

Episode Six: Have No Fear By SnSam

Bennington, Vermont Forest—Glastenbury Mountains

The late afternoon sun bathed the Vermont forest in a soft amber glow, casting shadows all around the young couple as they hiked through the dense forest. It was the perfect time of year to be one with nature, even though the air was pretty chilly, but right now Lauren Miller could care less. It probably had something to do with the fact Trevor, her boyfriend of two years, had led them in circles for the past hour or so, though he insisted they were heading back to the car. *Yeah, and apparently he parked the car at the top of the mountain...who knew?*

The small-framed brunette tightened the straps of her backpack as she glared daggers at the back of Trevor's head. "Trevor, I don't get why you won't admit we're lost."

Trevor barely turned to look at her. "I told you, Lauren, we're not lost. I've been trekking through these woods forever. I think I know where I'm going."

"Yeah, how about you try saying that again, this time a little more convincingly," she muttered as she stepped over a root protruding from the ground, but not before stumbling over it.

Trevor stopped and turned to face her. "You know what would really help me out right now? If you would quit bitching at me every five minutes."

"I wouldn't have to bitch if you could get your head out of your ass long enough to actually learn how to read a map."

Trevor held the map out to her. "Here, you think you can do any better? You take the damn thing and find a way out of here."

Lauren stared at the map in his hand before letting out a long sigh. "I don't want the map, Trevor."

She knew she wasn't really angry at Trevor—it was mostly exhaustion and the fact they really hadn't had anything decent to eat since breakfast earlier that morning. They didn't pack a heavy lunch, mostly snacks, simply because Trevor assured her they'd be out of there by lunch time. The only thing she really wanted at the moment was to take a hot shower, followed by a fatty diet consisting of pizza and double-fudge brownies. A little extreme, yes, but after today she figured she deserved it.

"Okay, I think I found out where we are." Trevor was looking down at the map, his brows drawn together in concentration. He pointed to an area of the map before looking up at her. "I remember seeing a mile marker a few yards back, so if we just cut through to our left, it should bring us back to the trail."

"Are you sure?" She shivered slightly against the cold wind and pulled her jacket tighter around her tiny frame.

"I think so." Trevor folded the map and slipped it into his pocket before cupping her face in his hands and giving her a kiss. "I know today hasn't been the best, but I promise when we get back home, I'll make it up to you."

Lauren smiled coyly. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

Trevor arched a brow before flashing his own coy smile. "I guess you'll just have to wait and find out." Taking her hand, he led the way and after a few minutes they finally emerged onto the trail. "See, told you we'd find our way back."

"We're still not home free yet, you know," she said, continuing to follow him down the marked trail.

"Come on, Lauren, what happened to having a little bit of optimism?"

Lauren sighed. "I'm not going to fight about this again, Trevor." She rubbed her arms as the chill seemed to get colder. "Let's just hurry, okay? It's really starting to get dark out here."

They continued their trek in relative silence, with nothing but the soft serenade of crickets keeping them company. The soothing lullaby did nothing to chase away the fear she suddenly felt creeping down her spine. She didn't know if she could explain it, but she had a feeling something was off. Almost as if someone—or something—was watching them. She knew the wilderness around her was plentiful with bears, mountain lions, deer, and other species and she figured that must be what she felt—some wild animal in search of food. Still, it did nothing to alleviate her fear.

"Hey, are you okay?" Trevor gave her hand a gentle squeeze as he looked down at her in concern.

Lauren nodded shakily. "Yeah, I think I'm starting to let my imagination play with me, that's all."

Trevor smiled. "We should be at the car soon, okay?"

Lauren nodded again at the same time a wild cackle echoed all around them. She didn't bother to stifle her squeal of terror as she clutched tighter to Trevor. "Did you hear that?"

Trevor frowned. "It was probably just a coyote."

"Are you sure?"

"No." He squeezed her hand again as he pulled her along, the cackle still echoing all around. "Come on, we should get out of here."

They barely took three steps before something leapt out of the air and landed right in front of them. Lauren screamed as Trevor quickly pushed her behind him, both their eyes widening in horror at the sight before them. She continued to scream as the being merely smiled at them before exhaling a blast of what appeared to be blue flame. Trevor took the blast head-on as he blindly pushed Lauren down to the ground behind him.

"Lauren, get out of here!" he yelled as he clutched at his face.

Lauren tried to get her body to obey, to get up and run like Trevor was telling her to do, but her brain was having a hard time getting the rest of her body to comply. The only thing she could do was crawl backwards as the being stepped over Trevor and took slow deliberate steps towards her. The brunette couldn't stop the sob from escaping as her back collided with a tree, stopping her frantic escape.

"Please..." she whispered.

"Stay away from her!" Trevor yelled from his position on the ground.

The being ignored Trevor's order and took another step towards Lauren. Her eyes grew to the size of saucers as the blue flame once again shot out of his mouth, this time hitting her. There was a burning sensation, almost as if soap had been poured in her eyes. She clawed at them, trying to alleviate the blinding pain. She opened her eyes trying to see where the creature was, but it was almost as if someone had taken a paintbrush and painted over her eyes. She couldn't see anything through the cloud blanketing her pupils.

The next thing she knew, she was being picked up and carried off into the night, Trevor's screams for her fading further and further away.

Lou's Diner Booneville, Kentucky

"I don't get you, Dean. How can you say that?"

"Say what?"

"You're going to sit there and honestly tell me you think Led Zeppelin is the greatest rock band ever?"

Dean Winchester tapped his index finger against his chin thoughtfully, acting as if he was giving the question serious consideration. “That’s what you heard me say isn’t it?”

Mia Cameron shook her head. “You are so delusional, you know that?”

Dean sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Okay, so you obviously disagree with me. Tell me—who do you think is the greatest rock band of all time?”

“AC/DC.”

Dean chuckled. “Seriously?”

Mia narrowed her eyes. “You don’t agree?”

“Don’t get me wrong—AC/DC is a kick ass band but no way are they even comparable to Zeppelin. I mean, where else do you find a drumming god like John Bonham?”

“And where else do you find anyone who can play guitar like Angus Young?”

“Can I get you anything else?” A waitress suddenly appeared at their table, a coffee carafe in her hand, and Sam Winchester swore right then and there she was a gift from God himself.

“Earplugs,” the young hunter said, an almost pleading look in his eyes.

The gray-haired woman smiled in confusion. “I’m sorry?”

Sam shook his head. “Forget the earplugs. Do you have a skillet lying nearby I can knock myself out with?”

“Um...” The waitress glanced away, looking uncomfortable. “I think another table’s needing me.” She hurried away before Sam could say anything else to her.

“Dude, what the hell was that?”

Sam turned back towards Dean, seeing the amusement on his brother’s face. “Apparently a lame ass attempt at a joke,” he muttered.

“What was that crack about earplugs? You getting tired of hearing our voices?”

“No, your voices are fine, Dean. It’s the fact the two of you are carrying on like an old married couple that’s getting on my nerves.”

“Oh...” Dean turned his attention back to Mia. “And what do you mean no one plays the guitar like Angus Young?”

Sam rolled his eyes, trying to reassure himself the pounding in his head had to do with the country music blaring over the diner’s speakers and not Dean and Mia. They’d been arguing about anything and everything under the sun since leaving Oklahoma and Sam gathered it was in part to drive him crazy as Dean now had a verbal sparring partner as stubborn as he was. Not that Sam wasn’t stubborn himself and couldn’t argue with the best of them—after all, it was in the Winchester Code of Rules—all men born under the Winchester name were required to be as stubborn as an old mule.

Even though Dean and Mia argued like they did, it didn’t take an idiot to see the attraction between the two of them. Sam noticed it as soon as they’d gotten her to Kyle’s—after she tried to flatten them with the roof of the local police station, that is—and the younger Winchester had to admit it was a welcome change in Dean, instead of watching him chase every skirt in sight. Dean tried to shrug it off, of course, but Sam knew his brother; he knew Dean more than anyone ever would, maybe even Dean himself. It was that outsider looking in thing, he supposed.

Taking a long sip of his orange juice, Sam tried to drown out Dean and Mia’s voices and focus on his task at hand. He had his laptop open in front of him, seeking out their next hunt. After the fiasco with Mia and her many possessions, he was hoping he could find them something relatively easy in order to relieve some of the stress they’d been carrying around like heavy luggage. It was still managing to take its toll on the two hunters, especially since they never quite figured out who or what was possessing Mia and why. He’d been searching for the last half hour or so but he’d come up empty after scouring the reports in Colorado, Ohio, Nebraska, and Wyoming. He was beginning to wonder if the supernatural was taking a break when a

newspaper article out of Vermont caught his eye. Clicking on the link for the *Bennington Banner*, he took a couple of minutes to scan the story.

"Hey, I think I found us something," Sam said without looking up from the screen.

"—has a great guitar riff," Dean was saying.

Mia threw her hands up in the air in exasperation. "I never said it didn't. What I said was nothing could beat *Freebird*."

"Guys," Sam tried again, but either they weren't listening to him or they were conveniently ignoring him.

"You're unbelievable, you know that?"

"I'm that and countless other things too, Dean," Mia said smugly.

"Oh, and she's full of herself, too."

"You're one to talk!"

"That doesn't make me full of myself, sweetheart."

"What does that make you then?"

Dean smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"You're a complete ass—"

They both jumped as a shrill whistle pierced through the diner. A few patrons even stopped eating to see who had caused the disruption. Sam slightly blushed at the unwanted attention, but quickly shrugged it off as it got the desired reaction—Dean and Mia finally shut up long enough so he could speak.

"Glad I finally got your attention."

"Hell, Sammy, you got everyone's attention with that. You could have just asked for us to stop, you know. There was no need to get all dramatic."

"I tried—" Sam closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh, refusing to be baited by Dean. "Never mind."

"You gonna tell us what was so important you felt the need to create a fuss like that?" Dean asked, trying to cover up his smile.

Nope, not going to do it. "I think I may have found our next gig."

"Yeah?" Dean took a sip of his coffee. "Where's that?"

"Vermont."

Dean smiled. "Vermont? Hell, Sammy, the state's barely a speck on the map and you managed to find us a job there?"

"Delaware," Sam and Mia said at the same time.

"What?" Dean looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Delaware's barely a speck on the map, Dean." Sam said. "It's the smallest state in the U.S."

"Well, excuse me Rand-McNally. Any other geography lesson you two want to give me?"

Sam found his patience with Dean growing very thin. "Can I just tell you what I found?"

"Fine." Dean leaned back in his chair like a scolded child, causing Mia to snicker. "What the hell are you laughing at?"

"Dean..." Sam said through clenched teeth.

Dean scowled. "Hey, she's a part of this, too."

"So help me, I will leave the two of you here..."

Dean looked at Mia, a triumphant smile on his face. "We better behave before Samantha blows a gasket." Turning his head to be met by Sam's glare, he said, "Okay, let's have it. What's waiting for us in Vermont?"

Sam turned the laptop towards his brother, grateful to finally be on track. "A couple of days ago, a young woman, Lauren Miller, goes missing while on a hike with her boyfriend."

Dean shrugged. "Sounds like your garden variety missing persons case to me."

"Keep reading."

Dean did as he was told, his brows furrowing as he continued to peruse the article. "The thing leapt out of the air at us and a bright blue flame shot out of its

mouth, blinding me,' said Trevor Gregory. 'When I could finally see again, it was gone along with Lauren.'" Dean pushed the computer back towards Sam. "This guy could be imagining the entire thing, Sam. You know, spending too much time flying high and getting the munchies."

"What if he isn't?" Sam shrugged. "Look, it can't hurt to check out his story, can it?"

Dean finished the last of his coffee and signaled the waitress for the bill. "No, I guess not. But I'm telling you one thing right now, Sammy. This thing turns out to be a bust, you'll be washing and detailing the Impala for a month."

Bennington, Vermont

Hours later, Dean pulled into the small town of Bennington. It was charming to say the least, with a two-way street running through the major part of town. Stores lined both sides of the street, with people crowding the sidewalks, talking, shopping, and getting on with their daily lives. While a small part of Dean wished he and Sam could have a normal life like that, a bigger part of him was glad they didn't. Dean needed the constant action hunting gave him almost as much as he depended on the air he breathed.

"Okay, so tell me where this guy lives," Dean said as he braked for a group of teens crossing the street.

"Trevor Gregory," Sam answered as he pulled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and unfolded it. "1216 Jefferson Street."

After stopping to ask a local for directions to Jefferson Street, Dean turned the Impala off the main road, steering towards the residential area of the town. Honestly, he didn't even want to talk to this guy right now, preferring to find a motel room and some decent grub instead of going on what could potentially be a wild goose chase, but dammit if Sam didn't flash those puppy dog eyes of his. Dean was seriously going to have to look into a way to become immune to it, because too many times it landed him in some serious trouble.

It wasn't that Dean didn't want to find out what happened to the missing girl, it was just they had problems of their own, namely the one sitting in the backseat. They needed to find out why demons were gunning for Mia before it ended up getting her killed. He had to admit, he liked having her around if for nothing more than to break the monotony between him and Sam. She was a very intriguing woman and though Dean denied it to Sam, he felt himself liking her more and more, even though she was more challenging than any woman he'd ever known.

"I think this is it," Sam said, breaking through Dean's thoughts.

Dean slowed as a little, one story brick home came into view. Killing the engine, he noticed a small navy Chevy S-10 sitting in the driveway. "Looks like someone's home. Let's go see if it's our guy."

"Mia, you coming in with us?" Sam asked, turning around to look at the petite brunette.

Mia shrugged as Dean got out of the car. "Sure. There isn't much to look at out here anyway." She got out, following Dean up to the door, Sam taking up the rear.

Dean rang the doorbell and it was soon answered by a disheveled looking young man with unkempt dirty blond hair and dressed in a T-shirt and sweat pants. "What do you want?" he asked, squinting at them.

"Trevor Gregory?" Dean asked.

"Yeah."

Dean produced a badge from his pocket. "My name is Dean Young and this is my partner Sam Rudd," he said, hitching a thumb back at Sam. "We're with the State Police. We'd like to ask you a few questions if that's okay."

Trevor nodded at Mia. "Who's she?"

"She's with the Park Service—she's helping with the investigation," Dean answered smoothly.

"Look guys, I've been talking to reporters and police for the past two days and I've been getting nothing but flack. I'm not in the mood to be ridiculed any further." He made to close the door but Sam stepped forward and stopped it.

