

Hollow

The restored Impala slid around the snaking Kentucky roads like it had been built for them, its aged suspension taking the turns with nothing more than a slight lean as its weighty form prowled the old mining state.

The roads it traversed, like the car, appeared ancient, and yet somehow inexplicably appealing. Together, the Chevy and the picturesque panorama made the perfect couple - the past meeting the present, but never quite relinquishing it.

The car slowed as Dean tapped the brakes, it's recent, second overhaul in less than a year showing clearly as the newly lacquered paint reflected off the setting sun. Its engine purred from all the loving attention its owner had poured on it, and the revs dropped only begrudgingly because the master insisted.

Halfway out of the twisting bend, Dean eased his foot on the gas, accelerating back out of the curve. He grimaced as the car hit one of many tiny potholes in the ill-repaired backroad, and the steering wheel jarred to the left in his hands.

The elder Winchester quickly pushed away the expression of pain, forcing one of his trademark smirks instead. "Sonofa..." Dean cut the cursing short and didn't look over to his brother. For once, his cursing hadn't been about possible damage to his car, but more about his still bandaged palms.

It had only been two weeks since he'd burned them badly rescuing Sam from some bizarre cult, and the pain the injuries still inflicted was excruciating every time he drove. Of course, that was something he'd tried to hide from his baby brother every step of the way. Not that it was working.

Sam had been on one long guilt trip since he'd been saved, and nothing Dean could say seemed to make him feel any less accountable. Every little frown or scowl from Dean was duly noted and added to the pile of torment Sam was enduring. Dean had been hurt, Sarah Blake had almost died, and all because the demon wanted him. It was something that ate away at him every minute of the day and Dean was powerless to stop it. If he intimated "my fault" one more time, though, Dean was sure he'd have to give his sibling a cuff around the ear, sore hands or not.

"You know, I'm thinking we should maybe have gotten a motel back in Jackson."

Dean tried to tug the subject away from his smarting palms and onto something more constructive. It would be getting dark soon, and he really didn't want to drive into the next town. Nor, however, did he want anyone putting their kiss of death on his "baby." Sam had trashed it, Kyle had trashed it. He didn't dare to think what might be coming next.

"You could always turn around?" Sam offered, not really caring where he found refuge because sleep wouldn't come anyway. "Maybe we could try calling dad again if we get somewhere our cell phones actually work." He looked from the Impala's window at the wooded area they were passing through, not really paying anything much scrutiny. Getting a signal out here in the boonies was nigh on impossible.

Dean reluctantly nodded. He hated backtracking, but right now he thought it was their best option. His hands were throbbing, and Sammy definitely needed something to focus on. If that meant trying to get a hold of their dad because he'd picked up the demon's trail, then that's what Dean would do.

John had gotten information from a cult member about some kind of gathering while they were in South Dakota. Since that time they hadn't heard from him, and Sam had begun to fret that he'd once again gone to try and fight it alone. He had, after all, deceived them with the last bullet for the Colt. It was just another hunk of wood to add to the fire of self-derogation.

"I think I saw a pretty cheap-looking motel on the outskirts of town that won't question our MasterCard too much," Dean suggested, slowing the Impala and spinning the wheel hard over to make a tight U-turn. "Maybe we can find a diner

nearby and eat. I'm starving, man." He grinned, already having thoughts of what he would order. *If I'm lucky, maybe there might even be a hot waitress to serve it up.*

Sam shrugged. He wasn't really hungry, hadn't been for days. Instead, he let his gaze fall back out on the wilderness that enveloped them. In the distance, he could see wooden, ramshackle abodes speckling the horizon. It was like looking at a scene straight out of some "hick" movie.

"Don't you think it's bizarre that some people still live out here like this? In the hills, no TV, no modern technology at all, I mean?" Sam shook his head in amazement at a continent that could be so diverse.

America and the western world bristled with the newest, most amazing inventions, from the space shuttle to high speed internet and spy satellites. And yet, out here the locals were satisfied with a much simpler life. It made Sam question which existence was the truer, closer one to what God had intended. He didn't voice his opinion, though, because talking about God in Dean's presence opened up a whole new can of worms, especially after what had happened to Layla in Nebraska.

"Huh?" Dean pulled a face that suggested he hadn't heard half of what Sam had just said because he'd been deep in his own deliberations. "You're feeling sorry for everyone now? Jeez, Sam, something tells me you're getting a Messiah complex or something. Next thing I know you'll be doing the whole preachin' on the radio deal, trying to save everyone's soul. Maybe you should go hang out with Kyle." He smirked and waved a hand in the air. "Hallelujah, brother!"

Sam couldn't help but warm to Dean's snark despite his dour mood and his cheeks dimpled as his usual broad smile appeared. "I think I can admit to saving a few souls in my time," he confessed, flicking an M&M at Dean's head with a plastic spoon that had been bandied about the Chevy's interior for months.

Dean flinched as a red piece of confectionary hit him smack in the middle of his forehead and dropped unceremoniously into his lap. "You are SO cleaning my car after this, dude." His eyes narrowed mischievously. "Or maybe I should turn on the radio. The local crap they churn out around these parts would make you beg for Metallica."

Sam feigned disgust. "You wouldn't?" Another peanut M&M catapulted from the spoon and hit home right on the spot the last projectile had landed, proving he was an ace shooter.

The elder hunter took his eyes from the road just for a second to grin at his brother. "You really don't want to bet on that, Sammy. I have some new torture techniques all planned out and ready for testing."

"Dean!" Sam ignored his sibling's taunts and frantically pointed ahead of the Impala with his "catapult." "Watch out!"

Dean shook his head thinking the gesture was just another "Sammy trick." "No way are you gonna get me with that one, jerk." He smiled smugly and turned back to the road almost too late to see the young girl who had stumbled from the undergrowth in front of them.

Instinct and highly honed reflexes kicked in like a circuit breaker, and even though Dean had no time to think, his leg muscles reacted automatically and he slammed on the brakes.

The Impala groaned as its momentum tried to carry it forward against the braking action. Rubber squealed on the crumbling road surface, making long, black snake trails as the tires shed a thin layer of tread due to friction.

"Shit!" Dean let out a huge breath and subconsciously thanked whoever watched over him that the Impala's last overhaul had included the braking system. He tugged the wheel over for good measure just in case Sam's mechanical abilities hadn't quite matched his. *Shoulda' done all the work myself...*

Sam grabbed the dash as his body was pushed forward, but unlike his brother didn't feel the need to curse. Instead, his eyes zeroed in on the girl in the road, praying the car and Dean's driving stopped them in time.

The Impala came to rest seconds later, a hair's breadth and a little to the right of the unknown girl.

"Man, I swear I'll never criticize this crate again." Sam patted the dash and then swung the heavy door open to go check on the terrified young woman still sprawled in the road where she had fallen. Dean silently followed, as yet undecided whether to bawl the girl out for jaywalking or show some compassion.

"Hey, are you okay?" Sam kneeled with his usual gentle, concerned expression and was surprised when he saw how scared the girl looked. Her green eyes appeared wide and wild, and she kept looking back at the tree line she had just left rather than the car that had almost squashed her.

When she didn't answer, Dean took up the conversation. "Are you hurt?" He looked her over for injuries anyway, often knowing a person didn't always feel pain straight after the initial shock of an accident.

The girl still didn't reply, but as far as Dean could tell she was unscathed. At a guess, he put her between fifteen and eighteen, and from her clothes it looked like she'd been hunting, probably with a friend or family member.

Dean carefully placed a hand on her trembling forearm. "It's okay. You can tell us what happened. Was there an accident? Is someone hurt?" He spoke slow and clear, knowing from her dazed expression that she was not entirely focused on reality.

The word "hurt" seemed to spark something and the girl began to scream, her arms flailing wildly as both brothers tried to hold her down and calm her. "It took my dad! Its...its..." She lashed out in panic, punching Dean on the jaw with a mean right hook before trying to scramble away from their tenuous grasp. "I couldn't even see it! Oh, God, the blood...so much blood..."

Sam reaffirmed his grip and forced the girl back onto the road surface, trying desperately not to hurt her arms where he held her tightly. "Calm down!" He insisted in a stronger tone than he would normally use with a girl. "We're not going to let anything hurt you." He looked up to Dean, his eyes flashing questioningly back to the woodland and then the car.

Dean rubbed at his chin with a frown and muttered, "Slippery little sucker. Mean punch for a kid, too..." Then his hazel eyes softened and he leaned over the girl whose rage and fear had now turned to hitched sobs. "Look," he offered kindly. "We're gonna get you in the car. You'll be safe there. Then you can tell us what happened. Okay?"

Her pupils narrowed as she took in the information. It was obvious the doughty little blonde was weighing up the situation and her options. Could she trust them? Who were they? What the hell had just happened?

Dean suspected the girl normally wouldn't be the type to cry over a broken nail or a hair out of place. He could just read people that way. In fact, for some reason she reminded him of a younger, female version of himself. *Maybe she has an ex-military, demon-obsessed dad that brings her out here to learn how to hunt too.* He didn't really believe it, but the thought amused him.

The thing was, if little Miss Hunter wasn't normally the type to bawl at a spider in the tub, then what the hell had her all fired up now? He held out a hand and bobbed his head, indicating that she should take it and allow him to help her up and into the Chevy.

Reluctantly, she nodded back, still warily watching Sam from the corner of her eye in case he tried anything. What she had just escaped was one type of killer, but Bethany Jayne McCaffrey knew all too well that there was a whole world full of perverts out there just waiting for an opportunity like this. For all she knew these two guys could be picking her up in their shiny black beast and she'd never be seen again.

"My dad," Bethany paused at the Impala's rear door and looked back into the woodland, eyes wide. "He's an experienced hunter and it...it just dragged him away. I can't leave him like this."

"A bear, some kind of wild animal?" Sam didn't want to upset the girl all over again, but if they knew what they were dealing with maybe they could actually help before it was too late. "Did you see it?"

Bethany shook her head, her thought processes at least becoming a little clearer now that she was out of the danger zone. "There was nothing to see. It was invisible, just...just invisible..."

Sam wanted to tell her that it was impossible, that the animal had probably been hidden in the underbrush, but then he knew creatures like wendigos and skinwalkers existed, even if it was unlikely they were dealing with anything like that now. He looked to his brother warily.

Dean nodded back, silently pulling his favorite silver forty-five from his waistband. "I'll go check it out. Get the kid into the car while I take a look around." He cocked the weapon, licking his lips as he carefully stepped into the wilderness. *Guns are useless if it's a wendigo*, he mentally chided, but still moved forward swinging the gun in an arc as he searched the brush.

Something to his left skittered across his field of vision and he stopped dead, bringing his weapon down to get a perfect aim at it. Dean sighed and rolled his eyes when he realized he'd targeted a small deer. "Sheesh, I'm hunting freakin' Bambi!"

He took a breath and moved on until he came to fresh tracks on the ground interspersed with congealing blood. A short distance away, a discarded rifle with a bloodied handprint completed the scene.

Dean kneeled, examining the evidence. Among the tracks that he could make out were two sets of boot prints, and what looked like bare human footprints, although it was too over-trodden to really tell. Dean ran a finger over the deep indents in the ground, trying to picture a scene that would cause such marks. "Freaky," he admitted, "like something right out of *Predator*."

Dean looked around cagily in the rapidly vanishing light and decided there was nothing more he could do. The police would need to come in with tracking dogs and a rescue team if there was to be any chance of finding the girl's missing father.

Resignedly, he stood from his crouched position and took one last glance into the wilds. The woods were creeping him out, even though they shouldn't be. It was like eyes watching him from every bush, every tumbled, gnarled tree stump. He'd been the prey before, heck, even been caught, but this time even Dean couldn't stifle an involuntary shudder.

The hunter turned tail, heading back towards the Impala with his weapon still at hand, and it was then that he saw it- a flicker of light bouncing from a broken window pane in a long forgotten wooden abode.

Dean whirled, wondering if his mysterious watcher actually lived in the ramshackle structure that made "Mordechai's Hell House" look like a palace. He squinted, examining the building just a little more carefully. *Nah, now who's getting paranoid? No one's lived in that rat's nest for years. Besides, whatever attacked this dude will have dragged him away, not taken him home and set the table for lunch.*

Dean took one last look and then broke into a jog back to the car. The quicker they got the girl to the police, the quicker a rescue team could start scouring the woods. For some reason, he didn't envy them.

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It had taken Sam ten minutes to get Bethany into the car. She was still terrified of the "nothing" she had apparently seen tearing into her father, and she was scared of Sam too. Not that the girl had admitted as much, but the young hunter could clearly sense it. He didn't blame the girl. There was too much evil in the world to drop your defences even for a second- he knew that from personal experience.

"You didn't see anything? Not a blur of color or movement?" Sam sat sideways in the car's passenger seat, looking into the back at the girl with his best expression of compassion. "A sound maybe? Some kind of animal cry?"

Bethany shook her flushed face and rubbed at her already sore eyes, glancing every few seconds into the shadowy woodland. When she finally spotted Dean hurrying from the tree line she exhaled, relieved that her panicked explanation hadn't cost another life. "You can't see it. Just what it does..."

The driver's door swung open and Dean dropped into the seat he all-too often called home. He turned, mimicking his brother's posture so that he could look over at the girl.

"There's some blood out there and signs of a struggle. Pretty expensive rifle just tossed on the ground too," Dean recounted his findings. "Looks like a wild animal..."

"No!" Bethany tugged on the back of Dean's seat, pulling herself upright in a pose of utter defiance. "It wasn't an animal, least not any kind I've ever seen. I couldn't see it! It just tore into my dad and I couldn't even see it to get a shot off!" Her tone had changed from almost unhinged to angry and frantic.

"Whoa, calm down there, missy." Dean held up a hand, but was fast losing control. Women, he could deal with, but teenage girls always posed a problem- especially when their emotions were so out of control. "It could have been a wildcat hidden by the undergrowth," he suggested, even though he didn't believe it himself.

"It was invisible! How many times do I have to say it to make you understand!" The girl moved to jump out of the Impala but Sam caught her wrist. She pulled back once, and then gave in as she felt his grip tighten a little.

