

## GRAVEN IMAGES

### East Nottingham, Pennsylvania

Miranda Baker swore she saw rainbows when it took her grandmother.

"But Gramma, you *promised!*" the little blonde kid's voice was like nails on a chalkboard, midway between whining and screaming as she stamped a sneakered foot and screwed up her face into a thunderous frown.

Elizabeth Baker sighed for what felt like the millionth time that day, an embarrassed apology on the tip of her tongue as she glanced around at the store's other shoppers, most of whom either frowned and shook their heads or merely smiled sympathetically.

Those who smiled, Lizzie noted, all seemed to be accompanied by similarly-aged pre-teen girls.

"Now honey," Lizzie placed a gentle hand on her granddaughter's shoulder, eyeing with obvious disdain the denim belt Miranda assured her was actually a skirt. "You know what your Mom said. Nothing that'll make you look..." she trailed off, trying not to use the same word her daughter-in-law had.

"I think it was 'slutty'," Miranda supplied, as if reading her thoughts.

"Well, you know," Lizzie said, smiling indulgently and gently stroking Miranda's intricately braided hair. "You can't blame her. Not after that whole belly-button piercing incident..."

The little blonde sighed a little too loudly, turning and fixing her grandmother with a look of utter disgust before tossing the skirt to the floor, plastic hanger clattering against the garish pink floor tiles. "It's not fair!" she whined. "Mom never lets me have *anything!*"

Lizzie pushed an errant strand of grey-blond hair behind her ear as she bent to pick up the skirt, suddenly understanding why her daughter-in-law had suggested shopping as a way to keep Miranda occupied while she and Lizzie's son Martin spent the weekend in some country retreat in Vermont.

Olivia had never liked Lizzie.

"Honey, tomorrow," Lizzie promised, smiling weakly as she stood looking at the rail where the skirt had been hanging. Deliberating for a moment, she replaced the offending item of clothing exactly in the correct place on the rail, perfectly in line, right in the spot from where Miranda had taken it. *Just so.* "When I've checked with your Mom."

She stood back and admired her handiwork, smiling distractedly, so intent on straightening the other garments on the rail that she never heard the faint whirr of the store's security camera as it swept slowly in her direction.

Her expression faltered as she finally looked up at the thundercloud that was her granddaughter. "How about some nice jewelry?" she asked, gesturing towards a display of hypnotically sparkling plastic. "Maybe a bracelet? Or some earrings? I'm sure your mom wouldn't mind that."

Miranda's scowl softened slightly as she followed her grandmother's gaze to the display of moderately-priced junk jewelry. She unfolded her arms from across her chest, eye caught by a ridiculously glittery butterfly pendant that scattered rainbows about itself when the overhead lights caught its glass wings just right.

Had Miranda not turned away from Lizzie just then, intent on making her way over to the beckoning pendant, she may have noticed the security camera tilt ever-so-slightly, or heard the faint hum as its lens carefully zoomed in to perfectly frame her grandmother.

But she neither saw nor heard these things, attention completely consumed by the necklace whose cool glass now rested between her fingers, little rainbows playing across her face.

Turning back towards her grandmother, a brief flash of bright light sent her vision suddenly white. Blinking hard, it was a couple of seconds before she could see again, and then all she could focus on were the rainbows in Lizzie Baker's surprised blue eyes as her grandmother collapsed in a heap to the floor.

The gasp of the other shoppers briefly drew Miranda's attention before she suddenly found herself racing over to her Gramma's prone form, oblivious to the concerned onlookers crowding about her.

"Gramma?"

Kneeling at Lizzie's side, Miranda gently took her grandmother's hand, looking down into eyes completely blank and uncomprehending, totally devoid of rainbows or of any other color, irises grey and lifeless, pupils huge and black as coal.

"Gramma?"

Miranda never heard the hum of the security camera as it gently tilted back to its original position. Never saw the barely noticeable flare of rainbow-colored light across the lens.

Never heard the man's satisfied voice as he watched the little blonde kid leaning over the collapsed form of her grandmother on his monitor screen, fingers gently teasing the camera's zoom control.

"Welcome home, Gramma."

"So who did you say she was?" Sam Winchester glanced briefly over at his brother as he took a bend in the road a little too fast, causing the '67 Chevy Impala to groan in protest and Dean's foot to instinctively jerk against an invisible brake. Straightening up the car, Sam grinned at the whiteness of Dean's knuckles as he clutched at the roadmap. "And I thought *I* was the control freak...!"

Dean didn't even dignify that with a response. "You roll my car into a ditch, I roll your ass into a coffin," he replied sullenly, returning to his scrutiny of the map as Sam reached over and retuned the radio to some chick rock station. Dean scowled harder, knowing Sammy was just trying to push his buttons.

"Driver picks the music..." Sam began to quote with a smirk.

"Shut up."

"What's not to like about this song?" Sam demanded, as the Goo Goo Dolls' *Slide* jangled out of the speakers. "Apart from the fact that it's not thirty years old."

Dean grimaced, burying his head back in the map. "It's not called *Classic Rock* just 'cause it's *old*, Sammy," he grouched.

"Yeah, okay," Sam deferred, knowing that any criticism of Dean's taste in music was likely to get him banned from driving the Impala for the next thousand miles at least. Sighing, he repeated his original question. "So, the woman who called...?"

Dean looked up at him. "Yeah," he said distractedly. "Said we came recommended."

"Who the hell would recommend *us*?" Sam asked, glancing at the road sign streaking past the window that cordially welcomed them to Pennsylvania.

Dean shrugged.

"And to do *what* exactly?"

Dean shrugged again.

"*Dean*?"

"*Sam*?" Dean mimicked his brother's irritated tone perfectly. "How the hell do I know? You're the spoon bender, remember?"

"I am *not* a..."

"Sam, she said she had a job for us. Said we'd come recommended. Said she'd *pay* us. *Pay us*, Sammy! Like, with *money*. You remember that, right? That green stuff that buys food and gas and..."

"And isn't illegal, yeah I get it," Sam replied, vaguely relieved that at least a paying gig meant Dean wouldn't have to go getting himself involved in something that could land him in jail one of these days. No poker, no pool, no less-than-legitimate credit cards... "And her name's Kim?"

"Kim Gregory," Dean confirmed. "Manager of East Nottingham, Pennsylvania's brightest new shopping experience..."

"I thought you hated malls?" Sam commented.

"If ever there was a Hell on Earth," Dean muttered.

Sam snorted. "Paying gig though, right?"

Dean shook his head. "The things I do for money..."

The Major Oak Mall was not quite the Hellhole Dean had envisioned. But pretty damn close.

Turning into the parking lot that he was fairly sure was bigger than half the actual town surrounding it, Sam guided the Impala to a gentle stop not too far from the mall's main entrance, careful to park near a security camera. Just in case.

Dean noticed and appreciated the gesture, although this was verbalized by a grunted, "Hey, you actually managed to park straight this time!"

Mentally filtering his brother's remark via the First Rule of Winchester-ese, namely, *Never say what you actually mean, particularly if an insult will do just as well*, Sam justified his response of "You're welcome," in relation to the Second Rule of Winchester-ese: *Don't pay any attention to what's actually being said. It's what's not being said that's important.*

Although of the three surviving Winchesters, Dean probably spoke the most, Sam was certain he actually said the least of all of them.

Stepping through the mall's main entrance, Sam found himself gazing up at four stories of glass, metal and consumer opulence, as garishly-colored shop fronts stretched out as far as the eye could see, connected by curving glass escalators with fake palm trees clustered every few feet.

He could feel Dean hesitating behind him, hovering uncomfortably in the automatic doors as way too many bad mall experiences as a kid, and particularly as a teenager, came back to haunt him. Malls were where "normal" kids hung out, Sam remembered Dean telling him once. They weren't for people like them.

For his part, Sam had always had an easier time of making friends at school than Dean had and didn't share in his brother's antisocial aversion to these temples of consumerism.

Sam glanced back, fixing Dean with one of his "well?" stares, until his brother finally made eye contact, shrugged his shoulders like it didn't bother him, and started to make his way over to the adjacent Information Desk.

The guy behind the counter raked a practiced eye over Dean as he approached, before turning to Sam and performing the same threat assessment. When Dean just stared back at him, deliberately trying to provoke some kind of reaction on the man's carefully blank face, Sam decided to step into the breach before his brother wound up getting thrown out on his ass.

"Kim Gregory?" he said affably, the information guy merely blinking and raising an eyebrow. "She's expecting us," Sam added with his best conciliatory smile.

"Name?" the man demanded mechanically, lifting a telephone receiver to his ear

as his fingers poised over the keypad.

Sam felt Dean start to fidget next to him, and didn't need to look at him to know he'd got that "I'm going to ram that phone down your throat, pal" look on his face right now.

"Winchester," Sam said quickly. "Sam and Dean Win –"

"You made it!" a voice in Dean's ear startled him enough to spin suddenly, eyes coming to rest on a rather stunning-looking black woman in an expensively-tailored dark blue suit and heels that made her almost as tall as he was. Her hair was pulled back into a long, straight ponytail that dangled halfway down her back, and her flawless skin made her seem somehow ageless.

He whistled mentally. Almost old enough to be his Mom, sure. But *damn...*

"Kim Gregory," the woman said, smiling broadly to reveal perfect white teeth as she held out a hand towards Dean.

He hesitated for a fraction of a second, barely suppressing his most rakish grin, before taking the outstretched hand. "Dean," he replied, reluctantly releasing Kim's incredibly firm grip as Sam nudged him out of the way.

"Sam," Sam introduced himself, an equally bright smile lighting up his face as he took the woman's hand.

*Damn*, Dean found himself thinking. *Here come the dimples...*

Kim released Sam's hand, a wry smile on her own face as she took a step back from them both, almost as if she was appraising them in return. "Boy," she said, hands on hips. "Haley wasn't kidding. You two really *do* look like you could have been made in a lab!" She nodded approvingly, and Sam raised his eyebrows, uncertain whether that was meant to be an insult or a compliment.

Dean merely snorted. "Haley?" he echoed with a grin. "Haley Collins? *She* recommended us to you?"

"Uh-huh," Kim nodded. "She said you guys helped her and her brothers out with a little – uh – problem they had."

"Not so little," Sam replied, shuddering at the thought of the wendigo that had dragged Haley's brother Tommy off to hang in his larder. That thing had made even *Sam* look short.

"How d'you know Haley?" Dean asked carefully. He'd kept in sporadic contact with the girl since their untimely encounter with tall, dark and disgusting, but she'd not mentioned having recommended them to anyone.

Kim's smile faltered a little. "I went to school with her Mom," she replied, before adding a little sadly, "After she and her husband passed, I kind of kept in touch with Haley and the boys. Just to make sure they were okay."

Dean nodded his understanding.

"She was pretty taken with you though," Kim added, brightening, looking Dean up and down with a wicked glint in her eye. "And that doesn't happen very often, let me tell you."

Sam thought he caught a brief glimmer of embarrassment in his brother's eyes – something else that didn't happen very often. *Huh*. Maybe Dean had liked Haley a little more than he'd let on at the time.

Dean regained his composure quickly, easily finding his trademark immodest grin. "Hey, what's not to like?" he said, spreading his arms wide.

Sam snickered, an evil grin spreading across his face. "That must be because you nearly *are* thirty years old," he muttered, echoing their earlier discussion of Dean's musical tastes.

Dean tossed him a venomous glare. "Who rattled your playpen, junior?" he snapped. "Go back to your crayons, kid, the grown-ups are talking."

Kim cleared her throat then, as if to remind her guests of her presence, and Sam just smiled at her sheepishly like a naughty schoolboy, while Dean recovered his grin.

“So,” he said, taking a step towards Kim and lowering his voice. “I guess Haley told you what we – uh – do? So what exactly can we help you out with?”

Kim’s brows drew together pensively. “Not here,” she said, glancing briefly over Dean’s shoulder to the automaton behind the Information Desk. “Let’s go for a walk.”

She led them back out into the parking lot, long strides almost making it hard for the Winchesters to keep up with her. Once out into the fresh air, she slowed, eventually coming to a halt next to one of the tall lampposts dotted about the lot, leaning against it as if she suddenly needed the support.

At the look of concern from her guests, she waved them away with a smile. “Don’t worry,” she said lightly. “It’s stress, apparently.” She shook her head. “Like I have anything to be stressed about. Could lose my job by the end of the week if I don’t get this straightened out, but – no pressure, boys.” Her smile didn’t quite make it to her eyes this time.

“Kim –” Sam began.

“You see this parking lot?” Kim cut him off with a wave of her hand, indicating the vast expanse of asphalt surrounding her. “We’ve been open three months now. This lot should be pretty damn full of enthusiastic shoppers by now.”

Sam took another look around the parking lot. The almost empty parking lot. Come to think of it, they’d gotten a pretty sweet spot considering it was a Saturday. “Is it a security problem?” he asked. “Because I noticed you’ve not got many cameras around – maybe people don’t feel safe...?”

Kim laughed mirthlessly. “Oh, people don’t feel safe alright,” she agreed. “But not because we don’t have much security.” She smiled indulgently at Sam’s frown, voice softening. “That’s the main road through to Lancaster,” she said, indicating the highway which ran the length of one side of the lot. “We don’t put cameras on that side. A lot of Amish use that road.”

“Amish?” Dean echoed.

Sam nodded, suddenly understanding. “Oh, right,” he said. “They have that whole ‘cameras can steal your soul’ thing going on.”

Kim shrugged. “It’s partly that,” she agreed. “Although it has more to do with the worship of idols, graven images, that sort of thing.”

“Graven images?” Dean wasn’t sure he was following this conversation.

“Like false gods?” Sam clarified.

“Yeah, sort of,” Kim said. “But I think it has more to do with pride. As a sin, I mean. The Amish believe that a photograph – or any image in which a person can be recognized – could lead to that person becoming prideful, admiring their own appearance. Essentially, worshiping something other than God – self-worship I guess. Or that’s how it was explained to me. So we try to keep the cameras away from the highway – you know, we don’t want to offend the locals. Even if they don’t shop here.”

Sam nodded. “So if its not security,” he asked. “What’s the problem?”

Kim sighed resignedly, as if talking about it would somehow make it more real. “C’mon,” she said. “I’ll show you.”

The first place Kim took them was the food court. “This is where it started,” she said, hand sweeping in an aimless arc around her, indicating various food outlets standing virtually empty and a smattering of customers occupying the tables clustered in the middle of the huge eating area. “We’d been open two days,” she continued to explain, “when a couple of kids – a brother and sister – just collapsed for no reason, right at the table where they were sitting eating donuts with their folks.”

Sam cast Dean a wary glance. “‘Collapsed’?”

Kim nodded. “The only outward sign that there was anything wrong with them was their eyes,” she added, gesturing to her own dark brown orbs. “It was like something sucked the color right out of them...”

Sam’s own color drained visibly. “Black?” he asked quickly, immediately wary of demonic possession.

“No,” Kim shook her head. “Grey. Like – like the irises were all washed out.”

“That *is* weird,” Dean muttered.

“That’s why Haley suggested I give you guys a call,” she said.

Sam glanced over at Dean. “Yeah, weird’s pretty much our business,” he agreed. Then, “So what did the doctors have to say?”

“Some form of catatonia,” Kim explained. “They were able to move – to walk, to eat, to sleep. But it was as if – well, as if no one was home.” She tapped her temple. “Up here. Like they were totally unaware of their surroundings.”

“And the doctors didn’t find a cause?” Sam asked.

“No,” Kim replied. “They checked the mall for the usual things – contaminants, problems with the ventilation and air conditioning – but came up empty. Three days later, four more people went down with it.”

“All here?” Dean asked, gesturing towards the food court.

Kim shook her head. “No. In different places all over the mall. At different times of the day. By the end of the week, eight people had been affected.” She sighed, dropping into one of the metal chairs surrounding a blue café-style table that wobbled when she leaned on it. She indicated for the Winchesters to sit, which they did, before she continued. “That’s when the CDC were called in. Closed us down for a week. Last day they were here, one of their own people went down with the thing, and she was wearing a full Hazmat suit at the time.”

Dean whistled. “And they didn’t find anything?”

“No virus? No pathogens?” Sam added.

“Not a thing,” Kim confirmed. “The whole place is as clean as a whistle. Could eat your dinner off the floor. Although I wouldn’t recommend it.” She sighed again, an occurrence which she seemed more than accustomed to of late. “Our owners petitioned for us to be re-opened, and within a day, another – another –” she glanced down at her fingernails, taking a breath before continuing. “Another man was struck down. Off-duty cop.”

“How many?” Sam asked slowly, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

Kim met his questioning gaze across the table, eyes watery. “Thirty-seven,” she said, shaking her head.

Dean’s eyebrows almost made it all the way up to his hairline. “*Thirty-seven?*” he echoed incredulously.

Kim nodded. “They’re going to shut us down if we don’t figure out what’s going on,” she told them. “I’ve been given until next Friday.” Another sigh, and she spread her hands across the tabletop absently. “But in the meantime, there are almost forty people languishing away in waking comas. Some of them are in the hospital, others were taken home by their families. The doctors can’t really do anything for them anyway, so they figured at least if they were somewhere familiar, it might help... But that’s almost forty families that have... that have lost someone...” She trailed off, rubbing her hand across her forehead.

“When was the last victim... affected?” Sam asked then, fighting the sudden urge to touch the hand Kim still had spread across the table. He knew he was a sucker for a damsel in distress, but this was more than that. This was a strong woman in trouble, real trouble, not some little chick with a cat stuck up a tree. There were lives at stake

here, and, Sam sensed, maybe something else. Something personal. Like Kim had more than just her job on the line.

This was a woman who really needed their help.

Kim looked up at him slowly. "Yesterday," she replied. "Fifty-six-year-old grandmother taking her twelve-year-old granddaughter shopping."

Dean glanced briefly at Sam. "Can we see where it happened?"

Sam glanced around *Little Princesses*, the girls' clothing store where Lizzie Baker had met – whatever it was she'd met, not entirely sure what Dean thought they might be able to find here that the cops or mall security had missed.

"And she was standing right here?" Dean was asking the perky little red-headed sales girl who had been following them around the store for the last five minutes like an over-excited puppy.

"Uh-huh, right where you're standing," she confirmed, auburn curls springing up and down as she fairly bounced on the balls of her feet. "It was the little kid I felt kinda sorry for," she added. "I mean, sure, she was a little pain in the a...in the tushie," she giggled nervously, "but aren't they all at that age? Poor kid. Went on and on about seeing rainbows..."

"Was that recording?" Dean interrupted, pointing to the security camera in the corner of the store.

"Twenty four hours a day," Kim replied. "It's all recorded straight onto hard disk. The cops viewed it yesterday though..."

"Can we take a look?" Sam asked.

Kim shrugged. "Sure. But I don't think you'll find anything. Not if the cops didn't."

Dean cast Sam a knowing glance. "Cops aren't looking for the sort of thing we're looking for."

Kim looked between the two of them uncertainly, chewing her lip. "Look," she said eventually. "You know I wouldn't have called you guys if I wasn't desperate. I don't really believe in..." she trailed off, eyes darting nervously to the red-head, who was still hanging on their every word.

"You know, if you're trying to flatter us," Dean said with a lopsided smile, "you *really* need to work on your sales pitch. Bad enough we're the first thing that comes to mind when you mention the word "weird" to Haley, and now it's 'don't call them unless you're *really* desperate...'" He shook his head. "*Weird and Desperate*. They ever turn the story of our lives into a Movie of the Week, I think we got a title right there..."

Kim smiled grudgingly at Dean's attempt to lighten the mood. "Okay, point taken," she said. "Come on. I'll show you the CCTV Control Room."

Dean whistled appreciatively as he and Sam followed Kim into a moderately-sized office crammed wall to wall with TV monitors.

