

REMOTE CONTROL

By Irismay42

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Sandie Bishop had a million thoughts rattling around in her head as she absently turned her beat up silver minivan into the parking lot of Penny's All You Can Eat Diner.

As was usual for a Saturday, the lunch crowd had arrived early and simply not left, hungry families intent on taking the diner's name quite literally piling inside with what seemed like at least a hundred kids apiece, all of whom appeared dead set on consuming their own weight in burgers, fries and ice cream sundaes.

Sandie barely noticed as she carefully circled the parking lot, the ancient security cameras dotted around the perimeter fence squeaking slightly as they followed her progress.

Now what time did Janey need picking up from soccer practice? Two-thirty? Or was it three? Sandie shook her head slightly. No, three o'clock was when she was supposed to be collecting Robbie from Luis' house and dropping the boys at Mitchell's birthday bowl-a-rama. So Janey must be two-thirty.

Crap! she berated herself as she scanned the parked vehicles for one in particular. *Ruby's costume!* Her youngest daughter would throw a fit if she had to be the only pirate without an eye patch in the school play. *Must run down to the store. Can't have Cap'n Ruby without an eye patch...*

She smiled as she finally spotted the big black car parked slightly away from the others to the rear of the lot, checking the license plate number and nodding in relief.

Good. They're here.

So: Soccer at two-thirty, bowling at three, eye patch for Ruby and she *had* remembered to put a full clip in the 9mm, right?

Easing the minivan into a spot just left of the big shiny black car, she yanked on the parking brake before pulling her purse roughly across the passenger seat and tugging out the black handgun secreted inside. Releasing the clip, she checked its stock of ammo before sliding it back into the grip and sighing contentedly.

Soccer. Bowling. Eye patch. Bullets.

All was right with Sandie's world.

Pleased with herself, she stepped calmly out of the car, not really registering that this was the first calm she'd felt all day. This was okay, this was right, she told herself. *Just get this done, then off to pick up Janey after soccer.*

Sandie's smile faltered slightly as she wondered how her oldest daughter was doing at practice. She hadn't scored a goal in four games and was starting to get a little bummed about the whole thing. Maybe she'd take her out for pizza. And Ruby. Have ice cream. Maybe come to Penny's...

Just needed to do this one little thing first.

She patted the trunk of the big black Chevy as she passed, walking slowly and deliberately toward the diner's entrance – no hurry, no panic – fingers curling confidently around the Beretta just peeking over the lip of her purse.

She glanced up at the security camera above the door as the little bell chimed to announce her entrance, smiling faintly and hoping her lipstick looked okay.

Must get a new tube of the fuchsia next time I'm at the drugstore, she reminded herself, suddenly remembering she was out of her favorite shade.

"We're a little crowded today," the brassy blonde waitress informed her, smiling falsely as she lifted up the coffee pot to avoid smacking some guy in a Phillies cap over the head with it. "If you'll just give me a minute..."

"Oh, that's okay," Sandie replied cheerily, glancing around the crowded restaurant and smiling brightly as her eyes lit on a booth way in back toward the fire exit. "I'm looking for someone..."

Silently reminding herself to pick up the dry cleaning on the way to Janey's soccer practice, Sandie methodically drew the 9mm from her purse, raised it to shoulder height, and began to walk purposefully toward the rear of the diner, completely oblivious to the sudden screams of startled patrons all around her, some of whom began to fling themselves off their chairs to cower beneath their tables as the gun in Sandie's hand swept in a wide arc above their heads.

Approaching the booth she'd spotted from the doorway, Sandie's smile widened as her finger hovered over the trigger of the Beretta.

"Ah, there you are," she said pleasantly, before proceeding to empty the clip into the horrified crowd.

Dean Winchester wasn't having the best day.

Bad enough that the Impala had gotten a flat on the way into town; that his best jeans had gotten a little more ripped when he went to fix it; that Sam had insisted on ordering him *green stuff* with lunch when they'd finally found a half decent motel room and made it to an overcrowded diner swarming with goddamn kids; screaming kids, wailing kids, yelling kids, running kids. Dean didn't usually have a problem with munchkins, but today his head was still trying to decide whether he should have stopped when they brought out that third pitcher of sangria last night, or whether two should really have been his limit. Five, his throbbing headache was telling him, was probably pushing it.

Wow, those checkout girls had *really* been in the mood to party...

And then, of course, he still had to put up with Sam's continual mother-henning, which had increased to epic proportions since that whole getting-possessed-by-a-demon thing, culminating in his currently being force-fed broccoli – even though Dean had been at great pains to point out that even broccoli couldn't fend off demonic possession.

And all of that was before some suburban housewife had decided to burst into the diner and go all *Terminator* on the customers.

Yeah, *that* was all Dean needed today.

Hangover.

Broccoli.

Gun-wielding soccer mom.

Just perfect.

"What the hell?!" Sam hissed, pulling Dean back behind their overturned table as a bullet pinged off the Formica just as his brother reached for the downed waitress currently spilling blood all over the black and white tiled floor.

"Oh my god, that's Sandie Bishop!" the waitress cried, trembling hand pressed to the bullet hole in her shoulder as her ashen face looked up at the woman striding nonchalantly toward her. "Her son's in my daughter's math class!"

Dean made another attempt at grabbing the waitress' shirt, fingers finally snagging on the fabric, enabling him to drag her back behind the table just as the clicky-clack of the approaching woman's sensible heels came to an abrupt halt six feet away from them.

"You can't hide," the woman said calmly. "I see you back there."

Dean glanced at Sam wide-eyed as he cautiously slid his handgun from the inner pocket of his navy blue jacket. "So I'm not usually the paranoid type," he muttered, leaning his head back against the table as Sam drew his own weapon and returned his brother's incredulous gaze. "But you get the feeling this chick's here for us?"

Sam swallowed. "Now who've we pissed off?" he muttered, daring to peek out from behind the table just as another bullet took a chunk of foam out of the seat against which he

was crouching, barely an inch from his ear.

"You wanna list?" Dean offered, trying to ignore the oddly panicked look the waitress was throwing their way.

Sam smiled awkwardly at the waitress, pressing his hand against the one she was clutching to her shoulder. "Just keep pressure on it," he instructed her reassuringly. "You're gonna be fine. Probably won't even scar."

The waitress didn't look like she believed him, trying to push herself further back into the booth, into the space between the seats where the table had previously been standing.

"Come out come out wherever you are!" the soccer mom sang cheerfully, taking another step towards them.

"Well she certainly don't look like no hunter," Dean scowled, for the first time in his life relieved to hear the sound of police sirens wailing in the distance, just as another shot rang out above his head and his scowl deepened. "So who the hell is she?"

A loud click caused him to look straight up, right into the barrel of Sandie Bishop's deadly-steady 9mm, which had appeared over the top of the upturned table and was currently pointed right between his eyes. He gulped audibly, hands moving out to his sides in a gesture of surrender as Sam did likewise.

"Hey lady," Dean managed, not moving one iota, eyes slightly crossed as he continued to stare into the barrel of Sandie's Beretta. "You really wanna splatter a face this pretty all over some random diner?"

Sandie glared at him. "You're going to get what's coming to you," she assured him. "You're going to pay. After what you did..."

Dean frowned, trying to uncross his eyes but finding himself unable to focus on anything but the gun barrel hovering inches from his face. "Sweetheart, you're gonna have to be a little more specific." He smiled nervously. "We've done a *lot* of things –"

"You're not getting away this time," Sandie interrupted as if he'd not even spoken, suddenly shoving the barrel of the Beretta right up against Dean's forehead, forcing what Dean would later refer to as a grunt, but Sam would later refer to as a squeak to escape the older brother's lips.

"Wait!" Sam lurched forward, drawing out his pistol with lightning speed and aiming it above Dean's head. "You don't –"

"You're going to pay –"

Dean snapped his eyes shut as Sandie's finger squeezed the trigger, Sam's anguished scream of "No!" intermingling with a loud bang that resounded eerily around the suddenly silent diner.

All Dean heard then was the sound of Sam's harsh breathing, and he opened one eye cautiously, taking an experimental breath of his own.

Sam's eyes were as wide as that Christmas morning when he was six and Dad had actually remembered to get them a Christmas tree. He was staring at a point beyond Dean's shoulder, the older brother slowly opening his other eye and muttering "Please don't let there be soccer mom brains all over me," before twisting around to follow the direction of Sam's stunned gaze.

Sandie Bishop was lying sprawled out across the tiled floor, gun still held loosely in her hand as a tiny trickle of blood began to ooze down her temple and into her hair.

Dean's gaze immediately traveled up, to where a big black guy in a greasy white apron stood clutching a frying pan with both hands, teeth clenched together in a grimace of either grim determination or abject terror, the sudden tremble in his arms suggesting the latter.

Dean just stared up at him for a second, vaguely aware of Sam scrambling toward the downed soccer mom and knocking the Beretta out of her lax grip. He blinked twice, before managing, "Dude, you totally hit her with a frying pan."

The cook seemed to come back to himself slightly, a sheepish smile playing at the

corners of his mouth as his shrugged big shoulders. "Always works in the movies," he said, attention drawn suddenly toward the window and the parking lot outside, where two local cop cars had just screeched to a halt, blue and red lights flashing angrily as boys and girls in blue flung themselves out onto the gravel, cowering behind open car doors, service revolvers drawn nervously.

"You in the diner!" a crackly voice sounded loud over a bullhorn, feedback screech almost drowning out the cop's last couple of words. "Throw down your weapons and come out with your hands in the air!"

The cook shrugged again, ambling over to one of the windows, rapping on the glass before shoving it open a crack. "It's okay, she's disarmed!" he yelled.

The cop with the bullhorn straightened, motioning his fellows to move in, at which point Sam quickly stashed his own weapon out of sight and grabbed a fistful of Dean's jacket urgently. "Come on," he said, tugging his brother toward him. "We gotta get you outta here."

Dean squinted at him, for a second not catching on, before suddenly grinning lopsidedly. "I keep forgetting I'm a dead serial killer," he said, not resisting Sam's urging as his brother tugged him down behind a couple more overturned tables before beginning to crawl toward the emergency exit at the rear of the diner.

"Everyone stay put!" the cop with the bullhorn ordered, as the little bell over the front door tinkled to announce the arrival of two scared-looking young officers whose hands trembled on their handguns as they surveyed the scene in front of them.

One of them approached Sandie's prone form, handcuffs at the ready, while his colleague scratched her head in surprise as she took in the identity of the 'mad gunman' some guy trapped in the diner's toilets had dialed 911 to report as soon as the shooting started.

"Everyone stay where you are," the female cop repeated her superior's orders. "Once we've taken care of the wounded, we're going to want statements from all of you..."

Sam glanced back to ensure Dean was still behind him as he quietly reached out to shove open the emergency door. "Sorry officer," he muttered, ducking out into the parking lot. "Not today."

Dean followed close on his brother's heels, briefly checking out the cop before shaking his head a little disappointedly. "Even though you *do* kinda look like Heather Locklear in that uniform..."

"What the hell was that?" Dean burst out, only able to speak once the blue and red lights of the additional cop cars now swarming toward the diner were only distantly visible in the Impala's rearview mirror.

Sam sat rigidly in the passenger seat, staring forward so hard Dean was worried the kid might strain something. "I think you were right," he said at length, jaw tense and eyes wide. "I think she was after us."

Dean glanced sideways at him, noting his pasty pallor. "She wasn't a hunter, Sam," he assured him confidently. "They've not found us. If they're even still after us."

Sam swiveled in his seat suddenly. "Then what the hell was she, Dean?" he demanded, fists clenched against his thighs. "Because if she wasn't a hunter, then the only other logical explanation would be possession." He took a deep breath. "Maybe she was one of Haris' kids. Maybe they're not done with us..."

Dean flinched involuntarily, suddenly feeling the weight of the amulet heavy around his neck and unconsciously reaching to turn down the volume on the stereo as Cozy Powell's *Dance With the Devil* thudded from the speakers. He swallowed hard, clenching his teeth as he tried to regain his equilibrium, knuckles white as he clung to the steering wheel just a little too tightly.

Sam winced, for a second tempted to bite out his own tongue. "Dean, I'm sorry, I didn't mean —"

Dean shook his head. "This ain't exactly a demon's style, Sam," he said, cutting Sam off as if nothing had happened, clearing his throat as his voice cracked a little. "Sneak attacks; spooky basements; ambushes in abandoned warehouses. That's a demon's M.O. But taking out a crowded diner using a possessed desperate housewife? No way. Plus, you know, her eyes weren't –" his gaze inadvertently skittered to his own reflection in the rearview mirror. "They weren't – you know."

Sam lowered his voice, looking away awkwardly. "Neither were yours," he pointed out softly. "Not all of the time."

Dean fixed his gaze hard on the blacktop, voice faltering just slightly. "When – when it was –" he cleared his throat again, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "When it was – in control. That's when..." he trailed off, and Sam just nodded slowly.

"In your case, yeah," he agreed, suddenly aware of the loudness of the rain pattering against the windshield and the rhythmic clunk of the wipers. "When it was in control, your eyes went – dark." He sighed. Sam tried not to look away as his brother gritted his teeth and continued to stare straight ahead, as if too ashamed to look Sam in the eye. "But yours wasn't an ordinary possession, Dean." *Or an ordinary exorcism.* He glanced pointedly at the amulet. "You had some help."

Dean still wouldn't look at him. "Yeah," he jerked out. "So? What's your point?"

Sam sighed again. "Meg," he said shortly.

That got Dean's attention.

"Meg?" he echoed, finally risking a quick sidelong glance in Sam's direction. "Meg's your point?"

"Her eyes looked perfectly normal most of the time too," Sam insisted. "And the demon she was carrying was in complete control of her. I just don't think that's an indicator we can rely on, is all."

Dean didn't comment, just swung the Impala into the parking lot of the Travelers' Paradise Motel, bringing the big car to a halt in front of room four.

Switching off the engine, he scratched his head thoughtfully. "I don't know, Sammy," he said, voice a little resigned as he shoved open the car door with a creak. "This just don't seem like a demon kinda deal."

