

Season Four
Episode Three: Tastes Like Chicken
By Tree
Part One

Goodwell Mine – Tunnel 3

Joe Brackett pressed the small nub on the side of his watch, smiling slightly as the white-blue Indiglo numbers reflected back at him through the light bug dust that covered the face. Punching the red “shut-down” button on the jackleg’s control panel, he waited patiently as the drill cycled down, the long telescoping bit taking a last bite at the rock wall Joe had been working on for the past several days.

He’d recently been assigned to Number Three in order to sink a drift shaft and hopefully relocate the vein of coal that had petered out a hundred yards back in the main tunnel. Under normal circumstances, Joe would have been tending the Ripper, a massive machine that chewed into the rock face and tore the coal from the wall. But the Ripper had been shut down, a full shift of miners laid off as the Goodwell Corporation decided if there was anything left to strip from this area of West Virginia countryside.

It was all about the money from where Joe sat. Goodwell wasn’t about to drop another dime in the Mingo operations if there wasn’t a significant return on their investment. Considering they’d been working these shafts for the past two decades, Brackett wasn’t overly confident that there was anything left in the mountain to mine. Goodwell was thorough in their operations, never walking away from an area until it had given up every ounce of coal available.

Still, Joe hadn’t earned the nickname “Bloodhound” for nothing; every miner in three counties knew if anyone could sniff out the dark veins of coal hidden amid the thick layers of limestone and shale, it was him. Jumping down from his perch behind the jackleg’s controls, the forty-something miner hoped they were right. As a third generation rock-hound, Joe didn’t know how to function outside the pitch blackness of the mines. Sure, he’d wanted something more from life than a perpetually sore back and the threat of Black Lung, but all in all, he couldn’t complain. Coal mining was hard, dirty work, but it paid decently enough and the lifestyle was simple and peaceful tucked away in the remote Appalachian community.

Crouching, Joe walked back to the haulageway, sighing with relief when he reached the main shaft and could stretch to his full height. Making his way over to some unused timbers, he plopped down and unscrewed the cap on the dented thermos. Pouring a cup of lukewarm coffee, he considered heading topside to get some hot brew, but decided against it as he spotted Lennie Miller slowly approaching down the tunnel.

Lennie was a massive man, too tall to even navigate main shaft with its elevated ceilings, let alone any of the more claustrophobic crosscuts or passageways. Even after all the years he’d worked in the mines, he hadn’t managed to develop a sense of where his body was in relation to the low hanging braces and ribs. In fact, Lennie singlehandedly went through more hardhats than ten miners. Like Joe, the other men had tagged the big guy with a nickname. But where Joe’s conveyed respect, Lennie’s “Brained” was a by-product of the scores of times he’d smacked his head, sometimes even knocking off his helmet and laying open the flesh on his skull. The miners often joked that Lennie had left everything he could claim as brain-matter smeared on the rock walls and deteriorating timbers.

But what the man might have lacked in grace and intelligence, he more than made up for in sheer muscle and brute determination. There were four miners, Joe included, who owed their lives to the powerful strength of Lennie Miller. A human roof jack, the huge man had held a crumbling rib support with nothing more than his

broad shoulders as the others escaped certain death below the collapsing ceiling of the tunnel.

They'd been best friends ever since, hunting, fishing, even spending the occasional Friday night sitting on Joe's porch drinking whatever recent batch Lennie had cooked up. And it had been Joe that managed to sweet-talk the shift boss to keep Lennie around as they struggled to keep the mine open. It seemed the least he could do to repay the gentle giant for saving his life.

"Hey!" Joe called out as the lumbering shadow neared. "You bleed the lines before you came down for lunch?"

The grunt he got in reply told the miner that his buddy was likely nursing yet another hangover, or possibly had once again "brained" himself on a low hanging top. Joe chuckled to himself and waved Lennie towards a seat on the portal bus that sat quietly waiting to transport them back to the outbye at the end of the shift.

"You okay?" he asked as the tall miner stood there silently. "What'd you bring for lunch today?"

Miller didn't respond and Joe turned his attention away from the left-over roast beef sandwich his Hattie had lovingly packed into his pail. Setting the metal box down by his side, he was about to get up to make sure his big friend was alright when Lennie abruptly dropped onto the rear bed of the personnel carrier.

Joe watched as the other miner toyed with the large, plaid thermos in his hands, rolling the container back and forth as though he was reluctant to sample the contents.

"You know, Hattie would be more n' happy to pack you a meal or two. She feels sorry for you, being alone and all... got no woman to care for ya'... thinks you can't fend for yourself. But I keep tellin' her that you just prefer taking your meals in the liquid form," Joe continued jokingly.

Lennie gripped the thermos tighter, holding it protectively against his chest as Joe chuckled again.

"Here, I got a n'uther roast beef sam'wich in here. Hattie packed me a spare n' case I worked a double. You have it and then I got a big hunk of rhubarb pie too," Brackett offered, reaching out to hand the extra sandwich to the other man.

"M' fine," Lennie snarled back, his yellowed teeth standing out amongst his dust-covered features. Joe pulled his hand back, recoiling slightly at his friend's sudden burst of aggression.

"Alright, alright... suit yourself. I was just trying to be nice. I can see ya'll rose up on the south side of the bed this mornin'," Joe teased, returning to his lunch. "You got more hair o' the dog in there'?"

He watched as Lennie looked down longingly at the thermos before finally twisting off the stained red cap. The smell that emanated from the open container instantly filled the narrow confines of the tunnel and Joe had to swallow hard to keep the last bite of beef from reappearing.

"What the hell, Len? What you got in there? Roadkill or something?" Joe asked as he lifted his hand to cover his nose and mouth. "You been making possum stew again? How many times I gotta tell ya'll that eating that sort of garbage is gonna put you in your grave early?"

But if Lennie was listening to the older man's tirade it wasn't apparent. Lifting the thermos to his lips, he took a long chug from the container, his throat bobbing as he swallowed down several mouthfuls.

Joe looked on in absent fascination as his friend drank greedily from the tall, metal bottle. In the dim light of the shaft, he could see the rust-colored lines trailing down from the corners of Lennie's mouth. Not one to be the poster-child for manners, even Brackett had to grimace as the larger man attacked the contents like a ravenous wolf.

"Really, Len. That smells just god-awful. You sure you don't want the extra sandwich?"

Miller paused, his hand slowly lowering the thermos from his mouth. Joe noticed the wild look in his eyes long before the miner spoke.

“Still hungry...”

Joe smiled and reached for his lunchbox. He was about to hand his friend the extra food when Lennie’s towering shadow fell over him. Close enough now, he could see that the dark stain on the man’s face held an eerie resemblance to blood. The smell of copper filled his nostrils and his stomach rolled as the gruesome odor assaulted him.

“Lennie?” Joe called out worriedly. “What’ve you done?”

“Hungry...” the big miner slurred, his arms reaching toward Brackett.

Joe looked down at the blood-stained hands coming at him, his eyes conveying the image but his brain struggling to make any sense out of what he was seeing.

“Lennie, are you hurt? What happened?” he asked, scanning his friend’s body for the source to the blood.

It was then that he also noticed the discarded thermos, tipped over and spilling its contents out onto the tunnel floor. Thick dark fluid, interspersed with larger flesh-colored chunks, seeped into the dirt, congealing as it was exposed to the cool air of the mine. Joe gagged again, the mess reminding him of the time Bobby Meekins had gotten tangled up in a chain conveyor, the crossbars dragging him into the mechanism, tearing his arm off and shredding it into so much human coleslaw.

“What the hell?” he cried out, stepping away from the larger man.

Lennie smiled then, his eyes widening so that the whites nearly swallowed his pupils. His appearance was unnatural, unnerving even. Something was seriously wrong with the man and, despite his allegiance, Joe wasn’t sure he wanted to wait around to find out what.

Dodging out of Lennie’s reach, Joe struggled to get to the carrier, hoping he could fire up the transport and bust ass back to the entry. Nearly a half-mile underground, he knew there was no way to outrun the larger man on foot.

His thumb stabbed frantically at the power button, the portal bus rumbling to life. Joe grabbed the control bar with his left hand even as his right yanked the gearshift down into reverse. The carrier jerked backwards, metal screeching in protest as it ground against the rough rock wall of the tunnel.

He corrected the direction, but not before Lennie vaulted over the front end, his thick fingers closing around Joe’s neck. Brackett released the controls, his own hands flying to his throat as he tried to pry the other man’s hands from his windpipe. Struggling to breathe, he realized a fraction too late that the real threat wasn’t suffocation; it was far worse.

Leaning in, his face so close that Joe could smell the awful odor of rancid meat and blood on his breath, the bigger man’s mouth opened in a wide, almost macabre smile. Pressed back against the metal seat of the personnel carrier, Joe couldn’t budge Lennie’s heavier weight off his chest. Pinned down, terror filling him, he briefly felt the pressure on his neck lessen, replaced by a sharp, tearing sensation that nearly made him black out.

Joe would have screamed, cried out a warning, begged for his life, yet even as the air briefly returned to his desperate lungs, he couldn’t make a sound. Looking up at his former friend, Brackett felt his mouth fill with blood, the sticky warmth pouring out and spilling down his chest. As his vision dimmed, Joe’s last glimpse was Lennie chewing, his lips smacking together as he finished his first bite and leaned in to tear out another.

In the suffocating darkness of the mine, Joe Brackett died quickly, his body held in place like a meaty bone between a dog’s paws as his flesh was torn away. Amidst the empty tunnels and silent shafts, the only sounds to be heard were the grotesque noises of Lennie Miller finishing his lunch.

Outside Mingo, West Virginia

It was dark, cold and desolate, the road winding before them empty except for the occasional pile of roadkill that Dean deftly steered around. A hardened hunter, the elder Winchester wasn't fazed by any amount of blood and guts, human or otherwise. But there was no way he wanted to have to pull over and power wash off the fresh entrails of some possum or skunk from the undercarriage of the Impala.

Swerving to miss another gooey target, he chuckled inwardly. This was becoming something of a game - *Roadkill Slalom* - and he absently wondered how a stretch of backwoods highway with hardly any traffic on it had become so lethal to the local fauna. His snicker must have been audible after all, the oppressive silence that had enveloped the car for the past hundred plus miles suddenly lifting when Sam spoke.

"What's so funny?"

"Huh?" Dean replied, glancing over out of the corner of his eye.

Sam wasn't looking back at him, a relief considering neither of them really had anything left to say. It had been an awkward silence at first; Dean torn between screaming "I told you so" and more gently whispering "I'm really sorry, Sammy." Either statement would have been appropriate considering how things had turned out and deep down, Dean knew he needed to say something to ease the tension between them. But in the end, he had ended up saying neither. Instead, bitterness and worry had taken over his tongue and while his brother was still reeling from the aborted attempt to go back and save Jess, Dean had chosen to remind him that the only thing they'd managed to accomplish was wasting time on a wild goose chase while Dad remained trapped inside Stull.

His brother had tried to answer, had tried to tell him that he was sorry, that they'd had to take the chance with the watch, but Dean refused to listen. Interrupting with a wave of his hand and an even snippier "Let's just get back to Lawrence", he'd plunged them into a long, silent drive; Sam darkly sullen and Dean entrenched in his stubbornness.

"You laughed. I just wondered what was funny," Sam asked again meekly.

"Nothing," Dean answered sharply.

"Yeah, okay... fine. Sorry to bother you."

Dean looked over again, this time actually staring at his brother's face. No one wore the whipped puppy look better than Sam; in fact, the younger sibling had actually perfected the sad, downcast eyes and slight quiver to his lip to the point where Dean generally couldn't ignore it.

Except this time...

He was simply too angry now to let his brother off the hook so easily. Well, not angry per se', Dean admitted silently. More like he'd been scared half out of his mind when he realized what Sam was gonna do with the watch. His worry and fear had translated into the spiteful words he'd thrown back at his brother, his bizarre way of saying "I couldn't lose you too."

Still, none of that would have ever happened if they'd just stayed in Kansas. Dean just couldn't let go of the thought that while they'd been wasting time in Enigma, their dad was trapped God only knew where and suffering God only knew what kind of tortures.

No matter how hard he tried, Dean just couldn't force himself to think about anything other than getting Dad back. No matter how much he tried to convince himself that John was only skipping across the other alternate universes like he and Sam had, the vision of his father screaming as demons swarmed over him filled Dean's every waking moment. And sleep was no better. When his eyes closed, the real nightmares began.

But that's no reason to take it out on Sammy... His conscience berated him.

"Sam... I.." he began.

"Don't Dean... just don't," his brother cut him off.

"I was only gonna say..."

"I know what you were gonna say, Dean. You made it pretty clear back in Georgia," Sam growled back.

"I was worried..." the older man started.

"No, you were right. It was a huge waste of time and I'm sorry... I am. But I still don't think the answer to getting Dad back is gonna be found poking around some old graveyard."

"Sam," Dean's voice lowered, his irritation returning. "We're not gonna hash this out again. We can do research from Lawrence as easily as anywhere else. What if the church reappears and we're not there?"

Sam sighed loudly and Dean had to fight down the urge to call him on it.

"I've already told you. According to legend, Stull only appears twice a year, the autumn and spring equinoxes. So unless you have a way to speed up time or trick Mother Nature into skipping a season, there's no way to get into the place before the twentieth of March," Sam stated angrily.

Dean pounded his fist against the steering wheel. "I'm not giving up, Sam. Dad wouldn't give up on us, no way am I leaving him in there one second longer than..."

"I'm not saying we're giving up, Dean! Damn, why can you see that I'm just as desperate to get Dad back as you are? I'm only saying that if there's some other way to open Stull early, we aren't gonna find it there."

"So what then?" Dean demanded, his gaze leveling angrily on Sam. "We just roam around the country, chasing down every witch, soothsayer and two-bit carry act in the lower forty-eight that might have some half-assed idea or obscure piece of lore in hopes that it might get Dad back?"

"If it helps... yes!"

Dean snorted. "Helps? How's it gonna help Dad? We might as well be turning our backs on him."

"I don't get you. Four years ago when we were searching all over for Dad, weren't you the one that kept telling me that we'd find him? But all the while, we took every freakin' hunt, checked out every damn ghost story or Weekly World News article, from one end of the country to the other. So, how is this any different?" Sam threw back.

"Because back then Dad wasn't trapped in some disappearing gateway to Hell," Dean yelled, his voice booming within the small confines of the Impala.

"We didn't know if he was dead or alive back then either!"

"He's not dead now!" the elder sibling shouted. *He just can't be...* remained unspoken.

"Dean, I know you're worried, scared even... so am I. But you know I'm right. And sitting around Lawrence, well... that's not gonna help. In fact, you said yourself that the place is like the locus of bad luck for us. Too many bad memories, too many awful things have happened. We can't think straight there. We can't see outside the box," Sam continued, his voice softer, pleading even.

Dean clenched his jaw tightly. He knew his brother was right; he just couldn't force himself to admit it. Deep inside, he was afraid if he agreed, it would be too much like giving up, like leaving their dad behind. And as much as he never wanted to see Lawrence, Kansas EVER again, every fiber in his being was screaming at him to get back there and dig till his fingers bled if necessary until he found that freakin' church.

"Dean? Did you hear a word I said?"

"Yeah, Sam, I heard ya'," he answered noncommittally.

"So where are we going then, Dean?" the younger man queried.

He didn't have an answer, especially not the one his brother apparently wanted to hear. He only knew that right now he hated the twangy country music that was the only thing that came in on the radio, he hated the cold that seemed to be seeping into the Impala, he hated the barren West Virginia landscape, and he most certainly hated feeling so helpless.

Glancing up as his eyes caught the sudden bright lights at the edge of the dark road, Dean brightened slightly.

"We're gonna eat," he proclaimed, slowing the Impala and steering the old Chevy into the truck stop parking lot.

He could feel Sam look at him with disbelief, but Dean didn't care. Let his brother be angry with him. Sam could get over it or not. Dad was stuck in Stull and they had to find a way to get him out; that was all the older hunter could focus on.

