

## **Episode Fourteen: Harbingers**

### **By Thru Terry's Eyes**

#### **Raptures Climb, 1907**

Leviticus Cross stared at his father. "I'm not ready?" he spat in disbelief, his pale blue eyes flashing icy fire. "I'm your son. I've been at your side since I was seven years old, taken your place when needs be. I've done all you required of me and been an advocate of your teachings!" His voice rose with the pent up anger and frustration of realizing his deepest desire was being ripped from his grasp yet again.

"Do not raise your voice to me!" The Reverend William Cross thundered, allowing himself the luxury of a fist slammed on the desktop, causing papers to scatter in fear like a flight of birds. "You are my son. Remember your place, which is not to question my decisions but to follow them!" His own silvery-gray eyes burned with a flame so intense Leviticus was filled with self-loathing by his inability to meet the older man's flinty gaze.

The elder Cross snatched up a quill, touching the tip to his tongue in a quick jab and then tipping back the top of the inkwell to dip the pen within, making angry meaningless dashes on the remaining papers before him. "I have told you when I feel you are ready to lead the souls of my church I will relinquish them to you with a glad heart." His eyes darted back to his son in a brief, disappointed flick. "That time is not now and you are not ready." He gave his head a small shake and returned his gaze to the papers.

Leviticus' eyes narrowed and he tilted his head back slightly to study his father with an expression the elder man would not have found pleasure in had he bothered to look. "And just when, Father, may I ask, do you think I will be ready if after all these years I still appear unequal to the task?"

William continued to scribble furiously, but his voice picked up the faintest edge. "You are much like your mother even after all my efforts to bend you otherwise. You think I am unaware of you, unnoticed of your actions, of the things I know exist in your heart."

Leviticus felt a coldness crawl through him.

Daring damnation, Leviticus dredged deeply inside of himself to find the courage of defiance. "You don't know me," he snarled, "anymore than you know that pen you grip or the chair you sit on. I've just been a tool for you to use and cast aside when you finish with me-" Fury boiled up and without conscious thought he stepped forward and swept the quill and papers from under his father's face. "Look at me!!" He shouted.

William fell back in shock. "How dare you display such disrespect!" The wheelchair he sat in rolled back from his sudden movement. "Is this your way of showing me you are ready to take on the responsibilities of guiding this church down the path of righteousness? A tantrum that would shame a seven year old child?"

Leviticus recoiled, as shocked by his actions as his father, but for different reasons.

"Leave my presence!!" William roared in the voice that had terrified Leviticus since childhood, that had accompanied the physical punishments necessary to steer the child he had been toward his own path to God, that had verbally beaten the man he had become into a subservient shadow, trampled thoughtlessly beneath first his father's feet and then wheels of the chair the old man had been held captive by for the past ten years.

Fifty-seven years old and Leviticus still feared the bent old man before him. Fifty-seven years of loyalty and service, of being the slave and whipping boy, always working for the day when his father would retire and Raptures Climb would be his. It had been dangled before him like a prize to be won. Every time he could feel it within

his grasp, it had been snatched away once again in what he had come to think of as a sadistic game.

He was tired of playing games.

The church of Raptures Climb would never be his. Not as long as his father, William Cross, founder and Reverend of the small religious community, breathed.

"Leave your presence?" Leviticus replied in a growl. He snorted in contempt, "I think not, old man." He seemed to suddenly grow taller, back straightening, his hand slipping into his pocket.

William, eyes blazing, pushed his chair away from the desk and around to his son. "I couldn't admit it to myself," his father began in a low voice, "but I think I always knew this time would come."

"And what time would that be?" Leviticus sneered, feeling the strength he had never been able to summon on his own flow into him as his hand closed on the talisman, its touch against the flesh of his hand a sensation of fire and ice. He felt the very room they stood in begin to grow colder.

"The time I acknowledged that you hunger for power for the sake of power, not for the strength to guide our people to God. I have seen this, the desire for control. That you were too weak to traverse the road to righteousness." William lifted cold eyes and locked them onto his son's gaze.

"Righteousness?" Leviticus barked an ugly laugh. "Your believers have been choked to death, smothered by your self-serving idea of righteousness. I've choked on it every miserable moment of my life. Had it shoved down my throat until I couldn't take another day of it." Leviticus put his foot against the old man's chair and shoved suddenly, propelling the chair backwards, watching as it struck the opposite wall, almost knocking the older man out of the seat.

William cried out, shocked, as much from the impact as the words coming from his son's lips. His gnarled fingers gripped the armrests of his wheelchair, trying to summon the only strength he still had at his command: his voice. "HOW LONG?" he thundered. "How long has this betrayal been going on? How long since you turned your back on our teachings? On God?"

Leviticus stepped nearer, towering over the frail old man he had feared his entire life. "I haven't turned my back on anything!" he retorted hotly. He leaned in close to his father's ear to speak, as though William were not only crippled but deaf, putting his hands over his father's, trapping them there. William grimaced as the cold metal of the talisman clutched in his son's grip dug into the thin flesh of his hand. "If anything you pompous old fool, I've turned toward."

To his father's credit, he did not draw back the closer his son got to him. In the icy-blue of his son's eyes, William saw no warmth, no love, only a frozen emptiness that went on forever. He knew now it had always existed there and he cursed himself for allowing it to grow unchecked, unrecognized.

"I won't let you corrupt this church!" William shouted, struggling to rise, but the powerful body he had once commanded refused to cooperate. He finally slumped back in defeat, staring at his son in growing trepidation.

Leviticus' white hair swirled in an unrestrained mass around his shoulders, his bearing determined, his eyes wild. "I've waited decades for you to give me what was mine! And when that didn't happen I waited for you to die, prayed for it! And it never happened. You just kept on like some never-ending disease! I prayed to your God for the strength to bear it and that never came either." Leviticus straightened, stepping back to viciously kick the chair sideways.

William gasped, crying out as he spilled from the chair, face down onto the floor, mind swirling in disbelief.

"Then one day the strength finally came, Father, but not from God. And I embrace it! I welcome it!" Leviticus spread his arms.

"Satan has called you, Leviticus! Refuse him, come back to me. Come back to the true path—" William broke off as Leviticus laughed again.

"Back? Back to what? Back to being your slave, your whipping boy? I've found the true path, and guess what, Father? It didn't lead to you! Your congregation belongs to me now, as it should have a long time ago! Don't worry, Father, your memory will live on... you'll even be mourned." Leviticus, standing over his father's helpless form, enjoying the thought that William was cowering, held out his hand, the silver talisman spinning from his fingers by a short chain. He closed his eyes, lips moving in a silent invocation.

"No..." William whispered, as the air around him grew colder still, freezing his breath.

The shadowy figure that began to materialize in the air behind his son did not call forth fear, not on his own behalf. On the behalf of the church he had built from nothing, of the town he had founded, of the innocent souls in his charge that he was about to watch the spawn of his own loins betray. He could feel his blood recoiling in his veins.

"You cannot do this!" he cried out, clawing against the floor to try and drag his body forward, reaching out to clutch at the leg of his son's trousers. "I beg of you! Think of what you do!"

Leviticus threw his father a look of contempt and kicked the offending hand away, otherwise ignoring his pleas.

The dark figure now standing solidly at Leviticus' side smiled down at the old man then raised his brilliant yellow gaze to the younger man and held out his hand, head cocked slightly, still smiling.

"So I guess that means we have a deal?"

"NO!!!!" William screamed.

But the time for compromise was long past.

\* \* \* \*

## **Raptures Climb, 2007**

The coming of dawn burst through the impossible mists that crawled and drifted through the woods surrounding Rapture's Climb. As the glaring rays of the early sun burned away the dissipating tendrils that shrouded the buildings and streets, the sound of singing began to permeate the air, emanating from a low slung clapboard building with a stubby steeple that squatted at the end of the main street. Even in the early morning the heat inside the small wooden church hung in a thick, suffocating mass that made it hard to breathe. The few windows present were closed tight, the glass bare of decoration, allowing the sun to burn through with full power.

Hair straggled limply from beneath the chastely fastened hats of the women, long sleeves pulled down to the wrists and fastened firmly in place, high collars buttoned up tightly. Men in long sleeved shirts and jackets, collars buttoned equally tightly, the darkening sprawl of sweat soaking through both jacket and shirt.

Some of the congregation waved fans listlessly but the humid drift of the sluggish air brought no relief. A few flies droned, moving slowly enough to pluck out of the air with a bare hand, but even that expenditure of energy was too much. Their heat-dulled faces glistened with sweat, their eyes lifting slowly to stare blankly at the tall, black clad figure standing at the podium.

Watching as the sunlight crept slowly across the floor, the Reverend Leviticus Cross raised his own eyes and studied his congregation with ill-concealed disgust. He dragged a bony finger across his chin to catch the drop of sweat that rolled down from his temple.

Two days and it would be done...

\* \* \* \*

"My God," Dean groaned, wiping the sweat streaming off his forehead away for the umpteenth time, a continuously useless gesture as more sweat immediately ran down into his eyes. "Can we have it a little hotter, please?"

His hands were so slick with sweat he was having trouble gripping the steering wheel. His clothing was plastered to his body and the heat felt like a vise tightening around his head. Everywhere he looked the grass was brown, the ground was cracked, and the old broken tarmac was littered with bubbles of hot tar.

Dust settled heavily on the body of the Impala, turning sleek black into dull brown, and Dean had to keep turning on the wipers to get it off the windshield.

Sam sprawled next to him, melting steadily into the hot black leather of the seats. His long hair so damp with sweat it was curling, Sam rolled his eyes at Dean, but forbore to comment, taking another drink from the lukewarm bottle of water in his hand.

The interior of the Impala, even with all of the windows down, was as oppressive as an oven. The air conditioner, weak at the best of times, had passed on to wherever air conditioners go when they die—suicide, Sam had declared—and the air blowing in through the open windows was like a blast furnace.

The temperature had risen steadily the further they had gone down the badly marked, meandering detour, following vague directions from a gas station attendant regarding getting around the severe road construction that had been going on for approximately the past ten years.

Dean coughed as dust billowed into the window, swearing between hacks.

"You want some water?" Sam asked, holding out an unopened bottle of water, voice slow and heavy, eyelids at half mast.

Dean rolled his eyes and gagged. "Dude, I've drank so much water already, I'm sloshing whenever the car hits a bump and I'm still thirsty. No. I do not want any water! Besides it's warm. I can't drink warm water." He rolled his shoulders and made a sound of disgust. "I want food and an air conditioner set on arctic! Shit." He added flatly, running the side of his hand across his brow to catch the incessant drips.

"Where the hell are we anyway?" he growled, "Didn't that gas station guy say there would be a turnoff after a few miles? Hell, we've gone at least five miles and there's nothing!" He banged his fist on the wheel.

"Maybe we missed it," Sam replied, rolling his head along the seat back, staring up at the roof of the car. "Some of these back roads aren't marked very well."

Dean shot him a dirty look. "Aren't marked very well?" He snorted, "Try friggin' non-existent!" Dean rubbed a hand across his mouth. "I think that guy was full of shit and we're on some wild goose chase."

Sam stared at him. "Why would the guy send us off with the wrong directions? He showed us on the map; we're following the route it showed. Wallford is on this road, it's just taking a while to get there."

"Maybe the guy was bored, gets his kicks sending people the wrong way so when they turn around to get better directions he gets to sell 'em more gas—hell, I don't know! If I had to live in that crap hole town back there I might do the same thing. Jesus, it's too early in the morning to be this damned hot!!!"

Dean hated hot weather. In his opinion, seventy-five degrees was optimum but they never seemed to find that; it was always too hot or too cold. Although right now, he would have happily stood ass-deep in a snow bank and embraced a snowman.

He grimaced, pinching the bridge of his nose. The headache that had dogged him for what had seemed like days now, coming and going like the tide, had grown steadily worse with every passing mile. He didn't know if it was the heat or the overall stress of their existence the past few months but suspected the answer lay somewhere in the middle.

His wrists were still scabbed and healing from being hung from a rafter a short time before while a brood of test-tube vampires tried to destroy them. Sam had been writhing in agonized death throes shortly before that, as a victim of a poisoned bullet.

He was tired, dammit.