Sam exited the Chevy lost in thought, following his brother into the dingy motel room and trying not to wrinkle his nose at the ever-present mold motif caking the walls. "Then what else could it be?" he asked, slumping down on one of the beds as Dean absently flicked on the TV. "That woman *knew* us. That was no arbitrary diner hold-up Dean: She was there for us."

Dean nodded slowly as he began to flick through fuzzy TV channels looking for a local news station. "Maybe," he said, before glancing up at Sam. "Or maybe she's something to do with the whole reason we're here in the first place."

Sam frowned, prodding at a stack of dog-eared pages spread out across his bed. "I dunno, man," he said skeptically. "The whole weird randomness of what's going on around here was what originally got me to thinking maybe it was our kinda deal. Today was personal."

Dean shrugged. "I should think the security guard who got shot during that bank robbery thought it was pretty freakin' personal too."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Yeah," he agreed. "Maybe. But some couple going on the rampage at an elderly relative's rest home and trashing a security system?" He fixed Dean with a disbelieving squint. "Electrical and computer store thefts? Someone stealing a worthless hunk of crystal from a pawnshop? Not exactly victimless crimes I know, but still..." He scratched his head as he pawed through the papers on the bed. "I dunno, I guess it all just seems somehow *connected* in its randomness." He shook his head. "And then, of course, there are the perpetrators. Ordinary people who've never had so much as a parking ticket before."

"Convenient they don't remember a thing about it when they're arrested too..." Dean

mumbled.

Sam nodded. "Which is even more suggestive of some kind of possession," he argued. "They've all experienced lost time, Dean. Don't remember any of it."

"Which blows the whole demonic possession theory right out of the water, Sam," Dean countered, eyes flashing before he averted them uncomfortably from Sam's. "Because they – I –" His gaze gravitated downwards to the amulet hanging innocently around his neck. "Because I remember it, Sam," he managed at last. "At least some of it. And so did Meg, she *told* us that much."

Sam nodded slowly, taking a breath. "I guess," he agreed gently, focus shifting to the TV screen behind Dean, which had cut to a local reporter almost lost amidst a sea of flashing blue and red lights standing right in front of Penny's All You Can Eat Diner. "Hey, turn that up," he instructed, gesturing frantically at the TV set.

Dean turned, flicking up the volume.

"...has been identified as local thirty-eight-year-old mother of three, Sandie Bishop," the reporter was saying, face professionally serious. "Mrs. Bishop is reported to have gone on the rampage armed with a semi-automatic pistol, firing at least nine rounds randomly into this crowded lunchtime diner. A thirty-five-year-old waitress received a gunshot wound to the shoulder, but her condition is not thought to be life-threatening. No one else was injured in the incident, which was brought to a dramatic conclusion when the assailant was incapacitated by diner chef, Marlon Andrews, who is being hailed as a local hero by the customers and staff here at Penny's. Sandie Bishop has been taken to the secure unit at St. Agatha's Psychiatric Hospital pending evaluation, unofficial sources stating she claims to remember nothing of the incident..."

"There, you see?" Dean said, snapping his fingers at the screen as the cook who had downed the soccer mom with the frying pan grinned sheepishly into the camera. "Just like all the other perps in this weirdo crime spree."

Sam nodded sagely. "We need to see Sandie Bishop," he announced, decision already made.

"Yeah," Dean agreed, jerking his thumb behind him at the grinning cook on the TV screen. "And we owe that guy a beer."

"White pants," Dean muttered grumpily, staring down at himself in dismay before glancing cautiously around the loading bay of St. Agatha's Hospital and motioning Sam to follow him through the big swinging plastic doors leading into the building. "Why do hospitals insist on white pants?"

Sam surveyed his brother's current attire, recently snagged from a convenient laundry delivery piled up in hampers on the loading dock, and tried not to grin too big. "You look cute," he commented with a wicked smile. "Dangerous, but cute. Kinda like the Marshmallow Man."

Dean scowled at him as he began to stomp up the nearest stairwell. "At least I got matching socks," he grouched, looking pointedly at the inch of ankle clearly visible between the bottom of Sam's pants and his sneakers.

Sam followed the direction of his gaze, grimacing at his one light blue, one dark blue sock before casting a withering gaze in his brother's direction. "Dude, that's the last time I'm letting you do the laundry," he muttered, peering up the stairwell before following his brother cautiously.

Dean grinned back at him as he rounded the corner onto the second floor landing. "You're just worried one of these days people are gonna realize you're really just a midget on stilts, bro."

Sam took the next three stairs in one leap, catching up with his brother and shoving him in the lower back with a well-placed elbow. "While *you're* just a midget," he commented.

Dean scowled over his shoulder at him. "For the last time," he grit out, stomping loudly

up the next flight of stairs. "I am *not* short! It's just standing next to you all the time makes me look that way!"

"Yeah, my getting all the sunlight really stunted your growth, huh?"

Dean turned away from his annoyingly tall brother with a huffed, "Freaky tall freak of freakin' nature," as he gingerly shouldered open the door to the fifth floor and peered out into the corridor beyond. "Ah, man," he whistled, glancing behind him at Sam. "You are so going to fit in here, dude..."

Sam shoved him out of the way with a grimace, pulling up short at the sight of the barred hallway and the assorted patients milling about in the large common room beyond, several of whom appeared to be carrying out animated conversations with the wallpaper. "We better make this fast," he muttered.

"I don't want any more medication!" the woman strapped to the bed spat as the two orderlies entered her tiny room. "I just wanna go home to my kids!"

The taller of the two young men raised his hands, palms open toward her. "That's okay, Mrs. Bishop," he said, voice low and soothing as his colleague took one last furtive look out onto the hallway before closing the door quietly. "We're here to help you."

Sandie blinked at them – once, twice – relaxing slightly against the padded restraints around her wrists and ankles. "You –" she began, squinting at the shorter orderly as an odd image of him looking backwards and up at her suddenly sprung into her addled brain. "You look familiar," she said slowly, unable to trust the veracity of her own memories in the face of what the police and doctors were assuring her she'd done. "Do I know you?"

Sam smiled awkwardly. "I'm Sam," he introduced himself. "This is my brother, Dean."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Maybe I give you a gun to wave at me it might all come flooding back to you."

Sandie froze, the memory of cool metal against the palm of her hand, the solidity of an almost-pulled trigger, and someone shouting "No!" suddenly assaulting her senses. "You're not orderlies, are you?" she surmised, unsure whether to be afraid or relieved.

Sam shook his head. "But don't be scared," he reassured her. "We're not here to hurt you –"

Sandie laughed ironically at that. "No, I've got nothing to be scared about," she told him, blinking back tears. "I'm locked up in a hospital full of crazy people strapped to a bed in a barred room while the cops tell me I shot up a diner this afternoon... But I've got nothing to be scared about..."

Sam bit his lip, a look of total understanding spreading across his face. Somehow, Sandie was pretty sure the look was genuine. "You really don't remember any of it?" he asked.

Sandie shook her head minutely. "They say I had my husband's gun," she said, tears beginning to slide down her cheek as her defenses weakened in the face of Sam's sympathetic expression. "I don't even know how to use the thing!" she protested. "Ryan wanted me to take lessons, but I didn't want anything to do with it." She sighed, shaking her head again. "And they say – they say I shot Maggie Wade. Her daughter was at my son's last birthday party..." She trailed off, eyes turned up toward the ceiling. "I don't remember. I don't remember anything after –" She stopped suddenly, mouth still slightly open, as if she'd forgotten she was speaking.

"After what?" Dean urged. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Sandie thought about that, eyes still fixed on the grimy ceiling tiles. "I was – I was on the internet," she said slowly. "Looking for movie times. Thought maybe I'd take the girls to see that new Lindsay Lohan movie later..."

"Jeez, you really *must* be crazy," Dean muttered under his breath.

Sam frowned disapprovingly at him, before producing a notepad and pen seemingly from thin air. "What website?" he asked, interest piqued. "You remember?"

Sandie's eyes refocused on the young man standing at the foot of her bed. "You were there," she said slowly, gaze flitting suddenly to Dean and back again. "You two were at the diner. I was supposed to – I had a gun pointed at you."

Sam shifted from one foot to the other. "Ma'am –"

"It's Sandie," Sandie urged absently. "Call me Sandie."

"Sandie," Sam smiled at her again, trying to be as reassuring as possible. "You remember which website you were looking at before you –"

"Spaced out?" Sandie supplied. "Turned into a psycho gunperson?" She flopped her head back against the flat pillow beneath her. "It was just a local information website – pretty new I think. Uh – PAEye.com or something I think it was called."

Sam nodded, not looking up as he scribbled on his notepad.

"Why?" Sandie enquired.

Sam shrugged. "Probably nothing," he said. Then, looking back up at her, he added, "And you don't remember anything after that?"

"Bits and pieces," Sandie said slowly. "But nothing really until I came to in the ambulance. Handcuffed to a gurney with a couple of cops glaring at me like I was some common criminal."

Dean took a step toward her. "You knew us," he said shortly. "You said we wouldn't get away again."

Sandie blinked at him, scrutinizing him hopelessly before finally turning her head away. "I don't remember," she said. "I don't know what I said or what I did or why I did it." She fixed Sam with a pathetically helpless stare. "I just want to go home. Can you help me?"

"Why'd you tell her that?" Dean demanded testily, fingers curled tightly around the Impala's steering wheel as he hurriedly pulled the big Chevy away from St. Agatha's Hospital.

"What?" Sam demanded just as testily, readjusting his notes on his knee while avoiding looking up at his brother.

"You know what," Dean growled. "Why'd you tell her we'd help her?" His gaze unconsciously strayed to the rearview mirror as the hairs on the back of his neck began to prickle, and he fought the urge to glance down at the amulet, certain that this uncomfortable sensation of being watched he'd been experiencing since the incident at the diner had nothing to do with any residual paranoia he was still feeling about his all-too-recent possession.

No, this was just the regular kind of old-fashioned paranoia he always felt – because someone generally was out to get him most of the time.

"I just told her we'd try," Sam insisted, not failing to notice his brother's edgy demeanor. "The poor woman's desperate. We can at least give her some hope."

"False hope," Dean put in shortly. "When have we ever been able to convince the cops that something supernatural was responsible for a crime? Huh? You forget St. Louis? Jeez, you'd have thought a little CS'ing on that shapeshifting freak would have clued the cops in to something hinky in his DNA. But no, they just go right ahead and bury him, still thinking he's regular old Dean Winchester –"

"Oh, will you get off that whole St. Louis thing?" Sam groaned.

Dean came the closest to a sulk Sam had seen him since he was nine. "It just bugs me, that's all I'm saying," he grouched.

"Dean –"

"I mean, where's Gil Grissom when you need him?"

"Dean –!"

"What?"

"Can we concentrate here?"

Dean shot a sidelong glance at his brother. "I can talk, drive *and* concentrate at the same time, believe it or not, Sam," he insisted. "It's called multi-tasking."

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Closest you’ve ever gotten to multi-tasking were those three air hostesses in Buffalo.”

Dean snorted. “Hey, I offered to share, man –”

Sam wrinkled his nose. “Not if my life depended on it.”

Dean grinned broadly, shoulders relaxing slightly, for once oblivious to the expert diversionary tactics of his little brother. “All right,” he said at length, expression sobering. “Sandie Bishop.”

“I don’t think she was possessed,” Sam said, leafing idly through his notes. “At least, not in the traditional sense.”

Dean squinted at him. “There’s such a thing as *un*traditional possession?”

Sam neatly avoided the obvious comment, which would have had Dean back in a tailspin faster than he could have gotten the words “What about you?” out of his mouth. “I don’t think its *demonic* possession,” he mused instead, brows knitting in thought.

“Then what?” Dean asked. “Mind control?” he arched an eyebrow uncertainly.

Sam shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe. Would explain why she can’t remember anything – just like the other upstanding members of the community responsible for this apparently random crime spree.”

“So we need to salt n’ burn David Blaine or something?” Dean offered. “Cause man, I am so up for that –”

“He’s an illusionist, Dean,” Sam pointed out.

“He’s a –”

“Dean!”

“Jeez Sam, you’re starting to sound like that battleaxe teacher I had in fifth grade –”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Look, this could be the real deal,” he said flatly. “Not sleight of hand, or some Hollywood hypnotist out to grab himself some ratings.”

Dean considered that. “So whatever –”

“Whoever.”

“*Whatever.*” Dean shook his head. “If someone’s doing this to people – mind controlling them – then how’s he getting to them?”

“Maybe it’s someone they all know, someone they have in common.”

“Or someone who knows *them.*” Dean offered. Then, “I guess it doesn’t necessarily have to be someone they come into personal contact with...”

Sam bit his lip. “You mean like people being hypnotized through their TVs?”

“*Baywatch* had that effect on me all the time.”

“Dean –”

“Alright, what about that website Sandie was talking about?”

Sam inclined his head as Dean turned the Impala into the motel parking lot. “Worth checking out,” he agreed. “But we need to know what we’re dealing with before we go exposing ourselves to anything –” A snigger escaped Dean’s lips, and Sam just rolled his eyes. “Will you just get your mind out of the gutter for one minute?”

Dean affected Serious Face. “I’ll try, dude, but I’m not promising anything.”

“Listen,” Sam shook his head with a sigh. “I think we’re going to be here a little longer than we originally thought.”

Dean nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I’ll go book us a couple extra nights.” He swung himself out of the car, tossing the room key to his brother as he made his way toward the office. “No surfing HotSenoritas.com while I’m gone.”

Sam grimaced. “That’s called ‘projection’ you know,” he tossed over his shoulder as he headed for their room. “Expecting other people to emulate your own basest behavior...”

Dean made a base gesture with one finger. “Emulate this, Sigmund,” he muttered, shoving open the office door and striding up to the geeky-looking clerk who was busily poring over the ancient computer taking up half the check-in desk.

"I help you?" the clerk asked without looking up, light from the computer screen reflecting eerily off his thick plastic-rimmed glasses.

"Uh, yeah," Dean frowned at him uncertainly. "I'd like to book room four for a couple more nights."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," the clerk told him brightly, casually reaching for something beneath the desk. "You're not going to need an extra night anywhere." He suddenly withdrew a shotgun from beneath the counter, bringing it up and into Dean's face so fast the hunter barely had time to react at all, much less reach for the Glock secreted in his waistband.

