

Season Four

Episode Nine: Reflection

By irismay42

Part One

*Singer Salvage,
Sioux Falls, SD
March 19th, 2010*

“Shut the hell up you noisy mutts!”

Bobby Singer turned over heavily, the bed springs groaning a rusty protest beneath his tired body.

Light was just starting to seep in through the crack in the curtains and a glance at the old digital alarm clock on the nightstand revealed the time to be six thirty a.m. And while Bobby was usually an early riser, a late night with some moldy books and a bottle of Jim Beam had meant he'd had four hours sleep, tops.

Stupid noisy mutts.

Dragging himself out of bed, he padded sleepily to the window, pulling aside one of the musty maroon curtains and squinting into the semi-darkness.

Freakin' Lila. Knew he was a soft touch when it came to canines.

“He's just a baby, Bobby,” she'd cooed. “Can't keep him at the shelter much longer.”

Freakin' Lila and her freakin' rescue mutts.

The Rottweiler puppy in question—christened Alec by the staff at the animal shelter on account of him apparently being so smart—was currently planted in the middle of the yard, feet spread out and hackles raised, barking at shadows.

Bobby's Alaskan Malamute, Max, was standing right next to him, her own teeth bared at the same shadows, probably just to show solidarity with the younger mutt, Bobby figured.

Max was apparently a soft touch too.

As Bobby prepared to close the curtains and crawl back into his pit, the shadows shifted slightly.

Bobby had never trusted shadows.

Grabbing the first thing that came to hand—which happened to be the shotgun loaded with rock salt rounds he always kept propped by the side of his bed—Bobby stealthily opened his bedroom door, making his way quickly and quietly along the hall and down the stairs, before carefully unlocking the front door to the house.

Careful not to disturb the thick salt line laid across the threshold, Bobby cautiously pulled the door open, the dogs still barking up a storm in the yard and the shadows still shifting barely perceptibly beyond them.

Suddenly one of the dogs—Alec by the sounds of it—yelped, and Bobby almost took a step over the salt line.

“Max!” he called, his tone measured and calm so as not to spook either of the dogs any more than they already were. “Here girl. And bring that idjit toyboy o’ yours with ya while you’re at it!”

Both dogs were whimpering now, tails down, ears flat to their heads as they turned and headed quickly up to the house, climbing up onto the porch with a clatter of claws as their master ushered them into the house, careful not to disturb the salt.

No way whatever was out there was getting in.

And from the looks of the shadows out beyond the porch, there was more than one something out there.

Squinting into the half-light, Bobby raised the shotgun slightly as his eyes finally managed to adjust to the darkness.

There were several shadowy figures standing out in the yard.

None of them made any kind of move toward the house. They were just standing there. Watching him.

With jet black eyes.

Taking a breath, Bobby carefully closed the door, drew back the bolts, and reached for his cellphone.

***Best Budget Motel,
Lawrence, KS***

Dean shifted slightly on the lumpy mattress, muzzy head wondering why the hell someone was bellowing R. Dean Taylor’s *There’s a Ghost In My House* at full volume into his ear.

Cracking open one eye, he performed his usual check of the room—salt lines: check; weapons bag: check; dirty laundry on the floor: check; Sam snoring like a two-hundred pound hippopotamus in the next bed: check—before remembering he’d changed the ringtone on the new cellphone sitting on the nightstand only the night before.

Groping for the phone, Dean swore silently as he fumbled in the semi-darkness, almost dropping the little gadget onto the questionably-stained brown carpet before bringing it up to his face and squinting at the screen.

Bobby’s cell flashed brightly—too brightly for this time of day—at him.

Dammit. The thing had so many buttons he couldn't remember which one to push to pick up the call.

Oh yeah. Touchscreen.

Sam might love all this technology stuff, but Dean just wanted to make a damn phone call.

Finger pushing a little too forcefully against the touchscreen, Bobby's gruff, "You awake, boy?" rattled around in Dean's brain for a couple of seconds before he was able to formulate an answer.

"I am now," he muttered, glancing at the time on the clock on the nightstand. "Bobby, it's the middle of the goddamn night, man!"

"It's six thirty-five, sleepyhead," Bobby returned, his voice containing an edge of controlled worry that had Dean instantly sitting up in his bed.

"Bobby, what's wrong?" he asked. "You sound kinda weird."

"Part of the job description," Bobby replied. "As is having your damn house surrounded by demons at stupid o'clock in the morning."

"Demons?" Dean was instantly on alert. "Bobby, you okay? We can be there in like—" he checked his watch, even though he'd only just looked at the time. "—Five hours."

"My ass. Five and a half if you break every speed limit on the way," Bobby snorted. "Dean, I know what day it is, son. And I don't need you haulin' ass over here when your daddy needs you over there."

"But Bobby, if you need our help—"

By this point Sam was sitting up in bed too, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and running his fingers through his thick mop of hair. He cast a concerned look in Dean's direction, and Dean mouthed the word, "Bobby," to his brother, which didn't seem to lessen Sam's obvious unease any.

"Look, I'm fine, Dean, just wanted to give you a heads up is all," Bobby was trying to reassure him. "Damn demons are just standing there, watching. It's kinda creepy, but there's no way they can get in—the whole house is ringed with salt and there are wards and charms everywhere. They're not even tryin' to get any closer."

"So why are they there?" Dean asked.

"The sixty-four thousand dollar question," Bobby agreed. "Might be somethin' to do with what you boys are up to today. Y'know? Keep me stuck here so's I can't get to Stull to help you out tonight, like I promised."

"You think?" Dean asked. "Like demonic house arrest?" He rubbed at his eyes and exhaled slowly. "You think they're Lucifer's? Maybe he's got some kind of big plan going on to try and stop us getting Dad out tonight?"

Bobby sighed wearily. "Maybe," he agreed. "I sure as hell ain't gettin' no further than my porch today." He virtually growled down the telephone. "Damn, I hate bein' benched like this, right before the big game."

"Bobby, we'll be okay," Dean assured him. "We can do this."

"You boys even have a plan yet?"

Dean swallowed. "We're working on it," he insisted. "Only a matter of time till Sammy's geek-boy brain comes up with somethin'."

"Well, you and your brother look after yourselves," Bobby instructed. "Don't want you showin' up at my house dead or nothin'."

Dean snorted. "Not gonna happen, old man." He paused for a second. "You sure you don't need any help?"

"I can handle a few pansy-ass demons, boy," Bobby grunted. "You and Sam just go get your daddy."

Dean paused for a second. "We will, Bobby," he said. "Take care of yourself."

"Ditto, son," Bobby replied, and the call disconnected.

"Is Bobby okay?" Sam asked immediately, swinging his long legs out of bed and perching on the edge of the mattress nervously.

Dean shrugged. "Says his whole house is surrounded by demons."

"What?" Sam burst out, jumping to his feet. "We gotta get out there..."

"Hold your horses there, Hoss," Dean said, forcing himself up out of bed and grabbing Sam's arm. "Bobby's fine. The demons aren't doing anything. He thinks they're just trying to stop him coming *here*."

Sam nodded, taking a breath, although his body remained tense. "They know what day it is," Sam conceded. "They're gonna try and stop us getting Dad out of the Gateway."

"Course they are," Dean agreed. "You didn't think they'd let us just waltz into Stull cemetery, open the Gate and pull him out did ya?"

Sam grinned a little mirthlessly. "Well I was kinda hoping," he said, before shaking his head. "No," he admitted slowly. "But it's been five months since Halloween. Two weeks since the thing with the photo album. Two weeks bumming around every hunter, witch, psychic and soothsayer mentioned in Dad's journal and we *still* don't know how the hell we're gonna get him out."

Dean shrugged. "Then we do what we always do, man," he said, trying to muster up a cocky smile. "We wing it."

"Dad's life's not always on the line, Dean," Sam returned flatly. "I'm not sure 'winging it' is gonna work this time."

"No," Dean agreed. "Which is why you need to get that gigantic melon o' yours coming up with a plan."

"Planning's your department," Sam returned, sinking back down onto his bed. "I'm Research Guy, remember?"

Dean nodded, nudging Sam's foot as he headed for the bathroom. "Right now looks like you're Comatose Guy to me," he said. "Up an' at 'em, Sammy. We got a long day ahead of us."

Sam grunted, one arm thrown over his eyes. "Five more minutes," he muttered, sounding all of about six years old.

Dean smiled to himself at the memory as he closed the bathroom door behind him, peeling off his t-shirt and reaching to turn on the shower.

Just as his cellphone started to scream again.

"Dean, phone!" Sam's yell sounded muffled, and Dean was pretty sure he'd got his head under the bedcovers again.

Yanking the door open, Dean headed back to the nightstand where he'd left the phone, giving his brother's foot a slightly less gentle nudge as he passed. "C'mon, Sleeping Beauty! We got Hellgate's to storm, remember?"

Snatching up the cellphone once more, Dean again checked out the caller I.D., half expecting it to be Bobby calling back.

He was more than a little surprised to see "Bonnie" flashing on the screen.

Jabbing once again at the touchscreen, Dean frowned as he picked up the call. "Hey Bonnie," he began. "It's early. Is everything okay...?"

"Dean?" Bonnie didn't sound okay. She didn't sound anywhere near okay. In fact, Dean quickly realized, she sounded pretty damn terrified. "Dean, there's someone in my house," she finished.

Dean took a breath. "*Someone* or *something*?" he asked shortly.

Bonnie swallowed audibly. "Thing," she amended. "Things."

"As in more than one?"

"As in several. I don't know how they got in here. I know how to lay salt lines, you know I do."

"Dad taught you good."

"Not good enough, apparently."

"Are they demons?" Dean wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Black eyes and everything," Bonnie confirmed. "I don't know what to do."

“Are you alone?”

“Uh-huh. Just me and them. And they’re just...standing there. Watching me.”

“They’re in the room with you?”

“Oh yeah. Won’t let me leave the house. Won’t let me call anyone but you.”

Dean’s brain fritzed for a second, and Sam was once again sitting up in bed looking worried.

Man, this can’t be happening, he told himself. Dad had kept Bonnie and her family safe for sixteen years—*sixteen years!*—and not two weeks after Dean and Sam found out about her, she’d already got demons in her house.

“Bonnie, it’s okay,” he told her, not sure which of them he was trying to convince. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I know what day it is, Dean,” Bonnie said, repeating what Bobby had said just a few short minutes earlier. “I know you can’t help me.”

“No, that’s not true,” Dean asserted. “I won’t let them hurt you—”

Before Dean could get any further, Sam’s cell began to chirp some wussy emo chart crap, and he found his brother looking at him, the question in his eyes. Sam obviously knew something was wrong from the look Dean was failing pretty spectacularly to keep off his own face.

Swallowing hard, Sam picked up his phone, his face blanching visibly when he saw the caller I.D.

“Sarah?”

Dean’s stomach flipped right over even as he saw the color draining from his brother’s face.

This was bad.

This was *really* bad.

They’d not seen Sarah Blake in quite a while now, but Dean knew Sam kept in sporadic contact with her, even though he wasn’t sure where she was living these days.

“Dean?” Bonnie’s voice was in his ear, reminding him that he was already in the middle of a conversation, even as Sam’s fingers tightened on his phone and his lips compressed into a thin white line.

“Sarah, it’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“Bonnie, put one of those black-eyed sons of bitches on the phone.”

“Dean Winchester,” a calm, measured voice oozed like honey down the phone line almost immediately.

“Demonic bastard,” Dean returned, equally as calmly.

“Now, now, no need for name-calling,” the demon chided him. “We’re not going to hurt your *friend*,” the sneer was obvious in his voice. “Not yet anyway. Not until midnight.”

“What happens at midnight?” Dean hardly dared ask.

“If you’re here,” the demon replied, “nothing. If you’re not... well let’s just say your friend’s brain matter will be decorating her kitchen wall.”

“Son of a—” Dean growled. “You touch her, I’ll drag your evil demonic ass to Hell myself, you bastard!”

“Midnight, Winchester. You’ve got until midnight.”

There was a click, followed by the dial tone, and Dean was torn between throwing the phone at the wall and banging his head against it instead.

“Sammy...?”

Sam held up one hand to quiet his brother. “Yeah, well unless you wanna send me a plane ticket, asshole, how the hell do you expect me to get to San Francisco by midnight?”

Sam scowled into his phone, and Dean could hear the dial tone from across the room.

“Sarah?” Dean asked hesitantly.

Sam drew in a breath before nodding. “She’s in California,” he explained. “They’ve got her, Dean. They say if I don’t get there by midnight they’re going to kill her.”

Dean drew a tired hand across his forehead. “Same story with Bonnie,” he confirmed. “It’s gotta be Lucifer, right? Trying to separate us, keep us away from Stull, from Dad? We have to be *here* at midnight, when the Gate opens, not at opposite ends of the country.”

“Divide and conquer,” Sam agreed. “Remember what everyone kept telling us when we got stuck in the Gateway at Halloween? How bad things happen when we don’t have each other’s back?”

“Yeah, well in case you hadn’t noticed, bad things happen even when we *do* have each others back,” Dean pointed out. “Even if I floored the gas pedal the whole way, I’d never make it to Lynchburg in anything less than maybe ten hours,” he said. “No way I’d ever make it back in time.”

“And even by plane I wouldn’t make the round trip to San Francisco,” Sam agreed. He just stood there for a second, chewing on his lip and staring at the floor, before turning his attention back to his brother. “So what the hell do we do, Dean?”

Again, Dean never got the chance to answer, his cellphone choosing that moment to once again cry for his attention.

The pit in his stomach deepened as he read the caller I.D. *Kyle Williams*.

“Dammit, Moses,” he muttered, picking up the call.

“Dean?” Kyle sounded even more freaked out than Bonnie had. “I don’t know how they got in!” he declared, barely pausing for breath. “They can’t be here! This is holy ground! They shouldn’t be able to get in!”

“Holy ground doesn’t always work on demons, man,” Dean said slowly, rubbing at the headache forming between his eyes. “I’m guessing Broken Arrow has an infestation of the bastards too?”

“They won’t let me leave the church,” Kyle said by way of confirmation. “And they won’t let anyone in. I should be getting ready for confession! There are people who *need* me!”

“I’m sure Oklahoma has plenty of other places for people to confess their sins, Moses,” Dean pointed out. “Like the nearest bar.” Switching tack, he added, “Did they hurt you?”

The priest sighed. “No,” he said. “But they said you were the only one I was allowed to call.”

“Lemme guess. I don’t show up by midnight they’re gonna gank you?”

“Something tells me you’ve heard this story before.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed. “They’ve got Bobby and Sarah and—and a friend of our dad’s too.”

“You can’t get to all of us, Dean,” Kyle said, the resignation obvious in his voice. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be okay.”

Kyle was four hours away. Dean could make it. He could get to Kyle. He could save him, and still make it back in time to save Dad. But Bonnie... Sarah... Bobby...

Dad...

What was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to save them all?

“It’s gonna be okay, Moses,” he said confidently into the phone. “Everything’s going to be okay, okay? We won’t let them hurt you.”

“Dean you can’t. Sarah... Bobby... You can’t...”

Even Kyle knew that was true, and he didn’t even know about John being stuck in the Gateway as far as Dean was aware.

“I can,” Dean insisted. “And I will. Kyle? You listenin’ to me?”

“You have until midnight,” a different voice said coldly into his ear, and then the phone went dead.

“Dammit!” Dean resisted throwing the phone at the wall just because he didn’t know if one of his friends was going to need to call him again. Or maybe another of his friends might call.

He shuddered at the possibility.

No one else. They weren’t losing *anyone* else.

“We need help, man,” Sam said, sounding as if he was a million miles away.

Dean looked up at him, the headache blossoming into a pounding behind his eyes. “Who’s gonna help us, Sammy?” he asked. “*How* are they gonna help us?”

“Maybe we could call in some favors—some of *Dad’s* favors?” Sam offered. “See if there are any of Dad’s friends—other hunters—anyone near San Francisco or Lynchburg or—or Broken Arrow?”

“Or Sioux Falls?” Dean added. “Cause you can bet your ass Bobby’s on the same schedule as everyone else.”

“We can’t be in five places at once, Dean.”

“No we can’t,” Dean agreed. “Which I think is the point.”

His hand spasmed as his phone once again started to yell at him.

He closed his eyes briefly, not wanting to look down at the caller I.D. Not wanting to hear another of his friends was in mortal danger.

“Dean,” Sam said quietly. “You gotta answer that.”

“I know, Sammy,” Dean murmured. “I know.”

Finally glancing down at the phone, Dean was almost relieved to see “Unknown caller” flashing on the screen.

With some trepidation, he hesitantly picked up the call, saying nothing by way of greeting.

The silence stretched out for a couple of seconds, and Dean could hear someone breathing on the other end of the line. A rustle of clothing or long hair. A sigh.

“Hey, lover. Long time.”

Dean sucked in a breath as the world tilted suddenly sideways and he found himself collapsing down onto his bed, his legs no longer able to keep him upright.

Couldn’t be. *Couldn’t be*. He ganked the bitch himself.

“Dean, baby? You still there? C’mon, honey, talk to me! I don’t bite. Well, not unless you want me to.”

Dean swallowed. Hard. His chest had constricted painfully, and he was finding it kind of difficult to breathe.

“Dean?” Sam said, concern darkening his eyes. “You okay man?”

Dean shook his head. No he wasn’t friggin’ okay. He wasn’t okay at *all*.

“Dean?” the woman’s voice repeated his name.

“Bitch,” Dean replied flatly. “I’d say it was good to hear your voice but I’m not that good of a liar.”

“Aw, baby, don’t be mean! Did you miss me?”

“Like several holes in the head,” Dean hissed, before finally demanding, “Whaddaya want, Mia? Gotta be pretty damn important for you to come back from the dead and everything.”

Sam’s expression shifted to one of abject shock, and he blinked several times before sinking bonelessly onto the bed next to his brother.

“Can’t keep a good girl down,” the former half-demon snarked down the phone. “Or a bad one.”

She was laughing. The bitch was *laughing*.

“This is all you, right? What’s happening to our friends? This is all *you*?”

“Well Dean, I’m kinda hurt you couldn’t spot my handiwork a mile away. You getting rusty in your old age? Or just complacent? You know, I hope you haven’t gotten all fat and lazy while I’ve been gone. I mean, yeah, more of you to stick sharp things into, but I’d hate to think you’ve gotten all out of shape without me to chase you around.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, you’re not the one who’s gonna be doin’ the chasin’ today.”

“Well that’s right, baby,” Mia agreed. “Because you really have got a lot of running around to do before midnight, haven’t you? I mean, how, exactly, do you plan on saving all your friends and your dad?” She laughed hollowly. “Someone’s gonna die tonight, handsome. *Several* someones if I get my way.”

“Why are you doing this, you skank?” Dean demanded. “They’re *innocents*!”

“You left me *dead*, Dean,” Mia returned, voice suddenly hard as iron. “*Dead*. In a cemetery.”

“Best place for a rotting skank if you ask me.”

“You didn’t even bother to *bury* me! Just left me there. Like an animal!”

"You *are* an animal."

"I don't think Lucifer feels the same way," Mia retorted. "Raised me up right there off the ground and fixed me right up. Fixed the holes you put in me. Told me he had big plans for me. Big plans, baby. I'm in the starting lineup for the Big Battle, Dean. Star quarterback. Gonna crush your pretty little ass like a bug."

"While I can see death hasn't stopped you fixating on my ass," Dean returned, "over my dead body."

"Over *someone's* dead body," Mia replied. "And you, Dean, *you* get to choose whose dead body it's going to be. How about Bobby? Nice Uncle Bobby, used to tuck you into bed at night when your daddy couldn't be bothered to take care of you. Or pretty little Sarah. Break Sammy's heart if I put her on the ceiling and set her on fire, don't you think?"

Dean clenched his jaw, trying to look anywhere other than Sam.

"Or how about Kyle?" Mia continued. "That nice little priest who tried so very hard to save my soul."

"I see you're as grateful as ever."

"My soul was never up for saving, thanks to your daddy, Dean. Speaking of. So Bonnie, huh? Who'd o' thought Johnny had it in him? Stepmom. I bet Sam *loves* that!"

"We have other friends, bitch," Dean spat. "We'll get to 'em..."

"Not all of them, Dean. And maybe we have other surprises lined up for you today. Other people you care about thrown into the firing line because you're just too sloppy, too useless to protect them. Who knows what the day will bring? Maybe we'll even run into each other later, y'know? Kiss and make up? For old time's sake?"

"I'd just as soon kiss a wookiee," Dean replied tartly.

Mia obviously found that hilarious. "Pity you're such a Boy Scout, Dean," she said. "You're *really* fun to play with. And hot. Did I mention that? You're *really* hot. For a Boy Scout. And the sex was killer. Literally. You sure you don't wanna switch teams, baby? Come bat on Lucifer's side with me? It'd be a blast. I guarantee it."

