

Episode Seven: Love Bites By SnSam & Tree

Small ranch outside Marathon, Texas

Jasper Whitiker lifted the brim of the cowboy hat from his head and ran the back of his sleeve across his forehead wiping away the sweat. Even at night, the West Texas air was still warm enough to be uncomfortable. Add to that the sticky humidity of the incoming storm and the fact that Whitiker had spent the better part of the day putting up bales of hay, and his body was well past the point of being gritty and trail worn.

A distant flash of lightning lit up the night sky and the rancher spotted his small herd just ahead, milling around a small clump of Ash trees.

“Stupid cattle,” he muttered, replacing the hat and spurring his Quarter Horse forward. “Pick a spot, lie down and just wait for the damn lightning to turn you into well-done steaks.”

The small-time rancher grunted in frustration. Unlike the big operators back toward Dallas, he was just barely scraping by on a tiny chunk of acreage passed on to him by his father. The land wasn't fertile, no lush green fields for his herd to feed from, no crystal clear streams that ran cold and free year round. Instead, Whitiker barely clung to a hundred acres of rough scrub, hit and miss water holes, and about fifty head of mixed Black Angus and Longhorns that were bound and determined to get themselves killed long before they ever made it to the slaughterhouse.

It seemed like the only thing that thrived in west Texas were rattlesnakes and coyotes, and maybe his cheating ex-wife, although Jasper was fairly certain that MaryKate belonged to one of those first two categories.

Still, the land was his, free and clear. Even though he lived in what others might consider a ramshackle house, it was his and no one could take that away from him. Like the herd, he wasn't about to lose it to a storm or an ex-wife.

In the darkness, the screech of some predator echoed across the west Texas landscape, startling Jasper's horse and causing the herd to stir nervously. The haggard rancher cast a wary look around, noting the faint glow on the horizon from the lights back in Marathon.

Maybe I'll head into Buck's for a cold one once I get these boys back safe and sound, he mused. Then again, MaryKate's sure to be trotting her cheatin' ass around there with Toby and Lord knows I'll end up havin' to kick his ass again...

Nearing the herd, another flash of lightning was followed by an even closer call of a wild animal. Convinced that it was nothing more than a coyote and not likely to bother him with the incoming storm, but not willing to take any chances, Jasper pulled the Marlin 1894 rifle from the boot strapped to his saddle, cocked it and held it at ready in his right hand while transferring the reins to his left. Directing the horse towards the nearest of the herd, he whistled in an attempt to get the lethargic steers moving back in the direction of the house.

“Hee-yah, come on', let's go boys,” he coaxed, pushing the horse through the mass of cattle.

At first, the cows moved slowly, ambling forward like they were in no great rush to obey Whitiker's command. But as he cut his chestnut gelding back through the black mass of beef, Jasper noticed that some of the steers at the edge of the herd had begun to dart off in various directions.

Before he had a chance to consider the implications, a third high-pitched yowl sounded dangerously near. With only one hand holding the reins to the horse, Jasper was unprepared when the powerful steed reared up in terror.

“Whoa boy, whoa there,” he begged as his vision was filled with the darkness of the cloud-filled night sky.

The gelding continued to buck, its nostrils flaring as it could sense what its rider could not. In the end, the beast won, dislodging the rancher, and dashing off into the darkness.

Landing hard on the ground, Jasper was momentarily dazed, suddenly feeling every muscle and joint in his fifty year old body. He pushed up from the dirt, grabbing his hat and replacing it on his head before twirling around to look for his misplaced rifle.

Around him, the cattle stirred more vigorously, brushing into him and nearly knocking Whitiker back down to the ground in their rush to move away from the perceived threat. Retrieving his rifle, the rancher cast a final glance in the direction that his horse had bolted then turned back to the herd, determined to still bring them despite being on foot.

"Damn it, Dusty!" he cursed. "Good thing you're already a gelding."

With the rifle in one hand, Whitiker began to circle the cattle, whistling and clicking his tongue while he swatted at the rough hides. It would be a long walk back to the house and barn, but Jasper was determined not to lose any of the herd.

"Come on cows, let's move, hee-yah, move up thar'."

Briefly satisfied that the herd was moving in the general direction of the ranch, Jasper stiffened as a rough wind whipped up the loose earth, driving it into the Texan's face. He dipped his head down, sheltering it against the gritty abuse and perplexed by the strange hint of sulfur that filled his nostrils, as though someone had just struck a match.

Over his shoulder, one of the steer bellowed in pain and the others quickly shied away from it, their simple minds set only to self-preservation. Whitiker brought the rifle up to his shoulder, scanning the herd for any sign of a predator.

Taking a cautious step forward, he spotted the downed steer; the animal still struggling to rise, its brown eyes flashing wide in panic even in the darkness. Whitiker knelt beside the steer, running his hand along the creature's body and looking for signs of injury. As his hand reached the animal's flanks, he felt a patch of sticky warmth.

"What the hell?" he muttered, raising his hand closer to observe the thick blood coating his fingers.

Behind him, another steer bawled in pain while others around it cried out in bovine terror. Whitiker spun, searching for a target but settling for simply firing a round into the air, hoping the noise would scare the predator away. As the herd scattered, he quickly fired another shot, dashing toward the second downed steer.

Worse than the first, the rancher had to turn away from the sight of the mutilated animal, its belly torn open as though someone had slashed at it repeatedly with a machete. Sickened by the smell of blood and freshly exposed intestines, Jasper stifled back a gag. He sucked in a deep breath, hoping that the night air would clear the nauseous smell that was threatening to make him vomit, but instead, his nostrils were assailed by the overwhelming stench of sulfur.

Still not willing to submit to the panic teasing the back of his mind and setting the hairs on the nape of his neck on end, Whitiker, pulled the neckerchief up around his nose and mouth, trying to block the disgusting odor. He redoubled his efforts to collect his stock, a task that had become even more difficult now that the creatures were nearly ready to break into a stampede.

As Whitiker skirted around the edge of the moving cattle, he stumbled across two more slaughtered animals. Tightening his finger on the trigger of the Marlin, the rancher could only stare incredulously as a set of red eyes blinked at him from behind the body of one of the steer. :

"What in the Sam Hill is that?" he mouthed, taking aim with the rifle, still determined to defend his dwindling herd.

Just before his index finger could squeeze the trigger, something slammed into Whitiker's back, driving him forward. Fighting to maintain a grip on the rifle, he

staggered ahead as red-hot pain lanced between his shoulder blades. Something solid struck his side and a similar agony joined the sensations flaying at the flesh on his back.

Stumbling now, battling to stay on his feet, Whitiker could feel his flesh being torn apart by sharp claws and even shaper fangs, his clothing offering no protection against the attack of the predators that had devastated his herd and now seemed intent on finishing him as well. Dropping to his knees, he saw even more red eyes peering at him from the surrounding darkness.

The smell of sulfur was so strong now that even the cover over the lower half of his face couldn't block it out. But that was the least of his concerns as the coppery taste of blood began to fill his mouth. Jasper could feel his heart pounding in his chest, the wild thrum of it duplicated in his ears. He wasn't a man that frightened easily, but as he felt teeth sinking into the back of his neck, deep down he knew his fate was sealed just like his livestock.

Crawling forward on his belly, blood coursing from the ribbons of tattered flesh that hung from his body, Whitiker could finally see his attackers. Small and compact, the creatures looked like a cross between hairless wild dogs and oversized rodents. Combined with the red eyes and fangs, Whitiker had never in all his years of ranch-life seen anything like the hideous looking things that were now swarming all over him.

Vaguely, he could hear more of his cattle screaming as the strange beasts attacked them.

"Get...away... from... my... herd..." he choked out defiantly, blood frothing from his mouth in between each gasped word.

Barely able to raise his head as yet another of the creatures launched at Jasper's face, the rancher succumbed to the onslaught, as the feeding-frenzy began in earnest. He tried to scream; pain, defiance, and anger at how life had seen fit to treat him, all culminating in one final primal yell. Before the noise could escape his mouth however, gleaming fangs plunged into his throat, tearing back and forth until nothing but a weak gurgle of blood sounded across the West Texas night.

Karla's Suds and Buds – Laundromat and Bar Somerville, Tennessee

Sam sat with his back propped against one of the commercial-sized washing machines as he killed time working on a Sudoku online. Across from him, Mia sat absently turning pages through a tattered copy of *Car and Driver*. The laundromat was empty otherwise, everyone else electing to pass the time in the "other" half of the establishment, much like Dean had chosen to do.

The younger Winchester looked up from his laptop, bored with the puzzle, tired of the ongoing drone of the television mounted in the corner and most definitely aggravated that he had been relegated to laundry duty by his older sibling.

Still, in the two weeks or so that had passed since tangling with the NuJack in Bennington, even the relative quiet of the western Tennessee town was beginning to wear thin on Sam's nerves. Sure, they had worked a couple of minor gigs in between, but overall, they had avoided anything that even hinted at being dangerous after Vermont.

Sam knew that Dean was being cautious with Mia being around. At first he thought it was because his older brother was still bothered about the young woman's "mistake" during that hunt, but as the days passed and Sam watched their interaction, he realized it was much more than that.

The banter, the sarcasm, the shared glances, the casual touches, it was all adding up and even though Sam knew his brother would fervently deny it, Dean was attracted to the girl.

"Uh, I got a booger or something hanging out of my nose?"

“Huh? What?” Sam stammered, suddenly drawn alert by the strange question and noticing Mia looking at him intently.

“You were staring at me. It was kinda creeping me out. What’s the deal?” the brunette asked.

Sam smiled sheepishly, dipping his head so that his face was hidden beneath his own unkempt dark hair. “I’m sorry. I was just thinking.”

“About what? It must be something good if you were staring at me and now you’re kinda blushing,” Mia pressed him.

“N...nothing, really,” Sam insisted.

“Oh? So, does thinking about whitening your underwear and reducing static cling always turn you red and make you stutter?”

Sam looked back up at her knowing he was busted but deciding to try to change the subject regardless.

“Actually, I think white underwear is overrated. I pretty much subscribe to the ‘throw it all in one load and hope for the best’ method of doing the laundry,” he admitted with a chuckle.

Watching as Mia snorted and rolled her eyes, for the briefest moment, Sam was reminded of Jessica. He remembered chasing the playful blonde down the steps to the basement of their apartment complex to do their accumulated laundry. Then, like now, Sam had taken over the duty, but mostly because Jess had a tendency for turning things pink. He teased her unmercifully about her lack of ability to handle such a simple task and just as Mia had done, Jess would roll her eyes and then go on to declare that contrary to popular belief, laundry was not genetically encoded to women.

“Sam? Earth to Sam...” Mia called out.

“I’m sorry, Mia. I was just thinking again,” he answered.

“You do that a lot I’ve noticed. Did I say something wrong? You look kinda, I dunno, sad?”

Sam smiled at her. “Nah, You just reminded me of someone. It’s alright, really.”

“A woman?” Mia dug further.

“Yeah,” Sam admitted. He took a deep breath then continued. “Her name was Jessica. I uh... loved her.”

“Loved her?”

Sam felt the lump rise in his throat, but he managed to swallow it down, knowing that Mia’s question was innocent enough. “She died,” he answered simply.

There was a moment of silence between them as Sam nervously toyed with the keyboard and Mia mimicked the motion with the edge of the magazine in her lap. He could feel her eyes glancing back up at him, wanting to initiate more conversation but cautiously refraining.

“So, you and my brother, what’s up with that?” he asked quickly.

She looked up abruptly, her own cheeks now a rosy color as her eyes widened in surprise.

“Wow, ya don’t mince any words do you Sam?” she replied with an edgy laugh.

Sam closed the laptop and shifted slightly to face her. “Hey, don’t get me wrong Mia. I don’t mean to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, that’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point?” she asked defensively.

“I care about him. He’s my brother. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him, and I know you already got the same speech from him about me. But still, that’s not it. See, I know you and Dean have a lot in common but there’s something really important about him that you don’t know at all,” Sam informed.

He watched her face soften, curiosity lighting her cinnamon eyes as she waited for him to continue.

“Dean never asks anything for himself, Mia. He gives until it kills him, especially for the people he cares about. And along those same lines, he doesn’t expose any vulnerability, any weaknesses; but the thing is, deep down, Dean isn’t as tough as he

like to make people think. At least not when it comes to those he lets get close to him," he explained.

"I get that, Sam," Mia interjected.

"Do you?" he challenged. "'Cause my brother, he deserves to be happy Mia. All his life, ever since our mom died, he's devoted himself to being Dad's second in command, to raising and protecting me, to trying to save all the people we come across in our work. And he's never once asked anything for himself, Hell, I'm not even sure he knows how. So yeah, I want him to be happy and if that's with you or because of you, I'm good with that, so long as you know where I stand."

Sam watched the lithe young woman stand and walk slowly toward the row of washing machines across from them. She ran her hand along the edge before she turned and leaned against the washer, facing him.

"Sam, I think it's really fantastic how you and Dean watch out for each other. I never had that. I won't lie to you, I am attracted to your brother, but I'm not sure that Dean sees me the way you think he does," she said solemnly.

Sam laughed, startling her with his reaction.

"Mia, trust me. Do you realize that in the past three weeks or so that you've been with us, my brother has barely even talked to another woman in a convenience store much less hooked up with his normal small-town barmaid? I mean, considering Dean, I'm almost ready to either have him committed or try an exorcism," Sam joked.

He watched as the implication of his comment sunk in with the brunette, her face blushing again even though she tried to hide it by twisting her fingers into her long hair.

"So," she began, small dimples forming at the corners of her mouth as she spoke. "Are you saying that Dean is interested?"

Sam shook his head. "You really are just like my brother. He usually needs something hard to hit him on the head too before he sees what's standing right in front of him. Well actually, it's more like he gets tossed into something but that's neither here nor there. I'm just saying that Dean has been rather 'reserved' since you've been around him and that's not like him."

Sam rose, stretching his long body and enjoying the satisfying "pop" of cartilage in his back and neck. He moved closer to Mia, bending down until his mouth was near her ear.

"Go talk to him, Mia. Trust me, waiting on Dean to make the first move in this case, you've a better chance of getting him to trade the Impala in on a station wagon."

He nodded in the direction of the bar, encouraging her on, and for a second, Sam laughed to himself, suddenly feeling as though the tables had turned and he was "pimping his brother out". He watched Mia stop and turn back to him just before she reached the entrance.

"Sam, thanks! I, uh..." she stammered.

He watched the young woman standing there fumbling for words and he nearly forgot why she was in their care in the first place, forgetting that she too had known very little joy in her life.

"Happiness, Mia. You both deserve it," he reminded her, turning away to move the clean clothes over to the dryers.

In the bar

Dean sat at the bar his hands wrapped around a tall glass of beer that was already too warm for him to truly consider drinking. In truth, he wasn't even sure why he had ordered the damn thing, not that he had never drunk at eleven in the morning, but it wasn't his customary lunch beverage unless of course he had something weighing heavily on his mind.

Do I have something on my mind?

Dean lifted the beer, taking a swig and grimacing at the bitterness of the warm brew. Setting the glass back on the counter the buxom blonde behind the bar quickly scurried over to check on him once again just like she'd been doing frequently for the past hour.

"You ready for a fresh one, darlin'?" she asked, leaning in so that there was no mistaking her overt attempt to flash her breasts at him.

"No thanks, I'm good," he replied, barely even looking up, but not missing her disgruntled snort as she walked away, denied his attention.

You just ignored 36DD's on a tall blonde dude, where the hell's your head? He silently chastised himself.

The answer came without a second thought. *Mia!* The image of the brunette flashed into his mind, her brown eyes sparkling as she smiled.

Shaking his head, Dean dismissed the vision from his brain. The woman was an enigma to him; involved in some of the most violent and hideous murders he'd ever witnessed during a hunt, he tried to remember that she was nothing more than an innocent pawn in a demon's evil plan.

If he took away the possession stuff, he was left with a girl that knew as much about cars and classic rock as he did. If he was honest, Mia was a beautiful woman with a smart wit and an even smarter mouth that rarely if ever was at a loss to put him in his place. While he feigned irritation at her matching his sarcasm and snark, part of him was actually impressed and looked forward to the challenge every time he was around her.

"Dammit! Get out of my head," he grumbled aloud at the thoughts rambling through his mind. "This is ridiculous, Winchester. Where the hell do you think things could possibly go with her?"

You're a hunter! There's no room for a personal relationship in your life. Don't you remember where you are?

Tennessee, you dumbass, don't you remember?

And remember the last time you were in Tennessee? Remember the last girl you thought you could get close to? Brunette too, dark eyes, her soft touch...

Right up until she nearly brought a killer Wampus cat down on your ass!

"Melissa!" Dean muttered, quieting the ongoing barrage taking place in his mind.

"Close, but not quite. Are you already so drunk that you forgot my name?" Mia quipped.

Dean blinked several times, waiting as the memory of the deceased girl was replaced by the taller brunette that had dropped onto a barstool beside him. He flashed her a weak smile, before running a hand through his spiked hair.

"Mia, sorry. I was thinking."

"What is it with you Winchesters? Or is it just me that seems to have the penchant for bringing out the deep thought in you and Sam today?" she asked.

He looked at her blankly, not understanding the reference, but knowing he was missing something by the smile on her face.

"So what's going on Mia? You and Sammy all done with the clothes?" he asked.

"No, and speaking of which, why do we get stuck with laundry detail while your ass is in here sucking down brews and watching football?" she challenged.

"Easy: because I'm the oldest. And because I'm responsible for car maintenance and weapons. That leaves things like laundry, cooking or any other sundry duties to you and Sam," Dean explained with a grin.

"Hey, I'm pretty handy around a car too ya know," Mia insisted.

"Aw, honey, I'd never ask you to break one of those pretty nails of yours. Besides, the Impala is a one man woman. I don't think she'd take kindly to having a female's hands on her chassis. She just doesn't swing that way," he joked.

Mia laughed, amused by his sense of humor even if it bordered on chauvinistic. When it came to the classic Chevy, she understood where Dean's possessiveness was rooted.

"So, you want a beer or something?" Dean offered when the silence between them and Mia's brown eyes became unsettling.

"Um, no thanks. Uh, Dean..."

"Something to eat then?"

"Uh, no... look, Dean. I came in here to talk to you about something," Mia blurted.

The hunter recoiled with apprehension. *I need to talk to you about something...* Were there any more fearful words to come out of a woman's mouth?

Dean visibly jumped as the cell phone in his pocket chose that moment to begin blaring his most recent ringtone. He fumbled as he reached for the cellular, holding up a finger to silence the young woman as he slid the Motorola open and tapped the button to answer. He didn't even bother to check the caller ID, preferring whoever was on the other end of the call to the direction this current conversation was headed.

"This is Dean..."

The voice that returned was deep with just a hint of southern twang.

"My name is James Dixon. Sorry to bother ya but your dad told me to give ya a call."

Dean flinched at the mention of his father. With no word from their dad in nearly two months, the mere thought that someone had spoken to him was at least encouraging, but he wanted more.