"Look, whatever took your dad is dangerous. You can't go back in there without help." Sam locked his eyes on Bethany's. In his mind, he had no doubt she thought something strange had taken her father. Maybe she was just scared, delusional even, but maybe she was right. "We're with the Kentucky State Police," the lie came out totally convincingly. "We'll get you to the local Sheriff's office and they'll get a search team out here. There are procedures to follow. Do you understand?"

Bethany shot both brothers a look of uncertainty but nodded. She had little choice but to trust them or walk back into Jackson at the mercy of lord only knew what. Right now, she'd take her chances in the Impala.

She wrapped her arms around her shivering body and was thankful when Sam offered up a blanket from the car's trunk to keep her warm. Bethany glanced out of the rear window, but her mind couldn't focus on anything but what she'd seen. *Is it watching us?*

As the girl began to rock back and forth in the back, Dean rolled his eyes and his expression screamed *Just what the hell are you doing?* First, Sam had been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders about the events back at the steel mill, now he was taking on a gig without even considering what Dean might think.

Of course, Sam would say they were just posing as cops long enough to drop the girl off at the sheriff's, but Dean knew the look that had crossed Sam's face and it said he was "in the zone" and nothing was going to stop him.

Maybe it was the thought of trying to save a life, any life, that gave the younger Winchester some kind of absolution from previous events, or maybe he just wanted something to focus on so his mind didn't keep going back to the cult, to Sarah and to the demon.

Either way, for Sam, Dean would pander to his wishes. Besides, after what he'd seen in the woods, he didn't really believe the girl's father had been taken by anything natural either, although he never admit it yet. He'd tease Sam for an hour or so about choosing a gig without asking, then maybe he'd confess what he'd seen.

Dean shot Sam a bemused look, conveying his thoughts with just one teasing smile and then started up the Chevy. He flicked the shift into reverse and straightened out the car, careful not to rub his stinging hands more than necessary on the wheel. "You definitely owe me Metallica for this one, dude."

In the back, Bethany watched the two brothers begin to bicker and some part of her befuddled mind questioned their veracity as law enforcement officers. She huddled closer into her blanket, not wanting to think that she had possibly been lied to, or why.

Eventually, even the warmth of the blanket did little to quell her fears and she leaned forward, no longer caring what happened to her. "I.D." she cleared her throat, realizing she sounded hoarse, "I.D.'s...I'd like to see some..."

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Motel, Jackson Later That Night

Sam leaned back on the motel bed and finally allowed himself to relax after spending an hour at the local sheriff's office. He locked his hands behind his head, pondering what they had learned as the sound of a shower hummed in the background.

It had been pretty easy back in the Impala to flash Bethany a fake badge, and with her confused mental state she had accepted it. The sheriff had been just as easy to dupe. At the news that one of his hunting buddies had gone missing, he hadn't really paid Sam and Dean or their badges close scrutiny.

Sheriff Hank Waterston had known Bethany and her dad for a couple of years, had hunted with them, dined with them, even gone to church on Sunday with them. Seeing Bethany so distraught and in shock had clouded his normally clear police judgement.

Just like the brothers' first impression, Waterston had surmised his friend had been taken by an animal, and therefore concluded it would be better to begin the search the next day. Of course, he also thought there was little hope of finding Bethany's dad alive, but he'd had the tact not to say so in front of her.

Instead, Waterston had called up the girl's mother and put all the necessary procedures in place. The search party would set out at first light with tracking dogs, and Dean and Sam had requested to be on it. Or rather, Sam had requested to be on it. Dean hadn't shut up about that small fact all the way over to the motel. Dean wasn't sure they needed the case, and he was even less sure he wanted to be up at 5 a.m. in the morning. Sammy, after all, was the proverbial early-riser of the duo.

"Hey, Sam, I'm thinking we could maybe skip the food and grab something later. I saw this bar on the way over here that might just be civilized enough to have girls..." Dean bobbed his head around the door from the bathroom and flashed his tell-tale grin. He'd been taking a shower ready for a night on the town. Even if the place was tiny it had to have some kind of night life, and he wanted in on it. "Ya know, girls?" He jiggled his eyebrows suggestively and then vanished to continue preening himself.

"Whatever, man," Sam really wasn't in the mood for drinking or girls. He wanted to open up the laptop and do a search of local legends. Of course, out here his wireless card was about as useful as satellite TV with no dish. Instead, he'd just have to storm things through with Dean and hope they came up with something before big brother vanished on his "chick hunt." "Do you think Bethany could really have seen something weird take her dad?" He asked, hoping the prod would stir some interest from Dean.

Dean's head reappeared as he rubbed at his dripping-wet hair with a towel. "It's what she *didn't* see, dude," he padded into the room with just a towel around his waist and began rummaging through his holdall. "I mean, invisible rules out Sasquatch or any kind of Bigfoot, right? Skinwalkers are visible, black dogs are visible..." Finding the items he was after, the elder hunter returned to the bathroom without looking back.

Sam smiled mischievously and waited, keeping up the conversation without letting on that he was up to something underhanded. "But you do admit this is our kind of thing? Bethany didn't seem the type to make this stuff up or panic easily. And from the look on your face when you came back out of those woods you saw more than just a little blood and a discarded gun."

Dean's voice echoed from the tiny, steam filled bathroom as he splashed on half a bottle of Calvin Klein to add to his "babe-magnet" appeal. "I think it's worth a look, yeah. There was a third set of prints under Bethany's and her dad's, but they were pretty messed up. Definitely not your regular Yogi Bear tracks..." A clatter, followed by several curse words suddenly cut off further conversation about the gig. "What the..."

Dean appeared from the bathroom with the frown of all frowns burned across his normally jovial features. "Dude, you put freakin' "L'eau de Chick" in my stuff?" He turned up his nose as the strong and very sweet aroma of Dior's *Poison* intermixed with *Beautiful* and several tackier perfumes wafted across the room.

Sam shrugged from his position on the bed and failed miserably to stifle a grin. "Dean, you so needed to get in touch with your feminine side..."

Dean's glare intensified and he rechecked the contents of his holdall. "Man, you didn't?" He seethed as he realized anything with a 'Pour Homme' label had been swapped for something more girly. "Not everything?" He gaped.

"Oh, I did..." Sam couldn't help it. His grin turned into a full-blown chuckle and he savored the total look of defeat on his brother's face.

Dean had set the challenge in the Impala by suggesting he had some new "torture techniques" planned. No way was Sam waiting to get Nair in his shampoo or itching powder in his pants again. No sir, he was getting "first blood" this time.

"I can't believe you're starting this crap again," Dean retreated into the bathroom smelling like an entire harem, and didn't let Sam see he was actually smiling.

As he turned the shower back on, he tossed the spiked items from his bag into the bin and tugged off his towel, climbing back under the steaming hot spray of water to remove the syrupy aroma before he choked on it.

There would be plenty of time to get his brother back, but for now, Dean was just glad Sam had broken from his doldrums and could laugh and joke again. Maybe this was what he needed along with a new gig to keep his mind distracted. And if Sam needed a gig, Dean would work it.

Dean winced as the water soaked into the still healing flesh on his hands, and he hoped that this time there would at least be no demon. Fighting unearthly creatures was one thing, but Sam deserved a real break from his torment. Hell, they both did.

He looked back up, a smirk abruptly forming on his features as he pushed away dark thoughts and formulated his next prank. This one really would get little brother back for the "girly juice" he'd put in Dean's Calvin Klein bottle. "Okay, Sammy, let the games commence..."

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Woods just south of Jackson 6:47a.m. The Next Morning

The whirling lights of three police 4x4's reflected off the stark greens of the woodland like some bizarre feral circus. Each vehicle had been parked just off the highway as far into the wilderness as the overhanging trees would allow, their drivers awaiting the word to begin scouring the woods.

Behind the Sheriff's rig sat the Impala, its shiny black exterior contrasting against the stark white of the police vehicles. Dean had been careful to park the car as far away from any chance of harm as possible because he was fed up of having to

repair it. Somehow, out here in the boonies he just expected trouble, and not just for his beloved classic.

Sheriff Waterston ambled up to the two would-be state cops as they exited the Chevy and nodded a "good morning" salute by touching the brim of his hat. "Fellas," he jerked a thumb back to where his deputies were now gathering, along with the much-awaited tracking dogs. "Nice to see you up bright and early. Although, I'm danged if I know why you out-of-towners would be so interested in this. It's just a local thing."

"Let's just say we like to finish what we start." Dean strode alongside Waterston as the search party began a wide sweep of the woods. Sam followed just a short distance behind, taking in every movement in his surroundings.

"You know Bethany's not the kind of girl to panic, and yet after you left yesterday she told me the strangest thing about what happened out here." The Sheriff paused as they neared the site of the attack. He turned to face Dean, hooking a thumb under his belt in consternation. "You know the girl says what took her dad was invisible? She already told you that, right? And yet you're still out here?"

Dean shrugged. "*Something* took Bethany's dad. We're just trying to find out what before it happens again." He eyed the local law enforcement officer for a reaction, but Waterston didn't flinch.

"Has anything like this ever happened before?" Sam stepped up, joining his brother and the Sheriff as they watched the other deputies follow the yelping dogs into the distance. "Anything unusual spotted in the woods or surrounding areas?"

Waterston shook his head. He didn't know who he was dealing with, but some part of him was screaming that he should have paid these two yahoos' badge numbers just a little bit more attention. Right now they were reminding him more of Mulder and Scully than two state cops. And the Chevy? Heck, what a beauty, but kind of unusual to be using as a "cop car."

Dean noted the Sheriff's sudden pensive behavior and realized it was time to change the subject or get caught out. In the distance, he saw the same glint of broken glass from the shack he'd seen the previous evening and decided to use it as a way to deflect the conversation. He nodded towards the bleak structure that looked even more ramshackle in the light of day.

"What about the house over there? Anyone live there?" Dean was pretty sure the abode was abandoned, but then, so was Hell House and that place had been a bitch to deal with.

The Sheriff followed the elder hunter's gaze as they began to trudge through the undergrowth again and then shook his head. "Hell no. Nobody's lived there in over ten years. It used to belong to the Walden family, but as far as I know they left. I heard something about a disabled son and that they headed for the city to get him treatment."

Dean stopped, his ears no longer fully picking up what the cop was saying to him. About a hundred yards away he'd spotted a fence hidden by the encroaching thicket, and at the base of the blackened, untreated timbers he'd caught sight of something. He held up a hand, cutting off Waterston from further conversation until he'd investigated the dark crimson stain.

Treading carefully in case of hidden bear traps, Dean crossed to the swatch of color and crouched to run a finger through the drying liquid. It was reasonably fresh, but there was no way to determine human or animal.

Dean's eyes narrowed and he looked around, scrutinizing the foliage and contiguous greenery for more splashes of color. Noticing yet more blood spatter in the direction of the house, he indicated what he'd seen to his two companions and slid a hand to the back of his belt to retrieve his forty-five.

Sam and Waterston immediately followed suit, both silently drawing their weapons as they moved towards the rickety porch of the tumbledown building.

Dean reached the structure first and paused, weighing up whether the killer might still be within- if indeed it or he had ever entered the house. The blood trail had ceased just far enough away for it not to be a certainty.

The hunter turned, gesturing to his brother and the sheriff that he was going inside. Both men nodded an acknowledgement and poised to cover him, neither making any sound.

Dean eyed the rotting decking warily, wondering if the aged wood would take his weight. He placed a boot carefully on the edge of the porch, testing to make sure. When the timbers held, he moved forward, gripping his forty-five up to his shoulder as he reached what was left of the door.

Dean paused, considering a slow, cautious entry or a full-blown "kick the door in" assault. Out of habit, he chose the latter, standing back and lashing out at the entrance until the door's tired hinges tore away and it blasted into the interior of the abode.

No sooner had the wooden remains landed, than Dean was inside, sweeping the shack with his weapon until he was certain no danger lurked within. "All clear, guys!" The hunter let his guard down just a fraction to look around.

The ancient abode still held furniture, or what had once been furniture. Chairs were splayed out across the floor, their fabric covers chewed at by rats and other vermin until the foam from within spewed out across the bare boards. It made the Benders home look like a palace.

Cobwebs filled every corner, and somewhere in the rafters Dean swore he saw movement. *Probably bats. Great, flying rats. Just what I need.*

To the rear of the room was yet another door, this time more intact than its predecessor. Dean ignored the overhead movement and eyed it warily, noting something dark smeared on the timber in front of it. *More blood?* The hunter's senses instantly kicked back into alert mode and he pointed with his forefinger to his two companions before aiming his gun at the door.

This time, Sam took point, warily putting his back to the wooden wall panel next to the door's frame, his Glock held high. Once in position, he nodded, indicating for Dean to kick down the obstacle in their path.

The elder hunter let his boot heel hit the door about a third of the way up and it imploded into the next room. Without waiting for the dust and flying splinters to clear, he dived in, his finger tickling the trigger of his weapon.

Sam sprang in behind his brother, with the Sheriff bringing up the rear.

"Sweet mother of..." The Sheriff's words trailed as bile rose in his throat and he was forced to wretch at what the room held.

Piled in a corner, just left of a toppled dining table lay a mound of rotting remains. Some were mere skeletons, their bones long bleached by the sun through a nearby window. Others still held remnants of blackened necrotic flesh that buzzed with insect life and their yellowish larvae.

"Ah, man, talk about gross," Dean gagged at the stench coming from the heap and unconsciously held a hand over his mouth. When he'd finally stifled the urge to heave, he moved closer, examining their find.

"Doesn't look like anything too recent," Sam noted, thankful that Bethany's dad wasn't part of the mountain of tangled limbs.

The Sheriff joined the two brothers at the side of their find, but still struggled to look at the maggot infested bodies that had been strewn together. He'd seen some pretty disgusting sights in his time, but this was somehow more than some wild animal's lair, and he knew it. "Do you see anything human in there?"

"Nah, I don't see anything that isn't animal." Dean crouched down, scrutinizing the pile more closely. He prodded at a half chewed torso with the tip of his weapon, revealing what looked like a dog collar.

