oak coffee table dominating the room.

He had only a minute or two more to wait before the click, click, click of Portia's heels echoed through the house and she reappeared in the doorway, head

buried in a thick file. She didn't bother looking up at Dean and for some reason Dean was mildly disappointed by the fact.

"Most of the artifacts belonged to Ovidius," she stated, reading from the records in her hand. "Over two thirds of the weapons have been attributed to him and the rest are either accounted for in Sulla's own records or their ownership is unknown."

"What about the jewelry?" Dean asked.

Portia looked up and met Dean's eye, her own eyes cold and impersonal. Dean had to repress a shudder. "It's mostly unknown," she told him. "We know that soldiers often brought home trinkets for their families. Sulla wasn't one for frivolities but some of his legion probably had different views."

"Hmm." Dean nodded knowingly, enjoying the way Portia shifted from foot to foot, clearly in a rush to get rid of him. "What about Ovidius?"

She referred back to the paperwork in her hand. "Some of it was his," she concurred. "Probably a gift for his wife or daughters. The owner of the collection did some research on the rest of the jewelry, made an educated guess on some of the pieces. You can see the list if you want." She held out the file, inviting Dean to take it from her.

"No." Dean shook his head. "I'm only interested in Ovi."

"Ovi?" Portia sneered. "His name was Ovidius. He was a great warrior who commanded respect and fear. I hardly think giving him a common nickname appropriate."

"Yeah, well, you wouldn't," Dean returned. "Which pieces were his?"

Portia sighed dramatically and snapped shut the file. "About half the collection. You want to know exactly which pieces, the catalogue's in the studio. Feel free to go get one." She flung a hand out to the door, indicating the route Dean should take as he left.

As she moved back to allow him room to get past, her eyes fell on the coffee table and the hair accessories Dean had put there. She swallowed audibly and Dean watched with interest as her face lost a little color.

"Where did you get those?" she whispered.

"Where d'you think?" Dean retorted. "Were they his? 'Cause we think there's a link."

Portia nodded slowly, chewing her lip nervously, although Dean couldn't think why the jewels had provoked such a reaction from her. "They were his," she confirmed. "A gift for his wife."

She leaned forward, hand stretched out to grasp the jewelry off the table when there was a sudden, and to Dean, not totally unexpected drop in temperature, accompanied by the generic rock riff emanating from Dean's cell phone.

Ignoring the call, Dean reached into his jacket and pulled out the sawn off shotgun he'd hidden there early, just to be on the safe side. Portia's face drained of any remaining color and her fingers instinctively curled around the artifacts on the table, drawing her clenched fist to her body.

Catching sight of the weapon in Dean's hands, she whirled round to face the hunter, eyes wide and terrified by the frightening turn of events. Dean's face was the picture of concentration and for a minute Portia wondered if he even realized she was still in the room. He seemed to be totally focused on a spot just over her left shoulder.

Suddenly he took a step forward and Portia froze as he reached out toward her. Unable to comprehend what was happening, or why Dean had a gun in his hand, she came to her senses just as he grabbed hold of the jewelry she was clutching and yanked them out of her grasp.

Unable to hold back the cry of indignation, she was unprepared when Dean latched onto her arm and pulled her none-too-gently behind him.

"C'mon, you son of a bitch," he muttered, more to himself than anything. "Where are you?" and he scanned the room, swinging the shotgun from left to right easily, restraining Portia behind him the whole time.

"What are you doing?" Portia squeaked at him, but he ignored her the way he would ignore a bug on the windshield.

"Where are you?" Dean repeated, muscles tense and wondering if he could get Portia out of the room before any harm came to her. He reckoned they were four, maybe five steps away from safety.

But it wasn't to be. As Dean assessed their potential escape route, the heavy silence in the room was broken by an ear piercing scream. Spinning his head back round, Dean was stunned to see that Ovidius had actually obeyed his command and was standing in the center of the room, cold blue eyes burning, and Dean could have sworn the temperature had dropped even further.

He swung the gun round and aimed squarely at Ovidius' chest. With a cocky smile, he tightened his finger on the trigger.

Ovidius didn't seem too bothered. In the instant it took Dean to aim, he had raised an eyebrow and the shotgun was wrenched from Dean's hand, the metal scraping the skin on the palm of his hand and pulling his trigger finger straight with an altogether too brutal speed. Dean cursed as the gun flew across the room and out of reach.

He frantically scoured the room for an alternative weapon but Portia's sense of fine living looked as though it may well be the death of her. And him. The

poker and shovel by the open fireplace were brass, and the dining room, with its alluring silver condiment set, was too far to reach.

Portia's level of screaming had reached nerve-jangling proportions and Dean knew he had to get the girl out of there, not only for her peace of mind but his too. He grabbed hold of her arm and, watching the specter's slow but determined approach, pulled her to the corner of the room, hoping they would be able to skirt the edges to the doorway.

But Ovidius seemed to know exactly what the hunter had planned and the doors to the living room slammed shut, the vibrations juddering down Dean's spine. He stopped moving and straightened slowly, meeting Ovidius' glare full on, shielding the innocent woman with his body.

He knew, with a startling clarity, that the next few minutes were going to be painful but all he could hope for was for some miracle. He wondered briefly if this was how it was all going to end – not in a battle for glory but in a frantic brawl trying to save a girl he didn't even particularly like.

And then it all became academic. The Roman glided across the floor until he was merely inches from the hunter and his charge and he smiled with all the charm of a snake in the grass. Dean felt his blood run cold as he got an up close and personal view of the centurion's craggy face, years and years of cruelty embedded in the weathered crags and wrinkles of his forehead.

