

**Season Four
Episode Six: A Very Supernatural Toy Story
By JennyF**

Part One

Sam Winchester closed his eyes against the harsh light cast by the setting winter sun and let his head fall on the back of the passenger seat. The day had been crisp and almost perfect for the time of year. Dean had been complaining constantly for the last hundred miles and Sam was on the verge of fratricide. He knew Dean didn't have particularly good memories of this time of year but he couldn't believe it had all been so bad. He could take the griping and the whining, he'd had plenty of practice at it, but it was beginning to grate on even his calm temperament.

When his brother passed the fourth comment about the lack of a hunt in as many minutes, Sam finally snapped.

"Dude! Seriously, what is it with you today?"

Dean's expression was, to be honest, comical. The surprise on his face, coupled with badly disguised innocent indignation was worthy of an Oscar, if not a lifetime achievement award. He turned wide eyes to Sam, eyebrows raised.

"What d'you mean?" he asked.

"You've done nothing but complain since we got in the car. Six hours, Dean. Six hours of non-stop grumbling. That's coming close to a record, even for you."

"I'm not grumbling. Ten year olds grumble, Sam. I'm voicing an opinion."

"I've heard your opinion, man. Over and over and over. Would you just give it a rest now please? You're giving me a headache."

Dean heaved a sigh and turned his attention back to the road. "Drama queen," he huffed, lapsing into a sulky silence.

"You're sulking and I'm the drama queen?"

"I'm not sulking either, Sam. I'm... bored," he admitted after a few minutes silence. "I need to be doing something."

If Sam was surprised, he didn't let it show. He had suspected something along those lines but to hear Dean actually voice it gave him a petty sense of satisfaction. He couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face.

"It's Christmas, Dean. Peace and goodwill. Remember that? Holiday season. Maybe we should just kick back for a few days." Sam paused, studying Dean whilst wondering whether to finish his sentence. "Maybe have a Christmas of our own?"

It was a hesitant question and Dean wasn't sure if Sam was expecting an answer or not. If truth be told, he was unsettled. Christmas never really sat well with him. It was an overhyped season full of hypocritical sentiment he could live without. He couldn't understand the frenzy that swept over the majority of people, couldn't be doing with the plethora of

cheap gifts, false goodwill and forced merriment and he couldn't bear to be reminded of what he and Sam had missed out on as children. As far as he was concerned, the only good things about the season were eggnog and those cute Santa's Helpers outside department stores.

Looking back at Sam, Dean's heart sank as he realized yes, Sammy was waiting for an answer. It seemed it wasn't just a throw away comment, the kid actually looked like he wanted a Christmas.

Mentally shaking himself down, he sighed. "We'll pull into the next motel," he offered, hoping he could fob Sam off long enough for him to forget the whole holiday issue. "Get some rest."

Sam had been around his brother long enough to know when to push and when to let something slide. And he knew when Dean was trying to change the subject. He let his eyes drift back to the passing scenery, taking pity on Dean by letting the matter drop. For now. He closed his eyes and let the gentle purring of the engine wash over him.

True to his word, the first motel they came to, Dean turned off, the Impala coming to a graceful halt outside the reception office which was garishly decorated with multicolored fairy lights and a plastic tree in one corner. Playing the big brother card, Dean sent Sam in to register, unable to stomach the tackiness of the place.

The room they ended up with was small and hideously decorated in a mauve fleur de lys design, but thankfully no effort had been made to acknowledge the festive season. Dean decided it was a room best not to wake in with a hangover. In fact, it was a room best not dwelt in for too long at all.

Flinging his duffel on the first bed, Dean made a beeline for the bathroom, leaving Sam to explore what comforts the room offered by himself. When he reappeared, Sam was reclining on his bed, a variety of local tourist information leaflets spread around him like leaves fallen off a tree. Sam looked up at his brother with a mischievous grin on his face, waving one particular leaflet at him.

"Look," he grinned, "late night shopping. We could check it out? If you're, y'know, bored."

"Will there be anything to kill?" Dean snatched the offending literature out of Sam's hand and crushed it in one swift move, hurling it with deadly accuracy into the trashcan in the corner of the room. "Other than you."

Sam simply picked up another leaflet, thrusting it at Dean. "Well, if you don't fancy shopping we could always take the mystery tour round the town. It leaves at 10am on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Looks good value for money."

Dean glared and Sam raised his eyebrows in mock innocence. "No? How about the annual Christmas gathering round the tree in the market square? 'Carols followed by mince pies and mulled wine. Fun for all the family.' We could walk it from here in about fifteen minutes..."

"Sam..." Dean's growl would have put the fear of God into most people, but Sam wasn't most people. He could hear the affection behind the threat and in a bizarre way it felt good. Maybe stopping here wasn't going to be too bad. Maybe he could persuade Dean to relax for a few days after all, enjoy a little downtime.

It was a thought that Sam held on to as his head hit the pillow and he sank into a peaceful sleep that night.

The coffee was black, wet and hot but that was about all Dean could really say about it. He didn't demand a lot from his caffeine intake but he did like a bit of taste to it. He slammed the mug back down on the Formica surface of the table with enough force to jolt some scalding liquid out of the container and onto the paper Sam was currently engrossed in.

Whatever had captured Sam's attention was obviously so interesting not even Dean's exaggerated sighing and fidgeting were enough to draw his eyes away from the paper and over to his brother. Finally, impatient and restless, Dean flicked a teaspoon across the table, making sure it careened into the middle of the page Sam was looking at.

"Hey, Sammy. You still in there?"

"Mmm?" Sam's eyes appeared over the top of the page. "What?"

"What'cha got there? Must be fascinating. You've been looking at it for hours."

"Hardly hours, Dean. We've only been here twenty minutes."

Dean waited for Sam to share but his brother's head had disappeared behind the broadsheet again and seemed to be lost within the paper again.

"Seriously, dude. What's so interesting there? Is it a hunt?" Dean couldn't contain the excitement in his voice. Whenever Sam found a potential hunt he went quiet for a while before indulging his brother's almost constant need to know. He was pretty sure this was a case in point. It seemed to him Sam was being deliberately offhand about his current reading material.

Sighing loudly, Sam slid the paper over to Dean, pointing at the article which had had him so captivated. Picking up his own coffee he sank back in his seat, watching as Dean scanned the words in front of him, brow creasing in confusion.

"What the hell's this, Sammy?" he queried. "A sob story for Christmas? 'Local toy shop faces bankruptcy.' Hardly our kind of thing." He pushed the paper back disappointedly.

"I know," Sam agreed. "I never said there was. I just... It's sad, y'know. Someone puts all that effort into building a business and then it fails. I mean, it's a toy shop, Dean. At Christmas."

"And your point is?" Dean picked his cup up, eyed it distrustfully and put it back down again.

"It's just," Sam paused, waving his hand aimlessly in the air as though he could catch hold of the right words, the exact phrase he was looking for. "It's Mortimer Westland, dude."

Dean frowned and wracked his brain. The way the name tripped off Sam's tongue sounded as though it ought to mean something to him. He rifled through the catalogue of names he held in his head. Fellow hunters, people they'd met along the way who had helped or hindered them, people Dad had warned them about, people to avoid at all costs.

Nothing.

Watching Dean's face, Sam suddenly realized Dean had probably never heard of the man before. They had been back together for so long now Sam sometimes forgot there were four whole years of experiences and knowledge they hadn't shared. Every so often it crept up on him and hit him between the eyes like a sack of potatoes. Dean hadn't been at his side in Stanford, hadn't been to the parties with him, hadn't heard him expand on his latest theories for essays and theses, hadn't learned about things like Mortimer Westland with him.

"He was a highly respected business man out in New York. Made Vice President of Mayla Industries when he was just twenty-seven. One of the most successful businessmen of his generation. If anyone should be able to make it in business, it's him."

"Wow!" Dean stared up at his brother, although Sam wasn't sure if the look on his face was amazement or bewilderment. "You are just a font of...something. How the hell do you know all this stuff?"

"What do you think I did at Stanford, Dean?" Sam smiled.

Dean shrugged. "Not what I'd have done," he retorted, lost momentarily in dreams of student bars and sorority parties.

"Dude! Focus!" Sam snapped, although the smile on his face belied the tone of voice. "I did a paper on him in my second year there. He's an amazing man, Dean. He had a really hard childhood, had next to nothing, and yet he rose up through the ranks of industry relying on nothing but his own determination and intelligence. He was the original 'rags to riches' poster boy. Ruthless and hardheaded in the boardroom and a perfect gentleman everywhere else." Sam paused, turning the newspaper round to face him again. He traced his finger along the headline. "I just don't understand how someone like him can fail at running something as simple as a toy shop. I mean, he's got it all – business acumen, financial understanding, people skills – everything. If he can't make it..." Sam paused, seeing his brother's eyes glazing over. "All I'm saying is..."

"You're a bleeding heart, you know that? So, some high flyer can't make it out in the real world. So what? It's one of those things, Sam. What's the big deal?"

"No, you're right Dean. There's no big deal here. Man's life's falling apart at Christmas and all is right with the world."

"Geez – you can be so dramatic, you know that?" Dean shook his head in exasperation. "If it'll make you happy, let's go meet this childhood hero of yours. It's not like we've got anything better to do." He threw down a couple of bills on the table and slid along the bench seat till he could stand unhindered by the table. Casting one last look at the now stone cold coffee, he couldn't resist having the last word. "If you're really good, I might even buy you a present."

Westland's Toy Shop was even more idyllic than Sam could have imagined. A small, one roomed shop, it could have been lifted straight from any one of the seasonal greetings cards currently spilling off

shelves in every card shop, department store and gas station. If Sam closed his eyes and relaxed for a minute he could almost see Santa's sleigh coming in to land on the roof. It brought to mind boxes of chocolates and snow sprinkled children skating across frozen ponds in velvet coats and hats.

Every couple of minutes the bell above the shop door rang across the street as another customer entered, generally followed by a child or two clutching a brightly colored package. Sam noted with interest the children didn't look especially happy and the family groups leaving the store were, in the main, empty handed. While the adults looked satisfied, their offspring appeared crestfallen and the spirit of Christmas seemed to have been left behind.

"Doesn't look like a failing business to me," Dean grunted, still trying to work out how they came to be sitting in the Impala, staking out a damned toyshop.

"Yeah, but look at the kids though," Sam returned. "Nobody looks very happy."

Dean snorted. "It's Christmas, dude. They're shopping. Three days before Christmas. Who'd be happy doing that?"

Holding back a heartfelt sigh, Sam turned to glare at Dean but the sharp retort on the tip of his tongue died when he saw the expression on his brother's face. He had expected the comment to be accompanied by a belligerent stare, or at least an unspoken challenge to refute his statement. He hadn't expected Dean to be gazing at the family group just leaving the store, the mother's arm around a small child of about four or five who was in floods of tears. He hadn't expected his brother's eyes to hold the sympathy they currently concealed. If he didn't know better, he almost would have said Dean looked wistful.

He was just about to break the semi-awkward silence when Dean saved him the trouble. "Do you remember our Christmases, Sam?" he asked. "Remember the god awful gifts we got each other?" He turned to look at Sam, a slight smile turning the corners of his mouth upward.

"I remember the Barbie doll," he chuckled and watched with some satisfaction as Dean's face colored slightly.

"It was the best I could do," Dean defended himself. "And we did have fun with the baton, didn't we?"

"I remember you didn't use it as a baton for long. Who knew they worked just like light sabers!"

"Hey, you were asking for it!" Dean smiled at the memory of chasing his eight-year-old brother round yet another shoddy motel room armed with a sparkly cheerleader's baton. But the moment didn't last long as he remembered why Sam had ended up with such girly presents that year. Just another Christmas Dad hadn't made it back to the boys. And Sam wondered why Dean reserved judgment on the festive season.

As if knowing what was running through his older brother's head, Sam turned away to the street, just as a man and his two sons walked past them and on into the shop, a hand laying casually on each boy's back.

"He did make it some years, Dean. They weren't all bad." He sat back, watching the man and his boys through the panes of Westland's shop

and the milling crowd. “And he did get you some awesome presents when he was there.”

“Tools of the trade, Sammy. That’s all they were.”

“Maybe. But you tell me you didn’t want them. He knew what floated your boat, even then.”

“And you? You’re telling me you were really that thrilled when he got you your first hunting knife?”

Sam paused. It wasn’t exactly a limited edition of Lord of the Rings, but it was something his father had put some thought into. The knife had been a perfect fit in his hand, the handle smooth and warm to the touch, the blade razor sharp, shining in the moonlight glinting through the window that year. He had to admit it, he had been a little bit thrilled with it. An acknowledgement from Dad that he was ready to join his older brother on the hunt in the New Year.

“It wasn’t that bad, Dean. We just got a bit...jaded...about the whole thing. I guess it’s hard to believe in Santa when you know what’s really out there.”

“Oh, you believed in him. Trust me. I remember.” Dean slipped Sam a sideways look and smirked. “In fact,” he teased, “I reckon you’d still believe if I hadn’t told you the truth.”

“You are such a liar. If I believed, it was only to stop you feeling hurt ‘cause you’d been found out.”

“Found out? How could you ‘find me out,’ Sam? There were never any gifts around till Christmas morning.”

“Only because you didn’t steal them till Christmas Eve. D’you really think I didn’t know you snuck out every year? You didn’t exactly hide your movements. I knew it was you.” Sam smiled as memories long since buried made their way to the forefront of his mind.

Dean looked hurt as he regarded his brother keenly. “When did you stop believing then?” he questioned quietly and Sam wondered how to answer tactfully. It was quite possible, he suddenly realized, that Dean had never worked out Sam knew what he was up to. Every so often it hit him how easy it was at times to hurt his older brother’s feelings over something so far in the past.

“I was six, Dean,” he admitted softly. “I just never let on. I didn’t want you to stop. Didn’t want the magic to end.”

Dean swallowed hard. He had tried to keep Christmas special for Sam for so long, tried to make sure he had a childhood occasionally, even if it was just once a year, and to find out his kid brother had known all along, had been humoring him for years, was an unsettling discovery and he wasn’t quite sure how he felt about it.

In true Dean Winchester style, he decided to ignore his emotions, to push past any hurt feelings and disappointments. Casting one last look at Sam, he pushed open the door of the Impala.

“C’mon,” he ordered. “Time’s a wasting. Shop’ll be closing for the night soon. If you want a present this year, I suggest you get your ass in gear!”

It was just as Sam had imagined it to be. The brass bell jangled merrily every time the door to the store opened. It didn't discriminate between those leaving the shop and those entering, but sang its song regardless. All his senses assaulted at once, Sam didn't know which one to give in to first. The shop smelt of cinnamon and the heady scent of seasoned hardwood, sawdust and varnish permeated his nostrils, as his eyes drank in the sight of row upon row of exquisitely crafted wooden toys. There were trains, cars, soldiers and fortresses for the boys while for the girls there were shelves stacked with dolls, picnic sets and a selection of fairy castles and princess palaces. Every age group was catered for, from sturdy baby rattles to sophisticated jewelry boxes. Sam could easily picture children spending hours scouring the shelves for the perfect toy.

The shop was buzzing. There was no other word for it. As the brothers looked around them they could see no obvious signs of a business on the verge of collapse. Straight in front of the door, at the back of the shop, was a counter with a cash till that looked as though it came with the Ark, and behind it stood a middle aged woman, smiling at her customers, making time to pass a few words of conversation with every one of them. Dean couldn't hear what was being said over the general tumult in the store but he was rapidly losing interest in the whole affair. He twisted his head round to where his brother seemed to be rooted to the spot, gazing at the store keeper. Dean hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary about the woman but it looked as though Sam had spotted something of note.

