

**Season Two**  
**Episode Eight: Scorn**  
**By Tree**

She ran; ignoring the sharp pain of the rocks and sticks as they pierced the soft flesh on the bottoms of her feet leaving behind bloody little splotches to mark her trail. She ran; despite the branches that seemed to have come alive and were reaching out to lash at her face, slashing open the flawless, creamy white skin that had been the envy of many of her friends, but now was battered, bleeding and tear-streaked. She ran; fear pumping adrenaline into her bloodstream, numbing her brain to all sensations of pain or discomfort and feeding that primal place that told her to keep moving if she wanted to survive. She ran; unsure of where she was or even where she was going, only knowing that where she had just been was not a place that she ever wanted to be again.

As the moonlight peeked through the light mix of clouds and the tall cover of the tree tops, she stopped running finally to catch her breath, winded and leaning against the bark of the nearest pine. She shivered violently, not so much from any nighttime breeze, although her being clad in only a thin t-shirt and a pair of shorts certainly wasn't helping. The goose bumps on her skin were the result of terror and the memory of seeing her boyfriend lying in a pile of shredded flesh and jutting bones only moments before.

They had walked out into the woods just an hour earlier, blanket and cooler in hand, sneaking away from the bright lights of the main compound and the prying eyes of the other staff. Not that "extracurricular" activities were uncommon among the staff, but no way was she taking him back to her quarters and no way would she be caught dead in his. After all, as hot and hard-bodied as he was, she still had her standards.

They found a quiet place not too far from the facility, a thick bed of fallen pine needles providing a soft base for the blanket. Within minutes, they were on the ground, bottles of beer opened and any inhibitions that had existed being washed away with the alcohol. She kicked off her shoes, complaining about an offending stone, but really hoping he would take the hint and start rubbing her feet. Having her feet rubbed always turned her on. He quickly obliged and it wasn't long before her fleece hoodie was lying in a pile near her shoes.

Already encouraged, he ripped the t-shirt up over his head, purposely flexing the muscles in his arms and upper chest for her to see as he hovered over her. She sucked in a sharp breath, appreciating the fine physique, knowing that while he would never be a prize to take home to Mom and Dad, he certainly would make do as a diversion for the remainder of the summer. Her eyes rolled back in her head as his mouth descended on her earlobe, nibbling hungrily before beginning a slow trek down the side of her throat.

She moaned softly, which only spurring him on more, his hand snaking up under the thin fabric of the staff t-shirt to grab at her while his other hand headed for the button on the waistband of her shorts. Despite the tingling that threatened to overtake her entire body, her heart pounding in time with her heaving chest, her mind screamed out and she suddenly rolled from underneath him. She knelt on all fours, facing him like a lioness, a coy smile on her face in response to the look of confusion that covered his.

*Too fast, slow down!* Her brain shouted above the rush of endorphins. *Making out is one thing, going all the way on the first date, that's another. Still, he is hot!*

"I've got to pee!" She mumbled finally, the smile even more demure than before. "I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere," she added over her shoulder, tossing blonde hair in a way that she knew was going to drive him mad.

She watched a moment longer as he sunk down onto the blanket, leaning against a fallen log, muscles and other things still bulging in the moonlight. He feigned dejection, but she blew him a kiss before trotting off and caught the sly upturned grin he offered as she turned away.

She hadn't walked far, maybe several yards, just far enough that she could maintain a certain degree of modesty since she did in fact need to relieve herself. Finding a large tree, she was about to undo her shorts when she heard the first growl. A low rumble, it reminded her of the tabby cat she had as a child, only much louder.

She nearly had her shorts undone when she heard the first screech followed by the first blood-curdling scream. She knew instantly that it came from him; it was too close to be anyone else. Fear caused a moment of hesitation, but more screams followed by the loud sounds of tearing and the call of a wildcat spurred her into movement.

She crept slowly from tree to tree back the way she came, listening to the mixture of animal growls and weakening moans as she drew closer. Just as she reached the edge of the clearing, she caught sight of a blur of yellow fur blending back into the dark forest. Too large to be a mountain lion and definitely not a human, she shrunk back behind the closest tree for fear of being seen.

She hugged the pine, pressed close enough that the rough bark tore into her exposed skin. She wished she could blend right into it and hide until someone came and found her, certain that the pounding of her own heart would be heard and give away her location. Hovering there for several minutes, she waited until nothing more than the normal night time sounds of the forest returned.

With agonizing slowness, she peeked around the edge of the trunk, looking into the clearing, seeking some sign of the young man she had left just a few minutes before. Atop the fallen log, she spotted his muscular, tanned forearm dangling limply. Obscured by the deadfall, she could barely make out the rest of his unmoving form. She'd heard his screams and assumed he must have been injured by whatever had made the growling noises.

Cautiously, she approached the clearing. "Matt?" She called out, her voice a mere whisper. Two more steps and she was nearly around the fallen tree.

"Matt, are you okay?" she called out again.

Fully past the obstruction, her scream ripped through the silence of the mountain air as she came face to face with the carnage. What had been a tall, well built and handsome young man was now reduced to a mass of torn flesh, exposed organs and glistening white bones bared beneath raw muscle.

As the echo of her scream faded, she emptied her stomach of the remnants of the evening's meal as well as the small amount of beer she had drunk just before. Heaving until she could barely breathe, she forced her eyes away from the bloody remains, her brain unable to process the sheer horror of what was laying before her.

Her mind shut down, she was glued in position, seemingly unable to make herself turn away from the place of the slaughter. Somewhere in her head, she knew she needed to go for help or at the very least, run for safety, but she couldn't seem to compel the muscles in her legs to budge. The sudden scream of the wildcat in the woods behind her managed to do what her central nervous system could not and in immediate panic, she fled in the opposite direction.

Cold air on barely clothed skin, blood seeping from dozens of cuts, lungs heaving from exertion and fear, all ignored as she paused now only briefly to catch her breath. She strained to listen for sounds of the creature pursuing her and when she heard the sharp crack of a snapping branch, she did the only thing possible; she ran.

Behind her, she heard the beast crashing through the underbrush as it matched her every move. She stumbled over a raised root, falling forward and avulsing the skin on her right knee. She cried out sharply but struggled back to her feet just as the rancid smell of the creature filled the air around her.

She spun quickly around and found herself looking up into glowing yellow eyes set into a fur-covered, feline head. Standing nearly a foot taller than her, the creature looked like a mountain lion reared upright on its hind legs. She knew it wasn't possible, but there it was in front of her, long fangs bared, dried blood from the earlier slaughter covering its muzzle.

In a move that seemed like slow-motion, she twisted away and was nearly about to break into another panic-driven run when the bizarre cat lashed out with an arm-like appendage, its claws grazing her shoulder and opening four long wounds there.

To her credit, she cried out in pain, but managed to continue forward, her legs churning as she tried to escape the creature. She dodged back and forth around trees, jumping over fallen logs or larger rocks that blocked her path, ever conscious of the thing that stalked her. Another loud snarl to her right distracted her and she tripped over another concealed root, this time face-planting directly into the night-cooled earth.

She lay there unmoving, barely breathing, waiting for the painful death she felt was surely coming for her in the form of sharp claws and hungry teeth. When seconds finally turned into a minute and her heart continued to beat signaling the continuance of life, she slowly raised her head up and chanced a look at her surroundings.

She sucked in a sharp breath of excitement as her eyes caught the bright shimmer of lights coming from the camp not far in the distance. More than just a beacon in the darkness, the camp meant safety and escape from whatever the thing was that had butchered her young date.

Struggling once more to her feet, her abused body sluggishly responding to her brain's commands, she pushed forward. Fifty yards and she sighed in relief as the forest cleared and the trail became apparent once again. She could almost see the main hall in the distance, but the support staff's quarters were nearly within reach.

*"Funny,"* she thought to herself. *"Had I only swallowed my pride and gone back with Matt to his room, how different this night might have turned out."*

A haggard smile crossed her bruised and bloodied face as she limped painfully ahead toward the buildings. Almost within reach of the maintenance shed, she was about to call out for help when something slammed into her back, knocking her to the ground and squeezing the air from her lungs before words could be formed.

The ribbons of pain flaring across her spine were nothing compared to the absolute agony as claws impaled her calf and she felt herself being dragged backwards towards the forest once again. She managed a scream this time but it was drowned out by the louder cry of the creature.

Her fingers frantically dug into the soil, perfectly manicured nails and soft cuticles ripping apart as she fought to slow her movement. Still screaming, she heard the sounds of activity back at the compound and clutched at the briefest hope of rescue. Kicking out with her free leg, she felt her other limb suddenly drop and despite the weakness from exhaustion and blood loss, she forced herself to her feet one final time.

She managed two steps; a few of the staff awoken by her screams were now searching the camp perimeter and she was almost close enough to recognize their faces. Limping as fast as she could, one hand reaching out toward her would-be rescuers, she was about to shout out to the group when the low growl sounded in her ear and warm fetid breath bathed the back of her neck.

Her mouth opened in a silent scream as the strange beast's claws tore through the carotid artery on the right side of her neck, ripping out her throat and nearly decapitating her.

As the voices from the camp grew louder, flashlights piercing the darkness of the mountain woodland, her lifeless body fell silently to the ground, warm blood still pulsating from the torn artery as her heart completed its final beats.

The creature looked down at the body lying on the ground; red blood, nearly black in the darkness of the late night, covered the ground and most of the cat's torso and claws. It cried out once more, a victorious roar offered up to the heavens, then turned and sauntered back into the thick cover, disappearing like a golden mist within the trees.

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## **Interstate 41 – Outside Monteagle, Tennessee**

Dean rode in silent anger for the first two hundred miles so it wasn't surprising that he had now escalated to a seething rage while driving the past three hundred or so more. For the first time in his life, the Impala felt small, the interior choking him and the nearness of his younger brother creating a feeling of claustrophobia that was usually reserved only for flying. His hands held the steering wheel with a white-knuckled grip that threatened to cut off circulation to the ends of his fingers. In fact, he had held his arms so stiff, elbows locked for so long, that sometime during the past fifty miles spasms had turned to pain and now both extremities were nearly numb from remaining so rigid.

Still, he remained as unrelenting on his own body as he had chosen to be with Sam. To say that Dean Winchester was pissed was to say that the Grand Canyon was a hole in the ground: huge understatement. To be honest, he was more than just angry with Sam, he felt betrayed. How could Sam so casually bargain his life away and without even considering talking to him first?

His mind flipped back and forth between anger and guilt. This whole mess was ultimately his fault and Dean knew that the real anger was aimed internally. Maybe if he'd only been more careful and not fallen for Zack's trap? Maybe if they would have continued with the exorcism back at Bobby's? Maybe if he had tried to control the damn demon just a little harder and resisted tapping into the thing's power? Maybe... maybe... maybe...? The truth of the matter was that maybe if he would have just done his damn job and protected his brother the way he was supposed to he wouldn't be having this conversation with himself right now. In the only religion to which Dean Winchester subscribed, he had just broken the cardinal commandment, and burning in hell for his transgression was the least of his concerns.

Yet, as he stole a quick look at Sam out of the corner of his eye, a part of him wanted to pin his brother to the ground and beat him senseless while an equal part of him smiled just a little at how well his sibling had orchestrated the whole deception. It was a plot that Dean had to admire on some level even if he was still angry about Sam's choice of slipping a "ruffie" into his beer.

*"Note to self: From now on, switch beers with Sam when he's not looking,"* Dean thought to himself, a soft grin forming at the corners of his mouth for the first time in the past twenty-four hours.

The grin was short-lived as Dean glanced up catching sight of the "Welcome to Monteagle" sign on the side of the highway. Taking off on a hunt, even if it was their Dad that was doing the sending, was the last thing he wanted to do right now. There had to be some way to get Sam out of this deal and spending precious time solving somebody else's problems certainly wasn't going to help with theirs.

Angry and irritated once more, he turned the Impala sharply into the motel parking lot, making no effort to reduce his speed and getting a certain amount of satisfaction at watching his oversized brother scramble to hold on as his long legs and knees slammed into the dash.

At the last possible minute Dean slammed on the breaks propelling Sam forward towards the windshield and then sharply back against the dark leather seats. He killed the engine as a large cloud of dust settled on the black metal and turned to look

at his brother, doing nothing to hide the utter look of contempt on his face, almost daring his younger brother to complain about his driving.

For his part, Sam opened his mouth slightly but bit back the protest after seeing the flash of green glaring out from above the rim of Dean's sunglasses. For a brief instant, Sam thought he might have even seen the hazel turn black, but he knew it was simply a trick of his imagination coupled by the antagonism that was seeping out of every pore of his older brother.

He had tried to talk to Dean, had tried to explain why he'd done what he'd done, tried to make him understand that had he not bargained for Dean's freedom, in the end they might both have been lost. But his pleas for understanding had been met with a hardened exterior, three times more reinforced than any other wall he'd ever seen his brother erect in his entire life. He knew how stubborn Dean could be, he even knew how vengeful his brother could be too, had seen it often enough when Dean had his mind set on "righting" some injustice he perceived to have taken place. Getting Dean to listen to reason was not going to be easy let alone getting him to accept that for the first time in Sam's life, he was able to give back something to repay his older brother for all the sacrifices Dean had made for him.

Sam was worried. He knew Dean was smoldering, like a dry forest just waiting for the wind to sweep a spark up into a raging firestorm that would engulf everything, it was only a matter of time before his brother's rage found a focus. Sam could only pray that he was well out of the kill-zone when that happened.

"So, we staying here?" Sam asked as the Impala's driver's side door creaked.

Dean paused, one leg already out on the ground as he turned back around to face his brother. He did nothing to hide the annoyance in his face or the irritation in his tone as he answered.

"Ya know, for someone supposedly smart enough to go to Stanford, you sure can be a dumbass sometimes."

Sam considered replying, but he knew that the comment was directed toward more than the obviously rhetorical question he had just asked.

"I'll get our gear while you check us in, okay?" he offered.

"Yeah, whatever, do what you want," Dean shot back over his shoulder as he stormed off toward the motel office.

Dean returned several minutes later, room key in hand to find Sam standing patiently beside the car with both their duffels, his backpack and Dean's weapon bag equally distributed over both shoulders. He tried to look sufficiently apologetic, but if it was having any effect on Dean it wasn't showing. Instead, Dean grumbled "Number 5," motioning with his head toward the room just to the right of the car. He made no offer to assist Sam with any of the bags, content in allowing his brother whatever form of self-flagellation he chose. After all, it was so much easier to let his brother think he was truly angry with him when actually Dean was really fuming at himself.

He unlocked the motel room door, flinging it open with enough force that it smacked into the interior wall and swung back, nearly closing before Sam could enter. Dean flopped down on the nearest bed, crossing his arms over his face and pretending to ignore Sam's huffs of exertion as he struggled through the doorway. He continued to lay there as Sam dropped the gear bags to the floor at the foot of the second bed and then returned to close the door.

Sam wasted no time in unpacking the laptop and powering it on. Within a few minutes, he was on-line and surfing the local news trying to pick up on some clue to why their dad had sent them coordinates to this place. It didn't take long before he found several articles about the brutal killing of two local summer camp workers near Savage Bluffs. The report described the deaths as appearing to have resulted from some sort of wild animal attack but so far the regional game warden had yet to identify the likely culprit.

As peculiar as the deaths seemed, Sam didn't think that they warranted the attention of John Winchester. Surely, there must be something more insidious that

had spurred his dad into sending them here. Sam considered mentioning his preliminary findings to Dean, but a quick glance over at his brother revealed the same rigid posture, the same arm thrown across his face, the same tense vibe emanating that warned him off like the low growl of a pit bull.

Still, Sam was never one to let his older brother sit and stew about things, especially when Sam had a deep need to resolve the conflict between them. His mind raced as he considered starting another verbal war with Dean.

"So, how long are you going to continue the silent treatment with me?" he asked finally. "We got a job to do and we can't do it if you're gonna act this way!"

Dean sprung up from the bed so fast that Sam could not help but flinch.

"How am I acting Sam? Better yet, you got all the answers, tell me, how do you want me to act?" he shouted back. "Am I supposed to be like you? Act like nothing happened, act like you never made that damn deal and life is just gonna go on like always? 'Cause dammit Sam, you didn't drug me nearly enough to make me forget that!"

"Dean, please," Sam begged, reaching an arm out to grab his brother as he saw the car keys appear in Dean's hand. "Can't you understand that there was no other choice?"

"No other choice, Sam? Who said you get to make that decision? Who said you got to make that choice? What the hell makes my life more important than yours?" Dean yelled back, his voice betraying him, cracking with emotion.

"I had no right?" Sam shouted back, no longer content to be the silent target of his brother's wrath. "You've been making decisions for me for most of my life, deciding where we go, what we do. How many times have you sacrificed for me, risked your life for me? Who said YOU had the right to make those choices? Who ever said that my life was more important than yours?"

"Dad did." Softly spoken. *Dad did the night he put you in my arms and told me to take you outside. I've been in charge of protecting you ever since Sammy! Dean finished the reply to himself.*

The answer was a mere whisper and Sam wasn't even sure that he heard Dean say those two syllables, so when he replied with the standard "huh" it was all the escape that Dean needed.

Twisting past his brother, he had the door partially open before he turned back towards Sam. In the time it took for him to reach the exit the impenetrable wall was back in place, emotions back in check.

"You stopped me from getting acquainted with a six-pack yesterday," Dean began. "I'm going to catch up. You go do what you do best and figure out why Dad sent us here."