Sam pushed himself upright with an effort, groaning. The air was almost too thick to move in and his long body, normally under fairly decent control, seemed twice its size, twice its weight, and was operating at twice its normal temperature. It just wasn't worth the effort to shift it about.

"What are you doing?" Dean exclaimed as Sam abruptly drizzled the remainder of his water over his face, allowing it to dribble down his chest and soak in to his shirt.

"Trying to get cool..." Sam droned, closing his eyes and leaning into the air blowing in the window. There was a brief, blissful sensation of cool, but then almost as fast as it came he was dry again. And slightly muddy from the blowing dust.

Dean snickered at Sam's efforts, "Nice try, Sasquatch."

\* \* \* \*

Reverend Cross's pale blue eyes, almost lost under a ridge of bristling white brows, burned with an intense light, sweeping over the congregation, noting among the prayerful the telltale signs of encroaching corruption. He drew in a slow breath as his eyes moved from face to face, body to body.

Here and there were several young women sat with unbuttoned collars, an ankle visible below the trailing edge of a non-descript skirt, casting wanton glances at young men with their shirts also unbuttoned below the collar, sleeves brazenly rolled up, revealing strongly muscled forearms glistening with sweat.

In church. In *HIS* church...

In a fury, he seized the heavy, black leather-covered book lying on the podium and raised it.

"And God said unto him..." he roared into the thick silence, "arraign thyself in the trappings of evil and evil thy shall become!!" His voice thundered through the small wooden structure, eyes lifting from the benches to stare as he slammed the book back down onto the stand with a reverberating crash.

The congregation jumped back as one. Cross leveled a gnarled finger at them, leaning across the podium to single out each member with the twisted digit.

"You whimper and whine that God has turned his back on us! You dare this blasphemy, questioning the purpose of the Almighty and yet you sit there, painted whores, layabouts, SINNERS! You walk in the path of the devil and cannot understand why God has chosen to smite you! That his retribution is just and deserved!

"Since that day, so long ago, when God's messenger came to me and revealed his plan for Raptures Climb, we have fought to keep the blight of the outside world from our lives in the belief that at the end of our time of trial we would be rewarded with the gift of heaven. Do you dare defy his commands, now? So close to the end of our journey?"

Overcome, Cross stormed from the raised stage and grabbed the arm of a young woman in the front pew, dragging her to her feet and spinning her to face the congregation. He caught the back her neck and jerked her.

"See this? She bares her flesh to lure in the innocent, encouraging thoughts of lust and carnal desire!" He grabbed the open sides of her collar and pulled them together roughly, "Cover thy shame!" he exclaimed, shoving the girl back into the pew and pointing at her parents, cowering next to her, sudden shame clearly showing on their faces. "And you allow this! This child's guides and guardians!"

He stomped further down the short nave and pulled a young man from the seats, his strength surprising in one of such advanced age. He roughly rolled the boy's sleeves down.

"Do not reveal thy flesh in a manner to lure the innocent!" He reached out and jerked the skirt of the girl in the next pew down her legs to cover them completely.

"Who is the greater sinner? He who sins or he who sees the sin and turns away? Have you forgotten our teachings? Evil will corrupt the minds, bodies, and spirit of this town of Raptures Climb! Will you welcome it with your arms open and unquestioning, turning from our way in this, our final test? When the reward for our steadfastness lays only two days from our grasp?"

He pushed the boy back down, stalking the pews like an animal in search of prey. Church members turned from him as much in fear as shame.

"I say unto you, the realm of God's love is for the righteous!" He stopped at the end of the nave and pointed at the portrait hanging over the entrance door. "William Cross, my father and the father of all we have followed to these many years, sought the righteous path and turned away from that which would corrupt us."

Turning in a slow circle as he moved back toward the stage, he raised his arms and pointed at the congregation as a whole and as individuals, his gaze burning them all.

"Would he look upon us with disgust and loathing as we become the very things we sought to set ourselves apart from? Or with pride and love for the strength and determination we have shown in the time we are allotted?" he continued. "Would you call down the evil promised us?" He stepped onto the dais, facing away from the group, head lifted, arms upraised toward the heavy wooden cross mounted on the back wall, addressing it.

"That which would bring to an end the very world we have come to know, our homes gone, our lives, our souls, lost to the encroaching evil because we were not strong enough to stave it off!"

Turning, he swept the group with an angry eye, watching in satisfaction as they turned from his gaze.

\* \* \* \*

Overheated back into silence once again, Sam and Dean continued to drive along. After a while, Dean frowned, lifting his shoulder to catch the fresh moisture running down the side of his face with his sleeve. "Dude, we're going uphill. Isn't it supposed to be cooler in the mountains?"

Without opening his eyes or moving any more than necessary, Sam groaned. "This isn't the mountains; we're just driving closer to the sun."

Dean shrugged with his eyes. "You're the one who took the directions, not me," he accused, staring through the dusty windshield at the road ahead. "Do you suppose it's much further ahead?"

Sam had dragged the map off the floorboard and was tracing a blunt fingertip down the crooked magic marker line the gas station attendant had drawn. "There's nothing on this map, it doesn't show this detour, it must have been cut after the map was printed; all we have is what the gas station guy gave us." He crumpled up the map that he usually refolded neatly, to Dean's everlasting annoyance, and tossed it on the floorboards. His head fell back onto the seat, eyes closing. "Let's stop when we get anywhere, take a break."

"God, yes," Dean agreed, "I gotta get some air conditioning, food, a beer and a bathroom, not necessarily in that order. Hopefully there's somewhere to stop."

Sam glanced over at Dean, "You want me to drive for a while?" He hadn't missed the signs that Dean's head was bothering him.

Dean shook his head, "Nah, dude, civilization can't be that much further."

"Fine," Sam replied, "but I know you've got a headache."

"It's just this friggin' heat, don't make a big thing out of it. I'll take something when we stop."

Sam fruitlessly searched the car for any sunglasses and was disgusted to discover there wasn't a pair to be had even though Dean insisted there was always a pair in the glove box. Getting short tempered, as much from the never-ending road that apparently led nowhere as the ever increasing heat, Sam had shoved his hand into the glove box and swept the contents onto the floor to prove he wasn't lying.

That had merely pissed Dean off more.

After a short, but sharp verbal altercation, Sam began to gather up the collection of miscellaneous IDs, odd bullets, a curved dagger from Damascus with a broken grip Dean had been swearing to fix, M&M bags, both empty and full, a dog-eared spell book, two half-melted black candles, a bag of mandrake shavings Sam had been looking for a month ago, and what seemed like at least a hundred other odd bits, some of which he couldn't even identify, that he had pulled from the dash compartment in his fit of fury.

The broken tarmac gradually gave way to just plain dirt and they were forced to drive fairly slowly to avoid choking themselves to death on the resultant dust the passing of the Impala kicked up. It was that or roll up the windows and Dean's absolute threat to shoot Sam if he so much as touched the window handle put a stop to that.

"I'm dyin'," Dean groaned finally, deciding after an extremely protracted silence to grace Sam with his forgiveness for lying about the sunglasses. (Dean knew they were in the car—somewhere—despite Sam's claims to the contrary). "My brain's melting and its gonna run outta my ears." He pressed the heel of his hand into his temple to try to ease the throbbing there. His eyes felt gritty and strained from the constant glare.

Sam graced him with a dirty look and went back to staring out the window.

They did look at each other as the car suddenly bucked.

"What was that?" Sam asked warily.

Dean didn't answer as it happened again, wincing as though it caused him pain. "No, no, no, nooooo...." He moaned as the temperature gauge moved swiftly to the red mark while he watched. "Don't do this to me..." He stopped the car, seeing tendrils of smoke curling along the edges of the hood.

"What is it?" Sam asked. "Did it overheat?"

Dean ignored him, jumping out of the car with surprising speed and popping the hood, swearing and waving his arms as a white cloud billowed out from the engine.

"Son of a bitch!!!" The radiator cap was too hot to touch, as he discovered by stupidly reaching for it when he knew better. He jerked off his soaking t-shirt and used it as a hot pad to twist the cap off, still managing to scald himself as hot steam poured out.

He was vaguely aware of Sam coming to join him and stare uselessly at the ticking engine.

Dean sniffed the air and then dropped to his knees in the dust to look under the car where greenish fluid was puddling.

"Crap!" he snapped, getting back up and using his t-shirt to wave away the steam. He leaned into the engine and felt along the radiator hose, his hand coming away wet where it encountered a ragged slash.

"We blew the damned radiator hose! Great! Just friggin' great!"

"Can we fix it?" Sam asked.

Dean glared at him. "No. WE can't fix it." He said pointedly. "I could fix it if I had a new hose, which I don't." He grimaced, pressing his fingertips to his forehead.

"You okay?" Sam asked, watching him.

"Yeah," Dean growled. "But my head's gonna split in half if I don't get somewhere cool soon," he admitted in a rare moment of candor. He stomped to the back of the Impala and jerked open the trunk, rummaging through the items stored on the lid of the weapons cache, muttering to himself.

"Look, I know I'm not gonna be any help here, I'm gonna walk ahead a little, see what's around that bend." Sam offered, keeping a safe distance as items were tossed haphazardly from the trunk.

"Yeah, whatever," Dean replied, distracted.

Sam hadn't taken a step when Dean suddenly straightened. "Ten minutes, Sam. Back in ten and I'm not kiddin'." He held out a .45.

Dean might threaten to shoot him if he rolled up the window, but after New Jersey there was no such thing as too much precaution anymore. It had been cut too close; they had both walked too close to the point of no return and it wasn't happening again.

Haris was gone but the world was still full of bad things that jumped out at you when you least expected it and Dean wasn't sure he could handle another close call like the last one.

The sight of Sam, his body locked in muscle spasms, growing steadily weaker as poison sucked his life away, and worse, the sight of the empty bed when he'd thought Sam had...

Pain blasted his temple, making him press his hand there again.

"Ten minutes," he repeated in a voice that brooked no argument.

Sam frowned at him, taking the weapon and tucking it in the back of his jeans. "Will you be okay?"

"As long as you're back in ten minutes," Dean replied.

"Ten minutes," Sam agreed, turning away.

Dean nodded. "Ah hah!" he exclaimed, reaching into the clutter. He brandished a roll of duct with elation. "I knew you were in there!"

\* \* \* \*

Sam walked down the dusty road, the sun bearing down with almost physical force. Even walking slowly he was around the bend in a moment and out of sight of Dean and the Impala. To his surprise he was confronted by a weathered sign hanging crookedly from a post.

*Raptures Climb welcomes the righteous. Turn away those who would corrupt us.*

Cocking his eyebrow, he moved on.

He couldn't miss the wooden signs posted along the edges of the road, hand painted from the look of them. "Do not upon thyself take the sins of others," read one. "Do not walk with evil lest evil begin to lead the way," read another.

They seemed like...warnings...or admonishments. If they had stumbled on a religious town he would have to caution Dean to watch his mouth and behavior.

He paused to read another of the frequently-posted quotes. "Question not the teachings of thy master." He frowned at the next sign as he passed. "Blessed is the chaste woman". He found the markers a little dire and unsettling, wondering idly what sort of religion went along with signs like that.

The few scattered houses he passed were simple, neatly maintained buildings and perched right on the edge of a narrow street he assumed was "The Town." Power and phone lines appeared to be non-existent. There were no cars. There were, however, several horses and a few buggies. No one was on the street. He wondered if they had come upon an Amish or Mennonite community.

At the end of the short street there was a compact white building that was obviously a church of some sort; a blunt steeple with a cross on top made it the tallest building he could see in the small collection.

He paused to glance at his watch, he had already been gone almost ten minutes and it was turn back now or get his ass kicked thoroughly. Dean was balancing on the edge of a razor nerve-wise lately and it was too freakin' hot for a major confrontation. He mopped sweat from his face with his soggy t-shirt and edged

closer, drawn by the sound of unmelodious singing, unaccompanied by any musical instruments.

He stretched upwards to peek in the narrow glass window, fingertips just clasped on the edge of the frame, concentrating so hard on what he might see he didn't pick up on the sounds he should have heard.

Something hard caught him with great force right behind the ear. He went down without a sound, crumpled on the hot dirt.

And he stayed there.