Without thinking, Dean automatically glanced over his shoulder in the direction he'd last seen his brother as he slowly raised his hands above his head.

Registering the concern in Dean's action, the clerk grinned toothily at him. "Don't worry about Sam, Dean," he assured him, dragging Dean's attention back to his own immediate situation. "The maid's got something real special lined up for him."

PART TWO:

So how, exactly, had *this* happened? Dean wondered, fingers grabbing at air as the owl-eyed motel clerk shoved the shotgun closer to his face.

Staring down the barrel, Dean was overcome by an almost paralyzing sense of déjà vu. "Twice in one day?" he muttered through gritted teeth. "You got Ashton Kutcher back there someplace? 'Cause I ain't signin' no freakin' waiver —"

"You're not getting away this time, Winchester," the clerk growled, and Dean paled visibly: bad enough this freak knew his first name; how the hell did he come to know his surname? Dean figured the last time he'd been checked into a motel under the name "Winchester" he'd been four and Dad hadn't quite gotten a handle on the whole hunting thing yet.

"Listen, pal —" he tried, attention again drifting unconsciously over his shoulder, to the motel room where God knows what was happening to his baby brother.

"You're going to pay for what you did."

Again with the déjà vu.

"And you're not the first person to say that to me today," Dean returned, attention back on the clerk as the whirring of the security camera behind the guy's head tripped another, more distant memory. He blinked a couple of times, unable to quite grasp it, before returning abruptly to the present with a shake of his head. "Enough with the cryptic, Goggles," he said forcefully. Or as forcefully as he could manage with a shotgun shoved in his face. "Who the hell are you and what the hell have you got against me and my brother?"

The clerk began to move towards him, slowly inching out from behind the counter until the cold metal of the shotgun was pressed right against Dean's forehead.

Dean swallowed, momentarily closing his eyes.

"It's time for you to get what's coming to you," the clerk hissed. "Time for me to get my revenge."

Dean shrugged, eyes lifted to the barrel of the shotgun. "Yeah, well that's nice and everything," he said. "But you know what else it's time for?" He grimaced at the clerk. "It's time for you to get that goddamn popgun outta my face before —" Dean bit off the end of the sentence as the clerk chambered a round with an ominous clunk.

Dean shrugged again. "And now time's up."

He reached up suddenly, grabbing hold of the shotgun and yanking so hard on the barrel that the clerk was tugged off balance, Dean swinging him around in a wide arc while he clung on numbly, before finally jerking the weapon out of his hands and slamming the stock hard into the smaller man's temple.

The clerk crumpled to his knees, slightly unfocused eyes squinting up at Dean. "You won't get away this time," he spat venomously. "You can't run from me forever. I see everything. I'm everywhere. I'm *legion*. I'll find you. Wherever you go, I'm watching. And I'll find you. You'll get what's coming to you."

"Aw, will you shut the hell up?" Dean demanded, bringing the shotgun down one more time against the clerk's forehead.

This time, the clerk's eyes crossed before closing altogether, the young man's body slumping in a heap on the office's stained carpet.

Dean took a breath while he got his bearings, wheels in his head suddenly grinding to a screeching halt as the single word *Sam* filled every bit of his consciousness.

Sam.

"Sam!"

Taking off at a mad sprint, Dean covered the parking lot in less time than it took to say, "Sammy, hand me the rock salt," not slowing his momentum as he approached room four, but rather plowing straight into the door with one turned shoulder...

...And skidding to a rather surprised halt as he took in the scene inside the room.

There stood Sam, breathing heavily, one raised hand clutching a hardback Gideon Bible as he stood over a young woman wearing a maid's uniform who was sprawled across the carpet, meat cleaver discarded mere inches from one splayed out hand.

Sam looked up at Dean in vaguely stunned astonishment as his brother made his less-than-low-key entrance, blinking a couple of times before a sheepish grin broke out on his face.

Typically, Dean covered his obvious relief that his little brother wasn't missing any body parts with an incredulous frown and a disbelieving, "You knocked her out with a *Bible*?"

Sam shrugged apologetically. "First thing that came to hand," he said, before tossing the Good Book back onto the nightstand. "Not the first person to be struck down by the Word of God."

Dean winced. "Sammy, we gotta get you some better material."

"Whatever, man."

Dean took a breath, staring down at the stricken maid. "I can't believe the maid came after you with a meat cleaver."

Sam shook his head. "Seemed kinda extreme to me too," he agreed, crouching down to check the young woman's pulse. "She was already in here when I came in," he explained. "Hiding behind the door." He looked up almost apologetically. "Guess she got the drop on me."

Dean nodded, surprising Sam with the look of non-judgmental understanding that passed across his face. "Yeah, well, don't beat yourself up about it, Daisy," he said. "Cause the office clerk just tried to ventilate my forehead with a shotgun." He brought the clerk's firearm out from behind his back where Sam could see it.

Sam's eyes widened as he rose to his feet. "He *what*?" he burst out, before squinting at the gun and adding, "With *that* thing?"

"And that's not the best part," Dean continued, snagging his duffel from where he'd abandoned it on the floor earlier and flinging it onto the nearest bed. He met Sam's eyes as he began stuffing what little they'd unpacked back into his bag. "He knew my *name*, Sam," he said, shaking his head for extra emphasis. "Yours too. Called me 'Dean' first, so I figured, yeah okay, that's the name I checked in under. But then he called me 'Winchester' and said wherever we went he'd find us. That he could see everything. Real God Complex kinda deal."

Realizing what Dean was doing without the need to be told, Sam grabbed his own bag and began gathering up his possessions. "How would he know that?" he asked in a low voice. "*Who* would know that?"

Dean shrugged. "I dunno man, but the things he was sayin' before I—" he gestured to the unconscious maid, "—he sounded *way* too much like Sandie did in the diner."

Sam hefted his bag onto his shoulder and grabbed his laptop. "We gotta get outta here," he said.

"Yeah," Dean agreed, shouldering his stuff and heading for the door. "Right now." He glanced back at the maid and shook his head, snagging the shotgun as he opened the door. "Well, they say every cloud has a silver lining."

"How so?" Sam asked, tugging the door closed behind him and vaguely toying with the idea of calling an ambulance for the maid.

Dean grinned. "Well, it may be a popgun," he said, swinging the shotgun round in front of him. "But I've never been one to say no to a free firearm."

"I don't care if it was your dead grandma's, you lowlife! You pawn it, you pay to get it back — them's the rules of the game, son —"

Sam almost stepped back onto Dean's foot in his haste to get out of the way of the young man currently being forcibly ejected through the front door of Manny's Pawn Emporium.

The booming voice preceded a swarthy man whose beard seemed capable of supporting an entire rodent ecosystem. He paused mid-diatribes when he caught sight of the two

potential customers hovering near his doorstep, grinning maniacally and revealing one gold tooth that glinted in the weak afternoon sunlight. He placed thick fingers on plaid-covered hips, attention completely drawn away from the kid he'd just tossed out of his store.

"Gentlemen!" he greeted the Winchesters slimily, taking a step to one side and throwing an arm out in the direction of his densely-packed store. "Please! Welcome to Manny's!"

Sam, polite as ever, flashed the store owner a very brief smile before glancing warily over his shoulder at Dean.

"Uh-huh," Dean drawled flatly, pushing Sam none-too-subtly toward the entrance. He smiled his biggest smile at the greaseball storeowner as he followed his brother inside. "I take it you're Manny?"

"At your service!" Manny's smile broadened to match Dean's. "Welcome to my humble _"

"We're not customers," Dean stated, turning back to face the guy as he closed the door behind them.

Manny's smile slipped several inches and several degrees in radiant temperature. "Oh," he said, voice slightly less jovial and a whole lot less welcoming than it had been two seconds earlier. He pushed past the boys abruptly, heading for the rear of the store and narrowly avoiding a precariously balanced display of worn guitars and a beat-up old drum kit. "So whaddya want?" he demanded, retreating behind the shop counter, which housed an impressive display of jewelry, digital cameras and MP3 players behind locked glass. An array of electrical goods covered the entire wall to the boys' right, while behind the counter were more locked display cases, only these were crammed full of weaponry.

Sam noticed Dean's eyes lingering entirely too long on an ancient-looking .357 Magnum that looked like it had materialized right off the set of a *Dirty Harry* movie, and nudged his brother in the ribs in an attempt to regain his attention.

Dean blinked away his dreamy expression, attempting to go straight for Serious Face without much success.

Manny's grin had returned full throttle the instant he noted the direction of Dean's lustful gaze. "You know I'm told that's an exact replica of a prop gun that was a duplicate of the one Clint Eastwood's stand-in used on the set of *Magnum Force*."

Dean's eyes widened, and Sam shot him a murderous glance before he even had the opportunity to open his mouth. "Dean –"

Dean rolled his eyes. "Sam?"

Sam shook his head in exasperation before turning his attention back to Manny. "We need some information," he stated shortly.

Manny shifted from one foot to the other impatiently. "Call the Yellow Pages," he advised.

Dean suddenly withdrew the shotgun from the inside of his jacket, causing Manny to duck behind the counter in alarm.

"Hey, I already been robbed once this week!" the storeowner pleaded. "Have some mercy on a poor honest businessman!"

Dean rolled his eyes again before slamming the motel clerk's shotgun down on top of the counter with a resounding thud. "Kinda what we wanted to talk to you about," he said, indicating that Manny should stand. "Listen," he continued, twirling the shotgun on the countertop as Manny rose uncertainly to his feet. "Though it pains me to do it, you give us the information we're after and I'll give you this fine piece of weaponry in exchange."

Manny raised a less-than-impressed eyebrow. "It's a popgun," he said shortly.

"No," Dean countered, jutting out his chin. "It's a *free* popgun. Be thankful I didn't pop you with it just to demonstrate its effectiveness."

Manny reached out thick fingers, all overly-burdened with gold rings, and gingerly took hold of the shotgun, pulling it to his side of the counter and out of Dean's reach. "Alright," he

said, plastering on his most insincere smile. "Whaddya want to know? Sports? General knowledge? How about nuclear thermodynamics, always a favorite of mine –"

It was Sam's turn to borrow Dean's eye roll. "The robbery," he grit out tersely. "We just want to know about the robbery."

Manny looked somewhat taken aback, bushy eyebrows disappearing into his even bushier hair. "Oh," he said, sounding disappointed. "Okay. Fire away." Panicked eyes suddenly darted to Dean as the words came tumbling out of his mouth before he'd really thought about them. "I didn't mean that literally," he assured the older brother with a nervous grimace.

Dean smirked at him. "You got the popgun, Clint."

"Look," Sam put in, clearly beginning to lose his patience. "The crystal that was taken –"

Manny nodded. "Worthless piece o' crap," he said bluntly. "Why the hell anyone would want that thing when they could have had all of this fine merchandise –" he waved his arm expansively, as if to indicate the entire contents of his emporium, before shaking his head. "Was even thinking about cutting my losses and having it made into a pendant for the missus..."

Dean cocked an eyebrow, eyeing the expansive inventory of jewelry Manny had just been indicating. "When you have all of this fine merchandise...?"

Manny squinted at him, as if gauging his level of density. "What are you, nuts?" he burst out. "I save the good stuff for my girlfriend!"

Dean did a double take. "You have a girlfriend?" he queried, as if such a thing were unthinkable.

A grin that was little short of a leer split Manny's mouth wide open. "Think Britney before the radical hair surgery."

Dean opened his mouth to enquire further, but abruptly closed it again at the pissed off scowl his kid brother was throwing his way.

Sam took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a second, before turning back to Manny. "So this crystal," he tried again. "Where did you get it from?"

Manny shrugged. "Some drunk who figured himself a voodoo priest," he scoffed. "Came right on in here, laid that ugly thing on my counter and told me I could use it to trap people's souls. Their *souls* for crying out loud!"

Dean exchanged a furtive glance with Sam. "Their souls?" he echoed, as nonchalantly as the constriction in his throat would allow.

Manny scoffed again. "Big steaming pile o' horse crap if you ask me."

"But you bought it anyway?" Sam pressed.

Manny blinked at him. "What can I say, I'm a humanitarian," he said with a shrug. "The guy seemed pretty desperate."

"And the robber?" Sam urged.

Manny looked decidedly abashed. "Damnedest thing I ever saw," he said. "She must've been eighty if she was a day!"

Dean gawked at him. "You got jacked by a coffin dodger?" he burst out.

"Dean –"

Manny nodded. "I know! Spitting image of Grandma Walton, I swear to God! Threatened to gut me with a bread knife if I didn't give her the thing!"

"And that's all she wanted?"

Manny continued to nod. "Sure did. Soon as I gave it to her, she was outta here as fast as her hip replacement could carry her."

"Can we see the security tape?" Dean asked, eyeing the camera above the counter and frowning as that same memory he'd been vaguely aware of in the motel office tickled at the back of his brain.

"No can do," Manny said. "My nephew – some kinda computer geek whiz kid – installed one of those hard disk systems a month ago. Shows how much he knows – ten minutes after

the robbery, my whole system goes fizz bang and the data gets corrupted. Irrecoverable, according to the cop techy guy.”

“Crap,” Dean muttered under his breath.

Manny brightened. “Cops I.D.’d the perp, though,” he added. “Guy outside recognized her. She lives in the same nursing home as his mom. Cops picked her up a couple hours later, fast asleep in front of the TV. Didn’t remember a thing about it.”

“We’ve heard that song before,” Dean sighed.

“And the crystal?” Sam asked.

“Never found it,” Manny replied. “Granny didn’t even remember taking it, so no way could she remember what she’d done with it. Poor old gal has Alzheimer’s. They didn’t even charge her with anything.” At the raised brows of both boys, he added quickly, “Not that I’d have pressed charges anyway –”

“Course not,” Dean agreed.

“Humanitarian like yourself,” Sam added.

Manny took a second to realize they were being sarcastic. His face returned to that vaguely annoyed expression he’d first sported when Dean had informed him they weren’t customers. “Well, gentlemen,” he said with a distinctly cold huff. “Much as I’d love to stand here and chat all day, some of us have paying customers to attend to.”

Dean glanced behind him at the empty shop, while Sam frowned. “One more question,” the younger brother insisted.

Manny sighed loudly. “If you must.”

“You know which nursing home Granny Walton lived at?”

