Room For One More

by TitansRule

Summary

Old habits die hard, and Jess couldn't help noticing the salt lines before they disappeared. On the night Dean comes to ask for his brother's help, she finally decides to speak up, but how will Jessica Moore handle the world of the Supernatural?
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Chapter heavily influenced by the Pilot episode; rewritten January 10th 2014.

There was something forever creepy about Halloween night, no matter how sensible you were or how little you believed in things that went bump in the night.

Even though this Halloween wasn’t spooky in the slightest – the decorations around Stanford University were more funny than frightening, the costumes either sexy or stupid (with a few exceptions), the weather cold but calm – Jessica Moore found herself turning the bathroom light on, rather than removing her make-up in the near darkness as she would normally have done with her boyfriend asleep.

She winced apologetically as the bulb flickered into life, alcohol making it seem brighter than normal, but Sam didn’t stir.

He hadn’t been sleeping well for the last week, probably due to the stress of waiting for his LSAT results, which, combined with his habit of early rising and their late night, had led to him collapsing on to their bed and falling asleep almost immediately.

Jess glanced towards the window as she reached for her cleanser pads. Somehow, the calm weather made the night seem even spookier – there was no howling wind, or crashing thunder, or tree branches tapping against the glass, but the silence was unsettling.

She shook herself, returning to her reflection, navigating the skin around her eyes with care.

Halloween night was only creepy because society made it so, she told herself firmly, and that was that.

But, still, her eyes were drawn back to the window.

The sill was empty, but for a potted plant and a thin layer of dust.

*As it should be.*

Jess flicked the light off again, and stepped back into their bedroom, navigating around the art supplies.

Art was more of a casual hobby than a vested interest, but since it was one they both shared, they had made the decision to invest in some equipment when they moved in together. Unfortunately, the apartment they shared was quite small, so it did create something of an obstacle course, but they could live with it for now.

Slipping out of the nurse’s costume she had donned for the evening (and feeling very glad she’d never actually have to wear one for work), Jess changed into the shorts and t-shirt she tended to sleep in and tossed the costume towards the laundry basket.

It didn’t quite make it, but she left it be.
She climbed into bed beside Sam, and exhaled deeply, her muscles relaxing as she gazed at the ceiling.

Salt.

Something about dark and silence always brought her mind back to salt.

It was just after they’d moved in together a few months ago that she’d noticed it. At first, she had assumed the cellar had been knocked over, but at second glance, she had realised that the cellar was on the other side of the kitchen.

Plus, the salt was far too neat to have simply been spilled – it looked as though it had been poured precisely, along the base of the window.

Jess had cleaned it up, but not mentioned it to Sam, and she never saw a line like it again, although up to a few weeks previously, she had still spotted salt granules in places they shouldn’t have been.

It probably wouldn’t be bothering her at all had she not looked it up online, and found that salt lines were supposed to be a deterrent for demons and other evil spirits.

In the light of day, it was so easy to laugh that off, but sometimes, when the room was dark and quiet, when she was trying to get to sleep, her mind continued to return to it.

If she hadn’t put that salt there, then Sam must have done, but Sam was a sensible, logical guy – he wasn’t that guy.

And that right there – that was what kept her awake and was the reason why she hadn’t said anything to him.

She wasn’t afraid that her boyfriend was a little on the crazy side.

She was afraid he wasn’t.

Beside her, Sam stirred slightly, breaking her out of her musings, and she huffed out a laugh into the darkness.

She told Luiz those last shots were a bad idea.

Sam had probably spilled the salt, moved the cellar, got distracted, and forgotten to clean up.

And here she was, getting all worked up over things that didn’t exist.

Even on Halloween.

Rolling over, she pressed a soft kiss to Sam’s shoulder, feeling him relax against her, and closed her eyes, letting sleep wash over.

Less than three hours later, Jess’s eyes snapped open again, and she rubbed her face tiredly, dimly realising that Sam was no longer lying beside her.

It took a few more seconds to realise that there were noises coming from the kitchen. She wanted to think that Sam had got up to get a glass of water and knocked something over, probably what had woken her up, but straining her ears, she realised that there was someone else with him.

No one had buzzed from outside, or knocked on the door, because she knew from experience that would have woken her up.
Steeling herself, Jess jumped out of bed and hurried towards the noise, not bothering with slippers or a dressing gown.

“We gotta talk.”

Jess slowed down, hesitating outside the kitchen. She didn’t recognise the voice, but the words seemed pretty casual for a burglar.

“Uh, the phone?” Sam asked, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

Jess breathed a sigh of relief, but didn’t relax completely. It definitely sounded like Sam knew their mysterious visitor, but it also sounded as though he wasn’t too happy to see him.

“If I’d called, would you have picked up?”

Reaching into the kitchen, Jess flicked on the light. “Sam?”

“Jess, hey.” Sam said blankly, looking between her and the unknown man. He cleared his throat, directing his next words at their visitor. “Dean, this is my girlfriend, Jessica.”

Jess’s eyebrows rose towards her hairline. “Wait … your brother Dean?”

At Sam’s hesitant nod, her gaze slid towards Dean to survey him. Sam never spoke about his family – never – and all she knew was that his mother had died when he was a baby and that he hadn’t talked to his father since he started at Stanford, so her curiosity was more than peaked.

Dean was at least a head shorter than Sam, even though she knew he was the older brother (by four years, she seemed to remember), and his hair was shorter too. He held himself with casual grace, a kind of laid-back easiness that didn’t quite reach his green eyes, which were roving over her in a way that didn’t quite disguise the mistrust in them.

They lingered on her shirt, and he gave her a charming smile that she was sure had bought him entrance to many a bedroom over the years, and that she couldn’t help feeling wasn’t as sincere as he wanted her to believe.

“I love the Smurfs.” He said, by way of greeting. “Y’know, I gotta tell you … you are completely out of my brother’s league.”

Jess glanced down at her pyjamas, realising belatedly that what she was wearing could hardly be called appropriate for meeting her boyfriend’s brother. “Just let me put something on.”

“No, no.” Dean said, still grinning. “I wouldn’t hear of it. Seriously. Anyway, I gotta borrow your boyfriend here, talk about some private family business, but – uh – nice meeting you.”

Jess smiled uncomfortable. Under other circumstances, she would say Dean was hitting on her, but it didn’t feel like his heart was in it, and a glance at Sam’s stony expression made her realise that his sole intention was to get under Sam’s skin.

She didn’t appreciate it, and neither, clearly, did Sam. “No.” He said, his tone clipped with annoyance. “No, whatever you say to me, you can say it in front of her.”

Jess’s smile grew more genuine as Sam moved to stand beside her, slipping an arm around her waist.

Dean shrugged. “Okay. Dad hasn’t been home in a few days.”

“So he’s working overtime on a Miller Time shift.” Sam said frostily. “He’ll stumble back in sooner
or later.”

Dean sighed. “Dad’s on a hunting trip. And he hasn’t been home in a few days.”

Beside her, Sam froze, and when she looked up, his expression was suddenly unreadable. “Jess, excuse us.” He said softly. “We have to go outside.”

“Well, you can’t go out like that.” Jess said automatically. “You’ll catch your death. I’ll grab you some sweats or something.”

She may as well have floated back to their bedroom, her mind was racing so fast. She pulled on some sweat pants and a hoodie herself, the chill beginning to permeate the thin walls of their apartment.

As she rooted through a drawer for something more substantial for her boyfriend, she finally made up her mind.

Sam’s reaction was too odd for their father to simply be hunting game. Clearly ‘hunting trips’ were not an uncommon occurrence, but they were worried he’d been gone more than a few days?

Again, her mind returned to that line of salt, the so-called protective nature of it.

It was crazy, she was crazy, there was nothing strange or unusual about it at all, but her feet carried her back to the kitchen almost without her consent, and the words spilled out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“Does this have anything to do with the salt?”

Sam and Dean had returned to their earlier face-off, but both turned at her words.

“What salt?” Dean asked.

The note of bewilderment in his question almost made Jess backtrack, laugh it off as tiredness and retreat back to bed to allow the brothers some privacy, but she didn’t miss the spark of panic that flared in Sam’s eyes or the glance he cast at his older brother.

“There was a line of salt at the kitchen window.” Jess elaborated, her gaze flitting between the two men. “I cleaned it up – didn’t say anything – but it was too neat for it to have been spilled or something. Seemed a bit quirky so I looked it up – salt lines are protection against demons and evil spirits, but Sam’s not the kind of guy to believe in that stuff if it wasn’t real, so either I’m going crazy or those things really exist.”

For a second, Sam looked like he would dispute it, but then Dean chuckled humourlessly. “Not bad, Jessica. Not bad at all.”

“Dean …” Sam began.

“Give the girl some credit.” Dean said, a strange smile lurking on his face. “Not many people would figure it out.”

“So I am right,” Jess said shakily, handing Sam the clothes she was clutching. “Your dad’s not hunting game, is he?”

Sam sighed heavily as he pulled the sweats on over his pyjamas. “No, he’s not. Alright, apparently, you can say it in front of her.”
“Whether she hears it is irrelevant.” Dean said with a shrug, letting himself out of the apartment. “She’s not coming with us.”

Jess gave Sam a startled look, but he seemed just as alarmed. “With us?” He repeated, following Dean into the stairwell. “Come on, you can’t just break in, middle of the night, and expect me to hit the road with you!”

Jess hesitated for a split-second, before curiosity won out, and she followed them, checking the door on the way. The lock had been picked, not forced, and she left it on the latch, relatively comfortable that no one else in the building was awake.

“You’re not hearing me, Sammy.” Dean said bluntly. “Dad’s missing. I need you to help me find him.”

“You remember the poltergeist in Amherst?” Sam asked in an undertone. “Or the devil’s gates in Clifton? He was missing then too! He’s always missing, and he’s always fine!”

Poltergeist?
Devil’s gates?

Jess’s head was swimming. It was one thing to get suspect that these things existed, something else entirely to get confirmation, but to just have them thrown out as casually as last week’s shopping list? She grasped Sam’s hand as they hurried along in Dean’s wake, half trying to calm him down, half trying to comfort herself.

Dean swung around to face them, and they stopped short. “Not for this long. Now are you gonna come with me or not?”

“I’m not.” Sam answered flatly.

“Why not?” Dean asked.

“Because I swore I was done hunting.” Sam said tiredly. “For good.”

“Then … the salt?” Jess asked.

“Just because I was done hunting didn’t mean I forgot.” Sam answered. “I got better at hiding it … under the carpets and so on. However much I wanted to turn my back on it all, I couldn’t risk it.”

“Come on!” Dean said, rolling his eyes. “It wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t that bad.”

“Yeah?” Sam asked, as Dean started down the stairs again. “When I told Dad I was scared of the thing in my closet, he gave me a .45.”

“Well, what was he supposed to do?!” Dean demanded, stopping once more as he reached the door out into the parking lot.

“I was nine years old!” Sam protested, causing Jess to inhale sharply against her will. “He was supposed to say ‘don’t be afraid of the dark’.”

“Don’t be afraid of the dark?” Dean repeated scornfully. “Are you kidding me?! Of course you should be afraid of the dark – you know what’s out there!”

His words were directed at Sam, but Jess still felt a shiver of fear run through her. It must have travelled through into Sam as well, because he glanced at her and softened his tone a little. “Yeah, I
know. But still … the way we grew up after Mom died … and Dad’s obsession to find thing the killed her …”

Jess raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Killed her? I thought Sam said it was a fire.

“… but we still haven’t found the damn thing. So we kill everything we can find.”

“Save a lot of people doing it too.” Dean stated proudly.

Sam stared at his brother for a second. “You think Mom would have wanted this for us?”

Dean rolled his eyes, but didn’t answer, opting instead to let himself out of the building.

Sam’s jaw clenched and he followed, pulling Jess after him. “The weapons training? Melting the silver into bullets? Man, Dean, we were raised like warriors!”

“So what are you gonna do?” Dean asked. “You’re just gonna live some normal, apple pie life, is that it?”

“No, not normal.” Sam refuted. “Safe.”

Dean snorted, almost under his breath. “And that’s why you ran away.”

“I was just going to college.” Sam said coldly. “It was Dad who said that if I was gonna go, I should stay gone. And that’s what I’m doing.”

Jess’s sympathies may have lain solely with Sam, but that didn’t mean she missed the regret that flashed through Dean’s eyes, even if he did promptly try to hide it.

“Yeah, well, Dad’s in real trouble right now.” He said gruffly. “If he’s not dead already. I can feel it. I can’t do this alone.”

“Yes you can.” Sam disagreed.

Dean’s gaze dropped to the ground. “Yeah, well … I don’t want to.”

Jess’s initial dislike of the man (caused more by protectiveness of her boyfriend than anything else) melted a little. It was clear – to her at least – that both brothers had been hurt deeply by the separation, but were both too stubborn (or emotionally repressed, or both) to show or admit it to the other.

Deciding to give Dean the benefit of the doubt, she cast around for some way of changing the subject or, at the very least, of lightening the mood, when her gaze fell on the car Dean was leaning against. “Wait a second …” She said softly. “Is that a ’67 Chevy Impala?!”

Dean looked vaguely surprised. “Yeah, why?”

“I never thought I’d actually get to see one.” Jess answered, running an appreciative hand over the bumper. “My Gramps loved classic cars.” She explained, seeing his mystified expression. “Whenever I went to visit, we’d look through all his pictures – the Impala was always my favourite.” She hesitated, telling herself not to ask, but her curiosity got the better of her. “What was your dad hunting?”

“Jess!” Sam protested. “I’m not going!”

“I know that.” Jess said with a smile. “But I’m curious. And, if I know you at all, you are too.”
Sam sighed heavily, his head dropping for a second. “Yeah …”

Dean grinned almost triumphantly and popped the trunk of the Impala, opening the spare tyre compartment to reveal an arsenal of weapons and paperwork.

“Jesus …” Jess muttered weakly. “Do you two know how to use all of these?”

“Yep.” Dean answered absently, rifling through the papers. “Let’s see, where’d I put that thing?”

“So when Dad left why didn’t you go with him?” Sam asked.

“I was working my own gig.” Dean said. “This hoodoo thing down in New Orleans.”

“Hoodoo?” Jess repeated. “Is that anything like voodoo?”

“Pretty much exactly the same.” Sam responded. “Voodoo is the common term, but it technically only refers to a particular type of … Never mind. It’s folk magic, basically.” He looked at Dean. “Dad let you go on a hunting trip by yourself?”

It was clear from his tone that it was his turn to get under his brother’s skin, and Dean reacted with a decently insulted expression. “I’m twenty-six, dude.” He finally pulled out a wad of newspaper clippings from a folder. “Alright, here we go. So Dad was checking out this two-lane blacktop just outside of Jericho, California. About a month ago, this guy …” He handed Sam one of the cuttings.

“They found his car, but he’d vanished. Completely MIA.”

Sam examined the cutting and Jess tucked herself under his arm to read it in the dim glow of the car’s interior light.

*Jericho Herald*

*19th Sept 2005*

*Centennial Highway Disappearance – Andrew Carey MISSING*

“So maybe he was kidnapped.” Sam said, handing the article back.

“Yeah.” Dean agreed, tossing another newspaper clipping into the trunk. “Well, here’s another one in April. Another one in December ’04. ’03, ’98, ’92 … Ten of them over the last twenty years. All men. All in the same five-mile stretch of road.”

“Okay, I’m no expert, but that sounds fishy to me.” Jess admitted.

Dean nodded. “Started happening more and more, so Dad went to go dig around. That was around three weeks ago; hadn’t heard from him since, which is bad enough.” He pulled a hand-held tape recorder out of the arsenal. “Then I get this voicemail yesterday.”

He pressed play and the other two leaned closer to listen. The quality of the recording was terrible and full of static, but they could just make out a man’s voice.

“Dean … something big is starting to happen … I need to try and figure out what’s going on … It may … Be very careful, Dean. We’re all in danger.”

Jess could feel her heart racing. If these people could take poltergeists and evil spirits in their stride, then what actually scared them?

“You know there’s EVP on that.” Sam said, not bothering to pose it as a question.
Dean smirked slightly. “Not bad, Sammy. Kinda like riding a bike, isn’t it?”

“Wait, what’s EVP?” Jess asked.

“Electronic Voice Phenomenon.” Sam said. “Something’s interfering with the EMF – electromagnetic field around the cell phone. That’s what’s causing the static.”

“And that something is …?” Jess prompted.

“A spirit, probably.” Dean answered. “That’s why you often find flickering lights or non-working radios and televisions around spirits. Their presence interferes. Anyway, I slowed the message down, ran it through a gold-wave, and this is what I got.”

He pressed play again, and a soft female voice floated out. “I can never go home.”

“Never go home?” Sam repeated.

Dean dropped the recorder back into the compartment, closed it and the trunk, and leaned against the car again. “You know, in over three years, I’ve never bothered you, never asked you for a thing.”

Sam sighed, and Jess practically watched his resolve break. “Alright. I’ll go. I’ll help you find him. But I have to be back first thing Monday. Just wait here.”

“What’s first thing Monday?” Dean asked.

“He’s got a law school interview.” Jess said proudly, beaming at her boyfriend. “He scored a 174 on his LSAT.”

“I’m gonna pretend I understood that.” Dean said, shrugging. “I’ll assume it’s a good thing though, so way to go, Sammy. Law school, huh?”

Sam said nothing, wrapping an arm around Jess’s shoulders and guiding her back inside. Neither of them said anything until they reached their bedroom, at which point Sam released her in favour of grabbing an overnight bag.

“I’m sorry I never told you.” He said, not looking at her.

“It’s okay.” Jess said quietly, sitting down as she realised her legs were shaking. “I wouldn’t know how to start either.” She watched him retrieve a rather nasty knife from his underwear drawer. “How many weapons do you have hidden around this place?”

“Not many.” Sam assured her. “Just enough that I can protect us both if I have to.”

To her surprise, Jess found that oddly comforting. Here was Sam, and this completely unexpected past, but he was still her Sam, still sweet, and thoughtful, and a little protective (and who could blame him, given what he knew?). There was still something bothering her though.

“How does a spirit kidnap someone?” She asked. “I thought they were … you know, incorporeal?”

“Never underestimate the power of a spirit.” Sam said darkly. “Especially an angry one.”

“Is that …?” Jess hesitated a second. “Is that what happened to your mother?”

For a few minutes, Sam didn’t answer, and when he did, his words were addressed to his duffle bag. “I don’t know. None of us know. I was only six months old when it happened. Dad heard Mom scream and came running into the nursery to find her pinned to the ceiling. Then she caught fire and...”
the whole room went up.”

Jess’s hand flew to her mouth stifling a gasp she was sure he wouldn’t appreciate.

“Dad swore to hunt down whatever it was and destroy it.” Sam continued heavily, sinking on to the mattress. “But … honestly, Jess, the way we grew up …”

Shakily, Jess crossed the room to perch on his lap, his arms encircling her waist automatically.  
“There’s something else.” She murmured, kissing his neck. “What is it?”

“Jess, for the last few weeks,” Sam took a deep breath, and let it out shakily, “I’ve been having nightmares … of you … dying in the … in the same way as my mom and … and it’s scaring me.”

A week ago, Jess would have brushed them off as understandable – she was one of (if not the first) significant women in his life since his mother died, after all; for him to transfer subconscious fear like that would not be unusual.

Given the night’s revelations, however, she was reluctant to label anything as ‘natural’. “What can we do?”

“Be careful.” Sam answered, before choking back a laugh. “I don’t know, Jessie … I don’t know what killed Mom; none of us do, and if it’s coming back …”

“Ssh.” Jess soothed, cupping his face. “It’s probably just a bad dream, honey. But if it makes you feel better, why don’t I come with you to Jericho?”

“Jess, that’s hardly safer!” Sam protested. “It could well be dangerous and …”

“Then I’ll stay in the car.” Jess interrupted. “I’ll be with the two of you; I’ll be safe.”

Sam grimaced. “Jess … I didn’t just keep it quiet because it’s unbelievable … hunting is … well, it doesn’t exactly rake in money, and we’ve done some … stuff in the past … and will do again, probably …”

“Sweetheart, you’re rambling.” Jess said, cutting him off. “Is anyone going to get hurt?”

Sam hesitated. “No one living.”

“Then I’ll deal with it.” Jess said simply. “Let me come with you.”

Sam sighed. “Alright. But Dean is not going to be happy.”
Chapter 2

As Sam had predicted, Dean was, indeed, not happy with Jess’s presence, but they had both ignored his grumbling before successfully shutting him up by falling asleep midway through his complaints.

When Jess awoke the next morning, it was to the sound of an 18-wheeler rumbling past them, causing the window to vibrate against her cheek.

She opened her eyes sleepily, stifling the yawn that crept over her as she stretched, her muscles screaming protest and gratitude at the movement.

It took a few minutes to realise that they had stopped outside a small gas station, and that she was half covered by a leather jacket that she was fairly sure wasn’t Sam’s.

Sam was sitting in the front seat, his legs stretched out of the car, rooting through a box. Catching her movement out of the corner of her eye, he offered her a smile. “Morning.”

“Morning.” Jess returned, undoing her seatbelt and letting herself out of the car to loosen her muscles a little. “This isn’t …?”

“It’s Dean’s.” Sam confirmed. “If you ask, he’ll say he was aiming for the seat you weren’t on, but Dean never misses – however pissed off he is that you’re here, the Impala doesn’t have the best heating in the world, and Dad raised us a certain way so …”

Jess nodded, folding the jacket up and tossing it back into the car. “Where are we?”

“About ten miles outside Jericho.” Sam answered, returning to the box on his lap.

Jess frowned, checking her watch. It wasn’t that long since she’d fallen asleep. “How did we manage that?”

“Oh, Dean never sticks to the speed limit if he can help it.” Sam muttered wryly.

Jess didn’t respond, turning her attention back to the car. She could appreciate it better in the light of day, the way it had been lovingly kept in prime conditions.

Something caught her eye and she leaned closer. “Is that an army man?”

Sam chuckled. “Yeah, I wedged it in there when I was a kid. There’re a couple of Lego bricks still in the vents too.”

“How long has Dean had it?” Jess asked curiously.

“Officially since he was eighteen.” Sam answered. “But we’ve had it for years. I think I was born in it actually.” He added thoughtfully. “I know we used to have another car as well when I was very young, but Dean and I grew up in the Impala. And don’t tell Dean I said ‘it’; he’ll kill me.”

Jess laughed as Dean emerged from the small store. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Dean greeted, looking in better spirits. “You want breakfast?”

“No thanks.” Sam muttered.

“What have you got?” Jess asked.
“Soda and chips.” Dean answered, holding up the items in his hands.

Jess shrugged. “Okay. Thanks.”

Dean handed her a bottle and a bag, and turned his attention to the gas flow.

“So how’d you pay for that stuff?” Sam asked casually. “You and Dad still running credit card scams?”

Jess froze in the act of opening the soda bottle, just for a second, until she realised Sam was watching her out of the corner of her eye. He’d warned her last night, she remembered, that earning a living through hunting wasn’t easy, and she’d told him it was alright.

So she pushed through, finishing the movement and taking a gulp of liquid, belatedly realising how thirsty she was.

“Yeah, well, hunting ain’t exactly a pro-ball career.” Dean said, replacing the gas nozzle, seemingly oblivious. “Besides, all we do is apply. Not our fault they send us the cards.”

“Yeah? And what names did you write on the application this time?” Sam asked, swinging himself back into the car.

“Bert Aframian.” Dean answered, getting into the driver’s seat. “And his son, Hector.”

Sam chuckled humourlessly. “That sounds about right.”

Jess shook her head in disbelief at how casual the discussion was. “Are they real people?” She asked warily, following their example.

“No, we’re not into identity theft.” Dean answered.

“Just identity fraud.” Sam muttered, finally abandoning the box. “I swear, man, you gotta update your cassette tape collection.”

“Why?” Dean asked, sounding insulted.

“Well, for one, they’re cassette tapes.” Sam said, smirking. “And two – Black Sabbath? Motorhead? Metallica? It’s the greatest hits of mullet rock.”

“Well, house rules, Sammy.” Dean said, taking the Metallica tape. “Driver picks the music; shotgun shuts his cakehole.”

“You know, Sammy is a chubby twelve-year-old.” Sam told him flatly. “It’s Sam.”

Dean turned the music up louder. “Sorry, can’t hear you. Music’s too loud.”

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“You just walked into a crime scene and pretended to be federal marshals.” Jess muttered, shaking her head. “Unbelievable.”

“Look, sweetheart, we’ve got to do our job somehow.” Dean said testily, as they drove into town.

“I know that.” Jess said, frowning. “But federal marshals don’t bicker as much as you two – that Sheriff knew something was up. What happens when he checks?”
“We’ll be long gone by that time.” Sam assured her. “Check it out, Dean – girl pinning posters on the theatre.”

“Bet that’s the girlfriend.” Dean agreed, pulling into a parking space.

“Hang on!” Jess protested. “You’re not giving her the fed line too, are you?”

“Nah, grieving partners never want to talk to feds.” Dean said. “We’ll be uncles or something.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “And when she’s met his entire family? Wait here – let me handle it.”

She was out of the car before either of the men could protest – indeed, before she had really thought it through herself.

Taking a deep breath, she headed, not for the sniffling girl, but for the coffee shop next door to the theatre, walking right past her before doubling back to read the posters.

**Missing – Troy Squire**

*Last seen Centennial Highway*

“Well, not another one.” She muttered, loud enough for the girl to hear her.

She knew it was a little cruel, especially when the girl let out another heart-wrenching sob, and Jess instantly reached out to her. “Oh, honey, I’m sorry … did you know him?”

“He w-w-was m-my b-b-b-boyfriend.” The girl stammered through tears, taking the offered comfort even from a complete stranger.

“I’m sorry.” Jess repeated, rubbing her shoulder. “I didn’t mean to …”

“It’s n-not your fault.” The girl fumbled for a tissue for several minutes before Jess fished one out of her purse and handed it to her. “Thanks. I just … I can’t believe he’s just … gone, y’know? I was on the phone with him last night and he was driving … he said he’d call me back and … he never did.”

“Why’d he hang up?” Jess asked. “Sorry, that was a really weird question.”

“No, it’s a good one.” The girl (Amy, she seemed to remember Sam saying) seemed to have recovered from her tears, although she still looked very upset. “We were just talking, he was telling me he had to work tomorrow so he couldn’t see me, and then … he said he’d have to call me back. It might’ve been bad reception – the line was a bit fuzzy.”

Jess’s brow creased. What had Troy seen on that road that made him hang up? Clearly nothing that had scared him, or he would have mentioned it to Amy … but then did ghosts have to be scary?

“Amy.” Another young woman approached them, handing Amy another stack of posters. “Got them copied for you.”

“Thanks.” Amy gave Jess a watery smile. “Thanks for the sympathy.”

“No problem.” Jess murmured, her eyes cutting back to the posters as Amy left, presumably to cover the rest of the town in them.

“They should close that road.” The other girl muttered.

“Can’t be the road.” Jess said, almost automatically. “They weren’t in accidents.”
The girl snorted. “Maybe it’s the ghost.”

Jess’s breath caught. “What ghost?”

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“For fuck’s sake,” Dean groaned, his head falling back against the seat. “This is not Women’s Hour!”

“Be patient, Dean.” Sam murmured, as Jess disappeared into the coffee shop, having finished her conversation with the second girl who’d appeared on the scene. “She’s trying to act normal. Besides, I could go for coffee.”

Sure enough, when Jess emerged five minutes later, she was carrying three take-out cups.

“It’s about time.” Dean said, when she handed Sam his cup through the open window.

“Shut up.” Jess returned, climbing into the back seat, and handing him his coffee as well, along with a packet of sugar. “I guessed straight black with one sugar, but I figured I’d go straight black to start just in case.”

Dean glanced at her in the mirror while he poured the sugar into his coffee. “How’d you guess?”

“Don’t ask.” Sam advised. “She studies psychology on the side; you probably blinked it.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “No. You just seemed like a ‘straight black coffee’ guy, but judging by the fact that you got yourself a candy bar for breakfast instead of a bag of chips, you’ve got a sweet tooth, hence the sugar.”

“Like I said.” Sam said. “You blinked it.”

Jess flicked him in the back of the head in response.

“Alright, kids, enough flirting.” Dean interrupted. “What did you find out?”

“Well, Amy’s very upset.” Jess said. “She was talking to Troy before he disappeared; he had to work today, but she wanted to …”

“Did you just gossip, or did you actually get anything useful?” Dean asked.

“… meet up.” Jess continued as though he hadn’t spoken. “He said he’d call her back, probably because the line was very fuzzy, like something was interfering with it. Oh, and apparently, the highway’s haunted. Girl got murdered several decades ago and reportedly gets picked up by drivers who are never seen again. Is that useful?”

Dean and Sam both twisted around to look at her. “Very useful.”

“You guys know you do that in unison?” Jess asked, taking a sip of coffee. “It’s weird. What do we do now?”

“Library.” Sam answered. “Need to find out more about that girl.”

Jess nodded, somehow unsurprised to learn that the legend was true. “Then?”

“First things first.” Dean told her, restarting the car.
“Maybe the legend’s just that.” Jess suggested. “A legend.”

“Maybe not.” Sam refuted, nudging Dean’s chair. “Let me try.”

“I got it.” Dean insisted.

Rolling his eyes, Sam shoved Dean’s chair out of the way and took his place.

“Dude!” Dean protested, punching Sam in the shoulder. “You are such a control freak!”

“Guys!” Jess hissed. “This is a library! You’re drawing attention again!”

Sam shot her a sheepish smile and lowered his voice. “Angry spirits are born out of violent death, right?”

“Yeah, but there haven’t been any.” Dean pointed out, gesturing hopelessly at the monitor.

“So maybe it wasn’t murder.” Sam said, pulling the keyboard towards him.

Female Suicide Centennial Highway

1 Result – Suicide on Centennial

Jess rested her chin on Sam’s shoulder, reading the story that popped up.

A local woman’s drowning death was ruled a suicide, the county Sheriff’s Department said earlier today. Constance Welch, 24, of 4636 Breckenridge Road, leapt off Sylvania Bridge, at Mile 33 of Centennial Highway, and subsequently drowned last night.

“1981.” Sam read, for Dean’s benefit. “Constance Welch, 24 years old, jumps off of Sylvania Bridge and drowns in the river.”

Dean frowned. “Does it say why she did it?”

“An hour before they found her, she called 911.” Jess said, her throat closing up. “She left her two young children alone in the bath for a few minutes and they both drowned. Her husband said she couldn’t bear to live without them.”

Dean tapped the screen, currently showing a picture of Constance’s husband standing on Sylvania Bridge. “That bridge look familiar?”

By the time they returned to the scene of Troy Squire’s disappearance, the car and the crime scene tape had been removed.

“So this is where Constance took a swan dive.” Dean remarked, leaning on the barrier and peering
down into the murky water below.

“You think Dad would’ve been here?” Sam asked quietly.

Dean shrugged. “Well, he was chasing the same story and we’re chasing him.”

“So now what?” Sam asked.

“We keep digging until we find him.” Dean answered. “Might take a while.”

Sam sighed. “Dean, I told you, we have to be back by …”


Jess bristled, and Sam glanced at her, silently asking her to let him handle it.

“Yeah, I forgot.” Dean turned to face them, smiling sardonically. “You’re really serious about this, aren’t you? You think you’re just going to become some lawyer? Marry your girl?”

Despite her irritation, Jess couldn’t help blushing, and Sam wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Maybe. Why not?”

“Dude, she only just found out the truth!” Dean said sharply. “You told her about everything you’ve done?”

Jess felt another shiver run through her and Sam dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Not yet.” He said, half in admission, half in promise. “I’ll tell her, Dean, I will, but that is my past …”

“Sooner or later, Sammy, you’re gonna have to face up to what you are.” Dean said.

“And what’s that?” Sam asked stiffly.

“You’re one of us.” Dean said, turning away again.

“No.” Sam said, dropping his arm from Jess’s shoulder. “I’m not like you. This is not going to be my life!”

Dean didn’t turn back. “You have a responsibility to …”

“To Dad?” Sam finished. “And his crusade? If it weren’t for pictures, I wouldn’t even know what Mom looks like. I don’t remember her, neither of you ever talk about her. And what difference would it make? Even if we do find the thing that killed her, Mom’s gone. She’s not coming back.”

Dean whirled around again, but his retort was halted by Jess’s sharp intake of breath. “Guys, look!”

A young woman had appeared, so suddenly and silently it was hard to believe she hadn’t always been there, balanced on the railings of the bridge a few feet away.

Jess had never seen a spirit before, but she hadn’t expected Constance to look so … human.

The boys’ argument had trailed off as they too gazed at the beautiful girl, who looked at them sadly, her white dress fluttering in the breeze, before stepping off the bridge and plunging into the river below.

There was no splash as she hit the water, and when they reached the spot where she had been, there was no sign of her, not even ripples in the water.
“Where’d she go?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know.” Sam replied, squinting into the darkness.

The Impala suddenly revved behind them, and Jess spun around in time to see the headlights flick on. “Dean? Who’s driving your car?”

Wordlessly, Dean reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys. The car jerked into motion, speeding towards them, and Sam grabbed Jess’s hand. “Run!”

In hindsight, they would both agree that it was a rather pointless instruction, because Jess had no intentions of waiting to see if the car would actually hit them.

In her first year at Stanford, her roommate had asked her why she went running every morning – “so I can run away from a ghost-possessed car” had never been one of her responses, but it was certainly a benefit.

Of course, no human can really outrun a car, especially a speeding one, no matter how fit they are, and as the Impala gained on them, Sam veered towards the railing. “Jump!”

It was a mark of how much Jess trusted her boyfriend that she complied without question, diving over the balustrade. Somehow, she managed to grab one of the railings, wincing as her shoulder jarred with the movement, and Sam grabbed her waist at the same time, both of them clinging to the side of the bridge.

“You alright?” Sam asked breathlessly.

“Yeah.” Jess answered, as the car came to a halt above them. “You think she’s gone?”

“Seems so.” Sam said, pulling himself back on to the bridge and leaning down to give Jess a hand.

“You’re stronger than you let on.” Jess commented, as he lifted her back over the railing with little to no effort. She knew he was stronger than most people assumed at first glance, but the angle was an awkward one, one that should have caused him some trouble.

“Years of training.” Sam shrugged, checking her wrist. “And you’re one to talk.”

“My wrist’s fine.” Jess said, flexing it. “It’s my shoulder that’s the problem. I think I pulled a muscle.”

“Most people would have dislocated something.” Sam said, pressing gentle fingers to her shoulder.

“I used to do gymnastics when I was younger.” Jess reminded him. “As you well know.”

Sam smirked. “How could I forget?”

“Where’s Dean?” Jess asked suddenly, realising that there was no inappropriate response.

The colour and smile drained from Sam’s face and he looked around frantically. “Dean? Dean?!”

Jess ran back to the railing, peering down into the river. Movement caught her eye, and she squinted, just able to make out a shape emerging from the river. “Down there! Dean, are you alright?”

Soaked and covered in mud, Dean collapsed on the bank, waving a weary hand up at them. “I’m super.”
Still muttering about evil bitches who possessed his car, Dean threw his credit card down on top of the motel counter. “One room please. Two beds.”

The clerk didn’t look up, just glanced at the name on the card and reached for a key. “You guys having a reunion or something?”

“What do you mean?” Jess asked.

“I had another guy – Burt Aframian.” The clerk elaborated. “Came and bought out a room for a whole month.”

“Yeah?” Sam asked casually. “Which room was that?”

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“I can’t believe we’re breaking into a motel room.” Jess muttered.

“Well, you can go back to our room, sweetheart, no one’s making you stay.” Dean said, glancing up and down the corridor.

“Don’t call me that!” Jess hissed.

“Guys, please stop fighting.” Sam said, straightening as the door swung open.

“Your dad’s a hoarder, huh?” Jess murmured, following him into the room. There were notes, photographs and newspaper clippings covering every available surface.

“He was in the middle of a case.” Sam explained, dragging Dean into the room and shutting the door.

“He hasn’t been here in a few days.” Dean remarked, sniffing a half-eaten burger on the nightstand and pulling a face.

“He was worried about something.” Sam added grimly, kneeling beside a line of salt on the floor. "Salt, cats-eyes shells. He was trying to stop something from coming in.”

“Constance?” Jess asked.

Sam shook his head. “Generally, spirits are confined to a particular area where they died. She wouldn’t be able to come here, it’s too far away from the road.” He looked over at Dean, who was examining the newspaper clippings. “What have you got there?”

“Centennial Highway victims.” Dean answered absently. “I don’t get it. I mean, different men, different jobs, ages, ethnicities. There’s always a connection, right? What do these guys have in common?”

“Maybe it was something private.” Jess suggested. “I mean, no one really tells the truth in obituaries, because it’s ingrained that we don’t speak ill of the dead. Maybe they all … I don’t know … had gambling problems, or drank too much, or had affairs, or …”

“Affairs.” Dean interrupted, spinning to face her. “Jess, you’re a genius!”

Chapter 3
“I am?” Jess asked in surprise. “Well, obviously, but what did I say?”

“Affairs.” Dean repeated. “She’s a …”

“Woman in white.” Sam finished, examining another newspaper clipping. “Dad figured it out too.”

“What’s a woman in white?” Jess asked.

“They’re sometimes called a weeping woman.” Sam explained. “A phenomenon found all over the world. When they were alive, their husbands were unfaithful, and suffering from temporary insanity, the women killed their children, and took their own lives when they realised what they’d done. But their spirits can’t find rest, doomed to wander the roads and waterways, and when they find an unfaithful man …”

“They kill him.” Jess finished. “And they’re never seen again, right?”

“Right.” Sam answered grimly.

Jess frowned. “So … now what?”

***

“Here.”

Jess started out of her thoughts, taking the coffee from Sam. “Thanks.”

“Anything?” Sam asked, nodding at her phone as she slipped it away.

“No. Just wanted to make sure Mom hadn’t tried to call me last night.” Jess answered. “You know what she’s like when I don’t answer the phone.”

Emily Moore was the only family Jess had left. An only child, her father had died in a car accident when she was six, but Jess’s relationship with her mother was a somewhat strained one. Everyone in Emily’s family had been Harvard alumni, and that Jess had turned Harvard down in favour of Stanford was somewhat of a sticking point.

On top of that, Emily tended to worry a lot about her daughter.

Sam’s phone rang and he glanced at the screen before answering it. “What?”

Judging by his greeting, Jess guessed it was Dean calling. After spending the night in the motel, she and Sam had taken the Impala to get something to eat, leaving Dean to continue looking through the research their father had left behind.

“What about you?” Sam asked, looking worried.

Jess froze, the coffee halfway to her lips. “What’s wrong?”

Sam hung up. “Cops showed up at the motel. No prizes for guessing who they’re looking for.” He rounded the car to the trunk, gesturing for her to follow him. “You know how to use a gun?”

“No.” Jess answered shakily. “You’re not suggesting we fight it?”

“Of course not.” Sam said, opening the spare tyre compartment. “But the Impala’s hardly subtle, they’ll have recognised it. You haven’t done anything wrong, so just lay low.” He pulled out a hand gun, checked it, and slipped it into her bag. “Hang on to that. It’s fairly easy to use if you need it.
You shouldn’t; even if you do run into Constance, she wants men.”

“What about Dean?” Jess protested. “And what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to keep working.” Sam answered. “Talk to Joseph Welch. Dean will wriggle his way out, he always does; when we’ve sorted it, we’ll swing by and pick you up, and get the hell out of here. Alright?”

“Sam …” Jess began.

“Jessie, this isn’t your fight.” Sam insisted. “It’s not fair for you get pulled into all the legal stuff here. The cops might figure out our real first names, but there’s nothing that suggests our last – you’re screwed.” He kissed her then, with a ferocity he’d never really exhibited before, like it might be the last chance he got to do so.

“I love you.” She breathed against his lips. “Be safe.”

He drew back, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “You too.”

Then he was back in the Impala and it was disappearing down the road.

Jessica took a moment to close her eyes and allow herself to panic inwardly. Then, drawing a deep breath, she opened her eyes again and shouldered her bag, beginning to walk down the road as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

On the inside, her mind was racing. She understood why Sam had acted as he did, and she appreciated it, but he had warned her before they left that they might have to break the law to solve the case.

And that didn’t mean that she was just going to sit tight until they came to get her.

Jess couldn’t decide whether she liked Dean or not, but he was Sam’s brother and that meant something, so the first thing she needed to do was get Dean out of hot water.

*Thank God for amateur dramatics.*

Finding her way to the Sheriff’s department, Jess stepped through the front door, hoping that they didn’t have the security that bigger towns had.

There was nothing and she relaxed, reassured that the gun in her bag wasn’t going to cause a problem.

“Can I help you, miss?”

“I’m looking for the Sheriff.” Jess said.

“You found him.” The man leaned back in his chair. “How can I help?”

“I’m looking for my brother.” Jess answered. “You don’t happen to have an idiot on the premises, do you?”

The Sheriff raised an eyebrow. “Idiot?”

Jess shrugged. “Fake ID, fake federal credentials, ghost stories or all of the above. Idiot. Is he here or not?”
“Oh, you mean Dean.” The Sheriff narrowed his eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Jessica Moore.” Jess said, handing him her driver’s licence and sinking into the chair with a sigh. “He hasn’t caused too much trouble, has he?”

“He’s the suspect in about ten disappearances.” The Sheriff told her grimly. “Possible murders.”

Jess shook her head. “No, Dean wouldn’t do anything like that. He’s an idiot, but he’s harmless.”

“How long have you been in town, Jessica?”

“Not long.” Jess answered truthfully. “Thing is, Sheriff, our mom passed away a few years ago and Dad … Dad was never quite right after that. He convinced himself that some kind of demon killed her and … Well, ever since then he’s been a ghost hunter. He hears these stories, like your – uh – disappearing motorists and he digs around and tries to find ghosts. Unfortunately, he’s managed to drag my brother down with him.”

“And the federal badges?” The Sheriff asked.

Jess shook her head. “I’m sorry, Sheriff. I just … humoured them, you know? Figured they’d get over it, but … they’ve started going to extreme lengths to get information, and …” A tear rolled down her cheek. “I’m so tired, Sheriff – I’m so tired of baby-sitting them, chasing them all over the country …”

The man leaned across the desk and patted her arm. “It’s not your fault, honey. It’s never easy losing a parent. Sounds like losing your momma did a number on them.”

“It really did.” Jess wiped her eyes. “They don’t mean any harm, Sheriff, really they don’t.”

“I guess this is your dad’s?” He asked, pushing a leather-bound journal towards her.

Jess took it, and flicked through a couple of pages, her eyes travelling on the notes of cases and supernatural creatures and the occasional burst of Latin. “Yeah, that’s Dad’s. Told you he’d lost it.”

“Well, there are worse hobbies to have.” The Sheriff muttered. “The credit card?”

“Credit card?” Jess repeated. “Oh, that’s it. I’ve had it, I can’t … I had no idea they’d gone that far, sir, I swear.”

The Sheriff nodded understandingly. “Well, I’ve run the name, it’s not real, so we’re not looking at identity theft, just fraud. And, from the looks of it, it’s his first offence. So I’m going to release Dean into your custody, but I want him out of this town, understand?”

Jess nodded hastily. “Absolutely.”

The man reached over to another desk to retrieve a form. “I just need to fill this in. While I’m doing it, any idea what that means?” He added, as Jess turned a page in the journal to find a note that read Dean 35 -111.

“No idea.” Jess admitted. “Probably something like “Dean, it’s a ghost” or “Dean, there’s nothing here” or “Dean, I’ve run out of whiskey”.”

Her last suggestion surprised a laugh out of the Sheriff, and he signed the form, sticking it a drawer in his desk. “Alright, take him.”

“Thank you, Sheriff.” Jess said sincerely.
“Just get him out of my sight.”

Jess did as she was told, practically dragging Dean out of the precinct. “You’re welcome.”

“I don’t wanna know how you did that.” Dean muttered. “We need to go back though, he’s got Dad’s …”

“Journal?” Jess finished, handing it to him.

Dean took it reverently. “I take back every doubt I ever had about you, Jess. Where’s Sam?”

“He went to talk to Constance’s husband.” Jess answered. “Figured the cops would be looking for the Impala, so left me here so I didn’t get arrested too.”

“We just got a 911!” A voice called from inside the precinct. “Shots fired over at Whiteford Road!”

Dean smirked. “That’s our cue.”

“For what?” Jess asked, allowing Dean to pull her away from the precinct.

“Sammy made the call.” Dean explained. “He’s distracting them.”

“Fake 911 call.” Jess muttered. “I don’t know if I’m impressed or horrified.”

“Be impressed.” Dean advised. “We need a car.”

“Oh no!” Jess said, grabbing his arm. “You are not stealing one.” She added quietly, catching sight of a rental shop across the road. “Wait here.”

Running across the street to the rental shop, she almost burst through the door, startling the poor clerk behind the desk. She was fairly sure Dean wasn’t a very patient man, and didn’t want to run the risk of him giving up on waiting.

“Sorry about that.” She said, smiling sheepishly. “I have an urgent appointment, and my car won’t start. I need a rental for a couple hours.”

“We only rent full days, ma’am.” He said apologetically.

“Then I’ll pay for the whole day.” Jess said, pulling a couple of bills from her purse along with her driver’s licence. “I just need a car, and I need it quickly.”

The sight of the money seemed to spark something in the clerk and he snapped to attention.

“Absolutely, ma’am.”

Jess hadn’t expected the man to almost completely ignore her licence, except to quickly compare the picture and date of birth, but it was a welcome surprise.

“I just need you to sign this insurance disclaimer.”

“Yeah, of course.” Jess scribbled a hasty signature, almost illegible, then the keys were in her hand and she was out the door.

She found the car fairly easily, and jumped into the driver’s seat, pulling up beside Dean. “Get in.”

“Nice.” Dean said, pulling out his phone. “Let me find out where we’re going.”
“Put it on speaker.” Jess requested.

Dean didn’t respond, but pressed the button and set the phone down between them so they could hear it ringing.

“Fake 911 call?” Dean asked when Sam answered. “Sammy, I don’t know, that’s pretty illegal.”

“You’re welcome.” Sam responded, the smile evident in his voice.

“Listen, we gotta talk.” Dean said.

“Tell me about it. So the husband was unfaithful. We are dealing with a woman in white. And she’s buried behind her old house, so that should have been Dad’s next stop.”

“Sammy, would you shut up for a second.” Dean growled.

“I just can’t figure out why Dad hasn’t destroyed the corpse yet.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” Dean sighed. “He’s gone. Dad left Jericho.”

“What? How do you know?”

“I’ve got his journal.” Dean answered, leafing through it.

“He doesn’t go anywhere without that thing.”

“Yeah, well, this time he did.” Dean muttered, pulling out the note that had so puzzled the Sheriff.

“What’s it say?”

“Same old ex-Marine crap when he wants to let us know where he’s going.” Dean said grumpily.

“Coordinates.” Sam concluded, answering Jess’s unspoken query. “Where to?”

“I don’t know yet.” Dean admitted.

“I don’t understand. I mean, what could be so important that Dad would just skip out in the middle of a job? Dean, what the hell is going on? Holy …!”

As the sound of screeching brakes came across, the connection began to break up.

“Sam?” Dean called. “Sam!”

The connection didn’t improve, but a female voice suddenly came into existence, the same voice they’d heard on the recording.

“Take me home.”
“Take me home.”

The call dropped at that moment, and Dean cursed. “Crap. Jess, where did the paper say Constance lived?”

“Er, 4636 Breckenridge Road.” Jess answered, thinking quickly.

“Get us there.” Dean ordered. “Fast.”

Jess nodded, quickly shifting gears. “Is that where Sam is?”

“It’s where he will be.” Dean said grimly. “Wouldn’t be surprised if Constance took control of the car again.”

“But why Sam?” Jess asked. “He’s faithful.”

Dean shook his head. “Honestly, I don’t think we’re dealing with a regular woman in white. They normally stand by the side of the road, wait for a man to offer them a lift, try to flirt with them, and then kill if the men respond. Given that tyre screech, I’d say she appeared directly in front of the car.”

“Maybe she’s come to the conclusion that all men will be unfaithful at some point.” Jess suggested. “Or, you know, that whole incident on the bridge has something to do with it.”

“Turn right.” Dean said. “Could be anything.”

“What if Sam’s not at the house?” Jess asked.

“Then we dig up Constance and make sure she’s been disposed of.”

Jess nearly stopped the car, but thought better of it. “Hold up. We’re going to dig up a corpse?”

“Only way to get rid of a spirit is to salt and burn the remains.” Dean confirmed.

Jess grimaced. They’d mentioned a ‘salt and burn’ the night before, but she hadn’t asked. “And if he’s already done that and the spirit’s still there?”

“Then we figure out another way.” Dean answered. “There has to be another weakness. There always is.”

As they pulled on to the empty Centennial Highway, Jess pressed on the gas, pushing the speed limit farther than she would ever normally dare, turning on to Breckenridge Road with a squeal of tyres and a faint smell of burning rubber.

4636 was right at the end, and the Impala was parked in front of it. Jess pulled the car to a halt and she and Dean jumped out, a scream escaping her mouth when she saw Sam writhing in the driver’s seat.

Even at that distance, she could see blood beginning to spread across his shirt, and Constance Welch flickered in and out of sight on his lap, her once beautiful features twisted after years of awful deeds.
“Sam!” Dean yelled. “Dammit!”

Reaching into her bag, Jess withdrew the gun Sam had given her and held it out. “I don’t know how to shoot this thing, but will it help?”

“No, but I’m desperate.” Dean took the gun, pulled off the safety and fired a bullet straight through Constance’s head, shattering the window. “Stay back, Jess.” He told her, approaching the car, still firing.

Jess flinched at every shot, but still moved forward, wanting to help yet not knowing how.

Finally Constance disappeared, and Dean lowered the gun. “Sam?”

Sam gritted his teeth. “I’m taking you home.” He announced. The Impala jerked into motion, driving straight forwards, crashing through the wall of the abandoned house.

“Sam!” Jess screamed, bolting forwards. She and Dean climbed through the wreckage, and Dean immediately dived for the driver’s door.

“Sam! Sam, you okay? Can you move?”

“Yeah.” Sam’s voice answered. “Help me?”

Jess moved to help Dean pull her boyfriend from the car, but froze. Constance Welch was standing a few feet away, holding a large framed photograph, gazing sadly at it.

“Guys?” She asked shakily.

Dean and Sam came to stand either side of her, Sam slipping an arm around her waist and holding her tightly.

Constance dropped the portrait and glared at them, a dresser sliding across the floor and pinning them against the car.

“Sam …” Jess whispered.

“It’s okay, Jess.” Sam murmured. “It’ll be okay.”

The woman in white glided towards them, but froze suddenly, turning towards the staircase. Jess peered towards it, seeing water spilling from it.

“Oh God …” She muttered. “At the top. Look.”

Silhouetted in a bright light, two small shapes stood hand in hand. Constance disappeared and reappeared at the foot of the stairs, staring up at them.

“You’ve come home to us, Mommy.”

Jess raised a trembling hand to her mouth. The children Constance had drowned were waiting for her. As the spirit turned back towards them, her children were suddenly there, embracing her, and she was screaming, and everything was flickering, and Jess turned her face into Sam’s chest, and then there was silence.

“She’s gone.” Dean said softly.

Trembling, Jess looked up, seeing that all three spirits had vanished. “This is where she drowned her
“Temporary insanity.” Sam reminded her. “That’s why she promptly killed herself. Didn’t even wait for the paramedics. That was why she could never go home. She was afraid to face them.”

“You found her weakness.” Dean concluded, slapping Sam on the chest affectionately. “Nice work, Sammy.”

“Yeah, wish I could say the same for you.” Sam smirked. “I didn’t give Jess salt bullets. What were you thinking, shooting Casper in the face, you freak?”

“Hey, saved your ass.” Dean said cheerfully, examining the Impala. “I’ll tell you another thing – if you screwed up my car, I’ll kill you.”

Sam chuckled. “Yeah, alright. You okay, sweetheart?”

Jess nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. Little shaky now the adrenaline’s worn off. It was more seeing those kids …”

“Yeah, that’s always tough.” Sam agreed, kissing her forehead. “But it’s over now, and you never have to deal with the supernatural ever again.”

“Will you?” Jess asked.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” Sam admitted quietly. “But then I wasn’t planning on this one either.”


“Luckily for you, Sammy,” Dean announced, appearing to have missed their whispered conversation, “Baby’s absolutely fine. So let’s get that rental back to the shop, and then we can hit the road.”

“Alright, let’s have a look at those coordinates.” Sam said, holding his hand. “See if I can figure out where the hell Dad went.”

***

“Thanks for the ride, Dean.”

“No problem.” Dean muttered, as they got out of the car.

Sam leaned in through the window. “Call me if you find him, alright? Maybe I can meet up with you later?”

Dean nodded, a smile crossing his face, the first since Sam had announced that their Dad had been heading for Blackwater Ridge, Colorado, but that he and Jess would need to get back to Stanford. “We made a hell of a team back there.”

“Yeah, we did.” Sam agreed.

“And it was nice meeting you, Jessica.” Dean added. “Keep an eye on Sammy for me.”

“It’s Sam!”

Jess laughed. “Will do, Dean. Take care.”
Dean gave them both a salute, and the car pulled off.

“How you doing?” Sam asked, as they made their way up the stairs. “Adrenaline worn off yet?”

Jess chuckled. “It will. How’s your chest?”

Sam shrugged. “Just a scratch.”

“It looked like she was trying to rip your heart out.” Jess argued in a whisper. “Which reminds me, what did you mean about salt bullets?”

“Salt bullets will have an effect on spirits.” Sam explained. “But not all our guns are loaded with them, and I … I didn’t give you the right one.”

He looked a bit guilty, and Jess reached up to kiss his cheek. “I wouldn’t have known what to do with it anyway.”

Sam smiled weakly, letting them into the apartment. “Well, if you’re serious about coming with us again, I’m teaching you how to handle a gun.”

“Great!” Jess said brightly, leafing through the mail. “Ooh, Cosmo’s here!” When Sam didn’t respond, she glanced up at Sam. “What? No comment on how guns and Cosmopolitan don’t go together?”

“Jess, shouldn’t the mail have been on the mat, rather than on the kitchen counter?” Sam asked quietly.

Jess looked back at the door. “We haven’t had a break-in, Sam. Besides, who breaks into an apartment and … tidies up … Oh God …” She groaned, catching sight of a familiar coat on the back of a chair. “Mom’s here.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “Your mother’s here? Now?”

“That’s what I said.” Jess said tiredly. “I gave her a key for emergencies; forgot to tell her I wasn’t here.” She pulled out her phone. “Six missed calls, ten messages.”

“Er, Jess, your mom knows we live together, right?” Sam asked.

Jess shook her head. “No, I haven’t told her yet. She thinks I’m on my own.” She turned to him apologetically. “We’re gonna have to take the couch, honey.”

Sam shrugged. “Hey, a spirit tried to kill me today. I don’t care where I sleep.”

Jess smiled. “Okay, you pull it apart, I’ll go and deal with Mom and grab some blankets.”

The shower was running when Jess walked into the bedroom. Part of her hoped that maybe she could get them both situated on the couch and ‘asleep’ before her mother emerged, so they could talk in the morning.

The rest of her knew that her mother would freak if she walked out into the living room and saw Jess sleeping ‘with a boy’, and it was probably best if neither of them would startle awake, so the introductions would have to be made as soon as possible.

If her mother didn’t like it, then …

Something warm and wet dripped on to Jess’s forehead as she crossed the floor, and she closed her
eyes momentarily.

*Great. We’ve got a leak.*

Another few droplets fell, and Jess looked up, to be confronted with the sight of her mother sprawled against the ceiling, a crimson stain spreading across her stomach.

“**MOM!!**”

As the scream escaped her, Emily Moore spontaneously burst into flames, the sudden surge of heat driving Jess back towards the door, which burst open as Sam crashed into the room.

He took in the scene with wide eyes, before pulling her into his arms. “Oh God, Jess … Jess, we have to go …”

Jess barely heard him, continuing to scream for her mother. Distantly, she heard the front door being kicked in, heard Dean’s voice, felt them both carry her out of the apartment.

She curled up in Sam’s arms on the hood of the Impala, staring numbly at the smoking building, at the fire-fighters who arrived in response to the frantic 911 calls of their neighbours.

She was oblivious to the well-meaning words of sympathy, the harried questions, Dean’s increasingly frustrated dealings with the police who had turned up as well.

The tenth time someone said they should talk to Jessica, Dean gave up on tact. “Does it look like she had anything to do with this?!”

His opponent in this round of ‘how many ways can we make this look like arson’ looked like he shouldn’t even be out of high school, all acne and bad breath, constantly pushing his glasses back up his nose like some kind of repetitive muscle spasm. “All the same, sir, we need to know what she knows.”

“She *knows* that she found her mother in a burning room.” Dean hissed. “Sam and I dragged her out, and then all hell broke loose. She’s completely distraught, so back off and leave her alone!”

“Sir, there is absolutely no need for …”

“Jenkins! That’s enough.” A man who appeared to be Acne’s boss approached them, giving Dean a respectful nod. “Faulty wiring in the ceiling of the bedroom. Nothing anyone could do.”

“The dreams.” Sam whispered into Jess’s hair. “Jess, I’m so sorry.”

This broke through. Lifting her head, Jess slid from Sam’s lap and took his hand, pulling him round to the back of the Impala and opening the trunk. “It’s not your fault.” She said lowly. “You did everything you could, Sam. You assumed it was me, warned me, kept me safe …”

Sam sighed. “It was your mom. The dreams were always slightly fuzzy when I woke up … I just assumed it was you.”

“And you did what you could.” Jess said thickly. “You didn’t pin her to the ceiling and set her on fire, that was …” Realisation dawned in her eyes. “That was the thing that killed your mother, wasn’t it?”

“Probably.” Sam looked at her with eyes filled with pain and guilt. “I’m so sorry, Jess.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Jess muttered, wiping her eyes.
“But …”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Jess repeated firmly, giving him a watery glare.

Dean rounded the car to join them, shrugging on his jacket. “Well, they’re all takin’ off. How you holding up, Jess?”

When had he stopped calling her Jessica?

After you lied to a Sheriff to break him out of prison after he broke about five different laws.

“I just lost the last family member I had left.” Jess said quietly. “How d’you think?”

“Yeah, I get that.” Dean muttered, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Is there anything we can do?”

Jess’s eyes landed on the spare tyre compartment. “Teach me.” She said firmly. “And take me with you.”

Dean raised an eyebrow and looked over her head at Sam. “What do you think?”

Sam looked up at their smoking apartment and nodded once, closing the trunk. “We’ve got work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for sticking with me thus far. The question now is what to do with it?
A) Finish the story now
B) Finish the story now and post a sequel of potentially unrelated and messy oneshots looking at how Jess's presence may have affected things
C) Carry on here and work Jess in in a (hopefully) logical and chronological way.
A, B or C, please vote now.
Okay, the overwhelming response was to continue this story, so I'm going to. It's unlikely that any episodes will take four chapters again, but we'll see how we go. Also, Jess's involvement with hunts will fluctuate depending on a) the circumstances and b) her experience.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have left Stanford so soon.”

Dean sighed. “Sam, we dug around there for a week. If we want to find the thing that killed Jess’s mom …”

“We have to find Dad first.” Sam finished.

“I can hear you, you know.” Jess murmured, her head resting against the window.

“Thought you were asleep.” Dean said, no apology in his voice. “Dad’s disappearance, and this thing showing up again after twenty years, it’s no coincidence.”

“Might not be anything sinister.” Jess said, without opening her eyes. “Maybe your dad got a lead, or something.”

“And didn’t tell us?” Dean questioned. “Didn’t tell me? He left in the middle of a case, just disappeared …”

“Leaving you coordinates.” Jess pointed out. “He wasn’t just taken.”

“Speaking of those coordinates,” Sam said, examining the map, “this Blackwater Ridge …”

“What about it?” Dean prompted.

“There’s nothing there.” Sam answered. “Why is he sending us to the middle of nowhere?”

Dean shrugged, pulling up outside the Ranger Station of Lost Creek National Park. “Alright, everybody out.”

“Me too?” Jess asked.

“If you want.” Dean said, non-committedly.

“We don’t know if anything is going on.” Sam told her quietly. “So we’re UC Boulder students working on a paper.”

“Got it.” Jess said, letting her hair down and running a hand through it, before tying it back more securely. “What do we know about this place?”

“Well, Blackwater Ridge is pretty remote.” Sam explained, tapping on the door before pushing it open.
The office was empty, and Sam wandered over to a large 3D map of the forest, pointing out the Ridge. “It’s cut off by these canyons here, rough terrain, dense forest, abandoned silver and gold mines all over the place …”

“Dude, check out the size of this freakin’ bear!” Dean said, examining the photographs on the wall. “… and a dozen or more grizzlies in the area.” Sam finished. “It’s no nature hike, that’s for sure.” “You kids aren’t planning on going out near Blackwater Ridge by any chance?”