"When are you coming back?" Sam asked worriedly.

"When I'm good and numb," Dean replied as the door slammed shut behind him.

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Despite his anger and his threat, Dean returned just a few hours later and not in the least bit intoxicated. Even though he wanted to drink himself into oblivion, they were on a hunt; no way would he jeopardize that.

He had passed by several bars but instead followed the main road through town until he spotted a turnoff that ran down toward the local river. Shutting off the car, he climbed out and walked down to the bank. His mind swirled in much the same way as the fast moving current.

Picking up a rock, he tossed it into the water. In his head, he could hear his Dad telling him over and over to watch out for Sam, keep him safe, and protect him. How was he ever going to tell his Dad that he had failed? What punishment could his father possibly dole out that would be fitting for this botched duty? That Sam was

now going to die all because he hadn't been strong enough to battle the demon inside him.

Picking up another rock he threw it even harder, his shoulder protesting at the strain. He remembered Haris' taunts, telling him that he had killed Sam, had sacrificed his brother on the ceremonial altar. Maybe not true back at the compound, but in a strange sort of way, he had just as effectively signed Sam's death warrant just the same.

He stood there by the river's edge, picking up and casting stones until his shoulder screamed at him to stop and until the voices in his head were shouting over top each other and he couldn't hear any of them clearly. Physically exhausted and emotionally drained, he sunk down to the dirt and simply sat there staring off at the water. Lost, confused and true to his word, numb, except for the agonizing pain in his chest and the accusatory voice in his head.

Returning to the room, he found Sam in much the same place as he left him, huddled over the laptop, one hand making notes on a small tablet while the other floated across the built-in mousepad. Dean merely nodded as Sam looked up, still unable to force himself into making small talk with his brother. He swooped down, grabbing his duffle before dropping onto the bed and immediately set to sharpening his Bowie.

Sam frowned. Seeing Dean back so soon and with not a hint of alcohol on board was surprising to say the least. He briefly wondered if Dean couldn't find an open bar, but then admitted that Dean not finding a bar was about as likely as a cop not finding a donut shop. So then, where had his brother been for the past couple of hours if not socializing with Jim, Jack or Jose'? Lost in his thoughts he didn't realize he was staring until the mesmerizing whoosh of the blade against the whetstone was absent and he blinked feeling Dean's eyes glaring back at his own.

"What?" Dean asked annoyed.

"Huh?" Sam stammered back.

"You're staring at me. What? Have I got something on my face or something?"

"Um, no, sorry. I, uh, found something. Probably why Dad sent us here," Sam continued, his head going back down to the computer.

"Oh? What is it?" Dean questioned as he continued sharpening the long knife, seemingly disinterested.

"Yeah, well at first I didn't think it was much, just two college kids getting murdered at a local summer camp, slaughtered actually. Kinda like some wild animal tore them apart." Sam explained.

"So, you thinking wendigo or even werewolf?"

"Nah, the lunar cycle is wrong for a werewolf and a wendigo would have taken its kill back and stored it for later. These were left behind, all torn up but not fed on, just outside the property of Ridgecrest Youth Resort where they worked," the younger man informed.

"Youth resort?" Dean questioned.

"Yeah, that's what they call summer camp when your parents have more money than most third world countries," Sam answered. "Besides, this isn't the first time it's happened which is why Dad probably sent us here. There's a report of two deaths at another camp last year and then again at a different camp a year before that. Each time, the bodies were mauled like by a wild animal."

"So how do we know it wasn't a wild animal or a serial killer or something? I mean, come on, I saw all the Friday the 13th movies, Jason Voorhies with a machete, always catches the camp counselors when they're half naked getting it on! Am I right?" Dean asked, his eyebrows wagging suggestively, a playful smile creeping onto his face.

Sam wanted to be irritated at his brother's lack of seriousness, but considering that this was the first crack in the hardened exterior of antagonism that he had seen

in his older sibling for the past twenty four hours, he shrugged it off and simply smiled back.

“Well, here’s the weird part then. Near each of the bodies, there have been tracks, big cat tracks like a mountain lion or cougar. Normal enough for the area, but dude, the tracks were never four at a time, only ever two side by side. It’s like the cat walks upright. They’ve tried tracking the thing, but the tracks just disappear into thin air, no scat, no lair, like the thing just kills and vanishes,” Sam explained.

He watched as his brother absorbed the information, Dean’s hand returning to work the blade’s edge along the stone, while his mind was working the details of Sam’s findings. Neither brother spoke for a long moment; only the rhythmic cadence of the knife broke the silence.

Sam waited patiently, knowing full well that he needed Dean to buy into this hunt for more than just the hunt’s sake. He needed Dean to focus on something other than the futility of Sam’s predicament and he desperately needed Dean to not be angry with him any longer. It was hard enough being faced with the countdown to his own mortality, but it had been an easy decision to live with when he could wake up every day and see the clear, hazel eyes of his brother. But having those same hazel eyes glare at him in anger made everything much more difficult to bear. Still, he wouldn’t have changed his mind even if Dean never spoke to him again. Luckily, that wasn’t to be the case.

“So, what are you thinking? What do we do next?” Dean asked, finally looking up from his task and running a careful thumb down the edge of the blade.

Sam smiled, this was all working out nicely.

“We need to get up to that camp,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Okay, as what? F.B.I.? Forest Rangers? Game Wardens?” Dean ventured, but grew suspicious as he noticed the grin spreading widely across his brother’s face.

“Nope, I got us something even better than any of those.”

Dean cocked his head, warily waiting for Sam to divulge his plan. “Well?” he asked impatiently.

“I got us jobs as camp counselors,” Sam revealed, before protectively ducking behind the laptop just as the Bowie impaled itself well above his head into the motel room wall.

“Bitch!”

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### **Ridgecrest Youth Resort – Later the next day.**

Dean pulled the Impala up to the front of the building marked Cumberland Hall and below that “admin.” It was the largest of a dozen buildings on the property and according to Sam was where they were to report for their new jobs.

“Oh joy!” Dean grouched out loud, meaning to keep the comment to himself but unable to restrain yet another in a long litany of complaints since checking out of the motel.

Sam ignored yet another grumble, content that his brother was at least communicating on some level albeit not exactly the most civil. Stepping out of the car, Sam stretched, inhaling deeply, actually relishing the fresh mountain air. Dean, by comparison, was ready to launch into another tirade when two blonde twenty-somethings flounced by in tight fitting t-shirts with “Ridgecrest Staff” emblazoned across their chests. Both smiled demurely at Dean, before turning back to each other and exchanging a knowing giggle. His head nearly swiveled on his neck as he followed their path from the admin hall, leering at their firm derrières as they walked past.

"You know Sam, I could definitely get into some nature hikes with those two. Ooh, the things about my nature I could teach them," Dean lewdly suggested staring after the two young women.

Sam grabbed his brother by the arm and tugged him around, guiding him up the sidewalk and the entrance to the main hall.

"Focus on the job, Dean!" he admonished.

"Dude, you drag me up here to where the local flower is poison ivy, the local bird is the mosquito, there's no cable TV, no cell service, and god knows no nightlife. I gotta find something to do to pass my time," Dean protested.

As they entered the main doors, the elder hunter's argument was cut short as the brothers took in the interior of the spacious lodge. Instantly awestruck by cathedral ceilings, vaulted by rough-hewn timbers, a towering stone fireplace and décor that looked to belong in Aspen rather than the backwoods of Tennessee, Sam and Dean could only stare at the opulence of the place.

Dean was already fervently hoping that the rest of the place, including the food, would measure up to what they were seeing now. Sam, on the other hand, was impressed, but just praying that his brother wouldn't end up acting like Bo Duke cut loose in the Hamptons.

"Sam Winfield?" Sam spun around, startled by the woman's voice. Standing before him was a middle-aged woman, wearing a red cashmere sweater with the Ridgecrest logo embroidered tastefully on the upper edge. There was no mistaking it, everything about her screamed class, refinement, breeding and money. She eyed Sam's tattered jeans suspiciously, making no effort to hide her distaste of his poor clothing. She cast an equally disparaging glance at Dean's appearance as well, but the elder Winchester matched her stare, his body remaining rigid under her scrutiny.

"I'm Elizabeth Rhodes. My husband, Roderick, and I own Ridgecrest. We're so happy that you and your brother could join our staff with such short notice," she greeted congenially. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you to meet Roderick."

She moved off toward a short hallway, leading the brothers to an office that was nearly as large as the foyer they had just been standing in. The office was just as lavish as everything else they'd seen so far with numerous stuffed wild game heads surrounding the room. A tall, dark-haired man rose from behind a gigantic oak desk, his hand offered out in greeting.

"Roderick Rhodes. Thank you both for coming up so quickly."

"Well, good to meet ya Rod. My name's Dean and this is my brother Sam," Dean introduced, enthusiastically pumping the older man's hand.

Rhodes sneered in displeasure. "The staff here at the resort refers to me as Director Rhodes. I would appreciate you doing the same. We expect a certain level of decorum here at Ridgecrest and I expect you both to adhere to those rules."

Sam stepped in front of Dean, intervening and diffusing the situation before his brother's dislike for all things snobbish or cultured turned into a pissing contest between him and their new employer.

"Thank-you, Mr. Rhodes. We're just glad that we could find positions so close to the season beginning," Sam stated back, offering his hand out to the older man.

"Actually, it is we who are grateful. Considering the last minute vacancies, I was skeptical that we would be able to fill those positions on such short notice. I truly appreciate that you and your brother were so readily available, however, please do not mistake our need for desperation. I do still expect that our rules will be adhered to. We operate a facility that caters only to the most privileged children. Crass behavior in our staff simply will not be tolerated. Is that understood gentlemen?" he asked, looking intently at Dean during the last statement.

"Yes sir!" Sam replied, while Dean nodded submissively.

"Mr. Rhodes, what happened to the staff members that we're replacing?" Sam asked innocently.

The older man glanced up nervously, a flash of fear briefly appearing on his face. He quickly regained his composure and cleared his voice before speaking.

"They were caught in a somewhat compromising position, if you understand my meaning. We had to let them go," Rhodes explained, even as the first trickle of sweat beaded at the edge of his brow betraying the lie.

"Oh really?" Dean pounced, sensing the man's discomfort on the subject. "We heard in town that they were mauled by some wild animal or something, not far from the camp."

Rhodes fumbled nervously with a letter opener on his desk, twirling the item around, the sweat now collecting at the side of his face although the office was air-conditioned.

"Okay, it is true that the two staff members were attacked and killed by some wild animal, but I will not tolerate public discussion or conjecture about the matter. The publicity so far has already resulted in several cancellations. Besides, I've hired two of the area's best hunters to track and destroy whatever killed the two staff members, so everyone will be quite safe I assure you," Rhodes asserted.

Dean looked over to Sam and mouthed "hunters" before smiling. Rhodes meanwhile pressed the intercom on his phone and called out to someone named Angela. Within seconds a petite redhead appeared in the office door, clad in typical Ridgecrest apparel.

"Angela, would you please show Sam to his room in the lodge and Dean to his quarters with the rest of the support staff," Rhodes instructed. "Gentlemen, you can get settled in and acquainted with the facilities. The first group of attendees will arrive tomorrow morning. Dean, Angela will give you a list of your duties and Sam, you can coordinate with Marcus Hathaway, our head counselor, to see what groups you'll be leading this week."

Rhodes did not leave open any chance for reply or comment as he immediately picked up the phone and began another conversation. Dismissed, the brothers obediently followed Angela out of the office. As the secretary began droning on about Dean's very obvious maintenance related duties which included but were not limited to emptying the camps dozens of trash cans, Dean very quickly realized how short the end of the stick was that he had just gotten stuck with.

Leaning in towards Sam, he whispered in the harshest voice he could muster and still be discrete, "I'm outta here Sam. No way I'm playing servant, picking up shit after a bunch of spoiled rich kids all day. Let 'em all get eaten for all I care. Besides, how'd you get the nice cushy job?"

Sam smiled deviously. "'Cause I told them that I attended Stanford, whereas you on the other hand, I told them got your GED from a correspondence school," he stated, breaking into laughter as he saw the look of utter fury return on his brother's face.

Reaching out, Dean punched Sam as hard as he could in the arm so quickly that Sam couldn't stifle the yelp of pain. Angela stopped her dissertation of responsibilities and turned to check on the disturbance. She was understandably perplexed when she saw one brother grimacing and holding his upper arm in pain while the other brother muttered a staccato "bitch" under his breath.

\* \* \* \*

Dean entered the dining hall several hours later. He was more than ready for something to eat having spent the better part of the afternoon emptying trashcans and picking up litter. Not that he minded the manual labor, but he felt quite certain that several of the "Counselor" staff were purposely dropping things on the ground just to see him have to come along behind them and pick it up.

He quickly scanned the large room and found Sam seated next to a couple of young ladies. By the laughter and the batting eyelashes of one of the young women, Dean was fairly certain that his baby brother wasn't asking her anything about the recent deaths. He smoothly slid into the nearest empty chair and flashed his best come-hither smile.

"Hello ladies," he greeted enthusiastically. "I'm Dean."

Both women looked over at him smiling, but simultaneously frowned, their noses wrinkling upward, hands rushing to their faces. Without a word, both quickly got up and scurried away from the table.

Dean sat there looking dumbfounded as the two young women hurried off. It wasn't until he turned back towards Sam that he noticed that his brother also mimicked the same look of distaste.

"What?" Dean whined.

"Couldn't you have showered or something before dinner?" Sam asked, one hand covering his mouth and nose.

Dean bent his head down towards his chest and sniffed.

"Hmm, yeah, well Angela wanted me to get rid of this dead raccoon over by one of the lodges," he answered. "Must be from that."

"Did you roll in it or something? 'Cause dude, you reek!"

"Yeah well, sorry Mr. My Ass Gets the Cushy Job While My Brother Works His Ass Off In the Sun. Next gig, you get to do the stinky crap, the down in the hole with the rotting corpse kinda crap," Dean retorted.

Sam smiled. "Oh dude, you oughta see my room. Bigger than any motel room we've ever stayed in, I swear. Satellite TV, internet access in the main lodge, which is good. But the bed dude, oh god, the bed. So freaking soft."

Dean glared back at his brother. By comparison, his room was only slightly larger than the average closet. Tucked in behind the facility's garages, certainly well away from the "paying customers" eyes, the support staff were given just enough space to sleep, shower and store their clothes. Not much more.

Tired of listening to Sam go on about his wonderful accommodations, and focused on the remnants of food scattered about the tray in front of his brother, Dean rose and sauntered off to the food line, his stomach growling in anticipation. Support staff or not, Ridgecrest certainly put out a nice spread.

He worked his way down the line, first grabbing an assortment of fruit and pastries until he reached the hot entrées. Focused on the steaming potatoes and thick slab of roast beef, he nearly missed the doe-eyed brunette standing behind the counter.

She smiled at him shyly before asking him if he'd like some of the beef, but he was so caught up in her rich brown eyes, the question didn't register in Dean's ears. When she repeated it a second time, a broad knowing smile on her face, Dean finally stammered out a "yes".

Just as she was about to spear the last thick piece and place it on Dean's plate, a tall figure clad in a Ridgecrest polo pushed in front of the hunter and slid his plate ahead of Dean's demanding the last slab of meat. Nearly as tall as Sam, the young man glared at Dean, defying him to make a comment or better still, dare to make a move.

As Dean watched, three other young men joined the first, backing him up just beyond his shoulder. Still, outweighed and outnumbered really meant nothing to him as he placed his tray down on the counter, his body tensing, fists clenching open and closed.

"It's a shame that some people just don't know their place in the scheme of things," the young man stated to his friends who all laughed in agreement.

Dean coiled. He was ready to punch the cocky S.O. B. so hard that he'd have to suck the roast beef through a straw when Dean got done hitting him. But a split second before he struck, the brunette behind the serving line placed the portion on the young man's plate.

“Go on Nathan,” she commanded. “Take your food and your goons and leave him alone.”

Defused, the four young men moved on, but Dean maintained his glare with the one named Nathan until the latter finally turned away. Dean then looked back at the brunette who simply shrugged and smiled apologetically. He wanted to be angry, but he realized that she was just hired help like him, not one of the “beautiful people” like the rest of the counselors or the guests that would be arriving in the morning. She finished serving him and he returned dejectedly back to the table where Sam still sat.

He ate mostly in silence while his brother laid out a plan for investigating the recent deaths. Sam suggested that Dean scout the facility grounds tonight while he interviewed as many of the other staff about the deceased. They agreed to meet back at Dean’s quarters after dark and would pool their findings then. Dean watched, a glimmer of jealousy tingling in his head as Sam trotted off with a group of other staff. He dug ferociously into the remainder of his meatless meal, shoveling the food in angrily as he thought about just how unfair life was treating him lately.

After a healthy dose of self pity, he realized that he was the lone person in the dining hall, the silence of the cavernous place now catching his attention. Finishing off the last of the cookies, he rose and took his tray to the wash line and headed for the exit.

His mind was caught once again in a miasma of thoughts. Sam’s birthday was a short time away, there just had to be some way to get his brother out of the deal he’d made with Haris. Maybe he should call his Dad. Any extra help in solving this problem couldn’t hurt? Right? But he had gotten Sam into this mess, wasn’t it his responsibility to get him out? So many questions, he couldn’t think straight anymore. And what the hell was he looking for here at Ridgecrest anyway? Tracks? A mountain lion? A creature? Who the hell knew?

