

Season Four
Episode One: Refraction
By irismay42

Dean had nowhere to go.

No door, no magic escape route.

And no clue what had happened to Sam and John. Were they still trapped, like Dean, in the ever-changing maze Stull church had become? Were they fighting for their lives just like he was, desperate to find a way out that really didn't want to be found?

For the fiftieth time, Dean scanned the room where he found himself cornered, hoping against hope that somehow the church had shifted again, that another door had appeared out of nowhere and he could get the hell out of Dodge.

And Winchester luck was going to change now all of a sudden?

There was only one way in or out of here, and that was through the door opposite, which right now was completely blocked by the hordes of demons literally pouring into the small chamber, eyes narrowed and nostrils flared as they smelled the sweet scent of Winchester blood.

No way was he getting out that way.

Dean didn't know where all these demons were coming from, but he was starting to get the impression that maybe the legends were true and Stull cemetery really *did* sit atop one of the seven gateways to Hell. He certainly hadn't seen Mia in the company of any demon army. So where else could they have come from? Express elevator from the Underworld? It seemed a lot more plausible than it had an hour ago.

And if that were the case, if these demons really *were* tasting free air for the first time in years, maybe even centuries, then it was probably a safe bet they were looking to have themselves one hell of a good time.

And right now Dean figured he pretty much looked like the good time to be had by all.

He swallowed, kind of wishing Sam had his back, but kind of glad he didn't, doing his level best to convince himself that his kid brother was off somewhere safe with Dad and it was only Dean set to become a demon army's chew toy.

Okay, so there was no way out. Fine. But that didn't mean Dean couldn't go down swinging.

Reaffirming his grip on his favorite .45, his left hand gently grazing the outline of the demon-killing feather still tucked into his jacket pocket, Dean squared his shoulders, set his jaw and took a step toward the mass of approaching demons.

"Alright boys... come and get it!"

Although he knew bullets wouldn't have much effect against this enemy, Dean began firing his Colt randomly into the throng, hoping at least to slow a few of the bastards down.

When the clip clicked on empty and the Hellish horde still kept coming, he took a step back, his shoulders hitting the cold stone wall behind him as the demons continued to surge in his direction.

Hand to hand then. Okay.

He dug in his pocket for the feather, fingers closing around the weeping remnant, just as an odd sensation started to tingle up his spine. Before he knew what was happening, something unseen seemed to grip him by the shoulders and tug him forcibly backwards.

Thrown off balance by the unexpected—and, in Dean's defense, invisible—assault, he found himself falling, back, back *through* the wall behind him, all sense of

up and down twisted and distorted as bright light seared his retinas and the howls of a hundred outraged demons lodged in his ears.

And then there was silence.

He hit the ground with a thump, still able to see the demons and the room in which he'd been trapped, but now it was as if he was looking at it down a long dark tunnel, the church receding further and further away into the distance as light seeped into the edges of his vision and bleached the entire scene out to nothing.

Blinking hard, he sat up.

He was on his ass in the cemetery, the church gone, and a bright cheery sun shining down from a perfect, clear azure sky.

What the hell?

Carefully, he attempted to clamber to his feet, his hand ghosting over his cracked ribs as he endeavored to favor his injured side and stole himself for the pain he knew was sure to follow.

But it didn't.

There was nothing. No bone-jarring, breath-stealing spike of agony so intense it made his eyes water. Not even a twinge or a dull ache.

He straightened a little uncertainly.

Okay. So far, so freakishly weird.

Remembering the gash on his arm from where a piece of exploding gravestone had nicked him, he twisted to examine the injured limb, only to discover there was nothing there, not even a tear in his jacket.

While Dean wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, he knew his body spontaneously healing itself wasn't exactly normal.

But first things first. He could figure out his miraculous recovery later. Right now he had other priorities. Namely Sam. And Dad. And not forgetting the Impala. And getting all four of them the hell out of this creepy ass cemetery before it changed its mind and decided to trap them here forever.

Thing was, Dean couldn't help feeling there was something off about the cemetery in which he was now standing, something different, something that tickled at the back of his subconscious, made him look around himself and think, "Huh."

When Dean had gone into the church with Sammy and their dad, it had been just after midnight, Halloween giving out to All Saints Day, November 1st. It had been a cold, clear Kansas winter's night, frost sparkling on the pathways and the service road that bisected the old cemetery.

Dean once again looked up at the cloudless blue sky. It was sunny and it was warm, and from the position of the sun it was somewhere around midday. There was no sign of Sam, no sign of John, no sign of the Impala. Hell, there wasn't even any sign of the service road where Dean had parked the old Chevy back when the world made some kind of sense.

He turned slowly on the spot, trying to picture the old Stull cemetery in daylight and comparing it to the place he now found himself. The church was gone, that was a given. So was the road, and with it the Impala. Glancing to his left, he expected to see the little hill and the tree where Mia had held his father prisoner, the only slope in the Kansas-flat boneyard.

But the tree was gone, along with the hill and Mia's lifeless body.

Instead, he found himself atop a steep slope, the ground falling away in a series of gently rolling dips and rises leading down to the cemetery gates and beyond that a vista of red roofs and softly swaying palm trees.

And Dean remembered.

He remembered this cemetery. He remembered that grave marker over there, the angel who looked like a cross between Madonna and Cher. He remembered that low, black metal fence surrounding a small family plot, and that crypt with the name "Holloway" etched into the stone.

He remembered all of this because he'd been here before.

At Jessica's funeral.

With a jolt, Dean realized he wasn't in Kansas anymore. He was in Palo Alto.
Stanford.

He was looking out over Stanford University. It had only been a few weeks since Dean was last here with Sam, after all, when the two of them had met up with Zach Warren.

So how the hell did *that* happen? How had he gotten almost two thousand miles from Kansas to California without passing go or collecting two hundred dollars?

Dean looked up at the sky again, at the palm trees. At the California sunshine. *I can't be here*, he told himself. *I can't. I'm dreaming. Or stoned. Or dreaming and stoned...*

Before he'd even had time to process the impossibility of his situation, the distant sound of voices drifted in his direction, causing his heart rate to pick up a little.

Craning his neck in the direction of the sound, he spotted a little knot of people dressed in black standing around an open grave. A funeral was in progress, and as he made his way hesitantly toward them, he gradually began to realize that not only did he recognize the cemetery in which he unaccountably found himself, but he also recognized the plot where this group of mourners were gathered: the wooden bench perched on the side of that little winding path; the trees with the wind chimes gently singing through their branches.

This was where Jessica was buried.

An uncomfortable chill spread through him then, and he almost turned away, afraid of what he might see should he get any closer.

But his feet appeared to be working independently of his brain, and he continued onward, nervously scanning the group of mourners for one particular face.

But this time, Sam wasn't here, looking fragile and breakable and determined and angry and so much like his dad it had made Dean's head spin.

Instead, Dean's eyes lit on a small group of twentysomethings huddled together just to the left of the open grave.

Rebecca Warren's face was half-hidden in a tissue, her skin pale and waxy and her eyes red-rimmed. Next to her, her brother Zach was holding the hand of a pretty redhead who it took Dean a second to identify without the ball cap and dirty jeans. Daisy Duffield. Cousin Daisy. Earthquake Girl.

Dean was actually surprised to discover he was pleased to see the annoying little archeologist, and his first instinct was to go over to her and see how she'd been since nearly dropping Mount Diablo on his head.

But before he could make a move toward his cousin he had to stop dead in his tracks, his attention wholly consumed by the tall blonde quietly crying at the center of the group, her head resting on the shoulder of an older lady who seemed vaguely familiar.

For a second Dean thought he was hallucinating. He blinked hard, but when he opened his eyes again the blonde was still there.

Jessica, whole and alive and beautiful and a little older than Dean remembered her.

And she was holding a baby.

For some reason, Dean's brain decided it couldn't process that image, Jessica alive and well with a baby in her arms, and instead he found himself focusing on the woman standing next to her. It took him a second to place her, the memory resurfacing reluctantly: she was Jessica's mom. Dean remembered speaking to her at the funeral. Jessica's funeral. Jessica who was standing there whole and unharmed with a baby in her arms.

It was too much for Dean, all of this. Jessica, Palo Alto. His spontaneously traveling two thousand miles without him actually going anywhere.

He had to get out of here.

That was the only course of action that made any sense to him right now.

He *really* had to get out of here.

He turned to leave as quickly as his jellified legs would carry him, but slowed as the pastor's baritone voice rose above the quiet sobbing and the grief-filled hush of the graveside.

"And so we commit Samuel's body to the ground..."

Dean stopped. Everything stopped. The world stopped, the birds stopped; for all Dean knew the grass stopped growing beneath his feet.

Samuel...

No. No way. No freakin' way. This is not happening.

It took Dean's legs a couple of seconds to decide whether to run like hell or head back over to the funeral party.

Taking a deep breath, he turned back to the gathered mourners, his face set into a grimace and his hands balled into fists at his sides. *This is not happening*, he told himself over and over as he strode purposefully toward the somber group, determination in every step. Finally drawing up behind them, his eyes lit on the marble headstone next to the freshly dug grave and his breath hitched in his chest.

SAMUEL JAMES WINCHESTER

2nd May 1983 – 2nd November 2009

Loved eternally

Dean's vision began to swim, and his legs threatened to buckle right out from under him as one by one the mourners began to file past the hole in the ground, each gathering a handful of dirt from the pile by the side of the grave and tossing it onto the casket; the casket holding Dean's brother. The casket holding Dean's *dead* brother.

The casket holding *Sam*.

And then it was Jessica's turn, and she stood there, utterly composed and dignified, silent tears slipping down her face as she threw a single red rose into the ground.

"Why, Sam?" she whispered, before turning away, her mother's arms enveloping her shoulders as the tears turned into sobs.

Dean couldn't do this. He couldn't. He couldn't bury his brother.

It's all a dream, he told himself, squeezing his eyes tightly shut and shaking his head in fierce denial. *It's just a dream. C'mon Dorothy, click your friggin' heels together already—I need to get back to Kansas!*

When he opened his eyes and the scene before him hadn't changed, he gritted his teeth and virtually growled in frustration, determined to think of an explanation for this insanity.

Okay, if it's not a dream, maybe it's an hallucination, he speculated. *Or a hex. Or a million other supernatural-related effed-up piles of crap that could be messing with my head...*

Whatever it was he wanted it to stop.

Someone make it stop! Now, dammit!

"Do...do I know you?"

Jessica was standing right in front of him.

Dean's heart leapt into his throat and he almost choked on his own name. "Dean," he managed to blurt out. "I'm...I'm Dean."

Jessica inclined her head slightly to one side, a tiny line forming between her eyebrows. "Dean, Sam's brother Dean?" the girl asked, her red-rimmed blue eyes lighting up hopefully.

Dean nodded slightly. "Yeah, I'm... yeah."

Jessica's expression broke a little and she looked as if she might start to cry again. "We tried so hard to find you after Sam's—after the accident."

Dean blinked. "It was—it was an accident?"

"A fire," Jess confirmed. "In the baby's nursery." A sad smile flitted across her face as she presented the child in her arms to Dean. "This is Mary Ellen."

Dean was still trying to get his head around the fact that Sam had apparently died in a nursery fire, so suddenly finding himself in a staring contest with a gurgling rugrat came as something of a shock. She was a cute little thing too, with masses of curly blonde hair and almond-shaped hazel eyes. *Sam's eyes.*

"So—so—" Dean very rarely found himself lost for words with women, but as the baby—*Sam's baby*—happily gazed up at him out of her daddy's eyes, Dean realized the chances of him managing to string together any kind of coherent sentence were somewhat remote. "So—she's how old?" he finally managed to stammer, his voice sounding strangled and way too high pitched.

"Six months," Jess replied wistfully.

"Yeah. Figures." Dean rubbed at the spot between his eyebrows, a headache starting to form behind his eyes. "And—and you said it was a nursery fire?"

"I barely got her out," Jess told him, stroking one finger down the little girl's pink cheek. "I heard Sam yelling, went in there and—and found the place was on fire and Sam—Sam was—"

She broke down into quiet, shuddering breaths, and Dean placed what he hoped was a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"But you saved the baby," he pointed out softly.

Jess nodded. "Yeah. Mary and I got out."

"Mary Ellen," Dean continued in an attempt to divert Jess's attention from the painful memory of what had happened to the love of her life. "That's a pretty name."

Jess somehow managed to find a watery smile. "Sam's idea," she told him sadly, her teary eyes sparkling in the incongruous sunshine. "After your mom and your stepmom."

Dean blinked at her. "Our—our *what* now?"

If Dean hadn't felt like his head was going to explode before, he sure as hell did now.

Jess frowned minutely. "Your stepmom?" She gestured over toward the graveside, where her mother and an attractive brunette in her early forties were speaking quietly with the pastor. "Ellen's been a godsend," she went on to add. "I don't know what I would have done without her. She's the only one I told—the only who I knew would believe me—it's just so—so crazy..."

Dean almost didn't pick up on Jessica's teary confession, still pretty damn well stunned by the revelation he had a stepmom he'd never even heard of. And he was pretty sure if his dad had gotten hitched he might have mentioned it. The guy was secretive but not *that* secretive.

He shook his head. If he could just focus on a single instance of crazy rather than attempting to make sense out of the whole steaming pile of it, he might stand a chance of unraveling some of the knots the world seemed determined to tie in his brain.

"Believe you about what?" he managed to ask, and Jess looked at him appraisingly, uncertainty in her wide eyes. "You can tell me, I'll believe you," he added. "The day I'm having? Crazy doesn't even begin to cover it."

Jess bit her lip, hesitating for just a second longer. "If I tell you," she began slowly. "You won't... You promise not to tell anyone? I don't—I don't want people to think..." She trailed off and Dean gently squeezed her shoulder.

"You don't want people to think you're nuts?" he hazarded, causing the ghost of a smile to crinkle the corners of Jessica's mouth. Trying for reassuring, Dean added, "Don't worry. You can tell me anything, no matter how crazy it seems. We're family, right?"

Jessica cast him a look of mild surprise that gradually shifted into one of appreciation. Nodding and taking a deep breath, she slowly began to explain. "The night of the fire?" she said, glancing around herself furtively, as if afraid of being

overheard. "I heard Sam yelling. I went into the nursery and saw the flames and grabbed Mary from her crib. And then I ran."

"And Sam?" Dean prompted a little hesitantly, his voice breaking on his brother's name.

"This is the crazy part," Jess continued. "I couldn't see Sam in the nursery at all, and all I could think about was getting Mary outside as fast as I could."

Dean swallowed before clearing his suddenly parched throat. "So far so familiar," he muttered. "Then what?"

"I—" Jessica hesitated. "I looked back and—and I swear I saw Sam on—he was on the *ceiling*, Dean. On *fire*."

A knife to the gut would have been less painful.

Dean's head swam for a second and he had to take a couple of short, sharp breaths just to stop the buzzing in his ears.

Obviously mistaking Dean's reaction for disbelief, Jessica quickly added, "I know, I know it's crazy and I've only told Ellen because—because I know she knows stuff about—about *stuff*, y'know, from that roadhouse she runs, but I swear, I *swear*, Dean, Sam was on the ceiling."

Over the pounding of his heart, Dean somehow managed to squeeze Jess's shoulder once more and offer her a completely sincere, "I believe you."

Jessica seemed somewhat taken aback. "You—do?"

Dean nodded. "Sam told you about our mom, right? About what happened to her?"

"I know she died in a fire too—"

Jessica never got to finish her sentence as the formidable-looking chick she'd earlier pointed out to Dean as being Ellen, the *stepmom*, was suddenly striding over toward them, a look on her face that could have melted iron at fifty paces.

To say she looked a little pissed was the understatement of the century. So much so that Dean actually flinched when she marched right up to him and grabbed him by both biceps.

"Where the *hell* have you been, boy?" the woman demanded, shaking him a little bit to add emphasis to her words. "Don't you know I've been worried sick? You and that no-good reprobate daddy o' yours just takin' off like that the way you did! No explanation, no nothin' just *whoosh* and you're outta here! It's been almost two years, Dean! We've never bothered you, never asked you for a thing. Least you could o' done was let your little brother know you were alive! You know how worried he was? And now..." She trailed off, hanging her head as she continued to cling to Dean's arms, although he suspected more for support than out of anger. "Now..."

"I—I'm sorry—" Dean stammered.

Ellen's head whipped up, eyes flashing angrily. "You damn well should be!" she admonished him. "You abandoned your family, Dean. You know Sam never—" she glanced sideways at Jessica. "You know he never took this—this threat seriously. Always in denial that boy. Too busy tryin' to be normal to learn how to protect himself. But that was what your daddy trained *you* for, Dean! How could you just up and leave like that?"

"I—" Dean really couldn't answer that because he honestly had no idea. The thought of abandoning Sam was a completely alien concept to him.

"I know your daddy got a lead on—" Ellen cast another furtive glance Jessica's way, "—the thing that—y'know—your mom, but you could have picked up the phone! Jess and I—the voicemails we've left for you... It wouldn't have helped Sam, but at least you could have been here after!"

Voicemails?

Dean dug his cell out of his pocket. No service. Figured.

"I didn't get your messages," he stumbled feebly.

Ellen shook her head sadly, finally letting go of his arms. "That thick-headed father of yours is no better," she said. "Haven't heard from him in six months. Not since he

signed himself out of that hospital AMA after the thing with the truck. I swear, it's like being married to freakin' James Bond."

"Truck?" Dean echoed. "You mean the semi? When it broadsided the Impala?"

Ellen scowled at him. "You and your dad been hit by any other trucks lately?"

"Lately?" Dean frowned. "But—but that was 2006..."

Ellen grabbed his chin, tilted his head back and made a show of looking into his eyes. "You hit your head a little harder than everybody thought when the Impala got turned into a pretzel?" she demanded. "That was six months ago, Dean! May 2009! Do we need to get you an MRI? Or a shrink? Or has your dad's habit of talking nonsense finally rubbed off on you?"

Dean scrubbed at his forehead, thanking his lucky stars his dad had never remarried. As far as he was aware. "Man, this place is givin' me a headache," he muttered, even less sure what the hell was going on or where he was or what everyone was talking about. Times like this he really needed Sam around to do the whole geek research thing. *He'd* be able to work out what kind of rabbit hole Dean had fallen into.

His gaze slid to the open grave and the marker with his brother's name on it. Sam wasn't dead. He *wasn't*. Dean couldn't believe it, *wouldn't* believe it. Because if Sam was dead then...then... Then Dean's world had been yanked right out from under him. Sam couldn't be—couldn't be...

Before Dean could even contemplate finishing that thought, he suddenly felt as if the world really *was* being yanked right out from under him.

Just like back at the church, he experienced the creepy sensation of something grabbing his shoulders and dragging him backwards and Ellen and Jessica receding away from him down a long dark tunnel just as a bright flash momentarily short circuited his vision and everything faded out to white...

* * * *

It was pitch black wherever Sam was this time, the church having apparently morphed again while he was knee-deep in demons and desperately trying to find Dean and his dad.

Except this time when the church shifted it wasn't just a case of a new door opening in the wall or Sam turning around to find himself in a different room than the one he started off in. No, this had been way weirder. One minute he'd been fighting off Lucifer's least finest, the next there'd been a bright flash of light and he'd felt as if he was being physically dragged backwards into...this place.

Wherever this place was.

It was dark wherever it was. That was the one thing Sam knew for a fact.

Thing was, no matter how dark Sam's current environment, he just couldn't help feeling he wasn't in the church anymore. Maybe it was the change in temperature or the altered acoustics or the absence of that chilly, stony, woody, papery smell that his senses always associated with the word "church." Sam wasn't sure. All he knew was he was somewhere *else*. And he couldn't find Dean.

He cursed for the twentieth time as he once again stumbled into something heavy and unyielding. This time a little groping around revealed the obstacle to be a large wooden packing crate, just like the other hundred or so—well, maybe five—he'd managed to walk into since finding himself here. And that wasn't all he'd stumbled over, smacked into or tripped on so far during this little field trip. Who'd have thought there'd be so much heavy machinery lurking around trying to break a guy's kneecaps? Of course, damage to Sam's patellae aside, the copious amount of machinery scattered seemingly at random around the place did back up his theory that he was no longer a guest of Stull's most famous building, but rather that he might be in a warehouse or a processing plant of some kind.

Of course that didn't make any sense either.

Sure, the morphing rooms had been crazy weird, but as far as Sam had been able to tell the church could only alter the shape of the rooms that already existed as part of its structure, not conjure new ones out of thin air. And Sam was pretty sure there hadn't been a warehouse stuck in the middle of the church's chancel.

Which again begged the question: Where was he and how did he get here? And where were Dean and Dad?

Sam didn't generally have a problem with the dark—it was kind of an occupational hazard in his line of work—but right now he would have given anything for Dean to show up with his Zippo, ragging on him and calling him Samantha for being scared of the dark.

Irritably attempting to ignore the little voice in his head currently yelling for his big brother like a snot-nosed six-year-old with a boo-boo—the little voice Sam tended to think of as “Sammy,”—Sam began to feel his way gingerly along the cracked plaster walls, stumbling into another room without actually tripping on anything else, his fingers finally fumbling with a lever that he hoped might bring up the lights.

Perhaps a little too excited to have found a possible source of illumination, Sam hastily lunged forward into the room, his foot suddenly hitting something hard, and, with his center of gravity all off kilter, he knew this time he was going down.

Trying to grab onto something to stop his fall, all his fingers found was the lever which he was hoping controlled the power, unintentionally yanking it down as he plummeted toward the concrete floor, his hands landing in something wet and sticky as his knees hit the deck with a sickening crack.

As brilliant light flooded the room, Sam scrunched up his eyes, his other senses taking over while he was temporarily blinded.

He could smell blood.

And Dean.

Scrambling upright, the first thing Sam saw when he managed to prize open his eyes was the blood coating his palms. Rocking back on his heels, one bloodied hand shot out behind him to steady himself, brushing denim before planting against concrete.

Twisting his head to see what it was he'd tripped over in the first place, Sam found himself suddenly inches away from two dead green eyes, wide open and unblinking.

“Dean?”

Sam startled backwards, fingers scrabbling at the floor as he sought to extricate himself from his brother's unnaturally still form, slumped against the wall in a seated position with his head tilted slightly to one side. His face was waxy, frozen in an expression of shock and pain, and there was no mistaking the jagged tears in his throat: Bite marks. Like the injuries inflicted by the vampires Sam remembered fighting with Dad—Luther and his crew.

Sam fought the urge to retch, his stomach more prepared to believe what he was seeing than his eyes or his brain.

He blinked hard, willing himself to wake up in that creepy church surrounded by demons wanting nothing better than to tear his head off and show it to him. That would, after all, be so much more preferable to *this*.

It's just a dream, he tried to tell himself. A very intense dream. You got hit on the head. You're gonna wake up and Dean's gonna be laughing his ass off at you. You're such a girl, Sammy...

But Dean was still sitting there, staring up at him with sightless eyes, his throat torn out and his own blood staining his shirt and his jeans.

Sam tried to breathe through the nausea, his head spinning and his eyes refusing to focus. *It's not real. It's not real. I'm still in Stull...*

But the bruises around Dean's neck looked real, just like the bite marks and the gore, as if someone had grabbed his brother around the throat and squeezed long and hard before ripping the life right out of him.

Demons. It's demons. They're making me see things. This isn't happening. Dean's not...Dean can't be...

But a demon didn't do this. A demon didn't sink fangs into Dean's neck and leave his big brother's dead eyes staring at nothing. Staring at Sam.

Vampires. A vampire did this...

"Shouldn't let big brother hunt alone, Sammy."

Sam started, jumping to his feet before he'd even spun in the direction of the deep, mirthless voice and the even deeper laugh that followed.

The guy was about Dean's height, dark-skinned with short cropped hair, red rings circling coal-black irises with blood smeared across his face and crusted in his neatly-trimmed goatee. When he opened his mouth to grin gleefully, Sam could see a jagged row of yellowed, bloodstained fangs.

"You... You did this?"

Sam took a wary step backwards, his heel nudging Dean's outstretched leg.

The vampire glanced down at Dean's motionless form before inclining his head slightly. "You know I'd heard the Winchester Dream Team broke up back when I was in the Big House—oh and thank you very much for that, Sam. You really thought prison would come between me and my date with the Antichrist?" The vamp laughed again, the sound echoing through the empty warehouse. "Even getting vamped ain't changed my opinion on *that* subject, Sam. Although I could never get Dean to see the light. I heard he made a little deal for you. His soul for your life? And then he wouldn't hunt with you anymore 'cause he was scared you were gonna get yourself killed trying to get him outta going to Hell. Oh yeah, I know all about Dean's demon deal, Sammy. His own soul in exchange for a monster like you? Poor deluded son of a bitch. I figured he of all people should know what's dead should stay dead. And you should have stayed dead, Sam."