They were in the bowels of the mall now, having been led down to the CCTV Control Room via a maze of identically-painted grey corridors that were a murky contrast to the bright airy malls above them.

The room they now found themselves in held only three chairs, two of which were occupied by men dressed in uniforms barely distinguishable in color from the walls around them. Both stared intently at the monitors stacked up in front of them, occasionally zooming in, or re-focusing one of the camera angles.

The man farther away, a big bulky bear of a man whose thick black hair seemed barely contained by the regulation grey ball cap perched on top of his head, gently caressed a slider control with the fingers of one hand. The picture on the monitor

nearest to him zoomed in on a couple of kids ineffectually attempting to tag the wall outside of an electronics store.

Pushing the button on the side of a desk-mounted radio, the camera operator muttered, "Joe, Mall Three, east corridor. Outside *Gadgets and Gizmos*. Couple of taggers. Both Caucasian males, aged approximately fourteen to sixteen. The first one's wearing a Green Day t-shirt, the other a Phillies shirt. You copy?"

"Copy that, Control," a disembodied voice crackled out of the radio, and within seconds a burly security guy appeared on the monitor, the two would-be taggers easily dealt with.

The CCTV guy followed their progress across several of the monitors, as the two kids were unceremoniously dumped out into the parking lot, while Joe the security guard headed hurriedly back inside, having caught sight of the buxom blonde leaning suggestively over the smoothie stand by the door.

"Quite an operation you got here," Dean commented, eyes roving over the bank of monitors, trying not to stare at the smoothie girl as he scrutinized the various views of what appeared to be every corner of the mall.

Kim didn't reply at first, merely shook her head dejectedly. "Supposed to keep everyone safe," she muttered at length. As if mentally shaking herself, she indicated the two security guys. "Tony Lozano," she said, the big guy sitting farther away curtly bobbing his head. "Howard Grumnik."

The guard sitting closer didn't look up, eyes resolutely fixed to the screens in front of him. He was a mousy kind of man, small and slightly built, with a pointed face and beady dark eyes that reflected the light from the monitors so eerily it was all Sam could do not to shudder. Reminded him too much of...other things.

"This is Sam and Dean Winchester," Kim continued, not batting an eye at the second guard's lack of response. "They're – uh –"

"Consultants," Sam supplied helpfully, tearing his gaze away from Grumnik to smile at Lozano.

The bigger guard raised a thick eyebrow. "Oh yeah?" he said. "What do you consult on?"

The Winchesters exchanged a look.

"Depends who's paying," Dean replied shortly, grinning before turning his attention back to the monitors.

Lozano snorted, before Kim cut in, "Howie, you wanna bring up the *Little Princesses* footage?"

Grumnik's eyes slid sideways, but he didn't look at Kim, fingers playing deftly with the controls in front of him. "Cops already looked at it," he commented, the monitor in front of him splitting into four images, one of the inside of the store, while the others showed the doorway and the mall outside. "I can de-multiplex the images if you'd like..." he added, clearly hoping to impress the new arrivals with his command of technical lingo.

Dean merely nodded. "Yeah, just display the in-store feed," he instructed absently, leaning over Grumnik's shoulder as Sam stared at him pointedly. Feeling his brother's eyes on him, Dean met Sam's inquisitive gaze with a shrug. "What?" he asked.

Sam just shook his head. "Nothing." So Dean apparently *had* been paying attention all the times he'd grumbled about Sam watching *Law and Order*...

Grumnik's beady eyes had settled on Dean while the young man's attention was elsewhere, but as Dean glanced back at him, he abruptly averted his gaze to the control board. "Here," he said quietly, as three of the images on the monitor disappeared, while the view of the inside of the store expanded to fill the screen.

Sam and Dean watched as the camera honed in on a middle-aged lady who was standing with her back to the lens, obviously chatting to the little blonde girl hovering over the jewelry display.

"This is in real-time?" Dean asked, eyeing the time stamp at the bottom of the screen.

Grumnik's head bobbed just once.

The little girl turned then, just as the picture flared and the whole screen went completely white for a second before the image of the store came slowly back into focus. The woman was now collapsed on the floor, a crowd of anxious shoppers almost obscuring her from the camera's view.

"What was that?" Sam asked, frowning.

"We think it's a camera malfunction," Kim replied. "Happened every time someone collapsed, which was why we thought at first that all of this was being caused by some kind of electro-magnetic interference..."

"An EMP would affect the camera," Dean agreed. "But it shouldn't affect the person. Not to this degree." He cocked his head and frowned at the camera feed, as Sam threw him another surprised look. "Can you play it again?" he asked Grumnik, oblivious to his brother's scrutiny. "Frame by frame this time?"

Grumnik frowned. "Ms. Gregory –" he began to whine.

"C'mon, Howie," Lozano put in suddenly. "We talked about sharing your toys, right?"

Grumnik didn't even look at his colleague, instead pushing a few buttons much harder than Dean thought was strictly necessary while grumbling, "It's *Howard*."

Dean just managed to catch himself before a whiney *It's Sam!* escaped his lips, the look on his brother's face convincing him it might not be such a great idea to be mimicking him in present company.

"Here," Grumnik said grudgingly, bottom lip stuck out like a petulant six-year-old, as the picture returned to its original time stamp.

"Thanks, *Howie*," Dean said, unable to resist getting a rise out of the little security guard.

Sam frowned at the sudden tautness in Grumnik's shoulders and the grimace on his face. One of these days, Dean was going to get a little too sarcastic with the wrong person...

The image moved jerkily on the security monitor, as Dean watched the frame by frame replay intently. As the white flare began to dissipate, Dean suddenly jabbed his finger at the screen. "There," he said. "Can you freeze that?"

The image stopped accordingly, and Sam squinted, trying to see what Dean was so interested in.

"The little girl kept talking about rainbows, right?" Dean said, glancing at Kim for confirmation.

"Uh – yeah," she agreed. "I guess."

"Look at that." Dean indicated a tiny sliver of light arcing across the very bottom of the screen. Light that looked as if it had been shone through a prism.

Rainbows.

Sam moved closer to the monitor. "Part of the camera flare?" he suggested.

"Not if the kid saw it too," Dean observed.

Kim also moved closer to the screen. "What the hell is that?" she asked.

"I don't know," Dean replied honestly, biting his lip. "But it might help if I could see the rest of the footage...Of the other victims?"

Kim, still staring at the little rainbow at the bottom of the screen in front of her, nodded slowly. "Sure," she agreed. "Howie...?"

"I have maintenance rounds," Grumnik replied shortly, before Kim could even ask. "And my shift ends at five."

Lozano snorted again. "Sure, Howie," he said. "Like you *ever* go home..." He glanced over at Dean then, not expanding on what he meant by his last comment, merely meeting Grumnik's narrow-eyed glance innocently. "It's okay, kid," he said, ignoring his colleague. "I'll get you the footage."

Dean nodded his thanks.

"In the meantime," Sam said, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he watched Grumnik scuttle off out of the room, over-sized toolkit in hand. "I think I'm gonna head to the local library – check out the history of the area." He shrugged. "You know. Just in case."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Just like old times," he observed, slipping into Grumnik's vacated seat.

Sam frowned. "How so?"

"You heading off to the library while I sit and watch TV," Dean replied with an impish grin.

Sam shook his head, aiming his next comment at Lozano. "Don't let him near the shopping channels."

Two incredibly tedious hours later, Dean was so fed up of staring at CCTV monitors that he figured calling Sam and pretending to be interested in his geek research might actually be a welcome diversion.

"So, are we sitting on an ancient Native American burial ground or what?" he asked in response to Sam's initial, "Hello?"

Sam's frustrated sigh seemed to make Dean's cell phone vibrate. "Not that I can see," he replied deflatedly, his faith in the Power of the Library for once seemingly misplaced.

"Okay," Dean replied, nodding to Lozano as he re-entered the room with two cups of coffee.

As the Control Room door swung to a close behind the big security guard, Dean's eyes traveled idly to the corridor outside, where Howie Grumnik was hurriedly scuttling past – in the opposite direction to the exit and an hour after his shift was supposed to have ended.

"So," Dean continued his conversation with Sam, mentally filing away his observation for future investigation. "The mall's built on the site of a grizzly mass murder..."

"Nope."

"Natural disaster?"

"Nope."

"Fire? Flood? Pet cemetery?"

"Nope. Nope. And nope."

"Huh."

"Dean, from what I can tell, the site of the Major Oak Mall has been nothing more exciting than a poultry farm."

"Pissed off chicken spirits out for bloody revenge?"

"Dean –"

"They're gonna peck us all to death!"

"*Dean!*"

"Look out, Colonel Sanders!"

"*DEAN!*"

"I know," Dean sighed, boredom obvious in his tone. "Alright. So I'm almost

done here. How about you come pick me up in – say – twenty minutes?”

“Yeah, okay,” Sam agreed. “The library’s about to close anyway.” There was a pause, before he added, “So you think maybe Haley was wrong to recommend us for this one?”

“I dunno,” Dean replied slowly, eyeing one of the monitors as Howie Grumnik’s retreating form came shuffling into the frame. “Maybe. But I did find weird color flares – rainbows – on all of the security footage just as the victims did – whatever they did...” He sat up straighter, watching as Grumnik glanced around furtively before entering a door just out of the security camera’s range. “Sam, listen,” he muttered into the phone. “I gotta call you back. Something I need to check out...” He didn’t even wait for Sam’s puzzled reply before slowly closing his cell phone and glancing over at Lozano.

The security guy was absently thumbing through the sports section as he sipped at his coffee, and the thought entered Dean’s head that maybe that’s what Grumnik had been counting on as he snuck past the last of the security cameras and into – wherever he’d gone.

“So Tony,” Dean said, picking up his own coffee and taking a sip. “You take your break at this time every day?”

Lozano glanced up at him quizzically. “Well – yeah,” he said. “When I’m on this shift. Why?”

Dean shook his head and shrugged. “No reason,” he replied, feigning innocence. “You always work with Howie?”

Lozano shrugged. “Let’s just say our orbits collide more often than not,” he said. “No one actually works *with* Howie... He’s kind of a law unto himself.”

Dean nodded, keeping his tone deliberately neutral. “So what you said before. About him never going home...?”

Lozano actually laughed at that. “Standing joke around here,” he explained. “Always hours early for his shift...Like he’s been here all night or something.”

“Right,” Dean said, matching Lozano’s laugh with a casual one of his own, before taking another sip of his coffee and smoothly changing topic. “Listen, I’m done here. Just got a couple more things to check out, then I’m calling it a day.”

Lozano nodded. “Okay,” he said, obviously struggling with how to phrase what he wanted to say next. “Well,” he managed eventually. “I hope you guys have more luck figuring out what’s going on here than we did.”

Dean glanced sideways at the monitor where Grumnik had briefly appeared before agreeing, “Yeah, me too.”

Taking a last sip of his coffee, Dean exited the Control Room, hovering on the other side of the door for a couple of seconds, until, like Grumnik, he was pretty sure he could count on Lozano having gone back to scrutinizing his newspaper before he headed down the dingy corridor in the direction the mousy security guard had taken.

Most of the heavy metal doors at the far end of the hall were festooned with yellow and black tape, and big notices declaring, “This area under construction. No unauthorized entry.” The door Grumnik had entered was no exception, and Dean vaguely remembered Kim having mentioned something about the finishing touches of construction work having been put on hold until Major Oak Mall’s little “problem” had been resolved.

Pushing the door gingerly, Dean wasn’t a bit surprised when it didn’t yield to his touch, pulling out his lock picking kit with a sigh and a nervous glance at the security camera.

Although Dean had always been better at handcuffs, Sam was faster with locks, so he silently prayed Lozano’s interest in the Phillies held out a little longer.

Eventually, the lock made a satisfying “click” and the door swung invitingly open,

revealing beyond it another grey corridor complete with eerie yellow construction lights and partially completed ceiling panels, some of which dangled dangerously from the metal air conditioning conduits above.

Although this section of the mall was clearly not finished, Dean got the distinct impression that no construction had gone on here in a while, the thick layer of dust covering the floor barely disturbed, save for what appeared to be a well-trodden path to the door on his right, the first in a series which were all covered with the same black and yellow tape.

Following the dusty pathway, Dean pushed against the nearest door, surprised when it offered no resistance. Instinctively reaching for the handgun tucked in the back of his jeans, he cautiously passed through the doorway and into a room of similar size to the CCTV Control Room.

And of almost identical appearance.

Dean fought the urge to whistle again, acutely aware that the room's single chair was empty, which meant Grumnik could be anywhere.

Laid out in front of the chair, exactly as in the Control Room, was a bank of about thirty TV monitors. But unlike the professional, uniform layout of that equipment, these were all different sizes, shapes, brands and colors, an odd mish-mash of salvaged hardware strung together with sheaves of dangling, multicolored wires, like some freakish avant-garde sculpture. Some of the monitors were tipped at crazy angles, the wiring clearly amateurish and, Dean thought, probably nowhere near up to safety code, while the control panel set out in front looked like something copied from a low budget sci-fi movie, the front of a coffee maker clearly visible next to the slider switches purloined from an ancient eight-track tape recorder.

While the would-be gadget geek in him could only admire the builder's ingenuity, Dean's main focus was drawn to the images flickering on the monitors themselves.

Taking a step closer, he squinted at one of the screens, not entirely sure he believed what he was seeing.

It wasn't the ridiculously bright sunshine filtering through the rose-tinted windows of the chocolate-box-perfect flower shop that drew Dean's attention. It was the woman standing behind the counter.

Lizzie Baker.

Alive and well and apparently going about her everyday business.

Blinking, Dean reminded himself that Lizzie Baker was, in fact, lingering in a waking coma in the home of her son in West Nottingham.

But on the monitor in front of him, Lizzie Baker was clearly selling flowers to a young woman who looked suspiciously like Lisa Flynn, the CDC tech who had collapsed whilst wearing full Hazmat gear.

Eyes slowly roaming the other monitors, Dean came to the conclusion that either he was completely delusional, or he'd spent way too much time staring at CCTV monitors today.

Because if neither of those options were the case, he had absolutely no plausible explanation for what he was looking at.

Ranged before him, on every TV monitor in the whole rickety structure, was a different image of a town so picture perfect Dean was pretty sure he was getting cavities just looking at it; a town where people waved to each other on the street, smiled at each other, sat on sunny benches in the town square eating lunch out of brown paper bags.

A town which seemed to have a security camera in every store, every house, every building, and on every street corner.

A town exclusively inhabited by the people who had collapsed at Major Oak Mall.

"You shouldn't have seen that."

Dean turned sharply at the sound of the low, threatening voice.  
Then all he saw were rainbows.

Sam glanced nervously at his watch, fingers tapping against the Impala's steering wheel in time with the rain splattering lazily against the windshield.

Six thirty-five.

Gazing absently at the slow trickle of shoppers exiting Major Oak Mall, his fingers slid almost unconsciously to the cell phone discarded on the seat next to him, some kind of muscle memory in his thumb causing it to push against Dean's speed dial number before he even realized he'd done it.

He heard the faint "brr brr" of Dean's cell phone ringing out before he'd even put his own phone to his ear, the recorded voicemail cutting in on the sixth ring. "Can't get to the phone. Leave a message." Abrupt and to the point. Dean in electronic form.

The hairs on the back of Sam's neck were standing up, and a faint knot of concern was starting to do the tango in the pit of his stomach.

"Dean, where the hell are you? I've been waiting fifteen minutes out here!" he barked into the phone, irritation at his brother's tardiness slowly giving way to concern for his well-being as, tone softening considerably, he added, "Hey, call me back as soon as you get this, okay?"

He tossed the phone back on the seat, eyes straying once more to the mall's entrance, where he could clearly see the big security guard from earlier lurking around the blonde on the smoothie stand.

Then he caught sight of Kim, apparently leaving for the day, and was out of the Impala and half way across the parking lot before his brain even realized he'd moved.

"Kim? Hey Kim!" He jogged up to the mall manager, trying to keep the nervous tremor out of his voice. Trying to keep the panic from showing in his eyes.

So Dean was twenty minutes late. So what? His big brother wasn't exactly known for his rigorous time keeping. Still...

Kim looked surprised to see the younger Winchester, but smiled nonetheless, teeth showing white in the bleak sodium lighting. "Hey Sam," she said. "I thought you left hours ago?"

Sam returned her smile awkwardly. "Yeah, me too," he agreed. "Only..." God, he felt so stupid. Like a six-year-old who'd gone crying to mommy because he couldn't find his big brother. "Only," he continued, resolutely gritting his teeth, and deciding a little humiliation was the least of his worries. "Only Dean was supposed to meet me about fifteen minutes ago, and hasn't shown." He jerked the sentence out quickly, an apologetic little shrug tugging at his shoulders.

Kim just looked at him, completely non-judgmentally. "When did you last hear from him?"

"A little before six," Sam replied. "He said he had one more thing he wanted to check out..."

Kim read the worry in the young man's eyes, and Sam realized there was more to her reaction than mere panic that someone else may have been hurt in her mall. "He was in the Control Room, right?" she asked. "With Lozano?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah," he confirmed, glancing over Kim's shoulder and into the mall, barely controlling the urge to dash straight in there and tear the place apart till he found his brother.

"I'm sure he's fine," Kim said quietly, taking a firm grasp on Sam's elbow. "C'mon. We'll take a look."

Sam followed Kim meekly, the colors, sights and smells that had assaulted him on his first visit to the mall now blurring into a muted cacophony of background noise as his head started to buzz and the tingling in the pit of his stomach had turned into a dull ache.

He would have given anything to have seen Dean leaning across the smoothie stand just then, tossing a flirtatious smirk in the hot blonde's direction, or even to have bumped into him drooling over the acres of scratched up albums tricking out Vince's Vinyl Emporium.

But, somehow, he knew that wasn't going to happen. Something else had happened. Something had happened to Dean. He just didn't know what. And he didn't know how he knew.

They'd reached the CCTV Control Room before Sam was even aware he'd passed the smoothie girl, the buzzing in his head growing louder as he descended into the underground corridors. A light at the far end of the hall was blinking out of time with the pounding in his head, and he squinted, barely able to make out the yellow and black tape bedecking the last few doors before the corridor dead ended into a cement-grey wall.

"What's down there?" he found himself asking, a vibration of – *something* – coming up through his feet and making his chest hurt.

Kim followed the direction of Sam's gaze as she pushed open the Control Room door. "Oh nothing," she said dismissively. "If we ever get construction finished on this place, it's just going to be storage space. That's the building's outer wall right there."

Sam's gaze lingered on the guttering light before he followed Kim into the Control Room, the weird vibrations stopping the second he crossed the threshold.

Lozano was just tucking into a hotdog as they entered, mustard splattering onto his tie as he all but choked at Kim's unexpected appearance.

"Eve-evening Ms. Gregory!" he forced a cheerful voice, mopping up the mustard with a napkin and glancing sideways at the woman sitting in the other chair, a muscular brunette who looked like she could probably bench press twice the weight Sam could. Hell, she could probably bench press *Sam* given half the chance. "I thought you'd left for the day?"

"Tony," Kim nodded, not feeling the need to explain her presence any further. "Sam, this is Adrienne McCaffrey – graveyard shift this week, huh?"

The bulky security lady nodded. "Switched with Grumnik," she replied. "Although damned if I know what he's got against the night shift."

Kim paid little heed to McCaffrey's comment, and turned her attention immediately to Lozano. "Tony, Sam was supposed to meet Dean a while ago and he didn't show. When did he leave?"

Lozano raised an eyebrow and glanced at his watch. "Around six," he replied. "Not seen him since."

Sam frowned. "You don't have a camera covering this door do you?" he asked awkwardly, jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards the door through which he'd just entered the room.

Lozano glanced at Kim. "Sure," he said. "You wanna see the footage?"

