

Journey's End by Scribblesinink

"Journeys end in lovers meeting,
Every wise man's son doth know."

—Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (II, iii, 44-45)

From www.hauntingsinbritain.co.uk:

Sellesley Hall, Yorkshire

Sellesley Hall has been home to the Pelham family since the mid-1500s. The manor passed to the National Trust when the last Baron of Sellesley died. The house has since been converted to a museum and is now open to visitors.

But visitors beware! Hauntings In Britain has it on good authority that there is more than meets the eye to this mainly Elizabethan property. In the early seventeenth century, the fifth baron's daughter, Matilda, vanished mysteriously on the same night that her suitor, Geoffrey Blackwood of Oakley, was found stabbed through the heart before the fire place in the drawing room. Ever since, servants and family members have reported hearing whispered curses and feeling cold drafts that cannot be explained by the wind off the moors finding its way past old windows and heavy drapes.

While the Pelham family tried to draw a discreet veil over Geoffrey's murder and Matilda's disappearance, local gossip suggests Geoffrey surprised Matilda—a leading beauty in the Yorkshire society of the time—entertaining another paramour. Perhaps the lovers eloped from the scene of the grisly crime. Whatever the truth, Geoffrey's killer was never apprehended, and no trace of Matilda has ever been found...

oOo

The Impala roared through the growing darkness. If he dipped his head low enough, Sam could see in the side mirror the last of the daylight fading away behind them, clouds lined with pink mottling the deep purple sky. Up ahead, stars were popping out. He slid further down the leather of the seat until his knees hit the dash, letting his head fall back. He rubbed at his eyes, gritty with fatigue. Hell, there wasn't an inch of him that wasn't sore or stiff. The fresh scrapes on his left cheek stung; he stank of grave dirt; and, somewhere near Davenport on the Iowa/Illinois state line, his ass had turned numb from too many hours in the car.

Dean was hunched over the wheel, staring as if hypnotized at the asphalt slipping by. He

must be as tired as Sam was. Probably more: except for a few quick bathroom breaks and coffee stops, Dean had been driving non-stop since before sunrise. Sam wouldn't be surprised if Dean had frozen in position: eyes front, hands wrapped around the steering wheel, brow furrowed in concentration.

At the edge of the road, a sign flashed by, announcing the next exit was coming up in another mile. It also promised rooms at the SleepInn for \$29.99, with breakfast thrown in, as well as gas and the usual mix of fast-food places.

"Let's take this." Sam's voice sounded hoarse in his own ears: it was the first thing he'd said in many hours.

Dean's eyes flicked briefly away from the road. "Nah, not yet. I wanna keep goin' till we're in Indiana."

"Dean, we must've done eight hundred miles already. And we're two states over. That oughta be enough."

"Sure," Dean said. "And once we hit Indiana we'll have *three* states between us and a seriously pissed-off county sheriff who's hell-bent on throwing our bony asses in jail. We keep going."

The Impala raced past the exit. Sam swiveled his head and watched the beckoning lights of the SleepInn disappear behind them. He turned back and shot a glare at his brother. "If you hadn't been so goddamn flippant about us digging up the sheriff's grandfather's corpse, he mightn't have got so mad."

"Yeah? If you'd done your job and kept watch like I told you, I wouldn't have had the chance to get flippant, would I?" Dean reached for the radio and turned up the volume so high further conversation was impossible without yelling at the top of their voices. The music was hard and angry, and Sam felt the vibrations shake the entire car.

Sighing, he went back to watching the dark countryside speed by. To be honest, Dean had a point: Sam had let his attention slip, if only for a moment, when he caught the inscription on one of the headstones. The lapse had been long enough for the restless spirit of the old man to sneak up and throw him halfway across the graveyard, until his face met the trunk of an ancient oak tree. Sam wasn't sure what had happened right after—the world had turned into a dim haze for a short while—but the next thing he knew was Dean propping him up while flashlights blinded them, and Dean attempting to explain to local law enforcement why they were digging up an old grave in the middle of the night. Sam'd known they were truly in deep shit when the sheriff, a balding man in his forties with a drooping mustache, had taken one look at the open grave and growled,

"That's my granddaddy's final resting place, you sick fucks."

Dean must've come to the same conclusion, because he'd hauled Sam to his feet, given him a hard shove in the direction of the car, and taken off. Sam had stumbled after, stubbing his toes against head stones, and crashing through the dogwood and honeysuckle lining the paths as he ran. Furious sirens had followed them all the way to the county line, and only Dean's driving skills had kept them from getting caught and arrested.

But *dammit*, that headstone had been a shock. Nearly eighteen months had passed since Jess had died, and Sam had thought he was starting to move past it, surely if slowly. But then something like that happened—seeing her name on a headstone in a rural graveyard—and the memories came crashing down on him, all fresh and painful.

Never mind that this Jessica Moore, of Imperial, Nebraska had died in 1932 instead of 2005.

It wasn't something he could tell Dean. And thus Dean was still mad at him. Would probably stay mad for a while, too, since messing up on the job was a pretty serious transgression of the Winchester code of conduct. Besides, they hadn't even managed to finish salting and burning the old man's bones, so chances were the kind of bad shit that had led them to Imperial in the first place would go on happening: more blood on his hands.

Their lives so sucked.

Something tickled Sam's ribs, rhythmically, and it took him a moment to figure out it wasn't the bass vibrating from the speakers but his phone buzzing. He dug it out from his jacket pocket and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Sam?"

He could barely hear the woman's voice over the radio, and he reached over to turn down the volume. "Yeah."

"Oh, thank God." She sounded scared. "It's Sarah."

Sarah...? Who?

"Sarah Blake," she prompted when he didn't say anything. "From New Paltz, New York...." Her voice trailed off as she waited for him to remember.

"Oh, hi, Sarah." It seemed a lifetime ago since they'd been to New Paltz to investigate a

haunted painting that killed its owners. When they'd left, he'd promised Sarah he'd look her up some day, but he'd never kept the promise. Different time, different *job*, and he might have. As it was.... Sam fidgeted in his seat and wondered why she'd called him after so many months. "How are you?"

"Not so good. I... I think I need help." The sound of something heavy crashing down muffled her words. Sam furrowed his brow. "Your kind of help."

Sam glanced at Dean. "Our kind of help?" Another loud *thump* came over the line.

"Yes. You know.... With a ghost?" She let out a nervous laugh. "God, when I say it out loud...." Glass shattered somewhere near her, and she yelped. "There's something here, at the auction house." Panic edged into her voice.

"Okay, just get out of there." Sam winced as he heard another thud. "We're on our way. We'll be there by morning. Can you hold out that long?"

"I... I guess so." Her voice hitched. "Sam? Please hurry."

She cut the call, and Sam stared at the phone in his hands for a few seconds before he raised his head and looked at Dean. Dean met his gaze, one eyebrow quirked.

"That was Sarah."

Dean rolled his eyes before looking at the road again. "Yeah, I got that. When you said her name. Sarah who?"

"Sarah Blake." Dean gave a slight shrug to show he still wasn't any the wiser. "Remember that haunted painting, last year? The little girl with the razor?"

"The one where I had to salt and burn the little bitch's doll? *That* Sarah? What's she want now?"

"She needs our help." Sam gestured with his phone. "With something supernatural. I told her—."

"I heard what you told her." Dean took his eyes off the road long enough to glare at Sam. "Dammit, Sam, are you nuts? New Paltz is at least another eight hundred miles! We can't get there by morning. I've been driving for the past fifteen hours, and you were whining ten minutes ago that we should stop for the night. And now you want to head straight on through Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania?"

Sam shrugged. "I can drive." *If you stop being pissed at me and let me.*

Dean snorted. "Right. Did you forget you got knocked out by a friggin' tree less than a day ago? Your brain's probably all scrambled. You're in no condition to drive."

"Neither are you," Sam shot back. He squeezed his eyes shut a moment and took a breath. "Dean... she sounded really scared."

"Shit." Sam could barely make out the muttered word, but saw Dean slump in his seat, and he knew he had won. Dean let out a pained sigh. "Get some rest." He rolled his shoulders to loosen them. "I'll wake you in an hour."

Sam nodded. He nestled himself in the corner between the door, and the seat and tried to get as comfortable as he could in the cramped space. Closing his eyes, he quickly drifted off to sleep.

There were no dreams.

oOo

The driver behind them leaned on his horn when Sam cut a corner too close and forced the other car to brake hard. Even in a small town like New Paltz, early morning rush hour traffic was chaotic: streets crowded with harried mothers trying to get their kids to school in time, and businessmen in fancy suits chauffeuring Buicks and shiny BMWs while yammering into their cell phones. Sam swallowed a jaw-splitting yawn and glanced at Dean, but not even the sound of the car horn had woken his brother.

Perhaps, Sam thought, they should've stopped and crashed for a couple hours; he could've called Sarah to let her know they were running a bit later than promised. But she'd sounded truly scared, and that was why Sam had kept going, against his better judgment, once Dean finally handed over control of the Impala. He scraped his memory, trying to remember the route from the freeway to the Blake auction house. Two wrong turns and several red lights meant it took longer than he'd expected, but at last Sam could hit the blinker and turn into the half-full parking lot. A commercial van with a picture of a broom and the words *Triangle Cleaners* painted on its side had been backed up against the entrance.

Sam found an empty spot and killed the Impala's engine. Dean shifted and woke with a startled murmur. He blinked at Sam. "Is it my turn?"

Sam grinned, amused at how Dean could always sleep through the loudest racket, and would wake as soon as the Impala's engine changed pitch. "No, sleepyhead. We're here."

Dean glanced around the parking lot and frowned at the gray morning light. "I thought I told you to wake me after an hour?"

Sam shrugged. "You needed the rest more than me. You were behind the wheel for almost twenty hours straight."

"We had coffee breaks." Dean yawned widely, and Sam had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop himself from following Dean's example. "Sam, you—."

"Dean, I'm alright. I got us here in one piece." Sam held up his hands. "Don't worry, I only hit one fire hydrant along the way. Oh, and I think I might've grazed the fence when I turned into the parking lot...."

Dean shot up straight, a panicked expression on his face. "Goddammit, Sam, if you scratched her paint, I swear I'll—"

Sam chuckled. "I know. You'll kill me. Which is why I was careful."

Grumbling something under his breath that Sam couldn't make out, Dean opened the door and climbed from the car. Sam crawled out too, wincing as unused muscles got stretched and his spine cracked. Yet, it felt good to be standing up at last. Dean circled the car, studying it minutely and rubbing a cuff over a dirty spot here and there.

Sam laughed. "Dude, relax. I didn't hit anything." He thought it best not to tell Dean about the near miss he'd had just after coming off the interstate: Dean might never let him drive the car again if he knew. Sam turned towards the open door of the auction house. "Come on. Let's find Sarah, see what's what."

Dean shot a last, concerned glance at the Impala, before falling into step next to Sam. They rounded the cleaners' van and walked in. Glass scrunched under their boots right inside the door, and the place was abuzz with activity: people in blue coveralls with a broom similar to the logo on the van embroidered on the chest pockets were sweeping up broken glass and earthenware, and collecting debris in trash bags. On their right, a painting had clearly crashed to the floor, its gilded frame cracked and splintered. Near the staircase, a pile of dangerously sharp, glittering shards was all that was left of what had probably once been a mirror.

"Whoa." Dean waved at the shards. "That's gotta be worth at least seven years' bad luck."

"I should hope not."