Sam's mouth had fallen open but no words seemed to want to come out. What the hell was this nutjob talking about? Deal? Monster? Dead? Hell? *Antichrist*? "I—I'm not a monster," he finally managed to stammer. "You—you don't even know me! What—who—who *are* you? How do you know my name?"

"Don't be like that, Sammy," the smirking vampire chided him. "I know I look kinda—uh—*different* since the last time we met, and I might not be the Gordon Walker you knew and—well—didn't like very much. But there's still a part of me that's almost human. Almost. And at least I know I'm a monster. And I'm gonna do the right thing when this is all over. When I've done with you. I'm not gonna let you become the Antichrist, Sammy."

Sam frowned. What the hell? "I don't know you, man..." he began, but the guy just started in again with that soulless laugh of his. "I don't know what you're talking about!" Sam added, unnerved by the sardonic laughter and the way the guy was looking at him like he was—like he was something less than human.

"Come on, Sammy. You know it's gotta end like this. I gotta end you. Dean should o' done it himself, but I just couldn't get him to come around to my way of thinking. But he knew. Deep down he knew what you are. We could have been friends, him and me. Comrades. But he had a one track mind that brother of yours. 'Protect Sammy,' even if he is worse than the filthy things we hunt."

Sam swallowed hard. "Listen, man," he said, backing up another step. "I really have no clue what you're talking about. I never met you before today. I never—"

The vamp didn't appear to be listening, his eyes sliding to Dean's body, and more particularly the tear in his throat. "It's funny," he said, the hungry look in his empty eyes suggesting exactly the opposite. "I expected him to taste like gasoline." He stepped forward and Sam flinched involuntarily, the vamp grinning horribly as he drew one long finger through the gore at Dean's neck before slipping it into his mouth and licking off the congealing blood. "Never expected him to taste like cherry pie."

The vamp turned his face up to Sam and grinned big and wide, Dean's blood all over his fangs.

And that was it.

Something snapped in Sam's head, something hot and angry and bloody. This Gordon Walker guy was *toast*. No way this bastard was doing this to Dean and then laughing about it to Sam's face. His head was coming off his shoulders right the hell *now*.

Moving faster than the vamp appeared to be expecting, Sam grabbed a length of piping off the floor and swung it at the bloodsucker's face.

Walker ducked, his grin broadening into a leer. "That's my boy, Sammy. Knew you had it in you. C'mon, it's true colors time! Show me what you got, *demon spawn*."

Sam gritted his teeth, reaffirming his grip on the pipe and taking another swing.

Walker dodged beneath his arm, tackling Sam bodily and slamming him to the floor where he landed with a whump, all the air knocked from his lungs.

"That's it, Sam. Be all you can be!" Walker ducked his head toward Sam's neck. "Wonder what the Antichrist tastes like, huh?" He bared his fangs. "Bet you're not as sweet as your brother!"

Sam grunted, slamming his palm hard against the vampire's jaw, shoving his head back a little, but not enough to give him the leverage to get out from under him.

Walker growled, jerking his head up and away from Sam, before grabbing the younger man by the hair and yanking his head to the side so that his neck was bared, jugular just begging to be bitten.

Sam tried to shove the guy off but he was just too strong, fangs inches from Sam's neck, so close Sam could smell his brother's blood on him. His brother's blood... *Cherry pie...*

The smell was intoxicating, and Sam's head began to spin with it. Blood. Dean's blood. It was all he could think about, all he could concentrate on, the blood on Dean's neck and the terrifying urge to...to...

"No!"

Sam shoved Walker so hard the vampire was thrown several feet across the room, and Sam sat up suddenly, for a second dazed and disoriented, his senses tingling and adrenalin thrumming through his system. Blood. Dean's blood. Wanting to *taste*.

The vampire was staring at him with wide, surprised eyes, and Sam stared right on back, his mouth drawn into a snarl and his fingers curling into claws while his heart hammered so fast and so loud he was sure he could *hear* it thumping against his ribs.

But it wasn't just his heart he could hear. He could hear *everything*. The rustle of Walker's jacket. The ticking of his watch. Cars on the highway two miles away.

And the smell... Dean's blood...

All of his senses heightened and *thrumming* with power and with need.

With a jolt Sam realized what he was feeling: the vampire. He was feeling the vampire, his power, his desires, his strength, his anger and his insatiable hunger. It was like nothing Sam had ever felt before, a heady mix of unparalleled strength and immortal invulnerability; he was channeling the vampire, just as he had Alyssa or those demons in Elko. Just like he channeled *Lucifer*. The vampire's power was coursing through Sam's veins, his strength bolstering Sam's own.

He could do anything; *kill* anything.

There was a coil of razor wire at Sam's feet.

He picked it up with his bare hands, feeling nothing, not the barbs slicing into his flesh or the blood running down his arms. All he could think about was this vampire, this vampire tearing out his brother's throat and emptying his veins.

Walker never knew what hit him, Sam launching himself at him so fast he was a blur of motion, muscle, sinew and sharp edges as he wrapped the razor wire around and around the vampire's neck, pulling it taut and holding it fast, even as Walker struggled and thrashed, his own power and strength reflected back and magnified by Sam's instinct to protect his brother and to avenge his murder.

Sam pulled the wire tighter and tighter until flesh was rent and arteries popped, reveling in the strength and the energy coursing through him. He could feel it in his veins, dark and evil and so, so wrong, could hear his pulse thundering in his ears, could almost taste his brother's blood on his tongue as the heady scent mingled with the smell of Walker's blood and of Sam's own.

Finally, the wire gave, slicing through skin and tissue and bone alike, and the vampire's head came away from his body, falling to the concrete floor with a wet thud, blank eyes staring up at Sam just as Dean's had.

Gordon Walker seemed surprised.

Sam stood there, breathing hard, his arms shaking as the tension was released from his muscles and the razor wire, which he abruptly dropped to the ground, staring at his bloodied hands as his head buzzed and the room began to spin around him.

What did he just do? Did he just behead a vampire with his bare hands?

His knees began to buckle and he felt himself once again collapsing toward the floor. But before he could hit concrete, something seemed to grab his shoulders and tug him backwards as the room around him exploded into light and his senses, overwhelmed, could finally take no more, shutting down completely and plunging him once again into darkness.

* * * *

Dean drew in a sharp breath and tried not to hurl on the carpet.

Carpet? Since when did cemeteries have carpet?

He blinked, ghostly after-images of Jessica and Ellen seared onto his retinas superimposing themselves over the decidedly ordinary-looking apartment door in front of which he inexplicably now found himself standing.

He blinked again, mildly surprised to discover he was no longer in the cemetery in Palo Alto, but rather in the hallway of what looked like a big old house that had been converted into apartments back when stripy shirts and red suspenders were all the rage.

And his hand was raised as if he'd just rapped on the door in front of him.

Dean had no clue who lived here. Awkward.

But seriously, *what the hell?*

Was he dead? Was he dreaming? Was he lying unconscious in Stull church somewhere, demons beaming random images into his head? Or was this all an illusion, just as, perhaps, the morphing rooms within the church had been?

Except here it was *reality* that was morphing instead of the space around him.

His head hurt. And he wished he knew where Sam was.

Not in that grave in Palo Alto, he told himself. Sam wasn't dead. Dean would know. He'd just know.

Suddenly he heard a key scraping in the lock, and the sound of a deadbolt being flung back, and the next thing he knew the door was opening and he found himself looking down at a gorgeous brunette who was smiling at him as if he was her favorite person in the whole world.

Okay, this was more like it! Maybe his crappy day was finally taking a turn for the better.

"You must be Dean!" the petite young woman greeted him enthusiastically. "I can't believe it, I finally get to meet Sam's elusive big brother! I was starting to think you didn't really exist!"

Sam?

Dean smiled awkwardly, unable to get a word in edgewise before the girl stuck out her hand and resumed her chattering.

"I'm Madison," she finally introduced herself as Dean hesitantly shook the proffered hand. "Well come on in, can't have you standing out here all day!"

Without letting go of Dean's hand, Madison tugged him into the apartment. She was a lot stronger than she looked, and for some reason Dean totally didn't resist. "Er, yeah. Okay."

"God, I was so nervous about meeting you!" Madison continued, finally letting go of Dean's hand and ushering him into a fairly large, comfortable-looking apartment. "I mean, I know it must be a hundred times worse for you—you and Sam not having spoken since he left for Stanford and everything. Believe me, he's nervous too, although he'd never admit it. Cool as a cucumber that one!"

Madison finally stopped to draw breath, turning back toward Dean and once again catching hold of his hand, which she proceeded to press between both of her own. "Dean, I'm so glad you two are talking again. It took me *months* to persuade him to try and track you down. But trust me, life's too short to spend it being angry with the people we love. And he's really missed you." She laughed awkwardly, inclining her head to one side and arching an eyebrow. "That's another thing he'll never admit."

Dean managed to swallow the lump which had unaccountably formed in his throat, but still couldn't seem to get any words to come out. This was all just a tiny bit overwhelming. One minute, he's standing next to Sam's grave with a sobbing Jessica clinging to his brother's baby, the next minute he's in a swanky apartment with a hot brunette who tells him he and Sam have apparently not been talking to each other for years. Well yeah, Sam could hold a grudge like a teenage girl sometimes, but *years*?

How did his life suddenly get so complicated?

Before Dean could attempt to come up with an answer to that one, a tall figure hesitantly emerged from the bedroom opposite.

"Sammy?" Dean muttered, impossibly relieved to see his kid brother alive, breathing, whole and looking—*good*. Wow. Dean had never seen Sam look so—so *happy*. His skin was tanned a golden brown, broad shoulders relaxed, finely sculpted body toned like *whoa* and...and it had to be a sign of the Apocalypse: Sam had cut off his girlie hair. Gone were the tousled brown locks, his hair now short and neat, with bangs swept back no longer falling over his forehead in unruly curls.

Dean couldn't quite believe what he was looking at. "Wow, Sammy you look...big."

It was true, the kid's muscles had muscles.

Sam smiled sheepishly. "And you look like crap."

Dean glanced down at himself and frowned. "Thanks."

"Just calling 'em like I see 'em, big brother," Sam returned with a grin, approaching his sibling like a nervous teenager on his first date.

For a second the two of them just stood there staring at each other, and Dean got the distinct impression they both had completely different reasons for not having a clue what to say to one another.

This obviously wasn't *his* Sam, and Dean had to keep reminding himself of that. But in some ways he kind of wished it was. He didn't ever remember his Sam looking so relaxed and happy. So at peace and comfortable in his own skin. But still... Dean didn't really know this Sam, no matter how much he looked like the Sam Dean had last seen back at Stull. What was he supposed to say to him?

He was spared trying to come up with a decent icebreaker by Sam suddenly grabbing hold of him and enveloping him in a bone-crushing hug. Yeah, so this *so* wasn't Dean's Sam, who he figured would probably only hug him if he was on fire. And then he'd bitch about it. Or maybe that was Dean. So hard to concentrate when someone ten times your size was trying to squeeze the life out of you.

"Dean, I'm sorry. I'm *really* sorry," Sam was saying to the top of Dean's head. "I was wrong to give you the cold shoulder; to cut all ties with my family; wrong to blame you for the things Dad said. It wasn't you who told me if I walked out that door I shouldn't ever come back." He stopped abruptly, finally letting go of his big brother and holding him at arms length, squeezing his shoulders as he looked into his eyes with those big puppy dog ones of his own. "I shouldn't have blamed you for the things

Dad said, Dean. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Sam ducked his head slightly. "I really missed you, big brother."

As Dean tried to come up with a suitable reply, Sam pulled him into another hug and all he could think about was that Sam smelled like dog.

"I—I missed you too, Sammy," he said at length, and it wasn't a lie. He *had* missed Sam while he'd been incommunicado at Stanford, just like he was missing Sam right now.

"Hey," Sam still couldn't seem to meet Dean's gaze as he finally released him. "I'm sorry I missed Dad's funeral."

Dean looked up sharply. Funeral? First Sam, now Dad? Was he going to lose every member of his family today?

"Stupid way to go," Sam continued. "Car wreck. The guy driving the semi was drunk, right?"

Semi?

"Uh—" Dean stammered. "I—guess..."

Sam's hands were on his shoulders, squeezing gently. "I'm glad you got out okay. If you—I mean, it's bad enough Dad—and I never got to say—never got to tell him..." Sam trailed off, his head hanging between his impossibly massive shoulders. "If you'd not got out...well I don't know what I'd have done."

Dean swallowed. "It's okay, Sammy," he said. "I'm—I'm here now."

Sam nodded, finally looking up at his brother. "That's all I wanted. I just wanted to say—to say sorry."

Dean thought back to that night when he'd picked Sam up from Stanford, the night he'd begged his kid brother to come help him find Dad. *That* Sam hadn't felt the need to apologize. He'd just been going to *school* after all. No reason to feel guilty for that, right? Obviously Dad dying had changed *this* Sam's mind.

"What's done's done, Sammy," Dean said at length. "Can't change the past."

Sam locked eyes with his brother. "No we can't," he said, and there was something in his eyes, something dark and unreadable that caused Dean to shift uncomfortably, reminding him he didn't actually know *this* Sammy at all.

"Are you boys done with your chick flick moment?" Madison was suddenly at Sam's elbow, smirking up at him as she tugged on his sleeve. "Come on. I've got beer. And vodka. And those little cocktail sausages."

Sam laughed softly, inclining his head toward the lounge area. "C'mon. Wouldn't want to miss cocktail sausages."

Dean felt some of the tension seep out of his shoulders at the sound of his brother's laughter, following Sam and Madison toward the couches angled around the big TV in the corner.

As Dean sat, he stole a glance in Sam's direction as his brother flung himself down on the opposite couch, his arm curling around Madison's shoulder. As he did so, his shirt shifted a little, revealing four painful-looking scratches on the kid's neck.

Dean frowned, stiffening a little. "Wow, that looks like it hurts," he commented nonchalantly, nodding in the direction of Sam's injury.

Sam glanced down at himself before laughing. "What this?" He pulled Madison closer to him, his cheeks coloring. "It's nothing. Maddy and I got a little—uh—rough last night."

Dean squirmed. Eww! Little brother sex! "Yuck, too much information, Sammy!" he burst out, grimacing.

"Hey, you asked!" Sam returned, grinning.

"Concern for my baby brother, man!" Dean replied. "So don't want to hear about your nocturnal exploits!"

An odd look passed between Sam and his girl. "You don't know the half of it, bro," he observed cryptically.

Dean frowned minutely, but thought no more of the comment, feeling himself begin to relax a little more in the company of this happy, settled Sam. "So how did

you two love birds meet?" he asked eventually, looking from Sam to Madison and back again.

The young woman looked up at his brother, obvious adoration in her big brown eyes. "I threatened him with violence," she replied incongruously, before turning back to Dean and snickering. "Just kidding," she added. "Last summer he was interning at the law firm where I work."

"You're a lawyer?"

"Legal secretary. He broke the photocopier, dropped a box of paper on my foot and later spilled coffee on me. It was love at first sight."

Dean smiled slightly. "Yeah, that sounds like Sammy."

"Thanks," Sam replied.

"Well you *are* kinda clumsy, dude," Dean pointed out. At least, *his* Sam was kinda clumsy.

"Good thing physical grace isn't a job requirement for a lawyer," Madison said. "He's got a real shot at an Associate's position when he graduates Stanford Law in the summer."

Dean sat back against the couch cushions, a tiny spark of bittersweet pride warming his chest. Sam could have had this: the girl, the apartment, the career. The life. Normal. Safe.

Madison reached over to the coffee table, picking up an already empty bottle of beer. "Hmm, that's not right," she said, rising to her feet. "Think we need more happy juice."

As she headed off in the direction of the kitchen, Sam's attention shifted to the big bay window which looked out onto a rather stunning view of the San Francisco skyline. It was a clear night, and a full moon was rising above the Golden Gate Bridge off in the distance.

He stood, indicating for Dean to accompany him as he ambled toward the window.

Dean followed a little uncertainly, Sam's suddenly stiff posture suggesting he had something serious to discuss with his brother.

Here we go. Was that the sound of the other shoe dropping Dean could hear?

As he drew level with Sam's position, he noticed another room off to his left, an incongruous metal door partially obstructed by a large potted plant and a pretty substantial broken padlock swinging from a busted clasp. The door was dented, as if something had been thrown against it or—or something that had been locked inside had been trying to get out.

Hunter's instincts kicking in, Dean felt a prickle of disquiet in the pit of his stomach as he followed his brother's gaze out to the moon-washed streets beyond the window, the bright white light streaming into the room and oddly illuminating Sam's eyes as he gazed off into the night.

"Sam...?" Dean questioned softly. "Sammy?"

Something wasn't right here. Dean knew it as surely as he knew this huge man before him wasn't really his baby brother.

"I'm sorry about this, Dean," Sam said matter-of-factly, not turning away from the window, face turned up to the huge white disk of the moon. "Wrong time of the month, y'know?"

"Sam—"

Dean started at the sound of a low growl behind him. Sam had a dog?

Very slowly, he turned in the direction of the sound.

"It's not her fault," Sam was saying. "A neighbor attacked her. We took care of him, but it was—it was too late."

Dean glanced sideways at Sam, before his eyes were drawn back in the direction of the growling.

"Sammy—" Dean gasped in horror as Madison emerged from the kitchen. "You—you shacked up with a *werewolf*?"

Strangely enough, the creature before him wasn't bringing more beer.

Dean took a step back as the werewolf—Madison—approached him slowly, fangs bared and snout drawn into a vicious snarl, her eyes inhumanly yellow and her long claws bloodstained.

“Crap,” Dean muttered, patting himself down as he backed further away from creature. Gun. Where the hell was his gun? Rifling through his pockets, all he could find was the stupid feather, and he suspected that wouldn’t be much help against Sam’s follically over-stimulated girlfriend. “Sam?”

When his brother didn’t answer, Dean risked taking his eyes off Madison long enough to look at Sam.

But Sam wasn’t Sam anymore.

Dean’s mouth fell open but he didn’t even manage to cry out in surprise as the seven foot tall werewolf now standing where his brother had been only moments before bared its teeth and snarled at him menacingly.

“Sammy?”

Oh *crap*.

Dean took another step back, Madison approaching from his right as Sam stalked him from his left, the two creatures corralling him backwards, towards the room with the metal door.

Glancing briefly over his shoulder through the small crack between the dented door and the doorframe, Dean’s heart sank as he spied the scratches, claw marks and blood smeared all over the walls of the room beyond.

Oh *crap*.

“Sammy, listen,” he stammered, taking another step back. “I get it, you’re a werewolf now. Okay. I’m not judgin’ you, man. Seriously. I got nothin’ against werewolves. Y’know. As long as they’re not rippin’ people’s hearts out.” He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender as his shoulders smacked into the door, something hard digging into the small of his back.

Reaching behind him, he felt the solid weight of his Colt nestled in the waistband of his jeans.

“Sammy,” he said, looking into the feral eyes of the larger of the two werewolves slowly stalking him. “Don’t do this man. I’m still your brother, right? Sam?”

Pulling the gun from behind his back, he deftly slid out the clip and checked the rounds, mildly surprised to discover the bullets were silver. Had he known? Had the Dean who hadn’t spoken to his little brother in years known what Sam had become? Had he come here not to reconcile himself with Sam but to hunt him? If so, how did *Dean* get here? Why wasn’t *that* Dean here?

He hesitantly raised the .45 to shoulder height, his hands shaking even as he tried to steady himself.

This was Sam. *Sammy*. This wasn’t just some random werewolf, some creature Dean was compelled to hunt. This was *Sam* and he *wasn’t* a monster.

Dean couldn’t do it. He couldn’t kill his own brother, no matter what he’d become. No matter that his brother’s fangs were bared and his eyes were wild and he was being corralled into what it was becoming apparent was Sam and Madison’s killing room.

“Sammy?” Dean took another step backwards, the door swinging open behind him. “Sammy, please don’t make me do this.”

Sam growled in response, long lupine legs flexing as if he was preparing to spring forward.

“Sammy.” Dean flicked off the safety, his finger hovering over the trigger. “Sammy please don’t—”

Sam snarled and lunged toward him.

And Dean squeezed the trigger.

As the single shot rang out, Dean felt himself falling back through the metal door, his vision filled with hair and teeth and claws before everything faded out to white.

* * * *

Okay, so this was just weird.

A second ago, Sam was in a warehouse channeling the visceral power of some crazy-ass vampire, Dean dead on the floor at his feet.

Now?

He gripped the steering wheel of the Lexus he inexplicably found himself driving, trying to adjust to the sudden shift in his environment. Gone was the warehouse, Gordon Walker's severed head staring up at him, and Dean's bloodied corpse sprawled on the floor.

Instead he was looking through the windshield of a luxury saloon onto trees and grass and sunny fields with not a dead body in sight.

Still, every time he blinked, all he could see was his brother's dead eyes staring up at him.

That wasn't something he was going to forget in a hurry.

And neither were the vampire's taunting words. Monster? The next *Antichrist*? Jeez, what was that guy *on* anyway?

Sam shook his head and took a shaky breath, for a moment basking in the sunshine and the absence of the stench of blood, his brother's or otherwise.

He was on the interstate. Somewhere.

He craned his neck to look at the road signs flashing past the window, but the lettering seemed kind of blurry. Bringing his hand up to his face, he realized to his surprise that he was wearing wire-rimmed glasses. Squinting, he plucked the spectacles from his face, breathing a sigh of relief when the road signs abruptly came back into focus. I-90. He was on the I-90.

Tossing the glasses onto the passenger seat next to him, they landed in an open briefcase, and he glanced down at himself to discover he was wearing an expensive-looking navy blue suit and a blue and yellow silk tie similar to one Jess had bought him on his twenty-first birthday. She'd said it brought out the blue in his blue-green eyes.

Smiling slightly at the memory, Sam cast another quick glance in the direction of the open briefcase, his attention caught by a mugshot staring up at him from what looked like an open police file.

Dean.

Sam didn't recognize the picture from any of the times Dean had been arrested in recent years. The sign he was holding in front of him stated the arrest had taken place in Little Rock, and Sam couldn't even remember the last time they'd been in Arkansas.

Trying to keep one eye on the road, Sam twisted slightly, trying to get a better look at the file. Paperclipped to the mugshot was a pretty impressive-looking rap sheet, the words "grave desecration," "credit card fraud," "breaking and entering," and, finally "murder" standing out starkly on the white paper.

Wait. *Murder*? Sam didn't understand. Dean was wanted for *murder*? "Victim: Emily Channing, St. Louis, MO," the page read, and Sam frowned. Didn't Guevara fix that? Hadn't Dean been exonerated?

Scanning further down the page, Dean's next offense appeared to have been a bank robbery in Milwaukee where at least three people had died.

Sam's frown deepened. A bank robber? *Dean*?

That didn't make a lick of sense. When the hell had Dean ever robbed a bank?

Sam was so intent on trying to skim read Dean's police file that he almost didn't notice the roadblock coming up real fast in the front windshield.

Slamming on the brakes, the Lexus fishtailed a little as it screeched to a stop a foot away from the first patrol car.

Taking a breath as he attempted to shove his heart back down into his chest cavity, Sam warily eyed the rather rotund police officer approaching him, his hand on the service weapon at his hip.

Sam swallowed, pulling on the parking brake and winding down the window.

“Officer?” he greeted the cop a little nervously. “What’s going on?”

“License and registration please, sir,” the cop demanded gruffly, and Sam was seized with sudden panic. License. Where the hell would he keep his license?

Fishing in his jacket pocket, his fingers immediately closed around a soft leather wallet, and pulling it out, he yanked it open, pretty impressed by the array of platinum credit cards tucked away inside.

Searching through the cards, he finally found the I.D. he was searching for, his own face smiling up at him, and the name “Samuel James Winchester” emblazoned across the plastic for all to see.

His real name? He was using his real name?

Sam didn’t remember the last time he’d used his actual, honest to God, completely non-fake drivers license.

Quickly scanning the credit cards, Sam noted they, too, all proclaimed their owner as Samuel J. Winchester, and that immediately set alarm bells ringing in his head.

Nevertheless, he dutifully pulled his drivers license from the wallet and handed it to the police officer, nervously opening the glove box in the hopes of finding the vehicle registration and silently praying the cop wouldn’t see what else was more than likely hidden in there.

It came as something of a surprise, then, when the glove box revealed only papers, pens, a flashlight and a couple of rolls of Lifesavers rather than the customary guns, knives, holy water and box of fake I.D.s usually to be found in any Winchester vehicle.

Sam sighed in relief, pulling out the Lexus’ pink slip and offering it to the patrolman, who was frowning at Sam’s drivers license as if it held the key to the secrets of the universe.

Suddenly drawing his sidearm, the cop stepped back from the door, leveling the weapon at Sam’s head.

“Get out of the vehicle, sir.”

Sam blinked. “Sorry, officer, is there a problem?”