"Let our friends go *right now* or I swear to God I'll kill you all over again. And again. And again. And as many times as it takes to make sure your skanky demonic ass is really, really dead."

"In your dreams, Boy Scout," Mia snorted. "You be sure and have a nice day now."

The line clicked over to static, and Dean's head was pounding so hard he was pretty sure it was going to explode any minute.

"Please tell me that wasn't who I think it was," Sam said slowly.

Dean shook his head. "She's back, Sammy," he said through gritted teeth. "The bitch is back."

They needed a plan, dammit. They needed to *think*.

They needed to save their friends. Before midnight. Before Mia tore them to pieces.

**Lawrence Public Library,
Lawrence, KS**

"Sammy, while I admire your commitment to the written word and Geekdom in general," Dean said, slamming the Impala's door and turning to look at the big, one-storey building in front of them, "you really think we're gonna find something to help us *here*?"

Dean had never been a big fan of libraries, Sam knew that, but if they were going to find anything to help them save their friends today, Sam was convinced they would find it here.

"I heard they have a really extensive occult collection here, Dean," he informed his brother, leading the way toward the library's main entrance. "Maybe we can—"

"What?" Dean cut him off suddenly, grabbing Sam's sleeve and spinning him back to face him. "Find a spell to turn us into time travelling Terminators who can be in five places at once?"

"Dean—"

"We're wasting time, man! Time our friends don't have!"

"Dean, we can't leave Lawrence," Sam pointed out, sounding a hell of a lot calmer than he felt. "Not now, not today. You of all people know that. *We can't*. So right now this is all we *can* do."

Dean took a breath, eyes skittering off to scour the street beyond Sam's shoulder. "I know, Sam," he said quietly, a hint of resignation in his voice and the sudden slump of his shoulders. "I know." His eyes returned to seek out his brother's, a vaguely teasing tone returning to his voice. "But I'm surprised to hear that from you, man. *You* putting Dad before Bobby, Kyle and Bonnie. Not to mention Sarah."

Sam shrugged. Although he wanted to believe he was doing this for Dad, a tiny part of him knew it wasn't John Winchester's wellbeing he was putting before everyone else's. It was Dean's.

"C'mon, man," he said, refusing to explain his plan of action to his brother. "Like you said, we're wasting time."

Dean nodded, finally releasing his hold on Sam's jacket and allowing him to open the door to the large, modern-looking library.

Sam's heart sank a little as he crossed the threshold.

Lawrence Public Library was all big windows and sunlight and Dan Brown novels. It certainly didn't look as if it held an impressive occult collection.

"Sam, are you sure about this?" Dean muttered from behind him, obviously arriving at the same conclusion. "Cause unless Jackie Collins started writing grimoires, I'm not sure we're gonna find anything to help us here."

Sam bit his lip, scanning the floor plan on the wall before making his way to the front desk, Dean shuffling behind him in his wake.

The woman who looked up at their approach could have had the words "stereotypical librarian" tattooed right onto her forehead. She was the living embodiment of the picture Sam figured popped into everyone's head when they heard the word: twin set and pearls, hair up in a tight bun, sharp eyes peering at him over half-moon glasses.

She smiled brightly at him, fingers tapping on the desk in front of her.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" she greeted them. "How can I help you today?"

Sam returned the smile with as genuine a one of his own as he could muster. "Uh, hi," he said, approaching the woman cautiously. "Me 'n my brother here—" he indicated Dean over his shoulder, who waved helpfully, "—we're into local history, and wondered whether you had any material about the Stull legends, or occult lore in general? It's—it's for a paper we're writing. We're students at Kansas U."

As if *that* explained everything.

The librarian paused for a second before her smile broadened still further and she nodded enthusiastically. "Oh yes, there's always a lot of interest about Stull around these parts," she said. "Although it's usually around Halloween."

Sam returned her smile. "Well we like to be different," he told her lamely, and she squinted at him a second before edging out from behind the desk.

"If you'd like to follow me?"

"Not particularly," Dean muttered, and Sam elbowed him sharply in the ribs before dragging him after the librarian, who had marched off toward the furthest, darkest corner of the library, to a single bookcase standing all by itself.

"Wow, she is way too hot to be working in a library," Sam heard Dean murmur from behind him, and, figuring his brother wasn't talking about the librarian, he turned to glance in the direction Dean was looking—backwards, naturally, rather than the way they were going. Following the direction of Dean's gaze, Sam's eyes lit on an attractive young black woman shelving books nearby. She was dressed in a navy blue skirt and white blouse, her hair tied back in a long ponytail, and her gaze flitted curiously in their direction, before abruptly looking away again when she caught Dean's eye.

Dean snorted softly and Sam figured his brother was pretty used to women looking at him when they thought he wasn't looking back.

The librarian in the meantime was pointing to the rather uninspiring-looking bookcase in front of them, and Sam couldn't help feeling a little crestfallen. There really wasn't much here.

"This is it," she told them with a sunny smile. "If you need any more help, don't forget to holler!"

"Oh, we will," Dean told the woman, his voice oozing insincerity. "Count on it."

The librarian appeared not to notice, instead smiling at them once again before heading back to her desk.

Sam shook his head as he examined the books in front of them. "We'd have been better off going to Bobby's," he declared, picking up one of the dusty volumes and flicking through it unenthusiastically.

"Except we wouldn't have gotten past the demons," Dean pointed out, also snagging one of the books and pretending to look through it.

There were a few books on Stull, Sam noted. Nothing really awe-inspiring. Nothing that looked as if it might contain something to help them out of their impossible situation.

"Y'know, Bobby said they had some good stuff here," Sam told his brother, again shaking his head. "But if they do, I sure as hell can't see it."

"Look man," Dean said, suddenly serious. "We have—" he glanced at his watch, "—fifteen hours until midnight when Bitchface Hellsucker's gonna gank all our friends—"

"You mean Mia?" Sam couldn't help smiling at Dean's latest nickname for the half-demon.

"Who d'you think I meant?" Dean asked. "Santa Claus? Look, if we don't find a way to stop the demonic bitch, Dad's stuck in Stull for another *six months* and we're gonna be attending a hell of a lot of funerals, Sammy. Not to mention Lucifer's Little Helper will probably find a way to wreak even more havoc, whether she's fully human or fully demon now."

Suddenly Dean broke off, his attention snapping to a spot just beyond Sam's shoulder.

Sam turned, to find the hot library assistant standing right behind them.

Dean blinked at her. "I help you with somethin'?" he asked, clearly a little perturbed at the woman's sudden appearance in his personal space.

"No," the woman said shortly. "But I might be able to help you."

When she blinked her eyes were black.

Sam's left hand went straight for the flask of holy water in his inside jacket pocket while his right went for the Glock secreted in the waistband of his jeans.

Dean's Colt was already out, the barrel inches from the woman's forehead, but she merely raised her hands in surrender and sighed heavily.

"Truce, guys," she said, seemingly unconcerned by the gun in her face or Dean's murderous expression. "I'm *really* here to help you."

"Like hell," Dean spat. "No pun intended."

"Who are you?" Sam demanded. "What do you want? Have you been following us?"

The demon shrugged. "Hey, I just work here," she informed them. "If anything I might start to think you're following *me*."

"Bull," Dean growled. "Gimme one good reason why I shouldn't send your ass back to Hell right now, sweetheart?"

"Because it's such a pretty ass?" the demon hazarded with a mischievous grin.

Dean blinked at her, his gun faltering a little. He'd never been particularly comfortable with demons flirting with him, Sam reflected.

"Look," the demon continued, hands still raised but her relaxed stance indicating she wasn't in the slightest bit afraid of what the Winchesters might do to her. "You don't have to worry, okay? I'm not like that Hellbitch Mia Cameron that you boys seem to enjoy hanging out with so much. I've not come here to make friends with you then turn around and bite you in the ass or anything. Although from what I hear you might like that, huh, Dean?"

Dean scowled at her. "What the hell do you know about Mia?" he asked. "And *us*? What—*how* do you know about us?"

"Oh come on, sweetie!" the demon burst out. "I know you boys are modest, but you gotta realize *everyone* knows about the Winchesters, don't you? You guys are famous. Especially in the demon community."

"Community?" Dean echoed.

"Well it's not like we get a newsletter or a corporate email or anything," the demon agreed. "But we hear things. And from what I hear, you boys have a big problem."

"Oh yeah?" Dean said. "And what would you know about that?"

"You can't save your friends as well as your dad," the demon said. "Best you can do is split up. Maybe save a couple of them."

Dean blinked at her. "How did you—?"

"It's not magic, Dean," the demon said. "I overheard you talking when you first came in."

Dean's cheeks colored slightly. "Oh," he stammered. "Okay."

“So what can you do to help us?” Sam put in. “You seem to know so much. At the most, we can only save two of them. And that’s if we both head off in opposite directions and forget all about saving our dad.”

“Don’t you boys *listen?*” the demon suddenly burst out, dropping her hands to her hips and all pretence at surrender. “Didn’t you learn *anything* from your little trip through the looking glass?”

“Uh—” Sam stammered.

“You boys are stronger as a family!” the demon reminded them. “Don’t you see? That bitch Mia’s trying to split you up so she can pick you off one at a time! You *know* bad things happen when you don’t have each other’s backs!”

Sam glanced surreptitiously at Dean, who he was pretty sure was also wondering whether this woman had somehow bugged their motel room and eavesdropped on the conversation they’d had earlier.

“So why would you want to help us?” Sam finally managed to ask her, pushing Dean’s gun down as he spotted a security guard meandering in their general direction.

Dean caught sight of the elderly guy a second after Sam, quickly stowing his Colt in his waistband, although his hand continued to hover over the grip menacingly.

“Okay,” the demon said, smiling pleasantly at the security guard, who tipped his hat at her before carrying on straight past them. “My name’s Addie. Addie Roberts. Or—y’know—that’s the name of my meatsuit.” She raised an eyebrow. “No way you get to know my *real* name. Way too much power in that. Look, I’m being straight with you guys. I’m a demon, so it goes without saying I’ve got an agenda. We all do. It just so happens my agenda coincides with yours, otherwise I wouldn’t be seen dead—or whatever—with you guys. I may be a demon, but I’ve got standards.”

“Thanks,” Sam snorted. “Seriously.”

The demon—Addie—ducked her head. “My meatsuit—sorry, my *host*, she doesn’t like it when I call her a meatsuit—has been working in this library for ten years. Four years ago she found out she had terminal cancer. She had two little kids, both under five. So one day, she’s working down in the basement and she finds a spell book containing a ritual to summon forth a demon, and I was the one who answered the call. Lucky for me, because I *hate* it Downstairs. Couldn’t wait to be forcibly dragged Topside.

“Anyway, Addie—my host—made a deal with me.”

Sam raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, Sam, one of *those* deals.”

It was Sam’s turn to blink at her.

“I didn’t want to go back to Hell. Addie didn’t want to die. So in exchange for Addie allowing herself to be possessed indefinitely, I had to make sure she survived. While

I couldn't heal her, I could stop the cancer from spreading, keep Addie alive long enough to see her kids grow up."

"Wait," Dean said, holding up a hand. "Let me get this straight. You gave up the happy-go-lucky life of a demon to be a *desperate housewife*?"

Sam shook his head, suddenly understanding. "Not a desperate housewife," he said wistfully. "*Normal*. You wanted *normal*."

Addie nodded just as wistfully. "I used to be an angel once," she told them, her eyes momentarily distant. "One of the Fallen, just like your buddy Lucifer. One of those thrown out of Heaven and into the Pit because we wouldn't bow down before you humans." She shrugged. "Millennia later, I finally understand what my Father saw in Humanity. Addie gave up her free will, her eternal rest, just so she could be there to guide her children into adulthood. I just want what she has. I just want to be *happy*. I just want to be *normal*. A normal, quiet life. Two kids. A husband. A dog. A job I enjoy. The white picket fence and the minivan. The whole nine yards."

"And Lucifer could destroy all that," Sam agreed, nodding. "If he succeeds. He could take it all away from you."

"I didn't like Hell," Addie said. "So I really don't want to see Hell on Earth, which is, I think, Lucifer's ultimate goal. I like Earth just the way it is, thank you very much. I'm happy. For the first time in two thousand years. I don't have to listen to screaming souls being torn apart over and over. I don't have to torture anyone. I don't have to kill or maim or destroy." She shrugged her shoulders, gaze suddenly downcast. "It's the closest I've been to Heaven since I Fell."

There was a pause, when all Sam could hear was the shuffling of Dean's feet.

"Why should we believe you?" the older brother asked at length. "Demons lie."

"Yes we do," Addie agreed. "And if I was in your position, I wouldn't trust me either."

"Lady, you ain't exactly making your case here."

"All I'm asking is you give me the benefit of the doubt," Addie continued. "I haven't lied to you. I haven't pretended to be human, not like your friend Mia. I've laid it all out for you like it is and all I ask in return?" The demon laughed hollowly, shrugging. "All I ask is that you save the world. Not that big of a deal, right?"

Sam couldn't help his own mirthless snigger. "No, not that big of a deal," he agreed, as Dean finally took his hand off the grip of his Colt and seemed to relax for the first time in several minutes.

Addie smiled a little lopsidedly at him, nodding her head a fraction before tilting it slightly to one side.

"So," she said, taking an obviously relieved breath. "You boys want to see the real occult collection?"

* * * *

Now *this* was more like it, Sam mused, casting his admiring gaze over the rows upon rows of ancient-looking tomes arrayed floor to ceiling all around him.

Addie had led them down to the basement and into a locked room which she was only able to access using an electronic keycard, and now Sam was here he felt a little like a hyperactive kid in a candy store.

“Wow, you guys even have a copy of the Key of Solomon!” he burst out, admiring the large volume, which was in a whole lot better condition than the copy Bobby had given to them, and now lay hidden at the bottom of the Impala’s trunk.

“Bobby Singer’s mighty jealous of this place,” Addie confirmed with a nod, causing Sam to glance up at her, and Dean to frown suspiciously.

“You know Bobby?” Dean asked uncertainly, one brow raised while his fingers returned to hover near the place where he’d secreted his Colt.

“Uh-huh,” Addie confirmed. “He’s been in here a few times. Knows we have one of the best occult collections in the entire continental US.” She grinned conspiratorially, leaning into Dean as she added, “Don’t think he knows he was shown in here by a demon the last two times he visited though.”

A glimmer of a smirk flickered across Dean’s face. “Mr. Greatest Living Demon Expert,” he snickered. “If only he knew.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Addie agreed. “It’d break his heart if I told him. Plus, y’know, I might find myself on the wrong end of the *Rituale Romanum*.”

“True,” Dean nodded. “The guy’s definitely the fastest exorcist in the West. Except for Sammy here, of course.”

Sam looked up from the book he’d been perusing, only half listening to conversation going on between his brother and his new demon friend.

“It’s all in the tongue,” he told his brother with a rakish grin, which caused Dean to actually snort in return.

“Maybe I should have studied a little harder,” he said. “Might have some real world applications we’d not previously considered.”

Addie had disappeared behind one of the stacks, and chose that moment to poke her head around the corner. “So that half-breed has four of your friends held captive, right?” she asked, scanning along the uppermost shelf with one long finger.

“Yeah,” Sam confirmed. “That about sums it up. We have to get to all four of them by midnight or she’s going to kill them.”

“Okay,” Addie said, selecting a small, unprepossessing volume that had definitely seen better days and laying it on the reading table in front of the Winchesters. “Then this one should do it.”

Sam looked down at the small, black book, the cover of which was embossed in gold leaf with the words, “*Darke Spelles*.”

“A spell book?” he observed a little skeptically. “Really?”

Dean grimaced in disgust. “You’re not a friggin’ witch on top of bein’ a friggin’ demon are you?” he grumbled.

“The hell I’m not!” Addie burst out. “I actually find them pretty disgusting. All that spitting and blood-letting. Yuck.”

Dean appeared slightly perturbed by the idea of sharing an opinion on *anything* with a demon. “Uh—yeah,” he managed. “I—yeah. Exactly.”

“Nice to see you two agreeing on something,” Sam teased, causing his brother to scowl at him.

“Okay, this is the spell we need,” Addie was saying, laying the book open and pointing at one of the yellowed pages. “It’s a location and dispersal spell.”

Sam frowned. “Meaning...?”

“Meaning I’m going to use it to pinpoint the exact location of the demons who have your friends and send them back to Hell where they belong.”

Dean blinked. “You can do that?” he asked, sounding more than a little awestruck.

Addie smiled brightly, her eyes once again oiling over into black.

“Oh yes,” she confirmed confidently. “I can do that. But I’m going to need some supplies...”

***Best Budget Motel,
Lawrence, KS***

“Jesus, it looks like a mini-mart exploded in here,” Dean commented, leaning one shoulder against the motel room door as he surveyed the “supplies” Addie had spread over the floor and both beds.

Sam was standing looking over the girl’s shoulder as she completed the complex pattern she’d been drawing in white chalk on the carpet for the last ten minutes, wiped her hands off on her sensible skirt and finally rose to her feet.

He couldn’t make heads or tails of the design, and he was pretty sure he’d never seen anything like it in any of the spell books he’d read at Bobby’s.

“Guess we’re not getting our deposit back,” Dean muttered, as Addie picked up a bowl full of weird-smelling herbs she’d discarded on the bed prior to ruining the carpet.

“What’s in there?” Sam asked, eyes skimming the remains of plants and flowers, most of which he didn’t recognize, which Addie had discarded all over the other bed as she prepared her concoction.

“Just some stuff,” Addie replied noncommittally. “Herbal stuff,” she added, catching sight of the skeptical frown on Sam’s face. “Don’t worry, I’m not trying to conjure Lucifer into your bathtub or anything.”

“Good,” Dean said with a smirk. “Cause we don’t have a bathtub. Just a shower stall.”

Addie returned his smirk with one of her own. “Well there’s a stroke of luck, then. Wouldn’t want to disappoint the Big Guy, would we?”

Dean sniggered, and if Sam hadn’t known any better he might have started to think his brother was beginning to like the demon library assistant.

“Okay,” Addie said, carrying the bowl and the spell book into the center of the chalk drawing and taking a breath to compose herself. “Here goes nothing.”

With infinite care, the demon began to read aloud the ritual from the spell book, Sam only catching the odd word here and there as Addie chanted in a language that might have been Latin but could just as easily have been something else entirely.

After a few seconds, Sam noticed Dean suddenly straighten up from his position slumped against the door, the single word, “Sam...?” expressing the concern flooding his features as Addie’s eyes suddenly glazed over completely white.

Sam took a step toward the demon, but stopped abruptly when the chalk pattern surrounding her suddenly began to glow.

“Dude, if she sets fire to the room I’m blaming you, okay?”

Sam scowled. “She’s not going to set fire to the room, Dean,” he reassured his brother, although he found himself suddenly checking out the ceiling for a smoke alarm or sprinklers.

There were neither, which he wasn’t entirely sure he was relieved about.

“What’s she doing, man?” Dean asked, cautiously approaching the demon’s position and tipping his head to one side as he examined the lines glowing around her feet.

After a couple of seconds examining the pattern, he raised one brow and muttered, “Huh,” and Sam was reminded of that time in Chicago when Dean saw a pattern in the blood splatters left by the Daevas on that girl Meredith’s carpet, and found himself wondering what the hell Dean had managed to see this time that he couldn’t.

Taking a step toward his brother, Sam instantly retreated with a startled yelp when a section of the carpet a couple of inches in front of him and off to the demon’s far left suddenly burst into flames.

“Sammy, you’re such a girl,” Dean snickered, causing Sam’s scowl to deepen. “*She’s not going to set fire to the room, Dean.*”

“I take it back,” Sam returned, trying to remember whether he’d seen a fire extinguisher anywhere in this dive of a motel. “Maybe we should do this someplace else? Outside maybe...?”

Dean ignored him, his attention still fixed on the carpet, where the flames were already burning themselves out. "San Francisco," he murmured, nodding as he circled the chalk drawing, and Sam tilted his head as his brother had, trying to work out what the hell Dean was seeing.

"One down," Addie muttered, before returning to her chanting, her eyes still white and her voice not even faltering as she easily switched between languages.

Without warning another section of carpet slightly behind the demon and to her right burst into flames and Dean nodded again, muttering, "Lynchburg," just as another section ignited just behind where Addie was standing. "And that'd be Broken Bow," Dean continued with an impressed grin. "Kyle's place."

"It's a *map*?" Sam burst out, suddenly understanding. "It's a map of the U.S.?"

"Go to the head of the class, Sammy," Dean said, just as an area directly in front of Addie caught fire.

"And that'd be Bobby's," Sam hazarded. "Sioux Falls, right?"

"Uh-huh," Dean confirmed. "Pretty damn ingenious. For a demon."

"I'm so happy you're impressed," Addie snarked, her eyes still glazed over.

Dean raised an eyebrow. "That's it?" he asked her. "You got 'em all?"