Sam nodded a little too enthusiastically. "Yes. Please," he added as an afterthought, as Lozano brought up a list of security logs on the monitor in front of him. Highlighting Camera 141, he entered a sub-menu, before bringing up the time stamp 17.54. "There you go," he said, as a grainy image looking straight down at the door outside filled the monitor.

"Great," Sam thanked him. "Can you move it on a little?"

Lozano nodded, pushing a couple of buttons which caused the time stamp to

click over a little faster, although the picture of the doorway seemed to remain the same.

At 17.58, Lozano himself could be seen entering, carrying two steaming cups of coffee, and that was all the activity there was until 18.02, when Dean exited.

"There!" Sam barked, pointing at the screen as Lozano instinctively switched to real time mode. The picture slowed down, clearly showing Dean glancing off to his right, before heading out of shot to his left, out towards the exit and the main mall.

"So he left here about six," Kim commented. "At least we know that much for sure."

Sam nodded absently, chewing nervously on his thumbnail. Something bugged him about the image of his brother...something not quite right...something he couldn't put his finger on... "Where's the next camera?" he asked. "The next one in the direction he took?"

"Stairwell," Lozano replied, immediately bringing up a screen headed Camera 140. He ran the footage, again from 17.54, fast forwarding to 17.57, where the security guard could again be seen with his coffee, this time descending the stairs. He continued to fast forward onwards to 18.00... 18.01... 18.02... 18.03... 18.04...all the way to 18.10.

No Dean.

"So where was he?" Sam asked. "Why didn't he come up the stairwell?"

Kim glanced over at Lozano, who shrugged. "I'll check the logs," he offered.

"Make sure we didn't have any outages or downtime."

"He can't have just disappeared between here and the stairwell," Kim muttered.

"There's nothing else down here..."

"He said he wanted to check something out," Sam repeated, eyes still resolutely fixed to the screen. "I just wish he'd told me what..."

Dean's head hurt.

*Oh man, this is some hangover...*

Hold on.

Rainbows.

Dean remembered rainbows...

A bright flash of light and a threatening voice.

And rainbows.

He was lying down. He could tell that much by the feel of soft fabric beneath his fingers. And there was a bright light trying its damndest to force its way through his eyelids.

*Open your goddamn eyes, Winchester...*

Gingerly, thick eyelashes parted to reveal golden sunlight streaming in through an open window, blue sky with the barest smattering of white clouds beyond, and an almost overpowering scent of freshly-brewed coffee lingering in the air.

He blinked.

Last time he looked, it was after six and getting dark outside. Jeez, how long had he been out of it?

"Don't worry, honey, it'll all come back to you," a soft female voice startled him, a gentle hand barely grazing his shoulder.

He blinked again, somehow managing to turn his head away from the open window.

The kindly face of a familiar-looking middle-aged lady with soft curls of grey-blond hair looked down at him, hand gently stroking his forehead. He could sense movement behind her, but couldn't seem to focus on anything further away than her face.

"Where...? What...?"

"It's okay, honey," the woman said. "You're safe now. You're home."

Dean felt panic tickling at the recesses of his brain. *Home?* "I'm...what...?"

He continued to blink, more rapidly now, the woman's features coming into sharper focus, the back of her hand against his cheek, as if feeling his temperature.

And that's when he sat up so fast she jumped back in alarm, snatching back her hand and staring at him with wide eyes.

"Lizzie Baker!" he burst out, staring right back at her with wide eyes of his own.

"You – you're Lizzie Baker!"

The woman glanced nervously over her shoulder, smiling awkwardly, a strange, strangled little laugh escaping her lips. "Hudson, honey," she corrected him. "Lizzie Hudson."

Dean followed her gaze to the far corner of the room, squinting as the dark shape of a security camera swam into focus.

Security camera.

He'd been at the mall...

"Mom, is he awake yet?" A boy in his mid-teens emerged from behind the smiling woman, tousled hair flopping in his dark brown eyes as he tugged at his Green Day t-shirt.

Dean vaguely remembered having seen that t-shirt before recently, but it took him several seconds to remember the young tagger who he'd seen escorted from the mall while he was in the CCTV Control Room.

Control Room... TV monitors... Lizzie Baker in a flower shop...

"Yes, sweetie, he's awake," Lizzie smiled at the young boy, ruffling his hair.

"Matthew," the boy announced, sticking out his hand towards Dean with a huge smile on his face.

"Hey, Matthew," Dean muttered, taking the proffered limb absently.

"I'm your brother."

Dean's hand jerked unconsciously, gripping Matthew's a little harder than he'd intended. The boy just continued to grin at him, as if he'd just said the most normal thing in the world.

"My – you're my – what... *What* did you just say?"

Matthew withdrew his hand, grinning up at Lizzie. "Boy, I *always* wanted a big brother!" he burst out. "This place *rocks!*"

Lizzie continued to stroke his hair, a weak smile crossing her face as she glanced over at the camera before returning her attention to Dean. "Yes, honey. I'm sure it does."

"So I'm not good enough for you now?"

Dean's attention shifted to a young girl, maybe a year or so older than Matthew, who had slouched into the room, a butterfly pendant dangling incongruously over a t-shirt emblazoned with the cover shot from Pink's latest album. She cast a dark glance over at Dean before turning her attention to Matthew, arms folded sullenly across her chest.

Matthew tossed her a dismissive glance. "Sisters are lame," he informed her. "I got a big brother now!"

Dean didn't like the direction this conversation was taking. "Hold on," he said slowly, running his hand over his face and blinking a few more times. "You're *not* my brother, kid," he said, looking Matthew up and down. "I already got one of those and he's twice your size and three times the trouble..."

"Sweetie," Lizzie stepped hurriedly between Dean and the camera, patting him on the head like a favorite pet. "Don't worry, you're just a little disorientated... The

accident, I'm sure..."

"Accident?" Dean echoed. "What accident? I wasn't in any..."

"Your car kicks ass!" Matthew said suddenly. "You'll teach me to drive it, right?"

Dean glanced from Matthew to Lizzie and back to Matthew, jaw open but no words coming out.

"You couldn't drive that thing with six inch blocks on your shoes," the girl muttered, arms tightening across her chest.

"Could too!" Matthew replied. "You're just jealous, Mindy..."

"Am not! You know how much gas cars like that guzzle? Think of the world around you..." She stopped suddenly, biting at her lip, before suddenly bursting into tears and running from the room.

"Mindy..." Lizzie followed the girl's sudden departure from the room, before turning her attention back to Matthew. "Go check your sister's okay."

"Why?" Matthew demanded. "It's not *my* fault she doesn't like it here..."

Lizzie glanced again at the camera. "Of course she likes it here. She loves it here. Just like Dean's going to love it here..."

"You – how d'you know my name?" Dean demanded, watching Matthew reluctantly disappear after his sister. He swung his legs over the edge of the couch and instantly wished he hadn't as he fought down the subsequent wave of nausea.

"Don't worry honey," Lizzie continued, starting to stroke Dean's hair now that Matthew had left the room. Dean resisted the urge to push her off, figuring it was probably some kind of nervous habit. And if anyone had the right to be nervous, it was her. "Your dad's explained everything, and I understand what happened..."

"My *dad*?"

"I'm sure your mom's a lovely woman..."

"My..."

"So I don't blame him. I don't blame him for not telling me about you... Not right away, anyway..."

"About...?"

"And I know we'll get on famously. I just wish you'd tried to find us sooner, that's all."

Dean just stared up at the woman like she was completely mental. Her serene smile faltered ever-so-slightly, eyes flicking meaningfully to the camera, as if she was trying to tell him something but didn't know how.

"Your dad's just checking over your car," Lizzie added. "It's just a scrape I'm sure. He'll help you fix it up. He's good at things like that. Guess that's where you get it from... He tells me you're a mechanic?"

Dean blinked at her. "He... I'm..."

"So you shouldn't have any trouble. And Greg's just fine. His truck could take out a tank, I'll warrant..."

Dean continued to stare at Lizzie Baker – Lizzie Hudson – whatever the hell her name was – for a full five seconds, mouth hanging slightly open, until she was suddenly joined by a man who caught her elbow as if she needed steadying.

He was a good head taller than she was, about Dean's height, silver-grey hair and a slim, deeply tanned face that suggested he worked outdoors. His eyes were dark brown, like Matthew's, and when he looked at Dean he got this weird expression on his face, somewhere between deep mistrust and the sincerest of apologies.

"I'm – I'm glad you made it –" he stammered. " – son." He didn't look Dean in the eye as he said the last word, just stuck out his hand much as Matthew had.

Dean stood, not sure why, something about the way the guy held himself... "Y-eah," he said slowly, taking the man's hand. His grip was firm, lingering longer than it

should have. "I guess..."

"Coming all this way," Lizzie interjected suddenly. "Only to nearly wreck your car a mile from – from home." She glanced up at the man nervously. "Isn't that right, Stephen?"

Stephen just looked at her.

"Stephen?"

"The car's not wrecked," Stephen muttered. "Big old thing like that. It'd take more than a little side impact to do that beauty much harm..."

"This is so stupid." Mindy was standing in the doorway again, eyes red but dry, arms once more folded across her chest. "People don't just have kids they never knew they had show up on their doorstep like this! Not in real life! Especially not ones that look like..." she gestured wildly in Dean's direction, "...*that*. What is this, *Days of Our Lives*, or something? Honestly, who comes up with this stuff?"

"Mindy..." Lizzie's tone carried an unspoken warning. "You know what'll happen... What happened last time..."

Mindy frowned. "I'm not scared of the Sanatorium," she said. "This isn't *Dallas* either, *Mom*. 'Cause I used to watch re-runs all the time you know. With my *real* mom. I know that's where he got the idea... Maybe you should just change your name to Sue Ellen and be done with it. Big ole nasty JR gonna throw you in the nut house if you're bad, huh?"

"Mindy..."

"He's *not* my brother," Mindy huffed, tossing her head in Dean's direction. "And *you're* not my mom any more than you're *his* mom..."

"No, I'm not his mom," Lizzie said flatly, neatly side-stepping the first part of Mindy's accusation. "You know that. She's in Kansas..."

"Kansas?" That got Dean's attention. "My mom's in *Kansas*?"

Lizzie met his startled gaze, surprised to have regained his attention so forcefully. "Topeka, I think," she said, glancing at Stephen, suddenly uncertain. Uncertain and afraid. "That's right, isn't it, honey?"

"What's wrong?" Mindy asked. "Forgotten the Script again?"

"Lawrence," Stephen said hurriedly. "She's in Lawrence. We – your mother and I –" he cast a sidelong glance at Dean, still not meeting his gaze. "It was a long time ago. She and I didn't work out... I didn't know about you... Not until she called me – to say you were asking about me – well, I couldn't say no. Couldn't deny you the chance to meet the family you didn't even know you had..."

Dean bit his lip. Okay, so he'd fallen down a rabbit hole somewhere. Into Daytime Soap Opera Hell.

He took a breath, closed his eyes and thought for a second. "So I'm – I'm your son," he said slowly, opening his eyes and scrutinizing Stephen. "And she's my stepmom," he said, glancing at Lizzie. "And she's my half-sister," he nodded towards Mindy. "And my mom's in – in Lawrence. And I crashed my car right before I got here, which explains why I have a killer headache and can't remember anything. Right?"

Lizzie nodded, beaming at him. "Good boy," she said, happily.

"Sap," Mindy muttered.

Dean glanced over at her. "You wanna show me this bitchin' car I got?" he asked suddenly.

Mindy straightened, seemingly taken aback. "O-okay," she said, turning and heading away from the room.

Dean followed her, smiling awkwardly at his newly-acquired "parents" before quickly catching up to his "sister," taking hold of her elbow and inclining his head down towards her. "Mindy Tyler, right?" he whispered. "You and your brother were the first to

be – taken.”

Mindy looked up at him, shocked. “That’s – right,” she stammered. “Tyler. God, that’s the first time I’ve been called that in –”

“Three months?” Dean supplied.

Mindy squinted at him as she headed out onto a bright yellow wooden porch that reflected the sun to an almost painful degree. “I don’t know,” she said truthfully.

“Maybe. It’s hard to keep track. We don’t always get night time...”

Dean wasn’t sure how to take that statement. “You know where we are?”

Mindy shook her head. “He calls it Sherwood Falls. But it’s not a real place... I don’t think.”

“Who’s ‘he’?” Dean said suddenly,

“Huh?”

“You said ‘*he*’ calls it Sherwood Falls...”

“Oh,” Mindy nodded in recognition. “The Sheriff.”

“Sheriff?”

Mindy nodded again, gaze becoming distant. “I wish I knew where we *really* were...”

“You’re at home,” Dean told her. “Trust me. Wherever this is, you’re really at home with your folks.”

Mindy stopped stock still. “I am?”

Dean nodded. “Although...” he trailed off thoughtfully. “Although I’m not entirely sure where *I* am...”

Mindy glanced unconsciously at the camera mounted behind Dean. It had been pointed at the front door of the house, but had suddenly swung in their direction. “Are we ever going home?”

Dean followed Mindy’s glance before returning his gaze in her direction. “Damn straight. If me and my brother have anything to say about it... My real brother, that is.”

Mindy smiled then. “Yeah,” she said, casting her gaze towards Matthew, who had just breathlessly rounded the street corner. “And he calls *me* ‘lame’...”

“Dean!”

Matthew had skidded to a halt on the driveway, a big red and white tow truck lumbering around the corner behind him and pulling up at the curb outside the house.

“It’s only a scratch I think...”

Dean followed Matthew’s excitedly gesticulating hand towards the rear of the tow truck... And drew in a sharp intake of breath.

“Chevy Impala, right?” Matthew was bouncing on his toes. “‘67. Like the rocket car. Right?”

Dean blinked so hard he thought his eyeballs might pop right out of his head. “Yeah,” he muttered, slowly descending the porch steps, Mindy close behind him. “‘67. Like the rocket car.”

The tow truck driver dismounted his vehicle, heading towards the rear and unhooking the big black car from the tow cable before running an admiring hand over the gleaming paintwork. “Ain’t seen one of these in years,” he muttered, patting the vehicle’s hood fondly.

Dean took a step towards the car, frowning. “She – she’s damaged?” he asked hesitantly, taking another step, eyeing the paintwork, the lights, the chassis, the tires... The license plate...

“Only a scratch,” the tow truck guy pointed out a little dent in the driver’s side door. “I’m sure your dad’ll be able to fix it.”

For a brief second, Dean almost answered, ‘Well of course he will...’ before he realized that the guy *wasn’t* talking about John Winchester. And he had no idea what

Stephen Hudson was capable of fixing.

"Here," the tow truck guy held out a slip of paper, which Dean took obligingly. He glanced at it slowly, realizing it was a bill for the tow. He was about to comment on the charge when he noticed the customer name scrawled at the top: *Dean Hudson*.

"My – my name's not..." Dean began, but was cut off by Stephen appearing as if out of nowhere. He snatched the piece of paper out of Dean's hand with a grin at the tow truck guy.

"It's alright, Otis," he said. "I've got this."

Otis nodded. "Steve, you boys need a hand fixing this beauty...?"

Stephen smiled, putting an uncomfortable arm around Dean's shoulder. "I think my boy and I can handle it..."

*What's wrong with this picture?*

Sam had been staring at the grainy CCTV image of his brother for almost an hour now, brows drawn together in an ever-deepening furrow of concentration, frustration and *worry*.

Lozano's shift had ended at seven, so, with the night shift guy not due in until eight, Sam found himself alone with the slightly terrifying McCaffrey, who kept sneaking glances at him when she thought he wasn't looking, and at one point had decided to favor him with her views on the relative merits of "taller guys."

Desperately trying to tune out McCaffrey's diatribe, Sam concentrated on checking the video feeds Lozano had set him up with, each showing different sections of the mall around the time Dean had disappeared.

So far, only Camera 141, the camera outside of the Control Room, seemed to have captured his brother's image before he had seemingly vanished off the face of the planet.

What Sam didn't understand was if Dean had been "taken" by whatever it was that was stalking the patrons of Major Oak Mall, then where the hell was his body? Or whatever was left over after. Kim had had security personnel comb every inch of the place, and Dean just wasn't there – in any form.

Sam sighed, rubbing a hand across his tired eyes as he ran back the footage of Dean leaving the Control Room one more time.

Door.

Dean.

Freeze frame.

*What's wrong with this picture?*

Something...

Something glinting...

Catching the light just right as Sam froze his brother's image.

Dean's ring.

Glinting on his left hand.

His *left* hand.

"God, I am so stupid!" Sam whacked his forehead with the heel of his hand, startling McCaffrey almost out of her seat.

"What?" She glanced over at the image on Sam's monitor, not for the first time regretting having missed meeting the tall kid's brother in person. That must be some gene pool these boys sprang from...

Sam was gesturing wildly at the screen. "Dean's ring," he explained excitedly, rewinding the footage for the millionth time. "It's on the wrong hand – he wears it on his right, but look –" he jabbed at the screen, "– here it's on his *left*..." Sam trailed off as he watched Dean disappear out of frame to his left, ostensibly towards the exit.

McCaffrey was just staring at him. "And...?"

Sam grimaced at her triumphantly. "The picture's been reversed," he announced. "Flipped over. To make it look as if he was heading *out* of the mall..."

"When really he was headed in the opposite direction?" McCaffrey was catching on. "But there's nothing down that hallway."

Sam grimaced as he suddenly remembered the weird vibe he'd gotten from that corridor. "Are there any cameras down there?"

"Just one," McCaffrey punched a menu up on her screen. "Or, just one that's operational. None of the others in that section are connected into the grid yet. No point until the construction work's finished."

She deftly brought up a feed labeled, "Camera 142", entering the section time stamped 18.00. Another bland section of grey corridor filled the screen, the camera angled down slightly towards a doorway at the end of the hall that remained just out of shot.

As McCaffrey inched the footage forwards towards 18.02, Sam held his breath, absolutely certain Dean would appear at any second.

18.03...18.04...18.05...

"It shouldn't have taken him more than a few seconds to cover the distance between those two cameras," McCaffrey pointed out.

Sam nodded in defeat, all of the hope that had been forming a lump in his chest suddenly leaving him in an agonizing rush. He slumped back in his chair, running a frustrated hand along his forehead just as McCaffrey suddenly jabbed a large finger at her monitor.

"You see that?" She froze the image at 18.08.

Sam straightened. "What?"

McCaffrey rewound the footage slowly, pausing at one particular frame before proceeding to advance the footage a frame at a time.

And then Sam saw it.

It was barely perceptible, almost like a tiny shake of the camera, and Sam was sure neither he nor McCaffrey would have spotted it if not for the guttering of the overhead light. Up until 18.08, the light was totally out of commission. After 18.08, it was back on, blinking away like crazy until it finally gave out completely at 18.15.

McCaffrey ran back the footage, this time taking it back as far as 17.45. "Okay, so the light's working," she muttered, running the sequence forward until the time stamp showed 18.01, when the same little camera shake preceded the light suddenly snapping off completely.

"That's when Dean should have been there..." Sam muttered.

McCaffrey nodded, advancing the footage to 18.08 once more, when the light spluttered back on. "It's been spliced," she declared, sitting back in her seat. "Sonofabitch..."

Sam just looked at her. "It's been what?" he asked.

"It looks to me," McCaffrey said, tearing her eyes from her screen and pinning Sam in a concentrated stare, "that someone has totally erased the footage from 18.01 to 18.08 – when the light in the corridor was working – by inserting seven minutes of footage recorded *after* 18.15 – when the light was broken..."

"The seven minutes of footage Dean would have appeared on," Sam nodded, understanding. "So, taking a wild stab in the dark here, I think it's safe to assume that the person who flipped the footage from Camera 141 to make it look as if Dean left the mall was the same person who tampered with the footage from Camera 142 to make it look as if Dean had never been down that corridor...right?"

McCaffrey nodded slowly. "Yeah," she said carefully. "I would say that's

something you're definitely safe to assume."

