Do You Recall

by Zeppelin_Skies

Summary

It was Bobby's fault, really. When she called, it was rarely for help like this. The two men—two hunters—currently occupying her porch were definitely not Bobby Singer...a road trip to gank a witch in Utah before the Summer Solstice was definitely not part of the plan, nor was what happened afterwards. But that's just the thing with hunters. Even when you're out, you're in. [Dean/OC]

Notes

The story title and chapter titles are based on much loved Journey songs, for those of you who are classic rock fans like me! Some you may recognize, others you probably won't. But here's the first chapter of DYR, let me know what you thought.
Anytime

Chapter Notes

This series is also available to be viewed on Fanfiction.net under the same username. It was published there first in fact, and any future sequels/companion stories in the series will likely be published there first.

I: Anytime

It was Bobby's fault, really. When she called, it was rarely for help like this. And when it was, (which was rarer still), he usually came himself. This case in particular was different. It was personal, and he knew that.

"What the hell?"

The two men, two hunters, currently occupying her porch were definitely not Bobby Singer. The slightly shorter one of the two smirked, while the other looked a little taken back by her outburst.

"Nice to see you too, Lena," said the first, the one she recognized. She could see he was a bit uncertain. "…Remember me?"

She came back to herself, shaking her head apologetically.

"I'm sorry. It's just…"

"Bit of a surprise, I know," he said, waving it off. There was a teasing glint in his eyes when he said, "Sorry about that. But I'll understand if you'd rather we hit the road. There's gotta be something to take care of in the next town over…"

Again she shook her head, this time wryly.

"It's good to see you, Dean," she said, offering an amused smile, then shifted her gaze to the man next to him. "Who's this?"

"You don't remember me? I didn't think I'd changed all that much." She focused more on his face, and realization hit her with a pang. This was a far cry from the lanky kid she remembered.

"Sam! It's been…a while. Damn, you got tall." She laughed, looking up at him. He practically towered over her, and she was relatively average height for a woman. He cracked a smile.

"And you obviously stayed short," he teased. She rolled her eyes and opened the door wide in invitation.

"Har, har. And Dean, if you bring up that goddamn nickname, I will throw you out of my house." She turned away from them to walk back inside, but she could hear Dean laughing behind her.

"Aw, come on—"
"No."

Sam sent his brother a questioning look, and Dean's grin promised he would tell him later.

"So Bobby sent you, huh?" They followed her into the kitchen where she grabbed two beers out of the fridge and set them down on the small dining table, gesturing for them to sit.

"He tried to call, but your line was busy," said Sam. "Said to tell you he was in the middle of a hunt that he couldn't leave for another few days. He's getting rid of a vamp nest in Ohio."

"And we were a lot closer than he was," Dean added, taking a swig of beer.

*e*And they're the only other hunters Bobby trusted to help me*, she mentally finished, which made her feel a little better. Though he could've told her when she called that he'd be sending someone in his stead.

"He did say he was a bit busy, might take him some time to get back to South Dakota," she admitted and grabbed a beer for herself, then turned to Dean as she leaned against the kitchen counter. "How've you been? I haven't heard from you in a couple years...I heard about your dad."

The unspoken condolence was left between them, but Sam and Dean took it for what it was. It took Dean a moment to look up from his beer, but when he did, he shrugged casually. "Been fine, Elena. You know how it is."

She did know, but that wasn't really the point.

"You two are hunting together now?" she asked. Dean had told her his brother was at Stanford, getting a degree. Elena never told Dean back then, but she'd been happy for Sam, that he was pursuing what he wanted.

"For a couple years now. But what about you?" Dean asked with a wry smile. "Last time we talked you were out for good."

She could see this was news to Sam, so she clarified by saying, "I got a real job. I work at the Black Hills Museum of Natural History."

Seeing the look on Dean's face, she added, "It's not as exciting, but it pays for cable TV and hot showers. I take care of the artifacts, make sure they're clean and put in their proper places, and I help do the tours."

"So...you dust off worthless junk," Dead deadpanned. She shot him a glare.

"Priceless junk," she corrected.

Sam's mouth quirked into a half-smile and said, "So if you're out, why are you hunting?"

"I'm not. But my dad is. He usually checks in once a week to tell me where he is, what he's hunting, asks for help on research, stuff like that. He hasn't called in two and a half weeks."

The brothers glanced at one another. They could understand why she would be nervous. Elena went over to a messy work station closer to the living room and brought back a few newspapers she'd been looking through.

"Last time we talked he was in Nevada dealing with a poltergeist. I tried to track that to what he would go for next, and I called Victor Graves, pretty much my dad's only friend. He owns a bar in
the town Dad was in."

Dean knew Vick. He wasn't a hunter, but knew plenty of them and passed information where he could. Even gave them their first drink on the house.

"What did Vick have to say?" asked Dean.

"My dad came in, but only said he was heading toward Utah." Elena sighed and pinched between her eyes. She's poured over this stuff until 3:00AM the previous night, right before passing out on the couch. Her day hadn't started much better: a headache from lack of sleep and she'd run out of coffee, making work drag on far longer than it usually felt. Now at 5:30, she was in aching need of a shower and something hot to eat.

"Long day?" asked Sam sympathetically. She gave him a dry look.

"You have no idea. Look, I've got a spare room here and an empty couch that's not too bad to sleep on if you guys want to stay. I'm going to order a couple pizzas then grab a much deserved shower. You two okay with that?"

Sam looked over at his brother. Staying here sounded better than finding cheap motel of the week, and it said something about her trust in Dean that she was offering. He didn't know her as well, and it sounded as if Dean knew her better than he'd let on when they talked in the car.

"I didn't know Bobby had a niece," said Sam as Aerosmith's "Livin' on the Edge" played for once at a moderate volume on the stereo.

"Her dad is his brother-in-law. You know her, Sammy. Elena," Dean replied, not taking his eyes off the road.

"What? I don't remember…"

"The first time you were about eleven. Maybe twelve. Dad had carted us off to Bobby's for a few days and she was there."

The memory was slowly beginning to surface.

"Oh yeah. I remember you were pissed at Dad for not taking you along. What was it, a wendigo?"

"Yeah."

"Right. She was cool. I remember she beat your ass at cards and kicked the soccer ball around with me." Dean rolled his eyes, but his mouth twitched suspiciously.

"She just wanted to shut you up about being bored."

"Could you blame me? Bobby's house wasn't exactly Disney World," said Sam, "But that doesn't answer why Bobby seemed to think she'd be happy to hear from you."

It took Dean a moment to answer, but eventually he said, "Dad and I went on a couple hunts together with her and her dad, Jack, while you were in college."

Sam waited for him to continue, but when Dean didn't say more, he prodded by asking why.

"The first time we happened to be working the same case in Montana. A rugaru. When that was over we met in a bar, stayed late at night and got jumped by a skinwalker with a grudge against hunters.
There ended up being a pack of them we had to take out, and it took a while to find them again after that night in the bar."

Sam contemplated this in silence for a couple minutes. Like usual, his brother was downplaying the story, but as far as he could gather, Elena had become a friend.

"So when was the last time you talked to her?" he asked. Again, Dean's response was delayed, but eventually he said,

"About a month or two before I came to get you from Stanford." Sam looked over at him in mild surprise.

"That's over two years, Dean."

"I've been busy, Sam," Dean said defensively. His life had been problem after problem since John had disappeared on that hunt. They'd finally ganked the demon their dad had been after for twenty years, but what had it left them with? A dead father and Dean with a year to live.

"Besides, she was doing just fine last time I saw her."

Sam left the question as to what she was doing alone for the time being, only because he knew he'd be able to get it out of Dean when he was less prickly.

Sam and Dean decided to stay the night, with Dean letting his brother take the bed (once he lost at Rock, Paper, Scissors). It was around nine when Dean, with good natured teasing, took up Elena's rather pointed suggestion of the shower being free. It left her and Sam to pick up after the mess of pizza boxes and paper plates.

"So, when did you decide to get a job at a museum, if you don't mind me asking?" Sam said, bringing the cups to the kitchen sink. She raised a brow, but a knowing grin played across her features.

"You mean, how'd I get 'out?' I got tired of my dad snubbing me from the job," she replied honestly. At his confused expression, she explained, "He never wanted me hunting, just wanted me to know what was out there and how to protect myself…especially after my mom passed. I was fourteen, and then it was just me and him."

Elena only told him about her mom so he wouldn't ask. She knew he'd seen the family pictures in the living room with a younger, happier version of her family that included her mother. Plus, she didn't know if he remembered too well the first time they met.

She spent most of high school taking care of herself. Jack would come home for a couple days every other week. She would make him a few good meals before he left again. As a police officer retired early, his pension scarcely covered the bills, but her mother's life insurance covered the rest, along with weekly trips to the grocery store and gas for the beat up Camaro Elena had convinced her dad to keep when he decided to get his truck.

"But by the time I finished I'd already been on quite a few hunts on weekends and holidays. I convinced him to take me with him for real." She'd been tired of being alone. "He finally caved, only if I could keep up with a few online college classes."

He gave her a surprised look.

"You were able to do both?"
"Not very well," she admitted. "But I got my Bachelor of Arts from University of South Dakota in History, focused on Ancient Studies. As it turned out, research was handy with the cases."

It wasn't long after that when she accidentally met up with Dean again for the first time in seven years.

"But if you had that going for you, why would you want to continue hunting?" he asked. She had every right to make a life for herself and get a better paying job, meet someone, do something that made her happy.

"Because my dad wouldn't have a Dean watching his back if I really left him on his own," she said with a sigh. Jack may have wanted better for her, but not enough to quit hunting.

It was easy for Sam to notice the parallels in how they were brought up, but there were also obvious divides in what drove their decisions. It raised the question of how her father had gotten into the job, but with any hunter that was usually a question to avoid in casual conversation. They hardly knew one another, yet she'd already told him far more than he'd asked. Though he realized she knew a fair amount about him and Dean if she knew about him being at Stanford.

"My brother said the two of you went on a couple of hunts with our dads."

Her mouth twitched into a small grin as she finished packing the garbage. He was long done with the dishes, and leaned back against the counter as she fished out a bottle of water from the fridge. She held it up to him in silent offering and he took it.

"That's right," she said, then leaned towards him conspiringly. He played along, wearing an amused grin of his own. "If you tell him this, I promise you misery…"

Here she stage whispered, "He's actually a hell of a lot smarter than he looks."

"Damn straight I am."

Dean's loud voice made the two of them jump, and Elena fixed him with a glare as he strode past her to raid her fridge for another beer.

"Hey! You already got your courtesy beer. Does this look like a bar to you?" He popped the cap open and gave her a cheeky smirk.

"If it were, this wouldn't be free."

"Yeah, because I bought it," she retorted and rolled her eyes. "You haven't changed much, have you?"

But she could see that he had. There was an edge in his eyes and a heaviness set on his shoulders that he hadn't had two years ago. Something had happened, more than just losing his father. But then again, it wasn't really any of her business.

"You love it." He took a long sip of beer, exaggerating his enjoyment.

"Like I love a canker sore." Dean gestured at her with the half-finished bottle in his hand.

"That's disgusting."

"So are you," she pointed over to the open duffle bag on her couch. "With your bag of hazardous waste eating through my cushions. Throw those clothes in the washing machine."
"Yes, mom," he mocked, but his smirk betrayed him as he went over to the duffle bag.

"How long did you say you two were on the skinwalker hunt?" Sam asked, enjoying the entertainment while it lasted. Before they had to get serious about the matter at hand: finding her father.

"Three weeks or so. They kept moving just when we'd caught their trail, tricky bastards," Elena said.

" Took us what, two states to gank 'em?" said Dean from the other room. He came back with an armload of laundry.

"Yeah, so I'm well acquainted with the sight of that," she said, pointing to the wound up ball of clothes. "I'll show you where the laundry room is. Feel free to shower and change too, Sam. You can bring your clothes down when you're done."

"Sounds good, thanks," Sam agreed, and grabbed his backpack from the floor beside the sofa and followed them toward the back of the house. Elena led Dean to the farthest door at the end of the narrow hallway and into a small room that functioned as both a linen closet and a laundry room. They dumped his clothes into the washer and she put a double dose of detergent before starting up the machine. Dean shook his head at her.

"You're so full of shit! It's not that bad," he dismissed.

"More like your nose is desensitized," she muttered and closed the lid, then went over to the closet and pulled out two sets of fresh sheets.

"It's all right, Sam and I can make our own beds," said Dean, reaching for them. Elena evaded his reach.

"No matter how obnoxious, you two are my guests," she said, then amended, "well, not Sam. He's okay."

They went over to the guestroom and Dean helped her strip the bed of the old sheets and put on the new ones.

"Yeah? Wait until you're stuck in the same car with him for hours, especially after Taco Night," Dean countered.

"What's so bad about tacos?"

"He likes bean burritos," he said, nearly shuddering at the memory of the after-smell Sam left in the Impala after Taco Thursday (it used to be Taco Tuesday, but they moved it to Thursdays). "And you complained about my clothes being toxic."

She restrained a laugh at Sam's expense.

"Listen…I know Bobby asked you to come down here, but you didn't have to. So thanks," she said. "I know it's been a while and you probably have other problems to deal with."

Dean paused from fitting a pillow case and stopped her with a look more serious than he'd been all night. She was right. He did have other problems to work out. His demon deal being one and Bela stealing the Colt being another. Not to mention Lilith doing God knows what after the stint she pulled in Colorado. But there was a time when the woman fluffing pillows in front of him had his back, and trusted him to do the same.
"I didn't come just because Bobby asked me to," he said bluntly. "You need help, so I'm here."

After a moment she broke into a smile, ruefully shaking her head. He really hadn't changed all that much.

"Thanks, Dean."

He cracked a small smile too.

"Anytime."
II: Precious Time

Dean called Ash that night and got him on the case of finding Jack Hayes. They'd done as much research as they could, but the morning was already considerably better than the one before with actual breakfast and fresh coffee. The scenario was all too familiar and he hated that, but he guessed it couldn't be helped.

"So Nevada, right?" he said around a mouthful of eggs. She raised a brow at his lack of table manners, but Sam noted she didn't seem surprised.

"Yeah, pretty much at the east border heading toward Utah."

"Do you have the name of the motel he was staying at and the name he was using?" asked Sam. "If Ash doesn't come up with anything solid, we're going to have to take a trip, see if we can follow his trail."

"It's unlikely that Ash won't find anything though," Dean said, seeing her look.

"I'm going to have to take more than a sick day, huh?" she asked wearily.

"Maybe, maybe not." But he wouldn't give her false hope.

"So what do we do in the mean time?"

"All we can really do is wait—" The sound of Dean's phone going off cut off Sam's reply. Dean looked down at the caller ID with a smile, and held it up for them to see before answering it.

"Hey, man. Watcha got?"

Dean hated driving through Utah for reasons. Most of it was uninhabited, which is only a partial plus (less traffic), but mostly it sucked because it was scorching hot in summer and driving through the desert seemed to take so much longer without at least some scenery.

He could hear Elena fidgeting in the backseat, trying and failing to get into a more comfortable position after nearly seven hours of straight driving. It wasn't new to him, but he knew she'd been working at a steady job driving an hour a day at most, unless she'd visited Bobby when they weren't there.

Sam was dozing in the passenger seat, even as Bachman Turner Overdrive played loudly on the radio.

"He had to get lost in the middle of the goddamn desert," Dean heard her mutter, and he smirked.

"Cedar City," he corrected. She narrowed her eyes at him through the rearview mirror.

"That's just where his credit card trail left off. The GPS on his phone clocked out miles east of the highway," she reminded him. "There's nothing but mountains and desert there, not to mention what the hell he was doing heading out that way."

She stopped herself there. Thinking about the "what ifs" would only wind her up more, and with another six hours to go until they even got to Cedar City, she didn't need more energy to burn.
Elena had to ask for some time off work for a family emergency after she'd already taken Wednesday off as a personal day. But after saying her father had a heart attack, Craig, her boss, was lenient enough to give her the rest of the week and the weekend. Just as long as she came back to work on Monday morning. Her friend Val agreed to split covering her shifts with one of the teenagers that was only working the summer.

"Look, I'm not saying it's going to be easy," he said after a minute. "But we're gunna find him."

Always so sure of himself, she thought. But when it came to the hunt, he was only ever blankly honest with what his gut instincts told him. At least that was what she'd gleaned from their brief time working together.

She bit her lower lip absently. The final riffs of "Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet" fill the car, then faded into a familiar intro she knew well.

"I've had a lot of big dreams"

"Aw, not this shit," said Dean, raising his hand toward the knob on the stereo. "This is why I rarely listen to the radio."

"I've made a lot of bad moves"

"Don't you dare!" Elena propelled herself forward into the front half of the car and smacked his hand away.

"I know you could walk away, but you never do"

"Hey, hey! This is my car, Shortstop. I pick the music," he said, fending her off. "Sit back the fuck down!"

She hated that nickname. Inwardly she seethed, but she wouldn't get what she wanted by getting angry over that now.

"Oh, come on, you know you love this—"

"I've met a lot of cold hearts"

"Hey, what the hell is goin' on?"

"I've learned to smile and deceive"

"She's trying to take over, Sam!" Dean managed, while still trying to bat her hands away from where she was obstinately covering the buttons.

"I know I'm hard to be around, but you never leave"

"I just want to listen to this one song! Don't tell me the chorus doesn't make you want to—"

"I'm not easy to understand"

"Not in my car, damn it! I didn't think you liked this shit."

"But you hold out your hand"

"It's not shit. It's music, you ass! Just let me listen." After a heated ten seconds, Dean begrudgingly relaxed against his seat, staring broodingly out at the road.
"And you say you love me, just as I am…
You always treat me the best that you can"

"This is torture," Dean murmured. She shushed him.

"You say you want me, need me,
Love me baby just as I am…just as I am"

From the rearview mirror he could see her mouthing the words and obnoxiously motioning with her hands. It was sickening 80s pop, in his opinion only slightly more tolerable than any post 1990s pop or 2000s top 40s hits. The longer the song went on, the more he was itching to turn it off (especially after he caught himself tapping to the drum beat and nodding to the guitar riff).

The entire time, Sam glanced at his brother out of the corner of his eye, silently laughing throughout the entire four minutes.

You just let a chick break house rule number one, dude.

When Dean looked over he read the thought clearly on Sam's face. He slid his gaze back to the road, pointedly ignoring Sam.

"You say you want me, need me,
Love me baby just as I am…
Just as I am…"

"Excuse me. We're trying to meet up with a friend. Do you have records of a Don Henley staying here?" Sam asked the clerk behind the reception desk. It was a cheap motel like any one of the hundreds of sleazy motels they'd stayed at before.

"Let me see…uh, yeah. Room 27. He checked in two weeks ago, paid for up until tomorrow. I haven't seen him come in for a few days, though," said the clerk—Joe, his nametag said. His eyes were red-rimmed, like he'd been doping up just before they walked in.

"How many days are 'a few days','" Elena asked.

"I dunno, lady. Maybe five. A week," said Joe, who was beginning to get a bit impatient. "Are you going to buy a room?"

She looked over at Dean in exasperation, who nodded at Sam.

"Two rooms, please. One with two twin beds," said Sam, handing the clerk a credit card. He ran it through and got them checked in.

"Well, Happy Days over there was helpful," Dean remarked. He unlocked the door to one of the rooms and looked inside. "This one's ours. Damn, I should have asked if they had a couch. We could've just paid for one room."

"It's okay, Dean, I can pay for my own," Elena said with a smile. She unlocked the door next to theirs, and remarked, "My junk-dusting job does afford me small luxuries."

He smirked but shook his head, "Nah, don't worry about it. We already got it covered. Meet us back out here in ten minutes."

It took her about five to shower and another three to hastily get dressed, but by the time she got back
to the hallway they were already jimmying the lock to Room 27. Dean glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

"About time, princess. Stop to repaint your nails?"

The nerve. She didn't even wash her hair before throwing on a fresh t-shirt and a worn pair of jeans.

"Stuff it, ass-hat."

Sam just looked amused, but also like he wanted to shake his head at his brother. He was starting to like Elena.

"Yeah, this is definitely a hunter's room," Dean said when they were inside. The place looked barely touched, save for the gym bag poking out from underneath the bed and the desk, utterly trashed with newspaper clippings, pictures, and other clutter. His laptop was buried underneath it all.

"Yep, this is him all right," said Elena. Even working at the local police station in Hill City, South Dakota, the few times she'd visited his office she remembered his cubicle looking much the same. The way he researched while on hunts wasn't any different, and that she remembered well.

"He was obviously on something's trail," said Sam, noting the red circles on names in Cedar City obituaries. They found article clips of similar deaths—all of them young women recorded as accidental or suicide, all in intervals of twenty-five years, and all in the same city—dating back over a century.

"And on the summer solstice," Elena added. Her eyes were glued to Jack's computer screen, where several tabs had been left open. Her dad had a bad habit of closing the laptop without shutting it down completely, and now more than ever she was thankful for it.

"Electrocution via toaster, strangled by shower curtains, impaling themselves on kitchen knives—this sounds like hexes," said Sam, "Which sounds like witch activity."

"Okay, but why the summer solstice?" asked Dean.

"A summoning ritual," said Elena. She turned the laptop around so both of them could see. "Why do witches always feel the need to raise their masters from their fiery keep?"

"Looks like they were trying to raise one powerful mother," said Dean, glancing through the several tabs open on the screen. "The murders were sacrifices…one ingredient in a long list we don't have."

"Are you sure that's all it is?" asked Sam. "If they were able to raise a demon, then why keep doing it every twenty-five years?"

"Maybe it didn't work," Elena suggested after a moment, "Maybe something didn't take. With something that powerful you probably only get one shot, right?"

"Yeah, but how many murders do we have here? Five. They'd have to be the stupidest witch I've ever seen," Dean remarked. "When is the summer solstice anyway?"

"It happens twice a year, but in the northern hemisphere it's usually between June 20 and June 22," said Sam. Dean gave him a peeved look.

"How the fuck do you know that?" Sam opened his mouth to answer, but Dean cut him off. "Forget it. 'S not worth it."
Sam smirked and looked down at the ancient book he'd found in Jack's duffel bag, even as he heard Dean mutter, "Nerd."

"Heard that."

"Shut up."

"This year it's on the twentieth," Elena interrupted, the small smirk on her face betraying her amusement.

"And it'll be the nineteenth in," Dean checked his watch, "three hours."

There was a brief moment of silence as each of them took in the new information.

"So my dad was after this witch to stop her from murdering another woman, and from summoning what we assume is a badass demon," Elena began, "but how did he know to go after them? There hasn't been a death that fit the pattern in this town since 1982. And why wouldn't he tell me he was after one?"

"Something about that bothers me, besides the obvious," said Sam. "Why do they have to be women? Something tells me that's a specific part."

"You concentrate on that," said Dean. Something about the timeline didn't feel quite right. "Elena, go ahead and call Vick again."

She shot him a confused look.

"Why? He already said he only knew Dad was heading to Utah, nothing about what he was hunting."

"I know, and I know Vick. I just want to talk to him."

She gave him a look that said she didn't understand what he was getting at, but she picked up her cell phone and scrolled through her contacts.

"Vick? Hey, it's Elena. Yeah, I'm in Utah trying to find him. With the Winchesters." Elena pulled a face, as if she couldn't believe what the man on the other line was saying. "Well, what did you expect? He's been missing for two weeks! Look, if he told you anything, you have to tell me right now."

Dean had enough of the ride around he was sure Victor Graves was giving her.

"Give me the phone, Lena." She gave him a look, but put Vick on hold to pass the phone to Dean.

"Graves? It's Dean Winchester."

"Winchester? Look, I already told her all I know."

"I think we both know that's not true," said Dean. He glanced over at Elena, who had joined Sam at the other side of the room to help him research the spell. He lowered his voice and continued, "Look, whatever Jack told you about keeping Elena away from this hunt, doesn't mean shit now. My brother and I've got her back. If you don't tell me what we're up against, we might not be able to bring him back alive."

There was a pause on the other line, but eventually he heard a heavy sigh.
"He didn't want to worry her into coming to help him."
"Tell me."

Apparently some guy came into Vick's bar while he and Jack were talking, out of it and a shaky on his feet. Tossed back three shots before he told them a story about how he was running away from his home town, eventually got it out of him that something evil had killed his wife twenty-five years ago, and he knew it would be back," Dean recounted the story as concisely as he could. They didn't have a whole lot of time to be sitting around. In fact, they had little more than twenty-four hours to find Jack Hayes and gank a witch.

"He was jumping states with his daughter because didn't want it to take her next."
"Did he say what killed his wife?" Sam asked.

"He didn't really know what it was, besides what looked like a regular guy, but he saw it and described it. Turns out the witch is actually a warlock, if you want to get technical," said Dean. "He's trying to raise some nasty fucker called an aswang. Bitchin' name."

He said the name as if it were some wacked out medical disease someone could barely pronounce, but Sam's eyes widened in recognition.

"You know what that is?" Elena asked him. Sam took out his own laptop from his backpack and ran a quick search, coming up with a grotesque creature that looked vaguely like a wendigo if it had fangs and large wings.

"An aswang eats both the dead and the living, but prefers children and unborn fetuses," Sam skimmed the page. "They have a lot of power through touch, mostly to read the thoughts of who they come in contact with. They're mostly like demons in that they can choose to possess someone, usually young women, and have some of the same weaknesses, like holy water."

"Does it say how you kill it?" Dean asked.

"Most folklore says silver, or you can banish them back to hell. A regular exorcism won't work, though."

"The question is why a witch—or warlock, wants to summon one," said Elena. "What's in it for them?"

"The power to control it, maybe. Use it on an enemy," Sam said. "Witches that get to be old enough can get pretty creative when it comes to revenge."

"Pretty sick way of getting your kicks," Dean muttered. "But the good news is, we have a name on our mystery witch."

"I haven't seen much of Nick lately. He seems to have a lot on his plate."

"Oh, well, that's too bad. We haven't seen him in a while and thought we would drop by…it is that house across the street, right?" Dean asked. The elderly woman smiled.

"Yes, that's it. He's probably at work by now, but if you're sure you lost his number he should be back in the afternoon," she said. "I didn't know he had any family nearby."
"Well, we're driving from Nevada over to our parents' house in Salt Lake City," Dean made up on the fly. "Just wanted to stop by on the way and see if our brother wanted to come with us."

"We'll probably get some lunch and come back later," Sam added. "Thanks for your time. We didn't mean to distract you from your cleaning."

"Oh, it's no bother," she said, waving off his apology. "Those mothballs under the couch were making me sneeze like crazy. But I hope you find him."

"Thanks, ma'am," said Dean, and stepped off the porch when the woman closed the front door behind her. The three walked back to the Impala with no intention of leaving to get lunch.

"That's the annoying thing about small towns," said Sam. "Everyone knows everyone—their schedule, their business…"

"Good thing for us though," said Elena. They got into the car, but Dean parked it a street over just in case Margaret, the neighbor they just spoke to, decided to look outside through her window. It didn't take long for Dean to pick the front door lock after making sure Nickolas Greenwood was actually away. Though Elena found her dad's truck parked behind the house with all of his weapons missing.

The inside of the house was immaculate. Nice furniture and sophisticated looking, but definitely belonging to a bachelor. They searched the house and didn't find anyone inside, and Sam hit the jackpot with the usual witchery paraphernalia in Nick's rather large walk-in closet.

"He works at an insurance agency," Elena said as she flipped through the man's mail. "Life insurance. The irony."

"Find out the building's hours," said Dean. He was helping Sam sort through the various ingredients in the closet. Sam found an ancient book that was dog-eared on a page that detailed the summoning spell in depth.

"This stuff is just for hex bags. This obviously isn't where he puts together his more intricate spells," said Sam. "There's no basement in this place, so I don't see where it would be."

"Maybe that's why the GPS signal on Jack's phone died about a mile out from Greens Lake Drive. It's nothing but rocks and hills out there," Dean suggested. "Maybe he has a shed or a cave somewhere."

"A cave, Dean?" Sam asked with a slight grin.

"Whatever, man. Somethin'."

"Okay. Let's say he has a secret cave in the hills somewhere. We have no idea where it is," said Sam. "But we do know he'll probably go there tonight. Timing is everything with this spell. It needs to be done on the day of the summer solstice, but before dawn. That's only about a five-hour gap."

"So we follow him," Dean clarified.

"Yep."

"First he needs a sacrifice…unless he already abducted a woman," said Elena. That gave her chills, because it was obvious now that he had taken her dad, had probably interrogated him for answers… But she pushed that train of thought away to keep her mind focused on the case. It was strange being back on a hunt again, but it was familiar and she more or less enjoyed the feel of it, thoughts of
finding her dad aside. They had already lied to get Greenwood's exact address, based on the information Vick gave Dean on what the poor man who'd lived in this city said.

Now they were breaking into a witch's house.

She never quite forgot the excitement of this job.

"Where did you say he works?" asked Dean.

"About a five minute drive from here, but he doesn't get off until five," she replied. Dean considered this, then said,

"Okay. Let's actually grab some lunch, though, 'cause I'm starved and we got time to kill."

Elena sighed and checked the GPS on her phone for the nearest diner.
"One bacon cheeseburger with fries, BLT with coleslaw, and a turkey Panini with onion rings," the waitress rattled off as she set down each plate. "You guys need anything else?"

"Nah, we're good," Dean said to the brunette with a wink. She gave him a smile that showed her dimples and walked away. Sam, far used to this by now, just tucked into his sandwich after dumping a few forklfuls of coleslaw between the bacon and the top bun of his BLT.

"I forgot you did that," said Elena, squeezing a packet of mayo onto her Panini bun.

"What?" Dean asked innocently. She raised a brow at him and took a bite of her sandwich.

"Chase every skirt within a five-mile radius." Sam coughed and had to take a long sip of his drink to flush down the food that caught in his throat.

"I resent that," Dean said around a mouthful of burger. She couldn't quite keep the disgust from her expression.

"I'm sure you do," she said.

"What, is it illegal to talk to beautiful women?"

"No, Dean, but you're intentions aren't exactly subtle."

"My intentions?" Dean repeated in a tone that suggested he didn't understand her meaning, but in actuality he was a bit annoyed. So he flirted casually, what was the big deal? They were on a hunt. He wasn't looking for a lay right this second. But he was a man. If after this was over, a pretty woman offered or agreed to go home with him, that was her own prerogative.

"Dean," she said with a tired smile, "Forget it."

"Why, Elena? If you're trying to tell me something, by all means," he said, gesturing widely with one hand while the other held his burger.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? It's none of my business," she said when she noticed how touchy he was becoming.

"Damn right, it's none of your business," he said, and popped a fry into his mouth. She leaned away, taken aback.

"Hey, I said I was sorry, all right? No need to give me the third degree."

"Just eat your sandwich."

"Just tell me what your problem is. Why are you so pissy all of a sudden?"

"Guys," Sam interjected, his tone placating, "This isn't really the time for—"

"For what, Sam? We're having a conversation," said Dean. His nonchalance was beginning to grate on Elena's nerves, and Sam noticed.
"No, you're having a hissy fit. I was just joking," she said. Dean gave her a long look.

"Cut the bullshit, all right. You were saying I'm a skirt-chasing pig. So go ahead, continue."

"I wasn't," she said defensively. "I just mean you're a flirt, that's all."

"Right," he scoffed. What right did she have to judge him? After everything he'd put into this job, everything he gave up and lost, he wasn't allowed to do what he wanted in his last days? And then he paused.

"You know what?" she said, dropping her sandwich onto the plate in front of her, "I'll be back. Gotta go powder my nose."

The sarcasm was evident in her voice, and inwardly Dean sighed. Sam measured his brother with a look Dean knew all too well.

"Dean."

"I know, Sam."

Sam didn't have to say anything; his bitchface said it for him. Dean rolled his eyes.

"Stop staring at me."

Sam knew Elena could have been more tactful, but she didn't deserve to be driven away from the table before she finished her food.

"She doesn't know about the deal, Dean." And there it was—the reason for his less than responsible behavior during the past few months. Leave it to his brother to voice his thoughts.

"I know."

"You gunna go talk to her, or what?" Dean gave him a deadpan look. Sometimes, Sam could be a real pain in the ass.

"Shut up."

Sam smiled to himself and pretended not to watch his brother take the walk of shame.

Unsurprisingly, he didn't find her by the bathroom. She was standing by the old-fashioned juke box in the corner, flipping through each song absently. He knew she noticed him come up behind her, but she didn't acknowledge him. Instead she fished fifty cents out of the wallet in the back pocket of her jeans and pressed a button. Soon, the strains of familiar power chords filled the small diner.

"I've made a lot of bad moves"

It took all he had not to laugh when she turned around with a knowing smirk.

"I know you could walk away, but you never do"

"Just admit that you liked it."

He looked down for a moment, not quite being able to fight a smile. When he looked up he was straight-faced, save for the way his eyes were dancing.
"Don't tell Sam."

"Deal."

They did return to Sam at their table, allowing everyone to finish eating in peace without reference to the past ten minutes. But considering they had another five hours to wait, Sam made his way over to the bar to order them some drinks. Just one each though. It wouldn't do well to get shitfaced on the job, especially one this important.

"So tell me something," Elena began, reaching across the table to steal one of Dean's leftover fries. "How did you know Vick was holding back from me?"

"What do you mean?" Dean hedged, and he was almost successful in coming off honest.

"It was like your Spidey-sense was tingling or something," she said around a mouthful of fry, "My dad's known him for years, why would he lie to me?"

"That's kind of the problem."

"How do you mean?"

Dean toyed with the straw in his glass of coke for a moment before answering, this time sincerely.

"I remember what your dad was like. Rode your ass pretty hard, right?"

She scoffed in agreement.

"Never wanted you at the flashpoint of anything, and I understood that. You were still kinda new to the job and he was trying to keep you safe...but if you were going to be a part of the hunt, you have to survive the hard shit," said Dean. Elena stared at him pensively.

"That's pretty much what John said to my dad about it," she said. "I think it was the only reason he let me on the skinwalker chase."

Dean didn't say anything, but his expression told her he already knew that.

"But what does that have to do with now?"

"He might've told Vick not to say anything, so you wouldn't up and follow him," said Dean. Her brows furrowed as he watched her take that in, then contain the following anger it caused.

Then Sam came back with much needed beers, and they had that to occupy the next half an hour.

"I called Bobby last night," said Elena.

"What'd he say?"

"That he should be able to come down tomorrow, and that's if he catches a plane," she said flatly. "Which he probably won't." Clearly she was disappointed, but she tried to pass it off with good-natured sarcasm.

"You told him not to bother, didn't you?" Dean asked knowingly.

"No, but I did tell him the situation. He said he would try to get here as fast as he could."
"Well, it's just us then. But we're used to that," said Sam.

"It's just the endless fucking waiting," Elena said in aggravation, then lowered her voice. "Are we seriously going to sit here all afternoon while my dad is out there? He could be God knows where. Hurt, or…"

She pursed her lips and sat back against her chair, ran a hand through her dark hair.

"Just relax, okay. I know you're frustrated. Believe me, I know how this is," said Sam. "But we're going to find him tonight, no doubt about it. We just need to be patient for a little while longer."

She knew that.

But Patience was a bitch, and Time could go fuck itself.

It was nearly 4:30 when Dean finally agreed to drive by the building where Greenwood worked. It was another hour when the man in question (or at least, who they believed to be based on Vick's descriptions) walked out to his car, swinging his keys around his finger. He wasn't a particularly tall man, but even at their safe distance away, Dean noted the superior way he carried himself as he walked. Physically he was fit, tan and sporting an almost casual business suit and stylish sunglasses.

"This guy already looks like a dick," Dean muttered, but followed the car at a sedate pace, careful not to get too close. They hadn't been driving five minutes when Greenwood pulled into an unfamiliar neighborhood and stopped in front of a small, yellow house. Dean parked a couple streets over, as usual.

"You think this is it?" he asked. "What happened to a cabin in the woods?"

"I don't know. You wanna wait?" said Sam.

"Not really, but you think it's smart to go in now?"

"We technically have the advantage of surprise," Elena pointed out. "And a statistical advantage of three on one."

"Yeah, but he's a witch, so you can't really count that," said Dean. "What will work is a bullet he doesn't see coming."

"So we're going in then," said Sam.

"Yeah, let's get the stuff from the trunk."

Elena whistled lowly when Dean unlocked the arsenal.

"I forgot about this," she said.

"Got all the party favors," he said with a grin and held out a gun for her. He hadn't seen one on her earlier and she hadn't taken one out of her bag. "Here's an extra if you need it."

"It's all right," she said. "I'm not big on guns, remember?"

Sam looked over at her with thinly veiled incredulity, while Dean nodded at the memory. She hadn't told him why, but he remembered her being adamant against touching one unless she had to.

"What?" Sam asked in confusion.
Elena opened her jacket that held two silver knives. Both brothers raised their brows, but neither commented.

The two grabbed knives and guns and loaded them with silver bullets, just to be safe. Normal bullets would kill a witch, but not an aswang.

Once in front of the house, Dean motioned for Sam to find a backdoor entrance while he and Elena took the front. On the silent count of three, Dean burst through the door with Elena hot on his heels. The last he saw was Greenwood standing in the living room, palms outstretched, before his vision faded and nothing else mattered.

Dean blearily woke, groaned at the pain in his head shooting between his eyes. At first he thought something was wrong with them, but then his vision focused more and he realized he was in relative darkness. There were fire-lit torches hanging on the walls that helped illuminate the room, and it looked like the inside of a cave.

_Told you, Sammy._

And then he looked around. He didn't find Sam, but Elena was sitting slumped against the wall next to him with her hands and feet tied with thick rope, like Dean was.

"Lena." She stirred a bit after he said her name a little more persistently. She blinked, frowning down at her tied self before looking over at him.

"Where the hell are we?" she asked.

"Good question," said Dean. But he paused as he saw Elena's eyes widen, filling with hope. He followed her gaze to his left, where a hunched figure leaned against the wall.

"Dad?" she choked out. The man was a mess. Bruises on his face and tattered clothes, and blood streaming from a cut on his hairline and above his left brow.

"Dad," she called more earnestly. With a little difficulty, he raised his head. His gaze met hers and widened in surprise.

"Elena?"

"Hey, Dad," she said with a shaky smile. Jack looked over at Dean, who nodded at him in greeting, then back to his daughter.

"What…what are you doing here?" he asked, then turned to Dean. "Did you bring her here?"

Dean gave him an incredulous look, but Elena beat him to it.

"What the hell are you talking about?" she exclaimed, voicing Dean's thoughts. "We're here because you didn't call in two weeks. Of course I was going to check if something was wrong!"

"You shouldn't have come," he said with a sigh, slowly shaking his head. "…You don't understand —"

"Oh good, you're all awake," said Greenwood, who finally made his appearance. He was still in the suit, and in Dean's opinion, looked like more of a dick up close. "We've been hanging out here, Jack and me. Just chatting."

"What is this, your Batcave?" Dean quipped. "Where the hell are we?"
"Somewhere secluded a couple miles east of the highway. But you knew that already, didn’t you?" said Greenwood. He stood in the middle of the sparsely furnished room with his arms crossed.

"I usually prefer dinner before a man takes me back to his place," Elena sassed. Greenwood raised an amused brow at her.

"Yes, well, do excuse me. I don't believe we've properly met. Maybe that's because you so rudely broke into my girlfriend's apartment and tried to kill me." He gestured behind him with a sweep of his hand, and Elena's eyes widened.

A young woman was tied up similarly to them, unconscious.

"Um…is it just me, or…" Elena trailed, and looked over at Dean. He looked just as weirded out as she was.

She looked slender, fair in complexion with long black hair framing a pretty face.

It was as if a shapeshifter had copied Elena.

But on further inspection, there were a few differences. Even sitting down, she could see this woman was taller with longer legs, and Elena's hair was not as dark, just on the side of brunette.

"Um, if she's your girlfriend, why's she tied up and knocked out?" she asked flatly. Greenwood smiled.

"Well, obviously she's not my real girlfriend. But Rachel here is just what I need: feisty, though you can't really tell right now, resilient, and nearly the spitting image."

"Of who?" asked Dean.

"My Mirah, of course," said Greenwood, with a grandiose gesture of his hands, as if they were supposed to know exactly who he was talking about. After a second, Dean's eyes grew wide.

"You've gotta be kidding me," he deadpanned. "You're summoning a demon."

"Not exactly a demon," said Jack. "Kind of a demon's cousin."

"Who happens to be his undead lover," Elena remarked. "How sickeningly Twilight."

"If that's true, then why'd it take you five tries to summon her?" Dean asked. Greenwood let out a longsuffering sigh.

"I couldn't find the right host. All of their hearts gave out," he said. "Not resilient enough. And this spell is so particular."

Which is why he had to wait twenty-five years to try again. It sounded like this had been a longtime frustration for him.

"So you made them look like suicide, or accidental," Elena surmised.

"Hmm, yes. I'm glad we got all that cleared up, but I have a few things to do before midnight rolls around in," Greenwood checked his watch, "Half an hour. But you all can amuse yourselves in the meantime."

He began walking away, but then turned back as if suddenly remembering something.
"And, um…don't bother trying to get out of those bonds. Magically sealed and all that," he added. "And you're bound to where you sit. But don't worry! I'll be right back."

"Asshole," Dean muttered when the witch finally left the room.

"No kidding," said Elena, but then she pinned Dean with a sharp look. "You knew, didn't you? About the witch wanting a host that fits nearly my exact physical description, thing. And you didn't tell me."

"No, I didn't know," Dean said honestly, but now he felt like an ass now knowing why Jack was glaring at him.

"Are you two happy?" asked Jack in frustration. "Now if he needs a spare sacrifice, he has one."

"Listen, if you would have just told me what was going on, we wouldn't be in this mess," she said, and met her father's glare with her own.

"You and I both know that wouldn't have made a difference," he said sourly. "If anything, it would have gotten you here faster."

"And maybe if I had, we would've had more time to plan a rescue."

"You're too fucking stubborn for your own good, you know that?"

"Right back at you, Dad," she spat. "You know, I'm sick and tired of you trying to control my life while pushing me away at the same time. I'm not a little girl who needs her hand held!"

"That may be true," said Jack, "but like it or not, you're not cut out to be a hunter."

Elena's eyes widened, and she wasn't quite able to mask the hurt quick enough. Dean saw that look, and glared at Jack.

"You've got the skill, even the head for it," Jack clarified, and stared at his daughter with stone-cold sincerity. "But you don't have the stomach for it."

"…If that's true, maybe I'm better off," Elena said evenly. "I'd hate to end up like you."

Jack pursed his lips, his jaw clenching in anger.

"Look, stop it, all right?" Dean said firmly, his voice boding no argument. "We need to concentrate here. I don't know where Sam is, but we've only got a little bit of time to figure out what we're going to do."

Sam had reached the back of the house, but turned quick when he heard his brother's shout of alarm. Around the corner he saw a flash of white, and cautiously made his way toward the side window. The curtains were peeled back enough so he could see into the living room. It was a small, but homely place with frames on the walls and, among other furnishings, shelves and a couch. A young woman lay unconscious on it, her arm hanging off the side.

On the verge of what he could see, Sam saw his brother and Elena on the floor, also unconscious, with a man staring down at them pensively. And then, with a flick of his hand, their bodies raised from the ground and floated through the front door, followed closely by who Sam could pretty much assume was Greenwood.

He silently retraced his steps to the back of the house and watched from a safe distance as
Greenwood packed the two hunters and the woman into an SUV, first tying their hands and feet together before shutting the doors and climbing into the driver's side himself.

Sam sighed.

Dean would kill him for hot-wiring the Impala, but without the keys, he was shit out of luck.

"W-What…what am I doing here?" croaked a scared voice. The three of them turned to the young woman, now awake, but wide-eyed and confused. "What the hell?"

"You're Rachel, right?" Elena asked gently. The other woman nodded.

"Nick…he knocked me out," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "Where are we?"

"We're somewhere east of the city," said Dean, "Don't worry though. We're getting out of here."

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that," said an annoyingly familiar voice. When Greenwood stepped out from a doorway back into the room, he was met by four similar glares. "Wow, tough room."

"You're a sick bastard!" Rachel shouted and stood up as well as she could with her ankles tied together, but was unable to move forward more than a step before an invisible force stopped her. Her face was the picture of utter confusion as desperate tears began to stream down her face.

"Yeah, yeah. Sit down and shut up." With a wave of a hand Rachel was forcibly sat on the ground against the far wall. She still glared at him angrily, but gave up on shouting expletives.

In his hands he held two bowls filled with ingredients that he began strategically placing in the center of the room. Dean recognized most of it as seriously bad hoodoo. Eventually, Greenwood stopped to admire his handiwork, then looked down at his watch.

Midnight.

"Right on time." He turned behind him to grin at Rachel. "Your turn to shine, sweetheart."

"Don't!" Dean shouted, but Greenwood ignored him completely. He dragged Rachel, literally kicking and screaming to the center of the room and forced her into a kneeling position.

Where the hell are you, Sammy? Dean thought furiously.

"Goddamn it!"

Sam slapped the wheel in frustration. That was the third SUV that disappeared right before his eyes, just as he was getting close to it. The witch had placed trigger-spells on his trigger-spells to make sure he wasn't being followed, which meant Sam was already halfway out of the city going north, and now no closer to finding his brother.

Unless…

Shit…I'm an idiot.

He stopped on the side of the road and pulled out his phone, and after dialing in a couple different codes, he successfully activated a GPS map and location of where Dean's phone was heading.

Fifteen minutes southwest.
Sam sighed, locked the car into drive, and pulled an immediate u-turn.

Greenwood stretched out his hand and began the incantation in Latin, and the farther he got the more Rachel began to shake. Her tears fell and dried, and then her eyes opened wide as Greenwood's voice grew louder. From the contents of the bowl, now ash as a result of the spell, rose a plume of red smoke. It coiled through the air for a moment until entering Rachel's mouth.

She slumped forward and Greenwood caught her, removing the magic seal on her binds then ripping them off with a knife. He cupped Rachel's face in his hands and brushed the hair away from her face. After a few seconds, her eyes slid open, her mouth curving into a soft smile.

"My love?" Greenwood whispered reverently. Her hand came to rest over his left.

"Yes." Already her voice was different from the scared young woman she was before. It was deeper, calculated and smooth as silk. "You've saved me."

"Did you ever doubt that I would?" Greenwood said with a tender smile. "My Mirah." Dean rolled his eyes as the two shared a passionate kiss. This was why he steered clear of soap operas and chick flicks.

"Ugh, if you're gunna use tongue get your own room," he said, attracting the monster's attention. For that was what it was now. Rachel may still be buried down there, but Sam was the one who had the copy of the banishing recitation.

"And who is this?" Her voice was as velvet smooth as her movements as she rose to a stand with Greenwood unnecessarily assisting her. Her eyes fell on each captive. "Are these for me?"

"Dean Winchester, according to his wallet," said her lover. Dean glared. "And yes, if you want them."

"You took my weapons and pickpocketed me?"

"Winchester," Mirah said pensively. "I know that name."

After a moment, a slow smile graced her features.

"Ah…I remember now. Your dad is a famous one in the pit."

Dean stiffened, but outwardly didn't allow himself to react to her words.

"Yes, you're the family that tried so hard to kill Azazel," she said. "Too bad it didn't quite work out like you hoped, huh?"

Dean remained silent, but his cold look spoke for itself.

"Hmm, I don't have to read you to know about your little family hardships. Practically every demon in hell knows about the Winchesters," she said, a mischievous glint in her eye. "But then again, I'm not really considered part of the family."

"Why's that, if you're supposed to be so special," Jack interrupted. It was his attempt to stall for time; the creature's entertainment wouldn't last much longer when she got hungry.

Mirah glanced over at Jack with what was at first disinterest, but the more she looked at him, curiosity grew in her features.
"My, my. You look half dead already." She sent Greenwood an amused glance. He shrugged.

"I was bored," he said casually. "He thought he could sneak up on me."

Mirah sighed, then finally addressed Jack's question.

"If you must know, my kind are of demons. The name your language gave us is...strange and tacky, if you ask me. But your folklore has most of its facts correct," she said absently.

"Sounds like you're just B-list entertainment for Hell," Elena interjected. Jack sent her a warning look, but it was too late.

"Well, you're rude," said Mirah, her mouth curving in a smirk. "Was this supposed to be an alternate vessel, Nickolas?"

"No. She came along with that one," said Greenwood, gesturing over at Dean. Mirah drew nearer to Elena with an inquisitive gaze.

"Hmm, I like the body I have on better. It's taller, more athletic. This one is paler." Sharp blue eyes met piercing gray.

"What, shopping for eyes?" Elena snapped. Mirah's smirk deepened.

"Sure, want to trade?" She grabbed Elena's face with one hand, nails biting into her cheeks. "Or I can just take them."

"Stay away from her!"

Mirah tilted her head to the side and gave Jack a cursory glance. She turned back to Elena, and something clicked in her mind.

"Ah, I see we have a family reunion here." She looked over at Jack. "Was this supposed to be your rescue party?"

Jack's furious glare was answer enough. To both his and Dean's relief, she let go of Elena and backed away slightly.

"And what are you?" she asked Dean.

"What's it matter to you?"

"Wait, wait...don't you have a brother?"

"He didn't come."

"I highly doubt that."

"Believe what you want, but I left him five states over."

"If he's here, we won't have to worry about him. I spelled my truck," Greenwood chimed in. "Gave whoever tried to tail me something to keep them going for a while."

Dean only barely reacted, but Mirah caught it and laughed.

"It's adorable sometimes, humanity."
"Shouldn't you take offence to that?" Elena asked Greenwood, who so far had done nothing but stand leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

"Why should I? It's not me she's referring to."

Mirah looked over at Elena, something passing through her expression that Elena couldn't name.

"You're a curious one."

"Must be my magnetic charm," she quipped.

"More like an inflated sense of self."

"Oh bite me," Elena said with a roll of her eyes. At a speed she couldn't follow, Mirah appeared crouched in front of her, wearing a smirk that curved wickedly.

"This won't hurt much."

She gripped Elena's face firmly under her chin toward her jaw line, and both their eyes closed as the creature stole the information she sought. The force of the invasion took Elena by surprise, but Mirah's grip kept her from being able to struggle much. Elena wanted to shudder at the feeling of inky claws probing through her mind, and a small, strangled whimper escaped her at the strain of it. Distantly she thought she heard her father's angry shouting, and while Mirah ignored him, after a few seconds she let go and stepped back. There's was a contemptuous smile on her face when she looked down at Elena.

Mirah shuddered slightly. "It's like swimming through mud in there."

Elena was still trying to breathe easier, but she managed out, "No one asked you to come barging in, fucking bitch."

"You okay?" Dean asked, and she saw the concern in his eyes, as well as Jack's.

"M' fine." Mirah laughed at that.

"Oh, my dear. That's actually almost funny," she said, and crouched in front of Elena, peering deeply into her eyes. She spoke softly, but her voice was ice and poison. "I see now. I see a small, pathetic child, still clinging to a shadow of a memory of a happy life. Of a family. But we both know that ended a long time ago. When you killed Jamie."

Elena froze.

"…You bitch," Jack cursed lowly, leaving Dean to stare at Elena in confusion. He saw the way her expression remained blank, other than her jaw clenching and her eyes turning hard, versus Mirah's devious smirk. It was almost like looking at a dual reflection, with one side fractured and wrong.

"Don't tell me you don't remember," Mirah cooed, and wrapped a strand of Elena's hair around her finger. "No one likes a liar."

"That's not what happened," Elena said, the tremor in her voice the true indication of how the creature's words were affecting her. Mirah smiled in response and let the coil of hair fall against Elena's cheek.

"Let it happen. Pull the trigger." She straightened and stepped away with a shrug. "Same thing."

"That's not what happened." Mirah spun on her heel and gave a cold sneer.
"Then what did happen?"

Elena's eyes grew distant, haunted. Dean felt helpless. *Where the hell was Sam?*

"Lena," he called, but if she heard him she didn't acknowledge him.

"It was an accident," she said coarsely.

"You were supposed to be watching him," the creature pointed out, and crossed her arms.

"It was only three minutes—"

"Three minutes too many," Mirah taunted. "Enough for him to find Daddy's gun and give it a whirl."

Dean watched as frustrated tears spilled down Elena's cheeks, and he looked over at Jack, who he thought was being too damn quiet. He was almost angry at the man for not even trying to stick up for his daughter, but his eyes were clouded with an old pain, and guilt.

*Which explains her thing about guns*, he thought.

Dean didn't have the time to think about that, though, and bristled when the creature grabbed a fistful of Elena's hair and yanked her head back against the wall, ignoring the grunt of pain it elicited from her.

"You were the older sister, Lena," she reminded. "You were supposed to protect him, watch out for him, save him."

"...I tried," Elena said, her voice cracking. The tears fell freely now, but she refused to give into the hopelessness she felt. Sam was still out there somewhere. There was still time for him to find them.

"Don't you see?" Mirah shook her head. "Try isn't good enough. It's weak, and always too, too late...right, Dean?"

Now he really wanted to stab this bitch in the face.

"Go fuck yourself."

"Ooh, testy," she teased. "But the truth is, you know all about that don't you? It wasn't enough that you failed your dad, but Sam too?"

Dean felt Elena's eyes on him, but he avoided meeting her stare, even as Mirah invaded his personal space.

"And you just couldn't take it," she said, and her voice was incredulous, as if she was marveled by humanity. "That's why your head is on the chopping block now, right?"

"My God, do you ever stop fucking talking?" said Dean. He'd had enough of the demon-psychoanalysis they liked to throw around at the drop of a dime. All it did was waste time, and severely piss him off.

Mirah rolled her eyes and looked back at Nickolas with a questioning look. He shrugged and stepped out from the background to stand beside her.

"Hmm, well," she said, "Perhaps that's all the entertainment I can scrounge from you. I've never been one for fast food, but—"
And then everything happened at once.

A single gunshot rang through the air before the intruder was caught, his gun falling out of his hands and sliding across the ground.

"Sam!" Dean called out, though there wasn't much he could do but stand up, with Mirah standing a foot in front of him. Nickolas pinned the younger Winchester with the raise of his hand and began choking him, but the witch soon slid to the floor as two out of three bullets embedded themselves into his back. Mirah cried in outrage at seeing her lover lying dead in a pool of his own blood, and whipped around to face the culprit.

Elena would have pulled the trigger again, but the other woman moved with inhuman speed and knocked the gun out of her still bound hands. Her eyes widened and she tensed, waiting for the finishing blow.

But the creature spun around, catching the knife headed toward her neck by the hand that held it and twisted, eliciting a sharp yell. Her other hand closed around his throat.

"Dad!" Elena shouted, but couldn't move very well with the way she was bound around her ankles, nor would she with Mirah holding Jack as a human shield against Sam and Dean, who'd by now freed himself from his bonds with Sam's help. Mirah's eyes were wild as tears trailed down her face, but she laughed like the demon she was.

"You know what's so utterly satisfying about this?" she asked Elena. Everyone stared, waiting for the moment to end the stalemate. "I don't have to kill him."

Elena couldn't beat down the flutter of hope that swelled in her chest.

"You already feel like an orphan."

Jack's eyes widened, surprise and hurt piercing the mask of his features, then understanding, and guilt.

"But I will anyway."

Mirah let go of him, but stabbed her arm all the way through Jack's middle, then yanked it back out. Elena screamed, Jack gasped a bit for air and fell to his knees before his daughter.

Sam and Dean pumped the creature's body full of silver bullets before she could come near them, but both knew it wasn't enough. Elena had sunk to her knees, and her clothes became more and more soaked with blood as she tried to hold her father and support his torso to try and get some air into his lungs. It wasn't any use. But unlike the movies, there were no famous last words.

There was no last minute apology. For either of them.

There were only three dead bodies, and Elena sobbing on the floor, covered in blood that wasn't her own. After a few seconds, Dean put his gun away and knelt down next to her. She stiffened when he touched her shoulder, but she let him pry her hands away from Jack's body, then let her cling to him and stain his own shirt red after he cut the ropes from her wrists and ankles. He didn't hold her any less tightly.

Sam came on her other side, squeezing her shoulder in support. They stayed where they were until her tears subsided, until she was spent. Then Dean slid his hand out of her hair that had tumbled out of its braid, and leaned back just enough to see her face.
"Let's get out of here."

They burnt Rachel and Nickolas Greenwood's bodies and everything in the cave. They gave Jack Hayes a hunter's funeral, burning his body amongst the hills and sparse trees of Utah. Sam and Dean allowed Elena some time to herself by the fire as they put away their weapons into the Impala.

"Tell me something, Sam," said Dean. "Where were you?"

"He sent me on a wild goose chase, Dean. I followed his car for miles around town before I finally caught up with it," Sam said tiredly. "It was an illusion spell to keep me off his tail."

"How did you find us then?" Dean asked after a moment. Sam scratched the back of his head.

"Well…when that didn't work, I tried the GPS on your phone. Greenwood must've forgotten to turn it off."

"Lucky it fell out of my pocket in the car." But Dean didn't feel very lucky. "We should probably head out, get our stuff out of the motel. I gotta call Bobby…could you go get her?"

Sam nodded and looked over at the woman standing with her head bowed, arms wrapped around herself. A conflicted look passed over his face for a moment, before he started walking over to her.

He made sure to let gravel crunch under his foot so he wouldn't take her off guard, and hesitantly stepped next to her.

"Are we going?" Her voice was coarse and small.

"Only if you're ready," Sam said gently. Something twisted in his gut, rose up his chest and into his throat.

*If I'd just figured out he was playing me sooner…*

"I'm sorry, Lena."

*Sorry I wasn't able to save him. Sorry you have to get on in life like the rest of us.*

"Sam, how do you walk away?"

He paused, confused. She caught the look out of the corner of her eye.

"How did you walk away when...when you were standing here?"

Then he realized what she meant; when it wasn't Jack Hayes slowly turning to ash.

He simply held out his hand, palm facing up, near her elbow. Elena's gaze turned downward, allowing a tear to escape her eye.

Eventually, she placed a shaking hand into his strong one, and he led her back to the car.
"There's a feeling that's gone
Something has gone wrong
And I don't know how much longer I can take it
House made of heart break it
Take my head in your hands and shake it."

REM, "Near Wild Heaven"

IV: Departure

It was a long drive back to Hill City. Sam was relieved to see Elena had dozed off in the backseat to the lull of a slower REM song on one of many mixed tapes collected in the Impala. He noticed how Dean skipped over the heavier rock tracks.

Sam saw the immediate change in his brother once there was someone who was hurting; he returned to the person he was before making the deal. As per Dean's nature, he was a fixer. And Sam could see him trying to mend the situation the best he knew how. By picking up pieces and propping up a fallen hunter, and by taking her home, where the only family she had left would be waiting. Sam had they stay in Cedar City for at least the morning to let her sleep a few hours comfortably, but she'd declined, preferring to just get on the road to home.

So they checked out and hit the highway by morning. The three of them cleaned up the research in Jack's old room and Elena put his duffel bag in the back of the Impala, saying she'd go through later. Both brothers knew she probably wouldn't.

"Dean?" Sam said quietly. He didn't want to disturb her moment of peace either.

"Hmm."

"When we get to Hill City…"

Dean spared him a cursory glance.

"We leave her with Bobby."

Sam hesitated. It felt kind of wrong to just dump her on her front porch and drive off.

"Look, Bobby will take care of her a hell of a lot better than we could," Dean assured, guessing at Sam's thoughts by the look on his face. He could read Sam well enough by now, especially when he sighed that way.

It reminded him of the time their dad accidentally nicked a stray cat with the car, and an eight-year-old Sam was determined to fix the mangy thing's broken leg, or at least take it to an animal hospital. Even then, it had been a battle of wills between him and John, but eventually the man caved and drove to the nearest animal shelter that took care of the cat.

It didn't make it through the night, and Dean had to be the one to tell his little brother that he'd tried, and that was all he could've done.

She woke to Dean's gruff voice telling her they were here, at her house. In her driveway in front of a
small, white house so nondescript it almost didn't warrant description. Save for the arch over the walkway that Jack had built years ago at her mom's insistence, because she'd seen it in a catalog and thought it would add a bit of appeal to the front yard. The grass that had once been kept trim was now getting a bit wild, the stone path from the driveway cracked in places.

It took every screech of energy she had to keep herself blank, calm, outwardly numb. But every step she took toward the door, to this house, to the small life she'd tried to attain for herself was another she wanted to back away and run for miles. But Sam and Dean were only a few feet away. They would stop her.

Elena forced herself to unlock the door and step inside. Her eyes took inventory of the place. The couch and TV in the living room with shelves of books, movies, and CDs, the kitchen toward the back, and the beginning of the hallway to the left where three bedrooms were once occupied. One had been converted to an office, the second remained Elena's.

Like the rest of the house, the third—the master bedroom—was empty. Always would be, now.

"Lena?" His voice reminded her of who was waiting behind her, and of who wasn't. Who would never be coming home.

She didn't realize she was crying until a heavy hand gripped her shoulder, and she looked up into green eyes that understood; that knew her hold on her emotions was much more tenuous than she'd tricked herself into believing. Dean let her lean forward onto his chest, cling to his shirt with fisted hands as her body shook. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. It was the second time she'd done this to him in two days, and she wondered if he was sick of her yet.

But if he was, Dean didn't say anything about it, just led her to her room and into her bed, Sam following close behind with her forgotten duffel. She didn't even bother changing, but did kick her shoes off. Sam left her bag by the door just in case.

"You too probably have to get going now," she said in a small voice, bringing the covers closer to her chin as she curled further into herself. The brothers looked to one another, understanding passing between the two.

"Not if you don't want us to," said Dean. "Not until Bobby gets here."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, it's no problem."

"Okay," she nodded, gratitude in her eyes.

"I can order some Chinese," Sam offered. Elena told him where the menu brochure was, but her expression said she was clearly not interested in food. Dean nodded in appreciation. It had been a long two days, and they hadn't eaten since the diner.

"Get me some eggrolls," said Dean. "Don't forget my eggrolls like you do my pie."

"Yeah, yeah." Sam rolled his eyes but nodded. There was a small smile on his face, even as he left the room.

"Right," Dean slid his hands into his pockets. "You get some rest. Come out if you get hungry, or feel like watching a movie or whatever."

He gave her a parting smile and turned towards the door. She stopped him at the doorway.
"Dean?" He turned back to her.

"Yeah?"

This had been bothering her for a while, but she hadn't really had the chance (or the guts) to ask.

"What the demon said…about your life being on the line?"

Dean stilled. After a few seconds he sighed and went back over to the bed, sitting on its edge near her feet.

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

He explained Azazel, who John had been tracking since his mom died. He explained the demon trying to recruit Sam as part of some kind of army, kidnapped him, and summarized in the briefest detail how he'd ended up being literally stabbed in the back. It had killed Dean. So he made the crossroads deal, and only got a year. Well, a little over two months now.

"So now we're looking for a way out of it…hasn't been going so well," Dean admitted with a weary chuckle. Her expression was saddened, concerned.

"Can I help you?" she asked, sitting up a bit. "At all?"

He waved her off and shook his head.

"Don't worry about it. Sam and I are working on it. You just chill here, unless you want some company."

He got up and headed for the door. Her voice stopped him yet again.

"Dean?"

"Yeah, Lena."

"…Thanks." Her mouth tried to form a smile, but wasn't quite there. He returned it anyway.

"Anytime."

"She's got some good stuff here," said Dean, eyes skimming her extensive DVD collection. He pulled one out and grinned over at Sam. "Here, Sammy, you can see the dinosaurs."

"We're not watching Jurassic Park, Dean."

"Aw, come on," he teased. "You used to love this as a kid." Though he didn't actually want to see those fake-ass robot-looking things, he might've watched it just for Samuel L. Jackson being his usual badass self.

"All right, what about something more your speed?" He held up Pride & Prejudice, to which Sam rolled his eyes. "A little Mr. Darcy to get you through the night?"

"Just pick a movie, Dean." Then as an afterthought, he added, "Nothing too loud. Don't wanna wake her up."
Dean's grin faded at that.

"Yeah."

So that meant no action or horror (not that he would seriously want to watch a horror movie), and definitely no rom-coms. Eventually Dean put on Tommy Boy, the 1995 comedy. He remembered watching it as a teenager while at Bobby’s for those few days John had been on the wendigo hunt. He remembered that had been one of the few things to make Elena laugh and get Sam out of his brooding.

It was fifteen minutes in before the delivery guy came with the food, and Sam came back into the living room holding up a small white bag from the tray.

"Your precious eggrolls," he said, and set down the tray on the coffee table in front of the couch. "Think we should ask Elena if she wants something?"

Dean paused the movie and glanced over at the dark hallway.

"Yeah, she needs to eat somethin' too."

"All right, I'll make her a plate. You can take it up there if you want." Dean looked over at his brother suspiciously. He didn't like the seemingly innocuous smile on Sam's face as he started opening cartons.

"What the hell is that?" Dean asked. Sam gave him a look of innocent confusion.

"What?"

"That face," said Dean, his tone boding no bullshit runaround.

"Nothing, Dean." Still with that stupid smile.

"Don't try to bullshit me. I taught you that," he said, but still got up to find some plates and utensils. And get himself a beer.

"Nothin'. I can tell you like her, that's all." Sam's tone irked him, so casual and sure of himself.

"You're kidding, right?"

It was entertaining for Sam to watch Dean flounder for once—actually kind of surprising, with how sure of himself Dean usually was when it came to women. It was also a little payback for all the heckling and not so subtle nudging when he met Sarah Blake.

So Sam shrugged with a grin and scooped some rice onto the plate.

"You mean to tell me you don't?" Dean asked. "I heard you two that night. Before I walked in you were being pretty chummy."

"Yeah, she's cool," Sam acknowledged. "But you know that's not what I meant."

Dean did, but he didn't have to like what his little brother was insinuating. Despite what Jack had thought, Elena was a good hunter. She had a refreshing personality after months of watching back and forth arguments between his dad and his brother. More than that, she had been someone he was able to talk to, if only briefly, about Sam leaving for Stanford and understood both sides of it. She hadn't judged him or his family. Just listened.
Dean shook his head and set the plates down on the coffee table. "Now's not the time, Sammy."

That surprised Sam, hearing that come out of his brother's mouth, but he conceded with a nod. It really wasn't the time, with what happened. Dean hadn't denied it, though.

It was nearly nightfall by now, so it was pretty dark when he walked into her room. Elena hadn't moved from where she lay on her side, hands tucked under her head with the covers drawn nearly to her chin. He chanced the possibility of her yelling at him and turned on a lamp, illuminating the room and her peacefully sleeping face.

Dean set the plate down on the white desk by her bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress. He lightly shook her shoulder.

"Elena." She stirred and clenched her eyes shut at the light, but eventually she shifted onto her back and blinked sleepily at him. It made him smile a little.

"Hey, brought you dinner." He nodded over at the plate on her desk. She frowned.

"'M not hungry." Her voice was gravelly with sleep.

"You will be once you take a couple bites, come on." He gestured for her to get up, but she stubbornly clung to the bed sheets. "We're watching Tommy Boy."

She paused and gave him a sideways look.

"How far are you?" she asked.

"Not far, like twenty minutes in." He flashed another smile and grabbed the plate. "Look, I gave you one of my eggrolls."

Her mouth twitched into a small smirk.

"How generous of you," she remarked. He nodded like it seriously was, which made her smile a bit more genuine, if a bit tired. She pushed the covers away from her body and shivered from the sudden chill that made as she sat up next to him.

"You know…it makes sense why Bobby sent you guys instead of coming himself," she said. He quirked a brow. "Besides the fact that he was working a job."

"You think?"

She sighed.

"Yeah…you could say he and my dad had a falling out. It's why Bobby and I aren't particularly close."

"How so?"

"Well, if you know how Bobby got into hunting, then you know that too." Dean remembered that Dream Root-induced nightmare all too vividly. But that didn't explain—

Wait…

"I was really young when Aunt Karen died, so I don't remember her much," said Elena. "But I do remember she was warm, and was really good at baking…after that, Dad started going on extended
business trips."

When in reality, he had started researching what Bobby had claimed was possessing Karen. He had to record the incident as self-defense on Bobby's part after hearing (and eventually believing) his story, but he hadn't forgiven him for killing his sister. He learned the truth from a hunter, Rufus Turner, who had been working the case and identified it as a demon.

"He dropped me off with Bobby a few months later, just because he had no one else that he trusted to take the proper precautions," she said. It was the first hunt he was going on after retiring early, and he didn't want to leave her by herself, unprotected and still unable to drive at fourteen years old.

"You think he didn't want to see Jack?" Dean asked.

"More like Dad didn't want to see Bobby," she said with a sigh, then more wryly, "Doesn't matter now, though, does it?"

Dean shook his head, but instead of answering her question, said, "Sam's probably started without us. Come on."

He then pulled away and handed the plate to her when they stood, and the two went over to the living room where Sam was waiting to un-pause the movie.

"Bout time," he said with a welcoming smile to her. Elena returned it and sat in the middle of the couch, leaving Dean to fill in the other side. It wasn't long before the food was long gone, fortune cookies read, and the movie made all of them relax. It was the deer busting through Richard's car that finally made Elena laugh, just like the first time. Especially when she leaned over to Dean and said, "What if that was the Impala?"

Dean was not amused.

"Betcha it took a shit in there too."

"You shut your mouth."

But he got her to agree on another movie after that had finished: the copy of *Iron Man* she bootlegged with surprisingly good quality. Nice and action-packed for the boys, and some eye candy for her with Robert Downey Jr.

Eventually though, worn out from the long drive and nearly twenty-four hours without sleep, the brothers were sound asleep against their respective ends of the couch. As the credits rolled, Elena grabbed the blanket folded behind her head for times such as these, and made it stretch the length of the couch. It covered all three of them as she nestled in the middle, closed her eyes and allowed the sounds of their light snoring lull her to sleep.

Bobby's hug was warm. Like her father's used to be when she was a kid. A tear escaped her eye before she could stop it, but she let herself be comforted by, essentially, the only family she had left.

When he pulled away it was only a little awkward, but he didn't say no to an offer of a beer as the four of them made their way to the kitchen.

"You have like, an endless supply in here," Dean commented, a note of jealousy in his tone.

"Remember that job I told you about?" she quipped.
"It can't pay that well." She smiled a little and sat down at the dining table.

"So...how've you been, Elena?" asked Bobby. The question seemed to make the air suddenly tense, but eventually she shrugged casually.

"Okay...considering. I've been taken care of," she said, aiming a small smile at Sam and Dean. They returned it, and Sam took a seat next to her.

"I'm real sorry I...couldn't make it out here in time."

"...It's okay, Bobby. You sent your best," she said eventually. "I wouldn't be alive right now if it wasn't for them."

"They're good," Bobby agreed, but before Dean could get a word in he said, "Don't go getting a big head. Got enough ego weighing down your shoulders."

"Thanks, Bobby," Dean mocked and sipped his beer. The older hunter rolled his eyes.

"Anyway...I don't think I've ever seen this place," he said tentatively, adjusting his baseball cap. "It's nice." It had been years since he came for a visit, before Elena's family moved to Hill City. Since before Karen died.

"Yeah...same stuff, different place, I guess," she said, a little bitterness coloring her tone. Not directed toward Bobby, just in general. The house was fully furnished with things a family should own; pictures, knickknacks, books, and everything else that made up a home. But it was also void of the one thing it needed. Life.

"Well, how about some burgers?" Dean suggested. "I think I saw some meat in the fridge."

As it went, Elena wasn't a bad cook. She sucked at almost anything else domestic, like cleaning (hence the dust on any furniture that wasn't used daily) and gardening (weeds and grass growing wild in the yard). She couldn't really count herself as hospitable since she hadn't had to take care of anyone but herself, and not many people came over.

But cooking, she could do. It wasn't too hard for her to follow recipes, and she'd had to pick up the skill pretty early on if she wanted meals to be edible and not fast food all the time.

The guys seemed to enjoy it well enough, besides Dean's good-natured teasing about his being burnt. She could tell by the way they didn't talk much, just devoured the small stack of patties and buns and cheese and ketchup, but sadly for her, no pickles.

"If you like them so much why don't you have any?" said Dean around a rather large mouthful of beef patty. Her face and Sam's expressed the same disgust, but she replied,

"I ran out. Didn't exactly have time for a grocery stop before you two got here."

"Doesn't need it," said Bobby. He and Dean were on their third burger, while she was still on her first. She glanced over at Sam and noted he'd eaten just as much as the other two, but was better at disguising it. Maybe he just had better table manners.

But Bobby stayed the night. The next morning he said he was going to Cedar City, Utah to pay his respects at Jack Hayes' grave, and that threw the Winchesters for a loop. With Bobby and Elena talking in the kitchen, the brothers stole to the living room.
"I thought he would stay a little longer. Make sure she was okay," Dean said. Sam looked over at Elena, talking calmly and even smiling a little here and there.

"Well...she looks like she's holding up all right," he said. "And I've already found us a case in Wisconsin. Possible vengeful spirit."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Dean said after a moment. They had already stayed too long as it was, and she had things to get to—a job and friends here in the city. The longer they stayed, the more she would be reminded of Jack. "We're just holding up her life here."

Sam saw the bit of disappointment in his brother's eyes, even if to anyone else his expression would seem blank.

But Elena walked Bobby to the door, thanked him again for coming to see her and for sending her help when she called.

"I just wished I coulda done more," he said, and after a brief nod, "...You know you can always call me."

She nodded, the corner of her mouth lifting. He gave a flicker of a smile.

"Take care of yourself. You too, boys...you know where I'll be, if you need anything."

The three of them watched his car pull out of the driveway and down the road. Dean was the one to reluctantly break the silence.

"We should be heading out too, Lena." She looked up at him with a sort of resigned look, though he could see she didn't really want to see them go.

"Yeah, I figured as much."

They went back inside to grab their bags and Elena made them some sandwiches for the ride.

"Something not flash-fried in grease," she teased, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"We'll keep in touch," Sam promised, and her smile turned a bit more sincere.

"You better," she said, and he gave her a warm hug. When she pulled away and looked over at Dean, she could smile a bit more, despite this being goodbye for now. The hug he gave her was tight and just as warm as his brother's, and unlike before when she was blinded by grief, she could actually enjoy it.

"Thanks, Dean," she whispered in his ear.

"No need," he said, and finally pulled away.

He and Sam walked out the door, and it felt like they were taking something with them.

It took her all of five seconds to run out after them, nearly knocking into Dean who had barely cleared the steps of the porch.

"Whoa, whoa, what's the matter?" he asked in alarm, steadying her by grabbing her arms.