Manny shrugged. “Look for some place full of old people,” he said. “That’s as much as I know.”

“So what could turn an ordinary, everyday housewife into a gun-toting psycho, and a sweet old lady into Edward Scissorhands?” Dean mused, glancing in the rearview as the Impala sped down the highway towards a motel which he fervently hoped *wasn’t* full of crazed employees out to kill him.

“I’m starting to like the mind control theory even more,” Sam said, noticing Dean’s eyes flicker to the rearview for, like, the twentieth time in a minute. He resisted the urge to glance over his shoulder, instead plowing right on. “But until we find out whether Sandie and Granny Walton had anything or anyone in common –”

“Besides the homicidal maniac thing?”

Sam frowned. “Yeah, besides that,” he admitted. “Then it’s gonna be pretty damn hard to figure out who or what exactly had them in its thrall –”

“*Thrall?*” Dean echoed, putting enough sarcasm into the word that it somehow came out in an English accent. “You swallow a dictionary this morning, Mr. Webster?”

“Shut up,” was the best comeback Sam could think of. “And I don’t hear you offering any theories.” His frown deepened as Dean’s gaze darted once more to the rearview. “Dude, what the hell are you looking at?”

He twisted in his seat, peering through the rear window, where all he could see was a shiny new Toyota following a few car lengths behind them.

Dean’s jaw clenched. “Probably nothing,” he said, cocking an eyebrow as the opening strains of Black Sabbath’s *Paranoid* began to blare from the speakers.

“What, Dean?” Sam twisted back toward him.

“I don’t know.” Dean’s face screwed up in something akin to embarrassment. “It’s just – since we got here – since the motel clerk – I just – I just –”

“Feel like someone’s watching you?” Sam offered.

Dean blinked in surprise. “You too?”

Sam nodded slightly. “Damn creepy.”

Dean's focus again skittered to the rearview. "I don't like this," he muttered, as the car behind suddenly began to accelerate. "This guy's been behind us since the pawnshop –" which was the exact second an almighty crash shook the Impala's sturdy frame, causing Dean to slam into the steering wheel and Sam, thrown against the dashboard, to once again curse the old Chevy's lack of seatbelts.

"Goddammit, sometimes I *hate* it when I'm right!" Dean cursed through gritted teeth, barely keeping the Impala on the blacktop as the now less-than-pristine-looking Toyota backed off a little.

Sam had again twisted in his seat to get a better look at their assailant. "I don't recognize the driver," he said, putting a hand out to steady himself against the dashboard, just as the car behind suddenly lurched forward again, rear-ending the Chevy and causing Dean to growl a string of curses that would have made a sailor blush. Sam swallowed. "If it's any consolation," he managed. "I don't think it's a hunter."

"That makes me feel so much better, Sam," Dean bit out, stomping on the gas as hard as he could as he gripped the wheel so tightly his fingers were in danger of cramping. "Whoever it is, he hurts my baby one more time, I'm going to work on his teeth with a pair of rusty pliers!"

He swore again, caught slightly off guard as the Toyota, which seemed to have lost its front fender after the last collision, suddenly sputtered forward, drawing almost level with them before abruptly lurching sideways, as if it was trying to force the Chevy right off the blacktop and into the ditch alongside.

"I don't think so, pal," Dean snarled, tightly-wound reflexes kicking in with microseconds to spare as both boots slammed against the brake, causing the Impala to fishtail into a dizzying spin before sliding sideways across the road and coming to a halt with the front tire hanging perilously over the ditch by the side of the blacktop.

The Toyota, unprepared for the sudden evasive maneuver, seemed to skid almost in slow motion toward the opposite side of the highway, front end crumpling like tinfoil as it slammed into a metal post bearing a county traffic camera.

A shower of sparks rained down on the stricken vehicle's hood as the driver slumped forward over the steering wheel, one bloody hand dangling limply onto the dash.

A couple of tortuously long seconds passed as neither Winchester dared to move; Sam certain he could hear Dean's heart hammering as his older brother's fingers whitened with their refusal to release the death grip they had on the steering wheel.

Eyes never leaving the Toyota or its occupant, Dean managed to croak, "Sammy, you got any pieces missing?"

Sam shook his head. "Everything present and correct," he gasped out. "Except I might be losing my stomach contents any minute now..."

Dean released one shaky hand from the steering wheel to wave toward the passenger door. "Outside – upholstery –" he mumbled, finally having the presence of mind to shift the Chevy into park and switch off the engine.

Sam nodded. "Yeah, yeah," he waved his brother away, finally managing to crank open the car door and swing his long legs out of the vehicle.

Dean followed suit, now satisfied that his Beloved wasn't about to roll into the ditch, eyes squinted almost closed as he prepared to survey the damage.

Sam was already looking, a neutral expression on his face. "Well," he said, hands on hips. "I can honestly say it's not as bad as when we got hit by the semi..."

Dean released a breath as he noted the slight dent to the rear fender and the scratches along the back quarter of the driver's side. "Teach him to go up against a Classic in a Japanese tin can," he muttered. "And I'm *still* gonna pull his teeth out with rusty pliers, then go to work on his –"

"We should check if he's actually alive first," Sam pointed out. "After all, his car came off

a lot worse than ours.”

Dean cast a glance over at the crumpled Toyota, grinning despite himself. “Good,” he said shortly. “That’s what he gets for buying a hybrid.”

Sam didn’t rise to the bait, having given up trying to convince his brother of the harmful effects a gas guzzler like the Impala could have on the environment when he was still in grade school. “C’mon,” he said instead, inclining his head toward the other car as the post supporting the traffic cam groaned and began to list a couple more inches toward the vehicle’s hood. “We gotta get that guy outta there.”

“Why?” Dean stuck out his lower lip stubbornly. “Guy just tried to kill us, Sam! And, more importantly, he tried to kill *my baby!*”

“It’s a *car*, Dean,” Sam reminded him, before again indicating the Toyota and flashing his brother that expression which had always gotten him the last bowl of Lucky Charms.

Dean sighed theatrically before reluctantly following him toward the stricken vehicle.

The driver, who had been stock still up until this point, had just begun to moan incoherently, and a quick examination of his cashmere sweater and neatly-pressed slacks quickly allayed Dean’s fears that he may have been some pissed off hunter out to get his little brother.

Or me, he reminded himself: He doubted the hunters who had helped his dad storm Haris’ fortified HQ had gotten the memo that Dean was no longer With Demon...

“Hey – uh – sir?” Sam stammered awkwardly, still acutely aware of the undisguised hostility in his brother’s accusing gaze. “We need to get you out of there –”

The man raised his head slowly, a trickle of blood running down his forehead, and Sam quickly realized he looked like the kind of guy who’d snatch away your latte in a Starbucks and be out of the shop before you had the chance to remonstrate.

City guy.

“Hey,” Sam tried again, reaching out toward the guy. “You think you can stand?”

The man’s gaze roved around him in confusion, eyes lighting on the post in imminent danger of crushing what was left of his car, but too dazed to really comprehend the threat. “Where the hell am I?” he mumbled, trembling fingers brushing at the blood on his temple. “Oh my God, I’m bleeding! How did I...?”

“You’ve been in an – uh – accident,” Sam supplied, again offering his hand to the spaced-out driver, who this time took it uncertainly.

“I – I don’t even remember getting in my car...”

While Sam helped the driver to safety, Dean reached in and shut off the Toyota’s engine, pulling out his cell phone and dialing 911.

“My name’s Sam,” Sam supplied, guiding the driver to the side of the highway, where he settled him down on the grassy verge. “What’s yours?” He crouched down in front of him, affecting his most trustworthy expression, which for Sam was less art and more nature.

“Uh – Chris,” the driver managed, fingers hesitantly exploring the blood trickling from his hairline.

“Hey Chris,” Sam smiled reassuringly. “Don’t worry, my brother’s calling an ambulance for you – you’ll be fine.”

Chris glanced about himself, wide-eyed and jittery. “Did you guys hit me?”

“Hell no!” Dean put in suddenly, ambling toward them as he slid his phone into his pocket. “The only person to blame for the concertina where your car used to be is you, pal.”

Sam shot Dean a “will you let me handle this?” look, before smiling at Chris apologetically. “I’m sure it was a genuine accident,” he lied smoothly. “You say you don’t remember anything? Maybe you blacked out at the wheel...?”

“No,” Chris disagreed. “Like I said, I don’t even remember getting in my car.”

Sam once again utilized the sympathetic smile coupled with a nod of his head, and even Dean was impressed by the smoothness of his brother’s method of intelligence gathering. “So

what's the last thing you *do* remember, Chris?" he asked casually.

Chris scrunched his forehead, wincing at the pain the action elicited. "I – I was at an internet café," he said slowly. "Just finished reading my emails."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "And –?" he urged gently.

"And then I was looking on some local information website for a good dry cleaners nearby," Chris added, smiling weakly. "Only moved here two weeks ago."

Sam tried not to be too obvious when he seized on that last snippet of information. "Oh yeah?" he said carefully. "You remember the name of the website?"

Chris looked momentarily confused, but eventually shrugged, as if figuring Sam was just trying to keep him talking until the ambulance arrived. "Uh, some new site," he replied.

"PAVision or something –"

"PAEye?" Sam offered.

Chris' eyes lit up. "That's the one," he agreed.

Another reassuring smile from Sam. "And that's the last thing you remember? That website?"

Chris nodded. "Pretty much."

Sam glanced up at Dean, who nodded minutely, but was prevented from commenting by the traffic camera suddenly collapsing completely along the length of Chris' formerly shiny new Toyota, embedding itself in the roof even as every window popped simultaneously.

Dean turned back to Chris, who could only stare on in mute horror. "Dude," he said slowly. "You – er – got insurance, right?"

"So it *has* to be this website," Sam insisted, throwing his duffel and laptop onto one of the beds of the Good Nite Motel tiredly.

Dean cast one final look back over his shoulder before closing the door behind him and locking it for good measure: no homicidal maids or clerks so far. Which was always a bonus. "We should take a look at it," he agreed, throwing his own bag onto the bed nearest the door.

Sam shot him an incredulous look. "That's the *last* thing we should do, Dean!"

Dean met his gaze quizzically. "Sam, that website was the last thing two of our wannabe psycho killers remember looking at! If that's not what's putting the whammy on them somehow, I'll – I'll –" he groped for a suitable wager. "I'll let you drive for a month!"

Sam stubbornly refused to see the funny side of that comment. "I agree, it's a big coincidence if it's *not* the website," he admitted, "although I'm not sure whether bread-knife-wielding Grandma Walton would have been much of a web surfer."

"So you're agreeing with me?" Dean sounded mildly confused.

"Yes," Sam confirmed. "To a point."

"What point?"

"The point where we expose ourselves to some potentially hazardous website that could take control of us and turn us into murderers or criminals."

"Technically, aren't we both of those already?"

"Dean –"

"I get what you're saying, Sam," Dean held up his hands in surrender. "But how are we going to check it out without – you know – checking it out?"

"There are other ways," Sam insisted, studiously avoiding Dean's gaze. "We need to know what we're dealing with first." He sighed heavily, raking both hands through his hair in frustration before suddenly rounding on his brother and snapping, "Jesus, Dean, haven't you had enough of something controlling you for one lifetime?"

Dean flinched, eyes widening in shock as he took an involuntarily step backwards and away from his brother.

Sam just stared at him, breathing hard.

Dean rigidly sett his jaw before grinding out, "Well maybe the amulet would protect me –"

"That was *demonic* possession, Dean!" Sam burst out, advancing a step towards his sibling and raising his hands impatiently. "We don't know what the hell this is!" *And I'm not risking losing you again. Not after what it took to save you...* He shook his head, deliberately calming his voice at the sight of the uncertainty – or was it *fear* – in his brother's eyes. "And besides, that demon still possessed you, even *with* the amulet. It didn't protect you from that, just kept it at bay so it couldn't get complete control."

Dean made no comment, just stared down at his duffel like it was a sack full of hellspawn and he wanted nothing more than to pulverize it into atoms.

Sam sighed. "Listen," he said, voice softening, hesitantly raising a hand towards Dean's shoulder before thinking better of the gesture and again running his fingers through his unruly hair. "I feel like roadkill. I'm gonna take a quick shower." His shoulders slumped slightly at the defeated expression on Dean's face. "We'll figure this out, okay?" When Dean didn't answer, just continued to glare down at nothing in particular, he added a little more forcefully, "Okay?"

Dean looked up, barely-checked anger glittering in his eyes.

Sam swallowed, almost expecting to see a hint of oily blackness encroaching on the hazel irises.

"Okay," Dean agreed grudgingly.

Sam nodded, snagging his washbag from his duffel before adding uncertainly, "No looking at that website, alright?"

Dean glared at him. "Sam, I'm not seven," he pointed out.

Sam grinned. "If I gotta threaten to tan your hide, I will, bro. I'm bigger than you, remember?"

Dean scoffed. "Like to see you try, Sasquatch," he said, mouth quirking into a reluctant grin. "And despite what you might read to the contrary, size ain't everything you know."

"Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that, dude," Sam tossed over his shoulder as he closed the bathroom door behind him.

Dean watched his brother's retreating back before his eyes were inevitably drawn to the laptop discarded on Sam's bed.

Biting his lip as he glanced guiltily back at the bathroom door, he hesitated a second before finally stalking over to Sam's bed and perching himself on the edge of the mattress, sliding the computer towards him, opening the lid and powering up the machine.

As the sound of water hitting tile trickled from the bathroom, Dean opened up the web browser and typed in the address, glancing down once at his amulet before hitting "Enter."

PART THREE:

Sam stepped out of the bathroom amidst a cloud of steam and some girly soapy scent that Dean would no doubt give him hell for later.

Snagging a clean t-shirt from his bed, he glanced over at his brother before tugging it over his head and grinning mischievously at the glazed expression on Dean's face as he stared unblinkingly at the laptop.

"You remember that big word I used earlier?" he needled with a smirk. "'Projection?' Well I think you got that going on right now, big brother. You better not be sullyng my IP address with that stripper from Vegas again..."

When Dean made no sarcastic response – in fact, no response at all – Sam ambled up behind him as he shrugged into an almost-clean shirt, figuring his brother must *really* be getting his twenty dollars' worth this time.