Moving over to a shelf full of wooden puzzles, he fingered the smooth pieces, admiring how each one fit so perfectly with its neighbor, seamlessly joining together to form the whole. Out of the corner of his eye, he observed the woman passing a paper bag over to the latest customer. He couldn't see anything suspicious about her. In fact she was, quite possibly, the most unthreatening character he had met in a very long time. But Dean was a Winchester, raised a hunter, trained to trust no one but family, taught to expect the unexpected and to never let his guard down. So he watched her carefully, following her hands as they moved effortlessly round the counter, handling money and goods confidently.

Eventually he decided whatever had caught Sammy's attention was beyond him and he shuffled surreptitiously toward him. Nudging him none too gently with his elbow, Dean nodded at the woman.

"Not really your type, is she?" He raised his eyebrows suggestively. "Although if I'm wrong, just say the word and I'm gone..."

Sam turned to his brother and cast a withering glare in his direction. Dean lifted his hands in mock self defense and smirked.

"If you must know," Sam began, "that's Tessa Westland. Mortimer Westland's wife. They were childhood sweethearts." He broke off as the woman in question smiled at the last paying customer in the store and handed over a package wrapped in plain brown paper.

Sam and Dean were now the only people in the showroom and it was fairly obvious they weren't there to purchase anything. Regardless of

the web of lies both brothers could spin at the drop of hat, for some reason neither was willing to fabricate a falsehood for being in the shop. The woman threw them a worn smile and gestured at the shelves surrounding them.

“Anything got your interest, boys?” she enquired, although from her tone of voice it was clear she already knew the answer.

Moving over to the counter, Sam cast a quick glance at Dean over his shoulder. Dean gave an imperceptible lift of one eyebrow and stood to one side, happy to let Sam say or do whatever he needed to say or do so they could get out of here.

“No, ma’am.” Sam was saying, almost apologetically. “We saw the article in the paper about the bankruptcy and, well, I recognized the name.”

“Westland?” Tessa looked surprised. “I didn’t think we were that famous.” She smiled, silently inviting Sam to continue.

“Oh, I um, I studied at Stanford for a while. Your husband was one of our case studies and I remembered the name. He’s an amazing man - we all wanted to be him. I just wanted to come see how things could possibly have gone so wrong for him. From everything I learned...” he trailed off as Tessa’s face fell and her hands dropped to the counter in front of her.

“It was going well,” she confirmed, “until about a month ago.” She laughed wryly, “Just in time for the Christmas rush. Then things just started to go wrong for us and now we’re a couple of days off closing.”

“Doesn’t look like things are going wrong to me,” Dean interrupted. “Seems like you’ve got more customers than not.”

“See these toys here?” she asked, waving at the piles of wooden gifts sitting on the counter and stacked up behind her. “They’re all returns. Every single one of them. These people aren’t buying toys, they’re bringing them back. There’s nothing wrong with them but folks are demanding full refunds and our policy...” She stopped and her forehead creased, exaggerating the worry lines around her eyes. “I wouldn’t mind if there was a reason. I’d prefer them to say nothing rather than these lies. And they’re all telling the same lie! I don’t understand it. It’s as if the whole town suddenly has a grudge against Mort and it’s just not right.”

“Lies?” Sam asked. “What lies?”

Tessa looked up at him, tears in her eyes. “They’re saying the toys are bad news. They’re saying that at night, they come to life! Toys! Coming to life? How ridiculous is that? Whoever heard of toys coming to life? It’s an insult to Mort and me.” She was clearly on a roll now that she had started her story. As she spoke, Sam wondered how long she had had to keep this tale bottled up inside her. She plainly didn’t believe the reasons for the returns, and why should she? Sam and Dean, on the other hand, had seen much, much more implausible things.

Dean raised a suitably surprised eyebrow. “Coming to life?” He picked up the nearest toy, a wooden workbench designed for chubby toddler hands, complete with hammer and nuts and bolts. The wood was smooth and somehow pleasing to handle. To Dean’s untrained eye it looked the perfect present for a three year old. He twirled the hammer

absently round his fingers. "How does a hammer come to life?" he wondered.

"Exactly. The first time I heard it, I just thought someone didn't want to admit it was an unwanted present. By the fifth time..." Tessa shrugged. "But what can I do? It's destroying Mort. The only toys returned are the ones he makes. He hardly comes out of the workshop nowadays, I can't get him to talk about it. In fact, he hardly says anything at all." She leant forward, lowering her voice. "It's starting to affect Nathan now too," she confided.

"Nathan?"

"He's our son. He's twelve now and we rarely see him before midday."

"So, he sleeps in," Dean observed, swapping the hammer for a perfectly crafted miniature steam train. "Isn't that what twelve-year-olds do?"

Tessa laughed, "Maybe it is. Maybe this is just getting to us all more than I thought."

Sam was about to reply when the cheerful sound of the doorbell rang through the store and a woman entered carrying a bag in one hand and a determined, yet haunted, look on her face. She hovered in the doorway momentarily, eyes flitting over the shelves and displays positioned strategically on the floor. Her gaze settled on the counter, taking in the conversation she had obviously interrupted, and she took a few steps in that direction. Seeing the conversation was about to be ended, Dean waved the little train at Tessa.

"I'll take this one, please," he told her, digging in his pocket for the cash. Both Sam and Tessa looked at him in amazement.

"Really?" Sam asked.

"Are you sure?" Tessa couldn't quite understand why the young man in front of her was about to make a purchase after the bizarre story she had just shared. "You'll be bringing it back before the week's out."

Dean simply handed over the bills, smiled his most disarming smile at Tessa and pocketed the train. "I'll take my chances."

By the time the Winchester brothers had made their way back to the motel, the moon had risen in the winter sky. The clear night showed the stars to maximum effect and if it hadn't been so damned cold out there, Sam would have been content to stay outside for a little while longer. Dean, on the other hand, couldn't get inside quick enough.

On leaving Westland's Toy Shop they had headed for the nearest diner, ostensibly to get something to eat, but Sam suspected Dean was just trying to stay out of the crappy motel room for as long as possible. After what seemed an age he had persuaded his older brother the time had come to pay up and leave. Dean had dragged his heels a little but the motel couldn't be avoided forever. Plus, Sam wanted to see if he could find any other instances of toy animation. He'd never heard of it before, but there were plenty of supernatural phenomena they'd not come across yet.

Once the door was closed behind them and salt lines laid, because they were both too well traveled to ignore the basics of the hunting life, Sam's first move was to get his laptop up and running. Burying himself in various promising websites, he closed himself off to the outside world in general, and Dean's fidgeting in particular. It was as he suspected, however. He could find nothing at all that sounded even vaguely similar to the situation Tessa had explained to them and he was beginning to wonder if the root of the problem, if there was a problem, lay not in the toys but in the toymaker. Switching his search from toys to Mortimer Westland, he sat back and stretched his arms out in front of him, noticing for the first time that Dean was sitting staring at the pocket train he'd purchased earlier.

The train was resting silent and still on the bedside table, Dean sitting on the bed, staring at it, almost daring it to do something. Sam idly wondered how long he'd been glaring at the toy and couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face. Dean's sixth sense must have kicked in about the same time because his head snapped up, eyes locking onto his brother's immediately.

"What?" he asked, defensively.

"Nothing," Sam replied. "Just wondered what you're doing?"

Dean shrugged noncommittally and turned his attention back to the train. He ran his fingers along the little locomotive's tank as far as the funnel. Picking it up, he slowly turned the wheels, admiring the precision with which the turning rods moved in perfect synchronization. Placing it back on the table, he pushed it along, stopping only when the surface ran out and the train would have fallen to the floor.

Smiling benevolently, Sam turned back to his laptop and his research on Mortimer Westland. He found little new on the website regarding the man himself, but the shop itself had caused quite a stir when it opened. He had just found a particularly interesting website on new toy manufacturers when his concentration was interrupted by a strange noise emitting from his brother's direction. Something between a hiss and a snort.

Looking up, he was surprised to see Dean had moved from the bed to the floor, train and all. He was lying on his stomach, pushing the train along with one finger and imitating the sound of steam and train wheels click clacking over rail tracks. Sam toyed with the idea of getting his cell phone out. Photographic evidence of this moment would be worth its weight in gold one day and it really was an opportunity too good to pass up. Just as he was reaching into his pocket though, Dean let out a loud "whoop whoop," making Sam jump, knocking a bottle of water off the table he was working at.

"Dude! What the hell are you doing?" he exclaimed, no longer able to contain his amusement. Dean, for his part, looked startled. He had become so absorbed in his activity he had actually forgotten Sam was in the room still and his face colored ever so slightly.

"Research," he mumbled, face turned away from Sam.

"Research?" Sam repeated. "How can playing with a toy be research? This," he waved a hand at his laptop, "is research. That," waving at the

train, "is messing about. If you're bored why don't you go find a bar or something? There must be one in town you haven't been to yet."

Dean rolled on to his back and sat up, resting against the side of his bed. He picked up the train and brandished it in Sam's direction. "Tessa said the toys are waking up kids to play at night. If this is gonna work, I have to make it believe there's a kid in the place." He let his hand drop by his side, giving Sam a triumphant look. Sam, however, wasn't convinced and merely raised his eyebrows at his supposedly older brother. Dean didn't miss the look and tilted his head to one side. "Hey, it could work. If you've got any better ideas, I'm all ears," he defended himself.

"Whatever," Sam conceded. "How come you're suddenly taking this so seriously, though? I thought this was just a sob story for Christmas as far as you were concerned. Why the sudden change of heart?"

"It's children, Sam." He sighed as though that answered all Sam's questions. A cloud passed over his features and he scrubbed a hand over his face. Sam waited patiently for his brother to continue, knowing when to give Dean space. Dean shook his head and studied Sam seriously. "If the toys are just playing with children, Sam, there's no harm done. But toys aren't meant to come alive. They're meant to sit quietly until they're picked up. These toys aren't natural, Sammy. And if they're not natural, then it's just a matter of time till someone gets hurt. And chances are that someone is gonna be a kid." He paused, collecting his thoughts, appreciating Sam's silence. He turned back to the loco still resting in his hand. "I couldn't live with myself if a child dies and I could have done something to stop it, Sam. I just couldn't."

"What makes you so sure this toy is going to do anything?" Sam asked softly after a pause, digesting his brother's admission.

"It might not but Mort made it and all the 'magic toys' have been made exclusively by him." Dean shrugged, his maudlin mood passing like a leaf on the breeze. "And if it doesn't, well, that's your Christmas gift sorted." He gave Sam a cheeky grin and pushed himself up from the floor. Passing by Sam on his way to the bathroom he placed the wooden train next to him. "Keep an eye on it, for me. Just in case."

Lily Campbell was six. She had been six for twenty-four hours and she had worn herself out. The party her mom and dad had thrown her earlier that day had been beyond spectacular and she had eaten enough chocolate cake and candy to see her through to puberty. Her friends had surpassed themselves in their generosity and her mom suspected it had a little more to do with keeping up with the neighbors than love of her Lily. But Lily didn't know, or care, for the politics behind the gift giving. She just knew that Aunty Linda had the best taste in dolls. She'd never had a wooden doll before but she was certain that Millie and she were going to have the most awesome tea parties in the history of, well, tea parties.

There had been the obligatory sulks at bedtime. Lily had tried to tell Mom that now she was six, she should be allowed to stay up till Daddy got home from work at least. Mom had just smiled and put her to bed at

the normal time, stashing all her toys away in the wicker toy basket standing in the corner of her pastel pink bedroom. Lily had watched with eagle eyes as Millie had been placed reverently at the bottom of the basket, other softer and older toys placed gently on top of her. She made up her mind that as soon as Mom was out of the room, she would rectify the situation. Millie deserved to be at the top of the pile.

But it had been an exhausting day and by the time Mom had reached the end of the Lost Little Duckling, Lily had been fast asleep, dreaming of birthdays and parties and cakes and Millie.

Lily wasn't sure what had woken her but she knew it wasn't getting up time yet. It was still dark outside and there was no noise in the rest of the house. If it was time to get up she would have heard her parents moving around, getting breakfast ready, preparing for the day ahead. As it was, there was only silence and the shadows cast by the night light in the corner of the room, throwing a warm glow over her dresser, bookcases, toy box and other various childhood accoutrements.

Sitting up, rubbing her eyes, Lily slowly adjusted to the light and slight chill in the air. She cocked her head to one side as her ears detected a scraping noise coming from her toy box. With the curiosity and fearlessness only childhood can muster, she shoved her bedcovers to one side and swung her legs over the edge, toes curling in the deep pile of the carpet. When the noise came again, she twisted her head in the direction of the sound, watching with fascination as the lid lifted slightly, then dropped back down again.

With no idea that perhaps she should be afraid, Lily made her way over to the corner of her room, carelessly kicking her stuffed bear out of the way. She placed her hand on the wicker lid and raised it, propping it up against the wall. Delighted, she spied Millie sitting on the top of the other toys in the box. Lifting her carefully out, untangling her long, woolen hair from the skipping rope she'd become entwined in, Lily gave her a swift hug, clasping the doll to her like a long lost friend.

Suddenly Lily moved the doll from her chest to her ear, listening intently as she imagined a conversation she might have with the doll. It was obvious to her young mind that Millie wanted to play. There was nobody around to say no to Lily and she decided that at six years old she could make her own decisions about these things now. She nodded, as though in agreement with the doll, and pulled her robe off its peg on the back of the door, and together Lily and Millie made their way downstairs and into the kitchen.

Setting Millie on the worktop, Lily pulled a stool over from the breakfast table and climbed up on to it, careful not to knock any cutlery or crockery while she was at it. Listening intently to her doll, she scurried around the kitchen, opening cupboards and drawers until she had all the necessary ingredients and equipment to begin baking. Putting flour and sugar, butter and eggs into a large white bowl in no particular order or quantities, she grabbed a large wooden spoon off of the worktop, chatting all the while to Millie. Nonsensical, childish chatter which would have meant nothing to an onlooker. Covered in white flour and sticky from egg white and yolk, she poured the resultant mess into a muffin tray and ever so carefully, just like Mom had shown her, placed

them in the oven, set to a random temperature.

Satisfied with her work, she trotted back to Millie and, grasping her hand, pulled her from the kitchen, into the living room where the game quickly turned from homemaking to tea parties. But tea parties have a habit of becoming sleepovers and before the hour was out, Lily had succumbed to fatigue, curling up on the sofa, a cushion beneath her head and her arms wrapped tightly round Millie.

David Campbell was convinced he was dreaming about bonfires and barbecues but when he heard the shrill whistle of his home fire alarm all images fled his sleep-fuddled brain. He shot up in bed, checking immediately his wife was still by his side. Alice was now fully awake too and her thoughts immediately turned to their young daughter, sleeping in her room across the hallway.

Leaving David to ring the emergency services, she tore into Lily's room, panic seizing her heart when she saw the empty bed. Spinning around to ensure she hadn't missed Lily hiding in a corner, she caught sight of Millie resting on top of the wicker toy box. Too scared to worry about the fact she had placed the toy firmly at the bottom of the box, she dashed from the room, heading to where the smoke was coming from. Meeting her husband on the stairs, they split up, unspoken direction taking over.

Alice spun round on the spot at the bottom of the stairs, running through the blueprint of her house in her head, debating where her daughter would most likely be. Putting herself in Lily's place, she decided the living room held the most attractions for a six-year-old child. Rushing to the doorway, she felt a weight lift from her shoulders as she spied a huddled shape on the sofa and, flicking on the lights, she almost sobbed with relief to see a peaceful face, thumb firmly in mouth, snuggled round a cushion.

Lily woke with a start as her mother shook her gently on the arm and gathered her in her arms. She looked on with confusion as her dad appeared in the doorway, beckoning the pair of them out of the room, and out of the house. She couldn't understand the look that passed between them but, as they passed the smoke filled kitchen, she wondered where Millie was and whether she was safe.