"Do you need a hand out there?"
"…What?"

"Can I come with you?" she rephrased. Dean let go of her once he thought she was set on her feet. After a few seconds of staring at her hopeful expression, he sighed.

"Let's talk inside."

"Lena, you've got a whole life here," said Sam. "To be honest, there was a time where I would've been jealous of that. You've got a job, coworkers, friends, a house. You want to give it up to hunt?"

Elena's mouth twitched into a melancholy smile.

"Sam…" She shook her head and sighed. "I only took that position at the museum so I could stay in Hill City…so my dad would have somewhere to come back to."

Now I'm more alone here than ever, she thought.

It was as Sam thought. She'd never really liked it, even if it paid the bills. She only came here because Jack kept pushing her away from working with him. He looked over at Dean, who sat on the edge of the couch's arm, arms crossed with a pensive look.

"Even if you do want to hunt," said Dean, "It shouldn't be with us."

Sam and Elena gave him a confused look.

"We don't attract the nicest of people…or things," he explained, and understanding lit Sam's expression. "You'd be better off going with someone like Bobby."

"Come on, Dean. We've hunted together before," she said.

"It's not like how it used to be…look, Lena, you've been through a lot," he said, and looked into her eyes, a bit sad and confused. His were serious, and honest. They were in some deep shit right now, and she was out of practice. "Back in Cedar City, I promised we would have your back, and we almost got you killed…I'm not doing it again."

The silence was tense, but Elena looked up at Dean with honest eyes, revealing the vulnerability there.

"Everything about this house…is a memory. Everything about this town…" She stopped herself and forced a sigh, collecting herself. "It was me trying to hold onto something that just wasn't there. And I still want to help you break your deal, Dean. Especially after everything you two did to help me."

The mention of his deal made Sam look over at Dean in surprise that he actually told her about it, but Dean ignored him for now.

"The way I see it," she said, "I owe you."

Dean stared at her for a moment, but eventually said, "I wasn't anglin' for a favor."

"But you've got one anyway."

He breathed a sigh through his nose and crossed his arms in front of him.

"…Fine. But there might come a time when I say you're done. And if I say you're done, I'm taking you back here or to Bobby's. Understand?"
She gave the ghost of a real smile.

"Deal."
Keep on Runnin'

"There was a time some time ago
When every sunrise meant
A sunny day,"

– REO Speedwagon, "In My Dreams"

V: Keep On Runnin'

The place looks deserted, they said. We'll go back tonight when no one will be sniffing around, they said. It'll be a simple salt n' burn, they said. So stop being so pissy, Dean said.

Well Dean Winchester was a fucking liar.

"Whoa…I know you…"

"Yeah, sure you do, let's see some identification."

"Whoa, whoa wait a second…I know you two."

"…Holy shit."

Dean looked over at Sam in question.

"What?"

"Uh…West Texas, the tulpa we had to take out—those two goofballs that almost got us killed—um…hellhounds or something?"

Dean's expression went slack.

"Fuck me."

"Uh, we're not hellhounds anymore, okay?" The scruffy man in front of Elena seemed indignant, but she was looking from Dean to Sam, hoping they would see how confused she was.

"Ed, what's going on?" his blonde friend in the camouflage outfit asked nervously, though he kept filming with a digital video camera the entire time. He looked skittish. It was obvious to her both of them belonged nowhere near this house.

"It's okay, Corbett, they're not really cops," Ed assured him. Then he noticed Elena. "Friend of theirs?"

"You could say that," she said with a sideways glance to the brothers. The corner of Dean's mouth lifted at seeing the exasperation written all over her face.

"Hey, you had a partner didn't you? A different guy," he said, smirking while holding his flashlight. "He around here somewhere?"

"Y-yeah, yeah. Harry's uh, running around. Chasing ghosts." Ed didn't seem as sure of himself as he wanted them to believe.

"Yeah, okay well you and Rambo need to get your little girlfriends and get the hell out of here,"
Dean said smoothly, but Ed just laughed him off and stepped closer, going for nonchalance and confidence.

"Listen here, chisel-chest," Elena had to contain a snort of laughter (Dean ignored her), "Okay, we were here first. We've already set up base camp. We beat you."

Dean looked over at Sam, his face unamused. He raised his brows as if to say, "here that, Sam?"

"They were here first." Sam rolled his eyes. Dean chuckled, then pinned Ed against the wall with enough force to really startle the guy. Elena raised a brow and looked over at Sam, who only shook his head.

"Ed?" Dean had his full attention. "Where's your partner."

Ed was pretty complacent after that, though he still tried to give Dean the runaround. As far as Ed Zeddmore was concerned, this was still his case. Or the Ghostfacers, whatever the hell him and his friends were calling themselves. Elena had put together most of the pieces so far, but she still asked Sam what the fuck was going on. He filled in the gaps of when he and Dean met Ed and Harry, and everything that had gone wrong from then on until the brothers managed to undo their mess.

"Sounds like a bunch of Scooby Doo wannabes," she said to him while Dean grilled Ed for information on why he and his team were at this house, the Morton house, on a leap year. When the reported killings happened.

"You're not wrong," Sam said flatly.

"It's for our TV show," Ed explained, and that made Sam perk up.

"Wait, what?" He let his arm drop to his side in aggravation. "Oh, perfect."

"Yeah, nobody's ever spent the night before," said Corbett, who was still filming.

"Uh, actually yeah they have," Dean pointed out.

"We've never heard of 'em," said Ed.

"No surprise there," Elena muttered. Ed gave her a peeved look, but shifted his attention back to Dean, who was walking towards him.

"And you know why?" Dean asked. "Because the ones who have, never lived to talk about it!"

"Oh, God, I don't believe you." Ed rolled his eyes. Sam went on to explain the missing persons reports that left the found body of Freeman Daggett's body as the most suspicious hard evidence.

"These look legit…"

"These are legit, and starting at twelve midnight your friends are going to die," Sam said seriously, and the effect was only enhanced by the frantic sounds of the rest of the Ghostfacers, Harry, a young woman, and another cameraman running down the stairs and into the room to find Ed. Until they noticed the three hunters.

"Hey…aren't those the assholes from Texas?" Harry exclaimed, then noticed Elena. "Who's she?"

"Yes," Ed answered, and Dean sighed. "She's their friend, but I-uh…what's your name?"
"…Elena," she said eventually with a roll of her eyes.

"All right, let's have this reunion across the street, guys. Come on, come on!" He tried ushering them out, but the Ghostfacers were obstinate, ignoring him in favor of returning to where they had laptops set up to view their footage. "We'll all go for ice cream. My treat, huh? What do you say? Let's go!"

They continued looking at the screens and marveled at what they saw. It was making Elena increasingly frustrated how they had almost no regard for what was actually going on in this dilapidated house.

As it turned out, they hadn't making all that racket out of fear. No, no. They were excited. About a death echo. Those were harmless spirits, just replaying their death on an infinite loop. She followed Sam and Dean away from the team for a moment to actually talk.

"They can't be serious," said Elena. Sam nodded.

"Yeah, I mean, that was just a death echo."

"Yeah, but what's it doing here? Did anybody get shot here?" asked Dean.

"No, not that I could find."

"What's a death echo?" asked one of the cameramen—Spruce, Elena thought she heard Harry call him. Dean shook his head and had to explain what it was to the team, while Sam pointed out that whatever the problem was, a death echo wasn't it. The three of them tried to get the team to pack their stuff and move out as fast as possible, but all at once Ed silenced everyone with a single question.

"Where's Corbett?"

The result was chaos, everyone panicking while Dean tried to stop Ed from leaving the room to go look without a plan. Then they all heard a male scream that resonated throughout the house. The remainder of the team took off up the stairs, despite the hunters' calls to wait, and form a plan. That left them staring up at the open door at the top of the stairs. Elena checked her watch.

10:45PM

"Shit," said Sam. They ran up and followed the boy's screams the best they could, but eventually they died away, leaving all of them looking around without a clue as to where Corbett was taken. The hunters ushered them the best they could down the hall and into another room to regroup, collect themselves, and think strategically. Most of the Ghostfacers were checking on their equipment, charging batteries, all of them in a state of shock, while Sam, Dean and Elena tried to get the front door open.

It wouldn't budge.

"You happy now, Dean?" asked Sam. "Let's go hunt the Morton House,' you said. 'It's our Grand Canyon.'"

Dean sighed and turned away from the door.

"I don't want to hear it."

"Hey, if I remember correctly, you're the only who found the hunt, Sam," Elena interjected, crossing her arms.
"Yeah, well, that doesn't change the fact that Dean only has two months left," he said angrily in his brother's direction. "Instead, we're gunna die tonight."

He picked up a dusty old stool on the floor and tried busting the door open with it. Elena sighed when it was obvious the door wasn't going to open, but the crashing sound alarmed the Ghostfacers.

"Hey, what's going on?" Spruce asked.

"I'll tell you what's going on," Sam began, fully steaming now. "Every door, probably every exit in this house—they're all sealed."

"W-Why are they sealed?" asked the girl, Maggie, if Elena remembered Ed saying.

"It's a supernatural lockdown, okay?" Dean explained. His exasperation was evident. "The thing that took Corbett doesn't want us to leave. And it's no death echo, it's a bad mother and it wants us scared."

"Or…it just wants us," Maggie finished tremulously. The EMF meter began to sound, and that's when Spruce announced that the camera was on the fritz again.

"Everyone stay close, there's something coming," said Sam, and all the computers began spazzing along with the EMF. Then appeared another death echo; a portly man looking around, seemed a bit drunk.

"Is this the same one you guys saw earlier?" Dean asked.

"Uh, no. Different one," said Spruce.

"Multiple death echoes? What the hell is going on?"

"But that doesn't make any sense…" Elena trailed.

"Beats me," said Sam, and as Dean tried to shock the ghost out of its loop, Sam explained to Harry how though it was rare, it was still possible. Unfortunately, the ghost continued on its loop until it was hit by what sounded like an oncoming train.

Dean looked back at them, just as confused and frustrated, if not more, than he was before.

"I just don't get it. There's no records of any of it," he said. "No one got shot here, obviously no one got run over by a freakin' train."

"There's gotta be something tying them here," Elena said, voice lowered over Sam's call of "Stay close!"

"Did the echoes take Corbett?" Maggie asked.

"Yes…no…I don't—we don't know what's doing what here, that's what we're trying to figure out, okay?" said Dean. Again, Sam reminded them all to stay close, and Elena followed him with a growing sense of unease. Multiple death echoes in one place was one thing. But ones that had never lived or died there? That was unheard of. And with these "Ghostfacers" here, this hunt was rapidly turning sideways.

A lot of things had been turning sideways recently.

But she'd called her boss and quit her job, then called her workmate Val, who spent half an hour
grilling Elena for the reason why. She'd lied. Unable to muster up the real reason, she told Val that she would be staying with some family friends for a while, since the family emergency turned into something more extensive that Elena had to take care of. Eventually, Val begrudgingly took her word, and it gave Elena a pang of guilt that she had to lie to the only real friend she'd ever had in the past two years at the museum.

Now she was back in a place that was familiar, yet she still felt out of place and out of practice.

"Seriously, does watching this nightmare through that lens make you feel any better? I mean…" she heard Dean say, and turned around to see Maggie stutter a, "well, yeah," and see Dean shake his head. He caught up to Elena's side and shot her a wry glance. The corner of her mouth kicked upward.

"Simple salt-n-burn, you said?" she teased. He gave her a mocking smile before it vanished into a deadpan look.

They came to what looked to have been a cross between a panic room and a freaky-ass exhibition, with stuffed dead animals on the walls and standing like sculptures. Sam found a certificate of excellence for twenty years of service at Gamble General Hospital, under Freeman Daggett's name.

"So he was a doctor?" asked Dean. Sam inspected the framed paper again.

"Janitor," he corrected.

"This looks like his den," said Dean, peering around with his flashlight in hand. "Did you say he died in '64?"

"Yeah, heart attack."

Elena studied the amount of boxes poorly stacked on a table against the wall, along with large containers covered in dust and cobwebs.

"What are these, C-rations?" she asked.

"Army issued, three squares," Dean replied, glancing at them curiously. "Like a lifetime supply."

"Is that all he ate?" She picked up a can of God-knew what. Probably beans, a million years ago.

"One stop shopping," said Dean.

"Ah hell, guys. This is ridiculous! How the hell is any of this going to find Corbett?" Ed exclaimed, mostly in Dean's direction. "We should be digging up the friggin' floor boards by now!"

"Calm down, we're trying to figure out what took him before we go running in blind," Dean explained, then started breaking the suspicious lock on the refrigerator. Elena held the flashlight so he could utilize both hands.

"Huh," said Sam from where he was crouching on the floor. A pile of papers and records were spread out in front of him. He held an informational booklet that appeared as old as everything else in the house. "'How to Survive an Atomic Attack.' An optimist."

Finally Dean broke the fridge open and pulled out a metal box. He set it on one of the tables they'd cleared and popped it open. There were letters, scattered papers, a book on taxidermy (which explained a lot), and…
"Eww…"

"What?" asked Sam. He and Elena looked over on either side of him.

"We got three toe tags here: one death by a gunshot, train accident, and suicide."

It didn't take long for Sam to piece it together.

"Ewww." Elena looked up at them, confused.

"What—" And then she saw the book on taxidermy, thought of the death echoes, and the obvious hermit behavior of the late janitor and…

"Oh, ick."

"What?" asked Harry.

"Well that explains why all the death echoes were here," said Sam. When the others just blinked at him, he restrained a sigh. "They're here, because they're bodies are here…somewhere in the house."

Dean almost shook his head. With these people, you had to explain things in plain terms they could understand.

"Daggett brought their bodies home from the morgue…to play."

There was a beat of silence, then collective "ewww"s from the other three guys.

"That's nasty man," Spruce added.

"Right," said Sam, and he looked over at Dean, who had a pensive look on his face.

"Wait a minute," said Dean. "Wasn't there a girl with you?"

Ed and Harry looked around.

"My sister, Maggie," said Ed worriedly. "Oh God, where'd she go?"

Dean sighed and gave Sam and Elena a parting look, then stared hard at the former Hellhound ghost hunters.

"Stay. Here."

Elena and Sam looked to one another with mirrored looks of unease.

"I don't like this, Sam."

"Yeah, I know." He felt kind of bad about that. He had been the one to find this hunt, thought it would be something easy to get Elena back into the swing of things after…well, after her being at a steady, normal job for two years where the most she had to worry about was getting there on time and making sure people didn't steal old vases. And after what happened in Utah…she wasn't completely on her feet yet. Even Sam could see that, even if he didn't know her that well.

He and Dean had tested her and made sure she was brushed up on her survival skills as far as hand-to-hand combat, which she thought wasn't really fair, considering how much bigger both of them were compared to her. Dean pointed out that pretty much anything they'd be up against would be bigger than her. She conceded that, after she'd punched him in the kidney.
As it turned out, she was better at slipping out of someone's grasp and using their weight against them than handling any kind of weapon.

And that brought them to guns. When she quietly but firmly refused, Dean didn't push her. It was the closest they came to talking about what Mirah had taunted her with. Sam and Dean had seen her shoot Greenwood in the cave and, from the way she'd handled herself, they could assume she knew how to shoot correctly. But later Dean looked a little angry when he told his brother that he'd caught her with one of his extra hand guns. She'd been stumbling through taking it apart and putting it back together, and slowly but surely emptying the barrels and putting the bullets back in.

It was clear Jack had made sure she knew her way around a gun, even after her brother's death.

Then Sam understood why Dean was angry. It said something about Jack Hayes.

"Found a straggler," Dean announced his presence with Maggie trailing behind him. Both Ed and Harry asked if she was okay, but then the EMF meter started spazzing along with Spruce and Maggie's cameras.

"Whoa, something huge is coming! Ed, look!" Harry said, showing Ed the spiking EMF signal. "It's past eleven, you guys."

"Nobody move!" said Dean, though the whirring sound was beginning to grate on his nerves. Then, all at once, there was nothing at all, and the EMF and the cameras shorting were silent.

"Sam?" said Elena in alarm. He'd been standing right next to her. But her shout alerted Dean.

"Sam?" he said. He searched the whole room with his flashlight, but it was clear Sam wasn't here. Not anymore. "Sam!"

Elena picked up the fallen flashlight and looked up at Dean fearfully. Not for herself, but for Sam.

The next half hour they spent looking for Sam and Corbett throughout the house. Elena felt increasingly guilty with every room she and Dean checked together that came up empty.

"Sammy?" Dean called out. "Where are you, man?"

"He's not in this room," Elena determined after closing a closet.

"You sure you didn't see anything?" Dean asked as they went back into one of many hallways they had crossed. "He was standing right next to you, for fuck's sake."

"Look, I'm sorry. I really didn't see anything," she promised. "I didn't even hear him, with the EMF going off and everything else."

Dean sighed. And then they heard yelling farther down the hall. Not the "I'm in danger, please help," kind of yelling, but the kind of racket people make when there's a fight going on. The two of them rushed into the room and found Ed and Harry wrestling and slapping at each other, while Maggie watched, shouting at them to stop. Spruce was getting it all on camera.

Dean immediately held Elena back by the shoulder and brushed past her to break it up.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he bellowed, sending Harry on one side of the room and Ed on the other. "Cut it out! We're down by two people."

Dean rolled his eyes when the two looked appropriately chastened and walked out the door,
"So Daggett was a Cold War nut, right?" Dean started, flipping through the papers Sam had been scanning through not an hour before. Elena and the remaining Ghostfacers were following his lead, skimming through to find more information they might have missed. "He was an amateur taxidermist, he like to slow dance with cadavers and all the C-rations...so what the hell are we looking for?"

"Horrible little life," Maggie commented.

"A lonely life," said Dean, inspiration striking, "A Cold War life. He was scared."

"Dean?" asked Elena.

"He was scared. He was scared," Dean continued, slamming the papers in his hand down on the table and moving toward the other end of the room.

"Scared of what?" Harry said in exasperation, but Dean took off, out the door and down the stairs. Elena huffed in aggravation and ran after him, and she could hear the others behind her.

"Down here?" she asked when they got to a decrepit wooden door on the first floor of the house.

"Guys like Daggett—back then, the ones who were really scared of the ruskies—they built bomb shelters. I'm guessing he's got one," Dean explained, then wasted no more time in walking through the door. Elena and Spruce followed next, and then the door slammed closed behind them. It made her jump and gasp in surprise.

"Uh, hey, that's not cool," said Spruce. They could hear Ed, Harry and Maggie on the other side of the door just as confused. "What's going on?"

"It wants to separate us," Dean said, climbing back up the stairs. He tested the door and, like he thought, it wouldn't move an inch.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Elena breathed, and he gave her a wry look before getting close to the door. "Inside your duffel bag?"

"Inside the salt, you idiot!"

"Ah! Okay."

"Goddamn it," he muttered and turned away from the door. Elena rolled her eyes.

They made their way down the stairs and through the remains of cobwebbed taxidermy and mildew along the walls. The shotgun filled with rounds of salt was heavy in the waistband of Elena's jeans, but she didn't feel like carrying it when she had her flashlight. Any excuse to ignore its presence was one she took. She only had it on her now because the one thing (of many things) her father had insisted on was a shotgun filled with salt for any kind of angry spirit. It was the best defense short of iron (though she did have an iron rod the length of a wrench in her belt).

"Can I ask you something?" Spruce said to Dean, which was odd, because Spruce didn't actually say
much as far as initiating conversation.

"What?" Dean said, without turning around, though Elena looked at the cameraman with veiled curiosity.

"Earlier, you and Sam. You said you had two months left?"

Elena’s heart sunk at that particular reminder, and her gaze traveled to the ground.

"Eh, it's complicated…a while ago, Sam…” Dean started, but then he noticed the camera was still definitely rolling. He chuckled humorlessly and looked straight into the lens. "Ah no, no, I'm not gunna whine about my fucking problems to some bullshit reality show. I'm gunna do my fucking job."

He turned his back on Spruce and the camera and resumed his search with Elena for a door.

"Is it…cancer?"

"Shut up."

Elena shook her head and turned to where Dean was next to a wide shelf, trying to find the door.

"Do you hear that?" Dean asked. She paused and listened.

"Music?"

"It's coming from behind this wall."

Again, Elena held the flashlights while Dean pulled the shelf away from the wall by himself with a grunt of effort.

"Wow," said Spruce. "You're strong."

Dean flipped off the camera, making Elena smirk. Between the two, they were able to get the door open just in time to see the ghost looming over a seated and bound Sam. It was a tall man, broad shoulders and an unseemly appearance. He looked more like a burly farmer than a janitor and taxidermist.

"Sam!"

Dean immediately pulled up his shotgun and fired. The ghost scowled and disappeared on impact, and Dean and Elena rushed in to break Sam out of his bonds. Dean saw that his little brother was a worse for wear with a black eye and blood streaming from a cut on his forehead, but besides that and the party hat on his head, he was fine. Dean didn't dwell on anything else than that.

Sam groaned once he was out of the chair and rubbed at his chafed wrists. Once seeing that he was all right, Dean took in his less than pleasant surroundings. Dead and decayed bodies were strapped to chairs all around the table where there were plates and utensils set, a cake that would probably cave within itself if it were to be touched, and finally…Corbett.

"Oh no…” Spruce groaned. "Corbett."

Finally, he lowered the camera away from his face and looked back at the solemn hunters, both sad and imploring. *He* sure didn't know what to do. Now he knew none of his team had a fucking clue of what they were getting into by coming down here.
"All right, let's get out of here," said Dean. None of them could agree more. They made their way into the hall, and Dean almost sighed when Spruce once again started asking questions.

"So what's with this Daggett guy anyway?"

"Loneliness," Sam answered, fending off the flashlight on Spruce's camera from his bruised eye.

"He never heard of a RealDoll?" asked Dean.

"No, no, Daggett's the 'stuff-your-mother' kind of lonely."

"Again, ick," said Elena, and she and Dean shared a grimace.

"He lifted these bodies from the morgue and threw a birthday party…except these are the only people that would come," Sam finished, touching his eye gingerly. "At midnight, he locked them in the bomb shelter and OD'd on some horse tracks."

Dean gave Sam a look that said he was curious, but didn't really want to ask the question.

"How do you know this?" Sam's expression was frank.

"'Cause he told me."

"…Oh," Dean nodded. "So now that he's dead, same song, different verse? Trying to get people to come to his party?"

"That's what it looks like," said Elena. She restrained a shiver and crossed her arms instead, rubbing her chilled arms discreetly.

"Yeah, pretty much," Sam agreed, "and stay here forever."

"All right, well I'm not waiting around for party favors," said Dean, and led them back up the stairs to the still sealed door. Seeing that it wouldn't budge, he tried using the back of his gun to pound against the wood.

Sam glanced behind him and saw that Spruce had resumed filming.

"You still shootin'?"

"Yeah." As if he would miss any of this.

"It makes him feel better. Don't ask," Dean quipped, and continued hammering against the door.

"We're not gunna get through with the ghost still on our ass," said Elena from where she stood at the head of the steps, close to Sam to give Dean room for his bulldozing.

"Well we can't just sit on our asses, can we?" Dean shot back without pausing. She restrained a sigh.

"I'm saying, maybe we can find another way out."

"Um…guys," said Spruce from behind Sam, but it didn't seem like any of them heard him. Dean clenched his hands on the gun and finally faced Elena.

"All there is down there is the fucking basement and a whole lot of decaying crap, okay? There's not gunna be a—a hidden passageway or underground tunnel," he snapped, gesturing down the steps. "This isn't Indiana Jones and what mummified those people ain't the damn Ark of the Covenant."
Despite him getting annoyed with her, she couldn't help but tease, "Does that make me Marion?"

"Okay, calm down," Sam said when he saw his brother's jaw clench in sheer aggravation.

"Guys!" Spruce said, finally getting their attention. "Getting a ghost roll thing, something's coming."

Before they could react, Daggett appeared behind Spruce and effectively threw the guy back into the room downstairs. Spruce groaned, letting his hand holding the camera fall to the ground as his eyes closed. The hunters bolted down the stairs, though Dean was faster in drawing his gun and once again fed the ghost salt rounds while Elena checked on Spruce. He groaned again and she laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah…think so," he nodded, and Sam helped him stand back up while Elena took out her iron rod from her belt. Sam steadied him, and then the camera was good and rolling again. Spruce brought it up to his face and nearly swore.

"Uh…guys…"

Daggett appeared behind Dean, pissed as ever, and despite Elena's warning shout, Dean was thrown against a metal table. Elena swung with the rod, but the ghost grabbed her arm and by her shirt and tossed her more effortlessly than he had Dean, and hard, right into Sam. She felt something hard smack into the back of her head and the world grew fuzzy. Maybe she even blacked out for a minute, because when she opened her eyes, Corbett was standing there.

"Corbett?" she heard Sam say coarsely.

Daggett turned around from where he had cornered Spruce, and Corbett rushed at him, latching on and wrestling with the bigger man until the entities of the two ghosts meshed in silvery light. They heard Corbett's struggles until both spirits disappeared into oblivion.

Elena heard Sam grunt behind her and felt his hand on her shoulder. They helped each other up and met a groaning Dean in the middle of the room.

"You guys okay?" asked Spruce. The three of them turned and incidentally faced directly into the camera. "Damn. You look rough."

Dean took the liberty of grabbing the camera.

"What do you think's gunna happen tonight, huh? Just say what you think's gunna happen on this trip."

"I think tonight…I really do…I think all of our dreams are gunna come true." Corbett finished packing the rest of the tools into the Ghostfacers van. "Does that sound stupid?"

"Kinda does, yeah," Spruce replied. Corbett laughed it off and shrugged, offering one more smile to the camera.

Elena remembered the final moments of the video with a sense of nostalgia. All in all, it had been put together pretty well, even if the entire thing had to be completely scrapped (which Sam and Dean took care of). There was a part of her that wished it could be shown to the world. Maybe that poor boy's death would seem a little less in vain. But as they drove away to the outraged shouts of the Ghostfacers, she knew they'd made the right decision.
"So what's next?" Dean asked, "Got a stretch of road ahead of us."

"I dunno, you're ready for another one already?" Sam asked, unable to completely veil the concern in his eyes. They only had so much time left to figure out how to save him, and Dean was already on the next hunt. "Sure you don't wanna stop somewhere for the night, get some sleep?"

"Yeah, Sammy. Sleep off that shiner in the car. We're burnin' daylight," Dean said, tossing a grin back to Elena via rearview mirror. Sam saw her slowly return it, and then saw his brother's grin directed at him. Sleep wasn't what Dean needed, Sam realized. Or Elena, for that matter. They needed to keep the momentum moving, keep on running. He couldn't begrudge either of them that, even if his muscles (and his swollen eye) ached.

Sam let out an inaudible sigh.

"All right, let's get some food on the way though. I'm starved."

"God, me too," added Elena, rubbing her painfully empty stomach. Dean's smile became a little more genuine.

"You got it."

Then the radio was on, music blasting over the sound of the Impala's motor. His foot pressed more steadily on the accelerator, bringing his Baby nearly flying over the blacktop as the sun rose higher in the sky.

"We climb, and climb
And at the top we fly..."

"Aw no, not this shit again," Dean refused, hand immediately reaching out to change the station. Suddenly a hand shot out from behind him and slapped his away. It startled him enough that the car veered right and then left.

"Leave REO on, goddamn it!"

"Fucking hell, Elena! What are you trying to do, kill us all?"

"Leave it on the fucking station!"

"Let the world go on below us,
We are stuck in time..."

"It's my goddamn car—"

"Guys, I already have enough of a headache!"

"And I don't know really what it means..."

"If this is how it's gunna be the whole ride, I'm dumping your ass off here," Dean threatened.

"Psh. As if," she snorted. "I'd track you down and then I'd really be pissed."

Dean reached his right arm into the back seat and she coiled away, slapping at his fingers.

"Dean, you're veering again!" Sam exclaimed.
"Shut up, I'm trying to concentrate!"

"And I don't know really what it means…"

"I swear to God, we have a better chance of dying here than we did by Daggett's angry ghost."

"In my dreams."
People and Places

"See the line of sight inside your mind,
But from where I don't know
And the tales that are left behind,
Left for all to grow."

– Journey, "Precious Time"

VI: People and Places

Elena watched from her window as they passed the Wisconsin state line. They crossed Illinois after one motel stop and pancakes in the morning, followed by a few burritos in the evening. They rolled the windows down through Indiana farmland.

There wasn't much she remembered while dozing in the backseat. It was a blur of buildings and rivers and natural beauty, and then came the plains and lowlands of Ohio.

The ride was quiet. Sam was still frustrated with Dean for his lack of hope where finding a way out of his demon deal was concerned, even though for nearly the past month they'd checked lead after lead, stayed up consecutive nights tearing through books and online databases, asked every hunter Bobby knew. With a little over a month left, Dean just wanted to do what he'd spent his entire life doing until his time was up.

It wasn't long before they were passing expanses of trees and the smaller redbrick houses and shops of Milan. The streets were lively; people walking their dogs and mowing lawns and doing their Saturday shopping. Quaint and colonial, the little town marked the farthest Elena had ever been from home. When she said as much as they checked into the closest motel, Sam looked over his backpack laden shoulder at her.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Illinois had been the farthest east," she said. Dean glanced back at her as he jingled the room key into the lock.

"I thought you told me you'd been to Vegas."

"When did I tell you that?" They walked into their room of two queen beds plus a couch. She saw it wasn't as horrendously decorated as previous ones they'd stayed in the past few weeks.

"The first time, at Bobby's," he said, tossing his heavy duffel on the bed to the left.

"Dean, that was over ten years ago," Elena said dryly. She plopped on the couch and immediately kicked off her boots. "How the hell am I supposed to remember that?"

"Well, were you lying, then?" he shot back with a teasing grin. "Trying to be cool saying you played the slots underage?"

"Of course not." She crossed her arms, but there was a telling shift in her eyes. Sam shook his head with a reserved smile.

"Trying to impress us?" he asked. Elena didn't answer right away, and Sam could've sword he saw her blushing. Dean's chuckle told him his brother saw it too.
"Dean was already hunting by then, and he's only two years older than me," she defended herself. That was intimidating enough for her, having only known about the supernatural for a few years by that point. "And two boys. I was awkward enough at fourteen as it was."

Sam and Dean shared knowing looks.

"What? I thought you were cool. My mistake."

Dean looked almost genuinely offended.

"Who beat your ass at poker?" A glance at Sam. "Can't say much for brainiac here, but…"

"Not you, I remember that," she retorted. "As I recall, it was the other way around."

"Hey, whatever gets you through the night," said Dean, his arms spread wide. Then he rummaged through his bag and pulled out a change of clothes. "I call first shower since I went last the last time."

Before either of them could complain, the bathroom door was firmly shut and the showerhead started inside.

"I can take the couch, Lena," said Sam. She kept insisting on the couch if they didn't have to rent two rooms, even though all three of them knew if the beds weren't that comfortable, the couch couldn't be much better.

"Nah, it's okay," Elena waved him off. "I don't mind it."

"…You sure?" Sam said uncertainly. "It can't be that comfortable."

"Really, I can sleep on anything," she assured, which maybe wasn't altogether true, but she felt like she owed them for letting her tag along for this long to try and save Dean. Even if the thing did feel solid as a rock, in the past few weeks she'd gotten used to running on a mere couple hours of sleep. Anyways, it was nice of Sam to offer.

Always a gentleman, she thought, smiling at him. After a month, she felt like she'd gotten to know the younger Winchester better. They had a fair share in common as far as taste in books went, and while on cases, they bonded over knowledge of ancient history and mythology. Those topics were her main focus while in college. Sam had just picked it up over years of doing most of the extensive research, both when he'd been hunting with his father and brother and while studying at Stanford. He related some of his experiences from his "college years" to Elena, who hadn't really had the university experience while doing her classes online.

"Well, you get second shower then," Sam compromised, but with a look that warned her of trying to refuse. She chuckled and nodded. He was the type to smile and be just as serious.

"Thanks, I'm about ready to drop. And I wasn't even driving."

"And you won't be any time soon," called Dean behind the closed door. Sam and Elena looked to one another with identical amused grins. Sam went over to the old jeans strewn on Dean's bed and found the keys to the Impala. He nodded over at her and threw the keys over. She caught them and started rattling them, so Dean could hear.

"I think Sam and I might just go for a joyride," she teased. "Donuts in the parking lot…"

It was amazing how fast the bathroom door opened. Steam poured out as Dean came stumbling out, shirt half over his head (though his jeans, fortunately for him, were on). Elena laughed at the bit of
panic in his eyes, and the way he tried to cover it up. She tossed him the keys and he caught them
with the hand that was already through one of the sleeves. He gave her an annoyed look, and as
usual, she feigned innocence.

"Hey Dean?" she said.

"Yeah?" he said, a little gruffly as he fixed his shirt.

"Might wanna keep the eggs in the basket."

His eyes snapped up to hers, and she gestured downward. He looked down and swore.

Sam laughed louder than he probably should have as Dean zipped up his fly, and that earned him a
pillow to the face.

"All right, all right. Last call for showers before I turn the lights off," Dean grouched.

"What are we, five?" Elena whined mockingly. "I wanted to stay up and play Truth or Dare."

"Yeah, great, we'll have a fucking slumber party." Well used to his sarcasm by now, Elena smiled.

"I have nail polish and everything."

He scoffed.

"Don't hold your breath."

He then threw his dirty clothes back in his bag and threw that on the floor, pulling back the covers.

"You're sleeping in jeans?" Sam asked. Again, Dean looked down at himself, and almost sighed. He
ignored the other two sniggering as he went back into the bathroom with a pair of sweatpants.

In short, Dean was pissed.

He was the one who found the monster; he had every right to help his dad hunt it down.

"Have you ever seen a wendigo?" John asked. Dean pursed his lips.

"...No, sir."

"That's because they're too fast to be seen, even in the daylight. They've killed seasoned hunters.
Easy." John packed the rest of his backpack and slung it over his shoulder. Dean had only really
been actively hunting for two years. "Both of you are staying at Bobby's for a couple weeks or so.
This thing's over in Oregon."

He didn't have to tell Dean that. He was the one who did the research; he knew. He wanted to raise
the point that John would be going by himself with no one to have his back. But God forbid the man
think Dean was giving back talk to a direct order.

So the teenager silently simmered the whole ride over to Sioux Falls. Sam was okay with it more or
less, he just didn't want to be stuck without anything to do for what was probably going to be more
than a couple weeks. John wasn't exactly reliable. So the youngest Winchester kept his nose in one
of his comics, one he'd read a thousand times and still wasn't tired of it.

But when the Impala pulled into Singer Salvage Yard, Dean noticed an old blue Camaro parked by
the front door in serious need of a tune up. A good wash and wax, some new tires and a paint job for
starters. If he were to guess, it had to be an 80s model. It hadn't been kept in very good condition, but
it was a Chevy. There was potential.

John walked past it without glancing at it once his sons were heading up the porch steps. With a few
knocks, Bobby let them in and offered John a beer. After greeting the older hunter, Sam and Dean
headed for the couch in the living room. Both were stopped at seeing there was someone already
occupying it, sitting on the cushions while reading a book. It was a girl, and she looked like she was
trying to concentrate.

"Uh…" said Dean, a little awkwardly while still holding his duffel. She looked up and blinked light
grey eyes at him. They were wide and surprised as they took in the two boys staring at her.

"Oh…hi."

"Who are you?" Sam asked, finally letting his comic fall to his side.

"You're not the only guests I've got, boys," Bobby's voice said from behind them. Dean looked up at
him in confusion. "Never thought I'd be a damn babysitter."

The last part was mumbled, but even John looked a little surprised. It was hard to do that kind of
thing.

"Who's this, Bobby?"

"This here's Elena…my niece," said Bobby, who gave John a meaningful look. "Her dad's a hunter,
asked me to watch her for a few days. Lena, this is John Winchester and his boys, Sam and Dean."

Elena reluctantly got up and greeted them all with a shy, "hi."

"Who's your dad? Maybe I know 'im," said John. His voice was deep and gruff, and may have been
off-putting if she hadn't been used to Bobby already.

"Jack Hayes," she said quietly, and John's eyes dimmed with in understanding. He'd never met the
man, but he'd heard of him through a mutual acquaintance, Vick Graves. Everyone had a story of
how they started as a hunter, and Hayes was no different. It just happened to be the same as Bobby
Singer's. The only reason John knew was after almost an entire night of whiskey at a seedy dive,
Bobby had been drunk enough to let it slip. They'd never talked about it again after that night.

"I've heard of him. He's good," said John. What he didn't know was why his daughter was here
when she could be at home. From what he'd known, the man still had a wife, rare as that was.

Elena nodded, seemingly uncomfortable with talking to the hunter. Which he supposed was
understandable, considering she probably thought she'd be alone here with her uncle, not talking to
three strangers.

"Well, I should be going," he said, and looked down at his sons. Well, not so much Dean. The boy
was gaining height quick, only a few inches shorter than him. It was Sam that still had yet to go
through a growth spurt at twelve years old. "Don't give Bobby trouble."

Dean nodded for both of them, and John returned it and walked with Bobby to the door. The two
talked for a moment before John walked through the door. What about, Dean didn't know. He
couldn't hear or concentrate while Sam asked the girl what she was reading. Her reserved body
language said she didn't really want to talk, but she showed him the front cover. Dean saw it and
almost rolled his eyes at the title.
"Ooh, Stephen King is great," said Sam, interest lighting his eyes. So much so that he set down his comic next to him on the couch and sat down. "I haven't read that one though."

"Cycle of the Werewolf?" Dean read dubiously. "Bet that isn't even remotely accurate."

Those kinds of books never were—all usually full of holes and exaggerated lore.

"Actually, how he describes lunar cycle is pretty on point," she said, her voice clearer and stronger than when she first (sort of) introduced herself. Dean got the feeling she wasn't normally shy. "And the guy uses silver bullets to kill it."

"Oh yeah?" Dean asked, crossing his arms at her matter-of-fact tone. She looked up at him, and despite her bland expression, he caught the hint of amusement in her eyes.

"Yeah." She closed the nearly finished book and laid it casually on her lap. "I liked it better though."

Sam's eyes widened in horror, and Dean laughed because he actually remembered the movie.

"The clown one, right?" he said through a chuckle. She nodded, but gave Sam a curious look.

"Don't mind him. Let's just say Pennywise is his phobia," Dean smirked, and Sam glared at him.

"It's your fault, you jerk!" Sam groused.

"How's it my fault?" The younger Winchester gave his brother a look that said he knew very well how.

"You left me alone at that stupid place for hours. They were everywhere!"

"Aw, Sammy, I said I was sorry for that," said Dean, though his grin was anything but apologetic. Sam wasn't amused. Despite what he thought, Dean had been across the street getting what he could for the week as far as food.

Not that a kid going into the store and buying cereal and canned food didn't look strange enough, but to take his little brother in there with him? That would've gotten them sent to the manager by some overly caring mother who had nothing better to do with her time.

"I was four."

"Where did he leave you?" Elena asked, for the first time looking genuinely curious (and a little bit pitying). When Sam didn't answer right away, Dean answered for him.

"Plucky Pennywhistle's Magical Menagerie." Elena's brows rose, the corner of her mouth lifting as Dean was sure she saw the resemblance in the names.

"I try to forget," Sam deadpanned.

"I never liked that place either," she sympathized. "Smells like feet and old popcorn."

"Got a point there," Dean chuckled, while Sam nodded in agreement. There was a short stretch of silence in which all three of them didn't really know what to say. Elena toyed with the corner of the book cover while Sam picked at a small stain on his shirt.

Dean drummed his fingers on his thigh and said, "Well, I'm bored."

"Shocker," Sam quipped, rolling his eyes. He would be fine reading his comic for another hour, and
one thing Bobby did have in abundance was reading material.

"I've got cards in my backpack," Elena offered. Dean shrugged.

"Sammy?"

Sam looked down at the Superman edition in his hands.

*I already know how it ends*, he supposed.

"All right, fine." Dean nodded and looked over at Elena with a teasing glint in his eyes.

"Just so you know, I'm not showing mercy," he said, and smirked, "just 'cause you're a girl."

Again, he saw that subtle shift in her expression. Veiled amusement and a tug at the corners of her mouth that suggested she would have smiled.

"Sure."

She woke with a start, breathing heavily in the early morning light filtering through the windows.

*I'm okay…motel room…not a cave…okay.*

Elena looked over the back of the couch. The boys were still asleep. In an effort to bring her heart rate down, she tried long, easy breaths in through the nose and out the mouth.

*Always just a dream.*

"I see a small, pathetic child, still clinging to a shadow of a memory of a happy life. Of a family. But we both know that ended a long time ago."

She could still hear the gunshot ringing in her ears. In her head. It always did. And now it pried open new wounds that hadn't had the chance to heal.

Angry tears welled in her eyes; she scrubbed at them fiercely and drew her knees to her chest.

*I don't have to kill him."

Elena smothered a shuddering breath, letting the tears fall and dry on her shirt.

*You already feel like an orphan."

She went out before she lost it, came back with donuts from a bakery just across the street. The smell woke Dean up, and Sam woke from the pillow thrown at his head. But breakfast and coffee and the brothers arguing over sugar packets was all Elena needed to put the nighttime behind her.

"So the supposed suicide," Dean said around a powdered jelly, "We going as FBI?"

"Think police detectives will do for this one," said Sam, who took a sip of coffee while rereading the local news article Bobby had sent him online.

"Means you need a monkey suit," Dean said to Elena, who pursed her lips.

"I didn't bring—"

"I know, that's why we've got some shopping to do."
"Never have I ever…driven a car."

Both Elena and Dean sighed, each curling one finger towards their palms.

"Damn it, I've only got one hand left," Dean grumbled.

"We've only been playing ten minutes," Elena pointed out. She still had eight fingers left. He shrugged.

"Not my fault both of you are pansies."

"Hey!" Sam protested, and Elena managed to punch him lightly on the arm. Well, she thought it was light.

He grunted and rubbed his arm, shooting her a glare that wasn't altogether playful. It teased a smile to her lips.

"Okay. Never have I ever…gone on a cross-country road trip," said Elena. The brothers shot one another identical looks and bent another finger down. That put Dean almost out of the game with four fingers left. Sam had six.

"You guys have been everywhere, haven't you?" Elena asked. It was the fifth day since they came, and they told her of how their dad had brought them along from hunt to hunt since they were little.

"Maybe not everywhere," Dean allowed. "But a hell of a lot."

"What's been your favorite place?" she asked.

"Well…California was pretty cool," said Sam. He liked the beaches, and the parks, and all the things to see there. Dean nodded.

"Yeah, Vegas was awesome," he smiled at the memory. John had let him come with him to one of the casinos, and Dean, mature in appearance at sixteen, looked just old enough to pass for twenty one (after letting his face go unshaven for a few days). "You ever been?"

She blinked at the question, but smiled.

"Yeah. It was really cool, everything lit up at night and stuff," she said. "The food was pretty good too."

"Did you get to go into any casinos?" Dean asked.

"Um…just one. My dad snuck me in and I got to do the slot machine for like an hour," she said with a small grin. He chuckled, admiring her smile. He hadn't seen it much, but it was nice. Now that he knew her a little better, he didn't mind her company, even though she was two years younger than him. She had decent taste in movies (they'd watched both Terminator movies and The Matrix, and she'd preferred them over Sixteen Candles), and in music, she liked the classics. Journey being her favorite.

Plus, she watched a whole Lord of the Rings marathon with Sam so Dean wouldn't have to, letting him help Bobby out with some of the cars. As far as he was concerned, she was all right.

Elena adjusted her blouse for the umpteenth time. It kept riding up in the front. Meanwhile, her black slacks were sticking to her legs and giving her heat stroke.
"Stop fidgeting with the buttons. You're a detective, not a hooker," Dean whispered in her ear as Sam knocked on the door. She glanced behind her over her shoulder and glared at him.

"This top is too fucking tight." She'd told him she needed a bigger size, but there hadn't been any more and they'd been pressed for time.

"Too late now, deal with it."

She huffed out a breath.

"Typical."

Talking to the widow was more informative than they'd originally thought. Mysterious phone calls in the middle of the night by an unknown, strange number, possibly a woman named Linda, before a guy shot himself was reasonably high on the Richter scale of weird.

They got back to the motel and checked it out, and according to Dean, not only was Linda Bateman a "babe," but she was also Ben Waters' first wife who died in a car wreck that he lived through. That constituted angry spirit behavior. The really weird thing, though? Linda was cremated.

"What about that caller ID?" Dean asked.

"Turns out it's a phone number," said Sam, surprising both Dean and Elena.

"That's no phone number I've ever seen."

"Yeah, that's because it's about a century old. From back when phones had cranks."

"So why use that number to reach out and touch someone?"

"You got me there too," Sam allowed. "But we should still try and run a trace on it."

"How the hell are we going to do that?" asked Elena. "The number's over a hundred years old."

"Because this time," Sam said with a grin, "We go FBI."

Elena was comfortable, but bored. This was the eighth book she'd read in its entirety since she'd arrived at Bobby's almost a week ago, and if she stared at another page her eyeballs were going to dry out. The house was quiet with the boys outside, Dean helping Bobby make repairs on an engine that a neighbor wanted fixed by that afternoon. Elena remembered Sam having walked out with a soccer ball…but it was summer, and South Dakota scorching.

Still, she could stay inside, feeling like a lump on the couch and watch TV, or she could get some fresh air, maybe take a walk.

After changing into some athletic shorts and a tank top, she threw her hair into a high ponytail and stepped into the yard with the full intention of taking a walk around the neighborhood she hadn't seen for such a long time. It hadn't changed much from when she lived in the area, but it still didn't quite feel like the kind of "home" she was used to.

Elena could hear Bobby giving Dean instructions on how to clean the parts and how to put them in place, and she figured they were farther behind the house.

And then she saw Sam out of the corner of her eye, kicking the soccer ball around the small dirt clearing by himself. He was trying to balance it on his foot, kick it up and bounce it on his head, then
land it back on his foot. A couple times he made it half way there, but the ball would bounce too far. She was walking up to him before she realized it.

"Hey, whatcha doin'?" He looked up with a smile.

"Just trying to this trick…I saw a guy at the park doing this like it was nothing," he said, and attempted it again. The ball bounced off his head, and it stayed near the tip of his shoe.

"Ha! Got it!" he exclaimed in triumph, and she grinned.

"Here, pass it to me," she said, and tried and failed to catch it on her own foot. She had decent balance, just didn't have the skills of a soccer player.

"Hey, you almost had it," Sam encouraged, and she smiled and passed it back to him.

"Try it again!" They passed it back and forth until they were both tired and sweating, but laughing harder as each miss grew worse and worse. Until Sam head butted the ball so hard that it went sailing through the air and into a window in one of the junk cars. The two looked at one another with wide eyes.

"What the hell was that?"

"…I got it, Bobby."

"Uh oh," said Sam.

"What the hell's goin' on over here?" Dean's voice drifted over, and it wasn't long before they saw him coming around the corner, in dirt-stained jeans and a grey tank top and sweating. "You breakin' stuff for no good reason?"

Again, Sam and Elena looked at each other.

"Run!" she said, and the two bolted. They heard Dean calling after them over the sound of their laughter, and Sam even glanced over his shoulder to wave his clearly pissed off brother goodbye. Even as the salvage yard became a distant thing behind them, they kept running past house after house, only slowing down when they were sure Dean wasn't chasing after them. The two walked past a grocery store and a more residential area until they found a park, large and green with a walkway of people passing by around the trail. In the center was a large pond, where a couple sat closely together on a blanket.

Sam and Elena crossed the street and stopped just within the grassy field. Elena breathed in the fresh air, even though her heart was pounding and both of them were still panting for breath.

"It's nice here," Sam commented.

"Think so, huh?" The two felt a heavy hand on their shoulders and both jumped with a gasp.

"Dean!" Elena exclaimed, shoving his hand off. As if her heart needed another reason to beat faster. "You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"Where did you two think you were going?" Dean said, and before Sam could interject, the older Winchester bent to the ground next to him and stood straight again, revealing the soccer ball he held in his hands. "Without me?"

Dean's smirk was infectious, and Elena grabbed the ball out of his hands and started running away
with it.

"Hey!" Sam called behind her. "That's travelling!"

"Ya snooze, ya lose!"

"I got her, Sammy," Dean said, grabbing Elena by her middle and dragging her back to what they'd just made the field of play. She tried to wiggle out of his grip, but it was kind of hard when she was laughing too much to concentrate. Sam took the opportunity to pluck the ball out of her grasp and toss it to the ground.

"Okay," he said. Dean let go of Elena and gave her a Cheshire grin when she playfully glared at him.

"Now we play this right."

The place was kind of gross, and so was the Indian man sitting at his computer desk stacked with pornography. Clark Adams, the manager who showed them in, looked like he had half a mind to fire the guy for how messy he kept his workstation, let along doing that on the job. But Dean was pretty quick about getting "Stewie" to trace the ancient caller ID, despite his quips about getting a "platinum membership" for Busty Asian Beauties. Elena had ignored him for the most part, but couldn't restrain a roll of her eyes.

"Holy crap."

"What?" Sam asked.

"I can't tell you where it comes from, but I can tell you where it's been going," said Stewie. He downloaded and printed out the records.

"What do you mean?"

"Ten different houses in the past two weeks," he handed Sam the paper, "all got calls from the same number."

Stewie went back to his desk while the three of them looked over the records and each address.

"So," said Stewie, getting their attention. "Are we done here? I was...kind of busy."

Elena wanted to gag. Sam didn't blame her.

"Right," said Dean, pointing with a mischievous grin. "We'll just be going."

Two days later, Dean came into the house, drenched in sweat from the noon sun that had been beating down on him and Sam while they played some football. Sam had already called the first shower, so he ran up the stairs ahead of Dean, who veered left to the kitchen to grab some water. What he didn't expect was Bobby and Elena to be talking quietly, the old man's hand on her shoulder as she wiped at something in her eye.

"Another week's not so bad," he said, rubbing his neck. "'S not often I've got company...you can stay for however long you want."

"I know," she said, and Dean thought he heard a tremor in her voice. "I'm okay...thanks, Uncle Bobby."
After a moment, Bobby nodded and let his hand fall to his side while the other reached for a beer on the counter. Elena backed out of the kitchen and made a beeline for the stairs, nearly smacking into Dean on the way there.

"Hey," he asked, and hesitated to steady her. She unconsciously backed off a little and righted herself. "Something wrong?"

Elena didn't meet his eyes, but he caught a glimpse of her face and alarms went off. At sixteen he knew with girls, tears was just one of the things they did. But she didn't seem like many of the girls he'd met.

"'M fine," she mumbled. Before he could get a word in edgewise, she slid past him and up the stairs to the other bedroom. There were two upstairs with a bathroom, one downstairs. That was the master bedroom with its own small bathroom. Sam and Dean shared the upstairs room on the right, while Elena had the left.

It took Dean all of three seconds to gain his nerve follow her up.

Her door was open a crack. Just a few inches, but enough to see that she was curled on the bed, knees drawn to her chest. When he heard sniffing, he rapped lightly on the door. She stiffened and looked over her shoulder a little.

"What?" she snapped. He restrained a sigh and cautiously came in, pushing the door back to its nearly closed position.

"It's just me," he said, letting it hang in the air. If she didn't want him in here, she had the opportunity and the right to tell him to get the fuck out, and he would leave. But she didn't.

Standing in the middle of the room, he felt a little awkward. Instead of asking the stupid question, "Are you all right?" he sat down on the edge of the bed, giving her about two feet of space.

"Wanna talk?" he asked tentatively. If she said no, he would probably leave.

To his relief, after a short pause, she sighed.

"No..." Her voice broke, but he turned toward her as sobs began to wrack her body. Despite his better judgment, instead of getting up like he wanted to, he scooted over a couple inches, then another, until he was next to her. After some inner conflict, his hand lightly touched her trembling back. Finally, Elena uncurled herself long enough to turn over and lean against him and his damp shirt. Slowly, his arm found its way around her.

They stayed like that until her fit subsided enough for her to speak.

"M-My mom's gone," she admitted. He let out a long breath through his nose.

"How long ago?"

"...A month."

"...Did something...uh..." He should've just kept his mouth shut. Usually he was good at it in these situations.

"...She was sick."

_Damn_, he thought. Then it hadn't been quick. _That's why she's here._
"I'm sorry."

She cried harder, and that's when Sam poked his head in. Dean tried warning him away with a look, but at the sight of his friend, Sam came in and sat on the floor by Elena's feet, against the bed, since there wasn't really enough room for him. Bolder than Dean took his little brother for, Sam leaned his elbow on the mattress and slipped his hand into Elena's. It surprised her at first, but after a second, she bit her lip and squeezed back.

After a while, her tears ebbed and she could breathe easier as her face rested against Dean's chest.

"…Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"You really stink."

"…Too bad."

Sam snickered.

"That poor girl," Elena said as she and Sam drove away from the house. "Can't imagine what that first call must have been like."

Sam shook his head.

"I don't know, but the sooner we stop it, the better," he said, and flipped his phone open. Elena didn't mean to tune out his and Dean's conversation, but her thoughts drifted. She didn't want to think about what she would do if whatever was doing this decided to call her, posing as…well, either of her parents.

It would actually help them if it did; it'd make it easier to find the thing, lure it into a trap.

She wasn't strong enough for that, though. To even hear either of their voices…

But she could try and kill whatever the hell was doing this.

After a few minutes, they made it to the motel before Dean and were able to change out of their suites and into regular clothes. When Dean came in, looking spaced out of his mind and in need of a drink, Sam immediately asked him what had happened. But after Dean explained, Elena fell completely silent, while Sam was trying to make sense of it all.

"Dad…as in, Dad?"

"I don't know, maybe," said Dean, but it seemed like he believed it.

"Well what did he sound like?"

Dean looked back at Sam incredulously.

"Like Oprah." Sam sighed. "It's Dad, he sounded like Dad. What do you think?"

"What did he say?" Sam asked, trying for the love of God to be patient. Dean continued his pacing across the room.

"My name."
"That's it?"

"Yeah, call dropped out."

Sam was quiet for a moment, thinking about it.

"Why would he even call in the first place, Dean?"

"I don't know, man. Why are ghosts calling anybody in this town?" Dean shrugged, but it wasn't as nonchalant as he wanted to make it seem. "I mean, other people are hearing from their loved ones. Why can't we? It's at least a possibility right?"

"Well... yeah, I guess."

"Okay, so what if... what if it really is Dad?" Dean sat on the other bed and faced Sam, who looked confused.

"What if he calls back?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do I say?"

"... Hello," Sam suggested.

"'Hello?' That's what you come up with, 'Hello?'" Dean asked in mock amazement. Sam shrugged, not understanding what his brother wanted from him. Elena wanted to sigh as Dean grabbed his jacket and headed for the door. At the last second, he turned and said, "'Hello?'"

The door shut behind him, and Elena came to sit in the sofa across from where Sam sat on one of the beds. They looked at one another.

"Well, what now?" she asked.

Sam sighed.

"Time to get digging."
When You're Alone (It Ain't Easy)

VII: When You're Alone (It Ain't Easy)

Three hours later, and they still hadn't found anything. When Dean walked back through the door and saw their faces, he guessed as much, but still asked anyway.

"We can't find any reason why anything supernatural would be going on in this town," said Sam.

"Well ya know, you'd think a Stanford education and a high school hook up rate of 0.0 would produce better results than that," Dean teased.

"Hilarious," Sam said with a very much fake smile.

"You're just looking in the wrong places, pal." Dean reached into his jacket.

He seems to be in a better mood, thought Elena with a raised brow.

"And what are the right places, Dean?" Sam asked.


"And?" Elena asked.

"Keep reading," said Dean, and the two looked down at it again. A headline jumped out at them, and they looked up Dean with similar grins.

"You're kidding," said Sam.

Dean smiled.

"We're not watching Terminator again."

"Aw, come on, Sammy," Dean wheedled.

"No! Or 300, or any of the Batman movies."

"Come on, you love Batman!"

"Yeah, Dean. But we've seen them fifty times. Each."

"I'm kind of tired of those kinds of movies too," said Elena.

"Well, I'll watch whatever you put on," said Bobby. "So the three of ya, make a decision."

"Fine," Dean said eventually. "What about something funny?"

"Like what?" Elena asked. "Back to the Future?"

"No," Sam groaned as he flipped through the DVD collection. Suddenly his face lit up. "Here, what about Tommy Boy?"

Elena smiled.
"I like that movie," she said.

"Well, I've never seen it," Dean admitted. "So I guess that's all right then. Pop it in, Sammy."

It started off kind of weak, but it was a lot better than he thought it would be. He kind of felt bad for Tommy with all the fat jokes Richard was throwing his way, but he really couldn't stop laughing. But a little piece of him probably withered and died when the moron managed to bend the car door backwards, making it fall off. It only digressed from there.

He sort of wanted to hit the fast forward button when the fucking deer tore through every scrap of interior and broke every mirror in the car, so much that it tore a hole in the roof and climbed out. To his surprise, he heard three voices laughing over the sound of his sympathetic hiss. Dean looked over and saw Elena and Sam nearly doubled over laughing. He rolled his eyes while fighting a smile.

Thomas Edison's "Spirit Phone," his final invention, which he was convinced could be used to communicate with the dead. It was old enough to have been built around the time the phone number was around, but it gave off no EMF signal, nor did it explain why it would be working now all of a sudden.

"Still, it's the best answer we got," said Dean. "…So maybe it is Dad."

Elena didn't think he would take it well if she voiced her doubts, so she stayed quiet about it. By the time they got to the motel, she was too tired to remember, until the next day, when she and Sam had to come back with bad news. The girl from the day before, Lanie, had been pretty shaken up last night with her mom trying to coerce her into doing something Lanie would regret.

"That sucks," Dean agreed, though he was a bit distracted with trying to narrow down the lead John had apparently given him. About a way to break out of his deal by finding the demon that held the contract. Elena wanted to believe it. She did. But it sounded too good to be true.

The way Sam was reacting told her he was thinking along the same lines, even when it came down to checking out the exorcism that could, in theory, kill a demon. They'd called Bobby and asked, and the hunter verified that it was an exorcism…just nothing to prove that it could kill a demon.

"There's no evidence it can't," Dean pointed out.

"Dean, come on, man—"

"As far as I can see the only one of us that has actually been to hell, is Dad. Think the man could've picked up a couple tricks down there?" said Dean. "Like which exorcisms work?"

"Look, maybe it does, I hope it does too, but we just gotta be sure," Sam tried to placate him, but Dean wasn't having it.

"Why aren't we sure?" he pressed.

"Because we don't know what's going on around here, Dean," said Sam, and Elena could see the man was coming close to his last nerve. "Some guy blows his brains out, a little girl is scared out of her mind—"

"Aw man, a couple of civvies are freaked out by some ghosts. Newsflash, Sam, people are supposed to be freaked out by ghosts!"

"But Dean," Elena eased in, "We don't even know if they are ghosts yet."
Dean's gaze slid over to her, surprise in his eyes as his brows rose.

"Oh, so you're taking his side then. Perfect."

"I'm just saying—"

"Oh no, I understand. Don't bother explaining," Dean dismissed angrily, prompting Sam to cut in.

"Did Dad tell you where to find the demon?"

"I'm waiting on the call!"

Sam nodded tiredly. He discreetly glanced at Elena, who looked at her watch. It reminded him of their scheduled visit in half an hour.

"I told Lanie I'd stop by," said Sam. "Elena too." Dean stared blankly as Sam turned away.

"Oh, no, go ahead and hang out with Jailbait," Dean mocked. "Just watch out for Chris Hansen."

Sam turned back around with a "really?" expression.

"I'll just be here, trying to save my life." His eyes flicked to Elena, and they made her feel the pinprick of guilt that snuck its way under her skin. She frowned at him, but after that he ignored her and continued to give Sam the third degree. His brother only turned toward the door again, until his brother's voice stopped him.

"You are unbelievable, you know that?" Dean said, pure frustration, and maybe a little hurt, in his voice. "I mean for months we've been trying to break this demon deal, now Dad's about to give us the freakin' address and you can't accept it? The man is dead and you're still butting heads with the guy!"

"That's not what this is about," Sam said, trying everything in his power to be calm, but the angrier his brother got, the more the whole situation ate at him.

"Then what is it?"

"We've got no hard proof here, Dean! After everything, you're still going on blind faith!"

"Yeah, well, maybe. Maybe that's all I got left, okay?"

Elena saw the moment where Sam deflated, and there was a part of her that wanted to cry.

"Please, just please don't go anywhere until we get back. Okay, Dean?" He nodded, but Elena hardly doubted he meant it.

"I don't have to come," she said quietly to Sam when he walked to the door.

"No," said Dean, waving a hand dismissively. "You promised you would go? Go. I don't need a fucking babysitter."

Her brows furrowed a bit as she frowned at him, biting the inside of her lip a little, but he clearly didn't want her company.

"You know that's not what I meant," she said, but he ignored her. So she nodded and walked out the door with Sam right behind her.
"Have you told your father about any of this?" Sam asked.

"And bother him at work?" said Lanie. "No. He wouldn't believe me anyway, just chuck me into therapy."

"So what did your mother say?"

"...That she wanted to see me." She crossed her arms. "So at first, I thought I was supposed to go to the cemetery."

"Did you?" asked Elena.

"Nothing happened...but then, she started telling me to do other things," said Lanie, her voice beginning to quiver.

"What sort of things?" Sam asked.

"Bad things." Tears swam in the girl's eyes, and Elena looked up at Sam with sympathy toward her. Sam didn't want to ask, but he needed to know.

"Lanie, you have to tell me what happened."

"My mom told me to go to my dad's medicine cabinet and take all his sleeping pills!" she exclaimed, as tears slid down her cheeks. "All of them!"

"She wanted you to kill yourself?" Elena asked incredulously. Lanie pressed her hands to her mouth and nodded.

"Why would my mom want me to do that?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted, shaking his head. His gaze drifted to the world outside the window as his brain scrambled for the answer.

"What, just so I could 'come to her?'"

Something clicked.

"What did you say?"

"She said she wanted me to come to her."

"Yeah, but—but how did she say it?"

"'Come to me,' like a million times!"

It donned on both hunters with chilling clarity.

"Lanie...that's not your mother."

Sam and Elena rushed to secure the house with instructions to Lanie not to answer any phones. They were on their way to the door when Lanie's voice stopped them.

"Where's Simon?"

"Who's Simon?" asked Elena.
"My little brother…" Lanie glanced out the window and gasped. Sam rushed over and swore under his breath, immediately taking off out the door. The boy was about to cross the street while several cars rushed by in afternoon traffic. Elena and Lanie ran after him, and they caught up with him just in time for Sam to pull the boy out of the road before a truck could run him over.

Lanie, hysterical by now, gathered Simon in her arms and kissed the top of his head. While she asked if he was all right, Sam and Elena looked at one another gravely.

"Dean, it's not Dad," Sam said over the phone, and the volume was so loud that even Elena could hear in the passenger seat.

"Then what is it?"

"It's a crocotta."

"S that a sandwich?"

"It's a scavenger, whispers 'Come to me' as your loved ones, lures you into the dark and swallows your soul."

"…Crocotta, right. Damn it, that makes sense."

"Dean, look. I'd sorry, man. I know—"

"Hey, don't these things live in filth?"

"Yeah."

"Sam, the flies at the phone company."

Sam and Elena looked to one another in comprehension.

Stewie.

But as it turned out, it wasn't their favorite porn-watching, wisecracking friend. It was the manager, "Clark." Poor Stewie didn't have a chance, and Sam felt guilty when the creature stabbed him through the heart, right in front of them, and ate his soul. Strapped to their chairs, they couldn't move to help him. Sam looked to his left and saw Elena was still out cold with a bruise over her brow.

"My last call with Dean…that was you," said Sam. "You led us here." Clark looked down at him as if he'd said something precious.

"Some calls I make, some calls I take, but you gotta admit," he said, pointing a finger. "I had you going for awhile. All that Edison phone crap."

Clark smirked and went over to a metal box along the wall with buttons that glowed red. With his touch they began blinking, and the machine hummed with power.

"What are you doing?" Sam asked as a hollow feeling entered his stomach.

"I'm killing your brother." Then he paused. "Or maybe I'm killing another guy…we'll just have to see how it goes."

He made the call, impersonating a little girl that knew who her murderer was. He was waiting at the
man's house, right now, and that made Sam's blood boil.

"You know, impersonating Dean is one thing," he said when the crocotta stepped away from the box and yanked the knife out of Stewie's corpse. "But impersonating my dad? That's one hell of a trick."

"Once I made out that you three were hunters, it was easy," Clark said, and pushed Stewie away, started stepping closer and closer to Sam with the bloody knife in hand. "Found Dean's number. Then your number. Then your father's numbers. And emails. And voicemails. Everything. You see, people think that stuff just gets erased, but it doesn't. You'll be surprised just how much some of your stuff is just floating out there, waiting to be plucked."

Sam kept the thing talking while he loosened the wires binding his wrists together so painfully. All the while he hoped and prayed to whatever was listening that Dean didn't kill that guy, or get himself killed.

"You're all so connected…but you've never been so alone."

While Clark continued monologuing, Sam heard Elena stir. He didn't chance glancing over at her until Clark noticed with a sinister smile.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll get to her after—" Sam didn't give the creature a chance to finish and tackled it like a linebacker, vaulting out of his chair and bringing Clark to the ground. Both of them scrambled for the knife that had clattered to the floor.

"SAM!" he heard Elena shout, but he didn't have time to acknowledge her as he was thrown across the room, into the wall. When Clark tried to stab him, Sam used his longer reach and pinned the man against the desk. A stray punch had Sam reeling back, but he corrected his footing and blocked what would have been a blade to the eye.

All the while Elena tried to wiggle out of her bonds, even as the wire cut into flesh deeper and deeper. She felt blood dribbling down her wrists and palms, but she continued to loosen the knots. Then she heard a squelching sound.

Her eyes snapped up in alarm, but it faded as she saw Sam standing over Clark, who was impaled through the back of the throat by a hanging key hook. Blood ran down the crocotta's chin in rivulets, and she grimaced.

"You okay?" Elena asked, when Sam came over to help untie the wires. His cheek was red and swelling.

"Yeah. Are you?" Sam removed the wires from her wrists and he saw her wince.

"Yeah. Got a massive headache though."

"We'll get patched up after we find Dean."

Dean answered his phone when Sam called and filled him in on what happened. No, he hadn't killed the man who he'd thought was the demon. With "A motherfucking crocotta, why didn't I think of that," and a "You okay?" and they were back to equilibrium.

Sam and Elena entered the motel room moving slower than usual. Dean saw Sam through the bathroom mirror as he pressed a warm towel to a cut on the edge of his brow.
“I see they improved your face.”

Sam’s brows rose slightly.

“Right back atcha.”

Dean looked at himself again and nodded in agreement. He tossed the towel into the sink and turned around, taking in the sight of them. He glanced at Elena and frowned.

“There’s Advil in my bag.” His gaze traveled down to her hands that were still bloody. “You should get cleaned up.”

Her eyes regarded him for a moment. Eventually, the corner of her mouth twitched upward.

“Thanks,” she said, and brushed past him. She figured she would let the brothers talk, anyway. Elena spent time in the shower just cleaning off all the gunk of being knocked out and half dragged on the floor, all the blood and grime swirling to the bottom of the shower and disappearing down the drain. She took care when she got out and bandaged her wrists, and though she didn’t mean to, she could hear conversation from the room.

“There’s nothing wrong with having hope, Dean.”

“Nah, hope doesn’t get you jack squat…I can’t expect Dad to show up with some miracle at the last minute. I can’t expect anyone to, ya know?”

Elena rested her forehead against the bathroom door. She listened to his voice with sadness. It was a far cry from the cocky teenager she used to know.

“The only one who can get me out of this is me.”

“…And me,” said Sam.

“…’And me?’” Dean’s tone was incredulous.

“What?”

“Deep revelation, having a real moment here and that’s what you come back with…’And me?’”

“…You want a poem?”

“Moment’s gone.”

Elena smiled and figured that was a good a time as any to come out. She dropped her used clothes in her bag and walked past Dean to get to his.

“Whoa, whoa, where you going with that?”

“You said I could have some Advil.”

“Oh…yeah. It's in the side pocket.”

“Sam, I found a first aid kit in the bathroom. You can wrap your wrists,” said Elena. Sam nodded.

“Thanks. That and a shower actually does sound good right now.”

He got up and grabbed a change of clothes before heading in there, shutting the door behind him.
Elena took advantage of his absence and sat on his bed after popping the pills in her mouth, and took a sip from a water bottle.

"Where'd you get that?" Dean asked her. He didn't remember her buying water when they stopped at that Seven Eleven.

"Your bag." A rare find of water instead of booze.

"Right." He shook his head. It really wasn't worth the argument, considering he stole Twix and Snickers from her "secret" stash of chocolate bars in her duffel on a semi-regular basis.

Dean turned on the TV and popped open a beer.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked.

"Stopped on the way back and bought a case." And there was the more likely purchase.

"Right."

Both of them occasionally sipped as they watched a soccer game. One team scored a goal and Dean nodded, pumping a fist. She didn't know if he was rooting for a team or was just excited to see someone score after five minutes of nothing. But him raising his arm made her catch a whiff of something.

"Hey, Dean?"

"Yeah."

"You stink." He took a long swig of beer.

"…That's just too bad, ain't it."

It wasn't long before Sam came out, patched up and looking more refreshed, and sat alongside Elena while animatedly watching the game. Eventually they'd call in a night and turn in, but for now, the moment was a little bit too peaceful to pass up.

Elena woke up on the floor between the couch and the coffee table. There was an ache in her back and a groan out of her mouth before she'd even realized what had happened. Then a lamp was on, chasing the darkness into the far corners of the room, and feet thudded heavily on the carpet until she was met with an alarmed and disheveled Dean. He still looked half asleep and she felt guilty for waking him up unnecessarily.

"Fuck…you okay?"

"She all right?" she heard Sam sleepily mumble.

She took the hand he offered and allowed him to grab the blankets her legs were tangled in while she seated herself back on the cushions. Her skin was cold yet slick with sweat, and she could still feel her heart racing.

"I'm okay, I…" She looked at her mussed surroundings and shrugged, "Guess I had a bad dream or something. I'm really sorry I woke you up."

He waved it off, but he was making that Dean look that said he didn't subscribe to bullshit.
"You sure?" he pressed.

"Yeah, Dean. Go back to bed, I'm fine."

Eventually, he begrudgingly returned to the bed and turned off the light. It wasn't long before the sound of him snoring softly reached her. Elena was wide awake now.

"You already feel like an orphan."

She shuddered and rolled over, checked her phone on the table. Only two hours and fifty three minutes left until morning.

Bobby was at a neighbor's house fixing their air conditioning. Sam was downstairs reading. Elena was in her room with the door closed.

Dean could bug his little brother until Sam got mad enough to start hitting him with his book, but that might end like the last time: rearranging Bobby's living room and denting Dean's forehead.

Or he could chance on Elena. If she wasn't napping, usually she wouldn't be doing much that would provoke bodily harm if he were to interrupt.

He went upstairs.

She allowed him to come in and he found her awake, playing with an ancient-looking record player. Dean had never noticed it before, but that might've been because it'd been camouflaged by Bobby's ancient book collection that continued even on the second floor.

"I brought this from back home. This was my dad's, back in the sixties," she said with her back turned to him. "But the records are mine. Especially this one."

She looked over her shoulder and held up the old vinyl for him to see, then placed it inside the turntable. The record crackled, coming to life as the first strains of music resounded in the small room.

"I know this song," he said. It was vaguely familiar, like it had been on the radio at some point…

"Billy Joel, 'And So it Goes,'" she supplied with a smile. He only saw it when she finally turned around.

Ah…yeah, he actually had no idea what song that was.

"Right."

She smiled knowingly.

"It's all right. It was one of his less appreciated songs." Dean raised a thoughtful brow.

"What makes it so special then?" he asked.

Elena paused, smiling softly as she listened to the simple, gentle melody.

"It's my favorite song," she admitted. "I used to listen to it at least five times a day around the time I first heard it."

"Sounds like when I got Led Zeppelin IV after saving up for a while."
"That's one of the best."

"You'd be right."

"Yeah…my dad and I listen to that one in the car…well, used to be a car."

Dean perked up at that.

"You mean the blue ’82 Chevy Camaro in the yard?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"I saw it when Sam and I first got here. That car's still got some life left in it."

"It was my mom's car," she confessed quietly. He looked at her for a moment, and gave her a small, but genuine smile.

"All the more reason to fix it up for her."

And that's how Dean, Bobby, Elena, and Sam (after they'd wrangled the book away from him) spent the afternoon. Bobby and Dean replaced the engine while Sam and Elena passed tools and cleaned the interior. Day by day, the car got worked on. New brakes, tires, new paint job, fixed the windows, add a spare tire in the trunk and the Camaro was a thing of beauty. So much so that Bobby hardly recognized the car he'd towed two weeks ago.

They celebrated by going out in the car to the nearest diner, where they almost got kicked out after Dean threatened a guy who came too close to it with triple-scoop of ice cream that was about to topple over on the new paint. Bobby could only shake his head and grab Dean by the back of his jacket before he "got his fool head shot in."

It was late enough by the time they got back that they were surprised to see John Winchester waiting for them in the Impala.

"Hey boys."

"Dad…you're on time," said Dean. He couldn't really believe it, but John was looking at him in slight confusion.

"Yeah, I'm on time. Say your goodbyes and get your stuff."

"…Yes, sir."

It was a long walk back inside. Longer than he thought it would be. It was even longer coming downstairs, where Elena stood leaning against the back of the couch. She'd been waiting for them. The brothers stopped in front of her, the only real sounds coming from where Bobby and John were talking outside.

She offered a semblance of a smile, and Dean returned it the best he could.

"Well, looks like we're out of here…" he said. "Any idea when your dad's coming to get you?"

"In a couple days," she said, glancing down at her shoes. "Maybe I'll see you guys around."

Dean doubted it, but he nodded anyway. Elena looked up just in time to have her arms full of Sam. Her arms came around his shoulders, and as she was only a little taller than him, she was able to hug him to her comfortably.
"We'll keep in touch," he promised, and backed away toward the kitchen with a smile. "I'm gunna grab a water bottle before we go."

Her eyes brightened a bit and slid over to Dean, who watched his brother go with a reserved, fond smile on his face. His eyes met Elena's, and he tucked her close to him with one arm while the other shouldered his duffel.

"Thanks for making these past two weeks not suck," she said with her cheek resting against his chest. He laughed and the sound traveled through her body.