"You talked to my dad, Mr. Dixon?" he asked, trying to hide the desperation in his voice.

"Yep! And call me Dix. Talked to John just yesterday. Was hoping he could help me with a hunt I'm on down in West Texas."

Yesterday! Dean was stunned into silence that this man had spoken to his dad as recently as yesterday when John Winchester hadn't seen fit to return a phone call to his own sons since mysteriously walking out of Bobby's.

"I got me a problem with a chupacabra down near Marathon. I was hoping John could help but he said he was too tied up with the gig he was currently on. Told me you boys were cut from the same cloth and gave me your number," Dix explained.

"Dix, did my dad say where he was by chance? What he was hunting?" Dean asked.

"Sorry son, he didn't, and I didn't ask. You're a hunter, you know what a cautious bunch we can be," the hunter replied. *"Besides, the few times I've run into your daddy before, he wouldn't have said crap if he had a mouthful. Hell, I'm surprised he even returned my call."*

"Yeah, well that's John Winchester I guess," Dean admitted dejectedly. "So, Dix, how can we help you out?"

"Well, as I was saying. I'm on a hunt down here in West Texas. Thought it would be a simple chupacabra thing. Get in, get out. But there've been too many killings over too much territory to be just one chupa. So, I know when I'm in over my head. And I could use some extra hands and eyes."

Dean considered the man's request. West Texas was at least warmer and a chupacabra hunt was generally a cake walk in the park. Besides, it beat Tennessee, the memories and the threat of the "conversation" with Mia.

"Okay, Dix. We can be down that way by tomorrow lunch. I'll give you a call once we hit town."

The other hunter acknowledged and Dean ended the call. Swinging around on the barstool, he downed the last of the now completely tepid beer, uncaring how vile the alcohol tasted, just wanting it to take the edge off the heavy ache in his chest.

"You okay?" Mia's voice broke through his inner pain.

"I'm fine."

"That call, it's another hunt?"

"Yeah," Dean answered shortly, wishing she would just be quiet.

"You asked about your dad. Did that guy know where he was?" Mia continued.

"No."

"And you're upset?"

"No."

"Can you string together more than one syllable at a time?"

Dean felt the explosion boiling up inside him. Anger and pain resulting from the feeling of being abandoned yet again by his father threatening to surface and level the young woman even though he knew she wasn't the cause, only the accelerant. He fought back the urge to snap at her but couldn't hide the emotion from his face or body.

"Mia, just leave it be, okay," he pleaded, pulling away slightly when she placed a petite hand on his.

"Dean, I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. It's just how it is with my dad and us. Been there, done that." He answered, standing up and jamming a hand into his pocket to pull out several bills.

He slapped them down on the countertop then swung around and gave Mia a weak smile.

"Let's go round up Sammy before he starts ironing the underwear. I hope you didn't leave him with any of yours or we'll never peel him away from the Spice Channel tonight," he joked, waggling his eyebrows as he led Mia from the bar.

Rattler Motor Lodge Marathon, Texas

Dean walked back toward the Impala, a scowl darkening his features as he joined Sam and Mia by the parked car. He looked down distastefully at the two room keys in his hand and cringed; the cold, scaly feel of the disembodied rattles gave him the creeps.

"Room fifteen and sixteen," he announced, drawing closer and wiggling the keys for effect.

"Ewww. What is that?" Mia exclaimed.

"Well it isn't a baby toy," Dean replied, tossing one at the young woman. "For what it's worth though, Uncle Fester in the office assures me that none of those were taken off snakes gathered from our rooms."

"Gee, isn't that a comfort," Sam grumbled.

"Dude, one look at the guy in the office and I'm less worried about the snakes and more concerned about whether they filmed *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* here," Dean snarked.

"I, for one don't care, so long as it wasn't *Psycho*. Just point me in the direction of a hot shower," Mia whined, slinging her bag over her shoulder and heading toward the room marked on her key.

Dean watched her walk off, his eyes glued to her as she sauntered away.

"She might need someone to scrub her back," Sam suggested, jamming an elbow into his brother's ribcage as he snickered.

"Shut up," Dean snapped, turning back to the car and grabbing his own duffle before stalking off toward their room.

As he unlocked the door and flung it open, the sight of their latest lodging loosed a string of expletives from the young hunter. Pulling up next to him, Sam could only stand in stunned silence as he took in the décor.

"What the hell, Sam?" Dean complained as he tentatively took a step inside the room.

"I guess it makes the room key seem... appropriate?" the taller man replied.

Dean walked around the room, curiously touching the bizarre decorations. Everything from snakeskin lampshades to a bleached out longhorn skull adorned the room, but the piece de resistance in Dean's estimation was the stuffed armadillo that sat atop the dresser.

"Okay, that's just not right," he protested, pointing at the offending mammal.

"It could be worse, Dean," Sam suggested.

"How's that? I mean, seriously dude, the damn thing is staring at me no matter where I go in the room."

"It's just a trick of the taxidermy."

"Its gotta go, Sammy. Put it outside or something," Dean demanded.

"You're kidding, right?" Sam asked, surprised.

"Either you stick that damn thing outside or in the closet, or I swear I'm gonna ventilate it until there's nothing left to identify it by." Dean threatened, pulling the .45 from the pocket of his jacket.

"Dean, it's already dead," Sam implored.

"Something that looks like that shouldn't ever have been alive to begin with and I'm not taking any chances. You gonna take care of it or am I?"

He watched, his hand still tensely wrapped around his Colt, as his younger brother, barely containing laughter, walked over to the dresser and began to lift to dead creature. Sam tugged, grunted, and tugged again.

"Uh, Dean?"

"What?"

"Got a little problem, dude."

"Too heavy for you there, Samantha?" Dean taunted.

"Uh, no. It's actually screwed down to the top of the dresser. I guess they were afraid someone might steal it. You know how motels are?" Sam explained.

Dean groaned, hastily moving closer to check and see if Sam was telling the truth or just screwing with him. Tucking the automatic under his armpit, he yanked on the rigid animal to no effect.

"I told you," Sam stated smugly, standing back with his arms folded across his chest as he watched his older brother's peculiar behavior.

"That's it. I'm getting another room," Dean insisted.

"From Uncle Fester?" Sam reminded. "The next room might be worse. Just suck it up. What's so bad about a dead armadillo?"

Dean spun around, away from the animal cadaver and away from the suspicious eyes of his younger brother.

"Nothing. Just forget it," he grumbled.

"No, come on, what gives," Sam edged on, a mischievous smile creasing his face.

"You're not afraid of it are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous..." Dean protested.

"You are, aren't you?"

"Look we don't have time for this. We're s'posed to meet Dix in an hour and we need to make sure Mia is secured before we go," Dean tried to change the subject.

"It's just a dead armadillo, Dean. They're harmless," Sam continued.

"Kinda like clowns," Dean threw back, watching his brother for his reaction.

"That's low, Dean. I was a kid. Besides, you're one to talk. How is it with your little phobias of planes and rodents?" Sam countered.

Dean glared back at his brother before betraying himself and casting a glance back at the dead animal. Sam followed his gaze, suddenly making the mental connection.

"That's it, isn't it?" he asked, as Dean grumbled and started for the door.

Reaching for the handle, he paused, turning to look back at his brother. "It looks like an overgrown rat," he admitted. "A friggin' giant, armored-car of a rat and I swear if you say one more word about it, I'll put a round in your ass right after I put a round in *that thing*."

With that he stormed out of the room determined to ignore the loud laughter of his younger sibling and even more determined to stop at the first McDonalds he could find in Marathon, Texas and purchase the largest red-headed clown the fast food chain offered.

Dean Winchester didn't get mad... he got even!

Whitiker Ranch

Later...

Pulling up to the front of the rundown ranch house, Dean felt his chest seize tightly as the dust stirred up from their drive down the lone dirt road finally settled to reveal a black pickup truck parked just off to the side. Deep down, he knew it wasn't his dad's, but getting his brain to convince his heart of that reality was another matter entirely.

Fortunately, or *not*, the illusion was shattered when a shorter, slightly rotund man, strode down the steps of the porch. If Dean had any thoughts that his father was waiting for them at the Whitiker homestead, the appearance of James Dixon quickly wiped them away.

"So that's him?" Sam asked skeptically, eyeing the middle-aged man as he approached. "Seems more like an accountant than a hunter."

"Guess so," Dean answered. "But looks can be deceiving, I s'pose, and Dad trusts him, so that's good enough for me."

The brothers exited the Impala and moved to meet the stout hunter. Despite his rather short legs, he scurried forward toward them, extending his hand while a wide smile spread across an otherwise pale and clean shaven face.

Dean met him first, towering over the smaller man, the thought skittering through his mind that Sam was nearly twice as tall by comparison. He cocked an eyebrow as the older hunter pumped his hand in greeting, surprised by the strong grasp and worried that his shoulder might be dislocated at the rate Dixon was shaking his arm.

"Jim Dixon, but my friends call me Dix. Can't tell you boys how much I appreciate you giving me a hand on this one," he welcomed them. "I was a bit surprised when Johnnie told me he had a couple of boys that were following in his footsteps. He'd never mentioned that you boys were hunters before."

"So, uh, you and our dad have hunted together before?" Dean asked.

"Yeah, a couple of times, nothing major really. We worked together on a pack of black dogs near Modesto and then one other time he helped me out with a poltergeist," Dix answered.

"Have you known him long?" Sam questioned suspiciously. "He's never mentioned you."

"A few years I guess, but like I said, you know John, not like you could get a glass of water out of that man if he was standing outside in the pouring down rain with a cup in his hand," the older man joked.

Dean glanced over at Sam, knowing his younger brother was still wary, while he too wanted to question the man more about his absent dad. Yet the little man was likeable enough, honest and forthcoming, even if he seemed too soft, not nearly hardened enough to be an actual hunter.

"So, Dix, what are we doin' out here on the farm?" Dean asked, waving his hand in a wide gesture.

"This is where one of the victims was killed," Dix stated. "I wanted to show you the kill-spot."

"Well, lead on."

"Oh, not here, boys. Jasper Whitiker ran his cattle over several hundred acres. The chupa took him down out on the pasturelands," the heavy-set man informed with a slight chuckle and a tip of his head.

Dean followed his nod, suddenly spotting three horses tied to a rail a few yards away by the barn.

"Oh hell no!" he groaned.

"What? You don't know how to ride, son?" Dix asked.

"Can't we drive out there?" the young hunter queried, a hint of a whine to his voice.

"Only if you want to replace the transmission and suspension in that classic car of yours," Dix responded. "If you're worried about the horses, I promise you, they're as gentle as kittens."

"Ignore my brother, Mr. Dixon," Sam interjected, starting toward the waiting steeds. "He just doesn't like any animal that's smarter than him."

"Bitch," Dean snapped, coming up behind his brother and slapping the back of his head.

The ride out to the kill zone only took about fifteen minutes, but to Dean's body, it felt as though he'd been on the horse's back for half the day. His teeth felt as though they were ready to fall out of his mouth from the sheer bouncing up and down in the saddle. If there was any satisfaction in being subjected to the torture it was that ahead of him Sam was also bobbing up and down like an over-sized ragdoll and fighting his own mount for control as though the beast had been fed LSD-laced oats just before leaving the barn.

"How ya doing there, Sammy?" Dean called out as they pulled to a halt and dismounted.

"Just friggin' great," the lanky hunter replied, glaring first at his horse, then back at his brother as he stretched his sore back.

"Don't hear you laughing now smartass," Dean snarked.

"Keep it up, Dean and your little hard-shelled friend back at the motel will end up in your bed *Godfather* style," Sam threatened.

"Hey guys, over here," Dix called out, waving the brothers over to his position.

They ambled slowly over to the older man, neither of them walking without a pronounced bow to their legs, but neither commenting on it either. As they neared, the stench of the rotting cattle wafted on the air while the faint buzz of the mass of flies swarming over the carcasses could finally be heard.

"Sonofabitch," Dean exclaimed, taking in the slaughter.

All around them, the ground looked scarred, the blood of the cattle and rancher having transformed the landscape from green to reddish-brown. The remains of the cattle, picked nearly clean by scavengers, lay raw in the sun while dozens of small tracks surrounded the butchered bodies like frantic invisible dancers.

"Look at how many there are," Sam observed.

"Yeah, too damn many," Dean added. "And they took down a human too?"

"Yep, a rancher out trying to bring in his herd," Dix informed.

"Chupas aren't usually greedy. They don't normally bring down more than they can eat or go after larger prey," Sam commented.

"And not usually humans either," the elder Winchester put in.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg, boys. There have been other attacks. First was a Conservation Officer found ripped apart over by Big Bend Park."

"Chupas?" Dean asked.

"Hard to say for sure, wasn't much left of him. But not long after that, a couple of tourists were found dead next to their broke-down car out on I-385. There have been a few other attacks closer to town, family pet kinda things," Dix recounted.

"One chupacabra couldn't be responsible for all this. You sure that's what it is?" Sam challenged.

"Well, the cops think it's just some whacked-out psycho-killer, and I gotta admit, at first I was pretty skeptical too. I mean, it doesn't fit. One chupa can't possibly be responsible for all these kills, spread all over this territory. And now, seeing all these tracks, I've never seen anything like that before."

"This sure isn't typical chupa M.O.. So what's your plan then?" Dean asked the older hunter.

"Find the damn thing and kill it. Isn't that what we do?" Dix answered bluntly. "But this is West Texas and it could be nearly anywhere."

"And you're assuming there's only one," Sam countered, gesturing at the myriad of prints.

"The thought has crossed my mind that there could be a pair, maybe mates or a female and her brood or something, but with this many tracks, I'm thinking now we might actually have a pack on our hands. Still, it doesn't matter, we find them, we exterminate them," the older man steadfastly maintained.

"Kill 'em all, let Fish and Game sort 'em out?" Dean joked.

"Works for me," Dix agreed, his usual jovial smile disappearing, replaced by a steely glint to his eyes that suddenly sent a chill up both younger men's spines.

"Well, it's too late in the day to accomplish anything out here now. And I for one would rather have some idea of what we're getting into before we walk blindly into it," Sam remarked with a huff. "Let's head back, check on Mia and I'll pop on-line and see what I can find out about this area."

"Fine with me. We can get a fresh start in the morning. I have some topo maps and have marked some spots that I think warrant checking out," Dix stated reaching for the reins to the chestnut mare. "We can hook up at sunrise. That'll give us maximum daylight to scout the area."

"Oh joy! Sunrise, horseback rides, why don't we ever get any gigs in Vegas?" Dean grumbled as he trudged back toward his waiting horse.

"We had that job in Vegas, Dean." Sam reminded. "Or have you already forgotten your special friend with the sequined wardrobe and the um..."

"Shut up, Sam!" *So gonna stop at McDonalds on the way back to the motel...*

Back at the Rattler Motor Lodge

Dean stopped the Chevy in front of their room, but despite Sam's plea for a hot shower, the older Winchester was still determined to head for the office and demand they be switched to other "armadillo-free" accommodations. Ignoring his own protesting derriere and disregarding the mixture of perspiration and equine odor that seemed to waft off both him and Sam, Dean stalked off to see Uncle Fester.

"I don't know why you're being so stubborn about this, Dean. It just a stupid dead animal," Sam whined, trailing a step behind.

"Told you, I'm not spending a night in the room with that thing. Besides, after the day I've had, cut me some slack," Dean retorted, yanking the door to the motel office open with enough force to emphasize his irritation.

"It was just a horse," the younger hunter added, barely scooting inside before the screen door slammed shut.

"It was a walking can of Alpo dude, or it should be," Dean insisted, striding up to the counter.

He pounded the bell repeatedly, taking great satisfaction in the grimace creasing his brother's face at the racket that filled the small space. When there was no response, Dean yelled out for the night clerk.

An ominous quiet returned his call sending the hairs up on the back of Dean's neck. While Sam looked at him curiously, he vaulted over the countertop and headed to the back of the manager's quarters.

He didn't make it far into the living area before the smell of death and the stark evidence of slaughter in the form of a massive pool of blood greeted him. "Uncle Fester" lay sprawled across the floor, his intestines scattered across the shag carpeting like lengths of raw sausage while his chest was torn open and exposed like a side of beef in a meat market.

Dean fought down the contents in his stomach as Sam pulled up abruptly at this side. All around the room, bloody little tracks marked the earlier presence of some small carnivorous attacker.

As his eyes scanned the area, Dean followed the trail to the opened patio door leading to the outside deck and the dark Texan landscape beyond. The hunter carefully stepped over the slaughtered clerk, walking over to the glass sliding doors and peering out.

“Chupas?” Sam asked, breaking the silence.

Before Dean could answer, a woman’s scream tore through the nighttime quiet, echoing from further down the row of rentals.

“Mia!” Dean yelled, simultaneously pulling the .45 from the back waistband of his jeans as he darted out into the darkness and towards the young woman’s room.

Despite the fatigue and sore muscles, Dean drew up to the doorway marked with a sixteen, his brother just on his heels and brandishing his own automatic.

“Mia! Open up!” he shouted, pounding on the door with his fist.

When the young woman’s shriek sounded once more, Dean didn’t delay. Taking a step back, he put every bit of force he could muster into launching a booted foot against the locked door. The cheap, hollow door gave way in a shower of splinters, caving inward with a loud crash as the hunters followed behind, entering on full alert.

Boxed into the corner, Mia huddled between the nightstand and the farthest bed, a thin trickle of blood trailing down the side of her face from below the tangled mess of her brown hair. She held the chair from the desk before her, using it as though she were a lion tamer trying to keep the lions at bay, except Simba wasn’t in her room.

As Dean looked on in horror, a half dozen chupacabras were pouring into the young woman’s room from the open patio door. Like ants swarming a picnic, the creatures flooded the space, the stench of sulfur nearly overpowering as the snarl and snap of fangs sounded loudly. The pack growled in unison, their red eyes glowing even as their maws were still stained with the night clerk’s blood.

Dean snapped off a shot, clipping the first of the chupas as it approached the crouching girl. The creature dropped on its side only to be attacked by the next of its brethren as they continued to seek out fresh meat. Like a tidal wave of blood-thirsty jackals, the chupacabras continued to fill Mia’s room, climbing over one another, snapping even at their own in their quest to reach human flesh.

Dean kept firing, dimly aware of the report of Sam’s weapon behind him. He spotted the solitary red-eyed creature leap toward the young woman, fangs bared as it launched toward her exposed throat. Somewhere in his mind, he calculated the distance between himself, the open patio door, the onslaught of chupas and the girl.

“Mia!” Dean yelled at the top of his lungs. Diving across the open expanse of the room, he emptied the remainder of his clip, even as the beast landed on top of the young brunette with an unearthly howl.

“Mia!”

Dean pulled the trigger on the .45 as fast as his index finger could twitch, his heart pounding in fear even as the chupa launched at the young woman’s throat. The bullets hit the creature square in the back and it fell down next to Mia, struggling briefly as it died. Before Dean could even think to get to the girl to make sure she was okay, he heard angry snarls behind him and turned around in time to see five more chupas come into the room behind him and Sam.