"Not quite," the demon murmured, her brow crinkling slightly in concentration. "Just one more—"

It was Addie's turn to yelp as the carpet beneath her feet suddenly burst into flames, and she jumped back as her eyes flew open, back to her host's ordinary warm brown.

"What was that?" Sam demanded, not quite understanding what just happened.

"She's in Lawrence," Addie declared, breathing hard as her knees went out from under her, Dean catching her before she could faceplant onto the smoldering carpet.

"Who's in Lawrence?" the older brother asked, gently guiding the girl to the nearest bed, where she collapsed gratefully, just as Sam's cellphone began to warble.

Sam fished the phone out of his pocket, mildly surprised by the name appearing on the caller I.D.

"Missouri?"

"You and that no-good brother of yours better get your no-callin', no-writin', no-visitin' asses over here right now, boy," the psychic's unmistakable voice bellowed into his ear.

"Missouri, are you okay?" Sam began to ask, but was abruptly cut off by Missouri's sharp reply.

"No I'm not okay, Sam," she snapped. "Some skinny white chick just walked into the devil's trap in my kitchen, and you boys better collect, 'cause I sure as hell don't deliver..."

Part Two

Lawrence, KS **March 19th, 2010**

"You boys ever hear of this little invention called the telephone?" Missouri Moseley demanded, standing with her hands on her hips, her chin raised slightly, as she watched the Winchesters climbing out of the Impala and heading up her front path.

They'd left Addie at the motel where she'd promised to clean up the mess she'd made with her little spell—it'd be as good as new, she'd promised them, and Dean wasn't entirely sure what she meant by that—and hightailed it to Missouri's as fast as they could.

Still, from the disgruntled expression on Missouri's face, Dean kind of wished he was back trading insults with the demon, because she wasn't half as scary as the psychic standing in front of them.

"Uh, sorry, Missouri," Sam said, doing the whole puppy dog thing, which Dean approved of wholeheartedly. If anything could get them into Missouri's good books it was Sam's hangdog expression and his dimples. "We were kind of...busy."

"Busy savin' the world, Winchester style, I suppose," Missouri snorted, her expression softening a little as Sam stepped up onto the porch. She caught his hand in her own, just as Dean remembered she had that first time they'd met, right here in this house, and her expression softened still further. "You still got the weight of the world on your shoulders, honey," she commented, patting his hand before turning her attention to Dean, who took a cautious step back.

"As for you?" she said, grabbing Dean's hand and yanking him forward again. "You got some explaining to do, boy."

"I—uh—do?" Dean stammered, attempting to pull his hand out of Missouri's ridiculously firm grip but failing spectacularly.

"Uh-huh," Missouri nodded. "Hear you boys were in Lawrence last Halloween. Didn't think to come say hello to an old psychic, huh? Oh wait. *Too busy*. You ever think I might o' been able to help you two numbskulls when you done went and lost your daddy over in that accursed cemetery?"

Dean balked at that. "I—well—honestly? No." He looked down at his feet, suddenly finding a detailed examination of his boots preferable to looking Missouri in the eye. "Didn't actually occur to me."

Missouri still had hold of Dean's hand, but instead of breaking his fingers, she surprised him by giving them a comforting squeeze.

“Well next time you boys go losin’ somethin’ that valuable *right on my doorstep*, you remember to come look me up, huh? You never know, I might actually be able to help you out a little.”

She surprised Dean still further then by suddenly putting her hand on his cheek and giving it an affectionate pat.

He blinked at her stupidly.

“Now, you boys mind tellin’ me why on God’s green earth I have a demon sneaking into my house in the middle of the day?”

Despite Missouri’s unexpected show of affection toward him, Dean simply couldn’t help himself. “Hey, you’re the psychic. Don’t you know already?”

That earned him a slap to the back of the head.

“Mind your tone, boy. I still got that spoon.”

“And a devil’s trap on the ceiling of your kitchen?” Dean returned. “That a permanent part of your décor or somethin’ you put up there this morning?”

“Well, as you just pointed out, I *am* psychic,” Missouri replied archly, before her expression once again softened and she winked at Sam. “And Bobby called me.” Dean snorted, causing Missouri’s gaze to snap back in his direction. “And notice, even with his house surrounded by demons, *Bobby* still knows how to pick up a telephone?”

“Kiss ass,” Dean murmured under his breath.

“I heard that,” Missouri replied.

“So you know what’s going on?” Sam interposed. “With the demons?”

Missouri nodded. “They have your friends under house arrest,” she confirmed, beckoning the boys into her house.

“Not anymore,” Dean informed her, carefully stepping over the line of salt and cat’s eye shells piled across the threshold.

“We called them just after you called us,” Sam added. “They all had the same story to tell. Apparently the demons holding them captive all suddenly grabbed at their own throats, and before they knew what was happening, demon smoke was being choked out of them and they were taking an unscheduled trip Down South.”

“Everyone’s safe now,” Dean said. “Thanks to Addie.”

Missouri nodded. “Addie Roberts?” she said. “From the library, right? I’ve known her a few years. Although I don’t think she knows I know she’s a demon.”

“You do?” Sam said. “She said she’d help us if we stopped Lucifer bringing Hell to Earth. Performed this nifty little spell that located all the demons and sent them packing back where they belong.”

“Damnedest thing,” Missouri said, leading the boys through her house toward the kitchen in back. “Demon setting up house with a willing host like that. I’ve only ever heard of such a thing a couple of times before.”

“You have?” Sam asked. “I figured she must be pretty unique.”

“Well there’s another obvious example,” Missouri said. “Friend of yours, actually.”

The brothers exchanged an uncertain glance.

“Big New Jersey mobster by the name of Luciano Ferinacci ring a bell?”

“Ferinacci’s a meatsuit?” Dean burst out. “I always thought—”

“That he was Lucifer’s physical form? No, Lucifer needs a host like any other demon. I guess he promised Ferinacci he’d make him king of the criminal underworld or something.”

“And king of the—you know—*actual* Underworld,” Sam added, shuddering. “Can’t imagine being possessed by Lucifer. The guy must have been crazy to make that deal.”

Missouri nodded her agreement. “People go to strange lengths to get their hands on a little power, Sam,” she observed, shrugging. “At least Addie’s host had altruistic reasons for making the deal she made. Her family all thought it was a miracle you know, her remission. Still, I think she can be trusted. Addie and her *guest* have been working at the library for years and there’s never been any trouble.”

The psychic paused briefly, stopping before a closed door, her hand hovering over the door handle.

Taking a breath, she pushed open the door, revealing her homely kitchen and the young woman standing beneath the devil’s trap painted across the ceiling, her arms folded tightly across her chest.

Long chestnut hair fell in soft waves down the girl’s back, and she turned expectantly as the brothers entered the room.

“Not exactly the kind of reunion I was expecting, boys.”

Dean sucked in a sharp breath.

Had he not been half-expecting it, he might have looked surprised, rather than merely repulsed.

“Mia,” Dean greeted the half-demon neutrally. “So very horrible to see you again.”

“You too, baby,” Mia agreed, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “I was really hoping you two’d be decomposing six feet under by now.”

“Aw, that’s nice of you,” Dean cooed sarcastically. “Sorry to disappoint, baby. I guess we’re even harder to kill than you are.”

He folded his arms across his chest, mimicking Mia's posture exactly, which caused the girl to drop her hands to her sides, fingers curling in impotent fury.

Dean began to circle her, a grin splitting his face. "You know, all I can say is, go Addie!" he said. "I'm seriously impressed. Demons exorcised, all our friends safe, *and* the bitch behind bars! I owe that girl a drink!"

"You can't keep me here forever," Mia spat, involuntarily glancing up at the devil's trap.

"I certainly hope not," Missouri put in. "You think I'd be able to eat a bite in here having to look at your skanky face all through dinner? It's enough to give a body indigestion."

Mia didn't respond, merely narrowed her eyes at the psychic, her arms coming back up across her chest.

"You know, we killed you before," Sam put in. "We can do it again."

"With extreme pleasure," Dean added, drawing his Colt and aiming it squarely at the half-demon's head.

Her expression shifted slightly, chin raised and nostrils flared. "Kill me and you'll never get your daddy back," she hissed.

Dean almost laughed. "You think we'd actually fall for that?" he demanded, flicking off the safety. "How stupid do you think we are?"

"You better not answer that with a gun pointed at your head, hon," Missouri added, smiling brightly at Dean, who frowned at her.

"Look," Mia said, drawing a long, lazy breath as if this was all *terribly* boring and she had far more interesting places to be. "Kill me, don't kill me, I really don't give a rat's ass. I die, Lucifer'll just bring me back. Like last time."

"Well aren't you the lucky one?" Dean observed. "Your own little Resurrection Buddy."

Mia smirked. "Guy can't live without me. Surely you can relate to that, Dean?"

Dean shrugged noncommittally. "Can't live with 'em, can't kill 'em without 'em coming back from the dead. Story of my life, sweetheart."

Mia sighed theatrically. "A sad and pointless tale of one man's struggle to figure out how to tie his shoelaces without his little brother to hold his hand."

Dean didn't even flinch. "Kinda hard to tie your shoelaces with someone holding your hand, sweetheart," he observed. "No wonder you're so screwed."

Mia narrowed her eyes. "Oh, I'm not screwed, baby," she purred. "I'm exactly where I'm meant to be."

“Stuck in a devil’s trap in the middle of Kansas?” Dean asked. “Jeez, your long term goals really suck, honey. I’d fire my life coach if I were you.”

“Don’t need a life coach when you’re Lucifer’s most trusted lieutenant.”

“Well, I always said he was a terrible judge of character.”

“Yeah, well,” Mia sighed. “Me too, apparently.”

Dean raised a brow. “Oh yeah? You finally realized you’re batting for the wrong team?”

Mia scoffed. “Oh *absolutely*. You two are *way* more impressive than Lucifer,” she spat sarcastically.

“And yet here you are.”

Mia sighed again. “Here I am. Stuck in a devil’s trap in Kansas. With you two idiots.”

“And your boss’s plan all gone to hell and back. Pardon the pun.”

Mia squinted at him. “You just got lucky, Dean. You have people around you who actually know what they’re doing while you fumble around in the dark like an old, blind, really freakin’ annoying terrier who should have been put out of everybody’s misery years ago.”

“So what exactly was the plan, Mia?” Sam interjected, before Dean could put a bullet through Mia’s brain just on principle. “You were just gonna talk us to death?”

Mia shifted her attention to Sam. “C’mon, Fred, you don’t actually expect me to tell you and Daphne here—” she indicated Dean with a jerk of her head, “—my whole diabolical scheme, do ya?” she asked.

“Daphne was pretty hot,” Dean commented. “I think I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Dean,” Sam hissed, bitchface telegraphing the instruction, *Shut the hell up!* more clearly than any words ever could. “C’mon, Mia,” he continued, turning back to the half-demon. “I know how much you like to monologue, given the opportunity. Here’s your opportunity.”

“Well it’s not like you’ve got anywhere important to be for, oh, I don’t know—” Mia glanced at her watch. “Eleven hours, right?”

“Talk, don’t talk,” Dean hissed, echoing Mia’s earlier words. “I really couldn’t give a rat’s ass. I shoot you, you stay dead until Lucifer finds you, and, believe me, I’ll make it my personal goal to make sure the Big Guy never finds you. Not all of you, anyway.”

“Color me terrified. Oh Dean, you’re so badass!”

“Back to my ass again. Give it up, sweetheart, we’re over. You gotta move on. Although that’s kinda hard to do stuck in a devil’s trap.”

“Laugh it up, pretty boy, you’re not gettin’ your dad out of Stull without my help tonight.”

“And why would you want to help us?” Sam asked.

Mia sighed again. “Enlightened self-interest,” she said. “Like you said, my boss’s plan’s kinda in the toilet.”

“His plan to...?”

“To get you away from Stull tonight,” Mia finally admitted. “To make it impossible for you asshats to be here at midnight when the Gate opens.”

“You were trying to lure us away,” Sam clarified, “by taking our friends hostage all over the country.”

“I always said you were the smart one, Sam,” Mia confirmed. “Although in your gene pool, I guess smart’s kinda relative.” She cast Dean a condescending glance.

“So what do you want?” Sam continued. “Are you actually offering to help us? Or are you just yanking our chains like usual?”

Mia shrugged dismissively. “I’ve got no loyalty to Lucifer,” she said. “Sure, he may have brought me back from the dead and everything but this is *my* second chance at life, not his. I’ve never really been the big picture type. I’m only in this for myself.”

“Now there’s a surprise,” Dean muttered.

“Look,” Mia burst out in exasperation. “I don’t want to die again, alright? You idiots agree to let me go when this is all over, I’ll help you get your dad out.”

Dean shifted uncertainly. “That’s it? You want us to just let you *walk*? After everything you’ve *done* to us?”

“That’s exactly what I want,” Mia confirmed. “Sure, messin’ with you two and killin’ folks in the name of the Prince of Darkness is fun and all, but in case you didn’t notice, I don’t play well with others. Let’s just say I prefer self-employment. You let me walk, I’ll get your dad out. It’s as simple as that.”

“How?” Sam demanded. “How do you plan on doing that?”

One corner of Mia’s mouth ticked up into a smug smirk. “Lucifer, my lord and master, bestowed upon me some of his powers,” she explained, modulating her voice like an actress doing Shakespeare. “I can control the Gate better than he can.”

“Wait,” Dean held up a hand. “You can control the Gate? So—so screw the Equinox, screw the rules, you could just open it for us?”

“Not exactly,” Mia admitted. “I can’t open or close the thing. Even Lucifer can’t do that. But I can choose which realities I enter, which I travel to. If your dad’s still alive, I can help you find him.”

“He’s alive,” Dean said confidently. “And we’re gonna find him, without your help.”

“What makes you think we’d ever trust you?” Sam added. “After everything you did.”

“I don’t need you to trust me,” Mia returned. “I just need you to promise not to kill me if I help you find your dad. I don’t want to be snuggle buddies with you, Sam. I don’t need you to like me. This is purely a business arrangement. You help me, I help you. You get your dad, and I get my freedom.”

“What makes you think Lucifer won’t find you?”

“I’m *real* good at hiding,” Mia replied. “And he gave me some of his powers, remember? Believe me, I can get him off my tail.”

“Well, that’s the problem right there,” Dean said. “We *don’t* believe you. Because you’re a lying, cheating, two-faced, back-stabbing Hell-bitch, and I wouldn’t spit on you if you were on fire, honey.”

“Then you can kiss your daddy goodbye, Dean,” Mia hissed back. “You’ll never see him again. Just because you couldn’t get over yourself enough to let me *help* you.”

“*You help me?*” Dean burst out, taking a step toward the half-demon. “Because *that’s* so gonna happen!”

“Dean.” Sam was suddenly pulling him backward, away from Mia, back toward the doorway where they’d entered.

“Sammy, what—”

“We need to talk.”

Dean suddenly found himself yanked back out into the hallway, Sam all in his face with the earnest expression and those friggin’ puppy dog eyes.

“Dean, maybe we should listen to her.”

Well *that* wasn’t exactly what he’d been expecting his brother to say.

“You’re kidding, right?” Dean burst out. “Or high? Or brain damaged? *Listen? To her?*”

“Dean, Dean just wait.” Sam had his hands on his brother’s shoulders, apparently attempting to hold him still. “Look, we don’t exactly have much of a choice here, man! We have eleven hours and *still* have no idea how to get Dad out of Stull! We don’t have a lot of options, Dean.”

“But it’s *Mia*, Sam!” Dean burst out. “Remember her? The bitch who kidnapped me? Hit you with the car and left you for dead? *Tortured* me? Tortured *Dad*? Tried to kill us all? *Several times?*”

“Dean, I know. I do. But this might be the only shot we got, man! And if Mia’s the only hope we got, well that’s better than no hope at all!”

Dean honestly felt like his brain might explode. “Sam,” he said, shaking his head. “Sammy, we can’t *trust* her! You really wanna put Dad’s life in her hands? Really?”

"No, of course I don't," Sam returned. "But we're out of options and it's zero hour, Dean."

Dean shook his head. "Sam—"

"I know, man. But it's not like we're gonna just blindly follow her, right? We know better than that now."

"Sammy. Sam, this is Dad's *life* we're talking about!"

"And we have no idea how to save him! Dean, we gotta do this. It's the only way."

Dean took a breath and swallowed the scream trying to make its way up his trachea.

Setting his jaw, he spun on his heel and marched back into the kitchen, stopping at the very limit of the devil's trap and glaring at Mia.

"Alright, bitch," he ground out through gritted teeth. "Deal. But the first sign you're yankin' our chain? You're toast, sweetheart."

Mia just smiled.

***Stull Cemetery,
Stull, KS
11:55pm, March 19th 2010***

"So where's the friggin' church?" Dean demanded, hands on his hips as he kicked at the damp grass beneath his feet.

"Patience, sweetie," Mia cooed, hands buried deep in the pockets of her jeans as she squinted off into the distance. "It'll get here when it gets here."

"That's very Zen of you," Dean observed. "But I might have decided to gank you by then. Y'know. Just for the hell of it. History repeating and all that stuff. This is where I blew your brains out before, right?"

"Yes, Dean," Mia said on a sigh, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "This *is* where you killed me. So many happy memories. Maybe we should bring a picnic next time."

Dean snorted.

"So what happens when the church materializes?" Sam interposed, shoulders hunched over as he stuffed his hands in the pockets of his hoodie, steeling himself against the midnight chill.

"It'll be just like Halloween," Mia replied. "Without the 'killing Mia' part."

"Pity," Dean muttered. "That was my favorite part of last Halloween."

Mia pointedly ignored him. "When the church reappears, we go inside, and I decide which reality we cross into. Unlike last time you knuckle-draggers did this, we shouldn't get pulled from one random reality to another."

“We—uh—need to hang on to each other or somethin’?” Dean asked, causing Mia to shoot him a disturbingly flirtatious look.

“Sure, I’ll hold your hand if you’re scared, baby.”

Dean scowled at her. “Can it, Jezebel,” he spat. “And for your information, last time we did this, the only way me ’n him managed to end up in the same goddamn place was if we had a hold of each other.”

“Aw, that’s sweet,” Mia cooed. “Maybe you’d rather hold Sammy’s hand then.”

Before Dean could actually think about what he was doing, he’d drawn his Colt and pressed the barrel against her forehead. “It’s not too late for me to change my mind about ventilating you,” he warned her threateningly.

“Remember your daddy, Dean,” Mia reminded him, not even flinching. “You need me.”

“Like a hole in the head,” Dean agreed. “Which you’re gonna get if you don’t shut the hell up.”

Mia never got the chance to reply, as the ground beneath their feet suddenly started to tremble, the air in front of them shimmering like a heat haze while the grave markers around them rumbled ominously.

“Is this it?” Dean asked, blinking.

When he opened his eyes again, Stull church was looming right in front of him.

It was exactly as he remembered it from Halloween, crumbling stone and dark, hostile windows, a large wooden door that looked as if it would collapse if anyone pushed too hard against it.

The only difference was the demons.

Or lack thereof.

Maybe the demons only come out to play on Halloween, he mused, glancing at his watch. 12:01am. March 20th. Spring Equinox.

“At least the Gate’s punctual,” Sam murmured, glancing from his brother to Mia.

The half-demon shrugged, inclining her head in the direction of the phantom structure. “Well go on, Dean,” she said brightly. “Ladies first.”

“After you, bitch,” Dean returned, gripping his Colt and reminding himself for the fiftieth time that night he was doing this for Dad. Maybe he’d get to gank the skank later. Make this whole sorry night worthwhile.

Mia shrugged. “Don’t you two forget to hold hands now,” she told them, shoving past them and heading straight for the church’s rickety-looking door.

Dean spared Sam the shortest of pissed off glances before following her inside.

But instead of being greeted by the church's dingy interior, he saw only...sunshine.

Stull Cemetery
Stull, KS
12:02am March 20th 2010

The cold stone angel made no protest as Lucifer leaned against the grave marker, one arm draped casually around its marble shoulders.

"Now don't you worry, brother," he told the insensible monument. "I know I'm only supposed to be here on Halloween, but let's face it, the old rules don't really apply anymore." He smiled ever-so-slightly. "It's not as if I only walk the earth one night a year these days."

Unsurprisingly, the angel made no reply, and Lucifer turned his attention back to the church, to the Gateway, and to the three shadowy figures moving cautiously inside.

The half-breed had already screwed this up once. That human wannabe and her meddling spells. Mia should have dealt with her sooner. But still. She'd get hers. The Light Bringer had plans for Addie Roberts.

And for Mia.

If she screwed things up again tonight, she might find herself out of a job.

And a life.

* * * *

Sam blinked in the bright sunlight and tried to remember what just happened.

Church. Mia. Dean...

Lawrence?

