

Season Three
Episode Five: Between Two Fires
By Kittsbud & Tree

Morgan's Garage
Warner, OK

The waning moonlight played across the harsh concrete floor, making grotesque shadows around the plethora of power tools discarded there.

The silhouettes, like the tools, only told half the tale.

It was late evening – the shift should have been over for the night – and yet, a solitary inspection lamp still dared to illuminate the workshop. The metal-encased light hung from beneath a battered SUV that was held skyward by a bright yellow vehicle ramp.

From somewhere behind a wheeled tool cabinet, Iron Maiden's *'Fear of the Dark'* blurted from the radio, the signal clarity impaired by its makeshift aerial until the words were distorted into gibberish by the hiss of static.

Yet, somehow, the inspection lamp seemed to swing in time to the music, like the rocking pendulum of a carefully wound clock.

Like some impending countdown to doomsday.

Drip...

Drip...

The lamp continued to swing, but there was a new sound to accompany its motion along with the rock music. Something dark and thick was slowly dribbling from the light's metal casing onto the floor beneath.

Something scarlet was pooling under the Ford, pooling, in fact, around several of the discarded tools until the garage was almost awash with its sticky, coagulating presence.

There was an odor too – the rank smell of death – of murder.

A rodent skittered across the workshop, pausing at a power drill to sniff inquisitively at the thing impaled on the drill's bit. The rat's whiskers twitched, its tiny brain processing the smell of fresh meat before daring to begin to feast.

Mia Cameron watched the macabre event but dared not move. Her startled and unnaturally wide eyes were fixated on the freshly plucked eyeball that had been skewered by the drill bit.

The eye seemed to look at her, even though most of the inner vitreous fluid had escaped, leaving it somewhat deflated.

Was it really just watching or was it actually *accusing*?

Mia shivered, her hands, her whole body shaking violently. She belonged here – no – worked here, and yet she had no memory of how the dismembered body part had come to be speared on the drill she had been using earlier. Nor had she any idea where the puddles of blood around the garage had sprung from.

She looked down, smudges of oil and grease on her hands all but hidden by yet more of the heinous scarlet liquid. Deep red blood that had begun to dry into a more rustic hue – blood that she knew was not her own.

Why can't I remember? Why don't I know what happened after I took off the damn muffler?

Mia instinctively looked up at the underbelly of the Ford. Its muffler had been peppered with holes, but the thing was so old she'd had to take an angle grinder to it to remove it. She closed her eyes, recalling the smells, the noise, the whole scene from earlier in the day.

There had been someone with her – they'd been alone in the workshop – laughing, joking, *flirting*.

Mia flinched and scrambled to her feet. She had needed to remember, but now those fleeting recollections were bringing more fear.

She looked away from the drill as she crossed the room, not wanting to see the rat now dragging the eyeball away with the remnants of the optic nerve that were still attached to it.

*Fear of the dark, fear of the dark
I have a constant fear that someone's always near
Fear of the dark, fear of the dark
I have a phobia that someone's always there*

Iron Maiden's lyrics still screamed from the radio and Mia focused on the sound. She needed something to be able to latch onto – anything – rather than look at the floor.

Because the floor held other items she really didn't want to see.
I did this...

The whirring of the angle grinder filled her head and she quickly placed her hands over her ears, desperate to shut off the sound. Her palms pushed over her lobes until she thought the pressure would burst her eardrums, but the grinding, cutting, grating, *killing* noise couldn't be shut out.

There was no way to stop it, because it didn't emanate from the room, but from her own mind.

Mia's eyes flashed wide and she couldn't resist the urge to look in the corner – the place where she recalled last using the cutting tool.

I was working on the Ford, on the car dammit...not over there...
But she was still forced to look.

The grinder lay on the concrete, its cable strewn dangerously close to the cutting blade as if the last user hadn't been thinking rationally. The stone disc had long since stopped spinning, but like Mia's hands, it too was painted scarlet.

Beyond the grinder, there was something larger laying just out of sight in the shadows. Perhaps if the Moon were free from the clouds that held it captive, the thing would have been visible, but for now it teased, urging Mia to draw closer.

The girl felt sick – but she couldn't help herself – she was mesmerized as well as sickened to the point where she had to satiate her own morbid curiosity.

Forcing a trembling hand forward, she touched something soft, something fleshy and warm. Her fingers traced its shape until they began to sink into something sticky, something suspiciously like the empty eye socket of a human skull.

Mia screamed – not because she realized she was handling the decapitated head of her co-worker – but because she realized that maybe *she* had done this with the grinder.

No...no...NO!

Bile erupted in her throat and she made a dash across the workshop, only getting halfway before retching up the contents of her stomach next to a half-dismantled Indian.

The acid, like her missing memories, burned in her chest eating at her, clawing until she began to become breathless. She was just an ordinary girl, things like this were for TV shows, for documentaries. She wasn't like those crazies that appeared every few months on the six o'clock news, was she?

Mia tried to slow her breathing, tried to regain some semblance of control – and it almost worked – until she saw the blood smeared with grease on her palms again.

"It wasn't me. I'd never hurt him. Why would I hurt him? I *loved* him..." The muttering seemed almost manic, but it was what she needed. She needed to hear a voice of reason, even if it was only her own strained tones.

Moving towards the door as she continued her oratory, Mia headed towards the garage's meager reception area. Like the workshop, it was small and outdated, but it served its purpose.

A long row of worn seats lined the shortest wall, and across the other a wooden counter had been placed to serve as both a desk and reception. Behind the counter, a short row of grimy photographs showed the establishment's employees.

“Why don’t I remember? *Why?*” Mia shook her head as she approached the images, realizing for the first time that a good section of her mid-length mop of hair had actually stuck to her face. She pushed away the matted brown locks, knowing that another person’s blood had gelled it to her skin.

On the wall, her own image glared back at her along with that of her dead lover.

Mia touched the glass covering the photos, hoping the tactile sensation would bring back more memories – helpful memories – not bad ones. *Greg...I loved Greg...would never hurt...*

No more memories emerged, only a sickening pain in her chest. She needed to leave this place, leave the badness behind.

Mia’s eyes darted to a sink in the corner. It was meant for washing away the everyday oil and grime from the workshop, but tonight it would serve another purpose.

Taking two long strides she reached out and placed her hands in the bowl, nudging the hot water faucet to “on” with her elbow.

Steam hissed out as the purifying liquid began to cascade over her bloodied hands, but Mia didn’t feel the intense heat. Instead, she rubbed in more and more hand cleanser, hoping its abrasive properties would wash away her sins.

Looking up for the briefest moment, she rubbed away condensation from a cracked and abused mirror to peer at her own features. Her hair was matted, her face contorted with fear and desperation – but her eyes – her eyes were inhuman.

Eyes that had once glinted with a gentle brown tinge now seemed to glass over with the most obsidian stain Mia had ever seen. It had to be a trick of the light, a panic-induced hallucination, maybe?

It’s not real...not real...

Mia pulled away from the sink and its “magic mirror,” almost stumbling in her haste to escape the garage that had suddenly become some circus of horrors.

“Priest...I need a priest...” The girl paused at the desk, common sense making her realize she needed more than a holy man – she needed transport.

Glancing up at the wall, she grabbed the second set of keys on the rack, knowing the car was not only fast, but the repairs it had been brought in for had already been taken care of. There was no point in “borrowing” a set of wheels that was likely to give out on you after two miles, now was there?

A smile cracked her mask of pain and her heart skipped a beat. She wasn’t a religious person, but how could she be smiling at her own cunning at a time like this? Was she even in control anymore?

Mia fingered the keys to the Camero she was about to steal and made a choice. She couldn’t go to the police, she couldn’t go to friends after what she had done.

What did that leave?

I can’t let this happen again...I’d rather die first...

Slamming through the garage’s main door, she didn’t even bother to reset the alarm. If any of the young yahoos who’d be plaguing the place for months decided to break into Morgan’s tonight, they would be in for a big surprise.

Florida Panama City Beach Motel

“Dude, tell me again what we’re doing here?” Dean lay back on the motel room bed, interlocking his fingers behind his head as a scowl formed on his features. If this was what fun was supposed to be like, then he’d trade it for a good hunt any day. Not that Florida was supposed to be boring – not according to all the half-naked girls he’d seen advertizing it on the TV – but that, he was quickly learning, was pretty much hype this time of year.

Sam's face creased into a smile and he took the time to look up from his laptop screen to shake his head at his brother. "We're *here*," he explained as if he was teaching kindergarten, "because *you* thought it would be cool to play chick-magnet."

Dean scoffed and let his eyes stray out of the nearby window. "Hey, we just kicked the ass of a serial killing demon with a serious clown fetish! Man, I'm telling you, we deserve a little 'fun time.'" He shrugged. "How was I to know this time of year we're more likely to get Ma Clampett in a thong instead of some full on semi-naked babe with big..."

"Dean!" Sam rolled his eyes skyward and tossed an empty paper cup at his brother. The cup bounced harmlessly off the edge of the bed and landed atop the elder sibling's duffel.

"You can be so damn unimaginative, you know that?" Dean pushed away from the headboard and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. The *ordinary* bed that didn't even have the luxury of "magic fingers" to keep him occupied. *Next time, I so book the rooms...*

Sam ignored the direct jibe, putting his attention, and his fingers, back to work on the laptop. "You know, after the whole deal in Leicester, don't you think we should find some way of tracking demons instead of just taking random hunts? I mean, Ferinacci almost..."

"Almost released an army of freaks hellbent on taking over us poor human schmucks?" Dean finished the sentence for his brother and raised a brow questioningly. "What's eating at you, Sammy? You've been at that friggin' computer for two days when you coulda been out getting laid or something." He pursed his lips, scratching at his head in thought. "On second thoughts, with the selection of female talent on offer around here, maybe you should stick with the laptop..."

"Dean, will you just listen?" Sam spun the laptop around on the bed so that his brother could see the screen. "I've been working on something that will bring up all the possible demon related news items around the country. Maybe we can't beat Ferinacci, but we can at least stay ahead of him this way –"

"So what have you got, Kolchak?" Dean bounced down on the bed, unsure if he really wanted to look. Coming to Florida might not have been the best plan he'd ever had, but after freezing his butt off in the Arctic, almost being consumed by the fiery pit itself and then fighting a bunch of demonic serial killers, well, he wasn't sure he was ready for the next stage of Lucifer's little "game."

"It's a report from a small town in Oklahoma. Apparently, a priest at the local church was killed by a woman during confessional."

"So?" Dean shrugged. "Maybe the padre wasn't the forgiving type..."

"Or maybe," Sam continued, "the woman was possessed. Take a look." He let a finger slide midway down the laptop screen. "There are reports the same woman was seen running from the church, and her eyes were black – as in *all* black, Dean."

"Why would this demon chick kill some random priest? I mean I know their kind got the whole Tweety and Sylvester hatred thing going on, but c'mon, gotta be a motive." Dean let his eyes stray from the screen to his brother, then grabbed a half-empty can of Pepsi from the bedside table. Taking a swig, he waited for answers. Sammy was better at this crap than Fox Mulder – not that Dean would ever tell him that. That kind of thing was reserved for unspoken acknowledgments only.

Surprisingly, Sam closed the laptop and picked up his cell. Hitting a number in the speed dial section, he slid the phone to his ear, holding a hand over its base to continue talking while he waited for the ring tone. "If anybody has any more information about this, it'll be Kyle. He knows to watch out for signs of this kinda thing in the church."

"Moses?" Dean mouthed, his face scrunching into a pained expression. "Dude, you know what happened with Laura. We don't want the world's friendliest preacher trying to deal with this black-eyed freak. His Holiness will get his ass kicked, *again*."

“Just information...” Sam cut off his answer and quickly removed his hand from the bottom of the cell. “Kyle, it’s Sam Winchester...”

Dean watched as his brother chatted with the priest for over twenty minutes, taking in every strained expression that crossed Sam’s face and every stroke of the pen he’d grabbed to make notes. Apparently Kyle had heard about the killing, but whether that was good or bad news remained to be seen.

The elder hunter liked Kyle Williams, but Kyle was a shy little man who could often be overzealous and put himself and others in danger. For the priest’s sake, Dean hoped Kyle didn’t need to get too involved with this new gig. He’d almost died once at the hands of a soulless monster; he didn’t need to face off any more demons just yet.

“So,” Sam finally spoke after flipping his cell closed. “Looks like the girl is definitely possessed. Kyle says the priest wasn’t killed during a confessional – get this – he was doing an exorcism.”

Dean nodded and took down a breath. It made much more sense for the holy man to have died trying to banish a demon, than for the demon to have just walked into a confession box and whacked the priest for nothing. “He bought the farm trying to out this thing from the girl. At least he went out with a bang.”

“Pretty literally, Dean.” Sam slid his phone into his jeans pocket and then grabbed his tan jacket from a peg on the back of the door. “Kyle says whoever this demon is, it’s pretty powerful. It brought half the church roof down on Father Lane.”

Dean winced, the bridge of his nose puckering slightly in distaste. “So if we find this thing we gotta exorcize it fast or get our asses squished worse than Wile. E Coyote on a bad day huh?”

Sam pulled on his jacket and then retook his seat on the edge of the bed. He reopened the laptop and entered several new key search phrases. Once the machine was working, he looked back up to his brother. “It gets worse, Dean. Way worse. Father Lane had *finished* the exorcism when the girl took him out. It looks like the *Rituale Romanum* doesn’t work on this thing – at the very least – it doesn’t last.”

“So you’re telling me you can’t do your whole ‘chant in Latin and can its ass’ deal?” Dean tossed his now empty Pepsi can in the small waste basket provided and began to pace. Of all the hunts he’d been on, both solo and with Sam, the *Rituale Romanum* had always worked. The thing that scared him most now, even though he wouldn’t admit it to his brother, was that maybe this was all part and parcel of Lucifer’s big plan.

How would the world cope with a demon infestation if the *Rituale Romanum* no longer had any meaning?

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted, his eyes locking on something on his screen. “But take a look at this. Two more murders near the town of Warner, Oklahoma. There’s security footage from the first. Looks like some girl killed her own boyfriend at a garage and then vanished. “ He paused, thinking hard. “And, Dean? She fits the description of the woman who killed the priest...”

Dean nodded slowly. Whatever her reasons, the girl – or rather the creature inside her – was going on a killing spree. Maybe it was a random demon thing, or maybe it was part of Ferinacci/Lucifer’s “End of the World” plans. Either way, they had to stop things before they escalated any further.

Grabbing his scuffed leather jacket and slipping it on, Dean pulled his duffel from the end of the bed and knocked away the empty paper cup Sam had lobbed on it earlier. There was little to pack, because he rarely had time to unpack, but then, that was the Winchester way.

“Time to go find the black-eyed bitch and send her on a one way ticket back to Hell, little brother.” Sticking a hand into a side compartment of his bag he retrieved a small flask. With a quick flick of his wrist the flagon’s cap was off and he was able to check the contents. “Just make sure you got plenty of this stuff handy, because it sounds like packing anything else ain’t gonna cut it this time.”

Sam swallowed and looked across to the journal that sat innocently by his bed.

Dean caught the direction of his brother's gaze and realized what he was thinking. For the first time, their dad's diary was useless to them – everything they'd been taught – everything they'd picked up on the road with other hunters. It was all useless.

"If we catch her, Dean, just how do we save her?" Sam's innocent eyes skipped to the window rather than to his brother. "How do we send the demon inside back to hell without the exorcism rite?"

Dean stuffed the canteen of holy water back in his bag and slung the duffel on his shoulder. Like his father's journal, he didn't have the answers, but he wasn't giving in, not now, not ever. Maybe this was a war they'd never win, but that didn't mean he'd ever stop trying.

For the innocent girl enslaved by the new mystery demon, for Sam, for humankind.

"I don't know," he eventually answered. "But we'll make it happen, Sammy. I promise..."

St. Joseph's Church 323 North Virginia, Muskogee, OK

Sam carefully straightened his tie and shot a stray glance over to his fidgeting brother. Dean hated wearing suits almost as much as he hated chart music, but sometimes it was just plain necessary to take one for the team.

That meant that while Sam had attempted to look his best for their little charade, Dean was trying his hardest to escape the "death grip" of the thing around his neck with little regard to how that made him look.

The younger Winchester was tempted to remind his sibling that FBI agents didn't usually go around looking like scarecrows, but before he got the chance, a small, gangly-looking priest appeared from behind the pulpit and began to walk their way.

The holy man nodded as he approached, offering an outstretched hand in welcome. "I'm Father Malone. You must be from the police," he concluded with a small sigh.

"FBI," Sam corrected, pulling a freshly made ID from his breast pocket. "I'm Agent Shears and this is my partner Agent Marquis." He stole another glance to Dean, resisting the urge to smile as he saw the sudden onset of pain in his brother's eyes. *Gotcha, dude!* "We spoke earlier," Sam continued, reaffirming his focus on the priest.

The short man bobbed his head, his eyes abruptly falling to the floor. "It was a sad business... Father Lane was a good friend. A good priest..."

"And you have no idea why this girl would want to harm him?" Dean tapped the small black pad in his palm as if he actually had notes on it to refer to.

The little priest shifted warily from foot to foot, his dark green eyes remaining out of contact with the two brothers as if it would help him hide some deep dark secret. "I... I don't think so..."

"And there was nothing strange about her?" Sam gently probed. "Nothing *different* about her eyes..?" He paused, noting the priest's hand trembling slightly.

"Father... did you or Father Lane think this girl was... possessed?"

The last word seemed to bite into the priest so hard he started. "You're not FBI..."

Sam took a step forward, wanting to both reassure Malone and gain his trust. In their line of work, priests were an asset, and alienating this one wasn't on their list of things to do. "We're here to help," he cajoled. "If you'll let us?"

Malone finally took his eyes from the stone-slabbed floor and looked at each brother in turn. His gaze lingered on Dean for a moment before he stepped back, allowing his knees to buckle as he slumped onto a pew.

Sam waited, knowing the forty-something-year-old was struggling with his faith and how to handle what had happened. Most priests never had to face a possessed human, or any kind of spirit or demon. When they did, like now, it was an eye-opener.

"We've been given information that Father Lane was trying to perform an exorcism when he was killed. Is that right?" Dean took a seat by the side of the priest, surprising even Sam with the amount of understanding in his voice.

Malone seemed to warm to the inflection. "Yes...yes he was. I'd been called out that day, and by the time I got back the exorcism was over." The priest began to nervously wring his hands as if he was reliving prior events. "The girl *should* have been saved...but her eyes. I'll never forget those eyes. So *black*..."

"So, any ideas why the exorcism didn't work, padre? Do you think Father Lane could have screw...messed up somehow?"

"No." Malone shook his head. "This wasn't Father Lane's first exorcism. He knew the *Rituale Romanum* better than anyone I know. And yet..." He turned, gesturing with a quick nod towards a cordoned off section of the church. "And yet that thing brought half the roof down on him with one flick of her hand – "

Sam looked across the church at the yellow police tape that still marked the spot where Lane had died. Pieces of slate and stone still lay untouched on the floor, and above, he could see the vivid blue hues of the sky through a hole in the roof. "Thank you," he finally offered. "If we need anything else we'll be in touch."

Malone exhaled but didn't move as they walked away.

Maybe Sam was wrong, but he suspected the little man had been exhausted just by their conversation. *I hope the girl doesn't come back. He'd never handle her.*

"Okay, Agent *Shears*." Dean jerked a thumb towards the arched stone exit. "That wasn't real helpful. Any more suggestions other than using dumbass names on our ID's?"

Sam chuckled. He'd been waiting for this the whole time in the church and was relatively surprised he'd gotten away with it this long. "Oh you mean because I didn't use something like Hendrix or Paige?"

Dean's nose scrunched in distaste and he jumped down the church steps two at a time to get back to the Impala – something that Sam found highly amusing. Whenever Dean got pissy, Sam could count on him wanting to get to the Chevy as if it was some last refuge or sanctuary. It was a habit he'd formed even as a kid, and sometimes Sam suspected his brother associated the car so much with their father that to Dean, it had become an extension of the Winchester patriarch. A patriarch that was still missing since he'd hastily left Bobby's awhile back.

"Friggin' *Scissor Sisters*! I thought you'd gotten over that whole thing back in Big Bear..." Dean's muttering continued as he heaved open the Chevy's door and dropped in behind the wheel.

"Hey, you were the one that started it messing with my cell..." Sam settled onto the bench seat and shut the car door somewhat more gently than his brother. The ancient metal still gave out its usual grating moan before the latch clicked into place. "Anyway, can we concentrate on demon girl here for a second?"

Dean nodded in submission, but Sam couldn't help but notice his brother slyly flick through the ring tones on his cell as they began to talk. While Sam hadn't considered it before, he had to admit that perhaps a little nighttime mission with some funky disco downloads might not be such a bad idea. He was sure Dean would so appreciate Irene Cara's *Fame*, or maybe even the Bee Gees *You Should Be Dancing* for his ringtone.

"Okay, so, you're ancient and very questionable musical tastes aside, what have we got?" Sam finally loosened his own tie and heaved down a deep breath in frustration. "I mean, the girl comes here for help. Was she maybe still in control a little? Otherwise we're back to why a demon would even come here..."

"Let's take a step back, Sammy." Dean dropped the cell into his pocket after finding no evidence of sibling tampering. "This chick didn't just kill the priest. According to those news reports you found, she offed two other poor schmucks too. Looks like the boyfriend, a local doctor and then Father Lane. There has to be some kind of pattern here we're missing."

"You hope," Sam pointed out, watching curiously as his brother leaned forward and popped the glove box. "Dad's journal?" He asked in surprise as the small, leatherbound book appeared in Dean's hand.