“Sam!”

“Yeah, I see them!” Sam raised his gun and shot one at point blank range, the shot hitting the creature in its forehead.

Seeing his brother pretty much had a hand on things on his end, Dean leapt over the fallen chupa he’d shot, kneeling down next to the terrified brunette. In the background, he could hear Sam firing more rounds at the fanged beasts. Reaching out a hand, he swiftly pulled the girl to her feet. “Are you okay?”

Mia didn’t say anything, but nodded tersely as she brushed her hair out of her face. Dean knew she was lying, but now wasn’t the time to dwell on it. They could worry about injuries—physical and emotional—later. For now, they needed to get out of the room before they met the same fate as the motel clerk.

“Dean!”

Dean whipped around at the sound of his brother’s voice just as one of the chupas launched onto Sam’s back, sinking its teeth into his shoulder. A guttural cry tore from

the younger Winchester's lips as he tried to fight the thing off, dropping his gun in the frenzy.

"Stay here!" Dean yelled to Mia. He didn't give her time to answer as he hurdled towards Sam, ripping the creature from his sibling's arm. Sam curled into himself, trying to grasp his injured arm, stemming the mild flow of blood.

Dean plucked Sam's gun off the floor and fired a shot into the chupa's head before it could attack his fallen brother again. As the smell of blood permeated the air, the remaining three chupas temporarily forgot about the three humans as they feasted on their dead brethren.

The elder Winchester helped Sam off the floor, pushing him towards their bags as he made his way back to Mia. "Grab our shit and go!"

Pulling Mia to her feet, he shoved her towards the door as a couple of the chupas looked up at them, growling deep in their throats. "Sam, shag ass and let's go—looks like the Benjis are ready for a round two!"

By the time Dean had Mia in the back of the Impala, Sam was out the door, his arms laden with their bags. Dean quickly threw open the trunk, allowing his brother to shove everything in. The older man barely let Sam get his door closed before he tore out of the parking lot, the chupas giving chase.

"Get Dix on the phone," Dean ground out as he pulled onto the highway with a squeal of tires.

Sam fumbled to get his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed the numbers with slightly shaking hands. Before he could get two words out as way of greeting to the other hunter, Dean yanked the phone out of his hand.

"You were right, Dix."

"I'm often right about a lot of things. You've got to narrow it down for me."

"The chupas—there are a pack of them."

"How do you know that?"

"Because half a dozen of them tried to make an all-you-can-eat buffet out of us!" Dean bit out.

"Don't you dare start yelling at me! I'm not the one who sent them after your asses!"

"Look, I'm sor—"

"Forget about it. Are you okay?"

"We got a few little scratches, but it's a lot better than what the motel clerk got."

Dean let out a sigh and chanced a look in his rearview mirror to see Mia was asleep. *How the hell is she sleeping after everything that just happened...* "Listen, we need a place to hole up for the night. And Sam and Mia need patched up."

"Ya'll come on down to Big Bend—I got a cabin rented there. I can make some room."

"You sure?"

"There's not much elsewhere you can stay, especially in town, not with those damn chupas going nuts."

"All right—we'll see you in a bit." Dean hung up the phone and handed it back to Sam.

"What did he say?" Sam asked.

"For us to head out to his cabin—we can hash it out there and see where to go next."

"Sounds good."

"Yeah." Dean chuckled, wondering where the hell he was managing to find something humorous, under the circumstances.

"What is it?"

"There's one good thing to come out of this tonight."

"Only you could find something good, Dean." Sam leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. "What is it?"

"We don't have to stay in that damn room now."

Sam laughed. "You're such a wuss, Dean. Afraid of a stupid dead armadillo."

"One word for ya, Sammy. *Clowns*..." Dean quickly replied.

Sam opened one of his eyes to look over at Dean. "Whatever, Dean. Room was just fine to me."

"Be happy to take you back there and drop you off."

"Armadillos..." Sam laughed as he drifted off.

"Shut up."

Dix's Cabin

"Mia, we're here." Sam gently nudged the sleeping girl awake as Dean pulled up beside Dix's pick-up truck.

Mia rubbed at her eyes as she sat up and looked out the windshield. "Where are we?" she asked groggily.

"We're at Dix's cabin—we figured it would be the safest bet for right now," Dean answered as he pushed out of the Impala.

The door to the cabin opened and Dix stepped out, the light from the interior framing him in a silhouette. "You find the place all right?" he asked, wiping his hands on a dish towel.

Dean smiled as he pulled a couple of the bags out of the trunk, leaving the laptop and Mia's bag for Sam to grab. "Never took you for a Martha Stewart groupie, Dix."

"Kiss my ass, Winchester, or I'll send you right back to the chupas."

Dean smirked. "You'd really put us out like that?"

"You, yes, but not your brother." Dix looked past Dean until his eyes settled on Mia, who was following closely behind Sam. "And certainly not a lady." He held out a hand to Mia. "The name's James Dixon—but everyone calls me Dix."

"Mia Cameron." Mia's delicate hand was swallowed by his as he squeezed it. "Nice to meet you."

Dix smiled. "You three come on in. You look like you could use a little R&R." He followed them inside, closing the door behind him. "You're going to have to excuse the mess. I'm not used to having company. Also, I only have two bedrooms, so I figure the young lady can use the spare room and you two boys can camp out in the living room."

"Jeez, Dix, you make it sound like we're having a slumber party," Dean said as he took in the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and something that smelled much like a stew wafting through the air.

"Now you listen here, Winchester—"

"It sounds great, Dix," Sam said stepping in before Dean managed to get his ass kicked. "Come on, Dean. Let's go put our stuff down."

"I can take my bag, Sam," Mia said, stepping forward and holding out her hand.

"I got it." Sam pushed Dean ahead of him towards the living room.

"Dude, careful how you handle the merchandise."

"You look like you belong on a clearance rack, Dean."

Dean scoffed and nodded towards Sam's shoulder. "And you're one to talk."

"Whatever." Sam said as he handed Dean his laptop. He then went and deposited Mia's bag in her room and joined the others.

Dix nodded towards Sam's left shoulder. "Looks like one of the chupas got a little friendly with you." He reached into the refrigerator and pulled out several beers, passing them out.

Dean gratefully took the proffered beverage and smirked at his brother. "Nah, that's just a love bite. Sammy should be happy the thing didn't try to hump his leg."

Sam glared at Dean but didn't say anything as he looked around at the walls, covered in papers from floor to ceiling. "Looks like you've been busy," he commented to Dix.

Dix waved a dismissive hand. "Most of it's crap—just trying to put together a picture that makes sense."

"You know, I could offer you a hand, if you want."

Dix nodded as he handed a beer to Sam. "I may take you up on that."

"Careful there, Dix, or you may cause Geek Boy to have an orgasm." Dean hissed in pain as Mia reached over and cuffed him on the back of his head. "What was that for?"

"Do you have to be such an ass?"

"Would you like me to answer that for him?" Sam smirked.

"You can just shut up," Dean said, rubbing his head. "Besides, Sammy knows I'm playing around." He looked at each of them in turn and when no one offered to back him up, he let his eyes roam to the stove. "What's cooking, Dix?"

"Beef stew. Bowls are above the stove there." He nodded to Sam and Mia. "You kids help yourselves, too. No sense in letting Dean hog it all."

"Hey!" Dean protested as he scooped himself a large helping.

Sam smiled as he nudged his brother. "Seems like talk of your mammoth appetite follows you everywhere, Dean."

"A guy like me has to keep his strength up if he continually has to save your scrawny ass." Dean took his bowl to the small round table, looking for a spot to set it among the papers and books littering the battered surface.

"Just push everything aside—it's not in any order," Dix said.

Dean grabbed everything and put it on the floor beside the table, making enough room at the table for the other three. "You're not going to eat?" he asked as Dix sat down with his beer.

"I ate earlier. I was about to clean it up when you called, but figured you kids could use something good to eat."

Dean smiled as he spooned a large bite. "You seem mighty confident of your culinary skills there, Dix."

Dix narrowed his eyes. "Take a bite of it, boy, and tell me that ain't the best damn stew you ever put in your mouth." He took a swig of his beer and pointed a finger at him. "I'll kiss your ass if it isn't."

Dean put the bite in his mouth as Sam and Mia joined them at the table. He honestly thought he'd died and gone to heaven as the savory concoction slid smoothly down his throat. "I'm telling you right now, Dix—it's a good thing you're not a woman because I would marry you right now if you cooked like this every night."

"Don't worry, Dean, you're not my type." Dix's tone then turned serious. "Okay, so tell me exactly what happened."

Sam wiped his mouth with his napkin and shrugged. "After we parted from the Whitiker Ranch, we headed back to the motel to rest up a bit."

"When we pulled up there, I headed to the motel office to grab some towels from the clerk but there wasn't any sign of him. I walked around the desk and found him with his chest pretty much ripped open."

"Animal attack?"

Dean nodded. "Definitely an animal attack. No way could a human kill like that."

Sam nodded his agreement. "We then heard Mia screaming so we rushed to her room."

Dix focused his attention on the petite brunette. "How did they get in the room?"

Mia shrugged sheepishly as she kept her head down, avoiding the hunters' eyes. "I heard a noise outside the door, but when I looked out the window I didn't see anything. I thought I imagined it, but then I heard it again. I opened the door and this *thing* just leapt at me."

Dean glared at Mia, but didn't say anything. He wasn't about to lay out all her drama for Dix. Sure, he thought he could trust the guy but he didn't want to risk it—to risk her. He wouldn't do that.

“Sammy and me burst in to see the chupa backing Mia into a corner. We managed to fight them off, but not before they managed to get a few shots in,” he added with a glance at Sam.

Sam didn’t miss the glance. “After that, we just got out of there and booked it,” he finished as he pushed his bowl away. He glanced across the table at Dix and grinned. “This was great, Dix—much better than eating at another diner.”

“Don’t mention it.” Dix drained the last of his beer and nodded at the youngest Winchester. “Wanna help me with some of this research while your brother cleans the kitchen?”

Sam smiled. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

“Did anyone bother to ask me what I wanted to do?” Dean asked, looking between his brother and Dix.

Mia pushed away from the table and began to gather dirty dishes from the table. “I’ll help you, Dean, if you don’t act like such a baby about it.”

“I’m not being a baby...” Dean trailed off, knowing there was no way he was about to win the argument.

Fifteen minutes later, Sam and Dix were immersed in their research, talking quietly between themselves. Sam barely glanced up as Dean joined them at the table, setting down a hot cup of coffee in front of him.

“Thanks,” he said with a small smile.

“Don’t mention it. Hey, Dix, you have a first aid kit laying around here somewhere? I must have left ours in the car.”

Dix jerked his thumb behind him. “There should be one under the sink over there.”

Dean nodded, leaving the table and returning a few seconds later with the kit in his hand. “Pull your shirt off, Sammy.”

Sam sighed finally turning his attention away from his laptop. “Dean, I’m fine. It doesn’t even hurt anymore.”

“Uh-huh, I’ll be the judge of that. Pull it off or I’ll cut it off myself.” To emphasize his point he pulled out a pair of scissors from the kit and made as if he was about to cut Sam’s shirt.

Sam slapped his hand away. “I’ll do it!” he snapped as he gingerly worked his way out of the garment. “Pain in the ass older brothers...”

“There ya go, Sammy.” Dean smiled. “Show me that love.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “I’ll show you something.”

Dean cocked a brow. “Dude, I’m not into that kinky crap—at least, not with my brother.”

“Dean!”

Dix chuckled as he watched the brothers bicker. “There’s no denying the two of you are brothers.”

“That’s debatable sometimes,” Sam muttered. He let out a hiss as Dean probed the bite on his shoulder. “Dude!”

“Would you quit being such a pansy, Samantha?” Dean asked as he cleaned the wound. “I swear, a two year old could handle this better than you. It doesn’t look too bad, but you’re going to be sore for a couple of days.”

“That’s not anything new,” Sam said as Dean taped a gauze pad over the bite. “Okay, it’s your turn.”

“I just got a couple of scratches on my arm,” Dean argued as he packed the kit up. “Besides, you need to get your shirt back on. Not everyone is in love with your body like you are.”

“Jealous?” Sam smirked as he pulled his t-shirt over his head.

“Of you? Hell no. Why would I be? I was blessed with the looks in the family.” Dean got up and returned the kit to its rightful place.

"Whatever." Sam focused once more on the research. "If you're finished fawning over yourself, Dix and I have figured some things out."

Dean returned to the table with two beers. He handed one to Dix, at the same time grabbing a chair and turning it around so he could straddle it. "What've you got?"

Dix popped the top of his beer. "Your brother and I have pretty much determined the locus of attacks." He pointed to an area of the West Texas map spread out across the table. "They seem to be centered around the Big Bend National Park."

"What makes you think that?" Dean took a long swig of his beer.

"Remember the first attack I told you about? The conservation cop?"

Dean nodded.

"Think about it, Dean—this whole area out here is remote, not easily accessible by the everyday traveler," Sam pointed out.

"Meaning the chupas could roam around freely with little or no detection," Dean said nodding.

"Exactly. It's perfect for any kind of pack of animals."

"Besides that, they pretty much had an all-you-can-eat buffet out there with all the wildlife," Dix said.

Dean frowned. "Then why move towards town if they already had an abundant food supply?"

Sam shrugged. "They must have run out. It's the only reason I can come up with. I think what we confronted tonight may have only been the tip of the iceberg."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've been reading up on the chupa lore. It originated in Middle America many, many years ago, but there have been sightings reported in and around the U.S. and Europe. Up until recently they've been chowing down on animals, mainly domesticated."

"But they've changed their game now," Dean said.

"Apparently so." Sam frowned as he tapped his pencil against the table. "It's weird because they tend to be loners, yet here they are roaming around in large packs."

"Like wild dogs?"

"Exactly. But in everything I've been reading about them, I think we're dealing with a new breed here, something that's a little more evolved. There aren't too many accounts of them, but in what I could find not one single person has been able to confirm the existence of chupa packs."

"Until now," Dean finished.

Sam nodded. "Until now."

"From what you boys encountered at the motel tonight, this pack is only going to get worse," Dix said somberly.

"Meaning we need to do something now before that can happen," Dean said draining the last dregs of his beer. "Any ideas on how we do that?"

"Find the pack and kill them and hope to God there aren't too many more," Dix said as he gathered up the map. "But we're not going to do anyone much good if we don't catch us some shut-eye."

Sam let out a huge yawn as he shut down his computer. "I agree."

The door to the bathroom opened and Mia emerged, dressed in a pair of sweat pants and a baggy T-shirt. Her long brown hair hung in damp strands around her shoulders and the scent of honeysuckle wafted behind her in an intoxicating trail. The three hunters' eyes followed her every move, but none more so than Dean.

Sam smiled as he took in his brother's expression. He could just see the thoughts racing through Dean's mind, though he imagined them to be nothing more than a jumbled mess. Dean had it bad for the girl; there was certainly no denying it.

"Hey, Mia—hey, how was the ..." Dean cleared his throat. "Uh, you know—how's the shower?"

Mia looked at him strangely. "It was good." She narrowed her eyes. "Are you okay, Dean?"

Dean scoffed. "What? Me? Yeah...yeah, I'm good. I was just, you know...I was just curious."

Sam snorted and ducked his head when Dean glared at him. He had to bite his tongue from crying out in pain when Dean delivered a sharp kick to his shin.

Mia smiled softly. "Okay, well I think I'm going to head to bed."

Dean nodded. "Sounds good."

"G'night."

Sam finally let out the laughter he'd been holding in one great exhale as soon as Mia went into her room. He was surprised when Dix joined him.

"Go ahead and laugh it up," Dean said, scowling at the both of them.

Sam managed to quiet his laughter enough to speak. "Dude, you sounded like a teenage boy getting ready to ask a girl out for the very first time."

"Shut up."

"I've gotta tell you, Dean, I haven't seen anyone as tongue-tied as you in ages," Dix said chuckling.

"Glad I could provide you with some entertainment," the elder Winchester grumbled.

"Hey, Dean...I bet if you ask nicely, she'll let you tuck her in." Sam's smile couldn't possibly get any bigger.

"Bitch." Dean punched his brother in the arm, grinning when Sam let out a hiss of pain. "I'm going outside."

Sam gingerly rubbed his arm as he watched Dean stalk out of the cabin, the door slamming behind him. He really couldn't help but be amused by his sibling's behavior. It was very rare for Dean to be flustered but when it happened Sam had every intention of enjoying it, even if it got him slugged in the process.

Dix quirked a brow at the youngest Winchester and smiled. "Was it something we said?"

Trailhead outside Big Bend National Park The Next Morning...

The early Texas sun rose above the horizon, casting a soft glow over the blanket of forest stretching across acres of the dense landscape. It was chilly, but not to the point of freezing, the sun already beginning to warm the atmosphere. But it did nothing to warm Dean Winchester's mood.

It was bad enough he actually let his brother see him tongue-tied last night. He never got like that, especially with a woman, and damn Sammy because he knew that. He was thrilled he could provide his pain-in-the-ass little brother with hours of entertainment.

Payback is going to be such a bitch, Sammy...

Dean could handle Sam ribbing him—not like the kid was good at it anyway. At least not as good as him. What Dean *couldn't* handle were the four-legged creatures standing in front of the group. If Dean wasn't sure the Big Guy upstairs didn't have it in for him before, he sure as hell believed it now.

"Dix, tell me you're not serious about this," Dean grumbled. "It's bad enough we had to do this yesterday as soon as we got into town."

Sam laughed. "It could be worse, Dean."

Dean glared at him. "How is that, oh wise one?"

"We could be flying."

When Dean visibly paled, a chorus of laughter echoed around him.

"Who knew the great Dean Winchester was afraid of a little horse?" Mia asked as she caressed her mare's snout.

"You should see how he reacts to—"

"Sam!"

Sam held up his hands in surrender. "I wasn't going to say anything else about your fear of flying." He smirked and flashed a mischievous smile at Mia. "I was going to say rats, but Dean probably didn't want you to know that."

Mia burst out laughing and Sam didn't duck in time to miss Dean's hand across the back of his head.

"That's just a teaser for what I owe you later, Sammy," Dean ground out before turning his attention back to Dix. "Come on, Dix—can't we take a Jeep or something that has an engine..." His voice was almost a whine, which of course only made Sam and Mia laugh harder. "Any time you two would like to zip it."

Dix tucked extra rounds into his saddlebag and glanced over at Dean. "The Jeep wouldn't help us. We've got too much territory to cover and the terrain is too rough."

"Still don't see why we have to rely on a stinkin' horse." Yeah, he sounded like a petulant five-year-old, but he *really* hated this. A lot.

"Would you rather walk it?" Dix asked.

Dean perked up at the suggestion, but Sam stepped in before he could answer. "Don't give him the option, Dix, because he'll take it."

"You just have to learn to trust the horse, Winchester. You do that and he'll trust you."

Dean snorted. "What, are you the horse whisperer or something?"