Jess spun around, startled, to see that the ranger had returned. “Oh no, sir. We’re environmental study majors from UC Boulder. Just working on a paper.” Dean raised a fist lazily. “Recycle, man.” “Bull.” The ranger said gruffly. “You’re friends with that Haley girl, right?” “Yes.” Dean said, after a second’s hesitation. “Yes we are, Ranger … Wilkinson.” “Well, I will tell you exactly what we told her.” Ranger Wilkinson said tiredly, seating himself behind his desk. “Her brother filled out a backcountry permit saying he wouldn’t be back from Blackwater until the 24th, so it’s not exactly a missing person now, is it?” “No, I suppose not.” Jess answered. “But she’s ever so worried.” “Well, tell her to quit worrying.” Ranger Wilkinson said bluntly, but not unkindly. “I’m sure her brother’s just fine.” “We will.” Dean said. “That Haley girl’s quite a pistol, isn’t she?” “That is putting it mildly.” Ranger Wilkinson muttered. “Actually, you know what would help,” Dean said innocently, “is if I could show her a copy of that backcountry permit. You know, so she could actually see her brother’s return date.” Jess couldn’t quite believe the ranger went for it, but they walked out of the ranger station a few minutes later with a copy of the permit in hand. “Look, this isn’t necessary.” Sam said bluntly. “We should be finding Dad.” Dean sighed. “Look, Sammy, if we’re right, and Dad’s out there, then whatever made this Haley girl’s brother disappear might be related …” “If he disappeared.” Sam pointed out. “The ranger has a point.” “And if Jess is right, and Dad isn’t in trouble, but sending us places, then maybe he wants us to help figure out what’s going on.” Dean continued. “So I say we find a motel, and then go and talk to Haley. And then tomorrow, we can head out to the Ridge.” “We?” Jess repeated. “Listen, I know I said I wanted in, but you don’t even know what’s out there, and …” “She’s right.” Sam agreed. “It could be anything, and Jess isn’t nearly experienced enough.” “And that’s why she’s staying in the motel.” Dean concluded, rolling his eyes.
“How’d the talk with Haley go?” Jess asked quietly.

While Dean and Sam had gone to talk to Hayley (playing the part of rangers), Jess had done her own research and they had met up at the bar near the motel to get something to eat and compare notes.

“Well, we’re getting company tomorrow whether we like it or not.” Sam said wearily. “Haley has a younger brother, Ben, and they’re both taking matters into their own hands to find Tommy. She sent me the pictures and video messages that Tommy had been sending, and there’s definitely something out there. You can see the shadow move past the tent.”

“Yes, there is.” Jess agreed.

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Why do I get the feeling you’ve been busy?”

Jess smirked. “Because while you were out, I looked through your dad’s journal. Blackwater Ridge doesn’t get a lot of traffic – local campers mostly – but last April, two hikers went missing and were never found. In 1982, eight different people vanished throughout the year – authorities said it was a grizzly. Again in 1959, and before that in 1936. Every 23 years, like clockwork. In 1959, one camper survived the ‘grizzly’ attack – a kid, barely came out alive.”

Dean’s eyes lit up. “Not bad, Jess. You get a name.”

Jess grinned. “Oh, I did one better …”

Jess felt a little nervous knocking on the door of the small house, but steeled herself. The door opened on an elderly man, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. “Yes?”

“Mr Shaw?” Jess asked. “I’m terribly sorry to bother you this late, but I’m a student at UC Boulder, and I’m writing a paper on Blackwater Ridge …”

“Let me guess.” The old man said hoarsely. “You want to know about what happened in ’59? It’s all public record, missy. Parents were mauled by a …”

“Grizzly.” Jess finished. “Yeah, I read that. And the other people that year, they were all grizzly attacks? But the bear was never found or killed, and there was nothing the next year.”

“You wouldn’t believe me.” Mr Shaw said tiredly. “No one ever did.”

“I will.” Jess said gently. “Whatever it was. I’ll believe you.”

Mr Shaw jerked his head. “Come inside then. You won’t be able to use it for your paper though. No one’ll believe you either.”

“That’s alright.” Jess assured him, wiping her feet in the mat. “I’m just … morbidly curious, I suppose. What did you see?”

“Nothing.” Mr Shaw answered, gesturing to one of the chairs in front of the fire. “It moved too fast to see … hid too well. I heard it, though. A roar. Like … no man or animal I ever heard.”

“It came at night?” Jess asked softly. “Got inside your tent?”

“Inside our cabin.” Mr Shaw corrected. “I was sleeping in front of the fireplace when it came it. It
didn’t smash a window or break the door. It unlocked it. Do you know of a bear that could do something like that?”

Jess shook her head, her mind racing. Over the last week, she had been reading John Winchester’s journal, trying to memorise everything, but there was so much to take in.

“I didn’t even wake up till I heard my parents screaming.”

Jess swallowed. “It killed them?”

“Dragged them off into the night.” Mr Shaw shook his head tiredly. “Why it left me alive … been asking myself that ever since.” He lifted a trembling hand to his collar, undoing one of the buttons. “Did leave me this though.”

“He let me take a photograph.” Jess finished, showing them her phone so they could see the three long claw marks that had adorned his skin. “He said there was something evil in the woods, like a demon.”

“Demons don’t have to unlock doors.” Dean disagreed. “Neither do spirits. They just go through the walls.”

“So it’s probably something else.” Sam concluded. “Something corporeal.”

“Corporeal?” Dean repeated. “Excuse me, Professor.”

“Shut up.” Sam said, rolling his eyes. “So what do you think?”

Dean sighed. “The claws, the speed … could be a skinwalker, maybe a black dog. Whatever it is, we’re talking about a creature, and it’s … corporeal.” He smirked at his brother. “Means we can kill it.”

***

The following night, Jess didn’t sleep at all. Sam had assured her they’d keep in touch, and he’d sent her a text every hour, letting her know they were safe.

The last text read: At the coordinates. Found the camp, everything’s destroyed. Something definitely out here.

Then, there was nothing.

Jess felt thoroughly useless, although she knew she wouldn’t be much more help out there. In fact, her presence would only give Sam and Dean one more person to protect, so she was more help back at the motel.

She didn’t even have the journal to take her mind off of things, because Dean had taken it with them, although that was somewhat of a blessing, because her half-formed images of worse-case scenarios were only half-formed.

It was lunchtime the day after Sam and Dean had left that her phone rang, and she dived for it.

“Hello?”

“Jess, it’s me.”
Feeling her legs wobble with relief, Jess sank on to one of the beds. “Oh thank God … where are you?”

“We’re on our way back. We should reach the ranger station by six; it was a wendigo, we got it.”

“What’s a …?” Jess cut herself off. “Never mind, tell me later. I’ll meet you at the ranger station.”

“Thanks. Love you.”

“Love you too.” Jess ended the call, falling back onto the pillow.

It was time for her to stop learning theory and start learning practice, she decided, because waiting was far worse than anything.

***

Jess arrived at the station a second before the ambulance pulled up, and three paramedics jumped out to wait with her. She hoped that the paramedics were just there for Haley’s brother (Tommy, she remembered).

Sam hadn’t mentioned him or Dean being hurt, but then he wouldn’t have wanted to worry her.

The paramedics shifted beside her and then suddenly burst forward as five people emerged from the forest trail, Dean and Sam practically carrying a young man who seemed to be missing chunks of flesh.

She managed to wait until the paramedics were preoccupied with Tommy, before hurrying over to practically throw herself at Sam.

He caught her easily, holding her tightly against him. “I’m fine.”

“Thank God …” Jess breathed, clinging to him. “I was so worried, Sam. What happened?”

“Son of a bitch lured us away from the camp and stole our stuff.” Dean grumbled. “But we got him.”

“Are either of you hurt?” One of the paramedics asked.

Dean gave her a weary smile. “Nothing an aspirin won’t fix, thanks.”

Jess opened her mouth to disagree, since Dean seemed to be heavily favouring his left leg, but Sam kissed her instead.

“Nothing we can’t handle.” He murmured against her lips. “We don’t have insurance.”

That made sense, of course. Now that she thought about it, her own medical insurance had lapsed as well.

“Here come the cops.” Dean murmured, shifting slightly.

“What’s the story?” Jess asked quietly.

“Grizzly.” Sam answered. “You don’t need to worry, sweetie. As far as they’ll be aware, we’re friends of the family, wanted to help Haley find her brother.”

“And will Haley back you up?” Jess asked.
Dean grinned. “She saw the wendigo. They both did. They’ll back us up. Ben looks a bit nervous though, Sammy. Go and give him some moral support.”

Sam rolled his eyes, pressing a kiss to Jess’s forehead before releasing her, and striding over to the young teen.

“Are you both okay?” Jess asked softly.

“Fine.” Dean assured her. “I’m worse than Sam, but we can handle it.”

Jess wasn’t entirely convinced, but nodded, letting the matter drop. It didn’t take long for the police to finish with their questions, then Tommy was loaded into the ambulance, Haley thanked the two Winchesters, and she and Ben accompanied their brother to the hospital.

“Now what?” Jess asked, once they were alone.

“Well, Sam and I did some thinking out there.” Dean said. “We think you’re right. Whatever Dad’s up to, he wants us to pick up where he left off. So I say, we hit the road and keep going until we find something else.”

“And in the meantime,” Sam added, “we need to teach you how to fight.”

“Yeah, you do.” Jess agreed. “Can we at least get something to eat before we go?”

Dean’s stomach made a loud noise in agreement. “Good idea.”

Sam slung an arm around her shoulders as they walked towards the Impala. “Food does sound good.”

“So what exactly is a wendigo?” Jess asked curiously.

Dean sighed. “Your turn, Sammy.”

“Don’t call me Sammy.”
Dean Winchester was an eternal ladies’ man, Jess decided, sipping her coffee. He was sitting opposite her in the small diner, only half paying attention to the newspaper in his hand.

The rest of it was fully on the waitress, who was hovering beside him and flirting shamelessly.

“Can I get you anything else?” She asked sweetly, her voice dripping with promise that ‘anything else’ didn’t have to include something on the menu.

“Just the check please.” Sam answered, returning from the restroom.

She smiled tightly at him. “Sure thing.”

As Sam slid into the booth beside Jess, Dean’s face fell. “Sammy, we are allowed to have fun once in a while. That’s fun.”

“Why are you trawling through the paper anyway?” Jess asked curiously, trying to avoid a fight.

“No one really believes in the supernatural, things aren’t going to just pop up, are they?”

“They are if you know what to look for.” Dean said, pushing the paper across to them. He’d been reading through the obituaries, and he’d circled one of them. “Lake Manitoc, Wisconsin. Last week, Sophie Carlton, eighteen, walks into the lake, doesn’t walk out. Authorities dragged the water; nothing. Sophie Carlton is the third Lake Manitoc drowning this year, and none of the other bodies were found either. Funeral was two days ago.”

“Funeral?” Sam repeated.

“Yeah, they buried an empty coffin.” Dean confirmed. “For closure, or whatever.”

“Closure?” Sam snorted. “What closure? People don’t just disappear, Dean. Other people stop looking for them.”

“Sam …” Jess said gently, taking his hand.

“The trail for Dad is getting colder every day.” Sam continued, ignoring her.

“Exactly.” Dean said. “So what do you propose we do? I’m not going to stop looking for Dad, Sam. But I’m not going to ignore things like this, when we could be helping people. Besides, don’t you think your girlfriend deserves a bit of field experience?”

“Don’t drag me into this.” Jess warned, but Sam looked thoughtful.

“Alright.” He agreed. “Let’s go and check it out.”

“Good.” Dean gave the waitress a charming smile as she returned with the bill. “Thanks. Any chance I could get your number as well?”

Sam just sighed.

***

“Alright, Jessica. Go.”
“Go where?” Jess asked, startled.

Dean grinned at her. “Start theorising. Can’t just let us do all the work, you know.”

“You guys know more than me.” Jess muttered, falling on to her bed and promptly wincing. “I hate motel mattresses.”

“Suck it up, princess.” Dean said cheerfully. “You’ll get used to them.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Dean …”

“He’s fine.” Jess assured him.

Having received directions (and a tour guide) to the nearest motel from Andrea, the Sheriff’s daughter, the three ‘Wildlife Service agents’ had managed to procure a room (the clerk had profusely apologised that they only had one available, but had managed to find a third travel bed for them), and had set up office in the middle of it.

“So there have been three drowning victims this year.” Jess continued, thinking aloud. “What about before then?”

“Six more.” Sam answered. “Spread out over the last 35 years, and those bodies were never recovered either. If there is something out there, it’s picking up its pace.”

“So a lake monster on a binge?” Dean asked.

Jess grimaced. “I don’t think it’s a lake monster.”

“Why not?” Sam asked. “I mean, I don’t either, but why not?”

“Because a lake monster, I’m assuming, would be corporeal.” Jess pointed out. “But the Sheriff said they’d dredged the lake, several times, and found nothing. Unless you guys know of a lake monster that can disappear and reappear at will.”

They both shook their heads.

“Plus,” Jess went on, “this town has been here for longer than 35 years, so why did no one drown before then? Why did it start killing people?”

Dean nodded thoughtfully. “Sammy? Your reasoning as well?”

“Not quite.” Sam admitted. “Everywhere else reported to have lake monsters – Loch Ness, Lake Champlain … there are hundreds of eyewitness accounts, but there’s nothing here. Whatever it is, there’s no one living to talk about it.” He raised an eyebrow, reading something on his laptop. “On second thoughts …”

“What?” Dean asked.

“Christopher Barr, the victim in May, was Andrea Barr’s husband.” Sam said. “He took their son out swimming; Lucas was on a floating wooden platform when Chris drowned and it was two hours before the kid was rescued.”

“Poor boy.” Jess whispered, remembering the silent boy with the mop of hair they’d met in the Sheriff’s office.

“So we do have an eyewitness.” Dean said thoughtfully. “Where do you reckon he and Andrea are
In the end, they found Andrea at the park, watching Lucas at a nearby picnic table with several army men surrounding his drawings.

“Mind if we join you?” Sam asked.

Andrea glanced up at them. “I’m here with my son.”

“Oh.” Dean said, looking over. “Mind if I go and say hi?”

Jess followed Dean towards the young boy, hearing Andrea say, “Tell your friend this whole Jerry Maguire thing is not gonna work on me.”

“Alright, Jess.” Dean muttered. “Go on.”

Jess shook her head. “I think you might be able to connect with him more, Dean. I understood what happened to my mom, more or less. You didn’t.”

“Hey Lucas.” Dean greeted, sitting on the other side of the bench. “How’s it going?”

Lucas spared them both a glance, but kept colouring.

“Army men, huh?” Dean asked, picking one of them up. “I loved these when I was a kid. You ever play with them, Jess?”

Jess shook her head. “I was more of a Barbie girl. Don’t suppose you’ve got any of those lying about?”

Lucas didn’t respond, but she was sure she caught the ghost of a smile on his face.

“So crayons more your thing?” Dean asked. “That’s cool. Chicks dig artists.”

Jess didn’t bother chiding him, looking at the picture of a red bicycle on top of Lucas’s pile of pictures. “These are pretty good, Lucas.”

“You mind if I sit and draw with you for a while?” Dean asked, picking up a crayon. “You know, I’m thinking you can hear us, you just don’t wanna talk. And that’s fine. I don’t know what happened to your dad, but it was something bad. I think I know how you feel; when I was your age, I saw something. Maybe you don’t think anyone will listen to you, or believe you, but I will. You don’t even have to say anything if you don’t want to. You could draw me a picture if you like, of what happened, on the lake.” He handed Lucas a picture of stick people. “This is my family. That’s my dad, and my mom, and me. And that’s my geeky little brother.”

“No offence, Dean.” Jess said. “But Lucas is better than you.”

This time, she definitely got a sort of smile, but neither of them pressed the matter, returning to Andrea and Sam.

“He hasn’t said a word, not even to me.” Andrea said, looking a little apologetic. “Not since his dad’s accident.”

“Yeah, we heard.” Dean said gently. “I’m sorry.”
“I guess it’s some kind of post-traumatic stress.” Jess remarked quietly. “Sorry, I trained as a nurse, before I changed jobs and …”

“No, that’s what the doctors say.” Andrea agreed. “We moved in with my dad, which has helped, but when I think about what he went through …”

“Kids are stronger than we believe them to be.” Dean said wisely.

“He’ll start communicating again.” Jess predicted. “It might not be verbal, but he will.”

Andrea nodded. “The doctors said that too. He used to have such a life, hard to keep up with at times. Now he just sits there, drawing these pictures, playing with those army men.” She smiled weakly as Lucas approached them, carrying a piece of paper. “Hey sweetie.”

Wordlessly, Lucas handed Dean the piece of paper, and headed back to the bench.

“Thanks Lucas.” Dean said, examining it. “He’s quite the artist, Andrea. Budding talent there.”

Andrea’s smile became more genuine. “That he is.”

***

The picture, of the Carlton’s house, turned out to be more of a clue than they expected, when Sophie’s brother Will was mysteriously drowned in the kitchen sink. The news that Christopher Barr had been Bill Carlton’s godson made it rather obvious that the Carltons were being targeted.

The three had promptly returned to Andrea, who had reluctantly let Dean in to talk to Lucas again, who (although keeping stubbornly mute) had handed him another picture of a young boy on a red bike outside a house beside a church.

“There’s that red bicycle again.” Jess murmured, examining it as they searched the two on foot.

“Again?” Sam repeated.

“Lucas had a picture of a red bicycle in the park, remember Dean?” Jess asked.

“Yeah, he did.” Dean muttered, coming to a halt. “That church look familiar?”

Jess held the picture up, comparing the two scenes. “That’s the house.” She said, pointing at the gates. “Right there.” She frowned. “But that’s not right.”

“Why do you say that?” Dean asked.

Jess ran her eyes over the house, noting the pristine state of the garden, the lack of colour. “No child lives in that house.” She said with certainty.

“So where’d the kid come from?” Dean asked.

Jess felt a tugging in her gut. “Let me handle this one? Please?”

The two boys exchanged a look, but shrugged. “Alright.” Sam agreed. “We’ll meet you back at the motel.”

Jess nodded, pressing his hand once, before crossing the street to the house. Generally speaking, if agents (of any organisation) were dating, they weren’t sent on the same assignments, so they were keeping it under wraps. As it was, they’d have to tweak their cover stories – three environmental
agents to investigate drownings that had nothing to do with the environment seemed a bit excessive.

When she reached the house, she checked the mailbox, finding a piece of junk mail addressed to a Mrs Sweeney. She left it there, but made a note of the name, knocking on the front door.

It was a shot in the dark, and Jess knew it was risky, but she was sure she was right, so when the elderly woman opened the door, she gave her a soft smile and said, “Mrs Sweeney? My name is Jessica. If it’s not too much trouble, I’d like to talk to you about your son.”


“I’m a history major interested in local history.” Jess lied. “I came across the story and …”

“They never found him.” Mrs Sweeney murmured.

“I know.” Jess said sympathetically. “I know it sounds silly, but I wanted to check up on you, make sure you’re alright.”

“Oh, you’re a dear.” Mrs Sweeney said, waving her hand. “Come in, dear, come in. I just put the kettle on, let me get you some coffee.”

“Oh, that’s alright …” Jess began, but she was swept into an armchair and presented with a mug of coffee and some cookies before she could finish. “Well, if you insist.”

“Peter was such a good boy.” Mrs Sweeney sighed. “Never any trouble. His father died when he was a baby, you see, but he was such a help to me. I’ve tried letting go, but …” Her hand touched one of the toy soldiers sitting on a side table. “It’s hard.”

“I know.” Jess said gently. “Is that Peter in the picture?”

“That’s my Peter.” Mrs Sweeney confirmed, with a tear-filled smile. “It still doesn’t feel real.”

Jess reached out to her. “Tell me about it.”

***

Jess left Mrs Sweeney’s house over an hour later, not wanting to leave the woman when she was so upset, but was surprised to see the Impala driving towards her.

It pulled up and she got in immediately. “What’s going on?”

“We’re leaving.” Dean answered bluntly. “Sheriff caught on. Bill Carlton just went out on the lake in a boat and got dragged in. Boat’s vanished as well.”

“Sheriff said if we didn’t leave he was keeping us all as material witnesses.” Sam explained.

Jess sighed. “Peter’s probably at rest now anyway.” She murmured.

“Peter?” Dean asked sharply.

“Peter Sweeney vanished 35 years ago.” Jess explained. “He was supposed to ride his bike straight home after school, but never arrived. He and the bike were never seen again. He was friends with Bill Carlton. My guess is that he stopped by the lake to play with Bill and Bill accidentally killed him.” She pulled Sam’s laptop out of the bag on the seat next to her, and opened it, causing the old news reports to pop up.
“I don’t like it.” Dean muttered. “I mean, it’s got all the marks of an angry spirit, but Lucas … Lucas doesn’t have a connection to Bill Carlton. Grand-godson isn’t a thing, is it?”

“No.” Jess answered, as Dean pulled up to crossroads. “But here’s something else interesting. One of the older drownings was Emily Devins.”

“As in Sheriff Devins?” Sam asked, twisting around to look at her.

“Exactly.” Jess confirmed. “And I can’t find a connection to Bill Carlton.”

“And Lucas was terrified.” Dean muttered, swinging the car round. “We’re not going anywhere until I know that kid’s okay.”

“Who are you and what have you done with my brother?” Sam asked, but Dean said nothing until they had pulled up outside Andrea’s house.

“Are you sure?” Jess asked, as they followed Dean to the front door. “It’s pretty late.”

Dean ignored her, ringing the doorbell. They heard pounding feet, and the door flew open to reveal Lucas, white-faced and terrified. He took one look at them and took off towards the stairs, the three adults close behind him.

Lucas skidded to a halt outside a closed door, rattling the doorknob, before looking at them helplessly.

Jess pulled Lucas out of the way, enveloping the shaking boy in her arms, giving Dean room to kick the door in.

Brown water was pouring out of the bathtub, and Sam dived for it, reaching in further than should have been possible. Andrea’s head appeared, but something sucked her back under again. Dean joined his brother, and between the two of them, they managed to pull Andrea out of the tub and into the hallway.

“Take Lucas.” Jess said to Dean. “Sam, give me a hand with her.”

Sam whipped his hoodie off so they could preserve what was left of Andrea’s modesty, and they helped the woman to sit up and lean forward, so Jess could rub her back, helping her cough up the water that had entered her lungs.

Lucas was whimpering, clinging to Dean, his eyes fixed on his mother.

“Hey, Lucas,” Jess said calmly, “you want to help your mom?”

He nodded jerkily.

“Can you show Dean where the towels are kept?” Jess asked. “Then we’ll get your mom dried off, okay?”

Lucas nodded, pulling Dean down the hallway.

“Andrea, let’s get you out of the hall.” Jess said gently. “Do you need help?”

Andrea nodded, still coughing, and Jess and Sam helped her to her feet, almost carrying her to her bedroom across the hall.

“Anything I can do?” Sam asked.
“Go and make her a cup of tea.” Jess answered, still rubbing the woman’s back. “And direct Dean and Lucas in here with towels.”

Sam nodded, and hurried out of the room, just as Lucas poked his head round the door, and scampered in with a towel.

“Where’s Dean, kiddo?” Jess asked, handing the towel to Andrea, who seemed to have caught her breath.

Lucas pointed back at the hall, and Jess nodded. “Alright. How are you doing, Andrea?”

“I’m fine.” Andrea said with a weak smile.

Catching on, Jess gave Lucas a brighter smile. “Why don’t you see if Dean can whip you up some hot chocolate? I think you deserve some.”

“Good idea.” Andrea agreed hoarsely. “Powder’s in the bottom cupboard.”

“Bottom cupboard, Dean.” Jess repeated, slightly louder.

“Got it.” He responded, as Lucas trotted back to him.

“Real answer?” Jess prompted.

Andrea shivered. “I will be fine, but …”

“I know.” Jess said soothingly. “You want some privacy?”

“No.” Andrea said hastily, grasping her hand. “No, please stay.”

“Alright.” Jess agreed.

“If you’re not Wildlife Service agents,” Andrea said curiously, “what are you?”

Jess chuckled wryly. “It’s a long story. You probably wouldn’t believe it.”

***

Several hours later, Andrea had almost recovered, but was still refusing to talk about what happened in the bath-tub, despite Jess's explanation of what they were (which she had given at Andrea's insistence).

“It doesn’t make any sense.” She repeated. “I’m going crazy.”

“No, you’re not.” Sam assured her, handing her what must have been her sixth cup of tea. “Tell me what happened. Everything.”

“I heard …” Andrea faltered. “I thought I heard … there was this voice.”

“What did it say?” Sam asked gently.

“It said … It said ‘Come play with me’.”

Jess and Dean were examining the books that lined the walls of the living room, listening intently to Andrea, but trying to avoid crowding her.

Jess came across a photo album and carefully extracted it, finding the label Jake – 12 years old.
“Jake …” She murmured under her breath. That was the name of the Sheriff. She flipped through the pictures, until she came across one of an Explorer Troop.

“Andrea.” She said, bringing the album over. “Do you know who these people are?”

Andrea examined it. “Not all of them. That’s my Dad there though.” She added, pointing to one of the boys. “He must’ve been about 12, I guess.”

“Why?” Sam asked.

“Because that boy next to him is Peter Sweeney,” Jess answered, pointing him out. “I don’t think the connection was just through Bill Carlton.”

“Connection?” Andrea repeated. “What are you talking about?”

Dean frowned, glancing over at Lucas, who was standing very still, staring out of the window. “Lucas? You okay?”

Lucas didn’t respond, but walked out of the room and out of the front door.

“Lucas?” Andrea called, jumping to her feet.

They followed the young boy out of the house to a spot among the trees with a view of the lake and jetty, just visible through the dawning light.

He stopped, looking hard at the ground, then up at Dean.

Dean exchanged a glance with Sam and Jess, and put a hand on Andrea’s shoulder. “You and Lucas go back to the house and stay there.”

Andrea nodded, pulling Lucas back towards the house. Dean retrieved three shovels from the Impala’s trunk, and the three of them began digging.

It didn’t take long before Sam’s shovel struck something, and they abandoned the tools in favour of brushing dirt away from what turned out to be a child’s red bicycle.

“Peter’s bike.” Jess concluded sadly.

“Who are you?!” A voice barked.

Jess looked up sharply, freezing when she realised she was almost directly staring down the barrel of a gun.

“Put the gun down, Jake.” Sam said firmly, dropping his shovel and pushing Jess behind him.

The Sheriff’s eyes fell on the bike. “How did you know that?”

“What happened?” Dean asked. “You and Bill killed Peter, drowned him in the lake and buried the bike? You can’t bury the truth, Jake. Nothing stays buried.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” Jake hissed.

“You and Bill killed Peter Sweeney 35 years ago.” Dean barked. “That’s what the hell I’m talking about!”

“Dad!” Andrea cried, skidding to a halt a few feet away.
“And now you’ve got one seriously pissed off spirit.” Dean concluded, as though Andrea hadn’t arrived.

“It’s gonna take Andrea, Lucas, everyone you love.” Jess said softly. “It’s going to drown them, then drag the bodies God knows where, so you can feel the same pain Peter’s mom felt. Bill Carlton told us that losing both of his children was worse than dying, and that’s exactly what Mrs Sweeney said to me about losing Peter. And after that, it’s going to take you, and it’s not gonna stop until it does.”

“Yeah?” Jake sneered. “And how do you know that?”

“Because that’s exactly what it did to Bill Carlton.” Sam answered.

Jake shook his head. “Listen to yourselves. You’re insane.”

“I don’t really give a rat’s ass what you think of us.” Dean said, rolling his eyes. “But if we’re gonna bring down this spirit, we need to find the remains, salt them, and burn them into dust. Now tell me you buried Peter somewhere. Tell me you didn’t just let him go in the lake.”

“Dad, is any of this true?” Andrea asked, aghast.

“No.” Jake said bluntly. “Don’t listen to them. They’re liars and dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” Jess repeated incredulously. “We just saved your daughter’s life!”

“Something tried to drown me, Dad.” Andrea agreed. “Chris died on that lake. Dad, look at me!”

Jake’s eyes shot to his daughter, who was staring pleadingly at him.

“Tell me you … Tell me you didn’t kill anyone!”

Jake averted his eyes, the gun in his hand wavering slightly.

“Oh my God …” Andrea whispered, looking horrified.

“Billy and I were at the lake.” Jake said suddenly. “Peter was the smallest one … We always bullied him, but this time … it got rough. We were holding his head under the water … we didn’t mean to, but … but we held him under too long and … and he drowned. We let the body go, and it sank.”

The three hunters exchanged a horrified look, identical to the one on Andrea’s face, but for a very different reason.

“Oh, Andrea, we were kids.” Jake whispered. “We were so scared. It was a mistake! But, Andrea, to say that I had anything to do with these deaths … with Chris? Because of some ghost? It’s not rational.”

“If the body’s gone, what do we do?” Jess asked.

“We need to get Andrea and her family away from this lake.” Dean said firmly. “As far away as we can. Right now.”

Suddenly, Andrea let out a gasp of horror, and they spun around to see Lucas on the jetty, reaching down towards the water.

“Lucas!” Jake shouted.

Dean and Sam took off, sprinting towards the lake, but the others weren’t far behind.
“Lucas!” Dean called.

“Lucas, baby, stay where you are!” Andrea yelled.

Just as they reached the edge of the water, Lucas tilted forward and plunged into the water, and Andrea screamed, as a young boy’s head, eyes milky white, surfaced for a second before vanishing.

Dean and Sam reached the end of the jetty within seconds of each other and dived in; Jess caught Andrea’s arm as she made to follow suit.

“You need to stay up here.”

“That’s my son!” Andrea sobbed.

“I know.” Jess soothed, putting an arm around her. “But Peter doesn’t want Dean and Sam, he does want you. They’ll be safe; you won’t.”

The boys resurfaced, shaking water out of their eyes.

“Sam?”

Sam shook his head, and Dean grimaced, diving back under again.

“No, Lucas …” Andrea groaned, shaking.

“Peter?”

Jess looked around, to see that Jake had removed his jacket and was wading out into the lake. “Peter, if you can hear me … please, Peter, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“Daddy!” Andrea screamed. “Daddy, no!”

“Peter, Lucas … he’s just a little boy!” Jake called. “Please, it’s not his fault, it’s mine! Please take me!”

Dean and Sam resurfaced again, and Dean’s eyes fell on the Sheriff. “Jake, no!”

“Just let it be over!” Jake shouted. His face turned grey with fear as something grasped him under the water, his whole body jolted, and then he sank beneath the surface.

“Daddy!” Andrea screamed, her voice breaking with sobs.

Dean and Sam exchanged a look, and dived once more.

Jess wrapped Andrea in her arms more securely, her eyes darting over the water as though she could somehow pull Lucas back from the murky depths just by looking.

Sam reappeared and he shook his head grimly.

“No!” Andrea cried, her legs buckling, but at that moment, Dean broke the surface, Lucas’s small form clutched in his arms.

Jess released Andrea in favour of dropping to her knees at the edge of the jetty, taking hold of Lucas’s arm and pulling him up onto dry land.

“Lucas? Lucas, can you hear me?”
His head lolled, and she checked his vitals, glancing up at his frantic mother. “Call 911!”

Andrea nodded, fumbling with her phone as Sam and Dean heaved themselves out of the lake.

Jess began chest compressions, willing the boy to move, counting off in her head. As his mother hung up, the ambulance on its way, Lucas suddenly took a breath, coughing frantically.

Immediately stopping the compressions, Jess helped the boy roll to the side, water spilling from his mouth.

“Lucas!” Andrea gasped, scrambling to kneel beside her son, taking his face in her hands. “Oh, Lucas, are you alright?”

Lucas nodded, his small body shaking. Sam had run back to the house and returned with three towels, one of which Jess wrapped around the young boy, trying to warm and dry him at the same time. Slowly, his breathing calmed and the coughing became more sporadic.

As the sirens of an ambulance grew louder, Lucas looked up at his mother. “Mom …”

For the first word spoken in five months, it was hardly a surprising one.

But the adults crowded around him would all agree that no other word had ever sounded so wonderful.
It took at least a week for the high of saving Lucas’s life to wear off.

Admittedly, the fact that they hadn’t been able to save his grandfather was disheartening, but as Sam had said – they couldn’t save everyone.

Besides, with no body, Dean admitted to Jess that there was nothing they could have done to stop Peter, other than give him what he wanted.

Now the high was wearing off, though, the nightmares were starting to return.

Sam’s, Jess knew, had never really stopped, so she didn’t complain – at least she got a night or two in between of uninterrupted rest.

Last night had been one of the latter, much to Jess’s relief, and she stretched lazily as consciousness began to creep over her.

A second later, she jolted awake fully as the door to the motel room opened. In the next bed, Dean jerked awake as well, his hand sliding under his pillow for the weapon she knew was stashed there.

“Morning!” Sam greeted cheerfully, kicking the door shut behind him. The scent of coffee followed him in, and Jess sat up to take one.

“What time is it?” Dean muttered, relaxing again.

“About five forty-five.” Sam answered, handing Jess a Danish pastry as well.

“In the morning?!” Dean asked.

“Yep.” Sam confirmed, looking vaguely amused.

“Yep.” Sam confirmed, looking vaguely amused.

While it was somewhat early, it was no earlier than Jess used to wake up at college in order to go running every morning, and she couldn’t help but share Sam’s amusement.

“Where does the day go?” Dean grumbled, sitting up. “Did you get any sleep last night?”

Sam shrugged. “Yeah, I grabbed a couple hours.”

“Liar.” Dean said matter-of-factly, grabbing his own coffee. “Cause I was up at three, and you were watching a George Foreman informercial.”

“Hey, what can I say?” Sam asked innocently. “It’s riveting TV.”
“When was the last time you got a good night’s sleep?” Jess asked softly.

“I don’t know.” Sam admitted. “A while, I guess. It’s not a big deal.”

“Yeah it is.” Dean disagreed.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Look, I appreciate your concern …”

“Oh, I’m not concerned about you.” Dean said dismissively. “It’s your job to keep my ass alive, so I need you sharp.”

Jess turned away to hide the fond smile that threatened to spread across her features. She was beginning to understand the dynamics of the brothers’ relationship now, and the more she learned, the more oddly endearing it became.

“Are you still having nightmares about what happened to Mom?” She asked gently.

“Yeah.” Sam sighed. “But it’s not just that. It’s everything. I just forgot, you know? This job … it gets to you.”

Jess nodded understandingly. The image of Constance Welch trying to rip her boyfriend’s heart out was more or less seared into her mind now, along with her mother burning on the ceiling and Sheriff Devins being dragged to a watery grave.

“You can’t let it.” Dean advised. “You can’t bring it home like that.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “So … all of this never keeps you up at night?”

Dean shook his head.

“Never?” Jess asked. “You’re never afraid?”

Taking a gulp of coffee, Dean shrugged. “No, not really.”

Sam and Jess exchanged a disbelieving glance, and the latter leaned over to pull a large hunting knife from under Dean’s pillow.

“That’s not fear.” Dean said, grinning. “That’s precaution.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “What’s the grin for?”

“You’re handling the knife right.” Sam explained. “It’s about as close as you’ll get to ‘I’m proud of you’.”

“What?” Dean asked. “ Took you a couple months to hold a knife properly.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “I was a kid.”

Dean’s phone rang just then, forestalling a possible argument. He glanced at the screen and frowned questioningly. “Hello? Oh, right, yeah! Up in … Kittanning, Pennsylvania, the poltergeist thing.” He looked worried suddenly. “It’s not back, is it?”

Sam and Jess watched, puzzled, as Dean relaxed again.

“What is it?” He listened intently for a second, then nodded. “We’ll be there. We’ve got a job.” He concluded, when he’d hung up.
“In Pennsylvania?” Jess guessed. “What is it?”

“No idea.” Dean admitted. “Jerry says he wants to see us in person. Dad and I got rid of a poltergeist for him couple of years ago, so he knows what to look for.”

Sam nodded. “Alright, I’ll pack the car.”

***

Maybe it was because it was one of her first hunts, but Jess didn’t think that was why she was confused – it was clear from Sam and Dean’s behaviour that they were as lost as she was.

As they left the late George Phelps’ home, she let out a sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Okay, so we have a plane that crashed, seven survivors, an EVP recording that claims ‘no survivors’, and a supposedly normal passenger pulling the emergency exit door open mid-flight. I mean … does any of this make sense?”

“None.” Sam said grimly.

“A middle-aged dentist with an ulcer is not exactly evil personified.” Dean agreed, frowning. “You know what we need to do is get inside that NTSB warehouse, check out the wreckage.”

“Okay.” Sam agreed. “But if we’re gonna go that route, we’d better look the part.”

A few hours later, the three strode into the warehouse, flashing their badges at the bored-looking security guard, who gave them a cursory glance and let them through into the main room.

As the door closed behind them, Jess shook her head, tucking her badge back into her jacket. “Awful, isn’t it?”

“Terrible.” Sam murmured, his gaze travelling over the burnt and twisted pieces of metal. They had been laid out in such a way that it was obvious what parts of the plane they had once been, but were it not for that helpful hint, she would never have known.

“What are we looking for?” Jess asked, as they began to wander through the wreckage.

“Anything out of the ordinary.” Sam answered.

Jess rolled her eyes. “Thanks, because that narrows it down.”

“You’ll know when you see it.” Dean said, donning a pair of headphones.

“What is that?” Sam asked, staring at the device in his brother’s hands.

“It’s an EMF meter.” Dean answered. “Reads electromagnetic frequencies.”

“Yeah, I know that’s what an EMF meter is.” Sam said, rolling his eyes. “But why does that one look like a busted up Walkman?”

“Cause that’s what I made it out of.” Dean said with a grin. “It’s homemade.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Sam muttered, causing his brother’s grin to fall.

“How?” Jess asked, eyeing it.

“Well, I …” Dean began, before cutting himself off. “I’ll tell you later. We’ve got work to do.”
Jess nodded understandingly, and went back to examining the wreckage.

The device in Dean’s hand, which had been buzzing with static, suddenly began making a strange high-pitched squeal.

“Is that the emergency door handle?” Jess asked in a whisper.

“Yeah, and it’s covered in …” Dean frowned, rubbing a finger against the strange yellow residue.

“Whatever this is.”

“If you don’t know what it is, you probably shouldn’t have touched it.” Jess pointed out. “How do we figure out what it is?”

“By taking it with us.” Sam said, flipping open his pocket knife. Carefully, he scraped some of the residue into a small bag and sealed it methodically, before tucking it inside his jacket.

A sudden crash somewhere behind the wreckage made Jess jump, and Sam suddenly covered her mouth with his hand.

“Stay calm.” He murmured. “I think the real Homeland Security just showed up.”

Dean jerked his head towards the back of the warehouse, and Sam and Jess followed him, Jess’s heart thudding in her chest. She guessed the boys were used to potentially getting arrested, but she wasn’t.

Dean and Sam led her around the back of the wreckage and back towards the door they had entered through.

Dean peered around the corner of the wreckage, nodded once, and gestured for the other two to follow his lead.

Calmly, as though they had every right to be there, they walked out into the lobby and out of the warehouse.

The second the door opened, an alarm began blaring, and Sam grabbed Jess’s hand as they began sprinting towards the gate, Dean shedding his jacket as they ran.

When they reached the locked gate, he threw the jacket over the barbed wire and jumped up to swing himself over the fence.

Sam gave Jess a boost, and she followed suit, feeling a sort of satisfaction when Dean kept a close eye on her descent, but made no move to catch her, having faith that she could handle herself.

As soon as Sam landed beside Jess, Dean grabbed his jacket, and they took off towards the place they had hidden the Impala so its plates wouldn’t be associated with them.

Dean grinned at them. “Guess the monkey suits do come in handy.”

***

“I could have told you that was a bad idea.” Jess said with a sigh, as Dean hung up the phone.

Dean scowled. “Why’s that?”

“Because it’s first flight Amanda’s taking after she nearly died in a plane crash.” Jess pointed out fairly. “You don’t think she’s going to talk to her sister?”
Once the strange yellow substance had been identified as sulphur, Dean and Sam had instantly announced they were dealing with demonic possession.

Unfortunately, neither of them had dealt with demons before, which made Jess very nervous.

When the pilot of the original plane had been killed in a second plane crash and Sam had noted that both planes had crashed after exactly forty minutes, finding six other flights that could well have also been targets, she had become even more nervous.

Because Flight 2485 had been the first flight to leave survivors, and one of those survivors had now also died, suggesting that the demon was planning on finishing the job.

The five surviving passengers had all sworn never to fly again for a very long time, if ever, and the only wildcard was Amanda Walker, the flight attendant, who was about to set sail, so to speak, once more.

“Time for Plan B, I guess.” Sam said. “We’re getting on that plane.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Dean shook his head. “Just hold on a second.”

“Dean, that plane is leaving with over a hundred passengers on board.” Sam said firmly. “And if we’re right, that plan is gonna crash.”

“I know.” Dean admitted quietly.

“Okay. So we’re getting on that plane.” Sam concluded. “We need to find that demon and exorcise it. I’ll get the tickets; you two grab whatever you can from the trunk – whatever will make it through security,” he added hastily. “Meet me back here in five minutes.”

Jess nodded, but Dean looked pale.

“Are you okay?” She asked.

“Not really.” Dean admitted.

“What?” Sam asked. “What’s wrong?”

Dean swallowed hard. “Well, I kind of have this problem with, er …”

“Flying?” Jess finished.

“It’s never been an issue until now!” Dean said defensively.

“You’re joking, right?” Sam asked disbelievingly.

“Do I look like I’m joking?!” Dean hissed. “Why do you think I drive everywhere, Sam?”

Sam sighed. “Alright. I’ll go.”

“We’ll go.” Jess corrected sternly.

“What?!?” Dean demanded.

“You stay.” Jess said. “We’ll do this one on our own.”

“Are you both nuts?!” Dean snapped. “That plane’s gonna crash!”
Sam rolled his eyes. “Dean, we can all go, or Jess and I can go by ourselves. I’m not seeing a third option.”

Dean groaned. “Dammit!”

***

“Are you humming Metallica?”

“It calms me down.” Dean muttered tensely.

Sam sighed. “Look, man, I know you’re nervous, alright? But you’ve got to stay focused. We’ve got thirty-two minutes and counting to track this thing down, or whoever it’s possessing, and perform a full-on exorcism …”

“In a crowded plane.” Dean added. “That’s gonna be easy.”

Beside the window, Jess shook her head and squeezed Sam’s hand. “Give us a minute?” She murmured.

Sam glanced at her, and nodded, unbuckling his seatbelt.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Dean asked.

“Bathroom.” Sam answered, raising an eyebrow. “Didn’t realise I needed permission.”

Dean scowled, muttering something under his breath, and Sam squeezed past him, clapping his shoulder as he did.

As soon as Sam was out of earshot, Jess unbuckled her own seatbelt and shifted across into Sam’s seat. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Dean said shortly.

“It’s okay to be scared, you know.” Jess said, her voice low and calm. “Everyone has a phobia of something.”

“We don’t.” Dean snapped, before snapping his mouth shut and looking away from her.

“By we, do you mean hunters or Winchesters?” Jess asked knowingly. She was beginning to understand the dynamic between the boys and their father, and it wasn’t one she was particularly enthusiastic about. “It makes sense, you know.”

“How?!” Dean hissed, apparently in spite of himself. “I am a hunter, I have …”

“I know that.” Jess interrupted, before he could say anything to potentially terrify the passengers in front of or behind them. She wasn’t sure, but hearing a fellow passenger admit to killing things was likely to trouble even the most confident flier. “I know, Dean, but you have control in those situations. You can do something. If something happens in the air, you can’t do anything.”

“Great, thanks Dr Phil.” Dean growled. “Any idea how to stop it?!”

Jess took his hand, squeezing it gently. “Why does Metallica calm you down?”

“I don’t know!” Dean’s pulse was racing; she could feel it pressed against her own wrist.
“Think.” Jess said softly. “Do you associate it with anything?”

Dean was quiet for a second. “Mom used to play it.” He whispered.

“Okay, good.” Jess murmured. She knew very little about Mary Winchester, as Sam couldn’t remember her at all, and she knew that Dean never spoke about her, so she’d have to tread carefully with this one. “What was she like, your mother?”

“She was … She …” Dean seemed to struggle with himself, and she stroked the back of his hand with her thumb, gently prompting him to continue. “She was amazing. Sweet. Funny. She made the best cherry pie. Used to play Metallica and Zeppelin and AC/DC while she cooked.”

A smile spread across Jess’s face as she listened. She wondered if Sam knew that was why Dean was so taken with heavy metal, then decided almost immediately that he didn’t.

“She was an amazing cook.” Dean continued, his pulse calming a little as he spoke. “We had these amazing pot roasts every Sunday … made me tomato-rice soup when I was sick, because that’s what her mom used to make her. She used to sing Hey Jude instead of a lullaby, because it was her favourite Beatles song.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “Huh. That’s my favourite too.” She didn’t get a response, but started humming it under her breath.

**Hey Jude,**

*Don’t make it bad,*

“I know what you’re trying to do.” Dean said, with no heat in his voice.

*Take a sad song,*

*And make it better …*

“Is it working?”

*Find a way to let her into your heart*

“No.”

*Then you can start to make it better.*

His fingers contracted around hers. “But thanks.”

***

*“Regina terrae, cantate Deo, psallite Domino … per caelum, caelum antiquos … glory Patri …”*

Jess’s heart thudded as the Latin flowed from her lips, her hands gripping John Winchester’s journal so tightly that her knuckles had turned white.

The original plan had been for Sam to read the invocation while Dean restrained the demon, but the possessed co-pilot was putting up quite a fight, and Sam had thrust the journal at her and dived in to help his brother.

They could only hope that Amanda trusted them and didn’t immediately alert the air marshal that was probably on board.
Jess wasn’t even sure her pronunciation was correct, but Sam had hastily assured her that it didn’t matter too much, and from the increasingly frantic behaviour of the demon it seemed to be working.

Fighting the boys off momentarily, he managed to rip the tape from his mouth, grabbing Sam by the shirt. “I heard what happened! It’s your fault you know!” He choked for a second, before black smoke poured out of his mouth and disappeared into one of the air vents.

“What was that?!?” Jess demanded

“That was the demon.” Sam answered, checking the co-pilot’s pulse as the man slumped against him. “Stay here with him. We’ll …”

The plane gave an almighty lurch, and they all stumbled as it tilted back towards Earth and picked up speed, the journal tumbling out of Jess’s grasp and skidding down the aisle.

“I’ve got it!” Sam shouted over the screams of terror, darting after it.

Jess sank to the ground, her stomach heaving with nausea as the speed increased, pinning her against the emergency exit door.

Dean’s hand clamped down on her shoulder, pulling her closer, trying to protect those around him even faced with his own greatest fear.

Later, she would wonder if either Winchester had been raised with any sense of self-preservation, or if it was just Dean as the older brother, but right now, she could only squeeze her eyes tight and pray that Sam would get to the book in time.

It had always been her practice to pray to the Lord – the sudden discovery of demons and ghosts and everything else that went bump in the night hadn’t dimmed that faith.

After all, there must be something that meant the name of the Lord was practically poison to a demon.

But now, as she clung to Dean, her life, and the life of every other passenger, in Sam’s hands, a fiery demise just minutes away, looming ever closer, Jessica found herself praying to someone else – fully aware that ‘the Lord works in mysterious ways’, there had to be someone up there more invested in their survival.

Mary, please, if you can hear me … if you can do anything … help your son. Help Sam. Please!

Sam’s voice rose above the chaos, the plane suddenly jerked upwards, Dean and Jess collapsed as the force pinning them against the metal suddenly disappeared.

“Are you okay?!?” Dean demanded. “Jess, are you alright?”

“I think so.” Jess gasped, her heart still pounding. “Is it … Is it over?” Sending a silent thank you towards the sky, whether God or Mary Winchester or anyone else who might have been listening had done anything – she didn’t care – she accepted Dean’s help to her feet, and moved over to the co-pilot, checking his pulse. “He’s alive.”

“Yeah, it’s over.” Dean assured her. “It’s over.” He added, when Amanda stuck her head through the curtain, looking pale.

“Thank you.” She whispered. “I’ll go and tell the pilot he’s been taken ill.”
“I’ll stay with him.” Jess said. “I’m a trained nurse.”

“Thank you, but we’re all trained first-aiders.” Amanda said. “And we need all passengers in their seats for the remainder of the journey.”

“I understand.” Jess agreed, following Dean and Amanda back through the curtain.

Dean sank back into his seat and closed his eyes. “I need a drink.”

“Something tells me they’re not bringing the drinks trolley round.” Jess muttered, slipping past him to her own seat, falling sideways into Sam, who had tucked the journal away and was waiting for them. “Good timing.”

Sam wrapped his arms around her. “Are you alright?”

“I think I just aged about ten years.” Jess quipped weakly. “I’m alright, don’t worry.”

“Thank God.” Sam murmured, kissing the side of her head.

“So …” Dean said, his eyes still shut. “Had enough of hunting yet?”

“Are you kidding?” Jess asked, keeping her voice low. “We just saved the lives of over a hundred people; I’ve got the best job in the world. But …”

“But?” Sam prompted.

Jess grimaced. “Next time, let’s try to stop it on the ground, not forty thousand feet in the air.”

“I second that.” Dean said. “I am never getting on a plane again.”

“Yes, you are.” Sam told him, smirking. “We’ve got to get home again.”

Dean groaned. “Son of a bitch!”
“Bloody Mary?”

Jess was fully aware that she had turned into a parrot of sorts, but she didn’t much care. Following their stop at the county morgue in Toledo, Ohio, Jess had left the boys to speak to the family, while she dropped their stuff off at a motel and started looking through the journal to see if John had encountered anything that made people’s eyes bleed out.

Finally, with no luck, Sam had called her and asked her to meet them at the library, where they told her that Shoemaker had been found in front of the bathroom mirror, and his youngest daughter, Lily, had admitted to ‘summoning’ Bloody Mary that night at a sleepover.

“You’re telling me Blood Mary is real?”

“That’s just it.” Sam admitted. “We don’t know.”

Jess shook her head. “There’s no way. I did it when I was a kid, and no one bit it. Besides, doesn’t the legend say that she kills whoever summons her?”

“But the guy did die in front of the mirror, and according to the legend, she scratches your eyes out.” Dean pointed out. “All legends come from somewhere – there’s got to be some sort of proof, local woman who died nasty, that sort of thing.”

“But with a legend this widespread it’s hard.” Sam pointed out. “I mean, there’s like fifty versions of who she actually is – a witch, mutilated bride …”


“What?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know if it’s the same as the legend,” Jess admitted, “but Queen Mary I of England was nicknamed Bloody Mary, because she had 280 people burned at the stake for being Protestants during five years of reign, whereas her sister, Elizabeth, had, I think, 30 Catholics executed after she was excommunicated, and she ruled for 44 years.”

“And how did she die?” Sam asked cautiously.

Jess shrugged. “Illness, I think. We can probably rule her out.”

“So what are we actually looking for?” Dean asked.

“Well, every legend has a few things in common.” Sam said. “It’s always a woman named Mary, who died in front of a mirror. So we search local newspapers for anyone who might fit the bill, far back as we can.”

“Well, that sounds annoying.” Dean muttered.

“It won’t be that bad.” Sam insisted, just as they reached the computers. All of them had large ‘Out of Order’ signs hanging on them. “I take it back.”
“Maybe we’re better off going back to the motel.” Jess suggested. “Sam and I both have laptops, and we can get some of the local history books out and go through them.”

***

They worked through the night with no luck. Neither Dean nor Jess said anything when Sam drifted off to sleep, but Dean set the book to one side and continued on Sam’s laptop.

As the sun began to creep across the motel room floor, Sam jolted awake with a gasp. “Why’d you let me fall asleep?”

“Cause I’m an awesome brother.” Dean answered absently. “What did you dream about?”

“Lollipops and candy canes.” Sam muttered, closing his eyes again.

Jess set her laptop to one side and settled down beside him, resting her head on his chest. “Yeah right.”

“’M fine.” He murmured, his arm lifting to encircle her shoulders. “You find anything?”

“Besides a whole new level of frustration?” Dean asked. “No. We looked through everything. A Laura and a Catherine committed suicide in front of a mirror, and a giant mirror fell on a guy named Dave, but no Marys.”

“I looked through strange deaths in the area as well.” Jess added. “Eyeball bleeding, that sort of thing. There’s nothing. Maybe it’s not Bloody Mary. Maybe it is just a very back stroke.”

Sam’s phone rang on the nightstand, and Jess reached across to answer it, when it became clear Sam wasn’t going to move. “Hello?”

There was a sniff on the other end. “Is this Sam’s phone?”

“Yes, this is his girlfriend.” Jess frowned slightly. “Who’s this? Are you alright?”

“M-my name’s Charlie.” The girl said, her voice shaking with tears. “We met at D-Donna’s house and … h-he said t-to call if s-something h-happened.”

“What’s wrong?” Jess asked.

“It’s my friend, Jill.” A sob broke across the line, and it took Charlie a second to get herself back under control. “She’s d-d-dead … I think it was h-her …”

“Alright, Charlie, where are you?” Jess asked, sitting up and nudging Sam.

“The p-park. I ran out when Mom told me.”

“Sam and Dean will meet you there.” Jess told her. “Don’t move.”

“Who are we meeting?” Dean asked, as Jess hung up.


Dean stood immediately. “Alright. We’ll go and talk to her. In the meantime, Jess, widen the search. Forget the local area, just see if you can find any Mary that fits, and then see if you can find a connection to Toledo.”
It turned out there were a lot of Marys who had died in potentially suspicious circumstances.

Jess had both laptops running, moving slowly backwards through time, but so far none had involved a mirror and a connection to Toledo.

A handful had one or the other, but not both.

*1983. Mary Carter, Ohio, mugging, January 8th. Mary Hanson, Alaska, intruder, May 10th.* Jess paused in reaching for her coffee. “I guess I should have seen that one coming.” She murmured.

*Mary Winchester. Suspicious house-fire. November 2nd.*

Exactly twenty-two years before her own mother had died in exactly the same way.

A note underneath stated that the case was closed, and that the cause of the fire was faulty wiring.

The same excuse the fire department had come up with for Emily’s death.

Another note added that Mary’s sons were potentially in an at-risk category, and Jess hastily moved on to the next Mary, not wanting to dwell too long on Sam and Dean’s childhoods.

Her phone rang, providing a happy distraction, and she answered it, finally retrieving her coffee at the same time. “What’s up, Sam?”

*“Found anything?”*

“Nothing so far.” Jess answered, mostly truthfully. She didn’t want to bring up their mother with no due reason. “You?”

*“Lit up the bathroom with a black-light.”* Sam told her. *“Found a handprint on the back of the mirror, along with the name Gary Bryman.”*

*“Hang on.”* Jess opened a new search engine and typed in the name, opening the news story that appeared. “Okay, Gary Bryman was an eight-year-old boy killed two years ago in a hit-and-run. Car was described as a black Toyota Camry, but no one got the plates or saw the driver.”

*“Got it. Thanks, Jess. We’re gonna head over to the Shoemaker house, see if Mary left another calling card. Love you.”*

“Love you too.” Jess hung up the phone, her mind racing. From what she could tell, there was no connection between Jill and Gary Bryman.

“The only possible connection would be if she was driving the car.” She murmured to herself, clicking through the next few Marys. “So maybe …”

Her train of thought came to a screeching halt as the name *Mary Worthington* flashed up on the screen.

*Unsolved murder … Fort Wayne, Indiana … eyes cut out.*

Her heart thudding, Jess typed the name Mary Worthington into the search engine and opened the first page, finding a photograph of a mirror with a handprint and the letters *T-R-E* smeared in blood across the glass.
She grabbed her phone and called Sam back. “I’ve found her! Bloody Mary, her name was Mary Worthington …”

“Slow down, Jess.” Sam said, and she heard the car door slam. “We’re on our way back. Charlie convinced Donna Shoemaker to let us have a look at the mirror; same handprint on the back and the name Linda Shoemaker.”

“Donna’s mother?” Jess guessed, temporarily side-tracked.

“Yes, accidentally overdosed on sleeping pills.” Sam confirmed. “Our guess is that Mary gets summoned and latches on to the nearest person with a nasty death-related secret. Jill killed a kid in a hit-and-run, Mr Shoemaker killed his wife.”

“Not necessarily.” Jess said. “All the folk-lore surrounding mirrors – they reveal all your lies, your secrets, true reflection of your soul and so on – maybe you don’t have to be responsible for the death. Maybe just feeling guilty and blaming yourself is enough.”

“Tell us about Mary.” Sam requested.

“Mary Worthington, died 1982 after having her eyes cut out.” Jess answered. “She was found in front of an antique mirror, and there was a handprint and the letters T-R-E written on the glass. My guess is that she was trying to write the name of her killer, but died before she could, because the case was unsolved.”

“Unsolved murder is a good basis for a restless spirit.” Sam commented. “Connection to Toledo?”

“None that I can find.” Jess admitted. “She was killed in Fort Wayne, Indiana.”

***

“I was on the job for 35 years, detective for most of that.” Former Detective Steve McArthur said heavily. “Everyone packs it in with a few loose ends, but the Mary Worthington murder … that one still gets me.”

“What exactly happened?” Dean asked.

McArthur seemed to pause in his reflection to eye them suspiciously. “You said you were reporters?”

“We know Mary was 19, lived by herself.” Jess said quickly. “We know she won a few local beauty contests, dreamt of getting out of Indiana, becoming an actress. And we know the night of March 29th, someone broke into her apartment and murdered her, cut her eyes out with a knife.”

“That’s right.” McArthur confirmed, his eyes turning heavy once more.

“See, sir, when we ask you want happened, we wanted to know what you think happened.” Sam said gently.

McArthur looked at all three of them for a long minute, before heaving himself out of his chair and crossing the room to a filing cabinet. “Technically, I’m not supposed to have a copy of this.” He admitted, rifling through it and withdrawing a file. He opened it and the three drew closer to see that photograph Jess had found. “Now see that there? T-R-E? I think Mary was trying to spell out the name of her killer.”

Jess hid the satisfied smile that threatened her composure. “You know who it was?”
“Not for sure, but there was a local man – a surgeon. Trevor Sampson.” McArthur explained, showing them another picture. “And I think he cut her up good.”

“Why would he do something like that?” Sam asked, studying the man.

“Her diary mentioned a man she was seeing,” McArthur said. “She called him by his initial – T. Well, her last entry, she was gonna tell T’s wife about the affair.”

“Yeah, but how do you know it was Sampson who killed her?” Dean asked.

“It’s hard to say,” McArthur admitted, “but the way her eyes were cut out … it was almost professional.”

“But you could never prove it?” Jess guessed.

“No,” McArthur said with a sigh. “No prints. No witnesses. He was meticulous.”

“Is he still alive?” Dean asked hopefully.

“Nope,” McArthur said, sitting down with another heavy sigh. “If you ask me, Mary spent her last living moments trying to expose this guy’s secret. But she never could.”

“Where’s she buried?” Sam asked, in a would-be casual voice.

McArthur shook her head. “She wasn’t. She was cremated.”

Jess shot the two boys a questioning look, and Dean looked thoughtful. “What about the mirror? It’s not in some evidence lock-up somewhere, is it?”

If McArthur found something strange about this query, he didn’t show it. Maybe his mind was back in 1982, in Mary’s tiny apartment, looking down at her broken body, blood smeared across her beautiful features. “No, it was returned to Mary’s family a long time ago.”

Sam nodded. “You have the names of her family by any chance?”

Twenty minutes later, they were speeding back to Toledo, while Sam pretended to be an antiques dealer to get his hands on the mirror Mary had died in front of.

From the look on his face, it wasn’t a successful call.

“That’s too bad, Mr Worthington. I would have paid a lot for that mirror.” Sam was saying ruefully. “Okay, well maybe next time. Alright, thanks.” He hung up with a frustrated sigh.

“So?” Jess prompted.

“That was Mary’s brother.” Sam answered. “The mirror was in the family for years, until he sold it one week ago, to a store called Estate Antiques. A store in Toledo.”

“So wherever the mirror goes, Mary goes?” Dean concluded.

“Her spirit’s definitely tied up with it somehow.” Sam confirmed.

Dean frowned. “Isn’t there an old superstition that says mirrors can capture spirits?”

“Yeah, there is.” Sam answered slowly. “Yeah, when someone would die in a house, people would cover up the mirrors so the ghost wouldn’t get trapped.”
“So Mary dies in front of a mirror and it draws in her spirit?” Jess asked. “How could she move through the others?”

“I don’t know.” Dean admitted. “But if that mirror is the source, I say we find it and smash it.”

“Maybe.” Sam said, fishing his phone out of his pocket again as it rang. “Hello.” He stiffened. “Charlie?”

***

Once they had settled Charlie in their motel room, with every possible reflective surface covered, Jess, Sam and Dean headed straight for the antique store.

After Donna Shoemaker had ‘summoned’ Bloody Mary to prove to Charlie that Dean and Sam were insane, the girl had begun to see her, and spilled her secret to Jess and the boys before they left.

“You know, her boyfriend killing himself, that’s not really Charlie’s fault.” Dean said after a while.

“Maybe it’s like Jess said.” Sam responded. “You know spirits don’t exactly see shades of grey, Dean. Charlie had a secret, someone died, that’s good enough for Mary.”

“I guess.” Dean muttered.

“You know, I’ve been thinking.” Sam said. “It might not be enough to just smash that mirror.”

“Why?” Jess asked.

“Well, Mary’s hard to pin down.” Sam pointed out. “She moves around from mirror to mirror, so who’s to say she’s not just gonna keep hiding in them forever?”

“Maybe we should try to pin her down.” Jess suggested. “Summon her to the mirror and then smash it.”