"This reminds me of something." Dean began to rifle through the tattered pages, pausing every few seconds only to move on again when the right date didn't present itself. "I've seen a case Dad worked way back when – I dunno, Sammy, seeing the types of people this demon takes out just brought back the memory." He eventually tapped a page and carefully passed the book over. "Bingo! Look familiar?"

Sam raised a brow but took the journal and began to read. "Dad never solved this," he pointed out, wincing at some of the garish details his father had made note of – including a doctor that had been decapitated when a small section of his office roof had collapsed.

"It was an early gig," Dean admitted. "But take a look at the list of victims Dad put together. Sound familiar?" He gazed over, looking at his father's scrawled handwriting.

Lover
Believer
Healer
Protector
Friend
Family

"You're thinking we can already scratch lover, believer and healer off the list of hits?" Sam asked, turning the page to read the last few notes.

Dean shrugged. "I'm thinking it's a pretty thin lead, but yeah. Dad never mentioned the name of this friggin' demon or why it was doing this, but maybe if we can find enough about the girl it's possessing we can beat it to the next victim." His eyes seemed to glaze over and he quickly looked out the side window. "Maybe we can even save the girl."

Sam didn't miss the abrupt change in his brother, but he didn't comment on it. Just a short while ago, Dean had been witness to the death of a friend – Erika Gudrun – and despite his wise ass attitude, Sam knew Dean was far from over it.

Dean had never liked Erika – at least – not outwardly, because he considered her a reaper. Even so, watching her die and being helpless to prevent it had made him even more angry at the powers of darkness.

Even more angry at *himself*.

Sam was all too aware that right now his brother was inwardly vowing to save this unknown girl, no matter what the cost, because he was reliving Gudrun's death over and over in his mind, constantly taking the blame like only Dean could.

The events in Leicester hadn't helped Dean, either. It wasn't every day, even for a Winchester, that you got to feel the thoughts and memories of a soul condemned to Hell.

"Okay," Sam flipped John's journal shut. "We know from the reports that the girl worked at Morgan's Garage in Warner. She probably had friends there who might be able to give us a few leads. "

"Sounds like a plan, little brother." Dean flicked the ignition and the Impala growled into life. Slipping the column change into drive, he used his free hand to completely pull away his tie and toss it on the back seat. Grinning at the instant relief the move gave, he switched on the stereo.

When The Doors' *People Are Strange* began to fill the Chevy's interior with Morrison's haunting tones, he began to sing along until Sam was convinced there was a pregnant werewolf in the driver's seat. That, or maybe the tie really had strangled his brother's vocal cords.

"When you're strange, no one remembers your *nameeeee...*"

"Dude," Sam shook his head, pulling out a piece of tissue from his pocket and sticking it in his ears as a sign of sibling protest. "*You're strange, very strange...*"

"You're just jealous 'cause you can't sing for squat."

Sam wound down the window, choking back a chortle. At least while he was singing, Dean wasn't having serious self-doubt about Gudrun's death or his chances of saving the possessed girl they were tailing.

"Man, just don't go expecting to be on *American Idol* anytime soon. That Cowell freak would so cream your ass!"

Dean headed across the next intersection, tapping the steering wheel in time to the music. "You know, I've been thinking about him. Ya think maybe *he's* possessed too?"

Sam opened his mouth to respond, but for the life of him, he couldn't find one good argument to fight Cowell's case. Instead, he just crossed his arms and thanked whoever was listening that his brother had at least not broken out his latest Deep Purple CD.

Morgan's Garage Warner, OK

"Thank you for seeing us, Mr. Morgan." Sam perched his huge frame on a "less than roomy" office chair and waited for his brother to do the same before continuing. "We're doing a follow up on the Greg Watson case, and any extra details you could give us would be very helpful..."

Harry Morgan rubbed a hand across his clean-shaven features and shrugged. He was a short little man who looked almost as round as he was tall. Maybe Sam's own height and muscular frame made him biased, but Morgan reminded him of a human barrel – with bright red cheeks and a small moustache finishing off the details.

"I don't know what I can tell you two fellas that I didn't tell Cooper – I mean, Sheriff Cooper, but I'll try." Morgan leaned forward and interlocked his fingers on the desk, tapping his hands on the surface in nervous frustration.

"We'd like to know anything you can tell us about..." Dean looked at his notepad, reading the scribblings he'd taken from Sam's newspaper report. "Mia Cameron? Can you tell us the names of any friends, relatives, that kind of thing?"

Morgan sniffed as if the name brought back memories he didn't care to share, and after a second he looked out of the side window before answering. "Mia was a great girl. I still can't believe what she did to Greg – she loved him, why would she hurt him? And so brutally? She kept carving and carving at him with that damn angle grinder."

"You were here?" Sam asked, his brow arching in surprise as he looked to Dean and then back to the garage owner.

"No." Morgan shook his head. "I wasn't here, but I saw it on the CCTV footage." He tapped the monitor screen on his desk. "My brother is in the business. After some local yahoos broke in a coupla times he installed me a state of the art system. Everything is recorded onto a hard drive."

"Sheriff Cooper took the drive, right?" Dean asked, a look of disappointment already creasing his normally jovial features.

"Yup, took it first thing after I found the body. 'Course, I'd already seen it, not to mention sent a copy over to my personal PC right here." He dipped a thumb to the desktop unit hiding under his desk, smiling with just enough perverse pleasure that it actually scared Sam. "I know it was wrong, but..."

Sam tried not to wince. Morgan seemed like your everyday Mr. Ordinary. He looked too squeaky clean to even work in a garage much less own one – and yet – he was sick enough to want to keep the recording of a brutal murder.

"We'll need to see that," Dean chipped in, closing the pad in his hand and stuffing it in his pocket before rising from his seat and standing over the "human barrel" just enough to intimidate him. "Unless you'd like your personal computer confiscated right along with your security system hard drive?"

Morgan squirmed but began tapping at the keyboard on his desk. Tiny beads of perspiration began to form on his brow and trickle down his face as he worked furiously to bring up the footage.

Sam watched the garage owner and realized he was enjoying seeing the man writhe and fidget as Dean stood over him. Morgan was one of the small percentage of the population that fit right on in with the demons and angry spirits of the world. He was evil in human form.

"Here, here it is," Morgan mumbled, turning the LCD screen so that both brothers could get a view. "It's pretty dark and the noise level...maybe I should turn off the volume before the screaming starts?"

Sam wanted to shake his head, but he couldn't.

Even though the recording was grainy due to light quality, he had already spotted Mia in the corner of the screen, angle grinder in hand. It looked like she was talking to someone in the shadows – possibly the boyfriend.

After a second, Mia began to cross over the workshop, but she didn't put the grinder down. The noise from the tool began to grow louder – as if she had it on maximum revs.

Greg appeared, arms outstretched, begging, pleading for her to stop, but Mia had no intention of stopping.

The voices turned to screams, and the screams soon turned to the grinding of bone as the girl began to coldly cut into her partner until his head was severed from his torso. Not satisfied with the bizarre decapitation, she walked around the garage choosing other tools to desecrate her ex-lover's body. A drill to his eyes, a nail gun to his hands and finally she had used a screwdriver and brute force to gouge out his heart and toss it at the Ford.

"Where could she get such *strength*?" Morgan was shaking his head, but the twinkle of raw pleasure was still clear in his eyes as they fixated on the monitor.

Dean shot a glance to his brother. "Sam, take a look at her eyes..."

Even though the footage was monochrome, the total blackness of Mia Cameron's eyeballs was vividly apparent.

"Mr. Morgan, have you any records on file for Mia? Next of kin? Relatives? That kind of thing? Does she have any friends in town she might go to?" Sam leaned forward and hit the pause button on the computer's video player as he spoke. While Morgan might be getting a cheap thrill out of a young kid's death, Sam found it deeply disturbing.

Not only were they witnessing a murder, but the possession of the girl was pretty overwhelming too, even for him. It reminded Sam of Meg, and how they had been unable to save her as she'd choked her last breaths in Dean's arms. Would Mia be any different?

Crap, I'm starting to sound like Dean!

Morgan grunted with annoyance that the CCTV footage had been paused, but pushed up from his chair, virtually "rolling" over to a filing cabinet near the doorway. After rummaging for less than a minute he shook his head. "I only have one address on file for next of kin." He passed the sheet over to Dean. "Course, Mia had plenty of friends in town. Damn likable gal, if you know what I mean..." He wiggled his eyebrows just a little too suggestively.

Dean nodded. "Yeah, we know exactly what you mean..." He folded the paper, stuffing it in the same pocket as his notepad. "You're sure there's no one in particular she hung out with?"

"Well, maybe just Karen Aldridge. They used to go shooting together. I guess you could say they were like sisters before all this."

"Where can we find Karen?" Sam stood to his full height, hoping it gave him the same intimidating air Dean had used on Morgan earlier.

For some reason, it didn't seem to work. Morgan shrugged and slumped back into his chair as if he lived in it – which from his size – Sam guessed was a pretty distinct

possibility. “Karen is the Deputy Sheriff around here. I think you FBI boys can find *her* without my help, right?”

Dean’s eyes narrowed. “I’m pretty sure we can, Jabba. Maybe we’ll drag your ass down there with us for withholding that footage. Whattya say, Morg? In fact, maybe we should search that hard drive of yours for anything else *interesting*.” He winked roguishly. “I’m sure you’ve got some sick stuff stashed on there, don’t ya?”

Morgan’s pupils narrowed and his skin paled, but he didn’t answer. Sam suspected if they pushed him more he’d probably start screaming for a lawyer – something they really didn’t want – considering their none FBI status.

Sam dipped his brows, trying to achieve his best “stone face” expression – the one he’d watched so many *Death Wish* movies to try to perfect – but had never quite mastered as well as Dean or Charles Bronson. “Wipe your hard drive, or I promise we’ll be back with a whole unit.”

Morgan didn’t move.

The garage owner simply sat in his chair, bobbing his head like a cheap toy dog in the rear window of a car.

* * * *

“Dude, that guy was one sick puppy. He actually *enjoyed* watching that chick go Jason Voorhees or her partner.” Dean squirmed as he placed his hands on the Impala’s roof, looking across as Sam joined him.

“Yeah, sometimes I wonder which is worse,” Sam admitted, opening the rear door and tossing his jacket on the seat. “At least demons are inherently evil. But humans can be just...”

“Nutjobs?” Dean grinned back, remembering a conversation from a recent gig in Leicester.

“Yeah, well, Jabba may be a nutjob *and* a pervert, but he isn’t our problem right now.” Sam craned his head and arm through the open side window of the Chevy and pulled out a local area map. After flipping it over, he tapped the page with his forefinger. “The Sheriff’s office isn’t too far. I think we should start there first.”

Dean bobbed his head in agreement and ducked behind the wheel of his black four-wheeled mistress. “You’re thinking Mia the Mutilator’s cop buddy is the ‘Protector’ on the list, huh?”

Sam joined him inside the car, his stomach already churning at the possibility that they were right – and maybe already too late. “Yeah,” he answered quietly. “But either way, if we’re not fast enough, there’s going to be a body count even Michael Myers wouldn’t be able to match.”

Local Sheriff’s Office

Dean gently tapped the brake pedal of the Impala, bringing it to a stop just a short distance from the local Sheriff’s office. The Chevy’s engine died as he switched off the ignition and craned his head forward to take a peek at the building they’d come to visit.

Despite the fact that it was still only early evening, the offices were mostly in darkness, including the front reception desk. Somewhere to the rear, a fluorescent tube flickered on and off, like some portent of impending doom.

“Dude, so not liking what I’m seeing here...” Dean slid a hand under his jacket and pulled out his favorite silver Colt. The slugs it held would do little damage to Mia while she was possessed, but it still felt good to have it handy, its carefully worked metal soothing the hunter like a child’s pacifier.

Sam nodded and reached over onto the back seat to his duffel. Rummaging in the bag, he quickly offered up two silver flasks of holy water and two flashlights. Slipping his own into his jacket, he let Dean take the other set of items.

Satisfied they had everything they could to fight the girl, Sam pushed open the Chevy's heavy door and stepped out onto a narrow section of sidewalk.

The Sheriff's office was situated on an area of land that was pretty much self-contained. There were no other buildings near the stark grey-walled structure, and no one appeared to be visiting.

Two cruisers sat idly by the main entrance, but there were no deputies to be seen anywhere.

"I'm seriously getting an *I Am Legend* vibe here, Sammy." Dean finally exited the Impala, keeping his hand wrapped around the Colt beneath his jacket as he warily walked towards the building's entrance.

Sam didn't answer, but as he reached the glass double doors he pushed his back into the side frame and flicked on his flashlight. Letting the light cut into the dark lobby, he paused mid-sweep when the beam picked up on something slumped on the floor.

Dean joined his brother the other side the doors, using his own light to give extra illumination.

The body looked to be that of a young deputy. They'd never know for sure, but he had probably been manning the front desk when Mia had arrived. From the odd angle of some of his limbs and the glistening patch of blood on the far wall, it was an easy guess he'd been tossed across the room "demon style" at high speed.

Dean nodded his head, silently signaling that they should go inside. Taking point, he kept his flashlight in one hand, scanning it across the lobby along with the muzzle of his weapon.

Ahead, he could see the stark white flickering of the fluorescent light they'd spotted from the Impala, and it made his finger instinctively tick on the Colt's trigger.

From the nearby desk, a burst of static followed by garbled radio chatter made both hunters whirl. The radio mike clicked, but there was no one to answer the deputies out in the field anymore.

"Dean, we don't have much time. When they realize they're not getting any reply from control they're going to come back here. I don't know about you, but I don't think this would be a great place to get found right about now."

Dean glanced at the speaker, listening intently as another deputy tried to call in but received no response. While it was true they couldn't allow themselves to get caught here, they couldn't leave without searching the whole building either. It was probably too much to hope that Mia still lurked in some corner of the offices, but it was a hope he held onto.

Mia needed their help – the population of this little community needed their help – before this rogue demon took out half of Oklahoma just for kicks.

"We should check out back first." Dean bobbed his head towards the still flashing light tube and then picked up the pace, keeping his weapon high as he entered a short corridor. There was no time to argue, and he wasn't about to give Sam chance to try. He'd seen enough on the video at Morgan's garage, and he was seeing enough here.

Halfway down the passageway, he stopped again, noting something smeared along the walls to his left. Letting a finger slide through the substance he realized he was touching blood.

How many had died here?

Ignoring the thought that Mia could have wiped out almost the entire Sheriff's department, he continued forward until he reached a door. According to the embellished gold lettering, this was Deputy Sheriff Aldridge's office.

Nudging the door open with the tip of his CAT boot, Dean swung inside, Colt at the ready.

The room was empty, but there had definitely been a scuffle here. Splashes of blood painted an eerie pattern on the cop's desk, and on the floor, it looked like

someone had been dragged out from behind the desk and back out into the corridor, leaving a sticky scarlet trail to follow.

“Dean, take a look up there...”

Dean turned to see Sam’s gangly frame was standing in the doorway, pointing with his Glock towards something hanging on the wall along with Aldridge’s commendations.

In the harsh light, it was hard to see at first, and the elder hunter was forced to bring the beam of his light across the object to get a full view.

“Aww man, that is just...friggin’ *gross*...” Dean put a hand to his mouth and quickly turned away. For whatever reason, the Mia *thing* had cut off someone’s ear – probably Karen Aldridge’s – and pinned it to the wall like a trophy.

Dean wasn’t sure, but it looked like it was actually dangling from the remnants of the owner’s gold ear stud.

“I think it’s a pretty safe bet we’re too late,” Sam suggested, eyes darting around the room and then back to the corridor as if he expected a SWAT team to burst in at any second.

“Maybe.” Dean moved back into the corridor, squatting to quickly appraise the blood trail. “But we owe it to the cop chick to be sure.” He glanced up, his lips ticking into an impish grin. “What’s the matter, Sammy, scared of being turned into Mike Scofield?”

Sam’s own expression twisted into annoyance. “Yeah, *actually*. You are still kinda wanted, remember?”

Dean straightened, cautiously moving forward again. “Dude, you’re just scared you’ll end up being T-Bag’s bitch. Told ya that girlie side of yours is gonna get you in trouble one of these days...”

Sam pouted, a move that brought another small smile to his brother’s face.

“Looks like we’re coming up on the cells,” Dean muttered, abruptly killing the beam of his flashlight in favor of the relative protection of the darkness.

“Dean, I think I hear something...” Sam held up a hand as he listened intently to the sound again.

Annoyed that he wasn’t allowed to wisecrack back, Dean scrunched his brow and concentrated on the noise.

It was someone softly whimpering.

A *girl*, softly whimpering.

Forgetting any thoughts of caution, Dean kicked into a sprint, holding the Colt waist-high and slightly to one side as he charged into the holding area.

There was more light here, and he didn’t need to switch his flashlight back on to find the source of the sobbing. The woman was in the corner cell, lying on one side as blood oozed through her uniform.

Guardedly entering the cell, Dean’s eyes darted to each and every shadowy corner before he placed his attention on the fallen cop.

Karen was still alive, her eyes lightly glazed, blood matting the blonde hair one side of her head where her ear had been crudely hacked away. Without peeling away her jacket, he couldn’t tell what had caused the stomach wound, but from the amount of blood she had already lost it wasn’t anything he or Sam could patch up in a hurry.

“It’s okay,” Dean cajoled, watching as Karen’s panicked eyes locked with his. “We’re gonna get you some help.” He turned to Sam, anger at the thing that had done this lacing his words. “Sammy, ambulance...”

Sam stuffed his Glock into his waistband and quickly pulled his cell from the back pocket of his jeans. Using his thumb, he began to hit speed dial only to have the tiny unit abruptly torn from his grip.

The cell seemed to momentarily dance in midair before being joined by Dean’s forty-five.

“What the..?” Dean pushed up from his crouched position, any thoughts of Karen Aldridge forced from his mind by a new and sudden danger. Before he could react

further to the loss of his weapon, the cell door they'd so haplessly walked into slammed on them, the lock clicking as if a key had turned its tumblers.

Outside the cell, the Colt and Sam's phone floated into the hands of a young woman who watched them with bemusement.

"Don't you know it's rude to snatch?" Dean walked up to the bars that now held him, placing his hands on the cold metal rods. "What's the matter, bitch. Don't they teach manners in Hell?"

Mia cocked her head, raven orbs reflecting back the moonlight from the tiny cell window. "Hunters," she mouthed tossing both the cellphone and Dean's automatic onto the floor in disinterest. "And small fry at that. Not at all what I'm looking for..."

"Then what are you looking for? Death, destruction, all for a cheap kick?" Sam stole a glance at the dying cop and then back at the demon.

Mia flicked her brown locks, the slight southern drawl to her voice the only indication of the real girl beneath the demon's hold. "Cheap trick? Oh no, I'm looking for something very specific...and let's just say I haven't found it yet..."

"I'm not gonna let you keep killing people like this. Hurting the girl inside like this." Dean's voice had turned to a low growl and he clutched at the bars restraining him until his knuckles began to turn white.

After Haris, he'd thought it was over, but then Erika Gudrun had taught him a harsh lesson he wouldn't forget in a hurry. Maybe people did have a purpose – a destiny to fulfill – and his would always be to kill these evil sons of bitches.

Mia, or the demon in control, ran a hand through the front of her hair, seemingly bored with the conversation already. "I'd heard that your kind like to draw us into long monologues while you try and come up with some pathetic escape attempt. Too bad, big boy, I'm just not the talking kind..."

The girl smiled at the brothers then slowly sashayed over to the nearest wall. Placing her palms on the open brickwork, she closed her eyes and inhaled.

From somewhere unseen, a macabre breeze seemed to fill the holding area, tousling through their hair and making their eyes smart with its icy intensity.

The wind seemed to grow stronger, like a mini-whirlwind was forming, and as it coalesced, forming a bizarre epicenter, the Sheriff's office began to shake.

Dean looked to Sam as the realization hit that they were about to be caught in a demonic version of an earthquake. "Grab Nancy!"

Sam looked back questioningly and Dean had to mentally admit that his brother's hesitation was probably warranted. Even if he picked up the girl, there was nowhere to go and no way to stop Mia's dirty work.

They were trapped in the cell while the building literally caved in around them.

Her task complete, Mia turned back to the cell enclosure as the roof above started to groan and buck with the malevolent pressure forced upon it. "Nice meeting you two. Shame, but I really do have to dash – people to kill, you know?"

Dean pulled the small flagon of holy water from his pocket, and straining through the bars managed to toss its contents at the fleeing girl. Very little of the liquid seemed to hit home, and Mia vanished into the shadows as the first section of roof decided to crumble inwards.

"Did you really have to piss her off?" Sam grabbed at the cot in the corner as he groused, placing it over Karen to try and shield her from the rubble, but it was only a matter of time – not just for Karen – but for all of them.

Dean shrugged as a piece of falling concrete glanced off his shoulder. "What? You want me to play nice with that thing?"

Sam looked up as the ceiling overhead began to twist and bend, showering them with dust and tiny segments of plaster. "Actually, right this second? Yeah, I'm wishing you'd given her your best 'Let's go have wild sex' line."

Dean's eyes narrowed. "Dude she's not *that* cute." Then his gaze followed Sam's and he considered changing his mind. He was no architect, but at a guess, they had a few seconds before the ceiling decided to crash down on their skulls.

And despite Sam insisting he was hard headed, Dean really didn't like the prospect of that scenario.

"Dean! This side!"