The elder brother leaned in closer, plucking the tarnished tag from its resting place and flicking it over in his hand. The name "Rocky" and a telephone number were engraved into the metal.

Dean huffed matter-of-factly and straightened up, tossing the tag over to his brother. "Some of these bodies are domestic animals, peoples' pets. Whatever is storing its food here isn't just sticking to the woods to get its meals."

"And it's been doing it for a long time," Sam added, inspecting some of the skeletal carcasses more carefully. "I think it's safe to say we can't rule out the thing that did this from having taken Bethany's dad."

"A rogue bear maybe?" Waterston eased away from the mound and its plethora of busily feasting flies, preferring instead to focus on the room's exit. He needed fresh air to think. Not that he really suspected the predator responsible for the carnage before him was a bear. Bears just didn't act that way. He'd hunted them long enough to know.

Dean raised a brow at the cop's suggestion, knowing it was a spur of the minute and very irrational idea. They were dealing with something new here, and the hunter didn't like what he was seeing. The cadavers he'd gotten close enough to had been torn into alright. Some even had visible teeth marks, but the canine incisions didn't look deep enough to be any wild animal he'd ever encountered. The whole scene was just "off."

"I don't think it's a bear," Sam agreed, seemingly reading his brother's mind. "Maybe we should take another look around, see if we can find any more tracks. We still haven't found the end of that fresh blood trail..."

Dean glanced around the room, following a sudden bemused look from his brother. Both Winchesters' eyes paused on the same spot as they noted what appeared to be some kind of cellar door. It had a rusted padlock that obviously hadn't been touched for a very long time.

"Sheriff?" Dean wafted the barrel of his weapon towards the newly-found entrance, forcing the cop to return his gaze back into the center of the room. "I think we should take a look down there."

Waterston nodded and joined the brothers at the small wooden doorway. As long as he didn't have to look at the putrid pile of flesh, he could pretend to ignore the smell and remain in the room. "I guess we'll probably need the bolt cutters from my cruiser." The Sheriff cocked a brow as he examined the lock, suspecting it was too corroded to open of its own volition even if they had the key.

"Or maybe not..." Dean shot the local a cocky grin and produced a small and very bent paper clip seemingly out of thin air. He wafted it like a magician and proceeded to gently poke it into the padlock, teasing until he felt his way through the rusted interior mechanism. After a second he felt the lock give way, but it still wouldn't open.

Sam couldn't help a small smirk as his brother showed off. "Maybe we should have just kicked it down. This place is so full of termites it probably would have collapsed with one kick."

Dean huffed and swivelled the forty-five in his hand like a gunslinger until he was holding the barrel. With one swift tap on the lock with the automatic's butt, it clicked open. Dean grinned and quickly grabbed the door handle, pushing it inwards as he twisted the forty-five back the right way up in his palm. "Patience, Mr. Gung Ho," he smirked and then tugged out a pen-sized flashlight, pointing it into the gloom.

The basement was just what all three men had expected. Just a small to medium sized room dug out of the earth beneath the cabin and fortified with very fragile wooden beams. A few shelves had been erected along the farthest wall, and some still held long-outdated jars of pickle, half-rusted paint tins and a few other cob-web covered household items.

Dean swung the pen-light further to his left, illuminating yet more of the darkened corners. He paused mid-arc and returned to a point closer to the shelving. Something lay on the floor covered by a moldy green tarp.

"I'm gonna go take a look. Cover me." Dean held his weapon on the tarp with one hand and the beam from his light with the other. As he approached he felt a lump form in his throat. Anything could be under the tarp, including any number of nasty and supernatural creatures right out of his dad's journal.

The hunter stepped carefully down the angled ladder that led into the shadows of the cellar, worrying more about falling through rotten rungs than what lay beneath. *Great, I'm bound to fall on my ass with Sam and the local Sheriff watching.*

He sensed the wood give under his right boot and didn't wait for the step to give way further. Instead, he leapt forward, jumping the rest of the distance into the chamber and landing upright with a grunt.

Without pausing, he brought the flashlight back up to waist height and twisted the beam so that it hit the weathered tarp dead center. As he watched, something slowly began to move and seemingly writhe beneath the canvas.

Dean froze, every sinew in his body suddenly readying for a possible fight. He brought his prized silver automatic up alongside his light, both brows furrowing as he tentatively approached the thing on the ground.

Above, Sam watched as his brother made slow, cautious steps in the darkness. From his position, all he and the Sheriff could see was what little illumination Dean's mini-light gave to the scene.

Sam's stomach lurched as he recalled a similar incursion into a cellar that had almost cost Dean his life. *This is no Rawhead, and there's no tazer...*

Still, the younger sibling's grip on his Glock tightened until his knuckles began to turn white with the pressure.

In the murkiness below, Dean felt the same kind of trepidation as his brother. Gone was the jovial, wayward Dean, replaced by his serious, no-nonsense side. He reached the tarp and the movement beneath abruptly ceased. Whatever was below had sensed his presence.

Crouching carefully, gun still aimed at the canvas, Dean grasped the filthy material with his thumb and forefinger and quickly jerked it up.

"Son of a bitch!" Dean jumped backwards and almost squeezed off a shot as a huge black rat scuttled from its hiding place and headed in his direction. The rodent seemed to sense impending doom, and at the last minute made a sideways dash into the dark void beneath the nearby shelving.

Dean blinked, exhaled, and then shot an annoyed glance in his brother's general direction.

The "look" failed to stop a chortle from Sam as he explained to Waterston than his fellow "cop" had an aversion to rodents and similar vermin. "He'd rather face a wild hog than a rat," he clarified, finally loosening his grip on the Glock. *Or a Tulpa, for that matter...*

"Son, you pair ever faced a wild boar? Cus I'm telling you I'd take the rat any day of the week." The Sheriff stowed his revolver back into the holster on his belt and clipped the leather strap into place that secured it. He held Sam's gaze for a second, unsure how to take the unlikely duo he found himself working with.

"Actually, yeah," Sam answered honesty. "And Dean would still take the hog any day, believe me." *And a whole lot worse things,* he added silently under his breath.

"Are you guys gonna quit makin' eyes at each other and get down here?" Dean's somewhat annoyed voice echoed from the chamber below, suggesting both men join him. "Because "Ricky Rodent" wasn't the only thing under the tarp..."

The sheriff let his gaze finally drop from his companion and clambered into the basement. So far, the "out of towners" were finding all the leads, and he didn't want that to continue. Waterston didn't care about credit, but he didn't want the case suddenly wrenching from his department and turning into a state police or fed case either.

As Waterston crossed over to where Dean was once again kneeling, he pulled out a small flashlight from his utility belt and let its beam intersect with that of the young hunter's, shedding more light on the scene.

"Looks like this time we're dealing with human remains," Dean pointed to several skulls piled atop various other bones. Some of them still had wispy hairs attached to the bony white craniums, but there was no decaying flesh or sinew. These bodies had been dead much longer than their animal counterparts. "Better send for the coroner and some more backup, Sheriff. Animals don't padlock their prey in cellars..."

* * * *

Outside the Shack Two Hours Later

Sam watched as several coroners' assistants continued to wheel out the remains they'd found earlier in black body bags. Death, once again, had found him. To the young hunter it sometimes felt like he should have been born a "Reaper," because that was all he seemed to do- find people when it was too late.

"Hey, space cadet, want some coffee?" Sam looked up from his musings to see his brother approaching with two Styrofoam cups and a bag that undoubtedly held food of some variety. "Heard anything from the Sheriff yet?"

"Nope, he's still talking with the County Coroner." Sam shook his head and took the cup he was offered suspiciously. He squinted, eyeing his brother for that tell-tale glint in his eye, and then removed the lid to sniff at the liquid.

Dean found the reaction amusing and swiftly took the coffee, swapping it with his own before taking a long swig. "Dude, you're too uptight. I'm way more inventive than spiking your drink." His lips curled into a small smile and he bit down on a fresh chocolate-topped donut, stuffing far too much into his mouth at once.

Sam wasn't convinced about the inventive part, but he took a sip of the piping hot beverage he'd been given and was thankful for it. It wasn't a cold day, but somehow the woods seemed to hold a chill that gradually seeped into his bones the longer he stayed in them. Maybe it was something only he sensed- part of his gift. Or maybe, it was something none of the others out here wanted to admit to feeling.

"You guys still hanging around?" Waterston finally appeared from the shack, a slight frown on his face as he realized his two newest friends weren't about to leave him to work on his own.

Dean nodded, trying to answer through a mouthful of food. "Like I said, we finish what we start." He stuffed the empty donut bag in his pocket and walked towards the Sheriff still chewing.

"Any news from the coroner?" Sam queried, cutting off his brother's muffled mumblings and bad manners.

Waterston put a hand on his hip and sighed. "Well, there's not much to go on with just bones until he gets back to the lab, but Mike thinks they've been dead as much as ten years." The cop pursed his lips. "I guess maybe the Walden's didn't leave town after all."

Dean cocked his head as he finally finished munching. "What, the kid too? I didn't see anything down there that looked like a kid's bones."

The Sheriff looked away. If he were honest, he hadn't wanted to take a good look at anything in the house. In all his years as a cop he'd never seen such a mess, and it bothered him on some level he couldn't even begin to understand.

Waterston rubbed at his jaw, finally admitting what Dean already suspected. "Well no, Mike's taken away five bodies, and as far as our records show there were six family members." He looked bemusedly at the young man whose eyes had just

widened slightly in comprehension. "But what difference does that make? The Walden kid has to be dead, right? Or where the hell is he?"

Sam glanced to Dean, all thoughts of pranks suddenly forgotten. Dean was onto something, and Sam had already guessed what. Still, Dean was never the greatest interrogator. He lacked a certain finesse that was always a requirement to get the job done properly.

"Can I ask how old the Waldens' son was when they vanished?" Sam questioned carefully. "And what exactly was wrong with him?"

"Hmnn, Jerry would have been around eight, I think." The Sheriff paused, trying to sift through gossip he'd been told when he'd moved to Jackson after taking on the job of the county's protector. "I'm not really sure what was wrong with the kid. Some kinda skin disorder if I recall correctly. Course, I was just a deputy back then, and I didn't live in Jackson, so..." As an afterthought he turned, looking across to the house at one of his deputies. "Dave, wanna come over here and answer a few questions while I deal with the press?"

A short, ginger haired deputy that looked no more than twenty began jogging towards them, his eyes twinkling with an eagerness to please.

Oh great, he's sticking us with a rookie. Dean didn't know why, but Waterston was beginning to annoy him. "He's kinda young. Wouldn't he have been just a kid back then?"

Waterston nodded, already walking away from them towards a local reporter. "Yup, but he knew the family." He shrugged, not understanding why the long-dead Walden's medical history could be so important. "Knock yourselves out, boys. Meantime, I got a killer to catch while you're out playing Dr. Kildare..."

Dean shook his head. "That guy has no freakin' clue what he's dealing with."

"Maybe that's a good thing," Sam concluded as Dave finally joined them.

"So," Dean leaned forward to read the deputy's badge, "Deputy Caruso, can you tell us what you know about Jerry Walden?"

Caruso seemed surprised, but nodded. "Yes, sir, I knew Jerry a little. We used to play together years back, until he got too sick." The deputy looked to Dean and then Sam, wondering where the questions could possibly be going.

"When you say sick, what exactly was wrong with Jerry?" Sam took another sip of his coffee and noticed the inexperienced cop looking at it longingly. *I'm not the only one who feels the chill around here.*

"Oh, Jerry had a skin disorder, you know, like psoriasis, only much worse." Dave shrugged, not really knowing the details. "Last time I saw him it had gotten pretty gross. You could almost see the muscles and tissue under his skin. People around here had already started callin' him a freak. I thought that's why his folks left town."

"Except they didn't," Dean corrected. "Somebody or something fixed 'em up for the next chow time, main course and dessert."

Caruso flinched at the elder hunter's description and Dean guessed the youngster hadn't seen the carnage inside the Walden home. If he had he'd have been a decidedly deeper shade of green by now. Still, that didn't stop the hunter from liking the kid. He was keen, but most of all, he reminded Dean of Sam.

"So, um, when you knew Jerry, did he ever talk to you about getting any treatment?" Sam cut off any further 'chow time' comments from his brother and got back to the details. "Do you know who the family doctor was?"

"I don't know who they're doc was, but I know Jerry used to make regular visits to the Kentucky River Medical Center. We've only a small town here and that's the nearest hospital."

Sam nodded. "Thanks, Deputy Caruso. You've been a great help."

Caruso turned to leave. "No problem. Anything to help catch the creep that did this." He looked slightly saddened. "You know, they haven't even found Jerry's body yet?"

"Yeah, we know," Dean declared somberly, not wanting the cop to know what they truly suspected. Once Caruso was out of earshot, he added, "That's because Jerry's been sinking his teeth into more than mom's meatloaf for the past few years."

Sam grimaced. "You have a way with words, you know that? I mean, c'mon, Dean, show some respect!"

Dean grinned and tossed his empty coffee cup at his brother. "Dude, you're the college boy, I'm just the ass-kickin' ghost killer. I don't need to be eloquent."

"Huh?" Sam couldn't believe his brother's last admission. No way would he come out with a line like that unless there was a catch. That catch was about to drop like a ten-ton concrete demolition ball.

"That," Dean offered smugly, "is why you're the one going into Kentucky River Medical Center to get the kid's medical records."

Sam stopped dead, wafting his hands in the air in defeat. "Dean, no matter how good a talker I am, no way will they release medical records to just anyone. I took pre-law, not medicine, remember?"

Dean turned, but continued to slowly walk backwards with an ear-to-ear smirk. "Dude, do what I do, use that manly charm of yours. Unless you're too in touch with your feminine side after buying all that perfume you spiked my stuff with." He winked impishly. "I'm sure you'll do just fine after all the *House* reruns you watch, Gregory."

Sam's expression couldn't have been more pained if he'd tried. It was true that late at night when he couldn't sleep he did tend to watch anything that got him away from the real world and demon hunting. After all, the last thing he was about to watch was *Medium* or the likes. Still, he had thought Dean had been blissfully unaware of what he'd been tuning into. Apparently not. And now it was biting him in the ass, big time.