The truck stop was nearly as deserted as the highway they'd just been travelling, with only two semis idling quietly in the lot and just a few customers seated within the restaurant. Heading inside, they were greeted by a vivacious blonde waitress who all but rubbed against Dean the minute he entered. Her blouse was cut low enough to display her ample breasts like melons at a market and her skirt was high enough to barely be worth the effort. She was young, pretty, and asking to be noticed. Dean did, but for once he just didn't care.

She broke into a wide smile, jutting out her chest, her hips swaying left and right as she guided them to the nearest booth. Dean still didn't respond to her overt sexual advances, instead just dropping into the seat and immediately flipping opening the oversized menu.

"What can I get you to drink, Darlin'?" she asked with an overly thick accent.

"Coffee," Dean answered without looking up.

"And how about you, Good Look'n?" she drawled at Sam next.

The younger Winchester flushed slightly but replied in kind. She gave him a quick wink before bouncing off.

"Wow, mark this day on the calendar," Sam joked as he unfolded the napkin and set the silverware to the side.

"What are you talking about now?" Dean grumbled, peeking above the top of the menu.

"Dude, I've *never*, in over fifteen years and forty eight states, *ever* seen you pass up something that looked like THAT!" Sam teased.

Dean glanced in the direction the waitress had gone. "Yeah, so? You make it sound like all I do is chase tail."

Sam broke into laughter. "Dean, there are several constants in this world. The sun rises, people die, the government taxes and you... go for THAT!"

"Yeah, well whatever. Not tonight. Hand me the laptop," Dean demanded evenly.

He watched his brother's face darken, the humor giving way to a scowl. "Dean..."

"Sam, just pass me the damn computer. You want to research from somewhere other than Lawrence, well I don't need a friggin' GPS to know we aren't there," the elder hunter growled with an angry smirk.

"Fine... here!"

"You boys ready to order?" the buxom waitress interrupted as she set down the beverages. "Everything's pretty tasty, both on... and off... the menu."

"I'll take the special," Dean snapped as he flipped open the laptop, barely even making eye contact with the blonde and ignoring her blatant offer.

He heard the waitress huff, even caught a petulant eye roll as she scribbled down his order before turning her attention on his brother. Sam was more pleasant, obviously trying to make up for his lack of nicety, and Dean idly wondered how far his brother would go when it came to being civil.

The blonde apparently was now focused on Sam, as evidenced by the casual touch of her fingers against his as she gathered his menu and the smattering of "honeys" and "sugars" she tossed his way before sashaying off to place their order. Dean snickered silently as he stole a quick glance at his brother's fumbling response and the faint red tone to the younger man's cheeks after the waitress left.

Quickly returning to the task at hand, Dean's fingers traced across the built-in mouse as another website flashed up on the screen. The same silence that had

permeated the Chevy settled over the booth and despite Sam's strategically placed sighs, he refused to take the bait, steadfastly concentrating on the information appearing on the computer.

Several minutes passed and their food was delivered, the waitress nearly throwing the plate down in front of him while conversely placing Sam's Cobb Salad on the table like she was serving a visiting dignitary. Dean toyed with his food with one hand while the other still played at the keyboard. He was hungry, but distracted by the images on the screen, his appetite taking a backseat.

"You gonna eat or stare at that screen all night?" Sam asked, after the waitress walked away.

"You gonna tap that tonight or just dream about it?" Dean replied, nodding in the direction of the blonde.

"You're disgusting, Dean."

"So you tell me repeatedly..."

"Seriously, dude. Put the computer away and eat. Just take five damn minutes. You don't do anything anymore but obsess over Stull. You barely even sleep much less eat..." Sam pleaded.

Dean erupted. Throwing down the fork, he simultaneously slammed closed the laptop. "We're gonna do this again? Here... now? Sorry if I'm not living up to your expectations, Sammy. Maybe you'd prefer me to be stuffing my face and banging some chick. Is that the way I'm s'posed to be acting, Sam? Tell me, huh, 'cause obviously I didn't get the memo on the correct way to act when your dad's stuck in some gateway to Hell."

He'd yelled louder than he'd intended and the other patrons had now ceased their conversations and were staring at his outburst. Sam smiled weakly at their startled looks, even waving off the burly cook that had peeked out from the kitchen.

Dean rose from the booth, throwing down his napkin and upsetting a glass of water. He was still sort of hungry but realized that his little tirade had managed to draw all attention to himself within the restaurant, not to mention there was no way he could sit back down and act like everything was okay with Sam. He needed some space to cool off, so he stalked from the restaurant and out into the chilly night air.

Making a bee-line for the Impala, he climbed up on her hood, ignoring how the metal instantly transferred the bitter cold from her skin to his own. He closed his eyes and inhaled the crisp, fresh air, relishing how it cleared his head, if only for a moment. It brought him a semblance of clarity, quieting the myriad of voices that had been screaming in the back of his mind for most of the evening.

As his fury washed away, Dean found himself feeling remorseful yet again. His emotions were spinning like a revolving door, alternating between anger and guilt like some desperate housewife too long off her Prozac. Worse still, the unfortunate target of his wrath had all too often been Sam. Dean knew he was lashing out at the one person who was also shouldering a fair amount of his own pain as well.

"Face it... you're not really even angry at Sam. You know who's *really* responsible for Dad being left behind?" he bemoaned.

In fact, for all his complaining to Sam about wasting time in Georgia, Dean was really still blaming himself that they hadn't gotten their father out of the church when they'd escaped. Sure, it had perhaps only been sheer luck that he and Sam had managed to get out of the church as that last strange reality disintegrated around them, but he couldn't shake the memory of his dad's eerie call to grab his brother and run. If only he'd only tried harder, maybe he could have reached out and brought John back too. If he could have cleared the chasm, if he could have grabbed his dad... if he hadn't hesitated... if Sam hadn't yanked him back... if... if... if...

Dean sucked in a breath, his chest shuddering with the memory. He needed to go back inside, if for no other reason than to avoid catching a cold. That, and the overwhelming need to make amends with Sammy. They were a family after all, even if it was just a family of two right now.

Sliding down from the hood, he was two steps towards the diner when he heard the shrill scream from a female. Pausing, he cocked his head as he listened for the direction. Another cry sounded and Dean zeroed in, his feet rapidly carrying him around the back of the building.

His eyes already adjusted to the darkness, he had no trouble making out the two shapes tucked between the dumpster and the back door. Without a doubt, one of the forms was the waitress from inside, her blonde tresses tossed about inelegantly as her body was roughly jerked by the larger male. The latter, dressed in jeans, flannel and a thermal vest looked the stereotypical trucker, complete with a grease-smeared ball cap.

"Hey!" Dean yelled, grabbing the man's arm and yanking him around and away from the woman. "Doesn't look like the lady is interested."

"Mind your own business, asshole," the big man snarled, tearing out of Dean's grasp and moving back toward the waitress.

"I don't think so, jerkwad," Dean growled, snagging the trucker's collar and whipping him back around. He was ready for the punch that was aimed for his jaw, deftly ducking it and delivering his own in return to the bigger man's gut.

Their dance started in earnest, blows exchanged as blood began to flow from split lips and abused faces. Dean grunted as the behemoth drove a shoulder into his chest, lifting the hunter up and driving him into the side of the dumpster, his back slamming into the unforgiving metal.

He let his earlier emotions feed him as he drove his fists into the trucker's fleshy gut, but the other man was simply larger, outweighing Dean by at least a hundred pounds. With a loud bellow, Dean felt himself hefted off his feet, a void of air created between his boots and the asphalt. In the next instant he was flying through that same empty space, landing hard on a squishy pillow of rotting food and other trash inside the dumpster.

With a groan, he struggled back to his feet, wading back to the edge of the container in time to see the trucker running off into the darkness. Heaving himself over the side, Dean made his way to the still-shaken waitress, flinging off pieces of clinging garbage with disgust.

"You okay?" he asked with genuine concern as he neared.

She looked up and smiled weakly, cradling her arm to her chest. "Yeah, thanks to you. Can you believe that freak?"

"Did he hurt you?"

"No, not really. I was just finishing up for the night, taking out the trash, when he caught up to me. He wanted me to go back to his rig and when I told him I didn't do delivery, he wouldn't take no for an answer. Things got a little rough and can you believe it, he freakin' bit me," she exclaimed, thrusting her arm out for Dean to see.

He gently took her arm, carefully examining reddened flesh. It was true, there was a small wound in the round shape of someone's teeth, but it had barely broken the skin, just the faintest blush of blood trickling down her arm. Pulling a blue bandana from his pocket, he lightly wiped it away and then wrapped it around her arm.

"It doesn't look like it needs stitches or anything, but you should probably wash it good with soap and water," Dean advised. "How 'bout I make sure you get to your car okay?" he offered, looking around the darkened lot.

The blonde smiled but took a step backwards, trying in vain to hide her disgust from the odor that was now emanating from the bits of trash still clinging to his clothing. "No! Thanks, but really, I'll be okay."

Dean cast a glance down at his clothing and shrugged. Funny what a difference a little left over spaghetti and rotten lettuce apparently made. He watched her trot off, her bounce less pronounced now that she apparently wasn't trawling for a big tip or after-work snack.

Walking back to the Impala, he wasn't too surprised to see Sam waiting impatiently beside the black Chevy. It was all part of their normal game when they

were pissed at each other, seeing who would cave first. Detoured by the waitress and the resulting fight, Sam had apparently come looking for him.

"What happened?" the young hunter asked worriedly as Dean approached. "How the hell did you get into trouble that quick?"

Dean scowled, rubbing absently at the bruise that was forming on the side of his temple. "Was nothing," he grumbled.

"Nothing?" Sam repeated, drawing near and reaching up to wipe at the trickle of blood seeping down from the corner of Dean's ear.

Irritated, the older man swatted at his brother's hand. "Get off me. Geesh, think you never saw a little blood before," Dean growled.

"You know, the food inside was pretty good, Dean. No need for you to go dumpster diving," Sam teased with an impish smile.

"Get in the car," Dean snarled without any real anger and flinging a stray piece of pasta at his brother's head.

They drove a short distance before coming across a decent, by their standards, looking motel. Checking in went smoothly, the pimple-faced teenager at the desk paying little attention to the fake credit card as the latest episode of *Melrose Place* and a nearly naked Katie Cassidy graced the television screen.

Dean wasted no time claiming the first shower and Sam didn't argue. Already the stench from the rotting food was settling into the small motel room and they elected to leave the door cracked slightly while Dean's leather jacket was banished to the Impala's trunk until they found a dry cleaner.

The hot shower was a welcome relief to the stress and the encroaching West Virginia winter. It might only be November, but the mountains told a different story. Still feeling a little guilty, Dean cut off the tap sooner than he would have liked and decided to extend the olive branch to his baby brother by leaving a little hot water.

Toweling off, he donned clean boxers and a fresh t-shirt before stepping back into the main room. The T.V. was playing the local news and thankfully Sam had closed the door, but neither of those things really captured his attention. Instead, it was his brother, seated at the small table and tapping away at the laptop.

"Feel better?" Sam asked, looking up as Dean returned. "You definitely smell better."

Dean nodded and dipped his head toward the computer. "What you up to?" he asked suspiciously.

"Uh well...just looking for..."

"A hunt?" Dean finished the sentence. "You're looking for a hunt aren't you? Can't even wait a friggin' day and you're looking for a hunt. I cant freakin' believe it!"

"Dean... that's not..."

"Save it... Knock yourself out, Sammy. Don't let me or saving Dad get in your way!" Dean growled as he tugged on his jeans and another shirt.

"Where are you going?" Sam asked worriedly as Dean pushed his arms into his blue jacket.

"What does it matter, Sam?" he threw back over his shoulder, heading for the door. It slammed shut behind him with a resounding thud, the silence deafening in his wake.

Next morning

Sam lingered in bed longer than he'd intended. Not because he was tired, in fact, he was more than rested. He mostly just didn't want to wake Dean up.

Let sleeping dogs lie... or in this case, let the grumpy brother remain unconscious.

Still, between his full bladder and his empty stomach, something had to give. As quietly as possible, Sam threw back the covers and crept across the threadbare carpet to the bathroom. He closed the door, cringing when it creaked but relieved

when he came back out and found Dean in the same sprawled position on the far bed.

He wasn't really surprised and if truth be told, Sam wasn't even sure why he was taking so much stealthy precaution. He'd been half awake when Dean had come staggering back to the motel room at half-past early, reeking of stale cigarettes and alcohol. The behavior itself wasn't all that surprising; Dean had been teetering between anger and guilt since the morning after they'd popped out of the church. Like a festering wound, it seemed the only palliative treatment had been eighty proof or stronger and then only in quantities that left his sibling comfortably numb.

It wasn't that Sam wasn't sympathetic; he was shouldering his own fair share of guilt since Stull as well. And he knew that Dean had every right to be angry with him over the whole deal with the watch, but somehow he needed to persuade his single-minded brother that they needed to move on. It hadn't been all that long ago that Dean had so blatantly informed him that while they were hunting for Dad, there were still plenty of other evil creatures to put to an end to along the way.

Short of them pitching a pup tent and waiting for the spring solstice, hanging around Lawrence wasn't going to get Dad back. Somehow Sam needed to convince Dean of that.

Sighing, he shot a quick glance at his still unconscious brother. Dean hadn't budged, his still clothed limbs draped from one corner of the bed to the other. No doubt he'd remain that way for a couple hours more.

Sam's stomach growled and he quickly decided that he'd feel better if fed and ultimately his brother would be in a much better mood if he slept off his high blood alcohol content. Dressed and leaving a note, Sam was out the door and down the road to the truck stop diner in less than fifteen minutes.

The place was no busier than it had been the night before, odd enough considering it was only eight a.m. and Sam would have expected some sort of breakfast crowd. He was motioned to a place at the counter by an older version of the blonde, this one saggier and bearing far more wrinkles. To top it off, she didn't flirt with him nearly as much, matter of fact, she was barely congenial at all.

"What d'ya'll want," she asked sourly as she filled the coffee cup in front of him, her drawn on eyebrows raised in irritation.

"Ummm, short stack?" Sam replied, lowering the menu without even looking.

"Get it to ya' as soon as I can. Short-handed this morning thanks to Shelly's lazy ass," the woman complained.

"I'm sorry," Sam offered good-naturedly.

The waitress wheeled back around, pausing as she leaned slightly on the counter. "You'd think she'd worked so hard, ya' know? Serve a couple meals, flash those boobs in some trucker's face? Is it too much to ask for her to do the prep for the morning crew like she's s'posed to?"

"Shelly's the waitress that was working last night?"

"Yeah. If I know her, she's probably shackled up with some trucker that came through here."

"Actually, she was attacked last night, just outside in the parking lot. My brother fought off the guy," Sam stated.

The woman paused, seeming to consider the information. "Good for your brother, wasted on that piece of trash though," she grumbled before turning away to place Sam's order.

Sam snorted. Reaching for his backpack, he drew out the laptop. In a few seconds, he pulled up the newspaper article he'd been looking over last night. The report told of two recent deaths at a lumber mill in Colorado. While the authorities said the deaths were unrelated, one a heart attack and the other an accident with a chain saw, Sam was skeptical. Digging deeper, he also found a police report of a fatality involving one of the mill's logging trucks as well as another death six months prior that was written off as an accidental overdose.

It was all too coincidental to a hunter like Sam and the details screamed “angry spirit”. Now if he could only talk Dean into looking into the situation.

“Here ya’ll go,” the waitress announced, delivering a plate of pancakes that wobbled precariously.

Sam thanked her, pouring a generous amount of warm syrup over the stack before digging into the mound. He devoured them like a ravenous dog, partially to satiate his hunger and partially to get back to his research.

He managed neither...

“Thanks for waking me,” an all-too-familiar voice grumbled.

Sam looked up and into the red-rimmed green eyes of his older brother. Dean dropped onto the seat beside him and grabbed for Sam’s coffee cup.

“Sure, help yourself,” Sam replied, shoveling another bite of hotcakes into his mouth. “You gonna eat anything this morning?”

“Well I’m not planning on scoping out the dumpster if that’s what you’re thinking,” Dean joked.

Sam smiled and nonchalantly closed the laptop.

“Still scoping out a hunt?” Dean asked as he slurped another sip of coffee.

The young hunter swallowed nervously, breakfast suddenly sitting heavily in the bottom of his stomach. He really wasn’t in the mood for round three, especially with his hung-over sibling.