Sam paused thoughtfully, gazing at the broken light guttering on the monitor before returning the security guard's intense stare. "So that leaves one question," he said. "Who would be capable of something like that?"

"So this Sheriff," Dean clarified, absently toying with the ring on his right hand, as Mindy kicked at the bench on which they sat while Matthew gazed longingly at the nearby Impala.

"Yeah, he's kinda God here," Mindy explained, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "His word is law and all that crap."

Dean cast a wary gaze around the oh-so-clichéd town square in which he found himself, squinting up at the slanted sunlight dappling an ornate clock tower which formed the centerpiece of an impeccably landscaped garden. Wrought iron benches were scattered liberally along the tidy asphalt paths, punctuated by trash cans and lampposts and even the odd water fountain here and there.

Despite the prettiness of the square, however, the fact that it lacked one thing was enough to instantly convince Dean of the innate *unnaturalness* of his surroundings: Pigeons. Not a single one.

Shuddering for no apparent reason, his attention was drawn briefly to a mural of some kind, splayed out on a long wall to the rear of the garden, but he couldn't quite figure out what it depicted from this distance.

He was about to go over there and investigate the thing when a young man he recognized as having been snatched right off his skateboard whilst being pursued by three breathless mall security guards, sauntered past, staring at him without the slightest hint of embarrassment. Dean stared right back, blinking as the guy chewed loudly on his bubble gum, blowing out a ridiculously-sized bubble before spitting the pink substance out onto the pathway.

At this point, the air in front of him seemed to fizz, and a huge man not entirely dissimilar in appearance to The Rock suddenly materialized out of nowhere, hands on hips and thick brows drawn into a severe frown.

The punk stopped mid-stride, color draining visibly from his already pasty cheeks as he carefully squinted up at the man in front of him.

"You shouldn't have done that," the man said, his voice an impossibly deep baritone, as he placed a massive hand on the boy's shoulder.

The kid, shaking visibly, cowed his head before nodding apologetically. "No sir," he agreed.

The security guy ran a finger over the shiny gold badge labeled "Deputy" which was pinned to the shirt of a uniform not unlike the ones worn by Lozano and Grumnik back at the mall. Lowering his head slightly, he calmly asked, "You know where Disobedience leads, don't you Ryan?" The kid muttered something inaudible, and the Deputy bent lower. "Ryan?"

"D – Divergence," Ryan mumbled a little louder, shoulders hunched, as if preparing for a physical assault.

The Deputy, however, merely smiled coolly. "And where does Divergence lead, Ryan?" he prompted.

Ryan continued to study his sneakers before finally looking up into the Deputy's unfathomably dark eyes. "The – the Sanatorium?" he stammered.

The Deputy's cold grin broadened. "And we wouldn't want to go there, would we?"

Ryan shook his head fervently.

"Good boy. Now run along." Ryan made to bolt, just as the Deputy suddenly

tightened his grip on the boy's shoulder. "Uh-uh-uh," he said, wagging his finger. "Forget something?"

Ryan smiled awkwardly, before sheepishly bending to scoop up the gum and depositing it in the nearest trash can.

The Deputy quirked the corner of his mouth. "Dismissed," he said.

Ryan didn't need telling twice.

The Deputy straightened, breathing deeply. "Anti-social none-Scripted behavior neutralized," he seemed to say to no one in particular, before cocking his head to one side and slowly turning his gaze onto Dean.

He just stood stock still for a second, staring at him, and Dean would have sworn the guy made a whirring sound, like a camera zooming in.

"Why don't you just take a picture, pal?" Dean muttered from between gritted teeth.

The Deputy continued to stare at him unblinkingly. "Subject inactive, sir," he said after a few more seconds of deliberation. "Appears to be complying with role parameters."

Dean didn't like the sound of that. Dean Winchester, after all, rarely complied with anything. "What role?" he demanded, rising to his feet and taking a step towards the Deputy.

The Deputy beamed brightly at him, displaying a mouthful of impossibly perfect white teeth. "You have a nice day now," he said, before fizzing out of existence as suddenly as he'd arrived.

Dean took a startled step backwards, feeling Mindy at his elbow, as he suddenly noticed three more of the uniformed men in various positions around the square. He blinked hard, convinced he was hallucinating the fact that they all appeared completely identical.

"Deputies," Mindy explained, tugging gently on Dean's arm. "Besides the cameras," she indicated the surveillance camera mounted atop the nearest lamppost, "they're the Sheriff's eyes and ears. And mouth. Tell us what to do. Modify our Bio. Feed us lines occasionally..."

"Bio'?" Dean echoed, glancing down at her as the frown deepened between his eyes.

"Yeah," Mindy shrugged. "You know. Like characters in a TV show? They've all got a Bio – like a backstory. A history. Well so have we. And sometimes it changes – like today. Suddenly one of the Deputies shows up out of the blue and tells our "Dad" that he has a long lost son. And hey presto – here you are."

"That's my Bio?" Dean asked skeptically. "Long lost son'? Jeez, three words? Is that the most they can spare me?"

"Long lost *illegitimate* son," Mindy corrected. "Gives your character a bit of intrigue."

"Long lost illegitimate son with cool car," Matthew piped up.

"Oh, that makes me feel so much better," Dean muttered.

Mindy grinned evilly. "Face it, big brother. You're set decoration. Eye candy."

"Story of my life," Dean muttered, looking suitably scandalized at Mindy's assassination of his character. But at least she was smiling, so he didn't mind too much. "So this happen often?" he asked. "They just alter your Bio?"

An odd look passed between Mindy and Matthew, the smile quickly faltering on the former's face. "Our mom," she said quietly. "Our first mom. The one before Lizzie..."

Dean frowned, before suddenly nodding. "You've been here three months. Lizzie's been here a day, right?"

Mindy's fingers toyed with the butterfly pendant around her neck. "Yeah. She arrived the same time I suddenly got this..."

"It was the last thing she saw," Dean explained. "Before she was taken." He glanced cautiously around the square, noting the position of the three Deputies. "So your first mom," he lowered his voice conspiratorially, motioning for Mindy to sit again. "What happened to her?"

Mindy took a shuddering breath, while Matthew's eyes averted back to the Impala. "She's in the Sanatorium," Mindy answered finally. "They took her a week ago."

"Why?" Dean asked. "What is that place?"

"It's where they take you if you won't – if you don't do as you're told – don't stick to the Script."

"Script?"

Mindy met his inquisitive gaze again, nodding slightly. "The Sheriff calls it 'Divergence,'" she explained. "When you can't – or won't – accept your Bio, your new identity here. Jackie – our first mom – just wouldn't. Refused to let anyone call her 'Hudson.' Screamed the place down if we called her 'mom,' like we were supposed to. Tried to escape more times than I can remember..."

"Escape?" Dean's eyes lit up. "There's a way outta here?"

Mindy glanced up at the nearby camera, which had altered its position and was now pointing straight at them. "Not that I know of," she replied cautiously, angling her head downwards so that her face was partially obscured by her hair. "Jackie certainly never found one, although not for want of trying. That's why she's in the Sanatorium."

"And what happens there?"

Mindy shifted uncomfortably. "They – they – adjust your – your..."

"They torture you," Matthew said suddenly. "That's what they do. That's what James said they did to him before he..."

"Who's James?" Dean asked.

"James Gregory," Matthew replied, an excited glint and a touch of hero worship in his eyes. "He's the only one that's ever gotten out of here."

Dean's eyes widened. "So someone *has* escaped?"

Mindy shook her head, acutely aware of the whirring of the overhead camera. "No one knows for sure," she said. "When James got out of the Sanatorium, he was – was talking crazy. Kept saying he was getting out, whatever it took. Then he just..."

"He jumped off a cliff," Matthew supplied. "Right into Sherwood Gorge."

Dean's eyebrows shot up. "He *killed* himself?"

Mindy shrugged. "Like I said," she muttered. "No one knows."

"Everyone says he got out, though," Matthew insisted, eyes still shining. "He was a cop – real tough. If anyone could get out, it was him."

Dean suddenly remembered Kim mentioned an off-duty cop... Gregory... Kim Gregory... "Was Gregory his real name?"

"I think so," Mindy said. "They only change your name if you're part of a family. He was on his own. He was supposed to be the local firefighter – seeing as there are no cops around here except the Deputies. But he wouldn't do it. Fought all the way. Got himself thrown in the Sanatorium twice before he escaped..."

Dean whistled. "He escaped from the Sanatorium too?" he asked. "Sounds like my kinda guy." He thought for a second. "So this Gorge," he said. "Is there a bridge over it? To the next town maybe or..."

"No bridge," Mindy said. "No 'next town.' If there had been, Jackie would have found it. She tried every road out of here..."

"There's a road out?" Dean seized on Mindy's words.

"Yeah," Mindy said slowly. "Out that way," she indicated the western side of the

square. "Comes in from that way," indicating the eastern side. "But neither road leads anywhere. And no cars ever come in. Except yours. And I've no idea where that came from."

Dean thought about that one. "Hmm," he said slowly. "I do." He glanced behind him, at his-but-not-his Impala, frowning at the dent in the door. "So this road," he said carefully. "It goes where...?"

"You want me to come with?" McCaffrey asked, as Sam made to leave the Control Room.

The younger Winchester shook his head. "No," he said. "Better you stay here in case – in case I don't come back."

McCaffrey nodded. "How long till I send in the cavalry?"

Sam grimaced. "Gimme an hour," he said. "If I'm not back by then, I think I may be in trouble."

"Good luck," McCaffrey said, before returning her attention to her screens.

"Yeah," Sam muttered, stepping out into the hallway. "I have a feeling I'm going to need it."

He closed the Control Room door quietly behind him, tipping a two-fingered salute at the camera above the door before heading down the corridor to his right.

He'd gone all of three steps before that odd vibration hit him again, thrumming up from the slate-grey floor tiles and making his head swim. The urge to cover his ears was almost irresistible, but somehow he managed to keep his hands down by his sides, taking one step at a time, fighting forward, almost as if he was battling a gale-force wind.

Camera 142 came swimming into view through his squinting eyes, and he glanced up at it briefly, a flash of pain shooting through his skull as everything suddenly went blue.

Bright blue, like a summer sky.

He was still looking up at a camera, but this one was mounted on a wrought iron lamppost, bright blue sky behind and an old fashioned clock tower beneath; trees; grass... And a painting which ran the length of a wall...

"Dean...?"

Sam blinked hard, and was again staring up at Camera 142, the pain in his head suddenly gone, while the vibration had dissipated into a soft thrum felt only through the soles of his feet.

He took another step towards the end of the hallway, glancing from door to door, unsure which Dean may have entered. Gingerly, he reached out towards a doorway on his left, pushing slightly, the door opening to reveal only an empty storeroom.

Sighing, Sam turned, eyes lighting on the door beneath the camera.

Reaching out towards it, the vibration began to hum once more through his fingers, becoming stronger the closer he got to the door and then stopping abruptly the second he touched the cool metal.

Pushing, the door gave about an inch but no further, and Sam peered through the gap, seeing only a heavy, rusted chain that was somehow twisted across the doorway, effectively denying him entry.

He sighed in frustration.

Bolt cutters. He needed bolt cutters.

There were some in the trunk.

Certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was the route Dean had taken, Sam turned to head for the exit, the parking lot beyond, the waiting Impala and the bolt cutters.

If someone – something – had his brother beyond that doorway, then nothing as

mundane as a rusty chain was going to keep him away.

He hadn't taken more than a couple of steps, however, when he hesitated, half turning in response to a sudden urge to return to the end of the hallway. Barely breathing, he carefully began to retrace his steps, uncertain what had made him turn back, but utterly convinced that there was a reason he was supposed to be here.

By the time he found himself once again standing in front of the far wall, his fingers had begun to tingle.

Very slowly, he reached out...

Dean brought the Pretend Impala to a slow stop by the side of the highway.

Yeah, so the car looked the same – same upholstery, same interior, same paintwork, same tires – hell it even had the same license plate number. But something was *different*. Maybe it was the empty glove box. Or the absence of the battered box of tapes from under the seat. Or maybe it was the smell. This Impala didn't smell right. Didn't smell lived-in. Didn't smell *loved*.

Sure, she was still a sweet drive. But she wasn't *his* sweet drive.

He exited the vehicle thoughtfully, frowning as the door squeaked when he closed it. Not the squeak his car made. Different somehow. A half octave higher maybe.

He wasn't entirely sure why he'd stopped here. Mindy had told him the highway didn't go anywhere, and he believed her. But it sure looked like it did, disappearing off into the distance like a promise of something else.

He took a few faltering steps along the blacktop, fingers tingling as an odd vibration seemed to emanate from the asphalt and reverberate right up his legs.

Taking another step forward, he reached out an uncertain hand, a weird feeling in his gut telling him not to walk any further up the long, straight road stretching out ahead of him.

Maybe it was the same feeling that had made him stop the car here in the first place.

And yet he took another step, not sure what he was expecting, the tingling in his fingers increasing until with a start he felt them brush against something solid in front of him; something solid and apparently invisible, standing as he was in the middle of a deserted highway, nothing in front of him but endless miles of blacktop and only thin air between himself and the distant horizon.

Or so he thought.

Cautiously, he ran his hand along what seemed to be an invisible barrier stretching, he guessed, from one side of the highway to the other and probably beyond that, the tingling in his fingers increasing as he maintained contact, like tiny electric shocks a little more intense than static but not enough to really hurt him.

"No escape," he muttered to himself, somehow knowing deep down that he had reached the boundary of whatever the hell this place was. "Jeez, I'm never getting out of here..."

Suddenly overcome by an overwhelming sense of helplessness and defeat, Dean leaned his forehead against the invisible barrier, the tingling in his fingers increasing until he reached one particular spot...

Sam ran his hand over the featureless grey brick which comprised Major Oak Mall's outer wall, fingers tingling, almost as if the stone itself were electrified.

Glancing up at the broken overhead light, the thought crossed his mind that perhaps there was some kind of electrical problem down here, something that had shorted out the light and was now running current through the building's infrastructure.

Dismissing the idea, his tingling fingers slowly began to move along the wall, unsure of what he was looking for until he reached one particular spot...

And Sam almost jerked his hand away in surprise.

"Dean?"

"Sam?"

Dean almost pulled away from the invisible barrier at the sound of his own name. "Sam?" he returned, the tingling in his fingers beginning to intensify until he had to will himself not to jerk his hand away, despite the sheer oddness of hearing his brother's disembodied voice calling out to him.

"Dean? Dean, are you okay?"

Dean glanced about himself: at the empty highway; the tantalizingly distant horizon; the Pretend Impala, which seemed to have had its soul ripped right out through its headlights.

He was so far from "okay" he was in a different time zone.

But the desperation and concern in Sam's voice was enough to cause the words, "I'm fine, Sam," to issue automatically from his mouth, Protection Reflex kicking in as he sought to allay Sam's fears. Protection Reflex satisfied, Defense Mode triggered Dean's next question, "Where the hell are you? Did he get you too?"

Tingling fingers pressed against the cool plaster of Major Oak Mall's outer wall, Sam eyed the dingy grey corridor warily. "I'm still at the mall," he replied. "Near the CCTV Control Room. Where the hell are *you*? I've been looking *everywhere*! And – and did *who* get me?"

"Howie!" Dean replied urgently. "It was Howie Grumnik – the security camera dude!"

"Huh?" Sam sounded less than convinced. "That creepy hamster-looking guy?"

"Yeah, him," Dean agreed. "I found this weird control room – like the one Kim showed us. Only – only different. Almost home-made, you know?"

"Like that lame EMF meter of yours?" Sam could almost hear Dean frowning.

"Dude, shut up for a second. I'm imparting knowledge here."

"Imparting?"

"You wanna know what's going on or what?"

Sam sighed almost contentedly, continually amazed by the size of the hole Dean left in him when he wasn't around. "Impart, O Great One."

Dean ignored the jibe. "Dude," he said instead. "You gotta get me outta here! This place is a waking freakin' daytime TV nightmare!"

Sam frowned. "And 'here' would be...?"

Dean shook his head, even though he was pretty sure Sam couldn't see him. "They call it Sherwood Falls," he explained eventually.

"And 'they' are...?"

"What, am I speaking Swahili all of a sudden?" Dean burst out irritably. "The taken people!"

"They're with you?" Sam ignored Dean's snarkiness, figuring his brother probably had just cause.

"Yeah," Dean confirmed. "All of them. In this – this weird-ass plastic daytime soap opera town where they're all forced to play a role – like – like scripted reality TV taken to extremes, I guess. And there are these Deputies who wander around threatening them if they don't stick to the 'Script.' And they all look like The Rock – I swear, *The Rock*, dude. And they all answer to this Sheriff guy who tells everybody

what to do and watches them all the time on the security cameras, which are, like, *everywhere*, and – and – it's *Howie*, Sam! It's *Howie* and he *knows* us! He stuck me with this family – Lizzie Baker's my *stepmom* here – and they told me my real 'mom' is in Lawrence. Freakin' *Lawrence*, Sam! How did he *know* that? And – and he even went to the trouble of copying my *car* – I've got an Impala here, man! And...And..." Dean trailed off, suddenly realizing he'd not taken a breath in several seconds and was really starting to sound kinda crazy.

So much for allaying Sam's fears.

There was a slight pause, before Sam finally returned, "You done?"

Dean took another breath. "Yeah, I'm good," he replied, trying not to sound any more manic than he already did. "Sam. Where the hell am I?" When Sam didn't reply, he continued, "Tell me you found my – my body, dude, 'cause you know, out of body experiences are so not cool when you don't actually know where your body is. And that's not something I wanna go misplacing, you know? Call me possessive, but I'm kinda attached to myself."

Sam paused again, feeling the panic coming off his brother in waves. "I've not found you," he finally admitted. "But you were down here when you were taken, right? I saw you on the security camera footage, despite Howie having tampered with the evidence..."

"He *what*?"

"Yeah. Messed with the tape. Made it look like you were leaving, then erased the footage from another camera altogether."

"Son of a..."

"But you must still be down here. Howie's gotta have you stashed somewhere."

Dean shuddered. "Creepy-ass piece of –"

"Dean that's not helping."

"I'm gonna kick his ass all the way to Krypton when I find him –"

"That's not even a real place."

"Doesn't mean I can't kick him there."

"Dean."

"Sam."

Another pause, Sam leaning against the wall just as Dean leant against the barrier.

"Sammy?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you – you got any idea what happened to me? How to, you know, fix me?"

Sam felt the coolness of the wall against his aching forehead. "Not really," he admitted. "Just... Well, just a – just an *idea*..."

"What kind of idea?"

Sam sighed. "You remember what Kim told us about that Amish belief that cameras can steal your soul...?"

"Howie stole my *soul*?" Dean burst out incredulously, leaning harder against the barrier, suddenly unsure whether his legs were up to the job of holding him upright any more.

"Maybe," Sam mused.

Dean fought the urge to scream as loud as his lungs would let him. "What – what would make you think that?" he asked cautiously, his voice unnaturally calm.

"Well," Sam replied, tried to sound equally as calm. "All of the victims were standing right in front of a security camera when they were taken, right? And there was the flash of light that we thought might be a camera flare? Not to mention the rainbows..."

"Yeah, definitely rainbows," Dean agreed. "When Howie did – whatever he did to me," he said, "I was poking around his freaky *I Spy* room, and when he came up behind me, I turned, and there was a camera pointed right at me and then there was a bright flash – and rainbows – and – and I was here."

"It would explain why the victims are all still able to function the way they do," Sam muttered, more to himself than to his brother, as if Dean's apparent proximity had temporarily helped him forget that the older Winchester was himself one of those "victims." "Still aware of their surroundings enough to survive physically, but not enough to be able to interact with the world around them. If the soul is essentially a person's essence, then without it, you've just got a shell. Like a car without an engine."

Dean shuddered again, trying not to think too hard on what Sam was theorizing. "Sam," he asked carefully. "How does Howie know about us?"