"Please, Mr. Gregory—I know this has been hard for you, but we'd really like to know what you saw."

"Do we have to do this now? Can't you come back later?"

"We wait until later we may never find Lauren," Dean said and he saw Trevor flinch as if he'd hit him. "Please, Mr. Gregory."

Trevor nodded as he opened the door to let them in. They followed him into the living room and settled onto a worn black leather sofa as he took a seat in the small La-Z-Boy recliner.

"What can you tell us about that night?" Dean asked as he and Sam pulled out small notepads and pens from their pockets.

Trevor took a deep breath. "Lauren and I were out for a hike near the Glastenbury Mountains when we got lost. We were both becoming frustrated and...it took us a while to find our way back to the marked trail. When we finally did, we heard this cackle all around us."

"Cackle? What, you mean like a coyote?"

Trevor shrugged. "That's what I told Lauren it was, but mostly to calm her down."

"So, it wasn't a coyote?" Sam asked, frowning.

"I don't know what the hell it was. It was deeper than how a coyote would sound." Trevor shrugged. "Anyway, I told her we should hurry and all of a sudden this *thing* leapt out in front of us."

"Can you describe it?"

"No, I didn't get much of a look at it before it sprayed some kind of crap in my face."

"Now, you told the *Banner* it was a blue flame," Dean said. "Is that correct?"

"I don't know what the hell it was. It burned, sure, but not like a fire would. All I know is as soon as it hit me, I couldn't see."

"What about Lauren?"

"I pushed her down out of the way." Trevor began to wring his hands together and he swallowed hard. "I heard her screaming and I told her to run away. I could hear her trying to get away, but then she was struggling, and then nothing."

"How long was it before you could see again?"

Trevor shrugged. "A couple of hours, I think."

"Mr. Gregory, do you think you could show us approximately where you were when you were attacked?" Sam asked.

"Sure, I have a map right here." Trevor got up from the chair and grabbed a small map from a stack of newspapers in the corner of the room. He unfolded it and spread it out across the small coffee table in front of the sofa. He pointed to a spot on the map. "We were right here."

"Do you mind if we take this?"

"No, not at all."

Sam gathered up the map and stood up, Dean and Mia following suit. "I think that's all we need, Mr. Gregory."

Trevor followed them to the door. "I have to know, detectives—do you think you'll find Lauren?"

Sam turned back to look at Trevor. "We're going to try our best, Mr. Gregory."

The brothers and Mia walked back to the Impala in silence. Even as they climbed inside, Dean made no move to start the car.

"So, what do you think?" Sam asked.

"I'm not sure, Sammy. I'm still thinking this could be nothing."

"You heard what he said, Dean." Sam sighed. "How he was talking: that was a man in serious denial and grief. No matter what we think, we should get out there and see if we can find anything."

"Yeah, I know." Dean turned the engine over and pulled away.

Abandoned hunting lodge Glastenbury Mountains

Lauren Miller came to with a startled gasp and in a world of pain. Her arms felt like they could give at a moment's notice, but that wasn't what was causing her the pain, even though she was currently hanging by her wrists from a beam in the ceiling. No, the pain was in her head—it was relentless, almost as if a Battle of the Bands were vying for the championship title up there. What she wouldn't give for a few ibuprofens at that moment, but she knew it wasn't going to happen—not in this lifetime, anyway.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been here, or where "here" even was. It appeared to be a hunting lodge of some sort, made apparent by the fact several deer head, along with several other species of game, were mounted on the walls. The place didn't look like it had been used in years, which didn't bode well for her. It meant no one would be coming to save her any time soon, if they even knew the place existed at all.

While her predicament was enough to scare the hell out of any normal person, her greatest fear through all of this was Trevor. Lauren had no idea if he was okay, or if he was even alive for that matter. She'd asked time and time again, but the man—as far as she could tell it was a man—wouldn't tell her anything. He would just smile and she would go back to the place so full of pain and fear, a place she so desperately wanted to find escape from.

"Please...somebody...help me," she croaked, but even those few words caused great strain to her parched throat. She knew full well the plea would fall on deaf ears. No one would help her.

Something behind her made a tsk sound, causing her to jump in fright.

"My dear, sweet girl..." the man crooned as he stepped out of the shadows and stopped in front of her so she could see his piercing red eyes. "No one can hear you."

"What do you want from me?" A single tear ran down her cheek and she immediately hated herself for it. She hated this vile thing to see her as weak.

He brought a clawed hand up to her face and wiped the tear away. Bringing the finger to his lips, he licked the salty liquid off, a wicked smile forming. "That fear...it tastes so...sweet."

"What do you want?" Lauren demanded again, louder this time. She didn't care if it made her throat worse. She wanted answers and she wanted them now.

"I want to taste your fear."

Okay, this guy is definitely off his meds. "Where's Trevor?"

He merely smiled.

"Tell me!"

"I wouldn't worry about him." He walked in a slow circle around her. "But tell me something—is that your greatest fear, hmm? Afraid of losing that boy of yours?"

"Leave him alone."

"I take that as a yes." He chuckled. "Oh, I don't have to do anything to him. You see, what I want," he stopped in front of her once again and placed a finger on her forehead, "is right here."

Lauren tried to move away from him but with her feet barely touching the ground, it proved difficult. "Stay away from me."

He went on as if he didn't hear her. "Let's see what you have in there for me, shall we?" Bringing both hands to her face, he placed them on her cheeks as he closed his eyes, sighing in what could only be described as ecstasy.

Lauren jerked under his touch, feeling as though she was being electrocuted, and then it went away as her eyes rolled back in her head and her mind drew her into a dark abyss.

Trevor stood across the street, a bright smile on his handsome face when he caught sight of her. She lifted her hand in an exuberant wave, a smile of her own gracing her face as she let out a relieved sigh. Everything before had been nothing but a nightmare—she was back with Trevor again. Everything was going to be okay now.

She watched as Trevor stepped off the sidewalk and started to make his way across the street towards her. She wanted nothing more than to wrap herself in his arms and escape in his warm embrace.

Lauren tried to take a step and frowned in confusion when she couldn't. She looked down at her feet but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't move them. She glanced back up to see Trevor still walking towards her, but now it was almost as if he was walking in slow motion, even though everything else remained at a normal speed. She tried once again to take a step to no avail.

All of a sudden, a loud horn shattered the silence and Lauren looked up in horror as a truck sped out of control down the street narrowly missing scrambling pedestrians. She turned her head to see Trevor was no longer moving. He seemed to be stuck just as she was and when he sought her out, there was terror written all over his face.

"Trevor!" she screamed. She tried to will her body to move, to do anything, but it stubbornly refused to comply.

If it was at all possible, time seemed to slow even more, but Lauren knew it would do nothing to change the outcome. She closed her eyes tightly, refusing to watch. Instead, she heard with sickening clarity as Trevor's body slammed against the truck, followed by the loud screech of brakes. She heard a piercing scream and it took her a second to realize it came from her and not a bystander. Just as she heard Trevor's body hitting the pavement with a resonant thud...

...She was no longer there.

She sucked in a deep breath as she felt the hands move away from her face. She opened her eyes to see she was once again in the lodge and for a second, she honestly didn't know which was worse—watching Trevor die or still being stuck in this living nightmare. She watched wearily as the man moved away from her, his gaze now directed towards the window, almost as if he sensed something—or someone.

Please, let it be someone...

She couldn't stop the whimper escaping her lips as he turned to look at her, a cruel smile on his lips. She felt her eyes growing heavy and before she slipped into the wonderful bliss of unconsciousness she heard him say something.

"Don't worry, love. Looks like you're going to have some company soon."

Forest—Glastenbury Mountains

"It looks like we're going to have to walk it from here," Sam said, his flashlight illuminating the map spread out across his lap. He knew it was the last thing Dean wanted to hear, mainly because the woods plus the Winchesters never equaled anything good. That was made apparent by Dean's loud sigh as he brought the Impala to a stop, jerking the gear into park in annoyance.

"I so don't want to do this," Dean muttered as he glanced out of the windshield at the trail ahead, its path lit by the faint glow of the moonlight.

Sam smiled despite himself as Dean stepped out of the car and walked back to their cache of weapons in the trunk. His brother could protest about it all he wanted, but Sam knew in the end Dean would do what needed to be done. Sam pushed out of the car and joined Dean where he was loading salt rounds into their sawed-off shotguns.

"Do you think we should take anything else?" Sam asked as he pocketed additional rounds and grabbed a couple of flashlights.

Dean shrugged. "We don't know what's out there, if there even is anything. This should do for now," he added as he shut the trunk and pocketed the keys. He handed one of the guns to Sam. "Let's grab Mia and get going."

"You really think that's a good idea, Dean? We bring her out there with us she'll be out in the open. It makes it that much easier for a demon to get to her."

"If we leave her here, Sammy, she's just as vulnerable. At least out there, I can keep my eyes on her."

Sam frowned, then grinned as an idea struck him. "Maybe not."

"What?"

Sam ignored him as he opened the car and rummaged through the glove compartment. A few seconds later, he re-emerged holding a thin, white pencil.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"It will keep her safe, Dean," Sam said as he began to dust the roof off. *Would it actually kill Dean to wash the car every now and then?*

"Dude, no way in hell am I letting you draw on my car again. I had a hard enough time getting that crap off the last time you went Crayola on me."

"What's going on out here?" Mia asked as she rolled down the window. "You two are carrying on like children."

"Nothing. Sammy and I are just having a minor disagreement." Dean never took his eyes off of Sam.

"About what?"

"You."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Dean, you know I'm right. Quit being such a baby about the Impala—it will wash off. Hell, I'll wash it off for you."

"What the hell is this about?" Mia asked, looking between the two of them.

Sam stepped back to peer in at Mia. "We're trying to figure out a way that would be safer for you while we go investigate the attack site. I vote to leave you here under the protection of a Devil's Trap, but Dean seems to think you'll be better off with us."

"Do I get a say in this?"

"No!" the brothers said in unison.

"Last time I checked I was a big girl who could take care of herself," Mia said glaring at them.

"And the last time I checked, Moses called us to watch over your ass because you weren't doing such a great job," Dean said, finally looking at her.

"Hello, demons? Kind of hard to look after your own ass when they can make you go stark raving mad in the blink of an eye."

"You still don't get a vote on this. We were asked to keep you safe and that's what we're gonna do." He shot a look at Sam. "Draw your damn Devil's Trap. No way am I going to listen to her bitching the entire time."

"This isn't fair, Dean." Mia fixed her glare on him.

"No one said I had to be fair, sweetheart."

Sam handed his gun over to Dean and leaned down to talk to Mia quietly. "If you stay in here, you'll be safe. Demons can't get through one of these. We'll try to be back as soon as we can."

Mia said nothing, instead staring out ahead into the forest. Sam straightened himself up and proceeded to draw a large Devil's Trap on the roof of the Impala. After double-checking to make sure it was precise and unbroken, he pocketed the pencil and followed Dean up the trail.

"She's pissed," Sam commented as soon as they were out of earshot of Mia.

"She's not the first person to get pissed at me, Sammy." He flashed a grin at Sam. "Hell, I haven't even begun to reach my quota for the day."

"That's pretty sad, Dean, considering it's only a couple of hours until midnight."

Sam chuckled and they continued their trek towards the site of the attack. It took

about ten minutes to find it and when they finally got there and began to comb the area, Sam had to wonder if maybe the attack was imagined after all. There were no signs of a struggle, no signs that anything had happened at all. Sam knew not all supernatural creatures left evidence behind, but there should still be a little something. Maybe this was a domestic problem, an argument that got out of hand and Trevor did something to Lauren. It wasn't that far-fetched; people did some pretty amazing things to stay out of the eyes of the law.

"We're not finding anything out here, Sammy. This is nothing but a search for a needle in a stack of needles," Dean said, breaking Sam from his thoughts.

Sam sighed. "Yeah, I know." He didn't want to admit Dean was right about this but it was looking more and more like he was.

"I say we cut our losses, grab us a bite to eat, and find us a motel for the night."

Sam nodded, casting one more look around. "I still can't help but think there's something to his story, Dean."

"Maybe there is, but we're not going to find it tonight, dude." He glanced down at his watch. "Let's head back to the Impala and make sure Mia's okay." He didn't wait for Sam as he began to lead the way back.

"You just want to make sure she's not mad at you anymore," Sam said, smiling.

"Dude, can you blame me? There is nothing worse in the world than having a chick pissed at you."

"Not even demons or the other things we hunt on a daily basis?"

"Nothing," Dean repeated. "I'd take any demon any day of the week than a pissed off woman."

"God knows you've left a trail of those in your wake," Sam muttered loud enough so Dean could hear.

Dean shot him a look over his shoulder and was about to retort when a loud cackle filled the air. Both brothers stopped, bringing their weapons up, eyes alert for any sudden movement.

"Trevor's right about one thing," Dean said softly, his eyes never stopping its constant search of the forest.

"What's that?"

"That ain't a damn coyote."

Sam scoffed. "Yeah, I kind of figured that."

The cackle sounded once again and Dean let out an irritated sigh. "It sure is annoying as hell though." He glanced over at Sam. "You see anything?"

"No," Sam answered just as a dark figure leapt from the sky to land right in front of the brothers.

Dean brought his gun up and shot Sam a look. "You were saying?"

"Sammy..." Dean's voice held the unmistakable tone of warning.

"Yeah, I see it, Dean," Sam said as he steadied his grip on the sawed-off. He didn't really see how anyone could miss anything looking like the creature standing before them. It was tall, matching Sam in height. Long black, stringy hair hung past its shoulders in tufts and its red eyes seemed to glow with either anger or hunger, Sam couldn't be sure. It was dressed in tight-fitting clothing and if the young hunter didn't know any better, he'd swear it was oilskin. A long cape hung from its shoulders, the loose fabric billowing in the non-existent wind. Despite all this, the creature looked...human.

Something was tickling the back of Sam's mind, telling him he knew what this thing was, but before he could think much on it, it leapt at them.

"SAM!"

Sam and Dean fired at the exact time the mysterious blue flame shot out of the figure's mouth. Sam didn't know how Dean did it, but somehow he managed to place himself in front of Sam, taking the full assault of the creature's attack.

"Son of a bitch!" Dean yelled as he fell to the ground, clutching at his face.