"Glad I was able to entertain you," he remarked dryly, and pulled away with a grin. "Now you've got a car to come meet me when I'm back in South Dakota."

She smiled and shrugged. He saw something hidden in her eyes then, but couldn't quite pin down what it was.

"All you gotta do is call," she said, though she knew neither of them probably would.

"The fuck, Elena, don't try and bullshit me!" Dean's face was frustrated and concerned and Sam was trying to be patient and concerned, but she didn't want to deal with it.

"Look, I—"

"If you say you're fine...one more time," Dean warned, and she quieted.

"Just tell me the truth." The patter of rain outside was all that disrupted the heavy silence.

She sighed.

"So I'm having some trouble sleeping."

"Not five minutes ago, you were screaming like you were dying," Dean said flatly.

"How long have you been having nightmares?" Sam asked more gently. It took her a little while to answer, but with Dean's unyielding stare, she caved.

"Since we left Hill City."

"You could have said something," said Dean. She gave him a long look.

Yeah right, she thought. Yeah, by now Elena could count Sam and Dean as friends, but that didn't mean she was seriously about to spill her guts like a little girl. She was a hunter, and so were they.

He understood, but obviously didn't like it anymore than he liked being startled awake at four in the morning.

"You want to talk about it?" Sam offered. Her closed expression said it all.

"I just need some air." She got up and laced up her boots.

"Want one of us to go with you?" Sam asked tentatively, and as it turned out, that was the wrong thing to say. She looked over her shoulder and glared.

"I don't need my hand held, thanks," she scoffed. "Since when do you two treat me like a fucking five year old?"
Elena grabbed her cell and stuffed it in her pocket before walking out of the motel.

"She didn't take an umbrella," said Sam. Not that they had one.

"Did it look like she cared?" Dean retorted. Sam's sigh was enough to grate on his nerves, because that sigh coupled with that expression said a good part of Sam didn't feel right letting her go out like that. It grated on his nerves because he felt the same way.

He made sure to grab an extra hoodie before going out.

Dean didn't need to go far. Didn't even need the sweatshirt. Elena hadn't left the front of the motel awning, where she leant against a support pole with her arms crossed. She glanced over at him when he came to stand next to her, silently offering her the hoodie. She took it, because it was in the lower fifties outside and with the rain and the wind chill, she was cold.

"Lena—"

"Dean. I'm not doing this now."

"Don't tell me it's not eating at you."

She looked down at the ground, lips pressing into a line. But he knew the signs. He'd been there a year ago, when he got out of the hospital.

"You're angry…and it's there, just under your skin all the time," Dean said. He looked out to the rain-slicked road and watched the downpour of millions of silver bullets hitting the pavement. "Inside's empty. Even if you can laugh it's never the same."

Tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to blink, refused to let them fall.

"It's fucked up."

"I know," he agreed, but then she turned to look at him.

"It's fucked up because it wasn't supposed to happen like that." The tears finally fell and she took a shuddering breath. "It…I…"

Elena sighed and ran a hand over her face and through her hair.

"It's fucked up because I'm still…fucking angry. At him." Her lower lip trembled as she shook her head. She avoided Dean's gaze, not wanting to see the reproach that was surely there. "He'd push me away and push me away, especially after Mom. After everything I…"

She paused, closing her eyes to collect herself.

"If I'd just grilled Vick more the first time, I could've been there to have his back…If he'd told me where he was—or better yet, let me come with him!" she exclaimed, "He'd still be alive."

For those last two years, she'd hated him even as she tried to stay close, stay in touch in case he ever needed someone, ever needed what was left of his family.

She never had the chance to say she was sorry.

"And that…it kills me."
There was a long pause where neither of them spoke. The rain continued to fall, though it began to ease.

"It wasn't fair," Dean said, surprising her. There was no judgment in his expression, only understanding. Only now did he get why she didn't hate him and Sam for not being able to save her dad. She was too busy blaming Jack, but mostly, blaming herself.

She nodded and wiped the tears from her face.

"You don't have to...do this alone, you hear me?" His green eyes bore into hers. "Either way, it ain't easy, but...we've got your back, all right?"

Again, Elena nodded, dabbing at her face with her sleeve.

"Yeah...I hear ya."

He cracked a smile.

"Good. Let's get Sammy and grab some breakfast," he said, and steered her back to the room by her shoulder. "I want me some eggs and bacon."

With some extra hash browns and maybe some toast smothered in butter.

"Hmm, bacon," she hummed in agreement.

"Just don't steal all the ketchup this time."

"I told you a million times, there was only a little bit left!" She strained to look over at him and show with the measure of her fingers just how meager the amount in the bottle had been. "The waitress brought a new one over no problem."

"But then I had to wait, and by then everything was cold," he said. "You can't eat cold eggs!"

Elena sighed.

"If you're that choked up about some ketchup, you're in need of serious therapy," she said as he twisted the key into the lock and opened the door.

"Ha!" he said over his shoulder. "No amount of therapy in the world would cover it, save a straight jacket and a one-way ticket to the Nut House. But hey, as long as there's free cable and pie, sign me up."

She and Sam rolled their eyes.

"You and your goddamn pie," she muttered. He flashed her a grin and grabbed the keys to the Impala.

"You know it."
So apparently they were hunting zombies in Erie, Pennsylvania. Or maybe just one zombie that was very good at his job.

After interrogating demon after demon for the name of who held Dean's contract went sour, Sam figured Dean could use the break. That last one had been a little too mouthy, and it had ended like all the rest. They were too afraid to talk.

The medical practitioner who surveyed the body of a man who'd had his liver surgically removed showed them the very clean, very not savage incision. Whoever did it knew their way around a scalpel.

"So that kind of punches a hole in our zombie theory," Sam said when they were out of the medical room.

"Yeah, a zombie with skills—Dr. Quinn Medicine Zombie," Dean quipped, and while it made them laugh a little, it didn't bring them any closer to a logical explanation.

"Maybe we're on the wrong track looking up for hacked up corpses," Sam pointed out.

"What should we be looking for?" asked Elena.

"Survivors," said Sam. "This isn't zombie lunch, this is organ theft."

They talked to a guy who'd only had his kidney stolen—jumped from behind while feeding the car meter, probably knocked out or drugged and strapped to a table. Other than waking up a couple times from the agonizing pain and finally in a bathtub full of ice, he didn't remember much of anything that could help them.

So they went back to the motel of the night and did some research; Sam on suturing procedures, and Dean and Elena on the closest place with the best burgers.

"So I got a theory," said Sam.

"Yeah?" said Dean. Elena was too busy biting into juicy, tender heaven between buns.

"Yeah, talked to Mr. Giggles' doctor. Turns out his incisions were sewn up with silk."

"That's weird," Dean said through a mouthful of beef and bread and cheese.

"Nowadays it is, but silk used to be the suture of choice back in the early nineteenth century." Sam turned his laptop around so the other two could see.

"It was really problematic. Patients would get massive infections, the death rate was insane."

Dean scrolled through the pictures with mild distaste.

"Good times."

"Right, so doctors, they had to whatever they could to keep infections from spreading," said Sam.
"One way was maggots."

Elena made convulsive sounds while Dean made a look of disgust.

"Dude, I'm eating."

"It actually kinda worked because maggots, they eat bad tissue and leave the good tissue, and get this," Sam continued. He looked so excited at the prospect that Elena didn't want to bring down his obviously good mood, but he was making her sick. "When they found our guy, his body cavity was stuffed full of maggots."

"Dude, I'm eating," Dean said more forcefully and pushed the laptop back toward his brother. Sam gave a semi-apologetic look. "Okay, let me get this straight. So people are getting ganked, right?"

"Yeah," Sam nodded.

"A little Antiques Road Show surgery, some organ theft—why is this all sounding familiar?"

"Because you've heard it before," Sam said. The other two still looked confused. "When you were a little kid. From Dad."

Sam opened John's journal and slid it over to Dean. The page held a lot of scribbled description, but in the middle of the right page was a strange symbol Elena had never seen before.


"Right, no one hears from him in like, twenty years then all of a sudden people start showin' up dead," Dean finished.

"Dead or missing an organ or a hand, or some other kind of body part."

"Gruesome, as usual," said Elena as her eyes skimmed the pages.

"And it was actually working. He kept on going while parts would keep on ticking, and when they wore out he'd replace 'em," Dean continued. "But I thought Dad tracked him down and took his heart out."

"Yeah, I guess the doc must've plugged in a new one," said Sam.

"Oh, ick," Elena complained, and she pushed away her half-eaten burger. Dean chuckled and picked up his own, taking out a large bite.

"Kay, where's he doin' the deed?" Sam picked up the journal and skimmed the lines.

"According to this, Benton's picky about where he sets up his lab. He likes dense forest area with access to a river or stream, or some kind of fresh water."

"Why?" With this turn of conversation, Elena guessed it wouldn't be amiss to finish her burger. The sight of it reminded her she was still hungry. The smile edging onto Sam's face should've warned her.

"Because, that's where he likes to dump the bile, and intestines, and fecal matter," he finished, barely restraining a chuckle at how Dean was paling. "Still hungry?"

Elena just managed to swallow what was in her mouth, but she dropped the rest of it onto the bag.
Dean made gagging gestures, but the look of his sandwich…he couldn’t waste food like that.

"I could never stay mad at you, baby."

The generous bite he took made Elena cover her eyes.

They were scoping out the possible hideouts in Erie when Bobby called about a lead on Bela Talbot. Elena had never met her, but apparently she’d stolen the Colt, a one of a kind gun with one of a kind bullets, and she was very good at covering her tracks. But the lead was one Rufus Turner, former hunter turned hermit and salesman on the side, who got a line on Bela wanting to buy some things.

"I haven’t seen him in fifteen years, not the Christmas card type,” said Bobby. "I doubt she knows I know him…Canaan, Vermont."

"All right. Thanks, Bobby. We’re on our way," said Dean.

"And one other thing. Take a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue."

"…Okay," Dean said uncertainly, and he hung up the phone and turned to Sam and Elena. "Come on, we’re going after Bela."

"What?” said Sam. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on a second—"

"Come on, get your stuff."

"Whoa, wait. I think we should stay here and finish the case."

Dean laughed a bit.

"Oho, are you insane?” he asked, putting his jacket on.

"Dean, that was months ago, she probably sold it the second she got it," Sam pointed out. Dean seemed to consider this, adjusting his jacket.

"Well then I’ll kill her. Win-win."

"Wait, kill her?” Elena asked. Dean gave her a longsuffering look.

"I’ll give you the long, ridiculous fucking story in the car."

"Dean—"

"Sam. We’re going." Dean threw his duffel onto the bag and looked over at Elena.

She was torn. On one hand, the Benton thing was here, and he was hurting people. On the other hand, the missing Colt in Bela’s hands seemed the greater threat, if Dean’s reaction was any indication. More lives at stake.

She tentatively grabbed her bag with an apologetic look at Sam.

"No," he stubbornly refused.

"Why the hell not?"

"Dean, this is here, now. This is what’s going to save you!"
"What, chasing some Frankenstein?" Dean asked skeptically.

"Chasing immortality." That threw Elena and Dean for a loop, but Sam explained, "Look, Benton can't die. We find out how he did it and give it to you!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You have to die before you go to hell, right?" Sam began, "So if you can never die, then—"

"Wait, wait, wait a second," said Dean, coming closer to Sam. "Did you know this was Doc Benton from the jump?"

Sam hesitated, but said, "No."

Dean watched his brother closely. His bullshit detector was going off with red sirens.

"Look," Sam said eventually, "I was hoping—"

"So the whole zombie thing wasn't anything, you were lying to me?"

"I didn't want to say anything until I was sure, Dean," Sam said earnestly. "All I'm trying to do is find an answer here."

"No, all you're trying to do is chase...Slicey McHacky, here," said Dean, annoyance and anger raising his tone. "And to kill him? No, you wanna get him a freakin' beer, you wanna study him."

"...I was just trying to help."

"You're not helping," Dean said firmly, despite the hurt in Sam's expression. "You forget, that if I welch on this deal, you die. Guess what, living forever is welching!"

"Well, fine! Whatever the magic pill is, I'll take it too!"

"Oh, what is this, Sid and Nancy?" Dean dismissed and turned away. "No, it's just like Bobby's been saying. We kill the demon that holds the contract and the whole slate is clean, that's our best shot."

Sam regarded him incredulously while Elena remained silent, waiting for how this would play out. She understood what Sam was saying, but Dean had it right. Benton was a long shot, and Dean would never risk his brother's life for that.

"Even if you did have the Colt, who are you gunna shoot?" Sam asked. "You don't know the demon that holds the ticket."

"I'll shoot the hellhounds then, before they slash me up!" Dean shot back. He was beyond done with this conversation, and all it was doing was wasting time. "Now you comin' or not?"

"I'm staying here," Sam said resolutely. Dean stared at him in disbelief.

"No you're not. Because I'm not gunna let you wander into the woods alone to track some organ-stealing freak."

"You're not gunna let me?" Sam chuckled humorlessly.

"No, I'm not—"

"You're not gunna stop me." Dean's brows raised at the challenge. "Look, Dean. We're both after the
same thing here."

Dean nodded a bit, thinking how this could be resolved when his pain in the ass brother was being so fucking stubborn. Sam wasn't going to come with him. That was obvious. He knew Elena well enough that she wouldn't stay for this. She had her bag over her shoulder and was ready to go.

*Fine.*

"I know," he said, and grabbed his duffel. "But we're going. You want to stay? Stay."

Elena followed him to the door, casting Sam another apologetic look, and he nodded slightly. He wasn't mad at her, maybe a little annoyed she didn't take his side, but he understood her trust in Dean.

"Sammy, be careful." Dean's voice was quiet from the doorway, but it was both a warning and a plea. He turned around and met his brother's gaze.

"You too."

She waited until they were out if Erie to ask, "So who's Bela?"

"She's a conniving bitch."

"Ah."

She almost thought he wouldn't continue, but he actually explained how they had the misfortune to meet her, and how she continued to reappear and disappear from their lives, bringing complications and chaos with her. She was a thief, and selfish, and good at what she did. But above all else, she couldn't be trusted.

"Dean…she's a thief and all, and she's been a real pain in the ass. I get that. But killing her?"

"Look, you'll understand once you meet her," said Dean. "She doesn't care about anyone but herself, and she'll do whatever it takes to get what she wants. Things like morals don't fit in her quota."

She didn't have anything to say about that, so she remained quiet.

"However she tries to con us, don't buy it," he warned. "Just follow my lead once we find her, and we'll get this done."

"But what's in Canaan, Vermont then?"

Rufus Turner, apparently."

That scotch came in handy. For five minutes it was the third degree, but once the bottle came out as a peace offering, Rufus was happy enough to let them in.

"Bottoms up," Dean said once they were inside and sitting at a small table. Rufus chuckled as he poured for Elena and himself after Dean, and clanked glasses with them.

"You know, I don't even bother drinkin' unless it's this stuff," he confessed. "Nectar of the gods, I'm tellin' you."

"Yeah, it's a nice change, ya know," said Dean, "Most of my whiskey comes from a plastic jug."
They laughed, and Rufus put the cork back on the bottle.

"So, Bela was here because…"

"She wanted to buy a couple of things…which is gunna take me some time to round up."

"Where is she now?" Rufus hesitated.

"Kid, can I as you somethin'?"

"…Sure," Dean said.

"You got three weeks left," said Rufus. "Why are you wasting your time chasin' after that skinny, stuck up English girl?"

To say Dean and Elena were surprised wouldn't cover it. But unknowingly, their thoughts both ran to Bobby as the culprit.

"Who told you 'bout that?" Dean asked. Rufus sipped at his drink and leaned in.

"I know things," he said. "I know a lot of things, about a lot of people."

Dean's smile was beginning to fade at Rufus' tone. Elena could only stare at the man and watch for what Dean would do.

"Is that so?"

"I know ain't no piece shooter gunna save you."

Dean took a swig of whiskey.

"What makes you so sure?" he asked.

"'Cause that's the job, kid," said Rufus, his expression no longer jovial. "Even if you scrape yourself out of this one there's just gunna be something else down the road."

His gaze shifted to Elena.

"Folks like us? There ain't no happy endin'…we all got it comin'."

Dean nodded slightly, then offered a humorless grin.

"Well, ain't you a bucket of sunshine."

Rufus gave a mocking smile and leaned back.

"I'm what you have to look forward to if you survive." He drank nearly the end of his glass. "But you won't."

"It's not worth it, Lena. Just get in the car."

"That son of a bitch." She could kill something right now. Never had she met a more infuriating, callous person. The only thing holding her back from turning around and knocking through that old man's door was Dean's hand at the small of her back leading her to the passenger side of the Impala. Because he knew if he didn't follow her all the way to the door, she would turn around.
"Calm down," he said when he was in the driver's seat.

"Calm down? Don't tell me to fucking calm down, you asshole!"

Dean rolled his eyes and backed out of the driveway. They got the information they needed, strange as it was how Rufus got it, but they got it.

"I've got half a mind to go back there. And give me back my knife!"

"You'll get it back when you've got your head back on straight."

Elena made a sound of frustration and glared at him.

"You've got some damn nerve, Winchester."

He grinned and gave her a cursory glance.

"Not for nothin', I wouldn't waste a bullet on him either."

She crossed her arms and muttered something he pretended he didn't catch.

"I appreciate the thought." She looked over at him, and he smiled a little. "But we've got better things to do."

They parked behind the building so they wouldn't tip off Bela before she even got to the hotel room. Dean unlocked the trunk and pulled out his own gun, plus a spare to stick on the other side of his belt.

"Dean, give me your spare," said Elena. He looked over at her slowly, trying and failing to hide his confusion.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I can cover you better if I have one."

But now that he knew what it cost her every time she held one, he was reluctant.

"Lena, you don't have to—"

"Dean," she said firmly, but her eyes guarded. "When I ask for a gun, it's because I'm sure. Give me the damn gun."

"All right," he relented, and handed her his spare. She tucked it in the waistband of her jeans and threw the hem of her shirt over it. "We'll take the stairs."

They were able to break into her apartment and take Bela by surprise. Elena was a bit taken aback by Dean's ferocity, but considering everything he told her, she could understand the anger snapping at its leash. He anticipated the concealed gun behind Bela's back and he searched the apartment thoroughly while Elena kept her on gunpoint.

She was short, shorter than Elena with mousy brown hair. But her eyes were sharp and unreadable and cut through Elena as if she weren't standing there.

"I told you I don't have it."
"Yeah, I'm gunna take your word for it," Dean answered, sarcasm dripping from every word, and shoved a hand through Bela's suitcase.

A shot rang out, the sound reverberating throughout the room, and Dean spun around with his gun aimed. There was a hole in the door by her shoulder.

"He told you not to move," Elena said while keeping her gun aloft. She didn't have to look at her hands to know they were shaking. The shot had been an accident, despite what Dean told her about giving the woman a warning shot if she moved an inch, but Elena could aim.

Every muscle in her body was tense. Too tense. She didn't know this woman, how she would react, but she knew that even if Bela still wasn't afraid of Elena, right now, she was afraid of Dean. That was probably enough.

Bela regained her breath and sighed, and Dean nodded, going back to rifling through the expensive looking carrier bag.

"It's gone. Get on a plane if you must." Dean gave up on the suitcase and searched the room for any other kind of hiding spot. "Track down the buyer and you might find it."

Dean's jaw clenched. He moved toward her and aimed his gun, allowing Elena to stand down. She silently let go of her breath and found relief in that.

"Are you going to kill me?" Bela asked, staring at his face blankly.

"Oh yeah." Elena could hear in his tone and see that, while he was obviously pissed to the nth degree, he wouldn't shoot to kill.

"You're not the cold-blooded type."

"You mean like you? It's true. See, I couldn't imagine killing my parents," Dean said flatly. Elena caught a shift in the other woman's gaze.

"I don't know what you're talk—"

"Yes you do. You were, what, fourteen?" he asked knowingly. "Folks died in some shady car accident, police suspected a slashed break line, but it was all too crispy to tell."

Bela's expression remained indifferent.

"Cut to little Bela—oh, I'm sorry, Abby... inheriting millions."

Her face slackened, just a little.

"How did you even—"

"Doesn't matter."

Something flickered in her eyes before she looked down, let out a breath. It caught Elena's attention. But when Bela looked back up at Dean, the brief vulnerability was gone, replaced with a mild smirk.

"They were lovely people," she said, her accent lilting her words. "And I killed them. And I got rich. And I can't be bothered to give a damn."

Her smirk deepened.
"Just like I don't care what happens to you."

Elena blinked and Dean had Bela pressed against the wall, his arm pressing against her neck hard enough to be uncomfortable while his gun was poised against her throat.

"You make me sick."

Bela didn't blink.

"Likewise."

Dean backed away from her, this time aiming his gun true. He would've shot too. But his eyes caught the dried plant placed just over the door. It looked familiar.

He knew Elena was behind him. He knew she thought he was better than this. Maybe he was.

Or maybe she already had her express lane ticket downstairs.

"Nah," he lowered his arm with a smirk. "You're not worth it."

"Hey."

"Hey... did you get the Colt?"

"What do you think?" said Dean as they drove down the highway. Both he and Elena were tense and in sour moods after the crap-load of nothing they just got, but Dean had to check in, even if he'd rather avoid his brother's "I told you so" over the phone.

"Then Bela's..."

"No, no. She deserves to die a thousand times over, but I couldn't do it. I'm really screwed, Sammy," Dean admitted, despite Sam trying to tell him otherwise. "Ya know, Bela was a goose chase, Colt's gone... and this time I'm really screwed, Sam."

"... Maybe not... Dean, I found Benton's cabin."

"You okay? Was he there?"

"Yeah."

"Did you kill him?"

"... No."

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"Dean, please just listen for a second. I found his lab book, it has the formula."

"What, the 'live forever' formula?"

"Yeah!" He sounded optimistic, but Dean was less than enthused. Even so, he caved at Elena's insistence to put the phone on speaker so she could hear.

"All right, lemme guess. I've gotta drink blood out of a baby's skull?" Elena shot him a disgusted
"No," Sam laughed. "That's the thing, it's not black magic. There's no blood sacrifice or anything... it's just science, Dean. Very, very extremely weird science, but..."

"Whoa, wait a second. What are you saying?" Dean asked. "You think..."

"Yeah, I think it might be doable," said Sam. "I mean, I know we've hit a lot of walls, but I think this formula—I think it might be it. This could save you."

Dean was momentarily speechless as he and Elena looked at one another, eyes wide. But after a few seconds he forced his mouth to work.

"Okay, so this formula..."

"Right, well, we're not out of the clear yet. There are still some things that I don't get, but—"

And then Sam cut off, muffled sounds coming through the speaker. Dean and Elena looked at one another in both alarm and confusion.

"Sam?" asked Dean. When the muffled sounds became accompanied by some thrashing and rustled fabric, his voice became more urgent. "Sammy?"

Then the line cut off.

It took all of one second for Dean to step heavy on the accelerator.

Finding Sam was the easy part. The location of the old, broken down barn was in an open tab of Google Maps on Sam's laptop. But no matter how many times Dean shot the bastard, he wouldn't go down, would barely even flinch. Even when Dean stabbed the good old doctor right through the heart, that mismatched, ghoulish face only laughed and kept the knife in place as he stood. He grabbed Elena by the arm when she tried to sneak past him to help Sam, bloody fingers staining her skin, and shoved her hard into a mess of wooden crates against the wall.

"What part of immortality...do you not understand?"

Dean breathed easier when he heard her groan and begin to lift herself out of the broken wood. He smirked at Benton.

"Good. That means it should be pumping strong," he held up a bottle of chloroform, "sending this stuff all throughout your body."

"No..." Benton groaned, but his body eventually swooned and fell against a metal cabinet.

"Oh. Hiya, Doc," Dean said, leaning over their captive with a smirk. Sam and Elena stood on the other side of the table, making sure the restraints were strong. "Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey."

"Please..." Benton begged.

"Please, what? You've been killin' poor bastards for over a hundred fifty years and now you've got a request? Shut up."

"You don't understand, I can help you. I know what you need—"
"I'm gunna have to cut him up into little bits, this mortality thing is a real bitch," Dean said, looking up at the other two with a wide grin. Sam barely tried at a smile while they stood right next to the table he was just strapped to an hour ago.

"I can read you the formula," Benton hedged, piquing Sam's attention. "You know…immortality, forever young. Never dying."

Dean paused. It gave Sam the courage to try and get his brother's attention.

"Dean…"

"Sam," he warned. But Sam walked away into the other room, making Dean and Elena follow him.

"What?" Dean asked.

"I mean, we're talking Hell in three weeks not needing a new pancreas in half a century."

"Yeah, you can't exactly get those at a quickie mart," Dean shot back.

"It's not perfect, but it buys us more time to think of something better."

"…Yeah, but can you reverse that kind of quick-fix?" Elena pointed out. They were all desperate to find an answer, but she couldn't see Dean becoming...that. What was lying on that table, seemingly helpless, after over a century of massacring people to patch up his own skin and insides.

"We just need time, just please…think about it," Sam begged.

Dean shook his head.

"No."

Sam's eyes widened, his lips pursing in frustration.

"Dean, don't you want to live?"

"What he is isn't living," Dean refuted, "Look, this is simple."

"Simple?"

"To me, it is, okay? Black or white, human, not human." Dean walked back into the room, Benton's eyes following him. "See what Doc is, is a monster. I can't do it…I would rather go to Hell."

He dunked a cloth with some more chloroform.

"You don't understand," said Benton. "I can help. You."

Dean held the cloth over the Doc's mouth while Elena held down his shoulders, even as the old man struggled. Dean met his brother's eyes.

"I'm gunna take care of him. You can either help me or not, it's up to you."

"Enjoy forever, Doc," Dean said to the desperate, angry shouts coming from the refrigerator lying in a six-foot hole. Bolted with chains and a lock, neither Benton or his journal were getting out for a long time. Especially after they buried the hole in dirt.

They made a quick dash to the motel to get their stuff and head out, getting about two states over by
the time Dean called the motel room. Bela picked up.

"Hiya, Bela. Here's a little fun fact you might not have known: I felt your hand in my pocket when you swiped that motel receipt," said Dean.

"You don't understand—" She sounded pressured, desperate. But he didn't care.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I understand perfectly," he said. "You see, I noticed something interesting in your hotel room. Something tucked above the door. An herb? Devil's shoestring?"

He heard her sigh.

"There's only one use for that…holding hellhounds at bay. So you know what I did? I took another look at your folks obit, looks like they died ten years ago today." There was silence on the other end, but he knew she was listening. "You didn't kill 'em. A demon did your dirty work. You made a deal, didn't you, Bela? And it's come due."

Still silence.

"Is that why you stole the Colt? Tryin' to wiggle out of your deal? Our gun for your soul?"

"Yes," came the thick reply.

"But stealing the Colt wasn't quite enough, I'm guessing."

"They changed the deal…they wanted me to kill Sam."

"Really? Wow. Demons, untrustworthy," Dean said offhandedly. "Huh. Shocker…That's kind of a tight deadline too, what time is it?"

11:58.

"Aw, look at that. Almost midnight."

She finally broke down, and he heard her tears through the phone as she said, "Dean, listen, I need help."

"Girl, we are weeks past help."

"I know I don't deserve it—"

"You're right, you don't. But you know the bitch of the bunch is?" Dean asked over her soft sobbing. "If you would've just come to us sooner, and asked for help, we probably could've taken the Colt and saved you."

"I know, and saved yourself," she admitted. "I know about your deal, Dean."

"And who told you that?"

"The demon that holds it…she holds mine too. She says she holds every deal."

"She?" said Dean.

"Her name's Lilith."

"Lilith?" Dean repeated, shooting Sam a look. "Why should I believe you?"
"You shouldn't but it's the truth."

"This can't help you, Bela. Not now, why're you telling me this?"

"Because just maybe you can kill the bitch."

Go figure.

"I'll see you in Hell."

They stopped in South Bend, Indiana at some no name motel, in the middle of a busy town for once. But before the motel, Dean parked in front of a liquor store.

"Dean, what're we doing here?" Sam asked. If Dean wanted a drink, or hell, to get wasted, why didn't he just go to a bar?

"What does it look like, Sam? Goin' grocery shopping."

"Sure you don't just want to go to a bar?" Elena asked. That way it'd cost more to get more drunk than they could afford…she'd seen Dean hit the bottle a little too hard before on a night he thought she and Sam were asleep.

"No," he said, surprising her. Because usually he was all for the dive atmosphere; scoping the talent and kicking back. "But we're taking a night off."

And apparently, that meant beer and real whiskey, followed by tequila for the hard hitters. Mainly because he knew Sam couldn't resist tequila.

Pretty soon they were sitting at a plastic table in the middle of the motel room. Shots were being kicked back in doubles, triples, and Dean was more than a little light headed. He turned down the music that was playing after he realized that it wasn't his head pounding in that rhythm.

"Deeean," Elena whined as she examined a shot glass. "I'm bored. So bored."

"You drank half your size, what more you want?" he remarked dryly.

"What about a game?" Sam offered. Elena's face lit up, but Dean frowned.

"She's not gunna be able to focus on the cards," he said, thumb pointing in her direction. She gave him a peeved look through narrowed eyes.

"How dare you?" she hiccupped, "'M fine."

He only gave her a deadpan look.

"Fine…oh, what about that one," she said, "That one I can't remember it's name…you ask a question and the other person…that person tells the truth or has to do whatever they tell 'em to do."

"Truth or Dare?" Sam asked with a smile, trying to make sense of what she was saying.

"Yeah! That one," she said. Dean groaned.

"Oh come on, it'll be fun!"

"Lena…"
"Please, please, pleeeease, Deeean," she begged. He grimaced as she put all her weight on his shoulder and clung there, making herself sufficiently in his personal space. "It'll be like, a real sleep'ver!"

Because he had the practice of holding his liquor much better than her, he actually considered the request with a good amount of clear-headedness, though there was that part of his brain that was a bit fuzzy. He had to focus harder than he was used to if he seriously wanted to consider the probable consequences of what the game would bring. But because he wasn't really in a position to be thinking of later consequences,

"Sammy, you wanna play?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"Truth or Dare," Elena said excitedly. Sam looked tipsy, but not quite drunk. He'd hit the tequila light this time around, not wanting the hangover he'd had the last time. So he raised a brow at his brother.

"Really?"

Dean shrugged with a deadpan expression. Meanwhile, Elena was bouncing in her seat. She took one of her empty beer bottles (of which there were surprisingly many) and set it in the middle of the table.

"Who wants t' spin first?" she asked.

"You can, Lena," Sam said, smiling in amusement. She was clearly a happy drunk.

"Okay!" And then her face was pure concentration as she positioned the bottle just right, then spun. It landed on Sam.

"Kay, Truth or Dare. And if you take the dare you can't change your mind!" she warned.

"Hmm," Sam thought on it for a second, taking a sip of beer for good measure. "Think I'll go with truth."

Elena bit her lip with a pensive look on her face. Her head cocked to the side, and the brother's eyes met over their drinks.

"Let's start off easy," she said. "What was the craziest thing you ever did?"

Sam grinned, while Dean snorted. The memory came easily enough.

"We've done a lot of crazy things," Dean said.

"But it's gotta be when I jumped off the roof when I was little. Dean said I was Superman and I could fly." Elena gasped, looking at Dean in horror.

"He was dumb enough to believe it," Dean remarked, taking another large gulp of whiskey even though it burned.

"You would be the one telling people to jump off bridges," she murmured, but gestured for Sam to spin next.

"Here we go," Dean griped when it landed on him. And before Sam could ask, "Dare."
His brother raised both brows, an "are you sure you're sure?" look.

"Go ahead. Bring it on," Dean goaded him. Maybe that had been a bad idea. That's how he found himself with his fingernails painted red. Plus, there were sparkles in it. **Sparkles.**

"And that's gunna be a bitch to get off later," Elena said, her speech only slightly slurred. "Gets red all over your fingers."

"…Well that's just great."

Dean hadn't been the best champ throughout the whole process, but on the bright side, he was ready to take his turn. When it landed on Elena he was half disappointed, but also half glad. He could get her back for making him look like a drag queen.

"Truth or dare, Shortstop," he taunted, and she almost leaned over to hit him on principle. Well, she would've, but her depth perception was off by a mile and the attempt almost had her on the floor tumbling out of her chair. Sam and Dean helped her up even though Dean was having a hard time while laughing so hard, but eventually she was able to answer, "Truth."

"Okay…" His expression turned mischievous, his smirk making Elena nervous. "How'd you get your cherry popped? And when."

Her eyes widened large as saucers. Sam spluttered into his beer.

"**Dean!**"

"Why you wanna know? 'Sides, that's two questions," she complained.

"It's a valid question! No take backs," Dean said firmly with a grin, pointedly ignoring Sam.

"Ugh, fine you perv…perv. I was," she thought hard, "Eighteen, and we'd been together for…I think a year. Dad was always gone, so we went to my house after seeing a movie. One minute we're making out on my sofa, next we're in m' room and I can hear the neighbors' dog barking at us the whole time. Wasn't exactly date of the year."

Sam was a bit more successful at restraining a snicker than Dean, forcing it back into an amused smile.

"You need the play-by-play or are you good without the hot and heavy details?" she asked sarcastically. Dean shot her a wry look.

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks."

"Kay. Well then, it's my turn."

The game went on for several rounds, gaining higher in stakes as they drank. It went from Dean admitting to getting caught stealing from a department store by the police to Elena revealing that while on a solo hunt, she once pretended to be a hooker to catch a shapeshifter that was very particular in his tastes.

And yes, Dean, she still had the clothes. No, asshole, she wouldn't give him a private demonstration.

Sam having to strip down to his boxers was a highlight, at least for Elena. Dean had thought it would be funny to see his little brother embarrassed, and it was, until Elena, inebriated as she was, couldn't stop staring at the younger man's chest and abdomen. Sure, she didn't usually think of Sam like that.
But she was a woman. She had eyes.

"It's a bit cold in here," Sam complained. Dean was tempted to make Sam put his clothes back on, just because he was sick of that weird look on Elena's face being made toward his brother. But she spoke up before he could.

"You gotta live with your dare 'til we end the game!" she exclaimed, and gestured Dean to take his turn.

"…All right, Elena. Truth or Dare."

"Hmm…don't want end up like Sam. Truth." Not that either Sam or Dean would ever make her strip to her underwear in front of them, but it managed to make Sam blush.

"I dunno…you got a phobia?" he asked. She blinked.

"Phobia…like a biggest fear?"

"Sure."

"Umm…" This one she obviously knew, but she looked like she was having a hard time saying it. He realized that may be a little too hard for her, considering what he knew of her and her past, so he tried to correct the situation.

"That's a dumb question, lemme think of a better one—"

"No…it's okay," she said, a bit quieter and less enthusiastic as before. "Um…I don't really like the dark all that much, if I'm by myself. Being alone in the house, I used t' leave the hallway light on at night."

"Really?" Sam asked. He couldn't say he'd never been there when he was little, knowing about the things they did, the stories their dad would sparingly tell them to make sure they knew how to protect themselves while on their own.

"Yeah," she said, then brightened as it was her turn to spin. She liked watching the brown bottle go round and round. It made her dizzy to look at for too long though.

"Dean, Truth or Dare?" Dean sighed.

"Truth, I guess."

"Okay, I'ma think of a good one…" She bit her lip in concentration and pulled at a strand of her own hair. Dean could see she was getting tired. Good thing too. That meant this could end soon.

"Dean… you ever been 'n love?"

Dean swallowed the whiskey too hard and had to rub his chest for the feeling of heart burn to fade. Sam fell oddly silent, watching his brother's reaction.

"Um…you serious?" He met her eyes then, light grey and piercing, and strangely serious for how much alcohol she'd consumed. He wanted to sigh, to turn away from that stare. It was too much. But he kept her gaze.

"Once."

"What happened?"
His mouth curved slightly into a deprecating smile.

"Didn't work out."

"I'm sorry." Her words were slurring, but her eyes were honest. His smile became slightly more genuine.

"It's okay."

She smiled, but her blinking started slowing, and she yawned.

"Finally tired?" he asked.

"...Yeah."

Dean looked over at Sam, who nodded and reached down to get his clothes from the floor. Sam blearily made his way to the bathroom and shut the door behind him. The guy had been drunk, but he was a bit more sober now than he had been. It was Elena that probably needed help.

"Can you make it to the bed?" he asked, his head clearing somewhat of its alcohol-induced fogginess.

"I thought I had...couch."

"Nope, you're getting the bed tonight. I'll take the couch," he said, and moved over to her. Despite her protests, he lifted her out of the chair bridal style. She held onto him tightly, curling her body closer to him.

"Don't worry, I gotcha," he assured, and started walking her over to the bed with the goal of not losing his balance.

"Dean...Dean-o."

"Hmm."

"You've got a grouchy face sometimes..." Her finger poked his cheek, and he raised a brow, fighting a smile. "But I like it."

"'S that so?"

"Yeah...some p-ple think you're...like that all the time. But I know th' truth."

He laid her down on the bed and stretched the covers over her.

"What's that?" he humored her.

"You're a good guy," she smiled lazily. "Really good, Dean-o..."

"Hmm, thanks," said Dean, finally letting the smile loose. He was about to move away from the bed and let her sleep, but to his surprise, she grabbed onto his hand.

"Dean..." Her voice was small and pleading, and he was surprised to see unshed tears in her eyes. "I don't want you to go."

"I'm right here, Lena. Just gunna go to the couch—"
"No. I mean, I don' want 'em t' take you…like Bela."

He stilled. His smile faded and she gripped his hand tightly with both of hers.

"I don't," she insisted, blinking glassy eyes. It kind of felt like a sucker punch to his gut. "…I don' wanna miss you. 'Nd I don' want Sam t' miss you. So…you don' give up, kay?"

He looked down at her, trying and probably failing to contain the emotions he felt roiling inside him. When he made no move to answer, Elena shook his hand a bit.

"Kay?"

"…Okay."

"Promise?"

Only then did a tear escape, rolling down her cheek. He wanted to sigh.

_This is why I let her come?_

He should've known she'd get hurt in the end.

"Promise."

"…Okay."

And just like that, she was smiling and letting go of his hands to burrow into the covers. He brushed strands of hair away from her forehead. She hummed happily and pulled the sheets close to her body.

"Kay…" She snuggled into her pillow and was basically out. He shook his head and made his way over to the couch, and didn't bother with all the empty bottles at the table.

_I'll make Sam clean up that shit in the morning._

Sam made his way to the only empty bed. He'd changed and brushed his teeth, but he didn't feel comfortable. He saw Dean, in a deep sleep on the sofa, face peaceful for once, but still drawn. Sam wanted to scream. Throw things. Shoot things. Destroy something with his bare hands, because in three weeks, he would lose his big brother. It wasn't fair. Not after his mom, after Jess. After his dad.

He glanced over at Elena, also sleeping soundly. She'd had it right. Sam didn't want to miss his brother.

He scrubbed at the sting in his eyes and got into bed, falling heavily on the pillow.

_It's not fucking fair._
IX: Line of Fire

For the past week or so, she'd had a sense...oh, let's call it a vibe, of something. Something she wasn't supposed to be seeing, but it was there. Like how conversation (that sounded heated) between the boys would suddenly stop when she entered the room. Or maybe, more specifically, it was how Sam wouldn't quite meet her eyes, Dean almost overcompensating for normal. Or at least, what had become their normal in the past month and a half. Though now with only one week left, they were more urgently searching for Lilith, leaving no lead unchecked and letting no demon by without asking a few questions.

Elena also noticed that as days passed, Dean got more and more edgy, and understandably so. She just didn't know that it was for more reasons than one. Not until they'd been on the road for about ten hours, and she woke up from her doze. She saw the directional sign on the side of the road and yanked her headphones off. They were in Iowa, heading north.

"Dean, where are we going?" She'd learned never to say things like, "I think we're going the wrong way," or "weren't we supposed to make that turn half an hour ago?"

At least not when Dean was driving.

"Southwest."

"That sign said we just past Coralville, going northwest."

"What?" She couldn't see most of his face, but the eyes that peered at her through the rearview mirror were dismissive. "Weren't you sleeping all of one minute ago?"

"Didn't we agree on Colorado?" she pressed. When he didn't answer, she glanced at Sam. He was staring resolutely at the road, arms crossed over his chest. That vibe was a full on siren now.

"Would someone tell me what the hell is going on?"

She saw Dean's hands grip the wheel tighter, and something dropped in the pit of her stomach. Her expression hardened, lips pulling in a thin line.

"Stop the car."

"...Elena—"

"Stop the goddamn car!" She reached for the door handle, and that's when Dean finally acted, swearing and jerking the car to the side of the road before she could rip the hinges off the door. By the time he and Sam got out of the car, Elena was on her way over to Dean in purposeful strides. Sam came around the other side and stood by his brother.

"You asshole! You're taking me to Sioux Falls," she hissed. "After everything—"

She made an aggravated sound and forced herself to plant her feet, even though her hands were itching to slap him over the head.

"Look, sorry we didn't tell you right from the jump, but it's easier this way—"

"Easier?" she laughed. "Well fine. If I'm such a liability, I wouldn't want to get in your way."
Dean sighed, while Sam shook his head.

"That's not what he meant," he tried to placate, but she shook her head.

"You know, the whole reason why I came was to help you—"

"And you did." Green eyes met angry, slate gray. "But it's enough, Lena."

"What do you mean, 'it's enough?' We're still trying to track down Lilith!"

Dean's thoughts trailed to the sheriff's station Monument, Colorado. How hard they had to fight to get out alive. How in the end, they'd fought to save no one but themselves. Because one demon had found them and blown up the entire building.

"I'm saying it's enough for you," he said firmly. "You're not coming."

There was shock in her eyes, but Dean smothered any guilt that was cropping up. He'd rather she hate him and be alive than dead trying to save a dying man.

"And why the fuck not?" she demanded.

"Because I told your dad's best friend that Sam and I'd make sure you were okay," he said, loudly enough to quiet her. "We almost got you killed, Elena."

He'd apologized to Jack's grave that night, both for failing to save him and for bringing his daughter back into the supernatural world. But the closer they got to finding the bitch that sent him to Hell, the more Dean realized how far in Elena was getting with them. This was only supposed to be a few weeks, not a few months. She was supposed to go back to her life, not put it on hold for a guy she hadn't seen or heard from in years. Despite what she thought, Elena didn't owe him any favors. She'd risked her life enough for him as it was.

"And Lilith?" he said. "Not your garden variety demon. Makes that bitch we ganked in Utah look like a preschooler."

"It's not that we don't want you with us," said Sam. "It's that we shouldn't."

Elena's expression was stony. Dean had never seen it like that before, or at least not directed at him.

"Let me tell you something," she said flatly. "You're not my father, but you're sure acting a lot like him. I'm not a little girl that needs protecting."

"Maybe not," he allowed. "But you and I—we made a deal, remember?"

"I'm not dragging you into this any more than I already have, he into the hellish nightmare that was his life—especially when his nightmares were about to become reality in a little over a day. Especially when she had a chance to get out, no matter what Rufus said. Even now Dean remembered that nice little conversation with brutal clarity.

"Folks like us? There ain't no happy endin'...we all got it comin'."

If he did let her keep going with them, she'd never be able to get out again, and she didn't get it.

And maybe when this was over, Sam could have a shot at the normal life he wanted. He secretly hoped Elena would stay friends with Sam and keep in touch with Bobby, sure, but go home.

"You know," she said, the anger in her eyes sparking. "You really ought to stop making deals."
His eyes widened marginally, teeth grinding and jaw clenching in effort not to let his temper take control. But damn it, she wasn't making it easy.

"I said, you're done."

"I say, fuck that."

"Why are you in such a hurry to get yourself killed, huh?" he shouted.

"You don't get it, do you?" Her hands went to her hips and her voice rose to match his. "When people care they don't just walk away, especially when it's the shit that matters. You taught me that. So either I get back in the car with you and the three of us drive to Colorado, or leave my ass here and I'll catch my own damn ride."

For a long, tense moment, it was a battle of wills. Dean wanted to shake her by the shoulders until she saw sense, but before he could say anything, his phone started buzzing loudly in his pocket.

"...Bobby?"

"I've got a lead."

"New Harmony, Indiana," said Bobby. The giant pendulum looking thing had its arrow pointed to the small town on the map, but Elena hardly believed it was that easy. Sam was ready to jump in the car and go after Lilith, while Dean popped bubble after bubble as to why going in halfcocked was a terrible idea.

"I mean first of all, we don't even know if Lilith holds my deal," he started, "We're seriously going off of Bela's Intel? When that bitch breathes the air comes out crooked, okay? Second, even if we could get to Lilith, we have no way to gank her. And third, isn't this the same Lilith that wants your giant head on a pike, should I continue?"

"Well aren't you just bringin' down the room," Bobby remarked. "It's a gift."

"Okay, then what are we supposed to do?" Sam asked in aggravation.

"Just 'cause I gotta die doesn't mean you have to, all right? Either we go in smart or we don't go in at all."

"Okay fine. If that's the case, I have the answer," said Sam. Dean gave him a skeptical look.

"You do?"

"Yeah, a surefire way to confirm it's Lilith, and a way to get us a bonafide demon-killing weapon—"

"Damn it, Sam, no," Dean rebuffed, and turned away from him. Elena looked over at Sam, and saw that he was completely done with what he probably saw as Dean refusing to help himself. Elena knew Dean was only doing it for their sake, but what Sam proposed was actually the most logical, even if the last thing they wanted to do was deal with demons to gank demons.

"We are so past arguing," Sam snapped, "Dean, I'm summoning Ruby."

"The hell you are!" Dean exclaimed, turning back around to face his brother. "We've got enough problems as it is!"
"Exactly. And we've got no time and no choice either."

"Come on, man, she is the Miss Universe of lying skanks, okay? She told you that she could save me, huh? Lie," Dean countered. "She seems to know everything about Lilith but forgot to mention, oh right, Lilith owns my soul."

"Okay, fine. She's a liar," said Sam. "She's still got that knife—"

"Dean," Bobby cut in, where Elena remained quiet. She never knew how to butt in when they got like this.

"For all we know she's working for Lilith!"

"All right, well give me another option, Dean! I mean, tell me what else is there?"

"Sam's right," said Bobby.

"No, damn it!" said Dean, making the other two quiet. He shook his head. "No…we are not making the same mistakes again."

His eyes flicked from his brother, to Bobby, and then Elena.

"I'm done with making deals," he said. Elena's mouth dropped open a little, shame making her drop her gaze. "If you want to save me, find something else."

He went to Bobby's table where small piles of books littered the surface and sat down, opening a book to start researching again.

"Where are you going, Bobby?" Sam asked while the older hunter threw on his jacket behind him.

"I guess to…find something else," he said, and went out the door. Sam looked down at Elena and saw the worry in her eyes. The fact that she was standing there, even when they'd tried getting her here under other motives, was a testament to how much she was willing to give to save his brother and be with them in this. But Dean had been right about one thing. No matter how they did it, it wouldn't be by bringing Bobby or Elena down with them.

"Can you stay here and help my brother? I'm going to see about something," he said quietly. She looked up at him knowingly.

"Sam…"

"We're going to save him, Lena." His tone was firm, but she could see the desperation in his eyes. "We have to."

Elena bit her lip and shook her head…but let him leave. If there was a chance that Sam was saving Dean by doing what he was going to do, and she stopped it, Sam would never forgive her. But if he was wrong, and it cost them everything…

She would never forgive herself.

For ten minutes they flipped through dusty books in silence, occasionally reading off something interesting, but going back to skimming when they realized the information wasn't useful. Every minute that passed by was one that Elena wondered (with a growing sense of unease) what Sam was doing. She knew he was somewhere outside, and part of her wanted to blurt it out to Dean already.
But the man was so focused on the page he was reading, who was she to interrupt him? Besides, like she really wanted to be the one he got pissed off at for letting Sam go in the first place.

"Okay, so we know this keeps hellhounds at bay," Dean said, gesturing to the page. She looked over and saw a picture of an herb and recognized it as Devil's Shoestring. "But for how long?"

"Hmm, I think for a few hours," she said. "Maybe half a day."

"There's gotta be something that lasts longer than that."

"Well, I've got a volume on herbs and spells here. Let me comb through it," she said, and peeled back the worn leather cover. The dust it spread into the air made her wrinkle her nose, and after turning a few pages past the table of contents, she sneezed, unwittingly blowing more dust around. She groaned, and heard Dean's small chuckle. She looked over at him through narrowed eyes.

"What are you laughing at?" He was looking down, trying not to smile. A grin tugged at the corner of her mouth.

"Nothin', just you getting snot all over Bobby's books."

"Oh, shut up." She grabbed a napkin from under a beer bottle and blew her nose.

"Classy," he remarked. She rolled her eyes, but otherwise ignored him. "You find anything yet? Or are you too busy coating the upholstery?"

Elena balled up the napkin and threw it at him. He laughed even as he made a face of disgust when he caught it, looking at the crumpled, poor excuse for a used tissue in his hand.

"This is gross," he declared, and chucked it haphazardly across the table.

"No more than you and your brother's laundry when it's been in your gym bags for weeks," Elena said with a grimace. "Your socks—ugh. You must reuse them like, three times."

"Nah. Like five at least."

She made a sound of revulsion and he cracked a grin. It didn't take long for it to fade.

"Where is Sam, by the way?" he muttered. "I saw him head out back…"

Dean checked his watch, and that uneasy feeling she had came back again. I fucking knew it, he thought, with that sinking feeling that came when he didn't want to be right.

"It's been…what, fifteen, twenty minutes?" he asked. She nodded, trying to immerse herself in the tome. But she could practically feel Dean's eyes on her, analyzing her face and body language like he did all. The fucking. Time. It annoyed the shit out of her because she knew he was reading her like a book.

"…Elena."

"What?"

"Where's Sam?"

Her eyes flicked up to his, and the question vanished, replaced with anger.
"Damn it, Elena!" He got up out of his chair so fast that the legs squeaked against the wood floor.

"You're fucking dying!" she exclaimed, standing up with him. "You got any better ideas?"

"Than calling that…anything would be better!" he said, gesturing widely with his arms. "I thought you knew that."

"Yeah, it's not the best, Dean," she conceded. "But it's all we've got short of the spices in the pantry and some table salt!"

Dean made a sound of frustration, clenching his fists.

"You don't want anyone of us to get caught in the crossfire, I get it," said Elena. "But we don't have to trust her—"

"And what, just use her? That's exactly what Sam said before. And guess what?" said Dean. "She lied better. That's what demons do. They lie."

He shook his head.

"I expected this from Sam. He's too fucking stubborn for his own good. But you?"

"Ooh, don't do that," she glowered, pointing at him. "Don't. I'm only here because of you. So don't you dare try to make me feel bad about helping your brother save you from eternity in Hell!"

Dean's glare softened, just a little. Now both of them were pissed and it wasn't getting them anywhere.

"Fine," he said tightly. "Then let's go find him."

Elena followed him out the door and around the back. They didn't find Sam around the junkyard, but the farther around the house they went, the more they could hear conversation. It sounded heated, and sounded like it was coming from the old shed where Bobby's used to do most of his maintenance on the cars that would come in. It was big enough that it could've been a barn at some point before Bobby bought the house, but now it was much too far gone to house any livestock, let alone any cars.

Dean signaled to her, and she stayed close behind him.

"You can save your brother…and I can show you how."

"So that's you, huh? A slutty little Yoda."

Sam turned around slowly, inwardly wanting it to be anyone else but Dean behind him. He almost sighed at seeing Elena. He should've known Dean would get it out of her sooner than later.

"Dean," said Ruby, her blue eyes less than amused. "Charming as ever."

"Oh, I had a feeling you'd show up," he said, drawing more out of the shadows with every step. "'Cause I knew Sam wouldn't listen."

Sam shifted, and he glanced over at Elena who gave him a half apologetic look.

"But you're not gunna teach him anything," Dean finished. "You understand me? Over my dead body."
"Oh, well you're right about that," she said, brows raised.

"What you are gunna do is give me that knife," he said. "Then you're gunna crawl back into whatever slop you came from, and never bother me or my brother again. Are we clear?"

"Your brother is carrying a bomb inside of him and we'd be stupid not to use it."

"Dean look, just hold on—"

"Sam. Don't," Dean warned, and Sam closed his eyes. He knew this was how Dean would react, he knew. But Sam would try the hardest he could to make his brother see reason.

"Come on, man, what are you, blind? You can't see that this is a trick?" Dean asked.

"That's not true—" Ruby interjected, but he ignored her.

"She wants you to give into this whole demonic, psychic, whatever okay? I mean, she probably wants you to become her little, antichrist superstar."

"I want Lilith dead," she corrected. "That's all."

Dean nodded with a mocking smile. One that disappeared with the flat question, "Why?"

"I've told you why!"

"Oh, right yeah. Because you were human once. And you like kittens and long walks on the beach."

"You know, I am so sick of proving myself to you," Ruby said, getting closer to Dean. He only smirked at her. "You want to save yourself? This is how, you dumb, spineless dick."

Dean nodded and turned, began to walk away, but spun around and punched Ruby square in the jaw. It drew blood, and despite Sam's urging not to, she swung back, catching Sam with swift jabs when he tried to pull her back. Slamming his face against her knee, she let him sink to the ground. She then blocked Elena's punch and threw her against the wall, but had to duck away from Dean. She aimed a kick at his abdomen, sending him backpedaling. Ruby followed it up with a few punches that had him on the ground, then a swift kick to his stomach. He rolled away and got up, until she kicked him down again. He looked up with a smirk, though his teeth were bloody.

"What the hell are you grinning at?" Ruby asked, breathing heavier. He started getting up and held her knife in his hand.

"Missing somethin'?" She glared angrily.

"I'll kill you, you son of a bitch."

A force stopped her from coming at him. She was confused until looking up, coming face to face with a Devil's Trap.

"Like I said," Dean's smirk deepened. "I had a feeling."

He began to walk away from her and held out a hand to Elena, who accepted it, getting up shakily. She'd slammed her head against the stone wall.

"Wait," said Ruby. "You're just gunna leave me here?"
"Let's go, Sam."

They started the long climb up the stairs.

"Oh, so you're just too stupid to live, is that it?" she said. "Then fine. You deserve Hell. And I wish I could be there, Dean. I wish I could hear the flesh, sizzle off your bones. I WISH I COULD BE THERE TO HEAR YOU SCREAM!"

"Yeah, well I wish you'd shut your pie hole," he shot back. "But we don't always get what we want."

"Hey, Bobby. When'd you get back?"

Elena trudged into the kitchen and grabbed an ice pack from the freezer. He did a double take from his seat at the table.

"What the hell happened?"

She joined him at the table and pressed the pack to her temple.

"Ruby's a bitch."

"...I see."

"Any luck?"

"A big fat nope."

"Great. Well, on the bright side, we've got the magic knife." Bobby raised a brow.

"What are the boys doin' then?" he asked.

"Cleaning themselves up now, but I think we were waiting for you before taking off," she said. "Oh shit, they asked me to come over here to get...some beers."

Bobby gave her a skeptical look.

"Oh yeah?" he asked. "Then why do I hear a motor runnin'?"

She paused, listened. Then…

*Those fuckers.*

Elena pursed her lips and started to get out of her chair, but Bobby got up at a more sedate pace, gesturing for her to calm down.

"They ain't goin' anywhere," he said, and held up what she was sure was a car part, though she didn't know what it was. Probably something important. "Let's go round 'em up then."

Bobby rapped on the driver's seat window, startling Dean.

"Where you think you're going?"

Looking very much caught red-handed, Dean looked from Bobby to Sam, and the two eventually
got out of the car. Dean almost grimaced at Elena's steaming glare, but instead he focused on Bobby's expectant look.

"We got the knife."

It didn't look like he cared all that much.

"And you intend to use it without me. Without Elena." He gave the brothers a dry look. "Do we look like ditchable prom dates to you?"

"No, Bobby, of course not," Sam said with a shake of his head.

"This is about me and Sam, okay?" said Dean. "This isn't your fight—"

"The hell it isn't!" Bobby exclaimed. He stepped towards Dean as his anger and frustration finally broke through. "*Family* don't end in blood, *boy.*"

And then as soon as it had come, the anger ebbed back when Bobby stepped away.

"Besides," he said. "You need…all the help you can get, really."

"Bobby—" Dean protested.

"You're playing wounded. Tell me, how many hallucinations have you had so far?"

Sam and Elena looked to Dean in both confusion and suspicion as to why he hadn't said anything, because if the look on his face was any indication, Bobby hit the nail on the head.

"How'd you know?"

"Because that's what happens when you've got hellhounds on your butt," Bobby snapped. "And because I'm smart."

He handed Dean the missing car part with a fake smile.

"I'll follow," he said, and headed toward his car. "Don't be stopping to pee every ten minutes either."

Dean resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

That left the two with Elena.

Dean sighed when she remained standing with her arms crossed, an expectant look on her face.

"Look, we're sorry—" She brushed past him and climbed into the backseat of the car. He shared an exasperated look with Sam before replacing the part and getting back into the driver's seat. Dean only flinched a bit at a slap to the back of the head, while Sam yelped a little. He kind of half expected it. And the muttering from the back seat.

"Shut up and drive."

He rolled his eyes and pulled out of the salvage yard.

Elena tried for all she was worth to tune out Sam's "in case this doesn't work out" speech. It would just be reminding her with more clarity what was already nagging at her. She wasn't surprised when Dean shut that down quickly. But she couldn't stop the smile tugging at her lips at the two of them
warbling out Bon Jovi's *Dead or Alive*.

Then they heard police sirens behind them.

"We getting pulled over?" Sam asked. Dean checked his left side mirror.

"I've got a busted taillight," he said. "It's not like we're in a hurry or nothing."

The policeman stepped up to the driver's side once they were pulled over, a man in his mid-fifties asking for Dean's driver's license and registration.

"You do realize you've got a taillight out, Mister…Hagar."

"Yes…yes, sir," said Dean. He looked up at the officer and paused. "You know, I've been meaning to take care of that…as a matter of fact—"

He opened the door sharply, right into the policeman's knee. The guy shouted out in pain and fell to the ground.

"Dean!" Sam and Elena called out to him, shocked still for a moment before they jumped out of the car. But Dean stabbed the man under his chin, shocking the demon inside to death.

Bobby jerked to a stop behind them and came running.

"What the hell happened?" he exclaimed.

"Dean just killed a demon," Sam said, still looking stunned.

"How did you know?" Elena asked. Dean looked back at them wide eyes.

"I just knew," he said, but she saw the fear there, both in his eyes and the slight shake of his voice. "I could see his face. His real face, under that one."

…*Great,* she thought.

"So you're seeing demons now?" Sam asked as they did their best to hide the police car in leaves and branches. They'd already buried the body.

"I've been seeing a lot of things lately," said Dean. "But nothin' like this."

"Actually, it's not all that crazy," said Bobby. Dean paused and gave him a disbelieving look.

"How is it not that crazy?"

"Well you've got what, five hours to go? You're piercing the veil, Dean. Glimpsin' the B-side."

Dean blinked at him.

"A little less New Agey, please."

Bobby rolled his eyes.

"You're almost Hell's bitch," he said. "So, you can see Hell's other bitches."

*Bobby.* Elena gave her uncle an incredulous look, while Dean smiled mockingly.
"Thank you," he nodded. Bobby shrugged as if to say, "What more do you want?"

"Well, it's actually coming pretty handy," Sam commented. Elena gave him the same look she gave Bobby.

"Yeah, well, glad my doomed soul's good for something."

"Damn right it is, Lilith's got demon's crawlin' all over town," said Bobby. "We can't let 'em sound the alarm. If she knows we're here we're dead before we've started."

"Oh yeah, this is a terrific plan," Dean deadpanned. "I'm excited to be a part of it. Can we go, please?"

"It's the little girl," said Dean. They stood far enough away to look into the front windows of the house, but not be seen. AKA: the empty house across the street. "Her face is freakin' awful."

"Well, then let's go," said Sam. "We're wasting time."

"Wait," Dean insisted, grabbing hold of Sam's jacket. Even though they'd just witness an old man having his neck twisted.

"For what? For her to kill the rest of them?"

"And us too if we're not careful." Dean turned back to watching the house. "Look. There's a real go-getter mailman. Really, at nine PM? And Mr. Rogers over there."

Sam looked into the binoculars and saw an older man sitting in his living room in the house next door, flipping through a book.

"Demons?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay, fine. We-we ninja past those guys and sneak in!"

"And what, give a Columbian necktie to a ten-year-old girl? Comeon."

"Look, I know it's awful—"

"You think?"

"But this isn't just about saving you, Dean," said Sam. "It's about saving everybody."

"She's gotta be stopped, son," Bobby added, and no matter how much Elena didn't like it, she nodded as well. Dean glanced at all three of them.

"…Damn it."

"All right, Sam and I will take 'em down without tippin' off Little Miss Sunshine," said Dean, leaning against the kitchen counter. "You've gotta find the pipes and time it right."

"Ain't that hard," said Bobby. "The box is right behind this house, over by the sidewalk."

"Okay…I guess this is it then." Dean nodded at Bobby and Elena, then at his brother and headed for
"Boys," Bobby called after him.

"Yeah, Bobby?" Sam asked.

"You be careful." The corner of Dean's mouth quirked upwards, but he didn't promise anything. Sam didn't either, but gave Bobby a small smile.

Elena watched him walk away without a goodbye. Because they all wanted to hope it wasn't goodbye.

But goddamn it.

"Dean!"

He and Sam stopped short before the door and turned to see her rushing toward them.

"What—"

"I know you don't want to deal with the sappy crap, but if you walk out that door without… I mean, I swear to God I'll—"

Elena stopped short before she made a bigger fool of herself, because she didn't know what it was she wanted to say. She could've laughed at Dean's bewildered expression if it were any other day.

But eventually he grinned a little.

"I made you a promise, didn't I?"

Her eyes widened, but she nodded. She was pretty sure she knew what he was talking about. Some parts of that night a few weeks ago was fuzzy, but it wasn't the most drunk she'd ever been in her life.

"Wait for me."

She nodded and let him go. It still wasn't goodbye, and that was all she needed.

Elena and Bobby snuck behind the house and blessed the water in the pipelines. She held the lid open while Bobby recited the incantation and dropped the crucifix into the water. Once he finished, she let go of the lid with a grunt. Her fingers were red with the strain of pulling it back.

"I think you read it slow on purpose," she muttered.

"If that was hard, you need some more work on those noodle arms."

"Or you just didn't want to do it yourself, you old man."

"You watch it. This old man'll kick your ass."

"All right, Grandpa, keep it moving—" She glanced out the window and paused. "Oh shit."

"What?" Bobby asked, coming to stand next to her. "Shit."

Apparently, the boys hadn't managed to keep things quiet. Nearly a dozen of them were after them, but they were nearly to the house where Lilith was terrorizing the small family.
"Time to turn on the heat, then," he said, and they hurried back to the pipes. There were maybe ten different switches and knobs, but eventually he found the right one to turn. The sprinklers.

Elena laughed as the demon's shrunk back, hissing and screaming in pain.

"That'll keep 'em off their ass," he said with a smirk.

But fifteen minutes later it was 11:55, and Sam and Dean hadn't come out yet.

"They're taking too long," Elena said, worrying at her bottom lip. Bobby looked at his stopwatch and muttered a curse. The holy water would only work for another five minutes.

"Bobby we've got to get in there. We've gotta help them!" Elena started for the door, but Bobby stopped her.

"And how are we supposed to get in there," he said, "with a bunch of demons in the front yard?"

"We'll sneak around back—"

"How? There's a fence surrounding the house. To get in we'd need to get past the bomb squad over there."

"Damn it, Bobby, I'll scale the goddamn roof if I have to," she exclaimed, "In five minutes Dean is dead."

"Don't you think I know that?" he said, matching her volume. "Don't you think, that everything I got inside me is screamin' to bulldoze straight through the lot of 'em?"

She blinked and swallowed past what she knew would be coming soon, shut her eyes against the telltale sting.

"I didn't get this far in my miserable life by being dumb." Bobby looked at his niece in the eyes. "And I'm not about to lose the only family I got left."

Elena was at a loss for words. The only thing she could do was turn away from the intensity of his stare, out the window to the one across the street, past the lawn of sprinklers. And suddenly she saw Dean being flung onto the dining room table, and a glimpse of blonde hair pass by window. Then Dean was gone, and a solitary figure stood with an eerie smile.

"Ruby—Bobby, it's Ruby!" she shouted, and the two watched as a flash of light engulfed the room. When it dissipated, Ruby was no longer smiling. Elena looked down at her watch.

12:00.

Before Bobby could stop her, Elena was running out the door, gun in hand. Strangely, the demons were nowhere to be found, even though the sprinklers were still on. She was half drenched by the time she got to the front porch and threw the door open, but when she did, she stopped short, her breath catching in her throat.

Ruby was gone.

And Sam was kneeling on the floor, beside Dean.

"Nice to see you too, Lena," said the first, the one she recognized. She could see he was a bit uncertain. "...Remember me?"
She came back to herself, shaking her head apologetically.

"I'm sorry. It's just…"

"Bit of a surprise, I know," he said, waving it off. There was a teasing glint in his eyes when he said, "Sorry about that. But I'll understand if you'd rather we hit the road. There's gotta be something to take care of in the next town over…"

Again she shook her head, this time wryly.

"It's good to see you, Dean."

She heard Bobby walk in behind her, but couldn't tear her eyes away from all the blood. His chest… ripped open. And his face…God, his eyes were open and lifeless.

"I didn't come just because Bobby asked me to," he said bluntly. "You need help, so I'm here."

After a moment she broke into a smile, ruefully shaking her head. He really hadn't changed all that much.

"Thanks, Dean."

He cracked a small smile too.

"Anytime."

Sam's devastating cries reverberated in the room, tearing her apart with each new breath. Water dripped from her clothes and onto the polished wood floor, especially as she knelt on the other side of Dean's body (wincing with a shudder at what was now soaking her jeans) while Sam cradled him. Elena didn't realize her face was wet with tears until they too, dripped down.

The floor was ruined anyway.

"You don't have to…do this alone, you hear me?" His green eyes bore into hers. "Either way, it ain't easy, but…we've got your back, all right?"

Again, Elena nodded, dabbing at her face with her sleeve.

"Yeah…I hear ya."

He cracked a smile at her.

"Good. Let's get Sammy and grab some breakfast," he said, and steered her back to the room by her shoulder. "I want me some eggs and bacon."

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice breaking. "I'm sorry I couldn't do the same for you.

"I'm s-sorry…"

"I don' wanna miss you. 'Nd I don' want Sam t' miss you. So…you don' give up, kay?"

When he made no move to answer, Elena shook his hand a bit.

"Kay?"

"…Okay."
"Promise?"

"Promise."

"…Okay."

Elena brought her hands to her face, curling her fingers into her hair. She wanted to kill something.

"Y-You promised…" Her voice was heavy and coarse, and it made Sam flinch and squeeze his eyes shut. She set a hand on his shoulder to both steady him and apologize.

"Wait for me."

*You promised, goddamn it! Her mind screamed. And I fucking waited, damn you. I waited.*

And then she felt horribly guilty.

Because Dean was already damned.

And he wasn't coming back.
"In a fantasy of my anticipation
I knew there was no consolation,"

—Journey, "Forever in Blue"

X: Forever in Blue

Sam didn't hear the door open. Didn't even blink when grocery bags were placed on the table right behind his open laptop.

"I brought lunch."

He spared a cursory glance.

"It's all right," he said, and continued scrolling down on the article he was reading. "I'm not hungry."

There was a pause.

"But I brought you a chicken salad sandwich…see? It's got tomato and everything."

He kept reading.

"…Sam."

"What, Elena?"

He finally looked up at her and didn't look perturbed by her deep frown.

"You need to eat. And not just some granola and a bottle of water every few hours," she said sternly, and deposited the plastic bag right into his lap. "Give your eyes a rest for ten minutes."

"I can't," he said stubbornly, shaking his head. "I found this newspaper article—"

"Sam," she interrupted, but more gently. "It'll still be there after—"

"And so will Dean!" he shouted, stood up from his chair roughly. "I can't stop, not when I know he's…"

Elena ignored the painful stab that brought. Seeing him like this made her heart ache, but she was trying. She was trying hard.

"We've gone from motel to motel for two months. Sam, you're not getting any sleep—"

Neither was she, but that was beside the point.

"So that's it. You're done? What, you want to give up?" Sam asked. His hair was unbrushed, and she could see the stubble on his usually clean shaven face, the dark circles under his tired eyes.

"Of course not," she sighed heavily, preparing the same tired words she'd been using for weeks. "But…maybe a break. Sam…you're running yourself into the ground—"

"Dean would never stop. Not if it was me," he glared at her accusingly. "So you want me to sit
"You," said Elena, "are killing yourself! He wouldn't want—"

"Don't you dare," Sam shouted, "Don't you dare tell me what he would've wanted. He told me to keep fighting and that's what the hell I'm going to do. If you don't like it?"

He leaned over the table, mere inches from her face.

"Then get out."

Elena stared into his hard, angry eyes. They'd had variants of this conversation before, all of them ending with Sam getting angry or turning on her with his grief in his eyes. Then Elena would give up. More often than not she'd stay up with him until the early hours of the morning, on the computer or nose-deep in some book. But never once had he told her to leave.

She wanted to be mad at him. But all she saw was a deeply wounded boy that wanted his brother back. That didn't mean his words didn't hurt, though.

"You don't mean that."

"Wanna bet?"

She sighed, and gave him a hard look.

"Sam, I wouldn't be here if...if I didn't care."

He ignored her and shifted his eyes away from her face.

"I just don't want to see you do this to yourself."

He didn't look up at her again as he started scrolling through the small words on his screen. His head was pounding, and his eyes burned, but it didn't matter. He knew what he needed to do, and he didn't need anyone to help him.

"No one's asking you to stay," he said coldly. Out of the corner of his vision he could see her face darken.

"You're so fucking stubborn, you know that?" she said, a little more snappish than she intended. "Keep going like this and you're damn well going to break down. And then what? Everything your brother did for us—for you—"

Sam slammed a fist on the table and snapped his furious, bloodshot gaze up at her.

"You've got no damn right to stop me," he said. Dark hazel met stormy grey in a tense stalemate, one hard and unyielding, the other angry, but sad.

Finally, grey blinked and turned downwards, frustrated brows furrowing, before returning in resignation.

"Fine."

She threw her things into her duffel bag, but on her way out, she placed the sandwich on his lap. Plus a bottle of Coke and the baked whole grain chips he liked.

"Eat that. I spent eight-fifty on it."
She tossed him her motel key and walked out the door, got into her Camaro and drove. She didn't know where she was going, but she pacified herself with the thought that Sam had her on speed dial.

Elena didn't know how she ended up on Bobby's front porch. She really didn't. But he opened the door and looked surprised to see her.

"Hey…sorry I haven't called." Her voice was shaky, even to her own ears.

"It's…no problem," he said, but looked confused. "Where's Sam?"

"He, um…he decided he wanted to keep going on his own, and I…" Her eyes fell to the ground. Suddenly she felt a lot more lost without Sam. She just knew she didn't want to be alone. "I didn't know where else to go."

"…Well, come on in already."

She smiled hesitantly and followed him inside. It faded when she got a good look at the place; beer bottles littered the small dining table and much of the available counter space. There were empty Chinese takeout boxes on the table next to the bottles.

"Want a beer?" Bobby asked.

"I'm fine," she said, dumping her bag on the couch. She joined him in the kitchen and marveled at how many stains could be on one stove. "When was the last time you cooked?"

"Uh…" He gave her a look. "Do I look like Betty Crocker to you?"

She smiled, shaking her head.

"Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"Nope. It's only four."

"Good. That means I've got time to clean."

"Clean?" he asked skeptically. "When was the last time you cleaned something more complicated than dirty dishes?"

Her smile kicked up into a grin as she shrugged.

"Never too late to learn."

By seven o'clock, the kitchen and living room weren't spotless, but the beer bottles and used containers were in the trash, the dishes were done and set on the table, and the stove and counters were clean enough to use. Bobby's cupboards were mostly empty, save for some canned food, a couple boxes of spaghetti and a bag of rice. Elena settled with spaghetti because he had the sauce, and after getting up on a small step ladder she could reach the back of the pantry for some parmesan cheese.

"How'd it come out?" she asked him after five minutes of relative silence, save for the television playing some kind of 60s movie Elena had never seen, but Bobby seemed to be enjoying.

"Beats takeout," he said, but his hand kept reaching for the spoon in the pot for another helping. And if he touched the half-drunk bottle beside his plate a little less, then that was enough for her.
"This is Supervisory Special Agent, Jessie Manning. How may I help you?"

Elena drummed her fingers on the desk.

"Yes, Agent Mercer has been conducting this case for the past three weeks. It would be in your best interest to allow him to see the body," she said. "I cannot disclose the full nature of the investigation. I'm sure you understand."

Inwardly she sighed in relief when the police officer on the other line begrudgingly gave in.

"Thank you for your cooperation," she said, and hung up the phone. "That's like, what, eight calls in the past half hour?"

Bobby came in from the kitchen and handed her a plate full of sandwich and Pringles.

"You said you wanted a 'more or less' stable job," he shrugged. "I could send you back out with Roy and Walt."

Elena shook her head immediately.

"Walt gives me the creeps."

"Any particular reason why?" Bobby asked.

"I dunno…you get the feeling he likes the job a little too much," she said, and took a bite out of her sandwich. She chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then wrinkled her nose.

"Did you put mustard?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Ugh. Bobby, you know I hate mustard."

"If it bothers you so much, get off your ass and make your own damn sandwich," he said around a mouthful of ham and cheese. "Tastes fine to me."

"You don't put mustard on ham!"

"Says who?"

Elena sighed and got up to head over to the kitchen. Maybe she could scrape the yellow paste off with a napkin.

"You know what? Forget it."

"Good. And while you're up, get me that book on Greek mythology over there," he said, pointing to the shelf on the far wall. "Wilkins thinks he found a harpy."

"A harpy?" she asked, deciding she'd wiped off as much mustard as she could. She'd just add more pickles to distract from the sharp tang. "I thought those things were in Greece."

"Not all creatures stay in their hometowns, 'specially if they're ancient," Bobby explained, and glanced at the old clock on the wall.

"Don't you gotta be somewhere tonight?" he asked. Elena's eyes widened in realization as she set the
book down next to his glass of water.

"Oh yeah. My ride's getting here at five," she looked at the clock, then took a few more hurried bites of her sandwich with some chips. "Damn it, it's two thirty."