\* \* \* \*

Dean peeled the hot, sticky tape from his fingers as he tried for the third time to wrap it around the radiator hose. The engine of the car was so damned hot he couldn't stand to be under the hood for more than a few seconds.

His head was pounding so hard that when he stood, he stumbled back dizzily, ending up ass down in the dusty road clutching his head while the immediate world spun around him.

He sat there for several minutes, eyes closed while his head and stomach crawled back to their usual positions.

This was not good. Blearily, he rolled to his hands and knees, reaching out to use the bumper of the Impala to shakily regain his feet. He groped back to the driver's seat and sank into the blazing interior with his head down between his knees until he could stand to open his eyes.

He fumbled for the water bottle Sam had offered earlier and cracked it open, first pouring a goodly amount over his head and neck and then, warm or not downing several swallows. He let his head hang again, balancing elbows on knees, feeling the water trickle down the bare skin of his chest and back and drip to the ground between his boots. His skin was so hot, he was surprised it didn't sizzle.

His eyes focused on the face of his watch and he jerked as he realized Sam had been gone over half an hour.

"Shit!" he snarled. Pushing to his feet as adrenaline pumped into his system he turned in the direction Sam had gone but could see nothing beyond the bend in the road.

He walked a short distance and yelled Sam's name. In the thick air the sound carried about seven feet before it, too, succumbed to the heat and collapsed to the ground.

Dean came back to the car, groped for the shirt he had tossed in the backseat earlier and shoved his arms down the sleeves, fumbling a few buttons through the holes. He swiftly locked up the car, swearing. He jerked out his .45 and a decent blade that he shoved in his boot sheath and slammed the trunk lid down. Stomping down the road, angrily rolling up his sleeves, he wasn't sure what was causing him more pain, his headache or his worry.

Rounding the bend, he stopped dead at the sight of the old sign mounted next to the road, frowning.

"Rapture's Climb?" he read out loud. "What the hell kind of a name is that?"

There must be some kind of a town up ahead, maybe Sam had found a cold place to hide. His initial relaxation at the thought burned away as he considered if that was the case, why the hell hadn't Sam come back to let Dean in on the secret?

The answer was simple.

He would have, as long as he was able.

Looking down, he could make out the prints of Sam's boots in the dirt. Sweat dripped from his chin and splashed into the closest boot shaped depression. Swiping his forehead with an equally sweaty forearm, a grim look on his face, he stalked down the road following Sam's clearly marked trail.

\* \* \* \*

The sound of soft weeping could be heard now as Cross moved back through his congregation to the stage. He turned and stretched out his arms, imploring.

"Turn from the evil ways and be pure among them! Separate thyself and be above them! This I say to you!" He let his arms fall to the podium, gripping the edges as he leaned forward and spoke with emotion thickening his voice.

"Be ever-watchful for the harbingers of our doom lest we fall into the traps that Satan has scattered in our path—false omens we have virtuously destroyed in our brief time over these many long years as a sign of our faith and devotion."

Voices began to murmur in the small crowd as the dullness faded from the glistening faces before him and the light of hope began to shine in their eyes. It was truly going to end at last.

"Long have we waited for the reward promised us," Cross continued, stretching his arms out once again in a gesture of embrace. "Let us not grow careless in our vigilance as our time of penance draws to an end and the glory of renewal will at last be ours!"

\* \* \* \*

Dean stared in disbelief as he passed several buggies and horses tethered next to the wooden sidewalks. The few stores along the side of the road had "closed" signs posted on the doors and there appeared to be no one around. The whole place made his skin tingle and he couldn't help falling into a stealth mode, his body shifting, shoulders tightening, his hands open and ready at his sides. As he moved through the small group of buildings, he didn't draw his gun, but he kept his hand on it and nothing about it made him feel foolish.

*This place is freakin' weird.*

Taking a few shallow breaths, he stared at the ground, sweat burning his eyes as he tried to identify Sam's boot print among the many on the dusty ground. He went down on one knee and squinted against the reflected glare, finally identifying Sam's print by the star-shaped cut out in the heel. Sam had never noticed, but Dean had carved it there the morning after Sam had gotten the new footgear.

He looked up, frowning at the chapel at the end of the street, wavering in the heat. At least he hoped it was the heat making it move. The few footprints he could identify led straight to the boxy building.

He wiped his hand over his face, rubbing his eyes. Getting to his feet shouldn't have been such a struggle. The heat bore down on him like a physical weight. He could feel the sear of it on his exposed skin, the pound of it against his temples as he was assaulted by wave after wave.

Fighting off the lightheadedness, he pushed himself toward the innocent-looking white building.

Sam had gone that way so Dean had no choice but to follow.

\* \* \* \*

Cross moved around the podium to the front of the stage, arms still out in invitation.

"Step forward into the light, forsake the darkness and let God welcome the righteous and smite those who would follow the dark path! Do not forsake the words of God that he has seen fit to speak through me, his obedient servant!"

There was a flurry of people rising to their feet and rushing the stage, kneeling at Cross's feet in supplication, weeping and crying out for forgiveness for their doubts and faltering faith, gathering around him as he stretched out hands to brush over their heads.

Lifting his eyes, Cross saw the young girl he had singled out standing at the fringe of the group. Humiliated tears streaked her face, but there was no remorse in her eyes or in the defiant lift of her chin.

Cross gazed at her for a moment, the faintest of frowns creasing his forehead. Slowly, he moved through the people surrounding him, his hand outstretched. His flock parted to make way for him, shuffling and turning to watch him offer solace to this lost lamb.

"Come forward, my child," he requested as he approached her. "God has forgiveness for those who are truly contrite. It's not too late to change your path. Only the unrighteous need fear, only those who would take from us our one chance at the salvation promised us."

She drew back as he came nearer, sudden fear in her eyes, her hands crossing over her chest as if to protect herself.

His voice dropped to a soft murmur, a verbal caress. "Welcome him into your heart, my child..." He stretched out his hand, pressing his moist, warm palm against her cheek, holding it there even as she tried to pull away. "Accept his plans for you..." he whispered, his eyes lidded. "He has plans for us all..."

She stiffened under his touch, eyes widening. An inarticulate noise bubbled up from her throat and her body began to jerk spastically.

Cross stumbled back from her with a look of horror, the back of his hand against his mouth.

*NO!* He thought desperately. *Not when we're so close!!*

His congregation murmured and exclaimed behind him, rising to their feet. The girl's parents rushed forward, but Cross caught them in a grip of iron.

"Stay back!"

The shaking girl clutched her head, her eyes rolling back, her body convulsing as she dropped to her knees on the dusty floorboards.

A loud creak drew all eyes to the doors as one side was pushed open.

\* \* \* \*

Dean paused to wipe the sweat away again, leaning against one of the double doors. He was braced, but he still felt the door shift slightly, opening a crack, the voices from inside becoming clearer as he put his ear near the door.

There was a sudden chorus of gasps and startled cries. A voice that was spouting garbled gibberish.

Over them all, another voice that thundered, "Stay back!"

He shoved the door open and stepped inside.

\* \* \* \*

As the door opened, the garbled sounds the girl was making became shrieks, orange flames suddenly erupting from her body engulfing her from head to toe. Her clothing burned away in an instant, the flesh beneath charring black and peeling away from the bones in clumps.

Screams erupted from the watching congregation.

The crackling blaze shot upwards to scorch the ceiling, blackening the boards, long flames licking greedily at the beams. The heat was made even more appalling as it blasted from the flaming woman.

Shocked, Dean yelled, jerking sideways. The door slammed shut behind him. He threw an arm over his face as the screaming, living pyre, stumbled forward, bringing with it a blast furnace of heat, collapsing in a writhing mass of fire at his feet. One charred arm stretched toward him, blackened fingers clawing against the floor, actually scorching the toes of the boot her fingers brushed against. Her screams choked off abruptly and she lay still.

Dumbstruck, the congregation and Dean stared at the blackened corpse as the fire burned out, over almost as quickly as it had begun. All that was left was the sickening smell of burning flesh, wafting gray smoke and a twisted husk lying in a shallow drift of ash. The wood floor beneath the girl's body showed only the slightest sign of the conflagration that had just raged upon it.

Dean hesitantly lowered his arms and raised his eyes, looking up at the group of people that were eyeing him with decidedly unfriendly faces.

Cross, standing at the forefront of his followers, stepped forward and leveled a finger at the disheveled young man swaying before him. "I am Reverend Leviticus Cross, leader and protector of the church of Rapture's Climb and I say unto you, avault, spawn of Satan and be gone to the pit from which you crawled!" Cross bellowed.

Dean looked around, seeing nothing out of the ordinary, if he didn't count the smoldering body at his feet, which surprisingly didn't seem to be commanding the attention he would have thought. His eyes widened as he realized the black clad old man was talking to him!

"What the ..." Dean finally choked. He shook his head. *This had to be some kind of heat-induced hallucination...* "What the hell are you people doing?"

The girl's parents fell to their knees at their daughter's side, clutching each other, weeping, as the other members gathered around in awestruck horror.

"Behold the sign we have long feared! The harbinger of what is to come!" Cross lifted his arms and face skyward. "Prepare yourselves for the Lord's retribution!" he cried. "And the hand of God will make from among you an example... an innocent perishes in the flames of hell brought to us by Lucifer's minion!"

"Hey," Dean barked, fumbling behind him for the door handle, feeling the gun tucked in the waistband of his sweat-soaked jeans. "I'm just looking for my brother. Whatever you got goin' on here-" His fingers closed on the grip of the gun.

*What the hell had he and Sam stumbled into? And where the hell was Sam?*

"God's will be done unto us, his servants..." Cross continued, advancing slowly toward Dean. Amid the muffled sobs, sounds of hoarse "amens" chorused around him.

As the other men in the group began to gather around Cross, his voice rose, his extended hand clenching into a fist. "And God's will be done unto the servant of evil for whom we have waited, he who will suffer and be witness to the triumph of righteousness that God has promised us, the blessed of Rapture's Climb!"

Dean pulled the gun and brandished it before him. "Are you freakin' nuts? Back off!" He ordered, his back pressed to the door.

It had to be heat stroke! That, or he'd stumbled onto the film set for a sequel to *House of Wax* ...

His eyes met those of the white-maned preacher. "I don't know what kinda looney bin you got here, but anyone so much as touches me, I swear to God, I'll kill 'em. I'm just looking for my brother!"

Cross laughed. "How dare you speak the name of God with your demon tongue? We have naught to fear from you... any you strike down will be enfolded in God's arms and reside with him forever in glory." Cross's eyes narrowed and he tilted his head back to peer at Dean through the slits. "It is you who should fear, demon-spawn, for the promise of our salvation lies within you!!"

Lost in confusion, slowed by heat and pain, Dean's finger tightened on the trigger, but not fast enough.

Three men hit him at once, slamming him solidly against the door, joined by at least half a dozen more who all seemed intent on getting in at least one good blow apiece.

The gun was torn from his grasp; his arms and legs held fast as he was dragged, yelling and swearing, to the ground by the sheer mass of people.

Just before a boot connected with the side of his head, he caught a look at Cross, standing back from the crowd as they struggled to hold Dean's thrashing body down. On his face was triumph. But in his eyes was fear. Lightning struck then and Dean was blown into oblivion by it.

\* \* \* \*

"Be still! He's coming around."

Sam heard a soft flurry of movement around him along with the whispered words but it was still on the periphery of his senses and his eyes refused to obey his command to open.

His breath deepened as he crawled unwillingly back to consciousness. The part of his skull just behind his right ear had to be caved in, it couldn't possibly hurt like that and still be intact.

He didn't even try to smother the groan as his mind finally broke the surface and he blinked.

Turning his head slightly, he took in a weakly glowing oil lamp and a goodly number of intense faces. At least ten. Men and a few women, all gathered in what appeared to be a rather small room. He was lying on some sort of a cot.

"What... what's going... going on?" He lifted a hand to the back of his head, grimacing. "Where's Dean?" He grunted as he rolled awkwardly to the side in a shaky attempt to sit up.

A gentle hand caught him by the shoulder, pressing him back.

"Lie still a bit longer. Amos was a little... over-exuberant... in his efforts to subdue you." The soft, contrite voice belonged to a young woman with chestnut hair and doe-brown eyes. She dropped her gaze as he looked at her.