Sam looked up at the sound of Sarah's voice. She was coming down the stairs, a warm smile of welcome lighting up her face; beneath the smile, she looked pale and wan, with dark circles under her eyes. Even so, she seemed genuinely pleased to see them, and Sam found himself smiling in return. "What happened?"

Sarah's smile faded. "I was hoping you guys could tell me that." Her eyes narrowed as she looked up at Sam. "What happened to *you*?"

Dean smirked. "Sammy tried to French-kiss an oak tree. Tree didn't like it much."

Sam shot him a glare. "Hazard of the job." He raised a self-conscious hand to the scrapes on his cheek. The newly-formed scabs felt rough beneath his fingers. "I'm fine."

Sarah looked from Sam to Dean and back. And although the expression on her face said differently, she let the matter go. Instead, she suggested, "Why don't we get out of the way of the clean-up crew and go upstairs to my office to talk? Coffee?"

"Oh God, yes."

Dean's tone made Sam feel like smacking him—he'd managed to make it sound as if he hadn't had the tallest size cups-to-go every time they'd stopped in the past twenty-four hours. Sarah simply shook her head, an amused look on her face, and turned and started back up the stairs.

About halfway to the second floor, Sam's sleep-deprived mind finally caught up with something Sarah had said. "*Your* office?"

She glanced back at them. "Yes. My father retired. Handed over the reins about four months ago. The business is mine now." She gave a rueful grin. "Shattered china, broken mirrors, and all."

"Wow. That's great. I mean, that the auction house is yours. Not—" Sam gestured behind him. "—that something did all that."

Dean poked him in the ribs with an elbow. "Smooth, dude." He kept his voice low. "Real smooth."

Sam shot Dean a dark look, but quickly turned his attention back to Sarah when she asked over her shoulder, "So, you really think it was *something*?"

"It sure as hell wasn't a *someone*." Dean glanced over the railing at the mess down below. "Or you'd have called the cops, not us."

"True."

They reached the landing and Sarah took them to a room at the far end. A large antique desk made of dark wood took up most of the space. The modern flat-screen computer on its surface presented a strange contrast and Sam smiled at the sight; such was the antique business in the twenty-first century. Not as if hunters hadn't moved with the times: he couldn't count how often they'd used the Internet to unearth some obscure bit of history.

A coffee pot bubbled in a narrow alcove off to the side, and Sarah walked over to it. A few moments later she handed them each a steaming mug.

"So." Sam blew on his coffee. "Tell us what happened?"

Sarah remained quiet for a moment, gathering her thoughts. "It started several days ago." She gestured them to where several chairs were grouped in a corner. Sam settled himself gingerly on a narrow-legged chair that looked as if it would collapse under his weight. He breathed a little easier when it didn't.

Sarah continued talking. "Pieces that seemed to have got lost, and then showing up where they weren't supposed to be. At first, I thought I just misremembered where we'd put them, or that someone on the staff had marked the lots wrong. But then I'd get here in the morning, and discover things had been displaced that were too heavy to move around carelessly. Dinner tables, an antique wardrobe, stuff like that. Two days ago, I found a beautiful nineteenth century chandelier in pieces on the floor right inside the door."

Sam whistled between his teeth.

"Yeah," Sarah agreed. "It wasn't as valuable as some of the antiques we broker, but still valuable enough to be a loss I can't really afford. And I knew it couldn't have been one of the staff: I was the last one here the night before, and nobody else had arrived yet." She paused for a moment, plucking some invisible lint from the leg of her pants, before she looked up to meet Sam's eye. "So, yesterday, I decided to stay overnight. See what was going on. At first, everything stayed quiet, until about an hour after sunset. That's when all hell broke loose: all sorts of stuff flying through the air; furniture toppling over and crashing to the floor; lights flickering and doors slamming. I felt like I was an extra in a horror movie. That's when I called you."

Sam exchanged a look with Dean. Dean gave a one-shouldered shrug to show he didn't know. "Poltergeist? Malevolent spirit? Could be all sorts of nasty things."

Sam turned back to Sarah. "Think you can show us around the property?"

"Of course."

"I'll get the EMF." Dean pushed to his feet.

Sam gave his brother a startled glance. Dean hardly went anywhere without that thing in his inner pocket. It was one of the things he almost always carried, along with a penlight, the silver knife in his right sock and an assortment of salt packages stashed away in various places. That he'd left the EMF in the car—.

But then Dean winked at him, right before slipping out of the door, and Sam knew it was another trick to give him some time alone with Sarah. Like the lost wallet. He wasn't sure whether to be irritated or thankful. Dean could be a persistent matchmaker ever since he'd hooked Sam up successfully with busty Jenny Nichols in eighth grade: big brother looking out for his little brother. In this case, the attempt was doomed to failure. There was no way Sam would put Sarah in danger, and God only knew what would happen to those close to him once the yellow-eyed demon put his plans in play. Sam made a mental note to tell Dean to cut the crap the first chance he got; he wasn't going to take any risk with Sarah's life.

"So," Sarah broke the slightly awkward silence that had fallen after Dean left, "how've you been, Sam? I must admit, I had kinda hoped you'd call, or drop by."

"Um, yeah." Sam shuffled his feet and rubbed his palms against his knees. He thought back on his life of the past months. "It's...."

"Let me guess," Sarah said with a laugh that sounded sad, "another long and complicated story?"

Sam grimaced. "Yeah. Something like that."

She nodded, chewing her lower lip while she observed him.

"Look." Sam gestured helplessly, feeling she deserved more of an explanation than that. "I would have liked to.... But my life...." He shook his head.

"You're still afraid someone might get hurt." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. Sarah...." He caught her eye. "I'm not trying to make excuses. I like you, and I think I could like you a lot more. But when I look back at these last months...."—*Dad dying; the demon's unknown plans for him; murdering Steve Wandell; attacking Jo*—"...I'm not sorry for not calling you."

She observed him quietly for a long moment, her dark eyes studying his features. Sam forced himself not to fidget under her scrutiny. "That's never gonna change, is it?" she asked at last, quietly. "There's really no chance for us?"

Sam looked down, shaking his head. "No. I don't think so."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Me too."

Neither knew what to say after that, and the silence stretched out uncomfortably. A large clock that Sam hadn't noticed before ticked away the seconds loudly, stretching the time into a minute, and another one. He cleared his throat. "Dean should be back with the EMF. Maybe we should—."

"Yes." Sarah hopped up from her chair, appearing as grateful as Sam for something to do.

oOo

"So, you found nothing?" Sarah took a bite of her toast, a small furrow creasing her brow. The breakfast-all-day diner was largely empty around them: too late for most breakfasters, and too early for the lunch crowd. They'd taken a booth halfway down the aisle, next to the window overlooking the parking lot, Sarah sitting opposite Sam and Dean. The waitress had put plates filled with blueberry pancakes and crispy bacon and scrambled eggs on the table before them a few moments ago, and the scent of the food reminded Sam how long it had been since he'd eaten a decent meal. He poured syrup over his pancakes and scooped up a large chunk.

"What does that mean?" Sarah continued. "That whatever's doing it's not something... weird?"

"Don' mean nuphin'," Dean mumbled around a mouthful of bacon and eggs.

Sarah's frown deepened and she glanced at Sam.

"What Dean is trying to say," Sam put down his fork and met Sarah's gaze, "is that it's not unusual that nothing shows up on the EMF during the day. There are plenty of things that only manifest at night."

Dean swallowed. "What I'd like to know," he said, gesturing at the waitress for a refill of coffee, "is what made it show up in the first place."

Sam nodded. "Sarah, do you know if anything like this ever happened before? Or anything else unexplainable, for that matter."

Sarah thought it over for a minute. "No. Other than that... painting...", She stumbled a little over the word, and Sam couldn't blame her: the experience must've been really harrowing for her, "I don't think so. The business has been in the family for many years, but I've never heard anything odd mentioned."

Dean hummed his displeasure at the answer, even as he stirred sugar into his coffee. "Have you made any changes recently? Sometimes, that sets a spirit off. Alterations, remodeling, that sort of thing?"

Sam added, "Or are you planning to have any work done?"

Sarah shook her head. "No. Dad had the entire building overhauled a while back. New wiring, new plumbing. But that was at least three years ago."

"So...", Dean dragged a piece of toast through his eggs, "if it's not the place...."

"... then it's a thing," Sam finished. He exchanged a look with Dean, before turning back to Sarah. "You said these hauntings started a week ago. Did you get any new stuff in around that time?"

Sarah winced at the word *hauntings*, but she didn't comment. Instead, she gave a brief laugh. "We have new acquisitions coming in pretty much on a daily basis. But... come to think of it," she frowned again, "I think the... hauntings started the day after we received a large shipment from Europe. Old family estate, lots of valuable pieces, some of them dating back to the Renaissance."

Dean let out an annoyed breath. "You know what this means, don't you, Sammy?"

Sam nodded, unhappily toying with the last few slices of pancake.

Sarah looked from one to the other. "Is there a problem? You can do something, can't you? 'Cause I don't think my insurance covers damage due to ghosts."

Though she gave a self-deprecating chuckle at the joke, Sam wasn't fooled; he'd caught the slight note of desperation in her voice. He straightened and speared another piece of syrup-coated pancake. "No, we can help. It's just—" He glanced at Dean. "It's not going to be as cut and dried as we'd hoped." He gestured with his fork. "See, if a spirit's connected to a place, it's usually near where they died. That makes it relatively easy to expel them."

"Find out who it is, dig up their bones, apply the good ol' salt and burn." Dean shrugged. "You know?"

Sarah shivered, probably remembering the night she'd gone with them to the local graveyard to unearth Isaiah Merchant, when they'd thought he was haunting the people who'd bought the Merchants' family portrait.

"But sometimes," Sam continued, "a spirit latches on to an object instead of a location. Especially old objects."

"Like you got from Europe." Dean plunked down his empty coffee cup. "Which would be the good news, in this case."

At Sarah's puzzled look, he explained, "Any bones associated with your shipment would be buried in Europe. Not exactly our usual stomping ground, but we probably don't need the bones. We can just get rid of this thing by destroying the object itself."

"So, what's the problem then?" Sarah wanted to know.

"Finding out what the object is." Dean pushed his empty plate away and slouched back. "That's gonna be a bitch, because it could be *anything*." He sighed. "It's kinda like a supernatural scavenger hunt."

"Sarah, we're gonna need to go over all the papers you've got relating to that shipment." Sam leaned forward. "Provenances, bills of sale, anything. We need to learn everything we can about the piece histories."

"Oh." She pushed her plate to the middle of the table, toast half-finished. "The files are a mess, I'm afraid. And with all that's been happening, I haven't even had time to run a proper inventory."

"Great." Dean rubbed his neck and pointed at the toast. "You not gonna eat that?" At Sarah's shake of her head, he grabbed it and stuffed it into his mouth.

Sam finished the last bite of now-cold pancake and downed the rest of his coffee in one big gulp. "Then we should head back to the auction house. Get started right away." He felt the weight of Dean's gaze on him. From the corner of his eye, he caught his brother glaring at him.

"Dude, seriously? Because I've been on my feet since..." Dean looked up at the ceiling, mentally calculating, "...since so long I don't even remember what a bed looks like. Same

as you. I'm beat and sore and you, quite frankly, could use a shower: you stink of cemetery."

"So do you," Sam shot back. He shoved his hands underneath the table, hiding the Nebraska dirt caked under his fingernails. "But—."