Lost in the jumble, he ran head first into the brunette as he left the dining hall, knocking her down onto the sidewalk. She let out a muffled yelp of pain that instantly snapped Dean out of his introspection. Quickly, he knelt down and offered her his hand back up.

Standing, she was just a little shorter than him, but minus the hair net and protective apron, he might not have recognized her. Standing before him now, her hair fell in waves just past her shoulders and her petite form curved just nicely from waist to hips.

She smiled at him again shyly as he mumbled out another quick apology. She took a quick step back from him and he remembered that he was still pretty ripe from the afternoon’s activity, so he apologized once more for the smell. She smiled yet again and thrust out a brown paper bag. He took the bag from her hand and as he opened it to look inside, she darted off like a scared wild animal, never once uttering a word.

Inside, Dean found two sandwiches and a piece of apple pie. Never one to turn down food, he glanced back up in the direction that the girl had charged off and shouted “Thanks!”, hoping that she might hear.

Continuing on, he began to walk the perimeter of the facility grounds. Immaculately kept, there didn’t seem to be a stick or stone out of place. As the evening gave way to night, the sun setting slowly behind the western edge of the bluffs, Dean finished his circuit of the camp coming finally to the maintenance shed near to the support staff quarters.

He entered the shed and fumbled for a second until he found the switch by the door and turned on the interior lights. The inside was lined with various tools and implements and as Dean walked along the walls a blood-stained shovel caught his attention.

Pulling the tool from the hook holding it, he held it up to the light examining the brownish-red blot that covered the lower third of the blade. Suddenly, Dean was

thinking that maybe the creature really did walk on two legs as he found a bloody fingerprint on the wood handle of the shovel.

Eager to go and show Sam his findings, Dean startled when an unearthly screech from outside the shed sounded. Weaponless except for the shovel in his hand and the small knife in his boot, Dean moved warily from the building. Stepping out into the darkness, the night was moonless with only the limited light from the single bulb inside the shed illuminating a small patch outside.

Another growl sounded just beyond him in the forest as Dean moved cautiously forward. He considered going for Sam, thought about getting a flashlight or a more useful weapon, but as he breached the edge of the tree line, a dry twig snapped behind him and he spun around. Instantly, the night lit up in a multitude of brilliant lights, searing his eyes and blinding him as pain filled his head and he collapsed in a heap onto the cool earth.

Dean hit the ground hard, his shoulder striking the shovel as it became trapped between his body and the damp earth. Dazed, he heard another growl and his body was rocked as something solid came in contact with the left side of his chest. It took every ounce of concentration he could muster just to force another breath of air into his lungs. He struggled to rise back to his knees, but just as he got up to one arm and lifted his head, he spotted the front end of a hiking boot coming straight at his face.

Throwing up a protective arm deflected the attacker but left him vulnerable to yet another and he felt himself lifted off the ground as a separate booted foot contacted his abdomen. Despite the pain, part of Dean was mildly relieved. Boots were good; boots meant human and human was better than what he thought had been connected to the growl he had heard. Well, at least that's what he was telling himself at the moment.

Lying on the dirt, Dean felt several more blows land on his body but he cut off that part of him that acknowledged the pain. There were three of them judging by the voices and the different angles that the kicks were raining in on him. He marked their positions around him and even timed the volley of their kicks. The bad thing about attacking someone in a group is that each person basically had to take a turn. A rhythm developed and rhythms were predictable.

Dean waited patiently, catching a glimpse of food line "Nathan" in between one round of kicks. He could hear the rich bastard going on about "him learning his place" and how they were going to "teach him a lesson". Springing up, vertigo threatened to flatten him again, but he fought it down and grabbed the next booted foot that was on its way in.

"School's in session boys," Dean announced, pulling back on the boot and the leg it was attached to, dragging down one of the attackers. He immediately spun around and landed a fist directly into the nose of the second and was facing Nathan so fast the young man's shocked look said it all.

Dean smirked, relishing the fear in the kid's eyes. He'd seen this dozens of times before. Every time they moved and started a new school, he'd gone through the same thing being the outsider. Never having the right clothes or the latest "in" thing, he had almost always been the outcast. As such, it wasn't usually too long before someone came looking to teach the "new kid" a lesson. Dean learned early on just how to handle himself in those situations. It was training that had served him well over the years.

As he was about to throw a punch directly at the young man's face, Dean was spun around by the meaty arm of one of Nathan's buddies. He took a hit to his jaw that made his ears ring but answered with one of his own that staggered the crony back on his heels. Knowing that the next attack was sure to come from the second of Nathan's friends, Dean twisted and ducked underneath the fist that flew in over his head from the left. He propelled to his feet using the muscles in his legs to add force to the uppercut that he delivered with his right hand. Dean followed that with a left hook that put the Ridgecrest staffer flat on his backside, dazed and bloodied. Circling

back to the first assailant, Dean landed two more punches in rapid succession and capped off his own offensive by a well placed knee to the chin of the muscular counselor. He smiled with satisfaction seeing the blood flowing freely from the man's nose and mouth.

Before he could turn and advance on Nathan, Dean felt a solid impact across his lower back and he fell forward to his knees. His breath stolen once more, his mind became occupied with the pain that emanated from his spine but not so much that he didn't comprehend the imminent danger associated with seeing the cocky rich kid standing over him brandishing the forgotten shovel.

"Devon, Sean, let's go!" Nathan ordered, his eyes fixed on Dean, the shovel poised to strike.

The other two young men slowly climbed up from the ground, both definitely worse for the wear. They looked down at Dean as they walked past but neither made a move to attack the hunter any further. Once they made it past Nathan, the young man took a single step toward Dean and raised the shovel above his head.

"You just remember your place around here," he threatened. The weapon shaking as he held it high.

Dean met his eyes but glared back defiantly. He knew Nathan wasn't going to hit him with the shovel, not face to face. The guy didn't have the guts to do it. People like Nathan had others do their dirty work for them. So when the blow did not immediately fall, Dean sprung to his feet and in a fluid movement had his hands on the handle of the shovel. Nathan surrendered the tool easily and was hurriedly backpedaling to catch up with his buddies as Dean twirled the shovel around in his hand.

For a moment, Dean considered pursuing the spoiled snob, but in truth, the attack was now starting to take its toll as bruises began to make themselves known and his brain began to acknowledge the pain that he had earlier denied attention. Going back to the maintenance shed, he turned off the light and carefully shut and latched the door.

Slowly and painfully, he made his way the short distance back to his quarters, catching sight of Sam standing outside as he approached. His brother was engaged yet again in a conversation with the two girls from dinner but as Dean approached, their discussion abruptly halted as the trio caught sight of his bloodied and discolored face.

The girls looked panicked and Sam immediately rushed over, his long strides quickly closing the short distance between Dean and the group. He reached out to support Dean, but the older sibling waved off the offer of assistance with an irritated grumble.

"What happened?" Sam asked worriedly.

"Oh, just my personal initiation into the Ridgecrest Chess team. No big deal," Dean answered hotly.

"Nathan Taylor, I'll bet," one of the girls suggested. "He's always trying to be the big man on campus or in this case, big man in camp. Every year, he's always pushing the townies around. Lots of money, but what a jerk."

Dean did his best to smile back at her, to reassure her that he was okay and that Nathan's type was nothing new to him. "It's all right. I don't push easy."

Sam noticed the bloody shovel that Dean was still toting and asked his brother about the item. As Dean was about to explain his find and the rest of the evening's events, he noticed that the two young ladies were still intently listening.

Grabbing Sam by the arm and beginning to draw him off towards his room, Dean turned toward the beautiful young staff members and smiled.

"Ladies, I have to talk to my brother about the archery class he's teaching, but uh, if you'd like to get together with me later and help me prepare for a class on basic first aid, we can practice some "hands on" assessment skills," he offered, his eyebrows raised suggestively, his smile every bit as seductive as he intended it to be.

The girls smiled coyly at the offer and the taller of the two glanced over at Sam and asked if he would be helping “teach” the first aid class too, obviously more interested in the younger Winchester than the beaten, bloodied and still less than aromatic Dean.

Sam chuckled, amused at seeing Dean so effectively shot down, so rare an occurrence that he had come to believe it nearly impossible. But then, these weren’t exactly Dean’s normal fare. When you’re used to cheeseburgers, it can be hard to know how to cook filet mignon. Dean shrugged it off. What was another load of crap in a perfectly crap filled day?

Dean led Sam to the door to his room, flipping on the switch to the one and only light within the tiny space. Barely large enough to contain a twin bed, dresser, night stand, small table and a chair, including Sam’s large frame was more than enough to make it feel confining.

“Damn dude,” Sam began, taking in the spartan accommodations with a single glance. “This place is so small you could turn around in here and run into yourself. Rhodes sure doesn’t waste any money behind the scenes.”

“Yeah, well maybe if I’m a real good boy, someday I can make it up to the big house like you,” Dean grumbled back, disappearing into the equally small bathroom. He returned a moment later with a wet washcloth and began to wipe off the drying blood from his head and face. Sam pushed him down into the chair and reached for the cloth to take over but Dean angrily swatted his hand away. Trying to ignore his brother’s continued bad temper, Sam took the half step back to the room’s door and picked up the blood-covered shovel Dean had found.

“So what’s the story with this? I’m assuming that this isn’t your blood?” Sam asked using a nail to scrape at the brownish stain.

“Nah, your counselor buddies apparently prefer using boots to shovels. Hell, I’m not sure Nathan would know what to do with that thing if his life depended on it,” Dean replied back sarcastically.

“They’re not my buddies, Dean.”

“Yeah, well whatever. I walked this entire place and there’s no sign of any big animal tracks anywhere. Matter of fact, there’s no sign of anything supernatural going on here. But I came across that shovel in the maintenance shed. That’s a lot of blood on there Sam. Too much for just some sort of accident. So, I’m thinking that maybe our killer really does walk on two feet,” Dean announced.

Sam sighed. “I dunno Dean. Don’t you think if it was a person the police would have been all over that by now? Besides, I’ve been talking with some of the staff and they’re definitely spooked about the whole deal. The night that the two were killed, some of the workers woke to hear the girl screaming at the edge of the woods. They also heard something else, like a growl or screech of a big cat.”

“Yeah, so it’s a mountain lion like everybody says. Big deal! Rhodes has his hunters on it, it’s not our gig! Let’s get the hell out of here,” Dean demanded, wincing as the washcloth touched the open wound on the back of his head and fresh blood began to trickle down his neck.

Sam grimaced and moved over behind his older brother, this time ignoring Dean’s stubborn refusal for help and snatching the cloth out of his brother’s hand to dab away the blood and get a better look at the injury.

“I’m telling you Dean, I don’t think it’s something as simple as that going on here. The deaths at this camp, the ones at the other camp last year and the year before. There’s a pattern to all this, I just haven’t figured it out yet,” he stated, then added “And this needs stitches dude!”

Without waiting for his brother’s approval, Sam dug through Dean’s gear bag, still laying unpacked on the edge of the bed. Taking out the necessary first aid supplies, he quickly went to work patching up his brother before Dean could protest. As he began to pull together the edges of the deep laceration, he could feel Dean tense underneath his hands.

“Sam look, I know you want there to be a hunt. But dude, we’re wasting time here. At best, this is a serial killer and at worse, it’s a friggin’ wild animal. Either way, we need to be outta here and working on getting your ass free and clear of Haris again.”

“Dean, if you’d focus for just a minute, then you’d see that there really was a job here. Even if you didn’t trust me, you ought to trust Dad. He wouldn’t have sent us here for no reason.”

“He wouldn’t?” Dean questioned. “ ‘Cause not like he hasn’t done that before.”

“I’m just saying that we haven’t even been here twenty-four hours. Why are you in such a hurry to ditch and run? It’s just not like you!” Sam commented as he pulled another length of suture through his brother’s scalp.

“Because I have more important things to do, Sam!”

“More important than saving people, hunting things?” Sam taunted, throwing his brother’s words from long ago back at him. There was tangible silence in the tiny room before Dean spoke.

“I only care about saving one person and hunting one thing! I don’t give a damn about anything else Sam,” Dean replied solemnly, his reference to Sam’s deal with Haris blatantly clear.

As Sam tied off the last of the stitches, pulling the knot tightly, Dean flinched and barely stifled a grunt of pain.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to hurt you,” Sam mumbled, instantly regretting the comment, knowing that his brother was sure to misunderstand his intent.

“Yeah, well, too late for that isn’t it?”

“Dean, are we gonna start that all over again?” Sam asked exasperated.

“No, we’re not,” Dean replied, rising to his feet and walking to the door. Opening it up, he leaned against the edge for support, not willing to expose any weakness to his brother that might cause Sam to hover one second longer in the small quarters. Sam sighed, taking the hint and heading for the room’s exit.

Dean could feel the mix of anger, desperation, and fear rising back up in his chest. Accompanied by the evening’s physical abuse and fatigue, he knew he was in no shape to debate Sam. So instead, he fired off the one weapon he knew would send his baby brother packing.

“Leave me alone Sam. Go back to your cushy lodge with your rich educated friends. I’ve got two doors to fix first thing, a dozen trash cans, oh and how could I forget, Cabin 4 needs another coat of stain. I’m going to bed.”

Sam started to reply, but before the first syllable came out of his mouth, Dean closed the door. He leaned against the interior wall for a minute, listening as his brother called out to him. As he heard Sam’s retreat, he slowly slid to the floor, his legs unable to hold him up any longer, the room spinning wildly.

He sat there for a long time, angry at Sam for forcing him to concentrate on this hunt, angry at himself for getting the shit beat out of him by a bunch of snot-nosed rich kids, and mostly, angry because the bed was only two feet away, which at the moment, was twenty-three inches too far.

\* \* \* \*

Sam was already eating when Dean made it to the cafeteria the next morning. Surrounded by a group of other “counselor” staff, it was abundantly clear that there was no place for Dean.

As he moved up to the food line, he spotted the same petite brunette from the day before. She looked up at him, doing a quick double-take as she spotted the fresh cuts and bruises marring his face. Dean saw her distress and did his best to smile back at her hoping it would reassure her.

“Hi. My name’s Dean. I wanted to thank you for the little snack last night. That was really nice.”

She smiled back at him, but instead of returning his greeting, she merely heaped a mound of bacon on his plate followed by an equally high pile of scrambled eggs. Dean grinned widely. If he couldn't get her to talk, then this was an acceptable method of communicating as far as he was concerned.

He was just about to thank her for the extra portion when something rammed into his back, pushing him forward and nearly causing him to spill the entire tray. Dean recovered his balance just as Nathan Taylor and three of his cronies strode up to the serving line.

Dean carefully set his tray down on the counter as the other four young men offered up their plates to the girl for food. The brunette's eyes narrowed suspiciously as she looked over Nathan and his boys and then back at Dean. She could see that Dean had apparently given as good as he had received by the look of the broken nose and the blackened eyes on two of the bigger guys, that knowledge giving her reason to smile again just slightly.

Nathan turned toward Dean, eyes glaring as he attempted to intimidate the young hunter. Dean never flinched, merely met the stare and returned it back with an equally cold gaze.

"Do you need another lesson like last night?" Taylor questioned.

"You better bring more friends," Dean answered, his fist already clenched and ready to strike.

Nathan was about to tap one of his friends into action when Roderick Rhodes strode into the large cafeteria and up to a podium.

The assembled staff all hushed respectfully as he began to speak, even Nathan and his troops turned their attention away from Dean and toward the camp Director. Nearly everyone in the place was watching and listening to Rhodes except for Dean. His attention was on the brunette who had chosen the distraction to stealthily spit into Nathan Taylor's scoop of eggs before she placed them on his plate.

She saw Dean watching her, fear instantly flashing in her eyes. But Dean's quiet laugh, his green eyes brightly winking back at her, quickly put her at ease. He smiled one last time, nodding at her conspiratorially then moved away to find a seat.

As Dean wolfed down the food, Rhodes droned on about the first group of guests arriving later today. Stressing the importance of preparation and decorum, he reinforced his earlier comments to the brothers about not tolerating any discussions on the "unfortunate events" of the week earlier. Rhodes finished by encouraging all the staff to "just be sure the guests have fun" and stepped away from the podium to the cheers and claps of those assembled. Dean merely shoveled in another bite and tried not to let all the pomp and circumstance make him ill.

As Rhodes moved away from the podium and amongst the rows of tables, he chatted with several of the Ridgecrest counselors. Nearing Dean, he frowned with displeasure seeing the obvious bruises and raw cuts across the young man's face.

"I believe I told you that uncivilized behavior will not be tolerated here at Ridgecrest. I hope that I do not need to repeat myself again," Rhodes stated.

Dean was about to snap back an angry answer, his patience with Rhodes, Nathan Taylor, and the entire place, worn seriously thin, when Sam dropped into an empty seat next to him. Dean returned to his breakfast as the older man moved off toward the exit nearly running headfirst into two men dressed in camouflage as they entered the cafeteria.

Sam and Dean watched as Rhodes exchanged several heated words with the two hunters before ushering them quickly from the prying eyes and ears of the nosy staff. They continued to watch as the men walked out of the dining hall, curious about the conversation, but sensing that the news had not been good for Rhodes.

"So what do you think that was all about?" Dean asked between bites.

"Hard to say, but I'm guessing Rhodes' hunters have come back empty-handed," Sam replied. "Not surprising really," he added after a second.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I talked to this girl, Deidre. She said she couldn't sleep and was walking out in the woods the night the other two were killed. She actually even ran into them while they were making out. She turned to go back to camp and then heard all the screaming. She took off running, but said she was pretty sure she saw a six foot tall mountain lion or something behind her," Sam informed.