Sam thought about that one. "He could have seen the Impala on the security cameras," he reasoned. "Kansas plates. Maybe he did some digging."

"I knew that guy was stalker serial killer material," Dean muttered.

"Either that or he just thought you were so pretty you belonged on TV."

Dean grunted. "Which brings us to the problem of getting me *off* of TV..."

"That could be –" Sam searched for an adequate description, "– tricky."

"No kidding," Dean agreed. "Seems the only guy to get out of here did it by jumping off a cliff."

"Someone got out?" Sam seized on Dean's words just as Dean had seized on Mindy's.

"Yeah. Cop called James Gregory. I thought maybe he was related to Kim?"

"I'll ask her," Sam said. "If there's a way out..." He broke off suddenly, a whirring sound behind him drawing his attention to Camera 142, which had just started to pan in his direction. "Uh, Dean," he began slowly. "I think maybe I gotta go."

"What?" Dean sounded panicked again. "Wait! I mean – how do we contact each other again? You think this is your psychic mojo doing its thing or what?"

"I don't know," Sam replied honestly, again eyeing the camera. "Maybe it's just a fluke."

"Or – or maybe it's this place," Dean mused suddenly. "Sam, I think I'm standing right on the edge of Howie's little Stepford town – there's this invisible fence thing across the highway. Maybe it's because I'm *here*..."

Sam nodded slowly, feeling the wall, cool and rough against his fingers. "Right now I'm standing at the edge of mall," he agreed. "Maybe that's how we're connecting. Maybe – maybe we're occupying the same space – somehow..." He trailed off, not entirely sure whether he was just trying to rationalize the irrational. "But I really think I have to go, or the question's going to be pretty academic."

"He's trying to zap you?" Dean's voice shifted from Panic Mode to full-on Protection Mode in the time it took to say "cheese." "Sammy, go. Go now! No point us both being stuck here!"

Sam continued to eye the camera warily, the whirring altering in pitch as the lens began to zoom in on him. "Dean –?"

"Ah crap –"

"Dean?"

"I got company."

"Dean!"

"Sammy get that big brain of yours thinking 'cause I think I might be in trouble here –"

"What trouble? Dean? *Dean!*"

And just like that, the tingling in Sam's fingers stopped abruptly.

And the younger Winchester bolted down the hall, just as a flash of light lit up the spot where he'd been standing.

"That was very naughty of you."

The guy was big. *Real* big. Made Sammy look normal-sized. Didn't look like the Deputies – taller, although as forbiddingly muscular, steel-grey hair cut short to his scalp and steel-grey eyes almost as cold as the sparsely-furnished room in which they stood.

Dean swallowed, game face on, trying not to think about the last time someone had towered over him like this, all menacing and in his space and yellow eyes and Dad's face and...

No.

This guy was no Demon.

The Deputies on either side of him held him fast between them, fingers like metal vises around his upper arms, while the big guy got in his face, looking down at him as if he were merely a minor annoyance to be terrified into submission.

Dean didn't terrify easily. And he didn't submit easily either.

"You gonna make me go stand in the corner?" he asked, the innocent look on his face enough to make one tiny nerve in the corner of the big guy's upper lip quiver slightly.

Dean half expected the guy to hit him, but managed not to flinch when a large hand merely grabbed his chin and held him fast.

"I think you may have set a new record, Mr. Hudson," the big guy said, voice as cold as the icy eyes staring far too intently into Dean's. "Most of our – uh – guests have been in Sherwood Falls at least a week before their introduction to the Sanatorium." He lifted his wrist, melodramatically examining the silver Rolex glinting there. "But you?" he said, smiling mirthlessly. "Three hours. Like I said: a new record."

"Always like to make a good first impression," Dean returned, flashing that infuriating grin one more time.

"I'm sure," the man agreed. "But then, that's why the Sheriff wanted you here, I suppose. Thought you'd be – entertaining. A challenge." He released his hold on Dean, turning slightly to eye the camera mounted in the corner of the whitewashed room before retreating behind a grandiose solid oak desk where he began to shuffle through a pile of orderly paperwork.

Dean's eyes drifted to the brass nameplate neatly situated towards the front: Warden Benjamin T. Chappell.

The Warden, having apparently located what he was looking for, returned to his intimidating invasion of Dean's personal space, looming over him as he cast an eye over the manila folder in his hand.

"Hmm," he said distractedly, the folder opening enough for Dean to see a photograph of himself paper-clipped to the inside cover. "I can see why the Sheriff brought you here. You're not going to be easy to break are you?" When Dean made no response, the Warden's cold gaze flitted back in his direction. "But make no mistake, it *will* happen. Sooner or later. Everyone breaks. You'll come to accept your role, accept the Script. Sooner or later *everyone* bends to my – to the Sheriff's will."

Dean inclined his head slightly, returning the Warden's gaze with a quizzical one of his own. "*Your* will?" he repeated the Warden's Freudian slip, narrowing his eyes before squinting straight into those of the man opposite. "*Howie?*" he burst out. "That you in there?"

If Dean hadn't been acutely aware that the Warden and his cronies were more than likely not exactly human, his pride in his hunter's reflexes may have been hurt almost as much as his throat when the Warden suddenly snatched out a huge hand and

yanked him right off his feet before he even had time to blink.

"Don't call me that," the Warden growled, voice low and threatening.

Gasping for oxygen as black spots started popping in front of his eyes, Dean managed to croak, "Dude, this whole choking thing? So not my kinda deal. You're confusing me with my brother."

If it were possible, the Warden's eyes seemed to become even frostier. "Ah yes," he said, tightening his grip around Dean's throat. "Which brings me to the reason you're here..."

"Howie!" Dean swore, not sure whether to aim his comments at the camera, through which he was convinced Grumnik would be watching, or at the Warden, who he was equally convinced had to be the little security guard's alter ego in this freaky soap opera of his. "Howie, you so much as *touch* my brother and..."

"And you'll *what*?" The Warden shook him like a rag doll, and suddenly his voice sounded to Dean as if it were echoing down a very long corridor. "You can't do anything. You're *there*. He's *here*. With me. In the real world."

"Damn it, I *knew* this freak of nature was your idea of wish fulfillment, Howie!"

"It's *Howard*!" The Warden spat, finally releasing his hold on his captive, the manila folder scattering across the floor as Dean only avoided an up close and personal with the shiny black tiles thanks to the two gorillas still hanging on to his arms.

Blinking rapidly, Dean's eyes managed to focus on the papers now littering the floor of the Warden's tidy office, frowning as he realized that apart from the name *Hudson: Dean* typed neatly across the top of the first page, the rest of Dean's "file" was comprised of blank sheets of paper.

He glanced up at the towering Warden, whose teeth were grinding audibly. "That's it, isn't it?" he said slowly. "There's no Script, is there Howie? Just you and your damn fantasy wish fulfillment. You get off on torture, huh? Is that what this place is? Somewhere you can inflict pain and influence on people you don't have any power over in the real world?" He stood straighter, looking right into the camera. "Well you can torture me all you like, you little pipsqueak. Like you said yourself – or you said through you mouthpiece here," he indicated the Warden, "I don't break easy. So take your best shot."

The Warden's head moved quickly, icy eyes suddenly inches from Dean's. "Maybe not," he said through gritted teeth. "But there's something you need to remember: Don't forget you still have a physical body. You'd be amazed how *inventive* I can be when motivated; the things I could do to what's left of you in the real world..."

"Yeah, go ahead, Howie," Dean spat defiantly, doing his best to disguise the unsettled tremor in his voice. "Pick on someone who can't fight back. I guess that's just your style, right?"

The Warden grunted. "You've been a bad boy, Mr. *Hudson*." He emphasized the name sarcastically. "Trying to talk to that not-so-little brother of yours. Trying to communicate with the real world. Don't you realize, Dean? For you there *is* no real world. This is it for you. This is your life now, *this* is your reality. The sooner you accept that, the better it'll be for you –"

"I'll never –"

"The better it'll be for your brother."

Dean froze.

"Because as much as the thought of hurting *you* appeals to me, the thought of hurting *him* to hurt you appeals even more. And I *will* hurt him, Dean. I swear. You try to talk to him again and I'll send him to a place so far away from you you'll wish I'd sent you both to Hell."

There was a pause, when all Dean could focus on was the Warden's eyes, and

all he could hear was the zoom of the camera lens.

"You mean I'm not in Hell already?"

The Warden laughed at that, a hollow, pitiless sound. "It's time you understood, boy," he said quietly, face a mask of oh-so-superior condescension. "Round these parts, I'm *God*. By the time I'm finished with you, you'll be *begging* to worship me. I'm your God now, boy. *Your God*. You understand that?"

Dean considered for a second, before flashing the Warden his sunniest grin.

"Would this be a bad time to mention I'm an Atheist?"

"Sam!" Kim smiled awkwardly, tugging at her rumpled t-shirt and running a hand through her hair as she switched on the porch light. "What are you –?"

Sam smiled just as awkwardly, bouncing nervously on the balls of his feet as he muttered apologetically, "I know. I'm like the proverbial bad penny, right?"

"That's alright," Kim assured him, concern in her dark eyes. "Did you – did you find Dean?"

Sam inclined his head. "Yes and no," he replied enigmatically. "But I think I know who's responsible."

Kim raised an eyebrow. "You do?"

"It's Howard," Sam told her. "Howard Grumnik."

"Howie?" Kim echoed incredulously. "Howie Grumnik an evil genius? Sam, are you sure? I just don't see it..."

"Yeah," Sam confirmed. "Pretty sure."

"But how? What's he doing?"

"Not sure yet," Sam replied honestly. "But I think you might know someone who can help me with that."

"Good choice of music," Kim observed, Hendrix's *All Along the Watchtower* thrumming from the Impala's speakers as Sam gunned the engine.

The young man frowned ever-so-slightly, barely even remembering having turned on one of Dean's CDs on the drive over from the mall.

Comfort blanket.

Being surrounded by the Impala obviously hadn't been enough; Sam needed something else to simulate his big brother's presence.

"Yeah," he muttered finally. "Dean has the odd CD that doesn't make me want to throw myself under a bus."

Kim smiled slightly, her expression faltering as Sam pulled away from the curb. "James doesn't make a whole lot of sense most of the time," she said solemnly. "I don't know how much help he's going to be."

Sam nodded sympathetically. "Why didn't you tell us your husband had been taken?"

Kim shrugged. "My husband's in a psychiatric hospital," she said. "Not something I want to broadcast to just anybody."

"And he just woke up? Just like that?"

"Three weeks after he was taken. He's the only one who – the only one who's come back."

"But he was...?"

"Different." The word sounded as if it had lodged in Kim's throat. "The things he was saying – where he said he'd been – it just sounded crazy. Implausible. Impossible."

"Where did he say he'd been?" Sam glanced sideways at her, mindful of Dean's description of where he'd been taken.

Kim shrugged. “Kept talking about a – a Sheriff. And a Sanatorium where they – where they –” She averted her eyes to study her fingernails a little too intently. “He said he’d been tortured in there.”

Sam swallowed hard. The last thing Dean had said was that people were coming for him... “You should have told us,” he said quietly, trying to ignore the sudden brittleness in his voice.

Kim nodded. “I thought it was irrelevant,” she said. “I thought James was just...” She trailed off, unable to complete the sentence.

Sam broke the uncomfortable silence first. “You think they’ll let us in to see him this late?”

“I’ll tell them it’s a family emergency,” Kim assured him. “Don’t worry. I’ll get us in.” She lapsed back into silence for a moment, concentrating on the steady movement of the windshield wipers and the low rumble of the music. Then, “You really think James can help you?”

Sam didn’t answer right away, slowly releasing a breath. “I hope so.”

Kim studied the young man’s face thoughtfully. “Can *you* help *him*?”

Sam glanced at her carefully as he turned into the hospital parking lot, smiling as reassuringly as he could, but unable to give her the answer she needed to hear.

So this wasn’t so bad, Dean told himself, assessing his surroundings with the practiced ease of someone regularly caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

“Rock” right now was being ably simulated by the two burly Deputies standing on either side of the white door opposite him, while “hard place” was undoubtedly the chair to which he found himself strapped, which uncomfortably reminded him of the electric variety.

He winced slightly as he tugged against the leather restraints biting into his wrists, fastening him to the chair arms just as similar straps secured his ankles to the contraption’s wooden legs. They’d forced him into a thin white t-shirt and pajama pants, which really offered little padding against the tight restraints, one of which was buckled a little too tightly around his midriff, while another encircled his neck, ensuring he couldn’t move his head too much without choking himself.

Okay, so maybe this was pretty bad, he decided, reassessing the situation as the door to the small white room opened to admit the hulking behemoth that was Warden Benjamin T. Chappell. Dean could swear the guy had grown a couple of inches taller since their last encounter. Maybe Howie figured he wasn’t intimidating enough already.

“Mr. Hudson,” the Warden bobbed his head curtly, closing the thick door quietly behind himself as he glanced at the camera in the corner of the room.

“It’s Winchester,” Dean spat through gritted teeth. “*Howie*.”

Temper flared on the Warden’s face. “Don’t call me that!” He raised a hand as if to smack Dean across the face, but caught himself just in time, forced calm flooding his features as his captive grinned up at him infuriatingly.

“Told ya so.”

Had Dean been able to move his head just then, he may have flinched as the Warden leaned his face down towards him, hands resting heavily on the arms of Dean’s chair.

“You need to learn to speak when spoken to,” Chappell breathed. “To be seen and not heard. Your mommy never taught you that?”

Dean’s jaw tensed, but he didn’t reply.

Chappell smirked. “Because she’s not really in Lawrence is she?”

Dean’s eyes flicked to the camera before locking back onto the Warden’s. “Sure

she is," he insisted. "My – uh – stepmom told me so."

The Warden smiled lopsidedly, pulling away and straightening. "Not as dumb as you look, are you?"

"Not me," Dean agreed. "How about you?"

The Warden didn't rise to the bait. "I wish I could believe you," he smiled disingenuously, "Mr. Hudson," he added, grin widening as the muscles continued to tighten along Dean's jaw. "But until I'm sure you're not going to go running off looking for ways to contact your little brother again – until I'm certain that you can be trusted as a valued member of this community – you're going to be staying right here. In this room. In that chair."

Dean gripped the chair arms unconsciously. "I've been in worse places."

The Warden nodded, grin widening still further. "Oh, I seriously doubt that."

He moved off to Dean's right, to a bank of equipment that would have looked right at home on the bridge of the original Starship Enterprise: all color and no function.

If that control panel actually controlled anything, Dean would stand naked in the middle of Times Square singing show tunes. No way that thing controlled –

"Aagh!" Dean let out a surprised grunt, as Chappell spun a completely functionless-looking red dial, and his prisoner suddenly felt as if he'd been struck by lightning.

It was difficult to describe the sensation. Like wrestling a hundred electric eels in a vat of boiling water just as someone tossed in a radio still connected to the mains.

Dean jerked – once, twice, three times – body stiffening as the pain crackled from his head down to his toes and back up again, eyes swimming out of focus as they were suddenly blinded by flashes of the brightest light he'd ever seen in his life.

When the pain stopped, all he could see were rainbows.

"Did that hurt?"

Dean could hear the voice, but the words sounded odd – indistinct and unintelligible, as if someone were speaking to him in a completely alien language.

Taking a deep breath, he was suddenly aware of the heaviness of his own body, head drooping against the restraint around his neck as his fingernails dug into the hard wooden arms of the chair.

"What's your name, boy?"

Suddenly the words started to make sense again, and for the first time in several seconds, Dean actually knew the answer to that question.

"Dean," he said, teeth chattering as he spoke.

"Dean what?"

"W – Winchester –"

The next spike of pain tore through his skull as if it was ripping out chunks of his brain, a strange noise suddenly assaulting his ears as he felt as if he were drifting above himself, looking down at the young man twitching and jerking against his restraints.

It was only when the pain stopped that Dean managed to identify that awful noise.

It had been the sound of himself screaming.

"Let's try that again, son," the Warden insisted, fingers toying with the red dial in front of him. "I didn't quite catch your last name...?"

"Howie, I swear you do that again and –" Dean never got to finish the threat; an agonized scream ripped from his throat before he'd even had time to recover from the last one.

"What's your name?"

Dean had the distinct impression of floating this time, hovering up towards the ceiling, looking down at a figure he didn't recognize strapped to a big wooden chair

beneath him.

"Name."

"Winchester."

"Name?"

"I don't –"

"Accept the role, boy. Just accept it. I'll make the pain stop, I swear. I'll make it all better. Just tell me your name."

"Winchester!" Dean fairly hurled the three syllables across the room at his tormentor, the next wave of agony causing him to lose all sense of up and down, all sense of time and space. All sense of *self*.

"Just tell me what I want to hear, son. Just give in to it. Just let go. Tell me your name and this can all be over –"

"Win –"

"I can make it stop –"

"– chest –"

"And I won't even have to lay a hand on your brother –"

Dean opened his eyes wide before squeezing them shut again, breathing hard and swallowing bile.

"Hudson," he said quietly, hanging his head. "Dean Hudson."

Sam fiddled unconsciously with the leather bracelet around his wrist, hands resting lightly on the metal table in front of him, that weird tingling in his fingers having somehow made it to the back of his eyes.

Dean was in trouble. Something was hurting him. He just *knew* it.

Kim fidgeted nervously at his side, long fingers drumming against the tabletop, eyes darting to the door at the slightest sound.

Finally, it opened, and a tall African American man whose shoulders looked impossibly broad in his hospital-issue white pajamas entered the room, closely followed by an orderly of almost the same size.

A brief smile flickered across his handsome face as he registered Kim's presence, but quickly turned to an almost hostile frown when Sam stood and held out a hand towards him.

*Tall kid. Too tall.*

When James Gregory didn't take his outstretched hand, Sam sat abruptly, suddenly remembering that his height could sometimes be intimidating, even though he estimated that the former cop was only a couple of inches shorter than he was at best.

James sat too, following Sam's lead, but still wary of him, eyes warming as they returned to Kim. "Hey baby."

Kim smiled then, shoulders relaxing. "Hey yourself." She ran a finger along the back of his hand, temporarily lost somewhere a long way away from the dingy green visitors' room. Coming back to herself abruptly, she nodded briefly in Sam's direction. "This is Sam," she said. "He has a problem he thinks you may be able to help him with."

"I don't help folks no more," James said shortly, liquid brown eyes shifting languidly to Sam, obviously dulled by the drugs floating around in his system.

When James said nothing further, Sam cleared his throat, figuring the direct approach was probably the way to go. "My brother's been taken," he said flatly. "By the same thing that took you."

James showed no obvious emotion apart from an almost imperceptible flaring of his nostrils.

"I think he's where you were," Sam plowed on. "And I need to get him back. I need to get them *all* back."

James shifted in his seat, eyes suddenly sharper. "What makes you think I can help you? No one believes me." He looked pointedly at Kim, who averted her gaze, before sighing deeply. "Hell, sometimes I don't even believe me."

"I believe you," Sam insisted, looking the cop right in the eye. "I know you're the only one who got out. I know you threw yourself off a cliff to do it."

If James was surprised he didn't show it. "Desperate," he said shortly. "Only way I could think of."

Sam nodded his understanding. "I know," he said, voice soothing and low. "But I'm not sure telling a whole town full of people to jump off a cliff would be such a great idea."

James' eyes widened in horror, big hand snatching out and encircling Sam's wrist. "No!" he burst out, squeezing so hard Sam barely managed to stifle a yelp. "No!"

"Honey –" Kim reached out to her husband, one eye on the orderly who had taken a wary step in James' direction.

"They mustn't do that!" James seemed oblivious to the movement behind him. "I shouldn't have. Came back – wrong. Different." He abruptly released Sam's wrist, resting his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. "Pieces missing. Pieces they took."

Sam glanced sideways at Kim, whose eyes were brimming with tears.