The wall Dean collided with was solid. He had a vague recollection of an arm being waved and of flying through the air in an impressive display of gracelessness. He hit the wall hard and the air was expelled from his lungs with a whoosh. Portia's screaming seemed to have escalated again, although at this point Dean supposed it might be the ringing in his ears.

Scrambling to his feet, willing his eyes to focus, he looked across to where Ovidius was looming over Portia. The girl had crumbled into a cowering wreck under the wrath of the Roman and Dean couldn't blame her. He was an imposing figure and under any other circumstances Dean would probably be admiring the muscles and determination on display.

For now though, all he could think of was getting him away from Portia. Keeping one hand against the wall for balance, he did the one thing he did best. He began to hurl insults at the ghost.

"Hey, Ovi. I'm over here," he yelled, waving his arm around and eyeing the distance between him and the discarded shotgun. "You wanna fight, pick on someone your own size. Unless, of course, you fight like a girl..."

Ovidius stiffened and halted his approach toward the fallen girl. He visibly straightened up and Dean watched as he very gradually turned his head, the rest of his body following slowly.

"Portia?" Dean ventured, slowly and calmly, hoping to pacify the terrified woman somewhat. When she babbled an acknowledgement, Dean continued in the

same low, composed tone of voice. "Get out of the room. Call Sam. Do it now."

She nodded, a frightened gesture that could have meant anything from "Yes, I understand," to "What the hell are you talking about? Is that even English you're speaking?"

Satisfied she wasn't completely lost to him yet, Dean returned his attention to Ovidius. He had completed his turn and was now glaring at the hunter. While Dean didn't like the look on his face, he had at least succeeded in diverting the Roman's interest away from Portia, allowing her the opportunity of escaping. Which she was attempting to do. In a painstakingly slow fashion.

Ovidius didn't seem aware of her actions, he had other fish to fry. Dean's taunts had obviously worked their way through his brain and an insult against his prowess as a warrior was something he would not stand for.

He had moved with stealth while Dean had been issuing instructions, and the hunter was shocked to find him in his personal space. He could almost smell the battle on the soldier and the deaths of thousands of foes clinging to him like a personal security blanket. And he could feel the grime under Ovidius' fingernails as the Roman reached out a tanned hand and wrapped his fingers tightly in Dean's jacket, pulling the other hand back to deliver a brain-jangling blow to his cheek, snapping his head round so fast he felt the snap of sinews in his neck.

The lights dancing on the periphery of his vision formed an entertaining distraction as he hauled leaden arms up to grip on to the surprisingly corporeal wrist preventing him from falling where he stood. The second blow took the floor from under his feet and by the time he'd managed to regain control of his knees, Dean decided he was clearly on the losing team in this fight.

Ovidius seemed to be enjoying himself and he released Dean, stepping back to watch the hunter slump back against the wall, wiping Dean's blood off his knuckles with disgust. He turned to glance at Portia, his stance changing when he noticed she'd managed to get a whole two feet from her previous position. He moved decisively away from Dean, his intent clear to all.

But Dean wasn't having it. With what little strength he had left, he threw himself at Ovidius, using the wall behind him as a launching pad. He collided with the Roman's knees, succeeding in bringing them both to the floor. Landing on top of the spirit, Dean waved his hand frantically at the door.

"Go!" he shouted. "Get out of here. Go!"

Ovidius kicked out with both legs, catching Dean in the side, his recently patched wound splitting open and fresh blood seeping through the bandages. Like a dog catching a scent, Ovidius narrowed his eyes, flipping them both over till Dean lay on his back, Ovidius straddling him.

The pain from his injuries, fresh and old, was distracting, and had Dean been in a better condition he would have seen the next move coming. Ovidius reached

out a hand and applied an unbearable pressure to the stab wound he had inflicted earlier.

Dean couldn't hold back the groan of pain which quickly turned into a stifled scream as the Roman twisted his fingers in the flesh on either side of the wound. Licking his lips in a parody of passion, Ovidius smiled at Dean and leaned forward until Dean could imagine his breath caressing his ear.

"Who's the girl now?" the soldier whispered and, sitting back on his haunches drew his arm back to deliver one final blow to the head before abandoning Dean to the encroaching darkness.

As he rolled with the punch, Dean glimpsed Portia huddled in the corner of the room as far away from him as she could have gotten. She had her hands firmly locked over her head but it seemed to be doing little to protect her.

As the edges of his vision turned to gray, Dean watched with horror as Ovidius loomed over the helpless girl and reached out both arms.

Part Four

Sam swallowed and craned his neck forward as Sarah swung her car into the driveway of the Whittakers' residence. The house was ominously dark at the front and Sam could feel himself edging off the passenger seat before his companion had even switched off the engine. Flinging the door open, he threw himself out of the car and was on the front porch before the car door had swung shut behind him.

Grasping the ornate door handle, he yanked hard. The door remained steadfastly closed and Sam cursed under his breath. He was vaguely aware of Sarah's presence behind him but as he rattled the door on its hinges he couldn't bring himself to care. He knew in his bones that Dean was inside and in trouble – there could be no other explanation for the unanswered calls.

He stepped back from the door and slipped his hand into his jacket pocket. Sarah hovered anxiously to one side, eyeing the lock pick set he drew out.

"Sam?" she queried.

"It's locked," he answered, shortly. "Dean's in there. I have to help him."

Sarah nodded and backed off as Sam deftly inserted the fine metal rods into the lock of the grand door. Twisting his wrist deftly he leant back, expecting the door to swing gently open. Frowning when that didn't happen, Sam tried again to no avail.

Biting back a cry of frustration, he stood back off the front step and beat his fist against the solid wooden obstacle keeping him from his brother.

"It's sealed," he muttered, as if saying it would release the door from its supernatural bindings. Sarah's face paled as she cast her eyes over the front of the property.

"What about the windows?" she suggested, shrugging helplessly but needing to feel useful.

