

Episode Twenty-One: Sacrifices

By Tree

Lexington, Kentucky

John Winchester pulled his black truck to a stop outside the gate to Lexington Reservoir Station Number 4. It was just before midnight and the moonless sky helped create an eerie feel to the pump station and the water as it rested undisturbed within the huge catchments.

John glanced at his watch, knowing he had some time before the scheduled meet was to take place. He hated being late for anything, years of Marine "promptness" drilled into his head. Yet, there was something to be said for being early. Being early meant that he had time to kill, and time to kill meant he had time to think. Thinking lately for John Winchester meant that he could reflect on the one thing that haunted his every waking thought: Haris!

The demon was out there and even more active than he'd been before. There certainly had been enough signs recently to validate that. There was no doubt that he was coming after John's boys, maybe even more so since Dean had tried to bind him in the bow of a submerged ship and add to the fact that Sam's deal with the demon had miraculously been broken. If demons could be pissed, then John felt sure that Haris was definitely one pissed-off demon. To some extent, there was a certain amount of satisfaction to be taken in knowing that his sons had harried the yellow-eyed demon.

John knew it was all just a matter of time before Haris caught up to his sons. Just a matter of them slipping up or letting their guard down for one critical second and that bastard would claim them both. If John Winchester had thought that the pain of losing his beloved Mary had been agonizing, he knew he'd never survive the loss of his boys to the same demon. A fact his sons had never understood, never comprehended when he tried to keep them out of harm's way. Sam had always assumed that John's disappearances were part of some effort to keep him out of the big battle. And Dean, well Dean was the faithful trooper, always doing whatever John asked without question, at least until recently, when it seemed that Dean's loyalty had shifted slightly more to Sam than to John.

Still, for all his sons' misunderstanding, maybe even for his own misguided efforts, it was all about protecting his boys. Finally, John had a plan. He'd spent the better part of the last several months hunting and researching, but he was now fairly certain it would work. It might not be the best plan in the entire world, but at least it gave him some hope, some glimmer of saving...

His watch beeped out its alarm, alerting him to the hour and his appointment. John pushed away the thoughts and climbed from the cab of the truck. He patted the pocket of his jacket, reassured that the 9mm was tucked away inside. He was meeting another hunter, but years of experience taught him that one could never be too careful.

John walked slowly toward the tall gate of the pump station, looking around cautiously as he advanced. The scuff of a boot on concrete caused him to spin around, instantly alert, his hand halfway inside his jacket until he relaxed as recognition of the person approaching eased him.

"JD."

"Howdy, John. It's been a while," the taller man replied back. "How ya'll been?"

John shrugged. "You know, saving people, hunting things. Second verse, same as the first."

Jefferson nodded, smiling back easily.

"Yeah, same here. Just got done with a job down near Texarkana. Woman said there was a ghost of some man haunting her house, breaking things, scaring her and

her friends, typical poltergeist kinda stuff. Hired me to get rid of it. I'm getting my ass kicked by this dude 'cause he got no intention of going down without one helluva fight. Come to find out, she killed the poor bastard, then moved into his place, took all his money, all his stuff. Needless to say, he was one vengeful spirit."

"Did you salt and burn the body?" John asked.

Jefferson paused, then his face spread in a wide grin. "Hell no! I figured she got what was coming to her. Better justice than anything our court system was likely to hand out. Besides, the good ol' boy was just protecting what was his anyway. I figure it was a match made in heaven, er... maybe that's hell?"

John chuckled and Jefferson joined him, their laughter breaking the silence of the dark night. When the moment passed and seriousness returned, John broke the awkward silence.

"So, what's going on Jefferson? Why all the secrecy? Why meet out here of all places?" John asked.

The lanky Texan looked down toward his boots, scuffing his right nervously back and forth as he absently toed at a stray pebble.

"Jefferson?" John asked again, his tone filled with apprehension as the skin on the back of his neck began to prickle.

"John, you have to understand. After Tennessee, after what we saw at Haris' compound, a lot of hunters, well, you know how they are John."

"No, Jefferson. Why don't you tell me how they are," John snapped back.

"John, we saw things. We saw your boys, well, you were there, you know what we saw. What do you expect? Things are pretty black and white for hunters. It has to be for us to do the jobs we do."

"So, that's what this is all about? You want to get my boys? You think I'm just gonna hand 'em over to ya?"

"No, we didn't expect that you would John."

The deep voice came from behind him and John spun around to come face to face with Sid Morrow. He instantly recognized the burly hunter from the assault on Haris' compound and later on the attack at Bobby's.

"You see, we know how you prize those sons of your above everything else in this world, Winchester," Sid sneered as he leveled a 9mm at John's chest. "And we know that you'd die a thousand deaths before you'd ever give them up. But, we're willing to bet that your sons aren't quite as hardened as dear old papa, freaks that they are."

John shook his head and looked back at Jefferson. The betrayer turned away, unable to face the accusing glance of his former friend.

"You give it your best shot, Morrow. But you just remember, I raised and trained my boys to be hunters. They didn't just wake up one day at twenty and say 'hey, what do I want to be when I grow up? They've ate, drank, slept and breathed hunting since they were kids. Every. Single. Day," John spat back defiantly.

Sid nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, you trained them, but then, you fell for our trap too," he stated simply pulling the trigger on the pistol.

The gun discharged shattering the stillness of the night and even disturbing the calm of the water as two mallards stirred from their nest. Sid looked down at the motionless body of John Winchester, a wry smile crossing his face.

This had almost been too easy!

Fort Yates, North Dakota

Dean threw open the door to room number twenty of the Sitting Bull Motor Lodge and walked inside. The uncontrolled laughter that had emanated from the older brother softened abruptly as he led the way into the room. Always cautious, Dean Winchester usually made it his objective to be the first through the door whenever

they came back to the room. It was an unconscious habit that he'd developed many years back, but it had saved the brothers' asses more than a few times.

Once the lights were on and a quick sweep of the room revealed no immediate threats, Dean felt the hilarity return. Sam sensed it too and inwardly cringed.

"I'm telling ya, Sammy, the look on your face, it was priceless. If I'd have had a camera, we'd be a million dollars richer after I submitted the video to one of those programs on T.V.," Dean chuckled as he tossed the gear bag onto the nearest bed. He dropped into one of the chairs, slouching back and still laughing as he watched Sam follow him in.

"Yeah, real funny, Dean. How was I to know that crazy old woman was gonna come flying out of that cornfield?"

Sam trudged in behind him, a thin cover of dark brown covering the lower half of his jeans and most of his back side. He mimicked Dean by discarding his own bag on the adjacent bed and was about to follow the pack's path when Dean abruptly stopped him.

"Oh, no way!" Dean shouted, rising to his feet. He grabbed Sam by the shoulder and spun him towards the closed bathroom door. "This is one time I won't fight you for the first shower. Bad enough the Impala's gonna smell like cow manure, but no way I'm gonna sleep in here tonight with the room smelling like a freakin' barn. Get your ass in there and wash that stench off ya."

Sam acquiesced, feeling the tightness beginning to seep into the muscles of his legs and lower back. If Dean was willing to sacrifice hot water to be rid of the odor, then Sam was will to oblige his older brother and indulge his aching body. Besides, it served Dean right for making fun of him.

Dean watched his baby brother slowly move into the small bathroom. He could tell from Sam's body language that the younger man was sore and gradually becoming stiff. Yet, even as the door closed behind Sam, Dean barely stifled the smirk as he recalled the evening's events.

The brothers had come to Fort Yates just a couple of days before on what seemed to be another Woman in White type of case. Except, as they investigated further into the sightings, they found that it was actually a "woman in black" that the locals had claimed to have seen. Even more strange was that while there had been deaths associated with the sightings, unlike the case in Jericho, none of the men actually disappeared. There were no blood-stained cars left behind and in fact, most of the men's death's looked to be accidental.

They spent the first day in town researching the local news sources for reports of any suspicious deaths or suicides on the roads outside of Fort Yates. But an afternoon spent in the local library turned up little more than weary eyes for Sam and a couple of potential phone numbers for Dean.

Following dinner, they drove out to the area where most of the sightings and deaths had occurred, but an early evening thunderstorm seemed to have warded off any likelihood that their spook was going to appear.

Another day spent checking out the town and basically poking around only left the brothers more skeptical as they headed back out to Black Tongue Hill that evening. Sure there were plenty of stories about a ghostly apparition dressed in black wandering the roadway and preying on unsuspecting male drivers, but there weren't really the tell-tale deaths associated with her as the hunters would have expected.

So they began by driving the four mile stretch back and forth just after dusk, but when the woman in black failed to appear, Sam proposed that maybe she was a "no-show" because they were both in the car. Of course, the only problem with Sam's logic was that it meant he got to hide off in the edges of the cornrows since there was little chance that Dean would give up the driving duties.

It was on the tenth or eleventh pass that the excitement really started. As the Impala crested the top of the hill, a small figure enshrouded in black stood ethereally in the center of the road.

Dean slammed on the brakes to the old Chevy, screeching the tires as the car shuddered sideways to a stop. He stared curiously at the slight shape before him in the headlights; long white hair cascaded outward as the evening wind whipped over the high plains, a thin black shawl wrapped tightly around bony shoulders, tattered edges joining the hair in its wild dance.

The woman stood there, mockingly, defiantly, as though she were eager for Dean to continue towards her. He obliged her, gunning the accelerator while she cackled maniacally. But just as the car was nearly to her, she dodged to the side and dashed into the one of the many lines of endless cornstalks.

Dean rapidly hit the speed dial button on his phone to Sam, eager to alert his brother even though he could have nearly shouted from his position to where he had left Sam hiding off the side of the road.

In the end, it hadn't mattered. Sam's startled yelp sounded out both from the cellular as well as across the dark North Dakota sky as the old woman popped out of the field and nearly right on top of the younger Winchester.

Definitely not a ghost, but only slightly less angry and deranged, she clawed and shrieked sufficiently to rival the best of banshees, hopping onto Sam's back as he whirled about the cornfield blindly trying to dislodge her while Dean shouted at him over the phone.

By the time Dean pulled the Impala to the side of the road and scrambled from the car, Sam was seated on the ground with an equally disheveled looking old woman sitting several feet away. The old woman looked back and forth between the brothers, glaring at each of them in turn. Both she and Sam alike were covered in muck although Sam bore more scratches from both her nails and the sharp stalks.

Dean drew up short, taking in the scene and chuckling slightly. "She's no ghost dude."

Sam had looked up at him, flinging down mud from his fingers. "You don't say, Sherlock?"

And so they pieced together that the old woman, every flesh and bone bit of her, had created her own fragment of urban legend by taking up "haunting" that particular stretch of lone highway. Getting her back to town and to the local hospital encompassed several more scratches and a few near-miss bites for both of them, but Sam insisted and after all, as Dean rationalized, they couldn't exactly salt and burn her anyway.

Now, hours later, showered, slightly refreshed, and definitely on the downside of a less-than-typical hunt, Sam and Dean headed back out to grab a quick bite to eat before calling it a night.

"I'm telling you, Sammy, I know you've been looking for easy hunts ever since Harrisburg, but dude, I think this one might take the cake. Actually, does this even qualify as a hunt?" Dean mused as he finished tying the laces to his boots.

"Dean, please, can't you just let it drop?" Sam whined, grimacing slightly as he stretched to pull a t-shirt over his head.

"Aw, what's the matter, Sam? You sore cause granny got the drop on ya or 'cause she got the free piggy-back ride?" Dean asked, rising up and grabbing his cell and keys. "I know, you're just embarrassed because your scream sounded more girlie than hers did."

"Ha ha ha," Sam answered in fake laughter. "And once again, I bow to your sparkling witticism and obtuse humor."

Dean paused at the door, staring at his younger brother as he tried to wrap his brain around the words. He knew there was a "dig" in there somewhere, but like always, Sam's larger vocabulary left him speechless. Shrugging, he merely waited for Sam to walk out the door before pulling it closed behind them, choosing to focus on the grumbling in his stomach rather than the temptation to tease his brother any more.

Before he took a single step towards the car, the first strong chords of Black Sabbath's *Ironman* warbled out from Dean's cellphone. He stopped abruptly, fishing into the right pocket of his jeans and looking at the caller ID before hastily jabbing the button to answer the call.

"Dad?" he asked tentatively, trying to mask the hesitancy in his voice. After all, the last communication he'd had with his dad hadn't exactly gone all that well following Sam's near-death in New Jersey.

"Dad, is that you?" Dean repeated when there was no immediate reply.

Sam drew closer, seeing the concern in his brother's face and hearing the name, now said twice. "Dean, what is it? Is it Dad? Is he okay?" he asked rapidly.

Dean waved him off as he strained to listen for any response. He was about to call out for his father again when a harsh grunt emitted from the phone followed by his dad's low voice.

"Dean. Son, I need you to listen carefully, okay?" John began.

"Yeah, yeah, sure, dad," Dean stammered back, his heart beginning to race as he detected the urgency and even the hint of pain in his father's voice.

"Son, I'm needing a little help on a hunt I've been on. I'm uh, up near Northern Wisconsin, after a Hodag. I need some help Dean. The thing's a big bitch and I can't seem to bring it down by myself. I need you and Sam to bring the Colt and the special bullet to me. It's the only thing that'll work on something like this," John explained, his voice raspy as he tried to feign normality, but Dean knew better.

Dean, more than any other living soul on the planet, could read John Winchester's tells. Not that it was saying much, considering that John basically had two emotions that he showed the world: angry and determined. But over twenty years of hunting, Dean had also glimpsed fear, desperation, and pain. If Sam wanted to accuse his older brother of building walls and hiding his emotions, then Dean had to admit that he'd learned it from a pro.

"Dean? Did you hear me?" John's voice cut through the elder son's reverie.

"Yeah, Dad, I understand. Are you okay? Where are you exactly?" Dean demanded, pacing the sidewalk in front of the motel.

"Son, just do as I..." John's voice rose in irritation but before Dean could press for more information, his father's voice and the call were abruptly cut off.

Dean stopped, looking blankly at the silent phone in his hand. He shoved the cell back into his pocket and wiped a sweaty palm against the front of his jeans as he looked up at his brother.

Sam's eyes met Dean's, questioning him, needing his older brother to fill in the gaps to the bad news he'd already gleaned from Dean's reaction. He tried not to notice the slight tremble in his older brother's hand as Dean unlocked the door to their room.

"Dean, what's going on? Where's dad? Is he okay?"

Dean sucked in a deep breath, moving across the room and grabbing his gear bag.

"Dad's in trouble, Sammy," he began, as he rapidly stuffed clothing into the pack. "Someone or something has him. He was trying to warn us."

"What did he say exactly? Do you know where he is?" Sam asked eagerly, moving to mimic Dean and packing his own belongings.

"I'm not sure. He said he was hunting a Hodag in northern Wisconsin. Hodags are bogus, never existed."

"I know that, Dean, but what does that mean?"

"Well, he also said that he needed our help hunting it, but to bring the Colt and the special bullet. He said the special bullet was the only thing that could bring the Hodag down," Dean repeated.

"So, we're heading to Wisconsin?" Sam asked.

"No."

Sam spun around to face his brother, slamming the backpack down on the bed. "What do you mean, no? Dean, something's got Dad and we're not going to get him?"

"No, Sammy, we're not. Dad calls us and tells us that he's hunting a bogus creature. Then he tells us to bring him the Colt, which we don't have, and the special bullets, that we know are fake. He's telling us that whatever he says is also a lie. He doesn't want us coming after him," Dean explained.

Sam exhaled in frustration, plopping down onto the bed and staring up at Dean. He shook his head angrily, until his brother noticed that Sam had ceased packing.

"What, Sam?" Dean shouted, his own irritation compounded by fear for their father and the desire to beat something, *anything*, with his fists right at this particular moment.

"This is Salvation all over again, just like when Dad was taken before," Sam griped. "We sit with our thumbs up our asses and wait while a demon or whatever has him."

"This is not Salvation and by the way, I was right then too," Dean threw back. He calmed slightly, stopping his own hasty packing and squatting down to face his brother. "Sam, trust me, please. We need more intel first. I don't think this is Haris. Call it a gut feeling, but this is something else. Dad's trying to warn us and the deal with the Hodag, there's more to it than just the ruse. We gotta talk to Bobby."

"Bobby?"

"Yeah, 'cause Bobby Singer and John Winchester once went on a Hodag hunt together. Course, all they returned with was a pickup truck full of empty beer cans and some stories that never made a helluva lot of sense," Dean answered, a wry grin crossing his face.