He was looking up at a big blue house, a gnarled tree reaching twisted fingers toward an upstairs window. A tire swing hung from one of its lowest branches, swaying slightly in the gentle breeze. Porch light. Newly-mowed lawn. Minivan on the drive.

This was Jenny's house. The house Mia had burned down.

The house that had burned down twenty-six years earlier.

The house where Mary Winchester had died.

Dean was rubbing awkwardly at his eyes, as if he didn't believe what he was seeing.

He also looked like his knees might go out from under him at any second.

"You okay, man?" Sam asked, catching his brother's elbow and offering a little support before Dean face-planted on the sidewalk.

"If we're in that goddamn photo album again..." Dean growled, blinking rapidly as he struggled to focus on the building in front of them. "Sam? We're not where I think we are, are we?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah, Dean. I think we are."

Mia appeared strangely unaffected by the whole experience, even as Sam's ears continued to ring and his limbs felt strangely unattached to the rest of his body.

The half-demon was looking about herself with a vaguely perplexed expression on her face.

"Problem?" Sam asked, following the girl's gaze across the street to the Winchesters' former home.

"Uh—" Mia mumbled.

"Where are we?" Sam continued. "I mean, not *where*. We're in Lawrence. Obviously. But. *Where* are we? And is this where we're supposed to be? Is Dad here?"

Mia shrugged dismissively. "Detour," she informed him casually. "I guess dear Johnny's a lot deeper into the Gateway than I thought he'd be. Could take a few hops to make it to his reality."

"You've gotta be kidding me—" Sam began, smelling a rat, just as Dean's Colt was suddenly in Mia's face again.

"I swear to God, you don't take us to our dad *right now* I'm gonna—"

"Dean!"

Dean looked up sharply, he and Sam both following the direction of the woman's voice calling Dean's name.

Across the street, a middle-aged woman was walking down the path from Jenny's house—their house, Sam reminded himself. She was beautiful, long blonde hair, twinkling hazel eyes. Beautiful and...and *familiar*.

There was a little boy in her arms, tow-headed and pale skinned with freckles strewn across his nose. He couldn't have been more than four or five years old, and he was waving excitedly at a shiny black behemoth of a car that had just pulled up at the curb.

A young man virtually launched himself out of the driver's side of the car and toward the woman and the boy, and it was with a start Sam suddenly realized he was looking at the Impala.

And he was looking at Dean.

The Dean standing next to him made an oddly strangled sound in the back of his throat.

"The Impala looks...good," Sam stammered, absently admiring the Chevy's brightly polished chrome and showroom shine as the woman with the little boy in her arms grinned incandescently at the Dean across the street, before rushing toward him.

"Look who's here!" she cooed to the little boy, as the Dean across the street held his arms out for the child.

"Daddy!" the boy cried out, as Dean swung him high into the air before pulling him in for a bone-crushing hug.

"Hey there, Sammy," Dean said, kissing the top of the boy's head. "You had a good day with Granma?"

Sam almost choked on his own tongue. *Mary. Mom. That was Mom.* Right there. On the other side of the street. And—and Dean...Dean was a *dad*.

"What—what is this place?" the Dean standing next to Sam managed to croak, stumbling over the words as he struggled to force them out of a desperately dry-sounding mouth.

He was staring so hard at the little family across the street that Sam figured his eyes must be hurting.

Mia shrugged dismissively. "Who the hell cares?"

"*I care!*" Dean spat, and once again his Colt was abruptly jammed in the girl's face.

"Dean," Sam cautioned him, putting what he hoped was a steadying hand on his brother's wrist, although he was shaking almost as much as Dean.

Mia once again exhaled her most histrionic sigh. "This is Happily-Ever-After-Ville, Dean," she explained. "The fire in Sam's nursery? Didn't kill your mom here." She glanced briefly at Sam before adding, "Just killed you, Sammy."

The world—whichever world they were in—spun briefly in front of Sam's eyes and he blew out a sharp breath as if he'd just been punched in the gut. "This—this is what happens to our family if I die instead of Mom?"

"Sam, don't—" Dean began to remonstrate, but the rest of his sentence completely lost all inertia when another figure appeared behind Mary.

Dean took an involuntary step toward them.

"Dad?"

Sam reached out and caught Dean's arm, shaking his head sadly. "That's not him, Dean."

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

Sam had never seen his dad looking so relaxed, so happy as the man standing across the street, one arm around his wife, the other mussing the hair of his grandson. This wasn't the man who had disappeared into the Gateway with them, the

man who had been tortured by a yellow-eyed version of his youngest son, the man who he and Dean had left for dead on a crumbling scab of rock.

Dean didn't even look at him, but immediately halted his forward momentum, clamping his jaw shut and balling his fists at his sides.

"Dean—" Sam began, but found himself suddenly sidetracked when the passenger door of the Impala was flung open and a young woman clambered out, loaded down with baby bags as she struggled to get herself and her luggage out of the big Chevy.

"Jess?"

This was getting weirder by the second.

There she was, Jessica Moore, dumping her bags and her packages on the sidewalk and stroking the little boy's hair as he clung to Dean's neck.

"Hey, baby! Miss me?" she asked, before turning her face up toward Sam's brother and—and *kissing* him.

Sam wasn't sure he could watch anymore.

"Holy crap," the Dean Sam was currently hanging onto for dear life mumbled, apparently horrified.

"Oh yeah," Mia smirked. "I forgot about that. In this reality you're not such a loser, Dean. *You're* the one who gets the girl."

"How—how did...?"

"Stanford, honey," Mia said. "In this reality you're not such a moron either. You and pretty little Jess? You met at Stanford here."

Dean's mouth opened and closed a couple of times but no sound managed to make its way out.

"Dean went to *Stanford*?" As soon as the incredulous outburst left his mouth, Sam instantly regretted how patronizing he sounded.

Dean didn't seem to notice.

"I went to Stanford?" he simply echoed, as if he couldn't believe it either.

"Baseball scholarship," Mia confirmed. "Majored in Mechanical Engineering. You build spaceships or something." She shrugged. "You did good here, Dean. Without your little brother to weigh you down." She shrugged. "Funny how you're just a dumb waste of skin in our universe and not in all the others." She smiled sweetly, suddenly reaching out a finger and running it along his cheekbone. "It's such pretty skin though," she cooed. "Who cares if you're a vacuous airhead, huh?"

Dean jerked away from her in disgust. "Touch me again and you lose a finger, bitch," he growled, scowling across the street at the sickeningly sweet scene before shooting a piercing look back at Mia. "Can we go?" he demanded. "*Now?*"

“Thought you enjoyed Happy Families, Dean?”

Dean glanced briefly at Sam before once again aiming his Colt between Mia’s eyes.
“Dad. *Now*, bitch.”

Mia rolled her eyes pointedly. “Keep your pantyhose on, Princess.”

She raised her hand, brow furrowing slightly, and Sam began to feel that oh-so-familiar tug on his shoulders, the colors fading out in front of his eyes, leaving only a bright after-image on his retinas: Dean and Jessica and little Sammy in their arms, John and Mary beaming proudly behind them, all happy and smiling and *this is what happens if I die*.

And then it was as if the whole world around him was a kaleidoscope, different pieces of different realities rushing past in quick succession, rather than the sudden jerk from one place to another, as if Mia was sifting through each universe, trying to decide where to stop.

And then suddenly *everything* stopped.

* * * *

When the world—*worlds*—stopped spinning, it was dark.

And hot as Hell.

Oddly, Dean would rather be here, standing in a dingy cave stinking of sulfur with the sounds of wailing voices assaulting his ears, than back in Lawrence, looking at that snapshot of what might have been.

If Sam had died.

Sure, he’d thought about what his life would have been like if November 2nd 1983 had never happened. But he’d never considered what his life would have been like had Sam been the one to die that night.

Never.

And he didn’t want to consider it now.

He was *never* going to consider it.

Not ever.

Instead, he glanced about himself, trying to get a lay of the land.

“This sure don’t look like Kansas anymore,” he muttered, scratching his head thoughtfully.

“Oh, but it is, Dorothy,” Mia replied, squinting down a tunnel branching off to their left.
“We’re getting close now.”

“Close to what?” Sam asked, and Dean wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

“Hell,” Mia replied shortly.

“Hell’s in Kansas?” Dean asked.

“No. But it’s close. C’mon. This way.”

She headed off down the tunnel, not even sparing her companions a backwards glance to check they were following, and Dean exchanged an uncertain look with Sam, who shrugged.

“When in not-Kansas...” Sam said with a shrug, and with that, he headed off after the half-demon, Dean reluctantly following in his wake.

While he was glad to be away from the Stepford Winchesters, Dean couldn’t say he was exactly overjoyed to be here. Wherever *here* might be.

Rounding a corner, his eyes skittered to some odd shapes scattered about the cave floor, blackened, charred lumps sticking up at strange angles out of the rock. On closer inspection, he discovered they were pieces of bone, broken skeletons. Lots of them. And skulls. Lots of skulls. Blackened and twisted, fractured and broken, some of them limned with traces of yellow, and Dean shuddered involuntarily.

Here be demons.

“Sammy...?” he called after his brother a little uncertainly, and Sam paused to turn back toward him, his face ashen and his eyes dark.

“I know,” the younger brother confirmed quietly, and Dean had to close his eyes for a second as hot air blasted at them, the sounds of distant screaming beginning to intensify.

“You *sure* we’re not in Hell?” Dean asked, and Mia didn’t even turn to look at him, just carried on picking her way through the skeleton-strewn tunnel. “Sure as hell sounds like it.”

“Those aren’t the souls of the Damned you can hear, Dean,” Mia explained off-handedly, barely paying him any attention at all.

“Then what are they?” Sam asked. “What is this place?”

Mia stopped suddenly, looking over her shoulder at Sam and grinning. “Hell on Earth,” she explained, motioning the boys forward with a brief inclination of her head. “Come see. This is what happens when Lucifer brings about the Apocalypse.”

Dean followed Mia and his brother to the mouth of a huge cavern thronged with people packed shoulder to shoulder like cattle being led to slaughter.

The sound of their wailing was almost unbearable, thousands of voice raised in what, in some other place, might have been mistaken for worship, but here sounded more akin to entreaty.

They were begging for mercy. All of them.

“Welcome to Lawrence, boys,” Mia almost had to shout to be heard above the sobbing and the pleading. “Under Lucifer’s reign.”

No way.

No. *Way.*

As Dean scanned the tormented crowd in disbelief, something grabbed his arm, and he looked down to see a young woman, her face twisted in agony, clothes torn and sticking in patches to burnt and blackened skin.

“Help me!” she begged through bloodied teeth and cracked, parched lips. “Deliver me!”

“Uh—” He pulled his arm out of her grasping, bloodstained fingers, nails torn from charred nail beds, skin peeling from charred bone.

“Help us!” Another voice cried from in front of him, more hands reaching out for him, grasping at his jacket, his hair, his hands. “Please!”

“Mercy! Have mercy!”

“Sammy?” Dean tried to push the grabbing hands away, tried to locate his brother in the throng of bodies closing in all around him, a putrid sea of rotting flesh at high tide.

“Dean!”

A strong hand gripped the collar of his jacket, pulling him backwards, away from the throng of hopeless desperation, and he was looking at his brother again, face even paler than it had been before.

“Dean.”

Sam’s gaze had drifted beyond his brother, across the heads of the wailing multitude, some of whom had dropped to their knees, faces buried in the dirt in supplication.

Dean followed his brother’s eye line to a raised area at the far side of the cavern, where a familiar-looking man sat on a golden throne, legs crossed casually as he sipped from a goblet filled with a red substance that Dean was pretty sure wasn’t a nice Bordeaux.

“Lucifer,” he muttered, blinking as his eyes strayed to the smaller throne positioned at the Devil’s right hand and the tall man reclining on the blood red cushions.

Yellow eyes looked out from Sam’s face and Dean heard his brother draw in a sharp breath as a contented smile slid across the cruel countenance of his mirror image.

Yellow-Eyed Sam took a delicate sip from the goblet Lucifer held out to him, his lips stained with blood as he bowed his head slightly in subservience.

And Dean couldn’t watch anymore.

“C’mon, Sam,” he said, grabbing his brother’s arm. “Let’s go.”

Sam shook his head, his eyes never leaving his counterpart as he remained rooted to the spot.

“Don’t, Sam,” Dean pleaded. “It’s not you. Don’t think about it.”

But Sam obviously *was* thinking about it. In fact Sam didn’t appear able to *stop* thinking about it.

“C’mon, Sammy,” Dean insisted once again, tugging on his brother’s arm. “Don’t.”

Sam shook his head, not even looking at him, eyes still transfixed by the duplicate of himself lounging on the dais, distant and cruel and so *unSam* that Dean couldn’t even bring himself to look again.

“Sam—”

“How many realities am I like this in, Dean?” Sam asked, teary-eyed and shaking. “All of them? Is this the way it’s gonna go for me, whatever I do? Am I damned to be *this*?”

Dean planted himself firmly between the spectacle of his little brother cozying up to Lucifer and his *actual* little brother trembling in front of him.

“*No*, Sam,” he said firmly, gripping his brother’s chin in his fingers and forcing him to look away from the yellow-eyed version of himself. “You don’t have demon blood in you, Sammy. Remember?” he reminded him, and Sam’s downcast eyes finally looked up and found Dean’s own. “*That’s* the difference, kiddo. This isn’t you. You know that. This isn’t going to happen to you. I won’t let it. *You* won’t let it. You have choices, Sam. That evil schmuck? Well he probably didn’t, all that poison in his veins.”

Sam nodded slowly, exhaling a shuddering breath.

“Sam?” Dean prodded.

Sam sniffed and wiped at his eyes. “Yeah. Yeah, Dean.”

“Okay then,” Dean said. “Now let’s get the hell outta here, huh?”

“Yeah,” Sam repeated, keeping his eyes studiously averted from the opposite side of the cavern. “Let’s.”

Dean pushed his brother in front of him, back out of the cave, and Mia was suddenly at his side, grinning.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” she crowed. “That’s he’s not destined to go Dark Side?”

Dean didn’t even look at her. “The hell I do,” he confirmed confidently. “Sam’s nobody’s Anakin Skywalker, honey.”

He made to follow his brother into an adjoining cave, but Sam had stopped dead just a few feet in front of him, plastered to the wall in the shadows, and suddenly Dean could hear someone screaming. Not screaming like those agonized souls behind them. This was different. This was someone being *tortured*.

This was someone being tortured who Dean *knew*.

He started to run for his brother's position, Mia suddenly grabbing his arm and pulling him up short.

She put a finger on her lips as they sidled up behind Sam, her eyes glittering as she whispered, "C'mon, Dean. You're gonna love this, baby."

Dean squinted at her before turning his attention to the cave before them, Sam standing stock still and staring at the figure strapped to the rack at the other end of the room.

"Dad?"

The word seemed to burn a hole in Dean's larynx and for a second he couldn't say anything else, couldn't move, couldn't think, could only stand there looking at his father's battered body, his face a mass of bruises, one eye swollen shut and blood *everywhere*.

And then the paralysis lifted as quickly as it had overtaken him, and he made to bolt toward his father, straining to get to him even as Mia held him back, shoving him against the wall and scowling ferociously at him.

"Wait, dammit!" she hissed, slapping her hand over his mouth before he could make any further sound of protest. "You need to see this first!"

There was someone else in the room.

At the far end of the cave, in the shadows behind the rack, someone moved.

He was removing tools from a wooden cabinet and placing them on a tray in front of him—knives, saws, pliers. He seemed to be smiling as he worked, even though he was mostly turned away from them, taking great pleasure in handling his instruments of torture as he laid them out before him.

"Scream for me some more, Daddy," he said softly, turning toward the cave's entrance, toward where Dean and Sam and Mia stood cloaked in darkness.

And for an instant green eyes flashed yellow.

"All hail, venerated father of the Boy King and his beloved brother!"

He was laughing. He was laughing as he turned back to their father, bloody knife in one hand, razor in the other, and Dean's legs nearly gave out completely and he had to look away. He had to look away because he couldn't look at himself with yellow eyes any more than he could look at Sam.

The only sound in the room was John's rasping breathing and the steady drip-drip-drip of his blood off the end of Yellow-Eyed Dean's knife.

"No," Sam murmured in disbelief. "This would never happen. Dean, you'd never—"

"He'd do *anything* for you, Sammy," Mia cooed. "You know that, right? *Anything*. Even share your blood."

Sam glanced back at her, revulsion in his eyes. "I don't have—"

"Demon blood? Yes I know, not in your reality," Mia agreed. "But in this one? In this one you do, remember? In this one you're Lucifer's Boy King and your beloved brother Dean is his Chief Torturer. You're a regular Dynamic Duo here. Although I'm pretty sure you don't get invited to many parties."

Dean couldn't watch, couldn't look anywhere but at his feet, the blood rushing through his head and pounding in his ears and suddenly he understood exactly how Sam had felt the last time they fell through the looking glass, when he'd stood on that rocky outcropping and first laid eyes on a yellow-eyed version of himself.

"Dean would never..." Sam trailed off, shaking his head. "Neither of us..."

"Potential, Sam," Mia hissed. "Remember that, Sammy. You boys both have such *potential*."

Suddenly John let loose a terrified howl of sheer agony and Dean's attention snapped back to his father and the yellow-eyed version of himself standing next to him with a dripping razor in his hand.

"No!"

Dean wasn't entirely sure how he got there, how he was suddenly standing a foot away from the demon-blood-infected version of himself, his Colt raised inches from his alter ego's forehead.

Yellow-Eyed Dean smiled at him.

And he emptied the gun's entire clip into him, wiping the smile—and everything else—off his face in a burst of frenzied and completely uncontrolled violence.

Dean didn't really register the sight of his mirror image's bloodied and faceless corpse slumping to the floor. Was only half aware of Sam coming up behind him and taking the gun out of his hand, bending down and closing the other Dean's one remaining eye.

Maybe he didn't want to look at Dean with yellow eyes any more than Dean himself did.

"Dean?"

Sam was standing in front of him, head bowed slightly so they were at eye level.

"Dean?"

Dean blinked at him.

“Dean, you with me?”

John groaned and Dean came back to himself with a snap. “Dad?”

He snatched the other Dean’s bloodied knife from the floor where it had fallen and approached his father’s bruised and broken body cautiously, raising the knife and beginning to hack at the bonds holding John Winchester captive as Sam picked up the razor and went to work on the other side.

“It’s okay, Dad,” he tried to reassure his father. “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to get you out of here.”

John didn’t reply, barely conscious, his head hanging low between his shoulders.

“It’s him, right?” Dean asked Mia as she stood at the far end of the cave, watching. “This is *our* dad?”

“It’s him,” the half-demon confirmed, her voice strangely emotionless.

“Hold on, Dad,” Sam was saying in an echo of his brother. “It’s going to be okay.”

John stirred, a low moan emanating from his throat that sounded uncomfortably like a wounded animal.

Slowly, carefully, he raised his head, his dark eyes bloodshot and wild with terror.

“Get away from me!” he screamed, his body wracked with trembling and his gaze never leaving the razor in Dean’s hand. “Get away from me you monsters!”

Part Three

“Get away from me you monsters!”

John Winchester was almost hysterical, switching between flinching away from the boys’ ministrations as they attempted to cut him down from Yellow-Eyed Dean’s torture rack, and lashing out at them with poorly aimed fists.

One lucky swing caught Dean on the cheekbone and he had to grab hold of his father’s flailing arm and restrain him for a second while he endeavored to get his eyes to focus again.

“Dad, don’t! Dad, it’s *us!*” he tried to reassure his father, Sam finally managing to slice through the last leather strap pinning John’s leg to the wooden rack.

“Let’s get him down,” the younger brother suggested, awkwardly trying to get his shoulder underneath his father’s armpit while Dean attempted to do the same.

After a brief struggle, John finally went limp in their arms, a dead weight suspended between them, his head once again hanging down between his shoulder blades as if all the fight had fled out of him.

"It's okay, Dad, you're okay," Dean murmured, wrapping his arm about his father's waist. "You're gonna be okay, we're gonna get you outta here."

At first John didn't seem to hear what Dean was saying to him, his head lolling limply from side to side, but just as Dean ducked his head to check whether the older Winchester was actually conscious, John suddenly spun, grabbed hold of his eldest's arm and wrenched it almost out of its socket, flinging Dean away from him at the same time as his foot connected squarely with the back of Sam's knee, sending his youngest sprawling to the floor.

Momentarily stunned, Dean managed to regain his balance before spinning back in his father's direction, narrowly ducking the other Dean's razor which was now firmly gripped in his father's right hand.

"How the hell...?"

Dean wasn't sure how his dad had managed to wrestle the razor from Sam, but he didn't exactly have time to think about it, the old man having further armed himself with one of the knives still gleaming on the other Dean's torture tray, both of which he was now waving threateningly at his sons.

"Stay away from me! Don't you come near me!" he hissed, looking from Sam to Dean and back again with his one good eye. "I mean it, I'll kill both of you evil sons of bitches, I swear to God!"