Sam's attention immediately went to his brother but he realized how dangerous that could be. He stepped in front of Dean, trying to provide a protective barrier between his brother and the creature and looked up to see the thing leering at him. Before it could launch its attack at Sam, though, the hunter brought up his gun and fired off a blast, the shot hitting it in the chest. For good measure, Sam fired again, causing it to screech and take off into the night.

Sam wasted no time as he dropped to the ground beside Dean, trying to get his brother to stop his wild thrashing. "Dean! Dude, stop moving around like that! Are you okay, Dean?"

"Where is that little bitch, Sammy?" Dean asked, through clenched teeth.

"I shot him—he disappeared." Sam tried to move Dean's hands from his face, but the older man wasn't letting them budge. "Dude, let me see your face."

"I can't friggin' see!" Dean bit out.

"That's exactly what Trevor said happened to him."

"Thanks for the refresher course, Sam," Dean snapped, but Sam knew he didn't mean to come across so harsh. He was hurt and it was one of the ways Dean dealt with pain—lashing out. "Do you think we can get out of here before that thing comes back?"

"Yeah, okay." Sam braced himself to help Dean off the ground, but before he could get Dean even a few inches up, he sensed something behind him.

"What the hell's happening, Sam?" Dean asked as he was carefully lowered back down to the soft forest floor.

Sam didn't answer, only spun on his heel to aim the shotgun, but before he could get a decent aim, the thing ripped the weapon from his hands. Sam swallowed hard as he watched his gun go flying and didn't have any time to react before the creature grabbed him by his jacket. Lifting him off the ground as if Sam weighed nothing more than a feather, he tossed him into the air. The young hunter frantically pedaled his arms and legs, trying to slow his flight and finally came to a stop when he collided with a tree, hitting his head.

"SAMMY!"

Dean's voice was nothing but a faint whisper in his ears and before he lost all tethers to the conscious world, he saw the thing walking towards him, a twisted smile on its face.

Mia let out an irritated sigh as she watched the brothers retreat into the deep forest. "I'll be damned if I'm gonna sit here and be treated like a damsel in distress by the freakin' Hardy Boys."

It pissed her off they didn't think she could take care of herself. Yeah, so they thought she had some unknown demon gunning for her ass—big deal. *I'm sure if I had a big classic car with a trunk full of weapons, I'd show them I could handle it just fine on my own, too.*

It bothered her how protective Dean was and she seriously wondered how it was that Sam hadn't killed him already. Was this what the younger Winchester had to put up with on a daily basis? *No wonder he's always in a pissy mood...*

Speaking of Sam—the youngest of the Winchester clan wasn't completely innocent, either. He was a smidge better about it than Dean, but it didn't stop Mia from noticing his watchful eyes on her. "But still, if Sam wasn't bad enough, I've got Dean pretending to be Sir Freakin' Lancelot, intent on riding in on his black stallion and saving the day."

The entire thing was suffocating, really. But Mia knew one thing for sure: If Dean didn't drop this savior act of his, she was going to go out of her mind. "Either that, or I'll end up killing him sooner or later." *Sooner, if the jackass continued to play his cards wrong.*

Releasing a woeful sigh, Mia let her eyes roam the interior of the Impala, grinning when they came to rest on the glove compartment. "They said to stay in the car. They never said I couldn't be nosy while I was stuck in here like a stupid prisoner."

Climbing over the backseat, Mia planted herself in the passenger seat. She opened the compartment and had to catch a few odds and ends that spilled out. *It's Dean Winchester...why the hell would I expect organization from him? It's like asking to win the lottery or something.* Tossing the items into the seat beside her, Mia reached in for the small wooden box tucked away inside. Opening the lid, she pulled out several badges, ranging from FBI to doctors to Homeland Security.

"Looks like someone has big dreams around here."

Closing the box, she continued to rummage through the small storage space where she found a couple of old talismans, a small notebook with several Latin incantations and many scraps of paper with phone numbers scrawled on them. As she browsed through them, she figured she counted at least twenty different numbers.

"Amber...Chrissy...CiCi...Mindy...why am I not surprised?" Stuffing the oh-so-treasured mementos back into the compartment, she closed it up and reached under the seat where she found an old shoe box.

"Let's see what we have here..." Thumbing through the old cassettes, Mia realized Dean was turning out to be worse than she had originally given him credit for. She knew he had an affinity for classic rock; he turned into a complete baby when someone talked bad about it. She appreciated some of it herself, but this was taking it a little far. "Motorhead...Black Sabbath...Iron Maiden. Yep, Mia, you certainly know how to pick them."

Dean had certainly made this car his own and he was clearly staking out his territory. It kind of made her wonder if Sam had anything in here he could claim as his own. Then again, that didn't seem like Sam; he had everything he needed in the car when Dean was with him. Watching the two of them together, Mia could see as long as Sam had Dean, he was happy and vice versa.

Mia glanced down at her watch and suddenly realized they'd been gone for quite a while. Surely it didn't take that long to investigate what Dean kept claiming was a lost cause, did it? She knew she was supposed to stay in the car but what if the brothers were in trouble? Dean would be pissed that she didn't listen to him, but he would eventually get over it. Biting her bottom lip, Mia once again gazed into the thicket of trees but saw no approaching lights or any sign of movement.

Her mind made up, she got out of the car and made her way down the trail, cognizant of the fact she was now alone and unarmed. Taking a deep breath to calm her jittery nerves, she kept to the marked path, recalling where on the map Trevor had pointed to as the attack site. She continued on for a few minutes before she heard Dean's frantic voice.

"What the hell's happening, Sam?"

That can't be good... She stealthily made her way towards his voice, hiding in the cover of the brush when she came to an opening. The sight before her made her gasp loudly and she put a hand over her mouth, shrinking further into her hiding spot. Dean was being lowered to the ground while Sam had his back turned to some man. Mia thought about calling out a warning, but she knew if she did she could be caught and then they would all be in trouble. Instead, she watched with morbid fascination as he plucked Sam's gun from his hands and tossed it aside. Then he picked Sam up by his jacket and gave him the same special treatment.

"SAMMY!" she heard Dean yell, his voice now on the verge of full-blown panic.

Deciding she needed to do something, she emerged from her cover just as Sam collided with a tree and fell to the ground in a boneless heap. As the man approached Sam, she found one of the guns and grasped it firmly in her hands. Just as he was bending down to make a grab for Sam, she cocked the gun, its sound echoing through the quiet night.

“Hey!” Mia shouted and smiled when he turned to look at her, something akin to fear in his red eyes.

“I would advise you not to interfere, girl,” he said, his voice a slight hiss.

“Yeah, well, I was never one to take advice.” Mia fired the gun, the blast hitting the creature right in the chest. Before he had a chance to recover, she fired the last remaining round into him. He let out a feral growl before leaping away into the night.

Mia exhaled a deep breath, tossing the gun aside as she ran to Dean’s side. “Dean, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Dean grunted. “We’ll talk about you leaving the Impala after you check on Sammy.”

“I saved your ass.”

“Check on Sammy.” Dean’s voice held no room for argument.

Mia sighed in frustration, but did as Dean told her. Crouching down next to Sam, she gently turned him over noticing the blood trailing down the left side of his face. Pushing his hair away from his forehead, she spied a large lump forming with a small cut right below his hairline.

“Come on, Sam. Wake up,” she said, lightly tapping his face. When he didn’t respond to her gentle prodding, she hit him a little harder. “Sam!” she tried again, her voice firmer.

“Wha—what?” Sam blinked rapidly, trying to focus his eyes. He frowned when he saw her. “Mia? What are you doing out here?”

Mia smiled. “As I just told Dean, I’m saving your ass. Are you going to be as ungrateful as your brother?” She stood up offering a hand to him. “Come on, get up.”

Sam took the proffered hand and got to his feet, stumbling as dizziness seemed to overtake him. Shaking himself slightly, he looked around the forest. “Where did it go?”

“I shot it and it took off.” Mia looked towards where the creature disappeared. “I don’t know how long it will stay gone though, so we should get out of here.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. He glanced over to where Dean was leaning against a tree and approached his sibling. “Dean, are you okay?”

“No, I still can’t see anything.” His voice then took on his protective tone. “What about you? What did it do to you?”

“Gave me an impromptu flying lesson.” Dean grunted as Sam helped him stand up. “Good thing a tree was there to stop my flight.”

“You found something that could penetrate that hard head of yours?” Dean smirked. “I’m impressed, Sammy.”

“How did you know I hit my head if you can’t see?”

“Come on—that’s about the only thing I’ve found that can actually shut you up, Sam.”

“Bite me.”

Dean laughed.

Sam turned back to look at Mia. “Mia, can you grab our guns while I help Dean get back to the car?”

“Sure.”

Sam waited until she gathered them up and then let her walk in front of them. When they got to the Impala, Sam helped Dean into the passenger seat. “Hand me your keys, Dean.”

Dean reached into his pocket and pulled them out. “Just because I can’t see doesn’t mean you can screw around with my car,” he said as he held them out.

Sam rolled his eyes and plucked them away. “You worry too much, Dean.” Shutting the door, he walked to the back of the Impala where Mia was waiting for him and unlocked the trunk.

“Is he going to be okay?” Mia asked, nodding towards Dean. She couldn’t hide the worry in her voice and was acutely aware that was letting Sam hear it. She was sure

the younger brother already sensed it, that this was bothering her, that Dean was worrying her.

Sam's eyes softened as he took the guns from her. "He'll be fine. Dean's had far worse happen to him, so this is actually pretty mild."

"Are you sure?"

Sam closed the trunk and nodded. "He just needs to rest for a bit. His vision should clear up in a few hours and he'll be back to his charming self tomorrow morning."

Mia frowned as she walked to the back passenger seat. "Oh, well, in that case is there anything we can do to prolong it?"

Sam laughed as he climbed into the car.

Mountain Top Inn

Dean lifted his head from the pillow as he heard the motel room door close. His hand instinctively reached for the Bowie knife he kept tucked there, senses on the alert. It kind of surprised him that people were right when they said after one sense goes, the others seem to become sharper. He hated the fact he couldn't see more than a few inches in front of him. It made him feel weak and, although he hated to admit it, slightly vulnerable.

"Relax, Dean, it's just me," Sam said as he placed a paper bag and the keys on the small table in the room.

Dean sniffed the air as the aroma of burgers and fries filled the room. "Hey, is that grub?"

"Yeah, I figured you could use something to eat."

"God, yes." Dean sat up straighter on the bed and tried to make out the blurry massive form of his younger brother. "Did you get Mia settled in?"

"Yeah, she's in the room next to us. She's a little pissed off right now, though."

Dean let out an aggravated sigh. *Could nothing be done to please the woman?* "Why now?"

"She wanted to get out of her room for a little while, take some time for herself, but I told her with you pretty much being out of commission right now and me having to take care of things, it would be better if she just stayed in her room."

"Thus pissing her off."

"Exactly. She wasn't happy about it but she agreed. I salted the door and the windows and laid a Devil's Trap on the floor so nothing can get in."

"Good." Dean clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Now, how about you hand over that food?"

"Not yet."

"Come again?"

"You're not getting anything until I get a good look at your eyes."

Damn Sam and his mother-henning. "What about your head?" he returned.

"Blindness trumps a head injury."

"Not in my book it doesn't."

"Well, your book is closed." Dean felt pressure on the bed as Sam sat down beside him. "Open your eyes."

"Did I not teach you anything about manners, Sammy?" Dean grouched.

"Oh, that's right, you did. I forgot. Open your eyes—jerk." Dean could hear the smile in his young brother's voice.

"Bitch," Dean muttered but did as Sam said anyway. The last thing he wanted to deal with right now was a pissy Sam, considering they had a pissy Mia in the next room. Two pissed off women was more than he could handle. One thing was for sure, though—when he got his sight back, Sam was going to learn who the Florence Nightingale was in the family.

Mia could hear the faint arguing emanating through the walls as Sam and Dean verbally sparred. She didn't understand how two grown men could act like complete children at the same time. She guessed it was a talent the male species of the world possessed and they felt the need to lord it over the masses.

Right now, the young woman wanted nothing more than to knock the both of them out. She was beginning to see she was wrong in her earlier assessment of Sam: he could be just as protective as Dean when he needed to be. *I'm surprised he's not cutting my food for me...* she thought as she discarded the rest of her cheeseburger into the garbage can.

Okay, maybe that was a little mean, but at the same time it was the truth. Was it so wrong to want to be by yourself for a little bit? Yeah, she was in her own room but she wanted to get out and stretch her legs, get some fresh air and clear her head. Mia was sure Sam had to get away from Dean from time to time so why couldn't she receive the same courtesy? Did the two of them realize how annoying they could be?

"This just sucks out loud!" She grumbled as she threw herself down on the bed. Well, she didn't have to take this—they weren't her parents and they couldn't keep her from leaving if she wanted to. *I'm a grown woman, for God's sake. Last time I checked I didn't have to ask permission to venture out on my own...*

Mia made her mind up—she wasn't going to let them tell her what she could or couldn't do. Lying in her bed, her gaze on the ceiling, she listened intently as the voices finally died down, the sounds of passing traffic taking its place. She wanted to make sure they were asleep before she slipped out of her room.

So she waited.

Mia remained in her bed for another hour before quietly stepping out of her room and into the darkness.

When Sam woke up early the next morning his head was killing him, not to mention other parts of his body were making their aches known loud and clear. He figured flying head first into a tree would do that to a person. He wanted nothing more than to turn over and go back to sleep, but his pounding head wasn't going to let him have a moment's respite.

So, he'd lied to Dean last night when he told him he wasn't hurt too badly, but honestly, what could his brother have done considering he couldn't see two inches in front of him? Sam's luck, Dean would have inadvertently hurt him even further and Sam didn't want to deal with that. Dean was bad enough on any given day but throw in some guilt and the elder Winchester was next to impossible to deal with. Sam knew Dean would give him hell for lying about the extent of his injuries, but he would worry about that later.

After he downed a few ibuprofens, that is...

Pushing away the covers, Sam twisted his tall frame around and planted his feet on the ground. A wave of pain washed over him and he had to shut his eyes in order to push it away. Taking a deep, steadying breath, he slowly got up and grabbed up their first aid kit, in search of the pain medication. Palming three of them, he shuffled into the bathroom and filled up a glass with lukewarm water. Tossing the pills back, he chased them with the water and then walked back into the room just as Dean was starting to stir. Sam sat heavily on the bed and watched his brother slowly open his eyes and blink rapidly as the sun streamed into the room.

"Hey, how's the vision?" Sam asked.