Dean barely had time to hear his brother's yelp and feel Sam's huge hand tug at him before he was yanked halfway across the cell. His rapid sideways momentum slammed him into his sibling and they both tumbled backwards into the far wall.

As the pair toppled to the concrete floor in a heap, the section of ceiling Dean had been standing under finally gave way.

A chalky-white miasma of dust and debris mushroomed downwards like an inverted nuclear cloud, filling the cell with a choking haze that seemed to suck away all the oxygen in the air.

Dean hacked as the smoke from the collapse tickled at his throat relentlessly, and he was forced to lean forward as the coughing nearly doubled him over.

"Dean, the outside wall's going!"

The elder hunter forced his stinging eyes to look up, wiping spittle away from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand as he searched through the smog and debris for his brother.

Somehow, Sam had managed to avoid inhaling too much of the debilitating fog and had clambered to his feet. As Dean watched, a section of timber plunged from the hole in the ceiling, narrowly missing his brother, but Sam barely flinched.

"Dean! MOVE!"

Blinking through long, dust clogged lashes, Dean finally realized what Sam was trying to tell him. While the upper story of the Sheriff's Office may be coming down like a house of cards, it wasn't exactly doing so in a very natural manner.

Demonic intervention...

And right now, that intervention might actually save their asses rather than bury them.

The cell wall that faced into the parking lot was crumbling faster than the remaining section of ceiling. If they could give the brick and concrete a little helping hand, maybe it would cave in before the rest of the roof rafters did.

Glancing over to Karen, Dean forced up from his knees and lurched across the small room to grab at the cot that covered her. The tubular metal frame wasn't exactly the most ideal battering ram, but he and Sam had improvised with far worse on many occasions.

"Sammy, you better have had your Wheaties this morning or we're about to feel like a couple of extras in *Armageddon*."

Sam grabbed at the edge of the cot. "Man, as long as I'm not Bruce Willis' character, I don't care..."

Dean shared the sentiment, bobbing his head silently as he put all his weight into helping Sam ram the bed into the wall.

The metal jarred on the brickwork but still the wall wouldn't quite yield. "Again, Sam!"

Dean closed his eyes as he urged his muscles to give more strength than they were actually capable of. Instead of seeing an ordinary brick wall, he envisioned he was in Hell – just like the soul that had inhabited him for a short while in Leicester – just like Mia would be if they couldn't save her.

He charged again letting his emotions fuel his arms, wanting, willing the wall to fall.

Alongside him, even though he couldn't see it, he felt Sam's presence doing much the same.

"Dean, it's going!"

Finally, the elder hunter let his eyes snap open to a full view of the parking lot. The cell wall was gone, leaving only a mound of dusty rubble as evidence it had ever existed.

Dean blinked just once and then turned in time to see his brother gathering up Karen. She didn't protest, simply lying limp as Sam carried her towards their newly-made exit.

Was she already another casualty of their war?

Dean didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to wonder if mankind was really worth saving anymore.

From somewhere above, an unnatural groan made the hunter unconsciously look up. Whatever form of luck had been holding up the ceiling apparently decided to now vacate the premises, and the remainder of the building had chosen to disappear with it.

"Sammy, shag ass!" Dean took a breath and vaulted over the pile of broken bricks, steel and concrete that had once held him. He landed heavily, his right knee giving way as he twisted sideways.

A string of verbal expletives rolled off his tongue before he bit back on both the cursing and the pain now burning down his leg. "Sonofa friggin' *bitch!*"

Dean grabbed at his knee with both hands, rubbing it as if the swift motion would somehow quell the twisted muscle's spasms. "I swear when we find this demon's name I'm going to..."

"Dean!"

Sam's sharp delivery of his name made the complaining hunter abruptly snap his mouth closed.

While their own near miss had been bad enough, it was nothing compared to what had been done to Greg – and now Karen and her co-workers.

Dean clambered to his feet, forgetting his own aches as he delved into a pocket for his cell. No doubt someone had already realized something bad was going on here, but just in case, he needed to call in the emergency services for the Deputy Sheriff's sake.

He tapped at the phone twice before he realized it was dead. *Just like anyone who gets in this demon chick's way...*

Angrily slamming the cell into the ground until its outer casing shattered, Dean looked across the lot and out onto the road. Maybe they could drive the cop to the hospital.

Maybe.

Such a small, but very meaningful word.

"Dean..."

Dean took a breath, calming himself before he looked down. Even if he was boiling inside, on the outer surface, he had to remain cool.

"How's she doing?" He dropped to his knees to kneel alongside his brother and the stricken officer.

Sam had the cop carefully leaning against a debris-covered late Ford, her glazed eyes blinking, but not focusing fully.

"I'm doing...crap," Karen spat out the words along with a mouthful of clotting blood. "Gutted like *a pig* by...by my own...best friend." The cop's mouth ticked into the wryest of smiles and she coughed out more serum "Go figure..."

"Do you have any idea why Mia would want to come after you?" Sam slid off his jacket as he talked, gently lying it over Aldridge.

Karen huffed, placing a shaking, blood-covered hand over the coat to clutch at the wound beneath, but she didn't attempt to answer. She was in too much pain for small talk.

Dean had seen this kind of injury before, and he knew the likely outcome as he watched Karen struggle to remain conscious. The cop was dying, and like it or not, if they didn't get valuable information from her first, then many more people might die too.

“Karen, this isn’t Mia’s fault, whatever it might look like, but we need your help to stop it happening again.” The elder hunter shot a glance to his brother, noting Sam’s surprised expression at his abrupt approach.

Perhaps under normal circumstances he could have spared the dying Deputy Sheriff the truth, but not today. Even though he hadn’t come right out and said it, he’d confirmed what she probably already suspected.

She was going to die, and they needed her assistance before it was too late.

Dean put a bruised and bloodied hand sympathetically on Karen’s shoulder and lightly squeezed. “We need a name. Anyone you can think of that Mia might think of as a friend or relative. If you can’t help us, someone else dies tonight...”

Karen’s head lolled onto her shoulder and a thin, continuous rivulet of blood began to seep from the corner of her mouth. Eyes that had once been full of life seemed to lose their glow, and for a moment, Dean thought they were too late.

He saw the startled, almost hurt look on Sam’s face as his brother probably realized it too.

Then, before either could speak, Karen exhaled one long, laborious breath and blinked. Her eyelids fluttered like the rapidly beating wings of a hummingbird and then once again became still.

Death had come for her, but she wasn’t yet ready to relinquish her tenuous hold on life.

Reaching out, her tiny palm grabbed Sam’s jacket, and she squeezed with a newfound strength born of desperation. “Alex...Alex Hamilton...” Karen’s grip weakened. “Mimosa Drive...”

Dean watched as the cop’s hand finally slid away from his brother and he realized she was now just another victim to add to the tally.

Just another human to die in a fight few of mankind would ever know about. He looked to the bricks and debris that encroached on the edges of the parking lot – anywhere but to the empty shell of Karen Aldridge.

“Dean, we should go...”

There was a pause, an instant when Dean actually considered asking “go where,” but then he snapped back.

Because Dean *always* snapped back.

It was what was expected of him.

Tossing the Impala’s keys to his brother, he began to limp back inside the ruins of the Sheriff’s office with a renewed sense of purpose. It wasn’t easy to even pick out where the demon “chick” had been standing before the mini-earthquake, but somehow he managed.

Somehow, he managed to just *know* where to dig in the mounds of rubble until he found what he was searching for.

Brushing aside the thick white dust from the impromptu demolition, he let his fingertips caress the engraved metalwork like a puppet master controlling his prized marionette.

“Dean...”

Dean looked up, his face as cold as an arctic breeze drifting across the North Pole. He lifted the dusty forty-five in his hand, brandishing it as if he was daring a target to present itself. “Sammy, that black-eyed bitch is going *down*...”

450 Mimosa Drive Warner, OK

Sam wasn’t sure if they were trespassing or not. In fact, thinking about it, Sam was pretty sure they were.

At any moment, the gangly hunter expected a Rottweiler or some similar huge beast to come bounding up and take a chunk out of him.

“Dean, are you sure that freaky gadget is going to work?” He cocked his head and winced at the thing in his brother’s hand. “Dude, I’m telling you, if that blows a few fingers off I’m so not wiping your butt for you...”

Dean ignored the jibe and grinned broadly, clambering under a large patch of with the offending item. “Hey, c’mon, Bobby said it’ll work. You dissing Bobby’s creative abilities? Man, wait until I tell him...”

Sam bobbed under the same area of undergrowth, struggling more than Dean due to his freakish height. He squirmed as the bush’s spikes dug into him, catching his thick mop of unruly hair as he pushed on through to the opposite side.

“It’s not Bobby I don’t trust,” he finally panted. “It’s your *wonderful* assembly work. Dude, it’s just a pipe with a gas canister stuck on the end.”

Dean hunkered down, watching the house at the end of the driveway as they talked.

It hadn’t been difficult to discover the exact address of the only Alex Hamilton on Mimosa Drive, and it hadn’t taken them long to do a little reconnaissance and find he was home – and for now still in one piece.

Now, all they had to do was wait until Mia came calling and it should all be over.

“This,” Dean responded with a look almost akin to pride. “This is as good as the cops use. I fire this thing and that bitch’s ass will be stuck under a web better than Spidey could spin.” He wiggled his eyebrows and patted the weapon with his palm.

“You *hope*,” Sam scoffed, eyeing the impromptu net launcher with a look of uncertainty. It was one thing for Dean to mess with guns – those he really did know about – but homemade stuff was another matter. Sam couldn’t help but think back to the time Dean had fried himself chasing a Rawhead every time the elder hunter broke out some new and untested weapon.

“Looks like we’re both about to find out, Sasquatch.” Dean tensed, holding the net launcher a touch closer to his body as he bobbed his head towards the far fence.

In the dark, it wasn’t easy to see movement in the shadows, but there was something there, something dodging from one hiding place to another in the gloom.

Sam squinted, noting the size and shape of the stealthily moving figure and knowing it had to be Mia. Sliding a hand to his waistline, he pulled out his Glock ready to back up his brother if needed.

He didn’t want to use the gun on the girl unless he had to slow her down, because any injury would manifest itself later once she was exorcized.

If we can exorcize her again...

“Hey, bitch!” Dean pointed the tube in his hand, angling it just above the girl’s head. “Show time...”

Mia stopped dead at the hunter’s voice, spinning around lithely on the balls of her feet. As her eyes honed in on the metal cylinder in his hand, it took seconds for the item’s purpose to register – seconds that gave Dean time to fire before she reacted.

The tightly meshed net exploded outwards from the tube, billowing over the girl and draping her in its confining grip.

Mia, or at least the thing inside her, began to thrash, trying desperately to tear through the netting. She screamed in rage as her hands, her skin touched the sticky residue on the web and it restricted her movements further.

After a minute, her struggling ceased and her eyes flashed over black. She smiled, examining the thing that held her captive more closely. “Very clever boys, a net, but not just a net...” Mia sighed. “I really wouldn’t have given you credit for such a thing, but then, maybe it wasn’t your idea at all?”

Dean tossed down the tubing in his hand and looked up as a light came on in the nearby house. “Sweetheart, it ain’t the designer you’ve got to worry about, it’s the guy who just pulled the trigger-”

“A Devil’s Trap on a riot net, whatever will you hunter types drum up next?” Mia let her eyes flick back to their human form, rolling them skyward mockingly. “I’m really not worried about you...why should I be? Your pathetic types have been trying to

exorcize me for weeks. Not doing such a bang up job, are we boys? Knock yourself out exorcizing me all you want.” She paused, licking her lips suggestively. “I’ll only take this body back later and tear out your hearts with it...”

Sam moved forward, eyeing the Hamilton house as yet more lights flickered on. If they didn’t move soon, what little was left of the local police department was likely to arrive and slap their butts in chains. “Dean, she has a point. We can’t just treat this like a regular gig. We need help...”

“You’re agreeing with a black-eyed freak?” Dean raised a brow, grabbing at the net to drag it across the garden back to the awaiting Impala. “Sammy, so gotta watch your ass, you’re turning darkside.”

Sam took a hold of the other side of the webbing, careful not to allow the edges to open up and give the demon an opportunity for escape. He tugged hard, wondering if the real Mia would remember their rough handling later. “Well, if you have any smart ideas...”

They reached the hedge and Dean paused, looking at the glue now smeared haphazardly across his palms from the homemade riot net. “Man, this is friggin’ gross.” He wiped the offending glop down his blue jacket. “Maybe we could call Moses?” He eventually suggested, his expression saying the idea was most definitely born of desperation.

Sam inhaled, listening as the sound of muted sirens seemed to head their way. If they were caught with the girl like this it would look like an abduction. In fact there was probably enough evidence on their clothing to link them to the Sheriff’s office fiasco too.

Maybe Kyle Williams wasn’t the best option for anything outside of pure research, but right now, he was all they had. He’d also recently moved from Wyoming after the police had gotten a little too close for comfort. He was, after all, a wanted man too.

Sam shook his head. “I can’t believe I actually agree with your funky logic. I think Kyle is probably our best option.” He stole a glance at the girl who sat quietly and possibly far too subserviently in the netting. Were things fitting into place just a little too easily for comfort?

Dean made a huffing noise. “*Funky* logic, huh? I’ll remember that later Mr. Spock.” He flexed his fingers playfully in front of his brother as he retook the corner of the riot web. “Looks like I won’t be needing you to wipe my ass after all, Sammy...”

St. Benedict Church 2200 W Ithica St, Broken Arrow, OK

Kyle Williams hadn’t changed an inch. Despite the attack by Laura Mitchell that had almost cost him his life, he was still the same shy little man who thought everybody had a chance to be saved.

His overlarge glasses still had a tendency to fall to the edge of his nose, and he still had the habit of wringing his hands when he was nervous – which was usually all of the time.

“It’s nice to see you again – even under these circumstances...” Kyle smiled softly as he ushered the two hunters and their captive into a small area at the back of the church. “I’m...really not sure if I’m the man for this job, but...”

“You’ll try, right, Padre?” Dean hauled the net into a carefully marked Devil’s Trap the stammering priest had prepared in anticipation of their arrival. “I mean, Moses was all about saving asses, right?”

Once Mia was central, Dean pulled out his favorite hunting knife and released her from the restrictions of the mesh jail.

Kyle coughed, looking at Sam nervously as he straightened his dog collar.

Sam nodded back, hoping to give the holy man some confidence. While Kyle was quite capable of performing an ordinary exorcism, they had no clue what would happen with Mia.

Sam knew Kyle wasn't afraid – not for himself – not for the Winchesters, but he was afraid for the girl. The little priest may be rich, but he had very old fashioned values. They were about to exorcize someone who had already suffered the procedure at least once. Some humans didn't even survive the procedure the first time.

"You ready to let loose the Latin and fry us a demon?" Dean smirked at Mia as he crossed the room, joining his brother and the priest.

Kyle swallowed hard, lacing his fingers around a leather-bound and extremely worn copy of the *Rituale Romanum*. "I'm ready," he offered shakily. "But I'm not sure why you think I'll do a better job than Father Lane did..."

Sam wasn't sure either, although he didn't voice the concern out loud. Lane had been a pro at this kind of thing, and yet he'd died only moments after supposedly "saving" the girl. Still, this was, as far as they could tell, an unprecedented case. What else could they do but try again?

"We have to try something," Sam reassured. "And this time at least we're prepared."

Dean pulled out his silver flask to support the statement, brandishing it at the edge of the painted symbols on the floor. "How about a little drink before the main course?" He shrugged when Mia hissed at him like a taunted reptile. "No? Sure you don't want to reconsider? I've heard it's a little hot where you're going..."

Mia didn't respond. She moved to the far edge of the trap and turned her back on both the hunters and the priest.

Sam watched her as she calmly sat on the floor, crossing her legs like some yoga guru. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more it did *look* like she was simply meditating. Hardly the behavior they'd come to expect from a demon fighting for survival.

The young hunter watched the possessed girl in fascination, only broken from his train of thought by the sarcasm in his brother's voice.

"Moses, can we get this over with some time this year? Because, man, I'm starving..."

The little priest scrunched up his nose, examining the slimy marks on the hunter's jacket and the tacky glop that had refused to wash from his hands. "May I suggest a shower before food?" He turned, winking slyly to Sam as he continued. "I really don't want to feel like I'm dining with a caveman..."

"Huh?" Dean took a moment to realize the little priest was suggesting he was a slob. "Yeah, well, at least I don't have the musical tastes of one, Moses."

Kyle smiled, enjoying the brief humorous respite before opening the *Rituale Romanum*. Once the book was open, he moved to the edge of the Devil's Trap, his gentle eyes focusing solely on the girl.

"I exorcise thee, most vile spirit, the very embodiment of our enemy, the entire specter, the whole legion, in the name of Jesus Christ, to get out and flee from this creature of God..."

As the priest recited his litany, Sam continued to watch Mia. At first, nothing happened. The girl didn't seem to flinch or struggle as was usual in common cases of possession.

Would she be tossed around the trap as Meg had been?

"...yield to God, who by his servant Moses drowned thee and thy malice in Pharaoh and in his army in the abyss..."

Finally, Mia began to shake.

Sam noticed the young girl's arms first, as if she was about to have some kind of seizure. Then the trembling moved to her legs until her whole body was almost convulsing.

She fell backwards, writhing like some obscene serpent was trying to tear itself from her body.

And then, she screamed – a deep, guttural wail – a death howl that reminded Sam of the Hellmouth he'd hovered over not so long ago.

"Dean..." Sam stepped forward until his sneakers almost crossed the edge of the trap. He wanted to hold the girl, help her through the ordeal even though he knew it wasn't possible.

But then there were strong hands pulling him back – Dean's hands – and when Sam tried to pull free, his brother held him fast. Sam turned then, wanting to tell Dean Mia shouldn't have to go through this, shouldn't have to be tortured over and over until finally her body could stand possession no more.

But when Sam looked into his brother's eyes, he knew there was nothing to tell.

Dean felt the same thing he did.

"I know, Sammy," were all the words Dean offered, but they said far more than an entire oratory.

"He excludes thee, who has prepared for thee and thy angels' everlasting hell; out of whose mouth the sharp sword will go, he who shall come to judge the quick and the dead and the world by fire..." Kyle lowered his head, making the sign of the cross as he finished the ritual with an unspoken prayer and psalm.

Mia screamed again, her shivering body finally falling limp dead center of the Devil's Trap.

"Is it over?" Dean raised a brow. "Cause I didn't see any creepy black smoke shagging ass outta this joint, or the girl..."

Kyle closed the book in his hand and looked uncertainly to both Winchesters. "I...I've completed the *Rituale Romanum*...she should be free..."

"Yeah, well tell that to the last priest after she literally brought the house down on him." Dean pulled out the small flagon of holy water he'd brandished earlier and walked to the edge of the circle. Cocking his head, he warily watched to see if the girl still appeared to be breathing.

"Dean...Kyle finished the *Rituale* perfectly..." Sam edged to his brother's side, knowing that without the familiar raven smog after the exorcism, something was wrong.

Dean nodded, stepping cautiously into the trap to approach where Mia lay. As he grew closer, her fingers began to flex and she drew a sharp intake of breath, causing both hunters to pause mid-step.

Dean studied the girl warily as she pushed up on one elbow, her straggly hair hanging loose over her features. "Knock knock," he hunkered down, looking her straight in the eye for signs of continued possession. "Who's home, little lady?"

The girl gulped several times as if a lump had formed in her throat. Her eyes looked to Dean and then wildly around the room as if she didn't even recognize her surroundings. Eventually, she slumped back, her body beginning to tremble once again. "Who are you?"

Mia let her gaze fall on each man in turn, finally settling on the priest. The dog collar seemed to draw her, perhaps giving hope.

Kyle began to wring his hands again, suddenly back to the timid persona he was known for. He opened his mouth, but found he couldn't even stammer a timely response.

"We're here to help you," Dean offered, studying the girl as he waited for a reply.

"I...I was with Greg and then..." Mia's pupils widened and she placed her hands over her face as recent memories returned. She shook her head, tears beginning to stream down her normally pretty features as her chest hitched in uncontrolled sobbing. "I...ki...killed Greg..."

Dean winced, and Sam saw his brother hesitate in putting an arm around the girl. It was hard for the Winchesters not to empathize with her after their own ordeals, but they couldn't drop their guard – at least – not yet.

Sam joined his brother in the trap, waiting silently as the minutes ticked by and Mia's sobs became less pronounced. Eventually, Sam dared to take the girl's hand.

“Do you know what’s been happening to you?” He asked, his voice all but a whisper as he searched Mia’s eyes for recognition.

Mia thought about it. “I...I was at work. Something came over me – as if I didn’t even have control over my own limbs.” Her head drooped and fresh tears began to tumble from her already swollen features. “I killed my boyfriend, killed him and tore his body to pieces...”

“Do you know why?” Sam stole a glance to his brother, knowing Dean was taking in every word from the girl, every expression and twitch of her body.

“I ...I remember thinking I must have lost my mind...but I hadn’t. I know now I hadn’t.” Mia rubbed away the moisture from her cheeks with the back of her hand. “Something was inside me...” She looked up to Kyle, suddenly startled. “I think I tried to find a priest...I think I...”

Mia couldn’t finish, instead she pulled away from Sam and began to sob again until she could barely draw a breath.

Dean cringed as the girl seemed to withdraw into herself, hiding from her own transgressions like a tortoise retreating into its shell. “Moses, I don’t suppose the church happens to keep any brandy around here? Purely for medicinal purposes, of course,” he added, as the priest scowled.

