



Chapter One



The steady fall of rain echoed against the metal frame of the car in a constant drumbeat. John Winchester latched on to it like a rope tossed to a drowning man and tried to pull himself out of the murky waters of unconsciousness.

His brain felt detached, his body borrowed. Nothing seemed willing to comply with his requests to move. Even when he managed a tremulous twitch, John wished he hadn't. Violent pain raced up his left side, almost tipping out the contents of his stomach and it took a couple of seconds for the bile to retreat down his raw throat.

Eyes still tightly shut, John ran his tongue over his cracked lips and tried to remember what the hell had happened. For a moment he was sure he had been on a bender the night before; the headache kneading behind his eyes certainly felt alcohol induced, but he didn't remember drinking. In fact, he didn't remember anything. He had also done enough drinking in his lifetime to know that while killer migraines were a given, sharp agonising pain to his side was something else.

Slowly, and carefully, John forced open one eye, managing nothing more than a half-mast slit. The other followed a moment later. Stabbing pain lanced through his head and dizziness swept over him in heavy squalls but he somehow managed to swallow down the nausea.. He shuttered his eyes and waited for everything to come back into focus, unable to make out anything through the haze, and the darkness, that had completely consumed his vision.

Fragmented white light in front of him illuminated a thick, gnarled tree trunk through the oppressive night.

Something about that didn't seem right either, but John was too disoriented to make sense of it.

He closed his eyes again and took shallow breaths through his mouth. Every inhalation made his chest throb violently and made his vision wobble.

"D-dad?" The voice sounded distant and hollow, like he was listening to it underwater. John couldn't push through the muddy air enveloping him to answer. He wanted to sleep, wanted to give in to the pull of unconsciousness.

"Dad? Answer... me, please!" Frightened and panicked... It was enough to push the looming fog out of John's head and attempt to answer.

Groaning, John slowly turned his head towards the voice. His neck howled in protest of the movement, his surroundings fracturing briefly before sharpening once again.

Unable to fully turn his head, John slid his gaze as far right as he could.

"Dean?" His voice cracked and hitched, his throat felt scratched as it attempted to push it through unfeeling lips.

The sigh of relief was audible even over the ringing in John's ears.

"Thank God," Dean murmured. "I thought you were—" A shaky breath was the final response.

Yeah, you and me both, kid, John thought, a little panicked himself by the gravity of the situation.

John winced as he let his gaze wander sluggishly around the space. He was in the car, in the Impala - at least what was left of the damn car. Twisted metal was pushed inside the vehicle itself, the hood practically part of the dashboard now. The entire right side of the car was pushed so close to John's side that he wasn't sure how he hadn't been cut in half. His seatbelt was pressed against his chest, his ribs practically creaking under the crushing weight and his legs were numb.

The car itself was tilted on a forty-five degree angle, sandwiched against a stand of trees, the driver's side higher than the passenger's. John winced, letting half-slitted eyes shift around the crumpled car.

"You hurt?" John asked quietly, his eyes shutting again as he swallowed hard.

"Fine," Dean murmured, sounding anything but fine. There was a slur in the teenager's voice that John hadn't noticed before and for once he wished Dean wouldn't play the tough guy routine so well.

"Dean! Are you hurt?" John repeated, injecting a little more bite into his tone. This wasn't the time for lies. John needed to assess the situation and figure out how the hell to deal with it.

"My...my back..." Dean admitted.

"Any blood?" John asked clinically even as he was attempting to move his own legs. It took him a moment but he managed to wiggle his feet. It was enough. At least his spine was still in one piece. Everything else he could deal with.

There was a rustling of material. "Don't think so," Dean said finally, a muted whimper escaping his lips. Evidently the kid was lying through his ass.

“Dean?” He tried for a tone that brooked no argument.

Dean sighed. “No blood. Just bruised I think.”

John needed to get out of the car and assess his son, but his thoughts didn’t seem to want to come together to tell him how to do that.

“Your head... it’s bleeding, Dad.”

John blinked at the statement, his fingers instantly moving towards his head to test the truth of his son’s words.

“What?” He felt blood and grimaced.

“You must have hit the wheel when we crashed.”

Yeah, that made sense. It explained the headache from hell as well, but not the sharp pain in his abdomen. With gentle fingers he’d probed his side and felt warm stickiness there too. He pulled a face. He’d deal with that later, for now the main priority was getting out of the twisted wreckage.

“I’m OK, son,” John assured him even as he wiped his bloodied hand on his jeans. No need to worry the boy, not yet anyway. Not until he could see what he was dealing with himself.

“Can you see Sammy from there?” Dean asked in a small pained voice. “I’ve tried callin’ him but he’s not answering.”

Sam...Sam had been with them on this trip?

He couldn’t recall the details before the crash, couldn’t visualise if his youngest son had been with them or not. His brain kept flashing images of motel rooms and he couldn’t discern between them and reality. Dean’s insistence was confirmation enough.

John couldn’t twist to look in the back-seat at all, in fact trying to move period made white spots spill across his eyes and made his stomach roll. He shuttered his lids and took a couple of convulsive gulps before he was able to speak.

“S-Sammy?” That sounded pathetic, but John didn’t care. He needed to know if his youngest was ok.

For a moment everything was deathly silent apart from the incessant ringing in John’s ears and his own laboured breathing.

“Sam?” John tried again, barking the command, hoping beyond hope that his son would respond to the order. His heart sputtered over several beats when he still got no response.

Carefully, tilting his neck backward, he managed to slide his gaze towards the rear-view mirror. John’s lips parted as he took in the empty back-seat. The door was ajar but Sam was nowhere to be seen. Where the hell was his youngest? Bile crept up his throat. No...no...no... Dean had made a mistake... he must have. Sam couldn’t have been with them, and yet there was evidence to suggest otherwise. Sam’s rucksack was tossed haphazardly on the seat, the plaid, threadbare blanket pooled on the floor, a small pile of books littering the space. The absent teen made John’s stomach clench impossibly tight.

“Dad?” Dean spoke, his voice hitching. “Can you see him? Tell me he’s OK.” The tone of his eldest son’s

voice made John ache. All pretence of being strong was gone. Dean was crumbling, and it wasn't because of the crash.

John's mind was racing as he tried to remember everything that had led up to the accident. What the hell had happened? They had been heading for... Sioux Falls... Sam was... Sam had been lying in the back... Sam had been in the back-seat prior to crashing, so where the hell was he now? John took a deep breath, trying to curb the icy panic that was racing through his veins.

"Is he OK, Dad?" Dean demanded, desperation and fear undisguised in his tone.

John swallowed hard, his own stomach turning inside out. He felt numb, hollow... He was starting to remember what had happened, was starting to piece it together and John didn't like the way the pieces were coming together. He was filled with the burning desire to pound something – or someone.

"Dean... before the crash... what do you remember?"

He could feel Dean's incredulous stare burning into him, but ignored it, ignored everything. He had to know what Dean knew. He had to know if what he was remembering was correct or if it was some strange side-effect of what was without a doubt a concussion.

"Dad? Is Sam--"

"Please, son, just... just answer me."

There was a long pause and, for a moment, John thought Dean wasn't going to answer.

"I... I don't know," Dean stumbled over the words, uncertainty in his tone. John knew he sounded scared. He could only imagine how that was making his eldest feel. John, who wasn't scared of anything, who fought monsters on a daily basis and survived, was scared. Worst case scenarios had to be racing through Dean's head, but John didn't have time to reassure him. He had to know what the hell they were dealing with here.

"Think, Dean," John pressed, momentarily shutting his eyes. He was so goddamn tired. "This is important."

"There was someone in the road..."