Dean turned to look at him. "Good enough to know you look like crap."

"Nice, Dean."

“Yeah, well...”

Sam smiled as he held up three fingers. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“I don’t know.” Dean held up one of his own. “Tell me how many I’m holding up.” He reached over and turned on the bedside lamp. “Damn, Sammy—did you have to find a motel that was so girly?”

Sam sighed as he placed his head in his hands. Dean was back to normal, but then again, Sam couldn’t blame him for his comment. With its light blue walls and a ceiling border consisting of small white and yellow daisies, the room was meant to look like a prairie field in the mountains. Flowered curtains hung from the two small windows on either side of the door while the two twin beds were dressed in thin light green blankets meant to symbolize the leaves of the flowers. Rough sage green carpeting covered the floor and Sam supposed that was supposed to be the grass. Mirrors in the shapes of daisies and a couple of cheap prints decorated the walls. The room would make an avid gardener consider suicide.

“You try finding a motel in the middle of the night while you’re worried about your blind brother,” Sam muttered. He really wasn’t in the mood to start an argument with Dean this early in the morning. “Besides, Mia picked it out.”

Dean smirked. “Nice try, Sammy, but you’re more feminine than Mia is.”

Sam frowned. “I’m not sure if that’s insulting me, Mia, or the both of us.”

Dean merely shrugged, but then his expression turned sober. “Seriously, man, are you okay? You don’t look like you feel too good.”

“I just have a headache. I already took something for it before you ask.” Sam looked up and tried to smile at Dean reassuringly, but it failed miserably.

Dean walked across the small room and flipped on the overhead light, causing him and Sam both to squint at the sudden brightness. Dean slowly made his way over to Sam and sat down beside him. “Move that mess you call hair and let me see the damage.”

“Did anyone ever tell you, you’re extremely bossy?” Sam muttered as he pushed his hair away from his forehead.

“Has anyone ever told you what a piss-poor liar you are?” Dean returned, gently probing the small cut.

Sam hissed as Dean applied more pressure and slapped his brother’s hand away. “Dammit, Dean!”

Dean shrugged. “It doesn’t look too bad. You got a pretty good sized lump there, but at least the cut isn’t too deep.”

“I told you I was fine.”

“Yeah, and I didn’t believe you.” Dean got up from the bed and stretched his arms over his head. “I’m gonna grab a shower and then we can go find something to eat.”

Sam said nothing as he lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. He heard Dean rummage around the room, then the sound of the bathroom door closing. Soon after, the gentle sound of the shower emanated from the closed door, lulling Sam into a light sleep.

He was awoken a few minutes later by a knock at the door. Grumbling as he got up from the bed, he opened the door to find Mia standing there.

“You look like crap,” she commented as she brushed past him into the room.

Sam shut the door. “That seems to be the general consensus around here this morning.”

“Where’s Dean?” She took off her jacket and sat down on Dean’s bed.

“Shower.”

“So, I’m assuming his vision is back to normal.”

“Yeah.” Sam smiled. “Now he can go back to his normal, pain-in-the-ass self. By the way, you’re responsible for picking out this motel.”

“Excuse me?”

“Dean said it was too girly, so I sort of blamed it on you.”

“There is no way in hell I would pick a hellhole like this,” Mia said, arching a brow.

Sam let out a defeated sigh and hung his head. "Dean didn't believe it for a second, either."

Mia laughed. "Smart man, that brother of yours."

"He certainly has his moments."

The door to the bathroom opened and Dean, dressed only in blue jeans, emerged through a billowing cloud of steam. "I thought I heard you talking to someone," he said to Sam. He glanced at Mia. "How long have you been here?"

Mia shrugged. "Only a few minutes. I was seeing what was on the agenda for today."

Dean clapped Sam on the back as he walked to his open duffel bag. "That would be a question for our resident Geekboy here."

Sam rolled his eyes at the comment and bit back a retort. Dean was doing his damndest to get under his skin and he wasn't going to give in. Instead, he focused his attention on Mia. "After the attack on us last night, I would definitely say there's something going on out there." He looked pointedly at Dean.

The other hunter held his hands up in surrender. "You're not hearing crap from me. I want that bastard just as much as you do."

"We need to do some research. I know I've seen the thing that attacked us somewhere before, but I just can't place it."

Dean slipped on his jacket and grabbed up his keys. "That sounds exciting and everything, Sammy, but before we settle knee deep into boredom, we're grabbing something to eat." He looked back and forth between Sam and Mia, smiling. "Any takers?"

Fifteen minutes later, the Winchesters and Mia entered Aunt May's Diner, a small mom-and-pop eatery promising to serve up the best home-cooked meal you could ask for. Sam wasn't too sure of that, since most of their jaunts when it came to eating usually involved food that would clog your arteries just glancing at it—well, Dean's choices anyway. Sam was willing to give Aunt May a chance, considering he needed to get something in his stomach. He didn't really get a chance to eat his burger the night before, or he gave up on it—he wasn't sure which. Luckily, his headache had dimmed somewhat, though it still beat a staccato rhythm, just to let him know it was still there and maintaining residence.

A tiny bell announced their presence and a young woman, who appeared to be in her early twenties, with long red hair pulled into a ponytail, waved them in. "You can sit anywhere you like," she said bobbing her head in the general direction of the tables and booths. "I'll be with you in just a minute."

"Thanks," Dean said as he pointed to a booth in the back. "We'll be back there."

"That's fine," the waitress said as she poured coffee for a couple of elderly gentlemen.

Sam was about to follow Dean and Mia when a bulletin board to his left caught his eye. "Hey, Dean, check it out." Taking up a good portion of the corkboard were missing persons fliers in yellows, greens, blues, and pinks, though some were slightly faded with age. Perusing them, Sam noticed some of the dates and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Some of these are a few months old, while some go back twenty years," Sam commented when he saw Dean join him.

Dean pointed to one in the middle. "There's one for Lauren Miller."

Sam frowned. "You think that thing we saw last night took all these people?"

"I don't know what to think, Sammy." He reached out and steered Sam away from the board. "Come on. Let's get back to the table before Mia orders us some rabbit food."

Sam chuckled and followed his brother to the table where the waitress was setting down coffee for all of them. As he slid into the booth, Sam couldn't help but be troubled by all the "missing" posters. Maybe they'd stepped into something bigger than Lauren Miller—maybe there were countless others unaccounted for and maybe the creature that attacked them last night was responsible for it all. Whatever it was, he knew he'd seen that thing before. It was tickling the back of his mind and honestly driving him crazy.

"Are you ready to order?"

Sam jumped at the sound of the waitress's voice and glanced up to see her pen poised above her order pad, patiently waiting to take his order. He felt warmth creep into his cheeks and knew he had to be registering a firm six on the embarrassment scale, if not higher. Quickly picking up the laminated menu, he gave it a speedy scan and flashed her a bashful smile. "I'll have the blueberry pancakes with an orange juice."

"Sure thing." She jotted down the order and collected their menus. "I'll be right back."

"Dude, what were you thinking about that you didn't notice the incredibly hot chick standing a foot away from you?" Dean asked as soon as she was out of earshot.

Mia shot Dean a look. "Hot chick? Are you always this demeaning to women?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"You're talking about her like she's an object, not a person." Mia rolled her eyes. "You know, it's no wonder you can't hold on to a decent woman for any length of time."

"How do you know I can't hold on to a woman?"

"Because I know your type."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really."

"Do you two have to argue every time you step foot into a restaurant?" Sam asked, rubbing at his temples, trying in vain to stop his headache from flaring up again.

"We wouldn't be arguing if your brother would just apologize for what he said," Mia protested.

Dean looked at her. "I'm sorry—you're right. I was being a complete ass and I shouldn't have said that." He turned his eyes to Sam. "Dude, what were you thinking about that you didn't notice the incredibly *attractive woman* standing a foot away from you?" He glanced at Mia again and smiled. "Better?"

"Oh, dear God," she muttered, turning her head away to look out the window.

"What?" Dean held his hands up, his face the picture of innocence, but no one answered him. "What?"

Just then, the young redhead came back to the table with their orders. After placing a plate full of fried eggs, bacon, toast, and sausage in front of Dean, she gave Mia her bacon and eggs and Sam his pancakes and orange juice. Just as she was about to leave them to eat, Sam reached out a hand to stop her. "Excuse me."

"Way to go, Sammy," Dean said softly, garnering a kick from both Sam and Mia. "Ow!"

The waitress, whose nametag read "Jill," looked at Dean strangely and then frowned at Sam. "Is there something wrong with your order?"

"No, not at all," Sam assured her quickly.

Jill let out a huge sigh of relief. "What can I do for you then?"

Sam silently thanked God Dean didn't give her an answer. "I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions—if you're not busy, that is."

Jill looked around the now empty restaurant. "You appear to be my only customers at the moment." She grabbed a chair from a nearby table and pulled it over. "What do you need to know?"

"We're investigating Lauren Miller's disappearance."

"Yeah, that was such a terrible thing to happen. I went to school with her a few years back. Everyone around here is pretty much freaking out."

"I was noticing the bulletin board when I came in. Were all those people from around here?"

Jill nodded. "No one can understand what's going on. Like I said, everyone's freaked—nothing really stays open until late at night except another diner down the road and a bar. No one wants to venture out at night because they're afraid they may be next."

"Do the police have any suspects?"

Jill shook her head sadly. "They say it must be some kind of serial killer but I think that's just the best thing they can come up with."

"What do you think is happening?"

"Honestly, I'm not too sure of that. I just don't buy into the whole serial killer scenario. I mean, what kind of killer murders and then waits for twenty years to do it again?" She looked to the brothers but they didn't offer up any answer for her.

"How do you know those people were murdered?" Dean asked, suspicion clearly in his voice. Sam shot him a look but Dean chose to keep his attention focused on Jill.

Jill shrugged. "They disappear and are never heard from again. What other explanation is there?"

"How long have you lived here in Bennington?" Sam asked.

She glanced over at Sam again. "All my life, which must make me crazy or pretty close."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, you know the legend of Bennington, right?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't think so."

Jill leaned forward in her chair, as if she was letting them in on a big secret. "There have always been weird things going on around here."

"Weird like how?"

"Strange occurrences—weird lights over the area, strange sounds coming from the forest, weird disgusting odors coming from anywhere but nowhere at the same time."

"And no one can explain them?"

"Nope." Jill looked up as the bell above the door signaled another person—a police deputy. "I should really get back to work, guys. I hope you can find Lauren."

"We hope so, too." Sam gave her a small, hopeful smile.

Jill gave them a little wave as she put her chair away and went up to the counter to help the deputy.

"What do you make of that?" Dean asked, keeping his voice low.

Sam shrugged as he finally cut into his blueberry pancakes and took a bite. "I'm not sure. Paranormal areas aren't that unheard of, especially ones connected to mysterious disappearances. There's the Bermuda Triangle in the Atlantic and the Dragon's Triangle in Japan." He swallowed down some orange juice and frowned. "Now that I think about it, there's something called the Bennington Triangle over this way."

"You think this is the same Bennington?"

"I don't know." Sam chewed on his lower lip. "Could be. I think it would be too much of a coincidence if it wasn't."

"And coincidence is one of a few things we don't believe in, right up there with the Easter Bunny, Bigfoot, and Santa."

"Exactly."

Dean pushed his polished-off plate away. "Okay, so what do you want to do?"

"We really need to do some research on this town and that thing we saw last night."

"We should also talk to the sheriff, though it pains me to admit that. Maybe he can shed some light on these disappearances."

"I think the best thing to do would be to split up. We can work a lot faster."

Dean nodded. "I agree." He looked at Mia. "Are you coming with me?"

Mia shook her head as she wiped her mouth with a paper napkin. "I think I'll stick around and help Sam out."

Dean looked at her in surprise. "You're seriously telling me you're volunteering to do research with Geekboy here?"

"It doesn't take two people to lie their way into the sheriff's office, Dean. Besides, I'm sure Sam would appreciate some help."

Dean looked over at Sam, but the younger man shook his head. "I'm staying out of this."

"Okay." Dean took a final swig of his coffee and stood up. "You two have fun."

Bennington Sheriff's Department

Dean couldn't stop the feeling of apprehension washing over him as he stepped through the doors of the Bennington Sheriff's Department. Ever since the fiasco with the shapeshifter back in St. Louis, he couldn't help but be worried, though he was technically dead. That would certainly be a hard one to explain—a seemingly dead man walking through the doors of the local sheriff's department. Then again, this was a small town so he should be okay.

It was all about confidence and Dean Winchester had plenty of confidence, so much so he was sure it could come shooting out of his ass at any time. All he needed to do was plaster on a bright smile and he could get anything—or anyone—he wanted. Luckily, a female was sitting at the front desk so he knew this would be a walk in the park.

"Hi, can I help you?" The cute brunette with bright green eyes smiled up at him.

"I certainly hope so..." Dean paused, searching for her name.

"Hope," she supplied, blushing slightly.

Dean smiled. "Hope...that's a cute name."

Hope laughed and turned a brighter shade of pink.

"I'm Detective Young with the State Police." Dean produced a badge from his pocket and flashed it at her. "I was wondering if it would be possible to speak with the sheriff?"

"Are you working on the Miller disappearance?" Hope asked.

"I am."

Hope glanced behind her and Dean followed her eyes to a closed door. "Let me go see if he's busy."

"Sounds great." Dean flashed her another dazzling smile and had to keep himself from laughing when she stumbled as she got up from her chair. *Oh, yeah. I definitely still have it.*

A couple minutes later, she came back out this time followed by a tall man with short, slightly wavy blond hair. "I'm Sheriff Todd Landon." He held out his hand to Dean. "Can I help you?"

Dean took the proffered hand, not surprised at all by the older man's firm grip. "I'm Detective Young with the State Police. I'm here investigating Lauren Miller's disappearance. Is there somewhere we can talk in private?"

Landon nodded. "Sure, we can go to my office." He glanced at Hope. "Hope, hold my calls."

Hope nodded. "Sure thing, Sheriff Landon."

Dean followed the sheriff to his office, a small room crowded with an old desk with a worn leather chair. Two folding chairs sat in front of the desk and three large gray filing cabinets took up the left wall. Awards and accolades, along with family pictures, decorated the walls.

"Have a seat," Landon said indicating the chairs.

"Thanks." Dean sat down as the sheriff closed the door and moved around the desk to take his own seat.

"I didn't know the State Police were involved," Landon said, weaving his hands together and resting them on the desk. He fixed Dean with an intense stare.

