

Episode Three: Hole In The World

By irismay42

Leicester, MA

"It was the size of a *whale*, I tell ya!"

Joey Wheatcroft rolled his eyes and tightened his grip on his fishing rod, momentarily mesmerized by the movement of the silver spinner dancing on the end of his line just beneath the surface of the water. "Grandpa, I so don't believe you," he huffed, shaking his head without taking his eyes off his lure.

His grandfather Ernie, a sprightly sexagenarian with a thick shock of unruly white hair and a cantankerous glint in his bright blue eyes, squinted sideways at the twelve-year-old, lips pursed in an effort to suppress a grin. "Oh you don't, huh?"

Joey glanced quickly at him. "Trout the size of a whale?" he echoed. "In the Quabaug?" He blew out a breath noisily. "I don't think so."

Ernie's eyes virtually disappeared beneath frowning snowy eyebrows. "Boy," he said, puffing out his chest as his own spinner glinted wildly in front of him. "I been fishing this river since I was younger 'un you and twice as canny. And if you don't believe me, you can just look it up on that there world wide whaddayamacallit of yours. The year I caught Ole' Bessie, the trout were so big one fish'd feed a family o' six for nigh on a week!"

Joey sniggered. "Okay, Cap'n Ahab," he snorted. "I get it. No such thing as McDonald's when you were a kid, right? If you wanted to eat it, you had to catch it and kill it, and then you had to lick the road clean the whole ninety-seven miles you had to walk to school with no shoes on every day..."

"Wise ass," Ernie retorted. "And it was ninety-eight miles," he added, a grin creeping across his face just as his grandson's attention snapped back to the river, a sudden hard insistent tug tautening his line.

"Grandpa!" the boy burst out excitedly. "Grandpa, I think I got something!"

Ernie carefully laid his own rod on the riverbank as he scuttled over to investigate what his grandson had biting. "Let's see what you got there, junior."

"Whoa!" Joey burst out, a sudden jerk on his line almost pulling him right off his feet.

Ernie quickened his pace, coming up behind his grandson and adding his own weather-beaten hands to the boy's fishing rod, one arm on either side of the kid in an effort to avoid him being dragged any further down the bank towards the river.

"Wow, Grandpa, this thing has to be even bigger than Ole' Bessie! Like – like – the size of Moby Dick or something!"

Ernie narrowed his eyes and frowned. "Or somethin'" he agreed uncertainly, squinting into the murky water as dark shapes began to gather just beneath the surface.

"Grandpa?" Joey's tone faltered, fingers slipping on the fishing rod, just as the eager smile slipped from his face. "Grandpa, what is it?"

Ernie's frown deepened, as did the watery shadows in front of them, a darkness fanning out as far as they both could see, upstream and down. "Joey, son, let go of the rod," he instructed cautiously, slowly attempting to ease his grandson further up the bank.

"But Grandpa –" Joey began to protest, just as an odd popping sound preceded the body of a small trout inexplicably bobbing to the surface of the river mere feet from where they stood, floating on its side as dead eyes stared at nothing.

"Joey –"

Another pop was followed by another corpse, another dead fish rising helplessly to the surface of the river just as another pop heralded another. And another. And another. Corpse after corpse bursting to the surface until the water was all but

obscured by the throng of dead bodies choking it, fish, frogs, even the odd bird carcass dotted amongst the carnage.

Joey's eyes widened as he stared at the choked surface of the river. "Grandpa?" he asked quietly.

"Joey, let go of the line," Ernie repeated, tone deadly serious as his face paled considerably. "Now, son."

"But –"

Before Joey could argue further, a sudden jolt almost yanked the rod right out of their hands, both grandfather and grandson hanging on for dear life as the pole bent almost to breaking point. Before Ernie could warn him against it, Joey was yanking in the reel like a man possessed, tugging on the line as a dark shape began knifing through the water toward him, closer and closer until Joey slowly realized that what was snagged on the hook most definitely wasn't a fish.

Ernie squinted at the dark shape being inexorably dragged to the surface of the murky river on the end of his grandson's line, the hook beginning to tear through already-tattered fabric enshrouding something that look uncomfortably like a human arm...

"Grandpa!" Joey burst out, instantly dropping the rod as first blue-tinged fingers, then an arm, and finally the remainder of a hideously bloated corpse bobbed soundlessly to the surface of the river.

Ernie had dropped the rod the second his grandson had, gathering up the boy in his arms and backing them both away from the water just as another dark mass broke the river's surface, human arms and legs drifting at odd angles beside another unnaturally swollen torso.

Ernie swallowed as yet another human corpse gently bobbed to the surface. And another. And another, just like the fish and the birds.

"Holy Mother of God," he breathed, as the entire length of the river, now choked with bobbing corpses both animal and human, slowly began to turn a deep blood red...

Outside of Leicester, MA

One week later

Sam glanced up from the half-tree of notepaper he had laid out across his lap, shot a disapproving look sideways at his brother, his mouth hanging slightly open somewhere between dismay and disgust, before clamping his jaw shut again in frustration and staring straight out through the windshield.

"Dean," he ground out on a sigh, closing his eyes and taking in a deep breath as he silently prayed for an inexhaustible supply of patience, something that seemed to have become a necessity when spending large amounts of time in the company of his older brother. "They're not 'nutjobs.'"

"Sam," Dean echoed his brother's sigh; on purpose, Sam was sure. "Excuse me, but wasn't the whole point of us coming here because half the town has inexplicably turned nuttier than a barrel full of squirrels in a Snickers factory?"

"It's called schizophrenia, Dean," Sam corrected his brother for what felt like the fiftieth time that day. "It's a distressing and life-altering illness that can destroy not only the lives of the people who are afflicted with it, but also their loved ones." He sighed again, more theatrically this time. "Would it kill you to show a little empathy every once in a while?"

Dean just looked at him. "Well pardon me for breathing, Dr. Doolittle," he said at length. "If I'd known you were gonna go all After School Special on me I'd have pulled over and grabbed myself a pillow."

Sam shook his head, too tired to argue. They'd had a rough few weeks, what with both of them nearly dying and everything, and neither of them were feeling

completely up to par. “Whatever,” he said dismissively, before adding, “And it’s not half the town.” He rifled through his notes some more, hunting down the statistics he was after. “But there’s no denying the unnatural rise in the number of people being admitted to the local psych ward with sudden onset schizophrenia is...” he searched for the right word, “...troubling.” He stopped abruptly, looking up as if suddenly rewinding the tape playing in his head. “And Dr. Doolittle spoke to animals.”

Dean grinned, big and wide, and Sam rolled his eyes, finally realizing what his brother was up to. Ever since Wyoming, since the battle with Haris, since the loss of the other psychic kids and of Gudrun in the wilds of Canada, not to mention the unexpected revelation that Luciano Ferinacci was none other than Lucifer himself, Dean seemed to have made it his personal mission to try and keep Sam’s mind off recent events, the “dumb” card being the latest in a long line of dubious diversions ranging from a whole day full of off-color limericks to a unscheduled stop at a lap-dancing club. “Had you goin’ though, huh?” the older brother teased. “You know sometimes I’m offended at how stupid you think I am.”

“I don’t think you’re stupid, Dean –” Sam began to protest, before catching the teasing glint in his brother’s eye. “Would you be serious for five seconds?” he demanded, trying desperately to maintain an air of authority despite the reluctant chuckle tickling at the corners of his mouth.

Dean frowned. “I dunno,” he said. “Five seconds is a long time to be serious.”

Sam affected his most long-suffering sigh. “Dean, I appreciate this sudden joie de vivre you’re exhibiting –” this time Dean’s look of confused non-comprehension was genuine. “But we’re on a job here!”

Dean huffed. “What makes you think it’s a job?” he asked. “People turn nutty –” he shrugged as Sam frowned at him, “– have sudden mental health issues all the time. Doesn’t make it our kind of problem.”

“No,” Sam agreed. “But in this one town, the crime rate has risen three hundred percent in the last two weeks. Violent crime now accounts for ninety-five percent of all calls received by the local police department, and reports of sudden and unprovoked violent assaults have gone through the roof. Leicester is rapidly becoming Massachusetts’ most potentially explosive powder keg.”

Dean grinned again. “Sounds like my kinda town!”

Sam shook his head. “Over a hundred people have been admitted to the local hospital in the last two weeks alone, Dean,” he continued. “Most of them acting violently and irrationally, many of them claiming to be ‘hearing voices,’ people in their heads telling them what to do.”

Dean frowned, becoming suddenly serious without Sam even having to ask him to be. “Hearing voices?” he echoed thoughtfully, obviously having forgotten he’d been playing dumb two seconds earlier. His fingers unconsciously began tapping against the Impala’s steering wheel in time to Matchbox Twenty’s *Mad Season* before he suddenly realized the irony of what he was listening to. He glanced at the radio and shrugged slightly before adding, “You know, the symptoms of schizophrenia aren’t that different to the symptoms of demonic possession.”

Sam nodded, relieved Dean was finally catching on to his line of thinking. “Exactly,” he agreed. “And that’s not all that’s going on in this town.”

Dean arched an eyebrow. “There’s more?”

“At least twelve people have thrown themselves into the Quabaug River in the last two weeks alone,” Sam informed him. “And those weren’t the only people driven to suicide in the area recently.”

Dean pursed his lips for a second. “That is weird,” he commented, as a road sign flashed by declaring they had entered Leicester’s environs.

Sam grinned almost as big as Dean had earlier. “Wanna hear the real kicker?” he asked, as if triumphantly pulling a rabbit out of a well-used top hat.

“Do I get a choice?”

“Leicester has another claim to fame.”

“Aside from being a town full of nutjobs?”

Sam huffed. “Spider Gates Cemetery,” he said expectantly, as if Dean should know what that was.

Dean squinted at him. “Sam, you tell me we’ve got some more freaky-deaky relatives buried in this burg and I swear –”

“No, Dean,” Sam said. “Spider Gates Cemetery.” Dean looked at him blankly. “The Eighth Gateway to Hell?”

“The what now?” Dean shook his head dismissively. “Come on, Sammy, everyone knows there’s only seven...”

Sam nodded enthusiastically. “So the stories go,” he agreed, “the Seventh Gateway being –”

“Stull Cemetery near Lawrence,” Dean finished for him, nodding a little hesitantly. “Yeah, I know.” A wistful smile played at the corners of his mouth. “You know, I remember Dad taking me there once when I was little. Y’know. Before.” He shrugged again. “He said he was teaching me local history but Mom said he was just gonna freak me the hell out.”

Sam smiled wistfully. “Were you?” he asked.

Dean glanced over at him. “Was I what?”

“Freaked the hell out?”

“Sam I was four. There was no such thing as monsters back then and Hell was just someplace Mom told me I was headed if I didn’t eat my broccoli or say my prayers at night.”

Sam looked away. “Yeah,” he said quietly, wishing he remembered times like those. “I guess.”

Dean picked up on Sam’s sudden change in mood, biting his lip and trying to think of something neutral to say. All he could think of was, “So Eighth Gateway to Hell, huh?”

Sam nodded, as if only just remembering what they were talking about. “It’s one of the local urban legends,” he said. “There’s all the usual literature – ghost sightings, cold spots, weird vibes and odd noises.”

“Like being at a Celine Dion concert,” Dean offered.

Sam cracked a reluctant smile. “But a helluva lot cheaper.”

“And probably a lot more fun.” Dean grimaced. “I dunno,” he continued, sounding a hell of a lot less than convinced. “You think the one thing has anything to do with the other?”

Sam shrugged one shoulder. “Like you said, schizophrenia and demonic possession can look a whole lot alike to the untrained eye. Way back in the day, people with schizophrenia were burned at the stake because they were believed to be possessed by demons.”

“So you think demons are coming out of this so-called Hellgate and possessing the locals?” Dean frowned. “Seems like a stretch to me.”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “But something’s sure as hell turning these people into –” he stopped abruptly, wincing as the grin returned full force to light up Dean’s face.

“Nutjobs?” he offered.

Sam shook his head and clamped his jaw shut tightly, unwilling to rise to the bait for a second time.

Dean smirked. “C’mon, Sammy!” he burst out, eyes skittering sideways to glance at his brother. “Wouldn’t hurt you to smile every once in a while. It’s therapeutic. Uses way more muscles than frowning...”

Sam’s eyes suddenly narrowed as he squinted off into the distance. “Dean.”

“Sam?”

Sam turned and looked at him, gesturing urgently out the window. “Pull over.”

"Huh?" Dean's attention lurched back to the road in front of him, just in time to narrowly avoid plowing into a line of stationary vehicles which were completely blocking the blacktop. "What the...?"

Slamming his foot on the brake, Dean managed to pull the big Chevy off onto the side of the road just in time to avoid flattening the little Ford at the back of the line, bringing the car to a dead stop only a few feet to the rear of a large crowd of people gathering around the footings of an old, rusted-up bridge straddling the Quabaug River.

"Man, I got a bad feeling about this..." Dean muttered, shoving open the driver's door and swinging his feet out onto a graveled parking area between the road and the riverbank he figured was no doubt used by the local fishermen. And parking couples.

"Just keep smiling," Sam told him, himself exiting the Impala. "It's therapeutic."

"Shut up," Dean returned none-too-kindly, craning his neck to try and catch a glimpse of whatever the hell everyone was staring at. "Can you put that freakish height of yours to good use and see what's going on?"

Sam shook his head. "Too many people," he said, following Dean as he began to slowly edge forward into the crowd. "But I gotta say, whatever it is, I don't think it's gonna be good."

Sam wasn't kidding. Half of the crowd looked like their dog just died while the other half looked like their team just lost the Superbowl.

"Repent! Repent!" A loud booming voice suddenly cut through the subdued hum of lowered voices, the attention of the crowd turning as one to a black-garbed man standing on an upturned crate near the river. He was younger than he looked, Dean figured, maybe in his early thirties, black hat pulled down over unkempt sandy hair and piercing blue eyes looking out of a pale, drawn face. "The End Times are upon us!" the man continued, gesturing heavenward with a leather-bound black Bible in his right hand. "Repent! Repent! Hide your faces and look not upon the wrath of God!"

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Uh-oh," he muttered. "So that's 'Nutjob' with a capital 'N,' huh?"

He pushed deeper into the crowd, Sam close behind him, the two of them drawing closer to the preacher as the people in the crowd began to mutter amongst themselves, fear palpable in the very air surrounding them.

"For so the prophet says," the preacher continued, gesturing behind him with flailing arms. "*And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters; and they became blood...*"

"Blood?" Dean repeated a little incredulously, finally breaking through the last line of frightened onlookers and finding himself standing on the riverbank. "What the hell is this doofus talking about...?"

Which was when he caught sight of the River Quabaug, blood red and liberally littered with the floating corpses of rotting fish.

"Oh," he said shortly.

"*And I heard the angel of the waters say, Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus,*" the preacher continued animatedly. "*For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink...*"

Sam appeared at Dean's shoulder, peering over with widening eyes at the sight of the bloody river. "That's not —" he began, but stuttered to a halt almost immediately. "I mean — it can't be —"

"The End of Days is upon us!" the preacher continued. "As the prophet John foretold in his Revelation of God! Repent! Repent now, ye sinners of the earth!"

"It's a trick," Dean muttered, eyes never straying from the hideous scene laid out at his feet. "Gotta be —"

"This much blood?" Sam said, shaking his head in disbelief. "I mean, even if you collected every drop from every person who drowned themselves, it would still never be enough to fill up an entire river..."

"Repent!" the preacher continued to exhort the now cowering crowd. "Repent and renounce your wickedness! For God has seen into your hearts – seen into your souls – seen into this sinners' paradise you once called 'home!' At the whim of these evil outsiders you have allowed your home to be corrupted into a den of iniquity! And you do nothing to prevent this sacrilege! This desecration! God has seen and God has despaired! God has seen and God has acted! See your river –" he cast his arm in a wide arc to encompass the bloody water. "Your life-spring. Your sustenance. It has become as blood as the prophet foretold! As the men who walked these lands before us foretold! For when those who spoke the Algonquin tongue named this river 'Quabaug' – 'red water' – 'bloody pond' – surely they foresaw this time in which we find ourselves despoiled and debased. Tarnished and corrupted. Sinning through inaction. You allow these demons into your town where they shall create their Hell on Earth!"

"Demons?" Dean echoed. "Seriously?"

Sam shook his head. "If the original Native American settlers in this area named the river 'red water' then there's got to be a logical explanation."

"Like heavy clay deposits or something?" Dean looked up at Sam hopefully.

"Maybe," he agreed. "Or it could just be some really elaborate prank. Someone coloring the water..."

"And killing all the local wildlife?" Dean interjected. "Not to mention enticing the local populace to throw themselves in. That's some seriously whacked out prank if you ask me!"

"It's not a prank."

The brothers turned in the direction of the deceptively calmly-spoken words, to where a stocky young black guy in his late twenties, maybe early thirties, was eyeing them solemnly as he fiddled unconsciously with the plastic ID card clipped to his jacket. Dean couldn't read the text from that distance, but he recognized the logo of the local water company.

"And it's not dye, either," the young man continued, gazing at them levelly. "That's real human blood."

Sam did a double take, blinking owlishly at the guy. "But –" he stammered, eyes skipping back to the river then back to the young man. "*Blood?* I mean... It can't be *blood* blood, right?"

If Sam was this tongue-tied, Dean figured his little brother must be pretty damn freaked. And he wasn't far behind him.

"Repent ye sinners!" The preacher chose that moment to exclaim loudly. "Repent or be cast into the pit of Hellfire for all eternity...!"

ID card guy sighed. "Elijah Warriner," he said, tipping his head in the preacher's direction. "Don't mind him, he's a little –" he paused, selecting the right adjective, "– enthusiastic."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "We can see that," he agreed. "What's his story anyway?"

"Started off as a Sunday school teacher," the young man said, shrugging slightly. "Got a little bit obsessed with it all." He laughed mirthlessly. "We were in high school together. Can you believe it?"

Dean grimaced. "Must have been a blast at pep rallies."

ID card guy sniggered ironically. "Oh yeah," he confirmed, grinning broadly before suddenly sticking out his hand in Dean's direction. "Malik Lloyd," he introduced himself.

Dean nodded in greeting, grasping the young man's hand. "Dean –" he stumbled briefly, trying to remember the name on his current credit card. "– Reeve," he

managed, a blinding flash of insight reminding him he was working his way through Supermen. He'd had to draw the line at "Cain" though. "My brother, Sam."

Malik nodded at Sam before shaking his hand in turn. "You guys reporters or something?" he asked a tad suspiciously.

The brothers glanced at one another. "Or something," Dean agreed with a sly grin.

"How do you know that's real blood in the river?" Sam asked quickly, nodding in the direction of the bloodied water in an effort to change the subject.

"I'm an engineer at the water processing plant upriver," Malik replied. "Tested it myself. You should have seen this place a week ago. You think this is bad now..."

"Well, yeah, actually," Dean put in. The look on the engineer's face prompted him to add, "It was worse?"

Malik sighed. "This is what it looks like *after* we dredged out the dead bodies."

Sam swung back in Malik's direction, broken from his contemplation of the river. "Bodies?"

"Um-hmm," Malik confirmed. "Fish. Birds." He paused. "Not to mention the townspeople who've thrown themselves in here these past couple of weeks."

"There were *human* remains in the river?" Dean clarified, his frown deepening by the second.

"Oh yeah," Malik confirmed. "Just floated up to the top. Same time the whole river-turning-to-human-blood thing happened."

"But... How is that even possible?" Sam asked.

"Besides Apocalypse Now y'mean?" Malik clarified.

Dean chuckled despite the dire circumstances, liking this guy's sense of humor. Twisted, like his own. "Yeah," he said. "Besides that."

Malik shrugged. "Beats the hell outta me. Up until a week ago this was one of the best fishing spots in the county. Now..." He trailed off, gesturing futilely at the expanse of bloodied water.

"What happened a week ago?" Sam asked, seizing on the engineer's words astutely.

Malik regarded him for a second, as if trying to gauge whether he was friend or foe, before leaning forward and, in a lowered voice, asking, "You're not from New Jersey, right?"

Sam just looked at him before casting an uncertain glance in Dean's direction. "Uh – no," he managed after a slight pause, before adding an inquisitive, "Why?"

"No reason," Malik laughed awkwardly, stepping back a pace. He glanced at Dean for a second before shrugging and turning his attention back to Sam. "Nah. Didn't peg you two as Tony Soprano types." When the Winchesters just stared at him blankly, he continued, "About eight days ago, some company out of New Jersey broke ground on their redevelopment of an old cannery site a couple of miles upriver – about halfway between here and the water processing plant. Been in the planning stages for months, but nobody round here really thought they'd ever get the go ahead."

"New Jersey?" Dean shifted uncomfortably, his and Sam's most recent forays into that state tending to end badly.

Malik's uncomfortable laugh returned, but he was grinning wide, as if trying to convince the newcomers this was all really one big joke to him.

Or maybe he was trying to convince himself, Dean observed.

"Hey, I'm not saying every company outta New Jersey is a subsidiary of Corleone Inc or anything," Malik continued. "But I – I kinda heard bad things about this company – ethically, environmentally. You know what I'm saying?"

"You think they did something to the river?" Sam asked.

"All I know," Malik said, "is that the water's fine when it leaves the plant. By the time it gets here, it's –" he paused, "– not."

"And the redevelopment broke ground eight days ago?"

"A day before this happened."

“What are they building?” Dean put in suddenly, eyes drifting once again to the Quabaug.

