

Season Three

Episode Twenty-Two: The Art of Dying

By Kittsbud & Tree

Kalispell, Montana

Sid Morrow pushed up from a seated position, groaning slightly as cramped muscles, aggravated by the chilling Montana evening air, protested the deep recline of the Adirondack chair. Whatever possessed him to sit in the hard damn thing escaped him now as he struggled to reach his feet, pushing off again against the armrests.

Successful on the second try, he took a half step and leaned against the wood railing, breathing heavily as he looked out along the tree-lined valley. The afternoon sunlight had descended behind the eastern ridge of the mountains an hour or so earlier and now soft shadows and the ebb of twilight were easing across the range.

The place was breathtakingly beautiful, or it would have been had Morrow been able to force himself to consider it. But the fact remained that he was bitter, a sourness deep down inside him that curdled every other emotion. He'd been holed up in the cabin for nearly two months, healing from the leftover wounds he acquired in Wisconsin and slowly seething as he thought back on the ordeal... and the Winchesters.

"Bastard family," he grumbled angrily, slamming his palm down against the rough-hewn rail for added exclamation. "So help me, I'm gonna get that bastard John and both of his demonic whelps, and when I do..."

He was about to turn for the door to the cabin, seeking to find a fresh bottle of whiskey, when movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Instantly on alert, Morrow slowly backed toward the cabin entrance, his eyes cautiously scanning the edge of the forest.

When his hand bumped into the knob, the hunter twisted the handle and used his boot to nudge the door open. Without taking his eyes from the landscape, he reached inside the jamb and grabbed the rifle that had been propped against the interior wall.

Carefully, he raised the weapon to chest level, not quite taking aim but prepared to shoot from the hip if need be. Listening intently, he employed all his senses and his keen hunter's instincts to detect any sounds or movement that might signify an approaching threat.

And then, just off to the southern edge of the woods, a flash of white shifted between the tall trunks of the Aspens.

Morrow startled, swinging up his rifle and loosing a single shot in the direction of the movement. The report of the rifle echoed between the two mountain ranges, and the hunter cringed as he realized he'd just potentially given away his hideaway. He felt even stupider when the massive brown bulk of a large buck dashed from the trees and darted back and forth in the clearing before being swallowed up in the relative security of the forest.

"Stupid! A little jumpy, hey Sid?" Morrow muttered, lowering his weapon and shaking his head. "What a damn dumbass thing to do."

He huffed loudly and turned back toward the cabin, his foolishness replaced once more by resentment. None of this would be happening if it hadn't been for the Winchesters. He could

be sitting at a warm bar, enjoying the company of a loose woman instead of being stuck out here in no-man's land, alone and miserable.

"Paranoid, bastard," he mocked himself. "Been up here too long."

His shoulder chose that moment to send a sharp spike of pain that cascaded down into his chest and he froze, reaching out to grasp the edge of the door as he steadied himself. Even after months of rest and healing, the bullet wounds to his body were stark reminders of his failed plan to take out his enemies. He'd been so close too, had John and his eldest within his clutches only to allow Sam - the worst of the three- to sneak up and rescue them.

Rubbing at the subsiding ache in his arm, the grizzled hunter proceeded over to the fireplace, determined to stoke up the flames and chase away the encroaching nighttime chill. Tossing a large log onto the dying flames, he then reached for the poker and stirred the coals back to life.

Morrow leaned the tool back against the hearth and then stepped back, enjoying the increased warmth as it soaked into his sore muscles and joints. He closed his eyes, his mind still seething from the thought of the Winchester clan as he struggled to let the tension seep from his body.

A sudden squeak of the floorboard behind him caught the hunter's attention, but he shrewdly remained still. Sensing movement, Morrow's eyes rose to the shotgun that hung just above the mantle, yet he remained motionless as his mind calculated his response.

"You'll never make it to that gun," a soft voice called out from the shadows.

Morrow chuckled nervously. "If you wanted to kill me, you would've done it by now. Besides, maybe I'll get lucky."

The stout hunter stiffened when the voice behind him "tsk'd" mockingly.

"Lucky? You'd better have a rabbit's foot tucked underneath that flannel of yours and a couple of four-leaf clovers in your pockets, cause there isn't enough luck in the world that would get you to that shotgun before I ripped your spine out."

"Pissy bitch, huh?" Morrow snapped back. "So, what the hell do you want with me? I'm nobody special, just an old man trying to live peacefully up here out of everybody's way."

The woman laughed again and he heard her boots strike the hardwood floor as she took another step closer. Morrow held his position, hoping for and counting on the fact that the mysterious intruder would be sloppy and draw near enough for him to get his hands on her. He was certain, that in close quarters, his size and skills would enable him to take *any* female.

"Oh, I know who you are and you're anything but a peaceful old man, now aren't you... hunter? Even now, I'm betting that you're calculating just how much closer I need to come so that you can try to get your paws on me. But trust me, I wouldn't suggest you try," the voice warned.

Morrow scowled. She was either really good or he'd let his skills get sloppy over the course of months he'd been sequestered away here. Holding his hands out to his sides, palms opened and face up, he forced a smile on his face and slowly turned to face his uninvited guest.

"Now was that so difficult?" the brunette asked, her head cocked slightly as her eyes scanned the hunter's form.

He shrugged, offering his own lopsided smile back at her. That she was the most beautiful thing he'd seen in quite some time didn't stop him from not trusting her. Sure, she was tall, slim and had doe-brown eyes that Morrow was certain he'd loved to get lost in, but there was an almost predatory quality to the way she held herself; erect, rigid, muscles tense in anticipation of action. Maybe she was another hunter; she certainly seemed to possess the skills. Still, he wasn't opposed to a little hot action in the sack; after all, he liked a woman with a little fight in her.

"So what do you want with me?" he asked with a leer. *I know what I'd like to do with you...*

"Why don't you tone down the testosterone there, big guy? You might want to listen to what I have to offer before you make a move that you'll regret," the woman advised.

"You're pretty sure of yourself. If you know who and what I am, then you know what I do for a living. If you think your threats are scaring me, bitch, you might want to think again," Morrow retorted.

The brunette didn't respond, she merely glared back at him, her deep brown eyes narrowing as she seemed to stare right through his very soul.

"We have something in common actually," she continued after a moment. "And I think we can help each other."

"In common? What could I possibly have in common with you?" he snarled back.

"The Winchesters..."

Morrow froze, any hint of the smile on his face immediately disappearing at the mention of his nemeses.

"What do the Winchesters mean to you?"

"We have a history, starting with John. Suffice it to say that they owe me big time, and I aim to collect."

"You might have to stand in line," Morrow hissed. "I have a personal score to settle with those sons of his. Those bastards are working for the very demon-scum they swore to hunt."

The hunter didn't miss the shiver that seemed to cascade over the brunette's body following his comment, but he shrugged it off and continued.

"So what's your beef with them? And how do you propose we work together?"

"I've got a way to take them all out in one fell swoop, and for good. But I gotta find them first," she replied, casually moving around him toward the fireplace and slowly rubbing her hands together before the open flames.

"What's in it for me?" he asked suggestively, moving up behind her.

She turned to face him, the firelight bouncing off her long tresses and illuminating her fine features. He absorbed the smile she offered, returning it with one of his own. She moved in closer, her long fingers reaching out to his chest and smoothing down the flannel of his shirt.

It was immediately electrifying and he leaned into her stroke.

"I'll make it worth your while," she offered in a husky tone.

Morrow grinned impishly, extending his own fat fingers to skim along the side of her face. She pulled away from his touch, denying him any further contact, teasing him with a seductive glint in her eye and taking in a deep breath that only served to jut her ample breasts into his face.

“Easy there, big boy. I need to see the goods before I remit *payment*...” she warned gently, following it with a quick dart of her tongue across full red lips.

“I’ll show you the goods,” Morrow slurred in reply, a lecherous grin spreading across his face.

She turned away from him, her hips swaying as she sauntered back toward the glow of the fireplace.

Morrow watched her move, his body responding to the sexual innuendo and the appealing form of the brunette. Hurriedly, he turned and walked over to the large desk in the corner of the cabin. He tugged on the chain dangling from the lamp, illuminating the scores of papers littering the top as well as the myriads of clippings and photos that were pinned to the nearby wall.

“I’ve been gathering intel on them through contacts I have in the hunting community. I don’t know where his boys are offhand, but I just received information on John’s location yesterday,” Morrow offered as he pulled open the center desk drawer.

Drawing out a folder, he flipped it open and spread out the contents. His gnarled hands pushed through the scraps, coming to rest on a few fresh photographs and a small map.

“Dumb bastard thinks he’s so smart, flying under the radar, but there are hunters out there that would sell out their own mothers for the right price. The word is out now that his boys are working for the enemy, there’ll be plenty of folks wanting to put a bullet in their brains.”

“What do you mean, working for the enemy?” the woman asked curiously, turning and striding over to the opposite side of the desk, her eyes sweeping over the contents.

“You don’t know? The oldest one, Dean, was possessed, working for that sonofabitch Haris. And the younger one, Sam, well he’s gotta be a near full-on demon himself. He has all these freaky powers or something. Word has it that he has Haris after him too, just itching to recruit him. Hell, he’s no different than the demons and creatures we hunt,” Morrow stated. “And John, he’s just too blind to admit the truth, too stubborn to see that his own flesh and blood are nothing more than demon pawns.”

The woman laughed loudly, her long tresses bouncing as she shook her head vigorously.

“Working for demons huh? Yeah, real great intel you have there,” she muttered sarcastically, all hint of seduction suddenly gone.

“Hey, I’ve seen it myself... first hand,” the hunter insisted.

The brunette shrugged. “Whatever! So, where are they?”

“Like I said, don’t know where his boys are, but a buddy of mine said John’s been poking around Stockton, California, chasing down demons,” Morrow stated.

The girl came around the end of the desk to stand at the hunter’s side. She continued to run her long fingers across the pictures and notes, her touch holding an almost sensual quality. She was close to him again, her body nonchalantly brushing up against his own and instantly rekindling the flutter in his groin.

He could smell her, the hint of honeysuckle in her hair, the smell of musk that seemed to ooze off of her. Closing his eyes, he pictured her naked, lying next to him atop the soft fabric of the sheets, a roaring fire gently illuminating her curves.

"Is Winchester still there?" she asked, breaking him from his distracted thoughts.

"Err... uh... yeah, yes, I'm pretty sure," Morrow stammered.

"And do you know where exactly?"

"Yeah, my buddy said he was staying at the Comstock Inn. I got a picture of him just outside the place as recent as two days ago."

The hunter moved quickly, pushing aside the top layer of papers until he came across the photograph he was seeking. He flipped it up and held it for the woman to see.

She turned, her face moving in even closer, peering down at the picture. "Hmm... well, that's what I needed to know."

He watched her with disbelief as she quickly spun away from him and headed toward the cabin door.

"Hey, wait, where you going? Don't we have... er... *plans* to make?" he asked worriedly.

She turned back and smiled, her head cocked slightly to the left. "What? Were you expecting something else?" she asked suggestively, her eyebrows raised.

"Weelllll... I did *share*..." Morrow whined.

She took a step back towards him, her smile even more demure, her hips swinging lightly as she approached. "Aww... don't worry, darlin'. You've been a big help and I did promise to repay you. You can rest easy knowing that your enemies will be taken care of."

Morrow grinned broadly and stepped forward, closing the distance between them. He was directly in front of her once more, her hands reaching out and rubbing slowly down his chest and well past his belt before continuing back up to stroke the side of his neck.

"I don't even know your name," he murmured as she drew his face down to her mouth.

She pressed her lips next to his earlobe, her breath hot against his skin. He was melting under her touch, his body reacting to the promise of sex.

"My real name is Emma," she purred into his ear. "But I go by Mia now," "

The brunette pulled away abruptly, her hands still remaining gently at his neck. Their eyes met, but even in the darkness Morrow could see her irises glaze over black. He tried to pull away, but she held him firmly.

"You... you're a ..."

"Yeah, that's right..." she finished for him as her nails tore into the side of his throat.

Morrow tried to cry out, to scream in defiance, but the blood was already pouring out of his slashed carotids, his larynx silenced as she ripped the trachea from his neck.

She stepped back, releasing her grasp and watching emotionlessly as his body dropped to the hardwood floor, the blood pooling out around the hunter.

Kneeling down beside his still-jerking body, she casually wiped the offending red fluid from her hands onto Morrow's shirt.

"I'm a demon," she spat down at him. "Pity you weren't a good enough hunter to figure that out."

Stockton, California

John Winchester rose up from a long-held squatting position, wanting to stretch to his full six foot plus height but hampered by the low ceiling of the storage container. Droplets of sweat beaded at his forehead and stung his eyes as they trailed down his face. He swiped the back of his hand across his brow, careful not to lose sight of the body in front of him as he did so. His hand came away sticky and John realized that it wasn't just perspiration that coated his scalp.

The heat inside was stifling, any chance at fresh air lost to the tightly closed hatch. Adding to the warmth were the two kerosene lanterns, strategically placed so that they easily illuminated the entire space, but also throwing off enough ambient heat to turn the container into an oversized oven.

John peered closely at the form before him. Sweating profusely, the young man looked haggard, nearly dead. But the seasoned hunter knew better. Bruises marred smooth skin and blood trickled from the corners of the blond's mouth, evidence that neither of them had come out of the initial scrap unscathed.

"You're gonna die hunter!" Black eyes glared out from the limply raised head, blonde hair plastered to a face that bore a natural tan and a youthful complexion.

John didn't react to the threat. Instead he stared back, matching the angry glower with a nearly sympathetic gaze.

The young man was not much older than Sam and had it not been for the long, sun-bleached locks, the kid would have been a dead ringer in stature for his youngest. But there the similarity ended. Where Sam was a bookworm, always trying to figure out the how and why of the world, this kid was a surfer, a free-spirit unbound by societal constraints, content to find freedom atop the waves.

John chuckled silently, the image of either Sam or Dean hanging out at the beach, clad in board shorts or a wetsuit, and ready to hit the surf seemed incongruous with what his sons had become. But he quickly pushed that thought aside as the pleading blue eyes of the young man appeared again.

He sighed. Maybe there wasn't any difference then? Certainly Sam and Dean lived outside of the norms. After all, despite his current participation in the "family business", Sam had definitely shown his free-spirit when he'd abandoned his father and brother to try for a taste of life beyond hunting. His youngest had certainly always known what he wanted out of life.

But wasn't that why he was here... now? Wasn't he trying to prevent the bleak ending that the future seemed to hold for his sons?

...they were never yours at all...

John shivered; an icy hand seemed to pierce his flesh and firmly grab his heart and lungs, stealing away his breath for a split second. The feeling passed quickly enough, even though the memory of Lucifer's comment still echoed in his head just as it had nearly every day for the past year.

He turned back to the ferocious face of the demon-possessed surfer. If looks could kill, he was sure he would have been reduced to a boneless pile of steaming flesh by the evil-spawned hatred pouring off the young man. John wasn't fazed, he knew there was no love lost between himself and the denizens of Hell, and equally certain that after everything demons had cost him, he didn't give a damn either.

"Why were you following the girl?" John demanded, his attention focused once more on the task at hand.

"What girl?"

John advanced, his fists clenched at his side. "You damn well know which girl. Krista Fieser, the little redhead that works at the IHOP. You've been watching her, following her, nearly every day since I got here."

"So, maybe I have a thing for redheads and pancakes," the possessed man replied sarcastically.

"Yeah, and I enjoy Broadway musicals and sushi," John snapped in return. "Let's cut the crap. What the hell do you sonsofabitches want with her?"

"Nothing!" the demon snarled.

"Bull! I know who she is..."

"Then you know *what* she is..."

"So why are you trailing her? Haris is gone, who are you working for?" John asked.

The blond laughed, shaking his head from side to side. "Jeez Winchester, figured you were smarter than that."

"Lucifer? He has you watching the girl?"

"Not just her," the demon taunted.

John paused as he considered the implication of what the demon said. He knew there were others like Krista Fieser, like Matt Teller, like Sam... He'd been compiling a list of their names, tracking down the others from cursed families like his own, hoping to find out why his own son seemed to be on Hell's short list.

"What does Lucifer want with her?" the veteran hunter demanded.

Black eyes stared back at him, silently mocking the elder Winchester. Furious at the unresponsiveness, John stepped closer and grabbed the young man by a handful of t-shirt. Yanking him forward, the hunter's face was mere inches away from the demon's.

"WHAT DOES LUCIFER WANT WITH HER?" John shouted, his own eyes wide with anger.

"Go to hell," the creature spat back.

John loosed his grip and backed off slightly. "You first!"

Retrieving a smaller version of his leather-bound journal, he automatically flipped it open to the section he needed.

"Exorcizo te, immundissime spiritus, omnis incursio adversarii, omnis legio..."

The young man before him began to twitch, his lanky body struggling against the thick ropes holding him secured to the chair. He hissed and spat, his eyes flashing back and forth between blue and black as John continued the Latin rite.

"You... can't... save... them..." the man's strained voice cracked as the demon fought against the exorcism.

"Tell me what he wants with them... what does he want with my son?" John yelled again.

Another laugh echoed within the tight confines of the metal shed. Perspiration combined with blood and ran in small rivulets down the surfer's face. Yet the dark eyes showed no sign of relenting.

"You think this is just about your sons? I'd heard you were an egotistical bastard," the hellspawn jeered.

"Audi ergo, et time, satana, inimice fidei, hostus generis humani..."

The blond writhed more vigorously as blood began to seep from the wounds created by his thrashing against the bindings. John didn't yield. Spurred by the demon's taunts, his mind still haunted by the insinuations against his sons, he continued the ritual.

His entire life had been spent in pursuit of the yellow-eyed demon, culminating over a year ago when Dean had finally put the bastard down for good. He'd thought it was all over then, at the time thinking he'd saved Sam only at the expense of his eldest's sacrifice. Yet even the utter relief he felt when Dean miraculously returned to life there on the cold Wyoming dirt was short-lived when he recalled Lucifer's final words.

Since then, he'd spent most of his time researching and chasing down any lead that remotely related to his boys. There'd been the nineteen-year-old working in the grocery store in Memphis, a gold medallion hanging from his neck for all the world to see. If the boy knew anything about his Guardianship, it wasn't apparent; but then, neither had Dean really. If anything, John was shocked he'd found the kid at all, especially after all the rocks he'd dug under back before Wyoming.

And his search hadn't been confined to seeking the elusive Guardians either. John also followed up on any report of kids with "special" abilities; like Sam. He'd checked on the ones he knew about, starting with Matt Teller and most recently, the former priest, Kyle Williams, seeing how they were doing, or rather maybe "what" they were doing. He'd only caught wind of Krista Fieser after a report of her involvement in thwarting a recent robbery at her place of employment.

It wasn't the fact that the petite redhead had stood up to an armed bandit, what caught his attention was that she'd supposedly been shot in the process, only to be miraculously "fine" by the time the paramedics arrived, not a mark on her other than a red blotch staining her apron.

She was one of them, he knew it. Although he had no idea how she'd managed to escape Eli's round-up, he didn't know, but John was certain he was going to find out the truth, no

matter how many demons he had to work his way through to do it. He might have lost Mary, but no way was he coming close to losing his sons ever again.

John continued on with the exorcism, the words slipping off his tongue so automatically even though his thoughts were elsewhere. He ignored the screeching of the demon-possessed man before him, the blood that ran freely from torn fingernails as the kid's hands dug into the wooden armrests.

"...origo avaritiae, casua discodiiae, excitator dolorum; quid stas et resistis cum scias."

"He wants them..."

The weak voice rose above the Latin, desperation apparent in both the tone and the eyes.

"What? What does he want them for?" John demanded, his patience pressed thin.

"I dunno, its need to know only and I'm not high enough up the food chain to sit at the big dinner table. But I do know that the Boss has big plans for humanity. Seems he's tired of being exiled down in the Pit, wants to reign topside for a bit," the demon explained.

"Yeah, so? No newsflash there. What does that have to do with Sam and Dean?"

"They're a threat, a big one. There's checks and balances in everything, the Big Guy Upstairs made sure of that. Haven't you ever wondered why Haris wanted all those kids to begin with? And why he was so desperate to get that amulet off your son?"

"It was part of Solomon's sword. He was afraid of it," the hunter replied.

"Not alone, it was what it represented in the larger picture," the demon continued.

"And what's that?"

"Lucifer knows. He saw what happened to Haris and he knows what might happen if the Guardians all banded together; or worse, if all the special kids from those cursed families managed to put their freakish talents to use."

"So he wants them all out of his way?"

"Wow! And to think we figured Sam for the bright one..."

John scowled at the jibe. "So your boss wants my sons, all the rest of them, dead?"

"Dead, alive, he doesn't really care, so long as they stay out of the way of his master plan. Of course, dead is less risky in the long run..."

The blond's demon-possessed face curled up in a smirk, his black eyes sparkling as though the threat brought some sort of satisfaction to its evil mind. John merely turned away. He'd heard enough, it was just a different verse of the same old song. Something always seemed to want him or his family dead, that was nothing new, and even the prospect of their latest enemy being nothing other than Hell's Prince really did little to faze the haggard hunter.

Thumbing over to the next page, John resumed his oration. *"Recede ergo in nomine Patris et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti..."*

"NO! WAIT... you promised..."

"I did? ... *da locum Spiritus Sancto, per hoc signum sanctae Crucis Jesu Christi Domini nostri...*"

The young man screamed, a thick black fog poured from his open mouth and rose upward as John finished the ritual. The dark cloud slammed into the ceiling of the container, spreading out against the painted sigil before dissipating into the humid air.

As the commotion faded, John closed the small notebook and laid it on top of a nearby crate. Pulling a large knife from the sheath at this hip, he slowly moved toward the silent young man, cautiously watching as small droplets of blood plopped to the floor.

Carefully slipping the edge of the blade beneath the ropes at the man's wrist, John quickly cut the bindings, catching the lanky surfer before his body fell to the ground. He lowered the unconscious victim to the floor, cutting away the remaining pieces of rope before rising to retrieve some clean bandages.

Stepping out into the cool evening air, he stopped and turned his face up to the full glowing moon. Sucking in a deep breath, John tried to slow the pounding of his heart, certain that it was loud enough that anyone nearby would be able to hear it.

When he opened his eyes again, he looked down at the drying blood that covered his hands. Some of it was his, but most belonged to the innocent kid lying just a few feet away. Reaching the truck, he pulled an oversized tackle box from behind the bench seat and a half empty jug of water from the passenger's side floorboards.

It took several minutes for him to clean up and bandage the minor wounds that adorned the tanned flesh of the young man. He did it methodically, forcing himself not to make any more haphazard comparisons to his own sons. But his mind was still chewing through what the demon had told him.