"You've got nearly three hours," Bobby said, rolling his eyes. But by now he knew his niece well enough to know that she'd need every minute. "Maybe if you were more of a girl and less of a perfectionist, you'd take less time to paint your nails."

She stilled. Familiar words echoed in her mind.

"About time, princess. Stop to repaint your nails?"

"Yeah well," she said eventually, after she'd unstuck her tongue from the roof of her mouth. "If I need any lessons, I'll just ask you."

"Oh, that's rich." If he noticed her falter, he didn't comment. "Just don't use up all the hot water. You're not the only one who likes to be clean around here."

"Could've fooled me," she shot back. "This place was a dump when I got here."

He snorted.

"You kiddin'? This place is still a dump."

Elena shook her head with an amused smile, but headed upstairs to what was now her room on the left. Just to spite him, Elena took her time in the shower. She got out before the water started to get cold though. Toweling off her hair, she decided on a V-neck blue top with a black skirt. She knew she would be talked into wearing heels eventually, but for now black flats were it.

Bobby, damn him, was unfortunately right on most occasions. Makeup always took her forever, so she stuck with the basics: foundation, mascara and eyeliner…and fine, a little blush to give her some color. It was more than she did in a normal day. While on the road these past few months, eyeliner and mascara was usually all she had the time or energy for before they were out the door for the next case.

Her hair though, was an animal. Blow-drying it was a bitch, and took the longest out of anything since she had so much hair. It was thick and nearly to her waist now.

I seriously need a haircut, she thought, and considered pulling a pair of scissors out of the bathroom drawer, but thought better of it. With her luck, she'd end up butchering it.

Almost an hour later, she was basically done, just ironing out the kinks on the top layer with the brush rolled in close to her head.

That was when she heard the shouting and loud thumps against the wall. She immediately shut off the dryer.

"I'm not a shapeshifter!"

Elena froze. That voice…it was familiar. But more importantly, Bobby was in trouble.

She took the stairs two at a time on the way down, stopping in the middle to survey the damage.

"Bobby—"
What she saw instead made her trip, nearly rolling her ankle when she landed on the last step. Her ass ached, but in reaching for a weapon she drew out her hairdryer.

Bobby looked all kinds of stunned, but wasn't him her eyes were glued to. It was Dean Winchester, standing in the middle of the living room in jeans and a buttoned down shirt rolled up on the sleeves, looking a bit worse for wear, but...alive.

*It can't be.*

It looked like him. But there was no way.

"Lena," the imposter said. "...It's me."

"Y-You..." she brandished the hairdryer with wide, scared eyes, "S-Stay back!"

His mouth twitched upward.

"You're gunna blow me to death?"

That was definitely a crappy joke he would make.

So it sounded like him. But it wasn't. And why wasn't Bobby doing anything?

"It's him, kid," he said, and she could've sworn she saw unshed tears swimming in his eyes.

Elena shook her head, and the motion painfully reminded her that her brush was still lodged in her hair.

Her hands shook when "Dean" started moving towards her, slowly. When he knelt in front of her, he gently pried the dryer from her hands and set it down from the floor, then grasped her hands and helped her stand.

"Bobby tested me with silver already," he said. "I dunno how it happened...but I'm back."

He then gently pulled the brush out of her hair and offered it to her. Eventually, she took it.

And she tossed it away.

Elena threw her arms around his neck and he grunted at the impact, but wrapped his arms around her back, chuckling. She felt the vibration of it through her chest, and maybe she had to wipe away a few (a lot of) tears. But she felt herself smiling, especially when he put her down and looked down at her with a grin on his face.

"But...how?" she asked, still teary-eyed. His skin was covered in dirt, that much was certain.

"I don't know," he confessed, letting go of her. "I just—"

Water splashed in his face, and he closed his eyes, spitting the rest out.

"Bobby," he heard Elena scold. He wiped his eyes and stared at the older hunter blankly.

"I'm not a demon either, ya know."

"Sorry...can't be too careful," Bobby said with a shrug. He handed Dean a towel to clean the rest off.
"So anyway," Dean continued, "I…I woke up in the dark, in a pine box and…after I busted myself out, I was standin' in front of my grave."

"But that don't make no lick of sense," said Bobby. Dean shrugged and tossed the towel over his shoulder.

"You're preaching to the choir," he replied.

"You didn't see anyone?" Elena said, concern coloring her tone.

"No one…"

That was when he finally got a good look at her. His brows furrowed a little.

"You goin' somewhere?" Dean asked. He'd never seen her dolled up before, didn't even know she owned a skirt. Her eyes seemed brighter, her face with a bit more glow than he remembered. Was she wearing makeup? "You look good."

Suddenly she was a little sheepish, her gaze averting from his.

"Oh, um…yeah," she said, then her smile became a little more playful when she looked back up at him. "I've got a date."

His expression slackened.

"…Oh yeah?" he asked, his brows shooting up. He forced a teasing smile. "Anyone I know?"

"Hmm," she pretended to think. "I don't think so."

And then, conveniently, there was a knock at the door. Elena checked the clock.

5:05

"Wow, on time for once," she muttered, and went to the door. When she opened it, Dean became even more confused.

"You're five minutes late!" Elena griped. A young woman about Elena's age rolled her eyes, blowing a strand of auburn hair away from her face and pulling large black sunglasses to the top of her head.

"You've gotta be kidding. You're worse than my mother. Honestly, it takes me like six hours to get here. You should be grateful I make the effort to come pick your ass up," she said, giving Elena a friendly kiss on the cheek and walking in, toting a brown leather purse with manicured nails. "Hey, Bobby. I'm stealing her for the night, but I'll bring ya back a bottle of whiskey as compensation, kay?"

And then she looked up with dark blue eyes that zeroed in on Dean's surprised face. Hers mirrored his, but with an underlying edge that made Elena grow wary.

"You didn't tell me you were bringing a party favor."

Dean's eyes widened marginally, and Elena's face was comical.

"Val, this is Dean…he's a family friend," she corrected, shooting the other woman a stern look. Val only looked amused. "Dean, this is—"
"Pleasure to meet you, Family Friend, Dean Mystery Hotness," she said, holding out a hand. He marveled a bit at the many old bracelets adorned on her wrists. They clashed with everything else she was wearing that was more refined. "I'm Best Friend Valerie Hatfield."

"...Nice to meet you," he said eventually, shaking her hand.

"Val, can I talk to you for a minute?" Elena asked.

"Sure," she shrugged, but winked at Dean as they passed. When they were in the relative privacy of the kitchen, Elena sighed as her friend looked like she was about to explode if she tried containing herself anymore.

"All right, go ahead."

"Who is he, where did he come from and why didn't you tell me about—"

"Okay," Elena interrupted. "I can't explain everything right now, but he's a good friend of mine I've known for a long time. He was...away, for a while...but he just got back, and if I know Dean..."

She paused, glancing over at him as he talked quietly with Bobby.

"He's going to need some help."

"Help with what?" Val asked, a little more seriously.

"First?" said Elena. "Finding his brother."

"He has...a brother?"

Shit, Elena thought.

"Forget about that for now, just...I'm really sorry but—"

"Say no more," Val said, shaking her head. "I got a hotel about two miles out. You've got my number when things are settled again, and we'll get Mystery Hottie and his brother over to Jesse's."

Jesse's was the club the two had been going to when Val felt like making the drive up to Sioux Falls from Hill City to visit her aunt. Ever since she'd called and got back in touch with Elena, the two had gone almost every Friday and Saturday night. It was a nicer place, and the food was actually decent. Good for dancing and hitting back some shots.

Elena smiled in amusement at what it would be like to get Sam and Dean in there.

"Next time," she said. "Thanks, Val."

"No problem, sweetie," she said with a genuine smile. "Just don't forget lil' old me while you're running around all over town with Mr. Wall of Muscle. I swear to God, the back of that ass—"

"God, please shut up," Elena hissed, and ushered her back into the living room. Dean and Bobby looked up expectantly.

"Sorry I can't stay," Val apologized, "But Lena's got my number whenever you wanna go out for a night on the town."

"Sorry for the short notice," said Bobby. She waved him off with a grin that deepened into a smirk when she caught Dean's eye.
"See ya later, cupcake." She winked again, and followed Elena to the door.

"I'll call you," Elena promised, and Val shook her head. Her smile was affectionate.

"That's what they all say," she teased, but hugged Elena warmly. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Shut up," Elena said with a laugh, but waited until Val was in her car before she closed the door, and looked back at Dean and Bobby.

Dean thought she looked tired.

"So," she said airily, "what are we doing?"

"…Well," Dean said eventually. Part of him wanted to say, "You're staying here while Bobby and I…"

But he had a pretty good idea of what that would get him, and Bobby would let her.

One of several phones on Bobby's desk rang before he could answer her, and she picked it up.

"Lieutenant Miller speaking," she said, surprising Dean. He looked over at Bobby, who shrugged.

"I'm not allowed to disclose that, but Special Agent Sands has been handling a case that may or may not be related," she said, sitting down more comfortably in a chair. "If you'd just give him access to those reports…yes, thank you."

She hung up and swiveled around in the chair to face them.

"Since when have you been handling the phones?" Dean asked.

"She came around a couple months ago," said Bobby, "So I put her to work. Can't have a freeloader in my house."

"And cooking and cleaning wasn't enough?" she asked, crossing her arms indignantly.

"Cookin' and cleanin' don't pay the bills," he quipped.

"And hunting does?"

"Wait, wait," Dean interjected. "You've been hunting by yourself?" She rolled her eyes.

"Sometimes. Usually Bobby sends me with whoever needs help with a case every once in a while."

That made Dean feel a little better. At least she had back up most of the time, but she hadn't done what he thought she would do either. What any sane person would do, and…well, maybe he shouldn't be so surprised. None of them were the poster children for healthy and balanced.

"Okay…so Bobby told me you were with Sam for a while after…"

Elena's expression dimmed.

"Yeah…" she sighed. "We parted ways a couple months ago…that's when I came here."

"Why, what happened?" Dean pressed, and she gave him a strained look. She wasn't about to tell him his brother had been a wreck and careening down a self-destructive spiral.

"He wanted to keep going by himself." Dean looked incredulous.
"You didn't stop him? Lena—"

"Dean." Her brows furrowed, and he saw thinly veiled pain in her eyes. "How could I?"

…Fair enough, he thought, and after a while, he sighed.

"All right. Well let's find him then."

Dean was able to track Sam's whereabouts to Pontiac, Illinois, the same city where Dean got out of his grave. Considering the state of the burial site, which according to Dean looked like an bomb went off, the fact that Sam was in the area was a red flag. They took Elena's Camaro and drove the nine hours from Sioux Falls to a six out of seven star hotel called Astoria, whose lights flashed brighter than anything else on the block. It was a far cry from the kind of booking any of the hunters were used to, and already it was making Dean feel edgy.

After talking to the desk clerk, they found the room number and tried not to cough at the cloud of perfume swirling around in the elevator, all the way to the third floor. Once reaching Room 307, Dean knocked on the door. Soon enough it opened, revealing a short brunette wearing nothing but a grey tank top and underwear, with a slightly pissy look on her face.

"So...where is it?" she asked. The three looked at one another.

"Where's what?" said Dean.

"The pizza," she said matter-of-factly, "that apparently takes three people to deliver."

"...I think we've got the wrong room," Dean started, until Sam came into view in the doorway. He was wearing loose-fitting clothes, as if he'd just woken up. By the look of the brunette, that might very well have been the case.

"What's..." Sam stopped himself, eyes honed on Dean in blatant shock. He then noticed Elena and Bobby, but returned his gaze to Dean, who smiled softly.

"Hey, Sammy." He stepped inside the room, past the girl, and waited for Sam to relax a little.

Then he found himself being pinned against the wall and fighting off a death stroke via silver knife, and it felt way too much like déjà vu.

"Sam, stop!" he heard Elena shout, but it was Bobby who was able to yank the taller man back, allowing Dean to back away from the wall.

"Who are you!" Sam demanded.

"Like you didn't do this!" Dean shot back.

"Do what?" And that had Dean at a loss.

"Sam, it's Dean," Bobby said through the strain of containing him. "We've been through this already." And despite Sam still holding his knife threateningly, Elena laid a tentative hand on his left shoulder to stay clear of it.

"It's really him," she tried assuring gently. Sam started to calm, but he was still wild-eyed and breathing heavily.

"But..."
"I know," said Dean, and then he grinned a bit, "I look fantastic, huh?"

Sam's lower lip trembled the slightest bit, and finally went forward to hug his brother. Elena had to avert her eyes with the sudden rush of emotion, just barely blinking back tears. Until a voice caught all of their attention.

"So…are you two like…together?" asked the brunette. Sam gave her a quizzical look.

"What? N-No," he said, and then smiled a little as he looked back at Dean. "This is my brother."

"O-Oh. Well…I guess I should go then," she said awkwardly. Maybe she realized she was half-naked in a room full of strangers.

"Uh, yeah…that's probably a good idea," Sam said with an apologetic look, "sorry."

Dean's grin was just a bit wicked when he nodded over at her. But she just raised a brow and changed in the bathroom while Sam put on a shirt that made him look a little more put together, a little more Sam-like.

"So, call me," the girl said with a smile on her way out the door with her purse, now dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt. Sam leaned against the doorway.

"Yeah, sure thing, Kathy." Her smile faded.

"Krissy," she corrected, looking disappointed. Sam's smile became a little more strained.

"Right."

She frowned and gave him a parting look before making her way down the hall. Sam closed the door behind her and turned to face the rest of them, all staring at him knowingly. He elected to ignore them and sat near Bobby on the god-awful tiger print couch and started packing his bag.

"So tell me," said Dean, crossing his arms, "How much did it cost?"

Sam looked up in mild surprise.

"The girl?" he laughed. "I don't pay, Dean."

That made Elena feel a little better, to know Sam thought himself above that. But she knew that wasn't what Dean was asking.

"It's not funny, Sam," Dean deadpanned. "To bring me back…what'd it cost? Was it just your soul, or was it something worse?"

"You think I made a deal?"

"That's exactly what we think," Bobby stated, leaving Sam looking dumbfounded.

"Well I didn't."

Don't lie to me," Dean said quietly, but the warning was clear.

"I'm not lying."

"So what now," Dean asked. He got up from where he was leaning on the wall and uncrossed his arms. "I'm off the hook, now you're on, is that it? You some demon's bitch? I didn't want to be saved
"Look, Dean," Sam cut in, standing to his feet and looking a lot like Elena remembered him when she left him: lost and angry. "I wish I had done it, all right?"

Dean grabbed the front of his brother's shirt, forcing Sam to look him in the eyes.

"There's no other way this could've gone down. Tell the truth."

Sam knocked his hands away angrily.

"I tried everything, that's the truth. I tried opening the Devil's Gate. Hell, I tried to bargain, Dean, but no demon would deal, all right?" Dean started to relent, but Sam wasn't through. "You were rotting in Hell for months, and I couldn't stop it...so I'm sorry it wasn't me...Dean, I'm sorry..."

Dean saw the raw guilt in Sam's eyes, and it tore at him inside. Outwardly though, he just nodded and said, "It's okay, Sammy..."

Sam nodded, but Dean didn't think his brother really believed it.

"You don't have to apologize, I believe you."

"Don't get me wrong," Bobby interjected, "I'm glad that Sam's soul remained intact, but...it does raise a sticky question."

"If he didn't pull me out," said Dean, "then what did?"

Elena took the beer Sam offered her, but right now she couldn't really look at him as he started talking about how he'd tried to track down Lilith after he "figured out" he couldn't save Dean. She didn't know what brought that about, but she could hazard a guess and say it was a couple months ago when she ditched him.

He told you to go, she reminded herself. But for him to say, "I was pretty messed up," was more of an understatement than the two men on either side of her would ever know. And she'd walked away from him. She let Sam drift by himself without anyone to watch his back.

"Anyway, I was out in Tennessee tracking some demons. They took a hard left and lead me back up here."

"When?" Dean asked.

"Yesterday morning."

Dean and Bobby shared a look.

"That's when I busted out."

"You think these demons are here 'cause of you?" Bobby asked. Dean shrugged; it was a possibility.

"But why?" said Sam.

"...I dunno. Some badass demon drags me out and now this? It's gotta be connected somehow."

Bobby regarded Dean through slightly narrowed eyes.
"How you feel anyway?"

"...I'm a little hungry."

"No, I mean do you feel like yourself?" Bobby asked. "Anything strange or...different?"

"Or demonic?" Dean finished dryly. "Bobby, how many times do I gotta prove I'm me?"

"Listen, demons ain't lettin' you loose out of the goodness of their hearts. This has gotta be somethin' nasty planned."

"Well, I feel fine."

"Okay, well we don't know what they're planning," Sam pointed out. "We've got a pile of questions and no shovel. We need help."

"Like who?" said Elena.

"I know a psychic, few hours from here," said Bobby. "Somethin' this big, maybe she's heard the other side talkin'."

"Hell yeah, it's worth a shot," said Dean. Bobby got up to make the call, saying he'd be right back, and Dean got up, only waiting at Sam's insistence.

"You probably want this back," he said, and took Dean's amulet from around his neck and gave handed it to his brother. Dean looked at it in disbelief at first.

"Thanks," he said.

"Yeah, don't mention it..." Dean waited, because he knew that look. Sam was itching to say something.

"Hey, Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"What was it like?"

"...What, Hell?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know...I don't remember anything," said Dean after glancing over at Elena. She wasn't paying attention, sitting on the couch while idly checking her phone. "I must've blacked it out."

"Well...thank God for that," said Sam with a small smile.

"Yeah..."

A flood of images entered his mind, and he tried hard to shut them out. As long as Sam didn't see anything in his eyes...none of them would ever have to know.

Bobby's friend was about four hours out by the interstate. Elena had been ready to lead the way in her Camaro, until Bobby took the keys from her.

"You ride with them. Make sure they don't stop for too many bathroom breaks."
That old man. He knew her now, and she wasn't altogether used to it. But she was sure he wasn't used to her catching onto him either. In the first few weeks of her staying with him, he'd bring back four to five bottles of assorted liquor at a time, be it whiskey or bourbon or whatever flavor of the night he felt like. Elena left the beer in the fridge, but of the hard stuff, she'd locked all but one of them in one of his old safety boxes and bought a new lock for it. She wouldn't put a new bottle out until he'd been at least three days with the first, and then she kept on adding time in between until he was down to just beer and a fifth of whiskey a couple times a week.

Somehow it worked. He never once picked the lock, even though she knew he could have easily broken it open.

"There's just one thing I don't understand," said Dean. "The night I bit it…or got bit."

No one laughed at the "joke."

"How'd you make it out?" he asked Sam. "I thought Lilith was gunna kill you."

"Lilith?" asked Elena.

"Oh…yeah, you weren't there for that," Dean explained. "Lilith took over Ruby's meat suite before she sicked her dogs on me. But she was headed for Sam next."

"Yeah, she tried, but she couldn't," said Sam.

"What do you mean she couldn't?"

"She fired this like…burning light at me, and…it didn't leave a scratch," he said. "Like I was immune or something."

"Immune?" Elena asked.

"Yeah…I don't know who was more surprised, her or me." He sighed. "She left pretty fast after that."

"Huh…how about Ruby, where is she?" said Dean.

"Dead, probably," Sam said with a shrug. Dean nodded.

"So you've been using your freaky ESP stuff?" Sam looked at his brother incredulously.

"No."

"You sure about that?" he asked, "I mean, now that you've got…immunity, or whatever that is. Just wondering what other kind of weirdo crap you've got going on."

"Nothing, Dean," Sam said in exasperation. "Look, you didn't want me to go down that road, so I didn't go down that road. It was practically your dying wish."

Dean nodded, turning back to the road.

"Yeah well, let's keep it that way."

Pamela Barnes was five feet and seven inches of spitfire, and the Winchesters and Elena knew it from the moment she opened her front door and hefted Bobby into a crushing hug, then invited the rest of them in with a flirtatious smirk toward the boys.
"So you hear anything?" Bobby asked.

"Well, I Ouija-ed my way through a dozen spirits," she said, closing the front door behind her, "but no one seems to know who broke your boy out, or why."

"So what's next?"

"A séance I think. See if we can see who did the deed."

"You're not gunna summon the damn thing here…"

"No," she grinned, and walked past them into the next room, "I just want to get a sneak peak at it. Like a crystal ball without the crystal."

Sam and Dean shared a look and shrugged.

"I'm game," said Dean, and started following her with Sam behind him. Elena caught Bobby's pensive look.

"What're you thinking?" she asked quietly. He looked back at her and frowned.

"I dunno."

"There's still time to pull back from this," she reminded him.

"Should be harmless enough," he said after a moment, "if we're careful."

"His loss," Elena heard Dean say as she and Bobby walked into a room of book shelves and a round table in the center, and Pamela looking up at Dean with a candle in her hand.

"…Could be your gain," she said, eyes roaming his body appreciatively before setting the candle on the black cloth-covered table. Elena rolled her eyes at the look on Dean's face when he and Sam turned around, whispering to one another like high school girls. She busied herself by helping Bobby close the curtains.

"You're invited too, Grumpy," said Pamela. She winked at Sam and went to retrieve more ingredients from the shelves. Dean looked over at Sam sharply.

"You are not invited," he hissed. Elena failed to smother a snicker at Dean's expense, and he glanced at her sheepishly as she raised a brow at him.

When they were all sitting around the table, Pamela instructed them to hold each other's hand.

"Now, I need to touch something our mystery monster's touched."

Dean's knee jerked, hitting the table as he jumped a bit.

"Whoa, he definitely didn't touch me there!"

"My mistake," she laughed. Sam had to look down as he fought a smile, and Elena shook her head while Bobby rolled his eyes. But all mirth died the moment Dean shrugged his jacket off and rolled up the left sleeve of his shirt, revealing a large, red handprint of raised flesh on his shoulder. It startled both Sam and Elena, who stared at it with wide eyes.

Even Pamela's playful mood dimmed into seriousness as she laid her hand gently on it and began the séance.
"I invoke, conjure and command you, show me your face," she repeated the phrase over and over, earning the name "Castiel," and a warning to turn back. The table and walls shook as she kept going, and the rest of them looked at one another in apprehension.

"Maybe we should stop," Bobby interjected. He had a bad feeling.

"I've almost got it," she refuted, and kept up her mantra. "I command you, show me your face! Show me your face, now—"

The flames from the candles in the center of the table shot upward, and the sound of something being seared echoed in the room, along with Pamela's agonized screams. Blood streamed from her eyes as she looked into the fire and she slumped, falling from her chair onto the floor. Bobby immediately went to her.

"Call 9-1-1," he barked, and Sam got his phone out. Dean and Elena knelt beside where Bobby held Pamela. Her eyelids were severely burnt, and when she tried opening her eyes, they were hollow.

"Oh God, I can't see," she gasped, sobbing without tears.

"I can't see!"
XI: Edge of the Blade

Dean and Elena sat in a nearly empty diner, dejected and guilty. Sam came back to the table after hanging up his phone with news that Pam was stable in ICU. And because of them, she was blind.

"And we still have no clue what we're dealing with," said Sam.

"That's not entirely true," said Dean. "We've got a name, Castiel or whatever. With the right mumbo jumbo we can summon him, bring him right to us."

"You sure that's a good idea?" Elena asked him incredulously.

"You're crazy, absolutely not," Sam agreed.

"We'll work him over, after what he did—"

"Pam took a peek at him and he burnt her eyes out of her skull, and you want to face him?"

"You got a better idea?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do," Sam said. "I followed a bunch of demons to town, right?"

"Okay," Dean followed.

"So, we go find 'em. Someone's gotta know something about something."

"That makes sense," said Elena.

A waitress came over and slid three slices of blueberry pie in front of each of them.

"Thanks," said Dean, but then she sat in the fourth seat between Elena and Sam, folding her hands in her lap and smiling at them. Dean smiled back, though he was a bit confused.

"You anglin' for a tip?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought you were looking for us."

Her eyes flashed black as pitch. A hand gripped Elena's elbow and she subconsciously followed its backward tug.

A man in an electrician's uniform went to the front door and locked it, and stayed between their table and the door.

"Dean," said the smiling demon. "To Hell and back. Aren't you a lucky duck?"

Dean inclined his head.

"That's me."

"So you get to just stroll out of the pit, huh? Tell me, what makes you so special?"

"I liked to think it's because of my perky nipples." He grinned, but the demon only stared impassively.
"I don't know," he admitted flatly. "Wasn't my doing, I don't know who pulled me out."

"Right, you don't," she said skeptically.

"No, I don't."

"Lying's a sin, you know."

"I'm not lying," Dean said, smiling a little though the tense edge never left his expression. He glanced at her nametag. "So if you wouldn't mind enlightening me, Flo."

"Mind your tone with me, boy," she said coolly, tilting her head. "I'll drag you back to Hell myself."

Sam, in anger, started to get up at the threat, but Dean held up a hand at him, silently telling him to wait. He let go of Elena's arm and smirked. "No you won't."

"I won't?" Flo asked, smirking back at him.

"No. 'Cause if you were you would've done it already," he said. "Fact is, you don't know who cut me loose. You're just as spooked as we are. And you're lookin' for answers."

The demon's gaze shifted from Dean to Sam, to Elena, and back to Dean.

"Maybe it was some turbo-charged spirit. Hmm? Or…Godzilla," he wisecracked. "Or some big bad boss demon, but I'm guessing at your pay grade that they don't tell you squat. 'Cause whoever it was, they want me out. And they're a lot stronger than you."

The demon stared. Her silence was more telling than if she'd spoken.

"So go ahead, send me back. But don't come crawlin' to me when they show up on your front doorstep with vaseline and a fire hose," he smirked.

"I'm gunna reach down your throat and rip out your lungs," she threatened. Elena knew it was an empty threat, but it still made a chill run up her spine. Sam was similarly on edge, but Dean didn't even blink. He stood up, walked over to the demon, and slapped her across the face. Her head whipped to the side, but she looked back at him with a tight expression. He slapped her again, and still, she stayed where she was, though her eyes burned with fury.

"That's what I thought," said Dean, then turned to Sam and Elena. "Let's go."

They got up and waited for Dean, who pulled out a ten dollar bill and set it on the table. "For the pie."

Once they were outside, Elena could breathe.

"Hooooly shit that was close," said Dean as they crossed the street. She turned to him angrily.

"Then why'd you fucking egg her on like that? You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"You're alive, aren't you?" he pointed out, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

"We're just going to leave 'em in there?" Sam asked. They began walking down the sidewalk toward
where they parked the Impala.

"There are at least three of them, probably more. And we've only got one knife between us so yeah," said Dean.

"I've been killing a lot more demons than that recently."

"Not anymore. The smarter brother's back in town."

"Dean, we've got to take them down, they're dangerous," Sam insisted.

"They're scared. Scared of whatever had the juice to yank me out," said Dean. "We're dealing with one bad mofo here. One job at a time."

When they got back to the hotel it was around seven, and though they were all exhausted, the night was young enough for a few hours of research. Hopefully they could find something about what kind of creature was powerful enough to yank a soul out of Hell and completely heal Dean's body. Elena sat on the couch next to Sam, book in hand while he scrolled on his laptop. Dean was in the shower, warbling loudly and out of tune to what sounded suspiciously like a Michael Jackson song.

"What?" Sam asked her. Her eyes flicked to him in surprise.

Oh.

She hadn't realized she'd been snickering out loud.

"Dean borrowed my iPod earlier to help him focus. He must've had the shuffle on by mistake," she said with a grin. The man could take apart ten different gun models and reassemble them without a hitch, but he couldn't figure out an MP3 player.

"Don't blame it on the…sunshine, don't blame it on the moon times…don't blame it on the food rhymes…"

Sam smiled in amusement as the tune of the song became vaguely familiar, no matter how much the lyrics were being botched.

"Really," he asked wryly. "Blame it on the Boogie?"

She shrugged.

"Makes me wanna boogie."

He shook his head and grinned a bit. Soon enough, it faded.

"Lena…"

She glanced over and frowned at seeing the solemn shift in his demeanor.

"What's the matter?"

He didn't answer at first, but he closed his laptop. After a few beats of looking down at it, gathering his thoughts, he looked up at her.

"Last time we saw each other, I said some things…"
Her expression softened, and she restrained a sigh.

"Sam—"

"Things I'm not proud of. I hurt you and I'm sorry," he continued with a sigh, wiping a hand over his tired face. "I just...Dean was gone and I...I didn't think how you were probably hurting too."

She shook her head.

"Can't say I was exactly there for you either, Sam," she said sadly, regret clear to him in her eyes. "I'm the one who left you there. Didn't even call to make sure you were okay."

"I didn't give you much choice, though. Did I?"

"You were angry, I knew that."

"And you were just trying the best you could," said Sam. She smiled a little, shaking her head. "Looks like neither one of us have been so great, huh?"

His small smile was soft.

"I guess not."

"What're we talkin' about here?"

Elena smiled in amusement.

"Nothing, Dean," said Sam. He and Elena shared a look as he opened his laptop again.

And then Dean squeezed onto the couch by Elena, forcing her into the middle.

"Ack, what the hell, Dean? Can't you get your own chair?" she complained as he practically sat on her right side.

"This is more comfortable."

Elena rolled her eyes and shoved at him, and he waggled his eyebrows when she couldn't get him to budge. That's when Sam decided to get up.

"It's all right, I was going to go shower anyway."

That let Elena push free from Dean and claim the other end. He laughed at her, to which she maturely stuck her tongue out at him. Dean crossed his arms and put up his feet across the couch's length so she only had about half of her cushion.

"Hey! Get your nasty feet out of my bubble."

"They're clean," he protested. "I just took a shower."

Then she smirked.

"Well mine aren't." She kicked off her shoes and crossed her ankles over his lap. His face screwed in disgust and he moved his hands away from touching them.

"What are you two, four?" Sam asked incredulously.
"Get your stank-ass feet out of my face!"

"Only if you move over! I can't concentrate if I'm not comfortable."

"Well excuse me, princess."

"Yeah, excuse you, so move over!"

"What's the magic word?" Dean sassed.

"Move the fuck over before I strangle you!" He grinned lasciviously.

"Mm, kinky." She immediately pulled her legs toward her and slapped his thigh.

"Shut the fuck up!"

"I'm leaving," Sam said, though he was sure neither of them heard him. He shook his head all the way to the bathroom.

Dean was snoring lightly on the couch by the time Elena remembered she hadn't showered yet, and that made her feel dirtier. She closed the book in her hands (not that she'd made any more headway in the past hour than she had before) and grabbed a change of clothes.

"I'm gunna shower," she whispered to Sam, not wanting to wake Dean up. It had been a long day for him. For all of them.

Sam nodded, and she closed the door behind her. She was too tired to bother washing her hair, so she settled for throwing it in a bun and taking a five minute shower to wash all the grime of the day, and she put on some grey sweatpants and a blue t-shirt over her underwear. Her used clothes she threw in a plastic bag to be washed later.

A tremor shook the bathroom walls, and she stilled.

*Are there earthquakes in Illinois?* Maybe, but with their luck, she doubted it was something that minor.

She rushed out of the bathroom and saw Dean awake and standing at the ready with his gun, but Sam was nowhere to be found.

"What's happening?" she asked him in alarm. The TV was going haywire while a whirring sound reverberated in the room.

"I don't know, get over here!" he shouted over the sound, and pointed his gun at the front door. But the high pitched whine only grew louder, so loud that he was forced to press both his hands over his ears and eventually drop his gun. Distantly he could hear Elena's strain to block it out in a pain-filled groan, and the two of them were forced to their knees by it.

Then mirrors started to shatter.

Glass rained down and blew out at them from behind. Dean grabbed her and threw them as far left as he could when a large mirror to their right shot glass straight at them. They landed painfully on the floor that was already littered with it, and it bit into their skin, even as blood started trickling down from their ears at the piercing, high frequency sound. He shielded Elena the best he could without squishing her into the biting shards.
"DEAN!" He heard it just over the whirring, "ELENA!"

Bobby.

He felt himself behind pulled up from under his arms and he was able to stand, but he only stumbled out of the ruined hotel room when he saw Bobby hefting Elena into his arms. Once into the hallway, down the elevator and in the Camaro, he allowed himself to relax. The Impala was gone, Sam along with it most likely. Elena breathed heavy in the backseat while they waited for Bobby to come back with towels to clean off the blood.

"You okay?" he asked gruffly. She sighed.

"I'm okay."

Her arms were cut to hell. Bobby had just finished getting all of the glass out, including a chunk that had gotten itself lodged in her shoulder when she and Dean had been forced to throw themselves away from the blast.

Soon enough though, Bobby was back with damp towels for both of them.

"We'll stop at a CVS and get some other stuff," he said climbing into the driver's seat and ran a search for the store on Elena's GPS that was attached under the radio.

*Turns out they're good for something*, he thought. *Go figure.*

He started the car and drove away from the hotel. Things were quiet for a while, the road stretching in front of them illuminated by brightly colored city lights.

"You kids all right?" he asked. He made sure to glance at the GPS directions every now and then to make sure he was headed the right way.

"'Sides the church bells ringing in my ears," Dean said dryly. "Peachy."

He took out his cell phone and dialed his brother.

"*Hey.*"

"Where are you?"

"*Couldn't sleep, went to get a burger.*"

"In my car?"

"*Force of habit, sorry,*" said Sam. "*What are you doing up?*

"Well, Bobby's back. We're gunna go get a beer," Dean said, looking over at Bobby who gave him an incredulous look.

"*All right. Well, uh…spill some for me.*"

"Done, I'll catch ya later," Dean said, and hung up.

"Why the hell didn't you tell him?" Bobby asked.

"Because he'd just try to stop us."
"From what?" Elena asked.

"Summoning this thing," Dean said, "It's time we face it head on."

"You can't be serious," Bobby exclaimed.

"As a heart attack," he said, then grinned. "And it's high noon."

"We don't know what it is! It could be a demon, it could be anything."

"That's why we gotta be ready for anything," Dean said, and pulled out Ruby's knife.

"We got the big time magic knife, you've got an arsenal in the trunk…"

Bobby gestured with his thumb to Elena in the backseat.

"She's still bleedin' on the seats. I'm stoppin' for a first aid kit."

Dean glanced back at Elena through the side mirror and saw her frowning, still pressing the towel against her cuts. She was still bleeding, and he felt a bit guilty for that. Whatever it was, it had been trying to get to him and caught her in the middle.

"I know. We'll go there first, then deal with this thing."

"…This is a bad idea."

"I couldn't agree more, but what other choice do we have?"

"We can choose life," Bobby remarked.

"Bobby, whatever this thing wants it's after me. That much we know, right?" said Dean. "I need someplace to hide. I can get caught with my pants down again, or we can make our stand."

"Dean, we could use Sam for this," Bobby said, trying to reason with him.

"Nah," said Dean. "He's better off where he is."

"That's a hell of an art project you've got going there," Dean commented. He added yet another knife to the arsenal on the table while Elena surveyed the empty storage shack in appreciation, spray bottle in hand. She'd helped with a good portion of it, but she'd had to study the books closely to even have a prayer of drawing the ancient symbols correctly. The walls and floor were entirely covered with wards.

"Traps and talismans from every faith on the globe," said Bobby. "How you doin'?"

"Stakes, iron, silver, salt, the knife, I mean," said Dean, pointing to each one, "We're pretty much set to catch and kill anything I've ever heard of."

"This is still a bad idea."

"Yeah, Bobby. I heard you the first ten times." Bobby gave him a firm look at the sass mouthing, but Dean continued, "What do you say we ring the dinner bell?"

Bobby held his start for a second longer before moving to the other table full of ingredients to perform the spell. The three of them unconsciously held their breath…but nothing happened. Bobby
whistled a tune while they sat on the edge of the tables and waited. And waited.

And waited.

"You sure you did the ritual right?" Dean asked, losing his patience. Bobby gave him an exasperated look. Elena smiled in amusement.

"Sorry…" said Dean. "Touchy, touchy, eh?"

And then the shutters on the roof banged open and closed, as if a storm were coming through. They were on their feet and armed at the ready, taking in their surroundings for anything breaking through.

"Wishful thinking, but maybe it's just the wind," said Dean.

"Yeah, wishful thinking," Elena nodded. One by one the lights went out, forcing them to duck away from the sparks, and the wooden doors flew open despite being previously latched.

A man stepped forward. A dark-haired man wearing a trench coat over slacks and a loosened tie, who came steadily but calmly, not fazed in the least by the several bullets that cut into his chest and abdomen. He seemed almost sorry that they'd wasted the ammo, and continued toward them even as Dean grabbed the knife and held it behind his back. He moved along with the stranger, back-stepping and circling around.

"Who are you?"

"I am the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition." The voice was cool, only slightly higher than Dean's and possessing grit.

"Yeah…thanks for that."

The man, who Elena could only assume was Castiel, looked down at the knife Dean embedded in his heart and smiled, just a little. He pulled it out and dropped to the floor, then blocked the crowbar Bobby attacked him with and touched his forehead with two fingers. Bobby's eyes rolled into his head as he slumped to the floor.

"Bobby!" Elena exclaimed, but Dean grabbed her arm before she could cross the creature to get to her uncle.

"Wait, damn it," he commanded, and she reluctantly stayed close to him. The "man" turned around.

"We need to talk, Dean," he said, and his eyes settled on Elena. "Alone."

Dean shoved her behind him.

"Oh no, no fucking way—"

"Your friend's alive."

"Just unconscious," Elena spat, though knowing Bobby was okay relieved her a great deal.

"He's unharmed," Castiel said mildly. Then in a blink he was gone, leaving the two searching the room with their eyes. Elena turned and gasped. She was face to face with deep blue eyes and a hand reaching for her.

And then there was nothing at all.
She woke up in the dark. For a moment it was cavern walls surrounding her with the smell of dirt and sweat and blood filling her nose. Her throat clamped shut as the hairs on her arms raised, her breaths coming out quick and shallow.

"Elena."

She blinked and the roof of her Camaro came into view.

"You awake back there?"

Elena swallowed past the lump in her throat and sat up. Her fingers pressed into the familiar material of the car's interior.

"Yeah," she croaked, and met Dean's eyes in the rearview mirror. They stared intently, flicking to the road and back.

"You all right?" Bobby looked at her over his shoulder from the passenger seat.

"What the hell happened?" she asked.

"Long story," said Dean.

"Give me the short version." He seemed hesitant, so Bobby, not one to beat around the bush and also probably knowing the reason why Dean was holding back, said,

"His name's Castiel…and he claims to be an angel."

Her jaw slackened. Mouth parting, Elena blinked, but wasn't able to form the words. At least, not at first.

"I'm sorry, I think I must've hit my head when he fucking mind-drugged me. Are you saying…"

"Like, servant of Heaven, angel," Bobby sent Dean a sideways look. "Apparently, he had wings."

"…Wings," she deadpanned. Dean's expression was hard and focused solely on the road, but his hands clenched the steering wheel. Bobby wasn't kidding.

…Wings. Angels. Heaven…

She supposed the countless Sundays of Mass her mom dragged her to when she was younger was good for something after all.

"I need a drink," she muttered.

"Get in line," Dean said as Bobby snorted.

"…Where are we going then?"

"To go get Sam," said Bobby. "Then head back to my place." Dean didn't look excited about it.

"Because he'll be so happy about this," she said, raising a brow at him through the rearview. His mouth tugged downward, just shy of a grimace. "Did…Castiel, say why he did it?"

Dean hesitated, and it made her both curious and concerned.

"Dean?"
"…I'd rather not have to say it twice."

After a moment, she nodded in acceptance. Elena wouldn't push him. Not if he would tell her eventually.

Surprise, Sam wasn't happy. At least, not at first. Sure he'd been angry that Dean had left him out and all of them could've been killed, but after explaining Castiel's apparent holy mission from Heaven and God's apparent "plan" for Dean, he started getting enthusiastic once Bobby established that an angel was virtually the only explanation for what Castiel was. Nothing else, no demon or creature from the lowest depths of the earth, had the power to pull out a soul from Hell. But if there were angels, there was a decent chance there was a God, too. Sam pointed out that maybe it was the good guys giving them a little help for a change.

Dean was less than enthused.

"Look, I know you're not all choir boy about this stuff, but this is becoming less and less about faith and more and more about proof."

"Proof?" Dean said incredulously.

"Yes."

"Proof that there's a God out there that actually gives a crap about me personally?" Dean asked. He shook his head in refusal. "I'm sorry, but I'm not buying it!"

"Why not?" Sam asked.

"Because why me?" Dean said, looking at each of them. "If there is a God out there, why would he give a crap about me? I mean I've saved some people, okay? I figured that made up for the—the stealing and the chicks, but why do I deserve to get saved? I'm just a regular guy."

Elena shook her head with a melancholic frown. Everyone in this room but him knew that wasn't true.

"Well, apparently you're a regular guy who's important to the Guy Upstairs," Sam remarked. Dean looked put off by that.

"Well that creeps me out," he said. "I mean, I don't like getting singled out at birthday parties, let alone by…God."

"Okay, well too bad, Dean. Because I think he wants you to strap on your party hat."

Dean crossed his arms, cleared his throat a little, then looked over at Bobby.

"All right then...fine. What do we know about angels?"

Bobby gave a flat look as he hefted five large, dusty tomes onto the desk he was sitting at.

"Start reading."

Elena sighed. Dean slipped the thinnest one from the top. He then pointed at Sam.

"You're gunna get me some pie."

Sam rolled his eyes and met Elena's, the two of them sharing amused looks.
"What do you think of all this?" he asked her. She was hesitant to reply at first, but eventually she crossed her arms and said,

"I think you're right," she admitted. "But I understand why he's not completely on board with the idea."

"Fair enough," he nodded, then grabbed the keys to the Impala. "Wanna come?"

"Nah, I'll stick around," she said with a small grin. "Make sure he's working."

"I don't see you reading anything!" Dean's voice called from the living room. She rolled her eyes again and picked up an ancient book from the pile.

"Keep your panties on," she teased and sat next to him on the couch. He sent her a look, but didn't say anything.

Sam shook his head.

"I'll be back," he said to Bobby, and shut the door behind him.


"Don't forget the chips," said Dean.

"Yes, Dean. I'll get the chips."

"Would you leave him alone already?" Elena snapped. "You've called him three times."

"And don't forget my pie," he added.

"Dean, when have I ever forgotten the pie?"

"Uh…"

"Exactly."

"Get apple if they have it…or wait, I'm feeling like cherry."

"Fine…uh, I gotta go."

"All right, see ya."

"Yeah, bye."

"Now don't call him again!" Dean looked over at Elena's peeved expression.

"What are you so pissy about?" he asked. "I told him to get your damn Cheez-Its."

She huffed, but couldn't exactly contradict him. Cheez-Its were her favorite snack food, and he'd told Sam to get them without even having to ask if she'd want some.

"Keep in mind, I'll be wanting some."

"Uh, no. If you get a hold of 'em there'll be nothing left by the time I get there."

"Aw, that's not true," he refuted.

"No?" she asked. "Then why are the Snickers and Milkyways I keep in my bag always gone, or
bitten into?"

Dean tried and failed for innocent.

"And you leave the fucking wrapper so my clothes get chocolatey," she complained. He sighed, not bothering to deny it.

"How would you like it if I ate your pie?" Elena asked, and he froze. His eyes slid to her face comically, but his expression was so serious, it made her restrain her laugh.

"You laugh now…" Dean trailed.

Elena smirked coolly and went back to her reading. Informative stuff, as she was getting back to the New King James Version of the Bible and reading verses her phone had spat out at her.

"This almost feels like…" But she stopped herself. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. Then Dean looked over at her.

"Like what?"

"…Like when it was me and my dad," she said, lowering her eyes to the coffee table. "I'd sit and turn page after page and research for the case, or for my classes."

"Right, 'cause you were taking 'em online," he said.

"Yeah…it was hard as hell. Especially with us being on the road all the time."

"Why'd you do it then?" he asked. "From what you told me back then, you didn't really want to deal with college."

She smiled ruefully.

"It was the only way he'd let me come with him."

"…Hmm," Dean nodded after a moment. "For the record, not that I ever really cared about going to college…but I kinda wish my dad had cared more about that stuff."

She looked over at him, trying to hide her surprise.

"Yeah?"

He got a little smile on his face.

"Yeah. Maybe I could've…I dunno…" He scratched the back of his head. "But I wish Dad would've lightened up…for Sam's sake, ya know?"

She understood. Sam wanting to go to school shouldn't have been as taboo as John Winchester had made it seem. For him to want more than hunting for the rest of his life made sense. Sam was smart, and talented in ways Elena knew she'd never be. He would've made a good lawyer if he'd ever gotten the chance.

"Yeah…I never really thought about what I wanted to be," she confessed. "My mom was a dancer. I used to watch old tapes of her company while she was in college. I've got two left feet, but I used to pretend…"

Elena stopped herself with a laugh.
"I sound like such a girl."

Dean quirked a grin.

"No, no, go on. This should be good," he said. "With the tutu and everything, right?"

She shot him a side glance, but her smile remained in place.

"Yeah, no. I guess...I just," she trailed, "she was beautiful. Grace and poise and all that. I just wished I'd gotten some of that."

"Aw, what do you mean?" he said, a playful gleam in his eyes. "You look just like your mom."

She gave him a confused look.

"How do you know what she looks like?"

"I saw the pictures in your house." She had dark hair, just like Elena. And they had the same eyes, expressive and light grey. Like clouds, in his mind. The memory of the picture was faded, but he might've remembered seeing Elena's smile on an older, more mature-looking woman.

"She was hot," he said honestly. It made Elena roll her eyes and smile a little.

"She probably would've liked you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, she was fun, always hopping from one thing to the next," Elena's smile grew fonder. "My dad could hardly keep up sometimes, but he could never say no to anything she did either."

"Hm, sounds about right," he said with a grin. "You'd have to get it from somewhere."

She rolled her eyes, but her smile stayed.

"So are you telling me you like to dance?" Dean asked, raising his brows. Elena shook her head wryly.

"Nah. But I always wished I could," she admitted.

Before he could answer her, Bobby walked into the room.

"Hey." He looked like he'd just gotten off the phone. "I have a friend, Olivia Lowry. I've been trying to reach her for three days for some help on this angel front. She hasn't called back and it's unlike her."

"Okay, are we going to go check on her?" Elena asked. She'd worked with Liv last month while helping out Bobby; great hunter, and she really knew how to throw back bourbon.

"Yeah, go grab your stuff if you're coming," he said. "We'll wait for Sam."

Not only did Sam forget the pie, but they found Olivia Lowry in the middle of her living room, lying dead in a pool of her own blood. There was a gaping hole where her stomach should've been, and her entire right arm was missing, torn off raggedly. Bobby had to leave the room angrily, while Elena had to avert her eyes. Maybe this was what her dad meant when he said she didn't have the stomach for the job, because she was almost ready to throw up.
"What did this?" she murmured. Sam examined Olivia's closet—a hidden arsenal with the door left wide open, and found an EMF meter strewn about haphazardly.

"Vengeful spirit activity," he concluded solemnly.

"Yeah, on steroids…" Dean trailed. "I've never seen a ghost do this to a person."

Bobby came back in, closing the door behind him. He still looked pale, but more composed than before.

"Bobby, you all right?" Dean asked.

"I just called some hunters nearby."

"Good… we could use some help."

"Except they're not answering their phones either."

"…There's something going down, isn't there?" Sam asked. Bobby looked up from Olivia's body at him. His grief was expertly hidden, only revealed in his surly tone.

"You think?"
Edge of the Blade II

XII: Edge of the Blade, Part II

They split up: Bobby in his car, Elena in her Camaro, Sam and Dean in the Impala, and started calling nearby hunters. Every house and apartment and motel room they checked had bloody floors and walls and their voicemails full. They agreed to meet back at Bobby's, for which Elena was grateful. She'd seen enough dead bodies in the last three days. If she saw one more, she'd be sick.

Halfway through Minnesota, she got a call from Dean.

"Hey."

"Hey. Everything all right on your end?"

"Yeah, why? Did something happen?"

"Sam got attacked, by this guy...long story short, an FBI agent who was on our trail for a while and locked us up in jail, but ended up helping us gank a bunch of demons. Lilith torched the place right after Sam and I left...he didn't make it."

"Damn...I'm sorry," she said. "Is Sam okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine...look Bobby isn't answering his phone. Have you talked to him?"

Worry set at the bottom of her stomach.

"Not since yesterday when he called."

"Okay, well we're on our way. Almost out of Nebraska."

"You might get there before me. I only passed Rochester half an hour ago."

"All right...be careful."

"You too."

But by the time she made it to her uncle's house (and she borderline raced to get there in under three hours), she found all three of them. Alive, but shit had clearly gone down; they were all beat to hell and the house was a mess.

"Lena," Sam greeted, somewhat sheepishly under her worried glare.

"What the hell happened?"

Apparently, it was ghosts. Specifically, ghosts of the people they couldn't save, and each of them with a branding on their hands. Sam drew it out, and Bobby recognized it enough to begin looking through his book shelves. Then the lights started flickering.

"We've got to move," he said.

"Move where?" Sam asked. Bobby measured him with a look.

"Somewhere safe, ya idjit."
Bobby had built a panic room. He had a panic room, and Elena had never noticed it while living here. Did that make her an idiot? It was in the basement of his house; one hundred percent iron and coated with salt. There was a cot for a bed that was already made, a desk and chair with paper and other writing utensils, and another shelf of books. Not to mention a full and extensive arsenal that Dean fully appreciated.

He and Sam spent their time making salt rounds while Bobby and Elena looked for the symbol, which the older hunter finally found. It was the “Mark of the Witness,” specifically of the unnatural. The nature of their deaths forced them to rise, and in agony. It blinded them, making them vengeful spirits against their will. The spell used to raise them was so powerful that it left a mark on their souls.

"'The Rising of the Witnesses,' it figures into an ancient prophecy," he finished.

"Wait, wait, what book is that prophecy from?" Dean asked.

"Well, the widely distributed version's just for tourists," said Bobby. "But long story short, Revelation."

The brothers looked at him oddly. Elena had read it over his shoulder already, and shook her head.

"This is a sign, boys," he said. "…Of the Apocalypse."

The silence in the room was deafening, until Dean spoke up, wanted clarification that this was the Biblical Apocalypse they were talking about.

"Yeah. See the Rising of the Witnesses, it's a mile marker."

"Okay, so what do we do now?" Sam asked. Dean scoffed.

"Road trip," he said, walking away to the table full of shotguns and salt rounds. "Grand Canyon, Star Trek experience…Bunny Ranch."

"First things first," Bobby said dryly, "Let's survive our friends out there."

"Right," said Dean. "Any ideas besides staying in this room until Judgment Day?"

Bobby tapped on one of the pages in front of him with his pencil.

"It's a spell, to send the Witnesses back to rest." He shrugged. "Should work."

"Should work?" Elena asked. Sam laughed shortly.

"Great."

"Good thing is, I think I've got everything we need at the house," said Bobby. He leant back in his chair.

"Any chance you got everything we need in this room?" Dean asked with a hopeful grin. Bobby glanced over at him sardonically.

"You thought our good luck was gunna start now all of a sudden?" Dean rolled his eyes. "Spell's gotta be made over an open fire."

"The fireplace in the library," Sam realized.
"You got it."

"It's just not as appealing as a, uh…ghost-proof panic room," Dean commented. "You know?"

"Most things in our lives aren't," Elena replied. Dean paused.

"Touché."

With a warning to watch each other and not run out of ammo until Bobby was done with the spell, they cautiously left the panic room. Then it was a race to get to the library and make a salt circle around the fireplace while Bobby got the ingredients. He sent Sam upstairs to get a hex box, then Dean to the kitchen to get something out of a false drawer under the cabinets.

Twin girls appeared behind the salt line, grinning darkly and calling out to Bobby.

"You walked right by us," one said, "while that monster ate us all up."

"Why didn't you do anything?" said the other. Elena glanced over at Bobby and saw him staring at them, wide eyed with a pained expression. She shot at both of them and they were gone. It freed her uncle from the distraction and allowed him to continue with the preparations.

Then the kitchen door closed, separating them from Dean.

"Dean?" Bobby called.

"I'm fine, Bobby. Keep workin'!"

He scrambled even faster for ingredients, until his hands came up empty for an herb. It was hard to come by and needed to be kept in dark, cold places. But he knew he had some.

"Lena." She turned to him, concern clear in her eyes.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"Get me a dark green bag—under your bed. It should be next to an old shoebox."

"Got it," she said, and headed up the stairs.

Elena had never looked under the bed. It was weird to think about, but she hadn't, even when she'd come here to stay when she was a kid. She had to practically lay on the floor to reach under it. There were things so jammed between one another that she ended up pulling out everything she could, until finally reaching the shoebox. The lid tumbled off in her haste, revealing several pictures, old and frayed.

She recognized one of them; it was of Aunt Karen, probably in her early twenties and sitting on a playground swing. She was smiling widely with a shoe missing from her left foot.

A rasping, whisper of a voice called her name, breaking the silence.

She froze. The picture fluttered down between her fingers.

"Don't tell me you don't remember me, 'cause then you'd be lying," said the bright voice. She didn't want to turn around. Her heart hampered in her chest, her breath coming out in ragged pants.

"Elena." This one was different, gruff, yet just as familiar. If not more. Finally, she looked behind
"Dad?" she choked out.

Dean tried talking around Victor Henrickson when he came for him. All his words were the truth, but were also an effective way of stalling. Until he got a spectral arm through his ribcage and his gun thrown yards away. He couldn't block through the pain, and he couldn't shake Henrickson off. But he didn't have to.

Sam shot the ghost with a solid round of salt, making it disappear.

"You all right?" he asked. Dean gave his brother a pained look.

"No," he said, but accepted his helping hand. The two brought the stuff for the spell into the library, but Dean looked around the room, confused.

"Bobby, where's Elena?" Bobby looked up from his work, thinly veiled alarm in his eyes.

"Upstairs in her room, I needed her to get me somethin',"

Dean swore loudly.

"Sam," he barked, and the two ran up to the second floor. Just when they reached the top, a gun shot rang out clear and loud.

"You've always been a disappointment." Dean recognized the voice. It was coming from her bedroom. "Never listened to me…never did what you were goddamn told."

It was followed closely by an agonized scream, long and echoing off the walls.

"Elena!" Dean shouted. His heart leapt into his throat and he and Sam sprinted to her room. He ripped the door open and saw the ghost of Jack Hayes gripping his daughter's wrist. Her elbow was in an unnatural angle, with his other hand at her throat. Dean didn't wait for her face to get any redder to shoot a round of salt into Jack's head. Elena slumped to the ground in a coughing fit, gasping for air, and Sam easily lifted her in his arms.

"Gotta get back to the salt line," he said, but she stopped him with a hand. Between coughs, she pointed to the bag lying on the floor. Dean grabbed it and followed his brother downstairs.

"What happened?" Bobby demanded.

"What do you think happened?" said Sam. He deposited her in the desk chair. "Can you feel your arm?"

Elena shook her head. Her eyes were clouded with pain.

"It's numb."

She could barely feel her fingers either.

"Don't move it. Your elbow looks dislocated," Dean said.

"Trust me," she said, "I'm not—"

The windows flew open, blowing the salt line away and making the flames in the fireplace flicker.
"Shit," Dean swore, and propped his gun up at the ready. Ghost after ghost came, and Bobby continued speaking out the spell as Sam and Dean, and Elena with one arm, pumped the spirits with salt. Meg Masters, the college student possessed by a demon and robbed of her life. The Twins. Henrickson. Ron, from the bank back in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Jack. And then a boy that was unfamiliar to the brothers.

"Who are you?" Dean asked. The little boy cocked his head to the side, his brown eyes wide and mockingly hurt.

"She didn't tell you about me?" he asked. "She didn't tell you how she killed me?"

Elena froze, could only watch helplessly as the spirit of her little brother watched her with contempt in his eyes that had never once been there when he was alive.

Sam was the one who finally shot him, making Elena flinch violently. But she decided to stand. She would shoot better standing up.

When Henrickson threw Dean's gun away from him, he was forced to use an iron rod. Sam, busy with desperately trying to reload his gun, was taken unawares by Meg who moved a small shelf and trapped Sam against the wall.

"Sam," Dean called.

"Cover Bobby!"

Elena was still shooting rounds even though pain was shooting up and down her right arm. She wasn't left-handed, so her shots were occasionally a bit off. She missed Jack by a hair, and he appeared inches from her. He punched her across the cheek and grabbed her bad arm, making her cry out and drop her gun. But after a shot from Dean, the ghost dissipated.

Then Bobby's scream of pain alerted them to Meg, who stood behind him with her hand through his back. The filled bowl in his hands began to slip out.

"Dean!" he called, and Dean dove, just managing to catch it.

"Fireplace!" Bobby ordered, and the bowl and all its contents went into the flame. The room was then engulfed in a flash of light so bright it was painful, and then it was gone, including all the ghosts. Bobby gasped and fell to the floor.

"Bobby," Dean grated out, and he and Sam, who by then had managed to push the shelf away from him, helped Bobby stand. They surveyed the utterly trashed room.

"Well, shit."

They took Elena to the emergency room after the three men unanimously decided (despite her protests) that it would be better than trying to reset and treat a dislocated, possibly broken elbow from Bobby's house. If they didn't do it right they could end up really breaking her arm, with longer lasting damage. She whined and complained all the way there and through the hospital corridors after her vital signs were taken and her case was deemed not life-threatening.

"Quit whinin' and just maybe I won't leave your ass here," Bobby threatened. She quieted after that.

They were forced to sit in the waiting room for twenty minutes. Elena grew fidgety, though she winced with every shift. Dean looked over and felt bad for her. Her elbow was bruised purple and
swollen, like a balloon.

"Is that guy over there here for a bloody nose?" he whispered in her ear. She looked over to where a twenty-something year old guy had napkins shoved up his nose. Other than that, he looked fine.

"Seriously?" she groaned, then leaned toward his ear, lowering her voice. "Someone's been hitting the pay-per-view a little too hard."

Dean coughed on a laugh, earning strange looks from the people sitting in front of them. Usually he would've been the one to make that joke.

"I think I've rubbed off on you," he said, not quite able to fight off an amused smile.

"Like that wasn't your goal all along."

"True."

"Wilson, Ann," a nurse called. "Ann?"

"Finally," Elena sighed, and stood. "Coming!"

The three of them followed her and the nurse to another room, where the nurse encouraged Elena to sit on the bed while they waited for the doctor. It took another five minutes, but soon enough, Dr. Steve Marshall came out—a thirty-something with a head of blonde hair and dark eyes that were as friendly as his smile. He introduced himself to everyone and greeted Elena (or more accurately, "Ann"), her father, and her two brothers.

"Now, as I see it you think you've dislocated your elbow?" he asked kindly.

"Tripped and fell down the stairs," she supplied.

"She doesn't have the best balance," Dean added. She gave him a cursory side glance.

"My brother tends to leave his shoes on the steps," she told the doctor. "Kind of like a five year old."

Sam looked down to hide his smile as Dean raised a brow at her, while Bobby only sighed tiredly. The doctor smiled good-naturedly.

"Well, let me just take a look and see how bad it is, Ann. Is it Ann, or Annie?" Elena smiled, feeling a small blush on her cheeks.

"I like Annie too," she admitted. He smiled back.

"Okay, Annie. Well, let's see here."

He probed lightly at the skin around the joint. She hissed in pain once, then twice, and then Dean wished this guy would finish with his fucking tests and blatant flirting and get her some painkillers and a sling already.

He asked her routine questions about her overall health history, previous surgeries, etc., along with the major symptoms she was experiencing besides bruising, inflammatory pain, and numbness.

"I'll have to run an x-ray to make sure, but your elbow may be broken. If that's the case, then you're going to need surgery."

Elena blanched.
"Surgery?" she asked weakly. Dr. Marshall gave her a sympathetic look.

"'Fraid so. It's the easiest way to fix the bone."

"How long will that take to heal up?" Bobby asked.

"Recovery can take up to several months, unfortunately. But if it's only a dislocation, recovery time is pretty quick in comparison."

"How quick are we talking?" said Sam.

"Three to five weeks, depending on the severity. When it's healed enough you can start physiotherapy treatments to strengthen it back up again," said the doctor. He turned to address Elena, "But let's take you to get x-rayed now, and we'll know for sure."

She nodded and stood, but looked back to Bobby and the Winchesters.

"You'll wait for me…right?" she asked, though her eyes were more on Bobby than anyone else. His softened a bit.

"Course," he promised. She smiled a little, then followed the doctor out. When the door closed, Dean grinned over at his surrogate father.

"Gettin' soft in your old age, huh, Bobby?"

"Oh, shut up."

Fortunately, it was only a dislocation. They gave her a sling with a prescription of painkillers. In a few hours, they were on their way back to Bobby's house. The old hunter made sure they all had their own blankets and pillows so he didn't have to go looking for it later, because he was taking a nap, even though it was only six in the afternoon. What used to be the boys' room now only had one twin bed, since the other one had gotten too old and too hard to sleep on. So now there was Elena's room, one other empty bed, and the couch.

With Bobby trudging to his bedroom and closing the door behind him, that left the three of them. The sun was still up, but Dean didn't think he could take another step more than what it would take to shower and lay down.

"I'll take the—"

"It's all right. I'll take the couch," Sam cut him off and set his backpack on the nearest cushion.

"Sam—"

"Dean, you're about to fall over," he said bluntly. "You guys go ahead and shower, I'll get some food."

"Got it. But I'm lying here for a while," Elena said, and pretty much dropped onto the couch.

"You feel like something specific?" she heard Sam ask. Usually he'd just go out and get the closest thing.

Dean's only been back a month, and already he's been beat to hell, she mused, her lips turning down with a frown.
His face was bruised, lip split, and from what she'd heard, Henrickson would've gotten him if Sam hadn't been there in time. That must have been enough to get to Sam.

"Uh, I dunno man," Dean said, and stretched his back a little. "Did you see anything on the way?" He could have pushed his brother about the couch thing, because Sam looked pretty exhausted too, and he'd rather see to Sam than the other way around. But it looked like he was in one of his moods, when pushing against him was like pushing against a brick wall. Frankly, Dean didn't have the energy.

"I know there's a Chinese restaurant, a Papa John's…I think I saw a burger place around the corner with a 'takeout sign' on the window."

_Damn_, Dean thought. The sound of a burger was already making his mouth water.

"You're reading my mind, Sammy. Cheeseburger with bacon?" he asked hopefully.

"And extra onion rings, got it," Sam said with a grin. "Lena?"

"Cheeseburger."

"Fries?"

By the sound she made, she didn't care much.

"Right. I'll be back," Sam said, and grabbed the keys on his way out. Dean glanced over at Elena's prone form.

"You gunna shower?" he asked.

"You go ahead," she murmured.

"Sure?"

"Mhm."

He knew something was off, but he wouldn't press her for now. Instead, he gathered his clothes and washed off all the blood and dirt and grime, cleaned the small cuts on his arms and prodded gently at the bruise on his cheek while examining himself in the mirror. Then he got a good look at the rest of his face and almost sighed. With a tired exhale, he stared hard.

His body was clean and, besides the new cuts and the handprint on his shoulder, void of all his old scars. But the eyes that stared back at him were decades older. Tired. Holding in everything he wouldn't say. Couldn't say. And that was how it had to be.

Dean blinked and the weight was gone, pushed behind the surface for now.

He stepped out of the bathroom with a wad of clothes he threw in his bag. Only ten minutes had passed according to his phone, but it felt like an hour. He looked over and saw that Elena hadn't moved, not even an inch from where she was curled on herself facing the back of the couch.

"Elena?"

When she remained quiet, he tentatively sat beside her.

"Hey," he said. From here he could just make out the profile of her face. She was awake, her gaze not really focused on anything. She didn't answer though.
"Somethin' wrong?" He almost winced, realizing how dumb that sounded after…well, today. "I mean…"

"Dean," she stopped him. Her voice was tired. "I just want to sleep."

"You can't sleep yet…Sammy's bringing back food," he said. "And Sam wants the couch."

This time when she didn't answer him, he did sigh.

"Come on, Shortstop," he prodded, "Talk to me."

That earned him a narrowed look from over her shoulder, and he grinned a little. Her eyes returned to the dull beige walls, but he caught sight of the emotions beginning to break through.

"I saw your dad," he confessed. "Before, I mean…when we came to get you." Elena stiffened…then gradually relaxed. Her exhaling breath was a slow sigh. She blinked a few times, jaw clenching and unclenching.

"Did you…hear?"

"Some of it."

Elena bit her lip, and the cracks fell through. Tears rolled down her face.

"He blamed me," she choked out, "for Jamie. And…Jamie blamed me…"

"That wasn't him," he said, but her body began to shake anyway, curling more upon herself. From his vantage point, it couldn't be comfortable. Her trembling didn't stop when his hand rested on her shoulder.

"Hey," he said softly. And with that gentle lilt of his gruff voice, the dam broke. The hand on her shoulder squeezed a bit. "It wasn't either of them."

He was surprised when her hand, small and warm, came to rest over his and squeezed back. But he waited until she stopped shaking, smoothed his thumb along her shoulder as her tears ebbed. Eventually she let go of his hand and rolled onto her back, looking up at him with pale, glassy eyes. With the same hand he dried her flushed cheeks and got her to smile a little. That small embarrassed smile he liked to get out of her sometimes.

Then she laughed, closing her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again he was still there with that little grin he always got when she unraveled in front of him like this. That stupid, stupid grin that came out after Elena finally had to smile at his stupid face.

"How do you always know what to say?" she asked, and took in a shuddering breath. "Every fucking time?"

His grin broadened slightly.

"'Cause I'm awesome."

A smile played at her lips, but she rolled her eyes and sat up. Folding her legs under her, Elena paused for a split second before hugging him around his middle with one arm. Dean was warm and smelled like soap and spice deodorant, and she closed her eyes when he pressed a kiss to her hair. That was new, but she couldn't say she minded.

She'd forgotten the way he'd make her cough out what was wrong, but would actually listen to her
and quip a joke afterward that would make everything more or less okay. He wouldn't try to fix everything, just be there. For her, that had always been enough. Always.

And then Dean was gone.

Bobby, bless him, would try. When he saw that she wasn't handling it well—her father dead, her new-old life in Hill City gone, Dean, then Sam, in a matter of months—on a bad day, Bobby would ask. He would pry as much as he could, and sometimes (and these were few and far between) she would tell him exactly what was on her mind. But more often than not, she didn't have the heart to say things that would only bring her uncle more pain or guilt by mentioning them. One step closer to the whiskey in the cabinet.

Elena felt a few tears leak from the corners of her eyes, drying on Dean's shirt.

_I missed you._

All too soon he pulled away, and she grabbed her things to take a quick shower before Sam got back. But the odd combination of spice and soap stayed with her until she shut the bathroom door behind her.

Elena had slept soundly the night before with all the pills she'd taken, but apparently Castiel (or "Cas," as Dean had taken to calling the guy) appeared to Dean, this time without all the pomp and circumstance. He confirmed Bobby's notes on the Witnesses. It was part of sixty-six seals being broken by Lilith, of all people. Well, demon, but whatever.

The seals functioned as locks on a door, specifically a cage door. Lucifer's cage. The fucking Devil and archangel. And that's why the angels are more frequently coming down to earth after, according to Castiel, over two thousand years.

Lucifer.

The Apocalypse.

It all made sense now, at least to Elena. And though she didn't want to see them go, it also made sense to her why Sam and Dean had to leave without her. She couldn't very well hunt with a dislocated elbow, and she'd done what she'd set out to do. More even; she tried to help the Winchesters break Dean's deal. When that didn't work, she and Sam tried to find a way to save him that didn't involve hoodoo of any kind, but that went south too. Finally, when Dean was alive and more or less well, she'd helped them track down who brought him back. Elena supposed that was… the most she could do.

But now there was a matter of the impending Apocalypse, unless they found a way to stop it. Stopping it would involve killing Lilith, which they had no leads on and no real way to find her.

So for now, Elena was helping Bobby anyway. For the two months until October it would be answering phones and doing things with her left hand.

Sam called once or twice, just to see how she was feeling and update her on what they were doing. It was sweet of him, so she told him the truth: she was bored to tears. She couldn't even drink a beer with the painkillers and antibiotics she was on. Plus, she always felt loopy and unfocused whenever she took them. He'd laughed and said that was normal, though he wished there was a little more boring on their end.

Elena got a package toward the beginning of October from "Joe Elliot." Either it was the lead
vocalist of Def Leppard sending her a green Oktoberfest hat, or it was Dean Winchester. Attached to the long black feather on the side was a note written in his familiar scrawl:

*Don't down that beer until you're off your meds.*

She'd sent him a picture of Bobby's fridge; half the second shelf was filled with about two six-packs of beer. She texted him.

**E: Its like I'm an alcoholic or something. I dont even drink tht much.**

His reply took all of five minutes.

**D: We'll fix tht when ur cleared.**

With Bobby on hunts more often than not, it got kind of lonely. But she had Val to talk to (the woman was always ready to talk her ear off), and she was certain that once Elena got her cast off that the two of them were going to Jesse's, but not until she wouldn't get a headache from the loud music and flashing lights. Keeping discussions about Sam and Dean at a minimum was hard, but Val eventually got the hint not to press so much on why they travelled all the time (the story about the business her dad used to be a part of that Elena decided to rejoin sounded flimsy to Val), and if they were single. Or worse yet, Val trying to set up Elena with one of them.

"You don't even know them," Elena said over the phone, rubbing the bridge of her nose, "How are you so sure of how many kids Sam would want to have, if he even wants any?"

"He seems like the family man type, which I know is more your speed. He'd want two kids, at least. And you two have a lot in common, with the whole bookworm thing going on," said Val. "But then again, Dean is all mysterious, rough and leather jacket wearing badass."

Elena had to laugh. Val was the only one she could talk to like this. For a few minutes she could pretend she was a normal twenty-eight year old talking about guys and making normal plans to catch up with her best friend.

"Just stop, you've only met him once," she said. "And Sam is…he's like my brother. You don't even know what he looks like, what he—"

"Well, what does he look like then?"

"Um…he's tall, like six-three, probably four—"

"Stop there. Too tall for you."

"I'm not that short."

"Honey, you need a step ladder to reach Bobby's wall cabinets," said Val. "You're a short-ass."

"Fuck you," Elena laughed.

"Just saying. Anyway, it seems like Cupcake's caught your eye."

Elena could only assume she meant Dean.

"Are you kidding?" she choked, smiling involuntarily. "We're just friends. Been friends for a long time now."

"Then how I can tell your face is getting all smiley? Especially when you told me about that hat."
Elena rolled her eyes, glad Val couldn't see her blush.

"I'm smiling because you're an idiot."

"I can smell your denial. It reeks, even from this side of the state."

"Come on, Val."

"No, you come on! I can sense it."

"What, like a Spidey-Sense?"

"No, you fuckwit. Women's intuition."

"Since when do you have women's intuition?"

"Since always. It's like, my sixth sense. That's why if you know what's good for you, next time you go out you'll wear that top I bought you last time we went out."

"What, that lacey half of a hoe's uniform?" Elena exclaimed with a laugh.

"Just trust me."

"Yeah, because I've got every reason to do that."

"You're getting laid one way or another. When was the last time you—"

"We're not going there," Elena shook her head. She heard a blowing sound from the other end, like there was a breeze. But she knew Val. "You're smoking, aren't you. I should've known. You always try to give me dating advice when you're high as shit."

"...That's beside the point."

"I don't think so," Elena muttered. Val coughed a bit.

"Whatever...so when are you going to visit me? Or when can I come up?"

"I'm kind of swamped here right now, but you can come up whenever your schedule clears up," Elena promised. "I know you've got work pretty busy around now with Halloween this month."

They usually decorated the museum she used to work at pretty heavily, even took out the more priceless breakable objects and made the place sort of a haunted house with actual information from the time period Halloween was created. Not stuff heavy or dark enough to creep kids out, but enough that they might actually learn something historical.

"I'll let you know," she said.

The following week, Dr. Marshall cleared her for everything, even took off the splint, and she never thought it would feel so good to bend her arm. It was just her luck that by the time she got back to Bobby's, the Winchesters needed help on a case.

"Dean's got ghost sickness," he told her.

"What?" she asked. "That's a real thing? Thought it was made up."

"Nope. It's real, hallucinations aside," said Bobby. "Thing is, they can't salt and burn the ghost. He
was road-hauled by a factory. The remains are all over the place."

"So what do we do?" she asked worriedly. If that was true, Dean didn't have a lot of time before his heart would give out from the "fear" the sickness induced. She'd read about it in books she read for one of her mythology classes in college, but hadn't heard of anyone in the hunting world who'd ever come across it.

"That's what we're gunna figure out when we get there."

"Get there?" she asked. "Where are we going?"

"Colorado."

They ended up saving Dean in record time by road-hauling the ghost with iron, replaying his own death, near moments before Dean could have a heart attack. It wasn't until they were all teasing him about his time as a scared little girl that the brothers noticed her cast was off.

"You're free," Sam commented with a smile.

"Free to do whatever the hell I want," Elena grinned.

"Don't go burnin' buildings," Bobby warned.

"Well, I did promise a party night, didn't I?" said Dean. He winked at her, then turned to Bobby. "Care to join us?"

Bobby snorted.

"The hell I wanna be with you three on a goddamn spree," he said with his usual snark. "Leave me out of whatever fool plans you've got. Just make sure I don't hear about it the next morning. I'm not doin' any bail outs."

"Will do, Bobby," Sam promised with a crooked grin. With all the crap they'd had to deal with lately, unwinding a bit sounded good.

And that's how Elena found herself once again in the Impala on the way to the motel they'd settled in. the boys let her shower first, knowing she would probably take the longest to get ready. They hadn't known how right they were until it was an hour later and the two of them were bored to tears.

"Elena," Dean started, getting up to knock on the door. "Get your ass out here or we're leaving without you—"

The door slid open, and he was met by exasperated grey eyes and long, dark lashes. His gaze roamed her face, lured in by the pout of dark red lips, down to the lacy black top she was wearing. "Relax, I'm done," she said with a small grin, and brushed past him. He caught a whiff of something—perfume, he realized, and couldn't help but admire the curve of her hips in that black skirt. He was shocked, however, by the back of the blouse.

"You look great," Sam complimented, took her hand and twirled her around for effect. It made her laugh, even as embarrassment made her face grow warm.

"What happened to your shirt?" Dean remarked. "Lose a fight with a pair of scissors?"

It was cut low, nearly down to the small of her back and revealing smooth skin. It was catnip to
many a skeevy bastard, Dean knew. But she only laughed.