Dean cut him off. "Sam, that spook's not gonna show until tonight. Nothing we can do till then."

"We can do the research." Sam remembered the fear in Sarah's voice that had echoed over the phone last night, and he wanted to stop this ghost before she got hurt.

Dean blew out a breath and scrubbed a hand over his face. "Research? Right now, I wouldn't see a clue if it were written in flashing pink neon."

Sam opened his mouth, but Sarah was faster. "Your brother is right: you do look like you're about to drop dead." She shot a glance at Dean. "You both do. And I know I could do with a bit of sleep after the night I had."

"See?" Dean smirked. "Girl's smart. You should listen to her."

Sam caved. They did have a point, both of them. The letters of the menu had danced on the page, and he could feel his eyelids threatening to droop. "All right. A few hours, then." He turned to Sarah. "Got any suggestions for a low-budget place nearby where we can crash?"

A spark danced in her eyes, full of meaning. "Already taken care of."

They both stared at her, and Sarah laughed. "What? You think I'd let you guys come all this way and then not fix you up with a decent place to stay?"

"You didn't have to—Ow!" Dean kicked Sam's shin under the table, hard. Sam scowled at his brother, who pretended not to notice.

Also feigning tactful blindness, Sarah slid a set of keys across the table. "You're in the Oak Tree Inn. It's a bed and breakfast a couple blocks from the auction house." She gave them directions on how to find the place and finished up, "Room's in my name."

"Works for me." Dean snatched the keys from the table, slid out of the booth, and dropped a couple of bills next to his empty plate. "Sammy, let's go. Sooner we get some shuteye, sooner we can get rid of that son of a bitch." He nodded at Sarah, holding up the keys. "Thanks."

Sam hesitated.

"Come on, Sam, it's the least I can do." Sarah smiled at him. "Now, go, before your brother leaves without you." With a dip of her head she indicated Dean, who was gesturing in the doorway for Sam to hurry up.

Sam grinned back at Sarah. "We'll see you in a couple of hours, then."

"I'll have the paperwork ready," Sarah promised.

oOo

Ten minutes after they pulled out of the diner's parking lot, Dean slowed the Impala to a halt on a wide road in a sleepy neighborhood, where a modest sign near the sidewalk announced they'd arrived at the *Oak Tree Inn*.

"Damn." Dean had climbed from the car and gotten his first good look of the house. "Your girl's got class."

"She's not my girl," Sam murmured absently. He considered the inn—a converted Victorian home painted in earthy tones—and wondered how much staying at a place like this would cost. Probably more than the already heavily drawn-upon credit card in the name of Donald Holliday that he was currently toting could bear.

"Dibs on the shower" Dean was unlocking the trunk of the Impala and slinging his duffel over his shoulder. He winked at Sam, who rolled his eyes.

He followed Dean up the runner-covered stairs to their room. An antique dresser, holding a fragile-looking vase full of lilies, stood beside the door. Dean bumped the dresser with his duffel as he tried to open the door with one hand, and Sam jumped to catch the vase as it tottered dangerously. "Dude!"

They were so not cut out for a place like this.

Dean managed to get the lock open without further incident. The room was large, far larger than most of the places they usually slept in. Antiques filled it, but the central eye catcher were the two queen-sized beds covered with thick, fluffy-looking comforters of cream-colored satin.

"Damn," Dean repeated. He dropped his bag onto the bed closest to the door, and the duffel nearly disappeared into the feather-down coverlet. Dean spun around and smirked

at Sam. "Dude, I'm startin' to like this job more and more." He rooted around the contents of his bag, collected a semi-clean shirt and pair of jeans and disappeared through another door into what Sam assumed was the bathroom.

A moment later Sam heard an odd noise coming through the door. He knocked on the door. "Dean! Did you just... *squeal!*" Sam couldn't think of another word for the sound he'd heard.

The bathroom door flew open and a grinning Dean stood in the doorway. "Sammy, check this out." Dean pointed at the clawed feet holding a free-standing bathtub up. "And even better...." He gestured. "Steam shower." His eyes sparkled with glee. "God, I love those."

"Dude, you're such a girl." Sam couldn't help but laugh, and decided not to worry any longer about how much money this place would cost Sarah. After their father's death and the promises Dean had made, first to Dad, and then to Sam—not to mention that yellow-eyed bastard's threats hanging over them—life didn't hold much to smile about any more. So nowadays, anything that turned Dean into the proverbial kid let loose in a candy store was worth every cent in Sam's book.

"Am not," Dean objected, but there was no force behind his words. He shoved Sam back out of the bathroom and shut the door. A minute later, Sam heard the water running, and Dean belting out *Stairway To Heaven* at the top of his lungs.

Sam plopped down on the edge of the nearest bed and started unlacing his boots. Once he'd kicked them off, he let himself fall back. The mattress was as soft as it looked, and he sank deep into the downy coverlet, absently thinking he'd have to manhandle Dean out of the shower in a few, or his brother would hog the bathroom for the next couple hours.

Before he'd even finished the thought, Sam was fast asleep.

oOo

A couple hours of sleep did wonders for Sam's disposition, and he felt more cheerful than he had in a long while. Though the scrapes healing on his cheek itched, and a long night of hunting lay before him, the opportunity to wash off the Nebraska dirt helped improve his mood further.

"So." Dean yawned and shrugged a flannel shirt over a faded black tee. "Were you planning on tellin' me what the hell happened in Nebraska, or is this one of those things you need to keep to yourself?"

Sam's head whipped up from where he'd been lacing his boots. "Um... I...." Dean's

question had caught him unawares. It was almost as if his brother had waited for his guard to be down before bringing it up.

Dean reached down and slipped his small silver knife into its customary place at his ankle. "I saw the inscription too," he said softly, straightening and patting his back pocket to make sure the picklock set was where it was supposed to be.

"Dean... I...."

Dean swiveled back. "Look, Sam, I get it. But—."

"Do you?" Sam interrupted, suddenly angry. "Do you, really?"

Dean held Sam's gaze for a few seconds. "Alright, maybe I don't. Doesn't change the fact that I need you sharp when we're on a job. Getting put off your game like that'll get us killed. And I can't allow that, Sammy." He flashed a sudden grin. "Promised to keep you safe, didn't I?"

And with those words, Sam knew he was forgiven for the momentary lapse. His anger faded and he kept his mouth shut: Dean would likely grouch if he tried to say anything more on the subject. So he grunted a wordless reply and bent back to tying his boots.

"We'll go back in a few weeks." Dean collected his wallet and gun from the dresser and stashed them away. "Get rid of that bastard once and for all."

Sam searched the room for his jacket. "I don't know that we can," he cautioned. "You really pissed off that sheriff, I doubt he'll forget us any time soon."

"Hm." Dean shrugged into his leather coat and collected the keys for the Impala from the nightstand. "We'll call Ellen, then. Ask her to keep an eye out for anyone plannin' to head that way so they can finish the job." He opened the door. "You comin'?"

oOo

The sky was turning blue-black by the time they reached Blake's Auction & Acquisition. The parking lot was much quieter than it had been in the morning: the cleaner's van and most of the cars had gone. The only vehicle still occupying a space was a small, bottle-green Toyota that Sam guessed belonged to Sarah.

They parked at an angle close to the door, and Dean opened the trunk. He propped up the lid of the secret compartment with a shotgun and started rifling through the trunk's less-than-innocent contents. "What do we need?"

Sam shrugged. "Not sure."

Rolling his eyes, Dean tossed rock salt cartridges, lighter fluid and flashlights into a canvas bag. He added matches, consecrated iron bullets and silver knives, while Sam collected the small string-tied pouches filled with purifying herbs and roots similar to those they'd used in their old house in Kansas. Finally, they were done. Lifting the bag over his shoulder. Sam winced at how heavy it was, but reflected that at least they were prepared for every eventuality they might have to face.

Dean held out a handgun, and Sam took it and stuck it into his jeans behind his back. "Silver?" he asked, referring to the bullets in the gun.

Dean nodded as he dislodged the shotgun that held up the lid and closed the trunk. He snapped the shotgun open, checking to see it was properly loaded with rock salt. "Let's go."

Sarah greeted them at the door. She had changed into a pair of black slacks and a green blouse, wearing a little make-up to hide the circles beneath her eyes. Sam thought she looked beautiful, if a bit worn with worry.

"Hey." He grinned encouragingly at her. "Did you get any sleep?"

Before she could reply, Dean stepped up beside Sam. "I sure did." He smirked. "Slept like a log. That place is awesome."

Sarah smiled back, though the smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "I take it you like it?"

"Oh yes. So, let's get started." Dean hefted the shotgun. "The sooner we get the bastard, the sooner I can go back to that steam shower."

"I've already gone over the Pelham estate." When Sam raised a questioning eyebrow, Sarah explained, "The shipment from Europe." She led them deeper into the auction house, which was silent now that everyone was gone. There was no sign of the destroyed antiques, and the floor had been swept clean of debris.

"You shouldn't've done that." Dean picked up an old desk clock and examined it before setting it back down. "Could've been dangerous."

"Oh." For a moment Sarah looked taken aback.

"Well, nothing happened." Sam dropped the heavy bag onto an oak table. "Did it?"

She shook her head. "No. What's all that?" She nodded at the bag.

"Stuff." Dean put the shotgun down on the table next to the bag. "We brought a bit of everything, just in case."

Sam suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. "We're not entirely sure what sort of spook we're dealing with," he admitted.

"Figuring out what'll work could take a while." Dean gestured at the collection of artifacts and antiques that filled the auction house almost from wall to wall.

"So," Sam ignored Dean, "the plan is, first off, to purify and ward the building." He showed Sarah one of the pouches stuffed with herbs. "These are called gris-gris bags. A bit of hoodoo, actually, designed to protect. There's angelica root, Van Van oil, that sort of stuff, in there."

"Hoodoo?" Sarah inflected the word with skepticism. "Is that like voodoo?"

"It's related. And you might not believe in it, but some of it actually works." Sam put the gris-gris pouch down and rooted through the canvas bag for the others. "We have to put these in the north, south, east and west walls. If it's a poltergeist, that should get rid of it completely. If it's a spirit, we hope it'll at least hold it off from doing any further damage while we figure out which object is keeping it here."

"You hope?"

Sam offered her a shrug. "Best we could come up with on such short notice."

"Seeing there aren't any bones we can burn." Dean had walked a couple feet away and was eyeing a set of delicately painted china cups. He turned back. "But don't worry, once we get rid of the object, then *poof...*," he clapped his hands together, "...no more hauntings."

"Sounds simple enough." Sarah folded her arms in front of her chest.

Sam gave a dry laugh. "It's never simple."

She met his eyes. "I know."

Sam held her gaze; Sarah was one of the few people outside the hunting community that did know. It had seemed so simple the last time, too—until they learned it wasn't Isaiah

doing the killings, but his adopted daughter. If not for Sarah's knowledge of antique dolls, she and Sam might've ended up getting their throats slashed by a straight razor wielded by an angry ten-year-old.

Sarah rubbed her arms and pulled her gaze away after a few seconds. "I sent the staff home early." She gestured around at the deserted auction hall. "Didn't think you'd want curious eyes around."

Dean flashed her a grin and, when she wasn't looking, shot a wink in Sam's direction and mouthed "clever girl". This time, Sam did roll his eyes.

Unaware of their silent communication, Sarah indicated a big pile of folders on a scroll-work writing desk. "Those are the shipping manifest, the bills of sale, and any other documentation that came with the consignment. I've gone over them but...."