Part Two

Sam groaned and rolled over in bed. Dawn was trying to break through the heavy snow clouds and he wondered if the day would bring anything worthwhile. Looking across to where his brother slept, he couldn't keep the grin off his face. Despite all Dean's protestations that he was going to watch the small locomotive all night, he was currently sprawled on top of the comforter, one leg flung over the edge, hand under his pillow and face relaxed

and peaceful. From the number of discarded mugs of coffee, Sam would hazard a guess that Dean had actually tried his damndest to stay awake as long as he could, but nature had evidently had other things to say about it.

Deciding to take advantage of a clear run at the bathroom and unrestricted hot water, Sam forced himself out of bed. The room was cold, colder than he would have liked, but when money was tight, luxuries like heating tended to take a backseat. Checking Dean was still fast asleep, he made his way over to the small bathroom.

By the time he returned, refreshed and relieved, Dean had managed to roll onto his back but little else had changed. The train was still sitting on the bedside table, exactly where Sam had last seen it the previous evening. It was clear to him that Dean's theory had failed. With a small smile on his face, Sam reached over and picked it up. He hadn't handled the toy before and he was surprised by the warmth of the wood. He was no expert but he thought the main components of the little engine were crafted from oak and rosewood.

Turning the toy over in his hands, the smile on his face faded, to be replaced by a frown. Standing up, he moved to the window and opened the drapes to allow as much natural light into the room as possible. The wood beneath his fingertips felt warm, too warm. The heating in the room was virtually nonexistent and the train had been sitting on the stand all night. Yet the wood was warmer than room temperature. Confused, Sam set the train down and ran his fingers along the windowsill. It was decidedly cold in comparison to the train. Moving back to the bedside table, he rested the back of his hand on the veneered surface. It had more warmth to it than the sill, but not as much as the wooden toy.

Convinced there must be some logical reason behind the warmth, Sam picked up the train once more, turning it over and examining it minutely. He could see nothing to explain the unusual warmth in either the toy or its surrounding environs. He had to admit, he was flummoxed.

Turning to his brother, he lay one hand on Dean's shoulder, giving him a gentle shake. When that didn't have the desired effect, he shook a little harder. Knowing from past experience the possible consequences of waking his brother unexpectedly he took several steps back, just as Dean shot up in bed, swinging one hand wildly in his direction.

"Dude," Sam laughed. "It's just me."

"Sammy?" Dean's sleep-laden eyes were a sight to behold, confusion and disorientation slowly clearing as he focused on the room. "You know better than to wake me like that," he grumbled.

"C'mon. Day's nearly over, man. Time to get up."

Dean flung an arm over his eyes, ignoring Sam for as long as he could as his younger brother proceeded to move around the room, preparing for the day and generally making as much noise as he possibly could about it. Eventually, he couldn't block out the noise and disturbance any longer.

"Could you be more obvious?" he demanded. "I'm trying to sleep here in case you hadn't noticed."

"You've had plenty of time for that," Sam replied unsympathetically.

"Well, I would have done if I hadn't been watching that damned train all night," Dean grunted, barely intelligible.

Sam raised a single eyebrow. "All night?" he sought clarification. He couldn't help the smirk that crept onto his face when Dean looked away sheepishly.

"Yeah."

Nodding sagely, Sam looked at his brother seriously. "Did it do anything, then?" he asked, trying not to laugh out loud when Dean threw a look that would have frozen Hell over his way. Flinging himself out of bed, Dean stalked past his brother on the way to the bathroom, muttering something about "enough hot water" and "know it all brothers."

By the time Dean returned, marginally refreshed if not fully compos mentis just yet, he was amused to find his younger brother sitting on the edge of his bed holding the little engine in the palm of his hand. He watched from the bathroom door for a few minutes as Sam lifted the toy to eye level and squinted at it, turning it to various angles and tilting his head this way and that. Eventually he put it down and frowned at it.

Dean took a step forward, flinging a towel down on the floor, ignoring the glare Sam sent his way.

"So, what's so fascinating about it then?" he enquired, gesturing at the train and stepping over the discarded towel in a deliberately exaggerated manner, just to annoy Sam.

Sam, however, took no notice of Dean's antagonistic actions and simply folded his eyebrows together, making creases in his forehead that had no business being there. "Have you touched it this morning?"

Taken aback by the question, Dean raised an eyebrow of his own. "Touched it? Why the hell would I do that?"

"When I picked it up earlier," Sam began, "it was warm. Warmer than it should have been and now..." he trailed off, not quite sure of how to continue without sounding as though he was talking complete and utter nonsense. He looked up at Dean, an earnest, solemn expression on his face. "It smells kind of...smoky." He sat back and waited for the sarcastic comment he just knew was coming from his brother. He wasn't disappointed.

"Dude," Dean grinned, "there's help out there for people like you, you know. I could fix you up with someone if you like."

"Dean." Sam didn't mean to whine but somehow Dean managed to bring out the bratty little kid in him just a bit too easily at times. "I'm serious."

"So am I! Really. There's all sorts of treatments. I'm sure you're not the only person out there that sniffs trains. Admittedly glue might be the preferred option but, well, whatever does it for you."

Sam glared. He had known Dean wasn't going to take this seriously but he really did have a point. He picked up the train and thrust it at Dean so vigorously that the older Winchester flinched involuntarily.

"Just feel it," Sam commanded, refusing to take his eyes off Dean's face until he was guaranteed cooperation.

After a brief stand off, Dean stretched his hand out, accepting the wooden loco with ill grace. He made a great show of turning it over and over in his hand and examining it every which way.

"Yeah," he acquiesced, "it's a little warm. But dude, you've been cradling it for at least a half hour now." He looked at Sam through lowered lashes.

"Which, let's face it, is a little odd for someone your age. You sure you don't need me to make a call?"

"Dean!" Sam's patience was running out and Dean was walking a thin line. "Tell me what you smell." He paused and contemplated pulling out the patented Sam Winchester puppy dog eyes. "Please?"

Dean huffed and took a cursive sniff of the wooden object in his hand. He looked up at Sam. "Nothing. I smell nothing. Can we get breakfast now?"

"Properly, man. Do it properly."

"This is stupid," Dean muttered under his breath, thanking God there was nobody there to witness his rapid decline in coolness. He raised his hand again and inhaled deeply. Lowering his hand he looked over to where Sam sat watching him expectantly. He sighed and nodded once, reluctantly agreeing, "Yeah, I guess it does smell a little funny."

"So, you believe me now?" Sam sought reassurance and Dean nodded again.

"What is that smell though?" Dean wondered. "It's not wood, or at least I don't think it is. Maybe Mort uses some sort of lacquer to finish off his products. Or maybe it's..." he trailed off, rummaging around in his head for something to tie into the odor lingering in his memory.

"It's smoke," his brother declared.

"Smoke?"

"Think about it, Dean. It's a steam train. How do steam trains work? It must have...come to life...last night and what we can smell must be the residue of the smoke coming out of the funnel. Smoke."

"Great theory except for I was watching it all night. I would have seen if it had done anything."

"Not all night," Sam corrected his brother. "You didn't make it all the way through the night, remember? Doesn't matter how much coffee you drank, at some point you fell asleep."

Dean glared at the toy and slammed it down on the table. Raising his eyes to Sam he hoisted himself off the bed and flung his jacket on, gathering various articles to him that he might have need of during the day - keys, wallet, gun.

"I think we need to pay Morty another little visit," he decided, not bothering to check if Sam was following behind him.

There was little choice in town for coffee, and seeing as Dean had discounted the diner without a second thought, the only place left to try was Martha's Coffee and Ice Cream Parlor. Dean had insisted on some form of breakfast before returning to Westland's Toy Shop, but once faced with the plethora of baubles and elves in the window of the coffee shop, coupled with the nauseating Christmas songs floating out into the street every time the door opened, he had quickly lost the desire to sit down in a civilized fashion.

Which is how Sam found himself at the end of a line for breakfast. Breakfast which, for his older brother at least, consisted of chocolate donuts and a maxi strength black coffee. Sam would have preferred a traditional morning meal, hell, pancakes and syrup would be better than the sugary

confections offered at Martha's, but try as he might, he just couldn't face donuts at this time of day. Selecting an array of cakes for Dean and a couple of coffees, he paid for his purchases with a smile at the assistant and made his way back out of the shop.

Dean was where he had left him, propped up against the Impala. Sam noticed with wry amusement that he had procured a local paper from somewhere. He hadn't noticed anywhere in the vicinity where it was possible to get hold of one but his brother had his own unique methods of obtaining things where none seemed available. Sam couldn't help checking up and down the street for the poor passerby who had, no doubt, been persuaded to part with his or her morning read.

Crossing the street carefully, balancing cardboard cups and donut box, Sam made his way over to his brother. Dean had his head bowed, brow furrowed in concentration as his eyes skittered across the pages of the daily paper he held. Sam reached the car and held out the box with a carefully positioned beverage. Dean was engrossed in his reading though and Sam had to clear his throat a couple of times before Dean looked up.

"What you got there?" he questioned, only to be greeted by a distracted "huh?" and a pair of eyes raised above the journal.

"In the paper," he clarified, curiosity now getting the better of him. "What're you reading?"

Dean folded the paper over on itself, leaving page four exposed, and waved it at his brother. "You seen this?" he demanded, pointing to an article barely two paragraphs long.

"What is it?" Sam asked, placing the box of donuts on the roof of the Impala, slightly disturbed when his actions didn't provoke an instant rebuke from Dean for defiling his baby. He glanced at the headline just above Dean's finger and, as he took in the words, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"A kitchen fire? Really?" He looked back up at Dean who had a bizarrely triumphant look on his face. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Read it." Dean ordered. "Properly." And he thrust the paper at Sam with such force the younger brother had no option other than to take it in order to avoid a face full of paper cuts.

Dean watched as Sam's eyes flitted across the words at breakneck speed and nodded smugly when Sam did a double take and reread the article with more care. Dean could almost see the thought process reflecting on his brother's face, starting with a patronizing, *I'll humor my brother*, attitude and ending with confused concern. Snatching the box off the roof of his car, mentally making a note to talk to Sam about the proper care of his baby, he bit into the biggest donut he could find.

"She said her doll told her to it?" Sam exclaimed, incredulously.

"Oh yes," Dean confirmed, leaning toward Sam as though he was about to impart the world's biggest secret. "And where do you think that doll came from?"

Sam shot Dean a knowing glance. "Mort's?" It was a guess, but an educated guess nonetheless, and the raised eyebrows coupled with the *I told you so* look on Dean's face was enough of an answer for him. "That could have been a nasty accident." Sam mused, grabbing his rapidly cooling coffee.

"If it was an accident," Dean responded curtly.

"Of course it was, Dean. What else would it be?"

"Toys, Sammy. Toys coming to life. Ring any bells for you?"

"She's six, man. Six year olds have vivid imaginations. Don't you remember being six?"

Dean's face turned serious and Sam winced, wishing he could take back that last question. "Yeah, Sam. I remember. I remember I didn't have imaginary friends because I knew what they really were."

"Dean," Sam softened his tone, hoping Dean would take it for the apology it was. "She was just playing with a new toy. In the middle of the night. She fell asleep and forgot about the cakes." He paused. "It's what kids do. I really don't think there's anything more to it than that. I don't see anything malicious going on here."

"Her doll told her to do it, Sammy. A doll which just happened to come from Mort's. A shop which is about to close because the toys are coming to life. Are you seriously telling me you don't see the connection here?"

Sam sighed. Dean had been craving a hunt for days and as far as he was concerned this was a good enough excuse for him to launch into full-on hunter mode. "You're right, Dean," he acquiesced. "We should check out Westland's again. Just in case."

"Thank you!" Dean's exclamation was tinged with glee at what he perceived to be his successful persuasive powers. "This needs to be stopped before anyone gets really hurt. It's not natural, Sammy. Nothing good ever comes of that."

The new day had brought nothing good for Westland's Toy Shop. Although to outward appearances the little store was bustling with customers, old and young, the conversations being held in the warmth of the cozy showroom were anything but convivial. The pile of toys and gifts behind the counter had grown threefold and the shelves were fully stocked.

Tessa sighed and ran her hand through her neatly styled hair. She felt, rather than saw, her next customer looming up at the counter and looked up to find herself facing a tall, middle aged man. She automatically scanned up and down and frowned when she could see no package to be returned or purchased. She wondered briefly what could possibly have happened to his child to warrant an empty handed visit to the store. Putting on her best smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, she took a breath.

"Can I help you?" she asked pleasantly, not warming to the man, but not feeling threatened either.

"I'd like to speak to Mortimer Westland," the man answered, placing both his hands on the counter and leaning forward slightly. Tessa frowned and took a tiny, involuntary step back at the invasion of her personal space.

"He's busy at the moment," she replied. "Can I help you?"

The man shook his head and smiled, a cold, thin smile. "I doubt it," he answered, lowering his head to Tessa's level. "I really need to speak to Mr. Westland in person."

"He's busy in the workshop," Tessa explained. "He doesn't like to be disturbed when he's working."

"Doesn't look like he'll need to be working for much longer," the man sneered, looking exaggeratedly around the shop. "Doesn't seem to be much demand for his goods." He raised his eyebrows, inviting a response from the toymaker's wife.

"There's still plenty to be done." Tessa gesticulated at the short line that had formed behind the man.

"In which case," he insisted, "I'll leave you to it and see myself into the workshop." He pushed himself up away from the counter. "Through here, is it?" he enquired as he moved purposefully toward the door at the back of the shop leading to the workshop.

"You can't go through there," Tessa reiterated, hastening to the front of the door. "I've told you, Mort's busy and not seeing anyone. If you have something to return or buy, I'll deal with it. If not, you're welcome to browse or leave." *Preferably leave*, she thought as she became uncomfortably aware of the height difference between herself and the man in front of her.

"I don't want a toy," he snorted. "I want to talk to Mortimer Westland." He took another step forward, crowding Tessa, moving so close she could almost feel the heat of his breath.

"And I said, he's not seeing anyone. Especially you." She hadn't realized her voice had risen but she was decidedly uncomfortable in this man's presence. Glancing around the shop in hope of some support, she was dismayed to see all her customers had discovered fascinating things to look at on shelves or in the display towers. Nobody seemed inclined to help her.

Just as she was convinced the man was going to barrel past her into the workshop, the merry brass bell above the door chimed its happy jingle and her salvation walked over the threshold. The man in front of her ignored the distraction with all the arrogance Tessa had suspected he had all along. His voice a couple of decibels louder than what was comfortable, he continued to demand entrance to the work shop.

"The lady said 'no.' What bit of that don't you get?"

The words, growled softly, carried through the air, holding a menace and threat of damage if the man failed to respond in an appropriate manner. Tessa leant slightly to one side and tilted her head, mouth turning up ever so slightly into a smile as she recognized the two young men who had appeared the previous day. She took a step back as the older of the two pushed through the milling crowd of customers, glaring at the man as though he could burn the meaning of his words into his opponent's brain by sheer willpower alone.

"What's it got to do with you?" The man tried to sound as menacing as he could but, upon turning to face the newcomer, the threat died in his throat. Dean smirked, lulling the guy into a false sense of security.

"Specifically? Nothing. In general? You're an asshole. What don't you understand about 'he's not seeing anyone'? It's not complicated." The older hunter waved his arm toward the door he and Sam had just entered through. "There's the exit," he stated. "I suggest you use it."

Closely studying Dean and taking in Sam's stance just behind his brother, the man decided to cut his losses and run. But not before he threw one last comment to Tessa as he thrust a business card at her. "I'll be back to talk to him," he promised, turning on the spot and making his way out of the shop, deliberately crashing his shoulder into Dean, causing him to sway a little on the spot.