"Subdue me?" Sam grimaced and pushed himself upright, closing his eyes as the floor shifted. He rubbed his head. A cup of water was pushed into his hands, which he drank gratefully, realizing belatedly that it was actually cool here. That was almost more startling than anything. Air conditioning meant electricity so why were these people using oil lamps?

"Where am I?" He snapped, louder than he meant to, seeing everyone flinch as he spoke.

One man, older than the others, eyes still down, stepped forward. "Forgive us. We forget ourselves," he gestured around him. "You are in —"

"Wait--Rapture's Climb," Sam completed for him. "Yeah, I saw the sign."

The man nodded. "More specifically, the caverns beneath the town, but yes, this is Rapture's Climb. Such as it is." He gave a small, sad smile, fingers twisting the brim of the hat he held.

"Are you he that was promised us? One of the wanderers that will deliver us?"

This voice came from the crowd before him, timidly spoken words that caused each face to turn from him.

"Am I what?" Sam rasped, bewildered.

As Sam's eyes adjusted to the low light he began to notice how old fashioned the attire of everyone around him was. Several of the women wore poke bonnets, their clothing plain and lacking in any style, and the men in work clothes and brimmed hats, many wore beards. They reminded him of a western movie.

"Are you Amish or something?" Sam asked, feeling slightly surreal.

The faces before him stiffened. "We are the followers of William Cross, leader of our journey to righteousness and the gift of God's salvation." This time a younger man spoke, voice so strong with conviction and purpose that Sam felt a quick flash of envy.

"Who's William Cross? And what did you mean a minute ago? The wanderer?" Sam pushed himself to his feet, instantly towering over everyone present. He caught himself against one of the stone walls until his balance steadied, hand to his temple.

"What's going on here? Why the hell did Amos hit me? Who are you people?" Sam's voice rose equal to his frustration level. He squinted at his watch.

*Holy crap*, he'd been gone over three hours. Dean would be insane with worry and spitting blood from anger.

"I don't know what's happening, but I gotta get back to my brother, I know he's looking for me--" He looked around trying to figure which way was out.

He didn't miss the soft gasp at the mention of his brother.

He turned and cast them all with an accusatory glare which none of them would meet. "What?" he snapped, in exasperation.

\* \* \* \*

*"Do you believe in destiny?" Sam asked, looking over at Dean, who, up to that moment had been staring blankly at the TV while his younger brother finished his homework. English, or Dean would have been helping him.*

*"Do I what?" Dean asked, turning to stare at the eleven year old.*

*Sam's features were still soft with childhood, while Dean's had already taken on the harder planes of an adult. Childhood had not been kind and it showed in Dean's eyes if anyone bothered to look.*

*Sam's long hair spilled into his eyes in soft brown curls, Dean's dark-blond hair was already hacked off short and rubbed into messy spikes.*

*When Dean looked at Sam he still saw the little child, not the burgeoning young man who all too often asked questions that flat put Dean on the spot.*

*Sam's cheeks reddened slightly. He shrugged, "I was listening to some kids at lunch. They started having an argument about whether we controlled our own actions or if it was destiny."*

*Dean turned to face him now. "What the hell happened to talking about girls? What kinda kids are you hanging out with?" He demanded, slightly outraged.*

*"They were just talking," Sam replied. "Never mind." He went back to his papers.*

*"No," Dean said after a long thoughtful moment, "I don't believe in destiny." He waited for Sam to look up at him. "I'm in control of what I do, and so are you. Anyone who says different is trying to find somewhere to put blame."*

Dean couldn't for the life of him imagine why that particular moment flashed into his mind. *Why couldn't it have been that night with the stripper in Phoenix?*

His eyelids fluttered open and he realized he was not, in fact, lying on the most uncomfortable bed he had ever encountered in a long, horrible history with uncomfortable beds.

It was actually much, much worse.

Blurily he tried to focus on his surroundings, all three of them, as they slid back and forth across his line of vision. It was very bright, blindingly so, and "hot" was quickly taking on a new meaning.

Another moment and he realized that what he had thought was a million-watt globe hung from the ceiling was, in point of fact, a heavily-barred roof that opened to the sky and hanging right in the middle was the biggest, brightest, hottest sun Dean could remember seeing, shining right down on him.

Turning his head to the sides revealed that his upper body was apparently arched across a barrel or some such thing. It kept his shoulders off the floor about a foot but tapered downwards below his lower back and thighs, supporting them. His wrists were shackled to the ground as far as his arms would stretch, as were his ankles. There also appeared to be some sort of collar around his neck that was tethered in such a way that he could only lift his head a few inches before it choked him.

His body was pulled so tightly to each anchor point, he could only shift a few inches with his feet. It was just enough to cause stress at the joints, but not actual pain.

Yet.

His shirt was gone and he could feel the rough wood of whatever he was tied to dig into the skin of his back. The sweat rolled down his neck into his hair. Likewise, his arms and back. It tickled and itched and was more distracting than the heat itself.

He finally allowed his muscles to relax and let his head fall back, which was only slightly more comfortable and it put his face directly in line with the sun, forcing him to close his eyes.

Coupled with the beating he had just received, his headache had morphed into throbbing flashes of hurt so bad it was no longer pain, but something new and for which he had no words.

His mouth and throat were sticky-feeling and running his tongue over his lips was like caressing cardboard. He didn't need to be told he was seriously dehydrated.

He felt like he was being baked alive on a spit.

Struggling to concentrate enough to try and grasp what the hell could possibly be going on, he would have jerked when a voice suddenly spoke, startling him, but the tightness of his tethers precluded such a reaction.

"Struggling will not avail you," the voice said. "We have dealt with such as you before."

Dean twisted his head in a vain attempt to see the speaker. "Let me go you crazy son of a bitch!" He growled hoarsely, pulling against the bonds despite himself. "I don't know what in hell-" He broke off, coughing as both his dry throat and his collar choked him.

A familiar black-clad figure swam into view, white hair pulled back into a long ponytail. Two men flanked him, their eyes determined. They each carried a wooden crate that clanked ominously as they set them down on the floor.

Cross reached down and traced the tips of his fingers over Dean's cheek. Dean tried to pull away from the touch of the moist skin but only succeeded in choking himself again.

"Get away... from me!" he gasped.

"I understand you're in pain," Cross murmured. "Even the servants of Satan suffer at his hands."

"What the hell are talking about?" Dean cried, "I'm not a demon or a servant of Satan! You gotta be outta your-" He broke off as Cross slapped him with the speed of a striking snake.

"Deny not your evil nature!" Cross roared, straightening. "We understand the meaning of your arrival among us on these, the last days of our trials. Satan sends you as a last test of our faith, witness the burning of one of our own as a sign of your coming, foul creature of the pit! This is a test we shall not fail!" Sweat rolled down Cross's face and locks of white hair started to pull loose from their moorings.

He turned to his two assistants. "Ready the implements of purification!" His voice shook as he spoke and he began to pull his jacket off, rolling up his sleeves. "Tonight we will offer up to God the gift of our final step toward the righteous glory that he has promised me. The salvation and release of Rapture's Climb which will be ours to rejoice come the dawn!!!"

Still reeling from the blow, Dean rolled his eyes helplessly. "You're insane!" He snapped.

All eyes went to the door as a sudden flurry drew their attention. A young man hurried into the room, looking startled as his eyes fell on Dean.

"What is it?" Cross barked.

The boy looked away. "We found the...vehicle... we believe to be theirs, another type of carriage. The others are pulling it into the square by the store."

Cross nodded, looking pleased. "Good! We can burn it too. Leave it there for the moment."

Dean floundered wildly against his restraints. *They were gonna burn the Impala? Holy shit!* "No! That's my car!" He gagged as the collar throttled him, struggling fruitlessly. "You can't burn my car!"

One of the other men grabbed Dean's hair and pulled his head back as far as he could, cramming a leather ball into Dean's open mouth and tying it in place with the attached straps.

Dean tried to push it out but the man was too fast and once in place, it was all Dean could do to breathe through his nose.

"We need to talk," Cross said conversationally. "About this so-called brother of yours."

If Cross thought Dean's reaction to his vehicle was frantic the mention of his brother made the younger man go completely berserk. Cross waited until Dean exhausted his body even though the younger man's eyes still boiled with fury.

He gazed down at Dean, a sad, almost reluctant look on his face that could only have been described as "This is gonna hurt me more than it will hurt you."

Looking his situation over, somehow Dean had to doubt that.

\* \* \* \*

"What exactly is going on here? I gotta get back to my brother. He's gonna go crazy!" Sam demanded.

"Please," the man who had first addressed Sam as the promised wanderer spoke. "You don't understand. What we did was necessary—"

"You're damned right I don't understand!" Sam replied.

There was a general shift backwards by his audience. Sam topped most of them by almost a foot and even though it was his nature to be polite, he was getting pissed.

"Please, if you'll only allow me to explain—" the man began.

"Who are you?" Sam snapped.

"Thomas Gable," the man supplied quickly, destroying the brim of his hat. "The other man, your brother? We know where he is."

Sam cut him off again. "Where? Take me to him! He better be alright—"

"I'm sure he is not," Thomas replied, daring to meet Sam's angry gaze head on. "Cross and the others took him. Even now the black vehicle that was left on the road is being pulled into the square."

"The *Impala*?" Sam yelled. *What the hell was going on?*

Thomas looked blank.

Sam's hand shot out and gathered a formidable amount of Thomas's shirtfront in his sizeable fist, dragging the smaller man to him. There were cries of alarm from the watchers but no one moved to interfere.

"You said you followed a William Cross? Is he responsible for this? Is that who took my brother?" Sam was not aware he had pulled his gun until he saw the barrel pressed into Thomas's neck.

"No!" Thomas exclaimed, feeling the barrel dig into his neck. "No, please! You need to understand—"

Sam suddenly realized what he was doing and released Thomas who stumbled back. Sam did not, however, lower the gun. "You tell me what the hell is happening here, right now. I want to know where my brother is and who the hell this Cross is!"

Totally nonplussed, Thomas fought to regain his composure as he stared up at the angry young giant. He swallowed nervously. "William Cross is not responsible for what is happening here, what *has* happened here. It is his son, Leviticus." The name came out with such contempt it might have been a swear word. "Leviticus is the cause of all our sorrows, all our pain, this our curse!"

Sam lowered the gun this time, frowning.

The Thomas facing Sam now, anger in his eyes, was not the same one who had begged for Sam's attention a moment earlier. This was a man with a mission, a purpose. The faces of the others around him had taken on the same steely look of shared pain, shared sorrow and shared anger.

"Your brother is in dire circumstances, at the mercy of a madman, as are we are all. If you are not the promised ones, the wanderers who hold the key to setting us free, then we are truly lost because time has run out for us come the setting of tomorrow's sun."

Thomas implored Sam with a look of fierce determination.

"We have witnessed the signs, the omens foretelling the arrival. The very fires of hell consume us as the sun burns the life from us, our innocent are consumed in the flames of Satan's arms. I have seen this today, as Heloise Crane burned alive at your brother's very feet. As Cross and his followers fell upon him and carried him away." Thomas's voice rose in anguish. "We struck you down to bring you here to a place of relative safety lest the same fate befall you. As has befallen all the others before you. We did not know of your brother's presence until afterwards. I'm sorry." He added, "We had thought you alone."

Thomas straightened, holding out his hands, approaching Sam and clasping his arms in a vise-like grip of terrible need. "I beg of you, tell me truly, are you and your brother the promised? The wanderer's sent here by God to release us from our damnation?"

Sam shook his head slowly, "I don't know what you're talking about."

His words triggered weeping among the women, and sounds of despair from many of the men.

Thomas' head dropped and he sighed. "Then this hell goes on forever."

Sam swallowed and rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry, I don't know who you think we are, or what it means to you, but our car just broke down outside of your town. That's all." He looked around at the broken faces staring at him in desolation.

"I've got to find my brother. Please, can you tell me where he is? What this Cross wants with him?"

"He wants to purify him." A gravelly voice behind Sam stated.

Sam whirled to look behind him, startled to find his eyes resting on a very old man, seated in an old-fashioned wheelchair, moving himself out of the shadows toward Sam.