"Way to go, Daddy!" Mia crowed from behind them, clapping her hands in apparent glee, and Dean aimed a brief scowl in her direction before glancing quickly at Sam, who was endeavoring to pick himself up from his rather undignified position on the floor.

Reassured his brother was still breathing, Dean finally turned his attention back toward their father, holding his empty hands out in front of him. "Dad, look," he began. "It's okay, Dad, it's *really* us—"

"You can't fool me again!" John yelled at them, spittle flying from blood-caked lips. "I know you were—you were never...never mine," he added, shaking his head. "Never mine to protect or save. Never mine at all..." He trailed off, breathing hard, his face twisted into a mask of agony that Dean didn't think was entirely physical.

"Dad...?" he tried softly, taking a cautious step toward him.

John just shook his head. "Never mine at all," he repeated. "Never mine to protect or save," and it was as if he was reciting something from memory, something that had been stuck on permanent repeat in his head for a very long time. "Never mine at all..."

John was wild-eyed, rambling and out of it, and Dean didn't know how to get through to him.

"Dad," Sam said softly from the other side of his father. "Dad, please. It's really us. Let us help you..."

John suddenly spun in Sam's direction, swinging the knife in a vicious arc, and Sam barely sidestepped in time, the knife tearing through the front of his jacket.

His father momentarily distracted, Dean seized the opportunity to make a move toward him, but, even injured and confused, John Winchester was still too fast, shifting his weight to his right foot and sweeping the razor in a wide slashing motion as he lunged toward his oldest boy, the blade slicing into Dean's cheek and causing him to fall back with a startled yelp.

Dean blinked in shock, bringing his palm up against his bloody cheek as he simultaneously attempted to stop the bleeding and assess the damage. By the feel of it, the wound wasn't deep and most likely wouldn't even scar, but it hurt like a bitch and there was no denying he was rattled.

Their dad was so out of it, he didn't even know his own sons.

"Dad...?" Dean squinted at his father who froze, seemingly as shocked by his sudden maneuver as his son.

This time, it was Sam's turn to take advantage of John's distracted state, coming up behind him and grabbing the hand still clutching the knife even as Dean dived for the hand holding the razor.

Somehow, between the two of them they managed to manhandle their dad face down onto the floor, knocking the weapons out of his reach and keeping his arms firmly pinned to the rock beneath him.

"Dad, take it easy!" Dean burst out, trying not to sound as completely freaked to hell as he felt. "It's us, it's really us!"

"Dad?" Sam added, one large hand splayed across their father's back in an effort to comfort him. "Dad, can you hear me?"

John's breathing was slowing, his struggles lessening, and Dean wasn't sure whether he believed them or whether he'd just given up fighting.

"Dad, remember Stull?" Dean tried hesitantly. "Remember the church? We tried to hide when the demons came, remember? After we killed Mia? After we rescued you? Remember that?"

John continued to breathe evenly, his face turned awkwardly to one side.

"We should turn him over," Sam murmured. "Help him breathe..."

With an effort, the boys managed to roll their father onto his back, where he just stared up at the ceiling as if none of this was registering with him at all.

"Dad?" Sam tried again. "There was...there was another version of me. He had yellow eyes. He tortured you, remember? We came and got you—killed him—and that reality started to destroy itself. Remember that? Dad?"

Dean swallowed. “We had to leave you,” he added, and it hurt him to admit it, even months later. “We had to leave you when the ground between us collapsed. I tried to get to you but Sam...Sam...”

Sam ducked his head slightly. “I wouldn’t let him,” he said, cheeks coloring. “I wouldn’t let him try and get to you, Dad, remember? You told me to take him and run...”

“And we got out,” Dean finished for his brother. “We got back to the church and got out but you—you were stuck in here and we couldn’t—we couldn’t come back and find you until the spring, until the equinox...”

“Dad?”

John was breathing evenly now, blinking his one good eye at the ceiling as his body seemed to relax.

“Never mine at all...” he murmured.

“Dad, it’s okay—” Dean began, as his father’s eyes slowly tracked to the gash in his cheek, to the blood congealing on the pale, freckled skin. “It’s okay, Dad.”

He almost flinched when John suddenly raised his hand, running one fingertip gently along Dean’s cheekbone, parallel to the cut.

“Dad?”

“Dean?” John whispered, barely audible, lips hardly moving. There was moisture gathering in his good eye, and his breathing had become suddenly uneven and choppy. “Dean, let that be you,” he said softly. “Please let that be you.”

Dean swallowed, taking his father’s hand and pulling it away from the cut on his face before enclosing it in both of his own. “It’s really me, Dad,” he confirmed thickly. “It’s really me.” He smiled awkwardly, before adding, “And the sasquatch over there is really Sammy.”

Sam snorted softly, and John’s gaze tracked to his youngest son, his other hand suddenly cupping Sam’s cheek and pulling him down toward him.

“Sammy?” Slowly, deliberately, he looked deep into Sam’s eyes, the relief in his own obvious as he pulled Sam closer and brushed his bruised lips against the crown of his youngest’s head. “Need...haircut,” he managed to gasp out, causing Sam to laugh wetly.

“Soon as we get you home, Dad,” he promised, carding his fingers through John’s own hair.

“Didn’t mean—” John began, before breaking down into fits of painful coughing. “Didn’t mean—” he touched Dean’s cheek again. “Didn’t mean...didn’t want to...hurt you.”

“Dad—”

“Didn’t think—thought it was...thought it was *him*.”

Dean nodded. “I know, I know, Dad, it’s okay, it’s okay. We’re here now.”

John shook his head. “Never mine,” he muttered. “Never mine to protect or save. Never mine at all...”

“Dad—”

John suddenly grabbed the back of Dean’s head, pulling him close with a strength that he really shouldn’t have had left in him.

“Are you really mine? Dean? You’re really mine?”

Dean wasn’t sure how to answer that. “Ye-yeah, Dad,” he hazarded. “It’s us. It’s really us.”

John’s open eye crinkled slightly. “How do you know, son?” he whispered, the desperation in his voice almost painful for Dean to hear. “How do you *know*?”

Dean glanced briefly at Mia, who was watching stonily, arms folded across her chest. “She told us,” he informed his father shortly.

John’s good eye shifted behind him, and he blinked hard, his body stiffening once again. “No!” he cried out, trying to get up. “No! You’re dead!” He turned his attention back to Dean, his expression hardening. “*You’re lying!*” he yelled. “It’s another trick! You’re not him. This isn’t real! You killed her! Dean *killed* her—”

“Dad! *Dad!*” Dean caught hold of John’s shoulder and pushed him back to the ground, holding him there till he once again started to calm. “It’s okay. Yeah, we killed her but Lucifer... Lucifer brought her back. We made a deal... She got us in here to get you out.”

John shook his head, his expression breaking slightly as his fingers tightened in Dean’s hair. “Don’t—don’t trust her—Dean. Don’t—”

“I know, Dad,” Dean reassured him. “It’s okay. We got this one.”

“You know, this is all very touching,” Mia drawled sarcastically, “but we really should be getting out of here. Unless you want Yellow-Eyed Sammy showing up and realizing you killed his darling brother. He’s got a short fuse, that one. Flies off the handle at the slightest thing.”

John swallowed, and he nodded shortly, the expression on his face apparently pained at having to agree with the half-demon. “They’re—they’re hardly ever apart,” he said slowly, for the first time seeming to register the messy corpse of that other version of Dean barely four feet away from him. “He—he’ll be here any minute. He—he likes to watch you—he likes to watch *Dean*—work.” His purpled face seemed to pale, and Dean couldn’t tell whether it was in revulsion or disgust.

He shuddered.

Either way, he was pretty sure none of them wanted to see just what format Yellow-Eyed Sam's wrath would take on finding his brother with half his face blown off.

"Maybe we should go," he suggested, and Mia rolled her eyes.

"*Finally*," she burst out in exasperation, returning the scowl Dean aimed in her direction. "Well, hurry up then! We don't have all millennia!"

Dean growled at her before shakily hauling himself to his feet, he and Sam somehow managing to shoulder their dad's weight between them as they pulled him upright.

"Which way?" Sam asked Mia, reaffirming his grip around John's waist.

"Uh." The girl sidled up to the entrance of the cave, glanced first one way and then the other. "This way. I think."

"You *think*?" Dean echoed.

Mia shrugged at him. "My educated guesswork is the best you've got, honey," she reminded him. "I said I could find my way *between* realities. Didn't say I could find my way *around* realities once I was in them."

Stepping out into the corridor beyond the torture chamber, Mia tossed her hair over her shoulder before striding off to her right.

Dean glanced at Sam, who merely shrugged helplessly.

"Follow her?" the younger brother suggested, and Dean sighed, unable to come up with a better plan at such short notice.

"We wind up in Albuquerque I'll be pissed," he commented, before the three Winchesters followed the half-demon out into the corridor.

The sounds of distant wailing immediately assaulted Dean's ears, but this time it sounded coordinated, almost like singing but...not.

"Chanting," John murmured, as if he'd read his son's mind. "Praying to Lucifer for deliverance."

"They pray to Lucifer?" Sam echoed, shaking his head in disbelief.

"And..." John stammered. "And to you, Sammy. They pray to you."

Sam swallowed. "What—what does that make me? The Antichrist?"

John shook his head weakly. "I don't know, Sam. You—he—he sits at Lucifer's right hand. Dean at his. Unholy trinity. Yellow-eyed and—and—"

"Evil?" Mia suggested over her shoulder. "Yeah, well I guess it takes one to know one." She winked at Sam encouragingly. "Potential, Sammy. Remember that."

If Dean had had a hand free he might have punched her. "Don't talk to him like that."

“Aw, Dean, that’s sweet. Defending your brother’s honor and everything. Maybe you two aren’t so different from the Sam and Dean in this reality. They say they’re real close here.” She winked again, this time at Dean. “*Real* close.”

“Shut your yap, bitch,” Dean growled at her. “We didn’t pay you to *talk*.”

“You didn’t pay me at *all*.”

“Better than the alternative, babe,” Dean returned. “I can always put another bullet in your brain.”

“And then where would you be, lover?” Mia asked, raising her hand just as she had outside their house in Lawrence. “Stuck in this reality forever? I bet that other Sammy in there would just love to play with you for all eternity, baby.”

Dean shuddered again. “You know, this is all very interesting, but I thought you were the one said we had to get us the hell outta here? So what are you waiting for? The friggin’ Apocalypse?”

Mia smirked at him. “Been and gone, baby. Been and gone. Anyone would think you were *scared* of your big bad brother, Dean.”

Dean quirked one shoulder, ostensibly to settle his father’s weight more comfortably, but in reality it was easier to put Dad in the middle of them than have to look Sam in the eye just then. “Just get us out of here, Mia.”

Mia snorted, turning her attention to the air a foot in front of her hand. “Always know we’re in trouble when you call me by my actual name, *Dean*,” she commented, her brow crinkling slightly as she began to concentrate.

John grunted uncomfortably just as a chill shot through Dean’s body from his head to his feet.

He felt his dad’s weight shift as Sam moved, and he stole a look at his brother, whose attention was all on Mia.

“You’ll like this, Sam,” Mia murmured, the fingers of her outstretched hand twitching as a crackle of electricity shot from her palm to the spot she and Sam were staring at, white light reflecting off her dark eyes before crackling from the ends of her hair.

John shifted again, and Dean’s attention returned to Sam, whose own hand was twitching in an odd parody of Mia’s, opening and closing his fingers at his side as Dean suddenly felt the yank on his shoulders signaling he was about to be dragged off to God knows where with absolutely no say in the matter.

Except this time it felt different, different even than back in Lawrence, in front of his mom and dad’s house—that other Dean’s mom and dad’s house—as if he was being pulled toward something, but something else was holding him back.

The air in front of Mia’s hand shimmered, and it was as if a window opened up in front of her, offering a view of a bombed out city, collapsed buildings and corpses piled high in the streets, people screaming as fire and brimstone rained down from the sky.

“Oops,” Mia giggled. “Don’t wanna go there.”

Her fingers twitched and the vista changed to blue sky and sunshine and a tall man and a blonde woman sitting on a beach with a couple of kids running around them laughing and screeching.

“You look far too happy there, Sam,” Mia commented, “better go somewhere that brooding forehead of yours won’t look too out of place.”

She twitched her fingers again, the view this time changing to a long corridor with barred windows and a man in orange, his wrists handcuffed, being led to a darkened room at the far end, a priest walking in front of him reading from the Bible.

An odd sound escaped Sam’s lips and Mia glanced at him for a second. “Been here before, huh? This the one where Dean winds up extra crispy? Or is it death by lethal injection in this reality?”

Sam didn’t reply, but Dean saw something twitch in his brother’s expression and he remembered Sam telling him about the reality where Dean had been on Death Row.

“Much as I’d like to see you go gently into that good night,” Mia commented, “that’s not where we need to be right now.”

She jerked her fingers again, and this time the view appeared to merely hold up a mirror to the reality they were already standing in—caves, rocks, heat and distant screaming.

Dean was suddenly jerked forward, trying to keep his hold on John even as he felt himself being tugged toward the reality currently appearing beyond Mia’s outstretched hand.

Then as suddenly as the tugging started, it stopped again.

And Dean was looking at Sam’s broad shoulders, Sam who had suddenly interposed himself between his father and his brother and the bridge Mia was creating into that other reality.

It was as if Sam was blocking the entire corridor, and he seemed even taller, even wider than he usually did.

“Sammy?”

Mia turned to look at them, surprise obvious on her shadowed face.

She laughed nervously, looking from Sam over his shoulder to Dean and John, none of whom were moving toward her doorway.

“What’s going on, Sammy?” she asked casually, her smile rigid on tightly drawn lips. “It’s this way.”

Sam didn’t move.

“I don’t think so,” was all he said.

“Uh, Sam?” Dean interjected. “You wanna share with the class?”

“Sam, come *on!*” Mia burst out irritably. “Quickly! Or do you *want* to get sliced and diced by your psycho lookalike?”

Sam still didn’t move.

Mia placed her free hand on her hip impatiently, fingers of the other hand still crackling as she held open the doorway. “You know what he’ll do to Dean, right?” she added. “To your dad? He’ll *enjoy* it, Sam.”

Sam nodded. “I know,” he said, flexing his fingers at his sides.

They crackled. Electricity arcing from fingertips to ground.

“Sam, come *on!*” Mia cried, not seeming to notice, her attention all on the doorway it appeared she was now struggling to maintain. “I can’t hold this forever you know!”

“I know,” Sam said again, his voice completely calm and neutral.

“Sam?” Dean took a step toward his brother, barely keeping his dad upright. “What’s—”

Sam suddenly raised a hand, fingers millimeters from Dean’s chest, and Dean could feel it, the energy flowing from his brother’s body.

“Don’t, Dean,” Sam instructed.

“Sam...?”

Dean’s question remained unanswered, and he realized he could hear wailing and screaming, louder and even more desperate than that he’d heard reverberating around the cave where tortured souls worshipped a yellow-eyed version of his brother.

It was coming from behind Mia, from the other reality she was keeping open.

Fiery shadows danced along the hallway behind her, heat blasting out at them from the rift she had created between the two realities, and Dean thought he could see rivulets of blood running down the walls, even as he felt himself being drawn forward once again, toward that reality, only to find himself stopped in his tracks by Sam’s hand splayed out on his chest.

“Sam,” Mia fairly growled, taking a step backwards. “I don’t know what the hell you think you’re doing, but if you don’t get your freakishly tall ass in here right *now* I’m gonna close this door and *leave* you here!”

“Sam, maybe we should—” Dean tried to take a step toward his brother, but Sam’s hand held him firm, and John was suddenly restraining him too, fingers clutching desperately at Dean’s arm.

Dean glanced back at his father, whose one visible eye was once again dark with terror. “Don’t go that way, Dean!” he burst out, clutching at his son’s jacket. “Not that

way!" He was gazing off beyond Sam, beyond Mia, into that other reality, and his fingers were so tight in Dean's coat that they'd actually turned white.

"Dad? What is it? What's wrong?"

"You're gonna listen to *him*?" Mia burst out, clearly becoming more and more pissed off as the seconds ticked by. "His head's macaroni and cheese, Dean!"

"Dad?" Sam asked calmly, eyes never leaving Mia's. "Why shouldn't we go that way?"

John looked utterly terrified, and Dean could feel him trembling as he clung bonelessly to his eldest son, shaking his head from side to side insistently. "Don't go that way, boys," he pleaded. "Please don't go that way."

Suddenly John started to struggle, fingers tightening in Dean's jacket as he tried to push his eldest behind him while making a grab for Sam.

"Don't go that way!"

It was typical John Winchester, and Dean shouldn't have been so surprised that his dad, barely able to stand and with his legs about to go out from under him at any minute, was attempting to protect his boys to the bitter end, even when he couldn't protect himself.

And right now, protecting his boys meant keeping them away from the reality Mia was trying to lead them into.

"Dad, what—"

But John was facing up to Mia now, his back suddenly straight and his shoulders squared. "You're not having them!" he yelled at her, swaying slightly on his feet until Dean grabbed hold of him and steadied him. "You're not having them! Not again! These are *my* boys, I don't care *what* he says! You can't have them. *He* can't have them. Mine, you understand me? Mine. *Mine* to protect. *Mine* to save."

Suddenly, John shoved at Dean's chest, pushing himself away from his son and lunging at Mia, slamming into her with his full bodyweight and toppling them both backwards and through the doorway she had created, into the other reality.

They landed with a thud on the hard rock floor, a tangle of limbs and Mia's surprised face looking up into John's suddenly determined single brown eye.

"Get off me!" Mia screamed, shoving John off her and jumping to her feet. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing you crazy lunatic?"

"Dad!" Sam yelled, taking a step toward the doorway, which had remained open despite Mia being on the other side, her hand no longer controlling the energy needed to maintain the link. "What's through there? What are you trying to protect us from?"

John turned and looked at him, struggling to regain his footing but failing completely without his boys there to act as his crutches.

He didn't seem able to look Sam in the eye.

"Hell," he admitted slowly. "It's Hell, Sammy. She's trying to bring you boys to Hell. I won't let her, son. I won't. I'd die first."

Mia glanced nervously from John to Sam to Dean and back again, laughing in a way that couldn't have seemed more forced if she'd tried. "Hell?" she echoed. "What are you, *high*, old man? This is the way *out*, you knuckleheads! In case you'd forgotten, I'm trying to get you *home*!"

John shook his head at her, finally managing to look at his youngest son. "It's Hell, Sam," he repeated. "She's trying to take us all back to Hell! Just run! Take your brother and *run*, Sam! Don't look back!"

Dean took another step toward his brother. "Dad, we've never been to Hell!" he pointed out. "How can she be taking us *back* if we've never been there?"

John shook his head. "Not mine," he insisted. "Not mine to save, not mine to protect. Not mine..."

"Daddy's gone bye-bye, boys," Mia snapped. "Now get your asses over here before I have to *drag* them over here!"

"Sam?" Dean glanced from his brother to his father, who was still lying prone on the other side of the doorway. "Sam I can't leave him again—"

"Just *go*!" John yelled at them. "Get out of here."

Sam took a shallow breath, his voice still completely calm. "Not this time," he said, screwing up his forehead in concentration.

And Dean knew that look.

"Sam!" he repeated. "What—" but he got no further, suddenly aware of another noise approaching them. Not screaming or wailing this time.

Barking.

Lots of barking.

John's good eye widened, and he twisted awkwardly, trying to see behind him, back into—into Hell, or whatever the reality he was stuck in really was.

The barking seemed to be getting closer, and to Dean it sounded like a whole pack of dogs approaching, but he couldn't see anything, even in the shadows at the furthest end of the corridor where his father lay.

"Dad...?" he began. "What is it?"

"Hellhounds!" John replied, the panic obvious in the way the color had drained completely from his battered face. "Hellhounds, Dean! They're coming for us! Dean, take your brother! Take your brother, Dean! You have to protect him! You have to—"

“That’s it,” Sam put in suddenly. “We’re leaving.”

“What?” Mia burst out, glancing behind her into the fiery shadows. “You’re kidding, right? Sam? *Hellhounds*? You don’t actually believe that, right? Sam?” She looked kind of nervous, and Dean shifted uncomfortably, torn between grabbing Sam and running, as his father had ordered, and jumping through the doorway to grab his dad instead.

Because Sam? Didn’t look like he needed much protecting right now.

“Just come on through here!” Mia insisted. “Seriously, this is the way *home* you idiots! You wanna *die* here?”

The barking and the growling was getting louder, closer, and Dean could *smell* it.

Dog. Sulfur. *Death*.

“Sammy, what are we doin’?” he asked his brother uncertainly.

Sam finally spared him a backward glance, his palm still pressed against his brother’s chest.

“We’re leaving,” he said shortly. “But not that way.”