Sam loosed a brief laugh breaking the tension as he pictured Bobby and his dad on some drunken pseudo-hunt.

He rose to his feet and slung the backpack over his shoulder, moving over to gather the laptop.

"So, we can be at Bobby's by midday tomorrow then?" he asked.

Dean didn't immediately answer. With his back turned away from his brother, he hoped his voice wouldn't betray him. He really had no idea if Bobby could help them or not. He wasn't even sure if he had interpreted his dad's message correctly. For all he knew, their dad could be dead by now.

"Yeah, Sam. By tomorrow," he answered simply, forcing the negative thoughts from his head as he walked over to the motel room door and looked out into the night.

Singer Salvage Next Day

Bobby beat on the rusted fender of the old Ford with the ball-peen hammer, sweat glistening on his brow beneath the rim of his baseball cap. He momentarily stopped his labor to remove the hat and run an equally sweaty forearm across his forehead.

It was already shaping up to be a humid day, but if he wanted to get the old truck running any time in the near future, he knew he needed to get some of the creases out of the metal so that it didn't gouge into the tire when it turned.

Despite the fact that Bobby considered himself a hunter first and foremost, he faced the reality that it didn't pay the bills. Unlike others of his kind that hired themselves out as mercenaries or chose other means of keeping fed and clothed, Bobby elected to maintain something a little more law-abiding, at least on the surface.

Sure, having a salvage yard wasn't the most glamorous occupation in the world, but then, it also kept people from asking questions and for that matter, any greater

expectations of him. After all, junkmen were by popular definition, a strange lot. Why should he bother to try to change anyone's opinion on the profession?

He tucked the hammer underneath his left arm and pulled a beat-up thermos from the bed of the truck. Even in the heat, he still preferred coffee before noon and then, well, something with more of a *kick* to drink for after the lunch hour.

Replacing the thermos, he reached inside the old pickup and turned up the volume on Tammy Wynette and whoever was cheating on her now. He tapped the side of his grungy jeans in time with the song before picking up the rhythm with the hammer against the metal once more.

Bobby worked on the fender for another ten minutes until he stepped back to eye the line of the vehicle and was satisfied that it would suffice. With the radio still blaring, he then ducked underneath the hood, his attention fixed on the radiator.

"Now where are you leaking from?" he asked, his hands running over the back of the grille and across the attached hoses. "I 'spose I'm gonna have to replace you altogether."

He took out a wrench and began loosening the bolts that held the part in place, resorting to beating on the radiator with the tool when it failed to come loose.

As the cacophony of country music and hammering echoed throughout the property, the stealthy approach of six armed men went unnoticed. They spread out in a standard flanking formation, leap-frogging ahead of each other by twos, each pair covering the one before them as they darted from one point of cover to the next. Within a few seconds, the teams had closed in on the unaware hunter.

Several yards behind them, a lone figure walked casually through the mounds of stacked, rusting hulks. Seemingly unconcerned about covertness, the figure watched from behind as the teams took up their places strategically.

With a wave of a small hand, Rennie Lofton signaled the group to continue. Her dark hair hung loose, obscuring her features but not hiding the steely glare from her eyes. The men she commanded held no particular respect for her, but the stories that circulated about the vicious scar that bisected the otherwise creamy complexion of her face were nearly an urban legend on their own.

Whether any of the stories were true, no one but Rennie knew for sure, but the woman's tense body language and terse speech generally told everyone to "stay clear" regardless. Those that she allowed close enough to hunt with her knew she her looks were deceiving. Like a pitbull, the woman was a bundle of muscle in a small package. And like the breed, she tended to fight just as ferociously.

Man, creature or demon spawn from hell, it didn't matter to Rennie, everything was perfectly simple in her mind: hunt it and kill it.

She watched as one of the men from the lead team pulled the rifle from his shoulder and drew a bead on the target. Bobby Singer would never know what hit him. Quick and efficient, Rennie had argued for doing the job herself, but Sid had insisted on the extra men.

Looking at Bobby now, she didn't see why Sid was so concerned. This man, this supposed hunter, didn't look like much to her, even less than she remembered him from the assault in Tennessee. Hammering on the engine of some broken down old truck, Singer didn't look to be much more than the old beater he was working on.

"What a waste of manpower," she griped. "Could've taken this old codger in my sleep."

She continued to watch in feigned boredom as the sniper took careful aim. Rennie felt the sudden cool breeze blow the hair from her face and she silently willed the shooter to hold until it passed. A dozen yards away, she heard the clanking of the wrench suddenly stop, followed by a low "sonofabitch."

NO! Rennie shouted a silent warning even as the gunshot barked out. The female hunter slapped her hand on a nearby car frame in disgust as she watched Bobby duck down to retrieve a dropped wrench just as the bullet ricocheted off the metal of the hood inches from where his head had just been.

The element of surprise lost, the hunters began firing rapidly and randomly as their target ducked behind the relative safety of the truck. Rennie rolled her eyes in frustration and pulled her own .45 as she took off in a run to join in the battle.

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Bobby breathed heavily as the hail of bullets rained around him. He was too busy being angry with himself for having let his guard slip to be truly surprised by the attack. Still, there'd be time for self-recrimination later, right now he was outnumbered, exposed, and unarmed.

He listened intently, marking the positions of his attackers from the reports of their weapons. They might have the numbers and the surprise, but Bobby Singer wasn't stupid. He'd prepared for this possibility years in advance, strategically placing those so-called junked cars throughout the property, likewise leaving little hidden caches of weapons where he could get to them if need be.

Dodging between the rows, he hunkered down when he reached the frame of an old Ford Escort. Reaching underneath the hatchback, he grabbed the stashed shotgun with his left hand as his right sought out the loose shells that were tucked beneath the mat.

Immediately, he was back on the run, taking only the briefest opportunity to turn and fire whenever one of his enemies got too close. He only casually recognized the sting of a bullet that cut through his upper arm, tugging at his shirt as it dug a furrow into his bicep. Another whizzed past his head, narrowly missing him and fragmenting metal as it penetrated the door of the truck beside him.

He ignored the panic that was threatening the back of his mind, focusing only on the back door to his house and the relative safety that it represented. Taking a tentative step away from his cover, he caught the movement of the man out of the corner of his eye and quickly ducked back. Waiting till his foe committed to stepping out into the clearing, Bobby took careful aim and fired the shotgun.

The man went down with a scream, clutching his ruined leg as he writhed on the ground. Bobby took the opportunity and darted for the backdoor to the house. He was nearly through the door when he felt the bullet slam into the back of his left shoulder, spinning him around so that he was face to face with the shooter.

"Rennie!" he shouted, seeing the woman standing several feet away, the .45 still raised in her hand.

Before she could pull the trigger again, he dropped and rolled into the house, hearing the bullet splinter the wood frame of the door. Bobby slumped against the kitchen cabinets, limply holding the shotgun in his numb left arm as he pushed several more shells into the weapon.

Outside, the other hunters surrounded the ramshackle house, firing round after round into the walls. High-caliber automatics pierced holes through the siding, spraying papers and shattering glass as they continued their path through the interior of the house. Bobby crawled along the floor, keeping low as the barrage continued, coming to a halt when he reached the wall between the living room and the book-filled dining room.

"Bobby!" Rennie's voice rose above the din of the weapon's fire. "Come on, Bobby, why make this so hard? You got nowhere to run now. You're trapped."

The older hunter responded to the taunt by firing his shotgun defiantly through the large window to his right. He knew he wasn't going to hit anything, but he had no intention of letting that bitch think he was giving up.

"Are you bleeding bad, Bobby? Vision getting a little blurry? Hands getting shaky? We can just wait till you bleed to death, doesn't make a difference to me, old man," Rennie mocked.

Bobby scooted over toward the window, ignoring the pain in his shoulder and the huge stain of red that marked the wall where he had just been. He'd been shot before

and knew that the current wound in his shoulder wasn't good. In fact, he knew Rennie was right and that if he kept losing blood at this rate, he'd either pass out or bleed to death, neither of which boded well for his chances of survival.

Peeking over the edge of the windowsill, Bobby spotted Rennie standing defiantly in what passed for the front yard of his place. Dressed in black leather pants and an equally dark leather jacket, he knew the clothing was more for effect than appropriate for the weather. She looked hot, in more ways than one, but Bobby knew that underneath the hard body was an equally hard soul.

As much as Bobby Singer didn't care for hurting women, somehow Rennie Lofton no longer fit in that category for him. Taking careful aim with the shotgun, he fired at her, glass shattering as the spray of the pellets ruptured it on the way out.

Rennie jerked backwards as some of the pellets struck her. While none of them were lethal, they still stung nonetheless catching her in the upper chest and peppering her neck. She screamed in anger, her hand flying up to her throat.

"You sonofabitch!" she shouted, whirling around to take cover behind her black Yukon.

"Are you bleeding, Rennie?" Bobby called out from the house. "Is it easy to get blood out of leather?"

He smiled as he imagined her fuming in anger, knowing he was correct when she capped off several rounds in his general direction. Bobby heard her yelling orders to the other hunters that had surrounded his home and from his vantage he could see them closing in.

"You're gonna die, Singer. I'm gonna have these men drag you out here and I'm gonna stomp on your skull until there's not enough left of you for anyone to identify," Rennie hissed. "You're gonna pay for betraying the cause and protecting the Winchesters."

"Betraying the cause? Is that what this is all about? You people are still going after John and his boys? You really are insane, Rennie. John Winchester and his sons are fighting on our side, always have been. You simple fools are just too blind and dumb to see that."

"You're the blind one, Bobby, helping those Winchesters. One's a freak and the other is a demon's pawn. You've lost your edge and its time for retirement," the small huntress yelled.

"Bring it on, better men than you have tried," he shouted back, punctuating the statement with two more rounds from the shotgun.

Another volley of return fire answered and Bobby ducked down as more of his home was ventilated. He considered that things weren't looking too optimistic at the moment and even considered calling for help. The only problem was who to call, and really, by the time anyone would get there, he'd surely be dead. At the very least, he thought he should warn John and the boys. But as he moved to reach for the phone, there was a loud crash from the rear of the house.

Bobby struggled to his feet, knowing that the hunters had grown tired of waiting on the outside and had finally launched their assault. He saw the shadow of movement in the kitchen and readied himself around the edge of the doorway.

Just as he was about to swing around into the room, another loud crash sounded from the front. He spun to see the grenade land on the hardwood floor and roll underneath his cluttered desk.

Diving toward the kitchen, firing the shotgun repeatedly as he moved, the house behind Bobby exploded violently. Wood, glass, paper, a lifetime of research, a life's worth of blood blown outward in a fiery blast.

Hours later

Road leading to Bobby's

Sam fumed silently in the passenger side of the Impala. While Dean could at least hide away in the solitude of driving, Sam was left with nothing other than his own mind to keep him occupied.

He really did understand that Dean was doing the right thing. It was just that the right thing didn't feel very *right* at the moment. Not that he could ever be accused of excessive displays of emotion when it came to his relationship with his dad, but Sam hated the feeling of helplessness, hated that they only knew that their dad was being held captive, was probably hurt, and they weren't doing anything to rectify that situation.

While Dean continued to stare out the windshield, his gaze fixed on the road ahead of him, his hands clenching the steering wheel as if he could snap some imaginary foe's neck, Sam in turn focused his frustration in the steady thump of his foot as his entire right leg bounced nervously.

He knew the worried movement was grating on Dean, could see the occasional glance of Dean's eyes his way, the huff of air when Dean knew Sam was watching him. Sam just didn't care. He, not unlike his older brother, needed to vent his anger, needed to strike out, and unfortunately, confined to interior of the old Chevy, the siblings had no other focus for their emotions than each other.

"Sam, if you don't stop with the hyperactive leg thing, I'm either gonna tranquilize you or yank the damn thing off and beat you with it," Dean finally barked.

"Yeah, 'cause not like you clenching your jaw over there isn't just as annoying. Really, Dean, I could tolerate listening to friggin' Nugent rather than listen to you grind your teeth or hear your knuckles pop while you strangle the steering wheel for the next hundred miles," Sam snapped back.

He waited for his brother to say something equally hurtful back, but when Dean remained silent, Sam knew that his older brother was absorbed in God only knew what sort of thoughts about their dad and really didn't need any more added pressure to the mounting stress he was already under.

Stopping just short of apologizing, Sam dialed the number to Bobby's once again. He waited for the same unanswered ringing that had greeted him the last few times he had dialed. Instead, Sam found his right leg beginning to bounce even faster as this time, Bobby Singer's phone line was completely out of service.

Tossing the phone onto the dash, he ran a nervous hand through unruly brown hair. Trying to contain his worry, he knew it was too late when Dean looked at him, hazel eyes flashing with concern.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"The line to Bobby's is dead," Sam answered simply. When Dean didn't answer, Sam added. "How far out are we?"

"An hour," Dean replied in monotone, his foot pressing on the accelerator as his hands gripped the wheel even tighter, knuckles turning from red to white.

"Dean, do you think..."

"Yeah," Dean cut him off.

Sam wanted to press for more conversation, needing in some sadistic way to hear Dean verbalize the fear that he knew was eating away at both their minds. But Sam also knew his brother too well, knew that Dean's method for dealing was silent introspection and internalization of every damn emotion that the elder Winchester remotely perceived as a sign of weakness.

"Dean," he began.

"No, Sammy. We are not gonna have the *What if* conversation," Dean quickly intercepted. "Bobby's fine, Dad's alive and we're gonna get him back. That's the only way we need to think right now."

"Dean, I was only going to say, that I trust you. I'm behind you one hundred percent. Whatever's happening, whether it is Haris, or... well, whatever, I know you'll do what's right."

Dean swallowed hard and Sam could see the hitch of his breath before he spoke.

"Sam, I... I don't always know what I'm doing. And I'm sorry that sometimes I kinda boss you around instead of asking your opinion. The truth is... I, well I don't know what to do next. I don't know where dad is or what has him. But if it is Haris, no way am I gonna let that yellow-eyed bastard anywhere near you. And that I do know for sure," Dean stated, casting a glance over to Sam, his eyes suddenly more hardened and serious than his younger brother had seen them in recent weeks.

Sam nodded, watching as Dean turned his attention back to the road. He knew what that little glimpse into his brother's head had cost Dean, knew that he would have rather gone ten rounds with a Hell Hound than to have admitted what he just had to Sam.

"Thanks, Dean," Sam softly offered.

They continued on in mutual silence until the familiar scenery of the salvage yard rose on the horizon. Sam breathed a sigh of relief, glad that Bobby's place was finally within sight, but just as quickly it turned into a gasp.

"What the hell?" Dean shouted, as Sam sat up straighter in the seat.

A large plume of thick black smoke rose from amid the wall of old automobiles. Sam braced himself, one hand reaching out to the dashboard as Dean slammed on the gas. Dust and rocks flew out from the tires as the Impala fish-tailed briefly before Dean righted the car on the dirt road.

The stop was as violent as the start, the cloud of dust shrouding the black Chevy as it came to a sudden halt in front of the still smoldering remnants of Bobby Singer's home. Both brothers tore from the car only to be gagged by the choking smoke that clung to the smoldering ruins like the ethereal form of some demon settling over the site to observe its handiwork.

Fanning the air around his face, Sam picked his way to where the front of the house had once been. Beyond him, Dean was already searching out the property, desperately hoping to find their friend somewhere other than among the destroyed structure.

"Bobby!" Dean's voice shouted out towards the garage and assorted sheds.

He called out several more times but received no answer. Turning back towards Sam, he shrugged.

"Maybe he wasn't here. Maybe he took off into the woods or somewhere safe," Dean suggested, still frantically looking around.

"Dean," Sam called out solemnly. "Dean, come here."

Sam knelt down in the rubble of the old house, one hand covering his mouth as he lifted a charred board from the ground. Dean was by his side immediately, his hands tearing into other pieces of burnt debris.

As the final board came free, Dean shook his head and turned away. He flung the piece of wood remaining in his hand with every ounce of energy he possessed, screaming out a long "NO!" as he did so.

Sam flinched as his brother raged. Unable to lift his eyes from the sight before him, all he could do was stare at the charred human remains that lay exposed in the bright afternoon sun.

"Aw, Bobby," Sam cried, as his eyes landed on the scorched remains of a baseball cap sticking out from the rubble like a makeshift tombstone.

Remote Cabin Cable, Wisconsin

John struggled to find a more comfortable position on the hard cabin floor. His chest ached from where Sid's bullet had hit the right side, struck a rib and apparently glanced off.

Pretty damn lucky, he thought, otherwise I'd likely be dead.