"Dude, do you think these rich city kids would know a mountain lion from a fuzzy slipper?" Dean asked skeptically.

"She said she could take us out to where she saw it, to where the couple was killed. It's worth a look Dean," Sam insisted.

Dean sighed, he still wasn't giving in on his desire to be gone from the place and off onto finding a way to save his brother, but the one thing he'd never found a way to do in the past twenty-seven years of his life was to tell his baby brother "no." Shoving in the last bit of eggs and several pieces of bacon simultaneously, he nodded in agreement, mumbling out a muffled "fine."

Sam smiled eagerly, silently relieved that he wasn't going to have to fight his brother to investigate this further.

"Great! Let's meet over by Cumberland Hall in two hours. I have to finish putting together some stuff on deciduous trees for a class tomorrow."

Dean stopped chewing, staring at his brother in disbelief. "Dude, you're like in geek heaven aren't you? You're taking this camp counselor crap way too serious if you ask me. Fine, two hours. I have a class on waste-removal 101 that I still need to finish too."

\* \* \* \*

### **Later that morning**

Sam walked beside Deidre, his eyes intently focused on the trail while Dean followed a short distance behind, his eyes intently focused on Deidre. It was a relatively quick hike to the kill spot, the noise from the camp still detectable from beyond the rise of the hill.

When they reached the place, Deidre gasped, quickly turning and burying her face into Sam's chest at the sight of the grisly remains. Although the body had been removed, the clearing was painted in a brownish bath. Ground cover, trees, leaves, nearly everything in the small radius had been splashed with blood during the slaughter of the young maintenance worker. While Sam tried to comfort the shaken young woman, Dean scouted the area, picking up a small bit of bloodstained clothing. Turning it over, he instantly tossed it back down with a disgusted grunt when his fingers sunk into an attached piece of rotting flesh.

Sam ushered Deidre off to the edge of the clearing and rejoined Dean in canvassing the scene. Kneeling down and brushing aside some fallen pine needles, he picked through the debris until his fingers closed on a small tuft of golden fur. Rising back up, he called Dean over to his side.

"What've you got?" his brother asked in a hushed tone.

Sam held out the piece of fur in his open palm. Dean nodded then motioned Sam over to another spot in the clearing. Bending down, Sam's eyes followed to where Dean pointed out several marks in the soft dirt. The tracks were definitely "cat-like" but there the similarity ended. Twice the size of any wild cougar, the markings were nearly larger than Sam's opened hand. As the reports had said, there were only two prints, side by side, just like a human walking upright.

"I'm suddenly getting flashbacks to New Jersey," Dean announced, shaking his head. "Okay, so those tracks certainly don't belong to a normal mountain lion and whatever killed that kid must have ripped him to shreds from the looks of all the blood."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "I don't know what in the world we're dealing with, but it's definitely not human either."

"It might be helpful to see the bodies," Dean suggested.

"I thought of that, but they've already been sent back to their families," the younger hunter replied, his shoulders shrugging. Sam was about to continue speaking when a sudden noise beyond the clearing startled both brothers.

Dean immediately reached for the concealed .45 that he had tucked inside the "Ridgecrest" issued coveralls, but his hand relaxed as Rhodes' two hunters appeared. Rifles in hand, the men entered the clearing, obviously surprised to see the threesome there.

"What're you kids doin' out here?" the bearded one demanded, releasing the tension on the weapon's trigger.

"We were just curious," Sam lied. "It was kinda a dare."

"Well, you better get your asses back to Ridgecrest and stay there," the second hunter ordered, brandishing several rusted steel traps. "We're baiting dozens of these traps all over the area. Gonna get that cat and don't need no more of you city kids turning up dead."

"Tell me," Dean asked stubbornly, "have you ever seen anything like these tracks before?"

The burly hunter glanced off-handedly to where the older Winchester was pointing. He tried to hide his surprise and concern, but it was crystal clear to both Sam and Dean that neither of these "hunters" had ever come across prey such as this.

"Don't you kids worry. There's nothing that Daryl and I can't track and kill," the man responded.

Dean tried to contain his smile, part of him wanting to tell Bubba and his in-bred brother that they were horribly unprepared for hunting this particular creature until he sadly realized that he and Sam really didn't know what they were up against either. Since there was nothing more to be learned from the scene, Dean nodded toward his brother and they collected the still shaking Deidre and headed back to the compound.

As they broke through the edge of the forest, numerous cars were pulling into the camp entrance, many parking and unloading the first wave of Ridgecrest guests. Dozens of the preteen privileged were emerging from BMWs, Mercedes, and even the occasional Hummer. Walking past the front entrance of the admin building, the threesome couldn't avoid Rhodes' supervising gaze.

"You two are late. You were supposed to be available to greet the guests as they arrived," he reprimanded Sam and Deidre.

"Sorry," Sam offered, nodding to Dean as he and Deidre scurried off to join their fellow counselor staff.

Rhodes then turned to Dean, and making no attempt to hide the scowl on his face he continued, "There's a clogged drain in the kitchen. Please remember what it is that we pay you to do here at Ridgecrest."

"Sure thing Rod," Dean affirmed, turning away before the red-faced owner could respond.

\* \* \* \*

### **Camp Kitchen – Shortly After**

Dean made his way to the rear entrance of the cafeteria, the bustle of activity in response to the newly arriving campers. With his standard issue toolbox in hand, he asked the first worker he came across which drain needed attention and was directed to one of the larger prep sinks. Since plumbing and auto mechanics had very little in common, Dean wasn't exactly sure where to begin. Large wrench in hand, ducking

his head underneath the metal counter, he began to tinker with the main pipe descending from the strainer.

Distracted by his efforts, he jerked backward striking his head on the edge of the counter when a soft hand touched his shoulder. Rolling over to his knees, one hand rubbing at the tender spot on the back of his scalp, through watering eyes he saw the serving-line brunette looking down at him apologetically.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," she offered, her voice soft but with just enough southern drawl to make her charming. "My name's Melissa."

For the second time today, Dean introduced himself to the attractive young woman. Pushing himself up from the kitchen floor, the room began to spin madly as he fought to maintain his balance, his head reeling from yet another blow in the past twenty-four hours. Dean could feel the trickle of wetness begin to trail down his neck and when his fingers came away bloody, he knew Sam's handiwork had busted open.

Melissa noticed the fresh crimson line as well and without a moment's hesitation, she quickly pushed Dean down into a nearby chair. Grabbing a towel, she located the source of the bleeding and pressed the cloth firmly against the wound apologizing when Dean winced in pain. He considered brushing her away, not wanting her to fuss over him, but then reconsidered, deciding that it had been far too long since the last beautiful young woman had graced him with any concern.

"What happened to you? Who did this? Was it Nathan?" Melissa fired off the questions in quick succession, her face registering a concern that Dean found endearing.

"How did you know?" he asked back, suspicious that everyone in the camp seemed to know about Taylor and his antics, yet no one had challenged the spoiled bully.

"I know his type. I've worked at summer camps almost all my life. When other kids were going to camp enjoying horseback riding and canoeing, I was cleaning cabins and cooking meals. I knew my family didn't have the money to send me to camp so I thought it was a fair trade at the time," she explained sullenly. "Now that I'm older, I know that there are two kinds of folks that work at places like Ridgecrest. There are the rich college kids who screw around all summer, working here so they can get in their service hours, and there are the 'townies' like me, who do all the work, catch all the crap and get treated like servants or outcasts."

A quick smile crossed Dean's face as he silently acknowledged Melissa's assessment. Like the hard-working young woman, there had been a lot of "Ridgecrests" in his life too. Still, being an outcast, being a hunter, he hadn't ever really minded it. He'd become accustomed to being different, conforming to only his standard of normal, living behind society's scenes.

"You seem to have a pretty good feel for things around here. Did you know about the two staffers that got killed here a week or so back?" he chanced the question.

"Yeah, a little. The girl was some attorney's daughter out of Memphis. But Matt, the guy you replaced, he was from right near here in Monteagle."

"How'd they end up playing 'back to nature' out in the woods if there is such segregation between the staff around here?" Dean asked her.

"Well, the girl was just slumming and Matt was just dumb enough to think he could get himself out of the backwoods of Tennessee by banging some rich chick," Melissa answered frankly. Her bluntness seemed inconsistent with her soft features and demeanor, her simple beauty not enhanced by make-up or designer clothes.

As a silence fell between them, Melissa came back around to face Dean. The blood-stained towel in her hand, a stray length of brown hair dangled down from underneath her hair net teasing at the corner of her mouth. She swatted at the delinquent strand, blushing as she noticed that Dean seemed entranced by the combination of her hair and lips. She cleared her throat, which snapped him back to the here and now and both smiled and looked away from each other.

“Well, I think those stitches should be okay. The bleeding seems to have stopped,” She stammered out.

“Yeah, I better get back to that drain,” Dean said nearly simultaneously, rising from the chair, the heat of the kitchen suddenly seeming to have risen several degrees. “Um, maybe after dinner, if you’re not busy, you can tell me more about things around here.”

“I might be able to do that,” Melissa replied, as she turned to walk away.

Dean crawled back underneath the sink once again. He watched as the lithe young woman walked away from him, smiling as he saw her peek back over her shoulder to see if he was looking. Turning the wrench on the pipe, Dean grinned broadly, hoping tonight there might be more than just sandwiches and pie waiting for him after dinner.

\* \* \* \*

The brothers actually sat together for the first time in days, eating their meal and carrying on a civil conversation and only because for the first time Dean was actually focused more on the hunt than on his self-imposed blame for Sam’s predicament. As they shared their day’s findings, Sam telling his brother that while everyone had nothing but good things to say about the dead girl, no one he’d talked to knew much about the guy she was with.

“I’m not surprised,” Dean answered. “There are some definite class lines that don’t get crossed around here. I dunno Sam, I’m not sure that hanging out here is gonna get us anywhere.”

“Dean, you agreed to give this a little more time. You saw those tracks out there today,” Sam insisted, fearful that his brother was once again trying to escape the hunt in favor of pursuing Haris.

“I’m not saying that Sam. I agree, okay, those tracks, that clearing, yeah, something definitely happened here. But staying here while you babysit a bunch of rich brats and I run around picking up their crap ain’t exactly getting us anywhere. Have you even had a chance to get on the computer, check into those tracks?”

“No, not really,” Sam replied, sighing with relief. “I was going to work a little on it later,” he continued, “but some of the counselors are having a secret campfire later on. I’m gonna see if I can find out anything else.”

“Fine,” Dean shot back. “I’ve got some plans for later too. Besides, somehow I don’t imagine I’m exactly welcome anyway. Just be careful, okay?”

Sam nodded, rising from his seat to dispose of the remains of his dinner. As he walked away from his older brother, he relaxed for the first time since accidentally revealing his deal with Haris to Dean. Having his brother finally committed to this hunt was a coup to say the least. He knew that Dean wouldn’t have given up on trying to get him out of the arrangement he’d made, but at least for now, he wasn’t solely focused on it. Sam knew there was nothing that was going to save him from his deal with the demon and he could only pray that the sooner his brother came to terms with that irrefutable fact the better things would be.

\* \* \* \*

### **Later that evening**

Dean finished the remainder of his evening duties and returned to wait by the doors to the cafeteria in hopes of catching Melissa when she finished with the last of hers. The sun had already set behind the edge of Bryant Ridge casting yellow-red hues across the landscape. The mountain air had already begun to cool for the evening and many of the young guests had begun to assemble at the huge

Chattanooga Lodge for the evening's recreation, freeing many of the staff for the remainder of the night.

As he waited, Dean leaned casually against the rough-hewn logs that framed the exterior of the building, chugging down the last of a bottle of water. Having spent the latter part of the afternoon working out in the warm sun, he had unzipped the upper half of his coveralls and they were now pulled down around his waist, leaving only a gray t-shirt to tightly hug the taut muscles of his upper body and arms.

He idly watched as more of the staff and campers headed off toward the hall, everyone chatting, seemingly carefree and happy, oblivious to the fact that two of their ranks had been brutally butchered just several days before right outside the false security of the resort.

His interest piqued more when the two blonde counselors from their arrival yesterday walked past him on their way to the Rec Hall. They smiled as they passed him, but caught in their own conversation, they continued on not noticing when the taller of the two dropped her name tag into the dirt.

Pushing off of the wall, Dean retrieved the badge and quickly caught up to the two young women. Holding out the pin, he returned it to the girl who thanked him graciously. He was about to return to his post and await Melissa when the young women invited him to join them at the secret campfire later that evening. Dean smiled victoriously, imagining the surprise on Sammy's face when he showed up with the two blondes. He flirted with the two for a few moments more before they excused themselves and Dean returned back to the cafeteria to find Melissa.

By the time he reached the dining hall, the place was quiet and Dean realized that Melissa must have left through the rear exit. Deciding to shower and change before seeking her out, he headed back to his quarters.

After a much needed long, hot shower, Dean stepped out to a steam-filled bathroom that was now seeping out into the bedroom area. He had just pulled on a clean pair of jeans when a knock at the door spun him around. Smiling broadly, he hoped it was Melissa coming to find him and not Sam just coming to gloat before heading out to the super-secret camp fire festivities. Oh well, he was ready for Sam if it was him.

Pulling open the door, he tried to hide his shock and surprise when Nathan Taylor surrounded by his usual entourage stood in the doorway. Completely unarmed, Dean hadn't the chance to grab anything since just getting out of the shower. He glanced over his shoulder to where his duffle bag lay just a few steps behind him, the .45 loaded and waiting. But no, not like he could shoot his way out of this.

Taylor and his boys pushed their way into the tiny room, backing Dean up until his retreat was stopped by the edge of the bed.

"I saw you earlier talking to Elise and Bethany. Guess you still haven't learned your lesson about knowing your place around here. Stay away from our women! There's plenty of townie trash for you to get off on," he shouted at Dean, stepping aside as one of his larger cohorts moved to the front.

Dean didn't wait for the fight to come to him. He lowered his head and shoulders and barreled into the nearest of the four men. He managed to stagger that one back, adding a punch to the gut for good measure, but before he could bring his attention back to the remaining three, someone kicked in the back of his right knee dropping him to the floor.

Dean knew he needed to get up off the floor in a hurry but even as the first kick rained in on his chest, lighting him up with another blinding flash of breath-stealing pain, he knew it was too late. He tried to push off of the wood with arms and legs that were fast succumbing to the blows that continued relentlessly. Despite the confining limits of his small room, the three young men took turns pummeling Dean's body while Nathan sat watching from the nearby chair.

Dean wasn't sure how long the three of them continued their abuse. Somewhere along the way, the pain, Taylor's laughter, Sam's deal, his failure, even the

ridiculousness of this place all came together in his fogged brain and he began laughing himself.

Struck by the oddity, the three cronies paused, looking back at their leader for direction. Taylor rose, walking to stand over Dean's beaten and prone form. Looking down at the bruised and bleeding hunter, he snarled, not amused by whatever Dean had found so humorous. Drawing back, he kicked as viciously as he could muster, the force of it lifting Dean's body completely off the floor and stealing away any air that Dean might have used for laughter.

"You ... kick ... like ... a ... rich ... girl!" Dean gasped, putting the last of his energy into the insult before his hazel eyes closed yielding to the painless oblivion his body craved.

\* \* \* \*

Melissa walked towards Dean's quarters a short time later. She had headed in that direction twice already, turning back each time, her face reddened each time she thought about the short-haired young man with the green, sparkling eyes, strong upper body and cocky grin. She knew nothing about him, yet somewhere inside her, she felt a kindred spirit with this young man. Maybe it was the way he stood defiantly against Nathan Taylor and his gang? Or maybe it was just that his smile made her stomach flop nervously?

She turned around again, deciding that she could at least walk past his quarters. No harm in that, right? Timidly, she approached the small set of steps that led to his room. From a few feet away, she noticed that the door was open, finding that strange but not alarming.

As Melissa came closer to the door, she heard a soft moan escape from inside the room. Worried now, she rushed up the steps and through the open door sliding to her knees as she found Dean lying on the floor.

She rolled him over gently, letting his head rest carefully in her lap as she took in all the damage with a gasp. He groaned again, blinking open his right eye, the left already purpled and swollen shut. He tried to smile when he looked up and saw her beautiful brown hair cascading down around her shoulders and nearly tickling his face as she bent close.

Melissa ran her hands over his upper arms and chest, wincing with him when he groaned under her light touch. "I'll go get the camp nurse. Just stay here, don't move," she ordered, starting to rise.

Dean grabbed her arm, preventing her from leaving. "No! Just help me up, okay? I've had worse than this before," he tried to reassure her.

It took several attempts, but once Dean managed to get to his knees, Melissa was able to get an arm under his and helped him to the bed where he collapsed again out of breath, eyes closed.

Melissa dashed to the bathroom, returning with a cold wet cloth and began wiping away at the blood once again covering Dean's face and chest. As she cleaned away the mess, she noticed the myriad of white-line scars and suddenly knew that what Dean had said about not being a stranger to pain had apparently been true. Hardly a portion of his upper body was unmarred by some previous injury, but compared to the already turning bruises, the older wounds seemed less important.

"These look bad," Melissa announced. "You might have some broken ribs. I really should get the nurse."

Dean opened his eye, worried because despite only having one eye open he was still seeing two Melissas.