Malik’s sardonic chuckle didn’t sound particularly amused. “That ‘den of iniquity’ the preacher’s spouting off about?” he explained. “Well they’re calling it a ‘recreational leisure complex.’”

“Which, in English, means...?”

“Giant casino,” Malik translated. “Couple of lap-dancing clubs. Themed stripjoint.”

“Themed...?”

“Dean.” Sam cut his brother off before he could show too much interest.

“What?” Dean asked innocently.

“Cowgirls and Indian squaws,” Malik supplied. “Doctors and nurses. Goths and vampires. You get my drift?”

The Winchesters exchanged another uncertain glance.

Sam cleared his throat awkwardly. “Vampires?”

“Yeah, y’know – fake teeth, pale skin. Leather.”

“So, more *Blade* than *Buffy*?” Dean clarified.

“Hey, who knows, man? Bunch of freaky weirdos if you ask me.”

“And a bunch of heathen sinners if you ask him,” Sam observed, nodding in the direction of Elijah Warriner, who was still exhorting the crowd to repent if they wanted to avoid the plague of open sores and the endless nighttime Saint John predicted would accompany the bloody river.

Malik considered the preacher for a second. “I don’t know if this is a sign of God’s wrath,” he said slowly, “or the sign of an environmentally unsound corporation dumping their toxic crap into our river and hoping we won’t notice –”

“What could they be dumping that would turn an entire river into human blood?”

That was the sixty-four thousand dollar question, and Sam certainly didn’t have an answer.

Neither did Malik, who shook his head, sighing heavily. “Beats me, man.”

“Repent!” Warriner’s voice had risen several decibels, drowning the Winchesters’ and the engineer’s conversation and drawing their attention back in the direction of the preacher. “The End of Days is upon us!” he declared. “See the blood of the unholy who have squandered God’s greatest gift of life by casting themselves into this abhorrent water! The current washes away their souls into the Pit, and you will all follow if you do not repent this folly and return to the Light! Repent! For the End Times approach! Do you not see? This is a Sign. The End of Days approach! Lucifer’s time is at hand! The Beast will rise up to claim the earth!”

Dean shuddered involuntarily. “Sam –” he said quietly.

“I know,” Sam replied, not looking at his brother.

“Repent!”

A repeated popping sound behind them caused the brothers to turn back toward the Quabaug, bubbles of bloody water preceding murky shapes bobbing to the surface – fish, birds. Humans. Floating on the surface in one grisly mass of putrefying flesh.

“Repent!”

“Not again,” Malik sighed.

“Every living soul will be cast into the Pit!”

Fish. Birds. Humans.

“So pronounceth the Almighty...”

* * * *

**Saint Vincent Hospital,
Worcester, MA**

“So,” Dean said, stepping out of the lobby of Saint Vincent Hospital and into the elevator, barely waiting for Sam to join him before he started jabbing at the door control. “Rivers running with blood and half the town turning psycho overnight. You’re not telling me there’s not a connection there.”

Sam glanced up at the floor indicator as it blinked at him from above the elevator door, counting off each floor silently. “Nope,” he said decisively. “I’m not.” Dean looked at him expectantly and he lifted one shoulder in resignation. “Damned if I can tell you what it is though.”

Dean shook his head. “Stanford my ass,” he muttered. “This is the point where you’re supposed to dazzle me with your brilliant insight, Professor.”

Sam eyed his brother wryly. “My brilliant insight doesn’t believe in coincidence,” he offered as the elevator jerked to a halt and the doors slid smoothly open. “But beyond that I got nothing.”

“Dude, you’re really shattering my illusions here,” Dean declared, stepping off the elevator in his brother’s wake. “What’s that big brain of yours been doing all this time?”

Sam didn’t answer, shaking his head as he headed down the corridor, only stopping when Dean suddenly reached out and caught hold of his arm, effectively halting him in his tracks. He swung back to face his older brother, his expression a question mark. “What?” he asked uncertainly, a little thrown by the uncomfortable expression on Dean’s face.

“You don’t think —” Dean began, fidgeting from foot to foot before licking his lips uncertainly. “I mean — New Jersey. And — everything. Y’know? Eighth Gateway to Hell? And — I mean — you don’t think — you don’t think that maybe — y’know —” he paused. “I mean, you don’t think — *Lucifer*? Right?”

Sam looked at him for a long moment before attempting to shrug off his concerns. “Dean, what would Lucifer want with Leicester Massachusetts?” When Dean made no response, Sam shook his head as reassuringly as he was able. “Nah. I don’t see it.”

Dean considered Sam’s back as the younger brother turned away again, vividly remembering all those times when they were kids, when he’d used that exact same hollowly reassuring tone of voice on Sammy: “No, there’s no such thing as monsters,” or “Sure Dad’s coming back.” He didn’t know whether Sam had believed it then, and he sure as hell didn’t think he believed it now.

Swallowing the nagging fear to leave it gnawing persistently at his gut, Dean followed close on Sam’s heels as he made for a distinctly unwelcoming nurses’ station presided over by a distinctly unwelcoming nurse who would probably have made three of Sam, or maybe four of Dean. Her steel wool hair was scraped back into a migraine-inducingly tight bun at the nape of her neck, and she squinted at them over thick, black-framed spectacles, like a hawk looking for its next unsuspecting meal.

“Yes?” she snapped by way of greeting, and Dean shoved Sam hard in the small of his back, causing him to stumble forward a step until he was standing right in front of the woman, looking up at her with an expression that almost had Dean expecting his brother to ask, “Please ma’am, can I have some more?”

By the time Sam managed to find his voice enough to squeak, “We’re — uh — here to see Doctor Benjamin,” the nurse already appeared to have lost interest in them, turning her attention back to the paperwork in front of her.

“Name?” she demanded, more out of habit than anything else, not even looking back up at Sam.

“Reeve,” Sam supplied a lot more smoothly than Dean had earlier. “We’re from the University doing a paper on —”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” the nurse said, ticking something on the clipboard in front of her before gesturing toward the corridor to their right, still refusing to look back up at them. “Third door on the right. She’s expecting you.”

Sam hesitated for a second before making to follow the nurse's directions, Dean just standing staring at her until she finally looked back up at him.

"You don't happen to have a brother called Scotty, do ya?" he asked sweetly. "Lives in Burkitsville Indiana?" When the nurse just frowned at him, he nodded thoughtfully. "Same winning personality," he commented. "Anyone would think you were twins."

He was spared the wrath of the nurse by Sam suddenly grabbing a fistful of his jacket and tugging him away from the nurses' station none-too-gently.

"Hey, watch the threads, man!" Dean protested, as Sam shoved him toward Doctor Benjamin's office.

"Only if you watch your mouth," Sam returned through gritted teeth. "Or do you *want* to be sacrificed to another scarecrow god?"

Dean considered that for all of a nanosecond. "Let's go see this crusty old doctor shall we?"

"I think that's a good idea," Sam replied, continuing to push Dean down the corridor until they approached an off-white door with "Dr. R. Benjamin" stenciled on it in neat black lettering.

Raising his hand to rap on the door, Sam paused for a second, suddenly aware of the sounds emanating from the far end of the dingy corridor, where a barred doorway opened out into what looked like a dayroom. Various patients stumbled through their field of vision dressed in pajamas and robes, most of them muttering to themselves incoherently.

An elderly Asian man suddenly appeared at the doorway, fingers gripping the bars until his knuckles turned white. His eyes widened when he caught sight of the Winchesters and for no apparent reason he began screaming at them in a language that sounded distinctly like German.

"Whoa," Dean muttered, trying to resist the dual urges to either take a step back away from the guy, or a step forward in front of Sam. "What's his problem?"

A young nurse appeared at the screaming man's shoulder, gently prying his fingers from the bars and patting his arm soothingly. "It's okay, Johann," she said softly. "It's okay. Come sit down and I'll get you a drink of water. That's it. Come on."

The Asian man gradually stopped yelling at the nurse's ministrations, eyes still huge and staring as he let her guide him back into the dayroom, and Sam threw a questioning look in Dean's direction.

Suddenly the door Sam was poised to knock at was yanked open and a pretty, olive-skinned woman in a white lab coat almost ran right into him.

Sam backed up a step as the young woman abruptly halted her forward momentum and blinked up at him. "Oh," she said, smoothing a hand down her coat and tucking a loose strand of long curly black hair behind her ear. "I was just coming to see what all the ruckus was about."

"One of the patients –" Sam jerked a thumb over his shoulder hesitantly.

"Ah," the young doctor said. "Probably Mr. Wang. He gets a little over-excited when he sees outsiders."

"He was speaking German," Sam pointed out. "And the nurse called him 'Johann.'"

"Yes," the doctor agreed on a sigh, before turning a disarming smile up at him. "You must be Mr. Reeve?"

"Sam." Sam shook the petite doctor's outstretched hand before indicating his brother with a jerk of his head. "My brother Dean."

Dean's hundred-watt smile blatantly telegraphed his revised opinion of the doctor as he practically elbowed Sam out of the way in order to shake her hand. "Nice to meet you," he said, and Sam was pretty sure that was an extremely censored version of what his brother was actually thinking.

An amused frown creased Dr. Benjamin's brow for a second as she threw open her office door. "Come in," she invited them. "And let's see what I can do to help you."

Sam jabbed a pre-emptive elbow in Dean's ribs before he could make the unsuitable comment Sam just knew was on the tip of his tongue, and Dean just scowled at him as he followed him into the doctor's little office.

"Please, sit." She offered them both uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs before seating herself behind an untidy desk littered with various papers, folders, patients' notes and charts. "Excuse the mess," she smiled awkwardly. "I was writing up my notes." She pushed some of the paperwork out of the way and leaned forward into the space she'd created on her blotter. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Dean narrowly avoided a yelp as Sam purposely kicked his foot, a strangled "Dude!" escaping his lips instead.

Sam smiled sunnily at the doctor. "Well, Doctor," he began.

"Rosa," the young woman interrupted. "'Doctor Benjamin' always makes me think my dad's standing behind me!"

"Rosa," Sam amended. "As I told you on the phone, we're writing a paper on sudden onset schizophrenia, and from the news reports, your county seems to be suffering more than its fair share."

Rosa nodded. "Most of my patients are from Leicester," she told them. "A couple from Worcester. It's the oddest thing. In the past two weeks we've had forty-seven new admissions, all diagnosed with some form of schizophrenia, and that's just on the secure ward alone. But I have to say, I've been working with psych patients for six years and this isn't like any kind of schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder I've ever seen."

Sam sat forward slightly in his chair. "How so?" he asked, puppy dog eyes in full-on empathy mode.

Dean barely disguised a disgusted eye roll.

Rosa ran a hand across her brow, once more fussing at a loose lock of hair. "These people," she said slowly. "They're my neighbors, my friends. People I've known for years. Sure, some of the less acute cases are exhibiting a lot of the usual symptoms of schizophrenia – hearing voices, hallucinating, experiencing sudden mood changes or delusions. But the chronic cases we have up here... They're not just acting as if something is trying to confuse them or influence their thought processes; they're actually acting as if they're *completely different people*; often crazed, irrational people. Almost as if a totally different personality has been superimposed over their own, taking them over. Almost like they're – they're –"

"Possessed?" Dean supplied with a smile that made it clear to the doctor he was just kidding.

"Something like that," she conceded. "Sometimes they even respond to completely different names, often, as in Mr. Wang's case, speaking a language their friends and relatives swear they never learned." She looked the Winchesters over for a second before continuing. "You know he's a successful businessman? Owns a string of restaurants and grocery stores. His parents came to this country from China when he was just a baby, but now he's speaking German, insisting his name is Johann Lenz and claiming to be a Nazi officer stationed at Belsen."

"Wow," Dean whistled. "That's kinda –"

"Weird?" Rosa finished for him. "Yes it is. But do you know what's even weirder?" Sam and Dean both shook their heads. "There actually was a Nazi officer named Johann Lenz stationed at Belsen! He was killed when the camp was liberated by the British and Canadians in 1945. And he's not the only one. Some of my patients..." She trailed off for a second, shaking her head almost as if she didn't believe it herself. "Some of them give pretty accurate accounts of historical events as if they were actually *there*."

Sam and Dean glanced at one another, before Sam asked tentatively, "Could we speak to some of them? I mean – if that's okay. We don't want to cause any trouble but it would really help with our paper..."

Rosa seemed to think that over for a moment before slowly nodding. "I don't see that being a problem. Not all of our patients are violent."

"That's comforting," Dean commented.

* * * *

The middle-aged woman perched on the edge of her chair, wringing her hands as they rested nervously in her lap. Her arms and her neck were covered in nasty welts and sores – something like psoriasis or eczema, Sam noted.

"This is Joanne Millward," Dr. Benjamin introduced the woman. "She's a schoolteacher in Leicester. Lived there all her life. Fifty-four years old. Grown up son and daughter. Husband's a dentist." She patted the woman gently on the shoulder. "Michael," she said softly. "You want to tell these gentleman why you're here?"

Sam frowned slightly as the woman responded to the name, continuing to wring her hands.

"It was New Years," she said, a thick Brooklyn accent coloring her words. "I was out partying with the guys around the neighborhood." She swallowed. "Had a few beers. A few too many, I guess." She ran a shaking hand over her mouth. "Shouldn't o' been drivin'. I knew it then. But what the hell, I thought, it's only a couple o' blocks." She shook her head. "Never saw the red light at the intersection. Ran my truck right into their car. Mom, Dad, two kids. All dead because o' me. Because I was too stupid to walk and too cheap to spring for a cab."

"What year was that, Michael?" Rosa asked.

"1974," Joanne replied. "Those poor kids. Youngest was only three."

Rosa looked up at the Winchesters before patting the woman on the shoulder again. "Thanks, Michael," she said, beckoning the brothers to follow her to another table in the dayroom, where a well-built guy in his forties with a shaved head sat drawing daisies on a yellow legal pad. "Aaron Blakemore," she said, inclining her head towards the man whose arms and scalp, Sam noticed, were covered in the same sores visible on Joanne's skin. Glancing around the room, every patient here seemed to have the same ailment to some degree. "Aaron's one of Leicester's Finest," Rosa continued. "Been a cop since he was nineteen. Five citations for bravery." She gently patted the big man's shoulder. "How are you feeling today, Agnes?" she asked.

The cop looked up at her, blinking. "Fine," he said quietly. "A little better."

"No more nightmares?"

"I keep seeing her," the cop muttered.

"Sarah?"

Aaron nodded. "When they put the noose around her neck." He looked up at Rosa then, tears in his eyes. "Why didn't I stop it? Why didn't I tell them it was me that was the witch, not my little sister!"

"You weren't a witch, Agnes."

"No more than she was," he countered. "I let them take her – told the pastor she was a witch so they wouldn't hang *me*! I denounced my sister as a witch in front of the entire congregation of Salem!" The big man hung his head. "Because I was afraid. May God have mercy upon me," he whispered. "Me and my cowardice. She hanged for *me*, mistress. She hanged for me..."

Rosa patted the big cop's shoulder again as he collapsed into sobs, turning a desperate gaze on the Winchesters as she did so. "We checked out the names," she said slowly. "The people Aaron can describe – the events he claims to have seen. They all happened during the Salem Witch Trials, just as he tells it."

Sam regarded Aaron's broad shoulders, wracked with sobs. "And the sores?"

“Some form of psoriasis,” Rosa explained. “Can’t explain that any more than we can explain the schizophrenia.” She glanced down at Aaron. “Or whatever the hell this is.”

“Doc,” Dean said slowly. “All of these patients –” he gestured around the room. “They all have stories to tell like this?”

Rosa nodded. “Yes. And historically speaking they all seem to check out.” She stepped forward, raising her chin as if trying to emphasize the importance of what she was about to say next. “Every one of these people,” she said, taking in the room with one glance. “Every one of them seems to be recalling the life of someone who died years ago. Every single one of them.”

* * * *

Shirley’s Rest Stop Inn Leicester, MA

“So the blood and the sores,” Dean said, working a well-worn key into the lock of room number seven at Shirley’s Rest Stop Inn and shoving the door open with his shoulder. “That’s all straight out of Revelations, right? Signs of the End of Days?”

Sam nodded, following his brother into the room and dumping his duffel on the nearest bed. “Yeah, pretty much,” he confirmed, sitting down heavily and pulling off his sneakers. “The sores were the first blight on those who bore the mark of the Beast –”

“I dunno, I didn’t see no 666 tattooed on Vic Mackey’s head back there.”

“Satan worshippers, Dean,” Sam explained. “In the Bible they were the ones who were afflicted with sores and boils.”

Dean made a face. “And that’s when the seas turned to blood, right?” he hazarded. “Then the rivers?”

Sam nodded. “Then great heat before total darkness. Like the man said: Apocalypse Now.”

“Man, I got a really bad feeling about this one,” Dean muttered, slumping down on the bed next to Sam.

“It’s not the End of Days, Dean,” Sam said with a degree of certainty that surprised even him. “It’s someone who knows their Bible, someone who knows which symbolic buttons to push.”

“And those people back in the psych ward?” Dean countered. “Who the hell was pushing *their* buttons? I mean – the Salem Witch Trials? Seriously?”

Sam ran a weary hand over his face and through his hair. “Okay, I agree, this is weird even on the Winchester scale of weirdness,” he said. He sighed heavily. “Look, I’m gonna hit the shower. Maybe we get a good night’s sleep it’ll all make sense in the morning.”

Dean flopped back on the bed. “Dude, when did our lives *ever* make sense in the morning?”

* * * *

Clouds of billowing steam followed in Sam’s wake as he finally stepped out of the bathroom, feeling slightly guilty for taking all the hot water, but considering it payback for all the times growing up he’d had to wait for both Dean *and* Dad to clear out of the bathroom before he could take his turn.

His guilt lessened still further when his gaze fell on his brother, who appeared to have collapsed exactly where Sam had left him, still-booted feet sticking out over the edge of the mattress, snoring softly, one arm thrown over his eyes.

Well at least he wouldn’t be wanting any hot water.

Sam briefly considered removing Dean's boots, but fraternal responsibility only went so far, and instead he carefully untangled Dean's wrist from the strap of his duffle and removed it to the other bed, pulling out a clean t-shirt and wondering whether Dean had done that on purpose: His big brother always had insisted on the bed nearest the door.

Yanking the t-shirt over his head, he glanced back at Dean, shook his head and sighed heavily, before proceeding to remove his older brother's footwear. Dean never even stirred, which was a good thing because Sam was sure, had he woken, he would have insisted Sam was chick-flicking him, called him "Samantha" and then berated him for using all the hot water.

That little task complete, Sam barely had the energy to shift his duffle to the floor before he himself collapsed onto the other bed, seemingly asleep before his head even hit the pillow.

And yet, he couldn't be sleeping because someone was talking to him.

He wanted to sit up, to glance over at Dean and ask him why he was disturbing his sleep with his chatter, but he couldn't move and deep down inside of him he knew he wasn't hearing Dean's voice.

"You have to leave."

It was a woman's voice, knife-edged and icy cold, insistent and persuasive.

"No I don't," Sam heard himself say, although he knew his lips weren't moving. "I was here first."

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law, honey," the voice insisted. "I came, I saw, I wanted your body. You probably get that a lot, huh?"

Sam didn't answer.

"Don't take advantage of it as much as that brother of yours, I'll bet. He's cute and all, but me, I like taller men."

"That's nice for you." There was an indulgent smile in Sam's voice that his brain really wasn't feeling. "Now are you going to leave me alone and let me sleep in peace?"

"Oh I don't think so, honeybunch. I been looking all day, and I finally found a model I want to take out for more than just a test drive. So here I am. And you're in my body. Time for you to be gone."

Somewhere in Sam's muddled mind he wondered whether this was what it felt like to be possessed by a demon. Was this a demon? "This is *my* body," he insisted stubbornly. "Time for *you* to be gone, I think."

"Baby, don't make me hurt you. We can do this amicably, right? It's all really simple. I want this body and I don't intend sharing. So you need to vacate the premises before I call in the repo men. They don't take kindly to squatters."

Wow, Sam found himself thinking, this was one obnoxious dream-demon. Mentally, he shrugged. He'd had weirder dreams. Bloodier dreams. Fire and ash and *Why, Sam?* dreams. Compared to those, this was just annoyingly vivid.

"Look, ma'am," he said in his most politely patronizing tone of voice. "I'm flattered you think I'd make a nice vessel for someone such as yourself, really I am. But, besides the whole gender confusion thing you'd be stepping into, I'm really not ready to let you have my body right now. I'm kind of attached to it. You know, if you'd asked me a couple of weeks ago when my hand was all busted up, I might have considered your offer, but for right now, I really think you need to take a hike. With respect."

"You call that respectful?"

"No, not really. I guess I've been spending too much time with my brother. He's not really into social pleasantries."

"You can't win this, boy. I'm stronger than you." The voice had changed slightly, subtly. Had even more of a frosty edge to it.

"No you're not. You're just annoying. I get death visions and was touched by a demon when I was a baby. You really want to get into a pissing contest with me?"

"You'll regret this –"

“Oh, I don’t think I will.”
“We’ll take something more valuable –”
“Sorry, I left my Rolex and my stock portfolio at the summer house in the Hamptons. But you’re welcome to my dirty socks if you’d like.”
“You don’t want to defy me –”
“Yeah, actually you know what? I really think I do. Now get lost will ya? I’m trying to sleep.”