"You saw them?" John asked, his heart sinking; he'd seen the figure too. He'd hoped it had been a dream, a memory from some other time dredged up because of the crash, but Dean's words confirmed that was not the case.

"No... I didn't, but Sammy... he shouted..." Dean hesitated for a brief moment. John could practically feel the fear rolling off the kid in waves and wished he could say or do something to curtail it. "Dad what is it? Is Sam-? Please, just tell me."

"Your brother... He's... he's gone, Dean," John said numbly.

"What the hell do you mean he's *gone*?" The emotion was so raw that John's throat constricted as he attempted to hold his own feelings at bay.

"I mean he's not there, Dean. He's vanished...Sam's... gone, and he's in real trouble."



Earlier

The storm was building momentum, the rain hammering violently against the windshield, tear trails smearing down the glass. The road itself had disappeared into the darkness, lost in the murky charcoal horizon, a black ribbon winding through the countryside. Harsh white beams of light illuminated the gnarled trees that lined either side of the winding asphalt, and farmhouses were sporadically nestled amongst the rolling hills. The rest of civilization had been left firmly behind.

Sam Winchester slid a side-long glance at his sandy-haired brother in the front seat before returning his gaze to the road. Dean was carefully tracing paths across a large road map that practically engulfed the passenger side, his green eyes split between the folded-out paper and the road itself.

"We're lost, aren't we?" Sam asked finally, unable to hold his tongue any longer.

Dean twisted to glance over his shoulder, his expression offended. "We're *not* lost," Dean assured him.

"Dean, we've been driving down this stinking road for the last hour and haven't seen any sign of this town you said we'd be hitting twenty-minutes ago."

"Yeah," Dean muttered sourly, "well we still ain't lost... I just don't know exactly where we are right now."

"Dude, that's kinda the definition of lost," Sam said with a snort, shifting his gaze out of the side window at the dark shapes whizzing past the car.

Nightfall had crept in, shrouding the fields in murky darkness that even the Impala was battling to push through. Sam pressed his fingers into his gritty eyes, barely managing to stifle the yawn that sat on his lips. He was tired. Sam wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and sleep for the next twelve hours but they hadn't seen a house, let alone a motel, for miles. Sighing deeply, Sam let his head drop back against the bench seat and closed his eyes.

"This road must be on the damn map somewhere," Sam heard John say in a low throaty growl. Even with his eyes closed, Sam could tell his father was quickly reaching the end of his tether. Six hours on the road had pushed all three of them to the proverbial edge, but John was about ready to leap onto the rocks below.

"I'm telling you, Dad," Dean said, "this road we're on – it don't exist on this map or the other two maps we've got in the glove box."

Sam opened his eyes in time to see the hint of frustration splay across his father's face. John sighed deeply, muttering something about backwater towns under his breath.

"There's got to be a way to get back to the Interstate," John snapped irritably.

"You seen a frigging turn off in the last hour?" Dean demanded, his attention diverted between the road and trying to figure out where the hell they were on the map. "Just keep going," Dean said wearily, "we're bound to reach a road marker at some point."

Sam nestled back into the seat, pulling the threadbare blanket over his legs. He was exhausted and it was taking more effort than he wanted to expend to keep his eyes open. However, every time he closed his eyes or moved, a sharp pain shot through his wrist. It was making sleeping difficult.

“How’s your arm?” Dean asked. Sam frowned. Sometimes he wondered if his brother could actually crawl into his head and pick his thoughts out.

“It’s fine, Dean,” Sam assured him with a frustrated sigh, picking absently at the tube bandaging covering his left arm and hand. “Stop fussing.”

Sam wasn’t exactly a stranger to injuries – he’d had his fair share over the years and patched up more than he could remember on his father and brother – however, for some reason, the sprain he had suffered yesterday was causing a disturbing amount of apprehension from his family. Sam didn’t really understand it. He suspected a lot of it was because of how he hurt it. From the age of nine, Sam had been taught how to protect himself from the supernatural. He hadn’t expected danger to come from such a normal source. He’d seen the car a fraction of a second too late. It was ironic as hell that his father spent all his time protecting him from monsters and yet it was something as mundane as a car that had put Sam in a hospital waiting room this time. The incident had definitely pushed Dean and his father into some kind of panic mode and Sam felt smothered by their apprehension.

“You got smushed by a car, Sam,” Dean said with a grunt. “How exactly is anything about that fine?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “It barely touched me.”

Which was true enough. Sam had come away with nothing more than a sprained wrist and a smattering of cuts and bruises to his legs and face. It had been enough to knock him off his feet but it could have been a whole lot worse, and Sam had the feeling his father and brother were more shaken by this than by any other injury he’d received to date. He figured it was definitely something to do with the fact the accident had been so... *normal*. John had never prepared for the normal stuff. Monsters, demons and spirits? Sure. Something as humdrum as being hit by a car? Nope.

“Besides,” Sam continued sleepily, burrowing deeper under the blanket, “I thought you said the girls dig scars.”

“Scars, yes. Eating all your meals through a straw... not so much,” Dean said.

Sam snorted. “Dude, you never use silverware.”

“Who are you, Martha Stewart?” Dean demanded with a shake of his head. “Jesus, Sammy, didn’t you pay attention when you learned to cross the road? Left, right, then look left again. Avoiding big-assed SUVs is also a good tip, dude,” Dean teased, but Sam didn’t fail to notice it lacked the usual bravado. In fact, it seemed a little half-hearted.

“That’s enough, Dean.” John finally intervened. Dean’s humour – however forced – evidently wasn’t doing anything for John’s frayed nerves. He wasn’t in the mood to joke about any of this shit.

Silence fell over the car, the rain the only sound, the wipers flicking frantically back and forth to clear the water from the windshield. Sam sighed and let out a long breath, his gaze wandering to look out the window.

Sam barely glimpsed the figure illuminated in the headlights. A watery apparition in the centre of the road, shrouded in dark clothing, arm outstretched, thumb held out. The Impala was hurtling towards the person,

John seemingly unaware that there was anyone in the road. Sam's heart jumped into his mouth, his stomach filled with ice as time slowed to a crawl. They were going to hit the hitchhiker. Sam's mouth went suddenly dry.

"Dad! Look out!" Sam managed to scream finally, but his voice was lost in the deafening screech of the brakes and John's cursing.

The Impala didn't come to a stop when the brakes were applied, however. The rainfall had created a layer of water across the road's surface. The wheels locked and the car skidded across the watery road surface, the back end fishtailing as John struggled to bring the vehicle under control. The tires squealed agonisingly as the brakes locked and the car slid sideways with the momentum of a runaway train.

The shallow ditch at the side of the road should have slowed down the vehicle, should have allowed the car to find traction, but it didn't. Mud and dirt were churned up as the car dove over the edge of road and hurtled down a steep incline, crashing through the undergrowth. John struggled with the wheel, struggled to bring the speeding car under control. It was too late for that. A row of fat tree trunks loomed closer. Sam barely had time to take a breath, let alone shout a second warning as it impacted with a deafening crunch of metal and wood.

Sam's entire body jolted, his head hitting the side window with sickening force. His vision fractured suddenly and then everything went black.



Sam's first waking thoughts were far from pleasant. The scene when he opened his eyes was like a nightmare. Steam was hissing from underneath the crumpled hood, the engine spluttering like a smoker with a forty-a-day-habit. Cracking his eyes open fully, he was suddenly hit with a wave of dizziness that nearly dragged him back into the muddy waters of unconsciousness. Clawing his way back was like swimming in sand, and it was a few minutes before Sam even dared to open his eyes again.

His father was slumped in the driver's seat, his head tipped back, blood trailing down the side of his face. He was deathly still; his normally commanding eyes hidden behind heavy lids.