He had white hair and tiny wire-rimmed glasses. His face was deeply lined, his hands twisted together in his lap, fingers deformed by arthritis. His eyes, as he gazed at Sam, were a brilliant blue and burned with a strange combination of fury and sadness.

"I am to blame for this, despite what Thomas tells you, by my own foolish negligence, I and no one else. For in my hands lay the power to stop it and I was too weak." He stopped just short of rolling into Sam and gazed up at the towering figure before him.

"Who are you?" Sam whispered.

"I am William Cross, shamed that I am the father of the evil that exists among us, masquerading as the leader that would take the people of Rapture's Climb toward the righteous path and has instead led them to hell." His blazing eyes locked onto Sam's.

"Your brother will be 'purified' in the misguided belief that by revealing his evil, his soul will be set free. His husk will then be burned so that his soul can find its rightful place in heaven. This is the final gift that ends it all. The key that my son has feared and sought in his quest for power. And he will find it at the cost of your brother's life."

Sam stepped closer. He had never threatened an old man in a wheelchair before, but now looked like as good a time as any to start.

"Where's my brother?" He said in a low voice. "If anything happens to him..." Sam's face was dark with anger, his fists clenching.

William stared up at Sam without fear. *What had he left to fear after all? What could be worse than this living nightmare?*

"Threaten me, strike me, do what you will," William invited. "Nothing you may do to me, or to any of these people, will help your brother. You are a part of this now, as much as any of us. Our time is running out and this farce must be played out to the end if we have any hope of escaping its consequences."

"You're all talking in riddles! My part in *what?*" Sam snapped. "You're not making any sense! Some maniac has my brother, doing God knows what to him and all you can do is talk in circles! I don't understand!" Sam twisted away, a hand clawed in his hair.

Several of the watchers flinched back as Sam yelled.

"God does know what your brother may be enduring. With faith, we will hopefully gain the strength to end this before it is too late for him, for you," William shook his head and covered his eyes with one shaking hand, "for all of us."

He leaned forward in his chair and held out a gnarled hand. "Hear out what I have to say, boy, and heed the words. Few travelers have found their way to us over these many years. In the effort to thwart our curse, my... son... has made sure those few who discovered us traveled no further lest they be the ones promised—"

"Who are these promised travelers?" Sam demanded. "What curse?" He leaned on the rough table, resting his weight on his hands, head down as it swirled with sudden dizziness.

William sighed. "Sit down and I will explain it all. The sordid betrayal of a weak man and a weaker son. A son who, in his lust for power, however trivial, struck a deal with Satan. Tomorrow, if you and your brother be not the promised gift of release, this bargain will be sealed and we will all be lost to hell.

"Please," William murmured, "If you wish to save your brother, you must listen. You cannot defeat what besieges him—and us—if you do not understand what it is you fight."

\* \* \* \*

*Amateur*, Dean thought, grimacing nonetheless, as the willow whip slashed across his belly again. He'd had worse and by weapons wielded with more skill. It still hurt like hell, but the hard leather ball stuffed in his mouth and buckled in place, along with the tight cuffs that tethered him to the floor, kept him from being able to do more than jerk as each blow fell.

Cross somewhat made up for his lack skill with a certain enthusiasm for his work though, Dean had to give him that. Every few blows Cross would stop and demand Dean confess his demonic wrongdoings and the whereabouts of his brother.

Dean definitely had some words for Cross, but had he been able to speak, he was fairly certain they wouldn't have furthered his cause. It seemed like the repeated demands for information and confession were more for the benefit of the two men lurking outside the door than in the hopes of gaining any insight into Dean's evil side.

It was fairly obvious Cross really didn't give a damn about anything Dean might have had to say.

Cross had removed his jacket and vest and stood in his black shirt, sleeves rolled up, the white square on the front of his collar a glaring beacon.

Or a target, as Dean had come to think of it.

Cross was drenched in sweat from his efforts, breath heaving. Despite the fact that the opening to the ceiling had been closed, blocking the sun, an act for which Dean was supremely grateful, the room was still an oven.

The thought of how many others had worn the gag in his mouth made Dean's stomach turn. How many had Cross interrogated here, beaten pointlessly? And to what end?

He hadn't realized his eyes had closed until the fire of the whip across his face made him buck upwards, choking again. The heated air seared his nostrils as he tried to breathe.

"Open your eyes!" Cross thundered. "Face your retribution!"

Dean responded with a wordless noise of anger.

Cross turned, moving out of Dean's limited line of vision. When he came back he was sipping water out of a dipper, allowing it to run down his chin and trickle down his shirt front.

Dean tried not to look but he couldn't help himself. His body was so parched already the sight of the wasted water running off Cross's face and chest was too much for him. His throat tightened as the drying tissues clung together and he was literally unable to breathe let alone swallow.

His body bucked as he tried to draw in air, his eyes growing wilder with each passing second of denial.

Cross finally seemed to take notice of his distress and watched curiously for a few more seconds before he suddenly reached out and released the catches that held the gag to Dean's face allowing it to fall to the floor. He did the same with the collar. He wasn't ready for this to end.

Still Dean could not inhale and his struggles were slowing, his eyes rolling back.

Slowly Cross reached out and allowed some of the water to trickle into Dean's mouth.

There was a small geyser of water as Dean abruptly coughed, choking. The water soaked into his deprived tissues, as he swallowed convulsively. It seemed barely enough to wet his tongue but he could suddenly breathe again, a hoarse, raw sound in the tomb-like silence of the room.

"You son of a bitch..." Dean croaked, his head falling back. "Why are you doing this?"

Cross smiled. "Tell me where this brother of yours is. Loose ends are untidy and at this juncture I cannot afford to be less than fastidious." He drained the rest of the water from the dipper, shaking the last few drops onto Dean's face where they melted into the sweat and rolled away with it.

"Even if I knew where he was," Dean hacked, forcing the words out, "I sure as hell wouldn't tell you! Do whatever the hell you want to me to get your jollies off!"

Cross's hand closed over Dean's throat and he leaned close. "Do you think I do this for pleasure? Some twisted desire? There is so much more at stake here than you can imagine."

"I don't know," Dean gasped. "You'd be surprised what I can imagine."

Cross's smile faded. "I have waited for this time. Prayed for it, bartered everything for it. I will not let your presence or the presence of your brother interfere. I know you are the promised ones, the keys to keep from me what is mine. I know what must happen to insure this is completed as was agreed. I will not be denied this time!"

Dean's eyes widened. "You think me and my brother are part of some crazy-ass deal you made? Jesus Christ you are insane!" His voice was fading into a harsh whisper as the little moisture he'd been granted was dried up by the effort of speech.

Cross slapped Dean roughly across the mouth, splitting his lip. Blood drifted sluggishly from the cut.

"Do not take the name of the Lord in vain!" Cross snarled, "I did what I must to save this church. Your destruction will prove my faith and devotion to God and I will be granted my rightful place as head of this church!"

Dean coughed again, his mind beginning to lose its focus. "You prove your faith to God by making a bargain with the devil?" Dean couldn't help it.

He laughed.

Cross drew back, his face flushing deep red in fury. He threw back his head and bellowed into the air.

*"Open the ceiling!"*

Dean hadn't thought he could be more miserable.

He was wrong.

\* \* \* \*

It was all Sam could do to sit still and listen to what William had to say. The fact that Dean was somewhere in this place, being "purified" at the whims of a mad man, did not make it easy to be patient.

"Leviticus was a child who enjoyed having others under his control, be it a creature of some sort or another child. I saw this as a trait that I thought could be used to mold the boy into the type of leader Rapture's Climb would need to see it move closer to the path of righteousness we all seek."

Sam's eyes dropped to the floor at that statement. *Was he seeking the right path? Was Dean? Was right merely a point of view?*

"The path that would move us that much closer to God." William continued. "We are a small community that moved to this place to seek God's salvation in our own way, and we moved along without bother to any or from any-"

"But what does that have to do-" Sam interrupted but was cut off by William lifting his hand.

"You must hear it all to understand," William insisted, his anxiety as evident as Sam's. "We did not come to this place in our lives by blind chance. Indulge me, if for no other reason than I need to unburden myself for the wrongs I have committed in my own misguided need for control. To help me understand the motivation that drove my son to betray us for his need to control. You will not find your brother in time without our help and we will not escape without yours."

"You keep talking like this was supposed to happen, like us being here wasn't an accident... I don't believe that, I *can't* believe that." Sam insisted. "You're wrong about us."

William shook his head. "What you believe doesn't matter. If you possess the means to end this, if you *are* the ones who can free us, belief is irrelevant."

He resettled himself in his chair, working the fingers of one hand with the other.

"Leviticus was much like his mother, a stubborn, willful boy, but lacking the strength to demand, preferring to play the sycophant to win others to him. Even I fell victim to his fawning, thinking he did these things in an effort to please me. As time passed, I came to realize he sought control of the congregation of this church for the sake of the power over their lives it would give him."

William made a face. "There were whispered comments about him that I did my best to ignore, revelations about his nature I refused to acknowledge. I kept myself blind to the actions of my own son, the very man I hoped to pass the guidance of this church on to." He removed his glasses and wearily rubbed his eyes.

"Again and again he entreated me to give him the leadership of the church and again and again I managed to put him off, but at some point he decided to make... other... arrangements."

The old man seemed momentarily overcome as he covered his face. Behind him Sam heard the soft crying begin again.

"What happened?" he asked softly.

"He struck a bargain with the evil one," William replied in contempt and disgust. He looked up at Sam, anger blazing in his eyes. "Under *my* roof, under *my* eyes, in exchange for position, he offered Rapture's Climb unto the pit. And his offer was accepted."

Thomas rested a hand on William's shoulder. "You had no way of knowing. It wasn't your fault-"

*"It is my fault!"* William shouted, slamming his fist onto the arm of his chair. "Because I was too full of my own self-righteousness I wouldn't let myself see what my son had become, that he had willingly given his soul to hell! And by doing so doomed us all to hell!"

Sam looked around at the faces gathered in the small room. "What exactly was this bargain?"

William sighed again. "At some point, I have no idea how long before, Leviticus was contacted by a... representative... of the dark side, for lack of a better term. The foundation for this deal was apparently created at the time. Leviticus was given a... talisman... of some kind by this being, to be used at the time that Leviticus desired to cement the deal."

Sam looked puzzled. "Why would he do that? Why not just make the deal?"

"I can only think that perhaps Leviticus believed I would yet relinquish the church to him and needed to justify to himself that he was doing the right thing to accomplish his desires." William shook his head sadly. "Had I but realized..."

"What did the talisman do? Call the demon?" Sam cocked his head, finally moving into familiar territory.

Nodding, William began to roll the chair back and forth in a restless pattern. "We had an argument. I denied William yet again, told him he wasn't ready to lead our flock. He brought the talisman out of his pocket and began to summon the demon, and I learned the true depths to which my son had lowered himself."

He closed his eyes in memory of that night...

\* \* \* \*

### ***Rapture's Climb, 1907***

*"Leviticus!"* William shouted. *"I beg you! You cannot consort with this evil being! He serves only the interests of his master, no matter what tale of fancy he spins you!"*

*"You used the talisman,"* the young man pointed out addressing Leviticus. *"I assume you wanted to complete our deal, otherwise I got places to go and other deals to make."* He held out his hand for the silver talisman Leviticus clutched, one eyebrow cocked and a "sorry we couldn't do business" smile on his face.

*"No!"* Leviticus said instantly. *"His opinion no longer matters."*

*"Fine then! Let's make sure we understand the details of our little bargain."* The finely-dressed young man said, rubbing his hands together. *"Always read the fine print as the lawyers say, and trust me I've met a lot of them."*

*The dapper demon produced a piece of parchment from inside his jacket with a flourish.*

*"The ladies like to seal the deal with a kiss but I like things a little more formal, I'm sure you understand."* His face suddenly lost its jovial aspect and became very serious.

*"You want control of this hamlet, the people, the church, the whole nine yards. That was what you said in our original conversation?"*

*Leviticus glanced at his father, who still lay on the ground, his head buried in his arms. Turning back to the demon, he nodded. "Yes."*

*"Fine, terms are mine as was agreed. And frankly I'm a little bored, thought it might be fun to inject a little challenge into this."* The demon's teeth glittered in a brilliant smile. *"A little sport if you will."*

*A look of uncertainty crossed Leviticus face. "I don't understand, you said-"*

*"I said I'd give you what you asked for. Sure, I can just remove the old man from the equation-"* he raised a hand and clenched it suddenly.