“Out of the vehicle, sir,” the cop repeated, his tone of voice brooking no argument.

Sam sighed in resignation, unbuckling his seatbelt before opening the car door, his hands raised a little sheepishly above his head. “Officer, I think there’s been some kind of misunderstanding—” he began to remonstrate, before suddenly finding himself spun around and slammed face down across the hood of the car, his wrists yanked up his back as handcuffs were slapped on a little too tightly.

He grimaced as the cop hauled him to his feet while speaking coolly into his radio. “We’ve got the other one, sir,” he said. “Bringing him to you now.”

As Sam was bundled unceremoniously into a waiting police cruiser, he couldn’t help but wonder what the hell he’d dropped into this time. Shrugging as he settled into the uncomfortable vinyl seat, he figured it couldn’t be any worse than seeing Dean dead and bloody at his feet.

Two cops climbed into the front of the car, pulling the vehicle smoothly away from the roadblock and heading up the interstate in the same direction Sam had been traveling. Finally able to read the road signs, Sam noted they appeared to be headed for Boston, and settled himself in for the ride as his brain cogitated on potential escape routes and the relative wisdom of dislocating his thumbs.

Thirty minutes later, Sam found himself being driven into downtown Boston, the police cruiser turning into what looked like a pretty rundown warehouse district.

The car took a sharp right, and Sam could see that something was going on at the bottom of the street, blue police lights flashing as a gaggle of cops strung copious

amounts of blue police tape around what looked like the entrance to a disused warehouse.

As they drew closer, a female cop waved them forward, talking into her radio as she moved a sawhorse out of the way to allow the patrol car through.

Pulling up next to at least five marked police vehicles, a couple of ambulances and a few unmarked, unremarkable sedans, the two cops exited the front of the cruiser before opening the back door and yanking Sam out.

He stumbled a little, but the cops each took an arm, stringing him out between them as they dragged him toward the entrance to the warehouse.

The place looked dark inside and Sam blinked, vaguely wondering whether this was the same place where he'd had the run-in with that nutjob vampire.

That question was answered soon enough as he passed two gurneys being led out onto the street to the waiting ambulances. On the first gurney was a young woman. She was clearly dead, bite marks raw and angry at her throat, a handkerchief twisted around her neck as if she'd been recently gagged. There was a hole in her forehead that had obviously been inflicted by a bullet, and from a large caliber weapon judging by the size of the entrance wound, Sam noted.

On the second gurney lay a headless corpse.

Sam swallowed bile as he realized there was a severed head looking at him from its position next to the body.

Gordon Walker.

But how? Sam had clearly not been here when the vampire bit it. No pun intended. So who could have killed him if it wasn't Sam?

Feeling himself being tugged away from the corpse of the vampire, Sam was suddenly aware of tall black guy with a goatee and bald head approaching him. He walked with an air of self-confidence that was really quite intimidating, and the navy blue FBI windbreaker he was wearing gave some clue as to his identity.

As he neared Sam's position, a smug smile spread across his lips, and he finally stopped right in front of him, hands planted on his hips as he nodded, obviously pleased with the situation.

"Sam Winchester," he said, grinning broadly. "It's been a while."

Part Two

"Sam Winchester." The smugly-grinning Fed took a step closer to Sam, hands on hips to pointedly reveal his sidearm. "It's been a while."

This was getting embarrassing. Everyone seemed to know who Sam was, but he was completely unable to say the same about anybody else. Like that nutjob Gordon Walker. *He* thought Sam was the Antichrist, while Sam didn't know *him* from Adam. He wasn't sure anyone could have a lower opinion of him than that, but he was still a little worried about who the Fed standing in front of him might think he was.

"You have me at a disadvantage, officer," Sam said coolly. "You seem to know who I am, but I don't think we've been introduced..."

"Don't gimme that crap, Winchester," the Fed snapped. "You know damn well who I am. And pretending you don't ain't gonna help no insanity plea you might be cookin' up."

Sam really *didn't* know who this guy was, but he knew better than to say so. He'd studied at the John Winchester School of Etiquette, after all, so he knew there was a time to be honest and speak your mind, and a time to cut your losses and shut the hell up.

This, he was fairly sure, fell into the latter category.

The Fed nodded at the two cops still flanking Sam at either side. "It's okay, guys, I can take it from here," he told them with a confident smirk.

The cops dutifully released the hold they had on Sam's arms and retreated, leaving the Fed to grab his elbow and resume pulling him deeper into the warehouse.

Sam didn't resist—again, he knew there was a time and a place for putting up a fight. Sometimes it was to your advantage to just go with the flow, and right now the only advantage Sam seemed to have was the fact he wasn't dead. Yet.

"You know I heard you boys weren't running your little operation anymore," the Fed was saying conversationally. "Heard after Milwaukee you had a falling out?"

Sam was only half listening, his attention consumed by the state of the room he now found himself in; the walls and the machinery and those heavy as hell packing crates were all riddled with bullet holes as if there'd been some kind of huge firefight here.

"So what happened?" the Fed continued. "You decided to go all legit and respectable? Let that psycho serial killer brother of yours take the fall?"

That *did* get Sam's attention. *Serial killer?*

"Not that I blame you," the Fed added. "I mean, keeping his crazy-ass ass outta jail must o' been a full-time job in itself, right?"

The Fed cast his eye over him disparagingly, and Sam was suddenly acutely aware of his expensive suit and the soft leather shoes he appeared to be wearing.

"Never did have much time for lawyers," the Fed informed him. "Especially scumbag lawyers like you."

Sam opened his mouth to object, but quickly closed it again when he realized he really didn't have the first clue what kind of lawyer the Sam this Fed was talking about might be.

"Y'know," the Fed continued, "we might never have been able to prove you had anything to do with Milwaukee, but that doesn't make you any less guilty."

Sam searched his memory for recent references to Milwaukee, uncertain why this guy seemed so hung up on the place. Then he remembered Dean's rap sheet. The bank robbery. At least three dead...

"You're just a serial killer in a suit, Sammy," the Fed continued, leading Sam into another room that looked as if an entire police precinct had used it for target practice. "You're as much of a monster as *he* is. Running the show from your corner office while he's off murdering anyone you paint a bullseye on, right? You knew we'd never be able to link you to Milwaukee, prove the whole sorry mess was your idea. That's why you tossed Dean's ass, ain't it? Let him take the blame? Cut your losses? Poor dumb Dean, too stupid to realize you'd sold him down the river. But come on, you didn't actually expect us to believe Dean had the smarts to pull off a bank heist that size on his own did you? Give us a little credit, Sam! We know you're the criminal mastermind here, the one running the show. Not your intellectually challenged halfwit psychopath brother. Dean's just a hammer. Clyde to your Bonnie. Sammy's blunt little instrument."

"Dean's not stupid," Sam blurted out, unable to hold his tongue any longer.

"You gonna tell me he's just misunderstood? Or maybe he's just differently-abled, huh?" The Fed laughed sardonically, and Sam was uncomfortably reminded of the vampire he recently beheaded only a few feet away. "You might change your mind about that soon, Sam," the guy added with a grin.

As the Fed led Sam into the next room, a uniformed police officer approached, fingering his radio as if he'd just been about to make a call. "You want this one bagged and tagged Agent Henriksen?" he asked, inclining his head further into the room.

Henriksen, huh? Sam tried to remember whether he or Dean had ever had a run in with an Agent Henriksen, but came up empty. If he knew this guy, it must have been in another life.

"Not yet," the agent was saying to the cop. "Time for a little show and tell with Sammy here first."

Henriksen jerked on Sam's arm, and Sam followed obediently, a little intimidated by the number of cops around him, not to mention the ridiculous number of bullet holes peppering the walls.

"Shame you got here a little late for the party," Henriksen was saying. "I gotta say, after Milwaukee I'm surprised, you showing up here to help out personally. What happened? You figured it was about time you got your hands dirty? Had enough of your nutjob brother getting to have all the fun? I guess I just figured you wouldn't wanna be seen dead with Dean once you'd ditched his sorry ass. But I guess I was wrong. Brotherly love's a beautiful thing, Samuel. I guess you two just decided to kiss and make up, huh?" The Fed shook his head in a horribly fake mockery of an apology. "Well that's nice. But I don't figure Dean's gonna be doing much kissin' after today, Sam."

As they rounded the next corner, Sam's feet stuttered to a halt as, with a shock, he realized they were standing in the exact spot where he'd beheaded the vampire.

Henriksen frowned, yanking insistently on Sam's arm. "C'mon, Sam," he cajoled. "We're almost to the best part."

As Sam followed the agent into the room, his eyes lit on a bloody coil of razor wire strewn across the floor, along with a scattering of spent shell casings. There were even more bullet holes in the walls here than in the rest of the building, and Sam couldn't help thinking that someone had to have gone down in one hell of a blaze of glory to make this much mess.

Which was when he saw the pool of blood on the floor.

And the body lying in the middle of it.

And his brain froze completely.

"Dean?" The name was barely more than a whisper, Sam's brother's body so riddled with bullet holes that blood was congealing over every inch of him, his t-shirt and jeans completely soaked through, his mouth slightly open in a look of mild surprise and his eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling. There was a hole in his forehead the size of Sam's fist, brain matter clearly visible splattered across the packing crate behind him, and part of his cheekbone was missing. The gory residue of the injuries inflicted upon him continued to ooze out onto the floor as the puddle of crimson fluid stretched slow-moving fingers toward Sam's feet.

Violently shaking off Henriksen's clutching fingers, Sam skidded to his knees in the pool of his brother's lifeblood, his own tears dripping onto Dean's waxy, lifeless face.

"No, Dean, no," Sam whispered. "Please..."

"Only a matter of time," Henriksen was saying behind him, making no move to yank Sam back to his feet again. "Knew we'd get him sooner or later. Just had to wait for him to slip up. More chances of that happening with you outta the picture. Although I gotta admit, I'd have preferred to see him fry. But hey, dead's dead, right? One less serial killing psycho scumbag running around out there giving me an ulcer."

Sam didn't want to hear. Didn't want to listen to the untruths coming out of the Fed's mouth. Dean wasn't a scumbag or a psycho or a killer. He wasn't any of those things. Dean was Sam's big brother and if he was dead... if he was dead...

"Shame you didn't make it here for this, Sam," Henriksen gloated. "The two of you could have gone down together. Blaze of glory. Brothers in arms. The whole nine yards."

"*Shouldn't let big brother hunt alone, Sammy.*" Gordon Walker's words came back to haunt Sam as he leaned over Dean's lifeless, mangled corpse, his own face reflected in sightless hazel eyes.

"Dean, I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left—I shouldn't have left you..." He trailed off, squeezing shut his eyes and trying to convince himself this wasn't his life, wasn't his brother. *Couldn't* be his brother.

Please let me be somewhere else, he prayed silently. *I wanna be somewhere else. Anywhere. Please. Please let me be somewhere else.*

And when he opened his eyes, he was.

* * * *

It was dark again when Dean opened his eyes, dark and cold and wet and, yeah, wouldn't you just figure it, he was on his ass again. But unlike suddenly finding himself sitting on soft green grass in the warm California sunshine, he was suddenly aware of the familiar and uncomfortable sensation of sitting in mud. Yuck. Sam was so gonna bitch at him about the laundry bill.

Which was when he remembered his brother's feral eyes staring out at him from a werewolf's face, teeth snapping at his neck and claws sinking into his chest.

He shuddered.

So it was dark. And wet. And cold. And his ass was covered in mud. But at least Sammy wasn't a werewolf here. Wherever here might be.

And Dean didn't seem any the worse for wear. Just as his injuries from the battle at Stull appeared to have miraculously healed themselves, so had the puncture wounds left by his brother's elongated claws and jagged teeth back in that apartment in San Francisco.

Huh.

He grimaced as he pulled himself stiffly to his feet, remembering all the times he'd called Bobby an old-timer for bitching about his knees acting up in damp weather, and he pretended he didn't feel the aching in his joints as he straightened up and looked around him.

Wiping mud off his hands onto his thighs before swiping rain off his face with the sleeve of his jacket, Dean slowly examined the terrain surrounding him and sighed. He was cold and wet and muddy and miserable and freakin' confused as hell and pissed off and he *still* had no idea where Sammy was, where Dad was, where the Impala was or, hell, where *he* was.

"Friggin' Frontierland," he muttered as he began trudging up the muddy main street of what looked like an abandoned set from a Hollywood Western. Any minute now he expected to see Gary Cooper or Jimmy Stewart, or maybe even his great-great-whatever-grandfather Emmanuel Claviger come striding down the street toward him with a pissed off expression and a six-shooter in his hand.

Instead, when he looked up there was a young black kid in desert fatigues running toward him.

The kid's eyes were huge, wild and unfocused, and he was clearly freaked out of his gourd about something or other.

Dean knew someone going into shock when he saw them.

"Hey kid, you okay?" he asked uncertainly as soldier boy got close enough for Dean to read the name "Talley" stitched to his shirt above his breast pocket.

The kid just looked at him, his eyes crazy big, as he mirrored Dean's earlier movement and swiped his arm across his forehead to mop up some of the rain.

He had a bloody knife clutched in his hand.

Dean took an instinctive step back, hands held up in a gesture of placation, but even though the kid was looking right at him, Dean wasn't entirely sure he was actually seeing him.

"I'm sorry," the soldier kid said, and Dean didn't know whether he was apologizing to him or to someone else. "I'm so sorry. I never meant—I didn't mean—it, it all got out of control and, and crazy and I, I never meant—I never meant to..."

The young man trailed off, and Dean unaccountably began to get a cold, sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Every whacked out place he'd been since being yanked out of Stull church seemed to wind up with Sam dead or dying.

"Sam..."

As the soldier stood there looking at his bloody hands, Dean raced past him, bolting down the main street and rounding a corner, where he was more than a little surprised to see Bobby running towards him. Skidding to a halt, he managed to yell, "Bobby!" in order to get the older hunter's attention.

Bobby glanced over at him, his face puckering in confusion for a second. He didn't stop, didn't even slow down, just continued to run in the direction Dean had come from, merely yelling, "The kid, the kid—get the kid, Dean!" over his shoulder.

Dean faltered, part of him wanting to follow Bobby's gruffly barked order, but part of him knowing he couldn't, that there was something else he was supposed to do or see here.

Hesitantly, he continued on in the direction from which Bobby had been running, finally emerging onto another wide street flanked by dilapidated buildings and eerily shifting shadows.

In the midst of the mud and the rain and the cloying darkness, he spotted two figures kneeling on the muddy ground a few feet in front of him, and he stopped dead in his tracks.

Sam had a hole in his back.

It was more than a little disconcerting for Dean to suddenly find himself watching another Dean on his knees in the mud, clinging to his injured brother as if his life depended on it, one hand on his neck, the other fumbling at the wound oozing blood from the base of his spine.

"It's not even that bad," the other Dean was saying, an empty reassurance that clearly wasn't reflected in his terrified tone. "It's not even that bad, alright? Sammy? Sam! Hey, listen to me, we're going to patch you up, okay? You'll be as good as new. I'm gonna take care of you, okay? I'm going to take care of you, I've got you. Because that's my job, right? Watching out for my pain in the ass little brother?" He pulled his brother to his chest, fingers entwined in the back of his hair. "Sam? Sam? Sammy!"

The other Dean shook his brother hard, but from the way Sam's head was lolling against his shoulder and the amount of blood staining his jacket, it was obvious to Dean that no amount of shaking was going to wake his baby brother. The other Dean's baby brother. Not ever again.

"Sam?" he whispered quietly, as across the street his mirror image turned his face up to the heavens and screamed the same name, his lifeless brother's body still clutched tightly to his chest.

It was too much. Too much. Dean couldn't do this; couldn't *keep* doing this. How many times was he supposed to watch his brother die? And who the hell was doing this to him? Lucifer? Mia? Had that bitch found a new way to torture him? 'Cause sure, tying him up and stabbing, hitting, cutting, beating, slashing and electrocuting him hadn't exactly been his idea of a good time, but seeing his little brother dead or dying over and over and over again? That was so much worse.

Something broke inside of him as he watched himself—the other Dean—collapse to the ground with his baby brother's dead body still cradled in his arms, rocking silently onto his heels as he smoothed the younger boy's sodden hair from his face and continued his whispered litany of, "It's gonna be alright, Sammy. I'm gonna make it alright. I'm gonna take care of you."

And while his heart broke for that other Dean, that other Sam, he could only cling to the knowledge that wherever he was, whatever this place was, he didn't belong here. That wasn't *him* collapsed in the mud cradling a murdered Sam in his arms. That wasn't *his* baby brother, *his* Sammy, lying dead with a hole in his back. *His* Sam was...somewhere else. Somewhere safe, he hoped. Somewhere safe with Dad. And *his* Sammy wasn't dead. He *wasn't*. And Dean was sure as hell going to make sure he stayed that way. Because he was going to find him. He was going to find him, and make sure nothing bad ever happened to him, and they were both going to get home. Somehow.

And Dean clung to that as fiercely as the other Dean clung to his little brother's corpse.

This *wasn't* going to be them, Dean promised himself. This *wasn't* going to be their life.

He took a step back as he heard Bobby yelling his name, but the other Dean showed no indication of having heard, Sam's lifeless form the only thing he seemed able to focus on, his head resting on his big brother's shoulder, for all the world as if he was sleeping.

The other Dean was still talking to him as he stroked his hair mindlessly, "It's going to be okay, Sammy. Nothing bad's gonna happen to you while I'm around."

This isn't going to be us.

If this was some kind of freakin' death vision thing that had somehow been beamed into Dean's head instead of Sam's, then it wasn't going to happen. Dean was going to make sure of that. Sam wasn't going to die like this, stabbed in the back in a muddy ghost town by a kid who looked almost as scared as that other Dean did. It wasn't going to happen. And Dean needed to find Sam to make sure of it.

Please let me be somewhere else now, he prayed silently. I just wanna be somewhere else.

And not a moment too soon he felt that now familiar tug on his shoulders, and once again he was falling backwards as the world whited out around him.

And he had never been so grateful.

* * * *

The woman gripping Sam's hand had a *really* firm handshake, he mused, blinking owlishly at her as he found himself once again in unfamiliar surroundings.

From the bars on the windows and the unsmiling guards with their hands on their nightsticks, there was pretty much no doubt where he'd landed this time, however.

Prison.

Hmm. So not much of an improvement on where he was before.

But better than Dean riddled with bullet holes in a pool of blood at his feet.

"Mara Daniels," the woman introduced herself, continuing to pump Sam's hand with smooth efficiency. "Your brother's attorney."

Sam blinked at her. She was hot for an attorney, he found himself thinking, instantly chiding his inner voice for sounding way too much like Dean. Why did he always seem to do that when he and his brother had been separated for too long?

But still, the woman was undeniably attractive, despite looking a little frazzled; a couple of locks of her fair hair had come loose from the knot at the nape of her neck, and her white silk blouse seemed a tiny bit ruffled. Letting go of Sam's hand, she smoothed her hands down her smart black skirt, before trying to tuck the stray hair back into place. "I've been Dean's attorney since he got arrested in Little Rock," she added. "You know? When he broke into the Arkansas Museum of Anthropology?"

Sam nodded blankly. "Uh. Okay."

Why the hell would Dean want to break into a *museum*? Knowing Dean, it'd be far more likely he'd be trying to break *out*!

Daniels smiled wanly at him, before shaking her head and looking away, turning her attention to straightening some already-straight papers on the metal table in front of her. "Right about now I'm wishing that little prison break he tried to stage over at the Green River County Detention Center had actually worked," she said quietly, a mirthless laugh in her subdued voice. She sighed before looking up again, packing the paperwork into her briefcase and motioning Sam out of the open door toward a long, drably-painted hallway.

"I know you're a lawyer yourself, Mr. Winchester," she began.

"Sam," Sam interjected automatically.

The attorney smiled sadly. "Sam. Look, you know the score, what's going on here, so I'm not going to sugarcoat any of this for you." She sighed again, distractedly fussing once again at the lock of hair that seemed determined to fall into her face. "But Dean's final appeal has failed. The Governor won't grant a pardon or a stay. Your brother's still scheduled for death by lethal injection at midnight."

“Wait, *what?*”

Sam stopped dead in his tracks. Lethal injection? *Dean?*

“At midnight,” Daniels repeated, carrying on walking as if she hadn’t noticed Sam was no longer next to her.

Sam caught up with her quickly, remembering what that Henriksen guy had said about wanting to see Dean fry, and thanking whoever was listening that whatever state he was in no longer used the electric chair.

“Look, Ms. Daniels,” he managed to stutter out.

“Mara,” the attorney corrected him.

“Mara. Dean never killed anyone. I swear. He doesn’t—he doesn’t deserve to die—”

“I know that, Sam,” Daniels agreed, nodding. “And I believe you. Just like I believed Dean. He’s been telling me the same thing for years. Never changed his story, not once. I mean, I know it’s a little crazy—I know *he’s* a little crazy—but I always believed him. Right from the moment he asked me to look into his eyes and tell him whether I believed he was guilty or not, whether I believed he was a monster or not. Right before he asked me to go find out where some random prison nurse was buried.” She smiled sadly and shook her head again. “Look, Sam, I know what Dean does; what your dad taught you to do. And I completely understand your decision to step away and go to school; have a life. Be a person. You shouldn’t feel guilty about any of this. It’s not your fault.”

The attorney’s words seemed too familiar, things Sam had said to Dean being repeated back to him by this woman he’d never met before. She seemed earnest and sincere enough, and Sam figured she must have spent a lot of time with his brother over the last couple of years for him to have unburdened himself to her like that. To have told her the truth, who he really was. Dean never opened up to strangers.

“Thanks,” was all he could think of to say in return for the woman’s kind words. “That—that means a lot.”

Daniels stopped for a second and squeezed his bicep before inclining her head to a small cell off the main hallway. “I’m glad you came,” she said quietly. “This is going to mean a lot to him.”

She ushered Sam into the cell where Dean was sitting on a low cot, chowing down on what Sam could only imagine was his last meal: burger and fries followed by cherry pie. Figured.

He looked pretty good considering he must have been in prison a good couple of years, still toting that cocky smile of his like this was all part of the plan. And Dean was certainly the only person Sam knew who could look good in an orange jumpsuit.

But Sam knew his brother—even if this wasn’t *technically* his brother—and he could see the abject terror lurking just beneath the surface of his wide green eyes.

Dean looked up as Sam entered the cell, his apparent calm slipping slightly when he caught sight of his little brother.

“Hey, Matlock,” he greeted him, grinning in a way that somehow looked forced, his tone slightly off as if he was faking civility. “Wondered if you were gonna show up.”

Sam wasn’t sure what to say, uncertain what kind of relationship, if any, this Dean might have with the Sam that actually belonged in this place. “Wouldn’t miss it,” he blurted out, mentally kicking himself and grimacing as Dean snorted loudly. “I mean, I didn’t—You know what—You know what I—”

“Yeah, I know what you mean, kiddo,” Dean assured him, and this time the grin he tossed Sam’s way seemed a little more genuine. He rose slowly to his feet, surprising Sam by suddenly cupping a hand to the back of his neck and looking up into his eyes. “I kinda missed you, Gigantor,” he added. “You okay? You need anything?”

Sam choked back a watery laugh. “Do I need anything?” he asked a little incredulously. “Dean. You’re about to—they’re going to—”

“Better ’n hellhounds, Sammy,” Dean replied, and Sam wasn’t sure what he meant by that.

“Seriously, Dean,” Daniels interjected. “Is there anything I can get you? Anything you need?”

Dean cast an odd look Sam’s way before shaking his head. “Nah, I’m good,” he told the attorney. “Got everything I need right here.”

Daniels nodded, before blowing out a breath. “Dean—”

“Hey, c’mon there, Ally McB,” Dean cut her off. “You know how I feel about chick flick moments.”

Daniels smiled softly at him, nodding minutely and wiping at her eyes as if she totally had some dirt in them or something. “Yeah, same here,” she agreed.

“Thanks though,” Dean added, reaching out a hand to snag one of hers. “You were awesome.”

“Not awesome enough, apparently,” the attorney observed, squeezing Dean’s hand gently, before pulling him into a hug. “I’m so sorry, Dean,” she whispered. “If there was anything else I could do, you know I’d do it.”

“Yeah I do,” Dean replied, to Sam’s great consternation not pulling away, but instead hugging the attorney back warmly. “And I know you did everything humanly possible and then some. Some things are just meant to happen the way they happen, sweetheart. Nobody’s fault. Karma, I guess. Maybe in the next life I’ll be Hugh Hefner.”

Daniels laughed wetly, dabbing at her eyes some more as she pulled away.

“C’mon, honey, it’s not that bad,” Dean said. “Although I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? For what?”

“For ruining all your future relationships. ’Cause you know, every time you meet a hot guy you’re gonna be comparing him to me, right?”

Daniels snorted. “In your dreams, hotshot.”