“Uh... nothing major... just something out in Colorado,” he covered.

“Oh? Colorado huh?”

“Yeah. Could be a spirit. I’m not sure. I haven’t really put all the pieces together yet.”

“Well, if anyone can, it’s you,” Dean replied confidently.

Sam was speechless. He’d expected several reactions out of his brother but acquiescence hadn’t been at the top of the list.

“Close your mouth, bro. This place ain’t the cleanest in the world and you’re about to attract flies.”

“So? You’re telling me you want to check this out?” Sam asked, unable to hide his surprise.

“Why not?” Dean answered, fishing a bill from his wallet and tossing it on the counter. “Colorado’s just a hop, skip and a jump from Lawrence, couple of hours tops.”

Sam groaned, he hadn’t seen that coming. He should have known that Dean’s interest had to have had an ulterior motive.

“Come on, Sammy. Daylight’s burning. I can catch a bite on the road.”

Sighing, he was about to rise when he spotted the older waitress.

“Hey Dean, hang on a sec. Last night, the other waitress, how bad was she hurt?”

Dean shrugged. “I dunno. Not too bad I don’t think. Just a couple of bruises, maybe a split lip. She seemed alright, why?”

“The waitress here today was saying that Shelly didn’t finish up last night, didn’t call in today. Something about that she’s not answering any calls this morning either,” Sam filled in.

“Shelly huh?”

“That’s her name. You think she’s okay?”

“I dunno. She seemed okay last night, not even shook up. But that dude was pretty big. Maybe he came back after her again,” Dean admitted.

“Maybe somebody oughta check on her?” Sam suggested.

“Somebody as in us?”

“Seems like the right thing to do?”

“And we always do the right thing?” Dean sighed audibly. “I s’pose we could check on her on our way out of town. You see if you can get her address from Flo there and I’ll go load up our stuff in the car.”

Sam nodded as Dean whirled around and up from the seat. He was out the door even as the younger man was calling the attention of the waitress. By the time she begrudgingly wrote down Shelly's address and Sam made his way outside, Dean had returned.

The drive out to the young woman's place didn't take long and finding the address wasn't hard considering the nearest neighbor was a good quarter mile away. The house itself would have been the Webster's picture for the word "shack", complete with worn and discolored siding, a front porch that sat askew to the main structure and a front yard with grass tall enough to nearly obscure the entire place.

"So obviously she's never met a landscaper," Dean snarked as they pulled up the gravel drive.

"Or maybe just not one that she wanted to bring home," Sam added with a laugh.

"Maybe she did but she lost him in the front yard," Dean continued the joke.

"Considering how she was hitting on you last night, maybe it was a good thing you didn't take the bait."

"How's that?" Dean asked as he stopped the Impala behind a blue Cavalier and shut off the engine.

"Cause as bad as it was picking spaghetti out of your hair, I would imagine it would be worse picking crab grass out of your ass," Sam teased, climbing out of the car.

"Oh, you're hilarious!"

Sam continued laughing as he followed his brother up to the front door. Standing off to the side as Dean pounded on the rotting wood, he subdued his humor as the sound of movement inside eked through the door.

"Hello?" Dean called out, knocking once more.

Still, no one came to the door.

In the next instant, Sam had out his lock pick while Dean was drawing his Colt M1911. They were inside the house in less than ten seconds, warily pausing just beyond the doorway as Dean called out to Shelly once more.

The previous sounds of movement were absent and no one responded to the elder hunter's call. Cautiously, they began to move through the small structure, separating as Dean turned right into the kitchen and Sam continued down the narrow hallway back toward the rest of the house.

"Shelly?" Sam called out gently. "We came to check on you. They're worried about you back at the diner."

It was quiet, almost too quiet as he slowly crept down the corridor. Just ahead, he could see an open doorway that exposed an unmade bed and scattered clothing tossed about on what had to be the bedroom floor. To his left, a second entry led to another empty bedroom and to his right, a half-canted door hinted at a bathroom.

Continuing toward the far bedroom Sam yelled again. "Shelly... are you here?"

His well-honed hunter's instincts called out a warning at nearly the same moment he spotted movement out of the corner of his eye. Whirling around, he saw her, blonde hair unrestrained and draped down across her face like a long yellow veil.

She moved slowly at first, unthreateningly, yet the voice in the back of Sam's head and the skin on the back of his neck weren't buying it. He took a half step back and held out his hands palms up.

"Shelly? My name's Sam. We didn't mean to scare you. We just wanted to make sure you were okay?"

He couldn't see her eyes beneath the unruly mane but he heard the unmistakable growl, low and throaty. And he didn't miss the way she lowered her shoulders, dropping into a crouch like some predator about to pounce.

So when she attacked, Sam was prepared, but he didn't expect the young woman's maniacal scream or the way in which she clawed at his face and neck. Her momentum carried them both to the floor and despite her lighter weight; Sam found it difficult to throw her off.

Shelly raged like a rabid animal, her fingers weaving into Sam's thick hair as she pounded his head against the floor repeatedly. Dazed, he raised his arms to fend off her attack, absently wondering where the hell Dean was. Surely his brother had to have heard the banshee-like screams of the crazed woman.

Yet as the blonde continued her abuse, Sam looked up into her face, glimpsing her eyes between the strands of blood-streaked blonde tresses. The whites engulfed her pupils and numerous small capillaries had burst, filling the edges with a bloody tinge that made her gaze look even more deadly. Whatever was wrong with the waitress, it was well beyond a simple misunderstanding of Sam being in her home unbidden.

"Shelly... stop..." Sam pleaded.

She shrieked once more, her hands closing around Sam's neck as she pinned him to the floor, eyeing his flesh with a gaze that resembled hunger, saliva collecting at the corners of her mouth. He reached up to tear at her grasp, but she was suddenly stronger than her small stature should have accounted for and she batted aside his hands like he was a gnat.

Sam was panicking now. He tried to call out to Dean, but little more than a strangled cry escaped. Shelly cocked her head and looked back down at him with a sadistic smile. She shushed him like a child, one finger gently placed against his lips. Her finger then gently trailed from his mouth until it rested on his jaw. Almost seductively, she turned his face to the side and exposed his neck. Then without warning, her face turned into a snarl, and baring her teeth, Sam could feel her hot breath as she lowered her mouth toward his throat.

Part Two

Outside Mingo, West Virginia

Dean poked absently through the pantry of the crappy little kitchen. He shivered unconsciously, his stomach twisting as he saw the mouse droppings on the shelf and cockroaches skittering as he disturbed some trash on the floor with the toe of his boot.

"This chick served my food?" he mumbled. *And on any other night, you would have come home with her too. Think about that...*

"I really need to work on my taste in woman," Dean mused, his nose wrinkling as he spotted something that resembled a leftover piece of raw meat. Funny, Shelly hadn't struck him as a steak tartare kinda girl.

Concluding the blonde was only a slightly better waitress than she was a housekeeper, he was heading for the backdoor to have a look outside when a loud commotion and Sam's voice called his attention to the rear of the house.

"Shelly... stop..."

Spurred by his brother's tone and the loud screeching of a woman, Dean charged from the kitchen. Rounding the corner, he spotted Sam sprawled beneath the blonde, her legs on either side of his brother's chest while her breasts hovered scant inches from Sam's face. Under other circumstances, Dean might have thought his brother was just getting "hooked up" with the buxom waitress. Then again, this was Sam Winchester and Sammy rarely, if ever, got "hooked up", much less in broad daylight and in the middle of a hallway in some backwoods, *Deliverance*-inspired cabin. As if that wasn't reason enough for Dean to be suspicious, there was the fact that said "hook up" was currently trying to tear Sam's throat out.

Still, Dean wasn't above giving his brother a moment of grief over the rather risqué situation he found the younger man in. "Really, Sammy? There's a bedroom down the hall. Haven't I taught you better than this?" he teased, moving rapidly forward.

Sam gasped in reply, his struggle to keep Shelly's teeth from sinking into his flesh consuming all his energy. With the .45 still gripped tightly in his hand, Dean briefly

considered the weapon as he quickly took in the scene. Despite the threat to his brother, he couldn't bring himself to employ lethal force on the woman, especially not knowing what the hell was going on. Instead, tucking the automatic into the waistband of his jeans, he grabbed a handful of Shelly's hair and a fistful of her blouse and forcefully pulled her off of his brother.

She peeled away from the younger Winchester like a tick embedded in a coonhound, screaming and thrashing the whole way. Dean dodged her flailing hands and bare feet, scarcely maintaining a grip as he lifted her up and unceremoniously tossed her through the open door to his right. Before she could recover, he grabbed the handle and pulled the door closed, trapping her inside.

"Sammy, grab a chair from the kitchen! Quick!" he shouted, struggling to hold the door as the crazed woman quickly began raging against the inside.

Dazed but spurred on, the young hunter complied, rapidly returning and jamming the top of a dilapidated Shaker-style chair underneath the knob as Dean jerked his hands away at the last second. They backed away reluctantly, both carefully eyeing the door, warily watching to see if the rickety plywood would withstand Shelly's frenzied pounding. When it looked as though it would hold, Dean grabbed Sam by the jacket sleeve and pulled him toward the front door.

Once outside and resting against the relative sanctuary of the Impala, Dean's hands rapidly glossed over Sam's face and upper body, assessing any damage left from the young man's encounter with the psychotic waitress. Other than an already bruising eye and a split lip, he seemed none the worse for wear.

"What the hell was that about?" Sam asked, brushing off his brother's examination.

"Maybe you shoulda left a bigger tip last night," Dean joked.

Sam threw him a dirty look, his gaze returning to the house. "Do you think she was on drugs or something? Maybe she had some sort of mental breakdown?" he mused.

Dean rubbed his jaw where one of Shelly's flying fists had glanced off. "I dunno, but she sure was packing one helluva right hook. Maybe this is just what happens when your momma marries her brother?"

Sam huffed. "We're not back in Hibbing, dude. You saw her. She was fine last night and now today..."

Dean shrugged, looking down at his watch. "Whatever. We came and checked on her. She's alive and breathing... demented, but breathing nonetheless. I say we file this under "not our problem" and put West Virginia in the rear-view mirror as fast as possible."

He knew Sam wasn't moving even as he pulled open the Impala's driver's side door and elicited the Chevy's characteristic loud metal screech. Dean looked back before dropping into the seat, mentally groaning as he spotted Sam worrying at the edge of a fingernail.

"You coming?"

He watched as Sam took another look back at the decrepit house, his hesitation clearly declaring what was going through his head.

"We just can't leave her like that," Sam stated after a moment.

"I could put a .45 in her melon," Dean jokingly suggested.

"That's not funny, Dean. Come on, be serious. We gotta get her some help."

Dean sighed. "Alright, but no way is Psycho Shelly getting in the Impala; not unless you have a couple of tranquilizer darts in your back pocket. And since I'm not thinking that there's anything resembling 9-1-1 way out here, what's the plan, Mother Teresa?" he demanded sarcastically.

"Uh... we could head into town? Even if there's no hospital, maybe there's a clinic or doctor's office. We could get someone to come out and check on her. It's the right thing to do."

"And we're back to that again, huh?" the older hunter bemoaned.

Dean recoiled slightly as Sam whirled around and looked him dead in the eye. "You're seriously okay with just taking off and leaving her like that?" Sam demanded, anger tingeing his voice. "You wouldn't lose any sleep if we just headed to Colorado, wouldn't think twice about what happened here today?"

"Dude, we've got bigger problems of our own to deal with don't you think? Why do we always have to put other people's issues ahead of our own? Maybe just for once, we think about us?" Dean threw back, his own green eyes wide and pleading. "Besides, this isn't even our kinda gig."

He tried not to lose his temper when Sam shook his head in disgust. How ironic that just a couple years ago, their roles had been reversed; Sam angrily arguing that nothing came before finding their missing father while Dean steadfastly insisted that John Winchester was alive and well and would be found in all due time. Along the way, they hunted every evil creature they came across and saved every innocent soul they could.

But that was then. *And back then, their father hadn't been left behind in some disappearing gateway to Hell...* Dean quickly reminded himself.

Dean looked down at his watch again, making no effort to hide his impatience and irritation. With a snort of air, he acquiesced, knowing there'd be no winning with Sam until the younger man felt they'd exhausted every effort to help the girl. It wasn't as though he didn't care, just more that he was focused on points west and not getting tied up with a mentally-imbalanced hash-slinger; at least not when their dad was lost in some Hell-realm, suffering unfathomable torment.

"Fine, let's get going then," Dean grumbled, shaking his head as Sam almost gleefully bounded to the car. "I just want to point out this in no way means that you won."

"I know," Sam replied smugly, pulling the passenger's door closed. "I'd never think that."

They drove down the mountain road until they reached the crossroads that split Route 219, one branch twisting down toward Mingo while the other indicated nine miles up to the Goodwell mines. Following the blacktop into town, the two-lane was dotted with modest houses and the occasional farm.

The village of Mingo was barely more than a blip on the map, a small conglomeration of businesses covering two and a half blocks that started with a Post Office at one end and concluded with a tiny grocery at the other. In between, Dean noted a thrift shop, a diner, a hardware store, a pharmacy and Randolph County Sheriff's substation; the latter stealing away the hunger pangs that had been gnawing at his stomach since their hasty departure from the truck stop earlier.

"I'm not seeing anything resembling Rampart here, Sammy," Dean snarked. "What do you propose we do now?"

The short-haired hunter gazed out the Chevy's window as he waited for his brother's reply. He watched as a few locals ambled about the sidewalks, their expressions strangely blank, faces lined with age and worn by the struggle to survive under the poor conditions in mining country. Every so often, one of them would cast an eye skyward, glancing at the gray clouds gathering overhead and threatening to add rain or worse to an already dismal day, only to just as quickly dip their gaze back down and continue on their way.

Dean wasn't really sure how much more depressing life in this area could be. Wasn't it enough to be dirt poor, relegated to a life handed down by your father, and his father before, with little hope of escape? A life filled with wondering if there would be food on the table or if dad might make it home from the mines?

In his own way, Dean understood the weight of that lifestyle. Was it really any different than his own? Growing up, food always seemed scarce and variety was a

concept as foreign as going for pony rides at a fair. But they survived, much like these people did. That didn't mean that there weren't plenty of days when PB&J sandwiches became meals; and even then that was only accomplished by picking the green spots off the remaining pieces of bread. It also didn't mean there weren't plenty of times that Dean didn't sit in some nameless motel room, wondering not when, but if, their dad was going to walk back through the door.

"Earth to Dean..."

"Huh... what?" Dean stuttered, blinking rapidly and glancing over at Sam.

"I said, maybe we should try the Sheriff's office," Sam repeated.

Dean's eyes narrowed as he yanked the steering wheel to the right, pulling the Impala to the curb and stopping the black Chevy abruptly. He ignored the expletive Sam muttered as the lanky Winchester rubbed at bruised knees; Dean simply didn't care. Throwing the gearshift up into park, he spun sideways in the seat.

"Are you out of your ever-loving mind? Did that chick bash that over-sized brain of yours in?" Dean asked incredulously. "You want us to just waltz into the Sheriff's office and say what? 'Excuse me officer, but we went out to some waitress' place, busted in, found her stark raving cuckoo for friggin' Coco Puffs, and left her locked in the bathroom'. Oh and by the way, don't mind the fact that we're wanted in several states for several felonies."

"Don't you think you're being a little overly dramatic about this, Dean..."

"Overly dramatic?" Dean cried out, exasperated by his brother's patronizing tone. "Are you willing to risk playing 'hide the soap' with some dude named Bubba just so Shelly can bounce around a padded room? Just where does 'it's the right thing to do' end for you, Sammy?"

"Dean, relax. First of all, this place is so freakin' backwoods, I doubt they even know how to spell F.B.I. much less worry about who's on the Most Wanted list. And second, it's not like you're still wanted in St. Louis anymore. Guevara took care of all that, remember? We can just tell whoever's inside the truth about last night and that we just wanted to check on Shelly this morning. We found her that way and decided to report it; end of story." Sam explained simply.