"D-dad?" Sam's voice cracked, his throat raw.

He coughed weakly, the muscles in his chest tightening like elastic bands. His sprained wrist was throbbing. Cradling the tender limb to his torso, Sam fumbled with his free hand for the blanket, trying to extricate himself from the material, his attention split between his task and his father. Sam noticed the slight rise and fall of John's chest and let out a relieved exhalation. At least he was breathing.

His brother was curled against the passenger side door, his head at an unnatural angle. The window had caved in; glass flakes dusted the right shoulder of Dean's dark shirt, jagged shards still protruding from the frame itself. Sam couldn't see how badly injured his brother was from this angle, but he was definitely unconscious and that scared Sam. He wasn't sure what the hell to do.

"Dean?" Sam tried tentatively. "Dad?"

No answer.

The silence was horrendous. Sam wanted them to speak, to answer him, but he was met with unearthly stillness. That made Sam's fear ratchet another three notches higher.

"C'mon... wake up," he whimpered, desperation and fear lacing his tone. He didn't care that he sounded like a pathetic kid, he *felt* pathetic. His need for his brother and father to wake up overrode all the crap he'd had drilled into him since birth about 'the Winchester way'. There was no way in hell that Sam could suck up this situation and deal with it. He was frigging terrified.

Sam moved forward to check on his family, immediately regretting the movement. The pain in his side felt akin to having a spear driven between his ribs. He couldn't help the gasp of pain or the tears that brimmed in his eyes. It hurt so badly that he nearly threw up.

Dammit. He sucked air through barely parted lips until the pain had abated to a bearable level and let his head fall onto his chest, too-long bangs dripping into his eyes. His entire torso felt like it had been crushed and his brain felt loose within his skull. Trying to draw in air was like inhaling fire and Sam resorted to shallow breaths, his bruised lungs protesting even that slight movement.

"I need a ride."

The unfamiliar rasping voice brought Sam's head up. His body fought against the movement, but the adrenaline pumping through his veins overrode it, instinct taking precedent.

Sat in the seat next to him was a dark-haired man. He was dripping with blood from head to foot, his clothes saturated with crimson. His shady eyes were glazed and yet hard with anger, and all that anger was directed at Sam.

Sam gulped, swallowing spasmodically as the man tilted his head to one side and considered Sam carefully.

"You killed me," he hissed, blood pooling at the corners of his mouth.

Sam recognised the man. He'd only seen him for a moment, but he was certain it was the hitchhiker; the hitchhiker Sam had screamed at John to avoid. Sam let his gaze slide over the dark-haired stranger, his stomach twisting as he noticed the gaping wound in his stomach; a wound that wasn't bleeding at all. Sam frowned, his eyes rising to the stormy eyes.

The man shimmered, rippling like white voile caught in a breeze, then he winked out of existence completely. Sam's heart staggered over a couple of beats as he twisted his head around the all too small space in the wrecked car. What the...? Where the hell did it go?

The spirit reappeared just as abruptly as he had disappeared. This time he was more stained and a thick, jagged cut across his throat was spurting blood frantically.

"Murderer!" The hitchhiker gurgled, blood trickling from his mouth.

Sam didn't have a chance to respond, or react. The hitchhiker moved swiftly. Sam was forced onto his back across the bench seat, the ghost straddling him. He dug his hands into Sam's sides, watery fingers burning as they met Sam's warm skin. The pain was instantaneous and electric.

"Dean! H-help...! Oh... God," Sam gasped the words, his eyes squeezing tightly shut. He'd never felt anything like it. He could barely breathe, could barely even think. He could taste iron in his mouth and could do nothing to stop himself from choking on the blood that was pooling in the back of his throat.

Panic overrode any survival instincts as Sam attempted to drag oxygen into his deprived lungs. Bloodied spots spilled over his eyes and the edges began to fade completely. It felt like the spirit was trying to pull his insides out.

His arm slid onto the floor of the car, his body going numb as unconsciousness loomed over him.

And then the pressure eased.

Sam took a tremulous, gasping breath, his entire body twitching as he gulped in as much air as he could. The hitchhiking spirit was gone, but Sam's sides felt bruised to hell. His sprained wrist curled around his abdomen, he used his uninjured one to lever himself up. His only thought was the trunk... he had to reach the trunk and arm up before it came back, he had to protect his injured father and brother. There were weapons in the damn trunk, rock salt, holy water – an arsenal any soldier could be proud of. John might have been a former Marine, but the man still thought like one.

He managed to manoeuvre his sluggish body enough to push the back door open. His descent out of the Impala was a little less graceful. Collapsing face-first onto the soaked grass with a grunt, his unresponsive limbs did little to stop the fall and the wave of agony that shot up his already injured arm and exploded in the base of his skull nearly plunged him into darkness once again.

This time Sam could do nothing to stop the bile from rising in his throat. Vomiting was painful as hell on his tender abdomen and chest muscles. Every spasm of his stomach felt like he'd been smacked with a sledge hammer, but Sam could do nothing but endure it. His forehead was practically touching the rain-soaked ground, his elbows all that were keeping him upright. His sweatshirt was already sodden, his hair plastered to the side of his face. Whether from the rain or his own sticky perspiration, Sam didn't know.

Lungs heaving, Sam coughed weakly before dragging the back of his hand over his mouth and grimacing at the stench permeating the air.

Carefully pushing himself onto his knees, his feet tucked underneath him, Sam pushed up the hem of his hooded sweatshirt. Even in the feeble light he could make out mottled bruising spanning his entire torso. He winced. Sam wasn't sure how much of it had been caused by the crash, and how much was the spirit. Not that it mattered; the end result was the same.

He'd barely raised his head when the hitchhiker reappeared once more at the front of the car. Dragging a hand across his dripping face, Sam let out a shaky breath, his gaze shifting between the ghost and the car. His father and brother still hadn't stirred.

C'mon, Dad, now would be a great time to wake up and fight Casper, the pissed-off super-spirit, Sam thought desperately, please...

It was a childish want. There was no way in hell his dad was going to wake up now and save the day. Sam wasn't that goddamn lucky. He was on his own with this, and he was going to have to save himself and his family.

With that thought in mind, Sam tore his gaze from the hitchhiker and staggered to his feet, ignoring the pain in his wrist as he pushed his abused body off the ground. The trunk was his destination. He didn't even make two steps.

Sam's legs were swept from underneath him suddenly. He flew through the air like a rag doll. When he came down, it was hard. The air left his lungs forcefully and for a moment he actually couldn't breathe at

all. Sam coughed, rolling onto his back and pushing his hands into the mud.

“I need a ride,” it hissed.

Sam wasn't sure what the hell this ghost's issues were, and frankly he didn't care; he just had to live long enough to survive this shit. Ignoring all the aches and pains, all the bruises, Sam somehow found the strength to move. Crawling in the dirt using his elbows to lever himself onto the balls of his feet, Sam attempted to put as much distance between himself and the hitchhiker as he could. He had almost reached the incline back up to the road when he felt chilled fingers brush down his spine. The ghost helped him the rest of the way up the hill.

The fourteen-year old boy folded like wet cardboard, hitting the asphalt heavily. Pain reverberated up his elbows and through his hip, and he couldn't help the groan of pain that escaped his lips. Winded and aching, Sam kicked his legs out and tried to crawl away from the hitchhiker on his stomach but icy fingers circled his ankles.

Knives pierced through the material of his jeans, and into the skin – at least that was how it felt. Sam kicked desperately and pathetically, trying to unseat the man's hold. It didn't work, Sam couldn't free himself. His stomach twisted inside out and his heart was beating so frantically that Sam couldn't drag air into his lungs quickly enough to feed the pumping muscle.

