

Season Three

Episode Twenty: No Excuses

By SnSam

Oklahoma State Penitentiary Six Months Earlier

THOP...

THOP...

THOP...

Peter Hines smiled to himself as the sound of the tennis ball bouncing against the cinder block wall echoed throughout the eight by ten cell. It was just another noise to add to the multitude of others that seemed to plague the prison—the constant fighting, the threats and the sound of metal clanging against metal. If the convicted felon wanted to be entirely honest with himself, he knew the ruckus he was causing pissed off the other inmates and the guards and he couldn't care less.

Oh, well...get the hell over it, Hines thought as he continued to bounce the ball. Not like these pansies have the balls to say anything to me.

That was the truth.

As soon as he'd been sentenced to this hell hole ten years ago, Hines quickly set the precedent that he wasn't one to be screwed with. Of course, it helped that on his first day, he'd sent one guy to the ICU for two weeks to get that point across. When he was released from solitary confinement, Hines was pleased to hear that word had spread quickly to stay away from him.

But that threat was diminishing rapidly and Hines knew it. He'd heard the anxious whispers in the courtyard and the cafeteria for the last week or so. His days were numbered—two to go, to be exact; he'd be meeting the business end of the syringe soon enough, which he was sure would thrill the majority of the state of Oklahoma.

What the hell did Hines care, though? Sure, he'd killed ten people, but did he have any remorse about it?

Hell, no.

Regrets?

Hell, yes.

Regrets that he'd gotten caught. In Hines' mind, he still had a lot more tricks up his sleeve. He still had a lot more terror to inflict, a lot more dreams to haunt.

Well, he still had a way to do that. No way was he going to give the state the satisfaction of pulling his plug. If he couldn't be out there creating havoc for the masses, then Hines would at least dictate the way he was going to go out of this world.

Catching the tennis ball single-handed, the killer rose from his cot and walked to the far facing wall, removing a carefully carved out chunk of cinder block. Reaching in, he pulled out the homemade shiv and smiled coldly.

Even though he'd made it more than a couple of months ago, Hines had never had the occasion to use it. He'd secretly wished someone would come along to piss him off just so he could have felt the warm blood on his hands, but maybe it was a blessing no one did. After all, if that happened, the weapon would have been confiscated and he wouldn't get to use it for its true purpose now.

Running his finger over the finagled blade, Hines smiled in satisfaction as blood seeped out from the cut. "Yep, this will do just fine."

The felon felt no fear as he brought the blade up to his throat. If anything, this would be a release—a sweet, intoxicating release that, if he was lucky, would still be savored for some time to come.

Faint footsteps stopped Hines from completing his deed just then. "Even better," the murderer murmured. "I always did love an audience."

He didn't have long to wait before the penitentiary's newest hire—a short, lanky and constantly nervous guard—stopped in front of Hines' cell, his hand resting on his nightstick as if it was the very salvation to save his pathetic life if things went downhill. Hines smiled in glee as he took in Twitchy's fearful expression as the guard eyed the blade the prisoner held.

"Don't think you're gonna make it in time there, Twitch," Hines said as he watched the uniformed man reach for the keys on his belt.

Before Twitchy could even grasp the keys firmly in his hand, Hines brought the blade across his throat, spraying the guard and cell in a shower of crimson.

* * * *

"On my count of three. One...two...three."

The medical staff worked as a solidified unit as they transferred Peter Hines from the stretcher to the gurney in the trauma room. Doctor Seth Luger wasted no time as he began to check the vitals of his patient, though every fiber in his being was screaming at him to let the scumbag go to Hell where he deserved.

Which was exactly where he was headed with this type of wound. Hines' breathing was ragged at best as blood continued to sputter out of his neck. How the psycho was managing to hold on to life was beyond the veteran doctor. Luger had to give it to him though—Hines knew exactly what he was doing when he slashed himself.

"Pressure's dropping," one of the nurses replied brusquely.

Let it drop, Luger snorted as he kept the thought to himself. Instead, he put on his practiced medical persona and said, "Let's keep working, people. We still have time to save him."

Though Luger was sure if he took a vote no one would agree to that.

Somehow, Hines managed to turn his head enough to look the doctor in his eyes, a leering smile on his face as he choked on his own blood. There was no denying that Hines knew he was going to die and to the physician, it almost seemed as if Hines was happy with that.

Well, let me be the one to send you on your way...

"I lost his pulse," another nurse called out as a steady beep pierced through the frenzied air.

"Get the crash cart in here!" Luger barked as he pushed his way forward to begin compressions. He barely even turned around as an intern handed him the paddles and a nurse pushed medication into Hines' system. "Charge to three hundred! Clear!"

The killer's body convulsed as the paddles were pressed against his chest and an electrical charge pulsed through him.

"Still nothing."

"All right—let's try again!"

Luger and his staff continued their valiant efforts but to no avail. Realizing there was nothing more he could do, the doctor called for everyone to cease their work.

Looking down at his watch, Luger said, "Time of death...21:06." Stripping off his gloves, the medic reached for the chart and made the notation. He cursed under his breath when he noticed something else on the paper.

"Son of a bitch..."

"Is there a problem, Doctor Luger?" the last remaining nurse asked worriedly.

"I guess it depends how you look at it," the doctor replied. "Notify the organ retrieval team and let them know they have a new customer. The sooner they get it done, the sooner this bastard can go to the morgue where he belongs."

With one final stab of his pen against the clipboard, Luger shoved the trauma room's swinging door open, intent on saving the lives of people who were actually worth it.

Tahlequah, Oklahoma Five Months Later

There were days when Jerry Houston loved owning his own business and today was no exception. A local lawyer for the fine people of Tahlequah, the fifty-six

year old silver haired man was glad he had the luxury of working from his home office, instead of sitting in a stuffy brick building all day. Not to mention the fact he got to stay near his family, especially his grandchildren who lived next door. The prosecutor was pretty much a happy camper.

Then again, Jerry had a lot to be thankful about lately—namely a new lease on life in the form of receiving a new kidney. Five months ago, just as the doctors were telling him dialysis was no longer working and he only had a month to live, the new organ had finally come along. He took to it surprisingly well and the doctors were thrilled to report he now had a long life ahead of him.

Jerry was ecstatic to hear the news because there was so much that needed to be done. He'd immediately cut down his seventy-plus hour work weeks and spent more time at home with his wife of thirty-five years, Audrey. Not only that, he began taking on pro bono cases until they eventually became the majority of his caseload.

It felt good to give back to the community that supported him in his so-called hour of need.

Letting out a sigh, the attorney tried to focus on his newest case. Jerry was trying to get together his defense for the case of the Dossett family against the Environmental Protection Agency. High levels of lead had been found in building materials used to build their new home, resulting in lead poisoning to their two young children. Jerry felt confident of their chances of winning the case, but he found he was having a hard time concentrating as little noises began eating away at his thought processes.

It was the everyday noises that a person grew accustomed to and had never seemed to bother him before—the birds chirping outside his window, the neighborhood children squealing with delight in the street and Audrey bustling to and fro in the kitchen as she prepared their dinner. The sounds kept pounding away in his head and his notes quickly became gibberish as his hands began shaking violently from the rage building inside of him.

"What in the world is happening to me?" he whispered as the feeling of pure fury washed over him, subduing his usual gentle demeanor.

"Hon, supper is five minutes away," Audrey said as she stopped in the open doorway, drying her hands with a dish towel.

"I'll be right there," Jerry said, smiling tightly as his wife's voice grated against his nerves.

Audrey didn't seem to notice Jerry's mounting rage. "I know how you are when you get a new case—there's no budging you." Audrey smiled warmly. "I promise I won't bother you the rest of the night if you come and eat with me now."

Jerry only nodded tersely and watched as she left him alone to return to the kitchen. *There's only one way I'll get the peace I need*, Jerry thought as he opened the top desk drawer.

Nestled inside at the very back was a small handgun that was meant for protection, but would serve a different purpose today. Picking it up, he was satisfied to see the clip was still fully loaded.

Rising up from his desk, Jerry made his way towards the kitchen, keeping the gun at his side. He spotted Audrey with her back towards him, fixing their plates.

"You must have been hungry," she teased, but she didn't turn around.

Jerry said nothing as he slowly raised the gun to take aim at her.

Completely oblivious to her husband's intentions, Audrey turned around, smiling brightly as she held a heaping plate in each hand. Her expression quickly turned to one of horror and the plates fell to the floor, shattering upon impact, when her eyes lighted upon the gun.

"What are you doing, Jerry?" she demanded fearfully, bringing a hand to her mouth.

Jerry said nothing, his face expressionless.

"Jerry, please...put down the gun," Audrey pleaded. "You don't know what you're doing."

The attorney tuned out her voice as his finger squeezed the trigger, firing off two shots into Audrey's chest. She fell to the floor and as she landed unmoving at his feet, Jerry seemed to finally snap out of his murderous trance.

"No..." he whispered in horror as blood began blossoming from under his wife's body. "What have I done?"

Looking down at the gun still tightly grasped in his hand, Jerry brought it up and aimed it at his head. There was one more shot before Jerry's prone form joined that of his beloved Audrey.

Present Day Cornerstone Diner, outside of Joplin, Missouri

*You can't see the mornin', but I can see the night
Drive, drive, drive, let it ride
While you've been out runnin'
I've been waitin' half the night
Drive, drive, drive,, let it ride*

Why does it seem like every diner we go to has to either blare classic rock or country music? Sam Winchester thought as Bachman-Turner Overdrive's *Let It Ride* blasted through the speakers. Looking across the table, it was obvious Dean was enjoying it as he bobbed his head in time to the music, while shoveling massive bites of eggs down his throat.

Sam supposed it could always be worse because he would gladly take classic rock over a sappy, lovelorn country song any day of the week. It was a wonder those artists and songwriters didn't spend the majority of their time with a shrink, considering all they knew how to come up with was all of that depressing crap.

*Babe, my life is not complete, I never see you smile
Drive, drive, drive, let it ride*

*Baby, you want the forgivin' kind and that's just not my style
Drive, drive, drive, let it ride*

"Sorry, Sammy, but I'm just not buying what you're trying to peddle me here," Dean said as he chased down the eggs with a healthy chug of coffee.

Sam sighed as he looked up from his laptop, a rueful smile playing on his lips. "Well, I might be agreeing with you for once because I'm not really sure if I'm buying it myself." He shrugged a shoulder as he swallowed down some of his orange juice. "But then again, it's too coincidental to ignore."

"What do you mean?"

Again, Sam sighed. "In the last five months or so, throughout Oklahoma and surrounding states, there's been a spike in murder-suicides."

"So?"

"The perps were all upstanding citizens of their communities, never got into a spot of trouble before this," Sam explained. "They had no reason to commit these murders."

It was Dean's turn to shrug. "People change all the time, Sammy. We know that from personal experience. This sounds like something for the Five-O, dude."

"I thought you didn't think very much of their abilities to do their job?" Sam commented, grinning.

"I still don't, but I don't see how this is our kind of gig."

"Did I mention that every single person who committed a murder was a recent organ recipient?" Sam asked.

"How recent?" Dean asked, arching a brow.

"Five months recent."

"And you said that's when the spike in murder-suicides began?"

Sam smirked. "Look who's been paying attention in class."

"Dude, would it kill you to give me a little credit every now and then?" Dean griped, stabbing at his last bite of eggs.

"Not at all, if your credit didn't come so few and far between," Sam answered.