Dean swallowed and nodded. "We've actually been looking at this case from a distance for a couple of days now. Then Lauren's parents called and here I am."

Landon frowned. "Rick and Lori didn't tell me they were going to do that."

Dean gave a half shrug. "I don't know anything about it except I was asked to come look into it." Dean pulled out a small notepad and pen from his jacket pocket. "What can you tell me about Lauren Miller's disappearance?"

Landon sighed and leaned back in his chair, causing it to squeak in protest. "We don't really know much about it to tell you the truth. There was no evidence left behind."

"Her boyfriend claimed something attacked them."

"We just don't have any evidence to back that statement up." Landon shook his head sadly. "At this point, Trevor Gregory's a very strong suspect until we can find something to corroborate his story."

"Lauren isn't the first missing person around here, is she?"

"Unfortunately, no. We seem to be having a run of bad luck in these parts."

"And Trevor's not a suspect in all of those, is he?"

Landon let out an irritated sigh. "I see where you're going with this, Detective Young. As I said before, Trevor is just one suspect—we're looking into other possibilities as well."

Okay, Winchester, pull back the reins just a bit. You do not need to piss off the law. "Do you think there's a possibility Lauren Miller might be found alive?"

Landon seemed to calm a bit. "She's been missing three days already. It's a real shame because she's a good girl, but there may not be anything we can do for her."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the same thing happens here every twenty to twenty-five years, since the 1940s. People go missing and they are never heard from or seen again."

"Can you elaborate?"

The sheriff looked at his watch and frowned. "Unfortunately, I can't right now. I have a meeting with the mayor in ten minutes." He stood up and grabbed his jacket off the small coat rack behind his desk. "Go to the library, it's where we keep the old crime reports. Helen can help you find what you need."

"Thanks, Sheriff." Dean stood up and shook the lawman's hand again.

"I certainly hope you have better luck than we have, Detective. I would love for an ending to this nightmare."

Dean nodded as he opened the door to the office. "Yeah, me too."

"Call me if you need anything else."

"I will. Thank you for your time, Sheriff." Dean gave a small wave to Hope and walked out the double doors into the bright sunlight. The young man couldn't help but be troubled about what he'd learned from Landon.

One thing he did know for sure, though: He was going to bring an end to whatever evil was plaguing the town of Bennington.

Mountain Top Inn

Sam rubbed at his tired eyes as the screen before him started to fade in and out. Yes, research was boring—almost as exciting as watching paint dry but somehow, the shaggy-haired man seemed to thrive off it. Maybe it was the prospect of being rewarded by something new he didn't know, like solving a mystery and all the pieces of the puzzle starting to fall together. But Sam was realistic, too—he knew how painstaking it could be and that answers didn't just fall into your lap like those one-

hour crime dramas led you to believe. If things were that easy, Sam was sure there would be far fewer problems in the world.

So far, he was having very little luck in the research department and it was beginning to frustrate him. He wanted to find answers and bring this creature down. It aggravated him that he'd seen this thing before but for the life of him, he couldn't remember when. If only there was a stupid website that could read his mind and pop out the results he was looking for. *Yeah, and as soon as that happened, Dean would actually learn to share his feelings.*

"Wow."

Sam looked up at the sound of Mia's voice. "What?"

She pushed away the book she'd been reading and spread out on her stomach across Dean's bed. "This is incredibly boring."

Sam laughed. "Hey, I never promised this would be fun."

"Hey, I never asked. Next time, I will definitely remember to do that."

"You don't have to stick around if you don't want." Sam shrugged. "I'm pretty used to handling this not so glamorous side of hunting by myself, anyway."

"No, it's fine." Mia grabbed the book again and flipped through it as Sam returned to his laptop. "I just thought I would let you know."

Sam smiled but said nothing.

"So...Dean doesn't help you with any of this?"

"Sure he does. He inserts his various snarks and well-timed punchlines when needed."

Mia laughed. "That sounds like Dean."

"Yeah, but all kidding aside, he'll do his research when he needs to. He'd just rather be in constant action mode at all times. He doesn't like to waste time when there's a chance we can save someone." Sam gave a half-shrug. "It's one of the things I admire about him—what he's willing to do to make sure an innocent life's spared."

Mia smiled. "You really look up to him, don't you?"

Sam nodded. "I guess that's what little brothers are supposed to do. Look up to their big brothers, trying to emulate them."

"You've got a good one in Dean."

"The best." There were a few awkward seconds of silence before Sam cleared his throat. "So...now that we've delved into the personal territory for me, what about you?"

"What about me?"

"You and my brother—is there something there?" Sam shook his head. "Who am I kidding? Of course there's something there."

Mia nodded. "I'm not going to lie to you, Sam. I'm attracted to your brother and yeah, he's hot and everything."

Sam cleared his throat. "This just got several levels of uncomfortable..."

Mia smiled. "As I was saying, I'm attracted to Dean, but it's not like I want to settle down with him, have kids and join the PTA."

Sam considered that for a few seconds before looking at her. "Mia, can I be honest with you?"

"Sure. I wouldn't want you to be any other way."

"Okay." Sam was quiet for a few moments as he tried to think of the best way to be honest without hurting her feelings—too badly. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but when it comes to Dean, I'm protective as hell. You think he's bad on any given day, you haven't seen anything yet. My entire life Dean has done nothing but look after me and I'll do the same for him, if not more."

"You don't have anything to worry about, Sam."

"That's a good thing to say, Mia, and it should be something I want to hear, but I've learned to take things with a grain of salt. Dean deserves to have something good happen to him and I refuse to see him hurt." His cold gaze on Mia was

unwavering and he saw her flinch a little. *Good, she knows I'm serious.* "I won't let you hurt him, Mia."

Mia nodded. "I get what you're saying, Sam, and I can't blame you for how you feel about me. Hell, I'd be the same way if the roles were reversed." She smiled softly. "I'm not going to sit here and promise you anything, Sam. That's not who I am, but I won't hurt Dean as long as I can help it."

Sam nodded. "That's all I can ask."

"So, is the grilling portion of our show finished?"

"Yeah—for the most part, anyway." Sam looked back at his open laptop. "Now, if only finding this damn creature was that easy."

"You thought that was easy?"

Sam shrugged as he pressed a few keys. "Easier than talking to Dean, anyway." He frowned as a site popped up and then instantly brightened. "Hey, I think I found it."

"Really?" Mia hopped up from the bed and walked behind him so she could peer over his shoulder. "What is that thing?"

"A Spring-Heeled Jack. It was thought to be a man who terrorized citizens across London between 1837 and 1904. He mostly pursued women because they were easier targets. He would attack them, leaving them in a constant state of fear. He never actually killed anyone until 1845, when a prostitute by the name of Maria Davis was murdered."

"So, you think this is what we are dealing with here?"

"Not exactly. This thing stuck to Europe, but I think we're dealing with a variation of it—I guess you could say a NuJack, for lack of a better term. It's more evolved and it's stepped up its game compared to the Spring-Heeled Jack."

"What is it then?"

Sam shook his head. "I'm not sure." He saved the page in his list of "favorites" and then typed in another search. Clicking on a page when the results popped up, he quickly scanned the article. "It looks like Jill was right about Bennington. For years it's been the setting for a lot of mysterious supernatural occurrences."

"Like what?"

"Exactly what Jill was saying—weird lights, sounds, and smells coming from the forest surrounding the Glastenbury Mountains."

"That's where we were last night, isn't it?"

"Yep." Sam read a little more before speaking again. "That's not all, either. It says here that Native Americans wouldn't even get near it, saying it was cursed land. They used it mostly for burying their dead. The town of Glastenbury eventually became a ghost town in 1937, after succumbing to disease, bad weather, and deaths."

"That's weird."

"Definitely." Sam clicked on another link. "It says in 1892, Henry MacDowell murdered a fellow millworker by the name of Jim Crowley in a drunken brawl. They say MacDowell was declared insane and sentenced to the nearby Waterbury Asylum. He escaped a short time later and was never seen again."

"That could have been nothing more than your everyday escape," Mia argued.

Sam shook his head. "They didn't think so, not at that time anyway."

"So, is his spirit haunting the forest?"

"No, the thing we're dealing with is definitely not a spirit. It would have been repelled by the rock salt if it was. The only thing that managed to do was piss it off even more." Sam rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ease the tension building there. "Spring-Heeled Jacks are thought of more like phantom attackers, like the Mothman." He got up from his chair and walked over to his duffel.

"What are you looking for?"

"My dad's journal. I want to see if he has the place marked down." Pulling out the worn leather book from the bag, he thumbed through the pages. Sam barely even looked up as a knock sounded at the door.

"I'll get it," Mia said and Sam gave her a dismissive wave as he finally found the page he was looking for.

John definitely had the area marked along with a list of names filling most of the small page. He didn't appear to have much on it and Sam wasn't sure if it was a place his dad hadn't gotten around to or if he thought it was all just talk.

"Mia, who's at the door?" Sam asked, his head still in the journal.

Mia didn't say anything and Sam looked up just in time to see her go flying across the small room and hitting the wall with a loud resonating thud.

"Mia!" Sam threw down the journal and rushed to the fallen woman's side. He frantically checked for a pulse and was relieved when he found a steady one. Senses on the alert, thinking somehow a demon had found them, he was on his feet in an instant grabbing the holy water from the weapons bag. Turning around, he was met by the NuJack.

"You're not going to need that, boy." The NuJack swiped the silver flask out of Sam's hands and grabbed the startled hunter by the shoulders, at the same time shooting the blue flame from his mouth.

Sam cried out in shock and pain as the flame hit his eyes and he struggled out of the creature's grasp. In his hurry and confusion to get away from the NuJack, his foot hooked on the table causing him to lose his balance.

Sam saw stars as his recovering head hit the edge of the bed, but they were quickly replaced by darkness.

Bennington Public Library

Dean Winchester let out an audible groan as he arched his back, trying to alleviate the stiffness settling there. He supposed sitting in a hardback chair going through file after file in a quiet building would do that to a person. He would give anything to have some sort of commotion to break up the monotony, but he was pretty sure Helen the librarian would frown upon that. He'd barely taken two steps into the small building before she pointed to the sign on the circulation desk saying "Quiet please."

What did she think I was going to do? Pull out a tambourine and perform a little dance number?

Surprisingly, since it was something he'd always had a problem with before, Dean held his tongue. Instead, he opted to flash her a charming smile and ask where he could find the old crime records. Helen didn't say much, only pointed to a door and told him everything he was looking for could be found in there, adding nothing was to be taken out. Dean considered pulling out his cell phone and letting Sheriff Landon know just how helpful the bird-faced librarian was. As if reading his thoughts, she shot him a stern look and his hand instantly moved away from his pocket.

Papers and old files lined the table where he was sitting, but at least he was getting somewhere. *That'll show Sammy he's not the only one who can do research in this family...* Dean could do it with the best of them and actually come up with something to show for his efforts. The sheriff had been right about the length of time between the disappearances. They'd occurred every twenty to twenty-five years and during each cycle, five people went missing without a trace and were never heard from again.

Out of all the missing people, only one body had ever been found—Freida Langer. She'd been hiking with her cousin in 1950 when she slipped and fell into a stream. She'd told her cousin she was going to go back to camp and change into dry clothes, and she was never heard from again. Until 1951, that is...her badly decomposed body was found in an area of Somerset Reservoir, an area that had been searched thoroughly not seven months before. A cause of death could never be determined but the police chief at the time said it appeared her "body had dropped dead of shock ten minutes earlier."

Dean wasn't too sure what to make of that, but he would take anything he could get at this point. Sure, people exaggerated greatly back in those years, but what if what the chief said was true? They could be dealing with something far more sinister than they first believed.

The hunter also found out Lauren wasn't the first person to disappear during this cycle—she was the third. It appeared this thing, whatever the hell it was, took one person a year during the five-year cycle. Clifton Lewis had disappeared back in 2005 while on his annual fishing trip and Trisha Sinclair went missing back in 2006 while hiking with her dog. The dog was found a day later wandering aimlessly while there was no sign of Trisha. Dean wasn't sure whether to be relieved with how this creature took his victims or not.

On the one hand, if it only took one a year, that meant they had time to stop it before the next person was grabbed. On the other hand, after it attacked them last night in the forest, he wasn't sure if it was going to change its modus operandi out of panic or if it was merely protecting its territory.

All of this concentrating was beginning to give him a headache. Jotting down the rest of the names, Dean figured he could go back to the motel and check on them there. Besides, he wanted to check in on Sam and Mia and see how they were making out. If he wanted to be completely honest with himself, he was worried about leaving them as long as he had. It had been only two hours since they split at the diner, but that was exactly two hours too long in Dean's mind.

Gathering up his mess, Dean shoved the files back into the box, not in the order he found them of course. It was the least he could do to thank Helen for her frigid hospitality, aside from the fact it would provide him with some much needed amusement. Placing the boxes back on the shelves, he stuffed his journal into his leather jacket and left the small prison-like room.

"You have yourself a good day, Helen," Dean said, flashing her his brightest smile and giving her a small wave.

Helen returned the salutation with a cold stare over the rim of her big red framed glasses.

Oh, yeah...that was so worth it, Dean thought as he walked out of the library, whistling.

Mountain Top Inn

When Dean pulled into the motel parking lot, he couldn't help but let out a small sigh of relief. But it was short-lived when he noticed the door to the room he and Sam were sharing was slightly ajar. A cold feeling of dread washed over the experienced hunter, his mind telling him no way in hell would Sam ever leave the door open—*not unless something happened anyway.* Reaching into the glove compartment, he pulled out his beloved pearl-handled .45, the cold steel feeling comfortable in his grip.

Pushing out of the car, Dean left his research behind. Nothing was on his mind now except making sure Sam and Mia were okay. He would never forgive himself if something happened to them, especially when in the back of his mind he knew he should never have left them alone. It wasn't that Sam couldn't take care of himself or anyone else; hell, Dean had pretty much taught Sam how to fight. It was just that it was supposed to be Dean's job. He was the oldest, he was the protector.

Quit thinking like that, Dean! You don't know if anything's happened or not so get in there and find out, instead of beating yourself up!

Nudging the door open with his booted foot, Dean held the .45 in front of him, his eyes roaming the quiet room while staying alert for any sudden sound or movement. "Sam? Mia?"

No answer.

Don't panic yet, Winchester. There could be a perfectly good reason why they're not answering.