Still, it hurt like hell to breathe and lying with his hands tied behind his back certainly wasn't helping matters. He rolled over to his left, finding that taking some of the pressure off the wound helped a little, but it also put him face to face with Sid.

The broad-shouldered hunter sat at a nearby table, his booted feet propped up on the edge as he watched John's movement with a smile. He tilted back a cup, savoring the contents before looking again his restrained former comrade.

"Ya know, John. After all the stories I heard about you, after seeing you in action back in Tennessee, you sure don't look like much lying there on the floor."

"Yeah, well, untie me and we can play who's the better hunter," John snapped.

Sid laughed. "Now what kind of a fool do you think I am, John? You know, that little standoff that you and Singer pulled back in South Dakota? You cost me a couple of good men. We really should have killed you both then, but I made the mistake of thinking that you two weren't really the target."

Rising from his chair, Sid took a couple of slow steps towards John. Sighing deeply, he continued. "But, I've taken care of that little oversight now. I've captured you and now Bobby is nothing more than overcooked hamburger. Such a shame, I used to really like Bobby. We had some good times together, he and I."

"You bastard," John snarled, but Sid only laughed more.

"You know the best part? It's only a matter of time before we get our hands on those freakish boys of yours. Gonna stop them before they cost any more lives."

John lashed out, kicking at Sid with his feet while he struggled against the ropes that held him. Anger, frustration and fear for his sons fueled him as he tried to reach the other hunter. He felt the rope abrade the skin from his wrists, felt the sticky wetness of blood as it began to seep from the wounds, but he didn't care. Nothing was worse than the pain he was feeling inside, the pain of helplessness, the pain at the thought of losing a friend, or worse, of losing his boys.

Sid waited, stepping aside and out of reach of the thrashing captive. He watched until John dropped back to the floor, breathless and defeated. He closed the space once again, kneeling down so that his face was within inches of the eldest of the Winchester men.

"I understand that they're your boys. I never had kids of my own, but I suppose it's gotta be tough admitting when your own flesh and blood is working for the other team. I mean, even worse when they *both* go against you," he taunted.

"My sons have never turned against me, never turned against the fight. All they've ever lived for was bringing down that sonofabitch Haris. All they've ever done is try to help people," John refuted.

"That's not what I saw, not what everyone saw back in Tennessee. You've got one son that's having demonic visions and another that's possessed and working for the same thing you've been hunting for a lifetime. You expect me, all of us, to believe that your boys don't need brought down just like all the other evil shit we hunt?"

John sucked in a deep breath, knowing he couldn't change Sid's mind, even understanding on some level why the hunter felt the way he did, but there was no way he was going to let him think that Sam and Dean were nothing more than sick animals to be slaughtered.

"Sid, look, Haris is after my boys, Sammy in particular. He used Dean to try to get to Sam, but Dean isn't possessed anymore. You know for yourself that the people that become possessed aren't responsible for their actions. It nearly killed Dean to think about what he'd almost done to his brother."

"Tomato, tomatoes. Call it whatever you like, John, make whatever excuses you need in order to sleep better at night. It doesn't change what has to be done. There's a war coming alright, and your sons are the enemy," Sid announced. He stood back up and walked over toward the cabin door, grabbing a rifle from the nearby gun rack and cocking it.

"Sid, please. You gotta believe me. I can save my son. I've found a way to destroy Haris forever and keep him from getting Sam. Just let me loose and I swear, me, my boys, you'll never see hide nor hair of us again if I can pull this off," John pleaded.

Sid stopped, turning away from the door as he looked at the man before him. There was sincerity in the hazel eyes, dark brows raised as the hunter begged for the life of his children. Still, Sid was a hunter too, and too many lives had been lost for him to turn away from this path now.

"John, I wish I could believe you. I truly wish I could. But you'd do anything for those boys, even lie about that damn demon."

John merely nodded in agreement. "You're right, there's nothing I wouldn't do to save my sons. But it's true, I swear to you. I can kill Haris once and for all and Dean is the key."

Singer Salvage Yard Early Evening

Dean knelt in the burned out shell of the house. Memories flooded him as he sorted through the charred remains. This place had been like a second home, or maybe more appropriately, like going to an uncle's house. Except this uncle was a grease monkey that was into weapons, rituals and demon lore. A pretty damn cool *uncle* in Dean's opinion.

And now that "uncle" was gone, burned beyond recognition by someone or something that wanted not only Bobby Singer, but apparently John Winchester, out of the way. That there was a connection between Bobby's death and his dad's capture, Dean was certain. But that knowledge didn't make the young man feel any better. In fact, the anger inside him had overtaken the fear and was now threatening to explode like contents under too much pressure.

Dean looked over at the tarp-covered form lying just beyond in the grass. He glanced to see where Sam was before swiping angrily at eyes that seemed determined to mist over. It was just the final straw! Too many lives lost, too many friends dead and gone. The sacrifices for the job just kept mounting and mounting with so very little success to show for it in return.

Standing abruptly, the anger he'd been trying to contain spilled over the walls and Dean lashed out. Picking up another of the blackened boards, he swung it batter-style at a lone standing section of the frame. Again and again he struck, over and over until the wood finally succumbed and fractured in half.

Panting heavily, sweat dropping from his forehead, Dean looked over his shoulder to see Sam staring at him. His younger brother's eyes were filled with concern, but he remained standing in place amid the rubble that he'd been picking through.

Don't come near me! Dean silently warned, his own eyes dark and still filled with the rage borne of grief.

He looked about the area, sizing up the next target of his fury. With the remainder of the burnt plank in his hands, he strode purposefully toward the nearest stack of junked cars. Breathing heavily, his arm drew back as he prepared to unleash once again.

"Dean, stop!" Sam quietly yet firmly ordered, grabbing his brother's upper arm with both his hands.

Dean glared back at Sam, trying to pull away, intent on continuing his destruction, but his brother held fast.

"Dammit Sam, if you know what's good for you, you'll let go of me right now," he warned, his voice a low growl.

"No, Dean. This doesn't do anyone any good. We need to figure out what happened here. It's obvious that whoever or whatever killed Bobby, that it's tied to what's happened to Dad. We need to look around and there might be some sort of clue as to what's going on. We need all the information we can get."

Dean turned on his brother, the board still raised in his hand threateningly. His anger was palpable as he glared at Sam, muscles tense as he resisted his brother's restraint.

"There's nothing here, Sam. Bobby's dead, the place is burned, everything's gone. We don't know any more now than we did yesterday," he shouted, pulling once more to free himself from his brother's strong grasp.

"We're gonna get him back, Dean," Sam simply replied, holding firm to his brother's arm. He locked his eyes on Dean's, watching as the green narrowed and then finally softened. He felt the anger drain from his brother like a departing tide, felt the muscles in Dean's arm tremble then go lax.

"Sam, I..." Dean began, his voice cracking as his breath snagged in his chest. *I don't know what to do. I don't know how to find Dad. I don't know if he's alive and I don't know if I can take it if he's not.* The confession went unvoiced, but the emotion was starkly evident on the older sibling's face.

"I know, Dean, I know," Sam said softly, his hand now moving from where it had restrained his brother's arm upward to his shoulder in a gesture that he could only hope Dean would accept.

There was a moment of utter quiet in the former friend's yard as the brothers just stood. Dean's head down, the rage gone, he hid from Sam's watchful concern as he gained control, reaching deep inside for the sarcastic, defiant persona he knew needed to reappear. Sam said nothing, merely watched as the walls came back up, as Dean buried the fear and grief becoming the ever resilient older brother, protector, and hunter that he embodied the other three hundred and sixty four days out of a year.

The silence was broken a second later when there was a loud crash of metal from behind a nearby mound of wrecks. Both brothers spun toward the noise, weapons drawn, hunter's senses on full alert. Dean motioned for Sam to move off to the left as he skirted in a low crouch toward the right. When his brother was in place, Dean signaled Sam to cover him as he sprang forward toward where the noise had sounded.

He hovered low behind the fender of a rusted and badly damaged old Dodge pickup, listening intently as the sound of scuffing footfalls drew closer. Dean nodded over to Sam, alerting his younger brother that he was about to break cover. Bolting up from behind the truck he sprang into the opening between the rows of old cars. Gun held out before him, his finger applying a fraction less than the amount of pressure needed to pull the trigger, Dean came face to face with a ghost.

He swallowed hard, his brain not fully comprehending what his eyes were telling it. When realization finally set in, Dean's hand holding the .45 dropped to his side as he advanced forward in a rush.

"Bobby!" he exclaimed, grabbing hold of the older hunter in a fierce embrace.

Sam hurried forward, eyes wide in disbelief, one arm quickly thrown around his friend's shoulder as he felt relief wash over him.

"Sam, Dean. What are you doin' here?" Bobby asked, pulling back from the brothers and staggering slightly.

Dean looked the man over with concern, his hands gliding over Bobby's head and continuing down to the tattered flannel shirt. The wounded hunter was covered in blood, dirt and soot, the combination creating a frightful mask of his face. Dean grabbed him by the arm, eliciting a groan of pain from the older man.

"Sorry, sorry," he apologized, helping guide Bobby over toward the seat of the open pickup.

Once seated, Sam darted off to grab some water as Dean pulled the pocket knife from his jeans and began cutting away at the bloodied shirt that covered Bobby's left arm.

"What happened here?" he asked, his attention focused on the bullet wound and the exposed skin that was reddened and singed. "How'd you get out? We found a body, God Bobby, we thought it was you."

Bobby grimaced as Dean inadvertently tugged at a piece of clothing that was stuck to one of many small lacerations. Sam quickly returned and offered him the bottle of water. He drank greedily, parched throat relishing the cool liquid.

"They hit me around noon, probably a half dozen of 'em all armed. Hunters and that bitch, Rennie Lofton," Bobby began. "I was out working on a truck when the first round missed my skull by a coupla inches. I managed to get to the house, was trading shots with them when that fellow came busting in the back door. I went after him right about the time someone tossed a grenade in through the front window. Just managed to shoot him and hit the stairs to the cellar when the place went up. Got out through the basement escape and hid out in the woods till they left."

"Bobby, hunters? Why?" Sam asked, brows furrowed as he struggled to comprehend the revelation.

"Yeah. Gotta say, I was a bit surprised. Didn't think they'd be coming back after your dad and I sent 'em packing with their tails between their legs last time. But, I guess they don't forget."

"They came after you again? Like before?" Dean asked. "Because of us?"

Bobby was silent for a moment, sensing the anger that had rapidly built in the elder boy.

"Well, it wasn't the same bunch, but like I said, Rennie Lofton was leading them and she was with us on the assault on the compound. She was spouting off nonsense about me siding with you and your dad, turning against the cause," Bobby recounted.

"Against the cause?" Sam exclaimed. "What the hell? They think that Dad isn't on their side? The simple fools, they don't know crap about our dad."

"It isn't about Dad, Sammy," Dean cut in. "It's us. Isn't it, Bobby?"

"Fraid so, son. This bunch that were there at Tennessee, they saw things and they got spooked," Bobby answered.

"Spooked because of me?" Sam demanded. "They tried to kill you because of me, because they saw me have a vision? This is going back to that?"

Bobby's head went down, unable to face the younger brother. While he didn't necessarily understand the "visions" that Sam had or how and why the things he saw seemed to come to pass, Bobby knew all the way to the marrow of his bones that the kid wasn't evil. He'd watched these two brothers grow from gangly, quiet kids into well-trained and respectable young men. Despite Dean's best efforts to appear hard-assed and callous, and Sam's tendency to be the reluctant hunter, Bobby knew that there weren't two more caring, self-sacrificing people in the world. It burned him to think that Rennie and her bunch had let their fear of the unknown turn into prejudice toward Dean and Sam.

"Bobby, I think they got our dad too," Dean announced.

"That's why you're here? What's happened to John?"

"Sam and I were in North Dakota, got a call on my cell last night from my dad. He said he was in northern Wisconsin hunting a hodag and needed our help."

"A hodag?" Bobby exclaimed laughing abruptly. "No such thing, your daddy knows that."

"Yeah, so do we, but he said he needed the Colt and the special bullet to take the thing down. We don't have the Colt. It's been lost since we tangled with those cult freaks over there in Clark County. Dad knows that. And the special bullet was nothing but a fake that Dad left with us. Anyway, I remembered the time that you and him went to Rhinelander to supposedly hunt one. I thought you might know something that could lead us to Dad," Dean explained.

"Well, it's pretty obvious that whoever Rennie is working with probably has your dad. I'm bettin' that they're holding him to get you boys. Your dad was trying to tell

you that whatever he said or maybe whatever you were told was a lie, like the hodag and the bullet.”

“Yeah, that’s kinda what I thought, but we don’t know where to even start looking for him. Hell Bobby, they tried to kill you, maybe they’ve already killed our dad,” Dean suggested.

“And this is all because of me,” Sam added in, shaking his head. “It’s always because of me. Hell, it isn’t bad enough that I’ve got a demon that’s after me, now we’ve got hunters trying to kill us and everyone around us too?”

“It’s not your fault, Sammy. We’ve gone round and round about this before. It’s no different with these jokers. Face it, bro, it’s you and me against the world, well... and everything else in heaven and hell apparently,” Dean joked, trying to refocus his brother’s attention away from Sam’s usual conclusion that he was the target of some demonic plot and therefore everything bad that happened was somehow directly related to his perceived connection to the yellow-eyed demon. “Hell, dude, look at it this way. When everybody’s your enemy, you can shoot first and well... then keep on shooting some more.”

Sam smiled slightly. Leave it to Dean to put a twisted sort of perspective on things.

“Okay,” Sam started with a deep breath. “So where does that leave us now?”

Dean looked from his brother to a haggard Bobby, the older hunter beginning to slump against the seat.

“Well, to start, let’s get the old man somewhere where we can patch him up. Not like we can stay here any time soon,” Dean proposed.

“Hey, watch who you’re calling *old*,” Bobby huffed, straightening a little with a groan. “I can still kick your ass from one end of this yard to the other.”

“Yeah, well, you got anything left around here you want to take with you? Like maybe a spare ball cap somewhere, ‘cause Bobby, it’s almost creepy seeing you with nothing on your head,” Dean said, laughing while Sam tried to contain a snicker beside him.

Bobby glared, swatting at Dean’s offered hand and standing up on his own. “You gotta lot of nerve givin’ me crap about my ball caps when I’m always seeing you in that chunk of dead cow you call a jacket. And you,” he said, turning to focus on Sam. “Hell boy, you couldn’t jam a hat on that head if your life depended on it, all that damn hair, looking like a friggin’ giant sheepdog.”

The older hunter continued to mutter more complaints as the brothers closed in on either side of him, each placing a hand under his arms to help him to the Impala. He allowed them to help him to the waiting car, biding the assistance without a grumble. Once inside the back seat, Bobby looked out across the still smoldering debris that had once been his home.

If these hunters wanted to declare war on the Winchesters, then they had just made a serious mistake by involving me, he thought to himself as Dean started the car and slowly pulled away.

Motel

Some time Later

Bobby lay in one of the twin beds snoring loudly while Sam hovered over the laptop and Dean hovered over Sam’s shoulder. They had driven a few miles to a motel, stopping mostly because Bobby’s injuries needed attention and because none of them had eaten since earlier in the morning.

The wound to the older hunter’s shoulder was serious, but the bullet had managed to avoid bone and go clean through without involving any major vessels. Once it was cleaned, not withstanding a fair amount of foul language on Bobby’s part, Dean stitched both the entrance and exit before applying a thick bandage. It was the most annoying first aid job Dean had ever completed, each of his actions watched over and commented on by the patient.

Looking over at Bobby now, Dean breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that their long-time friend was finally asleep. He turned his attention back to Sam's search on the computer.

"So? Anything?" he asked.

Sam returned an exhausted groan, leaning back in the chair and stretching his arms over his head. He sat forward again, rubbing reddened eyes before standing to pour another cup of coffee from the motel room pot.

"Nothing Dean. Other than mention of so-called Hodag sightings in Rhinelander and Dodgeville, which of course were all fake, there's nothing else that seems to mean anything," he replied finally.

"Well, Dad did say he was hunting in Northern Wisconsin. Rhinelander is pretty far up there. Maybe he was trying to tell us he was there?" Dean guessed.

"I dunno, even if he was in Rhinelander, that's a lot of ground to cover. Can you even guess how many cabins and hunting lodges are back in those woods? He could be anywhere."

Dean grunted in agreement, coming over toward Sam and pouring his own cup of coffee. He grimaced when he found the coffee to be lukewarm, tossing the remainder of the contents into the nearby sink, the cup clattering right behind the discarded liquid.