Dix ignored him as he passed around two-way radios. "Your cells are pretty much useless out here so we'll have to use these to keep in contact."

"Sounds good," Sam said, taking the small communication device from the seasoned hunter.

"This just keeps getting better and better," Dean muttered, eyeing the radio.

They continued to pack their saddlebags, double-checking to make sure they had enough provisions and weapons for the trek.

"How long do you expect us to stay out here?" Dean asked.

"As long as it takes," Dix answered as he mounted his chocolate-colored steed. Sam and Mia followed suit, leaving Dean to stare at his horse.

"Damn four-legged glue factory." Looping his left foot into the stirrup, he awkwardly hoisted himself up and over the horse.

A couple of hours later, Dean had come to a decision: he was going to kill someone. Or something. The only problem with that was there were a few contenders for the hit. It could be Dix, who was the one who insisted they ride the stupid horses; Mia, who kept ribbing him about his rat phobia; Sam, who was the reason Mia kept teasing him and who kept laughing at Dean about the awkward way he was riding the horse; or the horse, itself, because it was the one who was making him look like a total idiot.

The sun was beating down on them through the canopy of trees and Dean was thankful it wasn't the dead of summer, or he was sure his bad mood would have escalated quite a few notches. To make it worse, his stomach began playing a symphony, the growls seeming to echo throughout the quiet forest. It had been a couple of hours since the breakfast Dix had fixed up for them and Dean was feeling the hunger pangs.

"Dix, do you plan on stopping any time soon?" he asked, trailing behind the other three. If anyone asked, it wasn't because he was having a hard time maintaining control of the horse; it was because he was keeping an eye on things back here.

Dix didn't even look back. "If we keep going and find these chupas, the sooner we can get back to the cabin." He chuckled. "Don't tell me you're already crapping out on me, Winchester."

"We haven't seen anything since we started and my ass is starting to go numb from sitting on this stupid horse."

The horse huffed and came to a sudden stop, throwing Dean forward. He quickly grabbed the saddle to keep from falling off.

"You forget the horse has ears and feelings, too, Dean," Sam teased.

"Feelings?" Dean scoffed and the horse jerked to the side. "Okay, okay! I get it! I'm sorry!"

"I think you spoke too soon there, Winchester," Dix said, bringing his horse to a stop.

"What are you talking about?" Dean snapped as he tried to coax the horse into moving forward.

"We've got some tracks up here."

"Where do they lead?"

"Pretty much everywhere," Sam answered.

"Of course they do," Dean muttered miserably. He finally got the horse to move forward and joined the others. "What do you want to do, Dix?"

"The best thing would be for us to split up and see where the tracks lead," the older hunter said.

"Are you sure that's a good idea with these chupas running around like lunatics?" Dean asked.

Dix looked at him and shrugged a shoulder. "You'd rather stick together and be out here a helluva lot longer than necessary? With the horses?"

Dean nodded his head to the left. "Mia and I will go this way, you and Sam head to the right."

Sam chuckled, but then became serious. "Make sure your radio stays on, Dean."

Dean waved dismissively. "Yeah, yeah." He nudged the horse forward. "Come on, Mia."

"Dean."

Dean huffed as he glanced back at his brother. "What?"

"If you find the chupas, don't be an idiot and go after them alone. You call us."

"Sam, do you really think I'm stupid enough to do something like that?"

Sam narrowed his eyes and was about to answer when Dean held up a hand. "It's probably better if you didn't answer that. Be careful, Sammy."

"You too."

"These things certainly know how to leave a bloody trail, don't they?" Sam asked as they passed a rotting deer carcass. It was maybe the twentieth or so carcass they'd passed in the last few hours or so, the unfortunate victims ranging from deer, bear, cougars and wolves, among others. They were each in various states of decay, making Sam's stomach somersault every time they came across a new one.

"Their stupidity and sloppiness is certainly helping us," Dix said. "At least that's one good thing we can say about these creatures."

"That's true. It's making tracking them a lot easier." Sam rotated his neck in both directions, trying to ease the stiffness settling there. "I wonder if Dean and Mia are having as much luck as we are?"

Dix chuckled. "If anything, I'm sure your brother is driving that girl crazy with his complaining."

"Well, I'm getting a break from it so I'm not going to complain."

"You know, watching the two of you, it makes me kind of glad I never had a brother."

"Do you have any siblings, Dix?" Sam ducked his head as Dix glanced back at him. "I'm sorry—I've always been told I'm a little too nosy. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

Dix shook his head. "Nah, it's okay." He let out a sigh. "My parents were told they would never be able to have children and then I came along." He smiled at Sam. "I sometimes wonder if they regret that with the amount of trouble I caused them."

Sam chuckled. "That bad, huh?"

"Typical teenage rebellion. But I'm guessing you didn't get into any trouble like that—not with John Winchester as your daddy."

Sam smiled, but didn't say anything. He could regale Dix with countless stories of growing up as John Winchester's kid for hours on end, but he didn't want to go there. He was still pissed at John for leaving them with barely two words and talking about his dad would only bring his anger and frustration boiling to the surface.

Thankfully, Dix saved him from saying anything by pointing ahead. "Looks like we've got quite a bit of tracks up here." Dix dismounted the horse and knelt down, running his fingers over the imprints.

Sam followed suit, bending down to peer over Dix's shoulder. "They look pretty fresh," he commented as his eyes followed where they led.

Dix nodded. "I'd say they were made within the last day or so."

"You notice how many there are?" Sam couldn't mask the apprehension in his voice.

"I'd say at least a dozen separate ones, meaning your friends back at the motel have a lot more in their pack." Dix stood up, brushing the dirt from his jeans.

Sam rose to his full height. "Maybe the ones back at the motel were scouts or something? That's typical in any pack of wild animals."

Dix nodded. "Meaning there has to be a den around here somewhere," he said, looking out into the distance.

Sam followed his line of sight, pulling out his two-way radio from his jacket pocket. "I think we should let Dean know what we found."

"Good idea." Dix grabbed a bottle of water from his saddlebag, draining half its contents in one swallow.

Sam brought the radio up to his lips. "Dean, it's Sam—do you copy?"

Static was the only sound to greet him.

"Dean?"

Still no answer.

"I wouldn't worry too much," Dix said, pointing at the steep hill behind them. "The butte's probably blocking any signal in or out. We'll ride up there and see if we can get a signal and scout out the countryside."

"Yeah." Sam climbed back up on his horse again, refusing to allow himself to believe anything was wrong with Dean or Mia. If they'd gotten into trouble, they would have called Sam and let him know. It was like Dix said—the hill was simply blocking the signal.

It had to be the reason.

"Let me ask you something: Is it possible to lose all feeling in your ass to the point where you can no longer sit?" Dean asked as he and Mia ambled through the forest.

Mia rolled her eyes and let out an exasperated sigh. "Let me ask *you* something: Is it possible for a person to go completely crazy to the point where they want to toss you off the nearest cliff?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dean asked, looking sharply back at her.

"It means you've done nothing but complain the entire time, even more so since Sam and Dix split with us. I may just find the cliff and toss myself off if it will get me away from your whining."

Dean brought his horse to a stop, thus causing Mia to stop too. "Hey, I do not whine. I may gripe but there definitely is no whining."

"Dean, you bitch and moan like a little girl." Mia smirked. "In fact, you're giving women everywhere a bad name."

"I can't help that today has been a total waste of time. We've got tracks that lead to nowhere and are at least a week old. I've lost all feeling in my body from my waist down and *I hate this stupid horse!*" Dean finished, his voice a frustrated yell.

"You think I like being stuck on a horse all day?"

Dean shrugged. "You haven't said anything against it."

"Because it does no good to complain about it. It's not going to make the day go by any faster."

Dean nudged his horse forward, leaving Mia behind. "I won't say another word."

Mia rolled her eyes. *Could he be a bigger girl right now? Wait until Sam finds out about this...* Still, she couldn't stand the silent treatment especially when it meant the only sounds she would hear would be the chirping of the birds. It was time for a distraction—something that would take Dean's mind away from the horse and the lack of progress.

"So...have you and Sam hunted chupas before?" she asked tentatively.

Dean didn't say anything as he kept his eyes ahead.

"Oh, come on, Dean. You know you won't be able to stay quiet the rest of the day, so we may as well talk about something interesting." When Dean still didn't say anything, Mia let out an annoyed sigh. "Fine, have it your way."

"A few years ago," Dean answered a few minutes later.

"Do what?"

"We hunted a chupa a few years ago, me and my dad. Sam was in school, so we took care of it."

"Where was it at?"

"Somewhere in Oklahoma. I forget where at exactly."

"Was it anything like what we're dealing with now?"

Dean barked out a laugh. "Not even a little. It was a rabbit compared to this."

"So, what happened?"

"It was snacking on some cows. My dad and I just got into town and went to the farm where it was causing the most trouble. That was the ugliest bastard I ever saw in my life and I've seen some pretty ugly things." Dean chuckled. "Made me glad Dad never actually let us have a dog."

"Did you kill it?"

"Yeah, but not before it tried to hump the crap out of my leg, though. We toasted it eventually."

"You really enjoy this life, don't you?"

Dean shrugged. "It's the only one I've ever really known. I couldn't imagine doing anything else." Dean looked back at her. "Why are you so curious about hunting anyway?"

"Would you rather me talk about something girly like shoes?" Mia challenged as they came upon an old, dilapidated fence line. Wire mesh hung in a tangled mess and the wooden support posts stuck out at odd angles, just screaming potential safety hazard.

"God, no. That's more Sammy's speed." Dean shrugged. "It's just that most women get scared and bail when they find out about this life. The last woman I told didn't take it very well."

"I'm not about to bail and I'm not like most women."

Dean smiled back at her. "No, you are definitely not."

A sudden hiss broke the camaraderie, followed closely by the startled whine of Dean's horse. It rose on its hindquarters and Dean fought desperately as he tried to maintain his hold on the frightened animal as it struggled to get away from whatever was scaring it.

"Dean, it's a rattlesnake!" Mia yelled as she watched Dean's horse buck away from the poisonous serpent.

“Dammit!” Dean screamed as he lost his tenuous grip, the horse bucking again in its frantic attempt to get away from the rattler. The hunter went flying into the air, trying to reach for anything to stop his fast descent to the ground. He came to a sickening halt as he fell onto the rickety fence, landing with a bone-crushing thud.

He never even heard his horse gallop away into the Texas wasteland.

Sam and Dix

They reached the top of the mesa, the vista almost breathtaking had it not been for the nagging voice at the back of Sam’s head distracting him away from the colorful terrain. He pulled the horse to a stop next to the seasoned hunter, but instead of reaching for the canteen as Dix did, the younger Winchester’s hand again went for the two-way. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dix cast a disparaging glance, but Sam didn’t care. He wasn’t overly concerned about the lack of contact with Dean at this point, but the little voice in his head was starting to yell just a bit louder.

“Come in, Dean...” Sam spoke into the receiver and tried to look unfazed when nothing but static returned. “Dean, come in... over...”

He looked over at Dix, shrugging when there was no response. “What’s the range on these?”

“About twenty-five miles, especially up here on top,” Dix replied.

“Do you think we could have gotten that far from Dean and Mia already?” Sam questioned, peering out across the empty basin. “I mean, we can see a good twenty miles from here, can’t we, and there’s no sign of them.”

“Boy, do you always worry like an old mother hen? First of all, your brother is well able to take care of himself, been on plenty of hunts from what I’ve heard. And second, he’s out there with that pretty little brown-haired gal. Have you thought that maybe they’re looking less for chupas and more for some private place to get cozy?”

“My brother wouldn’t do that on a hunt,” Sam insisted.

“And how many times has your brother had someone that looks like Mia with him on a hunt?” Dix threw back.

Sam glared at him. How dare he insinuate that his brother would be doing anything other than taking this job as seriously as the countless others before it? Sam would never argue that Dean didn’t have a reputation for chasing a pair of long legs or the curves of a beautiful woman whenever the opportunity arose, but never when it compromised a hunt or especially if it might jepordize someone’s safety. With Mia under Dean’s supervision, the last thing on his mind would be anything that might put her at risk.

“Look, Sam. I don’t mean to get you riled up,” the older man added. “I’m just saying that I’m sure your brother is okay. Most likely they’ve either gone back to the trailhead or maybe they’re just over the other side of that butte. Either one could account for why the two-way isn’t getting through. So why don’t you give your imagination a rest and let’s head down to the southwest there? Do you see those tracks over there?”

Sam followed the hunter’s outstretched hand to where he indicated an area below them. The ground was pockmarked by scores of fresh tracks each heading out to the west, further away from their current position, and where they had separated from Mia and Dean. With the recent rain, there was no doubt that the chupas had been through this area within the past couple of days. To ignore the chance to follow the trail just because Dean wasn’t answering the radio and was more than likely waiting back at the Impala bitching about the horse would truly have been a stupid thing to do.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, Dix,” Sam admitted. “Knowing my brother, he’s headed back to the car still complaining about having to ride the horse. I’m surprised

we can't hear him from here. There's no sense passing up the fresh tracks or the daylight."

Dix nodded with a smile. Reining his horse around, he led them back down the mesa as the sun began to wane.

Dean and Mia

Mia screamed; her yell an incoherent mix of Dean's name, a belated warning and even a frantic plea as their horses thundered off. She hesitantly took a step in the same direction as the dappled mare, but as the horse's form faded into the distance, she realized there was no chance of catching the panicked steed. Reluctantly, she turned back toward the fallen hunter, a gasp escaping her lips as she took in Dean's silent form.

Lying amidst the remains of the old fencing, Dean was tangled within the wire, blood already seeping from dozens of tiny cuts where the rusted barbs had clawed through his clothing and into the skin beneath. Mia scrambled to his side, her hands stopping scant inches from actually touching him as she took in the full extent of his injuries. He groaned, his eyes slitting open as he fought to look up at her, pain and sunlight simultaneously vying to overwhelm his vision.

"Dean, easy, just lie still, don't move," Mia cautioned, her own eyes frantically skimming over the injured man's body as she carefully peeled the metal twine off of him, cautious not to hurt him any further.

"Mia..." he gasped, lifting one hand to reach toward her.

"Shh..." she hushed him, pushing his arm back down. "Where do you hurt?"

He gulped audibly, closing his eyes as his breathing became more labored.

"Leg..." he hissed shifting slightly then becoming ominously silent.

The brunette looked down to the extremity, her hand flying up to her mouth as she took in the wound there. Impaled several inches above Dean's knee just through the meatier part of his thigh, a piece of the rotted fence post was sticking out of the denim, a torn piece of flesh and thick sheen of blood coating one end. The other end of the wood must still have been buried within his leg because Mia couldn't see a secondary exit wound or any other bleeding on the other side.

Forcing herself to touch the area, Mia probed the far side of the wound, grimacing when she could palpate the hard edge of the post just barely beneath the surface of the skin. The slightest bump and it would likely tear through causing even more damage and with it, she was sure, excruciating pain. As she touched again, Dean groaned and turned away from her contact. She pulled away abruptly, her hands already covered with his blood.

"You're bleeding bad," she announced, not sure why since Dean seemed well beyond replying. "Gotta stop this bleeding...right? Dammit, why didn't I watch more *ER* instead of *Monster Garage*?"

Glancing about, Mia fought to keep calm. When the realization struck her, she quickly yanked off her outer shirt, a flannel *borrowed* from Dean days before, and now to be returned under less than ideal circumstances. Ripping off one of the sleeves, she folded it into a square and placed it around the protruding piece of wood. She considered pulling the chunk free altogether, but somewhere she remembered hearing about leaving things like that in place. Instead, she took the remainder of the shirt and tied it as best she could around the wound, securing it tightly and eliciting a strangled cry from Dean as she tied it off.

"Shh... it's okay, it's okay..." she whispered, smoothing her hands through his hair and gently pushing him back down as he arched up off the ground in response to the pain. But deep inside, Mia knew it was anything but okay.

They were out in the middle of God-only-knew where, Dean was seriously injured and the horses were gone. Mia was resourceful, but MacGyver she wasn't.

The walkie-talkie!

"Who needs to be resourceful when you can just call for help?" she quipped.

Scooting closer to Dean, she carefully patted down the outer pockets of his jacket, remembering seeing him replace the two-way into one of them earlier in the day. Her small hand thumped against the rigid plastic and eagerly she delved inside to retrieve the device.

Pulling it out, Mia's heart sank in her chest. It was useless, the outer casing smashed open and the circuitry hanging out like the guts of a dead animal left to be picked apart by a vulture. Even the antenna hung at an awkward angle; broken and eerily reminiscent of Dean's badly injured leg.

Disgusted and disheartened, the young woman threw the useless radio down to the dirt, watching with grim satisfaction when pieces of it flew up into the air, completing the destruction.

Looking around the desolate terrain, Mia tried to guess just how far they might have travelled away from Sam and Dix. How long ago had the foursome separated? If she yelled, could they possibly hear her? Would her voice carry or echo off the nearby mesa?

Maybe if she backtracked, she could find them, or even make it back to the trailhead and the vehicles. But no, that would mean leaving Dean behind. That wasn't an option.

Stealing a glance back down at the young hunter, she didn't like the pale cast to his skin or the crimped set to his face even though he was unconscious. How much blood had he lost? How much was too much?

"Dean? Come on, wake up for me please," she begged, gently tapping his cheek.

He stirred briefly, turning away from her touch, but didn't wake.

She called out to him again, slapping his face a little more forcefully this time.

"Dean! Please. I need you to open your eyes!"

Green slits peeled apart as he weakly raised a hand to block the sun's rays. Mia spotted his feeble attempt to shade his eyes and she shifted her body to shield his face from the afternoon glare.

"Mia? What... Where?" he asked; single word questions that only further indicated the full extent of his wounds.

"Your horse got spooked by a snake and tossed you into that rickety old fence. Do you remember?"

She watched as Dean's expression changed, his brows furrowing in disgust.

"Damn walking glue factory!" he grouched. "My leg, is it broken? I think it's broken," he added, struggling to rise and reaching to feel the injured extremity.

Mia caught his hand, gathering it up in her own and holding it firm. It was cold, and in the back of her mind, a warning bell sounded. It wasn't cold enough outside for his hand to be chilly to the touch, quite the contrary; the sun was blazing causing perspiration to form an irritating rivulet down her back.

"Dean, I don't think your leg is broken, but there's a big chunk of the fence stuck in it. It was bleeding pretty bad, but not so much now," she told him, hoping the explanation would satisfy his curiosity and calm him enough to lie back still.

"Hurts like a sonofabitch," he weakly complained, biting back a grimace. "Did you call Sammy?"

And if that wasn't the dreaded ten-thousand dollar question...

"Umm... not exactly."

That got Dean's attention and he struggled once more to sit up, failing miserably as both pain and Mia pressed him back flat to the dusty ground. He blinked several times, forcing eyes that seemed insistent not to focus, before finally giving up and just leaving them closed.

"Not exactly?" he repeated. "I think we need some help here, darlin'. Where are the horses?"