Yeah, right. It's not like they're in the shower together...are they? I was so kidding when I said I wanted to see how they were "making out."

"Sammy!"

Dean swung full into the room, his heart hammering in his chest as he surveyed the scene around him. Books and papers littered the floor and the bedspread from Sam's bed hung limply over the frame, even though Dean knew his younger brother made it up before they left for breakfast. *I think this definitely qualifies as signs of a struggle—way to go, Sammy!* Dean's praise for Sam was cut off when he noticed the blood saturating the carpet next to Sam's bed, but no sign of his sibling.

Dean heard a faint groan to his left and he turned his head to see Mia lying on the floor between Sam's bed and the wall. He rushed over to her side and turned her on her back.

"Mia?" Dean gently nudged her, urging the young woman to wake up. "Come on—open your eyes, Sleeping Beauty."

Mia's eyes slowly fluttered open and Dean watched as they focused on him. "Who the hell are you calling Sleeping Beauty?"

Dean cracked a smile. "Would you rather be Snow White?"

"I'd rather wipe that damn smirk off your face after you help me up from the floor."

"You can barely keep your eyes open. How the hell do you expect to hit me?"

Dean held out a hand and waited until Mia had a firm grip before pulling her up.

"You have a big head. I don't have to have that much of an aim."

"Wow—who's the cranky bitch when they wake up?" He got her settled on Sam's bed, making sure he stayed by her side since she looked as if she would fall over at any moment.

"Shut up."

"Are you hurt? Where's Sam?" Dean couldn't stop the tremor of fear in his voice.

Mia closed her eyes and didn't answer.

"Mia!" Dean barked, which caused her to jump. He didn't mean to sound so harsh but he needed to know if she was okay and where Sam was. "Are you hurt?"

Mia brought a hand up to her head. "My head hurts. I must have hit it when I crashed into the wall."

"Let me see." He pushed her hair away and gently probed the lump forming at the base of her neck. He then walked over to their first aid kit and after grabbing a few ibuprofen and a glass of water, handed them to her. "What happened?" he asked, before again repeating, "Where's Sam?"

Mia popped the pills and washed them back with the water. "Sam and I were doing some research when there was a knock on the door. I went to answer it and the next thing I knew I was flying across the room. I must have blacked out after that."

"You never saw what happened to Sammy?"

Mia shook her head. "I thought I heard him yell out my name but I'm not sure if that was real or if I just imagined it."

"Son of a bitch!" Dean began to pace in front of the beds. "Did you see what attacked you?"

"It was the same thing from last night—that freak in the cape." Mia closed her eyes as she clutched her head. "Sam found something."

Dean immediately stopped his pacing and knelt on the floor in front of her. He grabbed Mia gently by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him. "He did? Mia, what did he find?"

"Something about a Jack?" It was a question, as if she wasn't sure she had it right.

Dean frowned. "Jack?"

"Maybe it was Summer or Winter or something..."

Dean wasn't listening to her as his brain whirled. "Heeled Jack..." He looked at her with wide eyes as it finally hit him. "A Spring-Heeled Jack?"

Mia looked at him in confusion and then slowly nodded, the fog seeming to clear from her mind. "Yeah, that was it. Sam said it was a Spring-Heeled Jack."

"Crap." Dean stood up and rubbed a hand through his short spiky hair.

"Dean, do you think this thing has Sam? That he's in trouble?"

Dean nodded soberly. "Definitely."

Abandoned Hunting Lodge

Sam would give anything and everything to stop the pain, especially the pain in his head. Why was it his head seemed to be attracted to every hard surface within reasonable—or unreasonable—distance lately? Wasn't that supposed to be Dean? Sam was the one who was supposed to be choked while Dean was the one who crashed head-first into everything. *When did the roles decide to get reversed?*

The first thing Sam became aware of when his fogged brain allowed him to actually function was that he was hanging by his wrists. It was kind of hard to ignore when the strain on his arms from holding his weight made them feel like they would pop out of their sockets at a moment's notice. It kind of made him wish he was still the gawky, lanky boy from his teenage years—at least then he wouldn't have all the bulk and muscle he now had to carry around.

The second thing Sam became aware of as he opened his eyes was his surroundings. He appeared to be in an abandoned lodge of some kind and on any given day, that wouldn't have bothered him. The smell of death, however, assailed his nostrils and his eyes immediately went to the human remains littering the floor, some so badly decomposed it was hard to tell if they were human or not. *How in the world has someone never noticed this before? The smell alone is enough to knock a person out.*

"This is definitely not good, Sam," he muttered to himself as he pulled against his restraints. It didn't do anything to help, only seemed to tighten the ropes, but it also didn't stop him from trying again. "Dammit."

Giving up for the time being since it was doing nothing but irritating his skin, Sam glanced to his right and his eyes widened in shock when he saw a girl around his age hanging next to him. To say she looked like death warmed over would be an understatement. Her dark brown hair hung in limp strings around her bruised and bloodied face. He could make out the trails of dried blood running down her arms from her chafed wrists. The ropes holding her in place were also saturated in dried blood and Sam vaguely wondered how it was her wrists were still attached to her arms.

By all accounts, the young woman looked to be dead and Sam felt anger coursing through his body as he thought about the innocent life extinguished by a depraved creature. Sam wanted nothing more than to get free and show this monster what true pain felt like—he wanted the thing to *hurt*.

A soft moan tore Sam away from his personal diatribe and for a second he thought he imagined it. That is until he heard it again and there was no mistaking the feminine tone.

"Hey," Sam called softly.

The girl stirred slightly and looked to Sam as if she was desperately trying to fight the fatigue threatening to overtake her.

"Hey!" Sam called, louder this time. He cringed when the girl gasped, though it came out more as a strangled sob.

"Please, don't hurt me again," she croaked.

"I'm not gonna hurt you, I promise. I'm right beside you—look over here at me."

The girl turned her head and her eyes widened when she saw Sam. The young hunter tried to smile reassuringly but she shook her head and turned away from him. "No, this is another one of his tricks. You're not real." Sobs began to wrack her petite frame, her tears mixing with the dried blood and running down her face.

"Listen to me, okay?" Sam said soothingly, but she refused to look at him. "My name is Sam Winchester. What's yours?"

The girl remained silent and Sam was afraid she wasn't going to answer him before she finally whispered, "Lauren."

"Lauren Miller?"

She looked at him in shock, but eventually nodded.

"Lauren, I want you to listen to me, okay?" He waited until she nodded. "I'm real, all right? This isn't a trick and I'm not in your imagination." Sam looked around the room with disgust. "I'm in the same crap hole of a situation as you."

Lauren choked out a laugh. "That's an understatement."

Sam smiled. "My brother and I have been looking for you. Your boyfriend has been worried sick about you."

Lauren's head jerked up. "You've talked to Trevor? He's alive?"

"Yeah." Sam frowned. "You thought he was dead?"

Lauren nodded and tried to choke back another sob. "That bastard wouldn't tell me anything."

"We're going to get out of here, Lauren." Sam tried to sound confident but he wasn't sure if he succeeded or not. "My brother's out there and he'll be looking for us."

Lauren snorted. "He won't find us."

"Well, maybe not right away..."

"No, Sam." Lauren fixed him with a level stare. "He won't find us. No one has ever been found."

"What do you mean?"

"Take a look around. Everyone around Bennington knows if you're taken, it's a pretty much guaranteed death sentence."

"Not this time."

"You keep holding onto that hope, Sam." Lauren smiled weakly. "It may help you."

Sam frowned. He wasn't about to give up and he didn't like Lauren talking as if she had already given it up completely. He was going to find some way to get them out of this mess. "Lauren, what has he been doing to you?"

Lauren nodded ahead of her as the NuJack stepped out of the shadows. "I think you're about to find out yourself, Sam."

Sam tried to stand up straighter as the creature walked towards them but it was hard when his tiptoes barely touched the ground. He swallowed hard as the NuJack appraised the both of them, his red eyes lingering on Sam as if he were a delicacy to be savored. A sick feeling went through Sam, one that made bile rise up in the back of the young hunter's throat.

The feeling increased tenfold as the being turned his eyes away from Sam and focused all of his attention on Lauren. The young woman began to whimper as she tried to get away from him.

"No, please..."

"Stay away from her! Take me instead!" Sam yelled, trying to divert the NuJack's attention.

The creature turned to leer at Sam. "Don't worry, Sam. You'll get your turn soon enough, but I have to say, I appreciate the audience participation."

Sam grunted as he once again struggled with the ropes holding him in place. "You stay away from her, you sick bastard!"

The NuJack ignored him and focused his attention once more on Lauren, whose whimpers were becoming more frequent. "Please, leave me alone. I can't do it anymore. Please...don't make me do it anymore."

"Shh...hush child. It will all be over soon," the monster soothed as he placed a hand on her cheek.

"Lauren, you hold on, you hear me?" Sam yelled. "Fight him, Lauren! You can fight him and win!"

"I can't," she said so softly Sam almost didn't hear her.

"That's right...you can't," the NuJack continued in his disgustingly soothing voice. "Just give in to it, Lauren. Let me take all that fear away from you."

"No!" Sam paid no attention as blood started to ooze down his arms from his futile struggle with the ropes.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she whispered.

The creature's smile became wider, almost to the point Sam was sure his face would surely split in two. He watched with morbid fascination as Lauren spasmed and jerked against the NuJack's touch and finally went limp, her body swaying softly back and forth. Blood leaked from her nose and fell to the floor in large droplets.

"Lauren!" Sam grunted in frustration at the entire situation. Maybe if he could get free there would still be time to help Lauren. "Lauren, answer me!"

The NuJack chuckled. "I'm afraid Lauren won't be waking up any time soon, Sam."

"You sadistic son of a bitch!" *There ya go, Sammy—channel Dean. Oh, great...I'm even calling myself Sammy. This really isn't good, not at all.*

The being's leer grew as he unsheathed a wicked-looking dagger from behind his back. Sam swallowed hard as the creature approached him, his bright eyes glowing.

Maybe channeling Dean wasn't such a great idea. Isn't that what always gets him in trouble in the first place?

The NuJack turned away from Sam and raised the blade up over his head. The young hunter cringed as the NuJack cut through Lauren's ropes and the limp girl fell into his waiting arms. Sam didn't bother to hide the tide of repulsion going through him as the creature caressed her face with a clawed finger.

Lifting her up into his arms, he unceremoniously dropped her among the other decayed human remains. It drove Sam to the point of rage to see an innocent life discarded like that. If only he'd done more, tried harder, he could have saved her.

Be realistic, Sam, the voice in his head chided him. There was nothing that could be done. It was a death sentence for her as soon as Lauren was grabbed.

The NuJack brushed his hands together as if wiping away dirt, as if Lauren had been nothing but garbage to him. "Now that she's out of the way, how about we see what you have to offer me, Sam?"

Mountain Top Inn

"Have you found anything yet?"

Dean glanced up from the laptop at the sound of Mia's soft voice. Rubbing his face, he shook his head. "Sam has so many sites saved on here and there's not one that's plainly marked 'Spring-Heeled Jack.'"

"Shouldn't it be the last one he saved?"

"I already checked it out—apparently everything is saved in alphabetical order so I'm having to go through all of these." He got up from the small table, grabbing up his coffee mug. Picking up the coffee pot, he poured another cup and swallowed down a hearty sip, letting the hot brew warm up the chill that had settled into the pit of his stomach. It was only a temporary relief, for the chill came back seconds later.

He was worried sick about his little brother. He didn't like not knowing where Sam was and certainly didn't like playing hide-and-seek with a monster when the end result could be finding Sam dead. Dean tried not to think along those lines, but it was hard when after going through all the other disappearances and talking to other people gave him the same answer: no one was ever found and if they were, they were already dead.

"I'm sorry."

Dean jumped at Mia's sudden admission, spilling the coffee on his shirt. "Son of a bitch." Setting the cup down, he slipped out of his button-down shirt. He pulled off his wet T-shirt and grabbed another one from his duffel. As he yanked it over his head, he glared at Mia. "What do you have to be sorry about?"

"It's my fault Sam's gone."

"And how do you figure that?"

Mia shrugged. "I could have done more."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Oh, you mean while you were unconscious?"

Mia shook her head. "Before that—I should have never opened the door. I should have been more cautious."

Dean walked back over to the laptop and sat down. "Mia, it wouldn't matter what you did. If that thing wanted in this room, it was going to get in. Nothing you did could have prevented that."

"It still doesn't make me feel any less guilty."

Dean rolled his eyes. "For the love of God, I swear you could give Sammy a run for his money on this guilt trip thing."

"You don't feel bad about this?"

"No." Dean fixed her with an intense stare. "You know why? Because we're going to find him. *I'm* going to find Sammy."

"How can you be so calm about it, Dean?" Mia got up from the bed and began to pace the room. "Why aren't you screaming at me? Throwing things? Hell, say a bad word!"

"Damn."

"What?"

"You told me to say a bad word."

"God!" Mia grunted out. She stopped to glare at Dean, but his attention was once again on the open laptop. "Will you please do something?"

"I'm not going to yell at you, Mia, just to make you feel better. It won't help anything." He clicked on another bookmarked page. "Now, come look at this and tell me if this is what attacked you."

"You didn't see it last night?" Mia asked as she walked over to stand behind him.

"It was too dark to make out much of anything before that bastard shot that crap in my eyes." Dean clicked on a thumbnail and a bigger picture popped up. "Is that it?"

"Yeah, that looks about right, except the cape was longer and he had black stringy hair, not gray."

Dean sighed. "Well, at least we know what it looks like. It still doesn't help us find out where it took Sam, though."

"Do you think we can find him?"

"No." Dean turned his head up to look at her. "I know we can. We have to."

Before it's too late... the little voice in Dean's head added.

Abandoned Hunting Lodge

Sam didn't like the way the NuJack was watching him, as if he was an animal on display at the zoo. It made him feel uncomfortable, violated even, and he swore then and there he would never step foot into a zoo again as long as he lived. Which, if history remained true, wouldn't be too much longer.

The situations I get myself into...Dean really ought to invest in a tracker for me. It would make it a hell of a lot easier to find me and we could skip this whole getting-to-know-you bit with the evil creatures.

Sam tried not to let the monster get to him but it was hard when those glowing red eyes watched his every move, or lack of moves on his part. The young hunter couldn't help but be transfixed by them and if he wasn't mistaken, there was hunger in those crimson orbs. Well, enough was enough already. If the NuJack wasn't going to break the ice, then Sam would break it for him.