"I was thinking, Dean. What if we call someone else for help? I mean, Bobby's hurt and we can't ask him to do any more for us," Sam suggested.

"Who, Sam? I mean, who can we trust besides Bobby?"

"Well, Kyle for one."

"Moses? You're kidding! He's no hunter. What's he gonna do? Pray for a divine light to shine down from heaven and mark the way to Dad?" Dean snapped.

Sam rolled his eyes. "You don't have to be a smartass. You got any better ideas?"

Dean moved over toward the second twin bed, collapsing down to sit on the edge, his head dropping into his hands.

"I sure wish Caleb or Pastor Jim were still around," he said wistfully, hands rubbing at his temples. "We're running out of friends, Sammy."

"What about Jefferson? Dad used to go to him, trusted him. Maybe we could call him," Sam suggested.

"Hmm, maybe. But he was with them in Tennessee too. Can we trust him?"

Sam merely shrugged. "Hell, Dean. You're asking me?"

"Yeah, well now would be a nice time for you to do your Psychic Friends impression. I'd rather rely on one of your weird visions than anyone else," Dean said jokingly.

"That's not funny, Dean. You know it doesn't work that way."

"I know, dude. I just don't know what else to do," Dean admitted. "Call Jefferson, I guess."

Sam nodded, reaching for his Treo on the small table. He scrolled through the contacts list until he came to the number for the Texan. Tapping the call button, he waited as the phone rang on the other end and a deep voice answered.

Dean listened silently as his brother talked with the hunter. The conversation seemed to be fairly one-sided with Sam recounting what had happened in the past twenty four hours, culminating with the younger sibling asking Jefferson for help in finding their dad.

When he hung up a few moments later, Dean waited, breath held, for Sam to fill him in. "Well?" he asked anxiously.

"Jefferson said he hasn't heard from Dad in a while. He hasn't seen Rennie Lofton since Tennessee. He doesn't know who might be after us in addition to her, but he said he'd check some things out and get back to us if he found anything," Sam answered.

Dean rose, rubbing the back of his neck as he paced across the small room. "So we're still at square one? I swear, I feel like I'm going to fly out of my skin."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. After everything we've been through, as if we didn't have enough problems with Haris, now we have to have humans trying to kill us," Sam agreed. "You know, maybe we should have been more careful when we were hunting Bloody Mary. I think all those mirrors we broke are coming back to haunt us."

Dean laughed, slapping his brother gently on the shoulder. "Dude, I think we were screwed long before that."

He was about to speak again when his cell phone began playing the familiar music that signaled an incoming call. Dean looked across the room to Sam, suspicion and fear flashing across his face. He took the three steps across the small room that brought him to the nightstand, where he had earlier laid his cellular.

"Dad?" Dean asked, seeing the familiar number on the caller ID as he quickly answered.

"Son," John began. "Have you got the Colt?"

"Yeah Dad, we uh, we got the Colt. Bobby had it. Was keeping it safe. We picked it up from him tonight," Dean replied.

Dean heard his father groan with pain, could hear another man's voice and the tell-tale sound of grunts as someone struck John.

"Dad! Are you okay?" he asked in a panic.

There was a long silence as he waited for an answer, but instead of his father's voice returning to the phone, a gruffer tone came across the cell.

"Listen, Dean. Let's cut the bullshit here. You know we have your dad and we know that Bobby Singer is still alive," Sid stated. "So, this is how it's gonna be. We don't want John and we're willing to release him, unharmed, if you and your brother come in."

"You bastard. What the hell have we done to you?" Dean demanded. He was answered with the muffled sound of another grunt of pain.

"Did you hear that, Dean? That was Lou. Lou is about six foot five and nearly three hundred pounds of pure muscle. Lou doesn't care much for traitors and he doesn't seem to be real fond of John. Now, I have a real hard time controlling Lou, so it might be in your best interest to shut up and listen to my offer before Lou turns your dad into the vegetable of your choice," Sid threatened.

Dean squeezed his eyes tightly shut, his free hand clenching tightly at his side as he fought down the urge to crush the cell phone beneath his boots. He took a deep breath, holding it as his fingernails drew blood from where they dug into the inside of his palm.

"Are you still there, Dean?"

"Yes. Tell me what you want," Dean replied in submission.

There was a chuckle on the other end before Sid continued.

"See, now was that really so hard? Alright. There's a truck stop just outside La Crosse on I-90. Look for a green pickup. You boys be there by midnight or we'll send your daddy back to you in a box."

"Okay, we'll be there. Now let me talk to my dad."

"Midnight, Dean. You might want to get into that fast black car of yours and see if you can avoid the state police. The clock's ticking."

Before Dean could respond, Sid cut off the call, the cell going dead in his hand. In anger, Dean flung the phone against the headboard, not breaking it but startling Bobby who had already woken to the loud conversation.

"What did they say, Dean? Is Dad okay?" Sam asked worriedly.

"He's alive, Sammy, but they said we have to meet at a truck stop outside of La Crosse or they'll kill him. Said they don't want him, just us."

"You don't believe that for a minute do you?" Bobby interjected, sitting up with a soft groan. "You gotta know it's a trap. No way are they gonna let your dad go even if you boys do show up at that meeting place."

"Dammit, don't you think I don't know that, Bobby? What the hell else am I supposed to do?" Dean demanded.

"Stop and think, boy. Your daddy taught you better than that. Quit thinking with your heart and start thinking with the damn brain in your head," Bobby threw back. "You boys are hunters, start acting like it."

"What do we do, Bobby?" Sam asked, quietly.

"Well, you don't go rushing headlong into a trap. Besides, they aren't gonna kill your dad so long as they can use him to get to you boys. Quit letting them push you. Become the hunter instead of the hunted."

Dean huffed air, slamming his fist against the nearby doorjamb. "I say we go to the meet and just shoot the shit outta anyone that shows up."

He turned to see the looks of disapproval coming from both Sam and Bobby. Sighing, he acquiesced, turning his hands up in surrender.

"Okay, so we wait?" he asked.

Bobby nodded. "Let them come to you. Draw them in."

"Listen, Dean. I don't like sitting here any more than you do. But I think Bobby's right. We both know it's a trap, Dad's already warned us. We know that they have the firepower. We need a plan," Sam concurred.

"Fine," Dean conceded. "We plan. But I need real coffee and some food if we're gonna be planning all night."

"I'll go get us something," Sam readily offered. "Give me the keys to the Impala."

Dean feigned being wounded. "What? You don't trust me?"

"Nothing to do with trust, bro. I just know you too well." Sam answered, snagging the keys from his brother's hand as he grabbed his jacket and headed toward the door.

Remote Cabin Cable, Wisconsin

Sid closed the cell phone, laying it down on the table before turning back to face John Winchester. He waved off the large mound of humanity that was Lou Chambers. The muscular hunter grinned sadistically, wiping the bloody knuckles of his right hand against his jeans as he strode from the room.

Looking down on John, Sid grimaced in sympathy. Blood seeped from his nose and mouth, one eye was already turning a violent shade of purple and blue as it began to swell.

"Sorry 'bout that, John. Lou does love to use his fists," he began. "But hey, the good news is that it's just a matter of time now. Your boys are probably bustin' ass right now to get to that truckstop by midnight. I told ya they'd never let Dad die."

"You don't have them yet, Morrow."

"Soon enough, John, soon enough. Ya know, I'm feeling generous tonight. I'll let you decide. Should I just kill them right there at the truckstop so you don't have to see or would you like one last family reunion before we put a slug in both their heads?"

John tensed every muscle with rage. Behind his back, the rope around his wrists gave slightly. He'd been working at the bindings for the past several hours, not heeding the damage to his flesh or the resulting pain. He was desperate, needing now more than ever to free himself and try to get to his sons.

"What? No belligerent comment? No defiant retort?" Sid taunted.

John waited until his captor had turned his back and with a final burst of energy, he yanked his hands apart, severing the rope. In a continuous motion, he rolled to his feet, right hand swinging wide and catching Sid square in the face as the man reacted to the movement.

Sid was a fairly large man, but John Winchester wasn't small and he had been storing up every ounce of anger, frustration and fear for the past two days. He put all of that emotion into the first punch, dropping the brawny hunter to the cabin floor, dazed and with blood pouring from his nose.

John didn't hesitate. He rushed to the door, pulling it open and heading down the steps, missing one or two but staying on his feet. When he reached the ground, he took a moment to look around, his eyes struggling to adjust to the dark, moonless night.

He spotted the pickup truck parked at the edge of the gravel drive and trotted off towards it, cautiously peering over his shoulder for any pursuit.

John had just gotten into the front of the cab and was beginning to pull down the wires from the steering column when the shot rang out. He felt the bullet slam into his left arm, throwing him backwards on the bench seat.

He felt the warmth of fresh blood cascade down his arm, pain causing his vision to blur for a moment. John bit down on his lip, knowing that he needed to get back to work hotwiring the truck, needing to get free of his captors.

"Goin' somewhere, Johnny?" Sid snarled, the muzzle of his gun inches from John's head.

John considered trying for the gun, figuring he could take Sid and if not, then he had lost nothing. His plan was abruptly thwarted when Lou appeared at Sid's side, reaching in and dragging John from the truck.

He hit the ground, the impact driving air from his lungs and reawakening the pain from his earlier gunshot wound.

"That was a pretty stupid move, Winchester. I oughta smash your face in for breaking my nose, but I think I'll just let Lou have his fun."

John felt himself being pulled to his feet just before the behemoth casually tossed him forward across the yard. The process was repeated several more times, each leaving John weaker from the abuse.

In a short time, he found himself back to the cabin, lifted and thrown through the door to collapse on the floor bleeding and dazed. Sid crouched down to meet him at eye level.

"This was never about you, John. I told you that. But now, I'm gonna enjoy seeing the great John Winchester cut down to size."

Sid emphasized his statement by slamming his fist into John's face. Blood splattered across the hardwood floor as his lip erupted from the punch.

The beaten hunter managed to lift his head to glare back at his former colleague. "You can do whatever you want to me. It'll never make you the better man," John hissed back, spitting out a mouthful of blood that struck the front of Sid's shirt.

Sid's eyes went wide with anger. He stood up, pausing for a split second as he saw the defiance in the face of the man before him. He drew back his foot and kicked John brutally in the gut, watching him fold over in pain as he gasped for air.

"You're a dead man, John. And you know what's even more satisfying? Knowing that I'm gonna wipe out every damn Winchester male before the sun rises!"

Motel South Dakota

Sam returned from the nearby all-night diner. With both hands full of food and fresh coffee, he banged on the door to the motel room with his elbow, waiting for Dean to let him in. Several seconds passed and when the knock went unanswered, Sam kicked at the door, using his foot to pound louder.

He heard a low grumble and the door suddenly flew open to reveal a bleary-eyed Bobby Singer leaning against the interior jamb. Moving inside, Sam deposited the food and drinks on the nearby table as Bobby staggered back to the bed.

The younger Winchester quickly glanced about the small room seeking his older brother. The other bed remained empty and the door to the bathroom was wide open, the light off.

"Bobby, where's Dean?" he asked suspiciously.

The tired hunter looked about the room and shrugged.

"I dunno. I was half asleep and he said something about getting a soda from the machine," Bobby recalled.

"How long ago was that?"

"Jeez, Sam. I'm not sure. I kinda fell back asleep until you started making that god-awful racket on the door. I guess it probably wasn't too long after you left. How long you been gone?"

"About thirty minutes," Sam replied, slamming the keys to the Impala down on the table in anger. "Damn him!"

Bobby looked at the young man, confused by the outburst. "You thinking Dean took off for that meet?" he asked. "But you had the Impala."

Sam shot him an irritated look. "This is my brother we're talking about. He probably had a car hotwired and was on the highway before I even placed the order for the food. Dammit Dean! I shoulda known he was up to something. He gave in way too easy."

"Sam, I'm sorry. I didn't think he'd go off like that after he agreed that it was a trap," Bobby said apologetically.

"Aw, Bobby. I'm not mad at you. I should have known better. Hell, sometimes I wish there was something like a Devil's Trap that would hold my brother in one place. But no, he's always gotta be the one to throw caution to the wind. Nothing can stop the invincible Dean Winchester. I swear to God, one of these days I'm going to beat his ass for all the times he's pulled crap like this," Sam ranted.

"Well, if we get going, we might be able to catch up to him," Bobby offered. "Maybe we can get there in time to keep his ass and the rest of him from getting killed. You know, so you can kick it once this is all over."

Sam turned to face his friend. He chuckled, grateful that the older man had the presence of mind to stay focused on the current problem instead of getting sidetracked by irritation as he had just done. Really, hadn't he had the fleeting thought when he pulled away from the motel that it would be just like Dean to take off while he was gone? He should have trusted the voice in his head when it had tried to warn him.

"Okay, let's at least take the coffee with us. I suppose Dean probably snagged the weapons bag. Course, we've got others in the trunk," he suggested as he moved quickly through the room gathering their remaining belongings.

While Bobby pulled on his boots, Sam finished collecting the laptop and his own gear bag. With the backpack tossed across his shoulder, he was about to go and offer the injured hunter an arm to lean on as they headed for the door.

Just as Sam was about to reach for the knob, a loud pounding reverberated through the thin wood, shaking the door as it strained against the frame.

"Sam and Dean Winchester. Know you're in there," a booming voice shouted from the other side as the hard pounding continued.

Sam looked over to Bobby; the older man's face was filled with trepidation, mirroring Sam's as both men reached for their weapons.

The hunters had found them!

McKay's Truck Stop La Crosse, Wisconsin

Dean eased the Dodge Charger into the parking lot, carefully stopping between two large semis that had pulled in for the night. He killed the engine to the car, relaxing his grip on the steering wheel for the first time in nearly three hundred miles.

Climbing out of the new car, he raised his eyebrows in surprised appreciation. It had been tough finding a car to steal that had the power to get him the distance in such a short time and he'd felt lucky when he'd come across the shiny silver automobile parked at the end of the motel parking lot.

He might have felt guilty for stealing the car had it not been for the dire need. Besides, it was all Sam's fault anyway for taking the Impala. Dean smiled, picturing the look on his brother's face when he returned to find him gone. Served his brother right for thinking he had been so smart and had prevented Dean from going after their dad.

Dean looked at his watch. Nearly midnight, it left him no time to do any reconnaissance before he was to meet with his dad's captors. He knew it was a trap and that knowledge at least gave him a small edge.

While it would have been nice to have had Sam or Bobby for backup, at least this way, Dean knew he could fire and move without concern. Like he had told Sam, when everyone is your enemy, you don't have to worry about who you shoot.

Carefully, he skirted between the rigs, using the large trucks for cover as he moved toward the edge of the parking lot. The lights at this end were sparse, barely illuminating the concrete. It was the perfect place for the exchange; or an ambush.

He pulled the .45 from the pocket inside his jacket as he walked beside the semi. Abruptly, Dean spun around when the sound of a truck door slamming shut startled him. The heavyset truck driver nearly collapsed to his knees finding the muzzle of Dean's automatic mere inches from his face. Dean sheepishly shrugged an apology before waving the man out of harm's way with the barrel of the pistol.

Dean continued forward, crouching low between the semis as he saw the green pickup truck pull into the lot. He backed up, ducking beside the fender of a rig, watching and waiting.

A mountain-sized man stepped out of the driver's side, scanning the immediate area with the wave of a pistol. Opposite him, another figure moved from the cab of the truck.

"Rennie Lofton," Dean muttered, recognizing the woman as she dropped to the ground.

She moved to the front of the truck, the headlights illuminating black leather that clung like a second skin to her every curve. She moved like a panther, a predator even with her sleekness, curves accentuating her sexuality.

I bet you could kick my ass, Dean thought to himself looking at her. *But hell, it might be worth it.*

"Winchester!" Rennie yelled out into the darkness. "You better be out there. Hate to think we drove all this way just to have to kill your dad. Coulda done that back at the cabin."

Dean flinched, tempted to move from behind his cover but smart enough to remain silent even though his jaw was clenched tight enough to snap his teeth. He watched as the larger man, assuming from the size that it was the infamous Lou, walked to the back of the pickup.

The big hunter pulled something from the bed, but in the shadows Dean couldn't tell what or who it might be. Shoving the figure forward, Dean bit his lip as he watch the captive stumble and fall to the dirt.

Once in the glow of the headlights, Dean could see that the figure's head was obscured by a dark hood drawn down over its face. From the size and stature though, Dean was pretty sure it was his dad.

"Come on boys, show yourself, else Johnny here is going to have his brains splattered all over the front hood of this truck," Rennie threatened, cocking her pistol and pointing the muzzle against the side of the hostage's head.