“Yeah, probably,” Dean agreed, before sobering slightly. “Seriously though. Thanks for everything.”

“You’re welcome,” Daniels assured him. “I’ll send your brother the bill.”

It was Dean’s turn to snort. “Aw honey, I’m gonna miss you.”

“Same here.” Daniels glanced sheepishly at Sam then, as if only just remembering he was there. “Okay, well I’d better leave you two to—to—say goodbye. I’ll be back in a little while, okay?”

“Sure,” Dean nodded, watching the attorney’s back as she left the cell, before turning his attention back to Sam. “So Sammy. Came to see me off, huh?”

“What the hell happened, Dean?” Sam couldn’t help asking. “How did you wind up in this mess? And—and why am I only just hearing about it?”

“Look, it was a set up, Sammy. No biggie. Thought I could handle it by myself is all. Only other hunters I’d have trusted to have my back on this one, y’know, besides you, would o’ been Bobby—who’s sorta long in the tooth for this kinda gig—and Jo, who’s, well. A girl.”

“*What* kind of gig?” Sam asked uncertainly.

“You think I’m dumb enough to get caught breaking into some crap-ass *museum* for crying out loud?” Dean hissed, pulling Sam aside in the hopes the guards waiting outside the cell wouldn’t be able to hear them. “I got myself caught by the cops on purpose!”

Sam frowned, the obvious question hovering for a second on his lips. “Why?”

Dean sighed impatiently. “Remember Deacon?”

“Dad’s buddy from the Corps?”

“Yeah,” Dean confirmed. “He’s a prison guard now—”

“Let me guess. Green River County Detention Center?”

“Mm-hmm. The place was being haunted by the spirit of this freaky-ass nurse who was ganking inmates just for the hell of it.”

“Which is why you asked Mara to find out where she was buried?”

Dean raised a salacious eyebrow. “Oh it’s ‘Mara’ now huh?”

“Dean.”

“Okay, okay. Yeah. That’s why I needed to know where she was buried. Deacon was supposed to get me out when the job was done, but things went south when Henriksen—”

“Agent Henriksen?”

“No, Lance Henriksen!” Dean shot back. “Yes Agent Henriksen, asshat! You know any other Henriksens?”

Sam was tempted to point out he didn’t know any Henriksens, but let Dean’s comment slide.

“Special Agent Victor Friggin’ Henriksen shows up,” Dean continued. “He’d figured out the link between Dad and Deacon. Made *damn* sure my little prison break never happened. Got Deacon *fired*. And I wound up in Supermax charged with a whole string of so-called ‘murders,’ starting with your buddy Zach’s girlfriend Emily in St. Louis, y’know, the one that devilishly handsome shapeshifter tortured to death? Right up to a whole slew of hostages who got themselves ganked when another shapeshifter decided to rob a bank in Milwaukee. I got the shifter, but things got a little—uh—complicated when this have-a-go hero decided to try and help me out when he didn’t really have a clue what was actually goin’ on. He wound up getting ventilated by a police sniper. I got out, but Henriksen convinced himself I was the bad guy. After that, I was public enemy numero uno as far as Henriksen and the Feds were concerned.”

Suddenly the “bank robbery” prior Sam had read about in Dean’s police file made sense, as did Agent Henriksen’s apparent obsession with Milwaukee. If Dean got away from right under the guy’s nose, then Sam could see how that might have pissed the Fed off. Still didn’t explain his apparent belief that Sam was somehow involved though.

“So... So where was I while you were off robbing banks?” he asked a little cautiously.

“*Dude*, how many times I gotta tell you, I was *not* robbing banks!” Dean protested, before apparently registering the mischievous smirk on Sam’s face. He grinned a little lopsidedly before continuing. “Y’know I’m actually kinda hurt you’ve not been following my illustrious career from your corner office, dude,” he informed his brother, before pausing, eyebrows crinkling into a confused frown. “You even *have* an office, Matlock? Or do you only get one o’ those when you make Partner?”

There was a trace of bitterness in Dean’s voice, and Sam couldn’t help wondering what had happened to the two of them in this version of their lives to make them so apparently distant and awkward with each other.

Sam shook his head. “So you were hunting that shifter by yourself?” he clarified. “No backup?”

Dean’s eyes were a little downcast. “Sammy, I’ve been hunting without backup since Dad disappeared and got t-boned by that semi, you know that.”

“You shouldn’t hunt by yourself,” Sam found himself echoing Gordon Walker’s words, and shuddered slightly.

“Yeah well. Like I said. Bobby’s gettin’ too old and I ain’t huntin’ with no almost-life-sized Barbie, no matter how hard she begs.” Dean met Sam’s gaze for the briefest of seconds before looking away again. “And you weren’t there.”

“Dean—” Sam swallowed the lump that had unaccountably risen into his throat.

“Sam, it’s okay,” Dean cut him off. “I don’t blame you for wanting a life. Or for not wanting *this* life. And—and believe me, I was so proud of you for standing up to Dad and going off to do your own thing at Stanford.”

Sam did a double take. “You—you were?”

Dean cautiously raised his eyes to find Sam’s. “Course I was, Sammy. You’re my little geek, egghead brother. What’s not to be proud of?”

Sam snorted softly. “Thanks.”

“And I know we’ve not seen each other since Dad’s funeral,” Dean continued, sobering a little. “Which is as much my fault as it is yours. I—I didn’t mean to shut

you out, Sammy. It's just—it's just hard to fit into your world when you don't want to fit into mine. Y'know? It's not like I'd be welcome at the Law Society spring formal, right? Or that you'd want to hang out at the Roadhouse with me 'n Bobby." Dean suddenly gripped Sam's biceps tightly, looking up at him with genuine regret in his eyes. "We're from two different worlds, Sammy. You got to be normal. A 'real person,' remember? And I'm glad. I'm glad you got out. Otherwise you might have wound up here with me. And I don't think I could have handled that."

Sam wiped the back of his hand across his nose and sniffed, blinking his eyes rapidly. *Not my Dean, not my Dean*, he kept telling himself, willing that to be true.

"Sammy." Dean's hand was on his cheek. "I'm glad you came. I'm glad we got this chance to say goodbye, man."

"But—but it's not fair," Sam stammered, his voice cracking a little. "My getting to have 'normal' shouldn't mean you having to die!"

He thought about all the times growing up he'd wished he could stay in one school, have friends, play soccer, go to the mall; all the times he'd wished Dean had never come to get him at Stanford, all the times he'd wished he'd not gone with him to Jericho, wished he'd stayed with Jess, kept her safe, kept her alive, got married, had kids.

Sam thought about all the things he'd wished for in his life, all the escape plans he'd made, right from the age of eight when he first found out about the "family business;" all the things he'd thought he wanted. And he suddenly realized that none of them included Dean. None of them. And that just seemed incredible to him now. That he could have wished for a future and a life without Dean in it.

Sam knew he wasn't that person anymore, that he didn't really want those things anymore. He knew there was no going back, and he knew he wasn't destined to have the two point four kids and the white picket fence and the dog.

And he was surprisingly okay with that. Especially if him and Dean being apart meant this, meant Dean was destined to die if Sam didn't have his back.

So why was Sam being shown this stuff? Why was he being shown over and over that he and Dean needed to stick together? There had to be a reason. Some *point* to all this. Right? It couldn't just be random.

"Dean, you don't deserve this, and I'm sorry," he managed to choke out. "I shouldn't have left you to do this by yourself."

"Sammy—"

"No, Dean, listen. It was never about you, okay? My wanting to leave? It was never about you."

"I know that, Sam—"

"You're a good person and you don't deserve this. You never killed anything that didn't deserve killing, and you sure as hell never killed an innocent! I don't understand! I don't understand why this is happening."

Dean smiled bitterly. "Because life sucks and no good deed goes unpunished?" he offered. "Look, it's okay, Sammy. I'm okay. You know, at least one of us survived this craptastic mess of a life our family seems to have gotten itself condemned to. Sammy?" Dean had both his hands on the back of Sam's neck, tilting his face up so he was looking him in the eye. "I'm okay with this. I'm okay with dyin' as long as I know you're gonna be okay. You're gonna be okay, right?"

Sam shook his head. "Dean—"

"You and Jessica and the rugrat," Dean continued. "Don't let Mary Ellen forget her awesome Uncle Dean, okay?"

Sam shook his head again, his heart unable to get with the program as his brain tried to remind himself *this wasn't his life, wasn't his Dean...*

"Dean, it's time."

Mara Daniels had appeared at the entrance to the cell, flanked by two guards.

Sam glanced at his watch: ten minutes to midnight. "What, what's the date?" he asked a little hesitantly, and Daniels frowned.

"November 1st," she replied, mimicking Sam's movement and glancing at her own watch. "Nearly November 2nd."

"November 2nd?"

"Sam, don't think about it," Dean put in suddenly, again angling his brother's head so they were facing each other. "Don't think about it, okay? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It's gonna be okay, okay?"

"Dean, how can this be okay?"

"Look, you should go now. I don't want you to see this, alright?" Dean glanced over at Daniels. "Make sure he doesn't see this, Mara. Promise me, huh?"

Daniels nodded.

Dean's hand was warm on Sam's neck, and Sam couldn't help himself. Without really thinking about what he was doing, he was wrapping his arms around his big brother and hanging on as if his life depended on it. "Don't go," he whispered. "Dean, don't go."

Dean didn't pull away, just muttered into Sam's collar. "It's okay, Sammy. Just remember what I taught you. Remember what Dad taught you. And take care of my wheels, okay?"

This hurt too much. It wasn't real, Sam knew it wasn't real, but this Dean before him, this Dean he was clinging to like a life raft in the middle of the ocean? Ultimately he was still Sam's big brother: looked like him, sounded like him, smelt like him. And the pain in Sam's chest was very real, as were the tears threatening to choke him. But he refused to cry. Dean would hate that. *Any Dean.*

But this just hurt too damn much.

Finally, Dean broke the embrace, pulling away with a gentle pat to Sam's cheek. "Take care of yourself, Sammy," he instructed him, before turning to the guards and taking a breath. "Okay, guys. Show me to the party."

"No, wait, Dean—"

"It's gonna be okay, Sammy," Dean told him. "I'll see you in the next life, huh?"

It was too much, and Sam had to scrub at his cheeks with the arm of his jacket as the guards entered the cell, each taking one of Dean's arms and leading him out into the hallway.

"Dean—"

"Bye, Sammy."

No, no, no...

"Please, someone, please take me home," he whispered, raising his eyes to the ceiling in a silent prayer. "Please. Please. Someone take me home."

And then he felt that now familiar tug on his shoulders, and once again he was falling backwards as the world whited out around him.

And he had never been so grateful.

* * * *

"Oh Dean, thank God!"

Dean had a mouthful of brunette hair and a woman hugging him so hard he thought his ribs might just break. Again.

She stepped back, holding him at arms' length and looking him over as if to convince herself he was okay, he was all in one piece, it was really him.

"Ellen?"

It was the woman from Sam's "funeral." *The stepmom.*

She looked different somehow. Her hair was no longer encumbered by the business-like ponytail she'd worn when Dean had last seen her, and gone were the smart black skirt, jacket and high heels she'd worn at the cemetery, replaced instead by scruffy jeans, a plaid shirt and sturdy-looking walking boots that Dean figured would hurt like hell if she decided to kick you in the shins with them. Quite why the woman's current appearance led Dean to thinking she might actually *want* to kick

someone in the shins, he wasn't sure, but there was definitely something different about her, something less harsh but somehow harder at the same time.

"They said you were dead!" she burst out, squeezing his arms none-too-gently. "Dragged off by hellhounds just like—just like your dad!"

"I guess the reports of my death have been slightly exaggerated," Dean replied a little uncertainly. *Hellhounds?*

"Well thank the Lord for that," Ellen said, choosing that moment to pull him back into a heartfelt hug. "I know you said your dad—that he got out through the Hellgate—but still. The thought of you in Hell..."

Hell?

Okay, now Dean was *really* confused.

Ellen pressed her hand against Dean's cheek, and she seemed genuinely relieved to see him, not at all like the woman—*stepmom*—he'd met in the cemetery in Palo Alto.

He smiled down at her warmly, before risking a glance around himself to get his bearings.

He was standing in a gravel parking lot outside a rundown shack with a sign proclaiming "Harvelle's Roadhouse" on the outside. There were a couple of pickups in the lot, a motorcycle that had definitely seen better days, and a beat up old Dodge Caravan that looked completely out of place, and Dean got the distinct impression the joint wasn't exactly jumping.

"Come on inside, hon," Ellen was saying, taking his arm and leading him toward the entrance to the bar. "You must be parched."

Dean considered that. How long had it been since he'd had anything to eat or drink? He really had no idea. He couldn't even say how much time had passed since he'd first entered the church at Stull. "Yeah," he agreed, allowing Ellen to pull him through the parking lot. "Beer sounds good."

"You know it," Ellen agreed. "Look, Dean, I know we lost touch after the fire—the *almost* fire—and the Hellgate and all of that craziness," she added. "And I'm real sorry about that, believe me. Honestly, it's so good to see you boys again."

Dean's attention snapped to her instantly. "*Boys?*" he echoed, a thread of needy curiosity weaving its way into his voice. "As in *more than one?*"

Ellen obviously saw the question in his eyes, beaming up at him like she was the keeper of the best secret in the whole damn world. "C'mon, sweetie," she said. "Someone inside's been waiting for you."

Reaching out, she pushed open the door and urged Dean into the roadhouse, and he had to blink hard to adjust from the bright sunshine out in the parking lot to the dimly-lit interior of the low-ceilinged room opening out in front of him.

The place looked worn but somehow welcoming, the floorboards stained and scuffed from heavy traffic and heavier boots and the dilapidated furniture showed definite signs of having seen one bar fight too many.

There was a sprinkling of tables across the room, all of them empty, and a pool table listed a little drunkenly to one side in a raised area up a couple of steps to Dean's left.

To his right, the bar itself was surrounded by empty barstools, the only patron being a guy with an unruly mop of brown hair and broad shoulders hunched over a beer with his back to them. He was wearing a brown hoodie and, Dean noted idly, jeans with frayed hems over black and white running shoes that had definitely seen better days.

Dean figured the guy would be pretty damn tall when he stood up.

He took a step closer, and, as the guy swiveled around on his barstool Dean's breath caught in his throat.

"Sammy?"

Part Three

“Sammy?”

Dean took a step toward the young man at the bar, who in turn rose uncertainly to his feet.

“Dean?”

This version of his brother appeared just as hesitant and unsure as Dean himself felt, and he tried to force down the tiny spark of cautious optimism which insisted on whispering, “Maybe...?” into his ear just loud enough for him to hear it.

What business had Winchesters being optimistic anyway?

None. Zip. Zilch, Dean chided himself. If this was *his* Sammy, he’d know. Right?

Well at least this Sam was an improvement on the previous Sam, Dean observed. Because if nothing else, *this* Sam was breathing, even if he wasn’t Dean’s *actual* brother. And that had to count for something.

Dean took another step forward, his hands twitching as he tried to control his arms which, completely independently of his brain, were urging him to grab hold of his little brother and never let him go.

Not my Sam dead in the mud, he kept telling himself, as if the more he repeated it, the more he could believe it, the more true it became. *My Sam’s okay. He’s alive. He’s safe. He’s...here?*

Damn stupid optimism! Stop sneaking up on me! I’m not an idiot! And I’m not gettin’ fooled again...

“It’s—it’s good to see you, Dean,” Sam said cautiously, his voice casually restrained, as if he was holding something back. Holding himself back, maybe.

If Dean didn’t know better he’d have sworn his little brother’s eyes were kind of sparkly, as if he was on the verge of tears.

Can’t be my Sammy... Dean told himself. *Can’t be...*

“Yeah,” he managed to agree carefully, once again waiting for the other shoe to drop. “You too.” Vampire? Zombie? Shapeshifter? Dying of cancer? What was *this* Sam going to turn out to have wrong with him? “How—how’d you get here?”

Sam shrugged, sticking his hands in his jeans pockets stiffly before motioning with his head in the direction of the parking lot. “Bobby. Lent me a car.”

Dean snorted despite himself. “Please tell me my only brother hasn’t been riding around in a Dodge Caravan?”

The corner of Sam’s mouth ticked up and he seemed a little chagrined, and for a second Dean almost thought...

Stupid optimism.

“It was the only thing he had on the road,” Sam was saying.

Dean smirked. “Dude, you are now officially a soccer mom. You know I can’t be seen with you ever again, right?”

Sam’s eyes seemed to get a bit more sparkly. “Think you’ll get infected by my incurable uncoolness?”

Dean’s smirk actually broadened into a grin. “Damn straight!” he agreed.

There was an awkward silence while the two of them just looked at each other, Dean desperately trying to pick up on any tell, any clue that this might be the real deal, the real Sam. *His* Sam.

Don’t fall for it again, Dean. It’s just the universe screwing with you some more.

It was Ellen who broke the stalemate. “Somethin’ wrong with you two?” she asked with a frown, eliciting blank stares from both the brothers. “You seem kinda...off. You boys have a fight or somethin’ before you went your separate ways?”

Separate ways? Oh here we go. Another freakin’ lesson on how bad things happen whenever we split up. It’s like bein’ friggin’ married...

Dean sighed. Of course, he really didn’t need some acid trip to Fantasy Island to tell him he and Sam ought to stick together. Real life had demonstrated that only too well and on too many occasions for him to have not learned that particular lesson by now.

“Separate ways?” Sam echoed Ellen’s words as if he was echoing Dean’s thoughts, glancing sidelong at his brother before stammering, “Yeah, when we, when we split up, right.” He nodded firmly. “Which we did. Yeah. When we—when we went our separate ways.” He smiled awkwardly at Ellen, inclining his head slightly to give the puppy dog eyes a better angle to achieve maximum impact. “And—and we did that because we needed to...?”

Ellen was probably the only female Dean had ever encountered on whom the puppy dog eyes had absolutely zero effect. Instead, she just rolled her own eyes impatiently. “You boys both take a knock to the head while you were gone?” she demanded. “Jeez, maybe I was right to be worried about the two o’ you!”

“You were worried about us?” Dean clarified, still a little unused to people he knew worrying about him, let alone people he *didn’t*.

“Of course I was!” Ellen burst out, apparently pretty affronted by the question as she snagged a dishrag from on top of the bar and flicked Dean’s arm with it.

“Hey!” Dean yelped, immediately swallowing the rest of his protest at the dark look Ellen threw in his direction.

“You think sellin’ your soul to a *demon* is somethin’ I’m gonna forget about in a hurry, boy?” she snapped, and Dean’s jaw clamped shut abruptly.

He just blinked at her for a second. “Selling my *what* to a *what*?”

“And you—” Ellen had already turned her attention to Sam, who took a precautionary step backwards as his eyes slid to the dishrag still clutched in the woman’s hand. “Running off with your little psychic kid army? No explanation. No phone call. No word whether you were alive or dead!”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “My psychic what?”

“You could o’ called me, Sam!” Ellen continued. “*Both* of you could o’ called me! I mean, I know it was a stressful time for you boys, both trying to find a way out of Dean’s Deal—” she looked Dean up and down pointedly, “—and I’m guessing you found one, considering you’ve not been ripped to shreds by hellhounds and you’re not doing hard time down in the Fiery Furnace right about now—”

Dean glanced at Sam, who just looked back at him blankly.

“And believe me, I’m real happy about that, Dean,” Ellen continued. “I really am. I’m happy for the both of you. But it’s just—it’s just I worry when you boys don’t have each other’s backs is all. Neither one o’ you should be hunting alone. Not now.”

When Dean again glanced back at Sam, his little brother seemed to be considering Ellen’s words even as he studied Dean.

Ellen sighed, her posture deflating a little as she turned her attention back to Sam. “And don’t think I’m not grateful to your psychic friend Ava, Sam,” she assured him, glancing about the roadhouse wistfully. “A lot of demons bit it that night. If she hadn’t warned us about that little fire they had planned for this place? Well it could o’ been a lot of hunters instead. Not to mention Ash.”

“Ash?” both boys managed to ask in unison, trading another brief glance as they did so.

“He’s probably asleep on his computer keyboard again,” Ellen continued, apparently oblivious to the query in Dean’s voice. And if Dean wasn’t mistaken, in Sam’s voice too. “Last time he did that, he drooled so much he almost electrocuted himself stone dead.” Ellen shrugged and shook her head. “That’s geniuses for ya. Matter o’ fact, he’ll probably want to say hello to you boys. I’ll go see if he’s anywhere near conscious.” She turned to head for a small doorway behind the bar, before suddenly pausing and adding, “And I’ll make sure he’s got his pants on this time.”

Dean raised an eyebrow and Sam laughed nervously. “Okay, yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” the younger brother stammered, watching Ellen disappear through the doorway as Dean, in turn, watched him.

As Sam shifted his attention back to Dean, their gazes met once again, each brother eyeing the other warily.

“So,” Dean said at last, finally breaking the awkward silence. “Psychic kid army huh?”

Sam shrugged barely perceptibly, his hands still resolutely stuck in his pockets. “Demon Deal? Hellhounds?”

Dean matched Sam’s shrug and raised him one of his own. “Yeah, I guess,” he said carefully, his instinct to trust this version of Sam almost overcoming his reason. “It’s—it’s weird though. Almost like—” he paused thoughtfully. “Almost like something that happened to me in another life.”

He waited patiently, trying to fathom the tiny contraction of Sam’s eyebrows and the way his eyes opened a little wider, as if Dean had taken him by surprise.

“Yeah,” Sam said, very slowly. “That’s exactly how it feels.” He affected a pose of relaxed nonchalance before adding, “In fact, I suddenly realized I don’t actually know how you got out of the Hotbox.” He paused for a long second, before adding, “Do you?”

Dean swallowed. Hard. *Goddamn it, optimism, leave me the hell alone!*

Shaking his head cautiously, it took him a second before he could manage a reply. “Don’t remember a thing.”

Sam’s expression didn’t change, he merely nodded, his hands casually emerging from his pockets and flexing at his sides. “About Hell?”

Dean twitched his head a little, shifting his weight onto the balls of his feet. “Uh-huh,” he confirmed. “Hell. Hellhounds. Demon Deal. You dyin’...” He stopped suddenly, before a torrent of words flooded out of his mouth. “This place. Ellen. Ash. You and some psychic chick called Ava. Sammy, I don’t remember any of it.”

Sam swallowed. “Any of it?”

Dean shrugged. “Nada, nothing.” He knew he sounded desperate, and he hated that, but this could be *his* Sam. This could be *Sammy*. “Sam, I’ve never been to this place before in my life and I don’t have the first clue who these people are!” he burst out abruptly.

Sam raised an eyebrow and took a step toward him, opening his mouth as if to interrupt.

But Dean raised a hand and waved him into silence. He had to get through this. He *had* to. “Wait, wait, just hear me out, man!” he begged. “I know this sounds crazy, I do, but just hear me out.” He took a breath. “As far as I know you never died and I never made no Deal with no demon to save you—that was *your* gig, man!” He inclined his head slightly, a frown drawing his brows together as all of a sudden he seemed unable to stem the tide of words that came pouring out of his mouth. “Not that I wouldn’t have. If our situations had been reversed. You know that, right? But—but I never sold my *soul*, Sammy! Not for you, not for anyone! And I’ve sure as hell never been to—uh—Hell! Well, not yet anyway. And today? Well today I’ve pretty much spent getting jerked around from one whacked out version of our lives to another, and none of them was any kind of improvement on the pile of crapola we *actually* have to put up with, and I don’t know what the hell’s going on and I—I didn’t... I don’t know where I am or what I’m supposed to do. And—and I don’t know if you’re you or another you and if you’re another you I don’t know where *my* you is or—or where I am or—or *who* I am or—or where I’m supposed to be or why any of this is happening...”

Dean trailed off helplessly, taking a resigned breath before hesitantly raising his gaze to this facsimile of Sam, feeling naked and exposed, laying himself open to this guy who could be his brother, but could equally be a complete stranger.

Sam’s expression softened slightly, wariness and uncertainty giving way to something else. Hope, maybe?

“You never died for me, Dean,” Sam assured his brother slowly, carefully taking another step toward his brother. “You never went to Hell for me. And I never died either. Although there have been some pretty close calls.” He smiled weakly. “There’s no psychic kid army, and I don’t know anyone called Ava. Most of the

psychic kids like me pretty much bit the big one when Lucifer decided we needed culling.” The hope in Sam’s voice was gradually shifting into something else: desperation. “Dean, I swear, I never met any of these people before today. Before—before—”

It was as if he couldn’t bring himself to say it, to take that final step. So Dean did it for him. “Stull church?”

Dean held his breath, carefully watching the expression on Sam’s face. Which immediately seemed to melt into utter and total relief, his shoulders slumping as the tension seeped from his muscles.

“Dean?”

“Sammy?”

Dean would maintain till his dying day that it was *Sammy* who virtually launched himself at his big brother and enfolded him in a hug so desperate it was as if he intended snapping him clean in half.