"Gone," she answered sullenly.

"Probably just as well. I think I'd likely put a round in mine right about now," he joked.

"It's not funny, Dean," Mia responded, her voice quivering. "The horses are gone, the radio is broken. What are we going to do?"

He swallowed hard, running the back of his hand slowly across his mouth.

"First, don't be scared. We'll be okay. I'll be okay. This is just a little scratch. I've had way worse before."

"A scratch huh?"

"Chicks dig scars. You'll be loving this one in a few months," he snarked, flashing the best smile he could currently muster. "Alright, you need to get back to the trailhead and meet up with Sam and Dix. Then bring 'em back to me. Okay?"

"Are you insane?" she yelled at him, her brown eyes flaring. "I'm not leaving you here hurt and alone! God knows how long it might be before we could get back. It could be after dark."

"I'll be fine," Dean insisted.

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Absolutely not. End of discussion. I'm not leaving you behind, bleeding, alone, possibly in the dark and with those freakin' monstrosities roaming around out here," Mia adamantly refused.

"I have my.45..."

"Which holds what? Eight rounds? Last night there were how many of those little bastards in my room? How many do you think might be wandering around here just looking for a late night snack? Not happening, Winchester."

Dean sighed in defeat. After all their verbal sparring, he'd finally come out on the short end. Or had he?

"Okay, so we both go," he proposed, pushing up on his elbow.

"What?"

"You won't go, you won't leave me, and we can't stay, so we both go together. Granted, it will take longer, but if you help me, and maybe if we use one of those other posts for a crutch, I think we can do it," Dean suggested.

"This is stupid. You can't walk on that leg, it's gonna bust open again," Mia fretted.

"It'll be okay. Help me up."

"You're such a stubborn ass."

"I think we've established that before."

Dean extended his hand, waiting for Mia to grab it with both of hers. Using his right, he pushed down against the hard packed ground for leverage as she pulled up with all her might.

Their first attempt was nearly a failure as vertigo and hypovolemia nearly planted him back down on his back. Luckily, Mia knew if Dean went all the way down, she'd never get his larger and more muscular frame back up, so just as he started to sway, she managed to swing underneath him and pull the young hunter's arm over her shoulder, balancing him precariously on her slight frame.

"That...was...close," he panted into her hair, his head resting against her own as he fought to stay upright.

"You're bleeding again," she grumbled, peeking down at his thigh and the crimson trickle that was seeping out from underneath the makeshift bandage.

"B' fine... let's just get going," he mumbled in return.

Mia helped turn him slowly so that they were heading back in the direction they had come, stopping only to retrieve the loose fencepost for Dean to use as a crutch. Pulling his left arm across her shoulder, she tried to support as much of his weight as possible as they began a slow stagger.

In theory, it might have worked. They might have gradually made their way back to the trailhead and the relative safety of the waiting Impala. In theory, Sam and Dix might have even met them on the way back and saved them the walk.

Of course, in theory, things like chupacabras probably shouldn't even exist and Dean Winchester should have never been on a horse tracking down large packs of them.

So really, it was no great surprise when after the fourth or fifth step, Dean sucked in a sharp breath and collapsed in an unconscious heap to the dusty West Texas ground. In theory, he should have never stood up at all.

Evening Sam and Dix

The sun was barely squinting above the butte to the west, but there was still enough light for Sam to check out the landscape behind them. His eyes scanned both left and right, as far back as he could see from where they had come, but there was no change in the terrain.

Really? What had he expected to see? Dean and Mia galloping up to meet them?

Sam cut off a noise that was half laugh, half grunt, twisting back around in the saddle to see if his fellow hunter had noticed.

"Still worried about that brother of yours?" Dix asked.

"Um... nah, just checking our back trail," Sam lied.

"Yeah, right. Look kid, we've got work to do and if you're not focused on it, then you're no good to me," the older hunter chastised him.

Sam blinked, stunned momentarily at the man's snappy response. For a second, it was as though he was a teenager listening to his father reprimand him for not paying close enough attention during a hunt. The similarity was chilling despite the fact that James Dixon bore no physical resemblance to John Winchester, and his tone brought back a flood of memories.

"I *am* focused on the hunt," Sam insisted. "But I'm worried about my brother too."

"Well, I've already told you, he's likely curled up with that pretty brunette in the back of that hotrod. Hell, they're likely laughing about us being out here working our asses off while they're *screwing* around," Dix lewdly implied.

"You shut up about my brother. I told you before, Dean would *NEVER* mess around on a hunt," Sam yelled back, his body tensing visibly causing the horse underneath him to stir nervously.

"Okay, okay. Just calm down. Boy you really need to get the stick out of your craw when it comes to your brother. You take things way too seriously. Why don't you just call him on the radio again? Not like you aren't dying to do it anyway," Dix grumbled. "I'll ride up ahead while you do and see if these tracks lead anywhere significant."

Sam nodded, grateful to be rid of the irritating man even for a few brief minutes. He watched as Dix kicked his horse into an easy trot, following a separate branch of the trail they'd been following off towards the northwest.

Pulling the radio from his jacket pocket, he spun his horse around so he was facing back to the east and the point where they had separated from Dean and Mia so many hours earlier.

"Dean, this is Sam, come in..."

Static crackled back at him from the two-way's speaker. He twisted down the radio's squelch and tried calling his brother again.

"Dean, this is Sam, come in please..."

When repeated static, not even a glimmer of a response from his sibling, blared back from the walkie-talkie, Sam became frantic.

"Dammit, Dean, answer the freakin' radio," he shouted into the device. "I swear, if you're screwing around and just ignoring me, I'm gonna kick your ass when I get a hold of you."

And if you're lying somewhere bleeding or hurt, I'm so gonna kick my own ass for being such a jerk...

"Dean, please answer..."

The last was nothing short of begging and deep down, Sam knew his final words over the two-way went as unheard as his previous attempts. His guts in knots, he tried to tell himself that it was still something as simple as distance or topography that was blocking the radio. Maybe Dean's radio had accidentally gotten broken.

There were still plenty of *reasonable* explanations for why his brother wasn't responding to his calls. Except...

Somehow Sam just knew that no matter what reasonable excuse he could possibly come up with, Dean was in trouble. If for no other reason than their luck just ran that way. How many times had he ignored the voice in his head, only to find out later that his brother was injured or in trouble?

Chupas be damned. He wasn't ignoring the voice in his head any longer, especially since it was now screaming at him.

As Dix rode back up to rejoin him, Sam was already calling out to him.

"We gotta go," he demanded.

"Why? What's wrong? Did you get a hold of your brother?"

"No, that's why we gotta go now," the younger man insisted, reining his horse around.

"Whoa there now boy! If you didn't get him on the radio, then what's the big rush? I just found another kill ground. I think we're close to the den," Dix informed him, pointing over his shoulder to a spot just a couple hundred yards in the distance. "I don't care..." Sam replied, already leading back off to the east.

"Son, there's a half dozen carcasses over there, not more than a day or two old. The tracks leading away from them are all fresh heading toward that rise. You want to take off now, when we're this close, to chase after your brother?" the older hunter asked incredulously, his steed still unmoving.

Sam stopped his own horse and turned to face the older man, biting back the frustration, fear and even anger that were threatening to blend into an explosive combination. He forced down the rage but let the other emotions seep into his voice when he spoke next.

"Look, Mr Dixon. I get that you don't really know me and my brother but you seem to know our dad, right?"

Sam paused until Dix nodded, adding "Yeah, I've known John a while."

"Then you basically know my brother, Dean," Sam immediately continued. "Our dad raised Dean to be a hunter since he was four. That's all Dean has ever known. And all your little snide comments aside, there's no way my brother wouldn't do anything but take this hunt seriously. So if he's not answering his radio, then at the very least it's broken and at the worst, something's happened to them. But either way, I'm not taking any chances with sunset coming on and a bloodthirsty pack of chupacabras on the loose."

The young man took in a deep breath when he finished with his lengthy tirade, waiting expectantly for the other hunter's reaction. Dix ran a hand through the scruff of a beard accumulating on his chin, glancing back and forth between Sam and the distant butte, obviously torn in his decision between the young man's heart-felt appeal and the desire to continue on the hunt.

Sighing deeply, Dix shook his head as his lip curled in disgust. "Alright, let's go find your brother. In the long run, I 'spose it's better to have him with us if we do find that den. Besides, with the sun going down, it's just as well we start heading back in."

Sam smiled his thanks, grateful that Dix had relented. Even more appreciative that he wasn't forced to relive a pseudo-confrontation with his dad. He liked Dix just fine, but the man's single-mindedness on a hunt was just too John Winchesteresque for Sam's liking. Especially now, when all he could really think about was making sure Dean was alright.

The two nudged their horses into a gallop, eating up the terrain at a much faster pace than they had traversed it coming out. In less than twenty minutes they were back to the high mesa where Sam had earlier tried to reach his brother.

By now, twilight was casting long shadows off the rocks and a gentle breeze was steadily blowing against them. At first, only the smell of the horses and their own sweat-soaked bodies wafted on the air, but as they neared the small plateau, a more pungent odor drifted on the wind.

"Dix!" Sam called out worriedly. "Do you smell that?"

The older man paused, lifting his head up and testing the air much like an animal. He wrinkled his nose a moment later, his eyes widening simultaneously.

"Sulfur! Dammit! That's not good, son."

"Chupas," Sam stated redundantly, his hand reaching for the shotgun tucked into the saddle.

"I sure hope you have something loaded in there other than rocksalt," Dix asked nervously as he reached for his own rifle.

All around them small red eyes began to peek out from behind the rocks rising to their left. The overpowering smell became stronger as the hunters moved onward and Sam raised a hand to his mouth in an effort to block the offensive odor from gagging him.

"This is worse than demon stench," Dix bemoaned.

Sam was about to laugh at the comment when a chorus of unearthly howls rose up on the evening sky. They seemed to come from everywhere at once, high-pitched shrieks, lower yowls, some calling, others answering, but there was no mistaking the message.

Food, chow's on, dinner's served...

"Can we outrun them?" Sam yelled out above the din.

"I don't know, but I'm sure as Hell gonna try..." Dix screamed back, kicking his horse hard.

Yet even as equine legs tore into the West Texas dirt, dozens of smaller fanged creatures poured out of the rocky mesa, ravenous beasts intent on ripping their prey to shreds.

Nighttime Dean and Mia

The night was fairly dark, but hardly silent. Dozens of noises, everything from small insects to larger predators created a nighttime symphony of sound. The problem was, the one sound Mia wanted to hear was ominously absent.

For the past several hours, Dean had remained stubbornly unconscious and unresponsive to her every attempt to rouse him. Ever since he'd collapsed after his stupid effort to walk back to the trailhead and even after she'd moved him to the relative shelter of a small ash tree, the young man had barely done more than offer up a weak groan.

The wound in his leg had continued to seep blood, although not as copiously as when he'd first fallen, but enough that now, even in the darkness, Dean's features seemed pale, almost transparent. Add to that, he was quietly shivering, and the wounded young man didn't look good no matter what the lighting.

Mia knew enough that the blood loss was the culprit for the poor color as well as Dean's lack of consciousness and the constant trembling. While there was nothing she could do to replace the blood he'd lost to the injury, Mia was determined that she could at least try to do something about keeping him awake and warm.

As she wiped the back of her hand across a mouth that felt as though it was filled with cotton, she first cursed the horses for taking off with the few provisions they had and then chastised herself for having contributed to the loss of her own mount. At the very least right now, they could have used the water. Dean could have used the water.

Nothing to be done about all that now, she concerned herself with what she could fix. Squirming down beside him, Mia curled her body as close to Dean as she could,

hoping her own warmth might extend to the young hunter and provide him with some heat that his struggling body could use. Spooning next to him, she tucked her head into the curve of his shoulder while laying her arm across his chest.

For a moment, despite the tremors cascading over him and in spite of his condition, Dean felt solid and strong against her. His tall muscular body still maintained an aura of confidence and determination, even in his weakened state and Mia immediately recognized the same glimmer of hope this man had tried to convey the first time he had told her he wouldn't give up on her, no matter what.

Just lying there next to him not only felt good, it felt encouraging. It somehow gave her hope as though Dean would just wake up and tell her everything was going to be okay.

How can he make me feel this way?

She shook off the sensation, reminding herself that it was simply too soon after Greg. She couldn't be feeling anything for this man. He was too different and she hardly knew him. Did she?

Dean stirred, turning into the added warmth and innocently twining his fingers into Mia's. He gently pulled her hand further onto his chest, clinging to it even as he mumbled incoherently.

She struggled to hear what he said, but all she could focus on was the steady thrum of his heartbeat underneath their hands. The brunette was tempted to just let the young man remain lost in whatever dreamscape currently occupied his injured mind, figuring he deserved whatever respite it gave him. But as his hand gripped her's even tighter and his head began to thrash from side to side, she knew she couldn't let it be.

"Dean? Sweetie, come on, wake up..." she whispered intently, rising up on her elbow so her free hand could gently stroke his temple.

He groaned, still lost in his unconscious memory.

"Hey, Dean! I need you to open your eyes... RIGHT NOW," Mia demanded.

She watched him carefully, ready for almost any response, knowing that he could just as easily come up swinging as anything. Instead, glassy green eyes, more dilated than normal in the darkness, opened, closed, then struggled to stay open once again.

"You with me now?" Mia asked, trying to make the connection.

"Mia?" Dean breathed out.

"Still me, unless you were hoping for someone else."

"What happened," he asked, looking around in the darkness. "Are we camping out?"

"What do you remember?"

Mia saw him blink several times, reach to rub the side of his head and instead detour to his leg.

"I'm hurt..."

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Mia quipped.

"Do I look like I'm in the mood for joking?"

"Oooh, who's the grumpy ass?" she teased, then turned serious. "Okay, listen, here's the CliffsNotes version. You got tossed off Trigger, ran a fencepost through your leg and then insisted you could walk back to the Impala. I assume you haven't lost enough blood to figure out that you didn't make it very far."

"Damn..."

"Yeah, that's pretty much the reaction I'd expect. Honestly, how are you feeling?"

"Uh, like I got tossed off Trigger and jammed a log through my leg, then tried to walk back to the Impala but fell flat on my face," Dean answered. "And like an ass."

"Why like an ass?" Mia asked.

"I'm sorry."

"What the hell for?"

"For you being stuck out here too," he answered sullenly.

“Holy Hell. Are you serious?” she cried out laughing. “You gotta be kidding me?”

“What?” he returned, struggling to look up at her through eyes that simply refused to focus in the darkness.

“You must be in shock or just really going for the pity. Or do you always carry the burden of others on your shoulders even when your own ass is laying on the ground bleeding to death?” Mia snapped back.

“Jeez you’re an unsympathetic bitch. I’m trying to tell you I’m just sorry that I got you into all this crap and you’re gonna bust my chops. I think I’d rather be unconscious,” Dean moaned. He shifted slightly and the moan turned into a full-fledged cry as the lodged piece of wood in his thigh inched painfully within the wound.

Mia panicked, sitting upright and immediately coming to his aid. She quieted him, gently smoothing back his hair, which was suddenly soaked by perspiration while she hushed him like a mother “cooing” to an upset child.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she apologized as Dean breathed rapidly through wave after wave of pain.

“It’s alright,” he finally managed through clenched teeth. Dean swallowed hard, opening his eyes and smiling weakly as he looked back up into Mia’s worried face. “Hey, don’t look that way. Things could be worse.”

“Oh really? Cause from where I’m sitting, I can’t imagine how,” Mia bemoaned sadly.

“Well, for one, it could be raining.”

“Don’t jinx us.”

“Well, we could be back at that freakin’ motel,” Dean reminded her.

“Okay, good point,” Mia agreed, shivering as she recalled the mass assault of chupacabras in her room.

Several quiet minutes passed and the brunette startled when Dean’s head began to slide over to the side. Mia sat up and lifted the hunter’s shoulders into her lap, calling out his name until his eyes reopened and he stared back up at her through glazed eyes.

“Are you still with me?” she asked worriedly.

He didn’t answer immediately, instead blinking rapidly as he swallowed, his breathing once again speeding up.

“Dean, you’re really scaring me.”

“Mia, uh... yeah... sorry,” Dean gasped.

“I think you need to stay awake, dude. You’ve lost too much blood,” Mia warned.

Dean nodded. “Just... talk to me, okay?”

The young woman smiled down at him nervously, her mind scrambling to come up with some topic of conversation.

Dean chuckled weakly. “Mark this day down: Mia Cameron at a loss for words.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, but her face just as quickly softened. “So, tell me about you and Sam when you were kids. What was it like when you were growing up?”

He didn’t answer immediately and for a second she thought maybe he’d passed out again. But when Dean sucked in a deep breath, Mia knew she must have hit a nerve with the hunter.

“We didn’t exactly have a normal childhood. I told you before that our mom was killed by a demon when Sam was a baby, well that set our dad off on hunting early on. It’s pretty much all we’ve ever known growing up,” he explained.

“That seems pretty harsh. You make it sound like you never did anything like a normal kid. Didn’t you ever play football or baseball? Surely you went to school and dated and did all that kind of normal crap growing up?” Mia continued.

“Oh we did some normal things. We moved around a lot and if you listen to Sammy, he’d make it sound worse than it really was, but it wasn’t exactly *The Brady Bunch*.”

"More like *The Simpsons*?" she joked.

Dean laughed weakly. "Yeah, I guess there's some similarity to me and Bart, and Sammy's definitely Lisa. But really, we're not the Simpsons either. Maybe more like the reverse Munsters."

"Reverse Munsters?" Mia asked confused.

"Yeah, we were always hunting things like them which was ironic, but we tried to be normal and blend in like they did, even though we weren't."

"That's kinda warped, ya know," she commented.

"Welcome to my childhood," Dean added.

"So, maybe something happier then? What's your favorite food?" Mia posed, hoping to change the subject to some other less sensitive topic.

"Is there a category for 'anything that doesn't eat me first'?" Dean joked back.

"Why does that not surprise me?" she laughed easily. "I'm also betting that list doesn't include anything that's green, yellow, or orange."

"You've been talking to Sam?"

"I know the type: carnivores. Tell me, do you wait for your steaks and burgers to quit 'mooring' or do they basically slit the cow's throat and just serve it to you?"

"It depends. But listen, can we please move on to the next topic, 'cause sweetheart, breakfast was a long time ago if you know what I mean?" Dean whined.

Mia grimaced. *Great! Two for two Mia, got any other bright ideas of how to torment this guy? Why not just slam your fist into his leg while you're at it?*

"You can really see a lot of stars way out here away from the city lights," she fumbled.

Yeah, that's real smooth! And the weather has been mild too. And I'm a complete idiot, Dean – can you tell?

"Wow, we've already run out of things to talk about? That didn't take long," Dean observed.

"Gee, you must be a ton of romantic fun on a date."

"So, this is a date then? 'Cause I think I missed that part when I was laying here bleeding."