“Wait, Sam—”

Without apparently even hearing Dean’s protests, Sam suddenly strode through the doorway and virtually lifted John off the floor, quickly and efficiently manhandling him back through to the reality where Dean still stood, watching open-mouthed.

“Who died and made you Rambo?” he asked, a little bit more than stunned, as Sam thrust their father at his older brother and turned back to the doorway, where Mia stood, waxy-faced.

“Wait!” the girl cried, and for the first time her façade slipped a little, as if she suddenly realized she wasn’t quite as in control of the situation as she previously thought she was. “Sam, where are you going?”

“Home,” Sam replied coolly, his hand once again twitching at his side.

“You’ll never get there without me!” Mia spat.

A smirk worthy of his brother slid across Sam’s placid features. “Wanna bet?”

And then he lifted his hand in front of him, just as Mia had when she opened the doorway, and the air beyond his open palm seemed to shimmer and shift, electricity sparking from the space between him and the half-demon, and Dean felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Mia scowled at the both of them. “You think you can reflect *my* powers?” she burst out incredulously. “*His* powers? You can’t even *hope* to contain Lucifer’s energy, Sam!”

Sam sighed in an exact parody of the girl in front of him. "Been there, done that," he said, boredom oozing from his voice. "You just sit back and watch the rerun, *lover*."

Sam was fairly vibrating with energy, electricity crackling from his fingertips, arcing toward Mia, who stood there, for a second dumbfounded, as the sound of approaching dogs grew louder and louder.

"Dammit."

There was panic in her eyes, and glancing briefly behind her, she suddenly made a run at the doorway, toward Sam, who merely smiled serenely at her, and at Dean, who had other ideas.

His Colt useless after recently being emptied into his evil twin's face, Dean swiftly grabbed Sam's Glock out of the waistband of the younger Winchester's jeans, pointing it at Mia's head and smiling almost as serenely as his brother.

"Don't think so, sweetheart," he said, flicking off the safety and chambering a round. "I'm thinking Hell suits you. Maybe you should stay."

Mia scowled at him, bringing her hand up in an attempt to open another window, another way out; but it was pointless: Sam was already reflecting every bit of energy she had.

"You can't leave me here!" she screeched, virtually stamping her foot as she ground her fists against her thighs. "You'll never get out without me! Soon as I'm gone, so's my mojo, Sammy!"

Sam shrugged. "Got it covered," he said calmly. "Don't you go worrying your pretty little head about that."

"Specially as it sounds like it might be gettin' torn off by Satan's pooches any minute now," Dean added, grinning brightly at the girl in grim satisfaction.

The barking and growling was *right there* now, and although Dean still couldn't see anything, it was pretty obvious from the look of sheer terror on Mia's face that she *could*.

"Wait!" the girl screamed, backing up until she was against the cave wall, shaking her head at something slowly approaching her. "Dean, you loved me once, remember? You can't—you can't let them do this to me! You won't!"

Dean shrugged. "Saves me buying a Valentine's card next year," he commented. "Not that I was planning on getting you one anyway."

Mia glanced briefly in his direction, but was prevented from making any snarky reply by something suddenly grabbing hold of her ankle and dragging her down onto the ground, where she began to thrash and scream desperately.

Unaccountably, there was blood all over her legs and her jeans began to shred, seemingly of their own accord, claw marks and teeth marks gouged into the tender flesh beneath as Mia pleaded with anyone who would listen.

“Master, I won’t fail you again! I swear I didn’t betray you! I brought them to Hell, just like you said!”

She screamed again as the flesh was ripped from her arms and legs, and her stomach and chest cavity were torn to ribbons right in front of them.

“Daddy ain’t listenin’ honey,” Dean told her grimly. “I guess you’re on your own now.”

The girl looked at him for a second, opening her mouth as if to spit out some venomous reply, but suddenly her eyes widened, and instead she began to choke, blood filling her mouth and oozing from her nose and Dean found himself unable to look away, morbidly fascinated as more blood began to spurt from her neck, ragged teeth marks shredding the flesh, ripping into muscle and arteries, tearing out her throat.

There was blood everywhere, and even though the half-demon must already be dead, her brown eyes remained open and fixed on Dean, even as invisible Hellhounds tore her body to pieces.

“Holy sh—” Dean began, but was cut off by the window onto Hell, or whatever that reality was, suddenly blinking out, something else starting to shimmer into existence in its place. “Sammy, tell me we’re goin’ to Disneyland...” he muttered, even as Sam’s face screwed up in concentration, his fingers twitching much as Mia’s had when opening a doorway into another reality. “Sam?”

“I nearly got it,” his brother assured him, his left hand clutching at his head as his right continued to spasm. “Just a little more...”

“Sammy, you might not have noticed, but ding dong, the wicked bitch is *dead*, dude!” Dean pointed out. “How the hell do you plan on reflecting Mia’s reality-jiggling power and gettin’ us the hell outta here if she’s a doornail?”

Sam didn’t answer, which was probably a good thing as it meant Dean was able to hear the sound of footsteps approaching from behind him, several demon flunkies escorting the yellow-eyed version of Sam into the yellow-eyed version of Dean’s torture chamber.

“Oh crap,” he muttered, shoving his dad against the wall in the hope they might not be spotted.

Sam, on the other hand, was standing right out in the middle of the corridor with a twelve foot super-high-HD-ultra-surround-sound TV screen shimmering in front of him.

“Sammy, I think we need to go.”

That? Was the understatement of the century, a howl of absolute anguish and complete, unadulterated rage suddenly issuing from the torture chamber, Yellow-Eyed Sam’s demon henchman falling to their knees, their heads bowed to the ground as their master emerged from the cave, his brother’s broken body cradled in his arms.

“Who did this?” the other version of Sam screamed, the hallway seeming to vibrate as his anguish reverberated through the rock. “Who did *this*?!”

He fell to his knees, cradling his brother to his chest, long fingers ghosting over the exposed bone and gore where Yellow-Eyed Dean’s face used to be.

Dean swallowed.

This was so not good.

Other Sam was sobbing, his grip on his brother’s corpse tightening and the ground shaking harder and harder with each successive sob, and when he finally raised his head from his brother’s mangled face, a scream of such agony was ripped from his lungs that the very walls around him began to shake themselves apart, the prostrated demons screaming even as their master screamed, clutching at their heads as blood leaked from their meatsuits’ eyes.

“*Who did this?!*” Yellow-Eyed Sam screamed once again. “Someone will pay for this outrage! *All of you will pay!*”

And the demons’ screaming tripled in intensity, their faces seeming to collapse in on themselves as if their heads were being squeezed in some gigantic invisible vise until bones began to break and eyeballs popped out of sockets, and finally each demon’s skull was crushed in on itself in a gory mess of blood and sinew and brain matter, the meatsuits all collapsing to the floor in a simultaneous howl of agony.

And Yellow-Eyed Sam was looking right at Dean.

“Sammy, we *really* need to go,” Dean informed his brother, swallowing hard as the expression on Yellow-Eyed Sam’s face morphed into something Dean really didn’t want to think about. “Sam?”

“I almost got it,” Sam repeated, squeezing shut his eyes as lightning shot from his fingertips and the window in front of him exploded with color. “I got it!”

And that was all Dean knew.

* * * *

Sam’s head *really* hurt.

And his teeth were tingling.

And his fingers felt as if they’d been rubbing themselves against a nylon carpet for the past half hour.

He blinked up into a smoke-filled sky, trying to figure out where he was but seeing only the ruins of shattered buildings all around him.

There were fires on the horizon, a whole city in flames, and bodies littered the gutters like autumn leaves.

He swallowed bile and tried to breathe through his mouth.

Death. Decay.

A scrawny dog barked at them before moving on, dodging between the abandoned, burnt out husks of cars and moldy, putrefying corpses.

“Where...?” he hardly dared ask, and it was only when he heard his father croak the word, “Angels,” that he even remembered to check John and Dean were there.

“Angels?” he echoed, surveying the devastation all around him and completely unable to reconcile the one with the other.

“Fighting,” John added, struggling to breathe amidst the smoke and the smell.

Dean was still hanging on to him, and had he not been, from the looks of him John would already be a barely-conscious heap on the floor.

“Dad?” the older brother asked cautiously. “How do you know?”

John smiled weakly. “Been here before,” he said. “Couple months. Couple months *here*. Maybe a couple days back...back where you’re from.”

He didn’t say it. Didn’t say *home*. As if he still couldn’t believe it could be true.

“What happened here?” Sam asked. “Is it—is it the Apocalypse?”

John shrugged. “You boys shouldn’t have said yes,” he told them, and Sam glanced at his brother to check whether Dean had any idea what that meant.

Dean just shrugged at him.

“Shouldn’t have said yes to the angels.”

Like *that* made it all make sense.

“We shouldn’t stay here,” John continued. “Not safe. Not safe to be here.”

“Sam?” Dean said slowly, looking anywhere but at his brother for a second, before finally meeting his gaze. “Sammy? Can you get us home? Really? Mia’s dead, man. Her power died with her, right?”

Sam tilted his head slightly, focusing his attention on his fingertips. “I’m not sure,” he said shortly, and Dean somehow didn’t seem at all comforted by that.

“You’re not sure you can get us home? Or you’re not sure Mia’s power died with her?”

“Either,” Sam replied, flexing his fingers. “I can—I can still feel it. Her power. Kind of like—I dunno, an aftershock, maybe? An echo?”

“But she’s dead. And in Hell.”

“So technically if she’s dead, and in Hell, she might not be dead.”

“Huh?”

“Dean, if she died and went to Hell, she’d still be a conscious entity, right?”

“Uh—”

“So if she’s in Hell right now she might be dead, but she might not be—”

“You say ‘dead’ I’ll kick your ass.”

“—Gone.”

“And if you say she’s coming back, I’ll kick your ass some more.”

“I doubt she’s coming back,” Sam said. “People don’t come back from Hell. Right?”

John closed his eyes briefly. “Sometimes.”

“Well that makes me feel so much better,” Dean sighed.

“But it *does* mean there might still be a link,” Sam offered. “Between me and—and what’s left of Mia. Sure, it’s not as strong as when she was standing next to me, but I can still feel it. The echo of it.”

He flexed his hands again, pins and needles shooting up his forearms.

“I can still make it work.”

Except, right then, he couldn’t.

His hand was raised, just as it had been before, just as Mia’s had been, and he was concentrating the energy, Mia’s energy, his own, concentrating it a couple of feet beyond his outstretched palm.

But...

It wasn’t working.

“Sammy?”

Sam squeezed his eyes shut. “Just...wait. I can do this. I can.”

But there were voices in the distance, raised voices, and Sam couldn’t help flashing on the phrase, “angry mob” and images of fire and pitchforks.

“Sam...?”

Suddenly something went whizzing past Sam’s ear, and from the ping and the thud behind him, he was pretty sure it was a bullet.

And Dean’s fist was in his jacket dragging him backwards.

“Cover. *Now.*”

Sam couldn't exactly argue, opening his eyes on what was, indeed, an angry mob who, while not armed with pitchforks, all seemed to be carrying automatic weapons of one description or another.

And they all seemed rather upset about something because they were shouting and running and, yes, some of them appeared to be drooling and pustulating, and right now “cover” seemed like a really good idea.

Spinning on the spot, Sam grabbed the side of his dad Dean wasn't already holding up, the two of them dragging him into an alleyway partially hidden from the street by a bombed out SUV and a rusting hulk of a camper van like the one in *Back to the Future*.

Leaning against the SUV, Sam could hear his father's labored breathing behind him, virtually holding his own breath as the mob passed the entrance to the alleyway, apparently oblivious to the Winchesters' hiding place.

“What's wrong with these people?” he asked a little uncertainly, morbidly fascinated by the savage mob, all of them wild-eyed and crazy and hungry for something other than just food.

“Dad?” Dean said sucking in a breath as the mob passed them by, seemingly undetected. “How long did you say you survived here?”

“Time...different here,” John mumbled. “I told you. Long time. I was here...a long time, Dean.”

“Was that before or after Hell?”

John didn't answer Sam's question, his eyes becoming unfocused and distant.

Sam could feel Dean's eyes on him, but couldn't bring himself to look.

“So...So what do we do now?” Dean asked at length. “We can't be stuck here for a few months, Sammy. That Gateway's gonna *close today.*”

Sam sighed heavily. He could do this. He *had* to do this.

“Okay,” he breathed. “Gimme a second here.”

“No pressure, Sammy.”

“Shut up, Dean.”

He stretched out his hand once again, trying to focus his energy—Mia's energy—on a point just beyond his fingertips. Opening a doorway, a window, onto another reality. Feel the edges. Feel the tears, the intersections. Thousands of roads not taken. Thousands of crossroads left undisturbed. Junction after junction, world after world, Sam after Sam and Dean after Dean and Kansas that isn't Kansas and...

Sunshine.

When Sam opened his eyes it was sunny.

It was sunny because he was standing in the desert.

Uncomfortable memories of his father staked out on a rocky cliff and a yellow-eyed version of himself assaulted him, and unconsciously he looked up, looking for the bluff where he and Dean had seen the distant figure of John Winchester being tortured by his son.

Not *his* son.

But close enough.

Never mine to protect and save... Never mine at all...

For a second Sam thought he understood what his father had been repeating over and over since his rescue, but he didn't have time to ruminate on the subject, as a distant humming sound began to fill his ears, closer and closer, louder and louder, and at first he thought it was a plane.

Then a black cloud appeared on the horizon, blotting out the sun, making the desert cold and dark, and Sam remembered the plague of locusts in Paw Paw.

Locusts...

"Apocalypse," John muttered from behind him. "Horsemen..."

"Dad?" Dean said slowly. "How many of these realities did you get stuck in?"

Sam didn't have time to wait for John to answer.

The buzzing sound was increasing in volume, the black cloud approaching their position at an alarming rate, and Sam knew he had to act fast if he was going to get his family out of here.

So he concentrated. Hard. And he held out his hand and felt his fingers tingling, but it was weaker, so much weaker than before. He was losing his connection to Mia and her power, and if he lost the link, his brother, his father, they were going to die here.

Sam couldn't let that happen.

"Dammit."

Screwing up his eyes again, he focused everything he had on one thing: Open. Window. *Now.*

"Any of these places have a happy ending?"

Sam opened his eyes again.

At first, he thought he'd transported them back to the alleyway where they'd been chased by the angry, pustulating mob, but something was different here, something

was slightly *off*. In the far distance he could hear gunshots and screaming, could smell death and decay and fire and destruction.

And sulfur.

And he could also see the word “Croatoan” spray-painted in six-foot high lettering across the wall opposite.

“Croatoan?” he muttered, trying to bring to mind where he’d heard that word before.

But the memory just wouldn’t seem to surface.

“Roanoke,” Dean murmured from behind him. “Lost colony.”

“Virus,” John corrected him. “Demonic virus. Sends you mad, rabid. Sammy, we gotta go. If we get infected...we could take it back to *our* reality. We can’t. We can’t let it spread.”

“You heard the man,” Dean said. “Let’s book, dude.”

Sam nodded.

Book. Right.

His head *really* hurt.

And the gunfire really wasn’t helping.

The gunfire that was getting closer and closer.

And the music. The *really* loud music.

“Sam?”

He’d closed his eyes and hadn’t even realized he’d done it.

Because nothing had happened.

Absolutely nothing.

He’d felt *nothing*.

*Got to feel Mia’s power. Got to mirror it. Got to find a way **home**...*

His eyes flew open.

It was gone. Mia’s power, his link to it. It was gone.

Maybe he’d been wrong. Maybe she wasn’t still...*not dead*.

Maybe she wasn’t anything at all.

And if she *wasn't*... Then he couldn't get them out of here. He couldn't get them *home*.

The sound of gunfire was getting even closer, and Sam flinched when a bullet pinged off the wall right next to where he was standing, Dean grabbing his collar and pulling him backwards, just as he had before.

A rabid mob rounding the corner, just as they *hadn't* before.

"Sam?" Dean burst out nervously, continuing to pull Sam and his father back deeper into the alleyway. "Please don't tell me you've lost your mojo, dude!"

Sam swallowed. "It's okay," he said uncertainly, trying to disguise the tremor in his voice. "It's okay. I can do this."

The music was almost deafening, bullets strafing the entrance to the alleyway, taking out a few of the stragglers at the back of the mob.

But still leaving a mob.

Still leaving an angry, hungry, *demonic virus-infected* mob.

"Sam?" Dean's voice was gentle, almost resigned. "Sammy, it's okay—"

"I can do it!" Sam snapped. "I can do it, Dean!"

I can't do it.

"Sam!"

Part Four

"Sam!"

Sam could hear his brother calling his name. Distantly. As if Dean was very far away, down a long tunnel.

The pain between his eyes was growing exponentially, the muscles cramping down the back of his neck, into his shoulders, down his arms. His fingers hurt.

"Sammy?"

He could feel some kind of sensation, something touching his face, his hair. When he blinked he could sense someone standing in front of him. But his eyes...his eyes hurt so much. Just needed to close his eyes. Just for a few minutes. Make the pain go away...

"Sam?"

Just make the pain go away...

"Sam!"

There were hands gripping his shoulders, and he felt himself being shaken, his eyes opening to his brother's only inches away.

"Sammy, c'mon, man! You gotta stay with me here!"

"Can't..." Sam managed to slur, and his lips felt swollen, his teeth no longer seeming to fit in his mouth. "Can't—Mia. Can't feel Mia anymore. She's—she's gone. Can't... I don't think I can do this. Not without her. Need her here. Need her here so I can...reflect...so...so..."

Sam felt himself slipping again, unable to remember what he was talking about. Where was he? Was Dean here?

"Sam!"

Oh. There he was.

"*Goddammit*, Sammy!"

Strong hands were grabbing him by the shoulders again, shaking him. Hard. And when he blinked his eyes open once again, Dean was *right there*, up in his face with a scowl on his own.

"Sam!" he gritted out. "Are you listening to me?"

"Mmm?"

"Sammy, listen." Dean's voice softened slightly, and when Sam blinked again, his brother's face seemed to come into clearer resolution, as if someone had just adjusted the focus on Sam's eyes. Dean looked...worried. "Sam?"

Dean's hand was on the side of Sam's face, and it was comforting and warm, and Sam could feel his eyes drooping again.

"No you don't, Sleeping Beauty! Up and at 'em, kiddo!"

"Huh?" Sam jerked upright, daylight slowly beginning to seep into his foggy brain.

"Okay, there you are," Dean sounded momentarily relieved, before his voice suddenly hardened again. "Now get your ass in gear, Sam! You gotta get us outta here, remember?"

Sam shook his head. "Can't. Mia—"

"Screw Mia!" Dean burst out. "You don't need her here, Sammy! You don't need *her* power, you've got your own!"

Sam blinked at him. "I don't—I just reflect other people's—"

"Sam, shut up and listen for a second," Dean instructed him, and for once Sam did as he was asked. "You remember the night we ganked that half-demon bitch, right?"

Sam nodded mutely.

“Sammy, that night? You weren’t *reflecting* her power, you were *draining* it from her! Remember? Drawing it into yourself like a—a, I dunno, a sponge, maybe? Soaking it up. Until it was *inside* you. Part of you. Remember that? When you drained her power it weakened her enough for me to gank her, right?”

Sam nodded again.

“And before that? Remember Mount Diablo? You said when you reflected Gudrun’s power you could feel something else, your own power, right there alongside hers. Your *own* power, Sammy!”

Sam swallowed, and his tongue still felt too big for his mouth. “So...so what are you saying?”

“I’m saying you don’t just borrow other people’s power, Sam. I don’t think you ever have. Once you’re exposed, it’s like you absorb some of that power into yourself. Remember Nathan Cole? That night in Fort Worth and that little indoor tornado you raised to get Mia off our asses? That was *you*, Sammy. You did that! You hadn’t seen Nathan for weeks. *Weeks*. And yet *you* did his whole stormchaser routine while he was miles away.”

“So—” Sam took a shaky breath, not sure he understood what Dean was trying to say to him. “So you think—”

“So I think you don’t need someone standing next to you to be able to reflect their power, Sam,” Dean reiterated. “It’s already *in* you.”

“Boys...”

John’s voice issued a warning, and Sam realized he’d forgotten his father was even there, his gaze sliding over to the oldest Winchester, who Dean had left propped up against the alley wall.

He was pale and hunched in on himself, struggling to breathe, his arms wrapped around his ribs protectively. But he was somehow hanging onto consciousness so he could keep a lookout while Dean tried to convince Sam he could still save them all.

Sam followed the direction of his father’s gaze, having to squint a little to make out what he was looking at.

The mob was approaching them, murder and something else in their eyes, and before Sam really knew what was happening Dean had grabbed his jacket and shoved him behind him, pushing him against the wall next to their father.

Dean had Sam’s Glock raised in front of him, and for a second Sam couldn’t remember why Dean had Sam’s gun or what had happened to his Colt.