"Come on, Dean. I'm not gunna go in a Zeppelin t-shirt and old jeans, am I?"

"That's not what I'm saying," he protested. "It's cold outside. Like in the thirties."

"That's why I have a jacket," she pointed out. At his dissatisfied look, she said, "If you want to wait another twenty minutes for me to change, be my guest," she said, placing a hand on her hip. After a tense pause, Dean sighed and grabbed his keys.

It was going to be a long night.

As usual, Dean did the driving. He didn't tell them where he was going though, which irked Elena. Until they saw the signs for Denver, Colorado, and she started getting excited. It was beautiful at night, all the stores and restaurants and lights and people walking around. After parking the Impala on one of the roadside parking spaces, they became part of the crowd. Every now and then, Elena would stop and look at something, be it pastries in the window of a bakery, or handmade knickknacks and painted candleholders she would probably never need.

Eventually, Sam caved and they went into one of the bakeries, splurging on sandwiches with fancy names and cookies dipped in chocolate that Elena and Dean fought over. She ended up stealing the last one out of his hand, but felt bad enough at the pathetic look on his face that she bought him a chocolate covered Twinkie to make up for it. He gave her half anyway.

Eventually they made their way past a club that, from the outside, looked bigger than the kind of places they were used to going for drinks. More expensive.

"Let's at least check it out," Sam reasoned, and Elena was glad he did. The place was nice, but casual. Large enough for there to be a dance floor, but not so packed that you couldn't find seats at the bar. They were able to find three next to each other, and Dean immediately started ordering. Eventually they found themselves sharing a booth enough away from the loud music that they could actually hear one another.

Elena swirled the ice around in her drink. It was nice, she reflected, being with Sam and Dean again, talking and joking at their own table. The place was big enough and loud enough that they could sit close together and make fun of the drunks on the dance floor.

"So after tonight," she started, a little reluctantly. The brothers looked over at her. "Are…you taking me back to Bobby's?"

The two glanced at one another, then back at her. Dean shrugged casually.

"If that's what you want," he said, taking a long sip of beer. She blinked and…shrugged.

"Sure," she said, and downed a shot. Sam's gaze lingered on her face, until Dean bumped his shoulder and pointed out a guy who just split his pants trying to dance a bit too hard.

A few shots later and Elena was more than a little buzzed, though. Part of her thought it was a good idea to go on the dance floor. The other part told her to sit the fuck down. Then a third part chimed in. The part that was eyeing the list of drinks written in chalk on the far wall black board.

"I wanna try something new," she told them. "We always get the same stuff."

"Go for it," said Sam. "Just remember to pace yourself."
She stuck her tongue out at him and went to the bar and only stumbled on her heels once.

"Hi," she greeted the bartender, her speech only a little bit slurred.

"Hi," he replied with a bored expression. "Something else for you?"

"Yeah," she nodded, leaning on the counter. "I want something I've never heard of."

"That's specific," the bartender said. She glanced at his nametag that read, "Mick." He was tall, into his forties and built, like he'd worked at a few dives before this club, and not as a bartender. As a bouncer, maybe.

"Feeling adventurous?" he asked.

"Yep. Lay it on me."

"You got it."

In about five minutes, "Mick" came back with a tall glass of something iced and dark red, almost black.

"Enjoy," he said.

"What the hell is that?" With the music pounding in her ears, she didn't really catch what he said next. But he promised it would be fruity. She could've sworn he said Mongolian Nutter Butter, and hoped it wouldn't taste like peanuts and sugar.

 Fuck it, she thought, and made the mistake of trying to throw it back like a shot. The liquid that scorched down her throat tasted like gasoline and orangey pineapples—oh, and with a side of Pepto. She found herself in a coughing fit that had the bartender asking her if she was okay.

"What the hell did you put that?" she exclaimed, and set the glass, three quarters full, down on the counter. "I just drank motor oil with a fruit basket."

"Hey, calm down, lady. If you hadn't chugged it like a milk carton maybe you wouldn't be coughing out a lung."

"Yeah, well, can you make me something that won't cost me an organ transplant?"

"Look, that was a thirty dollar drink you want to piss away. You sure you wanna go for something else?" Mick asked. Elena's eyes widened comically.

"Thirty dollars? For that?" she snorted. "Look buddy, I've already got a tab. I'm not paying for something that nearly made me upchuck my lunch."

"Let me tell you the way things work around here, powder puff," Mick said, his expression turning stony. This alone was enough to spark her anger. "People order, drink, and pay their bill. No exceptions."

Just when she would've shot back with something less than pleasant, Dean's hand fell on her shoulder.

"Is there a problem here?" Dean asked with his usual disarming grin meant to diffuse the situation.

"She wants to skip out on her tab," Mick answered, but Elena shook her head.
"Not the whole thing, just the fruity carburetor fluid you gave me," she corrected, gesturing at the glass. Dean looked at it, puzzled, wondering why it was familiar.

"Let's see, it can't be all bad," he said, and sipped at it. He swallowed past the liquid fire sensation and felt a shiver run up his spine. Dean had to shake himself.

"What the fuck is that?" he coughed. Then after a moment to taste what had just been in his mouth, he almost groaned when he realized where he'd tasted that before.

"You see!" Elena exclaimed. "I told you!"

"She ordered it, not my fault she's having second thoughts," said Mick.

"You gave her a Mongolian Motherfucker?" Dean asked. "What the hell is wrong with you? A whole thing of this and she would've been passed out on the floor!"

"Look, pal. If you have that much of a problem, pay your bill and get out. People come here to have a good time, not to be bothered by people like you."

"Does she look like a heavy hitter to you? I oughta—"

"Dean," Sam interrupted, coming up from behind his brother. "Look, I'm his brother. I couldn't help overhearing…before you made my friend's drink, did you tell her what it was or show her the price?"

Mick stared at Sam blankly, though he could see the man was silently simmering.

"I didn't think so," Sam said smoothly, and pulled out his wallet. "But how about this. Here's our tab, and an extra fifteen dollars for the drink, and we'll be on our way."

He held out a wad of cash, and after a moment, the bartender took it and waved a dismissing hand as he turned away from them. Sam all but hauled his brother and Elena out of the club.

"Next time, ask what it is first." Sam said while Dean left to go get the car. They'd had quite a few more drinks at a different bar as the night went on, and Sam and Elena were significantly more buzzed. Well, Sam was buzzed. Elena was heading down the route of plastered if she had a few more shots.

"Stop bitching," she grumbled. "You're all…pissy."

He gave her an annoyed look.

"You're the one who couldn't take the heat," he pointed out. "I'm the one who had to save your ass."

She grinned up at him.

"I didn't know it was your time of the month too."

He rolled his eyes.

"Next time I won't bother."

"Whatever, Samantha," she teased, but leaned on him a bit when a gust of wind hit them. She blamed the cobbled sidewalk for throwing her balance off. "Dean's the one who blacked out the first time you dared him to drink the…Nutter Butter thing."
Sam laughed a little, conceding her point.

"At least he made a good call on going to get the car," he said. "It would suck having to drag you a mile to it."

She gave him a peeved look and shivered.

"I res…resn't that."

"I think I see him. You might wanna put on your coat."

"I don't wanna."

Sam sighed.

"You're cold."

"I'm so not," she said contrarily. He was pretty sure she was just spiting him. "If I put it on it'll be too hot."

"I hear your teeth chattering."

"It's your fault. We're standing under a vent."

"We're about to go outside where it's worse."

"You don't have yours on either. Quit being so…" She paused, obviously trying and failing for the word for it. "Pissy."

He thought about it. Slinging his arms through the sleeves of his own jacket sounded like a lot of effort.

"Fine, just get in the car," he said, shaking his head with a smile. They walked out of the nightclub, and Dean looked at them incredulously.

"Where are your jackets, dumbasses?" he said when the two climbed into the car. "It's thirty and dropping."

"I was too hot," Elena whined. Dean then looked over at his brother.

"And you?" he asked. Sam shrugged.

"I dunno, man," he said, in his defense. Or just too inebriated to care. "I didn't feel like putting it on either." Dean shook his head.

"Damn five-year-olds," he muttered, and drove back to the motel. Elena was a little more sober by the time they got there, but that wasn't saying much. Sam let Dean help her get out, as she was complaining about the thin heels on her boots being "uneven."

"Come on. It's like, twenty something degrees," Sam reminded them. As if they needed reminding.

"It's all right, go inside," Dean said. "I can handle this."

"…Whatever, dude," Sam said with a parting wave. He was about to crash, and crash hard on the nearest bed.
Dean got her standing on the pavement and she immediately shivered.

"It's cold."

"I told you," Dean said, and grabbed her coat. He wrapped it around her. "Why don't you just take off the damn heels?"

"If I bend over, I'll fall," she said factually. Her balance was screwed to hell at the moment and both of them knew it. Dean sighed. He hadn't been able to find good parking on a Saturday night, even for this rickety motel. So they were on the far end of the parking lot.

"All right, sit down." She sat down on the edge of the car seat. Dean knelt in front of her and began undoing the buckle on one of her boots, then ran the zipper all the way down. He slid it off and momentarily glanced down at her smooth legs, though they were thinly covered by black stockings.

"Do the other one," she wiggled her left foot impatiently. He breathed a laugh and obliged. Then he looked up at her, finding amusement in her almost childlike smile.

"You ready to get up?" he asked.

"Yep," she said, and held out her hands. Dean shook his head and stood, grabbing her hands to lift her up after him. She ended up too close. Their legs were brushing one another, his hands still holding hers up to his chest. The way her eyes widened when they found his made him pause, made his mouth go dry.

"Dean?" Elena asked, sounding more sober than she had before.

"Yeah."

"Thanks." Her gaze flicked to his mouth when he licked his chapped lips.

"No problem."

It wasn't long before he found himself leaning toward her. He didn't realize it until she was tilting her head up to him.

But Dean hesitated, pulled away slightly. She was vulnerable, pretty drunk at this point. The smell of alcohol mingled with her perfume.

It didn't feel right, even if her curves pressed against him did.

And then Elena pulled away too. He caught the flash of disappointment in her eyes before it was gone, replaced with her usual, if a bit inebriated self, despite her shiver at the gust of wind that blew through them.

"Come on," he said, steering her toward the motel. "Let's get inside."
Dean was about to drive Elena home, until Sam found something an hour's drive away about two mysterious deaths. They might as well check it out at least, if it was on the way to Sioux Falls. Neither Dean or Elena had a problem with that logic.

But after spending their Halloween chasing after a witch hell bent on raising a demon from hell in a situation that reminded all of them way too much of what happened in Utah, Dean decided they needed another break. Just a day to catch their breath.

They'd had to deal with scheming smartass angels and Elena seeing Sam using his psychic powers for the first time. She wouldn't admit it, but they all knew it had scared her, enough that she couldn't really look or talk to Sam for the next couple days after. Dean couldn't even say anything because, well, it had scared him the first time too. Still did.

But she eventually plopped next to him on the couch one early morning with two fresh cups of coffee and a cheerful greeting to him and a look that said "I'm sorry." The quick but warm hug that followed surprised him, but he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and greeted her back with a smile that said, "It's okay, I understand," and "Thanks."

Seeing them in better accord put Dean in higher spirits, and gave him a hankering for some good pie. So, they went to what was supposedly the best diner in the state. He ate a plate of pasta and bread rolls, but was really excited for the pumpkin pie, more than anything.

The older waitress passed it in front of him with a kind smile and moved to the next table. He took the first bite and it practically melted in his mouth.

"Shit, that's good pie."

He looked up at the menu above the bar and found the dessert section. Looked like they had nearly ten different flavors of pie, and they sold it by the box. Perfect. He would have to remember to buy one before they left. He looked down to get another forkful and his eyes flew open.

Dean paused, fixed at the now gaping hole at the end of his slice. His eyes followed the trail of crumbs slowly to the right, then panned upward to rest on her face. Elena was munching contentedly, not even considering the danger of her seemingly harmless actions, and had the nerve to smile at him when she noticed him staring.

"S'good pie here."

She continued to chew, savoring the flavor and absentely sighing through her nose. Dean looked back down at his plate with his fork still in hand.

Elena hadn't even had the decency to start at the tip of the slice like a human being. No. She had to take from the end. From the crust.

You dirty bitch.

Sam watched in muted horror. He didn't know what to do. Elena didn't seem bothered in the slightest by Dean's ominously blank stare. He'd never seen his brother not react. It was actually scaring him.
And then Dean did the unthinkable.

He nodded and went back to his dessert.

"I know right?"

Calm, like nothing had ever happened.

*Oh God.*

Sam shook himself a bit and returned to his Caesar salad.

He knew nothing, and it was staying that way when they got back to the motel. He might just go to the front desk and pay for another room with a single bed. For himself.

But no. Realistically, he couldn’t do that. Not only did they not have the money, but Sam was most likely going to end up being the mediator. He resisted the urge to huff out a breath, and instead called the waitress back over.

"Can I get a beer?"

"Sure thing, hon."

"Thanks."

Elena was, surprisingly, in a great mood after the week they'd had.

The case was finally over with, she'd gotten a *great* night's sleep the night before, *and* she got a deal on half-priced Twinkies for Dean and buy-one-get-one Chex Mix for Sam. That way they wouldn't be out for at *least* seven days...or five. With their metabolism, it was a guesstimate. But if that ran out, she got Cheez-Its. Those were mostly for herself.

"Hey guys," she greeted. Sam paused from skimming several newspapers and smiled up at her from the couch. Dean nodded at her with a grin, but his eyes soon drifted to the grocery bags she was carrying. She rolled her eyes, but there was a smile on her face when she set the bags in his lap for his perusal.

"I'm gunna shower. You mind if I put my music on, Sam?" Sam didn't look up from the article he was reading, and so didn't see the small smirk creeping on his brother's face as he half-pretended to be immersed in the new food she bought.

"Nah, go ahead," said Sam. He knew she liked to blast in the bathroom if she was in a good mood, but the door would muffle most of it.

Elena hummed to herself as she went over to her duffel bag that sat on her bed, and reached around for her clothes. She was able to get a clean shirt, underwear and another pair of worn, comfortable jeans, but she faltered with finding a bra. She could've sworn she'd washed all of them, tucked 'em in a wad somewhere in here. Elena fumbled around until reaching one of the bottom corners, heard a crinkling sound and felt familiar plastic. It was one of her few chocolate bars she kept on hand when she felt like munching on something sweet.

*That's weird.*

The one in her hand was open. She never left trash in her bag.
Then she was pulling out all her clothes, extra shoes, her iPod, and finally got to the five snacks she usually kept in a zip-lock bag. They were strewn about, wrappers opened. She examined a Crunch bar, and her eyes widened when she saw the massive bite taken out of it. Her eyes drifted to the other four left.

No.

She picked up the Snickers. Nearly a quarter of it was missing. Almond Joy and Butterfinger? Same. Then finally, the Twix.

Damn it.

Both sticks were bitten nearly in half.

"Who the hell—" she muttered, but then she stilled.

Dean was setting the bags of groceries on the coffee table in front of him when he felt something hard hit the back of his head.

"Ow!"

"You asshole!"

He took one look at Elena's fuming expression, and started laughing.

"I fucking knew it was you!"

He fended off her slapping at him with the now broken Crunch bar and reflexively curled his legs onto the couch, leaning away from her and into Sam.

"Dean!" Sam protested. He shoved back and muttered a curse when Dean showed no signs of letting up. Sam got up from the couch and transferred all his papers to the single chair.

"Here, have the rest," she said, and dumped the chocolate bars, sans wrappers, into Dean's lap. She walked away with a satisfied smirk at hearing his vocal complaints of getting chocolate on everywhere. Elena sighed and put everything back into her bag, except for her change of clothes and her iPod. She turned it on and scrolled through her playlists as she made her way into the bathroom.

Fuck no.

"DEAN!" they heard her shout, even though the bathroom door was still wide open. "What the hell is this shit? You messed with my iPod?"

Sam gave Dean a disapproving look, but the older Winchester was smirking and eating Twix.

"All genres of country and top 40s pop," he called back. "Enjoy!"

Sam shook his head.

"You're unbelievable."

"She had it coming."

Then they heard her scream in outrage.
Elena's ran a frustrated hand through her hair and forced herself to breathe evenly. All her music was still on her laptop. It could be copied onto her iPod again.

*I didn't even think he knew how to work an iPod!*

Despite how it looked and how she acted last night, she knew exactly why Dean had done this, and that *alone* stopped her from strangling him. She knew he would settle the score *somehow*, but she hadn't thought he would go to the lengths he had to get her back.

Elena sighed. Whatever. She'd intended to prod the sleeping dragon, so she could live with a few half-eaten candy bars. Why she'd done it? That might be one of the eternal questions. It had been a whim, mostly. To see what he'd do. And maybe she was feeling a little emboldened by the beer, like she'd almost been last week. What happened in the parking lot replayed in her mind constantly. It dredged up memories of the post-embarrassment the morning after that she hid under the worst hangover of her life. She'd almost kissed Dean Winchester. Her best friend.

*He almost kissed you,* her thoughts treacherously corrected.

She shook her head to clear it.

*Let's not think about that.*

She turned off the iPod and set it on the counter, then looked up at the mirror to take her hair out of the tight ponytail it was in. She gasped at the red streaks that had been drawn in broad strokes on the glass.

**GET OWN PIE.**

"**DEEEEEEEEAN!**"

She came out of the bathroom and Dean had to duck to avoid a shoe aimed at his head.

"What?" he asked innocently. Her eyes were wide and incredulous. Slowly, her hand came up to hold a small black tube in front of her for both brothers to see. The red stick was now broken unevenly down to the base, nearly about to fall onto the floor.

"That was my *good* goddamn lipstick!"

"Well that was my good goddamn pie!"

Her eyes widened even more, if possible, and she pointed the lipstick at him with an angrily shaking fist.

"You're buying me a new one in the next town we stop in, goddamn it!"

Dean sat up at the edge of his seat and pointed back at her.

"Only if you buy me a *whole* pie!"

"Oh fuck you," she seethed. And he feigned a hurt expression. She called bullshit.

"No need to get nasty."

"I'm the one who got nasty? *You ruined my lipstick and ate my chocolate over a piece of pie!*"
"It was pumpkin pie," as if that was a legitimate excuse.

"It was MAC lipstick," she countered. Dean gave her a bland look.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

Elena made a sound of pure frustration and threw the now useless tube at him. He blocked it with his hand, but frowned when it stained his palm.

"You're so...male!"

"Well you're so..." Dean faltered, glanced at his hand, then held it up as evidence. "Girly."

"Oh, one tube of lipstick makes me girly?"

"That, and your girly shampoo and half the shit you leave in the bathroom! Every time you come out it smells like a fucking rainbow!"

"Excuse me if I don't want to smell like a toilet all day long."

Both paused at the heavy sigh that came from the other side of the room. Sam fixed them with a look that said he was one hundred percent done with their shit.

"You're both childish."

The two looked at one another, then back to him.

"Shut up, Sam!"

"No one asked you!"

Sam just shook his head and went back to reading.

It was a good thing when he got them a case in Concrete, Washington: a small town that Dean initially jumped on at the prospect of saving naked women from ghosts in their showers. When the lead dried up, the whole thing was disappointing (not just for Dean's sake, but because they made the drive all the way out there). Until they found a man named Gus claiming (loudly) to have seen Bigfoot. The sheriff was highly skeptical, but after questioning the man and finding the place where he supposedly saw the thing...they found footprints.

Big footprints.

They followed them through the woods and to a general store that was pretty much trashed. The front door was broken open, bags of food littered on the floor, bottles upon bottles of booze broken. The whiskey shelves were significantly depleted.

"So what, Bigfoot breaks into a liquor store jonesing for some hooch?" Dean mused aloud. He squatted on the floor to examine the brown bottles. "Amaretto and Irish Cream."

He looked up at Sam with a grin.

"He's a girl-drink drunk."

"I resent that," Elena quipped.

"Yeah, well. You don't count."
She scoffed.

"What, as a girl?"

"You're not a girl-drinker."

"...Okay. That should prove my point."

"Elena," said Dean, "If it weren't for this job, you wouldn't be a drinker."

"What does that have to do with anything?" she asked. "I'm still a girl, aren't I?"

"Guys," Sam cut in, annoyance and amusement fighting for dominance. "Focus."

He walked over to the magazine rack and called them over. Dean raised his eyebrows.

"He took the whole porno rack?"

Sam pulled out a tuft of brown fur from between the shelves.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Elena muttered.

"I'll say it again," said Dean. "What the hell is going on in this town?"

They exited the trashed store and sat on a bench outside, no closer to figuring out what was happening than before. And then a little girl on her bike rode past with a yellow crate attached to the back, and a magazine flew out. Dean picked it up and they all looked at the provocative cover.

"She's a little young for *Busty Asian Beauties.*"

Her house was too large and too well kept for just one little girl, as they soon found out her parents weren't home, it boded more red flags as to the weirdness level. Especially after she started talking about her teddy bear, rather than a Bigfoot doing all the shoplifting and booze drinking and porno reading.

Under the guise of...teddy bear doctors ready to treat her mentally unstable stuffed animal, they went into the house upstairs and to her bedroom.

"He's in my room...he's really grumpy," she warned, and knocked on the door. "Teddy? There's some nice doctors here to see you!"

She opened the door.

"Close the friggin' door!" came the squeaking reply from a large, stuffed bear with black buttons for eyes. But it was life size, and it was scaring the hell out of Elena.

"*What the fuck?*" she mouthed to Dean, who slowly shook his head and shared a wide-eyed look with Sam when the girl closed the door again.

"See what I mean?" she pleaded.

"How long has your bear been able to...talk?" Elena asked.

"All I ever wanted was a teddy bear that was big, real, and talked," she told them. "But now he's sad all the time. Not ouch sad, but ouch in the head sad. He does weird stuff, and smells like the bus!"
"Um, little girl," Dean began, but she cut him off with a pointed, "Audrey!"

He paused, eyes widening.

"Audrey," he corrected himself, "how exactly did your teddy become real?"

"I wished for it," she said simply.

"You wished for it?" Sam repeated.

"At the wishing well."

Dean nodded and opened the door again. Teddy was watching the news while drinking out of a whiskey bottle; a bombing that had buildings up in flames.

"Can you believe this crap?" he asked Dean incredulously.

"…Not really."

"It is a terrible world."

"WHY am I HERE?"

"For tea parties!"

"Tea parties…is that all there is?" the bear cried. His mouth moved when he talked and it was unnerving with that huge red bow around his neck and glassy, plastic beads for eyes. Dean closed the door when the teddy bear began to weep.

"You look traumatized," Elena whispered to him. He leaned over to her.

"I think the bear is worse off."

"Audrey," said Sam gently, "Give us a second, okay?"

She nodded, and the three of them stepped to the side.

"Are we…should we…" Sam paused, then whispered, "Are we going to kill this teddy bear?"

"How?" Dean asked. "Do we shoot it, burn it?"

"I don't know."

"Guys," Elena interjected. "We can't kill this poor little girl's bear!"

"Besides, I don't want some giant, flaming pissed off toy on our hands," said Dean.

"Yeah…I don't think the bear is really the core problem here," Sam pointed out.

"And why is this girl home alone?" asked Elena. They turned to Audrey, and Sam asked her where her parents were.

"My mom wished they were in Bali, so I think they're in Bali."

That threw Sam for a loop.

"Okay…well, I'm really sorry to have to break this to you, but your bear is sick," he said. Audrey frowned sadly. "Yeah, he's got, uh…"
"Lollipop disease," Dean finished. Sam agreed on it, while Elena wanted to slap her hand over her face. "It's not uncommon for a bear his size, but see, it's really contagious."

"Yeah, so is there maybe a grownup that you can stay with while we treat him?" Sam asked.

"Well, Mrs. Turley lives down the street," she said. Dean nodded in approval.

"Yeah, perfect," said Sam. "We'd like you to stay there for a few days, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed.

"Oh, and Audrey?" Dean asked. "Where is this wishing well?"

They walked in the Chinese restaurant just as a blonde ten-year-old was walking out, brushing past Dean. There was a "wishing well" in the center of the place.

"Think it works?" Dean asked.

"Any other reason for Teddy back there?" Sam replied. Dean pursed his lips and nodded.

"There's one way to find out," he said, reaching into his pocket. He tossed in a coin and closed his eyes while making his wish.

"What are you gunna wish for?"

"Shhh. Not supposed to tell."

The front doorbell rang as it opened, a delivery man in a green outfit holding a sub.

"Anyone order a foot-long Italian with jalapeño?" Dean raised his hand hesitantly.

"That would be me," he said. They sat down at a table with his free sub, which he was quite content with. Between the sandwich, the teddy, and the guy winning the lottery in the local paper, that pretty much nailed the wishing well as being legit.

"And I'm guessing that," Sam said, gesturing with his eyes to the couple eating together, but being all flirty and nauseating. He was clearly the mathlete back in high school with his khaki pants and sweater vest and glasses, while she'd been the prom queen, all eyelash curlers and miniskirts. Something didn't match up there.

"I dunno, they seem happy to me," said Elena.

"Add that to the list," Dean muttered. "What are we supposed to do, huh? Stop people's wishes from coming true? Sounds like kind of a douchey thing to do."

"Yeah maybe," Sam allowed. "But come on, man. When it's something like this it doesn't come without a price tag. And usually a deadly one."

"Eh. I don't know," said Dean. "This is a damn good sandwich."

He took another large bite.

"All right, we stay until we find out what's wrong."

An older Chinese man, most likely the restaurant's manager, came up to their table and informed
them that they didn't allow people to eat "outside" food in the restaurant. Dean coolly came back with a health inspector badge, prompting Sam and Elena to do the same, and claimed the place had a rat infestation. The manager was beside himself, but it allowed them to examine the fountain once the place was closed and everyone was out.

It was a more or less typical fountain, save for the hexed coin they found at the bottom. They couldn't pry it off, not even with a hammer and crowbar that almost gave the manager a heart attack. Sam used a piece of paper and a pencil to shade the coin's mark. He shoved it into Dean's hands.

"You gotta look into this."

"Why me?"

"Because something just occurred to me."

With that he walked out the door, leaving Dean and Elena to look at one another curiously. And to deal with the manager giving them the evil eye.

After they managed to talk down the old man and escape the restaurant unscathed, Dean and Elena made their way to the motel they'd book that morning. Passing through a courtyard and parking lot, a group of boys ran straight through with a smaller blonde kid chasing after them. The kid stopped to meet Dean's stare.

Wait a second, he thought. That's the kid from the…

"You got a problem, mister?" he asked pointedly. Dean's eyes widened.

"N-No." The boy nodded after a second and went after the boys that had been chasing him around just that morning.

"You gunna give him your lunch money?" Elena teased. Dean gave her a sideways glance.

"Shut up."

He paused, holding his stomach when it gurgled loudly. A sharp pain hit him in the lower abdomen.

"Is your stomach imploding?" she asked, sidestepping from him.

"Oooh, I don't feel good."

"Oh shit."

It was a mad dash back to the motel, where Dean subsequently upchucked everything he'd ever eaten. At least, that's what it felt like. For the first twenty minutes, he'd closed the bathroom to be by himself in his misery, but just when his legs started to go numb from kneeling, he heard a gentle knock on the door.

"Hey…you okay?"

Dean groaned. He used the counter as leverage to get up. Then Elena was there with a cup full of cold water and some Tums for when he washed his mouth out.

"Thanks," he murmured. Embarrassment kept him from looking at her face, but he would've seen her amused and sympathetic smile.
"I think it was the jalapeño," she teased lightly, and dabbed at his sweaty face with a damp towel after he'd eaten the Tums (or Pepto-patties, as Dean called them; just with more flavors).

"I think I just gave up a kidney," he said with a moan, and held up a finger. "Hold up."

To his relief Elena left the bathroom while he continued to vomit, but by the time he was done she was back with more water. The front door opened and closed, signaling Sam's arrival.

"Dean...you all right?"

"He's okay now," said Elena.

"The wishes turn bad, Sam," Dean said weakly. "The wishes turn very bad."

"Sandwich, huh?"

"Yeah. The coin is Babylonian," he told Sam. "It's cursed. I found some fragments of a legend…"

Dean paused a moment to cough, hating the taste of bile that made its way up his throat and went back down.

"I'm good," he grinned weakly, to which Sam smiled back with pity.

"The serpent is Tiamet," said Elena as she sat on the bed across from him. "The Babylonian god of primordial chaos. Their priests must have been working on serious black magic."

They made the coin?" Sam asked.

"Yeah," said Dean, who sat down next to Elena. "To sow the seeds of chaos. Whoever makes a wish at the wishing well and tosses in the coin turns on the well. Then it starts granting wishes to all comers."

"But the wishes get twisted," Sam supplied with a grin. "You ask for a talking teddy…"

"You get a bipolar nut job."

"And you get E. coli." Dean's expression turned grim as he sipped at his water.

"This thing has even wiped a few cities off the map," said Elena. "One person gets their wish, that's trouble, but if everybody gets they're wish…"

"It's chaos," Sam finished. "Anyway to stop it?"

"One way," Dean nodded. "We gotta find the first wisher. Whoever dropped the coin in and made the first wish, they're the only ones who can pull it back out and reverse the wishes. So for now we've got a couple of nutso wishes come true, but once the word gets out about the well, things are just gunna get crazier and crazier."

Deciding that they needed their five hours and no one would be awake by then anyway, they tried to sleep. It didn't come so easy for Sam, so he ended up getting up in a couple hours to research, while Elena woke maybe four hours after they went to sleep. She didn't get out of bed, but after a few minutes of being awake, she saw Dean twitching in his sleep. It made Sam clench his jaw when he saw.

"He's having a nightmare," she said quietly. Sam didn't answer, though it looked like he knew
exactly what Dean was going through when he started murmuring in his sleep.

"Sam, we should wake him up."

*That's good actually, Sam thought. Maybe he'll finally tell both of us how he remembers Hell.*

Sam knew it. Elena wanted to believe Dean's lie.

"*Dean,*" Sam said loud enough to rouse his brother, who woke with a start, fumbling to get into a sitting position.

"Sleep well?" Sam asked knowingly.

"Tanned, rested and ready for action," Dean said, and it was weak even to his own ears. Elena frowned when he picked up a bottle of whiskey off the floor and took a swig.

"I know what's happening." Dean looked back at Sam.

"What do you mean?"

"The nightmares, the drinking—I'm with you 24/7, Dean, I know when something's up," said Sam. And it looked like Elena finally believed it too. Dean signed and tossed the bottle onto the bed.

"Sam, please."

"Uriel wasn't lying, but you are." Dean got up, but Sam stayed in his seat, watching him with perceptive eyes. "*You remember Hell, don't you?*

Dean looked from his brother's expectant face to Elena's sad one, and back.

"What do you want from me, huh?" he asked, smiling though there was no humor in it. "What?"

"The truth, Dean," said Sam. "I mean, I'm your brother. I just wish you'd *talk* to me."

It was in times like this that Elena realized this was a brother to brother conversation, even if she was in the room. Sometimes it forced the other to be more honest knowing she was there to call bullshit, other times it did the opposite, and they waited for an actual one on one conversation to say what they had to say. She didn't mind it, preferred it actually. Sometimes she felt caught in the middle, forced to pick a side, back when she'd first joined them and stress levels were at an all time high with Dean's demon deal.

But now felt like one of those times where Dean's hand would be forced, because both she and Sam were listening and waiting for him to answer.

"Be careful what you wish for," he said, grinning a little.

"Cute," Sam said, sarcasm coloring his tone.

"Come on, can we stow the couple's therapy, huh? I wanna work."

Or Dean could weasel his way out of talking. Fine, Elena thought. But he couldn't do it forever.

The problem they faced with the case was they had three options that they knew of from the last two weeks: an invisible kid that Sam caught the day before spying on women in the shower, the guy with the girlfriend way out of his league, and the teddy bear. Not to mention any others they hadn't heard of yet. Dean pointed out the local newspaper, which listed Wesley Mondale and Hope Casey as
newly engaged—the couple in the restaurant.

"Really?" Elena said, her expression dimming.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Dean.

"I just…they looked happy to me," she said. If that guy had made a wish just to get the love of a pretty girl he never thought he could have in real life…

That kind of thing tended to piss her off.

"Yeah, cause the guy wished on a coin."

Elena didn't answer. It tipped off both of the brothers, but Dean wouldn't press it right after he'd just diverted Sam's "twenty questions."

Instead, they asked around town and made their way to Wesley's house. Who they could only assume was Hope opened the door with a confused look, one that brightened into a smile when they introduced themselves as florists her fiancé had asked to drop by and discuss possibilities for the wedding. "Wes" was sitting comfortable in a living room chair and a plate of roasted chicken untouched beside him on a tray, and the smile plastered on his face fell as Hope left the room to go get her "folders" of wedding ideas.

"So, coin collector. Huh, Wes?" Sam commented. He viewed the shelves on the wall with several coins in a glass case, none of which that looked the same.

"Oh yeah," Wes said absently, then, catching their meaning, his tone turned less absent-minded. "My grandfather gave them to me."

"You happen to lose one of those coins lately?" Dean asked. "And by 'lose' I mean drop it in a wishing well at Lucky Chin's, and make a wish on it."

Of course Wes denied it, like they knew he would, and Hope returned with a massive folder filled with labels and dividers.

"I was thinking a Japanese…Cabana kind of thing, ya know?" she said with a smile. Dean returned it with mock enthusiasm, knowing she wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

"That sounds great. I can see it."

"So, Hope," said Sam, "When did you two love birds meet?"

"Oh, best day of my life," she sighed. "It's the funniest thing…we both grew up here but I never really knew who he was. Not by name anyway."

Shocker, Elena thought, and watched Wes become more nervous.

"Until one day last month, it's like I just…saw him," said Hope, caressing Wes's face after setting down the load in her hands. "The first time he was just…glowing."

"Uh, babe, can you get us some coffee?" Wes tried to diffuse the heat they all could see in Hope's eyes, but couldn't keep her hands off him when she attacked his lips. The hunters could only stare as he eventually was able to pry her off. She practically skipped to the kitchen.

"We know, Wes," Sam said bluntly when she was out of earshot. "So tell us the truth."
After a moment, Wes sighed and led them over to the coin collection. He explained that his grandfather found it during a trip in Africa and brought it back, claiming it was a real wish-granting coin, though no one should ever use it.

"Yeah…he was all I had," said Wes. "And when he died, I thought, 'well, you know what? Why not give the coin a shot?"

"Yeah, well, now you're gunna wish it back," said Sam. Wes laughed a bit, but when their faces remained stony, he realized they were serious.

"Oh, ha-ha. No I'm not," he refused.

"If you don't stop, something bad is going to happen," Elena warned.

"Something bad," Sam agreed, "Like us."

Dean pulled out his gun and held it casually.

"We really wish you'd come with us."
Elena would really rather not be sharing air with Wes in the backseat, especially when he started moaning and groaning about having to un-wish the wish. He really just didn't get it. Besides the fact that the wishes went sour, Sam and Dean were trying and failing to convince this guy that his "wish" wasn't working. Neither were the ones in the rest of the town, as judged by the downwards spiral it was going in.

"'Careful what you wish for,'" Wes mocked. "You know who says that? Good-looking jerks like you guys. The ones who got it so easy because you happen to be handsome."

"Easy?" Sam and Dean said in disbelief. Elena had no words for the stupidity.

"Yeah, women look at you. They notice you." Wes then looked over at Elena. "That's why you're here with them right?"

All three of them bristled at the implication, but Elena beat both brothers to the punch. Her terse look made Wes retreat a bit to his side of the backseat.

"Let's get something straight here, fuckwit."She leaned towards him, staring with slate grey eyes. "Mind your damn business."

Wes wisely dropped his gaze and didn't say anything.

"Nobody gets what they want in life," Dean said after the tense moment somewhat passed. "We don't. We're miserable. In fact, we've gotta fight tooth and nail just to keep what we have."

"You get what you want, you go crazy," Sam added.

"Yeah, just look at Michael Jackson. Or Hasselhoff," said Dean.

"Well you know what? Hope loves me now. Completely," said Wes, grating on Elena even more. "Besides, I don't see what crazy stuff you're talking about."

Until they came to a red stoplight and could hear kids screaming in fear in the parking lot to their right. The blonde kid from earlier had his bullies trapped in an SUV, where he was taunting them by tapping on the front car door, and finally tipped the whole thing over with his own strength.

"Kneel before Tod!" he demanded, while the kids inside screamed.

"Well, that should cover it!" said Dean, and hopped out of the car. At seeing Tod begin to rock the SUV back and forth, Elena followed him out, hearing his instructions to Sam to get Wes to the restaurant. They didn't wait for the car to peel away before they hurried over to Tod.

"Hey, kid. Can I talk to you for a second?" Dean asked. Tod glared at him and began stalking towards Dean.

"Get out of my way," he demanded. Both Dean and Elena backed off.

"Hey, whoa. I can dig it, Tod…it's Tod right?" Dean asked, bending down to his level. "Look, I know the score. Those guys have been bullying you."
"Every day. Every day, you don't know what it's like!" the boy exclaimed.

"No," Dean admitted. "No, I don't. But you're you and I'm me, so—"

"I couldn't stop them. I couldn't do anything," said Tod, glancing down at his feet. But he looked up again, more assured of himself. "But then Audrey told me that the wishing well worked."

Elena bent down, somewhat warily, but trying her best to be nonthreatening.

"Tod, you got 'em back, buddy," she said gently. "Got 'em good. They're never going to come after you again, I guarantee it."

"I know," he replied. "But that doesn't change all the times I had to miss the bus and walk to school cause they'd be there waiting for me, or every time I had to run home cause they found me after school."

"Okay, look, I get it. They're mean little jerks," said Dean. "But they're not superhuman, like you. See, with great power, comes great—"

Elena gasped as Dean went flying into the garbage bins from Tod's solid punch. When he started toward her, she backed up a bit with placating hands. The last thing she wanted to do was beat up a ten-year-old.

"Tod, listen to me—" He tried to kick her in the shin and she was able to dodge, but when he managed to grab her wrist and yanked down, his strength forced her onto the ground. He twisted her wrist at an awkward angle, and with enough pressure he could break it with ease.

"Hey, kid!" Dean shouted, coming up behind them. "I didn't want to have to do this, but—"

He threw a punch that caught the kid in the jaw, but ended up hurting Dean a lot more than it hurt Tod. Dean made a noise of pain and frustration and sunk to his knees. Tod grabbed Dean by the throat and Elena by the hair and began squeezing, not letting go no matter how much they struggled.

And then, Tod let go, looking at his hands in confusion. His strength was gone, Dean could breath, and Elena didn't feel like her hair was about to be ripped out. She let Dean deal with the kid, conning the others just climbing out of the car that Tod was no one to be messing with. Then Dean walked back to Elena, who stood crossing her arms.

"Were you really going to quote Spiderman at him?" she said, a teasing smile on her lips. He shrugged, grinning.

"Hey, gotta put it in words the kid'll understand." She laughed, nodding in accession.

Slowly they made their way to Lucky Chin's and met up with Sam, who held the unlucky coin in his hand. First things first, they had it melted down, then they split up and went through the town, made sure all the other wishes had resolved.

After checking on the now visible teenager, Elena found herself wandering the dirt roads of the small town, looking at the shops and letting busier people breeze by her. Until a shoulder bumped into hers, and she looked up to the startled face of Wes.

"Uh…sorry," he said.

"No, it's fine."
He was obviously alone now, as Hope was nowhere in sight, and he had the look of one miserable sap.

"You okay?" Elena asked him, reluctantly, because she already knew the answer. Wes looked up at her, swallowed, and shook his head.

"No." He glanced down at the ground, hands in his pockets, then back up. "I um…I came home to an empty house…the only girl I ever cared about doesn't know I'm alive, and…"

He sighed.

"I guess that's the way things are supposed to be."

It was Elena's turn to sigh. She knew what it was like to come home to an empty house and feel like you had nothing and no one left.

"Wes…if you honest to God want her to know you, just go up and talk to her," she said. "Get to know her. Get to know people. Look for a job. Find out what you want to do with your life. You can't live hiding in your house…your grandfather probably wouldn't want that for you."

"Yeah, that easy, huh?" he asked, huffing a skeptical breath.

"No. It's not," she said. "But it's a hell of a lot better than being alone."

He didn't answer, but maybe that dejected look in his eyes lighted the smallest bit with understanding.

"Bye, Wes," she said, and headed on her way down the street, where she met up with Sam and Dean. Things looked tense between them, but she didn't think this was the time to ask. They walked to where he parked the Impala and got in.

"You find invisiperv?" Dean asked.

"Yeah, and our friend Wes," she replied. "Looks like someone killed his puppy in front of him."

"Yeah, getting your favorite toy taken away does that to you," he snorted.

"I think it was a little more than that."

Dean glanced at her through the rearview mirror.

"Since when are you his cheerleader?"

Elena grimaced.

"I'm not. But I kinda feel bad for him," she said. Dean gave her a flat look. Sam didn't have much cause to agree with her either.

"Why, 'cause he had to put a spell on a wishing well just to get laid?"

"More than that, a relationship with a girl he genuinely liked."

"Obviously it wasn't golden," Dean said dryly. "It wasn't even real."

She conceded that point with a nod.
"But when it is, it's…nice," she said while looking out at the long stretch of road before them. "More than nice. He wanted that."

And that sentiment Sam couldn't argue with. Dean saw the identical pensive expressions on their faces as they looked out of their respective windows.

The motel was just as rundown as Elena remembered. The thought of facing dull beige walls and beds older than her, a ceiling with spots of yellowed leakage and an air conditioning that only worked when you beat it into submission…for the first time in months, she craved being home. Not Bobby's house, though it was a comfort to her, but the home she'd had for most of her childhood in Hill City, South Dakota—a town wedged in the heart of the Black Hills that made more money in lumber than tourism. A town that was so small that, when she lived there, every day going to work she still saw many of the people she went to school with and had known all her life, just going about their day.

So while Sam was in the shower and Dean sat on the couch with a Snickers bar he'd stolen from her now packed bag, Elena off-handedly told him she was going to get some air, and stepped outside onto the wooden porch. She breathed in the clean Washington air and wished she could smell pines and timber. Leaning against the railing, she allowed herself to daydream a bit while watching the clouds roll by. She almost didn't hear the door open behind her.

"Hey," Dean said, coming to lean against the railing beside her. "We're leaving in a bit."

"Kay," she nodded a little. He glanced over at her and caught the absent look on her face.

"What're you thinking about?"

"I dunno…sometimes you wonder why things happen the way they do," she said, "Why people never get what they really want. That little girl will have a fucked up teddy bear in her memory forever. Wes thinks he's going to die alone. We're going to end up doing this for the rest of our lives…"

She was starting to see why Sam and Dean discouraged her from coming back to hunting in the beginning, why her father had for all those years. It was a crappy job but…she couldn't not be in it now. Her life had revolved it since she was fourteen, and there was no way to go back to being quiet. Normal. Because she wasn't anymore.

Elena hadn't felt normal in a long time.

"It doesn't have to be all bad," said Dean, turning his gaze to the now quieted city. "Wes learned a lesson, and he'll hold onto that. As for us…well, that doesn't have to be all bad either."

He looked back at her.

"So we move around, so we don't get paid for shit. It's better than dragging other people down with us or letting them die."

He'd been where she was, questioning what the point was when people still died, were still miserable, and when doing what they were doing didn't pay half as much as it should. But they did help people, and that made the difference.

"Yeah," she said. "But at the cost of never really being happy?"

Elena sighed and met his green gaze.
“I know…in our line of work, relationships, a home—all that shit…they're all precursors to a sad, bloody ending. But when you have it…it's someone there when your day goes to shit, and they remind you there's still something to look forward to.”

Elena's gaze wasn't focused on him now, had moved past him. She crossed her arms over her chest and paused, taking in a breath that coursed throughout her body and left her feeling somewhat hollow.

"When it's good, you know, because no matter how things around you do go to shit, you're still better off with them there than if they're gone because they know you, and they stay anyway."

There was a brief moment of silence between them as Dean thought about it. She'd revealed a lot more about herself than she probably realized. He knew what she was saying though. It was why losing his mom had driven John nearly to the brink, why losing Jessica had nearly ended his brother and haunted him with oppressive guilt. But Dean's time with Cassie—a thought he hardly allowed himself to remember since leaving her in Missouri—had been too short for him to truly know for himself.

"And when did it go bad for you?"

Her eyes met his, and a melancholy smile touched her lips.

"He found someone who wasn't ‘secretive,’” she bit her lip, remembering. It hadn't bothered her for a while now, but every now and then, she would remember. "A ‘compulsive liar.’"

Hell, could he understand how that was.

"Sorry," Dean said genuinely. Elena smiled a little, but it didn't last long.

"Doesn't matter," she said after a bit. "It probably won't ever happen again…maybe I'm better off."

He knew what she meant, but to get her to smile again, he said, "Aw, really? Don't tell me you're givin' up on men cause of one douche bag."

She raised one brow, but he succeeded in getting an amused smile on her face.

"I don't know, maybe I'll have better luck with someone that understands me as a woman,” she said, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Who better than a woman?"

Dean's brows rose suggestively as he leant toward her. "Nah. You're just in need of a real man."

She rolled her eyes.

"Like you? Right. Honestly, I don't see the appeal," she teased, gesturing to his form. "From a guy who spent half the day upchucking the past week's takeout."

"Aw, come on, Lena," he wheedled and leaned over to her, purposefully getting in her personal space. She predictably leaned away, but her smile deepened despite her best efforts.

"Oh, go away."

"You know you want me," he teased, and once again raised suggestive brows, playfully prodding at her sides lightly and making her simultaneously flinch and giggle.

"Deeean…” she whined and tried in vain to push his hands away. He drew closer and trapped her with an arm around her waist, leaving his other hand free to mercilessly attack her sides. Through her
girlish laughter Elena grabbed his arms to stop him, but only succeeded when she looked up at his face that was much closer than before. She watched his grin fade into a more concentrated look. Her eyes blinked and found his, staring down at the inches of space between them with his arms wrapped around her waist, then up again when she bit her lip nervously. His eyes, no longer playful, were drawn to it.

Elena intended to avoid that look by pulling away, hopefully to head inside the motel room and to a hot shower. But her feet wouldn't move according to what her brain was telling her to do. Neither was the rest of her body as her chin tilted up toward him. And then his lips were crashing onto hers and coherent thought fled.

Her hands slid into his hair as his own drifted from her waist to the small of her back, pinning her against him. In two steps she was pressed against the wall, bringing every part of her, chest, hips, and thighs, aligned with him. Her left hand trailed down his back, lightly dragging her nails. She felt him shiver a little, but she reflexively clenched the fabric of his shirt when his tongue teased hers.

But as suddenly as it began, it stopped, with him pulling away and leaving her panting as she leaned against the wall. Her eyes were wide and confused, while his were mischievous and full of satisfaction. Although she also caught the bit of lust there (that made her already racing heart pound audibly in her head), his stance told of playful confidence once again.

"Told you." His voice was rougher than usual; deeper, almost making her shiver. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Her brain was short-circuiting, a muddled heap of crisscrossed wires. Elena was sure a blush stemmed from the base of her throat to her cheeks—she could feel the heat emanating from her own skin. So she made a hasty retreat.

He watched her bolt inside the motel room, nearly smacking into Sam as he was coming out.

"—S-Sorry, Sam," she mumbled, but still flit past him. His face was the picture of confusion as the door shut behind him, until he looked up at saw Dean.

"Dean." Not surprise, just exasperated resignation from his little brother.

"What do you want?" He regretted nothing.

Sam knew it, even if he didn't know what exactly happened.

"What did you do?" he asked, lowering his voice. He tried restraining himself from sounding accusatory, but didn't quite manage it.

"None of your business," Dean teased. "The adults were talking."

"Dean."

"This is one thing we don't need to talk about, Sam." Dean tried to walk past his brother into the room, but Sam's grip on his jacket near his shoulder stopped him.

"This is Elena, all right?" Sam said sharply.

"I know."

He really didn't think Dean did.

"She's family," Sam warned.
Dean knew.

It had been a moment of weakness on his part, acting on that gut feeling elicited by the look in her eyes when she'd tried to tease him back. That bit of longing she couldn't quite cover up, the way her eyes roamed up and down and instinctively liked what they saw. Dean knew that look. He'd seen it plenty on other women before when they looked at him, but never had it been in the eyes of someone who knew him, had experienced his personality on the worst of days and still was there to look at him like that.

But he also knew the look because he'd been making it too. Whenever he managed to piss her off and she stormed away, hips swaying, or when she was lacing up her boots nearly the length of her calf, letting her shirt ride up on her back and making her jean-clad ass more prominent. Or the time she'd dolled herself up to go to that bar.

But sometimes, it was less obvious. Sometimes, it was just the way she laughed at one of his jokes, dirty or otherwise. That full body laugh that had her spluttering if he caught her off guard; that had him wanting to laugh with her.

He'd just wanted to see what it would be like. A knee-jerk impulse he wasn't able to curb, and he wasn't disappointed.

_One night…might not be so bad._

It was tempting.

He wasn't quite able to shake off the thought, but pinned Sam with a firm look that said to drop it.

"You don't need to tell me that."

"Obviously not, if I have to say it."

Both brothers glared at one another.

"Look, whatever it is," Sam said eventually, "If it's something you just need to get out of your system or whatever, do what you have to do. Just don't use her to do it."

Dean's glare deepened, his jaw clenched. He'd never use her.

"All right?" Sam prodded. The older Winchester offered a slightly mocking smile before turning away from him.

"Let's get the car packed up. I'm ready to get the hell out of here."

The car ride was unusually quiet after that. So Sam found the next case in Poughkeepsie, New York. Something about five men in five nights being found on the side of the highway near an old, broken down bridge by the Hudson River, their bodies completely drained of blood.

"Vampire?" Dean asked while passing a drifting car on the highway. A choice finger was itching to stick out the window. "Fucking people on their cell phones, man."

"Something ripped their skin off, or ate it," Sam said, shaking his head. "Just left the insides…like an animal that leaves the carcass."

"Okay, ew," said Elena. Sam gave her a sympathetic look.
"Yeah. You don't want to see the pictures."

"Okay…did they report any survivors?" she asked.

"Not so far, but when we get there and take a look at what the police have, we may be able to
narrow down what could've done this."

"So New York, huh?" Dean asked. His expression grew sly, suggestive as his gaze slid to his
brother. "I seem to recall something, or someone being from around there."

Sam rolled his eyes while Elena remained confused.

"Dean…" he warned, knowing full well Dean was getting him back for what happened just a few
hours ago.

"You remember, Sammy. Long brown hair, blue eyes, had a thing for old paintings and your
luscious locks," Dean teased. "Cool chick, that one. Had guts."

"Who are we talking about?" Elena asked in amusement while Sam tried to pretend his brother
wasn't talking.

"Oh, what was her name, Sam? I've seemed to forget—" Sam sighed loudly and turned to Elena.

"Sarah Blake. Saved her from a haunted painting…that was a long time ago now." He gave his
brother a pointed look. "Almost four years ago."

"And he was crushing on her Hardcore," said Dean. "Like a high school geek."

Sam glared at his brother, while Elena, still smiling, shook her head at Dean's antics even though she
was still finding it hard to look at him without blushing.

"Maybe after the case is done we'll head farther upstate," Dean suggested, waggling his brows.

"Shut up," Sam laughed, shaking his head. "She probably wouldn't remember me anyway. It's not
like I ever called. Four years is a long time."

"You think she wouldn't remember the guy who saved her life?" Dean pointed out. Sam quieted, and
Elena could see that part of him was considering the idea. But there was a greater part that was
weighing the possible consequences.

"I can't uproot her life like that again. Not now when," he paused, then sighed. "We've got a lot to
deal with right now."

"Yeah but—"

"Dean," Sam shook his head. "Just…no. Forget it."

He left the living area to get his bag from the bedroom, leaving Dean and Elena to share a look.

"He must have really liked her," Elena said sympathetically.

"Yeah…" Dean sighed. "He's right though…a lot of shit's happened since then. A lot of shit's
happening now."

He paused.
"And frankly…he's not the same guy he was."

Elena nodded hesitantly. She'd seen the evidence of that. But underneath all that…Sam was still Sam. It looked like he was learning from his mistakes. Above all, she could still count on him, and still trusted him with her life.

"Not all of that could be a bad thing, though."

"It's no mystery, guys," the doctor told them, sliding the remains back into the metal compartment. "People that live close to the road there heard a coyote howling. I'm sure the police told you how the first victim's wife said her husband saw one on the road, went outside to steer it away from his chickens in case it got too close, shoot it if he had to, and he never came back. I pulled canine hairs and other DNA off the victims. Now it's just the police tracking down the bastard."

"A coyote?" Elena clarified.

"They're pretty common around here. Folks know the difference between that and a dog," he said. "It'd have to be a pretty rabid dog, though."

"And the black dress the police found torn to shreds last night...were you able to find a DNA match?" A female victim would be out of the pattern if it wasn't just a coyote.

"That's the only strange bit," said the doctor. "I did find the same hairs on the dress, but nothing else matched any of the victims we found. It's possible that there are more remains the police didn't find."

"All right," Sam said eventually, "thank you for your time."

"No problem. Don't know why FBI is interested in this, but good luck to you."

Once the three of them were out of the lab, they looked at one another in confusion.

"So not a vampire. The lunar cycle isn't right for it to be a werewolf, not to mention the heart was still relatively intact," Dean ticked off with his fingers. "You think it's still our kinda gig?"

"I dunno, one man every night?" said Sam. "That sounds too exact and too out of the ordinary for it to be just a coyote attack. They go after rabbits and mice, maybe livestock, but not people."

"Okay, so what are we thinking, skinwalker maybe?" said Elena.

"Either that or a rabid Wile E. Coyote," Dean remarked. "I still wanna talk to that guy that got away last night, what was his name?"

Sam took out the notepad from his jacket.

"Jason Fields."

"It was a woman," Jason told them. His manner was subdued as he sat in his lawn chair, mug of tea in hand with a black and white sheep dog lying by his feet. He was an older man in his fifties with an average build. But what stood out to Sam was the long scratch across the man's stubbled face.

"A woman?" said Dean, disbelief coloring his tone.

"At first."
"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

"She was just standing there, blocking the road."

"Okay…what did she look like."

"After my Beth, probably the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen," Jason admitted.

"Beth?" Dean asked.

"My wife."

"Okay, other than that," said Sam, leading the man along. "Coloring, what she was wearing…"

"She had red hair, if I remember. Bright red…she was wearing a dark dress."

That made the three hunters pause as they made the connection to the unknown dress found in the tall grass.

"What did you do then?"

"I asked her why she was out on the road, if she needed a ride anywhere. It was pretty late at night, I figured maybe her car had broken down or something."

"Was there a car anywhere?" Elena asked.

"No, and she didn't ask for a ride either. Just said she was looking for company," he said, then rubbed the back of his neck. "I said I could take her home if she wanted, but I had to get home to my wife and Josie here."

His dog perked up at the sound of her name, her tongue wagging.

"What did the woman do?" said Sam.

"Got in the passenger seat. Started to get a bit too friendly, if you know what I mean," said Jason. "I tried to push her off…but then she bit me."

"Bit you," Elena repeated.

"Yep, and none too gentle. I cursed pretty loud, and she backed off screaming. That's when I noticed she'd torn a chunk out of my neck, and I damn well pushed her out of the car when she kept trying to get at me like some rabid animal," said Jason. He still had a large gauze pad on the side of his neck to prove it. "After that…I drove to the police station fast as I could and told 'em everything."

"How'd you get that?" Sam asked, gesturing to the wound on Jason's face.

"The bitch scratched me. Her nails…they were almost like claws or something," he replied tiredly.

Sam and Dean glanced at one another, then with Elena, they encouraged him to describe anything else he saw. He looked reluctant enough, but after a little more pressing from Sam, Jason finally admitted that he thought he saw her eyes flash bright blue, maybe purple.

"It was probably just my nerves messing with me," he dismissed, but something in his eyes said he didn't quite believe himself.

"Okay, sir. Thanks for your help," said Sam.
"Just make sure you catch her."

"What a wily bitch," Dean mused. He veered the car right on their way to the motel. "That poor guy almost got himself eaten."

"But what saved him?" Elena asked. "What made her just…stop?"

"We're jumping ahead," said Sam. "First we gotta figure out what she is."

It was about an hour of Sam and Elena scrolling on their respective laptops and Dean flipping through page after useless page of mythology before Sam finally found it.

"I got it," he said. "It's an empusa."

"An Em-hoo-ha?" Dean asked.

"Empusa," Elena repeated. The name sounded familiar, like she'd studied it before, but she ran a search on her own laptop anyway. "Ancient Greek mythology."

"It's a specter, believed to devour the human flesh of travelers along the road. And they could assume different forms, but more often than not chose to appear as a beautiful woman to seduce men," said Sam.

"As always," Dean said dryly. Elena rolled her eyes.

"But get this," Sam continued. "The name has also been applied to shapeshifting hobgoblins that pestered farmers in the form of a dog, ox, or mule. In this case, the dog makes sense."

"So we've got our coyote," Dean commented.

"Would explain the canine hairs on the remains," said Elena. "What's their weakness?"

"Says here that whenever a traveler addressed them with insulting words, it would literally run screaming," said Sam. "Whatever Jason yelled at her must've done the trick."

"Okay, fine. We curse the bitch out. But that still doesn't say how to kill it," said Dean. "Silver, some magic hoodoo, what? I gotta get out my blowtorch?"

"Well, they're somewhat related to Lamias, so I guess silver would be our best bet."

Dean nodded, but Elena could tell he was somewhat disappointed about the blowtorch.

"Okay, I can work with that."

They waited until nightfall, naturally. Dean took the Impala, dropping Sam and Elena off at a wilder patch of land between two houses where they could hide, but still be able to watch Dean from across the road when he would circle around and drive past the bridge.

"Sam, I'm still confused about something," said Elena. Sam looked over at her.

"What?"

"In Greek mythology, empusas served the goddess Hecate, known for guarding three-way crossroads."
"Yeah," Sam followed.

"But this is practically the middle of nowhere. What is it guarding?" Elena asked. Sam thought for a moment.

"I guess we'll have to find out," he said. "Dean should be coming around that corner and passing the road to the bridge pretty soon."

"Yeah…"

Sam glanced over again and caught her frown. He smiled a little.

"Don't worry. He doesn't fall *that* easily over a pretty face." Elena shot Sam a sideways look.

"Not why I'm worried."

"You sure?"

Elena raised a brow at him.

"What are you talking about?"

Sam's smile deepened only slightly, but she caught it and frowned, feeling her face warm.

"Nothing," he said innocently. She called thirty flavors of bullshit.

"You're right though, not everything's clear," Sam agreed. "But we'll figure it out once this thing shows."

Elena nodded, though there was an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of her stomach as they watched the Impala cruising up the road. Just as he approached the bridge, a figure was there in the middle of the road. Elena blinked. They hadn't been there a second ago.

"Sam," she said tensely.

"I see her," he replied, stance relaxed but alert as he held his gun loaded with silver bullets.

Dean could see the appeal. The chick obviously fit the job description of seductress, if that was what she was calling herself. She looked him up and down with a teasing smile and wide, blue eyes under a fringe of hair that curled over her cheek.

"You need a ride?" Dean offered.

"How about some company?" she replied smoothly, voice soft yet rich. It was almost compelling. Dean smiled, then got out of the car. He pulled out his gun and pulled the hammer back.

"All right, *bitch.*" Her expression immediately hardened into a frown as she took a couple steps back, hissing at him as her eyes began to glow a strange bluish color.

"I wouldn't move, unless you wanna get your ugly ass pumped full of silver," he warned. Her expression changed to one of both surprise and fear. "That's right, I know what you are. That getup ain't foolin' anyone."

The empusa glared at him and, with another hiss, turned and changed before his eyes into a wolf. Not a dog or a coyote. A *wolf* that only got as far as a few yards before Dean shot it in the leg, making it bark in pain and stumble onto the road. He heard Sam and Elena coming behind him and
looked back at them, gesturing to follow him. He ran toward the fallen creature, though it was
struggling to a stand and harried stumbling across the bridge. It was probably heading for the stretch
of forest area straight ahead, a New York state park. But it was in vain; with one more shot the
empusa fell in a heap of fur and blood.

The streetlamps above began to buzz and…brighten. It was a loud enough sound that made him stop,
and Sam and Elena stopped beside him.

"What's that?" Sam asked. Dean didn't have time to answer as all three of them were thrown back by
a force that felt suspiciously like magic, all tingly and wrong. The force of it took the wind out of
him, but when he was able to groan and lift his head, a beautiful woman was standing there, blonde
and dressed in white. Her eyes were that same blue as the empusa's.

She looked down upon them disdainfully.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked. She looked bored, but there was fire simmering in those eyes.

"There was a time when all the world knew me and my dominion," she said. Her voice was dark and
smooth.

"You're from Greece!" Elena pointed out, and accepted Dean's helping hand to stand.

"The pinnacle of Western Civilization, unfortunately, has become this continent," she said, with the
same measure of disdain.

"Like in Percy Jackson?" Elena asked in disbelief. Dean gave her a strange look.

"You're Hecate," Sam clarified.

"I am," the goddess nodded with a dismissing waive of her hand. "Goddess of the crossroads, and
you have disturbed my dominion."

"Wait, wait. This is the middle of fucking nowhere," said Dean. "Why would you camp out in one
little town? Why sick your Rottweiler on these people? They've never done anything to you!"

"For all you claim to know of this world, you are still ignorant," she sneered. "Mortal men are selfish
and barbaric. Cruel, creating the means to destroy the earth and sap it of its resources, only turning to
nurturing means when it turns to dust in your hands."

She clenched her hand, and it was as if a force was gripping their insides with a stronghold. Straining
for air and gasping with pain, they were brought to their knees on the road.

"I protect what is left, and…discourage others from coming near," said Hecate, her face twisting into
a smirk. "By whatever means necessary."

The forest, Sam thought. She's protecting the wildlife.

"I'm all for…going green," Dean choked out, obviously coming to the same conclusion as Sam. "But
lady, you're one uppity bitch."

She turned to glare at him just as he raised his gun and shot her not once, but twice in the head: one
between the eyes and the other an inch and a half above. Her last expression was one of shock and
outrage before the light dimmed in her eyes and her arm dropped to her side. Her body swayed once,
twice, then finally fell to the floor. The three hunters sagged in relief as her hold was cut off,
allowing them to breathe.
"If we're lucky, she'll stay dead," Elena said wearily.

"Nope, you didn't kill her."

"Whaaaat," Dean whined, "Come on, Bobby, they were silver bullets! And we burnt the body."

"Oh, don't get me wrong. That'll stun her for a few decades, but she can't be killed permanently with anything short of a spell I happen to have. She'll be up and running again by the time you're eighty, once all her parts find one another."

"Great," he deadpanned, and flopped onto one of the motel beds.

"If you had told me before you barbequed the corpse, I'd have given you the spell."

"Yeah well, least she won't be around in our lifetime."

"Small favors," said Bobby. Dean sighed.

"All right. Thanks, Bobby."

"Yeah, yeah." Dean hung up with a shake of his head.

"What'd he say?" Sam asked from the couch. Dean summarized the conversation for Sam and Elena, to which the latter rolled her eyes.

"Not for nothing, but I'm ready to get the hell out of Poughkeepsie," she said.

"Right there with you," Dean agreed. "Poughkeepsie. Hey, that'd make a good code word, eh Sammy?"

Sam looked amused.

"Meaning what?"

"I dunno, but it'd be good."

"'S not very inconspicuous," Elena pointed out.

"It would catch on quick though," said Dean. "Wouldn't mean squat to whoever we're with, could be good if we're trying to get away fast and throw 'em off."

She gave him a dubious look.

"Hey, that's it," he said, eyes widening with enthusiasm. "When we need a quick getaway—a, a drop everything and get the fuck out."

Sam couldn't fight a smile at Dean's expression.

"Yeah, all right," he said. "Poughkeepsie."

They would go to bed early that night. Or at least Dean would. Elena was just out of the bathroom, Dean's snores filling the room, when she heard Sam's voice floating from just outside the motel door. Curious, she pressed her ear to the wood.

"...Yeah, it's me," she heard Sam laugh a bit, that slightly nervous laugh that said he was trying to be
chill. "Um…I actually just finished a case…I'm leaving Poughkeepsie."

Who the hell is he calling this late? Elena wondered.

"Uh…I don't think we'll have time to come by," he said. "But…I know, I'm sorry…it's good to hear your voice too…maybe I will."

There was a smile in his voice, she could tell. But she scurried to her bed as his voice got closer to the door. She didn't want to be caught eavesdropping when he walked back in. Tucked in bed, Elena just caught the ending of the conversation and smiled to herself.

"All right. I'll…I'll call you," Sam promised. "Bye, Sarah."
Despite what Dean would like her to believe, Elena was not an idiot. Even without him confirming it, she could see that his nightmares were memories, not random or "nothing to worry about." But she did agree with him about Ruby, and didn't trust her, even if she claimed to be helping Sam and them by extension. Sam was all too willing to search out her hunch on Anna Milton, a girl that escaped a psychiatric ward. Some demons were after her with orders not to kill for once. Not suspicious at all.

Sam found that not only was she a real person who had escaped the ward, but the orderly she knocked out in the process had no recollection of going into her room. After her doctor gave them Anna's journal filled with drawing of the Biblical seals being broken, then told them of Anna's paranoia of the Devil rising to start the Apocalypse, both Dean and Elena were forced to concede that the case was definitely real.

Next they went to Anna's parents' home—a friendly looking house with no one answering the unlocked front door. It was the kind of house visitors would comment on using phrases like, "you have a lovely home," or "it's so cozy."

But Anna's parents were lying on the floor in pools of their own blood, their throats cut and remnants of sulfur dusting the polished wood flooring. The demons had clearly beaten them there, but the question was, where would Anna go if not to her parents' house?

"Hey, do you still have her sketches?" Sam asked Dean while looking at a family picture.

"Yeah," he said, and handed them over.

"Check this out," said Sam. He held a photo of the Miltons with Anna, all smiling and standing in front of what looked to be a church, most likely the church her father was pastor of. The painted glass window on the building was identical with one of the drawings in the journal.

"She was drawing it over and over," he said. "If you were religious, scared, and had demons on your ass, where would you go to feel safe?"

The church was old, though it looked to have been painted fairly recently. There was a set of stairs inside that climbed to the height of the building, and they went up cautiously with weapons drawn. For all they knew, demons could be there already. They reached the attic, where the window allowed sunlight to seep in through its painted colors. There were chairs, knickknacks, a statue of a woman (most likely Mother Mary), and storage bins littering the place, and a glass wall painted similarly to the window. They put away their guns when they saw Anna through it.

She heard them coming, and they saw her hasten away from the glass.

"Anna?" said Sam. "We're not going to hurt you…we're here to help."

When she didn't answer, they continued looking around for her.

"We're here to help," he repeated. "…I'm Sam, and this is Dean, my brother, and Elena."

"Sam?" came the scared reply. "Not Sam Winchester."
They looked to one another in confusion.

"Um…yeah."

Anna stepped out, looking at them with a hopeful expression.

"And you're Dean," she said, almost disbelieving. "The Dean."

Dean's eyes widened.

"Well, yeah…the Dean, I guess," he said, and couldn't help a grin that made both Elena and Sam roll their eyes. Elena's was more with annoyance.

"It's really you," Anna said, a bit breathless. She began walking toward them. "Oh my God."

For a moment Dean's grin deepened, until confusion and wariness set in. This chick had been in a psych ward for almost four months.

"The angels talk about you. You were in Hell, but Castiel pulled you out. And some of them think you can help save us," then she looked over at Sam. "And some of them don't like you at all."

Sam's expression fell flat, but she continued talking. To Elena, it looked like they'd opened a can of worms.

"They've been talking about you all the time recently," she told them, awe coloring her tone. "I feel like I know you."

"So you talk to angels?" Elena asked.

"Uh—no, no. They probably don't even know I exist," she explained. "I just, kind of…overhear them."

"You overhear them?" Sam repeated, asking for clarification.

"Yeah, they talk and…sometimes I just hear them in my head."

"Like…right now?" Dean asked.

"Not right this second, but a lot, and I can't shut them out. There's so many of them."

"So they lock you up with a case of the crazies when you were just…tuning into Angel Radio?" Dean said with an incredulous smile. Anna looked like she'd never heard it put quite like that, but was grateful for someone who understood and believed her.

"Yes. Thank you."

"Anna, when did the voices start, do you remember?" Sam asked.

"I can tell you exactly," she said. "July 18."

Sam and Dean looked to one another with grim realization.

"The day I got out," Dean mused.

"First words I heard, clear as a bell," said Anna. "'Dean Winchester is saved."

Dean glanced at Elena, then to Sam, who was nodding.
"What do you think?" Sam breathed a laugh.

"It's above my pay grade, man." Dean turned to Elena, who shrugged.

"Sounds legit to me."

"At least now we know why the demons want you so bad," said Dean. "Get a hold of you, and they can hear everything the other side's cooking. You're 1.900-Angel."

Anna smiled, but then a thought seemed to come to her.

"Oh, hey. Um, do you know if my parents are okay? I didn't go home."

Before they could answer, Ruby came through the door, looking harried.

"You got the girl? Good, we gotta go."

Anna backed away with wide eyes, in horror of the demon's face even as Sam tried to assure her that she was there to help.

"Don't be so sure," Dean groused.

"We've gotta hurry!" Ruby exclaimed.

"Why?"

"Because a demon's coming big time and we can fight later, Dean."

"Well, that's pretty convenient. Showin' up right when we find the girl with some big wig on your tail."

"I didn't bring him here, you did."

"What?"

"They followed you from the girl's house, we gotta go now!"

"Dean," Sam cut in and got his brother's attention. The statue they'd seen when they came in was crying blood, if that were possible.

"It's too late," said Ruby. Her fear showed on her face. "He's here."

Sam wasted no time in leading Anna away, having her hide in a closet to the right. He then took out a silver flask of holy water and began to unscrew it.

"No, Sam. You've gotta pull him right away," said Ruby.

"What are you talking about?" asked Elena, while Dean said at the same time,

"Whoa, hold on a sec—"

"Now is not the time to bellyache about Sam going dark-side," Ruby cut him off. "He does his thing, exorcises that demon, or we die."

Elena and Dean looked up at Sam with similar expressions of unease, but Sam put his flask away and faced the door. It wasn't long before the door burst open, revealing a well-dressed man in his late fifties, hair grayed at the temples. He strolled in with a confidence that never wavered, and when he
regarded them coolly, there was an unmistakable darkness in his gaze.

Sam raised his hand and tried to use his power, but the demon's eyes rolled back white as he adjusted his tie, nearly unperturbed as icy blue pupils rolled back to normal.

"Hmm, well that tickled," he said, and began to step forward. "You don't have the juice to take me on, Sam."

With the wave of a hand, Sam was pulled forward and thrown down the stairs. Before Elena could shoot a salt round, she was tossed into some plastic storage bins and old pottery, leaving Dean to brandish Ruby's knife while Ruby herself went after Anna.

"Nice to see you again, Dean," the other demon hissed, and backed Dean into one of the attic's supportive beams. Punch after punch to the face made him drop the knife.

"Don't you recognize me?" the demon asked, pausing in his assault. "Oh, no. I forgot, I'm wearing a pediatrician."

Blood drizzled from the corner of Dean's mouth and from his nose as the demon landed more blows.

"But we were so close...in Hell."

Another punch had Dean seeing spots at the edge of his vision, but memory after memory clicked in place, along with a weight in his gut that felt a lot like dread.

"...Alastair."

The demon smiled, then chuckled and would've continued, if not for Sam who grabbed Alastair's shoulder and stabbed him in the heart with the knife. It crackled with power, but Alastair only chuckled again.

"Gotta do a lot better than that, Sam."

His blow to the cheek sent Sam careening back, but it was enough distraction for Elena to help Dean up as he gripped his ribs. With Alastair struggling to take out the knife embedded in his chest, Sam found his balance again and steadied Dean and Elena. The glass window was the only exit. They looked to one another.

Then they jumped.

Dean washed his bloody mouth out in the dirty motel sink with his arm pinned to his side while Elena stitched a long cut on Sam's arm. It seeped with blood, but the stitches were even.

"You almost done with that?" Dean asked. He came back into the room and picked up a bottle of some kind of booze, taking long gulps. It wasn't numbing the pain well enough.

"Yeah," she said over Sam's small gasps of pain. "Going as fast as I can."

"Good. Cause I've got a dislocated shoulder over here."

"I'll pop it back when she's finished," Sam said with another short gasp. Once Elena tied the final knot and clipped it, he looked over at the large green bottle in Dean's hand.

"Give me that," said Sam, reaching out for it with his good arm. Dean handed it over and watched as Sam poured a bit over the wound with a hiss. Elena's brows furrowed, and with one leg she pushed
away from the bed he was sitting on from the chair she was in. The other she'd wrapped tightly from half her calf to mid-thigh, so her knee wouldn't move an inch. Unfortunately, pushing back didn't get her very far and some of what she thought was bourbon splashed on her immovable leg.

"So you lost the magic knife, huh?" Dean asked.

"Yeah, saving your ass," Sam snapped back. "Who the hell was that demon?"

"No one good," Dean answered. "We gotta find Anna."

"Ruby's got her. I'm sure she's okay." Sam put the bottle by the floor and heaved himself to his feet. "All right, come on."

He helped Elena get out of the chair and walked her over to the other chair at the plastic table by the window, so she could take care of a cut on her brow and splinters from the crates. Dean sat in her vacant seat and steeled himself.

"On three," Sam said. "One—"

Dean's shoulder popped back into place with an audible crack and he couldn't contain a shout of pain. He had to get up and pace toward the bathroom to walk it off.

"Are you sure about Ruby?" he asked with labored breath, when he'd recovered somewhat. Sam didn't respond, just pressed a towel to his bloody arm. "You know, I think it's just as likely that she used us to find Radio Girl, then brought that demon in to kill us."

"Because that demon is probably watching us right now," Sam said, his voice rising with annoyance. "Waiting to follow us right back to Anna again. That's why he let us go."

Dean chuckled humorlessly.

"You call this letting us go?"

"Yeah, I do. Look, killing us would've been no problem to that thing. That's why we've gotta lay low and wait for Ruby to call us."

"Yeah, and how's she gunna do that?" Dean turned around and came closer to the beds, tossing the ice pack. "I told you, Dean," Sam said, in a tone that spoke of how he was simmering under the surface. "How many times do I have to explain myself?"

"...No, you know what? No. I need more than that," Dean said. "I deserve more than that."