The hitchhiker started to drag him across the road by his leg. Sam's fingers clawed desperately at the asphalt, frantically searching, reaching out for something, *anything*, to latch onto. He never found it. The spirit continued to pull Sam like he was nothing. His hooded sweatshirt rode up his back, the gravelled ground scraping the skin raw. He had no idea where the hell this thing was taking him, or what the hell he intended to do to him. He knew he should be fighting back more, that he should be doing anything to stop this from happening, but that was easier said than done. Sam was struggling to make his overwrought brain think of escape plans but his abused body was tired and energy-depleted.

“Yer killed me,” the hitchhiking ghost snarled even as he continued to drag Sam's limp body. “Killed me good, boy. No one gets the best of Jed Ellis, no one,” he muttered to himself, his grip tightening beyond painful levels. “Make yer pay, make yer pay, yer little shit.”

Rain spattered against Sam's cheeks, his eyes shuttering frantically to avoid the liquid debris.

“I-I didn't kill anyone,” Sam tried but Jed wasn't listening. The insane muttering continued relentlessly, the spirit's anger growing with each moment that passed.

Sam's desperation was mounting as he was pulled further from the Impala, further from safety, further from his injured family. Sam struggled against his hold but the spirit was surprisingly strong. The grip was iron-clad and he was only making himself exhausted, his limbs leaded.

And then they halted, the hitchhiker disappearing into thin air so suddenly that Sam wondered if he had imagined the whole thing. If it wasn't for the pain in his legs and side, he might have thought so.

Frowning deeply, Sam's frantic gaze darted around the darkened road, squinting to see through the trees that lined the asphalt and swallowed the sky underneath their leafy canopy. The ghost was gone.

One arm curled around his side, Sam rolled off his back on to his stomach and somehow managed to push himself onto shaky elbows, his head practically grazing the waterlogged ground as he coughed weakly. He wasn't surprised to taste blood in his mouth, nor was he surprised to see in on the ground in front of him. His entire body hurt.

He needed to get back to his father and brother, he needed to get them help. Sam had no idea what kind of spirit he was dealing with, but he wasn't exactly friendly, and for Sam that was incentive enough to avoid it. He knew how to deal with ghosts, he knew about salting the bones, but he'd never been thrown into the deep end like this. Hunts were usually planned to the nth degree. Every scenario was taken into consideration; every problem was discussed in depth. Sam usually went into a hunt sure of his role, sure of the plan. There was no plan here. There were no scenarios, there was nothing but hopeless uncertainty. Sam desperately wanted the back-up of Dad and Dean, wanted them to appear and make this right but, apart from his own wheezing breath, the air was still. There was no sign of his family, no sign they were going to appear any time soon and that scared Sam.

The hitchhiker suddenly reappeared and was on him in seconds. This time Sam didn't have a chance to lash out. Fists and kicks rained down on him, smashing into his abdomen, chest and any exposed flesh Jed Ellis could find. It went on for what seemed like hours, the pain unbearable. Sam tried to curl up his body, tried to protect the tender areas but the spirit seemed to slide past all the defences he put up.

"Thought you could outsmart me, Jenkins?" The hitchhiking spirit of Jed Ellis snarled as he fisted his icy cold fingers into Sam's sweatshirt, pulling him close to his watery face. Sam didn't resist. He couldn't have fought the ghost even if he'd wanted to.

Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut, breathing through the nausea that had settled in his throat. He ducked his head away from the man, pleading with his somersaulting stomach to hold still but it didn't seem to want to listen.

Sam could barely make sense of what was going on and, before he could react, his hands were being tied together. He had no idea where Jed Ellis's ghost had got the rope from, but he pulled the ends so tightly that Sam was sure his bones crunched under the pressure. The skin was already starting to graze.

Ellis grabbed him savagely by the arm, his cold touch burning the skin, his sprained wrist throbbing. Sam whimpered at the brutality, trying to remove the cruel grip to little avail.

"Please," Sam begged, the pain too much to bear. "Oh god, *please, stop.*"

The spirit ignored Sam's plaintive pleading and grabbed him by the leg once more and continued dragging him towards the trees, further away from the road and the Impala.

Sam tried to fight him, he really did, but his head was swimming and his torso hurt so badly. He was dizzy as hell and he was sure he could feel more blood trailing down his face. His chest ached and every breath felt like an ice-pick sliding between his ribs.

"Time ter go, Jenkins," Jed Ellis growled as he grabbed Sam's leg again and started to drag him towards the tree line.

"Not... Jenkins," Sam muttered thickly, his eyes at half-mast. He was struggling to stay awake. "Name's Sam.

The storm was raging now, rain coming down heavily. Lightning cracked across the sky illuminating the countryside for a moment, then followed by the angry growl of thunder. Droplets tapped against his skin, his hair plastered to his face but he was so tired and hurt so badly that he couldn't find the strength to fight Ellis. Instead, he could do nothing but watch as the Impala headlights got further and further away as the hitchhiker dragged him deeper into the trees that lined the road.



Chapter Two



Moving was harder than it should have been but, as long as Dean kept looking straight ahead, he could handle it. His neck ached badly and his back felt as if someone had taken a sledge hammer to it, but none of that shit mattered. All that was running through Dean's head was Sam.

Sam was gone.

Where the hell he was, Dean wasn't sure but he *was* going to find his little brother. Nothing was going to stop that.

"What the hell do you mean - Sam's gone?" Dean demanded of his father, injecting as much bite into the tone as he could as he fumbled with passenger side door. "Gone where?"

"It took him. I saw the damn thing," John murmured, his voice slurring a little.

"Saw what?" Dean's fear was growing for his brother. That didn't sound good.

"The... uh... hitchhiker..."

Dean frowned. He hadn't seen a damn thing. "What *hitchhiker*?"

John scowled, worry fuelling his anger. "It a ghost, Dean, we're dealing with a damn phantom hitchhiker."

Dean's blood ran cold. He'd heard of them and knew the legends well. It was another one of those things that civilians got wrong about the supernatural realm. Stories emerged all over the world about drivers picking up a hitchhiker who would ride with them and then disappear. The driver would then discover the passenger was dead and had been for quite some time.

It was bull. Most people who had genuinely seen a phantom hitchhiker never lived to talk about it. The apparitions were usually violent spirits who had died in some kind of traffic accident, or along the stretch of road they were haunting. They'd force the driver off the road and while the driver was looking for the body of the hitchhiker they hit, the ghost would strike.

Phantom hitchhikers, vanishing travellers, woman in white... they were all the same sort of thing, and they weren't looking to reach out and greet the corporeal world.

Dean stared unseeing out the window. "You think it has him?"

John shifted his shoulders. "I don't know. All I know is that your brother was here before we crashed, and now he's goddamn vanished."

Processing that information made Dean's head hurt and his stomach constrict. God, if this thing had his brother... Dean didn't even want to think about it. "Did you know it was here?"

He didn't need to be able to turn his neck towards his father; he could feel the glare being directed at him.

"Do you think I would put you or Sam in the way of this thing without *telling* you?" Even laced with pain, John's tone managed to sound just about as pissed as Dean had ever heard him. "I had no idea this frigging thing was out here."

And Dean believed him. If this had been a hunt, there would have been briefings and plans. John never walked into a hunt blind, and he certainly wouldn't let his sons do so either.

With a low breath, Dean returned his attention to the door. The car itself was on a forty-five degree angle which put Dean lower than John, and the whole driver's side was jammed up against the trees. Dean's side seemed to have avoided most of the damage during the crash.