"Dean..."

"Gotcha," Dean's chuckle filled the woodland as he hiked back to the Impala, his "torture mission" of the day starting out well.

* * * *

Kentucky River Medical Center Some Time Later...

Dean pulled the Impala into the medical center's lot and looked over at his brother with a smile.

Sam was sitting in the passenger seat, blissfully unaware of Dean's amused look as he fiddled with his tie. It was a habit he didn't realize he had, but one that entertained his brother every time he saw him in a "monkey suit." It was a nervous fidget, and Dean liked to see his brother squirm that way; it was kind of funny.

Eventually, Sam stopped looking in the mirror and tugging at the tie, and glanced over, sensing Dean's gaze. "What?" He snapped, knowing Dean was loving every minute of sending him into the hospital. *Dude, this is so not fair...*

"Nothing," Dean offered back innocently as he killed the Chevy's grumbling V8. "Just making sure you look the part, Doc."

"You'll be the first to know if I don't." Sam bobbed his head out of the car's open window and searched out the hospital entrance. "So, I grab the records, read and copy. What if they ask why I want them in the first place?"

Dean shrugged, thinking up a suitable lie as he leaned over to open the Impala's glove box. "Tell them you're working for the coroner's office and you need the kid's files to match or exclude him from the recently discovered remains. Something like that." After a quick rummage, he offered up a recently made I.D. card with a grin.

Sam snatched the card, immediately scrutinizing it to see just what embarrassing title he'd been given this time. Dean hadn't disappointed. "Dr. Hugh Laurie M.E? Are

you kidding me? No way am I going in there with this thing!" He flicked the I.D. over to his brother who promptly flipped it back.

"Hey, I made that just for you, Gregory. I thought you might like to pay homage to your favorite TV doc." The familiar and all-too cheeky grin appeared. "I thought you'd be happy I hadn't used a rock legend."

Sam huffed but grabbed the card from where it had fallen. "Yeah, well Osbourne was getting kinda old." He pushed open the Chevy's door and pulled his tall frame out into the afternoon sun. As an afterthought, he leaned back down to peer in through the window. "You know, I barely saw more than two episodes of *House* but from what I recall, you'd fit this part so much better than me."

"Huh?" Dean stopped tinkering with the radio and looked up, one brow creasing. "Dude, how'd you figure that?"

Sam smiled. *Gotcha!* "Because *House* is an acerbic smartass who thinks he's always right. Sound familiar?" Before Dean could answer, Sam stepped away from the car and continued to chortle all the way to the hospital entrance.

Dean scowled and gave in with twiddling the radio, instead slapping in a Def Leppard CD and searching out 'Animal.' As the music began to blurt out, he ramped up the volume and muttered under his breath, "Yeah, but *House* is always right..." Not that he could tell Sammy that, or it would be admitting he'd watched too from his bed as his little brother had tuned in on many a sleepless, tormented night.

* * * *

Sam reappeared from the hospital just under two hours later, his face flushed red and his gait indicating he might launch into a sprint any second.

Dean leaned forward, unsure whether to crank the Impala ready for a swift getaway or wait. As Sam neared and no one seemed to give chase, the elder brother relaxed somewhat and sat back in his seat.

When Sam yanked open the Chevy's door just a little too hard and slumped gratefully into the passenger seat, Dean couldn't resist asking, "What kept you, Gregory?"

Sam tossed the small briefcase he'd taken with him across the car into his brother's lap. "Next time, I'll stick with the rock legend," he grouched, pulling off his tie and tossing it on the back seat heatedly.

"What? They didn't buy Dr. Laurie?" Dean flipped open the latches on the case and began sifting through all the files Sam had been able to retrieve. When he suddenly realized the papers may have been in Greek for all he could understand them, he tossed the case back to Sam.

"Oh no," Sam explained, some of the extra color now finally fading from his cheeks. "Pretty much the opposite. The nurse in charge of the pediatrics records liked me just a little too much. Why do you think I was so long? She followed me around like a damn limpet. Couldn't get over the name coincidence..."

"So," Dean hunched his shoulders, mischievous thoughts filling his head. "What was the problem, was she like eighty, or just plain fugly?"

Sam began reorganizing Jerry's files. "Neither, she was pretty much your type, cute, blonde, not a lot of upstairs brain."

Dean's expression changed to one of mirthful suspicion. "Whoa...no wonder you were a long time..."

"Dean! No, I so didn't go there!" Sam sighed. Just because big brother would have had a little fun didn't mean he had, or indeed would. He still thought too much of Sarah for that.

"And you didn't even get *me* her number?" Dean exhaled deeply in disappointment and pointed to the now tidied contents of the case. "At least tell me you understand some of that, because to me it's like trying to figure out EVP without Goldwave."

"I picked out bits and pieces while I was copying it, but a lot of it is too technical, Dean. Like I said earlier, pre-law, not medicine." Every few seconds, Sam glanced to the hospital entrance, unable to shake the feeling that bimbo-nurse was about to stalk him. "Can we go through this back at the motel?"

Dean ignored the last comment, instead focusing on what Sam had managed to decipher. "The bits you picked out? Spill, Gregory, or I'll invite your nurse friend over for a beer."

Sam pulled a face but sifted to the third sheet of paper he'd copied along with several photos. "It's just like Deputy Caruso said, Jerry had a pretty unique skin disorder caused by a genetic mutation. Not only were the pigment forming cells of his skin unique, but so was the way Jerry's body handled light." He handed over the pictures with a slight grimace.

Dean took the stills, turning them around until he could determine which way up they should go. What he was looking at on the top picture didn't even resemble anything human. It was like looking at a corpse that had been mangled in a meat grinder. Sections of bone and sinew were clearly visible through thinner, almost opaque layers of tissue. The worst part was looking at the eyes.

Jerry's eyeballs seemed to pop from raw looking hollows in his skull, and as Dean brought the photo closer he could actually see parts of the kid's brain through transparent sections of his orbital bone.

"Freaky," Dean admitted, sifting to an older picture of Jerry that was at least recognizable as a person. "Looks like whatever this mutation was, it got worse as he aged." He looked up from the garish images. "Does it say why the kid turned into *The Thing* or was it just one of nature's little glitches?"

"According to the doctors reports they think it was a unique combination of genes passed on from the father, coupled with some flawed DNA on mom's side. Basically, a chance in several billion or more." Sam tapped the paperwork. "Get this, though. The guy who brought Jerry up? George Walden? He wasn't Jerry's biological dad. His DNA wasn't a match when the doctors did tests to try and help the kid."

Dean whistled. "Whoa, mommy must have been playing housewife with the local Bible salesman."

"Think it has any bearing on what's happening now?"

Dean cocked his head and shrugged. "Nah, it's pretty much irrelevant who the kid's dad is. Looking at these pictures I'd guess Bethany's invisible fantasy creature isn't such a fantasy anymore, though." He scanned the photos again, starting with the almost normal image of a bouncing baby boy, and finishing with the half translucent monster Jerry had become. "I'm thinking the more Jerry aged the more invisible his body became until he was totally transparent. The question is, why kill his parents and turn into Hannibal Lector?"

Sam took the copied photos from his brother and studied them. "What if every time you looked in the mirror you saw that? Imagine being a kid and seeing your features just seemingly melt away. Your own friends start to make fun of you; maybe your parents resent you- especially your father, because he knows you're not really his kid..." The young hunter tossed the pictures back into his case. "Remember the movie *Hollow Man*? Kevin Bacon's character went over the edge after just a few days. Jerry had a lifetime to crack."

"Hollow what?" Dean's face contorted.

"Hollow..." Sam began to explain, but gave in with a smirk. "Oh, that's right, you prefer the daytime wonders of the fabric softener bear and chick flicks like *Titanic*."

"Jerk!" Dean cuffed his brother playfully and then leaned forward to crank the Impala. "I saw the movie," he confessed with a grin, "but Jerry isn't an experiment gone wrong like Bacon's character. He's a flesh-eating monster of nature." He pulled the Chevy from the lot and headed from the main road back onto the winding track that cut through the woods to Jackson.

Sam read his brother's thoughts. "You're thinking this isn't our kind of gig, after all, aren't you? Even though Jerry's like nothing anyone's seen before."

Dean's face lit up at Sam's unintended pun. "Man, nothing anybody can see, period," he corrected, taking a sharp left to avoid a rut in the road. "You have to admit; once the local cops know what they're dealing with this is something they can handle. They don't need us."

Sam looked out the window, disappointment showing on his usually affable features. "You just want to hand over what we've discovered and leave?"

"I'm just saying it's an option." Dean stole a glance over and realized Sam wanted this case, supernatural or not. In fact, maybe it was the lack of a real creature or demon that was drawing him to it. Maybe they could save a few lives without having to face their own family skeletons for a change. "Okay," he surrendered. "What say we switch on the scanner and see how our good friend Sheriff Waterston has been doing in our absence?"

Sam nodded, flicking on the concealed unit beneath the dash and tuning in to the local police frequencies. After a few pops and crackles, radio chatter began to fill the Impala.

"All available units, this is Sheriff Waterston on the Forest Creek trail requesting backup. We have an officer down, I repeat officer down..."

Sam looked straight to Dean an unreadable expression on his face. "Still think we can leave this to the locals?"

Dean floored the gas pedal, his face turning stoic, but he didn't answer. He simply steered the Impala towards Forest Creek as fast as its grunting suspension would allow.

* * * *

Forest Creek Trail Thirty Five Minutes later...

The sun was slowly setting as Dean once again parked in the Kentucky woodland. The last vestiges of the day's sunshine were melting into a faded orange glow that filled the evening sky. The hues weren't quite dark enough to be called a shade of red, and yet it still made Dean shudder as if the heavens were colored with blood.

If an officer was down, in all likelihood it meant another person had met their death at the hands of Jerry Walden. Sam was right, the kid, or rather eighteen year old may be human, but there was certainly nothing 'natural' about him. That made it their kind of gig.

Dean climbed from the Impala and headed straight for its trunk, intent on arming himself before anything else. Before he could reach the rear of the car, Waterston broke through his own yellow police tape and joined the elder hunter. The Sheriff's face was a mask of anger and pent up frustration that Dean could relate to. It was the face Sam wore every time the word "demon" was mentioned.

"You state boys sure did a whole lot of good with your extra help," Waterston's tone was more than sarcastic, it was acidic. "While you were out chasing ghosts one of my men got taken by this damn animal. Dave was just a kid. He had a great career ahead of him..."

Dean stopped in his tracks and couldn't help but glance at Sam. Dave Caruso had been the young ginger haired cop they'd spoken with only hours earlier. Dean had liked the kid, and now he was probably being used as supper while they stood around talking about it.

"What happened?" Sam exhaled deeply as he asked the question, but the pitch of his voice told the true tale of just how he felt. He was as angry as the Sheriff, as angry as he knew Dean was under that brash façade of his.

Waterston pointed beyond the tape and through the trees to a small clearing. "We'd just begun sweeping the area for Bethany's dad when I heard Deputy Caruso cry out. I tried to run over, but I just wasn't fast enough. All I could see was Dave being dragged down to the floor and away through the bushes..." The sheriff stopped, shaking his head in disbelief. "It was just like Bethany said. There was nothing there...I couldn't see a damn thing."

Sam nodded consolingly, his voice still low. "We know," he confided, "and we think we know what we're dealing with here, but you have to call your men out of the woods. It'll be dark soon and they're no match for..." The hunter's words trailed as he realized he had no clue how to describe Jerry.

The boy had become something less than human, but still, he was no animal. "They're no match for the predator that's about to tear them a new one, Sheriff," Dean finished for his brother and then cocked his pump action shotgun. "Call your boys back in, or there's gonna be a massacre tonight."

He tossed an SKB to Sam and then stuffed several spare clips for his forty-five into his jacket pocket. As an afterthought, he retrieved another item and stowed it quickly in an inside pocket.

"After all the help you've been, you expect me to just up and follow your orders?" The Sheriff turned, looked over his shoulder at the woodland around him and then shook his head. "I have a responsibility to the citizens of Jackson and the surrounding county. I can't just call off a manhunt because you have some crazy idea. And I won't give up on Deputy Caruso until I find a body, dammit!"

Dean shot Sam a glance as the younger hunter stowed the infrared camera and thermal scanner into a shoulder bag. For a moment he thought about telling the cop before him the truth. *Hell, he'd never believe me that Jerry Walden is the thing out there tearing flesh apart like a wildcat...* "Sheriff, I don't intend giving up either. I think Dave was a good kid. I don't want to see any more of your men get hurt alongside him. This thing eats raw flesh like a delicacy. It hunts like no animal you've ever seen. Now will you just call them back in?" The way it was barked, the sentence was more of an order than a request.

Sam slammed the trunk lid down and looked at his brother in amazement. In that one split second, Dean had sounded just like their father, growling out his commands marine style.

Still, Waterston wouldn't yield to common sense. "My men stay in the field. They've got the dogs out there and I've more backup on the way."

Dean raised a brow. "More backup? Geez, you're providing breakfast as well as supper!"

The Sheriff whirled, about to tell both state cops to get the hell out of his face, jurisdiction or not, but the radio clipped to his shoulder began to buzz as the dispatcher's voice came through.

"Sheriff Waterston, this is dispatch. I have a call for you from Mrs. McCaffrey. I'm patching you through..."

Waterston unclipped the unit and his eyes narrowed as he looked first to Dean and then Sam. He walked away, just far enough so the boys couldn't hear his conversation, but turned to keep a watch on them while he talked. "Hi, Melissa," he spoke into the mike, "what can I do for you?" his tone changed from anger to deep concern the more he listened. "You're sure?" He demanded.

When Bethany's mom confirmed her last statement he quickly signed off and jogged to his own cruiser to retrieve a shotgun of his own.

Dean and Sam looked to one another and then approached the cop, knowing something new was going down.

"More bad news?" Dean came straight to the point.

Waterston grabbed his hat from the car and tugged it on. "You could say that," he growled through clenched teeth. "That was Bethany's mom. Seems like Bethany

doesn't think local law enforcement is doing enough about her dad. She's taken his best rifle and headed back out into the woods to look for him herself."