*William cried out and clutched at his chest. "Leviticus!"* he gasped.

*The demon relaxed his hand and William slumped to the floor, wheezing. "But where would the fun be in that?" He looked up at Leviticus, his eyes glowing a brilliant yellow.*

*"I'm giving you one century, one hundred years—"*

*Leviticus' eyes lit up and his face began to glow. This was more than he could have hoped for, leadership of the church AND another century for him to enjoy it!*

*"You in control from the moment our hands clasp. But—" The demon walked over to Leviticus, a finger in the air and began to move around the older man in a slow circle. "To make this interesting, there will be a way for this deal to be broken."*

*The demon stopped, pausing to draw aside the curtain and peer at the people outside who moved about on their own daily business.*

*"As the century passes," he intoned carefully, "there will be ten opportunities to end this." He continued, oblivious to the sudden clouding of Leviticus features.*

*"There will be a traveler, a lost wayfarer seeking help. This chosen traveler alone will possess the means to stop the deal. If the traveler succeeds, you and the town and all its inhabitants are forfeit to me. If the century ends and you have managed to keep the traveler from living out their destiny, this town, its people and your leadership will continue unchanged."*

*"But how am I to know this traveler? To know when the appointed ten times are upon me?" Leviticus argued.*

*The demon smiled. "Trust me you'll know when it's time. As to how you'll know the traveler, again, if I make it too easy, where's the fun? They won't even know, so you'll just have to figure it out. How or what you choose to do with them is your business. It could happen during any of the ten times so you don't want to take any chances."*

*"And if I am successful in destroying these travelers before the ten chances are used?"*

*Another sunny smile from the young demon. "Initiative always deserves a reward."*

*"My leadership will continue unchanged?" Leviticus questioned.*

*The demon leaned close and whispered softly. "Eternity, my friend, eternity."*

\* \* \* \*

Sam sat silently as William and the others watched him. "I'm sorry," he began, spreading his hands slightly. "I feel like I'm missing something..." He suddenly felt it even more strongly as looks were exchanged over his head. "This has been going on for a century?" He glanced at the people gathered around him and the wheelchair-bound old man. Some of them were barely more than his age.

"The demon told Leviticus he would know the ten chances without a problem," William replied. "That was in the year of our Lord, 1907. Once every ten years Rapture's Climb, for seven days, exists in this world. At the end of that time it ceases to be until the cycle repeats itself nine years and 358 days later. Nine times this has happened over the course of the past one hundred years. This is the last window of opportunity, the last day before all is lost and we are condemned forever."

Sam's brain finally started shuffling the pieces of the puzzle into place. "So in between these times..." he started.

"Rapture's Climb vanishes from the earth. Time for us ceases, nothing changes, nothing is gained, lost, no progress, there is no memory but of the week we had ten years before. It is though we never existed. The world for us does not exist. If my son manages to carry out his ill-conceived deeds, we will go on like this for eternity. We cannot die."

William leaned forward, "Neither can we live, we are in hell already."

Sam felt his breath leave in a rush. "My God..." he looked up. "But, Dean and I can't be the only people who've ever found this town?"

Sam would have had to be blind to not see the sudden pain, the guilt, these words caused. Thomas and several others looked away or at the floor.

William shook his head. "No, there...have been other... unfortunates... whose paths have crossed ours. In his zeal to make sure the promised travelers did not escape him..."

"My God," Sam murmured again. *He had to find Dean!*

"During the brief periods of our existence, sides were chosen: those who follow my son and those who, like me, wish this nightmare existence to end."

Tears spilled from William's eyes then, anguish adding the full weight of the past century to his years. "I beg you, you must find a way; there will be no more travelers no more chances..."

Sam scrubbed his face and raked back the hair out of his eyes. "I don't know how to end this, what needs to be done...I have to get to my brother!"

"You don't understand," William exclaimed, "there is no escape for you, the moment you set foot in this place you became a part of it... if we perish in this hellish bargain you perish with us now! You MUST find the way!"

Sam gaped at him, all thoughts of grabbing Dean and leaving the whole awful mess to shift for itself flying out the window. He rose and paced across the room, the others making way for him. He stared at the stone walls and let his mind race through half a dozen scenarios in the space of a heartbeat. His mind reeled at the implications of what he had just heard.

*Could it be true? Could he and Dean be the answer the people of this town had been waiting a century for?*

Seeing a possible loophole, Sam said, "If the curse says the *traveler* must be destroyed, Dean and I travel together, how can we be the traveler you're talking about if there are two of us?"

William shook his head, "It was never said that the traveler would come alone. Only that they would come. I don't know."

"What has to happen for your son to meet his end of the bargain?" Sam snapped, trying to think.

"The traveler must be offered as a gift to seal the bargain. Before the sun sets tomorrow."

"How?" Sam asked, heart in his mouth.

William wouldn't meet Sam's gaze. "He'll be burned," he said quietly.

Sam swallowed, closing his eyes. *Of course, he would be burned...*

"This talisman, can you describe it to me?"

An electric thrill shot through the room as he spoke, a spate of soft comments was murmured from one person to another.

William lifted his head and for the first time in forever, hope kindled in his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Dean thanked God, the Devil and everyone else he could call to mind when the sun finally crept out of view of the opening in the roof. He was half-blind and half-unconscious, desperate to fall the rest of the way and put an end to this madness. The heat was so thick around him he had begun to imagine he was wearing it as a garment he couldn't remove.

Cross had left him alone after the initial encounter which was almost worse than the beating and the incessant questions and demands. Left alone, insane with thirst, body rebelling against the unnatural position he was left in, thoughts began chasing back and forth along his fear for Sam like a dog running a fence.

He tried to let his mind drift, seeking escape, anything to get away from his personal piece of hell, but the release didn't come.

The door he couldn't see banged open and Cross's two associates came into the room, followed leisurely by Cross. He was attired in fresh clothing and had added a large silvery pendant to his outfit. The three men were shimmery blurs, but the pendant stood out to Dean's burned vision like a beacon. He squinted and blinked,

feeling an unpleasant drag from his eyelids. *Can your eyes literally shrivel up in your head?*

As Cross came closer glaring down at him, Dean watched the pendant, following it with his eyes as it swung on a chain.

"N...nice...neck...lace," Dean croaked through cracked lips, "Boy...friend...give it?"

Cross narrowed his eyes and grasped the pendant leaning down, holding it so close to Dean's face it made Dean flinch back.

"This is the key to salvation," Cross spit through his teeth. "With this I will summon he who will receive my gift and grant me that which was promised so long ago."

Dean struggled to focus on the strangely-shaped object, his befuddled sense trying to convince him there was something familiar about it.

It was dark silver, irregularly shaped, slightly cupped with an intricate design etched on to the surface. The chain was run through a narrow slot in the center of the piece. It had obviously not been designed to be worn as an adornment.

Before Dean could get a better look it was snatched away as Cross straightened abruptly.

"Release him!" He barked, stepping back.

The two men moved over and quickly loosened the shackles that held Dean's arms and legs in place, leaving the throat until last.

Dean sagged downward, his muscles too weak to hold him as the tension was released, gagging as his weight tightened the collar, his arms flopping ineffectually in an effort to get it off.

Waiting a few seconds longer than was really necessary, the collar tie was finally released and Dean rolled limply to the floor, coughing, unable to even push himself to his hands and knees. His jeans were sopping wet with sweat, rivulets running from his skin to drip onto the dirt floor.

"What...what are you...doing?" Dean rasped, his lips pressed into the ground, inhaling dust. His fingers curling through the mud his body was creating.

"I brought you something to drink," Cross replied. "You have an important role to play tomorrow; you're no good to me dead. Get him up!" Cross ordered harshly.

Dean was hauled roughly to his knees, dragged over to the "shade" of the corner and dropped there. He collapsed bonelessly, dizzy and shaking, his shoulders screaming from the strain of being pulled back so tightly for so long, his hands were almost numb.

He could hear the slow thud of Cross's boots as he moved to the other side of the chamber. The sound of liquid being poured pulled Dean's head up without his consent, his eyes trying to locate the source of the sound.

Cursing himself for being weak, he couldn't stop his body's reaction to the dipper of water held just out of his reach. Every instinct and muscle he possessed pulled him toward the container, his eyes locked on the quiver of the surface as it trembled slightly with the beat of Cross's heart as he held it.

Cross watched Dean with a sad smile on his face. It would be glorious to finally achieve his goal, but he had to admit, there were a few things about the happenings of the past century he had come to enjoy. A startling personality revelation, but he was going to miss it.

Cross moved the dipper enough to slosh some water over the side, splashing into the ground below, a few drops trickling down the side to dangle before dropping with a silent plop.

Dean's agonized gaze, his desperate need so strong a blind man could have seen it, followed each drop to the earth.

"You want it?" Cross asked softly.

He smiled. "Beg for it."

Body trembling, crying out for the precious moisture, head spinning with need, Dean stared at Cross for a long few seconds, his survival instincts shrieking. His

eyes slid closed and he forced the trembling of his head into a side to side movement, dropping it down to his arm, too weak to hold it upright any longer.

"No." It was a hoarse whisper, barely loud enough to be heard even in the tomb-like silence of the room but it carried every last ounce of defiance Dean could dredge from his soul. "NO!"

Cross frowned.

"S...screw...you," Dean rasped. He refused to look up, unsure he could turn away again.

"I see." Cross replied, rising. He poured the water in the dirt next to where Dean's face was pressed into his arm.

Dean jerked as a few stray drops splashed him.

Cross gave a curt nod to his thus far nameless assistants. "Bring him in."

Dean jerked his head up at that, heart thudding as the two men left the room, returning almost immediately dragging a limp form on its knees through the dirt. Releasing their grip, they allowed the body to fall unceremoniously to the ground with a loose-limbed thud.

Dean cried out as Sam's face came into view, eyes closed, a dark bruise forming over his right eye.

"Perhaps you'll feel differently now..." Cross said, returning to crouch in front of Dean with another dipper of water.

\* \* \* \*

Sam frowned as he made a few scribbled additions to his rough sketch. "Something like this?" He asked, holding the paper out to William, Thomas, and several others who had gathered around to see.

William looked up. "Yes, it looks very much like that," pleased his description of the talisman had been accurate enough for the younger man to produce such a likeness. There were assenting nods from the others. "He wears it on a chain, flaunts it as though it were a medal to be proud of."

He gave the paper back to Sam. "I have only seen him call the demon with it once, but he will summon it again for the passage of the gift. Have you seen such a thing as this before?"

Sam cringed inwardly at the idea of Dean's burned corpse being given as a *gift*, but right now that didn't matter. He nodded absently. "Not in person and not exactly like that, I just can't remember where or when..." he smacked the table with a fist. "Dammit!"

He glanced at his watch; they were running out of time. "You said they pulled the car into town. Are they guarding it?"

Thomas looked surprised, "From what would they guard it? We have no knowledge about such things. Cross's associates know of our allegiance to his father, but we are no threat to him. Many of the others who follow him do so out of fear. But, yes the...car...is in the main street. Why?"

"I need to get to the... stuff... stored in it." Sam replied. "See what I can find that might help us here." He took a deep breath, "I don't know if I can stop this, but I have to find Dean. He has to know he's not alone, that we're trying to figure a way out of this. I need your help."

There was general look of horror that passed over each face. "He commands a demon!"

Sam turned toward the speaker. "My brother and I have fought demon's our whole lives!" He snapped. "You think I don't know what you're up against?" Sam ran angry eyes over the group huddled in trepidation around him. "You can lie down and wait for this to happen, you can sit back and hope that someone will come along to do your dirty work and save your asses, or you can band together and help me try to end this before it's too late. If I'm stuck here, if Dean is, then I know one thing—he

won't go down without a fight. And if we *are* going down... dammit, we're going together!"

Sam stopped and shook his head. These people were so bound by their own fear they couldn't even try to help themselves to save their own existence. "Help or don't help," he finally said, unable to keep the frustrated contempt from his voice. "I'm going now whether you do or not."

He grabbed the drawing and stuffed it in his pocket, turning to leave.