“No, no brandy, I’m afraid -”

“Jeez, I made a buddy out of a teetotal, wuss ass music lover who drives a Ford.” Dean looked to the church ceiling, feigning disgust. “Tell me why I like your sorry butt?”

Kyle took off his glasses and cleaned them with a small white cloth before smiling. “Because I have Jack Daniels?” He offered, already moving to a locked cabinet drawer.

“Tell me you have enough glasses to go around, Padre, and I *might* just forgive your musical sins.” Dean watched the little priest pour out several drinks and then put his attention back on Mia.

She was rocking back and forth, her eyes tightly closed until he could see the flesh of her eyelids scrunched into a mass of wrinkled skin. “Mia...it’s alright...”

Dean reached forward, gently touching her forearm enough to make her start. She yelped, almost drawing back away from him for a second before calming.

“Listen, we’re here to help you figure this out.”

“You can’t help me. I’m a murderer. It doesn’t matter about the whys or the how.” Mia began to wring her hands, much as her host, Kyle, had wrung his earlier.

When Dean reached out, tenderly placing an arm around her, she didn’t flinch away.

Sam watched as the girl sank into the warmth of his brother’s arms, shakily taking the tumbler of whiskey Kyle brought over for her. She took a sip, then another until its warmth joined that from Dean’s body and she finally allowed herself to relax.

“Maybe you should rest up tonight.” Sam looked as Mia sagged against Dean’s chest, sheer exhaustion after the exorcism threatening to push her to the point of collapse. “We can talk in the morning. There are things we can do to help. Things to protect you. “

Mia bobbed her head, but the young hunter doubted she’d even heard him. Sam’s eyes moved to his brother and Dean nodded, silently sliding his arms under Mia until he supported her full weight.

“There’s a spare room this way...” Kyle pointed down a dimly lit, wood-lined corridor before taking the lead. After only a few steps, he came to a door which he unlocked with an ancient-looking key.

Sam eyed the thing in surprise, wondering just how old the church could be to have such medieval-style locks. Inside the room appeared even more primeval, a genuine four-poster bed sitting central in the paneled room.

“Man, I feel like I’m stuck in the *Cat and the Canary* waiting on some freaky secret passage to slide open...” Dean’s eyes skittered around the chamber as he placed

Mia on the bed. "You think some hairy hand is gonna come outta the wall and make a grab for my ass..?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Nobody's that desperate."

Dean huffed, but he wasn't really paying attention to the usual brotherly banter.

He was looking at Mia.

The girl had curled into a ball on the bed, her hands gathering the top blanket like a comforter even in her exhaustion-induced slumber. She moaned softly every few moments, her eyeballs darting back and forth under their lids as if she were reliving her real life nightmare over and over.

"Perhaps you two would like another drink while I lock the windows and adjoining doors?" Kyle suggested meekly as he looked over his glasses. "It really has been a long day. Perhaps I might even partake myself..."

Dean slapped the priest heavily on the shoulder until he almost fell forwards.

"That's the spirit, Moses! We'll make a man of you yet..."

"...or be the death of me," Kyle mumbled as he scurried to the window, locking the latch down with one of the keys in his hand.

Sam's face creased into a smile and he turned, stealing one last look at Mia before heading back out the door. He wasn't a heavy drinker, in fact, he didn't really drink as much as Dean even, but tonight he was ready for whatever Kyle had to offer. It had been a long day, and he suspected the "Mia case" was far from over.

As he headed back into the corridor, he heard Dean's footfalls pause on the oak floor timbers and he frowned, intuition telling him that maybe "Jack" would have to wait awhile longer.

Spinning around in the doorway, Sam was just in time to see Mia with her arm locked around Kyle's neck. If she'd been asleep moments earlier, she was now wide awake and her eyes sparkled with a new sense of life.

The black oily patina of demonic verve.

"Did you really think your pissy little version of an exorcism would keep me out of the girl?" The voice was still Mia's – at least, it was "borrowing" her vocal cords. But even so, the personality had distinctly changed.

Dean shrugged, his usually wry smirk playing across his features, hazel eyes dancing with mirth. "Oh, I think you'll find we were prepared for you paying a return visit." He shook his head, the grin getting wider as he moved in front of the girl and her captive. "Guess your kind just can't get enough of us Winchesters..."

Mia eyed him with suspicion, but had little time to try and figure out just what the hunter's comment had meant.

Dean didn't wait for backup from Sam, but leapt forward instead, diving at the girl and her prisoner as if he was tackling a quarterback.

Mia screeched, but there was simply no room to maneuver out of Dean's way. Instead, all three were propelled backwards, landing on the four-poster bed with a whoosh of air from the freshly placed linen.

Before Mia could fully react, Dean rolled on top of her, pinning her arms down with his full weight. She spat at him, confusion playing across her features as to why he could so easily subdue her.

Nevertheless, she continued to struggle against his grip, writhing and contorting like a snake.

Dean grinned and then looked across to where Kyle still lay in stunned silence. The little priest may have been aware of the Winchesters' contingency plan, but it had still apparently shocked him that they'd needed to use it.

"Get off me you *human scum*..." The Mia demon's black eyes bored into Dean as if he were violating her in some way. Considering the way she'd been trapped, perhaps he was.

"Don't flatter yourself, sister." Dean looked up to the lace canopy above, where a hastily scrawled Devil's Trap did its work. "Trust me, you and the padre here are so not my idea of a threesome..."

Kyle started, quickly pulling himself together and scrambling off the bed as if he'd somehow sullied his vows just by laying there.

Mia didn't even notice the priest leave. Her black orbs had shifted from Dean to stare at the trap above her. The way it had been placed meant she was effectively bound in the bed unless the Winchesters chose otherwise.

Dean felt her muscles relax beneath him and he let go of her wrists, stepping quickly away from the four-poster to join his brother. He crossed his arms, examining the bed and demon girl with a curious, somewhat faraway stare. "You know, in *that* bed? I think maybe I could go for the 'Let's go have wild sex' line after all..." he mused.

"Yeah, well, can you try and find a chick that's not so buckets of crazy first?" Sam looked down from his lofty heights, apparently remembering a time when his brother had shot him a similar line about Meg. The contrast didn't go unnoticed and Dean puckered his lips and shrugged.

"I hate to interrupt your...um...musings." Kyle looked over his glasses as if he were chastising a naughty child at Sunday Service. "But, what do we do now?" He glanced to Mia who still hadn't moved and appeared to be in some kind of trance.

Dean's impish grin returned and he put an arm around the priest, guiding him back towards the bed, even though Kyle's slow gait suggested he was scared to return there. "You, Padre, are going to repeat your earlier performance. Kinda like an encore. In the meantime, me and Sammy are going to go make a few calls and see if we can't find a way to stop this damn freak getting back inside the girl."

Kyle's face turned into a mask of mental pain and he took a step back, realizing Dean had steered him too close to the edge of the bed for comfort. "...I'm safe as long as I stay this side of the trap...?"

"Safe as a priest in a pulpit," Dean agreed, fishing around in his pocket for his flask of holy water. Finding the silver container, he slapped it into the priest's open palm. "And if all else fails, burn the bitch with this..."

Kyle's eyes widened but he bobbed his head, tucking the flask into an empty pocket before re-opening his copy of the *Rituale Romanum* and beginning to recite its contents. "Depart therefore in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; give place to the Holy Ghost, by the sign of the Cross of Jesus Christ our Lord, who with the Father and the same Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth one God, for ever and ever, world without end..."

Dean watched the priest for a second then tugged at his brother's jacket. "Come on, Sasquatch, time to put that big brain of yours to use to save this girl..."

* * * *

Dean pushed back in Kyle's chair and tossed his cell phone on the desk in front of him. Given that it was his second phone in one night, it wasn't getting any better treatment than the first.

The unit bounced once and came to rest next to a Bible – something that was giving the hunter little solace right now. He'd called everyone he could think of that might know a way to help the girl, and so far he'd come up empty.

That "everyone" even included John, but it had come as no surprise that the Winchester patriarch still wasn't answering calls. John hadn't picked up the phone once since he'd hastily left Bobby's, and Dean doubted he would until whatever had pulled him away had been dealt with. It was their father's way – always had been – always would be.

That, though, wasn't helping Mia one iota.

Dean ran a hand through his spiky hair and then pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. There had to be a way to stop the girl getting possessed again while they figured out a way to really get rid of the demon. Exorcizing alone only seemed to work in the very short term and it simply wasn't giving them enough time.

Time.

How much more of it did Mia have? How many more possessions could her body and soul take before she was reduced to some drooling mass residing in some state mental institution?

Dean had to admit, she was one plucky girl to have gotten this far and still be running on all cylinders.

“Dean, I think I’ve got something...”

“Tell me it’s more than dirty laundry and a bad haircut,” Dean snarked back, abruptly sitting up straight in the holy man’s chair.

“I talked to Bobby and he says there’s not a lot out there that can keep a demon out besides salt and a Devil’s Trap,” Sam explained, twiddling the pen in his hand like he was spinning a tiny mace.

Dean relaxed, sitting back with a sigh of disappointment. “Great, tell me something we didn’t know...”

“Dad may have had a trinket that you basically ‘bind’ to the wearer and it repels evil spirits and possibly...*possibly* demons.”

Dean locked his hands behind his head and let the chair recline, placing his boots up on the desk even though he knew it would irk Kyle if he came in. “*May* have, *possibly*. Sounds like a whole lotta nothing to me, Sammy. I mean, just where the hell do we find this thing even if Dad had it once upon a time?”

Sam leaned forward, picking up the Impala’s keys from the oak desk’s worn top. He shook the bunch in front of his brother’s nose and then smiled. “Hiding in plain sight,” he enlightened. “Bobby says Dad used to keep the thing in his glove box, and seeing as you *never* seem to clear that thing out...”

Dean let his CAT boots quickly slide back off the desk and he leaned forward, grabbing the Chevy’s keys as he launched himself from his seat. “This trinket? It’s small, gold, circular shaped, right?” He questioned as he moved towards the door.

Sam nodded. “Yeah...Bobby says he always thought the legends about the thing were a whole lot of mumbo jumbo, but I guess Dad believed enough to keep it around...” He pushed away from his own chair to follow his brother outside into the brusque Oklahoma night air.

Dean listened, but didn’t stop his rapid pace towards the car. He took long, speedy strides until he was almost jogging across the tiny rectory parking area to the Impala.

The car was waiting just where he’d left it, its glove box’s contents a mishmash of fake IDs, spare ammo clips and other assorted oddments.

Dean flicked the compartment open and jammed in his hand, rummaging through the mess until his fingers met something small and soft. It was possibly the only soft thing in the entire car.

Pulling out the small jewelry box, he paused a second before flicking open the lid with his thumb. He had known all along the box was in the car, but until now he’d never known its true value or why his father had kept it so close.

Dean smiled, thinking of the irony. He had always thought the glimmering necklace had been his mother’s, and that John had stashed it in the car for sentimental value – one last piece of home to remember Mary by.

“Dean?” Sam padded up behind his brother, one brow arched in surprise that the elder hunter had so easily found the trinket. “You knew it was here all along..?”

Dean took a breath and then closed the lid of the box, hiding the very special necklace. “I thought it was Mom’s,” he admitted, thinking back to the woman with long blonde hair he barely remembered. “I thought that was why Dad had kept it...”

There was a brief silence. A brief moment when both Winchesters shared the memory of what a demon could do to a pretty, unsuspecting woman who had never harmed a soul. Then, they both returned inside, hoping this time they could make a difference.

* * * *

Sam grabbed the lace canopy, using his lofty height to pull the material away from the four wooden beams that held it. The canopy, along with the Devil's Trap that adorned it slid ungracefully to the floor and landed in a crumpled heap at the foot of the four-poster.

Mia watched, fascinated, her earlier transgressions as the demon seemingly forgotten – or perhaps, pushed aside into some deep recess of her mind so she didn't have to relive them like a bad network re-run.

Dean held out a hand, the intricate chain of the trinket glistening in the dim light from the bedside lamp. "We want you to wear this," he offered, gently placing the charm in Mia's palm. "It'll help protect you against..."

"Against *possession*?" Mia finished for him, taking the charm somewhat unenthusiastically. "A simple piece of gold can really do that?" She shook her head, but slid the chain around her neck anyway, carefully fastening the trinket in place with her long fingers.

"Trust me, it'll help." Dean shot a sideways glance to his brother, hoping that his lanky sibling had the facts straight from Bobby. From the washed out pallor of the girl's skin, he doubted she could take another round with the demon he'd aptly named "Demolition Man."

Mia flicked her tousled hair back, offering a muted huff in return. "Trust?" she asked looking across into an antique mirror on the dressing table. "Right now, I don't even trust my own reflection. Is that really even me in the glass?"

Dean's gaze locked on the mirror and he recalled an earlier time. A time when he too hadn't dared to look at his own reflection for fear of seeing a pair of dusky black orbs looking back at him.

Am I a Monster? The thought had been a constant one during the time one of Haris' (only because you've spelt it like this later on...) kids had ridden piggyback on his soul. Mia must be imagining the same right now – possibly worse – after all her "possessed self" had been through.

"You've nothing to lose by trusting us," Sam suggested in his best "we're the good guys" voice. "All you have to do is wear the necklace and let us try to figure out the rest."

Mia slumped backwards onto the bed and let her tired eyes fall to the woven rug at her feet. "How about my eternal soul? Can I lose that? Or maybe my mind? God knows I've thought I'd lost that enough times already these past few days..."

Sam looked to his brother, knowing for once Dean was going to take the lead in the conversation again. This was Dean's ball park. He knew the rules and had batted in his own personal hell pretty much like Mia was doing right now. Maybe only Dean could help her win this game.

"Listen." Dean hunkered down, locking eyes with Mia so intently she almost flinched. "No sonofabitch demon is gonna touch your soul, that's *my promise*. I know my promise isn't worth jack right about now, but I won't give up on you, or on catching that black-eyed freak and sending its ass right back to Hades. Now you catch some shut eye, and me and Sammy will figure this thing out, okay?"

Mia slowly bobbed her head, fingering the gold bauble that now hung from her neck. It was a simple design, yet somehow captivating to look at. Maybe not exactly what an average shopper would snatch up to wear to their next party, but definitely eye-catching in its own way.

Perhaps it would serve its purpose, or perhaps it was just as Bobby suspected – a whole lot of mumbo jumbo. Tonight only time would tell.

* * * *

Sam tapped absently at the laptop, uncertain just what he thought he was looking for. Yes, maybe the charm would protect Mia from possession, but that still didn't give them a clue where to start hunting the thing that was after her – or why it was after her.

So far, they'd gotten very little from the girl information-wise, and that wasn't helping.

The young hunter sighed, taking a chug from the beer Kyle had left him. The timid little priest had served them with food, drink and in Dean's case, food drink and cable TV, and then he'd retired to bed.

Apparently, two exorcisms in one day had been far too much for him and he'd needed a sleeping pill to even contemplate slumber. Dean ribbed him about that for twenty minutes before Kyle had been able to escape the hunter's jibes.

"For crying out loud! You gotta be *friggin'* kidding me!"

Sam winced at his brother's use of profanities in the holy house, but didn't bother expressing his distaste. It was of little use, because Dean was standing in front of Kyle's tiny TV, remote in hand, about to put his CAT boot through the screen.

"Dude," Dean griped to no one in particular. "Every damn channel has the same Travolta movie on!" He slapped the TV's ancient wooden casing to try and persuade it to show something other than *Broken Arrow*. Not that Dean considered the flick all that bad, but given their current location it just seemed somewhat bizarre. "I'm telling you, man, I think that freaky demon took over the cable box just to piss me off..."

Sam shook his head and chuckled as Dean continued to press the remote in desperation for a further ten minutes before giving in to the inevitable.

There was an abrupt *thump* as the elder Winchester crashed into a rather scruffy chair and began reciting Travolta and Slater's lines as if he had a copy of their script in front of him.

Within minutes, the hunter was engrossed in all the gunfire, quietly muttering to himself about how John Woo movies "kicked ass" even if they *were* predictable as he munched on the half-eaten remains of someone's pizza.

Sam watched the movie and Dean's consumption of the stale foodstuff for a moment longer and then returned to his own distraction, because even if the demon really had possessed the cable box, it wasn't likely to stay there for long...

Sometime Later

Dean pushed himself up from the threadbare sofa, thinking he wasn't sure which had been more tortuous: the lack of anything decent on TV or the broken-down couch that could have doubled as a coroner's slab. He knew clergymen often took a vow of poverty but maybe Moses had taken this a bit too literally. After all, the priest certainly had the dough to spring for a decent big screen and recliner.

He stretched his arms and loosed a wide yawn, feeling his ears pop in response. Rolling his neck, he reached back and rubbed at the knots that had formed while he had lain there. His entire body protested the recent abuse, but he ignored it like he always did. Bruises would fade, sore muscles would loosen, and lacerations would heal. Considering that he'd barely escaped having a building land on top of him, everything else was minor.

Dean glanced at his watch. With a few hours left before dawn, he figured it was time to check once more on Mia and make sure that his "supergeek" brother called it a night and got some sleep. He knew Sam was just as stumped about Mia's possession as he was. That meant his younger brother was even more likely to be burning the midnight oil, surfing the internet or buried in some obscure text.

"First, some coffee for me," the young hunter grumbled, slowly making his way to the small rectory kitchen.

Prowling around the cupboards, Dean found a cup and poured the last dregs from the bottom of the pot. Taking a huge gulp, the strong caffeine struck his system not unlike the Jack Daniels they'd had earlier.

"Ah, that's my boy, Sammy. Gotta love it when you make the brew," Dean murmured appreciatively before taking another swig.

With the cup in hand, Dean made his way down the hall toward the small bedrooms where Kyle and Mia slept. Passing by the priest's study, he paused at the doorway, smiling briefly as he spotted Sam fast asleep, his head collapsed on his folded arms as he snored softly. Books were half open and strewn across the desk and Sam's laptop was still dimly glowing, all indicating that his brother had indeed passed out in the midst of his research.

"Get some rest, bro," Dean whispered, flipping off the light switch and plunging the room into darkness, the light from the computer acting as an appropriate sort of nightlight.

Continuing down the hall, louder snoring echoed from the farthest bedroom and Dean laughed aloud, shaking his head as he realized the raucous noise was coming from the priest's room.

"Damn, Moses! I've heard of sending prayers to heaven, but I don't think God meant for you to raise the roof off the place. Hell, I've known banshees that are quieter than you," he joked as he continued toward where they had secured Mia for the night.

Reaching the young woman's room, he tapped softly, calling out her name before slowly edging the door open. The room was dimly lit, a small lamp on a bedside table casting tall shadows about the sparsely furnished space. At first he didn't see her, the linens mounded in a lump making it look as though she were huddled beneath them.

"Mia?" Dean called out tentatively.

Something was off. The blankets didn't budge, not even with what should have been the easy rise and fall of her respirations.

Dean watched for a few seconds more, waiting, willing there to be movement. It was then that his eyes caught the piece of paper, bold white sitting stark against the dark wood of the night stand.

In two steps, Dean crossed the space from the doorway to the table, snatching the note up with one hand while throwing back the comforter with the other and confirming his suspicions. His eyes pored over the hastily scribbled letter, the handwriting conveying the desperation even if the words did not.

Sam & Dean,

Thanks for everything you did – but I can't live with what I've done or what I've become. I know you tried, but I'm not sure you can protect me and worse still, I'm not sure you can protect anyone else from me.

No one else should suffer because of the evil inside of me and it just has to end...

Mia

"Dammit!-" Dean grumbled, spinning on his heels and storming toward the hallway. "Sammy!"

He sprinted to the study, calling out his brother's name the entire way and skidding to a halt as he reached the doorway. His yelling paid off as he saw Sam was already stirring, hands rubbing at sleep-reddened eyes as the younger man struggled to come alert.

"Sammy, she's gone," Dean shouted.

"Huh? What? What the hell, Dean?" Sam asked, running a hand through his hair.

"Mia, dude. Wake the hell up. She's gone. Left a note."

"A note?"

"Yeah, the angsty, let the world go on without me variety. Sammy, come on. We gotta find her," Dean pleaded, flipping on the lights and tossing his brother's earlier discarded jacket at him.

Sam raised a hand to block the sudden offending glare, but still managed to deftly catch the coat.

"Dean, hang on. Let's be smart about this. She could be anywhere. I'll wake up Kyle and start in the church, you look around in the church grounds," the younger man suggested.

"Yeah, sounds like a plan. Call my cell if you find her," Dean announced, bounding out the door with Sam close on his heels.

The older hunter cursed under his breath as he headed for the front door of the rectory, alternately blaming himself for not checking on the distraught young woman sooner and doggedly refusing to let anything happen to her now that she was within their protective care.

Stepping outside, the nighttime air assaulted him, suddenly chilling the exposed skin on his face and hands. Dean looked in both directions, not sure if he should check the outbuildings, the grounds or simply head down the street. In the end, his decision was made simple as his eyes landed on the Impala, still parked along the curb and gleaming in the reflection of the streetlight.

Movement silhouetted in the front seat of the old Chevy drew Dean closer and as he approached the passenger's side he spotted Mia seated behind the steering wheel. Even from a few feet away he could see the brunette sitting there, barely moving, her head hanging down to her chest while long tendrils of her russet tresses dangled like delicate ribbons.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he thought she merely had second thoughts about stealing the Impala until he reached the passenger side door and looked inside. Panic filled the older Winchester, his hand immediately fumbling with the door handle as he spotted the red gas can nestled ominously on the bench seat beside Mia, a length of rag dangling from the mouth of the container.

"Mia?" he called out trying to contain the alarm in his voice as he carefully opened the car door and even more slowly slid onto the leather seat.