"Bethany's out here?" Dean grimaced as he looked around the darkening backdrop. It was bad enough Caruso had been taken, but at least he had police training on his side, the girl had nothing but a little false bravado and a large gun. His worried gaze met Sam's. "We better find Jerry, and fast..."

"Now wait," Waterston held up his free hand. "Just what the hell has Jerry Walden got to do with any of this? The kid's dead."

Dean didn't have time to try and explain so he ignored the question. "Radio your men and tell them we're coming in. I don't want some yahoo deputies shooting at my ass. Tell them to stick together too. The more they spread out, the more they're inviting this thing to attack."

Sam nodded. "Sheriff, if you can get any infrared scanners, maybe from the fire department? It's the only way you're going to see what you're fighting."

Waterston took the radio back from its place on his shoulder and for once agreed with the brothers; even if he had no clue what the hell they thought they were hunting. "I'll make the calls, but I want a damn good explanation before you leave here."

Dean shrugged, checking the sights on his silver automatic. "Dude, we can stick around all night and tell camp fire stories, but if we do you better make an extra call."

"What for?"

"A truck load of body bags." Dean's throat bobbed as he gulped and Waterston knew he wasn't trying to be sarcastic- he was deadly serious.

* * * *

Forest Creek Trail Half a mile into the undergrowth

Deputy Frank Miller pushed through a heavy patch of brush, careful not to scratch himself on the thorny branches that teased at his body. He was a local man, but had never really been out in this section of woods at night before. Hunting just wasn't his thing. Frank was more the type to spend his free time doing yard work, or maybe playing the occasional round of golf if he could be bothered to make the trip to the nearest course.

Right now, Frank wished he'd taken up his companion's offer of tagging along on his last hunt. Deputy Rich Graf was well known for his skills with a knife as well as a rifle, and Miller wished he'd learned some of those skills.

"See anything?" Miller craned his neck to glance over to where Graf was using his rifle butt to prod the leaves and twisted roots at his feet.

Graf shook his head, his upper lip curling into a negative expression. "Not even any tracks," he grumbled, "and man, after what the Sheriff saw, there should be a shit load of 'em out here."

Miller suddenly wanted to shiver. He'd heard the rumors about what they were hunting, heck the whole department had, but until now he just hadn't considered that the gossip might actually hold some truth.

The deputy looked past Graf, further into the darkening countryside. As far as the eye could see, fellow cops walked a line through the shrubbery. He was safe among so many fellow officers, wasn't he? Nothing dare attack them, surely?

Miller ran a palm along his police issue shotgun's barrel and let the cold metal give him comfort. A few more hours and he'd be home safe in bed. *Sure, I bet that's what Caruso thought...*

"Frank," Graf's husky voice cut through the night forcing Miller to shift his gaze. "Frank! Down!" His partner was pointing frantically for him to hit the dirt, and Frank wasn't about to argue.

Miller hit the emerald carpet that covered the woodland floor with a grunt and rolled over. He locked eyes with Graf who had assumed a somewhat more professional pose on his stomach, rifle outstretched before him. "Frank, I saw something move to the left of that Bur Oak. Just a blur, but I swear it was something on two feet, not four." Graf hunkered down and put an eye to his rifle's nightscope.

"You think it's what we're after?" Miller's heart began to pound in his chest and it dawned on him with sudden realization that he was not cut out to be a cop. Cruising town streets and arresting the odd burglar was fine. Being stalked by an invisible, flesh-eating foe was not. He rolled on his back, breathing hard.

In the distance, the tracking dogs barking continued, as did the now fading voices of his departing companions. Frank gulped, feeling bile rise in his throat from simple fear. *Why isn't Rich answering?*

The deputy took two deep breaths, willing himself to roll back and check on his friend. Graf was probably just busy with the nightscope, scouring their surroundings, after all. *But...*

Miller twisted his body to the right, his shotgun clasped tightly to his trembling body. As the woodland floor to his left came into view, he screamed.

Where Graf had lay only seconds earlier was a thick, viscous pool of blood, and smack in the center, staring blindly back at Miller was his partner's severed head.

Miller tried to scream again, but his second cry was stifled by an invisible hand reaching across his mouth. The deputy kicked back, biting down hard on his foe's fingers until he drew blood. The red liquid was visible for a few seconds, and then faded into nothing, just like its owner's body.

The cop's eyes grew wide, both from the shock of what was happening and lack of oxygen as his air supply was slowly cut off. In a last ditched attempt, he tugged his shotgun back with one hand and squeezed off the trigger, not caring if the buckshot hit him as well as his attacker.

Thousands of pellets strafed the air, embedding into the surrounding trees and anything in there path. Miller vaguely heard a muffled grunt before falling unconscious, but he had no clue if he'd hit what he had tried to aim at.

* * * *

Sam brought the infrared camera from his left to his right in a slow arcing movement until he was sure there was nothing in the woods in front of them. He continued to sweep as the brothers moved forward, while Dean kept a constant vigil behind in case of an attack from the rear.

"You getting anything?" Dean was on edge. The hairs on the back of his neck were sticking up just enough to tell him that this hunt was going to be a deadly one if they weren't careful.

"Apart from neck ache staring at this thing. Nope." Sam took his eyes from the camera and looked up into the imposing darkness.

It was weird, but there wasn't a sound in the woodland, not a cricket, not the fluttering of a bat overhead. He stopped, listening harder as a memory of the wendigo in Colorado brought fresh concern to his features. It was like something was eating at him, something that told the younger hunter to turn.

Sam brought the camera around to his left but didn't get time to check out the viewfinder. Instead, his ears had caught the sudden sound of a muted cry, followed by a gunshot. He looked up, squinting to check for movement as shafts of moonlight began to filter through the treetops, giving at least a little illumination to the scene.

"Dean!"

Dean spun around, automatic brought up in a defensive posture as he reacted to his brother's warning.

He never got to see what he was trying to aim at.

* * * *

Forest Creek Trail Somewhere...

Frank Miller didn't know how long he'd been unconscious in the undergrowth. It was still nighttime and the stars still winked down at him from their blissful haven in the heavens, but other than that he had lost all perception of time.

The passage of time right now was, however, the least of his worries. Miller rolled onto his side, landing in the pool of blood from his now long-dead partner. Graf's fixed pupils stared back at him, a grotesque death masque painted across the dead cop's features.

Miller flinched, trying to recoil, but a searing pain in his stomach forced him to pause. Somehow, it felt like his attacker had torn into him with its bare hands, trying to eviscerate him or worse.

The deputy let a trembling hand fall over his shirt, probing for injuries, and was rewarded with a sticky wet circle that he dare not look at. Instead, Miller let his already tacky fingers slide under two of his buttons, sensing what they would find.

The thing that had killed Graf had ripped into his flesh, and although Miller had no idea how deep the wounds were, he couldn't shake the idea that his intestines would tumble out if he didn't keep a hand to his stomach.

The thought, and the pain, brought about a fit of retching as Miller realized the blood pool he lay in wasn't just from Graf. *I'm gonna die out here...*

The cop tried to compose himself and coughed back more bile as it rose in his throat. Somewhere in the woods a whole bunch of his companions were still searching. Maybe if he could muster a cry for help he'd be saved.

Miller listened, craning his neck as he strained to seek out the barking of the tracking dogs, but the woodland was eerily quiet. The men sweeping this section had long moved onto the next. The only thing that may await him now was the killer. Maybe it would be back soon to finish off the job of filleting him.

The suffering deputy swallowed hard and realized he could taste salt and iron in his mouth. He wiped the back of his free hand across his lips and as he suspected it came away bloody. There was little time left to be rescued, but that didn't mean he had to sit and let the killer return for its next meal.

Miller grimaced as he tried to pull his body into a sitting position and he finally gathered the nerve to look down. Shards of his once pristine blue uniform shirt hung tattered and bloody from beneath his palm, and with the material, slices of tissue trailed from his stomach. There would be no walking out of here.

"Shit..." A small word, a simple word- the only word that Miller could think of as his life's blood ebbed from him onto the greenery below. It was ironic, but of all the things he'd wanted to do or say before he grew old and died, all that his mind barked now was a simple cuss word.

Miller spat a clot of blood out and decided it wasn't going to end this way. He wasn't going to end this way. Making use of the surge of adrenalin that washed through him, Frank Miller somehow managed to tug out his service revolver and began to crawl from the tiny glade he'd found himself in.

* * * *

Woodland Somewhere Near Forest Creek Trail

Dean felt something hard crash down on his skull, forcing his vision into some brilliant white void. He felt the forty-five loosen in his grip and he staggered, not quite falling into unconsciousness as his attacker had intended.

From somewhere, he heard Sam frantically call out his name again and he tried to focus. The silver automatic slipped from his fingers and he reached out, trying to grab at anything to remain standing.

The hunter's palm found the rough bark of a nearby oak and he pushed his weight against it, stopping his forward tumble. He squinted, forcing back the pain in his head by biting into his lip. With the new pain came clarity, and his vision cleared enough to see a blade swiftly being pressed against his neck.

Dean didn't have the energy to fight back yet, and simply let his assailant wrap his free arm around his neck, pulling him close so that Sam couldn't get a shot off.

"Put the gun down or your brother feels my steel..."

The voice seemed strangely familiar, and Dean dared to move his head just far enough to see the flash of a police uniform and a name tag. "Caruso?" The revelation was a harsh one. The young cop he had liked now had a blade pushed hard against his throat. "What the hell are you doing? We're on your side, remember?"

Sam waited, his eyes darting from his brother to Caruso and back, his weapon still poised. Was the kid simply scared after being taken by Jerry, or was there something more sinister to his motives for attacking them?

"You've never been on my side," Caruso addressed Dean first, and then spat to Sam, "Now drop your gun or I'll slice his neck open." To prove his point, the deputy twisted the blade just enough to nick his captive's flesh.

Dean winced but shot his brother a look that screamed, *Don't you freakin' dare*. Sam ignored the expression and slowly placed his Glock on the ground in front of him. "Dave, what are you doing? That thing is out here somewhere. It's Jerry, Dave, you have to believe us," Sam coaxed.

Caruso nodded his head not seeming to hear. "Move over to that tree." He slid the knife from Dean's neck just long enough to gesture behind Sam. "And sit down at the base, hands behind your back."

Sam did as he was told; glancing back every few seconds to make sure Caruso didn't follow through with his threat with the blade.

Once the younger brother was seated, Caruso moved forward, pushing Dean at the base of his spine until he was level with the tree. As soon as they were close enough, he jostled his still bleary-eyed captive down to the ground with one quick push to his shoulders.

"Dude, all you had to do was ask nicely..." Dean looked up as Caruso tugged his hands behind his back and cuffed him to Sam so that there was effectively a Winchester either side the tree trunk. "Although I'm telling you this is so not my kind of bondage thing..."

"Why are you doing this?" Sam ignored his brother's attempts at humor in the face of danger and focused on the deputy. "And how did you get away from Jerry? The Sheriff saw him drag you down?"

Caruso stood back to admire his handy work and then folded his arms, smiling. "The Sheriff saw what we wanted him to see. It's called deception, and apparently it worked."

Dean's brow cocked quirkily and he squirmed against the handcuffs that were already chaffing his wrists. "We?" He questioned, "You're not seriously helping that nut job just because he was once your friend? Dude, don't you know his type tend to bite the hand that feeds? Like, literally?"

Caruso leaned low until his face was close to Dean's. Gone was the façade of an innocent, helpful kid, replaced by something much more unpleasant. He looked deep into the hunter's eyes, sizing him up before replying. "Jerry's not just a friend, Jerry's family. You of all people should know how that is. Wouldn't you do anything for your brother?"

"Brother?" Sam pulled against the cuffs, craning his neck until he could look at Caruso. "You're dad had a fling with Jerry's mom, didn't he?" He thought back to the

hospital records, recalling that George Walden hadn't been Jerry's biological father. "How long have you known?"

"Since I was a kid," Caruso admitted with a shrug of his shoulders. "My dad liked to drink, and one night I was late home from Jerry's and it all spilled out. He said I was lucky I wasn't like the lil' freak I played with and that neither of us should ever have been born. Dad was kinda nice like that..." The deputy's gaze shifted and he walked around to face Sam, leaving Dean to simply listen.

"Where you the one that locked the Waldens' bodies in the basement? I mean, I take it Jerry did kill them?" Sam asked, trying to decipher as much as he could before their captor decided to leave.

Caruso appeared to go distant, as if he were actually going back ten years in time and reliving the day. "Jerry's skin had gotten pretty bad. Every time I called around to play he got more and more volatile because of it. Wouldn't you, if you had to see that in the mirror every day, knowing there was no cure?"

"And the last day you called he'd killed the rest of his family, right?" Sam tried to sound compassionate, knowing Caruso was probably almost as unhinged as Jerry.

"Yeah, he'd killed them. From what he told me, the old man had finally found out who his wife had been hookin' up with and they'd argued. Jerry soon sorted out that little family tiff." Caruso gave out a wry chuckle as if five deaths were somehow amusing. "Course, I was just a kid myself, but I knew what would happen to Jerry if the authorities had found out what he'd done. He'd have been locked away, experimented on maybe..."

The deputy shuffled back around to Dean, somehow needing him to be part of the conversation too. He took the elder brother's chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing Dean to look at him. "You can't even begin to imagine what it's like to have a brother who is different. A brother who has to hide because of what nature has made him. What if Sammy here had a secret? Wouldn't you die to keep it safe? To keep him safe?" Caruso let go his harsh grip and stood from his crouched position. "You see, I'd do anything for my little brother."

The cop's strange choice of words hit a nerve deep in Dean's heart. Sam did have a secret, and a damned big one. And yes, Dean would die to keep Sam and the secret of his gifts safe. Dean glowered at Caruso, but couldn't find a suitable retort to respond with. All the sass had been knocked out of him by the sudden realization that the Winchesters weren't so different from Jerry and Dave Caruso.