"That's all right." Sam tried not show his dismay at the size of the pile. "I'll have a look."

"Hey, Sarah?" Dean had wandered deeper into the auction house, and they found him staring at a large painting that leaned against the wall. "Where'd you get this?" He dipped his head to indicate the painting. It was age-darkened, showing a young woman in Elizabethan clothing (or perhaps it was from the Jacobean period, Sam wasn't too sure—art history classes could only teach you so much), with voluptuous skirts, flaring sleeves and an elaborate lace collar. She looked out with a serious expression on her face; behind her was a small park with a lake with swans on it.

"It came in with the Pelham shipment." Sarah turned away from the painting to look at Dean. "Why?"

"If you squint at it sideways, that could be you."

Sam studied the woman in the painting and found himself agreeing with Dean. There was a definite likeness between the portrait and Sarah: something about the expression in their eyes and the shape of their faces.

"Maybe some ancient ancestor, eh?" Dean chuckled and walked on. Despite his relaxed and apparently aimless manner, Sam knew he was taking in his surroundings, marking each object's place in his memory.

"Could be." Sarah followed Dean, glancing back at the painting over her shoulder with a small frown, as if she didn't see the resemblance. "My family's roots do trace back to England."

"What else came in from Europe?" Sam asked.

"Most of what you see here." Sarah waved at the things closest to them. "Besides the painting, we got that small eighteenth-century side table and the chestnut commode. Those chairs." She pointed at a couple of chairs with faded red cushions and gilded frames, the gold leaf scratched and flaking. "Couple of silver candelabras from different eras, some jewelry." She indicated packing crates stacked high. "Lots of ceramics. And over there," she pointed, "those pieces of plate armor."

Dean blew air through his teeth and scowled at Sam. "Imagine wearing *that* on a hunt." He picked up the breastplate and nearly dropped it. "Whoa...! It's heavy."

Sarah nodded. "It would be: an average suit of armor weighs fifty pounds. Anyway, I suspect I'll sell that to a museum somewhere."

"Is it worth much?" Dean wanted to know.

"The armor? Historically speaking, it's priceless. It's well-maintained, nearly complete."

"What about the rest of the shipment?" Sam glanced at the crates, trying not to think about how many items might be in them. "Is any of the rest valuable?"

Sarah shrugged. "They sold off most of the estate in bulk. It's up to us to separate the wheat from the chaff. Usually, in cases like these, only a few items are really valuable, the rest are often the sort of junk you can find at any flea market."

"Like this?" Dean bounced a glass decanter with a large round belly and a thin neck in his hand. Age had stained the glass an opaque dirty yellow.

Sarah tensed visibly, and she sounded a little breathless when she answered Dean. "T—that's Venetian glass. Seventeenth century. It's incredibly rare to have survived to this day without damage. Please, put it down. Carefully."

"So, it's worth quite a bit?" Dean squinted at the decanter as if he wasn't quite sure whether Sarah wasn't making fun of him.

"Yes. Especially as a matched set. With the other piece, probably the most valuable item in the entire shipment."

Dean muttered something about ugly old bottles being a dime a dozen in the average dive-bar's storage room, but he was careful when he put the decanter back down onto the protective foam pellets inside its crate, next to another bottle that was a different shape to

the first but just as dusty and stained.

"Anything else?" Sam asked.

"Not much." Sarah cast a last, relieved glance at the Venetian bottles before turning toward Sam. "A trunk filled with old books that I haven't gotten around to looking at yet. A few other odds and ends that I suspect fall in the junk-category, too."

Outside, dusk was falling rapidly, and shadows were gathering in the corners inside. Excusing herself, Sarah headed off to turn on the lights. A few moments later fluorescents bathed the auction house in bright glare. Sam looked around at all the artifacts and antique furniture from Europe, wondering how many separate pieces they'd have to go through once they started opening up those crates. He gathered up the files Sarah had collected and waved them at Dean. "We best narrow it down to likely candidates first."

Dean heaved a sigh, a pained grimace on his face. "Damn. It's probably something heavy that's hard to destroy, like that suit of armor."

Sam chuckled and offered Dean half of the folders. "Here, Grumpy. You're a real optimist, you know that? Could be it's just some old necklace or something."

Dean snorted. "Right. And when have we ever been that lucky?"

Sarah rejoined them and held out a hand to Sam for a share of the files. "So, what are we looking for?"

"Anything with a sordid past." Dean grimaced he accepted a handful of folders from Sam. "Violence, bloodshed, nasty deaths, that sort of thing. For starters."

Somewhere deep inside the building, a door slammed shut. The sound echoed through the auction house. Sarah jumped. "What was that?"

The lights flickered, and a gust of wind rustled the pages in Sam's hand, ruffling his hair.

"Here we go," Dean muttered. "Looks like we better get those wards set first." He put the folders down on a nearby table, and grabbed a couple of flashlights from the canvas bag.

Sam turned toward Sarah and took her elbow. "You should go. It'll be dangerous for you here."

"No." Sarah's voice was firm, but Sam detected a note of fear beneath the determination. "This is my auction house. I'm not gonna to let some preternatural creep chase me out."

The lights flickered again and went out, casting the room in darkness. Somewhere in the shadows, something crashed to the floor with a loud *crack*, and Sarah yelped.

Sam exchanged a look with his brother as Dean switched on the flashlights and handed him one, and then turned back to Sarah. "All right." He held out his hand and, without speaking, Dean passed him a canister of salt. "But you gotta promise you'll stay inside the circle so whatever it is can't get to you."

"I don't—," Sarah began.

Sam held up the salt. "It's either this, or you really do have to leave."

"Okay." She gave a resigned sigh.

Sam quickly poured a circle of salt around her, about three feet in diameter. "Stay inside," he repeated. "Watch your head, though. Spirits won't be able to cross that salt line, but they can still throw stuff at you. And if last night's anything to go by, things'll start flying pretty soon." Sarah nodded and visibly swallowed.

As soon as Sam was done with the salt, Dean handed him a couple of sweet-smelling herb bags and a crow bar. "Here. You take the north and west walls. I'll handle things this end."

Sam took the pouches and trotted off deeper into the blacked-out auction house, weaving his way between antique furniture and packing crates, the glow of his flashlight picking out gilded wood and glittering crystal.

He just hoped Sarah would do as he'd told her and stay within the circle.

oOo

Dean watched Sam go, wondering if his brother was back on his game, or if the sight of the headstone had shaken him up more than he wanted to admit. If the wreckage they'd seen that morning was anything to go by, the ghost was still working up to its full potential, and they'd need all their wits about them.

Shaking off his worries, Dean snatched up the shotgun and loped across the hall, finding himself running a supernatural gauntlet when the unseen presence shoved chairs and crates in his way. He ducked to avoid a large china platter that sailed past so close it brushed his hair, and then had to jump over an upholstered footstool that suddenly blocked his path. The platter hit the wall and shattered into a thousand fragments, and he cursed when a splinter of crockery sliced across the back of his hand. Blood instantly

welled from the cut, but a quick inspection told him the wound was superficial. He put the sting from his mind; plenty of time for that later.

He managed to shove one bag into the east wall without too much trouble, and ran back towards the southern section of the auction hall, heading beyond where Sarah was waiting inside her circle. He hoped Sam was having no problems on his end, but the sounds that came from the far end of the hall weren't promising. He could hear glass breaking, wood snapping and, at one point, what sounded like a cry of pain from Sam. He hollered his brother's name, and Sam shouted back he was all right, so Dean left checking his baby brother over for injuries until after they got rid of the son of a bitch and things that weren't supposed to move would stay put.

Sarah was still crouched in her circle, arms wrapped over her head to protect herself from the shards and splinters and loose objects that flew every which way. "You all right?" Dean shouted as he ran by.

"Yes!"

Something heavy hit Dean between the shoulder blades and he went down, the air leaving him with an *oomph*. The herbs slipped from his grip; he made a grab for them but something gave them another push onward and they disappeared underneath a tall walnut wardrobe decorated with carved vines.

"Crap!" Pushing himself up, Dean caught sight of Sarah setting one foot outside the circle to come to his aid. "Don't! Get back!" He crawled toward the wardrobe on his hands and knees, and wiggled one arm underneath, straining to reach the bag. The wardrobe began to shake, tottering precariously on its carved feet, and Dean backpedaled as fast as he could. He'd barely managed to get out of the way before the wardrobe toppled over with a loud crash. The ground shook with the impact. *Fuck, that'd been close...*

But at least the pouch with the herbs was within easy reach now. Dean scrambled for it—but instead found himself getting picked up and propelled straight across the auction house, his flight only broken by crash-landing against a stand mirror. The shotgun clattered from his grip and slid away, while razor-sharp fragments of mirror glass rained down on him. Dean crumpled among the sparkling splinters and the cracked frame, his vision graying out for a moment. Even as he blinked, trying to clear his head, something caught his throat in a vise: a black, half-transparent shadow forming hands that cut off his air supply. He clawed at the hands feebly, but his fingers passed through the wraith-like limbs.

Shotgun, his oxygen-deprived mind tried to shout, and he groped for it, scrabbling through broken glass, not caring how the shards slashed up his palms. But the gun was

out of reach, just a couple of inches too far for his finger tips to touch.

Gray turned to black; muscles turned to putty; his lungs burned; and Dean knew he was going to die.

Just as he was about to lose consciousness for good, the pressure on his windpipe let up; gone from one instant to the next. Sweet, cool air rasped past his throat and he coughed. Forcing his eyes open, he discovered Sarah standing over him, her hair loose, cheeks flushed, holding a thin sword high over her head, ready to strike, like she was some female version of the archangel Michael.

Out of nowhere, the thought popped into Dean's mind: *Sam's such an idiot.*

He coughed again, pulling more blessed air into his aching lungs.

"You all right?" Sarah held out a hand to help him up.

"Yeah," he wheezed hoarsely, his throat raw. "What'd you do?"

She hefted the blade. "Slashed it." She offered a shy grin. "Something I learned from Sam."

"With that?" Dean pointed at the sword. "Looks like a girly kind of sword."

"It's a rapier, actually. Became popular in the seventeenth century. I remembered Sam saying iron dispels ghosts."

"Isn't that thing made of steel?"

"Only the outer layer." She held it up. "It's got an iron core."

Dean grunted. "*Pure* iron works against ghosts. You got damn lucky. And didn't Sam also tell you to stay inside the circle?"

She glared at him, eyes flashing. "Well, don't thank me for saving your life or anything." She stalked away.

Goddammit, he was starting to sound like Dad.... "Sarah?" She turned around. "Thanks."

Footsteps scrunched over broken glass and they both looked in the direction of the sound. The beam of his flashlight wavering ahead of him, Sam came trotting back. He took one look at Sarah and Dean, his eyes narrowing when he noticed the cuts on Dean's hands and the bruises around his neck. "What happened?"

"It tried to strangle me." Dean swallowed. It hurt. "Sarah chased it away."

"From there?" Sam indicated the circle of salt, and Sarah had the good grace to look down, cheeks growing pink. "So, did you get the wards into the walls?"

"No." Dean flexed his fingers experimentally, wincing at the pain from the cuts. "The south wall still needs doing. But I lost the bag. You see it anywhere?"