"No, really. I'll be okay. There's some stuff in my bag for emergencies. My brother can patch me up if necessary. I was gonna meet up with him at the secret campfire

tonight. You wanna go? Would be worth seeing the look on Nathan's face if I showed up there."

Melissa blanched. She couldn't believe that having just been beaten unconscious Dean could seriously consider going back at Nathan and his bunch so soon.

"Dean, I don't think so. And I don't think you can even stand up straight much less go after Nathan and his crew tonight. How about I go back to the kitchen and get us something to drink, some snacks maybe. I can bring back some ice for your eye and maybe for your ribs too? Why don't you just rest? For me? Okay?" she begged, her brown eyes soft and pleading.

Dean looked up at her face, the doe-eyes in full effect. Sammy-eyes, begging, pleading; eyes he could never say "no" to.

"Okay," he submitted. *Besides, he thought, despite getting my ass kicked yet again, staying in with Melissa beats hanging out with snotty rich kids any night.*

She checked to make sure he was settled, easing a pillow underneath his head and another underneath his right side that seemed to have taken the worst of the abuse. When she was sure he was as comfortable as she could make him, she coaxed him into closing his eyes, promising to wake him when she returned.

"I'll be right back" she promised, dashing off. "I won't be long at all."

\* \* \* \*

Sam walked out into the dark woods along with nearly a dozen of the other counselors. Beer-laden coolers in hand, blankets and even a radio, it was a bad scene from *Friday the 13th* and all Sam could think of was yelling at the lot of them, telling them how stupid they were being for coming out into the woods to begin with.

Several hundred yards from Ridgecrest the group came to a halt, spreading blankets and popping pull tabs on beer cans as several of the males and females began to pair up. As the music drowned out any of nature's nighttime sounds, typical conversations began to play out.

Sam listened intently as some of the group began to discuss the newly arrived campers, others talking about college and still others talking about Rhodes and the place. He waited until an appropriate moment and interjected a question about the recent deaths. Several of the group offered speculation, but never anything concrete, a couple of the staff even putting their own urban legend twists on the story.

The young hunter smiled, laughing easily as he listened to the recent account turn to other grisly campfire tales. Stories he had heard hundreds of times before, some even that he knew for certain were born of fact but skewed into fiction.

The fire blazing, giving off warmth to the immediate area, the entire group became instantly silent when the hard crunch of snapping twigs beyond the circle caught their attention. Sam was about to reach for his backpack, when Nathan Taylor and three other young men broke from the trail and into the clearing. Laughing loudly, they quickly plopped down and joined the gathering.

"You should see what we did to that townie tonight," Taylor bragged. "Taught him a lesson he'll never forget."

Immediately worried, Sam rose. He knew that Taylor had to be talking about Dean and knowing his brother, he was certain that Dean would not have gone down easily. Just as he was ready to head back to Ridgecrest and check on his brother, the piercing scream of a wildcat broke through the loud laughter and chatter of the group.

Silence enveloped the crowd, someone even turned off the music as they all shifted about nervously. Another growl sounded, closer this time, and the staffers became frantic as they detected movement in the forest just beyond them in the darkness.

Sam unzipped the backpack, reaching inside for the Glock, knowing that while it might not be of much use, it was better than nothing. Yet another screech and the group panicked. Possessions forgotten, each of the young men and women began to flee in multiple directions.

As Sam looked up, he saw two glowing eyes, but much higher up than he would have expected for an animal. Shouting out to the terrified staff, he tried to round them up and get them to follow him in the opposite direction and away from the creature.

Gun drawn, Sam started to lead several of the counselors back toward the main compound as more growls sounded followed by the sound of the creature crashing through the dense underbrush. Behind him he heard one of the girls scream. Whirling around, he detected no danger but saw that she had fallen. As he helped her back to her feet there was another screech from the front of the group, followed by a deeper scream as one of Nathan's buddies was grabbed from the trail and pulled into the woods.

Sam rushed up to the spot; blood covered the ground where the young man disappeared. He scanned the woods beyond the trail, but aside from the dense growth and the weakening screams, he could see or hear nothing else.

By now, the remainder of the group was running in every direction, self-preservation the guiding force. Sam looked around anxiously, not sure where to go or who to even try to save at this point. Up ahead in the glow of a flashlight, he spotted Nathan Taylor. Just as he was about to yell at the young man to rejoin the group, Sam saw a flash of yellow and something gigantic leap out of the forest and pounce on top of the young man.

He charged forward, firing the 9mm while simultaneously shouting for the remaining staff to haul ass back to camp. Firing off two more rounds as he approached the creature, the thing remained undeterred as it continued to shred Taylor's body into ribbons with its razor-like claws. Nathan screamed on and on as the creature tore into his flesh, begging for help as he watched the others fleeing away from him and the monster.

Sam drew closer, still firing uselessly on the beast. He was close enough that he could see that the creature was in fact standing on two feet, not four. As Taylor's screams ceased and the Glock's clip emptied, the creature swung around, lashing out with a paw that caught Sam on his left shoulder and sent him flying through the air.

Hitting the ground hard, Sam felt pain in his left arm as he heard the metallic sound of a trap snapping shut. *The hunters' traps!* He remembered suddenly, pain threatening to subdue him as he heard the creature snarl again nearby.

\* \* \* \*

Dean stirred awake, one eye peeking open as he felt the bed shift and saw Melissa settle beside him on the edge of the mattress. She opened up a brown paper bag and began pulling items out, placing some on the blanket and others on the nearby nightstand. Dean tried to focus on the contents, but found he really didn't have the energy or the desire to look at anything past Melissa's soulful eyes.

She caught his stare, suddenly blushing, dipping her head down and allowing her hair to fall forward to obscure her face. Dean reached up, his arm shaking from the effort, and pushed aside a long length, his fingertips lightly brushing against her cheek as he did so. Melissa tilted her head sideways, shyly avoiding his touch.

"Please," Dean asked softly, "don't hide your eyes from me."

She hesitated for a moment, uncertain why she was even here, in his room at this moment. But something in his voice, something so sincere, stirred her and she lifted her head allowing their eyes to meet.

Dean struggled to shift up in the bed, wanting to be able to sit upright so he could see and talk to Melissa. He managed only the barest movement before the pain in his ribcage flattened him against the mattress, leaving him gasping for breath and hugging his chest tightly. Melissa responded instantly, her hand going to his shoulder in a gesture of comfort. When his breathing calmed again, she went back to her task of pulling a wide elastic bandage from the bag.

"I got this from Brooke, the camp nurse. I told her that one of the other girls might have sprained her ankle on the wet kitchen floor. Let me help you sit up and I can wrap your chest. That should make it feel a little bit better."

Dean forced his eyes open and nodded. He felt Melissa's soft hands reach gently underneath his back and shoulders. She waited till she felt him take a deep breath, bracing himself against the pain that was sure to come. Giving a verbal three-count, she steadily lifted while Dean pulled against the blanket, grunting against the effort until he managed something that resembled upright.

It took everything Dean had to remain in that position while Melissa wrapped the length of bandage around his bruised chest. When she finished, he let out the breath he'd been holding, a fine sheen of sweat glistening across his forehead alerting her to the pain that he had refused to voice.

She watched him cautiously as he wavered in front of her and only when it appeared that he wouldn't immediately topple over did she hastily rush to the bathroom and return with a towel and wash cloth. From within the brown sack, she took out a plastic bag full of ice and carefully wrapped that into the towel. Placing a hand behind his back once again, Melissa gently guided him back down to the bed then placed the icepack against the right side of his chest.

Dean let out a hiss between clenched teeth, involuntarily recoiling away from the weight of the pack and the icy chill. He shivered once, groaning from the movement, but Melissa reached out and touched his shoulder again, the warmth of her hand and her soft voice soothing him.

"Shh, it's alright, just lie back and rest,"

Dean tried to follow her directions, he wanted to at least, but the throbbing in his head was just too damn distracting at the present moment. Frustrated, he shifted again, successful in only elevating the misery his body was enduring. This was so not the way he had planned on the evening turning out. He made up his mind then and there that Nathan Taylor was in for the ass-whipping of his young spoiled life, just as soon as Dean could stand up straight again. He shifted once more, wiggling like a small child that was forced to sit still for too long, groaning loudly when his body chastised him for his disobedience.

"Here," Melissa called out to him. "Since you're so determined to keep moving around, sit up one more time." She helped boost him up again, this time offering up a glass of water and placing two round tablets in his hand.

He took them without question, swallowing them down with a large gulp of water before handing the glass back to Melissa. Dean was about to fall back to the bed when he felt Melissa's body move from his side. He panicked for a second, thinking she was leaving and not sure why that thought bothered him so much when she suddenly swung around coming to rest behind him on the bed, her back propped against the headboard.

Dean felt Melissa's hands touch his shoulders, gently easing him back. His head sank softly into the pillow in her lap and from that position he was able to look straight up at the supple curve of her throat and into the deep brown of her eyes. She leaned forward, stretching as she reached to replace the icepack on his ribcage, her hair brushing across his face filling his nostrils with the scent of honeysuckle.

Next, she took the smaller washcloth, having wet it earlier, and began to gently wipe across Dean's forehead and down along his jaw. Dean never lost contact with her eyes, blurred as his vision had become, he refused to lose sight of her.

"Thank you, for everything," he offered.

"Shh," she replied back, discarding the cloth and now slowly using her fingertips to rub tiny circles at his temples, extending out into the short brown spikes of hair at the crown of his head. "Shh," she repeated once more as her fingers continued their geometric dance on his scalp.

Better than any narcotic, her soothing voice, the gentle massage, and the pounding in his head was already subsiding. Dean fought to keep his eyes open, struggled to stay focused on the rich russet irises that looked down at him now.

No, this was so not the way he had planned on the evening turning out, but as his eyes drifted closed, the pain in his body nearly forgotten, Melissa's final "shh" in his ear, Dean figured it wasn't half bad.

\* \* \* \*

Sam came alert with a panicked start but immediately stilled himself, not sure where the creature was or how long he'd been unconscious. He forced himself to slow his breathing as he listened intently for any sound of the strange cat, remaining as motionless as possible in case the creature was still nearby.

When no sound other than the pounding of his own heart within his chest greeted his ears, he chanced moving. Turning his head to the left pulled on his shoulder, reminding him of the abuse the limb had taken when the creature had lashed out at him with its massive claws. Pushing up to a seated position, his hand explored the jagged wound on his left arm. Although painful, he could still move it and the bleeding had slowed for the most part.

Sam rose slowly to his feet, reaching out to the nearby tree trunk to steady himself. His right foot struck something solid and Sam's gaze followed it down to the forest floor. It was a large chain that held one of the hunters' traps securely to the base of the tall pine. The same trap he had heard snap shut right as he had hit the ground.

Fortunately for Sam, it had been the Glock flying free of his hand and not any part of his anatomy that had struck the trigger causing the deadly jaws to slam closed. He shuddered to think about what that horrible device would have done if his arm or leg would have landed in it instead of the gun. Bending down, he scooped up the weapon and after checking that it was undamaged, he replaced the spent clip before venturing on.

Light from the dying campfire cast an eerie glow about the clearing, barely illuminating the left-behind remnants of the clandestine party. In their panic, the young staffers had fled in nearly every direction and Sam knew he needed to get back to the compound for help as soon as possible.

As he headed back towards the camp, he nearly stumbled over and into the remains of Nathan Taylor. Forcing down the bile that was threatening to rise, Sam remembered the young man's screams as the strange cat attacked him. Screams and the awful sounds of the beast's claws as it ripped through fabric, shredded flesh and tore into muscle and organs below. There was no point in checking for a pulse, Sam was quite sure the creature wouldn't have gone had one remained.

It was a short walk back to Ridgecrest and as he neared the Admin building, Sam knew that at least some of the group must have made it back safely. Outside, a flurry of activity was taking place. Rhodes and his hunters were talking with several of the counselors and from the frantic and rattled speech, Sam wasn't sure that any of the information they were getting was reliable.

He considered talking to Rhodes himself but figured the self-righteous owner and his hunters would only get in the way. Figuring the best way to help was to get Dean, get weapons, and get back out there, Sam headed for his brother's room.

Without knocking, he barged through the unlocked door coming to a dead stop when he saw Dean asleep in Melissa's lap. One look at his brother's bruised face and bandaged chest and Taylor's comments about "teaching the townie a lesson" flew back into Sam's head. Forgotten in the creature's attack, Sam now remembered and he rushed over to the side of the bed.

"Is he okay?" he asked worriedly, reaching out a hand to touch the white wrappings.

"Shh!" Melissa hushed him, swatting his hand away before it came in contact with Dean's chest. "He's alright," she whispered, "just a little worse for the wear. Nathan Taylor and his boys worked him over pretty good. I found him unconscious on the floor, got him cleaned up. I think he might have a couple bruised or broken ribs. Been sitting here with him since he passed out a couple hours ago."

"Have you tried to wake him up lately? He might have a concussion. He got hit in the head yesterday too," Sam stated, somewhat indignant that Melissa was seemingly taking over Dean's care.

"I said he's fine. Perfectly alert and oriented when he was awake. I may not have some high-priced college education but I'm not an idiot. I had three brothers that were pretty good at beating each other's and anyone else's brains in. I know how to take care of this sort of thing," she angrily snapped back in a low voice. "Now be quiet or you'll wake him up and he needs to sleep."

"Melissa?" Dean asked groggily, eyes blinking as he tried to focus in the low light of the room. "Is everything okay?"

The brunette glanced up at Sam, a look of "now see what you've done" plainly written on her face.

"Shh, Dean, it's alright," she calmly soothed.

"Dean? You okay, dude?" Sam asked, squatting down beside the bed, ignoring the daggers that shot from Melissa's eyes.

"Sammy?" Dean became instantly alert, struggling to sit up, but finding that the couple of hours he'd been sleeping had served to make him stiff on top of sore. He barely stifled a groan and Sam couldn't help but notice that the brunette immediately reacted, protectively placing her hands on Dean's shoulders.

Looking up at his younger brother, Dean saw the dried blood and torn material on Sam's left arm, that serving as all the impetus he needed to force his body into motion. With teeth nearly grinding and resisting Melissa's best effort to restrain him, Dean fought against the pain in his ribs and head and sat up, his hand reaching out to his brother's shoulder, probing the tattered remains of Sam's shirt.

"You okay? What happened? Was it the creature? Did it attack you?" Dean asked, unable to hide all of the panic in his voice as the questions came out in rapid-fire succession.

"I'm alright. It just grazed me. Dean, that thing was huge. I saw it. It really was like a giant wildcat, but it walked on two legs," Sam recounted. "And it was fast. Came at us out of nowhere. Grabbed one of the guys and yanked him right back into the forest before I could get a shot off."

"You tried to shoot it?" Dean asked.

"Dean, I emptied a whole clip into the thing. Nothing! It didn't even flinch. And dude, you don't have to worry about Nathan Taylor anymore." Sam continued.

"Oh? OH!" Dean answered as the significance of Sam's comment struck him.

"Look, I know you're beat to hell, but we gotta get back out there now. Rhodes and his hunters are already mobilizing, but considering that the bunch that made it back to camp are probably so shook up they can't get their story straight, we can beat 'em back out there. Dean, that other kid could still be alive and any tracks that thing left will still be pretty fresh." Sam insisted.

Dean nodded, reaching a hand out to his brother for assistance. "Let's go!" He rose to unsteady feet, holding back the groan, but unable to hide the grimace.

Melissa sprung up from the bed behind him. To her credit, she didn't try to stop him, having grown up with three elder and just as stubborn brothers, she knew it was pointless. Instead, she simply moved around to the front of Dean and checked the clips on the elastic bandage around his chest. Satisfied that it was snug, she then helped him pull on a clean t-shirt.

"You'll be careful?" It was half-question, half-plea, but accompanied by the soft brown eyes, to Dean, it was a reason to come back to Ridgecrest. He smiled back at

her, losing himself for only a second that felt like eternity in those eyes, and it was at that precise moment that it became so clear to him.

Melissa's eyes, Sammy's eyes, it was always the eyes. If he could only see the eyes, then he could tell, he would know. How many times had Sam got him to 'give in' just by looking at him with his puppy-dog eyes, just as Melissa was now? Those soulful hazel orbs, so innocent, never deceiving, until...

That was it! Ever since New Jersey, he should have known. He should have seen. It was what he hadn't seen that should have been the clue. Sam's eyes. And not just the recent stint in Riverside. It had started even before that. The lack of eye contact, the lack of Sammy's eyes. Sam knew, he knew that he couldn't keep the secret of his deal with Haris out of his eyes. That's what had been missing and now Dean knew it too.

Blinking back to the present, Dean smiled again at Melissa, reaching up to gently caress the side of her face. "I'd worry a lot less while I'm out there if I knew you were safe. Promise me you'll go back to your room and stay there. Don't leave the compound and don't go anywhere near the woods," he implored.

She looked at him warily, especially as she saw Sam pulling two shotguns from a duffel beneath the bed. Melissa opened her mouth slightly, prepared to ask Dean just what he and his brother were up to, but he was still staring at her, his hand still resting softly against her cheek. She simply nodded.

As Dean reluctantly turned away, Sam tossed him one of the shotguns. He checked the magazine before moving on to the .45, ejecting the clip, making sure it was full and then replacing it. Once confident that they had everything readied, Dean followed Sam to the door. Hesitating as his hand grasped the handle, Dean stopped, letting his younger brother continue on a few steps ahead of him.