Sam shook his head though and waved a hand in their general direction. "Probably sealed too," he mused and then backed up, launching a heavily booted foot at the door's lower panels in frustration.

He stood back again, running a hand through his hair, screwing his eyes closed in thought. Then he slapped his hand to his forehead in a gesture that, any other time, would have been perfect comic timing as he exclaimed, "Of course! How could I be so stupid?"

Striding back down the driveway, long legs carrying him past Sarah's car, he threw open the trunk of the Impala, rummaging around until his fingers found their target. He pulled out a worn shotgun and, quickly checking the shells were loaded with salt, he made his way back to the porch.

Firing from the hip, he was barely back up the steps before the salt had broken through whatever enchantment was holding the door fast, shredding the oak panel. One more shot and Sam was satisfied the hole was large enough to clamber through.

Folding himself virtually in half, he squinted through the gap in the wood. He couldn't see Dean or Portia, although that offered him little comfort. Grasping the shotgun firmly in his hand, he twisted his head back to Sarah. "Stay here," he commanded.

Sarah snorted and shook her head. "No way," she declared. "I've seen what you do, remember? You might need me. Don't think you're going to shut me out. Not after everything I've been through recently."

Sam raised his eyes heavenward briefly before muttering "Fine, but stay behind me."

Sarah smiled as she watched Sam squeeze through the gap he'd created before following him.

Once inside the house, Sam took a couple of seconds to survey his surroundings. Sarah had clearly been a visitor in the past and she eased her way past Sam, who cast an exasperated look at her as he gently grasped her arm.

"What did I say?" he reminded her, scanning the array of closed doors leading off the grand entrance hall they found themselves in. She shrugged apologetically before indicating the door directly in front of them.

"That's the living room," she offered.

"And that's where Dean is," Sam determined as the sound of a loud crash echoed through the hallway.

Not stopping to see whether Sarah was following him, Sam leapt across the gap between himself and the doorway.

Grasping the handle firmly, he gave a hefty yank, even though he knew it was pointless. The door was as firmly sealed as the main entrance had been.

"Crap," he muttered, trying to ignore the sound of crashing bodies and the occasional squeak he assumed emanated from Portia. He toyed with the shotgun he still held loosely at his side, torn between getting to Dean as quickly as possible and not wanting to inadvertently injure anyone on the other side.

His decision was made for him, though, as a thud reverberated through the house, accompanied by a blood chilling cry of pain Sam would have recognized as his brother's anywhere. If Sam had thought that sound was frightening, however, it was nothing compared to the resounding silence that followed.

Throwing caution to the wind, the younger Winchester hefted the shotgun into position and let loose with the salt rounds, barely letting a shout of warning pass his lips before the door disintegrated into a vague semblance of pick-up-sticks.

Slipping effortlessly through the gaping hole, not worrying whether Sarah was behind him or not, Sam scanned the room with inbred skill. Dean was lying on the floor, clearly not having moved for several seconds at least. A quick visual assessment from Sam reassured him that his older brother was not in any immediate, life threatening danger, although Sam had no doubt he was in a world of pain right now. His wound had clearly reopened and was bleeding freely and Dean's eyes were at half mast, bruises slowly forming on his face and knuckles. Sam wasn't even sure if his presence had been noticed.

Stifling the instinct to immediately make his way over to his brother's fallen form, Sam cast his eyes over the rest of the room. Evidence of the struggle, if any were needed, was easy to find. The room was in complete disarray, furniture out of place, vases on the floor, coffee table lying on its side.

But the most telling sign was the sight of Portia, huddled in the far corner of the room, Ovidius looming over her with a cold grin on his face. Sarah, peering cautiously round the door jamb, couldn't help but let a small gasp escape her lips. Portia hadn't been the best of friends recently, but not even she deserved this!

Sam, spurred into action by Sarah's unintentional outburst, turned his full attention to the scene playing out in the corner. Portia's normally impeccable hair and make-up were in a mess, mascara running down her face, following the trail of her panicked tears. Her hands were clasped together above her head in a vain attempt to keep herself safe from the impending attack.

And there, Sam realized, clasped in her left hand, was what Ovidius was after.

Her fingers were wrapped around a hair comb so tightly her knuckles were actually turning white.

Sam spared the time to take one last look at Dean, who had managed to pull himself up onto his knees and wave feebly in Portia's direction. It was all Sam needed.

"Your hairclip!" he shouted at the terrified girl. "Give him the clip!"

But his words were lost on the woman. Ovidius, on the other hand, turned sinisterly to the newcomers. He cast a discerning look at Sarah, then at Sam. He narrowed his eyes at the sight of the shotgun in Sam's hand and raised his eyes briefly to regard the younger Winchester.

Obviously deciding he was no threat, Ovidius swiveled back to Portia, who was still clutching the jewelry tightly, as though her life depended on it. Ignoring the ominous click of the shotgun as Sam primed it for a final round, the Roman warrior reached an arm out to the shaking woman and grasped her wrist tightly, pulling her round in front of him, blocking any clear shot Sam might have gotten off.

Portia, still not having the sense to release her grip on the hair comb, whimpered in pain and fear. Lowering the shotgun in disgust, Sam looked to Dean.

The older Winchester had managed to regain a little of his equilibrium and was securely on his knees, although Sam couldn't help but notice he hadn't moved away from the wall yet. He was transfixed on Portia and Ovidius and his lips were moving in a constant mantra Sam couldn't quite hear.

Suddenly Dean found his voice and he managed to get out a hoarse, "The clip. Give him the clip. Give him the clip."

Portia didn't hear, or if she did, she didn't understand what the hunters were trying to tell her. Ovidius, on the other hand, gave the boys a look of triumph as he ripped the jewelry from her hand, tearing the skin on her fingers at the same time, eliciting another scream of pain from the wretched woman.