Pissed off, Dean whirled around, fully intending to take the fight outside. A large hand on his forearm stopped him in his tracks though and Sam's face appeared in his line of vision.

"Let it go," Sam told him. "It's not worth it." He turned his attention to Tessa who was studying the card in her hand. Her face had drained of color and there was a slight tremble to her hand. "Are you okay? Who was that guy?"

She tore her gaze away from the card and looked at Sam with sad eyes. "Philip Gibson," she told him. "A journalist." She threw the card on to the counter and shook her head. "This is the last thing we need."

Sam watched as the journalist stalked out of the shop, recognizing within him a determination to get the truth and, less honorably, a willingness to ride roughshod over almost anybody to get there. He could see Dean out of the corner of his eye, reassuring Tessa, comforting her with soft words and a gentle hand on her forearm, and he wondered what exactly Philip Gibson thought he knew.

Attracting Dean's attention with a nudge to his arm, Sam nodded in the direction the man had taken, silently communicating his intention to follow the guy. Dean frowned slightly and Sam knew his brother thought he would be wasting his time but in this case he begged to differ. It was common knowledge that there was a breed of journalist who would dig and dig and dig until every stone was turned and every creepy crawly exposed, regardless of who got hurt along the way. He jerked his head toward the door, acknowledging Dean's resigned shrug, and left the storekeeper in his brother's capable hands.

Outside the shop Sam stopped, turning his head this way and that, hoping to spot his quarry. He was in luck. At the end of the street he caught sight of the man's coat tails disappearing round the corner. Sam picked up the speed of his stride and he was soon only a little distance from the man. Not wanting to startle him, Sam cleared his throat in a way that couldn't be mistaken for a simple seasonal cold.

"Philip Gibson?" he called, watching as the man froze before turning to face Sam with a curious expression.

"Yes," he confirmed and stopped, waiting for Sam to continue. He wasn't sure why the younger man had followed him and, bearing in mind the confrontation a few minutes ago, he wasn't entirely happy with the situation. He glanced round, taking comfort in the number of people milling about. Sam took in the man's show of bravado, and his surreptitious safety check, and was strangely satisfied by his reaction. He plastered a smile on his face.

"My name's Sam Whittaker," he said, extending a hand for Gibson to shake, or ignore. "I'm a writer for Toy Maker Magazine." Sam paused, studying the face opposite to see whether the name of the journal had rung any bells. If the man had connections there it could prove awkward.

Gibson relaxed slightly with Sam's introduction. He'd heard of the magazine vaguely but never got further than glancing at the front cover in various office reception areas. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I couldn't help overhearing you back at Westland's. I'm currently working on an article about the financial hardships facing independent toyshops and,

well, I've only just got into town. Mortimer Westland is a difficult man to get hold of. I just thought maybe we could help each other out." He stopped, mentally crossing his fingers that the man might just see an opportunity for himself here.

Gibson smiled and visibly relaxed. "Shops all over the country are going out of business," he told Sam as though he was speaking to a child and Sam felt the stirrings of irritation in his gut. "You want to know why Westland is struggling, though? It's nothing to do with the economic climate. I mean, c'mon! It's Christmas. No toyshop goes out of business at this time of year, no matter how crappy it is. And, between you and me, it's not a crappy shop. It's one of the best there is. I'll tell you what's wrong with that shop," and he leaned forward, glancing left and right. Sam had to stifle a laugh at how ridiculous the man looked, acting like a spy. Gibson lowered his voice, "It's haunted."

Sam's face was the epitome of shock and incredulity. Impressed by how he could school his features at the drop of a hat, Sam raised his eyebrows and let his mouth drop open. "Haunted?" he exclaimed. "What d'you mean, haunted? There's no such thing."

"That's what I thought," Gibson agreed, "until I came across Westland. But there's no other explanation."

"Explanation for what?"

"The accidents. The children. The returned toys." He watched Sam for a reaction, encouraged to continue by the look of bafflement and shock on his audience's face. "You read about Lily Campbell, right?"

Sam nodded. "The little girl who set fire to her kitchen, right?"

"Yeah. She's not the only kid in town to blame her toys for accidents. I've got a list as long as your arm back at the office of accidents and incidents, all involved children and all blaming their toys. Their new toys." He paused for emphasis. "New toys from Westland's Toy Shop. I'm just trying to get his side of the story. That's all. Honestly? It would be in his best interests to talk to me."

Hiding his rapidly growing dislike of the man, Sam furrowed his brow, playing his role for all he was worth. "What other kids?" he asked, injecting just enough morbid curiosity into his voice to stoke the fire of Gibson's gossip.

"Started a couple of months ago, across town. A kid called Tommy Marshall got a boat for his birthday from Westland's. Decided to go sailing it in the bathtub, so he goes to try it out and floods the bathroom in the process."

"So?" Sam shook his head. "That's not so unusual. Kids tend to play with toys."

"Yes, yes they do," Gibson conceded. "But this was four in the morning and the kid managed to flood the kitchen downstairs too. Took out most of the electrics in the house."

"Just means he was excited about his birthday and couldn't sleep," Sam theorized. "Doesn't make the shop haunted."

"Not in itself, no." The journalist was warming to his subject now. "Then, two weeks after that, there's a fire. Kid burns down his dad's tool shed. His excuse? The sparks from his wooden train's tinderbox caught the sawdust on the floor. And in the same week a four-year-old girl was treated for a fractured wrist. Mom and Dad blamed her older brother for playing rough but the kid claims it was one of his soldiers fighting its way out of the jail block he'd built

for it. His sister won't say anything about it, she's obviously too freaked by the whole thing." He stopped and waved one arm down the street. "I've got a whole, long list back at the office. You'd be more than welcome to come and check it out."

"No, it's fine. Thank you," Sam smiled, weakly. "I think I get the picture."

"Yeah. So now you see why I want to talk to the guy? He's got something freaky in that workshop of his, and I intend to find it. This is too big to let go. It could be my big break!"

Returning to the motel, Sam wasn't surprised to find Dean already there. Acknowledging his brother with a nod of his head, Sam settled himself down on his bed with his computer on his lap. Dean glanced up at him briefly, then returned his gaze to the toy train, still resting quietly on the bedside table.

"What'cha doing?" he asked Sam.

"Philip Gibson seems to have done a lot of our research for us," Sam replied, bringing up the website for the local paper and entering the name of the first child mentioned by the journalist. Sure enough there was a brief mention of Tommy Marshall and his nocturnal boating activities. Sam motioned Dean over and turned the computer so he could see it himself. Dean read it through carefully and scrubbed a hand through his hair.

"Coincidence?" he wondered.

"I don't think so, Dean. Gibson has a whole list of accidents involving children and Mort's toys." He turned back to the laptop and changed his search criteria to Philip Gibson. Mildly surprised by the plethora of stories credited to the man, Sam shook his head, hurriedly filling Dean in on the conversation he'd had with him, including the fire attributed to the train, a train that sounded exactly like the one Dean currently had beside his bed.

Dean straightened up and arched his back, working out the kinks making themselves at home in his spine. Pacing up and down the small room, he found himself unable to settle. The story Sam had brought home hadn't particularly surprised him but the severity of some of the incidents was on a grander scale than he had realized they were dealing with. His instinct was to get this thing dealt with as soon as possible. He didn't know how many of Mort's toys were sitting under trees or hidden in cupboards, waiting for Christmas Morning, but he didn't really want to be reading tales of woe the day after Christmas.

Scuffing the toe of his boots on the threadbare carpet, he turned to Sam. "We have to stop this, Sam." He paused and turned back to the toy. Eyeing it suspiciously he ran a finger along the smooth wooden steam engine. "D'you think this is safe?" Ignoring the way Sam's eyebrows shot up in surprise he continued, "I mean, it is one of Mort's creations. You don't suppose it's going to do anything while we're out, do you? Maybe we should take it with us."

Suppressing his amusement, Sam schooled his features into a suitably serious facade. "I'm sure the train is capable of being left alone, Dean. Actually, if you think about it, the accidents have actually been caused by the children playing games that have got out of hand. I think by now you're old enough not to be taken in by a toy." He paused and dramatically rubbed a hand over chin, narrowing his eyes at his older brother. "Of course, if you're

not sure you can resist..." Sam ducked just in time to avoid being hit by the pillow that came flying in his direction.

"Bitch."

Sam broke into a grin. "Jerk," he retorted. "What did you get up to with Tessa while I was gone?"

"She's pulling her hair out. Their accountant called earlier this morning, before we got there. He's coming down to pay them a visit on Thursday," Dean reported.

"Thursday?" Sam interrupted. "But that's..."

"Christmas Eve. Yeah, I know. Timing sucks," Dean agreed. "Thing is, he has the final say with the bank. If he doesn't like what he sees, he's going to pull the plug on the shop. Tessa doesn't know what she's going to do. Mort's burying his head in the sand, Nathan's hiding in his room, doing God knows what, and she has three days to turn things around. There's no way she's going to manage that." Dean flopped on to the end of his bed and let his head drop forward. "It doesn't seem fair, Sam. How the hell can toys be so damned destructive?"

"Strictly speaking, they haven't actually destroyed anything yet, Dean," Sam pointed out, taken aback when Dean's head snapped up and hard, green eyes fixed on to his.

"That's crap, Sam. I see a whole family being destroyed every time we walk into that store. You can't tell me that's not as destructive as ripping them to pieces?"

"I know. It sucks, Dean, but what can we do? We can't gank an accountant no matter how much you want to," Sam sympathized.

"There's gotta be something we can do about it, dude. I can't just sit here and do nothing. It's her family." Frustrated, Dean rose up from the bed, absently taking hold of the train, turning it over and over in his hands. "It all comes back to the toys. D'you realize we haven't even been inside that workshop yet? I think it's time we took a good look around. Preferably when Mort's not hiding away in there."

There was logic in Dean's plan and Sam couldn't find a reason not to go ahead with it. He'd come to pretty much the same conclusion himself and, well, he liked Tessa, wanted to help her, and this was something positive they could be doing. The shop would be closing late for the rest of the week, not due to desperation but in order to fall in line with the other stores in town. Late night Christmas shopping had hit with a vengeance. Which gave the Winchesters a couple of hours to eat a relaxed dinner for a change.

By the time Dean and Sam were finally hovering outside Westland's Toy Shop, the temperature had plummeted to barely above freezing and Sam was sure they would never be able to get their fingers working well enough to manipulate the lock picks they never traveled without. Standing over his older brother, who was alternately blowing warm air through his gloves and trying to get the pick into the lock, Sam kept a casual eye on the street. Frost was forming on car windshields and shop windows and the moon shone out from a clear sky. Sam was sure someone, somewhere, was singing It Came Upon a Midnight Clear. Shaking his head to clear away the festive fancy he rubbed his hands together, wondering how much longer Dean was going to take opening the door.

As if thinking it had willed it, Dean straightened up, giving Sam a triumphant grin as he pushed the shop door open with the tip of one finger. Sweeping an arm out in front of him, he took a little bow as he ushered Sam over the threshold in a grand gesture. Stepping through the entrance while pulling a face at his brother, it took Sam a couple of minutes to comprehend what was actually going on inside the shop.

Stopping so suddenly Dean ran into his back, Sam's jaw fell. "What the hell?" he asked nobody in particular. He could feel Dean edge his way forward until they were standing shoulder to shoulder.

"Sam?" Dean's voice was so hushed Sam wasn't sure at first if he had spoken at all. As it was, he had no answer for the unspoken question. All they could do was stare in dumbstruck silence at the scene before them.

The shelves of the shop were empty, the display towers were gone and the piles of returns behind the counter were nowhere to be seen. Every toy in the shop was on the floor, either solitary or in groups of two, three, four. There was no noise but the activity going on was something else. There were miniature battles going on over by the counter between the wooden Confederate Army and the Union forces. Wooden cowboys were being chased along the bottom shelves by hoards of Indians and, by the doorway to the workshop, there appeared to be some sort of drag race going on involving three or four of the exquisitely crafted cars.

Sam watched, entranced, as the collection of dolls seated in the middle of the shop floor engaged in silent, amiable conversation over the tea party that was taking place, wooden fruit and vegetables strategically positioned by each one. Little wooden arms waved animatedly and heads turned left and right, all the better to continue the conversation.

"This is not exactly what I was expecting," Dean hissed in Sam's ear. Sam turned to see his own bemusement reflected in his brother's face. Dean seemed to be particularly fascinated by the drag race and the collection of role play toys which were trying very hard to build a house with the building blocks he'd last seen sitting on a pile of unwanted gifts, waiting to be re-shelved.

"Me neither," Sam agreed. On reflection, he supposed his voice was, perhaps, a touch on the loud side. As one, the toys ceased to move, the previously amicable silence turning heavy and threatening. Then, moving like a well-oiled machine, every eye in the place turned menacingly to look at the Winchesters. Even toys without eyes managed to face the brothers. Dean couldn't suppress a shudder as the car headlights, train funnels, and even the wooden bananas turned their stance toward him.

Reaching slowly into his jacket pocket, Dean fumbled for the flask of holy water he had brought with him, knowing as he did so that Sam was doing exactly the same thing.

"Dean?" Sam's voice was hesitant, uncertain. He'd never come across a situation like this before and he honestly had no idea how they should be handling it. Glancing down at the silver flask in his hand, and checking Dean's, he looked up at the now frozen tableau before them. It didn't take a genius to work out that there was no way he and Dean could douse the entire stock with water. Hell, they didn't even know if the water would work. He had salt in his pocket too but he was even less certain that would have any effect on the toys.

Dean shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea, dude," he admitted, unscrewing the cap. He extended his arm, clutching the flask loosely between his fingers. He flicked an experimental drop at the nearest toy, a perfect replica of a motorbike complete with sidecar.

"Dean, I don't think that's going to do anything," Sam told him. "And even if it does, we've got, what? Two flasks of water. Against..." he gestured round the room. "We don't have enough water, dude."

Dean surveyed the scene carefully, mentally calculating how much water they had between them. He bit his lip in contemplation. "You're right," he agreed. "But what do you suggest we do?"

Sam opened his mouth to answer, but whatever he was going to say never made it past his lips as Dean suddenly grabbed hold of his sleeve and pulled him violently to the side. Stumbling slightly before regaining his balance, Sam glared at Dean. "What the hell..." he started, but broke off as another of the toys flew over their heads, settling itself back on the shelf where it belonged. Dean just raised his eyebrows and pointed at the flurry of activity that had suddenly broken out in the room.

Almost as if the toys were being operated by a central command post, they were all heading back to where they presumably had been at closing time. Taking the direct approach, the wooden vehicles drove in straight lines back to where they should be, while other wooden articles were crawling, sliding or, in some cases, flying back to their bases. Dean and Sam ducked and dodged, barely avoiding the soldiers marching over their feet. Dean instinctively hit out with the holy water still in his hand, but as soon as the liquid left the flask, the intended target had moved on. The toys were determined and fast. Too fast for conventional hunting weapons and neither brother was willing to go down the bullets and rock salt route.

A lull in the frantic toy retreat tempted Dean and Sam out of their hiding places. Somehow in the tumult they had managed to separate, Dean ending up by the counter, Sam crouching beside one of the display shelf units. Edging his way forward, Sam decided that, machismo be damned, there was safety in numbers. He was pretty sure neither he nor Dean would ever be bragging about this particular incident in the hunting community they hovered on the fringes of. Bent at the waist he shuffled in the general direction of his brother, concentrating hard on locating a relatively safe route through the few remaining toys on the floor. Just as he thought he had one, a well-built doll flew at his head. Caught by surprise, Sam only just managed to avoid a direct hit to the head, settling instead for a clip on the shoulder. Through the shock and sting he heard Dean snorting with laughter.