Dean flashed a bright smile as he swallowed down the food. "That's the difference between you and me, Sammy—you make life all simple and boring by paying attention and I make it more exciting and spontaneous when I don't."

Sam rolled his eyes. "No wonder I always end up being the bitch in almost every single hunt," he muttered under his breath.

Dean's smile grew. "You gotta admit, it's more exciting when I have to swoop in and save your ass."

"And how is it you manage to keep that ego of yours in check, Dean?" Sam didn't look at his brother as he returned his attention to the laptop.

Before Dean could reply with what Sam was sure would be his usual biting snark, the older Winchester's cell phone began to chirp. Shoving a strip of bacon into his mouth, Dean dug in the pocket of his favorite leather jacket and plucked it out.

Flipping it open, he held it to his ear only to be greeted by the dial tone. Pulling it away, he scrolled to the Missed Calls menu and frowned at what he saw there.

"Another hang up?" Sam asked quietly.

Dean closed the phone with a snap and nodded. "Yeah."

"You've been getting a lot of those lately."

Dean signaled to the waitress for another coffee refill and answered Sam without looking at him. "It's probably just a crank caller, Sam."

"Do you think it could be Dad?"

Dean shook his head as the waitress refilled his cup and waited for her departure before he continued. "Why would you think that?"

Sam shrugged. "He gets new phones all the time and he's never been the best at sharing the numbers with us, Dean."

"It's not Dad, Sammy. He wouldn't hang up without talking to us first," Dean answered.

"What if he was in trouble and he couldn't answer?"

"He would find some way to give us a message if he was in trouble," Dean stated firmly.

"Yeah, but what if—"

"Drop it, Sam," Dean said with a stern look. Picking up his coffee cup, he nodded towards Sam's laptop. "Tell me more about this case."

Sam wanted to push the subject further but he could tell Dean wasn't going to budge. That was it—the matter was closed. He trusted Dean when he said it wasn't their dad calling, but he could see by the way Dean kept darting glances at his phone that there was something his brother wasn't telling him—whether it was proof it wasn't their father or just a thought, Sam wasn't sure.

The younger Winchester didn't want to get into a fight with his sibling, especially in a public place, so instead he focused once more on the possible gig. "We're heading for Tahlequah, Oklahoma."

"Why there?" Dean's eyes slid from the phone to Sam's face.

"That's where the last murder-suicide occurred, not to mention three other recent recipients call it home," Sam answered.

"Dude, I still think this recipient thing and the deaths could be one big ass coincidence."

Sam grinned. "Sure, but you don't believe in those. You actually give the Easter Bunny more credit for being real."

"I'm willing to make an exception," Dean argued. "And no way in hell do I believe in a damn overgrown rabbit that shoots Peeps out of its ass."

Sam's face wrinkled in disgust. "Well, there's a nice picture for you."

Dean chuckled. "So, if these organ recipients are the common link, have you been able to find the winning donor?"

Sam frowned. "The records aren't that easy to come by. Hell, they don't even let the recipients know where their organs came from," he explained. "I just need to do a little more digging and I'm sure I can come up with something more definitive."

"I have no doubt about that, little brother," Dean said with an easy smile. "You're like the freakin' Energizer Bunny when it comes to research."

Sam flashed a half smile before sighing as he closed up his laptop. "This could be absolutely nothing, Dean, but it sure as hell beats us sitting on our asses, just waiting for Mia or Lucifer to strike."

Dean added his own tired sigh. "That's exactly my point, dude. We have enough on our plate to deal with without adding more to it."

"Since when have you been worried about stacking your plate too high?" Sam asked with a pointed glance at Dean's polished off breakfast. "Especially if it involved a buffet line. Why start now?"

Dean glared at his smirking sibling. "Bite me," he said as he got up to pay their bill.

Sam laughed as he packed up his laptop and watched Dean pay the waitress for their tab.

"Get your ass in gear, Sammy, or you can start footing it to Oklahoma," Dean called out as he pushed out of the door to the diner.

It's not everyday you can get Dean Winchester to shut up, Sam thought happily as he followed after his brother.

Tahlequah, Oklahoma

"My God, this neighborhood could make a person want to kill themselves," Dean

commented as he pulled the Impala into a tree-lined subdivision. At Sam's look of incredulity, he quickly added, "Excuse the pun."

"I think a lot of people wouldn't necessarily mind living in an area like this," Sam argued. "Isn't this what the American Dream is supposed to be about?"

Dean scoffed. "What, paying mortgages on half-a-million dollar homes? No thanks, dude. I'll take our backwoods motel rooms any day of the week."

Sam chuckled, but Dean ignored him. He really didn't understand how people could put themselves in debt by building and living in these monstrosities. Looking at all of the similar Italian-style villas that lined either side of the street, Dean was sure these people never had to do a day of manual labor in order to keep their properties looking pristine. Why should you when you could pay some poor schmuck to do it?

As he glanced at the homes, Dean figured maybe these people lived in these top-of-the-line homes because it made them feel more safe and secure. All the hunter knew was that a shotgun full of rocksalt, holy water, and the right Latin exorcism did the job just fine, too.

"This is it right here," Sam commented, breaking into Dean's thoughts. The older Winchester slowed to a stop as he parked across the street from one of the homes—the only difference between this one and all the others was the fading For Sale sign in the front lawn.

Dean had to give the realtor's office credit—they were certainly doing a great job with the upkeep up of the property. There was really no reason why this home should still be on the market, except for the obvious one—the last owners dying inside. It amazed Dean how the thought of death scared people, when in his line of work, it could be seen as a blessing in disguise some days.

"Doesn't look like anyone's home," Dean commented as he stepped out into the cool, autumn afternoon.

Sam shook his head as he joined his brother on the walkway leading up to the home. "It doesn't look like anyone's set foot here since the Houstons died."

"Well, looks can be deceiving," Dean muttered as he stepped up to ring the doorbell. "Maybe we'll get lucky."

"You do realize you're using us and lucky in the same sentence, right?" Sam asked, arching a brow.

Dean shrugged but said nothing as he rang the doorbell once again. Seeing as they weren't going to get an answer sometime in the near future, he nodded to the next door neighbor's home. "Should we try over there?"

"It couldn't hurt," Sam answered and the brothers made their way around, passing the iron fencing that cordoned off the estates.

Walking up that walkway, they stopped at the door and rang the doorbell. It wasn't long at all before it was answered by a petite brunette, her long hair pulled back into a messy, yet fashionably knot. She wore designer jeans topped with a stylish pink babydoll blouse.

"Can I help you?" she asked smiling, yet suspicion was obvious in her voice.

Sam returned her smile, quickly melting away the woman's apprehension. "We were wondering if you happened to know the people who used to live in the house next door?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out the doctored FBI badge. "My name is Agent Henley and this is my partner, Agent Denver."

"Um...I'm Abigail Bain," she answered, shaking each brother's hand in turn. "The people that used to live there were my parents, Jerry and Audrey Houston."

"We're very sorry for your loss," Sam said gently, his voice full of sympathy. Dean found himself having a hard time not laughing at the way his little brother worked his magic. As soon as Sam broke out that tone of voice, people—especially of the female persuasion—were putty in his hands.

"Thank you," she answered, smiling sadly. "What brings the FBI out here?"

"Could we possibly go inside and discuss it?" Dean asked.

Abigail seemed ashamed of her manners as she quickly stepped back to allow the hunters passage. "By all means, please come in."

"Thank you," Sam said sincerely as he followed Dean into the house.

Abigail shut the door behind them and led the way into the large, open living room that was professionally decorated with bright colors and modern furniture. A series of windows lined the back wall, allowing the afternoon sunlight to bathe the room in a soft amber glow.

Just as Dean was crossing the threshold, he was nearly mowed over by three small children hurrying through the room and up the staircase behind them.

"You three need to slow down!" Abby called out, but there was no anger in her voice. She glanced at Dean apologetically as another woman, who he assumed was the nanny, gave chase after the children. "Sorry about that. It's a little chaotic around here with my husband on a business trip. They tend to get a little restless."

"It's really no problem," Dean answered good-naturedly as he sat on the sofa beside Sam. "It looks like they keep you on your toes."

Abigail laughed softly. "If that isn't the biggest understatement...I really don't know what I would do without Sophia being here," she said before her tone turned serious. "Do you mind telling me what this visit is about?"

"Not at all," Sam answered. "We're investigating your parents' deaths."

Abigail shook her head in confusion. "But that doesn't make any sense. There is no case—it was a murder and suicide."

"That may be so and we could completely be wasting your time, but could you tell us if your father ever showed any signs of depression before his death?" Dean asked, trying to keep his voice as soothing as Sam's.

"No, not at all," the woman replied. "If anything, he seemed happier to me, especially within the last five months or so."

"Can you explain that?" Sam asked.

"He was dying from kidney disease. Dialysis wasn't helping anymore and the doctors only gave him about a month to live. Then, the next day, he gets a call saying a new kidney had been found," Abigail explained sadly. "He got a new lease on life and he began taking advantage of that."

"How?" Dean asked.

Abigail smiled faintly. "My father was the biggest attorney in Tahlequah; he dealt with the high dollar cases. But he gave the majority of them up in order to take cases pro bono."

"That was really considerate of him," Sam commented.

Tears welled up in the petite woman's eyes as she nodded shakily. "He really was a great man. That's why none of this makes any sense. Why would my father just snap like that? What could possess him to murder my mother—she was his world."

Sam and Dean exchanged uneasy glances, both frowning when she mentioned "possession." If she only knew how true that could possibly be. Nodding to Sam, Dean tilted his head towards the door, indicating it was time for them to take their leave.

"Mrs. Bain, we would like to thank you for your time," Sam said softly as he and Dean stood up.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"We've got some other things we need to check out before we can come to any conclusions," Sam said.

"You'll let me know if you find something, right?" Abigail queried as she followed them to the door.

"Sure thing," Dean replied, hating that he was lying to the grieving woman, but knowing that if it was something supernatural-related, no way in hell was she going to believe them. Walking back to the Impala, Dean didn't say anything until they were both inside.

"That didn't get us anything useful," he muttered as he started the Chevy, her loud growl earning a few glares from some of the residents.

"At least she solidified what everyone else has been saying about their loved ones—they didn't seem the type to do something like this," Sam pointed out.

Dean let out a weary sigh. "Where do we go next?"

Sam reached inside his suit pocket and pulled out a folded up sheet of paper. Opening it up, he pointed to the first name on the list. "Gwen Barton—she's the first person on here who has yet to snap."

Dean nodded. "Okay, do you have any idea how to get there, Tom Tom?"

Sam chuckled at the navigational nickname as he pulled out his cell phone, activating the GPS technology. Punching in Gwen's address, Sam had no trouble at all showing Dean the way.

Pulling onto Shasta Drive, Dean was relieved to see they were headed down a neighborhood that could be construed as normal by the average person. Small homes that seemed to be at least a couple of decades old dotted the street. Leaves created a blanket over the lawns of some homes, while others were raked, with a stray leaf here and there. Almost at the end of the road, the brothers finally pulled up to the Barton home, where a white minivan sat parked in the gravel driveway.

"Dude, that thing so beats a map any day of the week," Dean remarked as he turned off the ignition. Then he smirked. "I wonder if it could point me in the direction of some hot chick's house if I told it to?"

Sam rolled his eyes as he pocketed the phone and pushed out of the car. "You're completely hopeless sometimes, you know that?"

Dean chuckled as he shut his own car door. "Ah, you know that's why you love me, Sammy."