* * * *

Sam woke with a start, sitting bolt upright and wondering what the hell he’d just been dreaming about.
He *had* been dreaming, right?
Weird voice in his head, not wanting to share... That had been some vivid dream.
We’ll take something more valuable...
Wow, he really released his Inner Dean when he was dreaming, he marveled briefly. He’d sure kicked that skanky demon’s ass. Not exactly rapier wit, but he’d certainly told her where the hell to get off.
We’ll take something more valuable...
“Dean?” Sam flailed for the bedside light between the two beds, the other hand rubbing sleep out of his eyes. “Dean, wake up! I just had the weirdest dream...”
He blinked as the light snapped on, squinting at the lurid green digital clock on the nightstand showing 4.24am.
“Dean...?”
His eyes finally adjusting to the light, Sam managed to focus on the bed next to his, fully expecting to see his brother still laid flat out and fully clothed on top of the threadbare burgundy comforter.
“Dean?”
He blinked a few more times, sat up a little straighter.
We’ll take something more valuable...
“Dean!”
The bed was empty.
“Dean!”
Okay, don’t panic, Sam told himself, leaping out of bed and nearly wrenching the bathroom door off its hinges in an effort to find his missing brother.
“Dean!”
Nope, not in there. *Think, Sam...*
Keys. Impala keys. *He never goes anywhere without that car...*
Sam stopped abruptly as his eyes lit on the key ring still sitting on top of the slightly lop-sided wooden dresser.
We’ll take something more valuable...
No. No, that had just been a dream. Sam had been dreaming. No one had said those words to him. No one had warned him that...that...
“Dean!”
Sam threw open the motel room door, insensible to the early morning chill of the parking lot, the other residents who may have been spying out of grimy windows to see what all the noise was about, or the fact that he was only wearing his underwear.
The Impala stared back at him silently.
No. No, this wasn’t happening.
He turned, slamming the door closed again and grabbing his jeans.
Haris couldn’t possess Dean before. The amulet wouldn’t let him. So if this was demons...
But what if it wasn’t? What if this wasn’t demons and the thing that had been trying to get into Sam’s head had... *Taken something more valuable?*

Struggling into a shirt and his jacket, Sam reached down for his sneakers, his hand brushing against Dean's boots, still lined up neatly where Sam had left them last night, under the chair by the door which...

Sam just stood, numbly looking at his brother's jacket draped over the back of the chair.

It was pretty chilly out and Dean didn't have any shoes...

Okay, enough! Snap out of it, Sam! They did something to him and you're the only one who can find him!

Sam yanked on his sneakers before grabbing one of the duffels and beginning to stuff it with everything from Dean's sawed-off Remington to a flask of holy water, silver bullets to rock salt rounds, a Bible to Dad's journal.

Snatching up the keys to the Impala, Sam grabbed Dean's jacket and boots before stepping out into the deserted parking lot, slamming the motel room door shut behind him so hard the window rattled. Stalking over to the waiting Chevy, he yanked open the door and slid purposefully into the driver's seat. Then he just sat there for a second, staring out of the windshield and breathing heavily.

C'mon, Sammy, get a grip! Dean's voice echoed in his head.

"Dammit," he swore softly.

Gunning the engine, he quickly snapped off the CD player as it began to blare out Motorhead's *The Ace of Spades*, trying not to think about how Dean always insisted on screaming along at the top of his lungs, head thrown back in a self-proclaimed "homage to Lemmy."

Shoving the car into gear, he screeched out of the parking lot without the first idea of where he was going or what he would do when he got there, only one thought stuck on perpetual repeat in his brain.

Gotta find Dean...

He'd slung Dean's boots and jacket onto the passenger seat next to him and was doing his damndest not to keep looking at them, because looking left him hoping that the next time he looked Dean would be sitting there bitching about Sam ruining the Impala's transmission.

Dean's not there, he reminded himself. *But he will be soon. He will be...*

Arriving at an intersection, Sam wrenched the steering wheel, slewing the Chevy to the left and straight through a red light as he hurtled towards the road to Worcester. It wasn't even 5 a.m. and Sam figured all the traffic cops would be sitting in some coffee shop eating donuts. Or whatever cops who weren't in *The Simpsons* did at this unearthly time of the morning.

Slamming his foot down even harder against the accelerator, Sam flew down the highway so fast he wouldn't have been surprised if he had arrived at Saint Vincent's Hospital before he set out, having broken through the time-space continuum somewhere outside of Leicester.

He wasn't entirely sure why he'd decided the hospital should be his first port of call in his search for his brother. Maybe he was secretly hoping there were some cops in the area and they'd found Dean wandering along the highway in bare feet and instantly decided he was a whack job who needed sectioning.

Sam knew he was unlikely to get that lucky, but he at least figured if Dean wasn't at the hospital, then Rosa might be able to give him some clue as to where he should start looking.

Of course, he also doubted Rosa would be at work at 5 a.m., but there was no way he was sitting around his motel room counting ceiling tiles and waiting for office hours to roll around while his brother was out there somewhere; maybe not himself, not in control of his actions. Alone. Barefoot and without a jacket.

Sam glanced once again at the passenger seat, clamping his lips together and pressing even harder against the accelerator.

Saint Vincent Hospital

5.30 a.m.

Pale red light was beginning to color the sky a delicate pink by the time Sam reached the hospital parking lot, which seemed pretty deserted, even for this ungodly hour. Hospital staff were shift-workers after all, and even without visitor traffic, he would have expected the lot to be fairly busy.

As it was, Sam was able to pull into a space only a few yards from the main entrance, shifting the Impala into park and glancing about himself, unnerved by the lack of movement around him.

Casting his gaze toward the E.R. entrance on the far side of the building, he noted four ambulances parked empty in the emergency bays, no paramedics or hospital staff rushing around patients strapped to gurneys or in wheelchairs; no cop cars ejecting drunks whose heads had come into sudden and unfortunate contact with the gutter; no cabs dropping off screaming women in imminent danger of giving birth right there on the asphalt.

Overall, the general atmosphere was...eerie.

Unlike Dean, Sam had never really hunted alone, and while he had no evidence to suggest anything was amiss at the hospital, his hunter's instincts were currently screaming at him that he shouldn't go in there, not without backup.

Still, with no backup forthcoming and his brother God knows where, Sam didn't have a whole lot of options.

Drawing in a breath, he swung himself out of the Impala and made purposefully toward the glass lobby doors, which slid noiselessly aside to admit him into the hospital.

Stepping over the threshold, he felt a chill run down his spine.

The lobby was deserted.

Not one patient, not one visitor sat on the rigid plastic chairs in the waiting area; no clerks or nursing staff buzzed around the front desk, where the computers were still switched on and a half-eaten Danish rested atop a stack of manila folders; the elevators all stood empty, doors gaping open and no lights flashing above to indicate they had been summoned to another floor.

Sam swallowed. "Hello?" he called out hesitantly, taking a further step toward the abandoned front desk.

The only response he received was the low hum of air conditioning units and the lazy motion of screensavers.

Unsure what to do next – call the cops or just get as far away from here as he possibly could – Sam finally decided on a third course of action.

Swallowing again and wishing he'd brought his Glock with him now that it transpired hospital security wasn't something he needed to concern himself with, he strode decisively toward the elevator bank. As he boarded one of the cars, he silently prayed that this was all some incredibly well-executed evacuation drill and the elevator doors would open onto a comfortably bustling psych ward.

Hell, he would even have been happy to see Nurse Schwarzenegger scowling at him over her glasses right about then.

But it was not to be, the elevator doors opening only to reveal another floor as deserted and desolate as the lobby.

Inching cautiously along the hallway, the flat of his left hand pressed against the cold gray wall, the first thing Sam noticed was that the entrance to the psych ward's secure dayroom was no longer barred, the gateway hanging open at a crazy angle from only one hinge still secured at the top.

Making his way slowly into the dayroom, he ran his gaze over upturned tables and broken chairs, several drugs carts piled atop one another in the center of the room like some whacky avant-garde sculpture.

"H-hello?" he said quietly, clearing his throat before managing to repeat the greeting a little louder. "Anyone here?"

With no answers in the affirmative forthcoming, Sam crossed the dayroom and made for a doorway that had been securely locked on his and Dean's previous visit but now hung open, the metal door almost twisted right out of its frame.

Hesitantly entering the psych ward's secure accommodation, Sam shuddered when he realized the door to each small room branching off the main hallway was hanging open, the occupants long gone, beds unmade and empty, possessions strewn all over the floor.

This was bad.

This was incredibly bad.

He backed up a few steps before making to turn back toward the dayroom, sucking in a sharp breath when a dark shape suddenly flung itself at him from one of the rooms he'd already passed.

Caught off guard, he was knocked backwards, hitting the wall with a thud as he instinctively brought up his arms to protect his head from whatever was attacking him, steeling himself for the inevitable punch, kick, bite or recurrent strangulation that generally accompanied occurrences such as these.

When nothing happened after several seconds of breathless waiting, he cautiously lowered his arms, only to find himself eyeball to eyeball with a disheveled Doctor Benjamin.

"Mister? Mister, can you help me?"

Her hair hung wildly around her shoulders, crisp white lab coat gone completely, eyes sunken and hollow and staring at him as if he were the last lifeboat on the Titanic.

"Doctor – Rosa?" Sam straightened, frowning at the young woman, whose pretty face was contorted into a look of confused agony. "Are you –" he reached out a hand toward her, but she lurched back, covering her head with her arms, much as Sam had done moments earlier.

"Please, mister, I'm sorry!" she burst out, cowering away from him. "I never meant to do it! I never! I never saw the baby..."

Sam frowned at her, hands held out at shoulder height to prove he had no intention of hurting her. "Rosa?" he said quietly, perplexed by the doctor's sudden change in demeanor. Not to mention her sudden change of accent. He couldn't quite place it, but he was inexplicably reminded of Dick Van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*.

The woman looked up at him cautiously, slowly lowering her arms away from her face. "I never saw no baby, mister, I swear!"

Sam swallowed, deciding to play a hunch. "What's your name?" he asked neutrally.

Rosa stiffened, back suddenly ramrod straight, shoulders back, eyes front, and Sam was uncomfortably reminded of a twelve-year-old Dean standing to attention in front of their father. "Private Frederick Clarke, sir," the doctor snapped out smartly. "His Majesty's 64th Regiment."

Sam nodded. "How did you get here, Private?"

Rosa's eyes flickered uncertainly. "Lost the rest of me regiment, sir," she said, a trace of embarrassment in her confused voice. "Can't find 'em nowhere, sir. Looked everywhere I did." Her eyes were suddenly downcast, shoulders drooping again.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Sam asked gently.

Rosa seemed to shrink in on herself. "Boston, sir. Fighting the rebels, sir. The Patriots. And I – I –" She broke off, suddenly burying her head in her hands. "Didn't see no baby. Musket just went off in me hand. Didn't mean..."

Sam put a gentle hand on the young woman's shoulder, and although she flinched slightly, she didn't pull away. "Is that when you lost your regiment, Private?"

Rosa seemed to ponder that. "Terrible pain in me back, sir. Like – like nothing I ever felt before. And then – then I was – I was somewhere else. Alone. Not here. And

there was –” Her eyes widened, absolute terror suddenly reflected in her dark irises. “Fire!” she cried out. “There was fire, sir! Burning. Pain beyond imagining.” She pulled away from him again, backing up against the corridor wall and sliding down, curling herself into a ball on the floor, her head buried against her knees. “Fire. Terrible. Brimstone. Brimstone...” She began to rock slowly backwards and forwards, shaking her head from side to side and repeating the words, “Never saw the baby. Never saw the baby...” over and over.

Sam sighed. He wasn’t getting anything else out of Doctor Benjamin right now, and she sure as hell wasn’t going to be any help in finding Dean. The best thing he could do for her would be to track Dean down, figure out what the hell was doing this to her town and finish it before there was no town left for them to save.

Sam gently patted her shoulder before backing slowly away from her in the direction of the dayroom. “I’ll get help for you,” he promised. “I swear, you won’t be alone for long.”

“Never meant to kill the baby, sir. Didn’t see it...”

* * * *

Sam was exceeding the speed limit.

Just a little bit.

Okay, Sam was way exceeding the speed limit.

He justified his blatant disregard for highway safety with the fact he hadn’t seen a single vehicle the entire trip from Worcester to Leicester and that his brother could be in some kind of mortal danger. If some deputy with a radar gun tried to pull him over, then he figured they deserved the humiliation that would undoubtedly follow when they found themselves eating the Impala’s dust.

Of course, if he wrapped the aforementioned Impala around a tree in his bid to escape local law enforcement, he was pretty sure Dean would be less than pleased.

It was just after 7 a.m. now, and he should have been seeing signs of life as he crossed into Leicester. But there was no one; no early morning joggers or dog walkers; no delivery vans or kids on bikes delivering the morning paper; no cops, no buses, no cabs. No nothing.

As he neared the town center he began to realize why.

They were here.

All of them.

It was almost like a scene out of one of those cheesy ’70s disaster flicks with Chuck Heston or Doug McClure. There were people everywhere – fighting, looting, running from something. Although Sam wasn’t convinced they knew from what, constantly glancing over their shoulders as they stumbled onward, no idea where they were going, picking their way through abandoned vehicles, torn down billboards, glass littering the sidewalks from smashed store windows.

A cacophony of intruder alarms almost drowned out the wailing and the screaming, and Sam had to swerve almost onto the sidewalk to avoid a man brandishing what looked like a metal fence post stumbling down the middle of the road, yelling in Russian as he waved his makeshift weapon toward the heavens.

Taking a breath, Sam briefly considered what Dean would do to him if he left the Impala here and something happened to it. But, figuring he could live with whatever punishment Dean saw fit to dish out, as long as he had Dean back to dish it, he cautiously exited the big Chevy, his Glock gripped firmly in his right hand and his brother’s silver Colt tucked in at the small of his back.

Slowly edging his way down the main road into town, it was becoming all too clear to Sam the place was a total disaster area.

And that that had been no dream he’d had last night.

It seemed the locals had all had their own nocturnal visitations, but they obviously hadn’t been able to fight off – whatever it was – the way Sam had.

And neither had Dean.

Once again, his mind tracked back to the way he had “reflected” Alyssa’s memory-stealing powers back onto her; the way he had “reflected” the spell the shaman had cast to create the tupilaq back in Canada. Maybe he had done something similar to the – whatever it was – that had tried to take possession of him last night?

Dean, apparently, had not been so fortunate.

Sam checked himself mentally, refusing to give in to the wave of guilt that always came crashing down over him whenever he considered his dubious “gifts.” After all, it wasn’t *his* fault he’d been able to fight this thing off when the rest of the town couldn’t. It wasn’t *his* fault these other people – and Dean specifically – hadn’t been so lucky. They’d been defenseless. So maybe even though most of the time he didn’t feel particularly “gifted,” this actually *was* a gift – because he was still in control of his faculties, still able to save his brother from whatever currently had a hold on him.

And he *would* save Dean. Of that he had no doubt.

Or at least, he had no room for doubt.

Dean was counting on him, and so was the rest of this town. Time to step up and be a hero. Like Dad. Like Dean. Not the sub always waiting in the dugout for his one chance at glory.

Of course, this was never about glory for Sam. *Saving people, hunting things...* Saving Dean. That was all that mattered to him right now, all he could think about.

Wrapped up in his own considerable angst, he almost collided headlong with a young woman he vaguely recognized as the waitress from the diner where he and Dean had eaten the night before. Belinda? Bonnie?

“Brenda.” He caught hold of the young woman’s shoulders and she glanced up at him, sparkling blue eyes now dull and desperate, devoid of any spark of recognition. Which was surprising, considering she’s made several rather – uh – *forward* suggestions to both Sam and Dean during the course of their meal, and had they not both been so exhausted, Sam was pretty sure Dean at least might have taken her up on a couple of them.

“Brenda, right?” Sam repeated the name, shaking her slightly. “Waitress at the diner down the street?”

The girl seemed to straighten then, righteous indignation finally igniting some fire in her eyes. “Young man,” she said, a pronounced southern cadence in her accent that definitely hadn’t been there last night. “I am certainly no waitress! I’ll have you know my husband owns the largest cotton plantation in all of Georgia!”

Sam frowned. “Your –?”

“Been in the family for generations,” Brenda continued haughtily. “Renowned throughout the country! Why, we have over a hundred Negroes working our land! My husband paid a small fortune importing them from Africa or wherever it is they come from...” She shook her head, eyes suddenly downcast. “Although if this Lincoln fellow has his way, well I honestly don’t know what will happen. *Emancipation* indeed.” She said the word as if it left a bitter aftertaste on her tongue. “For Negroes! Did you ever hear of such a ridiculous thing?”

Sam balked slightly. “Wait,” he stopped her with a wave of his hand, ducking as something flew over his head and smashed into the streetlight on the corner of the block. He never even turned around to assess the damage, continuing to stare at the person formerly known as Brenda in complete horror. “Let me get this straight,” he managed, when he once again had control of his vocal cords. “Your husband’s a slave owner?”

Brenda returned Sam’s horrified gaze guilelessly, as if owning slaves was the most normal thing in the world. “Well of course he is!” she burst out, blinking in a way that suggested naive ignorance rather than malevolence. “Who else would tend our crop if not for the Negroes?”

Sam did a reasonable impersonation of a goldfish, opening and closing his mouth several times before finally managing to splutter out, "But you – you can't own another person –!"

The girl giggled merrily. "Oh, but they're not *people*, silly!"

Sam just stared at her mutely, the rational side of his brain telling him whoever was currently borrowing Brenda's body was a product of her time, her society and her education. The emotional side of his brain, however, was struggling to resist the urge to shake some sense into her.

Finally deciding he really didn't have the time or the energy to get into an argument on the immorality of slavery with a twenty-year-old waitress who believed herself an early nineteenth century plantation owner's wife, Sam just shook his head and sighed. "Listen, Brenda," he began, figuring from the look on her face that right now she didn't take too kindly to being addressed by that name. "I gotta find my brother. I don't guess you've seen him, huh? The guy who was with me in the diner last night? Y'know, yay big, short hair, loud mouth and kinda – uh – pretty in a guy sort of way?" Brenda continued to stare at him vacantly, and he wondered whether he was suddenly speaking in Swahili. "You were pretty much trying to get in his pants all evening," he added helpfully.

The angry slap to the face kind of took Sam by surprise just a little bit, and when Brenda turned on her heel and began to stalk away, squeaking, "Young man, if you're suggesting what I *think* you're suggesting... Well, I am *not* that kind of woman!" followed by a string of affronted mutterings about never having been so offended in her entire life and having her attorney sue Sam for slander, Sam figured letting her go would probably be for the best; she wasn't going to be any more help in finding Dean than Dr. Benjamin had been. And right now, that was pretty much all that mattered to him.

Continuing on into the town center, it wasn't long before Sam stumbled across another familiar face, this time the weedy teenaged motel clerk who had checked them into their room last night without once taking his eyes off the TV balanced on the corner of the front desk. He was about five feet five, weighed about a hundred and thirty pounds soaking wet and was utterly convinced he was an Irish navy building a railway tunnel in nineteenth century England when it collapsed in on him, burying him alive. He'd then burst forth into a litany of Hail Marys as he confessed to having slept with his brother's wife, and, God forgive him, he never meant for it to happen.

Sam, although once again disappointed in his quest to find someone who might lead him to Dean, was beginning to put together a pattern, something all of these people from the past had in common: They were mostly horrible human beings. Killers, adulterers, thieves and liars almost to a man. Or woman. Or woman who thought she was a man.

But they weren't demons.

Rounding a corner, he almost tripped over a stocky figure curled into a ball on the sidewalk, head on his knees as he rocked back and forth, much as Sam had last seen Rosa.

"Malik?"

Sam knelt down next to the engineer, one gentle hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Malik? You hear me?"

Malik didn't even seem to register his presence, mumbling jumbled words under his breath in a language Sam couldn't identify.

So far this morning, Sam had seen countless people like Malik dotted around Leicester's streets, islands of stillness in the midst of chaos, all in some state of deep shock or trauma, pressed into doorways or curled up behind dumpsters, in the grip of fear so terrifying, so bone-deep that it was all they could do just to breathe.

Sam had visited a couple of VA hospitals with his dad when he was younger, when John had been looking up old buddies from the Corps. So he recognized Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder when he saw it.

These people had been through something truly horrifying, witnessed something beyond their ability to process it, to deal with it. Something terrible. Something Hellish.

Or at least, they believed they had.

Sam continued to hold on to Malik's shoulder as the engineer's incoherent mumblings were gradually replaced by silent sobs, the sidewalk beginning to send a chill up through his knees as he gazed around the stricken town, not entirely sure what to do next.

He didn't know what this was, what was afflicting these people, but if the same thing had taken Dean then he needed to find his brother. Right now.

But where to look?

His eyes drifted down to Malik's ID card, still clipped to his jacket, a little askew but clearly showing the logo of the local utilities company, a flowing river forming the initials MPW – Massachusetts Power and Water.

And then it hit him.

The river.

The bloody river.

That's where the people had been congregating before this happened, where some of the more acutely affected residents of Leicester had said goodbye to the world.

The consciousness that had tried to take control of Sam last night hadn't seemed desperate, just determined, but Sam had no way of knowing whether the same entity had taken his brother. "*We'll take something more valuable,*" she'd said, implying she – it – was but one of many. And she had been a whole lot more lucid than the people Sam saw all around him, wandering around like lost souls looking for pieces of their lives to pick back up.

Patting Malik's shoulder again, Sam murmured, "I'll get you some help, man, I swear," before slowly rising to his feet, pulling the young man up with him. The engineer didn't resist, merely looked at Sam with tear-filled eyes and nodded slowly.

Sam swallowed. He'd been wandering the streets of this town for a good few hours now – the sun was already high in the sky – and he still had no clue where to find Dean or whether he was in an even worse shape than Malik.