“Well, how do you know that’s gonna work?” Dean asked.

“I don’t.” Jess admitted. “Not for sure.”

“Who’s gonna summon her?” Sam asked.

Jess took a deep breath. “I will. She’ll come after me.”

“Dean.” Sam said sharply, and his brother heeded the unspoken demand, pulling over at the side of the road so both men could twist around to look at her.

“I’ll do it.” Sam continued. “Not you.”

Jess shook her head. “That won’t work, Sam.”

“Why not?!” Sam asked.

Dean groaned. “Dude, what happened to Jess’s mom was not your fault! You wanna blame something, blame the thing that killed her! Hell, take a swing at me; I’m the one who dragged you out in the first place!”

Jess reached out to touch Dean’s arm. “I don’t blame you, Dean, or you, Sam. And this isn’t a secret, Sam. We know all about it. All about it.” She repeated, giving Sam a meaningful look. She wasn’t
sure if he had told Dean about the dreams, but her gut said he hadn’t.

“Well, what’s your dirty little secret?” Dean asked.

Jess gave him a tight smile. “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a secret, would it?”

“No.” Sam said immediately. “I don’t like it.”

“Me neither.” Dean agreed. “Not happening, kiddo.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Guys, that girl is going to die if we don’t do something. And who knows how many people will die after that?! I have to do it. You’ve got to let me do this.”

***

“Bloody Mary.” Jess said firmly. “Bloody Mary.” She swallowed, feeling Sam’s hand tight on her shoulder. “Bloody Mary.”

A light came on outside the store, and Dean stepped away from them. “I’ll go check that out. Stay here, be careful. Smash anything that moves.”

Sam and Jess stood side by side in front of Mary’s mirror, each clutching a crowbar. A commotion outside caused Jess to glance towards the front of the store. “We must have tripped an alarm.” She whispered. “Go and help him.”

“But …”

“Go!” Jess repeated. “It’s not good if we get arrested before we can do anything.”

“Be safe.” Sam whispered, kissing her forehead and hurrying towards the door. It swung closed, just as Jess caught sight of Mary in one of the other mirrors.

She swung the crowbar towards it, shattering the glass, but Mary appeared in another mirror, so Jess smashed that one too.

“Come on.” She whispered, facing the original mirror. “Come into this one.”

Her reflection smiled coldly at her, and Jess felt something constrict her throat, something warm and wet trickling down her cheek.

“It’s your fault.” Her reflection said. “You killed him. You killed your own father.”

The crowbar in her hand fell uselessly to the ground as her hand clutched her chest, gasping for air.

“How many times had he told you to be quiet so he could concentrate?” Her reflection continued as she fell to the ground, her vision becoming bloody. “It was dark, the roads were icy – he needed to focus. But you had to keep talking, didn’t you? Couldn’t stand not to be the centre of Daddy’s attention anymore.”

The mirror shattered as Dean’s crowbar collided with it, and strong arms pulled her to her feet.

“Jess? Jessie?!” Sam called frantically. “Talk to me, baby, please!”

“Sam!” Jess gasped out, the grip on her throat disappearing. “I’m okay …”

A sudden presence appeared at her other side, and she flinched, before a hand gently wiped the
worst of the blood from her eyes, and she blinked the rest of it away to see that it was Dean. “Hey.”

“We just knocked out two cops.” Dean said by way of greeting. “We need to get out of here.”

“Right.” Sam agreed quickly, wrapping an arm around Jess’s waist to help her out.

As they moved towards the exit, something moved across the broken glass behind them, and ice
crept over Jess’s skin as they slowly turned to see what it was.

Mary Worthington had somehow extracted herself from her mirror and was stumbling towards them.

As they looked upon her, Dean and Sam crumpled, their eyes beginning to weep blood, and Jess fell
with them as her lungs began to fail her again, her hand helplessly scrambling for something –
anything – to block the sight of her.

If they could just stop looking at her, maybe they would be alright.

Her hand hit the edge of another mirror and she lifted it in front of their faces.

The terrible tightness on her chest loosened and she sucked in air hastily, wiping her eyes with her
free hand.

“You killed them!” A woman’s voice hissed. “You killed those people!”

Intrigued, Jess peered out from behind the mirror to see that Mary had stopped, staring at her
reflection in horror.

Her own eyes were beginning to bleed, and her mouth opened in a silent scream, before she seemed
to melt and shatter all at once, turning to blood that solidified and joined the shards of glass littering
the floor.

“Smash it.” Dean croaked, and Jess let the mirror in her hands fall, watching it break into pieces.

“You both okay?”

“I think so.” Sam answered, helping Jess to her feet. “Are you okay to drive?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it.” Dean assured him, as they stumbled out of the shop, stepping over the
unconscious security guards.

“Think they took down the licence plate?” Jess asked, as she and Sam climbed into the back seat.

“Won’t matter.” Dean said, swinging into the driver’s seat. “Baby’s not registered.”

“Baby?” Jess repeated.

“Don’t ask.” Sam advised, as Dean pulled away from the antique store. “You want to tell us about
that secret now?”

Jess smiled weakly. “It’s not much of a secret to be honest. You know my dad died in a car accident
when I was sick. What you don’t know is that I was in the back seat. I was a complete Daddy’s girl
and he worked a lot, so I had to make the most of the time I had with him. It was late January, it was
dark, and the roads were really icy. He’d been telling me for nearly ten minutes to be quiet so he
could focus on the road, but I just kept talking and …”

“Black ice.” Dean finished, looking at her in the rear view mirror. “That’s not your fault, Jess. No
amount of silence or focus can let you avoid it.”
“I know.” Jess admitted. “Doesn’t stop me from feeling guilty though.”

“Nice job with the mirror, by the way.” Dean said, possibly sensing her wish to change the subject.

“It was kind of an accident.” Jess said sheepishly. “I just wanted to block her from view.”

Sam snorted. “Well, do us a favour, Jess, and have more accidents like that.”

“What I don’t understand is why you two went down.” Jess continued. “I mean, did she stop worrying about secrets and just focus on guilt?”

“Maybe.” Sam conceded. “Maybe not. Dean and I weren’t encouraged to talk about what happened on hunts. There were a couple of hairy moments out there.”

“Maybe for you.” Dean muttered.

Sam gave the back of Dean’s head a tired look. “You know as well as I do, that there were some hunts where Dad had picked up activity, but there didn’t seem to be any victims.”

“There would have been sooner or later.” Dean said stiffly.

“You believe that as much as I do.” Sam said softly. “You’d just never question Dad’s judgement.”

“Here and now is hardly the time and place for this discussion.” Jess said hastily, before Dean could retort. “Whatever happened, it’s in the past; don’t fight over it.”

“She’s right.” Dean said after a few minutes, his eyes meeting Sam’s in the mirror. “It’s all in the past. You don’t cry after hunts anymore for one.”

“I caught you once or twice, you know.” Sam refuted.

“Bitch.”

“Jerk.”

Jess closed her eyes with a smile. The argument may have seemed to continue, but she knew her boys.

They were going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

My numbers may be off with the whole Mary/Elizabeth history story.

Alright, kids, question time. Sam's nickname for Jess is Jessie, and it's one only he can get away with. Dean's nickname for Sam is Sammy, and it's one only HE can get away with. So what nickname can Dean have for Jess? He's called her Sweetheart and Princess so far, but I don't want it to be either of those, simply because I can see Dean using Sweetheart generically and ... Well, I have plans for Princess, and I want it to be a Dean-only nickname, one that annoys her to begin with but just becomes a token of their relationship - like Dean and Sammy. Answers in reviews please!
It was a month after they had left Toledo behind that Sam read the email.

They had pulled in at a gas station, and Dean was mapping out their next moves, Jess chiming in with ideas, when Sam suddenly cursed.

“What’s wrong?” Jess asked, immediately concerned.

“Zach’s been arrested for murder.” Sam answered, staring at his palm pilot.


“Whoa, back up!” Dean requested. “What are you talking about?”

“I was just checking emails from my old friends at Stanford …” Sam began.

“Hold up.” Dean interrupted. “You keep in touch with them?”


“Yeah? And where do they think you are right now?” Dean asked.

“Road trip.” Jess answered promptly. “I had a crisis of identity after Mom died, and Sam and I hit the road.”

“Oh, so you lie to them.” Dean concluded.

“I don’t tell them everything.” Jess corrected.

“Lying.” Dean repeated. “I mean, I get it; can’t tell them the truth.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “No shit, Sherlock. We went to college with Zach and his sister Becky. I’m assuming it was Becky who emailed you?”

Sam nodded. “She says he was arrested for killing his girlfriend.”

“No way.” Jess said again. “Zach’s not a murderer, Sam; there must be something …”

“She says the police have a really good case.” Sam turned to Dean. “They’re in St Louis. We’re going.”

Dean sighed. “Look, I’m sorry about your buddy, guys, but St Louis is four hundred miles behind us! And it’s hardly our sort of problem.”

“It is our problem.” Sam refuted. “They’re our friends.”
Before Dean could argue, Jess’s phone rang and she waved her hand, gesturing for them to be quiet so she could answer it. “Hello?”

“Is this Miss Jessica Moore?”

“It is.” Jess answered. “Who’s this?”

“This is Robert Carter from Carter, Williamson and Howe Solicitors. We need to speak with you about your mother’s estate.”

“My mother died four months ago.” Jess said shakily. “She didn’t have a Will …”

“There are certain things we’ve had to wait for, insurance paperwork and so on. She filed one with us four years ago on the date of September 15th 2001.”

“Just after I left for Stanford.” Jess whispered. She cleared her throat. “Is there something wrong?”

“Not at all, we just need you to come to our office, dot some I’s, cross some t’s, sign the paperwork, and so on.”

“Could you hold for a second?” Jess asked.

“Certainly, ma’am.”

Covering the mouthpiece, Jess let out a sigh. “Apparently, my mother’s attorneys need to see me.”

“Who are they?” Sam asked.

“Carter, Williamson and Howe; they’re based in Chicago.” Jess answered tiredly.

“Alright, we’re on our way.” Dean said.

“No.” Jess said, as he moved to start the car. “Drop me off, and then you two carry on to St Louis. Becky needs the support far more than I do.”

***

It felt strange, walking into the attorneys’ office alone, but Jess didn’t regret her decision, especially given the text she had just received. Once the boys had dropped her off, she had hired a car and checked into a motel, before setting about finding the office, which took about two and a half hours.

For anyone else, it would have taken another hour to reach St Louis, but Dean was not anyone else. And according to Sam, Zach was apparently in two places at once when his girlfriend died.

So much for it ‘not being their thing’.

“Can I help you?” The bored-looking receptionist asked.

“My name is Jessica Moore, I have an appointment with Mr Carter.”

“Take a seat.”

Jess perched on one of the seats in the small foyer, wishing she was wearing something nicer than jeans, but she just couldn’t afford it.
She didn’t feel comfortable using fake credit cards unless she had to or it was for a case, and she had lost most of her clothes in the fire.

“Miss Moore?”

Robert Carter was stick thin, with a very firm handshake. “Come through to my office. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” Jess murmured automatically. “Why has it taken three months for all this to get sorted out?”

Carter sighed, settling behind his desk. “Well, there was a bit of a contest, you see …”

“The Will was contested and you didn’t inform me?!” Jess demanded.

Carter gave her a small smile. “Had it seemed to be going to court, we would, of course, have informed you, but the contest came from a half-sister of your mother.”

Jess relaxed slightly. “I didn’t know my mother had a half-sister.”

“Neither did she, hence why Miss Barker wasn’t in the Will.” Carter explained. “She was the daughter of your mother’s father, your grandfather, but had never actually met him.”

Jess frowned. “But why would she contest the Will? For that matter, why would Mom even make a Will, she had nothing to leave.”

Carter gave her a curious look. “Do you know what your grandfather did?”

“No, he died before I was born.” Jess answered. “And Mom never spoke about him.”

“He owned a very lucrative accounting company.” Carter informed her. “And made quite a lot of money. Your mother was his sole beneficiary, but she never spent it, because she was earning herself. So now that money goes to you.”

For a few seconds, Jess sat in silence, her head spinning.

The first instinct, she supposed, was to jump on the money and spend it, but she had been raised to be frugal with what she had, and it seemed silly to do that.

“I assume it’s gaining interest at the moment?” She asked, her voice just barely staying calm.

“It is.” Carter confirmed, just as his phone rang.

“I’d answer that.” Jess said. “It might be important, and I’m not going to be able to form sensible sentences for a while.”

“You did quite well there.” He said with a smile, picking up the phone. “Carter, Williamson and Howe; Carter speaking. Honey, I’m working; you can’t just … Look, we’ve been through this, Janet; Katie needs to … What was that? The line’s terrible, are you … What?!”

Jess jumped at the sudden exclamation, shocked out of her … well, shock by Robert Carter jumping to his feet.

“Honey, get Katie out of the house; go to your sister’s! I’ll call … someone.” Carter hung up the phone, and buried his face in his hands.
“Are you alright, Mr Carter?” Jess asked.

“No.” Carter sighed. “But that’s beside the point. I’m afraid I’ll have to reschedule, Miss Moore, I seem to have a vanishing man living in my house.”

“Like a ghost?” Jess asked.

“Of course not.” Carter scoffed. “There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“But if there were,” Jess pressed, “is that how you’d describe it?”

Carter faltered. “Well … yes, actually.” He looked down at the information in front of him. “It says here you were a nursing student?”

“And we can’t believe in ghosts?” Jess asked sweetly. “As it happens, Mr Carter, I might be able to help you, if you’ll let me.”

Carter sighed. “I don’t know …”

“Come on.” Jess said coaxingly. “I don’t charge. What have you got to lose? It’ll give me time to get my head around this inheritance stuff.”

Carter hesitated for only a moment more. “What the hell. I can hardly call the police and tell them.”

“When did this man appear?” Jess asked.

“Well, I’ve never seen him.” Carter admitted. “My daughter, Katie, has. She’s eight. We moved in about … five months ago, and within a week, she called down late one night to say there was a man in her room. Obviously, my wife and I came running, but there was no one there. The windows were shut, the doors were bolted, and Katie kept pointing at thin air and saying there was a man there.”

“You assumed she had an imaginary friend.” Jess said.

Carter nodded. “Exactly. I thought we should just let her get it out of her system, but that was my wife calling … Janet said she saw the man as well, covered in blood.”

“You said that the phone connection was bad?” Jess asked.

“Yes, it’s been fuzzy since we moved in.” Carter confirmed. “I’ve called the phone company a number of times, but they insist there’s nothing wrong.”

“Have you noticed anything else unusual?” Jess asked. “Flickering lights, radios or televisions not working, things moving?”


“How old?” Jess asked.

“About ninety years.” Carter answered.

“All original fittings?” Jess checked.

“Yes, why?”

Jess shrugged. “Just putting pieces together. What do you know about the history of the house?
“Not much.” Carter admitted. “It had been abandoned for about twenty years when we bought it. We just got someone in to check it was habitable, we didn’t research the owners.”

Jess nodded understandingly. “May I take a look at it?”

Jess pulled up behind Robert’s car, and got out of her rental, immediately assessing the house. It definitely looked old, but not rundown in the way Constance’s house had done.

But then, no one lived there anymore.

On the way over, she had toyed with the idea of calling Sam and Dean, but it seemed as though they had a larger mystery on their hands – she, at least, knew vaguely what she was dealing with, and just taking a look couldn’t hurt.

She only wished she had more resources with her, but, as she rounded the rental to search the bag Dean had handed her and that she’d slung in the trunk, she discovered she had more than she thought.

“Keep this with you at all times,” he’d said, and she was grateful she’d listened.

Inside was a fake ID, a gun, a flip-knife, and – more importantly right now – some salt and another EMF meter. It wasn’t the one Dean had used in the warehouse to check the plane wreckage, but it looked just as homemade, and she had no doubt it worked just well.

Tucking the knife and packet of salt in her pocket and wrapping the earphones for the EMF reader around her hand, Jess zipped up the bag and closed the trunk to see that Robert was standing on his front lawn, speaking to a woman she assumed was his wife, and a young girl, who was clinging to her mother, looking very upset.

“It was probably my imagination, Robert!” The woman was saying as Jessica approached. “You hardly needed to tell the whole city.”

“That’s alright, ma’am.” Jess said, sliding into the conversation. “It’s only me.”

“I’m telling you, I imagined it!” She said crossly. “I’ve been stuck in that damn house for too long, that’s all!”

Robert folded his arms. “You sounded pretty certain on the phone, Janet. This is one of my clients, Jessica Moore. She was with me when you called, and she thinks she can help us.”

“And how much is she charging for this ‘help’?!” Janet Carter demanded, rounding on Jess.

“Nothing.” Jess answered with a raised eyebrow. “Look, either I can help you, or I’m about to make an utter fool of myself, what have you got to lose?”

“She’s got a point, Janet.” Robert said soothingly. “Let’s just let her take a look, alright?”

The little girl – Katie – stepped away from her mother and tugged Jess’s jacket. “Are you going to tell the man to go away?”

“I’m going to try.” Jess said kindly. “Can you show me where you first saw him?”
Katie looked at her mother, who sighed, but nodded, and took Jess’s hand. “He was in my room.”

Katie led Jess – and her parents – up to the second floor of the house, to a fairly large room, painted in bright yellow.

“You’ve got a lovely room, Katie.” Jess said, as she unwrapped the earphones. “I’m guessing your favourite colour’s blue, right?”

Katie giggled. “No! It’s yellow!”

“Yellow?” Jess repeated, looking around. “Really?” She popped the earphones in and turned on the EMF meter.

“What does that do?” Robert asked.

“It checks for electromagnetic frequencies.” Jess explained. “There’s always some, but around paranormal activity, it tends to spike. Where was the man, Katie?”

“Over there by the closet.” Katie whispered, her previous amusement vanishing.

Already, Jess could see the meter reacting, but as she approached the closet, it began squealing, and she pulled the earphones out. “Yeah, there’s something here.”

“What can we do?” Robert asked shakily.

“Right this second? Nothing.” Jess admitted. “We need to figure out who it is and what it wants. Has he appeared anywhere else in the house?”

“No.” Janet answered, her face white as snow. “When I saw him, he was standing right where you are now, covered in blood. I thought ghosts were supposed to be transparent, or white and smoky, or …”

“Some probably are.” Jess conceded, opening the closet. “I haven’t encountered very many. All the ghosts I’ve seen could have been alive … well, aside from the lake.” She shuddered. “That was creepy. Have you made any alterations to this room?”

“No.” Robert answered, stroking his daughter’s hair. “We painted it, that’s all.”

“What about the closet?” Jess asked.

Robert shook his head. “We thought about it, but it just seemed like extra work; we’d have to get all of her clothes out and then leave them out so the paint could dry, and …”

“Yeah, I get it.” Jess said with a nod, stepping back to observe the closet.

Something didn’t seem right. The closet was built in to the room, sticking out slightly and stopping the room from being a perfect square, but the closet was deeper than it appeared.

That in itself wasn’t strange – the room had been built with an alcove, and the closet built over it.

What was bugging Jess was that the wall the closet was on was the external wall of the house, and judging from the position of the window and what she could remember from the front of the house, the closet wasn’t deep enough.

A sudden gasp behind her made her whirl around to see that their mysterious spirit had returned.
He was a head taller than her, late thirties, with dark hair that made his gaunt face look even paler. His clothes were about twenty years out of style and he was staring at her wordlessly.

Jess took a step away from the closet and he took a step towards her, pointing towards the small space.

“In there?” Jess asked. “Is there something in there?”

The spirit said nothing, continuing to point.

Jess sighed. “Alright, ghost of Christmas Yet To Be. I’m going to need a bit of help on this one, because I am not a mind-reader. Or a ghost-whisperer.”

Pointing.

With another sigh, Jess turned back to the closet. “Alright, I’m just going to go with this.” Carefully sliding Katie’s clothes to one side, she examined the back wall, running a hand over it.

A whimper caught her attention, and she turned back to see that the spirit was moving towards the Carters.

“Hey!” She said sharply. “I’m trying to help you; leave them alone.”

The spirit looked at her, and disappeared.

Jess rolled her eyes. “Great.”

Robert suddenly gasped for air, dropping to the floor. “They killed me!” He rasped.

“Robert!” Janet cried, reaching for him.

Jess darted forwards, catching her arm. “That’s not Robert right now.” She whispered. “Whoever that spirit is, it’s possessing him.”

“Is that normal?” Janet asked frantically.

“I have no idea.” Jess admitted. “Do you have anything iron in the house?”

“Iron?” Janet repeated. “We have an old fireplace with a poker.”

“Go and get it.” Jess told her. “Take Katie with you.”

Robert grabbed her arm with a frighteningly tight grip. “My name is Charles Arthur.”

“Alright, Charles.” Jess said soothingly, trying to extract herself. “My name’s Jessica. I could have played Charades, you didn’t have to possess him.”

“They killed me!”

“Yes, I know.” Jess said calmly. “Who’s they?”

“My friends.” Robert’s face creased in confusion. “Why would they do that to me?”

“I don’t know.” Jess said, hearing Janet’s footsteps hurrying along the corridor. “What’s in the closet, Charles?”

“Me. It’s my house.”
“Alright, well, I’m sorry about this, Charles.” Jess said, glancing at the closet. “I’ll find you, I promise. But possessing people isn’t very nice.” She took the poker from Janet and pushed it into Robert’s hand, causing him to exhale sharply.

“What was that?” He asked shakily, releasing Jess’s arm.

“That was Charles Arthur possessing you.” Jess answered. “Mrs Carter, go downstairs and stay with Katie. Mr Carter, I’ll need your help.”

“With what?” Robert asked, ushering his terrified wife towards the door.

“Charles Arthur was murdered in this house.” Jess said softly, beginning to remove Katie’s clothes from her closet and laying them on the bed. “And somewhere in this closet are his remains.”

“Are you telling me there’s a body in this house?” Robert asked sharply. “I need to call the police.”

“Might want to find it first.” Jess advised, running a hand across the wall at the back of the closet. There was a small indentation behind the wallpaper that made her think there was a door there. “Unless you want to tell them the ghost said there was a body there.”

“Who killed him?” Robert asked. “Did he say?”

“Not exactly.” Jess admitted. “I get the feeling he wasn’t very … with it, mentally. Either he lived here or his so-called friends did, and they killed him and stashed the body in here.”

“Why would anyone do that?” Robert asked, his voice catching, and she glanced back to see that Charles had reappeared, looking very put-out.

“I’m sorry, Charles.” She said gently. “Hold on to that poker, Mr Carter. Ghosts don’t like iron. And help me pull down this wallpaper.”

“Guess we’re repapering after all.” Robert muttered, squeezing into the closet with her.

Together, they pulled the paper from the wall, revealing a door. There was no handle, just a hole where it had once been, which had been blocked up.

“Okay, back up.” Jess said, pulling the knife from her pocket and flipping it open.

“How do you know about all these things?” Robert asked, stepping out of the closet, but keeping one eye on the spirit.

“My boyfriend and his brother have some interesting … hobbies.” Jess said, half-truthfully. It wasn’t anything like a hobby, more of a lifestyle, but there was only so much anyone else would understand. She slid the blade between the wall and the door, sliding it up and down to loosen it, before carefully prying the door open.

A horrible smell washed over her, and she recoiled, slamming it shut and running to open the window. “Might want to have Katie sleep in your room tonight.”

“That’s it, I’m calling the police.” Robert announced, pulling his phone from his pocket.

“Yeah, well, let me leave first.” Jess said, covering her mouth with her sleeve and tentatively approaching the door again.

“Leave?” Robert repeated. “You found the body.”
Jess sighed. “Yes, and I know that normally that would be cause to talk to the police, but how exactly are you going to explain me being here? “Well, you see, officer, a ghost has been haunting us so I asked one of my clients to come and talk to him”?”

Robert frowned. “Now you mention it …”

“Just tell them that you decided to repaper the closet – tell them that Katie was scared of the wallpaper or something.” Jess suggested, taking another look at the wallpaper.

“Those patterns could look like faces in the dark; it’s plausible. You asked your wife to tear down the paper, and she found the door and called you. You came home on your lunch break, pried the door open, and voila.”

“So now we’ve found him, will his ghost leave?” Robert asked.

“Should do.” Jess confirmed. “Unless he decides to stick around to get revenge on his killers. Best thing to do is wait for the police to finish with the body, and then claim it. Something tells me if this guy had anyone looking for him, they’d have found him by now. He lived here, it would have been the first place they looked. So claim it, and make sure it gets cremated. That should get rid of him, even if he decides to stick around.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Call me.” Jess said. “My boyfriend will know what to do. I’m guessing you’ll want to postpone the rest of our meeting until after this blows over?”

Robert shook his head. “Yes. And I want whatever’s making you so calm about all of this.”

Jess took a moment to consider everything that had happened in the last four months. “Trust me. No you don’t.”

***

It took about four days for Robert to smooth everything out, but Jess finally got everything sorted. She made the decision to leave most of her inheritance where it was, so she could dip into it if she desperately needed the money, but wasn’t tempted to spend it all at once.

While they were hunting, they only really needed money for food, gas and motel rooms, and as long as they had other funds, they were fine.

This way, at least, the money was gaining more interest, and was there if she (they) wanted to take a step out of the life.

The thing that was worrying her now was the lack of contact with Sam and Dean. Surely she should have heard something by now. She finished packing her bag, and turned on the television in the small motel room, tapping her foot impatiently.

Maybe she should drive to St Louis and find them.

“In other news, the man accused of the attempted murder of a woman in St Louis, Missouri, was found dead this evening. Police believe that Dean Winchester is also responsible for the deaths of …”

Jess felt her heart stop, the reporter’s voice drowned out by the fuzzy noise that filled her ears as the screen showed several police officers removing a body from a house. She dived for her phone,
dialling Sam’s number, but no one answered.

Her vision was beginning to blur, tears beginning to spill down her cheeks as she sank onto the bed, her entire body shaking.

Living on the road meant that you developed quite an attachment with the people travelling with you. Obviously she knew Sam better, and was closer to him, but she had grown to care about Dean over the last four months, and the idea of him being dead was heart-breaking.

Not least because of what it would do to Sam.

Her heart seemed to kick back in, a thousand times faster than it should be. She knew she should run to the car, drive to St Louis, search everywhere until she found Sam, probably having a breakdown in the back of the Impala.

Right now, however, driving was not a good idea. She doubted she could even get out of the motel room right now.

After several tries, she managed to send Sam a text begging him to call her, before the device fell from her hands and she buried her face in the questionably musty pillow, letting it soak up her tears.

Had Dean been killed by whatever had framed Zach for murder?

Had he been killed by police trying to kill whatever had framed Zach for murder?

She was certain that the murders the police were blaming him for hadn’t been committed by him – that, or they weren’t human.

That much, she was sure of.

Minutes dragged into hours, and still she didn’t sleep.

The tears had dried up, leaving her dry-eyed and empty, as she sat on her bed, hugging a pillow to her chest, rocking back and forth comforting.

Every so often, she picked up her phone and checked the messages, but it remained stubbornly silent and empty.

As dawn approached, she heard the achingly familiar roar of the Impala outside, and flung the pillow to one side, just as her phone lit up with a message.

*Sorry, Jessie. Phone died. What room?*

Jess frowned slightly at the message. It was very casual for a man who had just lost his brother, but she sent back the room number, adding that the door was unlocked.

Running a hand through her hair, she stepped into the bathroom to wash the dried tear-streaks from her face.

She heard the door open and close, and pasted a sympathetic smile. “Hey, are you …?”

Her question broke off with a strangled gasp that would have been a scream had she not caught it in time.

“Jess?” Sam asked, his brow creasing in concern. “Are you alright?”
Jess didn’t answer, but made her way unsteadily across the room, reaching out to poke the shoulder of the man standing beside Sam, unsure whether she was seeing things.

“Jess?” Dean questioned. “You hit your head or something.”

Jess shook her head, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face in his shoulder. After a second’s hesitation, she felt him embrace her in return and felt the tears threaten to return.

“Jess?” Sam asked, his hand touching her back gently. “Are you alright?”

Jess took a few deep breaths, and pulled away, stepping out of Dean’s arms and looking him in the eye. “So. Not dead then.”

Dean looked between her and the small television, realisation dawning on his face. “It was on the news?”

“Well, that’s what happens when you kill two people, attempt to kill another and then get killed yourself.” Jess hissed. “What the hell happened out there?!”

“It was a shifter.” Sam answered, putting an arm around her. “As in shape-shifter. It took Zach’s form to kill his girlfriend, then someone else, then pretended to be Dean and nearly killed Becky.”

“Then pretended to be Becky to kill Sam.” Dean added. “But I found Becky and we got back in time to kill him.”

“So you shot a shape-shifter who looked like you, and he just … stayed looking like you?” Jess summarised. “So … what, legally, you’re dead now? Doesn’t that weird you out a bit?”

Dean shrugged. “It’s been a long time since I used my real name for anything. People’ll forget about me soon enough.”

Jess relaxed slightly. “Well … as long as you’re okay, I guess. You had me really worried.” She smacked Sam’s arm lightly. “Next time, answer the phone! Or at least send me a text to tell me it died.”

“I didn’t notice until we got here.” Sam said sheepishly.

“Then keep me updated.” Jess amended, rolling her eyes. “There’s been no word for four days. At least send me the occasional text to let me know you’re okay.”

Sam pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. We got a bit caught up in the case.”

“I know.” Jess turned back to Dean. “Have you always had two EMF meters or is that a new development?”

“Fairly new.” Dean answered, looking at her curiously. “Why?”

Jess shrugged. “No reason. Thanks for the bag of tricks though; came in handy. Mom’s attorney had a ghost problem.” She felt Sam tense behind her and tilted her head back to see his face. “Problem, darling?”

“You hunted by yourself?” Sam asked.

Jess rolled her eyes. “I’m a big girl, Sam. I went and took a look, and if I’d needed help, I’d have called you. It was just this guy who wanted his body found and laid to rest. The police took care of everything else – found the guys that did it, and everything. They were stupid enough to leave
fingerprints all over the room he was in. And Mr Carter claimed the body when no one else did and was good enough to have him cremated.”

“Not bad, Jess.” Dean said with a smile. “We’ll have you shooting things in no time.”

“Can’t wait.” Jess muttered, but couldn’t help smiling back.

“Speaking of time,” Sam put in, “we should hit the road.”

“Sammy, relax.” Dean said lazily. “We’re in another state, and they’re not going to be looking for me – I’m dead, remember? We can afford to grab a couple hours sleep.”

Sam sighed. “Alright. But you’re on the floor.”
“They didn’t deserve to be punished. I do.”

Jess felt a chill run down her spine. “Lori, don’t say that …”

But it was too late. The candles flickering on the altar at the front of the church all extinguished as one, and Sam jumped to his feet.

“Come on. We gotta go.” He and Jess each grabbed one of Lori’s hands, pulling her towards the basement door, but suddenly, the Hookman was there, his hook breaking through one of the panels.

“Go!” Sam shouted, pushing Jess and Lori ahead of him, and the two women ran down the aisle into a back room.

The spirit of Jacob Kearns followed, his hook swinging wildly as Sam stayed a few steps behind them, trying to draw the attention away from Lori, who had unintentionally signed her own death warrant.

Glass smashed, Lori’s terrified cries echoed from the walls, and Jess let out a scream as that damned hook finally made contact, tearing through Sam’s shoulder.

Jess jolted awake with a gasp, the remnants of a scream on her lips. She blinked a couple of times, bringing the dark interior of the Impala into sharp relief, only to jump violently when the car door opened.

“Dammit Sam!” She breathed, massaging her chest. “You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

“Sorry.” Sam said with a sheepish smile. “I thought you woke up.”

“I did- just.” Jess responded weakly. “But I hadn’t quite left the nightmare behind.” She undid her seatbelt and slid out of the car, stretching and melting into his arms in the same movement.

“Sorry.” Sam repeated, brushing a kiss against her hairline. “Hookman again?”

Jess nodded into his shoulder, pressing a kiss against his shirt, against the same place the hook had penetrated, reassuring herself that no real damage had been done. “Where are we now?”

“Oklahoma still.” Sam answered, gently untangling her hair with his fingers. “Dean’s inside,” he nodded at the bar they were parked outside, “and I’m searching for a job.”

“Find anything?” Jess asked, but Dean emerged from the bar before Sam could answer, looking triumphant and waving a wad of cash in the air.

Sam rolled his eyes. “You know, we could get day jobs once in a while.”
“Hunting’s our day job,” Dean said dismissively. “And the pay is crap.”

“Yeah, but hustling pool?” Sam asked. “Credit card scams? It’s not the most honest thing in the world, Dean.”

Dean sighed. “Well, let’s see. Honest or fun and easy?” He weighed it up for a few seconds before shrugging. “It’s no contest. Besides, we’re good at it. It’s what we were raised to do.”

“Yeah, well, how we were raised was jack.” Sam muttered.

Jess bit her lip, inwardly agreeing with Sam, but didn’t comment. How could she, when she’d never even met their father? “You know, Mom left …”

“We know, Jess.” Dean interrupted. “But we can manage.”

Jess nodded. Once the shock of the shifter debacle had passed, she had told the boys about her mother’s legacy, and her plans to leave it gathering interest until she absolutely had to use it; they had agreed with her.

Hustling pool wasn’t too bad (as far as she was concerned, if people were stupid enough to play for money with a stranger, that was their look-out, not hers), and while she wasn’t crazy about the credit card scams, they only occurred when Dean hadn’t had a chance to raise some money in a while.

Using the money outright would leave the account empty eventually, probably just before she really needed it.

“We got a new gig?” Dean asked.


“Human mad cow disease?” Jess asked.

“Mad cow.” Dean repeated. “Wasn’t that on Oprah?”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “You watch Oprah?”

“So this guy eats a bad burger.” Dean said, after a beat of embarrassed silence. “Why is it our kind of thing?”

“Mad cow disease causes massive brain degeneration.” Sam explained. “It takes months, even years, to appear. But this guy, Dustin? Sounds like his brain disintegrated in about an hour. Maybe less.”

“Okay, that’s weird.” Dean conceded.

“Could still be a disease.” Jess said, taking the paper from Sam to read the report herself. “Or something nastier.”

Dean tucked the money inside his jacket. “Alright, Oasis Plains it is.”

***

“So you found some beetles in a hole in the ground.” Dean snorted. “That’s shocking, Sam.”

They had left the scene of Dustin’s death- once Sam had been lowered into the hole he had been trapped in- with Sam in the back of the Impala, so he and Jess could both examine one of the dead
beetles he had found.

“There were no tunnels, no tracks.” Sam said. “No evidence of any other kind of creature down there.”

“You know, some beetles do eat meat.” Jess said thoughtfully. “Normally dead meat, but … How many did you find down there?”

“About ten.” Sam answered.

Dean glanced at them in the rear-view mirror. “It’d take a whole lot more than that to eat out some dude’s brain.”

“Well, maybe there were more.” Sam said.

“I don’t know.” Dean said sceptically. “Sounds like a stretch to me.”

“We need more information on the area, the neighbourhood.” Sam said. “Whether something like this has ever happened before.”

Dean made a non-committal noise, slowing the car.

“What?” Sam asked.

“I know a good place to start.” Dean said, pointing at a sign reading Models open. New buyers’ BBQ today!. “I’m kinda hungry for a little barbeque, how about you?”

Sam and Jess looked at each other, then both gave him a knowing look.

“What?” He protested. “We can’t talk to the locals?”

“And the free food’s got nothing to do with it?” Sam asked.

“Of course not.” Dean scoffed. “I’m a professional.”

“Of course you are.” Sam muttered, as Dean pulled over.

“Growing up in a place like this would freak me out.” Dean commented, as they walked back towards the open house.

“Why?” Sam asked.

“Well, manicured lawns, “How was your day, honey?”” Dean shuddered. “I’d blow my brains out.”

“I grew up in a place like this.” Jess said flatly.

“There’s nothing wrong with normal.” Sam said defensively.

Dean shook his head. “I’d take our family over normal any day.”

His gaze slid over them both as he spoke, and Jess smiled, warmed in a way the weather was lacking.

“Hang on.” She said. “You go ahead; I’m gonna run back to the car and get a jacket; I’m freezing.”

Dean tossed her the keys, and she caught them deftly, darting back towards the Impala.
Sam and Dean continued on to the open house and knocked on the door. An older man answered it, a friendly, probably fake, smile plastered on his face. “Welcome.”

“This the barbeque?” Dean asked.

“Yeah, not the best weather, but …” The man shrugged, holding out a hand. “I’m Larry Pike, the developer here. And you are?”

“Dean.” He said, shaking Larry’s hand. “This is Sam.”

Larry shook Sam’s hand as well. “Sam, Dean, good to meet you. So you two are interested in Oasis Plains?”

“Yes sir.” Sam lied.

Larry nodded. “Let me just say, we accept homeowners of any race, religion, colour or … sexual orientation.”

The boys paused, a little puzzled, when Jess appeared between them. “They’re brothers.” She said with a smile, taking Sam’s hand and offering her other hand to Larry. “I’m Jessica. Sam and I are looking for our first house together.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Larry began, shaking her hand.

Jess laughed. “Don’t be. Gives me something to rib them about.”

Larry led them through the house into the back yard, where he introduced them to his wife, Joannie, who swiftly engaged Jess in conversation, and a very energetic woman named Lynda, their head of sales.

“I take it you two are interested in becoming homeowners!” Lynda said cheerfully.

“Well …” Sam began, catching Jess’s eye.

“Well, let me just say,” Lynda continued, “We accept homeowners of any race, religion, colour or … sexual orientation.”

Dean chuckled, as Jess excused herself to join them. “Well, I’m gonna go and talk to Larry. Okay, honey?” He swatted Sam’s ass as he walked away and Jess smacked him over the head as he passed.

“Next time, we leave your brother at home.” She said in mock-irritation, hiding a smile.

Sam shook his head, looking tired. “Sorry about him.” He said to Lynda, who looked thoroughly confused. “This is Jessica; we’re the ones looking for a house.”

“Don’t worry.” Jess said hastily, before Lynda could apologise. “It’s a common mistake.”

***

“Squatting.” Jess murmured, peering out through the bedroom curtains.

“At least we get some privacy for once.” Sam pointed out, pushing the door closed. “Dean’s practically unconscious.”

Jess snorted. “I’m not surprised. He never sleeps properly in motels. It’s like he’s always on red alert.”
“He’s always been like that.” Sam said. “Dad always taught us that an attack could come from anywhere at any time. At least in a house like this, we have some time to prepare ourselves while they get up the stairs.”

Jess nodded silently.

“You agree with me, right?” Sam asked quietly, drawing closer to her.

“I think …” Jess said slowly. “I think that parts of your childhood were not what they should be. I think that your father should have put you and Dean before revenge, but I also know how difficult that must be. He clearly loved your mother very much, and no one would listen to him, thought it was an accident …”

“They thought it was an accident?” Sam interrupted, brow creasing in confusion.

“Her name came up while I was searching for Bloody Mary.” Jess told him, finally turning away from the window. “Initially a suspicious fire, closed as accidental, caused by faulty wiring in the ceiling.”

Sam breathed out a humourless chuckle. “Faulty wiring … right.”

Jess smiled weakly. “I think your father probably did the best he could, Sam, and was trying to protect you, but that doesn’t make any of it okay. And it’s okay to be upset about it.”

Sam nodded jerkily, his jaw clenched. “Are you okay with all of this?”

Jess frowned a little. “What do you mean?”

“This.” Sam repeated, waving his hand around the room. “Hunting. Squatting. Living out of the back of the Impala. Risking our lives and breaking the law practically every week.”

“Sam …” Jess reached out to him, laying a hand on his arm, feeling how tense he was. “Where’s all this coming from?”

Back there … you were in your element.” Sam said softly. “That’s your life, Jess.”

“No.” Jess said quietly. “This is.”

“But if hunting wasn’t an issue …” Sam began.

“Then maybe that would be my life.” Jess finished, stepping closer to him. “Let me rephrase that. This is my life. My life has always been my family, and you – and Dean – are all I have left. So if you’re hunting, I’m hunting, and if you’re not, I’m not. And – y’know – it’s not that bad …”

“Name one good thing about it.” Sam challenged, not looking convinced.

“Tommy Collins.” Jess said promptly. “While we’re at it, Haley Collins, Ben Collins, Lucas Barr, Andrea Barr, Amanda Walker … Hell, everyone on that freakin’ flight. They’re all alive because of you – because of us.”

Sam sighed, a small smile quirking on his lips, and settled down on the bed. “Are you sure you’re happy? Because …”

Jess chuckled. “Honestly? I was talking out of my ass earlier. Those people might say they’re open to all homeowners, but let’s face it, did you see an inch of diversity out there? I was what they wanted me to be, and it was as boring as hell.”
“Really?” Sam asked.

“You kidding?” Jess shook her head. “How can you stretch a discussion about how to get mayonnaise out of blouses into a twenty minute discussion?!”

Sam gaped at her. “Twenty minutes? About laundry?”

Jess nodded, looking tired. “And then an hour-long discussion planning our wedding.”

Sam gave her a look rather like a rabbit trapped in the headlights. “Er, Jess …”

“I know.” Jess assured him. “But you try telling them that. They’re like vultures. They either have no daughters, or their daughters aren’t old enough, or their daughters are, but were smart enough to let their mothers nowhere near their wedding.”

Sam relaxed slightly. “At least they were interested.”

Jess shook her head, moving to sit beside him, nestling against his side. “I swear, if we hadn’t needed information …”

Sam chuckled, pressing a kiss to her head. They sat in silence for a few seconds, before a yawn crept over Jess, escaping her before she could bite it back.

Sam stretched, yawning in turn. “Thanks for that. We should get some sleep.”

Jess nodded into his shoulder, not really moving as he rearranged them both so they were lying down. The house, although empty, was probably a show house, because it was fully furnished, although the beds weren’t made.

Jess wasn’t too bothered. The house was warm, and she hardly needed a blanket wrapped in Sam’s arms. “You’re not going to be too comfortable tomorrow.” She warned sleepily. “Maybe we should make a pillow out of something.”

“I’ll be fine.” Sam assured her. “I’ll wake you up at two, and we’ll swap places.”

Jess smirked. “You can try.”

She felt Sam shrug. “You don’t have to wake up. I’m sure you make just as good a pillow as I do.”

“We’ll have to compare notes.” Jess murmured, tilting her face up to kiss him.

Sam hummed in agreement against her lips. It had been a long time since they had any real privacy, and they easily fell into the relaxed banter they had toned down for Dean’s sake. “Next time,” he murmured, “we are booking a separate motel room.”

***

As a rule, Jess wasn’t scared of bugs. She tended to ignore spiders, unless they were particularly large or crawling on her feet (at which point it was the shock that got to her, rather than the actual presence of the spider), and beetles tended to fascinate rather than frighten.

The vision of a veritable cloud of bugs swarming towards the house, however, was enough to scare anyone.

“Oh my God …” Larry whispered, his hand clutching his son’s shoulder.
“We’ll never make it.” Sam said grimly.

One of Matt Pike’s hands made its way into Jess’s and she squeezed it gently. She was the one who had coaxed the boy into showing them the Native American burial site he had found the day before, which had led them to uncover the curse on the land. With Lynda also dead and found covered in dead spiders, they had tried to evacuate the Pikes as quickly as possible, but Larry had refused to listen to his son.

“Everybody in the house.” Dean said sharply. “Inside, go!”

They hurried inside, and Larry slammed the door shut, locking it.

“Okay, is there anyone else in the neighbourhood?” Sam asked.

“No, it’s just us.” Larry answered shakily, as his wife entered the room.

“Honey, what’s happening?” She asked. “What’s that noise?”

The sound of the swarm was getting louder, almost shaking the house.

“Call 911.” Larry told her, but she didn’t move. “Joanie!”

Looking frightened, she reached for the phone, but the hunters weren’t taking any chances.

“We need towels.” Dean said.

“In the closet.” Larry said, looking confused.

Sam clapped Matt on the shoulder. “We need to lock this place up – windows, doors, fireplaces, everything.”

Matt nodded seriously. “Got it.”

“Phones are dead.” Joanie informed them.

“They must have chewed through the phone lines.” Jess murmured, taking some towels from Dean and padding out the front door. “And the power lines.” She added, as the lights flickered and died.

“No signal.” Larry added, checking his cell phone.

“You won’t get one.” Dean said grimly, peering out the window. “They’re blanketing the house.”

“What do we do now?” Larry asked.

“Try to outlast them.” Sam answered, coming downstairs with Matt. “Hopefully, the curse will end at sunrise.”

“Hopefully?!” Larry repeated.

Dean emerged from the kitchen with a can in his hand.

“Bug spray?” Joanie asked incredulously.

Dean flashed her a ghost of his usual smile. “Trust me.”

The fireplace began to creak ominously, and Matt swallowed hard. “What is that?”
“The flue.” Sam muttered, glancing back at him.

“All right, I think everyone needs to get upstairs.” Dean said hastily, just as the swarm burst free from the fireplace, buzzing angrily.

Under the screams of terror, Dean flicked open a lighter and aimed the bug spray at it, causing the flame to flare up, warding of the bugs for a few seconds. “Everybody upstairs!” He ordered. “Now! Go, go, go!”

They wound up in the attic, ducking under the beams and rafters to back themselves into a corner. The buzzing was growing ever louder, and sawdust began sprinkling down upon them like a snowfall as termites began to chew through the roof.

A second later, the swarm burst through and Dean pulled out the bug spray, while Sam and Jess frantically tried to patch up the hole in the roof.

It was to no avail, and as they resorted to simply swatting the bugs away, Jess began to consider the fact that this was how she was going to die.

Mentally crossing herself, she silently began to pray, as her mother had taught her. Saint Michael the archangel, protect us in battle …

Light suddenly streamed through the hole in the ceiling and for one crazy second, Jess almost thought there was a figure standing in the ray of light.

She blinked, and realised that the ‘figure’ was actually the bugs, shooting back out of the house in a kind of cyclone. Within seconds, the attic was empty, and she, Sam and Dean cautiously approached the hole to peer out.

Dawn had come.

The curse was broken.

They were safe.
“I think I found a few candidates for our next gig.” Dean said, scrolling through a website on Sam’s laptop. “Fishing trawler found of the coast of Cali – crew vanished. Then we got some cattle mutilations in West Texas.”

“Just as likely to be natural predators.” Jess responded, keeping most of her attention on Sam, who was hunched over a piece of paper.

“Hey.” Dean called, following her gaze. “Am I boring you with this hunting evil stuff?”

Sam glanced up. “No, I’m listening. Keep going.”

Dean rolled his eyes, but continued. “Here, I’ve got a Sacramento man who shot himself in the head.”

“That’s not unnatural,” argued Jess.

“He shot himself three times.” Dean elaborated.

“Oh.” Jess mumbled distractedly, but frowned over at Sam, who was still staring at the piece of paper in his hand. “Sam …”

“I’ve seen this.” Sam said suddenly, reaching for his duffel bag.

“Seen what?” Dean asked, but received no response as Sam rifled through the contents.

“Jess, where’s that photograph?” He asked.

“Which photograph?” Jess asked, reaching for her own bag.

“The one of our family when I was younger.” Sam answered. “You know the one I mean.”

“Here.” Jess said, retrieving it from one of the side pockets.

Sam took it, comparing it to the paper he’d been doodling on. “That’s it! Dean, I know where we have to go next!”

“Where?” Dean asked.

“Back home.” Sam said. “Back to Kansas.”

Dean blinked, but Jess saw the flash of emotion in his eyes before he hid it again. “Okay, random. Where’d that come from?”
Sam handed the photograph to Dean. “This photo was taken in front of our old house, right? The house where Mom died?”

Dean nodded jerkily. “Yeah, why?”

“And it didn’t burn down, right?” Sam asked. “I mean, not completely. They rebuilt it, right?”

Dean shrugged. “I guess so. What the hell are you talking about?”

Sam took a deep breath. “Okay, this is gonna sound crazy, but … the people that live in our old house … I think they might be in danger.”

“Why would you think that?” Dean asked, taken aback.

Sam heaved a frustrated sigh. “Look, just … just trust me on this, okay?”

“Trust you?” Dean repeated.

Jess caught Sam’s hand as he began to pace. “Sam?” She asked softly. “Is this about the … you know?”

“What?” Dean repeated, only to be ignored.

“Yeah, it is.” Sam said softly. “I can’t let it happen again, Jess.”

“What?” Dean repeated impatiently. “What can’t happen again?!”

Sam shook his head, but Jess sighed. “There was a reason why I came with you to Jericho, Dean.”

“Jess …” Sam said pleadingly.

“Sam, he needs to know.” Jess said gently. “Especially if it’s happening again.”

“Well, I have these nightmares.” Sam said reluctantly.

Dean nodded, looking concerned. “I’ve noticed.”

“And sometimes … they come true.”

Dean blinked. “Come again?”

“He dreamed about what happened to Mom for weeks before it happened.” Jess elaborated. “He assumed it was me, and told me about them; that’s why I came with you.”

“People have weird dreams.” Dean said with a shrug. “It probably was you in the dream.”

“No, I dreamed everything.” Sam corrected. “In the dream, I was lying on the bed, I had a pain in my chest, from where Constance Welch tried to rip my heart out, and her blood dripped on to my face. The night before, in Jericho, my dream changed – I heard Jess scream, ran into the bedroom and saw her burst into flames. It wasn’t until it happened that I realised it wasn’t Jess in the last dream. And now I’m dreaming about our old house, about a woman screaming for help. I mean, that’s where it started; it has to mean something, right?”

“I don’t know.” Dean responded weakly.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Sam asked. “This woman might be in danger; it might even
be the same thing that killed Mom and …”

“Sammy, slow down!” Dean snapped, beginning to pace the floor like a caged animal. “I mean, first you tell me you got the Shining, then you tell me I’ve gotta go back home?! Especially when …”

“When what?” Sam prompted.

“When I promised myself that I’d never go back there.” Dean finished, his voice breaking slightly. “Dean.” Jess said softly. “We need to check it out.”

Dean nodded, his jaw clenching. “Yeah, I know.”

***

The new owner of the Winchester house, a young woman named Jenny and her two children, were indeed dealing with something supernatural, although they hadn’t realised it yet.

Aside from Jenny’s descriptions of flickering lights and scratches in the walls, her daughter, Sari, had reported a ‘thing on fire’ in her closet.

When they had left the house (for once, they had foregone a cover story; Jenny was more than happy to let the boys in to see their old home), Jess had been left to deal with two men who were both far more shaken than they let on.

And they let on a lot, for once.

After she had relieved Dean of the keys and driven them to the nearest gas station, they had almost calmed down.

Almost.

“Look, if this was any other job, what would we do?” Jess asked.

“We’d try and figure out what we were dealing with.” Sam said. “Dig into the history of the house.”

“Except we already know the history!” Dean protested.

“Then tell me.” Jess said gently. “Tell me what happened. Maybe there’s something you haven’t picked up on.”

Dean leaned against the car. “Mom screamed. Woke me up. I ran into the hall and asked Dad what was going on. I remember the heat and the fire, but that’s about it. Dad just shoved Sammy at me, told me to take him outside as fast as I could and not look back. So I did.”

“You carried me out?” Sam asked quietly.

“Yeah.” Dean frowned slightly. “You never knew that?”

Sam shook his head.

“And did your dad ever talk about what happened that night?” Jess asked gently.

“He found Mom on the ceiling. Whatever did it was long gone.” Dean cleared his throat. “That’s about it.”
“He never had a theory about what did it?” Sam asked.

“If he did, he never told me.” Dean said. “God knows we asked enough times.”

“Never wrote it down either.” Jess added. “I must have read that journal, like, ten times.”

“So we need to figure out what happened back then.” Sam said. “See if it’s the same thing.”

Dean nodded. “Yeah, talk to Dad’s friends, neighbours. See what they remember.”

Sam sighed. “This feel like another job to you?”

“I gotta go to the bathroom.” Dean muttered, walking away.

Jess watched him go sadly, and turned to Sam. “Hey, can I borrow your phone? I’m low on battery; need to call the bank.”

“Sure.” Sam said, handing it over. “You want anything when I pay for gas?”

“No thanks, I’m fine.” Jess said, moving away out of earshot. She waited until Dean returned before scrolling through Sam’s contact list. She had a feeling that Dean had been covering a phone call, and she was fairly sure she knew who he had called, but she wasn’t about to take chances.

Selecting the entry labelled ‘Dad’, she pressed call and waited.

Unsurprisingly, the voicemail picked up. “This is John Winchester. If this is an emergency, call my son Dean at 866-907-3235. He can help.”

Beep.

“Mr Winchester, my name is Jessica, I’m Sam’s girlfriend.” Jess said, glancing back at the boys. “I don’t know if Dean’s called you, or if he’s given up leaving messages, but we’re in Lawrence; there’s something in your old house, and it might be connected to what happened to your wife. We’re all a bit at sea here; we could really use some help. Thank you.”

***

After much discussion, Jess convinced the boys to let her go and talk to their father’s old work partner by herself. Her argument was that they would find it difficult to keep character if something was revealed, and Sam finally agreed, which helped convince Dean of the same.

Mike Guenther had been working on a pick-up truck when she walked into the auto-repair shop, but stopped working when she mentioned John Winchester.

“So you and John owned this business together?”

“Yeah, we used to, a long time ago.” He said, wiping his hands on an oily rag. “Matter of fact, must be … twenty years, since John disappeared. Why are the cops interested all of a sudden?”

Jess shrugged. “Re-opening some of our unsolved cases. Apparently, we’ve got too many of them. The Winchester disappearance is one of them.

“What do you wanna know about him?” Mike asked.

Mike chuckled. “Well, he was a stubborn bastard, I remember that. And whatever the game … he hated to lose, you know? The whole Marine thing. But, oh, he sure loved Mary. And he doted on those kids.”

“But that was before the fire?” Jess asked.

“That’s right.”

“He ever talk about that night?” Jess prompted.

“No, not at first.” Mike said. “I think he was in shock.”

Jess nodded. “Right. But eventually? What did he say about it?”

Mike sighed. “Oh, he wasn’t thinking straight. He said something caused that fire and killed Mary.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “He ever say what?”

“Nothing did it.” Mike insisted. “It was an accident. Electrical short in the ceiling or something. I begged him to get help, but … but he just got worse and worse.”

Jess wasn’t about to say anything, but even if John had lost it, that was not the best way to go about dealing with it. “Worse how?”

“Oh, he started reading all these strange books. Started going to see this palm reader in town, weird stuff.”

***

“Be glad you weren’t there.” Jess told the boys, when they met up near a payphone. “He thinks your Dad’s cuckoo. All but called CPS on you.”

“Why did you want a payphone?” Sam asked.

“Because your dad made several visits to a palm reader.” Jess answered. “He didn’t have a name, but they must be in the book. Could be the real deal.”

“Fair enough.” Sam said, leafing through the phone book. “Err … Alright, so there are a few psychics and palm readers in town. There’s someone called El Devino. There’s …” he sniggered. “There’s the Mysterious Mister Fortinsky … Missouri Moseley …”


“Yeah.” Sam looked up. “Why, does that mean something to you?”

“Dad’s journal.” Dean murmured. “That’s a psychic?”

“I thought he meant the state.” Jess said.

“What are you two talking about?” Sam demanded.

“Here.” Dean reached into the back of the car and extracted the journal. “Read this. First page, first sentence.”

Sam flipped it open. “I went to Missouri and I learned the truth.”
“Don’t you worry ‘bout a thing. Your wife is crazy about you.” Missouri closed the front door behind her latest client and turned to the three hunters, shaking her head sadly. “Poor bastard. His wife is stone-cold bangin’ the gardener.”

“Why didn’t you tell him?” Dean asked.

“People don’t come here for truth. They come here for good news.” Missouri set her hands on her hips. “Well? Sam and Dean, come on in already. I ain’t got all day.”

Exchanging bewildered glances, they followed her through a veil of beads into the back sitting room.

“Well, lemme look at you.” Missouri laughed in delight. “Oh, you grew up handsome.” She pointed at Dean. “And you were one goofy looking kid too.” As Sam snickered, she reached out a hand to Jess, who took it. “And Jessica … Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry about your momma. And, boys, your father … he’s missing?”

“How’d you know that?” Jess asked.

“Well, you were thinkin’ it just now.”

“Where is he?” Dean asked. “Is he okay?”

“I don’t know.” Missouri answered.

“Don’t know?” Dean repeated. “Well, you’re supposed to be a psychic, right?”

“Dean!” Jess chided. “Psychics aren’t magicians; they don’t pluck information out of thin air.”

“At least one of you has a brain in your head.” Missouri said. “Sit please. Boy, you put your foot on my coffee table, I’mma smack you with a spoon.” She snapped at Dean.

“I didn’t do anything!” Dean protested.

“But you were thinking about it.” Missouri said.

Jess choked back a laugh. “So when did you first meet their dad?”

“He came for a reading a few days after the fire.” Missouri answered. “I just told him what was really out there in the dark. I guess you could say I … drew back the curtain.”

“What about our mom?” Dean asked, his voice trembling slightly. “Do you know about what killed our mom?”

“A little.” Missouri said gently. “Your daddy took me to your house. He was hopin’ I could sense the echoes, the fingerprints of this thing.”

“And could you?” Sam asked.

Missouri hesitated.

“What was it?” Jess prompted.

“I don’t know.” Missouri whispered. “Oh, but it was evil.”
Missouri was surprised to hear that they thought there was something back in the Winchester house, telling them there had been no incidents in the intervening years that would warrant a haunting, but agreed to accompany them to the house anyway.

When Jenny opened the door, she was clutching her son, looking harried. “Sam, Dean. What are you doing here?”

“Jenny, are you alright?” Jess asked.

Jenny shook her head, clinging to Ritchie. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

Dean sighed. “Jenny, listen…”

He was cut off by Missouri smacking him over the head. “Give the poor girl a break; can’t you see she’s upset?” She smiled at Jenny. “Forgive this boy, he means well, he’s just not the sharpest tool box, but hear me out.”

“How about?” Jenny asked.

“How about this house.” Missouri answered.

Jenny frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I think you know what I’m talking about.” Missouri said. “You think there’s something in this house. Something that wants to hurt your family. Am I right?”

Jenny looked simultaneously nervous and relieved. “Who are you?”

“People who can help.” Jess answered. “But you need to trust us. Just a little bit.”

Jenny hesitated, then stepped back to let them in. “I don’t know what it is.”

“Neither do we at the moment.” Dean said. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Has something else happened since we were here last?” Jess asked.

“Well, I got a plumber in about the water, and the … the waste disposal unit chewed his hand up.” Jenny said shakily. “And just now, Ritchie managed to get out of his playpen and into the fridge.”

Jess examined the child-proof locks on both items. “That’s quite a trick. Didn’t your daughter say there was something in her closet?”

Jenny nodded. “I thought it was just imagination, but with everything that’s happened …”

“Can we see Sari’s room please?” Sam asked.

Jenny nodded, leading them upstairs. Missouri made a small understanding noise as they entered. “If there’s a dark energy around here, this room should be the centre of it.”

“Why?” Sam asked.

“This used to be your nursery.” Missouri answered. “This is where it happened.”

Sam glanced at the ceiling automatically as Dean pulled out his EMF meter, determinedly looking
“Is that an EMF reader?” Missouri asked.

“Yeah.”

“Amateur.” Missouri said as the meter began beeping frantically. “I don’t know whether you should be disappointed or relieved, but this isn’t the thing that killed your mom.”

“Are you sure?” Sam asked. “How do you know?”

“It isn’t the same energy I felt the last time I was here.” Missouri said. “It’s something different.”

“What is it?” Dean asked.

“Not it.” Missouri said. “Them. There’s more than one spirit in this place.”

“Why are they here?” Jess asked.

“Because of what happened here.” Missouri answered. “All those years ago, real evil walked this house. That kind of evil leaves wounds. Sometimes wounds get infected.”

“Like a magnet for the paranormal.” Jess concluded.

Missouri nodded. “It’s attracted a poltergeist. A nasty one. And it won’t rest until Jenny and her babies are dead.”

“You said there was more than one.” Sam said.

“There is.” Missouri said, frowning. “I just can’t make out the second one.”

“Well, one thing’s for damn sure.” Dean said, scowling. “No one’s dying in this house ever again. Whatever is here, how do we stop it?”

That night, the three hunters sat in the Impala outside the house.

Warding a house against a poltergeist while said poltergeist was trying to kill them hadn’t been easy, but they’d managed to get out of it without too many scrapes and, once Dean had cleaned up the mess (at Missouri’s insistence) and Missouri had assured them that the house was now clean, they had said their goodbyes and set off.

But Sam had refused to leave Lawrence just yet, which led to the quiet vigil outside the house.

“What are we still doing here?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know.” Sam muttered. “I just … I still have a bad feeling.”

“Why?” Dean asked. “Missouri did her whole Zelda Rubenstein thing, the house should be clean. It should be over.”

“Yeah, well, probably.” Sam conceded. “I just want to be sure, that’s all.”

“Problem is, I could be sleeping in a bed right now.” Dean muttered, closing his eyes.

Sam chuckled, but the laughter suddenly died. “Guys, look!”
Jess dived for the door and got out the car, peering up at Jenny’s window to see her pounding on the glass, screaming.

“You two grab the kids; I’ll get Jenny!” Dean shouted, as they sprinted for the house.

The front door opened easily, and they ran upstairs, all aiming for different bedrooms. Jess let Sam handle Sari, bursting into Ritchie’s room.

