

Season Three
Episode Eleven: The Darkest Half
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Part One

Super 8 Motel,
Roswell, NM

It was the absence of sound that woke Sam from his fitful slumber.

There were the usual motel room noises – early morning traffic on the highway; a dog barking in the distance; the relentless tick, tick, tick of his wristwatch.

And for a while he just lay there, pretending this was any other motel room on any other day and all was right with his whacked out world.

And for a while he almost believed it.

Almost.

But the absence of one particular sound sought to shatter the illusion, and, willing himself to believe the lie for just a little longer, Sam resisted opening his eyes for a few slow seconds, his heart pretending he could hear what his head knew he couldn't.

He couldn't hear Dean breathing.

Slowly, his lids parted to hazy sunlight slanting across yellowed ceiling tiles, seeping in through a crack between the stripy orange curtains.

He didn't turn his head right away, instead continuing to gaze upwards to the deafening accompaniment of his own breathing.

With a sigh that sounded too loud in his own ears, he slowly tilted his head to one side, eyes resting on the ancient clock radio on the nightstand: 6.28am. As he watched, the last digit flicked over to a "9" with a click that seemed to echo around the room and his eyes eventually slid to the unmade bed to his right.

He sighed again, part of him wanting to wonder where Dean had gone so early, while the rest of him suspected he already knew.

Dean had never exactly been an open book to Sam, but he'd always had some idea what was going through his brother's head most of the time.

But lately – since Cibola – since Sam had stormed off into the desert just to prove how angry he was at Dean's blind faith in Mia only to get himself bitten by a poisonous scorpion and subjected to hallucinations that had almost killed him in his sleep... Well. Things between the brothers had been somewhat less than stellar.

Huh. Understatement of the century.

They weren't exactly fighting – Dean had been too freaked out by almost losing his little brother to the desert to fight with him once he got him back. But they weren't exactly doing much of anything else, either.

They certainly weren't talking. Not about anything that mattered, anyway.

Sam had tried.

Two weeks of the silent treatment, of perfunctory answers and strained single-sentence conversations; of Dean talking but not *talking*.

Sam had tried, but every time he managed to get Dean alone, every time he tried to get him to talk to him, to really *talk* to him, there was Mia. Watching, listening. It seemed like every time he turned around, there she was, arm hooked possessively through Dean's or slung lazily around his waist, head on his shoulder.

And if Sam was honest with himself, wasn't that partly his fault? Hadn't he tried to play matchmaker?

He tried to convince himself it merely made him want to vomit, Dean getting all lovey-dovey with Mia, holding hands shyly, touching accidentally, blushing when their eyes met. But that wasn't it; it wasn't a kid brother's childish reaction to his big brother suddenly getting all chick-flicky with some girl. It was more than that.

It was suspicion. It was concern.

It was *fear*.

There was something about Mia. Something he couldn't put his finger on. Something that Sam just couldn't bring himself to trust.

Sure, most of the time she seemed nice enough: spunky, funny, smart. Just Dean's type.

Exactly Dean's type in fact.

Right down to the love of muscle cars and classic rock.

And that was the problem.

It was too much. *She* was too much. Too convenient. Too – too *right*. Which was more than enough to convince Sam she had to be wrong somehow. Winchesters didn't exactly have a great track record when it came to the fairer sex, and all of this – all of this happening for Dean? Now? No. It just didn't sit right.

It wasn't that he begrudged Dean his happiness. He loved his brother more than anyone breathing on this earth, and he desperately wanted him to be happy, to find someone who could make up for some of the terrible things that had happened to him in the last twenty-something years of his life.

But Mia? She wasn't it. She wasn't what Dean needed. Sam could *feel* it. He could feel it, deep down in his bones.

He had no proof. Nothing he could point to with a triumphant, "Hah! I told you so!"

But even Dean had to admit their rocky road of a life had become a hell of a lot rockier since Mia showed up. The NuJack in Bennington; Malphas; Joe Bearwalker; the Impala mysteriously breaking down outside of Cibola; the Pazuzu... None of it appeared to be Mia's fault on the surface. But all of it – all taken together? It set Sam's teeth on edge.

And now it had happened again, here in Roswell.

They'd headed for New Mexico at Mia's urging, after she'd read a number of news reports about strange, black-eyed creatures lurking around the outskirts of town, terrorizing tourists and locals alike.

Mia had been insistent. The reports smacked of a cult of Devil worshippers summoning demons from the depths of Hell.

Sam had been more than a little skeptical of Mia's theory. Devil worshippers? How the hell had Mia come up with *that* from a handful of sketchy reports of shadowy figures hovering around the fringes of the New Mexico desert? It didn't track. It didn't scan. It didn't make sense.

Just like Mia.

So when the "evil cult of Devil worshippers" turned out to be nothing more sinister than a group of high school geeks out to prank some gullible tourists into believing they were encountering little green men, the Winchesters having scared the crap out of a couple of spotty teenagers in Halloween costumes and black contact lenses by threatening to exorcise their scrawny asses to Hell, Sam had been somewhat less than surprised.

Of course, just like back in Bennington, Mia had apologized profusely for her error, and, just like back in Bennington, Dean had waved it off as yet another simple rookie mistake. Research, after all, was one of the hardest parts of the job, Dean had assured her. That was why he always left it to his trusty Geek Boy sidekick.

Ordinarily, Sam would have flashed his usual long-suffering smile at one of Dean's favorite terms of endearment, and that would have been the end of it. But when Dean had gone on to praise Mia for going with her gut, for following her instincts like all the best hunters did, Sam had just wanted to pick his big brother up and shake some sense into him.

Snap out of it, Dean! Listen to yourself! Listen to your gut! Listen to my gut! Aren't you even a little suspicious?

What made it worse was that Dean had never exactly been a "trust first, ask questions later" kind of guy, and when Mia had promised to be more thorough with her research in future, just as she'd promised back in Bennington, when she nearly

got them killed by telling them to use silver on the NuJack when fire was the only way to toast that evil sonofabitch's ass, Dean had merely nodded, declared that that was "Good enough," and planted a kiss on the top of her head.

Thinking about it made Sam seethe, his thoughts drifting back to his brother's current whereabouts.

He's next door. With her, he found himself thinking. I'm here by myself and he's with her...

He scrubbed his hands over his face angrily. "Goddammit, Sam!" he admonished himself. "You're just *jealous!*"

He took a breath, the words out of his mouth before the implications of what he'd just said began to sink in.

*Was that it? Was he *jealous*?*

No. That's not it, he told himself firmly. It's not...

It's not.

He thought back to Cibola, back to Hank Pruitt and his advice to keep an eye on Mia, to "listen to the voices." Well what did Sam's voices tell him about Mia?

They told him she was *wrong* somehow.

He didn't know how, but he just *knew*.

Mia was wrong.

And the more he thought about it, the crazier it made him. Why couldn't Dean see it? Why couldn't Dean see what was right in front of him?

Because all he could see was Mia. All he wanted to see was Mia.

"Dammit, Dean..."

Throwing back the musty green blanket and the suspicious-smelling comforter, Sam swung his legs out of bed and headed for the door, unsure of where he was going or what he'd do when he got there. Knock on Mia's door and ask if his big brother was there because he was scared of the monsters under his bed? Was he really that pathetic?

As quietly as he was able, he unlatched the motel room door, swinging it open slightly before pausing at the sound of Dean's voice somewhere nearby.

Carefully squinting out through the crack he'd opened in the doorway, Sam didn't need to look far before his eyes lit on his older brother, fully dressed and leaning against the Impala, his cellphone pressed firmly to his ear.

"So Dad," he was saying awkwardly, "if you get this message, it'd be great to – y'know – hear from you. Just so that we know where you are, what you're up to. That you're not dead or anything..." Dean laughed hollowly, but Sam could tell he didn't find this remotely funny. "So – so give us a call," Dean continued, shuffling his feet uncomfortably as he gazed down at his boots. "When you can. Just to – to – y'know... Yeah." He rolled his eyes momentarily to the heavens before closing the phone and staring off into the distance.

Dean was worried. And upset. Terrified that something had happened to Dad, terrified that that was why the old man hadn't touched base with them in so long. Radio silence had always made Dean crazy, and Sam instantly began to regret the petty jealous anger that had been welling in him since – since...

Since he'd thought of Dean next door with Mia.

He hesitated, unsure whether to go to his big brother, reassure him that Dad was fine, that Dean shouldn't worry, that the old man was probably off on a bender somewhere with Jim, Jack and Jose... Or should he just turn away, go back to bed, pretend he'd not seen or heard anything? Let Dean off with his dignity intact.

But Sam hesitated too long, Dean suddenly looking up, looking directly at him, eyes boring into him as if Sam had been the only thing on his mind, the only thing he ever thought about.

Dean's cheeks colored, the embarrassment clearly reflected in the way he broke eye contact almost immediately, pausing for the briefest of instants before abruptly

turning and yanking open the driver's side door, jumping into the Impala and gunning the engine.

He skidded out of the parking lot in a spray of gravel as Sam stepped out of the room, the word "Dean!" dying on his lips.

Sometime later...

"Hey, sunshine! Order up!"

Sam looked up from the laptop as Dean jostled his way into the motel room, a brown paper bag oozing with grease clutched in one hand and a tray laden with cardboard coffee cups balanced in the other. He shoved the door closed with one hip before unceremoniously dumping the food on the table in front of his brother.

Three cups, Sam noted.

"You were up early," was all the younger brother said, pushing suspiciously at the brown paper bag before helping himself to one of the cups of coffee.

"Vanilla caramelatte with a light dusting of cinnamon," Dean advised him with a grin. "Just the way you like it."

Sam scowled at him, gingerly lifting the lid off the cup to reveal a steaming measure of plain black coffee. "You forgot the whipped cream and chocolate shavings," he commented, grabbing up three packets of creamer from the tray and dumping them in the cup before seeking out the pile of sugar sachets hidden under the napkins.

Wait. Dean brought *napkins*?

Dean was still grinning down at him as he snatched up his own cup of coffee and balanced himself precariously on the edge of the table.

But he hadn't answered the question.

"So...?" Sam tried again, sipping at the coffee as Dean pulled an assortment of takeout boxes out of the paper bag.

"So what?" Dean asked, lighting on a carton of hash browns which he began to devour unmercifully.

"This morning," Sam prodded carefully. "You were calling someone. Out in the parking lot."

Dean's eyes clouded for just a second, his smile becoming a little lopsided before righting itself quickly. "Sammy, are you stalking me?" he asked. "I gotta say man, that's a little messed up, even for us."

Sam allowed a smile to flicker across his face, willing to play along for now if that was what Dean wanted. "So," he repeated. "Who were you calling?"

Dean shifted a little uncomfortably, turning his attention back to the brown paper bag.

"Some girl, right?" Sam said at last, finally deciding to take pity on his brother when it became obvious he wasn't going to tell him the truth. "Didn't want Mia to hear?"

Dean's megawatt smile returned and he shrugged nonchalantly. "It wasn't like I was being *unfaithful* or anything..."

"So who was she?" Sam asked, wondering just how far Dean would go to cover for what he no doubt saw as a moment of pansy-ass weakness. "Some waitress you picked up last time we were out this way?"

Dean's brow crinkled as he considered the question. "When the hell were we ever in Roswell?" he asked, taking a bite out of something that vaguely resembled a sausage McMuffin and spraying ketchup all over the threadbare carpet at his feet.

Sam shrugged. "I dunno," he admitted. "That weekend when Dad was off in Cali someplace and you figured we'd drive down here looking for little green men and maybe hook up with Katherine Heigl and Shiri Appleby?"

Dean snorted. "Oh *yeah!*" he burst out. "What a weekend that turned out to be!"

"You boldly went where no man has gone before, I seem to recall," Sam agreed.

Dean gazed off into the distance wistfully. “Though sadly not with Katherine Heigl...”

Sam laughed softly, snagging one of the hash browns as he regarded his brother thoughtfully. Dean certainly seemed relieved Sam apparently hadn’t heard him calling Dad like some punk-ass little bitch. And if that’s what Dean needed to get him through the day, then Sam was happy to oblige. At least Dean seemed in a better mood this morning than he had in – well, in what seemed like forever. Maybe now would be as good a time as any...

“So where’s Mia?” Sam asked innocently, and Dean glanced at him, as if trying to judge whether that was a trick question.

“I dunno,” he answered. “Probably still catching up on her beauty sleep. Or doing her hair, or her makeup, or whatever the hell chicks do for hours and hours every morning.”

Sam nodded. *Hours* sounded pretty good to him. “So she’s okay?” he asked carefully. “About steering us wrong on this hunt? Again?”

Dean just looked at him for a second, McMuffin temporarily forgotten. “Sam, don’t –” he began, but had to swallow the rest of the sentence when a timid knock on the door drew his attention away from his brother.

Sam sighed. *Every time I get Dean on his own for five minutes...*

Dean jumped lightly to his feet, obviously glad of the distraction as he threw open the door without even looking out through the little spy hole first.

Sloppy, Dean... Sam thought to himself. *Your head’s not in the game when she’s around.*

“Where’s my breakfast, woman?” Mia demanded, grinning brightly up at Dean as she fairly bounced on her toes in the doorway.

“I think ‘hunter-gatherer’ is part of the job description,” Dean quipped, catching the girl around the waist and drawing her into the room before brushing her lips with his own.

“Mmm, hash browns,” Mia exclaimed, kissing him quickly again before adding, “And sausage!”

Dean stepped to one side, allowing Mia access to the veritable feast of fast food already congealing beside Sam’s laptop.

“Ooh, coffee! There is a God!” she burst out, snatching up one of the cups and taking a sip of it, black and unsweetened.

“Yeah, but you can call me Dean,” Dean returned, grinning broadly.

“Yeah, yeah, Mr. Humility,” Mia drawled, plopping herself down on the edge of Sam’s bed, a napkin loaded with hash browns and a sausage McMuffin balanced skillfully in one hand.

Dean followed, lowering himself down next to her, their thighs, hips and shoulders touching as he stole one of the hash browns out of her hand. She swatted at him playfully and Sam had to fight the urge to vomit.

“So I found us a new gig,” Mia announced suddenly around a mouthful of muffin.

Both brothers looked up at her sharply, and for a second Sam was pretty sure he caught a glint of skepticism in Dean’s eyes.

“Already?” There was no trace of skepticism in Dean’s voice, however. “Boy, you work fast – we just got here.”

“Yeah, I’m a real slave driver.” Mia grinned brightly. “Wouldn’t want you boys getting all flabby in your downtime.”

Dean raised a brow. “Sweetheart, you ever see flab on *this* –” he indicated himself smugly, “– you have my permission to put a bullet in my brain.”

Mia sniggered. “Okay, Arnold. You wanna hear about this job or what?”

“Are you sure it’s a job?” Sam put in hesitantly, before shrugging one shoulder apologetically. “I mean, no offence, but – but after what happened this time?”

If Mia was offended she didn't show it. "Believe me, I did the research properly this time," she assured him. "And besides, I think you guys will be real interested in this one: you've got some history with this particular spook."

Dean raised a brow. "Oh yeah?" he said, clearly intrigued, glancing at Sam who shrugged slightly.

"Plano, East Texas," Mia continued, nodding. "Big old abandoned mansion house just on the edge of town. Locals have reported hearing moaning and wailing at all hours of the day and night – flickering lights, odd noises. Your standard haunted house stuff."

Dean huffed. "So far so *Scooby-Doo*," he commented, not sounding particularly convinced.

"Not exactly," Mia continued. "Two teenage girls have been found dead in the basement in the last month." She paused for effect. "Hanged."

"Hanged?" Sam echoed, something tickling at the edges of his memory.

Mia nodded. "Plano's only five miles outside of Richardson," she added. "Where you boys torched that old farmhouse belonging to Mordecai Murdoch, right?"

"The Tulpa?" Dean's eyebrows shot straight up his forehead. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly," Mia confirmed flatly.

"Wait," Sam put in suddenly, brow scrunching in confusion. "How do you know about Mordecai Murdoch?"

Mia grinned. "Your brother insists on regaling me with tales of your past exploits whenever he gets the chance," she explained. "Sometimes I even manage to stay awake right to the end."

"Hey!" Dean protested. "You said you like the Hook Man story!"

Mia smiled sweetly at him. "The possessed monster truck was even better."

"Okay, wait." Sam held up his hands as he tried to steer the conversation back on topic. "So what makes you think this might be Mordecai Murdoch?" he asked. "Does he have any connection to this house?"

"The Hamilton house?" Mia clarified. "No. But the way those girls died – hanged in the basement – it fits Murdoch's M.O., right? I mean, that website – hellhoundslair.com. It's still getting hits on those videos those bozos posted from Richardson. And just because the original sigils burnt down along with Murdoch's house doesn't mean someone couldn't have painted others in Plano –"

"But they're not streaming video from Plano –" Sam interrupted.

"No," Mia interrupted right on back, "but the sigils still appear on the website even if they don't exist in that location anymore."

"That doesn't mean Murdoch could have magically survived and somehow transplanted himself five miles down the road either –"

"And it doesn't mean he *didn't*," Dean put in, stepping in to defend Mia's theory. "Sam, we said at the time that just burning down Mordecai's house might not be enough – that we might have to go back –"

"But he has no connection to Plano, right?" Sam argued.

"We don't know that for sure."

"Dean!" Sam burst out, frustration evident in his voice. "How can he just have picked up sticks and switched location like that?"

"Someone could have summoned him there," Dean countered, the volume level of his voice rising a notch. "Like Mia said – painted new sigils in the spooky old mansion to keep him there."

"But who would do that? Who would know which sigils to paint? And why?"

"Craig Thursten," Dean replied instantly. "The kid who summoned the Tulpa last time."

"You really think he'd try it again?" Sam argued. "After that poor girl *died*, Dean? I mean, Thursten seemed pretty broken up about that to me!"

Dean jumped to his feet, anger flaring in the depths of his eyes. "Sam, you're just looking for reasons for Mia to be wrong!" he burst out, taking a step toward his brother.

Sam followed suit, rising up to his full height and stepping forward until he was deliberately towering over his brother. "And *you're* just looking for reasons for her to be *right!*"

"Sam, I swear to God, I'm getting pretty sick of this goddamned attitude of yours!"

"*My* attitude?" Sam raised his hands to his chest. "Dean, we could have *died* back in Bennington!"

"Oh my God, you're never gonna let that go, are you? What, you keeping a little scorecard hidden in your underwear drawer? 'One point to Sammy, big fat zip to Mia...?'"

"Dean —"

"*Sam?*" Dean made to take another step toward his brother, close enough to get right up in Sam's face, but Mia suddenly interposed herself between them, one hand on each of the boys' chests.

"Okay, enough with the testosterone, fellas!" she burst out, pushing Dean back toward the bed while Sam stepped away, jaw tight and hands balled into fists. "This doesn't get us anywhere," the girl continued. "Sam," she turned to face the younger brother, an earnest expression on her pretty face. "I understand your concerns. I do. I screwed up in Bennington, and I screwed up again here. I get that. But I'm not wrong about this. What harm can there be in us checking it out, huh? We could be in Plano by tonight if we hustle! If I'm wrong, we've wasted a day. So what? We head on out to the next gig tomorrow. But if I'm right..." She let the sentence hang, and Sam took a slow breath, eyes downcast. "People's lives are at stake here, Sam."

"Sam?" Dean's voice was lower, calmer, a little more conciliatory.

Sam looked up at him grudgingly. "Alright," he said, sighing resignedly. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to check it out."

Dean beamed at him as if nothing had happened, as if they hadn't both raised their voices and been seconds away from slugging it out with one another. "That's my boy, Sammy!"

Hamilton house, Plano, TX

"Well, Daphne," Dean said, gazing up at the decrepit ruin that had once been one of the area's most prestigious mansion houses, silhouetted off-white against the starry East Texas night sky, window shutters hanging by single hinges and doors buckling from their frames. "You ready to go unmask the scary caretaker who would have gotten away with it if it hadn't been for us pesky kids?"

Mia sniggered, leaning back against the Impala which Dean had parked discreetly some distance down the dusty winding road. "How come the Scooby Gang never had to sneak past armed police officers in the middle of the night?" she asked, glancing down the road at the patrol car situated very obviously across the old Hamilton house's short, potholed driveway, two patrol cops installed inside, one devouring a burrito while the other completed a Sudoku puzzle from that morning's paper.

"Cause cartoon cops are stupid," Dean replied flatly. "While those two would probably quite happily handcuff us to their car to keep us from busting into a sealed crime scene." He rubbed unconsciously at his wrist. "And me without any paperclips."

Mia frowned slightly. "You sound like you speak from experience," she said, leaning in to him and catching hold of his wrist, before running her fingers lightly up his arm.