So what could it hurt to check out the river?

His stomach lurched slightly as he pondered that, the people who had thrown themselves into the water not knowing what they were doing; the corpses rising bloated and lifeless to the bloody surface days later.

He had to find Dean. Before it was too late.

Pulling Malik behind him, he started to run.

River Quabaug Outside Leicester, MA

Sam slewed the Impala into the same graveled parking lot Dean *almost* parked in the day before, opening the door before he'd even shut off the engine.

Glancing at Malik, who was curled in on himself on the passenger seat, Sam exited the Chevy and carried out a brief visual recon of the area, noting how deserted it seemed compared to yesterday. Only one lone figure dressed all in black was anywhere within Sam's field of vision, standing by the edge of the river slightly downstream from his position.

Sam blew out a frustrated breath when he realized it wasn't Dean, running a hand through his hair as he scanned the area for any further signs of life.

The water was still bloody, but it looked as if yesterday's glut of corpses had been removed overnight, and Sam was about to turn back to the Impala when the guy further down the riverbank suddenly began to wade into the crimson water.

"Hey!" Fearing another attempted suicide, Sam sprinted toward the man, slowing as he drew level with him. "Sir! Just – just come back up onto the bank! I can help you –!"

"Only God can help me," the man said calmly, not turning back as he continued to wade out into the river. "Only God can help all of us."

Sam recognized the determined voice as that of Elijah Warriner, the preacher he and Dean had seen here yesterday. "Sir –"

Sam made a move toward the edge of the water, but Warriner had stopped his forward movement, the bloody currents only reaching up to his chest.

"Dear Lord," the man said, raising his head and his hands toward the heavens. "With this water, wash away my sins. Make me clean, make me innocent. Free me from my past transgressions. Let your waters cleanse me, oh Lord! Wash away my sin with your grace and let your waters run as pure as the heart that beats within this chest!"

Sam stood watching as the preacher continued his prayer, relaxing slightly once he realized Warriner wasn't about to kill himself, but was instead attempting some kind of self-baptism. Sam wasn't sure whether baptism in blood could ever be a good thing, but right now maybe the preacher's faith was all the town and its inhabitants had going for it.

His attention wandered further downstream, where the waters became choppier as they headed off into the rapids which in turn led to a small waterfall known locally as Devil's Gorge. The current was faster flowing once it passed beneath the rusty bridge upstream, but Sam figured the preacher would be safe between the two as long as he stuck to the shallows.

The sound of a car pulling up behind him alerted Sam to the arrival of a dirty brown Ford pickup that halted with a jerk and a spray of gravel before a middle-aged couple jumped out and headed straight for the riverbank nearest the preacher's position, passing Sam by as if he wasn't even there.

He began to turn toward the couple when the muted midday sunlight glinting off something shiny up on the bridge suddenly caught his attention. Squinting, he felt himself compelled to move toward the shiny object, his footsteps speeding up to match the increasing rhythm of his heart as he realized the thing up on the bridge glinting at him was attached to a figure moving toward the center of the span. Like the person was wearing a necklace. Or an amulet.

"Dean?"

He said the name slowly, uncertainly, pace quickening to a trot as the figure on the bridge stopped dead center and began to climb the rickety-looking safety railing.

"Dean!"

Sam broke into a run, eyes never straying from the figure on the bridge; the figure straddling the railing; the figure about to jump.

"Dean!"

Sam sprinted to the bridge's footings, looking up into his brother's vacant eyes as the older Winchester swayed slightly in the wind beginning to pick up along the river.

"Dean! Don't!" Sam yelled, feet pounding against the bridge's metal footplates as he raced toward his brother's position, skidding to an abrupt halt six feet away from him as Dean suddenly raised a 9mm Beretta and aimed it at his little brother's head.

"Stay away!"

Sam raised both hands in a gesture of surrender, visually checking Dean over for injuries as he balanced precariously atop the railing, the gun trembling in his hand. Aside from the paleness of his face and the wild terror in his eyes, he seemed to be in one piece.

Although he didn't have any shoes on his feet.

“Dean,” Sam said softly, voice artificially calm. “Dean, it’s okay. Just come down from there. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Dean stared at him unblinkingly, a tiny frown creasing between his eyebrows as the Beretta continued to tremble. “Don’t!” he said, a pleading quality to his voice Sam didn’t ever remember hearing before. “Please! The – the water. I have to – I have to – to put out the fire. I have to put out the fire.”

Sam swallowed, eyes never leaving his brother’s. “There’s no fire, Dean,” he assured him softly, resisting the urge to rush over and grab hold of his brother for fear of causing him to lose his balance and fall into the fast-flowing water below. “There’s no fire. Come back over here and let me help you.”

As if in response, Dean swung his other leg over the railing until he was balanced precariously on the opposite side of the barrier, Sam lurching forward a step before Dean once again brought the automatic to bear in his direction. “Dean –”

“Have to get away from the fire,” Dean insisted, his voice sounding odd, somehow not his own, as if his throat was raw and scratchy from breathing in smoke.

“Dean, nothing’s on fire, it’s okay –”

“Don’t let it get me! Please!”

“Dean –” Dean never talked about the fire that had taken their mother, and Sam couldn’t help wondering whether whatever had taken control of Dean’s body had somehow released the childhood trauma locked up in his brain. “The fire’s not here. It’s not going to hurt you –”

“I’m not going back.” Dean squeezed his eyes closed, the barrel of the Beretta pressed against his temple. “You can’t make me go back there!”

“Dean –” Sam made another abortive lurch toward him, but Dean once again brought the gun back up in his direction.

“You can’t make me go back!” he insisted. “It’s like – like drowning. But – but in fire. Drowning in fire. And – and you can’t breathe and you can’t move and you can’t pull yourself out because it’s *everywhere* and it’s always and forever and there’s never ever any end to it...” He trailed off, rubbing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, the Beretta dangerously close to his head. “I can’t go back there,” he whispered at length. “I can’t. Please don’t make me go back...”

“Dean...” It slowly dawned on Sam Dean wasn’t talking about Kansas. In fact, Sam didn’t think it was Dean doing the talking at all.

“Please,” Dean’s voice broke on the single syllable. “I can’t go back. The fire – the – the screaming. The noise of it. The heat of it. Fire and brimstone, just like they warned us. And – and the Beast. Always there. Always watching. Always *hurting*... I can’t –” His hand trembled, the Beretta dropping to his side as he ran his left hand over his face. “No more. I can’t. I can’t. No more. Please don’t let them take me back there! Hellfire and brimstone and – and *demons*. I never meant – I didn’t think – I didn’t think it was *real*. I didn’t think they’d really *send* me there! After. After I – when I –” He looked at Sam suddenly, blinking tears out of his eyes. “When I died.”

“Dean –”

“Please don’t send me back there.”

“Dean.” Sam took a cautious step forward, hands still raised placatingly. “Dean, that’s not you. You’ve not been there. It’s the thing inside you! You have to fight it! Understand? You have to fight it, Dean!”

Dean blinked at him, the gun lowered a few more inches. “I can’t go back –”

“Dean, whoever you think you are right now, that’s not you! Something – someone – has taken control of you! Dean, listen to me –”

“Who are you?”

It was Sam’s turn to blink. “It’s me, Dean,” he said after a second’s pause to collect himself. “It’s Sam. Your brother, Sam. Sammy.” He smiled awkwardly, and Dean just continued to gaze at him. “And you’re Dean. Dean John Winchester. You were born in Lawrence, Kansas, January 24th 1979. Your dad’s name is John. Your



mom was called Mary. And I'm your geeky kid brother, right? Sam. You remember me, Dean? Huh?"

Dean continued to stare at him, brow creasing slightly. "She had – long blonde hair..." he stammered uncertainly.

"Yes! Yes!" Sam agreed enthusiastically. "Mom! You remember Mom!"

Dean frowned again. "I remember fire."

Sam bit his lip. "It's okay," he repeated, although he wasn't entirely sure he meant it this time. "It's okay, Dean."

Dean brought the Beretta back up as he once again rubbed at his temple with his right hand, seemingly oblivious to the weapon now held slackly between trembling fingers as a look of stark confusion darkened his features. "Fire and brimstone," he mumbled. "Fire and *demons*..."

"Dean –"

"Take your brother outside –"

Sam's breath hitched in his throat as his brother's eyes slowly rose to meet his own.

"Sammy?"

The recognition rippled across Dean's face for the briefest of instants, the 9mm dropping heavily to his side while with his left hand his grip increased on the rusty railing, knuckles whitening as Sam pressed home his advantage, making a swift and sudden lunge for Dean's wrist.

In that split second, however, something altered in Dean's expression, breaking apart and reforming into the fearful look of a cornered animal, and Dean once again brought the Beretta up to shoulder height and pointed it straight at his baby brother. "No! Have to put out the fire –"

Unable to slow his forward momentum despite the weapon now aimed squarely between his eyes, Sam only registered the sharp crack of a gunshot as he crashed headlong into the railing, all the air driven from his body as pain lanced out from the point of impact with the rusty metal and his arm collided with Dean's hand, knocking the Beretta from his grip and sending it tumbling into the waters below them.

The decaying barrier groaned ominously as Sam's powerful frame slammed into already weakened support struts, the railing finally giving out and crumbling into little more than metallic dust as Sam fell through, barreling into his brother.

Sam's eyes met Dean's as he felt himself briefly suspended, time seeming to stop as gravity paused before reasserting its inevitable hold.

Then he was falling, one hand clutching Dean's t-shirt at the shoulder, the other encircling his brother's wrist as the brackish waters of the bloody River Quabaug rose up to meet them, claiming them with icy fingers as it pulled them down into the churning darkness below...

* * * *

Sam saw nothing when he opened his eyes. Just an all-consuming darkness like a physical barrier between himself and the rest of the world, crushing him, filtering out all the sunlight so that all he was left with was himself and this empty blackness, the only sound the insistent rush of water and his own ragged breathing.

He was wet and he was cold and as his eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness he could make out tree branches swaying slightly above him, could turn his head just enough to discern the waters of the River Quabaug flowing swiftly to his left.

River.

Water.

Bridge.

"Dean!"

He sat bolt upright. Fumbling in the grass around him in disorientation, memory flooded his brain and he realized the last sensation he had felt before he woke up

here had been that of sodden cotton slipping through his fingers as he lost his grip on his brother's shirt.

"Dean!"

Blinking in the unnatural darkness, with panicked movements he scanned the riverbank around him, his eyes finally lighting on a dark shape not eight feet away. Before he really knew what he was doing, he was crawling on his hands and knees toward it, oblivious to the slick mud beneath him and the stones biting into his palms and shins.

"Dean?"

Gripping his brother's shoulder, Sam carefully turned him over, hardly daring to breathe as he bent down to listen for any signs of life. He placed two fingers against Dean's neck, his brother's skin cold and clammy. His relief at detecting a faint but insistent pulse was short lived when he realized Dean wasn't breathing.

Tilting back Dean's head, Sam pinched his brother's nose as he bent down with the intention of attempting to administer mouth to mouth, but Dean suddenly coughed up a lungful of water, eyes snapping open and meeting Sam's with little short of a challenge sparking in their hazel depths.

"Don't even think about it, Samantha," he snapped, his voice gravelly and rough. "I know these lips are pretty damn irresistible, but there are some things even a lifetime of therapy would never be able to fix."

Sam was so happy to hear his brother's snark right then, he actually could have kissed him, but settled for slugging him on the shoulder, and in true Winchester fashion, growling, "In your dreams, pervert."

He offered Dean a hand, pulling him up into a sitting position and cradling his shoulders as he was wracked by another fit of coughing.

"What the hell...?" Dean managed to splutter. "Sammy, why do I feel like I swallowed half a river?"

"Uh," Sam managed. "We kinda fell in..."

Dean glanced down at his wet clothes. "Then why aren't we – y'know – covered in blood?"

Sam had to admit, in all the thinking-his-big-brother-was-dead-ness, that thought hadn't even occurred to him. "I don't know," he admitted, getting shakily to his feet and patting down his dripping garments.

Dean looked at him for a second, eyes suddenly snapping wide open. "Dude!" he burst out. "Did I – did I *shoot* you?"

Sam briefly checked himself over for bullet holes before shaking his head. "Good thing you're not the crack shot you think you are," he teased.

Dean frowned at him. "No way, man. If I'd meant to shoot you, I'd have shot you."

Sam didn't doubt it for a second. Slowly, he took a step closer to the river, leaning over and noting their current position – only a few feet upriver of the rapids and the waterfall that would undoubtedly have added both of them to the Quabaug's rising body count. He vaguely remembered snagging overhanging tree roots and somehow managing to haul himself and Dean to the riverbank, but beyond that the whole episode was a complete blank.

"It's water," he pronounced finally, discerning the river's current state by squinting in the only light source available – distant halogen lighting from the nearby highway.

"How the hell did that happen?" Dean asked, wiping his palm down over his face before taking in their wider surroundings. "And – y'know – I know I was out of it for a while there, but last I remember it was the middle of the day. Did I miss something?"

Illuminating his wristwatch, Sam frowned as he read the dial. "It's twelve-thirty," he informed his brother. "In the afternoon."

Dean squinted up at him, waiting for another coughing fit to pass before adding, "Either your watch stopped or someone forgot to pay the electricity bill."

Not one star was visible in the jet black heavens as Sam stared up at the sky. "Revelations," he said, slowly reaching an almost unfathomable conclusion. "The End of Days. After the plague of sores and the rivers of blood –"

"Darkness," Dean finished for him, nodding. "I remember."

Sam shifted awkwardly, taking a step toward his brother before halting a little uncertainly and finally asking, "What exactly *do* you remember?"

Dean looked up at him through lowered lashes, as if caught off guard by the question and not entirely sure how to answer.

"Dean, it's okay," Sam assured him, crouching down next to him. "The whole town's turned into –"

"Nutjobs?" Dean supplied, smiling mirthlessly. "Yeah." He shrugged his shoulders, picking at the muddy cuff of his jeans. "There was –" he broke off, as if trying to figure out a way to explain it. "There was someone else," he tried again. "In here with me." He tapped his temple.

"Yeah," Sam agreed sympathetically. "I think maybe she tried to get in my head first."

Dean frowned before shaking his head. "No man, not a *she*," he explained. "Definitely a *he*. And he was – he'd been tortured. In – in Hell." He flicked a quick glance at Sam before once more turning his attention to his sodden jeans. "I mean, he'd really *been* there, Sammy. It's – it's really *real*..."

"You – you remember Hell?" Sam asked tentatively.

Dean nodded slightly, not looking up. "Or – or *he* did, anyway. Real Old Testament stuff, man." Dean swallowed hard, and even in the dim light Sam saw him pale slightly. "Drove him nuts. I mean *seriously* nuts, Sammy. I mean this guy – he was in Hell a *long* time. Not that – not that time has any meaning there I don't think. It's just like seconds measured in more agony, more torture. And – and I – he – he couldn't – he couldn't get out. Couldn't make it stop. Until –"

"He found himself here," Sam finished for him. "Inside of you."

Dean nodded, hesitantly meeting Sam's concerned gaze.

"So maybe," Sam continued, tapping a finger to his lips. "Maybe the schizophrenia – maybe it is some kind of mass possession; demons that have somehow escaped from Hell...?"

"No, it's not demons," Dean said decisively. He dragged a hand through the short wet spikes of his hair. "The – the guy inside of me? He was just a *guy*, Sam. Just a guy. It didn't feel like – like before. With Haris' kid. And besides, the amulet..." He trailed off, fingers brushing against the gold charm still strung about his neck. "The amulet would have stopped a demon from getting in, right? Getting control? This was different. The guy –" he looked up at Sam again. "The guy had a *name*, Sam. Joseph Mercer. He was a farmer in – in South Carolina. Couple centuries ago I think."

Sam blinked at him, clearly taken aback. "You – you *remember* –?"

"This guy's life, yeah." Dean shook his head. "Or flashes of it. He – he got caught banging his brother's old lady – kinda *in flagrante*, y'know? The brother's pissed – understandably. They fight. Little Joe winds up shoving his bro onto a pitchfork." He looked down at his bare feet. "They hanged the guy."

"You remember that?"

Dean looked up, nodding. "And what came after."

Sam took a breath. "Hell?" he hazarded.

"In glorious Technicolor."

Sam blew out the breath he'd just taken. "Dean –"

"It's not like a complete memory," Dean explained. "More like – an impression. Feelings. Images. Heat. Fire. Pain. Never-ending thirst. Just – just what you think when you think of – y'know – Hell." He bent his head, scratching the back of his neck. "Dude, if ever anything could convince me to turn over a new leaf and go all Boy Scout like you? This would be it."

Sam laughed despite the subject matter. "Thanks."

“Seriously. I think harps and halos are the way to go.”

Smiling ruefully, Sam lowered his head so that he and Dean were at eye level. “I’m sorry,” he said earnestly. “That you had to see –”

“Not your fault,” Dean cut him off with a shrug of his shoulders, but Sam could see the way his jaw clenched. “I’m just – just sorry I couldn’t fight him off. Like you did.”

Sam didn’t reply, just averted his gaze toward the suddenly clean river.

“Maybe it’s your freaky psychic mojo thing,” Dean suggested. “That ‘reflecting’ thing you got going – like what you did to Alyssa.”

Sam had somehow neglected to tell Dean about what he’d done to the tupilaq and the Inuit shaman. “Maybe,” he said quietly, still gazing at the river, a hundred thoughts he didn’t want to be thinking swirling around in his head.

“Thing is,” Dean continued, obviously, Sam figured, sensing his little brother’s discomfort and trying to change the subject, “if these things aren’t demons...?” He let the question hang in the air between them, until Sam’s focus finally returned to him.

“The guy that’s possessing Rosa?” the younger brother said slowly. “He said he remembered something from after he died, too. Something that sounded a hell of a lot like what you were describing when you were possessed.” He smiled a crookedly apologetic smile. “Pardon the pun.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “You think this whole Eighth Gateway to Hell thing’s a little more real than we originally thought?”

“Who knows?” Sam said. “Maybe that’s just a coincidence. But there’s no denying we seem to be dealing with real people here –”

“Real people who at some point died and went to Hell,” Dean agreed. “And now they’re back as – I don’t know – disembodied souls maybe? The souls of the dead possessing the living?”

“We’ve seen weirder things,” Sam said.

“But that begs the question, if these are souls displaced from Hell –”

“How the hell did they get out of Hell?”

“And why? Why now? What’s their purpose? Getting people to throw themselves into the river?”

“Maybe there’s no purpose,” Sam suggested. “Maybe these are just the souls of people who went to Hell, and the longer they stayed there, the crazier they got until finally they were released into the world to – to wreak havoc. Somehow.”

“Released by who?” Dean asked, eyes locking with Sam’s.

Neither of them said what they were thinking. And Sam had absolutely no doubt they were thinking the same thing.

“Okay,” Dean said finally. “So just ‘cause Malik mentioned New Jersey doesn’t mean –”

“No it doesn’t,” Sam agreed a little too readily. “Could just be a coincidence.”

“Like crazed souls escaping from Hell in a town that advertises its own Hellgate.”

“So yeah,” Sam agreed a little defensively, “it’s a pretty big coincidence.”

“Pretty *huge* coincidence.”

“And we’ve got no evidence. Just a bloody river...”

“Plagues and twenty-four hour darkness? End of Days? The Beast? Sam...”

“The river’s not bloody anymore, Dean.”

Dean sighed, finally forcing himself to his feet and wincing at the cold mud squishing between his toes. “Yeah, and why is that exactly?” He frowned, taking a few lurching steps toward the river as the frown turned into a grimace.

Sam considered him for a second. “Dude, what’s wrong with you?” he asked. “You look like a cross between Frankenstein’s Monster and John Wayne.”

“You should try walking in bare feet and wet underwear,” Dean retorted caustically, eyes sweeping upriver, back toward the bridge.

“I got your boots in the car,” Sam informed him, deciding to take pity on his big brother for once.

Dean glanced back at him, a quizzical half-smile playing on his face. "You do?" he said. "Aw Sammy. That's so sweet."

Sam bumped his shoulder as he strode past him, heading back toward the parking lot where he'd left the Impala. "Shut up," he said shortly. "And you're not the only one with wet underwear. So quit whining and man up will ya?"

Dean blinked. "Who died and made you John Winchester?" he asked, turning to follow the direction Sam was headed. "And for your information I'm not just following you to the car because these freakin' stones are cutting chunks out of my feet and I'd like my boots back. Look over there, Sherlock."

Sam followed the direction of Dean's pointing finger, back to the shallows near the bridge's footings, where Sam had last seen Preacher Warriner wading out in search of divine absolution.

"No way," Sam muttered, quickening his pace while Dean winced as he stood on a particularly sharp stone.

"Hey, barefoot here, Gigantor!" Dean snapped, struggling to keep up. "Don't feel like you need to slow down for me or anything! Hate to stop you from striding over mountain ranges in a single bound!"

"Dean, shut up for a second," Sam insisted so authoritatively Dean's jaw actually shut with a resounding click. "Look. He's – he's baptizing them."

That indeed was the only explanation for what the preacher could possibly be doing standing up to his chest in the River Quabaug surrounded by at least thirty people and another forty or fifty crowding down the riverbank toward him.

"Holy hell," Dean muttered, causing Sam to wince slightly at his unfortunate choice of words as they began to thread their way through some of the people sitting on the riverbank in wet clothes, obviously having already been tended to by the preacher. Several of them were crying; most of them seemed to be in shock at the very least.