He was standing in his crib, crying, and she scooped him up, running for the front door. She made it outside just after Dean and Jenny, and handed the boy over to his mother, turning around in time to see Sari running out of the house.

“Sari, where’s Sam?” Dean asked, kneeling down to her eye level.

Sari was sobbing, but her words were understandable. “He’s inside. Something’s got him.”

Dean and Jess looked up sharply, in time to see the front door slam shut. Without exchanging a word, they ran back to the car.

While Dean grabbed an axe and ran to break down the front door, Jess loaded two guns with salt rounds and ran to join him, just as he made a hole big enough for them to squeeze through.

“Sam?!” Dean called.

“Sam!” Jess skidded to a halt in the kitchen, finding Sam pinned against the wall by his throat, staring at a figure made entirely of fire. She raised her gun, unconsciously mimicking Dean, who was right behind her.

“No!” Sam gasped out. “Don’t shoot!”

“What? Why?” Dean asked, not lowering his gun.

“Because I know who it is.” Sam whispered. “I can see her now.”

As Sam finished talking, the fire vanished, leaving behind a woman who Jess knew only from photographs.

Dean lowered his gun slowly. “Mom?”

Mary Winchester, still dressed in the nightdress she had died in, stepped towards them, smiling softly. “Dean.”

Jess had also lowered her gun, her hand clenched around it as though it was the only thing grounding her.

Mary’s eyes travelled from Dean to Sam, drinking in the sight of the son who couldn’t even remember her. “Sam.”

Sam could only manage a weak smile, still struggling against the poltergeist pinning him to the wall, tears beginning to make their way down his face as he heard his mother say his name for the first time in his memory.

Her smile faded, and she suddenly looked very sad. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Sam choked out.
Mary didn’t answer, looking at him sadly for a few more seconds, before turning away. As she did, her gaze caught Jess’s.

Neither of them said anything, but a silent understanding passed between the two women.

*Look after my boys.*

*I will. You know I will.*

Directing her attention at the ceiling, Mary took a few steps away from them. “You, get out of my house. And let go of my son.”

Her words dripped with a venom Jess hadn’t expected, and Mary Winchester suddenly burst into flames once more.

The inferno roared towards the ceiling, spreading across it, and rolled back in on itself, vanishing completely, leaving the kitchen untainted and Mary nowhere to be seen.

Sam gasped in air, stumbling away from the wall. “Now it’s over.” He said hoarsely, rubbing his throat.

Jess emptied her gun out of habit, sticking the rounds in her pocket, before slipping the gun inside her jacket. The chances of it going off were low, but she wasn’t going to take any chances. “Are you both okay?”

“We should get out of here.” Dean said bluntly. “Let Jenny know everything’s okay. Preferably before someone calls the police.”

“You’re fixing their door before we leave.” Jess told him, reluctantly letting him change the subject.

Dean sighed. “Yeah, yeah. I know.”

***

The next morning (once Dean and Sam had fixed the hole in Jenny’s front door), Jenny retrieved a box from the basement that had been left behind when the Winchesters fled Kansas.

While Dean rifled through the pictures, Sam and Jess sat on the front step, waiting for Missouri to finish checking the house.

“How are you doing?” Jess asked quietly.

“My throat’s still a bit sore.” Sam answered.

“Not what I meant.” Jess said, smiling weakly.

“I know.” Sam said with a sigh. “Honestly, Jess, I don’t know. I don’t remember Mom, shouldn’t remember her, but now … now I’ve seen her, there’s all these fragments in my memory that I want to believe are true, but …”

“Then believe it.” Jess said simply.

“What do you think she was apologising for?” Sam asked.

Jess hesitated. “Leaving you, probably.”
“You don’t believe that.” Sam said, non-accusing. “I thought that to start with, but that apology was definitely aimed at me. If it was that, she would have said it to Dean as well.”
“Maybe she knows what Dean’s like with chick-flick moments.” Jess joked.

“Jess …”

“I know.” Jess grimaced. “I don’t know, Sam. A mother’s instinct is to protect her child, something dangerous got close to you that night, maybe that’s why she was apologising.”

“Or maybe something happened to me that night.” Sam whispered. “Maybe she knew, Jess. Something’s happening to me, and you know it.”

Jess lifted the hand clutching hers and pressed a soft kiss to his knuckles. “It’ll be okay, Sam. Jenny and her children are alive because of you. Remember that.”

“Well, there are no spirits there anymore.” Missouri announced, exiting the house. “This time for sure.”

“Not even my mom?” Sam asked, scooting over so Missouri could sit beside them.

“No.” Missouri said gently.

“What happened?” Jess asked.

“Mary’s spirit and the poltergeist’s energy cancelled each other out.” Missouri explained. “She destroyed herself going after that thing.”

“Why would she do something like that?” Sam asked.

“Sam, you do ask stupid questions sometimes.” Jess said fondly. “To protect her boys, obviously. Where is she now then?”

Missouri smiled. “Child, there are some questions no one on this plane can answer.” She heaved a sigh. “Sam, I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Sam asked.

“You sensed it was here, didn’t you?” Missouri said. “Even when I couldn’t.”

“What’s happening to me?” Sam whispered.

“I know I should have all the answers.” Missouri patted his arm. “But I don’t know.”

“Sam? Jess?” Dean called. “You ready?”

Missouri and Jenny said goodbye, and the hunters piled into the car and drove away.

“Well,” Jess said into the tense silence. “That was one hell of a case.”

“You can say that again.” Dean muttered.

“Did your dad ever call back?” Jess asked. She smiled slightly when he gave her a startled look in the rear view mirror. “It was kind of obvious you’d call him.”

Dean grimaced. “Not a word.”
“You think he’s okay?” Sam asked quietly.

“Yes.” Dean said firmly. “He must be.”

Jess turned to look out the window, hiding a grimace. *He’d better be. Because I don’t know what they’ll do if he isn’t.*
Chapter 12

Jess had learned fairly quickly that Sam and Dean were more than a little emotionally constipated when it came to each other, something she put down to the way they grew up.

It had taken Sam a long time to become comfortable with telling her outright how he felt, let alone anyone else, and Dean had clearly never been comfortable with it.

So expecting either of them to deal with their father’s disappearance in anything resembling a healthy manner was probably a fool’s hope.

This week, their method of choice was calling their father’s old hunting contacts to see if they’d heard anything, while Jessica scrolled through news sites and mediated.

They hadn’t fought over it yet today, but she had a feeling it was imminent.

“No … No, Dad was in California last we heard from him.” Sam was saying, pinching the bridge of his nose. “We just thought … he comes to you for ‘munitions … maybe you’ve seen him in the last few weeks. Just call us if you hear anything? Thanks.”

“Caleb hasn’t heard from him?” Dean asked as Sam hung up.

“Nope.” Sam sighed. “And neither has Jefferson or Pastor Jim. What about the journal? Any leads in there?”

“No, same as last time I looked.” Dean said with a grimace. “Nothing I can make out – I love the guy, but I swear he writes like friggin’ Yoda.”

“Must be a dad thing, I could never read my dad’s writing either.” Jess said, fishing a packet of painkillers out of her bag and tossing it to Sam.

Sam caught it with a grateful smile and swallowed a couple dry. “You know, maybe we should call the Feds. File a missing person’s.”

“We’ve talked about this.” Dean said, nowhere near as patiently as he had when Sam had first suggested it several months ago. “Dad would be pissed if we put the Feds on his tail.”

“I don’t care anymore.” Sam said bluntly, as Dean’s phone began ringing. “After all that happened in Kansas. I mean, he should’ve been there, Dean – you said so yourself! You tried to call him, but … nothing.”

“I know!” Dean snapped, rooting through his duffle. “Where the hell is my phone?”

Jess sighed and began searching as well, although Sam remained rooted to the floor.

“You know, he could be dead for all we know.”

“Don’t say that!” Dean protested. “He’s not dead! He’s … He’s just …”

“He’s what?!” Sam demanded. “He’s hiding? He’s busy?”

Jess shook her head, finally locating Dean’s cell phone under a pile of papers on the table. It had stopped ringing now and, knowing better than to try to break up an argument, she flipped it open, finding a text from an unlisted number.
“Guys!” She said sharply, returning to her laptop. “Shut up a minute.”

“Jess …” Dean began.

She threw the phone at him. “You’ve got a text. Coordinates.”

“Where?” Sam asked.

“Give me a minute,” Jess muttered.

“You think it was Dad?” Sam asked Dean quietly.

“He’s sent us coordinates before.” Dean pointed out.

Sam rolled his eyes. “The man can barely work a toaster, Dean!”

“Sam, things can change,” Jess pointed out calmly. “And at least that’s more proof that he’s alive at the very least. Although it was an unknown number.” She opened a search engine and typed in the location the coordinates had given her.

“What do the coordinates point to?” Dean asked impatiently.

“Rockford, Illinois,” Jess answered. “And this is interesting – last week, Officer Walter Kelly came home from work, shot his wife and blew his own brains out. Earlier that night, Kelly and his partner responded to a call at the Roosevelt Asylum.”

“Wait a minute, I know that name,” Dean said, frowning.

“How?” Sam asked.

“Your dad’s journal.” Jess answered, reaching over to snag it. “Seven unconfirmed sightings, two – now three deaths.”

“This is a job.” Sam said in disbelief.

“Well, maybe that’s where he is.” Dean said hopefully.

“And maybe he isn’t.” Sam retorted. “Maybe he’s sending us out on our own to hunt this thing.”

“Who cares?” Dean said. “If he wants us there, it’s good enough for me!”

Jess groaned, resting her head on her arms. “Give me strength …”

***

A few nights later, Jess found herself bunkered down with two teenagers and a couple of shotguns, in an abandoned asylum filled to the brim with the spirits of patients killed in a riot.

The teenagers – Kat and Gavin – had been on a ‘date’ apparently (although Jess was fairly sure Gavin shouldn’t expect another date any time in the near future, if ever), and Sam and Jess had been trying to get them out, while Dean tried to find an explanation.

So far, it seemed that the spirits weren’t all dangerous, but that they were trying to tell them something.
It was the ‘something’ that was worrying them, however, and with all the exits barred and a frantic call from Dean from the basement, Sam had left to find his brother, handing a spare shotgun to Kat, who had apparently been shooting before.

“Just so you know,” Kat whispered harshly, “if we make it out alive, we are so breaking up.”


“You hear that?” Gavin asked suddenly.

Jess and Kat both raised their shotguns and, as a figure rounded the corner, Kat pulled the trigger.

Recognising Dean at the last second, Jess reached out and pulled the barrel down so the round fired into the ground instead. “Hey Dean.”

Kat looked sheepish. “Sorry.”

“What are you still doing here?!” Dean demanded. “Where’s Sam?”

“Looking for you.” Jess answered. “We can’t get out. Something doesn’t want us to leave.”

“Dr. Ellicott.” Dean confirmed. “He was carrying out these awful experiments on his patients, like extreme rage therapy.”

“But they got angrier and angrier and ended up rioting.” Jess finished. “And now his ghost is doing the same thing, making people homicidal with rage. The police never found his body though.”

Dean grimaced. “Well, I found his office – 137, just like the spirit said. No body, but his log book said there was a secret procedural room down in the basement; if I were a patient …”

“Crazy, but then I suppose that was the point.” Jess murmured. “So where was it?”

“What?” Dean asked.

“The body.” Jess elaborated.

“I’m guessing the basement.” Dean repeated. “Haven’t been down there yet.”

“But you told Sam you were in the basement and needed help.” Kat put in.

Dean frowned. “When did I say that?”

“When you called him.” Jess swallowed, fear creeping into her chest. “You didn’t call him, did you?”

Dean grabbed a couple of extra weapons from the packs they’d brought with them. “Stay with them. Watch your backs.”

“Dean!” Jess protested, as he sprinted away. “Dammit …”

“Are they gonna be alright?” Gavin asked.

“I don’t know.” Jess admitted. “Screw it, I’m going after them. Kat, keep that gun up at all times. Fire at will, got it?”

Kat nodded grimly. “Got it.”
“Good. Be careful.” Jess called over her shoulder, running after Dean.

The basement of the asylum was even darker and derelict than the upper floors, something Jess would have thought was impossible. Her flashlight barely cut through the dim light and she moved slowly, listening for any sign of movements.

Slowly, voices became audible up ahead, not that she could make out the words, but it was enough to reassure her that it was the boys.

Jess relaxed slightly, but a split-second later, a gunshot echoed through the hair.

“Sam!”

Dean’s voice sounded pained, and Jess picked up her pace, assuming that Sam must have managed to shoot Dean accidentally, the same way Kat almost had earlier.

Despite the situation, she couldn’t help smiling slightly. *Poor Dean. Bad day.*

But her smile vanished when she got close enough to hear Dean’s next words.

“We gotta burn Ellicott’s bones and this will all be over, and you’ll be back to normal.”

Jess stopped dead, her heart in her throat.

“I am normal.” Sam said, his voice colder than she had ever heard it, than she had ever thought possible. “I’m just telling the truth for the first time. I mean, why are we even here? ‘Cause you’re following Dad’s orders like a good little soldier? Because you always do what he says without question? Are you that desperate for his approval?”

“This isn’t you talking, Sam.” Dean said, his voice low and calm, but Jess had a sinking feeling that it was – if Dean was right, Ellicott had only magnified the anger already in Sam; everything Sam was saying were things that had crossed his mind, even if he would never normally have said them aloud.

“That’s the difference between you and me.” Sam said breathlessly. “I have a mind of my own. I’m not pathetic, like you.”

Jess forced movement back into her feet and stumbled forwards, her eyes darting around, trying to see if she could find anywhere that Ellicott’s body could have been stashed, although she was sure that Dean would have swept this room already.

But she couldn’t block out the words floating back towards her.

“So what are you gonna do, huh? Are you gonna kill me?”

“You know what, I am sick of doing what you tell me to do. We’re no closer to finding Dad today than we were six months ago!”

“Well, here then. Let me make it easier for you. Come on, take it. Real bullets are gonna work a hell of a lot better than rock salt. Take it!”

A strangled gasp ripped out of Jess’s throat, and she sprinted into the next room, where what looked like a hidden door had been broken down, and she peered through to see Dean lying on the floor, Sam pointing one of the silver bullet guns at his face.

“Sam!”
“Leave it, Jess.” Dean said sharply, not taking his eyes off his brother. “You hate me that much, Sam? You think you could kill your own brother? Then go ahead. Pull the trigger. Do it!” His voice echoed off the walls, and Jess squeezed her eyes shut, unable to watch and praying that Sam would snap out of it.

No gunshot came, and she reluctantly opened her eyes to see that Dean had obviously handed Sam an unloaded gun.

With his brother momentarily distracted, Dean delivered a right hook that knocked Sam to the ground, allowing him to get to his feet.

“Man, I’m not going to give you a loaded pistol.” He said, grimacing.

Another right hook laid Sam out cold and Dean himself almost fell with the force of it. “Sorry Sammy.”

“Dean …” Jess said shakily.

“Shake it off.” Dean ordered, straightening up. “We need to find that body before Ellicott does any more damage.”

They split up to search the room, brushing rotten drapes away with their shotguns, peering behind hospital beds and gurneys, anything that might be concealing a body.

“Over here!” Dean called.

He was crouched beside a cupboard and, as she approached, he pulled the door open to expose a mummified body.

They both recoiled, gagging at the stench that escaped.

“Oh, that’s just gross.” Dean groaned, upending a carton of salt over the body. “Soak it up.”

“Let’s just get it burning.” Jess said, pouring kerosene over the body. “I get the feeling we’re not …”

Out of nowhere, a gurney came flying across the room, knocking them both to the floor. The kerosene went flying out of Jess’s hand as she collided heavily with the wall, the pain reverberating through her head.

A second thud nearby caught her attention, and she struggled to stand, only to see Dean pinned to the ground by a spirit in a white coat who must have been Dr Ellicott.

His hands were glowing as they held Dean’s face. “Don’t be afraid. I’m going to help you.”

Dean was straining to reach his duffle to retrieve his lighter, and she fumbled in her jacket to find her own.

Pain lanced through her at the movement and she sucked in an involuntary breath at what was probably broken ribs. She was too far away to ignite the bones herself, and by the time she got close enough, it would probably be too late.

Gasping Dean’s name, she slid the lighter across the floor towards him; his fingers closed around it, the flame flickered to life, and he tossed it on to the mummified body.

Ellicott released Dean, fading away, and he pulled himself to his feet, stumbling over to Jess. “Thought I told you to stay with the kids.”
“Couldn’t just stand around and let you two have all the fun.” Jess retorted with a weak smile, pressing a hand against her side. “Shit …”

“Let me have a look.” Dean said, the order softer than it should have been, and she lifted her arm, letting him press surprisingly gentle fingers against her skin. “I don’t think you’ve broken anything. Just a bad bruise.”

Jess took a deep breath, wincing slightly as her chest expanded, but nodded in agreement. “Sam?”

“I didn’t hit him that hard.” Dean said with a frown. “He should wake up soon.”

“And he’ll be back to normal?” Jess asked.

“Hopefully.” Dean said.

Jess shivered as a cold breeze brushed over her skin. “That only got rid of Ellicott, didn’t it? What about the other spirits?”

“Hopefully, Sam was right, and they were trying to warn visitors about Ellicott.” Dean answered. “If so, now he’s gone, they may move on by themselves.”

“If not?” Jess asked.

Dean shrugged. “They’re not hurting anyone. Burning the entire building down is a bit of a risk – it could get out of hand. We’ll keep an ear out, and if we hear of any other problems, we’ll deal with it.”

Jess got the feeling he wanted to put Roosevelt Asylum in their rear-view mirror as soon as possible, and she didn’t blame him.

A groan across the room had her hurrying to Sam’s side as he woke. “Sam?”

Dean caught her arm, holding her back. “Sammy?”

“Dean … Jess …” Sam’s eyes blinked open in the dim light, looking groggy and vacant.

“You gonna try to kill me again?” Dean asked.

Sam averted his gaze. “No.”

“Good.” Dean said, letting go of Jess’s arm. “Because that would be awkward.”

Jess didn’t say anything as they made their way back up to ground level to pick up Kat and Gavin, speaking only to assure Sam that her ribs were only bruised. She mustered only a small smile when Dean advised Gavin to keep haunted mansions off the ‘romantic date locations’ list.

When they reached the Impala, Sam leaned on the car, looked seriously at Dean, and said, “I’m sorry, man; I said some awful things back there.”

“Wait, you remember all that?” Jess asked, breaking her silence.

“Yeah.” Sam said quietly. “It was like I couldn’t control it. But I didn’t mean it, any of it.”

“You didn’t, huh?” Dean asked, disbelief lacing his voice.

“Do you think maybe you two should talk about this?” Jess asked.
“No.” Dean said, getting in the car. “I’m not really in the sharing and caring kind of mood.”

The ride back to the motel was awkward in every sense of the word, and as soon as they got inside the room (just one, the clerk had said apologetically when they checked in), Sam disappeared into the bathroom.

Whatever Dean was feeling about the night’s events, Jess couldn’t help noticing that he waited until the door was shut and the shower was running before pulling his shirt off, hissing slightly when the fabric stuck to the abrasion left by the salt round.

“Well, that doesn’t look good.” Jess murmured, grabbing the first aid kit.

“It’s fine.” Dean said, examining it. “I just need …”

“To get the salt out.” Jess finished. “Sit down.”

“It’s fine.” Dean repeated. “I can handle it.”

Jess gave him a stern look. “But you won’t. You don’t have to handle everything by yourself, Dean. Sit down, shut up, and let me help you.”

Dean stared at her for a few seconds, before his lips quirked in a smile. “Yes ma’am.”

Quickly but carefully, Jess cleared the wound of salt, and cleaned it up, fixing a bandage over it. “There. All done.”

“Thanks.” Dean muttered, grabbing a clean shirt and pulling it on, just as Sam emerged from the bathroom.

He didn’t look at either of them, collapsing heavily on to his bed with a groan.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t talk about this?” Jess asked gently.

“We’re good, kiddo.” Dean said, patting her shoulder as he got up. “Right bitch?”

“Jerk.” Sam retorted, his voice muffled.

Dean shrugged. “See?”

“Oh, I see.” Jess muttered under her breath. “I see that this is going to come back to haunt you, but what do I know.”

Sam caught her hand as she passed, pulling her down into his arms. “It’ll be fine, sweetheart. Are we okay?”

“Hey, I’m not the one you shot.” Jess said, her voice gentle. “I won’t lie and say it wasn’t a little … disconcerting, seeing you like that, but it wasn’t your fault, Sam.” She turned her face towards him to press a kiss against his neck, and hid a yawn at the same time.

Sam rubbed her back lazily. “Get some sleep, Jessie.”

“Way ahead of you.” Jess murmured, sleep stealing over her.

She slept restlessly.

Her dreams were plagued – not by images of Sam standing over Dean pointing a gun at his head –
but by the spirits of the patients that had been haunting the asylum.

Now the case had been cleared up, she could only hope that Dean was right and that the other spirits would finally find peace.

Just as the eighteenth door slammed shut, leaving her trapped in a ward with yet another lost soul, a soft tinny noise cut through the silence of the asylum and she heard Sam’s voice.

“Dean?”

Jess blinked once, twice, three times, and the asylum disappeared to be replaced by the dark motel room. “‘S goin’ on?”

“Dean’s phone.” Sam answered groggily. “Dean?”

Dean stirred slightly, but didn’t wake.

“Now he decides to sleep like the dead.” Sam muttered, leaning across to grab Dean’s phone.

“Who is it?” Jess asked sleepily, snuggling back against his side.

“Withheld number.” Sam said, flipping the phone open. “Hello?”

Jess let her eyes close, not too worried about the call. It was probably a job, and Sam would tell her in the morning, or wake her up if it was important.

A split-second later, Sam bolted upright and Jess yelped, jolting awake to stop herself from falling off the bed, but any protest died on her lips almost immediately when she saw his face, white and shocked in the dim light.

“Dad?!”
At Sam’s shocked question, Jess nearly fell out of bed anyway, steadying herself and him by gripping his shoulder.

“Are you hurt?” Sam asked into the phone, his face relaxing at what must have been a negative response. “We’ve been looking for you everywhere. We didn’t know where you were, if you were okay.”

Jess strained to hear John’s response, but it was impossible. Across the room, Dean stirred and opened his eyes.

“We’re fine.” Sam said. “Dad, where are you?”

Dean bolted up, staring at Sam.

“What?” Sam asked. “Why not?”

“Is that Dad?” Dean asked.

“Yeah.” Jess said, when Sam didn’t answer.

“You’re after it, aren’t you?” Sam asked. “The thing that killed Mom.” A frown crossed his face. “A demon? You know for sure?”

“A demon?” Dean repeated. “What’s he saying Sam?”

Again, Sam failed to respond, his eyes cutting to Jess for a second, before they darkened completely. “You know where it is? Let us help.”

“Sam …” Jess said softly.

“Why not?!” Sam demanded.

“Give me the phone.” Dean ordered, but Sam didn’t move.

“Names? What names, Dad – talk to me, tell me what’s going on.” Sam rolled his eyes, his jaw clenching. “No, alright? No way.”

“Give me the phone.” Dean repeated.

Still, Sam ignored him, his expression almost mutinous, and finally Dean reached over and snagged the phone from his hand. “Dad, it’s me. Where are you? Yes, sir. Uh, yeah, I’ve got a pen. What are their names?”

Jess handed Dean a notepad as he started gesturing, and he scribbled down a few names, listening carefully.

“Uh huh. Yeah, I got it. And they …?” Dean frowned, jotting down some more information. “Got it. Yeah, we’ll leave now. Yes sir.” He hung up. “Guess we’re checking out early.”

***

In no time at all, they were back on the road, with Sam driving, since Dean had grabbed a flashlight
and started rooting through the journal again.

“So the names Dad gave us.” Sam said after a while. “They’re all couples?”

“Three different couples.” Dean confirmed. “All went missing.”

“From different towns.” Jess pointed out, studying the information Dean had scribbled. “Different states. Washington, New York, Colorado. Disappeared on a cross-country road trip. I mean, what’s the connection? They could have disappeared everywhere.”

“But each route took them through the same part of Indiana.” Dean explained. “In the second week of April.”

“This is the second week of April.” Jess whispered. “So your dad’s sending us to Indiana before the same thing happens again?”

“Yahtzee.” Dean shook his head, shining the flashlight on the news articles he’d found in the journal. “Can you imagine putting together a pattern like this, the different obits Dad would have to go through? The man’s a master.”

Sam snorted under his breath, pulling over to the side of the road.

“What are you doing?” Jess asked.

“We’re not going to Indiana.” Sam said.

“We’re not?” Dean asked.

“No, we’re going to California.” Sam said. “Dad called from a payphone, Sacramento area code.”

“Sam …” Dean began.

“Dean, if this demon killed our moms, and Dad’s closing in, we’ve gotta be there.” Sam said. “We’ve gotta help.”

“Dad doesn’t want our help.” Dean pointed out.

“I don’t care.”

“He’s given us an order.” Dean said harshly.

“I don’t care!” Sam repeated.

“Guys!” Jess interjected. “Come on, is fighting really going to solve anything?”

Dean glanced at her, and softened his tone, trying to reason with his brother. “Dad said it wasn’t safe. For any of us. I mean, he obviously knows something we don’t, so if he says to stay away, we stay away.”

“I don’t understand the blind faith you have in the man.” Sam sighed. “I mean, it’s like you don’t even question him.”

Dean scowled. “Yeah, it’s called being a good son!”

Sam stared at him for a few seconds, before getting out of the car, slamming the door. Jess scrambled to follow him, wrapping her jacket around herself, her eyes widening when she saw him unloading
things from the trunk.

“You are a selfish bastard, you know that?” Dean said, gripping the car door so tightly she was surprised metal didn’t bend beneath his fingers. “You just do whatever you want; don’t care what anybody thinks.”

“That’s really what you think?” Sam asked.

“Boys …” Jess said, but she already knew it would do no good.

“Yeah, it is.”

Sam shouldered his duffle. “Well, then this selfish bastard is going to California.”

Dean snorted. “Come on, you’re not serious?!”

Sam didn’t look at him. “I am serious.”

“It’s the middle of the night!” Dean protested. “I’m taking off, I will leave your ass here.”

“Good.” Sam said simply. “That’s what I want you to do.”

Dean shook his head in disbelief. “In or out?”

Jess hesitated for a split-second, knowing the question was aimed at her, the names of the missing couples flashing in her mind, before her gaze settled on Sam. “No question.”

Dean handed over her bag. “Stay safe, kiddo. Goodbye Sam.”

Jess took a step back, watching him close the trunk and get back in the car. As the Impala roared off into the night, she slung her duffle over her shoulder and took Sam’s hand. “Guess we’d better start walking.”

She could feel that he was still wound up from the argument, and didn’t push for a conversation, waiting for Sam to relax. She felt it before she saw it, his grip loosening before his jaw unclenched, and he sighed.

“Sorry for dragging you into this, Jess.”


“You probably should have stayed with Dean.” Sam admitted. “California’s going to be dangerous. The demon …”

“Killed my mother too, remember?” Jess finished, swallowing the lump that formed in her throat. “I am coming with you, whatever you or your dad think.”

“Dad?” Sam questioned.

“He said something about me.” Jen said. “I can read you like a book, honey. What did he say?”

“That it wasn’t fair you got dragged into it.” Sam answered.

Jess nodded understandingly. “Alright. I want an answer at some point though.”
Sam frowned. “I just told you what he …”

“Reading you like a book also entails knowing when you’re lying.” Jess said, squeezing his hand. They fell into silence again and kept walking, until the sun crept over the horizon.

“There’s gotta be a bus station around somewhere.” Jess said, pulling a bottle of water out of her duffle. “Maybe we can hitchhike or something.”

“Might be our best shot.” Sam agreed. “You wanna take a rest, see if someone comes along?”

“Let’s find an actual roadside first.” Jess suggested. “Looks like there’s a grass verge up ahead.”

“And someone else in the same predicament.” Sam added, as they drew nearer.

Sure enough, there was a young woman seated on the grass verge, a backpack resting at her side.

“She’s not dressed for the road.” Jess murmured, her brow creasing in concern. “Do you think she’s run away from home?”

“Maybe.” Sam conceded, shooting her an amused look. “She can’t be that much younger than us.”

Jess felt her cheeks heat a little. “Well, she’s still all on her own. It can’t be fun.”

Sam sighed and set his duffle down, approaching the girl slowly. “Hey.” He tapped her shoulder and she jumped, pulling her headphones off.

“You scared the hell outta me!” She chided, squinting up at him.

“Sorry.” Sam said. “I – we just thought you might need some help.”

“No, I’m good, thanks.” The girl said.

Sam nodded. “So where you headed?”

She snorted. “No offence, but no way I’m telling you.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“You could be some kind of freak.” She pointed out matter-of-factly.

“Freaks usually travel alone.” Jess pointed out, making herself known.

“Not always.” A smirk crossed the girl’s face. “I mean, you are hitchhiking.”

Sam sniggered. “So are you.”

“Van.” Jess said suddenly, spotting it driving towards them. They fell into silence, and it pulled up beside them, the driver leaning across the passenger seat.

“Need a ride?”

“Yes.” They answered.

“Not you.” The driver said to Sam. “Just them.”

“She’s staying with me.” Sam said, tugging Jess back against his chest.
“Your loss, honey.” The girl said, gathering her things.

“You trust shady van guy but not us?” Sam asked.

“Definitely.” The girl said with a grin, getting into the van.

“That was a bad idea.” Jess said, as the van disappeared into the distance. “What if something happens to her?”

“We can’t be responsible for everyone.” Sam pointed out, kissing her head. “We offered to help, she chose to trust truck guy over us.” He dropped his duffle to the ground, stretching. “We never did talk about what happened last night. In the asylum, I mean.”

Jess sighed. “I don’t really know what to say, Sam. I heard what you said, and I don’t think I’m the one you need to talk to.”

“But what I said …” Sam began.

“You said to Dean.” Jess pointed out. “And don’t say you didn’t mean it – you didn’t say anything you hadn’t been thinking. You would never have said it to his face, and you definitely wouldn’t have physically hurt him the way you did – that was all Ellicott – but you meant it.”

Sam sighed. “Well, he’s …”

“Oh no.” Jess interrupted. “I am not getting in the middle. I love you, I don’t think any less of you, if that’s what you’re worried about. This is about you and Dean, not me.”

A horn caught their attention, and they looked up to see a car approaching, which also slowed to stop beside them.

The inhabitants of this car made Jess feel much more at ease – a couple in their late fifties – and it was the wife who leaned out of her window. “Are you two stuck?”

“Something like that.” Jess answered. “Family drama – we were kind of hoping for a ride to the nearest bus station.”

“There’s one not too far from here.” The woman jerked her head towards the back seat. “Get in.”

***

There must have been something about the drivers’ perspective of distance and time, because it was mid-afternoon by the time they arrived at the bus station.

Sam and Jess thanked their ride once more, and headed inside to buy tickets, but they came up against yet another roadblock.

“Sorry, the Sacramento bus doesn’t run again till tomorrow.” The clerk said, glancing at the schedule. “Uh, five-oh-five pm.”

“Tomorrow?” Sam repeated. “There’s got to be another way.”

“There is.” The clerk said. “Buy a car.”

Sam made a noise under his breath that was almost a growl, and Jess grabbed his hand, pulling him away from the ticket window. “Down boy.”
“Hey.”

Seeing Sam’s expression shift from annoyed to surprised, Jess turned to see the girl from that morning sitting on the floor. “Hey.”

“You guys again.”

“What happened to your ride?” Sam asked.

The girl shrugged. “You were right. That guy was shady; he was all hands. I cut him loose.”

Sam nodded, glancing at the bus schedule.

“What’s with you two?”

“Just trying to get to California.” Jess said with a sigh.

“No way. Me too.” She got to her feet, walking towards them. “You know the next bus isn’t until tomorrow.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem.” Sam muttered.

The girl frowned. “Why? What’s in Cali that’s so important?”

“Just something I’ve been looking for.” Sam answered vaguely. “For a long time.”

“Then I’m sure it can wait one more day, right?” The girl asked with a grin, holding out her hand. “I’m Meg.”

“Sam.” He returned, shaking her hand. “This is Jessica.”

Jess shook her hand as well with only a half-genuine smile. There was something about Meg that made her feel slightly uncomfortable, something in the way she stood, the way she addressed them, that suggested that Jessica’s presence was some kind of irritation.

“I was just about to grab some food.” Meg said, jerking her head towards the café. “Wanna join me?”

***

“No, she wasn’t.” Sam insisted in an undertone.

Dinner had come and gone – nothing special, but it gave the three travellers a chance to talk. As it turned out, Meg had run away from home, from an over-controlling family, and Jess had seen a spark of solidarity in Sam’s eyes at the tale.

Now, they had set up makeshift beds on the floor of the bus station, and Meg was fast asleep, while Sam and Jess talked softly.

“She was.” Jess said, half teasingly.

“She was not flirting with me.” Sam repeated. “Maybe she was flirting with you.”


Sam’s phone rang, and he checked the screen. “It’s Dean.”
“Well?” Jess prompted.

Sam hesitated, and she rolled her eyes, snagging the phone from his hand. “Hey Dean.”

“Jess?”

“Sam’s being difficult.” Jess said. “Did you find them?”

“They’re long dead, all of them.” Dean said grimly. “All wound up in this little town, with this creepy-ass scarecrow in the local orchard. Another couple arrived just after me, got sent on their way; I followed them and this scarecrow climbed off its cross to kill them.”

“The scarecrow climbed off its cross?!” Jess repeated.

Sam scooted closer to her, and she held the phone out, putting it on speaker and turning the volume down so they could both hear him without waking Meg across the room.

“Yes, I’m tellin’ ya. Burkitsville, Indiana. Fun town.”

“It didn’t kill the couple, did it?” Jess asked.

“No. I can cope without you, you know.”

“Something must be animating it.” Sam said with a frown. “A spirit.”

There was a pause before Dean responded, and Jess rolled her eyes again, imagining Dean trying to decide whether to acknowledge his brother or not. “No, it’s more than a spirit.” He said finally. “It’s a god. A Pagan god, anyway.”

“Whoa, back up.” Jess said. “Pagan gods are real?”

“The annual cycle of its killings.” Dean answered. “And the fact that the victims are always a man and a woman. Like some kind of fertility rite. And you should see the locals, the way they treated this couple. Fattening them up like a Christmas turkey.”

“The last meal.” Sam concluded. “Given to sacrificial victims.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking a ritual sacrifice to appease some Pagan god.”

“So a god possesses the scarecrow, and the scarecrow takes the sacrifice.” Jess said. “And for another year, the crops won’t wilt and the town will be safe. You know which god you’re dealing with?”

“Yes, I’m on my way to a local community college; got an appointment with a professor. You know, since I don’t have my sidekicks to do the research for me.”

Sam chuckled. “You know, if you’re hinting you need my help, just ask.”

“I’m not hinting anything.” Dean said. “Actually … I want you to know … don’t think …”

Sam’s smile softened. “Yeah, I’m sorry too.”

“You were right.” Dean said heavily. “You gotta do your own thing. Live your own life.”
Sam raised an eyebrow. “You serious?”

“You’ve always known what you want. And you go after it. You stand up to Dad, and you always have. Hell, I wish I … Anyway, I … I admire that about you. I’m proud of you, Sammy.”

Something stirred in Jess’s stomach and she shifted uncomfortably. It wasn’t that she doubted Dean’s words, but he would never normally have admitted them.

“I don’t even know what to say.” Sam said.

“Say you’ll take care of yourself.”

“That goes for you too.” Jess said, unable to convince herself that she was worrying over nothing. “Be careful.”

“I will, kiddo. Call me when you find Dad.”

“We will.” Sam agreed.

“And call us when you find out what god it is.” Jess added. “Because I am officially intrigued.”


“Bye Dean.” Sam whispered. He took the phone from Jess and hung up. “You worried?”

“Little bit.” Jess admitted. “And that was not the talk I meant.”

Sam smiled weakly. “It’s as close as we’re getting.”

***

As their departure time drew near, Sam and Jess had grown increasingly concerned. There was no word from Dean after that call, not even a text to say that his meeting with the professor had been unsuccessful.

“Anything?” Jess asked, as Sam tried to call Dean yet again.

“Nothing.” Sam sighed, hanging up.

“Hey!” Meg called. “Our bus came in.”

Sam sighed. “Then you’d better catch it. We gotta go.”

“Go where?” Meg asked.

“Burkitsville.” Sam answered, handing Jess her duffle.

“Wait …” Meg protested.

“I’ve been trying to call my brother for three hours.” Sam said curtly. “I’m just getting voicemail.”

Meg shrugged. “Maybe his phone’s turned off.”

“That’s not like him.” Jess disagreed. “He’s in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Meg asked.
Sam hesitated. “Difficult to explain. Look, I’m sorry. Don’t miss your bus.”

“I don’t understand.” Meg said. “You’re running back to your brother? The guy you ran away from? Because he won’t pick up his phone? Sam – come with me to California.”

Jess’s discomfort, which had lessened since the night before, rose once more. “We can’t.”

“Why not?” Meg pressed.

“He’s family.” Sam said simply, and they left Meg to catch her bus to California, leaving the bus station altogether.

“How are we going to get there?” Jess asked in an undertone. “There’s no bus …”

“Wait here.” Sam said, kissing her forehead. “Try to find a map.”

Jess sighed, perching on a low wall and opening her laptop, hoping that the Wi-Fi would hold up. Thankfully, it did, and she quickly found directions to Burkitsville, just in time for Sam to pull up alongside her.

Slinging her duffle into the backseat, she jumped in, rattling off the directions while she changed to a search engine while she still had internet.

“ Aren’t you going to ask?” Sam asked, as they left the station behind them.

“No rental place nearby.” Jess said, cutting a glance towards the steering wheel. “No keys. Don’t really need to.” She still wasn’t comfortable with the idea of stealing cars, but she’d rather steal a car than risk something happening to Dean. “Okay, so check this out. The Vanir are Norse gods of protection and prosperity. Some villages built effigies and some practised human sacrifice. One male, one female.”

“Sounds like what Dean was dealing with.” Sam agreed. “We need to get him more used to technology.”

Jess chuckled. “It says here the energy sprung from a sacred tree. So … maybe if we burn the tree, it kills the god?”

“That’s probably our best shot.” Sam confirmed. “We need to find the orchard first.”

The orchard wasn’t difficult to find once they found Burkitsville, and it was about creepy enough to put Jess off for life.

They left the car on the road, and crept through the trees, peering through the dim light. Finally, they heard a female voice, and headed towards it, emerging into a clearing to find Dean and a young girl tied to trees.

“Dean?”

“Oh, I take back everything I said!” Dean said, relief dripping from his voice. “I’m so happy to see you. Come on.”

“Hang on, sweetie.” Jess murmured, untying the girl. “Can you stand?”

“I think so.” She said, her voice shaking.

“How’d you get here?” Dean asked.
“I stole a car.” Sam answered, a little sheepishly.

Dean let out a breathless laugh. “That’s my boy! And keep an eye on that scarecrow, it could come alive any minute.”

Jess looked up, her gaze darting around the orchard. “What scarecrow?”

“He should be right there.” The girl whispered, pointing at an empty cross.

“Too late.” Dean said grimly. “Run.”

“What are you two doing out here?” Jess asked, as they hurried towards the road.

“Saved this year’s sacrifices, so we got volunteered in their place.” Dean explained tersely. “Emily’s aunt and uncle own the gas station.”

Jess cut a horrified look towards the young girl, who couldn’t have been more than eighteen, but comforting her could wait. “So do we know which tree it’s tied to?”

“How did you …?”

“Googled it.”

Dean grinned. “Atta girl. It’s the source of its power.”

“And we need to burn it.” Sam concluded.

“In the morning.” Dean said. “Let’s just shag ass before Leather Face catches up.” He skidded to a halt in another clearing, and the others stopped just behind him, finding themselves facing four of the townspeople.

Turning, it became clear that they were surrounded, and Emily shrank back towards the hunters. “Please let us go.”

“It’ll be over quickly.” One of the men said. “I promise.”

“Please!” She repeated.

“Emily, you have to let him take you.” He said gently. “You have to …”

But what Emily had to do, they never found out, because a scythe was suddenly thrust into his back, emerging out of his stomach.

The woman beside him screamed, her voice mingling with Emily’s, when the scarecrow loomed behind them, wrapping it’s other arm around her neck and dragging both of them off into the darkness.

The townspeople scattered, and Emily turned to Dean, who wrapped his arms around her, shielding her from the sight. “Let’s go.” He said, urging them on.

Normally, they would try to fight and save the victims, but Jess had a feeling that the man and woman who had been taken were Emily’s aunt and uncle, and if they were willing to sacrifice their own niece for the good of the town, she was sure they wouldn’t mind sacrificing themselves.

They reached the car quickly, and Dean relinquished the front seats to Sam and Jess, since Emily didn’t seem likely to let go any time soon.
Sam drove them straight to the nearest town and they checked into a motel. As soon as they got into the room, Jess grabbed the wall for support, feeling her legs give out.

One room wasn’t ideal for four of them, but no one felt they could sleep; they just needed somewhere safe.

Aside from anything, Dean was starting look a) very uncomfortable and b) slightly panicked, and Jess bit back a laugh, moving to sit beside him, and placing a gentle hand on Emily’s back.

“Emily? Are you hurt?”

She shook her head and mumbled something incoherent, due to the fact that most of the sound was muffled by Dean’s shirt.

“She’s terrified.” Dean translated, stroking her hair.

Jess tutted understandably. “Come here, sweetie. Best let someone without emotional constipation handle it.”

Dean made an insulted noise, but Emily giggled weakly, allowing herself to be transferred from Dean’s arms to Jess’s, nestling her face in the crook of Jess’s neck.

Jess leaned back against the wall, adjusting the pillows with one hand to make it a little more comfortable. “Flip for the floor, boys; looks like we’re taking this one.”

“I’m not tired.” Sam said, setting himself up at the desk with his laptop. “Dean, you take it.”

“Whatever.” Dean muttered. “I’m gonna grab a shower.”

Jess sighed, her fingers gently combing through Emily’s hair, gradually feeling the shaking recede. It had been one hell of a night, and she still needed to get the boys talking before they split up again.

***

The following morning, Emily led the three hunters to the apple tree the god had tied itself to, and insisted on setting fire to it herself.

In the light of day, she had recovered better than Jess could have anticipated, although the pain of being betrayed by and almost immediately losing her only family would never fade completely.

Once they were sure the god had gone, they drove Emily to the bus station. She had some old friends in Boston that she could fall back on, and they waited with her until the bus arrived.

“You sure you’ll be okay?” Jess asked, as it pulled in.

Emily nodded with a smile. “I’ll get there. Thanks.”

“No problem.” Jess attempted a smile, but it felt false, even to her. She pulled an envelope out of her pocket and handed it to Emily. “Take this. It’s not much, but it’ll tide you over until you get to Boston and find a place to stay.”

“You didn’t have to …” Emily began, but Jess shook her head.

“Just take it, alright? Humour me.” This was technically not the emergency she was saving her inheritance for, but it was worth dipping in a little. “My number’s inside, just in case … Well, in case.”
“Thank you.” Emily hugged her tightly, waved to the boys standing by the Impala (the stolen car abandoned outside Burkitsville), and got on the bus.

Jess watched the bus pull away, and went back to Sam and Dean, both standing in an uneasy silence. “So the rest of the townspeople will just get away with it?”

Dean shrugged. “What happens to the town will have to be punishment enough. So can I drop you two off somewhere?”

“No.” Jess answered before Sam could. “You can find us a motel.”

Dean looked puzzled, but her tone left no room for argument, so he agreed, stopping at the first motel in the next town they came to.

Once they were inside the room, Jess turned to the boys with a stern expression. “Here’s what’s going to happen. I am going to go and get us some food. While I am gone, you two are going to talk— and I mean actually talk about what happened in that asylum, and everything that’s been bothering you.”

“But …”

“No buts.” Jess interrupted, already halfway out the door. “Just do it.”

She half-expected their protests to follow her out of the motel, and breathed a sigh of relief when they didn’t, crossing the street to the diner she’d seen on the way in.

Trying to give the boys time to talk, she lingered outside to read the menu through, before stepping inside and joining the line of people waiting to order.

Thanks to the lunch time rush, and her own wish to waste time (which probably didn’t endear her to the diner staff, or to the men behind her), it was a good while before she returned to the motel room with three take-out containers.

The Impala was still outside, she was relieved to see (since that meant that Dean hadn’t tried to escape), but it was still with a hint of nervousness that she let herself back into the room.

They looked up at her entrance, and a fond smile crossed her face. They had claimed a mattress each and were sitting, cross-legged, facing each other. Were it not for their heights, they would have looked like young boys who had been caught putting plastic wrap over the toilet seat or something.

“One Caesar salad.” Jess said, handing Sam one of the take-out containers. “One heart-attack on a plate.” She handed Dean the second, grinning at his raised eyebrow. “Bacon cheeseburger with everything on it.”

Dean’s lips quirked in an answering smile. “Thanks Jess.”

“So did you two talk?” Jess asked, expecting an affirmative response whether they had or not.

“Not really.” Sam admitted. “Neither of us have ever been very good at that.”

Jess sighed, pulling the chair out from under the small table and dragging it over to sit between them. “Alright. We’ll do it this way. Until we agree otherwise, we are in the Cone of Silence, understood?”

“And what does that mean?” Dean asked, his voice rougher than usual.

“Whatever’s said in the Cone of Silence can’t be used against us later.” Sam explained.
“I.E., we’re having a chick-flick moment whether you like it or not.” Jess said, more cheerfully than she felt. “Now, Dean, Sam’s very worried that something’s going to happen to your dad before you find him, partly because he feels guilty that the last time they saw each other ended so badly. Not that he should. Sam, Dean’s also worried that something’s happened or will happen to your dad, which is part of why he’s agreeing to these hunts, because as long as he’s hunting, he doesn’t have to deal with it. Discuss.”

“That’s it?” Sam asked her.

“What?” Jess responded, shrugging. “I’m just mediating and eating a chicken sandwich.”

“You feel guilty?” Dean asked suddenly.

“No!” Sam answered automatically. Then … “Yeah. Kinda. Maybe.”

“Well, that covered all bases.” Dean said, frowning.

Sam sighed. “I don’t feel guilty for going to college, Dean. I wanted a normal life. It was nothing against you or Dad … or Mom … I just wanted a normal life. But, yeah, I feel guilty that my decision hurt you and Dad.”

Dean grimaced. “I meant what I said earlier, Sammy. I’m proud of you for always going after what you want. Dad was … Dad was wrong, the way he reacted that night.”

“But you never think Dad’s wrong.” Sam said quietly.

“I learned to pick my battles.” Dean corrected, rescuing a piece of bacon that had escaped his burger. “I should have picked that one. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry I never called.” Sam said sheepishly. “And dodged your calls. And basically dropped off the face of the earth.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Honestly, Sammy, you think Dad was the only one who swung by when he could? I knew you were doin’ okay.”

Jess smiled. “Asylum.” She prompted, taking another bite of her sandwich.

Sam grimaced. “I would never have said any of that.”

“But you meant it.” Dean said flatly.

Sam hesitated. “Yeah, but … it sounded worse than it was. It just really pisses me off sometimes, that you just immediately fall back in line – we don’t know where he is, we don’t know what’s going on, and none of that seems to bother you!”

Jess cleared her throat. “If Dean doesn’t mind me going all psychological on him?”

“Go ahead.” Dean said.

“Sam, I can see why that’s frustrating, believe me I do, but you have to realise that, growing up, you had Dean.” Jess said.

“And Dean had me.” Sam said, looking confused.

“No.” Jess said with a laugh. “I mean … When your dad was on a hunt, Dean was in charge, right? And when did that start?”
Dean shrugged. “I don’t know … I suppose I must have been about … eight when he first left us. Not for long.” He added hastily.

Something inside Jess’s heart broke at the revelation, but she managed to keep her expression from betraying her. John Winchester’s parenting was not on trial here. “Okay, from a young age, Dean had an awful lot of responsibility, so I’d imagine that not knowing what to do is quite disconcerting, because it wasn’t just him he had to worry about, it was you too.”

“So Dad’s orders are … comforting?” Sam guessed.

Jess nodded, looking at Dean for confirmation.

Dean pulled a face. “I’d never thought about it like that, but … yeah, I guess so.”

“I didn’t realise that.” Sam said quietly.

“While we’re on the subject of your dad,” Jess said, tilting her head curiously, “what did he say about me?”

Sam grimaced, but sighed heavily. “That you shouldn’t be with us. Something about weak links.”

“Bull.” Dean said bluntly. “I’m surprised you didn’t tell him that yourself.”

“I picked my battles.” Sam said darkly.

Despite the brief moment of hurt that followed Sam’s admission, Jess couldn’t help smiling at their joint offence on her behalf. “Alright, back to you.”

Sam squeezed her hand and looked at Dean. “I’m not gonna suddenly agree with you.” He warned. “I still wanna find Dad. And you’re still a pain in the ass. But … Mom’s gone. Dad’s … God knows where. You and me … We’re all that’s left. So if we’re gonna see this through, we’re gonna do it together.”

Dean nodded. “Hold me, Sammy. That was beautiful.”

“Dean …” Jess said warningly.

“I’m kidding!” Dean protested. “I get it, Sammy. I do. But I … you …”

Jess was tempted to let him stutter for a moment, but took pity on him. “He’s got another reason for following your father’s orders.”

“He does?” Sam asked.

Dean raised an eyebrow. “I do?”

Jess sighed, directing her words at Sam. “He can’t protect your father, but he can protect you. Your dad doesn’t want you there because it’s too dangerous, and if he was on his own, he’d probably be halfway there by now, but something tells me he’s always looked out for you, and he’s not going to stop now.” She glanced at Dean. “Right?”

“What, you psychic as well now?” Dean asked sardonically.

“Told you.” Sam said in an undertone. “You blinked it.”

“No, I just read your dad’s journal and read between the lines.” Jess said with a shrug. “He
constantly refers to your job being to protect Sam. You know you spent a year sleeping in Sam’s crib with him after your mom died?”

Dean frowned slightly. “I don’t remember that.”

‘Cone of silence’ or not, Dean was starting to get uncomfortable, and Jess caught Sam’s eye, clearing her throat. “Are we good then?”

“We’re fine.” Dean said hastily. “Can we get rid of the silence bubble or whatever now?”

“Cone of Silence.” Jess corrected automatically, a mischievous smile crossing her face. “Any chance of getting you two to hug first?”

Their reactions were unanimous and instantaneous. “Not happening.”

Jess sniggered. “Worth a shot though.”
Chapter 14

“It was just a shortcut.” Jess repeated, her voice trembling a little. “And the windows were rolled down, so we heard the screaming …”

She had recited the cover story so many times, she couldn’t even remember what the truth was. All she could see was Dean twitching horribly in that electrified water, and the anguish on Sam’s face as he tried desperately to wake his brother up.

Finally, the officers were satisfied, and she hurried towards Dean’s hospital room, finding Sam almost clinging to the door frame.

“Well?” She asked, with more bravado than she felt. “What’s the verdict?”

“Don’t let Sam screw up my car.” Dean told her, with a strange smirk.

Jess swallowed hard. “That’s not funny.”

“He’s not joking.” Sam said hoarsely. “He’s … The doctor says he’s got a month, tops.”

For three days, the conversation chased itself around Jessica’s head, as though somehow reliving the awful news would make it go away. She and Sam searched everywhere for a something that could cure heart failure, but to no avail.

Finally, on the third day, Jess asked something that had been bothering her for a while. “Don’t you think you should call your dad?”

Sam sighed. “He won’t pick up the phone.”

“No, but he’ll get the message.” Jess pointed out. “It’s not the nicest way to get the news, but he deserves to know.”

“And when he doesn’t come?” Sam muttered, but dialled his father’s number anyway.

Jess left her laptop to sit beside him, taking his hand. Sam was taking his brother’s predicament understandably hard, and every time he said it aloud, it only got harder.

“Hey, Dad.” He said, as soon as the now-familiar message was out of the way. “It’s Sam. Uh...you probably won’t even get this, but, uh...it's Dean. He's sick, and uh...the doctors say there's nothing they can do.” His voice broke, and she inched closer, resting her head on his shoulder. “Um...but, uh, they don't know the things we know, right? So, don't worry, cause I'm uh … gonna do whatever it takes to get him better. Alright … just wanted you to know.”

He hung up, tossing the phone on to the bed, and buried his face in his hands. Jess said nothing, swallowing back tears of grief and helplessness.

There was nothing she could say that would ease the pain he was feeling, but, oh, how she wished there was.

Someone knocked at the door to the motel room, and Jess squeezed Sam’s shoulder before going to answer it.

It wasn’t particularly that she had any expectations about who she would find outside, but she definitely wasn’t expecting Dean to be there, leaning heavily on the door frame. “What the hell are
you doing here?"

“I checked myself out.” Dean answered, his voice still horribly weak.

“Are you crazy?” Sam asked, standing up from the bed.

“Well, I’m not gonna die in a hospital where the nurses aren’t even hot.” Dean said, using the wall to help him walk inside.

“You know, this whole I-laugh-in-the-face-of-death thing?” Jess asked, slipping under his arm, more to support him than to hug him (although the latter was still a factor). “It’s crap. We can see right through it.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Dean said dismissively. “Have you even slept? You two look worse than me.”

“We’ve been scouring the internet for the last three days.” Jess explained, helping him to a chair.

“Calling every contact in Dad’s journal.” Sam added.

“For what?” Dean asked.

“For a way to help you.” Sam answered, rolling his eyes. “One of Dad’s friends, Joshua, he called me back. Told me about a guy in Nebraska, a specialist.”

Jess sighed. “Sam, we talked about this. Don’t get your hopes up.”

Sam shot her a warning look, and she dropped the argument. They both knew that Dean would never willingly go to a faith healer, and it was worth a shot, however much she worried that Sam was desperate enough to believe anything right now.

Dean sighed. “You’re not gonna let me die in peace, are you?”

Sam smiled, the first smile she had seen since the doctor gave them the news. “I’m not gonna let you die, period. We’re going.”

***

Reverend Roy LeGrange was everything Jess expected with one small exception – it actually seemed to work. Despite Dean’s scepticism, he had been pulled from the congregation, and Jess and Sam had watched with bated breath as the healer laid his hands on Dean, who had slowly passed out.

When he came to, he was a bit groggy and seemed preoccupied with an empty space behind them, but his colour was far better than it had been since the accident.

Nevertheless, the first thing they did the next day was go to the local hospital to get Dean checked out. While they waited for the doctor to return with the test results, Sam paced the length of the hospital room, watching Dean in concern.

“So, you really feel okay?”

“I feel fine, Sam.” Dean muttered.

“You don’t sound fine.” Jess said gently.

Dean opened his mouth, but was prevented from explaining by the doctor, who walked in reading
over the test results. “Well, according to all your tests there’s nothing wrong with your heart. No sign there ever was.”

Sam and Jess both breathed a sigh of relief, but the doctor wasn’t finished. “Not that a man your age should be having heart trouble, but, still it’s strange it does happen.”

Dean perked up, like a dog on the trail of a rabbit. “What do you mean, strange?”

The doctor shrugged. “Well, just yesterday, a young guy like you, twenty-seven, athletic. Out of nowhere, heart attack.”

Dean nodded thoughtfully. “Thanks, Doc.”

“No problem.” The doctor responded, leaving them alone.

Dean frowned. “That’s odd.”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe it’s a coincidence. People’s hearts give out all the time, man.”

“No, they don’t.” Dean said darkly.

Jess sighed. “Dean, have you ever heard the phrase ‘don’t look a gift horse in the mouth’? Can’t we just be thankful that you were saved and move on?”

“Because I can’t shake this feeling.” Dean said.

“What feeling?” Sam asked.

“When I was healed,” Dean said quietly, “I just … I felt wrong. I felt cold. And for a second … I saw someone … this old man. And I swear, Sam, it was a spirit of some kind.”

“But if there was something there, Dean, I would have seen it too.” Sam pointed out. “I mean, I have been seeing an awful lot of things lately.”

Dean snorted. “Well, excuse me, psychic wonder. It’s not just me. Is it Jess?”

“I’m just happy you’re alright.” Jess said, avoiding his gaze.

“But you don’t believe it was an act of God any more than I do.” Dean said knowingly.

Jess sighed. “Honestly? No. And I consider myself religious so …”

“So if you think there’s something wrong,” Dean said, looking at Sam. “You’re outnumbered, Sammy. I’ve been hunting long enough to trust a feeling like this.”

“Alright.” Sam agreed warily. “What do you wanna do?”

“I want you to check out the heart attack guy.” Dean answered. “I’m gonna visit the reverend.”

“I’ll come with you.” Jess said. “I think this is going to need a subtle hand.”

***

After having tea with the reverend and his wife, Sue-Ann, and learning that Roy had discovered his ability to heal after miraculously recovering from cancer, Dean and Jess left their house to encounter Layla Rourke, a young woman they had met at the service the day before.
She looked tired, but greeted Dean with a smile. “Dean, hey. How you feeling?”

“I feel good.” Dean answered. “Cured, I guess. What are you doing here?”

Layla gestured to the woman standing behind her, glaring at Dean. “You know, my mom she wanted to talk to the reverend.”

The front door opened, and Sue-Ann stepped out on to the porch. “Layla?”

Layla sighed. “Yes, I’m here again.”

Sue-Ann shook her head. “Well, I’m sorry, but Roy is resting. He won’t be seeing anyone else right now.”

“Sue-Ann, please.” Layla’s mother pleaded. “This is our sixth time; he’s got to see us!”

“Roy is well aware of Layla's situation.” Sue-Ann said firmly. “And he very much wants to help just as soon as the Lord allows. Have faith, Mrs Rourke.”

Mrs Rourke turned on Dean as the front door closed again. “Why are you still even here? You got what you wanted.”

“Mom, stop.” Layla said softly.

“No, Layla, this is too much!” Her mother said sharply. “We've been to every single service. If Roy would stop choosing these strangers over you. Strangers who don't even believe. I just can't pray any harder.”

Dean frowned. “Layla, what's wrong?”

Layla sighed. “I have this thing...”

“It's a brain tumour.” Mrs Rourke said. “It's inoperable. In six months, the doctors say …” She cut herself off, her daughter’s hand resting on her shoulder.

Dean swallowed hard. “I'm sorry.”

Layla shook her head. “It's okay.”

“No. It isn't.” Mrs Rourke said softly. She turned to Dean, her eyes narrowed. “Why do you deserve to live more than my daughter?”

“Hang on a second.” Jess cut in, indignant fury rising within her. “I'm sorry for what you're going through, I really do – but why does your daughter deserve to live more than my brother?”

“I'd tend to agree with her more than you, kiddo.” Dean said, taking hold of her arm and leading her down the steps, away from the house. “Way to be subtle.”

Jess rolled her eyes, still seething inside. “Shut up.”

***

When they got back to the motel room, Sam was waiting for them, and it was clear as soon as they saw him that it wasn’t good news. He was sitting on the edge of one of the beds, his head bowed as though in prayer.
“What’d you find out?” Dean asked.

“I’m sorry.” Sam said, so quietly that they almost didn’t hear him.

“Sorry about what?” Dean asked, tossing his jacket on to one of the beds.

Sam looked up, a haunted expression in his eyes. “Mashall Hall died at 4:17. The clock froze.”

“That’s the exact time Dean was healed.” Jess said in a hushed voice.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, so I put together a list of everyone Roy’s healed over the past year and cross-checked them with the local obits. Every time someone was healed, someone else died. And each time, the victim died of the same symptom LeGrange was healing at the time.”

Dean frowned. “Someone's healed of cancer, someone else dies of cancer?”

Sam nodded. “Somehow, LeGrange … he's trading a life for another.”

Dean looked slightly ill. “Wait, wait, wait. So, Marshall Hall died to save me?”

“Dean, the guy probably would've died anyway.” Sam said hastily. “And someone else would've been healed.”

Dean shook his head. “You never should've brought me here.”

Sam sighed. “Dean, I was just trying to save your life.”

“But, Sam, some guy is dead now because of me!” Dean argued.

“And that’s terrible.” Jess said. “But we didn’t know, Dean. The thing I don’t understand is how is Roy trading a life for a life?”

“Oh, he’s not doing it.” Dean said darkly. “Something else is doing it for him.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

Dean sighed. “The old man I saw on stage … I didn’t wanna believe it, but deep down, I knew …”

“Knew what?” Sam prompted. “What are you talking about?”

“There’s only one thing that can give and take life like that.” Dean said grimly. “We’re dealing with a reaper.”

“The Grim Reaper?” Jess asked, startled. “Angel of death, collect your soul, so and on so forth?”

“Not the reaper, a reaper.” Dean corrected. “There’s reaper lore in pretty much every culture on earth; hundred different names. It’s possible there’s more than one.”

Sam’s brow creased in confusion. “You said you saw a dude in a suit.”

“What, you think he shoulda been working the whole black robe thing?” Dean asked sardonically. “You said it yourself that the clock stopped – reapers stop time. And you can only see them when they’re coming at you, which is why I could see it and you couldn’t.”

“But how is Roy controlling it?” Jess asked.

“That cross?” Sam murmured.
“What?” Dean asked.

“There was this cross,” Sam elaborated. “I noticed it in the church, and I knew I’d seen it before …” He began rifling through some of the papers he’d been looking through before they came in, finally holding up a card. “Here.”