The elder Winchester sighed deeply, letting go of his argument even though his body remained tense and his jaw was clamped tight enough that Dean was afraid his teeth might actually snap. He killed the engine without saying another word, nor sparing so much as a glance in Sam's direction.

Scowling as he opened the door to the first drops of rain, he turned back to his brother and growled, "Let's do this. But I'm warning you, the first hint that this is going south and I'm leaving your ass behind."

"Sure you will," Sam agreed with a grin.

They entered the little building just ahead of a downpour, Dean immediately grateful for the warmth. His eyes took in the entire place in one quick look; training and survival instincts kicking in as he checked out the structure for exits, threats and of course, the presence of law enforcement.

"Hey there, what can I do for ya'll?" an overly cheerful voice asked.

Dean's attention turned toward a dark-haired young man seated behind a desk in the corner of the room. Dressed in a tan shirt that bore a Randolph County Sheriff's Department patch and a silver badge prominently displayed on his chest, the deputy who greeted the brothers looked as though he should have been chasing cheerleaders rather than lawbreakers.

Leaning towards Sam, Dean whispered, "You were right. Doesn't look like Opie here is old enough to shave, much less have any real experience."

Sam elbowed him painfully in the ribs, smiling as he stepped past Dean and extended his hand to the baby-faced deputy. "Hi! My name's Sam, this is my brother Dean. We're just passing through town."

"Deputy Cash," the young officer replied, returning the greeting. "How can I help you?"

Dean snickered. "Cash? Johnny Cash?" he asked, looking down at the man's nametag.

The deputy's head dipped and his face reddened slightly. "What can I say? Momma was a huge fan."

"Guess it's better than Sue," Dean suggested, flashing a wide smirk.

The deputy had clearly been teased about the name for most of his young life and wasn't about to take the bait. Instead, he thrust out his chest and nonchalantly slipped a thick, black nightstick into the loop at his belt as he drew closer to the counter, his eyes locked on short-haired hunter before him.

Dean noted the move, smiling generously, but not backing down. He knew in the right hands the baton could do some serious damage, but he hadn't missed the fact the baby-faced kid carried no sidearm and all other weapons appeared to be locked up in a cabinet across the room.

"So," Sam finally interjected, stepping up beside Dean and attempting to diffuse some of the building tension. "Like I said, we were just passing through last night. As we were leaving the truck stop on 219..."

"The Breakline Diner?" the deputy interrupted.

"Yeah," Sam agreed and Dean rolled his eyes silently wondering if somehow another truck stop had miraculously appeared in the past twenty-four hours.

"Anyway, as we were leaving, some trucker was attacking one of the waitresses out back of the restaurant. My brother pulled him off and sent him packing. He checked to make sure the girl was alright and we left. This morning though, we heard she hadn't shown for work, so we thought we'd check to be sure she was okay."

"You talking about Shelly Palmer?"

"We didn't exactly get her last name," Dean added sarcastically.

"Lois out at the diner gave us her address. Place up on Ruckman Road?" Sam confirmed.

The deputy nodded. "Yep, that would be Shelly. She and I grew up together. Not like there's any mistakin' Shelly round these parts. One look at her... well... you saw her... you know what I'm talkin' 'bout," he said, barely containing a mischievous grin.

Dean chuckled and nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, we noticed."

"So, about Shelly..." Sam continued. "We got out to her place and when we heard a commotion inside the house, well, we kinda helped ourselves inside..."

"You broke in?"

"The door was unlocked," Dean quickly asserted.

"The point of all this, deputy, is that Shelly wasn't well. In fact, she seemed to be very ... *unwell*." Sam stressed, his brows pinched with frustration.

Dean hid his smile as he watched his brother's growing irritation. Nothing was more comical than Sam trying to get a point across while everyone else was less than *attentive*. It had frequently been one of Dean's favorite ways over the years to annoy his brother and seeing it in action with the deputy was simply priceless to the older man.

"I'm sorry, sir. Please... go on. What exactly was wrong with Ms. Palmer?" the deputy asked.

"We don't know for sure, but she attacked us without cause. It was like she was on some powerful hallucinogenic or..." Sam paused.

"Or what?" the young lawman prodded.

"Or she was out of her stark raving mind," Dean interjected. "Look, what difference does it make? We're just here to let you know that the only place Shelly ought to be serving meals is the cafeteria at the local funny farm. Since you don't seem to have a hospital or anything else resembling a medical facility, we're letting you know. And now... we're outta here."

He finished with a flourish wave of his hand, exasperated by the sheer amount of time the whole ordeal had already eaten up out of the day. Catching a glimpse of Sam's disapproving scowl, Dean ignored the dark look and started for the door.

"Please, sir. Wait one minute," Deputy Cash called out.

Dean paused, but didn't turn.

"Look, I really appreciate what ya'll did here. You definitely went above and beyond. Would ya' please just give me a sec to call the Sheriff? He needs to know about this and he might have a coupla' more questions. Okay?"

There were a thousand good reasons to leave running through Dean's mind, but Sam chose that moment to draw up next to the elder Winchester. Leaning in, the taller sibling voice whispered low in Dean's ear.

"It'll be more suspicious if we bolt," he warned.

Dean groaned softly then turned, forcing an insincere smile to his face. "We'd love to help any way we could, Deputy Cash.

They waited to the side as the kid radioed his superior, calling out several times for the sheriff as he attempted to get a response over the two-way. Dean toyed with a lethal-looking letter opener that was resting on the counter as he listened to the deputy's fruitless efforts.

"No word from the boss?" Dean asked, flipping the silver stiletto over in his hand.

"I... err... guess the sheriff must be busy up at Number 3..." the deputy stammered as he reluctantly hung the mic on the side of the radio.

"Number 3?" Sam queried.

"Oh, yeah, sorry, guess you wouldn't know what I'm talkin' about not being from these parts. Goodwell Mine number three. You probably passed the turnoff to it on your way back from Shelly's. The sheriff went up there this morning, following up a report from the line boss yesterday afternoon that they were two men down at the end of last night's shift. S'posedly, they went looking for the missing men but all they found was a lot of blood. Last I heard, Sheriff figured one of them boys killed the other, but they ain't found no bodies yet."

"Sounds like the residents of Pleasantville have gone off their meds," Dean snarked.

"There're miles of shafts in those old mines, a body could be about anywhere. It takes time to check," the deputy continued, ignoring the hunter's remark as he moved about the small office. "B'sides, you ever been down in a mineshaft mister? Ever been in something so dark and narrow that you swear you can't get another breath in your lungs?"

Dean swallowed tightly. "Yeah, I've been there before," he answered quietly.

The deputy unlocked the large weapons cabinet and pulled a Remington 12 gauge from the case. Grabbing a box of shells, the officer began loading shells into the weapon, pumping round after round into the shotgun.

Dean tensed visibly and took a half step back from the counter, only Sam's larger frame preventing him from all-out bolting for the door. While he didn't particularly see the young deputy as a threat, he was still less than thrilled about being unarmed *and* still hanging around to satisfy Sam's need to be a good Samaritan.

"Okay, you boys ready?" the deputy asked, coming around the corner of the counter.

"Huh? Ready for what?" Dean replied dumbfounded.

"Well, honestly, I was kinda hoping that since you had already come this far, maybe you wouldn't mind coming with me back out to Shelly's," the young man answered, his voice barely concealing a mix of desperation and something that resembled fear.

Sam's booming "Sure" was already sounding before Dean could form the first syllables of protest. This wasn't their problem, this wasn't even the type of thing that they "made" their problem.

He followed them out the door, cursing under his breath and inventing new names for his brother to be used the next time they were in mixed company. Cringing as the cold mist struck his face, Dean grumbled again and drew his sleeve across his eyes.

This was crap. No... it was worse than crap. It was just plain stupid. They were wasting time, precious time and he was done with it. Striding angrily forward he caught up with his brother and roughly grabbed Sam's arm. Pulling his brother off to the edge of the sidewalk, Dean released the tether on his pent up fury.

"What the hell, Dean?" Sam snapped, jerking out of his brother's grasp.

"My point exactly, Sam. What the hell are we doing here? We did what you wanted, now let's hit the road," Dean demanded.

"Is that an order?"

"No it's not an order, you jackass. Why are you being this way? What the hell is so special about this friggin' place that you want to put down roots?"

"It isn't like that," Sam refuted.

"No?"

"No!"

"Well, it sure seems like it. So why don't you enlighten me. Why the hell are we stickin' around and helpin' out Dudley Do-right?" Dean pleaded.

He watched his brother; Sam's hazel eyes hesitantly meeting his, the younger man's expression a mixture emotions that Dean hadn't counted on seeing.

"What? What is it Sam?"

"Saving people, hunting things... don't you remember, Dean?" the dark-haired hunter suddenly threw back. "Isn't that what Dad would want us to do?"

And that was it. If Dean had possessed any semblance of control, any form of regulator on his anger, any release-valve on the boiling kiln of emotions inside him, then those words thrown back in his face undid all of those safeties.

His fists clenched and unclenched at his side and he could feel his heart pounding so hard within his chest that Dean was sure it had to be audible to anyone within a city block.

"Well?" Sam pushed.

"You're gonna use that?" Dean responded, his voice low and holding an edge he generally reserved for threatening enemies. "After all these years, after Georgia, and knowing where Dad is right now, you pull this on me?"

"Dean, you know Dad..."

Dean waved off any further comment from his sibling. "Save it, Sam. I already read the manual from cover to cover; I don't need you to quote it to me. Let's get moving before Opie there gets worried."

He headed toward the Impala still fuming; hating that they were still in West Virginia, hating more that he'd allowed his brother to let them get involved in some small-town problem, and even more so, hating that deep down, he knew they were doing the right thing.

They followed the deputy's rusted GMC back out to the blonde's run-down house with Dean silently brooding the entire way. Pulling up the drive, the elder hunter remained with the Impala while Sam eagerly trailed behind the Randolph County officer up to the front door.

Dean leaned against the Chevy, his arms resting on the roof as he watched their approach. The house was silent, ominously so, and for a split second Dean couldn't help feel a cold shiver course down his spine. He shook against the chill, chalking it up to the early winter that seemed to have settled across most of the country. At least the rain had ceased, but he hated the way the sun surrendered so early in the afternoon at this time of year. It made the days seem shorter, each one passing by too fast and marking yet another that he'd failed to rescue his father.

Dean sighed and turned his attention back to the action on the porch. The deputy knocked several times and Dean shook his head with chagrin. Obviously Enos hadn't

been paying attention when they told him they'd locked Shelly in the bathroom, he thought to himself.

"Shelly! Shelly Palmer! This is Randolph County Deputy Cash. Are you in there?"

The young man's voice rang out clear on the cold West Virginia air. Yet despite being loud enough to be heard across three counties, it was obvious that no one inside the small abode was responding.

Dean was three feet away from the Impala when the deputy's first attempt to kick in the front door failed with a resounding crack that might have been the wood or kid's foot. The hunter barely stifled his laughter as he climbed the steps and stopped at Sam's side.

The brothers watched together as the deputy then reared back and drove his shoulder into the solid oak of the door. Despite the worn and weathered appearance of the wood, it withstood the officer's effort, bowing slightly but remaining in place.

The young man staggered away, obviously worse for wear but determined not to show it. He was preparing to have another try at the door when Sam intervened, offering assistance that was readily declined. They argued back and forth, Sam insisting, the deputy just as adamantly refusing.

Dean couldn't stand it anymore. He stepped forward, moving between them and actually pushing both of them aside and out of his way. They both protested but he ignored them. With enough force borne of irritation and reinforced by his steel-toe boots, Dean kicked in Shelly Palmer's front door like it was made of kindling; the frame reduced to a shower of splinters.

Stepping to the side, he motioned Sam and Deputy Cash inside with a smug smile. The officer entered first, having reclaimed his shotgun. Dean reached for the .45 he had tucked away inside his jacket, clearing it just as Sam was passing.

"What are you doing? Are you nuts?" his brother demanded in a hushed tone, pushing the gun back under the cover of Dean's coat.

"He's got one," Dean protested. "Besides, I'm not going back in there with Psycho Shelly unarmed..."

"Dean!"

"Okay...okay..." the elder hunter acquiesced. "But I bet Deputy Enos there hasn't ever dealt with anything worse than a drunk miner in his entire life."

"Can we just play nice, Dean? Please?" Sam pleaded.

"Hey, this is your gig, Sammy. We're all about the nice aren't we?" Dean shot back sarcastically as he pushed past the taller man and into the house.

Inside, Dean saw that the young deputy was already carefully moving about the small abode in textbook police fashion, doing his best to search and clear each room. Starting in the kitchen, the hunter followed behind the kid, noting that little had changed since their earlier visit.

"Not exactly Martha Stewart is she?" Dean joked. But the deputy cast him an irritated glance that rivaled Sam's best bitch-face and merely continued his canvas of the waitress' house.

They moved past the living room and slowly made their way down the short hallway. Even from his perspective behind the kid's body, Dean could see that the bathroom door was no longer closed.

He stopped abruptly and drew Sam's attention to the open entry. His brother's eyes narrowed suspiciously as they both spotted the smear of red painted along the edge of the jamb.

"Hey Johnny, hang on a sec..." Dean warned a split second too late as the deputy pushed open the door.

"Dear... God... in... heaven..." the young lawman gasped, one hand flying to cover his mouth.

Dean pressed closer, trapping the poor kid in the close confines of the small space. The bathroom looked like a slaughterhouse, the tiny room splashed with dried patches of blood from ceiling to floor. If he hadn't known any better, Dean would have

thought that someone had turned on a shower nozzle filled with red food coloring, were it not for the bits of human flesh that tenaciously clung to the ceramic tile.

But the real giveaway, and ultimately the thing that sent Deputy Jonathan Christopher Cash of the Randolph County Sheriff's Department running from the house, was the semi-masticated, bloody hand lying on the floor beside the toilet.

"Hmmm, guess maybe she got hungry?" Dean quipped, pointing at the gruesome stump.

He chuckled as the deputy tore past him.

"Really, Dean, have a heart, huh?" Sam chastised him, looking back down the hall and grimacing as the sound of repeated retching reached their ears.

The elder hunter shrugged and continued surveying the grisly scene before him. The window above the shower was busted outward and other than numerous claw marks on the wood frame there didn't appear to be any other signs of forced entry or exit.

"What the hell happened here, Dean?" Sam asked as he poked at the mangled hand.

"Shaving accident?" Dean offered as he perused the contents of medicine cabinet.

"Can you please be serious about this for a second? We weren't gone that long and this..."

"You want an explanation? Call that Bones chick."

"Do you think something could have gotten Shelly after we left?" Sam pondered, moving over toward the broken window.

Dean huffed. "Something? What could have gotten in here, Sam? You're seeing a boogey monster where there isn't one. This is just some whacked-out chick, end of story."

"Whacked-out enough to do this to herself?" the younger man asked incredulously. "Come here, take a look at this, Dean."

The older hunter followed his brother's direction and glanced at the broken window. "Yeah, so? She smashed that out like everything else," Dean muttered.

"Look outside, there's blood on the sill and just below on the siding. She got out that way," Sam stated with a smug tone that wormed its way under Dean's skin.

"So she's gone. Great! Can we go now too or do I have to gnaw off my own hand to get your attention?"

"Funny, Dean. But aren't you even a little curious why she would do that?"

"Maybe it's the whole wolf caught in a trap thing or maybe she mistook the PCP for the sugar in her morning coffee. Honestly, Sam, I don't know and I don't care. This isn't a hunt, quit trying to make it one," Dean snapped back.

"It looks like she chewed off her own hand and you think that's remotely normal?" Sam challenged.

"No, I don't. I think maybe good ol' Shelly ain't running on all eight cylinders; maybe her family tree don't have many branches in it. Hell, maybe she's even kookier than that freakin' bird for friggin' coco puffs. For all we know, maybe she just got really hungry and decided that her hand tasted like chicken, but you know what? I couldn't give a damn. If she comes at me again, I'll put a friggin' hollow point in her melon," Dean ranted, brandishing his cherished Colt for added emphasis.

Dean was ready for Sam's rebuttal; knew it was coming as soon as he saw his brother's sharp glare and heard the even sharper intake of air. But he was spared his sibling's chastisement when the deputy suddenly reappeared in the doorway.