Shoving the door with his shoulder, ignoring the spike of pain that ran down his side, it swung out with an unearthly creak. Carefully, mindful of his back, Dean pulled himself out of the seat using the car itself to lever his injured body.

Dean gently tested each of his limbs, using the Impala for support; his legs hurt and were stiff, but they held his weight. His spine, though, felt bruised to hell and every twist and pull made him feel nauseous. His head was bleeding too, the gash in his temple the result of smacking into the window. But he was in one piece and, considering how damaged the car was, that was nothing short of a miracle.

"Dammit," he groaned as his eyes roved over the mangled frame of the Impala. She was a mess. He pushed that thought aside, and focused on his father.

John was slowly starting to move, fingers curling around the door handle. The driver's side of the car was so twisted that Dean knew before John even tried that there was no way in hell he was getting the door open.

"Dad, you're gonna have to climb over my seat."

John raised rheumy eyes towards him and for the first time, Dean noticed the sheen of perspiration layering his pallid skin. His father was hurt... and lying about it.

"Where?" was all Dean said but John seemed to grasp what his son was asking.

"I'm OK." Dean's brow pulled down into a 'V'-shape. John scowled, dragging the keys from the ignition and handing them to Dean. "Instead of watching me getting out of this damn tin box, make yourself useful and grab some supplies from the trunk."

Reluctantly, Dean complied. He didn't want to leave John but he also realised time was a luxury they did not have. His brother was in the clutches of a potentially psychotic spirit and every minute that passed was a minute longer Sam was gone.

With shaky hands, Dean shoved the key into the lock and pushed the trunk open. The frame work was caved in on the left side, but other than that it was relatively undamaged. Lifting the panel that revealed the hidden stash of weapons, Dean's mind raced.

His brother had to be OK. Sam was smart; Dean tried to convince himself that his brother would be able to hold on till they reached him, but Sam had never gone solo on a hunt, had never had to face this sort of thing alone before. Dean hoped the kid had enough sense to run rather than try and take it on. His insides felt like they were twisted into knots. Fumbling, he grabbed a shotgun and handgun, sliding the latter down

his waist band, before snatching up a box of rock salt ammunition.

John appeared suddenly at the side of the trunk, hunched around the shoulders a little, one hand curled around his side. He held his other hand out for a gun and, obediently, Dean provided him with the pump-action Browning he had just picked up, taking the sawed-off Remington still in the trunk for himself. John took the weapon wordlessly, but Dean's eyes lowered to his father's mid-section and the guarded hand wrapped around it. Even in the poor light, he didn't fail to notice the dark patch staining John's shirt.

"Dad?" Dean raised worried eyes.

"It's just a flesh wound, son," John said, then, as if to emphasise the point, he leaned into the trunk and grabbed a box of ammo.

A flesh wound in Winchester speak could be anything from a cut to a full-amputation, Dean knew that. With that in mind, he wanted to push further about his father's injury, but he also wanted to find Sam. The fact his father was talking and walking suggested it wasn't *that* bad. That was enough, for now. He would deal with John's wound later once his brother wasn't in the hands of a psychotic ghost.

Loading salt rounds into the shotgun, John's eyes shifted around the shallow ditch before coming back to Dean's face. Anger and worry lined John's fine but underneath that Dean saw determination. Determination that they would get Sam back in one piece, determination that nothing – not even an injury - was going to stop him..

"Let's find your brother," John said, snapping the barrel back into place and starting up the incline.



Sam awoke trembling, his body shaking with cold and barely aborted adrenaline. He was lying face down on the ground, his legs curled into his torso, the smell of damp wood infusing his nostrils. Taking a ragged breath, he tried to open his eyes and was rewarded with a sharp, stabbing pain through his head that momentarily blinded him.

Once his vision had cleared enough, Sam dragged his swollen face across the floor and tried to figure out where the hell he was.

The room was lit with a spluttering candle, balanced unsteadily on the window ledge casting a murky orange glow that was struggling to push away the darkness. Shadowed trees wavered outside the small latticed window like silent giants, the leaves rustling in the cold air.

Thick dust layered the bare wood floors and a stone hearth lay on the far wall. Although there was not a stick of furniture in the room, aside from a rack of fire stokers and a wood bucket, Sam suspected he was in what must have been the living area.

Off the main room there was a set of double sliding doors, pushed back to reveal a second room – possibly the bedroom. The left door had come out of the runner and hung precariously by a thread, threatening to fall at any point and the wood was as rotted as the rest of the building.

A cabin... he was in some kind of cabin. It was like something right out of a horror movie which didn't ease his fear at all.

Groaning and wincing simultaneously as a wave of dizziness swept over him, Sam squeezed his eyes shut until the nausea abated. Every inch of him hurt, burned with the ferocity of his beating, of the crash and of god knows what else Jed Ellis had done to him while he'd been unconscious.

Carefully, Sam shifted his tied hands so he could probe his side. The gesture hurt more than he could have envisioned but he didn't halt his self-examination, holding his breath through the pain. He had to know how bad it was.

After a moment of skimming over his torso, the fourteen-year-old concluded that nothing was broken – although it sure as hell felt like it should have been. Each breath was like inhaling shards of glass, and his chest felt so tight that he could barely manage to drag air into his abused lungs. Thankfully, there was no blood. Bruising, he could cope with – no matter how painful it was – but blood... that indicated a serious injury and Sam couldn't deal with serious out here.

His head and face were another matter entirely. Sam wasn't surprised to feel something warm and sticky plastered down his left cheek. It was coming from a deep gash on his temple, a deep gash that was still spouting blood like a burst water pipe, dripping off his chin onto the ground. His too-long hair was matted into the viscous liquid, crusted into his skin. Sam's lip was also twice its normal size and split like a watermelon.

Eyes closed, Sam pushed himself onto shaking hands and managed to get onto his knees. The world spun around him for a moment before righting. One hand firmly planted into the ground, Sam risked prising his heavy lids to half-mast, grateful that everything was holding still again.

Gathering what was left of his muddled pride, Sam somehow managed to stagger to his feet, ignoring the pain in his legs and the way they trembled under his weight. His tall frame swayed with the change in altitude. The ground beneath his feet felt like it was shifting and rolling, and the sensation only added to his nausea. Where the hell was the frigging ghost?

Eyes scanned frantically but the house was completely deserted. For Sam that was enough incentive to get the hell out of there. Escape now, question later. He moved as quickly as he could manage with his injuries towards the front door and reached for the latch. He'd barely grazed it when the air in the room suddenly went cold as ice.

A chill ran up Sam's spine as if something had just brushed its fingers down his back making him shudder. The sense of being watched intensified until the only sound was his own shallow breathing and the protesting creak of old wood that hadn't been walked upon for a long time.

A hand appeared out of nowhere and tightened around Sam's throat. It was followed by the wavering apparition of Jed Ellis himself. Sam couldn't help the whimper that slid from his lips as he was slammed against the nearest wall, his head smashing against the wood. His spine erupted in an explosion of pain, spots spilling across his eyes.

Jed's icy grip held him tightly, squeezing with such force that breathing was becoming impossible. Sam struggled against the crushing grasp, his eyes locking with the angry pools of the spirit holding him, staring into the rage behind them. Jed Ellis meant to kill him. Sam recognised that look in his eyes: hatred, pure and unforgiving.

Tied hands clawed at the watery grasp, but his efforts were futile. The pressure against his windpipe was

increasing painfully and Sam's vision flickered. He tried to drag air down to his lungs but nothing moved past the hitchhiker's grip. His chest burned with the need to inhale, to get in even a small amount of oxygen but he couldn't. It was like a cork had been shoved down his throat. He was suffocating. God, he was dying.