He'd never really considered the implications of all the remaining Guardians coming together, never really caring about any of it beyond how it affected Dean. But he had to admit, reflecting on it now, he could easily understand the potential threat not just to any demon, but maybe even to Lucifer himself.

John huffed in disgust. He wished he would have checked into Shadrack Mann and the whole deal with Dean's amulet back when the strange old man had first approached him. Would he have done anything differently? Would he have kept Dean away, never to take on the peculiar responsibility? Would it have changed anything at all?

And what about Sam? Was there really anything he could have done to have prevented putting his youngest in Hell's crosshairs? There was still so much about the cursed families that he was in the dark about. Just as with Dean, he couldn't help wondering whether there was any way he could have kept Sam from taking on the strange powers.

A cursed family and a Guardian family; maybe Lucifer's taunt held a modicum of truth after all. Sam and Dean never really were his, their destiny sealed from the minute he and Mary first met: nature's way or even the "Man Upstairs" desperate attempt to keep things in balance. Maybe there was nothing he *could* do to protect his boys from whatever fate held in store.

"No!" John shouted defiantly aloud. He wouldn't admit that, couldn't... absolutely refused to with every red blood cell currently coursing through his veins.

The sudden sound of his voice caused the young man to stir before him. Bloodshot blue eyes peeked from between rapidly blinking lids, struggling to focus in the dimly lit container.

"What... where?" the blond stammered out weakly, his hand reaching out to clutch John's shirt.

"It's okay... just relax. You're going to be alright," he promised.

"What happened to me? Where am I? Please... please don't hurt me..." the young man begged, his eyes wide with panic.

"It's all right, son. I'm not going to hurt you," John assured him, gently holding a shoulder as he offered the tepid bottle of water.

The kid drank greedily, water splashing from his mouth and trickling down the side of his chin as it mixed with the drying blood.

"More... please..."

John nodded and eased the bruised body back down to the floor.

"I'll be right back," he grunted, rising back up to his feet.

With a pronounced sigh, the hunter moved to the door to the container. He pushed it open and made a quick scan right and left before leaving the relative safety of the metal box.

The truck was parked only a few feet away, but John knew that it never hurt to be cautious. It was impossible to know if the demon possessing the surfer had been working alone, and if it hadn't, then it was highly likely that he may have been followed despite his great care to obscure his trail.

For the past several days, he'd felt as though eyes had been watching him. In fact, ever since he'd arrived in Stockton, he couldn't suppress the sensation that someone had been following him, holding to the shadows, just out of eyeshot.

It was disconcerting, and he hated the feeling and the implication of weakness. But John knew that the hair on the back of his neck didn't lie, knew equally that those sorts of feelings were not to be taken lightly if he wanted to survive. Experience had taught him that valuable lesson several times over, and so John embraced his paranoia as just another of his well-honed hunter's skills.

When the coast seemed cleared, he moved toward the black GMC, his eyes warily watching his surroundings. He grimaced when the passenger's side door opened with a loud screech of worn hinges. It briefly reminded him of the Impala and a flash of Sam and Dean whisked through his mind.

Assured that the noise hadn't attracted any unwanted attention, John stretched inside and pulled two more bottles of water from underneath the seat. Tucking them underneath his left armpit, the weary hunter was about to turn back when the breeze suddenly stilled.

Still bent inside the truck cab, he froze, his movements becoming slower, more methodical as he nonchalantly reached for the glove compartment.

"There's nothing in there that will help you," a female voice called out from behind him.

He knew the voice; would go to his grave remembering the tone and timbre as it had launched vile threats at him.

"You!" he snarled, standing up straight and turning slowly to face the newcomer.

“Aw, Johnny... I get the distinct impression you’re not happy to see me,” Mia snarked in reply. “I’m surprised really... I didn’t think I’d sneak up on you so easily, the great hunter that you are and all.”

John shrugged, “Yeah, I’m shocked too. Don’t know how I missed your stench. What sewer did you crawl out of this time?”

The brunette chuckled and shook her head. “Always with the comedy. You really took up the wrong profession I think. You and Dean could have gone on the road together.”

“What do you want, Mia?” he asked, masking his concern with irritation.

“Wow, right down to business with you isn’t it? No time for pleasantries,” she taunted.

“The only thing pleasant in dealing with you, Mia, would be to see your lifeless body beneath my boots.”

The woman laughed once more, but her eyes narrowed betraying her next actions to the wary hunter.

She lifted her hand, pointing a crimson-tipped index finger at John’s chest. He tried to lift the weapon he’d managed to pull from the glovebox, but her demonic power was already launching him backwards into the side of the truck.

His back slammed into the black metal, the open edge of the door jamming into his spine with an explosion of pain. John struggled to move, his eyes going wide as he watched the hybrid demon approach with a slow saunter.

“Save your energy,” she advised him as she drew near.

“Go to hell,” John grunted back as he fought against the invisible force holding him pinned against the truck.

“Oh, I have every intention of it, John...” she sneered as she drew closer.

He tried to pull away from her contact, but his body would not respond. Instead, all he could do was cringe, his flesh crawling as she stretched up onto her tiptoes and put her mouth next to his ear. Mia lingered there without speaking for a prolonged moment, and the hunter flinched as her lips skimmed the side of his neck.

“Tasty...” she purred. “Like a more refined version of Dean. Pity, you and I never got to spend the type of quality time that he and I did.”

“I should have killed you when I had the chance,” John growled.

“As if you could have. I seem to remember leaving the three of you bleeding and licking your wounds back in Texas,” she reminded him.

“I seem to remember you running for your life,” he retorted.

She smiled, canting her head slightly with a shrug. “Yeah... well, see the last time I went about it all wrong, I tried to separate your boys, I tried to bait you in. But you were too smart... too cautious or calloused... to rush headlong into save your sons. But now, I’m smarter and I know which bait works best. See, I know Dean... he’d do anything to save his family and then there’s Sam... he’d do anything to save Dean. Like dominoes... one by one... you’re all going to fall.”

"You won't get them!"

John shook with anger, every muscle in his body contracting as he fought to free himself from Mia's trap. He ceased abruptly as the soft warble of a ringtone emanated from his pocket. His eyes betrayed him as he glanced down following the noise.

Mia snuggled up against his chest, her hands seeking out the cellular, her fingers sneaking into the front pocket of his jeans and freely roaming within the worn denim. John sucked in a breath and bit into his lower lip as she fumbled against his groin.

She smiled into his face, emitting a soft titter that for all its girlishness still held a sadistic, evil quality. She pulled out the cell phone... finally... her eyes sneaking a peek at the display.

"Ooohh, its Dean. Should I answer? I imagine he'd love to hear from me," she taunted.

"Whatever you're going to do, Mia... just get it over with. I'm tired of your games," John hissed.

She took a playful nibble on his earlobe and her breath assaulted the whiskered side of his face. The cell rang twice more before John's voicemail picked it up.

He watched as Mia glanced back at the now-silent phone. Her fingers clenched around it, the plastic and electronics suddenly exploding outward as Mia crushed it within her hand. She looked back up at him, her hazelnut irises giving over to the obsidian of her pupils.

"Oh, John, the game is only beginning. I've captured the king, and the knights won't be far behind. Before long, the queen will be the only piece left on the board!"

Bend, Oregon

Dean flipped the cellular closed with a grunt and tossed it across the room where it bounced twice on the lumpy mattress before coming to rest on the garish green bedspread.

"I don't know why he even carries a damn cell, not like he ever uses the goddamn thing," Dean grumbled, stalking back to the edge of the window and pushing aside the curtain to peer outside.

"Don't take it out on the phone, Dean," Sam advised, his eyes peeking up from underneath the long tendrils of brown hair. "You of all people should know how Dad is."

Absently, he heard Sam groan. From the corner of his eye, he watched as his brother looked up from the laptop, stretched and extended his arms up and behind his head before reaching to massage knots born of too many hours hunched over the computer from the back of his neck. Dean listened to the movement, but continued staring blankly out the window into the rainy, darkening night.

He was bored, having spent the better part of the day inside, watching Sam pour over every conceivable website dealing with angels, feathers or anything even remotely hinting at the two. Never mind that they had just managed to escape from a mountain of collapsing rock or an open Hellgate flooded with demons, Sam was obsessed with that damn feather, spending every waking minute digging through every resource both electronically or in print at nearly every library between California and here.

"Why don't you give it a rest, Sammy?" he suggested, instantly regretting the poor choice in words when his brother erupted with a hostile reply.

"Hey, don't bitch at me!" Sam yelled angrily. "I'm just working here, trying to dig up anything more about that friggin' feather. If you're gonna be pissed at Dad, fine... but don't take it out on me..."

"Sam..."

"I mean it, Dean. Funny, when I complain about how the old man doesn't respond, about how all he ever seems to do is avoid us, you're the first one to defend him..."

"Sammy, that's not..."

"But when you're pissed off at him, when you need him and he's not there, it's all okay for you to rant..."

"I didn't mean..."

"I'm so sick of you always sticking up for him... it never changes... not with him, not with you..."

Dean moved closer, his hands out in front of him open-palmed as he tried to explain and soothe his suddenly upset sibling. Behind the small table, Sam rose abruptly, his hands pushing off against the arms of the chair and causing it to fly backward where it crashed into the wall. He stalked out from around the makeshift desk, approaching Dean with wide eyes.

"...tell me to give it a rest..." Sam continued. "Why don't you save that advice for yourself...?"

The elder Winchester recoiled slightly as Sam stopped right before him. With barely a hand-breath between their chests, he braced himself, certain his brother was about to hit him.

"SAM!" he shouted, hoping to distract the taller man from his vehement tirade before fists started flying.

"WHAT?" Sam yelled back and Dean didn't miss the rigid musculature of his brother's arms as biceps seemed to stretch the fabric of the thin t-shirt in direct proportion to how tight his brother was wound.

"Relax, I didn't mean it ..." Dean began, but his next words were cut off as Sam's palms slammed into his chest.

He stumbled backward, trying to catch himself as his hands flailed out grabbing nothing but empty air. He landed hard on his hip, feeling the resulting concussion spread up his spine and jar his teeth. Sitting there, he looked up at his brother, trying desperately to mask the suspicion from manifesting on his face.

Dean had seen what Sam had done in the caverns; in fact, over the past couple of years he'd had a front row seat to the Sam Winchester Superpower Show. And while repetition might breed familiarity, it did nothing to ease the pesky voices in the back of Dean's head.

He wasn't frightened, not that he'd ever admit, not of Sam, more like he was just concerned, worried that somehow he was losing his brother over to the likes of Gudrun... or worse. It wasn't that Dean was afraid of what Sam could do, he'd certainly seen his fair share of "strange" in his life; it was more that he just didn't understand it, and that bothered him... being out of control, not having answers.

"Dean..." Sam's voice broke through the older man's inner turmoil and he looked up, focusing first on the look of regret that covered his brother's face and then down to the hand, extended outward.

"I got it," Dean grumbled back, swatting away the proffered hand and pushing up from the floor.

He was tired, and undeniably angry now, neither of which made him reasonable. Add in the nagging thoughts about his brother and the little business of having the world come to an end, and who could blame him really?

"Dean, I'm sorry..." Sam offered again, his head dropping low, his eyes obscured by hair that needed cut since before Paw Paw.

"It's okay, Sam. We've both had a lot on our minds," Dean replied as he moved to the side of the bed and flopped down, bouncing nearly as much as the cell phone had moments before.

He looked beyond his brother, avoiding any eye contact, content to fuel his anger just a little longer and knowing that if he caught sight of Sam's sorrowful look, he'd have no choice but to cave. It had always been that way.

"You just gonna blow me off now? We need to talk..." Sam stated, moving over to drop down on the edge of the second bedside.

"Nothing to talk about..." *Unless you count bleeding angel feathers, hordes of demons pouring out of Hell, and oh, Lucifer wanting our asses in a sling. And jeez, don't let me forget about baby brothers that can reap demons...*

Sam swallowed audibly; loud enough that Dean could hear it despite feigning a sudden interest in the laces on his boots. As he untied them and yanked off first the right and then the left, he heard his brother's soft exhale of air. He recognized that particular respiratory pattern, knew it was a telltale sign of Sam preparing to "talk."

Tossing his boots to the floor at the bottom of the bed, he scooted back up and grabbed for the remote.

Just let me get the T.V. on, fill the room with mindless noise and Sam can go back to his research and we can pretend that nothing happened...

"You staying in tonight?" Sam asked above the din of a Budweiser commercial.

"Yep."

He heard Sam sigh again following his reply. *That's a lot of sighing, never good...* Dean mused absently as he changed the channel.

His brother rose from the bed and for a moment Dean thought that perhaps Sam was going to head back to the laptop and grant him a reprieve from dealing with what had just occurred. Instead, the younger man swirled back around and faced him, emotional turmoil clearly displayed on his face.

"Don't do this, Dean. Not now... I got... we've got... enough problems to deal with that we don't need to be at each other's throats," Sam pleaded as he began pacing. "First there's this whole end of the world thing, demons coming at us like we're the main course on the menu, and then there's that freaky feather..."

Dean tried to stop the grimace when Sam mentioned the word "freak," but he knew he hadn't been able to mask the involuntary reaction when his brother suddenly stopped speaking. His mind scrambled frantically for the words to either deflect his obvious slip or to explain, but he wasn't fast enough.

"That's it isn't it?" Sam continued, his frenetic pacing increasing as he ran his hand through his hair, grabbing the strands and tugging them upward. "It's what you saw me do back there in the caves... with Gudrun..."

"No, Sammy..."

"You're a horrible liar, Dean. I could see it on your face then as well as now. It freaked you out..."

"Not true..."

"The hell it isn't."

"Sam, you're making something out of nothing," Dean insisted.

"I am? I remember what you said back in Texas, Dean. I know how much it scares you when it comes to the things I can do. You're transparent where it concerns stuff like that," Sam threw back at him. "Just like you are with Dad."

"We're not going there again are we? Cause I'd prefer just to lay here on the bed instead of the floor," Dean snarked, trying desperately to lighten the tone.

"Dean, I tried to say I was sorry about that. It's just that all this stuff feels like it's piling up on me. All the crap that's happened lately and there's nothing but more questions, never any answers. And now, what happened with me back in the caves, dude... I'm worried..." the young man confessed.

Dean watched his brother stop as he came to the motel room window. Sam stood there, not moving, not speaking, not even pushing the curtain aside to stare blankly outside as Dean had earlier. The elder hunter groaned silently, internally hating to see his brother this way. Broken bodies he could deal with, stitches he could place, fractures he could splint, but fixing the emotional stuff was well beyond his means of handling. Still, this was Sam, his brother, his charge, his ultimate reason for sucking in the next breath; no way could he sit there and remain silent.

"There's nothing to be worried about, Sammy," Dean began, snapping off the television and plunging the room into stark silence. "Look, dude, what happened back in Cali, it's no big deal..."

"Yeah right..."

"I swear. You're my brother, I trust you. Hell... your psychic crap has saved my bacon more than once lately. I just..."

Dean paused, cautiously choosing what he was about to say next.

"Just what, Dean?" Sam asked, turning back to face him.

"I'm just afraid for you, Sammy," Dean admitted. "You had Haris after you before because he wanted your powers, and even though he's gone, I'm just afraid of what else is out there. Maybe something worse, maybe something I can't stop this time. Maybe something you can't stop..."

Maybe Lucifer... maybe Mia...

"Dean, there's always something gunning for us..."

The older sibling shook his head. "I'm not talking about run of the mill demon trash, Sam. What if..."

Sam laughed, a hearty chortle that rose up from deep inside. Dean looked up at his brother, a look of confusion pinching his eyebrows together.

"You're finding all this funny now? Dude, have you been smoking something while I wasn't looking?"

"It's hilarious, Dean. We're hilarious... or pathetic," Sam answered cryptically.

"Yeah, ok, you're making complete sense," Dean muttered.

"I'm serious. Look at us, I'm afraid of this weirdo mojo of mine getting you killed and you're worried about keeping me alive. And do you know what the best part is?"

"No, but I'm sure you're gonna tell me."

Sam continued to chuckle. "Dude, we have the Big Bad himself looking to burn the world down to ashes, we might not live long enough for any of this to make a damn difference. Game over..."

"Well, aren't you the eternal optimist," Dean joked with his own snicker.

"You have to admit, it puts things in perspective. Hell, Dean, have you considered how many times in just the past few months, we've been up against either Lucifer himself or some of his troops? Whatever happened to a good ole'-fashioned salt and burn? When's the last time we put a black dog or a ghost down? Lately, it's just been one demon after another."

"Hey, that's not true, have you already forgotten all the whacked-out spirits of serial killers lately? Oh, and how about all the fun we had with that pack of chupas down in West Texas?" Dean suggested.

"Yeah, and then there's reincarnated Egyptian gods..." Sam lightheartedly added.

"Tattoo artists dabbling in black magic..."

"Kikituks..."

"Boo Hags..."

"Demon half-breeds..." Sam offered.

Dean went silent, the easy-going game suddenly coming to an abrupt halt. His smile immediately faded as memories of the sadistic brunette flashed through his mind.

"Dean... I didn't mean to bring up Mia..."

"S'all right, Sam," the older man replied, waving off his brother.

"You know I don't blame you for any of what happened," Sam said softly.

"You don't have to..." *I blame myself enough for both of us...*

The room became silent again, a heaviness settling back between the brothers like a suffocating wet tarp.

"Dean?"

"Just leave it, okay Sammy?" Dean begged, his voice little more than a whisper as he stood abruptly.

Mia was his problem, her continued existence a direct result of his poor judgment. Granted, he hadn't created the bitch, but he was certainly responsible for the fact that she still roamed free and perpetrated her brutality on innocent victims. *Like Erin...* he reminded himself.

Seeking the sanctuary of the bathroom, Dean was halfway across the room when his cellphone began to play his current ringtone. He paused, glancing back to the bed where the device still lay. He quickly rushed to grab it, thinking, hoping, that just maybe it was their dad actually returning his earlier call.

Picking up the phone, Dean stole a look at the displayed number, a dejected sigh escaping him when he saw the return number for Bobby instead of his dad's cellular.

"Hey Bobby," he greeted.

"Hey, Dean," Bobby returned. *"How you and Sam doin'?"*

"Ah, you know... just livin' the life. What's going on? Everything okay? You okay?"

He heard Bobby chuckle. *"Settle down, son. I'm fine. I just wanted to give you boys a little head's up on some intel that's floating around the hunter network."*

"We have a network?" Dean joked.

"Well, some of us do. Some of us actually play nice with the other boys and girls," the older man returned.

"Hey! I play nice, just ask anyone..." Dean refuted, looking back at his brother for support. "So, what did you call about? Hunter intel? Please tell me that this year's convention is being held at the Playboy Mansion."

He heard Bobby's irritated huff on the other end of the receiver and he smiled. He could picture the disgruntled frown crossing the hunter's face, the roll of the eyes as Bobby suffered through his antics. But Dean likewise knew that despite his old friend's gruffness, the salvage yard owner was smiling inwardly.

"No, you dumbass. Would you just shut up and listen for once. I just found out that your old buddy, Sid Morrow, was found dead."

Dean paused, his eyes going wide as the news sunk in.

"Dean... what is it?" Sam asked, drawing closer.

"Morrow? Dead? How? When?" the elder sibling asked, leaning over so that his brother could tilt his ear toward the phone and hear the conversation.

"Day before yesterday. Friends of his found his body up at some cabin he'd been holed up in since Wisconsin. Word is... he was torn to shreds," Bobby informed them.

"Well, good riddance, I say. One less asshole out there we have to look over our shoulder for," Dean groused.

"What killed him, Bobby? Does anyone know?" Sam interjected.

"Hey Sam! Nope, Morrows boys aren't talking, but word has it that it weren't no animal. Morrow bought it inside his cabin and the lunar cycle isn't right for a werewolf," Bobby replied.

"Yeah, but maybe it was something else. Not like Morrow didn't make enemies on either side of the supernatural line," the younger hunter observed.

"Well, I say who gives a damn? Whoever or whatever did it, I owe them a cold beer," Dean added in.

"There's more, boys," Bobby continued. *"Morrow aint the only hunter to wind up sliced and diced lately."*

"Oh?" both brothers exclaimed in unison.

"Half a dozen or so that I know about. Hunters, all over the U.S., each one of them torn apart like some critter got to them. I'll email you what I've dug up so far."

"There any connection?" Dean asked, becoming more serious.

"Other than being hunters? No. Far as I can tell, they each had their specialty, they all mostly ran in different circles. You know how hunters are," Bobby replied.

"What do you think?" Sam asked.

"Hell, I dunno. Lots of demons roaming around out there lately. More than ever. Might just all be a part of Lucifer's endgame. Look, boys, I just wanted to warn you to watch your backs. Don't trust any strangers, keep an eye out for anyone, or anything, suspicious," the sagacious hunter cautioned.

"Yeah, just like always..." Dean muttered.

"Just be careful, you two. You got a tendency to attract trouble like a crap attracts flies."

Sam chuckled and said his goodbyes, immediately heading back toward the laptop. Dean watched him and when he thought his brother's attention was back on the computer, he shifted away slightly, turning so that his back was to Sam.

"Bobby," he spoke quietly, "Have you heard from our dad?"

The long pause while Dean waited for Bobby's response did little to set the elder Winchester at ease.

"No, son. I haven't. But you know your daddy, not like he's the poster child for reaching out and touching someone."

"Yeah..." Dean admitted sullenly.

"Don't you worry, I'm sure your daddy's fine. No news is good news, right?" Bobby suggested. *"Look, you know I'll keep my ear out for him. I hear anything, you'll be the first to know, okay? Now, you two just make sure to keep yourselves safe or I'll kick your asses personally."*

Dean snorted. "Bring it on, old man. Seriously, we'll be careful... and Bobby... thanks!"

He ended the call but stood there with his back turned a minute longer. Sucking in a deep breath, Dean jammed the cell into his pocket. He paced back over to the window, his ears picking up the tap-tapping of Sam's fingers on the keyboard.

Pushing aside the curtain, he watched as the rain outside fell in sheets, the trees across the parking lot swaying gently in the cold breeze. He gazed out blankly, his mind going back weeks before to the job in Tahlequah.

"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?"

"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."

Mia's words sounded hauntingly in his mind, the image of her standing in the motel room as she flaunted her deeds still vivid.

Was she the culprit here again? Was this more of her brutal handiwork? What was the point? She'd already revealed that she was alive and kicking, why kill more hunters, especially someone like Morrow?

Dean rubbed the back of his neck, the tension of the evening suddenly returning with a vengeance. He considered mentioning his suspicions to Sam, but he couldn't bear to bring up her name to his brother, guilt still consuming him over what she'd nearly done, over what he'd allowed her to do.