Peering inquisitively over Dean's shoulder, he frowned at the sight of a decidedly average-looking webpage which seemed to consist of a directory of links to subpages interspersed with seemingly random photographs of Pennsylvania's best-known landmarks.

As Dean's finger hovered motionless over the mouse pad, Sam just stared at the page for a second, not quite registering what he was looking at and trying desperately to remember what he'd come over here to do in the first place.

Blinking rapidly, it took Sam another couple of seconds to process the name of the website smeared across the top of the page in a rather unprepossessing banner that looked like it had been created by someone completely unable to get to grips with the finer points of Photoshop. "PAEye – Your one-stop guide to Pennsylvania living," the banner proclaimed.

PAEye. Now why did that sound familiar again...?

PAEye.

Wait.

Think.

Crap.

"Dean!"

Sam slammed the laptop shut so hard it actually bounced a couple of inches along the length of the mattress, balancing precariously on the edge as Sam swatted Dean's hand away like a naughty schoolboy caught raiding the cookie jar.

"Dean!"

Sam caught hold of Dean's collar, pulling him roughly around to face him as his older brother continued to stare fixedly at a point just beyond Sam's left earlobe.

"Dean?"

Sam shook him a little, concerned by the glazed look in his wide eyes and the disoriented expression beginning to spread across his pale face.

Voice softening slightly, Sam put a hand on the back of his brother's neck, forcing him to look up at him. "Hey," he urged. "Dean, you with me?"

Sam felt himself breathe again as Dean finally blinked at him, pupils contracting as his eyes began to focus on Sam's face.

"You're all wet," Dean muttered thickly, eyes still slightly crossed.

Sam grinned. "Shower, remember?"

Dean's brow furrowed at that. "But you just went in there –"

Sam's voice hardened again. "Dude, how long were you looking at that thing?"

Dean scratched his head slowly. "What thing?"

"That damn website!" Sam straightened to his full, decidedly imposing height, positively glaring down at his brother from on high. "What the hell were you thinking, Dean?"

Dean's confused frown deepened a little further before his expression gradually began to clear, eyes finally losing their foggy dullness as they came to rest on the laptop. He sighed,

rubbing a hand across his face as if that would clear the residual effects of whatever the hell he'd just been exposed to, before looking up at Sam. "We – we needed to know –" he began to explain weakly, such a well-worn expression of contrition on his face that he almost had Sam looking over his shoulder for their father.

Despite that, Sam didn't falter. "Needed to know what?" he demanded, hands on hips. "That you're an idiot?"

What worried Sam the most was Dean's lack of reaction to the insult. "I just thought –" his eyes dipped unconsciously to the amulet. "You know. That if it protected me before, it could protect me again. You know? Stop me getting all mind controlled...?"

Sam sighed loudly. "Dean, we've been over this," he said, trying to keep his patience but sounding exactly like every teacher Dean had ever had write "Could do better" on his report card. "That was *possession*, not mind control –"

"But something got that demon outta me, Sammy."

Sam froze, finally realizing that the confusion in his brother's eyes wasn't just a residual effect of exposure to the website. In fact, this wasn't about the website at all.

"Sam," Dean plowed on, seeming suddenly younger and a hell of a lot less certain of himself than he usually appeared. "What if it was the amulet? What if that's what expelled the demon from me somehow? What if it really is protecting me and –"

Sam sat down heavily on the opposite bed, a steadying hand on his brother's shoulder. "Dean, whatever –" *whoever* "– got that demon out of you, the most the amulet did was stop the thing from getting control of you. It's not like it's an Invulnerability Shield or something. It doesn't make you invincible." He smiled awkwardly. "Whatever you like to think, you're not Superman."

Dean looked up at him through lowered eyelashes. "If I was gonna be a superhero," he managed, voice scratchy, almost as if he was trying too hard. "No way I'd be a geek superhero. Guy doesn't even know his underwear's supposed to go on the inside."

Sam smiled lopsidedly at him. "So you're not gonna try that again?"

Dean shrugged. "Quit worrying about me, Lois," he said. "Website bad. I get it."

"And you don't feel...?"

"Like coming after you with a meat cleaver?"

Sam snorted. "Something like that."

"Only if you keep trying to force-feed me broccoli, man." He reached up and caught hold of the amulet, turning it over in his fingers thoughtfully. "Ugly-ass thing," he muttered. "You could at least have given me superpowers. Even lame superpowers like Sammy's. Now I'm just back to being some guy with a freaky geeky little brother who smells like a roomful of teenage girls at a slumber party." He finally looked up at Sam then. "Dude, what the hell did you shower in?"

Sam glanced up briefly as Dean entered the room with coffee and two greasy brown paper bags stuffed full of food that definitely didn't smell green.

He indicated the phone cradled against his ear as he continued his conversation, and Dean dumped the food down on the table under the window, noting the Bethlehem PD logo emblazoned across the screen of the laptop.

"...That's right, officer," Sam was saying, not for the first time surprising Dean with his effectiveness when it came to being somewhat less than truthful. "As I said, my company can't authorize Mr. Mannheim's insurance claim without a few additional details." He raised his eyes to the ceiling for a second, listening intently. "Oh sure, I *could* wait for your report to reach our office, but Mr. Mannheim is one of our most valued clients, and I had hoped to expedite his claim..." Sam looked over at Dean as his brother mouthed the word "expedite" back at him with a sneer.

Forgetting, for a second, that he was supposed to be the more sensible, mature brother,

Sam stuck his tongue out like he used to all the time when he was – like – six, causing Dean to convulse into a snigger which he had to smother in the crook of one elbow.

Sam fought down his own urge to laugh, the sight of his brother even *smiling* having become such a rarity of late that his laughter was nigh on infectious, briefly silencing that little voice in the back of Sam's head that kept telling him that deals with demons always *always* ended badly, and that when Haris came back to collect on the one Sam had made to save his brother, Dean would never forgive him.

And might never recover.

Sam pushed that thought away with an almost physical effort, trying desperately to convince himself that this had all been worthwhile. Had to be. He'd done the right thing. Hadn't he?

His smile faltered, and he gradually began to tune back in to what the police officer on the phone was telling him. "Fletcher?" he echoed. "May Fletcher. Uh-huh. And she's confirmed as having Alzheimer's? So no criminal charges, okay. And she doesn't remember any of it? And the crystal – the stolen property – was never found?" Sam's brows drew together in an intrigued frown as he nodded his head and offered up the occasional "uh-huh" here and there, the officer obviously imparting some tidbit Sam found fascinating. "I see," he continued. "Well, okay Officer Regan, that should be all I need." He paused, before suddenly adding, "Oh, there's just one other thing..." He licked his lips, so close to the *real* information he needed, he could almost taste it. "What residential home did you say that was again?" Suddenly his eyebrows shot up. "Really?" he burst out, a look of genuine surprise on his face. "And this happened...?" He glanced up at Dean, before smiling knowingly into the receiver. "Yeah, that is weird," he agreed. "Well, thanks for your help, Officer. I'm sure our client will be very grateful... You should stop in. Maybe he could offer you a deal on an iPod..."

Sam hung up then, still looking at Dean, a big goofy grin on his face.

Dean huffed out impatiently. "And...?" he urged. "Not everyone in this room's psychic you know..."

"You'll never guess where May Fletcher – our crystal-stealing granny – lives."

"The suspense is killing me, Sam. Seriously."

"Locksley Residential Care Home."

Dean's expression remained utterly blank.

Sam arched an eyebrow. "That's the same place where that nice suburban couple went on the rampage and wrecked the security system."

"Huh," Dean said. "That *is* weird."

"And guess what else?"

"You know, sometimes I forget you're not still ten years old..."

"Apparently they just got hooked up with internet access for the residents," Sam ignored his brother pointedly. "And the last thing May Fletcher did before her little trip into town was to sit in on a demonstration by the home's 'Quality of Living' Coordinator –"

Dean snorted. "The what now?"

"The lady who decided it would be a good idea to install this new-fangled internet," Sam translated.

Dean grimaced. "You think it's her?" he hazarded. "You think she has something to do with the psycho-killer-crazy-felon-mind-puppet website?"

"Maybe," Sam muttered thoughtfully, brow furrowing. "You know, I swear I've heard of that place before."

"The rest home?" Dean queried. "I don't think Dad would appreciate your checking out places for him to spend his twilight years, man."

"Yeah, like Dad'll ever end up in one of those places," Sam said, standing and tugging on his jacket.

Dean pulled himself to his feet, a surprised look on his face. "We goin' somewhere?" he

asked, eyeing the as yet untouched burgers still oozing grease onto the table.

"We'll eat on the way," Sam said, grabbing Dean's shoulders and spinning him toward the door.

"Jeez," Dean groused, snagging the food he'd just brought in on the way out. "And I thought / was the bossy one..."

"This place doesn't exactly say 'evil genius at work' to me, Sam," Dean muttered, following Sam up the front steps and into the reception area of Locksley Residential Care Home.

"Yeah, well," Sam replied, "not all evil geniuses live under a Mediterranean island with a white cat and a swimming pool full of piranhas for company, man."

A dreamy expression drifted across Dean's face. "I would so make a great James Bond _"

"You're thinking of Halle Berry in a bikini again, aren't you?" Sam guessed, making his way toward the formidable-looking middle-aged lady at the reception desk.

Dean appeared somewhat taken aback, face screwing up in surprise. "I so was not -!" he began to protest.

"Oh please," Sam waved him into silence. "You *always* get that expression on your face when you're thinking about Halle Berry in a bikini."

Dean looked mortally wounded. "It's a classic cinematic moment, Sammy. You really think I'm that shallow?" Sam opened his mouth, but Dean quickly silenced him. "Don't answer that."

"Can I help you gentlemen?" The receptionist squinted at them over red-rimmed spectacles, scowling none-too-invitingly.

Sam smiled his biggest smile – that one that usually had middle-aged ladies offering to make him soup and darn his socks for him.

This chick? Didn't even bat an obviously-false eyelash.

Sam's smile never even faltered. "I sure hope so –" he glanced at the name tag on the woman's more-than-ample bosom. "– Loretta. We're – uh – investigating an insurance claim by a Mr. Karl Mannheim – the proprietor of a pawnshop that was robbed by one of your residents..."

Loretta looked him over with a practiced eye, raked her gaze over Dean, before returning her attention to Sam. "Oh you are, huh?" she barked. "Let me see some I.D."

Sam continued to smile brightly as he deftly pulled out the I.D. card Dean had made the last time they pulled off the "insurance investigator" routine.

Loretta squinted at the little card. "Alright, Mr. Hagar," she said, somewhat less icily. "What can we do for you? You're not getting in to see poor Mrs. Fletcher though, if that's what you had in mind."

Sam's sympathetic frown was almost sincere. "No, no, we wouldn't dream of that," he said, and Dean was pretty sure he meant it. "It's just there are a few inconsistencies in the information given to us by the police."

"Such as?"

"Well," Sam began, leaning conspiratorially over the reception desk, eyes so puppy-dog Dean had the sudden urge to vomit. "We hear the poor old lady's last lucid memory was of attending an internet demonstration by your Quality of Living Coordinator?"

The receptionist had stopped peering and now seemed to be gazing, Dean noted, not for the first time in awe of his brother's boy-next-door "why thank you, ma'am" appeal. "Ms. Richards," Loretta supplied, actually sounding almost helpful as her frosty exterior began to melt away under the force of Sam's too-encouraging smile. "Thought it might help our residents interact better with the outside world."

Sam nodded again. "That's a very noble sentiment," he said. "But I wouldn't have

thought many of the – uh – more senior residents, especially those in Mrs. Fletcher's condition, would have shown much interest?"

Loretta actually *smiled* then, and Dean made a mental note to leave the questioning of any more mature ladies they might encounter to Sam in the future. "Oh, they didn't have much choice," she told him, voice slightly lowered. "Captive audience." She winked at him, and Sam glanced briefly backwards at Dean, an "ah-ha!" look in his eyes.

"I see," Sam said, returning his attention to the receptionist. "And Ms. Richards oversaw the demonstration?"

"Oh yes," Loretta confirmed. "It's her pet project. Thinks she's going to have some kind of *Awakenings* breakthrough, I'm sure." She laughed hollowly. "You ask me, she's getting some kind of kickback from whoever runs that website she keeps shoving down everyone's throat."

"Website?" Dean temporarily forgot to leave the questioning to Sam. "What website?" Loretta glanced once at him dismissively, before returning her lingering gaze to Sam. "Some local directory thing."

"PAEye?" Sam offered.

Loretta rested her chin in the palm of her hand. "You read minds too?"

Dean grimaced. "There's no beginning to his talents," he muttered.

Sam studiously ignored him. "You think we could speak to Ms. Richards?" he asked hopefully.

Loretta pursed her lips thoughtfully, and Dean heard a distinct whine from over his shoulder, but glancing behind him, all he saw was the empty reception area.

And a single blinking security camera.

"She seems to spend most of her time down in the basement these days," Loretta was saying. "God only knows what she's doing down there –"

"I thought your security system got trashed," Dean put in suddenly, that niggling little memory suddenly exploding behind his eyes in a flash of rainbow-colored light and waking up somewhere he wasn't supposed to be with a name that wasn't his.

Loretta tore her attention from Sam to look at his brother. "It did," she said bluntly. "That was the darnedest thing. Lovely couple. Visit their dad every Sunday, regular as clockwork. Then last week, one minute they're helping their dad take his first spin on Ms. Richards' favorite website, the next they're wrecking all the cameras..."

"Except that one?" Dean pointed at the camera above the doorway.

The receptionist blinked up at it, eyes glazing over ever-so-slightly. "Oh they're all fixed now," she said, voice suddenly the consistence of honey. "Good as new. You'd never have known there was anything wrong with them."

Dean frowned slightly. That made *no* sense... The crystal had obviously been taken for a reason. And the bank heist, the store robberies – hell, even the freaks trying to have him and Sam pushing up daisies – they all seemed to have some kind of purpose, a goal, an end result, even if it hadn't seemed that way to them at first. And even if Dean didn't have a clue what it was yet.

But this? Some random, pointless act of violence? *What the hell...?*

He glanced over at Sam, expecting to see his own non-comprehension mirrored in his brother's eyes.

But all he saw was blankness.

Emptiness.

Nothing.