"Wait," Thomas said, putting a hand on Sam's arm. "What do you need us to do?"

\* \* \* \*

Sam followed Thomas down a tunnel and out through a door that opened onto an alley a few hundred feet from where the Impala had been dragged and now sat, her dark body reflecting the moonlight.

Stepping out from the relative cool of the tunnel into the stifling heat outdoors was almost staggering and Sam felt sweat soak him almost instantly.

"Is it always this hot?" he couldn't help whispering, wiping his upper lip.

Thomas shook his head, glancing down the street where bulky vehicle sat in the middle of the road. "No, this was one of the signs Leviticus spoke of, a great wave of heat would envelope the town as a foretelling of what was to come, innocence would be lost in a blaze of fire." Thomas cut his eyes at Sam, "Heloise Crane, today in the church."

Sam made a face. He moved further back into the shadow between the buildings, wanting to have some answers to this puzzle. "If he had omens to watch for why did he... kill anyone else who came into town?"

Thomas stepped back next to Sam, shaking his head. "In the beginning, Leviticus told us he had been visited by a messenger of God and that we were to be tested for our faith. We had no reason to think he would lie to us. We didn't understand his nature then. Nor now, truth be told. He said the messenger had come to take William as well and that he had passed in the night. He's *buried* on the hill next to his wife. At least his coffin is."

Thomas sighed, "It was not until the end of the next cycle that we discovered the truth, much of that first week was spent in prayer and fear. We had no idea what to expect."

"What *did* happen?" Sam asked softly.

"I'm really still not sure what happens, exactly. It's like going to sleep without realizing it, then suddenly... you're aware again, of the world around you. Life, even for that brief period had to go on." Thomas stared out into the street, moonlight glistening on the tear that suddenly rolled down his cheek. When he spoke again, there was a quiver in his voice.

"Then came the first of the innocent who passed our way." Thomas turned away from Sam, voice growing thick. "And we believed... and we helped Leviticus..." He smashed a fist against his mouth angrily, forcing himself under control. "We were such fools," he choked.

After a moment he went on, anger evident now. "It was on the last day of the second cycle that we discovered William Cross lived. Leviticus had imprisoned him in the cellar and it was in this discovery that we found out about the caverns that run below the streets. William told us the truth of that night and several others took him into the tunnels, sealing up the entrance to the cellar. He has dwelt there ever since."

"Hasn't Leviticus tried to find him? Tried to find you?" Sam was at a loss to explain such a lack of action under circumstances like these.

"To what end?" Thomas replied logically. "He could do us no more harm that had already transpired. We cannot die; we are trapped like this until the curse runs its time. We were no threat to Leviticus and his followers. Our time here is so brief; we could do nothing to save the unfortunates who stumbled upon us. It is as William

said. Once they have crossed into Rapture's Climb they are unable to leave. We tried to aid the next who found us but all roads led back to here. And still they fell into Cross's evil hands."

Sam leaned against the clapboard siding of the building they stood next to, feeling sick. "How many?" he asked.

Thomas turned to regard Sam with a look so terrible Sam thought he would break under it. "You and your brother will make sixteen." He stated flatly.

Sam's mouth tightened and he pushed away from the building. He had to get to the Impala. An idea had crept into this mind ever since Leviticus talisman had been described to him. It was too bizarre to really be given serious consideration which made it perfect for them. "Let's see what we can do to prevent that." He peered around the corner again, "Let's go."

He and Thomas crossed the streets with relative ease. Thomas appeared to be right: the Impala was unguarded. Sam crept down the passenger side of the car stretched out his hand to grasp the handle and push the release button.

Which didn't move.

*Son of a bitch!* Sam swore to himself. It was locked. *Of course it was locked! Dean would never leave the car unlocked no matter the circumstances! Shit!*

Well, there was nothing for it. Sam reached into his pocket and grabbed his wallet, pulling his two favorite lock picks from the lining.

"What's wrong?" Thomas hissed.

"Nothing," Sam whispered back. "Just gimme a minute." A few nail-biting moments later, he felt the lock give and he carefully tried the release again, mentally rejoicing as the door pulled free from the latch. Holding his breath, Sam eased the door open, his heart jolting with every creak of the hinge that he normally paid no attention to; here it sounded as loud as a scream.

Finally the damned door was open wide enough that he could slide in and get to the glove box which, thank God, fell open in silence even though the items that tumbled free did not do likewise. No longer caring, Sam clawed through the jumble on the floor and then through the glove box, gasping as his finger was jabbed suddenly. He closed his fingers on the object of his hunt and withdrew it, turning to tell Thomas he had it.

Once again he was struck bluntly across the head, falling back against the Impala and slumping to the ground.

\* \* \* \*

"*You bastard!*" Dean's voice was almost gone but the words were still clear enough to be heard. Adrenaline he didn't know he had left shot through his weary body and he tried to pull himself toward his brother. "Sam!"

Cross shoved Dean away roughly with a foot, knocking him back into the wall.

"You are going to die," he remarked, a though commenting on an event of little import. "There is no escape for you. You are to be claimed at dawn by the one I shall call forth. Before the deed is done, you will acknowledge your evil before me, before my congregation and before him. There will be no doubt among my followers that I am truly meant to lead them."

"Yeah," Dean grated. "Straight to... hell!"

Cross looked at a third man standing in the doorway, addressing him. "If this young man does not immediately request he given something to drink, I want you to kill that one."

Cross nodded his head toward Sam's unconscious form, then returned his attention to Dean who was watching the newcomer as he crossed to Sam and knelt by him, pulling a familiar-looking knife from his coat and brandishing it over Sam's throat.

Dean's eyes widened. "Where did-"

Cross kicked Dean again, cutting his eyes to the man over Sam who obligingly pressed the edge of the blade to Sam's skin.

"No!" Dean cried out.

Cross raised his free hand to stop his companion, holding out the water to Dean again with a smile.

It was a no-win situation and all Dean could hope to buy was time. Give Sam a chance to recover and maybe they could figure a way to get out of here.

Dean swallowed with effort and closed his eyes. "Give me the water." He ground out, raising his hand, willing it not to tremble.

Cross shook his head. "Is that how your mother raised you to ask for things?"

Dean's eyes snapped open.

Cross's smile faded slightly at the corners as what he saw in those fiery green depths.

"Please," Dean said through his teeth, unable to control the shaking now. "May I have... the water?"

Cross's smile broadened and he leaned down to hold the container to Dean's mouth, tipping it to his lips.

Once the liquid touched his lips Dean couldn't stop himself, he grasped the dipper and drank desperately.

Cross stepped back, pleased.

He waved the other man away from Sam, who was beginning to stir.

"You did very well, thank you, Thomas."

\* \* \* \*

Sam rolled his head against the hardness behind him, his head once again thumping with pain. *What the hell...*

He tried to sit up but discovered his hands were tied to something behind him, bringing him up short as he moved. *Where the hell was he and how did he get here?*

He blinked, waiting for his surrounding to come into focus. The room was dark except for the illumination provided by a weak sliver of light leaking through a slit in the ceiling.

It was hot. Not as hot as outside during the day, but no air moving, thick as molasses, hard-to-breathe-hot nonetheless. He couldn't imagine what the closed room was like during the sun-blasting hours of the day.

As his eyes adjusted he made out some strange looking contraption in the center of the room.

He felt a surprising chill as he realized the thing had straps hanging off of it and two rings bolted on this side of the floor. He didn't want to think of Dean strapped to that—whatever it was—unable to move, broiling in the oven-like room.

He moved his eyes toward the shadows beyond that-

*Dean!*

Sam jerked against his restraints. "Dean! Dean wake up!"

Dean was sprawled unmoving, on the dirt floor, his face turned away. Sam stared into the dimness intently, feeling a rush of relief as he saw the faint movement of Dean's bare chest.

"Dean it's me! Sam! C'mon Dean, wake up!" Sam raised his voice slightly but drew no response from his brother.

Sam sat back in frustration. *Great! Here was trying to figure a way out of this mess and he gets stuck even deeper in it.*

But, he considered, at least he and Dean were together and Dean appeared to be alive, if not conscious. That was worth something.

He automatically tried to lift his arm to see the time, forgetting his arms were tied behind him and apparently to the wall. How long had he been out?

He ran his mind over the time after he had left with Thomas to get the dagger from the car. He had been struck, which he was not expecting because Thomas had been adamant that guarding the car was pointless.

Sam suddenly rolled his eyes, making a sound of disgust. Of course there was no need to guard the damned car because Sam had the guard with him the whole time.

*Thomas.*

*That son of a bitch.*

Sam cursed his own gullibility. *How could he have been so stupid!* The whole thing had been an act carried out by a very talented group of homicidal maniacs intent on sealing their deal with the devil.

Even as this thought stomped through his head it felt wrong. Thomas, yeah, a plant would have made sense, someone to keep an eye on the other side, but thinking back, recalling the pure emotion in William's eyes.

No, that had been real. He was sure of it.

He jerked back as the door opened and a figure stepped inside, walked a few steps to Sam and hunched down.

"Hello, Samuel."

Sam curled his lip, pulling against the ropes. "You're a real piece of work, you know that?"

Thomas looked puzzled. "I'm not quite sure what that means but it doesn't sound like a compliment. I thought we were getting on so well." He shook his head sadly.

"How can you do this, turn your back on these people?" Sam demanded.

Thomas smiled. "I have no need to justify myself to you. I came for him." He nodded toward Dean's limp body.

"What did you do to him? I swear-"

Thomas rose, making a clucking noise with his tongue. "Swearing is a sin. You should be watchful of what comes out of your mouth. We gave him a drink, he was thirsty. I guess he was too thirsty to wonder what was in it. Now he's getting some rest, we want him alert for his performance. Don't worry," he added, moving to the door to the door and gesturing outside. He was joined by another, rather large man, easily as tall as Sam and much broader. "You'll be joining him shortly. It'll be dawn in another hour and we have a lot to do. It's going to be a big day. You don't want to miss it. Take him." Thomas said, pointing casually at Dean.

The large man walked to Dean and scooped him up as easily as a child, throwing him over a shoulder. Dean hung limp and unresponsive as the man walked back out of the room.

Sam thrashed impotently. "Dean!!" he yelled.

Thomas held his fingers to his lips. "Patience is a virtue, Sam, and silence is golden."

Sam ground his teeth together as Thomas hunkered down, companionably beside him.

From inside his coat he produced the curvy bladed dagger he had held against Sam's throat, the one Sam had taken from the Impala's glove box, the one Dean had bought cheap in a junk shop because the guard was missing that he kept meaning to repair.

"Recognize this, Sam?" he asked conversationally.

The one the shopkeeper had sworn had been given to Charlemagne by Pope Leo the III and had been carried through all the Crusades as a holy symbol of God and was purported to possess the means to slay the minions of the devil.

The one they'd tossed in the glove box so many years ago and forgotten.

Dean had listened to the story, laughed to himself, and bought it because he thought the etchings along the blade were pretty.

As an antique would have been incredibly valuable, intact, as a means to kill demons, it would have been priceless.

Without the guard it was supposedly worthless.

And the guard, Sam knew now, was hanging around Leviticus Cross's neck.

"I can't believe you've had this in your...car...all this time and never realized what it was. You do know what it is, I assume?" Thomas cocked his head and lifted a brow.

"Yeah," Sam gritted. "I do now."

Thomas laughed with delight and flipped the blade so the ornate handle rested in his palm, the blade pointed at Sam. "Kind of hard to use a knife like this without the guard, have to be real careful not to slice your hand."

"What are you gonna do with that?" Sam growled.

Thomas shrugged. "I guess you'll have to wait and see." He patted Sam on the shoulder, getting to his feet.

He strolled back out the door and slammed it shut.

"Damn you!" Sam shouted.

Thomas' echoing laughter was his only response.

\* \* \* \*

It was probably less than an hour when Sam heard footsteps coming down the hallway and the door banged open, but it felt like days. The man who had taken Dean earlier entered along with another man just as large.

The first man leaned down and slapped Sam across the face, shocking Sam as much as hurting him. He waved a meaty finger in Sam's face. "If you twitch, I'll kill you and you'll never see your brother again. Is this clear?"