"Wow, this doesn't look good," Sam announced, breaking the silence. "Nearly a dozen hunters, all found dead, like some big animal got to them."

"Yeah, blame it on Yogi," Dean huffed.

"According to what Bobby put together, in most of these cases there was no sign of forced entry and nothing seemed to be missing."

"But we know better don't we?"

"Demons, not like they need a key to get in," Sam added. "Sid might be the latest, but some of these go back for a couple of months."

"Morrow was an ass, Sam! He got what he deserved," Dean snarled.

"I'm not really arguing that, but we gotta know what we're up against, Dean. If this is Lucifer's handiwork, we need all the info we can get."

Dean sighed and let the curtain fall back. "We could be in Montana by morning," he conceded.

"Nah, let's leave first thing. We should get a good night's sleep. I've a feeling we're gonna need it," the younger man advised, flipping down the lid to the laptop and rising.

Dean nodded, but remained standing there.

“Yeah, a good night’s sleep...” he agreed quietly. But as he dropped down on the sagging mattress and began flipping idly through the channels, he knew full-well that even if he managed to drift off, his slumber would be marred by the recurring nightmare of his brother laying bloody and broken in the dirt and the visage of a brunette, laughing sadistically as she killed them all one by one.

Kalispell, Montana

Dean guided the Impala over the loose dirt track with just the palm of his hand on the wheel, letting the huge behemoth of a car come to rest alongside a bland log cabin that wouldn’t have been out of place in some ancient tourist brochure from the seventies.

In fact, as he looked the place over, Dean was sure he’d seen it in an episode of *Grizzly Adams* when he was a kid.

The structure was old, the gnarled wooden beams leaning slightly where the hillside had actually moved beneath it over the years.

It was exactly the kind of place Dean would expect to find Morrow – just because the man was an ass, didn’t mean he was a total idiot. There was enough of a hunter still in him to pick a good hideout when he needed one.

The cabin was obscure, and far enough up the valley to allow a clear view all around, right out across the treetops and over the distant mountains beyond.

Even the nearby woodland couldn’t give an assailant a clear run at the building without being seen.

“This place remind you of anywhere?” Dean flicked up just one brow, remembering a similar cabin where he and John had once been held captive.

Sam slammed the Chevy’s heavyweight door and trudged around to his brother’s side, sliding a little on the rough gravel beneath his shoes.

“Yeah, someplace I’d rather *forget*,” he responded, eyeing the rotting porch as if it might not take the load he was about to put on it. “Are you sure our feet won’t go straight through that thing? I mean, dude...all that pie you’re so fond of...” He grinned a little.

Dean shrugged and took point, testing out the old wooden timbers beneath his CAT boots before letting his full weight rest on the balcony. He smiled when the wood held, patting his stomach with affection. “Guess all that pie didn’t do me any harm after all, Sasquatch. Now quit bitching about my eating habits and get your gangly butt over here.”

Sam chuckled, still taking care where he put his feet as he stepped onto the porch. There was a hunting knife jammed carefully into the jamb as an impromptu lock, probably by the person that had found Morrow, but he pulled it free, pushing on the door until it swung open.

The cops obviously hadn’t visited this particular crime scene yet, even if other hunters had.

As Sam edged inside, Dean pulled his .45 from his waistband and clicked off the safety. Just because others had been here, didn’t mean there still weren’t hidden or demonic dangers – especially for hunters.

The interior of the lodge was in just as bad a state as the exterior, and the floor was littered with discarded and crushed beer cans making it was hard to see even the threadbare rug that covered the center area.

Dean kicked at a few of the cans and dregs of brown liquid dribbled out. He screwed his face up in disgust. The Winchesters weren't exactly the tidiest people – living out of a suitcase kind of made you a little less than house proud – but Morrow had been something else.

“Sammy, was this creep even house-broken? I sure as hell hope I don't need to take a leak in this place...”

Sam winced at the thought, and focused instead on the huge bloodstain in the left hand corner of the room. The browning patch had spread outwards across several floorboards, and looked far too wide to have come from any normal wound or injury.

Sam kneeled, examining the stain more closely. “When Bobby said Morrow was slaughtered, he wasn't kidding. No way are we looking at an ordinary cause of death here.”

Dean's lips puckered. “Define ‘ordinary’ for a guy that fugly? Dude, he probably looked in the mirror, didn't like the reflection and ganked *himself*.” There was more than a tinge of animosity in the hunter's voice as he remembered how viciously Morrow and his buddies had once treated him. *And Dad too...*

He wanted to say that Morrow had gotten his just desserts, and that maybe the world was a better place without him. But looking at the evidence, even Morrow probably hadn't deserved this kind of death.

“So, we're not looking at a break in, and there's no sign of a struggle. I'm thinking maybe Morrow knew who did this. Or whatever it was, it was so damn fast he didn't even see it coming.”

Sam agreed. Stretching up from his squatting position, he glanced around the scruffy room for any traces of the killer. “Fast and neat, no clues, no evidence anyone was ever here.”

“Yeah, well tell that to Morrow. I think he might argue your last point.”

Sam's shifting gaze picked up on something wedged under an oil lamp by the window. He squinted in the less than perfect light, zeroing in on a wad of crumpled photographs.

Dean followed the curious expression on his brother's face, and with perfect symmetry, the brothers moved over to examine their find.

“Well lookie here, Morrow was a regular little paparazzo, and we were his celebrities of the month.” Dean clicked his tongue. “Jeez, if I'd known I'd have had my legs waxed or something...”

Sam looked up from sifting through the pictures, a look of perfect sincerity on his dimpled features. “Man, I'd have gone for the full-on facelift if I were you...”

“So not worried in that department, dude. And hey, this guy has more pictures of you than anyone. Somethin' you wanna tell me here, Sammy?” Dean wiggled his brow suggestively, but didn't stray from the photos for too long.

The pictures were all of the Winchesters. Some were old and faded, while others were fresher, from more recent hunts.

“I'm guessing Morrow's still been keeping an eye on us all these months,” Sam suggested a little more seriously as he tossed several pictures down in favor of a ragged folder stuffed on a shelf.

Inside the browning wallet were even more images, along with paperwork from various motels, receipts, and a parking ticket issued to John's pickup.

"Relentless sonofabitch, wasn't he?" Dean noted with disgust.

"And thorough," Sam agreed, picking out a zoom shot of Dean, John, and himself that appeared to have been taken as they'd swiftly exited St. John's Hospital in Illinois.

"So, Morrow could have taken our asses out, except something got to him first and tore him a new one, big time. Whoever or *whatever* it was, they were quick, messy and had a set of jewels the size of King Kong." Dean ran a hand through his spiky hair and paced away from the window, rubbing his free hand over his lips in deep thought. "I'm thinking maybe Lucifer is having a little fun killing hunters. I mean, maybe we pissed him off a few times too many lately."

"But why not start with us?" Sam countered as he began to search the cabin more carefully. "We're the biggest thorn in his side. We're the logical first targets..."

"Who said demons are friggin' logical? They're from Hell, dude, not Vulcan." Dean huffed and smirked. "Oh yeah, and they have pointy tails, not pointy ears..."

Sam couldn't help but smirk at the reference. "So what if Lucifer or his goons were after us, and they wanted intel from Morrow to find us?"

Dean wandered back over to the bloodstain and crouched down. His eyes danced over the mark on the floorboards and then beyond its edges, as if he was imagining the exact position of the body. "Maybe," he admitted. "But would the likes of Lucifer need a dick like Morrow to find our asses?"

He continued to stare at the floor until his gaze locked onto something that had apparently fallen under a large and very moldy wall cabinet. Hunkering down further onto his knees, he slid a hand under the decrepit piece of furniture and pulled out another photo.

Dean's face scrunched up when he saw the blurred image's contents. "It's Dad," he explained, finally looking up at Sam with an expression of concern. "And I think it's recent. *Very* recent..."

Sam reached over and plucked the picture from his brother's fingertips. It appeared to show John Winchester outside a motel called "The Comstock Inn," and the usual stoic expression on his face said he was probably on a gig.

"Do you think whoever killed Morrow saw this?" Sam fidgeted, his boyish face changing from uncertainty to out and out worry in a split second.

"Maybe, maybe not, but I don't think we can afford to take any chances, dude." Dean slid his weapon away and replaced it with his cell. He didn't really expect an answer, that just wasn't John's style, but he had to try.

Hitting speed dial he waited impatiently for a tone, but instead the phone beeped the familiar "no signal" sound and asked him to try again. "Friggin' great. The curse of the hillbillies strikes again!"

Stomping outside in the hopes of better service, he sighed when he received the same *helpful* operator message. "I swear that chick gets a kick outta telling people that crap..."

"You going to throw the cell at the cabin wall anytime soon?" Sam asked, stuffing his hands in his coat pockets. "I mean, c'mon, this is Dad, he wouldn't pick up even if he thought the world was coming to an end."

Dean huffed, shooting his brother a look that said he should be more careful with his words. "One of these days it just might be," he snarked. "But until then, I'd like to keep what's left of this family breathing."

He opened the Impala door and angrily lobbed the cell onto the front bench seat. It would be easy to just write Morrow's death off because they didn't like him. But what about the other hunters that had been taken out of the game?

No, they had to take this more seriously, or it just might be their undoing; because, Dean realized, there was a part of the equation Sam simply hadn't factored in.

What if this wasn't Lucifer at all?

What if this was Mia?

Dean turned to face the skyline, watching as a low vaporous cloud drifted across the distant mountaintops. For ordinary people, it would be a beautiful, *perfect* day, but he could never look upon the world that way anymore.

There was always something more, something evil, lurking, waiting in the shadows to be part of Armageddon.

Mia tore that poor schmuck of a cop in Fort Worth into little pieces...

Finally, he spun back around, noting that Sam hadn't said a word to him while he'd been thinking. "Sammy, what if this wasn't about Lucifer or his meat suit militia?" He paused, hesitating before mentioning Mia.

It was as if the girl's name was a malevolent portent that should never be spoken aloud – and yet now he had to, and it burned in the pit of his stomach to have to suggest it.

"Dude, what I'm trying to say is...maybe Mia's back and pissy. Or maybe she's just ganking hunters in for the fun of it..."

Sam seemed to twitch nervously at the girl's name. She had tricked him and Dean, right from their first meeting, and it had almost cost them dearly – his expression now said everything to Dean that words could not.

Feeling the same terrifying fears for their father's safety, Dean ducked back into the Impala and tried his cell one last time. He paced as he waited for the incessant "no signal" message again, but it didn't come. This time, the line crackled, rogue static hissing until John's voicemail kicked in.

"Dad, this is Dean...your old army buddy John Reese is looking for you. Give him a call."

Dean clicked the "end" button and pinched the bridge of his nose as a dull throb began to take hold behind his eyes. Still, a headache was probably the least of his worries if John didn't find the message sooner rather than later.

To the uninformed, it sounded normal enough, but in truth, the message was a prearranged warning that something bad might be going down.

John Reese was a character played by Steve McQueen in one of Dean and John's favorite war movies, *Hell Is for Heroes*.

And only John would know that.

Please pick up the damn message, Dad...

"He'll hear it," Sam tried to sound optimistic. "But in the meantime, maybe the mountain should come to Mohammed."

"Huh?"

Sam popped the Impala's trunk and pulled out his backpack. Pulling the laptop out one-handed, he rested it on the Chevy's roof and booted it up.

"Hey, will you watch the paintwork?" Dean winced as the computer slid along the raven black bodywork he'd recently waxed. "Dad will kick my ass if there's a scratch on her..."

"We have to find him first," Sam retorted, tapping frantically at the keyboard until he'd Googled The Comstock Inn. Biting his bottom lip, he whirled the laptop to face Dean. "Look familiar?"

The image on the directory site was small and pixelated, but was easily recognizable as the one in the photograph of their father.

"Stockton, California," the elder hunter read out the address with a glower. "Well, what are you waiting for slow poke, *shag ass!*" He grabbed the driver's door handle and then paused, giving the laptop the "Winchester evil eye."

"And will you get that off my roof? It's not the kinda thing I like on top, dude..." He winked, his bawdy smile threatening to outdo a Cheshire cat's.

Outside Pueblo, Colorado

The recently constructed house had belonged to an ordinary working family. Dad, Mom and two little girls whose photos adorned a pine dresser on the far side of the room he was now sitting in. Looking at them, John supposed the kids were twins – or had been.

What remained of their bodies was now scattered around the kitchen in small, bloody heaps. Here and there if you really looked you *might* be able to distinguish a limb or piece of unflayed flesh still adhering to bone, but mostly, mostly these good people who had once lived, breathed, laughed and loved resembled raw burger meat.

John squirmed, tugging at the bonds that secured him to a chair until his wrists had begun to bleed. He didn't feel the pain, only an intensifying anger that spurred him on in his attempt to break free.

This family shouldn't have been harmed, they shouldn't have been forced to see Mia in her true colors, and the parents damn well *shouldn't* have been made to watch as their kids had been slaughtered.

And yet they had – and all because Mia had wanted a place to stay for the night where no questions would be asked. Hotels and motels might have been tricky, but breaking into a house with no alarm system had been all too easy for her.

As had the killings.

John felt his blood pressure begin to rise and his face flushed with color, his temper taking control of his emotions.

Mia had once been half-human, at least physically speaking, but he was convinced, despite her DNA, there was not one iota of human soul left within the creature he'd mistakenly allowed to live at birth.

He had made mistakes, but never one as big as letting this girl live.

"Still enjoying the view, John?" Mia sauntered into the lounge and licked a sliver of blood from her finger. She'd placed John at an angle near the doorway so he'd had no choice but to be an unwilling audience as she'd slain the Eckharts and their children.

Now, she was tasting their blood and savoring it as she rejoined him.

John snapped his head sideways, not wanting to look at her, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of seeing the disgust and pain running through him.

In his head, he kept seeing the little girls cruelly tortured with a kitchen knife over and over, until eventually their images blurred and morphed into Dean and Sam when they'd been their age.

Was Mia making him see this? Was she capable of such sophisticated mind games as well as physical torment?

Mia laughed, tossing her head back as she dropped down onto an overstuffed armchair. "Why John, what am I being blamed for now in that paranoid little mind of yours?"

She suddenly leaned forward, grabbing a handful of the short-cropped hair at the back of his head. Tugging his skull backwards, she watched as his throat bobbed convulsively. "You know, I've been getting a little rusty of late, and there are lots of none-fatal things I can do to you to make our trip a little more... *entertaining*..."

"What, you've never heard of the Sports Channel?"

Amusement filled her eyes, but she didn't retaliate with any kind of physical punishment. Instead, Mia let go of John's hair and walked across the room.

A small, fully-stocked drinks cabinet adorned the opposite wall to the dresser, and she stepped over to it, pulling out two square-cut whiskey tumblers.

Selecting a bottle of Glenmorangie from the front row of spirits, she poured out two triple shots and then walked back to stand in front of John. Taking a sip of the whisky, she ran her tongue along her top lip suggestively.

"Tastes *good*, John, but does it taste as good as *you*?" She tipped her body forward until she was level with the hunter's eyes. "Maybe I should find out..." Her smile broadened and she put the second glass of whisky to his mouth, forcing him drink until he was half-choking. "Then again," she snorted. "I'm not so sure I'd like a man who can't take his liquor."

Mia stepped back, chugging down the remainder of her own drink in just one gulp as if it was water. She looked at her glass as if considering another shot, but tossed it down onto her chair instead.

John's deep brown eyes looked at her pitifully. There was no hope for her, only death some day at the hands of a hunter – maybe even him. Life tended to be poetic that way.

He didn't speak, but simply stared at her until she shifted uncomfortably.

There was no point in trying to reason with her, and any attempt at conversation simply fed her ego. John wasn't falling for that trap.

Mia picked up a poker from beside the open fireplace and began to examine the end as if it held some hidden meaning or use. She talked as she tested the sharpness of the tip with her forefinger. "I suppose you're wondering why I haven't killed you outright, Winchester? Does your hunter's sixth sense tell you where we're going? You'll love it there this time of year, trust me..."

"Malibu?" John grumbled sarcastically. "No wait, maybe the scotch was a clue... *Brigadoon?*"

Mia clicked her tongue scoldingly and lunging forwards with the poker until its barbed end was digging into John's throat just above his Adam's apple.

"You're going *home*." She twisted the metal rod until it started to gouge into his flesh and he gagged from the pressure. "Don't think I don't know the significance of the place. And at this time of year, it's all I need to send you on a little package tour to meet my *real* mom. I'm sure she's been *itching* to meet you after you exorcized *most* of her back in Fort Worth."

John could hear the irritation in the girl's voice reaching a crescendo point until her normally imperceptible Texan twang was almost a full-on drawl.

She was pissed at him, and worse still, she might have some kind of plausible plan. "Lawrence," he acknowledged, his bass tone deepening further as the bittersweet truth crept into his mind.

"Ah...so you do know the real significance of the place." Mia let up the pressure on the poker slightly, watching as blood seeped from the small wound she'd inflicted. The red ebbing liquid seemed to excite her more, like a vampire waiting to feed.

John refused to be baited. Maybe Mia knew everything, maybe only pieces, and he'd be damned if he was going to give her more intel to work with.

"My my...you're a boring one, John. I enjoyed Dean's comebacks much more than your pathetic macho silences. He liked to be 'poked' a little more than you do too," she snickered. "But then, I suppose there are two differed kinds of poking..."

"Your kind are pathetic," John's self-restraint snapped, just for a second, and he strained his muscles, tearing at his bonds even though he knew it was useless.

Mia rubbed her hand over the cut to his neck, letting her fingers come away tacky. She examined the blood, tasting it in front of him. "Pathetic? You're forgetting I'm one of a kind."

Without warning, she lunged forwards with the poker, ramming it down into his thigh until he was forced to either scream or bite his own tongue from the pain.

Mia nodded, pleased with her work. But she wasn't finished yet.

“Does that make you feel alive, John? It better, because when I’ve done with you, you’ll know what it feels like at the other end of the spectrum...just like Dean did when I... *entertained* him for a while...”

John could feel his teeth grinding on one another as he screwed his features together. *I will not give her the satisfaction. Will not...*

But Mia was already wallowing in the expression on the hunter’s face, not because of the physical pain he was in, but because of the look that had overcome him at the mention of Dean and torture.

“You bitch,” he finally blurted, spittle flying from his mouth as he attempted to lunge at her, chair or no chair.

Mia dodged the clumsy move. “Ooh, kinda hard to attack anyone when you have a few inches of steel embedded in you, huh?” She grabbed the end of the poker back, twisting it with her unholy strength until all the fight drained from the hunter and he yelped uncontrollably in pain.

“Don’t you know it’s rude to try and leave a party so soon after arriving? Especially when I have so much more fun planned.” She stepped back, watching as John glowered at her, his chest heaving from all the anger, pain and exertion.

Inside his jacket pocket, John’s cell began to suddenly burble.

Mia’s eyes narrowed. “Rude to leave your cell on at a party too, John Boy...so gonna have to take it away from you now...” She reached over, grabbing his chin and pinning his head back.

With her free hand, she searched out the phone, checking the caller I.D. as she pulled it free.

“Well if it isn’t the Winchester brats looking for their daddy. Should we say hi?” She moved to answer the call, her finger hovering over the button for intense seconds before she switched off the cell and tossed it on the chair along with the whisky glass.

“You know, chatting with Dean is *a/ways* fun, but not as fun as cutting up his old man.” She pulled out a straight razor and sliced into her own finger to show her prisoner how sharp it was.

John watched as the blood quickly coagulated around the incision. She was going to be hard to kill, even for the Winchesters.

“Now then,” Mia interrupted his thoughts. “Where shall we begin...?”

Stockton, California The Comstock Inn

Sam looked around their father’s motel room and found it freakily comforting. Since Sam and Dean had been kids, John had been turning normal motel rooms into hunters’ paradises in less than an hour – or an average person’s junkyard, depending on the perspective.

This place was no exception.

The bed hadn’t been slept in, but the small desk and every other section of free space had been put to good use. The magnolia walls were covered in photographs, newspaper clippings and even pages from ancient transcripts.

The desk had a brand new journal, already half-full of shorthand notes and scribbles only a Winchester would understand.

Sam frowned as he turned the book towards him. *Well, maybe a Winchester could understand...*

"It looks like dad has been following Ferinacci and his New Jersey goons." Dean tapped an array of black and white prints that had been tacked to the wall to the left of the window. "I'm thinking the 'Big L' has been calling in favors with some major league demon ass."

Sam bobbed his head, never taking his eyes from the scrawl in the journal. "Dad thinks Lucifer wants us, Dean," he finally acknowledged, the low key edge to his voice giving away his insecurity.

Dean shrugged as if that was a given. "Hell, dude, everybody wants my ass. C'mon, it's a classy piece of white meat..."

"I'm *serious*." The low growl seemed more Doberman than the usual puppy dog.

Dean looked up, surprised at the attitude shift. "You find something important?" He took three long strides to join his brother, instantly glaring at the scruffy diary and its crumpled pages.

Ferinacci meeting with several upper level demons in Freemont. He knows what I know...

Dean huffed. "Well, that's typical Dad, cryptic as hell, but I don't see anything to get all girlie over. Could be the price of a six pack of Bud for all we know."

Sam huffed back and turned the page. "Yeah? Well what about the next part?"

The two kids in New Mexico are growing stronger and stronger. If Ferinacci discovers their abilities....

Met with contact today about the amulet. Not sure I can trust him...but maybe I know now what Ferinacci meant that day...

"*Dean*, Dad hasn't been researching Lucifer as much as he's been researching *us*." Sam pulled away from the journal and stood peering from the window out onto the rain-pelted street below. The downpour seemed almost unnatural – but then, maybe it was. "Psychic kids growing stronger and stronger, contacts who know about the amulet...man, talk about doing the whole withholding crap again..."

He took a breath, angry that his father, their father had been investigating them like they were the next hunt. Yes, his powers were scary, and yes, Dean's whole Guardian deal wasn't exactly "normal" even by hunters' standards, but John going behind their backs like this?

Is he actually scared of what his own sons have become?

"Dude, don't you think for one minute that Dad would do this if he didn't have a reason." Dean's raised voice suggested he was angry, but Sam had expected nothing less. "If he's checking on us, then it's to protect us, not because...because..."

"Because we're becoming a *family* of freaks?" Sam finished for him.

There was a beat and Sam waited for more anger, more of his brother's favorite defense mechanism, but instead, Dean suddenly grinned. "Damn handsome freaks too," he chuckled. "And don't you ever forget it!"

Sam exhaled, letting all the fight, all the doubts about John fade to a bearable level. Maybe Dean was right. Maybe John really had been spending hours on researching special kids and Guardians so he could better equip his sons for the inevitable fight between man and Hell.