"Who the hell are you two?" the young man demanded, his shotgun leveled at Dean. "And what's going on here?"

"Whoa! Easy there Opie!" Dean soothed, spinning his .45 around slowly so that the muzzle aimed toward the floor. "This isn't what you think."

"I don't know what the hell to think," Cash replied. "You just drop that weapon and back out this way nice and slow or so help me, I got no problem putting a slug in ya'll."

"Deputy, please," Sam pleaded. "I swear to you, we have no idea what happened to Shelly. She was perfectly fine when we left her. Why would we have harmed her and then brought you back out here?"

"I don't know," the young officer replied, his eyes narrowed as he looked back and forth between the hunters. "Maybe you just get your kicks outta messing with decent small town folk. Maybe ya'll think you're just too smart to be caught. Hell, maybe you figured on killing me too once ya' got me out here."

"That's just ridiculous," Dean groaned, still holding his ground.

"Well, you can protest all you want once we're back at the station," the deputy assured him.

Dean tensed, reluctant to relinquish his automatic and even more loath to allow the lawman to take them in to custody. Still, he was staring down the business end of a very lethal Remington, even if the deputy holding it was shaking like a leaf in a tornado. Having taken a chest full of rock-salt once, he had no desire to tempt fate with live rounds at point blank range.

"Okay, you win, we don't want any trouble," he submitted, easing the .45 to the floor while raising his left hand.

It was a ploy from the start and one that Dean hoped Sam would read and the deputy could not. In an explosion of movement, he went from nonchalantly placing his Colt on the floor to bursting upward, coming up underneath the barrel of the shotgun and grabbing it away from the young kid.

He had the weapon torn away from the deputy's grasp and pointed at the officer's chest before the young man could utter a protest. Dean tossed the shotgun to his brother and then stooped to retrieve his .45.

"You stupid ass," he shot back at the kid. "Don't be pointing a gun at someone unless you're ready to pull the trigger."

Dean spun the shaking deputy around, pushing him toward the living room and snagging the handcuffs from the holder on the back of the man's belt. He was ready to lock them around Cash's wrists when Sam grabbed his shoulder.

"Dean, hang on."

"What now, Sam?" Dean growled.

He begrudgingly allowed his brother to pull him to the side, his eyes still cautiously watching the deputy.

"What are we doing here?" Sam asked, nodding toward the lanky officer.

"Geez, Sammy, haven't I been asking that question since about nine a.m. this morning?" Dean fired back. "Now we're half-way up crap creek, no thanks to your do-gooder heart, and you're worried about Johnny there getting a little chaffed around the wrists?"

"That's not it, Dean. Can you just stop being pissed-off at me for five minutes and take a look around. Something's going on around here and if you weren't so damn single-minded about Stull and Dad, you might actually see it," Sam shot back.

Dean clenched his fist around the cuffs in his hand until the metal bit into his flesh. He wanted to punch something; he wanted to punch Sam.

...Base from Unit 4, you out there Johnny?

The squelch from the deputy's walkie-talkie sounded loudly through the relative quiet of the empty house and startled the brothers.

... Unit 4 to base... Johnny... pick up dammit... Where are ya', boy? All hell's breakin' loose out at Number 3...

The Sheriff's voice was momentarily replaced by the sound of muted screams and determined curses.

... there's blood everywhere ... I need ya'll to bring everything we got in the locker out here ASAP...

Dean shared a concerned look with his brother before glancing back at the panicked deputy. If the kid looked freaked before, then his face had now lost nearly all color.

“Whhaa... what are y-you gonna d-do?” Cash asked worriedly.

Dean was about to tell the young man that they weren't going to do anything more than climb into the Impala and put the West Virginia state line in the rearview mirror as fast as the Chevy's engine could manage when Sam spoke up.

“Look, we're not gonna hurt you. We're not the bad guys... we never were. There's obviously something going on around here and we all just need to calm down for a second and figure out what we're doing next,” the tall hunter calmly announced.

Reinforcing his point, much to Dean's chagrin, Sam moved closer toward the still-wary deputy and slowly offered him back the shotgun. The officer accepted it cautiously, looking unsure as he glanced from the taller brother back to the still seething elder Winchester.

“I don't understand what the hell is happening around here, but I need to get back to the station and then up to the mines. Maybe whoever got Shelly has something to do with whatever's going on up there. It's not that far between here and there after all,” Cash stated, straightening his shoulders and trying to feign more bravado than Dean knew he currently possessed.

“Whoever?” Dean mimicked, barely stifling a laugh. “Haven't you figured it out yet? This chick chewed her own friggin' hand off. This isn't some Jeffrey Dahmer thing going on around here...”

“Dean...” Sam's voice held a low warning to it. “Not helping. First things first, let's get back to town and regroup.”

The deputy nodded, seeming all too eager to be away from the bizarre discovery of the Palmer house. Dean grumbled audibly, less than thrilled by Sam's overt command of the situation. He knew he wasn't in charge here and more to the point, he was acutely aware that Sam wasn't about to budge and walk away from what he perceived to be a hunt.

So he shrugged and followed them out the door.

The phone was ringing non-stop when the threesome reached the office. The harried deputy tried in vain to answer all the calls, grabbing for one receiver while fumbling with another. Sam immediately joined in, dutifully answering the phone and jotting down addresses and complaints as fast as he could.

“Yes... he's what?” Cash asked of the person on the phone, his brows pinched with concern. “Are you sure its blood? Has he hurt anyone? Alright... alright... don't go near the rig. I'll be out there as soon as I can.”

Dean hung back on the other side of the counter, grinning in amusement. It was like watching a comedy routine as his brother and the young officer attempted to keep up with the myriad of calls that were streaming into the sheriff's office. It would have been hilarious if it hadn't have been so serious and after a moment, even the elder hunter's humor died.

Amidst the cacophony of ringing, the deputy's two-way squealed again, the sheriff's voice screaming out across the hiss of static and other more alarming background noises.

...John! John! Where the hell are you? I need you out here now, son. It's a Goddamn bloody mess out here at Number 3... John... Come in... Where the hell are you at?

The sheriff's voice cut off abruptly amid the unmistakable blast of weapons fire and then the two-way went silent. Dean looked over, noting that the deputy as well as Sam had ceased answering calls. In fact, the office had become ominously quiet.

Cash stood with a receiver held in his hand, his youthful face pale as he fought to control the panic pouring off him so heavily that Dean could almost smell it like a cheap aftershave.

"Seems like your little town is going to hell in a hand basket," the elder hunter commented sarcastically.

The young man sighed loudly before throwing back his shoulders. "Mister, I don't know what the hell is happening around here, but I do know if you aren't part of the solution, and in this case, I'm pretty sure it doesn't look like you're part of the problem, whatever the hell the problem is, then you're just making my life more miserable. Why don't ya'll just take off like you been want'n?"

Dean nodded with a wide smile, his hand slapping the dark oak counter. "Best idea I've heard all day. Let's go, Sammy."

"Dean, hang on," Sam called out, not budging from his spot on the other side of the desk. "Deputy Cash, we can help you. I know you don't trust us, but we can truly help you. Just like we told you back at Shelly's place, there's something really awful happening here in your town, and if I'm right, it's just starting. Let us give you a hand."

Dean rolled his eyes. There was just no end to the amount of bleeding his brother's heart could apparently manage.

The deputy looked between them, obviously wary but equally smart enough to know that he had more on his plate than he could handle. He shook his head and handed a slip of paper to the taller Winchester.

"I gotta get out to Number 3, but one of those calls was from the Breakline Diner. One of their regulars, trucker named Bobby, is holed up in his rig. The cab is covered in blood and he ain't answerin'. Think ya'll could maybe check that out and see if he needs some medical help?" Cash asked hesitantly.

Sam nodded eagerly as the officer started toward him. "Just remember, medical help only. Do not get more involved than that. And you..." Cash paused, pointing at Dean. "I'll take that fancy auto of yours. Can't have you traipsing around town waving that thing around and scaring the daylights out of the good folk."

Dean stared at him blankly, glancing over at Sam only briefly for his brother to offer some sort of salvation. But the deputy was unrelenting and his sibling offered no sympathy. With reluctance, he pulled the .45 from inside his jacket and watched as Cash turn and secured it inside the weapons locker across the room.

The young lawman retrieved extra shells and another sidearm before striding purposefully toward the exit. He paused at the doorway and turned back to face the brothers.

"Thanks again. Be careful. I'll try to be back down as soon as possible. If you need medical help, the nearest ambulance can be called in from Weston. If the weather's on our side, we can sometimes get a chopper out from Charleston, but don't count on that. Here's the spare two-way. Call me and I'll radio for whatever you need."

"We'll take care of it, don't worry," Sam responded faithfully.

Dean grunted and tried not to glance back at the weapons locker. He watched as the kid darted out the door, waiting till he heard the deputy's GMC fire up before he was back around the counter and working on the lock.

"Dean! What are you doing?" Sam nearly yelled.

"What's it look like?" he growled back. "Not leaving without my favorite gun."

"I'm sure he'll give it back when we're done," Sam continued, ignoring his brother's comment.

"Not waiting. And I'm not going to play Johnny Gage to some drunk trucker either. You want to, you go. I'm outta here."

"You'd seriously leave without me?" Sam asked.

"Yahtzee!" Dean shouted triumphantly, throwing open the cabinet door and grabbing his cherished Colt. "Yep! This is me leaving, Sam."

"Fine! You know what? Just go, Dean. I give up. There's something going on here and I'm going to figure it out, with or without you. It's our responsibility to help these people," Sam complained, exasperated. "You used to think that too."

“Even before our own personal needs?” Dean demanded. “Before Dad?”

“Splitting up though? Burkitsville, Dean? That ring a bell?”

“It didn’t stop you from leaving then. Matter of fact, seems like you’ve left before when me and Dad needed you, Sammy. Stanford ring a bell?” Dean countered.

It was a low blow and he knew it the moment the words flew from his mouth, but the past weeks hadn’t been easy. Between leaving their dad in Stull, and nearly losing Sam to the watch, he was beyond mincing words. Still, the look on Sam’s face told him he’d gone too far and chosen to reopen a wound that had long ago healed.

“We can agree on one thing, Dean. Bad things happen when we separate,” Sam gently reminded him.

Dean grimaced, Sam had him there. Silently, he had to admit he’d never liked hunting alone. For that matter, he never liked being alone. For all his insistence that he was independent and self-sufficient, the truth was, he lived to keep his family together solely because he despised being alone. He had no more intention of leaving his brother behind than he had of leaving his father in Stull one second longer than necessary.

Allowing a thin smile to grace his haggard features, Dean easily slapped Sam’s shoulder good-naturedly.

“I still don’t buy that there’s a hunt here, Sammy. But I won’t leave your geeky ass behind. Let’s go rescue BJ and hopefully he doesn’t have a Bear...”

Sam looked at him strangely, confused by the reference. Dean rolled his eyes and shook his head as he strode toward the waiting Impala.

Sammy might be a walking encyclopedia of weird, but he didn’t know squat about pop culture...

Breakline Diner and Truckstop

It was nearly dinner time when the brothers reached the diner, yet the place didn’t look as though business was booming. Dean pulled the Chevy into the lot, stopping when he saw the older waitress from earlier in the day standing near a short line of semis.

Parking the Impala, he and Sam climbed from the car and made their way toward the woman. She looked perturbed, hands on her hips, her hair disheveled, her uniform covered in a variety of food she’d been serving throughout the day.

“You two, again?” she snarled. “You ever find that no-account, Shelly? I had to work a double today because of her lazy ass.”

“Uh, well, you might say we sorta found her, ma’am,” Sam replied. “Deputy Cash sent us out here to help with your complaint.”

“Deputy Cash? Why’d he send you two?” she asked with a gravelly voice that betrayed years of cigarette smoking.

“Actually ma’am, we’re law enforcement as well,” Dean replied, flipping open a fake I.D. “State Investigators, just passing through, but Deputy Cash has his hands full with another situation so we told him we’d help out. Now, could you tell us where the rig is.”

The older woman eyed him suspiciously before pointing at a dark blue semi parked several feet away. She started walking toward the truck, leading the brothers as she spoke.

“Normally by now, Bobby would be up to Number 3 on his second run, dropping off timbers or picking up slag, but his rig has been sitting here since I came on shift this morning. I thought maybe he was sick, or drunk, so I came out a while ago to see if he needed something to eat. That’s when I saw all the blood,” she explained, pointing up toward the windshield.

Dean followed her motion. The glass was covered with brownish splatter, the gore nearly occluding the front like a red shade. As they moved around the side of the truck more of the dried fluid could be seen covering the metal on the fender, door and side of the cab.

"See?" the waitress exclaimed." I yelled for him, but there wasn't any answer. I don't know if he's inside, but I didn't touch anything. If he's in there, I don't imagine he's in good shape by the looks of all that."

"Yes ma'am. Well, thank you, we'll take it from here," Sam replied, firmly pushing the older blonde back in the direction of the diner. "We'll be back to ask you any further questions if needed."

She nodded reluctantly, but slowly walked away. Once she was gone, Dean reached up and beat on the cab door, doing his best to avoid any of the gorier portions of metal.

"Hello, inside the truck... West Virginia State Trooper... open up!" he yelled. "Helllooo... Bobby... are you in there?"

When there was no response, Dean chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Sam asked, perplexed.

"There's just something hilarious about yelling for a trucker named Bobby," Dean replied. "I mean, honestly, in any other circumstance, our Bobby could be a trucker, after all, he's certainly got the vest and ball cap collection for it..."

"Dean... can we focus..."

"Yeah, yeah... this thing is locked," the elder hunter replied, jiggling the door handle. "You pick, I'll be ready to go in guns blazing,"

They worked fluidly, Sam effortlessly picking the lock on the cab as Dean waited, his .45 ready. Once unlocked, they pulled the door open, cautiously watching for attack. The smell was immediately overwhelming, pouring out from the interior and reeking of old blood, death, and decay. It was enough to make Dean's lunch come back up, or would have, he thought, if he'd had anything to eat in the past twelve hours.

"That doesn't smell like there's anything alive in there," Sam commented.

"Looking like a slaughterhouse doesn't help either," Dean added. "Probably need to get up in there and take a look though. Don't suppose you want to shoot for it?"

"You're the one with the gun already," Sam pointed out. "Besides, I don't want to point out the obvious, but uh, any chance I can get an "I told you so" in here yet?"

"Bite me, Sam. Still doesn't mean this is a hunt yet. Still could be some whacked out serial killer," Dean replied as he grabbed the pull bar on the side of the cab to haul himself up into the truck.

"Yeah, 'cause that's the way it always works for us," Sam shot back as he watched his brother's body disappear into the shadows of the rig.

Dean forced back the bile that was rising in his throat. The smell and the semi-congealed blood and tissue that seemed to be smeared everywhere he touched was enough to make his stomach want to invert out his nostrils. He normally prided himself on being able to withstand even the rankest gore and vilest slop, but somehow this was just sensory overload.

Moving slowly through the tight confines of the cab something like a soft moan ebbed from behind the curtain that separated the sleeper from the front. While this portion of the truck was obviously empty, Dean knew that behind the thin material, there was plenty of space for any one or *thing* to be hiding.

He stole a quick glance behind him, spotting Sam on the last step just outside the cab. Motioning silently to his brother, he turned back to the curtain and slowly pushed it aside with the muzzle of the .45.

If the smell outside had been bad, then on the inside of the sleeper it was worse. Added to the odor of fresh blood, Dean could hear the sound of crunching.

No... gnawing. Like a dog chewing on a bone.

Dean strained to see in the near pitch-blackness of the sleeper. Only the briefest hint of light sneaked in from where he pushed aside the curtain and allowed him to see a shadow of a hulking figure tucked away in the corner of the space.

In the back of his head, Dean knew this was the missing Bobby, just like he knew that the trucker wasn't snacking on a bucket of Kentucky's fried. Before he could back out to tell his brother that Shelly had another long-pig snacking cousin, there was a loud growl and the ravenous mass lunged out of the shadows.

The hunter could smell the trucker's rancid breath as sharp, bloodstained teeth snapped at his flesh. The huge man atop him was strong, but his movements were uncoordinated, allowing Dean to prevent the massive trucker from connecting with any of his clawing blows.