Sam was about to respond when a terrified, blood-curdling scream ripped through the air. Trading anxious glances, the brothers reached for their weapons and raced up the wooden steps.

"What do you think?" Sam asked quietly as they took positions on either side of the door.

Dean shrugged. "Are we sure it came from this house?" he asked, uncertainly.

As if in answer to that, another cry erupted from behind the door before it was abruptly cut off. With a nod from Sam indicating that he was ready, Dean stepped back and brought his foot forward to kick open the door.

Sam quickly entered the room, Dean bringing up the rear to cover him. Both Winchesters stopped short as they burst into the living room and saw what greeted them there.

A woman stood sobbing over a prone form, closer inspection revealing it to be that of a young girl, blood soaking through her outfit and onto the area rug. The woman's head snapped up when she spotted the hunters, her eyes clearly reflecting horror for the deed she'd done.

Before they could even react, she brought a bloodied knife up to her own throat.

Episode Twenty: No Excuses

By SnSam

Part Two

Barton Residence

Sam took a step forward, trying to get the distraught, hysterical woman to release the knife from her own throat. He knew from the bloodied, unmoving body on the floor that it was too late for the girl, but maybe they could save Gwen Barton from the same grisly fate. At least he hoped so.

Gwen realized what he was doing and jerked the knife away from her throat to thrust it menacingly at the brothers while taking a couple of steps back. "Stay away from me!" she growled as tears streamed down her face in steady rivulets.

Sam held up one hand in a placating gesture while he holstered his weapon with the other, finally lifting both hands to show her he was unarmed.

"Sam, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Dean hissed fiercely.

Just shut up for once, Dean, Sam silently pleaded, refusing to answer, which he knew was pissing off his brother. But he also knew Dean would have his back which made this crazy stunt he was pulling even less...crazy?

Screw it—he can kick my ass for it later.

There was no doubt in Sam's mind Dean would do just that.

"Dude, do you have a friggin' death wish or something?" Dean asked. "Don't you know not to tangle with a chick, especially if she's wielding a knife?"

"Dean..." Sam said through clenched teeth. Then he focused all his attention on Gwen, who was staring at him with wide, crazed eyes. "We're not here to hurt you, Gwen. We want to help you."

Gwen barked out a bitter, sarcastic laugh. "Help me? How the hell do you possibly think you can help me? Can you bring me my daughter back?"

Sam eased another step forward. "No, but we'd like—"

Gwen shook her head vehemently as she thrust the knife forward, narrowly missing Sam as he dodged out of the way.

"Son of a bitch, Sam," Dean muttered. "I hope to hell this wasn't part of your brilliant plan. Stanford education, my ass..."

"Dean, just chill out," Sam said, making sure to keep his eyes on Gwen. He wasn't stupid enough to turn his back on her, considering she'd probably have no qualms about killing him especially after she just stabbed her own flesh and blood.

"Don't tell me to chill out, Sam," Dean said angrily. "This chick just tried to make a kebab out of your ass."

"Helping or hurting, Dean?" Sam bit back.

"I'll show you how helpful I'll be after she sticks you," Dean muttered. "Bet you'll be begging for it when you're on the ground bleeding to death."

Sam ignored his brother and his drama queen antics. He could give Dean a hard time for that later—if he didn't manage to get himself killed in the next few minutes.

Maybe this is stupid, he thought frantically. Maybe I am an idiot for even attempting this.

Sam shook his head slightly, forcing the thoughts to go away. No way was he about to take the defeatist attitude. They could still save this woman and he wasn't about to tuck tail and run without giving it all he had to offer.

Sam held his ground as he lifted his hands once more in a peaceful manner. "Tell me what happened here, Gwen," he prodded gently.

Gwen stared at him in disbelief as another sob wracked her body. "What, are you blind?" she demanded in a shrill voice. "I killed my own daughter—my Daphne is dead! What kind of mother would do that to her child?"

"How do you know you killed her?" Sam asked softly. "She could still be alive."

The woman stiffened as she glanced behind Sam, and the younger hunter turned around to see Dean kneeling next to the fallen girl. Glancing up at Sam with a saddened expression, Dean shook his head.

Dammit...I was hoping I was right. Sam turned to Gwen just as the woman dropped the knife and collapsed to her knees, sobbing brokenly into her hands. Sam rushed to her side, making sure he kicked the blade out of the way before leaning down to envelop her in a comforting hug.

Gwen clutched onto Sam as if he was her last remaining tether to this world. "Why?" she wailed. "Oh, my God...why would I do this to my Daphne? She was just a little girl for God's sakes."

"Shhh..." Sam soothed as he stroked her hair. "It's gonna be okay." He shifted his eyes to see his brother was staring at them, clearly uncomfortable with the display of emotion playing out before him. But he wisely remained quiet for which Sam was entirely grateful.

Maybe I'll let the drama queen bit slide...

"How can you tell me it's going to be okay?" Gwen demanded, her voice slightly muffled from keeping her face smothered against the young hunter's shoulder. "Nothing can ever make this okay."

Sam had no argument for that so instead he pulled her away gently and asked, "Why would you kill your daughter, Gwen?"

The mother shook her head, perplexed. "I don't know," she admitted. "One second, I was in the kitchen fixing her a snack and the next, I felt this blinding rage. Then there was nothing."

"Did Daphne say something to upset you or anything?" Sam inquired.

"Not that I know of," Gwen stated. "All I remember is hearing all of these noises, clouding my head. I just wanted a release from it so I grabbed the knife off the butcher's block and came back in here. And then I..." Gwen's voice trailed off as she began crying once again.

"You stabbed Daphne," Sam finished for her.

The woman nodded and tried to control her sobbing before answering. "I-I don't re-remember stabbing D-Daphne." She took a deep breath and seemed more in control of her voice when she continued. "When I snapped out of it, I was looking down at her and you two came in."

Sam nodded mutely.

Gwen's expression became suspicious. "Who are you, anyway?"

"We were passing by when we heard screaming," Sam answered quickly. He exchanged a furtive glance with his brother, knowing Dean was thinking the same thing—this sounded just like the other deaths.

Sam already knew the answer to the question he was about to ask, but decided to go ahead with it and play dumb. "Gwen, by any chance, do you happen to be a recent organ recipient?"

Gwen frowned at the unexpected question but nodded slowly. "Yes...why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Dean said, finally speaking up. Sam was glad his sibling didn't let loose a smart ass comment, as was his usual answer for everything.

"Dean, do you think you can call nine-one-one?" Sam asked softly, glancing back at the distraught woman he still held in his arms.

Dean nodded silently before stepping out of the room, pulling his cell phone out of his jacket pocket to make the call.

"Can I ask what you received?" Sam asked gently when they were alone.

"Why?"

Sam shrugged casually and waited for her to answer.

"A liver," Gwen eventually answered. "I was diagnosed with hemochromatosis and the treatments were no longer working for me. It's a genetic disease that causes me to retain too much iron in my liver. Eventually it just gave out. I got the new one about five months ago after remaining on the donor list for a while."

"That's great that they were able to find you one," Sam said sincerely as he helped her up from the floor and led her to the sofa.

The woman's eyes filled with tears once again. "I never meant to do this. You have to understand—I would never do anything to hurt my daughter," Gwen pleaded. "She was the only thing I had left in this world. There's nothing for me here if I don't have her."

Sam frowned, sensing where she was headed with the conversation. "That can't be true. You have a lot left in this world. If that weren't true, then I don't think you would have received your new liver. It was a gift."

Gwen shook her head. "It was for Daphne. I got this because she still needed me in her life." She looked down at her daughter's body. "She needed her mommy."

Dean returned to the room just as Gwen broke down once again. Shooting Sam another uncomfortable glance, he waited for his brother to join him before he said anything. "The police and ambulance are on their way, which means we need to bail."

Sam nodded before looking at Gwen. "Do you have a neighbor who can stay with you, Gwen? I don't feel right about leaving you alone."

Gwen nodded as she kneeled down and scooped her daughter up in her arms, rocking her gently. "Denise—my sister. She lives next door. Her number is by the phone." She glanced down at Daphne and began to hum, seeming to tune out everything else around her.

"I'll give her a call," Dean excused himself.

Sam said nothing as he turned away to give Gwen the privacy she needed with her daughter. The next ten minutes passed in a blur as a frantic Denise joined the fray and sobbing and wails filled the air.

Somehow, the brothers managed to escape before the police swarmed the neighborhood.

Edd's Drive-In

Dean sat in his car outside the hopping burger joint, trying in vain to drown out the bubblegum pop issuing from the establishment's outdoor speakers with his own radio. It really shouldn't have surprised him, considering most of the people here were college kids, but there had to be something better than this crap. Still, he tried turning up the volume to the local classic rock station, but it was quickly losing the battle. Somehow, the new Acorn or Achin' or whoever the hell it was, was finding its way through the classic guitar riffs.

Giving up, the hunter turned off the radio, instead letting his thoughts wander as he waited for his order to be called. Glancing out the window, he looked with unfocused eyes at the passing diners—including some very hot college chicks—as his mind played out what they knew so far.

Which admittedly wasn't very much to gawk at.

They knew that people were dying—organ recipients taking out their loved ones before offing themselves. So far, the only connection seemed to be that the recipients received their organs around the same time—five to six months ago. Other than that, they had nothing until Sam could come up with something better.

If it was up to Dean, they would have already packed their bags and motored. He just didn't see where there was a hunt here. His humble opinion—people were going stark raving mad and the organ transplants were just a coincidence.

A big coincidence, but a coincidence nonetheless.

But Dean wouldn't bail because he could clearly see that Sam thought there was something hokey going on. He knew there would be no swaying his little brother's mind, especially after what happened a couple hours prior. Which reminded Dean that he so needed to kick Sam's ass for that little stunt he pulled.

Maybe some hot sauce all over his burger. Or I could always stop at the drug store and pick up some Ex-Lax to put in his drink...

Dean knew his sibling was willing to go to great lengths to save an innocent life. Hell, Dean was willing to do the same thing, too. But going at a psychotic woman armed with a knife while you remained unarmed? Hell-friggin-no.

And Dean knew a thing or two about a pissed off woman, considering he'd left his fair share in his wake. Give him the demons and monsters, but leave the schizo women for someone else—it was a rule Dean Winchester lived by...religiously.

Oh, do we need to bring up Mia, then?

"Shut the hell up," Dean muttered to the nagging voice in his head. "That was different."

You wanna explain that one there, hotshot?

"Not particularly, no."

The case wasn't the only thing that was bothering Dean. He couldn't help but wonder about the hang-up calls he'd been getting recently. It had been occurring for the past two weeks or so and it was turning into a head-scratcher for him. Dean believed what he'd told Sam though—it wasn't their father.

So then who the hell was it?

Dean wasn't one to give his number out. In fact, he could probably count on one hand how many people knew his digits, though his overflowing phone book in his cell phone would tell a different story.

Try as he might, Dean tried not to worry about the mysterious phone calls, but he couldn't help it. It had never been stated that Dean Winchester liked the unknown—quite the opposite. Even though he worked with it on a daily basis, it didn't make it any easier. He just wished to hell whoever it was would have the stones to actually say something to him.

Letting out a weary sigh, Dean glanced at his watch, noting that he'd been sitting in the parking lot for fifteen minutes now.

"What did they have to do? Slaughter Bessie the Cow in the back or something?" he wondered.

The sudden chirp of his cell phone startled Dean, causing the hunter to jump. Digging into his pocket, he jerked it out neglecting to glance at the screen, figuring it was Sam with some news.