He swallowed. Hard.

Sammy...?

"Thanks very much for your help," Sam was saying all of a sudden, the familiar amiable twinkle back in his eyes as quickly as it had disappeared.

Dean blinked, wondering whether he'd imagined the whole thing.

"Is it okay if we take a look around?"

"Knock yourselves out." Loretta threw a shy smile in Sam's direction. "Anything you need, sweetie."

She buzzed the boys in through the door into the main body of the building, Dean's brow creasing slightly at the ease of their entrance.

Sure, Sam may be like bait on a hook to women like Loretta, but still...

"What exactly are we looking for, Sam?" Dean asked, following his brother into a large lounge area variously populated by elderly or infirm residents, some with visiting relatives. "That receptionist –"

"Loretta," Sam broke in.

Dean rolled his eyes. "*Loretta* told us everything she knew. The only real question is, what was the point in that couple trashing the cameras? They must have known they'd be repaired right away."

"Unless they only needed to be out of action for a little while," Sam suggested, scanning the large room distractedly. "Maybe just long enough for this Ms. Richards to do whatever she needed to do in the basement." His eyes lit on a hallway off to the right, and a doorway marked "Staff Only" offering the promise of a stairwell.

Dean nodded. "Yeah, okay," he conceded. "Like in the mall that time. When I got zapped and the security camera got locked into a loop so you couldn't see it had been tampered with –" He stopped abruptly, mouth dropping open and staying that way until he finally managed to burst out, "Holy crap!"

Sam, hand already reaching for the door he'd spotted seconds earlier, turned at his brother's outburst, only to see Dean still standing in the middle of the lounge, staring in stunned silence at a figure in a wheelchair who appeared to be gazing fixedly out of a large bay window. "Dean, what?"

He took a step back into the room, eyes following the direction of Dean's astonished gaze.

"Talk about speak of the freakin' Devil, dude!" Dean breathed, shaking his head as that elusive memory he'd been trying to pin down all day suddenly burst into his head in glorious Technicolor.

Cameras. Rainbows. Soul stealer.

"Howie freakin' Grumnik."

Sam's focus skidded to the guy in the wheelchair, the face of Major Oak Mall's mousy former security guard immediately recognizable as he continued to stare blankly out of the window, completely oblivious to the boys' presence.

Or anything else, for that matter.

Sam was at Dean's shoulder now, shaking his head disbelievingly. "Dammit, I *knew* I'd heard of this place before," he muttered. "Why does this suddenly all seem to be making sense...?"

"Soul-stealing crystal," Dean said. "Like the one he had in the machine at the mall."

"Stolen computer parts and a temporarily malfunctioning security system," Sam added.

Dean's eyes widened. "He's building another machine."

"And using the people he controls through the website to get the parts he needs."

"But –" Dean faltered. "Look at him, dude. He's just a – a shell. You zapped his soul right out into cyberspace before you nuked his soul-stealing machine, right? He could be anywhere –"

"No." Sam turned to look at him. "Dean, he could be *everywhere*."

"*I'm everywhere*..." Dean muttered. "*I can see everything*..."

"We gotta find whatever it is he's building," Sam asserted. "And I'll bet it's down in the basement, just like last time."

He turned and headed back toward the door, but Dean caught his arm and held him back.

"Wait," he said. "Just wait." His brow scrunched. "What if that's what he wants?" he asked. "What if that's why he had the receptionist chick tell us about the basement in the first place? Somehow? To lure us down there? What if –"

"Dean," Sam turned to him, put both hands on his shoulders. "You said it yourself – the only way to check this out is to check it out, right?"

"Don't do that," Dean said.

"Do what?"

"Quote me at me."

"Come on, man! We gotta put an end to this before someone else gets hurt!"

Dean hesitated, again catching that oddly empty expression in Sam's eyes as he turned back toward the door and tugged it open, revealing a dimly-lit stairwell beyond.

He glanced back at what had once been Howard Grumnik, still safely ensconced in his wheelchair. "Sammy, I don't think –"

"Dean, come on!"

Sam had already disappeared down the stairs, and despite every hunter's instinct he possessed screaming "set-up!" right in his ear, Dean's own personal Prime Directive compelled him to follow his kid brother. *Look out for Sammy...* "Sam, wait up!"

He found Sam in a dingy corridor at the bottom of two flights of stairs, cupping his hands around his eyes to better see through the reinforced glass panel set into a door off to his left.

Dean noted the flashing security camera that was pointed in his brother's direction with some trepidation, reluctantly moving alongside to get a look into the room himself.

"It only looks half-finished," Sam was saying, moving aside so that Dean could take a look.

He shuddered at the sight of a half-dozen TV screens jury rigged together amidst a tangle of wires, and the rudimentary control panel nestled at their base. "Makes the one at the mall look like the Starship Enterprise," he murmured, trying the door handle only to find it locked.

He pulled out his lock pick, unconsciously frowning as he concentrated on the task at hand while Sam kept a lookout behind them. "What I don't get," he muttered thoughtfully, smiling as the lock clicked and the door swung up, "is why Howie would want to build himself another fantasy sandbox. I mean, if he can really see *everything*, then surely that would be his idea of sicko voyeur heaven?"

Stepping into the room, he surveyed the machine in front of him pensively, stomach flipping right over as he remembered the last time he'd stood in front of one of these godforsaken things. "But it sure as hell looks like that contraption he used on me back at the mall –"

The unmistakable sound of a gun cocking behind him caused Dean to stop short, and for a second he froze, scarcely breathing. "Sam?" He pivoted on one foot, and for the third time that day found himself looking down the barrel of a gun.

Only this time, it was Sam's gun.

Clutched in Sam's hand.

And it was pointed right between Dean's eyes.

Acting more on instinct and training than any belief that Sam would actually hurt him, Dean raised a hand and pushed the .45 out of his face, flinching as the loud report in his ear and the little plume of plaster blown out of the wall behind him signified what to Dean was simply inconceivable.

Sam just tried to shoot me.

"What the *hell*, Sam?" Dean barked out, anger quickly overcoming his initial shock.

"Were you aiming that at *me*?"

Sam was instantly on the defensive. "Of course I wasn't," he protested unconvincingly, lowering his arm and averting his gaze almost guiltily. "The machine, Dean! I was aiming at the crystal! Why the hell would I be aiming at *you*?"

Without really thinking about it, Dean squared up to him, getting as much in Sam's face as their height difference would allow. "I don't know, Sam!" he spat. "You tell me!"

The .45 still gripped menacingly in one hand, Sam slammed the other against Dean's shoulder, shoving him away angrily. "Get the hell out of my face, Dean!" he growled, expression turning into a dismissive scowl. "You know, sometimes you can be almost as dumb as you look _"

"Well excuse me for not wanting to get my head blown off, college boy!"

"You're being ridiculous, Dean. I did *not* try to shoot you! I was aiming for the crystal, you idiot! We need to destroy that thing right now!"

"Since when were you all 'shoot first, ask questions later' Mr. Let's-consider-the-evil-baby-eating-monster's-feelings-before-we-blow-it-to-hell?" Dean squinted up at him. "You looked at that website too, didn't you? Even after you flipped out because /looked at it! Has Howie screwed with your head like he did Sandie? Sam? Huh?"

He was in Sam's face again, and the younger boy gave him another angry shove backwards. "Dean, if anyone's been screwed with, it's you, man! Listen to yourself!"

"Then why haven't you put the safety back on, huh Sammy?" Dean indicated the .45 still clutched in Sam's hand. "Huh? Answer me that, smartass!"

Sam rolled his eyes. "You're paranoid," he pronounced. "And delusional. Jesus, it's like having you possessed all over again!"

Dean flinched at that. "You saying you don't trust me?" he said, voice lowering considerably as his fingers began to reach very slowly toward the small of his back.

"Why the hell should I, Dean?" Sam demanded. "You were looking at that website a hell of a lot longer than I was!" His hand tightened around the cool grip of the handgun, finger twitching against the trigger.

"And *you're* the one who gets the hinky death visions from a yellow-eyed freak who put some Spawn of Satan mojo on you when you were a baby, Sammy!"

It was Sam's turn to flinch. "That's what you think?" he burst out, again going for the height advantage and looming menacingly over his brother. "Huh? Is that what you think of me? You think I've just been waiting all these years to go Dark Side? You think that's what's happening now?"

"How the hell would I know?" Dean shot back, fingers brushing steel behind him. "I'm always the last to know anything! Don't pretend you've not been keeping something from me, Sam, 'cause I know you have. You and your little secrets. You're as bad as Dad with the 'need to know' crap! Hell, for all I know you could have done some kinda deal with Haris! You could be working for him right now!"

Sam took another step toward his brother, every muscle in his body suddenly vibrating. "And *you* could be working for those damn hunters – the ones who came after us at Bobby's. The ones who saw me get that vision when I was trying to save *your* sorry, possessed, brother-sacrificing ass –!"

"That's it." Dean whipped his Glock out from where it had been tucked into his waistband at the small of his back, taking a smooth step backwards as he brought the gun up and pointed it at Sam's head. "Get away from me, Sam!"

Sam brought his own gun back up until it was once again aimed right between Dean's eyes. "No, *you* get away from *me*, Dean!" he snarled, taking up an overtly offensive position.

Dean clenched his jaw and tightened his grip on the Glock, flicking off the safety and straightening his arms. "I'm going to kill you," he promised, voice so soft Sam barely heard him.

Sam nodded, the barrel of his .45 mere inches from the barrel of Dean's Glock. "Not if I kill you first."

PART FOUR:

Dean heard the bullet whizz past his head; felt the air displaced by its passing; saw the little spark as it deflected off the metal casing surrounding one of the TV monitors behind which he was currently hunkered down.

He could see Sam's silhouette against the far wall of the little basement room; knew he only had to move a couple of inches to his right and he'd be able to draw a bead on him; even raised his gun as his muscles prepared to shift him sideways.

Then he froze, suddenly struck by the *wrongness* of it.

Why was Sam shooting at him?

Why was *he* shooting at *Sam*?"

Sam.

Dean had taken a shot right at his little brother's head, and if the younger boy had ducked behind the large rickety filing cabinet a millisecond later, his brain would currently be decorating the metal doorway.

He didn't even remember how he came to be here; why he came to be doing what he was doing. He just knew instinctively somewhere deep down in the bones of himself that this was *wrong*. He shouldn't be shooting at Sammy. Shouldn't be trying to hurt him. Why the hell was he trying to hurt him?

"He's gone Dark Side," the voice began to reverberate around in his skull again, and he startled at the closeness of it, the insistence of it. "You have to kill him before he kills you, Dean. You know you do."

Dean pressed the Glock sideways against his temple, oddly soothed by the reassuring solidity of the barrel.

"You know you have to do it, Dean. You have to kill him. And then you have to destroy the machine. Otherwise, *both* will fall into Haris' hands. You know that's what Sam's doing don't you? Trying to steal the machine for his new master? You don't want that do you?"

"No," Dean muttered uncertainly, scrunching his eyes closed and ducking down as another bullet shot past his ear. "No," a little stronger this time. A little more sure of himself. "No, I'm not listening to you." He shook his head vehemently. "You're gone. You were exorcized. You don't have control of me any more –"

"Kill him, Dean. Kill him. You've already lost him. He belongs to Haris now. Always did. You knew that. You always knew that. He's going to kill you. He's going to kill you to prove his loyalty to his new father. Kill you, take the machine. Use it to hurt everyone you care about: your dad; Bobby; Kyle; even Sarah. Because even she won't be safe from him. He'll kill everyone you care about, Dean –"

"No –"

"Dean, you have to do this –"

"You're not in control of me any more! I'm not – I'm not possessed! I'm not –"

"Kill him, Dean. Kill him and destroy the machine. Then you'll be safe. Your family will be safe –"

"He *is* my family!"

"You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him, Dean. You, your dad, your mom: if it hadn't been for him, you'd have been safe; oblivious to the things out there in the dark. A normal family. He brought this down on you all, Dean. He attracted Haris' attention. You think that yellow-eyed monster would have spared you a second glance? Come after you, put that demon in you, tortured you if it hadn't been for *him*? For Sam? Haris only wanted *you* to get to *him*, Dean! That's all you've ever been – a pawn in his end game. Disposable. *Bait*. Just like your mom. It's too late for her, Dean. But it's not too late for you – for your dad. You can still save your family, Dean –"

"Sammy *is* my family!" Dean repeated.

He shouldn't be shooting at Sammy.

Why was he shooting at Sammy?

Mind control.

Website.

Howie freakin' Grumnik.

God his head hurt.

He opened his eyes cautiously. "They were all unconscious," he muttered, oblivious to the bullet pinging off the table and exploding into the TV monitor barely a foot from his face. "It was when they were unconscious that they forgot; that they became themselves again..."

His eyes darted across the room as he became suddenly aware of movement: his brother was moving toward him, gun drawn. Must have thought Dean was incapacitated when he didn't return fire.

Hatred and anger in his eyes.

Hazel-blue eyes.

Not black. Not yellow.

Mind control.

Howie freakin' Grumnik.

Unconsciousness...

"Kill him, Dean! Do it now while you still can!"

Got to –

Sam cried out once as the bullet sliced through the flesh of his upper left thigh, collapsing in a heap onto the concrete, hitting his head hard as he went down.

"That's it, Dean. That's it. Just finish it. Sam, then the machine –"

All Dean could see was the blood seeping through Sam's jeans; the blood trickling down his forehead...

Somewhere in his head he realized that both wounds were superficial. Head wounds could bleed like bitches, and the bullet had barely grazed his brother's leg.

So he needed to finish this.

He was grateful Sam's eyes were closed because he didn't think he could have done it with his baby brother looking up at him, begging him not to.

Had to do it. Better he was dead than whatever cog he was destined to be in Haris' machine...

The machine.

Howie's machine.

"Do it Dean, kill him!"

His gun was pointed between Sam's closed eyes and he never knew how it got there.

Just knew the safety was off.

And his finger was caressing the trigger.

And the machine...

The machine...

"Do it *now*, Dean! Put your brother out of his misery!"

At first he didn't recognize the face filling the TV screens behind him. Just a blur of movement out of the corner of his eye, it drew his attention away from his brother and made him glance over his shoulder.

"Kill him Dean!"