"It's not funny, man!" he exclaimed, offended.

Dean, however, couldn't help himself. "Dude," he snickered, "you just got hit on by a chick!" and he dissolved into a fit of the giggles, leaning heavily on the counter to support himself.

Sam glared his sternest glare but in the face of Dean's hysterics it was impossible to hold a grudge. Retribution wasn't far away though. Almost before Dean had recovered from his giggles, a toy hammer flew across the room, intent on returning to its workbench which was sitting just behind Dean. Hurling through the air, not stopping for any obstruction, the hammer slammed into his wrist, sending a shockwave of pain up his arm and down the nerves in his fingers, numbing both wrist and hand.

"Crap!" he cried out, pulling his arm in to his body, cradling the rapidly swelling wrist with his other hand.

"You okay?" Sam's irritation at his brother quickly turned to concern as he heard the pain in his voice.

"Yeah," Dean hissed. "But that hammer is dust!"

"Dude, relax. It didn't mean to hit you." Sam straightened up. The shop was back to how it should have been, all the goods safely back where they belonged and peace and quiet had settled over the shop. "It was just trying to get home." Sam pointed to where the little workbench was sitting, all its parts neatly in the right slots.

"Home? How the hell can a hammer have a home, Sam?" Dean coughed, a little embarrassed by how high pitched his voice had risen. "That's gonna bruise," he complained.

"Live with it, Dean." Sam gave his brother's injured limb a cursory glance. "You'll do," he announced. He leant back against the counter, surveying the contents of the shop. "What d'you think is going on here then?"

When Dean didn't immediately reply, Sam twisted his head to the side. Dean was as still as a statue and Sam recognized the look. The older hunter had picked up on something. Trusting his brother's instincts implicitly, Sam reached for the gun tucked into his waistband. Turning back to Dean he raised quizzical eyebrows. In return, Dean put a finger to his lips and pointed at the counter, gesturing downwards. In the silence Sam could now hear it too. The soft sound of breathing. Someone or something was behind the counter and whatever it was, it wasn't made of wood.

Moving in perfect harmony they moved to either side of the counter, weapons drawn, ready for anything. Pulling a flashlight out of his jacket, Dean flicked it on, illuminating a huddled figure crouching beneath the worktop, head down and knees drawn up.

Part Three

Pulling his gun up, Sam glanced across at Dean. The figure huddled beneath the counter was most definitely human and most definitely scared. Dean shook his head in bafflement. Neither Winchester had been expecting to find a person in the shop and the shape currently in the spotlight was shaking with fear.

"Hey," he called, softly, not really knowing what they were dealing with yet. Unsurprisingly there was no response. Dean tried again, daring to reach a hand out but not touching the figure. "It's okay," he reassured the form on the floor. "We're not gonna hurt you."

Slowly a head was raised from on top of trembling knees and a tear stained face looked up at the brothers. "Please don't shoot me. Don't hurt me. I'm sorry." The words tumbled out of the mouth of the young boy now revealed in the light of the flash.

Surprised and concerned to be encountering a child, Sam and Dean exchanged a worried look. With a start, Sam realized his gun was still in full view and he hurriedly stowed it safely away, out of sight.

"We're not going to shoot you," he reassured the boy, giving him a swift once over for any injuries or bindings. Quickly satisfying himself the boy was

okay, Sam held a hand out to him. "C'mon out of there. We're not going to hurt you," repeating Dean's earlier sentiment.

The boy however, just shook his head vigorously and tried to push himself even further back under the cabinet. Sam pulled his hand away and looked to his brother. For some reason, and Sam suspected it had a lot to do with his own childhood, Dean was always much more successful at communicating with children. In this instance, he was more than happy to hand over the reins of this conversation.

Dean dropped down into a crouch so he was at the boy's level. Cocking his head to one side, he smiled. "I'm Dean," he said, "and this is my brother, Sam. What's your name?"

For a few moments it looked like Dean was going to have as little success as Sam getting through to the boy, but finally he turned his head to Dean, fixing bloodshot eyes on the older hunter's face.

"Nathan," he whispered.

"Nathan?" Dean repeated. "Nathan Westland?"

Nathan nodded miserably. "Are you going to tell my folks about this?" he asked.

"Well, that depends," Dean confided in the youngster, reluctant to make promises he might have to break. "I'm not entirely sure what all 'this' is. Why don't you come out of there and tell us what you've been up to tonight?"

The boy regarded Dean seriously, then turned to look at Sam who offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile in return. Hesitantly unfolding his legs, Nathan pushed himself to his feet, grabbing hold of the counter while the circulation returned to cramped limbs. He moved slowly into the main area of the showroom, stopping when he reached the shelf full of soldiers. Gently running his fingers along the smooth edges of wooden arms and legs, he seemed lost in his own little world. When he did finally speak, it was so quiet both the brothers had to strain to hear it.

"I didn't do anything wrong," he mumbled.

"Hey," Dean moved closer to Nathan, but not close enough to scare him into silence. "We're not saying you did. We just wanna know what's going on in here." He gestured toward the toys on the shelves and display towers. "'Cause I've seen a lot in my time, Nate, but this? Never. Which makes you the expert here."

He glanced at Sam who gave him an encouraging nod. Nathan's posture was relaxing ever so slightly, whether because he liked the idea of being the one with the most relevant knowledge or because the shock of being found was wearing off Sam didn't know. Or care. The boy was about to open up to Dean and that was all that mattered.

"If I tell you," he started, "you can't tell my dad. Or Mom." He turned and fixed Dean with eyes that were years too old to be in his face. "'Cause they've got enough to worry about."

"Yes, they do," Dean agreed, "so let's see if we can get this sorted out now, shall we?"

Seemingly satisfied with the answer, Nathan slid down till he was sitting on the floor, back resting against the shelf. He still had one of the soldiers in his hand and he played with it absently while he waited for Dean and Sam to join him on the floor. Suppressing a sigh, Sam dropped gracefully to the floor, next to his brother, whose own descent had been a little more functional.

"What do you want to know?" Nathan asked, eyes flicking from Dean to Sam and back to Dean again until Sam felt dizzy just watching him.

"Well, why don't you start with how long this has been going on?" Dean suggested.

"Couple of months," Nathan mumbled, then much clearer, "But I didn't do anything wrong."

Suppressing a sigh, Dean shuffled closer to the boy and laid a hand on his shoulder. "We know that, Nate. We're just trying to work out why all this is happening. Nobody's blaming you. Okay?"

"I am allowed down here, y'know," Nathan stated, and Sam was struck by how defensive he sounded. "My dad gave me a tool kit for my birthday this year. Saws, hammers, planes - the works. It's just the best ever. He said he'd teach me how to use them properly so I could make things for myself. He's been showing me how to make dovetail joints and stuff." He paused for breath and Dean nodded at him encouragingly.

"Cool stuff," he agreed, appreciating the hours of work that must have gone into perfecting each dovetail.

"Yeah, it is." Nathan grinned and suddenly his whole face lit up. "My dad's the best. Have you met him? He's so cool."

"I'll have to take your word for it on that. We've not met yet." Dean smiled back at Nathan, the enthusiasm pouring off him hard to ignore. "I'd like to though."

"He said when I'm older he's gonna show me how to use the lathe and stuff. Y'know - the big machinery. It's going to be so great. Lucas Jones at school said his dad only ever lets him sand things down and everything else he has to do at school. He always says my dad is so much better than his."

Sam and Dean couldn't help smiling at the boy's obvious adoration of his father. It was clear to them that Mortimer Westland hadn't lost his touch as a family man, whatever else was going on in his life. It was apparent that in Nathan's eyes, the man could do no wrong.

"The big stuff, eh?" Dean queried. "He must have confidence in your skills."

"He's a great teacher." Dean could almost hear the unspoken "d'uh" and realized that, as far as Nathan was concerned, he'd just made the most redundant statement in the history of mankind. "I'm allowed to use anything in the workshop I want to, as long as I don't get in his way. He's shown me what to do and he's given me loads of books and stuff."

"Wow," Sam murmured, appreciatively. "But how come you're in here and not in there?"

"Because this is where the toys play at night," the boy admitted after a short pause.

"Well, yeah. We see that," the older Winchester observed. "But how did you know they were...playing...here?"

"I saw them one night. I'd been in the workshop. I'd nearly finished my first boat and just really wanted to finish it so I could show Dad in the morning. It was the school break and Mom and Dad don't bother much about bedtimes in the vacations. It's not like I have to get up in the morning, right? Anyway, I kind of forgot the time and then I heard all these noises from the shop. I thought it was Mom coming to get me, and I just needed another half hour. I thought if I could stop her getting to the workshop, I might be able to persuade

her to let me have a bit longer to finish off. Thing is..." he trailed off, turning his gaze to the floor, studying the polished floorboards.

"The thing is what?" Dean prompted, gently.

"It wasn't Mom. Or Dad." Nathan shrugged. "It was the toys. They were all over the place, playing with each other. Then, when I opened the door, they all stopped and turned to look at me. Which was just plain weird 'cause they're just toys. Right? But after a minute or two they just got on with it again and it was, y'know, fun. I came down the next night, just to see if it had been a fluke but they were there again and I've been coming to play pretty much every night." He stopped and looked up at Dean, a brief flare of panic flitting across his eyes. "You're not going to tell anyone, are you?" he begged.

Dean took a deep breath, knowing he was about to disillusion a young child just days before Christmas. He was under no sentimental illusions that Nathan might still believe in Santa, but the toys coming to life might just be a Christmas miracle to the boy.

"Nathan," he began, looking to Sam for moral support on this. "You know this isn't normal, don't you? Toys don't just come to life. It's not natural. And I know right now it all seems cool and fun and awesome but some things just aren't meant to be. Sam and me, we see a lot with what we do and this," Dean swept an arm out to encompass the now silent shelves, "this can't go on."

"But it's only me here," Nathan insisted. "They're not doing anything wrong, they're not hurting anyone. Why do you have to do anything?"

"It's hurting your Dad, Nathan," Sam interjected softly, hating himself for bringing down the woes of the world on a twelve-year-old. His father's failing business was in no way Nathan's fault but he knew Nathan wouldn't see it that way, would probably blame himself for it, but it had to be said. "Your dad's shop is about to close down because the toys are freaking people out. Nobody wants to buy from him anymore. We can stop it, Nathan."

Nathan spun his head round to face Dean, eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "Is that true?" he whispered. "Is this why Mom and Dad are so unhappy?"

Dean nodded. "I'm sorry. But you see now why we have to stop it?"

"Okay," Nathan agreed. "If it'll help Dad."

"Good man," Dean clapped a hand on the boy's shoulder, rising up from the floor. He held out a hand for Nathan to grasp hold of, pulling him gently to his feet. "Get going," he said. "It's late and you should be in bed."

The brothers watched in silence as Nathan shuffled dejectedly out of the shop and through the private doorway leading to the living accommodation. When they were satisfied he was out of earshot Dean turned to Sam with a cocky grin on his face.

"Well," he announced, "that's one mystery solved."

"What are you talking about?" Sam asked, puzzled.

"We know why Tessa can never get him out of bed!"

Having decided nothing else would be learnt from the store or workshop that evening, the two brothers made their way outside. Immediately making his way to the Impala, Dean stomped his feet, huffing warmth into his hands

as he waited for Sam to catch up. His brother, however, was showing no signs of rushing. Sam had stopped outside the door and was gazing up at the darkened windows above the entrance, his attention obviously elsewhere. Dean huffed a little louder into his hands and, when that made no difference, decided more drastic measures were called for.

Making his way back to the sidewalk, he scooped up a handful of snow that had settled on a nearby mailbox, crafting it into a perfect ball before launching it at his brother's head. As he had expected, the snowball found its mark, catching Sam completely unawares.

"Dude!" he exclaimed furiously. "What the hell was that?"

"Snowball, Sammy," Dean smirked. "Thought you'd seen enough of those in your time. Oh, wait. No, they normally get you on the back of your head, don't they?"

"So not funny, Dean," Sam complained, shaking snow out of his hair before it had the chance to melt and send icy water down his back.

"Neither's hanging around in the freezing cold, watching you stargazing. C'mon. Let's go."

"I've been thinking..." Sam started.

"Ooh, that's never good," Dean couldn't help the snark. He was cold and tired and whatever Sam was thinking could wait until he was somewhere warm, preferably with a beer or two in front of him.

"Jerk." Sam glared at his brother, although he hadn't expected anything less really. "Where's Mort in all of this?"

"What?" Dean asked, wearily.

"Mortimer Westland." Sam clarified. "They're his toys, it's his shop, Nathan's his son. Yet he's the one person we've not seen hide nor hair of since we arrived in town. Don't you think that's a little odd?" He paused for Dean to absorb the implication in his statement. "I think we should go talk to the man."

"Oh, yeah. That's a great idea. 'Excuse me Mr. Westland. I'm sorry for waking you at three in the morning but I'd like to talk to you about your magic toys.' That's gonna go down real well, Sam. The only thing that's going to get us is a kick in the ass." He sighed as he took in the crestfallen look on the younger man's face. Sam looked as if Dean had just taken his favorite toy and stamped on it a thousand times. "I didn't mean it like that, Sam. I think you're right. We do need to talk to the dude, just not this very second, okay. Let's at least wait till morning. I'm tired, Sammy and I want to..." he broke off, swallowing the words that nearly escaped from his lips without his meaning them to.

Sam however, was far too perceptive to let it go unnoticed. "You want to what?" he queried.

"Nothing. Doesn't matter." Dean spun round on the spot and stalked back to the Impala, not stopping to check whether his brother was behind him.

"Dean, wait." Sam hadn't moved though, and he wasn't going to until he'd got some sort of answer from Dean. "What is it you want to do?"

Dean stopped, key in the lock of the driver's door. He let his head drop, shoulders following and he couldn't quite hold back a shiver as a wintery breeze drifted down the street. "I want to sleep. Okay? Sleep."

"No, no, no. Don't play that game with me, Dean. I know you too well for that." A smile was beginning to turn the corners of Sam's mouth upwards. He

was beginning to guess what his older brother wanted to go and do, but he wanted to hear him admit it for himself. It would prove to be an invaluable piece of ammunition in years to come, he could tell.

Dean apparently thought the same thing. He also realized he wasn't going to get Sam in the car until he confessed either though. Biting his lower lip and silently hating Sam for making him do this, he huffed,

"Iwannacheckonthetrain."

"What?" Sam managed to hide most of his snigger. "I didn't quite catch that."

"I want to check on the train," Dean repeated, swearing eternal vengeance on his brother, rifling through his mental catalogue of retributions he could visit on Sam sometime in the future.

"The train?"

"Yes, Sam!" Dean snapped. "The train. I want to see if it's been up to anything while we've been out here achieving nothing. Okay? Are you happy now?"

Seeing how exhausted his brother was, Sam gave in to the smile and relented. "Okay. Let's head back to the sidings. Although I don't think we're going to find anything there." *Except a bizarre and unhealthy attachment to a toy.* "You want me to drive or d'you think you can stay awake that long?"

Dean's glare was answer enough and Sam slid to his customary position in the passenger seat, waiting till his brother had started the engine and pulled smoothly out onto the street before quietly asking, "What is it about this train, Dean? Why are you so bothered about it? I thought we were agreed, the toys only come to life for kids, not adults? Although I use that term loosely."

Dean, however, fixed his gaze on the road ahead and refused to comment. Studiously ignoring the perplexed gaze Sam had locked on him, the older hunter poured all his concentration into the act of driving, a clear avoidance strategy since he could have driven his baby down the deserted streets with one hand tied behind his back. He really wanted Sam to drop this line of enquiry but he knew it was never going to happen. Sam had an itch that had to be scratched, whether Dean liked it or not.