Somehow, though, it still hurt to think about it.

Dean slapped his brother on the back and took a long breath. "I know, man," he admitted. "I'm still pissed he didn't tell us what he was up to here, but we gotta deal with the chips we got or lose the game already."

"So," Sam's eyes narrowed and he focused on his father's almost illegible writing again. "We know Ferinacci is upping his game, and that Dad looking at other special kids and Guardian stuff could mean we're part of that game."

"*Could?*" Dean scoffed, noting a bag of Doritos on the table and checking it out for leftovers. "C'mon, we've been pains in his ass for months. Dude, we're definitely invited to the party..."

Sam looked up as Dean lifted the foil package, letting a myriad of crumbs fill his mouth. He smiled wanly as his brother munched. "Okay, so what does 'I know what Ferinacci meant that day' mean?"

Dean shrugged, unable to answer due to the contents of his mouth – and more importantly, because he probably had no clue.

Sam wasn't surprised. They'd come here looking for answers and a way to find their father, but all they'd discovered as usual were more questions.

Frightening questions.

The two kids in New Mexico are growing stronger and stronger.

Would all the special kids grow stronger and stronger exponentially if left unchecked?

Would *he*?

Maybe Dad isn't scared of me, but more scared of what I could become if Lucifer could control me and the others?

I know now what Ferinacci meant that day...

Sam thought about the last line his father had written. Perhaps he did know something about it after all. There was something niggling in the back of his head, but this time it wasn't just about his own gifts, it was about the brothers together.

He'd only been half conscious at the time, a bleeding wreck on the dusty Wyoming ground.

But Ferinacci *had* said something to their father.

Something strange that Sam hadn't been able to comprehend because of his injured mind and body.

He tried to recall the words anyway, pushing at his memories, letting old wounds reopen to try and retrieve Lucifer's taunt.

"Sammy, I think I found something."

While Sam had been reminiscing, Dean had screwed up the empty Doritos bag, tossed it in an overflowing waste bin, and begun to search anew.

Now, he was holding some kind of receipt in his right hand, and he was grinning.

"Don't tell me, it's the free lifelong gold package you lost to Busty Asian Beauties?"

"Nope, it's a clue to where we might find Dad." Dean twisted the receipt between his thumb and forefinger until Sam could see the print.

"A storage shed?" Sam winced. "Dude, that could have been in here months. The place doesn't strike me as having the best cleaning regime, you know?"

Dean's grin didn't falter, but he shook his head as if he were a teacher scolding an inattentive pupil. "The name on this thing is Bill Kilgore....c'mon, Sammy, *Apocalypse Now*?"

Sam's blank expression didn't change, but the Doberman had definitely reverted back into a puppy dog. He shrugged apologetically.

"Sheesh," Dean chided. "Where were you when all the classic movies were made? A different *dimension*? Wait...no, don't tell me, you were probably in some frickin' library..."

Sam opened his mouth but realized he really didn't know how he'd missed so many movies that had meant so much to his father and elder brother. Had they really spent that much time apart before "The Woman in White" had brought them back together?

"What if we go check out this place and Ferinacci already has Dad? We could be wasting time." Sam looked around the room at their father's possessions. Was there really a right choice to make in this situation?

Lucifer could already have taken, or worse, killed their father.

Hell, Mia could have been here.

Or...or John could simply have gone to the storage unit.

"Hey, it's the only lead we got, Sasquatch. I figure doing something is better than sitting on our asses hoping Dad comes back on his own." Dean leaned forward, closing the journal and stuffing it into his jacket.

Sam nodded, but was distracted from further conversation when the door to the room abruptly burst open, the top hinges tearing from their wooden homes in a shower of splinters.

In the time it took to blink, he saw Dean reach for his .45, only to have it knocked from his hands by Rennie and two other would-be hunters he didn't recognize.

If anyone could have had bad timing, it was Rennie.

"Well look what the cat dragged in..." Dean snarked as the ginger-haired little sidekick on Rennie's left began to frisk him while the other goon kept a twelve gauge aimed at both Winchesters. "Tell me, is it just my body you're after, or are you in need of a little conversation

with something above a primate?" He looked to Rennie with a wink. "C'mon, must be pretty demoralizing hanging around with monkeys after a while..."

Rennie took a step forward and slapped him hard across the right cheek, but he snapped his head back and grinned right on back at her.

"Oh sweetheart, I never pegged you as the type who liked to play those kinda games..."

She scoffed at the very idea, as if touching him again in any way, shape or form would make her flesh crawl. "I don't sleep with anything less than one hundred percent human, Winchester. I guess that puts you pair of murdering freaks out of the picture..."

"We haven't murdered anyone!" Sam took a step forward and felt the barrel of goon number two's Remington poke him in his chest for the trouble.

"Oh?" Rennie's left brow arched. "Then what do you call what you did to Sid and the others? Are you so 'in' with the other side you don't even think killing a human counts anymore?"

She pulled a Beretta from beneath her long black leather jacket and pressed it into the center of Sam's forehead.

"We didn't kill *anyone*," he pushed, ignoring the sensation of cold steel digging into his flesh. "We heard about the killings, but by the time we got to Morrow's cabin there wasn't even a body. Look, we think maybe our dad might be next..."

Rennie let the gun drop to her side, but her eyes never left Sam's. "Oh, trust me, he *will* be next, just as soon as we finish up with you boys..." She glanced to the man who'd frisked Dean. "Chuck, bring the van around to the back. We don't want anyone seeing us load up our 'cargo.'"

"We're of no use to you dead." Sam tried to reason. "We can help you find who really did this before it's too late for everyone..." He felt a brief kick to his shins from Dean, followed by a look that definitely conveyed the message "will you stop pleading like a candy-assed wuss?"

Rennie saw the exchange and obviously found it amusing. Her lips curved into a smile and her gait took on an even cockier swagger.

Sauntering over to Dean, she pulled out a set of cuffs and roughly yanked his hands behind his back to snap them on.

Leaning in until her mouth was next to his ear, she whispered. "We've heard where you and your demon friends come from it's a little...hot, so we've arranged a nice big funeral pyre just outside of town to send you right on back home..."

* * * *

From the amount of driving time, Dean guessed they hadn't gone too far out of Stockton when the rusting van came to a halt, brakes squeaking from lack of attention.

The old GMC had a sliding side door, and Chuck hastily yanked it open to reveal a small clearing with a backdrop of trees. He couldn't be sure, but Dean remembered seeing a place known as the "Miwok Trail" on his maps of the area. Maybe this was the spot.

"Jeez, just the place for a picnic." He smiled breezily at Rennie as she shoved him out of the van still cuffed. "I hope you brought pie. I *love* pie. Now Sammy, he's more of a fresh chicken salad kinda guy but..."

Chuck rammed the butt of his shotgun into the hunter's back, sending him sprawling out onto the grass, hands still behind his back.

When Dean looked up, he realized he was peering at a large bonfire that had undoubtedly been made with two central attractions in mind – namely him and Sam.

He sniffed, rolling onto his back to look up at his captors. “Do we get fireworks too? I *love* me some fireworks...just like the 4th of July!”

“You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that,” Rennie admitted. “But if you think all that bravado is going to win you any hearts or sympathy, forget it. We’ve spent months tracking you, and now you’re going to pay for the hunters you’ve killed.” She nodded and Chuck bent down, dragging Dean to his feet as Sam watched helplessly.

As goon number two kept guard, Chuck hauled Dean over to the pyre and fastened his cuffs to one of two vertical posts at its center.

“You know, I really don’t taste good barbecued...”

Rennie took Sam’s arm, impatient for the burning. Not waiting for Chuck to finish, she tugged the younger Winchester over to his brother at gunpoint. “At least you have the sense to stay quiet,” she observed as she secured him to the second post.

Sam shot her a bemused glance. “Are you kidding? I just can’t get a word in...”

“Well then, here, let me help you.” Rennie grabbed a gas-soaked rag that she had meant to use to light the pyre and stuffed it into Dean’s mouth until he was gagging. “Anything you’d like to say now, Sammy, before I use your brother as the match?”

Sam blinked. “Yeah, two things, actually,” he said, choosing his words and tone carefully. “One, don’t ever call me Sammy.” His eyes darted behind the rogue hunters and then locked with Rennie’s. “And two, I think you just got caught with your pantyhose down...”

Dean retched some more until he finally managed to spit the crumpled cloth out of his mouth. “And then some, *bitch!*” he agreed, spotting the same thing Sam had.

Rennie flinched, resisting the urge to look behind her, but Chuck and his friend were less restrained, not having years of hunter training like their boss.

Chuck caved first, whirling around to see four men in Armani suits peering at him like he was something on their shoes. It wasn’t the expensive attire or belittling gazes that made him start to shake, however.

It was the pure black miasma that covered their eyeballs.

“Uh, Rennie, you might want to be thinking of beating a hasty retreat back to the van...”

Rennie spun, her high-heeled boots spiraling into the earth like corkscrews with the speed of her move. “Leave, you idiot? Before we send these bastards back to their ungodly maker?”

Chuck blinked uncontrollably, as if looking at the demons made his eyes water. “I don’t think we need to send them anywhere. Their pals have come to collect them!” He faltered and then made a run for the cab of the van.

Two strides later, the lead demon had the ginger-haired hunter by the throat, pinned to the nearest tree. He shook more, this time involuntary muscle spasms causing the twitching as his body was leeching of life.

He gurgled, spittle seeping from the corners of his mouth as he became brain dead from lack of oxygen.

Finally, Rennie realized what was going down and drew her weapon, firing rapidly at random, spent casing after spent casing hitting the ground with tiny dull thuds.

To her left, her second companion was attempting a similar defense with his Remington, but the tiny lead pellets seemed to do nothing but enrage his opponent further.

On the pyre, both Winchesters began to frantically squirm, realizing that if Rennie didn't kill them, the demons would.

"Man, now would be really good time to do the whole thumb thing with the cuffs, Sammy..." Dean tugged at the metal bonds on his wrists while watching the fight unfold around him. "I so don't want to end up extra crispy tonight, if you know what I mean."

"The thumb thing with the cuffs I *couldn't* do back in Jackson," Sam groaned. "I'm guessing this means you *don't* have a paperclip," He sighed, dodging to his right just in time as a bullet from Rennie's .45 whizzed by.

"Dude." Dean's face screwed up in annoyance. "Do I friggin' look like a poster boy for Staples or something?"

"Try more like Freddy Krueger if we don't get off this thing." Sam flinched as Rennie seemed to read his mind.

Apparently losing the fight with Ferinacci's best, she'd turned her attention to the Zippo in her left pocket. If she had to die, then it appeared she intended having the Winchesters burn with her.

Dean locked onto Rennie's waspish grin and from there to the flickering Zippo in her hand. He hated demons, but right now, he hated this woman more.

Using that hatred to push away the pain, he jarred at his own thumb, utilizing the metal ridge of the handcuffs to pop it out of place. If Sammy couldn't do it, then that left big brother to fill the gap. And come Hell or high water, he was going to.

His thumb felt like it had snapped, tendrils of pure agony snaking through his hand and wrist as he yanked it free from the manacles, but he didn't really feel it. The only sensation he had left was the overwhelming disgust he felt for the woman who had once been a fellow hunter.

Dean pulled his arms free from the pyre, but didn't waste time freeing Sam. He couldn't, not while Rennie still held the treacherous flame in her grasp, not while demons and hunters alike died around them, screaming as their souls were torn from their bodies.

"You're the one who's gonna burn, bitch." Dean hopped away from the soaked wood to stand in front of the sneering hunter. His voice was low, and his eyes cut into her like he had Superman's "laser vision."

"Big words from such a little man," Rennie snapped back, taking a second to glance over her shoulder as another one of her friend's cries for help was cut short as his throat was torn out.

“Oh sweetheart, I’m big in all the right places trust me. Not that you’re ever gonna find out...” Dean lunged forwards, keeping his eyes locked on the Zippo.

One false move now and Sam would go out in a blaze of glory better than even Jon Bon Jovi could conjure up.

Rennie yelped in anger as the hunter slammed into her and the pair rolled backwards.

Dean made a grab for the lighter in her hand, his fingers not quite able to reach the metal. The orange flame sputtered as the movement almost blew it out, but still it wouldn’t quite die.

Rennie’s desperate gaze watched in morbid fascination as the lighter jarred from her hand as Dean rolled over, putting all his weight into pinning her down.

The Zippo seemed to bounce, the loose earth beneath it actually acting as an extinguisher. That added with the draft from its fall were finally too much, and the silver lighter flickered once, and then died.

“Still trying to show me how size matters, Winchester?” Rennie pushed against Dean’s grip, but he still sat atop her, holding her arms down so she couldn’t throw any punches.

He was no fool – this girl could hold her own in any bar room brawl – and then some.

“Maybe we should call it a draw for today before your little demon-loving brother gets taken on a mystery tour by his brethren?” She looked past Dean to the pyre and he felt compelled to look, even though he knew she was probably just trying to distract him.

For once, she wasn’t.

One of Lucifer’s finest had reached Sam and was looking at him as if he was his next meal.

The thing actually licked its lips, saliva ebbing from the corners of its mouth like it was more vampire than demon.

Dean had the distracted thought that maybe Ferinacci had been doing a little cross-breeding, but he let the wild idea slide. “See you around, bitch!” He snarled, lip curling better than even James Dean could manage in *Giant*.

And with that he loosened the pressure of his hands, allowing Rennie to escape as he jumped up from his squatted position.

Rennie scrambled sideways, scooting to her feet and making a beeline for the darkness. Perhaps she was foolish enough to think she could escape there. Or maybe, she had a backup plan. With her, anything was possible.

At this point, Dean didn’t care.

“Dude, you better stop looking at my bro as if he’s supper, ‘cause I’m telling you, he ain’t the tasty one among us Winchesters...”

The Armani-suited demon whirled, black orbs reflecting in the moonlight. It seemed to weigh up its opponent. Possibly realizing that Sam was going nowhere, it left him, treading carefully forward through the petrol-soaked soil until it was facing off against the elder brother.

“Ferinacci sends his regards,” the demon snorted through a thick nasal voice Dean realized was caused by a broken nose.

“Love the Miss Piggy look, dude. Nice piece of improvised snout surgery you got there...”

The thing hissed, more saliva dribbling from its mouth until it did actually resemble something more porcine than human. “Maybe I’ll tear your friggin’ nose off, pretty boy...along with various *other* appendages...”

Dean waved the thing forward with both hands, his expression turning from smile into full-on smirk. “Bring it on, pork face.”

The demon hunched its legs and then launched like an animal, flying through the air to impact hard with the hunter.

The pair rolled, the demon instantly getting the upper hand as it smashed a fist into Dean’s face, drawing blood from his nose.

He spat the blood straight back in the thing’s eyes, momentarily blinding it with the scarlet liquid. It blinked, trying to clear its vision, while attempting another blow.

The strike missed as Dean dodged to the left, quickly grabbing the Zippo from where Rennie had dropped it. He flicked once, twice until the lighter flared up.

It was a calculated risk. Could he afford to try torching the demon’s soaked trouser bottoms? Or would that put Sammy in too much danger?

With little other choice, he doubled his body over to let the ebbing flame touch the demon’s flammable attire, for once thanking Rennie mentally for having the forethought to actually spill gasoline.

The thing’s legs immediately burst into several orange-yellow hues and it balked, trying to swat out the annoying fire.

While the rapidly growing flames wouldn’t kill the demon, it was too much of a distraction for it to carry on the kill while it burned.

Dean pushed away from the living torch, thinking of the horror movie *The Burning* he’d watched as a kid.

“Dean, hey *Dean!!!!*”

Dean risked taking his eyes off the dancing inferno to realize that sparks from the demon’s clothing were flaring out into the night sky dangerously close to where Sam still sat on top of the soaked pyre.

Ignoring the angry demon’s screams of frustration, he charged past the flailing thing and jumped up next to his brother.

“About time, dude. I was thinking I might have to huff and puff and blow the stupid fire out if you took much longer.”

“Is that your way of saying ‘What took you so long?’” Dean asked, struggling with the cuff locks because of his dislocated thumb.

“Bite me...”

"No thanks." He glanced over his shoulder to the still sizzling mass that was now treacherously close to lighting them up. "But that freak sure as hell looked like he wanted to chow down on your lanky ass."

Sam grimaced and finally pulled free, dropping down from the woodpile just as the floundering demon smashed into it, causing a new conflagration of volcanic proportions .

"So not my kind of barbecue." Dean commented, slapping Sam on the back as they ran in the same direction Rennie had taken, hoping it lead to a road. "Oh and by the way, dude, next time, you frag your own thumb, its way more painful than it looks in the movies..."

Sam just smirked back and carried on jogging.

* * * *

Dean pulled the Impala to a stop outside the storage sheds and winced. No matter how hard he tried, he seemed to catch his throbbing thumb, annoying it anew. It didn't matter that Sammy had yanked it back into place, it still hurt like a bitch, but he'd be damned if he wanted Sasquatch to know about it.

"Dean..." Sam bobbed his head towards the side of one of the storage lockers. It was pretty dark, but as Dean's eyes adjusted he could make out a pickup truck.

A black, *kick-ass* pickup truck.

"Dad's been here," he mouthed, carefully opening the Chevy's big door in an attempt to lessen its metallic whimpering.

Sam followed, instinctively reaching into the back of the car for a sawed-off and flashlight. He nodded to Dean when he was ready, and the elder Winchester pulled out his favorite .45 from his waistband and nodded back.

Anyone or anything could be waiting in the locker; anything other than John, probably.

As they passed it, Dean caressed the truck's hood with his free hand, assessing how long it had been parked. "Cold," he whispered, eyes dancing to the entrance of the shed.

Sam moved to the side of the door, gun cocked and ready, but he didn't attempt to answer. Waiting for Dean's lead, his chest began to heave as adrenalin and nervous anticipation took control.

Dean stepped to the other side, careful not to let his shadow play across the doorway. It seemed to be slightly ajar.

Just a tiny crack, but enough to signal something wasn't quite right.

There were no sounds from within, but a rich pungent odor permeated the air like a rotting carcass left out in the desert too long.

Dean pinched the bridge of his nose and gulped, hoping that the foul smell wasn't the precursor to a more morbid find. *It's not Dad in there. It's just not.*

Composing himself, he swung into the open and kicked at the entrance to the locker, diving in with his weapon at the ready, finger itching on the trigger in case Rennie had somehow beaten them here.

Rennie or something worse.

As Dean swung his .45 around in an arch, Sam joined him, playing his flashlight over the interior scene along with the barrel of his shotgun.

The beam from the light stopped on a mass of pulp on the floor that seemed to be several million flies' new best friend.

Dean coughed onto the back of his hand, only just able to resist the urge to wretch.

Whatever was being fed upon by the maggots and flies had once been human.

At least, Dean *thought* it had been human. The writhing mass that was left was difficult to actually identify.

"It's not Dad," Sam offered, sounding more confident than he looked.

"You can tell?" Dean shot back, wincing as he took another look at the remains.

Sam stepped forward, playing his light across what had once been a leg. It now lay severed at the thigh, the knee joint bent back oddly as if it had been snapped like a twig.

He kneeled, illuminating the foot end. "You think we'd ever catch Dad wearing those?"

Dean leaned forwards and squinted. Whoever the body parts belonged to had a penchant for garish surfer shorts, and sandals that no Winchester would be seen dead in – let alone on a beach.

Besides that small fact, the leg appeared to be far too skinny to be John's.

"So if it's not Dad, who the hell is it?" Dean asked, straightening back up. "And more to the point, who ground his scrawny ass into hamburger meat like this?"

"Well, I don't think this is Rennie's style," Sam reasoned. "But this kind of handiwork could definitely be demonic..." He let the flashlight wander around the rest of the storage area as he spoke, but there were no clues to what had occurred.

Lots of boxes containing books on magic, witchcraft, demonology, mythical creatures – basically, everything John had accumulated on his favorite subjects.

Their dad often joked it was in case he was ever a contestant on *Jeopardy*, but the truth was much darker.

"Yeah, well why would a demon kill this poor schmuck? And where the hell is Dad? I mean, he hasn't gone far without his truck unless..."

"Unless whatever did this took him...or worse..." Sam completed the sentence, his face paling, even in the dull glow from his light.

"I wasn't gonna say that!" Dean snapped back reprovably. "Dad's okay...he's just...on a gig or something..."

The truth was, Dean didn't think his dad was okay. There was too much evidence to the contrary, but knowing deep down and admitting it, well they were two different things.

"We should look in the truck. Maybe he left something in there we can use. A map, anything." Sam jogged back out of the locker and Dean followed, relieved that he didn't have to smell the minced dude's *eau de mort* any longer.

The truck was exactly where they'd left it. Nothing stirred in the yard, and there was very little traffic out on the main roads that ran adjacent to it. This place was dead.

As dead as the guy in their father's shed.

"It's open." Sam tugged on the truck's door and it creaked open, making an even louder grunt than the Impala. He clicked the flashlight on again and swung it around the interior.

While Sam looked on the seats, on the floor, and behind the sun visor, Dean flipped open the glove box. Several fake I.D.s fell out, along with a Sig Sauer and a spare clip.

Dean knew several other locations in the vehicle where he could find similar weapons. He smiled, thinking of how he'd watched his dad periodically check the guns in between hunts when he was younger.

If they'd been a normal family, the guns would probably have been fishing tackle, or maybe rifles more suited to deer or bears.

"I got nothing." Sam broke Dean from his memories, and the elder hunter had to admit neither had he.

"Ditto, Sasquatch. Whatever went down here, we got no M&M trail to follow." He shut the glove box back up and slammed the door closed. Talking over the hood as he walked, he made a face that said he was both worried and pissed at having no clues. "We can't go back to the motel, we might already have two lots of company back there waiting for us, we got no friggin' idea where to start looking for Dad, and did I mention I'd feel a whole lot better if I kicked somebody's ass right about now?"

Sam cringed. "I'd prefer it if you got in the car and just drove, dude. I can still taste the stench of that dead guy on the back of my throat. Maybe we can figure this out on the road. I can call Bobby, see if he's heard anything...?"

Dean reached the Impala and tucked his Colt away before opening the door. He sighed as he climbed inside. "Sammy, right now if we had a satellite fix on Dad's hairy butt, I wouldn't believe it till I saw it. And somehow I doubt Bobby will have anything half as good..."

* * * *

Dean had been driving for over forty minutes before Sam had finally been able to get Bobby on the phone. In all that time, Dean had said barely two words. Instead, he'd simply glared out into the darkness, knuckles white as he gripped the Chevy's wheel with just a little too much enthusiasm.

Sam knew what his brother was thinking – what they were both thinking. And there would be no placating Dean now until this mess was over and John had been found.