"This is how he's been," she mumbled. "Since he came back."

Sam took a breath, thinking. "James," he said slowly. "Who took pieces from you?"

"Not 'from,'" James said, not looking up. "Of."

"Of?"

James finally met Sam's quizzical gaze. "Pieces of me. Just floated away."

Kim shook her head, wiping away an errant tear.

"How did they take pieces of you?" Sam nudged gently.

James eyed him thoughtfully. "You spoke to someone? Someone *there*?" he asked, not answering Sam's question.

Sam nodded. "My brother."

"How?"

"Good question," Sam sighed. "I'm not really sure. He said he'd reached a barrier around the town –"

"No way out that way," James grunted.

"– And I was at the edge of the mall," Sam continued. "I think – I think somehow we touched."

To Sam's surprise, James didn't laugh. "You were lucky. Won't happen again." His tone was so authoritative, so final, Sam instinctively believed him. "They watch. *He* watches. Your brother..." He shook his head sadly.

Sam bit his lip. "He said people were coming for him."

"Yes. The Sheriff will have seen. Will punish."

"Punish Dean?"

James nodded. "For not accepting his role. Like me. Said no. No, this isn't me. I won't live your life, I won't." He was shaking his fist at something in the corner of the room, and Sam turned, startled by the unobtrusive grey security camera hidden in the shadows there. Then James calmed, looking into Sam's eyes again. "Always punish."

"How?" Sam's voice sounded hollow, broken.

James' huge shoulders shuddered. "Sanatorium," he said simply. "Warden. Took pieces."

"He tortured you?" Sam sounded aghast, and Kim reached across to hold her husband's hand. "This Warden tortured you?"

James met Sam's gaze levelly. "Wouldn't follow the Script," he said. "Wouldn't do as I was told." He let go of Kim's hand and caught Sam's wrist again, but didn't squeeze so hard this time. "Couldn't break me. You understand?"

Sam nodded. "So you ran off and jumped off a cliff?"

"Thought the pieces would come back with me."

"And they didn't? You came back wrong?"

James nodded. "Pieces missing."

"Pieces of what, James?"

The cop stared at him. "Will your brother break easy?"

Sam frowned, chewing on his lip before shaking his head wordlessly.

James nodded sadly. "Then they'll take pieces of him too. And even if he comes back, he'll come back wrong like me."

Sam fought the urge to jump up from the table, run for the car and drive back to the mall as fast as the Impala's V8 could get him there. "Why do you think you're 'wrong?'" he asked instead.

James seemed to consider that for a long moment. "Things don't work. Scattered. Short circuit. Pieces don't fit together right anymore. Holes. Pieces missing."

Sam took a long breath, exhaled slowly before repeating his earlier question. "Pieces of what, James?"

James gazed at him long and hard, before moving his head towards him slightly, hand still gripping his wrist, eyes boring into the younger man's. Voice lowered, he whispered, "My soul. They took pieces of my soul."

It was so quiet up here. Quiet and high.

He didn't like heights much. But this was okay. Not like flying. Like floating. No dizziness. Just... Here.

Floating.

Rainbows in his eyes.

So quiet.

Until that awful noise shattered the silence once more.

Terrible, terrible noise.

And he was falling.

Plummeting towards the noise. Towards the boy in the chair who was making it.

Dean screamed. Screamed until his throat was raw. Screamed until he thought his head would explode with the noise.

There'd been a brief sensation of floating, light all around him, no pain, just peace and quiet.

And then the pain had come rushing back at him and it was all he could do just to hang on.

Because something was trying to rip him away. Tear him from his body. His body that wasn't even really his.

He tried to breathe as the pain abruptly abated, blinking back tears as he tried to remember his name.

Dean. Dean – something.

"You're doing very well, son," the low voice next to him said. "I almost believe you. Almost. But not quite. Now tell me your name again."

"Don't – don't remember –"

"Give it time. There are bound to be pieces missing."

"Sammy," Dean said suddenly, only one name managing to make it through the

haze fogging his senses. "Need to – where's Sammy? Dad'll be mad at me –"

"You remember *his* name then? Alright. Tell me your brother's name."

"I just did."

"Tell me."

"Sammy. Sam."

"Your brother's name, Dean."

"Sam."

"Matthew, Dean. Your brother's name's Matthew."

"No, it's *Sam*."

"That's the wrong answer."

"Sam –"

And then the screaming started again.

His soul. They took pieces of James' soul. And he'd come back without them.  
His freakin' *soul*.

Sam couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe he'd been *right*.

So that's what this was? Howie Grumnik was a soul stealer?

It made so much ridiculous sense, Sam couldn't believe he'd even doubted himself when he'd laid his theory out for Dean. Howie was using the mall's security cameras to somehow steal people's souls. Transport them to his little fantasy town. Intimidate them into fulfilling the roles he'd cast them in, and torture them if they didn't comply.

Howard Grumnik was playing God.

Christ. This made killer bugs seem almost *plausible*...

Sam made short work of the lock on the door beneath Camera 142. Spared barely a second glance at the thick chain barring entrance as it clattered to the dusty floor, bolt cutters abandoned along with it. Strode along the gloomily-lit corridor like he owned the place. Easily identified the route Dean had taken from the marks in the dirt on the floor. Shouldered the door. Burst into the room, handgun drawn –

And almost dropped it the second he crossed the threshold.

It wasn't so much what Sam *saw* that shocked him – the huge bank of TV monitors like electronic crazy paving splattered across one entire wall. No. What shocked him was the *sound*.

The sound of his brother screaming out his name.

"*Sammy!*"

Sam had heard Dean cry out for him plenty of times over the last twenty-three years. Sometimes in anger. Sometimes in fear. Often in pain.

But never like this.

Never in absolute agony.

"That's *not* you brother's name, boy," a cold voice, barely audible above Dean's screams, seemed to fill the room around him, and it was only then that Sam realized where the voices were coming from.

Speakers.

Goddamn it.

Sam was listening to Dean being tortured in full-on 5.1 Dolby Digital Surround Sound.

And that was when he finally took a proper look at the image displayed on almost every screen on the wall in front of him.

"Dean?"

He covered the distance between himself and the jury-rigged control panel in three long strides, shoving aside the empty chair before resting his hands on the desk

before him.

Dean was there, repeated over and over, strapped to a wooden chair in a stark white room, a tall man standing over him, fiddling with a crazy-looking machine beside him.

“What’s your brother’s name, son?” the tall man repeated during a brief cessation of Dean’s agonized cries.

“S – S – ”

“Matthew. Come on, Dean. I know you want to give in to it. Let me help you. Let me stop the pain – ”

Dean grit his teeth. “Sammy – ” he managed, before another scream was torn from him.

Along with something else.

Sam blinked at the screen, knuckles white as he gripped the edge of the desk harder with each cry emanating from his brother’s mouth. He squinted. Tried not to see the agony on Dean’s face.

Rainbows.

Flashes of color rising from Dean’s tortured eyes, wide open and staring up at the ceiling.

*Windows on the soul.*

Sam remembered the old proverb and shook his head, desperately scanning the control panel in front of him for something – *anything* – that he could use to help Dean.

“If you keep saying that name, boy,” the steely-eyed guy on the screen was saying, “I might have to find a way to take Sammy right out of the picture.” Sam’s eyes snapped to the nearest monitor. “If that’s the only way to break you. If that’s the only way to make you accept your role...”

“Don’t – ” Dean managed weakly. “Please.”

Sam fought down the lump in his throat, eyes drawn to a flat screen monitor slightly larger than the others, just as Dean began to scream his name anew.

Wishing he could just shut off his ears, Sam squinted at the image on the larger monitor, the word “Control” stenciled lopsidedly on the bottom of the surround around the screen.

The screen showed an image of what looked like some kind of town square, a large, brightly colored mural covering a wall the entire length of one side. It reminded Sam a little of the Korean War Memorial in Washington, D.C. Dad had taken them there once when they were kids and he’d been on a hunt for a particularly sadistic warlock who had a thing for torturing politicians.

He remembered seeing his reflection in the smooth black granite wall, creating the illusion that he was standing with the soldiers depicted there.

The mural on the monitor had a similar three-dimensional look to it, and it was only on closer inspection of the figures ranged along the wall that Sam realized what he was looking at.

The people who had been taken.

All of them.

Images of them in full color from one side of the wall to the other.

Lizzie Baker. The two Tyler kids.

Dean.

As his brother let out another anguished cry, Sam’s eyes snapped briefly to one of the other monitors, where a swirl of rainbow-colored light was dancing above Dean’s head.

Looking back at the mural, Sam realized with a shock that the color was draining right out of the picture of Dean depicted on the wall, the image guttering and shuddering

with each new scream that escaped his brother's lips.

Pieces of his soul.

Photographs can steal your soul.

"I don't want to hurt you any more, Dean," the grey-haired torturer on the monitors was saying. "And I don't want to hurt your brother."

Sam started as he suddenly realized he'd heard that last sentence in more than just surround sound. There was another voice behind him, echoing the words being spoken by the man up on the screens.

Sam spun towards the voice, eyes widening as he found himself staring down the barrel of a Taser.

"I don't want to hurt your brother," Howard Grumnik spoke into his headset, grinning evilly as his words issued from Warden Benjamin T. Chappell's mouth. A self-satisfied smile twitched at his lips as he pondered the image on the PDA in his hand, the same image of Dean being tortured that was splayed across the bank of TV screens in front of him. "But I will if I have to."

He smirked at Sam as he pulled back on the trigger.

*Wow, that hurt.*

Sam put a hand to his forehead, blinking hard and sitting up in a blind panic when he suddenly realized he couldn't see anything.

*That's because it's dark, Sam,* he chastised himself, slowing his breathing in a valiant attempt to quiet his hammering heart. He tilted his head slightly, squinting at a shaft of yellow light spearing through the darkness above him before gradually standing on wobbly legs, trying to remember what the hell had happened to him as he stumbled toward the distant rectangle of illumination.

Howie. Taser.

Oh yeah.

He massaged his chest uncomfortably where the Taser's electrodes had struck him, grimacing as he bumped into a very solid wooden door, before pressing his face against the small window and blinking some more against the harsh light.

He found himself looking out onto Howie's freaky control room, the small security guard hunkered down in his huge control chair, his back to Sam as his fingers danced across his control board. Sam's gun and cell phone were clearly visible on the desk next to him, and Sam grit his teeth in annoyed frustration that he'd let a squirt of Howie's stature overpower him and take his stuff so easily.

When Dean found out, he'd never hear the end of it.

Howie's attention had drifted to the bank of TV monitors in front of him, and Sam followed his gaze nervously, clenching his jaw tightly when he saw Dean's image still displayed across almost all of the screens, eyes open wide as he endured whatever agony Grumnik was currently inflicting upon him.

Even through the locked door, Sam could hear the sound of his brother screaming out his name.

He beat his fist angrily and uselessly against the glass panel, his own voice almost a scream itself. "Howie, goddamn it, leave him alone!"

Grumnik half-turned, a smirk creeping across his self-satisfied features as he twisted a dial on the control board in front of him. Up on the screen, the big Warden seemed to repeat the procedure, Dean's screams intensifying just as Sam's attention was drawn to something pulsing on the control board next to Howie's right hand.

It was a crystal of some kind, set into the panel below the monitor displaying the

town mural, a tangle of dangerous-looking wires twisting around it, snaking off into the recesses of the computer equipment ranged behind the screens.

The more Howie twisted the dial, the brighter the crystal had begun to blaze, and it was only when the security guard seemed to relent, reversing the direction of the control beneath his fingers, that the crystal ceased its pulsing, going almost dark as Dean's screams finally abated, his body still jerking against his restraints as the light show above his head seemed to settle around him like some unearthly aura.

*Huh.*

Sam filed that little observation – albeit useless for the moment – away for possible future use, breath fogging the window as he leaned his forehead against the glass.

It was only because Dean had stopped screaming that Sam felt he was able to breathe at all.

His attention was drawn back to the TV monitors then, movement near his brother's image making his stomach clench. The Warden was circling him, gazing down at him thoughtfully as the maelstrom of color slowly descended back towards Dean's unnaturally staring eyes.

"Dean," the Warden said quietly, voice so low Sam could barely hear him, almost drowned out by the same words issuing from Howie's mouth a microsecond earlier. "All you have to do is say the word – the *right* word – and all of this can be over."

Dean's eyes were drifting in and out of focus, his face a mask of agony and – something else.

Anger.

"Screw you, Howie," he managed weakly, his voice hoarse and broken.

"Now, now," Sam heard Howie's words echoing from the Warden's mouth. "We don't talk to each other like that in Sherwood Falls. You know that. Honestly. What were you, raised in a brothel?"

Dean jerked against his restraints, clearly wanting nothing more than to tear the guy's face off.

The Warden chuckled, his laugh much colder and more menacing than Howie's high-pitched snort.

"Mom's in Kansas, remember Dean? Brought you up right, didn't she? Even without your dad there..."

Dean gripped the chair arms tighter.

"Poor Stephen Hudson. Never even knew you existed –"

"He's *not* my dad –"

"Never got to see you grow up –"

"He's *not* my –"

"Never got to teach you what he knew."

The Warden stopped, enjoying the look of anger frozen on Dean's face as he suddenly realized his captor wasn't really talking about the Hudsons any more.

"Oh, but wait," Chappell continued, grinning slyly. "Wasn't that your *mom*? I'm confusing things. Your *mom* never got to see you grow up, did she? Never got to teach you what she knew..."

"You sonofa –"

"Now you see, don't you, Dean?" The Warden lowered his face so that it was inches from his prisoner's. "You see how much better this is for you? How much better this is than the real world? Here, mom's back in Lawrence, alive and well, and you get to spend some quality time with your dad. That's better, right? All you've ever wanted?"

"You don't know anything about me." Dean's voice was low and subdued, and Sam didn't ever remember hearing him sound so uncertain of himself.

"I know you don't do as you're told, Mr. *Hudson*. Not very obedient, are we? Can't seem to follow orders."

Sam would have given anything for Dean to turn up that grin and spit some venomously inappropriate one-liner the Warden's way.

But he didn't. He didn't even attempt a response. Just closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the chair.

"Or maybe that's just me. Maybe you just won't do what *I* tell you to do. Maybe you only follow orders when it suits you, when there's something more important than *your* life at stake. Maybe it's going to take a different kind of persuasion to make you obey me." The Warden resumed his circling, shoes clicking rhythmically on the tile floor. He came to a stop behind the chair, leaning down before whispering in Dean's ear, "You see, I've got something more important to you than your own life now, Dean. I've got your brother. Sammy? The one you've been screaming for..."

Sam's fingers balled into fists against the glass as Howie leaned forward in his chair.

"I don't think I'll kill him. Not yet. And I'm certainly not sending him in there to play with you. Might keep him for a while. Insurance. There are pieces I could take from him. Won't damage him too much. People can lead productive lives with pieces missing... Pieces they don't really need..."

*They took pieces of my soul...*

Sam swallowed hard, and on the monitors, Dean did the same.

"...Pieces I could send anywhere I want to. I'm *God*, remember? I could send him all the way to – to Krypton. If it existed."

*Goddamn it!* He'd been watching them the whole time.

Howie's attention suddenly seemed to shift to one of the other screens, where Sam could see Kim entering the building on her way in to work.

While the fact that Howie was watching Kim was disturbing enough, the fact that this meant it must be morning already was worse. Much worse. Sam must have been unconscious for *hours*. Hours Dean had spent strapped to a chair having God-only-knew-what done to him.

Howie watched Kim enter the building, following her progress from camera to camera, and somewhere in the back of his head, Sam realized Howie must be hooked into the entire mall security camera system. So *that* was how he had doctored the footage of Dean. *That* was how he was taking people.

No wonder he never went home.

Howie glanced at his watch, his words falling from the Warden's mouth distractedly. "Well, Mr. *Hudson*, I'd love to stay and finish our little chat, but as you can see –" he waved a hand towards the barred window opposite Dean's position where sunlight was streaming through, creating criss-cross patterns on the tile floor, "– it's getting late."

Dean frowned up at him, opened his mouth as if to make some wise-ass retort about its being broad daylight outside, but quickly closed it again as Howie jabbed at a button on his control panel and the blue sky beyond the window abruptly transformed into velvety black night, complete with stars twinkling and a full moon.

Dean blinked. "Gives a whole new meaning to 'Lights Out,'" he muttered, suddenly remembering Mindy's words from earlier: *We don't always get night time*.

Jeez, this guy could control day and night too?

The Warden leaned down again abruptly, hands once more braced against the arms of Dean's chair. "I'm *God*, remember?"

Sam almost laughed out loud at that sentence issuing from Howie's lips, but Dean flinched, the same words sounding a hell of a lot more sinister coming from the

Warden.

Which, of course, was the point.

Howie's cell phone chose that moment to chirrup, and the security guard frowned at the caller I.D., deftly bringing up what Sam quickly recognized as the *other* CCTV control room on one of his screens.

Lozano was visible in one of the chairs, cell phone pressed to his ear and an irritated expression on his face. "Howie, where the hell are you? You're late, and Ms. Gregory's already asking after you!"

"I'm on my way down now," Howie replied into his cell with an audible sigh, real life an irritating intrusion into his fantasy world. "Two minutes."

"Alright, Howie," Lozano looked relieved. "But this isn't like you. Is everything – ?"

"I've been busy," Howie cut him off, scanning the feed displaying Dean, who was being manhandled out of the torture chair by the two Deputies. He hit a button on the panel in front of him, and the legend "Autorun" appeared on the big control screen displaying the mural, Warden Chappell beginning to speak without Grumnik having to say anything into his headset.

"Time for bed, Mr. Hudson."

Dean didn't fight the Deputies – from the way he seemed to be shaking from head to toe, Sam wasn't sure he had any fight left in him – meekly allowing himself to be led from the room, bare feet dragging on the floor as the two guards bore his weight between them.

The Warden followed close on his heels, a satisfied smile somehow darkening his sinister features.

Howie stood then, tugging on his jacket and sliding his PDA into his pocket. He made a move towards the door before stopping abruptly, pivoting, and retrieving Sam's handgun, which he slipped into the other pocket. "Just in case." He waved towards the door behind which Sam was clearly visible, a nasty smile spreading across his thin lips.

Sam scowled at him as he watched him scuttle from the room, all manner of curses popping into his head, some of which Dean, no doubt, would have been proud.

For a second, Sam just stood there, wondering what to do next, eyes sliding back to the monitor where Howie had been watching Dean, the picture now dark, as if the camera de-activated itself if there was no one present in the room.

The mural on the big Control Monitor had returned to normal, Dean's picture still displayed there, although the colors were a little muted compared to how they had appeared before.

Sam was about to turn away from the darkened screens, everyone in Sherwood Falls apparently under the thrall of the enforced Lights Out, when he caught sight of Dean again, this time on a different monitor that was slightly smaller and a lot harder to see.

The two heavies appeared to have laid him out on a low metal-framed bed, wrists and ankles restrained by the same leather straps that had secured him to the chair. Either he was asleep or he was unconscious, because he wasn't moving, and while that in itself would have caused Sam to freak out under ordinary circumstances, right now it was a blessed relief: At least he wasn't screaming any more.

For right now, that had to be enough.

A small noise behind him startled Sam out of his emotionally wrung out haze, and he spun suddenly, squinting hard into the near-darkness.

"Hello?"

Eyes sweeping the room methodically as he had been taught since childhood, he thought he caught sight of something moving about six feet from where he was standing.

"Hello?" he repeated. "Someone there?"

A tiny shuffling sound gave Sam the aural clue he needed, and he was across the room and on top of his unexpected roommate faster than a cheetah on an antelope.

"Who are you?" he demanded, grabbing two handfuls of shirt and yanking the room's other occupant into a sitting position, light from the doorway falling across a startled face.

Sam drew in a stunned breath.