Dean grinned lopsidedly. "Maybe," he confirmed, pulling the girl closer and snaking an arm around her waist. "She was a hell of a lot smarter than most cops I've met."

"She?"

Dean snorted. "She wasn't my type," he insisted.

"*Everyone's* your type," Mia countered, poking him in the stomach with one finger. "You liked her, huh?"

Dean shrugged, averting his eyes from the girl. "She was pretty cool," he conceded. "For a cop."

Mia nodded, and seemed about to say something else when Sam approached from a service road which circled around back of the Hamilton house, EMF meter held loosely in his hand.

Dean straightened, dropping his arm from Mia's waist, suddenly all business again. "You find anything?" he asked, worried by the frown etched deep into his little brother's forehead.

Sam glanced each way before crossing the deserted blacktop, and Dean had to smile to himself – all those road safety lessons he'd drilled into his brother as a kid had obviously made a big impression.

"Nothing," Sam pronounced, waving the EMF meter hopelessly. "Not a blip. This place makes Amityville look haunted."

Mia shifted awkwardly. "You sure?" she asked, taking a step toward Sam as if she wanted to check his readings for herself.

Sam nodded emphatically. "I'm sure," he said. "If there's something hiding in that house, then it's way inside that house –"

"Like in the basement?" Dean offered.

Sam sighed. "Yeah, I guess," he agreed reluctantly. "Maybe."

"Alrighty then!" Dean seemed to perk up at that, grabbing the handles of the duffle slung on the ground at his feet and hauling it up onto his shoulder. "Let's go kick some spook ass!"

"Dean, do spooks even have asses?" Sam interjected. "I mean, by definition they're non-corporeal, so they don't really –"

Dean rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry, Professor," he said, shoving Sam out of his way as he strode purposefully the way his brother had just come. "I'd love to stand around and chat but I have ghosts to banish and lives to save."

Sam followed him reluctantly. "You forgot your cape."

Mia chuckled. "Well at least this means I can come with, right?" she said, suddenly dodging around in front of Dean and bouncing on her toes. "That's what you said. Right?"

Dean stopped in his tracks. "Whoa, wait a second there, Buffy," he said. "Those cops are there for a reason –"

"Uh-huh," Mia agreed. "To stop idiot teenagers from trying to break into a house where two of them have died already." She paused for a beat. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not an idiot teenager."

Dean didn't answer that, just stared her down stonily.

"And you *promised*, Dean," she continued, barely keeping a whine out of her voice. "You said if Sam checked out the perimeter and didn't find anything, then I could come in with you guys. That's what you said. Right? You're not gonna go back on your word are you? Dean? Or did you just say I could come to shut me up?" She blinked up at him with big doe eyes that would have put Sam to shame, and Dean was a nanosecond from stamping his foot. "Huh? Dean?"

"Dammit, Mia," he burst out, stomping off toward the service road.

"All right!" Mia burst out, running after him and dodging in front of him again. "Now *that's* what I'm talking about!"

"You know what I said about handcuffing people to cars...?" Dean began.

Mia stopped his forward momentum with one hand on his chest before producing something shiny and silver from her jeans pocket. "I have a paperclip," she told him, grinning broadly so her cheeks dimpled and her eyes sparkled.

Dean's rigid mask of disapproval faltered a little as he fought back a smirk. "What are you, a Girl Scout?"

"Be prepared," Mia told him, scooting off up the service road toward the rear of the mansion. "I take my work seriously."

"So how do you want to play this?" Sam asked, tagging along to the rear, the EMF meter still gripped in one hand. "There could still be something in there –"

"What, the non-existent non-corporeal spirit who exists only in Mia's research?" Dean tossed back over his shoulder.

"Dean –"

"Yeah, okay," Dean said, pausing to take in the sheer size of the ruined house in front of him. "This place is pretty big," he commented, catching up with Mia, who was standing looking up at the smashed windows and big gaping holes in the tiled roof. "Gonna take some time to check it out thoroughly."

"Kinda looks like that place in *It's A Wonderful Life*," Mia murmured. "All the windows broken. Kinda sad."

"Yeah, my heart's bleedin'," Dean commented.

"Don't be like that," Mia said, snaking her arm around his waist. "I bet you watch that movie every Christmas. I know you're a romantic at heart." She glanced down at him suddenly, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Speaking of which, is that a cellphone in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"

Dean grabbed her hand and shoved it into the front pocket of his jeans. "It's on vibrate," he said. "Wanna feel?"

Mia elbowed him in the ribs before shoving him away from her. "Pervert."

"Groper."

"If you guys wanna get a room," Sam said, clearing his throat. "That's fine. Don't mind me or the pissed off Tulpa."

"Sammy, you really need to learn how to relax! Maybe you should take up yoga or something."

"Maybe you should kiss my –"

"Boys," Mia interrupted. "Sam's right. We need to focus. Okay, this is a big house. What do you want to do, we all take a floor each or –"

"What, are you crazy?" Dean burst out. "You're not wandering around Bates Motel without an escort."

Mia scowled at him. "I'm not a kid, Dean –"

"No, but you're exactly Mordecai's type, sweetheart. Or hadn't you noticed that?"

"Oh, and you're going to keep the big nasty Tulpa away from my defenseless little ass?"

"Yes," Dean agreed emphatically. "Because it's such a sweet ass I'd hate anything to happen to it."

Mia scrunched up her face at the half-compliment. "Alright, tough guy," she agreed. "You and I take this half, Sam takes the other?"

Sam nodded a little too eagerly. "Sounds great," he agreed, heading off toward a door to their right while Mia made toward another on their left.

"Hey, wait! Sammy, keep an eye out for cops, okay?" Dean advised his brother. "And – y'know – seven foot Tulpas."

Sam turned slightly, nodding. "I think I know the drill."

"Call me if you find anything."

"Uh-huh."

"Meet back here in – what – thirty?"

"Yeah, yeah..."

Dean got the distinct impression Sam wasn't actually listening to him anymore as he disappeared into the building's innards, a flashlight in one hand and the EMF meter in the other.

"C'mon, Fred," Mia broke in on his thoughts, tugging on his jacket insistently. "We got a Tulpa to toast."

Dean nodded, eyes lingering in the direction Sam had disappeared before he reaffirmed his grip on his weapons duffle and followed Mia to an open doorway which looked like it hadn't sported an actual door since Methuselah was in diapers.

Handing Mia the flashlight, he produced his own homemade EMF meter from the duffle bag, stuffing it into his jacket pocket before drawing out his trusty sawed off shotgun, breaking the barrel and double checking the load before closing it again with a satisfying click.

"Rock salt?" Mia asked, following close on Dean's heels as he stepped cautiously into what looked like it had once been some kind of laundry room in a very distant past life.

"Nuh-uh," Dean replied, shaking his head as his eyes darted about the room. "Wrought iron."

Mia's forehead crinkled. "I thought that didn't work last time?"

"Only because the Hellhounds' server crashed," Dean replied, stepping carefully across the room toward an ill-fitting door on the opposite side. "The information got uploaded eventually, just too late to be much help in Richardson. I figure the Internet Geek Patrol have had two years to concentrate on it hard enough to make it work for us by now."

Mia didn't seem convinced. "Kind of a long shot, don't you think?"

Dean shrugged. "Yeah, well, I also got a can of bug spray and a lighter, so either way, this freak's toast."

The door squeaked loud enough on its rusty hinges to wake several generations of the dead as Dean drew it open and peered out into the hallway beyond.

Paint peeled from the walls in long curly strips, unaccountably reminding Dean of his mom peeling apples in the kitchen back in Lawrence, and large patches of greenish-brown mold lurked in dark corners as water-damaged walls glowered down at them unwelcomingly.

"Hmm, charming," Mia muttered, trying her damndest not to touch anything.

"I dunno, looks like the freakin' Hilton compared to some of the places me n' Sam have stayed in," Dean commented, almost jumping a foot into the air when the EMF meter in his pocket suddenly started screaming like a banshee at a Mariah Carey concert. "Jesus..." he muttered, indicating for Mia to stop as he pulled the gadget out and examined the readout.

"Whoa," Mia said, spying the red lights flashing all over the meter's casing. "That looks kinda..."

"Serious," Dean said, gently sweeping the device in a wide arc and pausing at a low wooden door at the end of the hallway. "That way," he said, noting how the meter screamed louder when he pointed it at the door than when he pointed it anywhere else.

"Basement?" Mia offered.

"No crime scene tape," Dean observed. "But who's to say this place doesn't have more than one basement?"

"Storm cellar maybe," Mia continued. "Just 'cause there's no crime scene tape doesn't mean this isn't where those girls got – whatever they got."

Dean nodded. "Yeah, maybe," he agreed, reaching into his jeans pocket and pulling out his cell.

"What are you doing?" Mia asked uncertainly. "Shouldn't we be getting down there?"

Dean looked at her as if she was completely nuts. "What are you, crazy?" he said. "I need to call Sam. We're not going down there alone. And *you're* not going down there period."

"What?" Mia protested. "Why the hell not? I've come this far –"

"And if this is where Murdoch likes to string up his little girlies," Dean said, "you ain't going no further." He held up his cell to the weak moonlight slanting in through a

broken skylight above their heads, examining the little screen and scowling in frustration. “*Goddamnit!*” he burst out.

“What?” Mia said. “What’s wrong?”

“Battery’s dead,” Dean informed her, scrubbing at his forehead with the tiny phone. “And I checked it before we came in here, I know I did! It was fully charged – I charged it right before we left the motel!”

Mia frowned. “Are you sure?”

Dean looked like his eyes might pop right out of his head. “Yes I’m sure!” he ground out. “Dammit!”

“What’s the big deal?” Mia asked uncertainly.

“What if Sam’s in trouble?” Dean burst out, as if it should be obvious. “What if he’s been trying to call me?”

Mia shrugged. “Dean, he’s been out of your sight for, what? Two minutes? How much trouble can he have gotten himself into in that time?”

Dean seemed to consider that. “I dunno,” he muttered. “When he sets his mind to it, Sam can get himself into trouble pretty damned fast.”

“Then we’ll call him on my phone,” Mia said, reaching into her jeans pocket but frowning slightly as she came up empty. She patted down another couple of pockets, eyes meeting Dean’s sheepishly. “I think I left it in the car,” she confessed, before adding, “But I’m sure Sam’s fine.”

Dean took a breath. “Okay, alright,” he said. “You go back to the car – see if you can raise Sam. If you can’t, come get me. If you can, get him to meet me here in ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes?”

“Yeah,” Dean explained, focus wandering to the other doorways branching off from the hallway. “I want to check out the rest of this floor first, make sure there are no other hotspots before we jump right in to where those girls might have died.”

“Mordecai’s lair,” Mia nodded. “I get it.”

“Listen,” Dean turned to face her, one hand resting lightly on her shoulder. “When you get to the car, I want you to stay there.” When she looked like she might protest, Dean squeezed her shoulder tighter. “I was serious when I said I didn’t want anything to happen to you.”

A wolfish grin tugged at the corners of Mia’s mouth. “Not just concerned about my ass after all?”

Dean pushed a lock of wavy chestnut hair off her face. “I pretty much like the whole package the way it is,” he told her, struggling to maintain eye contact.

Mia swallowed, before nudging him in the ribs. “You’re *such* a girl sometimes,” she told him, standing on tiptoe and kissing him quickly on the cheek before turning on her heel. “Make sure you watch your own ass, Winchester,” she tossed back over her shoulder. “Cause I like *that* the way it is, too!”

Mia made her way back out of the decrepit mansion as quickly as she could, occasionally glancing behind her just to check on Dean’s whereabouts. She heard a door slam in the distance and figured he’d gone further into the building to check out the rest of that floor, exactly as he’d said he was going to do.

Good.

Because that was exactly where she wanted him.

Reaching into her jeans pocket as she stepped out into the Texas night, she casually pulled out her cellphone, a small smile slipping crookedly onto her face.

She checked the signal strength, currently at maximum, before twirling a lock of chestnut hair around her finger as she slid open the phone and hit speed dial.

“Mia?”

Sam’s voice came through the little speaker as clear as a bell, and her grin widened.

“Sam?” she breathed into the phone, her voice taking on a sudden edge of panic. “Sam, I think Dean’s in trouble...”

Hamilton house, east wing Plano, TX

Well if this house was haunted – by an angry spirit or a Tulpa or otherwise – Sam sure as hell couldn’t find any sign of it.

He’d swept the whole first floor with the EMF meter in five minutes, finding absolutely nothing but a nest of rats that would have had Dean jumping up onto the nearest table, and enough mold to keep a whole string of skuzzy motels in suitable décor for a year.

There was nothing here.

Mia was wrong. Again. He was convinced of it.

As he headed toward a flight of rickety-looking stairs intent on sweeping the second floor and no doubt finding zipola there too, his cell chirped in his pocket, and he figured it was Dean with the same story to tell. He and Mia had probably spent the time Sam had been working groping each other some more in a dark corner somewhere.

Drawing out the phone, he was surprised to see the caller I.D. displaying Mia’s name, hitting the button to pick up and bringing the cell swiftly to his ear. “Mia?”

Static crackled loudly, and Sam pulled the phone away from his ear to check the signal strength, frowning when he noted it was displaying at maximum.

“Sam?”

He instantly caught the edge of panic in the girl’s voice and his whole body tensed.

“Sam, I –” The signal crapped out again for a second. “...Dean’s in trouble!”

Sam began to head back the way he’d come immediately, even before he caught Mia’s next words. “Mia, where are you?”

“I’m...car,” the girl’s obviously frightened voice came back. “...Told me to...call you and...storm cellar...right now!”

“Mia?” Sam was running now. “Mia, say that again, I didn’t quite –”

“...Needs...meet him at the storm cellar. Right now! I think...trouble, Sam! ...EMF all over...where Murdoch killed those girls and Dean said...going down there by himself!”

“Mia? Mia!”

“Sam, hurry! I don’t think...”

“Mia!” The signal descended into total static, and Sam shook his phone as if that would help, even as five full bars of signal mocked him from the screen. “Mia!”

Sam raced through the building, back through the maze of connecting rooms and long, many-doored hallways, heart hammering as he repeated Mia’s name down the phone even though he knew she could no longer hear him.

Finally, he ended the crackly call, stuffing his cell into his pocket and bolting headlong in the direction he’d last seen Mia and his brother.

“Dean!” he yelled, tearing into the old laundry room where Dean and Mia had entered the building, ripping open doors and pounding down hallways until he stopped, suddenly. Listening.

“Dean?”

Straining his ears, he could make out yelling in the distance, someone screaming, and he picked up the pace again, launching himself in the direction of the noises until he skidded to a halt in front of a small door that was slightly ajar, set into the end of a long hallway.

He hesitated for a second. Would Dean really have gone down there without backup? He only had Mia’s word for it...

Another scream from the direction of the storm cellar erased all doubt from his mind, and before he knew what he was doing he was fairly leaping down ancient wooden stairs barely able to hold his weight, swaying and shuddering with each heavy footfall.

"Dean!"

Before he had the chance to shine his flashlight into the dank blackness in front of him, he felt something slam his wrist into the damp wall behind him, the flashlight knocked from his grip and sent skittering over the uneven stone floor with a clatter, the beam of light backlighting a dark shape suddenly looming in front of him.

Sam had no time to react before he was slammed bodily against the wall, a strong arm pinning his throat as jet black eyes blinked at him, only inches from his own.

Swallowing hard, he squinted into the darkness, the pale face of a teenage girl swimming into focus even as she tried to choke the air out of his lungs with demon-enhanced strength.

"W- Wait!" he tried to croak out, but the girl shoved harder, and the last thing Sam saw before his vision whited out completely was the noose around the girl's neck...

Hamilton house, west wing Plano, TX

Dean checked his watch nervously, even as he swung the EMF and the flashlight in a tandem arc around the second floor bedroom, weak moonlight streaming in through broken windows and tattered lace curtains.

It had only been a few minutes since he'd sent Mia off to call Sam, certainly not the ten minutes he'd allowed before the rendezvous with his brother back down at the storm cellar.

Still.

He'd found nothing here; less than nothing. No sign of a haunting, no sign of a Tulpa; no sign of anything. Just an old house that no one had set foot in for years until those girls had turned up dead in the basement.

The basement.

His teeth itched, Sammy Senses tingling.

Something was wrong. He was missing something.

He knew it hadn't been ten minutes but...

He backed out of the bedroom and headed for the staircase, his pace at first measured and even, but gradually beginning to pick up speed the closer he got to the first floor.

"Sammy?"

He pulled out his cell again, juggling it with the flashlight. The battery was still flatter than Mary-Alice McCormack's chest back in seventh grade under the bleachers.

Dammit. He *knew* he'd charged the friggin' thing...

"Sam?"

He rounded a corner and shoved open a badly-bowed door, stepping back out into the hallway leading down to the storm cellar.

"Sammy, you here?"

Which was when he heard shouting in the distance.

Straining, he fought to hear what was going on.

Voices. Raised voices. Shouting and...and screaming.

Sammy screaming...

Bolting down the hallway, he wrenched open the storm cellar door and virtually threw himself onto the wooden stairs, intent on killing the crap out of whatever the hell was hurting his brother.

"*Sam!*" he yelled, taking the stairs three at a time. "*Sammy!*"

But Sam never answered.

**Hamilton house,
Plano, TX**

“Sammy!”

Dean leaped the last four steps in one go, landing with a thud on the hard stone floor of the storm cellar even as the hideous screams he had heard all the way upstairs reached an ear-shattering crescendo.

Dean froze. It was a *girl* screaming; while his brother – his brother was screaming in *Latin*.

“...Ab insídiis diaboli, libera nos, Dómine. Ut Ecclésiám tuam secúra tibi fácias libertáte servire, te rogámus, audi nos. Ut inimícus sanctæ Ecclésiæ humiliáre dignéris, te rogámus, audi nos.”

Dean recognized the tail end of the exorcism just in time to swing his flashlight in the direction of the hysterical screeching. A teenage girl with a noose that didn't seem to be attached to anything hung loosely around her neck was illuminated a sickly yellow just as she tipped back her head and screamed black smoke out of her mouth. A mini tornado swirled around the basement in the demon's wake as the girl collapsed unconscious at Sam's feet, for all the world as if her strings had been cut right there.

Sam mostly caught her before she hit the ground too hard, lowering her gently to the floor before gingerly placing two fingers on her neck, checking for a pulse.

Dean blinked several times before managing to grind out breathlessly, “She okay?”

Sam barely glanced at him, gently removing the noose from the girl's neck. “She will be,” he said quietly, his voice rough and croaky. “If we ever manage to figure out how to explain to her that she was possessed by a demon who was trying to force her to hang herself.”

The older Winchester faltered slightly. “So...” he began, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. “Demon, huh? Not a Tulpa.”

Sam looked up at him slowly from his crouch over the unconscious girl, nodding even as he massaged his bruised throat. “No faulting your observational skills,” he said sarcastically, his voice as rough as sandpaper.

Dean shook his head and sighed heavily before taking a hesitant step toward his brother. “What about you?” he asked quietly.

Sam squinted up at him. “Huh?”

“Are *you* okay?”

The concern was obvious in Dean's voice, and Sam nodded shakily, just enough to allay his brother's fears. “Yeah,” he croaked. “Just peachy.”

“Good,” Dean said firmly, covering the distance between them in three short strides. “Because now I'm gonna *kill* you!”

“*You're* gonna kill *me*?” Sam burst out incredulously. “I think *I'm* the one with the axe to grind here! Where the hell *were* you, Dean?” His eyes flashed a challenge, hands held out to his sides.

“Where was *I*?” Dean cut Sam's next outburst short by suddenly grabbing his little brother's collar and yanking him a little less than gently to his feet. “I was exactly where I was supposed to be!” he protested, shaking Sam a little. “Even *I'm* not dumb enough or – or *reckless* enough to come down here without backup!” He shoved at Sam's chest, harder than he'd intended but not hard enough to do much more than cause Sam to rock on his heels.

Sam's eyes continued to flare and he attempted to push his brother away with little success. “I came down here because *you* told me to come down here, Dean!” he protested. “I came down here because I thought I was saving your ass!”

“Sam –” The anger drained from Dean in one sudden rush, and he merely put a hand on the back of Sam's neck and squeezed, unsure which of them he was

actually trying to keep on their feet. “What the hell were you thinking, coming down here by yourself?” He shook his head in disbelief. “It – it could have *killed* you, man!”

Sam took a breath, meeting Dean’s gaze evenly. “I thought you were in trouble,” he said at length. “I thought I heard you screaming. I thought it was killing *you*.”