"Whatcha got, Sammy?" Dean asked as way of greeting.

"Hello, lover," purred a female voice.

Okay, definitely not Sam unless he's been loading up on the estrogen.

Then it hit Dean like a wave of ice cold water.

"Mia."

"Nice to know I'm still on your mind," Mia cooed and Dean could practically hear the smile in her voice.

Dean said nothing as he tried to get over his initial shock. He figured he shouldn't really be too surprised—it's not like he didn't know she was still out there.

"No witty remark, Dean?" Mia asked. *"I'm disappointed. I always took you for a man who didn't know when to shut his piehole."*

Dean felt anger course through his body as she threw back one of his favorite words back at him. "Where the hell have you been hiding?"

Mia chuckled. *"What makes you think I've been hiding, Dean?"*

"You haven't shown your demonic ass around lately."

"Does that mean you've been missing me? Aw, I'm flattered, Dean." Mia let out a hearty sigh. *"Actually, I'm enjoying the sights of Tahlequah right now. Interesting town. It makes me wonder why I never made it here before, considering Warner never had much to wink at."*

"Yeah, I can see how slaughtering innocent people could take away from that."

The demon hybrid chuckled, ignoring Dean as she continued. *"I gotta say, the Wagon Trail Inn definitely has a lot to offer in the form of sights."*

Dean felt as if someone punched him in the stomach at the mention of the Wagon Trail Inn. *The bitch knows where we're staying. Sammy's sitting in there all alone—unprotected. And I left him there. Way to friggin' go, Dean!*

She could be lying though, Dean argued with himself. She could just be screwing with me. But am I really willing to take that chance? Hell no—I made that mistake with her once and no way in hell am I doing it again.

"Room fifteen is looking particularly delicious, Dean," Mia purred.

"You bitch...you better stay the hell away from my brother," Dean growled through clenched teeth. He could hear his phone creaking as he gripped it tighter to his ear and he had to force himself to relinquish some of his hold on it.

"Hey, did you ever notice how Sammy gets this little crease between his eyebrows when he's in deep concentration? It kind of makes a girl wonder how easy it would be to slip inside and gut the cute little geek like a pig."

"Mia..."

The girl ignored him. *"Tell me something, Dean—how hard would it be to get baby brother's blood out of the motel linens and carpet? I hear that cold water works like a charm on set-in stains like that."*

"I've got an order for four cheeseburgers—two with extra onions—two fries, and a chocolate milkshake!" a female voice called out and Dean realized it was his long-awaited order.

Ignoring it, Dean thrust the car into drive and tore out of the parking lot with a squeal of tires. He usually was one who wouldn't be so hard on his baby, but this was one of those rare occasions where speed was more important than his girl's wellbeing.

Son of a bitch! Why did I have to find a damn diner that was fifteen freakin' minutes away from the motel? Stupid, stupid Dean!

"You might want to watch that speed, Dean," Mia taunted.

"Yeah? You might want to kiss my ass."

"Temper, temper, Dean. Besides, I've already had the pleasure of kissing every part of your body," Mia said, laughing as she heard Dean's grunt of disgust. *"You know, rage and speeding is never a good combo when it comes to driving. Are you really willing to risk an innocent person's life in order to save little ol' Sammy?"*

"I swear on everything that's holy, Mia, if you touch one hair on that kid's head, I will hunt you down and tear you limb from limb."

"Then it's a good thing I don't believe in all that holy crap, isn't it?" Mia asked snidely. *"You know I don't have to touch Sam, Dean. I will admit, it does kind of take the fun out of it, though, since I have a lot of toys I never got to play with when I had you..."*

"Mia..." Dean warned.

"Who the hell am I kidding, Dean? I'm not worried about what you can do to me," Mia replied. *"You couldn't find me before this and you won't find me now."*

Before Dean could reply, the click on the other end of the line told the hunter that the girl was already gone. Quickly dialing Sam's number, Dean became worried when it went straight to voicemail.

"Come on, dude...don't do this to me now," Dean pleaded as he dialed again.

"This is Sam. Leave—"

"Dammit!" Dean screamed as he hit the steering wheel in frustration. There were plenty of explanations as to why Sam wasn't answering his phone—he could be on the other line, it could be dead, Mia could be killing him right now...

That last possibility had Dean putting on even more speed as he raced back towards the motel, praying to the very holy things he'd threatened Mia with that the police were taking the night off.

Wagon Trail Inn

Sam Winchester was a man on a mission as he scribbled furiously into the notepad sitting on the table between him and his faithful laptop. Ever since he got back from the Barton home over half an hour ago, he was focused on getting together any information he could about the case and he hadn't stopped yet. Some people would categorize that behavior as obsessive while Sam would argue that it was passionate.

He needed to get to the bottom of this before anyone else had to go through the same misery Gwen Barton was now facing. Sam knew in just the short time talking to her that she never wanted this to happen, not in a million years. There had to be something else going on and Sam would be damned if he wasn't going to find out what it was.

The four or five pages of notes, not to mention the pile of printouts, would show just how determined the young hunter was.

"And topping our news this evening..."

Sam stopped his writing and turned to face the small television as the anchorman continued with the newscast.

"The police are investigating the death of a nine-year-old girl. Gwen Barton has been arrested for the fatal stabbing of her daughter, Daphne. We now join Amy Miller who is on the scene—Amy?"

"Thank you, Tommy," the petite blonde said as she stared into the camera with a somber expression. "As you can see behind me, the police are still working the murder scene and have not been able to offer up a motive for the slaying. Earlier, I spoke to a few of Gwen Barton's neighbors and they all claimed pretty much the same thing—that she was a caring, polite woman and someone who was completely devoted to her daughter. The investigation is still in the very early stages and when we're able to find out more, we'll let you know. Back to you, Tommy."

"Thanks, Amy," Tommy said with a nod. "The governor held a press conference today—"

Sam shut off the television with a sigh, feeling sorry for the incarcerated woman. A small part of him wished he could just tell the media and the police the truth,

but not only would they not believe him, he would be in a heap of trouble, not to mention most likely locked up in an asylum for the rest of his life.

Instead, he would just keep working on his research and hope he could find something to help not only her, but the remaining two people as well.

Turning back to his computer once again, Sam was about to jot down some more notes when he heard what sounded like a thump coming from the bathroom. Frowning, he pushed away from the table while at the same time palming his gun that was sitting next to the laptop.

Sam figured it may be something from outside the room or a next-door neighbor banging up against the wall, but in his line of work you just could never be too sure. That kind of attitude could get you killed in an instant, considering the creatures they dealt with on a daily and nightly basis. Lord knows there were a lot of them out there anxious to get their hands on any of the Winchester clan.

Stopping at the closed door, Sam took a deep breath, steadying himself for whatever may be in there. Reaching out a hand, he turned the knob slowly and flung it open, causing the door to slam against the wall. A cool breeze met him and Sam frowned as he spotted the open window in the faint glow of the moonlight.

"What's that doing open?" Sam wondered aloud as he reached over to turn on the light. The sudden brightness had him blinking, and when he could see clearly, he spied an overturned bottle of shampoo in the bathtub. *I guess the wind must have knocked it over.*

"That still doesn't explain how the window got open," Sam muttered as he lowered his weapon. "I guess Dean must have opened it he took a shower."

Before Sam could give it any more thought, the door to the room burst open with a loud bang. Not hesitating, the young hunter turned into the room, gun raised once again, startled to see Dean aiming his Colt 1911 at his chest.

"Dean, what the hell?"

"Sammy, are you okay?" Dean lowered his gun slightly.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Sam replied as he put his down.

Dean shot a pointed look at Sam's gun.

The younger Winchester shrugged sheepishly. "I thought I heard something in the bathroom."

Without a word, Dean pushed past Sam and entered the bathroom, sweeping the tiny space with a cautious eye. "Why the hell didn't you answer your phone when I called you?"

Sam frowned as he dug his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen. "It's dead," he answered simply.

Dean shot him a surprised look.

"I thought the battery was still strong on it. I guess I was wrong." He nodded towards the window. "Dude, why did you leave the window open? You're usually more cautious than that."

Dean's expression became hard. "I didn't."

Sam watched, confused, as Dean breezed by him and into the room once again. He could tell by Dean's attitude that there was definitely something more going on. "What's wrong, Dean?"

Sighing deeply, Dean tossed his gun on his bed and collapsed down next to it. "We've got an unwelcome visitor in town."

Sam sat down across from Dean. "What do you mean?"

"Mia—she's been my mystery caller."

"Are you serious?" Sam asked, his blue-green eyes widening.

"Dude, you think I'd really joke about something like this?" Dean asked, arching a brow. "She called me again—just now. She said she was in town and that she was watching you. The bitch said she was gonna carve you up."

"Is that why you decided to go Rambo on our door?" Sam teased.

"This isn't something to joke about, Sammy." Dean's voice was like stone.

"Sorry," Sam murmured, knowing that his brother was secretly freaked about this latest development. "I guess that explains the open window."

"Probably." Dean let out another sigh. "Were you able to find out anything?"

Okay, obvious subject change, but I'll let Dean have it.

Smiling, Sam got up from the bed and collected his notebook and printouts. "I found out who our mystery donor was."

"Really?"

Sam nodded as he sat down on the bed once again. "It was a guy by the name of Peter Hines."

"I thought you said those records were confidential?" Dean pointed out. "How did you get your hands on them?"

"Because I'm brilliant," Sam answered. "And it's not too hard to get them if you know what you're doing."

Dean frowned. "That would have been nice to know back in high school. It would have saved me a lot of grief over my grades."

Sam grinned. "Dude, I could have given you straight A's and it still wouldn't have made a difference given with how much trouble you stayed in. Don't you still hold the record for the most detentions in a single year?"

"Believe me, it was a lot better than spending all of my free time in the library every single day," Dean retorted.

"Someone had to study up and be the brains of this messed up outfit."

"Can we just move on, please?"

Sam chuckled. "So, ten years ago Peter Hines was arrested and convicted for the torture and murder of ten people and subsequently sentenced to death for his crimes."

"What kind of psycho freak are we talking about here?"

Sam thumbed through the papers before handing Dean a stack he'd obtained from the local law enforcement's database. "We're talking Hannibal Lector psycho here—he wasn't picky about the sex of his victims, but the age mattered to him. He'd only take people between eighteen and twenty-five. After he'd take them, he would torture them for days before finally dismembering them—while they were still alive, albeit barely."

Dean cringed as he looked through the crime scene photos. "That's just sick and deranged and only proves what I say about people."

"Yeah," Sam agreed as he took the pictures from Dean. His brother wasn't lying about the murders—each photo showed the victims in various stages of dismemberment, intricately laid out, blood coating everything.

"You would think this guy would clean up a little better before the police showed up," Dean commented.

Sam shook his head. "Apparently, Hines liked the shock value he caused. He was careful not to leave any forensic evidence behind before personally calling the police to tell them where they could find the next body."

"Ballsy," Dean said, eyebrows shooting up in shock. "So, how did he get himself caught?"

"He got careless—or rather, full of himself. A witness saw him carry in a girl," Sam explained. "The police acted quickly and busted him just as he was beginning to torture her. Luckily, she lived through the ordeal."

"Maybe not so lucky if she had to live with that nightmare for the rest of her life."

Sam didn't have an argument for that. "Six months ago, Hines' due date comes up, but two days before the state can carry out his execution, he takes himself out. The doctors tried to save him, but he did a pretty good job of slashing his own throat—there was nothing they could do."