"Dammit," Dean hissed under his breath. He wasn't sure what he thought he was going to do to get his dad free, but he hadn't really counted on seeing his father with a gun pressed against his temple.

"Too late Winchester," Rennie shouted as her finger tightened on the trigger.

The report of the weapon echoed through the stillness of the night nearly blotting out Dean's scream of agony that sounded a fraction of a second later. He rushed

forward toward the hunters, uncaring about his safety, unable to take his eyes off the collapsed form on the ground.

Blood was splattered everywhere and continued to ebb forth from his dad's head, mixing with the dirt of the parking lot. Dean broke into the opening, gun forgotten as he fell to his knees beside the still body. Before he could reach out to touch the tattered and blood-stained denim of his father's jacket, he was roughly pulled backwards and tossed to the ground.

A series of punches rocked him as Dean fought to get back to his feet and defend himself. He managed to rise, his eyes flicking back and forth between the dead body and Lou's massive form. The giant hunter moved in, ignoring the punches that Dean launched toward his jaw and stomach as he reached for the young man. Grabbing Dean by the collar, he effortlessly slammed him against the hood of the pickup driving the air from his lungs and leaving Dean to collapse on the ground beside the dead body.

Rennie stepped forward, retrieving Dean's lost gun, laughing mockingly as she ejected the clip and tossed it aside. She looked down at Dean, her laughter unabated.

"What the hell is so funny?" he asked, spitting blood from his mouth and glaring at her defiantly.

She knelt over the body beside him, pulling up the black hood that had covered his dad's head.

Dean stared in horror as he took in the face of a gagged Rawhead, the creature's disfigured face even more distorted by the pieces of skull that had been blown apart by Rennie's bullet. It had been a trick and while Dean was instantly grateful that his father wasn't dead, he ruefully admitted that he'd fallen for their trap.

"Where's your brother, Dean?" the huntress demanded, a cruel smile still covering her face.

"I came alone," Dean hissed back.

"Aw, what a shame. I guess we'll have to wait a little longer to get Sam. Did you think you were protecting him by leaving him behind?"

Dean froze, silently condemning himself for having been so stupid. In his haste to get their dad back, he'd never considered that he might be leaving Sam vulnerable. Attempting defiance, he glowered at Rennie.

"Bitch, you don't know my brother. He might be easily pushed around, but piss him off, and he's a whole 'nother form of scary."

Rennie ignored the threat, leaning in closer to Dean's face. "Maybe, but I bet he'll collapse like a house of cards when he finds out he's the only Winchester left standing," she shot back, the butt of her pistol slamming down hard on Dean's temple.

She stood again, staring down at the unconscious young man at her feet. Looking up as Lou bent over and tossed Dean's limp body over his shoulder, she laughed again.

"Two down, one to go!"

Motel South Dakota

Sam dropped the gear bag to the nearest bed as he and Bobby backed away from the door. He tore into it, tossing Bobby the spare 9mm while he slammed a clip into his Glock.

The pounding on the door ceased abruptly leaving an eerie silence in its absence. Bobby moved behind Sam, darting into the bathroom and quickly returning.

"We can't get out that way. Window's too small," he stated.

"Well, they got us trapped in here. Plus, the Impala's out there. We wouldn't get far without wheels," Sam replied.

The silence continued, making seconds feel like hours as they waited. Sam moved to the side of the door, gun held up with his finger tensing on the trigger. Across the room, Bobby had ducked behind one of the beds, his own weapon aimed at the entry as well.

"You in the mood to go out guns blazing?" Sam asked finally.

"Only if I get to be Butch Cassidy," Bobby answered with a chuckle.

Sam reached down to the doorknob, glancing back to Bobby as he prepared to pull the door open. Just as his fingers brushed the handle, another knock sounded, startling him.

"Sam? Sam Winchester. I know you're in there. It's Jefferson, open up, dammit."

Sam looked warily over at Bobby, relieved that it was their friend but somehow still suspicious. Bobby's expression didn't make him feel any better; the older man's eyes still dark and hardened.

"Sam, let me in. I have information. I know that Bobby's alive and in there with you. I know Dean is in trouble. Please, I can help," Jefferson shouted out.

Sam let loose the breath he'd been holding, dropping his weapon to his side as he ran his free hand through his hair. Bobby rose from behind his cover, gun still held ready.

The young hunter waited a moment more, then mimicking Bobby's still wary behavior, he opened the door slowly, his gun still aimed toward the opening. He didn't feel bad when Jefferson stood in the entry, a look of shock on the tall man's face when he found himself with a gun pointed at his head.

"Sam? I'm by myself, I swear," the Texan stammered, empty hands held out to verify his statement.

Sam relaxed slightly, dropping his Glock down only slightly as he kept it trained on the hunter's chest. Bobby drew up beside him, his own weapon still aimed at Jefferson as well.

Motioning the tall man inside, Sam peeked out into the darkness to see if there was any other movement before quickly slamming the door shut behind him. He dodged past the window, not risking that there might be someone outside with a sniper rifle, just waiting for his shadow to pass by. Sam had never considered himself paranoid, but recently, it just seemed like a necessity.

Sam watched as Bobby pushed Jefferson into one of the open chairs, the older hunter still guarded and keeping his pistol aimed at the former colleague. Wary from lack of sleep and worry over his father, Sam dropped slowly to the end of the nearest bed, hands hanging between his knees as he took a deep breath.

"Look, I know you don't trust me," Jefferson began. "You probably don't trust anyone right now..."

"Oh really, you think?" Sam exploded, looking up at the lanky Texan who flinched visibly at his outburst. Without pausing, Sam continued. "What do you know about my father and what did you mean about Dean being in trouble?"

Jefferson paused, fear exhibited in his eyes and body when he saw Sam's hand tighten on the 9mm as the young man lifted it back in his direction.

"I asked you a question," Sam shouted, rising to his feet and storming across the room to stand directly in front of the now shaking man. "I swear to God, you better start talking right now or so help me I'll tear you apart."

Jefferson's throaty gulp was audible. But Sam remained unfazed as he continued to tower over the seated man, his free hand clenched at his side.

"I was contacted by Sid Morrow about a month ago. He said he had a special hunt and needed my help. I hooked up with him outside Des Moines and that's when he first told me what he was after and why."

"He told you he was after my dad and me and my brother and you just joined up?" Sam demanded. "My dad trusted you, considered you his friend and this is how you repay that friendship?"

"It wasn't like that, Sam. Sid said he only wanted to use your dad for bait, was never gonna hurt him. You have to understand, I didn't want to set up John, but Sid said we had to get you and your brother."

"Why? Because we're supposed to be evil? You believed that? Jefferson, you've known us for years, Dad even longer. What would make you believe that crap?"

The Texan's head dropped down, shame and regret evident beneath the cover of his cowboy hat. "I was at Tennessee too, Sam. I saw... I saw you. I saw Dean. What Sid said to me made some sense. I'm a hunter, this is what I'm supposed to do."

"Do?" Sam nearly screamed. "You're supposed to be a friend. You're supposed to trust what you know about people, not believe what some prejudiced ass tells you."

"But how can you explain what happened to you there? It spooked all of us. We're getting ready to launch an assault on a demon's compound and all of a sudden we've got this kid having some wacko vision and telling us that he can see his brother and this demon in his mind? Oh, and then let's don't forget, we see your brother, all black-eyed and working for this same demon?"

"Dean never worked for Haris. Zack Murzak set us up and Haris pulled his spawn out of him and possessed my brother. But Dean was never fully possessed. He fought Haris and he never tried to kill me. He was trying to cut me free from the altar."

"I'm just saying, we didn't understand. I didn't understand," Jefferson apologized. "I know now that I was wrong. That's why when you called I made up my mind to help you."

"How can we trust you? Why should we? Maybe you're just setting us up even now, stalling us here while Morrow and his bunch close in on us," Sam suggested.

Jefferson shook his head, looking up to meet the young hunter's eyes directly.

"I never signed on for hurting John. Then when I heard that Sid sent Rennie after Bobby too, I knew he was out of control. He's never gonna let John go alive. I might be a lot of things, but Sam, you gotta believe that I was always your dad's friend."

There was a long moment of silence as Sam considered the man before him. Gone was the look of fear, replaced now by thick brows raised above eyes that were filled with sincerity.

"I want to make this right, Sam. Please, trust me," He begged.

Sam looked over to Bobby. The older hunter had remained ominously silent throughout the questioning, but Sam noticed that his gun was now pointed toward the floor.

"Where's my dad?" Sam questioned more softly.

Jefferson relaxed visibly. He wiped his palms against the tops of his legs, removing the perspiration that had accumulated.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure. I was never there. But Sid said he had a place up near Cable, Wisconsin. The night he caught John, he said that's where he was taking him."

"What about Dean? You said you knew he was in trouble," Sam asked.

"They've got a trap set for him at the truck stop. Sid didn't say what, but seemed pretty sure your brother would fall for it."

"How'd they know it was just gonna be Dean?" Bobby asked suspiciously.

Jefferson looked toward the older man, a hint of apprehension flashing across his face.

"Because I told them," he answered.

"What?" Sam's voice rose once again in unison with the Glock.

"I saw him leave here in a silver Charger an hour or two ago. Sid already knew I was coming here to meet you, so when he called me to tell me that he had set up a meet in La Crosse, I told him that Dean had gone alone."

"Why would you do that? You just said that you were trying to help us," Sam asked, confusion tearing at him as he debated whether he could trust Jefferson or not.

"Sam, think about it. Sid still trusts me, still thinks I'm on the team. I knew they had set a trap, knew they were probably gonna get Dean. My only hope to keep them from coming after you and Bobby was to make them think that I was gonna bring you in myself," he explained. "This gives us the advantage now."

Sam remained wary. Jefferson's story held a certain amount of logic, but considering the only person he trusted at this minute was Bobby, thanks to Dean taking off, he wasn't ready to buy the hunter's explanation.

"He's right, Sam. If Sid thinks Jefferson is bringing you in, that lets us get close to wherever they're holding John. We can plan an attack of our own," Bobby agreed.

The dark-haired young man paced the small space of the motel room. He was torn, not fully trusting Jefferson, but desperate to get his father back. If what the Texan said was true and now Dean was being set up, then it was all the more important that he get to them soon. If Sid was as deluded as Jefferson implied, then Sam was afraid that he might kill Dean on sight, thinking his older brother was still possessed and working for the demon.

Sam fumbled with the gun in his hand. He'd never counted on fighting other humans. This wasn't what he had ever been prepared for, being raised to hunt and destroy spirits and other supernatural creatures. Yet with his dad's and Dean's lives in peril, he knew he had no choice.

Grimly, he recalled something his brother had said to him once before.

For you and Dad, the things I'm willing to do or kill ...

He hadn't understood at the time what Dean had meant, not fully at least. But now, under these circumstances, he finally knew. Under these circumstances, he was ready to kill anyone and everyone that got between him and saving his father and brother.

Turning back to face Jefferson and Bobby, Sam took a deep breath.

"Okay. What do we do?"

Remote Cabin Cable, Wisconsin

Warmth basked his back, heating even the denim of his jeans until the thick material was nearly uncomfortable pressing against his skin. Oddly, for as warm as his back was, his front felt equally cold. There was no heat on his face, but rather a bit of a chill that nipped at his skin. The strange dichotomy was what brought him more alert, forcing him to wake up and investigate why he felt that way.

Dean groaned as he moved his head and chanced opening his eyes. He was lying on his side on a dirty hardwood floor, the only thing within his immediate field of vision being a tattered rug that smelled of mildew.

He rolled to his back, quickly realizing that his hands were tied behind him as his shoulders and wrists cried out in discomfort from the position. The flames from the fireplace behind him flickered in his eyes, confirming why one half of him had been so warm moments before.

"You okay?"

Dean twisted over once more, moving so that he could come face to face with the voice. Beside him, his father lay on the floor as well. Despite being battered and bruised, John managed a weary smile back at his son.

"Dad!" Dean greeted happily, relief in his voice and his eyes.

He looked his father over, taking in everything from the swollen eye to the dried blood on the side of his shirt and the still wet-looking patch on John's left arm. Anger filled him, replacing the relief as he struggled against the rope that held his wrists firmly.

"Dean, stop," John commanded. "Even if you get loose, Sid and his people are all over outside."

"Yeah, but Dad, you're hurt," Dean refuted, still thrashing against the bonds.

"I'm alright, son. Just a little worse for the wear. Now what the hell are you doing here?" his father demanded.

"I was looking for you," Dean answered, chuckling nervously.

"Dean, I'm disappointed. I taught you better than to fall for a trap like that," his father admonished.

For a moment, the sternness of his father's voice, the chastisement in his words made Dean recoil. Years of training, fears of failure, and thoughts of disappointment rushed back, slamming into him and making his heart pound. He fought back the panic born of self-recrimination, forcing himself to remember that he no longer had to falter under his father's shadow. After everything that had happened in the past two years, Dean knew that he had more than proven that he could take care of himself and his brother.

"And exactly how did you come to be in these luxurious accommodations?" he snarked back tentatively.

John's face froze for a moment and Dean held his breath waiting for the barrage to start. When John's mouth broke into an easy smile, Dean visibly relaxed.

"Yeah, maybe we both need a refresher course," John teased.

Father and son laughed together briefly. Between the rare distraction and the dim lighting, Dean didn't see the peculiar look of sadness in John's eyes as he looked at his eldest son.

"So where's Sam? They didn't catch him?" John asked.

"No. I left him back with Bobby at a motel in South Dakota. I had to come to the meet, Dad, Morrow said they were gonna kill you if we didn't come. I knew it was a trap, but I had to show up. I couldn't take the chance," Dean explained. "I guess I was hoping that I could maybe trail them back to you. But they, well, they had a Rawhead dressed in your jacket with its head covered."

Dean sucked in a breath as the memory of Rennie's bullet impacting the black hood replayed in his head. Was it weakness to tell his dad that in that moment he lost all interest in avoiding traps, any regard for his own safety, and all concern for what happened from that point on? In that moment, he thought he had lost his dad, and short of losing his brother, there was nothing that caused more anguish in Dean's heart. He decided to skip recounting that horrid moment and instead continued on, forcing himself to blot out the vision of the blood as it poured out onto the ground.

"That bitch, Rennie Lofton, was there. Pulled the trigger and splattered the Rawhead's skull all over. She just laughed about it. Cold friggin' woman," Dean muttered.

John watched his son but remained silent. Despite Dean having left out the details, he could tell that the young man had probably gotten caught when he thought that his father was murdered.

"Anyway, between her and that gigantic ape, Lou, I pretty much ended up here. Wherever here is."

"Well, I don't know for sure either, they kept me blindfolded when they brought me in. But, listening to Sid talk, we're up in northern Wisconsin, Cable, I think," John answered.

"Is that why you kept talking about the Hodag?" Dean asked. "To let us know where you were?"

John sighed. "No, I was just hoping that you wouldn't believe anything Sid told you. I knew he would stop at nothing to bait you and your brother in, I just hoped that you wouldn't buy any of it."

Dean's eyebrows popped up as he shrugged. "Yeah, kinda figured that out. Sorry, Dad. I guess I should have kept that in mind when Rennie pulled that trigger."

There was a brief silence as John picked up once again on Dean's unvoiced fear. He wanted to be able to tell his son that it was alright, that he was alive and that Dean's fears were only that. He wanted to be able to undo all the years of hardened

training that had caused his oldest to pack away any semblance of emotion or vulnerability.

John had never been the best communicator, only Mary had been able to bring out the softer side of him. But Mary died and that part of him died along with her, leaving only a hardened shell of his former self.

He knew it all along, knew that his determination to find and destroy the thing that killed his beloved Mary had made him pass on that hardness to his sons. Well, Dean at least. John regretted it every day of his life, but he also recognized that it had served his sons well. So his regret was generally surpassed when he saw his boys in action or picked up on their successes as hunters. In the end, John knew that it would make it easier to do what he had to do.

"So, these hunters, they're after us because of what happened in Tennessee?" Dean asked, breaking the silence.

John snapped back from his introspection. "Yeah. Between seeing you possessed and Sam having a vision, they're pretty much convinced that you're both working for the demon."

"Damn fools," Dean muttered. "What has Sam ever done to anyone?"

"Well, they're not taking any chances. I've tried to talk to Sid, tried to reason with him, but it hasn't done any good. Not to mention that they're pretty pissed about their buddies that got killed when they tried to take you both at Bobby's."

"Hmmm, too bad you and Bobby didn't just finish them all off then. Coulda saved us the hassle now," Dean added sarcastically. "I bet Bobby's wishing he would have wasted 'em all back then."