"SAMMY!" Dean shouted out desperately as he tried to pull his .45 up between him and the larger man.

Despite his best effort, the trucker was simply too large and the bigger man grabbed the hunter like he was little more than a sack of potatoes, throwing the elder Winchester back against the dashboard. Dean's head hit the steering wheel, striking hard against the rigid metal.

He weakly shouted for Sam once more, dimly wondering where his brother had gone. Lifting his head, he looked up, eyes blinking as he struggled to remain conscious, his vision blurring as the trucker loomed over top of him.

As the big man leaned down, the hunter recognized him from the evening before. It was the same trucker who had attacked the waitress outside the backdoor of the diner, the same person who had bitten the young blondes' arm... and now, the same snarling beast eager to tear off a mouthful of Dean's flesh.

Part Three

Randolph County Sheriff's Substation

Dean stirred awake, a musty odor filling his nostrils as he struggled to brush away the cobwebs that clung tenaciously to his consciousness. Prying open his eyes, his sight rewarded him with the vision of long gun-metal gray bars and a ratty cot with a mattress so worn it looked like it belonged on the set of an old prison movie.

Oh crap... he quietly groaned. He was in a jail.

"Saaam..." he croaked, his throat dry and feeling abused.

He pushed up on his elbow, his body immediately alerting him to a myriad of underlying injuries as pain ate through him like a bone-chilling winter wind. Dean clenched his teeth tightly and ignored the discomfort, instead focusing on piecing together the fragments of memory that were flashing through his head like bad promos to an upcoming movie.

He sort of remembered a fight, or at the very least, his body seemed to be recalling the tell-tale after effects of one. That would explain the jail. He recalled a truck stop and something about a well-endowed blonde. And then there was a flash of some brutish trucker trying to force himself on the girl.

But no... that wasn't quite right. Dean struggled to sit up, swaying slightly and groaning when his stomach flopped like he'd been on a five day binge. Funny, he didn't really remember drinking.

Looking around the tiny confines of the cell, he felt a tinge of raw panic begin to creep up his spine. The last thing he needed right now was to be trapped in some backwater lockup for some barroom brawl by some local yokel lawman who had an axe to grind with him for being the stranger in town.

Where was *here* again?

Surging to his feet and ignoring the *1812 Overture* playing in Dolby Surround between his temples, Dean staggered to the wall of bars. Sucking in gulps of air as

he waited for the room to quit spinning, he was greatly relieved to see Sam standing at the *open* door when his vision finally cleared.

"Welcome back!" the younger man greeted him, a little too cheerfully as he offered him a tall glass of water.

Dean gratefully took the beverage and tilted it back, appreciating the coolness against his throat. After he drained it he tipped the empty container toward the open cell door. "Please tell me what the hell is goin' on here?"

"What do you remember?"

Dean dropped back down on the cot, pausing as he rubbed the side of his neck. "Truckstop... big dude... smelled like your shoes only worse," he recalled after a second.

"Funny, Dean. You should be kissing my ass right now," Sam shot back.

"What happened after Bobby the psycho trucker tried to make me his after-dinner snack?" Dean asked as more of his memory returned.

"It was close quarters in that cab, but I managed to get you away from him. I ended up unloading a full clip in the S.O.B. and got both of us out of there," the younger Winchester replied.

"Is he a doornail?"

"Well... eventually..."

"Care to elaborate on that lil' brother," Dean prodded worriedly.

"Once I had you outside and back to the Impala, the dude came at us again. Luckily enough, I had the trunk open and..."

"And?"

"Well, the machete was handy..."

Dean sat silently as the implication of what Sam had done sank in.

"So, are we thinking vampire here?" he asked after a moment.

His brother shook his head, his long dark hair flying and reminding Dean how much Sam really needed a trim. Of course, haircuts were the least of their worries at the moment.

"He was a revenant, Dean."

"Revenant? No way, Sam," the older man answered in disbelief.

"I know what I saw."

"Dude, a full-on flesh eating zombie? Come on!"

"Did you not see the back of the guy's truck, Dean? That wasn't exactly a steak he was eating in there. And honestly, add that to what we found out at Shelly's, it kinda makes sense,"

"Okay. Disgusting and a bit more *Resident Evil* than I was expecting, but okay. But why'd we end up here?" Dean asked, rising up again and nervously pacing back toward the open door, eager to be free of the confines of the cell.

Sam followed him outside, both of them taking seats in the office area.

"Well, once the screaming started, it seemed like the safest place to go. We drew a bit of attention back at the diner. Between the waitress and a couple of other witnesses, I didn't think there was going to be a reasonable explanation even for a couple of State Troopers to have decapitated a local trucker," Sam explained. "Besides, we don't know who Shelly and this dude might have come in contact with. This place is at least defensible"

"Are you nuts?" Dean exploded with what little energy he could muster. "We're not mounting any defense. We're loading our asses in the Impala and getting the hell

"Dean... honestly? You finally see for yourself that there's really a hunt here and you're still set on cutting and running?" Sam asked solemnly.

The elder hunter sighed. "No, you're right. We're not," he replied, smiling inwardly when Sam responded with an open-mouth, stunned look.

Just then the door to the office was flung open and the young deputy scurried inside, quickly securing the door behind him.

"Hey, you're awake. You doin' okay?" Cash asked with genuine concern.

Dean nodded weakly. "I'll survive. I still have everything intact," he answered, then looked across to his brother as panic overtook him. "Sammy, he didn't bite me did he?" Dean asked, rapidly peeling back his sleeves as he scanned his flesh for any obvious open wounds.

His brother chuckled. "Nah, your skin's still in one piece. I checked while you were out. At least I'm pretty sure he didn't get you," the lanky brunette answered.

"Pretty sure?"

"You're fine, Dean. Nothing but some bruises and a good sized knot on the back of your head. But if it makes you feel any better, I'll keep the machete handy," Sam teased.

Dean flipped him a middle finger as he rubbed gingerly at his neck, realizing too acutely how close he had come to being one of the undead.

"How long was I out, by the way?" he asked looking back at the other men.

"Long enough for all hell to break loose around here," Cash answered cryptically.

"John came back from the mine about an hour ago. Everybody was dead up there," Sam added.

"It was worse than Shelly's. It looked like someone took a chainsaw through McGraty's Funeral Home. There were body parts lying everywhere and worse..."

The young deputy paused, swallowing reflexively as he paled. He cleared his throat and continued. "There was so much blood. The damn ground was saturated. I found a piece of the Sheriff's shirt. It was bloody too."

Dean looked over at Sam. His brother grimaced and shook his head. He knew what his younger sibling was thinking; no way had anyone walked away from the mine.

"I'm sorry about the Sheriff," he offered quietly.

"Do you two care to tell me what the hell is going on around here?" Cash demanded loudly.

Dean considered the officer for a moment. The deputy looked exhausted, his eyes shadowed and his youthful features haggard and lined by stress. Unlike Sam, Dean was generally reluctant to ever disclose anything that resembled "the truth" when it came to what lurked out there in the darkness. Still, the kid had already seen too much to be easily explained away as a psycho killer or some ravenous animal attack.

"We don't know for sure, John," Sam interjected before Dean could speak. "We still..."

"Its zombies ain't it?" the deputy asked matter-of-factly, interrupting before either hunter could continue. "Seriously... It's like *Dawn of the Dead* around here. Right in my own little town..."

Dean chuckled nervously and shrugged. "Well, we don't know that for sure. There's no need to jump to conclusions just 'cause some trucker and a waitress decided to munch on a body part or two."

"A body part or two?" Cash cried out. "You didn't see what it was like up at Number 3. It was like that movie that came out last summer, 'cept this wasn't no psycho miner with an axe and I wasn't wearing those 3D glasses."

"Okay, you're right. There is something going on and maybe it does involve something supernatural. But honestly... my brother and I don't know for sure what it is or how it started," Dean answered.

"He's probably right about one thing, Dean," Sam interjected. "It does all seem tied to the mine. Bobby the trucker supposedly made deliveries up there. John, you said the initial report of missing miners came in yesterday. Wasn't that what the Sheriff went up to check out?"

"Sure, but how does Shelly fit in? She doesn't have any real ties to the mines?" the deputy asked.

Dean sat forward. "No, but she knew our trucker. Last night, he was the one I pried off of her by the back door of the diner. Remember I told you that she said her

attacker had bitten her. It didn't look like much, had barely broken the skin. But I guess it was enough to turn her too."

The small office plunged into silence as the three men succumbed to the gravity of the situation. It was the deputy who eventually broke the quiet, rising up and striding over to one of the large oak desks.

He pulled open the lower drawer and drew out a bottle filled with amber liquid, bringing it and three small glasses back with him.

"I know you two seem pretty calm about all this, but I could use a stiff belt," he stated, pouring out the whiskey.

Dean tilted his own glass toward the deputy's before slamming it back, feeling the alcohol burn its way down his throat before slamming into his barren stomach.

"I gotta hand it to you. This is pretty good stuff," the hunter complimented the lawman.

"It oughta be. Got a buddy of mine that brews it in a homemade still, back of his place up in the woods; ages it real smooth over a hickory pit just like the big boys do down in Tennessee. The only difference is, this stuff won't cost you a paycheck," Cash replied.

"So much for law enforcement, huh?" Dean snarked as Cash poured another round.

"I'd say the situation calls for it, don't ya'll?" the young officer threw back. "And how is it exactly that you both seem to be taking this so calmly? I mention zombies and neither of you even so much as blink. Most folks I know would have called the boys with the white coats."

"Let's just say that we're a little more open-minded about things like this," Sam answered.

"A lot more open-minded," Dean added as he downed the second glass of whiskey.

"I'm not even gonna ask. But I do want to know this... what do we do now?" Cash queried. "I have to assume that this isn't just gonna take care of itself? And I got a couple hundred people in town that I'm responsible for. How do we protect them?"

"We need to round up everyone that hasn't been affected," Sam explained. "Get them somewhere safe and secure and hold them there."

"And everyone else... people like Shelly? If we find them, can we fix them?" Cash asked.

Dean rose from the hardwood chair, his body complaining as the bruises sustained from his encounter with ZombieBobby made themselves known.

"Yeah, we can fix them," he answered with a wry smile. "We can burn their bodies, stake them through their hearts or my personal favorite, cut off their heads. Of course, as you've already seen, they're pretty good at the whole dismembering thing themselves, so..."

The deputy paled and Sam cast Dean a disgruntled look.

"Hey, I'm sorry, but you asked. Now my brother Sammy has just been itching for a hunt and you, well you been dreaming of being Buford Pusser, well here's both your chances to get what you wanted. So Johnny, time to pull on your big boy pants, 'cause this is about to get bloody."

They split up, Dean and Sam working from one end of town while the deputy started at the other. Going from door to door, they roused each of Mingo's residents and, using one bogus story or another, managed to gather them all back at the First Congregational Church gym. It wasn't the most easily secured place and Dean thought it stood out like a neon sign that screamed "all-night diner", but there wasn't any other building that could handle so many people.

By the time the young Randolph County Deputy had managed to offer some lame story about underground methane leaks at Number 3 and the MSHA wanting

everyone safe and secure until they had things under control, the crowd had worked themselves into mass hysteria. Fortunately, the residents of Mingo were born and bred to mining country. They knew the lethal dangers underground pockets of methane posed and they likewise knew the feds at the Mine and Safety Administration could and would keep them sequestered until they were darn good and ready to clear the Goodwell tunnels.

It wasn't a perfect plan and there was plenty of grumbling, but for now it was working. Still, by the time the boys left the church, a light snow had started to fall adding to the eerie quiet that had enveloped the tiny town. They walked down the center of the desolate main street as they made their way back to the Sheriff's Substation, three sets of eyes warily scanning the shadows.

"Do you think they're out there watch'in us?" Cash asked fearfully, his head shifting side to side as his hands tightened nervously on the stock of the shotgun.

"No, not likely," Dean replied calmly.

"How can you be sure?"

"Cause if they were out there, they'd be coming after us. Revenants aren't exactly the shy type," he snarked back. "And they tend to be hungry twenty-four-seven... fairly single-minded when it comes to that."

They reached the station and darted inside, quickly securing the main door before checking all the remaining points of entry. There wasn't really much that would repel zombies, not like salt lines worked against demons, but at least good solid locks and doors usually held.

Once finished, they regrouped back in the main room. Sam had collected his laptop from the Impala and immediately powered it up while Dean wasted no time spreading out his stash of weapons. Cash merely slumped into the nearest seat, his face a dazed mask.

The hours passed and the small office settled into a rhythmic hum of noise comprised mainly of Sam's fingers tapping away on the laptop keyboard and Dean's smooth movement of a whetstone against the edge of a machete. The only incongruous sound was the occasional howl of the wind outside as it blew snow against the windowpanes or rattled the main door.

"I just don't get it," Sam complained, breaking the quiet and pushing back from the desk.

"Well somebody call Ripley's, the Professor is stumped," Dean grumbled without looking up from the blade.

"I'm being serious."

"When aren't you?"

"By comparison, when *are* you?" Sam shot back snidely.

"I bring balance to the universe, Ying to your Yang," Dean answered with a grin.

"That's Yin and Yang, genius..." the younger hunter snapped.

"Are you two always this way?" Cash shouted, throwing down the rifle he'd been cleaning. "I mean really? I got a missing waitress who apparently chewed off her own hand, a decapitated trucker and a mine filled with chunks of human kibble and bits. Can ya'll cut out the whole Rick and AJ routine and just focus on our problems?"

"Rick and AJ?" Sam asked perplexed.

"Simon and Simon... come on, dude... Gesh!" Dean grumbled. "Okay then, what has college boy so stupefied?"

Sam sighed and brushed the hair back away from his face. "It's the whole idea about how this started that's been bugging me," he announced. "I mean, we've dealt with the standard issue revenants before, creatures raised due to Hoodoo or spellwork, but never anything like this."

"Like this?" Dean repeated.

"Yeah, the whole Hollywood version of zombies; the idea that it's viral or something, transferred from bite to bite."

Dean shrugged. "So? Does it really matter how it started? We do like we always do. We deal with what's in front of us."

"But in this case, Dean, we gotta know how this is spreading. I mean, if this is truly transferring from bite to bite, like from Bobby to Shelly, then who knows how far it's already spread? For that matter, maybe it's already gotten outside of Mingo? Maybe it started outside of Mingo and was brought here. We need to know how widespread it is," Sam proposed.

"We can only deal with what's in front of us, Sam. We start with this town. If we hear about any zombie action anywhere else, then we'll burn that town down too," Dean replied coldly.

"Wait just a second, nobody said anything about burning down my town," Cash steadfastly insisted, rising to his feet.

"And we won't," Sam responded calmly. "Sometimes my brother's mouth has absolutely no connection to his brain."

Dean was about to comment on a portion of Sam's anatomy and how it rarely made a "connection" either when the main door to the substation rattled under the hard pounding of someone's fists. The three men all jumped to attention, grabbing weapons, but while Sam and Dean remained behind the relative cover of the solid wood desks, the deputy sprang from behind the counter and raced toward the entry.

"Cash! What the hell are you doing?" Dean shouted when it became evident the young officer was about to open the door.

Before he could stop the kid, the deputy had the door unlocked and a huge bear of a man was staggering inside. Covered in blood and holding his stomach, the newcomer wore the tattered remains of a tan uniform.

"It's the Sheriff!" Cash exclaimed, rushing to the man's side and assisting him to a nearby chair.

"John, no!" Dean shouted a warning, holding his position and warily watching.

Sam moved to assist as the deputy tried to staunch the blood that was oozing between the older man's hands, clenched tightly around his midsection. Dean reached out and grabbed his brother's arm, stopping him before he could go any further. He shook his head sadly and motioned toward the Sheriff's belly.

"Please! Help me!" Cash begged as he pulled off the thick jacket he'd been wearing and prepared to press it against the wounded officer's abdomen.

"John... come away from him... NOW!" Dean ordered, reaching for his .45 and hoping to get a clean shot. He knew he'd never get to the man with the machete before the Sheriff could get to the deputy but, just perhaps, he could slow the big man down with the automatic.

"He's hurt..." Cash continued, oblivious to the hunter's warning.