"There was probably nothing the docs *wanted* to do. The bastard deserved to die."

Although Sam agreed completely with his bother, he just shrugged. "Hines was an organ donor. His organs went to a number of people, mostly in Oklahoma, but some surrounding states as well."

"Are those recipients the same as our murder-suicides?" Dean asked.

"They are."

"I'm not saying it's happening, but if it is, then we're dealing with a very pissed off spirit that's taken the term 'possession' to a whole new level."

"I agree."

Dean smirked. "You know this is sort of like *The Eye*."

Sam frowned. "You're actually kind of right about that, except for the whole freaky death vision thing."

"I know a thing or two about some stuff," Dean said, grinning cockily. "So, do you have any idea where Norman Bates may be buried?"

Sam shook his head. "I haven't gotten that far yet, but I do think we need to check on our remaining two names on the list before it's too late."

"I think you're right," Dean answered and the brothers grabbed their jackets and guns before rushing out to the Impala.

"Hey, I thought you were supposed to bring us back some food?" Sam commented as they got inside.

Dean glared at his sibling. "Dude, I was kind of freaking out about a demonic bitch coming after your tall ass."

"Wow," Sam said with a chuckle.

"What?"

"You chose me over food. I gotta say—I'm touched."

"Why don't you just bite me already?" Dean grumbled as he turned the key, but the car remained silent. "Son of a bitch."

"What is it?"

Dean didn't immediately answer as he continued to try to start the engine. "What the hell is going on here? I just drove it not even twenty minutes ago."

Sam remained silent, knowing nothing he could say would make Dean happy, especially where his baby was concerned. Not unless he wanted to ride in the trunk or walk for the rest of his life. Instead, he got out of the car and joined Dean who was peering under the hood.

"Did you find out what it was?" Sam asked quietly as Dean fiddled with the battery.

Before Dean could reply, the sound of approaching sirens cut through the quiet night. A convoy of fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars sped by fifteen

seconds later, causing the brothers to exchange anxious glances, both afraid to voice their fears.

"The damn battery cables were disconnected," Dean muttered, fixing them.

"How did that happen?" Sam asked as they raced back into the Impala.

"Beats me," Dean griped as he started the car. This time the classic Chevy roared to life with a throaty grumble. Just as he threw it into reverse, his phone began to go off.

Yanking it out of his pocket, he glared at the screen before giving it to Sam. "Looks like we know who screwed with my car."

Sam frowned as he read the text message out loud. "Run, run, run as fast as you can...you couldn't save me and you can't save them." Sam looked over at his brother. "It's Mia, isn't it?"

Dean's jaw was clenched as he said nothing and continued to race in the direction of the squadron. Finally, after a few more minutes of driving, they arrived in a neighborhood lit up by the strobe lights of the emergency vehicles.

"Tell me this isn't the address we're looking for," Dean said quietly.

Pulling the sheet of paper out of his pocket, Sam glanced at it before nodding. "It is."

The brothers could only watch in horror as the house before them was engulfed in flames.

Dean watched from the barricaded area, trying to blend in with the anxious neighbors as the emergency personnel contained the fire and worked the scene. The acrid smell of smoke filled the air, the night sky tinged with a faint amber glow. Dean's gaze swept around the cluster of people and he finally spied his brother talking to a deputy off to the side.

The neighbors' chatter made its way to Dean's ears and he managed to pick up a few of the snippets.

"I just don't see how this could happen."

"It had to have been an accident. You don't honestly think someone would do this on purpose, do you?"

"I don't see how. They were the sweetest couple you ever met. I don't think I ever knew anyone as much in love with each other as they were."

"I just really hope they got out of there before it was too late."

"Do you really think they did?"

Dean tuned the conversations out as he silently began to fume over the turn of events. He and Sam could have gotten here sooner if it wasn't for Mia screwing with his car. He wasn't stupid—he knew she was behind it. And while he didn't

really know if they could have saved the couple in time, it would always be something he wondered.

It was a different game now—she was playing with other peoples' lives instead of just his and Sam's. Dean felt the rage consume him once again as he realized how close she actually came to his little brother. The open bathroom window told Dean exactly how much danger Sam could have been in. Dean wasn't naive to think that it was luck that was with them; no, if Mia had wanted Sam dead, he would have been.

Mia had other plans and it bothered Dean that he didn't know when and where she would strike. It was like walking through a minefield, not knowing if the next step you took would be right on top of a landmine.

She could be here right now watching us, Dean thought as he slowly panned around the anxious onlookers with cautious eyes, searching for the demon. *I would be dumb to think she wasn't out there, just waiting for us.*

"Hey, are you okay?" Sam asked, his voice breaking through Dean's thoughts.

I'm not about to worry Sam any more than he already is. The kid has enough on his plate right now. "What did you find out from Barney Fife over there?" he asked instead.

"Dude..."

"What?"

Sam rolled his eyes and let out a sigh. "An older couple lived in the home—Louis and Sylvia Denilo. They actually celebrated their thirty-first year of marriage today."

"I'm guessing this wasn't exactly how they wanted to spend it," Dean commented.

"I'm thinking not," Sam agreed. "I talked to one of the neighbors and they said that Louis received a heart transplant about five months ago."

"We already knew that," Dean stated. "But let me go ahead and take a wild guess and say it was from Peter Hines, right?"

"Yep. From what the police can gather so far, they think that Sylvia was killed first before Louis took himself out, after setting fire to the place."

"How do the cops figure that?"

Sam nudged Dean away from the crowd as a couple of curious onlookers tried to listen in on their conversation. "The fire actually looked a lot worse than it really was. The fire department got here in time and contained it before it caused extensive damage. The Denilos had an alarm system that sends a signal at the first sign of trouble."

"Snazzy."

"When the investigators were able to get inside, they found a gun still clenched in Louis' hand."

The brothers grew silent as they watched the attendants from the coroner's office wheel out the bodies of the Denilos. A hushed silence filled the air as they were loaded into the black van and it remained unbroken until they pulled away from the property.

"What are we doing, Dean?" Sam asked quietly.

Dean glanced sideways at Sam. "What do you mean?"

Sam worried his bottom lip. "We're not doing anything. We're not helping, so are we just wasting our time?"

Dean shook his head as he walked back towards the Impala. He so wasn't about to let Sam do this to himself. "Stop it, Sammy."

Sam jogged in order to catch up with him. "Stop what?"

"I'm not about to listen to you do this to yourself," Dean argued as he stepped around to the driver's side. He peered at Sam over the top of the classic. "It's stupid."

Sam leaned against the car, clasping his hands together on the roof. "It's the truth, Dean. It's almost as if fate has been against us from the very beginning."

"Dude, you know I don't believe in that fate crap. Besides, we got there in time to save Gwen."

"Yeah, after she slaughtered her own daughter," Sam muttered bitterly.

Dean sighed, wishing it wasn't such a chore to convince his brother of something when he was moody like this. *Just like dealing with a damn chick.* "Look, we still got another name on the list. We haven't been defeated yet."

Sam let out a caustic laugh. "'Yet' being the operative word here. We may be too late for her, too."

"Screw it, Sam. Believe whatever the hell you want to believe," Dean said, annoyed. "I'm not putting up with your sulking ass for the rest of the night. Tomorrow morning, we start all over. We still have time to do something."

Sam remained silent.

Dean let out an irritated sigh and slipped inside the car, turning the engine over. About a minute later, Sam finally joined him.

"Did you ever consider a stint as a cheerleader?" Sam asked with an impish grin. "That was some pep talk there, Sparky."

"Once," Dean replied with a cheeky smile. "Until I found out the cheerleaders wore shorts under their skirts. After that, it lost all of its appeal."

The next morning

The brothers set out early, mostly due to Sam's eagerness to get to the last person on their list before it was too late. Sam couldn't help it, though. He was sick and tired of them being defeated and he was glad to know Dean wasn't arguing with him on it.

Dean was still slightly pissed that Sam was being so hard on himself, but Sam could no longer count on his hands how many times the roles had been reversed. It was part of their job—sure they got some tally marks in the "win" column every now and then, but when they lost, they blamed themselves, no matter if it was a battle they could never win or not.

"Dude, can you quiet your thinking just a little bit?" Dean griped. "I swear, you're gonna bust something one day."

Sam glanced at Dean with a scowl. "Just because you've never tried it..."

"I think!" Dean protested.

"Thinking about your next meal and conquest combo doesn't count, Dean," Sam said wryly.

"Whatever."

Sam grinned at his small victory as his brother turned into a modest neighborhood, the bright sunlight shining through the canopy of oak trees lining the streets. Slowing the Impala, Dean coasted along until he came to a light yellow two-story home with white shutters and a small white picket fence framing the property. Across the street was a park where parents were watching their children as they dashed around the playground with delightful squeals.

Watching the normal activities of the average person, Sam frowned when he heard Dean's grunt of disgust.

"It's not that bad, Dean."

"What?" Dean glanced over to where Sam was looking. "Not that, dude." He tilted his head back towards the home. "I'm talking about *that*."

Sam tore his gaze away from the park to see what was sickening his brother. Sitting in the driveway was a late model cotton candy pink Volkswagen Bug. Sam let out an amused chuckle.

"That is such a chick car," Dean said before smirking at Sam. "It may be something you want to look into, Samantha."

Sam ignored the jibe. "There's never another car that could compare with your beloved baby, Dean."

Dean's smile became bigger as he rubbed the dashboard affectionately. "Do you hear that, baby? It took long enough but Sammy finally gets it."

Saying nothing, Sam merely joined his brother as he exited the car and they made their way through the gate and up the stone steps to the front door. Dean was about to ring the doorbell when he hesitated.

"What is it?" Sam asked, noticing.

Dean shrugged a shoulder. "I was just wondering how we're gonna approach this without scaring the holy crap out of this chick."

"We'll just have to play it by ear," Sam answered. "We'll see how it goes and then decide how we wanna do it."

"Works for me." Dean pressed the doorbell and its chime reverberated throughout the home.

A few seconds later it was opened by a young freckle-faced brunette with bright blue eyes, her long hair gathered into low pigtails. She didn't appear to be any older than seventeen. "Can I help you?" she asked, brightly.

Sam flashed her a smile, causing the girl to practically melt. "We're looking for Erin Benezue."

"You found her," Erin answered. "Who are you and what are you selling?"

Sam and Dean exchanged uneasy glances and Sam knew his sibling was thinking the same thing he was: This girl was so not who they were expecting. Not a girl that was so young. But then Sam saw something else flash in Dean's green eyes—determination. No way were they going to lose this girl.

"We're actually from the United Network for Organ Sharing," Sam explained, sending Dean a look that told him to follow his lead. "My name is Sam and this is Dean. We're just conducting a follow-up consultation, making sure everything is okay and how you're coping with your transplant."

Erin smiled as she stepped back to let them in. "Sorry, we just have solicitors coming by all the time. Come on in."

Dean leaned over to Sam as they followed the teen into the bright, cheerful living room that was painted in a muted turquoise. "Dude, I thought I was smooth when it came to lying. That didn't sound like you yanked it from your ass at all."

Sam glared at Dean but said nothing. It's not like Dean should have been surprised. After all, subterfuge and lying came as easy to the Winchesters as breathing. Not a positive characteristic to possess, but one that was necessary.

"Can I get you guys anything?" Erin asked.

"No, thank you," Sam answered before Dean and his stomach could make any reply.