They glanced around, searching for the missing pouch. "There." Sarah pointed to the fallen wardrobe. Sam started to clamber over the rubble but in the next instant, both he and Sarah were thrown across the room like rag dolls. Dean dove for the shotgun, but an unseen hand shoved it away until it slid against the far wall, out of reach. The ghost advanced on Dean again, gradually taking on shape as its power grew with every passing second. Dean backed up until a stack of packing crates stopped him short. He snatched the first object his hand could find—some wood carving—and flung it at the apparition. It didn't even flinch as the missile passed through it, but kept advancing. Dean eased sideways, keeping the crates at his back, flicking a quick glance at the shotgun in the corner, wondering if he had time to make it over there before the black shape was on him. His hands clawed around through the packing materials, seeking a weapon, anything he could use to defend himself. His fingers closed around something smooth and hard; without looking, he whirled it at the spirit.

"No!" Sarah cried, somewhere to his right, and too late Dean realized he'd snatched up one of her precious Venetian glass bottles. It shattered, the yellowed glass bursting into a thousand small fragments. Light flared, so bright Dean had to shut his eyes, and the air around him seemed for a very brief moment to have been sucked away. His lungs burned again, while his hand groping in the polystyrene beads found something else, cool and metallic. He glanced at it. A candelabra that gleamed dully in the dim glow from the streetlamps filtering through the windows.

God, let it be silver.

He raised it to hit the spirit with, but before the candelabra could connect, the apparition disappeared abruptly. Sarah let out a little whoop of triumph.

"What the—?"

Sam crouched near the southern wall, chest heaving and a small, dark hole showing behind him where he'd stuffed the last of the hoodoo wards in. He gave Dean a thumbs-up and a pleased grin.

Dean allowed himself to slide to the floor, adrenaline gradually leaving his system and his heart rate dropping back to normal. The cuts on his hands stung, and he could feel blood trickling from a gash over his eye. He swallowed painfully through the bruises surrounding his throat.

It was *never* fucking simple.

oOo

Cleaning up took them the rest of the night. By the time pale daylight started to filter in through the windows, Sam felt ready for a week of sleep. He could only imagine how Dean must feel after suffering the brunt of the spirit's anger. Sarah had cleaned the cuts on Dean's hands and the scrape on his face, but purple bruises stood out starkly on his brother's throat. He didn't even voice his usual complaints about having to do something as mundane as cleaning up the wreckage left after a hunt.

"So, is it over?" Sarah shook the content of her dustpan into a large, black trash bag before she straightened, brushing at a strand of hair that was plastered to her face. Her fingers left a streak of dust on her skin. The auction house looked almost as if nothing untoward had happened—if you could ignore the damage to the heavy wood wardrobe that he and Dean had managed to stand back up with much cursing and grunting.

"No." Sam dropped the last of the broken crockery in the bag that Sarah held open. "We still have to find the object that the ghost is attached to. But it shouldn't be able to do any more damage, for now. So we'll take everything away, bit by bit, until something sticks."

"Then some good ol' fashioned salt 'n burn." Dean's voice sounded a little raspy. "Problem solved. Crap, I hope it's not that big-ass picture, that'd be a bitch to lug out and destroy." He was gazing up at the painting of the woman with the swans again, and Sam wondered for a moment why Dean seemed so fascinated with it.

"We'll start with the small stuff" Sam wiped his hands on his jeans, leaving smears of dirt. "The candelabras, the books, the vases."

"Yeah, speaking of...." Dean turned around.

Sarah shrugged. "What's done is done."

"I didn't realize—," Dean began an awkward apology.

She held up a hand. "I know. I was there, remember?"

"There's still the other one," Dean pointed out brightly.

Sarah gave him a weak smile. "Yeah. Not worth half as much by itself but it's something."

Outside, a car engine rumbled and shut off. "That'll be Mark, my assistant." Sarah ran a hand through her hair, trying to work out some of the tangles. "You should probably go, come back later."

Sam wanted to disagree, to tell her they should get started on narrowing down the objects that might possibly keep the spirit tied right away, but he knew she was right. The few hours of sleep they'd gotten the day before weren't nearly enough to refresh them, and Dean was moving like every gesture caused him pain. Even if they could explain to Sarah's assistant why they were taking away items from the auction house, the spirit had only shown itself after dark. Not even the EMF would be helpful, if yesterday's investigation of the premises was anything to go by. There was nothing they could do until nightfall.

They said their goodbyes, telling Sarah she should get some rest herself, and to call them if anything came up. After promising they'd return before nightfall, Sam headed out to the Impala, Dean following him. They climbed in. Dean sat behind the wheel, staring out the front window, his eyes a bit glazed.

"Dean? Want me to drive?"

"Huh? What?" Dean shook himself and looked at Sam. "No. I got it." But the next moment his eyes traveled from the pedals near his feet to the gearshift and the wheel as if he had no idea what they were for.

"Dude." Sam leaned forward to catch his brother's gaze. "What's wrong? You look as if you've forgotten how to—."

"Course not," Dean snapped before Sam could finish. "Don't be an idiot." He dug up the keys, inserted them into the ignition and Sam relaxed back against the seat. Dean turned the keys and the guitar screech of some heavy metal song reverberated through the car. Dean jumped, his head nearly hitting the roof, and clamped his hands over his ears, whimpering as if the noise hurt him. Sam quickly reached for the radio and turned it off.

Dean heaved a deep sigh, slowly taking his hands away from his ears. "That was... dreadful," he whispered.

Sam gaped at him. In other circumstances, he might've been grateful that his brother had finally wised up about his terrible taste in music, but right now, he was starting to get

really worried. Perhaps Dean had hit his head harder than any of them had thought. "You put that tape in yourself, Dean." And since when did his brother use words like 'dreadful'?

"Hm." Dean reached for the gear stick, shifting it. The transmission shrieked, the car lurched forward and the engine stalled with a hiccup.

"Okay, that's it." Sam shoved his door open. "Out. I don't know what's wrong with you, but I'm driving."

And if Dean's behavior had scared Sam before, it was nothing compared to the cold fright Sam felt when his brother obeyed without a word of protest.

oOo

Distant church bells woke Sam from exhausted sleep. Yellow sunlight poured in through the windows, and he squinted at the brightness, for a moment confused about where he was. They traveled around so much, sometimes it was difficult to remember what state they were in, or what case they were working on, let alone what room he'd fallen asleep in.

Then he remembered.

Sam shot up with a start. Dammit, he'd forgotten to keep an eye on Dean. If Dean did have a concussion, Sam should have woken him every hour or so. He'd firmly intended to do so, but he must've been more tired than he thought.

The gentle noises drifting from the other bed soon put his worries to rest. Dean lay on his stomach, one hand underneath the pillow, snoring softly. While Sam watched, Dean smacked his lips, mumbling something in his dream, and a trickle of drool dribbled from the corner of his mouth. For an instant Sam was tempted to get out his phone and take a photo—but no, that was something Dean would do.

Sam fell back against the pillow, thinking he could catch a few more hours of sleep before they had to get back to the auction house to start the tedious process of eliminating one ancient artifact after the other from the list. But he soon found he was more awake than he'd imagined—and the bright sunlight and chirping birds called to him.

He flung back the covers and padded to the bathroom. With Dean still fast asleep, he could try out that steam shower at his leisure.

A few minutes later, breathing in water vapor while nine different streams of hot spray washed the last bit of lingering fatigue from his body, Sam had to admit that Dean did

have a point: it was a far cry from the lukewarm trickles dribbling from rusty shower heads in the moldy bathrooms he'd seen most of his life. If he ever got his own place, he'd —with a pang of sadness, Sam realized that was yet another thing to add to his ever-growing list of will-never-haves.

He shook off the sadness and told himself that wanting normal was a thing of the past: he'd made his peace with living a hunter's life. At least until they'd killed that yellow-eyed bastard. Maybe after that, someday.... He shut off the shower, the joy of the warm, massaging streams melting in the face of his darkening mood, and toweled himself dry.

After scooting into a pair of fresh jeans, a T-shirt and a plaid flannel shirt, he ran a hand through his hair, absently thinking it was getting long again, and opened the bathroom door, letting a billow of steam carry him into the room. Dean was as he'd left him: always a sound sleeper—an unwelcome trait in a hunter—he hadn't stirred while Sam puttered around in the bathroom. But then Sam stubbed his bare toe against the small antique dresser where he'd dumped his bag and failed to bite back a gasp of pain.

Dean made that little grunt he always did when he woke, and scrunched open his eyes. As soon as he saw Sam, he shot up, gazing at him wide-eyed and in shock.

"Nightmare?" Sam suggested. Usually, he was the one waking up sweat-soaked, heart thumping, with fearsome afterimages burned on the inside of his eyelids, but Dean was known to have his fair share of bad dreams as well. No wonder, in their line of work.

"Nay." His brother's voice sounded odd, clipped somehow, though the raspiness was gone. Dean tore his gaze away, surveying the room as if he had never seen it before, a bewildered crease in his forehead. A shiver of apprehension ran through Sam. Something was not right.

"Cupshot?" Dean murmured softly to himself, the words barely discernible to Sam. "An so, 'tis a poor jest."

"Dean...?"

Dean looked back up. When his gaze landed on Sam, his expression held a mixture of suspicion, confusion and barely concealed anger.

"What place is this, boy?"

And in that instant, Sam knew.

This wasn't Dean.

He immediately forgot the throb in his little toe; it was, replaced by a bone-chilling fear as Sam ran down the list of possibilities in his mind. Demonic possession. Shapeshifter. Bodysnatcher. Some evil spell.... A curse.... So many ways....

Okay, Sam, calm down, he told himself. This wasn't the first time something like this had happened to them.

His hand found the small bottle of holy water hidden among the clean shirts in his bag. "Christo," he mumbled. The creature wearing Dean's face didn't flinch; he just stared as if Sam had lost his mind. Sam let go of the holy water and scratched demonic possession off of his mental list of possible suspects. Maybe it was a shapeshifter. Sam tried to recall where they'd stashed the camcorder. Was it in the car? Or had they brought it in with the rest of their stuff?

Dean pulled himself up. "Thou art mistaken, boy, for surely I am not Christo but Sir Roland Francis William Holyrood of Sotherton."

"What?" Sam's eyes widened and despite his fears, he couldn't stifle the snort of nervous laughter that escaped him. What sort of creature would carry such a ridiculous name?

Dean's green eyes darkened with fury at Sam's laughter. "Dost thou mock me? Didst bring me hence for sport? I bid thee, that I might know my tormentor, give me thy name...."

Sam could barely make out the words, let alone their meaning, through the rolling vowels and thick accent that sounded somehow... *British*.

"You don't know—?" Sam stopped himself. It was quite clear that whoever, or whatever the creature posing as his brother was, it didn't have a clue who Sam was. He struck shapeshifter off the list as well. A shapeshifter would have taken Dean's memories as well as his form. And the man before him seemed more uncertain than evil. "Sam," he said instead. "Sam Winchester. Of... um, of Lawrence, Kansas."

Dean frowned. "I recall none of that name, nor do I know the place thou speakest of. And thy speech is strange. Thou art from far-off lands indeed, I deem."

Sam bit down on the inside of his cheek to keep in the uneasy snicker that threatened at hearing Dean accuse *him* of speaking funny. If the situation weren't so serious, the fancy words spoken in that preposterous accent coming out of Dean's mouth—a mouth so much more suited for a "what the hell" or a well-deserved "son of a bitch"—would be hilarious. But Sam knew if he let the snicker escape, he might not be able to stop laughing and would end up in hysterics. He took a deep breath.

"All right." He made sure to keep his tone soothing, though he wasn't sure if it was for Dean's sake, or to head off his own panic. "We'll figure this out. What do you remember?"