Dean cast his mind back to the screams he’d convinced himself *he’d* heard only moments earlier: Sam’s screams. He shifted slightly, releasing his hold on his brother and scrubbing a hand down over his face. “You think it was the demon?” he hazarded. “Made us hear that? You heard *me* screaming, I – I heard *you* screaming...?”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “You heard *me* screaming?”

Dean nodded sheepishly. “Why d’you think I came racing down here where there might be a whole mess of rats, Sammy?”

“Not to mention a Tulpa.”

“Yeah. Not to mention a Tulpa.”

Sam shrugged his shoulders and ran a hand through his hair. “I guess demons can cause auditory hallucinations,” he said thoughtfully, scouring his memory for an example of such a case but coming up empty.

“Demons can do a whole lot of weird wacky crap,” Dean agreed.

Sam glanced at the still-unconscious form of the girl at his feet. “At least we managed to save her,” he pointed out. “Score one for Mia’s latest screw up.”

Dean looked up sharply. “Mia?” he echoed. “Now what the hell’s she supposed to have done?”

Sam huffed, hackles rising in response to the instant prickliness in Dean’s tone. “Dean,” he sighed, “I’m not –” He shook his head and made to scoop the girl up off the floor. “You know what, forget it.”

“Wait.” Dean blocked his path suddenly, expression mellowing a fraction. “Just wait.”

Sam paused and took a breath, looking away for a second before inclining his head down toward the demon’s unconscious victim. “We need to get her to a hospital.”

“Sam –”

“All right, Dean! All right.” Sam ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Look, Mia told me to meet you down here, okay? She said to get here right away because you were in trouble.”

Dean raised a brow. “She said that?” he clarified. “That’s not how it went down, man,” he continued. “I wanted to secure the rest of the area before we came charging down into the basement. Didn’t want something coming in behind us and trapping us down here.” He pulled his cell out of his jeans pocket and waved it uselessly. “Battery crapped out just when we got to the interesting part,” he explained. “Mia said she’d left hers in the car, so I told her to go find it and call you – tell you to meet me up top in ten.”

Sam frowned and shook his head. “That’s not what she said, Dean,” he insisted. “I swear, she told me to get my ass down here because you were in trouble, and when I got here I couldn’t find you and I heard you screaming – I swear, I heard you screaming, Dean – so that’s why I came down here alone. I wasn’t being stupid or – or reckless. I don’t have a death wish. I just – Mia said this was where you were and she said that you were in trouble. So I came down here. And if I hadn’t, this poor kid would be dead right now. Because that demon was gonna kill her, just like the others. Just like Mordecai’s victims.” He paused for breath. “Dean, I think this whole thing’s a setup. Something’s not right...”

Dean sighed heavily. “A setup? Come on, Sammy, don’t you think you’re being a little over-dramatic here?”

“Mordecai Murdoch was never here, Dean,” Sam pointed out. “And – and –” he stepped up to his brother and caught hold of his arm. “Mia almost got me killed.”

Dean slowly raised his eyes to his brother's. "Maybe it was just a misunderstanding?" he offered. "Or – or maybe a bad cell signal...?"

Sam shook his head. "That's the weird thing," he admitted. "I was getting a full signal, but Mia's voice kept crapping out."

Hope flashed in Dean's eyes. "Then maybe *Mia* wasn't getting a good signal?"

"And maybe I watched you charge your cell this morning."

Dean seemed to falter for a second before the prickliness returned to his voice. "Oh, you think she drained my battery now too?"

Sam shrugged one shoulder, as if he wouldn't have put it past her.

Dean hung his head a little. He didn't want to fight with Sam over this. But Sam was wrong. Sam *had* to be wrong...

"Look, let's talk about this later, okay?" Sam was saying, refocusing Dean's attention. "For right now we need to get this girl to a hospital."

As Sam once again made to stoop and pick up the girl, Dean suddenly held out his hand to him. "Gimme your phone."

Sam glanced up at him quizzically before reaching into his pocket and pulling out his cell.

Dean took the proffered phone, setting his jaw as he checked the coverage before hitting speed dial. He waited a couple of seconds, frown etched deep between his brows.

"Hey," he said suddenly, trying not to think about how crystal clear Mia's voice sounded over the phone connection.

"Dean?"

Concerned, he tried to convince himself. *She's concerned. Not surprised.*

"Yeah."

"Oh my God, I've been so worried!" Barely-controlled panic was suddenly evident in Mia's crisp, static-free voice. "Are you okay? I've been going out of my mind here!"

"Yeah, everything's fine," Dean told her, eyeing Sam as the younger brother hefted the young girl up into his arms.

"And Sam?" Mia asked, almost as if she was seeing out of Dean's eyes.

Dean bit down, jaw tightening so hard he was pretty sure Sam would hear his teeth grinding together. "Yeah, he's okay."

There was a pause. Barely perceptible, but it was there. "Oh thank God! Where are you?"

"We're coming out. See you in a couple of minutes." Dean disconnected the call with a grimace before slipping the phone back into Sam's jacket pocket.

Sam raised an interrogative eyebrow, and when Dean just looked at him blankly, he sighed before redistributing the girl's weight in his arms and asking, "Can we go now?"

Dean motioned to the stairs with his chin, scooping up both his and Sam's discarded flashlights before following his brother back up toward the first floor.

"Yeah," he murmured. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"I never said that, Sam!" Mia protested fiercely, hands on hips as she widened her stance and lifted her chin a little. "You heard me wrong!"

"Bull," Sam replied shortly, abruptly whirling on her as he left Dean to finish installing the still barely-conscious girl in the back seat of the Impala.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" he heard Dean ask softly, and she whimpered a little before muttering something that might have been "Jordan." "Don't worry, Jordan," Dean reassured her. "We'll get you fixed right up. You're safe now."

The girl continued to whimper, mumbling barely coherently, "No! I don't want to! Please! No, don't!" and Dean continued to make soothing noises while gently brushing back her hair.

Sam tried to hang on to his anger in the face of the poor girl's suffering. "Mia, that demon nearly *killed* me!" he remonstrated. "And her!" He motioned wildly in Jordan's direction, and Dean glanced up briefly through the windshield in response to the sound of raised voices. "Why would you tell me Dean was in trouble if *not* to get me alone in that basement? Huh? Alone with a *demon*?"

"I never said that!" Mia repeated defensively, eyes flicking briefly in Dean's direction as, satisfied Jordan was safely ensconced, he extricated himself from the Impala's backseat and began to head in their direction.

"You said, 'Dean's in trouble. Get to the storm cellar right now!' –"

"I said Dean's going to *get* himself in trouble if you don't get to the storm cellar in *ten minutes!*"

"That's not what you said –"

"Because the signal was so clear, right? Well I for one could barely hear what you were saying, Sam!"

"Yeah, well you can hear what I'm saying now, right?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Dammit, Mia, I already heard all your excuses from your *boyfriend* over there!"

Sam jerked a thumb over his shoulder at Dean. "Almost word for word. Almost as if you could *hear* us!"

"What? What the hell are you accusing me of, Sam?"

Mia took a couple of steps closer to Sam, and Sam didn't back up, choosing to utilize his excessive height to its full looming potential.

But Mia didn't flinch, instead stepping right up to him and getting as close to being in his face as a foot difference in height would allow. "*Sam?*"

"I dunno," Sam continued through gritted teeth. "Is there something I *should* be accusing you of?"

"Like *what*? Like finding gigs for you? Like doing your research for you? Like putting up with your sulking and your pouting? Like – like –" she raised herself up on tiptoe and scowled at him. "Like getting between you and your big brother? Because that's what this is *really* about, right?"

Sam's jaw tightened, and he barely controlled a flinch.

"Okay, that's enough."

Dean was suddenly between them, shoving Sam away with a hell of a lot more force than he'd used on him in the basement, Sam meeting his gaze for a second before abruptly looking away and heading back toward the car.

Dean spun in Mia's direction as she made to push him out of her way and go after Sam. "That means you too."

Sam glanced back over his shoulder, the words too familiar, like *déjà vu* in the worst way. And for the first time in a long time he found himself wishing his dad was here.

Mia took a step away from Dean, eyes locked on his, breathing heavily but saying nothing. She folded her arms across her chest sullenly and turned her scowl back onto Sam.

Dean shook his head, palms outstretched as he deliberately positioned himself between Mia and his brother. "Okay, I'm sensing some tension here," he said, and Sam was vividly reminded of all the fights Dean had broken up between him and Dad when he was a stubborn, know-it-all teenager.

Dean had always gone with humor first, threats of violence second, and actual violence as a last resort.

"We just need to calm down, okay?" the older brother continued. "Look, none of us was expecting a demon here, right? We're all just a little thrown is all. We need time to talk about this. Calmly." He looked at Mia. "Quietly." He looked back over his shoulder at Sam. "And preferably when we don't have access to knives or firearms. Ripping each other's heads off ain't helpin' nobody." He drew a hand through his hair. "And right now, we got a kid in the backseat who *needs* our help. She's been

possessed and almost murdered tonight, so I think we need to get her to a hospital. Right, Sam?" He held Sam's gaze as he echoed his little brother's words from earlier on, and Sam nodded slightly.

"Yeah," he agreed quietly. "I guess."

"Well okay then." Dean motioned to the Impala as he turned his attention to Mia. "You comin' or you wanna walk?"

Mia's scowl softened a little, but her arms remained firmly crossed in front of her chest. "Like I'm gonna let you bozos leave me out here with a demon."

"Demon's gone, sweetheart," Dean grinned brightly and Mia's brow crinkled. "Luckily my baby bro has a brain the size of a planet." He glanced back at Sam. "Who needs dusty old books full o' exorcisms when you got Sammy?" He winked. "Don't tell Bobby I said that."

Mia raised her eyes guardedly in Sam's direction. "You exorcised it?" she asked grudgingly. "From memory?"

Sam nodded stiffly. "You tend to remember stuff like that when you do it enough times."

"No, *you* remember stuff like that, Sammy," Dean said, opening the driver's side door as Sam made to get in the back with Jordan. "Normal people remember showtunes and jingles for fast food restaurants –"

"And Metallica lyrics?"

Dean looked genuinely offended. "Sammy, you callin' me *normal*, dude?"

Sam smiled weakly. "Wouldn't dream of it." He folded himself into the backseat, checking on Jordan who moaned a little before finally settling into a disquieted silence.

"She all right?" Dean asked from the front, as Mia climbed in next to him.

"As all right as she's gonna get right now," Sam said.

"No! Please! I don't want to!" Jordan suddenly muttered, as if on cue.

Dean glanced in the rearview at the girl before gunning the engine and stepping on the gas. "We'll get you help, Jordan," he told her. "Just hold on."

Plano Medical Center, Plano, TX

Dean pulled the Impala into the parking lot of Plano Medical Center, haphazardly navigating around parked vehicles while he looked for signs pointing him in the direction of the ER.

The tension in the Impala was unbearable, Jordan's soft whimpers the only sound as she drifted in and out of consciousness, and Sam was actually quite relieved when his brother jerked to a stop at the ER entrance, narrowly avoiding mounting the red-painted curb.

"So how we gonna play this?" Dean asked, glancing out the windshield at the sliding glass doors in front of him and the beefy security guy in the waiting area beyond.

Mia followed the direction of his gaze. "I'll take her in," she offered. "It'll look less suspicious."

"Less suspicious than what?" Dean demanded with a raised brow.

"Than a guy who's wanted for murder and his eight foot twenty inch brother."

"Hey, you're wanted for murder too, babe," Dean reminded her.

Mia shrugged. "Yeah, well, you're supposed to be dead, so which one of us do you think's gonna draw less attention?"

Dean snorted. "All right, you win. But be careful, huh?"

Mia shrugged. "This ain't my first rodeo, Stretch," Mia informed him with a lopsided wink.

"We've been in Texas, what, half a day and already she's talkin' like a native!" Dean burst out approvingly.

Mia's smile faltered for just a second before it returned again full force. "Hey, we fugitives need to blend, right?" she said lightly. "Don't worry. I'll tell them she's my sister. Had an accident or something."

"How are you gonna explain the rope marks around her neck?" Sam asked, the first thing he'd said to Mia since their argument back at the Hamilton house.

"Extreme macramé?" Dean offered.

Mia rolled her eyes. "I dunno. I'll say we were working out on Grandpa's ranch and she was trying to show me how to rope a steer or something."

Dean nodded his approval. "Hmm, creative approach to falsehood and deception. We'll make a hunter out of you yet."

Sam deliberately made no comment, instead attempting to rouse Jordan enough to get her out of the car. "C'mon, honey, we gotta go," he told her when she tried to push him away.

"Please no! Please, I'll be good, I don't want to die!"

"I think we better hope she tones the amateur dramatics hour down a little when we get inside," Mia observed.

Sam frowned. "She's been through a hell of an ordeal tonight, Mia," he reminded her, looking at her pointedly over the back of the bench seat. "Or have you forgotten what it's like to be possessed?"

Mia didn't answer straight away, just narrowed her eyes and looked at Sam as if he was something she found on her shoe. "No, Sam, I've not forgotten what it's like to be possessed," she returned at length. "Have you forgotten what it's like to not be paranoid and delusional?"

"Ladies!" Dean interrupted again before Sam could respond in kind. "Sammy, help Mia get Jordan out of the car."

Sam grumbled under his breath, but reached over Jordan and shoved the door open, Mia hopping out of the front seat and swinging the younger girl's arm over her shoulder as she hauled her out of the car with very little assistance from Sam.

"You got her?" Sam asked, following Jordan out of the Impala and grabbing her other arm to steady her a little.

Mia nodded. "Yeah, don't worry, I been lugging sacks o' potatoes around my grandpa's farm since I was big enough to peel 'em." She grinned brightly as she caught Jordan effortlessly around the waist and settled her against her hip.

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Grandpa?" he echoed. "I thought you said you grew up in foster homes?"

Mia blinked. "Sure," she agreed. "One of my foster families. I kinda kept in touch with my foster mom's dad."

Sam nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Okay," Mia continued as if Sam hadn't spoken, inclining her head in Dean's direction as Sam shut the back door and climbed into the front of the Impala. "Well I'll give you guys a call when I've got Jordan squared away. Come pick me up?"

"Well, I'll give it a try," Dean drawled, "but from the looks of how you're swinging that there girl on your arm, I think you might be stronger than I am!"

Mia shook her head. "Smartass."

"Back at ya, honeybunch."

"Dean —"

"All right, all right!" Dean grinned at her flirtatiously and Sam wondered how his brother could have apparently so easily dismissed Sam's misgivings so quickly. "Look, we'll head on back to the motel — do some regrouping — and come get you when you're ready."

"Okay, I'll call you later."

"Keep your eyes peeled for five-oh while you're in there," Dean advised her, before adding, "And if you run into Dr. McDreamy and that Grey girl, how's about you use that super-strength of yours to toss them down the nearest lift shaft? Do us all a favor."

Mia glanced over her shoulder and stuck her tongue out at him.

"I can't believe she watches that show," Dean muttered, shaking his head as he followed her progress toward the ER entrance.

As soon as she was out of sight a tense silence descended on the remaining occupants of the Impala.

Sam bit his lip and glanced sideways at his brother, who was still staring at the ER's glass doors even though Mia was no longer visible. "Earth to Dean!"

Dean blinked, turning to look at Sam as if he'd forgotten he was there. "Huh?"

"We stay here much longer we're gonna get towed."

Dean nodded, distractedly snapping on the radio to drown out the uncomfortable silence as he reversed the Impala out of the ambulance bay to the strains of The Kinks' *You Really Got Me*.

Girl, you really got me now.

You got me so I don't know what I'm doin' now...

Dean huffed, snapping the radio back off.

Sam paused before taking a deep breath. "Dean, we need to talk about this," he said, trying to broach the subject gently.

"Talk about what, Sam?" Dean said stonily, swinging the Impala out of the hospital parking lot and pointing her in the direction of their motel. "About how you think Mia's some kind of Big Bad out to sabotage our every move and eventually get us killed?"

Sam detected the irony in Dean's words and frowned grimly. "This isn't a joke, Dean," he pointed out seriously.

Dean sighed heavily. "Believe me, I know that, Sam," he admitted.

Silence again filled the car, only the sound of the Impala's V8 and her tires against asphalt filling the empty space between the brothers.

"Dean, look, I know you – you *like* Mia –"

Dean's gaze skittered sideways before fixing determinedly on the road ahead.

"But you've got to see a pattern forming here?" Sam persisted. "I mean, she shows up out of the blue having murdered her boyfriend and anyone else unlucky enough to get within half a mile of her; she's the victim of multiple possessions that – that by rights should have killed any ordinary person; she destroys a *police station* while manifesting all the powers of the demon Malphas, but when we summon *him*, he denies all involvement and – oh yeah – tries to kill us. And what did he call her? 'Common trash,' right?"

Dean didn't reply, merely continued to fix his gaze straight ahead as if he wasn't listening to a word Sam was saying.

"Then there's Father Normand in Missouri," Sam continued, his brother's narrowed eyes, flared nostrils and clenched teeth more than adequately telegraphing the fact that Dean was listening only too well. "Bobby sends us to the foremost expert in demon possession – besides himself; the only guy that might be able to explain Mia's possessions and know of a way to save her...and he winds up dead just before we get to talk to him."

"Coincidence," Dean ground out through gritted teeth.

"That's not what you said at the time, Dean," Sam argued. "And let's not forget Bennington – we nearly get our asses fed to the NuJack because Mia can't read a book."

"Sam –"

"And then there's Joe Bearwalker. And the Impala breaking down outside of Cibola for no apparent reason, just when Pazuzu is on our tail –"

"You're forgetting Mia let Pazuzu possess her, Sam!" Dean pointed out angrily.

"To save *my* ass!"

Sam shifted in his seat to better face his brother. "Did she?" he asked.

"Did she what?" Anger flared at the edges of Dean's voice.

"Did she really let Pazuzu possess her? Were you even really in danger?"

“What the hell are you talking about, Sam? That demon would have ripped me and Hank to pieces if she hadn’t done what she did!”

“How do we *know* that, Dean? What if –” Sam stopped short and Dean glanced sideways at him.

“What if *what*, Sam?”

“Dean.” Sam took a deep breath. His brain wanted to lay everything out in front of his brother, everything he’d been thinking these last couple of weeks. About Mia. About Dean. But his heart just wouldn’t let him. “I’m not saying this to hurt you,” he mumbled instead, looking down, looking away, looking anywhere but at his brother.

“Well you got a funny way of showin’ it.”

Sam glanced back up at the sudden uncharacteristic hurt in Dean’s voice. He wanted to apologize, wanted to say he was wrong, he was mistaken, take it all back... But deep down inside of him he knew that was a lie. He had to listen to those voices. He *had* to.

“I think something really bad’s going on here.” Even after Sam said it he wished he could make it not true. “With Mia.”

“Like what?” Dean took his eyes off the road for a second. “Sam, what exactly *do* you think’s going on? Huh?”

“I don’t know!” Sam admitted, already resigned to the fact that his next revelation was probably going to destroy what little patience his brother had left with him. “I just think... Look, don’t get mad okay –?”

“Oh God, I am so not gonna want to hear this am I?”

“So I’ve been doing some research,” Sam said slowly.

“What kind of research?” Dean asked, just as slowly.

Sam swallowed. “On Mia.”

Dean’s fingers tightened convulsively around the steering wheel and his jaw clenched even tighter. “Oh you have, huh?” he ground out, his voice artificially calm.

“Just – just a little,” Sam admitted. “You know, Dad always says to check out your friends as well as your enemies –”

“And when the hell did you ever listen to anything *Dad* had to say?” Dean demanded incredulously, the tips of his ears turning a distinct shade of scarlet.

“Dean –”

“So which do you think she is, huh, Sam? A friend? Or an enemy?”

“Dean –”

“Cause I’d really like to know where you stand on that.”

“Look,” Sam took a breath and tried to ignore the unbridled sarcasm in his brother’s voice. “I did some nosing around a few databases, okay? Hall of Records, DMV. CPS and a few police departments in Oklahoma. Dean, I couldn’t find any record of a ‘Mia Cameron’ anywhere. It’s as if she never existed. Not until about six months ago when she applied for an Oklahoma driver’s license. That’s the first record I could find of her *anywhere*, Dean – no birth certificate, no school records, no social security number...”

“Maybe she wasn’t born in Oklahoma –”

“I checked the surrounding states too,” Sam informed him. “Nothing. She’s a ghost, Dean. Right up until she showed up at that garage in Warner looking for a job. If she was bounced around foster homes all over Oklahoma like she said she was, surely CPS would have *some* record of her?”

Dean didn’t respond, merely continued to stare straight ahead, features flinty and eyes narrowed.

“And what about that slip-up over her grandpa?” Sam continued.