One of the infected men at the front of the mob made a sudden charge toward them, and Dean fired two bullets into his head, dropping him instantly, just as another guy tried to follow suit.

Again, Dean took him out with a headshot, but there were at least twenty others behind him and Sam knew there couldn't be more than five or six bullets left in the Glock's clip.

"There's too many of them..." he pointed out, his brother not even flinching as he took out another of the approaching infectees.

He didn't argue with Sam's assessment of the situation though.

"Need to fall back," John croaked. "Somewhere defensible—"

The rest of his sentence was drowned out by a sudden crackle of gunfire, a spray of bullets cutting down the entire mob in the blink of an eye and a spray of blood and brain matter.

Bodies collapsed on top of one another like dominoes, the corpses continuing to judder from the impact of round after round from what sounded like a small army of automatic weapons.

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the gunfire stopped, and all that remained was an eerie silence and a pile of corpses littering the entrance to the alleyway.

"What the hell?" Dean lowered the Glock fractionally, before taking a step toward the mound of bodies.

"Dean, be careful," John managed to grind out, and Dean merely nodded once, before gingerly beginning to pick his way through the dead. "I mean it, boy!" his father added. "You get their blood on you that's it, game over!"

Dean glanced over his shoulder at him, his jaw clamping shut before he turned his attention back to the carnage around his feet.

"No blood," he acknowledged, swallowing, as Sam watched him nervously consider the rivers of the stuff slowly seeping into the brick and asphalt beneath his feet. "Ten-four."

"Dean..." Sam began.

"I got it, Sammy," Dean assured him, grinning weakly at his brother and father before very carefully picking his way through the rest of the fallen and cautiously peeking out into the street beyond.

A hail of bullets almost took his head off and he turned on his heel, vaulting over the pile of corpses and sprinting back down the alleyway to where Sam and John waited.

"Or not," he gasped out breathlessly. "Couple of humvees headed in our direction," he explained. "Soldiers with big guns, chasing people, gunning them down..."

"Clean-up squad," John informed them. "They kill anyone they find in a hot zone. Doesn't matter whether they're infected or not."

Dean grimaced. "How very thorough of them," he ground out sarcastically. "Where do I sign up?"

"They'll put a bullet in your brain if they catch you," John told him. "They're real shoot first, ask questions later kind of guys."

"You're really cheering me up here, Dad," Dean snarked. "Maybe we should get you some pom-poms."

"Dean, this is serious—" John began to chide him.

"Don't you think I know that?" Dean shot back before his father could finish his sentence. "I know that, Dad! But unless Sammy gets his mojo back real quick, I'm not seein' a whole lot of options here!"

"Dean," Sam murmured, the pounding in his head almost drowning out the pounding of the approaching music. "I *can't*—"

"You said that already, Sam," Dean snapped. "And I know you don't think you can do it. But you can. *Trust* me! You want us all to die here?"

Sam shook his head, slumping his shoulders.

"Then quit your whining and *get us the hell outta here!*"

More bullets strafed the entrance to the alleyway, the corpses jumping with the impact, and Dean suddenly grabbed Sam's biceps and shoved him against the wall, fingers gripping tightly.

"Sammy, you gotta do this! You gotta! It can't end like this!"

"Hey, you there!"

Sam glanced beyond his brother's shoulder to where a scruffily-dressed soldier was standing in the mouth of the alleyway, his assault rifle raised threateningly in front of him.

Dean didn't even turn around, just grabbed his dad and his brother and pretty much dragged them further into the shadows toward the rear of the alleyway, pulling them down behind the burnt out husk of a Buick which lay on its side just in front of them.

Gunfire immediately peppered the place where they'd just been standing, bullets pinging off the wall and slamming into the Buick, and Dean was staring at Sam, desperation in his eyes. "You can do this, man," he told him firmly. "I *know* you can. You just gotta believe in yourself a little."

"Hands up! Right *now!*" the soldier yelled at them, bringing his weapon to bear.

"Shoot first, ask questions later," John repeated. "Doesn't matter whether you're infected."

"Sammy, *please*...?"

Just gotta believe in yourself... Sam repeated Dean's words in his head, trying to concentrate, trying to feel it, the power he'd felt when Mia had been standing in front of him opening a doorway into another reality.

It's in you, Sam!

Yeah, sure it was.

Dammit!

When the little voice in Sam's head cursed at him, it sounded like Dean.

Okay. He could do this. He *had* to do this. Dean and Dad were counting on him.

And Mia *wasn't* going to win.

Concentrate, dammit!

He could feel it, that tiny tingling in his fingertips, working its way up into his hands, his wrists, even as the gunfire and the music and the shouting and the screaming drew closer and closer and another hail of bullets slammed into the Buick.

Dean grunted at his side, fingers tightening in Sam's jacket sleeve, his arm wrapped around his Dad's shoulders trying to keep him from keeling over. Sam's Glock was still clutched in his hand, and there was a determined expression on his face.

And blood.

There was blood on Dean's face. Fresh blood.

"Dean?"

"It's okay, Sammy," Dean murmured. "Little bit of shrapnel is all."

There was a gash in Dean's forehead, blood running down his face and into the ragged cut where Dad had sliced him with the razor. He looked pale. And kind of pissed.

A new determination swept over Sam and he gritted his teeth.

Gotta save Dean. Gotta save Dad...

Pins and needles shot up and down his arms and his head began to pound out a new tattoo, but he could feel it, Mia's power, what was left of Mia's power, thrumming through his veins, pounding in his ears, and suddenly he could feel it all, all of Mia's power, *Lucifer's* power; all of it, his to command.

One hand on Dean's shoulder, the other on John's, he took a short breath before ordering, "*Home!*" authoritatively, and he fleetingly wondered whether they made ruby slippers in his size as he felt the tug on his shoulders which signaled he was being dragged to another reality.

It felt different this time, though, almost as if he could feel the pull deep in his bones, and he couldn't help wondering whether it was because this time he was the one doing the dragging.

He heard his brother gasp at his side, felt his father's shoulders stiffen, and when he opened his eyes he was looking up at the vaulted roof of Stull church.

And then he wasn't looking at anything at all.

* * * *

"Sammy?"

Dean's voice was stuck at the end of that tunnel again.

Sam blinked, the hazy form of his brother's concerned face lazily resolving into something solid and tangible that Sam was pretty sure if he reached out a hand he'd be able to touch.

Except Dean seemed such a long way away and Sam's arms felt like lead weights.

"Dean?" he managed to murmur groggily, trying to figure out where the hell they were and why there was blood all over one side of Dean's face.

It was dark all around them, but there was light gathering from somewhere beyond Dean's shoulder, and when Sam looked up he saw a large gold crucifix and suddenly realized the ground was shaking underneath him.

"Sammy, you gotta help me out here, buddy," Dean was saying, and Sam was immediately transported back to all the times when he was a kid, when he was sick or hurt and Dean was always there to take care of him with that concerned voice and reassuring smile.

Dean wasn't smiling now.

"Sam, last time I could carry your humungous ass you were six, dude. I can't do this alone, man. You gotta help me get us out of here."

Sam blinked again.

It was like some horrendous case of déjà vu.

They were in a small office or study that, with a jolt, Sam realized he recognized. From before. From the last time they'd been trapped here. Last Halloween.

He remembered getting separated from Dean, from Dad, being chased by demons and taking refuge here, in a room at the back of the chancel of Stull church. He'd hidden, but they'd found him, and he'd honestly thought he was going to die. But then everything had stopped and he had inexplicably found himself somewhere else, the demons gone, the church gone. *Dean* gone.

But this time, Dean was still here, watching over him.

The thought oddly comforted him as he tried to get his bearings.

He was lying on a large wooden desk, which wasn't the most comfortable place he'd ever passed out. And Dean was there, hovering over him, while Dad was slumped

against the wooden door, and Sam wasn't sure whether he'd collapsed or whether he was trying to keep something out, because he could hear fists hammering on the other side. Something was out there, and there was shouting and screeching, and Dean's face was white and covered in blood and there was blood on the sleeve of his torn jacket.

"Dean...?" Sam was instantly alert, pawing at his brother's arm, trying to find the injury, the source of the blood.

"S okay, Sammy," Dean reassured him, gently patting his hand. "One of them tried to feel me up a little while we were dragging your ass in here, that's all. Last time *he'll* try it on with a Winchester!" He grinned brightly before suddenly shaking his head. "Dude, like, how much do you weigh anyway?" he asked. "I think I got a hernia."

"Them'?" Sam echoed suddenly, returning to the earlier part of Dean's narration. "Them' who?"

Dean shrugged. "Demons," he replied matter-of-factly. "Think they followed us out."

Sam frowned at that. "How? There weren't any demons in the reality we came from."

"I dunno, man," Dean said. "*You're* the smart one, remember? Maybe when a door opens they can sense it and just head straight for it. Like lemmings. Or something. Or maybe they just got pulled out of whatever reality they were in when we did. Whatever, man, right now we got bigger fish to fry."

"We...need to go," Sam ground out, managing to lever himself into a sitting position.

"Not arguing with you," Dean told him. "But that door right there?" He nodded in the direction of the one currently being shored up by their dad's shoulder. "That's the only way in or out, dude."

"Mmm," Sam said thoughtfully, turning his gaze to the wall opposite. "Maybe not."

If he could open doors into other realities...

His head was still hurting, but he was pretty sure he could do this.

He just had to believe in himself. Just like Dean had said.

And he did. He believed. He could do this. He *could*.

Holding up a hand, he concentrated.

It was just like back in those other realities, one universe shifting to open a doorway onto another. One reality behind, a different one in front. Open a window. Open a door. Shift the atoms sideways, just a little bit. Morphing realities, a morphing church. Not so different really.

The wall opposite shuddered and moved.

Dean sucked in a surprised breath. "Sammy? Did you just...?"

Sam gritted his teeth together, twisting his wrist as Mia had done when she'd been flipping through different realities as if she was perusing a travel brochure, trying to find the right universe to lead them into.

The wall moved some more, just as it had last Halloween, shifting sideways with the flick of Sam's fingers, the church twisting and changing as reality twisted around it.

And this time, Sam was the one doing the twisting.

A door appeared out of nowhere and Dean did a double take, glancing first at the door, then at Sam, then back at the door.

"Sam, how the hell did you...?"

Sam shrugged. "Easier than opening a door into a different universe," he said modestly, trying to swing his legs off the desk and get himself vertical.

The maneuver wasn't a complete disaster, but it wasn't a complete success either, Dean having to grab him for a second to stop him faceplanting onto the cold stone floor.

"You okay?" Dean asked, his attention skittering from Sam's face to the door behind their dad, which currently sounded as if a herd of elephants was trying to kick it open.

Sam nodded. "Get Dad," he suggested, steadying himself against the edge of the desk while Dean went to retrieve John, who was gradually slumping closer and closer to the ground.

"C'mon, old man," Dean murmured, pulling John up off the deck, his dad's arm thrown around his shoulder. "Time to go."

"Less of the 'old,' Junior," John grumbled, hanging onto Dean as his eldest tried to maneuver him toward the doorway Sam had conjured up out of thin air. "On a good day I can still kick your ass."

Dean shrugged. "Call me crazy, but I'm guessing today ain't a good day," he observed, pulling John in Sam's direction just as the door behind them suddenly exploded, showering them with splinters as a horde of demons began to ooze into the room.

"Crap," Sam offered, trying to help Dean get John toward their only escape route.

"Agreed," Dean said, gaze lingering on the rapidly approaching demons. "Man, I *hate* reruns!"

"This time, we get out of here *together*," Sam insisted, pulling his dad and his brother toward the doorway and bundling them through before turning back to the opening in the wall and squeezing his eyes shut.

Close.

When he opened his eyes again, the doorway was gone, and all Sam could hear was the distant howl of frustrated demons as they battered themselves against the other side of the wall.

“Way to go, Sammy!” Dean cheered, and Sam turned toward his brother, who was leading their dad out into the church’s chancel, a distant doorway at the far end of the nave showing a glimmer of tantalizing daylight. “C’mon, man. That’s our way out.”

Sam nodded, following his father and his brother down the nave as fast as the three of them could go, briefly glancing over his shoulder to make sure the pursuing demons hadn’t yet found an alternate route out of the room where Sam had trapped them.

Of course, it was never a good idea to try and run in one direction whilst looking in another, and Sam let out a startled yelp as he narrowly avoided slamming into Dean, who had stopped dead in the middle of the aisle.

“Well that’s just damn unsportsmanlike!” Dean growled, turning his gaze up toward the wall now completely blocking their path from floor to high vaulted ceiling.

“Where the hell did that come from?” Sam asked redundantly, surveying the solid stone barrier now completely transecting the church from one side to the other. “The Gate? The church itself?”

Dean shrugged. “Who knows, man?” he said. “But *something* sure as hell doesn’t want us getting out of here.”

“Lucifer,” John ground out softly. “He’s trying to keep us here.”

Dean squinted at his dad as if he were an escaped mental patient. “*Lucifer?* Dad, how the hell would Lucifer know where we are?”

Sam shuddered unconsciously. “You really think Lucifer sent Mia into the Gateway with us without being able to keep tabs on her?”

Dean paled visibly. “He’s *watching* us?”

“That’d be my guess,” Sam agreed. “Somehow. Why do you think Mia was pleading with him not to kill her back in that Hell reality? She wouldn’t have done that if she didn’t think he could hear her.”

“He saw she’d screwed the pooch trying to get us into Hell?” Dean offered. “So he sent the pooches to screw her back? Or, y’know, rip her to pieces?”

“Double bluff,” Sam agreed. “She lets us think we’ve foiled her Big Bad Plan to get us away from Stull at the equinox so she can pretend to have a fall out with Lucifer and lead us into the Gateway to get Dad...”

“When really it was her plan all along to lead us into Hell?”

Sam nodded. “And now that’s gone horribly wrong, I figure Lucifer’s doing the next best thing—trying to trap us here for another six months so’s he can take another crack at us. Or, at least, get rid of us for a while.”

“Over my dead body!” Dean burst out, setting his jaw. “Or. Well. You know.”

Sam shrugged. “Well, whatever’s trying to keep us here, we’re sure as hell not getting out this way,” he pointed out, slamming his hand uselessly against the newly-materialized wall.

“Can’t you make us another door?” Dean asked, just as a loud thud reverberated through the church and demons began to pour out of a room at the far end of the chancel, behind the pulpit.

“Uh—” Sam began. “Not before those demons get here.” He grabbed Dean’s sleeve, trying to pull him toward a hallway off to the left, but another door exploded and suddenly more demons were swarming toward them from that direction, the Winchesters once again forced back out into the central nave, where demons stalked them on every side.

“Dude, no way this many demons followed us out of the Gateway!” Dean yelled, raising Sam’s Glock uselessly in the direction of the nearest horde of demons, as more and more meatsuits swarmed from every doorway, every dark passage and hall.

There were dozens of them, crowding in from every direction, all of them intent on only one thing: killing Winchesters.

“Sammy...?” Dean said nervously, back to back with Sam and his dad as the three of them tried to cover every direction with only one functioning weapon between them.

They were trapped out in the open in the dead center of the church, and there was nowhere Sam could even try and open a doorway, demons on every side of them, blocking every exit, every escape route, every wall he might try to move.

They were completely surrounded, and even if Sam wanted to, he had no way of opening an exit they’d actually be able to get to without being ripped to shreds on the way.

Unless...

Closing his eyes, he tried to concentrate, tried to block out the shrieks of the advancing demons, the heavy, pained breathing of his father, Dean’s finger squeezing the trigger of the Glock again and again in a futile attempt to force the demons to back off.

Have to get us out of here...

And then he was falling, the ground having disappeared from beneath his feet.

“What the...?”

Dean wasn’t far away, and even though he sounded mightily pissed, he didn’t sound hurt.

After all, they’d not fallen that far.

“Basement,” Sam explained shortly, looking back up to where any daylight seeping in from the church above their heads was suddenly blocked out by the frustrated demons crowding into the space where the Winchesters had been standing, trying to figure out where the hell they’d gone.

Before any of them could get it into their heads to jump down after them, Sam conjured up a trapdoor which he hurriedly dragged over the hole he’d made in the church’s floor, stone steps connecting the basement where they now found themselves back up to where they’d just been standing, where all they could hear was the howl of angry demons and the thump of running feet.

“You didn’t think of putting the stairs in *before* you threw us down here on our asses?” Dean commented wryly, hauling himself to his feet before helping John do likewise.

“Always with the details,” Sam returned, sprinting up the stone steps and throwing a bolt across the trap door, just as some clever demon above them tried to tug it open, obviously having figured out the connection between the door suddenly appearing at his feet and his quarry’s disappearance.

Sam wasn’t sure whether it was fists or feet he could hear banging on the trapdoor, but either way, the demons above them didn’t sound too impressed with the Winchesters’ unexpected getaway.

“Just gimme a heads up next time you’re gonna magic the floor out from under me,” Dean chided him, rubbing absently at his elbow.

“It was down or up, Dean,” Sam informed him, eyes scanning their dark surroundings for a way out. “And I know how much you love heights.”

“Heights I can deal with,” Dean grunted. “It’s *flying* I’m not so keen on.” He stopped and looked at Sam for a second, tilting his head to the side uncertainly. “You’re not gonna tell me you can *fly* now are you, Sammy?”

Sam snorted. “I don’t think so, Dean. Not unless I bump into an angel any time soon and somehow absorb *their* power.”

“Or Superman,” Dean offered. “You could try reflecting Superman! But you start wearing tights, I’m disowning you.”

Sam sniggered as he pointed to an opening off to their right. “C’mon. We can get out through the catacombs.”

It was really dark in the tunnels beneath the church, and Sam would have given anything for a flashlight. Every now and then, they hit a dead end and had to retrace their steps, at which point Dean would bitch about Sam’s lousy sense of direction and John would threaten to bang their heads together.

Just like old times.

The sound of hollering voices above their heads and frantic footsteps thundering along the church’s stone hallways was pretty much a constant, but so far the demons

hadn't been able to find a way down into the basement, and Sam was pretty sure they should be getting to an exit some time soon.

Like *now*.

He stopped suddenly, Dean drawing up to his shoulder.

"You found a way out yet, Indy?" Dean asked, and Sam shushed him, holding out his hand as he felt an early morning draft coolly caress his fingers.

"As a matter of fact, I think I did," he replied smugly, jogging a few steps up ahead to where a tiny sliver of daylight speared down from the darkness above them.

"What *is* that?" Dean asked, following the direction of Sam's gaze.

"Storm doors," Sam replied, his smug demeanor faltering a little when he tripped and stumbled on a short flight of steps leading up to the exit.

Dean didn't even attempt to cover a snigger. "Aw, Sammy. You might be able to open doorways between alternate universes with the power of your mind, but you've still got two very big left feet."

Elbowing his brother out of the way, Dean climbed the moldering wooden stairs two at a time, finally reaching the top and shoving his shoulder against the storm doors.

Not a lot happened, and Dean paused, running his hands over the old metal before finally locating a deadbolt.

"It's rusted shut," he informed his brother, struggling to get the bolt to slide open. "Don't suppose your superpowers run to magicking a can of WD-40 out of your ass, do they Superboy?"

Sam scowled at him, before mounting the stairs himself, shooing Dean out of the way, and making his own attempt at shifting the deadbolt.

"Boys?" John suddenly called from below them, looking nervously over his shoulder. "I think those demons finally figured out how to get down here..."

Sam's gaze followed his father's, the distant sounds of shouting and cursing and the thumping of approaching feet gradually becoming louder and louder as the seconds ticked by.

Dean was taking another shot at the deadbolt, grimacing in determination.

"Dean?"

"Gimme a sec."

Finally, his face screwed up with the effort, Dean slammed his hand against the deadbolt, the metal screeching as at last he managed to shove it to one side, his shoulder connecting with metal as the storm doors gave and early morning daylight flooded the catacombs beneath.

“Yahtzee!” both Dean and Sam managed to yell in unison, and John just shook his head at them tiredly.

“You think you boys finally got a handle on this lame-ass rescue?” he asked, but there was a sparkle in his one good eye that Sam hadn’t seen there since they’d pulled him down off of Yellow-Eyed Dean’s torture rack.

“We came, we saw, we kicked Stull church’s ass,” Dean informed him haughtily, jumping down the steps and grabbing hold of his dad’s arm. “Now come on, *old man*,” he added. “You wanna go home or you wanna stand here bitchin’ all day?”

John never got the chance to reply, as a dozen very pissed-off looking demons suddenly burst into the chamber, Dean raising Sam’s Glock and letting rip the last couple of bullets before shoving his dad up toward his brother.

Sam reached out and grabbed John’s arm, pulling him up and out of the storm cellar, and when he was sure his dad was clear, he dived back in for his brother, grabbing hold of Dean’s collar and pulling him up the last few stairs until his boots cleared the opening and the two of them slammed the storm doors shut right in the approaching demons’ ugly faces.