Erin nodded as she took a seat on the loveseat while the brothers occupied the sofa sitting across from it. "So, what did you want to know?"

"Maybe we should wait until your parents join us," Sam said.

"You're gonna be waiting for a few days."

"Why's that?" Dean asked.

"They went to the Bahamas for their anniversary. They won't be back until Saturday," Erin explained and she grinned. "Which gives me this place all to myself. It almost makes up for leaving me behind."

Sam frowned, not liking how the girl was freely giving away information. He hoped she wasn't this sharing with everyone that showed up at her doorstep. "Shouldn't you be in school today?"

Erin rolled her eyes and let out the typical exasperated sigh that seemed to be programmed into every teenage girl. "There's nothing wrong with skipping every now and then. Plus, it's like, the first time I've ever done it." She smirked at Sam. "Did you ever try it?"

Dean barked out a laugh. "You'll have to excuse my partner, Erin. Sammy's always been one to play by the rules."

"That sounds really boring," she said.

Dean patted Sam on the shoulder. "He's the very definition of boring. Look it up—you'll either see his name or his picture."

The teen let out a laugh and nearly fell over at the smile Dean flashed her way.

Okay, so time to get this show back on the road, Sam thought as he glanced at Dean. Schooling his features, he returned his attention to the girl who was watching them with amusement.

"How's your recovery been going, Erin?" the younger Winchester asked.

Erin pouted slightly at the subject change, clearly still wanting to joke around with Dean. "It's going good—I finally got finished with my physical therapy last week and the therapists say I can try out for cheerleading again, just in time for senior year."

Sam nodded. "Now, you got a meniscus transplant, is that right?"

The girl nodded. "Yeah, I managed to blow out my right knee trying to do everything—cheering, soccer and volleyball." She patted her knee proudly. "And now there's still hope."

"Have you been experiencing any weird feelings lately?" Dean asked.

Erin frowned in confusion. "Like what?"

"Anxiety? Anger? Anything that isn't your usual behavior?"

"Nothing besides what a girl my age should be freaking out about," she said. "You know, like if Blake's gonna take me to the Homecoming Dance or not? And if he does, then what in the world am I gonna wear? And if he doesn't—"

Dean held up a hand. "I think we get it."

"Why do you wanna know about my feelings?" the girl asked. "You're not shrinks, are you?"

"God, no," Sam answered quickly. "We do this with all of our recipients. We just want to be thorough."

Erin nodded as if that made complete sense to her.

"You said your parents would be returning on Saturday?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"We just have a few questions for them as well," Dean said. "We like to know how the families are coping as much as we like to know about the patients themselves."

"I'll let them know you need to talk to them," Erin said. "Was there anything else you needed?"

"No, I think that about covers it," Sam said, standing up and Dean mimicked his actions. "Thank you for your time."

"Oh." Erin looked a little disappointed. "Well, if you need to know anything else..."

"We'll be sure to drop by," Dean assured the teen with a smile. "Take care of yourself, Erin."

"Good luck with cheerleading," Sam added.

"Thanks," she said with a bright smile.

"What are you thinking?" Dean asked as they left and made their way back to the Impala.

"Besides paying you back for that 'boring' comment?" Sam asked, annoyed.

"Aw, Sammy—I was trying to put the girl at ease," Dean argued.

"At my expense?"

"I couldn't very well embarrass myself, could I?"

Sam sighed, realizing he wasn't about to win this argument. "Erin's situation is a little different, considering she's home alone for the next four days," he said instead.

"She has no one she can go postal on," Dean said, nodding in understanding.

"Right," Sam answered. "Either it won't manifest until her parents show up or it puts anyone who shows up here at risk, meaning we need to keep an eye on her either way."

"We need to find out where Hines is buried and torch his ass before the girl has the chance to go Carrie on someone."

"Why don't you go do that? I wanna stay here and make sure nothing happens to Erin," Sam said with a glance at the peaceful home.

"Come on, man—don't do this to yourself."

Sam said nothing, knowing his brother would eventually understand his need for this.

Finally Dean let out a sigh. "All right, I'll go see what I can dig up, no pun intended."

"Thanks, Dean." Sam flashed his brother a relieved sigh.

"Be careful, Sammy. Mia's still out there somewhere," Dean said quietly as he opened the car door. "I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

"You be careful too, Dean. Watch your back."

Dean smiled cheekily. "Try not to let Chris Hansen catch you poking around. I might have a hard time trying to bail your ass out of jail."

Record Office

You know, I promised myself I wouldn't be stuck with this job again and yet, here I am, Dean thought as he pulled a dusty cardboard box off the shelf and placed it on the lone table in the room. It was as if this was a continuous cosmic joke against him; it never did happen to Sam.

Nope, every single time Sam showed up to do research at the library, county clerk's office or records office, the computers were always up and running, things tending to run smoothly. But when Dean opted to do the deed, everything went wrong.

"Guess I should have spent a little more time in stuffy old libraries," Dean muttered as he lifted the lid off the box. "Maybe then I wouldn't be research's bitch."

Already on his fourth box, Dean was noticing a pattern—a real pain-in-the-ass pattern. The alphabetical principle was something that wasn't being practiced here, which was strange since this was a *government* building.

Talk about not practicing what you preach.

Thumbing through the records with a little more aggression than was probably necessary, Dean was becoming frustrated that he wasn't finding the burial record for Peter Hines. "They just couldn't have a box marked 'psycho serial killers' and make my job a helluva lot easier?"

Replacing the lid, Dean returned it to the shelf and grabbed the next one. "Great, only twenty more of these bastards to go. My luck, the damn file won't even be here...conveniently lost and all. Hope to hell you're having a good chuckle up there, Big Guy."

Just as he was setting it on the table, his cell phone went off. Yanking it out of his pocket, he intended to give Sam a good talking-to. "Sam, you better be calling me about something good or so help me, I will kick your ass."

"You know, I could always do that for you though my methods may be a little more...bloody," Mia said eagerly.

"Well, if it isn't my bitch-of-the-day call," Dean replied.

"You always assume it's Sam on the other line," Mia said, ignoring the barb. *"What are you gonna do when he fails to answer one day?"*

Dean let out an exaggerated yawn as he sifted through the records. "What do you want now, Mia?"

"Nothing much. Can't a girl just shoot the breeze with her ex-lover? Does she always need a reason to call?" Mia asked. *"But seriously, I do find it odd how Sam seems to be away from you a lot lately. Are you two gals having problems?"*

"Well, I will agree with you on one thing, Mia. Sam is more of a girl than you can ever claim to be."

Mia laughed softly. *"I always did love that biting wit of yours."*

"Too bad I can't return the compliment. It's not that you didn't have a lot of interesting qualities. It's just that the very thought of saying anything nice to you makes me want to wash my mouth out with acid."

"Ooh, what an interesting idea." Mia's voice turned hard. *"Maybe I'll have to give it a try. Are you willing to volunteer? I always did love to hear you scream, Dean. Or maybe Sam would try...I never got the chance to hear him scream."*

Dean ignored her and continued with his search.

"You boys have learned nothing yet, have you?" Mia asked. *"I thought you were stronger as a family and all that sappy crap?"*

The hunter let out a bored sigh. "God, you really can put a person to sleep with all that drivel you're spewing. Has anyone ever told you that?"

That seemed to infuriate the demon hybrid. *"Are you really that naive to think you and your brother are safe in your little world, Dean? Do you know what I could do to the two of you?"*

Dean smirked. "Is that before or after Sam kicks your ass again?"

"I forgot to ask how that felt, Dean. What was it like to have Sammy saving your pathetic ass? I'm betting you felt like the bitch in that little story."

"Oh, I don't know," Dean drawled. "You tell me. How did it feel to be the bitch when Sam handed your ass back to you?"

Mia's voice dropped to a snarl. *"I'm going to rip your bones from your body one by one while I make you watch as I peel the skin off of your baby brother layer by layer."*

"Yeah, I think you've gone oh-for-two in that category." Dean smiled triumphantly as he finally came to the file on Peter Hines.

"Keep joking, Dean," Mia said. *"We'll see who's laughing at the end."*

Dean folded up the piece of paper and pocketed it. No way in hell was he about to copy it like he was required to when it took him this long to find it. "Tell you what, Mia. How about you give me a call when you come up with something better? You know, something fresh and creative?"

"You think I—"

Dean hung up before she could finish. Sure, it probably only served to piss her off further but he found that he could live with that.

After double-checking to make sure he had the information he needed, he headed for the door, intent on putting this case to rest once and for all. Just as he was reaching for the knob, his phone rang again.

With an aggravated sigh, Dean flipped it open. "I gotta give you credit. I didn't think your brain could actually work that fast."

"D-Dean?" a confused female voice asked.

I really have to start checking my Caller ID. "Who is this?"

"Denise...Denise Harlow. You called me yesterday about my sister, Gwen."

"Oh, right. I'm sorry," Dean apologized, his voice a little more gentle.

"You told me to keep you posted about Gwen." Denise's voice broke slightly and it caused Dean to frown.

"Is everything okay, Denise?" The hunter pushed through the door and jogged across the street to the parked Impala.

"Um, not...not exactly."

"Denise, what is it?"

"She's dead. The guard found her in her cell early this morning. They said she didn't kill herself though. She just dropped dead," Denise rambled. *"No one can explain it. My sister is dead."*

Dean closed his eyes, knowing what this was going to do to Sam when he told him. "All right, thanks for letting me know, Denise. I'm sorry for your loss—I know this hasn't been an easy couple of days for you."

"Thank you for helping her, Dean. I know it doesn't mean much now, but...thanks."

"Yeah," Dean muttered as he closed the phone. Sliding into the car, he hit the steering wheel in frustration. "Could this possibly get any worse before it's over?" The green-eyed hunter scowled at the sky as he started the Impala. "You know what? Don't answer that."

Benezue Residence

Sam knew he stuck out like a sore thumb as he sat on the wooden park bench. He tried to look like he fit in, but it was pretty hard considering he was wearing what Dean lovingly called a "monkey suit." It didn't even occur to him when he volunteered to sit out here and keep watch over Erin, but it wasn't like he could just strip down right there.

Yep, I'm guessing a naked stranger would look a lot more conspicuous than a stranger in a cheap business suit. Dean might actually be right about Chris Hansen staking out the area....

Sam tried to keep his gaze wandering, even smiling pleasantly at a few passersby, but his eyes really never left the Benezue home. The great thing about learning your trade from an ex-Marine father? He taught you how to keep yourself focused on the job. So far, the house had remained relatively quiet, sans the heavy bass of the booming stereo inside.

I guess she really is taking advantage of the time she has alone. It's exactly what a normal teen would be doing....

Sighing, Sam glanced down at his watch, realizing he'd been there for over an hour. He was beginning to wonder why he didn't bring a book or something to occupy his time. He could only imagine what Dean would do to create some sort of excitement out here.

Then again, Sam could be listening to Dean bitching the entire time while searching for Peter Hines' final resting place. *This so beats that any time of the day. Give me sitting out here, bored out of my skull for five hundred, Alex.*

Besides, all of this quality alone time gave him an opportunity to think. Which may or may not be a good thing.

Sam knew he didn't want to lose this girl—he *couldn't*. Just the short time he spent with her told him she had so much to offer the world. Her light was just beginning to shine and Sam didn't want to see it extinguished so soon. She didn't deserve to die because some psychotic freak spirit had a deadly agenda.

Too many people had died and the young hunter wasn't sure if he could deal with another one. Sam just didn't know if his heart could take it.