Behind him, Sam had taken in Caruso's words too, and had felt the bite as the harsh truth had sunken in. He was different, so different that he was wanted not by inquisitive scientists, but by some ungodly demon with nefarious and unknown motives. And yes, he knew something else too...Dean would do anything for him—even die.

"So, you hid up Jerry's handiwork for awhile," Dean finally cleared his throat and broke the silence that had taken over. "But I guess your brother got a little too hungry to stick to animals huh? Why the hell leave him out here? You had to know what he'd become without help?"

Caruso didn't see it that way. "Help? I saw what help Jerry got from the hospital, from the care workers, from the community. He was a freak to them. At least up here he's free."

"Free to kill," Sam pointed out. "You swore an oath to protect the people of Jackson, not serve them up."

"Then it's just as well the next offering won't be a local one then." The deputy retrieved the knife he'd held to Dean's neck and looked from Sam to Dean as if he were making a choice which one to kill. His gaze eventually fell on Dean and he crouched low, offering up the blade before his captive's startled eyes. "Jerry's like a shark," his face cracked into a sardonic smile. "He can smell blood a mile away..."

Caruso brought the serrated blade up, slicing into Dean's forearm just enough to make it bleed heavily without becoming life threatening. Jerry would take care of the rest.

As the wound oozed blood he watched the elder brother for a reaction and was annoyed when all he got was a snake-like hiss through clenched teeth. He had wanted more, so much more. While Jerry enjoyed feasting upon his own kind, tearing into them like some feral creature, Dave enjoyed supplying the meat.

"You think you'll get away with kidnapping and murdering two state cops?" Dean refused to let the stinging to his arm get the better of him and attempted what he was best at- bluffing. "Once we don't radio in this whole area will be crawling with troopers. Hell, maybe even the National Guard the way the body count is going up around here."

Caruso began to walk away, stowing the knife in his utility belt and replacing it with a flashlight as he ambled across the copse. When he reached the small dirt path leading to the actual trail he turned back. "They might have sent in reinforcements if you really were state cops, but you're not. See, Sheriff Waterston thought there was something "off" about you two, so he had me check you out. Pity I got attacked by Jerry before I got chance to tell him who you really are..."

"Killing us I understand." Sam stalled. "But why fake your own death? It won't help Jerry."

"Who says I'm dead?" Caruso smile broadened. "The way I see it, I found you guys out and you tried to shut me up, but I escaped. When the Sheriff hears about how Dean here killed and mutilated a whole lotta people in St. Louis, I think he'll buy your brother was the killer all along. Hell, sounds a whole lot more plausible than some invisible thing roaming the woods, don't ya think?"

The deputy began to laugh as he vanished into the darkness, the beam from his flashlight the only illumination for miles.

Sam watched the cop until even the flashlight beam had melted into the void of night before he spoke. Even then, he really didn't know what to say. Caruso had made a point, and a good one. It seemed big brothers were doomed to look over their younger siblings no matter what.

On their last gig Dean had almost burned for him, how many more times could he cheat death just for Sam? "Dean? Tell me you have a paper clip and are working the lock on the cuffs as I speak..." Sam tried a little humor, but it just didn't seem to come out right when it wasn't spouting from his cocky brother's mouth.

"Dude, I can't feel my right arm, and my hands are kind of awkward with these damn bandages..." Dean wriggled as he spoke, but there was no way to get a hand to his back pocket where he did happen to have a clip for just such an occasion.

"Dean...I'm sorry..."

Dean stopped writhing and rolled his eyes. As soon as Caruso had finished speaking he knew there would be an awkward moment like this. Sam back on his guilt trip. "For what? You didn't exactly get me hit over the head with a gun butt. You didn't cuff me around a tree," he paused, cocked his head in thought and then smirked. "I guess you do owe me for the whole perfume thing..."

Sam huffed and strained to turn. "Dean, will you just listen to me? Caruso was right. Jerry would have been considered a freak, and so would I if it ever came out about the visions. People would think I'm nuts."

Dean nodded in agreement. "After putting up with your sorry ass twenty-four-seven I'd have to agree with them there."

"But that's just it. You shouldn't have to watch my back. You shouldn't have to say you'd die for me." Sam let his head drop. Being brothers shouldn't be about sacrifice. It should be about so much more.

Dean frowned. He was sure something had moved in the brush, but it was just too glum to see. High clouds had covered the moon and left the woodland in a virtual black abyss. He listed and squinted to try and force his eyes to pick out shapes in the

darkness, but there was nothing. *I wouldn't be able to see Jerry even if I'd got the freakin' Hubble telescope.*

Eventually, he relaxed a touch and answered Sam. "Look, I know I've said I'll die for you, man, but I never said I'd be dessert." He shot a glance over his shoulder but couldn't see his brother's expression. "So, what say we find a way out of this human food mart before Jerry decides its chow time in the boonies?"

"How?" Sam didn't sound convinced. "I can't reach your pocket for the clip and I can't get my knife out of my ankle holster in this position." He attempted to twist his leg around anyway and was rewarded with a sharp stabbing pain as he almost sprained his own ankle with the excessive effort.

"I saw this movie once were a dude dislocated his own thumb so he could pull his hands through the cuffs..." Dean pursed his lips. He wasn't really sure he liked the idea of trying out that particular move, not with the skin on his hands still raw from some pretty nasty burns.

Sam winced at the very suggestion. "Even if I could, my hands would still be too big." He tugged at the cuffs angrily and then let his body sag in defeat.

Dean noted his brother's crushed demeanor and decided it was time for some brotherly interjection. Caruso had fed the seeds of doubt that Dean had been trying to kill for months, and now, they were growing like wild prairie grass. Dean needed to toss on some weed killer and fast or Sam would end up back in the doldrums.

"So, you'll die for me, but you won't put your thumb out?" Dean feigned a shocked gasp. "Tell me I'm insured..."

"Dean, I swear my hands are too big..." Sam tried anyway.

The problem was, he hadn't seen the movie, and while he was pretty up to date on firearms training, first aid, and spook killing 101, he really had no clue how to put his own thumb out. Dean had always come through with the paper clip before such moves had been necessary.

"Ouch!"

Dean strained to turn. "You out?"

Sam sighed. "Not even close. I told you my hands were too damn big..." He paused, hearing a rustling from behind. "Dean, did you hear that?"

"Yeah." The elder Winchester turned back to look into the gloom where he'd originally spotted movement. This time, something was definitely coming towards them, and it was low to the ground. *Just like when Jerry attacked Bethany's dad...*

"See anything?" The question came out whispery and harried as Sam abruptly forgot the pain in his thumb as he wrenched at the cuffs.

Dean didn't reply and Sam took that as a bad sign. If motor mouth wasn't snarking that usually meant they were in big trouble.

"Hey, over here..." Suddenly, Dean broke the silence and Sam expected a *white meat, bitch* line any second. Instead, his brother began to wriggle anew. "This way, can you see us?"

"I ...see you..." A weak voice responded, and Sam's thudding heart began to abate somewhat. He couldn't see who his brother was talking too, but it definitely wasn't Jerry Walden.

"Dean?"

Dean ignored Sam's question and continued to coax whoever he was shouting to towards their location. His raised voice was also an open invitation to Jerry, but Sam decided not to point that little problem out. He squirmed, needing to see what was going on, but his neck just wouldn't twist quite far enough to see.

Dean, on the other hand, had a full view of who was approaching, and while any friendly face was a relief right now, their rescuer looked like he needed rescuing himself.

Deputy Miller was dragging his body along the ground sideways, paying careful heed not to jar his intricately carved up stomach for fear its contents might spill out.

He still kept one hand pressed against the gaping wounds, somehow using his free arm to tug himself along.

The cop's eyes were dull and unfocused, but at the sight of the brothers he visibly rallied. Maybe there was hope after all. If he could free the two state cops then his life might yet be spared.

Miller pushed to quicken his slithering pace until he had almost reached Dean. As he neared, he noted the younger man's blood pooling from a yawning slash to his arm. *Too much blood between us. It will know...*

"Do you have a key for the cuffs?" Dean rattled the handcuffs against the tree bark, indicating their predicament. "I know you're hurting, dude, but the quicker we get out of these things the quicker we can get help."

The injured deputy thought about it. Right now, everything seemed such a blur he was unsure of the question until the jangling noise from the cuffs jarred his tired brain from its slumber. Miller glanced down, at last recalling where he kept his own set of cuffs and keys on his belt.

With a sigh, Miller shook his head. Either during the scuffle with the monster, or during his "slither" through the woods, he'd lost the keys. He let his head fall apologetically, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth as it filled his insides. "No keys," he somehow managed to sputter.

Dean grimaced. "Shit!"

Sam struggled to understand what he couldn't see, but had already guessed Dean must be talking to a cop, albeit an injured one. "What's going on? Why can't he just shoot the cuffs?"

"Because Jerry already took a bite," Dean offered carefully, trying not to come out with the horrid truth in front of the dying cop. *Jeez, what does he want me to say, the guy's guts are hanging out, in front of him?* "And besides, the sound of the gunshot might just make our meat munching friend come a running. If not Jerry, then maybe his whacko, cop brother..."

"Can he reach your pocket?"

Dean arched a brow and shot Miller a glance. The deputy nodded, spitting more blood as he once again began to drag his injured body forward. Once he reached Dean's side, he paused, dragging in long, labored breaths before attempting to retrieve the paper clip.

The elder Winchester leaned sideways, hoping to ease the man's struggle to slip a hand into his pocket. Miller nodded his gratitude and let his shaking hand fumble for the clip. Normally, the task would have taken no more than two seconds, but in his condition, the cop had to take care not to drop his precious booty.

The clip seemed tiny beneath his fingertips, and Miller dare not take his gaze from the item until he weakly let it fall into Dean's cuffed hand.

Dean nodded his thanks, shooting the mortally wounded deputy a look of gratitude as he spun the clip between his thumb and forefinger. As he's told Sam earlier, this wasn't going to be easy because of his own bandaged hands, but he worked as fast as his beleaguered palms would allow.

In a minute and a half, with just a little quaking assistance from Miller, Dean's left hand was free, swiftly followed by his right. He didn't waste time freeing Sam from the other half of the cuffs, but jumped to his feet, scouring the darkness as he rubbed at his chaffed wrists.

Sam scrambled after his brother, looking down at the manacles that still dangled from his wrists. They were an annoyance, but he knew out here every second counted, and the cuffs didn't stop him running.

"Footpath...got to get back on the footpath..." Miller's strangled tones reminded Sam that the cop needed help, and he crouched down, peeling the deputy's fingers away to look at the wound to his stomach.

Sam stifled a wince, knowing their rescuer was bleeding to death and they had nothing to help him with. "Hang in there, we'll get you out of here," he consoled, not really sure if they could.

"Don't put too much pressure on that, Sammy, you could do more damage," Dean warned as he watched his brother carefully put a hand over the man's wound. "Better if we can get him back to the car and Waterston as fast as we can."

Miller's eyes darted across to where Dean was standing, watching the woodland. "Wha...what are we hunting?" Even though his voice shook as much as his body, it was easily apparent the cop knew his foe was something more than human.

"Ever hear the name Jerry Walden?" Sam asked, sizing Miller up ready to carry him.

The deputy nodded, his eyes widening as he realized the implication. "They told us...told us he was likely dead, like the rest of his family."

"Yeah, well, they exaggerated that point just a lil'." Dean finally took his gaze from the darkness and knelt beside Sam and the prone cop. "Your colleague Dave Caruso is Jerry's half brother. He hogtied us and left us for Jerry's next meal. Took our guns too. You got extra ammo for that revolver?" The hunter nodded to Miller's police issue weapon still tucked into its holster.

Miller tried to bob his head, his eyelids drooping and then flashing back open as he struggled with consciousness. "Yeah," he coughed, "Back of my belt..."

Dean slid a hand under the cop and found the pouch containing the extra rounds. Then he flipped the strap from the weapon and tugged it free from its home. He eyed it, checking it was loaded and then aimed at the nearest branch, inspecting the sights. "Okay, Sammy, ready to hit the road?" He ignored the blood dribbling from his forearm, instead putting his concern on the deputy and their escape.

Sam looked down apologetically at Miller. "I'm going to have to carry you," he offered, knowing the agony his touch would cause.

"S'okay, kid, I'd rather bleed to death...on your shoulder than at the hands of that...thing." He groaned, even before Sam tried to move him, and then spat out a thick glob of blood that had been clogging his throat.

"Nobody move..." Dean abruptly held up a finger and pointed frantically to the underbrush. He'd spotted something once again, and this time it wasn't Frank Miller crawling for his life.

The shape had been brief, almost invisible, but as the moonlight had returned from beneath the high cumulous clouds it had been enough- a silhouette, but not a silhouette. The shape of a man transformed by his own hideous, malformed genes into something beyond human and beyond compassion.

"It's back, isn't it?" Suddenly Miller's voice cracked with terror and his complexion turned even whiter than it had been before. Any chance of eluding his attacker was now gone.

Dean didn't answer but immediately looked to Sam. "What have you got, dude?"

Sam slid a bruised hand to his ankle holster, pulling out his blade. "Somehow I think Jerry has a weapon of his own," the younger brother admitted. "No way did he cause those wounds with his bare hands." He indicated Frank's still oozing stomach.

"We're all gonna die ...here." Frank gave in to his emotions. He wasn't going home. He wasn't going to see his lovely wife Beth ever again.

Dean rolled his head until his neck cracked as he swung the cop's weapon around the woodland, searching for their elusive foe. All he saw was a bat diving for some unseen prey. *Just like Jerry will be diving on us...*

A twig cracked to their right, followed by the further snapping of wood as something approached through the low hanging branches. The noise seemed twice as loud as both brothers and the deputy waited for the inevitable assault.

"Sam, get him out of here. I'll take care of Jerry." Dean didn't take his eyes from the trees, keeping his forefinger as tight as he dare on the trigger of the cop's gun. "I

said go, Sammy! You could be half way back to Waterston by now. Now move your ass!”

Sam hesitated. He couldn't leave Dean, not like this. Dean was hurt, and the scent of his blood was like offering raw meat to a tiger. Jerry would probably already be in some kind of feeding frenzy after attacking Miller. Dean would simply be the second course of the meal.