"What memory? My recollections are scattered...." Dean's gaze turned inward, and a moment later his brows drew down in apparent dismay. "Geoffrey, that lily-livered devil. Where has the cur hidden himself?" He rolled from the bed, hitching up the sweatpants he'd slept in with an absent frown. "And Lady Matilda? Hast thou seen her?"

"Um.... No, I haven't. Who are they?"

But Dean wasn't listening. "I must find her," he muttered. "'Ere that whoreson knave brings her harm." He flung open the bathroom door, glaring at the shower stall and the wet towels once he realized it wasn't the way out. His gaze found the other door and he made a beeline for it.

"Whoa, there." Sam planted himself in Dean's way. "Let's think this over. You can't just run out of here."

Dean peered up at him, eyes dark, and tried to shove past. Sam moved to block him again.

"Get thee hence, knave," Dean growled. "I must come to them, ere what is done cannot be undone."

"Okay." Sam thought fast. "Okay." Dean seemed determined to go out and look for those people, but he couldn't let him out of his sight. "I'll help you find them. But first... please, just give me a minute."

Dean frowned and murmured something that Sam didn't catch, but at least he didn't resist when Sam steered him to a chair. Sam pulled out his phone and dialed Bobby's number, thinking the old hunter might have a clue as to what happened to Dean. The instant Bobby answered, his "*Hello?*" squeaking thinly from the tiny speaker, Dean's head whipped around, his wide-eyed expression filling with fright and distrust, and Sam knew he'd made a mistake. Before Sam could grab him, Dean had bolted from the room.

"Bobby, hang on a sec," Sam barked into the phone before shoving it in his pocket and racing after his brother. "Dean, wait!" He pounded down the stairs, catching the outer door just as it swung shut.

He caught up with Dean on the porch. Dean was standing very still, every muscle tense and rigid, his eyes the only thing moving, flicking around and taking in the cars, the asphalted street, the phone lines running from pole to pole. Sam slowed down, thinking

Dean looked exactly like he imagined the typical deer-caught-in-headlights would look.

"Dean—?" Sam swallowed and tried again, keeping his voice low and reassuring. "Sir Roland, I can help." He reached for Dean's arm, and it was as if the gesture broke some spell. Dean started into motion and came up swinging. It was a clumsy fist, with none of his brother's experience or strength behind it, and it connected with Sam's jaw more out of luck than skill. Still, it made Sam's teeth clack together hard and he tottered back, hitting the balustrade and losing his balance.

"Unhand me," Dean hissed. "Leave me be."

Before Sam could recover and regain his feet, Dean had dashed down the steps and disappeared across the street, weaving his way through cars that screeched to a halt, drivers shaking fists at him.

God, Dean....

Sam's pocket squeaked. "Hello?" Bobby cried. "Sam? What's goin' on?"

oOo

"And that's when he punched me in the face and ran off," Sam concluded his story.

"Hm." Bobby was silent for a few moments. Sam waited. He had returned to their room on the second floor and was holding the phone with one hand while sorting through weapons and other hunting paraphernalia with the other—although, without knowing what had taken over Dean, he didn't have a clue what to look for. At least Dean hadn't taken the car, thank God; the keys to the Impala still lay on the dresser. Dean could've ended up anywhere. Assuming he'd remember how to dri—

Sam's breath hitched and he wanted to smack himself. "Bobby?" His voice was breathless. "I think I know where it started, and when."

"Yeah?"

"The auction house. I had to drive us back. I thought he'd just hit his head, but it was like Dean didn't remember how to drive at all. And he said he hated rock music." That alone should've clued him in to the fact something was very wrong. But he'd been so damned tired.... "Now—."

"—now you think whatever turned him into whoever he thinks he is was already happening." Bobby finished Sam's sentence.

"Yeah."

"So, it's something at that auction house." Bobby was quiet for a second. "Makes sense, a place chock full of old objects. Many of them'll have picked up supernatural energies over time. Sam, tell me what happened. Did Dean touch anything?"

Sam uttered a wry snort. "We fought off a powerful spirit that was wrecking the place. What do you think happened?"

"Right." Bobby gave a soft laugh, before his tone turned serious again. "What did you say Dean called himself?"

"Roland." Sam tried to recall the rest of that ridiculously long name Dean had rattled off. "Roland something or other of... of Sotherton."

Bobby repeated it slowly, as if he were writing it down. "And those other people?"

"Um... Geoffrey. And a woman, Matilda."

"All right. I'll see if I can dig up any stuff on them. You go back to the auction house—."

"No!" Sam broke in. "Bobby, I can't, I gotta find Dean. You didn't see him, but he was really freaked."

"Sam, listen to me." Bobby sounded patient. "The best way to help Dean is to find out all you can about the bric-a-brac your friend's got collected there."

"Bobby...." And in that word was all the misery and fear Sam felt.

"I know." The understanding in Bobby's tone made Sam want to cry. But he couldn't; just at this moment, Sam was the only one who could help Dean. "And *you* know I'm right."

oOo

Sam was climbing from the Impala when Sarah's Toyota pulled into the parking lot. She pulled up right next to him and got out of her car, glancing around before she met Sam's gaze. "Where's Dean?"

Sam shrugged. "I don't know. He—."

Before he could finish, the door to the auction house opened and a young man with short,

mouse-brown hair and rimless glasses perched on a straight nose, hurried up to them. "Oh, thank goodness you're here, Sarah. He stole the Venetian. Threatened me with a damn rapier when I tried to stop him."

"Did you call the police?" Sarah asked.

The man shook his head. "No. You said not to but...."

"Thank you, Mark." Sarah started for the door, nodding at Sam to follow her before turning back to Mark, "You should go home now, I'll handle it from here."

"Are you sure?" Mark shot Sam a wary look before he scurried to catch up with Sarah. "I can—."

"Yes," Sarah broke in. "I'm sure. I'm grateful you came in on your free Saturday, but there's no need for you to stay any longer." She stopped and turned to Mark, offering him a smile. "Really, it'll be all right. Go home, I'm certain your mother would like you to spend some time with her."

"Well, if you're really sure...." Mark hesitated a second longer before he ran ahead of them into the auction house. By the time Sarah and Sam had followed, he was returning, shrugging into a brown cotton jacket. "I'll see you Monday, then."

"What was that all about?" Sam nodded towards where Mark had disappeared.

Sarah didn't reply right away. She was surveying the auction hall, shadowed as dusk approached and with the fluorescents still off. "Mark's my assistant," she said at last. "He called me about an hour ago, half in a panic, saying someone was here acting like he owned the place. Or at least some of the things in it. The man he described..." She turned and looked up at Sam. "...it sounded like Dean."

Sam blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. "For all I know, it might've been Dean."

She shot him another look. "Mark said the guy talked weird, like he'd stepped out of a Shakespearean play."

Sam chewed his bottom lip. That did sound like Dean, the way he was now.

"And he stole the Venetian vase. The *other* one," Sarah continued, stressing the word 'other'. "Even as a single piece, it's still valuable." She folded her arms before her chest and cocked her head. "What's going on, Sam?"

"Something's wrong with Dean." He tried to shove the fear that clawed at him to the back of his mind, but failed. "I don't know what it is. Not a demon or a shapeshifter, I've ruled those out, but *something* took him. And I can't help him until I know what. Bobby's looking into it, but he thinks the clue's here somewhere." He swept his gaze over the auction house before turning back to her. "And I don't know where Dean is, but, Sarah, he looked so frightened...."

"Whoa, Sam." Sarah had held up her hands. "Slow down. I understood maybe one out of every three words of that. What are you saying? Something *took* Dean? What's that supposed to mean? And who's Bobby?"

Sam realized he'd been babbling. "Bobby's a friend who.... He's a hunter." He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. "And Dean... it's a kind of possession, I guess, or a body snatcher, or...." The look on Sarah's face told him he was losing her again. "Anyway, Dean's not Dean right now, and I need to help him."

"How the hell did that happen?"

Sam shrugged miserably. "I don't know. We think something must've happened here, last night."

"You think...." Sarah was quiet for a moment. "You think the ghost that haunted this place is now in Dean?"

Sam sought her gaze, finding her eyes full of concern. "Maybe. I don't know. I—"

It was at that moment his phone rang, the noise loud in the silence of the large hall, and they both jumped.

"I found something," Bobby said without preamble as soon as Sam answered. Sam heaved a sigh, relief flooding him. "Those names you gave me? Turns out there's a legend about a Sir Roland and his inamorata—."

"His what?" Sam interrupted.

"The woman he loved," Bobby said. "Sorry, been reading too damn many ancient texts. Anyway, her name was Matilda and she was the daughter of a nobleman. But there was another man who also wanted to marry her."

"Geoffrey." It was slowly starting to make some kind of sense to Sam.

"Yes. Geoffrey Blackwood of Oakley. It's quite a classic tale, actually. Turns out Blackwood was a bit of a necromancer, dabbling in the black arts. Story goes that he bewitched them. In any case, some time back in the seventeenth century, Blackwood turned up dead one day, and Roland and Matilda were never seen again."

"And you think it's the spirit of this Roland that has taken over Dean?"

"Looks like."

"Is...?" Sam hesitated, swallowing. "Is Dean...?"

"I believe he's still in there." Bobby understood without Sam having to give voice to the thought. Sam squeezed his eyes shut in relief.

"Then how do I get him back?" he whispered. "Exorcism?"

"No. He's not possessed." Bobby remained quiet for a long minute. "I've never heard of a case like this, I don't know what to tell you, Sam. I'm sorry."

Sam forced down the lump in his throat. "Thanks, anyway." He disconnected and plopped onto the nearest chair, ignoring the way the fragile antique creaked beneath his weight. He hid his face in his hands.

"Sam?" Sarah put a hand on his shoulder, urging him to look up. "What...?"

He quickly told her what Bobby told him.

"I remember that story." Her hand still rested on his arm, and he could feel the heat where she touched him. "I thought it was a myth, an old family superstition handed down and embellished over the years." Sam glanced up at her, not understanding.

"The estate." She drew back to gesture around at the auction hall. "It belonged to the Pelhams, a long-lined peerage. Matilda was the daughter of George Pelham, Fifth Baron of Sellesley. Even since she disappeared, there've been rumors surrounding the Pelham mansion, that it was haunted." She frowned. "I've never heard of this Roland, though."

"Stories tend to change over time," Sam muttered absently. His mind was elsewhere, mulling over the pieces of the puzzle. A haunted house, mysterious disappearances, a dead necromancer... and it was all tied in with the heirlooms Sarah had shipped in from overseas. He glanced around at the stacks of crates and boxes, knowing something here held the key. But what? He wasn't any closer to finding the object than before; it still could be anything. And in the meantime, while he tried to figure it out, his brother was

running around believing he was a seventeenth-century gentleman. God knows what sort of trouble he might run into....

Mind made up, Sam pushed himself up off the chair. "I've got to find Dean." He strode past Sarah and headed to the door.

"Sam, stop. I think you should stay here."

Sam spun around. "Dean's possessed by a damned ghost from the past," he snapped. "He must be scared shitless. You didn't see the way he looked at the *cars* this morning."

Sarah was shaking her head. "I didn't mean it like that." She walked over and rested a hand on his wrist. "Sam, this shipment is about all that's left of the Pelhams' possessions. Whatever's going on, the answer is here. But I don't know what to look for. You do. So let me go find Dean, and you stay here to look for clues."