Sam spit blood and nodded. The other man produced a knife and slashed through Sam's bindings. Between them they hauled him to his feet. The desire to fight back, *do something*, was almost overwhelming but Sam controlled himself and walked along between them, frantically trying to come up with a way out of this.

He was pushed outside into the first gray light of dawn, the stifling heat a solid object to be traversed.

The sight that greeted him did not fill him with hope. There were at least fifty-odd people gathered loosely in the center of the street, milling restlessly. Men, women, old, young, even a few children all gazing at the spectacle before them.

Sam followed their collective gazes, across the body of the Impala, a dark presence at the front of the crowd. A large amount of wood was piled around the vehicle, a sight which under any other circumstances might have been laughable, but Sam felt no smile tug at his face.

Behind the Impala, atop a much larger pile of wood, a small stage was erected with two poles thrusting up from the center and another pole spanning the small distance between them.

Dangling from the center pole, thick ropes wrapped multiple times around his wrists was Dean.

Sam felt his knees buckle. He was yanked sideways and pulled into a position at the front of the crowd.

Dean hung limply, his head barely moving as he struggled to lift it, his feet dragging loosely against the wooden floor, legs unwilling or unable to bear his weight.

Sam pulled against his captors, heart racing, and received a sound clout against the side of his head that almost took him to his knees.

Shaking his head to clear it he stopped dead as a tall figure dressed entirely in black, wearing a ministers white collar crossed in front of the platform of Dean's pyre and stood waiting for the small crowds attention. Around his neck was the talisman, a silver glow on his chest in the first rays of dawn.

The tall preacher, Sam assumed it was Leviticus Cross, raised his arms and silence fell over the waiting audience.

"My dear friends, my fellow townspeople, my congregation." He began in a ringing voice "Long have we awaited the day that lies before us. Since the night that God's messenger visited me and told me Rapture's Climb had been called to put its faith on the line we have endured hardship unlike any other, but we have protected ourselves and our faith from the evil that attempted to overtake us on our path to God. The day has come when our trial would come to an end and He will reward His faithful of Rapture's Climb for their devotion and sacrifice!"

There was a chorus of "amens" that made Sam sick to hear. There was no way he could convince these deluded people that their "leader" was dooming them to an eternity of virtual non-existence.

He gestured in Sam's direction and Sam's assistants immediately grabbed his arms and pulled him forward to stand next to Cross and his smirking companion.

"Dean!" Sam called, twisting to look up at him. "Dean please, wake up!"

Dean moaned and rolled his head, his legs shifting but he didn't respond otherwise.

The crowd began to murmur earnestly among themselves and point.

"Witness our triumph, our final gift, the evil that was foretold to us so long ago stands before you, ready to offer up as a tribute!"

"You're insane!" Sam shouted.

The resultant blow did take him to his knees this time, lights flashing on the periphery of his vision.

He gasped as he was jerked roughly back to his feet and a voice barked. "Stand up and be judged!" Thomas stood close behind him, the ropes around Sam's wrists tight in his grip. "Don't move," he hissed.

Sam tried not to gasp as the cold hardness of a knife was pressed into his hand. Fumbling it out of sight Sam recognized the shape as the dagger of Charlemagne.

"Wait." Thomas mouthed as Sam turned to stare at him, their eyes locking. Sam's heart began to pound even faster. Thomas nodded at him and moved away.

"We will reduce this evil to ash that will blow away with the flames of hell that have hovered over our town as a sign of what was to come, destroying finally, the harbingers of doom for whom we have waited for so long!"

Cross swiftly climbed the steps to the platform and stepped up to Dean. Reaching out he grasped Dean's jaw and lifted his head for all to see. Dean's eyes were sunken and dried blood clung to his chin from his cracked lips. He blinked slowly and appeared dazed.

"Admit your guilt, the evil which you bring tried to bring upon us. Admit this and we will be merciful with your companion, his destruction will be swift. Do you confess this?"

When Dean didn't reply Cross moved his hand to Dean's hair and pulled his head back, shaking it. "Confess!" Cross bellowed.

Sam forced himself to stay still, having no choice but to let the situation play out, simply rescuing Dean was not going to fix this.

"Are you the harbinger?" Cross demanded.

Dean grimaced, his eyes fell on Sam, but there was no light of recognition.

"Yes," he whispered hoarsely, barely able to force sound past his parched throat. "Yes..."

"God, Dean..." Sam whispered in return.

"Praise God!" Cross cried raising his arms. The voices of the crowd filled the air with their echoed cries. Coming back down the steps, Cross accepted a torch that had blazed into life. He held it aloft then thrust it into the tinder that lay beneath Dean's feet. It caught with enthusiasm, yellow flames licking up through the wood.

Cross stepped back, a look of satisfaction on his angular face. His hand closed around the talisman and his lips began to move as he recited the words he had memorized so carefully. His long unbound hair began to stir as a sudden breeze moved through the air.

"NO!" Sam yelled.

"Stop this abomination!" A voice rang out.

All eyes shot to the speaker as the crowd began to part with gasps and cries and William Cross was pushed forward in his wheelchair by Thomas. Stopping just short of his son.

Leviticus actually staggered back a step, his hand dropping from the silver pendant.

"Father..." he gasped. His eyes flicked to Thomas who smiled softly.

"This ends today, Leviticus. It's over."

Leviticus shook his head, "No. It *begins* today!" The invocation had been spoken, even with this sudden turn of events, the prize was still within his grasp.

Unnoticed in the confusion Sam frantically sawed at the ropes on his wrists with the dagger, feeling the strands part, he glanced up at Dean, who was starting to stir and cough as smoke began to drift around him. The tips of the flames just beginning to lick through the boards of the platform.

A hazy figure began to form next to Cross as Sam watched. Gasps went up from the assemblage. The wind was picking up and people were starting to shield their eyes from flying grit.

"You have slaughtered the innocent in your quest for this tiny bit of power," William accused, "doomed this community, turned you back and spit upon everything that we held sacred!" His voice rose to be heard over the now howling wind.

The flames beneath Dean began to crackle with a vengeance. His body was swinging with the force of his coughs and the power of the rising wind.

The form next to Cross coalesced into a well dressed young man with a salesman's smile.

Sam felt the ropes on his wrist part.

The demon flashed yellow eyes at the gathering with a disapproving eye.

"We have a problem?" he asked.

"No!" Leviticus shouted.

"Yes!" Sam replied. He shoved Leviticus into the demon and jumped onto the burning pile of wood. It was two quick steps through the flames and he was next to Dean reaching out with the dagger to cut him free.

"Stop him!" Leviticus cried, untangling himself from the demon and his father who had all gone down in a heap.

Several men rushed the burning platform. Sam twisted, fighting them off in a fury of slashing and long legged kicks, desperately trying to protect Dean. Two men went flying into the crowd, the third managed to grip Sam around the waist and drag him off the platform, both of them hitting the ground with a breath stealing thud. The dagger flying from his grasp.

Sam floundered to his feet and delivered a kick to the chin of the man who had taken him down. He staggered sideways and fell to his hands and knees, shaking his head. Vision clearing, he searched the ground frantically for the dagger. Out of the corner of his eye he saw William, lying on the ground, close his hand over it and begin to clamber shakily to his knees.

The fire was starting to rage and Sam had no time to vacillate. He scrambled up what remained of the burning steps, his clothing smoking and stumbled to Dean who was struggling to breathe.

Sam knew he had no pocketknife on him, he could try to burn the ropes to free Dean but by then the whole thing would be ablaze. There was a solid *thunk* next to his head and he jerked back instinctively.

A short bladed knife was quivering in the wood where his head had been. He didn't stop to question providence but pulled it free and cut Dean down with two quick slashes.

The knife clattered to the wood as Sam lunged to catch Dean's body as it fell. Sam could feel Dean moving in his arms but it was with the strength of a kitten.

Looking around at the flames surrounding him, Sam took a deep breath, wrapped his arms around Dean and jumped.

To his surprise waiting arms broke their fall and he looked up stunned as the men and women in the crowd gathered around them, many of them with tears streaming down their faces.

The wind had stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The only sound was the crackling of the flames and soft weeping.

Sam saw the people in front of him move to the side, their heads down as a figure walked through them. He pulled himself in front of Dean as the demon stood over him shaking his head.

He turned, waving a hand behind him. "Who'd've thought," he commented in disgust.

Sam, eyeing the other man suspiciously, rose hesitantly and took a few steps forward.

A short distance away laid Leviticus and his father, unmoving. William's hand was clasped tightly around the handle of the dagger, which was buried in his son's heart, the blade locked through the center of the talisman like a bullseye.

Thomas was staring down at both men. He looked up at Sam and sighed, walking over to them.

"All the little random things that come together to mean something," the demon mused with a smile. "I guess some things really are meant to be." He made clicking noise and turned to Thomas holding out his hand. "You win."

Thomas gripped the offered hand but did not smile. "I didn't make the deal to lose."

He turned to Sam. "I'm sorry, this was the only way. After William revealed what Leviticus had done, we couldn't figure out any way out except to make another deal. If the guard of the dagger was rejoined with the blade before Leviticus could make good on his deal, we were to be released. I'm sorry you and your brother were the ones to get caught up in it. You had the dagger. I guess it was meant to be."

He held out his hand to Sam. "Thank you." He walked behind Sam to join the people gathered behind him.

The demon shook his head. "Ah, well. Can't win them all. There's always another deal, another day." He glanced past Sam to look at Dean. Sam stepped to the side to block him.

The demon laughed, his form fading. "I'm sure we'll meet again, Sam Winchester."

There was a tiny pop, a brilliant flash of light that made Sam shield his eyes and the demon was gone leaving behind only an acrid smell of sulfur.

Sam lowered his hand, blinking. The sight that met his eyes caused him to whirl around to look behind him.

*Everything was gone.*

Around him were tumble down buildings and a few artifacts strew about. The wind picked up again and tiny whirlwinds danced down the dusty street. The sun, which had risen to glow brightly in the sky, became obscured as clouds rapidly gathered in the sky.

At his feet Dean groaned and coughed.

"Dean, my God, Dean are you okay?" Sam knelt and put his arm under Dean's shoulder to help him sit up.

"Thirsty..." Dean whispered, brushing his throat with his hand.

"Hang on, can you walk?" Sam helped Dean to rise, supporting as much of his brother's weight as he could. Getting Dean to the car Sam settled him in the seat.

Sam scabbled through the car in search of water, turning up two bottles, one of which he opened and handed to Dean who immediately turned it up and gulped.

Sam pulled it away.

"What are you doing?" Dean protested, coughing, reaching out for the bottle.

"Slow, Dean, you'll make yourself sick. You can have some more in a second."

Dean slumped back against the seat. He felt like a dried-out sponge. "What happened? I don't remember anything after they made me drink that water..." He sat up slightly and looked around. "Where is everyone? The buildings?"

Sam gave him a grim look, "I'll explain later. If I can." He popped the hood. "Did you get this fixed?"

Dean nodded, "Good enough. Needs water though, get us to the next town for a new hose." He held out a shaking hand, "Please, Sam, I'm really thirsty."

Sam glanced up and down the street, spotting a hand pump next to the remains of what had been the store. He handed the bottle to Dean. "Small sips, Dean!" He noticed Dean was shivering.

The sky was darkening steadily and the wind was rushing through the ghost town, the temperature had dropped considerably and there was a hint of moisture in the air.

"Let me get you some clothes," Sam said getting in the back seat and rummaging in Dean's duffel for dry jeans, a shirt and shoes. "Can you manage?" he asked.

Dean nodded, too exhausted and spent to offer a dirty look.

"I'll be back in a second, yell if you need me."

There was a bucket lying next to the pump. It took some serious effort but eventually water began to trickle from the spout.

As Sam carried the full bucket to the car, thunder rumbled overhead and it began to rain.

\* \* \* \*

Looking up as a distinctive rumble sounded over the soft rain, the station attendant stared as the black Impala he had sent down the detour two days earlier roared past, rooster tails leaping upwards from the water on the road.

He sighed, picking up the bowl from under the counter and stirring the deep red contents with a finger, hoping it was still fresh enough to get through.

He closed his pale blue eyes and waited.

After a few seconds his eyes snapped open again, the soft blue replaced by a solid marble black.

"No, I'm sorry." He said into the swirling scarlet. "It didn't work. They got away."

The End