Dean sensed his brother's hesitation and gestured to the fallen cop. Miller's eyes had slid shut and his chest barely moved. "You gonna stand there while he dies?" The elder brother knew the order to leave might be ignored, but the dying cop would not be.

Sam grimaced but finally gave in. He leaned low, tugging Miller over his shoulder in a fireman's lift, trying to position the cop so that his wounds didn't chafe on anything. "Don't do anything stupid, Dean. You're going to be right behind us, right?" He shifted Miller slightly, trying to evenly distribute his burden so that it was easier to make a run for it.

"Dude, do I look like I want to feed Cannibal Boy's face?" Dean licked his lips, wondering why Jerry was waiting. The kid was watching, of that he was sure. *Probably just sizing us up before the attack.* "Move it, Sam!"

This time, Sam obeyed; making careful steps towards the dirt path they knew led back to the Sheriff and his cruiser. Dean followed, keeping his back to his retreating brother so that between them they had a full view of their surroundings.

Another noise broke the darkness; this time to Dean's left. He whirled, seeing a fuzzy, almost transparent figure bounding towards him. Finally, Jerry was here.

Dean didn't hesitate even though his attacker could still be called human. If Dean faltered now, Jerry might be left to run rampant for weeks on some feral killing spree before he was caught. Countless innocents might die or be ravaged. No, the elder Winchester couldn't afford to feel sorry for Jerry. He couldn't afford to wait before tugging back on the trigger.

The revolver kicked in Dean's hand and he felt it rub against his already throbbing burns. He ignored the pain however, focusing on the thing that still barreled towards him.

Dean wasn't sure in the confusion if he'd missed, or if Jerry was somehow impervious to his shots. The reasoning didn't matter. All that he knew was he was about to be slammed into by a wild man who fully intended to chow down on something human if he were given half the chance.

The hunter dived to his right, desperate to escape Jerry's path. The move was futile and Jerry hurled his body straight into Dean's, forcing them both to the floor with a grunt.

Dean brought up his knee hard, hoping he was actually aiming at his attacker's stomach. He felt the impact, but had no clue if his blow had been on target. If it had, it appeared to have little effect.

"You freaky bastard!" Dean almost screamed as Jerry's grimy, sharpened teeth bit into his already bleeding forearm and he was forced to loosen his tenuous grip on Miller's weapon.

The gun fell to the earthy carpet with a dull thud and was lost to its fraught owner.

Dean forgot about the gun, needing to remove Jerry's gnawing teeth from his arm before he reached the bone. Fighting ghosts was one thing, but kicking off a teenage monster that was trying to feed on him was proving more than difficult.

Jerry rolled with every move the elder hunter made, and his body seemed to absorb the punches much the way it absorbed light. Perhaps his defective genes had made him impervious to pain, either that or his insane mind had long ago ceased to register it.

Either way, Dean was in serious trouble.

Poke him in the eyes... Yeah right, if I could just see his damn eyes! "Crap!" Dean caught the glint of something steely and he realized in fear that Sam had been right.

Jerry might act like a wild boar, but he didn't kill like one. Maybe he did tear at flesh with his bare hands, and maybe he did rip at his victims' bodies with his sharpened canines, but he also used a more regular weapon to kill if he needed to.

Suddenly, the pain in Dean's arm faded as his mind took on the new threat. Jerry Walden had a knife, and from the way it hung menacingly in mid air, its very invisible owner intended to use it.

Instinctively, Dean tugged his free arm up intending to block the thrust of the blade with it if he had to. Another bleeding arm was better than being dead.

As he made his defensive move, another noise caught his attention, but he dare not turn his head to check it out.

The dull thud of rapidly approaching footsteps soon proved to be Sam's gangly form barreling into the clearing at full throttle.

He never could take orders. Right now, Dean was very glad his little brother tended to rebel against any kind of command from himself or their dad. It was a trait that normally caused huge family arguments, but it had also saved Dean's life on several occasions.

Jerry heard Sam's approach just as easily as Dean had, and instead of plunging his blade downwards, he rolled from atop the elder hunter, sensing he may soon be outnumbered.

The unseen killer vanished back into the blackness of the surrounding oaks and for the moment was gone.

"Dude, everything was under control." Dean frowned as Sam offered him a hand up, which he took grudgingly. "I had Cannibal Boy right where I wanted him."

Sam nodded. "Yeah, right, I can see that." He bobbed his head to his brother's oozing arm and then tore off a small strip from his shirt sleeve to tie around the wound.

Dean winced, gritting his teeth as the cloth tightened down over the gash. "Man, I think I'm gonna need rabies shots after this." As Sam finished tying the piece of shirt off, Dean began glancing around for Miller's missing weapon. He'd dropped it close by, and yet there was no sign of it. Eventually, he gave in to the inevitable. "Sammy, I think Jerry boy has a gun."

"Your gun, right?" Sam sighed, turning to search the undergrowth himself just in case.

"Hey, you'd have dropped it too if you had that freak swinging on your arm like it was a Big Mac." Dean rubbed at his injury, still feeling the sensation of being used as a human burger. "C'mon, let's high tail it out of here before he figures out how to shoot. He only has six shots. I've still got the spare rounds."

"Dean, all it takes is one shot at close range. Jerry doesn't even have to be good with a gun." Sam turned to head back to where he'd propped Deputy Miller against a tree. They'd come here to save people, and the way things were going they might just need rescuing themselves.

Dean knew Sam was right, but that still didn't make it his fault. Losing the gun was bad, but Sam would probably have lost his grip on it too, given the same situation. Now all they could do was make the best out of what they had left. "You've still got the knife?" He let a hand slip inside his jacket, feeling to see if the last item he'd stashed there out of the Impala's trunk was still in place. It was.

Sam nodded, not bothering to turn around as he surveyed the countryside, squinting for a glimpse of their foe. He stopped midway back to Miller, certain for a second that he'd seen the glimmer of something amidst a dense area of thicket. He twirled the hilt of the blade in his right hand, sensing they were about to be attacked yet again. Jerry was nothing if not relentless.

"Sam!" Dean yelled out, just as he saw the glint from Jerry's blade flash against the moonlight as he charged towards them.

This time, though, Jerry was in for a surprise. Dean brought out the item he'd had hidden beneath his jacket and ran forward instead of retreating. All too late, Jerry realized the hunter had a small can of luminous spray paint in his hand.

Dean pressed down hard on the can's trigger, ignoring the spiking sensation it caused in his injured arm. A thick stream of yellow arched from the aerosol, hitting Jerry Walden straight in the face.

Instantly, the translucent teen became visible and he screamed like some hurt animal as he realized the implications. He clawed at his features, trying frantically to rub away the glowing paint, his long, unkempt fingernails digging into his own flesh.

"Let's see who the best hunter is now the odds are a little more even!" Dean didn't wait for Jerry to stop clawing; he charged forward intent on pinning the disorientated teen to the ground.

Jerry immediately knew he had to act, and pulled out Miller's missing firearm. He tried to aim, but some of the paint from Dean's aerosol had landed in his eyes, blurring his vision. Jerry didn't care, he pulled back on the trigger anyway, expecting the noise and threat alone would deter his opponent.

The bullet whizzed past Dean only inches from his right ear, but he ignored it. He'd been in enough fights to stay pretty calm under fire, and the kid before him wasn't exactly Rambo when it came to weapons training.

To his left, Sam had joined in the fray and was making his own charge at the incensed teen. Together, the two brothers should have been able to tackle their opponent easily.

Jerry, however, had other ideas. This time he wouldn't slink back into the woodland; this time he would finish his enemies or die trying.

With a roar, Jerry fired off more shells from Miller's firearm, sweeping the weapon around as his spidery fingers yanked on the trigger.

Dean ducked low, letting his body hit the floor with the intention of knocking Jerry from his feet.

The teenager saw the move coming and countered by diving to his left, right into Sam's path. If he couldn't beat both brothers maybe he could use one as a bargaining tool.

Jerry caught the younger brother unawares and swiftly wrapped an arm around his neck, pulling him back in some warped version of a neck lock. "Back owf..." The words came out slurred, it having been so long since he'd had the need to use his vocal cords. The muted, gravely warning came out like the muffled tones of a deaf person.

Dean held up a hand, hoping to placate Jerry while he tried to remember just how many shells the teen had used. *Were there five or six gunshots?*

Jerry smirked, holding the revolver to Sam's temple, and Dean realized for the first time that their foe would actually have been considered a babe magnet if not for his condition. The glowing paint had for once revealed the kid's true features, letting the world see what he would have looked like save for his bizarre genes.

"Jerry, we can help you." Sam's Adam's apple bobbed as he tried to reason with his captor.

Yeah right. Dean was less convinced. He just wanted Sam away from the killer as quickly as possible. That was going to prove difficult however, as Jerry not only had the revolver, but also probably the knife he'd brandished earlier somewhere too. "I won't let you kill my brother, Jerry, you should know that. Brothers stick together no matter what, just like you and Dave..."

The mention of his elusive brother's name brought a spark of recognition to Jerry's paint-filled eyes, and he backed up, dragging Sam with him. He squirmed as he watched Dean follow, unsure of what move to make next. In his deluded mind, only one thought remained. *Kill...kill...* It was what Jerry's genes had been built to do, wasn't it?

Dean paused as he realized Jerry's forefinger was pulling tighter on the revolver's trigger. The teen wasn't going to give Sammy up no matter how much Dean reasoned with him. Sam was going to die, and there was nothing he could do but stand and watch.

Dean couldn't allow that. He had a choice, just like Jerry, and that choice was to watch his brother die, or die in his place. Maybe making one last dive at Jerry wouldn't save Sam- maybe Jerry would still pull back on the trigger instead of re-aiming at Dean. But then, any chance was better than none.

Dean braced himself for the charge and the possibility of taking a slug for Sam, but he didn't get the chance to play hero. Jerry was tired of the game. This wasn't his kind of hunt. There was no thrill in killing with a gun instead of a blade or his bare hands- Jerry didn't like that.

The bored teen smiled, showing his intricately sharpened canines, and then pulled back on the trigger.

"No!" Dean's scream filled the night air and he launched himself at Jerry before he realized that the hammer of the revolver had fallen onto an empty chamber.

Jerry realized far sooner, and tossed the gun like some toy that no longer provided entertainment. He always had his backup, and that was far more interesting.

Jerry pulled out the blade, fully intending to plunge it straight into Sam's carotid artery. The spurt of blood would give far more excitement than the rest of the evening had- especially when the tall hunter's brother was forced to watch Sam's life drain away.

Dean saw what was coming next, but was still powerless to stop it. No matter how fast he could run, he was still too far away to tackle the weapon out of Jerry's hand in time.

This time, he didn't yell out, he didn't scream- a small part of him simply died inside at the thought of losing his brother. *My fault...my fault...* For once, it was Dean's turn to shoulder the burden, to feel the pain of not being able to stop the inevitable.

The elder hunter reached out as he ran, but he knew it was no use. He couldn't get to Sammy. He closed his eyes, not caring if he became Jerry's next victim. Without his brother was there really a reason to go on? Could he really live with the hunt alone?

A crack resounded through the woods, sharp and distinct in its origin.

Dean instantly recognized the noise as a gunshot and his eyes flashed wide open in surprise and hope. As he watched, Jerry's half visible form slumped to the ground, his rusted weapon slipping from his hand.

Sam blinked, still not believing he was in the land of the living. When the realization hit that he was still drawing breath, he looked up, expecting to see Dean brandishing a weapon he'd plucked from some unknown place. Dean, however, looked as confused as he was.

"What the..?" Dean spun around. *Maybe Miller had a spare...?* "Bethany?" One eyebrow cocked in amazement as it became clear who their savior was.

The young girl didn't answer. She simply stared wide-eyed at the fallen form of her father's killer. Her hands shook uncontrollably and the gun in her hand tipped forward, slipping from her tremulous grasp.

Dean jogged towards her, catching the toppling weapon before it could hit the ground. "Whoa, it's okay...you're okay..." He put an arm around the girl, sensing what she must be feeling after taking a life. No matter the reasoning, no matter how many others it saved, killing another human left a hollow void inside that was almost impossible to fill. Dean knew, he'd been there.

"Dad's dead..." Bethany's voice quivered as she relayed the news the brothers already expected. "I...I found his body about a half a mile back. I ...I couldn't even recognize his face, but...but this was his." The trembling girl held out a small gold

watch with an inscription on the back. Her hand shook so much as she offered it up that she almost dropped it.

"Jerry won't hurt anyone else now." Dean squeezed Bethany's arm, attempting to give just a little absolution for what she had just done. At his consoling touch she began to sob, her tears running freely until she couldn't see where she was walking without a guiding hand.

Sam kneeled to check on Jerry as Dean led the girl towards the footpath. He nodded to his brother, keeping his voice low. "He's dead."

Dean acknowledged the news with a bob of his own head, but kept a firm grip on Bethany. She'd lost family, and she'd taken a life. It would be a long time before she could return to normalcy. Maybe she never would, just like the Winchesters.

The elder hunter licked his lips as Sam jogged past him to retrieve Miller, and just for an instant Dean blamed himself for what the young girl was going through. If he'd taken out Jerry, then Bethany wouldn't have that cross to bear as well as her father's death. If he'd acted sooner. If he'd just forgotten the damn burns and dislocated his own thumb to escape the cuffs...

Sam vanished into the gloom up ahead and returned moments later shaking his head. From his expression, Dean knew they'd not only lost Jerry, but the Deputy too. Two lives wasted.

"The cop's dead," Sam sighed heavily and then noted his brother's dour, self-deprecating demeanor. "Dean, we can't save everyone. We've been through this..."

"Before," Dean finished. "I know, Sammy, but it never makes it feel any better." He looked down to Bethany and his mind darted back to Sam in the motel room when they were kids, helpless as the shtriga attacked. *I should have been there then. I should have been there now.*

"Dean?" Sam wanted to tell his brother they still had ass to kick. He wanted to demand they find Caruso and drag his sorry butt back to Waterston's office, but he couldn't. Dean rarely showed a weak side- a soft side; but tonight, as he held Bethany close, Dean wasn't the smartass most people saw on the outside.