Suddenly, a loud bang rang out, echoing around the small house. Sam recognised the sound immediately, even on the edge of consciousness. He wasn't sure who was more scared by the gunshot; him or the ghost. Jed Ellis shrieked and winked out of existence completely as the salt round hit him. Without the spirit's hold, Sam's legs folded beneath him. His knees barely grazed the floor before strong hands were fisted into his sweatshirt, holding him up.

"Sam!" The voice was familiar but Sam was having real trouble focusing on anything. "Sammy?"

Blinking, Sam raised his heavy head towards the voice, his lids struggling to stay open as he was gently lowered onto the floor. His brother pulled him into his chest, his head resting on his shoulder as he tried to get a look at his torn back.

"God, Sammy, I know I said chicks dig scars, but you didn't have to put that to the damn test."

"D-Dean?" How the hell was his brother here? The last time he'd seen Dean he'd been unconscious, now he stood before him, the proverbial white knight, riding in to save his little brother.

"Yeah, it's me." Dean pulled back from him, one hand clenched around the neck of his sweatshirt, the other on the side of Sam's face, steering his jaw to the side to check the extent of his injuries. After a moment he let out a low breath. "Your face looks like it went through a meat grinder."

It felt like it too. Sam kept that thought to himself, however.

"How'd you... find me?" Sam asked, his bound hands moving of their own volition to twist his fingers into his brother's jacket, reassuring himself that Dean was really there.

"You left tracks a blind guy could have followed, Einstein," Dean said quietly, examining Sam's head.

"You... you were –" Sam broke off, his voice hitching, his emotions frayed. "I thought you were both –"

Not dead, no; Sam hadn't ever thought that. He couldn't think that, couldn't wrap his head around the magnitude of such a thought. He had thought he was screwed, however. His sudden salvation wasn't doing anything for his shaky nerves.

Dean gave him a sombre look. "Me and Dad...? We're fine, Sam." When Sam favoured his older brother a sceptical glare, Dean shrugged. "We're doin' a helluva lot better than you, Rocky Balboa."

"The car... it...it... we crashed," Sam was surprised by the awe in his own voice. He couldn't help it. He felt safe with his brother here and, as he started relaxing, his adrenaline fled and shock set in.

"Don't worry 'bout the car, Sammy," Dean said softly, fingering Sam's head. The touch, despite being gentle, stung badly. Sam pulled back from his brother, instantly listing to one side. Dean wound his fingers more tightly into his sweatshirt, straightening him.

"Easy, short fry," Dean said quietly, pulling Sam against his chest once more to settle him. The world was spinning around the fourteen-year old and Sam was finding it difficult to focus on anything other than the roiling room.

"Short?" Sam pushed the word through barely parted lips, his eyes open no more than a crack, his voice breathy. "Taller than... than you, dude."

Dean snorted, his breath warm against Sam's neck. "Hair height doesn't count, Dolly Parton."

Sam swallowed hard, letting his head relax on his brother's shoulder, breathing in the reassuringly familiar scent of him. His whole body throbbed with pain, and the swirling in his head was beckoning him, wanting him to give into the pull of the maelstrom. Safe in his brother's arms, Sam gave into that desire.

"Hey, hey, eyes open, Sleeping Beauty." Dean's palm grazed Sam's cheek roughly as he pulled back from the embrace.

"Sorry..." Sam muttered thickly, trying to open his eyes fully. He didn't manage it.

"Where else you hurt?" Dean asked, his eyes searching Sam's abused body. "Apart from the obvious face-job the *Stay Puft Marshmallow Man* gave you."

"My... my little finger *doesn't* hurt," Sam said with a crooked, wan grin.

His brother didn't return the gesture, his fingers moving instead to fumble with the ropes circling Sam's wrists, his hands trembling slightly as he tried to loosen the knots.

It took a couple of seconds, but finally Sam was freed from his bonds. Lowering his hazel orbs to his wrists, he couldn't help but grimace at the markings the ropes had left. The skin was raw, painful and weeping a little. The bandage on his sprained wrist had absorbed most of the burns that should have adorned the skin, but there was still a small amount of blood staining the dirty material.

"I'm guessin' that didn't help your sprain much," Dean said giving him a sympathetic glance.

Sam shrugged tiredly. "It doesn't hurt that much."

Sam left out the fact that was because the rest of his body was thrumming. His brother was already in protective overdrive; there was no need to add to it.

"What 'bout you?" Sam asked, wincing as Dean continued to probe his wrists.

Dean glanced up, his brow pulling tightly. "Dude, you're sitting here looking like you went ten rounds with Muhammad Ali and lost, and you're asking if I'm OK?"

Sam scowled. "Well...? Are you?"

Sighing, his brother shrugged. "I'm fine."

If lies could be sold, the Winchesters would be millionaires. Sam could tell his brother, despite what he said, was in pain. There was a stiffness in his posture and a tightness around his mouth every time he moved, but no amount of probing was going to get his brother to admit to anything. It was Winchester code: anything short of death required an 'I'm fine' response.

"Where's Dad?" Sam asked, changing the subject realising his brother wouldn't admit to a damn thing. He vaguely recalled there had been blood on John's face, remembered his father hadn't been moving the last time he saw him.

"He's checkin' the perimeter," Dean replied, his voice tightening as he carefully eased Sam against the wall, one hand locked onto his shoulder to keep him from listing again.

"He OK?" Sam asked running his tongue over his dry, cracked lips, worried by Dean's tone.

"You know Dad," was all Dean said.

"Meanin' what?" Sam pushed, letting his head drop back against the wall, his wobbling gaze trying to focus on the shifting, cobwebbed ceiling. It was becoming more difficult to keep his eyes open and Sam was battling the twin demons of exhaustion and pain.

Dean merely grunted, but there was a hint of irritation in the gesture. "Dad's OK, Sam."

For some reason, Sam didn't believe that, but didn't have a chance to push it as the man in question appeared. Framed against the velvet darkness outside and the spluttering candlelight from inside the cabin, he shadowed the doorway like a silent sentinel. A shotgun in his hand, John crossed the dusty floor in three steps, dropping down onto one knee next to Sam.

"Sammy..." John breathed his name with relief that Sam had never heard so unguardedly before. The weapon came to rest on the floor, a hand moving to cup Sam's bruised face. "You OK, son?"

It was comforting to have both his brother and father here now. There was a certain amount of relief in knowing he no longer had to fight these things alone, in knowing that someone else would take this off his shoulders.

Sam nodded slowly, his vision fracturing a little with the movement. "M'OK, Dad."

John evidently didn't believe what he was being told because his next words were directed at Dean.

"Is your brother OK?"

"He's just peachy, Dad," Dean muttered. Sam didn't need to be able to see to know the look John was directing at his brother; he could practically feel it cutting through the air. Dean sighed resignedly. "He's pretty banged up. His head's a mess and his face... I dunno."

Sam wanted to point out that the doom and gloom attitude was unwarranted and that he was fine – well, not fine, but not ready to cash in his chips yet – but his damn mouth wouldn't work. Instead, he made some kind of sound that was somewhere between a groan and a whimper. Dean turned back to him, his expression grave.

"I think he needs a hospital," Dean said quietly, but the words reached Sam's ears and made his apprehension jump up a notch to fear. They rarely did hospital visits... it had to be goddamn serious for a hospital visit.

"One problem at a time, Dean," John murmured, his eyes shifting around the all too quiet house.

Sam's overwrought brain suddenly remembered what the hell had been hunting him.

"It's a ghost," Sam murmured through barely parted lips.

"Yeah, we know, Sammy," John replied, his eyes still scanning the room. "It's a phantom hitchhiker. I saw the thing... before I hit it," was all John said by way of explanation.