"How did I get here?" Brenda, the waitress who Sam had spoken to earlier when she was convinced she was a nineteenth century plantation owner's wife, sat staring at her knees, shaking her head as if the whole world was suddenly incomprehensible to her. "How did I get here? I wanna go home. Can someone take me home?"

"I saw *fire*." A young man wearing a paramedic's uniform was wandering around in circles, fingers clutching in involuntary spasms at his hair. "I saw – I felt –" He trailed off, obviously unable to put his remembrances into word.

"They're cured," Sam exclaimed, aware he was stating the obvious. "Aside from the sores. The souls – they've – gone. It looks like when the preacher baptized them...somehow they were –"

"Holy water." Warriner was looking straight at them as he spoke, lifting a young woman out of the river and ushering her, dazed and confused, toward the riverbank.

Sam's eyebrows disappeared into his hair. "Holy water?" he repeated.

"The river," Warriner explained. "I blessed the river."

Dean mirrored his brother's expression. "You – you turned the entire *river* into holy water?"

Warriner shook his head. "The power of prayer and the power of the Lord turned the river into holy water," Warriner amended.

"That's what turned it back into water?" Sam marveled. "That's what got rid of the blood? *You* did that?"

"The Lord worked through me," the preacher insisted. "I am but his humble instrument."

"And by baptizing these people," Dean continued. "You're driving the crazy out of them?"

Warriner smiled slightly at Dean's turn of phrase as he beckoned an elderly lady who looked as if she didn't have a clue why she was there into the water. "The Lord indeed works in mysterious ways."

"So I've been told," Dean agreed.

“Dean, this is what cured you!” Sam said suddenly, eyes lighting up as if a light bulb had just illuminated his brain. “When you fell into the river – when you fell into a river running with holy water! It must have driven the escaped soul out of you!”

Dean squinted at him. “You think so?” he asked a little uncertainly. “Is that even possible?”

Sam shrugged. “The preacher was already in the river doing his thing when I got here with Malik –”

“Malik’s here?”

Sam scanned the growing crowd. “Yeah. Somewhere. He was a mess though, man. Wasn’t even speaking English.”

Dean nodded. “So how – why – are all these people here? Why are they coming here? How do they know to come here?”

“Because they think they can be saved.”

Sam turned at the sound of the familiar voice, Malik striding toward them, his pants and shirt still damp from what Sam guessed had been an earlier trip into the river.

“You okay?” Sam asked.

Malik shrugged. “‘Okay’ is a relative term I guess,” he said. “The guy who was squatting in my head’s gone if that’s what you mean.”

Sam smiled, relieved. “Well that’s something.”

“Do you – remember any of it?” Dean asked tentatively, and Sam got the distinct impression his brother was asking a much more difficult question, maybe hoping seeking out someone with shared experiences might make him feel slightly less crazy.

“Oh yeah,” Malik nodded. “Didn’t understand a word of what he was thinking, but I saw the things he did. Before.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at an imaginary stone at his feet. “He was a Hutu soldier named Gahiji,” he explained. “He was killed not long after he helped slaughter hundreds of Tutsi during the genocide in Rwanda back in 1994.”

“Oh man,” Dean mumbled, somehow relieved he’d only had to witness the one murder through another man’s eyes.

“Yeah,” Malik said lightly, as if trying to dismiss the horrors of the things he’d been forced to see. “Somehow that was worse than the things he saw *after*.”

“When I brought you here,” Sam asked. “What made you...?”

“Jump in the river?” Malik supplied. “I don’t know. I just felt drawn here I guess. Or...or *he* felt drawn here. Like the answers were here.”

“Like you could be saved?” Sam suggested.

Malik considered that briefly. “Maybe. I don’t know whether it was the baptism or the water itself that got the sucker out of my head. Just...just one of us thought it would be the answer.”

“And it was,” Sam said. “For you.”

“But maybe not for him,” Malik agreed. “I don’t think he came here for the same reason as the thing that had your brother.”

“No,” Dean agreed. “That wasn’t about salvation. It was –” he thought about it for a second before continuing. “That was something else. Not something as – as rational, I guess, as the promise of being eternally saved from the fires of Hell. More like – more like a short term solution. Like the water could put the flames out and stop the burning and the agony.”

“You were there longer than me,” Malik noted, and the confusion in pronouns made Sam’s head hurt. “In Hell. I – my guy – he was only there fourteen years. I guess he was still comparatively lucid compared to some of these folks.”

Dean nodded, seeming relieved he could talk about his experience to someone who seemed to understand what he was feeling. “I think my guy was there a couple of centuries,” he explained. “That’d be enough to make the sanest person crazy.”

“So you think,” Sam put in thoughtfully, “these people – the ones being inhabited by the less crazy souls – are being drawn here because they believe baptism could be their Get Out of Hell Free card?”

Malik shrugged. “Stranger things, man.”

“So if that’s the case,” Dean said, eyes darkening. “If the escaped souls really *are* being driven out of their hosts – by the baptism or by the holy water or by a combination of both – ” He looked from Malik to Sam and back again. “Where do you suppose they’re going?”

Malik drew in a long breath and shook his head, not even attempting an answer.

“These people must have been in Hell for a reason, Dean,” Sam said at length. “They’re not just going to be given a free pass to Heaven. Or wherever.”

“Because they’re evil?”

The brothers’ eyes locked, and it was Sam who looked away first.

“Not everything others see as evil is that way by choice,” Dean insisted stubbornly. “Right Sam?”

Sam hated it when Dean had subtext. It wasn’t something he was used to dealing with from his brother – one thing Dean wasn’t was subtle. He shifted from foot to foot, finally turning his attention back to Malik, who looked decidedly uncomfortable, obviously picking up on the silent conversation going on between the brothers he wasn’t privy to.

“Malik, this company from New Jersey,” Sam said, the subject change so jarring even he felt like the ground had lurched under his feet in protest. “You remember the name of it?”

“The company behind the casino development?” Malik clarified. “Lemme think. It was a really bad pun –” His eyes lit up and he snapped his fingers. “Styx and Stones Construction, that was it.”

“There’s a pun in there?” Sam queried.

Malik snickered. “Styx spelt S-T-Y-X.”

“Like the band?” Dean raised an eyebrow.

“No, like the river,” Sam corrected him. “To Hell. Or Hades anyway.” The reference made his mind wander in the direction of Erika Gudrun for a second and he shuddered.

“Kinda creepy for a construction company,” Dean observed.

“Not when you realize who owns it,” Sam informed him.

Dean grimaced. “Ah, man! Don’t tell me –”

“Ferinacci,” Sam confirmed. “The name kinda stuck in my head when I did a little research on him – uh – before.”

“Who’s Ferinacci?” Malik asked innocently. “He the Tony Soprano in this story?”

The brothers exchanged a glance.

“You – uh – probably don’t want to know,” Dean assured him. “Let’s just say he’s not someone you’d want to bump into in a dark alley.”

Sam’s focus slid back to the river, and the seemingly unending stream of people flowing toward it.

“Malik, does the water from the processing plant flow down to the casino development site?”

Malik raised an eyebrow. “Sure. Like I said, it used to be a cannery, so there’s a whole network of inflow and outflow pipes underneath. It draws its water directly off of the river, then its waste water goes back in once it’s been treated and cleaned.”

Sam nodded, a thought forming in his head. “Malik, we need a favor.”

Dean glanced over at him, the question clear on his face.

“Anything,” Malik said. “If you hadn’t brought me out here I’d still be wandering around town wondering how the hell to get back to Rwanda.”

“Well, that’s kind of the first part of the favor,” Sam told him. “When the preacher’s done here, we need him to move on into town – baptize all the people there who

can't get here or are too whacked out to feel the call, or whatever it is you felt. Then maybe he's gonna need to move on into Worcester – the hospital anyway."

"Sam, what if they don't want to be baptized?" Dean asked. "I doubt all of these lost souls were good upstanding Christians in their day. Hell, some of them probably weren't even Christian."

"Doesn't matter," Sam said shortly. "We're not asking them to accept Christ into their lives or anything. We just need to get the souls outta the people they're possessing before they start to kill each other. Or themselves." His eyes slid involuntarily to the bridge further upstream and Dean swallowed. "It's not a matter of faith. It's a matter of survival. And that holy water will make sure they survive."

"Okay," Dean agreed, turning to Malik. "You think you can do that man?" he asked. "Kinda a tall order. But you said you knew Warriner, right? Think you can talk him into it?"

Malik nodded. "No problem," he assured them. "Consider it done."

Sam took a breath. "Good," he said decisively, before an apologetic smile crept onto his face. "Because this next part of the favor might be a little trickier..."

Pleasure Central Leisure Development site Leicester, MA

Dean grimaced as thick mud squelched beneath his feet, eternally grateful his kid brother was such a mother hen he'd thought to bring his boots. And his jacket. In the unnatural afternoon darkness, the temperature had dropped considerably and a fine drizzle was doing its damndest to soak him to the skin. Again.

He shivered slightly, causing Sam to give him the patented *Sammy Winchester Look of Concern*, to which he rolled his eyes and hissed, "I'm *fine*, Sam."

Sam nodded, a look of skeptical acceptance on his face, before turning his attention back to the new leisure complex's main gate, which the two of them had been surveilling from all conceivable angles for the last hour.

Dean could make out at least four security guys from where he was standing – the only people besides Sam in this whole town who didn't appear to have been possessed by the souls of the dead. They seemed to rotate duty every thirty minutes, suggesting at least four more guards were patrolling the perimeter fence, which was twelve feet high, topped with copious coils of razor wire and lit by industrial wattage security floodlights every few feet.

Shaking his head, Dean figured even Michael Scofield might find this place something of a challenge.

"Dude, no way we're getting in there without an invitation," he told his brother, stating the obvious as he tried to get his teeth to stop chattering. "And there's about as much chance of *that* as there is of us scoring an invitation to the Emmys."

It was fairly mild for a Massachusetts autumn, but the eerie darkness and the still-damp clothing were doing nothing for Dean's inner glow; and standing around ankle deep in mud watching apes in blue uniforms sipping steaming hot coffee from thermos flasks was making him more than a little grumpy.

Sam's attention had drifted to the muddy incline which sloped down toward the river, which in turn flowed alongside and around back of the new development site.

"And the Emmy for Best Drama Queen in a TV series goes to Sam Winchester..." Dean added, convinced Sam wasn't listening to a word he was saying.

Sam proved Dean's point by completely ignoring the jibe. "Malik said the old cannery had an inflow/outflow system into the river, right?" he said, his eyes still scanning the distant riverbank purposefully.

Dean sighed, always disappointed when he couldn't get a rise out of his kid brother. "I guess," he agreed, suddenly inclining his head as he realized what Sam

was getting at. "Back door maybe?" he hazarded. "Good thinking, Sammy. I knew I brought you along for a reason."

Sam huffed. "What, other than to make sure you didn't drown or freeze to death?"

Dean raised an eyebrow before heading off toward the river, tossing, "Well if you want to get *picky*..." over his shoulder as he stomped down the muddy bank.

Sam followed diligently, just managing to keep his footing on the slippery slope as the two of them inched their way slowly along the riverbank, neither particularly relishing the prospect of another unscheduled dip in the Quabaug that afternoon.

They stuck close to the river, making sure to duck down behind a small hillock between the bank and the wide expanse of grass and mud leading back up to the wire fence and the floodlights, finally rounding a corner where the Quabaug opened up into what appeared to be an artificially constructed inlet lying directly below the hulking wreck of the former cannery.

Water lapped softly at concrete foundations rising out of the little bay, and Dean suddenly beamed, exclaiming brightly, "Someone looking for a back door?" He pointed to a large pipe sticking out of the river bank, high up so as to be beyond the swells of the Quabaug. "Waste pipe," he proclaimed, noting how the concrete beneath was discolored a dirty yellowish brown, as if by years of running water.

Taking a tentative step closer, he estimated the waste pipe to be perhaps six feet in diameter, and as far as he could make out there was no grill or hatch securing the opening.

"Hmm, not sure you're gonna fit in there, Kong," he smirked, heading off toward the pipe before Sam got a chance to over-think this rather foolhardy little twist to their non-plan. "Might have to bend your head a little there."

Sam grunted. "Well we can't all be tall dark and handsome," he retorted, following on his brother's heels and snickering slightly as he added, "And if I'm King Kong, that makes you Fay Wray, dude."

Dean stopped dead in his tracks, Sam just about falling over him as he scowled up at him indignantly. "I am so not Fay Wray!" he spluttered, clearly incensed by the comparison.

"You're short, you're blond and sometimes you can be a real damsel in distress," Sam told him shortly, shoving past him and continuing on toward the pipe. "How many times have I had to swoop in there and rescue you from some big nasty monster, huh?"

Dean stood completely still for a second, for once in his life absolutely dumbstruck, his ears turning an odd shade of scarlet. "I – I'm not short!" he managed to protest when he finally recovered his ability to form words. "And – and I am in no way a girl, *Samantha* –!"

"Untwist your pantyhose, Fay," Sam shot back, grinning as he finally reached the pipe. "All that bitchin's gonna give you wrinkles." He stretched a hand up toward the rusty metal, running long fingers around the rim and frowning slightly when he brought them back up to his face covered in a red substance he couldn't immediately identify.

"Well if anyone's a *girl* in this relationship it's *you* Gloria," Dean continued to grouse as he drew level with Sam's shoulder. "What happened, you break a nail or something?" He peered up at the odd coating on his brother's fingers, tipping his head slightly to the side. "What is that?" he asked. "Rust?"

Sam pursed his lips distastefully. "Either that or –" he swallowed. "I think maybe its dried blood."

The two of them just stared at each other for a full second or two, before Dean's focus shifted to the concrete beneath the pipe, only now noticing the staining beneath also contained traces of a dirty crimson. "You think –" he began, hesitating for a beat before continuing. "You think maybe this is where the blood came from?"

Sam shrugged. "Pipe's too high to be for taking water in to the complex. You said yourself it looked more like a waste pipe."

Dean fished a Maglite out of his jacket pocket and shone it around the inside of the pipe. The red residue seemed to coat the bottom half of the metal tube, and he was pretty sure he could just about make out a tiny trickle along the bottom that was still wet. He glanced up at Sam. "You sure you wanna do this?" he asked at length, all trace of teasing or petulance gone from his voice and his expression. "I mean, if Ferinacci – hell, *Lucifer* – really is behind this whole thing, who knows what the hell we're likely to find in there."

"Hopefully it won't be 'Hell' we find," Sam commented. "We're a ways from Spider Gates Cemetery over here, so if Leicester really *does* have a Gateway to Hell –"

"What if it's here?" Dean finished for him. "Maybe the locals were off by a couple o' miles?"

"Like Malik said," Sam reminded him, looking for a handhold to help him haul himself up into the waste pipe. "Stranger things, man."

"You – you want me to – y'know – take point?" Dean offered, a vague shadow of concern flitting across his face as his hand ghosted across Sam's shoulder.

Sam turned and grinned at him. "What, you need a leg up or something?" he quipped, hauling himself up into the rusty red darkness and wincing at the unmistakable coppery tang of blood in the air.

"You need a slap upside the head?" Dean retorted, repeating Sam's maneuver until he was crouching down next to his brother, a macabre stretch of bloody blackness opening up in front of them.

"It's definitely blood," Sam reiterated, eyeing with distaste the gelatinous globules of deep crimson goo splattered liberally along the pipe. He rose to his feet as far as he was able, head ducked and shoulders hunched over in an effort to avoid any accidental concussions.

"That makes me feel so much better," Dean lied, aiming the flashlight down the tunnel as Sam made a move into the darkness. He followed, hand sliding unconsciously to the silver Colt nestled against his back. "And it begs the question," he added, lowering his voice as the echo reverberated around them almost as loudly as the clump, clump, clump of their feet, "if this is how the blood got into the river, then where the hell did it come from?"

"There's that 'hell' word again," Sam pointed out, long fingers trailing along the pipe wall in his wake.

"Yeah man," Dean agreed. "And we could be walking right into it! *Dean Winchester and the Sewer Pipe to Hell* definitely wasn't the title I had in mind for the movie of my life."

Sam snickered, the sound bouncing off the metal walls surrounding them. "I guess someone already used *American Psycho*, huh?"

Anyone else would have taken that as an insult, but when Sam turned his own flashlight back toward his brother, obviously concerned by the lack of smart-aleck comeback, Dean merely grinned big, the light reflecting brightly off his teeth. "Aw, Sammy," he declared. "You know me so well."

They continued on in silence for a couple of minutes, the pipe making a handful of unexpected twists and turns every few feet and an odd dripping sound causing Dean to shudder. *Water*, he told himself. *It's only water. There's definitely no blood dripping on me...*

"Hey," Sam put out a hand suddenly, halting Dean in his tracks. "Light up ahead."

Dean switched off his flashlight, Sam following suit, as the two of them inched toward the weak sliver of artificial light smeared across the darkness in front of them.

"You hear anything?" Sam whispered nervously, bracing a hand against the roof of the pipe as he sidled closer to the sickly pale disk of illumination maybe twenty feet ahead of them.

"What? Like wailing and gnashing of teeth?" Dean asked, sticking a lot closer to Sam than he probably ought to have considering the tight quarters and the very real possibility of an imminent firefight. Maybe even a *literal* firefight.

He shuddered, trying to block out the Hellish images still dancing just behind his retinas – burning, screaming, weeping. The constant desperate pleas for a mercy that would never be granted.

“Dean?”

Dean realized Sam was looking at him, concern plastered across his face.

“You okay, man?”

Dean stared at him for a second, as if he didn’t quite understand the question. “Huh? Uh. Yeah,” he finally managed to stammer unconvincingly.

“You wiggled out on me for a second there, bro,” Sam told him, brow crinkling. “Like you were a thousand miles away.”

Dean looked down, contemplating the sticky trickle of blood beneath his feet and the fire still crackling in his memory. “I was,” he said slowly. “At least, I hope I was.”

Sam’s crinkled brow creased further into a frown, as if he wasn’t entirely sure what to do with that. “You – wanna take a minute...?” he asked hesitantly, just as something seemed to snap back into place inside his brother, that familiar devil-may-care grin shuttering out any previous uncertainty.

“Dude, since when did we let a possible Hellgate keep us from a good time?” he demanded, surging in front of Sam and making headlong for the light source.

“Dean –” Sam hurried to catch up, hampered by his having to stoop further than his brother. “Dean, wait –”

But Dean had already stopped, teetering on the lip of the pipe, his eyes wide in the sudden lighting.

“Dean, what do you see –?”

Dean’s expression twisted into a slightly perplexed squint. “It’s a hole,” he said flatly, gesturing into the room beyond the pipe with his drawn Colt. “It’s a really big hole.”

Sam drew level with him, eyes following in the direction of his brother’s handgun. He blew out a breath. “Wow,” he agreed, nodding. “That is a big hole.”

Dean jumped the foot or so down into the huge concrete room in which he found himself, boots making a satisfyingly solid *thunk* as he hit the dull gray floor.

He ran a hand around the edge of the pipe, which looked jagged and uneven, as if it had recently been cut away from a more extensive waste system, before turning his eyes upward. The muted overhead lighting was barely adequate to illuminate the high ceiling, which was cross-crossed by an apparently abstract network of pipes of various sizes snaking in and out of the room. A metal walkway suspended from the ceiling by rusty-looking girders ran the entire circumference of the cavernous area, leading to various doorways set high in the walls, ladders leading down to the ground at seemingly random intervals.

“What the hell is this place?” he asked, voice subdued in something approaching awe.

“Machine room maybe?” Sam offered, jumping down beside him. “Sewer junction? Pumping room?”

“Or all of the above?”

“Malik said this used to be a cannery, right? Maybe this was the waste treatment area? I’m guessing the construction company must have ripped out the machinery when they got here...” Sam gestured around the room, to various other openings onto pipes like the one they’d just traversed, and others set higher into the walls all around them. “Maybe the waste came in there...got treated here...and everything got flushed out –”

“Back into the river,” Dean supplied. “Like the blood.”

“Might explain how the blood got into the river in the first place.”

“But not that big ass hole in the floor.”

Sam took a couple of steps toward the massive chasm in the center of the concrete in front of them. “I think we can safely assume this wasn’t part of the original design,” he said, examining the network of fissures and cracks spider-webbing out

from the jagged edges of the hole. “Looks like someone just blasted right down into the concrete –”

“Or blasted up,” Dean suggested, uncomfortably meeting Sam’s unsettled gaze before edging over to the brink of the chasm. He peered hesitantly over the edge before turning his gaze upward. “Where do you guess we are, Sammy?” he asked, examining the distant ceiling. “You think we’re under the casino or the strip club?”

“I’d say we’re dead center,” Sam said. “Pretty much right under what will eventually be the casino.”

Dean was peering down into the sinkhole again. “How far down do you think this goes?” he mused, absently pulling a quarter out of his jeans pocket and dropping it into the seemingly bottomless blackness.

They waited several seconds, expecting to hear the metallic tinkle of the coin hitting bottom at any moment. But the sound never came.

Dean blew out a whistle, looking back up at Sam. “I get the feeling this thing doesn’t lead to China...” he hazarded, and Sam nodded his agreement.

“Wherever it goes,” he said, casting his gaze around the network of inflow and outflow pipes surrounding them, miles of piping leading who knows where. “Whatever it’s for... Whoever’s behind this could probably taint the whole county’s water supply in a matter of days from this room.”

Their eyes met again.

“I’m pretty sure we know who’s behind it, Sam.”

“It’s not the End of Days, Dean. It’s a trick. A hoax –”

“It’s *Lucifer*, Sam! How much more End of Days can you get?”