“Huh?” That drew Dean’s attention back to his brother, a disbelieving frown hardening his expression still further.

“Outside the hospital,” Sam clarified, mistakenly believing Dean was confused rather than incensed. “She said she grew up helping out on her grandpa’s farm.”

“She explained that –”

“Just like she explained that weird little Texas twang showing up in her accent every now and then?”

“Sam, you heard her, she’s trying to be inconspicuous!”

“By trying out her inconspicuous Texas accent in New Mexico? Or in Vermont? Arizona? In *Oklahoma*, where she’s supposed to have been born and bred?”

“So suddenly you’re an accent expert now?”

“Took a course in sociolinguistics at Stanford,” Sam countered, causing Dean to huff dismissively.

“Yeah, ’cause College Boy knows everything there is to know about everything and the rest of us poor schmoes should stick to football and beer, right?”

“Dean, we’ve travelled from sea to shining sea more times than the Cannonball Run! You’re telling me you can’t tell the difference between an Oklahoma accent and a Texas accent?”

“So now you’re saying she’s lying to us about everything?” Dean said, pointedly not answering Sam’s question. “Where she’s from? Who she is?”

“I don’t know, Dean. There might be a perfectly logical reason why I can’t find any trace of her. Maybe she changed her name. Maybe she had a valid reason to change her name. All I’m saying is that we need to be careful. We’ve invited this girl into our lives without really knowing the first thing about her –”

“Sam –”

“Dean, I’m just trying to protect you –”

“Sam, as I recall *you* were the one who wanted me to shack up with Mia in the first place! You practically threw her at me!”

Sam straightened out his shoulders. “Yeah well that was before I –” He stopped abruptly, swallowing hard.

“What, Sam?” Dean’s voice was rising incrementally with each sentence. “Before you *what?*”

“I don’t *know*, Dean!” Sam burst out, meeting his brother’s glower before lowering his voice almost submissively. “I don’t know what it is about her, Dean, what she’s up to. I just can’t help thinking she’s up to *something*. Like luring us here with that Mordecai story –”

“*Luring*’ us?”

“– And almost getting me killed.”

Dean seemed to sober at that, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

Sam took another deep breath, steeling himself for the explosion he knew would inevitably follow what he was about to suggest next. “For all we know she could have been the one controlling that demon tonight, Dean,” he managed finally. “Just like she could have been controlling Pazuzu. Just like she could have been controlling *all* of them – *all* of the demons that have supposedly possessed her.”

Dean slammed his fist against the steering wheel, causing Sam to start. “All right, that’s it.”

Dean swerved the Impala onto the shoulder with a spray of gravel and a squeal of tires. Slamming the car into park, he fairly leapt out, almost as if he couldn’t stand to be in it anymore.

Almost as if he couldn’t stand to be in it with *Sam* anymore.

Sam jumped out after him. “Dean! Wait!”

Dean had already stormed away a good couple of yards along the side of the road, but Sam dashed after him, long strides catching up quickly until he was able to grab his brother’s arm and swing him back around to face him.

“Dean, please, just let me –”

“Let you what, Sam?” Dean shook off Sam’s hold roughly. “Let you try to convince me Mia’s some kind of demon puppetmaster?” There was fire in Dean’s eyes. Fire and anger and hurt. Real, deep-seated hurt. “Is that what you’re saying to me?”

Sam sighed, running a tired hand across his forehead. “Dean, I didn’t say...”

"Are you friggin' *mental*, Sammy?" Dean cut him off, suddenly right up in Sam's face. "Can you even *hear* yourself?"

Sam straightened, taking a half-step back in surprise. "Look, I don't know what she is, okay? And I don't know what to think. I just know that I'm not the only one who thinks there's something *off* about her!"

"And by 'off' you mean able to control demons with the express purpose of trying to kill us?"

"Dean –"

"Sam, she almost turned herself into a charcoal briquette back in Oklahoma! You really think she'd have done that if she was in control of the demon possessing her?"

"Maybe she's just a damn good actress."

"*What?*" Dean was yelling now, and Sam didn't manage to stifle a flinch. "You think she *wanted* to be burned alive?"

"No, I think she might have wanted *you* to think she wanted to be burned alive!"

"Why? Why the *hell* would she want to do that, Sam?"

"Sympathy? All the better to convince you she's the poor defenseless victim in all of this? You never could resist a damsel in distress, Dean."

"You have got to be *kidding* me with this, Sam!" Dean turned away, fingers tugging at his hair as he spun on the spot almost as if he was going to storm off again, before turning around and getting back up in Sam's face. "You have *any* proof? *Any?* Huh, Professor? Or should that be 'Your Honor?' You already seem to have her tried and convicted, after all. Now all you need to do is pass sentence, right? Judge, jury and executioner, all rolled into one giant, stupid, Sasquatch-sized package."

Sam shook his head and gritted his teeth. "Look, Hank sensed it too, Dean!"

"*Hank?* Hank the crazy hick mechanic back in Cibola? *That* Hank? Oh, if he says it, then it *must* be true!"

"Dean, even *you* said there was way more to him than meets the eye! And even *he* told me to watch out for her! To watch out for *you*! 'Listen to the voices' he said. Listen to my instincts. And Dean, my instincts are telling me to get the hell away from Mia as fast as we can – just put her in our rearview and get the hell outta Dodge, man!"

"Leave her by the side of the road like some discarded beer can, huh?" Dean said. "That's what you want? Let her eat our dust? After she saved my life – what, *twice?* That I know of. Like when that freakin' walkin' glue factory threw me and I got myself impaled on that fence post? I would have *died* if Mia hadn't been there, Sam!" Dean raised himself to his full height, jaw jutting out only inches from Sam's. "And where the hell were *you* then, huh?" Sam flinched visibly. "I didn't see *you* riding in on your white horse with the cavalry in tow!"

"Dean." Sam's voice was subdued, small. "How can you say that to me? We were separated! How was I to know something had happened to you?" Although, if Sam was being honest, he *had* known – somehow – that something had happened. But he wasn't about to admit that to Dean, who would no doubt freak even more if he knew Sam had some kind of psychic Big Brother in Danger early warning system hardwired into his brain.

Dean nodded. "Uh-huh. Somethin' up with those demonic Spidey Senses of yours, huh Sammy?"

The color drained instantly from Sam's face, his flinch even more noticeable. "Demonic?" he echoed, not quite able to believe Dean had just said that. "You're calling *me* demonic?"

Dean set his jaw and lifted his chin, but he seemed to falter just a little, eyes skittering away from Sam's shattered gaze. "Maybe it takes one to know one."

Sam laughed mirthlessly, dragging a hand through his hair as he turned away. "Yeah, well if that's what you *really* think of me then I'm glad we got it out in the open sooner rather than later. Wouldn't want me to go all Darkside on you when you least

expect it now would we? When you turn your back. When you're asleep in the next bed. Not like that motel room in New Jersey when you were lugging around Haris' demon spawn – when you threw me across the room and tried to gut me with your Bowie knife!"

Dean's jaw dropped slightly, eyes widening. "That – that was different!" he protested. "I was *possessed!*"

"And still I trusted you, Dean. Even when you were possessed." When Dean made no response to that, Sam added, "So maybe we should just part ways right now? Huh? If you don't trust me. If you think *I'm* the demonic one. Give it all up as a bad job. Maybe we were on the right track when I left to go find Dad in California and you went off to pick apples with that scarecrow god in Indiana. Gotta protect yourself from your big bad demonic baby brother after all, don'tcha Dean?"

Dean took a breath, eyes lowered, an edge of something almost approaching an apology in his voice. "Sam, I didn't mean –"

Sam turned back to face him. "Yes you did," he said quietly. "And if you think that of *me* but aren't even the *slightest* bit suspicious of Mia, then I guess I really don't know you as well as I thought I did." He straightened. "And you sure as hell don't know me."

"Sam."

"Dean, I don't know what's going on with Mia, okay? This is all supposition and – and – gut feelings and weird coincidences and little things that make me think maybe there's a bigger picture going on here we just can't see! Okay? But forgive me for not wanting to get bitten in the ass by another chick who turns out to be some kind of demon!"

Dean frowned, expression caught somewhere between regret and hostility. "Meg? You think she's another Meg?"

Sam shrugged, raising his hands to the heavens. "Who the hell knows, Dean? Maybe she *is* a demon. Maybe she has the power to control demons. Maybe she was never really possessed at all. But we've trusted her too much already and I think we need to check this out properly before we make the same mistake again –"

"*We?*" Dean echoed, eyebrows raised in disbelief. "I think you're confusing me with that other guy – y'know, the one who was dumb enough to hook up with a skanky demon chick out to use him as bait to trap and murder his dad. Remember him? Oh wait, that was *you*, right?" Dean shook his head. "You know, for a college boy fresh outta Stanford, you were pretty damn gullible there, Sammy."

Sam nodded, feeling the anger rising in him like mercury in a thermometer. "Yeah, well right back at ya!" he snapped. "And how come it always comes back to that? Me going to college? The big family betrayal. You know what? You're just jealous. That I got to leave. That I had a life –"

Dean's eyes flashed. "And *you're* just jealous I finally got someone in my life besides *you!*"

Sam took a heavy step backwards, almost as if Dean had physically sucker-punched him. Suddenly he found himself confronted by his own fears – wearing his brother's face and speaking with his brother's voice.

You're just jealous. You can't stand to play second fiddle to some random girl he cares more about than he does you.

Maybe he *was* jealous. Maybe that's all this was. Maybe Mia was just some incredibly unlucky innocent dragged into a world she couldn't control and Dean... Dean had let himself fall for her. And Sam was jealous.

"Is that it?" Dean continued, breaking in on Sam's thoughts as if he'd been reading them. "You're jealous because you think I care more about her than I do about you?"

Sam swallowed. "Dean, that's not true," he protested, and it sounded weak, even to his own ears.

"Yeah well I think it is," Dean insisted. "You've had me all to yourself since you were six months old, Sam. I've been there for every birthday, every soccer match, every school play, every skinned knee, every broken heart. First word, first step, first unrequited crush. I've always been there for you, Sam. Had your back. Been in your corner. And you? First chance you get, you up and leave. So forgive me if I figured maybe I deserved a life too. Forgive me if I figured maybe I wanted something like what you had with Jessica."

Sam felt hot tears prickle at the back of his eyes, but he willed them away, setting his jaw. "And look how that ended, Dean. You think I want to see you go through what I went through with Jessica?"

Dean gritted his teeth and looked away. "Sam, I think – I think I'm in love with her, okay? Don't you think I deserve that? Or can't you stand the fact I might finally have someone in my life as important to me as you are? Because this – what you're sayin'?" He shook his head. "You know how long it's been since I had someone in my life that wasn't you or Dad?"

Sam met his brother's gaze reluctantly. "Dean, look, I'm just trying to watch your back –"

"By telling me the first girl I've felt – *anything* – for since – since Cassie...you're telling me she's some kind of *demon*?"

"Dean, I never said... Look, I'm just trying to look out for you; I'm just trying to *protect* you –"

"Well thanks, little brother, but I think I can take care of myself," Dean snorted derisively. "'Cause I've pretty much been doin' that since I was friggin' four years old, haven't I?"

Sam blinked. Dean rarely talked about those first years after Mom's death. And the few times he had, it had never been with this much resentment, this much *honesty* in his voice. Sam wasn't familiar with it and had no idea how to deal with it. "Dean –" he began quietly.

But it was almost as if once the dam broke and the words started gushing out of Dean's mouth, he had no way to make them stop. "Who was lookin' out for you when you were four? Huh, Sam?" he continued. "*Me*. You think you're so much better than me, so much smarter? But I've been taking care of *your* ass since *I* was four. And now you think you know better than I do who I should be in love with? Well I got news for you, Sammy: I'm not an idiot. Despite what you might think. I can tell the difference between a demon and a human. And I can tell the difference between a villain and a victim. And Mia? She's a victim, Sam. Life dealt her a crappy hand and she made the most of it. And you know what? She never whines about the life she could have had – about what she's lost. About being *ordinary*. About being *normal*. She never *had* a family to want to run away from –"

"Dean, I never wanted to run away from you –"

"Yeah, well you coulda fooled me, Sammy. So maybe you were right before. Maybe this is the end of the road for us. Or maybe it should be. Maybe you should have left me to that fugly scarecrow god and gone off to look for Dad in California. Or maybe I should have never come gotten you from Stanford. Maybe we've just been spending too much damn time together. Familiarity breeds contempt, or some damn thing, right? Sam, if my having someone else in my life who's as important to me as you are is making you crazy enough to accuse her of conspiring with demons, then you gotta see how messed up that is! We're co-dependent screw ups, Sammy! So if you want me to choose between you and Mia – 'cause you're so convinced I care more about her than I do about you – then I gotta go, man. I can't deal with that. I can't live with a brother who looks at the woman I love everyday and wonders whether she's a demon who wants to kill us. I can't, Sam."

Sam just gazed at him levelly. "You finished?"

Dean shrugged. "Knock yourself out."

“So do I get a say in this at all?” Sam asked at length. “Or is that it? You ride off into the sunset with Mia while I’m left standing here by the side of the road?”

“S up to you, Sam,” Dean said. “But I love Mia and nothing you can say is gonna make me change my mind about her.”

“You’re gonna wait till she kills us both?”

Dean rolled his eyes skyward. “You know what, Sam, I’ve had it. Right now, I’ve had it. I can’t talk about this anymore. We’re just goin’ round in circles. You do what you gotta do, man. I don’t care anymore. I don’t.” He spun on his heel abruptly and began to head purposefully back toward the Impala.

“Dean, where are you going?”

“I’m gonna give you some space to think about it, Sam,” Dean tossed over his shoulder, steadfastly refusing to turn back toward his brother. “I’m gonna give you some space to think about how you feel – about me, about Mia. About how you really feel. And when you’ve made a decision, come find me. But right now I can’t do this anymore. So I’m gonna go get Mia from the hospital, and if you wanna talk you know where to find us.”

Sam made a move to follow him but stopped in his tracks as Dean finally tossed a look that was equal parts fury, resignation and devastation over his shoulder.

“Dean –”

“I’ll seeya, Sammy.”

Later, Sam would wonder why he didn’t go after his brother, why he didn’t try to stop him. Why he just stood there and watched mutely as Dean jumped into the Impala, fired up the engine and accelerated off down the road in a cloud of dirt and gravel. Just like in Indiana. Only this time it was Dean doing the leaving.

He wasn’t entirely sure how long he stood there, gazing after the Impala’s taillights in a haze of shock and disbelief that his big brother – his dependable, reliable, ridiculously over-protective smartass of a big brother – would leave him standing by the side of the road like an old truck discarded because it ran out of gas once too often.

Had Dean really chosen Mia over him? Had Sam driven him to that?

A sudden, gut-wrenching sense of loneliness assaulted him, and he realized Dean was right about one thing – Sam had always had his big brother at his back, always had him in his corner. Even during those two years they didn’t talk while Sam was away at school, he’d always known that if he needed him, Dean would be right there for him. Any time, any place.

Right now though, as he became suddenly aware of the chill seeping through his thin jacket, of the fact that it was the middle of the night and he was in the middle of nowhere and he had no idea how to get back to their motel, all he could do was stare at the place where the Impala’s taillights had last been and wonder whether this was it. Was it over? Had he really forced Dean’s hand, forced him to choose between his brother and the girl he was in love with? What if he was wrong? What if Mia really *was* innocent? And what if she *wasn’t*? Dean could be in real danger.

And all Sam could do was stand by the side of a deserted road in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere with no idea how to get back to his brother.

* * * *

He’d only met her once.

Jessica.

Sam’s girl.

Dean wondered, as he watched his little brother recede into a tiny dot in the Impala’s rearview, whether he and Jess would have gotten along, had things been different. Had she not burned up on her bedroom ceiling just like Mom.

He’d liked her. Sure, she was hot and everything, but it was more than that. He figured himself a pretty good judge of character and, based on the two minute

conversation he'd had with her at the apartment in Palo Alto, she'd seemed...nice. Girl next door nice. Bring you chicken soup when you were sick nice. Bake you cookies nice. And, of course, way out of Sam's league.

He smiled a little as he remembered her Smurfs t-shirt and the way she'd looked up at Sam like he was the only other person in the world; and he wondered whether he would have been jealous of her, had he been given the chance to get to know her. The way Sam was obviously jealous of Mia.

He shrugged and snapped on the cassette deck, blasting out a little Bad Company in the hope of erasing this evening's ugliness from his mind with a well-placed guitar riff.

*You've been living in a world of fiction, and you can't see who's wrong, no
You've been living in the past, it's a contradiction, and this can't carry on...*

Dean grimaced.

*Welcome to the world of the brokenhearted, I welcome you
You've been heading down the road to nowhere, and you don't know the way...*

Stupid Bad Company.

He ejected the cassette and tossed it in the back seat, listening to the sound of his own breathing instead.

But the car was too quiet and Dean had never been comfortable alone with his own thoughts.

He glanced at the empty passenger seat before his eyes drifted back to the equally empty rearview, and his thoughts once again wandered toward Jessica.

Of course, he and Sam had barely spoken after the younger brother had left for the shiny hallowed halls of Stanford. There had been time and distance between them, their relationship put on hold by hunting and by studying, by duty and by freedom. Dean had stayed and Sam had left and Dean had had no reason to feel possessive of his little brother or jealous of his girl.

But they were different people now than they'd been back then. A couple of years back in each other's lives, eating, sleeping, fighting and almost dying side by side and maybe Sam had a reason to feel the way he did about Mia. He was just being protective of Dean. Not jealous. Not at all.

But maybe Dean was just making excuses. Sam had no right to say the things he'd said about Mia. No right at all. Dean would never have said anything like that about Jessica. Never questioned her motivation or her loyalty. Even if he *had* been jealous. Which he wouldn't have been. No way.

"I gotta borrow your boyfriend here, talk about some private family business..." he suddenly remembered telling her, as if his claim on Sam was infinitely greater than hers could ever be, and a tiny corner of his brain remembered a sudden spike of – something – when Sam had put his arm around her, raised his chin and grit out defiantly, *"No. Whatever you want to say, you can say it in front of her."*

Of course, Sam had been wrong about that.

The way he'd been wrong about a lot of things.

The way he was wrong about Mia.

So yeah, Dean may have been a *tiny* bit jealous of Jessica, but he'd not snuck off to the nearest library in the middle of the night to research every last detail of her life like some demented stalker. Like *Sam*.

Of course, Sam probably hadn't snuck off anywhere to do anything, but that didn't stop Dean picturing it in his mind's eye, Sam with a villainous grin on his face as he produced another piece of damning evidence with a triumphant "Ah-ha!" and a twirl of his villainous fake mustache.

God, just thinking about it made Dean grind his teeth together and grip the steering wheel so hard he could practically hear his old girl squeal in pain.

How could Sam have gone behind his back like that? Sneaking around, checking out Mia's story; *spying* on them.

And, just as Dean had no proof Sam had snuck off to a library in the middle of the night while twirling a villainous mustache, he also had no proof that Sam had been spying on them. None at all. But he was just so damned *incensed* right now his brain didn't really give much of a crap about reason or logic.

He replayed the last hour over and over in his head – Sam sniping at Mia, Sam sniping at Dean, Dean calling Sam “demonic...”

Dean had called Sam *demonic*.

He blanched at the thought, stomach beginning to churn in shame.

How could he have said that?

How could he have said that to *Sam*?

What the hell was he doing? Was he *really* choosing to believe Mia's story over Sam's? On what grounds? His kid brother was the smartest person he knew and he'd known him a hell of a lot longer than he'd known Mia. So if Sam said there was something wrong with the girl, that her story didn't check out, then Sam had to be right. Right?

But then, what was Sam doing checking her out in the first place?

Dean felt his ire beginning to rise once more as he considered that. Sam had no *right* to do that. No right at *all*.

He wondered how long this had been going on, this little obsession of Sam's. How long had he been suspicious of Mia? How long had he been “researching” her? Since before Cibola? Is that why he'd gone storming off into the desert like a teenage girl with PMS?

Goddamnit, Sam!

Sam could have died.

Sam could have *died*.

He glanced into the rearview, his little brother no longer visible standing alone by the side of the road.

He needed to give Sam a little space, that was all. A little time to get used to the idea of Dean and Mia. Sam was a smart kid. Way smart. Eventually he'd realize he was wrong about the girl. He'd come around. Eventually.

Wouldn't he?

What if he didn't? What if Sam was so blinded by whatever this mental block was he'd put up between himself and Mia – be it jealousy or something else – that he never got past it? What would Dean do then? Was this it for them? Zero hour? If Sam couldn't handle Dean having any kind of relationship but the one they had with each other, then what hope was there for them? Was parting ways really the only way to go?