He whirled around, taking two long strides back to Melissa. Weaving his fingers into her long hair, he tipped her head back, pressing his lips hungrily yet tenderly against hers. She didn't resist and he didn't demand, and when he finally pulled away, hazel eyes once more locked onto brown, Dean Winchester felt his heart beat for the first time in days.

\* \* \* \*

### **Forest outside Ridgecrest**

Sam led the way back out into the woods, flashlight lighting the trail. By the time they reached the clearing, the embers from the campfire were barely glowing, flaring occasionally when the breeze stirred new life into them.

In the distance, the brothers could hear the thick country accents of Rhodes' hunters as they moved noisily through the forest. Hampered by poor directions, the two locals were slightly off-course to where the carnage had occurred, an edge that worked in the Winchesters' favor.

Just at the edge of the trail, they came across Taylor's grisly remains. Dean looked down at the butchered body trying to find some small amount of remorse for the dead young man.

"Guess there's always something bigger and meaner out there?" he said finally, shaking his head before turning away.

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "I know he was a jerk, but Dean, he didn't deserve to die like that."

"Huh! Guess it depends which side of his boots you've been on lately." Dean replied, pushing past his brother and continuing on.

Sam looked down for a moment longer, hearing the young man's screams echo in his mind even though his throat was now as mangled as the rest of his eviscerated body. He could still see the huge yellow cat, claws slashing through the air as it tore

through Nathan Taylor as though it's only focus was on dismantling the tall counselor.

"Strange," Sam thought to himself. *"It wasn't like the thing attacked and moved on. It was almost as if it had singled Taylor out of the group."*

"You coming?" Dean yelled back over his shoulder.

"Yeah, sorry, was just thinking," Sam replied, running to catch up to his brother's side. "Just up there is where the other one got pulled into the woods I think."

Dean followed Sam's finger, moving several more feet further up the trail. He squatted down, shining the flashlight into the woods first, scanning the immediate area. Kneeling down, he then examined the soft-packed soil, running his hands across the surface of the dirt.

"Sam, look!" he directed, using the flashlight to motion his brother to his find.

The print on the ground was slightly larger than Dean's stretched hand, bigger still if he considered where the tips of the claws ended. Dean swept the flashlight beam back and forth until he found another print, duplicate to the first and motioned Sam to follow him as he stepped off the trail and into the denser underbrush.

It didn't take long before they found the body of the other victim. Like Taylor, the other young man had been effectively sliced into ribbons, flesh hanging from his bones like bloody party streamers discarded on the ground. Sam bent down, checking for a pulse out of habit more than reason.

"Hmm, well, two down," Dean commented absently.

"What?"

"This is one of Taylor's buddies. I'd recognize the shoes anywhere."

"Connection? Coincidence?" Sam queried.

Dean shrugged, "Hey, don't look at me. Not like I didn't owe 'em one, but I don't need some mangy cat to do my dirty work for me."

"Yeah well, somebody does, 'cause no way that freakin' thing is normal," Sam stated.

"You can say that again. Where the hell are the rest of the tracks? I got tracks leading to the kill, blood everywhere, but not a single bloody track out. Matter of fact, not a single print of any kind leading away from the body. Does our big cat sprout wings and fly too?" Dean asked sarcastically.

Sam shook his head, looking around the forest and spotting the approaching glare of flashlights.

"I don't know dude, but we're gonna have company soon. Let's get back to Ridgecrest and try to figure out what we're dealing with. We've got to convince Rhodes to either shut down the camp or at the very least to keep everybody out of the woods until we can figure out a way to kill this thing."

Dean nodded in agreement, stuffing the .45 back into the duffle as he heard the voices of hunters nearing. A shiver ran down his spine as he glanced down a final time at the dead body. *God, how he hated camping!*

\* \* \* \*

They reached the camp just as the first rays of sunlight peeked over the top of the eastern ridge. Careful to avoid the Admin hall and all the activity surrounding it, they skirted the edge of the forest and came out near the maintenance shed and parking lot. Spotting the squad cars in front of the main building, Dean wisely stowed their weapons into the secret compartment in the Impala's trunk before he and Sam continued on.

Near the front of Cumberland Hall, most of the Ridgecrest staff had assembled and were listening intently as Rhodes, flanked by three uniformed police officers, addressed the group.

“Everyone is perfectly safe so long as you stay within the compound. It’s important that we remain calm and not scare the guests,” he stressed. “I simply will not tolerate any further breach in our policies and procedures.”

There was a brief murmur among the assembled, many of them still skittish from the events of the long night. If Rhodes’ words had instilled any confidence then it was washed away as the crowd caught sight of the first black body bag being carried out of the woods. The murmur turned into a collective gasp and soft sobs could be heard from a couple of the girls.

Sam and Dean held back at the edge of the group, cautiously observing. When Rhodes finally finished his “pep talk,” the staff slowly dispersed, most gradually making their way towards the dining hall. Dean caught sight of Melissa at the far side of the crowd, raising his eyebrows and smiling when their eyes met. He was about to walk towards her when Rhodes shouted out for him and Sam, waving the brothers over to him and one of the officers.

Reluctantly, Dean followed Sam over to the camp director, not eager to speak with the pompous man much less the cop standing next to him. The dark-haired hunter tensed visibly as he drew near seeing the officer place a cautious hand on the grip of the holstered pistol at his side.

“We have a few questions for you Mr. Winfield. We’ve heard that you and Nathan Taylor had an altercation last night before the campfire. Is that true?” Rhodes asked, eyeing Dean suspiciously.

Dean chuckled, “Altercation? Yeah, if you call him and three of his boys barging into my room and taking turns using my body for a soccer ball an altercation, then sure.”

“We found this in your room,” the officer stated, producing Dean’s long Bowie from within his jacket. “Could be you wanted a little revenge on Mr. Taylor and Mr. Mason. Maybe you went out into the woods dressed up in a cat skin, scared all those kids and then just waited for those boys. Gutted ‘em with this big pig-sticker?”

“That’s ridiculous!” Sam shouted. “I was out there with the group. No way was that thing that attacked us somebody dressed up in a cat skin.”

“Yeah, you caught me. I’ve been here for two whole days, got my ass kicked by Taylor’s boys both nights, but on my coffee break, I managed to hunt down and skin a mountain lion so I could dress up in its skin to kill these guys,” Dean snapped back. “And they say you small town law boys can’t solve the real tough crimes.”

“You better watch your mouth there son. I got two more dead kids to send home to their folks and you’re lookin’ like the closest thing to a likely suspect I got. So how ‘bout you try and tell me a story about what you were doin’ all last night.”

As Dean considered another smart-ass comment, from out of nowhere Melissa appeared at his side.

“I was with him all night,” she intervened. “I found him unconscious after Nathan and his bunch had attacked him. I got him cleaned up and I stayed with him the rest of the night while he slept. “

Rhodes stepped in, looking between Melissa and Dean as though he had just tasted something bitter. “I’m just sure you were both sleeping,” he said snidely. “But what else would I really expect out of the likes of you?”

Dean’s fist clenched reflexively, but Melissa placed a restraining hand gently on his arm. “You arrogant bastard,” he began. “You’re so pathetic you can’t see beyond the green in someone’s wallet, and you,” he continued, pointing at the cop, “wouldn’t have a clue about what’s going on around here if it bit you on the ass.”

The cop scowled at the obvious slur, his back becoming rigid as he straightened. Dean mimicked his posture, unwilling, basically unable to back down. Sam sensed that the situation was about to escalate and he quickly stepped in between his brother and the lawman.

“Sir, my brother wasn’t out there. I know it and she is his alibi. And there’s no law against him having that knife, unlike the laws that you broke by searching his room without a legal warrant,” Sam challenged.

The officer considered the younger Winchester’s argument, then halfheartedly flipped the knife over, offering it back to Dean hilt first. He turned back toward Rhodes, whispering something in the older man’s ear before lumbering off toward the line of emergency vehicles just as the second body bag was carried out of the woods.

Dean smiled across at Sam then turned to look at Melissa. He tucked the long knife behind the belt in the back of his jeans and was contemplating kissing the spunky brunette again when Rhodes’ voice broke the silence.

“I don’t care what your excuses are; I told you before that certain behaviors would not be tolerated. Pack your things and clear off the premises immediately,” he shouted at Dean.

Sam started to protest but Dean waved him off. He never wanted to be at Ridgecrest to begin with and now that things had gotten to this point, he was even more convinced that staying would only restrict their ability to hunt the creature.

“It’s alright, Sammy. I’m gonna get my things together and head back into town. Check some things out. You’ve gotta get on the computer and see what you can find out about that cat. Where’s it coming from and how the hell can we kill it.”

Sam nodded as Melissa curled protectively around Dean’s arm. “Dean, I’m sorry. I was trying to help,” she said apologetically, eyes downcast.

He lifted her chin with the edge of his hand. “Come with me now Melissa. Away from here! It’s not safe.”

She shook her head sadly, pulling away from his hold. “I can’t,” she replied. “I need the job.”

“Tell Rhodes to shove it up his ass! You can get something else.”

“Not for what I’ll make here during the summer. I can’t, Dean. I have to help out at home,” she explained.

Dean nodded. If anyone understood obligations to family, it was him. He lifted her chin up with the tips of his fingers and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

“I understand. Stay in the compound and near Sam when you can. I’ll be back. I promise!”

He pulled away from her by inches. Hands that were interlocked now slowly slipped apart, fingers separating until only tips touched and then those too slid away. She smiled at him sheepishly and when he winked at her, she blushed.

Dean turned away quickly, heading for his room to pack his meager belongings, suddenly thinking that the bandage on his chest had become too tight. *Yeah! That was it!*

\* \* \* \*

### **Later that evening**

Rhodes returned to his office just before dusk. Haggard, his entire day had been filled with the panicked calls of parents once word of the most recent deaths hit the news. Throughout the afternoon, the cancellations poured in while frantic mothers and fathers arrived to pull out their children lest they become the next victims.

He sank into the large leather desk chair with an exaggerated sigh. Although the office was beginning to sink into darkness, Rhodes made no effort to turn on any of the lights. Instead, he leaned forward, his head held in his hands in a gesture of exhaustion and defeat.

“*No, not defeat,*” he reprimanded himself. He had never given up in his life, having built Ridgecrest to be the premier facility for the privileged youth of the elite families in Nashville, Chattanooga and even Atlanta.

Rhodes had scraped, sacrificed and fought to build this place. He knew what it was like to eat beans, hell, he knew what it was like to not eat at all. If Elizabeth's family had ever known Rhodes' true origins, he felt quite sure they would have locked their daughter away and sent him packing all the way back to Cooper Mill, Tennessee and the small shack of a house that he'd grown up in.

But he wasn't Jimmy Edmonds anymore. He was Roderick Rhodes and this was Ridgecrest Youth Resort. And no stupid overgrown wildcat was going to make him give up this, the house in Memphis, or the chalet in Aspen. Not now, not ever.

Renewed, he reached for the banker's lamp on the corner of the large oak desk, snapping it on. As he shuffled through the mix of papers that cluttered the blotter his eyes fell upon a note written on Ridgecrest letterhead. In a woman's handwriting, he assumed it was a message from his secretary, Angela.

Telling him to meet the hunters by the first kill site, Rhodes excitedly rose from his chair. Hoping this meant that the two trackers perhaps had some sort of good news for him, he grabbed the light jacket that was hanging from the nearby peg.

Not an entirely trusting man, Rhodes also reached into the upper right drawer of his desk, pulling out a small .38 which he quickly stuffed inside the pocket of his jacket. Completing his gear, he grabbed a large Mag-Lite and headed out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Dean leaned against the hood of the Impala, binoculars lifted against his eyes as he looked down on the camp. The dusk to dawn lights scattered about the compound were just now flickering to life, the last of the sun's rays having dipped below the horizon. From his vantage on top the ridgeline, he still had the luxury of ambient sunlight to illuminate his view.

Having spent the majority of the day in town and learning nothing particularly significant, Dean had returned earlier in the afternoon and taken up post above Ridgecrest. He scanned the surrounding woods for any sign of the creature, but the only activity had been that of Rhodes' hunters and the remaining law enforcement officers. By late afternoon, the only movement was the occasional deer seeking forage.

Dropping the binoculars, he grabbed the bottle of pop from the roof of the car and chugged back the last warm bit. He then lifted the convenience store sandwich, the bread hard and stale, and tossed it back into the bag uninterested. What he wouldn't have given to have seen a certain brunette suddenly appear with a coy smile, timidly offering him a brown bag containing a fresh roast beef sandwich and pie.

Mouth watering, stomach growling and a strange ache in his chest, Dean went back to his position. He lifted the glasses to his eyes once more, searching the grounds till his eyes landed on the dining hall. He knew it was too early to see Melissa leaving, dinner just having finished, but it was worth the chance. He held there, watching several of the staff and campers leave, falsely excited when he saw a flash of brown hair only to realize that it wasn't her.

He laughed at himself, knowing what Sam would say to him, how he would tease him unmercifully if he even had a hint of how Dean felt. But then, how did he feel?

He sagged back against the fender, eyes staring wistfully out at the crimson sky, the fading sunlight creating a prismatic glow among the clouds that hung lazily atop the distant mountains. He let his mind wander back to last night, to the young woman whose panicked face first found him but who later took charge and confidently put him back together.

He thought about her soothing voice and tender touch as she eased away the pain in his body. For the first time in days, maybe even months, she had made him feel protected and secure in her arms. Dean couldn't remember the last time he had felt safe; certainly not since his time in Haris' possession, maybe not since long before that.

Dean pictured Melissa again in his mind. The way her long brown hair softly framed her face and how she shyly used it to hide herself. The soft feel of her fingers, the curve of her neck, and of course, the rich brown of her eyes. He could recall the southern lilt to her voice and the strong defiance when she stood up to Rhodes in his defense.

The strange ache returned to his chest and Dean shifted uncomfortably, fidgeting with the bandage still encircling his ribs but knowing that it had nothing to do with what he was feeling. He tried to ignore the sensation, knowing full-well that no matter what he felt about Melissa, his life, Sam's destiny, the family business was never going to allow him anything that resembled "normal" with anyone like her.

He picked the binoculars back up, forcing all thoughts about the girl from his mind as he swept the compound again. To the west, a flash of movement caught his attention and he zoomed back in toward the Admin building. Focusing in on the far side of the lodge he spotted the tall form of Roderick Rhodes turning on a flashlight as he slipped off into the forest.

Thinking it strange that the arrogant man would chance going into the woodlands after dark, Dean considered following behind him. As he started to gather his own gear, the sound of Godsmack's *Voodoo* played hauntingly across his cell. Surprised, Dean flipped it opened and answered.

"Dean." Sam's voice boomed out of the receiver.

"Sam? How the hell? I didn't think the cell would work up here," the older hunter stammered back.

"Yeah, well, I'm calling from a land line and I took a chance figuring with you sitting up there on the ridge and all," Sam replied. "Did you learn anything in town?"

"Not really. The locals aren't real fond of Rhodes or the camp. They all pretty much think he's a rich asshole, but no newsflash there. Other than that, I didn't find out anything else. How 'bout you?" Dean asked.

"Well, the good news is I know what we're dealing with. It's a Wampus cat, Dean. I think someone has conjured a Wampus cat. The original legend goes back to Indian lore where an Indian girl disguised herself in a cougar skin so she could tag along with the braves. She got caught and as punishment, she was trapped in the cougar skin forever. But, there is a Tennessee version that says local witches used to summon the Wampus cat to take revenge for them. I think that's what's going on here, Dean," Sam explained.

"But who, Sam? Who do you think would be sending the cat after all those kids? And not just here, but at those other places too, last year and the year before."

"I don't know, Dean, but we've got to find out. The only way to get rid of the cat is to get the person who conjured the damn thing to reverse it."

Dean sighed disgustedly. "Hell, Sam, it could be anyone, anywhere. Someone with a grudge against Rhodes, against Ridgecrest, maybe not even against this place at all. It could all just be some huge random thing, who knows? Where the hell do we start looking?"

"I don't know dude, but maybe we talk to Rhodes. See if anyone has a serious thing against him or the camp. I'll try and talk to him in the morning," Sam suggested.

"Rhodes!" Dean shouted. "Damn! Sam, he just took off into the woods. I was gonna follow him when you called. Meet me down by the Admin building in five. If someone has it in for him or this place, he might be walking into a trap."

Sam agreed and Dean flipped the phone closed, hurrying now as he grabbed both the flashlight and his .45 even though he knew the weapon was essentially useless against the supernatural cat.

He took off down the side of the ridge, carefully picking his way along the loose rocks and smaller trees and bushes. The lights of the camp along with the rising moon were enough to guide him and in a short time, Dean found himself at the edge of the compound. He worked his way around the perimeter, carefully avoiding being

seen until he reached the private entrance to Cumberland Hall, startling Sam when he came up behind his shaggy-haired sibling.

“Hey!”

“Dammit Dean!” Sam shouted, his hands raised defensively.

“Slackin’ dude! What d’ya think I was? Tall, yellow and furry?” Dean asked laughing. Sam glared at his brother, slapping his shoulder for good measure before gesturing out toward the darkening forest.

“Which way did he go?” he asked.

“In that direction, he’s got about a ten minute head start.” Dean answered starting off onto the path.

Sam followed closely behind, both hunters warily watching the trail as they ventured further into the looming darkness, the lights from the camp fading into the background. Surprisingly, it didn’t take them long to catch up to the Ridgecrest director as Dean stopped suddenly, raising his hand to signal Sam.

They hung back, ducking from tree to tree but keeping an eye on Rhodes as he continued to slowly walk forward. Dean had to hand it to the man: stupid as he was for venturing out into woods alone, Rhodes was certainly showing some serious stones.