The odor of the gasoline fumes seeping from the can assailed him and Dean nonchalantly left the door cracked open hoping to evacuate some of the gas, suddenly worried how long the brunette had been subjected to the closed car.

"Mia? Talk to me, please," he pleaded, hoping to elicit some response from the silent young woman.

He heard her shudder, a deep inhalation of breath followed by the smallest of movements and a flicker of light.

"Mia? What's in your hand, sweetheart?" Dean asked tentatively, fear creeping into his voice as his mind tried to deny what his eyes had seen.

The girl responded to him, her head lifting slightly but still not meeting his eyes while her hands opened within her lap revealing a lighter. Dean sucked in a breath when she ran her thumb along flint wheel igniting a tall flame.

He watched as she did so, both of them mesmerized by the yellow-orange dance of the fire within her hand. A dozen possible actions and outcomes ran through Dean's mind, each ending with them and the Impala being spread across the front steps of the church in a million crispy pieces.

"Please, Mia, you don't want to do this. Sammy and I, we're here to help you," he pleaded, simultaneously calculating the distance across the seat and whether he could grab the lighter before she could ignite the gas-soaked rag.

"I can't do this anymore," she finally spoke. "All my friends, the people I cared about, all dead because of me. I took all those lives, I should pay for what I've done."

Dean cringed at the desperation and despair in her voice. He bore his own fair share of guilt, lives lost that lay at his own feet. What rationale could he offer the young woman that wouldn't be a smack in his own face?

"Mia, I understand what you're going through. I really do. But you can't give up hope."

"How can you know?" she whispered back, her thumb flicking the lighter to life yet again, her voice filled with agony.

"I've been there too. I was sorta possessed once and people died because of it. Because of me," Dean admitted, feeling his own throat seize up at the bitter memory.

The bodies of the dead girls covered the floor around him as Haris' sadistic laughter rang in his ears, but Dean forced that vision from his mind, focusing instead on the young woman beside him in the car. The flame of the lighter in her hand erupted again and the hunter knew he needed to act quickly.

"Mia, please listen to me. I know things seem bad, but Sammy and me, we've faced worse odds, worse demons. And Sam, he's smart, he never gives up, he'll figure this out for you," Dean assured her.

He watched her, looking for a glimmer of hope, or barring that, hoping for an opportunity to take the lighter from her. She gave him neither.

"There is nothing to figure out, Dean" she replied, incessantly lighting the Zippo.

His panic went into overload when Mia methodically turned her head to stare straight at him, her eyes blank and lacking their normal sparkling hues of intermixed copper and sepia. Dean almost expected them to gloss over black as he watched her, his body tensing as he prepared for the demon to manifest in the woman yet again.

Still, all he needed was five seconds. Five seconds to launch his body across the seat, over the gas can that separated them and wrestle the lighter from her grasp. He outweighed her, he was stronger, he could do this. He could save her, he could save them both.

Four seconds... she shifted suddenly, twisting her entire body so that she faced him, faced the container. He twitched, throwing his body across the seat at Mia, his hands reaching for hers.

Three seconds... a small flash of light flared from the lighter as her thumb snapped along the flint wheel one final time, her hand managing to snake past his as they struggled in the small confines of the car.

Two seconds... a flame ignited, eating away at the rag that dangled from the gas can, brilliantly illuminating the interior of the Impala as it burned.

One second... Dean had waited one second too late...

* * * *

Gasoline and fire. How many times had Dean played with those two dangerous components? How many salt and burns had he first doused with gasoline before tossing matches on? And never once in all that time had he ever stopped to consider what gas and fire could do together if he wasn't careful...

Until now...

The flames that engulfed the rag crept closer to the opening of the gas can, threatening to ignite the contents and send the Impala skyward in a brilliant explosion. But even as that deadly thought burned into his mind, Dean was already acting, letting go of Mia's arms and instead grabbing for the blazing piece of cloth.

He felt the flesh on his hand start to blister, the gasoline on the rag clinging to his skin and burning with the heat. Dean might have cared about the extremity had he been less concerned about the rest of him being blown to smithereens.

"Sonofabitch!" he yelled, ripping the cloth free of the container while avoiding Mia's still clawing hands. Kicking the door open, he flung the still flaming rag free of the Chevy, watching it float to the ground where it finally extinguished itself against the dew-dampened pavement.

Sagging back against the black leather, his eyes closed, Dean felt the adrenaline still rushing through his system, his heart pounding within his chest a stark reminder of just how nearly lethal this whole situation had become.

The sound of whimpering drew him back and he opened his eyes and turned to track the soft noise. Beside him, Mia now sat limply, her head buried in her hands as sobs wracked her body.

"Mia? Come on, now. Its okay, it's all gonna be okay," Dean soothed, reaching over to put an arm around her shoulders.

He scooted closer to her, nonchalantly moving the gas can out of reach. Drawing her near, Dean was slightly surprised when Mia quickly twisted around, burying her face against his chest.

"It's alright," he crooned, gently rubbing her back. "I promise you, we're gonna make sure nothing else happens. We'll get you free of this and everything will get back to normal again."

He felt her shift, her small hand climbing higher on his chest as she clung to him in desperation. Never considering himself one to be suckered in by a crying woman, somehow with Mia, Dean felt different. It wasn't just the shared experience of being possessed. If he was honest, the hunter was simply tired of the casualties this war seemed to dump in his lap.

"I won't give up on you," he assured her.

Dean felt her shudder, the movement sweeping over her entire body like a wave. Her tears were wet and warm, soaking into the top of his Henley as she continued to weep. It was unnerving, her seeming so fragile and he hated that he felt so powerless to help her.

"Aw, please Mia. Don't cry anymore. Just talk to me," Dean begged, hoping to snap the young woman out of her inconsolable depression.

He heard her suck in a deep breath and for the moment, Dean thought the brunette was actually responding. By the time he felt Mia's body tense up within his arms, he'd already let his guard down. Thinking that the girl was so distraught, he never considered there to be any other sinister plans at play.

He realized a moment too late why he mistrusted crying women as Mia's hands snaked up his chest and circled around his throat. Shock and disbelief set in first as his mind struggled to process the sudden change in behavior, but survival being the most basic instinct won out and Dean grabbed for the hands around his neck.

"Mia!" he gasped, her fingers already pressing in against his trachea and threatening to cut off his air. "Why...?"

Dean tore at her fingers, managing to peel one of her hands away and relishing the return of oxygen to his constricted windpipe. She was directly in front of him now, having spun around to face him so he could see that her brown eyes had given over to jet black.

How was it possible? How could she be possessed again... so soon?

The thought ate at his mind, the lack of answers mocking Dean with the same tenacity as the demon once again possessing the girl. Hunter instincts overriding his need to currently rationalize the situation, the older Winchester fought back against the attack.

"Gonna kill you hunter..." Mia hissed at him.

Dean slammed his open palms against her shoulders in an attempt to throw her off. "Not if I send your demonic ass packing first," he shouted back defiantly.

"You haven't managed yet," the demon within the young woman taunted him, while one hand snaked out and clawed at the side of his face.

"Yeah? Well, why don't you quit hiding inside some innocent girl you piece of shit coward. Come out and fight. Or are you too afraid to take me on?" Dean retorted, not expecting to actually goad the demon into releasing Mia.

"Why should I waste my time with you? You're nothing more than a pothole on the highway I'm speeding down. An insignificant nuisance at best. I'm after much bigger prey than you."

"Well, don't underestimate me sweetheart. I only look this hot and act this charming to fool the riffraff like you," he snarked, throwing his head forward and slamming it into Mia's.

He hated having to hurt the young woman, knowing that ultimately she wasn't at fault, the words and actions not her own. But he had to control her physical body in order to help rid her of the demonic presence.

Mia's body slacked off of him as Dean scrambled to get out from underneath her, his arm straining to reach for the door. As his fingers closed on the handle, he felt her finger's twine into the short spikes on his head, grasping them tight and tugging, dragging him backwards.

He grabbed at her wrists, resisting her pull and trying to take some of the tension off his scalp, but the angle of their bodies within the front seat of the Impala left Dean with little choice but to twist back around before her hell-spawned strength snapped his neck. He heard Mia scream then felt his upper body lifted and thrown against the driver's side door.

"Mia... stop... fight it," Dean begged, switching tactics and hoping that somewhere inside some fraction of the girl could surface for control.

Instead, he was answered by her tightening her grip on his head and slamming it into the glass in the door. Dazed and seeing two of her straddling him, Dean was powerless to stop her as she pulled him forward until they were nearly face to face.

"Why don't you stop fighting it? Come on honey. Aren't you enjoying this? Just you and me alone in your shiny black car?" she sneered.

"Yeah, well the rough foreplay is kinda a turnoff right now..."

Mia's low sadistic laugh assaulted Dean's ears and he felt her hands snake up his body to grip the back of his head once more. Desperation filled him and he threw a right hook to her jaw, hating himself for having to hit her, but knowing his options were limited. He saw her head snap back, lengths of russet hair whipping about her face and obscuring ebony irises.

Her grunt was no indication of injury or submission as Dean very quickly found out when Mia drove the side of his head against the steering wheel. His grunt of pain, however, was very real as she repeated the process twice more, laying open a small cut on his left temple.

She let go of him finally and he dropped limply to the seat, his breaths coming in exaggerated gasps as his head throbbed from the abuse. Dean looked up at Mia, still perched above him like a cat ready to swat at a mouse, her eyes still filled with enmity and evil.

"That... the best... you got?" he choked out, fighting back the wave of dizziness making even the slightest shift of his eyes feel like he was on 747 jumbo jet during high turbulence.

"Aw, Dean. And I thought you'd *appreciate* me being on top," Mia answered, smiling suggestively. "But really, why rush things? I'll finish with you, then head back inside and take care of your brother and that nosy little priest. And I'll take my time killing them as well"

Dean ignored her threats. Closing his eyes against the vertigo and double vision, he took the opportunity presented by Mia's distracted diatribe to fish into the pocket of his jeans for the prized silver flask. Moving as slowly and cautiously as possible so as not to alert her, he managed to get his fingers around the top of the container.

"Ya know, you and your brother sure have been a royal pain in the ass," Mia grumbled, her voice bringing back Dean's attention.

He laughed loudly, regretting the noise when it reverberated through his skull. "Yeah, we've been told that before. Maybe we should put that on our business cards or something."

Her laughter echoed his in the small confines of the Chevy stopping suddenly when he brought his hand with the now opened flask filled of holy water up between their bodies. Unable to execute a full sweep of his arm, Dean settled for flipping the

open mouth of the container at Mia's face, relishing the satisfying hiss as the liquid splattered against her skin.

As she recoiled, he twisted to get out from below her, his knees pushing up in an effort to throw her smaller body off of his own. Dean threw more of the blessed liquid at the girl hoping to secure his escape, but instead of her retreating, Mia surged forward against him. Her hands once more encircled his throat while her knees dug painfully into his ribcage, each motion depriving Dean of precious oxygen.

"Goodbye hunter!" she snarled, glaring down at him.

Dean felt her fingernails puncturing the flesh at his neck as her thumbs pressed in on his windpipe. He tried to force her hands away, but lacked the strength to fight her as his vision began to fade.

I so don't wanna die like this... with a woman is one thing...but not like this...

The ironic thought screamed through Dean's head but as Mia's attack continued his mind processed it with less clarity. Dimly, he heard a rapping sound, the pounding of something on metal, something beating on the Impala.

Quit beating on my car dammit!

Despite the pain, despite the overwhelming desire to succumb to unconsciousness, the young hunter forced his eyes to track the annoying noise. Looking past Mia's demonic eyes, he spotted a new pair of blue-green orbs nearly obscured by a mop of shaggy brown hair, staring back at him through the open passenger's side door.

Sammy!

"Am I interrupting anything? Cause I could come back later when you're finished," Sam teased.

Dean attempted to answer but with no air to pass across his vocal cords all he could manage was an irritated grunt accompanied by a quickly fading glare.

Thankfully, his brother recognized Dean's dire situation and in a flurry of movement, the elder Winchester felt the weight lifted from his chest as Sam forcefully pulled Mia off his body and out onto the night-chilled ground.

Dean rose sluggishly, listing against the seat as he watched his brother doused Mia in holy water. She writhed on the pavement, alternately screaming in pain and rage as Sam proceeded.

Still reeling from the abuse of her demonic attack, Dean managed to slide to the edge of the seat but clung to the door frame as he listened to Sam begin to recite Latin. Within a few seconds, Mia quieted, her frantic struggle ceasing as her eyes drifted closed.

"Exorcism?" Dean asked, his voice rasping from Mia's attack on his throat. The words hadn't sounded like the familiar ritual, but then considering the fog that still cloyed at his brain, he wasn't entirely sure what he'd heard his brother mumbling.

"No," Sam answered. "A binding spell. Kyle found it. Thought we'd give it a try since its pretty obvious the *Rituale Romanum* isn't exactly working."

Dean nodded with chagrin. "Sam, what are we gonna do with her?" he questioned, motioning with his head toward the silent girl.

"It looked to me like you were well on your way to introducing her to the back seat of the Impala dude," the younger sibling joked.

"Oh you're friggin' hilarious, jackass. I'm serious man, when I first got out here, before she wiggled out again, she was going to kill herself." Dean explained. "She can't keep taking all this, being possessed over and over. We gotta do something, Sam. We gotta help her."

Dean waited for his brother's reply, hating that he'd revealed that tiny bit of desperation but hoping that Sam's deep-seated determination to "save people" would shine through now. He wasn't disappointed.

"We will, Dean. Somehow we will," Sam quietly answered.

Next Morning

Eight o'clock seemed to come all too early as Dean staggered into the small rectory kitchen following the beckoning aroma of coffee and bacon. Kyle greeted him cheerfully as he looked up from the skillet.

"You look worse than he does," the small priest observed, motioning with the spatula toward Sam.

Dean followed the motion to where his brother was slumped at the table with his head propped up in his hands. A cup of coffee sat underneath his face, steam rising up as though he were inhaling it like a vaporizer.

"Did you stay up the rest of the night?" Dean asked, already knowing the answer by the red-rimmed eyes that peeked up at him when Sam lifted his head.

"There's nothing, Dean. I searched and searched, and there's not a damn thing out there to help us." Sam's exasperated reply betrayed his exhaustion.

The older hunter sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "We're missing something, Sam. I don't know what it is, but we're missing something. Somewhere."

"Okay, okay, save it till after breakfast you two. You can dig into it again after you've put something into your stomachs," Kyle interjected, plopping plates down in front of the brothers.

"Pretty bossy there, Moses," Dean shot back as he dropped into a chair. Picking up a fork, he began to shovel the breakfast offering into his mouth, not missing the fact his brother was scarcely picking at his own meal.

"Not bad," he added a moment later. "Come on, Sammy. Eat up or Moses there will have you scrubbing the church toilets or something."

"I'm just tired, Dean. Sorry, Kyle. The food is fine. Thanks," Sam mumbled out.

"No apologies necessary, Sam. Look, eat up and I'll help you dig into some of those books we brought up from the basement," the priest offered.

Dean leaned back in his chair, momentarily pausing from his self-induced feeding frenzy. "Ya know what still bugs me? When I carried Mia back into her room last night..."

"This morning," Sam corrected with a wide yawn.

"Yeah, this morning, whatever. The point is, I noticed that she didn't have the necklace on. I found it on the floor of the bedroom when I put her back to bed."

"So maybe it fell off. Maybe the clasp came undone," Sam suggested. "It would explain how the demon got back in her again out in the Impala."

"Yeah, I s'pose. Hey, Moses, you have more of this I can take to Mia? She should eat something and I want to check in on her anyway," Dean told them.

He finished his breakfast, gulping down the last of the coffee in his cup. He then stretched his arms behind his back testing the flexibility and not surprised when the muscles replied with soreness. Rolling his head, he bit back a wince as his neck joined in on the pain parade. Glancing at Sam, Dean looked to see if his brother had noticed, but the younger hunter was barely aware of his own surroundings.

Kyle scurried over with another plate of food as Dean rose from the table.

"Do you need any help?" the clergyman offered.

"Never with a woman," Dean smirked as he headed for the hallway.

"Not what it looked like last night, dude," Sam mumbled without looking up.

"This morning," Dean corrected. "And I had her right where I wanted her."

"Live in the illusion, Dean," Sam called after him.

Dean grunted a response, heard Kyle chastise him for using that language in "God's House" and Sam's brief hint of laughter as he continued down the corridor.

He'd considered asking Sam to come check on him if he wasn't back within a short period of time, not entirely trusting the Devil's Trap or any of the other paraphernalia to protect Mia from the demon or him from Mia for that matter. Still, he wasn't about to let his brother have the satisfaction of, *or give him crap about*, rescuing him from the girl once, let alone twice.

Reaching the closed door to Mia's room, Dean paused. Balancing the tray of food on one arm, he raised his hand to knock on the door, hesitating for a moment as he wondered what he'd find on the other side.

Beautiful woman or black-eyed demon? Innocent victim or ass-kicking bitch?

He drew in a deep breath, not entirely calming himself but deciding that standing out there in the hallway wasn't going to serve Mia anything but cold food.

"Suck it up, Winchester. It's just a girl," he reminded himself, tapping on the door. "Not like you haven't been in a bedroom alone with a woman before."

He knocked again and when there wasn't an answer, Dean cracked open the door and peeked almost timidly inside. Nothing moved and the room itself was nearly as quiet and dark as it had been earlier when he'd checked on her only to find her gone. For a second, he thought Mia had escaped once more, but a sudden rustle of the blankets reassured Dean.

"Mia?" he called out softly. "You awake?"

The grumble that emanated from under the thick covers made him smile and Dean absently wondered if that's what he sounded like to Sam each morning when he fought being woken up.

"Come on Sleeping Beauty, your handsome prince has brought breakfast."

"Coffee?" The hoarse mumble was followed by a tousled mop of hair and the glint of a brown eye sneaking out from beneath the thick comforter.

"Of course," Dean replied. "Cream and sugar?"

"Bite your tongue," Mia shot back, creeping out from her fabric cocoon.

Dean ventured closer, unable to hide his wariness as he set the platter down on the bedside table and handed Mia the cup. For the briefest second, their fingertips touched and he felt her flinch and quickly snatch the beverage out of his hand, withdrawing against the headboard. He backed away as well, finding a Shaker style chair in the corner and pulling it near before straddling it backwards.

He watched her watch him, an uncomfortable silence settling over the room. She didn't move, merely sipped at the coffee in her hand, her knees drawn up to her chest as she huddled at the head of the bed. Dean hated that she once again looked so frightened, so small and fragile.

Clearing his throat, he broke the stillness. "Mia, I don't know if you remember much of what happened last night, but I meant what I said about Sam and I doing everything we can to help you."

Her eyes cast downward and Dean saw her shiver just slightly.

"I remember too much," she answered flatly. "I remember wanting to end it all. I remember you trying to stop me and I remember hurting you..."

"Nah, you didn't hurt me," he quickly interjected as he saw her eyes focusing on the bruises marring his throat. "Besides, I'm used to fighting off the ladies when I get 'em in my car."

Dean flashed his best encouraging smile, his green eyes twinkling as he ended with a wink. She smiled back at him weakly and Dean took some comfort in the tinge of blush that dusted across her cheeks.

"Seriously though, it's all okay. We're gonna work through this." Dean insisted.

"How can you be so confident? How can you sit there and think all this is going to work out? After everything that's happened, after everything I've done?" she cried out, tears threatening her dark eyes.

"Because we've beat these odds before, Mia. I've beat this before. See, my mom was killed by a demon when I was just four and Sammy was just a baby. We've spent our entire lives hunting for the S.O.B. who did it to make him pay. But along the way, he was hunting us too, trying to get my brother."

"Sam? Why?"

"That's kinda a long story in itself. But at one point, this other hunter sold us out to the demon and he trapped us. I was possessed by the damn thing's hell-spawned kid. Well, semi-possessed I guess you could say. But the point is, I couldn't always

control the thing that was inside me either. And at one point, I nearly even killed Sam,” Dean recounted, closing his eyes as he remember that night at the motel in New Jersey.

“But you got free of the demon?” Mia asked hopefully. “How?”

“Well, that was thanks to my brother making a dumbass deal with Haris, the demonic bastard, to get me free. But what I’m trying to tell you is that it’s not your fault, what happens while you’re possessed. There’s always hope, Mia. Don’t ever give up hope, okay? No matter what the voice inside you tries to tell you, don’t believe it. Demons lie. Even the ones inside you... inside your head,” he insisted.

Dean watched her face, hoping to see some glimmer that the young woman was heeding his words. He saw her blink several times, a short hitch of breath signaling she had something weighing on her mind.

“It tells me I’ll always be alone...” she whispered.

“It lies.”

“But I’ve been alone all my life, kicked around from one foster home to another,” she blurted out.

Dean remained silent, willing her to continue, nodding her on.

“My parents died in a car wreck when I was just a baby. There was no one else. So I ended up a ward of the state and made my way through the system one foster family at a time. Some of them weren’t bad, a couple were awful. But none of those places were ever home, never really a family, ya know?”

“Yeah, I get that,” Dean quietly replied.

“Don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t all bad. My last family, the Reeverts, were pretty cool. Mike, my foster dad, was a total gear head. He had this ’71 Camero Z-28 that we rebuilt. That’s what got me into cars. Kinda noticed your Impala too,” she added with a sly grin. “’68?”

“It’s a ’67, was my dad’s, but I grew up working on it. Dad was a mechanic too, pretty much taught me everything I know,” Dean stated with pride.