"Dean—"

"No, Sam. Since the beginning you haven't been straight with me about Ruby," he said, making Sam's jaw clench. "And now you're practically treating her like family. I want to know what the hell
happened when I was down under that made you decide she was worth your trust. Hell, why should I trust her?"

"Because she saved my life, all right!" Sam exclaimed. Dean raised his brows.

"Okay…want to elaborate on that?"

Sam paused, then stood.

"Never mind," he muttered and grabbed a jacket that wasn't bloody.

"Where the hell are you going?" Dean asked. "I thought we were supposed to be lying low!"

"The bar across the street," Sam said shortly. "I need some air."

Dean rolled his eyes and sat heavily on the bed that wasn't sprinkled with alcohol and blood. He watched dispassionately as Sam threw on a jacket over his bruised back and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. It was as if all the sound was sucked out of the room, leaving the two remaining hunters in heavy silence. Until Elena hesitantly suggested they go after him. Sam really shouldn't be driving. He should be lying down and cleaning up the rest of his cuts.

Dean huffed a breath as he shook his head and grumbled,

"Let him be pissed off, fucking throw a hissy fit."

He said that now, but even with everything that had been brought to light, Elena knew they would work things out like they usually did. Shout a little. Throw a few punches. Get back to the next hunt and the same familiar rhythm before Sam could complain that frozen hot pockets did not constitute as breakfast.

They heard the rumble of the Impala's engine peel away from the parking lot, and Dean's frown deepened.

Well, maybe not as fast as that, she amended.

Dean began reaching up to touch behind his aching head, but he faltered halfway through the motion as his shoulder screamed in protest. He breathed deep and slow and lowered his arm back to his lap.

"You hit your head, didn't you?" asked Elena. He flicked his gaze up to her concerned one trained on him.

"At this point, anything's possible," he murmured. The piercing pain emanating from the back of his head and the dried blood he felt on his neck confirmed it. When she began lifting herself from the chair he internally sighed.

"What are you doing?" he asked gruffly, exasperated. "Sit down before you fall on your ass."

She stubbornly got up and stretched her left leg the slightest bit (instantly regretting that decision), and used the table and chairs as support to make her way over to him.

"Stay right there, damn it!" Elena snapped when he made to get up. Too tired to argue, he shot her a glare at her stubbornness. She smirked.

Elena came to stand, somewhat shakily, on his left side and pushed away hands that tried to steady her. Though she did drop her bag of ice next to him and used his good shoulder to prop her up. Her fingers guided his head to tilt forward, and gently combed through his caked hair. His sharp intake of
breath told her when she found the cut. She grimaced sympathetically. It was actually small and had mostly stopped bleeding, save for mild oozing, so she pressed a gauze pad just enough to soak up the rest.

"Cracked your head well enough," she muttered.

"Gonna kiss it better?" he said dryly, but she knew in the way he was gripping his knees that he was struggling to contain the pain.

"Quit being a smartass and give me that towel."

He grinned a little as he looked around and saw the small crumpled towel on the floor. It had once been white, but was now pink and stained. He handed it up to her and she was thankful it was still a little damp. She didn't think she would've been able to make it all the way to the sink and back.

Dean winced and gripped the edge of the bed as she began dabbing lightly at the wound, cleaning away the blood.

"You don't have to do this," he said quietly. Elena saw only the profile of his expression, but after everything that happened that night, along with his less than pleasant conversation with Sam, she could see his weariness of mind as well as body.

"Just trying to do what you always do," she said lightly. His expression didn't change, so she added a bit more of the truth, "You look out for me." Take care of me.

"...Especially when no one asked you to."

It used to frustrate her to no end, until he was gone. It was a cruel way to realize she almost craved it, him taking care of her. In the huge ways like what he did today, or in the little ways that didn't really matter but really did.

His eyes focused on the ground between his feet while she wiped the back of his neck.

"I told you a long time ago I'd have your back."

"By trying to break my fall?" She sighed and shook her head. "Dean, you could've killed yourself."

Dean shrugged with his working shoulder. He knew Sam could more or less handle the jump. But she was smaller and lighter than both of them, had less to cushion the blow. If he hadn't, she would've broken bones (or worse), and they would've had to go to a hospital. Right now they needed to lie as low as possible.

"I've done riskier things."

"'Cause you're borderline insane," she murmured, and used his shoulder to get to his right side. She wanted to get the rest of the blood out of his hair before she put another gauze pad on, but she couldn't reach it without putting pressure on her left knee. It was already throbbing as it was.

"Don't try to pretend we don't have that in common," he said, mouth twitching upward. But it was short lived as Elena stumbled over his foot. He caught her by the hips before she could tip all the way over and settled her on his thigh, so she wouldn't hit the floor and jar her already sprained knee further. She breathed through the pain and reached out for his hurt shoulder to regain her balance, but corrected herself quick and grasped the front of his shirt instead.
Dean gave her a peeved, knowing look and she smiled sheepishly.

"I knew this was your goal all along." Elena scowled a bit at the mischievous glint in his eyes. She rolled her and picked up the towel at his side, turned his head to the right and continued her self-employed task. Ignoring the heavy hands still holding her waist was impossible, but she focused herself on checking for any more blood on a new gauze pad. There were some drops, but it wasn't nearly as bad as when she started.

Elena chanced a glance at his face and caught the intensity of his stare, guarded as it was. She blushed under the weight of it. But she also saw the underlining, bone-deep fatigue there, and that made her a little sad.

When was the last time someone took care of you, Dean?

Without her consent, her left hand reached up and slid through his hair—a caress that was first gentle against his stubbled cheek, her thumb stroking his skin. Dean's eyes closed, to his surprise. He realized the touch was achingly familiar, something that had never failed to bring him comfort, security.

It was one of the few good memories he had of his mom, so much that he got to have it again in his djinn-induced fantasy, if only one more time. His mom had always known how to make him feel better, even if it was just a simple touch, or her slender fingers in his hair. Dean hadn't known he could miss something like that anymore.

He was pulled out of his only semi-aware thoughts by Elena. Her hand drifted to the back of his neck, soft and warm, and she kissed his cheek. His eyes found hers and the gentle curve of her smile. It was different than in front of the motel, that look. That was lust and urgency and fire. This was affection, tenderness, comfort. And not just for his cuts and bruises.

Dean could've played it off, cracked a joke to break whatever atmosphere was being made here. He could get up now and walk away, and everything would keep being what it was before she looked at him like she knew he remembered Hell.

Mindful of her battered ribs, his hands rose higher on her waist and brought her closer, making their faces inches apart. This time when he kissed her, it was almost tentative. There wasn't any teasing excuse he could dish out this time, no way to dismiss the depth in her eyes or the way she touched him. She meant it.

And Dean was strangely okay with that.

So he kissed her, over and over again but with no real urgency, just taking pleasure in the feeling of her and her fingers in his hair.

Without the energy for much else, Elena rested her forehead against Dean's with her eyes closed, their lips still just barely brushing. His grip on her was relaxed and for now, they were content just to breathe. The only sounds came from the air conditioning and distant cars passing by. The sun had almost set, casting the room in shadows, and it was almost peaceful save for the dull pain of their injuries.

"Dean?" she said quietly, nearly a whisper.

"Hmm."

"I'm tired."
Of angels and demons and everything in between.

Dean let out a long, deep breath through his nose that she felt on her lips.

"Me too."

And despite his shoulder, he tucked one arm under her thighs and the other around her back and eased them back on the bed, depositing her next to him. She fixed the pillows and applied another pad to his head. He kicked off his boots and shut off the lamp, rested his head on hers when she curled into him. Neither bothered with the covers.

Sam came back a couple hours of beers later, calmer than before. He was still a bit mad, but couldn't help but pause at the doorway. His brother was dead asleep and snoring softly, even with Elena's hand at the base of his neck. On further inspection, Sam saw that she was holding some gauze there. Dean held a melted bag of ice to Elena's knee that rested against his side.

Sam shook his head incredulously. That gave him a bit of a rush, but he made his way over to the unclaimed bed. Maybe he stumbled a little, but hey, it was dark. He glanced over at them one more time, a bit envious that they looked more peaceful than he felt (even with the booze). Mostly he marveled.

If just for a little while, Dean let someone else take care of him. And maybe he finally understood what that meant.

Elena woke to something warm, but firm partially underneath her. It moved slowly up and down as she breathed. Shifting her head just, she realized it was Dean's chest. They were both still wearing the same clothes from last night, striped with blood and dirt, and it was seven in the morning if the clock on the nightstand was right. Sam was, for once, sleeping like a rock on his bed. They should probably be getting up by now to figure out what the hell they were going to do. Probably should get up anyway just to avoid Sam questioning them if he saw them now.

Instead she laid her head back down on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

Fuck it, I'm comfortable.

Elena exhaled and let her thoughts drift. An arm wrapped around her waist coiled a little tighter.

When she opened them again, it was an hour later.

Sam's bed was empty and the shower was running, so she could assume he'd locked himself in the bathroom. It was also probably safe to say he'd seen her and his brother curled together on the bed.

Great.

She felt Dean shift under her and she looked up to see him glancing down at her.

"Morning," she said. There was uncertainty in her tone, even as her voice was still groggy and coarse.

"You're lying on my arm," he said gruffly, voice still thick with sleep. There was a little grin on his face though. "It's numb now."

Her expression turned deadpan.
"Yeah well, your breath stinks."

"You weren't complaining last night."

She rolled her eyes and began sitting up with a muttered, "ass" along the way. Her hand went to her sprained knee as it groaned in protest. Then a supporting hand was warm on her back.

"Is it swollen?" Dean asked.

"Not enough for something to be torn," she replied and let out a long breath through the pain. The bathroom door slid open, letting steam into the room. "But I'm not pulling any marathons anytime soon."

"I've got aspirin," Sam said, and tossed the canister on the bed before toweling off his hair. He was fully dressed, but had bags under his eyes and still looked like he had a hangover.

"Long night?" she asked passively. It took him a moment to answer.

"No," he said, and dropped the towel on the empty bed. "I got in around two."

It was true, for them that wasn't very late. He seemed calmer, but there was still tension in the room. So much so that things were still quiet as Elena gingerly got up to brush her teeth while Dean scrounged up what he could from his duffel for them to share as breakfast. It wasn't safe for any of them to out again, and he wasn't chancing it.

So far he had a bag of beef jerky, a bag of Cheez-Its, and two chocolate bars. Sam added four granola bars to the pile. It would make for a sad-ass meal, but they had bigger problems.

"Dean," Sam said quietly. Dean looked up at him.

"Yeah?"

"…You were right." He raised his brows.

"I was?" Sam breathed heavily through his nose.

"Yeah. You deserve to know," he said. "But…it's hard for me."

There wasn't much Dean could say to that without being hypocritical. But after Elena came out and he was able to brush his teeth and they were sitting down and eating, Sam got their attention. His eyes found Elena's.

"After, um…after we went our separate ways…I wasn't at my best."

He proceeded to explain he tried to make a deal with a demon to trade places with Dean in Hell. It ended badly, and got even worse when Ruby and another demon attacked him. But instead of killing him with her knife, Ruby stabbed the demon holding Sam. The story that followed from there wasn't too pleasant, uncomfortable at times for both listeners for different reasons. The fact that he and Ruby had sex was disconcerting.

"Ugh. Dude, really?" said Dean in disgust.

"I said I was coming clean."

"But now I feel dirty."
Really he hadn't said anything graphic, but Elena was sure it was the fact that Sam was in such a state of despair and that it was Ruby, and Dean hated her. Elena herself was feeling low. More specifically, guilty for not having been there to help him, that she'd walked away and let him feel like he had no choice but to go down the road of using his psychic powers. She'd been comforted at Bobby's, got in touch with her friend Val and got on route to being okay. While Sam had Ruby manipulating him into a game of revenge on Lilith.

"Keep going, but…without the nudity," Dean said, and Sam nodded with a wry look. The story ended unexpectedly, with Ruby saving Sam from Lilith's henchmen after she gave them the slip, almost costing her own life in the process. It was out of character for a demon, sure. Maybe she was just bitter, but Elena didn't want to trust it.

For now, though, she would trust Sam, like Dean chose to trust Sam then.

"She got through to me," Sam continued. "And more than that, what she said to me…it's what you would've said. If it wasn't for her…I wouldn't be here."

And then there was a knock at the door.

"Housekeeping."

A maid, a long walk, and an awkward semi-apology between Dean and Ruby later, they were standing in a rundown, abandoned shack in the middle of the woods with Anna. She was fine, if a little worse for wear and anxious to call her parents. Though he was reluctant, Sam had to be the one to tell her the truth about the Miltons.

Anna's cries were heartbreaking, and he and Elena comforted her the best they could, but both were startled when she suddenly gasped through her tears, gazing eerily to the door.

"They're coming." The unadulterated fear in her voice had Sam pulling her to a stand and into the back room while Ruby locked the back door. Dean and Elena got weapons out of his bag and Dean handed a gun to Sam.

"Where's the knife?" Ruby asked. Sam and Dean looked to one another.

"Uh…about that," Dean trailed.

"You're fucking kidding."

"Don't look at me."

"Thanks a lot," Sam glared at Dean, who smiled, then turned to look out the window.


The lights buzzed and flicked on and off, and a loud breeze could be heard outside. It gave Dean a hollow feeling in his stomach.

But what came through those doors were not demons. Castiel and Uriel strode with purpose into the room, eyes scanning for what they sought.

"Please tell me you're here to help," said Dean, though his luck was never that good, even at the best of times. "We've been having demon issues all day."

"I can see that," Uriel said dryly, pointedly looking down at Ruby, whose eyes were flashing black.
"Want to explain why you have that *stain* in the room?"

Nothing they could say would sound rational to angels. Not even explaining the long and painful story would help.

"We're here for Anna," said Castiel. Ever one to get to the point. Elena regarded him with a measure of distrust. Maybe it was the whole "mind-drugging" thing he did the last time they talked.

"Here for her like…here for her?" Dean asked.

"*Stop* talking," Uriel snapped impatiently. "Give her to us."

"Are you going to help her?" Sam asked the crucial question. It didn't look like it.

"No," Castiel said bluntly. "…She has to die."
According to the angels, Anna was far from innocent. But who were hunters to believe what they were told? Even though they were hopelessly out-gunned, they fought back. Guns were useless, for that matter, and trying to fight an angel's strength hand to hand was an uphill battle in the snow with a ball and chain bolted on both feet, at best.

Castiel was easily able to breeze past Sam with a touch to his forehead rendering the hunter unconscious, but the moment Castiel touched the door, his form disappeared along with Uriel.

"What the hell was that?" Elena asked, out of breath and on the floor. Dean helped both her and Ruby up (which was new for him), and went to Anna while Ruby helped Sam sit up. Anna's arms were cut to hell, and strange symbols were drawn on the mirror in front of her in blood.

"I don't know how I did it," she said, eyes slightly vacant. "It just popped into my head."

Dean grabbed a towel from the night before in his duffel to wrap one of her arms, and Elena did the same with one of her old cloth bandanas. She wouldn't be wearing it again, that was for sure.

They didn't know how Anna did it when she didn't even know what it was she was doing, but Sam resolved to find out, while Dean and Elena walked Anna to the Impala and made the drive to Singer Salvage. Bobby welcomed them in with his usual gruffness and asked for a debrief before he went on his way. Where, he wouldn't say, but he'd given Elena an apology that he couldn't stay; he said he had something to take care of, most likely a hunter that needed his help.

So they led Anna to his panic room.

"Demons can't even touch the joint," said Dean.

"Which I find racist, by the way," Ruby quipped from just outside the room, crossing her arms.

"Write your congressman," he retorted. She tossed him and Elena a hex bag each.

"Extra crunchy. Hides you from demons, angels, all comers."

Dean nodded.

"Thanks, Ruby."

She looked a little surprised at that, but she nodded in return. He gave the hex bad to Anna and told her not to lose it.

"So Anna, anything playing on Angel Radio?" he asked.

"It's quiet. Dead silence," she said.

"Good. That's not troubling at all."

"We're in trouble, huh?" she asked. "You guys are scared…"

Dean shook his head after a moment, giving her a smile.
“Nah.”

Elena knew better. But when Sam called from upstairs, Dean asked her to stay and look after Anna with Ruby. She would because he asked her to, not because she wanted to be anywhere near the demon.

Before he left, Elena handed him her hex bag and he stuffed it in his pocket. If he was leaving the panic room, he would need it more than her.

“So…Sam left because…” Anna trailed, and Elena knew she was fishing.

“To look up the symbols on the mirror so we can know what they are, and exactly what they do,” said Elena. It wasn’t a lie. But he’d also gone to look up everything he could find on Anna.

“I know I freak you guys out,” she said, looking down. “I know I’m not normal. They’re talking about me, aren’t they?”

“We just want to know why this is happening to you,” Elena replied, trying to calm her down. It wasn’t happening. She genuinely felt sorry for Anna and hoped they could help her get these angels off her tail. But from the looks of it, they felt pretty justified in killing her.

“Well, I do too!” she exclaimed. “Why aren’t I allowed to know?”

“Look, it’s not that—”

“Forget this,” she said, and hastily made her way upstairs. Elena couldn’t run after her with her knee still bothering her (the fight with the angels hadn’t helped), but she gave Ruby an incredulous look when she let Anna by without lifting a finger.

“You’re just going to let her go right past you?” Elena said, walking to the stairs. Ruby rolled her eyes.

“Fine,” she said, and ran up the stairs. It left Elena to look up at the stretch of fifteen steps. She was already tired.

“She just kept saying that this real father of hers was mad. Like, wanted to kill her, mad,” Sam explained.

“Kinda heavy for a two year old,” Dean commented.

“Well, she saw a kid shrink and got better, grew up normal.”

“Until now…so what is she hiding?”

“Why didn’t you just ask me to my face?” Anna said, surprising them. They looked over and she was there with a hurt expression and Ruby standing next to her.

“Nice job watching her,” said Dean, “Where’s Elena?”

“Coming!” a voice called from downstairs. Slow steps could be heard making their way up, but eventually Elena reached the top, a little out of breath.

“I’m fine, thanks,” she quipped. Dean shook his head.

“You’re right, Anna,” Sam admitted. “Is there anything you wanna tell us?”
"About what?"

"The angels said you were guilty of something. Why would they say that?"

"You tell me. Tell me why my life has been leveled," she said, on the verge of tears, "why my parents are dead. I don't know, I swear. I would give anything to know."

"Okay," Sam said with a nod and a gentler expression. "Then let's find out."

After calling up an old friend, Dean drove the couple of hours it took to bring Pamela Barnes to Bobby's house. The sunglasses were new, but there was the familiar teasing and butt pinching for Sam, and a surprisingly warm hug for Elena. The last time she saw Pam, the woman was in a hospital bed. But she and Bobby had brought some CDs and Godiva chocolate (and her favorite brand of whiskey for when she was off her pain meds).

There was always a measure of guilt when she saw Pam, but she liked the woman all the same. At the very least, Pamela kept Sam on his toes. That and she was making Ruby uncomfortable, which was a plus.

Pam and Anna seemed to hit it off well; the psychic was all too willing to help against angels, considering. She had Anna lay on the cot in the panic room and lulled her into a state of hypnosis.

"Every muscle calm and relaxed…" she soothed, and soon, Anna seemed to ease against the pillow under her head. "Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you."

"Now Anna, tell me. How can you hear the angels?" Pamela asked. "How did you work that spell?"

"I don't know," came the soft reply. "I just did."

"Your father, what's his name?" Pam asked instead. Anna's eyelids twitched slightly.

"Rich Milton."

"All right. But I want you to look further back when you were very young, just a couple of years old."

"I don't want to." The girl turned her head a bit away from Pam, but the psychic continued.

"It'll be okay, Anna. Just one look, that's all we need."

"No…" She began to toss and turn now.

"What's your dad's name? Your real dad. Why is he angry at you?"

"No…"

Elena looked over at Dean worriedly. This was beginning to feel too familiar.

When Anna began to scream, yelling that someone—"He"—was going to kill her, Pamela wasted no time in trying to calm her down. The flickered oddly in and out of darkness, then the metal door slid shut and the ceiling lights burst in white sparks. All the while Pam remained calmer than anyone.

"Dean don't," she said steadily as Dean reached out for Anna. The punch she landed on him sent
him sailing into a chair, the wood breaking beneath his weight. Sam and Elena helped him up as Pam brought Anna out of the hypnosis. She brushed tendrils of red hair out of the girl's face and talked with soothing tones.

"Anna? Are you all right?"

Her eyes opened, and she sat up slowly as she looked at Pam.

"Thank you, Pamela."

The way she said it was a red flag to Elena. Pam, though she couldn't see Anna's face, leant back with no doubt a similar train of thought.

"That helped a lot," she said. "I remember now."

"Remember what?" Sam asked.

"Who I am," she replied, looking up at the brothers with an odd expression. Dean was a bit frazzled, but still wanted answers.

"All right, I'll bite. Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm an angel."

"Don't be afraid. I'm not like the others," Anna told Ruby.

"I don't find that very reassuring," the demon said. She kept her distance, as did the other four as they stood in Bobby's living room.

"Neither do I," Pamela deadpanned.

"So...Castiel, Uriel. They're the ones who came for me?"

"You know them?" Sam asked.

"We were kind of in the same foxhole," she said.

"So what, were they like your bosses or something?" Dean asked. She gave a ghost of a smile.

"Try the other way around."

"Hmm," said Dean. "Look at you."

"Now they want to kill you?" The distrust in Pam's tone was obvious, and understandable.

"Orders are orders," Anna shrugged. "I'm sure I have a death sentence on my head."

"Why is that?" Elena asked.

"I disobeyed, which for us is about the worst thing you can do," said Anna. "I fell."

"Meaning?" said Dean.

"She fell to Earth," Pam answered him. "Became human."

"Wait a minute. Angels can just...become human?" Sam asked. Anna nodded hesitantly.
"It kinda hurts. Try cutting your kidney out with a butter knife," she said a bit wryly. "I ripped out my Grace."

"…Come again?" Dean asked.

"My Grace, it's energy. I hacked it out and fell," she explained. "When my mother Amy got pregnant, she always called me her little miracle. She had no idea how right she was."

Was that pride Elena sensed in her tone? Maybe. She still wasn't seeing a clear picture on why an angel would make such a hefty and…painful decision.

"So you just forgot that you were God's little Power Ranger?" Dean said skeptically.

"The older I got, the longer I was human, yeah."

"I don't think you all appreciate how entirely screwed we are," Ruby cut in. Her exasperation was clearly written across her face, and Elena, for once, was inclined to agree.

"Ruby's right. Heaven wants me dead," said Anna.

"And Hell just…wants her," the demon added. "A flesh and blood angel that you can question, torture, that bleeds. Sister, you're the Stanley Cup. And sooner or later, Heaven or Hell, they're gunna find you."

"I know. And that's why I'm going to get it back," Anna replied. "My Grace, I mean. If I can find it."

Dean liked the sound of it; simple, and if they were able to find it, they'd have an angel finally on their side. Though she admitted that she lost track of it while she was falling at thousands of miles an hour.

"You mean like the human eye can see, as maybe a comet or meteor?" said Sam. Anna raised a brow.

"Why do you ask?"

With enough research, Sam found record of a meteor that was sighted exactly nine months to the day of Anna's birth in the same area of Ohio that she was born in. And at the same time, there was another over Kentucky.

"Her Grace," Ruby clarified.

"Might be," said Sam.

"That only narrows it down to an entire state." She huffed a breath and stood from the couch she, Sam and Elena were sitting on.

"It's a start at least," Elena supplied. Ruby turned around with her arms crossed.

"Look, I'm…I'm sorry I brought you guys this mess. If I would've down I would've just kept my mouth shut."

"You didn't know," Sam said, shaking his head. "We'll muddle through."

"This is a fight you don't want to get in the middle of. It's Godzilla and Mothra. If one side doesn't get us, the other will," said Ruby.
"Then what do you want to do? Dump Anna and run?"

The demon shrugged, her expression hopeful. Elena wasn't surprised. A demon's sense of self-preservation always won out.

"forget it. Look," said Sam. "I know the angels freak you out—"

"Forget the angels. It's Alastair I'm afraid of," she said, and it rang a bell in Elena's mind.

"Alastair?" she asked.

"You met him in the church, practically the head inquisitor downstairs. Picasso with a razor."

Now Elena remembered. She'd heard him taunting Dean, claiming to know him in the pit. And it seemed like Dean remembered things less fondly.

"I'll go get Dean," she said. "Ask him what he wants to do."

Sam nodded, and she left the room with a growing sense of unease and nagging curiosity that wouldn't leave her be. She knew Dean wouldn't want to talk about it, and he didn't exactly owe her an explanation.

Maybe now's not the time, she rationalized to herself.

When she found Dean with Pam and Anna in the living room, there was a clear rift between psychic and former angel that was more one-sided than anything, but no one was judging Pam for her distance. That's why when she motioned for Dean to come and talk in the hall and told him what Sam had found, she was in agreement with what he asked of her.

"How's your leg?"

"A bit sore, but fine. Why?" she replied.

"Would you mind taking Pam home?" he asked. "This is a bit more than she signed on for."

"Yeah," Elena nodded with a sigh. "I can meet up with you guys where you find Anna's Grace."

"I'll call you," he said, and with a teasing half-grin, "Don't put the radio on too loud. You won't hear your phone over Billy Joel."

"You're one to talk," she scoffed, and went to grab her leather jacket off the back of the couch where she'd thrown it earlier. "Hey, Pam. I'm gunna take you home."

"You sure, hon?" Pamela asked, but she got up out of her seat with a note of relief on her face.

"Yeah. We'll go in my car. It's parked out front."

Elena opened the door for Pam, but Dean stopped her before she could walk out the door. He bent his head near her ear.

"Keep your eyes open on the road," he said. "Who knows what the hell's watching us."

She grinned a bit and glanced up at him.

"You be careful too."
The Camaro pushed a solid eighty down the interstate. There were only a few cars on the road at nine thirty at night.

"Speed limit's sixty-five," Pam commented idly.

"How do you know I'm speeding?" Elena asked.

"You're bouncing your leg," she said, which wasn't entirely an answer. "You're nervous."

Elena didn't say anything.

"The boys can handle themselves for a little while," Pam assured.

"I know. That's not…" Elena sighed. "We're caught in the middle of two friggin' armies here. And I'm not sure which one's worse…if we stay in the way of them getting to Anna, it's not gunna end well."

"Yeah. Good luck with that by the way." Pam rested her hands casually on her thighs. "I'm sorry I can't be more help, but…"

"No, Pam. Seriously, we understand." Elena looked over at the older woman. "You don't need to be caught up in this."

"They'll be all right," Pam continued after a moment. "If there's one thing I know about Winchesters, they're stubborn as hell."

She fixed Elena with her marbled gaze that was only a little disconcerting.

"And you don't seem like the type to run away scared either."

"I'm not scared for me," she replied quietly. A sharp whap on her ribs startled her and made the car swerve for a few seconds until Elena was able to correct the steering. She panted for air to calm her beating heart and glared over at Pamela.

"What the hell was that? You're lucky there's barely anybody on the road!"

"Stop sounding like a pansy-ass little girl then," Pam said firmly. "You're a fucking hunter. Act like one."

"I can't be worried?" Elena exclaimed. "I think I have the right. Angels, you'd think they be the least bit benevolent. But come to find they're dickbag sons of bitches who could care less about humanity. Two of those are bad enough, but add a whole gang of demons on our ass?"

She laughed humorlessly.

"And the bastard leading 'em, who apparently 'knows' Dean."

For a moment, Pam was quiet. Eventually she asked,

"When he was in Hell?"

"Yeah."

"Tough break."

"Tell me about it."
Pamela sighed, and the conversation died down to the sound of the Camaro's engine. After ten minutes, Elena couldn't take the silence, but she didn't feel like getting into another talk like that one. She turned on the radio.

"Crazy...crazy for feelin', so lonely..."

She changed the station.

"I can't fight this feelin' anymore...I've forgotten what I've started fighting for—"

Sorry, REO. Not now, she thought.

"When you're gone, the face I came to know is missing too—"

"What the actual fuck!" Elena exclaimed in frustration and pressed the scan button repeatedly.

"Would you pick a damn station?" Pam snapped.

"They're playing a ton of shit!"

"REO's not shit," the psychic pointed out.

"I know, I know..." Elena let out a sigh of frustration. "I need to get some CDs in here..."

When she found an older station that, though it crackled in places, it was playing Journey's "Sweet and Simple" and Pam forbade her to change it. Elena was finally able to relax once she mentally drowned out the lyrics and focused on Steve Perry's crystal clear voice.

"So," Pam said, crossing her arms. She glanced over at Elena with a smirk playing at her lips. "You bang Dean yet?"

Elena spluttered and they nearly swerved again.

"NO," she exclaimed. "God."

"It's a simple question." The psychic pretended at innocence. Elena called bullshit.

"You're worse than Val," she muttered. Pamela laughed. Despite not knowing who Val was, she was glad someone else had the sense to see what her dim, yet lovable friend obviously chose not to.

"Now you're pouting like Grumpy."

"Am not!" Then Elena double-took at the woman sitting in the passenger seat. "How the hell would you even know?"

"You can't fool me. I have a literal sixth sense...well, fifth now I guess."

Elena sighed heavily.

"It's...complicated."

"How's that?"

Elena rolled her eyes and ran a hand through her messy hair. They showered at Bobby's, but she hadn't bothered washing it, even brushing it in two days. It was how the rest of her felt.

"He's like a fucking clam. It's hard to get anything definitive out of him."
"I'll bet. But you don't think he cares about you?"

"No, it's not that...I don't know what he wants," Elena admitted. "And...things have been a little too crazy to be thinking about it."

"Okay..." Pam trailed. "Well what do you want?"

She blanked. Pam could tell.

"You care about him too. That's not the question," she said. "But what do you want from him?"

"I don't want anything from him." _Besides answers about a couple of things._

"But you don't want a one-time thing."

"No." She replied without really thinking about it. Pam raised her brows.

"Then you have your answer," she said. "He'll have to figure his out on his own."

The rest of the drive was rock music and more casual conversation until they pulled up on Pam's driveway at about mid-morning. The two parted with smiles and a last warm hug before Elena made her way onto the highway and called Dean.

"Hey. Just dropped off Pam. Where am I going?"

"It was a bust. Her Grace is gone."

"Gone? What do you mean?"

"Someone took it," Dean sighed. "We're hiding out in some barn in the middle of Union."

"Kentucky?"

"No, Alaska," he sassed. She rolled her eyes and sighed. She had a long drive ahead of her.

"I'll be there in a few hours, but you need to tell me how to get to where you are."

He gave her directions, but it was a while before she stopped feeling lost with all the tall grass and cows she passed. It was well into the afternoon when she parked on the other side of the shack. From the front door she could just barely see the Impala hidden behind, under the dense trees and bushes.

She called ahead so they knew it was her knocking on the door, but she didn't take offence when they still looked wary until they saw her.

"She's not possessed," Anna determined. Elena gave her a bland look as she entered the shack. Sam closed the door behind her.

"Yeah. I've got the tattoo, thanks."

Dean's expression perked with interest.

"You've never said."

"You've never asked," she returned, crossing her arms. "I'm not giving an exhibition, if that's what you're getting at."
He smirked.

"Does that mean—"

"Dean," Sam cut in, shaking his head despite the amused look on his face.

"What?"

Elena rolled her eyes and took in her shabby surroundings.

"Nice place," she said dryly. "Looks totally angel proof."

"We've still got the hex bags. I think we should go back to panic room," said Dean.

"What, forever?" Ruby cut in. "Cause that's the only way—"

"I'm just thinkin' out loud."

"Oh, you call that thinking."

"Hey, hey, hey," Sam interjected. Evidently, this back and forth had been going on for a while. "Stop it already."

"Anna's Grace is gone, you understand?" Ruby exclaimed. "She can't 'angel up,' she can't protect us. We can't fight Heaven and Hell. One side, maybe, but not both—"

"Uh…guys," said Anna. "The angels are talking again."

"What are they saying?" asked Sam.

"It's weird…like a loop recording," she said. "It says, 'Dean Winchester gives us Anna by midnight, or…"

She hesitated to finish, but Dean prompted her otherwise. She looked at him with wide eyes.

"Or we hurl him back to damnation."

Dean's eyes flew open, and for a moment he was speechless, stiff with something he thought he'd long buried down. Elena could see in those eyes that it was fear.

"Anna, is there a weapon we can use against an angel?" Sam asked quickly.

"To what, kill them?" she asked. "Nothing we could get to. Not right now."

"Okay, wait," said Dean, "I say we call Bobby, we get him back from hedonism or whatever the hell he's doing, and—"

"Dean, what's he going to tell us that we don't already know?" Sam asked, voice raising with stress.

"I don't know! But we've gotta think of something," he said, matching his brother's tone with the slight note of panic in his own.

"Wait, how much lore is there on angels," said Elena. They'd uncovered at least fifty pounds of dusty books at Bobby's. "There has to be something we can use."

Sam and Ruby searched on his laptop while Dean, Anna and Elena flipped through the books stored in the Impala. It took a couple hours of back and forth arguing, but they finally agreed on a plan that
would either save them all, or get them all killed. Either way, it was the only shot they had, but that
didn't mean they could keep looking for things to help. Dean and Elena went to his car to retrieve a
few books they'd forgotten while Anna helped Sam with drawing a map of the area.

Dean popped the hood open and the two rummaged through guns and other miscellaneous weapons
to the farthest ends of the trunk, where the last few books were hiding.

"What are you thinking?" she asked without looking at him. She didn't have to see his face to know
he was tense.

"That this is a crappy plan." When he shut the hood, she placed the books on top.

"We've made it through better with less," she pointed out. He glanced down at the ground and leant
against the car.

"But Dean…what are we up against?" she asked. "…Who is Alastair?"

He stiffened and looked up at her, until he turned evasive.

"I told you. No one good."

"I need a little more than that," she said. "I heard him, Dean. He said he knew you."

That they were "so close in the pit" was the more exact wording, but if she brought that up she knew
he would walk away from her. As it was, he was already avoiding her eyes.

"This isn't something I want to talk about."

"Dean…don't you always get everything out of me eventually?" she asked. "I'm just asking for a
little on the return side."

"Elena," he warned. "Just drop it."

"Look, I…I can't imagine what you went through, but…" she trailed, then looked up at him with
earnest eyes. "But if you opened up about it, maybe it would h—"

"Do you open up about your brother?" Dean knew it was a low blow, and one wrong thing out of
anything he could have said, but he neededher to back off. He wasn't ready, wasn't even sure he
wanted her to know. The look she gave him was so taken back with old anguish obviously dredged
to the forefront. But he pushed the guilt down deep for once.

"This isn't any different," he said, finally staring straight into her eyes. "Look, I know you want to
help me, but truth is, you really, really can't. Talking about it doesn't help me. It makes it worse. I
can't make you understand what happened. And trust me, you don't want to."

Elena regarded him through disappointed eyes, her lips pressed.

Then she asked, "Why is it you can't let anyone in?"

Because the only one who ever really tried was Sam, and he'd ended up dead. And if Dean had left
him at Stanford, Jessica wouldn't have died. Sam would have had his life, been a lawyer, gotten
married, the whole nine yards. And now his brother was lying to him, wielding a power Dean didn't
understand, and apparently banging demons.

He wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. Not when she could be next.
"Why now, all of a sudden? For two years, it's not like you rang me up when I was trying to find my dad. You weren't there when he died, or when Sam…" Here he cut himself off, but continued, "And when I died, what did you do? You let him go off on his own to get caught by demons—"

"You're blaming me for that?" she asked, her mouth dropping slightly in surprise. She hadn't wanted to believe he would. Bobby hadn't seemed to think so, at least. So much for that.

"You're the one who wanted to get yourself stuck with us and our shit," Dean said, maybe a little harsher than he intended. He knew he was being a dick, but it was the only way she would leave him be, and maybe she'd get some sense. All he would do in the long run was get her killed.

"But a few hard weeks later, you couldn't take it, right?" he surmised. "Did you stop and think where I was while you were out partying with your friends?"

"I get it, Dean." Her voice was hard, but her eyes were glassy, fighting tears. Her hands fisted at her sides itched like she wanted to throw a swing, but was restraining herself. "I get it, all right? You just want to keep running until you burn out. And right about now…"

The wounded look in her eyes as she glared at him would be something else branded into his memory.

"That's fucking fine by me."

She walked away from him.

He didn't know how long he stood there, outwardly numb, but replaying the last five minutes in his head. It was all anger and frustration that, honestly, wasn't all directed at her. Suddenly he felt a lot like his father, and that thought made the pit of his stomach feel hollow.

He went inside the house with a wake of guilt in every step, but only found Sam, who looked at him incredulously when he walked in.

"Save it, where is she?" Dean asked.

"Dean—" Sam cut himself off and sighed heavily. He shook his head.

It hadn't been hard to hear their conversation, but it hadn't been his place to get in the middle either.

"Tell me where she is, Sam!" The look on Dean's face told Sam his brother was aware of whatever his problem was, but Sam almost didn't have the heart to answer the question. The sound of a car engine being revved and peeling away answered it for him.

Dean's expression was wide-eyed, blank, while Sam's was resigned.

"She told me to call if I needed help," he said. "But…she's going home."

He wouldn't mention the extent of what she said, but he could see Dean putting together the gist of what might have happened after she came storming in, grabbing her coat and keys and bag and telling Sam what to do if he needed her. She hadn't even spared Anna or Ruby a glance.

"But obviously your brother doesn't need or want my goddamn help. So I'm not going to get in his fucking way."

He could see the moment Dean chose to internalize his reaction, when he put on a cold front. Sam didn't need to press him for his thoughts to know where they were, and this time, Sam didn't try to
dissuade him.

She pushed the car to seventy, and it didn't feel fast enough. It was a good thing no one was on this dirt road, because she wasn't staying within her lane all too often.

The words he said to her kept replaying in her mind, over and over. It was true. Elena hadn't been there. She'd been doing a job she wasn't cut out for.

Maybe she still was.

And then she thought of Pamela Barnes.

Pam knew exactly who she was, and what she did. Even if it hurt. She stuck to her guns and used them.

*So what the hell am I doing?*

Was she really running away, abandoning Anna, because *Dean pissed her off?*

"*Stop sounding like a pansy-ass little girl,*" Pam said firmly. "You're a fucking hunter. *Act like one.*"

Elena sighed.

*Yes, ma'am.*

He was trying and failing to focus. Specifically on reading one damn page. It was frustrating, reading the same line over and over again. Dean was almost relieved when Anna came outside where he stood by his Baby.

"Hey…you holdin' up?" he asked.

"Trying."

"Yeah…" He knew the feeling.

"A little scared, I guess," she trailed. After a moment, she called his name softly, getting his attention. "I just wanted to thank you."

"For what?" he said, finally giving her his full attention.

"Everything…you guys didn't have to help me," she admitted.

"Hey, let's can the 'thanks for trying,' speech, ya know?" It just made things harder. "Participation trophies suck ass."

"I don't know," she shook her head, confusing him. "Maybe I don't deserve to be saved."

"Hey, don't talk like that—"


"Yeah well," said Dean, looking downward. "We've all done things we've got to pay for."
She leant against the Impala and looked up at him with eyes that were knowing, but comforting. He noted the change in her demeanor with some wariness.

"Dean, I have to tell you something, but you're not going to like it."

"What?"

"I heard the angels talking about a week ago…about what you did in Hell," she said. Her voice was factual, but not condemning. Instead, her hand reached up and rested against his cheek. "I know… but Dean…it wasn't your fault. You should forgive yourself."

Her touch was warm, but something wasn't right. Her hands were soft, but not a soft that he remembered. This was almost feather-light.

*Her left hand reached up and slid through his hair—a caress that was first gentle against his stubbled cheek, her thumb stroking his skin. Dean's eyes closed, to his surprise.*

Dean shook his head and lightly guided her hand away from his face.

"Anna, I…I can't," he said. "I can't talk about it."

And he couldn't do *this*, whatever it was. She seemed a little disappointed, but there was understanding in her eyes.

"I know," she said. "But when you do, there are people who want to help you…you're not alone."

She smiled and looked down for a moment.

"That's all I'm trying to say." After a while, he nodded, but couldn't find the words. She nodded back and stood up before heading back into the barn. Dean would've followed, if not for the revving of an engine in the distance, coming closer. It sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it until a dark blue Camaro came around the corner and parked beside the barn.

He watched Elena get out and lock the car, then walk up to the door. She glanced around and saw him. He knew she did. But she didn't even acknowledge him as whoever was at the door let her in.

*Just great.*

Anna was the first person Elena saw upon walking back through the door, and she didn't waste time on pleasantries.

"I'm sorry I left," she said with a sigh. "It was stupid…"

"You were upset," Anna said, and it didn't surprise Elena that the woman's tone was slightly knowing, but it did bother her a bit.

"Yeah, well…I'm not leaving this time. Not until we finish this, and you're home free."

Anna's mouth quirked upward.

"Not that I have much of a home to get back to, but thanks," she said. "You didn't have to come back…I appreciate it."

"It's okay," Elena said. "I…think I'm gunna lay down and try to get a few hours of sleep while it's still night."
"There's not much furniture in here."

"There's hay," Elena gestured to the pile of hay in the corner. But on second thought, there were probably ticks and other things just as pleasant. "Maybe I'll just lie down in my car."

It was ten in the morning, and Ruby was nowhere to be found.

"Where the hell is she?" Sam wondered aloud. His pacing was beginning to make Elena dizzy.

"She's your Hell buddy," Dean said, taking a sip of whiskey from a silver flask. Anna noticed it once she came in the room.

"A bit early for that," she commented. Dean shrugged.

"It's two in the morning somewhere."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said. Something was off, that was certain to Sam, but he also noticed that Elena didn't even spare his brother a glance.

A wind kicked up outside and stirred leaves that hit the side of the barn. It wasn't long before the doors burst open, making wooden splinters fly. Castiel and Uriel strode in much like before, one with a firm stare, the other slightly smug as usual.

"Hello, Anna," Castiel said. There might have been something akin to regret in his eyes. "It's good to see you."

"How?" Sam asked. "How'd you find us?"

Castiel's gaze flicked to the elder Winchester, who suddenly looked guilty.

"Dean?" said Sam. Dean looked down at Anna with the sincerest of apologies. "Why?"

Anna looked up at Sam.

"Because they gave him a choice. They either kill me, or kill you and Elena," she said. "I know how their minds work."

Her eyes met Dean's again.

"You did the best you could…I forgive you."

Dean looked torn, but he allowed her to step toward the angels.

"Okay. No more tricks," said Anna. "No more running…I'm ready."

"I'm sorry," Castiel said. Anna shook her head.

"No. You're not. Not really," she replied. "You don't know the feeling."

The other angel seemed to consider her words, regard them as the truth.

"Still, we have history…it's just—"

"Orders are orders. I know. Just make it quick."
"Don't you touch a hair on that poor girl's head." The voice came from behind them, and when the humans in the room turned with surprise, they came face to face with Alastair. With him were two other demons, who held up a swaying Ruby between them. Blood soaked the middle of her shirt and she looked abnormally pale.

Uriel stepped forward, and all three hunters plus Anna moved to the side, out of his way. Ruby was thrown to the side, and she scrambled to get out of the way, curling up by bales of hay. As heated words were tossed between angel and demon, Sam and Dean conferred without speaking.

"Turn away now," Castiel warned.

"Sure. Just give us the girl," said Alastair, and with a wink, "We'll make sure she gets punished good and proper."

"You know who we are and what we will do…I won't say it again." The angel stepped forward to side with Uriel. "Leave. Now. Or we'll lay you to waste."

"I think I'll take my chances."

In effect, those were the words that unleashed chaos. Sam, Dean, and Elena watched as Uriel killed the two lesser demons with relative ease. Castiel, however, was surprisingly not powerful enough to kill Alastair with simple touch. Instead, it was the demon who gained the upper hand, and began chanting a spell that seemed to be weakening the angel. Until Dean slapped him in the face with a crowbar.

It didn't do much, but he looked angry. And his focus was on them now.

"Dean, Dean, Dean…you had such promise," he said, and with a gesture of a hand removed the crowbar. "Such potential!"

His hand clenched into a fist, and for the brothers and Elena, it felt as if their organs were being slowly crushed from the inside. Such pain eventually brought them to their knees.

And then Anna screamed for them to shut their eyes.
Anyway You Want It

"Here we stand
Worlds apart
hearts broken in two, two, two
Sleepless nights
Losing ground
I'm reaching for you, you, you
Feelin' that it's gone
Can change your mind
If we can't go on
to survive the tide
love divides,"

—Journey, "Separate Ways (Worlds Apart)"

XVII: Any Way You Want It

Anna was not only able to steal back her Grace, but regain her angel status. By the time the explosion of light from her Grace disappeared, she and Alastair were gone with it, leaving two angels, a demon, and three hunters.

Dean picked up Ruby's knife off the floor and met Castiel's stare.

"Well, what're you guys waiting for?" he asked. "Why don't you get Anna? Unless you're scared."

"This isn't over," Uriel promised, though Castiel held him back from attacking them. Dean smirked.

"It looks over to me, Junkless," he said.

When the angels disappeared, all four of them were relieved. Ruby limped over to them, a deep stain of blood getting larger through her shirt.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked.

"Not so much," she replied wryly.

"What took you so long to get here?" Dean asked. She gave him an incredulous look.

"Sorry I'm late with the fucking demon delivery. I was only being tortured."

Dean nodded, but it wasn't an apology. He wasn't doing that more than once in his life to a demon.

"Well, Sammy. I gotta hand it to you," he said. "Bringin' 'em all in one place, angels and demons? It's a damn good plan."

"Yeah, well... when you've got Godzilla and Mothra on your ass," Sam said with a glance at Ruby, who gave him a small grin, "best to get out of their way and let them fight."

"Ah, now you're just bragging."

The last thing Elena wanted to do was stay, especially after Ruby left. There was nothing to distract
from how tense things still were, though not between her and Sam. He was the one who bribed her with a half-eaten chicken sandwich and a beer, so she wouldn't hit the road on empty. It was a poor excuse and both of them knew it, but because he asked her so earnestly, she caved and let him open a beer for her as the three of them leant against the Impala.

"I can't believe we made it out of there," Dean commented. Sam's reply was a huff of a laugh. Elena remained quiet.

"Again," Sam added. The two took long drags of their beers.

"I know both of your heard him," said Dean. His tone took on more weight, prompting Elena to finally look over at him with thinly veiled interest.

"Who?" Sam asked. Dean looked over at him knowingly.

"Alastair. What he said, about how I had 'promise.'"

"I heard him."

"You're not curious?"

"Dean, I'm damn curious. But you're not talking about Hell," Sam said honestly. "And I'm not pushing."

Elena looked down at the bottle in her hands.

It was a short while before Dean continued, but eventually he let his beer rest on his thigh.

"It wasn't four months, you know."

Confusion was etched on Sam's face.

"What?" he asked.

"It was four months up here, but down there… I don't know. Time's different. It was more like forty years." Sam stilled, and had to shake his head while Elena stiffened next to him.

"My God…" he trailed. He didn't have anything to say, because nothing would make it better or easier for his brother.

"They uh… they sliced and carved, and tore me in ways that you…" Dean had to pause, shake his head and find the words to explain what he'd been through. "'Til there was nothing left."

He inhaled deeply as memory after memory played in his mind.

"Then suddenly, I would be whole again. Like magic. Just so they could start again all over."

Elena felt her heart drop into her stomach, though the rest of her felt hollow. And after what Sam said, the guilt was hard to ignore. It was eating at her along with that emptiness.

This was what she'd been waiting for, what she'd asked for. She'd wanted the truth.

"And Alastair, at the end of every day, every one… he would come and make me an offer," said Dean, now earning both his listener's stares. "To take me off the rack if I put souls on. If I started the torturing."
Dean's mouth quirked in a self-deprecating smile as he said, "And every day, I told him to stick it where the sun shines."

And then the smile was gone.

"For thirty years I told him that." He bit his lip, and his eyes turned glassy. "And then I couldn't anymore, Sammy…I couldn't."

He swallowed past the lump forming in his throat.

"And I got off that rack. God help me, I got right off, and started ripping 'em apart…I lost count of how many souls." The confession was met with silence, but didn't fall on deaf ears by any means. Tears began to fall down his cheeks, and while she hid on her side next to a bleary-eyed Sam, Elena's shoulders silently shook.

"The things that I did to them…" Dean shook his head. He couldn't speak anymore, and couldn't bear looking at them in the eyes and seeing their disgust either. So he closed his in a vain attempt to shut away the tears that kept coming.

"Dean," Sam said, a little shakily. "You…you held out for thirty years…that's more than anyone could've."

"How I feel," Dean grated out, wiping at his eyes. "This…inside me, it's…I wish I couldn't feel anything, Sammy. I wish I couldn't feel a damn thing."

His sobs wracked his body, beginning to shake the car even. His beer was warming in his hands but his insides felt cold, everything inside dust. They'd been turned outside a thousand times until he was bloody and raw. But no amount of torture would ever justify what he did to hundreds of souls himself. People. Guilty people in Hell, but people.

Dean's eyes shot open and met Elena's. She was crying as heavily as he was. But shakily her small hands grasped his left that didn't hold a bottle; held it tight and traced over his knuckles with her fingers. To his shock, she stepped close to him, between his open legs, and clasped his hand to her chest. She closed the remaining space between them until her forehead rested against his chest, just over his pounding heart.

When her tears began to stain his shirt, he let his cheek fall against her hair.

"M sorry," she said weakly, sniffing. Guilt, shame, remorse—words like that didn't cover what she felt. But it was enough to make her feel sick.

Dean squeezed his eyes shut.

"Don't, Lena," he choked.

Against his will, her weeping reminded him of the ones who cried softly, begged for the pain to end…for him to stop. She held a hand that had butchered people the same way he had been.

So he pushed her away gently, but firmly. Dean slipped his hand out of hers and saw the fresh hurt on her face. He shook his head, tears still falling.

I'm worse than a murderer.

"Don't."
She stared at him for a long moment, and he knew she didn't understand.

"Why?" Her voice broke along with something inside him.

"I can't." Elena shook her head.

"You could," she said, with more tears, "if you let yourself. If...if you let me."

Dean was all too aware of Sam watching him. But he realized not everything he'd said to her before was misdirected.

"I can't," he said. She was too forgiving. "Because you won't understand. And in the end...I can't let you."

Her jaw clenched in anger and frustration, and she glared at him.

"It's the same shit over and over."

Dean looked away from her.

"Why won't you let me try?" she asked. After a moment, he looked up and met her gaze.

"I'm not draggin' you down with me." He shook his head. "Not in this."

It was enough to have Sam holding onto him. In some (a lot) of ways, he was keeping Dean afloat just enough to get through the string of near-death experiences that was their lives. For her sake, he'd rather not get used to depending on her.

He ended up losing people like that, one way or another.

By the way she was looking at him, it looked to be now. And that was fine by him, as long as she walked away.

"I don't want you to," said Dean.

Elena paused, incredulous at first.

But her stare slowly turned blank, and she nodded.

Then she wiped at her face and turned around, got in her car and left.

"Where do you wanna go?" Dean asked the next morning while throwing a button-down shirt over a plain black shirt. There was a map he'd placed in front of Sam, but he didn't look all too interested eating the last crumbs of a Chex Mix bag.

"Come on, Sammy. The road's awaitin'," Dean encouraged, slapping his brother on the back. Sam wasn't as amused. Finally Dean sat down across from him at the table, arms crossed on its plastic surface.

"All right, what?"

"Maybe we should head back to Sioux Falls."

"Why? There's plenty of monsters out there that need ganking."

"Dean...don't you think you should at least call her?" Sam asked. The mildly pleasant look on
Dean's face vanished.

"No, I don't."

"Just to make sure she got to Bobby's okay, at least."

"You can call her if you want." Dean got up and got the bag of beef jerky from his bag.

"Dean—"

"Sam," he shook his head. "It's better this way."

Sam had tried to hash this out with Dean before, but as per usual, getting something like this out of him took a lot of patience, especially when it was fresh. He knew Dean felt the absence as much as he did—no Dunkin' Donuts on the counter to wake them up in the morning, no fights for the shower (or at least, not as much), no complaints about how rank the boys’ dirty laundry was getting and no extra pair of hands to help get them patched up after a hunt.

Sam even kind of missed her iPod blasting from the bathroom.

"What makes you so sure?" he asked.

But Dean only glared at him, and went back to looking at the map.

Her steps were slow and heavy crossing the threshold of a house she hadn't lived in for roughly a year. Elena closed and locked the door behind her, dropped her bag, and eased herself onto the floor. She let out a shaking breath that ended in a sob.

Reaching into her pocket, she fished out her phone and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Bobby," she sniffed.

"…What's the matter?" She choked on a laugh.

"A lot."

"Where are you?"

"My house."

"Are you hurt?"

"No," she shook her head, even if he couldn't see it.

"I'll be there in a few hours."

"Where are you?"

"…I was in Vegas…long story."

She smiled a little.

"Okay…thanks, Bobby."
Sam and Dean pulled up to Singer Salvage Yard a day later, tired and in need of showers. Bobby let them in with a peculiar look as they stepped past him into the living room.

"I know, we're a little ripe," said Dean. "We've been driving a while and ganked a few vamps."

"I'll say," the older hunter drawled. "You know where everything is."

A subtle hint that they should take care of that before he broke out Elena's stash of candles, something he would never admit knowing about. Or maybe just some *Febreeze*.

"Thanks, Bobby," Sam said, and made his way to the bathroom with his duffel.

"Thanks for letting us crash," said Dean, taking a seat on the couch.

"It's fine," Bobby said, his eyes roaming the old walls of the living room. "I should just retire and turn the place into a bed and breakfast."

Dean smiled a little, but it faded as he realized something, or rather, who was missing. He was both relieved and…well, not disappointed, but if she wasn't here then she was probably working a job. Maybe alone.

"Elena…she hunting?"

"Went back home…for a little while, at least," said Bobby. "Needs to catch her breath."

Again, despite himself, Dean was relieved. He paused, but eventually asked if Bobby had talked to her. In turn, Bobby leaned against his desk and crossed his arms.

"Yeah. Yesterday."

Dean nodded, then a little hesitantly,

"She okay?"

Bobby sighed and fixed Dean with a pointed look.

"What do you think?"

Dean looked up at the frown on the other hunter's face.

"Her knee, or…"

"You already know what. So why are you askin'?" Dean blanked, taken aback by Bobby's bluntness. Inwardly though, he supposed he should be used to it by now.

"I don't—"

"Oh, let's just cut the bullshit, huh?"

Bobby's stare was unamused, and unyielding. It didn't take long for Dean to get the hint.

"She's better off, Bobby," he said quietly, and looked down at the ground. He prayed Sam hurried up in the bathroom.

"Not sure she thinks of it that way." Finally Dean grew frustrated and sighed, running a hand over his face.
"What is this, Doctor Phil?" he said peevishly. "My turn in the damn chair—"

"She called me the other night cryin' at one in the morning," Bobby snapped. "I only seen this girl cry a handful of times, and never over somethin' petty—"

Bobby's momentum was cut off by one of the landline phones ringing. Before going to answer it, he stood up and looked Dean square in the eyes.

"I understand Dean…I do."

He shook his head as Dean bowed his.

"You think about what the hell it is you want," said Bobby. "Be right and miserable, or go fuckin' talk to my niece."

Elena spent the better part of two days sleeping off the week she'd had. She called the electrical company so she could turn on the air conditioning and the lights in the house. Along with opening all the windows to clear out that musty smell, she called the city to turn her water back on, relying on the now smaller reserve of funds from both her father's retirement pension and her mother's life insurance to pay for what would probably be a small bill for the end of the month.

She didn't know how long she would be here, but she knew after Bobby left her house the day before that the Winchesters were on their way to his place; they'd called him not long before he left.

On the brighter side, she could listen to her records again. Her father's turntable still sat proudly next to a long shelf of books in the living room. The sound of her favorite record crackling as it spun was warm and familiar, wrapping around her like a blanket as she did menial chores around the house.

But considering there was really only canned food and a bag of rice in her pantry, she went to the grocery store, and for the first time in a while didn't buy Chex Mix or Twinkies. Though she did end up buying a Snickers bar and a Twix, even if it reminded her of the lipstick she still hadn't replaced.

She turned off the cable on her TV a long time ago, but there was nothing wrong with the DVD player. Still in the sweatpants and tank top she'd slept in, Elena picked a movie at random and settled on the couch with a basket of clothes and began folding. It was almost too mundane. She thought of washing Sam's putrid socks, and the memory somewhat made her feel better.

The knock at the door startled her a little. She hastily paused the movie and turned off the TV, moved the basket of clothes off the sofa and to the side, and grabbed the gun under one of the cushions before going to the door.

She glanced down and kicked back the corner of the small rug by the door, nodding in approval at the Devil's Trap that was still spray painted there. She smoothed the rug into place and opened the door.
"I've heard talk of blind devotion
Lovers through thick and thin
Lives touched with real emotion
Faithful 'til the bitter end
So many nights in blind confusion...
We reach out in disillusion
When one night isn't nearly enough."

—Survivor, "Is This Love"

XVIII: Trial by Fire

"Hey."

Dean Winchester stood on her porch.

Elena blinked.

"What are you doing here?" It was neither kind nor cold, but she was genuinely confused.

"Can we talk?" he asked, nodding toward inside the house. His mouth hinted at a smile, but his eyes were as weighted as his shoulders hefting his father's leather jacket against November wind. She set the gun down on a small table next to the door and crossed her arms at the chill hitting her.

"You were pretty clear last time."

"I…I'm not very good at this sort of thing."

"Human emotions?" she asked. His half-smile flickered into a small grin.

"Yeah, that."

Elena hummed in agreement. She knew how hard he had it, all the shit he shouldn't have to deal with, including angels with some grand master plan for him. She understood. And maybe she had pried too much, pushed him too hard when he needed his space. That much she could take responsibility for. But at the same time, there was only so much she could take.

"Look, um…" Elena leant against the doorway and ran a hand through her disheveled hair. She felt like such a mess. In fact, this was probably the most unattractive she'd ever been in front of him (at least after hunts she was a mess for a reason). Yet he was still here.

Still, she was particularly blunt when she said, "I'm kind of tired of having things thrown in my face."

"I know," he said. "And I'm sorry…for all the things I said. I was…"

He sighed and ran a hand over his face.

"It was a dick move, but I uh…" Dean sighed again. "I haven't exactly had a whole lot of good things in my life. And now I guess I don't deserve what I do have."

"…So what are you saying exactly?" she asked.
"I'm sayin'…good things usually get taken away from me, and…" He looked up at her then, and she finally saw the dead sincerity in his eyes. "I didn't want you to be one of 'em."

She hid her sadness under a blank stare. If the fact that he made the drive over here by himself said anything, the guilt she read in his eyes was enough to convince her that he meant every word. And maybe she was tired of being both angry and guilty.

"So what's changed then?" asked Elena. He paused, reluctant to answer. She could see it in the shift of his gaze.

"I won't push you anymore, Dean," she said. "But you tell me what you want from me or…just go."

She read the surprise (and a little pain) in his eyes and wanted to sigh. It wasn't her intention to hurt him, but unless he made it clear what he wanted, she couldn't allow herself to invite him inside, let alone leave with him, if that's what he was aiming for. She couldn't allow herself to break down and tell him how hard she wished he could stop carrying so much damn guilt, that he still deserved the people who love him.

Elena cared about him, more than she should. But she wasn't about to tell him that either.

"Why did you come here?" she sighed, and leant on the doorframe as he studied the ground, hands in his pockets. Eventually he looked up at her.

"Wanted to say I'm sorry," he said, "For what I said and…for what I've been doin', treating you like that."

His stance shifted a bit on the edge of the porch, near the steps. He was giving her space, she realized. At first he'd been close to the door, earnest at the prospect of coming inside the house to talk. But now Elena was sure he thought she was finished with him. That he was okay with it, willing to let her go if she asked him to…it said more than anything else.

"I never wanted anything from you," said Dean. His green eyes bore into hers, the sincerity there rendering her unable to reply. "But you kept givin' it anyway, helping me and Sam, dealing with our problems…I didn't want all our shit to be on you like that."

It was his turn to sigh, and she still didn't know what to say. So he surprised her by being more real with her than he'd ever been, more than that afternoon drinking beer by the Impala.

"I didn't know you'd be one of those good things," he said, a ghost of a smile tugging at his lips, "I don't wanna be without."

Elena crossed her arms again, considering. Because damn it all, that was the right thing to say.

She let out the breath that had been trapped in her lungs without her permission.

"Okay."

He raised a brow at her response.

"…Okay?"

We're okay? his eyes seemed to ask.

"Yeah," she said, finally cracking a small smile and relenting from the cool way she'd been handling his appearance on her doorstep.
His eyes met hers.

"Can I come in?"

After a brief pause in which she regarded him with a guarded expression, she eventually let the door swing open, but turned away from him to move farther into the house. Dean ventured after her into the living room, watched her stop in front of the long coffee table against the wall where several pictures sat in their frames, not one alike from the other. He followed the path of her eyes to one; a toddler, four at most, with dark hair and light brown eyes and a smile that lit up the entire photo.

Her fingers brushed the edge of that frame, but withdrew immediately, instead ghosting over to the wooden corners of a wooden turntable. It was familiar to Dean.

"I brought this from back home. This was my dad's, back in the sixties," she said with her back turned to him. "But the records are mine. Especially this one."

"You were listening to it, weren't you?" he asked. Her hand stilled, and her head turned a little in his direction, even though her back was still facing him.

"To what?"

Dean face was thoughtful, though Elena couldn't see it. He picked up the record case and flipped it a little in his fingers. It was worn, but one of the few of her collection that he could see wasn't dusty. He skimmed the track list below the bolded album title *Storm Front*, and found what he was looking for at the very last.

10. **AND SO IT GOES**

A moment of indecision and he was removing the vinyl and carefully placing it inside the turntable. It began to crackle with life after pressing a few buttons and skipping through the tracks. Simple, gentle chords filled the room.

As the beginning lyrics played, Dean watched Elena cross one arm, the other resting on top, with her fingers loosely over her mouth.

"So are you telling me you like to dance?" Dean asked, raising his brows. Elena shook her head wryly.

"I always wished I could," she admitted.

He didn't know why he did it, would probably never know. But he knew he needed to do something. "Sorry," he knew, was never enough. Nothing he could say would be enough, because he just didn't have the words. Even then, Dean never thought he'd be willing to embarrass himself this much. But before he could stop himself and back the hell off, at the risk of her flinching away from him, he reached out for her hand and gently pulled her around to face him. To cover his own discomfort and uncertainty, he grinned a little at her shocked expression as he laid a hand along the curve of her waist.

She knew that grin—usually a little quirked and seemingly innocent, always so insufferably endearing. It got her every time.

"What are you doing?" she breathed, though her fingers curled over his.

"You always wanted to dance, right?"
"Right now?" she asked incredulously. Again with that stupid, crooked smile.

"Why not?"

"Have you ever danced before?"

"…No," he confessed. "So there's no way you'll be worse than me."

A small smile finally began tugging at her lips as she looked up at him. Her hand came to rest on his shoulder. They were supposed to be talking, maybe over some beers to clear her head, not…this. He still hadn't even taken off his jacket and she was still in, essentially, her pajamas.

But to her relief, Dean started small, swaying them slowly from side to side. He didn't think he could manage much else. Billy Joel's poetry played in the background.

"I spoke to you in cautious tones, you answered me with no pretense…"

"You know," Dean said quietly, "You do the same thing I do—keep things in…try not to let anyone see how you're dealing with a ton of shit."

Her gaze didn't leave his shoulder, but her expression became resigned.

"I guess that makes me a hypocrite then," she said. "I know. It's easier that way, to pretend it doesn't hurt. Sometimes I can't…sometimes you can't either."

His hand curled around her, splaying against the small of her back. It brought her closer without him having to respond.

"And still I feel I said too much…my silence is my self defense."

They shuffled in small steps now, but her heart was beating so fast. Though being here, in his arms, it calmed her. She was still wary—confused really, and unsure of his intentions.

"Dean…"

"Hmm?"

She looked up at him, into his eyes that were soft for her. Maybe even fond. She wanted to just say it, like she got it out when they were on her porch…but there was a part of her that was afraid. Still the record spun.

"But if my silence made you leave, then that would be my worst mistake…"

"Why…" Elena trailed, and licked her dry lips. Dean's eyes followed the motion for a second, but focused back on her face.

"Why what?" he asked.

"So I will share this room with you…and you can have this heart to break."

"Is this…is this for real?" Her eyes lowered, avoiding his. But as much as she tried to mask it, he saw the vulnerability in her eyes, in the tentativeness of her touch. He fought a smile.

"So I would choose to be with you…"

"This?" he repeated. "What about it?"
"That's if the choice were mine to make…"

Elena restrained a frustrated sigh. Goddamn him. He knew it was hard for her as it was for him to talk about this kind of shit.

"Whatever this is between us…do you actually want me?"

"But you can make decisions too…"

Dean looked down at her and frowned a bit at her tone. It was hard for him to believe it came as such a surprise to her after everything that had already happened, not to mention what they were doing now. Or maybe it wasn't surprise. Maybe she was just trying to get the truth out of him, like so many trial and error attempts of before. It had taken a while, he could admit, but he had a pretty good idea now—how Elena Hayes somehow got herself wedged under his skin.

Dean couldn't really put it all into words. He wanted her to fight him for the music in the car, even if it drove him insane. He wanted her to tease him about his simple love of pie and laugh at his jokes when Sam just rolled his eyes. And even if he didn't always want it, he knew he needed her and Sam to push him for the truth and listen when he was ready to give it. Really, he just wanted her there.

So the hardest thing, he guessed, was realizing he didn't want her for just a night, even if that truth would one day come to bite both of them in the ass.

But right now she had her hair thrown up in a bun. She was wearing the oldest pair of pants she owned and only wore on laundry days, and a navy shirt that was too big to be hers. Dean knew because he'd been looking for it yesterday. He also knew there were curves hiding under those sweats. They were pressing against him.

Right now, he really just wanted to kiss her.

Dean brought the hand he held to rest against his shoulder and used the motion to bring her closer.

"Why wouldn't I?" he asked.

"And you can have this heart to break."

Elena's eyes widened marginally, but he didn't give her a chance to think too hard on his words. He was too close for her to concentrate on them, but while his lips descended on hers she couldn't help but think he enjoyed catching her by surprise.

His hands gripped her waist as hers slid up to his neck, pulling him down to her even as he pressed her up to him. Her fingers curled into his hair as his mouth slanted against hers, hot and greedy with tongues teasing at one another.

"And so it goes…and so it goes…"

Dean's hand slid into her long hair, cradled the back of her head as her heels lifted off the ground. The pads of her feet were just able to touch down. He liked how soft those curves were against him. Her heart thudding against his, how she responded to his every touch by giving into it or matching it with one of her own that set his skin on fire.

Running a hand through the length of her hair after he pulled it from its bun, Dean finally set her down and pulled away just enough to see her gray eyes, turned slate. He'd seen them darken like that before, but they didn't have the hard edge they had when she was angry. They were still cloudy and warm. Her lips already swollen and still slightly parted.
"And you're the only one who knows."

He kissed her again as the melody slowed, more deliberate. The press of his fingertips eased and stroked the curve of her hip and lower back, while her hands drifted from their tense grip to tender touches against his cheeks and jaw line. The record had stopped by now, but neither of them really noticed.

"Dean?" Her voice was soft and questioning, her lips close enough to brush his.

"Yeah?"

"I missed you, you know. When you were gone." Dean's gaze softened as hers became a bit glassy. "Sam and I tried everything…and I thought you were never coming back."

Elena didn't have to prove it to him. It just reminded him of why this was probably a bad idea. He never thought he would be at a point of starting something even vaguely serious. But he couldn't ignore it. He couldn't ignore her. He'd tried.

"I know."

"I'm sorry I gave up."

"No, Lena," he shook his head. "Don't."

His fingers brushed the back of her neck as he murmured, "Like I said—well, what I said before…I was being an ass."

Her short laugh caught in her throat. She blinked in attempt to dissipate the sting behind her eyelids. "You were stressed, and I was prying when I shouldn't have," she said. "…Can't say I haven't been pissy either."

Dean grinned a bit and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, but I kinda like it when you're pissy." She smirked and let her hands fall gently to his chest. Her right rested over his heart while the left toyed with the buttons of his plaid shirt. "You and Sam have the same bitchface."

She guffawed and aimed to smack him playfully, but he only laughed and caught her hand, tugging Elena close when she tried to back away. His other hand probed at her sides, which elicited involuntary giggles while she tried to squirm out of his grip.

"Let go!" she protested through her somewhat girlish flailing, but he only laughed and caught her hand, tugging Elena close when she tried to back away. His other hand probed at her sides, which elicited involuntary giggles while she tried to squirm out of his grip.

"Let go!" she protested through her somewhat girlish flailing, but he was merciless and hooked an arm around her waist. He brought her back flush against his chest as his fingers danced along her ribs. Her laughter turned into a squeal when he lifted her off the ground and deposited her onto the couch in a jumbled heap. She gasped for breath and flung her hair away from her face just in time for her to see Dean coming to join her.

Elena had to press herself against the back cushion as he nudged her over, and she ended up half lying on top of him. He'd effectively pinned her against his side. She laughed and pushed his teasing fingers away. Eventually though, Dean gave her time to catch her breath and relaxed his grip loosely around her waist. His grin was wide and so very Dean, it made her smile looking down on him. His green eyes shone with real laughter for the first time in a while, and now with affection as he caught her studying him.
Those eyes, they were so damn expressive.

"You know…before all this, you're one of my best friends," she admitted. He raised a brow.

"You have more than one?" he teased, and she gave him a peeved look before a contemplative smirk to cover her nervousness. Actual honest-to-God, non-platonic feelings had blind-sighted her. She really didn't know what to expect from him, or from herself for that matter.

"Well, there's you, Sam, Val…where is Sam by the way?" she asked curiously. "You leave him stranded at some motel by himself?"

"Dropped him off at Bobby's," Dean grinned. "Nothing he's never dealt with before."

She shook her head, smiling.

"Poor guy—"

Dean silenced her with a kiss that left her a bit breathless.

"He'll be fine." He could tell she was nervous, even if he didn't really know why. Though now he had an effective way to snap her out of it. Elena smiled, a tinge of red on her cheeks betraying her embarrassment. It only made his grin widen.

"You're so worried, I can tell," she whispered, and leaned down to press a chaste kiss against his lips, one that he continued and deepened. His fingers slid under the hem of her tank top and ran along her back, causing a pleasant chill up her spine as they brushed her bra strap. She began undoing the top buttons of his shirt, lightly teasing with her nails through his undershirt in a way that almost gave him a shiver. Once half the buttons were undone, however, he hesitated, slowing their kiss until she broke it.

"What's wrong?" she asked. He searched her gaze and read the concern there, and maybe some lingering vulnerability. Him stopping probably wasn't helping her nerves. It was admittedly out of character for him, but he had to know.

"Are you sure?" he said. She paused, confused. "About this—you and me."

"What's wrong, Dean?" she repeated. Because she saw it in his eyes—the doubt.

"It's just…you sure you know what you're getting into?" he asked. His eyes met hers straight and serious. "It's probably gunna be rough. Dealing with me, ya know?"

He didn't have the best habits. Not very good luck. Worse enemies, if that was possible.

"I've been around you long enough to know what I'm getting," Elena said, though she smiled. As if the day before wasn't any indication. He still wasn't so sure. She caught it and her smile diminished.

"Tell me the real problem." There was something else he wasn't saying. If they weren't more honest with each other, this was never going to work.

Eventually, he sighed and averted his eyes, though his hands remained at her waist.

"I'm…" Dean shook his head and started over. "You deserve more."

Her eyes softened, a frown marring her face.

"What is it that I deserve, Dean?" He didn't feel like delving into all the ways he felt himself
inadequate, all the things a less damaged man would be able to give her.

"Better." And she knew that summed up the weight of everything he couldn't say, but she knew he felt.

"Better?" she asked. He didn't meet her gaze. It broke her heart that he didn't think he was worth taking a chance on, even when she herself was more than a little skewed. Maybe, one day, she could be more than just what he wanted.

"Do you want to be?"

Dean considered it, where he was now in her living room. How he had never danced (not like this) with anyone, but he had for her. And she had let him hold her and sway them to her favorite song. She knew who he was, who he'd been, how he had changed, and still wanted this. He did too.

"I wanna try."

She smiled a bit at that.

"Then try."

He nodded and kissed her again. It was like picking up from where they'd left off, but this time, there were no interruptions. He lifted them up from the couch and, with her legs wrapped around his waist, carried her into the master bedroom. Laying her down on the bed, it became a battle of wills for the top as Dean was surprised by Elena's playfulness, her nervousness gone, and found himself lying on his back after some dirty moves on her end (she called the minor tickling "payback").

His strong hands slid over the cotton covering her thighs and slid the fabric down. Her fingers deftly undid the rest of the buttons of green plaid, but she sighed in frustration at the undershirt he wore. He chuckled and helped her pull it over his head.

She continued their heated kisses, eventually trailing down his neck, below his ear and down the curve of his shoulder as Dean gripped her waist, sliding his hands down her sides and up her back. But then she paused, pulling away just enough for him to see her face.

Dean watched the playfulness on her features fade as she touched the burn mark on his arm, tentatively. Her eyes were sad, and he knew she was remembering the months he was gone, and probably considering what the mark meant. If the past few days were anything to go by, their lives were about to get a lot more complicated.

But he slid his hand into her loose hair and down her back in a soothing gesture.

_I'm not going anywhere now._

For Dean, the handprint was a reminded of Hell, and everything he'd suffered. He couldn't look at it without remembering his shame.

To his surprise, Elena curled her arm around his shoulder, bringing him closer, and leant down to press her lips over the mark, gently. Then her eyes met his, and she kissed him, conveying all she wanted to say.

It was eleven at night, and though he was trying to sleep, he knew it wasn't going to happen. Sleeping this early hadn't worked for Sam since he was in college and on a daily routine of getting up early for school, studying, and going to sleep so it could start all over again the next day.
At least here at Bobby's it was more comfortable than in a no-name motel. But eventually he had to sit up in bed with his laptop, just checking emails and browsing through news clips and articles. Until a yellow icon flashed at the bottom of the screen.

Sam clicked on the Skype chat notification and subconsciously smiled.