Sam hesitated. Part of him just wanted to run out and scour New Paltz in search of his brother. He hadn't lied to Sarah; a man unfamiliar with the twenty-first century could easily get himself hurt, or worse. But there was logic in what she said. Given Dean apparently didn't have a clue who Sam was right now, Sarah could bring him back as easily as Sam could, but he'd have a much better chance of discovering how to fix his brother than she would—assuming there was a way.

"All right." Sam followed her deeper into the auction house, to where most of the estate was collected. They passed the painting, and something drew his attention. He stopped to look at the picture, trying to figure out what had caught his eye. Then.... His breath hitched, and he leaned in, squinting to make out the tiny detail. "Sarah, look...." The woman in the painting carried a lace kerchief embroidered with some initials: M.P.

"You think...?"

"Matilda Pelham." Sam was sure of it. "Yes."

She squeezed his hand. "Mark said Dean spent quite a bit of time staring at this." She leaned a bit away to take in the entire scene. "You know, there's a park like that not far from here. Perhaps...." Her voice trailed off.

"Go." Sam spoke in an urgent whisper. It was a long shot, but better than nothing. "Please, hurry."

Please, let Dean be there.

Soon after Sarah left, the silence in the auction house became oppressive, almost tangible, chafing at Sam's already frayed nerves. He had to force his attention to the task at hand; his thoughts kept drifting to his brother and what might be happening to him. Sam knew Dean could handle himself in any situation... if he was himself. Sam eyed his phone longingly, wishing it would ring with good news.

Pushing aside his worry, he rooted through the pile of folders Sarah had given him: provenances, bills of sale, piece histories, shipping manifests. He scanned the papers quickly, some so old that the yellow parchment threatened to crumble beneath his touch, the scrawled words written in ink faded to near illegibility. But, old or new, nothing jumped out at him and screamed of supernatural activity; it was all plain sales notifications, receipts, deeds of ownership. Sam also learned a bit of the family history along the way—other than the vanishing Matilda, there had been few scandals over the years. He found mention of a couple out-of-wedlock children, as well as a rogue son in the nineteenth century who squandered most of the family's fortune on gambling. The Pelhams had been left to wither into impoverished obscurity until the line had finally exhausted itself when the last baron died a few years ago. After some charity called the Britain's National Trust had converted the mansion into a museum, they'd sold the unwanted family possessions to Sarah to raise money.

If only they hadn't, none of this would've happened....

Sam sighed. If wishes were horses.... He scrubbed at his eyes; they stung from the effort of peering at tiny copperplate script, and a headache was building quickly behind them. He'd have to start going through the estate items one by one soon, and it wasn't something he looked forward to. He still had no clue what it was he was looking for, and it would be like attempting to find a needle in a field full of haystacks.

The sound of his phone ringing echoed in the silent room, and Sam started at the noise. He scrabbled for the phone.

"I found him."

Sam breathed out in relief. "Where? Is he all right?"

"He's in that park I mentioned," Sarah's voice was faint, as if she was whispering. "And yes, he seems all right, considering. I haven't talked to him; I don't want to scare him. Right now, he's just sitting in the grass, staring out across the lake. How about you, did you have any luck?"

"Not so far." Sam pondered the piles of records. "I looked at the files you left, but couldn't find anything. I'm going to see what else I can dig up."

"I was thinking maybe I should try to convince Dean to come back with me?"

"Think he'll listen?"

"I don't know." Sarah sighed. "It's worth a try, though."

"Just be careful you don't spook him into running again." If they lost Dean now, there was no guarantee they'd find him a second time.

"I will." She signed off.

Some of the weight had lifted off Sam's shoulders. Dean had been located, and he was okay. Well, as okay as he could be with a Renaissance ghost sitting in the driver's seat. Still, it was something to be grateful for that Sarah found him in one piece.

Sam got up, glancing at the collection of artifacts and furniture from Europe, each and any one of which might be the key to getting Dean back to *really* okay. But where should he start? His gaze landed on a large trunk. Sarah had said it was filled with old books, although she didn't expect them to be worth much, unless she found a first edition in there somewhere.

Old books. Sam smiled grimly to himself. That was truly their purview. It sounded like as good a place to start as any.

He pulled open the lid, wrinkling his nose at the dust and faintly musty smell that rose up, and started lifting out volumes.

Sarah had been right: most of the books were ancient, with worn, leather covers and yellowed pages. Several of the volumes were falling apart, the bindings tattered and the paper disintegrating under his fingers. Still, Sam carefully put them aside; his great love for old books didn't allow him to discard them easily. He had nearly reached the bottom of the trunk when he came upon a small notebook, bound in cracked black leather that felt scratchy beneath his fingertips. He flipped it open—and gasped.

The sigil on the first page told him everything he needed to know about the book. This... this was a grimoire: a book of black magic. Heart thumping fast against his ribs, he browsed the pages. It was too much for it to be coincidence that he'd found this among the Pelham belongings, a family that otherwise seemed as harmless as they came. No, this book must have belonged to Geoffrey Blackwood, the necromancer.

The pages were filled with handwritten instructions and spells, larded with diagrams and drawings. In fact, Sam admitted to himself wryly, as he scanned page after page, it didn't look that much different from his dad's journal—except this book was designed to do evil, while his father had collected his notes for the sake of fighting it.

Just past the middle, several of the pages were stuck together, rust brown staining the yellowed paper; the rest of the book was blank, as if the author had given up writing more—or perhaps had died before he could. Sam was quite sure the brown smirch was dried blood, and he cautiously peeled the pages apart. On their inside, the stain was darker, and the ink beneath had run when the blood was still wet. But he could make out some of the words; it looked like some kind of spell.

"... woe-begotten spirit..." Sam mouthed, squinting as he tried to make out the scribbles. "...dark oblivion...dreadful doom of life..." He sat up straighter.

Definitely a spell. Or a curse.

This book, Sam knew instinctively, was what he'd been looking for. Bobby said that Roland and Matilda had disappeared without a trace, and Sam would bet his laptop that Geoffrey, a necromancer voicing one of his spells, was the culprit. Even so, that still didn't explain how Roland had ended up in Dean's body; until he had that figured out, Sam didn't think he could fix things. His brow creased as he tried to remember everything that had led up to the point where he'd first noticed something was off with his brother. And suddenly it hit him.

The Venetian vases!

He recalled the strange, blazing flash of light the instant Dean broke the vase trying to ward off the attacking spirit. It had been blindingly bright, forcing Sam to close his eyes; he'd had to stuff the gris-gris bag into the hole in the wall by touch. At the time, he'd thought it was the spirit getting forced out of the auction house when he set the last of the wards; in retrospect, he wasn't so certain any more.

History was rife with tales of beings caught in bottles, if you knew what to look for. Hell, the fairytale of Aladdin and his genie lamp was exactly that. It wasn't too far-fetched to imagine Geoffrey capturing Roland, his apparent rival for Matilda's hand, in a bottle. And then, centuries later, Dean had broken Roland's glass prison, releasing the captured soul.

Sam rubbed a hand over his neck, thinking hard. Sarah's assistant, Mark, had accused Dean of stealing the second vase. And both Bobby and Sarah had said Matilda had vanished without a trace as well. Sam uttered a wry chuckle. It all started to make perfect

sense: the second vase must hold Matilda's spirit. Roland knew that; it was why he had taken the vase with him.

Sam couldn't help but grin. He finally knew how to get Dean back!

He dialed Sarah's number. "I got something," he blurted the moment she answered. "How's Dean?"

"The same," Sarah said. "I haven't dared speak with him yet. He's acting very... weird."

"Sarah, he's possessed by an ancient ghost, of course he's—."

"I know." Sarah choked back a wry laugh. "That's not what I meant. Sam, I think he's talking to that vase he took."

"Matilda's in there." Sam felt very pleased to find his suspicions confirmed. "His lover. Roland's lover, I mean."

"What?" Sarah sounded as if she wondered whether Sam had taken leave of his senses as well.

Sam chortled. "It's a long and complicated story."

"Ah, one of those." Sarah sighed, but Sam could hear her smile.

"Sarah, I know what we have to do. Do you have any empty bottles? And I'll need directions to where you are."

It seemed cruel, Sam thought, that the only way to get Dean back was to do the same thing to Roland that the necromancer had done hundreds of years ago: to lock up his spirit in a bottle for all eternity. But it was the only thing Sam could think of: he had no idea what else to do. Roland's body had never been found; even if it had been, he could hardly travel to Europe to dig up and salt and burn a four-hundred year old corpse.

oOo

The small park with the duck pond was near the university, and Sam found it easily enough following Sarah's instructions. He left the car in one of the campus parking lots and set off on foot along the narrow path that wound its way around the still pond. Night had fallen, and the temperature had dropped enough for his breath to frost in front of his face. He shivered deeper into his jacket. Dean had run out dressed in nothing but a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt: he must be freezing.

Sam's hand touched the piece of paper, stuffed securely into his jacket pocket, onto which he'd copied the spell from the grimoire. He'd considered bringing the grimoire itself, but he strongly suspected that Geoffrey's spirit was tied to the book. Given the havoc the spirit had wrought in the action house, he'd decided it was best left where it was warded. The neck of an empty Coke bottle that he'd found in the auction house's kitchenette peeked from another pocket.

It was dark beneath the trees: the moon was half-hidden behind fast-moving clouds, its filtered light casting strangely shifting shadows that left Sam a little disoriented. He switched on his small flashlight, using it to ground himself so he could follow the path more quickly.

He heard Sarah call his name before he saw her: a slim silhouette near the edge of the faintly gleaming pond. Dean was on his knees, in front of her. As Sam approached them, the moon came out and he noticed how stiff and awkward Sarah's posture was as she looked down at Dean. His brother was gazing up at her with an expression of rapture that Sam had rarely, if ever, seen on Dean's face.

Dean spoke softly, pleadingly.

"...thy eternal summer shall not fade,
nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st..."

Shakespeare! *Fuck it*, Dean was quoting *Shakespeare*; Sam recognized the love poem from an English Lit class at one of the many high schools he'd passed through. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Sarah met Sam's gaze over Dean's head and a look of relief flitted across her features at the sight of him. "He's..." She gestured helplessly as Dean grabbed her other hand and kissed her fingers.

Sam dug the spell from his jacket and put the soda bottle on the grass. "He must be mistaking you for Matilda." He remembered that his brother had remarked, even when he'd been himself, on the resemblance between Sarah and the woman in the painting. For Roland, who'd spent centuries in a bottle, the resemblance must have been more than strong enough to mislead him,.

Sarah gave a nervous laugh. "I should hope so."

Dean had glanced up at Sam's mention of his beloved's name. The look of admiration disappeared, and his brows drew down angrily. "Thou ninny-pated varlet. Hast thou too

little wit to see? The lady dost not desire thee for a husband."

Sam blinked, his brain slowly digesting the meaning behind Dean's words. *Uh-oh*. This could not be good. "No, I'm not—."

Before he could finish, Dean had bolted to his feet and lunged at Sam. Not quite prepared for the sudden onslaught, Sam's instincts took over. He caught the unskillfully swung fist in his hand, and shoved his brother away. Dean stumbled back—hand-to-hand combat was apparently not one of Roland's talents—and went down right on top the second crystal vase.

Crack!

Sarah uttered a small moan of dismay, while Dean cried out in pain. The dark night flared with another sudden blaze, like a flash of lightning without thunder, and Sam flung up a hand to protect his eyes. Once the glare had faded, the night seemed twice as dark. Sam blinked away the afterglow and crouched, tense and ready for another attack. But it didn't come.