“Not to mention the fact that there was only one set of tracks from the car – yours – and they didn’t exactly look like you’d gone for a stroll,” Dean said with a grunt. Sam could truly believe that. Jed Ellis had dragged him up to the road. That had to have left some pretty interesting markings. “Wasn’t too hard to put two and two together and figure out that something had gotten a hold of the huge beacon of trouble that you are.”

“How’s any of this my fault?” Sam demanded, trying to inject an indignant tone into his voice. He didn’t think he managed it. His tongue felt too big for his mouth, making it difficult to speak without tripping over his words.

“Trouble’s attracted to you in the same way that girls love puppies, Sam,” Dean said. “You’re irresistible.”

“Did it speak to you?” John asked, finally halting his scanning of the room and returning his attention back to Sam. He took over Dean’s examination of his injuries, but unlike his all-too-expressive brother, John didn’t let a single emotion slide across his face.

“He thinks I’m someone called Jenkins-- that I killed him,” Sam said. “He really doesn’t like this guy,” Sam hissed as his father probed his wrists. John raised liquid brown eyes to his youngest as he concluded his exam of the swollen limbs.

“He say why?”

“Thinks... Jenkins killed him.” Sam grimaced as John pushed the hem of his sweatshirt up uninvited to examine his torso. Dean let out an audible gasp as he noted the extent of the bruising.

“Shit, Sam,” Dean breathed.

“It’s not as bad as it looks.” Sam tried to assure him even as he pulled his bottom lip between his teeth. It felt like he’d been smacked by a truck, not that it looked much better. Sam didn’t need to lower his eyes, he’d seen the mix of black and purple that mottled his inflamed skin. It wasn’t pretty. The sceptical, raised brow from his brother said more than any words ever could.

“Yeah, well, it *looks* bad, Sam,” Dean said seriously, his green eyes locked onto his younger sibling’s body.

“It’s mostly bruising,” John confirmed, pulling Sam’s sweatshirt back down and pulling the inside of his cheek between his teeth. “Son of a bitch won’t stay hidden long,” John said, grabbing for his shotgun as he climbed back to his feet.

Sam blinked the haze from his sight and managed to battle through the fog to see his father’s imposing figure. John was blood smeared himself and hunched over a little, but the anger in his eyes was unmistakable.

“You’re hurt.”

John didn’t get a chance to reply. The only warning Sam got that the hitchhiker, Jed Ellis, was returning was a severe drop in the temperature and the bristling of the hair on the back of his neck.

Dean instantly raised his handgun, leaping to his feet without Sam having to warn him of what was coming. God knows his older brother had dealt with enough spirits in his lifetime to recognise the early warning signs. John had also stopped moving and had gone as still as a rabbit caught in a hawk’s eye line. Sam’s heart pounded frantically, his skin too hot as the spirit suddenly appeared in front of him.

John and Dean both fired simultaneously and Jed vanished with a blood-curdling shriek. Eyes darting frantically, John moved over to Dean and fisted his fingers into his jacket, shoving him a little towards Sam.

“Get your brother back to the car,” John barked the order.

“What about you?” Dean asked, a hint of apprehension in his tone.

“I’ll be right behind you.”

Sam saw Jed reappear first, his watery figure shimmering before becoming solid.

“Look out!” Sam barely managed to shout the warning before his father and Dean were air bound.

He didn’t see them land, didn’t see anything other than Jed’s face inches from his own, his ripped out throat spewing blood like a geyser once more. Icy fingers curled around his throat but the spirit barely applied any pressure.

“Brought sum friends, boy? Think they can save yer?” Jed snarled. “Ain’t no one gonna get the better of Jed. Not this time. Not again.”

The hand that wasn’t wrapped around Sam’s throat appeared in his rippling sight. Jed was clutching a length of chain, one end wrapped around his hand, the other hanging vertically nearly to the floor, swaying alongside his leg as he kept his gaze firmly locked on Sam’s face. Bile crept up Sam’s throat as he shifted pain-filled eyes towards the interlocking rings.

Where the hell did Casper get that frigging thing from?! Sam tried to shrink further into the wall, his head twisting to the side, his eyes closing of their own accord as if he could block out the ghost.

“Please...no...” He knew he sounded pathetic begging, knew his father would have looked down on such an act, but Sam didn’t care. His father wasn’t the one facing a psychotic ghost with a chain.

“Yer dead, Jenkins,” Jed growled and flicked the chain back.

Sam braced himself for the hit, braced himself for the explosive pain he knew was going to come. It never did.

Dean came out of nowhere and threw himself towards the spirit of Jed Ellis. The ghost winked out of existence and Dean, met with empty air, slammed into the floor heavily. Even as the spirit reappeared, Dean was moving towards his gun; he must have dropped it when the ghost threw him.

“Yer wanna die too, boy?” the ghost barked as he pulled the chain taut between his hands.

Ignoring the taunt, Dean half-staggered, half-ran, twisting and scrabbling across the floor for his weapon. He wasn’t going to make it; Sam could tell. The ghost was faster and his brother was hurting from the car accident or from being thrown, Sam wasn’t sure which. He tried to move, tried to get up to help his brother, but his hurt body didn’t want to comply. Eyes shifted quickly towards their downed father. John was sprawled in a heap and wasn’t showing any signs of getting up.

In a split-second, Jed Ellis had Dean by the front of his jacket, dragging him onto the tips of his toes. He looped the chain around his throat and pulled the two loose ends in opposite directions in a movement so swift that Sam hadn’t even had time to register it. Dean wheezed as it tightened, his lips starting to tinge

blue as his airway was blocked. He clawed pathetically at the chains, trying to loosen them but to no avail. Jed was stronger.

“Dean...” Sam blinked at the scene playing out in front of him, his mind rolling. “No... *no...*”

Pushing his own pain aside, Sam somehow managed to get to his knees. He could see his brother’s gun lying on the dusty ground; he just had to reach it. Blocking out Dean’s choked gasps for breath and the darkness encroaching in his peripheral vision, Sam attempted to stand. Using the wall to support his shaking legs, Sam half turned towards the spirit.

“Let him go, Jed...” Sam attempted to growl it, hoping the palpable fear coursing through him wasn’t evident. “You wanna kill me? Then kill *me.*”

Sam cautiously removed his hand off the wall hoping he’d stay upright and straightened as much as his aching chest would allow, which, as it turned out, wasn’t much. White hot fire exploded through his torso like he had never experienced. He clenched his teeth together, his brow knitting tightly. It was all he could do to stop himself from blacking out. That was not an option right now; to do so would only lead to his own death and possibly his brother’s.

The ghost twisted his head towards Sam, his stormy eyes dark. Dean collapsed suddenly onto all fours as Jed released him and vanished like morning mist. Gasping and panting desperately for air, his forehead pressed against the floorboards, Dean raised watery eyes, seeking out his younger sibling.

“Sammy...” his voice was quiet and raspy, barely more than a whisper but Sam heard the desperation in the tone.

Jed moved towards Sam, his teeth bared, the chain loose in his hands again.

“Yer think yer can take me on, boy?” the ghost snarled, moving closer to Sam, his footsteps echoing around the suddenly too small room. Sam’s hand found itself pressed against the wall again as his legs wobbled beneath him.

“Sam... no...” Dean was trying to rise but his own body was not complying, weakened from being strangled.

A cold hand shot out and wrapped around Sam’s chin, pushing him back against the wall. His neck was forced back, hyper-extended to the point of being painful as hell. Perspiration was trickling between his shoulder blades and his stomach was twisting into solid knots of fear.

“Enough games, boy,” Jed growled, his mouth inches from Sam’s face. “This ends here.”