John grunted in agreement. "So Bobby's alive then?"

"Yeah, no thanks to Rennie and her crew trying to blow him to kingdom come. One thing's for sure, he's gonna need a visit from *Extreme Home Makeovers* before he goes home again. I'm betting that him and Sam aren't real happy with me right about now, but maybe Jefferson will come through for them."

"Jefferson?" John nearly shouted. "That bastard is the one that set me up for Sid."

"Son of a bitch. I knew we shouldn't trust anyone. Dammit Sam!" Dean bemoaned. "So, you got a plan for getting out of here?" Dean asked, desperate now to break free and get to his brother before he was led into a trap.

"Tried once, bought this nice hole in my shoulder," John answered. "Still, I have a couple of ideas left."

"I just want a shot at Rennie Lofton," Dean added angrily. "I owe that bitch."

"Aw, how touching. Father and son, bonding by the fire," Sid interrupted, walking into the room.

"Screw you!" Dean snapped back, staring defiantly at the towering hunter, hazel eyes flashing dangerously even in the flicker of the firelight.

"Nice to see you raised your son to show respect, John. But then, maybe it's not your fault. After all, I'm sure that his time spent with that demon probably affected him badly."

"Dude, you don't know shit. Where did you learn to be a hunter? *Demon Hunting for Dummies?*" Dean mocked.

Sid laughed. He drew back and kicked Dean violently in the lower spine, relishing the woosh of air that escaped the young man as he was thrown forward.

"You sonofabitch!" John yelled, straining against the ropes that held him and ignoring the tearing sensation as the bullet wound in his shoulder began bleeding again.

"It'll all be over soon, John, very soon. Why don't you just call Sam and tell him to come in? We're gonna get him anyway. Save us the trouble of dragging him in," Sid directed, holding out an open cell phone.

"You don't have him yet," John reminded him. "And hell will freeze over several times before I give him up to you."

Sid nodded, lips pressed together as he closed the phone and returned it to his pocket. He motioned to Lou and another hunter standing behind him. As they drew in closer, Sid bent down closer to John's face.

"S'alright, John. You've made your decision. You want to save Sam for now, that's fine. Let's just see if you think you made the best choice while you listen to Dean scream," Sid snarled as the hunters moved in, grabbing Dean by the legs dragging him from the room.

County Road K

Sam sat behind the wheel of the Impala, Bobby occupying the shotgun seat while Jefferson finished his phone call.

"Yeah, I got the kid. He's convinced that I'm helping him get his brother and father back. No. He doesn't have a clue, thinks I'm still just a good ole' boy trying to help him find his daddy. We should be there by afternoon tomorrow. Don't want to push him and tip my hand."

Sam listened as the conversation ended, Jefferson telling Sid that it was all going according to plan. When he hung up, Sam pounced on him.

"My dad, Dean, are they okay?" he demanded anxiously.

"Yeah, seems so. At least so far. I think Sid wants to mess with your daddy, make him watch when he kills you and your brother. He's demented. Course, he always has been a little *off*," Jefferson observed. "And Rennie Lofton is worse still. That ice queen would shoot her own mother just to hear her scream. Sid's put himself a dangerous team together. Every single one of those hunters are a bit over the edge."

"A bit?" Bobby exclaimed. "They blew up my friggin' house."

"Bobby, I'm sorry 'bout that. I never knew anything about them goin' after you," Jefferson apologized.

"It's okay, just help Sam get John and Dean back in one piece."

"I'm trying, Bobby, I'm trying."

Impatience overwhelmed Sam as he shifted nervously in the driver's seat. He still had the nagging feeling that Jefferson was leading them into a trap, despite the hunter's insistence that he was truly on their side.

Maybe it was because they had trusted Zack Murzak too, and look how that turned out. Maybe it was because with his father and brother captured, Sam felt all alone this time. Or maybe it was nothing more than the tightness that was pulling at his scalp, beginning to pulse at his temples.

Great, just what I need, a stinking headache. But no wonder, not like I don't have any stress in my life!

In the periphery, Sam could hear Jefferson and Bobby plotting their attack once they reached the cabin. He listened as intently as he could manage; frustrated that it seemed he couldn't concentrate on what they were saying.

He squinted as the beams from an oncoming car blinded him, searing his retinas and augmenting the pulsing that was fast turning into pounding. Sam rubbed at his eyes, his hand going from there to the back of his neck where he continued to knead the muscles that seemed to be knotting up.

"So Sam can drop me off in Eau Claire. I'll meet up with Craig and Darnell. We'll follow you in to Cable from there," Bobby suggested. "That okay with you, Sam?"

Dimly, Sam had heard him. He tried to put Bobby's question in context with whatever had been discussed. But try as he might, he couldn't make his mind process information.

"Sam? You alright?" Bobby asked, the worry in his voice unmasked as he leaned toward the young man.

Sam tried to form the words, wanted to tell Bobby that he was just fine. But as the first syllable built on his lips, another car's headlights, set on high-beam, pierced his skull.

The only problem was, there wasn't any other car on the road besides them.

His vision failing, his brain feeling as though a strong electrical current was running through it, Sam slammed on the brakes as he felt the vision surging up to the surface of his consciousness. As the Impala came to a skidding halt, Sam's head slumped forward against the steering wheel, his hands losing their grip and flying up to his temples.

"Sam!" Bobby shouted, reaching over to steady the writhing Winchester.

"What is it? What's happening to him?" Jefferson asked, his voice pitched high with apprehension.

"A vision, I think. Sam, you with us?" Bobby questioned, one hand squeezing Sam's right shoulder.

The sound of Bobby's and Jefferson's voices was nothing more than garbled noise as Sam struggled to maintain some semblance of control. When the flashes began, rapid-fire bits of images, Sam succumbed.

John and Dean lay side by side on a dirty cabin floor. It's dark, cold and he can tell that both his brother and father are injured. In front of them, another man is holding a gun pointed at both of them.

The big man is telling John that it's just a matter of time before they capture Sam too. Soon, all the Winchesters will be dead. No more demon sympathizers, just a few less evil creatures roaming the planet.

John struggles on the floor. He yells back at his captor, insisting that they'll never get Sam. He's found a way to save his son. The burly hunter laughs, telling John that he can't save his sons, his boys were doomed from the minute they were born into the Winchester name.

But John isn't giving in. He strains against the ropes that have him bound. He tells the hunter that there is a way to save Sam. He's finally found it. He can kill the demon.

The vision stopped for a split second as Sam tried to resurface from it like a man close to drowning. He groaned loudly, still blinded by the pain from the fast-forward movie that had been playing in his skull. He sucked in a deep breath as another brilliant blast of lightning struck in the center of his brain dragging him back down into the cerebral motion picture.

The man continues to point his gun at John and Dean. He tells them that it's all over now. He's about to pull the trigger as he aims at Dean. John shouts for him to stop just before the gun fires, telling him that Dean is the key to saving Sam.

The scene suddenly changes and Dean is lying on the ground. He's not moving and it's hard to tell if he's even alive. John is kneeling beside him, tears brimming in his eyes as he quietly tells Dean that his sacrifice has paid off. He's proud of him.

The first thing Sam was cognizant of was a strong hand on the back of his neck while he heard his name being called over and over. For a split second he thought it was Dean, so accustomed to the calming strength his brother always exuded while he watched and waited for Sam to return to normal after a vision.

Yet as he became more lucid, Sam realized that it couldn't be Dean. His brother was being held by a group of psychopathic hunters bent on killing both of them. No, unfortunately, this wasn't Dean at his side and acknowledging that felt nearly as viscerally painful as had the vision.

"Sam?" Bobby's voice cut through the last bit of haze. "You okay now?"

He swallowed hard, looking around the dark interior of the car. Beside him, Bobby looked worried. Behind him, Jefferson looked truly scared. Sam shivered like a newborn colt, feeling just as shaky and unsteady as he tried to regain his composure.

"I'm good," he finally managed, patting Bobby's arm to reinforce the statement.

In truth, he felt like crap, still shaken from what the vision had shown him. But he knew that he needed to be fine in order to placate Bobby and to allay Jefferson's fear.

So this was how Dean pulled it off all the time? Although, Sam well knew that despite his older brother's standard line, he'd always been able to see straight through the lie.

"What was it?" Bobby asked finally, his eyes still watchful for any sign that the youngest hunter was not a hundred percent.

"Confusing," Sam replied, his face scrunched up in thought. "I saw my dad and Dean lying on the floor in a cabin. There was someone standing over them, pointing a gun at them. I couldn't see his face but I think it was Sid. He kept telling Dad that he was going to kill me, but Dad kept saying that he couldn't. That he had done something to save me."

"To save you? What did he mean by that?" the older hunter posed.

Sam shook his head. "I don't know," he answered. "But all of a sudden the vision changed and Dean was lying on the ground and Dad was kneeling down beside him saying something about his sacrifice paying off."

"Did Sid shoot Dean?"

"No, I don't think so. It wasn't like they were even in the cabin. Dean was lying in the dirt not on the cabin floor."

There was a long pause as Sam struggled to make sense of the strange prophecy. A gnawing fear crept inside him tearing at his gut as he reflected back on the sight of Dean lying motionless on the ground. What did it mean about Dean sacrificing something? Sam tried to rationalize that he had seen dark visions of Dean before, like at Max Miller's, and he had prevented that from coming true. He clung to the hope that this was nothing more than some jumbled psychic misunderstanding. Sighing dejectedly, he slammed his fists against the hard steering wheel.

"I dunno, Bobby. These visions, they're always the same way. Just little snippets that make no sense, like I'm seeing clips from a movie, but they're all out of order," he groaned in frustration.

Bobby reached over again and gave Sam's shoulder another squeeze for encouragement.

"We'll get them back, Sam. I've got some friends that I trust. We have help," he reassured him.

Sam looked over his shoulder to the rear seat. Jefferson remained quiet, but his eyes spoke volumes. Wide and non-blinking, the Texan looked like he was still fighting to comprehend what he had just witnessed.

"Jefferson? You still with us?" Sam chanced.

"Uh, yeah, yeah, I am," he stammered.

"Cowboy up there Jefferson," Bobby admonished. "There ain't nothing evil about Sam or what just happened, so get that thought out of your head right now."

"Yeah, I guess I know that," Jefferson answered tentatively. "I'm okay with it."

"You better be more than just okay with it. My brother and father's lives depend on it," Sam exploded. "So help me, Jefferson, you might have been my father's friend, but if you double cross us, there won't be enough of you left behind for a Reaper to drag off to hell."

Jefferson's gulp was audible in the quiet car as he nervously shook his head. "I'm with you, Sam."

"Good," Sam confirmed. Turning to Bobby, his eyes held a steely determination that pierced the darkness.

"Let's go get my family," he ordered.

Remote Cabin Cable, Wisconsin

Lou literally tossed Dean into the main room of the cabin, lifting the young man's body like it was little more than a sack of potatoes. Dean landed hard on the wood floor but managed to suppress the groan that his body wanted to let out.

The force caused him to roll twice before he came to a stop against the side of a couch in front of the fireplace. He looked back up at Lou, managing a wry smile as he met the giant man's eyes.

"Next time can you shoot for the couch, dude? I have this thing for sitting on the couch in front of a roaring fire," Dean snarked.

"You want more of what you got, huh smartass?" Lou snapped back in irritation.

"You know Lou, the steroids, they're not the answer. They make you mean and nasty and of course, there's all those uh... problems with the "equipment". Hmmm, maybe that's why you're so irritable?" Dean taunted.

Lou's face turned red with anger as he stormed back across the room to where the young captive lay. He grabbed Dean by the collar, pulling him up off the floor, one large fist drawn back and ready to smash into Dean's face.

"LOU!" Rennie's voice cut through tension that had been building. "You had your fun, now put him down," she commanded, her tone making her sound as though she were calling off a dog.

The muscular man looked at the raven-haired huntress, his lip curled in a snarl as his anger turned toward her and her demeaning manner. With a grumble, he dropped Dean to the floor again, stalking off like a petulant child.

Rennie took up his position, crouching down so she could make eye contact with the young hunter.

"You really shouldn't mess with Lou like that. He's totally brawn and no brain," she warned. "Although, you're not much different are you? I mean, decent brawn, definite hot packaging, but not much in the smarts department."

Despite the bruises to his face and a lip that was split open courtesy of Lou's fists, Dean managed his best rogue smile.

"Oh sweetheart, I got the full package alright. And while I might not be a Nobel candidate, I'm smart enough to keep away from a she-bitch like you," he replied back to her, his voice the same soft timbre that he reserved for the average small town conquest. "Tell me, do you kill and eat your mate after sex? Or are there even any men out there desperate enough to want to crawl into bed with you?"

Rennie flew into a rage. She pulled a long blade from the sheath strapped to the side of her thigh and pressed the edge against Dean's throat.

"Rennie!" Sid shouted out, his hand instantly grabbing the woman's arm to stop her action. She turned on him quickly, her body twisting around, the tip of the knife stopping mere inches from Sid's chest. The big man held his position, defiantly waiting for the woman to withdraw her attack.

Rennie panted, her rage slowly subsiding as did her blade. She glared at Sid and then looked back at Dean who remained on the floor, a broad grin on his face. Her eyes narrowed threateningly before she turned and stormed off.

"Seems like you need a zookeeper for your crew there, Sid. That and maybe a tranquilizer gun," Dean offered sarcastically.

Sid laughed in return. "Good to see that you still have a sense of humor, Dean. I'm impressed. I gotta imagine that you're not feeling nearly as great as you pretend."

"I'm good," Dean quickly answered. "Wanna try me out? Go a couple rounds? Just come on over and untie me."

Sid laughed again. "Nah, now why would I do that? 'Specially since I'm about to be a very happy man. By morning, I'm gonna have the whole Winchester clan at my feet. Let's see if you're still so sarcastic when your brother gets here."

"You'll never get Sammy." Dean hissed, straining up against his restraints, his anger betraying him.

"Live in that illusion, Dean." Sid shot back, turning and striding casually from the room.

Dean sagged back against the floor, finally allowing the groan to escape. In truth, most of his body felt like it had been run over by a steamroller, Lou's fists having pummeled him enough to tenderize the toughest cut of meat.

“So, you done letting your mouth get your ass kicked?” John asked, his voice gravelly from pain.

Dean let out a quick laugh, immediately becoming serious again. He scooted across the floor until he came close to his dad. John looked haggard and Dean could see that the shoulder wound was still seeping precious blood.

“How ya doin?” he asked.

John grunted, coaxing up a thin smile. “I’ve been worse.”

Several minutes passed in awkward silence as father and son nervously avoided each other’s eyes. Dean knew his dad was far from alright, knew it simply because he had mastered that bullshit rap himself. He also knew that, like himself, his dad’s pain wasn’t all physical.

Dean wanted to believe that Sam was safe and would remain so. But part of him was also concerned. He could only hope that Bobby’s common sense and experience would keep Sam from doing anything rash or stupid.

Kinda like I did! Dean ruefully recalled.

He glanced back toward John, hoping to convey some sort of encouragement.

“Sammy’s smart, Dad. He’ll be okay.”

When John didn’t reply, Dean became worried. He shifted on the hard floor, pulling against the ropes that bound his wrists and ankles. Beside him, John’s face took on an odd sadness.

“Dad? What is it? You gotta believe that Sam’s gonna be alright,” Dean implored.

John sucked in a long breath, his head dropping down to his chest. Dean felt his heart sink. If his dad had given up hope that Sam would avoid the hunters’ snare, then had he also given up that they would survive as well?

“Dad? What’s wrong? You don’t think that Sammy’s gonna keep away from these clowns?”

“That’s not it, Dean.”

“Then what is it?” the elder son demanded. “What do we have to do? Just tell me. We’ll find a way to bust the hell outta here.”

“It’s not that, Dean. I’m not worried about Sid and his bunch. Well, I am, but that’s not what I’m talking about here,” John began.

Dean watched his father’s face, confused by the emotion that was present there, having so rarely witnessed it over the years. As a matter of fact, the most recent time he could recall seeing his dad like this had been when they’d met up in Oxford and his dad had reluctantly confessed to the family curse.

That was it! Confusion, fear, apprehension, a wide range of emotions swirled inside him, but unlike his dad, Dean tried to hide it from his face and voice.

“You’re still worried about Haris aren’t you? It’s always that sonofabitch isn’t it?” Dean surmised.

John’s silence was his answer.

“That bastard ain’t gettin’ Sam. I stopped him before, I’ll find a way to do it again,” Dean swore. “I don’t know how, but I will!”