The man's lips moved in time with the words.

The voice was external.

Not in his head.

Not in his soul.

Not the demon...

Howie freakin' Grumnik.

"I know you," Dean mumbled, memories of bright light and rainbows and pain beyond description firing behind his eyes; strapped to a chair in a make-believe Sanatorium with a cruel, sadistic warden standing over him who wasn't who he appeared to be. "Chappell. Warden Chappell..."

The face on the screen grinned horribly. "Good boy. I told you I'd break you in the end." Dean blinked. "Get out of my head, Howie!" he growled. "I know it's you, you sick freak!"

The face on the screens positively leered. "Howard Grumnik has left the building, Dean," he said. "This is who I am now. I'm here to save you from your brother. He's going to tear you apart, just like Haris always planned. It's his destiny, Dean. You know that. Deep down, you know that. One bullet and all of this can be over. One bullet, Dean –"

"One bullet?"

Dean's finger tightened around the trigger as he breathed hard, turning slowly back toward where Sam still lay unconscious at his feet.

"One bullet."

Which was when the world skewed sideways as his legs were suddenly kicked out from under him.

He landed hard on the concrete floor, vaguely aware of a large silhouette straddling him and a strong hand encircling his right wrist.

"It's Howie, Dean!" Sam was yelling. "Listen to me!"

It took an almost superhuman effort to keep Dean pinned to the floor, the older brother desperately trying to free the hand still gripping his gun, eyes huge and pupils so big all Sam could see was black...

No.

Sam shook his head to clear it.

Dean wasn't possessed. He *wasn't*, not like the voice in his head had been telling him. "*Get him down to the basement, Sam. He's dangerous. Get him away from the civilians. You have to kill him, Sam. The demon's still inside of him. It never left. Haris double-crossed you. You have to kill him. It's the only way – the only way to save him –*"

He remembered little else except waking up on the cold floor, blood oozing into his eyes and a burning pain spearing through his leg.

And Dean standing over him holding a gun.

Mind control.

Unconsciousness.

He must have been knocked out when he fell after... Had Dean *shot* him?

"Dean, listen to me –"

His brother kicked and bucked underneath him, desperately trying to push him off, and Sam heard the distinctive grate of metal on concrete as Dean's boot connected with Sam's .45 which he must have dropped when he'd collapsed into unconsciousness.

Sam watched the gun skitter across the floor, well out of the reach of either of them.

And then suddenly he was flipped onto his back, fingers still gripping Dean's wrist, but somehow his older brother was kneeling over him now, left hand clawing at Sam's fingers, trying to regain control of his Glock.

"One bullet," Dean muttered, sounding so unlike Dean Sam actually shuddered, the older brother's brow furrowing as if not quite understanding what he'd been ordered to do. "I gotta end it, Sammy. Gotta end *you*."

And Sam could see it was tearing Dean apart; that somehow he knew Howie was in his head, but didn't know how to get him out. Didn't have the strength. Could only obey...

Was this what possession had been like for him?

"Sam –"

The pleading tone in Dean's voice spurred Sam into redoubling his efforts, somehow

managing to knock the Glock clean out of Dean's hand before it bounced once on the concrete and slid toward the bank of TV monitors.

A microsecond passed as both of them hesitated.

Then suddenly they were both diving for the handgun, Sam beating Dean to the prize thanks largely to longer arms and a clearer head, and then he was scooting backwards, away from his brother as he brought Dean's gun up to point directly at the older boy's head.

"Dean –"

Dean made a lunge toward him.

There was a bang.

And then Dean knew only blackness.

Well, at least the humongous pain in his temple had finally ousted the sangria-induced samba that had been thumping away in Dean's head since this morning.

This morning. Wow, that seemed a long time ago.

He remembered this morning; and the crazy lady in the diner; Manny and his self-sustaining beard; a dent in the Impala's rear fender. But everything after that was pretty much a blank.

So he guessed there was probably a very good reason he was sitting on a cold floor with his back to a cold wall and what felt like some guy drilling a hole in his forehead.

He opened one eye experimentally, not at all surprised to see a big guy in white hospital garb holding a gun on him.

His gun.

He blinked. White pants. The guy was so round he looked like a snowman. Roll him down a hill and –

Where the hell was Sam?

Had he...?

He remembered gunfire. And he was pretty sure he and Sam had been responsible for most if not all of it.

Crazy thing was, he was pretty sure he remembered an *exchange* of gunfire. Between the two of them. Like Sam would ever shoot at him! Or he'd ever shoot at –

"Sam!"

His eyes opened wide then, quickly taking in the bank of TV monitors and the second massive orderly who seemed to have Sam's .45 in his hand. Trained on his brother. Who was standing with his hands raised at shoulder height, eyes never leaving Dean's.

"I'm right here, Dean," Sam assured him, glancing back as the orderly took a step toward him. It could have been a matter of perspective from Dean's position sitting on the floor, but the towering behemoth made even *Sam* look small.

"You two just won't die, will you?"

The familiar voice echoed around them from the speakers positioned about the room, the image of Warden Benjamin T. Chappell – Howie Grumnik's wish-fulfillment alter ego in the fantasy world he had created from the basement of Major Oak Mall – filling every screen with his sneering visage.

The Warden looked over at Sam. "Velma, sit yourself over there next to Daphne," he ordered, inclining his disembodied head in Dean's direction.

"Hey!" Dean protested, glaring at Grumnik as the mountainous orderly shoved Sam none-too-gently in his direction.

Sam sat down hard beside him, stretching his left leg out in front of him with a grimace, although the pain was almost forgotten the second he realized the fratricidal glint had disappeared from his big brother's eyes. "At least you get to be the pretty one," he commented with a mischievous grin.

"Yeah, while you get to be the nerd," Dean returned.

The two of them looked at each other for a second before both muttering, "Huh," a little disconcertedly.

"You're bleeding," Dean observed, noting the sticky patch of red on the leg of Sam's jeans.

Sam glanced down. "I think you shot me, man."

Dean's eyebrows shot up. "I did?" He thought for a second. "I did." He shrugged. "I guess you were pissing me off, little brother. You can be damn annoying when you've got a gun in my face."

It was Sam's turn to look surprised. "I had a gun in your face? Wow. I just remember cracking you upside the head with it –"

"Oh, it's *you* I've got to thank for that, huh?"

"Only way to get you back," Sam explained. "Gotta be unconscious before you can shake Howie's mind control."

"That's why I shot you," Dean agreed, before adding a little uncertainly, "I think."

Sam blew out a slow breath. "Is that what being possessed feels like?"

Dean shook his head, completely serious. "No," he said. "I had more control then than I did this time."

"A fitting demonstration of my newfound power then," Grumnik interjected suddenly, drawing the boys' attention back to the TV screens.

Dean huffed. "Howie, you're about as powerful as a low energy light bulb on the runway at JFK."

"And yet I made you shoot your baby brother, Dean! Even Haris and that demonic passenger of yours couldn't force you to do that!"

Dean shut his mouth abruptly, leaving Sam to pick up the slack.

"How do you know about that?" he demanded, trying to keep the tremor from his voice.

"You know," Grumnik said with a grin that looked decidedly creepy on his cyber-face, "when you ripped my soul out of my body and flung me into the ether, not even caring where I wound up, I thought it was the most awful thing that had ever happened to me –"

"My heart bleeds," Dean muttered. "Someone hand me a violin."

"Howie, you remember what happened the *last* time you tried to monologue me, don't you?" Sam added with an innocent smile.

Grumnik ignored the interruption, talking right on over the both of them as if they'd never even spoken. "Could think of nothing else but finding my way back into my body and teaching you two a lesson you wouldn't live long enough to never forget."

"How's that goin' for ya?" Dean asked, glancing briefly at the two orderlies, both of whom had the same blank expression in their eyes as Sam had earlier.

The corner of Grumnik's mouth lifted in a forced grin. "You two nearly killed each other," he said. "Much more entertaining than having you die in some random car wreck or diner holdup."

"The key word here is 'nearly,' Howie," Dean observed. "We *didn't* kill each other; none of the 'assassins' you sent after us managed it either – not the desperate housewife or the city geek or the psychopathic maid service. That's pretty lame man. Especially for someone who claims to be as all-seeing as you do."

"It's not just a claim, Dean," Grumnik said, voice as honeyed as it was when he'd been tearing Dean's soul into little pieces back at the Sanatorium. Dean shuddered at the memory, despite his best efforts. "And it took me a while to realize my own power," Grumnik continued. "First, I had to figure out where I was and what I could do from there. Somehow, some link my soul had to my body guided me here – and I began to realize I could 'see' everything that went on here – through the security cameras. They're everywhere these days. And as soon as the implications of *that* began to sink in, all I had to do was get into the computer systems controlling them and I became virtually omnipotent."

"That's how you know about Haris," Sam shifted uncomfortably. "There were security cameras all over his complex..." What else had he seen? Did he know? Did he know about the deal?

"That worries you, Sam?" Grumnik asked, and for a brief second Sam wondered whether he could see into his head too. "I knew there was something – off – about you two." Howie raised an eyebrow and tilted his head to one side. "But one of you touched by a demon and the other protected by a magic necklace? Gotta admit, I didn't see *that* coming."

Sam tried not to appear too relieved, conscious of alerting Dean to his edginess. "So you figured out how to be the ultimate voyeur?" he prodded, trying to derail Grumnik from the subject of the Winchesters and back onto the topic he loved best – himself.

"Nothing so trivial," Grumnik replied. "At first, I just thought I could use my powers to gather intel –"

"Spy on people," Dean put in. "Yeah, that's called voyeurism, Howie."

"– Figure out a way to put myself back into my body; maybe communicate with someone. Then I happened upon that pawnshop – and the crystal – and a website by some sideshow hypnotist who reckoned he knew how to control a person's actions through a complex but virtually undetectable pattern of coding embedded into a website's background. He'd never gotten it to work himself –"

"Naturally," Dean put in.

"– But he said he had proof that advertizing companies had been using something similar for years. Kind of an extreme version of subliminal advertizing –"

"So that explains Celine Dion."

"– And it was only a matter of time until someone else perfected the technique."

Sam's brow crinkled. "And that 'someone' was you?"

If a disembodied head could preen, Howard Grumnik preened. "That was me," he confirmed with a self-satisfied smirk. "Of course, it only works for short periods of time – until the subject falls asleep or is rendered unconscious. As you two somehow managed to figure out. But it was enough. Heard Carolyn Richards talking about introducing the internet to this godforsaken hole. Insinuated my shiny new website onto her computer screen when she least expected it. Wasn't long before I had her showing it to everyone in the place, providing me with a nice, convenient army to do my bidding and help me build my new machine. Because I had different people under my control at different times, no one was any the wiser. And of course the added advantage was the people accessing the website on the outside. Hadn't really anticipated that. Made it so much easier, using them to get the parts I needed –"

"Commit robberies," Sam amended.

"– obtain funding –"

"Rob banks," Dean translated.

"– sort out any other little problems I might have –"

"Like us?" Sam asked.

Dean sneered. "I guess that part didn't quite work out, did it Howie?"

"And the crystal," Grumnik ignored them. "It's the twin of the one I had in my original machine."

"What are the odds?" Sam interjected.

"Surprisingly low," Grumnik replied smugly. "What, with my being omnipotent and everything. Which was when I came to realize something: All of these people in my thrall –"

"*Thrall*," Sam repeated with a snigger. "Told you."

"Shut up."

"– All fulfilling my every need, obeying my every command; that was when I realized you two had actually done me a favor ripping me away from my body: You released my true potential when you released my soul from the putrid flesh in which it had been imprisoned." He lifted his chin slightly. "Because now I'm beyond the physical; beyond soul and matter; beyond

life and death. I'm eternal. I'm forever. I'm everything. I'm *God*.."

"Ah hell," Dean muttered. "Now look what you've done, Sam."

"Created a monster," Sam agreed.

"And that pathetic body of mine? Weak and useless. Why would I want to imprison myself in something so limiting?"

Sam frowned. "So...wait a second. You're saying you went to all this trouble to build a new machine to get you back into your body and now you don't *want* to get back into your body?"

"It's every god's prerogative to change his mind."

"You're not a god, Howie," Dean reminded him.

"As good as," Grumnik replied defensively. "And now it's time for me to complete my journey to divinity."

A clunk to their left caused both Winchesters to glance at the door, which had swung open to admit a young woman in a starched white nurse's uniform, eyes the size of saucers, pushing a familiar figure in a wheelchair.

"Captain Pike, I presume," Dean muttered, eyeing the physical manifestation of Howard Grumnik as his wheelchair was abruptly brought to a halt in front of the bank of TV monitors. "Beep once for yes and twice for no."

"And you call *me* a geek," Sam commented, shaking his head.

"Don't knock the classics, Sammy," Dean replied defensively.

"Thank you, Julie," Grumnik honeyed. "You can go back upstairs and go to sleep now."

The young nurse nodded, turning and exiting the room without a sound, while the face on the TV monitors returned its attention to the orderly still holding Dean's 9mm, who proceeded to empty the clip methodically, before replacing one bullet and reloading the weapon.

"Stand up," Grumnik ordered.

The other orderly raised Sam's gun then, pointing it at the younger brother's head emotionlessly.

"Hey –!" Dean jumped to his feet and took a step towards him, but froze as the orderly released the safety with a click that seemed to echo around the concrete room. "Howie," Dean growled. "I swear to God, if you –"

"Remember who's *God* in this room, Dean," Grumnik warned him, nodding at the orderly holding the reloaded Glock.

The young man took a step toward Dean, who resisted the urge to fall back, eyes widening slightly when the bigger man suddenly grabbed the barrel of the handgun and thrust the grip in his direction.

Dean hesitated, eyes flicking between the proffered automatic and the one pointed at his brother's head.

"One bullet in there, Dean," Grumnik taunted him. "I'm going to let you decide what to do with it. Make the right choice and I might consider letting you and your brother go."

Dean's attention gravitated back toward the gun held out toward him, while Sam eyed him nervously. "Dean –?"

"One bullet," Grumnik repeated, and Dean shuddered as a vague half-memory of his aiming that same gun at his brother suddenly flashed before his eyes.

One bullet, Dean...

Slowly, he reached out and took the weapon, gripping it tightly before looking up at the TV monitors uncertainly.