What happened next, Sam wasn’t sure. Pain erupted through the back of his skull and for a moment everything went dark. When his vision finally came back online, the blackness was still curtaining the edges of his sight.

His hearing faded, his ears stuffed full of cotton balls but he heard the gunshot clearly – if not muted. Sam’s heavy eyes slid towards where the sound of the gunshot had come from.

Dad...

Dad was awake... His father had rolled onto his side, his shotgun raised and pulled against his body, but it was his expression that scared Sam. Angry...? Dad was livid.

The spirit disappeared... and then Sam was falling. His legs folded beneath him and he hit the floor hard. The smell of musty, damp wood infusing his nostrils was the last thing he remembered.



Sam felt his mind reboot slowly, and was immediately aware that something wasn't quite right. His face was numb... actually so was the rest of his body. It was masking an uncomfortable dull aching that seemed to thrum underneath the haze he was feeling.

"Sammy?"

At the sound of his name, Sam prised gritty eyes open. For a moment everything was blurry and Sam tried to blink the fuzz from his vision.

"Sam? You with me, man?"

Dean... it was Dean.

Sam rolled his gaze towards his brother's voice, a task which was a hell of a lot harder than it should have been, and tried to focus on the dark, familiar shape at the side of him.

"Think...so," Sam managed to say, although he sounded hoarse and his throat burned.

Dean moved closer and finally his face sharpened. His cheeks were littered with cuts and bruises and his lip was split. He was wearing a sling on his left arm too but other than that he seemed unscathed. Rolling his head across the pillows behind his head, Sam took in the rest of the room.

A machine beeped at the side of him, keeping a steady rhythm and the walls were white-washed and clinical. There was an IV coming out of the crook of his left arm and his right was in a shiny cast. The bottom half of his body was covered with a bobbled blue blanket, leaving his heavily bandaged chest exposed. Even without the smell of antiseptics, the tell-tale equipment and sterile environment, Sam would have known without even looking that he was in hospital.

"Thank god. Didn't think you were gonna come round before Attila the Hun made me leave."

Sam was sure nothing about that sentence made sense, but he was too tired to debate it.

"You OK?" Sam asked, attempting to sit up. Dean's hands were instantly on his shoulders, gently pushing him back into the pillows.

"Moving around is a big no-no, Sammy," Dean said softly, "Not unless you want Attila to kick my ass."

Sam frowned. "Dean...?"

His brother sighed and sank into the chair next to him. "I'm fine." When Sam gave him a sceptical look, he held his hands up defensively. "Seriously, dude, I am. The doc said I've got some bruising to my back, a busted arm and a concussion, but that's it."

Sure that his brother was telling the truth, Sam let out a long breath. "Where's Dad?" he asked.

"He's down the hallway. Got a nasty-assed slash down his side that earned him a couple of days in 'Hotel Hell'. Attila was worried he was gonna get gangrene or tetanus."

"Who the hell is Attila?" Sam asked, confusion splaying across his swollen face at the mention of the name for the third time.

"The frigging doc, dude," Dean muttered sourly, but Sam noticed his brother glanced towards the open door before he continued to speak. "She's vile."

Sam wasn't sure he even wanted to know. There was something else more pressing that Sam did want to know about, however.

"How long was I out?"

"Six hours."

Sam blinked at that revelation.

"Six hours? What's wrong with me?"

"You mean apart from the facial reconstruction Jed Ellis attempted?" Dean's tone sobered suddenly, the grin sliding from his face. "A couple of broken ribs, a bruised kidney and a concussion."

"What happened?" Sam licked his lips, his eyes sliding shut. Everything was a little hazy, images and events careening through his brain in no particular order making it difficult to put everything into some kind of chronology.

Dean's tone sobered. "Officially... Dad lost control in the storm and totalled the Impala. Unofficially... you got mashed by South Dakota's first hitchhiking serial killer spook."

That made even less sense when Sam repeated it in his head. "W-what?"

"Do you remember anything at all?" Dean questioned, his brow furrowing.

"Some..." Sam admitted. His head felt stuffy and he was finding it hard to pull anything out of it. "I remember the crash... the ghost... last thing I remember is being in that cabin."

"You remember Casper the psychotic ghost trying to kill you?"

Sam nodded slowly, wishing he hadn't as his head throbbed with pain.

"You OK?" Dean asked worriedly. "You want me to get the doctor? Attila's not *that* bad."

"No... I'm fine."

Dean snorted. "Sure you are."

Sam let out a weary breath. There was no point arguing his well-being with Dean. It wasn't an argument he would win anyway

“What about Jed?” He sounded so small, his voice cracking and hitching as he spoke the spirit’s name.

“Gone. Dad called Bobby as soon as the EMT brought us here. He and Caleb are stopping by to salt and burn the son of a bitch. Apparently, Jed was around in the forties. He used to hitchhike and when they stopped to give him a ride, Jed’d kill them off one by one. From what Bobby said he killed half a dozen people before Jed took on someone stronger.”

“Jenkins,” Sam said, fitting the last piece of the puzzle together. “Jenkins killed him.”

“Seems that way. They never found his body at any rate. Anyway, no one else went missing off the road until six months ago. Something must have disturbed Jed’s body, but I’m guessing that he’s been searching for Jenkins ever since.”

Sam nodded slowly. At least Jed wouldn’t be able to hurt anyone again. Bobby and Caleb would have done a thorough job.

“The car’s screwed, isn’t it?”

Dean sobered. “She’s in a bad way but a little TLC and she’ll be fine.” Dean must have been worried about Sam. Any other time and the car being totalled would have had his brother distraught. The fact he was brushing it off suggested Sam’s injuries were bad. Not that it surprised him. He suspected it was only whatever drugs that they were pumping through his IV that was keeping him from feeling every cut and bruise.

Sam closed his eyes, his lips twitching at the corners, “She? Dean, you do realise it’s just a car, don’t you?”

“Hold your tongue, heathen!”

Sam laughed, in spite of the muted pain it caused him. Dean smiled at his younger sibling before sighing.

“You know, we’re gonna have to fit you with a crash-helmet or something before your brains actually get beaten out of your skull.” Dean shook his head. “What the hell were you thinking antagonising the pissed-off spirit of a crazy son of a bitch?”

“He was going to kill you, Dean,” Sam said quietly. Even though Dean was fine, Sam couldn’t prevent the stab of fear that thrust into his stomach at the reminder of Jed attacking his brother. It had been a close call. Too close. The bruising to Dean’s neck was avid now; stark purples and blacks standing brightly against his pale skin. Sam wondered absently how the hell his brother had explained the markings. No way in hell would any doctor believe they were caused by the crash.

“Yeah, he very nearly killed *you*, Sam,” he snapped. “And I can take care of my goddamn self.”

Sam sighed. “I know you can, but you’re my brother and you were in trouble. I did what I had to. I did what *you* would have done.”

Dean frowned, his jaw twitching. He couldn’t argue with it because he *had* done exactly the same thing and the angry black bruising across his neck only highlighted that fact. Dean held his hand up, shifting uncomfortably.

“No chick flick moments, dude.”

Sam smiled wearily, letting the drugs coursing through his body take a firmer foothold. It was tempting to

give into them. "Whatever, jerk," Sam muttered, his eyes shut.

Dean snorted. "You're the idiot who was in two car accidents in as many days, jinx."

Sam cracked an eye. "Says the guy who got us lost on the highway to Amityville."

"Hey, it was you who attracted the Phantom frigging hitchhiking serial killer."

Sam shot back another retort half-heartedly. They had survived and they were all, more or less in one piece. At the end of the day, that was all that mattered.