Having a missing father was all part of the fun for the Winchester family. But somehow, they both sensed this time was different.

"So there have been more?" Sam asked Bobby after a long pause.

"Damn straight there have," Bobby grouched back down the line. "Hunters are dropping like flies. Good men me and your daddy's known all our lives. And that's not all...most of the bodies were so covered in sulfur they coulda been human matchstick men..."

"Demons?" Sam asked, his heart sinking. "We met up with Rennie in Stockton, was kinda hoping she had more to do with this than Ferinacci and his Hell brigade."

"Rennie's mixed up in this whole dang mess?"

"She tried kicking our asses, but I had to decline the offer," Dean chipped in, his voice loud enough to be heard even though he wasn't holding the cell.

"So, Bobby," Sam guided the conversation back on track. "If Rennie isn't behind the hunter killings, and demons are...any idea why?" He tried not to think about Dean's misgivings that a certain half-demon might be responsible for all this, waiting instead for Bobby to come up with some kind of alternative suggestion.

The line went quiet for a moment.

"Other than you idjits pissing the Devil himself off a few too many times? Err...nope." Bobby audibly sighed, and Sam once again tried not to think too deeply about Mia. "Look, the way I figure it, Lucifer shouldn't give a damn about hunters, we're small fry to him. So why the sudden crusade to wipe us out? There's somethin' big goin' down here, boys, somethin' real big." He paused again as if choosing his words carefully. "Any sign of John?"

"We trailed Dad to a storage locker. His truck was outside, and we found a mangled body inside, but nothing else. We don't know if he's still out there, or if Rennie or Lucifer..." Or Mia... Sam let the suggestion go unspoken as his voice grew gruff with emotion and he stopped.

"John's out there, I know it," Bobby reassured. "You'd have to show me the cold dead body before I'd believe anything else. Heck, with you Winchesters, I'm not even sure I'd believe that!" Sam heard the elder hunter take a swig of something on the other end – probably his home-made brew – before continuing. "Want me to come on out there and show you boys how to really track someone?"

Sam considered it. If anyone could track, it really was Bobby. The only two hunters he knew who were better were Joe Bearwalker and John. The thing was, Bobby was needed right now. They had to discover why Lucifer was suddenly having fun killing hunters. And if the Winchesters were indisposed, that meant Bobby had to spearhead the investigation.

"No thanks, Bobby, we need you to keep an eye on Lucifer right now. Try and find out why he's killing hunters..." As an afterthought, and to put Bobby's mind off arguing with him, Sam added. "Hey, did you ever find anything else out about that feather?"

Bobby grunted. *"Well, if the lore is to be believed, you might just have gotten yourselves somethin' special there, boys. It's taken me awhile, and a few promises I'm not even sure I can keep but..."*

"But?" Sam pressed, sitting forward on the Impala's bench seat.

"Legend has it that certain angels' feathers have specific properties. Some texts say the things actually glow and weep blood when they come into contact with anything evil..."

Dean looked over from steering the car, his ears still picking up the bulk of the conversation thanks to the high volume of Sam's cell. "Jeez, a crying friggin' feather? Am I supposed to be

impressed? Just how does that make it something special unless you're some Bible stomper?"

"Pity his brain ain't as fast as his mouth, he'd be a genius," Bobby chuckled back to Sam. "Now, if you two knuckleheads would just listen...when that thing bleeds, if the good ol' red stuff touches the evil sucker? Poof, he's ash! That angel feather is the best demon killer this side your daddy, and maybe then some..."

"But this is all just legend and folklore at this point, right?" Sam clarified.

"Right," Bobby admitted. "But I'm still workin' on it. Got a few more favors to pull in, and I'm still waitin' on our good friend Kyle to get back to me. I figured if anyone was in the know about angels, it would be his priestly butt."

"Okay, thanks, Bobby. And...watch your back, okay? I mean, hunters are in season right now. Fair game..."

"Sam Winchester, I just rebuilt this place, I ain't about to go hide from it." He sighed. "But I'll watch myself. Got my favorite piece right here on the desk and a box of shells in every room. Demons or Rennie's crew – they come lookin' for trouble, they'll sure find it here."

"Good to hear." Sam smiled at his old friend's tenacity. "Talk soon, Bobby." He flipped the cell closed and turned to his brother. "You hear all that?"

"Pretty much," Dean acknowledged, taking a right turn onto a road that thankfully at least had lights. "We got hunters and demons running around waging war on um...lots of other hunters. The real hunters. We got no motive, no reasoning unless Lucifer finally got choked by his own Hell smoke and ain't running on all cylinders. We got Mia still running around doing God knows what to God knows who. And..." He drew out the word. "To top it all up, Dad is still missing, no leads, no clues, no freakin' idea what's going on..."

"That about sums it up," Sam said matter-of-factly. "Could it be any worse?"

Dean grinned, despite the dismal situation. If there was one thing he'd learned as a hunter, you had to keep your spirits up somehow, and he had a sure-fire cure every time.

"Hell yeah, it could be worse," Dean growled. "I could be *hungry!*" He let his tongue roll over his lips and his eyes flashed to a road sign that suggested "Tuck in at Ted's" half a mile. "Fancy some chow, little brother?" He arched a brow.

Sam realized he was actually hungry. "Just no ketchup, okay? Not after the storage locker..."

Dean's grin widened as he slid the Impala into the jovially lit diner's lot. "*Dude*, would I..?"

Tuck in at Ted's 18 minutes later...

Sam ducked back down into his seat just as an unhealthily thin waitress named Mindy dropped a plate in front of his brother. He'd gotten a little hot in the Impala and had paid a quick visit to the men's room before ordering, but it looked like Dean had gotten fed up of waiting and had chosen food for them both.

To Sam's utter shock, the elder Winchester appeared to have actually picked a chicken burger over his usual greasy double cheeseburger.

“Dude, are you going soft in your old age? Where’s the half a ton of fat and onions you usually chow down on?”

Dean wiggled his eyebrows, taking a huge bite out of his food. “Hey, you’re not the only one who can eat healthy, college boy! Well...just a little healthy,” he corrected through a mouthful of bun. “Double fries are already on the way...”

To confirm it, he looked over his shoulder, and sure enough the waitress was returning with a mound of fries big enough to feed Godzilla.

As the girl set down the extra food, Dean eyed it, then eyed the waitress more than appreciatively, and Sam half expected his brother to offer her his cell number.

Sam shook his head, watching as the girl sauntered back to the counter, looking twice over her shoulder at Dean with the biggest “bimbo grin” he’d ever seen.

“Man, I think I’ve scored...” Dean’s eyes sparkled and he grabbed a fry, munching on it hungrily.

“You’re not kidding,” Sam agreed sarcastically. “Talk about *Dork* and *Mindy*...”

Dean shrugged, his lewd grin never faltering. “Sammy, with a body like that, she can come back to my place and play ‘nanoo nanoo’ anytime!”

“I always knew you were part alien...” Sam countered, beginning to inspect his own chicken burger. “How else can you explain your bizarre taste in music?” He stopped talking and winced as he lifted the top half of the bun to find ketchup smothered across the burger. “Very funny, dude, very funny...”

Dean winked. “I thought so,” he chuckled. “Got your appetite back yet, Sammy?”

Sam swallowed and realized that he actually hadn’t, and it was nothing to do with his brother’s prank. He’d felt hot out in the car, but now he could actually feel the heat coming off his face if he put a hand close enough. Splashing cold water over his cheeks in the diner’s bathroom obviously had done nothing to cool his soaring temperature.

He fanned himself and puffed as if he could exhale the intense heat brimming from his core. “Hot...” He gasped. “Man, I feel...kinda weird...”

Dean stopped munching and finally took his brother seriously. “You okay, little brother? You look like crap all of a sudden...”

Sam rubbed at his brow, noting with alarm that not only was he burning up, his head was beginning to pound too. Not a regular headache, but more like his brain was attempting to vacate the premises – through any orifice possible.

“Headache,” Sam panted, closing his eyes to try and dispel the pain and muscle-burning sensations searing through his frame.

“We should get you to the car...maybe some fresh air too...” Dean began to push up from his seat, but Sam waved him back down.

Fresh air wasn’t going to help, and besides, he suspected if he tried to move, he may just pass out. His head was swimming, like his mind was enveloped in a thick, unyielding miasma that was smothering all free thought.

"I'll be fine," he lied, hoping Dean didn't see right through him. "Guess I just need something to eat...low blood sugar or something..."

Dean didn't appear convinced, and his mouth opened as if he was going to argue when something clattered to the tiles back in the diner's kitchen. The hunter turned, looking over his shoulder reflexively as if poised for action.

From their bench seat, there wasn't a great view of the tiny diner's kitchen, but as Sam's gaze followed that of his brother, he saw a flash of flames and a small cloud of smoke ebbing towards the ceiling.

Several voices seemed to be yelling in unison until their conversation was unintelligible. Sam guessed someone had gotten a little too eager with the hotplate or frying pan and "Ted" was now paying the price with a small fire.

More shouting ensued, but none of the diner's customers apart from the Winchesters seemed to notice.

Sam saw a small pudgy man wearing a soiled apron appear with an extinguisher, and two seconds later the commotion was over without the need for a full-scale evacuation.

"Jeez, can't we even eat without being chased by some kinda Hellfire?" Dean quipped, settling back to his burger and fries. "I mean, c'mon..." He paused again, examining Sam. "You sure you're okay? You still look like you got your thumb stuck up your ass or somethin'."

Sam forced a smile and a bite of the hideously drowned burger. "Just tired," he lied again, wondering just when he'd become so adept at deception – especially with Dean.

The thought made him drop the food back on the plate and he tossed a napkin over it, unable to force any more down.

Pushing the plate away, he took down a long breath, but he still felt wrong. The headache had subsided some, and so had the fever-like symptoms. But he wasn't even half right, and if he carried on like this, Dean would know it.

Dean's gaze didn't falter as he finished the last of his burger in one mouthful. If he suspected anything at this point, his next sentence didn't reflect it. "Okay, c'mon, *Sleepy*, let's find you a motel and bed for the night before you turn into a cute little dwarf with a white beard, heavy eyelids and an *awesome* blue pointy hat!"

Sam forced a small smile and pushed up carefully from his seat. Whatever was causing the weird feelings, he wasn't going to find out sitting here. And if he couldn't find the cause, then he was at least damn well going to fight it. That was the Winchester way. Chow down on the bit and ignore the pain, the nausea, everything.

But what if it's demonic? What if this is some inner part of me "turning" somehow?

Sam ignored the stupid ideas filtering through his skull. Just because demons and hunters alike were chasing his ass didn't mean he was a bad person.

He watched as Dean pulled out a couple of notes and dropped them down on top of their tab, but he didn't speak until they were finally outside by the car.

He couldn't, because until the cleansing air had hit him, it had felt like his vocal cords had melted with the heat emanating from his body.

Reaching for the Chevy's door handle, he cleared his throat and attempted his first words. "You really think we'll find a motel that takes plastic away out here? 'Cause unless I'm mistaken you just paid with the last of our cash." The sentence sounded like he'd been sucking on sandpaper, but he raised a brow, hoping his brother didn't notice.

Despite his voice sounding harsh and gravelly, he was feeling cooler, and his head no longer felt like it was going to spontaneously implode.

Dean rubbed a hand over the stubble on his face and sighed. "Nope, I don't think we're likely to find any kinda motel, but we did pass an abandoned house about half a mile back that way." He jerked a thumb the way they'd come. "I figure free is always good, and I have a coupla six packs in the trunk that say we'll be asleep in no time and won't even notice the lack of room service. Whattya say, Sasquatch?"

Sam smiled, more from the fact he was feeling *almost* normal again than his brother's choice of accommodation. "I think you'd be a lot happier if you were sharing with Mindy than Sleepy," he sniggered.

Dean climbed behind the wheel, reached for the keys and then paused. His eyes narrowed mischievously. "Dude, don't give me ideas...I can always lock *Sleepy* in the trunk till morning..."

Lawrence, Kansas Disused Barn

John looked around the barn's interior with half-closed eyes, blood and sweat exacerbating the effects of the swelling where he'd been repeatedly beaten.

He blinked, the salt from his own perspiration soaking into the raw welts on his face and making him wince.

The place was old, missing laths on the ceiling revealing the clear sky beyond. Part of the upper level had long since collapsed, allowing the straw that had been stored there to tumble onto the floor below.

John was tied to a support beam nearest to the "fall-in." He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there, but from the numbness in his fingers and hands it had to be at least a few hours, if not longer.

He squirmed, feeling a jolt of pain in his left side to compliment the throbbing in his leg. Just a little more of Mia's handiwork to add to his screwed up body. He couldn't be sure, but the elder Winchester suspected he had a couple of cracked ribs.

"Enjoying your new room?" The barn door creaked open and Mia stood dead center of the opening, munching on an apple like a vampire would bite the inviting flesh of a human neck.

John grunted, realizing that dried blood had caked his lips and had coagulated in various parts of his beard. He ignored the odd sensation, eyeing Mia warily as she strolled further into the shelter.

"Wonder where I've been, John Boy?" Mia leaned over, assessing the damage she'd caused to his features. Apparently satisfied, she continued. "I've been out practicing! *Good* can always be *better*, right, hunter?"

"Depends on *what* you're practicing," John growled back, his head lolling forward as he tried to keep focus on his captor.

"Death, of course." Mia smirked matter-of-factly. "I mean, it's the one thing I truly do excel at, wouldn't you say?" She put a hand on her hip and then tapped her forefinger over her lips as if in thought. "Demonic gifts are just so 'in' these days. Everyone's after them. People practically jumping into Hell for a piece of the pie...and here's little old me just *full* of them without even trying, thanks to you."

Mia flicked her hair distractedly and then stretched out her hand, pointing her fingertips towards him. She closed her eyes briefly, as if summoning up the right "power." And then, he felt it. Just a minor twinge at first, a pang of pain that resembled the onset of indigestion.

But the pain in his chest grew, and John knew it wasn't from anything he'd eaten - because he couldn't remember the last time he'd had food.

Mia's eyes glowed knowingly as John writhed. "I can stop your heart with just one more flick of my fingers," she assured. "Trust me, I've just done a full rehearsal at the local gas station. Who knows, maybe they'll put all the bodies down to the legend around these parts...maybe something from the old church scared those poor suckers to death..."

"How many?" John gasped through clenched teeth, pain still shooting through his torso as if Mia physically had her hand inside him, squeezing at his heart. "How many did you kill just to fine tune your sick little powers?"

Mia shrugged, letting her grip on him lessen. "Oh, eight, maybe nine...if you count the brat that was still in diapers..."

"*Why?*" John heaved down a breath as the tightness in his chest began to subside. "If this is all about revenge against me..."

Mia slumped down onto an old tractor tire and tossed her apple core at the wall, watching it bounce off before she "willed" it right back into her palm like a movie sorceress. "Oh Johnny...you're so full of yourself it's painful. Why would I stop at killing you, when I can work my wonders on all your hunter pals once I've refined them?"

She eyed the apple core and tossed it again, but this time it disintegrated on impact and she lost interest in the game. Refocusing on John, she sighed as if becoming bored. "I've been waiting for months for this day to arrive. It's taken weeks of digging and research...but it will all be worth it tomorrow. All that wading through local legends and lore like some scumbag hunter...like you, even...all worth it in the end..."

"Except, I don't kill innocent people," John countered, testing the ropes that bound him as he talked.

Mia didn't like his reasoning. Stretching forward angrily, she used the back of her hand to swipe him across an already bloody section of his cheek. "You *killed my mother*," she hissed, face reddening. "Don't you want to know what I have cooking to repay you? How I'm going to make you burn in Hell until your skin peels from your bones with the heat, but you can't die, you can't ever have absolution...not from me, not from my brethren..."

"I don't care what you do to me," he whispered, swollen eyes boring into his kidnapper. "Hell ain't such a bad place to be..."

Mia laughed, tossing her head back like a wayward mare. "Such an AC/DC fan...I like that about you, John. In fact, I like that about Dean too...but that's okay, because right after I finish with you, I'll make sure your boys follow you into the Pit..."

"They didn't do anything to you. Haven't they suffered enough at your hands? Haven't all the innocents?" He coughed, wondering if his injured ribs and the chill in the barn were prompting the onset of pneumonia.

"There *are* no innocents," Mia scoffed, pressing her high boot heel harshly into his thigh like a poker. "No one lives, Winchester...not your boys, not any of those dicks that call themselves hunters...*no one*. When I'm done there won't be anyone left on earth like *you*."

John's head flopped backwards against the joist he was tied to. He was tired, so tired of all this, but he couldn't let her have the last word. "Why don't you just go to Hell and join your momma..."

Mia shrugged, obviously not as upset by the jibe as John had hoped. "You first, Winchester...and I'm sure *mother* will be waiting to have a word with you. *Lots* of my brethren will once the gate is open tomorrow."

John blinked again, finally putting some of the pieces of the conversation together to form a picture of Mia's plans. It wasn't pretty, hell, it wasn't even sane – but he was very afraid it was possible.

Mia hadn't just brought him back to Lawrence, she'd brought him back to Stull.

And tomorrow was Halloween.

John tried to hide the fear steadily building in his heart, in every fiber of his body, but he couldn't. His muscles spasmed involuntarily and he began to shake. He told himself it was the lack of heat in the barn, anything but admit the truth.

Local legends told the tale of Stull church, a holy place, with a very unholy passageway that appeared on certain occasions that led to Hell itself.

A church where Lucifer was said to appear twice a year, once at Spring Equinox, and once at Halloween...

The actual building had been torn down back in 2002, but locals insisted that twice a year, an apparition of the crumbling church would materialize and for one night evil would walk their tiny neighborhood, rising up from the catacombs below the mirage.

Most thought the rumors were just stories to bring in tourists, tall tales that had stood the test of time and snowballed until they were part of Kansas history.

But John knew different.

Kansas, Lawrence and Stull were so much more.

This was one of the seven true portals to Hell, and Mia intended to use her knowledge to make sure it opened, and possibly stayed open.

And if she did, and not only the Winchesters, but mankind perished, then it would be *his* fault.

"The old Stull legends?" He managed to sound upbeat, cocky even, although his face betrayed the lie. "They're just a myth. Just a few townsfolk trying to drum up business in a long dead town..."

Mia sniffed gleefully. "Oh really? Then why do I *smell* your fear? Half demon, remember, Johnny? You can't expect me not to *know* the real potential of this place. Every cell in my

body is drawn here. Drawn to the master and *his* night." She closed her eyes, inhaling the air as if it was tainted with traces of sulfur. "And you, your sons, and those like you? You'll be my sacrifices..."

She dropped to her knees, straddling him. Leaning close, she grabbed John by the neck and forced his head back so harshly he felt splinters dig into the flesh on his skull.

Mia took another long breath, taking in his scent, his life force. Then she tilted her own head forward, kissing him like they were lovers. Her lips lingered on his, and he was powerless to pull away until she had been satisfied.

Eventually, Mia yanked her head back, flicking her hair jubilantly. "Why John Boy...you and Dean really are similar." She let her tongue roll out over her lips savoring the moment. "I can taste the fear and defeat in you...just like I could in your cocky little spawn..."

Deserted House Elko, Nevada

Sam was surprised to find that the so called "abandoned" house his brother had spotted was, in fact, simply shut down. Either its occupants had come to an untimely end in some bizarre accident and it was awaiting a will being read, or more likely, the owners were off skiing somewhere and drinking cocktails for several months.

As he cut the wires to the sophisticated alarm system, Sam was betting on the latter. This was not the home of an ordinary family. Probably some rich lawyer or corporate suit used the house maybe once or twice a year and had properties in several other states, if not countries.

"Will you hurry it up there, dude?" Dean grouched, a six pack under his arm. "Beer's getting warm here..."

Sam cut another wire and then turned his attention to the front door lock. He was inside within two more seconds, hoping as he flicked the light switch that the water and power were still connected.

A magnificent fitment modeled on a classical chandelier burst into life, allaying his fears and casting new light on their accommodation for the night.

"Do I pick great spots, or what?" Dean bristled with enthusiasm, diving into the first room to find a TV the size of his local drive-in screen. He tossed the six-pack down and surveyed the rest of the lounge. Eventually he whistled. "Man, I love this family and I don't even know them..."

Sam used a button on the light switch to dim the room. Dean may be excited, but there might be neighbors who knew the house's owners weren't around. It wouldn't be wise to get tossed into the local jail for breaking and entering right now.

"Dude, will you start thinking with your brain?" Sam rubbed at his brow, but the tension there wasn't just caused by his brother's suddenly sloppy behavior.

While the pain and discomfort from the diner had long since faded, he couldn't shake the idea that there was something wrong in his head. And he didn't think it was anything physical like a tumor – it was something far stranger.

Sam turned for the door, abruptly not wanting to face Dean.

What if his gifts were growing, and he was losing control of them? Had he actually *caused* the fire back at the diner?

"Hey, Sammy, don't you want a beer?"

Sam glanced back over his shoulder to see Dean offering up a can, but he shook his head. There was always the option of telling his brother what had happened, what *might still* be happening, but what could he really say without freaking Dean out?

Hey, dude, I think I'm losing it...or worse still...

Sam shrugged off the thought. He was being stupid, letting a set of coincidences cloud his judgment.

"I'll grab one later," he finally answered, not stopping as he headed for the stairs in the hallway. "Gonna go grab a shower and freshen up first."

"Yeah, you smell like a skunk," Dean wisecracked back. "Wasn't gonna say anything, but we might have to start calling you Pepe..."

Sam laughed, but as he climbed the spiral staircase up to the bathroom, he couldn't help but think about the flames he'd seen licking up inside the diner's kitchen.

Funny, how everyone always associated Hell and Lucifer with flames....

* * * *

Dean laid a cloth over the ornate coffee table he was sure had cost more than an average car. He supposed it was kind of arty, if you were into that stuff, but it really wasn't his thing.

Instead of admiring the craftsmanship of its highly polished wooden surface, he began setting out weapons on the cloth ready for stripping and cleaning. Alongside the two shotguns and his .45, he set down a flask of water and a rosary ready to make some homemade holy water.

While Sammy bathed, he could maybe watch some TV and get a little work done.

Picking up one of the shotguns first, he detached the fore-end and then the barrels ready for cleaning, but despite his eyes focusing on the task, his mind was elsewhere.

Sam could hide it all he liked, he could make excuses and play all innocent, but Dean knew his brother was hurting, and whatever had brought on that mental or physical hurt, it had started back at the diner.

Why the hell won't he just open up sometimes?

Yeah, right, just like I do...stupid friggin' question...

Dean began feeding a small brush down the detached barrels as he talked to himself.