"Sam... he's blocking my shot. Grab the kid, I'll take care of the Sheriff."

Before the taller Winchester could obey the order, the deputy turned back to face the brothers. His face was sullen and his eyes were glistening with tears.

"No... please... don't hurt him..." he pleaded.

"Kid, your devotion to the boss is admirable, but really..." Dean joked.

"He's not my boss..." Cash cried back, tears trickling down his face. "He's my dad."

Dean exchanged a glance with his brother, feeling a lump suddenly forming in his throat. He didn't need any reminder of the past several weeks or their own situation, yet visions of his own dad lying on the ground, beaten and bleeding came rushing back to his mind.

"Dean, look!" Sam called out, dragging his attention back to the present.

Dean blinked rapidly and focused where his brother was pointing. The sheriff had pushed the deputy to the floor and was now standing with a menacing glare aimed at the hunters. His hands had fallen away from his belly and exposed an eviscerated abdomen; the dangling intestines looking as though something, or worse, someone had already been chewing on them.

The hunter choked back the sudden rush of bile and looked away from the awful sight. He focused instead on the dull lifeless eyes of the elder lawman. If there was any humanity still residing in the man it wasn't apparent in the vacant white orbs.

Dean replaced the Colt and slowly reached for the machete lying on the desk to his right. He could see Sam stealthily moving in closer and knew his sibling was going to try and pull the deputy out of harm's way so he could reach the sheriff. It was an awful thing he was going to have to do, and right in front of the kid, but it had to be done.

"Johnny, just hold real still," Dean cautioned, hoping to distract the young officer while his brother continued to move. "These things aren't real bright and they don't tend to move real fast. Just make your way over toward me real easy and you'll be okay."

"I can't," the young man said sadly. "I can't leave him like this. He needs my help. Can't you guys help him? There must be some way? Please?"

"I'm sorry..." Dean replied genuinely. "Look at him. There's no going back."

He nodded toward the sheriff just as the big man began to lick the dripping blood from his fingertips. Dean thought the kid was going to break as he watched the creature his father had become degrade into something less than human, but instead Cash merely swung around and grabbed the pistol hanging from the holster on the older man's hip.

Spinning around, the deputy fanned the weapon between the brothers, carefully positioning himself between them and his father.

"Drop that machete! Toss your .45 too," he ordered.

"John, don't do this!" Sam pleaded, raising his hands in submission.

"You're making a mistake, you stupid jackass," Dean shouted, slowly lowering the blade.

"It's my dad, you wouldn't understand," Cash shouted back, his voice a mixture of emotions. "Now back up into the cell."

Dean considered him carefully. He thought he could likely get to the deputy and pull the kid away before the sheriff could react, revenants tended to be slow and this one had half its guts oozing out onto the floor. Yet Sam was in the line of fire and if he miscalculated or if Cash was really that desperate, then his brother might pay the price. No way would he risk that, not for some Podunk town or some well-past already dead lawman.

Reluctantly, he raised his hands and slowly stepped backward, inching his way toward the awaiting cell. Sam followed suit and when they were both inside, Cash swung the door shut and twisted the key.

The deputy paused for a moment, looking over his shoulder at his father who remained standing a few feet away and was still eyeing his dangling intestines like they were the featured fare on an all-you-can-eat buffet. Cash turned away and stifled a gag.

"I'm sorry guys. But you should be safe in here. I'll radio the State Police and explain everything. Thanks for trying, but... he's my dad..."

Cash whirled around and grabbed the older man, virtually dragging the mindless creature from the building. They disappeared into the swirling snow and howling wind, the front door slamming closed behind them and plunging the small jail back into a strange silence once more.

"Well, isn't this just friggin' fantastic?" Dean grumbled, slapping ineffectively against the cold metal bars in front of him.

"Maybe we can get to him before it's too late," Sam suggested. He'd already produced the lockpick case from his jacket and was frantically working on the cell door.

"The kid's as good as dead already, Sammy."

"You don't know that, Dean."

"The hell I don't. You saw the Sheriff. He was a full-on zombie. It's just a matter of time before he gets tired of feeding on himself and sniffs out the fresh meat," Dean snapped.

"There's nothing else we could've done..."

"Don't! Don't you dare..."

Sam paused and turned to face him. "What? You're pissed at me now?"

"No, I'm not mad at you. It's just this whole crap-filled situation, Sam, that's making me angry. It's everything about this town; being stuck here, this messed-up hunt, and now that stupid, damned kid signing his own death warrant and for what?" Dean bemoaned.

"It was his dad," Sam stated simply.

"So that makes it ok for him to just serve himself up for dinner, to sacrifice himself like that?" Dean asked.

"Is that any different than trying to jump a widening chasm?" Sam challenged, his cryptic comment immediately eliciting a reaction from the elder hunter.

Dean glared at his brother and bit back the bitter reply that was right on the tip of his tongue. He wanted nothing more than to shout back to his brother that if he'd only tried to clear that ravine just maybe they wouldn't be here in Zombieville, USA today. Perhaps if he'd made his way back to their dad, they could have rescued him from Stull too. Maybe if Sam hadn't held him back then, just like he was doing here, their father wouldn't be lingering in some hellish universe, wounded or worse.

Instead, he paced to the far side of the cell and slammed the cot against the block wall. "Why don't you just get us out of here so we can work on saving our own asses," Dean snarled.

He fumed in silence while his brother worked the lock, not apologizing as he roughly stormed by Sam when the younger man triumphantly released the lock and swung open the cell door. Dean rushed to the desk, gathering the machete and his .45, relieved that Cash hadn't elected to take the weapons and leave them defenseless. Collecting an additional shotgun for good measure, Dean hastily made his way toward the front door as Sam packed away the laptop and the remainder of his belongings.

Heading out into the cold darkness, Dean paused at the top of the stairs leading down from the Substation entrance. The howling wind and swirling flurries created an almost tranquil nightscape but there was something else just beyond the periphery of the hunter's hearing that caught his attention.

Sam came up behind him and was about to continue on toward the Impala parked down the street when Dean reached out to stop him.

"Hold up," the older sibling whispered, grabbing a handful of his brother's jacket.

He cocked his head sideways, listening intently for anything out of the ordinary, the hair on the back of his neck standing on edge as every instinct told him there was something just not right. Then he heard it, loud and clear, there was no mistaking it this time. Dean could make out the high-pitched scream of a woman coming from just beyond the church.

"It's starting," Sam said, his eyes seeking out the source in the darkness.

The first scream was followed by another and the howling wind was suddenly augmented by a chorus of low moaning. Dean's gaze was torn to the center of Main Street where a shadowy mass of bodies approached.

"Time to go lil' brother. This place just turned into the hillbilly version of *30 Days of Night*," Dean shouted over the rising din.

"Wasn't that a vampire movie?" Sam replied as they charged down the slippery steps.

Dean raised his eyebrows, impressed with his brother's sudden cinematic knowledge. "Tomato... tomatoes... either way, we got a whole lot of blood-thirsty freaks coming after us."

They started for the snow-covered Chevy, which now seemed like it was miles away from where Dean had parked it. Between them and the Impala a second group of turned townspeople had come up from the opposite end of the street. They moved faster than Dean would have given revenants credit for and were quickly closing the gap between the hunters and their means of escape.

"Shoot 'em, Sam," Dean shouted, as he chambered a shell into the shotgun.

They fired in tandem, watching as bodies jerked in response. Still, the lifeless horde continued toward them. More of the affected residents of Mingo approached from the other end of the street and it was becoming apparent that the Winchesters weren't going to make it to the Impala.

When he ran out of shells, Dean tossed the shotgun and started swinging the machete. An arm went flying, a shower of blood turning the snow at Dean's feet from white to crimson. Bodies closed in around him and still he kept swinging the lethal blade until limbs were piling up around him like there'd been an explosion in a mannequin factory.

A very bloody mannequin factory... his mind added absently amid the carnage he was wreaking.

Next to him, he heard Sam continue firing the Remington, chambering shells until Dean heard the weapon click empty. From the corner of his eye, he saw his brother start swinging the gun in much the same way he was wielding the machete.

"Dean!" Sam called out, a slight panic to the younger man's voice.

"Take my .45, Sammy." Dean responded to his brother's unasked question as he hacked through the neck of older woman, dodging out of the way as her head narrowly missed falling on his foot.

He closed the small distance between them, putting his back against Sam's as they waited for the next wave to attack.

"Aim for their heads, but if we can't make a break for it out of here, save two rounds," Dean cautioned as he pressed the silver-plated Colt into his brother's hand.

Steeling himself, he watched as a dozen more revenants appeared out of the darkness. They shuffle-staggered toward the hunters, their low moans sounding like the collective growl of hungry stomachs, their opaque eyes standing out in sharp contrast to the pitch blackness of the night.

"Here they come..."

Part Four

Breakline Diner & Truck Stop

Dean dropped to the floor behind the counter, his chest heaving as he sucked air into his oxygen-starved lungs. Beside him, Sam drew a shaking arm across his face, unknowingly smearing blood across his forehead. It caught the attention of the older sibling and despite his fatigue, Dean moved closer to his brother.

"That's not yours is it?" he asked worriedly, reaching out to wipe at the red film spread across Sam's brow and matted in the younger man's thick hair.

The tall hunter looked upward then shook his head. "Nah, just got too close to some splatter."

"That's good," Dean snarked. "My machete's getting too dull to take your head off clean."

"You're all heart," Sam threw back, sagging back against wall and letting out a long breath.

Dean chuckled weakly then closed his eyes, surrendering momentarily to his body's demand for rest.

They'd only managed to escape the zombie horde in Mingo by Dean's slashing blade and Sam's skillful marksmanship, followed by a flat-out run for their lives to the outskirts of town. Dean despised leaving the Impala behind, but there'd been no

other choice at the time. It was either run or be risk being taken down by the revenants.

So run they had, nearly five miles to the Breakline diner where he'd quickly dispatched two more zombies that had been busy feeding on the remnants of the older waitress. They'd quickly searched the restaurant, finding enough body parts in the kitchen to know that there had been more than just the "daily special" being served in the place.

"You awake?" Sam called out.

"No, and please don't wake me from this wonderful dream," Dean answered sarcastically.

He pried his eyes open and groaned as he looked at his wrist, the timepiece there indicating that it was now well past midnight. "Just freakin' awesome," he bemoaned. "Another glorious day in West Virginia. Too bad we don't still have that freaky watch."

"You're gonna bring that up again... here and now?" Sam growled, sitting forward.

"Relax! I'm not busting your chops, Sammy. I was just gonna say that if we did, we could actually use it to maybe turn back time and just skip ever stopping in this godforsaken armpit. I mean really, things aren't looking so hot for us right about now," Dean mused.

"What? And miss out on all this fun? Who are you and what have you done with my brother?" Sam teased, jabbing Dean's arm.

Dean shrugged and laughed. "You can be such a smartass..."

"I had a good role model. Seriously though, we can't stay here forever. We need some sort of plan," the younger hunter stated.

"Yeah, you're right. We're out of ammo and I wasn't kidding when I said the machete was dull. I don't think it could cut Jello right now. I saw some decent knives that probably belonged to the cook, but that means getting up close and personal with a zombie to use 'em." Dean suggested.

"There was a small propane tank by the grill," Sam added. "We could turn that into a portable flame thrower and clear a path."

"Or we could rig it to one of the semis?"

"For what?"

"Hear me out. What if we baited the rest of the zombies here? Then we use the propane to ignite one of the big trucks out in the lot and blow them all to kingdom come?" the older hunter enthusiastically suggested.

Sam shook his head. "I dunno. There's no way to guarantee we'd get them all. Besides, who's gonna be the bait and how are we gonna keep them close enough to the truck?"

"Details... details," Dean complained. "Okay then, what's plan C?"

"Plan C? What happened to Plan A and B?" Sam asked.

"Well, I figure we're way past Plan A, which was getting the hell out of Dodge when we could have. And Plan B was blowing up the semi... sooooo..."

When Sam didn't reply, Dean huffed and pushed himself up with a grunt. "Well, I don't hear you coming up with anything better..." he grumbled as he began rummaging around the kitchen and collecting the larger knives.

"I was just thinking," the younger Winchester said after a moment.

"Thinking, huh? Well, I figured it was either that or you were constipated," Dean joked as he triumphantly raised a massive carving knife.

"Ha Ha. Really, Dean, you're just too funny. Okay, jerk, you're so set on blowing something up, then let's do this the right way."

Dean paused and focused on his brother. "I'm listening."

"I still think this all comes back to the mines. Remember what we were talking about back at the station? It all seems to have started there or at the very least, the mines are the common theme. The sheriff was up there investigating the missing two miners before all the carnage started. Let's just suppose for a minute that the miners weren't missing but were..."

"Digested?" Dean offered.

"Disgusting, but you're probably right," Sam continued. "Then you have Bobby the trucker up there making deliveries. He gets infected somehow and comes back and hooks up with Shelly, not to mention whoever else here at the diner."

Dean nodded. "Okay, no argument there. So what are you thinking?"

"Well, the one thing that's always bothered me is that this whole zombie thing hasn't exactly been the garden variety version. Let's face it, we're talking bigger hoodoo than even Baron Samedi could pull off and it's not like we're in the French Quarter right now. So, maybe we are dealing with the whole T-virus Raccoon City kinda deal?" Sam suggested.

Dean shrugged and chuckled. "I'm not sure which is scarier, the fact that you mentioned Samedi or that you know about Raccoon City. Damn what I wouldn't do to have Alice backing us up right now."

"Can we please focus here, Dean?"

"Yeah, alright. So, there's something nasty at the mine. How does that help us?"

Sam smiled and even in the dim light of the diner, the look on the younger man's face was enough to send a slight chill down Dean's spine.

"We get all the infected townspeople up to Number 3 and trap them inside the tunnel. Then we blow the entrance. Cash said there are plenty of methane pockets up in those old shafts, not to mention the coal and other mineral deposits. Chances are, the explosions will carry throughout the shafts and ignite the entire tunnel system. It's not perfect, but it'll take care of the immediate problem, and mining accidents happen all the time in coal country," Sam explained.

Dean considered his brother's plan. It was convoluted and required a helluva lot of luck, but it still included them blowing up something, so he was in.

"Let's do it," he eagerly agreed.

"There's only one thing," Sam added.

"Yeah?"

"Short of using ourselves as bait and running our asses off through town, how are we going to get everybody up there?" the young hunter asked.

Without a word, Dean darted off into the shadows, his muffled grunts giving indication only of his exertion but not of his activity. He returned just a few moments later, a large beef carcass slung across his shoulder.

"What the hell are you going to do with that?" Sam asked.

Dean smiled broadly and reached for a butcher knife with his free hand.

"Chum"

Goodwell Mine Number 3

Dean tossed the last piece of raw beef and jogged back to where Sam was finishing wiring together the last of the explosives at the mine entrance. He didn't have to look to know the zombies were already closing in on them, the ominous growls and low groans were definitely not the wind or his imagination.

"You almost ready, Sammy?" he asked as he drew up next to his brother.

Sam looked up from his work to watch as Dean smeared fresh blood on the outside of the tunnel timbers. The younger man cringed as he spotted an equal amount of the red liquid freezing flowing down Dean's left arm.

"What did you do?" he asked worriedly.

"Ran out of meat, figured we needed to be sure we had something to draw all of them in," the hunter replied, nonchalantly pushing down his sleeve to cover the self-inflicted wound. "So, are we ready, 'cause they're coming?"

Sam nodded and finished screwing down a final wire. "I've got explosives wired at least a hundred feet in. The tunnel splits from there and there's no guarantee that there isn't another way out, but it's the best we can do," he stated.

"Well, with any luck, the explosions will blow them to tiny little zombie bits."

"Okay, that'll do it. We need to take cover," Sam advised.

"Over there, out of sight."

Dean led the way behind a tall supply shack, huddling down behind the worn metal and damp wood. Sam dropped down beside him, the detonator held securely in his lap.

They simultaneously let out deep sighs and Dean chuckled.

"It's been a helluva day..." he remarked.

"Yeah," Sam replied solemnly. "Hey, Dean, um... I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what? You were right all along, Sam. There was a hunt here. Besides, we've been in tighter situations," Dean replied, trying to sound confident.