Dean shook his head. No, that was just stupid. And it made Sam sound plain *lame*. It made *Dean* sound plain lame. Sam wasn't a little kid anymore, pissed off that Dean would rather go out on a date than stay in and watch *Star Wars* with him for the millionth time. Sam was an adult now – smart and logical. He was mature enough to handle this. It couldn't be something as simple as petty jealousy. Dean had a much higher opinion of Sam than to believe that. So if it wasn't just jealousy and Sam's gut really was telling him they shouldn't trust Mia, then maybe he was right?

Dean thought back to the way Sam had looked, laid out unconscious on the dusty floor of that abandoned bar on the edges of the Sonora, and shuddered.

Sam could have *died*.

His gaze skittered toward his cellphone abandoned on the seat next to him, fingers of his right hand creeping across the leather until they curled around cool plastic.

He needed to call Sam. He needed to check he was okay....

As he brought the little phone up to eye level he suddenly remembered that the battery had crapped out on him back at the Hamilton house, and Sam's ridiculous assertion that Mia had somehow been responsible.

Like Mia could have drained the battery!

Like Mia could have almost set herself on fire just to garner Dean's sympathy and trust.

Like Mia could have done something to Joe Bearwalker or killed Father Normand.

Like Mia could control *demons*.

It was ridiculous. It was stupid. Sam was being an ass.

Screw it. He flung the cellphone across to the passenger side of the bench seat and punched the steering wheel in sheer frustration. *Stupid, snot-nosed, jealous little brat...*

He *deserved* to be ditched by the side of the road. Maybe it'd teach him to grow up a little.

That thought got Dean through the next five minutes.

But as he pulled the Impala back into the parking lot of Plano Medical Center, his mind soon strayed back to that question hovering at the edges of his consciousness; that question he had never thought he would be forced to answer.

If it came down to it, if he had to choose between Sam and Mia...What the hell would he do?

Roadside, Plano, TX

Sam kicked at an empty beer can abandoned by the side of the road as he continued to trudge along in the opposite direction to the one Dean had taken when he took off in the Impala. He glanced over his shoulder at the sound of an engine, but the headlights behind him turned off to the right before they even reached his position and he pulled his jacket tighter around himself to keep out the growing chill.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been walking, but not a single vehicle had passed him by since Dean had driven away.

Dean had driven away.

He cleared his throat before setting his jaw and trying not to think about it.

Was he even going in the right direction? He'd only passed a couple of junctions and he was pretty sure Dean hadn't turned off the main road on the way to the hospital. But they'd been headed from the direction of the Hamilton house, and now Sam wanted to get back to the motel. They'd been headed that way before they'd had the fight. *Disagreement*, Sam amended. *Misunderstanding*. He sighed. *Fight*, he finally admitted. And Dean had swung the Impala back the way they'd come when he'd told Sam he was going back to the hospital to pick up Mia. So Sam *must* be going the right way...right?

He frowned. How had he gotten himself so turned around?

That was a good question. How *had* that happened? Could he really be so *wrong* about Mia? Maybe Dean was right. Maybe Sam was just being an idiot.

He pulled his cellphone out of his pocket, finger hovering over Dean's speed dial before he remembered Mia had somehow drained the battery in Dean's cell.

He almost laughed at that.

How the hell could Mia have drained the battery in Dean's cell?

Yeah, he was being an idiot. And Dean was right...except he wasn't. Sam knew it. He just *knew* it. Mia had meant for Sam to wind up in that basement by himself. Mia had meant to get him killed tonight. He'd never been so sure of anything in his life.

So why wouldn't Dean *listen* to him? Why wouldn't he open his eyes? Why wouldn't he even admit the possibility that something could be up with Mia?

So this was it? Dean would rather trust Mia than his own brother? Whom he'd known his whole life while he'd know Mia *five freakin' minutes*?

Screw him, he thought. *He's being an ass*. If Dean didn't know enough by now to trust Sam, then maybe Sam should leave him to it and let him suffer the consequences.

But the consequences were pretty unthinkable.

He shuddered, trying not to dwell on it, wrapping his long arms about himself in an effort to fend off the early morning chill.

Goddamnit, Dean!

Dean could be in danger.

What if Mia wanted to kill him too?

He quickened his pace a little, encouraged by distant streetlights and what looked like a few houses a mile or so up the road. Dean would be okay. Sam would get back to the motel, they'd make a joke out of this and it would all be over.

Except Mia would still be in the next room.

His fingers tightened convulsively around his cellphone, thumb still hovering over Dean's speed dial even though he knew there was no way his big brother could pick up the call.

Dean...

He almost dropped the phone when it suddenly lit up in his hand, vibrating wildly as it belted out Feeder's *Feeling A Moment* and the little screen flashed a single word: *Dad*.

Plano Medical Center, Plano, TX

"Hey, hotstuff." Mia leaned in through the driver's side window, caught hold of Dean's chin and tilted his face in her direction. "I been calling you!"

Dean shrugged, slapping on a fake smile and trying not to think about the expression on Sam's face as he left him by the side of the road. "Phone's dead, remember?" he said.

Mia nodded. "Oh right. I broke your phone." She leaned in and kissed him before pulling away and grinning broadly as she scooted around the front of the big Chevy and pulled open the passenger door.

Dean frowned. "What was that for?" he asked a little uncertainly as the girl climbed in next to him. "For sticking up for me," she informed him. "With Sam."

Dean shifted a little uncomfortably, suddenly fascinated by a lone Cheeto wedged between the floorboards and the gas pedal. "Yeah, well."

Mia glanced around the empty Impala, brow crinkling a little. "So where is he?" she asked. "That pissy little brother of yours."

Dean looked up sharply. "He's not 'pissy,'" he told her quickly. "He's just a little —" "Nuts?" Mia offered, pulling the door shut with a squeak and sliding across the seat until her thigh was pressed up against Dean's.

Dean glanced sideways at her. "He's just trying to look out for me," he muttered sheepishly.

"Aww, sweet," Mia drawled, entwining her arm in his. "That why you ditched him?"

"I didn't —" Dean stopped abruptly, the mischievous twinkle in Mia's eyes causing the anger to drain from his voice. "I'm giving him some space," he said instead, unsure who he was trying to justify himself to.

"Okay," Mia said, her hand slipping down to Dean's thigh as her lips brushed his ear. "I could work with that."

Dean fought the urge to push her away as her mouth slid down to his neck. "Whoa there, little lady!" he managed, finally catching hold of her upper arm and forcing her to break contact.

She blinked at him before frowning. "What's up, you got a headache or somethin'?"

"Funny," Dean deadpanned, glancing around the parking lot. "Maybe we should wait till we're not on *Candid Camera*?"

Mia looked up at the security camera only a few feet away from them. "Dean Winchester," she said, "I had you down as a lot of things, but shy sure wasn't one of them!"

"Yeah well," he said, putting the Impala into drive and peeling away from the curb smoothly. "Maybe under this brash hard-as-nails exterior I'm really a gentleman at heart."

Mia punched him playfully in the shoulder. "You're something," she agreed, twisting in her seat until she was facing front again, although her arm remained entwined with his.

"So how's Jordan?" Dean asked, the change of subject seeming a little obvious, even to him.

"She's gonna be fine," Mia replied as if she hadn't noticed. "They pumped her full of happy juice and she'll probably wake up tomorrow thinking it was all a nightmare."

"It kind of is, right?" Dean said, glancing sideways at her. "Being possessed? Like waking up from one long awful nightmare."

Mia's expression sobered and she nodded slowly, finger twirling one long lock of her hair in a way that uncomfortably reminded Dean of Alyssa Medina, the memory-stealing freak who he'd last seen eviscerated in Wyoming. "Yeah," she said quietly. "It was. A nightmare."

Dean nodded slightly, eyes back on the road as something in his gut twisted uncomfortably.

She could have been controlling all of them – all of the demons that have supposedly possessed her.

He heard Sammy's voice echoing around in his head and started a little when he felt Mia's hand squeeze his thigh.

"Ooh, little tense, huh?" Mia drawled, her intentions plain on her face as her tone veered wildly from reflective to seductive in a couple of beats of Dean's heart. "You know I could help you with that..."

Dean laughed a little nervously, pushing her hand away. "Not while I'm driving, sweetheart," he managed, grinning a little awkwardly. "Wouldn't want to wrap my baby around a tree. I usually leave stuff like that to Sam."

Mia nodded. "I get it. Long night, huh? Nothing to do with the things Sam was saying about me."

Dean's eyes flickered away from the road for a second. "Huh?"

Mia shrugged her shoulders and sighed, disentangling her arm from Dean's and pushing herself slightly away from him along the bench seat. "Never mind."

"Mia, hey, I'm sorry," Dean apologized sincerely. "I – it's just..." He trailed off, shrugging one shoulder and reaffirming his grip on the steering wheel. "Me 'n Sam...kinda had a fight."

Mia seemed genuinely surprised. "Over me?"

Dean shrugged again but didn't answer, and Mia slid herself back toward him, gently resting her head on his shoulder. "You wanna talk about it?"

Dean shook his head. "Let's just get back," he said. "Get some shuteye. I'm just tired."

Mia nodded. "Sounds like a plan," she agreed.

Southfork Motel, Plano, TX

Dean didn't even think about it as he got out of the Impala and automatically followed Mia to her room. For all his protestations of just wanting to get some sleep, all his attempts to rebuff Mia's less-than-subtle amorous advances, right now Dean just didn't want to be alone.

And he knew no way was Sam going to be back yet.

Mia beckoned him inside not with a "come hither" smile, but with a genuine look of concern on her pretty face, catching his arm and guiding him into the room before motioning for him to sit on the bed.

He followed her instructions wearily, whole body tensed up and thrumming, and when, his eyes closed, he felt the bed dip a little to his left and Mia's gentle fingers in his hair, for a second he almost forgot all about what had happened earlier with Sam.

Gradually allowing himself to relax under her gentle caress, he leaned into her touch as she combed her fingers through the short spikes of his hair, the subtle scent of her perfume almost making him feel drowsy. He didn't resist her when he felt her lips against his, one hand entwining itself in her soft hair, and he almost felt as if he was going to drown in the scent of her.

Ozone.

He blinked, pulling away from her slightly as the other odor assaulted his nostrils.

"What can I smell?" he asked, even though he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

Mia looked down at him, perplexed, shifting her weight a little as she knelt next to him on the bed. "I showered this morning, I swear...!"

"No," Dean shook his head. "Ozone. I can smell –"

"Oh, *that!*" Mia rolled her eyes. "Damn hairdryer blew up on me this morning! Can you believe it? What's a girl to do –?"

She made to kiss him again, but he held her away, frown deepening between his eyes. "We were in a different motel this morning."

Mia blinked at him, sitting back on her heels. "Yeah, well, I thought maybe you'd be able to fix it for me, so I threw it in my bag somewhere. Stinks like a bitch though!"

Dean looked at her, looked into her soft brown eyes and relaxed a little. "Dammit, Sammy..." he muttered under his breath, scrubbing a hand over his face.

Mia caught his chin with her fingers. "You wanna tell me what happened yet?"

Dean hesitated for a second, never comfortable pouring his heart out to anyone, most especially not to a *chick*. He almost laughed at that.

"It was stupid," he said at length. "We just had this big emo set-to, right there by the side of the road and Sam..."

"Sam doesn't trust me," Mia provided, nodding slowly. "I get it. I do, Dean. He's watching out for you."

Dean raised his eyes slowly to meet hers. "Yeah, he is," he said quietly. "For the longest time...y'know it was just me, Sammy and Dad. Dad was gone a lot –"

"You said your dad's a hunter too, right?"

Dean nodded. "Yeah, ever since our mom..." He shrugged. "Anyway. He was gone a lot and it was pretty much just me and Sammy a lot of the time growing up so..."

"You look out for each other."

"He's not trying to hurt you, Mia."

"I know. I do. And I really do understand. I never had any brothers or sisters, but I can still get where Sam's coming from. I would have killed anyone who tried to hurt Greg..." She trailed off, sighing. "Who knew I'd be the one to hurt him, huh?"

Dean took her hand and squeezed it gently. "What happened to your boyfriend...wasn't your fault you know."

Mia nodded awkwardly. "Yeah. Demonic possession can put a real crimp in your love life."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

"You've not –" Mia began, but stopped herself abruptly.

"Not what?"

"You said it had just been you and Sam for a long time. There's been – no one else...? I mean, girl-wise...?"

Dean smiled lopsidedly at her discomfort. "There was this one girl," he said. "Back in Ohio. She runs a newspaper in Missouri now..." he trailed off.

"Didn't work out?"

Dean looked up at her. "Thought I was nuts."

"Ah. I can see how that could be a problem."

"Only girl I ever – I ever told. Y'know. About what we do."

Mia nodded. "Harsh," she said. "But I can see why Sam's acting the way he is."

"Huh?" Dean pulled away from her a little, frowning quizzically.

Mia twisted herself until she was sitting on the bed next to Dean, her foot gently rubbing against the side of his calf. "He's used to having big brother all to himself," she explained. "It's been just you and him most of his life. It's hard when you suddenly have to share someone you love with someone else."

Dean nodded a little. "I guess."

"Imagine how you'd feel if your dad suddenly remarried," Mia added.

Dean raised a brow. "That's not the same –"

"Yes it is," Mia asserted. "If you boys grew up like you say. Just the two of you. You taking care of him. You're kinda like a surrogate father to him, Dean, whether you want to admit it or not."

Dean didn't comment on that for the longest time. "Sam's a grown-up, Mia. Not some snot-nosed little kid jealous of his new stepmom."

"All I'm saying is that jealousy can be a really powerful emotion, not something even the most rational of us can control. Cut Sam some slack. He'll come around."

Dean shook his head. "I don't know," he said slowly, part of him screaming at him to shut the hell up while the rest of him wouldn't listen. "He's been – he's been researching you. Checking out your backstory."

Mia stiffened, pulling away and just staring at him. "He – what?"

"He –" Dean faltered a little. "He said you didn't exist until about six months ago."

"I look six months old to you?" There was a humorous lilt to Mia's voice that sounded somehow forced to Dean's ears.

"That's not what I meant –"

"I know what you meant, Dean."

"So...?"

"So *what*, Dean?" All pretence at humor was gone, and Mia was fairly growling at him, her whole demeanor having slewed in a complete one-eighty in the blink of an eye. "You askin' me why there's no trace of me up until six months ago?"

"Well – yeah, I guess..."

"So you don't trust me any more than your goddamned stupid brother?"

"He's not stupid," Dean began to protest. "And what happened to 'cut him some slack'?"

"He had no right to do that, Dean," Mia continued as if he'd not even spoken. "He had no right to go snooping into my history. That's *my* business and no one else's!"

"Yeah, I know that, but –"

"And now he has your head so twisted around you're actually starting to believe him, aren't you?"

"Mia –" He tried to put a hand on her arm, but she shook him off and jumped to her feet.

"So – what?" she said, spinning around to face him. "You think I'm some kind of Queen Bitch from Hell now, too?"

"I didn't –"

"Just because that no good, stupid, nosey idiot of a brother of yours says so?"

It was Dean's turn to jump to his feet. "Hey, watch your mouth, babe, that's my brother you're talking about. And he was just trying to get my back –"

"By stabbing me in mine?"

"Mia –"

"How *could* you, Dean? How could you take *his* word over *mine*?" Mia wiped hurriedly at her cheeks with the back of her hand as tears began to well in her wide brown eyes and trickle down her face. "I thought – I thought you *loved* me!"

"I do –"

"But not as much as you love Sammy, huh?" She straightened, setting her trembling jaw until her full lips compressed into a thin line. "You care more about that

damn brother of yours than you care about me!”

Dean recoiled, his own words thrown at Sam in ill-considered temper coming back to haunt him. “*You’re jealous because you think I care more about her than I do about you...*”

“We’ve – been through a lot together...” he stumbled over the words, trying to think of a way to deny Mia’s accusation that wouldn’t come off sounding like a bold-faced lie. “Of course I care about him – he’s my kid brother. I’ve been looking out for him most of my life!”

“Well maybe you ought to start looking out for yourself for a change!”

Dean frowned at her, like that was an alien concept.

“Look,” Mia said, taking a breath even as her hands balled into fists at her sides. “I get it, okay? I know you guys would go to Hell and back for each other. But whatever Sam might think, I never intentionally tried to get you hurt. Either of you. Why would I do that? You two cheeseheads saved my life! Took me in when no one else would give me the time of day. I just wanted to show you I was worth the effort, is all. And I know I messed up a couple of times. But I said I was sorry! I thought Sam accepted that?”

“Yeah, me too,” Dean said quietly, placing his hands gently on Mia’s shoulders. “Sam’s not trying to be difficult, trying to invade your privacy. It’s just the way we work, that’s all. I watch his back, he watches mine –”

“Why would you *need* your back watching, Dean?” Mia burst out, shrugging his hands away. “Or don’t *you* trust me either? Just because Sam says it, that automatically makes it true?”

“Mia –”

“Why’s *he* always the one you trust? Huh? Why’s *he* always the one you listen to? Can’t you see he’s stifling you? You’re the oldest, Dean, he should be in *your* shadow, not the other way around!”

“I’m not –” Dean began to protest, but Mia carried right on over the top of him.

“He’s so used to you doing whatever he wants whenever he wants it, he’s so used to being the sole focus in your life that he’ll never let you have anyone else, Dean! Can’t you see that? He’s *using* you! And you can’t see it! You can’t see he’s just a jealous, spoiled, manipulative *brat* –!”

“Don’t talk about my brother like that, Mia,” Dean warned her, his voice lowered as he took a step toward her before thinking better of it, almost afraid if he got any closer he might actually hit her. “I *mean* it! You don’t know anything about him!”

“I know he’s wrong!”

“No, *you’re* the one who’s wrong! About him and about me!”

“Sure, *I’m* wrong –”

“Just because we watch out for each other – just because we watch out for our *family* – doesn’t make us dysfunctional freaks!”

Mia nodded. “You know what? You’re right. You know what it makes you? It makes you *sad*, that’s what it makes you. Sad and pathetic.”

Dean paused, breathing hard. “What?”

“You ‘n him. Sad, pathetic losers. So scared of anyone hurting you or *leaving* you –” Dean flinched involuntarily, “– that you just keep on running back to each other when the going gets tough. Too scared to leave. Too scared to be alone. That’s what happened when your dad ditched you, right Dean? First thing you did, you went running off to find Sam, your own little security blanket!”

Dean blanched. “How did you...?” He’d not told her any of that. He was *sure* he’d not told her any of that.

“And the second time he goes running off to California he only makes it as far as the bus station before he comes running back to big brother.” Mia shook her head in disgust. “You’re hopeless, the both of you.”

“Mia –”

She took a step toward him, eyes flashing. “Pointless.” Another step closer. “Useless.” And another. “*Weak.*”

Dean had backed up until he felt the bed hit the back of his legs, for once in his life absolutely at a loss for words. “Mia, what the hell –?” he finally managed, his voice sounding oddly strangled.

Mia shook her head. “Goddammit, what the hell was I doing wasting my time on *you?*” she said, her face a mask of what Dean could only interpret as disgust. “There has to have been an easier way than this!” She raked a hand through her hair roughly before suddenly looking back up at him. “You know what?” she continued. “I’ve had enough of this game, Dean. It’s not fun anymore.”

Dean blinked at her, something in the back of his head – something with Sammy’s voice – screaming at him, and his hand slid unconsciously to the small of his back, feeling for his .45. “Mia, what the hell are you talking about?” he demanded, sounding more than a little rattled no matter how hard he tried to keep his game face on. “What game?”

Mia was right in front of him now, so close he could feel her breath on his neck. “I should have known you’d be a big disappointment, Dean,” she murmured, her breath slowing as she ran one finger down the side of his face. “You and your brother both. Like father like sons. It’s genetic I guess. You Winchesters – all so self-absorbed. Broken. *Worthless.*”

Dean swallowed hard, fingers finding cool metal as Mia thrust her face close to his, whispering in his ear; warm breath, ice cold words.

“You think I loved you, Dean?” she breathed, running her fingers through the short hair at the nape of his neck. “Huh? You think I *loved* you? Well I’m sorry to disappoint, baby, but you’re nothing more than a broken toy and I don’t want to play with you anymore. You understand me? Dean?” Dean tried to pull away from her, but her fingers twisted in the back of his collar and held him fast. “Dean? You get it yet? I never loved you! And now I’m *tired* of you. You were just the appetizer, sugar. You understand me? Now I’m ready for the main course...”

Roadside, Plano, TX

“Dad?”

Sam did his best not to sound too stunned as he pushed the talk button on his cellphone and spoke into the receiver.