“A Tarot?” Jess asked sceptically.

“It makes sense.” Sam insisted. “Tarot dates back to the early Christian era, when some priests were still using magic. A few of them veered into the dark stuff – necromancy, how to push death away, how to cause it …”

“So Roy’s using black magic to bind the reaper?” Dean asked.

“If he is, he’s riding the whirlwind.” Sam said. “It’s like putting a dog leash on a great white.”

Dean shrugged. “Okay, then we stop Roy.”

“How?” Jess asked pointedly.

“Dean, I know what you’re thinking …” Sam began.

“Sam, the guy’s playing God; deciding who lives and who dies!” Dean argued. “That’s a monster in my book!”

“We’re not killing a human being, Dean.” Sam said firmly. “We do that, we’re no better than he is.”

“Exactly.” Jess agreed.

Dean sighed. “Okay, we can’t kill Roy, we can’t kill the reaper. Any bright ideas, college kids?”

“Well, if Roy’s using some kind of spell, we’ve gotta figure out what it is.” Sam answered. “And how to break it.”

***

During the next service, Sam and Jess went to search Roy’s house, while Dean went to stop the next healing session, which turned out to be Layla’s. He managed to save the reaper’s next target, a man protesting that Roy was a fraud, but discovered that Roy wasn’t using a spell at all.

His wife was.

“So Roy really believes.” Sam concluded, back at the motel.

“I don’t think he has any idea what his wife’s doing.” Dean agreed.

“Well,” Jess said, pulling a small book from inside her jacket, “we found this hidden in their library. It’s ancient, written by a priest who went dark side. There’s a binding spell in here for trapping a reaper.”

“Must be a hell of a spell.” Dean muttered.


“Desperate.” Jess finished. “Her husband was dying, she didn’t have any way of saving him. She
was using the binding spell to keep the reaper away from Roy.”


Dean frowned. “But Roys’ alive, so why is she still using the spell?”

“To force the reaper to kill people she thinks are immoral.” Sam answered. “Marshall was gay; the woman who died yesterday instead of a lung cancer patient was a pro-choice lobbyist.”

“The protester’s an atheist.” Dean finished.

“May God save us from half the people who think they’re doing God’s work.” Jess said bitterly.

Sam squeezed her hand. “You alright?”


“Me too.” Dean agreed. “I feel like I haven’t eaten since that damn heart attack.”

“You’ve been eating healthily.” Jess said, her smile growing a little.

“Exactly.” Dean said.

Sam rolled his eyes. “I’ll go and get us something to eat. At least then I can sneak something healthy in for him.”

“I heard that.”

“Well, I said it loud.” Sam dropped a kiss on Jess’s head, grabbed his jacket, and left the motel room.

Dean leaned back against the headboard with a sigh, watching Jess straighten the papers on the desk. “You know anyone like that?” He asked, after a few minutes of silence.

“Like what?” Jess asked.

“Half the people who think they’re doing God’s work.” Dean elaborated.

“Not really.” Jess answered. “I mean, the town I grew up in was a bit … conservative. Mom didn’t think like them, that’s why she taught me how to be a Catholic rather than sending me to Sunday School. She took the whole bisexual thing really badly, not because she didn’t approve, but because she thought I’d have an easier time of it if I pretended otherwise.” She snorted, shaking her head. “Like I cared what those stuck-up idiots thought of me.”

“Atta girl.” Dean said with a grin. He tilted his head, observing her closely. “You called me your brother earlier.”

“I did.” Jess agreed. “And you are. Well, you’re as close as I’ve got.” Her words caught up with her and she froze, turning to face him. “Did you already know? That I was … y’know?”

Dean shook his head. “No, but we see such crap every day … whatever makes you happy. Love is love as far as I’m concerned. When’d you realise?”

“High school.” Jess answered with a smile. “I dated this girl, Amelia, for two years.”

“Why’d you break up?” Dean asked.
“College.” Jess said, shrugging. “Plus, she … I don’t think she’d ever really come to terms with the fact that she was bi. We both knew long-distance wouldn’t work, so we broke it off. And then I went to Stanford, met Sam and … here we are.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Was she hot?”

Jess grinned. “Oh yeah.”

Dean chuckled. “Do me a favour, kiddo; never break things off with Sammy.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.” Jess said, confused. “Why?”

Dean smirked. “You’d be terrible competition.”

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“You will, won’t you?” Jess asked, closing the motel room door behind her.

“Will what?” Dean responded, looking tired.

“Pray for her.” Jess elaborated. “We take that kind of promise seriously.”

“I will.” Dean assured her.

Jess nodded, walking over to look out of the window. They were almost ready to put Nebraska behind them. Once freed, the reaper had finished their work for them by killing Sue-Ann, although the congregation believed it was a stroke.

She almost felt sorry for Roy, suddenly losing powers he’d never really had. She definitely felt sorry for Layla, who had come so close to being cured and living a full life.

“How do you do it?” Dean asked suddenly.

Jess didn’t look round. “Do what?”

“Have faith.” Dean said. “How do you have faith? You’ve read the journal, there’s no such thing as angels, there’s no such thing as God – we don’t even know if there’s a Hell!”

“The journal’s not the be all and end all, Dean.” Jess said, resting her forehead against the window pane. “Believe it or not, your dad can be wrong. Pagan gods exist when most people think they’re myths, why can’t God exist?”

“But how do you have faith?” Dean repeated. “How can you see what we’ve seen and have faith?”

“Because I have no other choice.” Jess answered, finally turning to look at him. “Because evil exists. Real, terrible evil exists, and I have to believe that there’s something out there to counter that, you know? Or I’d go mad.”

“I couldn’t.” Dean said lowly. “People like Layla … she’s got her whole life ahead of her, probably never put a foot wrong in her life, and she’s dying in six months, and I get saved. Why me?”

“But you’re a good man.” Jess answered. “I can’t speak for other people, Dean, and especially not for other deities. When I was younger, I used to ask Mom why awful things happened to people, and she said, “Jessie, we are all God’s children because he created us, but then he created every other creature on Earth as well.” No one ever begins to demand explanations when animals get sick, do they?”
Dean chuckled. “No, I suppose not.”

“Maybe there’s a God. Maybe there isn’t.” Jess said gently. “Maybe Layla will make a miraculous recovery. Maybe she won’t. Maybe if you hadn’t been electrocuted, she’d have been cured. But then if you hadn’t been electrocuted, those two children would probably be dead, and Sue-Ann would still be playing God with a reaper.”

Dean sighed. “Damn, I hate it when you make sense.”
Sometimes, cases lingered in Jess’s mind long after they’d been solved, and Layla Rourke was no exception. Every day, she checked the obits for the small town, praying for a miracle and thanking God every time Layla’s name was absent.

Two months after their run-in with the reaper, the inevitable happened and Jess came across the news that Layla Michelle Rourke had passed away in her sleep at the tragically young age of 24.

Jess sent flowers anonymously (since she doubted Layla’s mother would appreciate the gesture, given the circumstances), said a prayer, and made herself let go.

Thankfully, the following morning brought a potential hunt in Pennsylvania, so they loaded up the Impala and set off.

Around lunchtime, they made a pit stop and Dean disappeared to get some food, while Jess and Sam studied the map.

“Ok. I think I found a way we can bypass that construction just east of here.” Sam said as Dean approached, tracing the route with his finger. “We might even make Pennsylvania faster than we thought.”

“That should work.” Jess agreed.

Dean barely glanced at the map, tucking his phone away. “Yeah. Problem is, we're not going to Pennsylvania.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “We what?”

“I just got a call from …” Dean hesitated for a second “… an old friend. Her father was killed last night, thinks it might be our kind of thing.”

“What?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. Believe me, she never would’ve called, never, if she didn't need us.” Dean said quietly, getting into the car. “Come on, are you coming or not?”

Sam and Jess held each other’s gazes for a long moment, before they followed Dean’s lead, Jess automatically folding into the back seat (since Sam was too tall to fit there comfortably).

“So, do we know what the case is?” She asked.

“Cassie’s dad was killed when his car was run off the road.” Dean answered shortly. “Except there were no other cars on the road.”
It was clear from his tone of voice that he wasn’t willing to elaborate, so Jess dropped the subject and Sam didn’t pick it up, at least until they’d been driving for a few hours.

“So,” he began, “by old friend you mean ...?”

“A friend that’s not new.” Dean finished.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Oh yeah, thanks.” He glanced at Jess over his shoulder, and she shrugged. “So her name’s Cassie, huh? You never mentioned her.”

“Didn’t I?” Dean asked vaguely.

“Dean?” Jess prompted.

Dean sighed. “Yeah, we went out.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “You mean, you dated somebody?”

“For more than one night?” Sam added.

“Am I speaking a language you two aren’t getting, here?” Dean asked grumpily. “Dad and I were working a job in Ohio, she was finishing up college. We went out for a coupla weeks.”

“And?” Sam pressed. When Dean did nothing more than shrug, he sighed. “Look, it’s terrible about her dad, but it kinda sounds like a standard car accident; lost control of the car or something.” He caught Jess’s eye again and she gave him a soft smile. The worry in his eyes told her that he too had noticed the similarity between Cassie’s loss and her own father’s death, and she silently assured him that she would be fine.

“I’m not seeing how it fits with what we do.” She agreed out loud.

Sam frowned. “Which, by the way, how does she know what we do?” When his brother merely shifted uncomfortably, his mouth dropped open. “You told her. You told her the secret! Our big family rule number one – we do what we do and we shut up about it. For two years, I do nothing but lie to Jess, and you go out with this chick – woman” he amended, when Jess pulled a face, “in Ohio a couple times and you tell her everything?!”

“What’s wrong with that?” Jess asked. “You told me.”

“That was different, Jess.” Sam said, glaring at Dean. “We’d been dating for two years and you’d already practically figured it out – all you needed was a final confirmation. Dean just flat out told this girl without her having any suspicion in the first place.”

“Look, the past is the past.” Dean muttered. “There’s no need to get worked up over it.”

“Dean, I’m serious.” Sam said. “Look, what happened with Jess is one thing, but we don’t just flat out tell people the truth without them first suspecting that it’s true! What would Dad say?”

Dean said nothing, and Jess caught Sam’s eye, shaking her head slightly. Admittedly, her initial reaction had been one of annoyance, given the hard time Dean gave Sam about her in the beginning, but she had a feeling that there was much more to this than Dean was letting on.

If there wasn’t, he wouldn’t be being so cagey about the subject.

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They found Cassie Robinson in the local newspaper’s office and, when they walked in, she seemed to be in the middle of an argument with two older men.

“Jimmy, you’re too close to this.” One of the men said firmly. “Those guys were friends of yours. Again, Cassie, I’m very sorry for your loss.”

As he left, pushing past Dean, the other man shook his head, squeezing Cassie’s arm, and walked away, leaving Cassie looking very upset.

For a second, it looked like Cassie would storm after the first man, but when she turned towards the door, she caught sight of Dean and seemed to relax into a whole other state of tension. “Dean.”

“Hey, Cassie.” Dean greeted quietly.

Sam and Jess exchanged a mystified smile, the latter beginning to form a clearer idea of why Dean had never mentioned Cassie before.

And she was fairly sure it was a four-letter word beginning with ‘L’.

Apparently breaking out of his stupor, Dean cleared his throat. “This is my brother, Sam, and his girlfriend, Jess.”

Cassie smiled at them, and they returned it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Cassie.” Jess said. “I’m sorry about your dad.”

In Jess’s experience, people apologising for the loss of people they had never met was one of the most irritating things in the world, but it was always obvious to her when people genuinely understood her grief, and from the way Cassie’s eyes softened a little, it was obvious to her too.

“Yeah. Me too.”

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Cassie took them back to her mother’s house and showed them to the living room before busying herself making tea.

Jess stepped in to help her, seeing the way her hands were trembling.

“So you know?” Cassie asked in a low voice, not looking at her. “About what … what they do?”

“The hunting?” Jess said, nodding. “Threw me for a loop when I found out.”

If Cassie heard the unspoken question she did not acknowledge it, setting the teapot on a tray and carrying it through to the boys, Jess trailing behind her with the biscuit tin their host had indicated.

“My mother’s in pretty bad shape.” She explained, setting the tray on the coffee table. “I’ve been staying with her. I wish she wouldn’t go off by herself; she’s been so nervous and frightened. She was worried about Dad.”

“Why?” Dean asked.

“He was scared.” Cassie admitted, pouring tea, some of the liquid spilling into the saucers.

“Like what?” Jess prompted.

Cassie sighed. “He swore he saw an awful-looking black truck following him.”
“A truck?” Sam repeated. “Who was the driver?”

“He didn’t talk about a driver.” Cassie answered, handing the cups out. “Just the truck. He said it would appear and disappear. And in the accident, Dad’s car was dented, like it had been slammed into by something big.”

Sam took a sip of tea. “You’re sure the dent wasn’t there before?”

Cassie shook her head. “He sold cars. Always drove a new one; there wasn’t a scratch on that thing. It had rained hard that night – there was mud everywhere. There was a distinct set of muddy tracks leading from Dad’s car …” She trailed off, and Jess reached across to take her hand automatically, not missing Dean’s almost involuntary movement out of the corner of her eye suggesting that he was about to do the same thing.

“This is the second death, isn’t it?” She asked gently. “The first was a friend of your father’s?”

“Best friend.” Cassie confirmed quietly. “Clayton Soames. They owned the dealership together. Same thing. Dent, no tracks. And the cops said exactly the same thing. Lost control of the car.”

“Can you think of any reason why your father and his partner might be targets?” Dean asked.

Cassie shook her head sadly.

“And you think this vanishing truck ran them off the road?” Sam concluded.

“When you say it aloud like that …” Cassie muttered, pulling her hand back. “Listen, I’m a little sceptical about this … ghost stuff … or whatever it is you guys are into …”

“Sceptical.” Dean repeated with a snort. “If I remember, I think you said I was nuts.”

“Dean,” Jess said quietly. “It is a lot to take in.”

“You managed it.” Dean said.

Jess rolled her eyes. “Yes, well, I’m special. Besides, I was still a little sceptical until your car tried to kill us.” She caught Cassie’s eye. “Don’t ask.”

Cassie nodded in agreement. “Besides, that was then. I just know that I can’t explain what happened up there. So I called you.”

Sam and Dean glanced at each other, but before either could say anything, the front door opened and a woman stepped in.

Cassie jumped to her feet, her three guests following suit automatically.

“Mom, where have you been?” Cassie asked, hurrying to her mother’s side.

“I had no idea you’d invited friends over.” Mrs Robinson whispered.

Her grief was plain to see, etched deeply into every line on her face. Physically, she and Cassie could not have looked more different, but there was something about the way she held herself that suggested that this was where Cassie got the fiery personality they had witnessed earlier.

“Mom, this is Dean.” Cassie said. “A … friend of mine from … college. And his brother and his girlfriend, Sam and Jessica.”
Mrs Robinson gave them a weak smile. “Well, I won’t interrupt you.”

“Mrs Robinson,” Dean said quietly, “we’re sorry for your loss. We’d like to talk to you for a minute, if you don’t mind?”

“I’m really not up for that right now.” She said coldly, disappearing in the direction of the stairs.

“Subtle, Dean.” Jess said. “Now where were we?”

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The following morning dawned with the news that Cassie’s boss had been killed in almost identical circumstances.

Posing as insurance agents, Sam and Dean managed to get a couple of older residents to admit that there had been a black truck circling the town – over forty years ago. There had been reports, the men told them in hushed voices, of black men vanishing into that truck and never coming home.

Without any other information, Dean went to talk to Cassie, to see what she could tell him about the new victim.

Sam and Jess waited at the hotel, Sam researching the mysterious black truck and Jess half-watching a documentary on the small television in the corner of the room.

“I can’t even find anything about the disappearances.” Sam said finally, shutting his laptop. “Let alone the truck.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Jess said wearily. “Small town, institutionalised racism. I’d be surprised if the police even pretended to care.”

“I forget sometimes,” Sam sighed, crawling across the mattress to sit beside her, “that not all monsters are inhuman.”

Jess made an uncommitted noise, distracted by the kisses he was trailing down her throat. “Sam, Dean is …” she began half-heartedly, her head tilting back of its own accord to give him a wider canvas to work with.

“Not going to come back.” Sam finished. “He’ll spend the night with Cassie, and it’s been far too long since we had any sort of privacy.”

“Fair point.” Jess agreed, just managing to turn the television off before losing all hope for coherent thought.

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The next morning, Jess woke to the unpleasant sensation of cold air on naked skin, and made a discontented sound as she searched blindly for the blankets without opening her eyes.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” Sam’s voice said. “But we need to get moving.”

Jess groaned, forcing her eyes open, and stretched languidly, a soft smile spreading across her face as she felt his eyes travelling over her body. “Are you sure we have to?”

“Mayor Todd is dead.” Sam said, reluctantly tearing his gaze away from her. “ Might be connected.”

Jess was awake and dressed in record time, shrugging on a jacket over her blouse. “Where?”
Where’ turned out to be the site of an old country house clearly in the middle of some remodelling, and Mayor Todd’s body was lying in the snow, looking like it had been run over.

“This must be a coincidence.” Jess murmured as soon as they arrived.

“Why do you say that?” Sam asked.

“Victim’s white.” Jess said with a frown. “It doesn’t fit.”

“Excuse me!” One of the officers called as they approached. “This is a crime scene; I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”

Jess pulled a badge from her pocket and held it up, her eyes sweeping the scene for any clues, letting Sam talk for them both.

“Agents Waters and Stiller.” Sam said, flashing his own ID. “We’re passing through on our way from a case a few towns over. I guess you could say we got curious. Mind if we take a look around?”

“Be my guest.” The officer said, stepping back. “Maybe you can make sense of the impossible.” He began explaining the situation, before his attention was caught by something behind them and they turned to see Dean approaching them.

“He’s with us.” Sam said, and the cop nodded, stepping away to talk to his colleagues, and Sam offered Dean a smile. “Where were you last night? You didn’t make it back.”

“I doubt you two were complaining.” Dean said in response. “When was the last time you had any privacy?”

Sam’s smile grew. “I’m guessing you guys worked things out.”

Dean snorted. “We’ll be working things out when we’re ninety.” He said heavily, looking down at the body. “So what happened?”

“Every bone crushed.” Jess answered. “Internal organs turned to pudding. Cops are all stumped – it’s like something ran him over.”

“Something like a truck?” Dean asked knowingly.

“Yep.”

“Tracks.”

“Nope.”

Dean frowned. “What was the Mayor doing here anyway?”

Sam checked his notebook. “He owned the property. Bought it a few weeks ago.”

“But he’s white.” Dean said, echoing Jess’s earlier observation. “He doesn’t fit the pattern.”

“Killings didn’t happen up on the road.” Jess said. “That doesn’t fit either.”

“Then why is he dead?” Sam asked. “And if this truck isn’t just targeting black men on the road, who’s the next victim?”
The first question remained a mystery, but the second was answered that evening, when Dean’s phone rang.

“Hello?”

“DEAN!”

“Cassie?!” Dean’s startled demand made Jess start, and she grabbed her bag.

“What’s happened?”

“I don’t know.” Dean answered, catching the keys Sam tossed to him. “Call dropped.”

He broke even his own speed records getting to Cassie’s mother’s house. There were no signs of any damage or any truck, but that didn’t mean that something hadn’t happened.

Dean reached the door first, hammering on the wood, and Cassie burst through it, throwing herself into his arms. He embraced her tightly, murmuring words of comfort in her ear, and Jess nudged them into the house. “Mrs Robinson?!” She called, poking her head into the living room.

Cassie’s mother was sitting in one of the armchairs, pale and shaking, and Jess crouched beside her, taking her hand. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t understand.” Mrs Robinson whispered. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ll make some tea.” Sam said, heading for the kitchen.

Dean guided Cassie through to the couch, sitting her down, and tucking her against her side. “What happened?”

“It was outside.” Cassie answered shakily. “It was … it was revving loudly and … and the headlights were lighting up the hall and … I thought it was going to come through the house.”

Sam reappeared with a tray of cups, handing one to Mrs Robinson and Jess, before handing another to Cassie.

Cassie took it with trembling hands, the cup rattling against the saucer. “Maybe you could throw a couple of shots in that.”

Sam gave her a sympathetic smile. “You didn’t see who was driving the truck?”

“It seemed to be no one.” Cassie answered. “Everything was moving so fast and then … then it was just gone. Why didn’t it kill us?”

“Whoever was controlling the truck wants you afraid first.” Dean said grimly.

Jess straightened up, but perched on the arm of Mrs Robinson’s chair, letting the older woman cling to her hand. “Mrs Robinson, Cassie said that your husband saw the truck before he died.”

“Mom?” Cassie prompted, when her mother didn’t respond.

Mrs Robinson shook her head. “Oh, Martin was under a lot of stress … you can’t be sure about what he was seeing.”
“Well, after tonight, I think we can be reasonably sure he was seeing a truck.” Dean said sarcastically.

“Dean.” Jess said warningly, squeezing the woman’s hand. “Mrs Robinson, your daughter is potentially in a lot of danger. I know it may seem crazy to you, but if you know something, now would be a really good time to tell us.”

Mrs Robinson took a shaky breath. “Yes, he was seeing a truck.”

“Did he know who it belonged to?” Sam asked.

“He thought he did.” Mrs Robinson whispered, tightening her grip on Jess’s hand.

“And who was that?” Dean prompted.

“Cyrus.” Mrs Robinson answered. “A man named Cyrus.”

The three hunters exchanged a look and Dean reached one-handed into Jess’s bag, withdrawing the newspaper article they had found about the original owners of Mayor Todd’s house, more specifically the disappearance of their son. “Is this Cyrus?”

Mrs Robinson nodded jerkily. “Cyrus Dorian died more than 40 years ago.”

“How do you know he died, Mrs Robinson?” Dean asked softly, gaining a bewildered look from both Cassie and her mother.

“The papers said he went missing and was never found.” Jess agreed. “How do you know he died?”

Cassie looked sharply at her mother, who sighed heavily. “We were all very young. I dated Cyrus a while, I was also seeing Martin … in secret of course. Inter-racial couples didn't go over too well back then. When I broke it off with Cyrus and when he found out about Martin … I don't know, he … changed. His hatred … His hatred was frightening.”

“The murders.” Sam concluded.

Jess closed her eyes, taking a steady breath. She could hear the guilt in Mrs Robinson’s voice and wanted to tell her that it wasn’t her fault, that Cyrus Dorian had grown up a rich white boy believing that the world owed him everything.

“There were rumours.” Mrs Robinson continued. “People of colour disappearing into some kind of a truck. Nothing was ever done. Martin and I … Martin and I … we were gonna be … married in that little church near here, but last minute we decided to elope as we didn't want the attention.”

“And Cyrus?” Dean asked.

Mrs Robinson burst into tears, and Jess wrapped an arm around her shoulders, leaning in to decipher the words between her sobs.

“The day we set for the wedding, was the day someone set fire to the church. There was a children's choir practising in there. They all died.”

Jess made a sound of horror and disgust. This may have started out as racially charged murders, but at the base of it was just a spoilt kid who would do anything to get his own way.

“Did the attacks stop after that?” Sam asked gently.
“No!” Mrs Robinson sobbed. “There was one more. One night that truck came for Martin. Cyrus beat him something terrible. But Martin, you see, Martin got loose. And he started hitting Cyrus and he just kept hitting him and hitting him.”

“Why didn’t you call the cops?” Dean asked.

“Dean, use your head.” Jess said. “This was forty years ago.”

Mrs Robinson was on the verge of hyperventilating, but pushed through. “He called on his friends, Clayton Soames and Jimmy Anderson, and they put Cyrus’ body into the truck and they rolled it into the swamp at the end of his land and all three of them kept that secret all of these years.”

“And now all three are gone.” Sam concluded grimly.

“And so is Mayor Todd.” Dean said, frowning. “Now he said that you of all people would know he is not a racist. Why would he say that?”

Jess rubbed Mrs Robinson’s back soothingly. “Take your time. Catch your breath.”

“He was a good man.” Mrs Robinson said after a few minutes, sounding a little calmer. “He was a young deputy back then investigating Cyrus’ disappearance. Once he figured out what Martin and the others had done he ... he did nothing, because he also knew what Cyrus had done.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Cassie asked shakily.

“I thought I was protecting them.” Mrs Robinson answered, wiping her eyes. “And now there's no one left to protect.”

“Yes there is.” Dean said, looking at Cassie.

Mrs Robinson followed his gaze, and seemed to collapse in on herself. Cassie seemed to have recovered from her ordeal, and Jess handed the older woman over to her daughter, following the boys out to the car.

“My life was so simple.” Sam said, watching Dean pace up and down. “Just school, exams, papers on polycentric cultural norms.”

“So I guess I saved you from a boring existence.” Dean said.

Sam shook his head. “Yeah, occasionally I miss boring.”

Dean ignored him. “So this killer truck …”

Sam snorted. “I miss conversations that didn't start with ‘this killer truck’.”

Jess sniggered, but she quickly sobered. “So this Cyrus guy … he was evil enough to infect his trunk. Swamp became a tomb and his spirit was dormant for 40 years, so what woke it up? Why now?”

“The construction on his house.” Dean answered. “Or the destruction.”

Sam nodded. “Demolition or remodelling can awaken spirits, make them restless. Like that theatre in Illonois, ya know?”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “No, but I’ll take your word for it.”
“And the guy that tore down the family homestead, Harold Todd, is the same guy that kept Cyrus' murder quiet and unsolved.” Dean continued.

“So his spirit’s awake now and out for blood?” Jess asked.

Dean shrugged. “Yeah I guess. Who knows what ghosts are thinking anyway?”

Jess sighed. “You know we’re going to have to dredge that body up from the swamp.”

The front door slammed and Cassie approached them, wrapping her arms around herself in comfort.

“Hey.” Dean greeted.

“Hey. She's asleep.” Cassie told them. “Now what.”

“Well, you should stay put and look after her … and we'll be back.” Dean answered. “Don't leave the house.”

“Don't go getting all authoritative on me.” Cassie said. “I hate it.”

“Jess will stay with you.” Sam said, checking the trunk.

Jess turned to him. “I will?”

Sam’s eyes darted to Cassie and back, and she followed his gaze, seeing a familiar sense of stubbornness in Cassie’s face, under her smile. She sighed, and gave him a stern look. “Fine. But be careful.”

Sam kissed Jess, Dean kissed Cassie, and the two women stepped back to watch the two drive away.

“Do they usually leave you behind?” Cassie asked.

“No.” Jess admitted. “But there’s always a risk that the truck will come back.”

Cassie looked terrified. “And if it does?”

“I have a gun loaded with iron rounds.” Jess answered. “It’s not a permanent solution, but it’ll keep it away.”

She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. Certainly, the gun would be effective against the spirit of a person, but a killer truck?

“Let’s go back inside.” She suggested, pushing those thoughts away. “It’s getting cold.”

Cassie nodded, leading her back inside and making a fresh pot of tea. They stayed in the kitchen, cradling the hot mugs in their hands at the table, Jess keeping one eye on the window just in case.

It was a fairly awkward silence, but after a while, Cassie cleared her throat. “So how did you get into all this?”

“Sam and I met at Stanford University.” Jess explained. “He was pre-Law, I was nursing. Dean turned up after a few years to tell Sam that their dad had gone missing. I went with them. We didn’t find their dad, but when I got back, my mom had been killed by … something. A demon, we think. So I tagged along with them.”

Cassie frowned. “How did you take it? The supernatural, I mean?”
Jess shrugged. “I guess … I guess it only really solidified in my head when I actually saw a ghost, but … I’d already noticed little things, and Sam was either going to be lying to me, crazy, or telling the truth. And I knew he wasn’t crazy or a liar.”

“Once you have eliminated the impossible,” Cassie quoted softly, “whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

Jess nodded, taking a sip of tea. “It hasn’t been easy.” She admitted. “There are times, when I wish we could just go back to the way things were, but … that is my past, and Sam is my future. And if Sam sticks with Dean, and Dean sticks to the road, that’s where the future is.”

“Do you think Dean will stick to the road?” Cassie asked.

Jess hesitated, observing Cassie over the rim of her teacup. “For now, yes- maybe even forever. I don’t think Dean knows how to not stick to the road. Until his dad’s been found and his mom’s killer’s dead … Dean will keep hunting. That’s what he knows. That’s what he does.”

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Dean didn’t talk much, as they drove away from the town, leaving Cassie in the rear view mirror. Sam attributed this to the fact that Dean was still mad at him for taking a chance on leading the truck to the site of the old church, where it had (luckily) disintegrated, after burning the bones did nothing to get rid of the actual vehicle.

At least, that was what Sam was pretending to attribute it to.

Jess wasn’t even bothering pretending and, when they pulled into a motel that evening, having spent the drive in almost total silence, she gave Sam a meaningful look on the way to the room.

“I’m gonna go and get dinner.” Sam said as soon as the door had closed. “What do you want?”

Dean made a grunting sound into the mattress he had collapsed on that sounded vaguely like ‘double cheeseburger’, and Jess rolled her eyes. “I’m not fussy.” She said. “You know what I like.”

Casting one last worried look at Dean, Sam kissed her cheek and left, grabbing the keys to the Impala from where Dean had tossed them upon entering.

Jess perched on the other bed, gazing at Dean. “You want to talk about it?”

Dean heaved a sigh that she didn’t hear but that made his entire body slump. “I’m never going to see her again, am I?”

“You might.” Jess said, causing him to turn his head to look at her. “I think you won’t work as a couple if you keep hunting. You could turn around right now, put down roots and give it a go.”

Dean stared at her for a few minutes. “Do you think I should?”

“I don’t know.” Jess said, shifting to sit against the headboard. “Do you want to stop hunting?”

“No.” Dean admitted. “Not yet. Maybe when we find Dad and if we ever find what killed Mom …”

Jess smiled slightly, her suspicions confirmed. “And if you did turn back and stop hunting to have a normal life with her, would you be happy? Or would you end up resenting her?”

Dean sighed again. “Latter.”
“Then no.” Jess said simply. “I don’t think you should.

“I love her.” Dean said, almost too quietly for her to hear, and her heart swelled with affection for this man who had become the older brother she never had, who kept his heart and his emotions guarded so closely, yet was trusting her with them.

“I know you do.” She said. “But love isn’t always enough, Dean. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Dean muttered.

“No.” Jess agreed. “But it can’t be easy, having me and Sam around, knowing that I handled it and she didn’t.”

“Why did you handle it?” Dean asked. “What’s the difference?”

“Well, Cassie and I are different people for a start.” Jess pointed out. “Different experiences, different backgrounds, different … Just different. Secondly, Sam and I had been together for a few years and we were thinking about a future together, so I had a little more investment than she did. Thirdly, I’d already begun to suspect something; she hadn’t.”

Dean rolled over on to his back, staring at the ceiling. “Love sucks.”

“Yeah.” Jess agreed quietly. “Sometimes it really does. Makes you do all sorts of crazy things.”

“Like running across the country fighting ghosts?” Dean finished.

“Sometimes.” Jess said, smiling. “But I wouldn’t change it for the world.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Chapter warning: Discussions of child abuse (see end notes)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He was going to kill me.”

Dean turned to Jess with a panicked expression and she sighed, pushing herself away from the wall to take the washcloth from his hand. “Here, let me. Ms Miller?” She asked gently, crouching down beside the shaking woman. “Alice? I’m going to clean this wound, okay?”

Alice Miller seemed far more comfortable with Jess than Dean – probably because Jess hadn’t been walking around her husband’s wake pretending to be a priest.

“He was going to kill me.” She repeated.

“I know.” Jess said soothingly, wiping the blood from her forehead. “Sam’s going to talk to him.”

“Did Max really kill them?” Ms Miller whispered.

Jess sighed. “I’m afraid so.”

“I don’t understand.”

Jess didn’t know how to respond to that. She didn’t understand either. Max was human, as far as they could tell, albeit human with extraordinary abilities, but what was the connection between Max and Sam that meant that Sam was having visions about him – because they could hardly be called nightmares anymore, not in the middle of the day?

The door creaked open and Jess glanced up to see Max walk in, Dean’s gun in his hand, with no sign of Sam.

Dean started towards him but went flying back into the wall.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Max!” Ms Miller protested, falling silent when Max raised the gun to point at her.

“Max, don’t do this.” Jess said softly.

“Shut up!” Max snapped, his hand shaking.

“It’s not as easy, is it?” Jess asked. She could see Dean getting to his feet and kept talking, hoping to keep Max distracted. “Doing it yourself? Your dad and your uncle – you used your powers to kill them. Didn’t see it happen. Didn’t watch the life leave their eyes.”

Max let go of the gun, leaving it hovering in mid-air.

“Where’s Sam?” Jess asked, feeling panic rise in her throat.
“He’s alive.” Max answered flatly. “He’s just stuck. That’s all.”

Jess breathed a sigh of relief that faded quickly when the gun cocked, the safety releasing. “Come on, Max, you don’t want to do this. You don’t want to hurt people.”

“No.” Max whispered. “Just her. She watched. Do you know what that’s like? For someone to just watch, while your dad beats you, over and over again? I thought it would get better, with her around, that she’d see what was happening and help me, but she didn’t!”

“Max, I can only imagine how awful that was.” Jess said softly. “But think about this for a second. Everyone thinks your dad killed himself, and your uncle was a freak accident. No one would believe us about those, even if we did tell someone. But this? People will know, Max. You’re about to throw your life away.”

“What life?” Max asked, his voice just about breaking her heart. “My chance of a good life died with my mom, in that fire.”

“Fire?” Jess said, momentarily distracted. “We were told it was a car accident.”

“It was a fire.” Max said, scowling. “Your buddy was just as obsessed with that as well. Said the same thing happened to his mom.”

“In the nursery.” Jess concluded. “On the ceiling.”

“My dad was drunk.” Max said, his voice rising. “He must have been! That kind of thing doesn’t happen!”

“Neither does this.” Jess said, gesturing to the gun. “Come on, Max, please don’t do this.”

Max’s eyes hardened. “She deserves to pay.”

Dean stepped into Jess’s eye-line, positioning himself between Ms Miller and the gun.

“Stay back.” Max warned. “It’s not about you.”

“You wanna kill her, you’re gonna have to go through me first.” Dean said firmly.

“Okay.”

“NO!” Jess cried, rising to her feet, just as the door burst open.

“No, don’t!” Sam shouted, clinging to the doorframe, softening his voice almost immediately. “Don’t. Please, Max, we can help you. We can, alright? But this, what you’re doing, it’s not the solution. It’s not gonna fix anything.”

For a few seconds there was silence. Max stared at Sam, sweat beading on his forehead, shaking with suppressed emotion, a lifetime of abuse etched into every line and contour of his body.

Suddenly, he relaxed, his face clearing. “You’re right.”

Jess’s eyes widened, automatically reaching for Ms Miller, even as the gun swung around. As the shot rang out, she pulled the woman to her, shielding her face so she couldn’t see the bullet rip through her stepson’s skull.

***
“If I’d just said something else …”

“Don’t do that, Sam.” Jess said quietly, as they walked away from the house, leaving Ms Miller in the capable hands of the attending officers. “He was too far gone.”

“She’s right.” Dean agreed. “Don’t torture yourself. It wouldn’t have mattered what you said. Maybe if we got there twenty years earlier …”

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing.” Sam said. “We’re lucky we had Dad.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Well, I never thought I’d hear you say that.”

“It could’ve gone a whole other way after Mom.” Sam said. “Little more tequila, little less demon hunting … we would’ve had Max’s childhood. All things considered, we turned out okay.”

Dean nodded, a strange look crossing his face. “All things considered.”

Jess narrowed her eyes at him, but said nothing, climbing into the backseat. She had been living and hunting with the boys for long enough that she knew when one was hiding something – and right now, they were both doing it.

When they got back to the motel, Sam headed straight inside, but Jess caught Dean’s arm. “Sam missed something, didn’t he? When you were growing up?”

“Leave it, Jess.” Dean said gruffly, locking the car.

“Dean …” Jess began, but didn’t finish. If he walked away, she’d let him have it, let the matter drop and they’d both pretend she hadn’t said anything.

And he knew it too.

“He’s a good Dad.” Dean said quietly. “Taught us how to look after ourselves. Kept us alive. And, yeah, sometimes, when things got bad, and he drank a little too much … He didn’t know what he was doing, Jess. And he never laid a finger on Sammy; I wouldn’t have let him.”

“He shouldn’t have laid a finger on you.” Jess said darkly.

“He didn’t mean it.” Dean insisted. “It was few and far between, alright?”

“Then why are you telling me?” Jess asked. “If it was no big deal, why are you telling me?”

“He didn’t mean it.” Dean repeated, shaking his head “So it’s okay.”

His eyes were as unguarded as she had ever seen them and her heart broke for the child staring back at her, pleading with her to agree with him, to keep his father untarnished in his eyes.

“It’s not okay, Dean.” Jess said gently. “But it’s not the same either.” She reached out to squeeze his shoulder as it slumped. “And Sam’s right – you did turn out okay. Great, in fact. A little emotionally stunted, admittedly, but …”

“Shut up.” Dean muttered, but she was relieved to see that the spark was back in his eyes when he grinned at her, and she let him sling an arm around her shoulders to guide her towards the motel room.

Sam was packing up their things when they arrived and glanced up to greet them. “Problem?”
“No.” Jess answered, brushing a kiss to his cheek as she passed him. “Just wanted to talk to Dean about something. And speaking of talking,” she added, “are we going to mention the fact that Max’s birth mom was probably killed by the same thing as ours?”

Sam sighed. “Yeah, about that. I’ve been thinking …”

“Well, that’s never a good thing.” Dean interrupted.

“I’m serious.” Sam said quietly. “This demon – whatever it is. Why would it kill our moms? What does it want?”

Dean shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Do you think it was after us?” Sam asked. “After Max and me?”

Dean frowned. “Why would you think that?”

“We both had abilities.” Sam pointed out. “Telekinesis, premonitions … Maybe he was after us for some reason.”

“It can’t have been.” Jess said. “First of all, my mom doesn’t fit – I don’t have any abilities – and before you say it was to get to you,” she added when Sam opened his mouth, “maybe it could have been, but Max didn’t lose anyone else, did he?”

“No.” Sam admitted quietly.

“Second of all,” Jess continued, “you said that until that call, your dad didn’t know what killed your mom, which implies he didn’t see it. Whatever the demon is, it left you alone.”

“Exactly.” Dean agreed. “You were a baby – if it wanted you, it would have taken you. This is not about you, okay? It’s about the damn thing that did this to our family. The thing we’re gonna find, the thing we’re gonna kill. That’s all.”

Sam sighed. “Actually, there’s … there’s something else.”

Dean groaned. “What?”

“Max locked me in a closet.” Sam said, looking at the floor. “And he moved that big cabinet across the door.”

Jess frowned. “The one standing in the middle of the living room when we came down to wait for the cops? That thing was heavy – how’d you get out?”

“I moved it.” Sam admitted quietly.

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Way to go, Sammy. You’ve got more upper body strength than I give you credit for.”

But Jess was shaking her head. “I don’t think that’s what he means, Dean.”

“I moved it.” Sam repeated, finally looking up at them. “Like Max.”

“Oh.” Dean said quietly.

“Yeah.” Sam muttered, sinking onto one of the beds.
Rummaging through the remnants of their meal that morning, Dean pulled out a spoon and held it out. “Bend this.”

“I can’t just turn it on and off, Dean.” Sam said, rolling his eyes. “I can’t control it … it was like a burst of adrenaline … I saw you die and it just came out of me, like a punch.”

“Well, I’m sure it won’t happen again.” Dean said with a certainty that contradicted the worry in his eyes.

“Yeah maybe.” Sam muttered. “Aren’t you worried, man? Aren’t you worried that I could turn into Max or something?”

“That is not going to happen.” Jess said, squeezing his hand. “Max wasn’t like that because of his abilities, Sam. He was like that because he had an abusive, crappy childhood and he never managed to move on from that. If he didn’t have his abilities, maybe he wouldn’t have killed anyone, but only because they gave him the luxury of removing himself from the situation. They gave him an option that maybe he wouldn’t have considered without them, but that doesn’t make them responsible. That was Max.”

“And even if they were the reason,” Dean added, “You’ve got something Max didn’t.”

“Dad?” Sam asked. “Because Dad’s not here, Dean.”

“No, us.” Dean said. “As long as I’m around, nothing bad’s gonna happen to you, Sammy. And Jess ain’t gonna let it either, are you?”

“Damn right I’m not.” Jess agreed.

Sam dropped his gaze once more, a small smile playing on his lips. “Thanks.”

“Now about these premonitions,” Dean said. “I know where we need to go.”

“We are not going to Vegas.” Jess said flatly.

Dean gaped at her, before turning to Sam. “How does she do that?”

“You’re predictable.” Sam and Jess answered in unison.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, I do not condone any form of child abuse. I do not believe - and, by extension, neither does Jess - that John would have been intentionally abusive towards his sons but that there were some nights, when he'd been drinking a little too much, that he did get a little violent. As far as I'm concerned this is abuse. If you are a violent drunk (and you know it) it is your responsibility to a) not drink or b) get help to stop drinking. Dean’s assertions that it wasn't the same are due (as Jess noted) to a child desperately clinging to the only parent he has left.

While you're here, any ideas for the Benders episode would be greatly appreciated, because it's the only episode so far that's given me nightmares, so I don't really want to watch it again. But I don't want to skip it - it's one of the 'corporeal' 'monsters' this season and so far Jess has avoided all of them. Also, I've posted a short prequel about
Jess and Sam's first meeting, so check it out :)
Chapter 17

Jess was quiet as they rolled into Chicago.

Minnesota had been a whirlwind of emotion. Losing Sam … finding Sam … meeting the Benders … She could still see it in her mind’s eye – the fear, the elation, the giddying relief when she managed to wriggle free of her bonds (apparently she was less of a threat than Dean), her desperate lunge across the room to grab the fireplace poker, only to swing around and …

A hand touched her knee and she jumped, startled out of her thoughts.

“Sorry.” Sam said quietly. “We’re at the motel. Only one room again.”

Jess shrugged with a small smile. “Could be worse.”

Sam slung an arm around her shoulders as they made their way up the stairs. “You wanna sit this one out?”

“I can’t.” Jess said tiredly. “People are dead.”

“And you’re exhausted.” Sam finished. “Minnesota did a number on you.”

“They were human.” Jess whispered. “They were monsters, yes, but … humans aren’t exactly what I signed up for.”

“I know.” Sam admitted, kissing her temple. “And I’m sorry, Jess. If we’d known they were human … we’d never have been there.”

“Benders still?” Dean asked as they entered the room. “Kiddo, let it go. They were pure evil. And you handled yourself pretty well.”

“She was a kid!” Jess groaned, falling on to one of the beds. “She was a kid, and I knocked her out.”

“Yeah, it was awesome.” Dean agreed.

“Dean!” Sam hissed.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Go and get changed, Sammy.”

Sam hesitated, but grabbed a roll of clothes from one of the bags and shut himself in the tiny bathroom.

Dean waited for the door to lock, before coming to sit on the edge of the bed beside her. “Yeah, Missy was a kid. But she was a psychopath, Jess – one too many generations of inbreeding. Do you regret it?”

“No.” Jess muttered, curling up on her side.

“Why not?” Dean prompted, stroking her hair.

“Because she was a psychopath.” Jess said, a little sulkily. “And if I hadn’t, we’d never have got out
of that house, and we’d never have found Sam, and he’d probably be dead.”

“Exactly.” Dean said, tugging a strand of hair lightly. “Sit this one out, kiddo. That’s not a suggestion. No offence, but you’re no use to anyone like this.”

Jess heaved a large sigh. “Yeah, I know.” She sat up. “You going in as feds?”

“No.” Dean said, shooting the bathroom door a disgruntled look. “Someone decided that we should go in as the security company.”

“That’s less suspicious.” Jess agreed. “No one bothers checking those companies.”

“Jess.” Dean said, almost whining. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“My girlfriend.” Sam reminded him, as he emerged from the bathroom. “My side. What do you think?”

Jess ran her gaze over the navy blue scrubs and raised an eyebrow. “Oh dear.” She said flatly. “How will I ever control myself?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.” Jess said in the same deadpan tone, as Dean began sniggering. “Be still my beating heart.” She waited just a second longer, before grinning. “Seriously, you look authentic. I wouldn’t have guessed, if I didn’t know. Anything you want me to start researching, if I’m staying here?”

“Yeah, any other unusual deaths in the area.” Sam said, while Dean took his turn in the bathroom. “See if there’s any evidence of what’s doing it.”

Jess nodded, gnawing on her lower lip, trying to remember the details of the case. She had been in a bit of a daze ever since the whole nasty situation, so a lot of their words had gone right over her head.

They had been endlessly patient with her though, never once complaining when they needed to repeat themselves more than once.

“This might be a stupid question,” she began slowly, “but … they were ripped apart, right? Like it was some kind of animal?”

Sam nodded. “That’s right. No evidence of how it got in or out.”

“Who the hell was she?!”

Jess looked up sharply when the brothers entered, her attention caught by the pure hurt in Dean’s voice masked almost perfectly by anger. “That sounds like something I should be saying.”

“Hi sweetheart.” Sam greeted her tiredly. “Find anything?”

“Nothing.” Jess said. “Well, actually, that’s a lie. There are several creatures it could be, but none of
them sit quite right. The closest was a hell hound, but according to every piece of lore I could find, they don’t remove the victim’s heart, plus they tend to appear roughly ten years after some momentously lucky occasion in the victim’s life. I was just about to start on the victim’s backgrounds just to make sure and to find out if there was anything else we needed to know. What happened?”

“Oh, we went to the bar Meredith worked and ran into a friend of Sam’s.” Dean said, scowling. “Seemed to know all about us and what an awful brother I am.”

“You’re not an awful brother.” Jess argued, turning to Sam with a frown. “And I’ve never heard you say that.”

Sam sighed. “It was Meg.”

“Meg?” Jess repeated blankly, a second before the name fell into place in her memory. “Wait, Meg? The girl we ran into at the bus station in Indiana? The girl that was flirting with you?”

“She was not flirting with me.” Sam said, rolling his eyes.

“Oh please.” Jess scoffed, before batting her eyes at him. “Sam, come with me to California.”

“It wasn’t like that.” Sam insisted, turning back to Dean. “And I never said anything like that.”

“He didn’t.” Jess confirmed, catching Dean’s arm as he passed. “However mad at you he was, Dean, he never said that. Just that you’d argued, had differences of opinion. Question is, why’d she lie?”

“Trying to stir up trouble?” Dean guessed.

“Yeah, but why?” Jess asked. “People don’t just … do that. If you ask me, there’s something strange going on here.”

Dean snorted. “Yeah, tell me about it. She wasn’t even that into it.”

“Our kind of strange.” Jess amended.

“Come on …” Dean began.

“No, I’m with Jess.” Sam said. “We met Meg weeks ago, literally on the side of the road, and now, I run into her in some random Chicago bar? The same bar with a waitress that was slaughtered by something supernatural? You don’t think that’s a little weird?”

Dean shrugged. “Maybe it’s a coincidence. It happens.”

“Not to us.” Jess disagreed. “Look, I could be wrong, but there was always something about her that was … strange. Something that didn’t feel right.”

“Alright, her name’s Meg Masters from Andover, Massachusetts.” Sam said. “Check her background and Dean can look up the victims.”

“And figure out what the markings mean.” Dean added.

“Markings?” Jess asked.

“Yeah, the blood stains made a particular pattern.” Dean explained. “Like a sigil.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s the kind of information I could have used while I was researching.”
Dean didn’t respond, his eyes fixed on his brother. “Sam, what are you gonna do?”

Sam hesitated for a second, before saying, “I’m gonna watch Meg.”

“You’re going to stalk her?” Jess asked.

“Watch her.” Sam repeated. “See if she is up to something.”

It was a mark of how much Jess trusted Sam that she merely shrugged. “Sounds like stalking to me. Just be careful and try not to scare her too much – she might just be a regular, run-of-the-mill bitch.”

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“Anything?” Jess asked, a few hours later, pushing her laptop away.

“Nothing on the victims yet.” Dean said. “But that call to Caleb checked out.”

“Yeah?” Jess said, brightening up. Dean had made the call outside the motel, so she hadn’t been privy to either side of the conversation. “What’d he say?”

Dean gestured to her laptop. “Ladies first.”

Jess sighed. “There is a Meg Masters in the Andover phone book. Even found her high school yearbook picture. She’s cut her hair, but it’s definitely her.”

“Just a regular bitch then.” Dean concluded.

“Probably.” Jess admitted. “Texted Sam, haven’t heard back yet. You definitely had better luck.”

“The symbol’s Zoroastrian.” Dean explained. “Very, very old school, like two thousand years before Christ. It’s a sigil for a Daeva.”

“What’s a Daeva?” Jess asked.

Dean grimaced. “It translates to “demon of darkness”. Zoroastrian demons, and they’re savage, animalistic, you know, nasty attitudes—kind of like, uh, demonic pit bulls.”

“Like hell hounds?” Jess asked, raising an eyebrow. “So I was close.”

“No, hell hounds are hell hounds.” Dean said. “Thing is, these Daevas have to be summoned, conjured.”

“Someone’s controlling it.” Jess concluded.

“Yeah, and it’s risky business.” Dean said, flicking through his notes. “These things bite the hand that feeds them. And the rest, if you catch my drift.”

“So what do they look like?” Jess asked.

“Well, no one knows.” Dean said. “No one’s seen one for a couple of millennium. Caleb reckons they even pre-date regular demons. So someone really knows what they’re doing.” He shook his head, turning back to the files on the victims. “But I don’t know why. I mean, these two have nothing in common – age, gender, occupation, hobbies – literally nothing is … Holy crap!”

“What?!” Jess asked, jumping when the door burst open and Sam stumbled in, breathless.
“It’s Meg!” He gasped out. “She’s summoning something.”


“Hold it!” Jess said, slipping between the brothers. “Both of you hold on for a split second, because this has the potential to get really confusing. Sam, what happened? Catch your breath first.”

Sam took a deep breath. “Followed Meg to this warehouse. There was this altar, really dark magic, she had a bowl of blood and she was using it to communicate with someone, she’s meeting them there, tonight. When she left, I took a closer look – there were human hearts and the same symbol as the blood in Meredith’s place.”

“Holy crap.” Dean repeated.

Jess turned to face him. “Now you go. What is it?”

“The files on the victims,” Dean said weakly, thrusting them into her hands. “Read them.”

Jess frowned, scanning the two documents quickly. “I don’t see … Oh.”

“What?” Sam asked.

“They were both born in Lawrence, Kansas.” Jess whispered. “We just didn’t notice before, because he moved almost immediately to Chicago, and she was adopted.”

“Holy crap.” Sam said. “That’s where everything started … you think Meg’s tied up with the demon?”

“Maybe.” Dean said.

“What’s the significance of Lawrence though?” Sam asked. “And how do the … Daevas? How do they fit in?”

Dean shrugged. “Beats me. But I saw we trash the altar, grab Meg, and have ourselves a friendly little interrogation.

“No.” Sam disagreed. “We shouldn’t tip her off. We need to stake out that warehouse, see who – or what – is meeting her.

“Well, we’re not doing it alone.” Dean said firmly, pulling out his phone. “You raid the trunk. See what you can find.”

Jess set the papers aside, pulling her knees up to her chest, thinking hard. It just seemed too … easy. She barely paid attention to Dean’s message on his father’s voicemail, or when Sam returned with bags full of weapons, but pulled her laptop back over and began researching again.

Finally, she said, “I don’t think you should go.”

Both brothers looked sharply at her, and she realised belatedly that they had been having a heated discussion. “Sorry … was I interrupting something?

“Sam wants to go straight back to school if we catch this thing.” Dean said.

Jess tried not to smile. “Well … I wouldn’t complain. It’s nothing against you, Dean.” She said with a sigh, when his face fell. “Alright? It is nothing against you. You’re family and you always will be.”
“Why don’t you think we should go, Jess?” Sam asked. “I mean, the bastard killed your mom too.”

“I’m aware of that, Sam.” Jess said, frowning. “Very aware, as it happens. But it’s too easy. I mean, your dad’s been chasing this thing for over twenty years and now we happen to find someone who could be communicating with it and Sam happens to overhear?”

“You think it’s too easy.” Dean concluded.

“It’s not just that.” Jess said. “I just dug further into the victims’ backgrounds and there’s nothing. No dead mothers, no fires, no hint of powers. Has it occurred to you at all that this might be some kind of trap?”

“Meg didn’t know I was there.” Sam said. “There’s no way she knew.”

“Yeah, and we have to risk it.” Dean said. “This might be it, Jess. But you’ve got a point.” He added when she began to argue. “You should stay here.”

Jess’s mouth dropped open. “Are you fucking kidding me?! This thing killed my mother too and you want me to stay here?!”

“It’s not that we don’t think you can handle it, Jess.” Sam said gently. “It’s just that … Well, you’ve been a little out of it lately.”

“Okay, that’s true.” Jess admitted. “But that does not mean …”

“Jess.” Dean said firmly. “Stay here.”

Jess crossed her arms with a deep frown. Some battles just weren’t worth the energy. “Fine. But if you two get yourselves killed, I will never ever forgive you, do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal.” Sam said, crossing the room to kiss her. She grasped his shoulders tightly when he made to pull away, prolonging it for a few more seconds.

“I mean it.” She whispered, resting her forehead against his. “I love you. Come home.”

“I will.” Sam murmured, kissing the side of her head. “I love you too.” He released her and she threw herself across the room, forcing Dean to catch her.

“I will get hugs if you’re leaving me here.” She warned, holding him tightly. “I love you. Come home.”

As platonic and familial as they were, she’d never said the words to him before, and they caused her throat to close up slightly.

He didn’t respond, but tightened his hold on her a fraction, before releasing her and kissing her forehead. “Stay safe, kiddo.”

Jess turned away as they left, unable to watch, and sat down on one of the beds, her foot tapping restlessly on the ground, but she had no intention of suffering for too long. She watched the clock, counting the seconds, and when five minutes had passed, she calmly stood up and opened her bag, changing into black pants and a black sweater, tying her hair back into a braid before slipping on a pair of black leather gloves.

The gloves had belonged to her mother, who had used them for driving, and Jess doubted Emily would approve of her daughter’s new use for them, but the fact remained that they were very useful
for hunting – not only did they keep her hands warm, but they were surprisingly supple, so they didn’t restrict her movement.

Then she grabbed the keys to the Impala and left the motel room.

The boys had walked to the warehouse, since it wasn’t far, so Jess opened the trunk and propped open the arsenal with one of the shotguns.

She slipped a bottle of Holy water into her jacket and loaded one of the guns with salt rounds, setting it in her waistband. Her fingers hovered over the rest of the items, before grabbing a flare gun.

*Demons of darkness, Dean said. Makes sense they’d hate the light. I hope.*

She shut and locked the trunk, put the keys in her pocket, and set off after the boys.

The warehouse was dark and covered with dust, but that was only a help, because Jess could just see the tracks Sam and Dean had left not long before.

She followed them up to the top floor and into a broken down elevator. For a few seconds, Jess was perplexed, but she heard a noise from the other side of the gate, and climbed to the top of it, finding a tiny space between the gate and the wall that she could squeeze into.

There were crates just in front of her, but to her right, she could see the altar Sam had described, and she could see Meg leaning against it.

The girl had an insolent smirk on her face and Jess’s heart sank. She couldn’t see the boys, but she could only hope …

“Hey, Sammy.” Dean said hoarsely, and Jess breathed a sigh of relief. If he was talking, he couldn’t be too badly hurt. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but your new bestie’s a bitch.”

“This was all a trap, wasn’t it.” Sam said, allowing the rest of Jess’s heart to settle back where it belonged. “Running into you at the bar, following you hear, hearing you … It was all a set-up, wasn’t it? Jess was right.”

Meg smirked. “She’s a smart one, Sammy. Too smart, really. Not sure it was a good idea, leaving her all alone back there.”

There was a soft noise, like one – or both – of them had tried to move towards her, and Jess concluded that they couldn’t move – hopefully because of some kind of incarceration and not injuries.

“And that the victims were from Lawrence?” Sam asked, his voice tight with anger.

Meg shrugged. “It doesn’t mean anything. It was just to draw you in, that’s all.”

“You killed those two people for nothing.” Sam said.

Meg chuckled. “Baby, I’ve killed a lot more for a lot less.”

“You trapped us.” Dean said flatly. “Good for you. It’s Miller time. But why don’t you kill us already?”

Jess bit back a process, her mind racing. She had no idea who – or what – Meg was, whatever the background check had said. Could she stop a bullet?
Except it wouldn’t even matter if she couldn’t, because unless Meg was actually some kind of spirit or creature, the salt rounds would have no effect whatsoever, other than piss her off and give away Jess’s position.

“Not very quick on the uptake, are we?” Meg asked mockingly. “This trap isn’t for you.

“Dad.” Sam whispered. “It’s a trap for Dad.”

Dean laughed. “Oh, sweetheart—you’re dumber than you look. ’Cause even if Dad was in town, which he is not, he wouldn’t walk into something like this. He’s too good.”

Meg pushed herself away from the table and walked forwards, disappearing behind the crate and out of Jess’s line of sight. “He is pretty good. I’ll give you that. But you see, he has one weakness.”

“What’s that?” Dean asked.

“You.” Meg answered, and Jess scoffed mentally.

That didn’t sound like that John Winchester she had been hearing about.

“He lets his guard down around his boys, lets his emotions cloud his judgment. I happen to know he is in town.”

Then again, Jess had always been very protective of her boys. She could be wrong.

“And he’ll come and try to save you. And then the Daevas will kill everybody—nice and slow and messy.”

“Well, I’ve got news for ya.” Dean said. “It’s gonna take a lot more than some … shadow to kill him.”

“Oh, the Daevas are in the room here—they’re invisible.” Meg said sweetly. “Their shadows are just the only part you can see.”

Jess tightened her grip on her gun, half-tempted to switch to the flare gun, but the Daevas seemed to be behaving themselves.

For now.

*What was it Dean said? They bite the hand that feeds them? Maybe they don’t like being controlled.* Her eyes narrowed, focusing on the altar Meg had been leaning against, covered in its goblets and sigils.

“Why are you doin’ this, Meg?” Sam asked. “What kind of deal you got worked out here, huh? And with who?

“I’m doing this for the same reasons you do what you do.” Meg said. “Loyalty. Love. Like the love you had for Mommy – and Jess.”

“I swear to God, Meg, if you touch her …” Sam began.

“Too late, sweetie.” Meg sang.

“Go to Hell!” Sam spat.

Meg laughed. “Baby, I’m already there.” Her voice softened to seductive tones. “Come on, Sam.
There’s no need to be nasty. I think we both know how you really feel about me.”

Jess had heard quite enough. Taking a deep breath, she fired a salt round at the leg of the altar. Salt rounds themselves wouldn’t do a lot of damage to a human being, but the altar was constructed on a rather old wooden table.

The leg buckled, the altar collapsed and overturned, and the shadows in the corners of the room swarmed forwards.

Meg screamed, a horrible, drawn-out scream, and Jess shut her eyes, trying not to hyperventilate.

*She’s human.*

*Oh God, what have I done?!!

She’s human.*

*What have I done?!!

The two phrases chased themselves around her head and she curled even tighter in on herself, as though making herself as small as possible could somehow silence the voice and undo the consequences of her actions.

“What the …?!”

Dean’s voice cut through the fog and she drew in a gasp of air, forcing her legs to carry her out from behind the crates to remind herself of the reason she had acted in the first place.

Sam was crouching beside Dean, cutting away the robes that bound him to one of the metal posts. Another post not far away also had cut ropes beside it, suggesting that Sam had been tied there moments earlier, and her heart swelled with relief that they both seemed more or less unharmed, aside from the bruises blossoming on what skin she could see.

“How did you get free?” Dean asked.

“Kept her talking,” Sam answered. “Hoped she’d think I was trying to distract her for you, so she was keeping an eye on you rather than me.”

“Well, it worked.” Dean said. “Nice work with the altar.”

“That … wasn’t me.” Sam said, frowning. “My hands weren’t free yet.”

“You mean that wasn’t your psychic mumbo jumbo?” Dean asked.

“No.” Sam said shortly. “Look, we need to get back to the motel, if she sent those things after Jess …”

“She didn’t.” Jess said, finally regaining her voice and catching their attention. “She was bluffing.”

Her heart was still racing and, as soon as Sam rose to meet her eyes, she broke, darting across the room into his open arms. A moment later, a second pair of arms closed around her, and she freed a hand to grasp Dean’s sleeve, clinging to them both unabashedly.

It was a few minutes before she stopped shaking, and a few minutes more before she was able to release them. “Thank God you’re both okay.”
“Thank God we’re okay?!” Sam repeated. “God, Jess, I thought … What are you doing here?!”

Jess laughed shakily. “Oh, like I was going to sit around and let you two have all the fun. I gave it five minutes and followed you. I figured that the best way to break the spell was to destroy the altar … what happened to her?’

Dean jerked his head towards the window and Jess followed him cautiously, peering out to see Meg lying sprawled across the pavement, her eyes wide and unseeing, her head at an unnatural angle.

Her neck was broken.

Jess turned away, her stomach heaving, and Sam clapped a hand over her mouth. “Sorry sweetheart.” He said. “You can hurl when we get back to the motel, I promise, but we can’t leave any DNA behind – there’ll be an investigation when the body’s found.”