"Are you going to keep staring at me like that or are we going to get this show on the road?"

The NuJack took a step towards him. "We're rather impatient, aren't we, young one?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "I just don't think it's nice to play with your food. Or stare at it, in your case."

The creature laughed. "That's very funny, Sam."

"What can I say? I have my funny moments."

"Tell me..." the NuJack took another step forward until he was only a few inches from him. Sam could smell his putrid breath on his face and it made his stomach queasy. "Will you be laughing when you face your fear?"

Sam smirked. "Is that what you do? Make people face their fears? Live through them?"

The creature smiled as he began to circle Sam. "You think I don't know what you are, Sam?"

Sam frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"You're a hunter."

"Good for you—you figured it out. So, what do you want? A little blue ribbon? A gold star?"

The NuJack went on as if he didn't hear Sam. "You're not the first hunter I've had the pleasure of having in my company."

"Guess that means I'm not special."

"You want to know what I've learned about hunters?" The NuJack stopped in front of Sam and smiled.

"I'd say no, but I figure it would be a waste since you're going to tell me anyway."

"Hunters have the greatest fear." The being began circling Sam once again. "Now, I don't know if it's because they know what exists out in the dark or if they've always had this fear but they've been able to hide behind their vocation."

Sam remained silent.

"Fear is a very powerful emotion, Sam. A very powerful *untapped* emotion. People push it down, refuse to acknowledge it because they are afraid of what they will find."

"There's a reason for that."

"Maybe there is, but if you ask me, that's the real waste here." He once again stopped in front of Sam, his red eyes glaring into Sam's hazel ones. "I can feel it radiating off of you, Sam. I could feel it last night in the forest. It practically oozed from you and I have to admit, it excited me."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Great, just what I was aiming for."

"We may not know each other too well, Sam, but I think I have a handle on where your fear lies."

"Yeah, and where's that?"

"Your brother. I saw the way you went to him last night when I attacked. You forgot about everything else in the world except for him. I wonder if he would do the same for you?"

Sam struggled anew with his ropes. *How dare this thing mention Dean!* He wanted nothing more than to wipe that leer off the bastard's face. "You leave Dean out of this!"

The NuJack threw his head back, laughing. "So, I was right. Don't worry, Sammy—I don't plan on getting your brother involved. It's you I want." He let out a deep sigh. "I tire of all this chatter."

Sam seriously didn't like the sound of that and before he could even flinch, the creature grabbed his face between his clawed hands.

"Let's see what you've got for me, hunter."

Sam felt his body jerk and a scream tore through his throat as his eyes rolled back in his head. There was a bright white flash and just as quickly it was gone.

The young hunter jerked awake and bolted upright as agony washed through him. He had no idea where he was, but as he looked around, he realized he was no longer tied up in the hunting lodge. Maybe Dean came for me... maybe he finally found me! But why would I end up here? He appeared to be in an old warehouse of

some kind—wooden shipping crates were stacked against the walls and debris littered the dusty floors.

"How in the world did I end up here?" He wondered aloud, his soft voice seeming to echo in the cavernous room. Getting up from the floor, he dusted himself off as he looked around, realizing he was utterly alone. "Hello? Dean?"

"No one's going to answer you, Samuel." Maniacal laughter accompanied the deep voice.

Sam jumped in surprise, his heart hammering in his chest as he sought the voice's origin and owner. "Who's there?"

"You don't really want to know that, do you, Sammy?"

Sam frowned, then swallowed hard as he recognized the voice. "Ferinacci."

The well-dressed New Jersey mobster stepped out of the shadows and held out his hands as he smiled. "Please, Sam...call me Lucifer."

"I can think of a few other names I'd like to call you."

Lucifer laughed. "There's that Winchester fire and spunk I love."

"What do you want?"

"World peace."

"That's funny."

Lucifer shrugged. "You boys aren't the only ones who can crack a joke."

Sam glanced around nervously, seeking out any other visitors in the shadows. But mostly, he was seeking out Dean. He wanted Dean there beside him more than anything.

"I assure you, we're alone, Sam—it's just you and me." He took a step closer to the hunter. "Not even Dean can help you."

Sam glared at the man before him. "Where's my brother?"

Lucifer shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know. Looking for you, I would hazard to guess. He didn't seem too happy when I took you from him—in fact, he seemed somewhat pissed."

"You haven't seen Dean pissed yet."

"Yes, I've heard about your brother's temper. Some say it's downright lethal."

Lucifer smiled. "He could be very useful to me."

"Dean's not going to do a damn thing for you."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, Sam." He took another step towards Sam. "With the right incentive, a person will do anything you ask of them."

Sam didn't back away. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Lucifer ignored him. "The same goes for you, Sammy boy. You know, I told Johnny you two boys didn't matter to me, but I see how wrong I was. You could be very useful to me."

"What are you talking about?"

The demon shrugged. "Haris seemed to think you were important and I have to tell you, there has never been anyone who's survived Eli before. It appeals to me."

"I told Haris I wasn't doing anything for him and I'm not about to do a damn thing for you."

"You sure about that?"

Just then the door to the warehouse burst open, causing Sam to whirl around. He almost sagged in relief when he heard Dean's voice.

"Sammy!"

Before Sam could call out to his brother, he found himself being lifted from the ground and flying through the air. He came to a bone-jarring halt as his back collided with a wall, an invisible force pinning him there.

"Dean! Stay back!" Sam grunted in pain as he felt a crushing pressure building throughout his body.

"Now, now, Sammy. We wouldn't want Dean to miss out on the fun, would we?"

"Leave him alone!" Sam gasped out, but Lucifer only laughed like a delighted child as Dean came rushing in, .45 in hand.

"Sammy!" Dean came to a stop, anger flashing in his green eyes as he saw Sam pinned to the wall, his face contorted in obvious pain. He jerked his attention from his baby brother to glare at the demon causing Sam this agony.

"Let him go, you son of a bitch." Dean's voice was cold, deadly and left no room for debate as he cocked the gun.

Lucifer smiled. "Oh, Dean, you know that won't work on me." With an imperceptible flick of his wrist, the gun flew from Dean's grasp and slid across the floor to land at the Devil's feet. Leaning down, he picked it up and caressed the muzzle. "Leave the theatrics for the high school drama club."

Dean growled deep in his throat. "Let. My. Brother. Go. Now."

"Why would I want to do that? Sam and I were just beginning to have some fun. In fact, I don't think I like your attitude very much, Dean." Without warning, he aimed the gun and fired, the shot hitting Dean in the thigh.

Dean went down with a cry of pain. "I swear to God, I'm going to tear you limb from limb!" he bit out through gritted teeth as he clutched his injured leg.

"Dean!" Sam wanted to break free, get to his brother before any more damage was done. He should have been able to help Dean—weren't his powers supposed to kick into high gear right about now?

Lucifer threw his head back, his cackle echoing through the large warehouse. "I really don't see where God's going to help you, Dean." He turned away from Dean and focused his attention solely on Sam. "I told you, Sam, with the right motivation, I can get a person to do anything. I'm betting you're willing to do anything to save your brother from any more pain, aren't you?"

"What do you want?"

"Sammy, don't you dare listen to him!" Dean's pain-filled voice pleaded with him.

Lucifer lifted a hand and Dean instantly flew into the wall opposite Sam. "I'm thinking we need a little less commentary from the peanut gallery." With another twist of his hand, Dean began to writhe in pain, the veins in his neck bulging.

"Stop!" Sam yelled. "Please..."

"Is that begging I hear, Sam?"

"Just let Dean go." He took a deep ragged breath. "I'll do anything you want."

The demon arched a brow. "Anything?"

"God dammit, Sam!" Another scream tore from Dean as pain lanced through his body.

"Yes, anything!" Sam looked at Dean, asking with his eyes for Dean to forgive him. Dean had to understand he was doing this for him, to save him.

Lucifer smiled. "That's what I like to hear."

"Sammy, don't you do it! Don't you give in to that bastard!" Dean struggled against the force assaulting his body to no avail.

"You know, I really am getting tired of hearing your voice, Dean." Flashing a cruel smile at Sam, he turned and fired the .45 at Dean, hitting the elder Winchester in the forehead. Shock barely registered on Dean's face before he slumped against his invisible bonds, dead.

"NO!"

"I always knew that mouth of his would eventually get him into trouble." The ancient demon laughed and with one more flick of his wrist, flames hungrily consumed Dean's body.

"NOOOOOO!"

Mountain Top Inn

"God, I hate stupid maps," Dean grumbled as he pored over the large scale map of the Bennington Forest laid out across the small table. He'd been looking over it for the last half-hour and he'd come to realize something—whoever did these stupid

maps had to be sitting back and laughing their asses off at the people idiotic enough to try to make sense of them.

"You've said that five times already," Mia said without looking up from her book.

"Yeah, well, I was just letting you know my opinion still hasn't changed."

"Thanks for that."

"Don't mention it."

Mia got up from the bed and went to stand beside Dean. "What exactly are you looking for?"

Dean sighed. "I'm looking for anything at this point. You know, I got to thinking—the Jack's attacks have been centered around here, right?" Dean pointed to the area of the map where the trail was marked.

Mia nodded. "Right."

"So, I gotta think this thing isn't going to travel far when it grabs its victims. He wants to keep it localized."

"That makes sense."

"Yeah, now the only thing I've got to do is find somewhere he would take them in the middle of all this friggin' forest."

"Well, there has to be a cave or a building or something out there. I mean, this place was civilized at one point." Mia walked over to the coffee pot and filled two cups, handing one of them off to Dean.

"Thanks." Dean took a sip and sat down heavily on one of the wooden chairs.

"You know, the thing that frustrates me most is how Sam was taken."

Mia frowned as she sat down across from Dean. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it—all of the other disappearances occurred in the Bennington Forest, so why was Sam different? Why did Jackie risk exposure and come out in the middle of the day and snatch Sam from a motel smack in the middle of town?"

Mia shrugged. "Maybe after seeing us in the forest last night, he set his sights on Sam and didn't want to wait."

"But that still doesn't make sense. I mean, not that any of these creatures we hunt ever make sense, but still. They usually stick to pattern so it would have been more feasible to come after us tonight."

"No, you think about it, Dean. If that thing would have waited until tonight, what would it have been faced with?"

"Jackie boy would have faced a very pissed off Winchester and been chewing on a barrel full of buckshot."

"Exactly. With how this thing operates, I mean, he seems very intelligent. Who's to say he wasn't watching us the entire time, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike?"

"Yeah...maybe." Dean wasn't completely convinced, but he wasn't going to argue it. It was pointless and it would only serve to frustrate him. Not that he wasn't frustrated enough already with himself. He couldn't stop the guilt gnawing away at him, thinking maybe if he'd been here, Sam would be safe.

Dean knew he was contradicting himself, especially after he told Mia she couldn't blame herself. He couldn't help it though—Sam was his responsibility, always had been and always would be. A tiny part of Dean made him feel worthless and incompetent as an older brother every time Sam landed in trouble. He knew he shouldn't shoulder himself with that burden, but again, he couldn't help it. He didn't think that would ever change.

Sighing, he drained the last of his coffee and returned back to the map. That's when he saw it and his smile couldn't have been any bigger. He'd never given much credence to those people who said if you walk away and then return to something, you could see it through a pair of fresh eyes. Looked like he was wrong.

"Hey, I got something."

"What is it?" Mia asked.

"It looks like it's an old cabin or hunting lodge." Dean smiled over at her. "And it's right in the middle of where the attacks took place."

"You think Sam may be there?"

"I don't know." Dean folded up the map where it just showed the building and immediate surrounding area. "But it's the best lead we have so far and I'll be damned if I'm gonna pass it up." He walked over to his bed and picked up his weapons bag. "Have you found a way to get rid of Jack?"

Mia nodded. "The only thing I can find that seems to be the general consensus is silver."

"Silver I've got plenty of." Dean pulled out his .45 and his case of silver bullets. After releasing the clip, he exchanged the regular rounds with the silver ones.

Mia closed her book and joined Dean, watching as he worked methodically and efficiently. "You preparing for a war or something?" she joked.

"Rule twenty-five of the *Winchesters' Guide to Hunting*—be prepared for anything and everything." He slipped his leather jacket on and slung the weapons bag over his shoulder. "And yeah, by the time I'm finished with this bastard he's going to wish he never screwed with us in the first place."

Abandoned Hunting Lodge

Sam came to with a sudden gasp, pain once again lancing through his skull. What he wouldn't give for someone to come along and cut it off.

Then again, that might be slightly overreacting and Dean would never forgive me if I did that...

The throbbing in his head seemed to increase in intensity with each throb, becoming so bad he felt bile rising in the back of his throat. Sam took a deep, calming breath and somehow he was able to hold the sickness at bay. He didn't need a mirror to tell him his nose bled, because he could feel the dried mess as he flexed the muscles in his face.

The images of the nightmare, vision, or whatever the hell it was of Dean dying, continued to play in his head as if it were a home movie on a constant loop. The rational part of him told him it wasn't real, it wasn't a vision, but it felt real to Sam. After all the crap with Haris, the hunter thought he and Dean could be free, actually get out there and live life a little bit. In the back of his head, Sam knew that couldn't happen.

God, what I wouldn't give for it, though.

After the reveal of Lucifer, Sam didn't know if he or Dean would ever truly be free. They would continue to play this twisted game, continue to be thrown into battles they probably had no chance of winning.

What Sam did know was that he wouldn't let Dean be taken from him like that. Dean fought too hard and too much, more than any boy or man should have and he deserved to have so much more. Sam Winchester was going to make sure Dean stuck around for years to come. Of course, in order for him to do that, he needed to get out of his current predicament.

Glancing around the lodge and keeping his eyes from Lauren's body, Sam searched for any sign of the NuJack. He saw no sign of the creature, but that didn't mean he wasn't hiding in the shadows, watching Sam's every move. It wasn't going to deter Sam, though. He refused to become another Bennington statistic. He was going to get out of here and kick some serious ass—for himself, for Lauren, for everyone else who'd been terrorized and slaughtered by this freak of nature.

Looking above his head, he grabbed the ropes tethered from the beam and began to pull at them. They still wouldn't budge and the ones around his wrists only seemed to tighten in response, almost as if they were taunting him, telling him he would never get free. As if to add salt to the wound, blood once again trailed down his arms.

Hell, when am I not bloody? This is just another day at the office for me...