“It was God who brought about the End of Days in Revelations,” Sam countered. “Not Satan. He meant it as a warning to those worshipping the Beast. If this is Ferinacci’s doing, then it’s a counterfeit, a fake –”

“For what purpose?” Dean demanded. “Why would he want everyone to think the End was nigh?”

“Chaos,” Sam stated bluntly. “You should see it out there, Dean! A whole town gone completely insane! It’s only a matter of time until they wipe each other out completely –”

“But that’s down to those tortured souls who’ve taken control of them!” Dean argued. “They’ve not been driven mad by the fear of Armageddon! The souls inside of them have already witnessed their own *personal* Armageddon! Why would the literal End of the World bother them?”

“Think about what this looks like to people on the outside,” Sam countered. “The people *not* tainted by this – the people living in neighboring towns. The whole of Leicester howling at the moon and jumping at shadows? Eternal darkness? Rivers running with blood? It’s only a matter of time until word gets out; until the chaos and the terror spreads to people who *aren’t* possessed; people who are just driven insane by the predictions of the End Times they’ve read about all their lives in the Bible suddenly coming true! I mean, think about it, Dean. If you thought the world was gonna end tomorrow, that there would be no consequences – at least in this life – for anything you did today? What would you do? Sit in church praying? Lock yourself in your house, switch on *Grey’s Anatomy* and hope when you wake up in the morning everything will be back to normal?”

“Ugh,” Dean wrinkled his nose. “Hell, if saving the world meant I had to watch *Grey’s Anatomy* I’d *still* change the channel!” His eyes became distant for a second. “Although that Katherine Heigl... Man, I’d sure get me some of that if I knew the world was about to end...”

“Exactly!” Sam beamed, his point made. “No consequences! Wine, women and song! Sex, drugs and rock n’ roll!”

“Party like it’s 1999?” Dean suggested. “Although that’s one prediction Prince sure screwed up. And if the Purple One can’t nail the date the world’s gonna end, why would anyone believe *this* is the End of the World?”

“Because it’s *Lucifer*, Dean! Just like you said! And without consequences – without rules – society collapses.”

“Anarchy,” Dean nodded. “With a capital A.”

There was silence for a second as both of them stared down into the bottomless pit in front of them.

“So how the hell do we stop Armageddon?” Dean asked eventually.

Sam sighed, no answer immediately forthcoming. “What we need is a plan –”

“What we need is a miracle.”

“You don’t believe in miracles.”

“Right now I’d believe in the Easter Bunny if it’d get us out of this.”

Dean swallowed his next comment as a distant rumble began to reverberate just on the edge of their hearing. “What is that?” he asked instead, as the volume slowly began to rise in intensity until the ground beneath their feet seemed to resonate at the same frequency, vibrations thrumming up their legs as the concrete started to tremble. “Sam –?”

“I think we need to go,” Sam pronounced as the vibration turned into a shudder, loose dust and chunks of plaster raining down on their heads from the ceiling above, the pipes rattling and clanking as the shudder turned into an all-out shake.

“Earthquake?” Dean suggested, eyes casting about him wildly.

“I don’t think so.”

Dean glanced back at Sam, something in the younger brother’s tone sending a shiver up Dean’s spine. He was staring fixedly at the sinkhole, eyes widening as he took a cautious step backwards.

Dean followed Sam’s gaze, almost dreading what he was going to see as the ground shook harder and harder beneath his feet and the distant rumble became a roaring cacophony.

“Holy crap!” he burst out, unable to hear his own words above the din. A morbid fascination overtook him as he found himself unable to look away from the surface of the sinkhole, where blood was beginning to bubble and trickle up over the rim and onto the concrete floor on which they were standing.

It was slow at first, just a few fingers of crimson oozing out toward them, but as the quaking continued to intensify, the trickle soon became a flood, blood literally pouring up out of the hole like some macabre fountain, spreading quickly over the trembling ground as it headed toward the myriad outflow pipes peppering the walls.

“Dean, we have to go *now!*” Sam repeated urgently, grabbing Dean’s arm and yanking him away from the approaching torrents of blood mere inches from their feet.

“Where?” Dean demanded, backing away as the bloody tide began to creep further and further across the floor, the hard gray turning to dark crimson in every direction.

“Up!”

They’d retreated back against the wall, Sam’s fingers curling around one of the flaking metal ladders leading up to the suspended walkway above their heads.

“Ladies first!” Dean insisted, as Sam began to haul himself up the ladder. Dean wasn’t far behind him, pulling his feet up off the ground mere seconds before the rapidly expanding pool of blood finally submerged the place where he’d just been standing.

Scrambling up the ladder after his brother, Dean didn’t look back until his boots hit the metal footplates of the walkway, which trembled and swayed like a carnival cakewalk in a high wind.

“Oh man! Anyone got some Dramamine?” he moaned, finally glancing backwards at the bloody tide, which had already risen a good few inches up the side of the walls, enough that it had begun to ooze into some of the pipes which would carry it out into the river.

“Dean, help me with this!”

Dean spun in the direction of Sam's voice, his brother tugging hopelessly at the nearest door as the walkway began to creak ominously.

"I can't get it open!"

Without a second thought, Dean ran at the door, bringing up a booted foot and kicking hard at the metal obstruction, almost falling back on his ass when the metal refused to budge.

"I think maybe it's bolted from the other side!" Sam had to yell to be heard, and Dean screwed up his face in annoyance.

"Like you couldn't have told me that before?"

Sam never got the chance to respond as the deafening rumble suddenly gave way to an altogether more unsettling noise, the sound of hundreds of wailing, screaming voices seeming to emanate right up out of the floor beneath them.

Dean paled considerably. "Sam?" he stammered. "That's it. That's the sound I – he – heard when I was – when he was – Down There."

Sam just stared at him. "You don't think – I mean – it can't be... We can't be hearing *Hell*, right?"

Dean was gazing at the bloody hole in the ground, seemingly transfixed. "If that's a Hellgate..."

"A sinkhole into Hell?" Sam exclaimed. "Seriously? You seriously think that's a sinkhole into Hell? In the middle of Massachusetts?"

Dean shook his head. "I don't know, man –" He was cut off by an almighty roar suddenly renting the air around them, columns of white hot flame shooting up out of the sinkhole causing both boys to fall backwards onto the walkway with a loud *thunk* and a curse as shoulder blades and elbows were slammed into metal.

Angry flames clawed crimson fingers up toward them, the screaming intensifying until the sound of the never-ending torture of a thousand souls echoed all around them, bouncing off the walls and reverberating along the pipes, screams and howls the likes of which Dean had hoped never to hear again lodging in his ears and drowning out all other sound.

Dean's breathing quickened as the noise and the heat and another man's memories assaulted him, the ground seeming to lurch right out from under him until all he could see was fire and blood, all he could hear was agony and anguish, lost souls screaming for mercy, darkness and heat, vision dimming, long blonde hair on fire behind his eyelids and a window exploding outwards as glass rained down and a buzzing that grew louder and louder in his head as the world around him slowly began to gray out.

"Dean? Dean, hey!"

The next thing he knew he was sitting upright, a strong arm around his shoulder, a soft voice in his ear blocking out the tumultuous roaring of flame and wailing of damned souls.

"Dean? It's okay, you're okay!"

"Sammy?"

Sam was holding him up, pulling him back from the edge of the walkway, clinging on to him like a child clings to its security blanket or a parent clings to its terrified offspring.

"It's okay Dean."

And Dean knew it was. As long as Sam was here. As long as Sam was here, he couldn't, *wouldn't* be in Hell, whatever his senses told him. Not if his little brother had any say in the matter.

"You passed out." Sam said it as if the very idea was completely alien to him.

"Did not," Dean slurred. "Just had a temporary lapse in consciousness is all."

Sam patted his shoulder, relief at his brother's customary prickliness plain on his face. "Yeah, I know you did," he agreed. "Can you stand? We really need to find a way out of here before –"

"Too late."

Sam followed Dean's wide unblinking eyes back in the direction of the sinkhole, mouth falling open to match his brother's. "Holy crap."

"With a cherry on top," Dean agreed, unable to tear his eyes from the fiery, gushing sinkhole as the flames began to part and a darkness so complete, so absolute appeared to consume the very center of the seething, bloody mass.

All sound in the room seemed to stop in that instant, the screams muted beneath the background crackle of fire, the trembling of concrete and infrastructure merely a distant hum like an insect trapped in a glass jar.

The darkness itself seemed to part then, thick like molasses, a shadowy shape rising up out of the blood, out of the flame and out of the terror, vaguely human.

Vaguely familiar.

Both Sam and Dean drew in a breath as the dark shape of a man became discernible, backlit by the dancing fire, rising up out of the sinkhole like a giant shadow absorbing all light, all sound, all hope.

Their eyes locked, each knowing what this meant.

The Gateway to Hell was open.

And Lucifer sure knew how to make an entrance.

It took Sam several seconds to figure out why his chest hurt.

He'd been so intent on the blazing sinkhole belching several inches of thick, dark blood over the concrete floor below him, he'd actually forgotten to breathe. And that was without taking into consideration the shadowy shape rising ominously up through the flames toward them.

Sucking in a huge lungful of acrid air, he barely smothered a hacking cough as smoke from the fire dancing higher and higher toward the ceiling of the old cannery's waste processing facility mercilessly burnt his esophagus.

"Sam –?"

Realizing he was still maintaining a death grip on Dean's shoulder, Sam inched further away from the edge of the walkway, dragging his brother back with him; further into the shadows; further from the Hellgate. Further from Lucifer.

"Dude!" Dean protested at the manhandling, trying to squirm out of Sam's firm grip with little appreciable success. "Personal space!"

"If he sees us we're dead meat," Sam hissed at him through gritted teeth, punctuating his point by once again yanking back on Dean's shoulder.

Dean looked as if he might protest some more, but obviously thought better of it, meekly allowing Sam to maneuver the both of them until their backs were flat against the warm gray wall. When Sam still didn't let go of him, Dean raised both eyebrows and inclined his head in the direction of Sam's clawed fist. "Okay, Mommy, you can let go now," he insisted sarcastically.

Sam glanced from Dean to the sinkhole and back again, trying to gauge Dean's relative level of freaked-out-ed-ness from the reflected firelight dancing in his eyes.

Dean didn't always do so good around fire. Sometimes it took them both by surprise, Dean momentarily freezing up when confronted by an unanticipated blaze. It wasn't a phobia exactly – Dean had torched plenty of corpses in his time after all – but Sam was convinced this was what had happened when his brother had almost taken a nosedive into the literal bloodbath beneath them, and he wasn't sure he wanted to risk that again. Especially when images of another man's horrific torture in the bowels of the Fiery Furnace were still so raw in Dean's memory.

So Sam kept his fingers entwined in the shoulder of Dean's jacket and tried not to make it too obvious when he narrowly avoided jerking his brother back as he leaned forward to get a better view of what was going on at the Hellgate.

If Dean had noticed Sam's convulsive grip on him, he was refusing to acknowledge it. "Dude, I take it back," he burst out, almost forgetting to blink. "Lucifer? So much more of a drama queen than you!"

It was almost as if the dark silhouette rising slowly from the flickering flames was absorbing all light around him, the fire becoming a muted yellow, further emphasizing the coal-black *emptiness* of the thing at its center.

Although Sam couldn't make out any facial features, there seemed little doubt as to the identity of this unwelcome visitor through the Hellgate.

For in that black hole of nothingness hovering unmoving amidst the flames, there were two barely discernable points of red light. Blinking. Windows onto a soul so bloody and malevolent that anyone looking into their crimson depths for too long was liable to be driven mad by the very sight.

Sam looked away. "We so need to get out of here," he reiterated.

"No argument here," Dean agreed, eyes widening as he suddenly gestured to the Gateway. Or, more specifically, to what was emerging *from* the Gateway. "What the hell...?"

Apparently Lucifer wasn't crashing this party by himself.

Hovering above the roiling pool of blood and fire, the demon spread his arms wide, as if welcoming something into the world in his wake. With a whoosh of superheated air that tore at the pipes directly above the Hellgate, ghostly after-images of people long dead inexplicably began to emerge from the depths of the bloody pool, translucent faces twisted into frozen masks of agony and despair.

"Oh my God," Sam breathed. "This is it, Dean. This is where the dispossessed souls have been coming from. This is where they've been escaping from Hell –"

"And Lucifer was the one to let them out?"

"Go! Go!" Lucifer's booming voice sliced through the roar of flames and thick black smoke as if in answer to Dean's question, reverberating around the room like a heavily-struck church bell on a Sunday morning. "This is your opportunity, my children! Your opportunity for redemption! Go now! Take the chance I offer you! Go!"

"Redemption?" Dean echoed. "Why would he be offering his own captives a shot at redemption when they've already been condemned to Hell?"

"He's not," Sam said, eyes never straying from the spectacle taking place beneath them. "Remember what Malik said? The soul inside him somehow thought he could be saved? It's a lie! There's no redemption waiting for them in this world – just madness and chaos until they're finally sent packing back to Hell!"

"Make me proud, young ones!" Lucifer continued to exhort the frantic creatures continuing to stream out of the sinkhole. "Perform my work and you shall be rewarded! Spread my word throughout this world! I am here! The day is at hand! Make these human fools tremble and quake in fear, beat their chests and rend their garments in terror as the End of Days approaches! You will be my foot soldiers! My army! Harbingers of a new dawn when this world and all that breathes within it shall be subjects of my dominion! Go forth and spread the news, my children! For darkness comes and who amongst them will challenge the Bringer of Light?"

"Man, this asshole *really* loves the sound of his own voice –" Dean began to gripe, Sam cutting him off by literally grabbing his collar and hauling him to his feet. "Dude, *will* you stop doing that?" he protested. "I'm not your own personal poseable action figure you know –"

"Dean, you want another of those things in your head?" Sam saw the indignation drain from Dean's face as he realized Sam was trying to nudge him along the walkway and past the locked door, toward another potential escape route.

"Good point," he admitted finally, glancing down at the sinkhole as the agitated specters began to swirl around their leader like some hellish tornado, spinning further and further out into the room. Further and further toward the walkway; toward *them*.

Diving toward another of the gunmetal gray doors, Dean grabbed the handle and yanked hard. "No dice, Sammy!" he reported, glancing back to where Sam was still standing looking out toward the Hellgate, his back to his brother. "Sam?"

"Stay there, Dean," Sam threw over his shoulder, backing up a few paces so as to position himself between Dean and the sinkhole.

It took Dean longer than Sam expected to realize what his little brother was up to. "Hell no, Sammy –"

His protest was never finished as a sudden gust of hot air threw him back against the solidly bolted door. Sam was knocked backwards several paces with him, but miraculously managed to stay on his feet, stubbornly positioning himself between his brother and the approaching wall of disembodied souls currently hurling themselves in their direction, translucent teeth bared and reflected flames blazing in the dark spaces where their eyes should have been.

Sam never turned to check Dean was still behind him, somehow knowing exactly where Dean was standing without having to look. Suddenly it seemed vitally important that he not turn around, that he face the clamoring souls head on, that he not turn away from the hellish creatures who were gravitating to the one thing they all currently desired above all else: human vessels in which to obey their master's will.

It wasn't the same as it had been with the displaced soul who had attacked him in the motel room last night, Sam mused, his mind calmly contemplating the multitude of voices screaming and wailing in his head. That single entity had been cold, logical. Focused. The voices currently clamoring for his attention were disorganized, frenzied, all desperately crowding into his brain as each attempted to find purchase there, get a foothold. Find a vessel. Each voice trying to dominate all others. Each voice trying to drive away the rest and take this vessel for its own nefarious purposes and those of its demonic leader.

Sam breathed deeply and calmly, closing his eyes as he felt the almost physical build up of pressure around him.

"Get out."

He wasn't sure whether he said it aloud or in his head, the resultant frustrated howl of the loudest of the voices drowning out any sound he may have made in the real world.

Slowly, the pressure began to recede, a tide ebbing away from him, releasing him.

Opening his eyes, he still sensed the insistent crush of souls all around him, each trying to force themselves closer to him, into him, but it was as if an invisible barrier had erected itself around him and his brother, a barrier their assailants were unable to breach or destroy. Faces pressed against glass, able to see but not touch.

He could hear Dean breathing heavily behind him, and suddenly felt it was safe to turn and look at him, his brother wide-eyed and pale at Sam's shoulder as the barrier continued to hold with minimal effort on the younger brother's part. It was almost comical the way the determined specters merely seemed to bounce off thin air a foot or so all around them, their frustration finally getting the better of them as they gradually began to wheel away until every last one of them had withdrawn back to the relative safety of the Hellgate. Back to their master.

Lucifer was watching them.

"S – Sammy?" Dean stammered, gingerly laying a hand on Sam's arm as if only now daring to touch him. "What – what the hell just happened?" He blinked owlishly at his brother as Sam turned calmly toward him, expression almost serene. Dean swallowed. "What did you just do, man?"

If Sam hadn't known better, he would have sworn Dean looked...afraid.

Of *him*.

"Is that what you did to Alyssa? What you did to the thing that came for you last night?"

Sam shrugged, expression suddenly darkening, like the sun slipping behind a cloud. "I don't know," he said honestly, his voice cracking on the last word. "I don't know, Dean." Suddenly he felt all of five years old, desperately wanting his big brother to chase the monsters from under his bed and tell him everything was alright.

"It's okay, Sammy," Dean said, slipping into the role with practiced ease, but barely disguising a tremble in his voice. "We'll figure it out. You – you did good, kiddo."

"Yes," a booming voice suddenly rang out loudly beneath them. "You did *very* good, Samuel. Neat little trick you picked up there. You'll have to show me how you did that someday."

Both brothers' attention snapped back to the Hellgate.

But Lucifer was no longer there.

Instead, their field of vision was completely filled by a pair of huge obsidian wings rising up directly in front of them, beating once, slow and powerful, as if created from the shadows themselves.

Sam drew in a sharp breath as Lucifer hovered before them, skull solid and corporeal, eyes crimson pinpricks in an ash white face, while his body seemed insubstantial as drifting shadow, long dark swathes of blackness swirling around him as he slowly began to ascend.

With a loud crack, the wings snapped open behind him, unfurling to their full twelve feet span and holding there, barely moving, solid and terrible.

Sam stared transfixed, the flickering light of the gathering flames glinting off each individual raven black feather, refracting into opalescence and creating an unearthly halo all around the demon.

It would have been terrifying beautiful had it not been for the fact that this was *Lucifer*.

Lucifer, who hovered only eight feet away from them.

"Sam and Dean Winchester, as I live and breathe!" the demon chortled, wings beating once so hard both boys were thrown back another step as Lucifer advanced toward them. "Well actually I do neither, but let's not bicker over semantics."

Sam just stared at him, a steely glint in his eye. And for a brief moment, Lucifer stared right on back.

Finally, the demon laughed, low and menacing. "Your Jedi mind tricks won't work on me, boy!" he told Sam, positively beaming at the reference. "Ah, Lucas," he added, shaking his head. "He always did believe good could triumph over evil. What a sap."

Sam gritted his teeth, still hyper-aware of the souls relentlessly patrolling at the edge of his consciousness, pushing, testing. When he pushed back he could feel them give ground, like a physical presence in his mind.

But Lucifer?

Sam couldn't sense Lucifer at all. Not on the instinctive level he could sense Hell's latest batch of desperate escapees.

He crinkled his brow in annoyance. What good were these freakin' abilities if he couldn't use them on the one creature he really needed to use them on?

"You keep on fumbling about in the dark there, kiddo," Lucifer taunted him, deliberately echoing Dean's earlier term of endearment. "You knew sooner or later something would have to stick!"

"Your minions can't touch me," Sam reminded him, oddly calm. "Or my brother."

"Ah yes. Your brother." Lucifer shifted his attention to Dean then, another beat of his giant wings elevating him several feet so he was looking down at them now.

Dean swallowed as he gave the door behind him another fruitless shove.

"This gift of yours," Lucifer continued, addressing Sam even as his eyes lingered on Dean. "As a rule, it only seems to kick in when he's in danger, doesn't it?"

Sam's eyes widened in alarm at the implication. "No! Don't —"

But the warning came too late, Dean suddenly finding himself yanked three feet into the air before being mercilessly slammed into the concrete wall behind him.

"Goddammit!" he swore through clenched teeth. "I'm not your goddamned sock puppet you sonofabitch!"

"Dean!" Sam made to run to Dean's aid but suddenly discovered he couldn't move, feet seemingly welded to the walkway as he helplessly watched Dean being dragged several feet up the wall, all the air temporarily knocked out of him so he couldn't even bitch about it.

"I could put him on the ceiling if you'd like," Lucifer suggested brightly, red eyes glimmering obscenely. "Light him up like a Christmas tree. If that'd make you feel more at home."

"Sonofa –" Dean managed to grunt.

"Now now," Lucifer chided him. "What would Mommy say if she heard language like that from her little boy?" He beat his wings once more, the movement propelling him upwards and closer to Dean, who flinched despite his best efforts not to.

"Mommy's little angel. You know, Haris may have been a whiny little upstart with all the personality of Swiss cheese, but he did have a certain flair for the melodramatic. I mean, torching mummies on the ceiling while their babies slept blissfully unaware below? Definitely one of his more creative ideas. Kinda wish I'd thought of it really." He eyed Dean again thoughtfully. "She was a real looker your Mom. Before she burned to ash. You remind me of her in so many ways...it'd be almost poetic if you met the same fate, wouldn't it? In honor of Haris, our fallen comrade..."