"It's all we've got to go on," he finally offered, not able to take the staring any longer. "We can't afford to overlook anything, Sam. Christmas is only just around the corner and there're going to be a lot of Mort's toys under trees this year, even without the ones that've been brought back."

"Dean," Sam hesitated, wondering how to approach the subject. He had to admit, he was at a bit of a loss. Dean wasn't sentimental in the least but Sam was fully aware of how his brother felt about children and safeguarding them. But even so, he felt Dean was beginning to take this a little too personally. "These toys, they're just playing with the kids."

"No, Sammy. They're not just playing. I don't know what it is they are doing, but there's more to it than that." And Dean turned his attention back to the road and the drive back to the motel, effectively cutting all communication with Sam. Accepting defeat, Sam sat back in the passenger seat and let his eyes fall closed.

When he next opened them, the car had come to a standstill outside their motel room and Dean was hefting the door open, letting a blast of freezing air into the hitherto warm interior of the Impala. He turned to watch his brother exit the car, shoulders hunched up against the cold, stalking towards their

room. Following him from a safe distance, Sam decided it would be best to give Dean a little space before going in for round two of what he had come to think of as "the train discussion." As far as he was concerned the topic was far from closed and Dean's reluctance to talk about it merely fanned the flames of Sam's curiosity.

Inside the motel room Sam wasn't surprised to spy Dean making a beeline for the little wooden engine. It was exactly where Sam had expected it to be - on the bedside table, just where Dean had left it. It hadn't moved an inch and Sam couldn't detect any odors that had no place being in the room. He watched as Dean picked it up, looking for signs on his brother's face that the train had somehow evolved into a living, breathing creature of the night. Dean's expression, however, didn't change.

Hefting the train in his hand, Dean was fully aware of Sam's beady gaze taking in his every action. Too tired to care what it might look like, and ignoring the fact he had ridiculed his brother for the very same actions earlier that day, Dean lifted the toy to his nose and took a cautious sniff. He was almost disappointed to discover there was nothing out of the ordinary about the train. There was no smell of smoke, or oil, just a faint reminder of the lacquer Mort must have used to seal the wood.

Cradling the train gently, he sank down onto his bed, running his fingers along the grain of the wood making up the tiny tinder box and up to the funnel.

"Dean?" It was a soft question and for a while Sam wondered if Dean had actually heard him. His brother seemed lost in a world of his own, holding on to the train like a lost child, as if it was his last link with a world long forgotten. "You okay, man?"

Looking up, startled from his reverie, Dean shook his head. "I'm fine. Why?"

"What's so special about that train, dude? And don't tell me it's our only lead. That's not what I'm talking about."

"What are you talking about, then?" Dean questioned, deliberately obtuse.

"Dean." It was a plea, Sam knew that, but he wasn't above pleading with his brother. He was quite prepared to pull out all the stops. Dean's head clearly wasn't fully in the game at the moment and Sam was convinced the train was to blame. He knew it was a low shot, playing the little brother, need to know, card when Dean was obviously tired and his defenses not at their peak. But if something was bothering Dean, Sam needed to know, had to be able to work it into any plans they might need to come up with.

Dean's mouth had curled up at the corners, ever so slightly. The smile was faint but it was there and Sam wondered if Dean even knew he was doing it as the older Winchester dropped his hands into his lap, the train nestled securely in the palm of his hand.

"I had a train like this once," he finally confessed, and Sam couldn't have been more surprised. Dean stopped, looking up at his brother, daring him to interrupt. When it became apparent Sam was going to be a perfect audience, Dean shuffled back onto the bed, folding his legs under him. "I remember Dad coming home on my birthday, I must have been four, and he had this package. It was wrapped in really shiny blue paper with space rockets all over it. Mom had let me stay up till he got in from work and I was so excited. He sat me down and told me that what was in the package was all mine and it was very special and I had to take real good care of it." Dean stopped, eyes suspiciously bright as he scrubbed a hand over his face. "It was a train, just

like this one. Except mine had been painted red and blue and green. And it had little wheels that went round when you pushed it along the floor. And a big number one on the side in gold paint. I remember Mom laughing and smiling and telling me how long it had taken Dad to make that damned train. He made it for me, Sammy. Took him six weeks of sneaking out when I'd gone to bed just to make sure I didn't find out. He made a little shed for it to go in when I was done playing with it." He laughed softly. "I was never done playing with though. I kept it by my bed. Didn't let you near it, that was for sure. But Dad? Him and me? We spent hours going on pretend journeys and arguing over who was gonna be the fireman and who was gonna be the engine driver. He promised he'd make a couple carriages for my next birthday."

"Wow. I never knew that."

"Why should you?" Dean shrugged. "You were a baby. And it's not like I ever got those carriages anyway."

"I'm sorry," Sam whispered, not really sure what he was sorry for. It was yet another reminder of Dean's lost childhood, of times when his older brother had been allowed to be a little boy, playing with children's toys and his father, just like any other kid in the street.

Dean sighed and moved forward to the edge of the bed. "Yeah, me too," he agreed, sadly. Then, snapping out of his morose mood, he put the train on the bedside table and turned his head to Sam. "It doesn't matter. It's just a toy," he asserted firmly, trying to believe his own words.

Morning came round far too early for Dean's liking. The lack of sleep from the previous night was playing havoc with his body clock and he was convinced he'd only had about three hours sleep when he felt Sam's foot connect with the base of his bed, rattling the mattress and startling its occupant from a blissful sleep. Sam's only saving grace was the fact he'd managed to procure a cup of real coffee from somewhere and a bacon sandwich to go with it.

Breakfast, however, was a fast affair, eaten and drunk on the move as Sam was determined to make it over to Westland's Toy Shop before the rush of aggrieved customers were even out of bed. Dean could complain all he liked, but Sam was not to be persuaded a couple more hours in bed would be beneficial. He simply smirked at his brother's not so gentle request and told him to get his ass in gear.

Reaching the shop in record time despite the Christmas traffic jams, Dean and Sam were the first visitors to the store that morning. Opening the door and waiting for the merry chime of the bells to ring out, Dean stepped over the threshold, closely followed by his brother, eager to be out of the cold wind. Tessa was in her customary position behind the counter but instead of putting toys and gifts out on display and on shelves she was fastidiously wrapping each one in tissue paper and sticking any loose edges in. The brothers watched as she then passed the packages to a young boy they now recognized as Nathan, who carefully placed each one in a large packing case.

Tessa stopped briefly as the bells announced the boys' presence, but on seeing who it was, she turned back to the job at hand.

"Morning, boys," she greeted them somberly, not stopping from the task in hand.

Sam raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Tessa?" he ventured, pulling the woman's attention away from the biplane she was currently covering with plain tissue wrap. "What's going on?"

"What does it look like?" she replied, tersely. She waved an arm towards Nathan and the packing boxes stacked up neatly behind her son. "We're cleaning up. This town has finally won, we're closing down." She sighed and rested her hands on the counter in front of her. Peeking out from behind her, Nathan's wide eyes sought out Dean's, silently pleading with him to keep quiet about the night's activities. Dean gave a barely perceptible nod and the boy visibly relaxed, turning back to his designated job.

Sam moved forward, reaching out a comforting hand to Tessa. "I'm sorry," he sympathized. "When were you told? I thought you had more time."

"I'm not stupid," Tessa told him bluntly. "Neither's Mort. We know what the accountant's going to say and there's a lot of stock here. Nathan and I just wanted to get a head start on the packing. I'm not sure how much time the bank is going to give us to vacate but probably not long." Her voice faltered on the last few words and Sam noticed her body shaking slightly. "It's not fair," she continued brokenly. "Mort's worked so hard on this place, so hard and now it's all over. He's never been happier than when he's in his workshop or watching the smiles his toys put on children's faces." She turned suddenly to Dean and demanded, "Do you have any idea what that's like? Making people happy?"

Taken aback by the sudden verbal assault, Dean snapped to attention. "No, ma'am," he confessed.

"It makes him feel good," she continued, "and that makes me feel good and that means we're happy. But this?" She waved an arm around demonstratively. "It's soul destroying and I don't know how I'm going to get Mort through it." She stopped and sniffed, wiping at tearful eyes while defying either of the Winchesters to comment.

"I'm sorry," Sam commiserated after an uncomfortable pause. Tessa was on the verge of tears and he knew any minute now Dean would be edging for the door. Dean didn't really cope well with women in tears and Sam wondered how he could get around the awkwardness of the situation without making Tessa feel any worse than she obviously already did. "Maybe we could talk to him?" he suggested. "Let him know not everyone thinks badly of him?"

Tessa nodded absently. "He's in the workshop, although what good it'll do, I don't know." She nodded towards the door of the workshop, giving the brothers her permission to interrupt her husband. "Thank you," she added quietly, as they made their way to the workshop. "It's good to know someone cares."

The workshop was quiet and gloomy. Mort had evidently decided to save money on lighting and only one bare light bulb was lit above a lathe. Sawdust hung in air, making Sam want to sneeze, and the scent of lacquer and glue mixed happily to create a distinctive atmosphere in the room. Mort himself was sitting at a workbench, meticulously sanding down the rough edges of a jewelry box. He was so absorbed in his craft he didn't notice the boys until Sam succumbed to the sawdust and let out a stifled sneeze.

"Who are you?" Mort demanded, wearily, turning around to study Dean and Sam carefully.

Despite the poor lighting Sam could make out tired features on a worn face. Mortimer Westland wasn't what Sam had expected. There was no hint of the businessman he had once been and Sam had to remind himself that the paper he wrote was highly outdated now and the man in front of him was a changed man. His face was marked with laughter lines and his eyes held the promise of sparkle from better times. Sam noticed his hands were rough and sawdust had collected under his fingernails. Had times been different for the Westlands, Sam could imagine this man to be a jolly giant. As it was, it seemed that Mortimer Westland was simply going through the motions.

"My name's Sam, and this is my brother Dean," Sam explained, slightly disconcerted when Mort turned his back on the boys and picked up a fresh piece of sandpaper. "We've been talking to Tessa and Nathan," he continued, hoping to get some sort of response out of the man. When nothing was forthcoming, Sam glanced at Dean, hoping for some sort of inspiration. Dean however, simply raised his eyebrows and shrugged. Sam was the expert at this sort of thing as far as he was concerned and he was happy to let Sam run the show for the time being.

Huffing silently at his brother's complete lack of help, Sam took a deep breath, instantly regretting it when sawdust caught in the back of his throat, causing a coughing fit that showed no signs of letting up. Just as Dean moved forward to slap Sam on the back, Mort turned round, holding a glass of water in his hand. Sam had no idea where it had come from but he didn't really care. Taking it gratefully, he sipped the cold liquid and gradually regained control of his lungs.

"Not used to sawdust, son?" Mort chuckled and his face lit up briefly with gentle humor. "Who did you boys say you were?"

"We were just passing through town when we saw your shop," Dean explained, giving Sam some time to regain his composure. "Sam here wanted to meet you. He was at Stanford," he confided, as though that was all the explanation Mort needed. And apparently it was. Mort gave Sam an appraising look and suddenly Sam knew what it must have been like to have been on the wrong side of the desk to Mortimer Westland, CEO.

"Stanford?" he questioned. "Did a case study on me, did you?" he continued, a smile starting to curl the corner of his mouth upward. "Can't say I've met anyone who's done a paper on me before. Tell me, son. Do I live up to expectations?"

"No, Sir. Well, yes, I suppose. I don't really know." Sam stammered, not quite sure how to answer.

Mort laughed outright at his reply though. "Don't worry. I've changed quite a bit from those days. I wouldn't expect you to have an answer to that question."

"Actually, Sir, we wanted to help," Sam said, covering his embarrassment.

"Don't call me Sir, it makes me feel old," Mort smiled. "I've been 'Sir' most of my life, I'm just plain old Mort now." He paused and frowned. "What exactly is it you think you can help me with?"

"We've been talking to Tessa and we've heard a few things around town," Dean took over the conversation. "Stories about your toys coming to life and stuff."

Mort snorted in derision. "Have you now? And you think you can save my business and my home from lies and scaremongers?" He sat forward on his stool and beckoned the boys nearer. Dropping his voice lower he whispered, "Have you ever heard such rubbish? If people don't want my toys they should just bring them back. These stories they're spreading? Pointless. You know what? I'll take back faulty toys. I'm a fair man. I'll take back toys that the kids don't want. People don't always know what their kids really want and I'm happy to exchange things like that. But what I can't do is accept these stories as truth. It's ridiculous and now I'm going out of business because some parents can't believe their kids might just be making up a few stories."

With a sinking feeling Sam and Dean exchanged glances. Mortimer was refusing to accept there might be more to the stories than just rumors and it would seem there was no alternative other than to enlighten the man as to what his creations were actually capable of. Intuitively delegating the task to his younger brother, Dean took a slight step backward, leaving Sam in the spotlight.

"Mort," the younger man began, "these stories aren't just rumors. These things really can happen. We know because, well, we've seen it happen."

"Right," Mort nodded condescendingly. "And because you say so, I should just believe you. Listen to me, young man. I've heard a lot of rumors and excuses in my time and I know bullshit when I hear it."

"I know," Sam replied. "But your toys really are coming to life. Dean and me? We kind of specialize in this sort of thing and we've seen your toys come to life. Here. In your shop."

"I don't know what you two are trying to achieve here, but I think it's time you left." Mort turned his back on Sam and picked up a chisel from the selection of tools sitting on the workbench.

"I know this sounds crazy," Sam insisted, "but it's true. I wouldn't try to fool a man of your standing Mr. Westland, but when we came here last night..."

"Last night?" Mort interrupted, whirling back round. "What the hell were you doing here last night?"

Deciding it was time to put an end to Sam and Mort's bickering, Dean stepped forward and, taking the chisel firmly out of Mort's hand, he pushed Sam gently to one side. "We were here to put a stop to it, Mort," he told the older man. "And d'you know what we found?" Not stopping for Mort to answer, Dean waved a hand, encompassing the finished toys on the shelves and the door to the store. "We found a hive of activity, Mort. Toys having tea parties, soldiers fighting wars, cars racing up and down the store. And you know what else we found? We found Nathan. Playing with the toys you made. You may not care what your toys are doing to the kids in town but your own son is down here, every night, playing with those toys and trust me, Mort, he's not running the show. Now, you may or may not have anything to do with this, but believe me, your toys are most definitely coming to life. And things aren't going to end well."

Mort had listened to Dean's rant with increasing incredulity. Rising to his feet, invading Dean's personal space, he leaned forward and jabbed a finger into Dean's chest. Caught unawares, Dean stumbled back a couple of steps.

"Get out," he hissed. "How dare you come in here and tell these lies? My son is twelve years old. He has a vivid imagination and, quite frankly, I

wouldn't expect anything less of him. But for you to get drawn into his games? It beggars belief that two grown men would fall for his tales."

"You can turn a blind eye if you want to," Dean retorted, feeling his blood begin to boil, "but sooner or later someone is going to be hurt. Badly. And you're not even prepared to consider the possibility that you could do something about it? These games the toys are playing are getting more and more adventurous. You just have to pick up the local paper to read about them. Someone is going to be seriously injured, maybe even die, and soon. Can you honestly tell me you're happy to have that on your conscience? Because I'm not."

Feeling a hand on his arm, Dean spun round to find Sam gently pulling him away from Mort. In his anger, Dean had stepped forward and he was now almost nose to nose with the toymaker. Allowing Sam to lead him away, Dean couldn't resist one last comment. "I'm going to do everything I can to stop your toys, Mort. Whatever it takes, I'm gonna do it."