“She’s beautiful. I’d love to take a closer look at her sometime,” the brunette continued.

Dean laughed, shaking his head.

“What?” Mia asked, perplexed by his reaction.

“Nothing. It’s just that Sammy would give you so much crap if he heard you calling the Impala ‘her’ or ‘she.’ It drives him crazy when I refer to the car like it’s a woman,” Dean answered still chuckling. He felt his tension ease as he saw Mia smile, her mood obviously lightening at the talk about cars.

“Well, you do understand that I have a ’73 Mustang Mach I and *he’s* almost totally rebuilt. Probably give your girl a run for her money,” Mia teased.

“You have Eleanor?” Dean asked excitedly.

“Well, not quite yet. But yeah, the original *Gone in Sixty Seconds* was one of the reasons I loved that car. I was still hunting down a couple of parts, but Greg had a line on a new grille...”

Dean watched her face draw up in pain, the lightheartedness of the moment gone as her eyes glazed over with the memory of her dead boyfriend. The tears began to fall, but without a word, she angrily wiped them from her face.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, barely stifling a sob. “It’s just that after everything I went through growing up, I thought that I finally had a life. I had Greg, my friends... and then I destroyed it all.” She paused, her breath catching as her eyes misted over once more.

Dean rose up and spun the chair around, moving it closer to the edge of the bed. He reached out, placing a calloused hand gently at the edge of the blankets.

“Mia, you didn’t do this, none of this is your fault. Your boyfriend, your friends, my mom, hell, countless people out there that those demonic sonsobitches have taken from us, none of it is fair. It doesn’t make sense and it isn’t fair and sometimes the

harder it seems like we fight the more it seems like we lose. But we have to keep fighting," he declared.

"I don't think I can..." she whimpered, tears flowing unabated now as she buried her face in her hands.

Fear cautioned him, but compassion overrode his instinct and he moved over to sit beside her, placing an arm around her shoulder.

"You can Mia, because you don't have to face this alone, and I'm not willing to lose," Dean adamantly stated.

He felt the young woman curl into the nook of his arm and the events of a few hours earlier replayed in his mind. His body stiffened cautiously, unable to help his response to the memory of the demon's attack. Mia jerked away, sensing his reaction.

As she moved, the collar of her blouse snagged and pulled away exposing the pale skin of her shoulder. With her back turned from him, Dean couldn't help but notice the bare flesh, and something else.

"Mia, what is that?" he asked suspiciously.

"Huh? What?" she replied, her sobs broken up as she peered over her shoulder to see what he was referring to.

"This," Dean queried, reaching out to gently touch at a darkened shape just above her scapula.

"It's just a stupid birthmark," Mia casually answered, attempting to pull her blouse back up to cover it.

"No, wait," he called out, reaching to prevent her. "It looks like something."

"Yeah, I know. It looks like a stupid bird. Give me a break okay. I got teased every day of my life during gym class showers," she bemoaned.

"Mia, I'm serious. This reminds me of something. I just can't place what," Dean insisted, his brows furrowing in thought.

"It's nothing Dean. I've had it as long as I can remember. Its pretty much always looked that way I think."

"Hang on, okay," Dean pleaded, jumping from the bed and bounding toward the open door. Sticking his head out into the hallway he shouted for his brother. "Sam! Sammy! Hey dude, haul your ass down here to Mia's room."

It wasn't long before Dean heard his brother's heavy footfalls pounding on the hardwood floors of the hallway approaching the bedroom. Having returned to sit at the edge of the massive bed, the young hunter perched again behind the brunette, his gaze fixed upon the peculiar mark on her back.

"Dean, what is it. Are you okay?" Sam's panicked voice matched his wide eyes as he swung into the room, barely skidding to a stop.

"Yeah, dude, why wouldn't I be?" Dean answered nonchalantly, throwing his brother an irritated scowl. "C'mere and look at this."

He motioned his brother over to where Mia sat on the edge of the bed. As the taller sibling drew near, Dean lightly lifted the young woman's long hair away from her neck to expose the strangely shaped dark patch of skin.

"Is that a tattoo?" Sam asked, reaching out tentatively to touch Mia's shoulder.

"She says it's a birthmark, but look at it. I've seen something like that before, Sam. I just can't remember where," Dean insisted.

Mia shifted uncomfortably under the brothers' scrutiny and Dean gently rubbed her arm to still her.

"Maybe it's some sort of weird demonic stigmata?" Sam suggested.

Dean nodded. "That or I was thinking it could even be some sort of binding mark?"

The elder hunter stared at the spot, a vague memory teasing at the recesses of his mind. Beside him, the soft click of Sam's cellular startled him slightly as his taller sibling snapped a picture of the peculiar design.

"I'm telling you, Sammy, there's something about this that seems familiar. I just can't remember what," Dean whined.

“Well, I gotta admit, it does sorta look like a bird. I s’pose there could be some sort of connection,” Sam agreed.

“Are you trying to tell me that I’ve been marked by a demon?” Mia exclaimed.

“It’s happened to others,” Sam admitted ruefully, exchanging a knowing look with Dean.

“Mia, this might help us figure things out,” Dean explained. “If this is some sort of link between you and the demon that’s been controlling you, then we have a chance of stopping it.”

“How? What are you going to do? Cut it off of me or something?” the girl asked, panic filling her voice as she stared wide-eyed at Dean.

He laughed, pulling the edge of her blouse back up onto her shoulder. “No. But if we can figure out who that symbol belongs to, then maybe we can summon it and send its ass back to hell where it belongs. Right, Sammy?”

Dean glanced up at his brother, seeking agreement and hoping Sam would help convey some encouragement to the young woman.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll get right on it,” the younger Winchester muttered, less than enthusiastically as he started toward the doorway.

“I’ll be there to help you in a few, bro,” Dean called out behind him, watching Sam wave in acknowledgment before disappearing into the hallway.

He rose from the edge of the bed, moving back to the nearby chair and putting a more comfortable distance between himself and the young woman. A sudden awkward silence settled over the room and Dean could feel Mia’s eyes on him even as he pretended to randomly inspect the back of his hand.

“So, um... you really think this mark will tell you something?” Mia asked tentatively.

Dean laughed wryly. “Well, it probably doesn’t tell me squat, but SuperGeek who just left will figure it out. That’s why I let him hang around,” he joked.

“He’s the brains, you’re the brawn, huh?”

“Some days. Don’t let him fool ya though. Sammy might come off like an overgrown puppy, but he can have some sharp fangs when he wants to bare them,” Dean warned.

“And you? I haven’t seen you bare any fangs yet,” Mia posed.

“No?”

“Not at me,” she answered coyly.

“I guess you don’t remember much from when you’re possessed then?”

“All I remember is that every time I seem to wake up, you’re there, telling me everything’s going to be okay.”

“Yeah, well, that’s because it will be,” Dean insisted.

“I wish I had your faith.”

“Faith? Ha! It has nothing to do with faith, sister. You want faith, go talk to my brother. For me, it’s just fact,” he answered stalwartly. “You can keep all your conviction and religion.”

“You don’t believe in having faith? In God?” she questioned, her eyes managing to capture his.

Dean turned away nervously, hating the direction the conversation had turned, once again resorting to counting the scars on the back of his hand. Every instinct shouted at him to just get up and excuse himself from the room, tell her he had to go fix something in the Impala, help Sam with the research, paint the entire freakin’ church if it got him out of talking about faith and God.

“Wow, something tells me making you speechless is a pretty rare feat,” Mia teased.

Dean rubbed his hand across his mouth, still refusing to meet her eyes. “You let your breakfast get cold. I can go get you something else,” he offered, reaching for the tray that still sat untouched on the nightstand.

“And now you change the subject...”

“Mia, there’s a lot you don’t know about me. Hell, sometimes I think there’s a lot I don’t know about myself. I told you my mom died when I was four, killed by a demon. Well, that’s why my dad became a hunter, dedicated his life to hunting down that bastard and pretty much every other evil sonofabitch out there. He raised me the same way, Mia. It’s all I know, all I’ve ever known. All I’ve ever seen is evil out there. What it does to good people... like you,” Dean explained solemnly.

He toed his right boot against the hardwood floor, shifting uncomfortably as he dreaded her response.

“You’ve never seen any good? Never seen a miracle?” Mia challenged. “Have you never seen a newborn baby? The very break of sunrise? The stars in a clear night sky?”

Dean raised his head finally to look at the brunette, locking into the depths of her multi-hued brown irises. He saw the sincerity in her questions; he just couldn’t find the same sincerity in his own heart.

“Wow, you’re just like Sammy. You got whammied with an extra helping of the ‘sappy genes’,” he snarked, ducking as a large pillow came flying at his head.

“You’re a jerk!” Mia groused good-naturedly.

“So I’ve been told.”

“So, your dad is a hunter too?” she asked after a moment.

“Yeah, he pretty much taught us everything. I don’t think he ever meant for us to be hunters, not really. He mostly just wanted us to be prepared, to know what was out there and be able to protect ourselves. He tried to keep us away from the big fight, but it sorta caught up to us a while back,” Dean recalled.

“Are you close?”

Dean smiled, his eyes drifting away in thought. “Yeah, we are. Sammy might not always agree. Him and Dad can really go at each other sometimes, but that’s just because they’re so much alike. When they’re around each other too long, they clash. Although lately, I guess that’s not been much of a problem...” he replied, his voice trailed off as he thought about his once-again missing father.

“Something’s wrong?” Mia asked perceptively.

“Nah, nothing. Just haven’t seen him in a while. But that’s John Winchester for ya. He’s probably off hunting some evil bastard. He’ll turn up when he’s sent whatever it is back to hell,” Dean stated matter-of-factly, trying to mask the raw wound that lay just under the surface.

“You should call him, talk to him,” the young woman suggested. “I mean, if it was my dad, I’d want him to know how I feel.”

Dean huffed air, simultaneously shaking his head. “If it were only that easy, Mia. I could call him, hell I have called him. But you don’t know my dad. He won’t answer and he won’t be found until he’s damn good and ready.”

“But if you needed him?”

“Mia, he doesn’t give a damn about us...”

The words escaped his mouth before he even realized they were forming, but it was too late to prevent the slip. Instead, Dean found himself even more desperate to escape the near-suffocating confines of the room. If he hadn’t been comfortable discussing religion, then the revelation about his relationship with his dad threw him right over the edge.

“Dean, I’m sure that’s not true. I bet if you called him right now he’d...”

“Mia, stop!” Dean demanded, rising from the chair. Grabbing the tray from the bedside table, he made no effort to hide his irritation even though it wasn’t really directed at the brunette. He was angry, hurt, and all of that was a direct result of one John Winchester.

Approaching the door, he turned to look back at Mia, his heart immediately sinking as he saw her huddled against the headboard once again. Feeling like a jerk for having snapped at the young woman, Dean scrambled for an apology.

“Um... Mia, I... um...” he stammered awkwardly.

"It's okay. It was none of my business. All you've ever done is be kind to me and try to help and I stuck my nose where it didn't belong," she answered quietly.

And now I'm officially a jackass...

"It wasn't you, Mia. It's just the dysfunction that is the Winchester family. Look, I better go help Sam before he starts whining about being left to do all the research. I'll send Moses back with some towels and stuff in case you want to get cleaned up okay?"

It was the closest thing to an apology he could offer, but Dean didn't wait to see if she accepted it or not. With his head still down, the young hunter trudged out into the hallway and away from the warm, brown eyes that seemed to bore right into his very soul.

Sam glanced up from the laptop as Dean half strode, half stumbled into the rectory's study. His eyes narrowed as he took in the look on his brother's face. Dean's normally bright green eyes were darkened, his brows furrowed together.

Sam knew that look. Although rarely making an appearance on his older sibling's face that look usually signaled to Sam that Dean had something weighing heavily on his mind. Add to that, Dean's less than graceful entrance and Sam knew something was up.

"What did you do?" he asked as Dean dropped into the chair across from the desk.

"Do?" Dean answered defensively. "Why would you think I did anything?"

"Well, you're here instead of with Mia. Although, I don't see a hand-print on your face so obviously you didn't say anything that got you slapped," Sam observed. "So something else must have happened that she sent you packing."

"She didn't send me anywhere," the older hunter retorted.

"Then why do you look like you just went down in flames?"

"I do not!"

"Dean, we're brothers. We've lived together nearly all our lives. And besides, I can read you like an open book," Sam reminded him. "So what happened?"

"Nothing," Dean insisted.

"I know that look..."

"Leave it alone, Sam."

"If it's just that you're worried about the girl..." Sam continued.

"Dammit, what is it with you all?" Dean exploded. "Does everyone have to keep digging and digging?"

Sam stared at his brother, shocked and surprised at his outburst and not understanding what it had to do with Mia or his current research.

"Oookaay..." the younger Winchester slurred out, deciding that Dean's current mood was better left alone. "So, while you were doing, well whatever you weren't doing, I actually found something."

Dean perked up and Sam could see that he was eager to turn the conversation away from any focus on himself.

"So what do ya have?" Dean asked, scooting forward in his seat.

Sam eyed him suspiciously, knowing that sooner or later, he really needed to get Dean to divulge what was bothering him, but deciding that now was probably not the time. Sighing, he acquiesced and swiveled the laptop around so the screen faced his brother.

"Well, Kyle found something about a demon named Malphas in the *Goetia*," he began.

"Malphas?" Dean repeated, as though he were testing the name on his tongue like some foreign food. "I know that name."

"I looked him up in Binsfield online and this is what I found," Sam announced, pointing to the monitor.

The screen displayed the image of a large raven, not too dissimilar to the strange mark that marred Mia's pale skin.

"Malphas, yeah. I remember now. Caleb used to always tell us that story about his familiars being ravens remember that?" Dean chimed in.

"Oh yeah, he used to tell us that Malphas used them to watch us whenever he wanted to scare us into behaving. Damn, I'd forgotten about that. I hated those freakin' birds," Sam reminisced.

Dean laughed and Sam joined him, silently glad that his brother's mood seemed to be lightening.

"Dude, you were like five. Dad was so pissed at Caleb for telling us that too. For months, he had to chase all the blackbirds away before either of us would step outside," Dean added in between chuckles.

The brothers' laughter continued unabated for a few moments more, silencing only when Kyle walked into the small library. The diminutive priest stared at the two young men, perplexed by their behavior.

"Dare I even ask?" he interjected.

Sam cleared his throat in an effort to return to some semblance of seriousness. He watched as his brother attempted the same, but ever the smartass, Dean couldn't resist a sarcastic reply.

"You could ask, but if we told you anything then we'd have to kill you," the elder hunter replied.

"Dean, save your intimidation for someone that doesn't know you," the priest rejoined quickly. "By the way, I got Mia fixed up with some clean clothes. She's taking a shower right now. She seemed a bit distraught when I mentioned your name. What did you do?"

"Mind your own business," Dean snapped back, the humor from his voice now absent.

"Hmm, I sense I've hit a nerve," Kyle mumbled, defensively moving further away from the tense hunter.

"I was just telling Dean about Malphas," Sam hastily interceded.

"Oh? Did you tell him about the demon's particular talent?" Kyle asked.

"His talent?" Dean asked curiously. "You mean beyond the regular tormenting of souls and possessing innocent people?"

"Yeah," Sam replied, pushing a worn tome across the desk toward his brother. "Check out the second paragraph."

He waited as Dean scanned down the page, nodding almost smugly when realization flashed across his brother's face.

"He throws down the building of his enemies?" Dean quoted. "No way?"

"Sound like anyone we know?" Sam asked. "Between the mark on her shoulder and her stunt at the church and the jail, I'm thinking we've found the demon behind Mia's possessions."

"So, we go after this bastard?" the elder hunter asked, thumbing through the text.

"Well..." Sam began.

"Well what?" Dean shouted, rising up from the chair and slamming both hands against the desktop.

"Dean, relax. Let your brother finish before you shift into overdrive," Kyle intervened, placing a hand on the older man's shoulder.

Sam held his breath as he watched his brother react to the well-meaning clergyman. For a moment, he thought he might have to vault over the large desk when Dean's eyes flared and his hand clenched into a tight fist in preparation to level the small priest.

"DEAN!" Sam called out, hoping his voice would snap his brother out of his retaliatory stance.

It took a moment or two, but to Sam's relief, Dean relented, his body slowly relaxing as he slumped back down into the leather chair.

Sam stared at him in disbelief. Whatever was bothering his brother, he needed to get Dean's head back in the game. This just wasn't like Dean!

"Dude, what's with you?" he asked calmly.

The green eyes that slowly peered back up at him held none of their prior vehemence. Sam saw only regret and his brother's soulful look of pain. In an instant, it was gone, carefully sequestered behind Dean's well-crafted emotional walls.

"I'm sorry, Kyle" Dean mumbled, absently fumbling with the edge of the book again.

"No worries, Dean. I know we're all just a bit stressed out and tired," the priest simply stated.

With relative calm restored, Sam sucked in a deep breath. "Okay, now I was about to tell you that freeing Mia from Malphas isn't necessarily going to be that easy."

"Do you have a plan?" Dean asked soberly.

"Well, we start with summoning it."

"And then what? We don't have the Colt and I don't think we're up to trying a repeat of Wyoming," Dean questioned, his hand automatically reaching for the golden amulet.

Sam shook his head. "No, that's not an option. And I better never catch that missing from around your neck again," he threatened.

"Then what's our plan?"

Sam smiled grimly, "I'm still working on that."

Abandoned Airfield Later That Night

Dean killed the Impala's engine, but didn't immediately move from behind the steering wheel. He peered out into the darkness, quickly scanning the deserted landing field for any immediate threat.

"You sure about this, Sammy?" he asked, turning to face his younger brother..

"Yeah. If we're gonna be summoning a demon that can destroy whole buildings, better to do it where it has nothing to drop on our heads."

"I s'pose that makes sense, but still, I'm not crazy about us being out in the open," Dean complained.

"It'll be safer, Dean. Trust me," Sam insisted.

"I always have, dude."

"So, are we just gonna sit here then or are we gonna try to save the girl?"

Dean grunted, throwing his younger sibling a dirty look before shoving open the driver's side door and stepping out into the cool night air. He ambled to the back of the Chevy meeting Sam at the trunk.

They removed several items, Sam pulling free a duffle bag full of materials for the summoning while Dean retrieved first an extra clip for his .45 then spare shells for the shotgun.

"And those are gonna stop a demon how?" Sam asked sarcastically as he sorted through the contents in the duffle.

"It makes me feel safer," Dean retorted "Besides, I'm not totally sold on your plan."

"Hey, if you have a better one, I'm all ears."

"No, you're not."

"Huh? I'm not what?"

"You're not all ears. You're mostly all feet and hands and that freakishly tall body," Dean teased, swerving out of the way as Sam swung a fist at his upper arm.

"Can we just be serious about this please," Sam pleaded, slinging the bag over his shoulder and moving away from the car.

“Be serious? I’m totally serious. Look how serious I am,” Dean repeated, grabbing the shotgun and a large canteen filled with holy water. Slamming shut the trunk he then trailed after his brother.

By the time he caught up to Sam, his brother was already carefully drawing out the sigil in chalk onto the concrete runway. Without a word, Dean set about placing candles in the appropriate spots and lighting them.

Having gone over the ritual back at the church, both young hunters were well aware of what needed to be done as they quietly went about preparing to summon the demon. With precision, Dean laid out the required objects while Sam completed the complicated design.

When he was done, Dean picked up the shotgun and stood on guard as he waited for Sam to finish. He listened to the sounds of the night creatures, his senses on full alert even though he knew they had yet to begin the incantation that would finally draw Malphas to them.

Still, he wasn’t taking any chances. Considering how many times exorcisms had been performed and yet the demon had found its way back into Mia only to wreak havoc on those around her, Dean wasn’t about to let his guard down tonight.

“Hey, did you bring the yarrow?” Sam asked, startling him back from his thoughts.

“Yep! It’s in the plastic bag in the backpack. The stuff reeks dude,” Dean whined as Sam began laying the plant cuttings at the four corners of the sigil.

When he finished, the younger hunter stood and stepped back to stand at Dean’s side. Dean chambered a shell into the shotgun, punctuating the relative quiet of the abandoned airstrip.

“Are we ready?” Sam asked.

“Are we ever?” Dean answered.

He moved to stand protectively over his brother as Sam knelt down before the intricate design and opening the worn book, began reciting the Latin incantation. As the words rose onto the late night breeze, Dean couldn’t prevent the shiver that traced down his spine. Something felt off, but he dare not mention to his brother that he was having second thoughts after all his “insistence” on finding some way to defeat the demon.

“...quem vetus adversarius...”

As Sam droned on in the ancient language, Dean’s gaze fell to the hastily painted Devil’s Trap drawn around the intricate summoning pattern. Would it work? Could it hold the demon once it appeared? Sam seemed to think it would and shouldn’t that be enough?

“...famulus tuus munitus et in animo tutus et corpore...”

The sudden rush of wind caused the candles to flicker and even ruffled the short strands of Dean’s hair. His finger tensed on the shotgun’s trigger, hoping the mysterious breeze was a precursor to an incoming storm but knowing it was a portent to a more malevolent arrival. In front of him, Sam continued unfazed despite battling the pages as they fluttered in the gust.

“...invoco Malphas, et impraesieo vos...”

At the vocalization of the demon’s name everything around them grew deathly quiet. The sounds of the nighttime creatures ceased and the once tumultuous zephyr just as rapidly stilled. With nothing moving around the two hunters, the strong odor of sulfur assailed them.

“Sammy?” Dean called out worriedly.

“He’s here,” Sam answered back, slowly rising to his feet.