"Wait!" Sam burst out suddenly, eyes locked with Dean's as he struggled pointlessly against whatever the hell had him pinned to the wall like a bug in a display case. "Wait."

Lucifer's deep rumble of laughter once again reverberated around the room. "Come on, Sammy," he said. "Your brother's in mortal danger! Let's see some more of that little 'gift' of yours! C'mon, Sam! Just like you did with the tupilaq!" He glanced sidelong at Dean, whose focus had shifted completely to his brother, confusion clouding his features. "Oh, but you never really told Dean about *that*, did you Sammy?"

Sam's jaw tightened and he maintained a stony silence, refusing to be baited despite the wide-eyed inkling of hurt betrayal creeping across Dean's face.

Lucifer chuckled, grinning broadly. "You think what you did to that creature – what you forced it to do to its creator – you think you did that out of self-preservation, Sam? Or maybe it was part of this 'higher purpose' that Valkyrie pain-in-my-forked-tail kept insisting you have?" His grin widened, lifting up at one corner as Sam unconsciously began to grind his teeth together. "Or maybe, just maybe, the real reason you forced that crazy critter to chow down on the shaman that created it is because it tried to chow down on your brother first? Huh? Sound plausible?"

Dean was staring at him so intently Sam felt his cheeks begin to burn.

"Sam?" Dean asked at length.

Sam looked at him, an apology in his eyes, uncertain why he needed to apologize for saving his brother's life but feeling it was somehow necessary. "Dean, I didn't know what –"

"Like that lovely Alyssa girl," Lucifer interrupted, both brothers' attention whipping back to the demon. "Messed with her noggin good after she messed with Dean's, right? And Max Miller? All he did was off your brother in a *vision* and that big brain of yours was tossing furniture left right and center so you could go kick his scrawny ass! Gotta love Haris. Gotta love the *poetry* of it: give these kids all these amazing powers but absolutely no clue what to do with them. Sammy. You figure out what to do with this power of yours and you and I could be pals! I mean really! So come on. Use the Force! You know you want to!"

"Go to hell!" Sam spat, aiming for defiant as he tried to disguise the fact that he had no clue what he'd actually done to repel the assault of the displaced souls. Or the tupilaq. Or Alyssa. Or Max.

"You know, I'd love to," Lucifer beamed cordially. "But you know how it is. Places to burn, people to torture. The Earth's ripe for it. Ready. Corrupt and degenerate. To be honest, Down There was getting to be a bit of drag. Sure, Prince of Darkness, Master of the Underworld, yada yada yada. But day in day out? Sometimes even a demon needs a change of scenery. Fire, screaming, torture. Flaying, cutting, lashing. Same old same old. You know, it just wasn't as much fun anymore. Guess I needed a new challenge."

“And that’s what this is to you?” Dean finally managed to find his voice again. “A challenge?”

Lucifer raised a brow. “You? No. Your brother? Mm, maybe. The world. Oh yes. One big, delicious challenge. Pastures new.”

One more beat of his wings and he was looming over Dean, only a few feet away from him, palm held out and upwards, an orange ball of lazy flame materializing out of nowhere and just hovering there, in his palm, feet from Dean’s face as the light flickered in his eyes.

“So much like Mommy,” Lucifer cooed. “How do you see your future career as a charcoal briquette, Dean –?”

Lucifer got no further with his threat, suddenly lurching back a foot as if physically tugged from behind, wings beating furiously in order to regain his equilibrium.

He whirled on Sam, pinprick eyes blazing, but Sam just stared at him, a tiny trace of shock registering on his face.

Lucifer’s smile had slipped momentarily, but he quickly restored his sneer to its rightful place. “That’s more like it, Sammy!” he crooned. “That almost tickled.”

The next thing Sam knew, he was hurtling backwards through midair, violently crashing into the concrete wall beside his brother.

“Sammy?” Dean managed to turn his head enough to glimpse his brother, who seemed winded but largely undamaged.

“Sammy, Sammy, Sammy,” Lucifer chortled, wings beating lazily. “You were right earlier weren’t you? When you called Dean a ‘damsel in distress’?”

Both boys’ eyes shot to the demon, this time shock registering on both their faces.

“I told you I notice everything, boys,” Lucifer grinned broadly. “Thing is, Sammy, I think you must get off on it. Dean being your own personal damsel in distress. Why else would that be the only time you can ever get those sucky abilities of yours to do anything worth a crap?”

Sam made no reply, continuing to stare Lucifer out like two dogs hanging onto the same bone. It was Lucifer who gave first.

“You know if you want to win this war, Sam,” he said slowly, wings beating a little harder. “You do realize you’re going to have to get the bad guys to threaten to hurt the crap out of your big brother at every damn turn if that’s the only way you’re ever gonna get those ‘powers’ of yours to work for you?” He shook his wings as if he was shrugging his shoulders, feathers brushing Dean’s cheek as if by accident as he did so.

Dean cried out, an icy-hot pain lancing out from where the feathers touched him, and when Sam turned to look at him, a gash had opened up on his cheekbone.

“What the...?”

Lucifer laughed. “Go on, Sammy. Look, he’s bleeding! Let’s see what you can do!”

“Leave him alone!” Sam growled, Dean’s eyes widening in alarm as the demon once again brought his massive wingspan up toward him. “No!”

Lucifer stopped suddenly, body shaking in silent mirth. “Poor Sammy. Afraid of a few feathers?” He shook his wings out again, preening like a peacock. “You like these? Beautiful aren’t they? Humans always seem surprised that I should still have them, being a *fallen* angel and all. But just because I fell, doesn’t mean I can’t still fly when I want to! How else do you think I got back up here?”

“Hell spat you out ‘cause you tasted like crap?” Dean suggested, wincing slightly as the effort of speaking caused the cut to open wider on his cheek.

Lucifer actually laughed at that. “You could be right,” he agreed. “I’ve been around longer than time itself. Maybe my blood doesn’t taste as fresh as someone younger.” His eyes met Dean’s menacingly. “Someone like you, Dean. Maybe I should taste some of yours, just to find out?”

He made a sudden move toward Dean, but again found himself meeting resistance.

“Don’t touch him,” Sam growled.

"There's my boy! Proving my point as usual."

"I swear, you touch him again and I'll –"

"What? Kill me? Ooh, color me scared, Sammy."

"It's *Sam*," Dean ground out through gritted teeth. "And you damn well *should* be scared you punkass little *bitch!*"

"You talk tough for a boy pinned to a wall, Dean," Lucifer said. "I thought you already had that whole 'disguising fear with humor' conversation with Haris a while back? And you're scared right now, aren't you Dean? It's alright. You're among friends. You can admit it. You're just a little bit scared of your brother right now aren't you? Of his freaky psychic mojo?"

Dean studiously refused to look at Sam right then.

"Your silence speaks volumes. Don't you think, Sam?"

Sam didn't answer. "You know you can kill us," he said instead. "But others will just take our place. They'll put your little uprising back in the ground where it belongs so fast you'll think you're falling for a second time."

"Uprising?" Lucifer echoed. "You make me sound like some piss-poor rebellious nobody, Sam! Hell, you make me sound like *Haris*. I think I'm offended." He inched closer to Sam, wings barely moving. "This is no uprising, boy. This is war." He threw out his arms, backing away a little, once again stretching out his wings to their full span. "This is an *army*, Sam! *My* army! It's genius, don't you think? An army of devoted followers on Earth controlled by damned souls from Hell? Puppets. All of them looking for redemption. Everyone deserves a little redemption, don't they Sam? Even the most evil of us. We all want redemption. Even you, Sam. All I had to do was dangle the promise of it in front of them and they were only too happy to obey. Go possess a few sappy humans, create a little Hell on Earth. And what better place to do that than a shiny new den of iniquity like the one I'm going to build above my Hellgate? A constant stream of eager new recruits all looking for their own brand of redemption. It's one of Humanity's greatest failings, Sammy. This myth anyone can be redeemed if they truly repent. It's all predestined. *Destiny*. We all have a destiny, Sam. It's just that some of us are more willing to accept it than others."

Sam met his burning gaze coolly, icy exterior not once revealing the cracks spreading through him on the inside. "What about free will?" he demanded. "What about self-determination? Nobody has to do anything they don't want to do –"

"Like hunting? You didn't want to do that did you, Sammy? Yet you came back. After poor little Jessica. Came back to join Daddy's big bad crusade against the darkness." Lucifer inclined his head jovially. "How is John, by the way? Retiring to a condo in Florida now that Haris is dead and gone? You know, he's got quite the reputation where I come from. Quite the price on his head Down There."

Dean tensed, a muscle twitching in his cheek.

Lucifer glanced at him dismissively. "You seem surprised Daddy's Hell's Most Wanted, Dean," he said. "Don't worry though. I'll get to him in time, even if none of them do. I'll get to all of you damned hunters in time. You two? Easy pickings. Have to admit, your little bit of resistance took me a tad by surprise, Sam. But as you can see, everything is easily compensated for. Here you are. You and your brother. Maybe you weren't the challenge I'd hoped you'd be after all. Pinned to a wall. At my mercy while my army reduces your world to rubble –"

"Hate to burst your bubble, pal," Dean put in suddenly. "But those 'devoted followers' of yours don't seem to have gotten a copy of the script. You wanted all Hell to break loose on Earth, but all you got is a little zombie action and a few trashed cars. Your little demon army is tearing itself apart out there. And you'd know that. Y'know. If you noticed *everything*."

Lucifer beat his giant wings, shrugging slightly. "Acceptable losses," he said coolly. "Every general is prepared for them. Maybe not as prepared as I am. So what if a few of my troops are a little –"

“Whacked out of their gourds?” Dean offered. “They’re tearing each other apart out there! Jumping into rivers; killing themselves and each other.”

“Chaos,” Lucifer nodded. “Exactly. Oh I noticed, Dean. I know what’s happening out there, and you know what?” He spread his arms wide again. “It’s all good. Or – y’know – evil, depending on your point of view. As long as those damned souls are out there creating havoc – making a Hell on Earth – then I’m golden. I don’t need to take over the world before lunch, boys. I have nothing but time. Eternity. This is just my advance guard. A little experiment. Nothing more.”

“But it’s not the End of Days,” Sam pointed out, shifting slightly beneath the pressure on his chest. “It’s just a cheap hoax. You’re a bad con artist, that’s all. You say you notice everything, yet even now that river out there no longer runs with the blood you put in it –”

“Ah, that pesky little preacher,” Lucifer said, voice like honey. “He’s tenacious, I’ll give him that.”

Sam balked slightly, and Lucifer didn’t fail to notice.

“I see everything, Sam. I already told you that –”

“But you couldn’t stop him. You couldn’t stop him from purifying the river.”

If Lucifer was bristling, it was only visible in the sudden tautness of his wings.

“He’s just one man,” the demon pointed out, the broken glass back in his voice. “I’d like to see him fix the eternal darkness!” He laughed, more for dramatic effect than out of amusement. “One believer does not an army make, Samuel. What chance does he stand against me, against the power of Lucifer? Soon the waters of Hell will flow freely where I see fit and the human race will taste but blood and ash!”

“Swallowed that Big Book of Evangelical Clichés again, huh?” Dean observed. “Yeah, I heard that can make a person sound like an asshole.”

Lucifer just looked at him, no trace of anger in his face. “Ever been to Hell, Dean?” he asked casually. Dean glanced sideways at Sam, who was making that *Just Shut Up, Dean!* face of which he seemed so fond. “I’m not sure you’d like it down there. The temperature can be a bit up there, and, well it’s a tad humid for a place with no water. I understand the eternal thirst alone has driven people mad.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not planning any vacations right now,” Dean returned. “And if I was, I’d choose somewhere a little more beachfront, if you know what I mean.”

“But I feel so ungrateful,” Lucifer continued. “I’ve seen your home. It seems only fair I should show you mine...”

Dean gulped in a breath. “That’s okay,” he assured the demon. “I’ve been to L.A., I get the idea.”

Lucifer glided closer to them once more, the sneer back on his lips. “If you thought L.A. was scary,” he said, “you ain’t seen nothing yet. Really. I insist.”

Sam grunted in surprise as his spine lost the intimate contact it had had with the wall for the last few minutes, suddenly finding himself drifting six feet above the walkway, arms pinned tightly to his sides, his entire body completely rigid and immobile.

“Uh, Sam...?” Dean sounded vaguely panicky as he unwillingly followed his brother’s trajectory, eyes drawn down to his boots as he cleared the walkway and suddenly found himself gazing down at a dizzying thirty foot plummet beneath him.

“Oh, how thoughtless of me,” Lucifer crowed, one finger crooked as it slowly arched toward the Hellgate. “You don’t like flying do you Dean?”

Dean swallowed a string of obscenities and instead managed his customary sardonic grin. “Oh, I don’t know, this flying thing could have its upside. I mean, Superman got some half-decent chicks, right? And that was a dude wearing *tights*.”

Lucifer’s upper lip curled into a sneer. “Don’t think you’ll have much time for sins of the flesh where you’re going, Dean,” he said. “In fact, you might not have much flesh left at all by the time I’m finished with you.”

Dean’s jaw clamped shut, and Sam could tell he was barely hanging on to that grin.

“What do you want?” Sam demanded abruptly, attempting to draw the demon’s attention away from his brother for a second.

Lucifer frowned. “Peace on Earth. Goodwill to all men.” He sniggered. “I’m just kidding. What do you mean, Sam? What do I want? What do you think I want?”

“Well you can’t take us to Hell,” Sam insisted, clearly playing for time. “Not while we’re still – well – breathing.”

“Why can’t I?” Lucifer asked placidly.

“Well for starters,” Dean chimed in, still eyeing the considerable drop beneath him if Lucifer should decide to lose his concentration, “don’t we get a – a trial or something? ’Cause as far as I know we’ve not been damned to spend all eternity in the Fiery Furnace. Well not yet anyway.”

Lucifer laughed dryly. “You forget who’s in control here, boys,” he crowed. “Just because you’re not damned – yet – doesn’t mean anyone’s going to intercede on your behalf. If you think it does then you’re as deluded as those poor saps down there who really believe they’re escaping to salvation!”

“You’ll never gain the respect of an army if you lie to them all the time,” Sam pointed out.

“Who needs respect?” Lucifer demanded. “What do I need with respect? I need chaos! Violence! Anguish and death! Why would I crave respect? You’re attributing human desires to someone who clearly isn’t human, Sammy. It’s going to be the death of you.”

“Sam,” Dean muttered, glancing from Lucifer to the sinkhole, which was growing ever closer the further they drifted out over the sea of roiling blood. “I think Philosophy 101’s gonna have to wait, man. Mortal danger here! Could do with some of that SuperSammy Kerpow action right about now! Any time you feel like it, dude.”

Sam knew they were in trouble but he just didn’t know what to do about it. As far as his powers were concerned, it was all about instinct and very little about control. As much as he hated to admit it, Lucifer actually seemed to have hit the nail on the head when he pointed out Sam’s psychic whatever-it-was only tended to kick in when Dean was in danger.

Instinct.

If Sam could just work out how to control it, to harness it, to use it when *he* decided to use it...

He was focusing so hard on trying to sense Lucifer, sense his power the way he had Alyssa’s, or the souls still whirling around them in dizzying circles, that it took him a second to realize he’d stopped moving.

Glancing down, he drew in a sharp breath as the flames surrounding the sinkhole parted, and suddenly he was looking straight down into the maw of Hell itself, blood and fire and darkness, suspended in midair, completely helpless and at the mercy of Lucifer himself. He swore he could hear the sound of distant wailing, souls screaming in utter agony, cries of terror, pitiful pleas for mercy. *Help us! Help us!*

He tried to close his ears, tried to close his eyes, but he could do neither, could merely listen as the sounds of Hell rose up all around him, and he prayed he and his brother would never have to experience such a place in person.

Dean himself appeared less than happy, only a couple of feet away from Sam but a little closer to the sinkhole, the flames closing in around him as the bubbling blood reached crimson fingers up toward his boots.

Don’t look down, a little voice in Sam’s head chanted over and over, and yet still all he could focus on was fire and blood, dark red liquid churning at the mouth of the sinkhole, flames licking at the rim of blasted concrete as more and more blood continued to ooze up out of the giant hole.

“I hope you brought sun block,” Lucifer said from somewhere over Sam’s shoulder. “Not that either of you will ever see the sun again. Although you boys could probably use a little color in your cheeks right about now.”

"You can't do this," Sam informed the demon through gritted teeth. "There are rules –"

"My Hell, my rules," Lucifer countered, spinning Sam to face him as firelight glinted over his white teeth. "What good's a two-way Gateway to Hell if you're only going to use it to get out?"

"Sonofa –" Dean tried to kick out as his feet skimmed the oozing surface of the bloody pool, soles of his boots dripping gory red. He turned his gaze back up to Sam, whose eyes, reflecting the scarlet firelight, appeared momentarily as red as the blood beneath them. Not for the first time Dean seemed afraid of something that wasn't Lucifer. "Sam," he said shakily. "I think maybe we could use that miracle right about now."

Slowly, the blood beneath Dean's feet began to swirl around him, gradually picking up speed until it was a giddy whirlpool of ever decreasing circles leading down, down, down toward the Hellgate, a cone of red twisting only into total darkness.

As Lucifer's bellowing laugh rang out around them, the encircling flames shot higher, and higher, reaching up once more for the ceiling as the demon slowly paused for a breath he didn't need to take.

"All too easy."

"Dean!" Sam's breath caught in his throat as he brother dropped like a stone toward the Hellgate, and he was suddenly aware of gravity and motion and Dean's weight and darkness like cloying quicksand.

Dean's unexpected plummet halted abruptly, feet and legs already swallowed by the entrance to the Hellgate, and Sam swore he could hear his brother's heart hammering even as he made a noise that sounded very much like a strangled squeak.

Lucifer's laughter continued unabated. "Come on, Sammy. You can do better than that."

"Sam." Dean's eyes skittered around the wall of blood and flame rising up on every side of him before darting up to find his brother's, asking for help without saying a word.

Dean dropped another foot, halting again as Sam crushed his eyes closed and tried to think of nothing but stillness and solid ground beneath their feet, even as a distant rumbling noise caught the edge of his hearing.

"Why do I suddenly feel like a chew toy?" Dean muttered to himself over the roar of whatever awaited him on the other side of the Hellgate and the increasing rumble of something else; something beyond the sinkhole and the blood and the fire and his little brother trying desperately to access a hidden part of his brain that might prevent them both from plunging straight into Hell.

"Dean, hold on!" Sam instructed his brother, scrunching up his eyes in concentration, vaguely aware of the rumbling around them, a slight shake to the concrete floor.

"Sam I think it's *you* that needs to hold on!" Dean returned, mild panic creeping into his usually stoic voice. "Seriously, dude! Hell's gonna play havoc with my complexion!"

"Comedian to the last, huh Dean?" Lucifer glared down at him, wings beating rhythmically, slow and measured. "Let's see how funny you find red hot poker and pitchforks shall we?"

"My dad warned me about places like that," Dean snickered nervously, somehow managing to keep the quiver out of his voice. "But I'm really not into that S and M stuff."

"Oh Dean. You don't know the half of it, boy. Believe me, you're gonna be real popular Down There."

Dean's defiant grin slipped a little, eyes darting to Sam, who himself suddenly started to plummet toward the Hellgate.

“Crap.” He halted a couple of feet higher than Dean, who had slipped right into the Gateway, an insistent tug at his ankles as the smell of sulfur and ash became almost unbearable.

“Uh, Sammy? This ain’t lookin’ so good...”

“Dean – I can’t – I don’t know how –”

Their eyes locked just as the distant rumbling became a thunderous roar, and beyond the rim of the Gateway water suddenly exploded from every pipe in the cavernous room, raining down onto the bloody pool as the floor began to shake violently.

Blood hissed as water made contact, huge plumes of steam shooting up toward the ceiling.

Lucifer’s blood red eyes widened and for a second time seemed to stop, droplets of water splashing as if in slow motion onto his wings and his skin, hissing and steaming as he threw back his head and let loose a guttural scream of agony and anger as his flesh began to sizzle like meat on a barbecue.

“Noooooooooooo!” he howled, holding red raw hands up to the heavens as more and more water poured down into the room, an echoing wail of agony and despair welling up all around them as the dispossessed souls screeched out in anguished pain.

“What’s wrong, bright eyes?” Dean asked, relief flooding his voice. “Getting a little hot up there for you?”

“What did you do?” Lucifer spat, darting toward the opening of the Hellgate, wings beating furiously as steam continued to rise from each feather, eyes narrowed in pain and fury.

“That ‘one man’?” Sam explained, grinning triumphantly. “That single believer, the preacher who purified the river? Remember him?”

Water continued to pour into the room, the blood beginning to wash backwards toward the sinkhole, steaming and hissing as the flames guttered and died all around them.

“What about him?” Lucifer’s voice hissed almost as violently as his sizzling skin.

“Holy water,” Sam explained. “Just like when he blessed the river.”

“One man, one river. There’s plenty more –”

“Did we mention we know a guy who works at the local water processing plant?” Dean added, grin back to its full wattage. “Introduced the preacher to a whole helluva lot of water up there.”

“Soon every water source you tainted will be cleansed,” Sam added. “And your ‘End of Days’ will be over.”

“Still think we’re easy?” Dean asked casually, grinning maniacally despite his still-precarious situation.

Lucifer’s face contorted in fury as more and more water poured into the room, flushing the concrete clean of all traces of blood, the water flooding into the sinkhole with an audible hiss.

And then there was an ominous silence.

Not a single sound emanated from the Hellgate beneath them; no screaming, no wailing, no begging. Nothing.