There was just too much going on, too much he had to try and ignore right now when in reality he was worried as hell. There was Dad, Mia, the weird feather that was definitely not for foreplay. And then there were rampant demons, Rennie the renegade and...and *dammit* his amulet felt weird...

Dean dropped his handiwork into the chair at the side of him, surprised and unnerved by the fact that the little golden necklace was vibrating against his skin, making his flesh tingle until he wanted to rub it.

Reaching under his shirt, Dean pulled at the cord the amulet was attached to until the bauble popped out into his hand.

It was glowing.

Not just a small shimmering effect, but a radiant burning light that seemed to eat into his retinas until he was forced to blink.

The amulet looked like it was about to melt, and as it touched the calloused flesh on his fingers he realized that it was indeed hot – although the heat appeared not to be searing his skin, even though it should be.

Dean let the amulet drop from his hand back onto the material of his Henley. It continued to pulse and gleam, and he could feel a low thrum ebbing through it even atop the shirt.

Dean looked to the windows and then to the lounge door. Had Sam locked the main door behind them? And dammit, why hadn't they had the good sense to salt all the window frames and entrances?

Dean pushed up from his chair, his chest suddenly heaving with the adrenalin rush blazing through his system.

The amulet never glowed like this, not this strongly – except for once, in the presence of Haris.

He reached the lounge door and opened his mouth to shout a warning up to Sam, but the words never had time to form in his vocal cords.

Even if they had re-locked the front door, it wouldn't have mattered.

The door exploded off its hinges and flew into the hallway in three separate pieces. Shards of wood and glass fell all around like an unholy deluge.

And in the midst of it all, three men strode into the house, eyes blazing in midnight-black triumph.

Dean stepped back into the lounge, quickly stuffing a hand in the back pocket of his jeans as the apparent ringleader zeroed in on him.

The man wasn't tall, but his muscles and stocky build reminded the hunter of a Latino version of Mr T – minus the Mohawk.

"Whoa, can't a guy even have a quiet drink in peace these days?" Dean tugged a small flask from his pocket and quickly unscrewed the cap. He smirked, showing the flagon to the demon now gawking at him.

The thing didn't trust him, keeping a wary distance. Dean shrugged, offering the creature a "suit yourself" look before taking a long swig.

"We want the *remnant*, hunter...or you'll be needing more than whiskey..." The demon's eyes narrowed and suddenly Dean was floating on thin air. For once, he wasn't tossed backwards into a wall, but the position was just as undignified.

"The *remnant*," the demon demanded again, nostrils flaring and eyes twitching as it shoved its grotesque face into the hunter's.

Dean didn't answer, but suddenly spit out a huge mouthful of liquid onto his enemy. The demon's flesh sizzled and cracked open, large sores instantly forming on its features.

It screamed, grasping its face and swiftly letting go its psychic hold on the hunter.

Dean dropped to the floor and was charging across the room for the intact shotgun before the other two demons could react. "I never said it was whiskey," he barked sarcastically. "What's the matter there, bud, can't take a little holy water before supper?"

He grabbed the Remington and quickly stuffed a cartridge into each barrel. But before he could yank it closed, demon number two had grabbed him from behind, spinning him around by the throat.

It ignored its still writhing boss and slowly squeezed its fingers, cutting off Dean's air supply. "We want the remnant..."

Dean coughed. "Jeez, a little monosyllabic in Hell, are we?" He shook his head. *Crap... where did that come from? Definitely been around Sam too long...* "Dude, I don't even know what the freakin' remnant is!"

The demon released the pressure just a little. "The feather," it droned. "We want the feather."

"Hey, sulfur breath, don't you think if I had that thing I'd have found somewhere to stick it right about now? Or is your head so far up your butt you don't realize what it will do to you?" Dean smirked.

"You don't have any more holy water, hunter. And if you don't have the remnant, you're of no use to us..." It didn't shift its gaze, but spoke to its fellow demons. "Find the other Winchester, bring him here, then search the house..."

There was no answer, only the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece.

The demon finally turned, annoyed at its brethren.

* * * *

Sam had been out of the shower five minutes when something exploded downstairs. Considering the mood Dean had been in, he could have taken out the TV with his shotgun if the local channels were showing reruns again, but the more likely scenario was that something big, and very bad, was going down while Sammy was standing almost butt naked in the bathroom.

Sam reached for his jacket hanging on the back of the door and pulled a small bottle of holy water from the pocket. He had his Sig too, but unless the noise was a police SWAT team storming the house, he was guessing bullets weren't going to be of much use.

Taking a look down at his boxers and huge bare feet, he couldn't help but feel slightly underdressed as he padded carefully down the stairs, ears tuned to any new sound as his eyes scanned the hallway.

The door was on the floor, its wooden sections shredded to pulp.

In the lounge, he could hear voices.

Dean was snarking, taunting someone, and Sam was sure he'd heard the words "sulfur breath."

So, that was it, more demons.

Edging up to the lounge door, he noted one of the creatures rocking back and forth on the floor, its hands cupped over its eyes. He guessed rightly that Dean had temporarily blinded it with holy water. That effect would only last so long, though.

One down, two to go...

Sam used the added stealth his shoeless feet gave him, sneaking across the wooden floor to come up behind the nearest creature. The demon appeared to have inhabited the body of a kid. If Sam was right, the poor schmuck didn't even look twenty.

Nevertheless, Sam had to try and take him out, or at least slow him down.

Sam tapped the youth on the shoulder silently.

But as the kid whirled, so did the demon holding Dean by the throat.

Crap!

Sam wanted to react, wanted his hands to move and throw water in the demon's eyes, but he couldn't. The feeling from earlier was suddenly back, only this time he wasn't just hot.

Sam took a step away from the demon, away from his brother, sensing the power building inside him like Vesuvius before the great eruption. Something was happening, and all he could think of was the transformation of Jekyll into Hyde.

Was the presence of evil literally "turning" him all the more quickly? Not turning, not turning...just my gifts...just gifts...not bad...

Sam's body began to shake violently, his hands shuddering so intensely that he dropped the holy water and the demons looked at him as if he'd gone mad.

He couldn't focus, he couldn't think, he couldn't fight – he was powerless.

And yet, at the same time, he was the *most powerful* thing in the room.

Sweat began to ooze from every pore on his body, and Sam couldn't take the ferocity of the event any longer. If his gift was to channel other beings' powers, then right now he was channeling the force of every demon in the room and surrounding area.

Mirroring one special kid or demon had been hard to control, Gudrun and Daisy together even harder, but this was impossible, even though his body, his mind were both demanding it.

"Dean!" Sam wanted to warn his brother, to yell out what might be about to happen, but his throat was once again as coarse as sandpaper, and his voice nothing more than a muffled croak.

* * * *

Dean couldn't take his eyes from Sam – how could he when Sam looked so afraid? So *different*.

Sam had backed himself up to the lounge doorframe and appeared to be wedged there. It looked like he was having some kind of convulsion, and a thin line of blood spilled out beneath his nose, ebbing over his lip to add to the frightening portrait of the unknown.

But his eyes, they were the worst of it, because no matter how hard Dean looked, Sam's eyes looked almost as black as the Hellspawns' now gathering around him.

"*Sammy!*" Dean fought the grip of the thing still holding him, using both his hands to try and pry its stubby fingers from his throat.

The demon didn't yield, but somehow seemed compelled to continue staring at the younger Winchester rather than fight. It was as if Sam's conversion had mesmerized it.

* * * *

Sam didn't notice. Whatever had taken hold of his abilities was now way out of control. "*DEAAAAAN!!!*" He screamed, letting out all the pent up emotions, the rage, the terror.

He wanted his brother safe, he wanted the demonic creatures obliterated by their own dark powers – but tonight, in his hands, there could be no differentiation between the two.

As his voice cracked with the effort of his screams, a massive, unrestrained wave of pure energy burst from his hands like an electromagnetic pulse, laying waste to everything and anything in its path.

The huge television in the corner of the room imploded, its screen sucked inside its casing and out the other side. The clock on the mantelpiece stopped ticking, the rotating brass balls inside its glass dome suddenly whirling so fast they tore from the metal shafts holding them in place.

Furniture was blown across the room as if a tornado had formed, smashing its way from where Sam stood towards the demons and beyond. Valuable artwork was tossed from the walls, canvas tearing as it too became part of the voracious maelstrom of power.

Sam felt like the cells in his body were disintegrating from the exertion, and he fell forwards onto his knees, panting, gasping down air.

But still the storm continued, blasting the demons from their feet and crushing them with its raw, unreserved energy.

Sam could hear their screams through the howling of the artificial wind around him, long guttural cries that almost made him pity them. And so he should, because wasn't Dean out there too, in the middle of the hell on earth he had created?

Sam tried to look up, forcing all-too heavy eyes to open, to focus, to obey.

Dean would be safe.

Sam would never hurt his brother – *not ever*.

But as Sam dared to strain his neck upwards, all he could see was that he had laid waste to an entire house.

Everything.

And *everyone*.

It took several minutes for the dust to settle and the deafening echo of the brief battle to finally subside. It was only minutes, but to Sam, it felt like hours. It happened so quickly, one second he was charging into a room full of demons and then the next, the entire place was leveled like a bomb had gone off.

I went off... Sam ruefully admitted.

Around him, mounds of debris, broken pieces of furniture and even an occasional body part, lay strewn. He'd seen pictures of grenades going off in small rooms that were less graphic than the scene before him.

He pushed away from the wall, his legs feeling wobbly, his heart pounding within his chest, the recent feeling of overwhelming heat gone now and replaced with a bone-deep chill. His body felt weak, as though all the energy that had just coursed through it had left a massive void in its wake. And his mind... his mind was scrambling, his inner voice screaming questions, demanding answers.

What happened? How did you do this? How could you do this?

Before, he'd always managed to control it, his powers, this bizarre ability to reflect supernatural energy. It wasn't like this was the first times he'd, "amped-out," certainly both in Leicester and even what he'd managed to pull off back in Fort Worth hadn't exactly been mental flinches. But lately, since the deal with Gudrun, and now this... These were far greater exhibitions of his freakish talent. Something was different and Sam couldn't chase away the feeling that the "something" was him.

Shaking his head in an attempt to dispel the disquieting voices, the young hunter staggered forward amid the ruins of the room. Tentatively, he pushed aside the rubble, each time sucking in a hesitant breath as he feared what he might find underneath.

Somewhere amid the wreckage was his brother, tossed around like a piece of refuse when Sam blew the place apart. He had to believe Dean was okay, even though each step seemed to reveal more blood and body parts and less hope of finding his brother alive.

"DEAN!" he yelled at the top of his lungs, fear and desperation filling him, guilt rising above the panic to choke him.

He's dead... you did this... the inner voice assailed him.

There was no denying it, the scene around him was stark confirmation of what he'd been fearing since the diner. He was changing... *had* changed, and whatever reason he'd been chosen to endure these strange abilities, right now he despised bearing the name Winchester.

Stepping over the torso of the once-possessed teen, he cringed as his eyes took in the crushed body. This had been someone's son, someone's brother, and even though the poor kid had obviously been under the control of the demon possessing him, there had still been a chance that he might have been saved if they could have exorcised the hellspawn. But there was no chance of that now...

Seeing the dead young man only spurred Sam on to find Dean. Clinging fervently to the hope that his brother had not met a similar fate at his hand, he tossed aside an overturned chair with a strength born of desperation.

“DEAN!” he shouted out again, pausing briefly to listen for a response.

When his call was only returned by silence, Sam tore through the rest of the living room, scrambling over the debris-cluttered floor as he sought his brother. Near the far wall, he spotted an overturned hutch leaning precariously against the ornate wainscoting. Hope filled him, his mind issuing a silent prayer that Dean was okay beneath the listing cabinet.

Vaulting over the remainder of the furniture, not caring that his stocking feet were being abused by the sharp pieces of glass and broken wood beneath them, Sam raced across the room, desperate to find some evidence of his brother.

With a grunt, he pulled the large oak piece over, fearing that instead of protection perhaps the heavy furniture might have crushed Dean underneath its massive weight. Instead, he found a bloody hand sticking out from beneath a blanket of colorful broken glass.

Dean was a mess; covered in multihued shards of shattered china, the older man looked like a piece of modern art gone wrong. Blood welled from dozens of small cuts and a large bruise was already turning a vibrant shade of red-purple underneath a rising knot on the unconscious man’s temple.

“Dean? Come on, dude... please...” Sam pleaded as his fingers felt the bounding pulse at his brother’s carotid.

His brother didn’t move at first, making Sam all the more concerned as he carefully brushed away the broken glass. Still, Dean was alive, which in itself was an acceptable starting point in Sam’s mind. He continued his methodic uncovering, his hands seeking out the presence of fractured bones or other deformities on his brother’s body while all the time his mind worked overtime on condemning himself for what had happened.

“Dean! Hang on... hang on...” he shouted with encouragement, carefully pulling a larger shard from where it rested, precariously aimed toward his brother’s neck.

Stubbornly remaining unconscious, Dean was so still Sam began to worry there might be more severe underlying injuries than the myriad of lacerations scoring his brother’s body.

He was about to pull Dean upright when the rock tones of his brother’s cell began to sound.

Later, Sam wouldn’t be able to say what possessed him to pull the phone from his brother’s pocket, especially since Dean was lying there before him, bloody and unconscious. But at the time, something just told him to answer it.

Looking down at the screen, he spotted his dad’s name come up on the display. Breathing a quick sigh of relief, Sam punched the answer button, his voice eagerly calling out to his father.

“Dad? Oh man, thank God you called,” he quickly rambled.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Sammy, but Daddy can’t come to the phone right now.”

“Mia!” Sam snarled. “What the hell do you want?”

“Well, I want to speak with your brother. Where’s Dean, Sam?” the demon demanded.

“He can’t come to the phone right now either,” the hunter mimicked sarcastically.

“Awww, I’m hurt. He doesn’t want to talk to me? And after everything we’ve shared.”

“Again, what do you want, Mia?”

“Put your brother on NOW,” she screamed.

“No!”

She laughed in his ear, the sound more devious than humor-filled. “Now, Sammy, it’s not like you to be the obstinate one. What’s the matter? Is Dean shackled up with some blonde, brainless bimbo? You can tell me, I won’t be offended. I totally understand that after me, all other women pale by comparison.”

“After you, I’m sure sleeping with a bloodsucking vampire with herpes would be preferable... by comparison,” Sam returned.

“Oooh! Wow, Sammy. You’ve been taking lessons from Dean on being a smartass? Such nasty snark. I’m sure he’s proud. But cut the crap, where is he? Don’t tell me something’s happened to him. I’d sure hate to miss out on the Winchester hat-trick after being a third of the way there,” she insinuated.

“Dad?”

She laughed again. “Well, aren’t you the bright one?”

“Is he alive?” he asked quietly, further questions silenced as Dean groaned beside him.

Glancing down, he watched as his brother struggled back to consciousness, glazed hazel eyes fighting for focus. Sam pressed his free hand against Dean’s chest in an attempt to keep his brother still as he continued to listen.

“Well, I’d love to torture you some more and tell you that I’ve torn him into tiny little pieces and scattered him across four states, but the truth is I’d much rather let you suffer through all the awful mental images that you can dream up by telling you that he’s still alive and in my care,” she taunted.

“Where is he? What do you want?”

“Want? I want what I’ve always wanted you idiot. Revenge... how much more obvious can that be?”

“Saaamm?” Dean called out hoarsely from beside him.

The young hunter tried to mask the look of worry from his face, but he could feel the color drain from him as Mia continued.

“I’m gonna put an end to your entire family, Sammy. Starting with your dad and then finishing with you and your brother. You’re gonna die screaming, bleeding, begging for your lives, just like Johnny’s been doing for the past coupla days.”

“Where’s my dad?” Sam shouted.

Next to him, Dean fought against him and rose up on one elbow. He was conscious now, albeit still wavering slightly. He grabbed at Sam’s arm, tugging at the loose sleeve as his eyes begged for information.

“Oh, don’t worry, Sammy. I’m gonna reunite you one last time before I finish with my plans.”

"Where?" he asked calmly, despite the slight tremor in his voice.

"Well, since things didn't work out the way I wanted back at my old home, I was thinking that maybe we could settle things up at yours," Mia told him.

"Lawrence?" Sam asked, watching as Dean twitched in reaction.

"DUH! And to think you're supposed to be the smart one. Look Einstein, if you can manage to find your brother, be here by midnight tomorrow or the party's starting without you."

She hung up without a further taunt or insult, leaving Sam sitting in stunned silence.

"Sammy?" Dean called out. "What the hell is going on? Who was that?"

He closed the cell and turned to look at his brother, momentarily relieved that Dean's questions didn't include asking about what had just happened with the demons.

"It was Mia," he answered simply. "We gotta go, NOW!"

"Mia?"

"That's what I said, Dean."

His brother pulled himself upright with a barely contained groan. Sam was immediately there, hands tilting Dean's head to the side as he surveyed the damage.

"I'm gonna kill that bitch," Dean snarled, slapping away Sam's hand and moving to search through the rubble for lost weapons. "Is she coming here? Does she know where we are?"

"She has Dad."

Sam watched Dean's movement grind to a sudden halt, his brother's eyes going wide as he absorbed those words.

"Where?" he asked, his voice a low growl.

"Lawrence..."

Sam saw Dean react again at the mention of their hometown. He knew how much it hurt his brother to even talk about the place, much less consider revisiting somewhere that held so many painful memories. He remembered the look of agony, the internal struggle that Dean battled the last time they'd gone home.

He supposed that Palo Alto was no different for him. He didn't think he could return to Stanford again if his life depended on it. Even though the memories of Jess had dimmed slightly, when he closed his eyes, he could still see her beautiful face, and he could still hear her terrified screams.

"Why there?" Dean asked finally, his voice betraying the underlying turmoil. "Why the hell is she going there?"

"I dunno, Dean. But she has Dad, and she said we had to be there by midnight tomorrow," Sam replied.

He watched as Dean looked around the remains of the room. He was waiting, expecting, his brother to demand answers about what he'd done there. Blood, body parts and even the

intact remains of one or two of the demons inevitably required an explanation. Yet he wasn't sure what explanation, if any, he could offer.

Dean kicked aside the broken coffee table with a pained hiss and a barely disguised wince retrieving his .45 before tossing one of the shotguns at his brother. Sam plucked it deftly out of the air, still stunned that his brother was standing upright, much less moving about with such determination.

"Dean, about..."

"Grab your crap, Sammy. We gotta get going," the older sibling interrupted.

His brother spun around, their eyes momentarily meeting, and for the briefest second, Sam thought he saw... fear, loathing, or at least something more than just the normal determination or brotherly camaraderie that usually filled the hazel eyes that stared back.

He bit back another attempt at offering an explanation buried within an apology when it became apparent that Dean was heading for the car. Staring down at his bare feet, Sam rushed back up the staircase to retrieve the remainder of his discarded clothing and belongings. Reaching the top, he paused for a second and glanced down over the banister.

The destroyed living room looked even worse from this vantage point, the destruction even more accusing than it had been when he was amidst it.

He'd done this... there was no denying it.

"SAM! Get your ass moving," Dean shouted, shouldering his own duffle as he limped toward the front door.

Sam nodded before turning back toward the bathroom and forcing himself to look away from the scene below. Even then, the images remained burned into his mind.

As the crow flies, it didn't seem like a long distance from Nevada to Lawrence, but then, the Impala was hardly a crow. So instead, Dean used the darkness and relative emptiness of Interstate 70 to eat up the thirteen hundred mile trip. To suggest that he was exceeding the posted speed limit was like saying that the members of KISS wore a little makeup.

They made it to the eastern side of Utah submerged in silence, the gravity of the situation forcing them into familiar introspection. It had always been this way, Dean realized. When they'd been searching for their dad back in Missouri or even when they'd been driving to the hospital in Springfield, any time the circumstances surrounded their dad being in danger, the resulting mood was usually morose.

Despite being one of the world's best brooders, second often only to the taller man seated beside him, Dean wasn't one that could stay silent for long. And even though his mind was solidly focused on finding Dad and dishing out some much-deserved payback to Mia, he couldn't help reflect on the night's "other" events.

Taking a sip from the cooling cup of coffee purchased an hour earlier, Dean let the beverage's rush of caffeine assault his fatigued mind. It didn't exactly ease all the questions that were burning at the edges of his brain, but it at least allowed him to focus more on the road ahead of him.

A stolen glance to his right revealed Sam sitting there sullenly, his brother's gaze fixed out the side window as though he were absorbed in the passing scenery. It might have been believable if it wasn't pitch black outside, *and* if Dean didn't know Sam better.

Next to Dean, Sam was the runner-up when it came to committing mental cannibalism; once seated at the table of guilt, he wouldn't leave until he'd eaten himself up over whatever was bothering him. And Dean was pretty sure he knew what was bothering his baby brother: it was the same thing that was nagging at the back of his own mind.

"See anything interesting?" he asked with a soft chuckle.

Sam didn't reply.

Dean softly sighed. This was going to be tough.

"Any chance you wanna tell me what happened back at that house?" he asked.

Sam shuddered.

Way to go, Winchester. Nothing like hitting him over the head... full frontal assault... Dean silently chastised himself.

"Dean... I'm sorry," Sam croaked, his gaze still fixed out the passenger's side window.

"Sorry for what?"

"I nearly... I... I could've killed you back there," the younger man admitted.

Dean laughed. "Nah, dude, when are you going to realize I don't break that easily?" he joked.

"Have you looked in the mirror?" Sam asked, turning to face Dean. "You might not be broken, but you're a damn sight bruised."

"A few scratches, that's all. I got worse off that frisky truck stop waitress outside of Shreveport."

"This is serious, Dean. Didn't you see what I did back there?"

"Well, actually... not the whole thing. I mean, one minute I was kicking demon-ass and the next... well... I think Hurricane Sammy struck ground in the living room," Dean teased. "I don't remember much after that. Care to fill me in?"

Sam sucked in a deep breath and rubbed the side of his head. "I'm not entirely sure myself," he replied.

"Not sure?"

"No. I mean, it wasn't like before. I heard the commotion as I was coming out of the shower and then I saw those demons taking you down."

"They weren't taking me down, it was all part of my plan..."

"And the next thing I knew... all I could feel... was like this surge of power rushing through me..."

"But that's happened before... right? When you mirrored other people's powers, it was like that?" Dean asked, his tone more serious.

"No. This was... different."

"Different how?"

"Overwhelming... and dark..." Sam confessed.

Dean remained quiet, unsure of what to say next. Memories of his brother's eyes filling with black as Sam stood at the edge of the living room replayed in his head. It was the last thing he remembered, before everything else went dark too.

"So..." he began tentatively. "You were mirroring all three demons at once. That's bound to cause a bit of an overload."

"Maybe, but Dean, I can't quit thinking about Leicester."