Jess nodded, swallowing back her nausea - that was another reason for wearing gloves when she was hunting. Gloves didn’t leave fingerprints, after all. They cleared up anything that could lead back to them, and left the warehouse, hurrying back towards the motel.

Jess’s stomach gave up halfway there, and she emptied it into a trashcan, feeling Sam stroke the back of her neck soothingly.

She stumbled back a few steps, letting him loop an arm around her waist to support her. “Sorry.”

“It’s alright.” Sam murmured, brushing a kiss against her forehead. “No one’ll make the connection from here.”

“Jess …” Dean began, but she shook her head.

“Not here.” She said firmly. “That’s the worst of it. We’ll talk when we’re safe. Not here.”

They continued the rest of the way in silence, heading straight for their room to finish packing. Sam didn’t even pause by the car to drop the weapons off, carrying the bags up to their room instead.

“Why didn’t you leave the stuff in the car?” Dean asked. “We’re getting out of here tonight anyway.”

“I said it before, and I’ll say it again—better safe than sorry.” Sam said grimly, one arm still tucked tightly around Jess.

Dean shook his head, unlocking the motel room door, but stopped just inside. “Hey!”

Jess’s heart stopped at the sight of a man silhouetted against the window. Sam reached past Dean to turn the light on, just as the stranger turned around, revealing himself to be anything but a stranger.

“Dad?” Dean asked softly.

“Hey boys.” John Winchester greeted.

Dean walked forwards and hugged his father tightly. Jess raised an eyebrow, pushing the door closed behind them. She had never seen Dean initiate physical affection – with anyone – not like that, at least, when no one was in mortal peril.

John released Dean with a pat on the shoulder, his eyes moving to Sam. “Hi Sam.” He made no move to greet Jess, or even acknowledge her presence, and she didn’t attempt to change that.
“Hey Dad.” Sam said quietly, setting the bags on the floor.

“Dad, it was a trap.” Dean said. “I didn’t know, I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright.” John said. “I thought it might have been.”

“Were you there?” Dean asked.

John nodded. “I got there just in time to see the girl take the swan dive. She was the bad guy, right?”

The boys responded in unison. “Yes sir.”

“Good.” John said. “Nice work.”

“Thank you.” Jess responded, even though she was fairly sure he hadn’t been speaking to her.

Sam broke into a smile as he looked at her. “Dad, this is my girlfriend, Jessica.”

Jess stepped forwards, holding out a hand with a polite smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr Winchester. I’ve heard a lot about you over the last few months.”

“I’m sure you have.” John said, shaking her hand briefly. “I’m sorry about your mother.”

“Thank you.” Jess said, leaning back against Sam, who wrapped an arm around her waist. “So Meg was definitely working with or for the demon?”

“It doesn’t surprise me.” John said. “It’s tried to stop me before. It knows I’m close. It knows I’m gonna kill it. Not just exorcise it or send it back to hell—actually kill it.”

“How?” Dean blurted out.

John smiled secretively. “I’m working on that.”

“Let us come with you.” Sam said. “We’ll help.”

John shook his head. “No, Sam. Not yet. Just try to understand. This demon is a scary son of a bitch. I don’t want you caught in the crossfire. I don’t want you hurt.”

*It’s a bit too late for that,* Jess thought, but she said nothing.

“Dad, you don’t have to worry about us.” Sam protested.

“Of course I do.” John said. “I’m your father. Listen, Sammy … last time we were together … we had one hell of a fight.”

Jess stiffened in Sam’s arms and he tightened his grip for a second, before releasing her. “Yes sir.”

“It’s good to see you again.” John said. “It’s been a long time.”

“Too long.” Sam agreed, his voice tight.

Dean grasped Jess’s wrist lightly as Sam hugged his father. “Don’t.” He murmured under his breath.

Jess scowled, but held her tongue, biting back – for their sake – her protests that it was John’s own fault that it had been so long and that maybe he should have thought of that before he threw his son out over wanting to go to college.
Seriously, who does that? There were kids in my school who were disowned for not wanting to go, and that’s bad enough, but the opposite is just illogical.

But it wasn’t her father – or her place – to forgive, it was Sam’s.

And if Sam was willing to forgive John, then she would have to accept it.

She would not forget though.

She would never forget.

Just as John and Sam pulled apart, a shadow in the corner of the room lunged forwards, forming into a hideous shape, throwing John, then Sam into the wall.

Jess dropped to the floor, avoiding the next attack, fumbling for the flare gun at her hip.

“Salt rounds won’t work on these things!” John called, fending off the invisible attacker as it clawed at his face.

Jess didn’t credit him with a reply, firing at the shadow. The bright light caused it to momentarily vanish, but it wouldn’t last long. “Sam, do you have any proper flares in that bag?”

Sam pulled one free. “Shut your eyes!”

This time, the light was so bright it hurt Jess’s eyes even through her closed lids, and she felt her way towards the door.

Dean hauled John to his feet, and they all stumbled out of the motel to the alley where the car was parked.

“We don’t have much time.” Sam said, tossing the bag on to the back seat. “They’ll be back as soon as the flare’s out …”

“Sam, wait!” Dean said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Dad … you can’t come with us.”

“What are you talking about?” Sam asked.

“You boys, you’re beat to hell.” John began.

“We’ll be alright.” Dean said, swiping at the blood that had begun to trickle down his face. “We’ve got a nurse.”

“I never graduated, Dean.” Jess said, with a small smile, handing him a tissue. “But use that.”

Dean grinned weakly. “See? She knows what she’s doin’.”

“Dean, we should stick together.” Sam argued. “We’ll go after those demons …”

“Sam, listen to me!” Dean said. “We almost got Dad killed in there. Don’t you understand? They’re not gonna stop. They’re gonna try again. They’re gonna use us to get to him. I mean, Meg was right. Dad’s vulnerable when he’s with us. He … he’s stronger without us around.”

Jess turned away to root through her bag for the first aid equipment she’d need when she had half a chance to patch them all up. It could wait until she actually had that chance, but the three men needed privacy and, besides, she didn’t really want them to see the smile on her face.
Not that she wanted Sam and Dean to lose their father again – however much she disliked the man, she would never wish that upon them – but she could hear the words Dean wasn’t saying.

“You were almost killed in there. They’re gonna use you to get to him. You’re vulnerable when he’s with us. You’re safer without him around.”

Whatever either of them said, Dean’s priority would always be his brother.

“No …” Sam whispered. “After everything … after all the time we spend searching … please. I’ve gotta be a part of this fight.”

“Sammy, this fight is just starting.” John said. “And we are all gonna have a part to play. For now, you’ve got to trust me, son. You’ve got to let me go.”

Sam was silent, and Jess looked up, meeting John’s eyes. He was still no happier about her being with them than he was when he called before Indiana, and she was held nothing but disdain for the man, but right now, they happened to agree, so she left her bag to take Sam’s hand. “Sam, he’s right. He’ll be alright, you’ll see each other again.”

Sam looked down at her, heaved a sigh, and nodded. Dean caught his father’s eye and they exchanged a few moments of silent communication, before John walked away to a truck parked nearby.

Just before he climbed in, he looked back, his eyes lingering on his sons. “Be careful, boys.”

Jess waited until the truck had disappeared round the corner before taking charge. “Alright, let’s get out of here before those demons come back.”

“Jess …” Sam began.

“That was not an invitation to start a debate, Sam.” Jess said firmly. “Into the car, both of you, before I drive.”

“She’s right.” Dean said, giving his brother a light shove to get him moving. “Where to, Lady Penelope?”

Jess wrinkled her nose. “Figures you’d be a Thunderbirds kid. Nearest town, next motel we come to. I want to patch you two up before those wounds get infected and I have a breakdown.”

As they drove out of the alleyway and towards the main road out of town, a flash of blonde hair caught Jess’s eye and she whipped her head round to look.

The street was empty, but discomfort pooled in her stomach.

“Jess, you alright?” Sam asked, twisting around to check on her.

“I’m fine.” Jess said. “Thought I saw Meg, that’s all.”

“There was nothing you could have done.” Sam said. “You saved our lives, Jess.”

Jess nodded and he fell silent, shelving the discussion until they were somewhere more comfortable, but the more Jess thought, the more convinced she became that Meg hadn’t been mistaken.

And the more she thought, the more convinced she became that Meg’s eyes, rather than the warm brown she remembered from Indiana, had been a solid, chilling black.
Yes, I decided to skip The Benders in the end, because the only scene I could come up with was the one referenced in this chapter and it would have been stupidly short. Plus we'd have been here until next year and I don't actually want to do that.
I am still fighting with the rest of Season 1 (and 2 and 3 for that matter) - but I do have a lot of ideas for seasons 4 and 5 and a lot of ideas for post season 8.
In case you were wondering, these include:

Mary Winchester punching archangels
Jess and Charlie being awesome
And Lucifer calling Jess Princess.

Do not ask me how my mind works. Stay tuned and don't worry - Jess is not going to keep her mouth shut for long.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Much thanks goes to A-LionGleek for his help with this chapter, especially with the Ghost Facers. This is one of the longest chapters to date and I did not intend it to be. I also intended it to be finished two weeks ago, but we all know about the road to Hell, right?

If anyone had thought that John’s reappearance precluded a more frequent communication with the man, they never said it – and they’d have been wrong anyway.

Jess tried her best to keep the boys’ minds off it as they rolled from town to town, searching for a new case.

That was the part of the job she could do without.

The hunting itself, she didn’t mind – it meant they were helping people and she liked that.

But why they had to stay on the road between cases, she didn’t know.

Surely not all hunters worked like this.

There must be some that had home bases.

John’s journal alluded to some for starters.

She never raised this with Sam and Dean though, mainly because they always managed to find a case just as the itch started.

Sam had found this one, in Richardson, Texas, but refused to say anymore until he’d done a bit more digging.

Jess had nodded off about an hour into the drive, her head resting against the side window, the vibrations of the engine lulling her to sleep rather than keeping her away.

She was sitting in a beautifully cultivated garden outside a house – or was it a bar? Maybe it was a house that had been converted into a bar, or maybe it was the other way around, Jess couldn’t tell, but she was too warm and comfortable to get up and take a look.

Two young women were lounging nearby, talking and laughing with one another. Both were blonde, but different shades. A young Asian man sat near them, engrossed in his laptop, but he allowed himself to be drawn into conversation every so often.

Jess let her eyes wander across the garden to Dean, who had his arm around a woman, her dark hair braided down her back. They were talking to another man, who had his back to her, the woman’s blue eyes oddly serious as she nodded at whatever he was saying.

Movement beside her drew Jess gaze to Sam, who was lying on the blanket beside her, one arm flung over his face to shield his eyes from the sun, the other supporting a small child curled up on his
The child’s partner, playing by her knee, looked up at her and smiled, lifting its arms to be picked up.

With a bright smile, Jess scooped the child up, kissing its head and nuzzling her nose into its hair, taking a deep breath. The infant gave another toothy grin, opened its mouth and …

“FIRE … OF UNKNOWN ORIGINS … TOOK MY BABY AWAY!”

Jess jolted awake, the dream fading immediately into obscurity. In the front seat, Sam did the same thing, flailing madly, and Jess, sitting directly behind the driver’s seat, could see that he had a plastic spoon in his mouth that almost certainly hadn’t been there when he fell asleep.

Dean just grinned as Sam finally composed himself and turned the music down.

“Very funny.”

“Seriously, Dean?” Jess asked, her lips twitching treacherously.

Dean shrugged, sniggering. “Sorry. Not a lot of scenery here in East Texas. Kinda gotta make your own.”

“We’re not kids anymore, Dean!” Sam protested. “We are not going to start that crap up again.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “Again? What do you mean, again?!”

“I don’t know what he’s talking about.” Dean said innocently – too innocently – looking at her in the rear-view mirror. “Start what up again?”

“That prank stuff.” Sam said firmly. “It’s stupid, and it always escalates.”

“Pranks.” Jess said to herself. “Of course they had prank wars.”

“Aw, what’s the matter, Sammy,” Dean asked with a smirk, “scared you’re gonna get a little Nair in your shampoo again, huh?”

“You did what?!” Jess demanded.

“It was a long time ago.” Sam said over his shoulder, before pointing threateningly at Dean. “Just remember you started this.”

Dean laughed. “Bring it on, baldy.”

Jess rolled her eyes. Sam had been very quiet since their father’s departure and this had the potential to bring him back out of his slump and she had a feeling that was why Dean was doing it, but still …

“Prank war.” She muttered, rolling her eyes again. “Where are we anyway?”

“A few hours outside of Richardson.” Dean answered, still grinning. “Don’t suppose you feel like elaborating yet, Sammy?”

“It’s Sam.” Sam muttered, but opened up his laptop again obligingly. “About a month or two ago, this group of kids goes poking around in this local haunted house.”

“Haunted by what?” Dean prompted.

Sam sighed. “Apparently, a pretty misogynistic spirit. Legend goes, it takes girls and strings them up
in the rafters.”

Jess grimaced. “Sounds nasty.”

“Yeah.” Sam agreed. “Anyway, this group of kids see this dead girl hanging in the cellar.”

“Anyone ID the corpse?” Dean asked.

“Well, that’s the thing.” Sam said. “By the time the cops got there, the body was gone. So cops are saying the kids were just yanking chains.”

Dean shrugged. “Maybe the cops are right.”

“Maybe.” Jess said slowly. “But it seems a bit extreme for a prank. I mean, a fake 911 call is one thing, but to let the cops interview them?”

“And I read a couple of the kids’ first-hand accounts.” Sam added. “They seemed pretty sincere.”

Dean glanced at him. “Where’d you read these accounts?”

Sam cleared his throat and Jess began to smile. “Where’d you read them, Sam?”

“Well, I knew we were going to be passing through Texas, so I surfed some local paranormal websites last night and I found one.” Sam said, all in one breath.

“And what’s it called?” Jess prompted, her grin widening.

“HellHoundsLair.com.” Sam said reluctantly.

Jess burst out laughing. “Seriously?! That website?”

Dean began grinning as well. “Lemme guess – streaming live out of Mom’s basement?”

“Probably.” Jess said.

Dean should his head. “Most of those websites wouldn’t know a ghost if it bit ‘em in the persqueeter.”

“Look, we let Dad take off.” Sam said. “Which was a mistake, by the way. And now we don’t know where the hell he is, so meantime we gotta find ourselves something to hunt. There’s no harm checking this thing out.”

“We might as well.” Jess agreed. “It’s the closest lead for a hunt we’ve had in a while.”

Dean sighed. “Alright, fine. So where do we find these kids?”

***

It wasn’t difficult to find the kids, hanging out at the local fast food joint. All of them told the same story, although their description of the victim varied from blonde to brunette to redhead.

And all of them agreed that the same person had taken them there.

Posing as writers for a small newspaper, the three hunters tracked down Craig Thurston at the local record store, who was all too happy to tell them about the legend of Mordechai Murdoch and the Hell House, but refused point blank to go anywhere near the house again.
“Can’t say I blame the kid.” Sam commented, as they trudged through the slushy mud towards the house.

“Yeah, so much for curb appeal.” Dean agreed, giving the building a once over.

“Wouldn’t want to live here now, let alone in the 30s.” Jess added. “Something about the story still bugs me though.”

“About the hangings?” Sam asked.

Jess nodded, frowning. “I know you said that if you hang someone quick enough, their neck breaks, but it’s still a strange way to kill your daughters if you want them to have a quick death. Public hangings only worked like that because there was a trap door – you’d need to have the right leverage, or it’d never work. If he wanted them to die quickly, why not shoot them? Or, hell, he was a farmer, he must’ve killed chickens or rabbits before – why not just break their necks?”

Her theorising was interrupted by the EMF meter beginning to click and whirl, seconds before Dean made a frustrated noise.

“You got something?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, the EMF’s no good.” Dean grumbled.

“Why not?” Jess asked.

Dean gestured to the power lines overhead. “I think that thing’s still got a little juice in it. It’s screwing with the readings.”

“Yeah, that’d do it.” Sam sighed.

“Considering how long it’s been since anyone’s lived here, you’d think they’d have cut the power in this area by now.” Jess remarked. “So we’re back to good ol’ fashioned sleuthing?”

“Yes.” Dean said with a grimace. “Come on, let’s go.”

The door was a little stiff and swung open with a soft creak, but they ignored that, and began looking around.

Dean let out a low whistle, pointing at several sigils painted on the walls. “Looks like old man Murdoch was a bit of a tagger here in his time.”

“And after his time too.” Sam added. “That reverse cross has been used by Satanists for centuries, but this sigil of sulphur didn’t show up in San Francisco until the 60s.”

Dean stared at him. “That is exactly why you never get laid.”

“Huh.” Jess commented. “What happened last night then?”

Dean opened and closed his mouth a few times before grimacing. “So didn’t need to know that.”

“Don’t dish it out if you can’t take it, Dean.” Jess said cheerfully.

“What about this one?” Dean asked, gesturing at the wall. “You seen this one before?”

Jess smirked, but let him change the subject, turning to the symbol in question and examining it closely. “You got me, I’m new here. Sam?”
Sam shook his head. “No.”

Dean frowned. “I have. Somewhere.”

Sam touched the symbol gingerly. “It’s paint. Seems pretty fresh too.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “Obviously painted pretty recently then.”

Dean pulled a face. “I don’t know, Sam; I hate to agree with authority figures of any kind, but … the cops might be right about this one.”

Sam sighed. “Yeah, maybe.”

“It was worth …” Jess began, set on cheering him up, but a noise from the next room caused them all to tense, drawing their weapons.

They silently moved into position either side of the door, readying themselves, and, at Dean’s signal, they burst through, only to be half-blinded by bright light.

“Cut!” A man’s voice said. “It’s just a couple of humans.”

Jess hastily stowed her gun away, blinking rapidly to readjust to the change in light, finally focussing on two men about her age. One was holding a video camera, the other a small device she couldn’t make out.

“What are you guys doing here?” The same man asked.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Dean retorted.

The man sniggered. “We belong here.” He said smugly. “We’re professionals?”


“I could take a few guesses.” Sam muttered in her ear.

“Paranormal Investigators.” He said, handing her and Dean business cards. “Take a look at that.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” The second man said. “Look.”

“Oh, you gotta be kidding me.” Dean muttered.

Jess snorted. “Seriously?” She tapped the card. “Wait a second … Ed Zeddmore and Harry Spangler … Where have I heard those names before?”

“HellHoundsLair.com.” Sam said. “You run the website.”

The two men looked even smugger (if that were possible), preening under the perceived attention.

“Yeah, we’re huge fans.” Dean said sarcastically.

“And we know who you are too.” Ed said.

“Yeah?” Sam asked nonchalantly.

“Amateurs.” He said with a smirk. “Looking for ghosts and cheap thrills.”

Jess tensed up and Sam squeezed her waist.
“Yeah, so if you don’t mind,” Harry continued, “we’re trying to conduct a serious scientific investigation here.”

“What have you got so far?” Dean asked.

Ed smirked. “Harry, why doncha tell ’em about the EMF?”

“Well …” Harry began.

“EMF?” Sam asked innocently.

“Electromagnetic field.” Harry explained. “Spectral entities can cause energy fluctuations that can be read with an EMF detector. Like this bad boy right here.” He turned on the device in his hand and it immediately began to hum. “Whoa! It’s 2.8mg!”

“2.8?” Ed repeated. “It’s hot in here.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake.” Jess sighed.

“Jess …” Sam began.

“No.” Jess interrupted, glaring at him, and then Ed and Harry in turn. “No, these guys want to act like arrogant dicks to every stranger they come across? It’s about time someone knocked some sense into them.”

“Hey!” Harry said, but Jess didn’t let him finish, taking their own detector from Dean and switching it on.

“Don’t you think that the EMF was the first thing we checked when we got here?” Jess asked. “But active electricity in the area can cause this thing to act as if there has been spectral activity even when there hasn’t been any. Did you know that?”

It was obvious from the glances the two exchanged that they had, in fact, not known that, but they clearly weren’t about to admit it.

“So …?” Harry prompted.

“So those power lines out there?” Jess said, smirking. “They’re still actively providing electricity to the area, and that natural electricity is what these machines are picking up, which makes them pretty useless in this particular situation.”

“What are you guys doing with one of those?” Ed asked.

“Because unlike you and Pumbaa over there,” Jess said, jerking her head at Harry, “we actually are professionals. And right now, we are in the middle of an important investigation of our own that actually has a chance of showing results. Have you ever even seen a ghost?”

“As it happens …” Ed began.

“Because I highly doubt it.” Jess interrupted. “If you had, you wouldn’t refer to it as a ‘cheap thrill’. You wouldn’t be here just to film it and get higher website traffic. Because it’s nothing like the movies. The first ghost I saw was in our car, trying to rip my boyfriend’s heart out, after killing ten other men. The last before today was possessing a truck and using it as a fucking murder weapon. In between that, I’ve seen ghosts dragging people into lakes, turning people insane, and slaughtering people. If this place is really haunted, I can guarantee that people are going to die. Did you even
know that ghosts could do any of that?"

Neither man answered. In fact, neither could even meet her eyes.

“Didn’t think so.” Jess said, rolling her eyes. “Next time you meet random strangers, show some
damn respect. Now like it or not, the actual professionals are here now and we are actually going to
do something, so why don’t you do something useful for once and leave.”

They glanced at each other but didn’t move.

“Out!” She snapped, causing them to jump.

“Yes ma’am!”

Jess closed her eyes and took a deep breath, counting backwards from ten until she heard the front
door close.

Then, she turned around to face Sam and Dean with a smile. “How did I do?”

Sam had a look on his face that made her grateful they had two rooms back at the motel. “You
certainly handled it better than I would.”

“So much for ‘we do what we do and we shut up about it’.” Dean said, but he looked impressed.

Jess shrugged. “They don’t know us from Adam. That being said, we’d better search a few more
areas just to be sure and give Timon and Pumbaa the impression that we’re working, just in case they
stick around to watch.”

Sam shrugged. “I think we can safely say that you’re the boss.”

***

The house yielded no more clues and by the time they split up half an hour later (Dean and Jess for
the police station, Sam for the public library), Jess was convinced it was a hoax.

True, she hadn’t been hunting long, but she had a feeling that Mordechai would have appeared
during their search if he actually existed.

She and Dean reached the library, just as Sam came out.

“Hey sweetheart.” She greeted.

“What you got?” Dean asked.

Sam kissed Jess and slipped an arm around her. “Well, I couldn’t find a Mordechai, but I did find a
Martin Murdoch who lived in that house in the 30s. He did have children, but only two of them, both
boys, and there’s no evidence he ever killed anyone.”

Jess frowned. “Blows a hole in Craig’s story, doesn’t it?”

“What about you?” Sam asked, as they reached the Impala.

Dean sighed. “Well, those kids didn’t really give us a clear description of that dead girl, but I did hit
up the police station. No matching missing persons. It’s like she never existed. Come on, we did our
digging. This one’s a bust. For all we know, those HellHound boys made the whole thing up.”
Jess rolled her eyes. “Judging by how little they actually knew and how disrespectful, unprofessional and arrogant they were, I wouldn’t be at all surprised.”

Sam smiled slightly. “Don’t hold back, Jess. Tell us how you really feel.”

“Sam.” Dean prompted.

“All right.” Sam conceded. “It was a bust. It was worth a look though.”

“I say we find ourselves a bar and some beers and leave the legend to the locals.” Dean said, getting into the car.

Sam began to smile, tightening his arm around Jess’s waist to keep her from following suit.

“What is it?” Jess asked.

“Just watch.” Sam said quietly.

Latino pop-dance music suddenly blared from the speakers when Dean turned the key in the ignition. Sam and Jess began laughing, even more so when Dean tried to turn it off and the wipers turned on instead.

While Dean turned everything off, Sam opened the back door for Jess, before getting in himself, marking an imaginary score in the air.

“That’s all you got?” Dean asked, giving him a dirty look. “Weak. That is bush league.”

Dean was as good as his word and quickly found them a bar, and they wasted a few hours with a few beers, a few games of pool, and some of the greasiest tacos Jess had ever eaten.

When they left, Jess put a hand across Dean’s chest before he could get into the car. “Give me the keys.”

“Excuse me?” Dean asked.

Jess sighed. “I only had one. You had several. You’re not driving.”

“I’ve never had a problem before.” Dean said.

Jess gave him a stern look. “And it’s a miracle you haven’t killed yourself or someone else. Give me the keys.”

“Just do it.” Sam advised. “You’re not gonna win.”

Dean handed her the keys, grumbling under his breath.

“Relax.” Jess said, swinging into the driver’s seat. “I do know how to drive.” She adjusted the seat and waited for the boys to get in, Sam folding into the back seat (there were only so many fights Dean was going to concede, after all), before switching on the ignition and pulling out of the parking lot.

Just as they reached the junction that would take them back to the motel, Sam leaned forwards. “You hear that?”
Jess frowned, peering right. “Sirens.” Making up her mind, she changed indication and turned right rather than left, following the sound of sirens right to the ‘Hell House’.

Unlike earlier, the place was abuzz with activity, people milling about like ants, the area lit up with the blue of emergency flashing lights.

As they got out of the car, a stretcher was removed from the house, a sheet covering its occupant.

“What happened?” Dean asked the nearest onlooker.

“Coupla cops say a girl hung herself in the house.” The man answered.

“Suicide?” Sam asked, taking Jess’s hand.

“Yeah. She was a straight-A student, with a full ride to UT too. It just don’t make sense.”

Once the man was out of earshot, Dean turned to Sam and Jess. “I’m thinking maybe we missed something.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “You think?”

Getting back into the house to investigate further proved easier said than done. Even after the paramedics and onlookers had left, a single patrol car remained, two cops standing around.

“I guess the cops don’t want anyone else screwing around in there.” Sam whispered.

“I’m not surprised.” Jess responded. “Sensationalised suicides like this often spark a spate of copycats.”

Dean smirked. “Try saying that five times fast.”

Jess rolled her eyes and shifted slightly to get more comfortable. The three of them were crouched in the bushes overlooking the house, trying to figure out how to get past the officers.

“I don’t belief it.” Dean said suddenly.

Jess twisted around to see what he was looking at, only to see Ed and Harry approaching, covered in all sorts of gadgets, whispering to each other.

“Guess they weren’t too put off.” Sam commented.

Jess shook her head. “Who do they think they are, the Ghostbusters?”

Dean chuckled. “I got an idea.” Cupping a hand to his mouth, he turned back towards the cops. “Who ya gonna call?!”

The cry had the desired dual effect of distracting the wannabe hunters and alerting the cops to their presence.

Jess, Sam and Dean ducked down as the cops chased Ed and Harry down the path and promptly made a break for the house while they could.

Once the front door was closed, any dim light from outside was completely extinguished, and they turned to flashlights in order to see properly.
Again, Dean’s attention turned to the strange sigil he’d singled out earlier. “Where have I seen that symbol before? It’s killing me!”

“More important things to worry about here, Dean.” Jess said, taking one of the rifles from Sam.

Sam nodded in agreement. “Come on, we don’t have much time.”

The basement was at the bottom of a very old, very rickety flight of wooden steps. “Well, it wasn’t suicide.” She concluded.

“Yes.” Dean said, the beam of his flashlight travelling across the floor. “But what makes you say that now?”

“Suicide’s a statement.” Jess said. “Aside from the fact that doing it here makes no sense, she could have broken her neck just getting down these steps. If she’d come here to kill herself, she’d have done it upstairs.” She peered up at the rafters. “Plus, there’s nothing she could stand on, no way of getting the rope up there … someone killed her.”

“Or something.” Sam added. “You still not sure about the ghost though?”

Jess shrugged. “It’s like you said, Sam – Mordechai Murdoch never existed, so how could he have become a ghost. Plus, we’re all certain the earlier dead body was a hoax, so why has no one died before now? You’re not telling me those kids are the only ones to come wandering in to explore.”

“Point taken. Hey Sam.” Dean said, waving a jar of red liquid in the air. “I dare you to take a swig of this.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “What the hell would I do that for?”

Dean shrugged. “I double dare you.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Dean, don’t be an ass.”

Their search continued, yielding no results. For a moment, they thought they had something in a cabinet, but when they opened the door, it was perfectly normal rats that squeaked and scattered, causing Sam and Jess to sigh, and Dean to jump backwards.

“I hate rats.” He muttered, when they looked amused.

“You’d rather it was a ghost?” Sam asked, smirking.

“Yes.” Dean said.


Dean just rolled his eyes and Jess turned to Sam, but the rest of the joke died on her lips, her smile fading into a horrified gasp.

Behind Sam, a man had appeared. Dressed in denim overalls and a cowboy hat, he could have been a regular farmer, were it not for the bloody axe in his hands and the menacing snarl on his deathly white face.

“Sam!” She warned, raising her gun.

Sam dived out of the way, the axe just missing him. Jess’s first and second shots did nothing; at the
third, he disappeared, but clearly of his own will, rather than because of the salt rounds.

“What the hell kind of spirit is immune to rock salt?” Sam demanded.

Jess gaped at him. “You don’t know?!?”

“Let’s move!” Dean said sharply. “Out, now!”

As they bolted for the stairs, Mordechai reappeared, his axe smashing the shelves and bringing the jars crashing down on Dean.

The next swing aimed for Sam, who grabbed the spirit’s arm to avoid getting split in half. “Jess, get outta here!”

Jess didn’t bother rolling her eyes. “Not happening!” She grabbed hold of the handle of the axe and gave it an almighty push.

Distracted by Sam, Mordechai stumbled and smashed into the electrical box, giving the three hunters time to get out of the house, completely ignoring Ed and Harry on their way back towards the house.

Any other day, Jess might have stopped to warn them, but it seemed a little pointless considering the fact that Mordechai had chased them to the front door. He had stopped just inside, unable to leave the house, reduced to roaring threateningly after them, brandishing his axe.

Ed and Harry may have been idiots, but they were certainly smart enough to get the hell out there after that.

***

“What the hell is this symbol? It’s buggin’ the hell outta me!”

Jess sighed, rubbing her temples. Once they had grabbed a few hours’ sleep (which hadn’t been easy following the events of the Hell House), they had reconvened in Sam and Jess’s room with books and laptops, and started researching again.

Well, Sam and Jess had started researching again.

Dean had sat with pen and paper and drawn the symbol from the house over and over again.

“This whole thing’s bugging me.” Jess said bluntly. “I thought the legend said Mordechai only goes after women.”

“It does.” Sam confirmed.

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Well, that explains why he went after you two, but why me?”

Jess sighed. “First of all, Dean, please don’t use femininity as an insult, because you’re insulting me as well as Sam when you do. Secondly, if you really want proof of how much of a man your brother is, I suppose I can start being louder …”

“Jess!” Dean protested, gagging slightly.

“Thirdly,” she continued, smirking slightly, “once again, don’t dish out what you can’t take.”

Sam was slightly pink-cheeked, but soldiered on with the case. “The legend also says he hung himself, but did you see those slit wrists?”
Jess frowned. “I did, now that you mention it. I mean, I was more focused on stopping him from turning you into firewood, but that doesn’t make sense. Neither does the axe. I thought ghosts followed the same patterns over and over again.”

“Usually, they do.” Dean said. “This mook keeps changing.”

“I’m telling ya, the way the story goes …” Sam trailed off, staring at his laptop. “Wait a minute.”

“What?” Dean asked.

“Someone added a new post to the HellHound site.” Sam said grimly. “Listen to this. They say Mordechai Murdoch was really a Satanist who chopped up his victims with an axe before slitting his own wrists. Now he’s imprisoned in the house for eternity.”

“What the hell?” Jess muttered, reading the post over his shoulder. “Where the hell is this going?”

“I don’t know.” Dean said, picking up his sketch of the symbol. “But I think I might have figured out where it all started.”

***

Once Dean confronted Craig with the symbol (apparently, the cover art for Blue Oyster Cult), the teenager caved quickly.

But none of that explained why Mordechai was real, if he’d never actually existed.

While Dean went ‘investigating’, Sam and Jess returned to their motel room to do some research. Sam started digging further into the history of the house to find out if anyone fitting Mordechai’s description had lived there, just not in the 30s.

Jess, meanwhile, began looking at the symbols and sigils that had been drawn on the walls, just in case Craig and his cousin managed to accidentally summon something.

Finally, Sam sighed. “You find anything?”

“Maybe.” Jess said slowly. “But it’s a bit … flimsy.”

“Flimsy’s better than nothing.” Sam said, checking his phone. “Dean’s on his way back, wants to grab food. I’m gonna grab a shower, tell us both over lunch?”

“Sure.” Jess said, stealing a kiss as he passed.

While Sam showered, Jess began tidying the room, just so they weren’t tripping over books every time they moved.

When Dean returned, she was just setting out a change of clothes on the bed.

“What are you, his mother?” He asked sarcastically.

Jess ignored him. “Sam, Dean’s back!”

“You find anything?” Sam called.

“No, nothing.” Dean said, wandering over to the bed. “Hey, Jess, do you happen to have my pocket knife?”
“I don’t think so.” Jess answered.

“Could you check?” Dean asked.

Jess shook her head with a fond smile. “I swear you’d forget your head if it wasn’t screwed on.” She said, reaching for her bag. “Alright, I’ll humour you.”

The shower cut off. “Jess thinks she might have a theory about what’s going on.” Sam said.

“Yeah?” Dean asked.

Jess nodded, still rooting through her bag. “What if Mordechai is a Tulpa?”

“A Tulpa?” Dean repeated.

“It’s a Tibetan thought form.” Sam said, emerging from the bathroom in a towel.

“I know what a Tulpa is.” Dean said. “Just wasn’t expecting Jess to come up with one. Why don’t you get dressed, I’ll meet you at the car. Oh, knife?”

Jess shook her head, putting her bag down. “I don’t have it.” She narrowed her eyes as he left. “He’s up to something.”

“He’s always up to something.” Sam muttered, grabbing his underwear.

****

By the time they had settled in at a booth in a nearby coffee shop with coffee and sandwiches, Sam had been fidgeting for about an hour.

“Dude, what’s your problem?” Dean asked.

Sam grimaced. “Nothing, I’m fine.”

Dean watched him for a few seconds longer, before turning to Jess. “So. Tulpa?”

“In 1915, a group of monks in Tibet visualised a golem in their head, meditated on it so hard, they brought the thing to life outta thin air.” Jess explained. “20 monks did that, but think about it. Craig starts the story about Mordechai, it goes online, spreads. That website gets something like 10000 hits a day – all of whom now believe. And now that belief is making him real.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “You’re telling me that just because people believe in Mordechai, he’s real? I’m guessing you didn’t pull a Tulpa out of thin air.”

“I started looking at the sigils in the house.” Jess explained. “Now most of them are regular Satanic symbols, the odd cult image thrown in for effect, but this one …” She turned the laptop so they could see it. “It’s a Tibetan spirit sigil, and it’s one of the pictures on the website. Craig said he and his cousin painted symbols from one of her theology textbooks – probably painting it without knowing what it was. This sigil has been used for centuries, concentrating meditative thoughts like a magnifying glass.”

“So thousands of people are on the website, staring at the symbol, thinking about Mordechai …” Sam trailed off. “It might be enough to bring a Tulpa to life.”

“It would explain why he keeps changing.” Dean admitted.
“Right, as the legend changes, people think different things, so Mordechai changes.” Sam agreed, shifting in his seat. “Like a game of telephone. Also explains why the rock salt didn’t work.”

“Because he’s not a traditional spirit.” Jess finished.

“Not bad, Jess.” Dean said with a grin, but Jess was frowning at Sam.

“Honey, are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” Sam said, pulling a face. “Let’s worry about the case.”

“Alright.” Dean said with a shrug. “Why don’t we just … get this spirit sigil thing off the wall and off the website?”

“It’s not that simple.” Sam said, before Jess could. “Once Tulpas are created, they take on a life of their own.”

“Great.” Dean grumbled. “How do we kill a thought?!”

Sam grimaced again, shifting in his seat. “Well, it’s not gonna be easy with these guys helping us. Have you seen their home page?”

Jess had, but it was obvious Dean hadn’t, so she pulled up the website and showed Dean the video from the previous night. “Their hits have quadrupled in the last day alone.”

Far from looking irritated, Dean looked intrigued. “I got an idea. Come on.”

“Where are we going?” Sam asked.

“We gotta find a copy store.” Dean answered.

This hardly answered the question, but Sam and Jess were accustomed to Dean’s habits enough to rise and follow him without question.

“Man, I think I’m allergic to our soap or something.” Sam muttered.

“You can’t be …” Jess began with a frown, but Dean started laughing.

“You did this?!” Sam demanded.

“Unbelievable.” Jess muttered. “You didn’t lose the knife at all, did you? You were just trying to distract me – what, itching powder?”

Dean nodded, still laughing.

“You’re a freakin’ jerk.” Sam growled.

“Just for that, you can handle whatever it is you have planned.” Jess informed him. “We are going back to the motel so Sam can have a shower.”

Dean just kept laughing on his way out the door.

***

A few hours later, the three reconvened in the trailer park Ed and Harry were staying in. Dean was still laughing at Sam’s misfortune and Sam was still plotting to get him back, but Jess had managed
to get them back on track.

It took a while for Ed and Harry to answer, but they finally emerged from their trailer, scowling petulantly.

“Ah, would you look at that?” Dean cooed. “Action figures in their original packaging – what a shock.”

Sam gave Dean a stern look, before turning pleading eyes on the two webmasters. “Guys, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, sorry guys.” Ed said shiftily. “We’re … We’re a little busy right now.”


Dean rolled his eyes. “Okay, we’ll make it quick. We need you to shut down your website.”

Ed laughed. “Man, you know, these guys got us busted last night, spent the night in a holding cell …”

“I had to pee in that cell urinal.” Harry added. “In front of people. And I get stage fright. Not to mention you were pretty damn rude to us yesterday.”

“Oh, cry me a river.” Jess said wearily. “You treat people like crap, you’re gonna get it back eventually. And we warned you about that house. We have a job to do.”

“Why should we trust you guys?” Ed asked, ignoring her.

Sam sighed. “Look, guys. We all know what we saw last night, what’s in that house. But now, thanks to your website, there are thousands of people who know about it.”

“Which means people are gonna keep showing up at the Hell House, running into him in person.” Dean continued. “Someone’s gonna get hurt.”

“Unless we manage to somehow get things set up so that he can cease to exist.” Jess finished.

Ed snorted. “Yeah, yeah.”

Harry frowned. “Ed, maybe they’ve got a point, maybe …”

“Nope.”

“No.” Harry repeated.

“We have an obligation to our fans, to the truth.” Ed said.

Dean glared at him. “Well, I have an obligation to kick both your asses right now …”

“Dean!” Jess interrupted, glaring at the two boys. “Do you even hear yourselves?! That girl is dead, because she thought it was all a bit of fun – how many more of your viewers are going to do the same thing? And you don’t even care!”

“Dean, Jess, forget it, alright?” Sam said, resting a soothing hand on her shoulder. “These guys … you could kick your asses … I could probably even them that thing about Mordechai, but they’re not gonna help up. Let’s just go.”
“Yeah, you’re right.” Dean sighed.

“We’ll figure out another way.” Jess agreed heavily. “Figures they’d brush that poor girl’s death off as a small price to pay for fifteen seconds of fame.”

As they began to walk away, Ed and Harry finally recovered their voices and began calling after them.

“What thing about Mordechai?” Harry asked, once he had their attention.

“Don’t tell ‘em, Sam.” Dean warned.

“Yeah, don’t.” Jess said. “They don’t care. You heard what they said.”

“But if they agree to shut the website down …” Sam said.

“They’re not going to do it, you said so yourself.” Dean pointed out.

“No, wait!” Ed said, catching Sam’s arm and letting go just as quickly. “Wait. Don’t listen to him, okay. We’ll do it.”

“Sam …”

“I don’t know, Dean.” Jess said, fixing the two boys with a piercing look. “If it could save other people, it might be worth it.”

“You’re supposed to be on my side here!” Dean protested.

“Since when?” Jess asked. “His girlfriend, his side. Your girlfriend can be on your side.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.” Dean said.

Jess smirked. “Maybe that’s your problem.”

“Guys!” Sam interrupted, turning back to Ed and Harry. “Look, it’s a really big deal, alright? And it wasn’t easy to find. So only if we have your word that you’ll shut everything down.”

“Totally.” Ed agreed.

“Yeah, definitely.” Harry added. “I mean, besides, dismissing that girl’s getting killed? Dick move there. Real dick move. We’re not killers.”

“Alright.” Sam said, turning to Dean, who sighed and reluctantly handed them some paperwork.

“It’s a death certificate.” Sam said. “From the 30s. We got it at the library. According to the coroner, the actual cause of death was a self-inflicted gunshot wound.”

“Didn’t hang or cut himself.” Dean added.

Jess nodded sadly. “Hung his daughters fast enough to break their necks, then shot himself dead.”

“He shot himself?” Ed asked, examining the certificate.

“Yep.” Sam answered. “With a .45 pistol. To this day, they say he’s terrified of them.”

“Matter of fact,” Dean said casually, “they say if you shoot him with a .45, loaded with these special wrought-iron rounds – it’ll kill the son of a bitch.”
Harry spun around and bolted back towards the trailer with Ed following more sedately.

“Harry!” He hissed. “Slow your roll, buddy. They’re gonna know we’re excited.”

***

In eight or so months Jess had been hunting, Dean Winchester had become the older brother she never had, and she loved him dearly.

On saying that, if he pulled that cord one more time, she was going to pull the stupid plastic fisherman off the wall and beat him to death with it.

And then she was going after whatever idiot decided to put an interactive laughing fisherman on the wall of a diner where anyone (namely Dean) could activate it.

Thankfully, the cord also served to shut the damn thing off, so it only laughed for a split-second before Sam stopped it again.

“If you pull that string one more time, I’m gonna kill you.” Sam warned.

“Get in line.” Jess muttered.

With a perfectly straight face, Dean pulled the cord again, and Jess stopped it immediately, glaring at him. “I’m warning you …”

Dean sniggered. “Come on, guys, you need more laughter in your life. You’re way too tense.” When they just gave him identical dirty looks, he sighed. “They post it yet?”

Sam rolled his eyes, but turned his laptop so Dean could read it, attacking his salad angrily.

“We’ve learned from reputable sources that Mordechai Murdoch has a fatal fear of firearms.” Dean read, smirking. “Alright. How long do we wait?”

Jess shrugged, stealing a piece of tomato from Sam’s plate. “Long enough for the new story to spread, and the legend to change.”

Sam picked his beer and took a swing. “I figure by nightfall iron rounds will work on the sucker.”

“Sweet.” Dean grinned, tapping his bottle against Sam’s.

Sam and Jess exchanged a conspiratorial grin, as Dean took a drink, but managed to avoid laughing until he tried to put the bottle down and found that he just couldn’t.

He was only confused for a few seconds though, before his suspicion settled on the couple sitting across from him.

“You didn’t.”

Beaming triumphantly, Sam held up a tiny tube of super glue. “Oh, I did.”

“Just be glad it’s only stuck to your hand.” Jess said, giggling. “I had something much crueller in mind.”

Dean scowled, trying in vain to get rid of the bottle. “Well,” he muttered, “thank the Lord for small mercies.”
As it turned out, the laughing fisherman ended up having some use after all – namely as a distraction for the police officers still stationed outside the Hell House.

As soon as they were out of the way, Dean, Sam and Jess entered the house, guns drawn, and began the search for Mordechai, making sure to watch each other’s backs in case he snuck up on them.

“I barely have any skin left on my palm.” Dean muttered.

Sam snorted. “Not touching that with a ten foot pole.”

Dean grimaced, shining his flashlight in Sam’s face for a second. “Bitch.”

“Jerk.” Sam responded automatically, leading the way into the next room.

“You think old Mordechai’s home?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know.” Sam answered.

“Me neither.”

Later, Jess would cite pure luck as the reason that none of them actually pulled the trigger. Even after realising it was just Ed and Harry, she was still tempted.

“What the hell are you doing here?!”

“Are you trying to get yourselves killed?” Sam added.

“We’re just trying to get a book and movie deal, okay?” Ed said placatingly.

“That’s what you’re worried about?” Jess asked incredulously. “I’d be more worried about staying alive!”

As though the house had heard her, the sound of knives being sharpened began to float up from the basement.

Jess stiffened, raising her gun again, drawing in closer to Sam, the three hunters forming a kind of barrier in front of the two civilians.

Barely a second later, Mordechai burst through the door with a blood-curdling scream. Without hesitation, Jess emptied her gun into the spirit, hearing Sam and Dean do the same, causing the crazed man to vanish into mist.

“Did that do it?” Jess murmured.

“Should have done.” Dean confirmed. “We’ll check the rest of the house. Watch them; try not to shoot ‘em.”

“I’ll try to restrain myself.” Jess said flatly, turning to Ed and Harry, who were examining their camera. “I’d say I hope you learned your lesson, but something tells me …”

She was interrupted, rather rudely, by an axe slamming down, destroying the camera and forcing Harry to the ground.

“Holy Hogwarts!” Ed yelped.
Jess stumbled backwards. “What the hell? Didn’t you guys post that story we gave you?”

“Of course we did!” Ed protested.

“But then out server crashed.” Harry finished.

“So it didn’t take?” Dean asked, appearing from the next room, gun in hand.

The boys shook their heads.

“So these guns don’t work.” Jess concluded, putting hers away. “Freakin’ fantastic.”

“Sam, any ideas?” Dean asked.

Sam grimaced. “I got nothing.”

“We are getting out of here.” Harry said, grabbing Ed and making a break for the front door.

“Smartest thing they’ve said all week.” Jess muttered, grabbing an iron bar from her pack.

“Jess, you know they’re not gonna work.” Sam said.

“No, but they’re all we’ve got.” Jess said grimly. “With any luck, they’ll hold him off until we can get out of the house.”

“She’s right.” Dean agreed. “It’s about our only option right now.”

Twin screams came from the direction of the front door and Jess groaned. “Oh crap!”

They had no choice.

“Hey!” Sam yelled, sprinting into the room. “Come and get it, you ugly son of a bitch!”

Jess ran after him, skidding to a halt beside the two terrified boys. “Get out of here, go!”

“The door’s stuck!” Harry protested.

Jess took a swing at the door with the iron bar, then another, and another. As soon as the wood gave way, she kicked out the main panel and shoved them towards it. “Go!”

Sam gave a strangled gasp behind her and she whirled around to see him pinned against the wall by the handle of Mordechai’s axe.

She took another swing at him, but he grabbed the iron bar out of her hands, using it to pin her against the wall as well. The metal was hard and unyielding against her throat as she gasped for air, trying desperately to free herself.

Her feet scrambled for purchase, the spirit slowly throttling her in more ways than one, and she tried once more to call for help – whatever Dean was doing, he’d better get it done quickly. “Dean …”

Her vision flickering, she closed her eyes, tried to force another, impossible, breath, and resorted once more to prayer.

*St Michael the Archangel, protect us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil …*

“HEY!”
A sudden burst of heat, and the pressure was suddenly gone. Jess stumbled forwards, gasping for air, her eyes flying open to see Dean with a makeshift flamethrower.

“Go!”

Sam grabbed Jess’s arm and they ran past him, scrambling through the ruined door. Dean caught up with them just outside.

“What now?” Jess asked, massaging her throat.

“Mordechai can’t leave the house, we can’t kill him.” Dean said grimly, flicking his lighter open. “We improvise.”

“That’s your solution?” Sam asked, watching the lighter fly into the house and ignite the lighter fluid Dean had splashed around. “Burn the whole damn place to the ground?”

“Guess nobody will go in anymore.” Jess conceded. “He can’t haunt a house if there’s no house to haunt.”

“Exactly.” Dean agreed. “Let’s get outta here.”

“Kinda makes you wonder.” Sam said, as they reached the car. “Of all the things we’ve hunted … how many of them existed just because people believed.”

Jess shuddered. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

***

The following morning, Sam, Jess and Dean met up with Ed and Harry at the trailer park.

“Morning gentlemen.” Ed greeted, stowing a couple of bags of groceries in their car. “And lady.”

“Thought we’d stop by.” Jess said, shielding her eyes from the sun. “See how you were after last night.”

“Well, I got the munchies like never before.” Ed said. “But, uh, things are looking up.”

Jess raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“Should we tell ‘em?” Harry asked.

“Might as well.” Ed agreed smugly. “They’re gonna read about it in the trades. Besides, they’re pros – and they saved our lives last night. They deserve to know.”

This was going to be good, Jess could tell.

“So this morning, we got a phone call from a very important Hollywood producer.” Harry said.

“Wrong number?” Dean asked.

Ed rolled his eyes. “No, smart-ass. He read all about the Hell House on our website yesterday, before we shut it down, and wants to option the motion picture rights. Maybe even have us write it.”

“And create the RPG.” Harry added.

“The what?” Dean asked.
“Role playing game.” Sam and Jess said in unison.

“Anyhoo, excuse us.” Ed said. “We’re off to la-la land.”

Sam grinned. “Well, congratulations, guys. That sounds really great.”

“Yeah, live long and prosper and all that.” Jess added.

Ed and Harry bid them goodbye, climbed into their over-packed car and drove away.

“I have a confession to make.” Sam said, after a few minutes.

“What’s that?” Dean asked.

Sam began to smile. “I was the one that called them and told them I was a producer.”

Dean laughed. “Yeah, well, I’m the one who put the dead fish in the back seat.”

Jess snorted. “You should’ve seen what I did.”

“What did you do?” Dean asked.

“Let’s just say that the people around them are going to get very pissed off every time they brake for the next thousand miles or so.” Jess said, hopping off the picnic bench she’d been perched on. “Let’s go, boys.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Holy Hell, it's another chapter! But Titans, it hasn't even been a week, has it?

Don't get used to it, I'm on a roll. Once again, huge thanks to A-LionGleek for his help and inspiration.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were some places in the world that should never be empty and a children’s playground was one of them.

Conversely, there were some places that should never be crowded and a children’s ward was one of them.

Today, though, in Fitchburg, Wisconsin, both places were the exact opposite of what they should be.

With no obvious cause for the children’s sudden illnesses, Jess, Sam and Dean had presented themselves at the reception desk as CDC agents (and, to Sam’s irritation, a bikini inspector – luckily, no one had looked too closely at their IDs) and soon found themselves shaking hands with Dr Heidecker, a dark haired man with a kind smile.

“Thanks for seeing us, Dr Heidecker.” Dean said with a charming smile.

Heidecker sighed. “Well, I’m glad you guys are here. I was just about to call CDC myself – how’d you find out?”

“Oh, some GP.” Dean said absently. “I forget his name – he called Atlanta; must have beat you to the punch.”

“So you have six cases so far?” Sam asked hastily, trying to draw the doctor’s attention away from where they might have come from.

“Yeah, in five weeks.” Heidecker said heavily. “At first we thought it was garden variety bacterial pneumonia. Not that newsworthy.”

“But now what?” Jess asked.

“The kids aren’t responding to antibiotics.” He explained. “Their white blood cell counts keep dropping. Their immune systems just aren’t doing their job. It’s like their bodies are … wearing out.” Jess frowned. “That’s awful.”

“Excuse me, Dr Heidecker?” One of the nurses asked, approaching with some forms.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?” Sam asked.

Heidecker shook his head, scribbling his signature. “Never this severe.”

“Anything similar? Could it be a new strain of something?” Jess asked, but the doctor merely shook
his head again.

“And the way it spreads.” The nurse added. “That’s a new one for me.”

“What do you mean?” Jess asked.

“It works its way through families. But only the children – one sibling after another.”

“You mind if we talk to a few of the kids?” Dean asked.

“They’re not conscious.” The nurse said apologetically, taking the forms back.

“None of them?” Sam asked in disbelief.

“Can we talk to the parents then?” Jess asked, when the doctor and nurse both shook their heads.

“If you think it’ll help.” Heidecker said.

Dean nodded firmly. “Who was your most recent admission?”

***

Jacob Tomlinson was a single father. His ex-wife lived a few towns over with her new partner, and it had been his turn to look after their daughters. She was still in transit, so he was the only one available for questioning.

“I should get back to my girls.” He said hoarsely, staring at the floor.

Jess took the seat beside him, although the brothers didn’t move. They had decided that she would handle this interview, being the only one without an emotional handicap. “We understand that, and we really appreciate you talking to us. We won’t keep you too long. Mary’s the oldest, is that right?”

“Thirteen.” Jacob confirmed.

“That’s one hell of an age.” Jess said, managing to get a small smile from him. “And she came down with it first, right? And then … Bethany?”

“The next night.” Jacob said, with a nod.

“Within 24 hours.” Jess concluded.

“I guess.” Jacob said, fidgeting. “Look, I already went through all this with the doctor, I’m gonna have to do it again with their mother when she gets here …”

“Just a few more questions if you don’t mind.” Dean said, but Jess caught his eye and he silently relinquished the interview back to her.

“Mr Tomlinson, I realise this must be incredibly frustrating.” Jess said quietly. “We just want to make absolutely sure that we have all the details right. Now how do you think they caught pneumonia? Were they out in the cold recently, anything like that?”

Jacob shook his head. “No. We think it was an open window.”

Jess frowned slightly. “Both times?”

Jacob shrugged. “The first time, I … I don’t really remember, but the second time for sure. And I
know I closed it before I put Bethany to bed.”

“Do you think she opened it?” Jess asked.

Jacob gave her a look of pure exasperation. “It’s a second story window with a ledge. No one else could have.”

“No.” Jess agreed. “No, that was rather a silly question, wasn’t it.” She stood up. “Well, thank you for your time, Mr Tomlinson. You have my word that we will do everything possible to find out what’s wrong with your girls.”

“Thank you.” He murmured, shaking her hand before disappearing back into the hospital room.

“You know,” Sam said, as they headed towards the exit. “This might not be anything supernatural. It might just be pneumonia.”

“Maybe.” Dean said. “Or maybe something opened that window.”

“You can’t get pneumonia just from being cold.” Jess said firmly. “It’s a commonly held myth, but you can’t. You’re more likely to contract it if you’re recovering from a cold or the flu, and your immune system is weaker when you’re cold, but you’d have symptoms before just dropping into comas like this. It’s not pneumonia. Or if it is, there’s something else behind it.”

“And Dad sent us down here for a reason.” Dean added. “I think we might be barking up the wrong tree.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully. “Well, I’ll tell you one thing – that guy we just talked to? I’m betting it’ll be a while before he goes home.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

***

Of course Sam was saying what she thought he was saying.

Luckily, Dean was more skilled than he should be at picking locks, so at least the poor father wouldn’t have to get a locksmith out on top of the inevitable medical bills.

Since Bethany was the last child affected, it was her room they checked. It wasn’t difficult to figure out which room it was – the door was flung open, probably in the father’s haste to get his daughter to the hospital, the bedclothes strewn across the floor, and (most tellingly of all) a child’s drawing was pinned to the wall, two small figures and a large one, each painstakingly labelled ‘Daddy’, ‘Mary’ and ‘Me’.

The sight caused something to ache deep in Jess’s chest, more reminders that the victims in this case were innocent children.

They hadn’t had many cases involving children, but each one stuck out vividly in Jess’s mind. They hadn’t lost a child yet – they weren’t going to start now.

But the EMF meters were coming up empty and so were they – until Sam moved to check the open window. “Dean.”

The sharp intonation in his voice had Dean and Jess both abandoning their search to join him.

There, in the wood, was a handprint – almost human, but not quite, with long claw-like fingers – but
whoever or whatever had touched the window ledge had left rotted wood behind.

“It’s rotted.” Sam said, unnecessarily. “What the hell leaves a handprint like that?”

“Don’t ask me.” Jess said. “I’m totally in the dark here.”

“I know why Dad sent us here.” Dean whispered, his face pale. “He’s faced this thing before. He wants us to finish the job.”

“So what is it?” Jess asked.

“It’s a shtriga.” Dean said bluntly, turning away from the sight. “Let’s get out of here, we’re not gonna find anything.”

***

Dean didn’t say anything on the drive to the motel, and neither of them tried to make him. Jess retrieved John’s journal and began reading again, looking for any mention of the thing.

“How do you spell it?” She asked finally.

Dean cracked a smile. “Do you mean how is it spelled or how does Dad spell it? Because I don’t think it’s the same thing.”

“Dean.” Jess prompted, smiling a little herself.


“So what the hell is a shtriga?” Sam asked, causing the smile to disappear from Dean’s.

“It’s … It’s a kind of witch, I think.” He said, taking one hand from the steering wheel to run his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know much about them.”

“Well, I’ve never heard of it.” Sam said. “And it’s not in Dad’s journal, is it?”

“Not that I can find.” Jess confirmed.

“Dad hunted one in Fort Douglas about 16, 17 years ago.” Dean said. “You were there. You don’t remember?”

“He was probably too young.” Jess muttered, flicking back to the beginning of the journal again and finding 1987, this time searching for any mention of the town – Dean hadn’t been lying when he said his father’s handwriting was atrocious.

“I guess he caught wind of the things in Fitchburg now and kicked us the coordinates.” Dean continued.

“So wait, this shtriga – it’s the same one Dad hunted before?” Sam asked.

“Maybe.” Dean said.

Jess frowned. “If your Dad went after it, why is it still breathing air?”

Dean sighed. “It got away.”

“Got away?” Sam repeated.
“Yeah, Sammy, it happens.” Dean snapped, pulling into the parking lot of the motel.

“Not very often.” Sam argued.

“What else do you remember?” Jess interrupted.

“Nothing.” Dean said. “I was a kid, alright?” He got out of the car and slammed the door, striding towards the motel.

“Well,” Sam said, twisting round in his seat. “That went well.”

Jess shook her head. “He remembers more than he says. Don’t push it. He’ll tell us when he’s ready.” But her eyes drifted down to the journal, open at the entry for May 2nd 1988. Most of it was ineligible, the ink smudged and handwriting messy, but the opening sentence filled her with dread and apprehension.

_Sammy is five today. Thank God. He nearly didn’t make it._

***

“Well, you were right.” Sam said finally. “It wasn’t easy to find, but you were right.”

“Right about what.” Dean asked through a mouthful of burger, causing Jess to wrinkle her nose in distaste.

“Shtriga is a kind of witch.” Sam answered. “They’re Albanian, but legends about them trace back to Ancient Rome.”

“So … is it a human or some kind of creature?” Jess asked, tucking her legs up underneath her – the motel had a comfortable mattress for once and she appreciated it. “I thought witches were humans who perform magic.”

“Generally they are.” Dean answered. “But there’s some magic that if you delve real deep into, it twists you.”

Jess nodded understandingly. “Like a wendigo. Once human, not anymore.”

“Right.” Sam confirmed. “Shtriga feed of spiritus vitae.”

“And for those of us not fluent in Latin?” Jess asked.


Dean frowned. “Didn’t the doctor say the kids’ bodies were wearing out?”

Sam shrugged. “It’s a thought. You know, she takes your vitality, maybe your immunity goes to hell, pneumonia takes hold. Anyway, shtriga can feed off anyone, but they prefer …”

“Children.” Jess finished darkly.

Sam nodded. “Probably because they have stronger life force. And get this – shtrigas are ‘invulnerable to all weapons devised by God and man.’”

Jess groaned in frustration. “Well, that’s just …”

“No, that’s not right.” Dean interrupted. “She’s vulnerable when she feeds.”
“What?” Sam asked.

“If you catch her when she’s eating, you can blast her with consecrated wrought iron … buckshots or rounds, I think.” Dean elaborated.

“How do you know that?” Sam asked.

Dean set the remainder of his burger down. “Dad told me. I remember.”

Jess gave Sam a meaningful look. Dean was something of a bottomless pit when it came to junk food – it was a sure fire sign that there was something wrong when he stopped eating.

It was also a sure thing that, if they pushed too hard, Dean would shut up like a clam.

“Anything else Dad might have mentioned?” Sam asked.

“Nope, that’s it.” Dean said, apparently very interested in the pattern on the motel bedspread.

“So assuming we can kill when it eats,” Jess said, “how do we find the thing?”

Sam sighed. “Well, that ain’t gonna be a cakewalk. Shtrigas take on a human disguise when they’re not hunting.”

“What kind of disguise?” Dean asked.

“Historically, something innocuous.” Sam answered. “Could be anything, but it’s usually a feeble old woman, which might be how the witches as old crones legend got started.”

“That certainly makes sense.” Jess agreed. “But how many old women are in this town?”

“Hang on.” Dean said, reaching across to grab a map of the town. “I marked all the addresses of the victims – check what’s dead centre.”


“The hospital.” Dean repeated. “When we were there, I saw a patient, an old woman.”

“An old person, huh?” Sam asked thoughtfully. “In a hospital?” He shook his head with a sigh, before breaking into a smile. “Better call the coastguard.”

Jess sniggered, and Dean rolled his eyes. “Well, listen, smart-ass, she had an inverted cross hanging on her wall.”

“Doesn’t mean anything.” Jess agreed, still smirking. “The patients don’t tend to decorate their own rooms.”

“Worth a look though.” Sam said, now looking more interested.

Jess shrugged. “Maybe. Why don’t you two go and visit with her, while I do some more research?”

It was duly decided that this was the best course of action and Jess gathered up the remainder of dinner before accompanying them out to the parking lot. She stole a quick kiss from Sam before he got in the car and carted the trash over to the dumpster in the corner.

Not long after the Impala took off, footsteps sounded behind her as she wrestled with the lid and a feminine hand reached over her shoulder to hold it open.
“Thanks.” Jess said, glancing over her shoulder. She recognised the woman from the check-in desk earlier – judging by the fact that her older son had been working the desk beforehand, she guessed she must be the motel owner.