And further, Dean would also maintain that no hugging at all was returned on his part, and that his arms just accidentally wrapped themselves about his kid brother’s midsection completely of their own volition and insisted they stay there for a good few seconds.

Chick flick moments? Not Dean Winchester, no siree!

Dean gently patted Sam’s back before pulling away slightly, still maintaining a physical hold on his brother—for *Sam’s* sake, obviously—before looking up into the kid’s distinctly watery eyes.

“Wait, wait,” he said, holding up a hand. “Y’know, not that I don’t believe it’s really you or anything, Sammy...” He paused for a second, before shrugging helplessly. “I just need a little reassurance, okay?”

“Reassurance?” Sam faltered.

Dean nodded. “Just—just go with me on this, alright?”

“Ooh-kay...” Sam shrugged uncertainly.

“Okay.” Dean took a breath. “Favorite ice cream?”

Sam blinked at him for a second, then seemed to relax a little, his apprehensive expression melting into an indulgent smile. “Mine or yours?” he queried good naturedly, rubbing a hand across his face and sighing in shaky relief.

“Yours, doofus.”

“Cherry Garcia.”

“Okay.”

“My turn,” Sam returned.

Dean squinted at him. “Who said you got a turn?”

“Little brother’s prerogative,” Sam informed him flatly. “First song you played in the Impala after Dad told you she was yours?”

Dean smirked. “Dude, too easy. Zeppelin. *Rock and Roll*. Okay, favorite TV show.”

“Now?”

“Then.”

“Dean—”

“Sammy.”

“*Thundercats*. Shut up.”

“Alrighty then!” Dean grinned big. “Only my geeky kid brother would admit to liking *Thundercats*. Now get off o’ me.”

Pushing Sam away in a theatrical demonstration of masculinity and testosterone—though not too far away, obviously—Dean instantly launched into his version of fact-finding mode. “So what in hell’s name is goin’ on, Sammy?” he demanded, believing Sam, as usual, to be the font of all knowledge.

“You expect *me* to know?” Sam just frowned at him blankly.

“Geekboy research nerd, brain the size of a planet?” Dean burst out. “*Hell yes*, I expect you to know! What the hell have you been doing with your time since Stull, Sam?”

"Honestly?" Sam asked. "Mostly watching variations of you dying, Dean. Or—y'know—stumblin' upon your mangled corpse. Literally." He shuddered and Dean frowned.

"Dude," he said with a smirk, trying to lighten Sam's dark mood even though he knew there was nothing remotely funny about their current predicament. "You were a total werewolf."

"I was a *what*?" Sam blinked at him in disbelief.

"Werewolf girlfriend, the whole nine yards!" Dean assured him.

"I—*what*?"

"I know, hard to believe, huh?" Dean returned. "You with a girlfriend! Who'd o' thunk it?"

"Dean—"

"And, also you've been mostly dead all day too."

Sam ran a hand through his hair. "You think someone's trying to tell us something?"

"Like what?" Dean asked. "That we should never, ever, ever, split up, not even when we're, like, ninety? Dude! Most *murderers* don't get a life sentence that harsh!" Dean shifted from foot to foot, his tone suddenly serious. "C'mon, Sam, you don't honestly believe there's a message here, do you? It's just the universe dumping more random crap on us and laughing its ass off."

"We don't know that," Sam returned, scratching thoughtfully at his chin. "It just—it just doesn't seem *random* to me. It's like—it's like maybe there's some kind of intelligence behind what's been happening. Maybe there *is* a message, maybe we just can't see what it is from our perspective."

"That's 'cause maybe it doesn't mean anything!"

"Or maybe the message wasn't meant for us at all," Sam continued, apparently oblivious to Dean's protests. "Maybe it was meant for a different us altogether."

Dean's face lit up. "Like evil robot usses?"

"Dude," Sam sighed. "We're not Bill and Ted. Get over it."

"Buzzkill."

"Dean, this is serious! I've been bounced around a whole slew of different versions of our lives since Stull and I still have no idea how we're supposed to—I dunno—wake up, or get back, or reverse whatever it is that's happening to us!"

Dean inclined his head slightly. "Okay. So you think maybe if we learn our lesson we'll get to go home? I dunno, Sam, seems a little Michael Landon to me. I mean, what's the point? I'm not goin' anywhere. And you're not planning on ditchin' me in the near future. Are you? Sam?"

Damn, Dean hated it when he sounded so goddamn needy.

Sam looked up at him as if he'd totally been thinking about something else.

"What? No! No, of course I'm not planning on ditching you."

The "again" went unspoken by both of them.

"Well. Y'know. Good."

"Although maybe one of these other Sam and Dean Winchesters had a falling out."

"Then why is this happening to us if it's meant for someone else? That's just stupid."

Sam rubbed at his temples. "I hate when you make sense, Dean."

Dean smirked. "Turns your little geeky world upside down, huh?"

"You have no idea."

"Well okay. So what am I supposed to learn from seeing you dead over and over? So far today I've seen you burnt up in a fire, werewolfed out and—and stabbed in the back."

Sam grimaced. "Ouch."

"Yeah. You?"

"Well, you got your throat ripped out by a seriously uptight vampire who thought I was the Antichrist. Shot to death by the cops. Oh, and let's not forget death by lethal injection."

Dean brightened considerably. "Seriously? Dude! I am so badass!"

"Dead badass."

"Did I have on one of those orange jumpsuits?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Bet I looked smokin' hot!"

"You looked like a popsicle."

"A smokin' hot popsicle though, right? You're just jealous."

"That you got executed? Man, I think I'll pass."

A shadow passed across Sam's face and Dean sobered slightly as he remembered the sight of that other Dean cradling a dead Sam to his chest in the middle of a muddy street. "Yeah," he agreed, his voice suddenly subdued. "Yeah, it's not exactly been a fun day. All things considered, I think I preferred the bugs."

"Wow, I guess it really *has* been a bad day."

"You have no idea," Dean agreed, steeling himself before asking his next question. "Sammy? What about Dad? Sam?" He managed to keep the tremor in his voice to a minimum, but still sounded like Sam had when he was five. *Where's Daddy, Dean?* "Sam, did you see him? In any of the other—whatevers? Was he with you when...?"

Sam shook his head. "No. We were separated." A tiny frown crinkled between his eyebrows.

"Sam?" Dean knew that look. It was Sam's "I've just had a nutball idea and you're not gonna like it" look. "What?"

"What?" Sam came abruptly back to himself, blinking at his brother as if it had completely slipped his mind he was there. "Oh. No. Nothing. Just thinking."

"And I'm just thinking you two have some damn explaining to do."

Ellen had emerged from the hallway at the back of the bar and was now brandishing a shotgun which was pretty much aimed at Dean's chest.

Dean glanced nervously at Sam, before turning back to the bar owner. "Hey, Ellen. What—what's the problem?" He flashed his most dazzling smile, which didn't seem to have the slightest effect on the woman.

"Put those pearly whites away, honey. They're not gonna stop me blowin' a hole in that pretty face o' yours if you move another inch."

Dean froze. "Ooh-kay..."

Ellen tightened her grip on the shotgun as a young guy, eyes drooping as if he were half asleep, appeared at her shoulder. He had the mullet from Hell on his head and an expression on his face as if he couldn't decide whether to back Ellen up, get a beer or go back to sleep. Or a combination of all three.

"I heard you boys talkin'," Ellen was saying. "About how you don't know us? Never been here before? What the hell are you? Ghouls? Shapeshifters?"

Dean once again attempted his most disarming smile. "Lady, I sure as hell hope you've got somethin' a little better 'n rock salt in that popgun, 'cause if we *are* shapeshifters you're gonna need some serious silverware."

Ellen swung the shotgun up in the direction of Dean's face. "Not if I blow your head off with it, sweetie."

Dean raised his hands. "Okay. You may have a point there."

"Wait, wait!" Sam interjected, mirroring Dean's gesture of surrender. "Ma'am, I swear, we're not shapeshifters—"

"Don't you 'ma'am' me!" Ellen snapped, the shotgun swinging in Sam's direction. "You make me sound like my mother!"

Sam ducked his head slightly. "Uh. Sorry ma—miss?"

Ellen shook her head. "And I'm not my daughter either!" The shotgun didn't waver from its position, and Dean started to edge slowly between the muzzle and any direct line of fire to Sam.

"Dean!" Sam warned between gritted teeth. "Quit it."

"Yeah, quit it, Dean," Ellen agreed. "Now, are you boys gonna tell me what the hell you are and what the hell you've done with the *real* Sam and Dean Winchester before I get *really* upset?"

"We are the real Sam and Dean Winchester!" Sam protested, hands still raised in surrender. He shrugged uncertainly. "Just maybe not the Sam and Dean Winchester you know."

Sam had that whole puppy dog thing going on again so Dean bit off the "Now get that shotgun out of my face!" that was on the tip of his tongue.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Ellen demanded, eyes narrowing as she appeared to consider what Sam had just said, the shotgun not lowering one iota. "Huh? Whaddya mean, 'maybe not the Sam and Dean Winchester I know?' You tellin' me you boys are freakin' pod people now? Clones?"

"No one could clone me, sweetheart," Dean informed her. "I'm one of a kind."

"Dean, shut up," Sam snapped, none-too-kindly.

Dean frowned at him. "You shut up!"

Sam did "prissy face" and Dean shut up.

Ellen snorted. "Whatever you two clowns are, you sure as hell *sound* like those Winchester boys."

"That's because we *are*—" Sam took a sudden step forward, and Ellen's shotgun lurched in his direction.

"Stay right where you are, Stretch," Ellen instructed him shortly, and Sam froze mid-stride.

"So Stull church, huh?" Mullet Guy suddenly chimed in as if he'd finally woken up enough to enter the conversation.

Dean glanced over at Sam who shrugged. "And who are you?" he asked. "Lynyrd Skynyrd roadie?"

The guy sniffed loudly. "Yeah, that's what you said first time we met."

"Ash?" the question was clear in Ellen's voice. "Ash, what the hell's going on here?"

"Ash, huh?" Dean asked. "Like Bruce Campbell?"

"With better hair," Ash replied. "And a freakin' genius I.Q. to go with it."

"What happened to 'rock god and stud muffin'?" Ellen asked with a tiny smirk.

Ash sniffed again. "Kinda thought that went without sayin'," he drawled.

"Oh yeah?" Dean snorted. "In which universe?"

Ash nodded sagely. "Well that's kinda your whole problem, ain't it?"

"What's our problem?" Sam asked, almost taking a step forward, but then obviously thinking better of it.

"You know the legend, right?" Ash went on as if Sam hadn't spoken. "About Stull cemetery being one of the seven gateways to Hell?"

"We're familiar with it," Sam replied coolly.

Dean was slightly more affronted. "We're not idiots, Brisco!" he burst out, posture stiffening. "Or worse, *amateurs!* Of course we know the legend!"

"Although you did have to get Dad to remind you what is was, right Dean?" Sam put in.

Dean shot him a look. "Whose side are you on, Walter Wikipedia?" he demanded.

Sam smiled serenely at him before turning his attention back to Ash. "According to the legends, the Hellgate opens at Halloween and the spring equinox, right? Allowing Lucifer to roam the earth for just one night."

Dean snorted derisively. "Lucifer can roam the earth whenever he freakin' well pleases," he pointed out.

Ellen frowned at him. "Lucifer?" she echoed. "What are you talking about?"

Dean shook his head and sighed. "Long story," he conceded. "But on our side of the rainbow? Lucifer's pretty much got his own season ticket Topside."

The bar owner shuddered, for the first time allowing the shotgun to lower slightly. "Where'd you boys say you were from again?"

"Well that's the sixty-six thousand dollar question," Sam murmured.

"What's the last thing you guys remember while you were in the church?" Ash asked suddenly.

"The church kept morphing," Sam replied. "I was running around kinda blind, trying to find Dean and Dad—"

"Your dad was with you?" The shotgun dropped entirely, and Ellen moved towards them.

"Yeah," Sam confirmed. "I lost them both. There were demons everywhere, and every time I thought I found a doorway, it'd up and disappear and reappear on the opposite side of the room, and when I finally managed to get out of one room, the room on the other side of the door was different to the room that was there before and—and—"

"It was like being inside a hall of mirrors inside a maze inside a carnival cakewalk," Dean added. "While being chased by demons."

"Fun times," Ash observed, reaching beneath the bar and pulling out the weirdest looking laptop Dean had ever seen.

"That thing get hit by a semi?" he asked, only half-joking.

Ash didn't even look at him. "Not all good things come in pretty packages," he said, leisurely tapping a few commands into the computer as if he had all the time in the world. And then some. "Built this thing myself. From scratch. And almost sober." He frowned as he read something off the computer screen. "So since you got pulled out of the church you've been where?"

"Different versions of our lives," Sam explained.

"Different completely whacked versions of our lives," Dean added.

"I saw Dean executed," Sam offered.

"And I saw Sam's funeral." Dean's eyes lowered. "It wasn't fun."

Sam swallowed. "No," he agreed. "None of this has been fun."

"And you just jump into one of these lives and then jump back out?" Ash asked casually, as if he was barely interested.

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "Pretty much."

"It's more like being pulled out than jumping out," Dean put in. "You kinda feel this tug—"

"On your shoulders," Sam finished for him. "Yeah. Like someone's grabbed you from behind and yanked you on to the next place."

"And then there's a bright flash and then *Yahtzee!* It's Crazy Time all over again."

"So you weren't together when you found out you weren't in Kansas anymore?"

Ash looked at them over the top of the laptop, face completely serious, and Dean didn't know whether he was making a joke or really hadn't ever seen *The Wizard of Oz*.

"No," Sam confirmed. "As far as I know we were on different sides of the building."

"And your dad?"

Both Winchesters shrugged.

"He could have been anywhere," Dean admitted.

"What day do you think this is?"

The question took Dean a little by surprise, and he glanced over at Sam, who inclined his head slightly to the right.

"Sunday?" Dean offered.

"The date, man," Ash amended sharply, as close to irritated as Dean figured he ever got. "What's the date?"

"November 1st, 2009," the brothers managed to respond together.

"It's September 18th, 2008," Ellen pointed out. "Thursday."

Dean's eyebrows leaped up his forehead and Sam's mouth fell open slightly. "Huh," the younger Winchester mumbled.

"Couldn't o' put it better myself," Dean agreed.

Ash didn't appear to be listening. "Freaky," he muttered, apparently to himself, still squinting at his computer screen. "Time, space *and* reality..."

"Reality?" Sam echoed.

Ash looked up suddenly. "You boys run into yourselves yet?"

Dean blinked. "I wanna say 'huh?' but I can't seem to make that into a sentence," he commented, rubbing at a spot between his eyes.

"You mean, have we seen other versions of ourselves?" Sam tried to clarify, edging a little closer to Dean for no apparent reason.

Ash nodded. "That's what I said."

Sam snorted a little incredulously. "No way. It's not possible, man," he said. "You can't exist more than once in any one place. It'd be a—"

"Paradox," Dean supplied, a little affronted by the three pairs of incredulous eyes suddenly turned in his direction. "What?" he demanded. "I've seen *Star Trek*."

Sam chuckled. "I only watch it for the chicks' huh?"

Dean shrugged. "Just 'cause they're wearing Lycra don't mean they can't talk technobabble as good as the next guy, Sammy."

"You're not wrong though," Ash weighed in, his vision a little distant. "About the paradox. *And* the Lycra."

"Counselor Troi, am I right?" Dean all but leered, and Sam, predictably, rolled his eyes.

"Dean."

"What?"

"Uh, mortal peril here, dude. Focus for a second."

"I *am* focused!" Dean protested. "And besides," he paused for a second, suddenly finding the bar floor absolutely fascinating. "I—uh—kinda *did* run into another version of myself."

"You—*what*?" Sam burst out.

Dean shrugged, not quite able to meet his little brother's gaze as he again pushed away memories of that other Dean sitting in a muddy street clutching a dead Sammy to his chest. He just couldn't seem to get the image out of his head.

"Okay then," Ash said, finally looking up at them. "I guess I have a theory."

"Alcohol related?"

"Alternate reality related."

"And we're back to *Star Trek*..."

"Hold on, Dean," Sam put in. "Ash? That's what you think's going on?"

Ash sniffed. "In my humble opinion. Y'know. As the genius in the room."

"You think we're experiencing alternate realities?"

"Different paths your lives could have taken if things had been different," Ash confirmed. "Y'know, one day you order Jack instead o' Bud. You take the bus instead of walking. You get up five minutes late. Theory is, there are an infinite number of alternate realities co-existing out there, and not all of them rely on you making some kind of life-altering decision, like if you'd not gone to Stanford, Sam."

Sam did a double take. "How did you know...?"

"Because the Sam who belongs here in *this* reality told me all about it," Ash replied before Sam had even asked the question. "Compared our experiences of higher education. Y'know, in some reality out there you might have gone to Princeton or Yale or—" he coughed wetly, "—MIT or somewhere. You might never have met Jessica. You might never have run off with Dean to go find your dad in Jericho..."

"Dude, you our official biographer or what?" Dean demanded.

"I hear stuff," Ash returned. "People talk when they think no one's listening."

"So you're saying—" Sam interjected, "—that in *this* reality, you and Ellen know another Sam and Dean Winchester, a Sam and Dean Winchester who are out there

right now doing whatever it is *that* Sam and Dean Winchester do, completely oblivious to the fact that there are now *two* of them—us—occupying the same reality?”

Dean blinked. “Sam, you’re making my head hurt.”

“And maybe in some other reality,” Sam continued as if Dean hadn’t spoken, “this roadhouse actually burnt down to the ground and you died? Or Ellen died?”

“Or Ellen’s our stepmom,” Dean put in, grimacing.

Ellen cuffed him around the head with the dishrag. “Don’t talk nonsense, boy!” she admonished him. “Sure, I like your daddy fine, or as much as the next loner psycho sociopath hunter; but my Bill comes home and hears you talkin’ like that, John Winchester’s gonna have himself a *real* problem.”

“You’re married?” Sam asked.

“Don’t sound so surprised!” Ellen said. “Sure I’m married. Goin’ on twenty-some years now. Bill’s off hunting a whole pack o’ black dogs three states over with our daughter, Jo.”

“Your daughter’s a hunter too?” Dean asked.

“Likes to think she is. Bill’s teachin’ her the tricks o’ the trade, seein’ as she wouldn’t stay at that damn fancy college we sent her off to.”

“But you’re saying in one of these realities you’ve visited,” Ash broke in, “Ellen and your dad were hitched?”

Dean glanced apologetically at Ellen. “Yeah. Pretty much ditched her the way he ditched me a couple o’ years back. Went off on a hunt and she’d not heard from him in months.”

“Yep, sounds like John Winchester in *any* reality,” Ellen agreed.

“So I’m thinking,” Ash continued, “Stull cemetery might not just be a gateway to Hell after all.”

“You think it’s a gateway to alternate realities too?” Sam asked.

Ash just looked at him for a second. “Steal my thunder much, man?” he asked.

“Uh—” Sam shrugged.

“Uh-oh, geekboy bitchfight,” Dean muttered.

“Shut up,” Sam growled, before turning back to Ash. “So...the rest of your theory?”

Ash paused for a second, as if considering whether or not to bestow his wisdom on the Winchesters. “Like I was saying before I was interrupted,” he began with a sniff, “urban legend says Stull church is one of the seven gateways to Hell, right? But what if it’s more than that? What if it’s also a portal between realities, and when you fell through it, instead of falling into Hell, as the legends suggest you should, you fell into one of the other realities, a reality closer to your own than Hell would have been.”

“Wait,” Sam held up a finger. “You’re saying *Hell* is just another alternate reality?”

Ash shrugged. “Who knows, man? Maybe. Maybe Hell’s a real physical place and the gateway works by fracturing reality to create a passageway that allows Lucifer and his minions to cross over from Hell into our world, creating corridors to all those other realities as a by-product.”

“So Lucifer can choose which reality he visits?” Sam asked.

“Would explain why he’s not scarfing down Halloween candy at the local mall every October 31st, right?” Dean added. “If he visits a different reality each year.”

“You keep talkin’ about Lucifer as if he’s an actual *person*,” Ellen suddenly interrupted. “Don’t you boys know there’s no such thing?”

The Winchesters exchanged a look, but neither of them answered.

“Anyway,” Ash continued, “whether Lucifer’s real or just some story invented to keep the locals in line back in the days of burning bushes and pillars of salt, I think we can safely say from current evidence—namely the two o’ you sitting here—that the portal’s very real and it definitely works. Whether it’s a gateway to Hell or not, it’s sure as hell a gateway to *somewhere*. Maybe when it opens, the fabric of space and time and the veil between realities is at its thinnest, making it easier to cross from one reality to another, or from Hell to Earth.”

"But why us?" Sam asked. "Why were we pulled through?"

"Proximity," Ash hazarded. "You boys were closest when the gate opened."

"So were a hundred demons, I don't see them pulling up and asking for a beer," Dean observed.

"Maybe something pulled us through because it was the only way to save us," Sam suggested.

Dean snorted. "What, like *God* or something?"

"No," Sam said, defensively. "Like—like—"

"Miley Cyrus? Justin Timberlake? Elmo?"

"Dean."

"Sam, this was just some random thing, some random, messed up thing like all the other random, messed up things that seem to happen to us. Maybe only humans can cross between realities or something."

"While demons can only cross from Hell to whatever version of Earth their boss is visiting," Ash theorized.

"So the demons could all have been pulled back to Hell when we fell through the gateway?" Sam asked.

"We couldn't get that lucky," Dean pointed out. "And why isn't everyone else being pulled along with us? Y'know, when we—when we 'jump' realities or whatever it is we do."

"Cause they belong in that reality, whereas you two bozos don't," Ash suggested. "My guess? Maybe the universe is trying to reassert itself to avoid paradox. Dean saw himself. He existed as two versions of the same person simultaneously in the same time, the same place, the same reality. And that can't happen. It just can't. It'd be chaos."

"So the universe is bouncing us around until we get back where we belong?" Dean said. "Like *Sliders*. Or *Quantum Leap*."

"Dude," Ash huffed. "How much TV did you watch as a kid?"

Dean shrugged. "Motel rooms are boring, okay?"

"Restoring balance," Sam murmured suddenly, and Dean's attention snapped back to his brother, who looked up at him, slowly. "Like my psychic thing. The universe restoring balance."

"So it's all Kumbaya and lentil casserole around the campfire?" Dean asked.

"Sorry, Sammy, I don't buy it."

"Whether you believe it or not, Dean," Sam returned, "we're still stuck here for who knows how long with no idea how to get back."

"Wait," Dean said. "You're saying we could end up being bounced around every sorry excuse for our lives for—for the *rest* of our lives?"

"The gateway doesn't stay open forever," Sam said quietly. "Just one night."

"And if it's closed we're stuck here? Forever?"

"Time's a funny thing," Ash interjected. "In this reality, it's September 18th. If it's still November 1st in your reality, the gateway might still be open."

Dean seized on Ash's words. "So there's a chance we could get back?"

"Honestly?" Ash said, his face falling a little into a genuine apology. "You might never get home."

Dean sucked in a breath as pinpricks of light danced in front of his eyes.

"So we could be stuck in limbo for the rest of our lives?" Sam asked. "Or is there a chance we could get back home next time the gateway opens?"

Ash shrugged. "Spring equinox. March 20th. That's the next time Stull gateway is supposed to open."

"And until then we have to dick around watching each other get killed in a variety of creative and exciting new ways?" Dean burst out. "Screw that! Lucifer could have raised an army back home while we're stuck here playing pin the tail on the reality! And you're tellin' me there's not a damn thing we can do about it?"

Sam shifted slightly by his side. "Maybe this was his plan all along," he said quietly. "Get us out of the way while he does his thing in our version of reality."

"Then we need to get out of here *now!*" Dean said, straightening. "If there's a chance that damn gateway's still open, we gotta find a way to get through it, otherwise—otherwise who knows what's gonna be left of home when we make it back!"

"If we make it back," Sam muttered.

"When we make it back," Dean amended. "I'm not lettin' no damn universe drag me around like a fish on a hook for the rest of my life while Lucifer and his pals are chowing down on our *home*, Sam!"

"We don't even know that's what's going to happen, Dean!" Sam returned. "We might get stuck in one reality—maybe *this* one, maybe the next one—forever!"

"Oh and that's so much better!" Dean snorted, shaking his head and scraping his fingers through his hair. "Sam—"

"Look, it could be worse," Sam cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"How could it be worse?"

"We might never have found each other," Sam replied quickly. "We could still be alone."

Dean paused while he considered that, deliberately slowing his breathing and resisting the urge to go bolting out the door and keep running till he made it all the way back to Kansas. Lowering his gaze slightly, he managed to ask, "And why is that, exactly? Out of all the realities we could have wound up in, how did we wind up back together?"

"Blind luck?" Sam suggested.