"I take back what I said earlier, you're right, you are an ass. Can't you just make the most of the situation? We're stuck out here. I'm doing my best to keep you conscious. And since you're laying flat on your back, why not enjoy the view?" Mia contended.

"Easy girl! Maybe I *am* enjoying the view," Dean replied, his hazel irises locking onto her darker brown as she leaned above his head.

Even in the darkness, he could see the blush tinge her cheeks as his comment struck her. Mia turned away, her long hair cascading down around her face and obscuring her from his view.

"So yeah, the sky is beautiful tonight," Dean quickly covered. "Looks like the moon will be rising just above that butte pretty soon. That should give us more light."

"Do you think Sam and Dix will come looking for us?" Mia asked worriedly.

"Yeah, knowing my brother, the minute I didn't answer the radio, he turned his ass around and came back for us."

"But finding us in the dark? That won't be easy."

"Sammy won't give up and Dix is a good tracker. They'll find us," Dean assured her, gently squeezing her small hand.

Mia blushed again, suddenly realizing Dean had continued to cling to her hand the entire time, his fingers still twined in her own. He didn't seem to be in any hurry to relinquish his grip either, so she quietly refrained from disturbing the contact.

A violent shiver ran through Dean like a Grand Mal seizure and he did nothing to bite back the groan that accompanied the motion.

"Dean?"

"Freezing..." he stuttered, fighting off another tremor.

"Shock, from blood loss," she announced, even though she knew he likely was just as aware of the cause as she was.

"You... coulda... lied. Just told me... it was... gettin' cold..."

"We need to find a way to keep you warm," Mia said, gently replacing Dean's head back to the hard soil and scooting back down to his side, never breaking the contact with his hand.

"I can... think... of one way," he suggested with a weakly lewd grin.

Mia curled in close to him once more, wrapping her body as tightly next to Dean as she could. Without hesitation, he reached and pulled her closer still, and she could feel the stark combination of his trembling and chilling skin even through the layers of his clothing.

"I don't think we have time for that, Dean," she teased in response. "Sam will be here soon." *Sam has to be here soon.*

She held him against her body, rubbing her free hand against his chest, hoping the movement would generate some heat within his core. He grew silent, despite the small talk she tried to generate but she knew he was still awake because of the occasional squeeze on her hand.

Mia was just about to try to rouse Dean further when the report of a rifle echoed out across the West Texas plain. Both Dean and Mia startled, each of them jerking to the sudden sound.

It was soon followed by the blast of a shotgun and a second rifle discharge off in the darkness. The weapons fire continued sporadically, even as Dean struggled to rise and follow the noise.

He never made it upright, falling back to the ground even as the barrage continued in the distance. Mia held him in her arms, her own heart pounding in her chest as she listened to the gunfire.

"Dean, what do you think that is?" she asked anxiously.

His consciousness slipping, the young hunter struggled to remain alert even as his mind told him what the rapid barrage likely meant.

"Sammy..." he murmured.

Next Morning Sam and Dix

The first hint of sunshine broke over the eastern rise of the mesa bringing with it the promise of a day and a fresh start. For Sam, the sheer fact that another day had broken and he was alive to see it was enough for him.

Pushing away from hard rock wall he'd held against his back, he groaned and stretched. There wasn't a spot on his tall body that currently wasn't stiff, sore or otherwise bearing some still-seeping claw mark.

He carefully waded through a sea of dead chupas, their small bodies littering the ground around him evidence of the battle that had been waged throughout the night. The creatures had attacked in waves, coming at them until it seemed that there was no way they could possibly fend them off.

Yet, they had, not only surviving themselves, but miraculously saving the horses too. Their saving grace had been that as the chupas went down, they tended to turn and feed on their own.

"Whoeee! Wasn't that one helluva fight?" Dix whooped excitedly, slapping his hat on the side of his jeans as he approached from the other side.

Sam looked at him skeptically. He'd never understand the euphoria that people like Dean, Dix or even his dad felt after a battle.

"I'm glad you had a good time," he replied sarcastically.

"Hey, any fight you can walk away from..."

"Yeah, we're just barely walking away. Take a look at yourself," Sam suggested, pointing at the long bloody gash scoring the older hunter's side.

"What? This?" Dix answered, glancing down. "Aw, this is just a love bite."

"Whatever," the younger man answered, moving toward the horses.

Dix walked among the carcasses, toeing each with disgust. "Ya know, I think this was just a small scouting party. I'm figuring the main den might have at least a hundred or so chupas in it considering the tracks we found yesterday."

"Does it really matter how many there are?" Sam snapped back. In his mind, he was over the immediate fight for survival and was back on track for worrying about Dean.

"If we don't find that den it does. Hell, boy, those chupas aren't doin' anything but sitting in that den eating and breeding. They keep massing and they're gonna be looking for more food. There won't be anything to stand between them and a town like Marathon," Dix theorized.

Inside, Sam knew the sage hunter was right, but at the moment, he just couldn't seem to focus on that. If he hadn't been convinced that Dean was in trouble before, then he was all but certain now. No way would his brother have left them out there all night with no communications, not without moving heaven and hell to find them.

"You still convinced that brother of yours is in trouble?" Dix asked, sensing the younger man's internal struggle.

"Yeah, I am," he replied simply, mounting his horse.

"Well, let's go find him. Sooner we do that, the sooner we can get on with business."

They rode in the early morning sun, coming across more sporadic chupacabra tracks as they made their way back toward the point where they had split up from Dean and Mia the day before. As the first and then second hour went by and more of the creatures tracks appeared, Sam became more worried.

And then the voice in his head screamed so loudly it was like a fire alarm going off behind his eyes.

His brain registered the image just a short time after his eyes, transmitting the signal to his legs which kicked his horse into a gallop. He reached the form lying on the dirt, dropping out of the saddle and rushing to it even before his mare came to a complete stop.

"Sam?" Dix called out pulling up right behind him. "Was it the chupas?"

"Yeah," Sam replied disgustedly. "Looks like it hasn't been dead long."

"Any sign of the other horse?"

"No, just Dean's"

"Ya know. It could have just gotten away from him. Not like your brother was exactly horseman of the year. It doesn't mean anything serious has happened to him. They could have even doubled up," Dix suggested.

Sam nodded, silently wishing he could believe the older man, but deep down knowing that their luck just didn't seem to play out that way. He quickly remounted his horse and tried not to conjure up the image of his brother lying dead and torn apart like the decimated animal before him.

Dean had to be okay, Sam just couldn't accept any other alternative.

Dean and Mia

Dean came awake to the soft feel of fabric pressed against his lips. The sensation was strange, almost irritating because of how cracked and dry his mouth felt, and he made a weak swipe at the offensive intrusion.

"Shhh, just lie still," Mia's soft voice advised him.

"What? What is that?" he hoarsely asked as the cloth pressed more firmly to his mouth.

He felt her arm behind his neck, supporting his head and then the fabric must have been squeezed because the wetness turned into a steady trickle that fell to his lips.

"Water?" he croaked, sucking it in greedily. He knew it wasn't, it had a peculiar taste, earthy, almost sweet.

"No," Mia answered as she turned the piece of cut off shirt over and squeezed it again. "*The Discovery Channel* finally paid off. I found a cactus and your knife. This was the result."

He smiled up at her gratefully, not really caring if she had milked a passing mountain goat at this point, he was so thirsty.

"More?" Dean begged.

"Hang on," she answered, scampering off.

He tried to follow her movements but the morning sun was bright in his eyes and the sheer movement of his head required more energy than he could currently muster. Instead, he settled for reaching down to touch the wound at his thigh, slightly relieved when his hand touched a relatively dry bandage there.

"Dean? Stay with me," Mia called to him. "Let me help you up a little."

She boosted him again before helping him drink the meager sips that could be squeezed from the swatches of fabric. He sank back to the ground, not sated, but feeling less parched and even managed a genuine smile when he looked up at her.

"Thank you," he offered, reaching up and gently skimming the side of her face with his fingertips as she hovered over top of him.

She shied away but not before Dean managed to cup her chin with his open palm capturing her within his grasp. It wouldn't have taken much for her to have pulled away from him, not in his weakened state, but she didn't. So he pressed on, guiding her down till her lips drifted just inches away from his own.

"Thank you," he murmured again, before closing the gap and kissing her.

Tentative at first, he soon released her, but when she didn't resist, he drew Mia down to him again. The second kiss was much longer, much deeper and filled with a passionate intensity that left them both breathless when he finally broke them apart.

Dean watched her, waiting for her reaction as she sat back on her heels. She didn't speak at first and it unnerved him.

"It must be the blood loss," she said finally with a chuckle, nervously toying with a stray piece of hair.

"If I had the strength, I'd show you where the blood was lost to," he answered her suggestively, waggling both eyebrows for effect.

She rolled her eyes, breaking into an easy laugh that lightened the moment. "Can't you ever keep your mind out of the gutter when it comes to women?" she asked him.

He stopped laughing and looked at her, his greenish eyes becoming starkly serious. "Maybe with you, for once I could," he suggested.

He didn't wait for her reaction, but pulled her close again, stealing another deep kiss despite the overpowering weakness threatening his body. She didn't fight him, instead meeting his insistent mouth and matching him.

The soft whinny of a horse finally alerted them and Mia sat up ending the kiss abruptly. Looking up, she spotted two riders in the distance and quickly hurried to help Dean rise to see.

Within seconds, Sam was dropping down from his still-moving horse as though he were an experienced wrangler, charging over to Dean's side in one fluid motion. If he noticed Mia's close proximity to his brother, he made no mention, but instead immediately began assessing Dean's all-too-obvious injuries.

"What the hell, Dean? I know you didn't like the horse, but did you have to get dragged behind the damn thing?" Sam teased him.

"You're freakin' hilarious, dude. Remind me to kick your ass just as soon as I feel up to it," Dean grouched.

"Crap, dude. That looks bad. What the hell is that stuck in there?" Sam asked, as he reached the impaled piece of wood in his brother's leg.

"His horse got spooked by a rattler. He was thrown into an old fence post. That's a piece of it," Mia answered. "I didn't remove it. I was pretty sure I read you weren't supposed to."

"Nah, you did the right thing, Mia. Control the bleeding until you have the time or place to work on it properly. There's a first aid kit in my saddle bags, will you get it for me, please?"

Mia trotted off dutifully as Dean struggled to rise up on his elbow.

"You've got a nasty knot on your head. Have you been unconscious? How much blood have you lost?" Sam questioned as he began to slice through the top of Dean's jeans.

"Did you find the chupa den?" the older sibling demanded in return, equally ignoring his brother's questions. "Was that you guys last night? We heard the gunfire."

"Can you move your leg? When did the bleeding stop? Has this bandage been this tight since it was put on?"

"Did you see any chupas? You did didn't you? You got hurt, you're covered in cuts and dried blood. That was you two last night."

"DEAN!" Sam shouted. "Shut up and answer my questions so I can patch you up."

"Sam!" Dean threw back. "I have a friggin' stick stuck in my leg. What more do you want to know? Now tell me what you guys found?"

Dix moved up to the brothers as they continued their banter, intervening and recounting the previous day's findings and the night's chupa battle.

"So we need to get back out there and find that den and take care of that main pack," he finished, shouldering the rifle.

Sam stood abruptly, purposely towering over the smaller hunter. "I don't give a damn about chupas or chalupas right now," he threatened, stabbing one finger into Dix's chest. "Take a look at my brother's leg. He's lost a lot of blood and we need to get him the hell out of here, NOW. Are you feeling me?"

Dix took a step back, raising his hands in surrender. "Hey son, ease off. I told you we'd take care of Dean. But we've only got two horses and I don't think your brother is gonna be riding very easy with that hunk of wood in his leg."

"He's right, Sammy. I tried standing on this, didn't make it far. Not sure I can even move it anymore. Why don't you all just go get the Impala and bring my baby back to me. I'll just wait here for ya. Kinda comfy any way," Dean answered, his singsong voice belying his condition.

"That's not gonna happen, Dean. We're getting out of here, No way any of us are staying out here another minute with that pack on the loose." Sam refuted. "But you're right, I gotta do something about that leg wound."

Mia returned, handing the small container full of medical supplies to Sam even as Dean nodded in agreement. She caught the tail end of the conversation between the two siblings, instantly becoming worried when she saw the younger brother begin to prepare bandages and some smaller surgical implements.

"What are you doing?" she asked, protectively moving to Dean's side.

Sam didn't miss the gesture, had actually seen the two of them kissing as they had drawn near. He wasn't surprised, the attraction between his brother and Mia had been growing for weeks and considering what the two of them had undoubtedly been through last night, he was sure that the bond was likely even stronger now. If anything, He was grateful, the beautiful brunette had obviously kept his brother alive and she was here now, emanating watchful concern over him.

"I have to get that piece of wood out, Mia. It's not gonna be pretty," he warned her.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"I think you're doing it," Sam noted, as she absently stroked Dean's brow.

She smiled and Dean remained surprisingly silent, his eyes closed as he braced himself for Sam's handiwork. In the end, the procedure left nearly all of them weak. Sam from the sheer amount of force it took to pry the thick chunk of rotten wood

embedded from the muscle in Dean's thigh, Dix from the effort of trying to hold the thrashing young man still, Mia from the overwhelming sight of blood that gushed from the wound when the foreign body was finally removed, and lastly Dean who tried to hold back from vocalizing the absolute agony but in the end screamed until his parched throat was raw and hoarse.

Sam was impressed that his brother had managed to remain conscious through the barbaric and torturous process, reminding himself that Dean had suffered much worse in his young life and had the scars to prove it. But as the blood continued to pulse from the wound and his brother's eyes were fluttering closed, Sam knew he needed to act quickly before more blood loss caused irreparable damage.

"Dix, lift his leg for me," Sam instructed.

As the older hunter complied, Sam took a wad of bandages and pressed down as forcefully as he could, eliciting a strangle cry from Dean that was short lived, as the elder sibling finally slipped into unconsciousness.

"Damn, that boy's a fighter," Dix observed. "Ya think he'd have the sense to just pass out and be done with it."

Sam chuckled slightly. "Yeah, well that's Dean. He doesn't tend to do things the easy way."

He finished by wrapping an elastic bandage around his brother's thigh, hoping the compression would prevent any further bleeding and praying further still that they could get somewhere he could properly clean out the wound so it wouldn't get infected. Glancing over to Mia, he saw that the young woman was still gently stroking the side of Dean's head, whispering something softly into his ear as she bent down close to him.

"He'll be okay, Mia. Dean's the toughest person I know. He's been through worse," Sam assured her.

She nodded with a smile and Sam backed away, content to let her alone with Dean while he cleaned up and put the kit away. He found Dix back by the horses scanning the horizon and making no effort to hide the repetitive checks of his watch.

"Dean should be able to be moved in a little while. He's lost a lot of blood, but if we're careful, he should be okay," Sam informed the older man.

Dix snorted, removing his hat and digging his fingers into the top of his head to scratch as he looked at Sam. "We need to get out of here," he began. "We're losing daylight and there's still several miles back to the trailhead from here. With only two horses, it's gonna take us a while to get back there. We might not make it before nightfall even if we leave now."

He gathered the reins to his horse and turned to look back where Dean was still lying on the ground. "Your brother is gonna be like a beacon to those chupas. All that blood scent is like a neon sign flashing 'come and get it' to every one of the damn things within fifty square miles. He's gonna slow us down," Dix continued.

Sam felt the anger boil up inside him and his fists clenched at his sides. But before he could react to the hunter's words, out of nowhere Mia appeared, her diminutive form thrust between them.

"No way in hell are you leaving him behind you sonofabitch," she shouted at Dix, her eyes wide and glaring. "I swear I'll personally kick your fat ass myself and leave the carcass behind for even suggesting it. We'll see how you make out with those friggin' mutant creatures..."

Sam relaxed, trying to stifle the smile that threatened to break across his face as he watched the petite young woman stand toe to toe with the seasoned hunter. There was no doubting now that she had staked her claim on his brother, even James Dixon could attest to that.

"Okay sweetheart..."

"I'm not your sweetheart," she interrupted defiantly.

"Sorry ma'am. I didn't mean any disrespect. I don't have any intentions of leaving anyone behind. I was just stating facts and the facts are we need to get moving soon."

We can't afford to get caught out in the open," he rapidly explained. Sam moved closer, enjoying the exchange but ultimately realizing that Dix was right. Placing a calming hand on Mia's forearm, he pulled her away from the older man.

"He's right, Mia. Come on, help me get Dean ready to move. We need to get out of here now."

They managed to get Dean on horseback again, notwithstanding a fair amount of grumbling and several recently invented new expletives on the elder Winchester's part. Sam alternated between riding behind him and walking ahead and leading the reins, not wanting to exhaust the already overworked steed. Mia, despite her earlier tirade, rode double behind Dix, but her eyes rarely left the barely clinging on form of the hunter on the mount beside her.

They weren't getting far very fast, as the sun began to slowly dip down on the horizon mocking their lack of significant progress. Dean called out again, begging for another reprieve from the constant bouncing abuse and the unrelenting pain from his injuries.

Sam stopped the horse, coming back around to his brother's side, but not fast enough as Dean gave up his fight to remain upright and relinquished his grasp on the saddle horn, slumping down against the horse's neck.

In an instant, Mia was there as well, and between them they lowered him as gently as possible to the ground. While the young woman uncapped the canteen and helped him slowly sip from the container, Sam inspected the bandaged leg. He looked over to the brunette, shaking his head worriedly as she recapped the canteen. "It's bleeding again," he announced.

Standing, he turned to face Dix. "He can't go any further. We're gonna have to stop."

Dix bit his top lip but didn't immediately speak. He took a long look around the nearby terrain, twisting around in his saddle for a better view.

"Look, if we can at least make it to the base of that hill there, we'll have something to put our backs against, just in case. Do you think we can get him that far?" he posed.

"I can make it..." Dean groaned weakly. "Everyone quit talking about me like I'm not here and just get me back on that damn walking bottle of Elmer's Glue."

"It's just a few hundred yards, Dean," Sam said encouragingly. "We'll make camp and get a fire going."

"Great, camping, another of my all-time favorite hobbies," Dean bemoaned as Sam lifted him underneath one arm.

The trek over the short distance to the rocky mound went no faster than their movement up to that point, the race to the sanctuary timed against the setting of the sun. Dean all but dropped to the ground once they reached the small rise. Sam quickly set to building a fire out of the few scraps of kindling that were scattered about, while Mia tried to make Dean comfortable. Beyond them, Dix moved to higher ground, choosing an outcropping where he immediately took up a position to guard the tiny encampment.

When Sam returned to check on his brother, he was somewhat surprised to find Dean so readily awake and coherent. Reclined against a flatter rock, the elder Winchester had at some point retrieved his .45 Colt and had it lying out on his lap. "Sammy, we need to talk."

"About?"

"You should take Mia and get the hell outta here. Ride hard and fast and you two can make it back for help," Dean insisted.

"Are you stoned? Just shut up, Dean, and get some rest," Sam threw back.

"I'm serious, dude. You can make it. Mia is small, lightweight. It won't bother the horse to carry both of you. Not like if it was you and me."