“No problem.” The woman said, her eyes lingering on the take-out containers. “You’re telling me my boys won’t grow out of it?”

Jess laughed. “Not a chance, sorry.”

“It’s Dr Carter, isn’t it?” She asked. “With the CDC?”

Jess nodded. “That’s right. I’m fine with Gemma.”

“Joanna.” She said with a smile. “You’re here about the children?”

“Yes.” Jess said, sighing heavily. “One of the … harder aspects of our job.”

“And the most rewarding?” Joanna guessed.

“Something like that.” Jess agreed. “I used to work in a hospital - sick kids were the worst part of the job, especially when you don’t know what's wrong.”

“Worst part of being a parent as well, I should think.” Joanna said, as they walked back towards the motel. “Do you have children?”

Jess smiled slightly. “No. You have two, right?”

“Michael and Asher.” Joanna said, her face lighting up in a smile. “They’re my world. Their father died in Iraq two years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Jess said immediately, and with complete sincerity. “That must be …”

Joanna waved off her condolences, her smile saddening. “I get by. Michael’s such a big help.” She glanced over her shoulder to where the Impala had been parked. “Listen, I don’t want to stick my nose in, but …”

Jess winced, realising she must have seen the interaction between her and Sam before she left. “Jack and I have been dating for a few months.” She said hurriedly. “Obviously, our bosses don’t know, but we work with Dave so often that he’s cottoned on.”

Joanna smiled at her. “Well, my lips are sealed. What I was going to say is, do you want me to book you two into another room?”

“Oh.” Jess said quietly, her face reddening into a blush that was only half-fake. “Oh, don’t worry. As long as we have two beds, we’re fine. We – uh – we try to keep our relationship away from work, so we try to keep things as normal as possible. Thank you for the offer though.”

Joanna nodded. “No problem. Let me know if you change your mind. We still have a few vacancies.”

The two women parted ways in the lobby and Jess returned to their room and the research. She decided the focus on witches in general, rather than search for some mention of a shtriga, but by the time the boys returned, she had still found nothing new.

Neither, from the looks on their faces, had they.
“She had cataracts and she’s been nagging the staff to fix the crucifix for weeks.” Dean grumbled.

Jess smiled sympathetically. “Well, it was worth a shot. And I’ve got nothing. I say we turn in, start fresh in the morning.”

***

‘Morning’ turned out to be much earlier than Jess had planned.

Half past five, to be precise, when someone began knocking on the door.

The knocking was quiet but insistent and Sam didn’t even stir beside her. Jess lifted her head, glancing across the room to see that Dean, likewise, was dead to the world. A fond smile crossing her face, she got out of bed and opened the door.

A young boy she recognised as Michael was outside, hopping from foot to foot with impatience.

“Are you Dr Carter?”

Jess blinked, taking more than a second to register her fake name. “Yes, I am. Michael, isn’t it?”

Michael didn’t answer, taking her hand and starting to pull her down the hallway. “Mom asked me to get you. Asher’s real sick and we called an ambulance but she said you said you’re a doctor …”

The rest of his words were lost in terrified babble, but Jess had heard enough. She managed to pull the door shut behind her and took his hand properly, letting him lead her to the suite of rooms Joanna’s family lived in.

As soon as she entered Asher’s bedroom, her eyes went straight to the open window.

There was a rotting handprint on the windowsill.

Her heart sank, but she could hardly tell Joanna that her son was comatose because of a witch.

“Hi Joanna.” She greeted, bending over the young boy’s motionless body. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“He’s normally awake by now.” Joanna sobbed. “I have to get the boys up early so I can get them ready for school and give them breakfast before dealing with the guests, but he just … he just won’t wake up.”

“How old is he?” Jess asked, pressing a hand against the boy’s forehead. He was hot – far too hot – but nothing she could do would bring the fever down, not without an immune system. He’d go from pneumonia to hypothermia before she could blink.

“He’s four.” Michael chimed in, his face white. “Nearly five. Is he going to be alright, Dr Carter?”

“I don’t know.” Jess said honestly, reaching across to touch Joanna’s hand. “Joanna, I’m so sorry, without the proper equipment, there’s nothing I …”

“No, I know.” Joanna said, wiping her eyes. “I guess … I figured it was better to …”

“I get it.” Jess assured her gently. “I’d rather be here and know there was nothing I could do to help, than be left wondering if I could have done.”

She stayed with the family until the paramedics arrived to take Asher to the hospital, whereupon Joanna broke down in tears and Jess made her a strong cup of coffee.
“I can’t lose him too.”

Jess winced, rubbing her back. “We’ll find out what’s happening, Joanna. We will. Why don’t you go to the hospital. I’ll keep an eye on Michael for you.”

Joanna nodded and Jess shepherded Michael out of the room so his mother could get dressed and gather her things.

It was while they were waiting in the lobby that Sam and Dean emerged, relief settling on both faces when they saw her.

Dean caught sight of Michael’s despondence first and stopped dead. “Hey, kid, what’s wrong?”

“My brother’s sick.” Michael said, with a tell-tale sniffle.

“The little guy?” Dean asked, his eyes flickering to Jess, who nodded.

“Pneumonia, I think.” She said flatly. “Joanna went to wake him this morning, couldn’t.”

“He’s in the hospital.” Michael added. “It’s all my fault.”

“Ah, c’mon.” Dean said, before Jess could. “How?”

“I should’ve made sure the window was latched.” Michael admitted. “He wouldn’t’ve got pneumonia if the window was latched.”

“Listen to me,” Dean said firmly, again beating Jess to it. “I can promise you that this is not your fault.”

Michael sniffed. “It’s my job to look after him.”

Jess stepped away from Michael towards Sam. “Is it just me,” she murmured, “or does Dean look as if he’s speaking from experience?”

“Yeah, I was thinking that.” Sam said, frowning.

Joanna appeared at that point, much more composed, her eyes still very red. “Michael, I want you to turn on the no-vacancy sign while I’m gone. I’ve got Denise covering room-service, so don’t bother with any of the rooms.”

“I’m going with you.” Michael said.

“Not now, Michael.”

“But I gotta see Asher!” Michael protested.

“Hey, Michael.” Dean said, resting a hand on his shoulder. “I know how you feel – I’m a big brother too, but you gotta go easy on your mom right now, okay?”

“Dammit.” Joanna muttered, her handbag slipping from her hands.

“I got it.” Sam said, stooping to pick it up.

“Listen, you’re in no condition to drive.” Dean said. “Why don’t you let me give you a lift to the hospital.”
“Oh, I couldn’t possible …”

“It’s no trouble.” Dean interrupted. “I’m headin’ that way anyway. I insist.”


Dean held the door open for her, then beckoned Sam and Jess over so Michael wouldn’t overhear. “We’re gonna kill this thing. I want it dead, you hear me?”

***

The library had a microfiche machine, which was not something that Jess had ever used much, but that Sam seemed perfectly comfortable with.

When Sam’s phone buzzed in his pocket, they double-checked the librarian was nowhere near them and drew closer together so Sam could put the phone on speaker on a low volume.

“How’s the kid?” Sam asked without preamble.

“Not good.” Dean answered in a whisper. “Where are you?”

“We’re at the library.” Jess said. “We’ve been trying to find out as much as we can about this Shtriga.”

“Yeah, what have you got?” Dean asked.

“Bad news.” Sam admitted grimly. “We started with Fort Douglas around the time you said Dad was there, same deal. Before that, there was Ogdenville, before that North Haverbrook, and Brockway. Every 15 to 20 years, it hits a new town.”

“And this thing is just getting started here.” Jess added. “In all the other places, it went on for months. Dozens of kids, before the shtriga finally moved on. The kids just ... languish in comas and then they die.”

Dean cursed on the other end of the phone. “How far back’s this thing go?”

“I don’t know.” Sam said, moving through some of the old reports. “The earliest mention I could find is this place called ‘Black River Falls’ back in the 1890s. Talk about a horror show ... Whoa!”

Jess’s eyes widened. There, on the screen, was compassionate Dr Heidecker, looking exactly the same in 1893 as he had the day before. “Oh, that’s not good.”

***

“That son of a bitch!” Dean growled, pacing around the motel room.

“Tell me about it.” Jess agreed.

“I’m surprised you didn’t draw on him right there.” Sam commented.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, first of all, I’m not going to open fire in a freakin’ paediatrics ward.”

“Good call.” Sam put in.

“Second, wouldn’t have done any good, because the bastard’s bullet proof unless he’s chowing
down on something.” Dean continued. “And third, I wasn’t packing, which is probably a really good thing, because I probably woulda just burned a clip in him on principle alone.”

“You’re getting wise in your old age, Dean.” Jess said teasingly.

“Damn right.” Dean said, ignoring the dig about his age. “Cause now I know how we’re gonna get it.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

“Shtriga works through siblings, right?” Dean began.

“No.” Jess interrupted.

“You don’t know what I’m gonna say,” Dean said, frowning.

“We are not using Michael as bait.” Jess said firmly. “Have you lost your mind?!"

“If this thing disappears, it could be years before we get another chance.” Dean argued. “It’s coming here anyway!”

“Then we get him to safety.” Sam said. “He’s a kid – we’re not gonna dangle him in front of that thing like a worm on a hook!”

“Dad did not send me here to walk away!” Dean said.

“Send you here?” Sam repeated. “He sent us here.”

“This isn’t about you two!” Dean snapped. “I’m the one who screwed up, alright?! It’s my fault! There’s no telling how many kids have gotten hurt because of me!”

Sam and Jess stared at him. “How is it your fault?” Sam asked finally.

Dean didn’t answer.

“Dean.” Sam prompted with a sigh. “You’ve been hiding something from the get-go. Since when does Dad bail on a hunt? Since when does he let something get away? Now talk to me. Tell me what’s going on.”

Dean sighed, his whole body slumping. “It was our third night in this crappy motel room and I was climbing the walls. I needed to get some air. Dad had left me in charge, told me not to leave the room, look after you, the usual. But I had to get some air. So I went down to the arcade the motel had. I wasn’t gone for very long – they were closing. When I came back in, it was too cold. I checked in on you, and there was … there was this thing, leaning over you. I tried shooting it, then Dad appeared and shot it, but it got away. Dad just … grabbed us and booked. Dropped us off at Pastor Jim’s about three hours away, but by the time he got back to Fort Douglas the shtriga had disappeared, it was just gone. It never surfaced until now. You know, Dad never spoke about it again, I didn’t ask. But he…ah…he looked at me different, you know? Which was worse. Not that I blame him. He gave me an order and I didn’t listen, I almost got you killed.”

“Dean …” Sam began.

“Don’t.” Dean said, getting to his feet. “Dad knew this was unfinished business for me. He sent me here to finish it.”

The door didn’t quite slam on his way out, but it was a close thing. Sam moved to follow, but Jess
put a hand on his wrist.

“Let me.”

“Jess . . .”

“No.” Jess said. “I know you want to help Dean, but you’re too close. Let me.”

When she got outside, Dean was sitting on the roof of the Impala, his feet resting on the trunk. She stopped beside the car, tilting her head up to look at him.

“Mind if I join you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Dean said.

“That didn’t answer the question, Dean.”

Dean sighed. “No, go ahead.”

Jess climbed up beside him, hugging her knees to her chest. “We’re telling him first.”

“What?” Dean asked, looking bewildered.

“Michael.” Jess said. “We tell him what’s going on, and if he wants to help then we do it your way. If not, we protect him, because he’s just a kid. It’s not his responsibility to get rid of this thing, it’s ours.”

“It . . .” Dean started, but she cut him off.

“I know that you don’t want to talk about it. You don’t have to. But I am, and I want you to listen. Alright?”

Dean closed his mouth and nodded.

“I do have a few questions.” Jess continued. “But they are about facts, not how you feel. Is that alright?”

Again Dean nodded, although he still looked like he was about to bolt.

“Did your dad know what he was hunting?”

Dean frowned. “I don’t know. He did at some point, but he never told me that’s what it was.”

“And how old were you?” Jess asked.

Dean shrugged. “Eight or nine.”

“And when you said it was the ‘third night’,“ Jess said, “was that since you had arrived or since you’d seen your dad?”

“Both.” Dean muttered.

“What about school?” Jess asked.

“He only enrolled us if we were staying more than a few weeks.” Dean answered.

Jess shook her head. “How Sam got a full-ride, I’ll never know. Alright, time to listen. What
happened back then was not your fault. You were eight years old. Your responsibility should have been doing your homework, or tidying your room, not taking up a shotgun to protect your brother. Either your dad didn’t know what he was hunting when he came here, in which case he should not have brought you with him, or he did know, in which case he should not have brought you with him – why not leave you with Pastor Jim to start with? This is not your fault, Dean, it is his, and if he ever thought or thinks differently, then he clearly deserves less than my already-shaky opinion of him.”

“Jess …”

“Listening, remember?” Jess said, giving him a stern look. “I know he’s your father. I know it’s not my place. God knows we run into him again, I will smile and keep my mouth shut because Sam already has problems there and I am not going to make them worse. I know that losing your mom must have been hell, and finding out that this stuff exists while you’re looking after little ones must have been even worse. But that does not excuse the fact that he was a fucking awful father, and I’m sorry, Dean, but it’s true. If Sam and I ever have children and, God forbid, something happens to me, if you and Sam raise those kids the way he raised you, I swear I will come back from the dead and kill you both.”

Dean cracked a shaky smile. “You’re terrifying. We wouldn’t, Jess. At least, I like to think we wouldn’t.”

“Why?” Jess asked gently.

“Because they’d deserve better.” Dean muttered, dropping her gaze.

Jess squeezed his hand gently. “So did you, sweetie.” She rested her head on his shoulder, heaving a small sigh, wishing she could turn back time and make things better. “We get Michael’s permission first.”

“Alright.” Dean agreed quietly.

***

As it turned out, Michael and Dean had more in common than just being older brothers. As soon as Michael realised that acting as bait for the shtriga could help his baby brother, he agreed.

Jess stopped by the hospital that afternoon (managing – just – to avoid even seeing Heidecker, let alone speaking to him) to assure Joanna that she would watch Michael that night, if the worried mother wanted to stay at the hospital.

Just as she had guessed, after a token protest, Joanna jumped at the offer and Jess returned to the motel to find Dean fitting a security camera in the corner of Michael’s room.

That night, the three huddled in the next room, watching the feed on Sam’s laptop.

“What time is it?” Dean asked, taking a sip of coffee.

“Three.” Jess answered. “How many coffees is that?”

“Lost count.”

“You sure these iron rounds are gonna work?” Sam asked.

Jess raised an eyebrow. “You wait until now to ask that?”
“Consecrated iron rounds.” Dean repeated. “And, yeah, that’s what Dad used last time.”

“Hey, Dean, I’m sorry.” Sam said suddenly.

“For what?” Dean asked.

“I’ve really given you a lot of crap, for always following Dad’s orders. But I know why you do it.”

“Oh God, kill me now.” Dean groaned.

Jess chuckled softly, the laughter dying on her lips when she spotted movement in the corner of the screen. “Look.”

Slowly, the window slid open and a black-cloaked figure slipped inside.

“Now?” Sam asked, reaching for his gun.

“Not yet.” Dean whispered.

The shtriga moved closer, leaning over the bed, and a soft pale light began to drift from Michael towards the disgusting creature.

“Now!” Dean ordered, diving for the door and bursting into the other room, Sam and Jess close behind him. “Michael, down!”

Despite being terrified, Michael had the presence of mind to follow orders, rolling off the mattress and under the bed, where he was shielded from the volley of bullets that dropped the shtriga to the floor.

“Mike, you alright?” Dean called.

“Yeah.”

“Just sit tight.” Dean told him, approaching the shtriga. When it didn’t move, he relaxed, but too soon – the shtriga suddenly sprung back to life, grabbed Dean by the throat and threw him against the wall.

“Dean!” Sam yelled, seconds before he hit the wall as well, sliding to the ground. The shtriga swooped down and forced his mouth open.

Jess watched in horror as Sam’s struggle for his gun became weaker, his skin turning grey. She aimed her gun, but the creature moved its hand slightly and she flew backwards, hitting the wall, her vision blacking out.

“Jess? Jess?”

Jess blinked, Sam and Dean coming into focus above her. Sam’s colour seemed to be back to normal, but he looked terrified. "What ...?"

"It's dead." Dean said bluntly. "We got it, it's dead."

She wasn’t on the floor anymore either – the ground was soft beneath her – and a quick glance around told her that they had moved her onto Michael’s bed.

“I passed out, didn’t I?”
“You were knocked out.” Dean corrected, his hand slipping under her head. “You hit that wall pretty hard.”

Jess flinched as his hand brushed over a nasty lump on her scalp. “That’s gonna be a concussion.”

“Don’t worry.” Sam said dryly. “We’re well-practiced.”

Jess smiled slightly, moving her head to see Michael sitting beside her. “You alright, kiddo?”

Michael nodded, but he looked exhausted.

“I should give you your bed back.” Jess said, trying to stand up.

“Whoa, hold on.” Sam protested, scooping her into his arms. “You’re not walking for a while.”

“I hit my head.” Jess argued. “I didn’t break my leg.”

“Still not walking.” Dean said, clearly in agreement with his brother. “Michael, are you gonna be alright, or do you want one of us to stay?”

Michael hesitated, torn between his fear and his need to be treated as more than a little kid.

“Never mind.” Dean said, with uncharacteristic sensitivity. “You go to bed. I’m gonna take this camera down. Your mom won’t be too happy if it’s here when she gets back.”

Looking relieved, Michael clambered back into bed. “You can use my mom’s bed, Agent Carter. She won’t mind.”

“Thanks, Michael.” Sam said, carrying Jess out of the room.

“Dean’s not leaving until he’s asleep.” Jess predicted.

“He’s not leaving period.” Sam corrected. “I know we both made jokes but he’s good with kids.”

“He’d make a great dad.” Jess agreed sleepily. “So would you.”

“We really having this conversation when you’re half-unconscious?” Sam asked, setting her down on Joanna’s bed, sitting beside her so she could nestle against him.


“We are not having this conversation now.” Sam repeated, stroking her hair. “Not while the bastard’s still alive.”

“Don’t talk about your father like that.” Jess murmured, her eyes closing.

Sam snorted. “I was talking about the demon, Jessie.”

Jess hummed in vague agreement, gradually slipping back under.

“I’ll wake you in an hour.” Sam murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I love you.”

Chapter End Notes
The tags are there for a reason. I know John Winchester is kind a 'love-hate' guy with the fandom. Personally, I hate him. You are not going to convince me otherwise. Like Jess, I see his motives, I realise what he must have been going through, but your past explains your actions, it does not excuse them.

Also, I hate the word 'shtriga'. That is all.

The line from John's journal is taken from the published version - there's also a bit more, but it would somewhat derail the plot so John's handwriting seems a convenient excuse for Jess not reading it.
Thanks to Austin (A-LionGleek) for his help and inspiration.

It was a side effect of working with Sam and Dean that Jess never took any news story for granted these days, especially when the stories in question were intentionally a little vague.

“Sam.” She murmured. “Check this out.”

Sam leaned closer to read her laptop screen over her shoulder. “Mark and Ann Telesca, huh? What jumped out?”

“Well, the police normally release some information.” Jess said. “It helps jog peoples’ memories. When they say nothing, it’s usually because they have nothing. So I cross-referenced all mentions of the story and the location and the details – and then checked the journal.”

Sam scanned his father’s messy handwriting and nodded once, decisively. “Got it. Where’s Dean?”

“Getting us some drinks apparently.” Jess said, glancing towards the bar where Dean was deep in conversation with a young woman.

Sam waved him over, but Dean signalled for him to wait, laughing at whatever the woman was whispering to him.

“They get much closer, they’ll get arrested for public indecency.” Jess muttered, getting to her feet.

Her movement did not go unnoticed and Dean hastily made his excuses.

Jess sank back into her seat with a smirk. She was usually a very good ‘wing-woman’ for Dean, but that didn’t mean she didn’t know how to ruin his chances – and he knew that.

“You’re mean.” Dean informed her, setting a beer down in front of her.

“We think we have something.” Jess said in response.

Dean glanced over his shoulder. “Yeah, me too. I think we need to take a little shore leave, just a little bit, right? I’m so in the door with this one.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “What are we today? Rock stars? Army rangers?”

“Reality TV scouts.” Dean said with a grin. “Looking for people with special skills. Not that far off, right? By the way, she’s got a friend over there, possibly hook you two up – what do you think?”

Jess clamped a hand down on Sam’s knee in warning and gave Dean her most deadpan expression. “Contrary to popular belief, bi does not mean threesomes. I’ve only ever done that once and it was a logistical nightmare.”

“I never know when you’re being serious when you say things like that.” Dean said.
“I know.” Jess said. “That’s why I do it. Now would you please focus?”

“Sorry, sorry.” Dean sat back in his chair, taking a swig of beer. “What you got?”

“Mark and Ann Telesca of New Paltz, New York were both found dead in their own home, a few days ago.” Jess answered. “Throats were slit, there were no prints, no murder weapons, all … Dean!”

Dean’s head snapped back towards her, pretending he hadn’t been eyeing the backside of the woman at the bar.

“Thank you.” Jess said. “No prints, no murder weapons, all doors and windows locked from the inside.”

Dean shrugged. “Could just be a garden variety murder, you know. Not our department.”

“That’s what I thought.” Jess agreed. “But your dad says different.”

This clearly caught Dean’s attention. “What do you mean?”

“Dad noted three murders in the same area of upstate New York.” Sam explained. “First one in 1912, second in 1945, and the third in 1970, same MO as the Telscas. Their throats were slit, doors locked from the inside.”

“So much time had passed between them that nobody caught the pattern,” Jess continued, “except your dad. No way it’s a serial killer, it would have to span across generations, and there’s usually more than one case.”

Dean nodded. “Alright, I’m with ya – it’s working checking out. We can’t pick this up until tomorrow though, right?”

“No …” Jess said slowly.

“Good.” Dean said, jumping to his feet and heading back to the bar. “Ladies! Did you miss me?”

“Dean …” Sam began.

Jess squeezed his leg. “Leave it, honey. We can handle the research tonight – you know he probably won’t be home.” She gave him a smile he knew well. “And you don’t even have to be a reality TV scout.”

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As well as her ‘never take news stories for granted’ rule, Jess had often considered adding another one – ‘Never let Dean pretend to be anything other than a cop or federal agent’.

In hindsight, they should probably have also checked the auction for a) a guest list and b) a dress code.

As it was, they stuck out like a sore thumb and the man in charge had already cottoned on that something wasn’t right.

“We’ll have to be quick.” Jess murmured. “I’ll bet anything that he’s gone to check the guest list and we’re not on it.”

“Check it out.” Sam said, pointing at a framed painting.
It was a little creepy, Jess had to admit. A typical 19th century family stared unsmilingly out at them – mother, father, two boys and a little girl clutching a doll.

“A fine example of American Primitive, wouldn’t you say?”

Jess turned to see a rather lovely young woman in a black dress making her way down a spiral staircase. Her dark hair was swept up on top of her hair, one curl trailing down the side of her face, and she gave them a charming smile as she reached their level.

“Well, I’d say it’s more Grant Wood than Grandma Moses.” Sam said, returning her smile. “But you knew that, you just wanted to see if I did.”

The woman laughed. “Guilty. And clumsy. I apologise. I’m Sarah Blake.”

“I’m Sam.” He said. “This is my girlfriend, Jessica.”

“We’re art dealers.” Jess said, following her gaze to the third member of their party, who was inhaling hor d’euvres. “And rest assured it’s also the last time we bring his brother with us. Right, Dean?”

“Dean.” Sarah said, with far more good humour than her father (Jess was assuming she was his daughter). “Can we get you some more mini-quiche?”

Jess glared at Dean and he swallowed hastily. “I’m good, thanks.”

Sarah turned to Sam. “So, can I help you with something?”

“Yeah, actually.” Sam said. “What can you tell us about the Telesca estate?”

Sarah frowned. “The whole thing’s pretty grisly if you ask me, selling the things this soon. But Dad’s right about one thing – sensationalism brings out the crowds. Even the rich ones.”

“Is it possible to see the provenances?” Sam asked.

“No time.” Jess interrupted, catching sight of Sarah’s father cutting through the crowd. “We have another appointment, honey, and we’re going to miss it.”

“Oh.” Sarah said, looking a little disappointed. “Well, the auction isn’t for a few days, so feel free to pop back if you have any questions.”

“Sarah …” Her father began, reaching them.

“Thank you, Sarah.” Jess said, pushing Dean towards the door. “Sorry, sir, we were just leaving.”

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“We’ll just drop in.” Jess grumbled, once they’d checked into the motel. “No one will notice us. Who needs a plan?”

“Alright, you made your point.” Dean said tiredly. “We’ll check it out first in future. Still, Sam did pretty good – Grant Wood? Grandma Moses?”

“Art History course.” Sam answered. “It’s good for meeting girls.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”
“In high school.” Sam said hastily. “It was in high school.”

Jess chuckled and Dean shook his head, unlocking the door to the motel room. “It’s like I don’t even know you.”

“I’d have thought you’d be … proud.” Jess said, her voice faltering as she took in the retro seventies disco room. “Huh. That’s a new one.”

Dean peered at the ceiling. “Well, at least there ain’t a disco ball. What was … providence?”

“Provenance.” Jess corrected. “It’s a certificate of origin – like a biography. We can use them to check the history of the pieces, see if any of them have a freaky past. Nice thinking, Sam.”

Dean smirked. “Well, we’re not getting anything out of chuckles, but Sarah …”

“Yeah, maybe you can get her to write it all down on a cocktail napkin.” Sam joked.

“Not me.”

“No.” Sam said firmly. “Pick-ups are your thing, Dean; not mine.”

“It wasn’t my butt she was checking out.” Dean said. “She’d go for it. In a heartbeat.”

Sam sighed. “In other words, you want me to use her to get information.”

Dean shrugged. “Sometimes, you gotta take one for the team. Call her.”

“Hold it!” Jess interrupted. “Sam, you are not calling her, you’re already taken, and she knows that. And as for you,” she turned to Dean, “how exactly do you know that Sarah would go for it – I didn’t see her checking him out.”

Dean laughed. “Well, I’ve only seen two other people look at him like that, and it’s always been at or not too far away from his – er – gluteus maximus.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Really, Dean?”

“And who would the other two people be?” Jess asked.

“Well, the first person was someone I met when Sammy here was still in high school. And the second,” he smirked, “I’m talking to her right now.”

“Well, at least I’m one of them.” Jess muttered.

“And who would the person in high school be?” Sam asked.

Dean chuckled. “You don’t remember? About your height, same hair colour as Jess, wore a real snazzy dress fit for a princess?”

Sam frowned thoughtfully. “No.”

“Seriously?” Dean asked. “Okay, Rachel Nave – that ring a bell?”

Sam’s jaw dropped into stunned comprehension. “Oh my God! Rachel Nave? You seriously remember her?”

“How could I not?” Dean asked.
“Wait, who was she?” Jess asked.
“She was my prom date back in junior year of high school,” Sam explained, “which Dean just
happened to decide to crash.”
Jess sighed, rubbing her forehead. “Now why doesn’t that surprise me?”
“She was a real hottie.” Dean said. “I’m surprised you turned her down when she made the million
dollar offer.”
“What offer?” Jess asked tiredly.
“Dean!” Sam protested. “I was sixteen years old! I’m not you – I specifically wanted to wait until I
was at least eighteen before doing anything like that, okay?”
“First of all,” Jess said, “I applaud you for clinging to your morals around this one.”
“Hey!” Dean protested.
“Second of all,” Jess said, ignoring him, “how exactly did she offer to go to bed with you in such a
way that Dean overheard her?”
“He can’t have done.” Sam said, frowning. “She did it before he got there.”
Dean chuckled. “Well, let’s just say, Sammy, it’s a real pity that you chose to be Little Miss Morals,
because you have no idea what you were missing!”
“Well, it’s not like you would …” Sam trailed off, realisation dawning. “You didn’t …”
“Yes, he did.” Jess said, pinching the bridge of her nose.
“Oh my God!” Sam groaned. “No wonder she went missing for so long! She was in bed with you?!”
“Yeah.” Dean admitted, grinning. “And boy did we have fun!”
Jess closed her eyes. “I did not need to know that.”
“Dean!” Sam protested. “What got into you?”
“Hey, don’t pin this on me!” Dean argued. “You’re the one who pushed her away!”
“Guys, let’s not fight over this.” Jess said tiredly.
“I’m serious!” Sam said. “Weren’t you, like, 20 back then?! She was only sixteen!”
Dean scoffed. “Please, you’re just jealous.”
“Okay, that’s enough …”
“The Hell I am!”
“I said, ENOUGH!” Jess snapped, causing them both to fall silent. “I do not want to hear another
word of this argument. You,” she pointed at Dean, “need to stop antagonising your bother and you,”
she pointed at Sam, “need to let go of something that means nothing now!”
“Jess …” Sam began.”


“No.” Jess interrupted. “You two are staying here for the rest of the day. *I* need a break from you two and all other sources of testosterone so *I* will see if I can get some info from Sarah. Especially since, as Dean so kindly pointed out, *I* apparently have a claim *I* need to stake.”

Dean winced. “You don’t have to do that, Jess; I was …”

“No,” Jess repeated. “I’m going to go out, call Sarah, maybe grab some dinner, whereas you two are going to stay here and work out your newest set of issues. Have fun.” She didn’t feel the slightest twinge of guilt for slamming the door shut behind her.

“Did she just walk out on us?” Dean asked.

Sam sighed. “Yes. Yes, she did.”

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Luckily, Sarah was just leaving the auction house when Jess arrived, and greeted her with a friendly smile.

“Jessica, right?”

“That’s right.” Jess said.

“Did you have some more questions?” Sarah asked.

Jess cast a careful look around for Mr Blake. She didn’t see him, but it was still better safe than sorry. “Well, yes, actually, but that’s not why I’m here. This is going to sound really odd, but would you like to grab some dinner? It’s just that I’ve been on the road with my boyfriend and my brother and I’ve had about all the male company I can take before I shoot someone.”

Sarah laughed. “I know how you feel. It’s just me and my father now; I don’t know how I’d deal with two of them!”

Jess took that as a yes, and the two managed to get a table at a nearby restaurant, chatting amicably about art.

Once their food was in front of them, Sarah gave her a piercing look. “How long have you been an art dealer?”

Jess sighed. “That obvious, huh?”

Sarah smiled gently. “It’s kind of obvious you haven’t been doing it long.”

“I haven’t.” Jess said honestly. “I was a nursing student and then my … my mother died.”

Sarah abandoned her knife to slide a hand across the table to cover Jess’s. “I’m so sorry.”

Something in her voice suggested it wasn’t generic sympathy. “You said it was just you and your father?”

Sarah nodded with a sad smile. “Cancer. Yours?”

“House fire.” Jess said, her throat closing up. “She was … she was asleep and the bedroom went up around her.”

“Oh my God …” Sarah whispered. “I think that’s worse … at least I knew it was coming.”
“I think I’d rather have had that.” Jess said softly. “Sometimes I wake up and I expect it to be a dream.”

Sarah shook her head, squeezing her hand. “That doesn’t change, hun.”

Jess managed a small smile. “It was about eight months ago. Sam and I were living together at the time and … I just needed to get away and he wanted a break from college. We both like art, so we figured … hey, let’s hit the road and see what happens.”

Sarah smiled back. “Jessica, don’t take this the wrong way, but …”

“I know.” Jess said, sighing. “Not how to go about it. I honestly think we’re both running from reality.”

“Sometimes, that’s a good thing.” Sarah said, releasing her hand. “What was it about this town that drew your attention?”

“Well, you were right about circumstances bringing out the crowds.” Jess admitted. She hesitated, wondering how much she should tell Sarah. “Actually, I’m a bit of a history buff as well, when we came here, I did some research and …”

“And?” Sarah prompted, sounding interested.

Jess lowered her voice. “Well, that poor couple … You know the same thing has happened in this town three times before? Exactly the same circumstances.”

Sarah frowned. “Really? That’s weird … close together?”

“No, decades apart actually.” Jess answered.

“So it wasn’t a serial killer.” Sarah said thoughtfully. She gave Jess a sharp look. “You’re not art dealers at all, are you? You’re private investigators.”

Jess shrugged, going with it. “Something like that.”

Sarah grinned. “Why didn’t you just say so?”

“Because we’re not here officially.” Jess admitted, spearing a bit of fish on her fork. “Just for our own professional curiosity.”

“I can understand that.” Sarah said. “So what’s the theory?”

“Well, at the moment, we’re wondering if something from the Telesca estate passed through the hands of the other victims.” Jess explained. “Maybe something that someone – or a lot of someones – wanted.”

“That wouldn’t keep the same MO.” Sarah said, frowning. “Would it?”

“Sometimes.” Jess said. “Of course, the other option is one of those paintings is haunted and that’s what killed them.”

Sarah laughed, but it was a nervous laugh. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

“Right now, it’s as good a theory as any.” Jess said, with false cheeriness. “I’m leaning towards option one, so …”
Sarah smiled at her. “Say no more. Walk me home after dinner, and I’ll grab you the provenances.”

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“I knew there was something freaky about that painting!”

Jess sighed. “Yes, thank you, Dean, and you were right. We also never disagreed with you, given we burned the thing and it still showed up to be sold.”

“And now that poor girl is dead.” Sam muttered. “How’s Sarah?”

“Either telling the police all about us,” Jess said, “or on her way here to confront us.”

Someone knocked sharply on the motel room door.

“I’m hoping for the second one.” Jess said, opening the door. “Hi Sarah.”

“What the hell is going on?” Sarah demanded.

“Come on in.” Jess said tiredly. “We’ll try to explain.”

“I just had to lie to the police.” Sarah said. “So it’d better be a good explanation. Who’s killing these people?”

“What.” Sam said.

“What?” Sarah repeated.

“It’s not ‘who’.” Sam elaborated. “It’s ‘what’ is killing those people.”

“Sarah, you remember that second theory I gave you?” Jess asked gently.

Sarah shook her head. “No. No, that’s impossible.”

“Sarah, you saw that painting move.” Sam said.

“No … no, I was … I was seeing things!” Sarah insisted. “It’s impossible.”

“Yeah, well, welcome to our world.” Dean muttered.

“Sarah, I know this sounds crazy.” Sam said. “But we think that painting is haunted.”

“You’re joking.” Sarah said, staring from one to the other. “You’re not joking.”

“Sarah, think about it.” Jess said. “Evelyn, the Telescas, they both had that painting. And the other couples I told you about … they had it when they were killed. Wherever this thing goes, people die. And we’re just trying to stop it. And that’s the truth.”

Sarah took a deep breath. “Then I guess you’d better show me. I’m coming with you.”

“What?” Sam asked, startled. “No. Sarah, you should just go home. This stuff can get dangerous … we don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Look, you guys are probably crazy.” Sarah said. “But if you’re right about this? Me and my dad sold that painting and might’ve got those people killed. I’m not saying I’m not scared, because I am scared as hell, but … I’m not going to run and hide either.”
The aftermath was quiet. After Sam, Jess and Sarah had almost all been killed by the ghost of little Melanie Merchant (because of course the daughter killed them all, what were they, stupid?), the Winchesters got ready to pack up and leave town.

At least, Sam and Dean did – Jess left them to pack and went and had lunch with Sarah.

“How are you holding up?” She asked sympathetically.

Sarah smiled shakily. “You know, after Mom died, I got asked that so many times that it grated on me, but … it’s different, isn’t it? Coming from someone who knows?”

“It is.” Jess agreed, methodically dismantling her burger so she could get rid of the pickles. “I know I only held it together because I had Sam.”

“Yeah?” Sarah raised an eyebrow. “You hire him out?”

Jess sniggered. “Sorry, honey. That one’s all mine.”

Sarah sighed melodramatically. “Back to the drawing board, I guess.”

“Seriously,” Jess said, fixing her with a look across the table. “Are you okay?”

Sarah drew in a deep breath. “I think so.” She said finally. “I think I’d feel worse if I hadn’t been involved. Because, yeah, that was scary, but no one else is going to get hurt. And we did that.”

“That is the best part of the job.” Jess said cheerfully.

“What’s the worst part?” Sarah asked softly.

Jess’s smile faded and she spent a few seconds reassembling her burger so she didn’t have to answer. “Sometimes, she said darkly, finally, “sometimes you can’t save everyone.”

Sarah’s hand slid across the table again and Jess gripped it gratefully. She had come to terms with the times they had failed, few though they were, but sometimes, faces floated into her peripheral vision, haunting her from beyond the grave – Meg, Max Miller, Jake Devins, even her own mother.

“How do you deal with that?” Sarah asked.

Jess closed her eyes tightly and willed the faces to disappear. “I remember,” she said in a choked voice, “all the people we did save.”

“Do you keep in touch with them?” Sarah asked curiously. “When they know, I mean.”

Jess smiled sadly. “I’d like to. Theoretically, I don’t. What we do is … dangerous and you may have noticed that we aren’t always honest with how we go about it …”

“Just a bit.” Sarah agreed good-naturedly.

Jess’s smile widened. “We dump our phones every month or so – new numbers, everything.”

“You said ‘theoretically’.” Sarah said.

“Well, I cheat a little bit,” Jess admitted, lowering her voice. “I have a burn phone. It’s not linked to me in anyway, but I don’t give the number out very often. I’ve only ever given it to two people – one
was a little boy we saved who went through some pretty crappy stuff – if he never needed someone to talk to – and the other was a girl who lost the rest of her family.”

“And me.” Sarah said, handing Jess her phone. “Not just if I need someone to talk to. Call me if you need someone to talk to. Remind yourself of the people you saved.”

Jess typed her number in and saved it. “I will.” She said. “Now I think we’ve got time for dessert before the boys come and spirit me away.”
If John Winchester made one more ‘Twilight’ crack, Jessica was going to deck him, Sam’s father or not.

Quite aside from the fact that only an idiot would use a fictional book as a vampire hunting tool, his apparent insistence on reducing her to a ditzy teenage girl was demeaning, sexist and was, quite frankly, driving her round the bend.

He seemed to have forgotten that his own sons had been surprised to hear that vampires existed, so his jumping on her lack of knowledge was a little rankling.

The worst part was that if she did retaliate, he would consider himself proved right.

In any case, Jess had bigger things to worry about – namely the missing people that had apparently been taken by vampires.

John was more concerned about what may or may not have been stolen from his hunter buddy, but since he wouldn’t actually tell them why it was so important, Jess was focussing on the human element.

Sam and Dean had stepped out to grab some food, but Jess had stayed behind to continue her research. In hindsight, it was not the smartest idea she had ever had, since it left her alone with John.

She had tried to make civil conversation, but he had made it abundantly clear that he wasn’t interested in a chat, so she gave up and concentrated on cross-referencing missing person cases with anywhere that a vampire might use as a lair.

“No offence, Jessica,” John began suddenly.

“You know,” Jess interrupted without looking up. “Most sentences that begin with those words are, in fact, intended to cause offence.”

John scowled. “We might work a bit faster if you weren’t here. You don’t have the experience.”

“You mean the experience Dean and Sam have hunting something they didn’t know existed two hours ago?” Jess asked sweetly. “If you were concerned about that, you’d have told them to leave. Not that it would work.”

John sighed. “Alright, what’s it going to take?”

Now Jess looked up, confused. “What do you mean?”

“What’s it going to take to get you to leave?” John asked bluntly.

Something began to burn in her chest and she set her laptop to one side. “Nothing.”
“Then why are you …?”

“I’m sorry, maybe I wasn’t clear enough.” Jess said sharply, standing up. “There is nothing in this world or the next one that would make me leave them.”

“If you cared about them at all …” John began.

Jess didn’t move consciously. Later, she would find that the next few seconds were a blur. She definitely slapped him though, judging by the stinging in her hand and the redness of his face.

John glared at her. “I ain’t never hit a woman, Jessica, don’t make me start now.”

“Don’t you dare,” Jess said in a low voice, righteous fury burning in her chest. “Don’t you dare accuse me of not caring about them. One of us was there when we went back to Lawrence, one of us picked up the pieces after they saw their mother’s spirit, one of us was there when Dean was dying, one of us was there when he walked away from the woman he loved again, one of us has sorted through each and every emotional landmine that their childhood left them with and it wasn’t you.”

“They don’t need a damn babysitter,” John argued. “You do not have the experience or the drive to …”

“Did you hear anything I just said? They don’t need a babysitter anymore, but you didn’t freakin’ give them one when they did. And I’m sorry, the drive?!?” Jess repeated. “I might agree with the experience, except the boys are damn good teachers and I’m not stupid enough to walk into a fight I know I can’t win, but I have exactly the same drive as Sam does – that thing killed my mother. I may even have more drive than Sam does, because I remember my mom, she was all I had from when I was six years old, and she was overprotective and drove me up the wall, but she was my mom and it killed her. So, yes, I do have the damn drive.”

“Do you know why it killed her?” John asked suddenly.

Jess froze, a little breathless. “What?”

“Do you know why it killed her?” John repeated.

“No,” Jess answered slowly. “Do you?”

“I think for the same reason it killed Mary,” John said. “I think it wanted Sam.”

“But it didn’t take Sam,” Jess argued.

“Doesn’t mean it didn’t do anything,” John said.

Jess’s mind flashed back to Max and his telekinesis, and Sam’s visions and slowly-evolving powers. “Even if,” she said slowly, “it wanted Sam and it did something to Sam and it killed Mary because she tried to stop it … even if it came after me to get to Sam and got my mom instead … it’s not Sam’s fault. He tried to blame himself when it happened, and I wouldn’t let him. He didn’t pin Mom to the ceiling and set her on fire.” She straightened up with a glare, hearing the Impala pulling in to the parking lot. “And I’ll thank you not to suggest that to Sam either.”

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Jess did not say a word to Sam about her … heated discussion with his father. Not when Sam confronted him about the Colt, not when John admitted to setting up a college fund for his boys and then spending it on ‘munitions, and not now, as they patrolled the campfire.
“Here,” John said, handing Dean a bag. “Toss this on the fire. Saffron, skunk’s cabbage and trillium. It’ll block our scent and hers, until we’re ready.”

Dean sniffed the bag and coughed. “Stuff stinks!” Nevertheless, he sprinkled the contents over the campfire, causing the other two to start coughing as well.

“That’s the idea,” John said. “Dust your clothes with the ashes and you stand a chance of not being detected.”

Sam glanced towards the car, where an unconscious female vampire was trapped in the trunk. “You sure they’ll come after her?”

“Vampires mate for life,” John said. “She means more to the leader than the gun. But the blood sickness is going to wear off soon, so you don’t have a lot of time.”

Sam checked his watch. “Half hour oughtta do it.”

John nodded. “Then I want you out of the area as fast as you can.”

“Dad, you can’t take care of them all by yourself,” Dean protested.

“I’ll have her,” John said. “And the Colt.”

“But after,” Sam protested. “We’re meeting up, right? Use the gun together, right?”

John didn’t answer.

“Here we go again,” Jess muttered.

“You’re going after the demon alone, aren’t you?” Sam asked in disbelief. “Seriously? After everything, you’re still going to treat us like kids?”

“You are my kids,” John said quietly. “And I know how important Jess is to you, Sammy. I’m trying to keep you safe.”

Jess raised an eyebrow. Maybe she got through to him after all.

“Dad, no offence, but that’s a load of crap,” Dean said heatedly. One Winchester stops, another one starts. Jess shook her head. Tag-team bull-headedness.

“Excuse me?” John asked.

“You had your chance to keep us out of it,” Dean said. “You never once took it. All those times Pastor Jim and Caleb and Bobby offered to have us stay with them, you never once took them up on it. And, Hell, you know what we’ve been hunting over the last year – you’ve sent us on half of them.”

“It’s not the same thing, Dean,” John said. “This demon? It’s bad – worse than anything we’ve come across before. And I can’t make the same moves if I’m worrying about you.”

“You mean you can’t be as reckless,” Dean retorted.

John heaved a heavy sigh. “Look, boys … I’m not expecting to walk away from this one. Losing your mother nearly killed me – I won’t watch you two die too.”
“And what do you think would happen to us?” Dean asked. “How do you think we’ll feel if you die and we could have stopped it?”

“We’re running out of time,” John said in response. “You should get going?”

Dean’s jaw set and Jess reached out, tugging on his sleeve with a sigh. “He’s right,” she said softly. “Talk later.”

Dean didn’t look happy, but nodded, turning to follow her.

***

“That may not have been one of our smarter ideas,” Jess admitted, rubbing her neck.

“You’d have been alright,” Dean said with certainty. “I’ve seen you and Sam get out of worse messes.”

“If you say so,” Jess muttered, tilting her head back to let him check her throat for bruises.

She knew there weren’t any - Luther’s choke-hold had been tight, but his arm was broad enough that the pressure had been more evenly distributed.

The sound of the door closing made them look up to see that John had let himself in.

“So,” he began, “you defied a direct order back then.”

“So we did,” Jess said, before Sam could.

“But we saved your ass,” Dean added.

“You’re right,” John admitted.

“I am?” Dean asked, releasing Jess.

“He is?” Jess and Sam asked.

“It scares the hell outta me,” John said quietly. “You two are all I’ve got. But I guess we are stronger as a family. So we go after this thing together.”
Jess hated hospitals.

Ironic, really, since she had always wanted to be a nurse, but she hated hospitals.

Especially when she was a patient and even more especially when someone she loved was a patient.

The last few days were a blur in her mind, between John finding out about Sam’s powers, the demon trying to take another mother, coming face to face with the thing that killed her mother …

And she still didn’t have a name.

She couldn’t keep calling it ‘the Yellow-Eyed Demon’.

Still, at the moment, it was all she had.

At least she had been proved right about Meg.

Not that this was something she was particularly pleased about – she didn’t want to be right about Meg – but she had been doubting her own sanity after seeing the young woman again on the way out of Chicago.

Demonic possession, in hindsight, made perfect sense, and made Jess feel a little better about causing her to be thrown out a window … at least until the demon was exorcised and the real Meg died from her injuries.

And then John’s possession …

Jess hadn’t even begun to let herself think about John’s – the demon’s – assertion that Sam had been planning to propose to her.

She was going to ask Sam about it once they’d got Dean and John to the hospital but then …

“Excuse me, Miss?”

Jess jolted, startled out of her reverie, and looked up to see a nurse crouched in front of her. “Oh, sorry.”

The nurse smiled at her. “No, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. The gentlemen you came in with?”

Jess inhaled sharply. “Are they alright?”

“I can’t get any sense out of either of the conscious ones,” she said wryly. “I’m starting to consider trying the other one, but I thought I’d try you first.”
Jess smiled weakly. “Of course. I’m Jessica Moore. The younger conscious one is my … fiancé, Sam Winchester. His father’s John, and then there’s brother Dean.”

“And what happened exactly?” The nurse asked.

Jess swallowed. “Dean came home pretty badly beaten up – figured he got mugged or something, so we got in the car to drive him to the hospital … we pulled across these crossroads and … this van, it … it came out of nowhere and …”

The nurse – her name tag read ‘Carla’ – patted her hand. “It’s alright. That pretty much matches with the van driver.”

“Is he alright?” Jess asked anxiously. She and Sam had escaped the worst of the injuries, because the collision had been with the other side of the car, so she had seen the demonic essence leave the other driver.

“Your concern does you credit,” Carla said, straightening up to sit beside her. “He’ll be fine. We think he had a minor heart attack at the wheel. Now, listen, Jessica, I have to ask you a question that is going to sound incredibly heartless, but …”

“We don’t have insurance,” Jess finished flatly. Normally, she would risk faking the forms, but with Dean as bad as he was, she couldn’t take the chance, not when this was not going to be an in-out job. “What’s the damage going to be?”

Carla told her, looking a little wary.

Jess nodded, running the number over in her head. It was high. Higher than she would have liked, considering the circumstances, but it was doable. “Can we work out some kind of repayment scheme?”

“Is that possible?” Carla asked, not unkindly.

Jess nodded. “Yes. I think I could probably pay up front, but I don’t really want to.”

Carla smiled. “That’s understandable. Would you like the number of our team or would you prefer to pass it to your attorney?”

“I’d rather the attorney deal with it,” Jess said, reaching into her bag for a notepad. She jotted down Robert Carter’s details and handed them to Carla. “Now what’s the other damage?”

“Well, Sam escaped with minor injuries,” Carla said, standing up. “John has a broken arm and severe concussion. Dean, I’m afraid, is completely comatose. There may be some difficult decisions to make.”

Jess nodded, blinking back tears. “Thank you. If you’ll excuse me, I need to speak to my family.”

***

Sam and John were arguing again.

“Could you two take that outside?!” Jess snapped, letting herself into the hospital room. “I know he’s in a coma, but there is evidence to show that people in comas can hear us.”

“Dad wants to fake the medical insurance,” Sam said, glaring at his father.

Jess rolled her eyes, crossing the room to Dean’s prone form. “That’s going to go badly. I’ve got it
covered.”

This broke through, and Sam whirled to face her. “Jess, you don’t have to … That’s …”

“I said I would save the money for an emergency,” Jess said softly, leaning down to press a kiss to
Dean’s forehead. “I would say this qualifies.” She straightened up and turned to face Sam. “Why
don’t you and I take a walk; I think you two need to give each other some space.”

Sam frowned, but didn’t argue as Jess took his hand and tugged him out of the room. They walked
through the hospital in silence, until they reached a small courtyard, where they took a seat on one of
the benches.

“What happened?” Jess asked gently. “That argument was way too heated for medical insurance.”

“Bobby towed the car back to the salvage yard,” Sam began, his voice flat with fatigue. “And Dad
asked me to go and get the Colt, make sure we could protect Dean …”

“That seems reasonable,” Jess said cautiously. “That demon does seem to be out to get y-us.”

Sam slipped an arm around her shoulders. “Yeah, except Dad also asked me to ask Bobby to get a
whole list of other stuff for protection, but when I gave Bobby the list, he told me it was to summon a
demon.”

Jess liked Bobby.

Over the last few days, news had flooded in about hunters being killed in demon attacks –
specifically hunters associated with John Winchester.

The last one had been a hostage situation that John had tried to take control of and failed.

That was when Sam and Dean went to Bobby Singer.

If Jess had been expecting another John Winchester, she was sorely mistaken. The man greeted Dean
and Sam with gruff but obvious affection, acting for all the world as though he were their father, not
John.

It didn’t surprise her in the slightest that he had seen John’s plan and foiled it.

“Now?” Jess asked.

“And that was the argument,” Sam said. “His heart stopped.”

So did Jess’s, just for a second. “What?”

“Dean’s heart stopped,” Sam elaborated, unnecessarily. “The doctors got it going again, but … Jess,
I think I saw him.”

Jess closed her eyes. “Honey … if you can see Dean’s spirit … then maybe …”

“No,” Sam said firmly. “I’m not losing him, Jess; I can’t.”

Jess bit her lip. All the doctors and medical care in the world couldn’t bring Dean back if he was
already dead. They could keep his body alive, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t already lost.

Still, she could hear in the waver of his voice that Sam was hanging on by a thread, so she decided to
let him have it for now. “Okay. So now what?”
“I’m going to get a Ouija board,” Sam said.

Jess sighed. “Of course you are. Sam, don’t you think we should talk about the last few days?”

Sam sighed. “What is there to talk about, Jess?”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Oh, I don’t know. It’s not like you seemed to have a death wish for a while there.”

“Jess, you heard what that demon said,” Sam said softly. “The demon is after me. It killed your mom to get to me.”

“Because it couldn’t get to me,” Jess said quietly.

“Exactly,” Sam said, getting to his feet and pacing in front of her. “This is all because of me, Jess – how can you tell me I shouldn’t do everything I can to stop it?”

“Sam, I love you. Mom is gone. Do I hate that she died because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time? Yes, of course, but I don’t blame you! Whatever caused that demon to go after you, Sam – you were a baby, how could you have done anything? You may as well blame your parents for whatever genetic pot luck you ended up with.” Jess stood as well, reaching out to wind her arms around his waist. He didn’t turn to face her, but he didn’t pull away either, and she rested her head between his shoulder blades. “I love you, you’re my everything. Please don’t leave me.”

Sam’s hands covered hers and squeezed. “I’ll do my best.”

“Well, don’t sound so enthusiastic about it,” Jess grumbled.

Sam chuckled, finally turning to face her, sweeping her into his arms, and she was so relieved to see a genuine smile that she laughed as well, tilting her head back so he could kiss her.

The warmth of his touch travelled all the way through her and settled in her bones, and when they parted, she couldn’t help giving voice to the other question on her mind.

“That story about you planning to propose to me … was he telling the truth?”

Sam hesitated, which told Jess a lot more than he probably wanted it to.

“I’m not expecting one now,” she added hastily. “I’d just like to know.”

Sam dropped his gaze and nodded. “I was going to. I was just waiting for Mom’s anniversary to pass and then I was going to make you dinner.”

A whimsical smile touched her lips. That was so Sam. “And then everything happened, and you wanted to give me time to get my head around it?”

“Am I that obvious?” Sam asked.
“No,” Jess said. “You’re that thoughtful. But I got my head round it.”

“Well, I figured I’d wait until we came out the other side,” Sam said. “The demon was wrong about that part. I don’t carry it in my pocket. It stays in my pack, with the photos of Mom.”

That explained a lot. Jess had seen that ring box, but she had never once thought it might have been for her. She had assumed, given its home, that it was something of his mother’s. She knew that Dean wore his mother’s wedding ring still.

“I picked it up along with the Colt,” Sam continued, pulling the small box from his pocket. “It was the conversation I was planning on having with you before Bobby blindsided me.”

Jess gave a tremulous smile. “What conversation would that be?”

Sam took a deep breath. “I don’t know what that demon wants. I know it wants me, but I don’t know why. I know that asking you to fall any deeper down this rabbit hole is exceptionally selfish of me, but I also know that you’re not going anywhere and I love you for it.” He fiddled with the box in his hands, not looking at her. “I can’t say the words, Jess. I want to, but … there’s a part of me that is genuinely afraid that asking you before the demon’s gone is …”

“Tempting fate?” Jess finished softly. “Yeah, I can see that.”

Now Sam looked up, relief crossing his face when he realised that Jess didn’t look hurt or upset. “I thought you would. But … I did get this for you. So … would you please take it?”

Jess hesitated. “No,” she said quietly. “Because taking it now would be giving up. You keep it. And then, when the bastard’s good and dead, you can give it to me properly.”

“Someday,” Sam said softly.

“Someday,” Jess agreed, resting her forehead against his. “Now, about that Ouija board …”

Chapter End Notes

To be continued ...
Chapter 23

Dean was definitely dancing with a reaper and they couldn’t do anything about it.

Quite aside from anything else, every solution they came up with too them back to Sue Anne Le Grange and how they had condemned her for playing God, so what right did they have to do the same?

Finally, they went back to Dean’s hospital room in the hopes that John might have some ideas, but he wasn’t there.

“Great,” Sam sighed. “Now where is he?”

“I don’t know.” Jess moved to Dean’s side almost automatically, sinking into the chair beside him. “I don’t think we can do anything.”

“You’re giving up?” Sam asked.

“Yes,” Jess admitted. “What can we do, Sam? Even if we can stop the reaper taking Dean’s soul, we can’t magically make him better. Wouldn’t he just end up a vengeful spirit?”

“I have to do something,” Sam insisted. “He’s my big brother, Jess; he …”

“I understand,” Jess said softly. “I do, Sam. I understand you can’t give up, I’m just preparing you for the fact that you might have to.”

Sam nodded, coming over to kiss her forehead. “Stay with him? I’m going to take Dad’s journal back to the Ouija board and see if we can figure something out.”

Jess nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Sam left her alone and Jess slumped back in the chair, closing her eyes. “You know, Dean, I’ve got a sinking feeling I know where your dad’s gone.”

There was no anger there, not anymore.

If John had come to the same conclusion Jess had, she couldn’t blame him for wanting to avenge his son and his wife as soon as possible.

She did think he could have waited until Dean had gone cold first though.

A soft noise caught her attention, and she opened her eyes again.

The room was empty.

The machines Dean was hooked up to continued humming and beeping and acting exactly the way they were supposed to.

But there had been a noise, Jess was sure of that – a huff or a sigh or … something.

Was it her imagination or were his eyelids flickering?

That was common in coma patients, she thought, but if Dean’s spirit was running around the hospital with a reaper, surely they shouldn’t be.
Casting a wary look at the door, Jess leaned forward and took his hand. “Dean? Dean, it’s Jessica. Can you hear me?”

She got no response, which was to be expected, but she could have sworn one of his fingers moved ever so slightly.

Months ago, she had told Dean that she didn’t believe in the power of prayer to heal people, that humans were no more important than any of God’s other creatures, and when it was time, it was time.

Still Roy Le Grange had picked Dean out of a congregation of hundreds to heal him (even if he had harnessed a reaper) and had insisted that it was divine intervention that led to that choice.

Jess had prayed more than she ever had over the last few hours, to everyone and anyone who might listen, but it had all been in vain.

“Hey Jude …” she sang softly. “Don’t make it bad … Take a sad song … And make it better … Remember to let her into your heart … then you can start to …”

Jess broke off with a sharp gasp.

There was no mistaking it this time – Dean’s hand had definitely contracted around hers.

Before she could press the call-button, his heart rate suddenly spiked and his eyes shot open.

Doctors flooded into the room and Jess was herded away from the bed to give them room to work.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it didn’t go very well; Dean was paranoid at the best of times, and he was becoming more and more distressed.

When they started talking about sedation, Jess finally forced herself into the crowd of people.

“Look, just back off and give him some space!”

“Miss …” One of the doctors began, but she ignored him, leaning over Dean so he could see her face.

“Dean? It’s Jess, honey, you’re alright, you’re okay. We’re in the hospital, Dad’s fine, Sammy’s fine – everyone’s alright.”

Almost immediately, his heart rate returned to a more normal level.

“You’ve got a tube down your throat that’s helping you breathe,” Jess continued. “The doctor’s going to take a look at you to see if they can remove it, okay?”

Dean made a noise around the breathing tube and she took his hand, squeezing it gently. “I’m right here, honey. I’m not going anywhere, even if you can’t see me for a bit, okay?”

She looked up at the doctor who had spoken. “I’m sorry, Doctor, but the last thing he remembered was a car accident and he’s very protective. He’d be more worried about us than himself.”

The doctor in question looked rather sheepish. “I apologise, Miss Moore, I should have realised that. Now, young man, let’s take a look at you.”

It was, for want of a better word, a miracle.
None of the doctors could explain how or why Dean had suddenly recovered, but the fact of the matter was that he had.

“So what did I miss?” Dean asked.

“Driver of the truck was possessed,” Jess answered, sitting back down. “Sam’s hunting a reaper with a Ouija board …”

“What?” Dean interrupted. “There was a reaper on my tail?”

“Yeah,” Jess said.

“Then how am I alive?” Dean asked.

Jess shrugged. “You’re stubborn? I don’t know, Dean.”

Dean sighed. “Where’s Dad?”

“I don’t know,” Jess admitted. “When Sam took the Impala to Bobby – she needs a bit of a tune-up by the way – he asked him to pick up some stuff, turned out to be to summon a demon. Last I heard, he promised Sam he wouldn’t go after it until you woke up, but he wasn’t here when we got back, so … I’m hoping he just went to the bathroom or for a walk or something.”

Dean rubbed a hand over his face. “Yeah.”

Sam sprinted around the door, skidding to a halt. “Jess, Dean just disappeared!”

“No, he woke up,” Jess said, pointing at him. “Sorry, I should have called.”

Sam gaped at his brother. “Dean? But … How?”

Dean shrugged. “Hell if I know. Jess says I was running from a reaper?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, still looking rather shell-shocked.

“How did I ditch it?” Dean asked.

“You got me.” Sam finally got his legs moving and stumbled over to sit on Dean’s bed, grasping his brother’s shoulder. “You don’t remember anything?”

“Not a thing,” Dean said, frowning. “But I got this pit in my stomach … Sam, something’s wrong.”

“Dean …”

All three looked up sharply to see John leaning against the door frame in relief.

“How are you feeling?” John asked.

“Fine, I guess,” Dean answered. “I’m alive, so that’s something.”

“That’s what matters,” John agreed.

“Where were you?!” Sam asked.

“I had some things to take care of,” John answered.

Sam snorted. “Well, that’s specific.”
“Sam …” Jess said quietly.

“Did you go after the demon?” Sam asked.

John sighed. “No.”

Sam shook his head. “Why don’t I believe you right now?”

“Sam, can we not fight?” John asked, almost pleadingly. “Half the time we’re fighting, I don’t even know what we’re fighting about, we’re just butting heads. Sammy … I’ve made some mistakes. But I’ve always done the best I could. I just don’t want to fight anymore, okay?”

Jess blinked. She was started to agree with Dean, something wasn’t right.

“Dad, are you okay?” Sam asked.

John rubbed a hand over his face. “I’m just tired. Would … Do you mind grabbing me a cup of coffee?”

“… Yeah. Sure,” Sam agreed slowly. “I’ll be right back.”

As soon as Sam was out of earshot, John looked at Jess. “Could I talk to you outside for a moment?”

The hair on the back of Jess’s neck was standing to attention, but she nodded.

“Jess …” Dean began, as she rose from her chair.

“It’s fine,” Jess said softly. She followed John out of the room, watching his movements with a critical eye. “Are you sure you’re alright? You look like you should be a hospital bed, not Dean.”