“You don’t even know what you’ve done,” Lucifer growled into the silence. “You don’t even *know* –”

A low rumble began deep in the earth beneath them, slowly growing in intensity as holy water continued to pour down into the Hellgate.

Sam looked up, the rim of the sinkhole beginning to tremble, the walls above them shaking visibly as pipes rattled and the metal walkway swayed dangerously.

“You don’t even know what you’ve done.”

“Uh, Sam,” Dean said slowly, as pieces of masonry started to shake loose from the high ceiling, raining down onto the concrete floor as more and more holy water flooded into the chamber, into the sinkhole. Into Hell itself.

The rumbling grew louder, closer, pipes loosening themselves from the walls as a section of walkway tore loose and clattered to the ground with a sickening screech.

Lucifer surveyed the shaking room, flesh and feathers still steaming and sizzling in the blessed downpour, grinding his teeth as the light in his eyes flashed orange.

"You think this is over?" he hissed, swooping down toward the brothers, inches from Sam, wings beating furiously. "Your little parlor tricks won't save you from this. You and your brother are Hellbound however hard you fight it and when I get you Down There you'll wish your *parents* had never been born! You two had better keep looking over your shoulders because one of these days I'll be looking back at you."

With that, Lucifer twisted into a dive straight down into the depths of Hell as the walls of the sinkhole shook violently, rock and dirt, holy water and lost souls raining down in his wake.

Dean let out a yell as he was unceremoniously released from Lucifer's grip and gravity took over, and Sam was suddenly aware of falling fast and hard, rock walls speeding past his vision as he prepared himself for the longest fall he was ever likely to make.

Then he stopped.

Looking up, his eyes met Dean's, his big brother hanging on to his wrist as if his life – both their lives – depended on it.

"Don't let go, Sammy!" Dean yelled, and Sam followed his gaze as he turned to look upward, up to where his right hand was clinging to an outcropping of rock, fingers digging desperately into sandstone.

Sam brought his other hand up with an effort, grabbing hold of Dean's wrist and hanging on with every bit of strength he had left. "Not if you don't let go first," Sam managed to yell back. *Don't look down, don't look down...*

Suddenly there was a sound like a distant explosion, the rumbling becoming a full-on quake as jets of steam shot up from the Hellgate, hot wind curling around them, tearing at them, trying to pull them down.

Sam cried out as he and Dean were slammed into the side of the sinkhole, his fingers slipping as invisible hands tore at his body and chunks of plaster and piping rained down from above.

"Don't let go!" Dean screamed again, grunting as something stronger than gravity seemed determined to drag them both down into Hell, but somehow managing to keep his hold on both the sinkhole wall and his brother.

Gradually the jets of steam retreated back to the Hellish depths from which they had escaped, but the quaking continued, the room above them shaking itself to pieces as Sam, breathing hard, managed to find his own handhold on the sinkhole wall, lessening the burden on his brother, whose arm looked like it might pop out of its socket at any minute.

"Sammy," Dean gasped, still hanging on to Sam's wrist even though his brother had managed to find a foothold. "Now would be a really good time for you to break it to me your weird-ass superpowers include flying, dude."

Sam shook his head, finding another handhold. "Sorry. But if you want to stop holding my hand for a second we might be able to climb out of here the old fashioned way."

As satisfied as he could be that Sam had a decent hold on the sinkhole wall, Dean reluctantly let go of him, setting about making his own way out of the Hellgate.

It would have been easier if the walls and the ground above them hadn't been shaking so hard, Sam observed, as he made slow progress toward the rim of the sinkhole. His hands were wet from the continued downpour of holy water and the rock was slippery, and every now and then something dislodged from the room above them and smashed into the wall, narrowly missing valuable body parts on several occasions.

Dean reached the top first, hauling himself up and over the rim before reaching down for his brother.

Sam took his proffered hand gratefully, allowing Dean to help pull him up the last foot until the two of them collapsed atop the sinkhole, trying to breathe as each surveyed the damage around them.

"We need to go," Dean observed, the flood of holy water lessened considerably, but the ground, the walls and the ceiling still shaking themselves to pieces. "Now, dude."

Sam nodded, hauling himself to his feet just as a crack widened where he'd just been slumped and a huge chunk of concrete snapped off and fell into the sinkhole.

"Which way?" he asked, trying not to think about what would have happened if he hadn't moved when Dean told him to.

Dean took stock of the shuddering room around them as huge cracks began to snake up the walls and sparks rained down on them as electrical conduits shorted. "Same way we came in," he decided, pointing to the pipe where they first emerged into the waste processing room.

Sam nodded, following Dean's lead as he made a run for it, a loud crack above them causing them both to duck instinctively as a huge chunk of ceiling broke loose and came crashing down on top of the Hellgate, partially blocking the opening.

"Dean, I don't think the holy water can be all that's causing this –" Sam began, picking up the pace as he dashed after his brother.

Dean jumped into the entrance to the pipe, turning and waiting for Sam to join him. "We can talk theology later," Dean told him, as if plucking the thought that had just occurred to Sam right out of his head.

Sam nodded, turning back toward the sinkhole as another thunderous crack shook the room, the entire ceiling seeming to come down in one almighty crash, effectively stopping up the Eighth Gateway to Hell just as the last of the dispossessed souls swirled back down from where they'd come.

"Let's get the hell outta here!" Dean yelled, ending on a splutter as plaster dust bloomed into the pipe from the collapsing ceiling. Grabbing Sam's arm, he began to run, Sam keeping pace despite the cramped quarters, the darkness and the slippery metal beneath their feet.

Behind them it sounded as if the world was coming to an end, the battered metal all around them vibrating as the rock surrounding it shuddered and shook and more debris from the disintegrating structure above them collapsed into the entrance to the pipe in their wake.

Sam had never felt as relieved as when he saw a glimmer of light up ahead of them, the brothers scrambling toward it as the sound of the former cannery collapsing in on itself some way above their heads chased them the length of their would-be escape route.

Once they reached the end of the trembling pipe, Dean virtually threw himself out onto the riverbank, Sam close on his heels, both hitting the ground running and neither turning back to survey the site of Luciano Ferinacci's erstwhile new pleasure complex until they were safely a quarter mile away.

Only then, standing on the sodden riverbank, clothes once again dripping with an odd combination of blood and holy water, did they finally stop running across the juddering ground and turn to look at the devastation they had left behind them.

What they saw was a whole new level of destruction that was impressive, even by Winchester standards.

The old cannery building was busy self-destructing, thick concrete walls quaking to their very foundations as the rock below bucked and crumbled, the whole structure collapsing in on itself with an eerie howl reminiscent of the screams of tortured souls filtering up through the Hellgate and into the world, where the only sympathetic ears to hear had been powerless to help.

A mushroom cloud of smoke and debris blossomed up into the inky black late afternoon sky as the building finally gave up the ghost completely, and Sam knew it would be some time, both literally and figuratively, before the dust settled on this one.

As soon as the building finally crumpled the earth beneath them seemed to cease its quaking, a deathly quiet descending on the river and the surrounding area, and the stunned people still standing along the riverbank holding their collective breath.

Dean turned his face up to the sky as a gentle rain began to fall, the pitter-patter of the raindrops oddly soothing in the unnatural silence.

The sudden screech of the last remaining guard at the pleasure complex's front gate startled both brothers out of their contemplative reverie, splitting the quiet air in two before the man collapsed into a quivering heap in the mud at his feet, the implications of what that signified were almost inconceivable.

"It's raining holy water?" Dean glanced up at Sam, who turned his own face upwards, tasting the rain sweet on his tongue. "How is that even possible?" Dean pressed. "Sam?"

"I thought you didn't want to talk theology?"

Dean just blinked at him, before laughing a little uncertainly. "Nah, Sammy!" he burst out. "Come on! You're not serious?"

Sam turned toward him, wiping the rain from his face on the sleeve of his damp jacket. "Look at that building, Dean," he said, gesturing at the pile of rubble that had once been a cannery. "We may have gotten Malik to talk Preacher Warriner into blessing all the water at the processing plant," he said, "and we may have gotten him to max out the old cannery's water pressure," he continued. "But no way, no way did we cause an earthquake, no matter how much we'd like to believe it. Don't tell me you seriously think we were responsible for bringing down that building and blocking the Hellgate?"

"So what's the alternative?" Dean asked. "You said it yourself, Sammy, it was an earthquake, nothing more, nothing less."

"Pretty conveniently-timed earthquake, Dean."

"So we were lucky."

"When do we ever get that lucky?"

Dean screwed up his face as he tried desperately to think of an example. "Uh –" stumbled. "Well – there was – okay I got nothing. Doesn't mean the fairies saved our asses –"

"I wasn't talking about *fairies*, Dean –"

"Angels, fairies. Whatever."

"It's raining *holy water*, Dean!"

"It's still dark, Sam!"

"You sure about that?" Sam gestured toward the distant horizon where pale gold fingers of light were beginning to feel their way across the midnight-black sky.

Dean didn't say anything for a good couple of minutes, and when he finally opened his mouth Sam abruptly cut him off.

"You say 'coincidence' and I'll throw you off that bridge again."

Dean huffed, crossing his arms across his chest sullenly. "I was gonna say you screamed like a little girl back there."

"At least I didn't squeak."

Main Street, Leicester, MA

Watery late afternoon sunlight had washed the sky a pale turquoise by the time Dean pulled the Impala into Leicester's town center.

The place still looked like the set of a Charlton Heston movie, vehicles of varying sizes and degrees of destruction abandoned in odd places all over the roads and the sidewalks. An SUV had crashed through the plate glass of the local Starbucks, scattering glass and cardboard cups all over the place, while a gaggle of dazed onlookers had gathered outside the police station, all gazing distractedly at darkened windows in the hopes that someone would come out and tell them what to do.

A couple of shell-shocked patrol officers stood shaking their heads at a police cruiser parked atop a gushing fire hydrant outside the copy shop, water cascading down Main Street and creating an almost perfect rainbow from one side of the road to the other.

No children splashed around in the impromptu fountain, not like Dean remembered him and Sam doing when they were kids and had come across such wonders of crap-ass engineering. Instead they seemed as out of it as their parents, the vast majority of Leicester's inhabitants wandering around aimlessly, wondering how the hell they got there and why they seemed to have a gaping hole where their memory ought to be.

"Hey, you found your brother!" Brenda, the sugar plantation-owning diner waitress, lifted a hand toward them as she hung out of one of the diner's broken windows.

"You remember that?" Sam strode across the street toward her, leaving Dean little choice but to follow, although he wasn't entirely sure what Sam was actually asking the girl.

She blinked false eyelashes reminiscent of crane flies at him, staring at him blankly. "You were looking for him," she told him a little hesitantly. "Earlier."

"Earlier?" Sam seized on the word. "And you remember that?"

Brenda shrugged. "Yeah sure," she said, but shook her head as she said it, confusion clouding her face. "Maybe."

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I found him," he said, turning to Dean before heading off along the street without a second glance at Brenda. "Thanks for your help with that," he tossed back over his shoulder.

Dean frowned at Sam's dismissal of the girl, smiling an apologetic little smile at her which she returned with a lascivious smirk that was anything *but* apologetic. "Glad to see you're feeling better," he told her, grinning back in an almost Pavlovian reaction to any pretty girl who looked at him that way. Before he could even take a step toward her, however, Sam grabbed his arm and pulled him away down the sidewalk. "Hey," he protested. "I distinctly remember us having a discussion about *personal space*, Sammy!"

Sam halted, suddenly turning to his brother. "You remember anything else?" he demanded.

For a second Dean couldn't read the expression on his brother's face, taking an unintentional step backwards that was anything but subtle. "Like – what?" he faltered uncertainly.

"Like when that – that *soul* had control of you?" Sam clarified, his voice speeding up a little impatiently.

"Sam –"

"Where did you go, Dean? Before the bridge? Where were you? What did it make you do?"

Dean's brow creased a little. "Why, Sam?" he asked. "What does it matter? And what makes you think it made me *do* anything?"

"Dean, it tried to make you kill yourself!"

"Exactly," Dean agreed, although he wasn't entirely sure what he was agreeing to. "I wasn't in control –"

"No you weren't." Sam nodded. "And we don't know who really was, do we? That dead farmer whose memories you shared, or – or Lucifer."

"Sam –"

"Dean, if you remember what you did – where you went – maybe we could get a better idea of what Lucifer's big plan was here! What the point was of all of this."

"He told us his 'big plan,' Sammy," Dean insisted. "Chaos! I don't think he *had* a plan beyond that!"

Sam shook his head. "No. There's gotta be more to it than that. This was a pretty elaborate stunt just to cause a little civil unrest –"

"You call *this* 'civil unrest?'"

“– In a town that probably won’t be any more than a blip on the local evening news tonight.”

Dean considered that. “He said it was a test,” he recalled.

“A test for what?” Sam asked. “The *real* End of Days?”

Dean swallowed. “This ain’t the End of the World, Sam –”

“And *do* you remember what you were doing before the bridge?”

Dean’s stomach twisted into a whole series of knots. “No,” he admitted eventually. “Not until the bridge. Not until I saw you. I don’t know where I was or what I was doing.”

“And why is that, huh?” There was an edge of desperation in Sam’s voice. “Why could this thing get control of you when Haris’ shiniest Hellspawn couldn’t? Huh?” It was as if Sam expected Dean to have answers the way Dean had always had answers when they were younger.

Dean glanced down at the amulet for a second, no answers forthcoming. “Maybe this thing just protects me from demons –”

“And maybe next time Lucifer could walk you off the top of the Empire State Building!”

“Sam, you’re over-reacting to this –”

“Over-reacting?” Sam suddenly turned and grabbed Dean’s shoulders so hard the older brother winced. “You could have *died*, Dean!”

“Yeah, but I didn’t –”

“You could have *died* because *he* wanted to make a point!”

So *that* was what this was all about? “Huh?” Dean frowned, unable to shake the impression Sam was getting his panties in a bunch over a whole lot more than Lucifer managing to play Puppetmaster with big brother. “Sammy, what –”

“Were you scared?”

The sudden shift in gears left Dean feeling he was rapidly losing his grip on this conversation. If he and Sam were even having the same conversation. “Scared?” he clarified. “When?”

“When Lucifer had you dangling over that Hellgate like bait on a hook.”

Dean shifted his feet, mildly embarrassed. “You were dangling too –”

“Dean.”

Dean knew that tone of voice. Any minute now he was gonna get the bitchface. “What?”

“Were you scared?” Sam repeated the question with a roll of his eyes punctuated by an exhale, and Dean could see his little brother was rapidly losing his patience.

“Sam, I thought I was about to take the express elevator to Hell!” he burst out. “Minus the elevator!” He shifted uncomfortably, eyes downcast. “Of course I was scared.”

Even that admission didn’t seem to satisfy his brother.

“No,” Sam said shortly, eyes averted, just as Dean’s had been. “Not of that.” He took a breath. “Of me. Were you scared of me?”

Dean felt like a light bulb just exploded in front of his eyes at the exact same moment someone ripped out his guts with a soup spoon. “Sammy, what – what the hell are you talking about?” He knew what Sam was talking about. He knew only too well. But he needed to hear Sam say it.

“Dean,” Sam still wouldn’t look him in the eye. “What I did – what he *made* me do –”

“Saving my ass you mean?”

Sam finally met Dean’s gaze. “He used you. To get to me. To see what – what I could do with – with whatever the hell Haris left behind in my head.”

“Damsel in distress?” Dean smiled crookedly, but it didn’t quite meet his eyes.

“Dean –”

"I get it, okay, I'm not blind," Dean continued. "What Lucifer said – about your abilities only seeming to kick in when someone's trying to kill me? He was testing you, right? Pushing you?"

Sam nodded minutely, looking up at Dean through lowered lashes like a sulky six-year-old. A pretty terrified sulky six-year-old.

"But you pushed back," Dean continued. "Huh? Used his own power against him? Like Alyssa. And Max. And whatever the hell you did to those body-snatchers back there."

Sam nodded again reluctantly.

"And the tupilaq?" Dean pushed hesitantly. "That's what you did to the tupilaq and the shaman up in Canada, huh? That's how come the shaman ended up with his throat on the outside?"

"I didn't mean to," Sam blurted, absolute agony in his eyes. "I never meant to kill anyone, Dean! You gotta believe me! If I'd known what would happen – what the tupilaq would do..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

"Sammy, that guy had it coming!"

"But what if – what if Lucifer's trying to pick up where Haris left off? Trying to make me into – something – whatever Haris was trying to make me into? What if –"

"Sammy." Dean put a hand on his brother's neck, stilling his anxious movements and forcing him to look at him. "Dude, chill. We already had this conversation, remember? Whatever happens with these superpowers of yours, you're not gonna turn into Darth Vader, okay?"

"How do you *know* that?"

"Because I know *you*, Sammy! You don't have it in you to go Darkside! Sure, you can get pretty damn dark when you want to – especially when your freaky telekinesis thing is stopping Lucifer from dropping me into Hell! But Sam, you don't *need* someone to stop you going Darkside because *you'd* never let it happen! Okay? Whatever I may have said to the contrary in the past, you're a good person, Sammy. And good people don't just up and turn evil overnight. Not even in our family. Sam, if it wasn't for this 'gift' of yours I'd be roasting my ass off in the Fiery Furnace right about now! Now sure, some people might not agree with you, but I for one think that's a good thing. You did a good thing, Sammy!"

Sam looked up at him, a glimmer of hope in his darkened eyes. "Yeah?"

"Damn straight! You did the female population of the world a huge favor keeping me around!" He grinned big. "Oh, and of course there was that little averting the Apocalypse thing, too."

"Oh yeah," Sam cracked a small smile. "That."

"Plus," Dean added, "you ever get the urge to shove me in a pit of molten lava and start walking around in a black plastic Halloween mask, leather jumpsuit and cape, you know I'll kick your ass all over town."

Sam actually laughed softly at that, some of the tension retreating from his eyes as Dean caught his shoulders and turned him back toward Main Street.

"Now stop being a little girl and come thank Malik for helping us kick Lucifer's scaly butt, huh?"

Dean inclined his head toward the next street corner, where the engineer was lingering at the rear of a small crowd gathering around a beat-up flatbed Ford.

He turned when he saw them, beaming brightly as they approached.

"Hey!" he greeted them, throwing open his arms to indicate the town around him. "We saved the world!"

"And not a single cheerleader in sight," Dean agreed, before adding, "More's the pity."

Malik caught his hand and shook it vigorously before repeating the maneuver with Sam. "When I heard about the plant –" He whistled. "I thought you two were hamburger meat for sure!"

Sam laughed at that. "Hellgates and collapsing buildings?" he said. "All in a day's work for us."

Malik nodded. "I'm starting to get that." He inclined his head behind him, to where Preacher Warriner was climbing up onto the bed of the truck. "And so's he."

"The Lord has delivered us from evil!" Warriner began to inform the crowd animatedly. "He spoke and the ground trembled! He spoke and the Devil cowered in fear! He brought rains from the heavens to cleanse us – sunlight to warm us – instruments of His will to protect us –" the preacher was looking right at them as he said this, "and the evil spirits within us were gone! He shook the world to its foundation and the Beast was cast back down into the Pit where he belongs! We are saved because God wills it so! Pray with me, neighbors..."

"Wow, he got a lot of new material outta this thing," Dean observed.

"And a lot of people to try it out on," Malik agreed. "Thanks to you guys. We pumped enough holy water into the local water table and the reservoir so that pretty much everyone from here to Worcester should be straightened out by now –"

"Worcester!" Sam burst out. "Rosa! The doctor at the hospital there – I hope she's –"

"They're back open to trauma cases," Malik informed him. "So I guess the folks there must be okay."

Sam breathed a sigh of relief, once again shaking Malik's hand. "Listen, thanks again, man," he said sincerely.

"Couldn't o' done a thing without you guys."

"We owe you a beer," Dean told him. "Hell, we owe you a *keg* of beer!"

Malik frowned slightly, seeming a little disappointed. "You guys not sticking around?" There was something in Dean's tone that suggested he wasn't going to be sharing that keg with him.

"No," both brothers said simultaneously.

"You think we want the blame for destroying a multi-million dollar development site?" Dean asked. "Nah man, we're outta here before Smokey spots the out-of-towners and hauls us into jail just for the hell of it!"

Malik nodded. "Understandable," he said.

"You take care," Sam told him, nodding gratefully at him before he and Dean turned back in the direction of where they'd left the Impala.

"You too."

"Oh we always do," Dean assured him, as he and Sam made to head on out. "Except when we don't and Lucifer tries to drop us into Hell," he added under his breath.

"Nobody's perfect," Sam told him, grinning as the sound of Warriner's sermon began to recede into background noise.

"Maybe the Preacher's right though," Dean grinned up at him. "Maybe you're – like – an instrument of God or something – smiting the wicked. You always did look the smiting type."

"Shut up."

"Better than being Lucifer's bitch."

Sam had to agree on that one. "Yeah, I guess."

"This could be inconvenient though," Dean continued.

"Huh?"

"Your SuperSammy superpowers only kicking in when someone wants to kill me."

Sam snickered, shoving his brother playfully with one shoulder. "Oh I dunno," he said. "I wanna kill you myself ninety-nine percent of the time so I think maybe this could work for us."

Dean grimaced up at him. "I'll remember that next time we're about to fall through a Gateway to Hell and your humungous ass is pulling my arm outta its socket."

"Yeah, you do that," Sam advised him, before glancing sideways at him. "And stop calling me 'SuperSammy'."

“Huh?”

Sam grinned just a little. “It’s ‘Super*Sam*’.”

The End