**Sarah JB:** Hey you

**Sam W83:** Hey, whatcha doin?  

**Sarah JB:** Literally watching the paint dry.

**Sam W83:** Babysitting a painting?

**Sarah JB:** I have no life.

Sam smiled. He forgot she was usually online around this time.

**Sam W83:** What's it for?

**Sarah JB:** Big exhibitions my dad is doing in Illinois, Wisconsin and South Dakota. We just got out of Wisconsin yesterday.

Sam paused and fought down a fleeting surge of…something.

**Sam W83:** Where in South Dakota?
Daydream

"Movin' sweet, so simple
Takin' time to say
The way to being, to being simple
Never felt this way,"

—Journey, "Sweet and Simple"

XIX: Daydream

The problem with birds? They wake up too early in the fucking morning.

She wouldn't have stirred, eyes opening blearily only to squeeze shut against the sunlight filtering through the window, if not for the birds perched on the roof and chirping loudly. Instead of welcoming the new day, she retreated further toward the bare shoulder supporting her head. She heard when Dean's breathing changed from slow and even sleep to the shorter patterns of consciousness.

What she didn't see was his eyes opening sleepily and taking in the sight of her burrowing into his chest to avoid the light. Or the small smile of amusement that he didn't realize he was making until his surroundings registered, triggering his memories of the night before to surface.

He shifted, bringing her closer and letting his head rest on top of hers. The digital clock on the nightstand read 10:36 a.m. Had they really slept that late? Mentally he counted back the hours from when he must have fallen asleep.

Well, shit.

Roughly seven hours.

He hadn't had five since…well, a while.

Dean looked down at the hand that came to rest on his chest and covered it with his own, absently stroking her wrist with his thumb. And he was…relaxed? There was no other word for it that he could think of. Not one muscle in his body was tense.

Elena breathed a contented sigh and gave up on returning back to sleep now that both of them were awake. Her face eased into a gentle smile at seeing him like this. His green eyes were calm and bright instead of the hard edge she'd seen so much of recently.

The arm under her head moved downward, inviting her to rest more comfortably against his chest as his arm curled around her waist. She enjoyed the feel of his heavy hand splayed on her lower back with his thumb smoothing circles against her skin. Elena's eyes closed as she breathed against him and she felt a kiss on her forehead.

"What time is it?" she murmured.

"Close to 10:40."

"Damn."

His hum of agreement rumbled through her and she couldn't help but smile through her surprise.
Elena was a light sleeper at best. Though she detested mornings, her body usually wouldn't let her sleep past eight. And she knew Dean was much the same way.

"You want coffee?" she offered.

"Don't wanna get up."

She didn't want to either, and from the strength of his hold on her, neither did he.

"I haven't slept that good in forever." Since before her mom died. When her world was still safe, and wasn't tainted with the knowledge a teenager trying to survive high school shouldn't have. Of magic and true evil and things worse than death.

"I couldn't tell you," said Dean, speaking for himself. When he leaned back a bit to see her face, he grinned slightly, "but this is shaping up to be a good morning."

And then another, less welcome thought hit her.

Normally, he wouldn't be doing this.

She knew Dean Winchester. If Elena was a girl he'd just met the night before, he would've been gone long before coffee could even be an idea. But the fact that he was still here allowed her to push the thought away.

For a little while they were content to lie there comfortably. And for once she didn't mind the silence of the house, simply relaxing and enjoying the warmth of the bed and a rare careless morning. Until Elena caught the pensive look on his face.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

He glanced down at her and their entwined fingers half covering his anti-possession tattoo.

"That I've solved the mystery of where your tat is."

Elena laughed and felt the hand at her side slide down to her hip. "I don't think that was worth my penny," she teased.

His fingers brushed a bit low on her waistline, where he now knew was a star surrounded by a sun etched in black ink. Her body responded accordingly, leaning into his touch. She looked up at him and bit her lip.

"But you seemed a bit more deep in thought than that," she said, meeting his gaze knowingly.

It took him a moment to answer, debating whether he should say fully. But last night he knew he'd made a promise…to be better.

"I don't think I've been this laid back in a long time." He paused, and she waited for him to continue, because she knew that wasn't all that was on his mind. "What happens next?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you and me…I've never really gotten this far."

That surprised her. Not what he said, exactly, but that he said it. Dean, who would rather make up something on the fly than plan anything past his next meal and his next drink. He was asking her
how they moved on from here.

"We'll make it up as we go along, I guess," she said with a smile. Sometimes planning was a bad idea. Considering she didn't know the answer. "But for now…I think breakfast would be good."

Dean smiled, but he threw her an expectant look.

"You wanna tell me what you were thinking?"

It surprised her a little that he'd read her so well, but it really shouldn't have. He was far more perceptive than people gave him credit for.

"Same as you. If all our mornings are like this…"

"Makes you wonder why we didn't get to it sooner," said Dean, a smirk in his voice. But her amusement faded when he added, "But that's not it, is it?"

*Can't con the conman,* she thought ruefully, even if she hadn't been trying all that hard to avoid the question.

She let out a long breath, trailing the pads of her fingers against his warm skin. Now more than ever she was consciously aware of the arms that held her bare body close to him and his ankle caught between hers. She was at her most vulnerable now as she had been while Jack lay dead in front of her. Dean held her even as she was covered in her father's blood. He was here and holding her now because he cared about her, and he *wanted* this, and that was hard for her to swallow.

"I feel safe," she admitted, her voice quiet. Naked and sleepy in a dingy little house, she couldn't be more at ease. It took Dean a while to answer, but he looked down at her with disbelief in his eyes.

"…How's that possible?" he couldn't help but ask. After what he'd told her, after everything he'd done…

But she shrugged.

"I haven't since a man broke into this house when I was ten," she said. "It was just me and my mom, and I…I took one of my dad's guns for the first time."

Well, the first time she'd held one with the intention of using it.

Dean's hold tightened marginally, but he listened in silence.

"He probably wanted to steal the TV or any valuables, but I shot him in the shoulder before he got a chance. I took him by surprise. By the time my mom called the police he was stumbling out the door." Elena sighed. "My dad was scared shitless when he got home that night, thought it had been some kind of monster when he saw the front door broken and hanging open."

"You knew already?" asked Dean. "About everything?"

Her look turned wry.

"No. But that night I found out. He was talking to my mom about a shapeshifter in the town next to ours and hadn't realized I'd heard. When he caught me listening he knew I was too curious for my own good. He had to sit me down give 'the talk.'"

His gaze on her was sympathetic; ten years old was young, and he had been younger. She smiled sadly. "After that, I couldn't lay back and relax. Not really."
"And now?" he asked, a little hesitantly.

"I guess you just have that effect on me," she teased, her smile turning more genuine.

"Hell if I know," he said gruffly, but his eyes spoke of affection, and deeper emotions she couldn't altogether make out.

"I dunno. I feel like pancakes though. You?"

Sam walked into the gallery, trying for all he was worth to seem like he belonged there. Adjusting his tie, he passed through the entrance with a small crowd, blending into the isles of paintings seamlessly. It made it easier that this was an open exhibition rather than a smaller, private one. Like last time.

He cleared his throat and fixed his tie again, even though it didn't need fixing.

Sam hadn't seen Sarah Blake in almost four years.

To distract himself he studied the paintings around him, though he couldn't focus very well. They were nice, sure, but he could really care less—especially when he caught the floating sound of Sarah's voice.

Really, he shouldn't be here. Sam had no right to drag her into his life again with what he and Dean were dealing with. Really, he should be trying to hunt down Lilith now that he had some time to focus. For a second he debated escaping through the side door. Few would notice, and it would save him the—

"Sam?"

He stilled.

"Sam, you're actually here?" Sarah laughed, and he turned to face her with a smile that became more genuine when he saw her pleasant expression. She hadn't changed much; her long brown hair was loose around her, though she wore professional grey slacks and a blue blouse underneath a jacket.

"Yeah," Sam laughed with her. "I was in Sioux Falls when you told me you were coming out here…"

He looked glanced at the ground before meeting her blue eyes with his hazel.

"I thought it was high time I came to see you," he said. She beamed up at him and crossed her arms.

"Well, you came at the perfect time."

Sam looked around; the place was still pretty full and bustling.

"You sure? Looks pretty packed to me." She smirked and leaned toward him conspiratorially.

"My dad is about to take them all to the back room where the more expensive pieces are, then we'll make our grand escape," she winked, and began slowly making her way down the aisle, as if admiring the paintings. He grinned a bit and played along, falling into step with her.

"Oh? And where are we going?"

"That'd suck the fun out of it," she said so matter-of-factly that it made him chuckle.
"I have a rental car parked in the front," he said.

"Oh no," she shook her head. "We're going in my car."

"What, that busted up Volvo you used to drive?"

"No, smartass." She rolled her eyes, though a smile played at her lips. "I got a convertible."

He laughed, but walked with her until her father addressed the entire gallery of people and directed them to the second room. Sam followed Sarah out the back door instead, over to a cherry red Volkswagen Beetle. He tossed her a knowing look.

"Cute," he commented.

"His name's Wilbur."

"Like the pig?"

"No, like the theater." Sam's expression turned to one of confusion, until he remembered the famous Wilbur Theatre in Boston, Massachusetts. Though he was confused again when she started laughing.

"Of course, like the pig," she said, shaking her head. "Get in, geek."

He raised a brow, but grinned, despite himself, and got in the passenger side. Sarah threw her business casual grey jacket into the backseat and reversed the car fast enough for the tires to squeak, startling him a little. Sarah looked over at him with wide eyes, a blush staining her cheeks that said she didn't mean to do that.

His mouth tugged into another smile and it was his turn to wink at her.

"Good to know I still have that effect on you," he teased. She rolled her eyes, but her face was still a pretty red as they turned onto the road toward the city.

Sam hadn't seen Sarah Blake in almost four years, and she seemed happier than he remembered. She could still make him smile.

Dean could hear her humming in the kitchen as he toweled off his wet hair. It was off-tune, but better than his own warbling to the radio at any rate. Except in the shower. Everything sounded better in the shower.

The smell of whatever she was making had his mouth watering though. So clad in only a towel, he made his way out of the bedroom and stayed by the hall for a moment, content to watch Elena pour batter onto a wide pan. The radio sitting on the windowsill played Loverboy's cheesy 80s reverb at a moderate volume.

"Everybody's workin' for the weekend…everybody wants a new romance."

Her body swaying was the only part of her in rhythm, but she lip-synched into the spatula (or makeshift microphone) in her hand, until she had to use it to flip the chocolate chip pancakes.

"Everybody's goin' off the deep end…everybody needs a second chance, oh—"

Dean stepped behind her and grabbed Elena by the waist, despite her small shriek. When she realized it was him she tried turning in his grip.
"Why. Do you always. Have to. Sneak up—on—me!" she exclaimed, using her spatula to punctuate her words. He only laughed, but did try to fend her off.

"They're burning!" he pointed out. She gasped and turned around to very much not burnt pancakes. Elena sighed and turned around with the intention of informing him exactly what constituted as burnt. But his hands snaked around her waist and he stole a kiss.

"Mm, someone stuck their finger in the batter," he commented, then licked his lips. "And dug into the chocolate chips."

"If you don't let me go, they're really going to get burnt." Her small grin was knowing, his was passive. "Don't tell me sex is surpassing your stomach after last night."

"Food runs a close second," he said, until his grin turned slightly wicked. "But who says they have to be separate."

She wrinkled her nose.

"Pancakes though? The syrup would be all sticky." He gave her a disappointed look.

"Don't tell me your OCD extends to sex too." Again, she rolled her eyes, but a grin tugged at her mouth.

"I'm willing to try anything once, but that just seems counterintuitive."

He thought about it.

"Touché."

He'd file that "willing to try anything once" comment for future reference, though.

She disentangled herself from him long enough to take those pancakes off the pan and make the rest of the batter. The wooden spoon in the mixing bowl was useful for whacking Dean's thieving hands.

"If you keep eating those chocolate chips I'm not making any cookies later," she warned. He perked up at that.

"Cookies?"

"Either that or the broccoli and squash I bought yesterday."

He dropped the contents of his hand back into the bag with a look of distaste.

"What do you want to do today?" she asked, flipping the pancakes over. He leant against the counter and crossed his arms.

"I should probably call Sammy, see how bored he's getting over at Bobby's," Dean trailed, but he did catch the small flicker of disappointment on her face.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she shook her head. Dean raised his brows and pushed off the counter. His hands found her waist and he bent near her ear.

"You suck at lying, just FYI." Elena's eyes slid over to his blandly, and he grinned. She sighed.
"You want to find a case?" she asked.

"Eventually," he allowed. "But it doesn't have to be right now."

"M'kay," she hummed. "You should probably get dressed. These are done."

"You're not dressed either," he pointed out.

"I'm wearing a robe. You're wearing a towel."

"And to think, I thought I was seducing you." She masked her surprise well at the heavy innuendo being whispered in her ear. Well, it wasn't surprising in and of itself, but Dean working his charm on her as she'd seen him do to so many other women was…it was going to take some getting used to. But she could see why they all fell for it.

Once she got over her blush, her eyes slid to his again as her mouth tugged into a flirtatious smile.

"Maybe I just don't want to kick off the morning with an empty stomach."

He raised a brow and held up a finger.

"I'll be back. I think my pants are under the bed somewhere."

Sam had never seen so much junk in one store.

Apparently it was famous for its antiques, but he didn't see how ceramic kissing frogs and hearts made out of barbed wire counted as antiques. Sarah didn't seem to mind though. She browsed through each isle and stopped to point out things that amused her. The obnoxious neon headshot of David Bowie on a canvas was a personal favorite of hers.

On one shelf there was a whole row of clay angels wearing intricately drawn robes and almost comically small wings. Their faces were simplistic, but looked somewhat like cartoon characters. The sight of them made something in his stomach twist.

His perception of them had been very different once, naïve maybe. Who was he to think that angels were benevolent—that they actually cared about humanity? About him. Who was he to think that there could still be someone that wouldn't look down at him? Like he was some kind of monster.

"Sam," Sarah prodded in a whisper, "That guy has a puppy."

He looked up to where she was gesturing, and sure enough, there was an older man, probably in his sixties, by the cash register with a leash looped around his wrist. Tucked under his arm was a golden retriever puppy eyeing everything in the store and sniffing at people as they walked by. Sam slid his gaze over to Sarah.

"You want to go pet him or the puppy?"

She gave him a peeved look.

"Go on," he laughed, and was content to watch her greet the man and ask permission before stroking the retriever's head. She then beamed over at him and gestured for him to come over. Despite himself, Sam moved to her side and exchanged pleasantries with the man, who introduced himself as Bern McKinley. Meanwhile, his retriever whined at Sam until he gently began petting the dog's head. It couldn't really be helped; he was a sucker for dogs.
"That's a sign she likes you right off the bat," said Bern wryly. "They're needy things—somehow manage to grab you by the heart with one look of them eyes."

"What's her name?" Sam asked, and smiled when the puppy began licking his fingers.

"Maya," he said. "My granddaughter named her."

"She's so sweet," Sarah cooed, smoothing down the fur on Maya's paws with a finger that they batted at playfully.

"You two vacationing?" asked Bern. Sam and Sarah glanced at each other.

"Sort of," Sarah answered. "I'm in town with my father on business, but we felt like getting some air, seeing the city."

What she hadn't told Sam until after they'd driven away from the gallery was that her dad already knew she had plans to see a friend that day. Her father reluctantly agreed to it, since she'd been working so hard, but he would really need her tomorrow for the rest of the exhibition.

"Parts of it are a sight to see, I suppose," Bern nodded. "Never gunna get better baked goods than that one bakery down the road here."

"Oh really?" she asked. "Where is it?"

Bern gave her approximate directions down the road and to the right, just around the corner from where they were. They thanked him and decided to take his advice, but before they left the store, Sam turned at the door.

"Hey, Bern," he called, and the old man looked over with a pleasant smile. "Do they have any pie, by any chance?"

Bern pondered it for a moment.

"Think so. But probably just your basic apple, cherry, maybe blueberry."

"That's perfect, thanks."

Sarah gave him a questioning look when they were outside, making their way down the sidewalk.

"You have a thing for pie, or something?"

He smiled a little to himself.

"Or something."

If (when) Dean found out Sam spent money renting a car and left Sioux Falls for this, when he and Dean could've made the trip together (and saved the cost of the motel room he'd probably need tonight), any words Dean would have for him could be drowned out by a slice each of his top three favorite pies.

It was strange spending a day like this. Breakfast that was actually cooked with ingredients that weren't out of a bottle or frozen first. A movie…well, half of a movie before someone started getting handsy. But really, who was Dean to stop her?

They'd slept an hour into the afternoon after that, and Dean had never felt lazier for looking at a
clock that read 2:15 in the afternoon. But for the second time that day he'd woken up next to someone he knew, and who more than remembered his name.

She washed his clothes and he washed the pile of dishes in the sink, and they played cards while listening to Zeppelin on the record player, and there was something weird about the whole thing if he thought too hard on it.

"You want a sandwich?" Elena asked. "I'm getting kind of hungry."

"Sure," he said, and put his hand of cards down. She got up and made her way over to the refrigerator.

"There's ham and cheese…salami I think."

"Sounds good," he nodded. "Though don't go makin' a mess in there after I just wiped everything down."

Her hand came to her hip as her expression turned sardonic.

"Not so nice is it," she remarked, "cleaning up after yourself?"

Dean rolled his eyes.

"It's not like you're my slave," he retorted. "I pick up after myself. And Sam, occasionally."

She snorted and pulled out a loaf of bread.

"Mayo?"

"And mustard."

She wrinkled her nose, but pulled out a bottle of mustard and only put it on his slices. They ate and talked through the other half of the movie they started that morning, and it wasn't long hours of research and nonstop driving or dealing with anything ugly or bloody. And then the word finally came to him while doing the second round of dishes as the credits rolled down the TV screen.

It was strangely domestic.

Elena took chocolate chip muffins out of the oven and waved her oven mitt over the top, making the room smell like the sugar rush he was sure to have after the half dozen he was about to eat.

Maybe a little domestic wasn't the worst thing that could happen.

Bobby was sick of the goddamn mess that was his house.

Those boys had come tearing through as usual, leaving behind a wake of beer bottles and paper plates and open books, although they were good about putting away the bed sheets they used. Messes never used to bother him before. Not physical messes anyway. Leave it to a woman to turn everything in his life backwards.

But then again, before this year he hadn't had a woman in his life for a very long time.

He swept trash into a black bag, but when one of the phones started ringing, he decided to leave the rest for later.
"Yeah?" The voice on the other end of the line grated on his ear, but he restrained the urge to emit a longsuffering sigh.

"Did you test for silver?" he asked. The reply was a hesitant positive.

"Did you or didn't you?"

Bobby sat down heavily at his desk.

"Then go do it, Garth! I'm not your damn babysitter."

The third phone rang mere seconds after he hung up the second one, and it was times like these where he wished "tedious secretary shit" wasn't part of his job description.

"What?" he snapped.

"Someone's having a rough day."

Bobby rolled his eyes.

"What'cha got, Rufus."

"Demon activity, been croppin' up more than usual," he said. "Any chance it's got somethin' to do with that fiasco a couple months back?"

"Which one?"

"The thing you told me about. The Witnesses."

"Ah, that."

"Yeah…listen, I've been hearin' talk," said Rufus. "Hunters are getting edgy, with what's been happenin'…they see the signs."

"What do you want me to do about it?" Bobby asked after a moment.

"Dean Winchester's topside. That's all well and good. But him and his brother were at ground zero at the start of all this," Rufus deadpanned. "You know that's how it's gunna be at the end of it, right?"

"Again," Bobby's tone sharpened, "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Keep your eyes open, 's all I'm sayin'. When they come to you for help," there was that hint of knowing in Rufus's tone that always managed to grate on Bobby a little. "Make sure you know what you're doin'."

The signal clicked, and Bobby set down the phone. He rubbed a hand over his face and couldn't help reaching in his desk drawer and pulling out the glass bottle inside.

It was a day for scotch.

He grabbed a small glass and poured a conservative amount for the moment. It swirled around in the glass as his thoughts turned to Sam. He’d left that morning after Bobby drove him to a rental car place, headed for Hill City. Why, he hadn't said exactly. Meeting up with Dean hadn't seemed like the forefront of it, though that was what Sam more or less gave as an excuse.
The boy worried him. It was clear that whatever he'd gone through while Dean was gone, Sam hadn't completely recovered from. Lilith seemed to be at the back of his mind more often than not—how to find her, how to kill her, as fast as possible before she broke more seals. In the meantime, Bobby saw both brothers immersing themselves in case after case without catching a breath.

It wasn't a wonder to him why his niece needed a few days off from the Winchesters. They were always caught in the middle of a pile of shit. And if they weren't, they were driving toward the next one to step in. That was why when she told him what happened, with the angels and the demons and Dean saying all the things he said, Bobby had no idea what to tell her.

All he could think to do was ask her how she felt about it, and what she wanted.

The following tears reminded him why he never had children, least of all girls.

But it also taught him a valuable lesson: he was right to worry about Dean. As good a man and as good a hunter as he was, Dean Winchester had literally been through Hell. That "time heals all wounds" bullshit was just that—bullshit. Some wounds just never heal.

And Bobby sent that man to his niece.

He had no doubt she would follow the Winchesters to wherever this would end. It wasn't like her not to see things through, to completely give up on anyone she trusted unless they made it clear she wasn't wanted. Somehow he doubted either of the brothers would be doing that again anytime soon.

And he loved those boys. He did.

But that's what scared him.
On a Saturday Night

Usually, Elena avoided going into the heart of Hill City. Parts of it were clogged with traffic and smelled like fuel exhaust, especially on a busy Saturday. But as small as the city was, there were things to see that could fit under the category of tourism, like the museum she used to work at. Some of it was not unlike the strip Dean took her and Sam to that night after they managed to save Dean from his ghost sickness.

There were plenty of shops and people crossing the streets and shuffling along the sidewalks, and Elena watched it all from the Impala's passenger seat window. She hadn't sat in the front in...well, since those two months where it was just her and Sam. She hadn't been in this car alone with Dean since...never really. He hadn't ever let her drive it, so if she went to get groceries or something similar (or more often, takeout), it had usually been Sam driving.

Now, however, Elena was glad for the change of scenery. It was weird to be in the house for so long after not having lived there for such a long time; it was like she was occupying a house she was borrowing, almost like staying at a cozier motel for a few nights. Stranger still was staying with Dean. As if they were just a normal couple, washing clothes, cooking food, watching movies, sleeping together...it didn't quite feel real, but not quite unreal. Like a daydream.

Just the fact that everything that happened between them actually happened kept Elena mentally reeling.

And today, it was surprising how little she and Dean had done compared to how busy things usually were when they were on a case (which was almost always). They hadn't even gone outside before Dean suggested they take a ride. She had a feeling he was getting as antsy as she was, maybe more.

So she awkwardly pointed out her old high school and the small park where she and Val used to have lunch at the picnic tables on sunny days. Thinking of the museum and Val made Elena feel guilty. She had been back in Hilly City for nearly five days now, and she hadn't bothered to let Val know. But her bubbly friend would have been over first thing after her shift and would've come with questions and questions Elena didn't have the energy or the emotional stamina to create answers for. And Val had her own bullshit detector that was pretty attuned to Elena.

"You must know everyone in town," Dean commented after she waved to Lisette, one of her elderly neighbors about to enter a general store.

"Not everyone, but yeah. It's a smaller town and people didn't really start moving away until I graduated from high school," she said, still looking out the window. "Bigger and better dreams somewhere else."

"All except for you?" he teased. Her gaze slid over to his, and her smile was wry.

"I wouldn't say that."

Dean's grin faded once he turned on the radio and had music that was distinctly not his own playing on the radio. He glared over at Elena, who was still bobbing contentedly in her seat.

"Did you fuck with my stations again?"

She smiled sweetly.
"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Whitney Houston?" he asked accusingly. "Really?"

"What? Her voice is smooth as butter!"

He only blinked at her incredulously.

"Oh, hell no."

Dean anticipated the slap aimed at his hands before she even started reaching and caught her wrist. He stopped at the red light and kept pressing the seek button while Elena continued trying to wrestle him.

"Goddamn it—"

"Just…leave it!"

"No! This is my car—do I have to tell you the rules again?"

"But—"

"I've had a lot of big dreams…" The lyrics floated through the car, clear and steady.

Both of them paused.

"I've made a lot of bad moves…"

Slowly…reluctantly, their hands fell away from the car radio.

"I know you could walk away, but you never do…"

Elena's eyes flicked to Dean, but when he looked back, she averted her gaze to the side, as if she'd never looked his way.

"I've learned to smile and deceive…"

Dean cleared his throat a little and focused on the road once the light turned green. In his memory he could see a diner and an old style jukebox in a shaded corner by the bar.

"I know I'm hard to be around, but you never leave…"

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Elena biting her lip. She was trying not to smile. Clearly, she remembered that day all too well.

Neither of them touched the radio after that.

And neither of them heard a phone ringing incessantly.

"Hey, you've reached Elena. This is my personal cell, so you must really know me. I probably won't listen to your message so try calling again, or shoot me a text. Either way, staying on the line by now is pretty pointless."

"Damn it." Val hung up before the pre-recorded lady on the other end of the line could start the "at the tone," spiel.
This was the second time today she'd tried to call without anyone answering. It was a damn cell phone. What could she possibly be doing that was so important? Elena was pretty good about answering, and if she didn't, her OCD wouldn't let her have a missed call in her notifications. She would've called back by now.

At least, under normal circumstances.

"Headin' home?" Val looked up and smiled at Craig, her boss.

"Yeah, dinner with the fam," she said. "I put the mop and broom away and took the trash bag out back."

During one of the field trip tours, a couple stupid kids decided to mess around with one of the displays and accidentally knocked it over. They were understaffed to begin with, which meant it was up to Val to tape the area off and finish giving the tour. Afterwards she had to go and clean up the mess of glass and destroyed artifacts, and call Craig so he could call the owners in charge of dealing out the reparation bills. You break it you buy it, even at the cost of those kids' future college funds.

"Good, good. I'm sorry I wasn't here to help with that," he said apologetically. The man had meetings up the wazoo, Val knew; mostly just a bunch of men in monkey suits swirling their coffee and exchanging meaningless witticisms that no one without a degree in pompous bullshit would understand.

"Not a problem," she said. She'd had to stay two hours overtime. "See you tomorrow!"

Val walked outside to her car and her perky smile fell off her face. Her feet ached and longed to be rid of the black pumps she was required to wear with a professional pantsuit. Thank God it was fucking Friday. Tom and Lea had the weekend shifts, which meant Val could enjoy two days out of the mostly shitty week.

But first, she had to make a pit stop at her mother's house. With a heavy sigh she peeled out of the parking lot and headed down a well-worn path through Hill City rush-hour traffic.

Besides her aching feet, Val's thoughts drifted back to her former workmate and partner in crime. She'd noticed a trend these past few months: this so-called "family business" necessitated a lot of travel. Fine. Enter the Winchester brothers, who she apparently travelled around with doing these odd jobs. All right. Though Val never got a clear picture of exactly what it was, it seemed to be something unorthodox. Val figured Elena was embarrassed to explain it. Or maybe she couldn't. Maybe she was a secret agent.

"Psh. Yeah right," she mumbled out loud. Not to say Elena wasn't smart enough, but the woman wasn't exactly "badass superspy" material. She could barely walk a straight line in heels, let alone know how to work an M-16 or whatever the hell FBI agents used.

Val didn't watch enough *Criminal Minds*.

But that was beside the point.

The point was, Elena was beginning to worry Val. The few times she'd gotten her friend on the phone since she left Bobby's house, Elena sounded tired. Stressed. Most often at some no-name motel in the middle of nowhere, supposedly "on a job," whatever the hell that meant. One of these days, she would get it out of Elena. But Val would have to put a pin in that for later, because for now she was parking on her mom's driveway next to a Toyota Camry.
The door opened after a few incessant knocks, and then her purse was dropped onto the ground to make room for the heap of dead weight that was her seven-year-old brother.

"Hey, buddy!" she greeted, and her mouth kicked into a broad smile at his childish giggling. "Ugh, you're freaking heavy, dude. You been fattening up while I've been gone?"

Even at seven years old, the boy looked peeved at being called fat.

"You've only been gone a week," he exclaimed, but then said in a lowered voice, "Mom made the nasty soup again."

"It's stew."

"Both are slop."

"Fair enough," said Val. Vanessa Hatfield was many things. A cook was not one of them.

"Valerie! Is that you at the door?" a voice called from the kitchen. "Come inside, you're letting the air conditioning out!"

"Hi to you too, Mother," Val muttered and set her brother down. She picked her purse up from the floor and entered the house, shutting the door behind her. Predictably, she found Vanessa in the kitchen slicing a French bread roll with a steaming pot on the stove.

"Sure you didn't drop a dead animal in that?" Val asked. "It smells."

"Just the chicken," said Vanessa. "Matt! Finish setting the table like I told you to."

Val expertly hid the smile from her face as her brother rolled his eyes and went back to placing the silverware. Then her mother's eyes slid over to her.

"So, how was work?" she asked pleasantly enough. Val knew it was just her attempt at being polite.

"Fine. Until some kids decided to play 'Keep Away' with something from the display case," she sighed. "Ended up toppling the whole thing over."

Vanessa tsked and shook her head as she placed bread slices into a wide bowl.

"Disrespectful," she said disdainfully. "Unruly, those kinds of kids."

It was Val's turn to shake her head.

"That's parents who can't watch their own kids for more than two minutes." She grabbed the silverware and started placing them on the table while her brother brought the drinking glasses.

"Well, a parent can only do so much with a naturally rebellious child," her mother remarked, and started serving the stew in small bowls. Val gave her a sideways look, but didn't comment further. It was a good thing those bowls were small, because she didn't think she'd be able to stomach the smell for much longer, let alone eat a respectable half of the serving.

"What'd you do at school today, kiddo?" Val asked her brother. He swirled his spoon around between overcooked broccoli and a chunk of potato.

"Nothing."

"That doesn't look like your 'nothing' face."
Matt remained silent. Val prodded him lightly in the ribs with her fork, ignoring her mother's sound of disapproval.

"Hey, kid. I'm talking to you." He glared at her.

"Don't call me a kid!"

"That's what you are," she pointed out. "But stop avoiding the question."

"What question?"

"What happened at school today, Matt?" Vanessa asked this time, pointedly staring at her son. Matt's eyes fell to the table, but Val caught something rushed about quitting his piano class. She'd been hearing his grumbling about it for a while now. How boring it was and how the teacher always looked at him like he was dumb. He understood the work and practiced like he was supposed to, but he just didn't like it.

"Oh…that's it?" she asked. "That was just an afterschool class, right?"

"You did what?" Vanessa exclaimed. "Without talking to me about it first? Matthew, I'm paying for those lessons—"

"Well now you're not paying 'em," said Val. "God, Mom. If he doesn't want to take piano, he doesn't have to."

"That's just like you," Vanessa said, regarding her daughter with a pinched look. "Work at something for a little while, and as soon as it gets hard, you tell him to quit. What kind of attitude is that?"

"That's not what this is. He doesn't like it, Mom. He's never liked it, but he stuck with it for almost a year," said Val. "I think that's good enough."

"Good enough?" Vanessa repeated. "Like a public college was good enough for you?"

"What does that have to do with anything—"

"I'm trying to make sure your brother is cultured, that he uses his full potential—"

"Not like me. That's what you're saying, right?" Val tossed her spoon onto the table with a clang. "Don't want him to be a grade-A fuckup like me, right?"

"You watch your language and tone in this house, you understand?" her mother snapped. Val got up from the table, making the chair creak loudly as it scraped the wood flooring.

"Oh, yeah. I understand," she glared. But her expression softened when she turned to her brother. "Get your stuff, we're headin' out."

"Excuse me," Vanessa raised her voice, "We're not done here. I didn't give him permission to go with you for the weekend, not after this mess."

Val turned around and pinned her mother with an icy stare. It was enough to still her. Val was tempted to say something, but Matt came down with a relieved look on his face and his duffel bag over his shoulder.

_Maybe one day, it won't be just a weekend._
"We're done," said Val.

She gave her mother one last hard look before guiding Matt to the front door.

As it turned out, Sam and Sarah found that the bakery was connected to a diner, and the dinner menu looked almost as appealing as the dessert. It was nearly six thirty, they might as well sit and eat real food before Sam had to drive back to Sioux Falls and Sarah to the hotel she and her dad were staying at in town.

There was a short wait as a young woman and a boy were in line for a table before them, and were soon seated toward the back. But eventually the couple was seated against the wall, far from the window.

Sam caved for once and ordered a cheeseburger, while Sarah was quite happy with her Tuscan chicken sandwich. Music played from a stereo in the corner, and they were content just to talk. Sam very briefly mentioned how he and Dean hadn't stopped working after they left New York the first time. There had been bigger and badder monsters to find, and though there was a lot he couldn't say—a lot—he could see the understanding in her eyes.

It was…refreshing.

"Sam…can I ask you something?" said Sarah. Sam paused from his burger and met her gaze.

"Sure."

"How have things been, really," she asked, "for you and your brother."

Enough memories flashed through his mind that he needed a moment to sip his beer and formulate his thoughts.

"…Rough," he said eventually. "Pretty rough."

His eyes rested on her face for a while. Sarah had honest eyes, soft features that spoke of both warmth and intelligence. She cared. Genuinely cared, even after all this time. After he called out of nowhere, disturbing her life with his again.

"But…things are looking up a little," he finished with a slight smile. She returned it, though those honest eyes looked down at the table before meeting his again. Her cheeks were a little flushed.

"For both of you?" she asked.

"Heading that way…" Sam nodded as he thought about it. "Dean's been…well, Dean. Mostly."

He could only assume he and Elena were working things out, as he hadn't contacted him yet besides a brief text telling Sam he was staying the night at Elena's house. Sam had been hopeful. From what Bobby had told him, and from what he could infer from when he'd called her a couple days ago, she'd been understandably upset. Dean hadn't been much better off.

"I think he's dating a friend of ours."

If Dean hadn't done anything stupid.

"Really?" said Sarah. "…He didn't seem like the dating type to me."

Sam snorted.
"Me either. But…she's good for him," he said, and then smiled again. "You would like her."

"Does she hunt things too?"

"Yeah. We've been working together for a while now." Sam took another gulp of his drink. "You could say she's…a friend of the family."

Sarah smiled at that.

"Well, I hope they're happy together." Sam nodded.

"Yeah…me too."

And with that a thought came to him as they started ordering dessert and he asked for three different slices of pie to-go.

"Sarah," Sam began. He twirled his now empty bottle of beer between his fingers. "I'm sorry if…this is too forward, but…these past few years…"

It was a simple question, he told himself.

"Have you, um…has there been…"

"Anyone else?" she finished for him, with a gentle (but knowing) smile.

"Uh…yeah," Sam laughed a little out of nervousness.

"Well, about a year after you left there were a couple," she admitted. "But…they didn't work out."

His lips twitched. Their eyes met, and the small grin on his face grew.

"Ah…sorry to hear that."

Sarah’s smile was beginning to hurt her cheeks from trying to stifle it.

"Yeah, you sound real broken up."

"Trust me. If you can eat a five-pound grease ball from anywhere else without a problem with the taste, this is the Holy Grail of burgers."

Sam recognized the voice. He paused and looked around, not spotting the source. It was decidedly feminine and injected with a healthy dose of sass. But he placed it immediately when it was soon accompanied by a gruffer, deeper voice Sam knew all too well.

He looked over to the entrance and his eyes met Elena’s.

They’d been walking down the long streets of small shops, Elena pointing out places she and her friends used to hang out after school, or the department store she and her dad used to go to. When she was really young, she used to run up and down the aisles and grab all the brightly colored coupons and give them to Jack.

By the time they got to the cash register, he would have a wad of coupons in his hand. Far used to his daughter's antics, he'd just use what he could and tuck the rest in his pocket. If she remembered correctly, there was a drawer in her kitchen that was full of old coupons that were never used.
Dean listened to her ramble, secretly amused. He didn't have memories like that of Lawrence. At least, not that clear. It was actually kind of nice hearing about hers though. They didn't talk about their pasts that often, let alone their childhood. Unless it was important, or a memory ripped open somehow. This was different, lighter, as if they were just a new couple getting to know each other.

"Whoa," said Dean. There was a line for a small restaurant and bakery, and through the windows he could see empty tables being filled. "What's goin' on here?"

"Dinner rush," Elena explained. "This is one of the most popular diners in Hill City. You would like it."

He looked down at her with a raised brow.

"Why's that?"

She smiled and pointed at the bakery side of the diner. Behind the glass display he caught the sight of assorted cakes and pies and smaller confections.

"They've got the best pie in South Dakota."

"Oh yeah?" he asked, grinning a bit. "Pretty bold statement. What about the rest of the food?"

"It's pretty good," she said. "I used to come here a lot…my mom and I liked the milkshakes."

Dean watched her as her expression turned softer, pensive. He'd seen it plenty of times that day as they revisited so much of her past, but it was always different when she mentioned either of her parents. Especially her mom.

He looked up and saw that the line of people was getting shorter, and didn't even stretch outside anymore.

"Well, I've had my share of diner food," he said, and with a wink, "I'll be the judge if it's good or not."

Elena looked up at him, and a smile played at her lips. She let him guide her into the restaurant with his hand warm at the small of her back.

"I like their chicken sandwiches, but they make a really good burger," she told him. They were two people away from the hostess' podium.

"Burger sounds good right about now," he said. "Better melt in my mouth, is all I'm sayin'."

She scoffed, but her eyes took in the scenery of the small, family diner. It hadn't changed much over the years, even less in the past few months that she'd been gone. Nor had it suffered any business; the lunch and dinner rushes on weekends never failed to make this place packed.

"Trust me," she said. "If you can eat a five-pound grease ball from anywhere else without a problem with the taste, this is the Holy Grail of burgers."

Though it was loud, she thought she heard…someone familiar. Her eyes scanned the room again and caught something to the left: a broad frame and shaggy brown hair. Blue-green eyes met hers and she stilled.

"Right this way please," the hostess addressed Dean with a smile.

"Lena, we're next," Dean said to her.
"Dean." She got his attention with her hand on his arm, and he followed the path of her gaze, brows furrowing until they shot up into his hairline.

"Sam?"

Sam blinked, staring blankly at brother who was looking straight at him with a mixture of surprise and confusion. And then his eyes shifted to the left, and brows rose even higher at seeing Sarah. Dean gave him the "oh really?" look, and Sam knew he was screwed.

The hostess asked him a question, and Dean spoke to her in smooth tones. When he pointed over at Sam's table, he noticed they were at a table with four chairs.

Shit, shit, shit…

"Isn't that Dean?" Sarah asked.

"…Yeah."

Her expression turned wry.

"You didn't tell him, did you?"

Sam gave her an apologetic look.

"Remember how he was with us the first time?"

"Yeah," she nodded.

"He's going to be a lot worse."

"Right."

The blonde hostess nodded and led Dean and Elena over to Sam's table.

"Hi there, I believe you know each other, is that right?" she asked Sam. Behind her Dean gave him a knowing grin.

"Y-Yeah, that's right." Unfortunately.

"So it's okay that they sit with you?"

"…Yes, yeah it's fine."

"You sure?"

"Yes, it's no problem. Thanks." The blonde smiled again and turned to Dean.

"All right, well I'll have someone come around and serve you guys."

"Thanks," Dean said, and then pinned Sam with a knowing look. "Sam. What a surprise."

"…Look, Dean—"

"Oh no, you don't have to explain it to me," Dean refuted, and smiled pleasantly at Sarah. "Hey, Sarah. Long time, no see."
She smiled back a little nervously, but she seemed to be trying to go with it.

"Hey, Dean. Good to see you," she said, then to Elena she held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Sarah. You must be who Sam was telling me about."

Elena smiled and shook the woman's hand.

"Elena," she introduced herself, "You must be the one Sam was telling me about." Sarah laughed a little.

"Yeah, it's one hell of a story," she admitted.

"Yeah, speaking of that," said Dean, eyes trained on his brother, "I'd love to hear the story of how you guys met up again."

"It's, uh…kind of complicated," said Sam. "Besides, I thought you didn't need me to explain anything."

"Just iron out some details, it's still a bit fuzzy to me." Sam hesitated before answering, but he was saved by the waiter that came to take Dean and Elena's orders of drinks and entrees, as both knew what they wanted. He walked away, pad and pencil in hand, and for a moment, the table was quiet.

Sam sighed.

"Okay…" He proceeded to explain how Sam called Sarah not long after they'd left Poughkeepsie, New York. After that, they started talking more—texting and Skype, mostly, but keeping in touch. Dean left for Hill City, leaving Sam at Bobby's. And when Sarah told him she was going to be in South Dakota for an exhibition…it was an opportunity he couldn't pass up on.

Elena couldn't help the smile that grew on her face as she listened. Sam's earnestness was something that made him Sam. That and how when he wanted something badly enough, he went and got it, even at the prospect of his older brother's teasing. Dean, for his part, listened with a ghost of a smile tugging at his mouth. He never interrupted Sam, was content to eat his burger when it came and sipped his beer when Sam finished.

"Okay," said Dean, who popped a fry in his mouth.

"…Okay?" Sam asked incredulously. Elena bit into her last bit of sandwich in attempt not to laugh. Her eyes slid over to Dean's plate enviously. She'd stupidly gotten a side of salad instead of fries.

"Yeah, Sammy," he shrugged, and caught the fingers sneaking over his plate. Still chewing, he looked over at Elena casually. She grinned sheepishly.

He raised a brow, but his eyes widened as she smugly slid a large fry into her mouth with her free hand. Dean let go of her, but with a look that said the battle was by no means over.

As neither of them had eaten very much, Val took the poor kid to a little diner they knew well. Made the best damn baked macaroni and cheese, and they always split a huge slice of cheesecake from the bakery half of the restaurant. Val especially loved taking her brother here, because (at least, when he was younger) he liked that they shared a name.

To most of the people who lived in this city, Mattie's was the best place to get anything sweet and baked with bread and sugar. She and Elena used to come early in the morning before their shift at
work and split half a dozen fresh donuts.

"You okay, buddy?" she asked. The boy was unusually quiet for just having left their mom's house. Usually the kid wouldn't shut up from when they got in the car until she put him to bed at night.

"Yeah…" He put a forkful of macaroni in his mouth.

"You're not gunna have to go to those lessons anymore, all right? I'll make sure of it."

Matt sighed.

"It's not that."

Val was at a loss.

"Then tell me what it is," she said gently. Matt looked up from his bowl.

"Why does Mom have to talk to you like that all the time?" he asked. That hit her sideways. Out of everything that could've been on his mind…it made Val smile a little.

"She's got it rough right now, Mattie." The divorce between her mom and her father was being drawn out. Vanessa refused to sign the papers, even though she'd be getting a great deal of alimony, while her father continued to what he did best now that he was finally moved out of the house and into the apartment he owned in Los Angeles (and had mostly lived in anyway) with his new girlfriend. He went to work.

"Yeah, but she's always been like that," Matt pointed out. Which was also true, though Val was surprised he'd picked up on it so young.

"Yeah…I ask myself that question a lot too," she confessed, and sipped at her beer.

"Hey, since it's just us," Matt trailed, watching her set down the bottle on the table. "Can I try some of that?"

Val laughed out loud.

"Trust me, you wouldn't like it."

"How would you know?"

"'Cause I'm drinking it." She shook her head. "Nice try, kid."

"Stop calling me 'kid'!"

"It's what you are. Better get used to it." Val laughed at his brooding glare, but squinted her eyes at the afternoon sun glinting through the window in her eyes.

"Damn it, you'd think they'd put some curtains on the window," she complained, and brought her hand up to shade her eyes. But they widened at what they saw sitting at a table of four.

"…Elena?"
"Did you hear that?" Elena asked, and surveyed the packed restaurant.

"Someone called you," said Sarah. Sam and Dean looked to one another in confusion, until Elena's face lit up with an incredulous, but broad smile.

"Val?" she laughed, and got up from the table. Dean's expression fell.

"Oh no…"

"Who's Val?" Sam asked, but was interrupted by the girlish squeals that came from behind him as Elena and Val enthusiastically greeted one another. It earned a lot of eyes and annoyed looks from around the room, but the two didn't seem to care.

"What're you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? I live here. What're you doing here? How come you didn't tell me?"

"It's a long story, but I'm back home for a few days," Elena said, and bent down to the boy who stood close to Val. "Hey, Mattie, I haven't seen you in so long! Come 'ere, buddy."

Matt smiled and hugged Elena, laughing when she squeezed him tight and swayed them from side to side. She smoothed his hair out of his face affectionately and introduced Val and Matt to Sam and Sarah, who stood along with Dean from the table.

"And you probably remember—"

"Hey, Cupcake, I knew it was you!" Val said, and despite his nervous smile, she hugged him tightly. Dean grunted as his eyes popped open comically. She was a bit strong for someone so small.

"Hey, Val," he managed.

"Don't break him," Elena warned, and her friend let go reluctantly.

"Finally I get the chance to meet the semi-mysterious Winchester brothers," she said with a grin. "The things I've heard…"

"Well, Elena's told us a bit about you too," Sam said, smiling in amusement.

"Nothing embarrassing, I hope," she winked. "But I don't want to disrupt your dinner…"

"Sorry I haven't been able to call," said Elena, who glanced at Dean before turning back to her friend. "Why don't you come over tonight? We'll talk for a bit. I'm not sure how long we're staying town."

Val thought about it. Matt was more than okay with the idea of staying up later than usual and hanging out with his favorite honorary "aunt."

"Yeah, all right. You've got a lot of explaining to do, anyway."
"It's a long story," Elena sighed.

"My growth is being entertained. I've got time," said Val, gesturing with a thumb behind her to where Sam and Dean were teaching Matt how to play poker in the living room. They were just playing for Oreos, but it was enough to occupy the kid.

At the restaurant they'd said their goodbyes to Sarah before she and Sam went back to the gallery, so he could pick up his rental car. Sam arrived at Elena's house an hour or so after the rest of them did, and they'd broken out sodas (for Matt's sake; Val had already had one beer in front of the kid that night).

"We had some trouble with a job," Elena eventually confessed. "We finished it all right, but I needed some time off…"

"Why's that?" Val asked pointedly. Elena was silent for a while, debating how much she could actually say without…it was difficult maintaining friendships with people who weren't hunters, let alone people who didn't know the truth about the supernatural.

She couldn't exactly say that they got caught between a standoff of angels versus demons for a fallen angel that lost her Grace, now could she? Elena couldn't say that she and Dean had gotten in the biggest fight they'd ever had just as they were starting to cross boundary lines, because he refused to talk about how he was tortured in Hell and she'd pressured him just a bit too much.

"Dean and I…we had a fight." Val's expression became even more serious, but she remained quiet, waiting expectantly for her to continue. Elena started again. "I pushed things I shouldn't have pushed, and we both said a lot of things."

She sipped at her Coke and ran a hand through her hair in a nervous habit.

"When he finally told me everything that he was going through, I couldn't handle it like I thought I could," she sighed. "I tried. But still…he still wouldn't let me help, so…I walked away. I shouldn't have, but came back here. Bobby told me to take it easy for a few days, so I did."

"But Dean's here now," said Val. "Him and Sam."

Elena nodded.

"Sam called me the day after it happened, told me they were going on another job. Next day, he sent me a text that they were coming to stay at Bobby's for a couple days, and asked me if I was okay with it. I guess he thought I would be there," she said. "But Dean showed up on my doorstep…and we worked it out."

"Worked it out, like…" Val raised suggestive brows. Elena bit her lower lip and didn't answer.

The effect was immediate.

Val's eyes, wide as saucers, flicked from Elena to the man sitting beside her brother and pretending to cheat and glance over at Matt's cards. Val pointed at her friend, and then at him, and then back.

Elena nodded sheepishly, still biting her lip.

Val slapped her own hand over her mouth but the shrill scream could still be heard from where they were in the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" Dean said quickly as both he and his brother stood from the table, but both women
waved them off. Matt dismissed it as nothing and turned back around in his chair.

"Nothing, nothing," Elena said, a little too quickly for Dean's liking. Val shook her head.

"G-Go back to whatever it was you were doing, teaching my brother how to hustle or whatever," she said. Dean raised a brow and looked over at Sam, who shrugged. So they joined Matt back at the table.

"Are you serious?" Val hissed.

"Are you fucking kidding?" Elena whispered furiously.

"Well, how serious is it?"

Elena paused and glanced over at the table. Both Sam and Dean were trying to explain a rule at the same time and kept cutting one another off. It eventually got to the point where Dean was crossing his arms, with a look on his face that usually meant Sam was starting to grate on his nerves. Elena had experienced the look before, usually accompanied by an eye roll.

A-a-and there it is, she thought, after Dean rolled his eyes. Catching her stare, he smirked a little and winked at her. Stupid as it was, it made her smile back with a faint blush.

"Oh," said Val. "That serious."

Elena turned to her in annoyance.

"It's almost sickening," Val smirked. Elena rolled her eyes.

"Oh, eat me."

"Looks like he's already got the job covered, but thanks."

Elena shoved Val's arm and shook her head, despite the mortified grin on her face.

"Oh my God."

"Now you can't deny anything, it's refreshing," said Val. Elena sighed.

"Is this what it's going to be like from now on?"

"You bet your ass it is."

"Just my fucking luck."

By midnight, Val declared it was time for her and Matt to go, but neither of them left without a parting hug from each of them. Dean was surprised when Val's hug was less crushing and flirtatious as it was sincere.

Elena watched as Val whispered something in Dean's ear though, and from how his eyes widened marginally, it wasn't something pleasant. He even seemed relieved when the front door closed behind her.

"What happened?" Elena asked him in amusement. The evasive look he gave her was only slightly suspicious.
"Nothing."

"Didn't look like nothing," Sam remarked as he cleaned up the cards from the table.

"Come on," she said. "Val talks a lot of shit. It couldn't have been that bad."

Dean gave her a dry look.

"She said I can't tell you upon pain of…things." And then with a look that was more teasing, "But let's just say I think Sam and I should run a background check on your friend."

Sam could tell it would be another night where he wasn't going to get much sleep. He was in Elena's old room that was mostly empty of her stuff, save for her bed and desk and some storage bins, and that was okay. He was pretty sure Dean was with Elena in the master bedroom, and that was okay too. They hadn't come out and said anything, but he was pretty sure they were together. And now they knew he and Sarah were talking again, which was also okay.

Then why did things still feel…wrong?

The threat of the Apocalypse hanging over their heads, probably.

Sam sighed and rubbed his face, and pulled out a book from his backpack. He read until he couldn't focus on the pages and then finally got up, wandered into the kitchen where the light was already on. It was weird, because he knew for a fact that he and Dean locked all the doors and turned off all the lights before heading to bed at two in the morning.

Elena was rummaging in the pantry, straining for the top shelf that was inches out of reach.

"Bit late for a midnight snack," he commented. She jumped and stumbled against the shelf door, turned around quick and sighed when she saw him.

"For someone so massive you walk like a fucking mouse, you know that?" she said. It wasn't the first time he'd snuck up on her without meaning to.

His answering bitchface was priceless, in her opinion. But she crossed her arms as he easily got the box of Cheez-Its from the shelf and set it down in front of her.

"Any other requests?" he said dryly.

"You ought to have a bell around your neck."

He rolled his eyes and got a glass from the cupboards and a jug of water out of the refrigerator.

"What are you doing up?" he asked while pouring in the cup.

"Same as you, probably. Just needed a drink," she said, grabbing a cup for herself. "Dean's dead as a rock."

Sam smiled at that, hearing the playful jealousy in her tone. He poured water into her glass for her before returning the jug in the fridge.

"I couldn't sleep," he admitted, after a while of relative silence between them. The only sounds came from the light rain hitting the roof outside.

"Something on your mind?" she asked.
"Probably too much."

Elena nodded and started munching on some crackers from the box.

"How was Sarah," she asked, "when you had to say goodbye?"

"It was okay," Sam replied. Another smile played on his face.

Sarah parked in front of the building next to the rental car. The lot was long deserted.

"Well…" she said, looking over at him. She wore a smile, but there was the hint of sadness behind it that made him feel both reluctant and guilty. He probably wouldn't get the chance to see her for a while, and she knew that.

"It's not goodbye," Sam reminded her. Just like the first time.

Sarah nodded and cut the engine. They both walked the few feet to his car that he would probably turn in tomorrow. Sam stopped in front of the passenger side and turned to face her, hands in his pockets and at a loss of what to say.

"It's not goodbye," she repeated. He shook his head.

"No. Course it's not."

Sarah bit her lip, then looked up at him with those honest eyes.

"I missed you," she said, "And I'm glad we got to spend the day together."

It got him to smile.

"Yeah…me too."

She grinned a bit, then lightly pulled him down by the lapels of his jacket and kissed him. It didn't take him long to react, carding his hands through her long hair and down her arms, pulling her closer. The way she moaned a little into his mouth when his hands found the curve of her waist sent a pleasant chill up his spine. But eventually, it slowed down to gentle kisses and touches, and he rested his forehead against hers.

"Sam," she said once she'd caught her breath.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"This time…call me."

Sam set down his glass on the countertop.

"I promised to call her."

Elena smiled, but it soon faded.

"Sam…you probably won't want to answer this," she began hesitantly. "But…what about Ruby?"

That caught him off guard.

"What about Ruby?"

"I mean…after what you told us, about what happened…" Elena trailed, but she felt it was a valid
question. He had been getting pretty chummy with the demon as of late, and not just because they'd slept together.

Sam sighed.

"That's passed, Lena," he said. "Looking back...there wasn't anything romantic about it."

He was out of his fucking mind, under a whole new level of grief and anger, and she'd helped curb it. And underneath all that...yeah, it was lust.

"Okay," she said slowly. "So...why Sarah?"

"She..." Sam stopped and had to laugh a little. He was opening himself up like a teenage girl. Then again, if he had to pick between Dean and Elena in talking about women, Elena was probably the better choice this time. There was a greater chance she wouldn't tease him like his brother would.

"There's a lot she doesn't know," he acknowledged, "but she understands the important stuff. She gets it—why we have to move around, why we take on case after case."

"And she understands you," Elena finished for him, and by the look on his face, she'd guessed correctly.

"I just...I don't know how it could work," he said. "Because it's not just the moving around. It's the danger I put her in just by knowing her. We don't deal with things like shitty coworkers. We deal with angels and demons out to start the Apocalypse."

It was some time before Elena said anything, but she met his eyes when she said, "If you care about her, just be honest."

Sam looked down at the liquid swirling in his glass, and for once wished it was from a bottle of whiskey. If Sarah knew everything, what he really was...she would never want to see him again.

"I guess that means Dean finally talked to you," he said. Elena nodded and sipped from her glass.

"Yeah. Showed up on my doorstep and wouldn't leave until he'd said his piece," she said, cracking a smile. Sam returned it.

"Sounds like him." And then his expression turned more serious. "When my brother thinks he's doing the right thing...there's little he won't do if he thinks he's protecting us."

Elena caught his meaning, and she sighed.

"I know...he just has a bad habit of shutting us out."

Sam scoffed.

"Believe me, I know." He shook his head. After a moment, he gave her a soft smile. "You'll be good for him."

She looked away, but he spotted her blush.

"Are you okay with it," she asked tentatively. "Me dating your brother?"

He gave her a long look.

"Honestly, I can't think of anyone better."
The morning brought Dunkin' Donuts and questions. Specifically, the question of if they were going to hit the road and take on a case. There was nothing stopping them, now that they were all in the same place. So they all more or less agreed.

Dean flipped through a few articles online and found Stratton, Nebraska, where a man appeared to be murdered in his bedroom, though the room was locked without any sign of forced entry. Sounded like a ghost, at the very least. An angry one.

It was a six and a half hour drive that Elena and Sam mostly snoozed through, not having gotten much sleep the night before. By the time they got there to check the place out, it was afternoon.

The house itself was now for sale, but Dean could hardly think of anyone who would buy it, old as it was. Just the story of how it had come to be on the market was enough to put anyone off.

"What a piece of shit," Elena commented, eyeing the leak stains on the ceiling and the peeling paint.

"I wouldn't knock it too much," Dean said, sliding his gaze over to her. "Even the walls have ears."

"Maybe they'll do something about the bloodstains," she remarked. Most of it was already taken care of. There were still some stains, faded, but visible on some of the floorboards.

Dean found a hollow spot on a wall in the kitchen, and the outline of a square that had been painted over.

"Huh," said Sam. "Probably a dumbwaiter. All these old houses had one."

He walked away to inspect the other side of the kitchen, and Dean looked over his shoulder.

"Know it all," he muttered.

"What?" Sam asked.

"What."

"You just…"

Dean looked at him expectantly.

"What?"

"…Never mind." Sam turned away and went back into the living room, and Dean looked quite proud of himself, until he noticed Elena still standing there with her arms crossed, an amused expression on her face.

"What?" he repeated. She rolled her eyes.

They ran the EMF meter throughout the second floor, especially in the room where Bill Gibson had died. Apparently the room had been freshly painted with a soft gray color.

"The needle is all over the place," said Sam.

"You got power lines right there," said Dean, pointing out the window. They were pretty close to the house and would distort the EMF. As far as he was concerned, there was not much here to find. Sam opened the closet door, and the old, chewed up doll's head staring back at him was a bit disconcerting.
"Well that's super disturbing," Dean commented from his brother's side. Elena pulled a face.

"Think it got left behind?" she said.

"By who?" he asked. "Unless Bill Gibson likes to play with doll heads."

There was a distant rumble of trucks nearby, which was odd, considering this place was literally in the middle of nowhere. They looked out the window and spotted a large moving van following an SUV.

"Uh oh," said Sam.

"I thought you said this place was still for sale," said Dean.

"Apparently not."

They hurried downstairs and out the front door, but couldn't help being spotted by the family that were unloading from the car. It looked to be a married couple, their two kids and a dog, plus another man that might or might not have been related to them.

"Can I help you?" asked the husband.

"Yeah, are you the new owners of the house?" Dean asked.

"Brian Carter," he supplied. "And you are?"

"This is Mr. Stanwick and Miss Gail," said Dean. They each held up similar badges with their aliases on them. "I'm Mr. Babar. County Code Enforcement."

"We had the building inspected last week," said Brian, a confused look on his face. He glanced back at his waiting family before asking, "Is there a problem?"

"We've found asbestos in the walls, and a gas leak," said Sam. "I'd say we've got a problem that needs to be taken care of."

"Asbestos, what does that mean?" said the woman, most likely the man's wife.

"Until this house is up to code, it's uninhabitable," Sam said.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said Brian, "You mean we can't stay here?"

"It's a health hazard. You don't want to," said Dean.

"Hold up," said the second man, "We just drove four hundred miles—"

"There's a motel just down the street. Until this gets cleaned up, I suggest you stay there."

"And what if we don't?" asked Brian.

"You can get a fine or you could go to jail, pick your poison," said Dean. Brian looked back at his family and eventually shrugged. He wasn't about to go to jail for something like this.

"One night, and I'm getting this worked out in the morning," he said. His daughter was less than thrilled at the prospect of staying at another motel, and was quite vocal about it.

The hunters felt bad about having to inconvenience them, but they'd rather put the family through
one night of discomfort versus the possibility of them getting killed.

They donned their FBI garb and visited Gibson's former housekeeper of five years, who initially found his body. She couldn't say much about him, only that he was a private man, kept to himself.

"Not that I blame him," she added.

"What do you mean?" asked Sam.

"His wife dies in childbirth, daughter hangs herself in the attic twenty years later, I'd be bitter too," she said. And after a moment, "...I think I've got some pictures."

She left and came back with two photos: one of a young girl, and another of a younger version of Gibson and his daughter.

"Thanks," said Dean. "Can we keep these?"

"Suit yourself."

"Do you know why the daughter killed herself?" Elena asked.

"Oh, I don't know. That was before my time," the woman admitted.

"Did you ever notice anything odd in the house when you were cleaning it?" asked Dean, who slid the pictures into the pocket of his business jacket.

"Like what?"

"Like, you know, lights going on and off, things not being where you left 'em..."

She shook her head, but then paused.

"Well, sometimes I heard some noises. Like...rustling in the walls."

"Like a rat?" Dean asked.

"Yeah."

"Must've been some big sons of guns."

"Wouldn't know, never saw any."

"Would you happen to know where his daughter and Mrs. Gibson were buried?" Sam asked.

"Nah, they were both cremated."

So they could eliminate that it wasn't the mom or daughter, but who else could it have been? They left the woman's house with the intention of giving the Gibson house a good once-over and finding out. But by the time they got there that night, they could see that the family had already started moving in.

"Shit," said Dean. "Not what?"

"...We could tell them the truth," said Sam. Dean turned to his brother.

"Really?"
"No, not really."

"Well, we can't just sit here," said Elena. Dean sighed heavily.

"Great."

But they did sit, until they heard screams coming from inside. They hurried to the door and Dean knocked loudly. When Brian opened the door, they were understandably suspicious, but they weren't expecting him to ask if either of the brothers touched his daughter.

"What? No!" Dean exclaimed incredulously.

"You've got a ghost," said Sam, to which his daughter Kate agreed, while her brother Danny claimed it was "the girl in the wall." Their exasperated father wasn't having it though, and tried in vain to calm down his frantic kids. His wife hugged them to her while the second man stood with his arms crossed.

"What are you guys playing at?" asked Brian.

"You're all in serious danger," said Dean. "You need to get out of the house now."

And then the power went out, startling the family.

"Nobody move!" he ordered, on edge for whatever came. But they heard the whimpering of a dog, and Danny immediately called out for him, taking off to look. They eventually found a trail of blood outside that led across the yard, and written in blood on the outside of the moving van were the words, "TOO LATE."

Brian directed his wife and kids to go back inside, while his brother-in-law Ted stood next to him. They both looked like they were at a loss.

"We are not the bad guys here," said Dean. "But you're in trouble."

"You've got to get your family out," Sam added. "Now."
"Go to that motel I was telling you about," Dean instructed. The family was dressed and ready to go, and they all made their way outside.

"What are you going to do?" Brian asked. Dean's reply was short-lived though, as they came back to both the Impala and the SUV's tires slashed.

"Oh, come on," Dean groaned as he checked Baby's rims. They were going to sink into the mud from the rain that had only just stopped outside. "Come on!"

Elena rested her hand on his arm and it reminded him to calm down. These people were depending on them to be level-headed while they freaked out. But even she winced and murmured, "Shit," at the sight of the car, already sunk half an inch into the dirt. It was going to be a bitch to tow.

"Dude, the guns are gone!" Sam exclaimed. "So are the…basically, everything is gone!"

"The truck's no good," said Ted, running back over to them.

"What kinda ghost messes with a man's wheels?" Dean shouted upward, into the sky, in the hope that whatever they were dealing with could hear.

"Oh God," said Kate, "What's happen…"

And then she screamed, pointing at the long grass and shrubs in the distance.

"What's the matter?" her father asked in alarm.

"It was the girl! She was there! There in the woods," she said. All Sam, Dean and Elena had were their flashlights, which they used to scan the area.

"What's a ghost doing outside?" Dean muttered.

"You wanna stay and find out?" Sam asked, raising a brow.

"Everybody inside," said Dean.

"Are you nuts?" asked Ted. "We've gotta get the hell out of here!"

"In what? The ghost is hunting us, so I suggest you get your ass inside," Dean exclaimed, and once again ushered everyone inside.

They stayed in the living room, and he lit the fireplace while Sam and Elena made the salt lines. Though Brian was highly skeptical, they were able to convince Kate and Danny that they actually did this for a living and were pretty good at what they did. The sister was able to identify the "girl in the walls" as the young girl in one of the pictures they were given by the housekeeper, which was confusing as hell, considering the Gibson's daughter Rebecca was cremated.

"That picture…she's dead," asked Susan, Brian's wife.

"She committed suicide inside this house," Sam said with a sigh. He stepped to the side with Dean and Elena.
"So, what, Rebecca wasn't cremated?" Dean asked.

"She died in the attic, right?" said Sam. "You want to babysit and Elena and I'll go check?"

"Look, I don't care who hung themselves where. Maybe there is something going on here," said Ted, getting somewhat into the Winchesters' personal space.

"It's a spirit, man," said Dean.

"No, it's just some backwoods hillbilly bitch," said Ted. "And I'm not about to sit around here waiting for her to go all Deliverance on my ass."

"Nobody's leaving this house."

"Stop me."

Ted pushed past Dean over the salt line, but in two steps Dean had the man in a hold that effectively halted him, and pushed him into the living room door frame. Susan gasped while Brian protested, but Sam held up a hand to keep them where they were behind the salt line even as he cast a wary eye on his brother.

"I have a gun," Dean said lowly, "If you don't get your ass back in that circle you're gunna have yourself a third hole."

He let go of Ted, but guided him back to the living room. Sam and Elena gave him similar "what the fuck was that?" looks, but it was Sam who said,

"Dude, you don't have a gun."

"And?" said Dean. "I'm not letting that bastard or anyone else die tonight."

"Okay…then we're gunna go check the attic," said Sam. But he was hesitant to do so with how tightly strung his brother looked. "You cool?"

Dean nodded somewhat.

"Go," he said. But Elena stuck around for a moment and drew closer to him.

"You sure you're okay?" she asked. He'd been a little off all night, and it concerned her.

"Yeah," he breathed, and squeezed her shoulder. "Make sure Sammy doesn't burn the place down."

She nodded reluctantly, then smoothed her hand down his arm before she followed Sam upstairs.

The attic looked to be seldom used, but there were a couple boxes of old junk. Sam and Elena flipped through it all, but the only thing of minor importance was finding Rebecca's diary.

"It's pretty detailed," Elena commented as she flipped through it.

"Think it—" Sam was cut off by the sounds of banging and screaming downstairs. They looked to one another before taking off and running straight for the living room, where they found Dean being attacked by a girl in tattered clothes and barefooted, hair wild as she screamed at him with every down-stroke of the knife in her hands.

"HEY!" Sam shouted, and shone his flashlight right in the girl's eyes in attempt to distract her. She
shrunk back and shrieked as if she was being burned, and ran for a door in the wall. Sam followed after her while Elena helped Dean up, but the girl was long gone into the walls.

They cleared out of the house, and Dean told Brian to get his family together and ready to make a run for the motel. He explained to them that the girl wasn't a ghost, and was able to cross the salt line.

"So who is she then?" Sam asked.

"I don't know, maybe it's the daughter, Rebecca," said Dean. "Maybe she didn't hang herself."

"Dude no, she'd have to be like fifty years old by now."

"Well, I don't know. What'd you two find in the attic?"

"Old piles of crap, mostly, but we found her diary," said Elena.

"Okay, well we've gotta get this family somewhere safe. She's human, so they can make a break for it, we've just gotta hold her off," said Dean. Sam pointed behind him to where Brian and his family were coming.

"Danny, Ted! We gotta go!" Brian called, and Ted came running.

"Good," he said.

"Danny?" Susan called. She began heading towards where Ted had just come from. "Danny, come on!"

"Danny!" Brian joined his wife in calling for their son.

"Told you it was some crazy bitch," Ted said to Dean.

"Yeah, you did," Dean said dryly, not even bothering to look back at him.

"You head into town," Sam told Brian. "We'll take it from here, okay?"

But that became irrelevant as Susan's calls for Danny remained fruitless. There was no sight of him out in the forest area. Susan started forward, shouting her son's name even louder, but Brian stopped her before she went too far and told her to take Kate and go to the motel. Both of them adamantly refused to leave without both him and Danny, and eventually Dean agreed, pointing out that the shed would be the safest place for them to hide.

Kate stared at him blankly.

"I am not going in there either."

"Yes you are. It's the best defense," he said, and addressed at Brian, "The windows are boarded up, it's got one door. It's our best shot right now. Trust me."

"Su, Kate, go," Brian told them, and they finally ran together to the shed.

"Okay, Brian, you and I will check outside," said Sam. Then to Dean, Elena and Ted, "You three take the house."

Dean looked like he wanted to argue as he and Ted glanced at each other with similar derisive looks, but they didn't have time for it.
The three ran into the house and immediately started checking the living room. Ted started rummaging in one of the partially opened moving boxes while Dean and Elena checked the walls for hidden openings.

"What are you doing?" Ted asked, taking out three kitchen knives. He gave one to Elena and one to Dean, who both strapped it onto their person.

"Since she's human, she had to have come from somewhere," said Dean.

"There are scratches here," Elena said, pointing them out in the wooden boards of the wall. He examined it closer and pushed them inward. When the boards wobbled, he applied some force and broke it open. The frame was smeared with blood, and it was a deep opening to blackness below. The poignant stench of death that came out had Ted gagging.

"You smell that?"

"Every day," said Dean.

"You going down or am I?" Elena asked him, undeterred by the smell, though she silently agreed that it was horrible. The depth of the darkness inside made her stomach churn, but this was no time to wimp out.

Dean gave her a wry look.

"Let me see if we fit first."

He stuck his head in and saw that it was big enough if they walked partially sideways. The path widened the farther in you went.

"All right, cover me," he said, and crawled in, flashlight handy. Elena steeled herself and followed him in, and not long after, so did Ted. It surprised both hunters, but they nodded and kept going. It was dark and had the occasional cobweb, though besides that and the smell it wasn't terrible. Dean found a rickety ladder of sorts that shot upward, most likely to the second floor. He kept walking though, having to squeeze past the corner as it got narrower. His flashlight illuminated a large hole in the floorboard—another abyss.

"You're not going down there," said Ted. Dean really, really didn't want to.

"Well, do you want to?" he asked. He didn't have to ask to know Elena would follow. He stuck one leg in at a time, and she helped him the best she could.

"Please nobody grab my leg, please nobody grab my leg," he prayed aloud, and with some squeezing down (the hole was narrow for a grown man), he made it under.

"This is by far the nastiest shit," Elena groaned, and crouched to lower herself down. It would be easier for her, since she was smaller and lighter. Thankfully it wasn't enclosed spaces she had a problem with. The darkness, however, was making her edgy and uncomfortable (not afraid; no, she wasn't afraid). Her flashlight was a mild comfort when it only allowed her to see a couple feet ahead, and in the hole she was about to climb into, she couldn't even see Dean—only blackness.

She tentatively began stepping inside and hoped she didn't get sucked down the rabbit hole.

"You'll catch me, right?" she asked in a voice that was stronger than she felt.

"I've gotcha," she heard Dean's voice echo from below. She recognized his rough, strong hands that
grabbed her hips when she was almost down, so she wouldn't fall to the dusty, grimy floor. He gave her a quick smile, holding her to him a beat longer in reassurance before he let go to survey their less than pleasant surroundings.

The smell was worse. Probably because of all the mutilated rats, and what was left of Danny's dog.

"Danny?" Elena called, not too loudly.

"Find anything?" Ted asked from above.

"Just her kitchen," Dean remarked.

"Her what?"

Elena wanted to plug her nose, but it wouldn't do any good knowing she was breathing the foul air. They looked around for any sign of Danny, but were soon startled by the agonized shrieking that reverberated off the stone walls. The two rushed back to the opening they came in from, but Ted's dead body partially fallen through the hole stopped them and almost made Elena scream. Dean was able to clamp his hand over her mouth in time to stifle it and pulled them back against the wall. They waited until the sound of scuffling passed, hopefully signaling that the girl was gone.

Dean removed his hand from Elena's mouth and curled his arm protectively around her shoulders. She'd never wanted to bury into his side and hide like she did now, but she allowed herself the small solace of sliding her arm around his middle and fist her hand in the back of his shirt to keep him close.

"You okay?" he asked.

"...Yeah," she nodded after a moment, a little breathlessly as she stared at Ted's lifeless face. Blood gushed from a stab wound in his throat and sluggishly dropped onto the already blood-encrusted floor.

"We've gotta get him out of there," he said, and reluctantly let go of her so he could push the body out by the shoulders. Eventually he got Ted far enough away so that they could climb out. Dean debated helping Elena out first, but then nixed that idea. He would rather it be him who got attacked first if the girl came back than Elena.

Fortunately, the girl didn't come back, allowing both of them to get out and bring Ted's body back to the surface.

Fresh air was a cleansing relief, but having to tell the Carter family that Ted's body lay outside on the grass outside was not. Brian tried to comfort his wife the best he could, but the man seemed to be in a daze. Dean knew that look, had seen it more than he cared to; it was the look of someone who couldn't believe what was happening to them, and didn't understand why it was happening.

"I shouldn't have left him alone," said Dean. He couldn't quite look at Brian in the eye. "I'm very sorry."

He stepped out of the shed and closed the door behind him, leaving Sam and Elena to share a look of unease and concern.

Sam read Rebecca's diary while Elena debated whether to join Dean outside or give him his space. She knew he needed some time to collect himself and get back into the case. At the same time, she knew something was wrong, more than how they failed Ted back in the house.
Meanwhile, Brian was trying to console his wife, who was growing hopeless. Macabre as it was, Danny still had a chance; the girl in the wall liked him. According to Danny, she hated adults, but wanted him to stay. The couple hung onto that as Brian assured Susan of the better life they would live when this was all over. Though Elena perked up at the mention of an "Andy." She'd heard the name only a couple of times, but bringing it up always seemed to strike a dismal chord in the small family.

"I'm going to check outside a bit," Brian sighed after a few beats of silence. "For anything."

"Don't go too far," Susan implored.

"I'll go with you," Elena said. It would give her an excuse to see if Dean was all right. On the surface, he looked fine, staring up at the large house solitarily.

"I'm going to go talk to him for a sec," she told Brian. He nodded, but was stopped short by the body of his brother-in-law. For a moment he could only stare, but eventually, he knelt down to give his respects.

Elena went to Dean, who turned as he heard her coming. His smile was small.

"Sam's skimming through Rebecca's diary," she said, sliding her hands into her pockets. It was a chilly night and the wind was cutting through the thin fabric of her leather jacket.

"Found anything yet?" he asked.

"Not yet, but there's still half to go," she said. "He's better than me at speed reading."

Another breeze drifted through, making Elena shiver slightly. She smiled when his arm came around her, comfortably pressing her against him.

"There's plenty of other thing's you're good at," he said with a smirk, but the mirth didn't reach his eyes. She rested her hand against his chest and toyed with the buttons of his shirt.

"Dean…I know something's up."

His smirk faded, and his cool green eyes settled on her face.

"When this is over." His hold tightened marginally, assuring her that he was telling the truth. "Promise."

After a moment, she nodded. It was progress, at least.

Dean's gaze scanned the area and found Brian again; he was slowly pacing the lawn, and finally stopped a few yards away from them, looking up at the house with an unreadable expression.