"Dean?"

The face gazing back at him was unmistakably that of his brother, pallid skin making his eyes seem unnaturally huge, pupils so big Sam could barely see the irises.

"Oh my God, Dean..." Sam momentarily forgot the Winchester Code, pulling his brother against him, the older man for once not resisting.

That was Sam's first clue that something was wrong.

*Car without an engine.*

*Lights are on, but no one's home.*

He pulled back slightly, holding what was left of his brother at arms' length, assessing him for injuries as best he could in the subdued lighting. Apart from a purple bruise across his left cheekbone, Sam couldn't see any real damage.

Not on the outside, anyway.

"Don't worry, Dean," he said stoically, trying to keep the tremble out of his voice as his older brother's eyes stared blankly at a point beyond his left shoulder. "I'm going to find a way to put you back together."

When Dean finally tired of counting ceiling tiles, he figured it was probably safe to make his move.

He hadn't heard the camera in the corner of the room make a sound in the time he'd spent lying here, at first pretending to be unconscious, and then finally risking opening cautious eyes.

The change in the Warden's tone had been Dean's first clue that Howie had either lost interest in him or just wasn't watching him at the moment, tipping him off that this might be the best opportunity he was going to get.

That, and the fact that it was night time all of a sudden.

Right. Time to get this show on the road.

He grimaced slightly as he bent his fingers, struggling to shrug his watch lower down his wrist as he was inexplicably reminded of that time in Kentucky when he'd tried to convince Sam to dislocate his thumb after they'd been handcuffed by that invisible freak's nut job of a brother.

Dislocation was, of course, a last resort, and at least on this occasion Dean had been presented with a ready-made Plan B right off the bat. Fortunately, the Warden hadn't noticed that Dean's photograph was no longer paperclipped to his file after it had tumbled to the floor at Dean's feet just prior to his almost taking a nosedive onto the tiles.

As he pushed his watch against the bed beneath him, Dean slowly managed to reveal the little sliver of metal tucked between the strap and his wrist, bending his fingers a hell of a lot further than was strictly natural until he finally held the paperclip between them.

Stage One successfully accomplished.

Dean said a silent prayer of thanks to the Angel of Escaped Mental Patients when he confirmed that his restraints were locked rather than buckled, and after a few seconds of fumbling to unbend the paperclip against the mattress, and a few more seconds of awkward finger gymnastics, he finally had his left wrist free before

proceeding to make short work of the other straps pinning him to the bed.

Another furtive glance at the mercifully motionless camera, and Dean was off the bed and dragging his clothes out of the closet where the Deputies had stored them earlier, positioning himself underneath the camera before dressing quickly, relieved to be back in his own clothes.

*But these aren't your clothes...* the little voice in his head reminded him. *This isn't even your body...*

"Shut up," he muttered to himself, peering briefly through the door's reinforced glass panel, out onto the empty corridor beyond, before examining the lock. Hmm. No way a paperclip was going to make a dent in that thing.

Alright. So he'd have to do this the old fashioned way.

Now if he could just find something to smash...

Sam had never seen Dean so... *still*.

The older brother – or what was left of him – was currently leaning against the wall, knees pulled up to his chin, head resting sideways on them while his vacant eyes had become permanently fixed on his kid brother.

Sam had found that kind of encouraging at first, as if there was still some shred of *Dean-ness* in there that recognized him.

But now it was just creepy.

Creepy and more than a little unnerving.

Sam had gone over the room twice since he'd woken, desperately trying to find another way out of this place. But there was nothing – no window, no magically insecure air conditioning vent, no wildly improbable sewer access cover.

"Why is it never like it is in the movies?" Sam muttered to himself, hands on hips as he made another fruitless visual scan of the room.

Which is when he realized he was an idiot.

Fumbling in his jeans pocket, the irritating absence of his gun and his cell phone were almost completely eradicated from his brain as his fingers lighted on something far more useful in his current predicament.

He grinned broad enough to light up a football field, and Dean raised his head from his knees to look up at him with even greater intensity.

"Howie," Sam muttered, turning towards the door. "You're an even bigger idiot than I am."

Removing his lock pick from the slim plastic case, Sam wasted no time going to work on the door, the satisfying "click" of the tumblers almost as beautiful a sound as the final "clunk" as the door swung open in his hand.

"Bingo."

Suddenly acutely aware that he really shouldn't leave his broken older brother shut in the supply closet, Sam turned back into the small room, wedging the door open with his foot. "Dean...?" He gestured for his brother to follow, but the young man didn't move, head returning to rest on his knees, eyes never leaving Sam's.

Sam glanced out into the control room before heading back towards his brother, gently catching him by the arm and indicating that he should stand.

Dean's hollow gaze had slid to the patch of light now spilling across the floor from the open doorway as if he didn't quite understand what it was, but he didn't resist when Sam carefully pulled him to his feet.

Sam swallowed, trying to ignore the sudden lump in his chest. Eyes fixed resolutely on Dean's, he muttered, "Howie, you're a dead man," before gently guiding his brother towards the exit.

Dean followed obediently, motor skills apparently functioning perfectly, as if he

had no difficulty moving as long as someone showed him where to go.

Sam bit his lip as he provided the necessary direction, leading Dean out into the control room where he blinked rapidly in the bright light.

Jeez, Dean must have been locked in that dark room for *hours*.

Sam shuddered at the thought as he tried to settle his older brother in Howie's big control chair. But Dean wouldn't have it, eyes so big when faced with the rapidly changing TV screens that Sam eventually had to settle for situating him on the floor near the control desk – okay *under* the control desk – where he couldn't see the monitors, arms once again wrapped tightly around his knees.

Sam swallowed again, completely thrown by his seemingly invincible big brother's sudden vulnerability, tearing his gaze away from him only with a supreme effort of will.

Perching himself on the edge of the control chair, his eyes scanned the panel in front of him before drifting up to the bank of monitors. Most of them were dark now, as if Howie actually had the decorum *not* to spy on his "cast" after Lights Out.

Somehow, Sam doubted that was the case. *Goddamn voyeuristic piece of...*

It was then that he realized Dean's bed was empty.

He did a double take, for a second convinced he was looking at the wrong monitor. But the way the restraints were untidily scattered across the bed; the pile of hastily removed hospital attire discarded on the floor; the – hell, was that a *paperclip*? – glinting on the mattress as the moonlight slanted through the barred window: Everything in that room screamed *Dean was here*.

And then, of course, there was the way the image suddenly lurched to one side as someone out of shot started swinging at the camera with a piece of tubing ripped from the bed frame.

"Come and get me you fugly-ass bastards!" Dean yelled at the top of his lungs, his fifth swing at the camera finally taking out the lens with a pop and a shattering of glass.

*Man that felt good...*

He kept battering at the camera like Babe Ruth on steroids until the screech of metal on metal preceded the whole assembly finally coming away from its housing and crashing to the floor in a shower of sparks.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" he burst out, admiring his handiwork for a second before moving on to the door.

Although he knew his makeshift battering ram would do little damage to the door itself, he had every hope it would have the effect he was actually after.

"Hey!" he started yelling again. "Rock dudes!"

He took a vicious swing at the door, the tubing bouncing harmlessly off the toughened safety glass in the window. "You guys better get in here soon, before I get *really* pissed!"

The distant clump-clump-clump of heavily-booted feet alerted Dean to the approach of at least one of the Deputies, and he continued to wail on the door with renewed vigor, battering the hell out of it until a key finally ground in the lock and a placid-looking Deputy stepped through the open doorway, an evil-looking black stick in his hand that uncomfortably reminded Dean of a cattle prod.

"Dude, it's about freakin' time!" he taunted, eyeing the Deputy's weapon warily as he took a cautious step backwards, mentally gauging how far he had to lure the big guy into the room before he stood a chance of getting past him and out through the door.

"You're making a noise," the Deputy told him, voice flat and emotionless. "You'll disturb the other patients."

"Too late, Dwayne," Dean said with an apologetic shrug. "I think they're already disturbed."

"You need to calm down," the Deputy continued, as if Dean hadn't even spoken, taking another menacing step towards him before reaching out and snatching the tubing from Dean's fingers as electricity arced blue across the electrodes at the end of his baton.

Dean gulped, beginning to suspect there may have been a slight flaw in his brilliant escape plan.

Glancing from the baton to the open doorway, Dean took a breath, mentally steeling himself for what would probably wind up being yet another stroll down Electric Avenue.

Now or never.

As Dean lunged for the doorway, the Deputy's weapon swung around towards him with inhuman speed, the heat radiating from the sparking current actually making the hairs stand up on the back of Dean's neck as the baton came within an inch of his skin...

...Just as a bright light flashed right in front of his eyes and a second Deputy fizzed into existence between Dean and the first Deputy's weapon.

The second Deputy had a hand already entwined in Dean's jacket at the shoulder, almost yanking him clear off his feet as he shoved the smaller man out of the way of the hungry current.

The first Deputy paused, frowning at his colleague.

"We have new orders," the hulk hanging onto Dean announced. "The Sheriff wants this one taken back to the Warden."

The first Deputy nodded, de-activating and holstering his weapon. "Acknowledged."

"As you were," the second Deputy continued, gripping Dean's shoulders and starting to shove him towards the door. "I'll take him."

"Like hell you will!" Dean protested suddenly, trying to wrestle himself free of the Deputy's intense grip. "I'm not going anywhere near that freak!"

The Deputy's grimace never faltered, and he tugged Dean to his side before slapping a big hand over his captive's mouth, eliciting a surprised grunt and a string of muffled expletives.

"Be quiet," the Deputy ordered sternly, almost yanking Dean off his feet again before suddenly bending and whispering right in his ear, "Or Mushy gets it."

Dean froze, eyes the size of saucers.

Mushy. Sam's favorite stuffed toy when he was, like, four or something. Dean was always threatening to pull the little sausage dog's ears off if Sam didn't quit his yammering and go to sleep.

No. Freakin'. Way.

Dean squinted up into the Deputy's dark eyes, trying to catch a glimmer of recognition to confirm what he thought he'd just heard. But all he saw was his own reflection.

The Deputy removed his hand from Dean's mouth, muttering, "Now isn't that better?" when Dean didn't make a sound in protest as he was manhandled through the door.

Dean glanced behind them at the other Deputy, who was surveying the wreckage littering Dean's room, before narrowing his eyes and squinting sideways at the guard as he allowed himself to be dragged down the hallway.

"Sam?" he whispered.

"This is weird," the Deputy said in response, tugging Dean around a corner and

down another long hallway, looking about himself furtively. "Like a very intense first person shooter game."

Dean grunted. "Now I know you're not Sam," he said. "No way Geekboy would waste time playing video games."

The Deputy smiled crookedly, and Dean almost shuddered at the appearance of such a familiar expression on a face other than Sam's. "You don't know as much about me as you think you do, bro."

"You tell me you moonlighted as a stripper while you were at Stanford and I might just have to throw up," Dean informed him, letting out a startled cry as the Deputy suddenly yanked him rather forcefully through an emergency exit.

"Dude –!"

"Sorry," Sam said in the Deputy's voice. "Don't know my own strength yet."

He led Dean into a stairwell, but the older Winchester stopped abruptly, looking up into the big guy's unreadable eyes once more. "Wait!"

"What?"

"How..." Dean fumbled for the words. "How'd you... How'd you get *in* there, Sammy?"

Back in Howie Grumnik's control room, Sam smiled at the monitor displaying the image of his brother staring fixedly at the Deputy.

"Howie had to go to work," he explained with a grin. "Probably got Kim to thank for that." He took a deep breath, steeling himself for the inevitable derisive comeback. "He – he managed to get a jump on me when I found his control room, but was dumb enough to lock me up with my lock pick in my pocket."

Dean's reply wasn't quite as derogatory as Sam expected. "If he's so dumb, how'd he get a jump on you?"

Sam bit his lip. If he told Dean the truth, he'd accuse him of chick flicking him, he just knew it. He sighed, the sound seeming odd falling from the lips of the burly Deputy. "I got distracted," he admitted. "He – he was torturing you."

Dean seemed momentarily taken off guard. "Oh," he managed. Then, "But you got out?"

"And figured how to take control of one of his Deputies, yeah," Sam agreed.

"I knew that big brain of yours would come in handy some day."

"His computer system's not exactly hard to figure out," Sam admitted. "Kinda like *Evil Mastermind 1.1 for Dummies*. Even you could have figured it out."

Dean scowled at the Deputy. "You see 'geek' anywhere on my resume?"

"You don't have a resume."

"Exactly. Which proves my point."

Sam shook his head. "Yeah, well," he said. "First thing's first. We gotta find a way to get you out of here."

"Dude," Dean said, pointing at the Deputy's belt. "You got keys. How hard can it be?"

The Deputy looked down, just as the camera fixed above their heads moved in the same direction, the big guard grinning Sam's grin brightly.

Dean actually did shudder this time, and had to look away.

"There's an exit at the bottom of the stairs," Sam was saying.

"Won't that be alarmed?"

"Not from the plans I'm looking at, no." Sam had brought up a floor plan of the Sanatorium on one of the monitors, grateful that Howie was pedantic enough to have detailed maps and blueprints of every inch of his little fantasy land stored on his hard drive. "And like you said, I have keys."

"Okay," Dean nodded, turning and heading down the stairs. "Let's go." He

turned back when the Deputy didn't follow him. "Sam? You coming?"

"Yeah, hold on," Deputy Sam said. "Just checking the best way out of the grounds..." He paused for a second, scanning the plans while he decided how to phrase his next sentence. "So..." he said slowly. "I found your body." *Yeah, Sam. Real subtle.*

Dean froze, before turning back and looking up the stairs towards the Deputy and the camera over his shoulder. He didn't say anything at first, taking a breath before finally managing, "I'm okay right? He didn't – he's not – done – anything to me?"

The Deputy shook his head. "No," Sam assured his brother. "You're fine. Just a little zombified."

Dean raised a relieved eyebrow. "*Night of the Living Dead* zombified? Or daytime TV viewer zombified?"

"The latter," Sam chuckled.

Dean heaved a sigh of relief. "Well that's okay then. At least I'm not shedding body parts, right?"

"Who's down there?" a deep voice suddenly grunted from above them, and Sam tilted the camera upwards, only to reveal another Deputy descending the flight of stairs.

Ripping the keys off "his" Deputy's belt, he threw them at Dean before making a shooing gesture with the guard's big hands. "Go!"

Dean just looked up at him as heavy footsteps echoed on the landing above his head. "Sam?" he questioned, a look of something akin to panic briefly crossing his face. "Go where?"

"Home," Sam urged. "Your – your stepmom's house."

"Won't that be the first place they'll look?"

"Probably," Sam admitted. "But that's where they took the Impala," he informed his brother, having already noticed the car on the feed from the camera positioned on the corner of the Hudsons' street.

Dean nodded his understanding. "Quick getaway. Gotcha." He took the flight of stairs in one jump, before again turning back. "Sam?"

"Would you just go?" Sam said shortly.

"Just take care of yourself, alright? And take care of me!"

Deputy Sam nodded as Dean disappeared out of sight just as the other guard rounded the corner onto the flight of stairs above him.

"Who were you talking to?" the approaching figure demanded, face contorting into a wary grimace.

Sam's Deputy tapped his earpiece. "Sheriff," he responded hopefully.

The other Deputy nodded slowly, before exiting the stairwell through the door behind his colleague. Sam turned his own Deputy to follow him, before releasing control back to the computer's automation system.

"You take care too, Dean," he muttered, eyes automatically moving to follow his brother's progress on one of the other monitors.

*So far, so good,* Dean thought to himself, the pilfered keys easily getting him through the exit at the bottom of the stairwell. Now he just had to get out of the grounds.

Scanning the wide swath of lawn between his position and the razor-wired perimeter wall, he spotted a small service road off to his right which seemed to lead to the rear of the building in one direction, while sweeping down to a small gated exit in the other.

Seeing no guard station or security gatehouse, and eternally grateful to Howie for turning off the sun just when he especially needed the cover of darkness, Dean stealthily snuck around the building before bolting for the gate full tilt, expecting to hear the sound

of Deputies fizzing into existence about him at any moment.

When that didn't happen, and he appeared to have made it to the gate without any sign that he'd been detected, he began to thank his lucky stars... Just as the security camera above the gate swung in his direction. He froze, deer in the headlights, until the camera started to jiggle up and down dementedly, and he suddenly realized that it was *Sam* he should be thanking for the lack of security. Sam, who had control of the cameras, the Deputies, and pretty much Dean's whole world right now.

Had Dean been a control freak, he might have found that rather disturbing.

Tentatively, he stepped right out in front of the camera and grinned like the cat who'd got the cream when no one materialized to torture him some more.

Turning and jamming the most likely looking key into the gate, he heard a satisfying "click" and as the gate swung open he couldn't resist turning back to the camera and sticking his tongue out at what he hoped was his kid brother.

The camera started to whirr in short staccato bursts, and it took Dean a second to recognize Morse Code.

Dot dash. "A"... Dot dot dot. "S"... Dot dot dot. "S."

Dean resisted the temptation to flip Sam his own method of signage, instead grinning broadly before slipping out of the gate and running like hell in the direction of the Hudson house.

Sam sighed loudly as he watched Dean beat a hasty retreat from the Sanatorium. Although his big brother had seemed reasonably okay, Sam realized that having pieces of his soul forcibly extracted from him had to have had some kind of effect on his psyche. Admittedly, if the rainbow light show going on above Dean's head like some kind of freaky halo had represented the pieces that had been ripped away, then it had looked to Sam as if everything had been returned to Dean's pretend body when the Warden had ceased and desisted with the whole torture thing.

Still. Sam couldn't stop thinking about James Gregory and wondering whether, should he ever be able to figure out how to get Dean back, his brother would ever be *whole* again.

But then, Dean hadn't exactly been whole even before he'd been soul-napped.

A small noise from beneath the control panel drew Sam's attention briefly to the shell of his older brother, currently huddled in on himself apparently attempting to make himself as small and unobtrusive as possible.

Sam was even more convinced that it was the screens – and his own face displayed there – that was freaking Dean out.

He chewed his lip as he briefly wondered what he would do with what was left of his big brother should he *not* be able to figure out a way to return Dean's soul to its rightful place in the universe.

He shuddered.

So not going to happen.

His gaze flitted back to the Control Monitor and its display of the mural in the center of town. Dean's picture there had regained its original appearance, and Sam was becoming more and more convinced that this, somehow, was the key to the whole thing.

Delving into Howie's exhaustive database, he frowned as he happened upon a folder labeled "Characters," bringing up a list of names that seemed to include variations of all of those who had thus far been taken from Major Oak Mall. The Hudson family – Stephen, Lizzie, Mindy and Matthew – all appeared in yellow, a still image of each of them displayed next to their personal details under the heading "Bio."

Beneath that was a blue file headed "Dean Hudson," followed by a red file headed "Jackie Hudson," and from her photograph, Sam recognized her as Jackie

Mathers, a journalist for the local East Nottingham newspaper who had been one of the first to be taken. The file was labeled "Removed," as was Dean's, and there was a link there which took Sam to a folder entitled "Sanatorium" and another list of names. But whereas Dean's listing was labeled "Temporary Transfer," Stephen Hudson's first wife's was endorsed with the words "Permanent Resident."

It was only when Sam clicked back into Dean's file that he noticed the photograph was the same as the one that appeared within the mural, only this version appeared to be the source picture, a still image taken from a security camera.

Clicking to enlarge the picture, Sam squinted at the background behind his brother, which had been excised from the image in the mural.

And it was then that Sam experienced an epiphany.

Dean was standing in front of the very bank of TV monitors Sam now faced, a bright light reflecting off both the screens and Dean's startled eyes.

Hurriedly bringing up the file image of Lizzie Hudson – Baker – whatever, Sam realized with a start that she was standing in the kids' clothing store where she had collapsed, a bright light also bouncing off her blue eyes.