"Roland? 'Tis thee?"

"Aye, my good lady." Dean paid Sam no more attention, and neither did Sarah. Before Sam's astonished gaze, they rushed at each other, clasping hands and entwining fingers, gazing deep into each other's eyes. For a long moment, Sam just gaped at them, mouth open in shock.

Then it hit him: the spirit of Matilda that had been captured in the second bottle, had been released when the bottle broke—and had now taken over Sarah.

"Shit." He'd gotten himself stuck with *two* spirit-possessed humans, and he'd only brought one bottle. Now what?

He glanced around the grassy slope leading down to the pond until he found a trash can. He rummaged through the contents, trying not to think too much about what nasty stuff people might've dumped in there, until a spark of moonlight reflected off of a shiny glass surface and Sam caught a glimpse of a multicolored label. Thank God. He drew the bottle out of the trash and headed back to where Dean and Sarah still seemed absorbed with each other.

After carefully setting it on the ground next to the Coke bottle, he reached into his pocket for the note with the spell and—*Shit!* It must have come out of his pocket in the struggle with Dean. He surveyed the area and spotted it where he must have dropped it, a few feet

from the crystal shards that glistened dully in the moonlight. He stooped to pick it up.

"Geoffrey, thy filthy plans shall come to naught."

Sam froze and glanced up. Dean was towering over him, his face set in a determined grimace. Behind Dean, a safe distance away, Sarah stood, wringing her hands together in front of her chest, looking both worried and enthralled at the same time. Sam suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. This roleplay was getting ridiculous.

He firmed his grip on the piece of paper and began to straighten. "Look, I told you, I'm not—" The words died on his lips when Dean jabbed at him with the tip of an antique rapier. Only years of training let Sam roll away quickly enough to avoid being pierced through the heart. Instead, the point of the weapon merely scratched his upper arm. Dean lunged again for him, arm stretched out, and Sam scrabbled backwards, the wet grass soaking his jeans.

Again and again, Dean jabbed and stabbed at Sam with the rapier. Sir Roland might've been clumsy with his fists, but he clearly was an expert with the thin, flexible blade; it was all Sam could do to keep himself from getting skewered. His breath came out in short, white puffs as he scrambled across the grass and through the underbrush, never having the chance to get back to his feet. Finally his luck ran out, and he found himself backed up against the trunk of a large oak tree with nowhere to go. A smirk played around Dean's lips. He placed the point of his blade against Sam's throat.

"Mayhap this time thou shalt remain slain, and leave good people be."

Sam tried to think through his options, and found them very limited. He swallowed, glancing up at Dean but seeing nothing of his brother in the green eyes that looked down at him from the other end of the blade. The pressure on his throat increased.

"Dean...."

Sam's fingers grappled for the spell, finding the paper clammy with dew. Trying to keep one eye on Dean and the other on the note, Sam squinted in the meager light. He could barely make out the scrawled words he'd hastily scribbled down earlier. A good thing, then, that he'd read over the original spell several times in the auction house.

"O woe-begotten spirit, fall now into dark oblivion...."

Dean growled and increased the pressure, the sharp point of the rapier piercing Sam's skin. "Thy ill-wrought schemes shall come to naught while I draw breath."

Sam gasped at the sting as warm blood started to well up. The final words of the spell came out in a soundless whisper, "...and forget for a while the dreadful doom of life...."

oOo

Suddenly, Dean could breathe again. Cold, clean air, heavy with spring fog, filled his lungs. Sound returned: night sounds, someone breathing shallowly. Goosebumps sprang up on his arms. Damn, it was cold and—.

But that wasn't important. Because sight returned as well. And in his sight....

His newfound breath stuck in his throat, and it felt like his heart had leaped up and got itself lodged there too. At his feet, Sam slouched against a tree, blood trickling from a cut on his left arm, and from a wound at his throat. Right where Dean was holding....

With a yelp, Dean flung the rapier aside as if the metal was hot, and dropped to his knees. He grabbed his brother's shoulders. "Sam? Sammy?"

Sam looked up. "Dean? Is that you?" He lifted a hand to his throat, fingers coming away bloody. "I'm alright, it's just a scratch."

"That I put there... I think." Hearing Sam's voice put the worst of Dean's fears to rest, along with taking a quick survey that told him the wounds were indeed superficial. Though they easily could've not been if.... Dean frowned. He had no clue what had just happened, where they were, or what the hell was going on. "Sam, what the fuck—?"

Sam didn't let him finish. He struggled to his feet, half-clinging to Dean. "Sarah?" Worry laced his voice. "Sarah!"

"Sam?" The reply came from the shadows. Sarah found them a moment later. She must have noticed the blood on Sam, dark in the moonlight, because her eyes widened. "Oh my god, are you hurt?"

"I'm alright." Sam repeated the assurance he'd given Dean. "How're you feelin'?" He glanced back at Dean. "Both of you."

Sarah thought for a moment. "Um.... Okay, I guess."

Dean shivered. "I'm freezin' my ass off, and waitin' for somebody to fuckin' tell me what the hell's going on, but yes, I'm all right." He thought he was, at least.

"Shh..." Sam was no longer listening. Instead, his attention was focused on something

behind Dean. Dean tensed, ready to attack anything or anyone that might be sneaking up on them. But then Sam smiled, a little wistfully, and murmured, "Journeys end in lovers meeting."

Slowly, Dean inched around to see what Sam was gaping at. Next to him, Sarah turned around as well, and she drew in a sharp gasp. Two people, a man and a woman, dressed like a pair of extras from Robin Hood or something—the original version, not that *Men-in-Tights*-crap—hovered at the edge of the lake. Dean gulped. Make that literally, he thought, noticing their feet never touched the ground. And... they were frickin' transparent! He could see the opposite shore right through the folds of their clothes.

He'd seen enough ghosts to know that was what they were. But, unlike most of the ghosts he'd come across, they paid no attention to the living; they were fully engrossed in each other.

"What the—?"

"Shh." Sam flapped a hand at him to be quiet.

While they watched in silence, the two specters slowly drifted toward each other. When their hands touched, they began to melt into one. A golden glow formed around them that showed their faces lit up with joy and affection; a blind man could've seen they were in love. Which, in Dean's opinion, was the weirdest thing for a ghost to be. The male spirit lowered its head and pressed its lips against the woman's....

The light surrounding them grew so bright that Dean had to look away. When he could see again, they were gone.

He swung back to his brother. "Will somebody just tell me what's going on?" He didn't much care that he sounded more petulant than he'd planned.

Sarah gave him an odd look, but Sam's face lit up, his cheeks dimpling as he broke into a genuine smile. "You don't remember a thing?"

Dean huddled in on himself and wrapped his arms around his shoulders in an attempt to get warm. "I remember getting flung around by that damn spook. I remember...." Not much more after that, he decided. Damn, he hated not knowing what had happened, though he could make a few guesses, none of them pleasant.

Sam grinned as if he could read Dean's thoughts. "Let's head back, and we'll tell you all about it. Here." He shrugged out of his jacket and offered it to Dean. "You need this more than me. Car's that way." He pointed down the narrow, graveled path leading away into

the darkness, before ducking to pick up a couple of empty soda bottles and dumping them in the nearest trash can.

Dean rolled his eyes. "The city's got people to do that, you know."

Sam merely smiled some more.

oOo

They'd left New Paltz two days later, after salting and burning the grimoire, and checking they'd got rid of Geoffrey Blackwood's spirit once and for all. Without being able to burn a body, they hadn't been sure burning the book would be enough, so they'd held their breath and stayed overnight at the auction house after they removed the wards from the walls. But things had remained still and quiet until sunrise.

The outcome pleased Sarah, although she'd been saddened to see them go again. She asked Sam to stay in touch; as he kissed her goodbye, he'd promised he'd call—a promise that was as sincere and as meaningless as it had been the first time he'd made it. 'Cause nothing had changed. And until it did, until they killed that yellow-eyed son of a bitch, Sarah was better off without him.

"We could've stayed a bit longer, you know." Dean turned the Impala onto the on-ramp to I-87, heading south for Pennsylvania, and reports of cattle mutilations that sounded vaguely interesting. "Taken a break."

Sam shrugged. Sure they could've. Wouldn't have changed a thing. He stared out as the last of New Paltz's houses fell away behind them and trees blocked the view from the Interstate.

"Then stop looking so gloomy." Dean turned on the radio but kept the sound low. "We got the job done, nobody died."

There was a fleeting look of guilt thrown in Sam's direction at that, but Sam decided to ignore it. Dean'd get past it. And if he didn't, Sam would tell him they were even the next time something put the whammy on *him* and he ended up hurting Dean. With their lives, it was bound to happen sooner or later.

Unaware of Sam's train of thought, Dean continued listing reasons for Sam to brighten up. "We got paid,"

Sam nodded: there was that. With the money Sarah had paid them, they could lay off the fake credit cards and pool hustling for a while. Though he'd told her she didn't have to,

that they were friends and had been happy to help her out. He'd only discovered a folded check in the breast pocket of his shirt by the time Dean was navigating the Impala out of the parking lot and the door had already closed behind her. He wasn't sure when she'd slipped it in—probably while her hands had bunched his shirt together to pull him close for a farewell kiss.

"She's something special, that girl." Sometimes, it was as if Dean could read Sam's mind. Sam flicked a glance sideways, but nothing in Dean's tone or expression said it was another attempt to hook them up. "Not too many chicks could go through what she went through, and not freak out."

"Yeah." That was true; Sarah took their crazy world pretty much in stride. The way she'd accepted what happened to Dean, gone out to help him instead of calling the police like any normal person would've done....

A wicked idea sprang up in Sam's mind. "Oh, dude." He chortled, as if at some funny memory.

Dean shot him a guarded look. "What?"

"You know, for a man professing his dislike for chick flicks every chance he gets, you sure know how to act 'em out."

Dean's brow furrowed. "What the hell you talkin' about?"

"Back at the park," Sam explained. "You should've seen yourself. Down on your knees, quoting Shakespeare to Sarah. Love poetry, no less."

"I did not!" Dean sounded horrified.

Sam punched him lightly on the upper arm. "Dude, you so did."

"Well, wasn't me," Dean grouched. "Can't be held responsible for something that a seventeenth century spook made me do."

"True." Sam nodded. "I know that. You know that. But..." He wiggled his cellphone at the edge of Dean's view, "...you can't see that on the video."

"What?" Dean made a one-handed grab for the phone, but Sam's longer arms took it out of his reach. The car swerved, and somebody honked at them.

"Dude, watch the road."

Dean growled beneath his breath but concentrated on bringing the Impala back into the right lane.

"Next six weeks." Sam grinned. "You: laundry duty."

"Dude, I am *not* touching your dirty skivvies!"

"*Everything*." Sam's brow furrowed as he glared meaningfully at Dean. "And I better not end up with itching powder in my underwear, or I'm afraid I'll have to send Ash a little e-mail."

"You wouldn't." Sam might have thought twice about the joke—if Dean hadn't sounded so uncertain.

"Oh, I would," Sam reassured him. "Six weeks, Dean."

"Fine." Dean barely managed to get the word out, his teeth were clenched so tight. "But dude, you'll pay for this."

Sam smirked, and put the phone back into his pocket. There was no video—he'd been far too busy rescuing his brother to even think of such a thing.

But Dean didn't know that.

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