"No offense, boys," Ellen said, "but you two don't strike me as the 'lucky' types."

"Maybe the universe—or whatever," Ash said, "recognized you two as being 'foreign' to the reality you were in, or that you both originated from the same reality. Maybe it pushed you together before it tried to get you home."

"You think the universe is trying to get us home?" Sam asked.

Ash shrugged. "Better than it all being a random accident and you're stuck like this forever."

"Then we need to find Dad," Dean insisted. "Because if the universe is trying to get us home, we're not goin' anywhere without him."

Sam nodded slowly. "You're right," he agreed. "I just don't know how we go about finding him."

"Well from what Genius Boy here says, maybe *he'll* find *us*," Dean suggested. "Or maybe the universe or whatever will figure out we should all be in the same reality—" He stopped suddenly, as he felt that familiar tug on his shoulders and the world began to blur into white around the edges. *No, no, not again...* "Sammy—"

"Dean!"

Sam was starting to blur out right along with the room as it began to fade into white, his voice sounding fuzzy and far away, almost as if he was underwater.

"Sam!"

For some reason, maybe it was instinct, Sam suddenly reached out and grabbed his brother's wrist, just as the world melted into an absence of everything and all Dean knew was his brother's fingers digging into his flesh, holding on even as reality disappeared all around them.

And all Dean could do was pray that when he opened his eyes his little brother would still be there holding onto him.

* * * *

John Winchester couldn't see.

Scrubbing futilely at his eyes, he blinked rapidly, hoping his eyesight would quickly readjust to the gloom and he could figure out where the hell he'd wound up this time.

This was getting ridiculous. Initially he'd thought maybe he was still stuck in Stull church, that the demons had overpowered him and were somehow causing him to hallucinate, to experience different versions of his life that had never really happened.

But now? Now, he was beginning to wonder whether maybe he really *was* experiencing these alternate lives, these alternate futures, rather than being some demon's bitchboy hallucinating in the basement of a freaky old church.

Of course, that didn't make him feel a whole lot better.

At first, after he'd discarded the hallucination theory, he'd convinced himself he was dead and had somehow made it past the Pearly Gates despite everything.

Because at first, he was with Mary.

She was whole and alive, the age she would have been had she lived to see their boys grow to manhood, and she was perfect and beautiful and...surprised to see him, seeing as he had apparently died of a stroke a year earlier.

Discovering that his boys were also with him in this life—Dean running the garage John had once owned with Mike Guenther, Sam finishing up law school—John had thought maybe all three of them had bit it back at Stull church, that the Winchester family had finally met its match and done what it had always been destined to do: gone down swinging.

Because his boys' lives were just what he would have wished for them here. Dean was happy, he had a real home and a beautiful girlfriend—a nurse called Carmen, no less—and Sam already had an offer from one of San Francisco's top law firms, and had just gotten engaged to his girlfriend Jessica. John had never met Jessica, never got to see how Sam's life might have been had it not been for—well, real life, John supposed.

But this life, this first life after he thought he'd died and gone to Heaven? It had been perfect. And he'd wanted to stay.

But he hadn't, pulled away without the chance to say goodbye to Mary or his boys.

Since then, things had gone downhill fast.

He'd seen his boys killed by that bitch Meg after she'd finished with Pastor Jim and Caleb.

He'd seen a world where Dean had died in the fire with Mary, and John and Sam barely spoke.

He'd seen his boys taken into care, separated and raised as strangers.

He'd seen Dean executed, death by lethal injection.

He'd seen Sam hunted down and killed by a guy John once knew, a vampire hunter by the name of Gordon Walker, who'd gotten it into his head that Sam was the Antichrist and had to die.

So in some respects, no longer being able to see anything at all came as something of a blessed relief.

Still, he knew he wasn't home and he knew he had to figure out where he was or he was never getting back to his boys. If they were even still alive.

He shuddered, and it wasn't just from the cold.

The air was damp and John felt the chill begin to seep into his bones as he reached a hand out into the inky blackness. Stumbling forward, his fingers brushed against the cold slickness of lime-covered brick, his footsteps echoing eerily, and something told him he was underground, maybe in a basement or a cellar of some kind.

He took a few more steps, the bricks beneath his feet uneven and jagged, halting abruptly as a sound other than his own breathing suddenly reached his ears.

In the distance, he could hear a soft whimpering; a keening moan that almost sounded too broken to be human.

Steeling himself for what he might find, John hesitantly headed toward the disturbing sound, each footstep echoing off the walls around him and filling him with

an unaccountable dread, the likes of which he'd not felt since...since he'd heard Mary's scream, and run upstairs to find her pinned to the ceiling.

His fingers still tracing his progress along the damp wall as he edged through the darkness, John saw a tiny suggestion of light in the distance, quickening his steps until he turned a corner.

A skylight set high in the wall threw muted light across what appeared to be a network of connecting rooms and passageways, and John realized his original supposition, that he was in some kind of cellar, had been correct.

Until he noticed the iron bars across the skylight.

Dungeon, he amended, his heart rate picking up a little as he shuddered at the thought.

The whimpering was closer now, just up ahead, and if this really was a dungeon, John wasn't sure he wanted to know what—or who—was making such a terribly hopeless, helpless sound.

Taking a further step into a pool of dirty gray light spilling over the filthy floor, John squinted at a dark shape huddled in the corner of the room, shifting slightly as the darkness around it moved and scurried.

Rats. Lots of them.

The whimpering intensified, the shape jerking away from the creatures scrambling over the cold floor all around it.

"H-Hello?" John managed to call out, unsure whether he was looking at a wounded animal or—or something worse.

The shape startled backwards at the sound of his voice, the unmistakable rattle of chains accompanying the movement as the figure scooted back as far as it could go into the corner of the room and cowered there, body rolled into a fetal ball.

John approached carefully, intent on not spooking the creature further, one hand held out in front of him as he shuffled closer.

It was a person, long legs folded in on an emaciated body, twig-like fingers and skinny wrists held up to cover its head as it buried its face against bony knees. The wrists were manacled, huge, cruel-looking iron bracelets snapped tight around flimsy skin and bone.

"It's okay, it's okay, I'm not going to hurt you," John murmured softly, kneeling down a few feet away from the figure as its keening grew ever more desperate, a sound of unadulterated terror.

Gingerly, John stretched out his fingers towards a bony, trembling shoulder, the gentle contact causing the head to whip up, and John found himself looking into two terrified wide green eyes.

Familiar eyes.

"Dean?"

John's head began to buzz as his chest constricted, the room around him dissolving into a blackened haze as all he could focus on was the broken shell of a man in front of him.

Just a boy. Just a boy. *His* boy.

His fingers tightened around Dean's protruding shoulder, digging into the threadbare t-shirt and bruise-smeared skin beneath as he pulled the quivering body of his eldest son against his chest and held on to him as if he meant to break him.

"It's going to be alright, Dean. It's going to be alright," he murmured, rubbing what he hoped were soothing circles into the boy's back.

His fingers came away sticky, smeared with dark red, Dean's t-shirt torn along with the flesh underneath. It looked as if he'd been flogged, and John fought the urge to vomit as he gently ran his fingers along Dean's jaw line, turning his face up towards him.

"It's alright, son," he whispered. "You're alright now. I'm here. I'm here."

Dean's eyes were wide and unfocused, and didn't seem to see John at all, or if they did, he showed no sign that he knew who John was.

“Dean? Dean, you with me kiddo?”

John ran his fingers through the boy’s too-long hair, the dark blond strands matted with dirt and blood and other things John didn’t even want to think about. Finally, his hands came to rest either side of Dean’s face.

“Son? Son, can you hear me?”

Although Dean appeared to be looking at him, John didn’t think the kid even knew where he was as his face slowly crumpled and his body became wracked with barely suppressed sobs.

There were no tears, and John didn’t know whether that was a sign Dean was dangerously dehydrated or whether it just meant he’d cried everything he had to left to cry a long time ago.

From the looks of him, he’d been here a while.

John felt something break inside of him.

This isn’t my son, he tried to tell himself. *This isn’t Dean*.

But no matter how many times he thought it, it didn’t change the way he felt when he looked at this Dean, the Dean currently cowering beneath his touch as if terrified he was about to be subjected to yet another beating. Or more torture.

Because John had no doubt this version of his son had been tortured.

“It’s going to be okay, son,” he murmured against Dean’s temple, finally pulling away from the trembling boy. “It’s going to be okay.”

Triage. He needed to triage the kid’s injuries.

At first he tried to be clinical and detached as he began cataloguing the bruises and the cuts, the gouges in the pale skin and the way Dean’s bones showed starkly through emaciated flesh. There were trails of dried blood stemming from his ears and his nose, which looked like it might be broken. More blood caked parched, split lips, running down over his stubble-covered chin and neck. His jaw and his cheekbones were badly bruised, as if he’d been punched or repeatedly had his face slammed into something hard, and a ring of finger-shaped bruises darkened his throat like a necklace beneath the thick manacle chaining him to the wall behind him.

His wrists and ankles were similarly shackled, bruises purple and black blossoming over broken, rubbed raw skin, and the soles of his bare feet were burnt and blistered.

John swallowed as he tried to remain focused, remain calm, remain in control of himself. But the more he saw of the ugly mess something had made of his boy’s body, the harder that became.

“Dean...” he whispered, pressing a gentle hand against his son’s stomach, only for his fingers to come away sticky with barely-dried blood. Dean whimpered slightly at the touch, but didn’t pull away, which in some small way heartened John as he gently examined his son’s abused torso.

Dean’s t-shirt was tattered and bloodstained, and John didn’t want to think about what had caused the ugly tears in the fabric and the flesh beneath. Part of him, the hunter part of him, wanted to think he was looking at claw marks left by some animal or supernatural monster. But the other part of him, the soldier part of him, recognized only too well that the monster who had done this to his boy had been all-too-human, and that fingernails had torn those ragged trails across his son’s chest and abdomen.

Dean winced and tried to draw away as John’s fingers ghosted up over his chest to his collarbone. From the odd angle of his left arm, John was fairly sure the kid’s shoulder was dislocated.

There were dark circles under the huge bloodshot green eyes, which continued to gaze at him uncomprehendingly, Dean’s cheeks sunken and hollow, and John wondered when the boy had last eaten.

“God, who did this to you, son?” he mumbled, his hands coming to rest at the nape of the young man’s neck. “Dean?”

Dean took a slow, shuddering breath, his head falling back limply into his father's steady hands. His focus had shifted so he appeared to be looking up at the ceiling, but John wasn't sure the boy was actually seeing anything at all.

Gently taking his son in his arms, John carefully nestled Dean's head against his own shoulder, careful not to jostle the dislocated arm as he slowly lowered Dean into a more reclined position. He could feel the boy's heartbeat, at first quick and erratic, but beginning to slow as his battered body gradually relaxed into John's embrace.

Does he recognize me? Does he even know I'm here? John couldn't answer the questions in his head, all he could do was hold on to his son and at least let him know he wasn't alone.

Because John was under no illusions as to what was happening here. He knew how this story ended.

His son was dying.

The young man coughed wetly, fresh blood staining his lips as he continued to gaze serenely at the ceiling.

"Dean...?" John whispered, tenderly running his fingers through his boy's hair. *Not my boy. Not my Dean...* "Dean? Who—who did this to you? Son? Who hurt you like this?"

The boy had clearly been beaten, starved, tortured. And over a prolonged period of time. John needed to know. He needed to know why. He needed to know who.

Dean's breathing was becoming erratic, his chest rising and falling in painful little pants as more blood bubbled up onto his lips. He wasn't looking at John, wasn't seeing him at all, but something had altered in his expression as he continued to stare past John's face and up to the darkened ceiling.

"S-S—" The sound was little more than a hiss, but John bent his ear toward the boy's mouth to listen.

"Dean? Dean, tell me what happened, son. Tell me who did this."

"S-Sammy."

John's gut clenched. Sam. Where was Sam? He'd not even considered that his youngest son might be here too. Was he in the same condition as Dean? Had he been tortured? Was he even still alive?

"Dean? Dean, where's your brother, son?" he asked urgently, pulling Dean closer to his chest. "Dean? Where's Sam? Is he alright? Is he hurt?"

"S-Sammy..."

Dean's eyes widened, and he finally seemed able to focus on something, something beyond John's shoulder. And what he saw clearly petrified him. He was shaking his head ever so slightly, eyes brimming with panic and mounting terror. "No. Sammy."

John felt Dean's body stiffen in his arms, his breath hitching in his chest, before the young man suddenly went completely lax, one last exhale rattling in his throat as he breathed his last.

"Dean?" John felt his eyes burn as he looked down into the empty green orbs of his eldest son, open and staring at nothing, his lips slightly parted as if still trying to call for his brother, even after death. "Dean, no."

John pulled his son's body closer, hanging his head as he pressed his mouth against the boy's dirt-smeared forehead.

This couldn't be happening. Not again. He couldn't watch his son die again.

"Dean..."

"Dad?"

John's head shot up, twisting to look over his shoulder in the direction Dean had been gazing.

"Sammy?"

Sam was *right there*, right there, standing behind him this whole time. His youngest son, his youngest was here, just when he needed him. Just when *Dean* needed him.

"Sammy. Sammy, are you okay, are you hurt?"

From the meager daylight leaking in through the barred skylight, Sam appeared whole and undamaged, not a mark on him. His clothes were pristine, his hair for once tidy, and he didn't seem at all troubled by the sight of his brother's battered, lifeless corpse laid out in his father's lap.

"Sammy, thank God you're here!" John burst out, switching his gaze briefly to his eldest's suddenly still form. "Your brother. Sam. Your brother—" He turned his attention back to Sam, who nodded, slowly.

"Yes," he said, his tone carefully neutral. "My brother. Always did get in my way. I enjoyed playing with him for a while. But then he stopped screaming. After that he really wasn't much fun anymore."

John looked up sharply, squinting at his youngest son, backlit by the skylight as dark shadows played across his face. "Sam?"

"Don't worry, Daddy," Sam said, his voice completely flat and emotionless. "It's okay. You'll get your turn."

And as a cold smile inched its way across his lips, Sam's eyes flashed yellow.

Part Four

Yellow light pried open Sam's eyelids, and he found himself blinking into a cloudless blue sky and bright, blinding sunshine.

Ow.

He closed his eyes again quickly, his head throbbing as he tried to figure out why he appeared to be lying flat on his back under a burning midday sun.

He'd been at the roadhouse talking to Ellen and that Ash guy about alternate realities and parallel universes and—

Dean.

"Dean!"

He shot up into a sitting position, suddenly aware of his hand numbing as it clamped down hard around skin and bone. Someone's wrist. He was hanging on to someone's wrist so tightly his fingers had cramped.

"You done holding my hand there, Sammy?"

Sam blinked and dragged in a ragged breath, impossibly relieved to see his older brother sitting right there next to him, as real and as solid as the sandy ground beneath them.

Sand? Why were they sitting on sand? Where the hell were they this time?

Sam glanced about himself, attempting to get his bearings, his fingers refusing to release their vice-like hold on Dean's wrist, not for one second.

Dean, apparently, appeared not to notice, allowing Sam the physical contact as if he was also afraid if his little brother let go one of them might disappear.

"Desert," Sam observed rather obviously, his gaze stretching out over the miles and miles of sand, rock, cactus and burningly hot sun in every direction. He wiped his free hand across his already glistening forehead, the sun beating down on his back as he searched to the horizon for any sign of civilization.

There was nothing. No road, no buildings. And no shade anywhere. In any direction.

He swallowed, his mouth already bone dry.

"I think we might be in Arizona or Nevada, judging by the vegetation," he said. "Somewhere in the Mojave maybe?"

Dean squinted at him. "Vegetation?" he echoed. "Well thank you Mr. National Geographic. I'll be sure to give you a call next time I'm lost in a desert with no idea how I got there."

Rising stiffly to his feet, Dean started to peel off his jacket before glancing down at Sam's hand still clamped around his wrist.

Sam smiled sheepishly before reluctantly letting go, breathing a sigh of relief when Dean didn't fizzle out into nothing.

"So why'd you grab me?" Dean asked casually, stripping off both his jacket and his outer shirt, his t-shirt already damp with sweat.

Sam stood on wobbly legs and followed suit, tying his outer garments around his waist and shrugging. "Figured if the universe wanted to keep us together, I'd help," he said. "The three of us were separated at the church, right? And we ended up in different places. I thought maybe if I was holding on to you—"

"We'd wind up in the same place," Dean finished for him, nodding. "Okay. Speaking of," he added, putting his hands on his hips and surveying the surrounding area, "you figure we're anywhere near Vegas?"

Sam snorted, despite their apparently dire predicament. "Unlikely," he said. "You're not that lucky."

Dean blew out a breath. "So why did the universe—or whatever—decide to dump us here in the middle of nowhere? Up till now we've always turned up in some whacky alternate version of our lives, right? But here?" Dean shook his head. "There's nothing here, man. No one we know. Nowhere we've been. No event we've ever experienced—"

"Well, there was that time I was stranded in the Sonoran Desert looking for Gertrude Tompkins Silver and her downed airplane," Sam put in.

Dean crinkled his brow. "But that was a hallucination, right? You never really lived it."

"Maybe in this reality I *did* really live it," Sam offered.

Dean shook his head, turning and walking a few steps away. "Whatever man. But our biggest problem here?"

"Aside from no water, no food and no clue where we are?" Sam interrupted.

"Bigger than that, man!" Dean insisted. "We got no Impala!"

Sam smiled indulgently. "Yeah, Dean, that's definitely our biggest problem."

Dean huffed as he turned on his heel and resumed walking. "Well if we had the Impala, smartass, we could get to somewhere with food and water," he grumbled.

Sam sighed, following sluggishly in Dean's wake. "So where exactly are we going and what are we doing when we get there?" he asked.

Dean glanced back at him. "Well right now we're walking," he observed, before motioning to a high rocky outcropping rising up out of the desert about a half mile in the distance. "And I figured maybe if we climb up there, we might be able to get a lay of the land. See which way's civilization. Or a McDonalds at least. There's bound to be a McDonalds, even out here in the middle of nowhere."

Sam shrugged and, for lack of any better ideas, followed Dean's lead without further comment.

The two of them walked in relative silence, Dean occasionally swearing at cacti, rocks and the sun while Sam looked around for anything they could use for sustenance, should they find themselves stuck in this reality for any length of time. But he could see nothing, not even the saguaro cacti that had sustained him during his previous desert hallucination.

The absence of those plants cast doubt on Sam's previous theory that maybe he'd really gone after Gertrude Silver in this reality, however, and he began to wonder what his life was like here, who he was. Was Jessica alive here? Was Dean?

"There's someone up there." Dean's voice broke in on Sam's thoughts, his brother standing at the foot of the rocky ridge with his head tilted slightly to the side as he looked upwards.

Sam followed his brother's gaze up to the top of the ridge where, sure enough, a dark figure appeared to be laid out on the rock, and Sam was unaccountably reminded of lizards basking in the sun.

There was a little bit too much sun for someone to be basking here though. Baking, maybe.

"Maybe that's who we're here to meet," Sam suggested, bulldozing past his brother and heading for the winding slope that led up to the top of the ridge.

"Hey!" Dean protested, scrambling to keep up. "Hold up there, Bambi!"

While Sam was a little more sure-footed than your average baby deer, his longer legs did mean he made it to the top of the ridge some way in front of Dean, the figure laid out on the rocks coming into clearer view as he finally mounted the summit.

Sam swallowed bile and fought the urge to retch.

It was a man, sure enough. A man bound with thick ropes around his wrists and ankles to a wooden X-shaped cross staked out on the rock. The ropes were heavily bloodstained, as if he'd been trying fruitlessly to free himself for some time, and, glancing up at the sweltering sun, Sam had no doubt that someone had left this man out here to die.

Sam quickened his pace, dashing over to the man despite Dean's protestations from behind him.

"Sam? Sam, where are you going? Just *wait*, dammit!"

Sam ignored his brother as he hastened toward the stricken man, and it was only when he drew within a few feet of him that he realized, with a sickening lurch of his stomach, that he recognized him.

"Dad?"

Rushing to his father's side, Sam collapsed to his knees, his hand ghosting first over the bruises purpling John's throat and then over his cheek, raw and blistered from prolonged exposure to the sun. His wrists were chafed raw and bloody, and there was blood glistening in his hairline.

"Dad? Dad can you hear me?"

John flinched at Sam's gentle touch, turning his head away from his son. "Get away from me, you evil son of a bitch," he ground out through clenched teeth and cracked, parched lips. "You touch me again and I'll kill you, I swear to God!"

It was Sam's turn to flinch, rocking back on his heels as if his father had slapped him.

"Dad?" he whispered uncertainly. "Dad, it's me, it's Sam!"

Gotta be delirious, he told himself. *Out here all this time...sunstroke...blood loss...*

John's eyes cracked open to tiny slits of brown, his face turning back in Sam's direction even as his body appeared to cower away.

"Dad?"

John was looking right at him. "I'll kill you. I swear I'll kill you," he growled.

"Dad..." Sam reached out a trembling hand, and John again whipped his face away. "Dad, it's Sammy..."

John screwed his eyes and his mouth tightly shut and refused to look back at his youngest son, who rose shakily to his feet, taking a step away from his father's battered form.

"Dean!" he called urgently over his shoulder. "Dean, get up here!"

But Dean was already there, heading toward Sam's position at double time.

"Dude, who were you talking to...?"

Dean stopped short as his eyes lit on the figure laid out like carrion on the scorching rocks, all color draining from his face as his lips appeared to fight to catch up with his brain. "Dad?" he whispered, feet not moving for a second. His eyes darted to Sam's before he too was skidding onto his knees at his father's side, his hand gently brushing the eldest Winchester's forehead. "Dad? Dad, talk to me!"

Sam stood back and let his brother take over, hands clasped uselessly in front of him as if he didn't know quite what to do with them. "I think he's delirious..." he managed to croak out. "He didn't—I don't think he knew me..."

"Dad?" Dean was whispering in his father's ear as if Sam hadn't spoken. "Dad it's Dean. Dad, look at me. Please? Dad?"

John's head moved slightly, his eyes opening once again. "Dean?" he whispered, struggling to focus on his eldest son, a shadow of pain and anguish passing over his weathered features. "Dean, I'm sorry," he croaked, his words broken and pained. "I'm so sorry..."

Dean continued to gently stroke his father's brow, digging into his jeans pocket for the knife he kept there. "It's okay, Dad. We're gonna get you out of here," he assured the older man. "It's gonna be okay."

Sam took a step toward his brother's back, wringing his hands uncertainly. "He didn't seem to know me, Dean," he repeated, trying to look at his father over his brother's shoulder. "It was as if—it was as if he was *afraid* of me..."

"Afraid of you?" Dean echoed, going to work on his father's bindings with his pocket knife. "Why would he be afraid of you?"

"Oh, he has every reason to be afraid of Sam."

Sam turned sharply at the sound of a voice behind him.

A familiar voice.

"Sam?" Dean stood, and was immediately at Sam's shoulder, and Sam didn't need to turn around to picture the expression on his brother's face. Because he was pretty sure it was mirrored on his own.

"How—who—??"

The Sam Winchester standing in front of them seemed taller, bigger, his shoulders broader than Sam's and his chest and arms more muscular. His hair was short and neat and he was dressed pretty much as Sam himself was, in jeans and a t-shirt, although he looked like he'd just wandered out from an air-conditioned penthouse where a martini was still waiting for him at the bar.

"Holy crap," Dean muttered in Sam's ear. "So much for paradox."

"Nice to see you here, Sam," the other Sam said, taking a step toward the Winchesters. "I thought you might show up eventually."

Sam retreated a step, Dean's hand suddenly on his bicep trying to pull his not-so-little brother behind him.

But Sam stood his ground, moving slightly in front of Dean, who virtually growled at him.

"Sam..."

"Did—did I—" Sam began to stammer, raising his chin a little. "Did *you* do this?"

Other Sam grinned horribly, spine straightening so that he seemed to grow at least another couple of inches taller. "He got in my way, Sammy," he said, his eyes suddenly flashing yellow. "Just like Dean."

Sam drew in a sharp breath as Dean's fingers tightened on his arm.

The other Sam—yellow-eyed Sam—glanced lazily at the older brother, his grin widening into a sickening smirk. "Not you, big brother," he said softly. "The other one. The Dean who belongs here. The Dean who belongs to *me*."

"The one you tortured and killed," John managed to rasp from behind them, and Sam's knees nearly went right out from under him.

No, no, no... He wouldn't believe it. He *couldn't* believe it. He'd never hurt Dean...*never...*

Yellow-eyed Sam laughed horribly, running a hand through his hair in a gesture that was sickeningly familiar. "Oh Sammy," he taunted. "Look at you. So weak. So pathetic. What kind of pansy-ass reality are you feeble excuses for Winchesters from anyway?"

Dean lurched toward the other Sam, but his brother held him back.