Which meant that the images of Dean and Lizzie and presumably all of the other inhabitants of Sherwood Falls which made up the town mural had been captured in the instant before their souls had been taken.

Which meant...

Sam slapped his hand against the desk.

He had to talk to Dean.

Right now.

Dean breathed a sigh of relief as he rounded the corner onto the Hudsons' street and immediately spotted the Pretend Impala parked on their drive under the yellow streetlight.

Yeah, so it wasn't his car. But it sure *looked* like his car.

Patting his jacket pockets, he quickly located his car keys before jogging across the street and up onto the sidewalk...

...Just as a Deputy materialized two inches from his face.

Stopping so abruptly he slipped backwards off the curb, Dean caught himself halfway between the ingrained fight or flight response before squinting up at the Deputy as he tried to determine whether he was friend or foe.

"Sammy?"

The Deputy grabbed Dean's collar and pulled him back up onto the sidewalk, and for a second Dean thought maybe he'd misjudged the situation.

Until the Deputy suddenly burst out, "Dean, I got it!" with all the enthusiasm of puppy at his first picnic.

Dean tried to cover his overwhelming relief with a nervous grin and his trademarked ill-timed stab at humor. "Well take it someplace else, 'cause I sure as hell don't want it..."

"Shut up for a second," Sam snapped, once again forgetting the Deputy's strength as he gave Dean what was intended to be a gentle shake but almost pulled his brother off his feet.

"Hey, enough with the manhandling, dude!"

"Sorry," Sam apologized. "Can't get used to this guy's strength."

"Yeah, a novelty for you I'm sure," Dean observed, pushing the big Deputy away roughly. "Okay, so I found the car," he added. "Now what, genius?"

"I think I know how to fix this."

Sam was leaning over the panel in Howie's control room, one eye on the monitor

displaying Dean and the Deputy he'd commandeered, the other on a list of files he was hastily scanning. "It's the mural, Dean. The one in the center of town."

Dean frowned. "What about it? I know it's not exactly the Mona Lisa, but..."

"You gotta destroy it."

Dean's frown deepened. "I gotta *what*?"

"Destroy it," Sam repeated. "I think it's what's keeping you there. I think it's what's keeping you *all* there."

"It's a *wall*, Sam," Dean pointed out. "And a virtual wall at that –"

"No, it's not *just* a wall, Dean," Sam insisted. "Remember that Amish belief? Photographs can steal a person's soul?"

"Wait a second," Dean interrupted. "You think those pictures on the wall are..."

"Are where Howie's storing everyone's souls, yes!" The look of enthusiastic excitement seemed so out of place on the Deputy's face that Dean almost laughed.

"They're stills taken from the security camera footage at the exact second you were –"

"Soul-jacked?" Dean offered.

Sam shrugged, and weirdly enough, so did the Deputy. "Yeah. I think those pictures are anchoring you all to Howie's little dream world. That's how he's hanging onto your souls."

"Sam, you know how crazy that sounds?"

"Any crazier than having your soul ripped out by a security camera?"

"Good point," Dean conceded. "So the mural. If we destroy it...?"

"Then," Sam faltered. "Maybe..."

"Maybe?"

"Probably."

"Maybe? Probably? That the best you got, Scully?"

Sam pulled a face that, thankfully, didn't transfer onto the Deputy. "There's some kind of crystal embedded into Howie's computer," he explained. "I think that maybe if I destroy that too..."

"There's that 'maybe' word again, dude."

Sam shook his head. "Well, 'maybe' is all we got right now."

Dean drew a hand across his forehead, suddenly very tired and still more than a little shaky.

"Dean, you okay?" Sam asked.

"Not really Sammy," Dean snapped. "I just got tortured remember? Kinda puts a crimp in a guy's day." He bit his lip and shook his head. "Crystals," he muttered.

"Freakin' crystals. Jeez, Sam, this is one helluva limb to be going out on on a "maybe"..."

"I know," Sam admitted. "But even Kim's husband's picture is still in the mural. It's in black and white, but it's there. Maybe we can even put *him* back together."

Dean sighed. "So how do I destroy a freakin' *wall*, Sam?" he asked.

The Deputy shrugged again. "You'll think of something," Sam assured his brother. "Destruction's what you do best, right?"

Dean frowned. "It's a *wall*, Sam. And I think I left my wrecking ball in my other jacket."

"Dean –"

"Sam?"

"Dean?"

Dean glanced over Deputy Sam's shoulder at the sound of the female voice suddenly calling his name. Mindy was hanging out of her bedroom window, bleary-eyed and rumped.

"Hey Mindy," he said, smiling at the girl before glancing back up at the Deputy.

"Okay, I'm thinking," he said. "You just make sure you destroy that itty bitty crystal while I'm busy demolishing a wall."

The Deputy grinned. "I will. You take care, bro."

Dean looked up at him solemnly, eyes drifting to the camera behind him. "Yeah. You too."

"Seeya soon," Sam added as the Deputy fizzled out of existence.

Dean sighed again. "Yeah," he muttered, trudging up the Hudsons' drive towards the Impala. "Soon."

He stopped beneath Mindy's window, looking up at her. "You okay?" he asked casually.

Mindy nodded, taking in the dark circles beneath Dean's eyes. "You?"

Dean was surprised by the genuine concern in the girl's voice. But then he remembered she'd already lost a mother to the Sanatorium. A pretend mother, sure, but a mother all the same.

Slapping on his brightest grin, he nodded reassuringly. "It'll take more than a freak with a leather fetish to break me," he assured her, not entirely sure which of them he was trying to convince. "Now go back to sleep. With any luck, next time you wake up, you'll be home."

The crystal and the mural. They were the key to this. They were the key to getting Dean back. Getting everyone back. Sam was convinced of it, now more than ever.

He tried to reach between the monitors and the miasma or wiring, but just couldn't get to the little hunk of mineral nestling within the circuitry. He'd just have to find another way to take the thing out of the equation, that was all.

He still didn't quite understand *how* Howie was using the crystal in conjunction with the security cameras. And how the hell he was using it to transport people's souls to Sherwood Falls. He knew crystals were often attributed with mystical or supernatural properties, but still... Howie just didn't seem the kind of guy who would have the smarts to devise a scheme like this.

"You break it, you pay for it. Store policy."

Sam spun at the sound of Howie Grumnik's voice, cursing himself for a second time for letting the security guard sneak up on him.

"You're not very good at this whole 'stealth' thing, are you?" Grumnik held Sam's gun in one steady hand, motioning him away from the control panel with a flick of the barrel.

Sam swore silently to himself, trying to position himself between Howie's line of sight and the monitor where Dean could clearly be seen getting into the Impala. "You hit six feet and stealth kinda goes out the window," Sam replied, pointedly looking down at Howie as he did his best to wring every last ounce of intimidation value out of his considerable height.

Unfortunately, Howie may have been a good ten inches shorter than Sam, but he was the one holding the gun, and Sam was the one with his hands held in the air.

"I see you've found your brother," the guard said, casting a dismissive glance in the direction of the dazed-looking young man currently crouched behind Sam, as far back underneath the control desk as he could get. "Touching reunion, I'm sure."

Sam bit his cheek, but said nothing, merely scowling at Howie for a few seconds before finally asking, "So what happens now? You planning on torturing me too?"

Howie smiled lopsidedly. "I've got other plans for you," he replied coldly, again motioning Sam further from the control panel.

The younger Winchester risked a quick glance behind him as a faint whirr

sounded in response to Howie touching a button on the panel to his left.

The camera in the corner of the room had swung in Sam's direction, and the young man had the decidedly odd experience of seeing the back of his own head displayed on one of the monitors next to Howie. He frowned, trying not to seem too interested in the bank of TV screens, as the Impala suddenly zipped across one of the monitors behind the security guard.

"I don't get it," he said at length, figuring if he could just keep Howie talking he might buy enough time for Dean to get to the mural and do his thing. Whatever his thing was going to be. "How'd you come up with this, Howie? The crystal's the key, right?"

Howie let a self-satisfied smile creep across his features. "You think you're going to trick me into revealing my whole diabolical scheme, huh?" he asked. "Who d'you think you are? James Bond?"

"Never could get that English accent," Sam admitted.

"You and Sean Connery both," Howie agreed. He smiled an oily smile. "Still. You're not going to be around much longer, are you Mr. Winchester? So what could it hurt to put you out of your intellectual misery?"

Sam returned the smile, eyes determinedly *not* looking at the monitor over Howie's shoulder. "A little monologuing never hurt anyone, did it?"

Sam was so going to owe him for this one, Dean decided. So this wasn't *his* Impala. Deep down, he *knew* that. But she looked like his Impala. Kinda felt like his Impala. Kinda purred like his Impala... And his baby had already been through more trauma these last few months than your average stockcar.

But he really wasn't coming up with any alternatives.

Of course, the damage to *himself* might be worse than the damage to the Pretend Impala. But then, he was only a Pretend Dean, right? James Gregory: He'd killed himself and lived to tell the tale. Sort of. Kinda messed up by all accounts. But he'd made it back to the real world in one piece. Okay, several pieces. But he'd not had Sam watching his back, had he?

Dean took a deep breath and floored the gas pedal.

"So how the hell did you get your hands on a soul-stealing magic crystal, Howie?" Sam asked, eyes still resolutely avoiding the monitor at the security guard's shoulder, where he could currently see the Impala screeching towards the center of Sherwood Falls.

Howie grinned. "Voodoo priest in New Orleans sold it to me," he replied, fingers stroking the handgun affectionately.

Sam figured the guy wished he had a fluffy white cat to stroke too. "No way you know a voodoo priest," he said disbelievingly.

Howie's "evil mastermind" expression faltered slightly. "Do too," he replied, sticking his bottom lip out like a petulant six-year-old.

"I don't believe you," Sam insisted, folding his arms across his chest. "Where'd you *really* get it?"

Howie sighed. "Alright, I got it off eBay," he admitted, sighing. "But the guy selling it *said* he was a voodoo priest..."

"And you believed him?" Sam scoffed.

Howie straightened. "It worked though, didn't it?"

Sam couldn't really deny the truth of that statement.

"And the whole security camera thing was my idea. Took me months to work out the details..."

"Howie, you need to get out more," Sam said, suddenly sounding like he was

channeling Dean from somewhere. "Find yourself a nice girl. Have a couple of kids. You watch way too much TV, man."

"But it's *my* TV show," Howie insisted. "My world. I'm God there, man. God. Those people have to do whatever I say whenever I say it. I press this button –" he reached over and pointed to one of the controls on the nearest panel. "It's day time. I press this one, it's night. They're so in awe of me, they do whatever I say whenever I say it. I say jump, they say how high..."

"They're *scared* of you, Howie," Sam interrupted. "That's why they obey you. You're ruling through *fear* not *awe*. They don't respect you. They don't think you're God. They think you're a sad little man with a God-complex who doesn't have a life so has to invent a virtual one."

Howie's ears had turned a furious shade of pink. "Shut up. You don't know anything about me."

Sam took a step towards him. "Just like you don't know anything about Dean," he said. "Yet you didn't mind torturing *him* with your half-truths, did you?"

"He needs to learn to obey orders. He needs to learn *respect* –"

"Dean has no problem obeying orders, Howie," Sam informed him. "He's just never going to obey *yours*. He's never going to respect you if the only way you can get him to do what you want is by threatening to hurt *me*. Nobody responds well to blackmail, Howie, and none of your little 'cast' will respect you if that's the only way you have to control them. They never will."

Howie's eyes narrowed, fingers tightening on the handgun. "You're wrong," he said. "They respect me. They respect me plenty. And so will your brother. When I show him what I can do. When I show him what I can do to *you*..."

"Sammy, you better be right about this," Dean muttered, the Pretend Impala screaming round a corner and onto the main road into Sherwood Falls' town square.

The tires squealed in protest as he jammed his foot even harder against the gas pedal, sweaty fingers struggling to maintain their steely grip on the steering wheel as he aimed the big black car directly at the little garden adorning the center of Howard Grumnik's fantasy sandbox.

The little garden and the big, brightly-colored mural spread across the wall beyond.

"Ah crap, they don't pay me enough for this," Dean spat, gritting his teeth and squeezing his eyes tightly shut as the speedometer hit seventy and the Pretend Impala mounted the curb with a crash.

"So – so what exactly *are* you planning to do to me, Howie?" Sam asked, nervously eyeing the monitor over the security guard's shoulder, where the Impala was currently a black blur on Main Street, streaking towards the mural with a roar of its V8 and no sign of slowing down.

*Dean...*

Grumnik smiled as if he had all the time in the world. "See this button?" he said, pointing at a big red control on the panel mid-way between where the two men faced each other. "I push that and you're gone forever. No coming back. No curtain calls. No re-runs. And you're brother – all of them – they'll know I'm serious; they'll know I'm a force to be reckoned with; they'll know my power. And they'll obey me. They'll respect me. They'll have no choice."

"You just don't get it, do you, Howie?" Sam said, taking another step towards the security guard as the camera began to whirr behind him and the monitor displaying the back of Sam's head zoomed in a little more at the touch of Howie's finger on a slider

switch.

"I push this button," Howie continued as if Sam hadn't spoken, "and your soul will be sent so far away your brother will never find you. No one will. You'll just be vapor on the ether; lost in the circuitry." He grinned, a faraway look in his eyes. "Wonder how much I'd get for what's left of the two of you if I sold you on eBay?"

Sam wrinkled his nose in disgust. "You're nuts, man," he announced. "You know that, right?" He took another step towards Grumnik, the camera behind him continuing to whirr as Howie refocused the lens.

"Hold still –"

"C'mon, Howie," Sam continued, taking another step forward as on the screen behind Grumnik the Impala mounted the curb and began to careen through the garden surrounding the clock tower. "You don't have the guts to do that to me –"

Howie grinned at him, a cold, evil grin that sent a shiver down Sam's back. "Wanna bet? I'm God. I can do anything I want. *Anything*. All I have to do is press this button –"

Sam inclined his head in the direction Howie was pointing. "What, that button there?"

Dean remembered that old adage about a person's life flashing before their eyes in the seconds immediately prior to their death.

But all he saw were crocuses.

Crocuses and bricks. Lots of bricks. Brightly colored bricks that from a distance made up the faces of every person who had been soul-jacked into Sherwood Falls – Lizzie, Mindy, Matthew, Stephen; Jackie, James Gregory and even Dean himself.

But this close, they were just bricks. Individual blocks of color that didn't signify a thing.

Like pixels on a TV screen.

And then there was a sound like a train wreck and Dean saw nothing at all.

Not even rainbows.

Howie turned as the almighty screech of the Pretend Impala plowing into the mural at seventy-five miles per hour tore from the speakers around him.

And that was all the distraction Sam needed.

Covering the distance between them in two long strides, Sam's hand was on the barrel of the gun, wrenching it from Howie's grasp as he spun the little security guard around in front of him, directly in line with the whirring camera that had previously been focused on the back of Sam's head but was now zoomed right in on Howie Grumnik's startled face.

Sam ducked as he brought his hand down hard on the big red button that Howie had been at such great pains to point out to him.

"That button there, right?"

The look of surprise on Howie's face was the last thing Sam saw before a bright flash lit up the entire room, Grumnik collapsing in a heap to the floor as the crystal pulsed wildly before gradually dulling to black.

Sam aimed the gun without hesitation, firing off two rounds in quick succession, the crystal shattering into a million tiny shards as a deep rumble seemed to shake the very ground beneath his feet and the room was lit up in glorious Technicolor, rainbows so bright he had to shut his eyes against them shooting upwards and dissipating across the ceiling with a whoosh that took Sam's breath away.

Breathing hard, he opened his eyes cautiously as a fizz, a shower of sparks and an anticlimactic pop preceded each of the TV screens going dark, winking out one by

one, like dominoes toppling from the place where the crystal had been.

Then only the Control Monitor remained, and Sam's breath hitched in his throat as he caught sight of the mangled black Chevrolet Impala buried beneath a mountain of broken bricks, just before that screen went dark too.

Sam closed his eyes, almost deafened by the sudden silence surrounding him, not wanting to look at the form of Howard Grumnik staring up at him with vacant, unseeing eyes.

"Sammy?"

Sam started at the sound of the familiar voice, momentarily frozen in place as his eyes snapped open and he sought out the source.

Better than 5.1 Dolby Digital Surround Sound, that was for damn sure.

Sam dove across the room to where his big brother sat huddled beneath the control console, eyes big and skittish as they darted about him, checking out his surroundings as if he'd just woken from a very bad dream.

"Dean?" Sam crouched down in front of his brother, hands on Dean's shoulders.

"Dean? You with me?"

Dean eyed Sam thoughtfully before his face crumpled into a grimace. "Man, you are so *not* the first thing I wanted to see in the Afterlife..."

Sam laughed, more in relief than anything else, fingers gripping Dean's shoulders so hard the older brother yelped.

"Dude —!"

"Sorry," Sam apologized. "Guess I don't know my own strength."

"So everyone's okay?" Sam asked nervously, sitting forward in the uncomfortable blue hospital chair as Kim handed him a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

"Looks like it," the mall manager replied, wistfully eyeing the people periodically exiting the double doors opposite. Pale but in one piece. Awake and alive. Loved ones there to greet them. All as it should be. She met Sam's gaze with a solemn one of her own, reaching out and squeezing his hand gratefully. "Even James."

Sam smiled at that. "He's going to be alright?"

"The doctors say he should be home in a few days."

"That's great news, Kim. Really."

Kim nodded her agreement, the smile genuine as it lit up her face. She turned back to the double doors leading from the treatment room, where each of Howie Grumnik's victims were currently being assessed. "And Dean? He's okay?"

Sam followed Kim's gaze to where his brother was leaning on the wall next to the doorway. "With Dean, 'okay' is kind of a relative term. But he's as sane as he ever was, if that answers your question."

Two teenagers chose that moment to exit the treatment room, momentarily swallowed up into the arms of a middle-aged couple who had been waiting anxiously in the chairs opposite Sam and Kim.

The girl looked up after finally managing to disengage herself somewhat from her mother's crushing embrace, smiling brightly as she caught sight of Dean standing just a couple of feet away.

"Hey big brother," Mindy greeted him with a wink. "I hear you wrecked that bitchin' car of yours."

Dean grinned at her knowingly. "Got another one in the parking lot," he told her. "You and Matt wanna come for a spin later?"

Matthew's eyes lit up. "For real?"

"Oh, it's definitely the real deal this time, kiddo," Dean assured him.

"Thank you," Julie Tyler said suddenly, reaching out and putting a hand on

Dean's forearm. "For bringing my kids back."

Dean shrugged sheepishly as he caught sight of Lizzie Baker being hugged uncontrollably by a sobbing kid with blonde pigtails. "Thank my brother," he said, nodding in Sam's direction. "He took down the bad guy."

"While you took down the wall," Sam added, standing and moving towards his brother.

Kim followed, holding out a hand towards Dean, which he took uncertainly. "Haley was right about you boys," she told them. "I ever hear of any other desperate people in weird situations, I'll be sure to give them your number."

Dean glanced down at the envelope Kim had put in his hand, whistling slightly as he peered inside and examined the contents. "I dunno," he said uncertainly, slipping the cash into his jacket pocket. "This working for a living's a real bitch..."

The security camera hummed gently to itself as it panned slowly around the Day Room of Locksley Residential Care Home, pausing briefly as its focus swept across each of the residents in turn.

Looking. Looking for someone.

The lens whirred as it finally framed the image of the pale figure sitting in the wheelchair by the large bay window, dark empty eyes staring sightlessly out onto the rolling countryside beyond.

Soulless.

But that could be fixed.

One day, the entity currently peering through the lens of Camera 27 would fix the man slumped obliviously in the wheelchair by the window.

One day, it would find its way back out of this cold circuitry, out of the ether, out of this nothingness and back into the body of Howard Grumnik.

Where it belonged.