Sam tightened his fingers on the shotgun, determined to put an end to Ovidius, at least long enough to get Portia away from him, when, with a speed and cruelty that left both Winchesters and Sarah stunned, the Roman slipped his hand from Portia's wrist to her throat and with a smooth twist, snapped her neck like a twig. The woman slumped down to the plush carpeted floor, eyes frozen open in terror, mouth ready to scream but silenced in death.

* * * * *

The beer in front of Dean was crisp and cold, beads of condensation trickling down the sides of the frosted glass, yet it was untouched. Dean's eyes were on the beverage, but unfocused and his thoughts were clearly elsewhere.

Lifting his own beer to his lips, Sam took a long sip and eyed his brother warily. He knew the look on Dean's face, he'd seen it often enough over the years. It usually meant Dean was wallowing in self-recrimination. Sighing, knowing the topic couldn't be avoided for long, Sam set his beer down on the table a little harder than necessary, jolting Dean out of his reverie.

"It wasn't your fault, you know," he told Dean.

There was no reaction from the older hunter for some minutes and Sam was just beginning to wonder if he'd even heard him when Dean lifted his head and turned bleary eyes on Sam.

"I should've stopped him," he confessed softly. "I was in the room. I was with her. I was meant to save her!" Dean's voice trailed away into nothing and his hands slipped over the beer in front of him. "I should've saved her," he repeated quietly.

"It wasn't your fault, Dean," Sam repeated.

"Whose fault was it then?" Dean snapped, head shooting up to glare at Sam. "We do this stuff all the time, Sam. And yet I couldn't save one girl."

"You didn't know about the jewelry. Hell, I didn't know until Sarah told me. You can't blame yourself for this. I hate to say it, Dean, but Portia kinda brought this on herself."

"I should've seen it coming though, Sam. I should've fought harder, held on to my gun. Something!"

"Dean, Ovidius was stronger and faster than either of us realized. There was nothing – nothing – you could have done. He was determined to kill Portia; I saw it in his face. Portia was greedy and vain and in the end she was just unlucky."

Dean's shoulders slumped lower, a sign Sam recognized as the beginning of acceptance.

"Doesn't mean she deserved to die," he mumbled and took a long swig of his beer, wiping the froth from his face with the back of his sleeve. "Most of the people we meet are stupid and greedy and they don't die. I was there, Sam. And I couldn't stop him."

Sam sighed and downed the rest of his beer. Realizing this was going to take some time, time he didn't really believe they had, he decided the only way forward was to bludgeon through his brother's feelings and hope that taking action would snap him out of his melancholy.

"If you want to blame someone," he argued, "blame Portia. After all she took the comb in the first place. Which, by the way," he continued, overriding any attempt to interrupt Dean made, "is now missing again. You still have the other items?"

Dean rummaged in his pocket and nodded, a little awed by Sam's tirade.

"Okay," Sam nodded in satisfaction. "It's my bet Ovidius is going to come after those pieces next. Which means we need to destroy them now."

Dean sat back and slowly chewed on his lower lip. He knew that Sam was right but he couldn't quite shake the guilt he was feeling just yet. "Won't get rid of Ovi though," he commented. "If we do this, we'll never find him or the other bit of jewelry. And if we can't find him, we can't get rid of him."

Sam huffed at his brother's deliberate obstructiveness. "What do you suggest then?" he asked.

Dean pondered for a few minutes then sat forward, elbows on the table.

"We need to bring Ovi out of the shadows," he declared. "Hang on to the other bits, he'll come for them, we ambush him, get the other comb, sling it on a fire and we're done."

He sat back with an air of satisfaction and downed what was left of the beer.

"Oh. Yeah. That's simple," agreed Sam with raised eyebrows. "How are we going to lure him out?"

"If we smelt one piece, he'll come," Dean reassured his brother, ignoring the doubt he felt himself. "All we need is a kiln in throwing distance." He stopped and thought about what he'd just said. "Does Sarah have one?"

"That's a really bad idea, Dean," Sam argued.

"I never said it was a good idea, Sam," Dean retorted. "Does she have a kiln or not?"

"No," Sam shook his head, "but there's a pottery studio just down from her place. The owners are pretty lax when it comes to security. We shouldn't have a problem getting in."

"Great!" Dean exclaimed, sliding his now empty glass into the center of the table they were sitting at and pushing himself up out of his seat. "C'mon then. Time's a-wasting."

Sam studied Dean carefully, noting the slight waver in his brother's stance and the clouded look in his eyes. "You're kidding, right?" he asked, concern creeping into his voice. Dean's confused brow didn't pacify Sam though. "You're hurt and your head's not really in the right place at the moment," he clarified.

Dean snorted in response. "It's a ghost, Sammy," he scoffed. "I could gank one of them in my sleep."

"Where's the plan in all of this?" Sam asked, hoping to make Dean see sense but knowing once Dean's mind was set on something there was nothing he could do to change it.

"Sam," Dean's long suffering sigh was overly dramatic but effective. "I thought we'd just been through this." He stopped and rested one hand nonchalantly on the table. "Look, Sam. I get it. You're worried about me but I'm fine. Honestly. Yeah, I'm a bit..." he trailed off, searching for the right words and failing while Sam waited patiently, not wanting to interrupt. "But I'm okay," he finally concluded. "Portia didn't deserve what she got and it's up to us to make sure it doesn't happen to someone else."

"So," Sam ventured quietly, "it's revenge you're after?"

Dean shrugged. "Whatever works," and he turned away from his brother and made his way through the crowd to the exit.