“Hey, Sammy.” His dad’s voice cut through the ether loud and clear, and Sam felt such an inexplicable sense of relief he had to stop walking for fear his knees might buckle.

“Are you – are you okay?” he asked hesitantly, something about the tone of Dad’s voice, something about the way he could hear his slow even breathing, making him uneasy. “We’ve not heard from you in so long...”

John let that hang there for a while. “I know, son,” he said at length. “I been – busy.”

“Busy with what, Dad?” Sam couldn’t help himself, needing to *know* what was more important to John than keeping in touch with his kids.

John didn’t answer that, and if it hadn’t been for the continuous sound of his rhythmic breathing, Sam might have thought he’d hung up. “So how are you boys?” he asked at length, an odd inflection in his voice. He almost sounded... *worried*. “I know I’ve been out of it for a while but... I just wanted to check you guys were okay.”

Sam frowned. “Dad, is everything all right?”

John sighed wearily. “Mostly,” he said. “How about you? Is Dean with you? I’ve been calling his cell for twenty minutes now. I was starting to get a little worried.”

The days when Sam would have silently seethed that his father had been trying to call Dean for twenty minutes with no reply before it occurred to him to try calling Sam

were long gone, so Sam merely shrugged. "Battery crapped out on him," he explained. "Right in the middle of a hunt, too."

Sam could almost hear John's frown down the phone line. "Not like your brother to get sloppy like that."

"Yeah, well," Sam said, "that's a whole other story, Dad."

"I got time."

Sam almost dropped the phone at that. "You – do?"

"I miss talking to you guys."

That was the closest the Winchesters got to a group hug, and Sam's mouth hung open for a second. "We – uh – miss you too, Dad."

"Your brother there?"

Sam chewed on his lower lip for a second. "Uh –"

"Think I could talk to him, Sam?"

There was an underlying thread of need in his father's voice that set even more alarm bells ringing in Sam's head. "Dad, are you sure you're okay?"

"Can I talk to Dean, just for a second?"

"He's – uh – not – we're not – he's not here."

Dad paused. "What time is it where you are?"

Sam glanced at his watch. "Uh – a little after one."

"He out with a girl someplace?"

Sam considered that. "Yeah, there's a girl involved I guess."

Another pause. "Something you're not telling me, Sammy?"

Sam sighed heavily. Even as a kid he'd never really confided in his dad, always preferring to spill his guts to Dean if something was bothering him. But right now, it was *Dean* that was bothering him and he really felt he needed to talk to someone about it. Anyone. Even *Dad*. And he *had* offered to listen after all....

"Dean and I," he managed finally, shoving his hair back from his face and closing his eyes for a second. "We had a fight."

John didn't reply for a second. "You did?"

"Yeah."

"Over a girl?"

Sam could hear a hint of amusement in his dad's voice, and he felt all of twelve years old again. "It's not what it sounds like."

"No?" John said, the grin obvious in his voice. "What was that girl's name?"

Candy? I seem to recall you putting bubblegum in her hair when she suggested Dean should take her to the movies instead of you..."

"I was eight, Dad."

"Some things don't change, son."

You're just jealous....

Sam shook his head. "This is – different," he said slowly.

"Different how?" The concern was back in Dad's voice, and Sam could imagine him instantly on the alert again, muscles tensed, phone pressed hard to his ear, worry lines creasing his forehead. He'd seen him like that a hundred times growing up – Dean calling to say he was in trouble or hurt; Pastor Jim calling with bad news; or worse, Bobby calling with possible intel about the thing that killed their mom. It was almost as if John could never again allow himself to relax completely after Mom died.

"This girl," Sam began to explain. "We picked her up a few months ago when our friend Kyle called us for help. She'd been suffering with multiple personalities – had killed a bunch of people where she worked without even knowing she'd done it. Or so she said..."

"What do you mean, Sam?"

"I don't know, Dad. There's something about her. Something – something *off*. And I just...I can't get Dean to see it. He's kinda...well he's kinda fallen head over heels if you know what I mean."

"Dean? *Our* Dean?"

"I know. And it's not – I mean there's nothing I can put my finger on, just... Well she's kinda put us in danger on a couple of hunts – hinky research that could have gotten us in big trouble – or – y'know – killed. Bad intel. Demons conveniently showing up so she can put herself in harm's way to save Dean. Remember Joe Bearwalker...?"

"That was her?"

"That was the demon that was supposedly stalking her, yeah. This last hunt? She swears up and down the phone message she gave me from Dean got garbled, but I swear, Dad, she *meant* to trap me alone in that basement with a demon..."

"She *what*?"

"I was okay – I exorcised the thing – but – but Dean just won't listen to me. Won't entertain the possibility that maybe she's not all she seems. He just – he just *trusts* her, Dad, and that's not like Dean, right? To just trust someone with – with *my* life."

John was silent for a couple of seconds. "Son, this is important," he said, suddenly sounding a whole lot more interested than he had when he thought his boys were just arguing over some random girl. "*When* did you run into this girl again?"

"Uh..." Sam considered that. "Not long after – after you ditched us back at Bobby's. Couple months maybe?"

John hesitated for the longest time, and Sam could almost hear the tension across the phone line. "What did you say she was called?"

"I didn't," Sam replied, a little taken aback that his dad would be so interested. "But it's Mia. Mia Cameron."

"And she's how old?"

"Twenty-three," Sam said. "But I – I did a little checking around and up until six months ago she didn't seem to exist."

"Meaning...?"

"No record of her. Anywhere."

"And where's she supposed to be from?"

"Oklahoma. Parents died in a car wreck when she was a baby. Says she grew up in foster care, but if that's true, CPS don't have a record of it. She's kind of a drifter – a lost soul. Y'know, no real home to speak of. I think – I think that's maybe why Dean connected with her, fell for her so hard."

"Describe her for me."

Sam's brow crumpled into a confused frown. "Describe...?"

"What does she look like, Sam?"

"Yeah, I got that –"

"And?"

John was clearly losing his patience and Sam had absolutely no idea why. "Well, she's maybe five-five. Slim. Dark brown hair. Brown eyes. Uh – kinda hot. Y'know, obviously, because Dean –"

"Any distinguishing marks?"

"Any...? Dad, you been away to cop school all this time or something?"

"Marks, Sam," John barked shortly.

"What, like tattoos?"

"Yeah. Exactly like tattoos."

"Well yeah. On her shoulder. Not sure if it's a tattoo or a birthmark. Kinda looks like a bird. Dean thought he recognized it but –"

"Where are you, Sam?" John demanded suddenly, cutting his youngest off mid-sentence and sounding closer to freaked than Sam could ever remember hearing him.

"Dad, what's wrong?"

"Just tell me where you are, Sammy!"

"Dad –"

"Right *now*, Sam!"

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"You...what?" Dean blinked hard, as if somehow that would rewind the last few minutes and erase the things Mia had just said. "You never...?" He pulled away from her, shrugging her hands off him and sidestepping the bed.

"Loved you?" She followed his retreat, hands on hips, a swagger to her walk that Dean didn't remember seeing before. "Yeah, that's what I said, baby."

"But – you...I..." "Lost for words" wasn't usually a phrase anyone would ever associate with Dean. But *this*? This was unreal. It couldn't be happening. And he couldn't think, couldn't feel, couldn't do anything but stare at Mia with a look on his face that was part shock, part disbelief and part utter devastation.

"Maybe you should have listened to that whiny little brother of yours, Dean."

Sam. Sam had been right. Sam had been right and Dean hadn't listened to him. Dean hadn't listened to him because – because he was so damn sure he was in love. With Mia. With this girl who was looking at him now like he was something she found stuck to her shoe. God, what an idiot he'd been...

He took another step backward, blood pounding in his ears and spots dancing before his eyes as he tried to remember how to breathe.

"Poor, stupid Dean. So in love you didn't even realize you were just a means to an end," Mia drawled, continuing to move toward him like a panther stalking its prey, a look of completely insincere sympathy twisting her features until she was almost unrecognizable to him. "Are you really that starved of affection? So desperate for someone to love you?" She laughed coldly. "Pathetic really. Needy. But then you've always been needy, haven't you, Dean? Dad's approval. Sam's love. Can't live without either one. Must o' nearly killed you when they ditched you. Funny, maybe I'm not the only one who's been using you."

Dean straightened a little. "What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded. "They never used me! Hell, you don't even know them! You don't even know me!"

"And you think you know *me* so well?"

Dean continued to back away from her, numb fingers still groping for the .45 at his back while his mind groped for one of his usual snarky comebacks but came up unaccountably empty.

"What's the matter, honey? Cat got your tongue? Or are you just too damn dumb to work it out for yourself without that little brother of yours to help you? Not much goin' on in that pretty little head of yours, is there Dean? Still, I guess we can't all have beauty *and* brains."

Dean continued to stare mutely at her, his heart feeling like someone had gone to work on it with a chainsaw while his brain appeared to have seized up from lack of oxygen.

"Daddy's little soldier," Mia added, smiling icily as she continued to advance on him.

"You – you don't know anything about my dad!" Dean repeated, fingers finally closing on cold steel.

"Don't be too sure about that, darlin'," Mia assured him with a twisted grimace. "I know a lot more about your family than you think. And I gotta say, the way you two sad sacks were raised? Your daddy'd be pretty disappointed in you right now. I mean, raised as warriors? Gimme a break! You couldn't spot a demon if it was sat on top of you!" She grinned lasciviously, licking her lips as she looked up at him through lowered lashes. "And hey, that was probably the most fun part of this whole gig."

Dean blinked. "So – so you're *a demon*?" he stammered, finally recovering the power of speech just as instinct kicked in and he managed to whip the .45 out from behind his back and aim it squarely at Mia's forehead.

"It's a little more complicated than that." Mia didn't even have to move, a flick of her eyes all that was required to rip the Colt from Dean's fingers and bring it arcing toward her, catching it deftly in one hand and smiling at him slowly.

"Sonofa –" But Dean never got to finish the sentence as he was picked up bodily and slammed against the wall behind him as if he was nothing more than a rag doll, eyes widening as he tried to pull away from the plasterboard only to be held in place by the all-too-familiar sensation of invisible hands pushing against his chest and limbs.

"Oh Dean," Mia sighed dramatically, sashaying toward him as she caressed the gun now held between slender fingers. "I guess Daddy's little soldier isn't really up to that much, is he?"

She stopped with only an inch between them, and he could feel her warm breath against his cheek as she moved her mouth close to his ear. "But then, you were never really good for much of anything, were you Dean?" She smirked, the edge of her tongue caressing his ear. "Besides the obvious, of course..."

Dean gritted his teeth and tried to hang on to what little composure he had left as Mia ran long fingernails through the short hair at the back of his neck and tilted his face down toward hers, red lips brushing lightly against his as she breathed seductively against his mouth.

"You know, there were some perks to making you think you loved me," she murmured.

"Oh yeah?" Dean ground out, trying to pull away from her.

Mia sighed. "Uh-huh," she confirmed. "You sure taste good. In fact, I think you're gonna be real popular with my little demon friends when they come to feast on your flesh."

Dean's jaw tightened visibly. "What the hell do you want, bitch?" he growled, trying not to flinch as Mia shoved his own .45 beneath his chin, forcing his head back with a dull snap before slowly running the barrel of the weapon along his jaw line and pressing it into his neck just below his left ear.

She rested her free hand against his chest, leaning into him and turning her eyes upwards as if she meant to kiss him, a trickle of oily blackness suddenly oozing across her dark brown irises before disappearing as she blinked up at him lazily.

Every part of him froze, paralyzed by the sudden crushing memory of staring helplessly at his own reflection as a similar demonic blackness slid across the surface of his eyes.

He shuddered, and Mia leaned in closer, breathing softly against his ear as her fingers slid once more into his hair. "Tell me where your daddy is, Dean..."

* * * *

Dad, I don't understand..." Sam stammered, his heartbeat beginning to crescendo in direct proportion to the rising apprehension gnawing in his gut. With the cellular still pressed tightly to his ear, the young man could hear his father's exasperated exhalation of air and he knew that the seasoned hunter was not one to keep waiting on an answer. "We're in Texas, Dad. Plano, Texas," he added.

"Don't go anywhere, Sammy. Do you hear me? Go find your brother. Get Dean and don't let him out of your sight. Do you understand me, son? Sam? Are you listening?"

Sam was listening. When John Winchester spoke there was rarely little other choice but to listen. Yet, while his ears may have been attuned to his dad's voice in the cellular, his eyes were focused on the oncoming headlights approaching from the distance.

Familiar-looking headlights...

"Don't worry, Dad. Dean's here. Dean's right here..." Sam chirped excitedly, taking a hurried step towards the nearing dark car.

“Sam...?”

The coal-black Impala ground to a halt a few feet in front of the younger Winchester, the headlights bathing him in a bright white shower of light.

“Sammy! Dammit, son!”

His father’s voice cut through his excitement snapping Sam back but only momentarily. So focused on Dean’s return and bringing his sibling up to speed on his conversation with their dad, Sam nearly forgot about the ongoing call.

“Dad, Dean’s here. Hang on, he’ll want to talk to you too.”

The tell-tale screech of the Chevy’s door opening distracted Sam from the strange static coming from the cell. Assuming that the call with his dad had been dropped, he powered off the phone and took a step toward the Impala.

With the glare of the headlights still shining in his eyes, Sam tucked the phone into his jeans and raised an arm to block the offending brightness from the car’s high-beams.

Jeez Dean... have a heart, huh?

Still, believing it was his brother that had finally come to rescue him from the barren roadway, Sam took another step toward the Impala.

“Dean?”

His arm still shielding his eyes, Sam could barely make out the shape that stepped out from the driver’s side of the car.

“Dean? So you got your head out of your ass and came back, huh? Well you’re just in time. Guess who was just on the phone?” Sam asked, unable to avoid the biting edge to his tone.

He was still irritated at Dean for leaving him on the side of the road, not to mention his elder brother’s apparent soul-bearing discourse on their relationship. Still, Dean was back and their dad had called. The least Sam could do was extend the olive branch himself.

Except as the form took another step towards him the identity became visible and it clearly wasn’t his brother.

Mia!

The pounding of his heart suddenly gave way to the drop of his stomach. His gut bluntly admitting what his brain was fervently trying to deny. No way would his brother ever let the brunette drive the cherished car. Not unless something had happened.

“Mia, where’s Dean?” Sam asked suspiciously.

The young woman confidently strode up to stand directly in front of him, her smile as alluring as usual; yet even in the darkness, Sam could see an almost sinister narrowing of her sienna-hued eyes.

“Don’t worry, *Sammy*. Dean’s not very far away,” she leered, her head tilting just slightly in a manner that seemed frighteningly familiar to the young hunter.

“Where’s my brother?” Sam demanded, the hollow pit that was his stomach suddenly threatening to turn inside-out as the brunette’s laugh seemed to echo on the night sky.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she sneered. “Funny, I imagine he’s probably asking the same thing about you right now. Well, if he could ask anything that is...”

Sam couldn’t control the shiver that coursed down his spine at the implication of Mia’s words. Yet even as he watched her, part of him disbelieving that this young woman was now standing before him, seemingly fulfilling his darkest fears and concerns, another part of him was hoping that somehow it was all just another of Mia’s quirks.

Except...

The look in her eyes, the hard line of her face. The cat and mouse game she was playing. He’d seen it before.

With Meg!

"Dammit, Mia. Tell me where Dean is. Right now!" Sam yelled trying to hide the fear in his voice far beneath what he hoped sounded like a commanding tone. He squared his shoulders, lowering his arm and ignoring the blinding glare of the headlights so that he rose to his full six foot four height to tower over the smaller woman.

If she was intimidated by his move she didn't show it as her near-maniacal laughter rang mockingly in Sam's ears.

"You're done giving me orders, Geekboy. Both of you losers have pushed me around for the last time," Mia snapped.

She took a step toward him and Sam couldn't stop himself from flinching backwards away from her. Despite her small stature, she exuded an ominous presence and the voice in the back of his head screamed at him to avoid her touch.

"What have you done with Dean, Mia?" he asked more gently this time.

She stopped her approach and simply shrugged. "Maybe I killed him," she offered, glancing casually down at the fingernails of her left hand.

Sam swallowed hard, his throat constricting so tightly he wasn't sure he would be able to take his next breath.

"Yeah," Mia continued looking up, her eyes now wild and dark. "I gutted him like a deer, listening to him scream and beg for your pathetic life when I told him you were next. Then I ripped his arms and legs off and tossed his body into an industrial shredder. So, like I said, he's kinda *all over*."

Sam grimaced as she described the macabre torture, crimping his eyes shut when she licked her lips, savoring the recollection. He refused to believe her, refused to accept that his brother was dead. She had to be lying. She had lied to them before. Still, here she was, alone and driving the Impala. Could there be any more blatant proof of Dean's possible demise?

"You're lying you bitch!" he snarled.

She laughed again. "Am I? Even now, you're just not so sure are you Sammy? Let's face it. You know I've been lying to you, to you both, leading you astray on hunts, setting you up. You've had your suspicions about me for a while. You've even tried to make that thick-headed brother of yours listen to you. So really, is it such a stretch to admit that whatever sinister plot I've been hatching I might have fulfilled it by getting rid of Dean?"

Sam listened to her, his heart sinking as he watched her eyes and found a certain rational sincerity in them replacing the wildness of moments before. Her calmness scared him and his hope sank, yet something darker snapped inside him.

With a flash of movement, his hand snaked inside his jacket and withdrew his automatic, the muzzle pointing scant inches away from the brunette's face. He fought down the urge to place just a fraction more pressure on the trigger and wipe the self-assured, smug grin from Mia's face, but as his conscience battled down the primal instinct, Sam saw the young woman's eyes flash dark and felt the gun ripped from his grip.

In a startled moment, Sam realized two things with amazing clarity. First, his weapon now lay useless several yards away in the ditch beside the road and second; that his worst fears about Mia were now confirmed as the girl glared at him through malevolent coal-black eyes.

"So, you *are* a demon then?" he asked, attempting more nonchalance than he actually felt. If anything at the moment, he *felt* as though he were in one hell of a mess.

"Oh Sam," she laughed mockingly. "If only it were that simple."

"You weren't ever possessed; you weren't ever being chased by a demon. All those deaths back in Oklahoma that was all you wasn't it?"

"To say you're the brains of the dynamic duo, it sure took you long enough to figure that all out! Hope you didn't pull anything."

"You killed your best friend. You killed your own *boyfriend*," Sam exclaimed.

"Are we talking about that grease monkey in Warner or your brother, 'cause honestly, you didn't really think I gave a damn about Dean did you? I mean, you can imagine how shocked he was right before I jammed that beautiful blade of his right underneath his ribcage." Mia snapped back.

"You better not be telling the truth about Dean you demonic bitch..."

"Sticks and stones, Sammy. Is that the best you can do?"

"Why Mia? Why the cat and mouse game. Why not just kill us right from the get go? Why screw around and pretend you gave a crap about Dean?" the younger Winchester demanded.

Weaponless and essentially defenseless against the demon, Sam knew his options were limited. But if he was going down, he at least wanted to know why this woman had chosen to play games with them these past couple of months. Was she just another of Hell's spawn, bored and looking for human flesh to torment? Or was she somehow connected with Lucifer's recent uprising?

Mia shrugged. "Why? Well, as much as I'd like to say it's just been for kicks, truth is I was actually trying to attract a hunter."

Sam shook his head, a soft chuckle escaping his lips. "Well you lucked out and bagged two of them. Guess that makes you official Demon of the Month."

"Aw Sam, don't be bitter. Honestly, I wasn't after you two bozos at all. I was after *much* bigger game."

Dean opened his eyes to utter blackness. For a moment, he panicked, praying it was just a dark, moonless night and not that he had somehow become blind. He searched his memory, scouring uncooperative brain cells to fill in glaring gaps, trying to remember any coherent thought.

Where was he, where had he been? What's happened? Where was Sam? Having more questions than answers irritated him, making the blood throb behind his eyes.

Still shrouded in darkness and mired in desperate frustration, Dean lashed out physically. Or... he would have. Except, as he tried to tense the muscles in his legs and arms, willing them to explode outward in a contraction of force nothing happened.

He tried again, focusing his effort on moving his right arm, desperate to reach up toward his still uncooperative eyes. He couldn't budge the extremity, not even to twitch his little finger.

His heart pounding within his chest, Dean yelled. Yet like all other previous attempts to manifest any activity, his voice remained silent, his vocal cords as paralyzed as the rest of his body.

Blinking, breathing raggedly, and taking some small sense of victory in those two achievements, Dean tried to remain calm. Wherever he was, whatever was happening, deep down, the young hunter knew that giving in to fear wasn't going to help him get out of this predicament.