Sam kept pulling at the ropes, thinking eventually if he kept doing it, they would weaken and he could get free. He blocked his mind from the pain, focusing instead on the task at hand. He was concentrating so hard on his efforts, he almost didn't hear the faint thud, as if someone was moving outside the door of the lodge. Sam stopped struggling, fear overtaking him for a moment as he thought it was the NuJack coming back to finish the job. He honestly didn't know if he could handle another fear vision, especially if it involved Dean. He couldn't watch his brother die over and over again, not without it killing him in the process.

The thud sounded again from behind him and Sam strained to see, seeking to make out who was coming into the lodge. For several tense moments, the only sounds Sam could make out were his heavy breathing and the pounding of his heart. It took him a second to realize there was another sound beating in perfect time to his thumping heart—footsteps. And not just any footsteps, but booted footsteps.

There were many sounds Sam Winchester committed to memory since he was young—the sounds of certain supernatural creatures, the sound of his father's voice as he instilled knowledge in his sons, but most important was the sounds of his brother—the rumble of the Impala, Dean's breathing as he slept, and the sound of his footsteps. Sam didn't need any further confirmation to know it was Dean who'd come into the room.

But it was still an incredible relief when he actually saw Dean there, .45 held out in front of him. He felt his legs give and hissed as pain tore through his tortured arms as they fought to gain control.

"Sammy!"

"Thank God that's you, Dean." Sam tried to right himself as he smiled back at his brother.

Dean raced to Sam's side as he tucked the gun into the waistband of his jeans and put down his weapons bag. He grabbed Sam's face in his hands and the younger Winchester saw anger flash in the elder's green eyes as he took in the blood on his face. "Sammy, you okay?"

"Yeah, Dean, I'm fine."

"Bullshit."

"Then why did you ask me?"

"Maybe I thought you'd actually tell me the truth for once."

"Not today, big brother." Sam grinned. "How did you find me, anyway?"

Dean feigned insult. "Dude, I am capable of doing research without you. Most of the time, I just choose to think with my downstairs brain and not my upstairs one."

Sam chuckled. "Ain't that the truth."

"Hey!" Dean reached down and pulled out a small silver blade tucked into his boot. "Where is Jackie, anyway? I thought he'd be at the front of the welcome wagon."

"I don't know," Sam admitted as Dean reached up to saw at his ropes. "When I came to he was gone."

Dean sighed. "I'm not sure if I like the sound of that or not."

"Yeah, me either."

"Well, it doesn't matter." Dean had to step on his tiptoes to get the blade high enough where it wouldn't accidentally nick Sam. "We need to get out of here before it comes back."

Sam nodded in agreement. He definitely didn't want Dean to have to go through what he and Lauren had to endure. He was about to answer Dean when the NuJack suddenly appeared behind Dean, leering. "Dean, look out!"

Dean whirled around, keeping a firm hold on the blade and as he brought it around in an arc, the NuJack grabbed his wrist, squeezing until Dean finally dropped it. The creature grabbed Dean by his arms and tossed him across the room. Sam winced as Dean landed on top of some of the older human remains, the distinct sound of bones cracking under the downed hunter's weight.

"Oh, now that's just gross," Dean grumbled as he awkwardly made his way to his feet. It was hard to maneuver past the bones, but somehow he managed to do it, pulling out his .45 at the same time. Before the NuJack could approach him again, Dean emptied the clip into it.

Sam watched with fascination as the NuJack took each shot, but somehow remained standing the entire time. In fact, the bullets seemed to have the same effect as if Dean were popping it with a rubberband. If anything, it only seemed to piss off the monster, his roar of anger reverberating through the lodge.

"What the hell, Sam?" Dean looked over to Sam for help. "Mia said silver was supposed to work on the damn thing!"

"Silver?" Sam asked, confused.

"Yes, silver!" Dean bit out.

"Don't you get pissed at me! I'm not the one who told you that!"

Dean bent down to the weapons bag, keeping his eye on the NuJack at the same time. "Well, any help you want to give me, Sammy, would be great right about now!"

"Fire's the only way to kill it, Dean."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Watching as the creature slowly approached his brother, Sam reached up for the rope holding him. When he was sure he had a strong grip, he swung forward bringing his legs up to his chest and kicking out at the NuJack. His feet connected with the thing's back, sending it sprawling to the floor. "Dean, now!"

The same time Sam yelled at him, Dean pulled the flare gun out of the bag, aiming it at his target. Just as the NuJack managed to get back to its feet with a low growl, Dean fired, the flare hitting its objective. A feral scream tore from the creature's throat as hot flames ravenously consumed it. The brothers flinched as a brilliant light flashed and then the NuJack was gone, only a pile of ashes proving it ever existed.

Dean took a deep breath and exchanged a look with Sam before throwing the flare gun into his bag. His eyes roamed the room for his small blade. He found it not far from where he'd been thrown and, scooping it up, went to work on Sam's bonds.

The elder Winchester nearly lost his balance as Sam fell against him, his dead legs refusing to hold his weight. Dean gently guided him to the floor, pushing him against the wall so Sam could have a little support against his back. Sam felt dizzy all over as his blood desperately rushed to replenish strained limbs.

Dean plopped down next to Sam and let out a sigh. "So, this must have been all of Jack's victims," he commented, looking around the room in wonder.

"Yeah." Sam nodded to the latest victim. "That's Lauren Miller. I watched that thing kill her and I did nothing."

"You've got to be kidding me." He looked incredulously at Sam. "You're seriously going to sit here and blame yourself for her death?"

Dean got up from the floor and walked over to Lauren's body. Sam guessed Dean was hoping he was mistaken, that the girl was still alive. Sam knew what Dean would find as he felt for Lauren's pulse and it was verified when Dean let out a frustrated sigh and rubbed a hand over his face.

"If I'd just gotten away, Dean..."

Dean nodded and walked back over to his brother, sitting once again. "Okay, you want to play the 'my stick is bigger than yours' game? Fine. How about I sit here and blame myself, Sam? If I was at the motel, you never would have been taken. If I had found out where you were sooner, I could have saved her myself."

Sam shook his head. "You can't do that, Dean. It isn't fair."

"Yeah, and you can't either, Sammy. I won't let you, dammit." Dean's voice was gruff and held a warning note, just daring Sam to argue.

The brothers sat in silence for a couple of minutes before Sam dared to speak up again. "We should really let her family know. They deserve that, at least."

Dean nodded. “We will, Sammy. I’ll call the sheriff as soon as we get back to the motel and let him know.”

“Good.”

“Hey, Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“What did that thing do to you?”

Sam sighed. He could lie to Dean, it would make it a whole hell of a lot easier, but he just didn’t have the energy to come up with a good, plausible one. At least not one Dean wouldn’t be able to drive a truck through. “He fed on my fears...my fear of losing you.”

“What did you see?”

“I saw you die—simple as that, Dean. I watched you die and there wasn’t a thing I could do about it.”

Dean nodded and once again, silence filled the room. Finally after a few minutes of them lost in their own thoughts, Dean nudged Sam with his shoulder. “Think you can get your lazy ass moving now?”

Sam smiled. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Good, let’s get going.” Dean stood up and held out a hand for Sam, which Sam grabbed gratefully. It took a little effort but finally the younger man was able to get his feet underneath him and stand up. After making sure Sam could stand on his own and wasn’t going to topple over, Dean retrieved his discarded weapons and canvas bag. “Now, how about we go have a little heart-to-heart with Mia?”

“Where is she, by the way?”

“In the car, which may change by the time we get back there.” He slung the bag over his shoulder. “If she doesn’t have a good reason for why she fed me crap information, she may find her ass walking back to the motel.”

“Dean, you can’t blame her for that,” Sam said softly.

“You wanna tell me why the hell not?”

“It was probably nothing more than an honest mistake. We all make them.”

“You can stand there and defend her all you want, Sammy. Her mistake almost got the both of us killed and I can’t overlook that.” He grabbed Sam by the arm and guided him towards the door and the safety of the Impala.

Mountain Top Inn

Dean hated the expression “*the air was so tense you could cut it with a knife*” but honestly it was the only way to explain it. The entire drive back to the motel had been wrought in silence, at least on his part. He’d refused to say a word to Mia, even when she remained persistent in her questioning about how things went. It wasn’t that he was trying to be an ass; he was afraid he’d blow up at her as soon as he opened his mouth.

It didn’t stop Sam from talking to her though. Nope, the kid could have an intelligent conversation with a tree if he wanted to. Though Mia gave Sam her full undivided attention, Dean didn’t miss the glances she shot his way every time he looked in the rearview mirror.

That’s why when they got back to the motel, Dean picked up the book Mia had been reading to check to see if it was nothing more than a mistake. He didn’t know if he was supposed to be grateful or disappointed to see it was—Mia had made an honest mistake, getting the lore for the NuJack confused with that of a shapeshifter. But for some reason he couldn’t help but still be upset by what happened. For far too long it had been him and Sam—they were a team, a great team, and Dean had come to depend on that teamwork.

It was just weird to him as soon as he let his guard down, let someone else in to help, it blew up in his face. He still felt he needed to set Mia straight because after all,

hindsight was twenty-twenty. Besides, nothing could be overlooked when it came to Sam's well-being and safety. Bottom line: it always came down to Sam.

"Dean, you've got to say something to her," Sam said as soon as he stepped into the room after seeing Mia to hers.

"No I don't, Sammy."

"She feels guilty enough as it is. You're seriously going to let her stew over this?"

"If that's what it takes to get it through her head, then yeah." He shrugged off his jacket and threw it on the bed. "Besides, I don't hear you telling her everything was okay in the car."

"It's not my place to, Dean. I told you—I don't blame her. It was a mistake and she feels horrible about it."

"I know it was, Sammy."

"Then why don't you go settle things with her?" Sam sighed when Dean didn't say anything. "I'm not going to fight you on this, dude. You want to fight, go talk to Mia and hash it out, but leave me out of it."

"How can you not be upset about this, Sammy?"

"Because I'm not." Sam shrugged. "I'm still alive, aren't I? Isn't that all that really matters?"

Dean didn't say anything, keeping his eyes on everything but Sam.

"Talk to her, Dean." Sam walked towards the open bathroom. "I'm going to go take a shower."

Dean watched as Sam closed the door and then sat heavily on the bed. *Damn Sam and his stupid voice of reason.* He still didn't understand how it was his kid brother continued to see the best in everyone, even after all he'd seen. He supposed it was Sam trying to maintain a desperate grip on his last remaining thread of innocence.

Sighing deeply as he heard the shower come on, Dean knew Sam was right. He needed to talk to Mia, if for nothing else than to let her know she couldn't mess up again. He didn't want to go over there and start a confrontation; in fact it was the last thing he wanted. He felt if he didn't set her straight, she may make another mistake and next time they may not be so lucky.

Grabbing up his motel key, Dean forwent his jacket and stepped out into the night. Stopping in front of her door, he took a deep breath and knocked.

The door opened just a crack, the chain keeping it in place. "Dean, what are you doing here?" Mia asked warily.

"Can I come in?"

Mia eyed him with something akin to apprehension. "You're actually talking to me now?"

"Come on, I'm freezing my ass off out here."

Mia sighed, then closed the door. For a second, Dean thought she was going to leave him out there until he heard the chain being removed. She opened the door and stepped back. "Where's Sam?"

"Why, do you we think we need a mediator or something?" Dean asked as he stepped inside.

"Might make it easier."

"Sammy's taking a shower. If it makes you feel any better, he's the one who told me to come over here and talk to you."

"I'm not sure how that makes me feel."

Dean turned to look at her. "Look, Mia, I'm not going to stand here and bullshit you. It won't do you any favors and it sure as hell won't do me any, either."

Mia leaned against the wall and crossed her arms over her chest. "Let's have it then."

Dean frowned. "I wasn't expecting it to be this easy. You're supposed to fight me, or beg, or do something."

"I'm not going to stand here and roll over for you, Dean. Sorry to disappoint you." She shrugged one shoulder. "I'll start if you don't want to—I messed up."

"You're right, you did."

"And I feel horrible about it. I would never intentionally hurt Sam, you have to believe that."

Dean shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, Mia. When it comes to Sam, I don't have to believe anything I don't want to."

Mia walked back over to the door and put her hand on the knob as if to open it. "Look, Dean, if you came over here to bitch at me and not listen, you can just go ahead and leave now."

Dean sat down on the bed. "I didn't come over here to bitch at you, Mia—well, okay, maybe I did—but if you're sticking around with us, then you've got to understand something."

"What?"

"With our job, you have got to get information right. If you get one little thing wrong, it could mean us getting hurt or killed or worse yet, an innocent person hurt or killed. Now, I'm not about to have that weight added to my already burdened shoulders."

Mia pushed away from the door and went over to sit next to Dean on the bed, but said nothing.

"That info you gave me about the Jack was crap and if Sammy didn't remember reading it himself, we would have been toast."

"All I can do is keep apologizing, Dean."

Dean scratched the back of his neck. "I've looked through the books because I was just hoping it was human error on your part, but both of them said the only way to kill the Jack was with fire."

"I must have read it wrong, Dean. My mind was still a little fuzzy from the attack and I felt guilty about Sam being taken. I must have let it get to me."

Dean sighed. "I know you're sorry, Mia, and you feel guilty about it. I just wanted to come over here and tell you that I've been thinking about it and I could see where you could make a mistake. The Jack lore was right next to the shapeshifter lore—I can see how you could confuse that."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, Dean, but you wouldn't listen to me."

"Listen, I'll be the first to admit that when it comes to Sam, I tend to block some things out especially if he's in trouble. Common sense pretty much goes out the window and I choose to believe what I want to believe and see what I want to see." Dean was silent for a few seconds.

"But Sam is okay. You got him back safe. Isn't that what matters?"

"Yeah, I got Sammy back—this time. Next time, I may not be so lucky."

"Dean, I don't know what else I can say."

Dean stood up and walked towards the door before turning around to face her. "You don't have to say anything else, Mia. I forgive you and wanted you to know I'm not pissed at you anymore. I didn't want you to carry around that guilt anymore since I was the one piling it onto you. Hell, you've got enough to stress about as it is. I just came over to make you understand one thing."

"What's that?"

"When it comes to Sam, I'll do anything and everything to keep him safe, everything else be damned."

"I know you will, Dean. That's what makes you a great brother—and a great person."

"Thanks." Dean flashed her a small smile as he opened the door and walked out into the cold night.

The End