John gave her a tired smile. “I’m fine, Jessica. I wanted to apologise.”

Jess narrowed her eyes. “Christo.”

Nothing happened, but his smile got a little wider. “I don’t blame you for that. I’ve been very unfair to you, and I don’t really have an excuse other than – I didn’t know what to do, when Mary died. I wanted to keep them safe and I didn’t know how to. It’s hard enough keeping them safe, without adding you into the equation as well.”

“We can take care of ourselves,” Jess said coolly.

John heaved a sigh. “I know. I’ve made mistakes, I know that. But I love my boys.”

“I know you do,” Jess said, relaxing. “I know you love them.”

John nodded. “I’d do anything for them.” He hesitated. “I have no right to ask you for favours, Jessica, but … I have a feeling things are going to get … difficult. Promise me that you won’t let them forget that.”

For a second, Jess wanted to ask why he couldn’t do that himself. But she didn’t. In the days to come, she would wonder if part of her already knew. “I will. I promise.”

“Thank you,” John said quietly. “I’d like to talk to Dean in private, if that’s okay.”

“Yeah of course,” Jess said. “I’ll go and find Sam.” She watched him walk back into his son’s room and went in search of the cafeteria.
Sam was just leaving when she got there.

“Everything okay?” He asked, handing her one of the coffees.

“Fine,” Jess said, taking a sip. “Your dad wanted to talk to Dean.”

“You think something’s wrong too, don’t you?” Sam asked.

Jess sighed. “I don’t know, Sam. Your dad sounded tired, but that’s to be expected.”

When they reached Dean’s hospital room, he was alone.

“Now where’s he gone?!” Sam groaned.

Jess chuckled. “If he’s got any sense, for a lie down.” She held out a hand. “Give me the coffee, I’ll go look for him. You and Dean can talk.”

Sam hesitated, glancing in at his brother. “No, you talk to Dean. I’ll find Dad.”

“Are you sure?” Jess asked.

Sam nodded. “Dean will need to talk to someone. And you know what he’s like talking to me.” He kissed her quickly before she could protest and set off in search of his father.

Jess tapped on the open door on her way in, catching Dean’s attention, and he promptly put on a smile. “You know that doesn’t fool me in the slightest, right?” She asked.

Dean sighed, his smile slipping a little. “Yeah, I know. It was worth a shot.”

“How do you feel?” Jess asked, perching on the edge of the bed.

Dean shrugged. “Alive. I still …”

“Something’s wrong,” Jess finished, when he trailed off. “Yeah, I know. I feel it too.”

“You think he’s here?” Dean asked in an undertone. “The Yellow-Eyed Demon, I mean.”

“I don’t know,” Jess admitted, shivering. “I think if he was, I’d have seen him by now. What did your dad say?”

Dean stiffened. “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Jess was about to try to coax it out of him, when a shout floated down the hallway, freezing her blood in her veins.

“Dad! Somebody help me!”
Sam’s cry seemed to inject some kind of adrenaline into Dean. Before Jess could stop him, he had ripped out his IV and dived out of bed.

“Dean!” She raced after him, but she didn’t have to go very far.

Dean had come to a halt beside Sam, who was clinging to the door of one of the rooms nearby. The coffee he had been carrying earlier was spreading across the floor in a brown pool.

A team of doctors were huddled around John Winchester, desperately trying to resuscitate him.

“Dean,” Jess said softly, her eyes fixed on the scene. “Go back to bed.”

“Jess …”

“Now,” she said firmly, rounding on him with stern eyes. “In fact, both of you, back into that room. You standing here is not going to do anything except put more pressure on those poor people, and make it harder on you.”

“She’s right, boys.” The nurse Jess had spoken to earlier – Carla – had appeared behind them. “You, Dean, are still under observation.”

“I’ll stay with him,” Jess said, softening her tone again. “Just go.”

A glance at Dean – who may have made a miraculous recovery, but still looked on the verge of passing out – finally got Sam moving, and he helped Carla manhandle his brother back along the corridor, ignoring his protests.

Jess stayed where she was, sinking into one of the chairs outside the room, burying her face in her hands.

This just could not be happening. John was fine – she had been speaking to him just minutes earlier, and there was no signs whatsoever that something was wrong.

Except there were, weren’t there? A little voice whispered, right in the back of her head. Apologising to Sam, talking to you … whatever he said to Dean …

“Family for John Winchester?”

Jess looked up, rising from the chair slowly. “I’m his daughter-in-law. Well, soon-to-be, anyway.” She saw the doctor hesitate and sighed. “Look, trust me on this. His sons will take it better coming from me than you. He’s gone, isn’t he?”

The doctor – Dr Reid, Jess seemed to remember – gave her an exceptionally sympathetic look. “I’m afraid so. Despite our best efforts, we were unable to resuscitate.”
Jess drew in a very shaky breath. “So what happens now?”

She barely listened to Dr Reid’s explanation, her eyes fixed on the open door.

A hand on her shoulder made her jump, and Dr Reid gave her a gentle smile. “You can go in and say goodbye, if you want.”

Jess didn’t want, not really. She was not the right person to go in and say goodbye. But the boys wouldn’t.

Not here, in the hospital, where there were any number of witnesses.

And somebody would need to remove anything unusual before an investigation started.

So she gave Dr Reid a weak smile and stepped into the hospital room, gently shutting the door behind her.

The machines were still active, a monotonous beep echoing around the room.

Jess knew better than to touch any of them, but went straight to the bags in the corner of the room, rifling through them.

She found no sign of any of the items John had sent Sam to retrieve, more or less confirming her suspicion that John had gone looking for the demon.

With a heavy sigh, Jess straightened up and approached the hospital bed. “Well, John, I don’t know what happened. But you’re with Mary now. And, honestly, I hope she kicks your butt for those boys.”

His shirt was lying open from the CPR and defibrillator pads, which had now been removed.

He could no longer feel the cold, but Jess still couldn’t help pulling the bedsheets up and over him.

“I won’t let them forget,” she continued quietly. “I promise. And I’ll look after them. However much you didn’t think they need looking after anymore.”

Returning to the bags, she opened the secret compartment where she knew John had hidden the Colt, the weapon that could kill anything.

What she found – or, rather, what she didn’t find – sent her heart into overdrive. “Oh, John … what did you do?”

***

Sam had wrestled Dean back into bed, but he was pacing the room when Jess returned.

“How is he?!” They both demanded, in near-unison.

Jess didn’t answer immediately, taking Sam’s hand and coaxing him to the hospital bed, so she could sit beside Dean and take his hand as well.

“Jess,” Sam prompted. “How is he?”

Jess took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, boys. He … They couldn’t save him.”

“What do you mean?” Dean asked in a hushed voice.
“They couldn’t save him,” Jess repeated, squeezing his hand. “I’m sorry, Dean. He’s gone.”

The pressure on her other hand vanished and she looked up to see Sam vanishing out of the room.

“Leave him,” Dean said quietly. “He needs time.”

*And I need you here.*

Jess pretended she didn’t hear his unspoken words and eased back on to the hospital bed, turning to Dean for the time being. “Are you alright?”

“No,” Dean said, burying his face in his hands. “I … How did this even happen?!”

Jess hesitated. “Do you want me to answer?”

“Do you have an answer?” Dean asked, lifting his head.

Jess gave half a shrug. “Not a definitive one. The doctors won’t declare a cause of death without an autopsy, which, by the way, is standard procedure after a death in hospital, however you can overrule that. But I can give you two likely theories. If you want an answer that is.”

Dean lapsed into silence, and she didn’t push him, counting the tiles on the opposite wall. She didn’t move until Sam returned, his eyes red and the knuckles of his right hand bruised and bloody.

Jess rose to her feet. “Bathroom wall?”

“Outside wall,” Sam muttered, wrapping his arms around her. “Needed something sturdier. What happened?”

Jess turned back to Dean, who nodded. “Alright, Jess, let’s hear your theories. I don’t want an autopsy.”

“Me neither,” Sam agreed. “I trust your judgement, Jess.”

“Thanks,” Jess said dryly. “Don’t put me under pressure or anything.” She got two weak smiles, but nothing more. “Okay, so the first possible cause is heart failure. Your father was not getting any younger and he had a very stressful job. However, I’m inclined to think that wasn’t it, because you rarely get heart failure or a heart attack without some symptoms beforehand, and he would have called for help.”

“Okay, so what’s the more likely theory?” Dean asked, his voice shaking just a little bit.

“Aneurism,” Jess answered promptly. “Bleeding on the brain. Head injuries can be incredibly dangerous – why do you think I’m so paranoid when either of you get a concussion? Bleeds can sit for days or even weeks before acting, and when they do, it can be as quick as the lights turning off.”

“Shouldn’t the doctors have picked that up?” Sam asked.

“They should,” Jess agreed, “which is where it gets difficult. You say you don’t want an autopsy. I’m inclined to agree with you, because there will be all sorts of old injuries that will throw up questions we don’t want to answer. However, it would be suspicious not to demand an autopsy when there’s possible medical malpractice, so what do you want me to do?”

“You?” Sam asked.

Jess sighed. “Yes, me. You two just lost your father; you don’t need to be dealing with all the
paperwork round it. Let me handle it, just … tell me how you want me to handle it.”

“Call Bobby,” Dean answered immediately. “We need him to pretend to be a local coroner or something.”

“And he can handle the ‘autopsy’ when we get him home,” Jess finished. “Got it.”

She didn’t want to leave them.

How could she leave them, when she knew how badly they handled emotional vulnerability at the best of times?

At the same time, however, someone had to take care of the small print, so she kissed them both on the forehead and left the hospital room.

Outside the hospital, Jess walked in the biting cold to the far end of the parking lot and called the Singer Salvage Yard.

Bobby answered almost immediately and was understandably shocked when Jess told him that they needed an undertaker – but for John, not Dean.

Half an hour later, a hearse pulled into the parking lot at the back of the hospital, and Bobby got out, dressed in a smart suit.

“So I want to know where you got the hearse?” Jess asked with a weak smile.

“I got every kinda car in that yard,” Bobby said gruffly. “How you holding up?”

“I’m alright,” Jess said, “but he wasn’t my father. Still, we … we didn’t get along, but … that didn’t mean …”

Bobby patted her shoulder. “I get it, kid. John was a difficult man to get along with. How’d it happen? How’s Sam handling it?”

“Sam’s …” Jess sighed. “He’s surviving. So’s Dean.”

“Dean’s awake?” Bobby asked sharply.

“Oh, God, Bobby, I’m so sorry!” Jess said with a groan. “I forgot … Dean’s awake. He woke up about twenty minutes before John died.”

“He did, huh?” Bobby said, sounding relieved. “Well, that’s a stroke of luck.”

“I don’t believe in luck,” Jess said. “I believe in facts. That’s the other reason I called you. I don’t know what to do. John’s death wasn’t an accident.”

“That’s one hell of a statement to make,” Bobby said, sitting on the bench beside her. “You told the boys?”

Jess let out a snort of humourless laughter. “Of course not. I told them it was likely that John had a brain aneurysm that the doctors missed.”

“But you don’t believe that?” Bobby asked.

“I trained as a nurse,” Jess said tiredly. “I knew we all took blows to the head in that accident and I made damn sure I told the EMTs when they arrived. I also know that it’s SOP to give accident victims MRI scans in this state. I know John was given a scan on the day he was admitted.”
Bobby was silent for a few seconds. “Could they have missed it?”

“If they did, they’re completely incompetent,” Jess answered. “For it to burst now, this soon after the accident, it would have to be a big bleed. There’s no way they could have missed it. And there’s nothing that happened between now and then to cause an aneurysm. So if it wasn’t an aneurysm, what killed him?”

“What do you think?” Bobby asked, sounding interested.

“I think John had the ingredients to summon a demon,” Jess said flatly. “I think that he disappeared with those items and we don’t know where he went. I think Dean woke up out of a coma with no signs of internal injuries not long before he came back. Injuries like that do not just vanish into thin air. I think that before John died, he apologised to Sam for the fighting, he apologised to me for his behaviour, and he had a private talk with Dean that left him pretty shaken.”

“John didn’t apologise,” Bobby said immediately. “He never admitted he was wrong. Ever.”

“Yeah, I got that impression,” Jess said. “He asked me to promise that I wouldn’t let the boys forget that he loved them really.”

“Jesus,” Bobby muttered. “You’re right, that’s suspicious as Hell.”

Jess nodded. “And there’s one other thing. John had the Colt with him. I saw it earlier today.”

“So maybe he did go and kill the son of a bitch,” Bobby said.

“Maybe,” Jess conceded. “But when he got back, he said he didn’t go after the demon. And he definitely would have told the boys if it was dead. But, Bobby,” her voice dropped to a whisper, “I can’t find the Colt.”

“What do you mean?” Bobby asked.

“I can’t find it,” Jess repeated. “I went into the room, before I went to the boys, after he died – the Colt’s missing.”
I may or may not have mentioned that I suffer from anxiety. Recently it has been sky-high, which has resulted in it being exceptionally hard to write.

My brain seems to have settled on CSI: NY again and the rewrite of Kindred Spirits, which - okay, is nice, because it's been a while since my inspiration was there, especially since the show was cancelled.

However, it does mean that inspiration for everything else has dried up. And I could force myself to write, but when my anxiety acts up, that ends up causing panic attacks. You do not want me writing on panic attacks, trust me.

I have not given up on any of my other stories or series. I just need to give myself a time-out for a bit.
Happy New Year everyone!
So here we are, once again. I feel I should give some more background as to the reason behind the frequent long gaps between chapters, as the general opinion seems to be that all fanfic authors have hours of free time in which to write:
I am 26 years old and I work 9-5 at a finance company. At present I have five works in progress that demand immediate attention and a number of others that are currently on hiatus until I have time to write them. I also have an original work that I hope to finish and publish. If I get writers' block in my free time, I'm probably not writing that day. Couple this with the aforementioned anxiety, and you can begin to see the issue.
At any rate, I seem to be doing better at the moment - long may it continue!

The disappearance of the Colt turned out to be the least of Jess’s worries – the demon had disappeared; Dean and Sam had not.

And Dean and Sam were not coping with John’s death in the slightest.

If she was being honest, Jess was more concerned about Dean than Sam.

Sam – while not talking about it – was at least talking in the first place, whereas Dean was spending his days out with the Impala, barely speaking a word.

For the first few weeks, Jess left him to it, spending her days in Bobby’s library, devouring every book of lore she could get her hands on.

Since the return from the hospital, Jess and Bobby hadn’t discussed her theory that there was something supernatural about John’s death, and she didn’t dare mention it to either of the boys, not when they weren’t dealing with it in the first place.

Sam recovered first – if recovery meant developing a desperate need for revenge, which was partly how they ended up in a borrowed car outside a deserted bar.

“You’re sure this is the place?” Jess asked.

“This is where the phone number led to,” Sam confirmed.

Jess flicked through John’s journal once again, but she knew it was pointless. Whoever ‘Ellen’ was, she was never mentioned.

Jess thought she had found a mention fairly early on, but it looked like the next few pages had been ripped out, so that was that.

Whoever she was, Dean looked more animated than he had since the incident, and he was talking again – even if talking meant complaining about the minivan they’d borrowed from Bobby.

“Did you ask Bobby about her?” Jess asked, squinting at the sign outside the bar. She thought it said ‘Harvelle’.
The two exchanged a sheepish look that she took as a no.

“Honestly,” she muttered, digging her phone out.

“You do that; we’ll go and look around,” Dean said, opening the door.

“Alright, be careful,” Jess said, already dialling.

“What do you need, Jess?”

“Hey, Bobby, does the name Harvelle mean anything to you?” Jess asked.

“Sure – Bill Harvelle was an old hunting buddy – went on a few hunts with John. His wife, Ellen, watched the boys a few times.”

“Ellen left a voicemail for John,” Jess explained. “Sounded like she could help with the demon. The boys wanted to check it out.”

“Well, ain’t that a turn-up?” Bobby asked. “Ellen runs the Roadhouse – kinda like a halfway house for hunters, and she can handle herself, but she never hunted. Especially not after Bill died and having a little one.”

The ‘not like John’ went unsaid.

“Okay, thanks Bobby,” Jess said. “See you later.”

The boys hadn’t re-emerged, so she got out of the car, and headed over to the bar.

Inside, it was fairly dim, and there was a young man asleep on the bar.

Just past him, Dean and Sam seemed to be in some kind of stand-off with two women.

“Honestly, I can’t leave you two alone for a moment,” Jess said, rolling her eyes. “I assume you introduced yourself?”

“Not exactly,” the younger woman said, glaring at Dean, who still had a shotgun aimed at her. “And you are?”

“Jessica Moore,” Jess said. “Those two are Dean and Sam …”

“Winchester,” the older woman finished, a look of realisation crossing her face as she lowered her gun. “John’s boys?”

“Mom, you know them?” the younger woman asked.

“John Winchester hunted with your dad a few times,” Ellen explained.

“We got your message,” Jess said, striding forwards and taking the gun out of Dean’s hands. “I assume this is yours,” she added to the younger woman. “Because it isn’t one of ours.”

“Yeah, it’s mine,” she said, taking it with a smile. “I’m Jo.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jess said. “Thanks for not punching Dean.”

“Oh, believe me, I’m still tempted,” Jo muttered.

“Yeah, a lot of people get that,” Jess said.
“Look,” Dean interrupted, “you called Dad, said you could help. Help with what?”

“Well, the demon, obviously,” Ellen said, rolling her eyes. “I heard he was closing in on it.”

“How’d you even know about the demon?” Dean asked. “What, is there a Demon Hunters Quarterly I missed?”

“Dean, must you alienate everyone that wants to help?” Jess asked with a sigh. “Bobby said this place is like a halfway house for hunters – you probably should have told him where we were going.”

“How do they get anything done?” Jo asked her.

“Believe me, they are amazing hunters,” Jess said tiredly. “People, they’re not so good with.”

“Hey!” Sam protested.

Jess grinned at him. “Love you.” She turned to Ellen. “I think I found your name in his journal. But the next pages were torn out. What happened?”

“You’d have to ask John that,” Ellen said, a little coldly. “Look, if you don’t want my help, fine. But John wouldn’t have sent you if …” she trailed off. “John didn’t send you, did he?”

When neither of the boys would meet her eyes, Jess heaved a sigh. “I’m sorry. He … passed away a few weeks ago. We think the demon got him before he got it, one way or another.”

Whatever had happened with John in the past, Ellen looked shaken. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Dean said, his voice rough. “We’re okay.”

“Basically, if you can help,” Jess said hastily, before Ellen could challenge him on that, “we could really use all the help we can get.”

“Well, we can’t,” Ellen admitted. “But Ash will.”

“Who’s Ash?” Sam asked.

“Ash!” Ellen called.

The guy asleep on the bar started, almost falling off as he woke up. “We’re closed!”

Jess eyed the guy’s mullet dubiously. “Seriously?”

“Give him a chance,” Jo said. “He’s a genius.”

“If you say so,” Jess muttered.

Sam shrugged, pulling the folder with John’s demon research out of his jacket.

“Are you kidding?” Dean asked. “This guy’s no genius; he’s a Lynyrd Skynyrd roadie!”

Ash laughed. “I like you.”

“Thanks,” Dean muttered.

“Just give him a chance,” Jo said, stashing the shotgun back under the bar.

Dean sighed, taking the folder from Sam and opened it. “Alright, this is about a year’s worth of our
“dad’s research …”

“We can’t make head or tail of it,” Jess added.

Ash rifled through the papers, shaking his head. “Come on. This shit ain’t real – nobody could track a demon like this.”

“Our dad could,” Sam said.

“There are non-parametrics, statistical overviews, prospects and correlations …” Ash trailed off, seeing their confusion. “I mean … damn! They're signs. Omens. Uh, if you can track 'em, you can track this demon. You know, like crop failures, electrical storms …”

“Isn’t that usual for demonic activity?” Jess asked.

“Not normally at this level, no,” Ash said. “I’d be expecting a whole hoard of demons at this level, not just the one.”

“Can you track it?” Dean asked.

“With this, yeah,” Ash said. “Just give me some time. Give me … uh … fifty one hours.”

“Thanks,” Dean said. “Dig the haircut.”

Ash smirked. “Business in the front, party in the back.”

Jess took a seat at the bar, watching him disappear into the back room.

Dean wandered over to talk to Jo, which worried Jess slightly, but Jo seemed like she could handle herself.

Who knew – maybe she could get Dean to open up?

“What’s that, Ellen?” Sam asked, pointing at the wall behind the bar.

Ellen glanced over her shoulder. “Police scanner. We keep tabs on things.”

“No, the folder,” Sam said.

“Oh, that.” Ellen took the folder off the wall and handed it to him. “I was going to hand it to a friend due to pass through in a few days, but you’re free to take a look.”

Sam opened the file, Jess reading it over his shoulder.

“Couple murdered, child left alive …” Jess read. “God, that poor child …”

“Gets weirder,” Ellen said.

“You’re telling me,” Sam said, reading ahead. “Kid says they saw a clown tear their parents to shreds and then vanish into thin air.”

“Are we sure this isn’t just psychological trauma?” Jess asked. “I mean, it says here they went to the carnival that day – children who go through traumatic events often mix up their timelines about the incident.”

“Possibly,” Sam conceded. “But it’s worth a look.”
Jess looked from the file to his face, but his expression was unreadable. “Have you … seen something like this before?”

“No,” Sam said. “But Dad wouldn’t want us to sit around. We’ll take this one, Ellen; if that’s okay.”

Ellen shrugged. “Be my guest.”

Sam picked up the file and went to talk to Dean.

“Oh boy,” Jess sighed. “Silence and avoidance tactics.”

“I’ll take unhealthy coping mechanisms for 500,” Ellen said. “You want a drink?”

“Love one,” Jess said. “Unfortunately, they’ll want to leave tonight, and I need a clear head to deal with them.”

“How long have you and Sam been together?” Ellen asked.

“Coming up to … four years,” Jess answered with a smile. “He and Dean are a package deal.”

Ellen smiled back. “Nothing’s changed there then.” She glanced back to the back room. “Something Ash said bothered you, didn’t it?”

Jess grimaced. “I’m wondering how likely it is that the demon was letting John track him. You know, leading him into some kind of trap.”

“Making the omens bigger,” Ellen said, thoughtfully. “It’s possible, I suppose … John certainly had target fixation.”

“Jess,” Dean called. “We’re heading out. Thanks for the help, Ellen.”

Ellen raised a hand in acknowledgement. “Good luck, Jessica.”

“Thanks,” Jess said. “I’m going to need it.”

A few days later, Jess followed Dean and Sam back into Bobby’s house and watched them both disappear in separate directions – Sam upstairs and Dean out the back.

“What happened to you?” Bobby asked.

Jess rolled her eyes. “Killer clowns, a carnival, rakshasa and a whole boatload of Daddy issues.”

“Thought you were going to talk about the demon,” Bobby said. “What happened?”

“Damned if I know,” Jess said, accepting a beer. “Normally, it’s Dean on the ‘what Dad would have wanted’ kick and Sam holding him back. Suddenly, it’s like the roles have reversed. Ellen had a job; Sam agreed to take it.”

“Killer clowns?” Bobby asked. “Kid hates clowns.”

“I know,” Jess said. “Or rather, I do now.” He sighed. “Is it weird that I’m grateful that at least something about these boys is normal? Nice, normal irrational phobias.”

Bobby chuckled. “Tell me about it. What did Ellen say about the demon?”
“Her friend Ash has set up some kind of tracking algorithm,” Jess said. “He reckons when the demon pops back up again, he’ll know. Oh, and Dean didn’t even attempt to hit on Jo.”

“Probably smart – her mother’s a wildcat,” Bobby said frowning. “But that’s … not Dean.”

“I know,” Jess said tiredly. “Dean says he’s dealing with John’s death and Sam isn’t, but …”

“Neither of them is dealing with it,” Bobby said. “They’re just both not dealing with it in different ways.”

“I’m not too worried about Sam,” Jess admitted. “He won’t talk about what happened, but at the same time … he’s interacting with people he cares about, whereas Dean wouldn’t even take a one-night-stand as a distraction. And the way Jo was looking at him … she’d have gone for it. It’s not like Dean to turn down a sure thing.”

“Sam’s behaviour is odd though,” Bobby pointed out.

“No, it’s to be expected,” Jess said tiredly. “Even Dean hit the nail on the head – Sam did nothing but fight with John and now he’s trying to do what he thinks John would want, to make up for that.”

“And that’s not unhealthy?” Bobby asked sceptically.

“Oh, it’s totally unhealthy,” Jess said. “But it’s not as bad as Dean’s lone ranger act. Aside from anything else … he still hasn’t said anything about John’s last words.”

Bobby scowled. “I’d never say this to the boys, Jessica, but that man did more harm than good a lot of the time.”

“Hey, you’re preaching to the choir here,” Jess said, setting her bottle down. “It’s just nice to talk to someone about this without getting told that ‘they don’t need babysitters’.”

“John was a soldier,” Bobby said. “Never learned there’s a time and a place for stoic. Me, I seen enough hunters break because they won’t talk when something’s bothering ’em.”

“Well, I’m going to talk to Dean,” Jess decided. “Even if I have to keep talking at him until I get a response.”

“Well, you must have the patient of a saint to have put up with them this long,” Bobby said, toasting her with his beer bottle. “So good luck.”

Jess pulled a face and followed Dean’s earlier path out the back door.

The heavy metal was missing, which was her first clue something was wrong.

The second was the steady sound of thuds, which got louder, and louder, until she rounded a pile of cars to find Dean attacking the Impala with a crowbar.

“What the … Dean!” Jess darted forwards, seizing the crowbar on the back swing and wrestling it out of his hands.

Her instinct was to confront him, but the grief was so raw and real on his face that she just couldn’t bring herself to do so.

Throwing it away as far as she could, Jess did the only thing she could think of, throwing her arms around her brother and holding him tightly.

He fought her for a few moments, then folded in on himself, crumpling into her arms.
Jess stumbled, but just about managed to guide them both to the ground.

They ended up sitting against the front wheel of the Impala, Dean’s face pillowed in her shoulder. She held him close, murmuring comforting nonsense, over and over, while he shook with the force of sobs he had probably been holding back for years, not just since John’s death.

“Dean,” she whispered, “what did your dad say to you?”

His arms tightened around her, and she felt him shake his head.

“Okay,” Jess pressed a kiss to his forehead. “It’s okay. We’ll just stay here. You don’t have to tell me.”

At this rate, Jess wasn’t sure she even wanted to know.
Chapter 27

Jess liked hunting.

She would never go so far as to say she liked all aspects of hunting – certainly the spaces between hunts were both dull and a little nerve-wracking; she was forever waiting for the law to come crashing down on them for the various credit card scams that Dean ran.

Luckily, Robert Carter had agreed to help her with any problems in future, once she had come clean to him about the kind of life hunting was.

Having experienced a spirit, he certainly understood.

Admittedly he had no experience in criminal law, but he had enough friends in the business and enough of a reputation, that he should be able to assist a little, should anything arise.

The hunting itself, though, Jess liked; there was something satisfying about walking away from a case knowing that they had saved lives, or, at the very least, avenged a death.

The only case she had not liked was that of the Benders, but only because they were human and as far as she was concerned, that was not their division.

They deserved what they got as far as she was concerned.

Sometimes, she thought about Missy Bender, and where she was now, but then she tried to put the thought as far out of her mind as possible.

She doubted any amount of therapy could give that child the ability to live a normal life in human civilisation.

In any case, all of the hunts thus far had a clear reason.

Here in Montana, there were a lot of cattle mutilations, but no bodies – at least, no human bodies.

There had been several dead vampires.

Dean wasn’t worried.

Then again, he had made a new friend.

Gordon Walker turned her stomach in a way that not even the Benders had managed.

Dean and Sam were arguing again.

After his breakdown, Dean had buttoned up again.

And Sam wasn’t talking either.

As a result, they were both short-tempered and quick to anger.

“Oh, would you both shut up?” Jess sighed, resting her forehead against the motel room window.

“You’re giving me a headache.”

Dean rounded on her. “Jess, back me up …”
“No,” Jess said shortly. “I won’t back you up, Dean, because I don’t agree with you. So far, we have found no evidence of these vampires killing anyone …”

“That doesn’t mean they won’t,” Dean said.

Jess rolled her eyes. “No, you’re right. There’s a guy down there at the crossing, who’s been twitching for the last ten minutes and ignored the last four red lights. I’m going to guess he’s looking for a fix. He’s probably going to meet his dealer. That doesn’t mean he’s not going to stab a little old lady and steal her purse. I still can’t shoot him in the head.” She turned away from the window. “You can’t kill someone because they might do something.”

Dean sighed. “Jess, these are vampires. They’re not human.”

“And yet they have the conscious mind to choose to feed on animals rather than humans,” Jess said tiredly. “They are nothing like the last vampires we dealt with. And, frankly, I don’t trust Gordon Walker as far as I could throw him.”

“Ellen said he was a good hunter,” Dean protested.

“Yeah, in the way Hannibal Lector was a good chef,” Jess retorted. “I called her back. When I told her he was hanging around, she got worried, and I don’t blame her.”

“Jess, we’re hunters,” Dean said flatly. “We kill things. That’s what we do.”

“I know,” Jess said. “And I make my peace with that. But there is a difference between killing things to protect people and killing things because you take some kind of sadistic pleasure out of it. You are not a sadist, Dean. You’re a hunter. I’m not sure about Gordon Walker.”

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“Thank you for trusting me,” Lenore said quietly.

She was still shaking.

Jess didn’t blame her.

She was still shaking.

“Thank you for not proving me wrong,” Jess said, realising that she had been quiet for a beat too long.

“My pleasure, believe me.” Lenore glanced at Sam. “You need to bandage that.”

Jess squeezed Lenore’s shoulder and moved to her boyfriend’s side, rooting in her pockets.

Her jacket was one of Sam’s, purely because it had bigger and deeper pockets than any of her own — something that annoyed her immensely.

She didn’t have any bandages, but she did have a clean tissue, which she used to wipe the blood from Sam’s arm, trying not to think about Gordon’s knife slicing deep into his flesh.

Her phone rang and she pressed the tissue against the cut with one hand, fishing her phone out with the other. “Hello?”

“Jess, it’s Ellen.”
“Hey Ellen. Is everything okay?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing. Is Walker still around?”

Jess glanced back at the house. “Yeah. Dean’s taking him to task.”

“What happened?”

“Long story short,” Jess said, “the vampires here have been feeding on animals rather than humans, and Gordon decided to prove a point by tying one of them up, slicing Sam’s arm open and all but shoving it in her mouth.”

Ellen said a few words that Jess made a mental note to remember and one she would need to look up later. “Is Sam alright?”

“Yeah, he’s fine,” Jess said, removing the tissue to peer at the wound. Thankfully, the knife had been sharp, so it was a clean cut. “Lenore resisted it. She’s still a bit shaken, but so am I, so we’re even.”

“So we’ve got a vampire more humane than the hunter,” Ellen said dryly. “Fantastic.”

“Gets better,” Jess said. “Gordon’s first kill wasn’t the vampire that killed his sister – it was his sister. They turned her.”

There was a long drawn out pause on the other end of the line.

“Jesus Christ …” Ellen muttered eventually. “How do you justify that?”

“She wasn’t human,” Jess said bitterly. “If it ain’t human, kill it.” She grimaced as the blood continued to seep out of the wound. “Ellen, I’ve got to go; Sam’s arm’s still bleeding and I need to find a bandage.”

“Okay, honey; take care and keep in touch.”

“Will do; see you later.” Jess shoved her phone back in her pocket. “Sam, hold the tissue. I need to get a bandage.”

“There might be something back in there,” Lenore said tentatively.

“You shouldn’t have to go near him again,” Jess said. “And I don’t want to.” She examined Sam’s shirt, toying with the seam. “You like this shirt?”

Sam sighed. “I can live without it.”

“Excellent,” Jess said, pulling on the stitches. They gave way, allowing her to tear a strip of cloth from the bottom of the shirt, which she tied tightly around his arm.

“I should go,” Lenore said. “The others will be worried.”

“I’m not going to ask where you’re going,” Sam said.

“That’s good, because I’m not going to tell you,” Lenore said, her smile taking any sting out of her words.

“It was lovely to meet you,” Jess said sincerely, “even if we could all have done without tonight.”

Lenore glanced over her shoulder at the house. “We could. But I think your brother needed it.”
As she disappeared into the night, Jess leaned against the hood of the Impala, rubbing her hand over her face. “God, what a night.”

“Are you alright, Jess?” Sam asked.

“I’m not the one who had my arm sliced open,” Jess said.

The door slamming alerted them to Dean, who came stalking towards them, his face covered in bruises.

“Where is she?”

Sam shrugged, frowning. “Dunno.”

“Good,” Dean said shortly. “Get in the car.”

“Walker?” Sam asked. “Are you okay?”

“He’s tied up right now,” Dean said. “Don’t make me say it again.”

Jess wasn’t going to argue. And, for once, neither was Sam.

The Impala roared out of town far quicker than it had come in, making just a very quick stop to grab their bags from the motel.

It took an hour before Dean’s shoulders began to relax, and another twenty minutes before Jess was able to convince him to pull over to the side of the road.

Once they were parked up, among some trees so they were partially hidden from the road, Jess retrieved her first aid kit from her duffle bag. She re-wrapped Sam’s arm with a proper bandage, and then set about cleaning the cuts on Dean’s face.

While she worked, Sam wandered further into the trees, trying to make it look casual.

Jess knew better. “Want to talk about it?” She asked Dean quietly.

“He’s not subtle,” Dean grumbled.

Jess rolled her eyes. “Well, you can either have me ask it where he can’t hear us, or argue with me while he can.”

Dean’s jaw stiffened and he looked away as best he could while Jess was still holding his face in place.

Jess waited patiently, dabbing at a particularly nasty cut above his eye.

“He was torturing her,” Dean said finally. “I could see his argument up until that point. I mean … Dad was pretty clear. Humans, good. Monsters, bad.”

“I’ve met some bad humans,” Jess said gently. “Stands to reason that there are some good monsters out there.”

“I wasn’t convinced Sam was right about her,” Dean admitted. “Not until she turned away from the blood, but even before … Why torture her?”

“Because Gordon Walker is a sadist,” Jess answered. “I can’t believe he killed his own sister. Or, no,
I can believe it. I could understand if he found her and she was killing people, and he had no choice, but … you wouldn’t admit it, would you?”

“Wouldn’t brag about it,” Dean muttered, his eyes darting towards Sam.

Jess shut her first aid kit. “There’s nothing else I can do for you.”

Dean gave her a shadow of a cocky smirk. “What? Not going to kiss it better?”

Jess laughed and went up on tip toes to press an overly-exaggerated kiss to his forehead. “Better?”

“You’ve got a magic touch, kiddo,” Dean said, but his eyes still kept returning to his brothers.

“Dean,” Jess asked slowly. “Where, in your father’s world view, did humans with psychic abilities fall?”

Dean froze for a heartbeat, then turned away from her. “C’mon, Sammy!” He called. “I wanna put another hundred miles between us and that asshole.”

Sam jogged back to the car and Jess climbed back into the back seat, letting Dean avoid the question for now.

After all, she already knew the answer, and she wouldn’t be surprised if Sam did too.

What worried her more was why Dean was so reluctant to admit it.
“This is stupid,” Dean muttered.

“You’ve said,” Jess sighed, her head falling back against the headrest.

“Why is it stupid?” Sam asked.

“Going to visit Mom’s grave?” Dean said. “She doesn’t even have a grave. There … There was no body left, after the fire.”

“She has a headstone,” Sam said.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Yeah, put up by her uncle; a man we’ve never met. You wanna go pay your respects to a slab of granite put up by a stranger?”

“That’s not the point,” Sam said tiredly.

“Grieving is for the living, Dean, not the dead,” Jess said softly. “My mom only has a headstone as well, but I feel better knowing there is somewhere I could go, if I wanted to feel closer to her. Besides, I’d like to go.”

“After Dad … it feels like the right thing to do,” Sam added.

“It’s irrational, is what it is,” Dean grumbled.

“No one asked you to come,” Sam said, frowning. “You keep worrying about the demon – why don’t you go to the Roadhouse.”

“Yeah, drop us off here and we’ll meet you there tomorrow,” Jess suggested. “We’ll hitch a ride or something.”

“Stuck with those people making awkward small talk until you show up?” Dean snorted. “No thanks.”

“Those people are perfectly nice,” Jess said.

“Dean doesn’t do socialising unless it’s going to end in sex,” Sam said.

“I think Jo would go for that,” Jess said smirking.

“She’s not my type,” Dean muttered.

“She’s not your type,” Jess repeated. “Gorgeous blonde isn’t your type?”

“You’re a gorgeous blonde,” Dean said. “You’re not my type.”

“I am in a different box,” Jess said. “I don’t count.”

“Whatever,” Dean said, pulling up outside the cemetery. “Are we doing this or not?”

Jess sighed, but let him take the change of subject, getting out of the car. As she did, she caught sight of a florist across the road. “You guys go ahead; I’ll catch up.”
As she browsed the arrangements, Jess couldn’t help dwelling on Dean’s words.

Why had Mary’s uncle put up the tombstone?

Had John not gone to his wife’s funeral?

For that matter, why had Mary been ‘buried’ – for want of a better word – in Illinois rather than in Kansas, where her children were (at least to start with)?

Picking flowers was difficult when she had no idea what Mary’s favourite flowers were.

In the end, Jess went with her gut, and bought a posy of sunflowers, carrying them back across the road to the cemetery.

She found Sam and Dean in a quiet corner, with a simple headstone, bearing the words MARY WINCHESTER 1954-1982 In loving memory.

Clearly the uncle wasn’t that close to Mary – that, or he wasn’t a big talker.

“Sunflowers?” Dean asked. “Why sunflowers?”

Jess smiled a little. “You blinked it.”

It had become a little inside joke among the three of them, used so that Jess didn’t weird them (okay, Dean) out by ‘psychoanalysing’ them.

Dean sighed. “What did I do?”

“You get a little smile every time you see sunflowers,” Jess said. “Figure it’s either an old girlfriend or your mom liked them.”

“She loved them,” Dean said. “She used to plant them in the spring and use me to measure them.” He cleared his throat. “Just get it over with, yeah?”

Sam watched him walk away to look at some of the other graves. “I never knew that.”

“I don’t think Dean likes talking about her,” Jess said quietly. “It makes him feel stuff and he was taught that wasn’t a good thing.”

“You mean, Dad taught him,” Sam said.

Jess held out the flowers. “Just visit with your mom.”

“No, you do those,” Sam said. “I’ve got something else.”

Jess smiled. “Either way, you should have some privacy first.”

Sam nodded, looking back at his mother’s headstone. She watched him steel himself and walk over to kneel in front of it.

Looking away to give him some space, her eyes fell on Dean, who was examining a nearby gravestone with a frown.

Hopefully nothing was wrong.

“Jess.”
Jess smiled and moved to join Sam, who had risen to his feet to take his hand.

“Mom,” Sam said. “This is Jess. And I love her very much.”

Jess pressed a kiss to his cheek and bent to set the sunflowers on Mary’s grave. “Hi Mrs Winchester. We’ve sort of met before.” She hesitated. “Honey, do you mind giving me a moment with your mom? I need a moment of girl talk.”

“Sure,” Sam said, glancing over at Dean. “Oh, what’s he doing?”

“I dread to think,” Jess said with a sigh.

While Sam went to talk to his brother, Jess crouched down to talk to silent marble. “Okay, Mrs Winchester, now it’s just you and me. I love both of your sons very much, in very different ways, and I promise you that I will take care of them.”

Whatever Dean was saying, Sam was not happy about it.

Their voices were beginning to get louder.

Jess sighed. “However difficult they make it.” She straightened up, but lingered a moment longer.

There was no body, and Jess knew her spirit had passed on, but still …

“Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.”

“Dean, this is ridiculous!”

Jess shook her head. “On a more personal note, Mary, give me strength. Boys!” She called, turning away from the headstone. “This is a cemetery; have some respect!”

***

As they drove away from cemetery, leaving Angela Mason to rest in peace – again – Jess had found herself increasingly concerned about Dean.

Sam’s assertions that Dean was finding hunts where there were none in an attempt to avoid thinking about Mary – or John, for that matter – had been proved wrong, but that did not mean Dean wasn’t acting strangely.

Sam seemed to agree with her – he kept glancing at Dean out of the corner of his eye.

After a few minutes of silence – not even Dean’s classic rock tapes – Jess cleared her throats. “Is now a good time to talk about what not to do if I die?”

“Not funny,” Dean muttered, suddenly swerving to pull up on the side of the road.

As the door slammed shut behind him, Jess frowned. “I was only half-joking actually.”

“I don’t think it’s what you said,” Sam said, opening his door.

Jess followed suit, and they joined Dean at the front of the car, the three of them leaning against the hood.

“Dean?” Sam asked quietly. “What’s up?”
Dean took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re …” Sam faltered. “For what?”

“The way I’ve been acting,” Dean said. “And for Dad. I mean … he was your dad too. And it’s my fault that he’s gone.”

Jess closed her eyes. “I knew this was going to happen at some point.”

“You know?” Dean asked.

“I know,” Jess said heavily.

“What are you both talking about?” Sam asked. “How is it Dean’s fault?”

“It’s not,” Jess said firmly. “It’s not Dean’s fault.”

Dean snorted. “Face it, Jess – I was as good as dead and then made a miraculous recovery. Meanwhile, Dad’s absolutely fine, then he’s dead and the Colt’s gone as well.”

“Dean, Jess told us what happened,” Sam said.

“No,” Jess said tiredly. “I told you a possibility. What I didn’t tell you, because you had enough on your plates already, was that I made damn sure we all got MRIs, because we’d all had head injuries. If they’d missed an aneurism that burst within 48 hours, they’d have to be blind.”

“What are you suggesting?” Sam asked.

“You can’t tell me there’s not a connection, Sam,” Dean said. “I don’t know how it went down. I don’t know how the demon was involved. But Dad’s dead because of me. That much I do know.”

“That’s not how it works, Dean,” Jess said softly. “Maybe your dad did find a way of taking your place, I don’t know. But if he did, he did that because he was your father. Parents protect their children, Dean; it’s what they’re supposed to do.”

“But …”

“No,” Jess interrupted. “I know you don’t want to talk about your last conversation with him. But the last conversation I had with him, he asked me to promise him that I would never let you two forget that he loved you very much, and that he would do anything for you. Your father was an adult, Dean; he made his own decisions, and you are not responsible for those decisions.”

“Besides,” Sam added. “We don’t know any of this for sure.”

“Sam …” Dean closed his eyes, a tear slipping down his cheek. “You two and Dad … you’re the most important people in my life. And now … I never should’ve come back. It wasn’t natural. And now look what’s come of it.”

“Dean …” Jess murmured.

“I was dead. And I should have stayed dead. You wanted to know how I was feeling.” Dean sucked in a shaky breath. “Well, that’s it. What could you possibly say to make that alright?”

Sam didn’t answer.

Neither did Jess. She just leaned into Dean, slipping an arm around his waist, feeling him rest his
head atop hers, tears seeping into her hair.

But still, she said nothing.

Because Dean was right.

There was nothing either of them could say to make any of it alright.

Chapter End Notes

Quietly adding Gabriel to my list of characters to do better by. Poor baby. I want someone to give him a hug. I volunteer Mary - the boys are still a little too emotionally stunted for that sort of thing. Or Jack. I bet Jack would do it.
Chapter 28

Jess jolted awake, not completely sure what had woken her, but certain that something had.

Blinking a few times to adjust to the dim light, she realised that Sam was sitting up beside her, breathing heavily.

“Sam?”

Sam took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m okay.”

Jess reached across and switched on the light. They were in another motel - in separate rooms, for once - so she had no need to worry about waking Dean. “No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not,” Sam agreed, burying his face in his hands.

Jess slipped her arms around his waist, resting her chin on his shoulder. “Talk to me, honey.”

“There was … a man,” Sam whispered. “A doctor, I think. He went into this store and asked to see a gun. And the clerk laughed but handed one over and … the guy loaded it, shot the clerk and then shot himself.”

Jess felt a chill run through her. “Any chance this is a normal nightmare?”

“No,” Sam said. “This wasn’t normal … The man … His eyes were …”

“Possessed?” Jess asked.

Sam shook his head. “No, he wasn’t possessed; he was … calm. Too calm. We need to tell Dean.”

“Hold on,” Jess said hastily, as Sam moved to get out of bed. “Sam, it’s 2am. He’s probably fast asleep. And even if you do wake him up, how do you plan on finding this guy?”

Sam hesitated. “The last time I dreamed like this, it was Max,” he said slowly. “So it stands to reason that this guy has something to do with someone else like me.”

Jess sighed. “So, what, we look for people who lost their mothers in nursery fires when they were six months old?”

“How many can there be?” Sam asked in response.

“Well, before Max, I would have guessed one,” Jess muttered, falling back on to her pillow. “Okay, so I’m guessing Ash would be our best bet.”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” Sam agreed.

“Yeah, well, we’re not going to drag him and Ellen and Jo out of bed at this time of night,” Jess said firmly. “We will tell Dean in the morning and then go.”

“But, Jess, what if this guy’s still alive,” Sam said. “I need to stop him.”
“Honey, you don’t know who he is and you don’t know why he did it,” Jess said gently. “This isn’t like Max, where it’s obvious something else killed him. You said so yourself; he shot himself.”

“And someone else,” Sam reminded her.

“And someone else,” Jess agreed. “But if you don’t know who he is, or why he’s doing it, it may be better to figure out who we’re looking for and stop them from hurting someone else - if that’s what’s even happening. Maybe you’re seeing his father, or his brother, or something, and there’s nothing supernatural about it. I think saving this guy needs to be the cherry on top - it’s great if we can, but we need to be realistic about that fact that we may not be able to.”

***

As Jess watched Andy Gallagher sweet-talk the police officers investigating his brother’s suicide, she could feel his girlfriend trembling beside her.

“Tracie, you okay?”

Tracie choked out a laugh that sounded slightly hysterical. “Yeah, of course! Let’s see, I’ve been kidnapped by a psychopath, been mind-controlled into committing suicide, been mind-controlled into not committing suicide, and then shot a guy!”

Jess shot a glance at the police officers, but none of them seemed to have heard her. Taking Tracie by the elbow, she led her gently, but firmly, away from the scene, so they couldn’t see Ansem’s body on the ground. “You know that Andy couldn’t have done anything else to save you, right?”

“I know,” Tracie admitted. “It’s just … I knew what he could do. I’ve seen him do it. I just … I never knew what it felt like. And now I do and … I can’t … I can’t watch him do that anymore.”

Jess shrugged. “Then don’t.”

“It’s that simple, is it?” Tracie asked sardonically.

“It’s never that simple,” Jess admitted. “But you’re assuming that after all this, he’s going to want to keep doing that. He might not, and then you won’t have to watch. I bet he’s freaking out as much as you are.”

“I could see it,” Tracie whispered. “When Web - When Ansem was telling me to jump because I could fly … I could hear him and see it all and my mind was screaming at me not to listen, but I … I didn’t have a choice.”

Jess could see that Sam and Dean were already at the Impala, but she didn’t want to leave Tracie on her own. Thankfully at that moment, Andy approached them. “Tracie, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to use it on you …”

“You didn’t have a choice,” Tracie said, her voice not quite managing to stay steady. “But I don’t think I can watch you do it to anyone else …”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Andy said with a nervous laugh. “I don’t want to use it ever again.”

“See?” Jess asked. “I told you there was nothing to worry about. I’ve got to go, it was nice to meet you both, although the circumstances not so much.”
“Thanks,” Andy said, wrapping an arm around Tracie. “Hey, ask Sam to let me know when he has an explanation, yeah?”

Jess promised she would, bid them both goodbye, and jogged back to the car.

Dean pulled away before she had even finished shutting the door behind them. “Well, that sucked.”

“Ever the master of the understatement there, Dean,” Jess muttered. “I hate dealing with humans.”

Dean’s phone rang and she grabbed it from him before he could answer. “Not while you’re driving, for God’s sake. Dean’s phone.”

“Jess, it’s Ellen. You guys need to get back here. We need to talk.”

“No problem,” Jess said, more than a little concerned by the way the line went dead immediately afterwards. “We’re going back to the Roadhouse. I think Ellen has something.”

***

As soon as Jo disappeared down into the cellar to get a crate of beer, Ellen fixed them all with a look. “So … want to talk about the last hunt?”

“Not really,” Dean said.

“Tough.” Ellen dropped a number of folders on the table in front of them. “Ash’s research. Andy Gallagher - house burned down when he was six months old. Just like yours. You think he’s connected?”

“Listen …” Dean began, but Jess kicked him under the table.

“Drop it,” she said tiredly.

“Jess,” Dean said. “We can’t …”

“Can’t what?” Jess asked. “Trust her? Look, this is not a personal crusade anymore, and you know that. Deep down, you know that. You’re just hoping if you can keep it quiet, it will all blow over, and it won’t.”

“She’s right,” Sam said, his eyes fixed on the table.

Jess squeezed his hand and turned to Ellen. “We don’t have all the answers.”

“That’s okay,” Ellen said, her tone softening. “That’s half the reason I want to know. So I can help you.”

Jess glanced at Sam and Dean but neither of them seemed about the jump in. “We know that the demon that killed Mary has yellow eyes and he did something the night she died that caused Sam to develop psychic powers - prophetic dreams to be exact. Andy was the same, so was his twin brother. And we met another kid a while back as well, Max Miller. The demon has said that he has … plans for them, but we don’t know what they are.”

Ellen was quiet for a few minutes. “Are these kids dangerous?”

“No,” Dean snapped.

“Yes,” Sam argued.
Jess rolled her eyes. “Some of them are. It’s the same as any ability. Some people will use their abilities to do good, some to do bad.”

“How do the powers develop?” Ellen asked. “Is it something to do with the mothers dying?” Jess grimaced. “I don’t think so. I mean, it was Andy’s adopted mother that died in that fire, no biological connection. How could killing her give her son powers?”

“And there’s something else,” Sam said. “Ansem’s adopted mother didn’t die, and there’s nothing weird in his past - no fire, nothing.”

Dean frowned. “Why did the pattern change with him?”

“Maybe it didn’t,” Jess said slowly. “I mean … say it has nothing to do with the mothers. Say he just goes into nurseries and … does something. If that wakes the baby and they start crying …”

“The mother gets up and goes to check on them,” Ellen finishes grimly. “If she doesn’t wake up, she lives through the night.” She tapped the folders. “So if not all the mothers died - whether we need to keep them safe or stop them from hurting people - how do we track the kids down?”

“I don’t think we can,” Jess admitted. “There doesn’t seem to be anything in common between Sam, Max, Andy and Ansem, except Andy and Ansem were twins.”

“And they’re all male,” Ellen added. “But that doesn’t help us either. Jo!” She called. “Make it a crate of whiskey, would you?” She looked over at Sam. “Listen, Sam, I know that John could be a bit … fanatic when it came to hunting. And I don’t mean that as a criticism necessarily. But I want you to know that Jo and I will back you up.”

Sam cleared his throat. “Thanks, Ellen, I … um … Ash in?”

Ellen smiled knowingly. “Yeah, he is. Go wake him up.”

Dean jumped to his feet as well. “Mind if I use the bathroom?”

“Go ahead,” Ellen said. “And you’re staying here tonight, so don’t even think about going to look for a motel.”

“Yes ma’am,” Dean muttered, disappearing after Sam.

Jess shook her head. “Sorry, Ellen, they’ve got a touch of emotional constipation.”

“Growing up with John, I’m amazed it’s just a touch,” Ellen whispered to her.

Jess stifled a giggle. “Thank you for being okay with all this. John never really reacted to the news; I think he would have taken Sam as the exception, but …”

“I wouldn’t bet my life on it,” Ellen said with a scowl.

Jess still didn’t know the history between Ellen and John, but she was still not going to ask.

“He wouldn’t have been alone either,” Ellen added. “I don’t need to tell you all to be careful who you tell.”

“Absolutely,” Jess agreed. “You’re different.”

“Well, I should hope so,” Ellen said, fixing her with a look. “How are you holding up, honey?”

“I’m fine,” Jess answered automatically.
“And again, without the Winchester filter,” Ellen said.

Jess gave a self-deprecating smile. “Fair enough.” She sighed. “I’m scared. I don’t know what’s coming; I don’t know why Sam was chosen; I don’t know what John’s last words were, so I don’t know why Dean’s still in the headspace he’s in - he’s not normally this abrasive; I don’t know what the Yellow-Eyed Demon wants.”

“Well, what do you know?” Ellen asked.

“I know that something’s coming,” Jess said with a sigh. “I know how to handle two stubborn Winchesters. And I know that I’m slowly getting out of my depth.”

“You could stay with us,” Ellen offered immediately.

“Thank you,” Jess said, “but no thank you. I’m seeing this through, I just …” She swallowed. “I miss my mom.”

It was coming up to the one-year-mark and, far from having an answer, she just had more questions.

“Were you close?” Ellen asked gently.

“No,’ Jess admitted with a laugh. “We fought like cats and dogs. I barely saw her by the time she died, but … I miss knowing that she was there. I miss being able to call her and just have a chat, even if it did end in an argument most of the time.” She wiped at her eyes, feeling them begin to burn with unshed tears. “I just miss her.”

A chair scraped across the floor and Ellen’s arms closed around her, guiding her into an embrace only a mother could give.

Jess didn’t hesitate to turn her face into the older woman’s shoulder, permitting a few tears to seep out.

Ellen brushed the hair back from her face and pressed a kiss to her temple. “You listen here, honey; any time you need to talk to someone, any time you need to call someone and rant about those boys being idiots, or fret about the future, or anything like that, you call me, alright?’ She pulled back from Jess to look her in the eye. “And I think your mom would be so proud of you.”

Jess sniffled, managing a smile. “Thank you.”

“Right,” Jo announced, appearing with the drinks. “Who’s up for shots?”

Jess laughed. “Oh, yes please!”

Chapter End Notes

So my method for writing this fic is changing as I go. As Jess is getting more established as a hunter, it's getting less fun to rewrite the whole episode. I might do that with some, but most are probably going to be behind the scenes or if Jess's presence is going to make a huge change. Once I get to seasons 4 & 5, I'm going to get to have more creative ... but I don't want to tell you all that just yet!
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

I have actually finished planning this story. That's not the same as writing it, but it gets me a lot closer. I won't be covering every single episode, just the ones that a) contribute to the overarching story or b) I really like or c) I get a wave of inspiration for. This chapter is c) which means it's not a very long one.

“This was my hunt. I’m working it.’”

Jess could understand where Jo was coming from. She could. But given that they were both the exact profile of the victims thus far, she herself would rather have not been on that hunt at all.

Before she, or Dean, or Sam could argue, Dean’s phone rang, and he answered it, still eyeing Jo like he wasn’t sure what to make of her.

“Hello? Oh, hey Ellen. Is Jo with us?”

Jo’s eyes widened and she shook her head emphatically, her eyes pleading with Dean to lie to her mother.

Dean hesitated, but Jess didn’t, taking the phone out of Dean’s hand and walking down the corridor.

“Hi Ellen.”

“Jess - my daughter’s missing; is she with you?!”

Jess sighed. “Yes, she’s with us; no, we didn’t invite her.”

“Oh, for the love of … I’m flying out.”

“That’s not necessary,” Jess said. “Look, no one can make Jo leave, Ellen; not even you. She’s an adult.”

“I don’t want her hunting, dammit!”

“Neither do I,” Jess agreed. “But she’s going to do this, whether you want her to or not - and she’ll be far safer with us than just following us.”

The call cut off, and Jess returned to where she had left the others, now in the apartment that Jo (and Dean) had managed to rent.

Jo looked thoroughly mutinous. “Why did you tell her?!”

“Look, she was going to find out eventually,” Jess said. “You made the decision to lie to her; it’s not fair to make us take the fall for it.”

“I suppose,” Jo muttered. “I’m not leaving.”

“Fine,” Dean agreed. “But you stick with us, alright?”
“I’m not a child,” Jo snapped.

“No, you’re not,” Dean said. “What you are is an inexperienced hunter, whether you like it or not, and whatever this thing is, it’s preying on girls that look like you. So for God’s sake, stick with us and listen to reason, alright?”

Jess turned away to hide a smile; she was fairly sure that Dean wasn’t as taken with Jo as she seemed to be with him, but there was still a marked difference between how he dealt with her and how he would likely deal with anyone else that had tried this.

Later that night, Jess got another call from Ellen, this time on her phone.

“I’m sorry, Jessica - I shouldn't have bitten your head off.”

Jess smiled. “Honestly, Ellen; that was nothing compared to what my mother would have done if I’d pulled that. I’m more worried about the fact that I’m acting about twenty years older than I am.”

“You’ve been through a lot, honey.” Ellen heaved a sign. “I was projecting. Bill … Bill was with John when he died. They laid a trap for a hellspawn - Bill was the bait. I don’t know what happened, but something went wrong … John never told me. He got back, told me that Bill was dead, grabbed the boys and ran. I never saw him again.”

“Oh God …” Jess let her head fall back against the wall. “Ellen, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ellen said. “It’s not the boys’ fault either. I need to remember that. Just … look after her, okay? Tell me she’ll be okay.”

“I can’t promise that,” Jess said softly. “I can’t promise that she won’t get hurt. I can promise you that we’ll try to look after her, and I can promise you that I will always tell you the truth, even if you don’t want to hear it.”

“That’s all I can ask for,” Ellen said, “even if I feel like I’m going to regret it.”

***

“Hold still,” Jess said softly.

Jo did as she was told, flinching only slightly as Jess dabbed at the cut above her eye. “I screwed up, didn’t I?”

Jess sighed. “No. It’s easy to say yes, but no. It could have happened to anyone.”

“But it didn’t,” Jo grumbled. “It happened to me.”

“You know how many times Sam and Dean get hurt?” Jess asked. “Do you want stories?”

Jo’s lips quirked in a reluctant smile. “Yeah, but I didn’t just get hurt. I got kidnapped. It’s embarrassing.”

“The first hunt after my mom died,” Jess said, “I didn’t go with them. I stayed in the motel while they went out to this campground in the middle of nowhere. Turned out to be a wendigo and it stole their packs, so I had no contact for almost twenty-four hours. I nearly went mad. Which reminds me - I need to call your mom.”

“Please don’t,” Jo pleaded. “She’s going to be mad enough as it is!”
“I know that,” Jess said, pulling an antiseptic wipe out of her bag. “But she’ll find out anyway and I promised her that I would.”

Jo eyed the wipe warily. “That’s going to sting.”

“That place was filthy,” Jess said. “Infection is going to sting more than the wipe is.”

“I suppose,” Jo said. “But I’m fine.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jess said. “She’s having flashbacks.”

“Flashbacks to what?” Jo asked. “I’ve never been on a hunt before.”

Jess froze for a second. She hadn’t counted on Jo not knowing. “Doesn’t matter; ignore me.”

“No,” Jo said firmly. “If something’s wrong with Mom, I want to know.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” Jess said, tossing the wipe into the trash can. “Stand up and hold your arms up.”

Jo did as she was told. “Why?”

“I want to make sure you haven’t got any broken ribs,” Jess said, gently pressing her fingers down Jo’s sides.

“No, I mean why shouldn’t you have said anything?” Jo asked.

“Because your mom told me something that I assumed you already know,” Jess said. “I guess you don’t. But it’s not my place to tell you.”

“I know Dad went on a few hunts with John Winchester,” Jo said. “Is that it?”


“Left,” Jo answered. “My left, not yours.”

Jess pressed again.

“Don’t do it again,” Jo yelped.

Jess smirked. “You are so like Dean, it’s ridiculous. It’s just bruised.”

“Still hurts,” Jo muttered. “Can I put my arms down now?”

“Yeah, you’re fine,” Jess answered, packing away her first aid kit.

“Do you think he likes me?” Jo asked, a little hesitantly.

“Yes,” Jess said immediately. “I’m not sure if you’re both on the same page though.” She pulled out her phone, scrolling down to Ellen’s name.

“You’re not really going to call her, are you?” Jo asked. “She’s just being overprotective.”

“I promised her I would,” Jess answered. “Honestly, Jo, if you’re looking for sympathy on this, you’re probably looking at the wrong people. You’re lucky you have a mother to worry about you.”

“That’s a low blow,” Jo said quietly.
“I know,” Jess said with a sad smile. “Still true though. You know the last thing I thought about my mom before I found her body was ‘I do not have the energy to deal with her right now’. The last thing I said to her on the phone was ‘Mom, you’re being ridiculous and I don’t have time to deal with you right now.’ And I can never take that back. I can never go back to that moment and change it, or amend it, or add on an ‘I love you’ to soften the blow. So, yeah, it’s a low blow. But I would give anything for my mother to be fretting about me right now, even if she was just being overprotective.”

Jo reached out a hand, covering Jess’s before she could dial. “I get it,” she said quietly. “But you don’t need to call her. I’ll do it.”

“You sure?” Jess asked.

Jo nodded. “Yeah, but … I might need your help.”

“No problem,” Jess said. “The boys’ll be a while getting food.” She sat down on the edge of the mattress beside Jo, who leaned against her while she dialled her mother’s number.

“Hi Mom … I know … I’m fine, but … I nearly wasn’t. I wanted to tell you myself. Jess is with me, so she’ll make sure I’m telling the truth.” Jo managed a watery smile. “I know. I’m sorry I scared you.”

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