* * * * *

By the time Dean pulled the Impala smoothly into a parking bay by the pottery studio Sam had alluded to, the hour hand was comfortably past one in the morning. The surrounding neighborhood was still and silent, one or two cars passed them by but none stopped. Nobody was around to see two silhouettes crouching at the rear entrance to the workshop, deftly gaining entrance via illicit means.

Unsurprisingly, considering the information Sarah had been able to give them regarding the owner, the studio was not alarmed. As Sam swung the door open, he winced at the uncoiled creak of the hinges and stepped back to allow Dean to pass him. The older brother stepped confidently over the threshold, snaking an arm out to the side, fingers searching for the light switch. Finding it in seconds, he flicked it up, bathing the workshop in a fluorescent light.

"Dean!" Sam hissed, unable to believe what his brother had done.

Dean simply turned to his sibling and, with raised eyebrows, shrugged one shoulder. "What?" he asked, innocently.
"The lights?!"

"Chill, dude. No one's gonna see that from the street." Dean turned and gave Sam a cocksure grin before sauntering into the premises.

To an outsider, it might look as though he was disregarding his own safety, but Sam knew beneath the façade, Dean was checking out every nook and cranny, not to mention all the viable escape routes they might need. He shook his head and allowed himself a small, indulgent smile. Dean wasn't one to be kept down for long.

Looking past his brother, Sam spotted the kiln and, to his relief, he noted it was already fired up, presumably full of earthenware being fired for the morning. He felt a brief pang of regret for the already lost artwork as he cautiously opened up

the heavy door of the oven, hand wrapped in a heat resistant glove conveniently hanging on a nail in the wall alongside the kiln. He stepped back as the heat from inside blasted into him, raising his other hand protectively across his face.

"Whatcha got, Sammy?" Dean hissed across the studio.

Sam shrugged as he surveyed the contents of the kiln. "Sculptures, plates. Nothing special," he reported as he surveyed the contents of the shelves. Even his untrained eye could tell there were no undiscovered future Rodins hiding amongst the clay pieces and he gently swung the door closed again, even while he knew he'd probably already ruined the firing process.

"Is it hot?" Dean pressed, not really caring about the contents, only really worried about whether he would be able to smelt the Roman artifacts and put an end to Ovidius' reign of violence. He still couldn't shake the feeling he was responsible for Portia's death but the thrill of the hunt and the anticipation of the kill were going some way to mollifying the guilt.

Sam snorted at the question and threw a glare in Dean's direction. "Yes," he replied, very slowly as though explaining something to a child. "It's very hot, Dean. It's firing pottery."

"Alright, smart ass," Dean retorted. "I'm just covering all our bases." He moved over to a workbench and settled himself on the edge, hands in pockets, fingers wrapped tightly around the ancient hair accessories.

"Now what?" Sam wondered. "Do we just sit around and hope Ovidius knows where we are? Hope he comes to us? Or did you have a cunning plan up your sleeve somewhere?"

Dean smirked and raised his eyebrows. "A cunning plan?" he repeated in mock amazement. "I always have a cunning plan."

"No, Dean. You always have a plan. It's not always cunning. In fact, quite often, they're not even that good."

"Trust me, Sammy," Dean smiled, "this is a cunning plan." He gave a lopsided grin, deciding not to mention the fact he'd only just come up with this particular plan. What Sam didn't know, he theorized, couldn't hurt him. Or give him reason to be any more pissed with Dean than he already seemed to be. Although, on reflection, that could just be Sammy's own unique brand of concern.

"Go on, then," Sam prompted and Dean realized he'd drifted off slightly. "Or is it a super-secret plan?"

"Ha, ha," Dean responded, pulling the Roman jewelry from his pocket and waving it in front of him like a flag. "This is my plan," he explained.

"Waving jewelry around? He's not a hunting dog, Dean. He's not going to pick up a scent just from you waving it about."

"No," Dean agreed. "But we still have two pieces, a comb and a pin. How pissed is Ovi going to be if we smelt one? I'll bet you dinner he shows up before we do it to the last piece."

Sam thought about Dean's theory for a few minutes, watching as his brother twirled the hair comb absently round his fingers. It was mesmerizing watching the jewels glint in between Dean's long fingers and Sam found himself wondering how hands capable of such intricate dexterity could wreak such damage on things with equal skill.

"Okay," he finally agreed. "But how do we know he'll have the other pin on him?"

Dean ceased his fidgeting with the comb and drew his eyebrows down. It wasn't really an option he'd considered. "Huh," he managed, then shook his head. "He will," he declared certainly. "I'm sure he will."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Well, we'll just have to adapt as and when that happens."

"And how do you propose to get it off him if he does have it?" Sam asked, knowing already Dean had some half-cocked plan for this eventuality but wanting, needing, to hear him vocalize it anyway.

"That's an easy one, Sammy," Dean smirked. "I'll distract him while you grab it."

"Why did I just know you were gonna say that?" Sam shook his head in mock despair. "That's just plain crazy, Dean. Look at you. You've already gone one round with Ovidius and you didn't exactly come out on top, did you?" He paused and waited for the inevitable protest from his older sibling. Just as Dean opened his mouth to voice his disapproval, Sam continued, "No, I'll distract him, you grab the pin."

"No," Dean refused bluntly.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm the older brother. It's my job."

"You're hurt already," Sam pointed out in a far too reasonable voice. "You'd manage to keep him occupied for what? Thirty seconds? No. Forget it. I'm doing it."

"No, Sam. Just, no."

"Not arguing on this one, Dean," Sam argued, grimacing at the irony of his statement. "I'm doing it."

Dean sighed and studied Sam's face, taking in the set determination of his features. He wasn't even trying the puppy eyes, he was just going straight for the "don't piss me off" look.

"Fine," he huffed. "You suck at picking pockets anyway."

Sam smiled and let that one go. He knew when to take what he could get and right now this was a pretty good result as far as he was concerned.