"Good boy," Grumnik said, once again inclining his head toward the orderlies, who instantly began to back away in the direction of the door, Sam's gun still trained steadily at the younger brother's head.

"What the hell...?" Dean began, as the two behemoths left the room, another resounding clunk indicating they had locked the door behind them.

“So here’s your dilemma, Dean,” Howard’s processed voice was even more smug than his smugly grinning face. “You’ve got one bullet: Do you shoot out the crystal, thus destroying my machine and ensuring I never use it to steal another soul as long as I –” he chuckled, “ – exist; making sure I never find a way back into my body so that I can’t wreak the same havoc I did at the mall. Or –” His gaze slid to the figure in the wheelchair, something almost distasteful in the expression on his pretend face. “– Do you shoot my body, thus destroying any chance I might have of returning to my former existence, where I might find an even better use for my army of automatons.”

Dean glanced back at Sam, who merely shrugged at him, as if they both already knew the decision that needed to be made.

“Your choice, Dean,” Grumnik continued, eminently pleased with the quandary in which he had placed the older Winchester brother. “Risk my continuing to wield this weapon on innocent bystanders; or risk my getting back into my body and inventing something even worse –”

Dean didn’t even hesitate, the gun raised and the bullet fired before Grumnik even finished his sentence.

An ominous fizz, almost like the sound of an electricity generator going into overload, began to emanate from the machine the second the bullet hit the crystal, but instead of the shower of sparks that had heralded the beginning of the end for Grumnik’s first invention when it had been Sam who had shot out the crystal, there was instead a blinding flash of white light and a bassy throb that seemed to emanate from the concrete floor before vibrating right up the boys’ legs.

“What the –” Dean blinked as the blinding light receded, lowering the Glock and squinting at the place where the crystal had been – where the crystal *still was*... “Howie –”

“It’s all done with smoke and mirrors of course,” the simulation informed them casually. “I just wanted to see if you’d have the guts to shoot a defenseless man. After all, if I let you shoot out the crystal, the explosion wouldn’t be nearly big enough to take out the whole room and everything in it...”

“To *what*?” Dean demanded, voice raised not merely to ensure he was heard above the increasing thrum of the machine. He scowled furiously at the images on the TV screens before turning disbelieving eyes on Sam.

“Dean, what the hell did you do...?” Sam asked slowly, attention drawn to one of the monitors which suddenly appeared to be displaying a digital countdown; a digital countdown which at the moment was enthusiastically ticking off four minutes.

“Hey, don’t look at me, man!” Dean burst out, shrugging defensively.

“Four minute warning, boys!” Grumnik grinned, self-satisfaction oozing from every pixel. “When that clock hits zero, there’s going to be a loud bang and some pretty fireworks, and then I’ll be rid of the both of you, along with that pathetic shell of mine.” A menacing sneer leeches across his simulated face. “For me to make my new existence more permanent, there are two things I can’t have existing in my brave new world. Firstly, this machine, barely even completed, but it has to go. I can’t risk any more little boys with inquisitive fingers looking for buttons to push –”

“Who you calling ‘little,’ Howie?” Sam demanded, struggling to his feet and straightening to his full imposing height despite his injured leg, the look of disdain on his face causing a grin to light up Dean’s.

“And secondly,” Grumnik continued. “My body. No one will ever imprison me in such a restrictive vessel again. Both must be destroyed.”

“Along with us,” Sam clarified.

“Four birds with one stone,” Howard smirked.

“You booby-trapped your own friggin’ soul-stealing machine?” Dean burst out incredulously, trying to avert his eyes from the rapidly-ticking countdown.

"Don't need it any more," Grumnik said, "Don't want it any more. I have everything I ever needed, everything I ever wanted right here, right now, like this, in this existence. I'll never be lonely again."

"You sick son of a –"

"Dean."

"I'm gonna –"

"Dean!"

"And then I'm gonna –"

"DEAN!"

Sam grabbed his brother's shoulders, spinning him in his direction.

Dean just looked at him. "What?"

"We've got two and a half minutes to defuse this thing somehow!"

Dean glanced at the thrumming machine and the crystal, which had begun to glow a sickly yellow, before settling his gaze back on Sam. "Defuse?" he echoed. "Defuse a booby-trapped soul-stealing machine? Dude, do I look like friggin' Jack Bauer to you?"

Sam glowered at him before limping over to the nearest monitor and shoving randomly at a few of the buttons on the keyboard underneath. "If we can't stop it," he said, trying to balance himself on his uninjured leg, before glancing up at the monitor as a control menu suddenly popped up in front of him. "Then we at least have to get Howie back into his body before the whole thing goes up in smoke."

"What?" Dean burst out. "Why?"

Sam didn't even spare him a look, fingers tapping furiously on the keyboard, total concentration in his eyes. "We have to stop him, Dean. We did this to him. We made this possible. We created this monster, Dean. This is our mistake. It's on us. We can't leave him out in cyberspace, free to do whatever he likes whenever he likes to whoever he likes –"

"Alright, alright I get it," Dean grouched.

"What are you doing, Sam?" Grumnik intoned, perfectly mimicking the whacked out computer from that weird '60s sci-fi flick. "This is highly irregular –"

"Shut up, Howie!" both Winchesters snapped in unison.

Dean dragged a hand through his hair helplessly as he watched Sam struggle with the computer. "You know how to work this thing?"

Sam nodded, before glancing up at his brother, shrugging apologetically, and shaking his head. "There was this big red button..."

"You see a big red button?"

"Er – no."

"Then I guess we're screwed, Sammy."

Sam spared his brother another exasperated glance. "Get the door," he ordered tersely. "I'll figure this out."

"Sam, we've only got a minute and a half –"

"Then get the goddamn door, Dean!"

Dean just stared at his brother's back, shoulders hunched as he pored over the computer. "For the record," he grumbled, patting down his pockets as he turned to size up the door lock. "You are so not the boss of me." He grimaced as realization hit him. "The Incredible Hulk took my lock pick. You got yours?"

Howard's booming magnified laugh shook the surround sound speakers, drawing Sam's attention back to the monitors.

"You think I'd make that mistake again, Sammy?" Grumnik asked, and Sam's memory flashed briefly to being trapped in a locked supply closet with only a soulless, gray-eyed Dean for company. "Come on. How stupid do you think I am?"

"You really want me to answer that?" Sam asked. "Cause I really don't think I've got that long."

Grumnik sniggered. "C'mon Sammy, don't be like that," he wheedled. "You wanna play chess or something? It'll calm you down –" He stopped abruptly as a resounding clang clamored to be heard above the thrum of the self-destructing soul-stealer, and his simulated eyes skittered over to where Dean had just succeeded in smashing the security camera from its housing above the doorway with a well-placed blow from the grip of his 9mm.

Dean turned and grinned up at the camera mounted behind the bank of monitors, Grumnik's mouth compressing until his lips disappeared completely when the young man produced a thin piece of the camera's metal casing, brandishing it at him like a trophy before setting to work on the lock with it.

Sam swore he saw the computer simulation shrug. "You're not getting out of here," Howard ground out. "Not matter how hard you try or how trying you are."

"*Trying's* my middle name, dude," Dean muttered, glancing behind him at the clock, which now read fifty-nine seconds. "How's it coming, Sammy?"

Sam positively growled in frustration, jabbing one key after another as his growing sense of panic began to escalate towards ineffectual anger. "Dean, I don't think I can do this," he said. "Everything I try to do he countermands right away as if he's – he's reading my mind, or something!"

"You forget I'm omnipotent *and* omniscient, Sam?" Howard virtually sang. "I know what you're going to do even before you do."

"Thirty seconds," a pleasant female voice announced helpfully. "Please vacate the area immediately."

"Love to, sweetheart," Dean muttered, jabbing at the lock, before glancing back over his shoulder. "Sam –?"

"I can't –"

"Can't you – you know – use the Force or something, Luke?"

"It's just –"

"You really don't know how to push my buttons, do you, Sam?" Grumnik's mouth widened into a smug smirk.

"Twenty seconds."

"Sam?"

Sam grit his teeth, glancing at Dean as a loud clunk signified his brother was having more luck with the door than Sam was having with the computer.

"Fifteen seconds. Fourteen. Thirteen..."

"God, this is *such* a clichéd way to go out," Dean muttered, shaking his head as he shoved at the door.

Then Sam saw it, and it was suddenly so simple an eight-year-old could have worked it out. "Man, I'm *such* a dork sometimes," he mumbled, tapping out a furious concerto on the keyboard, before suddenly stopping and glaring up at the monitor, a defiant half-smile flickering across his lips. "End of line, Howie," he said, ramming his finger against the Enter key.

Dean ducked instinctively as brilliant white light invaded every crevice of the dingy gray room, rainbow color arcing out from the crystal to the insensible form of Howard Grumnik, whose body suddenly began to buck, back arching as gray eyes opened wide before the irises regained their previous dark blue.

As the light began to dissipate, Dean became suddenly aware of two things: First, his brother, crouched down beside Howie's twitching body, and second, the helpful female voice intoning, "Seven. Six. Five..."

He wasn't sure whether he grabbed hold of Sam's arm or of Howie's wheelchair first, but before Dean was entirely certain how he came to be there, he was huddled in the dark service corridor, one hand held protectively over his head, the other over Sam's, as an ear-shattering explosion ripped through the air above them, spitting fire out through the basement door which was blown clean off its hinges, plaster, masonry and bits of soul-stealing machine raining down

on them before the fire alarm started to wail and the overhead sprinklers kicked in, cold water soaking them in seconds.

Blinking water out of his eyes, Dean's fingers found purchase on Sam's jacket, and he managed to drag his voice up from somewhere near his boots.

"Dude, you totally blew us up," he muttered.

Sam scrubbed wet curls out of his eyes, blinking back at his brother in slightly stunned amazement. "Big time," he agreed. "I haven't had this much fun since that coroner guy almost did an autopsy on me." He placed a hand flat against the wall at his back, trying to lever himself to his feet as his gaze fell to the prone figure of Howard Grumnik, lying in the upturned wreck of his wheelchair.

The former security guard slowly opened one eye, piercing gaze coming to rest first on Sam, then on Dean. "You idiots!" he screamed, his own voice slightly less intimidating than that of his computerized alter ego. "You've ruined everything! I'm going to kill you both stone dead! I'm going to rip you into little pieces! I'm going to tear you limb from limb and –"

Dean reached over and patted his shoulder reassuringly. "That's nice, Howie," he said with an innocent smile. "But I so can't hear a word you're saying, dude. Jeez, my ears are ringing worse than that time I jumped the fence at Ozzfest..."

"...Police remain baffled tonight after a resident at a small Pennsylvania care facility embarked on a seemingly motiveless explosive rampage..."

Dean glanced up at the TV, for a moment grateful for any distraction from watching Sam wince as he cleaned out the long graze where Dean's bullet had strafed his thigh.

"You know, I could help you with that," he offered, sitting forward slightly on the lumpy motel room mattress as the chick on the evening news continued to ramble on.

"No residents were injured when what local authorities are describing as a home made incendiary device detonated in the basement of Locksley Residential Care Home, some twenty miles south of Bethlehem..."

"Perv," Sam said seriously, glancing up at Dean when his brother failed to make the anticipated snarky comeback. "I'm kidding," he assured him with a forced grin, trying to ignore the guilty look on his brother's face.

Dean nodded. "Uh-huh," he agreed, forcing himself to look at the TV rather than at the damage he'd inflicted on his kid brother. "I knew that."

"...Long term resident Howard Grumnik, who has been in a state of vegetative catatonia for the past six months, was found near the scene of the explosion, his miraculous recovery being suggested as the possible catalyst behind a deranged campaign of terror waged against his former caregivers..."

"Miraculous my ass," Dean muttered, running a whetstone across the blade of the knife he habitually kept secreted in his boot in an effort to distract himself from Sam's wound and Howie's enraged grimace as a camera was shoved in his face just as the cops began to wheel him out into a waiting ambulance.

"You think this is over? This is *not* over!"

Sam and Dean both looked up at the TV as Howie's maniacal screech blared from the speakers.

"You can't do this to me!" he screamed, bucking and kicking as two police officers and a paramedic attempted to strap him down to a gurney. "I'm a *god*, goddammit! You should be kneeling at my feet! All of you! I'll get you! I'll get all of you – every last one...!"

"Aw, shut up, Howie!" both boys yelled, Dean throwing a pillow at the TV just as Howie's cursing form disappeared into the back of the ambulance.

"Mr. Grumnik was this evening transferred to a secure psychiatric unit after declaring himself the mastermind behind a recent crime spree in the Bethlehem area, claiming to have exerted some form of mind control over helpless members of the public who then went on to

commit a string of crimes from armed robbery to wanton vandalism...”

“At least that might get Sandie off the hook,” Sam ventured hopefully.

“Mr. Grumnik’s condition will be closely monitored until a decision can be made as to his long term treatment...”

Dean sniggered despite himself.

“What?” Sam asked a little uncertainly.

“Payback’s a bitch,” Dean replied, an evil glint in his eye. “Dude’s gonna get locked up in a sanatorium.”

Sam set his jaw. “Good,” he said flatly, grabbing the remote control off the bed and switching channels to some station with a god-awful green color scheme. “Serves him right for what he did to you last time. And for messing with our heads this time.”

Dean risked a quick glance at him. “Like our heads aren’t messed up enough already.”

“Speak for yourself, man!” Sam protested. “Stanford, remember?”

“My point exactly,” Dean replied. “Who in their right mind would give up all this –” he gestured around the crummy motel room, “– to sit in some stuffy classroom with stuck up girls whose IQs are higher than their bra sizes?”

Sam shook his head at him before returning his attention to disinfecting his bullet wound, Dean wincing in sympathy as his brother hissed out through gritted teeth, face drawn tighter than David Gest’s at a Liza Minnelli concert.

“Sam –”

“Dean.” Sam blew out a breath, flashing his brother a determined “don’t you dare apologize” look before his expression melted to a teasing mock-grimace. “Man, I can’t believe you shot me,” he said.

Dean raised an eyebrow innocently. “Maybe Howie’s not the only one on the receiving end of some karmic payback tonight, Sammy,” he said. “You think I forgot about Roosevelt Asylum?”

The End