As they approached the clearing where the first couple was attacked Rhodes stopped, looking about the area, his flashlight beam moving back and forth among the trees. Rhodes called out, his voice breaking the mountain quiet and it became apparent that he had expected to meet someone out here.

As the brothers watched, Rhodes began to pace nervously, his bravado waning as he was forced to look at his surroundings; the light illuminating the still bloodstained ground. It seemed that he was just about to bolt back to the safety of the camp when the screech shattered the woodland silence.

Rhodes immediately reached for the pistol in his pocket, but his hand never cleared before the massive cat launched out of the trees and pinned him to the ground. From their positions, both brothers drew weapons and charged from their hiding place.

Firing quickly, Dean unloaded the Desert Eagle, the gun’s slide moving rapidly back and forth as each flash from the muzzle lit up the night. Next to him, Sam copied the action, his shotgun aimed at the creature’s torso, but seemingly having little effect.

Rhodes screamed in pain and terror as the cat continued to claw him, oblivious to the sound of the weapons being fired or the yowl of the animal as it hovered over him. Emptying another clip and having closed the distance between them, Dean threw his body at the towering animal in an effort to peel it from the weakening man.

It might have been conjured from some ethereal plane, but the beast was definitely muscle and mass now as it effortlessly tossed the experienced hunter aside. Undaunted, it resumed its attack, claws casting off blood as they descended over and over into Rhodes’ soft flesh.

Sam yelled out to his brother, relaxing only slightly when he saw Dean rise slowly from the ground a few feet away. Stepping closer to the fray, he placed the shotgun’s muzzle directly against the Wampus cat’s spine and pulled the triggers discharging both rounds simultaneously.

The salt loads didn’t hurt the cat, but seemed to have distracted it in some manner. Rearing back, it screamed loudly, lashing out and knocking the shotgun from Sam’s hands with enough force to also pitch the younger Winchester to the ground as well.

Glowing yellow eyes seemed to hesitate for a moment, eyeing each man as Dean, now back to his feet, stood between the creature and Rhodes, a large chunk of wood held batter style in his hands.

“Sammy, get Rhodes,” he ordered, watching the cat cautiously.

The Wampus cat snarled, slashing out with one paw threateningly, but the elder hunter didn't budge. When the cat shifted, Dean did likewise, a stand-off ensuing. With another cry, the cat turned and ran off into the woods.

Dean dropped the branch and grabbed the discarded shotgun turning to Sam as he headed off after the creature. "Sam, take care of Rhodes. I'm going after that freakin' cat," he shouted over his shoulder.

He ripped through the small brush following the noise of the creature as it ran ahead of him. The moonlight shone brightly enough to glow off the beast's golden fur allowing Dean to catch a glimpse of it as it twisted and turned through the undergrowth. Before he realized it, the lights from Ridgecrest loomed ahead of him. Still chasing the Wampus cat, Dean was suddenly worried as the creature ventured closer towards the perimeter of camp.

Coming out the back door of the kitchen, her hands loaded with the last of the evening trash, Melissa breathed in the cool evening air. She heard a commotion in the trees just off to the right of her, but assumed it was just some of the kids playing a prank. Walking over towards the trashcans, she pretended to ignore the noise, figuring she would scare the kids just before they jumped out at her.

She heard the cry of the Wampus cat just as it sprung from the edge of the forest. Dropping the garbage bag, Melissa froze in place as the huge cat approached her, fangs bared, claws still dripping Rhodes' blood.

Dean broke from the tree line a split second later to see the creature as it moved closer to the young woman. He yelled out her name, panic filling him, knowing full well there was no way he could make it to her before the beast could strike.

In slow motion it happened: The cat screeched, Melissa screamed, and in that instant, Dean's heart stopped beating.

"MELISSA!" Dean screamed, his voice booming above the blast of the shotgun as he pulled the trigger. He ran towards her, legs churning, a burn in his chest that was part adrenalin, part pain from abused ribs, and part pure fear that threatened to drop him to his knees should he not reach her in time.

He watched as the mammoth cat snarled once more, saliva dripping from its long fangs as it turned to face the approaching hunter. It took one hesitant step towards Dean, flashing its claws as it moved in front of Melissa.

"Get away from her you sonofabitch!" he shouted, firing the shotgun again as he charged on.

The creature looked back at the frightened young woman, then at Dean, and with a final high-pitched shriek the Wampus cat turned and fled into the engulfing black of the forest.

Dean rushed to Melissa's side, dropping the shotgun as his hands quickly went about dusting over her body checking for injuries. She shook as she stood there, still frozen in place, seemingly oblivious of Dean as she stared blankly out into the darkness.

He pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly to his chest, absorbing her fear as he absorbed the trembling, willing it to be transformed into strength and transfused back to her. She clung to Dean for several minutes, her arms wrapped around his torso, her head pressed against the solid muscles of his chest letting him surround and protect her. Like every moment of their relationship so far, it was give and take, equally and without demand.

They might have stood there in each other's arms all night had not the earlier gunfire and the Wampus cat's screech brought the curious heading in their direction. As the excited voices of the other staff drew closer, Dean ushered Melissa away from the scene.

Offering to walk her back to her quarters, she refused, stating her roommate was likely already in bed. So instead, Dean diverted them to his vacated room, escorting the young woman inside and over to the nearby chair. He quickly twisted around and

pulled the blanket from the bed, wrapping it around her shoulders and pulling it closed as he knelt before her.

"I'm not cold," Melissa finally spoke.

"You're shivering," Dean replied back.

"I'm alright now." Determination back in her voice.

"I know. Humor me, okay?" he asked, smiling up at her.

Dean pushed off from his knees, groaning as he stood, the evening's battle with the cat suddenly making its presence felt in his already abused ribcage. He tried to mask the pain by turning away from Melissa, but she read the rigid posture and sudden tightness to his muscles.

"I think I'm in better shape than you," she said, standing and placing a hand on his shoulder, forcing him to turn back and face her.

"Nah, I'm good," Dean insisted.

"Let me check that bandage," Melissa offered, letting the blanket drop from her shoulders and reaching to lift up Dean's shirt.

He caught her hands in his just as they touched his chest, her contact sending a jolt of electricity through his body that seemed to fracture his control for the briefest second; a twitch in his muscles, a hitch in his breath that she couldn't help but notice and he couldn't hide. "I'm okay. I was just... the cat was right there and you ... and I didn't think I could get to you ... and all I could think was ..."

"Dean ..." she interrupted, one hand breaking free of his grasp and caressing the side of his face.

He leaned into her touch for just a second, his eyes closed, savoring the softness of her hand against his cheek. "Melissa, I can't ... I almost didn't ..." he faltered, unable to look at her, afraid of seeing her eyes, afraid they might look like Sam's.

"What Dean? You can't what? Didn't what?" she pleaded, waiting in silence while he tried to finish, seeing the internal struggle but not understanding.

"Nothing," he finally forced out, pulling away. "It's nothing. I've got to get back to my brother. Rhodes was attacked and Sam will need help. Promise me you'll stay here for tonight? I'll be back later to check on you. Okay?"

He waited while she stared at him, confused by his sudden withdrawal but sensing the urgency in his request. Melissa nodded reluctantly, bending down to scoop up the blanket.

"I'll wait here. For you!" she told him, tip-toeing up to plant a kiss on his cheek.

Dean smiled back at her, the familiar tightness in his chest gripping him again. "Melissa, I ..." *I what? Like you? Love you? Will leave you? Will hurt you? Will lose you like I lose everything and everyone?* "I'll be back in a little bit, okay. You'll be safe here."

Turning, he nearly bolted for the door, suddenly more afraid of standing one more second in that small room with Melissa than facing all the demons that Hell had to offer.

\* \* \* \*

Dean met up with Sam just as the younger man was helping the Ridgecrest director out of the woods. Bloody but conscious, the brothers slowly walked Rhodes into his office and over to a leather couch.

He collapsed breathlessly, his shirt in tatters, blood still oozing from the myriads of gashes that crisscrossed his chest in an erratic pattern. Sam went to work, peeling away the layers of clothing and exposing the vicious wounds. Rhodes sucked in a deep breath as the movement pulled against the lacerations but to his credit he didn't cry out.

"What in the hell was that thing?" he asked in between breaths.

"You probably wouldn't believe us if we told you," Dean replied, coming to stand over the now tractable man. "Why did you go out in the woods tonight anyway?"

"There was a note saying to meet the McMurtry brothers out where the first kids were killed. I thought maybe they had caught the cat," Rhodes answered, teeth clenching as Sam returned from the small bathroom adjoining the office and had begun cleaning and bandaging the wounds. "Obviously, that wasn't the case."

"No, I guess not," Dean agreed. "You still got the note?" Rhodes nodded, motioning with his head over toward his desk.

Dean strode over to the large oak desk, shuffling through the papers there until he came across the evidence. Definitely written in a woman's handwriting, he flashed the note up to Sam and Rhodes.

"Do you recognize who wrote this?" he asked.

"I figured it was Angela, s'pose it could be anyone," the director admitted. "Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on here or not?" Rhodes demanded.

"Dude, I don't have to tell you squat, you fired my ass, remember?" Dean threw back.

"Well, you're trespassing on private property then and I'll have you arrested," Rhodes countered, struggling to sit upright.

"You jerk, we just saved your ass and this is how you thank us ...?" Dean shouted back as Sam jumped to his feet, putting a restraining hand against his older brother while standing in front of the antagonized administrator.

"Just stop you two," he reprimanded. "Look, what attacked you is no ordinary mountain lion, it was something conjured up to hurt you or this place, we don't know. Can you think of anyone that would want to see Ridgecrest closed down?"

Rhodes sank back down to the couch staring in disbelief between the brothers. Dean smirked, shrugged and moved away, content to let Sam handle the situation. At this point, he didn't care about Rhodes, Ridgecrest, the Wampus cat or any of it. The job had been all wrong right from the start.

"Are you telling me that someone created that thing and it's killing people to get even with me for some reason?" Rhodes stammered. "I don't believe in witches and ghosts and crazy stuff like that."

"Well, then you tell me the last time that you saw a six foot cougar run through the woods on its hind legs?" Sam challenged. "We're trying to help you here. There only way that thing is gonna stop is if we can find out who's sending it after you. And, in the meantime, I think you need to get everybody the hell out of the camp, just to be safe," he quickly added.

"I can't do that, I'll be ruined!" Rhodes shouted. "Reservations are already down nearly fifteen percent from last year because of the deaths at that other camp. Some of the parents have already cancelled for later weeks and if I send home the kids that are here now, they'll never come back."

"Dude, you can send 'em home in BMWs or in body bags. Which is it gonna be?" Dean shot back. "I chased that freakin' cat right into camp tonight. It almost got Melissa. How long you think it's gonna take before it makes cat chow outta one of your little Richie Rich wannabe's?"

"Mr. Rhodes, please. My brother and I, this is kinda what we do. We're hunters too, but different. We can help you with this if you let us. Don't let anyone else get hurt or worse," Sam pleaded.

Rhodes looked down to the cedar planked floor, shoulders slumped in defeat. "Alright, I don't want anyone else to get hurt. I'll do whatever you say. Tell me what you want."

Sam sighed, relieved that at least they could get the children and staff to safety. "Well, for starters, an employee list, past and present would be helpful. Is there anyone that you can think of that might have a grudge against you or the place. Personal or business?" he asked.

Rhodes shook his head. "No, not offhand. I've made some enemies, but who doesn't in business?"

"Okay, but if you think of anyone." Sam added. Rhodes nodded.

"I'll have Angela get you that staff list first thing in the morning, is that alright? And the same with the guests. It's too late to start calling parents tonight. We'll start getting them sent home first thing in the morning, okay?"

Sam and Dean exchanged glances, both nodding to the dejected camp owner. Rhodes crossed over to his desk, limply settling into his chair, head falling into his hands once again. They left him in silence, the opulence of the office now slightly less impressive.

\* \* \* \*

Dean followed Sam into the large foyer of Cumberland Hall. No less impressive than the first day they arrived, a fire still blazed in the two-story hearth.

"Well, I'm gonna go do a little background check on our Mr. Rhodes and this place. See what I find out on my own," Sam stated. "You wanna come up and crash for a bit? I swear dude, the bed is unbelievable."

Dean glanced up at the huge cedar staircase leading to the second floor and the counselor's quarters. Morbid curiosity nagged at him to see what Sam's room was like and nothing sounded better at the moment than a hot shower and a soft bed. But he'd left the Impala up on the ridge and Melissa in his vacated room. Now, which one to deal with first?

"Nah dude, you need the beauty rest more than me. Besides, I need to go check on Melissa again and somebody ought to keep an eye out on the place tonight, just in case. Let me know if you find anything," Dean answered, waving off Sam as he trudged toward the main doors.

Sam watched him leave, saw the fatigue in his brother's slow step and the pain, which Dean thought he was hiding, in the taut set of his shoulders. He thought about calling out to his brother, considered jogging to catch up and offering to stand watch with him. But Dean had only just begun to talk to him civilly again, to treat him like a brother and not a traitor, a hunter and not a conspirator. Sam wondered if they could patch up their relationship, could they get back to the easy banter of brotherhood, was there enough time for forgiveness and healing to take place before ...?

Sam watched a moment longer as Dean crossed the compound and headed toward his old quarters and the beautiful young brunette that was waiting there. He didn't know Melissa very well; actually, he didn't know her at all. But what he had seen the other evening spoke volumes; her gentle caring of his injured brother, protecting Dean, looking out for him, rushing to Dean's defense, defiantly standing up against the accusations of Rhodes and the cop. She seemed to be the perfect complement.

If there was one wish that Sam could have for his brother it would be for Dean to find happiness in life, to settle down and have a home and family, to have the life outside of hunting that Sam knew Dean secretly craved. Maybe, just maybe, when he was gone, when his deal with Haris was concluded and they weren't being pursued any longer, maybe Dean could find that happiness.

As Sam watched Dean fade further into the darkness, he smiled to himself. Content that if even for one night, his brother found some form of comfort then coming to Ridgecrest had been well worth it.

\* \* \* \*

Dean headed towards his former room, his legs weary, each step feeling heavier than the last. A dozen yards from the Admin building and he was regretting not taking Sam up on his offer. Glancing at his watch, it was half past midnight but he felt as though he'd been up for much longer.

A few feet from the door to his quarters he caught sight of the Impala, shining in the moonlight like a black knight overlooking the kingdom from its post atop the ridge. He felt torn, the pull of the car battling Melissa for his attention. The Impala

had always been there for him, a constant, home. But Melissa was waiting just a few feet away, warm, soft, and comforting.

And what exactly did that mean to him anyway? Where was there a place for warm, soft and comforting in his messed up life? Especially now, when Sam's life was in the balance? Wasn't it bad enough that he was wasting time on this damn hunt when he should be trying to find some way to get his brother out of the dumbass deal he made with the demon? How could he possibly think about his own happiness when his brother was faced with a countdown to his own mortality and all because of him?

Mind made up, Dean turned away from the door to the quiet room and slowly began the climb up the rough terrain to the waiting car.

\* \* \* \*

The sun rose lazily the next morning with clouds that threatened rain hovering off to the west. Sam heard the Impala pull into the compound as he was coming downstairs but decided to check on Rhodes before going to meet Dean.

He found the Ridgecrest Director's office door open and Rhodes seated much as they had left him the night before. Behind the desk, the dark-haired man was already on the phone, hanging up just after Sam entered the room.

"Well, we're starting to reach most of the families. Some of them won't make it up here till later this afternoon. It's the best I can do," he explained.

Sam nodded. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Rhodes. I know how hard you worked to build this place. It's for the best, for the safety of the kids and staff."

Rhodes looked down, the dark circles under his eyes adding to the picture of exhaustion. He moved aside the phone and list of numbers he had been working on and pulled out another wad of papers that he offered up to the young hunter.

"Angela put this together. We've only been open for the past three years, so that's everyone that's ever worked here. The bottom sheet is even a list of people that applied but that we didn't hire. You know, just in case you think one of them is the... well, whatever they are."

Sam smiled, taking the papers. "Thanks. I don't know if our person will be in here, but we gotta start somewhere."

"Well, I appreciate what you're trying to do. I don't understand what's happening, but it seems that you and your brother do, so if you can stop this thing, then I would be willing to pay the same bounty to you that I was offering to the McMurtrys," Rhodes offered.

"Let's just work on getting rid of the cat, Mr. Rhodes, and keeping everybody alive in the process," Sam returned. "Then we can talk about bounties. I'm gonna go talk to my brother, then get started on these lists. If you think of anything else, let one of us know, okay?"

Rhodes nodded in agreement and as Sam left the office in order to find Dean, he could hear the weary director back on the phone, telling another set of parents that they needed to retrieve their child for safety's sake.

As he exited the building, he flipped through the papers, absently noting some of the staff names he recognized. Surprisingly, many of the staff had worked at Ridgecrest since it opened, with very little turn over from one summer to the next. In fact, the final sheet listing the names of those turned down employment was nearly longer than the other three lists combined.

The smell of coffee assailed his nostrils and he looked up, unsurprised to see Dean standing before him, steaming beverage held in his hand. His older brother's eyes were red-rimmed and despite the veiled attempt to appear alert, Sam could immediately tell that Dean hadn't slept last night.

"Whatcha' got there?" Dean asked, handing Sam a second Styrofoam cup.