Christmas truly had come early for the Mitchell family. Isobel Mitchell had spent the best part of the day in her newly fitted kitchen, the result of her husband's recent promotion, preparing a sumptuous meal for her family. Her parents were in town for just one night, on their way through to their Christmas vacation cruise which they'd booked nearly a year ago. It made Isobel smile every time she thought of her dad on a cruise liner. He got bored halfway through his favorite TV show and she wondered just how Mom intended to keep him entertained.

Sliding the oven door open for one final check on the turkey, she leant down to pat her three-year-old son's head as he charged unsteadily through the kitchen en route to the lounge. To say Cameron was excited was an understatement in the first degree. He had been too little to appreciate the festive season last year, but this year he'd done nothing but burble on about it ever since Miss Wilson at kindergarten mentioned Santa Claus and chimneys in the same sentence. Isobel watched him scamper through to the adjoining room, through to where the rest of the family were chatting and laughing.

Satisfied the dinner was as ready as it was going to be and deciding to let the meat rest for ten minutes, she joined the merriment in the other room. Mark was sitting with their son on his knee, pouring over "The Night Before Christmas" for the thousandth time, bouncing him up and down merrily. Her parents were watching with grandparently indulgence, glancing at each other from time to time.

"Come and sit down, Izzy," her mother beckoned her over. "You've been working flat out in that kitchen since we arrived. Come and enjoy the fruits of your labor." She patted the seat next to her. "The tree looks lovely, dear. How long did that take you?"

"Far too long, if you ask me," Mark interrupted. "Still, probably didn't help that Cameron had to get involved."

"Well," laughed Grandma, "what's Christmas for, if not for the children?"

"Speaking of which," Isobel's father reached behind his back, pulling a brightly colored parcel from under a cushion. "This is for you," and he waved the gift at the little boy.

Leaping up off his father's knee, Cameron bolted to his grandpa, grasping the package in both hands. His tiny fingers fumbled at the wrapping, clawing at the sticky tape holding it together. Mark laughed to see his efforts at unwrapping the present.

"Who wrapped that?" he asked, laughing even harder as Grandma sheepishly held up a hand.

Cameron, however, had little time for pondering the ethics of sticky tape usage. He had managed to get a finger into a small gap and was working on getting another finger in. With a triumphant cry of glee, he ripped the paper away, hurling pieces of varying size in all directions in his haste to get to the gift hidden within. Finally feeling a smooth surface, Cameron dispensed the last bit of paper and turned with a beaming smile to his mother.

"Look," he cried. "Froggy," and he held up a perfectly formed wooden frog for Isobel to inspect.

"It's a pull along thing," her father explained, needlessly.

"Thank you," she whispered. "It's perfect. Just what we need to fuel his amphibian obsession. Now, let's go eat."

Dinner was a long, drawn out affair. The wine flowed and food was never in short supply. The conversation ranged from Mark's job to Cameron's latest success at kindergarten. The atmosphere was jovial and as the daylight faded and Cameron's attention at the table dwindled, Mark suggested he and Grandpa clear up while the ladies, who had worked so hard to produce such a magnificent meal, enjoyed one more glass of wine. Leaving the women to indulge their passion for gossip, Mark helped Cameron down from the table.

"Off you go, sunshine." He gave the boy a playful shove in the direction of the lounge. "Go play with your frog."

Cameron didn't need much encouragement and before the dishes were off the table there were sounds of imaginary pond life emanating from the direction of the tree, dominated by the croaking of a wooden frog.

By the time Mark and Grandpa returned from washing the dishes, Isobel and her mother seemed to have finally run out of conversation. They had debated the best use of household vinegar, dissected Maryanne Tribble's latest affair and sympathized with Margaret Foster's most recent hospital visit. Returning to a lull in the conversation, Mark lay out the coffee set he had thoughtfully brought with him from the kitchen.

"Sounds like Cam's finally given up the fight," he commented, referring to the resounding silence coming from next door. "How much do you wanna bet he's fast asleep on the sofa?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Isobel agreed. "He's been on the go all day. Would you mind taking him up to bed? You probably won't even need to wake him."

Moving out of the dining room, Mark made his way to where he had last seen his son dragging his new frog across the floor at top speed. Not spying him straight away on the sofa, Mark edged round the furniture quietly, not wanting to wake Cameron. Finally spotting the boy lying under the tree, he bent down to pick the child up. Suddenly, his blood froze in his veins. The golden cord which Cameron had been tugging the toy along with was firmly wrapped around his neck and his lips were tinged blue. Unable to believe what he was seeing, Mark dropped to his knees, fingers scrambling to untangle the cord.

"Isobel!"

Part Four

Sam gazed in awe at the pile of waffles stacked on Dean's plate. He had a secret bet going with himself that the tower would topple over before his brother managed to get the lid off the syrup bottle. His own breakfast, by comparison, looked as though it had escaped from the nearest health spa and was seeking sanctuary in the only diner in town. He shook his head in amazement as Dean finally accomplished his task and poured an ocean of sweet sauce over his breakfast dish.

Catching Sam's movement out of the corner of his eye, Dean raised a serious face. "What?" he asked, innocently.

"Nothing," Sam replied, unable to tear his eyes away from the precarious structure beginning to wobble ominously on the plate. Subconsciously he slid his coffee cup out of the possible trajectory of falling waffles.

Dean shrugged and turned his attention back to his plate, hand hovering over his cutlery as if he couldn't decide whether to use a fork or a spoon or maybe both. The diner was almost deserted and Sam had persuaded Dean to give it another try on the basis it was Christmas Eve and Martha's Coffee and Ice Cream Parlor was now closed for the duration. Dean had protested and complained all the way to the diner but once he had discovered the array of sweet breakfast dishes on offer he had forgiven it the dire coffee it served.

The fairy lights adorning the window seemed to have multiplied tenfold since their previous visit and Dean had hesitated on the threshold, listening for the cloyingly cute sound of Frosty the Snowman or Jingle Bells. The relief on his face when all he could hear was the local news station was almost comical, Sam reflected.

Sitting in a booth in the far corner, the Winchesters were unobtrusive and blended into the background, just as they preferred. Totally absorbed by his waffle dilemma, Dean didn't notice Sam's hand, complete with loaded fork, stop its journey to his mouth or the way his brother's head jerked up and slightly to one side.

"Did you hear that?" Sam interrupted Dean's contemplation.

"What?"

"On the radio. Listen."

Doing as instructed, through a mouthful of waffle, Dean tuned into the background noise of the radio. Not hearing anything of particular interest, he raised his eyebrows in Sam's direction.

"What am I listening for?" he mumbled, washing his mouthful down with a swig of black coffee.

"The interview. Sound at all familiar to you?"

Paying more attention, Dean put his cup down on the table and pushed his plate away from him slightly. The interviewer on the radio had a soft lilt to his voice but Dean could detect a steely undertone to his questioning. If he had to hazard a guess, Dean would have said the guy didn't like his interviewee. And it didn't take long for him to work out why. Catching a name floating over the airwaves, Dean turned back to his little brother.

"Philip Gibson? Wasn't that...?"

“The reporter who was hassling Tessa?” Sam finished the sentence for him. “Yeah. Seems he’s not content with newsprint anymore. Looks like he wants to broadcast his scoop to the whole world.” The bitterness in Sam’s voice was evident and Dean couldn’t help being a little surprised. It took a lot for his brother to dislike someone; he usually went round in circles trying to find something to like about everybody and Dean couldn’t help wondering how the conversation with his brother had gone exactly. He was beginning to think Sam had given him the abridged version.

“What’s he talking about this time?” Dean decided to give Sam something to focus on other than his feelings for the reporter.

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted. He hushed Dean with a furrowed brow and wave of his hand. “Sounds like there’s been another incident.” He frowned as he listened carefully, straining to hear the words above the hum of morning conversation in the diner.

“Fortunately the boy’s father found him before any lasting damage was done. According to a spokesman, Cameron was taken to hospital but discharged shortly afterwards,” the newscaster was saying. “Parents are being warned to be aware of hidden dangers this Christmas.”

“Excuse me,” Sam grabbed the attention of the diner’s only waitress, a cheerful woman in her late forties. “What’s going on?” He gestured at the speakers of the radio.

“Oh, that,” the woman exclaimed, automatically refilling both boys’ mugs. “Some poor kid wrapped a toy around his neck last night. Nearly killed himself. His dad found him just in time.” She leant forward, taking a sneaky look round the diner. Lowering her voice, she gave Sam a sly wink. “Apparently the toy came from Westland’s, over on Market Square? There’s some guy saying the shop’s cursed and all the toys are mini killers!”

“Mini killers?” Dean couldn’t keep the mirth out of his voice. He’d heard many things in his time but he’d yet to hear a toy described as a mini killer. Whatever his own opinion on the matter, even he thought that was a bit of an exaggeration.

“Yep. But we are talking about Philip Gibson and we all know he’s a liar.” The waitress smiled at the boys and took her leave, heading over to the next table needing refills.

“Sounds like Gibson doesn’t have many fans here,” Dean commented, watching his brother’s face closely. Sam looked much happier at that news.

“Good. The guy’s a jerk. The last thing Tessa and her family need is some jackass trying to convince the world that their toys are dangerous. This kid just got caught up in a cord. Scaremongering isn’t helpful, especially when Mort’s so close to the edge. This might just be the final straw for him.”

“Woah there, Sammy. Don’t you think that’s a little over the top? I mean, yeah, the man’s uptight about his business right now but I wouldn’t say he’s about to go over the edge.” Dean sat back, eyeing his little brother thoughtfully. “I think you just don’t like Gibson. I can see why, he’s a colossal pain in the ass, but I don’t think he’s worth time spent worrying over.” He paused and regarded the remains of his waffle tower. It would surely be cold and congealed by now. But the point was moot as the news report had killed his appetite anyway. “You know what is bothering me, though?” he asked.

“How Gibson got the air time?” Sam replied, unable to shake the disdain he had for the man.

“Sam, let it drop,” Dean ordered. “He’s really not worth it. No, what’s bothering me is that these accidents are getting more serious. I don’t think we’ve got long to stop this before something really bad happens.”

Sam sighed and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a sheet of paper. He lay it on the table in front of him and smoothed it out.

“What are we missing here, Dean?” he wondered, casting his eyes over the paper. “Why these children?”

“What’s this?” Dean asked, snatching the paper from under Sam’s nose. He scanned the scrawl on the sheet and looked up at the younger Winchester. “Research? When the hell did you have the time to do this?”

Sam smirked and sat back in his seat. “I had loads of time, Dean. I think you were too busy to notice. You were, um, train spotting.”

Dean ignored the smirk and looked down at the list of victims Sam had compiled unbeknownst to him. It was, as expected considering it was Sam’s research, a comprehensive history of the incidents involving Mort’s toys over the last three months. Sam had listed the toy involved, the time, place and nature of any accident and a brief family history of the children involved.

“So, what are we missing?” Sam had kept quiet as long as he could while Dean perused the document in his hand. But he’d been watching Dean as he put his brain into gear, musing once again that his brother was very skilled at putting on a dumb face when in actual fact he was just as adept at finding hidden meanings and concealed facts as Sam was himself.

In answer, Dean dropped the paper on the table, narrowly missing a smear of syrup that had dripped off the stack of waffles. He prodded the middle of the page with his index finger, bringing Sam’s attention to the writing on it.

“What do all these kids have in common?” he asked, the corners of his mouth turning up into what was rapidly becoming a triumphant smile. When Sam’s forehead creased in confusion, Dean just picked up the sheet and waved it in his brother’s face. “Siblings,” he stated, dramatically.

“What?” Sam cocked his head to one side, wondering what he had missed and what his brother was talking about.

“Siblings, Sammy.” Dean couldn’t actually have made it sound more obvious if he’d tried. He enjoyed getting one up on Sam and was determined to make the most of the moment. “None of them have any. Every single child that’s had an encounter with Mort’s ‘mini killers’ has been an only child.”

Sam snatched the paper out of Dean’s grasp and quickly ran his eyes down the list of family details. “Just like Mortimer Westland,” he observed. “But how does that help us?”

“What?” Dean wasn’t expecting to be questioned on his find so Sam’s doubt over the usefulness of his discovery left him a little deflated.

“It doesn’t really mean anything, Dean. It could just be coincidence. Mort’s toys are aimed at small children and a high proportion will naturally be only children if their parents haven’t been together for long. I mean, what’s the average age gap these days? Two years? Three years? Look at us. There’s four years difference between us.”

“Whatever,” Dean retorted. “It’s more than you’ve come up with so far.”

“Yes, yes it is,” Sam acknowledged. “But actually, there have been one or two cases of siblings, at the beginning, when this whole business started.”

Sam hated to take the wind out of Dean’s sails but it was true. It may not have

been highly publicized but Philip Gibson had told him of a brother and sister incident. There may well have been more that they just hadn't heard of.

"Dude," Dean whined. He had been so sure he'd been on to something. "That's so not on your list. If you're gonna research, do it properly."

"I'm sorry, man," Sam couldn't help laugh. Dean sounded like a child who'd just been told to redo his homework for the third time. "But, y'know, it was something. Most of the kids are only children."

"But not all of them."

"No, sorry. But I think we can safely assume that everything comes back to Mortimer Westland. Everything seems to start, or end, there."

"So what d'you want to do about it?" Dean asked, feeling decidedly slighted. He was quite happy for Sam to make the decisions now.

"I think we need to go back to the shop," Sam declared, folding up the piece of paper and slipping it back into his pocket.

Having agreed the best time to revisit the shop was at night, Sam and Dean spent the day perusing the local papers, watching crappy cable TV and arguing sporadically about the temperature of their motel room, an argument that culminated in Dean telling Sam he could always go and sit in the Impala if he was too hot.

By the time the brothers were ready to move out to Westland's Toy Shop, they were both feeling the effects of being cooped up in a confined space together for longer than either really wanted. The banter had turned to sarcasm and Sam was convinced that pillow hadn't just "missed the bed," whatever Dean said.

Offering to drive had, on reflection, been a mistake, but Sam had reached the conclusion that his older brother was chomping at the bit to get out and into the action. Snow had been falling most of the afternoon and whilst it hadn't all settled, there was a fresh covering of virgin snow on the road. Despite the fact Dean had every faith in his baby and Sam had every faith in Dean's ability as a driver, the conditions weren't conducive to an easy drive. That, coupled with Dean's irritability, possibly due to a lack of real sleep over the last few days, had lead Sam to make the offer. An offer that had been met with a snort of derision and an incredulous look.

The street was dark and empty and Dean quickly ascertained the family were upstairs in the living accommodation area of the store. The lights were on upstairs and the shop itself was bathed in the soft glow of night lights and Christmas illuminations.

Cupping his hands together, blowing heat into them, Dean waited silently by his car, watching to ensure there was no movement heading in their direction, as Sam extracted his lock picks and, in a matter of seconds, had gained access to the store. The younger man reflected how easy it had been to break into the store and resolved to have words with Tessa when they had sorted out this whole business. If their security was so desperately lacking it wouldn't be the supernatural activity of the toys they would need to worry about, it would be the passing opportunistic burglar.

Throwing a glance back over his shoulder, checking Dean was alert and with him, Sam grasped his flashlight and gently opened the door. Feeling his

brother at his shoulder, Sam slipped over the threshold and swept his light over the shelves and floor.

The toys were silent and still. In some ways Dean found the atmosphere creepier than when they had been flying around the store, over their heads and under their feet. The dolls stared out at them and although Dean knew it was an optical illusion, dozens of wooden faces seemed to be following his every move.

Sam meanwhile had moved into the heart of the store and was staring at the door to the workshop. There was nothing to indicate anything other than darkness beyond the door but Sam was still reluctant to make the first move without his brother at his side, watching out for him.