Only Sam knew the real Dean- the brother whose feelings were hidden deep beneath a smokescreen of sarcasm and pranks. The brother who would die for his family, kill for his family, and love his family to the bitter end.

"Dean?" Sam pushed again, knowing they needed to get help. "We need to move. We should get Bethany out of the woods and reinforcements in here to find Caruso. Just because Jerry is dead doesn't mean the killing will stop. Not until Caruso's in custody."

Dean inhaled deeply, still feeling the young girl's hitched sobs as he held her close. Guilt, sorrow, and pain turned to anger and his cheeks reddened slightly. "Caruso better hope the cops find him before I do, Sammy, because that dude has one freakin' huge debt to pay this town. Supernatural or not, this gig just got personal."

Sam didn't answer. Mad Dean was better than self-deprecating Dean any day of the week.

* * * *

Waterston's Cruiser Forest Creek Trail Fifteen Minutes Later...

The Sheriff's whirling cruiser lights had never looked so good to Dean as he neared the edge of the clearing where it was parked. The car signified an end to their ordeal- an end to a night of terror for some of Jackson's residents.

The hunter paused, squeezing Bethany's arm to assure her that things would be okay now.

The girl nodded back, her abating tears giving way to some inner defense mechanism that was replacing her anguish with strength. "I need to get in touch with mom," she said quietly. "She needs to know about Dad..."

Dean nodded, his normally sparkling eyes dancing with something other than mirth. "We'll get the Sheriff to radio through." He began to walk towards the car when the strong arm of his brother tugged him back into the shade and protection of the tree line. "Hey!"

"Dean, hush." Sam put a forefinger to his mouth and was annoyed when the cuffs on his hands jangled together making the very thing he was trying to avoid- noise. "Dean, I have a bad feeling about this..."

Dean's brow furrowed and he hunkered down, getting a closer look into the glade where the cop car was parked. He noted with a grunt that Waterston was nowhere to be seen. *And he's not the type to leave the scene unattended.* "Bad feeling as in you've had a vision we're gonna get our butts kicked? Or bad feeling because the eggs on your breakfast weren't exactly fresh?"

Sam rolled his eyes but crouched down by his brother, watching carefully that Bethany stayed silent and close. "Remember back in Lawrence when Missouri said the house was clean..?"

"And you said you had a feeling..." Dean grimaced. "So," he offered, trusting his brother's instincts. "You think Davey boy took out the Sheriff and is waiting for us down there?"

Sam shrugged. "There's only one way to find out." He straightened up. "Seeing as I can't shoot worth a...you stay here with the gun while I go check things out." He grinned and before Dean could answer, the lanky sibling darted towards the cruiser as if nothing was amiss.

"Wait up! You're gonna get your ass canned!" Dean winced and quickly tugged out the gun he'd taken from Bethany. He turned briefly and noted the girl was simply watching him. "If anything happens, just stay here while Sam and I take care of it, okay?"

Bethany mouthed, "okay" and let her body slide to the base of a nearby tree, out of sight.

In the clearing, Sam neared Waterston's car and slowed his gait. The sensation that something was wrong intensified the closer he got to the cruiser. Static hissed from the car's radio, interspersed with bursts of radio chatter from the searching Deputies and the female dispatch officer. There was nothing from Waterston.

Sam swallowed as he reached the cruiser. Inside was a swatch of blood that seemed to center on the driver's seat. Spatter marks along the window that side indicated blood had sprayed out from a wound at maybe chest or shoulder height, depending on the victim's size. The question was, who was the victim?

A soft groan answered the young hunter's query and he jogged around the car to find Waterston lying on the ground, blood oozing from his jacket. There was so much of the red, viscous liquid it was difficult without further examination to even determine exactly where the Sheriff had been wounded.

Sam kneeled, intent on examining the cop when a click told him his "sixth sense" had been right. He let his head turn just enough to see Caruso pointing his police issue handgun downwards. Caruso didn't look happy.

"You killed him, didn't you? You just couldn't leave nature alone!" Caruso's hand trembled, and it was obvious any coherent thoughts he may have at one time had were gone. "You killed my brother..."

"Jerry killed a lot more. I'm not saying he deserved to die, but he couldn't be allowed to carry on either. Deep down you know that, don't you?" Sam straightened up, not daring to glance back for fear of revealing Dean's position.

Caruso licked his lips, eyes darting to his captive and then into the woodland. "Where's your brother?" He reaffirmed his grip on his weapon, palms sweating as he realized the mess he'd dug himself into.

“Dead,” Sam lied, his gaze hitting the floor in mock torment. “Jerry killed him...”

“Yeah? Payback’s a bitch, huh?” Caruso inadvertently mimicked Dean’s favorite quote, and Sam struggled to keep the bleak expression on his features. The crooked cop didn’t seem to notice. “I guess you jumped the Sheriff here and I had to shoot you, especially after what you did in the woods. Hell, I’ll probably get a commendation for this...”

Caruso backed up, finding just the right position for a headshot so that he wasn’t sprayed with Sam’s blood. “Say goodnight, Winchester. Guess you two didn’t live up to your namesake.” The ginger haired cop’s finger itched on the trigger but never got the chance to pull back.

“Goodnight, Winchester...” Dean’s sarcastic tones filled the clearing and Caruso tumbled forward from a short, decisive blow to the back of his head, crumpling into a heap at Sam’s feet.

“Couldn’t you have been a little quicker?” Sam grouched playfully. “I’m kind of sick of having guns pointed at my head tonight.”

Dean shrugged, grabbing Caruso’s hands to drag him towards the cruiser. “Figured you were having a good time with all that acting your ass off. Or should I say lying your ass off. I mean, Jerry killed me? I’m nobody’s supper.” The elder hunter’s expression changed to one of mock annoyance. “Will you grab his legs, dude? I’m injured here, ya know?”

Sam did as he was told, but not before shooting his eyes skywards in exasperation. “Your arm’s not exactly hanging off. It’s a flesh wound, Dean.”

“Flesh wound? Hell, I might just need to find some pretty nurse to stitch me up!” Dean huffed and took a glance at the blood on his arm, then set Caruso down, head and shoulders first. “Grab Waterston’s spare cuffs and we’ll fasten this creep to the car until the cavalry arrives.”

Sam nodded and whirled about, intending to retrieve the handcuffs and check on the fallen cop. Instead, he almost walked into Bethany.

As he neared, she stepped back, tightly gripping the sidearm she’d taken from Waterston’s holster. “You let him live,” she sniffled, letting a sideways glance fall on Caruso’s unconscious form. “After all he did...after he let that monster terrorize and feed on people...” The girl’s eyes moved to Dean, her disturbed air leaving nothing to the imagination. “Why didn’t you just finish him and save us all some time and tax dollars?”

Dean moved slowly to his brother’s side, his hands outstretched to show Bethany he had nothing to hide. “Because I’m not the judge, jury, and executioner. It’s not my job to make those kinds of choices.” He moved past Sam. “And it’s not your job either. If you kill him now, you’ll become what you hate. You’ll be a killer the rest of your life. Is that what you want on your conscience?”

Bethany bit into her lip and her hands trembled slightly. “I’ve already killed. I’ll never have a clear conscience again. Why not make it worth while? Why not get rid of the jerk that helped take my dad?”

“Because what you did tonight was to save a life- my brother’s life. It wasn’t in cold blood. There’s a difference. I’m not saying the burden of what you did will be easy to live with, but at least you’ll know it was for the right reason.”

“How do you know?” Bethany’s eyes began to well with tears, but her voice still sounded angry-accusing. “How can you possibly know how I’m feeling?”

Dean took another step until the nose of Bethany’s weapon was sitting point blank over his heart. “Because I’ve been there,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’ve taken a life because I’ve had to, and it sucks, big time. If I had to make the choice again, though, I’d still pull the trigger because, like you, it was for the right reason.”

“But not him?” The girl struggled to understand his logic as her tormented mind thought of only the loss in her life, the death, the emptiness. “Move out of my way and just let me end it...”

Dean shook his head. "I can't. Not because of him, but because of you. Trust me, you'd regret it. You're not a cold blooded killer like Jerry or Dave; you took a life out of necessity..." He carefully brought a hand up, letting his palm move over the barrel of the gun until he could gently tease it from Bethany's grasp.

The small blonde let him take it, but instead of the further sobbing Dean expected, she simply turned her back and walked away.

"Nice work," Sam's soft voice filtered over Dean's shoulder. "Who'd have taken you for a shrink, Sigmund? Although, next time you're talking someone around, can you please not get so close to the gun?"

Dean shrugged and tossed his brother the weapon. Suddenly, he didn't want to touch it or what it signified. There had been enough killing, enough violence, whether it had been out of necessity or not. "Yeah, well all that touchy feely crap must have rubbed off from you." He glanced to the cruiser and its radio, not even really feeling like snarking. "Better get some backup out here and an ambulance before we lose another cop."

Sam agreed, "I'm on it." He reached inside for the radio mike and quickly put a call through to the dispatch officer.

As his younger brother worked his persuasive magic, Dean silently watched Bethany amble around the glade as if she had no place better to go. He sensed her every thought, her every moment of heartbreak as if it were his own, because once, a long time in the past, it had been.

* * * *

Outskirts of Jackson

The Next Day

Dean nosed the Impala back out onto the rut-filled Kentucky roads and headed out of state. He wanted to be someplace normal, someplace where you could get cell reception, and Sam's network card would actually work. Maybe then they would hear from John and put their lives back on track towards finally killing the demon.

Killing. There was that one word again that meant so much. Life was just too precious to take wantonly, and yet if anything deserved it "Harry" did. Dean huffed at the nickname he had given the yellow-eyed demon and decided he needed some mental bliss to push away any further imagery of the thing and its gratuitous acts.

"Time for some music." Dean allowed the infamous lop-sided grin to appear as he flicked on the CD player he'd installed during the Chevy's first overhaul. He thumbed through the track list, uncertain what to choose to annoy his brother the most. It was their little game after all.

"Maybe you should let me drive?" Sam pointed at the highway as the Chevy swayed slightly under his brother's command as he tried to steer and meddle with the stereo at the same time. "That arm's gotta be throbbing like a bitch..." *Not half as much as my head will be if he puts on that damn CD player. Just why did I think it was a good idea when he installed it?*

"No pain, no gain, Sammy." Dean's expression lit up as his sibling's attempted diversion actually offered up inspiration for the next song. He slipped on the Scorpions and *No Pain, No Gain* with a nod and a satisfied smirk. "Besides, it's your needlework, Florence Nightingale. Shoulda let me find a cute nurse to bleed on..."

"I'm sure she'd have wondered just how you got those teeth marks too." This time it was Sam's face that lit up mischievously. "You really wanna get that kind of kinky rep?"

"It's not my rep you have to worry about, Geekboy..." Dean muttered the words under his breath and then cleared his throat.

"What?"

Dean shrugged. "Nothing." He let the steering wheel slide through his fingers silently, taking a sharp bend and then glancing over and changing the subject. "So, you think Bethany will ever get over what she saw? I mean, she seemed like a tough kid, but..."

"We saw worse at her age." Sam suddenly wanted Dean's music, and as loud as possible. Anything but to be reminded of what they'd gone through since childhood. "She'll be okay." The statement was final, cutting off any further discussion on the matter.

Dean nodded, bobbing his head as the rock music soothed his soul. As he slowed to make a right, Sam's cell phone began to ring and he couldn't help but look over as his brother tugged out the device. An impish grin spread across Dean's features, but he remained silent, watching as Sam checked the caller I.D.

When Sam admitted he didn't know the number, he finally picked up, curious as to who might be calling. As the voice at the other end rambled on, he finally had to cut them off. "Yes, yes, I'm Sam Winchester but...no, no. I didn't place the ad..." Frustration took over and Sam finally hit the "end call" button, relief washing over him. "Wrong number," he offered innocently.

Dean mouth "Riiigghht," with a nod, and put his attention back on the road. This was, after all, where Bethany had all but jumped out on him.

After two seconds, Sam's cell began to ring again and with a bemused look he picked up. "Yes, I'm Sam..." Silence followed while he listened to an overly long diatribe of affection and more. His cheeks reddened and he cut the call short, just like the first.

No sooner had he hit the "end call" again than the cell began to burble anew.

"Sounds like you're a popular guy today, Sammy..." Dean's quirky expression and glistening eyes left nothing to the imagination. "You know, if I were you, I might be thinking of switching to voicemail right now or maybe even switching off..." The elder brother's lips puckered in delight at Sam's horrified features.

"Dean, you didn't?"

"Oh yeah, I did. What else are big brothers for, Sammy?" He beamed, tapping the steering wheel along with the guitar riff echoing through the Impala. "Half a page ad in the local lonely hearts column. Nice color photo too...you looked really cute with that spoon in your mouth..."

Sam slapped a hand to his forehead. "Kill me now...Just make it quick and painless..."

Dean chuckled as he once again won the prank war. "No pain, no gain, Sammy..."

Sam sighed, tossed his cell phone onto the Chevy's rear seat and gave in to the inevitable. With a shake of his head he leaned forward and turned up the CD player even louder until the car almost reverberated with the noise.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, he turned to Dean, his face creasing into his usual puppy smile. It was good to be back on the road again, back on the hunt, and back with the sibling tomfoolery that made their otherwise harsh life worth living.

Sam had come to Jackson with the weight of the world on his shoulders, and even though he was leaving still knowing he couldn't change everything, he was also leaving knowing not everything that happened was his cross to bear. Sometimes bad things just happened. No more sulking about Dakota, no more blame.

Life was what you made of it, and how you handled yourself along the way was the important thing. Dean had shown him that with Bethany and with his quirky sense of morality. *But then, that's what big brothers are for...* The words were in Sam's head, but they echoed through his skull in Dean's cheeky tones.

"You try huggin' me like you did in Clifton that time, I swear I'll run that ad for a month!" Dean swatted his brother lightly around the ear and groaned, realizing exactly what Sam was thinking.

Sam couldn't resist laughing back at the elder Winchester's almost horrified expression. "Just a month? Geez, it just might even be worth it..."

The End