"Let's get on with it then," he agreed, not rising to the bait.

Dean slid off the workbench he had perched himself on and made his way over to the kiln. Sam tried to ignore the stiffness with which he moved and turned his attention instead to the workshop itself. Dean felt Sam move his eyes away from him and cursed softly at his own perceived weakness. Reaching the kiln he dragged his jacket sleeve down over his hand, eschewing the oven glove at the side. Grabbing hold of the handle he released the catch and opened the door. Momentarily surprised by the heat, he twirled the hair comb round his fingers one last time before tossing it forcibly into the kiln, heedless of the plethora of clayware slowing baking on the shelves.

Passing the remaining hairpin to Sam, he slammed the door shut, ignoring the sound of breaking clay from within.

Standing back, Dean turned to Sam and tilted his head to one side. "Now we wait," he announced and leant back against the wall.

It didn't take long. Within three minutes the temperature in the room dropped dramatically. Dean cast Sam a glance that Sam just knew was his "I told you so" look and, nodding briefly at Dean, Sam straightened up. He could feel tendrils of ice sliding down his spine and he knew without turning that Ovidius had made his appearance.

The apparition of the Roman centurion was standing by the door, posture straight and rigid and his eyes, such as they were, fixed on the remaining piece of jewelry clasped tightly in Sam's hand. Feeling the cold glare on his back, Sam turned slowly, determined to give Dean the best chance possible. His eyes slewed up and down the soldier's form, throat drying as he took in the sunken eyes which seemed to be firing pure hate at the brothers. Relief swept over him when he spotted the hair comb hanging loosely at Ovidius' waist, clipped to a sturdy leather belt.

The relief that Sam felt was magnified threefold in Dean. He hadn't been entirely sure this plan would work, he'd been putting on his game face, surprised it worked on Sam but he supposed the recent events in the Whittaker household had also taken their toll on his usually sensitive brother. The sight of the hair comb was like nectar to a bee and he felt a weight lifted from his shoulders.

He shuffled sideways so he had a clear view of the soldier while still being in a position to aid Sam if necessary. Yes, it was his job to retrieve the artifact, but he was never off duty when it came to protecting Sam. The hair comb was fixed

loosely and Dean reckoned he could unclip it without Ovidius even noticing, as long as Sam managed to distract him for a couple of minutes. Just long enough for him to sidle round the edge of the room without being spotted.

Sam knew what Dean had in mind and he knew he needed to keep Ovidius' attention on him, however unwelcome and painful that may turn out to be. But Dean's plan seemed to have one flaw. Sam couldn't use weapons against the spirit. Salt and iron would dispel the ghost and he would take the comb with him. So the iron knife in his pocket was as good as useless, as was Dean's shotgun.

But time suddenly was no longer on his side. Ovidius had finally recognized Dean and he had fixed his stare on the older Winchester, narrowing his eyes as he did so.

Unwilling to let Dean provide the distraction, Sam did the only thing he could think of. He waved the hairpin in the air, taunting the Roman with the prize he had come to capture.

"Is this what you're after?" Sam spoke softly, but it had the desired effect. In the stillness of the studio he might as well have been shouting at the top of his voice. "C'mon," he whispered. "Come and get it."

Dean shuddered at the menacing tone of his little brother's voice, remembering what he often chose to forget. Sam could be just as scary as him, sometimes more so.

Ovidius stopped in his advance on Dean and turned to Sam, halting completely when he recognized what Sam was waving around with abandon. Sam swallowed hard as he registered the second the Roman's attitude changed. He was no longer after a round with Dean, not now he could retrieve the remaining gift for his long dead wife.

Sam couldn't stop the pained grimace as Ovidius turned on him. He just knew the next few minutes were going to hurt and he could only hope that Dean was going to be quick. He held his ground as the Roman advanced on him slowly, a cold smile creeping across his face.

Waiting as long as he could in order to give Dean every advantage, Sam finally decided he had to move. Ovidius was only a few feet away from him now and he could see every battle scar on the warrior's face. The stench of death and warfare hung off the apparition like a cloak and Sam had to stop himself gagging in response.

Edging towards the kiln, Sam steeled himself for the impending attack he knew was just seconds away as he stretched his arm out to the door. Ovidius' stance changed instantly and he reached a muscle-bound arm out to the younger Winchester. Sam felt the pressure, like a hurricane sweeping across the room, pinpointing only him. His feet left the floor and it was only afterward he realized it was a shelf of finished plates he had careened into.

The clay pieces shattered into a thousand pieces under his weight, the shelving itself collapsing on top of him. And he was right. It hurt. A lot. The impact of his back with the shelf sent sharp spikes of pain up his spine, reverberating down his arm and it was pure willpower that kept his fist closed around the jewelry. He shook his head to clear it where the back of his skull had cushioned the fall of several jagged fragments of pottery.

Ovidius paused in his advance and an eerie sound filled the room. Dean halted his own advance and looked on in shock as the Roman centurion cawed with laughter. Part of him wanted to forget the whole hair comb business and just beat the crap out of anyone, or thing, that dared to hurt his brother and then laugh about it. But the hunter side of his brain was telling him to suck it up and get the hell on with the job in hand. A brief inspection of his brother reassured him that Sam was, in fact, okay and that he needed to hurry up.

Refocusing hurriedly, Dean resumed his progress toward the comb. Ovidius hadn't appeared to notice him, or if he had there was no indication he considered the older hunter to be any kind of threat. Dean pressed home his advantage and, moving with an ingrained stealth he'd learnt many years ago, he was soon within a finger's breadth of his goal.

Ovidius, oblivious to the proximity of the threat, had stopped laughing but the expression on his face as he loomed over the shaky form of Sam was just as frightening. His eyes glinted with the promise of untold atrocities he would bestow on the fallen Winchester and his smile was devoid of all emotion.