"Yeah, we'll get out of here and get back on the road. Dean..." Sam paused abruptly.

"Huh?"

"You know we'll get Dad back, right?"

Dean smiled weakly, his face barely visible in the blowing flurries that had resumed. "Yeah, I know, but..."

"But what?" Sam prompted.

The elder Winchester shuddered and glanced up at the snow. "What do you think is happening to him? I mean, where do you think he is right now?"

"We know where he is, Dean," Sam answered.

"I don't mean Stull. I mean, what layer of Hell, what reality? Do you think he got out of that last place like we did or did he get tossed somewhere else? What if he has to keep going through things like we did, living through seeing you or me die over and over? What if he's stuck on some alternate plane running for his life or fighting off demons? What if he's being tortured? "

"We'll get him back, Dean. I promise," Sam assured him.

"I know that. But what if..." Dean fumbled.

"What if what?" the younger man asked confused.

Dean ran his thumb along the edge of the machete, carefully avoiding making eye contact with Sam.

"What if we get him back and he's not Dad anymore?" he asked quickly.

"Who else would he be?"

There was a long pause, only the howling wind and the rising crescendo of growls filling the gap in the conversation before Dean answered.

"What if he's something else? What if he doesn't come out of there the Dad we knew?"

He hated the emotion he'd exposed in saying that, but he couldn't help voicing the nagging fear that had been eating away at him since their narrow escape from the Lawrence cemetery. Those fears had only become more prevalent by watching the young deputy confront the nightmarish change in his own father and Dean couldn't help but acknowledge that the same thing might happen to them if and when they ever found their dad.

"Dean, we made it out. Dad will too. We just..." Sam began, but Dean cut him off with a quick wave of his hand as movement at the edge of the road signaled the arrival of the revenants.

"Showtime," Dean announced.

The brothers watched as the zombies approached, the mass of undead scrambling up the roadway like wild animals following a scent. Some of them were still fighting over pieces of the carcass Dean had left to bait the trail while others were feeding on chunks of meat, the origin of which the hunters didn't want to consider.

It all seemed to be working according to plan as the group slowly made its way toward the entrance of the tunnel until Dean spotted two figures straggling near the rear. Straining to see through the darkness and swirling snow, he finally recognized the latecomers. It was the Sheriff and just a little further behind, Cash.

While the older lawman looked as though his body had gone through a wood chipper, the young deputy appeared to be unscathed. Hanging back in the shadows, it seemed as if Cash was still trying to keep an eye on his flesh-eating father despite the fact the man was well-beyond saving.

Dean rose from his cover, determined to reach the kid before Cash followed his father into the trap.

"What are you doing?" Sam called out in a forced whisper as he reached up to grab his brother's sleeve.

Dean slapped at Sam's hand. "It's the kid. Look at him! I don't think he's infected."

"Yeah, but if the others see you, they'll tear you to shreds," Sam pleaded.

"We gotta get them all inside. Look!" He pointed to the mine entrance where the deputy, his father and a couple other revenants had paused.

"Dean, no!" Sam shouted, even as the older hunter was on his feet and tearing off toward the milling zombies.

"Just be ready, Sam!" Dean called back over his shoulder.

He ran as fast as his fatigued legs would carry him, wary of the snow-slick pavement as his boots lost traction. He skidded past the Sheriff and barely slid underneath the scrambling reach of another hungry revenant.

"Come on, you nasty bastards. Dinner's served inside," he shouted, waving his hands and reopening the laceration on his inner arm to expose the fresh blood.

It had the desired effect as the last of the zombies, including the Sheriff, stumbled after the hunter. Dean made it to the entrance, surprised that it was relatively clear of the flesh-eating mob. He continued further in, decapitating one revenant before ducking into a small alcove.

Just beyond his secreted position, the main mass of affected townspeople had found something to eat within the dark passage, tearing into it like wolves. The sound of their ravenous grunts accompanied the sick echoes of tearing flesh and snapping bones as they devoured their prey and it took everything Dean had to fight down the bile rising in his throat.

Still, if it keeps them distracted ... he thought silently.

"Dad... please!"

Dean turned away from the feeding frenzy to see Cash following his father into the depths of the mine, the young deputy still lingering closely as the torn and tattered sheriff stumbled forward following the blood-scent like the rest of the pack.

"Dad, come back with me. I can help you," the deputy begged.

Dean watched with pity as the young man trailed after his father. The older man was oblivious to his son's pleas and it was nothing short of a miracle that the zombie hadn't yet turned on the deputy to feed.

"Cash!" Dean called out, stepping out from his hiding place.

He didn't wait for the deputy's response, instead pulling the young man behind the relative security of a belt conveyor.

"We've gotta get outta here," Dean ordered, grabbing the deputy's arm and trying to steer him toward the entrance.

"NO!" the young man shouted, pulling away. "I can't, not without my dad."

"Your dad is gone, kid and this place is gonna be history soon too. My brother's outside with his finger on the trigger to bring this whole mountain down. We need to get out of here," Dean insisted.

"I can't, you don't understand, he's the only family I got left," Cash cried.

Dean paused, looking carefully at the young man's face. Tears streamed down unabated as the deputy looked back up at the hunter.

"You don't understand," he repeated. "Everybody else is gone. My mom passed away from cancer two years ago and my sister died in a car wreck just a couple of months back. All I have left is my dad, I can't lose him too! I just can't!"

"You've already lost him, John. I'm sorry," Dean gently consoled him.

He got it, he really did. He'd spent the better part of his life trying to salvage his family, so he sympathized with the heartbroken kid standing before him.

"Maybe if I can lock him in one of the cells, just till I can find a way to fix him..." Cash pleaded.

"There is no way to fix him, kid. Your dad's not coming back. I'm sorry, but we gotta go now!" the hunter insisted, fisting a handful of the deputy's uniform shirt, resolved to save the young man even if it meant dragging him forcibly from the mine.

"NO!" Cash screamed and jerked out of Dean's grasp.

"DEAN! Get out of there now!" Sam's shout carried into the dark recess of the mine, the urgency in his voice alerting the elder Winchester.

He turned away from the deputy to see that several of the revenants had finished their meal and were beginning to drift back toward the tunnel entrance, drawn to the noise and commotion. As much as he was determined to save Cash, Dean knew he had to focus on the main job and prevent the zombies from escaping the mine.

Brandishing the machete, he started back toward the entry and the horde of fleasheaters moving in that direction when something solid blocked his path. Dean jerked around, the blade raised to strike.

"Wait!" Cash yelled, grabbing Dean's arm and wrestling the machete from his hand. "Go, I'll hold them off."

Dean reluctantly relinquished the weapon, wanting to argue with the young man yet seeing the look on the kid's face and understanding it was pointless to try. Instead, he clasped the deputy's shoulder and silently nodded; Dean understood.

Turning back toward the entrance he ran, calling upon his legs to drum up every ounce of speed he possessed. Stealing a quick glance over his shoulder, he could see the zombies swarming over Cash, the deputy swinging the machete like some movie ninja hacking through enemies, but there were simply too many and they were hungry again.

Dean could see the brighter light of the tunnel entrance even as he heard the hungry growls of the swarm right behind him.

So close and yet so far...

"Blow it, Sam!" he shouted, just as something grabbed at the back of his jacket. "NOW, SAMMY, NOW!"

There was a brief moment when Dean felt the icy chill of air and biting pinpricks of wind-driven snowflakes striking his face. There was even the blissful peacefulness of a cold early winter night where the stars stood out in brilliant contrast against a crystal clear sky. And for that brief moment, Dean Winchester thought he'd made it out alive, the world around him not nearly as brutal and filled with blood-thirsty creatures.

Except in the next instant, Dean's world exploded. Night turned into day with a violent flash of light that enveloped him like a blanket of fire, lightning and lava all wrapped up in one. It thrust him forward with a force that felt as though it would crush every bone in his body and suck the very air from his lungs.

Inside the mine, the explosives ignited flashing through the tunnels and setting off the methane pockets which in turn exploded and sent rock flying in every direction. Bodies were torn into pieces and equipment was twisted and crushed as the mountain crumbled and collapsed.

Fire belched from the mouth of the tunnel, flashing outward in an attempt to claim anything or anyone brazen enough to try to escape. Eventually the rain of rock ceased and only the frantic cry of a brother calling for his sibling interrupted the gentle peacefulness of the gently falling snow.

Crosscut Motel – Early in the morning

Dean stirred slightly and turned his head away from the light that seemed determined to bore its way into his skull like the flesh eating scarabs from the mummy movie. Movement was an instant mistake and he quickly realized that the migraine-inducing light was a less painful option than suffering through the gut-inverting cramps that came from shifting about.

Still, he was somewhat surprised by the limited range of motion. Considering the last thing he remembered was the falling mountain of rock and the earth-shattering blast, he figured he'd either be crushed under a ton of granite or splattered across half of West Virginia.

Gingerly, Dean tempted fate and decided to see just how badly he'd been hurt. He expected a laundry list of injuries, yet even with his eyes closed, he was surprised that the familiar scents and sounds of a hospital were oddly absent.

Concussion? He wondered. But oddly his head didn't really hurt. Strange enough when he distinctly recalled being thrown through the air and slammed into the ground as Sam's explosives detonated throughout the mine.

Reaching up, he rubbed at eyes that seemed reluctant to cooperate, determined to get his bearings.

Good news, not paralyzed... he silently joked, relieved to find that his extremities were not only still attached, but functional.

Hazy at first, his vision returned and Dean slowly took in his surroundings. Rising up on his elbow, he looked around the dismal room, the dated décor and weak sunlight peeking through yellowed curtains only adding to his confusion. Struggling to sit up, his stomach cramped violently and he groaned, his free arm grabbing his abdomen protectively.

Sagging back against the pillow, Dean wiped at the perspiration that seemed to instantly dot his forehead. Blinking against the spots that marred his vision, he was relieved when Sam appeared at the side of the bed.

"You're awake?" his brother asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Looks like," Dean replied, still breathing slowly against the pain in his gut.

"You gonna hurl some more?"

"Some more?" Dean asked, not sure if he was even going to start.

"Dude, you've been puking non-stop for the past two days. I seriously thought about taking out stock in Pepto Bismol," Sam teased. "Seriously, Dean, I was getting worried. You threw up over and over until I didn't think there could possibly be anything left in you, and then you'd throw up some more. You couldn't keep anything down and when you spiked that fever... well... I didn't know what to do."

"Worried?" Dean repeated, his face contorted with confusion. "Do I have a concussion? I don't feel like I have a concussion, but that would explain the puking. Maybe internal injuries or something? But no, you would have checked for that, right?"

Sam burst into laughter leaving Dean to stare at him with deepening bewilderment.

"Internal injuries?" the young hunter exclaimed. "I hardly think there's anything you could eat that would cause internal injuries – especially after what I saw you consume the other night. So, how are you feeling now?"

Dean's eyes narrowed and he glanced down his body taking a quick visual inventory. There were no bandages, no obvious open wounds or even bruises.

"Fine, I guess. Where are we? Are we still in Mingo?" he asked, trying to make some sense of memory and reality.

"Yep, still here, and dude... no internet, no cable. Next time, can you pick a better place for us to be stuck while you recover?" Sam chided.

"Is it safe then? No more zombies?" Dean asked seriously, slowly swinging his legs to the side of the bed.

He didn't miss the way Sam's eyes widened with humor. "Zombies? What the hell are you talking about?" his sibling asked. "The only zombie around here lately has

been you. Honestly Dean, you've been out of your head for the past thirty-six hours, barely conscious and spewing more bodily fluids than a witch."

Dean glared at him with all the energy he could muster, but his brother's teasing still didn't answer what had happened to all the revenants in the small town.

"Quit jerking around, Sam. The town was full of 'em – all feedin' on each other, it was a total Romero-fest. The Sheriff, oh and damn, the kid..."

He jerked away angrily as Sam reached up to feel his forehead. "I don't have a friggin' fever. Seriously, dude, what the hell happened after we blew up the mine?"

His brother was nearly hysterical with laughter now and Dean could feel his confusion giving way to pure anger. He wanted to know what had happened and Sam's attitude wasn't helping. This whole hunt had been a nightmare and now he was feeling as though he'd awoken to some new alternate universe where his brother had been replaced by a comedian.

"Sam!" Dean warned, his voice low and threatening.

"Okay Dorothy, I think the food poisoning has screwed with your head," Sam calmly replied, his humor abated as he steered a wobbly Dean back toward the bed.

"Food poisoning?" the elder hunter asked as he allowed himself to be pressed back down to the worn mattress.

Dean didn't resist as Sam fussed around him, the younger man uncapping a bottle of water and handing it over.

"Yeah, food poisoning," Sam asserted. "But what do you expect when you order the 'Trucker's Special'? It looked like roadkill, dude. Seriously, Dean, I warned you not to order it rare. It was probably possum... or something worse."

Dean finished the water and grinned. "Yeah... but it tasted like chicken," he snarked.

Sinking back against the headboard he closed his eyes as memories, real memories, began to flood his fever-weakened mind. He recalled stopping at the diner, famished and eagerly ordering the largest chunk of meat on the menu. He even remembered the buxom blonde waitress, Shelly, that served the meal and thinking how she could've been the perfect after-dinner-treat if only he wasn't so impatient to get back on the road and headed toward Kansas.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Dean replayed the rest of that night as best he could. There was another quick argument with Sam and then he was headed for some much needed fresh air and the Impala. Except he never quite made it. By the time he'd reached the black Chevy, the "special" was already working its gastrointestinal magic and before he knew it, Dean was doubled over and counting the rocks in the asphalt.

The blonde had reappeared somewhere during his first round of heaving into the dumpster and Dean vaguely remembered some big trucker that reminded him of Bobby showing up and asking him if he needed help. After that, things pretty much got hazy, but the elder Winchester was pretty sure Bobby the Trucker and Shelly the Waitress ended up going off together, leaving him to his misery while his insides tried to become his outsides.

Dean wasn't sure how he got from the diner to the motel, but he figured Sam must have found him and brought him here.

Of course Sam would...

He shook his head and chuckled.

"What?" Sam asked as he returned from the bathroom.

"Dude, you would not believe the dream I had," Dean replied.

"Dream? Dean, you were delirious. So what was it about? These zombies you've been going on about?"

Dean nodded and began recounting the story. He told Sam about Shelly, embellishing just a little how much the blonde had managed to get the upper hand on his sibling. He told him about Cash, about the miners, about the trucker who looked so much like Bobby – before Sam gave him the ultimate haircut.

As the tale went on, Dean elaborated on all the details, describing to his brother the appearance of the Sheriff, the betrayal of the deputy and their narrow escape from the town full of zombies out to feed on Winchester flesh. He finished with the trap at the mine, telling Sam how he baited in the revenants while his brother rigged the charges, but selectively leaving out any mention of their discussion about finding their dad or the entire sacrifice of Cash for his father.

Reflecting on it, Dean went silent. It made perfect sense really; his subconscious had merely incorporated bits of reality along with fragments of the supernatural nightmares he lived every day along with the one thought that had been consuming his every waking moment – save Dad!

What if we get him back and he's not Dad anymore...

The question asked of his brother during his dream returned to him now, but he didn't have the courage to voice it. Maybe it didn't matter after all. What difference did it make if they couldn't rescue their father from Stull?

"You okay?" Sam asked worriedly.

Dean glanced up at his brother and smiled weakly, knowing Sam would easily mistake the look for illness rather than what it truly was; fear.

"Yeah, I'm okay, Sammy. Just still tired. Guess I just need some more sleep," he answered.

Dean rolled over on his side, glad that his brother seemed appeased with his explanation. He was even gladder that the nightmare he'd thought had occurred in this backwater town had been nothing more than the bad combination of too many late night zombie flicks and a total disregard for his GI tract.

Still, as he closed his eyes and willed sleep to reclaim his weary and recovering body, Dean's mind couldn't let go of the one nightmare that continued to torture him. A nightmare worse than a small town filled with flesh-eating zombies or e-coli induced food poisoning, this was a torment Dean couldn't escape even when he was awake.

What if we get him back and he's not Dad anymore...

Who else would he be...

Who else would he be?

The End