“I already know how,” John said in a rush of words.

Dean blinked in surprise, momentarily silenced by this revelation.

“You do?” he asked in disbelief.

John nodded, opening his mouth as he prepared to disclose the information he’d been secretly holding for the past several months.

“Ever since you called me and told me about the deal Sam made to free you of the demon, I’ve been looking for a way to kill that yellow-eyed S.O.B. I’ve searched every ancient text, talked to every shaman, hoodoo priest, and Christian theologian in nearly forty-eight states. I’ve talked with hunters on two continents and even interrogated a demon I trapped down in Oklahoma. And even after all that, after the Colt, there was nothing.”

John paused, summoning courage for the next part.

"Until, I came across the tiniest bit of lore in the Koran. See, Christianity and Islam actually share a fair amount of common themes. For instance, they both chronicle the life of King Solomon. But where the Bible talks mostly of him being a wise and God-fearing ruler, the Koran goes on to talk about his involvement with demons."

"I know some of that," Dean interjected. "We found the Seal and of course there's the Key of Solomon that Bobby gave Sam. What else is there?"

"There's a sword. King Solomon's Sword. It's said to have been a demon killer. Similar to the Seal."

"A sword?"

"Yes."

"And tell me you know where this sword is?" Dean asked excitedly, his mind creating an image of him wielding a long blade, swinging it *Highlander* style while Haris' head became disconnected from the rest of the demon's body.

"Uh, well, not the entire sword," John answered. "But a piece of it."

"A piece? How does a piece help us?"

"Because the piece could be melted down into a bullet and used to kill Haris. Just one piece of Solomon's sword is supposed to be powerful enough to kill a demon, even him," John explained.

"So where is this piece of the sword?" Dean demanded.

John's eyes became glassy as he bit down on his lower lip. The moment was here and he fought to summon the final bit of strength he needed to voice the last words.

"It's hanging around your neck, Dean. It's the amulet."

Remote Cabin Cable, Wisconsin

"My amulet?" Dean asked, stunned by the news. "How can that be? This... thing is a piece of a sword?"

"Yeah," John admitted. "It, and others like it."

Dean struggled to absorb the information. He glanced down at the golden talisman that lay against his chest. He felt the familiar tingle from it even through the multiple layers of clothing that separated it from his skin.

Was he really surprised by this new revelation? After what he had seen the amulet do at Haris' compound, after it protected him from being fully possessed, even after it had seemed to shield him against the Bokor's voodoo magic in Louisiana? He wasn't really shocked. Confused maybe, intrigued a lot, but not really shocked.

"So, did you know about this before? When you took me to see that Mann dude when I was younger?" he asked.

"No, not all of it. Not then. But when I found out what the amulet was I went back and spoke with him about it and he told me everything," John confessed.

Dean felt anger boil up inside him. Here was his dad, full of half-truths and secrets again, holding out on his sons as though he couldn't trust his own flesh and blood with the truth. Dean was tired of secrets, tired of feeling like he was the last person to know what the hell was going on. Tired of being treated like a child.

"I want to know it all," he stated simply, quietly, intensely.

"The sword was powerful, as you can imagine," John sighed as he began to explain. "And once Solomon had passed, his closest followers knew that in the wrong hands, it would be dangerous. So to carry on his legacy, they broke the sword apart and recast it into many different objects, like your amulet. The recast sword pieces were handed down through the centuries to the Guardians, those sworn to keep and protect it."

"The firstborn sons," Dean recalled. "Claviger and those like him. Down through Mom's family, except she didn't have any brothers."

"No. So it was held, secretly, waiting for her firstborn male heir. You, Dean. You're the Guardian of this particular piece."

“Did Mom know? Did she tell you? Did you know when you took me to Mann?”

“She never told me, I swear! Shadrack Mann contacted me when he caught word of Mary’s death. At the time, I blew him off. But he kept after me, always tracking me down, always insisting that I had to bring you to him. So after a time, after all the things I had been seeing, killing, I did. But even then, he never really told me the whole story.”

Dean squeezed his eyes tightly closed, feeling like he’d been hit by that steamroller all over again.

“So, we melt the amulet down into a bullet, use it to kill Haris, and Sam is safe forever?” he asked. “It’s that simple?”

John looked at him starkly. He was always amazed at how black and white things could be for Dean. But then again, hadn’t he made him that way?

“Not that simple, Dean. Don’t you remember what happened the last time you lost the amulet? Don’t you remember what Mann told you would happen if you were ever separated from the amulet for any length of time?”

“Yeah, I’m toast.”

John was taken aback by the bluntness of Dean’s reply. He expected, no, *wanted* his oldest son to refuse, or at the very least have some sort of reservation.

“We kill Haris, Sammy is safe from that bastard forever. Game over, we win!”

“Dean, you have to know, I checked everywhere, with everyone. I even went back to visit Mann twice, hoping, praying that there was some other way, some way to break the binding between you and the amulet maybe,” John explained, his voice cracking with emotion.

“Dad, stop! Do you know so little about me that you think I’d have to consider this for even one minute? Do you think that if it was within my power to kill the evil sonofabitch that I’d pass it up no matter what the cost to me?”

John shook his head, a lone tear falling free of his eye and cutting a path down his blood-stained and bruised face.

“No, I’ve always known that there isn’t anything that you wouldn’t do to save your brother, to save this family. I remember that night at the cabin in Missouri, Dean. As painful as it was to be a prisoner in my own body, it was nothing compared to watching you sacrifice yourself for Sammy and me,” John admitted. “Son, I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want to lose either of you. I don’t think I can bear it after your mother. But every day that Haris continues to exist, I know the odds of me losing both of you grow higher and higher. When I didn’t hear from either of you in New Jersey, I thought for sure that he had gotten you both.”

“He almost did get Sammy, Dad. Seeing Sam in that hospital dying, I can’t go through that again. Not ever! We do this, we have to. Haris is never gonna stop coming after Sam, we both know that. And sooner or later, I’m gonna mess up worse than I did in New Jersey and not be able to protect him,” Dean admitted, his own voice now filled with desperation.

John watched as Dean turned his face away. He knew that his son was silently chastising himself for the perceived failure of protecting his brother. He’d seen that same look of failure many times over the years but had never realized how deeply it had cut into Dean’s very soul.

Sure, he’d meant for Dean to watch out for his younger brother, had even unwittingly placed far too much responsibility on him very early on. But, he’d never realized just how his eldest had grown to assume such complete liability for everything that happened to Sam.

Was it too late now to try and tell Dean that he’d never “messed up,” not even once? That if anything, all the young man had ever done was sacrifice every chance for his own happiness, his own wants and desires in order to keep his family together and his brother safe. Recognizing it now only made it that much more painful to accept this final sacrifice that Dean seemed so readily willing to make on behalf of Sam.

What kind of father am I? How the hell can I even sit here and let him do this? How could I even have considered it to begin with?

But those questions had already been asked and answered several times over in John Winchester's mind. Even now when he watched the young man across from him struggle with the perceived guilt of almost losing his brother at the hands of the demon, John knew that Dean would die before he'd let Sam be taken by Haris again.

I'll lose them both. One to the demon, the other dying to save him. The realization came flooding back to John, just as it had so many times before.

"Dean, I..."

"I want to do this, Dad. I need to do this." he pleaded.

John looked at Dean carefully, noting the intensity in the deep green eyes as his son stared back imploringly. A stray beam of early morning sunlight had peeked through the cabin window, bathing Dean's face in a soft glow. In that instant, despite the bruising and abuse, he looked young, innocent, and not at all the seasoned, hardened hunter that John knew him to be. Yet also in that moment, his son was definitely no longer a boy, he was a man, fully understanding and embracing the sacrifice he was willing to make for his brother.

His heart in his throat, John wished he was untied, wanting more than anything to be able to embrace his son, needing the physical contact since he knew the necessary words escaped him.

"Dean, I'm really, um... well, I know I've never said it enough but I'm ..." John fumbled, trying to tell his son how proud he was yet stumbling over the words like he had so many times before.

John dug down deep for a second go, carefully trying to avoid Dean's eyes as he summoned up the strength to tell his eldest how much he loved, respected and even admired him for having more strength and courage than even he possessed. In the end, his reprieve came in the way of a distraction outside the cabin.

Turing on his side, John strained to make out the noise. Beside him, Dean shifted as well, twisting his body so that he could lift up slightly on his left shoulder.

Beyond the father and son, Sid and Rennie rushed to nearby windows, peering out, weapons drawn.

"What is it?" Dean asked in a whisper.

"Sammy!"

Exterior Cabin

Sam pulled the Impala into the yard in front of the rustic cabin as the first rays of morning sun broke through the scattered clouds. Killing the engine, he tried to slow the wild hammering of his heart as his shoulder brushed against the muzzle of Jefferson's rifle that pointed at his chest. Even though it was a ruse, Sam's little voice was still screaming in the back of his head not to trust the tall hunter.

Climbing from the black car, he moved slowly, listening intently for any sound of Bobby or his friends in the adjacent woods. He knew the older hunter wouldn't be seen, he was too good for that, but knowing that he was out there, covering Sam's back, made the young man feel slightly less vulnerable.

Less vulnerable, that is, until Sam looked up and saw Sid Morrow stride out onto the front porch of the cabin. The hunter smiled broadly as he looked down at Sam, his own weapon lowering only slightly. Beside him, Rennie Lofton hung back; even from at this distance, she emitted a lethal presence.

Sam froze, waiting for Jefferson to draw up behind him, not anticipating the jab of the rifle as the Texan pushed him forward. He stumbled slightly, righting himself before beginning to walk slowly towards the steps.

"Jefferson, you did it!" Sid shouted enthusiastically. "Wasn't sure I could count on you, but you came through for us."

"Yeah, well, the kid is a freak. Saw it for myself," Jefferson replied.

Sam cringed; the Texan's answer was just a little too convincing.

"Well, we won't have to worry 'bout the lot of them soon," Sid answered back. "You've tied up this loose end nice and tidy. Time for a little family reunion and then we'll create a nice little Winchester family plot."

Sam glared at Sid, unable to hide the defiance even though he knew he was supposed to be playing the part of the beaten captive. Sid laughed heartily, already used to seeing a similar look in both the older brother and father, he wasn't really surprised the younger Winchester still had so much fight left in him.

"Rennie, go get the whelp," Sid ordered, motioning the huntress with his gun.

She sauntered off the porch, her weapon in hand as she moved in on Sam. She might as well have snarled at Jefferson as she came close, the taller hunter all but flinched when she moved alongside him and grabbed Sam's arm claiming the prisoner for her own.

Sam twisted out of her grasp, refusing to tolerate her hands on him. She whirled around to face him, her hair whipping out of her face momentarily, revealing the pale scar that bisected the creamy whiteness of her cheek.

She was beautiful, there was no doubt. Or rather, she would have been beautiful, if it wasn't for the absolute hatred that poured off of her like heat from a roaring fire. It colored everything about her and Sam could tell that she fed it and fed off of it.

Still, as threatening as she was, she was no match for the state of mind Sam was currently in. Filled with anger and desperation, he lashed out unexpectedly, throwing one arm around her neck and pulling her to his chest while his other hand tore the pistol from her grasp.

Rennie choked in Sam's tight hold, her hands flying up to his arm, nails clawing into the bare skin there. She kicked backwards, fighting like a wildcat as she tried to break free.

Sam held tight, his taller height and greater strength overpowering the smaller woman despite her fierce anger. He pressed the end of the .45's barrel roughly against the side of her head, pulling back the hammer with his thumb. The audible click stopped the woman's resistance and she froze in place.

"Drop your weapon or I'll kill her right now," Sam ordered, glaring up at Sid.

Behind him Jefferson swung his rifle up to cover the burly hunter on the porch.

From around the corner of the cabin, two more men appeared, each holding assault rifles, each of them with their weapons trained on Sam and Jefferson. The two men held their ground as the sounds of footfalls broke from the woods behind them.

Bobby and his men appeared from their cover with a hail of bullets. One of the two hunters at the side of the cabin dropped immediately, clutching his leg while the other man dodged for cover and returned fire back at the oncoming hunters.

Sam pulled Rennie with him back towards the Impala, somewhat regretting that he was using the woman's body as a shield. Dimly, he was aware of Sid shouting above the racket of gunfire and it wasn't long before the older man's shouts soon rose over the ruckus and the shooting ceased.

"Hold your fire! HOLD YOUR FIRE!" he called out to both his men and Bobby's alike.

Sam looked around nervously. He spotted Bobby at the edge of the woods, Craig and Darnell flanked off to his left and right respectfully. Bobby raised his hand, signaling the two brothers to cease their shooting.

Back up on the porch, Sid rose from behind the thick rail. Still with the ever-present cocky smile, he looked directly at Sam.

"That's more like it Sam. Now, call off your men and drop your weapons. You might think you have the upper hand out here, but I have two more men inside the cabin with guns trained on your dad and brother. The next shot that's fired is gonna be a bullet into both of their heads," he sneered.

Interior Cabin

Dean twitched with every pop of gunfire, his body reacting to the battle outside in much the same way a Thoroughbred anticipated the opening of the starter's gate. If Sam was out there among the weapons fire, then Dean needed to be out there too. Except there was this nagging little problem with his arms and legs being tied up and oh, not to mention the two guys with their automatic weapons pointed at both him and his dad.

Okay, so a minor inconvenience, but Dean was determined to get out there and find his brother come hell or high water. He stole a quick glance over at his father, saw a similar look of determination in John's exhausted and wound-weary face.

It was the last thing Dean needed to see. Pushed beyond the limit of tolerance, he was tired of dealing with these idiots and their righteous version of a witch hunt. It was time for action instead of reaction, Dean Winchester style. If these morons wanted to believe that his brother was evil incarnate, then so be it.

"That's my brother out there," he told the nearest of the two guards. "You've heard about my brother haven't you?"

The young man that stood over Dean was likely no more than twenty two or twenty three, probably hadn't seen much action in his young years considering the panicked look he shot back. Dean picked up on the fear and like a shark sensing the bleeding seal in the water, he zoomed in.

"You know, my brother, he's special. I wouldn't admit it to Sid, but those stories, they're only the half of it," Dean began.

He watched the kid's eyes grow wider, the young man's attention torn between the gunfire outside and Dean's dialogue. Inwardly, Dean smiled. *Fish on!*

"Ever since Sammy was younger he could do these cool things. Started off small, ya know, little tricks like making our dad take us for ice cream and stuff. But when he got older, he could make people do all sorts of awesome stuff, just by using his mind."

"Shut up Winchester. Don't listen to him, Mike. His brother will be dead same as him here in a minute," the other older guard snapped back, shifting his attention to his nervous comrade.

"Oh yeah, don't listen to me, Mikey. Not like I haven't seen my brother in action. Not like I haven't seen him turn people inside out. Their guts on the outside, bones stickin' out, I mean, seriously, ewwww! Hey Mikey, you ever see the movie *Firestarter?*" Dean asked slyly.

It surprised Dean that the young man's eyes could open any wider, but they did. The kid dragged a shaking hand across his forehead, mopping sweat from his brow then repeating the motion as he swiped his palm across the top of his jeans. He shifted his grip on the weapon slightly, his eyes shifting from Dean to the other hunter to the nearby door and back to Dean again.

"Yeah, some handy trick that is," Dean continued on. "Makes toasting marshmallows easy, but boy you should see the suntans he's handed out to the folks that piss him off."

Mikey swallowed hard, his face turning pale.

"Not enough left of them for the coroner to identify, have to check dental records. I'm telling ya, he just can't control it, lights 'em up like a friggin' bonfire. Doesn't even have to be near 'em, can just picture it in his mind."

Frightened, paranoid, seeking reassurance, Mikey turned toward the older hunter that was covering John. It was all the opening Dean needed.

Rolling over to his stomach, Dean used his shoulder for leverage to draw his knees underneath him. In an instant, he was upright, although not on his feet since his ankles were still bound together.

Mikey spun back around, his weapon leveled at Dean, but he was too close to get the muzzle in between their bodies before Dean tackled him to the ground. Without the use of his hands, all Dean could do was use his upper body to try to pin the young man to the floor. They rolled over and over, briefly entangled, and Dean could feel the ropes encircling his wrists give slightly as the skin peeled away from the strain.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the second hunter move in to assist Mikey, saw his father kick out and trip the second man, dropping him hard to his knees. Dean shouted out in defiance when the second hunter rose to his feet and smashed the stock of the weapon hard against his dad's head, knocking him unconscious.

His anger spurring him on, Dean head-butted Mikey with the top of his skull, ignoring the brief dance of stars that flashed in his field of vision. While the kid writhed beneath him, Dean gritted his teeth and pulled against the blood-soaked ropes around his wrists.