“Dean,” he hissed at his older brother, who seemed frozen to the spot, engaged in a bizarre staring competition with an array of dolls. “C’mon. There’s nothing in here, we need to check out Mort’s playground.”

Pulled out of his vendetta against the dolls, Dean snapped to attention. Sam was already reaching for the door and Dean wasn’t going to let him walk into the unknown alone. Hastening to his brother’s side, he gave a brief nod and watched as Sam opened the door.

The room beyond was dark and cold. Dean supposed it had something to do with keeping the wood at optimum temperature and humidity but the room was decidedly colder than the shop itself. Following the beam of Sam’s spotlight as the younger man swept it over the workshop, Dean took in the shelves of finished or virtually finished toys.

Moving stealthily into the depths of the workshop Dean gave Sam a gentle shove towards the workbench. “See if you can find anything in those drawers,” he suggested, indicating a set of drawers sitting solidly by the side of the workbench.

Nodding in acknowledgement, Sam set off in that direction while Dean turned to the shelves of finished and half-finished products, picking up a tin of oil absently as he passed by a silent lathe. He could hear his brother rifling through the drawers.

“There’s nothing in here, Dean.” Sam swung his flashlight in Dean’s direction, the beam halting suddenly as it illuminated the furthest corner of the room. Sam’s breath caught in his throat as he watched his brother advance into the same corner, oblivious to what had caught Sam’s attention.

“Dean, stop,” Sam commanded, softly.

Years of working, living and relaxing together had given Dean an unenviable understanding of every tone of voice his brother possessed and the undertones to Sam’s whispered order left no room for misinterpretation. Sam had seen something and the warning in his voice was unmistakable.

Dean froze, only moving his eyes to his brother, the unspoken question written all over his face. In response, Sam nodded his head to the spot where his flashlight had picked up a shadow that wasn’t at all toylike. The shadows cast by the beam had a distinctly human shape, wavering in and out of focus, slightly fuzzy around the edges.

“What the hell is that?” Dean demanded.

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted. “I’m guessing it’s a ghost.”

“I don’t know, Sam. I don’t feel anything...evil, and the temperature’s not changed in here. You got the EMF?”

“Maybe it’s not evil.” Sam ignored Dean’s request for clarification of the specter in the corner. “Maybe you can’t feel anything because you’re so tuned into things that are wicked you’ve blocked out any other sort of spirit.” He paused and took a couple of hesitant steps in Dean’s direction. “There are things out there that aren’t bad, Dean. After all, nothing malevolent has gone on here, really. Think about it, dude. Up to now it’s just been bad luck and bad timing and kids being, well, kids.”

Dean shot a disbelieving look in Sam’s direction. “Bad luck and timing?” he raised his eyebrows, voice unwittingly rising too. “Sam, these kids are on the verge of being seriously hurt and you’re calling it bad timing?”

Sam turned to face Dean, to meet the disbelief head on, when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Switching his attention from his brother to the shadow in the corner, he reached for the gun secreted at his back. Immediately following suit, Dean had his own weapon in his hand before he’d even turned back to the spirit.

The spirit was solidifying in front of their very eyes. The fuzzy edges were sharpening up, the hazy mist around the shape dissipating to leave a very definite figure of a man. As one, the brothers raised their weapons, pointing directly at the ghost before them, anticipating an attack at any minute.

For several long seconds nobody moved. Then, the spirit shifted slightly to one side, centering himself in the beam of Sam’s flashlight, allowing the boys their first good look at his features. The light revealed him to be a man in his mid fifties, Sam reckoned. He had a kindly face which Dean hadn’t been expecting but which didn’t really surprise the younger brother. Reluctantly Dean had to admit to himself that he didn’t feel at all threatened by him.

The figure did nothing. He watched the Winchesters with interest and dropped his head to one side slightly, studying them with gentle eyes.

“What’s he doing?” Dean whispered, unwilling to make a move just yet. “What kind of ghost just stares at you?”

“I don’t know,” Sam confessed. “It’s not our normal experience, I’ll admit. Maybe he just wants to talk?”

“Talk?” Dean was distracted momentarily from the ghost long enough to cast a scathing glare at his brother. “Whoever heard of a ghost wanting to chat? It’s not what they do, Sam.”

“Well maybe this one does!” Sam retorted, beginning to get exasperated with his older brother’s refusal to consider maybe this spirit was one of the few that didn’t want to cause mayhem and destruction. “Maybe you should be a little more open about this.”

“And maybe you should just open your eyes, Sam. He’s a ghost. When’s the last time you had a chat with a ghost that didn’t end with you flying across the room?”

Sam sighed. There were times his brother’s blinkered view on the supernatural could be frustrating in the extreme. He knew that, generally speaking, Dean was right. But sometimes Sam wondered if their Dad’s quest for revenge had left his brother with a narrower view on life than he could maybe have found useful. It didn’t happen often, but there were things out there that didn’t come back to wreak havoc on the world.

Sam was about to come back with a scathing reply when the ghost moved forward, slowly but surely. Dean’s reaction was instantaneous. He reaffirmed

his grip on his gun and mirrored the spirit's movement, stepping in front of Sam and holding his brother back with an arm flung out to his side.

Now the spirit was closer, Sam was able to study his face much better. He couldn't shake the feeling he knew the features but he just couldn't place them. He could see Dean's finger twitching on the trigger and he knew any second now his brother was going to disregard everything he'd just said and let loose with his gun anyway.

"Dean, wait," he urged, pushing the older hunter's weapon down till it was pointing harmlessly at the floor.

"Dude! What the hell?"

"Does he look familiar to you?" Sam refused to be sidetracked. He pointed at the figure, who had stopped moving when Dean raised his weapon.

"Now you want to discuss looks?" Dean shook his head, just about ready to turn his gun on his own brother. He was reaching the end of his tether with Sam's apparent desire to side with the ghost at every opportunity. "He looks like every other spook we've ever ganked. And that's what we need to do here, Sam. If you can't do it then I suggest you leave now and let me get on with it."

"No, Dean. Look at him, and I mean really look at him. There's something about him, if only I could place it."

"Well, don't blow a gasket thinking about it. We've got a job to do here and I, for one, intend to do it."

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Dean dismissed his brother's concerns with little more thought and concentrated on the matter at hand. Just as he was deciding whether to risk a shot or swap his gun for the iron knife nestled in his jacket pocket, a voice rang out from the toy shop.

"Who's in there? What are you doing?"

It was undoubtedly Mortimer Westland, come to defend his territory. The Winchesters could hear him stomping through his store, clearly making his way to the workshop. Wanting to keep him out of the way, Sam and Dean threw a desperate look at each other. Watching the door handle of the workshop turn slowly, Dean turned back to where the spirit had been hovering uncertainly.

There was now just an empty space and Dean's brow creased in confusion as he scanned the workshop, determined to find where the spook was hiding.

Mortimer Westland was not a happy man. He burst through the door armed with a baseball bat and flicked the light switch on, temporarily blinding both hunters. Seeing who had intruded in his workshop, Mortimer's face grew puce with anger. He had already sent these two packing once and he thought he'd made himself clear on the matter. Yet here they were, poking around his business as though they had some God given right to be there.

"You two!" he hissed. "What d'you think you're playing at? I told you yesterday, I don't need your kind of help."

"Mr. Westland. Sir." Sam tried placating the toymaker. "I know this must look a bit suspicious to you..."

"A little? You two come here, spouting nonsense about my toys coming to life." He stopped and waved his free arm around the room. "Which, quite clearly, they're not. And now you're trespassing? Again?"

"I'm sorry but there's something here, sir. Something that shouldn't be."

“Yes. You two.” Westland pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. “Give me one good reason not to call the cops on you,” he challenged, glancing down at the dial and hitting three buttons which Sam just knew were 911. Before he had the chance to hit the send button however, the overhead light flickered and Dean caught sight of the ghost rematerializing by the workbench.

“Maybe that’s a good reason?” he suggested, quietly, pointing to the apparition.

Mortimer Westland turned and froze when his eyes settled on the specter of the man in front of him. With wide eyes, he let his arm drop, the cell phone slipping from lax fingers.

“Dad?” he whispered so softly Sam wasn’t sure he’d heard right.

“Dad?” Dean repeated, looking to his brother for confirmation.

Sam simply shrugged. “It would explain why I thought he looked familiar,” he theorized, ignoring Dean’s glare and silent huff. Watching Mort step forward in his father’s direction Sam felt, rather than saw, Dean take a matching step. He grabbed hold of his brother’s arm, halting his progress and shaking his head. “Just wait, Dean. It’s his dad.”

The apparition had gained almost full corporeal status and his eyes were suspiciously bright in the glare of the light bulb. Mort had put the baseball bat down, his cell phone forgotten on the floor where it had fallen, and was looking at his father as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. Which, Sam mused, was a logical reaction. He was glad the shop owner hadn’t bolted for the door although he wasn’t quite sure where this turn of events was going to lead them.

“What are you doing here, Dad?” Mort questioned, hesitantly reaching out with one hand. “You can’t be here.”

“Well, he’s got that right,” Dean muttered, shaking his arm free from Sam’s grip.

“Shut up, Dean,” Sam retorted, wishing Dean would just leave Mort to do whatever it was he needed to do.

“I had to come, son.” The spirit spoke softly with a gentle burr to his voice, his hands splayed out to the side as though showing he meant no harm. “There was so much I hadn’t done yet.”

“You were busy, Dad.”

“I know I was, Mort, but it doesn’t excuse your childhood.” Westland Sr. moved round a pile of wood shavings on the floor and gestured around the workshop. “You’ve done well here. I’ve been watching you.” The spirit smiled. “Nathan’s picking it up too, I’ve noticed. I’ve been doing what I can for you.”

“I don’t understand.” Mort’s confusion was starting to win the battle with apprehension. “What have you been doing?”

“You know, I never managed to give you the childhood I wanted to. With your mother dying when you were so young, and me working every hour God sent. But your toys? They’re giving so much to so many children.”

“Wait a minute,” Dean interrupted, unable to hold his peace anymore. “You’re saying you’re the one doing this to the toys? Why would you do that?”

Mortimer’s father regarded Dean solemnly for a moment before answering. “The toys are enchanted,” he told the older hunter. “The children get so much more enjoyment out of them.” He turned back to his son. “It’s my way of saying sorry to you.”

“Sorry for what, Dad?”

“Sorry for not being there, not making it to your teacher conferences, not making it home for dinner every night, not taking you on vacation more often. Sorry for not giving you more of what you deserved.”

Listening to the older Westland’s apology, Sam couldn’t help the lump that rose in his throat. He cast a glance at his brother to see whether the statement was having any impact on Dean. He wasn’t surprised to see Dean’s face had clouded over and he knew, just knew, they were both thinking the same thing. The speech Mort’s father was giving was one the Winchester boys had waited a lifetime for but would never get.

“You gave me everything I ever needed though. You gave me your time. You were always there when it mattered.”

“But you had no toys, no real childhood.”

“I didn’t need them. We made our own toys, remember?” Mort had moved forward, all fear and apprehension gone. The ghost posed no threat to him and while he still didn’t really understand what his father was doing here, he felt some sense of gratitude. His father had died suddenly and they’d never really gotten the chance to say goodbye. He smiled, the Winchesters totally forgotten. “Remember that box the Fullers threw out?” he reminded his dad. “We snuck out and took it out of their trash. That box was perfect. Don’t you remember – it was a boat and a house and a space rocket. I had more fun with that box than any dime store toy you bought me.” He paused and looked at his feet briefly. “But I had more than that, Dad. I had you. It wasn’t just my boat, or house, or rocket. It was ours.”

Dean listened to the exchange in silence, unable to stop the comparisons to his own life. He had long ago accepted his own upbringing would be lacking in the normal childhood pastimes but that didn’t stop him from wishing he could sometimes have been a little kid. He knew it was wrong, but there was a subtle resentment creeping in towards the Westlands and the idyll that had apparently been Mortimer’s childhood.

Sam was obviously thinking along the same lines. He’d had a better time of it than Dean as a child, simply because he’d had an awesome older brother. Dean had often been more of a father than John had but at what cost? In adulthood, Sam was more aware of the sacrifices Dean had made which, at the time, he had taken for granted. He could tell the conversation taking place in front of them was making his sibling uncomfortable and he shifted slightly so his shoulder was barely touching his brother, offering silent sympathy, hoping Dean would take the contact for what it was.

Mort, in the meantime, had obviously come to a conclusion. Taking a deep breath, his voice tinged with regret, he looked to his father. “You’re making the toys come to life for me, aren’t you?” Not waiting for an answer, he plowed on. “You need to stop, Dad. It’s scaring the children’s parents and they’re bringing all the toys back. I’m about to go out of business.”

Westland Snr. looked shocked. It was clear he’d never really thought through the consequences of his actions. “What?”

“It’s okay,” Mortimer sought to reassure him. “I understand why you did it. But you need to stop. It’s time for you to move on. I’ve got everything I ever wanted here. Tessa, Nathan, my own business. I wish you were still here too, Dad, but maybe it’s time for us both to let go.”

“Amen to that,” Dean whispered, finally relaxing his grip on the gun still clutched tightly in his hand.

“Are you sure?” the specter was asking. “You’re really happy? This is what you want?”

The toy maker nodded. “Yes, Dad. I miss you more than anything, but I don’t think you being here is the right thing. And who knows, maybe Mom is somewhere, waiting for you?”

“Maybe she is,” Mort’s father tilted his head to one side, as though considering the possibility. With one final smile he backed away from Mortimer and the boys. “I love you, son. I’m glad you’re happy. Stay that way.”

Watching from beside his brother, Sam took a sharp intake of breath as the ghost seemed to rise above the ground, a soft glow beginning to surround him. The glow intensified into a bright, white light, and through the brilliance, he could just make out the silhouette of a man disintegrating into the light. Within a minute the whole show was over, the workshop returning to the glow of the overhead bulb and nothing else, leaving the three men standing in silence, each lost in his own thoughts.

The purple motel room hadn’t looked quite so bad when the brothers had their gear strewn over the floor and table. Now that they were packing up, the gaudiness was beginning to reassert itself. Sam wondered briefly if traveling on Christmas Day was such a good idea as he looked out of the window, taking in the dusting of snow that had fallen overnight.

Dean was insistent though. He had made it clear when they’d got back to the room last night that he didn’t want to spend another day in this town. He had politely turned down Mortimer Westland’s invitation to Christmas lunch, and he was relieved when, for once, Sam had agreed with him. Dean understood the man was grateful and, on any other day of the year, he would have taken him up on his offer. But it was a family holiday and he didn’t want to intrude, any more than he wanted to be reminded they weren’t a complete family at the moment. He knew their dad was still out there, somewhere, and until they were back together as a unit, Dean was refusing to play happy families with anyone. Not even Sam.

He screwed up the last pair of jeans and stuffed them into his bag with little to no finesse and stood back, waiting for Sam to stow the last of his clothing away, eager to get on the road. He reckoned there would be little traffic on the roads and he was keen to be away from the happy hubbub that was Christmas in small town America. He had already decided maybe a big city was called for, to cleanse him of the chocolate box nostalgia that had settled into his bones like a disease.

Casting his eyes around the room for the final time, checking they’d left nothing behind, incriminating or otherwise, his eyes settled on the wooden steam engine still sitting on the bedside table at the same time as Sam’s did. Ignoring his brother’s watchful gaze, Dean picked it up and waited till Sam had turned back to whatever he was doing. Slipping it surreptitiously into his duffel, he twirled the keys to the Impala round his finger and turned to Sam with a grin, game face firmly in place.

“C’mon, Sammy. Time to go.”

Sam smiled at Dean's retreating form exiting the motel room. His brother may have thought Sam hadn't noticed they were taking an extra item with them but if it gave Dean some comfort, Sam was more than happy to ignore it.

THE END