“Get out of *that* one, hellbitches!” Dean hollered, just as the doors banged back open and a demon’s head appeared in the opening.

“Uh, Dean—” Sam began.

But Dean was already on it, slamming his foot into the demon’s face before diving for a crumbling pile of rock nearby which he summarily proceeded to dump on the storm doors, effectively sealing them shut.

Sam shuddered and tried not to consider the fact that what his brother may have just used to trap the demons in the storm cellar looked horribly like the half-crumbled remains of grave markers, instead grabbing some more chunks of granite and marble and piling them on top of the storm doors for good measure.

Dean collapsed back onto the damp grass, grinning from ear to ear. “Now what was that you were saying about this being a lame-ass rescue, Pops?” he asked his dad.

John shook his head and rolled his good eye, before his knees apparently decided enough was enough and chose that moment to finally buckle out from under him.

Sam caught him before he could fall, somehow managing to keep him upright.

“Maybe we should—”

Go, he was going to say, but his point was made for him as the church suddenly began to shudder, the entire structure slowly starting to fizzle out of existence in increments, first a brick here, a brick there, then a roof tile, a window, as piece by piece Stull church once again began to phase in and out of reality, one second there, the next not, and Dean was on his feet again, grabbing John’s free arm and helping Sam steer him away from the disappearing structure.

“Aw, man,” Dean breathed, as the three of them hauled ass over the grassy area between the church and the rest of the churchyard. “If I never see another church the rest of my life it’ll be too soon.”

Finally, they came to a halt on the pathway where Dean had parked the Impala what seemed like centuries ago, the three of them leaning against her comfortingly solid frame as they watched Stull church gradually wink out of existence for another seven months.

Sam drew in a short breath, birdsong oddly the only thing he could hear in the suddenly silent cemetery.

“We need to find a way to stop this happening,” he pronounced at length, unable to tear his gaze away from the patch of grass where just a few moments ago Stull church had stood. “We need to find a way to destroy this Gateway so that Lucifer can’t try and get rid of any more of his enemies this way. Or. Y’know. Us.”

“Well, good luck with that, Sammy,” Dean returned, rubbing a hand across his jaw. “This thing’s been doing this for centuries. You think anything short of a nuke goin’ off’s gonna put a dent in its mojo?”

Sam shrugged. “Then maybe we need to get a nuke.”

For a second, Dean looked as if he wasn’t sure whether Sam was serious. Then his blood-soaked face broke into a slow grin. “Good one, Sam,” he said. “Real funny.”

Sam nodded, smiling weakly. Yeah. *Real* funny...

For several minutes, they stood staring at the place where, moments earlier, Stull church had fizzled out of existence, just to check the thing was really gone and no demons were likely to come crawling out into the world.

But nothing changed, except the sky became a little lighter, golds and greens chasing away the russets and the reds of an ominous late March sunrise.

“Red sky at morning...” Dean muttered, and Sam wouldn’t have been at all surprised if the color of the sky really was someone trying to warn them about something.

“We should go,” Sam said finally, his gaze cutting to his father, who was leaning heavily against the Impala’s rear passenger door. “Nothing else is coming out. And we need to get Dad someplace safe for a while. Bobby’s maybe?”

An odd little smile toyed with Dean’s lips for a second, and he shook his head slowly. “No,” he said softly. “I’ve got a better idea.”

Lynchburg, TN

John had slept the sleep of the dead pretty much the whole journey from Stull to Lynchburg. He didn’t even wake when Sam fielded a call from Addie, who had apparently sensed the shift in reality when the church returned to wherever it went three-hundred and sixty-three days out of the year, and had wondered whether the Winchesters had gone with it.

Not that she was concerned about them in any way.

Sam had thought it was sweet of her to call, and Dean had had to remind his sap of a brother that she was a demon. Sure, she was a hot demon. But she was still a demon.

“A demon who called to check we were okay,” Sam had returned with a small smile.

Glancing in the rearview at his might-as-well-be-comatose father, Dean sighed long and deep, causing Sam to shoot a concerned look at him, which Dean returned with a contented smile.

“We got him out, Sammy,” he said quietly.

Sam nodded. “That we did,” he replied, and it was the happiest Dean remembered seeing his brother in a while.

Sam might have some funny ideas about family sometimes, but he sure seemed glad to have their dad unconscious in the backseat.

Dean almost felt guilty about waking him, but they were here, and he wouldn't want his dad to sleep through the surprise reunion Dean had planned.

He pulled the Impala to a gentle stop outside of Bonnie's house and once again glanced into the rearview.

They'd not talked about it. Not any of it. Not Stull, not Hell, not the time John had been gone. Not the yellow-eyed versions of Sam and Dean, the torture John had endured, the things he'd seen. The horrors he'd suffered. None of it. John had just kind of rolled himself up into a ball and fallen asleep on the Impala's backseat, his boys in front of him, keeping watch.

Dean wondered whether John had slept at all the whole five months he'd been gone. Judging by the realities Dean had seen whilst on the Other Side, he probably hadn't. And he was pretty sure if he had been the one who had had to survive any length of time in those Bizarro Worlds he'd seen today, he wouldn't have slept either.

He'd kept checking the mirror all the way here, but there had been no signs of life in the backseat, and he and Sam had spent the whole trip talking in whispers about pretty much nothing, as Sam seemed about as willing to share as his father right now.

Two peas in a pod, Dean found himself thinking.

Except...what Sam had done back there...

He shuddered just a little bit.

It wasn't as if his baby brother hadn't channeled Lucifer before. He'd done it at the Hellgate in Leicester, right? To save Dean's ass? Again. But this time, something had been different. The way Sam had controlled the Gateway, controlled the church, without Lucifer even being present... well it was downright creepy, that's what it was,

and although Dean had been the one to convince Sam he could do it, when it came right down to it, Sam's abilities still made Dean a little bit uncomfortable.

Rubbing the heel of one hand into his tired eyes, he switched off the engine with the other, and John grunted, the sudden change in sound or motion causing him to open his eyes very slowly.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Dean greeted him sardonically, but John didn't reply, merely levered himself upright and blinked.

And blinked some more.

"Dean...?" he said slowly, as the fog in his brain seemed to dissipate and he gradually began to realize where he was. "What did you do?"

Dean grinned a little sheepishly at him. "Maybe I'm an old romantic," he offered with a shrug.

"Or maybe you have a concussion," Sam returned, as Bonnie appeared at her living room window.

She looked a little nervous, but she smiled and waved at them, and Dean waved back, eternally grateful he'd had the wherewithal to call her first. Might have been a little too much for her if they'd just shown up with her boyfriend—boyfriend, and Dean tried not to snigger—in the back of the Impala.

Glancing into the backseat, Dean wasn't sure what to make of the expression on his dad's face, a complete mask of nothing glazing his features as he gazed through the window into the house.

And Dean began to wonder whether maybe he'd made a mistake coming here.

"Somethin' you wanna tell us, Dad?" he asked instead, keeping his voice neutral and completely devoid of any kind of accusation.

John blinked again.

His swollen eye seemed a little better, and Dean could see a tiny fraction of the iris, dark and conflicted.

"How..." John murmured distractedly. "How did you...?"

"She called us," Sam explained gently. "A demon set a trap for us in her basement. Enchanted all your old photos. She didn't know what to do or who to call, and when she couldn't get a hold of you, she, uh, she called Dean."

"You gave her my number," Dean added, by way of mitigation.

John didn't say anything, just exhaled long and hard.

"You should have told us, Dad," Sam said softly.

John didn't reply for the longest time, didn't even acknowledge Sam had spoken at first.

Finally he sighed heavily, and dipped his head slightly in something that might have been a nod.

"You're right," he said finally, his eyes still fixed on the woman standing in the window. "I just couldn't—couldn't face—couldn't think about losing everything. Again. If I lost you boys and lost her too I just...I just don't think I could go through that again."

"We could have had a home here," Sam continued, his voice still soft and devoid of any kind of malice or anger. "Could have had a family."

"We had a family, Sammy," John pointed out.

"You know what I mean, Dad."

John nodded again. "Yeah. Yeah, I do, son. But the thought of leaving you boys here—leaving you anywhere—any longer than a couple weeks... I couldn't do that. And it would have been longer, you know it would." His gaze flicked briefly to his sons, both of whom were gazing at him, expressions deliberately neutral. "I never even left you with Bobby or Jim longer than a couple weeks at a time, right? Couldn't stand it. Couldn't stand to be away from you any longer."

Dean swallowed. "Dad..."

"And you might have been safe here, Sam," John continued. "You might have been happy. But if anything—Haris, anything—had found you here... I'd have lost everything. I couldn't. I couldn't risk it. Not for you, not for Bonnie. And she asked. Boy, did she ask. Asked about you two all the time. Begged me to bring you here. But I—I just—I just couldn't."

"We get it, Dad," Dean reassured him.

"No, son, I don't think you do," John said. "You remember what you were like at fifteen, Dean? You think you'd have been happy if I'd dumped you and Sammy here? With this woman you didn't even know? A replacement for your mom?"

Dean stiffened. "She never would have replaced Mom."

"I know that, Dean. You know that. Now. But that's what you would have thought I was trying to do. At that age. You were a good boy, Dean, but you were a teenager. And I know what it would have done to you. And Sam..." He drifted off, and Dean wasn't even sure he was seeing either of them anymore, his eyes fixed on Bonnie, who was gazing right on back at him. "Sam, you never knew your mom, and I didn't... I couldn't let anyone take her place. Not when you were that age. It—it wouldn't have been right. Mary—Mary's memory meant everything to me and I couldn't stand the thought of someone else—even Bonnie—taking Mary's place in yours."

"Dad, that wouldn't have happened," Sam put in quietly.

John shrugged, finally looking away from the window, at his hands twisting together between his knees. “Yes it would, son. You don’t remember your mom, and that’s not your fault, not Bonnie’s fault, and I know Bonnie would have been a good mother to you. But I didn’t want you to lose what little you had of Mary. And what little you had of Mary you got secondhand—from Dean. If I’d brought you here when you were a kid, the memories Dean passed on to you of your mom would have faded in comparison to the memories of your own you would have made here.”

Sam sighed. “Can’t always live in the past, Dad.”

“I know that, son. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t give you this life. Maybe I was selfish. Maybe I wasn’t thinking about what would have been best for the two of you. I don’t know.” He looked up. Looked at the house. At the woman in the window. “I just couldn’t leave you.”

Dean glanced back at the house at the sound of a door opening, and Bonnie was heading toward them, looking more than a little hesitant.

He took a breath. “Come on, old man,” he said, deliberately trying to lighten the tone of his voice. “The girlfriend’s waiting for you.”

John snorted wryly at that, wiping the cuff of his jacket against his good eye. “Doesn’t sound quite right, does it?” he admitted, actually allowing Dean to help him out of the car. The way he winced and gritted his teeth when he tried to straighten up spoke volumes, and Dean made a mental note to check his dad over for broken ribs later on.

Particularly as Bonnie might well have cracked another couple when she suddenly darted for him and wrapped her arms about his midsection like she was scared he’d disappear again if she let go.

“Is it really you?” she asked, looking up into John’s eyes as her own began to well with tears.

“I’ve been asking myself that same question for five months, baby,” John murmured, stroking her hair. “If you figure out the answer, let me know.”

Reynolds house
Lynchburg, TN

Bonnie’s kitchen had changed very little since the last time they were here, Dean observed. Although having your home invaded by demons a couple of times in as many weeks had certainly had some effect. Like the neat lines of salt across the thresholds that were now three times as wide and not nearly as tidy. And there were some sigils on the doors even Dean didn’t recognize, which he figured were probably parting gifts from Bobby.

Which didn’t really explain how Mia’s henchman had gotten in yesterday.

Dean would have asked, but kept getting distracted by the sight of his dad and Bonnie quietly holding hands at the kitchen table, because damn if that wasn’t the weirdest thing he’d ever seen.

Sure, John had had lady friends while Dean was growing up. That bitch teacher of Sam's for one. Ms. Lyle. Liliith. Whatever the hell her name was.

Yeah, and look how well that ended.

Not that he had any such misgivings about Bonnie.

First thing she'd done when she gotten him into the house was drag him into the bathroom, clean the mess off his face and try to patch him up a little bit.

She had really soft hands.

Which lead Dean back to staring at them, entwined in his father's.

If Sam was as uncomfortable as Dean was with their dad's public display of affection, then he sure wasn't showing it, completely failing to hide a sappy smile behind his coffee cup.

Bonnie had insisted on feeding them as soon as she'd cleaned Dean up a little. After she'd stood hugging their dad for what felt like six months on the driveway, that is. At first she'd offered them cookies and coffee, then finally hit upon pie, which at least distracted Dean for a couple of minutes from the way she was holding his dad's hand.

It was good pie too. Which could only be another point in her favor, as far as Dean was concerned.

She and John didn't seem to be talking a whole lot though, and Dean wasn't sure whether he and Sam should just book and leave them to it, but when he'd made some comment about dragging Sam outside to help him give the Impala a once-over, his dad had insisted they stay.

Of course, the old man hadn't said much to Dean and Sam either, still skittish and wary and spooked by everything, from the whistle of Bonnie's kettle to a neighbor mowing his lawn. Even the light from Bonnie's fridge made him wince.

On top of that, he kept stealing glances at his boys when he thought they weren't looking, as if he couldn't quite believe they were really here. And it hadn't escaped Dean's notice that whenever John did say something to them, it seemed to be to ask them a question only they would know the answer to.

"Have you seen Jim Murphy while I've been gone?"

"No, Dad, he died four years ago."

"I feel like I just staked a whole nest of vampires."

"You cut their heads off, Dad."

"I heard Bobby got himself a cat."

Which of course was just patently ridiculous and caused Dean to spit cherry pie halfway across the kitchen table.

If Dean didn't know any better, he'd have said his dad was testing them. Making sure they were who they claimed to be. Who he thought they were. Who he hoped they were.

"Dean, let that be you. Please let that be you."

Dean wasn't sure he'd ever forget the desperate look on his father's face.

Neither was he sure what more he and Sam could do to convince their dad it was really them.

Both he and Sam had tried to broach the subject of Stull with him, but he wouldn't talk about it. Or couldn't. He'd just choked up when they asked, choked up and shaken his head and whispered, "The things I saw... The things I saw you boys do... The things they did to you. I can't..." And that had been all he'd managed to say on the matter.

And if he was totally honest, Dean was kind of relieved.

Not that he didn't want to hear it.

But honestly? Part of him didn't want to hear it.

So they'd been sitting around Bonnie's kitchen table for a while, with only the sounds of the birds in the garden and the hum of the fridge and the soft rasp of John's thumb across the back of Bonnie's hand to break the silence, when Sam finally asked, "You think that was really Hell, Dad? Where Mia ended up?"

John continued to study his and Bonnie's entwined fingers, his eyes distant for a while, before he slowly nodded. "Yes, son," he replied at length. "That was really Hell."

"You're sure?" Sam asked hesitantly, and John merely nodded one more time.

"I'm sure."

He didn't elaborate, and Sam pressed on. "How long were you there?"

John shrugged. "Hard to tell. Time passes differently there." He blinked and swallowed and took a breath before continuing. "Seemed like years. Years, maybe."

"Years?" Sam echoed softly.

John made no response, just continued to rub his thumb in slow circles across the back of Bonnie's hand.

"How...How'd you get out?"

The movement of John's thumb faltered for a second, before slowly resuming. "You boys came for me."

Sam opened his mouth, but the question Dean was pretty sure he wanted to ask didn't make it out.

“It wasn’t really us, though?” Dean asked instead.

John’s gaze flicked up to his eldest’s just for a second. “No. Not really you.”

“That yellow-eyed asshat I ventilated?”

John sighed, before nodding.

“And his yellow-eyed torture buddy?”

John inclined his head slightly, as if for a second he couldn’t bear to look at either one of his sons. And then he shifted in his seat, taking a deep breath and forcing a slight smile onto his battered and bruised lips. “It doesn’t matter anymore,” he said quietly. “I’m home now. With my boys.”

And then he looked up, first at Dean and then at Sam, before repeating, “My boys,” and Dean wasn’t sure what he meant.

Outside the Reynolds house,
Lynchburg, TN

Luciano Ferinacci gazed out of the window of his town car, absently contemplating the ordinary-looking house across the street and the antique Chevrolet parked conspicuously outside.

This was a nice street. Uniform houses disappearing off into the distance in an orderly line. Nicely-kept lawns. Trees lining the road, leaves bursting out green in the spring sunshine. Kids playing in the yards, riding their bikes up and down the sidewalk. Dogs barking and birds singing.

Lucifer sighed.

He could lay this entire town to waste with a twitch of his finger.

If he felt like it.

For a second he turned his attention to the back of his driver’s head. His vessel’s driver’s head. He wondered if the pudgy, middle-aged Italian-American sitting up front had any idea who was really sitting in the backseat. Chauffeuring a mobster around the country might cause some men to re-evaluate their career choices. Driving for the Devil? Lucifer almost wanted to let him in on the secret, just to see the expression on his face.

Probably would have been almost as horrified as that half-demon skank seemed to be when Lucifer sent his puppies to chow down on her insides.

He didn’t know why she’d been so surprised. He was Lucifer after all. Not exactly known for his honest and forgiving nature.

And she’d failed him.

Spectacularly.

He was perhaps a little naive to have believed she could really lead the Winchesters to Hell for him.

“I’ll pretend to double-cross you,” she’d said, those big brown eyes wide and pleading and so very desperate to please. “I’ll pretend I’m helping them out of self-preservation, and because I have no loyalty to you. I’ll pretend and they’ll believe me because I’m a damn good actress who’s fooled them before, and because they’re idiots who’ll believe any damn thing I want them to believe. They’ll believe I’ve double-crossed you because that’s what I did to them.”

It was true. She was persuasive. And believable. And he might have fallen for it. If he’d been an idiot like the Winchesters.

And yet it had been the Winchesters who had betrayed Mia.

And it was the Winchesters who still eluded the Devil.

He’d sent demons to meet them when they’d returned to the church, of course. But it had been a half-hearted last ditch attempt to force them back into the Gateway, to try and salvage victory from the jaws of defeat. He hadn’t really expected his minions to succeed. Not where Mia had failed.

If things with the half-demon had worked out the way they were supposed to, the Winchesters would be rotting in Hell by now.

John had been there for a while. Found his way to Hell by accident, bouncing around from one reality to another. But Lucifer had been unable to keep him there. The Universe—or whatever—didn’t seem too happy that an innocent man should find himself condemned to the Pit without even having died.

Lucifer would have to make sure that didn’t happen again.

Next time John Winchester found his way to Hell, he would ensure he and his pain in the ass sons were most definitely dead. And most definitely Damned.

He was looking forward to their reunion with Mia.

He hoped the bitch enjoyed her Eternity as a hellhound’s chew toy. She certainly wouldn’t be opening any more dimensional doorways if he had anything to say about it.

He’d been a fool to trust Mia with his powers.

A fool who had, it seemed, put all his money on the wrong horse.

Sam Winchester could have become a worthy protégé. The way he had managed to navigate between realities; alter the structure of Stull church.

Lucifer had recognized early on that Sam’s gift—his mirroring ability—had great potential. He just hadn’t realized there was so much more to it than that. The boy’s powers were formidable. It had just taken Lucifer some time to see it.

And he was beginning to suspect Sam was only just starting to see it, too. Now that he was able to control it a little better.

Lucifer had that irritating Norse reaper to thank, in part, for that.

But she'd get what was coming to her.

They all would.

It would be a shame when Lucifer had to kill Sam Winchester. A shame and a waste of talent.

John's youngest son was finally becoming what he was always meant to be: so much more than just a mirror, so much more than just a reflection of other people's powers and abilities. Soon he would realize the true extent of his control over those powers he leeches from others.

He could become invincible.

He could become a god.

If Sam could be turned, it might be worth the effort. But, in the end, Lucifer knew he was too much like his father and his brother. Sam Winchester was every bit as much of a boy scout as John and Dean. He would never agree to join Lucifer's campaign.

And besides. Lucifer had other plans for Sam Winchester.

He had other plans for them all.

The Winchesters were a problem; a problem that Lucifer would eventually have to resolve. Eliminate.

Erase from existence.

On earth, anyway.

There was always room for the Winchesters Downstairs.

Separately, they were mildly annoying. Together, they could become dangerous. And Lucifer's plans were too far along to risk being derailed by a revenge-obsessed hunter, a smart-mouthed Guardian and Haris' favorite little prodigy.

Unfortunately, he couldn't kill all of them. Not right away anyway.

He needed one of them.

Didn't matter which.

But he needed one.

And while it would have been so much easier to merely pluck one of them out of Hell—which would have been the case had that half-demon screw-up done her job properly—he supposed he could make do.

Wherever they went, he'd find them.

And then one of them would finally become useful.

The End