Think! Dean! He silently chastised himself, forcing his breathing to slow down and closing his eyes to help focus and compose the jumble of thoughts raging through his head.

Blind, paralyzed, lost, what the hell happened? Where am I? Where's Sam? Where's Mia?

Mia...

At the thought of her the floodgates opened in Dean's memory, a rush of images flashing like a motion picture in fast forward speeding behind closed lids.

Sam, trying to talk to him, pleading with him to listen to his suspicions about the brunette. Sam, arguing with him, trading hurtful words with him in the way that only siblings could manage. Sam again, fading into the distance on the side of the road as he pulled away in anger and denial.

Then there was Mia, looking as demure as ever, plying her fake tears and emotions on him, pretending that she loved him right up to the moment she flung him against the motel room wall. Mia, black eyed and sinister as she ridiculed him, throwing his feelings for her back in his face like so much garbage. And Mia, taunting him at the end, daring to question his dedication to his family and wanting to know about his dad.

She was a demon! His brain screamed out, remembering her eyes as they glazed over black just as she effortlessly tossed him into the yellowed paneling with a resounding thud.

She'd caught him with his guard down and he'd fallen for her blindly. *What a friggin' jackass I've been... Sammy, I'm sooo sorry. What have I done? Why didn't I listen?*

Dean tried to thrash about again, anger at being duped, at being betrayed by this woman he'd thought he loved fueling his need to escape. But his body refused him. Whatever the demonic bitch had done to him had been thorough: he was caught, effectively neutralized and left for her to return and finish him off at her will.

I'm such a fool. How could I have been so stupid? I knew better, never get involved with chicks, not on the job. It never works out. Didn't I tell Sam the same thing? Sam!

Dean's mind scrambled as his fear for his younger brother's safety rose to the forefront of his thoughts. Sam knew Mia was trouble. He'd been suspicious that the girl had been trying to kill him all along. What if now, with Dean out of the way, Mia was making good on her previous attempts?

SAMMY! Dean yelled out silently. *Sammy, if you were ever gonna turn on that whole Professor Xavier brain of yours, now would be a good time for you to zero in on me bro... You were right about Mia and I'm in deep crap dude. Watch out for her Sammy!*

He didn't have any real faith that his brother might actually pick up on his frantic mental S.O.S., but Dean wasn't so skeptical not to try. Besides, he'd seen his brother pull off some fairly "remarkable" mental feats lately so if there was any chance to warn Sam, Dean wasn't beyond attempting it. With no idea of what Mia might have done to him or worse, what she might have planned for his brother, he was certainly desperate enough to try anything at this point.

Sucking in as deep a breath his constricted chest muscles would allow in an effort to clear his mind and send out what he hoped was another "broadcast" to his sibling, a familiar odor suddenly filled Dean's nostrils.

Rubber. Worn rubber more specifically and oil. The strangely sweet smell of heavy motor oil seemed to surround him. Odd that he hadn't noticed those odors before, but then waking up blind and paralyzed tended to distract a person.

And with those two pieces of olfactory information, Dean immediately knew where he was. The Impala! More specifically, the trunk!

The bitch put me in the friggin' trunk of my own car!

At least with the acknowledgment of his whereabouts, Dean knew why it was so dark. Exhaling a sigh of relief, it wasn't blindness that plagued his vision but rather the fact that he was trapped in the hidden compartment of the Impala, sequestered from any source of light.

I'm so gonna kill that demonic skank... Focus Dean... Gotta get out to help Sam...

Encouraged that he at least was in familiar territory, Dean concentrated on trying to move and reaching one of the many potential weapons he could only hope that Mia had left behind in the trunk. He barely managed the smallest shift of his body when muffled voices sounded outside the trunk.

Help! He shouted out within his mind praying that somehow the voices outside the Chevy might somehow rescue him from the dark metal prison. But as he listened for some promise of assistance, the voices became familiar.

Mia... and Sam!

"So, you *are* a demon then?" he heard Sam ask. *Aw Sam, come on, weren't you the one that told me she wasn't right? Way to go Captain Obvious!*

"If only it were that simple," Mia replied cryptically, tossing back her hair as a trickle of oily blackness once again darkened her irises. "Although you're half right."

Dean shivered despite the paralysis that held his body deathly still. *What the hell, Mia? Part demon? What are you then? Half demon, half heartless lying she-bitch?*

"You weren't ever possessed; you weren't ever being chased by a demon. All those deaths back in Oklahoma that was all you wasn't it?" *Sammy, don't chit-chat with her, get the hell out of there! What are you doing?*

"Are we talking about that grease monkey in Warner or your brother, 'cause honestly, you didn't really think I gave a damn about Dean did you? ... *Yeah, screw you too Mia. Hope you're proud of yourself bitch. You got me, I fell for you. Stupid Dean, sees a pretty girl and can't think with anything north of the belt buckle. Yeah well, you ain't won yet honey. And you ain't seen the last of me...* Dean silently shouted back in retaliation.

"Why? Well, as much as I'd like to say it's just been for kicks, truth is I was actually trying to attract a hunter." *A hunter? Not us?*

"Well you lucked out and bagged two of them. Guess that makes you official Demon of the Month." *Hahahaha, that's telling her Sammy! Now shoot the bitch, jump in the car and get us the hell out of here!*

"Aw Sam, don't be bitter. Honestly, I wasn't after you two bozos at all. I was after *much* bigger game."

Dean froze; his blood running cold and even his mental dialogue became silent as he listened to Mia's last reply. What the hell was she talking about? If Mia hadn't been after them, then who was her target?

Mia walked slowly around Sam surveying the tall hunter as though he were a prize steed at auction. Despite his towering height, she wasn't threatened. She could sense the fear oozing off the young man despite his best attempts to hide it. She knew he was forcing the look of bravado onto his face, his defiance more an act than carrying any real substance. She knew she could make him cave in and submit like a weak child merely by dangling his brother's welfare like a carrot above his head.

But that could wait. This whole game had played out a lot longer than she had originally planned and by damn, she was gonna savor every last minute of her victory now. Besides, Sam had been so cocky, always looking down his nose at her, so sure of his assessment of her. She would take great satisfaction in seeing him reduced to Jello.

Still, there were some minor loose ends to tie up. The grand prize was still out there, not that putting down Sam and Dean Winchester wasn't a definite feather in her cap. She knew she needed to be careful and not let anything mess up her chance to attain her ultimate goal.

"What are you talking about Mia?" Sam demanded, obviously perplexed by her purposely cryptic last statement. "All of this wasn't a trap for us?"

"Not originally," she admitted. "But you have to admit, I do deserve an Oscar for my performance."

"What are you talking about?"

Mia huffed, exasperated by the man's seeming inability to "catch on."

"Come on, Sam. Nothing like a poor little orphan, alone and harried by a demon to tug at Dean's bleeding heart. I mean, really, once I heard that pathetic story about how you two lost your mom to a demon when you were a baby and Dean was four, well, it was nothing to figure out how to sink my claws into your big brother. No way

was he gonna let me fall through the cracks, not Dean, not someone like him that values family above all else," she explained.

"You played him."

"Oh honey, like a violin. Poor, homeless, possessed, falsely-accused. The more I learned about your brother, the more I twisted my story to bind us together. Oh, and don't let us forget the whole 'just let me die, I don't want to hurt anyone else' line. There was no way Dean was going to walk away after that desperate plea. 'Cause, after his family, your brother is totally committed to saving the rest of the world," Mia sneered with distaste.

"He cared about you..."

"That was the plan. Of course, I do have to thank you too ya know. If it hadn't been for you pushing us together, I wouldn't have gotten our relationship over the hump. Your brother always put you first ya know."

"But you saved his life out there in Big Bend. Why not just let him bleed to death?" Sam challenged.

"I didn't have what I needed," she answered. "And honestly, let's face it, my mission aside, your brother is hot! And, well, I have to say, we did enjoy ourselves while he was recuperating back at Dix's."

"Still," Mia continued, "I didn't expect him to fall in love with me to the point of dumping me off at Bearwalker's. That nearly screwed up all my plans."

"Pazuzu, that was you too? You hurt Joe?" Sam queried.

"Give Andre the Giant another treat. Do you always feel compelled to ask the obvious? But yeah, that was me. Just like all the stuff in Warner, just like all the times that I deliberately mislead your hunts, just like here again. I mean I had to get back to both of you somehow. I couldn't live without Dean after all and besides, that freaking Indian only bathed once a week."

"I still just don't get it, Mia. Why drag it out so long? You had a dozen different chances to kill us. You had Dean nearly dead out in West Texas, me too for that matter out in Cibola. Why wait till now?"

Mia sighed, walking back around to the younger Winchester's side. She ran her hands up and down his muscular arms, relishing the way he tried not to flinch at her touch. Reaching up, she toyed with a dangling piece of Sam's brown hair, twirling her fingers into his straying locks.

She watched as he rolled his eyes backwards, his grimace unhidden as she continued to stand uncomfortably close.

"You know, when we first met, I was sorta attracted to you Sammy. I kinda like my men tall and hard-bodied," she taunted.

"Wow, lucky for me. How did Dean end up drawing the short straw then?" Sam snarked.

Mia let go of his hair and whirled around to face him. "He was just easier. I had more things in common with Dean. Not everything was a lie you know. I really do know a thing or two about cars and I'd much rather listen to AC/DC than that sappy-assed crap you insist on playing on your laptop. But here's the part that will really twist your boxers...At one point, I kinda bought into the whole 'Dean Winchester-savior of the weak and innocent' bit. I almost convinced myself that I did have feelings for him."

"You're just a cold-hearted bitch, Mia," Sam stated plainly.

"Nah, not really Sam. If I was cold-hearted, I wouldn't have put Dean out of his misery..."

An act? It was all just an act. She used me and I was stupid enough to let her.

Dean crimped his eyes closed so tightly he could feel the pressure increase on his pupils until he thought they would rupture behind his lids. He only wished he could

have done the same with his ears, blocking out the painful explanation he was hearing the brunette deliver to his brother.

It wasn't so much that he minded being used. Hell, he'd been both used and user more than enough times in his young life when it came to relationships with women. But it had always been mutually understood, mutually accepted and Dean had never blatantly lied and told a woman he loved her to gain so much as a free beer much less anything else.

Sex was sex, but love was something he neither expected nor gave without exerting a fair amount of caution.

So, where had he gone wrong with Mia? Sure, he listened to her go on about how she had used his history to play on his sympathy and maybe he should take some comfort in the fact that she had struck fairly low by using that tactic, but still, wasn't he ultimately responsible? Didn't he know better? Hadn't he been trained better to watch out and be on constant guard?

Even more damning, more brutally painful than knowing that she didn't love him, never had, was the stark realization that he had trusted her over Sam.

How could I fall for her? How could I have put her before my own brother?

Dean no longer heard the conversation going on outside the confines of the Impala's trunk as the hurtful diatribe of his argument with Sam replayed in his mind.

"You're jealous because you think I care more about her than I do about you?"

"Dean, I'm just trying to protect you –"

"By telling me the first girl I've felt – anything – for since – since Cassie...you're telling me she's some kind of demon?"

"... Look, I'm just trying to look out for you; I'm just trying to protect you –"

"Sam, I think – I think I'm in love with her... I think I'm in love with her... I think I'm in love with her..."

His words echoed over and over, accusing him, reminding him of his foolishness and the choice he had made by picking love over trust, a stranger over a brother, Mia over Sam.

"Dean, I'm just trying to protect you... protect you... protect you... protect you..."

It wasn't Sam's job to protect *him*. Wasn't that what their dad had drilled into his head since the night of the fire? Yet he chose to throw that back in his younger brother's face? He'd never meant those words, he'd never minded one second of the years he'd spent watching out for Sam. It was his job and one that he'd taken great pride in despite what he had viciously spouted at his brother.

And now, thanks to him, his brother was out there, with Mia, and in danger.

My fault... Sam's in danger... my job... watch out for Sammy...my fault... my job...

The pounding ache behind his eyes was mild in comparison to the heart-crushing pain in his chest. But if Dean Winchester had learned any lesson during his young life, it was to ignore pain, especially pain born of emotion. Bury it, wall it up and move on. Emotional or physical, it was a weakness, and Dean didn't have time to be weak for Sam's sake.

I'm so sorry, Sammy. If we ever get out of this... I hope you can forgive me....

"So why are you here now, Mia? What do you want with me? Come to finish me off too?" Sam asked casually.

He was still shaken by her taunting him with Dean's death, his very soul silently screaming out in agony and denial, but in honor of his brother he refused to give the woman the satisfaction of sharing his pain openly.

She laughed again as she had been doing since showing up in the classic Chevy; a mocking, sadistic laugh that bordered on cackling. Had the situation not been so

dire, Sam would have almost laughed himself, almost expecting her to twist the edges of a mustache like some villain from a silent movie.

"You really don't get it do you? I'm not after you, Sammy. I'm after your daddy," she sneered, her eyes locking with his. "And so far, he's not taking the bait."

Sam remained silent, his mind churning with this new information. Their dad! He'd never seen that coming.

"Our dad? What does he have to do with this?" he asked.

"Well, isn't that the sixty-four thousand dollar question? Where is he, Sam?"

"How the Hell would I know?"

"Oh come on, do you think I'm that stupid? I know you two have been in contact with him," Mia snapped.

"Well obviously you're pretty damn dumb then, 'cause I don't know where he is. I haven't seen or spoke to him for months. Not since..." Sam stopped abruptly, catching himself before he divulged any information that the brunette might be able to use.

With Dean dead..., *missing*, Sam corrected himself silently, protecting the secret of their dad's arrival might be the only thing standing between his survival and his certain demise. The brief phone call with his father had certainly seemed to indicate that the Winchester patriarch was wary of the girl.

"Since when?" Mia questioned, drawing back his attention.

Since he took off suddenly back at Bobby's... Sam answered silently.

In the next moment, he sucked in a deep breath as realization struck him like a punch in the gut.

Dad knew!

"SINCE WHEN?" she screamed at him, her eyes flashing back and forth between their normal sienna and the demon sable.

It was Sam's turn to smile, his eyes catching the subtle slip of control as Mia clenched her fists in frustration. Her façade of confidence now had a minor crack showing and the young hunter was determined to begin working on it.

"Tell me where Dean is and I'll tell you where my dad is," he offered.

Her eyes narrowed as she considered his proposal, but Sam could see that her body remained tense.

"Come on, Mia. You already said you were after the 'bigger prize.' Dean doesn't mean anything to you now. Not if you're really after our dad..."

Sam pushed her more as she remained obstinately quiet. "Think about it... John Winchester, the grand prize, the ultimate trophy for any demon. Why settle for Dean?"

She shook her head finally, looking away from him. "Nah. I don't think so. You're not gonna give up your dad. Nice try, Sammy."

"Oh? You should know there's nothing I wouldn't do for my brother, Mia. He's always been there for me, more than our dad ever was. So if it comes down to choosing between them, then you've not been paying attention to all the stories Dean told you or you'd know who I'd choose," Sam insisted.

"Very convincing argument. You might have been a decent lawyer after all. Of course, you do need to know when to walk away from a losing case, Sam. And this is such a loser 'cause you don't have anything to bargain with. Your brother is in chunks, spread across a half acre of landfill out west of the city. So unless you're willing to trade your live daddy for a bucket and a pair of tongs, which I doubt, then you might reconsider your offer," Mia taunted. "Maybe if you're lucky, you can even find a big enough piece of Dean to hold a decent burial with."

Sam cringed, bile rising up in his throat as his mind conjured up images to match the brunette's hideous description. Still unwilling to believe her, nevertheless, he couldn't help succumbing to her taunts.

Fighting back his stomach's desire to invert itself, Sam sucked in another lungful of the night air. His plan to try to trick Mia into giving up Dean had failed, but he

wasn't about to give in just yet. He just had to keep her talking and hope she let something slip.

"So what the Hell are you if you're not a demon?" he demanded. Better to know what he was up against since it was apparent that she had no intention of letting him go free.

"I'm the next step on the evolutionary ladder, darlin'" Mia hissed.

"More like the escalator to Hell," Sam snarked back.

"Maybe halfway there... but I'm okay with that." she chortled.

"Halfway?"

"Half human, half demon," Mia explained. "But all pissed-off. Now enough is enough! Tell me where Daddy is or so help me, you'll be joining your brother down in Hell..."

Half-demon, half human? What the hell? I mean, WHAT THE HELL? Good going, Winchester! Way to pick 'em!

Inside the Impala's darkened and stifling trunk, Dean lay helplessly immobile. Forced by paralysis to do nothing but listen to the conversation being carried on between Mia and Sam, the young man was left to his own self-recrimination.

What have I done? Sam... and now Dad? Why does she want Dad?

As the perspiration trickled annoyingly down his spine, Dean recalled all the subtle times Mia had asked about his dad. Seemingly innocent questions, "Why don't you call him?" "When did you last see him?", now held a much more sinister quality in hindsight.

She pumped you for information and you blabbed like a sixteen year-old girl. What happened to "we do what we do and we shut up about it?" Dad will so have your ass over this one...

Dad...

Dean struggled again against the uncooperative muscles in his arms. He could still feel the cell phone in the right pocket of his jeans. If only he could reach it. He might be able to call his dad for help or at the very least to warn him.

Not knowing if Mia had used some sort of demon power on him or if she had resorted to more traditional pharmaceutical methods, he merely knew that he had to try to fight against whatever was holding him. Concentrating, he focused on making the simplest movement of the fingers on his right hand. At first there was nothing, but as adrenaline borne of desperation began to surge through his system, he was rewarded with the slightest twitch of his index finger.

Still unable to vocalize any words of triumph, nevertheless, for that brief second, Dean felt his heart actually lift with some semblance of hope. If he could move that finger then it was only a matter of time before he would be able to move everything. His stalwart determination and his need to protect Sam would see to that.

Focusing once more, he drummed up every ounce of energy he could muster and put it into moving his hand. When nothing happened, Dean worried that maybe the first time had been an illusion, but just before he was ready to give in, the breath he was holding nearly ready to give out, his entire right hand jerked.

I'm coming, Sammy. Just be careful. I'm coming and that bitch is gonna pay...

"I'll never tell you where he is and you'll never find him!" Sam stated assuredly.

"Oh, you don't think so huh?" Mia countered.

"No. Not if he doesn't want to be found. Our dad is one of the toughest hunters out there. He's battled your kind before. He'll see you coming a mile away."

"But Sam, he's never dealt with *anything* like me," she reminded him taking several steps away from him toward the rear of the Impala, her hand gliding along the smooth black curves of the car as she retreated.

"You don't know our dad..." Sam warned. "He's gonna kick your ass when he finds you."

Mia whirled around to face him, her eyes shaded black again. "That's such an empty threat, Sam. Johnny isn't gonna be any more of a challenge for me than Dean was... or you for that matter..."

Sam never saw her move, not even the minutest flick of her head or hands or eyes. But he felt an unseen hand slam into his chest, lifting him high into the air and smashing him back down hard into the ground like an invisible pro wrestler.

His first thought was that his spine was surely snapped in half, everything going instantly numb as he fought to suck oxygen into lungs that felt as though they had been filled with wet concrete. But as the numbness submitted to returning pain, Sam could feel every rock, every stick underneath him, each jammed into his back and seeking to tear and batter his flesh.

"What? No smartass remarks?" Mia asked, bending down to peer at him. "Oh, but then I guess it's pretty hard to talk when your ribcage is flattened down on your spine."

With a groan, he rolled to his side, looking up to see where the brunette was and preparing for her next attack. He saw her move out of the corner of his eye and tried to hastily make it back to his feet, but to no avail.

Like a puppet, Sam was hauled effortlessly upward, his legs dangling several inches above the ground as he hung suspended in midair. Against his will, he felt his arms and legs yanked outward, each pulled in an opposite direction as though he was being torn apart. The pain was intense as his limbs threatened to dislocate from the sockets and Sam had to wonder if this was what the demon had done to Dean; if this was what his brother had endured as Mia tortured him to death.

Below him, Mia looked up, her face still bearing the smug grin she'd been wearing most of the night. He turned his eyes away, not caring to see her or to let her see the slight panic he felt show through on his face.

"Gee Sam, you're no fun at all. Not begging, not pleading, hell you're not even defiant like your brother. At least he managed a few last nasty threats my way. Right before I gutted him of course," Mia reminded him.

Sam screwed his eyes shut as his entire body tensed with rage. He couldn't go down this way. Not out of respect for Dean. Dean would never give in without a fight so how could he do any less?

Still, despite the agony of losing his brother, despite the utter fury Sam could feel spreading throughout his body, even despite the incredible pain that was threatening to make him black out, none of those stimuli seemed powerful enough to enable the psychic to tap into the latent power within him.