"Employee lists from Rhodes. I thought I'd start looking at them after I had something to eat. What about you? What are you up to today?"

Dean shrugged. "I don't know. Start getting some of these kids outta here. Maybe start poking around in some of the staff's quarters, see what that turns up. Finding out who conjured that friggin' cat up is like looking for a needle in a haystack Sam. It could be almost anybody."

"Yeah, I know. Well, I'm also gonna look at the staff list from those other camps where there were deaths last year and the year before too. Maybe we'll get lucky and find a connection. How's Melissa?" Sam asked.

Dean paused before answering, suddenly uncomfortable. "Uh, I haven't seen her yet. She was already gone when I got back to the room this morning."

Sam watched his brother carefully, recognizing the part of Dean that was already detaching himself from the beautiful young woman. "Go talk to her Dean. Don't do this to her. Don't do this to yourself."

Dean glared back at Sam, his look warning his younger sibling to stay out of his personal business, but inside, he knew Sam was right. Shuffling reluctantly towards the dining hall, he silently cursed his stomach for betraying him.

Entering the noisy cafeteria, Dean quickly sought out Melissa behind the far serving line. She looked up, doing a quick double take when she spotted him, a tentative smile crossing her face. He smiled back, nodding her way, lurching forward when Sam nudged him with his shoulder. He threw a punch back at a smugly grinning brother that only served to pull on his bruised chest, making Dean even more irritated as he approached the food bar.

Grabbing a tray, he tried to focus on the food, hanging back behind the kids that Melissa was serving. Once they moved on, he slowly moved forward, looking up when she said "good morning."

"Hey," he returned. "Eggs, bacon and potatoes, please." Dean asked, motioning toward the food.

"I missed you last night. Was everything okay?" Melissa responded as she dished out the fare. "You look exhausted," she added as she handed Dean the plate.

"I'm okay. Thanks. Everything's okay, well, as okay as it can be considering. Rhodes is going to evacuate the camp so at least no one else can get hurt. Beyond that, we've just got to find out who's controlling the cat."

"Evacuating the camp!" Melissa cried out. "Why? I thought everyone was safe here."

"Melissa, that thing almost got you last night. It's already killed four people for sure, what if it came after some of the kids? I know you need the work, but you can't tell me you'd risk that?" Dean questioned.

"No, no I didn't mean that. I wouldn't want that to happen," she corrected. "So, that's it then? Everyone will leave? You'll leave?"

"Well, my brother and I will hang out here for now. We're trying to find out who summoned that cat, try to get them to stop," he explained. "Melissa, look, sooner or later, I've got to go. My brother and I, we sorta have this job that we do and it takes us all over. I'm never in one place for very long. I'm sorry! I think I let you believe that there could be something here between us, hell; maybe I even let myself think for a minute that there could be something between us. But the truth is that my brother is kinda in trouble because of me and I gotta find a way to get him out."

Melissa looked down, unconsciously assuming that her hair was hiding her face as it usually did when it was unrestrained by the netting. Unfortunately for her, the disappointment and sadness was left unmasked, raw and unchecked for Dean to see.

"It's okay, I didn't expect anything, I mean, I don't want anything from you," she stammered back.

"Melissa, please, don't be that way. I didn't mean to hurt you. Someday, maybe after Sam is safe, I can come back. Just right now, I got things I got to deal with," Dean tried to explain, reaching out across the counter to touch her.

She jerked away as his fingers grazed her blouse, looking up briefly, tears filling the deep brown of her eyes. She dropped the utensil she was holding and ran to the back of the kitchen leaving Dean standing there despising himself and once more hating everything about this place and this hunt.

\* \* \* \*

Midday found the brothers immersed in the hunt. Dean had searched through most of the counselors' rooms in Cumberland Hall, finding nothing more suspicious than a book on wildlife hunting and trapping. Deciding to move on the support staff quarters, he passed by Sam working on the laptop. Poking his head in the doorway, he called out to his brother.

"Got anything?"

Sam looked up, rubbing his eyes then stretching his long frame backwards. "Nah, nothing yet. I started with the people that Rhodes turned down. But there's nothing suspicious with any of them. Most of them aren't even anywhere near here right now. How 'bout you?"

"Nothing," Dean replied. "Although your counselor buddies are the biggest bunch of freaks I've ever seen. No big surprise there though, having lived with you all these years."

"Whatever!" Sam threw back, smiling inwardly, happy that the banter had returned if only for a moment. "I saw that a bunch of the kids are starting to leave."

"Yeah! Doesn't break my heart. Less to have to worry about."

"You know Dean, we can't forget that these deaths didn't start here. They started and stopped at those other camps. What if they just stop here once everybody is gone?" Sam asked.

Dean shrugged. "Then we come back next year and kill the friggin' thing," he answered matter-of-factly.

"Dean, next year?"

"Aw Sam, don't give me any crap about you not being around next year," Dean exploded. "I'm gonna find a way to get your stupid ass out of that freaking deal, one way or another. So don't you even start talking like that!"

"Dean, that's not even what I meant you jerk! I was only saying that we can't just walk away from this without stopping it. That cat's killed a half dozen people; we can't just leave and see if it shows back up some other day." Sam implored.

"Yeah, well, we haven't left yet," Dean grumbled, trying to cover the rare glimpse of emotion that he'd let slip as he stalked out of the room.

Once outside, there was a bustle of activity in the center of the compound as several families were in the process of picking up their children. Rhodes and a few of the staff were busy making apologies, trying to reassure the parents that the move was merely precautionary, attempting to salvage any chance of a future for the camp.

Working his way through the throng of bodies, Dean was nearly to the first building that housed the support staff when Deidre charged out of nowhere nearly knocking the young hunter to the ground. He staggered as she fell into him, catching her and noting the panic in her eyes, her blonde curls disheveled as they clung to a dirt smudged face.

"Deidre, what's wrong?" he asked as she clung within his arms.

"Dean, you've got to help me. A bunch of the kids from my group went out on a scavenger hunt. I can't find them and I think they went down by old Crawford's Mill," she rambled. "They're out in the woods, with that - that thing."

"It's alright," he reassured her, rubbing her arms soothingly. "The cat hasn't attacked during the day. I'm sure they'll be fine. Can you show me which way they went?"

The petite blonde nodded, peeling away from the hunter's comforting embrace. Leading the way, Deidre headed out with Dean following her past the maintenance shed and off into the woods, neither one cognizant of the dark set of eyes that watched as the two blended into the shadows of the forest.

\* \* \* \*

Sam sat hunched over the computer, looking between the screen and the piece of paper that lay on the desk to his right. Fatigued and eyes bleary from staring at the screen for the better part of the day, he was afraid that what he was now seeing was a figment of his exhausted mind. At least, he was hoping that what he was looking at was wrong. It had to be!

He minimized one window on the screen and opened another, staring in disbelief at the name listed there. Comparing the two computer lists to the one before him, there was no denying what he was seeing; the connection. It could still turn out to be coincidence and Sam silently prayed that it was, but he had to be sure.

Grabbing the papers, he snagged the backpack as he flew from the room, heading out into the dying afternoon sun. He ran past the quad, now mostly empty, and towards the dining hall. Weaving past the few remaining staff that were busily preparing the evening meal for however many guests remained, he halted breathlessly in the middle of the kitchen.

"Melissa? Has anyone seen Melissa?" he asked between gasps.

"She hasn't come in yet," one of the workers replied. "Try her cabin?"

Sam nodded his thanks and sped off toward the staff quarters. It didn't take him long to bridge the distance between the cafeteria and the far side of the compound. He quickly found her room number and stepped up to knock on her door.

"Who is it?" she called out from inside.

"Melissa, it's Sam," he replied, suspicious when he heard her scurrying about inside. "Melissa! I need to ask you a couple questions. Can I come in for a second?"

"Um, I have to get ready to go to work. Can it wait till later Sam?" she answered nervously.

"Uh, Melissa, did you work last year at Camp Cherokee and then the year before at Camp Marengo?"

Sam listened intently, catching sounds of the girl tossing things about. When it was apparent that she had no intention of answering or letting him in, he reared back and kicked open the door to the room.

Melissa startled from the noise, seeing Sam's towering form standing in the doorway as the light from the outside flooded the space. She hurried to wipe the blood off her hands onto her jeans and quickly blew out the black candles that still dripped wax on the makeshift altar that had been her dresser.

Sam shook his head, confronted with the stark evidence that confirmed his earlier suspicions. "Aw Melissa, why?" he asked, regret for Dean filling him.

She looked up at him sadly, long brown hair shrouding her face. "I just got tired of watching everyone else get things in life. Go to college, get the guy, have the perfect body, the perfect life. Why not me? What's wrong with me?" she pleaded. "Even when I think I've got the guy, someone else comes along and takes him away. First that rich bitch comes and takes Matt and now, I lose Dean?"

Sam looked at her suddenly suspicious. "Melissa, what are you talking about? Who's taking Dean?"

Tears streaking her face, she looked up at Sam, venom flaming in her eyes. "I saw them! That pretty little blonde, Deidre. She was all over him and he was holding her.

That's why he didn't want me anymore. That's why he told me that stupid story about having to leave here because you were in trouble."

"Melissa, that's not true! I don't know what you saw, but I can guarantee you that there's nothing between my brother and Deidre. And yeah, it is true, I kinda am in some trouble and my brother, well Dean feels like he has to watch out for me. So he wasn't lying to you Melissa. In fact, it's sorta my fault that Dean feels like he can't stay here with you." Sam explained, watching her, hoping that his words found their way into her heart.

She looked at him for a long moment, staring deep into his eyes as though she was weighing the veracity of his words. He met her gaze, his own eyes pleading for her to believe him.

"What have I done?" she lamented. With a gasp, she spun around him and dodged out the open door.

"Melissa!" Sam screamed out after her. "What did you do? Where's Dean?"

\* \* \* \*

Dean followed Deidre out to the abandoned sawmill a quarter mile from Ridgecrest. They could hear the children's voices even before they saw them, both of them breathing a sigh of relief now knowing that the kids were alive and seemingly well.

Deidre rushed up to the group, simultaneously hugging and chastising the youngsters. Dean hung back, watching them out of the corner of his eye, while the hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood on end. It was the absence of normal forest sounds that first alerted him, the noises of birds and insects having gone silent. He was reaching for a weathered piece of discarded lumber when the Wampus cat's screech first sounded.

The children screamed in unison, panicked as they looked to Dean and Deidre for guidance. Deidre tried to remain calm, but she had already seen the handiwork of the creature, and her mind was already creating a macabre mental picture of how this was going to turn out. Dean didn't waste any time, essentially unarmed and saddled with a half dozen screaming kids, he sprang into action.

Shuffling the kids and Deidre behind him, he took a defensive posture with the wood two by four held in front of him, waiting for the cat to show itself. He backed the group up towards the old mill, hoping that if push came to shove, the rickety old structure might afford the kids some sort of protection.

There was another shriek and the big cat appeared out of the trees. The kids screamed again, one of the little girls even began to cry, her soft sobs serving only to make Dean more determined to protect them.

The Wampus cat advanced slowly, seemingly distracted by the raucous noise of the whimpering and crying children. Dean took advantage of the creature's distraction and jumped out and away from the group.

"Hey you furry freak! Over here," he shouted, waving the piece of wood in the air.

The cat hissed in anger, turning to face the lone hunter, its fangs bared as it gathered momentum to charge. Dean saw the creature turn its attention towards him and he shouted to Deidre.

"Get the kids out of here. Go, now! Run back to the camp and don't stop for anything."

He watched the blonde grab the first couple of kids by the hands, ushering the others before her, warily keeping one eye on the cat. The group started off tentatively, but as soon as Deidre saw that the beast had no intention of diverting its attention away from Dean, she spurred the children into a run.

Dean barely saw the children take off into the woods before the Wampus cat was on him. The massive creature struck him with its full weight, knocking him to the ground and driving the air from his lungs. Dean could feel the warm breath of the cat

against his face, could smell the fetid stench of dried blood in the cat's maw, and could see the beast's long fangs snapping mere inches from his head.

The only thing that immediately saved him was the sturdy two by four that had become pinned between his body and the creature when he fell. As the cat bore down on him, Dean pushed the timber up further, jamming it into the creature's jaw. The cat yowled in pain and lashed out with its front paw, claws extended, pulling the piece of wood from Dean's grasp and tossing it aside.

While the Wampus was distracted, Dean rolled out from underneath it, scrambling to get to his feet. He nearly made it to his knees before the beast caught him. Sharp claws ran down the back of his left leg, ripping through denim and flesh and leaving behind a blazing line of agony that felt as though his entire calf was on fire.

Dean cursed out loud and kicked backward with his right foot, connecting with the cat's muzzle and knocking it backward. He made it to his feet once again, stumbling as his weakened leg gave out under the demand he placed on it. He limped painfully forward, knowing that the creature was right behind him, but taking some solace in the knowledge that the cat seemed to be focused on him and not the children.

He made it to a large oak, leaning against the thick trunk when the cat attacked again. Launching at Dean at an angle, the hunter managed to side-step the cat but not before the beast's claws caught him a glancing blow across the upper right side of his chest and shoulder.

Dean bit back a cry of pain, his arm going nearly numb as the blood began to flow, cascading down to his fingertips and dripping off to splatter onto the forest floor. He sagged back against the tree trunk, energy seeping out of him like the blood that was leaking from his wounds. He thought about trying to make it inside the mill, but knew that was just prolonging the inevitable.

Stooping down, Dean managed to pick up another large branch. Smaller than the two by four, it still took every ounce of strength and willpower Dean possessed to hold it with his damaged arm. He held it in front of him as the cat advanced again, hoping to have the strength to swing it when the time came.

Vision blurring from blood loss, his leg threatening to buckle, Dean watched the massive Wampus inch closer, bloodied claws extended as it moved in to finish off its prey. He heard the creature's shriek, surprised that it sounded so similar to that of a woman's.

In the instant before the cat lashed out with its killing blow, Dean saw her. Long brown hair flowing behind her like the mane of a beautiful thoroughbred stallion, she charged into the clearing in much the same manner.

"Melissa!" he yelled out her name, instantly regretting it as the cat stopped its advance to investigate the interloper.

"Melissa, no!" Dean screamed as she continued coming towards him.

Dean hefted the make-shift club over his head, the movement sending a wave of pure agony coursing through his body. The Wampus cat returned its attention to the hunter, claws poised to drop the killing stroke. But it never came!

Dean stared in shocked silence, dropping the limb to the ground as he slowly began to realize what had just happened. Melissa lurched forward and he caught her in his arms, slowly lowering both of them to the ground.

"Melissa, what ... why?" Dean fumbled to comprehend what had occurred.

Covered in blood, she tried to respond, but as Dean looked closer, he could see that the cat's killing blow had landed after all. Melissa's throat was laid open, blood pulsing from vessels that were no longer intact.

"Oh no, Melissa no!" he cried out, hands going to try to staunch the flow of blood.

She looked up at him, brown eyes seeking out his hazel, blinking slowly as she struggled to keep them open. He watched her, fading from him, dying in his arms.

"Melissa, stay with me, please, keep your eyes open, look at me, stay with me," he begged. Dean glanced up, tears threatening his own eyes, when he saw Sam break into the clearing.

The brothers watched in stunned silence as the Wampus cat, still frozen in place a few feet from Dean, slowly faded away like smoke from a campfire dissipating on a strong wind until finally, it was gone.

Dean looked back down at Melissa, her brown eyes were still open, but now vacant and lifeless. He hugged her body up to his chest, rocking her back and forth until Sam came over and touched his shoulder.

"Dean, it's over."

He arched away from his brother's touch, unable to look at Sam's eyes, knowing that they would remind him of Melissa's. Dead Melissa. Soon to be dead Sammy. Why? Why were people always dying for him?

"No Sam, it's not over, it can't be over. I can't let it be," Dean mumbled back, eyes still locked on Melissa's limp form, arms still clinging to her lifeless body as though as long as he held on to her she couldn't truly be gone. If he couldn't save her, then could he hope to save his brother?

Sam watched his brother's silent agony, knowing that the impact of the girl's death couldn't have come at a worse time for Dean. He laid a hand on his brother's shoulder once more, this time Dean didn't flinch from the contact.

"Dean, come on, let her go," Sam softly began. "Let's get you back to Ridgecrest, you're hurt."

When his brother didn't respond, merely sat there, head down, eyes still locked on the girl's still form, Sam gently shook him. "Dean?"

"Why Sam?" Dean's voice, barely more than a whisper, cracked with grief.

"She never meant to hurt you Dean. She was just confused and in the end, I think it was the only way she thought she could make it all right," Sam offered.

Dean shook his head slowly, looking up at his brother, hazel eyes seeking his brother's, finding them and staring deeply into them.

"Not Melissa, you! Why'd you do it Sam? Why'd you make that deal for me?" Dean questioned. Sam glanced down, unable to face the utter torment and grief that so rarely showed in Dean's usually well-maintained stoic face.

"Don't do that! I want to see your eyes!" Dean demanded. Looking back up, his eyes meeting Dean's once again, Sam took a deep and less than settling breath.

"Because in the end, maybe it was the only way I thought I could make it all right," he simply said.

Dean stared blankly, absorbing the stark reality of his brother's words. He looked back down at Melissa, her body already cooling as it lay in his arms. With a gentle move of his hand he closed her eyes for a final time, refusing to see Sam's eyes in hers any longer. Silently determined to never see Sam's eyes close in the same way, he slowly rose to shaky feet and began the painful walk back through the lonely woods.

**The End**