"Dean, don't—"

"Come on, Dean. Show me some of that Winchester spirit!"

"Oh, I'll show you somethin'," Dean spat. "How about my fist in your face for starters?"

Yellow-eyed Sam chuckled mirthlessly. "Oh Dean. I guess you're the same in any reality. All mouth and nothing of substance underneath." He took a step toward the

brothers, and Sam instinctively shoved Dean back a step. "I'm going to squash you like a bug," he continued, fiery eyes never leaving Dean's. "Taste the iron in your blood. Just like *my* Dean. Oh we had such fun, he and I. Such good times. When I made him scream it was really kind of pitiful."

"You son of a bitch," Dean growled, pushing against Sam's restraining hand. "You're not Sam! No matter what you think you are! Sam would never do this. Sam would never—"

"Oh but he would," the yellow-eyed freak continued. "We're the same person underneath everything, aren't we, Sammy?"

Sam swallowed, trying to drag his voice up from somewhere near his feet. "I'm nothing like you," he insisted. "I'd never do anything like this to my father, my—my family."

The other Sam continued to smirk at them placidly. "Self-delusion is such a beautiful thing."

"How the hell did you get like this?" Dean demanded, and Sam wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know the answer to his brother's question.

"Azazel," yellow-eyed Sam replied helpfully. "He made me what I am today. What I was always meant to be." He chuckled. "Demon blood. Better than mother's milk."

Sam couldn't breathe, couldn't think. *Demon blood?*

"You're weak, Sammy," the other Sam continued. "Look at you. Like a little puppy dog, following your big brother around on a leash. You always do what he tells you? Huh? Good little soldier? Just like him?"

"You don't know anything about me—"

"I know you never built on the gift Azazel gave to you, to us. Demon blood. The drink of champions. One sip is all it takes. Just give in to it, let those switches flip in your brain. It's amazing what you can accomplish. The power. The rush."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Sam burst out. "Demon blood? And who the hell is Azazel?"

"Haris," John managed to choke out. "It's another name for Haris."

"*That* pipsqueak did this to you?" Dean burst out. "Aw man! And you call *him* weak?" He inclined his head in Sam's direction.

"He gave me the greatest gift any father could bestow upon his son," yellow-eyed Sam said, sounding almost defensive. "His blood runs through my veins. I might not be his actual progeny, but this is the closest a human can ever come to one so divine—"

"Haris—Azazel was a *demon*," Dean pointed out. "Nothin' divine about that freak o' nature."

"Azazel was one of the Fallen," other Sam corrected him. "One of the Heavenly Host. And he saw fit to bleed into my mouth when I was six months old. He gave me this gift, this *power*..."

"He did *what*?" Sam burst out in horror. "He bled *into your mouth*?"

"That's kinda disgusting, dude," Dean added from behind him.

"Not to mention jacked," Sam agreed. "That never happened! I don't have *demon blood* in me! What the hell are you talking about?"

Yellow-eyed Sam tapped his lip with his index finger. "Interesting. How different our realities must be."

"You're a *monster*," Sam spat. "*That's* how different our realities must be! How could you have done this to your own father...?"

"He's not my father," the other Sam reminded him. "He's *your* father. Mine died—well, he died some time ago. Burned to death. Just like Mom. If it hadn't been for big brother here, I would have gone up in flames too."

"And you repaid him by torturing him to death!" John spat, raising his head slightly from the rock, but just as quickly slamming it back down again.

"I got tired of his bleating," other Sam informed them. "*You can't do that, Sammy, it's wrong!* Boy was I tired of hearing that by the time I was old enough to chain him

to a wall in my basement! You know, sometimes I wish he'd actually let Child Services split us up."

Sam tried to take a breath but his chest hurt. "How—how can you say that? If he saved your *life*...?"

"First time he saved me from the fire, he was just a scared kid. Took me out of the house like Dad told him to. End of story. Second time? Second time he wished he let me die. I didn't owe him anything."

Sam shook his head. "He was your *brother!*"

"Hey, he tried to kill me first," yellow-eyed Sam informed them. "I just returned the favor."

Sam shook his head. "You're a sick freak," he spat. "I'm *nothing* like you. I'll *never* be anything like you!"

"Don't be like that, Sammy! You might be from a different reality but we're the same person deep down."

"No," Sam said, vehemently shaking his head. "No way. Azazel—Haris. He didn't do the same thing to me that he did to you! I don't have any demon blood in me! It's the curse—the Winchester curse. That's what makes me the way I am. It's the universe balancing itself out! Cursed families given power to make up for the crimes of their ancestors. No demon blood involved!"

"That's a nice story," other Sam scoffed. "Who told you that one? Daddy? Well I guess whatever helps you sleep at night."

"It's the truth!" Sam spat, before repeating, "You don't know anything about me. *Or* my reality!"

"But I know about your family. I know about your *weakness*. I know you're not who you think you are, Sam."

"That's crap," Dean put in. "Just because ole Yellow-Eyes screwed you over don't mean he did the same thing to Sam."

"Be quiet, Dean. I always said you talked too much."

Yellow-eyed Sam raised his hand casually, and, acting on pure instinct Sam figured, Dean reached for his Colt, his fingers tightening around the handle just as the gun was wrestled from his grip and flung off the edge of the ridge.

"Sonofa—" Dean took a step forward, bringing the pocket knife he'd been using to saw through his father's bonds up in front of him.

Yellow-eyed Sam raised an amused eyebrow as he made a tiny motion with his fingers, Dean suddenly flying through the air following the same trajectory as his gun.

He landed with a bone-jarring thud flat on his back right on the precipice of the ridge, one leg and one arm dangling precariously over the edge and the thirty foot drop straight down below.

"Dean!"

Sam took an anguished step toward where his brother lay motionless, cursing as he struggled to get back to his feet, or at least pull himself from the cliff edge.

"Can't move, Sammy," he managed to grit out to his brother. "Sick freak's pinning me down!"

Yellow-eyed Sam smiled in self-satisfaction, his hand still slightly raised. "Just you and me now, Sammy."

Sam balled his fists at his sides and took a threatening step toward his mirror image. "You let him go," he growled menacingly. "Right *now*."

"Or you'll what?" the other Sam asked. "Emo me to death?" He twitched one finger as the sadistic smile slid further across his too-familiar features, and Dean suddenly started to scream, his whole body stiffening in obvious agony and his teeth clamped together against the pain. "Music to me ears," yellow-eyed Sam continued. "It's been such a long time since I made big brother scream like that. Makes me all nostalgic."

Sam cast a helpless glance over at Dean's writhing form before turning back to his double. "Stop," he said quietly. "Please. Just stop."

Yellow-eyed Sam raised his fist in front of him, casually squeezing it tighter as his eyes slid closed and Dean's screams doubled in intensity.

"Dean!" Sam took a step toward his brother, away from the monster doing this to him, but suddenly faltered.

His brother was struggling to breathe, his screams cutting off into agonized gasps as he fought to take in air, while blood started to trickle from his nose and his mouth.

It was the cabin all over again, and Sam felt as helpless as he had then, as Harris had used his father's meatsuit to rip Dean apart from the inside out.

"You son of a bitch, you let him go!" John suddenly yelled, some measure of strength and coherence returning to his voice.

Other Sam's eyes snapped open at the interruption, the yellow irises flaming to gold, and he smiled sadistically as his fingers moved slightly in John's direction, Sam's father's screams abruptly rending the air in concert with his brother's.

"Who'd have thought I'd get to kill them both twice, huh?" yellow-eyed Sam gloated. "Must be my lucky day."

Sam swallowed, trying not to listen to the screams of his family being torn to shreds. "I-I thought you said your father died in a fire?" he stammered.

"Oh he did," other Sam confirmed. "But he might have survived if I hadn't tied him up and poured gasoline on him first."

Sam's mouth opened and snapped shut again. "You—you killed your *own father*?"

Yellow-eyed Sam's expression became wistful. "Oh, Dean tried to stop me. Ever the good little soldier. He was twelve when Daddy dearest told him he might have to kill me someday. If he couldn't save me. Like I needed saving. He was too weak to do either himself, so he thought he'd offload it on his kid, his good son. His *normal* son. Mistake. He should have offed me as soon as he found out the truth, but he didn't have the stones. Seemed surprised when I torched him as an eleventh birthday present to myself. Dean pulled me out of the house, of course, after I left Dad melting in the basement. Made all kinds of excuses for me—I was possessed, I wasn't myself, it was an accident. Yeah. Dad *accidentally* got hit over the head with a shovel and tied up in the basement and I *accidentally* poured a can of gasoline all over him. And the matches? Well I don't know *how* they got in my hands. Or *how* they got struck. Or *how* they got thrown at my dad. All an accident. That's what he told Child Services. Not my fault. *Please let us stay together, sir, he's my brother.* Yeah. He came to regret that one. Didn't try to off me till I was twenty-two though. It was kinda funny he should wind up in the basement, just like Dad. Thought I'd take my time with him. Savor the moment. Or the years. My own private little chew toy, just waiting to be played with like a favorite puppy."

"You—you kept him locked up for—for—"

Other Sam glanced theatrically at his watch. "Oh, about four years, give or take. Thought he'd leave me alone after I went off to Stanford, but no. He was always there. Hovering. Waiting to see if I went *evil*."

"I guess he was right about that one."

"Takes one to know one, Sammy."

"I'm *not* evil," Sam insisted. "And just because you killed *your* family doesn't mean I'm just gonna let you kill *mine*."

Sam wasn't helpless.

He *wasn't* helpless.

He knew things now he didn't know back then, back at the cabin.

He could save Dean. He could save Dad. He just had to control it.

"Give it your best shot, Sammy," other Sam taunted him, arms held wide. "Let's see whatcha got."

Sam gritted his teeth. He was pissed and he was scared and he was pretty damn well freaked out of his brain, but his brother and his dad were in danger, and he was *not* going to let this freak of nature—this freak of nature with his face and his name—hurt them any more than he already had. *Sam's* Dad and Dean weren't going to be

victims like this sicko, psycho, whacked out version of Sam's Dad and Dean had been.

He took a step forward, slowing his breathing, relaxing his tense muscles.

"This is your last warning," he said slowly, carefully, looking himself calmly in the eye. Yellow eyes. "Let my brother and my father go. Right now."

Other Sam chuckled. "Please, Sammy. You think you can hurt me? You're toothless. Helpless. *Hopeless*. If it's true, if Azazel didn't give you the gift of his blood when you were a baby, then you're *nothing*, you're powerless, and there's not a damn thing you can do to save Dean, your dad, or yourself. You and your pitiful family were brought to my world for a reason, Sam. You were brought here so I could show you who Sam Winchester really is, who he was really meant to be."

"I *know* who I was really meant to be," Sam snarled, closing his eyes and concentrating. "You ever think maybe I was brought here to show *you* who Sam Winchester really is?"

He could do this. He could control it. It didn't have to control *him*, not the way it always had before. It didn't have to be instinctive, it didn't have to be a freak adrenaline thing.

Sam's "gift" wasn't going to own him the way this other Sam's "gift" had taken control and twisted him beyond recognition.

He gritted his teeth, tried to feel it, tried to feel the power he knew he had within him. But all he could feel was a mind-numbing pain in his chest and as he heard Dean gasping for breath behind him, he knew he was feeling what his brother was feeling, his brother's agony.

No, no, no... It was too much, he couldn't concentrate, all he could feel was how much Dean was hurting, the fire in his chest and his head and—and—then he could feel something deeper, something darker, the power behind the pain, the power that was causing it. That other Sam's fist held in front of him, hammering his brother down into the ground and crushing his chest. It was like fire thrumming through his veins, the taint of it, the corruption of it. The power of it. Demon blood, coursing through him, black and malevolent and so, so intoxicating he almost... almost....

It's not going to own me. This is not who I'm supposed to be.

He felt dizzy and nauseous, and could sense the world spinning around him even as he held perfectly still. It wasn't going to own him. It wasn't going to control him. *He* was the one in control. *He* was the one who was going to save his family. He could feel it all at his fingertips, power and knowledge beyond anything he'd experienced, and as that yellow-eyed freak had said before, it was an incredible rush, such a rush and he could own it, it could be his. Everything could be his.

There was a rushing in his ears, like water, like fire, and screaming. He could hear screaming. His dad. Dean.

This wasn't him. This wasn't who he was. This wasn't who he was meant to be.

He was good. He was kind. He was powerful.

He was a mirror.

There was another scream, different. Not Dad, not Dean.

Sam could hear himself screaming.

Except he wasn't making a sound.

Cracking open one eye, he saw the other Sam fall to his knees, his hands clutching at his head in obvious agony. He was looking at Sam with a question in his eyes, his yellow eyes, his mouth slightly open in surprise.

"How did you...?"

"*This* is what I was always meant to be," Sam told him, reflecting his double's demonic power back against him, just as he had with Lucifer, with Mia, with Alyssa and with those demons in Elko. "*This* is who Sam Winchester really is."

It felt almost like it had back at Mount Diablo, when he'd felt Gudrun's energy mixing with his own, thrumming through his body, using him as a conduit. Almost. But not quite. Because it felt different this time. Back then, he could feel Gudrun's power

as a separate entity, something that was his to use but not *his*. This time? This time it felt different, as if this other Sam, this monstrous, twisted, tainted Sam, *this* Sam's power wasn't something alien to him, something that belonged to someone else that he was just reflecting or borrowing or augmenting within himself. This power, the power coursing through his veins, this power felt like *his* power, like something that belonged to *him* and him only.

And he had never felt so strong or so in control of it before.

"Stop!" the other Sam begged, still clutching at his head. "What are you doing? How are you doing this?"

"So I'm powerless, huh?" Sam almost smiled as the screaming in his ears abated, and he could feel Dean breathing, could feel the air being drawn into his lungs, the steady rise and fall of his chest and the beating of his heart.

"You can't be doing this! You *can't!*"

The other Sam screamed and screwed his eyes closed as Sam balled his fist in front of him and squeezed.

"No!"

And when his eyes reopened, wide and terrified, they were no longer yellow.

And he was laughing.

"That's it, Sammy," he crowed. "Yellow suits you! Look how pretty your eyes are now!"

"Sam, no!"

Sam distantly heard his father scream at him, even as he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the face of the watch on his raised arm.

Yellow eyes.

He had yellow eyes.

The other Sam was laughing so hard he was choking on his own blood.

Or maybe that was just what Sam had done to him.

"I'm *nothing like you!*" Sam yelled, again balling his fist, just as the other Sam had when he had been torturing Dean and his father, and again his mirror image cried out in anguish, blood running from his mouth and his nose and his all-too-hazel eyes.

"We're the same, Sammy. You just won't admit it!"

"No!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam sensed movement.

Dean was on his feet. He was unsteady and his body swayed precariously, but he was moving, heading over toward their father as Sam distracted the other Sam, the one who had been pinning his brother to the cliff edge.

Dean still had his pocket knife clutched in his hand and began to hack at the ropes restraining John, and, as Sam watched him, his concentration was momentarily distracted from the battle at hand as his brother triumphantly freed their father and tried to get him to his feet.

But John was beat all to hell and could barely move, and all Sam wanted to do was go to him, help his brother, get them to safety.

And that was when he felt it, a constriction about his throat, and as he turned his attention back to his double, he again caught a glimpse of his reflection, the yellow flickering out of his eyes even as that other Sam clambered back to his feet and drew himself up to his full, admittedly impressive height, eyes once again as yellow as sulfur.

"Nearly had me there, Sammy," yellow-eyed Sam growled. "Nice try though. Maybe in the next life."

Sam grunted as he suddenly felt as if his windpipe was being crushed, the other Sam once again smiling sadistically as he squeezed his fist tight.

This time, it was Sam who collapsed to his knees, his hands about his throat as he struggled to draw in air. He felt as if every inch of him was on fire, as if he was burning up from the outside in.

"This is how it was for Mommy," yellow-eyed Sam taunted, taking a step toward him. "For Jess."

Sam tried to fight back, tried to concentrate, to once again feel the other Sam's power flowing through him. But he'd lost it, he'd lost the control he'd established, if only briefly, if only for long enough to free his brother and his father. The mirroring wasn't working, he couldn't do it anymore, and Sam knew he was going to die here.

And if he died, Dean and Dad died with him.

He managed to open his pain-filled eyes long enough to turn his gaze up to his alter ego, standing there smiling as he choked the life out of him with a flick of his wrist. There was pure evil reflected in his flame-colored irises. And it was terrifying.

"Take it like a man, Sammy," other Sam crowed. "It's not your fault you're inferior. It's not your fault you can only borrow other people's power. It's not your fault you're going to die here, and that when I'm done with you I'm going to dissect your father and your brother and burn their entrails while they watch."

"Nice image. Anyone ever tell you you're one sick puppy?"

Sam looked up at the sound of his brother's voice, the other Sam barely having time to turn before Dean had produced the feather from his jeans pocket and rammed it into the back of his brother's double's neck.

Other Sam virtually howled in agony, once again falling to his knees as the weeping tip of the remnant bled into his body. Almost immediately, his skin became ashen and his body rigid, while his eyes were obsidian pools of nothing and the veins stood out black on his face, his neck, his hands and his arms.

Sam vividly remembered the fate of the demons under Mount Diablo, the ones Dean had killed with the feather, the way they had exploded into ash.

"Sam, why's he not dyin'?" Dean demanded, pulling the feather from the copy of his brother and taking a step back.

It was the demon blood in the other Sam's veins. The demon blood was turning to ash.

Sam dragged in a ragged breath. "Because he's not a demon," he explained. "Only the blood inside of him is demonic. That's the only part the feather can destroy."

And even as the other Sam screamed, he began to laugh maniacally. "He shoots, he misses!" he yelled, the color gradually returning to his face and his eyes. Yellow eyes. Always yellow. "You can't kill me, Sammy," he growled, breathing hard as he rose shakily to his feet. "And I might not be able to kill you." He glanced dismissively over his shoulder at Dean and smiled mirthlessly. "But I can kill *him*."

"No—!"

Even as Sam lunged toward his brother, Dean was flung backwards and up, held frozen in midair by the power of yellow-eyed Sam's will, exactly as he had been when Lucifer had dangled him over the Hellgate in Leicester. Except this time, Dean was kicking wildly and clawing at his throat as his airway constricted.

Other Sam was grinning maniacally, although it was pretty clear to Sam that his power was beginning to wane along with the demon blood now neutralized in his veins. It was only a little tremble of his hand that gave him away, the flicker of hazel in his eyes, the choppiness of his breathing.

"This is how it works, Sammy," he nevertheless crowed, as if nothing was wrong and he was as strong as he had always been. "This is how our family dies."

Sam snorted derisively as he began to feel the more familiar thrum of his own power tingling inside of him at the sight of Dean held there, helpless. "Not today," he said. "And not because of you. You really don't know anything about me, do you? What makes me tick? What pushes my buttons? What really pisses me off? Like someone trying to hurt my family, my brother. That makes me angry. And you wouldn't like me when I'm angry."

The grin on the other Sam's face faltered, even as the yellow began to drain from his eyes and his knees started to buckle.

The instinct to protect his loved ones, to protect *Dean*, had always been the trigger, had always been what kicked Sam's mirroring power into high gear, even before he knew what it was that was happening to him and had no idea how to control it.

And he could feel it now, feel it like a living thing, something inside of him that he could take hold of and wield as he saw fit, bolstered and amplified by the reflected power of the other Sam's demon blood still thrumming in his veins.

His hand spasmed, and the other Sam's eyes widened in shocked surprise as he was driven to his knees once more while Dean was dropped unceremoniously to the floor, choking and hacking, but breathing and most definitely still alive.

"My family are going to survive, you sadistic little freak," Sam spat, his fingers once again tightening into a fist. "I can't say the same for you."

He could feel himself choking the life out of the other Sam, almost as if he was outside of his body, an observer watching a battle in which he had no part. He could feel it, could feel his double's chest constricting as he fought for air that was forever to be denied him.

And he enjoyed it.

Sam enjoyed it, and he reveled in his enemy's pain.

Other Sam doubled over, his hands scrabbling at his throat, before he finally keeled over onto his side, his eyes wide and never leaving Sam's.

"I'm nothing like you," Sam repeated, striding over to his duplicate. "I'm *never* going to be like you. I'm not a monster."

"Don't be so sure, Sammy," the other Sam gasped, his body twitching helplessly on the rocky ground. "Don't be so sure."

He dragged in one final breath, hazel eyes locked with Sam's before the light was finally extinguished from them completely.

And Sam was left gazing down at his own face staring up at him in death.

There was a terrible silence when all Sam could hear was the sound of his own heart hammering against his ribcage.

Dean had somehow managed to struggle to his feet, and was just staring at him.

"S-Sammy?" he managed, his voice distinctly shaky.

Sam couldn't even bring himself to look at his brother, all he could do was continue to stare into his own dead eyes.

And then the ground began to shake.

Sam looked up sharply, at first believing it to be an earthquake, Mount Diablo all over again.

But then there was a sudden, ear-shattering crack of thunder, and lightning spiking down from a cloudless blue sky, and Sam knew this wasn't an earthquake, wasn't a thunderstorm, wasn't anything that could ever be explained in nature.

Because the sky had inexplicably turned blood red, and as lightning lit up the desert for miles around and thunder shook the parched ground, the sky itself seemed to split open just as the ground beneath them did the same, the ridge on which they were standing beginning to fracture into smaller pieces as the sky was torn apart above their heads.

"Sam!" Dean was yelling as the ground began to crumble between them. "Sam, what the hell's happening?"

Sam was thrown to his knees as the rock beneath him lurched and bucked, Dean falling backwards as the chasm widened between them.

Physical contact. Sam remembered how he'd held on to Dean's wrist during their last shift into this reality, how keeping hold of him had kept them together.

But he was getting further and further away.

"Dean!"

Sam struggled to his feet, the world rocking and swaying as a black tear opened up like a hungry mouth in the sky above them and the ground continued to shake itself apart.

Dean was on his feet again, looking across at Sam, looking over his shoulder at his father, who was still collapsed on the ground near the makeshift crucifix, and he clearly didn't know which way to go, which direction to take. Who to save.

"Dean, don't move!" Sam yelled, as if reading his brother's mind, stepping back before taking a running jump at the chasm separating them, the chasm into which the body of his double was slipping, falling into an abyss even deeper than the blackness inside his own soul.

Sam swallowed and tried not to dwell on the symbolism, instead leaping over the gulf between himself and his brother and abruptly grabbing Dean's arm so hard the older man actually yelped in surprised pain.

"Sammy, what the hell...?"

"Not this time," Sam interrupted. "It's not Hell this time, Dean! Paradox! It's paradox!"

Dean paused for a second before nodding slowly. "You just killed yourself."

Sam twitched his head in agreement. "It's like Ash said," he confirmed. "About how the universe is trying to avoid paradox at all costs, bouncing us around from reality to reality until it puts us back where we belong. You meeting yourself created a paradox and you were yanked off to another reality. How the hell does the universe deal with *this*, how does it fix *this*?"

"By destroying this reality," Dean murmured. "That's the only way it can deal with the paradox."

Sam nodded urgently. "And if this reality's destroyed while we're still in it..."

"We have to go," Dean said shortly. "Now!"

Just then an even louder crack of thunder resounded around them, a bright flash of lightning shorting out Sam's vision almost as it had when he'd been pulled into a different reality. Except this time, Sam knew he wasn't going anywhere, that he was still stuck in a world tearing itself apart, and he had no idea how to get his family back where they belonged.

"Sam!" Dean was suddenly yelling in his ear. "Sam, look!"

Sam opened his eyes hesitantly, his gaze following the direction of Dean's pointing finger to the far end of the ridge, where the light seemed to dance and swirl into a pattern that didn't seem so random, seemed somehow familiar, solid, *real*...

"Stull church," Sam breathed, barely able to believe it even as he said the words, even as the old stone building flickered in and out of existence in the lightning like a projection in a magic lantern, resolving into something solid and present and *there*, impossibly, in the middle of the desert, in the middle of this reality, where it had absolutely no right to be.

"It's—it's the barrier," Dean stammered. "The—the veil between realities. That's what Ash called it, right? Maybe it's breaking down. As this reality destroys itself. Maybe—"

"It's showing us the way home," Sam agreed, nodding. "We've got to go. Before the universe changes its mind!"

He tugged insistently at Dean's arm, but his brother resisted.

"Dad! We gotta get Dad!"

The brothers turned back in the direction they'd last seen their father, John Winchester curled into a ball on his side, unable to move, unable to stand, unable to do anything but cling to the rattling earth and try not to be dragged down into one of the massive chasms fracturing the ground on all sides of him.

"Dad, no..." Dean tried to pull away from Sam, even as the rift between the boys and their father grew wider and wider.

"Dean, we can't—"

"Yes we *can*," Dean insisted through gritted teeth. "I can make it—"

"Dean, you can't, you'll kill yourself!"