"What does that have to do with this? Not like this was the first time you did your whole Professor Xavier thing," Dean reminded him.

"Dude, think about it. I went up against Lucifer himself back in Massachusetts. Don't you think that two or three run of the mill demons should have paled by comparison to their boss?"

"You're thinking too much about all this, Sammy. You're making too much out of what happened."

"Dean, I almost killed you. I did kill that poor kid. I don't think that's overreacting," Sam cried out. "Something's wrong with me..."

"You're tired, hell, we're both exhausted. It's been nearly non-stop for us since we finished that gig up in Seattle. And face it, everything that happened with Gudrun, maybe you're just coming down from a psychic high or something," Dean suggested.

"This isn't an acid trip, Dean. I was out of control. Don't you see that?"

Dean did, he just didn't want to admit that to his already freaked out brother.

"Like I said, we're both beat, and beat up. Maybe you were just too tired to control it this time," he adamantly maintained. "You've told me before that it was always strongest when you were reacting to me being in danger."

"Yeah. And this was no different. I saw those demons, saw them going after you, but I never even got the chance to just jump into the fight. It was like I just went into immediate overload. And this wasn't the first time either, Dean."

Dean chanced a long look over at his brother, his level of concern spiking when he spotted Sam's head drop down as he began toying with a frayed edge of his shirt.

"What are you talking about?"

He could hear Sam swallow hard before speaking.

"Back at the diner, right before the kitchen went up in flames, I had the same feeling. I thought at first I just wasn't feeling good, but then it got worse, and the feeling got stronger. You know what happened next."

"Sammy, that wasn't you," Dean said simply, steadfastly keeping his eyes on the road ahead for fear that they would betray him even within the darkness that enveloped the Impala.

"Yeah, right..."

"Come on, dude. Think about it. Those demons were probably there at the diner the whole time, following us. They probably trailed us back to that house."

"The diner was practically empty dude..."

"Well, what if there was another of the psychic kids like you in there? Maybe one that didn't even know what they could do, like that Nathan guy."

"Yeah... maybe," Sam slowly agreed. "But what if it's more that I'm becoming like Nathan? Dude, you told me back then that you were afraid that I might become like him," Sam reminded him.

"That's not what I said at all. I told you I was afraid of what all this was gonna do to you. Look, Sam, whatever's going on, you can't let it get to you," Dean pleaded.

"Sure... don't let it get to me that I could have just as easily killed you as I did that kid tonight."

"Sam..."

"It's true, Dean and you know it. What if... what if the next time it's worse? You can't tell me you weren't freaked by what you saw me do tonight. I saw the look on your face," his brother stated in a flurry of words.

Dean shook his head. "Sammy, you said it yourself. These powers of yours always seem to kick in whenever I'm in trouble. I don't believe for one minute that you would hurt me with them. Hell, if it weren't for you kicking in the psychic afterburners, my ass would have been toast a few times over."

The Chevy plunged into silence once more as Sam seemed to consider Dean's words. Either that or he'd sunk back into his self-torture, Dean could never tell the difference. Sullen Sam wasn't grossly different than the guilty version.

Dean gripped the wheel tightly, wishing he could find the words to make his brother feel better about everything. The problem was, he first needed to find the words to make himself feel better about what had happened.

Deep down, he knew Sam had been right. When he saw his brother appear at the edge of the room, Dean had to admit he was relieved. The demons were honestly getting the better of him, despite his best attempt to open up a can whoop-ass on their hides.

Yet as he waited for Sam to enter the fray, his brother had remained oddly frozen in place. And then Dean saw it, Sam's eyes, glazing over as black as the demons' surrounding him. He honestly wasn't sure at that point if his brother was going to lend a hand or join the hellspawn in their attack. He was certain that the look on his face at that moment had betrayed him. Caught off-guard, he hadn't the chance to carefully mask the shock and fear that was raging through him.

And Sam had seen that. Sam thought he was afraid of him. And knowing Sam, his baby brother probably thought Dean despised him.

He let go of the steering wheel with his left hand to rub at the back of his neck. It was an unconscious move signifying nothing more than fatigue, but Sam spotted it.

"You okay?" the younger man asked worriedly.

"Yeah, Sammy. I'm just tired. Hell, dude, we're not burning the candle at both ends, we've tossed the bitch straight into the fire lately," he joked.

Sam chuckled and Dean returned a weak smile, satisfied that he could still lighten his brother's mood.

"Speaking of bitches," Sam interjected.

"Mia?" Dean asked.

"Do we know anyone worse?"

Dean shook his head slowly, accepting the "guilt baton" from his brother at the mention of the hybrid-demon's name.

"What are we gonna do about her, Dean?"

"Kill her," the older hunter answered dispassionately.

Sam huffed air. "Yeah, 'cause we fared so well against her the last time. She basically handed us our asses on a silver platter."

Which wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for me... Dean added silently.

Crimping his eyes tightly closed for a split second, he reopened them to look at the dark highway before him. It wasn't much different than that night; the night he'd left Sam by the road, alone and unprotected.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the loud thud of the Impala striking a pothole in the asphalt flooded him with the memory of hearing Sam's body being struck by the speeding truck as Mia laughed sadistically and Dean remained trapped and powerless within the Chevy's trunk.

Next to the memory of his mother's screams that fateful night, no other sound remained so brutally vivid in the recesses of his mind.

Sam being so worried about "almost" killing him with his abilities was nothing compared to the guilt Dean still carried for what had happened *that* night. He'd chosen Mia over Sam, and while his brother had repeatedly assured him that he didn't hold it against him, Dean knew his own absolution would take a lifetime to achieve.

He'd never put Sam in that position again...

NEVER!

It was then that it occurred to him what he needed to do. Slamming his foot down on the brake pedal, the heavy Impala screeched to a halt, her rear end sliding slightly as Dean pulled over onto the loose gravel on the side of the road.

He threw the car into park and turned to face his brother.

"Dean! What's wrong?" Sam asked in a panic.

"Get out, Sammy," Dean coldly ordered.

"Huh? Why?"

"You're not coming with me."

"And why the hell not?" Sam demanded.

"We don't both need to go," Dean answered.

"Which translated from 'Deanese' means that you don't want me to get hurt."

"Take it any way you want, but I'm going to Lawrence alone."

Sam grumbled and slammed his fist against the dashboard. "NO! No way," he shouted back in refusal.

"It's not open for debate, Sam. If this goes bad, and we both basically agree that it probably will, then no way am I serving you up for that bitch ever again."

"You can't go up against Mia alone. She's too strong."

"I'll have Dad..."

"Dad may already be dead."

"Then I won't have to worry about protecting anyone but myself."

"So you can be reckless? Then that's all the more reason you can't go after her alone," Sam insisted. "You need me."

"I need you to be safe. Sam, I can't..." Dean paused, sucking in a shuddering breath. "I just can't let you..."

He looked away, unable to voice the remainder of the sentiment.

"You're a hypocrite, Dean," Sam announced. "You just spent the last half hour trying to tell me that you weren't bothered by what happened tonight, that you weren't freaked out by what I did. And now, now you don't want me with you because you think I might overload..."

"That's not what I meant at all," Dean shouted back. "Sam... I can't let her hurt you again. Don't you understand that she nearly killed you last time and all because of what I did? You're so worried about me dying because you can't control your abilities, do you even realize that I nearly got you killed and all because I fell for a pretty girl?"

"She's a demon, Dean. She had us all fooled. And you thought she loved you," Sam replied gently.

Dean snorted. "Loved me? She was just using me and I let her. I chose her over you," he admitted ruefully. "It's my fault she's even still breathing."

"She used us both, Dean. And neither of us is to blame for what she is or what she's doing now."

Dean remained silent, absorbed in his memories and guilt, his determination fading the longer Sam remained in the car.

"You need me, Dean. Maybe now more than ever," Sam continued. "Besides, he's my dad too and I owe Mia a little payback myself."

He knew what Sam was getting at. They really didn't have many choices when it came to battling the hybrid demon; holy water hadn't been effective and the usual trick of catching her in a Devil's Trap was worthless since she wasn't truly possessed. His brother was counting on using his powers against Mia again. His out of control powers...

Dean didn't like it, but he had to admit there weren't any other options presenting themselves.

"We could always melt down the amulet..." he suggested jokingly. "I even promise to shoot you through the arm instead of the gut this time."

Sam laughed as well and the tension within the old car decreased slightly.

"You just keep that thing around your neck," he informed Dean. "Or Mia will be the least of your problems."

Dean shrugged as he snickered. Pulling the gearshift back down, he slowly guided the Impala back onto the highway.

Silence engulfed them once more as the car cruised on through the night, but Dean was relieved that they'd managed to cover all the "sensitive" topics leaving nothing more than the weather or the latest centerfold in Busty Asian Beauties as probable subjects for discussion. He knew the previous conversation might have touched on some raw wounds but it was typical for the brothers to surrender to their own internal thoughts when faced with such dire circumstances. If he had a nickel for every time they'd rode in the car, side by side, and yet with a huge chasm separating them, Dean figured he could have bought a lifetime supply of wax for the Impala.

Several more miles down the road and Sam suddenly twisted around to grab his backpack from the rear seat, his backside uncomfortably close to Dean's face. He might have thought it comical or even the start of a prank except that neither of them was in the mood for that kind of nonsense, all things considered.

"What the hell, dude?" Dean complained, shifting away.

"I need my computer."

"Why? Did you forget to update your My Space page today?" he teased.

"No, smartass. There's something just bothering me about all of this, the timing, ya know?" Sam answered as he plopped back down into the seat and flipped open the laptop.

"Timing? Do you honestly think that psychotic skank has some sort of timeline?"

"Tomorrow's Halloween, and she was adamant about us being there before midnight."

"And that means what? She's just being a bitch. It's a trap and she's just pushing us into it," Dean said.

"Maybe, but there's just something in the back of my head... I can't quite put my finger on it."

"Well, you do have a freakishly large head..."

"Funny, Dean."

The elder sibling looked down at his watch, noting that it was just a little after 4 a.m. They still had about eight hours left till reaching Lawrence, even at the current speed.

"We should hit Kansas just after noon," Dean stated. "You think you can figure it out by then?"

Sam ignored him, his head already buried in whatever Google had to offer, his fingers skimming across the mousepad.

Dean sighed and focused on the road beyond the windshield.

Heading home on Halloween with Mia holding all the cards... Could it be any worse than that?

Lawrence, Kansas

They reached Lawrence city limits around three-thirty, the fall sunshine beginning to ebb but the late afternoon heat was still somewhat oppressive within the car despite both windows rolled completely down. They didn't bother looking for a motel; the urgency of the situation combined with the possible outcome seemed to belie the need for seeking out a place to base operations.

Dean slowed the Impala as he turned onto West 6th Street, slightly surprised by the spread of the homes so far out to the west. It had been a few years since he'd been back to Lawrence, so he figured he shouldn't have been surprised by the growth, but still, it was a little strange realizing how much his little home town had changed.

Kinda like how much I've changed... he mentally added.

Dean slammed on the brakes as a bright red ball bounced out into the roadway immediately followed by a tow-headed little boy. He bit back a curse as the child grabbed the toy, looking up at Dean with wide-eyes as he stood in the middle of the street. A second later, the boy turned and bounded back to the sanctuary of his nearby yard, his laughter trailing behind him.

"Stupid kid..." Dean muttered.

"It feels weird, doesn't it?" Sam asked, his eyes following the child.

"Define weird."

"This place. It's our hometown, but coming back here doesn't feel like it," he explained.

"I told you that before."

"Yeah, I know, but it isn't just the old house. I mean, being here, I don't recognize anything. I don't have any memories of a favorite playground or toy store or school."

"Dude, you were six months old."

"Okay, granted, but shouldn't I feel something? Don't you?" Sam challenged.

Dean stared out the window at the newer houses as they passed by. Manicured lawns, driveways lined with Camrys and Caravans, mailboxes perfectly spaced and standing like

beacons of normality in a world that pretended evil was nothing worse than a speeding ticket or a bad test score. No doubt, all the people felt comfortable and secure within the perceived safety of the brick and stone. But he knew better; there was only so much that solid walls and doors could keep out.

"I don't remember much about Lawrence either. We left here just a couple weeks after the fire, never looked back." Dean recounted.

"Yeah, but before that," Sam pestered. "Mom and Dad must have taken you for ice cream or gone to a movie. Didn't you tell me you played T-ball that one summer? You gotta remember stuff like that?"

Dean groaned; he *could* remember... that was the problem.

"What's with the twenty questions dude? Why the interest in my early childhood?" he grumbled.

"No reason. I guess the last time we were here it was just under different circumstances. I didn't really get the chance to see the place, to get to know it. I mean, shouldn't I know where I come from? Where Mom and Dad were from?"

"You don't come from Lawrence, Sammy. This was never really home," Dean replied quietly. *This was only a place of death and bad memories...*

Sam started to speak but Dean's phone thankfully started to ring, sparing the older man any further trips down memory lane. Or so he thought.

Digging the cellular out, he saw that the incoming call was from his dad's phone and he immediately answered it.

"Where's our dad, Mia?" Dean snarled, knowing full well that despite it being his dad's phone, the chance of his father actually being on the other end was slim.

"Ah, Dean, so good to hear your voice. Sammy was a naughty boy, teasing me like that. Tell me, where were you last night?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I have to admit, I was a little worried about you."

"I was in good hands... very good hands..." he implied.

"Spare me the gruesome details, I just ate dinner," Mia snarked back.

"Cut the crap, bitch. We're here, in Lawrence. Now where the hell is our dad?" Dean shouted back, his voice betraying a momentary loss of his usual cocky control.

She laughed in his ear, her mockery chewing into his already worn nerves.

"Dammit, Mia," he yelled.

"Oh, calm down, Dean. Your dad is fine... for the moment. I promised Sammy that I'd reunite all of you, and I will. But first, why don't you chill and enjoy some of the sights around Lawrence? It'd be a shame for you to come all the way home and not have a chance to check out the old place."

"Yeah, well... that's not our home anymore," Dean replied.

She laughed again. "It's not going to be anyone's home much longer," Mia added cryptically.

"What did you do?" Dean demanded, his suspicions increasing.

"Consider it a housewarming party. You might want to bring some marshmallows," she taunted.

Mia's sadistic laughter filled the earpiece and Dean jammed his thumb against the "end call" button, silencing her. His heart was pounding as her words replayed in his head and he slammed on the brakes, making a last-second turn down a side street.

"Dean, what's going on? What did she say? Where are we going?" Sam asked rapidly.

"She's done something at the old house," he answered, the Impala's engine roaring as he pressed the accelerator.

"Jenny? And the kids? Oh my God," Sam added worriedly.

It might have been the longest three mile drive Dean had ever made, and he wasn't sure he breathed the entire time, his chest constricted tightly with apprehension. A block away, his heart sank when he spotted the thin plume of dark smoke rising up into the sky. Dean knew what it was, and he knew where it was coming from.

They screeched to a halt, tires squealing as the curb bit into the rubber, both brothers vaulting from the car almost before it came to a complete stop. Forced to park several houses away due to the presence of various fire trucks and other emergency vehicles, Dean couldn't immediately see the two story house.

Rushing up the sidewalk with Sam matching his stride, he reached the yellow police tape just as the medics were rolling a body by on a stretcher. The repugnant odor of burnt flesh and hair assailed his nostrils, forcing Dean to cover the lower half of his face with the back of his hand.

He turned away, the all-too-familiar smell causing memories to come crashing back on him. The sensation of heat washed over him, the sound of screams pierced his ears and the acrid stench of burning skin, bone and hair was as vivid as it had been nearly twenty-six years ago.

"Hey! What happened here?"

Dean dimly heard his brother's voice as Sam grabbed a passing firefighter, intent on getting answers. He leaned slightly closer, needing to hear but fearing he already knew the answer.

The man stopped, his soot-covered face downcast as he cleared his throat.

"Strangest thing," he began. "It started in the upstairs in the young girl's bedroom. It looks like it was electrical, but I'll be damned if I've ever seen an electrical fire spread that fast in all my years on the job."

"And the family?" Sam continued.

"Kids are fine. They're over there with some neighbors. Child Services ought to be here pretty soon."

"Child Services?" Dean interjected.

"Yeah! Their mom, she's not looking so good," he answered sadly, motioning toward the closed ambulance.

Dean swallowed hard, bile rising in his throat as he thought about Jenny. "You think she'll make it?"

The firefighter shrugged before turning away.

Sam moved closer to his brother, nudging his arm as he pointed toward the brown-haired girl and smaller boy that huddled against a neighbor's car.

"There's Sari and Ritchie," the younger hunter announced.

Dean followed Sam's direction, spotting the young girl, older and taller now, and her brother, no longer a juice-seeking toddler. They stood side by side motionless, a look of shock and despair on their young faces. Sari's arm encircled her brother's shoulders as the child sobbed, yet she remained stoic, her eyes fixed on the wisps of gray smoke that wafted from windows of her home.

It killed him to watch the kids, the looks on their faces, the emotion, or lack thereof, being displayed; it was hauntingly familiar. Sari was much older than he'd been when he lost his mom, but the similarities were startlingly similar. The flashing lights, the sounds, the smells, even the dazed looks of the siblings as they leaned against the trunk of the car brought all of Dean's most painful memories to the surface. He couldn't bear it, his own heart breaking once again as visions of the fire that fateful night replayed in his head.

Turning away, Dean stalked back to the Impala, stopping at the driver's side door but not opening it. Sam rejoined him a short time later, his brother mimicking his posture as he leaned against the opposite side of the car.

"Are they okay?" Dean asked quietly, his eyes downcast toward the black metal of the roof.

"No, not really," Sam replied. "But Sari said that they have an aunt in Kansas City, so they won't be alone through this."

Dean huffed. "If they lose their mom, nothing will make that better."

"Yeah..."

There was a pause as Dean rubbed the back of his neck and pushed away from the Impala. He reached for the Colt tucked inside the back waistband of his jeans, ejecting the clip to check the contents before jamming it back home with a determined grunt.

"Mia did this," he announced. "If it's the last thing I do, I'm gonna kill that bitch, as slowly and painfully as possible."

Sam grunted in agreement.

Dean's phone sounded again and he pulled it out, flipping it open without even looking at the caller i.d. He didn't need to. He knew it was her, calling to gloat, seeking to torment them even more.

"What do you want, Mia?" he shouted angrily.

"Aw, Dean. Just a little short-tempered today are we? Maybe it's the stench of charred skin and hair that's put you off. I s'pose its kinda hard to get that smell out of your nostrils, isn't it? Surprising though, I would have thought you were pretty familiar with it by now," the demon replied sarcastically.

"Screw you, Mia. I'm tired of all these games, you sadistic bitch. If you want us, come and get us, but leave all these innocent people alone!"

"Games? Do you think this is just a game to me?" Mia screamed back. "You just don't get it do you? I take my work just as seriously as you do. After everything your family has cost me, this is no game, its personal."

"You better believe its personal, you black-eyed skank. That works both ways," Dean returned, his voice low and lethal.

"Fine," she snapped. "Since you've sunk to name calling, let's just put this all to an end. Meet me at the old Stull cemetery... eleven o'clock. Otherwise, bring a shovel for your dad."

"We'll be there. And Mia..."

"What?"

"That shovel... it's gonna be for you," Dean promised.

Stull Cemetery

The five hours between Mia's phone call and when the Impala pulled off to the side of the old cemetery road seemed like forever. The brothers killed the time in a small diner in Kanwaka, a little blip on the map just west of Lawrence. The waitress had been pretty and under different circumstances, Dean thought he'd be all over her. But tonight, nothing, neither the girl nor the tempting aromas emanating from the kitchen, had appealed to him.

Under normal conditions, Dean's adrenaline would have been pumping, his body twitching as he readied for a hunt. But tonight, he didn't feel the same excitement, the same itch to rush headlong into the fight.

So now, remaining in the driver's seat, his hands still grasping the steering wheel, Dean stared out into the darkness. The cemetery appeared empty, the bright moon casting an eerie glow on the old markers. There was a small tree line off to the north of where the Impala was parked and a slight grade rose beyond the farthest row of graves, but other than that, there didn't appear to be any other place for cover.

Still, he knew Mia was there... somewhere.

"Dean, look," Sam alerted him.

He followed his brother's gaze, spotting the large oak that sat atop the hill. He'd missed it at first glance, but as his eyes narrowed, his pupils dilating to acclimate to the dim light, Dean picked up on the movement. The form shifted, its shadow peeling away from the dark bulk of the tree. It blended back in just as quickly, but there was no denying what it was.

"Dad!" Dean exclaimed, pushing open the car door and vaulting out.

Sam followed behind him as he cautiously skirted between the rows of graves. His eyes darted back and forth as Dean watched for the hybrid demon to make an appearance. He pulled up short at the foot of the little hill, his eyes taking in their dad.

John Winchester was tied to the tree, a thick rope encircling his upper body several times while another coil snaked around his ankles and a separate one was wrapped around his neck. Even from this distance, Dean could see the dried smears of blood that covered his father's face as well as the dark patches that marred his outer clothing. John's eyes were wide with concern as he strained against the thick gag that was jammed into his mouth.

Mia's handiwork!

He fought the urge to rush to his dad's side knowing it was a trap. Next to him, Sam mumbled a curse and Dean could feel the energy pouring off his brother as he struggled to restrain himself from reacting. Dean reached over and put a hand on Sam's arm, stilling the younger man and pulling him to a stop beside a large, cracked tombstone. With his free hand, he pointed toward the tree and the emerging figure.

"Hello boys!" Mia called out with a wave. "Glad to see you made it on time."

"We came. Now what?" Sam growled.

"Impatient much? Are you that eager to have all the fun come to an end?"

"I'm that eager to not have your voice screeching in my ear," Dean threw back.

"You used to like my voice Dean. Never heard you complain when I was whispering sweet nothings in your ear back at Dix's place. Of course, you were pretty busy making 'happy sounds' yourself that day as I recall."

"I was screaming on the inside..."

"Funny! But then that's what you're all about isn't it? Drowning yourself in sex and alcohol, love 'em and leave 'em, deal with the fallout or hangover the next day. Too bad you can't care about anyone else the way you do your father and brother," she taunted.

"And what would you know about family? You pretty much killed all of yours. Not to mention all your friends and basically anyone that even shares the same air space."

"I DID NOT KILL MY FAMILY!" she screamed in reply, stepping further from the shadow of the large tree and away from John.

"Live in that illusion, honey. But what's inside of you, killed them just as surely as if you'd pulled the trigger," Dean went on.

"NO! He killed them. Your dad killed my father and brothers. He killed my mother and left me like this."

"Your family was already dead when he got there, slaughtered by the demon that was possessing your mom. My dad was trying to save your worthless ass," Dean refuted. "No one could have known that friggin' Hellspawn was gonna decide to take up residence in you."