In a rush of heat, the demon appeared before them in the midst of the Devil’s Trap. For a brief moment, its form was lost in a swirl of black feathers finally materializing into a tall, dark haired man. Malphas looked around the open area, seemingly disoriented before his gaze landed on the Winchesters.

“Who do you think you are to summon me?” the demon hissed.

"We're the guys that are gonna send your ass back to the lower reaches of hell... permanently," Dean shot back.

The demon laughed, raising his hand in an effort to throw the hunter across the open airstrip, but the Devil's Trap served its purpose and restricted him. The look of contempt that appeared across Malphas' face was visible even in the darkness.

"Having a problem there Malphie?" Dean asked sarcastically.

The demon railed at the edges of the trap, eyes turning black and flashing in anger as his fingers elongated and began to claw at the concrete.

"Sam, you ready with that binding incantation?" Dean called out. "Otherwise, we might have some issues here real soon."

As his younger brother unfolded a piece of paper and began to recite yet another ancient rite, the demon spat at them defiantly.

"You pathetic humans, do you realize what I will do to you?" Malphas screamed with rage.

"Release the girl," Dean demanded.

"What girl?" the hellspawn queried.

"Mia Cameron. The young woman you've been using, possessing, tormenting, you sonofabitch," Dean snapped back. "Leave her go and maybe we'll reconsider sending your feathered ass back to hell. Otherwise, you're getting roasted like a Thanksgiving turkey."

"I'm killing you both first..." the demon continued, ignoring the elder hunter's threat and the younger's ongoing oration.

"Keep going, Sammy..."

"...iacio tergum ut abyssus..."

"...rip the flesh from your bones, then pluck your eyes from their sockets..."

Above the din of voices another faint sound rose. Beginning like the soft rustle of leaves, it grew until there was no mistaking it.

"Sam? What is that?" Dean asked, interrupting his brother's ongoing litany.

Stopping mid-word, Sam peered skyward, scanning the heavens, his face growing concerned as he spotted the source of the noise.

"Oh, that can't be good," he groaned.

The first raven dropped out of the darkness like a kamikaze dive-bombing an aircraft carrier, plummeting at Sam with a screech, its claws extended as it sought to tear into his flesh. Within seconds, dozens more descended on both hunters, beaks stabbing at bodies while wings beat unmercifully at exposed heads.

"Sammy! How the hell is he doing this? I thought the Devil's Trap contained him," Dean shouted, randomly firing the shotgun at the attacking blackbirds.

"It holds him, but these are familiars, Dean. He can summon them at will. We can't stop them," Sam replied in a panic, barely dodging a large raven that dove in and scored a slash along his neck.

But Dean didn't hear him, the rapid fire of the shotgun blocked out most of his brother's explanation. One after another, the birds continued to assault the brothers, shredding fabric and opening myriads of cuts on the skin below.

Beside him, Dean saw Sam go down beneath a sea of black feathers, his brother's arms still desperately flailing to dislodge the swarm of birds. With several still darting in and pecking at his face, Dean blindly staggered over to his fallen sibling. Using the stock of the shotgun, he swung at the ravens, determined to protect Sam.

He called out to his brother, tried to encourage him, tried to tell him to protect his head and face, but in the end, it was all Dean could do to protect himself. A secondary wave of avian attackers fell from the cloak of darkness, enveloping the young hunter like a living cape.

Dean screamed in defiance, dropping the empty shotgun and somehow managing to pull the silver-plated Colt .45 from the back of his waistband. Firing as accurately as his obscured vision would allow, Dean stood over Sam, trying to protect the both

of them against the onslaught. Vaguely, he could hear the demon laughing in the circle just beyond, and he considered taking a potshot at the bastard just for the hell of it. But as he ejected the spent clip and reached to replace it with a fresh one, a large raven soared in, beak and claws aimed directly for his face.

He raised his arms defensively, the bird smashing into him, knocking the pistol from his grip and opening a long bloody furrow in his right forearm. Dean felt the piercing stab of the bird's beak impale his hand again and again, as he dropped to his knees and sought to cover his face and head.

"The flesh from your bones hunter... and the eyes from your sockets," Malphas repeated. "And for what? You fools! Do you think I'd waste my time on filth like her?"

"Go to hell," Dean yelled back, crawling to huddle over Sam's already silent body and throwing a protective arm across his brother's head as a blanket of black wings swallowed them up.

Abandoned Air Field – late night

Malphas watched his minions swarm over the two cowering forms before him. His laugh was deep and insidious, a stark contrast to the loud screeching of the angry flock that was battering his enemies. Stuck within the confines of the Devil's Trap, the demon was nearly trapped and powerless.

Nearly...

"Kill them my pets!" he ordered, black eyes shimmering almost gleefully as he observed the vicious attack unfolding before him.

The muffled grunts of the humans were like music to his ears. Closing his eyes he inhaled deeply, the stagnant hint of copper hanging on the air as the hunter's blood welled from dozens of fresh wounds.

How dare they presume to summon him and then have the audacity to think they could trap and destroy him? Did they not comprehend the power he wielded? Did they not know that he could be a gracious master to those that chose to serve him or he could just as easily annihilate those who stood against him?

He saw one of the two, the more verbally defiant of them, feebly struggle against the thick mass of ravens. The pathetic human rose up on one arm only to slump back down over top the other taller, unmoving form. Malphas smiled broadly as both lesser beings finally became still, neither resisting as beaks continued to peck unabated at fragile flesh.

Raising his hands above his head, Malphas' raucous voice ascended to the heavens, ancient Akkadian rolling off his lips as he called his familiars away from the downed hunters. Within seconds, the birds retreated, most quickly fading back into the blackness of the night while a few gathered around their master's shoulders.

"You've done well my pets. Now, just one more thing I require of you," the demon crooned.

Without a further command, the ravens dropped to the ground at Malphas' feet. Obediently, they scratched and pecked at the carefully drawn markings on the concrete below the demon. In a short time, the outer edge of the Devil's Trap was obliterated, its continuous circle broken open, the binding power lost.

With a wave of his hand, Malphas dismissed his minions, the last of the blackbirds disappearing into the darkness with a rapid beating of wings. The demon strode from the trap, as though the entire incident had been little more than an inconvenience.

Walking over to where the two forms lay silently on the cold ground, Malphas looked down with disdain at the unmoving and bloody brothers.

"Fools! Let this be a lesson. I've no more time to deal with the likes of that common trash than to deal with the likes of you, but trifle with me again and I'll not be so ... gentle," the demon warned.

There was no response from either of the young men, not that Malphas desired or waited for one. Spinning on his heel, he disappeared in a whirlwind of thick smoke

and a flurry of black feathers, leaving only a gentle breeze behind to dust over the battered bodies of Sam and Dean Winchester.

Sam awoke to a heavy weight pressing down on his back and forcing his face into the cold, rough concrete. His body awoke a moment later, nerve endings coming alive and sending messages back to his brain that said he really should feel free to scream aloud considering the numerous small puncture wounds and claw marks that scored his body.

His chest muscles fought to be heard next, telegraphing their own communications to his central nervous system, shouting to be heard over the pain receptors and telling them to shut up and wait their turn while they dealt with removing the heavy blanket that was currently smothering any attempt at drawing in a deep breath.

It was the brain itself, that inner voice itself, which finally silenced everything else, telling pain, discomfort, even lack of oxygen to take a back seat, while self-preservation kicked in and scrambled to assess whether any threat still existed. Ears strained, eyes struggled to focus, and Sam lifted his head cautiously, waiting for another black-winged assault.

When seconds passed and none came, he breathed a sigh of relief, letting his head sag back down to the cool tarmac.

"Dean? You okay?" Sam called out as he began to peel himself out from underneath the unyielding mass atop him. "Dude, hey, where are you? I'm stuck underneath something. Gimme a hand would ya?"

Turning his head to the opposite side, Sam found the "proffered" hand nearly smacking him in the face as Dean's arm flopped limply over his shoulder. Desperation filled the younger hunter as he abruptly realized that the "weight" lying on him was none other than his older brother having succumbed to the ravens' attack while trying to protect him.

"Dean!" Sam yelled, somehow managing to roll over onto his back without dislodging his unconscious sibling. "Dean, come on. Wake up man!"

His brother's groan was a welcomed sound, quickly followed by Dean's customary jerk to an upright and semi-alert position. Sam grunted as his brother's weight was abruptly released from his chest and he snickered as he watched the older man struggle with pain, disorientation and the need to return to hunter mode all at once. It was so typically Dean, and as Sam looked on, he saw everything else give way to his brother's ability to push aside his physical needs in order to be on alert.

"You okay, Sammy?"

So typically Dean...

"Nothing a hot shower and a good looking nurse wouldn't take care of," Sam answered with a slight cock of his head.

He laughed when Dean sat there speechless, pleased that he had caught his brother so off guard with his uncharacteristic answer.

"Dude, you're not my brother," Dean added finally, shaking his head. "Seriously you jerk, did those KFC wannabes get you?"

"Nah, I'm okay, really. Better than you by the looks of things. Let me take a look at your arm," Sam demanded, reaching out to grab the freely bleeding extremity.

Dean started to resist, but Sam doggedly maintained his grip with his right hand while stretching out to pull the nearby duffle bag to his side with his left.

"The demon's gone," Dean observed, trying to ignore Sam's ministrations as he gazed about the empty airfield.

"Yeah, but at least he took his friends with him," the younger hunter added.

"How do ya think he managed to get out of the trap?"

Sam shrugged. "Who knows, I guess we weren't prepared enough, huh?"

"Ya think?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sam asked, diverting his attention away from the bloody gash that ran nearly the length of Dean's forearm.

"Dude, we got our asses handed to us by a flock of friggin' Hitchcock extras. Hell, you'll be pickin' feathers out of that shaggy freakin' mop of yours for months. Oh my God..."

"What? Dean? What is it?" Sam asked in alarm, seeing his brother's eyes widen in panic.

"My car! Dude, I swear to God, if those friggin' birds crapped all over my car, I'm gonna make it my personal crusade to eat nothing but chicken from now on," Dean vowed.

"Oh yeah, that'll teach the *ravens* a lesson," Sam agreed sarcastically. "Dean, do you have any clue how little sense that makes?"

"Ravens, chickens, whatever, they're all birds. Besides, not like I'd eat crows."

"Oh you so eat crow, Dean. More often than you realize," Sam contested with a chuckle, ignoring his brother's look of derision as Dean slowly caught on to the double entendre.

"Smartass," Dean threw back, jerking his wounded arm away from his brother as Sam finished wrapping a length of gauze around the injury.

"Hey, you said it."

"Whatever! Back to the point, what the hell do you think Malphas meant about not wasting time on Mia?" Dean questioned, absently flexing the muscles of his forearm and grimacing slightly when the edges of the gash pulled.

"I dunno. That seemed kinda strange, but to be honest. I wasn't paying too much attention at the time, I was kinda busy with the birds," Sam replied.

"Yeah, no doubt. But really, Sam. Why would he say that? What does he have to gain?"

"Demons lie all the time, Dean. You know that," the younger sibling reminded, as he began picking up their scattered belongings.

"I s'pose. Still, Mia did demonstrate similar powers to what Malphas is supposed to possess. She dropped that friggin' jail down nearly on top of us like it was made of Tinker Toys. And what about that damn mark on her shoulder?"

Sam sighed, picking up on the desperation in Dean's tone. He stood up after retrieving the Latin text, dropped in his haste to protect himself from the demon's familiars, and faced his brother eye to eye.

"Dean, I don't know what to tell you. Maybe it wasn't Malphas all along. Maybe I got the research wrong. I sure as hell missed the bit about him using his familiars against us. But then again, maybe he's just lying to screw with us. If it is him possessing Mia, look at what he's done to torture her, killing the people closest to her. He obviously gets off on creating despair like we figured. So what's to stop him from trying to mess with our heads too?"

He watched as his older brother chewed on that thought; Dean running a hand through his short-cropped hair and coming away with several small black feathers clinging to his fingers. The older hunter wiped them against his jeans in disgust before stooping down to pick up the .45 that had been knocked from his hands during the melee.

"I don't know, Sammy. Something's just off. It's like we've been chasing our tails on this one. Hell, ever since Wyoming, it's been one demon after another. I mean, is it just me or are they getting the upper hand on us or what? Maybe Lucifer does have it in for us and he's put a bounty on our heads or something," Dean said quietly.

"You think that because of what? Leicester?" Sam asked suspiciously, worried that his brother was still plagued by memories of Hell and the near plummet they both took into the dark pit.

"Leicester, Boston, oh and let's don't forget our wonderful excursion into Canada?" Dean answered all too quickly.

“Come on, Dean. We went hunting those things, not the other way around. Aren't you being a bit paranoid?”

“Yeah sure, Sam. We might have started off tracking down leads, looking for hunts, but in the end, it was our asses on the line. I'm just saying, what if the Big Bad knows this and he's just baiting us in? We're like moths to a flame dude,” the elder hunter theorized.

Sam shook his head, a slight grin forming on his face that quickly vanished when he saw just how seriously his older brother was taking the whole matter. This didn't seem like his brother talking, not the Dean who always seemed to rush head-first into danger- with no concern for his personal safety.

“So, what? Are you saying we just give up hunting because everything might be one of Lucifer's traps? Or if not his, then some other demon's? Are you saying we just give up on saving people? Saving Mia?” Sam challenged.

It was a horrible tactic to use on his brother and he knew it, but considering the mood swings sweeping over Dean the past day or so, Sam wasn't beyond resorting to it. Knowing that second only to his family, Dean lived and breathed saving innocent lives from the denizens of the supernatural realm.

“That's not fair Sam!” Dean's voice held an edge of warning to it. “You know that's not what I mean.”

“Well what do you want me to say then?”

“I dunno. Nothing...”

“So what are we going to do?” Sam asked as Dean grew silent.

Watching as Dean picked up his shotgun, Sam slung the duffle bag over his shoulder and stood quietly waiting, unsure what his brother might say or do next.

“Let's go save the girl, Sam,” Dean announced determinedly, striding off toward the Impala without casting a backward glance.

Back at Kyle's

The brothers staggered into the silent church, downy black feathers clinging to dried blood peeling away even as they both shucked outer clothing with a grimace. Dozens of tiny cuts screamed out in protest as they tried to move quietly through the residential portion of the place of worship, not wanting to wake up either the little priest or the young woman.

“You want first dibs on the shower?” Sam offered as they dropped their gear bags on the hardwood floor of the study.

“Are you kidding? Not before I've had something to take the edge off all these war wounds,” Dean answered with a grunt. “Where do you s'pose Kyle put that bottle of Jack?”

“I think you pretty well killed that off the other night,” the priest interjected, startling both young men as he suddenly appeared in the doorway.

Dean jumped, spinning around, his hand closing instinctively on the .45 inside the pocket of his jacket. “Dammit, Moses! I nearly just sent you to meet your Maker. What the hell are you doin' sneaking around here?”

“Uh, it's my church?” Kyle replied. “So, by the looks of you two, tonight didn't go as planned?”

“That might be a bit of an understatement,” Sam answered, pulling another stray feather from his hair with disgust. “We didn't count on Malphas summoning a flock of familiars.”

“Familiars?”

“Yeah, like every friggin' black bird in the state of Oklahoma. Talk about feeling like the bottom of a bird feeder,” Dean grumbled.

“So, at the risk of asking, what happened?” Kyle posed, hesitantly.

The brothers exchanged looks as Dean dropped down into a nearby overstuffed chair, a groan escaping his lips as he settled. Sam sighed and leaning back against

the desk, began recanting the night's events. Glossing over the details of the avian attack, his retelling didn't take long.

"So, by the time we came back around, Malphas was gone," he concluded.

"And you're telling me the demon said he didn't have anything to do with Mia's possession?" the priest queried.

"Not in so many words, but yeah," Sam confirmed.

"Do you believe him?"

Sam shrugged, "Honestly, I'm not sure what to believe anymore. It certainly seemed like Malphas was behind everything, but now, I just don't know. He could be lying, but then, he could have killed us too."

Kyle nodded, stroking his beard as he considered what the young hunter had told him. After a moment, he spoke again.

"So what's your next move?"

"Next move?" Dean shouted, rising up in the chair. "Take a look at us Moses. Do we look like we have a next move? Hell, if you have any bright ideas, any divine inspiration, well, bring it on, 'cause the Winchester manual on how to fix this crap is seriously missing *that* chapter."

"Dean..." Sam called out, rolling his eyes as he watched his brother storm toward the door.

"What, Sam?" Dean snapped, turning abruptly.

"Don't take it out on Kyle, dude!" Sam chastised his sibling.

Dean sagged against the jamb, the tension seeping from his body nearly as fast as it faded from his voice. His head dipped down as he offered out an apology.

"I guess my brother's used to me being ..."

"His burden to bear?" the little priest offered with a snicker.

There was a tense second, but Dean's easy laugh soon filled the room setting the others at ease.

"Well, I think the term Sam prefers is 'jerk', but I doubt he'd disagree with your choice either," the older hunter admitted amid the laughter.

The threesome's humor was suppressed first by Sam's wide yawn, followed behind by an equally vocal groan as Dean brushed his forearm against the edge of the doorway. Eyeing the bleary-eyed and worn brothers, the clergyman took initiative.

"Okay, then. Can I at least suggest at this time of the night, if there's nothing to be solved, the two of you can at least see to getting cleaned, and um... maybe patched up?" Kyle suggested.

Sam smiled. "That was sorta the plan when we got here. We were just drawing straws for the shower when you first came in."

"Hey, that was Sammy's plan," Dean added in. "I'm all for the 'patching up' so long as it starts with a little Dr. McGillicuddy's first."

"I'll make a deal with you, Dean. Start with cleaning up all those wounds from the outside, and I'll see what I can do to have something waiting for you to numb them from the inside when you're done," Kyle offered. "In the meantime, I'll make sure there are some sterile bandages and maybe a couple of sandwiches in the kitchen when you two are finished."

"Sounds good," Sam agreed, clapping the priest on the shoulder as he walked behind him. Approaching Dean at the doorway, his brother had yet to move. "I'll go first, then I can throw a couple stitches in that gash on your arm after you get done," he added.

"Yeah, okay," Dean consented all too readily, moving slightly to allow Kyle to pass by him.

"You alright?" Sam asked warily, noticing his older sibling's sullen look.

"Guess so."

"Then what is it?"

Dean rubbed the back of his neck, a long exhale of air escaping him.

“Just get a shower, grab a sandwich, patch us up? Start all over tomorrow? Except...”

“Except what, Dean?” Sam prompted.

“Except where’s the part where I have to tell Mia we failed? Where I explain to her that we have no idea how to help her now?” Dean asked solemnly, his eyes looking up and seeking answers from his brother.

Sam knew this whole situation was eating at Dean and it tore away at him that he didn’t have an answer that could set his brother at ease. Yet as he stood there in silence, searching for some gesture or word of encouragement, Dean rolled around the edge of the doorway and slowly walked down the dimly lit hallway.

Dean paced past the solid oak door leading to Mia’s room. It wasn’t his first pass by the young woman’s quarters, in truth, it wasn’t even his twentieth. The repetitious movement had started earlier in the night and had continued on well past the first hints of the sun’s morning rays. He’d walk up to the doorway, pause, and consider knocking only to turn away just before his knuckles met wood.

It hadn’t been fear that prevented him from going in to see Mia, there weren’t many things in life that Dean Winchester honestly claimed to be afraid of, but it was more the uncertainty of dealing with the woman’s reaction when he told her that they were no closer to finding an answer to her predicament. He had promised her, swore to her, that they would find a way to get her free of the demon. He’d led her into believing that by summoning Malphas, they would be able to do just that. And now, what was he to tell her?

And so, for the twenty-first time, Dean walked past the door. Deciding to check back in with Sam, he’d only taken a couple of steps when the creak of the hinges caught his ears, soon followed by Mia’s soft voice.

“Were you lurking outside my room?” she asked, her head peeking out from around the edge of the doorway.

Dean smiled sheepishly as he turned back to face her. “I guess you caught me,” he answered.

“What time is it?” Mia questioned, looking around and running a hand through sleep-tousled hair.

“Nearly eight. There’s coffee down in the kitchen, you want some? I can probably scrounge up some chow too,” Dean offered.

Mia shrugged but followed Dean’s lead down the corridor, her bare feet shuffling softly against the hardwood in stark comparison to the hunter’s heavy boots.

“How come you didn’t wake me up when you got back last night?” she asked.

Dean tried to hide the shudder that ran down his spine as she voiced the dreaded question.

“Well, it was late,” he began.

“And...”

“Um, well...” he stammered, twisting away to avoid her eyes as they reached the deserted kitchen.

“Dean? Please just tell me,” she pleaded, reaching out and grabbing his forearm to turn him around to face her.

He flinched as her hand caught the freshly stitched laceration on his arm, and he pulled away more roughly than he’d intended, a hiss of pain seeping between his teeth. Mia’s eyes widened in alarm, and she followed him across the room, trapping him against the sink and forcing his sleeve up to stare at the stark white bandages underneath.

Dean felt Mia’s eyes take in the rest of the raven’s wounds that weren’t covered by his clothing, her face contorting in sympathy as her fingers traced the barely-scabbing punctures and cuts. He caught her hands, pushing them away and

escaping her touch, not wanting her concern and definitely not wanting her compassion when he could not offer her anything but broken promises.

"Will you just tell me what happened?" she begged. "You got hurt and you're not talking. I'm not stupid, Dean, I can tell it didn't go the way you planned."

He escaped by pouring them both a cup of coffee, moving away from the stove and back to the table. Setting the cups down and then straddling a chair across from the young woman, he motioned for her to do the same.