As Dean reached forward and made a grab for the hair comb, Ovidius leant towards Sam, leaving Dean clutching at thin air, and wrapped calloused fingers round Sam's throat. Sam gasped and scrabbled for the corporeal wrists before him. He kicked out with his feet, desperately trying to gain purchase on the floor, slipping on fragments of clay and pottery. As he fought for air, he was vaguely aware that Dean was fumbling in his jacket pocket and he hoped he had some kind of hidden weapon in there.

The room began to spin gently and as his vision began to gray at the edges, Sam felt his arms turn to lead as his hands slipped off Ovidius' wrists, falling heavily to the floor.

Suddenly the pressure around his throat was gone and Sam found he could breathe again. Sucking in huge gulps of air, he waited for his vision to clear, only to find Dean in his face, concerned green eyes studying him.

"D'n?" he managed to croak.

"Knifed him," Dean explained, succinctly, brandishing the iron dagger Sam had seen him groping for in his pocket.

Sam nodded briefly and hauled himself up, wincing when his back twinged in protest. Accepting Dean's outstretched hands, he managed to find his feet and get himself off the floor.

"Did you get it?" he asked, rubbing his tender neck with one hand, the one that wasn't hanging on to the hair pin with a tenaciousness Dean had come to recognize as a sign of Sam's determination and stubbornness.

"No," he shook his head. "Didn't seem important somehow. You know, what with you being strangled and everything." He paused and took another good look at his brother. "You okay?"

"I'm fine, Dean," Sam replied, ignoring the slight croak but feeling quite pleased that his voice didn't break on the last word as he'd feared.

Dean narrowed his eyes skeptically. "Okay," he finally acknowledged. "Ovi's gone for now but it won't last. He'll be back for round two any minute so we don't have long. He knows what we're doing now and he's pissed."

"And?" Sam was having a little trouble following Dean's line of thinking.

"And he's gonna come in twice as hard this time. So if you're not okay..." he trailed off into a telling silence.

Sam smiled and shook his head. He opened his mouth to reply when movement just behind Dean's shoulder caught his attention. Watching his little brother, Dean's only warning of the Roman's reappearance was the widening of his eyes. Too slow to turn around, Dean gasped as an ice cold lancet pierced his upper body, entering through the center of his shoulder blades and exiting his chest through the middle of his ribcage.

Eyes flying open in pained shock, Dean couldn't even cry out. He locked eyes with Sam, whose own eyes reflected his horror. He vaguely heard Sam call his name but the pain numbed every other sense. Breathing was becoming an effort and he thought Sam was holding on to his shoulders but he couldn't be sure. Any awareness of his surroundings was slowly blurring into a miasma of colors and sounds, the main one being the sound of his own blood pounding through his head.

Suddenly he felt Sam being pushed away from him and he forced his eyes to focus on his brother, shocked to see Ovidius' arm reaching through his body to grab for the hair pin Sam still held. Though his strength was failing, Dean's overriding desire to put an end to the warrior pushed his body on to heights he didn't know he had.

Sam was pushing himself into the wall as best he could, keeping himself as far away from Ovidius as possible, while frantically trying to work out how to help Dean. His brother was pale and sweating and Sam couldn't even begin to imagine how he felt, being impaled by a ghostly limb as he was. He dodged the hand grasping for him, all the while imploring Dean to stay lucid and rational in his mind.

Dropping his head when the effort of holding it up became too much, Dean noticed with detached interest that in reaching through him, Ovidius had put the remaining hair comb within his reach. Wondering idly through the pain if he

could reach it or not, Dean tentatively stretched out his arm behind him. His fingers brushed against the leather belt and, using his faltering memory of where the comb had been attached, he groped weakly until he felt something hard and cold in his palm.

Forcing his hand to form a fist, he put all his remaining energy into one final yank. The sudden lack of resistance from the belt took Dean by surprise. The strength of the wrench pulled Dean away from the arm skewering him, dropping him to the floor. The agony of impalement, Dean mused, was nothing compared to the agony of release.

Sam watched with relief as he saw Dean drop to the floor, Ovidius' artifact in his hand, and turned his attention back to the soldier standing before him. His icy fingers had finally reached him and he grasped the front of Sam's shirt in both hands, ignoring the hunter on the ground. He hauled Sam away from the wall and flung him to the corner of the room. Sam's already injured back screeched in protest, but he was happy to take it if it meant Dean could get to the kiln. He kept Dean under close observation as his brother crawled on all fours toward the kiln, panting heavily. Just catching sight of Ovidius' fist flying at him, Sam ducked just a little too late, the blow glancing off his temple with enough strength to knock him to the floor, stunning him briefly.

Shaking his head to clear his vision, Sam realized the follow up blow had never come. Quickly turning his attention to Dean, he was shocked to see Ovidius had abandoned him in favor of his brother. Ovidius was moving far quicker than Dean could possibly hope to in his current state, and Sam was in no shape to help him.

Dean, however, had reached the kiln and was stretching an arm up to the door. Sam felt like cheering as Dean managed to get the door open, just as Ovidius grabbed hold of his ankle and pulled hard. Dean lost his balance and crashed to the ground, his chin slamming into the hard floor. He couldn't stop the groan as his top teeth bit into his lower lip, splitting the soft flesh. As Ovidius began to drag himself up Dean's legs, the hunter twisted onto his back, kicking out in an effort to dislodge the soldier.

Realizing it was useless, the Roman like a barnacle on his shins, he arched his back and flung his arm back, releasing the hair comb at the top of his swing. Praying he'd got his calculations right, hoping the trajectory was on course, he let his head fall back and concentrated on defending himself.