"NO!" she yelled again.

"Yep, face it Mia. All that evil inside of you, all those powers that you're so proud of displaying, that's what killed them. You think that what you've become is so special, you're just too stupid to realize you aren't controlling it, it's controlling you," he continued.

"SHUT UP!" she bellowed with rage, her arms pumping at her sides as she slammed her fists against her hips. "Shut up... shutupshutupshutup!"

Beside him, Sam shifted nervously. "Dude, what are you doing? Are you trying to piss her off? Don't you think she can kill us easily enough without you making her a into raving lunatic?" he whispered intently.

"She's already a raving lunatic, dude. Look, we need her to tip her hand. I don't know any other way to get her to show it," Dean replied.

He turned his attention back to the petite brunette standing atop the hill. She paced frantically, mumbling to herself in time with her movement.

"Deny it all you want," Dean went on. "But you killed your dad, you killed your brothers, you killed Greg and Karen and all those other innocent people that only tried to love and care about you. And... you killed your mom. Face it bitch, you killed every person that ever gave a damn about you either directly or indirectly."

Mia screamed, a high-pitched wail of fury and rage that echoed across the quiet cemetery.

"I HATE YOU!" she shrieked. "I HATE YOU ALL!"

Dean chuckled loudly. "Oh darlin', I know you do. And trust me when I say, the feeling's mutual."

He watched as her eyes closed, normal brown orbs obscured by blue-tinted lids.

"Get Dad," Dean whispered, leaning over toward Sam. "You do what you have to and get the hell out of here."

Before his brother could reply, Dean moved around the gravestone and toward the base of the hill.

"Come on, Mia... why don't you finish me off? Can't let me live, you'd ruin your perfect record," he taunted as he approached her.

Her eyes flew open, coal black irises blazing even in the shadows of the night.

"My pleasure," she hissed, her head dipping down as she glared at him from underneath her brows.

He felt it hit him, that all-too-familiar but invisible force that was an emissary of the pain to come. Dean felt his body lift off the ground and sail backwards, narrowly missing a granite headstone and landing hard against the packed soil. He groaned, lying there unmoving as he fought to pull in another breath.

"How's that for a start, Dean?" Mia asked, looking down at him.

Dean struggled back to his knees, reaching out to the closest marker to pull himself up. "You throw like a girl," he jibed.

She waved her hand and the tombstone exploded, propelling the young hunter's body through the air while peppering him with tiny shards of rock. He cried out as a long shard pierced his upper left arm, impaling through the thickest part of his bicep.

It took longer this time, but Dean managed to rise up again, his gaze seeking out the demon even while from the corner of his eye he spotted Sam slowly making his way up the side of the knoll towards their father.

Just keep her attention a little longer, he reiterated silently.

"What's the matter, Mia? You got nothing better in your bag of tricks?"

"Oh, I'm just getting started, Dean. I'm gonna enjoy listening to you choke on your own blood."

He dropped to his knees again as a crushing force wrapped around his chest. Dean knew what she was doing, he'd seen the end results first hand back in Fort Worth.

Hang on... he ordered himself as he felt a rib crack beneath his skin. He stole a quick glance at Sam. His brother had made it to their dad and was quietly cutting through the thick ropes that held John against the tree.

Just a little longer... hurry Sammy...

There was another audible snap, another rib fracturing under the invisible pressure. He couldn't breathe, he could barely see and the salty taste of blood on his lips was warm and sickening.

And then it was gone...

Dean dropped flat to the earth, his breathing ragged as he dimly wondered why she'd let him go.

He heard Sam's loud grunt, the sound forcing him to raise his head, panic filling him as he realized that Mia had released him only to go after his brother.

"SAM!" Dean screamed as he watched his sibling roll limply down the side of the hill.

"Nice try, boys. But I knew you were gonna do something stupid like that. You guys are like an open book. A very boring one, but nonetheless..."

She nodded toward the younger Winchester and Dean watched in horror as Sam's body was lifted and repeatedly slammed against a tall headstone. His brother was already bloody, red trickling from the side of his mouth while more covered his face from a wide laceration over his right eye.

"MIA! Stop!" Dean begged. *Not Sammy, not again...*

The repeated pounding on Sam ceased and Dean watched in desperation as his brother's body slid bonelessly to the ground.

"Aw, Dean. I so love it when you beg," Mia sneered.

She feigned a yawn, her porcelain features contorted as her palm patted against her lips. "But, as fun as all this is... it's kinda getting boring. I thought I might enjoy torturing you more, but I guess there's just no amusement in it, no challenge I s'pose."

Dean crawled toward Sam, one hand protectively holding his injured chest as he struggled to reach his brother. Sam's lids fluttered open, his pupils changing size as his eyes moved rapidly from side to side.

"Sammy, you okay?" Dean asked worriedly.

His brother grunted and reached out a shaking arm to Dean's shoulder giving it a less than reassuring squeeze.

"I'm fine..." he replied. "I don't think your plan worked."

The short-haired hunter pulled himself to his feet, biting back against the pain of his broken ribs and bleeding arm. Reaching down, he offered his hand and drew Sam up beside him.

"You'll have to do better than that," Dean growled at Mia through clenched teeth.

She turned back toward John, her long tresses flowing behind her on the soft breeze. Sauntering closer to the bound hunter, she snuggled in to him, her hands glossing over his body even as he tried to pull away from her. As her fingers reached toward John's face, tiny sparks danced from the tips, glancing off the older hunter's flesh like arcs of electricity.

Alarmed, Dean lunged forward, screaming out for the demon to stop. But she ignored him as her hands began to glow, her palms cupping John's cheeks. The elder Winchester bucked as the current raged through his body, his muscles straining against the ropes as the electricity triggered bone-snapping spasms.

Dean kept yelling, not even sure what words were coming from his mouth as he screamed at Mia not to kill his dad. Next to him, Sam remained unmoving, his hand resting on Dean's right arm as he gently restrained his older brother.

"I got this..." Sam barely whispered.

Dean stopped, his attention begrudgingly pulled from the scene atop the hill to focus on his brother. Sam's eyes drifted closed, and despite the relaxed appearance, his musculature became rigid, his jaw clenching reflexively.

"Say goodbye to your daddy, boys. Tell me, how do you like your meat? Rare or extra crispy?" Mia goaded them as she reached toward John's chest, her hand hovering over his heart.

Standing next to Dean, Sam's breathing slowed, his eyes remained closed, but an eerily similar glow began to illuminate his fingertips. Dean wasn't sure what his brother was doing, he'd never really cared about "how" Sam managed to reflect powers, he'd only ever seen the end results. Still, he could only hope now that his brother could somehow stop the psychotic woman before she killed their dad and finished them.

A high-pitched shriek stole his attention and Dean's head spun to find the origin.

Mia had pulled away from John, staggering backward as she looked down at her hands.

"What? No..." she muttered.

The glow that had once enveloped her extremities was now gone, replaced by small flashes of light that popped and crackled like an electrical socket shorting out. She bellowed with rage as the power drained from her. In the next instant, she was thrown backwards, her small body landing hard on the ground, smoke curling up from around her form.

Dean couldn't prevent the shocked expression from covering his face. His brother had managed to absorb all the energy and then throw it back at her. While he wanted to enjoy the moment, Dean knew it hadn't completely stopped her.

Mia slowly returned to her feet, her face contorted with anger. She glared at Sam, her eyes narrowing as she limped back to the spot in front of the oak. For a second, her face softened, betraying her weakness, but she quickly replaced it, her eyes refilling with black.

"Nice try," she sneered at the younger Winchester. "But see if you can stop this."

She twisted slightly, her gaze turning to fix on Dean.

He dropped to his knees, one hand reaching out to grab futilely at the edge of Sam's shirtsleeve while the other grabbed his chest. The pressure was incredible, worse than before, and Dean knew she was killing him. Sam couldn't save him now.

He looked up to his brother, wordlessly pleading as he felt his insides shifting and tearing. But Sam never lost his focus, staring straight back at the brunette, his eyes unblinking, his hands clenched tightly at his sides.

Darkness edged in on the periphery of Dean's vision, blood filled his mouth as he collapsed on his side. He looked between Sam and the hill, his brother strangely remaining stoic even as his dad jerked against the bindings, silently screaming as his eyes met Dean's. But as the young man felt the life ebbing from him, his heart pounding out its last beats, he noticed something else.

Atop the rise, Mia twitched, her body jerking slightly, her focus momentarily distracted. She sucked in a deep breath, her brows pinching together again. Dean felt the pressure lessen and then return. But this time it wasn't as strong, not nearly as torturous.

Stealing a look at Sam, he knew his brother was somehow managing to drain Mia's power; not reflecting it, but actually drawing it from her, absorbing it as if he was soaking up the warm rays of the sun on the first day of summer.

"Stop it, Sam!" Mia shouted. "I'll turn your brother into a pile of steaming slop if you don't stop now!"

"You won't get the chance, Mia. Even now, you're getting weaker aren't you?" Sam replied calmly. There was no turning back, Dean realized, not even if Sam wanted to.

The woman staggered again, dropping to one knee, her expression allowing a brief hint of panic to appear. She tried to cover it, but there was no mask to replace the fact that Sam was defeating her.

Dean felt his lungs expand, the pain in his body suddenly diminishing. He embraced the brief glimmer of hope as Mia fell forward to her hands, her body sagging like a limp rag doll, blood appearing at the corner of her mouth. Forcing his own hands beneath him, he pushed up with the last vestiges of strength born of desperation.

Beside him, Sam faltered, his knees buckling as he fought to control the surge of energy emanating from the demon. Tears poured from his eyes and perspiration covered his brow, mixing with the free-flowing blood from the laceration. But it was his eyes that worried Dean the most.

Sam's eyes were completely black, not a hint of his brother's usual blue-green or even a smidgen of white was visible. It was a frightening replay of the house, except this time, Dean saw nothing that reminded him of his younger sibling.

"Sammy?" he called out gently.

His brother didn't answer at first, his black orbs still gazing toward the failing demon yards away. But then, Dean noticed the tremor, a little tic of Sam's jaw that indicated how hard his brother was fighting against the dark power that was threatening to consume him or rip him apart.

"Got... her..." he croaked out weakly. "Finish... now..."

Dean nodded. Torn between wanting to help Sam, but not knowing how, and the fear that his brother might not be able to control all of Mia's evil energy, he suddenly realized what his brother had done.

Mia was drained... powerless... human once more.

Reaching into his pocket, Dean pulled his .45 and flipped off the safety with a quick movement of his thumb. He rose to one knee, his own body wanting nothing more than to collapse. He fought the weakness, steadying his arm as he lined up the shot.

"Dean!" Mia cried out, her hand reaching toward him imploringly. "Help me... please."

His heart broke for a split second as her eyes returned to their warm cinnamon, her features softening as she reminded him of the first time he'd met her. So innocent, so frightened, so seemingly human...

He blinked away the memory, his eyes glancing quickly to his father, bloody and beaten, then to Sam, trembling under the weight of the demon's powers.

"Sorry, honey," Dean snarled. "But I'm not making that mistake again."

He pulled the trigger, the Colt jumping in his hand as the slugs tore from the weapon. His aim was true and the bullets found their intended target, burrowing into the brunette's chest and shattering her sternum as they shredded through her lung and heart.

She stared at him in disbelief, her face dropping down to look at the blossoming red on the front of her shirt. She touched the spreading blood as though she couldn't accept it and then looked back to Dean.

"I'll see... you... in Hell..." she choked out.

"Yeah, maybe," Dean replied coldly. "But I'm okay with that."

He pulled the trigger once again, watching dispassionately as the final bullet plunged into Mia's forehead. Her head snapped back with a spray of bone, blood and brain matter before her eyes closed and she dropped to the cooling ground.

Silence settled over the cemetery and for a second, nothing moved. Dean dropped back to his rear, his eyes never leaving Mia's still form. Beside him, Sam sagged to the ground, his body wracked by tremors, chest heaving as though he'd just run a marathon.

He had... Dean dimly thought.

"Happy Halloween, Sammy," Dean joked wearily.

Sam laughed weakly, "Sorry I didn't get you any candy, dude."

Using the grave marker behind him, Dean pulled himself to his feet before offering a hand to his brother. He grimaced as Sam pulled against him, rising to his full height minus a couple inches as he hunched over slightly.

"You okay?" Dean asked worriedly.

"Fantastic. You?"

"Never better."

"Get Dad?"

"Yeah..."

They made their way up the grade, neither commenting as they leaned on each other. Reaching the large oak, Sam moved behind John, his pocketknife open as he began to saw through the ropes.

Dean cautiously approached Mia, his hand taut against the trigger of the .45 as he neared her.

He toed her cautiously, her body rolling onto its side, her eyes staring vacantly upward.

Dean swallowed the bile that had risen in his throat and ran the back of his hand across his forehead. Kneeling down, his fingertips glossed across her face as he pushed her eyes closed, knowing that his quickly surfacing guilt wouldn't be shoved away as easily.

"It had to be done." His dad's voice broke the silence even as John's huge hand grasped Dean's shoulder, delivering a gentle squeeze.

Had to be done? Sure... she was a demon, evil to the core, but she'd been partially human too...

And partially inhuman as well...

Dean was about to reply when a banshee-like shriek cascaded over the countryside. He startled, as did his brother and father, the three hunters scanning the area for the source of the unearthly noise.

It sounded again, closer this time.

"What the hell was that?" Dean posed.

"Can't be anything good," Sam added.

"Boys, we need to get out of here," John warned, his voice low even as he shifted nervously.

A rustle in the nearby brush pulled the men's attention even as more noises, grunts and growls seemed to surround them.

"Get to the car," John ordered, even as the first demon broke from the nearby darkness.

Dean looked toward the Impala. Parked near the northern tree line, the black Chevy was already being swarmed by dozens of Hellspawn. Wherever they were coming from, it was as if all of Hell had opened up and a mass exodus was occurring.

"We'll never make it," the young hunter shouted back, even as his eyes frantically looked for some other source of protective cover.

Grossly outnumbered, he knew they needed some place to make a stand, even if he couldn't fully understand why all of a sudden they had Lucifer's hosts coming at them.

"What the hell is that?" Sam queried, pointing in the direction of a small stone building that had just ethereally appeared at the end of the rows of graves.

"I dunno, but it beats being caught with our pants down out here," Dean replied, already heading in the direction of the small structure, even as several black-eyed humans reached the top of the hill.

"Dean... wait!" John yelled, following the younger men at a steady run.

They breached the door of the building, throwing open the rotting wood amidst John's continuing protests. Dean slammed the rickety barrier closed, pressing his back against it even as the bodies of the horde outside rammed into it.

He let loose a shaky breath, panting heavily. Across from him Sam mirrored his breathlessness, his eyes darting nervously around the room.

"What the hell is happening?" Dean managed after a moment.

"The better question is where the hell did this church come from?" Sam added, slowly perusing the interior of the building.

Between them, John paced nervously, his eyes wide with fear. It was a frightening look and one Dean had rarely ever seen on his father's face.

"Dad?" he asked tentatively. "What aren't you telling us?"

John Winchester stopped his pacing as he reached a wooden pew. Pulling a hymnal from the back of the seat, he held it up for Dean to see.

"Don't you realize what's happening here?" the elder hunter demanded.

Dean looked at him quizzically even as Sam drew back to the group.

"This is Stull church, isn't it?" the younger sibling posed.

"And it's Halloween. Mia knew what she was doing, bringing us to this place on this night," John added.

"You gotta be kidding me? This is holy ground..."

"No, this is very UNHOLY ground. Dude, seven Gateways to Hell and we manage to have one in our very own home town," Sam informed him.

Dean groaned as it all came together. "Holy crap, and Halloween; the one time of the year that the Gateway opens. Friggin' fantastic."

"What now?" Sam asked.

"Well, I'm not thinking that we'll last long out there," Dean returned, his body jerking as the door behind him bulged inward.

"We can't stay here," John said worriedly. "We need to find a way out and quick. You got anything in that gearbag Sam?"

The younger hunter shrugged the green canvas tote from his shoulder, nodding as he unzipped it and pulled out two shotguns. He threw one to his father before pumping a round into the chamber of the other. Reaching back inside, he drew out a handful of shells, taking a few steps closer and handing them to John.

"We have a couple dozen rounds and a couple flasks of holy water. It's not gonna get us far," Sam announced.

"Check the place out, see if there are any other exits. I'll hold this door," John ordered, moving to replace Dean at the entrance.

Dean deftly caught the flask of holy water Sam threw toward him, and after replacing the clip in his .45, he and Sam moved through the small sanctuary to the door at the rear. Outside the thin walls, the growls and screams of the tormented echoed all around and to the elder sibling, it was like a bad remake of *Dawn of the Dead*, except he knew that there were worse things out there than zombies. Way worse...

He tried to ignore the noises, blocking them from his mind as he focused on finding a means of escape. The exit led to a long hallway, dotted with three other doors, each closed and each appearing less inviting than the next. He flung the first open, groaning as it led to a small study sparsely decorated and oddly illuminated with a single lantern.

"I've got a door to a basement here," Sam called out even as Dean moved further into the room, his eyes focused on the peculiar light.

He was about to reach for the lantern, his fingers barely skimming the handle when the thing seemed to waver under his touch. Around him, the room flickered, the desk and books blinking in and out as though they were nothing more than special effects projected into the dark space.

"What the hell..." Dean exclaimed as everything disappeared. The desk, the papers, the lantern, even the small shuttered window across the room suddenly vanished.

Dean spun for the door, his eyes going wide as the wall behind him was now unbroken, no sign of any exit. He whirled around, desperately searching for a way out of the weird place.

"DEEEAAAANNNN!"

Sam's cry assaulted Dean's ears. It came from the other side of the wall, just where he knew the hallway was, or maybe had been. It was close, and yet Dean could find no way to get out of the room. He pounded frantically on the old plaster, desperate to get to his brother as the sound of the Remington firing increased his panic.

"SAAMMY!" he shouted back. "Sammy, where are you?"

"DEEEAAAANNNN!" Sam called out again, his voice betraying his pain and fear.

Desperation filling him, Dean aimed the .45 and emptied the clip into the nearest wall. When the automatic seemed to make no dent, he then took to the plaster with his fists, alternately punching and tearing at the material.

Outside the room, he heard the report of the second shotgun, followed by his father's grunts of pain and the pounding sound of footfalls signalling that the front door to the church had

been breached. He screamed out both his brother's and his father's names as he frantically clawed and kicked at the place where the door had been.

Around him, the walls shimmered once more and Dean spotted another door appear on the far wall. Charging toward it before it could disappear, he kicked it open, shocked when it lead to the former hallway instead of outside as he would have guessed.

"SAMMMY!" he screamed at the top of his lungs even as he tried to get his bearings, listening intently for his brother's location as the Remington fired once more.

He tried to follow the sounds, tracking them toward the doorway at the end of the corridor. Beyond the closed door, Dean could hear the demons animal-like snarls.

Hearing a loud crash followed by Sam's soft groan, Dean threw caution aside and slammed into the wood with his shoulder. He pulled up short as the room before him revealed itself to be none other than the original study he'd just existed.

He turned quickly, but it was no use. The door he'd just come through had already disappeared. Twin blasts from the shotgun in conjunction with several bellowed curses told him that his dad was still mounting a defense. He called out to his father, but John didn't reply.

Breathing raggedly thanks to the broken ribs, blood pouring down his arm from the piece of rock which had impaled him earlier, Dean wasn't sure how much longer he could manage to remain on his feet. He needed to get to his dad, needed to find his brother, but as the howling increased outside, Dean was beginning to think that maybe Mia, even in death, had won.

The walls around him shimmered again and Dean prepared himself for the next evolution of the strange church. He didn't have to wait long as another door appeared next to him. More cautious this time, Dean inched closer, his hand hesitating slightly on the knob.

He flung it wide open, his .45 aimed before him and into the oppressive darkness. He wasn't back to the hallway, he wasn't back in the study, and Dean was certain that this wasn't the main sanctuary. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his faithful Zippo, his thumb striking the wheel as a small flame coxed to life.

"Aw crap!" he bemoaned as the tiny light illuminated the space before him.

It was a stairway, dark and foreboding. Yet within the blackness something moved.

Dean knew instantly what was hiding within the void, he didn't have to see them to confirm it, even as the sensation of liquid trickling down his chest made him look down to where the feather was tucked away within the layers of his shirts.

It was bleeding...

Demons!

Backing into the room, he grabbed for the door hoping to block the entrance and buy just a little time before maybe the place would morph once more. But it had already happened; the door was gone as was any other sign of escape.

His shoulders struck the far wall even as the first of the Hellspawn vaulted into the room. Dean braced himself for the attack as more demons poured into the room. Taking careful aim, he raised the Colt, resigning himself to his fate.

“Goodbye Sammy...” he muttered softly as he stepped forward. “Alright boys... come and get it!”

Outside the glowing church a towering figure strode to the top of the hill and looked down on the cemetery below. Dressed in an impeccably tailored Armani suit, the newcomer smiled as he listened to the dimming sound of the melee going on in the building.

Demons ran uninhibited across the graveyard, some squealing in delight while others growled and raged in their freedom. It was their night, and the tall figure looked on with pride as his minions scurried across the countryside.

It was all coming together, his plans finding fruition on this most special of nights. Add to the fact that three of the biggest thorns in his side were down there trapped within the Hellgate and he couldn't have been happier.

Lucifer considered heading down to the small church, if for no other reason than to gloat over his enemies' eventual demise. But as he moved forward, his glowing red eyes fell on the silent form of the petite brunette at his feet.

Stooping down, he ran his fingertips through the tangled strands of her hair. She had been a good one and he'd been impressed with the havoc she'd created over the past year.

Cold... she was dead beneath his touch, the blood from her wounds already congealing in the chilling night air.

Lucifer smiled again. This was nothing he couldn't easily rectify.

He touched her temple and uttered a brief Latin incantation pulling away when she bolted upright with a gasp. She coughed several times, her eyes staring wildly as she tried to understand what had happened.

He offered her his hand but she remained wary, flinching away from his touch.

“I like your style,” he murmured softly. “How'd you like a place in the starting lineup?”

She watched him, her eyes narrowing as understanding of who and what he was became apparent. She returned his smile and reached to take his hand. Rising up, she took her place at his side as he stroked the back of her head, caressing her like a beloved child as she leaned into his touch.

Side by side they stood there, watching and listening as the battle waned in the church below. The sounds of gunfire gave way to a last defiant curse before everything submitted to the angry growls of the demon horde surging out of the Gate and roiling over the three hunters.

Eventually, silence returned, a quiet stillness settling over the cemetery as it welcomed three more souls into its ranks.

The End