"I'll never beg..." Sam spat back, stalling for time as he prayed to feel some semblance of the strange tingling that usually signaled his own *abilities* beginning to manifest.

"Oh, but you will. I'll make sure of that. I've been waiting a long time to see you bleed and hear you scream," Mia answered.

With the slightest tilt of her head, Sam felt the pressure on his extremities release a little just as a sledgehammer slammed into his chest. He heard the telltale sound of his ribs cracking, giving way to the unseen force. He knew Mia had pretended to be possessed by Malphas, but only now did he realize that it was actually her that had exhibited the power to crush and destroy buildings, never the demon.

"Is that...the best... you got?" he choked out as a thin trickle of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth.

Struggling to survive and desperate to find some way to defend himself, Sam resorted to channeling his brother's sarcastic defiance. Why couldn't he simply lash

back at her as he done with Alyssa Medina or even as he'd done back in Leicester? Mia's laughter broke his focus. "That's more like it!" she purred. "I was hoping you'd put up a fight..."

With a nudge of her head, Sam felt himself dropped to the pavement next to the Impala. Allowed a brief respite from her evil attack, the young hunter grabbed for the handle to the rear door in an effort to pull himself up.

He was nearly to his knees when he felt Mia's finger's weave into his shaggy hair, grabbing a handful and forcefully snapping his neck backwards. Sam went lax, allowing his body to follow his head, his sudden weight throwing the smaller woman off balance.

Mia stumbled back, relinquishing her hold and giving Sam the chance to twist around. He dove for her legs, tackling her to the asphalt and covering her body as he fought to gain control of her.

Sam could count on one hand the times he'd ever struck a woman, but at this moment, he saw Mia as neither human nor a woman any longer. Clenching his fist, he slammed it into her jaw, taking some satisfaction out of the soft crack of her head as it rebounded against the pavement and the harsh grunt that escaped her lips.

"That was for my brother," he snarled, staring down at her.

About to strike her again in an attempt to knock her unconscious, Sam was abruptly thrown backwards, his long body crashing into the rear quarter-panel of the Chevy so hard that the metal dented from the impact. As his vision blurred, he could barely make out the brunette as she rose and slowly approached him, but there was no mistaking the words she spoke.

"And that was just for me!"

Dean listened to the exchange between Sam and Mia, all the while fervently trying to make his body move. He had to get free, had to get out there and do something to help his brother out of the mess that he'd basically put him in.

As the verbal sparring continued between the two outside, Dean was left with no choice but to remain an unwilling audience. Trapped within the trunk, unable to make a noise, he couldn't signal to Sam, he couldn't even scream out all the anger and rage he felt at having been effectively used and betrayed.

In all the years that Dean Winchester had been hunting and even those times when he had found himself on the receiving end of some creature's brutal attack, he'd never felt as utterly helpless as now. Worse, he'd rather be taking a beating than be forced to wait and wonder, blinded to what was happening outside.

But at least so far, the confrontation had remained nothing but taunts and threats. Dean knew Sam could hold his own in that department, but unfortunately, he also knew that his little brother often tended to try to talk his way out of things when he should just cut and run.

"...Or shoot first and ask questions later..." Dean added silently.

When the talking suddenly ended, the young captive held his breath, stilling even his respirations as he strained to make out any noise to indicate what was going on. In the next instant, he heard what sounded like the soft grunt of air being exhaled as though someone had taken a punch.

SAMMY!!!!

His gut told him what his other senses could not. Whatever had happened outside, his brother had gone silent and had probably been the source of the noise.

Frantic, Dean strained to scream, a meager squeak barely escaping his lips, his vocal cords as unresponsive as before. In desperation, he focused on his hand again, willing the appendage to move. Unlike before, there wasn't even the slightest twitch.

There were more sounds of a scuffle and no mistaking the pained groan that filled the air. His brother was being hurt. Dean might not be able to see, but he knew nonetheless.

"Is that...the best... you got?"

Sam's defiant jibe pierced the dark gloom of the trunk and despite the slow breathlessness of his delivery, Dean was never so glad to hear his brother's voice.

That's my boy! You tell that bitch! There's no putting a Winchester down.

Except in the back of his mind, Dean reluctantly admitted that Mia had already gotten one over on him. Was his baby brother any match for the hybrid demon? Surely Sam could take her?

The elder sibling got his answer when the solid thunk of a fist connecting with flesh, followed by a female's harsh cry of pain seeped into the confines of the trunk. Dean smiled inwardly, taking great joy in knowing that Mia had just been on the receiving end of a Winchester knuckle sandwich.

"That was for my brother," he heard Sam bark at the young woman and in his mind's eye, he could picture the shaggy hair of his brother partially obscuring Sam's face as he combined his best glare to go along with the menacing tone.

"Finish her off, Sammy," Dean silently commanded, straining to hear the next of his brother's blows land.

But instead, the Impala was rocked by something heavy striking the rear driver's side. Within the trunk, Dean's body was tossed about like a rag doll as the entire car shifted from the impact.

Startled, Dean had no idea what was happening, but when he could no longer hear Sam's voice, there was no preventing the chill that raged down his spine. He knew, as he had before, that his brother was in trouble once more.

Summoning all the rage and fury he could muster, he focused on the right hand again.

For Sam...move it for Sam...got to help Sam...

He repeated the mantra over and over in his head, using its rhythm like the hard metal riff of Metallica to simultaneously soothe his frazzled nerves while also helping him work toward his goal.

For Sam... move it for Sam...move it for Sam...move it...move it... for Sam...for Sam... Sam... samsamsamsamsamsam....

First his index finger twitched, then suddenly his entire hand spasmed. Determined, Dean pressed on, forcing his fingers to flex open and closed, heartened by the minor movement even though it was the only physical activity he could manifest.

For Sam...

Pushing on, Dean slowly and stiffly raised his hand. Since he was locked inside the Chevy's trunk, above the secreted compartment, it meant the actual hatch was not far above his head.

Still straining to listen to the noises outside, he managed to reach up to the underside of the trunk lid. Still too weak to strike the metal and make any significant sound, instead he clawed at the lining with his fingertips.

"And that was just for me!" He heard Mia hiss.

Even more frantic, Dean tore at the trunk with his hand. His mind screaming even as the skin shredded from his fingers leaving bloody smears on the unyielding metal.

Mia lifted Sam without even touching him, effortlessly tossing him through the air and into the ditch beside the road. She repeated the process, several more times, using her demonic powers to telekinetically batter the young hunter as though he were nothing more than a tether ball she could beat back and forth.

Bruised and bloodied, Sam struggled to his knees during the brief respite she afforded him. He looked up at her from underneath hair matted with blood from a small cut in his scalp. Slightly dazed and breathless, he knew he was in trouble. He just needed to stall to catch his breath and think.

"Why Mia?" he asked, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

She paused, looking down at him with curiosity. "Why what?"

"Why the *World Championship Wrestling* exhibition? If you're so powerful, part demon and all, why not just finish me off? Surely you could just blink an eye and snap my neck or something? What's with beating the crap out me?" Sam queried.

She chuckled, her head cocked to the side as she brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face. "Because it's so damn much fun! And besides, you still haven't told me what I want to know. Where's your dad, Sam?"

"I don't know..."

"Liar!"

"Well, then you better pull up a lawn chair, cause this is gonna take a while," Sam quipped with a grimace.

"Fine..." Mia agreed and Sam felt himself thrown into the air, this time landing with sickening crack of a rib as he impacted a nearby telephone pole.

He barely raised his head to see her stride toward him. He was beaten, blood streaming from a dozen open lacerations and even more trickling from the corner of his mouth. It hurt to breathe, but that pain was resulting as much from the gut-wrenching ache of his brother's death as much as it was from his fractured ribs.

Part of Sam just wanted to submit, to just drop back down to the ground and let the darkness overtake him both physically and mentally. He didn't want to believe her that Dean was gone, but the strength she was exhibiting against him now left Sam with little hope that his brother could have fared any better against Mia than he was.

Dammit Dean, why couldn't you have trusted me? Sam silently chastised his absent sibling.

"What's the matter, Sammy? Giving in kinda easier than I expected for a big old boy like you. I'm shocked. I was hoping for a challenge after Dean," Mia sneered as she drew closer.

"Go to Hell," he gasped back, managing to draw up to one knee.

"Hell? Ha! Hell is Club Med to someone like me. But if you don't tell me what I want to know, even SPF ten thousand isn't gonna help you anymore than it did your brother," the brunette promised in return.

Sam huffed air, shrugging as he met her eyes defiantly. "You sure are more stupid than I thought if you think that threat is going to get me to give up any info on my dad," he replied.

The wide smile on Mia's face never broke as she listened to Sam's bold answer. If anything, she smugly knelt down and grabbed a handful of the younger Winchester's hair.

"I'm getting really tired of this. Tell me where your father is or I'll go back and rip out your brother's intestines and feed them to you," she hissed, yanking back Sam's head with a rough jerk.

The strain on his neck was excruciating, but Sam barely noticed, his mind pouncing on the young woman's last words. Mia had slipped, threatening him with hurting Dean. Had she meant what she'd said or was it just another of her tricks? Could Dean be alive?

"What's it gonna be, Sam?" Mia hissed, pulling even further on his head.

Dean's alive....

He knew. He could tell by the way she tried to cover, but was too late. His brother was still alive and Mia was still planning on and able to hurt him.

As the muscles in his neck protested the abuse, the cartilage in his spine cracking, a unexpected tingle of energy seemed to course from the center of Sam's

body. Flowing outward along his extremities, it was as though he had plugged himself into an electrical socket and was allowing the current to flow through him.

Something inside him exploded, like a primal scream tearing from his body even though he never uttered a sound. The pressure on his neck was suddenly released, allowing Sam to look forward and see Mia's body go sailing through the night air and slamming into the Impala's trunk with a resounding thud.

With only five fingers responding to his mental command, Dean clawed desperately at the interior lid of the trunk. Lacking the muscular coordination to move his entire arm, he was unable to beat on the metal and signal his presence.

Still, he wasn't about to give up now. Not when he could hear the battle going on outside, not when he was forced to listen to Mia's taunts and Sam's pain-filled grunts and groans as he tried to defy the demon.

Realistically, Dean knew he couldn't get out of his prison, not in his current condition. But even as he felt the blood stream down his hands from his mangled fingertips, mixing with perspiration and continuing down his arms to clot in a sticky mess, he didn't relent.

Driven by a soul-consuming guilt and the absolute need to protect his brother, Dean fought against the paralyzing effects of whatever power Mia had used against him.

For Sam...move it for Sam...got to help Sam...

He returned to the mantra, straining to move his left hand to compliment the ongoing scrabbling of the right. Just like its mate, beginning with an uncoordinated twitch then expanding to a grander movement, his fingers clenched closed then reopened.

For Sam...

Dean then focused on his arms, tensing the muscles in both biceps like a weightlifter about to benchpress a heavy bar. Like before, initially there was no response. But as the sounds of the melee outside grew, the hunter redoubled his efforts, crimping his eyes tightly closed as he put every ounce of energy into forcing his body to obey.

...got to help Sam

And then both arms moved.

He still felt as though they weighed a ton, neither appendage responding as fluidly as his well-trained body was accustomed, but it was a start. Pressing on, Dean reached to the pocket in his jeans for the cellular. Fumbling spastically, he finally retrieved it only to groan in silent fury when he remembered that it was still dead, courtesy of Mia.

Useless...

Like me...

Dropping the phone he then tried to feel about the trunk around his body, hoping there might be something useful for prying open the trunk from the inside. Providing of course, he could summon the strength to use it.

His hand came in contact with the handle of one of their well-used shovels, but the length of the implement lay mostly underneath his body. Even if he could roll off of the tool, it was unlikely he could move it in such close quarters to be effective.

Frustrated, he was about to resort to simply pounding on the metal. Maybe if Sam could hear him. Maybe his younger brother could break away long enough to free him. Two on one had to be better odds.

Raising his hands, he was just about to beat on the Chevy's trunk when a deafening crash made him recoil within the stifling darkness. Something, no someone, had just slammed into the top of the trunk rocking the entire vehicle and actually denting it in on top of his already confined space.

The scraping sound of movement against the Impala's metal skin accompanied a loud groan of pain causing a flood of dread to wash over Dean as he feared for his brother's welfare. How much more abuse could Sam take?

"Sammmmyy..." Dean croaked out, his voice nothing more than the barest whisper.

Sam rose shakily to his feet, blinking owlishly as he watched Mia's body roll convulsively on the back of the dark Chevy. His finger's still tingled as though he'd just been shocked and the hair on the nape of his neck stood on end.

His brain felt as though every single neuron was attempting to fire simultaneously and he absently wondered if he was going to have a seizure. Yet as he stood there, his mind coming to focus as his eyes did, Sam knew differently.

This was no different than Massachusetts, no different than Phoenix before. He had reflected Mia's power back on her, just as he had Alyssa, just as he had Lucifer himself.

"*You're calling me demonic?*" The words he'd thrown back at his brother just hours before now came back to haunt him.

What the hell, maybe I am. Sam thought to himself. Maybe Dean was right, maybe it did take one to know one.

Caught in his introspection, the young psychic didn't notice Mia slide off the rear of the car and stagger to her feet to face him. A smear of blood marred her milky complexion and her right cheek was already bruising from where her face had impacted the unyielding Detroit steel.

"I'd heard you had a few parlor tricks yourself..." she smirked, unsuccessfully trying to look as cocky as before.

Sam glared at her, his eyes steely as he strode confidently back toward her, ready to confront the hybrid demon once again.

Dean's alive...

"Where's my brother, bitch?" he demanded, feeling the surge of energy building within him again.

Mia wiped a hand across her mouth smearing blood like a toddler playing with lipstick. The visage she created would have appeared comical were it not for the absolute look of fury that flashed in her dark eyes.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she sneered.

"He's alive. I know it Mia. You can't lie about that to me now," Sam stated stalwartly, taking several more steps toward the brunette.

He saw her flinch as he advanced, a brief glimmer of fear taking residence in her eyes that she quickly tried to cover. It gave him hope and a sense of bravado that he hadn't felt up to this point. Before, his only plan was to put up a fight that would have done his brother proud. Now, he was in Pissed-off Sam Mode, fighting to save Dean.

"You'll never save him with those pathetic skills of yours Sam. You're no match for me," Mia taunted.

Sam took another step and was about to tell the demon just what he thought about her threats when she waved her hand and he felt himself frozen in place. Paralyzed, he couldn't move a muscle, he couldn't even form the words to speak.

He watched in frozen horror as she now closed the final space between them, a smug grin covering her face. Sam tried to breathe, but even that simple action seemed nearly impossible so complete was her power controlling his body. He was suffocating as he stood there, the muscles that expanded his chest as unresponsive as the rest of his tall form.

Sam cringed inwardly as Mia pulled close to him, her warm breath vile and violating as her mouth neared his ear. She paused, glancing over her shoulders as the glare of headlights illuminated the otherwise near darkness.

Turning back to face him, the smile that covered her face was nothing short of victorious and Sam felt his hopes diminish as his vision began to fade.

“Bye bye baby Winchester,” she hissed.

The blaring of a car horn permeated the metal coffin of the Impala's trunk and Dean briefly stopped his futile attempt at pounding on the lid's underside. As he held his breath, remaining as quiet as possible so he could hear what was happening, the squeal of tires followed by the sickening thud of a heavy impact assailed his ears.

His heart racing, Dean listened intently, waiting for any sound, praying to hear Sam's voice once again. For what seemed like an eternity, only the pounding of his own heartbeat within his chest echoed in his ears. He yelled out again, calling his brother's name, his voice barely stronger than before, but still not able to pierce the thick metal of the trunk.

“Not so special now, are you Sammy?”

Mia's voice was muffled but Dean could make it out all too plainly.

SAM!

What had the bitch done to his brother?

Spurred on by the desperate need to reach his sibling, Dean beat on the metal with both fists ignoring the further damage to his hands as the flesh tore from his knuckles and the metacarpal fractured from the relentless impact.

Despite the racket created by his determined pounding, the sound of footsteps approaching the trunk broke through the din. Dean stopped his frantic attempt to escape, waiting anxiously as the noise neared.

With a loud groan of metal, the trunk lid flew upward, light from a nearby streetlight cascading in and blinding him as he tried to blink against it. Raising a hand to shield his abused eyes, Dean blinked several times before his vision adjusted enough to see Mia silhouetted against the night skyline.

“Mia...” he hissed out between his teeth.

Watching as she bent down over him, her face was covered in blood from a gash above her eye and another just grazing her cheekbone. She looked as though she had gone several rounds with Mike Tyson and the thought made Dean smile briefly.

Atta boy, Sammy!

Yet, as he watched, the wounds closed seamlessly, returning her skin to the near-flawless complexion that he had once adored. Still looking at her, Dean saw that her hands were covered in blood as well, fingers coated with congealed red-black fluid as she reached in toward him.

“Don't worry, baby. It isn't mine,” she assured him as her hands neared his neck.

Dean twisted away, repulsed at the mere thought that she might touch him.

He jerked as she closed her bloody fingers around the golden amulet that lay against his chest. But as her skin came in contact with the ancient relic, the talisman tarnished over to jet black as though some evil cancer had eaten away at the gold.

In an instant, the former piece of King Solomon's sword became as black as coal, eerily similar to the appearance it had taken on when Dean had been possessed by Haris' spawn.

It knows what she is...

Mia let out a hiss, withdrawing her hand and sucking on her fingertips as though they had been burned. Shaking her head, she glared down at Dean, her eyes glazing over as black as the amulet.

“Dammit,” she snarled. “Boys and their toys.”

Reaching toward him again, Dean managed to twist sideways. “Stay the hell away from me,” he growled defiantly.

“My my. I thought we weren't talking,” Mia snarked, raising her hand to silence the hunter once again.

“Where's Sam? What did you do to my brother?” Dean managed before she acted.

Mia smiled sadistically, her eyes sparkling with sheer glee. Ignoring Dean's question, she instead grabbed his right hand and with more physical strength than he would have credited her with, she tore the silver ring from his finger ignoring the blood and fragments of skin that ripped free in the process.

"Give that back, you bitch!" he demanded.

"Be grateful I didn't take the whole finger-" Mia replied, " – lover."

"Where's Sam?" Dean asked again, his voice bordering on a plea.

Mia laughed deep in her throat. "Roadkill" she answered. "Another victim of our treacherous highways. You know there's a reason why hitchhiking isn't safe. You should see the statistics."

Dean thrashed in denial. "NO! SAM!" he screamed out into the night.

Mia waved her hand above him, silencing him both vocally and physically once again, his repeated cry of his brother's name wordlessly mouthed.

"Good boys should be seen and not heard," she chastised him.

Dean tried to yell out in defiance but once again his lungs would not cooperate. He struggled to lift his hand to reach for the trail of her blouse, but it would not obey.

Paralyzed once more, he could only scream in silence as he watched Mia hover over him. His last sight as darkness engulfed him was her face screwed up in a diabolical laugh as she slammed the trunk closed and sealed him back into his metal cage.

Mia continued laughing as the Impala's trunk shut with a resounding bang. Although she hadn't gotten exactly what she'd wanted out of the day's events, overall, she was relatively pleased with herself. Two hunters down and the big prize was sure to come running.

Walking over to the other side of the road, she glanced down into the ditch and the unmoving form that lay crumpled in a bloodied heap. Still smiling, she rolled the silver ring between her blood-smeared fingers before looking back at the unresponsive body.

Yep, things were turning out halfway decent ... all things considered. It hadn't been her original plan to bait John Winchester in this manner, but hell, whatever worked.

After all, Sam had been a royal pain in her ass. He'd almost blown her cover more times than she could count. She held no particular remorse for him now. And Dean... poor pathetic, usable Dean. So sure, so cocky, so easily twisted to her purpose. She basked in the misery she was causing him. Nothing was more torment to Dean than the thought that he had betrayed his own flesh and blood, and for a demon no less.

A soft moan rose from the ditch and Mia turned her focus back toward the broken figure lying silently among the weeds.

That's retribution!

"So sad," she said mockingly as she flicked Dean's silver ring at the younger Winchester. It landed on his chest, the blood from Dean's torn fingers mixing with Sam's as the piece of jewelry sat as a silent marker of the brothers downfall.

"You aren't looking so good there, Sammy. Sure hope Daddy finds you soon," Mia taunted.

Turning on her heel, she strode back to the Impala. Sliding into the driver's side seat, she keyed the ignition and shifted the powerful car into gear.

In a cloud of dust and flying gravel, she raced off into the night. One Winchester trapped and at her mercy, her plans for Dean just beginning to unfold, the other, bleeding and helpless, once again deserted by the side of the road.

To be continued...in **Retribution**...