He yanked and twisted until first his thumb and then the rest of his right hand came free of the bindings, leaving a thin layer of skin behind. He ignored the burning pain, too focused on the second hunter as he took aim with his weapon.

Dean rolled to his right away from Mikey but not before he pulled a knife from a sheath at the young man's boot. In a fluid motion, he sliced through the ropes around his ankles and dove behind the couch just as the second hunter pulled the trigger on his rifle. The round buzzed past Dean's head burrowing into one of the cushions on the sofa.

He heard the man curse loudly as he tried to lever the next round into the chamber only to find the bolt jammed. Dean didn't hesitate, taking the opportunity to break from his cover and rush the now weaponless second hunter.

He drove his shoulder into the man's gut, taking him down to the floor, his fists working like pistons as they fell.

Dean stopped only to strip the useless rifle from the hunter's hands, tossing it across the room. He started to rise, but the hunter grabbed him by the ankle and dragged him back down, clawing at his leg and landing a hard-knuckled blow to Dean's lower back that stole his breath and was sure to make him rue going to the bathroom for several days to come.

Dean kicked backward with his booted foot, catching the man in the nose and mouth and sending a cascade of broken teeth and blood splattering across the floor. He rose slowly to his feet, looking down at the man below him, who was nearly blinded from the facial trauma.

Dean didn't care. After everything this bunch had done and was planning to do to his family, this jackass was getting off easy with a broken nose and some dental work.

He staggered wearily over toward his father, adrenalin and bloodlust keeping him on his feet. Bending down to check on his still unconscious dad, he caught the faintest flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye.

Turning slowly, Dean saw Mikey standing off to his side. The kid had recovered and was standing again, a handgun pointed shakily at Dean.

Dean slowly raised his hands, not sure if the kid would pull the trigger by accident he was shaking so badly.

"Easy there kiddo! Don't do anything stupid," he said calmly.

"You're a demon too, aren't you? Like Sid said," Mikey stuttered back. "Just like your brother."

Dean closed his eyes, shaking his head.

"You damn dumb fool," he mumbled, diving at Mikey's legs.

The sound of the gun firing echoed throughout the cabin as Dean drove the young man into the table behind them. The legs collapsed under their combined weight sending Dean and Mikey to the floor and smashing a still-lit kerosene lantern against the threadbare rug that was spread beneath the table.

As dry as stacked kindling, the rug ignited instantly, flames erupting and filling the room with thick smoke as Dean drove his fists into Mikey's face, oblivious to the new danger. Higher and higher, the fire climbed, spreading throughout the open room, hungrily consuming the contents and threatening the inhabitants with its flesh searing heat and lung clogging smoke. By the time Dean crawled away from an unconscious Mikey, the cabin was fully ablaze. He couldn't see his father. For that matter, he couldn't see a way out.

Exterior cabin

Sam heard the first shot and then the second coming from inside the cabin. His body jerked both times as his mind pictured bullets slamming into the skulls of both his father and Dean. He felt the rage surge up within him, but he didn't care anymore. It didn't even faze him that Sid wasn't smiling anymore, that he looked confused, maybe even worried when he heard the report of the weapons.

Sam simply didn't care. He'd been harried, taunted, his family captured, threatened, hurt and now possibly killed. Sam might not have Dean's quick temper, but never let it be said that Sam couldn't be moved to anger.

His hand tensed around Rennie's neck, his fingers clamping slightly tighter on her throat. For a moment, she gasped, her eyes going wide as her air was cut off. She sensed Sam's finger tightening on the trigger, and maybe for the first time in her life, Rennie Lofton knew fear.

It was out of that fear that she tore free of Sam's grasp. Distracted by his own horrible thoughts of his family, Sam didn't react fast enough, stumbling forward as the woman's momentum pulled him.

At that point, everything happened at once. Rennie pulled away shouting for the other hunters to open fire as she dove toward the cabin. Bobby yelled at Craig and Darnell to re-engage as he moved closer to cover Sam. On the porch, Sid shouted out orders to the remainder of his men heading to the door of the cabin just as the pane of glass in the front window exploded, flames surging outward.

Gunfire erupted once more, Bobby's men trading rounds with Sid's hunters from between the cabin and the edge of the woods. The staccato sounds of automatic weapons, the deeper thrum of shotgun blasts punctuated the early morning, yet Sam wasn't cognizant of any of it. All he could focus on was the thick black smoke and brilliant red-yellow flames pouring from the cabin.

He darted in the direction of the steps, intent on getting inside and finding his brother and father. So single-minded in his determination, Sam didn't see Sid raise his .45 and take aim on him. He heard the weapon fire and felt something hard and heavy knock him to the ground.

Struggling to get air into his lungs, Sam panicked, not sure if he'd been hit until he felt the gangly form of Jefferson on top of him. The Texan sprawled across him, his body covering Sam from where he'd tackled him to the ground just before Sid's bullet had ripped through the air finding the tall hunter instead of Sam's chest.

Sam gently eased Jefferson over, relieved when he saw that the hunter was still alive and nursing a gaping wound in his upper thigh. He smiled tentatively up at Sam, his face unable to mask the pain of the damaged leg.

While the bullets continued to rain in every direction, Bobby skirted up next to the young hunter. Quickly assessing Jefferson's condition, he helped Sam pull the man to relative safety behind the Impala.

"Bobby, we gotta get inside. Dad and Dean are still in there," Sam pleaded.

Bobby glanced down at Jefferson, noting the pale sheen to the tall man as he pressed heavily on the bleeding wound. Around them, the gunfire was slowing.

"Jefferson, you gonna be alright?" Bobby asked.

The hunter nodded quietly. "Go get John," he gasped back.

"Where's Sid?" Sam asked, quickly peeking above the hood of the black Chevy.

"I got him," Jefferson hissed through clenched teeth. "Saw him go down right before he put one in me."

"What about that bitch Rennie?"

"I'll take care of her," Bobby insisted, moving from around the back of the car and dashing off in the direction the female hunter had gone earlier.

Sam cast one final glance down at Jefferson, an unspoken word of thanks before another loud sound of glass shattering tore his attention back to the inferno at the cabin.

He ran to the steps, taking them two at a time nearly stumbling headlong into the door when he hit the porch. He reached the cabin door and was about to twist the handle when something tugged at his ankle pulling him to the decking.

"You evil sonofabitch! I swear to God you're gonna die before you cost any more innocent lives," Sid threatened, his voice raspy and weak as he did his best to glare menacingly despite the blood that dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

Sam reached down and casually tossed off Sid's hand from his ankle.

"Take a good long look in the mirror, you ass," he shot back before continuing on into the inferno.

Inside, the heat and smoke were overwhelming. Sweat beaded instantly on Sam's exposed skin only to evaporate a second later. He could feel the hair on his arms curling, singeing, and beginning to burn with that tell-tale stench.

Covering his mouth with his shirt, he tried to block some of the acrid smoke that threatened to suffocate him. The cabin wasn't that large, Dean and his dad had to be nearby.

"Dean! Dad!" Sam screamed out their names in between bouts of coughing.

When his eyes could no longer see in the thick smoke, Sam resorted to using his hands to feel along the floor. He froze, his hand retracting involuntarily when he came in contact with something warm and stiff. A body!

Sam felt along the form more closely. It was compact, hard and lean, and Sam felt his heart climb in his throat when he thought for a moment that it was Dean. But as he tugged on the form, the lighter mass made him realize with relief that it wasn't his brother. Having carried Dean's unconscious form far too many times in his life, Sam knew all too well what Dean's body weight felt like, and this wasn't Dean.

Still, Sam wasn't one to leave someone, even an enemy, behind to burn. So he hefted the man over his shoulder and carried him outside to the awaiting fresh air.

Once in the sunlight of the burgeoning day, Sam dropped the hunter to the ground before a fit of coughing overcame him. When he regained his ability to breathe, he realized that he wasn't the only one still gagging on smoke as he looked over and spotted his brother kneeling on the ground about ten feet away.

Dean was covered in soot and there was no mistaking that part of his exposed skin had been burned and was already beginning to blister. He looked up and made eye contact with Sam and a silent conversation took place between the siblings.

Without saying a word, they nodded toward each other before both rose and bounded back toward the fully engulfed cabin, disappearing inside as a cone of flames shot through the roof. Outside, Bobby, Jefferson and the other hunters watched in fear as the brothers seemingly ran to their deaths.

Seconds turned into minutes, minutes felt like hours as the friends waited outside, clinging to hope and watching for some sign that the Winchesters might emerge. Just as the first creak of a timber collapsing had caused Bobby to give up any hope of seeing his friends again, he looked up to see three blackened and haggard figures stagger out of the front door.

John Winchester, propped up between the arms of his two sons, smiled weakly as the three hobbled over towards Bobby.

"Bobby."

"John."

"Good to see ya."

"Good to be seen."

"You get Sid and his bunch?"

"Naw. Him and Rennie, one other, got away," Bobby said apologetically.

"Slipping up there old man," John teased.

"Wasn't me that got caught to begin with there John boy," Bobby threw back.

"Hey, beaten, bleeding, and burned here. Can we move along to the hot shower and cold beer stage?" Dean interrupted. "And have I mentioned that I don't remember when I ate last."

Sam looked at his brother and chuckled. Laughed more heartily when he saw his father and Bobby begin to laugh along too. They were all a little worse for the wear, but they were all alive. Sam figured that was a pretty good start for the day.

Blue Lake, Minnesota Two Days Later

Sam looked up from the laptop, casually glancing around the motel room that had become the makeshift Winchester/Singer base of operations for the past couple of days. Across from him, Bobby sat running a knife along a whetstone, engrossed in the rhythm while John methodically stripped and oiled his handgun. The two hunters rarely spoke, content to communicate through a series of half uttered grunts when they passed some tool or cloth back and forth, at least when they weren't trading good natured barbs. Sam smiled; it felt almost comfortable in light of recent events to watch his dad and Bobby interact light-heartedly.

He turned to look over at Dean. His brother was laid out on the other bed, randomly flipping through channels on the T.V. with one hand while the other dug into a bag of potato chips. To say that Dean seemed strangely quiet was an understatement, but in truth, his older brother had said barely a dozen words since they had made it to the secluded motel two nights before. Stranger still, his usually hyperactive sibling had done nothing more than haunt about the room, occasionally sleeping but more often than not, simply lying in bed staring distantly at the television or ceiling.

Sam figured it was most likely due to Dean's normal avoidance of mentioning his injuries. Probably he was lying low, recuperating, trying to avoid the questioning and concern that he thought was sure to come from Sam, Bobby and his dad.

Dad! That was probably it too! Sam realized.

Dean was probably not real happy about being confined to the room with their dad either. Considering that his brother had never really gotten over the psychological trauma of what had happened in the cabin in Missouri or the fact that every time he even looked at John Winchester he felt compelled to snap to attention. Was it really any wonder that he seemed edgy now?

Yeah, that probably explained why Sam saw Dean steal nervous looks over at their father when John wasn't looking. Not to mention, he couldn't imagine the conversation that took place between the two of them back at the cabin. Then again, yes he could. Knowing his dad and John's lack of tolerance for failure, Sam was pretty sure that he'd probably laid into Dean fairly well.

Sighing disgustedly, Sam turned back to the computer. He was never going to change his dad or his brother any more than he was going to change the opinions of the hunters that had been after them.

Sam scanned through several more pages of the news services, stopping on a couple of articles that hinted at strange happenings but nothing that really tweaked his attention. He searched for any news of Sid or Rennie, any mention of the fire at the cabin in Cable, but thankfully there was nothing.

He was about to shut the laptop down and suggest they head out for dinner when a strange story out of Arizona happened to catch his eye. He scrolled down the page,

drawing in closer to the screen, his eyes growing wider as the name in the story struck home.

“Holy Crap!”

If anyone heard him Sam couldn't tell as no one else in the room responded to his exclamation. He looked around in amazement, slightly offended about being ignored and cleared his throat loudly.

“What Sammy? Did you find that Amazon women porn site again?” Dean teased.

“Funny Dean. No, you're not gonna believe this,” Sam replied, his face belying the seriousness.

Dean turned down the volume on the T.V. and even Bobby and John stopped their chores to pay attention.

“It's Alyssa Medina. Somehow she escaped from the facility in Arizona. There's a three state manhunt for her. It says here that they don't know how she got out, there's nothing on the security cameras and no one was in to see her. The place was locked up tighter than a drum.”

“Guess I better keep a pair of dark sunglasses handy,” Dean joked.

“That's not funny, Dean. Think about it, we left her catatonic. How the hell did she get out? She sure didn't just up and walk out of there on her own.”

“Yeah, well who would have helped her?” Dean snapped back, but quickly subdued as the answer became obvious.

The brothers answered the question simultaneously, “Haris.”

The mention of the demon brought both John and Bobby into the conversation, the elder Winchester moving to his feet and walking over to Sam's side. He glanced at Sam's laptop then looked curiously at his younger son.

“What's the yellow-eyed demon's involvement in this?” John demanded.

“One of our last jobs, a girl down in Phoenix murdered her entire family just to bait us down there,” Sam answered.

“Sammy!” Dean's voice was a low warning from across the room. Sam looked up, startled at why his brother seemed reluctant to recount the story to their father.

Ignoring him, Sam continued on. “She was another of the psychic kids like me, but working for Haris. When we got there, she did something to Dean. Used whatever power she had on him to make him forget, everything. Who he was, who I was, his family, everything. Eventually, he remembered this song that Mom used to sing to him about this cowboy and the amulet, but it was like Haris had sent Alyssa to purposely make Dean forget about the amulet and his connection to this cowboy named Claviger.”

“Sam, Alyssa, wherever she is, is three fries short of a Happy Meal. She's no threat,” Dean shouted back, nearly flying up from the bed.

He hastily tugged on his boots, tying loose knots before rising and pulling on his jacket. Before either Sam or John could raise a question, Dean reached for the handle to the door.

“I need to check on the Impala's alternator,” he mumbled, pulling open the door and heading out into the diminishing afternoon light.

Once outside, the claustrophobia that threatened to choke him subsided but Dean perpetuated the masquerade and lifted the hood to the old Chevy. He stooped underneath, toying with the various wires but not really checking anything despite his earlier stated concern.

His mind was whirling. First the hunters, then his dad's revelation and now if Haris had something to do with Alyssa's disappearance, it was more than Dean could process. It was never going to end, one thing after another coming after them, coming after Sam. But then, it could all end, and it rested with him, rested against his chest in the form of an ugly golden amulet.

He fingered the strange horned figure between his index finger and thumb, staring at it, wondering what it might have looked like when it was part of its whole. It buzzed

against his fingers, zapping him lightly, startling him slightly and he dropped it back against his chest.

"Second thoughts?"

Dean turned around to face his father, embarrassed that he had been so caught up in his own thoughts that he'd let someone sneak up on him unawares.

Fortunately, John didn't call him on it.

"No, never!" he steadfastly refused.

"Dean, its okay ya know, we don't have to do this," John began, drawing close and placing his large calloused hand on his eldest's shoulder.

Dean pulled away, unable to bear the touch.

"Don't you see, don't you understand? I have to do this. I can't walk away from this now. If that really is Haris that sprung that chick, then he might be coming back after me, after Sammy. This has to end, Dad, and it's in my power to end it."

"Dean, we can look more. There was the Colt before, we might..."

"What? Find something else? How many magic demon-killing weapons do you think are just sitting out there, Dad? Do you think old Yellow Eyes is just gonna sit back and wait on us to find something else?" Dean asked sarcastically.

John bowed his head. He already knew the answer. He already spent the past six months searching high and low.

"So the only question now is how and when. Sammy is smart, he's sure to notice the amulet being gone and if not that, well then, he'll know for sure when I... well, I won't be able to hide getting sick from him for long. You'll have to be quick about it."

John swallowed hard. "We'll have to melt it down, recast it into a bullet. Bobby can help me. Then we just have to summon Haris. Two days, three tops?"

Dean nodded slowly. Two or three days, he could keep Sam distracted for that long. He'd held up in the swamps that long before the full effect of being without the amulet had hit him. He could do this. For Sammy, he *would* do this!

Slowly, Dean reached up and deftly began to untie the leather cord that had held the golden amulet around his neck for so many years. He tried not to notice the glistening of tears that clouded his father's eyes as he placed the amulet into John's hand and quietly walked back toward the motel room, pulling his jacket tightly around him and ignoring the chill that suddenly seemed to eat straight through to his bones.

To Be Continued in *Dance With The Devil...*