Dean scowled at his brother. "I'm not leaving him!"

"Dean, it's too far—"

And it was. Sam knew as surely as he knew the flickering church was their only way out of here that the gap between them and their father was simply too wide for them to jump.

But that didn't stop Dean trying.

Yanking his arm free of Sam's iron grip, Dean turned and ran full tilt at the massive fracture yawning wider and wider between himself and his dad, and Sam knew that even if by some miracle he managed to jump the chasm between them, he wouldn't be able to get back. He'd die here. Dean would die here with their dad, their dad who could barely even move, much less leap a steadily widening canyon.

And Sam knew he couldn't let that happen. He couldn't lose his brother. He couldn't lose them both.

He couldn't do this alone.

"Dad!"

Dean had reached the edge of the gulf, his leg muscles contracting as they prepared to launch him into the abyss and then... Then he stopped. He just stopped, his body frozen mid-run, arms splayed to the sides, legs slightly bent.

He had his back to Sam, was facing their father, so he couldn't see the hand his little brother had raised in front of him, didn't know that the reflected power of the other Sam still thrumming in the younger Winchester's veins was what had stopped him in his tracks, was holding him immobile, like a bug pinned to a board.

Dean couldn't see that he was unable to move because Sam wouldn't let him.

But John could.

Their eyes met for the briefest of instants, and Sam saw reflected in those deep brown depths the truth of it: that John could see the writing on the wall as clearly as Sam could, even if Dean remained deliberately blind to reality.

"Dad!" Dean was screaming across the gulf, clearly perturbed by his sudden inability to move and the fact that the world was still tearing itself apart around him while he couldn't lift a finger to stop it, to escape, to save his father, to do *anything*, and Sam almost released his hold on him. Almost.

"It's alright, son," John managed to shout back, raising his head from the trembling ground. "It's going to be alright. I'll be okay. But you have to go. You have to leave me here!"

"No!" Dean screamed back, and Sam could see him desperately trying to break free of the grip he had on him, struggling and fighting with every ounce of strength he had left. "Dad! I'm not leaving without you!"

"You'll *die*, Dean! You'll *both* die!"

"Dad, *no*, I *can't*...!"

John pulled himself up into a slumped position, his eyes fixing on his eldest son as he drew in a difficult breath. "Take your brother and run!" he screamed. "*Now*, Dean! Go!"

"Dad..."

"That's an *order*, son!"

Sam lowered his hand, and although he knew Dean was able to move again, for a split second his older brother didn't.

"Dad, no..."

And then Sam could feel it, that familiar pull on his shoulders, something dragging him into another reality just as the door to his *own* world was right there in front of him, right there within his grasp.

He didn't know whether Dean and Dad felt the pull too, didn't know whether they were about to be dragged off to God knows where to face God knows what, but he did know that if he didn't get to Dean, if he didn't grab hold of his brother right now, he was going to lose him too, and neither of them would ever get home.

Decision made, he sprinted toward his brother, grabbing both his arms and yanking him forcibly away from the chasm, away from their father.

"No, Sam, we can't...!" Dean protested angrily. "We can't *leave* him here!"

“Dean, we’ve got to!” Sam yelled back over the roaring wind and the rumbling thunder. “We’ve got to! We can’t help him if we’re dead!”

“Sam, no,” Dean insisted, trying to shake himself loose from his brother. “We’ve got to *try*! We’ve got to try, Sammy!”

“Dean, go!” John shouted again, raising himself up a little further.

“Dad—”

John switched his attention from his eldest to his youngest, desperation in his eyes. “Sam—”

A slight nod was the only acknowledgement Sam gave to his father’s unspoken order, roughly reaffirming his grip on Dean’s arms and literally dragging him away from the chasm and toward the image of the church, which was still flickering in and out of existence, but seemed to be solidifying the more this reality tore itself apart.

Dean tried to put up a fight, and from the expression on his face, Sam was pretty sure he was in for the ass-kicking of his life when they got wherever they were going, but he still had yellow-eyed Sam’s power inside of him, and on this occasion he had the physical advantage over his brother. He was stronger, he was bigger, he hadn’t recently been almost ripped apart by demon blood-induced psychic power; and he was every bit as determined as Dean.

Dean virtually growled at him as he finally gave in, allowing Sam to half-push, half-drag him toward the church, which had now solidified to the point of actually looking like it might lead somewhere rather than merely tempting them to throw themselves off the edge of a cliff.

Reaching out, Sam grabbed the iron handle, twisting hard and roughly yanking open the rickety-looking wooden door before bundling his brother inside.

“Sam—” he heard Dean murmur, all the fight drained from him, his shoulders slumping and his body going limp in Sam’s grip as his eyes drifted back toward the closed door, back toward the direction of their father.

“I know, Dean,” Sam returned. “I know.”

And he pulled his brother to him, kept his desperate hold on him, even as the church in which they once again found themselves standing began to rattle from its very foundations and the world faded out to white.

* * * *

When Sam could see again, when the roaring of the thunder and the shaking of the ground and the flashing of the lightning were gone and all that was left was blue sky and distant birdsong, he sat up.

He was breathing hard, his head pounding and his eyes stinging, and not from the bright light or the dust or the debris.

He drew the back of his hand across his face before blinking into the sunshine.

Stull cemetery stretched out around him, gravestones silently watching as he dragged himself up into a sitting position.

The church had gone.

It was the middle of the day.

And Dean was by his side.

* * * *

The Impala’s hood was warm from the sunshine as Dean stretched out with his back against the windshield.

Ordinarily he would have regarded any such show of disrespect toward his baby as sacrilege, but right now warmth and comfort and anything that reminded him he was finally *home* were only too welcome as he stared at the place where Stull church had been only a half hour earlier.

He'd not moved from this spot since he'd found the old girl, sitting here waiting for him exactly as he'd left her, that tiny speck of a dent in the driver's side door—still waiting to be straightened out when he got the time—the most beautiful thing Dean thought he'd ever seen.

Home.

And yet not.

Because Dad wasn't here with him.

Dad was gone.

Lost.

And Sam was shying away from him, guilt, anger, frustration, loss and real fear practically written in neon all over his face.

Right now he was pacing up and down the gravel pathway, shoulders hunched as he spoke quietly into his phone. He was talking to Bobby, Dean could tell from his body language and the soft tone of his voice, even though he couldn't hear any of the conversation. If it had been Dad on the other end of the phone, Sam's back would have been curtain rod straight and his tone would have been defensive, argumentative, looking for a fight.

But it wasn't Dad on the phone.

Dean knew it wasn't Dad on the phone.

"There's no army," Sam said quietly, pocketing his phone and approaching the Impala with his eyes still lowered to the ground, almost as if he couldn't bring himself to meet Dean's gaze. "Bobby says everything's quiet. If Lucifer's troops really did escape through the gateway, then they're lying low."

Dean nodded, turning his face up to the sun and closing his eyes. "Somehow that doesn't make me feel any better," he said quietly.

"And get this," Sam added, and Dean could hear his footsteps crunching on the gravel, sense him coming closer, hear him stop in front of the Impala, stop and wait, as if he daren't approach any further. "There really is an Ellen Harvelle. And she really does run a hunters' roadhouse in Nebraska. Although in this reality her husband Bill's dead and her daughter Jo is away at college. There was a fire a couple years back. The roadhouse burned down to the ground but they rebuilt. Ash survived. He was in the basement, buried under the rubble. He'd traded out his wristwatch for some hunter's old ham radio, and when they found that guy dead in the ruins of the roadhouse, they stopped looking for Ash, thinking it was him. He was buried there three days before they found him."

Sam was talking for the sake of talking. *Avoidance*. Sam had accused Dean of the same thing many a time.

Dean sighed softly. "How could you make me leave him there, Sammy?" he asked quietly, eyes still closed, face still turned up to the sun even though he knew he'd burn if he stayed like that too long.

He heard Sam draw in a sharp breath. "Dean. His legs were messed up. He couldn't have jumped that chasm, even if you'd—"

"Sam."

He could hear Sam's breathing. Hear him run his fingers through his hair.

"It was you who stopped me, right? You stopped me getting to Dad."

He sat up, opening his eyes and looking at his little brother who shifted from foot to foot, eyes still averted to the ground.

"Dean—"

"You stopped me from moving. Stopped me from trying to help him. Just like that other Sam."

Sam looked up sharply. "No!" he burst out quickly, finally meeting Dean's even gaze. "No, Dean, no! No. Not like him. Never—I didn't—I didn't want—" Sam scrubbed both his hands over his face, shaking his head before uncovering his eyes. "Dean, I'm sorry," he managed to mumble softly. "I'd never hurt you. You know that,

right? And I didn't mean to—to do that to you. It's just—it's just I'd—" He took a breath, shoulders slumping. "I'd have lost you both. And I—I couldn't live with that."

Dean made no reply, his own gaze flittering off toward the distant shrubbery, the broken down family crypt half-collapsed under a listing oak tree, the makeshift fence screening the cemetery from the road. Anywhere but at his brother.

"We'll get him back, Dean," Sam was saying, but all Dean heard was six-year-old Sammy's voice echoing in his head, *I'm sorry, Dean, I'm sorry. I should have let you have the last bowl of Lucky Charms...* "Dean? Are you listening? When the gateway opens again—we'll get him back. Its five months, man. We'll get him back. I promise. Dean?"

"You know what day it is, Sammy?" Dean asked quietly, eyes finally returning to his brother's stricken face. "It's November 2nd." He shook his head sadly, once again averting his gaze as he picked at a loose thread in the thigh of his jeans that would soon become a hole. "Mom. Jessica. Now Dad—"

"Dad's not dead, Dean," Sam insisted sharply. "He's not dead."

"We don't know that."

"No we don't," Sam agreed, taking a step closer, his knees only a few inches from the Impala's hood and Dean's booted feet. "But I'm going to believe he's alive because I can't think about him any other way. He's alive and he's going to stay that way for the five months until we can get him out." A subdued chuckle caused Dean to look up sharply. "Or until he busts out of there himself."

Dean's mouth quirked slightly to one side. "Yeah. Yeah, that sounds like the sort of thing he'd do."

Sam nodded. "Damn straight."

There was hope in Sam's eyes. Hope and fear. And guilt. And Dean couldn't look at him for a second.

"What if he bounces around realities until he falls into Hell, Sammy?" His voice sounded tiny and broken and he hated that. "Huh? What then?"

Sam paused for longer than he probably should have. "If anyone can survive Hell, it's Dad." He scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the gravel, hands deep in his pockets, shoulders raised stiffly as his eyes trailed the movement of his foot.

"Sammy."

Dean was an idiot.

Here he was, so worried about his dad, so wrapped up in his own sense of failure and guilt that he'd not even considered how his little brother was feeling.

His little brother who'd just run into a demonic evil twin of himself.

His little brother who had just used that evil twin's power not only to kill a copy of himself, but also to paralyze his older brother so he wouldn't run off on a fool's errand to try and save their dad, thus leaving their dad to die or fall into Hell or possibly a combination of the two.

Yeah, Sam's day was going so much better than Dean's.

And Dean was beginning to realize there was a hell of a lot more freaking Sam out than simple guilt and worry.

"Sammy, you're not evil."

Sam didn't look up, just continued to follow the motion of his foot with downcast eyes.

Dean patted the hood next to him, motioning with his head toward the warm metal, and Sam finally lifted his gaze back up from the gravel, still ducking his head slightly and only looking at Dean through lowered lashes. "C'mon, Sammy," Dean cajoled. "My baby's warm and inviting and you might never get this offer again."

Sam's expression didn't change much, but his shoulders sagged a little with released tension as he withdrew his hands from his pockets and ran one finger over the Impala's hood.

Dean scooted forward, resting his heels on the fender before once again patting the warm black metal by his side.

Blowing out a slow breath, Sam gingerly pushed himself up onto the hood, mirroring Dean's posture so that his left knee was brushing against Dean's right.

Neither of them said much for a while, both staring off into the distance at the wide swathe of overgrown grass where Stull church had once stood, each lost in his own thoughts.

And that was the problem, Dean reflected, annoyed at himself. Some big brother he was. Sam was kind of falling apart here and Dean hadn't even noticed.

"That freak isn't you, Sammy," he reiterated finally, rubbing at a warm, smooth spot on the Impala's hood with his thumb. "You're never gonna be anything like him. Sure, you're annoying as hell, but you're not a power crazed dick."

Sam choked back a wet chuckle, rubbing his fingers across shiny eyes. "Thanks," he said shakily, a weak smile tugging at his lips before fleeing his face almost immediately. He drew in a jerky breath before continuing. "What if what he said is true, Dean? That yellow-eyed freak? What if what he said is true for *all* of us—every Sam Winchester in every reality?"

Dean frowned. "Sam—"

"What if that's what Haris was doing in my nursery all those years ago?" Sam blurted. "What if I really *do* have demon blood in me and it's *not* the family curse making me the way I am? What if—what if the curse accounts for the death visions, but the whole mirroring thing comes from somewhere else? *Something* else. Something evil—"

"Sam, if that assclown Haris had *anything* to do with the weirdo psychic mojo thing you got goin' on in that humungous brain o' yours, don't you think he'd have been crowing about it at *every* opportunity before we smoked his egotistical ass? C'mon, man, you ever met *anyone* liked the sound of his own voice like that pinhead?"

Sam shook his head slowly as he chewed nervously on a thumbnail, puppy dog eyes almost brimming over with tears he was obviously trying really hard not to shed.

And Dean immediately felt some of the anger he'd been feeling toward his little brother—for holding him immobile on that cliff edge, for stopping him from getting to his dad, *for saving your worthless life, numbnuts*—evaporate, the Big Brother Protection Mode switch flipping into the well and truly "On" position as he laid a gentle hand on Sam's shoulder.

"You're not going to go evil, Sam," he repeated, steel tempering every word so even he was starting to believe it. "I won't let you."

Sam looked up at him, blinking hard, but ultimately failing in his attempt not to tear up in front of his big brother. "You can't be sure, Dean. You heard what he said. You saw what I saw—all those other realities, all those other Sam and Dean Winchesters. It ended badly. In every version of our lives we visited. You can't tell me it's gonna be okay, Dean. You can't tell me you won't let me go evil—"

"I *won't*, Sam—"

"No, Dean. I need more than that. I need you to promise me. *Promise* me, Dean. Don't let me turn into something I'm not. Promise me you'll *end* me before you'll let that happen."

Dean blinked at him, his chest constricting in much the same way as it had when that other Sam had been crushing the life out of him while dangling him in mid-air like some worthless rag doll. "I can't, Sam," he managed to croak out. "I can't promise you that. Don't you ask me to do that."

"Dean, I don't want to be like him. I don't want to end up like him. I don't want to go evil like that!"

"Exactly, Sam," Dean seized on Sam's words, squeezing his brother's shoulder a little harder for emphasis. "You don't want to go evil. *You*, Sammy. You don't need me to promise you anything. Sure, I won't see you go evil, I *won't*, Sam, but you have a much bigger say in this than I do. If you don't want to go evil, then what makes you think you'll go evil? You're stronger than that, Sam! You're stronger than that yellow-eyed a-hole with delusions of grandeur and lousy taste in evil one-liners. Sammy."

This is *your* life, man, *your* choice. No one goes evil overnight and no one goes evil just because of bad things that happened to them in the past—‘I had bad parents,’ ‘I had a terrible upbringing,’ ‘I was bullied at school,’ ‘my mom made me eat broccoli,’ ‘I have demon blood in my veins.’ Sure, everyone’s *capable* of evil. Everyone. But it’s the choices we make that matter—whether to act on the impulse to commit evil or whether to fight it. And you’re a fighter, Sammy! You’re *not* evil. Just like you told that stupid, tall, gangly, sulfur-eyed, girlie-haired freakshow back there. Sure, you’re a whiny little bitch sometimes, but you’re not evil.”

Sam laughed again, snuffling and wiping at his reddened eyes.

“Believe me, kiddo,” Dean continued. “You’re never gonna go Darkside. Not because of me. Not because of Dad. Not because of Haris or Lucifer. But because of *you*. *You* don’t have it in you, Sam, and *you* would never let it happen. Me?” He shrugged dismissively. “I’m just the catcher, man, the guy who’s standing behind you if you miss a swing at the ball. That’s the difference between us and all those other Sams and Deans we’ve seen the last couple days. Sure, they ended badly—you dead, me dead, everybody else dead, yada yada yada. But here’s the difference, Sammy, and you can call me a girl for sayin’ this, I’ll probably even agree with you when I’ve had time to think about it. Sammy, they didn’t have *each other!* *That’s* the difference, man! In every reality we visited, that Sam and Dean had drifted apart, or fallen out, or plain just weren’t there for each other, weren’t there to back each other up. And we’ve seen it in our reality too, right? When we split up, when we fight, when we’re not there watching each other’s backs? Bad things happen.” He straightened, ducking his head slightly so he was looking Sam right in the eyes. “Well that’s not going to happen again. Right? We’re not gonna end up like all those other losers in all those other realities, Sam. ‘Cause we’ve got each other. Nothing bad’s gonna happen to you while I’m around. And nothing bad’s gonna happen to *me* while *you’re* around. You got me?”

Sam sniffed, nodding slightly as he met Dean’s determined gaze with red-rimmed eyes. “That’s why I couldn’t let you stay there, Dean,” he said thickly, his voice trembling and breathy. “That’s why I couldn’t let you stay with Dad.”

Dean nodded. “I know, Sammy. I know you were only watching my back.” He cupped the back of his little brother’s neck with one firm hand. “You did the right thing, Sam. Stopping me. Bringing me back here. I’d probably be dead or lost or—wherever Dad is right now if you hadn’t done what you did. I’m not blaming you for what happened to him, okay? I want you to know that.”

Sam shrugged. “Still. I shouldn’t have done what I did, Dean. I shouldn’t have—I shouldn’t have used my—*his*—powers on you like that. You’re saying I won’t go evil because I have a choice not to? Well I took away *your* choice, Dean. Your choice to try and save Dad. I took that away from you because I—because I was scared of losing you. And that was wrong of me. And selfish. And I’m sorry. I’m *really* sorry, Dean.”

Sam hung his head slightly, and Dean tightened his grip on the back of his neck.

“Sam, you weren’t selfish, okay? And you weren’t wrong. You saved my life, man. I’m grateful. I *am*.” Sam took another shuddering breath, and Dean tilted back the younger man’s head, forcing him to look up. “Sam? C’mon, man. Spill it. Somethin’ else is buggin’ you.”

Sam blinked wet eyes at his brother, before once again looking away.

“Sam.”

“Dean, are you—” Sam stuttered to a halt, his breath hitching on a tired sigh as he dragged a hand across his face. “Are you afraid of me now?”

It was Dean’s turn to blink, the sheer *randomness* of his brother’s question coming right out of left field and smacking him squarely between the eyes. “Am I—what?”

Sam was looking up at him again, eyes liquid and desperate. “What I did to you... I violated your trust, Dean. I used my stupid, freaky, psychic *whatever* on you. Against you. How—how can you trust me now? How can you *ever* trust me again?”

“Sam.” Dean blew out a breath. “I just got through reminding you, you just saved my life, doofus! I need to remind you again? Of *course* I trust you! More than anyone on the planet, in this reality or any other! I trust you with my *life* man! And of course I’m not afraid of you! Sometimes...well sometimes I’m afraid *for* you—this thing you can do. But that’s not the same thing. Y’know, it’s just sometimes it feels like you have a big neon ‘evil things please kick me’ sign on your back, Sammy. But that’s not your fault—”

“Dean, I just used my power—that yellow-eyed freak’s power—to stop you saving Dad from—well maybe from Hell, and now he’s missing and it’s all my fault, and I’m going to go evil like that sonofabitch who just tried to eviscerate you, who tortured and killed his *own* version of you, who tried to kill Dad, *our* dad, and I’m going to go evil like that and I’m going to end up hurting you and I don’t want to hurt you, Dean, and I don’t want to go evil and I don’t know what to do to stop it, I don’t know what to do about *any* of it, and—”

Sam finally paused for breath when Dean thrust the feather into his hand.

And then Sam stopped breathing altogether.

“It’s okay, Sammy.”

“Dean...” Sam’s eyes widened in alarm. “Dean, I never touched this thing before. What if—”

“It’s okay, Sammy,” Dean repeated, curling his brother’s fingers over the ancient remnant. “It’s okay. You’re not evil. It’s not going to hurt you.”

Dean wasn’t sure whether either of them breathed for a second, as both of them waited to see whether the feather reacted to Sam’s proximity.

“You’re a good person, Sam,” Dean continued, his hands clasping his brother’s. “I know that. *You* know that. And the feather knows that too.”

Uncurling his and Sam’s fingers, the brothers peered down at the remnant.

There was no blood. Sam’s hand was the same healthy pink it had been before Dean had thrust a demon-killing angel feather into it. There was no ash. No screaming.

Just a faint glow.

“See?” Dean said, smiling broadly. “I told you. You’re not evil, Sam. You’re not demonic. You’re just my pain in the ass little brother.”

Sam choked out a strangled half-sob, releasing a breath he’d been holding for too long. “It glowed like this before, right?” he asked softly.

Dean nodded. “Yeah. Back at Mount Diablo when it got near Gudrun.”

Sam frowned minutely, sniffing and trying to choke back tears that insisted on dribbling down his pale cheeks. “What does that mean? Dean? What does it mean?”

Dean shrugged. “It means that yellow-eyed psycho was wrong, Sam,” he said shortly. “It means you’re not a monster. It means there’s no demon blood in you, and not every Sam Winchester is the same as every other Sam Winchester in every reality.”

Sam nodded slowly. “You know,” he managed to croak, “I really ought to kick your ass, man.”

Dean drew away slightly, a look of mock offense crinkling his brow. “What’d I do?”

“Uh, you could have *killed* me with this thing, Dean!” Sam burst out.

“Nah,” Dean dismissed the idea. “I don’t have a lot of faith in much, Sammy, but one thing I *do* have faith in is you. I knew the feather’d fall for those big puppy dog eyes of yours.”

Sam swallowed, and Dean sincerely hoped he wasn’t going to start crying again.

“Yeah, I guess I’m just irresistible that way,” Sam agreed, smiling lopsidedly. “And, uh, Dean?”

“Huh?”

“You done holding my hand there?”

Dean glanced down at their still-entwined fingers, removing the feather from Sam's palm and abruptly stuffing it back into his pocket before finally letting go of his kid brother's hand. "Bitch."

"Yeah, you know you love me."

Dean abruptly swallowed the reply that almost made it to his lips, instead merely making a show of shoving his brother away before turning his attention back to the empty space where Stull church had once been.

"We'll get him back, Dean," Sam assured him quietly. "We will."

"Yeah, Sammy," Dean agreed with a sigh. "I know we will."

* * * *

A lone figure stood, one foot casually resting on the plinth supporting a crumbling marble angel whose weathered, disfigured face peered out from the most secluded corner of Stull cemetery.

The name of the person whose grave this was had long since faded into distant memory, the engraving worn away by time and weather, the broken-down angel all that was left to remind the world that someone had once loved this human being enough to erect a monument in their name. A name now lost to the endless march of the centuries.

To one who had existed for millennia, one such as Lucifer, a century was merely the blink of an eye, an exhalation of breath; time had very little meaning to one who lived eternally.

Still, he would have preferred the Winchesters to stay lost in Stull's revolving door to unreality just a little while longer.

He couldn't deny his disappointment when the two young men currently perched on their environmentally questionable vehicle had emerged, dazed and confused, from the gateway's elusive exit.

He had been watching them for several minutes now, just pondering how they had managed to escape when so few had ever done so before them.

Oh well. No matter.

One down, two to go.

It was better than nothing, he supposed.

And at least he had his army now....

* * * *

John Winchester sat on the hood of the Impala, pulling his feet up onto the fender and wincing slightly at the echo of ropes around his ankles as he gazed thoughtfully at his boys.

They looked like Dean and Sam, Dean in his favorite green shirt, Sam in his favorite hoodie; that little scar on Dean's chin and the flecks of gold in Sam's eyes.

They sounded like Dean and Sam too, squabbling like they used to when they were kids and had been cramped up in the Impala's back seat too long. Sam had forgotten to bring pie. Dean was berating him soundly, but Sam was holding his own, teasing his brother unmercifully for his apparent pastry addiction and "middle-aged spread." This latter insult hadn't seemed to impress the older boy much, and the two had resorted to schoolyard name-calling—Sam was apparently a bitch and Dean a jerk—before an impromptu mock wrestling match had proved there was nothing "middle-aged" or "spread" about Dean, and Sam had reminded his brother he was now a hell of a lot bigger than he had been aged ten.

John silently observed their roughhousing, smiling fondly at their raucous laughter, and if he closed his eyes he could almost convince himself this might be it, this might be home.

These might be his boys.

“Oh John, they were never yours to protect or save. They were never yours at all...”

Lucifer’s words echoed in his head and he shuddered.

The End