"Shut up, Dean. I'm not leaving you behind and that's final."

"But..."

"No! I'm used to all your self-sacrificing crap on my behalf, but it's not gonna work this time dude." Sam refuted.

"It's not like that..." Dean softly replied.

Sam glanced over at his brother, curious as Dean became silent. With his head held down, it was difficult to tell just what was playing out behind those usually telling green eyes.

When Dean finally looked up, it wasn't at Sam that he made eye contact with, but rather Mia that he glanced at then quickly turned away from. In that motion, Sam understood. Dean's request had nothing to do with his normal desire to place everyone else's well-being before his own. This time, it was all about the girl. He wanted Sam to protect Mia.

"We'll all be okay, Dean. I promise you. I won't let anything happen to you, or her," he assured his older sibling.

Dean met his gaze, smiling briefly as he realized his younger brother understood the unspoken sentiment.

"Now please, quit worrying and get..."

Before Sam could finish the sentence the first howls pierced the early evening quiet. They all jerked in unison, instantly on alert, even as Dix yelled down the first warning.

Sam brought up the shotgun, pumping the forend even as Dean chambered a round into the automatic.

Around them the air became saturated with the stench of sulfur, stronger than either the night before or the encounter at the motel. If the odor was proportionate to number of creatures, they were in for a large pack.

As the cacophony of howls picked up, the first sets of red eyes began to close in on their position. With the brightness of the moon hanging overhead, elongated fangs gleamed in the burgeoning darkness, stark white against the demonic red of chupas' irises that glowed in the shadows. Dozens upon dozens of the creatures moved in toward the camp, slowly encircling the group like sharks, each adding to the rising frenzy of screeches.

Dean protectively pulled Mia closer to him, exchanging a worried glance with his brother as the first of the chupas charged into the encampment. One thing was painfully certain: they didn't have nearly enough ammo.

The scene in the desolate Texas park seemed to play out like a weird sci-fi war movie—humans fighting for their lives against the mutant dog-like creatures. The hunters fired into the chupas with everything they had, but it seemed as soon as they got rid of some, dozens more were there to take their place. It really was a spectacle to see and a story no one in their right minds would ever believe.

A voice in the back of Sam's head was telling him there was no way they would be able to fight through this and survive. There were just too many of them and they had a man down, with Dean being seriously injured. Sam figured it would be a safe bet to say they were screwed.

A yell from his left tore Sam's attention away from the fighting and he turned his head for a moment to see a chupa had launched itself at Dix, biting the elder hunter on the leg. With a feral growl, Dix twisted his body and blasted it with his rifle, the shot cutting a clean hole in the chupa's chest.

"Dix, you okay?" Sam yelled as he continued to fire at the carnivorous creatures.

"Yeah, just damn peachy!" Dix bit out, firing another few rounds into the crowd.

Sam didn't say anything as he focused on keeping himself as a shield between the chupas and Dean. His brother was currently slumped against a couple of rocks, and Sam didn't miss the fact Dean could barely hold up his .45. Despite that, Dean's

face remained stoic as ever as he contributed to the battle, firing shot after shot at the mass of red-eyed creatures. Sam honestly didn't know how his sibling was functioning, much less staying conscious.

"Dean, are you doing okay?" Sam asked over his shoulder.

"Quit worrying about me, Sammy! Take care of these bastards!" Dean shouted back, ejecting the spent clip and popping in a fresh one.

The brothers were diverted from their purpose when one of the chupas leapt through the air, launching itself at Mia and latching onto her shoulder. A pain-filled scream ripped from her throat and she whirled around, struggling in vain to get it off of her. The Winchesters raised their guns to fire, but it was impossible to get a shot in with the creature being so small and Mia thrashing around wildly. It was too great a risk of hitting the brunette and they weren't willing to take that chance.

Dean tried pushing up against the rocks, using his gun as a brace, as he fought to get his feet underneath him. He yelled in frustration as his injured leg protested against the movement and would have face-planted if Sam hadn't caught him in time.

"Dean!"

Dean shoved Sam away. "Go, Sammy! Go help Mia!"

"Dean—"

"Please, Sammy!" Dean wasn't even trying to hide the desperation in his voice. "Save Mia!"

It was rare to hear Dean beg and it was all the incentive the younger Winchester needed as he rushed to the fallen girl's side. He felt an uncontrollable rage welling up inside of him as he bodily tore the creature away from Mia with a guttural cry. Slamming the thrashing chupa down to the dirt, he swung up the shotgun and pulled the trigger, obliterating the snarling beast in a spray of bone and blood.

Sam dropped beside the frightened girl, giving her a cursory glance for any potentially serious injuries. He noticed the cuts littering the upper part of her body, but they didn't seem to be bad. "Mia, are you okay?"

Mia pushed her hair out of her face and nodded shakily. "I—I think so."

"Good." Sam pulled her to her feet and pushed her towards Dean. "Go stay by Dean." He didn't stick around to see if she listened as he rejoined Dix.

"We can't keep this up all night, Dix!" Sam yelled as a couple of the chupas tried to get the jump on them. He and Dix raised their guns, simultaneously letting off shots.

"You think I don't know that, kid?" Dix ground out as he pulled out a long blade, thrusting it into a chupa that was trying to take another chunk out of his leg. "But right now, this is all we can do!"

The battle continued to wage on for another ten or so minutes, but eventually the chupas pulled back, choosing to feast on their dead rather than fighting for their food. They retreated into the darkness, though Sam was still able to see tiny red eyes peering at them, watching their every move, just waiting for them to slip up.

"Looks like they're giving up for now," Dix commented. Sam noticed the man still held his gun up, fingers tense on the trigger in case the chupas decided to ambush.

"Let's just hope they continue to do that," Sam said. "I don't know how much more we can take."

Leaving Dix to continue to watch the chupas, Sam walked over to Dean and Mia. The girl was sitting behind his brother, cradling him against her body, holding onto him tightly. Dean's eyes were closed and for a moment, panic set in for Sam as he crouched down next to them.

"Is he okay?" Sam asked frantically, looking down at Dean's leg where blood was seeping through his bandaging.

"I'm fine, Sammy," Dean mumbled, opening his eyes to peer at the younger man.

"Sure you are, Dean. You only look like death warmed over," Sam said, grinning faintly and trying to mask the fear he was feeling.

If Dean noticed, he pretended not to notice. “You’re one to talk—you look like you’ve gotten into a literal cat fight. Don’t you know the only good cat fight has to include at least two hot chicks?” he joked weakly.

“It’s just a few scratches.”

“Don’t believe you,” Dean murmured sleepily.

“I didn’t think you would. Dix and I think they’ll stay away for the remainder of the night, but we’re going to stay up and keep watch just in case.”

“Wake me...when you get...tired. I can...watch.”

“Dean, your eyes aren’t even open now.”

“Just...resting...them.”

“Sure you are. Listen, you just stay here and rest. Dix and I can handle it.”

Dean’s eyes opened enough to glance up at Sam. “Be careful, Sammy.”

Sam smiled and patted Dean’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about me, bro.”

“Always...worry...” Dean’s eyes finally slid closed as he passed out from exhaustion and blood loss.

“I know, Dean.” Sam glanced over at Mia. “Are you going to be okay?”

Mia nodded, unconsciously clutching Dean tighter. His brother stirred, but he didn’t wake up. “I’ll take care of him, Sam. I won’t let those bastards get near him,” she said, conviction in her voice.

Sam studied the girl in front of him, grim determination set in her voice. He didn’t miss the way her watchful brown eyes stayed on a constant vigil around the landscape before them. The younger hunter could tell she meant what she told him—she wasn’t going to let anything happen to Dean as long as she could help it.

“Thanks, Mia.” Sam smiled warmly at her. “Let me know if you need anything.”

She looked up at him long enough to give him a terse nod, and then refocused her attention on Dean once again, softly stroking his forehead.

Sam got up from his crouched position and rejoined Dix who was loading fresh rounds into his rifle.

“How’s your brother doing?” Dix asked softly.

“He’s still bleeding a little, but he’s holding his own.” Sam said, glancing over at Dean and Mia. “He’s out again now.”

“That’s probably just as well. He’s not going to be any good to us if he injures himself any further.”

Sam looked sharply at the older man before him, trying not to take offense at what Dix was saying. He knew Dix was right—at least, the rational part of Sam told him Dix was right. Still, it didn’t excuse the man saying that, especially when he barely knew them.

“Dean’s not going to do anything stupid,” Sam said defensively. “He wouldn’t put anyone in danger like that.”

Dix glanced up at Sam, slightly taken aback by his tone. He held up his left hand in a placating gesture. “Now, Sam, I didn’t mean anything by that, so don’t go getting your knickers in a twist.”

“Dean’s better than that.”

“I imagine he is but I was simply stating a fact. Now, once your hackles go down, you’ll see that I’m right.” He returned his attention back to his rifle.

Sam let out a long sigh, knowing he was being a complete ass. “Look, Dix, I’m sorry. I guess I’m just letting the stress get to me. I’m just not used to Dean being out of rotation. It’s usually me who’s sidelined.”

Dix shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. No harm done.”

Sam nodded and took a seat on a nearby boulder, looking out at the eerie red eyes still watching them. “It’s still a couple of hours until sunrise.”

“Yeah.” Dix pulled out a flask from his jacket pocket and after taking a hearty swig, passed it to Sam. “They shouldn’t be much of a bother after that. We’ll leave as soon as it’s light out and get your brother back to the cabin to recoup.”

Sam passed the flask back. “Are we gonna forget about the chupas?”

“Hell no. We’ll come back, find the den, and clean these bastards out. I’m not letting them have the victory dance on this one.”

“Me neither, Dix.” Sam smiled grimly. “Me neither.”

Morning Dix’s Cabin

“I swear, I’m going to kill that kid,” Dean ground out as Mia helped him sit up in the bed. He was in the bedroom Mia previously occupied, the events of the past day a blur. The only thing that stuck out loud and clear was that Sam wasn’t there—he’d gone back to find the chupa den with Dix.

“Dean, you would have done the exact same thing,” Mia argued as she fluffed up his pillow. “And you can’t kill Sam for two reasons: one, fratricide is against the law and two, you’d be miserable without him.”

Dean sulked. “Fine, I’ll just break both of his legs so he can’t go anywhere and then I’ll kill Dix for bringing him along.”

Mia smirked as she sat down beside him. “Still wouldn’t work, Dean. You’d have to drag Sam’s tall ass everywhere and I just don’t see you playing Florence Nightingale to him.”

Dean didn’t say anything as he glared at his injured leg. *Stupid leg for getting snagged by the stupid fence because the stupid horse had to get spooked by the stupid snake. If it wasn’t for that, I wouldn’t be in this stupid bed.*

“Besides,” Mia was saying, breaking Dean from his personal diatribe. “Sam’s a big boy who can make his own decisions.”

“He still could have woken me up and let me know what he was doing.”

“And if he did that, would you have let him go?” she asked, arching a well-manicured brow.

“Hell no. I would have tied his ass down or knocked him out.”

“With a bum leg?” she asked, amused.

Dean glared at her, hoping it could convey what he really wanted to tell her because no way should what he was thinking ever be said aloud to a woman.

“You can glare at me all you want, Dean, but you know I’m right. Sam didn’t want to fight you on this and I can’t blame the guy. He told me you might behave this way.”

Dean sat up straighter and pushed away from her. No way was he going to sit here and be coddled while Sam was out there without him as backup. “I’ve got to help Sammy.”

Mia pushed him down gently, but firmly. “No, Dean, you need to stay here and rest.”

“I can rest later. You don’t understand, Mia—”

“Yes, I do. You Winchester’s are so closed-minded when it comes to each other, willing to sacrifice everything for the other.”

“He’s my brother,” Dean pleaded.

“I get that, Dean, I do. You have to trust Sam to be able to take care of himself every once in a while. He doesn’t need you to keep holding his hand. Besides, he has Dix with him and I think he’s grown a soft spot for your brother.” Mia locked eyes with him. “Dix won’t let anything happen to Sam especially if he knows what will happen to him if he does.”

Dean was already playing at least a hundred different ways he could kill Dix if he let something happen to Sam. They were all painful, all tortuous, and all guaranteed not to kill him right off. Add to that, Dean had acres upon acres of West Texas wasteland to dispose of the body and he was completely sure he’d get away with it.

“You’re plotting his death already, aren’t you?” Mia asked, grinning.

“Maybe,” he replied, nonchalant.

Mia patted his arm and stood up. "How about I go see if I can wrangle up something for you to eat? I imagine you have to be starving."

Dean smiled at her as his stomach began to grumble at the sound of food. "That would be great."

"I'll be right back."

The hunter barely let Mia close the door behind her before he was tossing back the blankets and twisting his body around. Gimp leg or not, he had to get out of here and help Sam. He just wasn't willing to entrust Sam's welfare to Dix, even if he found himself trusting Dix. Truth was, he would never completely trust anyone enough to take care of Sam—except himself.

Gritting his teeth as a sharp, stabbing pain erupted through his injured limb, Dean applied most of the pressure on to his other leg, but it wasn't good enough as he fell. Luckily, he caught himself on the small wooden chair beside the bed. Taking a deep, calming breath, he managed to push himself up to his full height and take a couple of steps before he fell against the dresser, catching himself before he went crashing to the wooden floor.

"Son of a bitch!" He ground out as his leg throbbed unmercifully.

The door burst open and Mia rushed into the room, taking everything in. When her eyes fell on him, Dean could see her anger and frustration. Hell, he could feel it coming off of her in waves.

"Dean, you stupid ass!" She rushed over to him to offer her assistance, and Dean didn't even have the strength to push her away. Throwing one of his arms over her shoulders, her petite frame shook as she took on most of his weight. "Let's get you back to the bed, even though I should have just left you on the damn floor."

"Can't—have to help Sammy..." Dean protested weakly as she shuffled him to the bed. He felt bad she was doing most of the work, but after his stunt, he just didn't have the energy to do much of anything.

"You have to help yourself, Dean," she said as she helped him sit on the bed. She continued to hold on to him as he pushed himself up against the wooden headboard.

"I'm fine," he lied.

"Sure you are." She stepped back, placing her hands on her slender hips. "Now, are you going to stop being an idiot or am I going to have to tie you to the bed?"

Dean cracked a smile. "That sounds kinky."

Mia huffed and rolled her eyes. "Men..." she muttered. She glanced down at his leg and saw it was bleeding again. "Great, you probably busted your stitches. That's going to piss Sam off."

Dean shook his head. "Nah, Sammy likes playing nurse—he's even got the costume."

"Well, you're going to have to settle for me for now," she said as she grabbed the first aid kit from the dresser. "Believe me—my bedside manner is something to be desired."

"As long as you wear the costume, I'm okay with it." He winked. "It should be in Sammy's bag."

Mia smiled as she sat down beside him and opened the kit. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so much more."

Mia didn't say anything as she unwrapped his leg and gently cleansed the wound. "At least your stitches held," she commented absently as she grabbed a gauze pad from the tin box. "I'm telling you right now, Dean—you do this crap again and I will not be picking your ass up. I'll let you stay there until someone gets here and hopefully you won't bleed to death before they arrive. If you weren't so damn pig-headed and actually allowed someone to take care of you, you wouldn't be in this mess. But no, you have to be a typical alpha male and prove yourself and it's stupid—"

Dean smiled as she glanced at him. "Are you done?"

Mia smiled sheepishly and ducked her head but not before Dean caught the flash of crimson blushing her cheeks. As her brown hair gently framed her face, Dean couldn't help but be reminded of Melissa, but it quickly passed as he realized they were two completely different women. While Melissa had been incredibly shy and reserved, Mia was the polar opposite. Mia was strong-willed, intelligent, and more brazen than any woman he'd ever met. He couldn't remember a time when he felt as challenged as Mia made him feel and he welcomed it—he wanted it, actually.

“Hey, Mia...” his voice trailed off and he suddenly felt all of fifteen years old, trying to summon up the courage to tell a girl he liked her.

Mia placed the final piece of tape on the bandaging and looked up at him. “Yeah?”

“Um...” He kept his head down, peering up at her through long lashes. “I just wanted to...uh...thank you...for everything, you know.”

Mia laughed. “Dean, all I did was re-bandage your leg.”

“I'm not talking about that.” He lifted his head to look at her. “I mean for last night and before that. You stayed there and you took care of me and I...well...”

Mia smiled bashfully. “Dean, you don't have to say anything. You would have done the same thing.”

“No, I need to say this because I want you to know I appreciate it—all of it.”

“You're welcome, Dean.”

“That's not all...”

“Wow, you're really on a roll today, aren't you? That injury must be affecting you more than we realized.”

“God, would you just let me say this?”

Mia held up her hands. “Sorry.”

“It's just that, uh...well, I want you to know that...” Dean let out a deep breath. “It's amazing how it's easier for me to deal with every evil thing out in the world than it is talking to you.”

Mia frowned. “I hope that's not what you wanted to say.”

“No, it's...”

“Dean, why don't you just kiss me and get it over with?”

Dean laughed. “Never let it be said Dean Winchester doesn't do what it takes to make a woman happy.” Pulling her over to him, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her deeply. Mia returned the gesture, falling onto him as he lay back, the intensity growing until she pulled away, breathless.

“Wait, we can't do this. I could hurt you even more.” Concern was evident in her deep brown eyes.

Dean just smiled roguishly. “Sweetheart, I may be hurt but I'm not dead.” His kissed her again before pulling away, his smile genuine this time. “Besides, I haven't felt better in a long time.”

Mia smiled. “Really?”

Dean turned around, gingerly maneuvering himself so that she was now lying next to him on the bed, the curves of her body fitting snugly against the hard edges of his own. “Do you see me going anywhere?” he asked before he buried his face into the soft hollow of her throat, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her hair and skin as he became lost in the overwhelming passion of the moment.

Late Afternoon

Sam already knew the onslaught he'd receive from Dean even before Dix pulled up to his cabin. In fact, he knew it as soon as he'd left early that morning before Dean was awake. It wasn't that his brother was unreasonable—it was just that Dean was hard to reason with. Then again, Sam wasn't worried—he knew how to handle Dean. He'd even go so far as to say he was an expert on the subject.

So when Sam opened the door and entered the warm cabin, he wasn't disappointed to find Dean, lying on the couch waiting for him.

“What the hell, Sam?”

Sam sighed, knowing full well that any answer he was bound to give wouldn't satisfy his stubborn brother. Luckily, Sam was saved from answering when Dix appeared behind him, shutting the door.

“Don't go yelling at the kid—it's my fault,” the elder hunter grumbled as he threw his jacket on a chair.

“Last I checked, Sam was able to make his own decisions,” Dean said, glaring at Dix.

“Funny...I seem to remember telling you the same thing not too long ago,” Mia commented. She glanced quickly at Sam and the younger Winchester didn't miss the slight blush creeping into her cheeks or the fact she practically couldn't take her eyes off of his brother.

Something definitely went on here...

“So, what did you two do while we were gone?” Sam asked, an impish glint in his eyes.