So lost in his depressing thoughts, Sam didn't notice the shadow fall across him before it was too late. *Dean is gonna wipe the floor with my ass if I allowed Mia to get the drop on me.* Jerking his head forward, he inwardly sighed with relief when he saw it was Erin.

Maybe we won't tell Dean I let a seventeen-year-old girl catch me off guard....

"What are you doing here?" Erin demanded, hands on her hips.

Okay, she's pissed. "Um..."

"And where's your partner?" she continued. "Oh, my God, are you some kind of pervert? Did I let a couple of perverts into my house?"

Sam stood up, holding a hand out to her while at the same time glancing around, hoping no one had heard her. "I'm just here to keep an eye on things."

Erin jerked back. "You *are* a sick freak!"

"No no no. It-It's nothing like that," Sam's gentle voice tried to assure her but he could see she wasn't clearly convinced. "If we could just go inside, I could explain—"

"No way in hell am I about to let a pervert into my house again!" Erin said, outraged that Sam would suggest such a thing.

Sam sighed, not really having the patience to deal with this right now. "Look, if you really believed that about me, would you have come out here? I think you're smarter than that, Erin. You would have called the cops and let them handle it."

"Well..."

"I can explain everything to you, but it's gonna take some time and I'm pretty sure you're not gonna believe me."

Erin stared at him for a few long moments before finally nodding. "How about you let me be the judge of that?"

Sam let out a relieved sigh as he followed her across the street. Once they were inside the home, they made their way to the living room. As soon as they were seated, Erin pounced.

"What's going on? Who are you really? And don't feed me that crap from earlier because no way in hell am I about to believe it now."

Sam took a deep breath and decided to go with the direct approach. After all, if her time was almost up then she deserved to know the truth, no matter how insane it may be.

"Dean and I—we're brothers," Sam began. "We're here because we're worried about you."

"Why?"

"Before I tell you, just try to keep an open mind, okay?"

"Okay..." she said slowly.

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

Erin shrugged indifferently.

"In the last six months, everyone who has received an organ transplant around the area, not to mention a few surrounding states, has turned up dead," Sam explained as gently as possible, watching her expression at the same time. "Before killing someone else in the process."

Erin said nothing.

"Now, all of these people have received their organs from the same person—including you."

"Who did the organs come from?"

"A real piece of work named Peter Hines. He's a convicted killer who was supposed to be executed but he killed himself before that could happen." Sam swallowed. "His organs went to unsuspecting recipients and his spirit has been possessing these people, turning them homicidal."

Erin nodded and when she spoke, her voice was surprisingly calm. "So, he's been making these people kill others?"

"Yes."

"And you think the same thing's gonna happen to me?"

"I'm not trying to scare the crap out of you, Erin, but yes."

"Do you know how to stop it?"

Sam flashed what he prayed was a hopeful smile. "We're working on it."

"Is that where your brother is now?"

"Yes."

Erin abruptly stood up. "I need some water. Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you."

"Okay." Erin headed for the kitchen without looking back at Sam.

Sam ran a hand over his face, but before he could dwell on everything that had just transpired, his cell phone rang.

"*I got news,*" Dean said before Sam could answer.

"Yeah?"

"*I found out where Hines is buried,*" Dean continued. "*I'm on my way to do the salt and burn now.*"

"Good, because I think I seriously just freaked Erin the hell out."

"What do you mean?"

"I told her the truth."

"Sam, what the hell were you thinking?" Dean demanded. *"Have you finally lost your mind?"*

"Dean, she deserved to know what was really going on. It was either that or she was about to call the cops to come pick me up."

"Dude, that doesn't matter. We—"

"Dean, hold on," Sam cut him off at the sound of breaking glass.

"Sam, what's going on?"

Sam didn't answer as he slowly made his way towards the kitchen. "Erin? Is everything okay?"

The young hunter stopped short as the girl stepped into the foyer, pointing a gun at his chest. Swallowing hard, Sam spoke into the phone. "Hey, Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"You might want to speed things up a little."

"Sam, what are you..."

The rest of Dean's voice was drowned out by the sound of a gunshot.

The gunshot was like a cannon blast to Dean's ears. He'd never heard anything so frightening in his life and that fear only intensified by ten when the dial tone told him his connection with Sam had been lost.

"Oh, hell no...you're not doing this to me now," he muttered as he dialed Sam's number.

"This is Sam..."

Dean stabbed the disconnect button and tried again. Each of the five rings that passed seemed to be longer than the last. "Come on, bro. Answer the phone for me."

"This is Sam..."

"God dammit!" Dean screamed, his voice a mixture of fear and frustration. Tossing the phone on the ground, the hunter picked up the shovel and resumed his digging of Peter Hines' grave.

"Please don't let me be too late," he begged, hoping that elusive Higher Power was listening. "I can't lose Sammy like this. Not now."

The only answer was the constant patter of dirt as Dean tossed it behind him.

* * * *

Somehow, Sam managed to duck in the nick of time, the bullet lodging harmlessly into the wall where his head had been moments prior. Jumping behind the sofa, he managed to lose his grip on his cell phone just as Erin fired two more shots in his direction.

I was so not wanting to play a game of target practice today, Sam thought. From now on, I'm sticking with the research—that's safe. Dean can play with the loonies.

If there is a next time, you idiot.

Oh, shut up!

Way to go, Sam. Have an argument with yourself as some possessed chick is taking potshots at you. You should be finding a way out of this mess, you ass!

Sam could feel his gun tucked into the back waistband of his pants, the cool steel reminding him he had a way out, but he didn't dare go for it. No way in hell was he about to shoot a girl who wasn't in control of what she was doing. And he wasn't about to throw his gun to her as a sign of truce, either. That would just give her another way to shoot his ass if her current weapon ran empty.

Okay, so what do you do then, Sherlock? Stay back here like a sitting duck and pray that Dean gets the salt and burn done in time? I don't think that gun she's holding's gonna do too much waiting.

"Erin, you need to calm down," Sam said, his voice half placating, half pleading. "You need to think about what you're doing. You need to try to get in control. Don't let Hines win."

Erin fired off another shot, the bullet missing Sam by mere millimeters. "You know, I am so tired of people telling me what I need to do—the doctors, my parents, my coaches and teachers, complete strangers. Everyone treats me like I'm fragile, like I'll just shatter at any moment. Do you *know* how frustrating that is, Sam?"

"It sucks, I know, Erin. I'm sorry if I made you feel like that," Sam said. "People treated me the exact same way when my girlfriend died. I know how frustrating it is."

Sam hoped by bringing something personal into it, he could help her seize control of the rage Hines was causing her to feel.

Erin chuckled darkly, which sounded really strange coming from her. "Don't placate me, Sam. You're just like everyone else in my life and I am through with it."

"Erin, come on..."

"No, Sam. I'm going to show them all who's the fragile one now. No one will ever treat me like a child again."

The teen fired off another shot, causing Sam to hiss in pain as the bullet grazed his left temple. Warm crimson began to ooze down the side of his face, the droplet saturating the carpet underneath him.

Okay, Dean...time to hurry things up, dude.

Talking was clearly not working with Erin, which meant that Sam was going to have to take a more active approach. He could easily disarm the girl with a shot to her arm but he preferred that to be an absolute last resort.

So what then? If he didn't do something quickly, he was pretty confident the next shot would find its mark and he just didn't know if he could dodge another bullet.

Staying absolutely still and somehow controlling his breathing, he listened as Erin's faint footsteps approached him. That's when inspiration finally hit him. If he could distract her, he could then tackle her and get the gun away.

But he needed a distraction....

"You can't hide, Sam. You should just come out and we can get this over with," Erin said.

Sorry, not happening, Sam thought as he spotted a small porcelain figurine on the bookshelf next to the sofa. Grabbing it up, he threw it to his left at the same time launching himself at the teen.

* * * *

Dean tore through the top of the coffin with the tip of the shovel, unearthing the still mostly preserved body of the convicted killer. He much preferred to burn bones and he couldn't remember many times when he'd had to ignite a fresh corpse. But he wasn't about to be picky about it now. Not when so much was at stake.

Tossing the shovel to the side, Dean pulled himself out of the grave. Moving quickly to the green canvas duffle, he retrieved the salt and lighter fluid. Pouring a generous amount of each substance over the corpse, he lobbed the containers next to his other discarded items.

Though the gravesite was relatively isolated, Dean still darted a cautious look around to make sure he wasn't being watched. Satisfied that he was alone, he reached into his pocket and took out the booklet of matches. Tearing out a few of them, he struck the tips against the box, watching slightly mesmerized as the bright flame came to life.

Without another thought, he threw them in, the corpse catching fire instantly. As the smell of burning flesh and bones consumed the air, Dean gathered up his things and headed back to the Impala.

Let someone else clean up this mess. I have somewhere else I need to be.

Jumping into the car, Dean gunned the engine, hoping he was in time for Sam and Erin.

* * * *

Luck was clearly not on Sam's side as Erin deftly stepped out of his way. He landed on the floor with a thud, the breath whooshing out of his lungs. By the time he'd collected himself and turned over, the girl was aiming the gun at his chest, her finger poised on the trigger.

"Erin, don't do this," Sam pleaded softly, hoping to give reasoning a last-ditch effort.

Erin smiled cruelly. "Sorry, Sam. I'm sure you're a really great guy but I have to set an example." She shrugged helplessly. "And you just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Sam swallowed hard as he noted the resolution in her cold blue eyes. *Sorry, Dean...it looks like you're going to be too late for this one, too.*

Erin's finger tightened on the trigger and Sam closed his eyes, wishing for a quick fatal shot. Suddenly, the teen let out a strangled gasp as if she'd been punched in the stomach. As his eyes snapped open, Sam could only watch as the gun fell from her grip and she collapsed to the ground in a dead faint.

"Dean," Sam said with a relieved smile.

Letting out the breath he'd been holding, Sam dropped against the sofa, waiting for the cavalry in the form of his big brother to show up.

Wagon Trail Inn **A few hours later...**

"You want another slice?" Sam asked, holding out the pizza box to his brother.

Dean arched a brow. "Dude, like you have to ask? This is a friggin' treat," he said as he grabbed the biggest slice of the half-eaten supreme pizza. "I can't remember the last time we spoiled ourselves like this."

Sam chuckled. "You do realize how pathetic that sounds, right?" he asked as he swallowed down another bite. "Most people call steak a treat."

"No, that's a feast," Dean argued. "Besides, we have a reason to celebrate." He held out his beer bottle to Sam in a toast.

Sam clinked his amber bottle against Dean's with a smile. "I'll drink to that."

Though Sam had been injured, it wasn't as bad as some of the injuries he'd received in the past and for that, Dean had been truly grateful. The graze to his brother's head wasn't very deep. In fact, it'd only taken a couple of butterfly stitches to close it up and Sam was now good as new.

And incredibly happy with their victory. Dean couldn't remember a time in recent months he'd seen Sam positively glowing. That was what had prevented Dean

from telling his sibling about Gwen Barton's death. Though he knew he would have to eventually tell him, it wasn't going to be tonight. He wouldn't do that to Sam.

"So, Erin didn't have to go to the hospital?" Dean asked, shoving a pepperoni into his mouth.

"Nope. She refused to go. Actually, she wouldn't even let me call them. She said she was tired of being around hospitals." Sam shrugged. "I checked her over and she seemed fine to me."

"Does she remember anything?"

Sam shrugged again as he tossed his crust into the garbage can. "If she does, she didn't mention it to me."