"Mia, I'm sorry. We managed to summon and trap the demon, but he was able to use his familiars against us. He totally denied possessing you and, to be honest, we don't know whether to believe him or not," Dean explained.

"He would lie?"

Dean laughed boldly. "Honey, demons lie all the time. It's sorta their calling card. But all the same, he didn't kill us either, and he could have. Which is a bit weird, considering the Winchester family is pretty high up there on Hell's Most Wanted list."

"But if he was lying, will he come after me again?" she asked, unable to hide the fear in her voice, her hands quaking even as she toyed with the cup of coffee.

He reached across the table, his fingertips gently brushing against the tops of her hands as he tried to still them. "I don't know, Mia. But so far, the talisman has protected you so long as you've kept it on. And even if it is Malphas, he could have come after you last night when he had us ground into the pavement with his friggin' birds, but he didn't. So, maybe that's good news too."

Dean tried to sound encouraging, but even as he watched Mia's reaction, he knew the young woman was losing hope. Hell, so was he if he was honest with himself. All their research, all their efforts, everything they seemed know about possession wasn't working in this case.

"Mia, this doesn't change anything," he added quickly.

"It doesn't?" she demanded, her tone a mixture of frustration and desperation.

"No. What I told you before, I still mean it. I'm not giving up. We'll figure this out," Dean insisted.

"Why? It's not worth it. How much more can I ask of you and your brother? How can I ask you to risk your lives for me anymore?" Mia questioned.

"What? You're worried about these stupid little scratches?" Dean joked. "Hell, I get worse than this when I shave!"

"Is that why you don't?" she quipped with a nervous giggle.

"Ah, face it darlin', the women just love my roguish good looks. You think I just wake up looking this hot?" he teased.

"Take my word for it, you don't want to know what he looks like first thing in the morning, Mia," Sam's voice interjected as the young hunter suddenly appeared at the kitchen doorway.

"Bite me, bro," Dean snapped looking up. "Unlike Sam, at least I'm smart enough to figure out how to use a hairbrush. Mia, ask my brother if he can even spell 'haircut'."

"Oh funny, Dean. Just because my hair doesn't stand up straight all by itself..."

"Actually, Sam, you do remind me of this sheepdog my one foster family had when I was growing up..." Mia added with a laugh.

"Oh, I see how it is? Ganging up on me?" Sam remarked, feigning being offended even as he strode into the kitchen and refilled his own cup from the pot on the stove.

"Hey, I really loved that dog," Mia insisted. "I used to dress her up and put bows in her fur, little hats and stuff on her."

"See, Sammy. Aren't you glad you had me for a big brother? Just think if you would have grown up with an awesome big sister instead?" Dean taunted.

The elder sibling burst into laughter, barely reacting when Sam moved behind him and slapped the back of his head in retaliation.

"So, you had any luck this morning?" Dean chanced as Sam pulled up a chair.

Groaning, Sam shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mia. I'm sure Dean told you what happened last night. I've spent most of the morning trying to figure out what we've missed, but so far, there's nothing new."

"It's alright," she replied genuinely. "I know you guys have done everything you can. You've done more than I have the right to expect from anyone."

"We haven't given up," Sam repeated Dean's earlier insistence.

"Face it, maybe there's just no hope for saving me," Mia admitted.

"No!" Dean shouted, tipping over the chair as he abruptly stood. "Don't say that, don't even be thinking that way."

"Dean's right, Mia. We may have hit a snag, but we can't let ourselves think there's no hope," Sam maintained, as his older brother stirred nervously behind him.

"I just feel like I should get away from here. Get as far away from innocent people as I can," the brunette stated.

"We're not going down that road again, Mia. What's happened to you is not your fault. What happened to those other people is nothing you could have controlled. So just stop..." Dean ordered.

He regretted his tone as he watched her withdraw just slightly and was about to offer an apology when Kyle burst into the room. The priest's face was flushed and he sucked in air as though he'd been running.

"We've got a problem," he announced, leaning heavily against the table as he drew near.

"What is it?" Dean asked, instantly on alert.

"Two cops just came into the sanctuary looking for Mia. They know she's here, guys," Kyle informed.

"Local or state?" Sam asked, rising up and duplicating his brother's tense posture.

"Muskogee County Sheriff's Department," the priest answered.

"I guess we shouldn't be surprised, the jail was bound to have had video surveillance," Dean mused. "But how did they track us here?"

"It's a church, a refuge, and parishioners unfortunately talk," Kyle sadly admitted. "But that's spilled milk. I don't know that I can protect her or you to be honest. They think Mia is responsible for a whole slew of pretty horrific deaths, and one of their own no less. I can stall them, but I don't think I can stop them for long."

"Yeah, he's right, Dean. And let's face it, it's not like we're exactly on the law's best side either," Sam reminded his brother.

"Alright, Sam take Mia and grab all of her stuff, I'll get everything else ready in the Impala. Moses, can you keep them down in the main church?" Dean asked.

"Yeah, I think so. Sister Helen is distracting them right now. She's told them that I'm in the middle of a confession."

"She's lying? Isn't that somehow... wrong?" Dean asked, his eyebrows popping up suggestively.

"Well, then I guess if you want to keep me out of trouble with God, then you owe me your confession at some point Dean Winchester," the priest quickly returned, as he headed for the door. "Now, get moving."

"Hey Moses...er...Kyle..." Dean called after the little priest. "You'll um... be okay?"

The clergyman paused, smiling genuinely as he turned to face the hunter and acknowledging the underlying sentiment in the question. "I will be, and you're welcome, Dean."

Dean watched him disappear into the corridor. Gruff shouts suddenly echoed throughout in the building a moment later, spurring the remaining three into action. Heavy footfalls sounded, booming up the stairwell that lead to the residential section from the main sanctuary.

The brothers exchanged panicked looks as Dean waved Sam into action.

"Looks like Moses couldn't stall the Egyptians. Go, take Mia and get what you can. Meet me out back and I'll see what I can do to keep them off our ass," he ordered.

He bolted out into the hall, turning to the right, Sam and Mia following suit to the left as they hastened to make their getaway.

Dean hugged close to the wall, listening intently as voices continued to approach his position. Three voices, one obviously belonging to Kyle, the others he could only assume were the police officers, carried on a verbal barrage even as they stormed closer toward him. Despite Kyle's best efforts to dissuade them from their pursuit, it was evident that the humble priest was no match for the determined cops.

"Hey, whatever happened to the vow of silence around here?" Dean quipped, popping out from around the corner.

The two officers both shouted at him to stop, but the young hunter was already moving. While they charged toward him, Dean flew at them headlong, counting on the fact that neither of the deputies expected a frontal assault.

He barreled into the first officer, pushing the man into the wall and driving the air from the lawman's lungs with a well-placed forearm to the soft part of the man's fleshy gut. Without stopping, Dean rolled off and took the second deputy down at the knees, his momentum carrying both of them past a wide-eyed priest and to the top of the stairs.

Feeling the hard edge of the tread digging into his spine, Dean flailed out to grab the handrail and prevent the inevitable tumble, but the deputy was still intent on capturing his quarry and snagged his wrist. The twosome toppled down the flight, end over end in a mass of arms and legs and amid a chorus of grunts, each still struggling for supremacy.

When they reached the bottom, Dean scrambled to his feet first, ignoring his body's protest as he sprinted toward the chapel. He heard the officer shout at him again, heard the second lawman yelling from atop the stairs as he began his descent to join the pursuit.

Heading into the sanctuary, Dean barely missed knocking down the frightened Sister Helen as she cowered by a row of pews. Her yelp alerted him that the deputies were right on his heels as he ducked in behind a confessional. Peeking around the curtain, he saw her point in his direction and watched as the two men cautiously approached, weapons drawn.

A vibration in his pocket startled him and Dean fumbled to pull his cell phone, glad that he hadn't given himself away. Sliding the Motorola open, he tapped on the button and saw that a new text message had been sent.

At the Impala Lets go – S.

"Way to go, Sammy," Dean whispered to himself. He inhaled deeply, steeling his nerves, before breaking his cover and running for the massive oak doors of the church.

The morning air struck him cold and biting, the sunlight blinding him momentarily as Dean fought to get his bearings. Spotting the squad car parked in the church lot, Dean debated his next move. Knowing he should really head for the waiting Chevy, the young hunter also recognized he couldn't allow the deputies to follow them from the church.

Darting down to the waiting cruiser, he pulled out his pocket knife and sliding to a stop at the rear of the car, he plunged the blade into the left side tire. Even as the cops exited the church, their angry shouts breaking the silence of the otherwise quiet neighborhood street, Dean whirled around to the other side and repeated the move on the opposite wheel.

Without waiting, Dean took off again, scrambling back up to the sidewalk and around the corner of the building to the where the Impala had been left near the entrance to the rectory. He didn't look back to see if the deputies were still behind him, his energy was fading enough for him to know that it was either make it to the Impala or else. So when he cleared the edge of the church and the shining black car

greeted him along with Sam's shaggy head, nervously searching the grounds, Dean's relief was nearly palpable.

Sinking into the driver's seat, one hand grasping the wheel as the other turned the key in the ignition, he first glanced back at Mia and then over at his brother.

"So, how was your morning workout?" he asked with a devilish grin, throwing the car into drive and pulling out onto the street in a squeal of screeching tires.

Heartland Motel Pittsburg, Kansas

They drove until mid-afternoon, being careful to avoid main roads and anything resembling law enforcement, Dean for once trying to keep the Chevy under something that resembled the posted speed limit. With no particular destination in mind, they headed north, away from Oklahoma, although Dean's joke about heading south to the border had been a temptation when an overly-zealous Kansas State Trooper took an interest in the classic car during refueling at a truck stop.

Deciding to finally stop in Pittsburg, just over the Kansas state line, had been nothing more than picking a spot on the road. That and the fact that Sam reminded them they simply couldn't continue driving aimlessly without a plan or without any further idea of how to combat the demon plaguing Mia.

So the Heartland Motel added three guests to its less than booming clientele, even though the front desk clerk was more than suspicious about checking two young men and one beautiful brunette into two separate rooms. After making sure that Mia's room was adorned with a Devil's Trap both above the bed and by the doorway, as well as lining the door and windows with salt, the brothers returned to their own room.

"You gonna give Kyle a call and let him know we stopped?" Dean asked, rummaging through his duffle in search of his treasured Bowie.

"And to make sure he's okay?" Sam added.

"Yeah, that too."

Sam chuckled, shaking his head as he unpacked his laptop and powered it on.

"What?" Dean demanded, looking up as he nonchalantly tucked the knife underneath the pillow on his bed then flopped down on top of it.

"Nothing. You just crack me up sometimes," Sam commented.

"Well, I try to keep you entertained."

"I'm just saying, you want to act like you don't care about Kyle, that's fine. I'm okay with letting you pretend. But dude, I know you're worried about the little guy and you don't want anything to happen to him," the younger man observed.

"Whatever. I just want to make sure the Heat isn't still on our asses. Maybe they made him talk, you never know, they could have taken him down to the precinct and thrown him in a cell with some guy named Bubba," Dean joked.

"Dean, there weren't any cells left, remember?"

"Ah yeah, guess there weren't thanks to our little guest next door huh?" the hunter recalled. "Well, you know what I mean; they might have pushed him around or roughed him up or something. It's not like Moses is gonna stand up to any good cop, bad cop tactics."

"Dean, you watch way too much TV. I seriously doubt that the cops are going to strong arm a priest," Sam countered.

"I do not watch too much TV, and besides, don't you remember that episode of *TJ Hooker* where William Shatner beat up that church pastor 'cause he was looking for hidden heroin?"

"It was *Walker, Texas Ranger* and the guy was a fake priest dealing drugs to kids Dean," Sam corrected.

"Aha, caught you. I knew that, but I was just testing to see if you remembered watching it too."

Sam rolled his eyes as Dean smugly folded his arms and settled back against the headboard. "Seriously, though, I'm gonna call Kyle, then I'm gonna call Bobby, update him about last night and see if he has any other ideas, 'cause honestly Dean, I'm all tapped out." Sam bemoaned, sagging back in the naugahyde desk chair.

Dean closed his eyes, then for good measure threw his still-throbbing arm over top his face to blot out any further light. He was tired, exhausted actually, from lack of sleep and the past couple of nights spent fighting off first Mia then Malphas, not to mention the morning's calisthenics.

Pyromaniac possessed chicks and demon-controlled birds? What's my life coming to?

He faintly heard his brother talking on the phone, Sam's voice fading slowly as Dean succumbed to fatigue. A part of him felt obligated to ensure his younger sibling also took a break from his relentless research, knowing that Sam hadn't garnered much more rest than he had in the past seventy-two hours or so. But even as Dean's breathing evened out with sleep, he knew his baby brother was unlikely to give in any time soon, still determined to find some help for Mia.

Dean awoke with a start, disoriented and not sure if he'd been asleep for minutes or hours. Rubbing his eyes, he noticed that Sam was still seated over at the small desk, laptop still open, even though his brother didn't seem to be working on anything.

Since the light in the room was significantly dimmer, the elder hunter assumed he'd been asleep longer than a few minutes. He sat up, groaning with stiffness, and noticing that his forearm bore a fresh white bandage.

Definitely hours then...

"How long?" he asked.

"Probably not long enough, considering..." Sam answered.

"And how 'bout you?"

"Later. I talked to Kyle."

"Oh?"

"He's good. Said the cops basically asked a bunch of questions, but he told them it was a huge mistake."

"Mistake?" Dean asked, perplexed.

"Yeah, he told them you were some recovering drug addict that was rehabbing and staying there at the church. He said you probably freaked out when you saw them and just lost it. Kyle thinks they bought the story so we ought to be in the clear," Sam explained.

"And Mia?"

"Kyle says they asked him about her. He told them she had been there but took off one night. Told them that she was pretty strange, going on about demon possession and such. He didn't think she'd be back," the younger man retold.

"So Moses will be okay then?"

"Seems so," Sam assured.

Dean nodded, the relief apparent on his face.

"I have other news," Sam chimed in again. "I talked to Bobby and he found something for us."

"Well, haven't you been the busy bee?" Dean snarked, the sarcasm not hiding the underlying guilt he felt for having slept while his brother was still working to solve Mia's predicament.

"Well, it may not be a solution, but he hooked us up with a contact that might be able to help Mia out."

"Someone?"

"Yeah, believe it or not, another priest. Well, sort of..." Sam began.

"A *sort of* priest? Why do I not like the sound of that already?" Dean grouched, rising up from the bed. "So what's this all about?"

"Let's get Mia and I'll tell you both over dinner," Sam suggested.

"Alright," Dean agreed, reaching down for his boots as his stomach growled at the mention of food. "But I can't wait to hear you explain this one."

St. Clair, MO.

Next day

"So tell me one more time what Bobby said about this dude?" Dean asked snippily as he pulled the dark car slowly down the street lined with ramshackle houses in various states of disrepair.

Sam groaned, making no effort to hide his exasperation at his brother's repetitive questions. Since leaving Pittsburg, Dean had been less than enthusiastic about coming to meet the ex-communicated priest.

"Bobby said this guy was a well-respected member of the church, was actually a Bishop at some point I guess. But because of his views on demonic possession I guess he was sorta demoted," Sam explained.

"He got fired?"

"I don't think they call it that."

"Axed, canned, booted, whatever. The dude was out there kicking demon ass and taking names and those clowns kicked him out?"

"Bobby didn't know the details, he just said that this guy was still a major player when it came to demon possession, even if his methods were a bit... out there," Sam replied.

"Can we define 'out there'?" Mia spoke up from the back seat.

Dean glanced in the rear view mirror, meeting the brunette's deep brown eyes and locking them with his own.

"Don't worry. We won't let any Father Karras wannabe hurt you, but maybe he'll have some idea of how to help," he assured her with a smile.

Dean pulled the Impala up in front of a small house. In comparison with the rest of the neighborhood, this one stood out simply because it didn't stand out. Almost hidden in its appearance, at first glance, one would barely have noticed the bars on the windows or the heavy storm shutters that remained open but available. The security lights that were tucked up underneath the soffit would have been unseen by most unless tripped in the darkness.

"Hide in plain sight, huh?" Dean remarked as he killed the engine. "This guy certainly seems to think like a hunter."

"Well, I s'pose if you're dealing with demons, the city or the country, doesn't make a difference," Sam agreed.

Climbing out of the Chevy, Dean turned back to the rear door and blocked its opening.

"Stay here," he ordered Mia. "Let Sam and me check it out first. We'll come back and get you once we know it's all safe."

"Why? What do you think he'll do?" she questioned.

"I don't know and I'm not willing to find out. Just humor me please."

The young woman fumed, but relented when she saw Dean wasn't going to give in. When he pulled the Colt from inside his jacket pocket to check the clip, she reluctantly sank back into the seat and watched as the brothers climbed the stairs to the porch.

Approaching the front door, the Colt appeared in Dean's hand once more, as the hunters found the wooden entrance ajar. Sam ducked to the side of the opening, signaling Dean to take the lead as he pulled his own weapon and covered his brother.

Entering the house in a standard tactical team cover, the living room looked as though a battle had taken place. Furniture was overturned, glass was broken, and smears of blood covered the walls and carpeting.

"Sam, this doesn't look good," Dean whispered, overstating the obvious.

“Father Normand?” Sam called out warily. “Father Normand! Bobby Singer sent us.”

When there was no reply, Dean moved further into the quiet house. With his gun pointed ahead of him, he headed down the hallway as Sam poked through the remnants of the destroyed living room.

The first bedroom had been converted into a study, although recognizing it as such now was difficult at best. The desk had been reduced to kindling and whatever organization there had been to the paperwork and volumes looked to have been subjected to an F5 tornado. The common thread was again the macabre tint of blood painted throughout the room like some impressionist’s brush on a large canvas.

But still, no sign of the rogue priest...

Ducking back into the hallway, Dean continued past the tiny bath and to the final room and finally discovered the missing man. His hand flew to his mouth as bile rose up in his throat, burning and bringing tears to his eyes as he fought to control his roiling stomach.

“SAMMY!” Dean managed to yell after forcing his breakfast back down and finding his voice.

In an instant his brother was at his side, and in the next, Sam was mimicking Dean’s earlier reaction.

Former Bishop Kenneth Normand lay splayed out on the blood-soaked mattress of his bed, vacant eyes staring toward the ceiling out of a body devoid of any flesh. As clean and neat as any slaughterhouse kill, the former holy man looked as though he had been skinned alive, his mouth agape in a silent scream.

Around the room, bizarre symbols painted in the priest’s own blood adorned the walls, inverted Devil’s Traps and other symbols of protection, perverse mockeries of their normal designs.

“What the hell, Sammy?” Dean stammered, looking around the room apprehensively.

“I don’t know, Dean. But this can’t be good.”

A scream from behind them ripped through the silence of the space and both Winchesters spun to find that Mia had found her way into the house. Dean rushed to cover her view of the horrific sight, burying her face against his chest as he pushed her out into the hallway and away from the room.

Eventually, he got the shaken young woman outside and down to the relative sanctuary of the Impala, seating her inside. Pulling the silver flask from the glove compartment, he twisted off the cap and handed the brunette the container, watching as she took a healthy pull before he retrieved it and did so himself. Moving around to the trunk, he gathered a blanket and tucked it in around her as she sat shaking and silent in the back seat.

Within a few minutes, Sam joined him back at the car, still somewhat fazed from what he’d seen inside the house. Out of earshot of Mia, Dean drew up next to his brother, a mixture of concern and fear on his face.

“Do you think Mia’s demon did this?” he asked as they leaned against the front end of the Chevy.

“I just don’t know, Dean,” Sam answered, shaking his head. “Normand was a demon hunter. He could have had any number of them out to get him.”

“So this is just a coincidence then? Just bad timing?”

Sam grunted. “Yeah, because we so believe in coincidences don’t we?”

Dean shook his head and laughed. “I was afraid you would say that. So where does that leave us?”

“I just don’t know, Dean. Honestly?” Sam asked, looking over to meet his brother’s eyes dead on. “I’m exhausted *and* I’ve exhausted every avenue I can think of to help Mia.”

"I know, dude..." Dean replied sullenly, breaking away from his brother's gaze and casting a glance through the windshield to look at the girl who sat huddled in the rear seat.

"It *will* come after her again, won't it?" he asked after a minute.

"I think so. If it is that despair demon from Dad's journal, then it isn't done with her yet. I don't think it will be until it has her kill every person that's important to her by her own hand or it drives her insane. But then again, who the hell knows, Dean? It could still be Malphas and he's just yanking our chain," Sam admitted. "For all we know, it could be a dozen different demons each taking their turn with her. I just don't have a clue anymore."

Dean sighed, his head down as he absently picked at a scab on his hand.

"I know one thing, I wish Caleb or Pastor Jim were still around," Sam mused.

"I wish Dad was around..." Dean mumbled.

"Yeah, me too," Sam quietly agreed.

Lifting his head, Dean looked out down the street. "So, what do we do? I'm not willing to give up, Sammy. I've been in her shoes and I know how it is to feel like you can't control what's inside of you. We can't leave her to this thing."

"We won't, Dean."

"I'm tired of demons, Sam. Tired of innocent people being used by them and mostly I'm tired of losing," Dean complained.

"So, we just won't lose," Sam promised.

Dean looked up at his younger brother, hazel eyes meeting Sam's deeper bluish-green, shared strength and determination conveyed in a silent glance. And contained in that unspoken exchange was the acknowledgement that they wouldn't quit till they found some way to save the girl; they simply didn't know how to do anything else.

The End