Letting out a roar of fury as the comb hit the kiln with unerring accuracy, Ovidius vented his anger with one devastating blow to Dean's stomach. Unable to protect himself, Dean gasped and folded up on himself, uselessly trying to shake the warrior off his legs.

And then he was gone.

Rolling on to his side, curling round his abused abdomen, coughing and gasping for air, he squinted round the workshop through watery eyes.

"Sam!" he groaned as he spotted Ovidius making a beeline for his brother. Sam needed no warnings though. He'd watched in horror as the spirit had pummeled and pounded his brother and felt the elation as Dean's aim proved to be as true as ever. He knew the final piece of the jigsaw lay in his hand and he needed to get it to the kiln where it would join its sisters. He felt the surrounding coldness of the room as Ovidius stomped towards him, the poise and aura around him falling into obscurity to be replaced with rage and incoherent ranting from the soldier.

Sam eyed the distance still between him and the open kiln, grateful that Dean had thought to leave the door hanging wide. His own aim had always been something to be proud of, maybe not quite as honed as his brother's own skills, but he had no worries about being able to hit the mark.

But he wasn't close enough yet and the attack he had endured himself had left him depleted and weary. One look at Dean though was enough to spur him on. His brother now had his eyes closed and although Sam could see he was still conscious, he knew he needed to end this now and get his brother to the motel where he could rest and heal.

Renewed with determination, Sam sprinted as best he could across the remaining distance between him and the kiln.

Ovidius, surprised by this turn of events, swiveled on his heels, slipping slightly on a piece of discarded pottery.

The slip gave Sam the momentary advantage he needed to gain a few vital inches. Just as he felt the soldier's cold fingers gain purchase on the back of his jacket, jerking him to a premature halt, he hurled the hairpin towards the kiln.

Sam's aim was spot on, and as the pin flew through the air, he finally let himself relax, secure in the knowledge the antique was seconds away from being consigned to the depths of lost history.

Allowing himself to be pulled backwards, refusing to put up a fight, Sam fell back on Ovidius. The Roman had not yet realized what he'd done and was grinning manically at his perceived success. But as the hairpin began to melt, succumbing to the intense heat of the kiln, he released Sam who dropped to the floor and rolled away from the spirit.

Scrambling across the workshop to where Dean lay, eyes at half mast, Sam threw an arm over his face, shielding his brother with his upper body as Ovidius exploded in a plume of white flames.

Dean threw the last bag into the trunk of the Impala and closed it with a weary slam. Leaning back against his baby's body, he leant his head back and gazed at the clouds, unable to shake the feeling he hadn't done quite what he should have.

His reverie was disturbed by the sound of a car pulling into the parking lot, and he pulled his attention back to the present. He watched with mild interest as the car stopped neatly next to his and he smiled at the driver.

Sarah stepped out looking as fresh as a daisy, but she had a slight frown on her face when she looked up at Dean's bruised countenance.

"Don't worry," he forestalled her. "It's superficial. And Sam's fine too."

She smiled and began to reply as the door of the boys' motel room opened and Sam appeared on the threshold, carrying his laptop. He stopped as soon as he saw her and she stepped forward, past Dean, pausing long enough to give him a grateful little nod, although what it was for, Dean wasn't sure.

"Listen," he declared. "There's a little coffee shop I noticed down the road. I'm going to get us some breakfast. Okay?" Not waiting for an answer, he swung the door of the Impala open and hopped in.

Oblivious to Dean's remarkable show of discretion, Sam ushered Sarah inside the room.

"So," she started, "did you get him?"

"Yeah, yeah, we did," Sam assured her. "He's gone and the jewelry too. He won't be back."

Sarah nodded and smiled. "What about Dean?" she asked coyly.

"Dean?" Sam's look of puzzlement was a sight to be seen. "He'll be back. He's only gone for coffee."

"That's not what I meant," Sarah laughed. "When did your brother become so tactful?"

Sam shrugged, finally understanding what she meant. "Who knows?" he remarked. "Does it matter?" He looked down at the girl standing in front of him and smiled.

"So, when are you leaving?" she asked, already knowing the answer. She'd seen Dean close the trunk, seen the bags, and the room they were in was devoid of any trace of the brothers.

"Sarah," Sam began, hesitantly.

"Sam," she interrupted. "It's okay. I get it. This is what you do." She broke off, trying to hide her emotions, and stepped past Sam.

"I'll see you again," Sam offered, turning to catch hold of her.

"Maybe," Sarah agreed softly.

"If you want to, that is." Sam sounded hesitant, unsure of himself. "I mean, it's not like I'm a great catch or anything. All I ever seem to do is bring you trouble."

Sarah reached out a gentle hand and dropped it on Sam's chest. "Hardly your fault," she replied. "I called you this time, remember? And I don't recall you sending those demons to my place. And it wasn't you that killed Portia."

"But none of that would have happened if you didn't know me," Sam continued. "I mean, I'd understand if you never want to see or hear from me again."

Sarah smiled sadly as she reached up and put a finger on Sam's lips.

"You know what, Sam?" she asked him. "You're right. It would be easiest to never hear from you again. I could go on with my life pretending you don't exist, never wonder how you are, not worry that you're lying somewhere dead. My head tells me that all the time. But life doesn't work that way." She let her hand drop from Sam's face to his bicep and she rested her forehead on his chest. "You're in my life now, Sam. Have been since the day you walked into my father's auction rooms. I know your life is dangerous. I know you might be dead tomorrow. But I've seen what you and Dean do, the good you do, the people you help. That's worth the risk."

She stopped and stepped back from Sam slightly, looking up into his eyes. He licked his lips and nodded slowly.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure," she replied, kissing him gently on the cheek. "You still have work to do, Sam. But when you're done, if you're ever done, I'll still be here. You know where to find me."

The End