Dean nodded, chewing thoughtfully. "So..." he said, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"What?"

"I'm just wondering how it feels letting a seventeen-year-old get the better of you?"

"Hey, it's a lot better than a thirteen-year-old. Do we really need to bring up Missy Bender?"

"You bring up whatever you want." Dean grinned. "Whatever will help you sleep at night, dude."

Sam brought up a middle finger. "Sleep on that."

Dean laughed, reaching into the box for his fourth slice. Before he could pull it out, a knock sounded at the door.

"Dude, isn't it a little too early for your booty calls to begin?" Sam asked, smirking.

"Bite my ass," Dean muttered as he dropped the slice back into the box. Exchanging a wary glance with Sam as another knock sounded, the brothers stood up, on full alert.

Before they could take two steps, the door flew open and Mia walked in. The hunters didn't have time to react before she had them flying across the room, pinning them against the wall.

Shutting the door with a backward glance, she sauntered towards them, a cold smile on her face. "I know you told me to call when I came up with something more exciting, Dean, but I thought dropping by would be a little more spontaneous."

"You talked to her again?" Sam hissed in annoyance.

"It slipped my mind," Dean mumbled.

"Oh, is big brother keeping secrets from you, Sammy?" Mia purred. "That doesn't sound very nice, now does it?"

"Who asked—"

Mia cut off Sam's voice with a wave of her hand. "I'm talking, you're listening."

"Leave him alone, you—"

Mia glared at Dean. "What did I just say?" She began pacing between the two of them. "Apparently, you two dillweeds have stopped taking me seriously. I gotta say, that hurts a girl's feelings."

"That's okay, considering you're not a girl and a bitch doesn't have feelings," Dean retorted with a flippant smile.

"Get a new name already, Dean. 'Bitch' is beginning to lose its luster."

"Oh, I have a few I'd like to call you."

"You mean besides the ones you were screaming while we were having wild, hot sex?"

Sam cringed. "Kill me already."

Mia smiled. "Does all this sex talk make you uncomfortable, Sammy?"

"I'm sure you didn't come here to gloat about that, Mia, so let's say you get to it already," Dean said. "Sam and I would really love to get back to our pizza before it gets cold."

"Was I interrupting something?" she asked innocently as she plucked a slice from the box. She took a bite before continuing. "Actually, I'm here because I'm getting bored standing in the shadows. I'm ready to play."

"Then go fetch a ball like mutts are supposed to do," Dean smirked.

Mia ignored him. "The hunters out west surely didn't make it as exciting as you Winchesters do. It was all about the screaming and the begging. It could really drive a person nuts."

"Why did you kill them?" Sam asked. "They weren't even after you."

Mia shrugged as she swallowed down another bite, chasing it with a healthy pull from Dean's beer. "Shits and giggles, mostly. And the fact that I knew how connected the hunting community was. I knew it wouldn't take long for the message to get back to you. I wanted you to know I was still out there."

"Not like we could forget," Dean muttered. "You're like the Black Plague."

"Aw, Dean...that's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me," she said sweetly. "That really means a lot."

Dean and Sam rolled their eyes.

Dumping the rest of the pizza back into the box, she dusted off her hands. "After my little fun with them, I started following you around. Seattle was a real blast, by the way."

"You were there?" Sam asked.

Mia smiled. "And you were none the wiser." She took a couple of steps closer to the youngest Winchester. "Just like you had no idea how close I came to killing you, Sammy. It would have been so easy, what with you passed out on that park bench." She ran a hand along his chest, causing him to tense. "I was so close I even caught a good glimpse at that tattoo of yours." Her voice dropped down to barely above a whisper. "I gotta say, that certainly made your stock rise in my book."

"I'm flattered. Imagine me, attracting a demon bitch," Sam said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "Too bad I'd rather make out with a sewer rat than get anywhere near you."

Mia cringed and canted her head to look at Dean. "Wow, Dean, that's gotta sting a little." She pushed away from Sam and focused on him. "Does Sam always think this low of the girls you bring home?"

"No, just the really special ones," Dean said with a smirk.

"Don't think I've left you out of my little stalker adventure, Dean," she purred. "I saw you get shot in that liquor store. I smelled the blood all the way back to the motel. I even saw you sleeping when Sammy left you all alone." She brushed a hand against his cheek. "You never even knew I was standing right beside you, did you?"

Dean glared at her but said nothing.

She continued to stroke his face, grinning as she noticed Sam begin to struggle, clearly pissed. "Don't get your thong in a twist, Samantha. I'm not hurting Dean so your wussy ass powers won't work this time." Her grin grew wider. "I learned that lesson."

"Imagine you, learning something." Sam smirked at the demon hybrid. "I guess miracles really do exist, Dean. Who would've thought?"

The girl chuckled as she dropped her hand from Dean's face and returned to stand in front of Sam. "You think you're going to get under my skin, Poindexter? Maybe Dean didn't tell you what I wanted to do to that pretty little face of yours." She glanced at Dean. "Would you like to share with the class, lover, or should I?"

"You didn't do your homework, Mia?" Dean clucked his tongue in disapproval. "Looks like someone doesn't get her gold star today. I thought you were supposed to come up with something more interesting?"

"Why rush, Dean? We have all the time in the world."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Does that mean we have to listen to you drone on and on the entire time? I'll take your original idea, thanks."

"Don't think I've forgotten that acid idea of yours, Dean. I'm just itching to give it a try."

Sam glared at Dean. "Dude, you gave her an idea?"

"Since when has anyone ever listened to a damn thing I've said?" Dean returned. "Besides, I suggested doing it to myself."

"How about from now on you don't say anything that she can consider as an idea?" Sam asked.

"Are you seriously bitching at me right now?"

"Aren't you boys cute when you bicker like a couple of old hens?" Mia teased. Walking away from them, she went to Dean's bed and pulled out the Bowie he kept under his pillow. Fingering the blade, she smiled coldly at them. "You really should learn to keep your weapons hidden, Dean."

Yeah, I'm thinking the same thing too, Dean silently agreed.

Mia sauntered up to them again. "You just never know who could find them or what they may do with them." She ran the tip of the blade down Sam's arm, a trail of blood oozing in its wake from the shallow cut. She smiled in delight at Sam's hiss of pain.

"Leave him alone, bitch," Dean growled through gritted teeth.

"Calm down, Dean," Mia said with a sigh. "Though it would be easy to kill you both, I'm not ready to do that. If I did, then you would miss the big show and I've already reserved two front row seats for you."

"Lucky us," Sam bit out.

"Besides, I have something much better planned for you tonight. Something so much better than death."

The brothers exchanged worried looks, not liking the sound of Mia's words. Before either of them could reply, a timid knock sounded at the door.

Mia flashed a chilling smile. "Let's welcome our guest, shall we?" She held a finger to her lips. "I need you boys to be on your best behavior or you won't be able to have any more friends over."

Dean tried to call out to her but found he'd been rendered silent. Glancing at Sam, he saw his brother was having the same problem. They could only watch as Mia stepped behind the door. Reaching out a hand, she opened it up to reveal Erin.

"Sam? Dean?" The brunette stopped just past the door, bewildered by their appearance on the wall.

Dean's eyes widened, hoping to send the girl a warning, but Mia stepped behind Erin and grabbed her tightly, holding Dean's knife against the teen's throat.

"W-what's go-going on?" Erin asked fearfully, her blue eyes huge.

"Boys, would you like to say something?" Mia taunted, but she did allow them to talk.

"Mia, let the girl go," Dean said.

"She hasn't done anything," Sam added. "Don't do this."

"It's us you want."

Mia chuckled. "How cute is it that you think begging is going to work on me? You should know by now that it doesn't." She inched the blade closer to Erin's neck, causing her to choke on a sob. "After all, I killed my own family. What's to stop me from doing the same to her?"

"P-please..." Erin begged, crying.

"Mia, the girl is innocent. She doesn't deserve this," Sam pleaded. "It's us that you're after. Just let her go, please."

"Why do you think I'm doing this, Sammy?" Mia asked. "I don't give a crap about this girl."

Erin sobbed louder. "Oh, God...please."

Mia rolled her eyes and removed the knife from the teen's throat.

"Th-thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, sweetheart," Mia said coldly before glancing at the brothers. "We need to send these two a message that will get through those thick skulls of theirs."

Raising the blade, Mia plunged it into Erin's chest. The girl's eyes widened for a brief instant before blood streamed from her mouth.

"NO!" Sam and Dean yelled in unison.

Releasing her grip, Mia watched with glee as Erin fell down at the hunters' feet. "Finally, some peace and quiet around here. She really was getting on my nerves with all the crying and begging."

"You're gonna pay for this, Mia," Dean snarled.

Giving Erin a final nudge with the tip of her boot, Mia waved at the boys with a smile. "I'll be seeing you boys around."

Fort Gibson Lake One Day Later

Sam glanced across the waters of the big lake not really seeing it as his mind

tried to work out everything. He'd been sitting on top of the picnic table for the last hour or so and he was coming up with the same conclusion each time—Erin shouldn't have been the one to pay the price for the Winchesters.

He'd known what Mia was going to do even as the knock sounded at the door. It didn't matter if it had been Erin, the motel manager or the next-door neighbor—it was still going to have the same end result. Someone was going to die for nothing more than the sake of setting a petty example.

Part of Sam had wished it was anyone else but Erin at the door. She'd already had her life taken from her out of a malevolent spirit's vengeance. She'd gotten her second chance at life and Mia had taken it all from her.

What made it worse was that they'd had to watch as Mia killed her while being completely helpless to stop it. It wasn't fair because it should have been so easy to save the teen, but as was the usual story of their lives, it wasn't.

Sam no longer wanted to kill Mia—he wanted her to suffer. He wanted her to experience pain that she'd never experienced before and Sam wanted to be the one to do it. Not just for himself or Dean or their father, but for everyone. Anyone who even had to glance at Mia, Sam wanted vengeance for.

And he wouldn't rest until he'd achieved that.

The young hunter barely glanced up as a bottle of beer was held in front of him. Taking it silently, he popped the top and took a hearty swig, letting the cold alcohol work its way down his throat. He felt, rather than saw, Dean sit beside him.

"I should have said something yesterday, but I thought you should know that Gwen Barton died," Dean said eventually after sitting quietly for a few minutes.

Sam said nothing, somehow not shocked by the news. This entire hunt had been against them from the very beginning so why should it change now?

"Look, Sammy, I know you probably don't wanna hear this, but I don't think we were supposed to win this one," Dean continued. "All of the recipients died—it was the M.O. Even if we did somehow save Erin from Mia, I still think it wouldn't have made a difference in the end."

"I could have dealt with losing Erin to Peter Hines, as crazy as that sounds," Sam said softly. "But not like this, man."

"Sam—"

Sam shook his head. "I can't do it anymore, Dean. I can't watch anyone else die just because fate happens to put innocent people in our path."

"You can't blame yourself for what Mia did, Sammy," Dean argued. "If you want someone to blame, then blame me."

"Don't say that, Dean."

"No, I'm the one that let the bitch into our lives. If it wasn't Erin then it was gonna be some other poor innocent bastard," Dean explained. "We can't just sit here and shoulder all of this."

"Then what are we supposed to do?"

"We get out there and we stop her. We don't let her have the chance to destroy anyone else. We win this."

Sam refused to look at his brother. "Can you promise that, Dean?"

Dean was silent for a few moments. "No...I can't," he finally admitted softly.

The brothers said nothing more, each lost in their own thoughts as they stared out across the lake.

The End