“Nothing,” Mia answered a little too quickly.

“Ate...slept...” Dean mumbled.

Sam smirked at Dean and didn't even flinch as Dean glared daggers at him.

“Did you two at least find anything during your little outing?” Dean asked, sending one more glare at Sam as if daring him to say anything about him and Mia.

Sam knew when to stay back and not step on Dean's toes. He especially wasn't going to do it now because under all that false anger, Sam could see Dean was happy about whatever had transpired with Mia. He wasn't about to take that away from Dean, not when his brother's happiness was so little and so rare.

“We managed to locate the den if that's anything,” Dix called out from the kitchen. He came into the living room a few seconds later with two beers. Passing one to Sam, he popped the top on his own and took a long swallow. “But we have a problem.”

Dean snorted. “What kind of problem?”

Sam grimaced. “Well, there are quite a few more chupas than we thought.”

“Define 'quite a few'.”

“About a hundred or so,” Dix answered.

“Holy crap.”

“Our sentiments exactly.”

“Actually, Dix had a few more colorful words to add to that commentary.” Sam smiled. “He makes you sound like a nun, Dean.”

“I've been around a lot longer than the two of you so I've expanded my vocabulary a good deal.”

“So, how the hell are we supposed to get rid of a few hundred chupas?” Dean asked.

“That may end up being harder than we think,” Dix admitted. “The best way would be to wipe them out all at once. We do that and it prevents them from getting away so they can wreak more havoc.”

“Well, that's great and everything. How do you propose we do that? I mean, I'm as big a fan of explosives as the next guy, but it still gives them a chance to escape. Same if we try to block them in—some could still find a way to get out.”

“There is one way we hadn't thought of,” Sam said thoughtfully.

Three pairs of eyes fixed on him expectantly, waiting for him to elaborate.

“You plan on sharing with the rest of the class, Sammy, or are we going to have to take you out to the playground and beat it out of you?” Dean asked.

“Why is it that I can never draw things out, make you fish for it? You do it to me all the time.”

“Sam!” A chorus of three frustrated voices met his ears.

“Okay,” Sam said, rolling his eyes. “We can make napalm, take it back. We trap the chupas in the den, dump it on them, and light the suckers up. Problem solved.”

Dean glanced at Sam, disbelief written all over his face. “Well, if I didn’t know it before, I’d say you pretty much lost every ounce of that college education you got.”

“I don’t think so, Dean,” Dix glanced up at Sam, a slow smile forming on his weathered face. “I think the kid might be on to something.”

Dean sighed. “Great, you’re both off your rockers.”

“If you think about it, napalm’s pretty easy to come by—you just need some gasoline and Styrofoam and you’re all set. Now if we can get our hands on some benzene, it will be even better. It’s messy, but it’s fast and it will get the job done.”

Dean shook his head in wonder, taking in the calculating smiles on Sam and Dix’s faces. “I swear I have stepped into Mr. Wizard and his trusty assistant’s lab. I thought one geek was bad enough to deal with.”

Sam smirked. “You’re just jealous you didn’t come up with it yourself.”

“Bite me,” Dean grumbled. “All right, we’ll go with the Wonder Twins on this one. I just hope the two of you know what the hell you’re doing and don’t blow our asses to Timbuktu.”

“Trust us, Dean. This will work,” Sam said.

Dix drained the last of his beer and stood up, gathering his jacket. “I’m heading into town to get what we need.”

As soon as Dix left, Dean looked over at Sam, arching a brow. “You’re sure this is going to work?”

Sam shrugged. “It’s the only thing we have.”

“In that case...” Dean glanced at Mia, grinning. “You might want to take a bath while you still can—before the tub ends up in the front yard.”

* * * *

The Next Morning

“Do we have everything?” Sam asked as he came back into the cabin. It was early morning, the sun just beginning to peek above the horizon, casting a soft glow on the broad landscape. He and Dix had spent the previous night cooking up the napalm, both not getting to bed until at least one that morning.

“Yeah, I think that’s about it,” Dix said, taking one last look around the cabin.

“No, it’s not,” came a voice behind them.

Sam turned his head to see Dean stumbling from the bedroom, holding onto the wall for support, clutching his shotgun. “Dean, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demanded, rushing forward to give him a helping hand.

Dean pushed him away. “I’m going with you.”

Sam scoffed. “Like hell you are.”

“Do you plan on stopping me?” Dean challenged.

“Dude, all I have to do is push you down and it will lay you out flat.”

“Try it and I’ll turn you into chupa bits myself,” Dean threatened.

“Dean, you can barely stand up, much less walk.”

“I don’t give a crap, Sammy. I’m going with you and that’s final.”

“Dean—”

“Sam, you and Dix can’t do it all by yourself. There’s too much to do—trapping the chupas, setting the napalm bombs, igniting them and add to that, you have to make sure none of the bastards get out.”

“You’re just going to get in the way, Winchester,” Dix grumbled.

“It isn’t up for debate,” Dean said, glaring at the older man.

“There’s no talking you out of this, is there?” Sam asked.

“You’ll drop dead before you succeed.”

Sam looked over at Dix, knowing that was true when it came to trying to talk Dean out of anything. “We could use the extra pair of hands.”

Dix crossed to Dean, pointing a finger at him. "Fine, but you stay out of the way and let Sam and me handle the heavy lifting."

"No way—" Dean began to protest.

Sam crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at Dean. "It's either that or you stay here, Dean. It's not up for debate," Sam added, throwing Dean's words back at him.

"What if things—"

"Dean..."

"Fine," Dean bit out. "Let me just tell Mia what we're doing and make sure she's okay." He made to turn back towards the bedroom when the door opened and Mia emerged, rifle in hand. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going with you," she said simply.

"No, you're not."

"Dean, there's way too much for the three of you to do by yourselves—you can use the extra pair of hands."

"I'm not letting you walk out that door, Mia."

"I don't see how you can stop me."

"Oh, I can stop you."

"Really?"

Dean glanced behind him for some sort of assistance. "Guys, a little help here?"

Sam shook his head. "You're on your own, bro."

"Thanks a lot." Dean turned back to Mia. "You're not coming."

"Dean, just because yesterday was amazing, it doesn't mean that you own me. I'm not wearing a collar and leash and the last I checked, my name wasn't Fifi. Besides, I'm not the one oozing blood right now and if it came down to it, I could outrun your ass without even trying."

They stared at each other, at an impasse, both waiting to see who would give first. Sam watched from the sidelines, amused that someone was actually challenging Dean.

Dean was the first to give. "Fine, but you have to promise me you'll stay out of harm's way." He locked eyes with her, his gaze unwavering. "Promise me, Mia."

"I promise, Dean. You have my word if worst comes to worst, I'll leave your ass for chupa chow and never look back," she joked weakly.

Dean pulled her into an embrace, kissing the top of her head. "Please change your mind and wait here for me."

Mia pulled away, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Dean. I can't do that."

"You're a lot of work, you know that?" he teased.

Sam cleared his throat, suddenly worried that they may start making out in the middle of the living room. "Whenever you two are ready to wrap it up."

Dean took Mia's hand, giving it a squeeze. "What's the matter, Sammy? Are we making you uncomfortable?"

"I don't know about him, but you're certainly making me sick," Dix said, grabbing his rifle from the table. "Let's get going—daylight's burning."

The group walked out into the chilly morning and Sam smiled as Dean took in the sight before them. "What? No horses?" he asked, sarcastically.

"Are you disappointed?" Sam asked as Dix placed his rifle in the Jeep. "If you are, I'm sure Dix could wrangle up another horse for you."

"No, I'm just wondering why I was subjected to hours of torture with Mister Ed when we could have taken the Jeeps. Maybe then I wouldn't have an extra hole in my body not to mention half of my ass gone."

"We didn't know where the den was before and we had way too much territory to cover—the Jeeps never would have made it," Sam explained. "Now, quit your whining and let's go."

"Are the keys in the Jeep?" Mia asked, approaching the closest one.

"Yeah, they're in the ignition. You can follow me and Dix," Sam answered.

"Who said you were driving?" Dean asked.

"I did," Mia replied, climbing into the driver's seat. "You coming or what, Dean?"
Sam chuckled as he climbed into the Jeep with Dix. "You heard the lady, Dean."

* * * *

When they pulled up to the mesa about half an hour later, Dean had to admit he was impressed. Sam and Dix had done well locating the den and from the looks of the rough terrain around them, he knew it couldn't have been easy, especially if they were on horseback. It almost made him feel bad about being mad at Sam for ditching him—almost.

"There's the cave over there," Sam said quietly, pointing at the outcropping of rock tucked neatly between the trees.

"I hope you have another way of getting in there besides the front entrance," Dean said, squinting his eyes against the bright glare of the sun.

Sam sighed, narrowing his eyes at Dean. "We did do our homework before we came up with this plan, Dean. Just because you weren't with us doesn't mean we're incompetent."

Dean shrugged. "I'm just making sure, considering I don't want our asses to get handed to us by a bunch of Cujo wannabes."

"If you're going to start critiquing the way we're handling this, you can just stay here," Dix said as he unloaded the Jeep.

"I'm not critiquing anything. I'm just saying."

"Well, quit saying," Dix said shooting him a cool look. "And remember to stay out of our way."

Dean stopped himself before saying something he'd regret, considering Dix was armed with napalm and Dean was pretty sure if provoked just enough, the eldest hunter wouldn't hesitate throwing it on him and lighting it up.

Sam and Dix gathered up their necessary materials as Dean and Mia loaded up the guns and rounds, then followed them to the small outcropping. It took an effort to climb it and he only did it with Sam and Mia's help, though he would never tell them he appreciated it. Finally all four were at the top opening, peering down at the mass of chupas.

There were dozens upon dozens of the small critters, laying atop one another where it looked like the floor of the cave was nothing more than some weird gray, hairless mass bobbing up and down as they breathed. Most were sleeping, though a few stirred restlessly almost as if they sensed something was about to go down.

"It looks like one big orgy fest waiting to happen in there," Dean commented.

"There's three exits we found to the den," Dix said, pointing them out to Dean and Mia. "I figure if the three of you each take an exit and guard them against any getting out, I can drop the napalm bombs from up here and toast them."

Dean glanced at Mia seeing she was nodding her head in understanding as she listened to what Dix was telling them. He didn't like the thought of her being by herself—away from him—where he couldn't back her up if necessary. While the cave wasn't that big, it was still big enough to put distance between them. Then again, Dean didn't see any other way out of this, not if they wanted to exterminate the chupas and get out relatively in one piece. Not unless she opted out, that is...

"Mia, you can still back out if you want. Sammy and I can watch Dix's back," he said softly. *Please, just stay back...stay safe.*

Mia shook her head vehemently, her brown hair blowing in the slight breeze. "No way—I want to do this. Besides, I have some payback for these damn things and I intend to give it to them."

Damn stubborn woman... Seeing the determination in her eyes, Dean knew he wasn't going to talk her out of this. Finding no point in arguing it any further, he, Sam, and Mia quietly took their positions, giving Dix the signal when they were ready to go.

It wasn't long before the sound of terrified screeches pierced the quiet and the smell of burning flesh assailed their nostrils.

"Dean, we've got some making a break for it!" Sam shouted as he let off a couple of rounds. They each found purpose, two chupas falling to the ground dead as the shots went clean through their heads.

Dean fired at three of the small beasts trying to fight their way to him, their desperate attempts at freedom and retribution cut short. He glanced over to see Sam was fairing well on his own, managing to keep the chupas in the cave as he fired at them. Dix was still throwing napalm into the opening, momentum guiding him on. A shot to the right had him turning his head to see how Mia was making out. Surprisingly, she was doing very well against them, but it was short-lived.

It seemed to play out in slow motion as Mia's cartridge jammed and she frantically tried to free it. Seeing that it wasn't working and that the chupas were coming towards her, she turned the gun around and began swinging at them almost as if she was a batter down with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning and the team was counting on her for the winning homerun. Soon it became too much for the petite girl and, sensing weakness in the ranks, the remaining chupas fixated on her.

"DEAN!"

His name was an ear-piercing scream and it sent tendrils of ice through his chest as he watched her desperately trying to fight against the swarm. *This is not happening...this cannot happen! Not now, I won't let it!*

Dean sprang into action with a feral growl, rage running through his veins and quickly overriding the fear. He ignored the pain in his leg even though it was screaming out in protest. It was nothing compared to the pain he'd feel if he lost Mia. He began pulling the chupas off of her with almost inhuman strength, the adrenaline kicking in full force. Faintly, he could hear the blast of the shotgun behind him, knowing Sam was exterminating the bastards as fast as Dean was tossing them left and right.

One launched itself at Dean, realizing he was trying to keep the pack from claiming their prize and he snapped its neck almost to the point of ripping it clean off. Finally, he was able to see Mia tucked into the fetal position, weakly trying to protect herself from the attack. As he took in the numerous bites and scrapes littering her body, he sent a blast at the last chupa before grabbing her up into his arms. She collapsed against him, sobbing and clutching into his jacket, almost as if she was afraid she'd lose her lifeline if she let go even for a second.

"Shh...you're okay," he soothed, rocking her back and forth and rubbing her back. He exchanged a quick look with Sam as his brother joined him and then returned his attention to the frightened girl. "You're okay. Everything's going to be okay now."

Dean continued his ministrations and whispered soothing words as smoke from the chupa carcasses rose in the air, casting the Texas skyline in a thin gray film.

Three days later Joe Bearwalker's Place

Dean pulled up to Joe's place, hating himself for what he was about to do, but knowing it needed to be done. He couldn't continue like this, hating himself for feeling like he let Mia down. She deserved so much more and if the last few days were any indication, it showed him that he couldn't keep protecting her.

The pain in his leg was intense, but he'd insisted on driving, hoping it would do something to quell the thoughts racing through his head. He could suffer with the pain because at least it offered a mild reprieve from the pain he was feeling in his chest. It was a new kind of pain, a kind he wasn't accustomed to. It hadn't even been this way with Cassie and it scared Dean to no end he could feel like this.

"I'll go talk to Joe," Sam offered and Dean guessed it was so his brother could have an excuse to get away. There had been silence nearly the entire drive up,

mostly on his and Mia's part. Sam had tried to keep up a steady flow of conversation but the other two just weren't having any of it. He'd given up on the attempt around their second hour of driving and Dean felt bad about putting his kid brother in that position.

"Okay," Dean said and Sam exited the Impala, leaving him alone with Mia. Dean kept telling himself this needed to be done, this was the only way. He'd spent the previous night trying to convince himself and the girl of this and informing Sam of his intentions. Sam being typical Sam assured Dean he was doing the right thing but Mia didn't seem to agree. That was made obvious when, looking into the rearview mirror, he saw her staring back at him and the pain in his chest only intensified, almost suffocating him.

Suddenly feeling very claustrophobic, he pushed out of the car, cringing as the screech of the door reverberated through the air, seeming louder than it usually was. *You just couldn't let me do this quietly, could you?* he silently berated the classic.

Shutting the door, he walked around to the front and leaned against the hood, watching as the Native American came out to talk to Sam. A couple of seconds later, he heard another screech and didn't look up as Mia joined him.

"You know, for someone who claims to be a top-notch mechanic, it's amazing how you never heard of the wonder of WD-40 for a squeaky door hinge," she said softly as she took his hand.

Dean gave it a gentle squeeze. "Like you know crap about classic cars," he said, trying to sound annoyed, but knowing he failed miserably.

They both fell silent, holding hands, and looking at anywhere but at each other almost as if they were afraid of what they would see.

Mia was the first to speak. "Why are you doing this, Dean?" she asked, her voice now devoid of all hints of humor.

"Because I care about you," he softly replied.

"You have a funny way of showing it."

"Do you think I want to do this, Mia?"

"Then don't!" She turned Dean's head so he was looking right at her. "You said you would protect me, Dean. You promised me you would keep me safe from whatever's been after me. You told me that."

"I know I did, Mia, but—"

"What's going to happen to me now? How am I supposed to make it if I don't have you with me?"

Dean turned his head away as he felt a tear threatening to spill over as her desperate pleas tore at him. He wanted nothing more than to load her up in the car and drive away, keep her next to him. But if he did that, then he was being selfish and he couldn't do that. He couldn't let his feelings get in the way of doing what was right.

"Mia, I can't keep you safe...I tried."

"Yes, you can, Dean! You've been doing it this entire time."

Dean shook his head. "Sammy and me, we still have no idea what's after you or why. We can't keep going into this blindly and I can't keep putting you at risk. I refuse to do that." He put a hand on her cheek. "Texas showed me that—you could have been killed there and if that had happened...I don't know what I would have done."

"You could have been killed too, Dean. Hell, you were the one with the stick protruding from your leg."

"You don't understand, Mia," he said roughly. "This is my gig—my life—not yours. I refuse to let you get caught up in it."

"I want to be with you, Dean," Mia argued stubbornly. "I don't want to lose you. You have been the only good thing to come out of this nightmare, the reason I've been able to hold on for this long."

"Mia, please..."

“No, Dean! Why can’t you listen to what I’m saying? Why can’t you see that I need to be with you?”

“Because I can’t keep doing my job if I’m constantly worried about you. Don’t you see, Mia? I won’t be able to focus on what needs to be done if I spend every waking moment worried about what’s happening to you.”

“Dean—”

“I can’t keep doing it because I love you, Mia,” he blurted out, stunning the girl into silence. *Did I really just say that?*

Mia stared at him, watching the emotions play out on Dean’s face. She opened her mouth a few times to say something but she couldn’t seem to get the words out. “Dean, I—”

“You’ll be safe here, Mia,” Dean went on quickly. “I promise. Joe’s a good man, he’ll look out for you. I’ll call you every chance I get and see how you’re making out.” He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it. “I’m not giving up on you, Mia. I’m going to find out what’s after you, but I—”

“—can’t kick demon ass if you’re worried about me,” she finished for him.

“I’m sorry, Mia. I really am.” He brushed away a tear falling down her cheek. Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her deeply, wanting more than anything to stay that way forever, but knowing he had to let her go.

Finally pulling away from each other, he took her hand and guided her to where Sam and Joe were talking.

“I take it you’re Mia?” Joe asked, holding out a hand to greet her. “I’m Joe Bearwalker—I hear you’re in quite the pickle.”

Mia smiled weakly and shook the older man’s hand, but her eyes stayed glued on Dean.

Dean cleared his throat and nodded curtly at the hunter. “Thanks again for doing this, Joe. I’ll keep in touch.” He turned away and walked towards the Impala, refusing to turn back.

“You take care of yourself,” Sam said to Mia, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze before following his brother.

Dean already had the classic running and barely let Sam close the door before he pulled away. He tried to will himself from looking back and seeing what he was leaving behind, but couldn’t help himself. He watched as the girl wiped her face, growing smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror.

Pulling out onto the road, he began to absently rub at his leg as a dull throbbing pain settled there.

“Does it hurt?” Sam asked quietly, taking notice of Dean’s actions.

“More than you’ll ever know, Sammy.”

The End