Dean heard what went on inside the shed between him and his wife, how they kept talking about an "Andy." It wasn't hard to read between the lines of their conversations and gather a bit of insight on the Carters. Dean led Elena over to Brian and didn't waste time beating around the bush.

"Is Andy your son?" he asked. Brian nodded.

"Got himself killed in a car accident last year," he said. Dean restrained a sigh. He figured as much.

"I'm sorry," he said genuinely.

"It nearly tore Susan and I apart. Still could, I imagine," he confessed. "That's why we moved here.
"Fresh air, fresh start."

He smiled humorlessly and looked over at them.

"Not even my line. It was the marriage counselor's," he said. Dean shook his head a bit. "Could be right. After all, what could possibly go wrong in the country?"

"I'm going to get your son back," said Dean, "If it's the last God-forsaken thing I do."

Brian turned to him with a tired look.

"Why do you care so much?"

Elena knew.

Dean felt responsible; both for what happened to Ted and for their safety. The safety of good people who didn't deserve what was happening to them.

"Dean, Elena," Sam came up behind them, waving the diary. "We've gotta talk."

Once in the privacy of the house, Sam told them Rebecca's gruesome story.

"That little girl? Pretty sure it was Rebecca's daughter."

"So she had a kid?" Dean asked.

"It's all she talked about—being pregnant, being ashamed of being pregnant," said Sam.

"Jeez, read Juno already. Get over it. So why did she kill herself after having the baby?"

"Maybe because her father called her a 'dirty little whore' and said he was gunna lock the baby up so no one could see it."

"Why would he say that?" Elena asked. Sam just gave them each a look that said "think about it."

"Oh, gross," Dean gagged. He got it just before Elena, who made a face of disgust. "So the daddy was the baby-daddy too?"

"He was a monster," said Sam. Dean and Elena shook their heads.

"Wow," said the older Winchester. "Humans, man…so she's been locked up in this house her entire life?"

"You saw her eyes. She's never seen light. She's barely human," said Sam.

"Okay, so she's been caged up like an animal, and then she busts out and ganks dear old Dad…slash, Granddad?"

"I guess," Sam shrugged.

"Well, can't say I blame her," said Dean.

"It must've been horrible," Elena said quietly.

"Her life was hell," Sam agreed, "But that doesn't mean she gets a free pass for a murder spree."
Dean stared at his brother.
"Like you know what Hell's like."

Sam backtracked.
"I didn't mean…"

He sighed, and Dean shook his head.
"Forget it," he dismissed, and ignored Elena's concerned frown.

"…So how do we find her?" Sam asked.
"Kid's gotta eat, right?"

Sam gave Dean a confused look, while Elena shivered, remembering what lay under the floorboards.

"What?"

"He kept her locked up. But he had to feed her, didn't he?" said Dean.

"I guess…"

"I think I know where."

Dean busted open the painted square in the kitchen, revealing a platform and a ladder than led into darkness below. Brian insisted on going down himself at first to retrieve his son, but Dean managed to convince him to let it be Dean to go down. He promised to rescue Danny, so he was going to do it.

Just in case the girl made a retreat through one of the hidden doors, he gave Sam one of the kitchen knives Ted had given him and kept his own.

Sam held his flashlight while Dean made his way inside, and got it back for the rest of the way. Sam still aimed his own flashlight to help Dean, but instructed Brian and Elena to grab as many curtains as he could find from the moving boxes. They rifled through three or four until they found enough to start tying them together and make a ring at the end.

"Danny!" They heard Sam shout from the kitchen, and they rushed over so he could lower down their makeshift rope. Danny slipped it around his body, and between Brian and Sam, they were able to pull the boy up.

"I hear something down there," said Elena, alarm bells sounding in her head. And whatever it was didn't sound like Dean.

"He's fighting her brother," Danny panted, climbing out of the hole and into his father's arms.

"What?" she and Sam exclaimed. Just then, the sound of screams could be heard distantly, as if they were coming from outside. If the girl's brother was down there…

"Sam, where's the girl?" Elena asked, and Brian's eyes widened with panic.

"Su," he whispered raggedly.
"Help them," said Sam, nodding to the knife strapped to her belt. "I'll get Dean."

After a split second, she made a beeline for the front door out of the house, Brian right behind her, and to the shed where the sounds of snarling were almost drowned out by Susan and Kate's screaming. The girl had broken through the thin wood near the bottom of door and had Susan pinned, but Brian darted forward and grabbed the girl by the ankles, dragging her out. She immediately shrieked and twisted in his grip, and kicked outward. Catching him in the chin, Brian fell back, and the girl wasted no time in pouncing on him like an animal.

Elena was able to hook her arms underneath the girl's and yank her off Brian, sending the two rolling in the grass. Using her heavier weight to pin the girl down, Elena grabbed for her knife. But like a rabid animal, the girl kept trying to claw at Elena's arms, neck and face. Just as she got her wrist free and brought up the knife, the girl scratched across Elena's face with jagged nails and slapped the knife out of her hand, making it clatter into the dirt.

It stung like a bitch, though Elena was able to pull back enough that the scratch wouldn't draw more than thin lines of blood. Before she could recover from the blow, she found herself shoved onto her back with metal gleaming above her and coming down.

And its momentum ceased with a squelch. The girl uttered a choked sound, akin to gurgling, and looked down at the thin, iron rod protruding from her chest. Her chapped lips curled back, revealing rotten, bloody teeth. Then the knife dropped from her hands, landing just beside Elena's cheek. She panted, catching her breath, and her stunned state, she only watched as the girl slumped to the side and slid off of her.

Elena stared up at Brian, who stood over her with an expression that was partly wild, and partly concerned. He looked dazed again.

"Are you all right?" he said, holding out a hand to her.

"…Yeah," she said, and grabbed it, allowing him to pull her to her feet. "Go to your wife, I'm okay."

He nodded and ran into the shed, leaving Elena to take in her surroundings. With shaky legs, she made her way to where Danny was waiting on the steps. He looked relieved that it was over, but tears were streaming down his face.

"It's gunna be okay, Danny," she said with a tired smile. "It's over now."

He bit his lip and nodded, but looked even more relieved when his parents and his sister came out of the shed and ran to him, enveloping him in a desperate embrace.

Elena could've sighed in relief herself when Sam and Dean came out of the house, both looking free of any injuries.

"You okay?" the latter asked when he reached her at the foot of the stairs. His eyes did a quick scan of her body, but eventually lingered on the bloody side of her face.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said, "just a scratch."

"What happened?" Sam asked, and both his and Dean's gazes roamed the yard, probably for the girl.

"We got her," she said quietly, and gestured with her eyes over to the side, where the body lay amongst the brambles and tall grass. Dean sighed, though his hands went to her waist, gently pulling her toward him. She rested the side
of her face that didn't sting against his chest and let herself be enveloped in his warmth.

It's over.

Unfortunately, they had to crawl back through the walls to get the rest of the weapons that were stolen from the Impala. But with a brand new set of tires after a long walk into town, the hunters were ready to be on their way. The Carters, though understandably shaken and not by any means okay, Brian and Susan assured them that in time, they would be. They even gave the Winchesters and Elena a head start before the police got there.

It was about eight in the morning, but they were starving enough to grab the closest thing to eat. Cheeseburgers won. Dean parked on a lonely road under a bridge and sat in relative silence. At first.

Dean unwrapped his burger, but after a second thought, wrapped it again and set it down next to him. He was a little put off from eating as flashes of memory from that house kept appearing in his mind.

"You okay?" Sam asked.

"You know, I felt for those sons of bitches back there," he said. "Lifelong torture turns you into something like that?"

It took Sam a moment to see the connection, but with a glance at Elena he could see she also read in between the lines of what his brother was saying.

"You were in Hell, Dean," said Sam. But the elder Winchester only averted his gaze. "Look, maybe you...did what you did there, but...you're not them."

"They were barely human," Elena added softly. Dean nodded a little.

"Yeah. You're right. I wasn't like them," he said. "...I was worse."

Sam's eyes raised skyward, silently asking for strength. His brother's penchant for self-loathing was one of the things that bothered him the most.

"They were animals, Sam, defending their territory! Me?" said Dean. "...I did it for the sheer pleasure."

That made both Sam and Elena falter.

"What?" he asked.

"I enjoyed it," Dean confessed. "...They took me off the rack and I tortured souls, and I liked it."

He shook his head.

"All those years...all that pain...finally getting to deal some out yourself?" He bit his lip, but wouldn't look at either of them. He couldn't bear to see their faces. But if he would've looked up, he would've seen the hopelessness in Sam's eyes; the tears in Elena's, running down.

The worst part was that neither of them had anything to say. Because there was nothing to say. Nothing that would make a difference.

"I didn't care who they put in front of me. Because...’cause that pain I felt...it just slipped away."
His fist clenched and unclenched in his lap. None of it could ever be erased—he knew that. Just as he knew that this could drive him and Elena apart, like Brian and his wife.

"No matter how many people I save…nothing's ever gunna change that."

Dean sighed shakily. He knew now that Elena was probably better off. He'd known it from the beginning, no matter how much he'd tried to delude himself that something like them could work, because there just wasn't enough left of him to work with. At least, nothing good.

She and Sam would never be able to understand.

"And I'm never gunna fill this hole…never."
Two and a half weeks made a difference.

They'd passed through three states since leaving Nebraska and were going on their third case upon entering the state of Wyoming. Since that less than haunted house in the middle of nowhere, they'd dealt with magicians gone rogue and one seriously pissed off spirit haunting one of the brothers’ old high schools.

Elena stared out the backseat window as "Now Entering Greybull, Wyoming" flew by. Sam found the case this time: multiple cases of people effectively cheating death, and all feeling like they were being blessed with a second chance at life. The three hunters took on the challenge like usual, but like it had been for the past weeks, things were strained.

As a rule, they didn't talk about that morning under the bridge.

It went unspoken but was understood. For Elena, it was mostly because she didn't know how to go about it if she did try and bring it up. She knew Dean was hurting, and he still felt indescribable guilt. But she didn't know how to make him understand what she had come to realize about him.

Despite their job, what it had done to them—to him, the fact that he was being tormented by his actions proved he was still human, capable of coming back to himself. Maybe not completely, but maybe enough that he could stop trying to push away the people closest to him.

She might not have understood the scope of what he was going through, but it didn't mean she cared about him any less than before.

As it was, Dean was avoiding her. Not explicitly, but she could tell. He wouldn't do more than hold her hand in front of Sam, or anything in public for that matter. And when they were alone, few and far between that was, holding her was the most he initiated. He seemed to want the contact every now and then, but held back.

Elena refused to push him. She'd learned her lesson in that, and now knew when he needed the space.

*It'll pass,* she thought. But a bitter, less secure part of her was spotting the recurring theme, and dully wondered whether things had really changed.

And Sam. Sam had been acting strange ever since dealing with the magicians in Sioux City, Iowa, taking phone calls in the middle of the night, white lies here and there that he thought Dean and Elena wouldn't pick up on.

So they worked.

It was all they could do. Without knowing what the seals of the Apocalypse were, or where Lilith was, they had no real way of trying to stop it until the angels (or Ruby) tipped them off, or if an opportunity presented itself. Though it didn't seem like the angels knew what they were doing either, and they hadn't heard from Ruby at all since Anna.

The motel they were staying in was craptastic as ever, and when Sam came with news of a cancer patient walking out of hospice completely cured, and now going out with his wife for his twentieth
anniversary, it was high time to figure out what the hell was going on. No one looked to have made a
demon deal either.

Usually they got all fidgety, gave themselves away with the guilt of doing something they know they
shouldn't have. None of them looked to be lying.

And no one seemed to be dying either. The last one was Cole Griffith ten days ago, as published in the
Greybull Gazette.

"I dunno, maybe it's what the people say it is," said Dean. Sam scoffed.

"Miracles? In our experience, when do miracles just happen?"

"Well, there's no deals, no skeevy faith healers. I mean, these souls just ain't getting dragged into the
light."

"…Maybe because there's no one around to carry 'em," Sam suggested.

"How's that?" Elena asked.

"Well, grim reapers, that's what they do, right?" he pointed out. "Schlep souls. So if Death ain't in
town…"

"Then nobody's dying," Dean finished. Sam shrugged. "So what, the local reapers' are on strike?
Playing the back nine? I don't know, Sam."

"Well, then let's talk to somebody who might."

Both Dean and Elena gave him a strange look.

"Come again?" Dean asked.

"The kid," said Sam.

"The kid's a doornail."

"Exactly. Look, if he's the last person to die around here, then maybe he's seen something," said
Sam. "We should talk to him."

Dean huffed a laugh.

"I love how matter of fact you are about that," he said, sipping his coffee. "Strange lives."

"At this point, is there anything normal?" Elena asked, quirking a brow. After a moment of
consideration, Dean nodded.

"Touché."

The trip to the cemetery was a complete bust.

Not only did they not get a chance to try out the spell, but they'd been found by Alastair, who ended
up tossing Dean and Elena like frisbees. Now Dean had a concussion, and he wouldn't take the
painkillers Elena was trying to give him because he "didn't want to be all loopy" afterwards.

Despite the mild bruising, she was all right. Only because she'd fallen on him.
"You're so fucking stubborn," she muttered, and just handed him the cup of water.

"You should be nice to me," he groaned and sat on the edge of the bed, then downed the cup. "Used me as a damn trampoline. I'm in pain."

"You're in pain because you won't take the damn pills, so you're gunna stay in pain until you sleep it off," she retorted, but her glare had little heat. Knowing this, he grinned innocently at her.

"Come on," Elena sighed, and sat behind him on the bed.

"You're making me move?"

"Just come on. Lay back."

Elena guided him back by his shoulders and eased against the pillows until Dean relaxed against her with his head pillowed by her stomach. She'd taken off her jacket, so he was comfortable against the warm cotton of her shirt over the softness of her body. He let her take the ice pack from him and press lightly on his forehead.

Dean closed his eyes when soft fingers stroked his cheek, then ran slowly through his hair. His eyes opened again when he involuntarily made a noise of pleasure. He couldn't remember the last time he blushed, but he felt his face burning when she glanced down at him with a smile.

He covered it with a small grin, "I finally got the hot nurse."

The corner of Elena's mouth twitched upward at that. It was just too bad he wasn't in much of a state to do anything about it.

"Sorry for falling on you," she said quietly.

"I guess I just have that effect on women," he said cheekily. Elena only raised a brow, her smile turning into a small smirk at the cheesy joke. He definitely had a concussion.

"Yeah. Sure." Her fingers continued running through his hair, but avoided the tender spot at the back of his head. They smoothed out the wrinkles in his brow and stroked along his jaw line clenched with pain, forcing him to relax that much more.

"You're all tensed up. Let yourself breathe," Elena said, ghosting her hand down, only stopping below his ribs. "From here, all the way up…"

Her hand drifted back up, passing over his chest, and back up to his cheek.

"To here," she finished, then laid her hand, cool from the ice pack, against his forehead.

Dean breathed deep a few times through his nose and let it out slow each time. That combined with her ministrations helped ease the pressure in his skull.

"Tell me your secret," he groaned. It already hurt less. She'd never done this before, but it made him realize he'd missed…this. Being comfortable with her, that is.

She had a natural ability to relax him, make him feel like nothing was wrong, even when a ton of shit outside of this room was.

"I've done yoga a couple times," she admitted. His eyes were closed, so he didn't see her smile.

"Decent stress relief besides pounding the shit out of something."
"No kidding."

Dean could feel himself drifting off, though his mouth twitched at the soft kiss he felt on his hairline. Like this, he could probably just manage to doze off for a while.

And then Sam was back, unlocking the door and stepping through it and jingling the keys in his hand, until he noticed them and immediately paused. He sheepishly put the keys in his pocket and shut the door more quietly. But the damage was done.

"How're you doing?" he asked Dean, maybe louder than he should have.

"I'm in pain, that's how I'm doing," he sighed. "Think I've got a concussion."

"You want some aspirin?"

"No thanks, House."

"He doesn't want to get all 'loopy,'" Elena's tone was both teasing and long-suffering. Sam grinned. Reluctantly, Dean sat up.

Break time was over.

Though disappointed, Elena sat up with him and kept her hand between his shoulder blades.

"Demons?" she said.

"Looks like," Sam replied. "So much for miracles."

"So what the hell happened with Alastair again?" Dean asked.

"I told you. He tried to fling me or whatever, and it didn't work. So he bailed." Sam walked over to the counter where the coffee machine sat.

"How come he couldn't fling you? He did a good job of it last time," Dean remarked, a dubious glint in his eye. Sam looked back at him with a shrug.

"Got no idea."

"Sam, do me a favor," Dean said tiredly. "You're gunna keep your little secrets and I can't really stop you, but...just don't treat me like an idiot, okay?"

Sam had the grace to look taken aback.

"What? Dean, I'm not keeping secrets."

Neither of the other two hunters was amused.

"Mhm," said Dean. Sam still looked a bit wounded. "Whatever. So did you go back and Q&A the dead kid?"

"Didn't have to. Bobby called."

And they were back to (somewhat) normal. Or at least, the way things had been for the past few weeks. Sam explained that the reapers were most likely being kidnapped. By demons, in order to break one of the sixty-six seals. A reaper had to be killed under the solstice moon—tomorrow night.
"How in the hell do you ice a reaper? You can't kill Death," said Dean.

"I don't know. Maybe demons can," said Sam. "Where the hell are the angels, for that matter? We could use their help for once."

"Looks like we're on our own," said Elena, "if they can't find it within their busy schedules to float down."

"What are we going to do, just jump in and save the friendly neighborhood reaper?" Sam asked.

"If you've got a better idea I'm all ears," said Dean.

"Dean, reapers are invisible. The only people that can see them are the dead and the dying."

The older Winchester nodded and pressed the ice pack back to his head.

"Well, if the only ones that can see 'em are ghosts...then we become ghosts."

Sam and Elena looked at him with similar expressions of incredulity.

"You do have a concussion," Sam concluded.

"Sounds crazy, I know."

"It is crazy," said Sam. And after a beat,

"...How do we do it?"

Pamela Barnes was less than enthusiastic about their plan, basically calling it thirty-one flavors of bat-shit insane. Astral projection was fucking hard, even for a psychic as good as she was. It was basically ripping their souls from their bodies so they could stroll through the Spirit World.

She wasn't surprised it was Dean who thought of it.

"You don't know what you're doing," Pam shook her head.

"Yeah, but you do," Dean smiled.

"Yeah, I do. And you know what? I'm tired of getting dragged into your angels and demons crap."

"Well look, I'd love to be kicking back with a cold one watching Judge Judy too."

"Nice," she said. "Blind jokes?"

"You know what I mean," Dean said. She turned away from him and sat down on the edge of one of the beds. "We're talking the end of the world, here. Okay? No more tasseled leather pants, no more Ramones CDs, no more nothin'...we need your help."

Eventually she sighed.

"Fine."

They closed the curtains and lit a few candles while Pam leaned against the motel dresser with her arms crossed. The picture of disapproval.

"Tell me something, geniuses," she drawled. "Even if you do break into the veil and you find the
"reaper, how're you gunna save it?"

"With style and class," Dean retorted. Elena gave him a sideways look at his heavy sarcasm.

"It's a fair question," she said tartly. He might've convinced her to stay with Pam, but it didn't stop her from being the least bit worried. They didn't have a real plan. This in and of itself was pushing the envelope more than usual, let alone going into a world where they'd be relatively powerless.

"You're gunna be two walking pieces of fog," Pam pointed out. "You can't touch or move anything. You'll be defenseless, Hot Shot."

"I seem to recall a bunch of ghosts beating the crap out of us," said Sam.

"Yeah, and they had plenty of time to practice."

"Then I guess we've gotta start crammin'," said Dean.


She patted the bed in front of her, and the brothers each picked a bed. On his way over to one, Dean stopped in front of Elena, hesitating almost awkwardly.

"Be careful," she said. He nodded, and debated with himself for a moment. He settled with kissing her on the cheek.

"You too. Keep that gun on you," he said. She almost smiled.

The spell took mere moments to work, as Pam spoke aloud to them and they didn't reply. Their bodies didn't even move an inch. It was unnerving to Elena, knowing they were technically dead even though they only looked asleep.

"All right, so, I'm assuming you're somewhere over the rainbow," said Pam. "Remember I have to bring you back."

She stood up and walked over to Sam's body.

"I'll whisper the incantation in your ear."

What Elena heard was, "You have got a great ass."

Pam walked back to her chair and Elena gave the older woman a knowing look.

"Some incantation," she remarked. Pam smirked.

"Gotta live life, kid."

It was a lot of waiting.

And it wasn't like they could play cards, or do much of anything besides sit there.

"So," Pamela said finally. "Things haven't really slowed down for you guys, have they?"

"For a little while, they did," said Elena. And then the daydream shattered.

"It was nice."
"I'll bet."

Silence.

And then,

"You got laid, didn't you?"

Elena spluttered. Pam was smirking.

"How the fuck do you know?"

"I didn't, until you said that."

Elena was silent. Pam laughed.

"So how is Dean, really? He seems a bit off his game."

Elena sighed.

"It's complicated."

"When isn't it?"

"Fair enough," said Elena. "…He's got a lot to deal with."

"And you?" Pamela asked.

"What about me?"

"How are things between the two of you?" A teasing smile grew on her lips. "Besides the obvious."

Elena shook her head in amusement.

"Not too much of that actually, to be honest…I don't think he regrets us exactly," she said, "But I think his guilt is weighing him down."

Nothing's changed, was the thought that gnawed at her, even if it wasn't altogether true. Maybe the problem was that too much had changed at once before things could settle between them—the music cut off before they could get a rhythm. They'd been on the same one for so long, adapting to… whatever it was they were now, was kind of being a pain in the ass, Dean's fear of commitment aside.

"And stopping him from being open with you," Pamela finished. Elena sighed and nodded.

"Yeah…I thought we were past this. New shit just keeps dumping all over him. Or coming out of him."

"It 'dumps' on you too," Pam reminded. "Don't forget that."

"It falls harder on him though…he shoulders so much he doesn't have to. And Sam…" Elena sighed again.

I don't know what the fuck Sam is doing, she thought dully.

"He isn't exactly making it easier. Neither am I, for that matter."
"What makes you think that?"

"No matter what I do to help, it doesn't seem to make a difference."

Just as she thought she and Dean had worked things out, just when she thought things would be looking up, the Job jacked everything up.

"But you're there for him, right?"

"...I try to," said Elena.

"Then that's enough." Pamela turned toward Elena and laid a hand on her knee. "Doesn't seem like it, but believe me, honey. For now, it will be."

Then she leaned back, crossing her arms.

"It'll slap him in the ass one way or another."

Elena moved to the foot of Dean's bed with the magic knife and her handgun resting on the floor against her hip. Well, technically it wasn't her gun. It was one of Dean's spares. Every time she held on, it was a reminder of her past. But each time, it got a little easier. Holding it, cleaning it, checking the barrels; the last thing she wanted to call it was therapeutic, but in a sick way, maybe it was.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept. Really slept. On a real bed, not the Impala's leather cushion. Probably since the night Dean came to see her, standing on her doorstep with apology and regret written all over his face. It was the sincerity and hope buried underneath that convinced her to let him in and tear up her life all over again.

Not that she really minded.

With these thoughts, and her favorite song playing distantly in her mind, and night beginning to fall outside, she felt her eyes getting heavier. Her head leant back against the mattress, and she couldn't remember dreaming.

But when the window crashed open Elena was startled awake. She grabbed hold of her gun and shot the man that came in point blank in the chest, twice. The force of it sent him back against the wall.

"Lena—demon?" Pam exclaimed, sensing the creature. Elena scrambled to her feet as the burly man's eyes flashed pitch black. He wasn't taller than Sam, but was bigger than Dean in build.

"Demon!" she called back, and grunted when it came barreling toward her like a linebacker. The demon grabbed her around the waist and slammed her straight through the bathroom curtains and against the wall. Her head smacked against the tile and the world tilted on its axis, becoming hazy and slow, yet too fast for any coherent thought to pass through her brain but fightback-fightback.

She threw a disoriented punch that caught the demon's jaw, which only slowed him down for a couple seconds. Until he landed three more hits, then a final blow that could've broken her nose, and had her head snapping back into the same tile. This time the large fist connected with an audible crack, knocking her out cold.

And she slumped down into the dirty tub. The demon watched with satisfaction as the curtain fell partially over her unconscious form.
Pam wasted no time in saying the incantation in the closest Winchester's ears, but when she heard the loud crash in the bathroom, she immediately searched for some kind of weapon. She knew the boys had a knife that could kill it, but she didn't have the luxury of time to pad down the floor for it, nor could she go to Elena now.

The crashes stopped, and Pamela could hear him trying to sneak up on her. He might be a demon, but he walked like an elephant.

"I can hear you," she taunted. "What, you afraid of a skirt?"

And then he grabbed her. She managed to catch him in the jaw and kick him back a couple steps, but the demon dragged her back, picking her up and throwing her on the dresser. She could hear the candles rolling off and was glad none of them singed her, but it did no use.

White-hot pain flared between her ribbed, cutting upward into her lung, she was sure. It was a knife, razor sharp, and now stained with the blood oozing from her midsection.

"Pamela!" she heard Sam call her name, and she was relieved when the painful grip in her hair was gone. She heard some kind of struggling.

But then it was over, and Sam was beside her telling her she needed a doctor when all she needed was a goddamn drink to calm her nerves.

"I'm not gunna die," she said aloud to him, "Not here."

"Pam, you need to go to a hospital."

She gripped his collar both to make him listen, and to support herself.

"Make me a drink, Grumpy."

He ignored her, damn him, and tried leading her to his vacant bed. But instead she went to Dean and recited the incantation to wake him.

"Where's Elena?" Sam asked sharply, a note of panic in his voice.

"Oh God." The words fell from Pam's mouth without thinking. "Check the bathroom. Now!"

Dean gasped for air, waking with a start. The first thing he noticed was the broken window, then Pamela sitting on the other bed with her hand over a wound that was staining her hands.

"What happened?" he asked quickly.

"Dean!" Sam called. The sense of urgency in Sam's tone made Dean reluctantly leave Pamela and head to the bathroom. What he saw made his breath catch and his lungs constrict.

Sam half knelt with Elena limp in his arms as her legs hung off the sides of the tub. Dean rushed to them and quickly took in the state of the bathroom. There was a scuffed and chipped tile on the wall with a few hairline cracks smeared with red, and at the bottom of the tub was a pool of blood beginning to run down the drain.

"I've got her," Dean said, only semi-aware of the tremor in his voice. Sam carefully slid her into his brother's arms and gently tucked a hand under to shift her head onto Dean's shoulder. His hand came away bloody.

Both stared at it blankly.
"Help Pam," Dean commanded, snapping them both out of it. Sam left him to hurry into the other room, while Dean made sure Elena was fully in his grasp before carrying her out to his now empty bed so he could assess the damage. He laid her down and turned on the bedside lamp. She looked pale, with blood streaming from her nose and matting her hair.

He wiped what he could away and checked her heart rate. Something plummeted into his stomach like a stone at feeling how slow it was. With the pillowcase beginning to stain crimson, he eased his hand behind her head in a vain attempt to stop it, wrapping his other arm around her shoulders.

"Both of you need a hospital, now," he said to Pam.

"I'm not going to a goddamn hospital," she said. "You two take her."

"We're not leaving you alone," Sam said, shaking his head.

"That's the problem with you Winchesters," she said, shifting painfully. It was starting to get increasingly hard for her to breathe. "You never leave me the fuck alone."

"Pam, I'm so sorry," he trailed.

"Stop," she said, and took off her sunglasses.

"You don't deserve this."

"Goddamn right I don't," she said shakily, glancing at each of them. "I told you I didn't want anything to do with this…tell that bastard Bobby Singer to go to hell for…ever introducing me to you two in the first place. Now go take that poor girl to a hospital before you kill her too."

She was satisfied to see them both flinch. Dean immediately continued scooping Elena up and carried her to the Impala, leaving the front door wide open in his haste. Pam then shifted her attention to Sam and gave him a hard look.

"Come here," she beckoned him close to her. He was confused, but came close enough so she could grab his shoulder and speak quietly into this ear.

"I know what you did to that demon," she said, crying softly. "I can feel what's inside of you…"

Her breath was hot against his ear as her voice shook.

"If you think you have good intentions, think again."

When Dean came back into the room, Pamela was dead. Sam was sitting on the bed, a tortured look on his face.

"Sam," he called. His brother looked up, wide-eyed. "I need to take Elena. She's still losing blood."

Sam's brows furrowed, but after a moment of indecision he said, "You go, I'll take care of Pam. Meet you there later."

Dean nodded. He hated to leave Pamela like that. He really did. The pain and guilt was eating at him. But he grabbed his stuff and ran the few feet outside the room to the Impala, where he could see Elena shifting in the backseat.

"No, no, no, don't move," he said, stilling her hand that was trying to grab hold of the seat for leverage, even though she couldn't lift her body up.
"Dean?" she asked, eyes unfocused.

"Yeah, Lena, you're hurt." He laid her arm back down. "I'm taking you to the hospital."

"...hospital?"

Looks like he wasn't the only one with a concussion. He slid into the driver's seat and pulled out of the parking lot. The GPS on his phone said the nearest Emergency Room was six minutes away, fifteen to twenty with the current traffic. At this time there shouldn't have been any, but apparently there was an accident on the road blocking traffic.

Fuck it all.

"You're okay," he said in calming tones. "You're gunna be okay."

She was still losing blood. The towel he put under her head was half soaked. From the rearview mirror he could see her blinking lazily up at him. Her eyelids were slowly drooping closed.

"Elena!" he said, louder and harsher than he'd intended. But it had the desired effect as her eyes opened wide. "Stay awake for me, babe. Don't fall asleep."

"Dean..." Her voice was so weak, he barely heard it. He glanced at her through the mirror, seeing her trying so hard to keep her eyes open.

"We're almost there, just hold on," he said, and pressed the accelerator. ...If you're really up there, damn it...you better not let her fucking die.

Dean heard her small pained sounds and didn't even bother looking at how fast he was going. He would've ran all the stoplights too, if not for the traffic on one of the crossing streets blocking the flow of the main road.

"Damn it!" he shouted and smacked the steering wheel in pure frustration.

Please...

"Dean."

He jumped in his seat at the male voice, just managing to keep his foot on the brake, and looked over at Castiel.

"What the hell, man? Fucking with my life once today ain't enough for you?" he exclaimed.

"Pull over," said the angel.

"What?"

"It will be easier to keep from prying eyes away from the road."

Dean gave him an incredulous look.

"Like hell I am! She's hurt, no thanks to you 'sending us in' to deal with your shit!"

"I suggest you pull over."

Dean glared at him, but after precious seconds listening to Elena's labored breathing (and the red traffic light not getting any greener), he pulled the car over the boundary of where pavement met dirt
and drove farther off to the side, to make it seem like they were stopping to fix a tire or something. Castiel immediately appeared in the backseat, sitting on the edge by Elena's legs.

"What're you going to do?" Dean demanded. Castiel didn't answer, merely touched her forehead, and in due time pulled away.

Dean watched her intently—watched the color return to her face, which relaxed from its pained expression. He brushed her cheek with his fingers and felt the warmth there.

"She will be all right now," the angel said, and left the car. He appeared a couple yards away. Dean studied her face a little longer, then stepped out of the car. He didn't close the door, just stood by it and stepped out enough to address the angel.

"Why?" he asked.

"The hospital wouldn't have been able to help her in time."

That made Dean falter.

"How the hell do you know that?"

Cas only gave him a slightly pitying look. Dean's frown deepened.

If that was true, then he would've failed her. Like they failed Pamela.

"Why would you care?" he asked. For all the angel claimed to "sympathize" with Dean's plight and try to help him, it had always been with the Apocalypse in sight. Elena had nothing to do with his supposed holy mission. As far as the angels were concerned, she and Pamela were (or would have been) casualties of war. That's if they were even worth thinking about, if Junkless' thoughts of humanity were anything to go by.

Still, Castiel turned to him with something of a smile on his face, and said,

"Some prayers can be answered, Dean."

She woke to a room she didn't recognize. It was dark outside the window, but two lamps lit up the motel room. She'd seen enough to know what kind of place this was. It wasn't the one they'd been in before, though. And she didn't see anyone. Not until Dean, sleeping next to her on the bed. He was still fully clothed, minus shoes, but definitely snoozing as both of them lay over the covers.

Elena smiled and sleepily reached out for him, stroking his cheek that was prickly with stubble. His green eyes slid open and found hers. A soft smile touched his lips as he grasped her hand and kissed her palm.

"Where are we?" she asked. Her voice rasped with that sleepy look he'd grown fond of.

"Still in Wyoming," he said. "Town called Basin."

He'd wanted her to sleep more comfortably than in the backseat of a car, and this was the closest town—only ten minutes out from Greybull.

"Okay…what happened?"

Dean's expression faded.
"What do you remember?" he asked. She thought about it, her hand moving to his chest while his hold slid to her wrist.

"Well…pretty sure there was a demon," she said slowly. "I got Hulk-smashed into a wall…and it's all a bit fuzzy after that."

Elena smiled weakly. He didn't.

"Dean?" she asked when his eyes fell, avoiding hers. So she rolled onto her side toward him and pressed the palm of her hand to his cheek. "What happened?"

After some hesitation, he looked up at her and was tempted to grab her hand again.

"I tried to take you to the hospital." Elena blinked. She hadn't expected that.

"…That bad, huh?" His frown only deepened, so she continued onto her next question.

"You tried to?"

"You lost a lot of blood, and it was taking too long to get there." Dean paused. With effort, he said, "It, uh…it was Cas."

Her brows furrowed in confusion.

"Castiel? What'd he do?"

Dean was silent, watching her through a conflicted, pained gaze. It was worrying her.

"Dean…" she started.

"He healed you," he said, which confused her even more. She supposed it made sense that she was healed somehow; no more bruises, no headache she would've definitely had after getting her head bashed in. But it didn't make much sense why Castiel would do it if Dean had been on his way to a hospital.

"He…why?" Finally, Dean's eyes closed as he sighed and pulled her hand away from his face.

"Because I wouldn't have made it in time," he said. "I'm…I'm sorry, Lena."

The weight of his words took time to settle, but after a while, she sat up a little and propped her head up with her hand.

"For what?" she asked. "For saving me?"

"I didn't—"

"Stop," Elena stopped him with a thumb she pressed to his lips sternly, even as her hand came to rest along his jaw line. "You're the one who got me out of there…and it's my own fault anyway. I…I fell asleep on the job. Damn stupid, I know."

She moved her thumb away from his mouth and swept tenderly along his cheek, even if her eyes avoided his in shame. Dean had to shake his head.

You're unbelievable.

He knew he'd been avoiding her. Since Nebraska, he couldn't readily look her in the eyes. Hell, now
that she knew everything he figured she would want her space away from him. But her worry—that was real. Her attempt to ease his pain after they were nearly killed in the cemetery, in spite of knowing who Alastair was and how he'd "trained" Dean—that was real.

It was hard for him, coming to terms with that. It wasn't out of pity or obligation.

Despite everything he'd done to push her away, Dean kept coming back because when she wasn't there, it wasn't right. And every time Elena let him back in. Why, he had no fucking clue.

Tonight was his idea, his fault, no matter what she said. And after all that time keeping her at arms length, he'd almost lost her anyway.

So Dean kissed her on impulse, long and slow.

It was like relieving a craving he didn't remember he had.

He pulled her closer and she eagerly followed. Her hands wound into his hair as his snuck under her shirt and splayed on her back. Her legs tangled with his as he partially rolled over her, trapping her under his warmth. Elena could feel his fingers pressing against her skin and holding her to him in a way he hadn't before. Almost like he needed it, maybe (she dared to hope) needed her. She trailed away from his mouth and kissed his cheek, down his neck and toward his ear.

"It's okay," she said softly, and threaded her fingers through his short hair. He didn't answer her, but his lips lingered on the crook of her neck, breathing deeply. Elena could feel his rapid heartbeat and it made her own heart clench. She wished he would stop blaming himself for everything that was either some stupid decision on someone else's part, or something just out of his control.

And then she felt incredibly guilty for adding to his load.

"I'm okay," she added. "Because of you."

Dean let go of the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. It wasn't true, but at least she didn't blame him like Pamela did.

Elena guided his face back to hers and kissed him slowly, until the beat she felt through her skin calmed with her own. Eventually his hold on her eased until they were just lying there, comfortably. The low hum of the air conditioning was all that broke the quiet.

"Dean…what happened with the reaper?" she asked after a while, tilting her head up to see his face. "Did you stop Alastair?"

Shit, he thought. She still didn't know.

And the guilt was back.

"Yeah…the angels have him holed up somewhere."

"Then where's Sam…and Pamela?"

Dean sighed heavily. His hold on her loosened as he partially rolled back to his side. It gave her space to move away if she wanted to.

"Sam…he's taking her to Cheyenne, about five hours out." Elena gave him a puzzled look.

"But…she lives in Illinois." A sense of dread began to creep up her spine the more she watched his face. "…What happened?"
It took him a moment, but no matter how much he hated this, he had to tell her the truth.

"The demon stabbed her, Lena…she wouldn't go to a hospital."

The memory was still raw.

"…Tell that bastard Bobby Singer to go to hell for…ever introducing me to you two in the first place. Now go take that poor girl to a hospital before you kill her too."

"Pam's gone. Her only family left is her grandmother in Cheyenne," he said, and forced himself to watch Elena's wide eyes well up. Her breath caught and her brows furrowed in pain.

And she surprised Dean by reaching for him after squeezing her eyes shut, her arms winding tightly around his chest and under his shoulders. She buried her face into the crook of his neck, and all he could do was hold her just as tight.

Dean kissed her hair, and her cheek, and she wept.

"What the hell are we doing?" she whispered raggedly. It took him a bit to think of an answer.

"Trying to stop the Apocalypse from happening."

She scoffed, and it ended in tears.

"Bang up job we're doing so far."
XXIV: City of the Angels

Similar to a hunter's funeral, Pamela's was small. Maybe ten people at most. A few "coworkers," so to speak—fellow psychics she'd known as friends, Bobby, the Winchesters, Elena, and Pam's grandmother. Closed casket. They each gave Meredith Barnes their respects for her granddaughter and laid down a rose.

For the first time since she was fourteen, Elena prayed. Silently, but she did. She prayed to God or whoever was running the show that Pam was in a better place than this shithole.

*I'm sorry I never got the chance to say I'm sorry*, she thought. *And I'm sorry I couldn't stop this.*

It was her fault, after all. She made a stupid, stupid mistake, and it got Pam killed. It almost got both of them killed.

Tears would inevitably fall, but she let Dean pull her against him and lead her to the car when the service was over.

Sam took over behind the wheel for his brother, who was beyond the point of exhaustion. Elena was too, but her body wouldn't allow her to sleep with how the car bounced on the gravel road.

"Ruby said she'd meet us just outside of Cheyenne, said she's got some leads," said Sam. Dean made a noncommittal sound.

"Look, I know she's not exactly on your Christmas list, but if she can help us get to Lilith—"

"Man, work with Ruby or don't, I don't really give a rat's ass," said Dean.

"What's your problem?" Sam asked. Elena could've scoffed, but it wouldn't be worth the effort.

"Pamela didn't want anything to do with this, Sam, and we dragged her back in."

"She knew what was at stake."

"Yeah, stopping 'the end of the world,'" Dean shook his head. Elena's words from the night before echoed in his head. "And we're doing such a good job of it."

Sam sighed.

"Dean—"

"I'm tired of burying friends, Sam."

"...Look, we catch a fresh trail—"

"And we follow it, I know." Dean glanced out the window and watched the night fly by. "I don't know, I'm just tired, that's all."

Sam gave his brother a hard look.

"Well get angry."
That pissed Elena off a bit.

"We've got a job to do, is that it?" she said. "Just 'shrug' it off?"

"No," said Sam, catching her heated stare in the rearview. "So her death won't be for nothing."

They stopped at the motel of the night with duffel bags heavy on their shoulders. But just a few more steps would bring them to more or less soft beds.

That wasn't what greeted them when Dean turned on the light, though.

"Oh great," he groaned. Uriel stood in front of them, arms crossed, while Castiel leaned against the far wall.

"Winchester, Winchester, and…not Winchester," Uriel greeted, though the snark in his tone was evident. "You are needed."

"We just got back from 'needed!'" Dean tossed his bag away in sheer frustration.

"You mind your tone with me," the angel warned.

"No. You mind your damn done with us," Dean growled, and it took Sam and Elena on either side to stop him from stalking forward.

"We just got back from Pamela's funeral," Sam explained while holding out a placating hand.

"Pamela. You know, psychic Pamela?" said Dean. "Cas, you remember her, you burned her eyes out."

Castiel looked over at Dean with something akin to a frown. Elena studied his face, and though usually unreadable, she saw discomfort there. As if he'd rather not be here talking to them. Why, she didn't know, but if she were a betting woman (which she was), she'd put money on it being about what they were "needed" for.

"Remember that?" Dean continued. "Good times. Then she died saving one of your precious seals. So maybe you could stop pushing us around like chess pieces, for five fucking minutes!"

Uriel remained impassive, but his self-satisfied expression made Elena silently seethe as well as sick to her stomach.

"We raised you out of Hell for our purposes," he said smoothly. Dean cocked his head to the side.

"Yeah, what were those again?" he asked. "What exactly do you want from me?"

"Start with gratitude."

Elena glanced up and saw Dean's jaw clench, his whole body tense in preparation to throw a swing. So she subtly took his balled fist in her hand. After a moment, his relaxed enough to thread his fingers with hers. But she knew he was one more snide comment away from losing the tenuous grip he had on his temper.

"Dean, I know this is difficult to understand," Cas began. It seemed as if he was trying to diffuse the situation, but Uriel just kept pushing it.

"And we don't care," he finished. The look on Castiel's face said otherwise, and Elena knew Dean
caught it. Which was probably the only reason why he hadn't completely snapped.

"Seven angels from the garrison have been murdered," said Uriel. "The last one was killed tonight."

"Demons?" Dean asked. The angel nodded. "How're they doin' it?"

"We don't know."

"I'm sorry, but what do you want us to do about it?" Sam asked. "I mean, a demon with the juice to ice angels is a bit out of our league, right?"

"We can handle the demons," Uriel said, very matter-of-factly.

"Once we find whoever it is," Castiel added.

"So you need our help…hunting a demon?" Dean asked.

"Not quite…we have Alastair."

"Great. He should be able to name your triggerman."

"But he won't talk," said Cas. "Alastair's will is very strong. We've arrived at an…impasse."

Dean's smile was wry.

"Yeah well, he's like a black belt in torture. I mean, you guys are out of your league."

"That's why we've come to his student," said Uriel. "You happen to be the most qualified interrogator we've got."

Elena's chest seized along with her grip on Dean's hand. His responded by tightening on hers.

"Dean," Castiel implored, "You're our only hope."

"No," Dean refused. Point blank. "No way…you can't ask me to do this, Cas…not this."

Uriel shook his head, smirked and stepped towards Dean, leaning forward.

"Who said anything…about asking?"

Elena looked up at Dean in alarm, but her eyes only met Sam's. She gasped and realized her hand was empty.

Dean was gone, and so were the angels.

"Damn it!" Sam exclaimed, gritting his teeth.

"Sam." Elena's voice was choked as a weight fell in the pit of her stomach. They looked to one another.

"What the hell do we do?" she asked. His expression hardened.

"We find him."

So the bastard was tied and up to his eyeballs in magic symbols. Fine. But no demon or angel was getting him to do this. As far as he was concerned, both Junkless and Cas could kiss his ass.
"This is too much to ask," said Castiel, "I know. But we have to ask it."

Dean nodded and turned toward Uriel.

"I want to talk to Cas alone."

After a moment, the angel replied, "I think I'll go seek Revelation…for further orders."

Dean allowed a somewhat cocky grin to mask his unease.

"Well get some donuts while you're out."

To his surprise, Uriel laughed aloud.

"This one just won't quit, will he?" he asked with a smile. "I think I'm starting to like you, boy."

Dean blinked, and the angel was gone. He rolled his eyes and turned back to Castiel.

"You guys don't walk enough. You're gunna get flabby."

The remaining angel was silent.

"You know," said Dean, "I'm starting to think Junkless has a better sense of humor than you do."

"Uriel is the funniest angel in the garrison," Castiel replied. "Ask anyone."

Dean sighed. Right to the point then.

"What's going on, Cas?" he asked. "Since when does Uriel put a leash on you?"

"My superiors have begun to question my sympathies."

"Your sympathies?"

Castiel leveled him with a look.

"I was getting too close to the humans in my charge…you," he said. "They feel I've begun to express emotions. Doorways to doubt. This can impair my judgment."

Looking back, Dean saw how the angels might get that idea. He supposed Cas had taken a chance in more ways than one. Most recently being how he'd healed Elena. Dean still wasn't sure if Castiel did it out of "sympathy," or if it was some ploy to get Dean on the literal side of the angels when they eventually came to him for help. Today, for instance.

"Well, tell Uriel or whoever," he said, walking past Castiel and toward that door. Just the look of it was bringing on anxiety. Unwanted memories flashed to the surface, and it was all he could do to stuff it down.

"You do not want me doing this, trust me."

"Want it, no," said Castiel. "But I have been told we need it."

She couldn't concentrate on the words that kept blurring on the page. Even the pictures etched in deep black lines and scribbles seemed to float right off, not forming correctly in her vision.
"There's nothing," Sam said, "Nothing. Unbelievable."

Elena bit her lip. She could feel a headache coming on and pressed at the bridge of her nose, as if that could relieve the pressure.

"We could summon them well enough, but tracing them…"

"I can't find anything." Elena admitted. Her shoulders sagged with the helplessness she felt. Every time Dean needed her—really needed her—she couldn't do a damn thing. Not one damn thing.

"Fuck this," Sam muttered and pulled out his cell phone. That earned Elena's attention.

"Sam…who are you calling?" The sinking feeling in her stomach at the way he glanced over at her told her that she already knew the answer.

"I called her earlier and left a message," he said, and raised the phone to his ear once he was finished dialing. "If she got it—"

"Ruby. You're calling Ruby," Elena clarified. "She have some kind of angel GPS or something?"

Sam didn't answer, just kept waiting on the line.

"You know, you're a good liar," she nodded. Her hands went to her hips. "Too bad I've learned to tell when Winchesters are trying to pull a fast one."

His gaze remained on the far wall, but Elena stepped into his line of vision with her arms crossed.

"Fine. We can 'not talk' about what's going with you later, but I doubt Ruby is going to have the answers—"

"You don't know that," Sam cut her off. "Look, we don't have the time or the options to argue about this—Ruby, hey."

Elena silently seethed as she watched him talk to the demon presumably on the other line and give her the gist of what was happening.

"You know what you have to do."

Sam gave Elena a cursory glance.

"I know," he said, though he didn't know how he was going to get her to go along with it, after what she'd already seen. "We'll meet you."

He snapped the phone off, and Elena regarded him with raised brows.

"We're meeting her."

"Lena—"

"I didn't know this was a unanimous vote."

"Look—"

"No," she said firmly, pinning him with a glare. "You look. I don't know if you remember, but a demon killed my father. I'm not about to trust any of them as far as I can shoot them with the fucking Colt."
Sam's tight expression suddenly turned to surprise as he tensed and reached out for her.

"Elena!"

Her eyes widened, but she was too slow to turn around.

"You ask me to walk to that door, and go through it," Dean said, his hands shaking, "You won't like what comes back out."

"Calculated risks." Dean heard Uriel's voice and immediately tensed in frustration.

"I told you I wanted—" The words died on his lips when he saw her. Her wide gray eyes were afraid until she saw him.

"Dean." Relief colored her tone. She would've moved toward him, if not for the hand gripping her shoulder.

"Let her go," he demanded.

"This isn't necessary," Castiel said at the same time.

"I think it is," Uriel said, his smirk firmly in place. Dean almost smiled at how Elena's fear was replaced by an angry glower toward the angel, but Dean's icy glare deepened when Uriel grabbed her by the hair, an instance of pain showing on her face as she reached up to grab the angel's wrist.

"A little incentive goes a long way."

"You're an asshole," she ground out. Uriel glanced down at her with a bored expression.

"And you should shut up."

"Hey," Dean barked, finally getting Uriel's attention. "You gunna make me repeat myself?"

The corner of Uriel's mouth quirked upwards.

"Sure, you can have her," he said. "When you do your job."

"You don't have to worry about that." Uriel seemed to study Dean's face for a moment before a chuckle accompanied his slow smirk.

"See, Castiel?" He let go of Elena and sent her stumbling forward without deigning to touch her.

"Such simple creatures. It makes it too easy."

Dean caught her and did a quick once-over to make sure she was all right, then put himself between her and Uriel. He rattled off a list of what he would need and suggested Uriel get it if he wanted Dean to get started. Uriel's smirk only deepened, but he did leave to fulfill the request. Once the angel was gone, Dean rounded on the other one.

"So this was the plan? I don't come quietly and you threaten me?" he said, first in anger, then in suspicion. "...Is that why you saved her, to use her as leverage when you needed it?"

"That was not my intention—"

"But it didn't hurt, did it?" Elena spoke up and stepped from behind Dean. Her voice was quieter than his, but the accusation and mistrust was obvious in her terse expression.
"No," said Castiel, after a pause. "That was never my motivation."

His blue gaze clashed with hard grey. For all angels were terribly powerful beings, Cas didn't seem to know how to lie very well. The subtle shift in his eyes that usually indicated his discomfort… wasn't there.

"Hmm." Dean's look was wry as he shrugged, earning Castiel's attention. "Looks like we're not the only ones being played, then."

It was a tense moment before Uriel returned with a cart that he slid over to Dean.

"I believe that's everything."

He looked down at the various instruments while fighting to look impassive. Elena, on the other hand, stared at the knives, holy water, and other more unfamiliar tools with a mounting rate of panic. Dean looked up at Uriel coolly.

"If you think I'm leaving her in here with you, find another prosecutor."

Elena was getting sick of the sound of that angel's self-satisfied chuckle.

"I trust you have this well in hand, Castiel," he said, meeting Castiel's gaze expectantly. "I suppose I'll seek Revelation after all."

"Do me a favor and stay there," Dean got in one more biting remark before the angel disappeared. Elena was visibly relieved, but when she looked up at him it was with worry.

"Dean—" He grasped her upper arms and met her gaze firmly.

"Stay away from the door, no matter what you hear."

"Dean," she shook her head incredulously. Did he seriously think she would be okay with him doing this?

But the fact that he didn't have a choice fell heavily on her. Intentions or otherwise, Castiel would not allow them to leave. He had his orders.

"I mean it, Elena."

He was coiled so tightly, she saw it in the tenseness of his jaw and the sharpness of his eyes trained on hers.

He would do this, even if it broke him in the end. If he could be that strong, then she refused to cry.

Dean nodded, reading the understanding on her face, and surprised her with a hard kiss that was still somewhat tender. Not a goodbye, but something akin to it. Just in case she didn't recognize the man that came out afterwards.

"Wait for me," he said, when she held him to her with a hand at the back of his neck. Somehow, those words did little to comfort her this time. But despite herself, she nodded.

"Be careful."

It was his turn to nod, but he pulled away her hand and forced himself to walk away from her. He took the time to examine each of the tools on the cart and made sure he had everything, including Ruby's knife, before pushing the cart toward the door. Castiel watched and not for the first time in
the past twenty-four hours, he truly felt conflicted.

"For what it's worth," he trailed. His tone remained void of emotion, but there was an earnestness in it. Sincerity. "I would give anything…not to have you do this."

He couldn't see Dean's expression, but he could sense the man's inner turmoil. He felt when Dean chose to shove it all down as far as it would go and hold onto the only emotion that would allow him to step into that room. His hate for the demon.

When the screams started Elena had to remind herself they weren't Dean's. But that just made it worse. She closed her eyes but drew the line at covering her ears as she sat on the metal table in the center of the room. She refused to appear weak, even in the angel's presence. Castiel stood like a monument leaning against the wall, and every once in a while he would glance at her, watching her reactions.

"It was not my intention to bring you here," he said eventually, "for this reason."

"…Wow," she somewhat drawled. "Angels are capable of guilt, then."

That silenced him, but she really didn't particularly care for his shitty attempt at an apology.

"I understand how this will affect him."

"Have you ever been human, Castiel?"

Again, his silence was answer enough.

"You might think you understand what he went through, what it's costing him to do this," she continued with a shaky sigh. "But you really, really don't."

Not even she understood. Not fully. Never in her life had she been to Hell. She hadn't even been tortured physically before, let alone…

But it was one of her fears.

"Do you feel guilt?" Castiel's question took her off guard. His curiosity only thinly veiled his own inner conflict. She looked away from his probing look, like he could see through her if he wanted too.

Goddamn angels.

"Sam, my uncle…we all tried to save him," Elena restrained a sigh. "But we couldn't get him out of the deal."

If they had just found Lilith in time, Dean would never have died.

"There was very little you could have done."

"Don't you try to console me," she snapped. Maybe she was being ungrateful. He did get Dean out of the pit, journeyed through Hell to get to him. But he only did it to bring in a new recruit—another soldier they could command to clean up their messes. Castiel saved her. Why, she didn't know.

But he let Pam die.

"Saying 'there was nothing you could do' is a copout," she added. "You always have a choice."
"Even if that decision is futile?" Castiel questioned knowingly.

"Dean would probably tell you the point is you making the choice."

The sound of the demon's screaming broke Elena's concentration, bringing it to the door she was so tempted to peek inside.

"Tell me something," she said, though her attention remained at the door. Castiel was quiet, but she knew he was listening. "Why not Pam?"

"I…don't under—"

"Why me and not Pamela?" She hopped off the table and turned to him angrily, eyes flashing. "If you're so sympathetic, why couldn't you take ten seconds and—oh, I don't know—heal the woman you blinded and bled out for your fucking seal?"

The angel stared at her somewhat blankly at the sudden onslaught, but his conflict was beginning to emerge. His lack of an answer was pissing her off though. It might have been Elena's fault that the demon got to Pam, but the angel deliberately chose to do nothing, or simply didn't think she was worth the effort, even with all the power in the world. That was enough to make Elena wish she was strong enough to knock an angel's lights out.

"Nothing to say?" she asked incredulously. "You usually have a bullshit answer for everything."

Just as Castiel opened his mouth to respond, the white artificial lights dimmed and flickered. Immediately Elena was on guard, especially when one of the lights short circuited and blew out.

"Anna," Cas sighed, and glanced over his shoulder at the red-haired angel.

"Hello, Castiel." Her voice was smooth as she casually stood before them. She acknowledged the other wide-eyed woman with a ghost of a smile and a slight nod. "Elena."

"Um…hey," she replied uncertainly. Last time she'd seen Anna was in a cosmic flash of light from her grace that probably vaporized her human body. "You look…good."

"Your human body," Castiel trailed, though it didn't sound as if he was very surprised.

"Was destroyed," Anna acknowledged and drew closer to them. "But I guess I'm sentimental. Called in some old favors."

"You shouldn't be here," Cas said with another sigh, though he kept his back to her. "We still have orders to kill you."

"Somehow, I don't think you'll try."

She made her way around him to stand in his line of vision, though her focus was the door. It once again caught Elena's attention as well.

"Where's Uriel?" asked Anna.

"He went to receive Revelation."

"…Right." She nodded minutely and turned to face him. "Why are you letting Dean do this?"

Castiel hesitated, knowing Elena's eyes were on him now along with Anna's. He moved away from both of them with his hands in his pockets.
"He's doing God's work."

"Torturing?" she asked. "That's God's work?"

Anna shook her head while Elena watched Castiel, waiting for his reactions. Maybe she couldn't get through to him, but perhaps another angel could.

"Stop him, Cas. Please, before you ruin the one real weapon you have."

Before Elena could interject that Dean wasn't their weapon, Castiel spoke firmly.

"Who are we to question the will of God?"

"Unless this isn't His will."

"Then where do the orders come from?"

"I don't know," Anna admitted, though it sounded to Elena like she knew. "One of our superiors, maybe. But not Him."

Finally, Castiel turned to her at such a bold, thinly veiled accusation against one of their own. She stepped closer to him and met his aloof gaze with her own.

"The Father you love, you think He wants this? You think He'd ask this of you? You think this is righteous?"

The screams they could hear coming from the other room only served to punctuate her words. He closed his eyes and leaned the palm of his hand on the table.

"What you're feeling?" said Anna, "It's called doubt."

She boldly touched his hand with hers, and his eyes opened, filled with uncertainty at her actions and what she was telling him.

"These orders are wrong, and you know it. But you can do the right thing," she continued. "You're afraid, Cas. I was too. But together, we can—"

"Together," Castiel interrupted, and abruptly pulled his hand away from her. "I am nothing like you. You fell! Go."

"Cas…" Her eyes were pleading, but he only glared at her.

"Go."

Elena blinked, and Anna was gone. Where Castiel was once stern and unyielding, now he once again looked uncertain.

"You're one stubborn son of a bitch, you know that?" she said. He glanced up at her, annoyance showing in his features and the set of his shoulders, until crashing sounds coming from the next room made him pause. Something wasn't right.

Elena caught the change and looked to him in alarm.

"What—"

He disappeared before her eyes, and suddenly she could hear struggle cease in the other room. That
didn't stop her from going to the door and opening it as fast as she could, and going to Dean when she recovered from her shock at seeing him prone on the floor, bloody and unconscious. She inclined his head from the cement floor while Castiel fought off Alastair.

How he got free wasn't important now. What was important was Dean bleeding from cuts and bruises on his face and how his breathing was labored. The fact that he was breathing at all calmed her panic, but when Alastair spoke, it sent chills up her spine.

"I really wish I knew how to kill you, but all I can do is…send you back to Heaven."

Elena whipped around to see the demon holding Castiel against the wall, as if the angel were stuck there, though he struggled. He bled from his mouth and from a blow to the head. When Alastair began reciting an incantation that had Cas's eyes glowing white, his grace beginning to pour out of his vessel, Elena was forced to make a decision.

She gently laid Dean back down and ran to the cart, grabbing the first knife she saw. It wasn't Ruby's knife, but the holy water she dumped onto both sides was searing enough into the demon's spine that his attention was drawn away from the angel.

"Oh," he drawled, rolling his shoulders. "How cute."

Though it didn't help Elena when he elbowed her in the throat and backhanded her hard, causing her to stumble backwards into the cart. Its contents spilled over to the side and onto her on its way to the floor, the clanging metal ringing in her ears as the door was once again thrown open. She didn't hear it. But she did hear Alastair as he stepped into her line of sight.

"Hello, doll face. I don't think we properly met last time." The demon started towards her slowly. "But I've seen that pretty face before…so many times."

"What?" she asked weakly. Everything was still hazy in her disoriented state, and she was pretty sure some of those tools hit her on the head.

"Dean didn't mention our little…escapades down under, did he?" asked Alastair. "Oh, I had a lot of fun. He did too, after a while…here, I'll show you—"

And then she watched with wide eyes as her blurred, unfocused vision settled on Sam. He stood in front of her with his arm held out. Alastair was forced against the wall by an unseen force, angry and muttering obscenities. It was a few seconds before her muddled thoughts cleared enough to realize it was Sam that was controlling the demon. He spared her a look, and she didn't like what she saw in his eyes. They were wild, though his stance was confident in the power he wielded.

"Help Dean," he directed. Elena wanted to ask him what the fuck he was doing. But right now, Dean's life was more important.

"Who's murdering the angels?" she heard Sam ask. Her back was turned away from it all as she returned to Dean's side, smoothing her hand against his bloody cheek after she made sure of his pulse.

"Dean? Dean, hey." She tapped his cheek lightly but persistently. His breathing was still labored, and it was only then she noticed the red marks on his neck right under his chin.

"You think I'm gunna tell you anything?" Alastair chuckled at Sam.

"Yeah, I do," came the dark reply.
"Son of a bitch," she muttered. The demon definitely tried to crush his windpipe. And from the knot on the back of his head, he probably had another concussion. Elena struggled to support Dean's heavy torso against her without jostling him too badly, but if for a brief moment, he woke coughing and gasping at the intense pain in his chest and abdomen.

"Easy, easy," she breathed, rubbing his chest with a soothing hand. She ignored the demon's agonized sounds and Sam's interrogation. "You're gunna be okay. We're getting out of here."

"Al'stair..." he managed to choke out.

Elena risked looking back over her shoulder and watched the demon reveal that it wasn't Lilith killing the angels.

"It's okay." For the first time, she lied to him. It was instinctive, and she regretted it the moment just after it came out, but she did anyway. Because Dean didn't need to worry into injuring himself further by trying to stop his brother from doing something they both knew couldn't be stopped.

"Cas is handling it."

Dean's eyes grew confused, though he didn't have the energy to see for himself. He lost consciousness again, and Elena no longer had him to distract her from what was going on behind her.

"Go ahead. Send me back," the demon spat. "...If you can."

Another chill coursed through her at the cold, superior look on Sam's face.

"I'm stronger than that now," he said. "Now I can kill."

Elena watched in muted horror. Not at Alastair as he died, but at Sam as he killed him. When it was over, she glanced at Castiel and saw what was probably her mirrored reaction. She leaned away when Sam approached. He must've seen the stark fear on her face because he backed up and forced his expression to soften, though it did naturally when he looked down at Dean.

"He needs a hospital," she said, hating the tremor in her voice. Sam nodded and got down to help carry his brother.

"Let's go."

The car ride was painfully silent. The ER wasn't, only because of all the commotion happening around them as the medics carted Dean in. Sam and Elena waited as he filled out his brother's medical information, beside one another, but the wall was evident. They were shown to Dean's room hours later and sat in chairs on either side of the bed. The monitors and the IV drip were the only sounds that broke the silence.

Dean had multiple lacerations, three fractured ribs (one broken) that were making it hard for him to breathe, and a concussion, not to mention the black eye or other cuts and bruises. It was painfully hard for both of them to watch, but still neither spoke. Elena did take Dean's hand in hers on the bed, brushing her fingers over his scratched knuckles.

She'd been there, standing just outside the door, and she couldn't do anything to prevent this? She'd been just outside the room. If it had been Sam, or Bobby, she couldn't help but think they would've spent less time arguing with angels and more time paying attention to what was happening inside that room.
Maybe Dad was right.

Elena's grip on Dean's hand tightened fractionally, but she calmed herself by focusing on the mechanical noises coming from the heart monitor. His was still beating strong, getting stronger by the hour.

Both she and Sam did see when Castiel stopped briefly at the door, then kept walking. Sam's expression hardened, his anger breaching the surface, and he got up out of his chair to follow the angel. Elena stayed. No matter how angry she was, she was also too exhausted to pick another fight. She could hear them though, and hated how she agreed with Sam despite not even wanting to look at him, let alone be near him. He did exactly what both Dean and the angels warned him not to do, and he didn't care.

It saved Dean, reason reminded her. Still. How the hell did he do it?

He woke up two days later. She was getting coffee when it happened. With the tube already removed from his mouth (though he still needed a smaller breathing tube running under his nose and behind his ears) he still tried to smile when he saw her, even if it was a terrible attempt. Sam had been with him. He turned still with visible relief and saw her though she didn't spare him a glance.

Dean closed his eyes when she kissed him on the forehead and weakly told her to stop crying, he was fine. Elena told him to shut up and helped him drink some water. Her coffee sat for hours after that, forgotten.

Sam was downstairs getting dinner in the food court (trying to sneak some "real food" in for Dean) when Dean finally had time to think. He didn't think of anything in particular. In fact, he tried not to. Instead he absently brushed his fingers through Elena's dark hair while she sat in a chair, dozing with her head pillowed by her crossed arms on the bed. He noticed how she only allowed herself to relax when his brother was out of the room.

"Are you all right?" The voice came from his left. He didn't have to look to know who it was, and didn't want to anyway.

"No thanks to you." His own voice was still tired, clogged and weak. He saw the angel shift out of the corner of his eye.

"You need to be more careful." Dean could've scoffed if it wouldn't hurt.

"You need to learn to manage a damn Devil's Trap."

"That's not what I mean," said Cas. "Uriel is dead."

Couldn't say he was disappointed.

"Was it the demons?"

"It was disobedience." Castiel looked over at him with the face of someone who knew he had been played, but was still determined. "He was working against us."

"Is it true?" Dean asked after a moment. The angel's expression turned quizzical. "Did I break the first seal? Did I start all this?"

"...Yes." Castiel forced himself to look away from the cold realization forming on the battered man's face. "When we discovered Lilith's plan for you, we laid siege to Hell, and we fought our way to get
"Jumpstarted the Apocalypse." Elena began to stir, reminding both of them to lower their voices.

"We were too late."

"...Why didn't you just leave me there, then?"

"It's not blame that falls on you, Dean," said Cas. "It's fate. The righteous man who begins it is the only one who can finish it. You have to stop it."

No. Dean didn't want it. He couldn't even get the information out of Alastair, let alone stop the world from ending. It was too much. He couldn't stop the tear that ran down his cheek.

"Lucifer? The Apocalypse?" he asked incredulously. "What does that mean?"

The angel remained quiet.

"Hey. Don't you go flying off, you son of a bitch. What does that mean?" This time, Elena did wake. She didn't speak, but was surprised to see Castiel.

"I don't know, Dean," he admitted. "They don't tell me much. Our fate...rests with you."

Elena wanted to know what the hell he was talking about, but seeing how confused and tormented Dean looked, she could guess it wasn't pleasant.

"Then you guys are screwed," he said coarsely. His eyes became glassy, and even with Elena there, he didn't try to fight it. He was tired. "It's too big, Cas...Alastair was right. I'm not all here, I'm not...not strong enough."

Dean looked away from Cas, away from Elena. The tears came down and he couldn't stop it.

"I guess I'm not the man either of our dads wanted us to be," he said. "...Find someone else."

Let someone else give more than they had to give.

"It's not me."

After a few beats of heavy silence, Castiel left with the distinct ruffle of feathered wings. It left Elena at a loss, uncertain and disheartened. Though she couldn't look at Dean like this for much longer.

She got up and sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand. He sniffed every once in a while, but eventually he rolled his head back towards her. It was obvious he was in pain, but she wished she knew what he was thinking. Instead of asking, she leant forward and kissed him softly on the cheek, right below his bruised eye as a tear ran down hers.

"I wish you could see...how I see you," she confessed.

For all his usual bravado, his gruff nature and human flaws, he was still the sixteen-year-old kid who helped her fix her mom's beat up, piece of shit car into a Camaro that ran like a dream. He was the kind of man that wouldn't think twice about driving to some Podunk town in the middle of nowhere. He'd help some girl he barely used to know find her father, and be there to collect her broken pieces when it all went to shit.

Dean was the kind of man that refused kindness—would rather she leave him, than risk her being
hurt because of him.

Tears pricked behind Elena's eyes as she realized she was probably at least half in love with this man.

Dean slowly let out a shaking breath, and said,

"What, a grade A fuckup?" He didn't manage the words without his voice cracking.

She frowned deeply, but threaded her fingers with his.

"A good man."

His kneejerk response was something of a scoff. He turned his head away and blinked glassy eyes. After a while, though, he was drawn back to her face that was etched in sadness.

"Not anymore," he said.

Elena shook her head.

"I wouldn't be here if that were true."

Dean hesitated, then let out a long breath through his nose.

"You've almost been killed because of me," he said. "Why haven't you cut and run already?"

The corner of her mouth twitched upward.

"Guess I'm just a stubborn bitch."

He closed his eyes with a huff just shy of a laugh and a barely there smile. It was enough for her just to see it; a plus for her to have been the one to put it there. He didn't need to know she was most likely at least half in love with him. Not yet.

Hell, knowing Dean, he probably already knew.

"You've never given up on me," she said, and gently squeezed his hand. "What makes you think I'm going to give up on you?"

Dean stared at her, and she knew he didn't want to believe her. Almost couldn't.

"Part of me's hopin' you would," he admitted. Elena tilted her head.

"And the other part?"

She watched him swallow. That twitch in his jaw and the way his eyes avoided her face told her more of his inward battle than any words.

Finally, he squeezed the hand covering his, but still didn't meet her eyes. Not because he wasn't sure of his answer, but because he didn't want to be. And in that moment Elena knew she'd made him understand.

"It's damn grateful you don't."

She allowed herself a small smile.

*Maybe things have changed.*
Wheel in the Sky

XXV: Wheel in the Sky

Dean watched her shaky movements every time she got up to get him more ice, or talked to the nurse about how much he was allowed to have of the (fantastic) drugs he was getting, or when she helped him figure out how far up or down they could get the bed to incline so that he’d be comfortable.

He let her, because he knew she needed to. Part of it was getting a little annoying, seeing her running around in circles just because he was temporarily laid up…but hell if it wasn't a little nice. Just for a little while, he didn't have to concentrate on what happened to get him here, just on getting to the bathroom on time.

Sam came in and out, trading shifts with Elena the few times she left for longer than an hour. But something weird was going on there. Dean knew because she didn't so much as look at his brother when he was there, and they didn't speak. At least, not to one another. He got the feeling Sam was giving her a wide berth.

But when Sam left to get some coffee and find out when Dean could be released, Dean watched Elena with a small smile. She was reading the back of his unopened Jell-o cup from lunch with a narrowed scrutiny while pouring a cup of water for herself. What used to be her strawberry yogurt was empty on the tray they rolled his lunch on.

"Does it have more than the advertized one hundred calories?" he asked mildly. She gave him a cursory glance and held up the small container.

"This is not Jell-o."

"You're surprised? I'm not even sure the chicken was real."

Her mouth twitched into an amused smile, until her hand bumped the plastic cup while setting down the questionable dessert, sending ice water over the side of the tray and on the floor. She stepped back with a start and nearly slipped on an ice cube, but caught herself on one of the chairs leaned against the wall. It was blessedly large and sturdy, with a thick cushion.

"You okay?" Dean said quickly. He sat up a little more and wished he hadn't with the pain blossoming in his chest.

"Yeah, yeah," she said, holding up a placating hand, "I'll clean this up before someone else comes in and slips."

Elena got several paper towels from the bathroom to dry the floor and soak up the rest of what was on the tray, and sat heavily in the chair when she was finished. She heaved a sigh and pressed two fingers to her temples in the hopes of stopping the headache she felt coming on.

Dean saw her hands shaking and frowned.

"Hey," he said, earning her attention. He gestured to her with a head nod. "Come 'ere."

She smiled and momentarily closed her eyes, letting out a breath through her nose, and she slowly got up and made her way to the bed. He grasped her wrist and gently pulled her down to the creaky mattress on his left side. She only sat on the edge, hesitant to get any closer for fear of hurting him. He’d come a long way in a few days, stayed awake for longer periods of time and was sounding
more like his normal self, but he was still recovering.

"I said, come 'ere," Dean said in mock annoyance, and tugged on her arm. It teased a smile out of her, despite herself.

"Take this off first," he said, gesturing to her jacket. "Get comfortable."

Elena sighed and rolled her eyes playfully, but obliged by shrugging out of the threadbare brown leather. It was roughly thirty years old, since it came from her mom's closet from back when bellbottoms were a thing. But it had seen more action in the past decade than it ever had in the 70s when, at seventeen, her mom let her twenty-year-old boyfriend drop forty bucks on what her parents called, "a provocative piece of clothing."

It wasn't the best leather money could buy, but blood washed out of it pretty well. Elena guessed that was quality enough for a hunter.

"How old is that thing?" Dean asked after she tossed it on the chair.

"Old enough for my mom to be singing Bee Gees hits when my dad got it for her," Elena said with a teasing smile, and sat next back down next to him on the bed. When she made no move to get closer, he gave her a sardonic look.

With a slight shake of her head and a small smile, she relented and eased her legs up. Dean's arm draped over her hip brought her comfortably at his side without putting pressure on his cracked ribs. She laid her head on his shoulder and breathed deeply, closing her eyes.

"You should get a motel tonight," he said, squeezing her thigh lightly, "get some rest."

She curled her hand around his bicep and shook her head, smiling faintly.

"You're funny when you're doped up."

He turned his head over to her with an admonishing look.

"You've stayed the past two nights in a row."

Both Sam and Elena couldn't stay overnight, according to the hospital's policy. Sam had stayed the first night, leaving Elena alone in an empty motel room and sleeping by herself for the first time in months with thoughts of poorly drawn Devil's Traps (among other memories) keeping her awake.

"You're dead on your feet," he told her. "That chair ain't doin' you much justice."

"And it's any better for your brother?" she scoffed. "At least I fit."

Dean made a sound of amusement at the memory of Sam's long legs stretched out from the chair. Dean's thumb began tracing circles on her thigh.

"Can't stand to be away, huh?" he teased. "It's not like I'm gunna break the second you turn your back."

Elena restrained the urge to point out that he was already broken.

"No, you're not," she said tartly, "because you'll be staying put in this damn bed."

"If you haven't noticed, I've had a lot worse."
Yeah, she thought. Don't remind me.

"I don't care," she said, probably a bit more snappish than she intended. By the look Dean gave her, he was surprised by it. She briefly closed her eyes again and bit her lip.

"Not like that," she amended. "I mean it doesn't matter. You're still hurt."

It wasn't that she didn't care. But whether he'd been through worse was neither here nor there if she could do something about it this time. She didn't want him to use that as an excuse to treat his injuries like they were less than what they were.

"I'm—"

"Don't say you're fine," Elena warned, "'cause you're not."

The sardonic look he gave her was his equivalent of a groan.

"Do I have to poke you in the ribs?" she asked, her brow raised. He rolled his eyes.

"I've been banged up plenty of times," he pointed out. "Why now all of a sudden—"

"Not like this, Dean," she said, the weight in her tone quieting him. "Just…maybe a little peace of mind for once would be nice."

Dean glanced over at her with a frown.

"You wanna tell me what's been eatin' you then?" he asked. Elena was hard-pressed to cover her own look of surprise.

"I'm fine."

"Oh really?" Dean asked pointedly, and shook his head. "Thought we agreed a long time ago not to bullshit one another."

Her grey gaze met his, his waiting, hers a mix of uncertainty and something else he couldn't name. The drugs were fucking with his head a bit, but at least he wasn't in pain.

Elena wished she could turn away when he looked at her like that, but he wasn't the only stubborn one. Sometimes, she swore their entire relationship existed on a precarious balance of wills.

Eventually, she sighed.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry…"

She ducked her head, pressing her forehead to his shoulder to avoid his eyes. She both felt and heard his voice rumble to her,

"The hell are you sorry for?"

Elena shook her head, feeling the sting of tears in her eyes as the memories resurfaced. She'd known real fear before then. But she had seen him dead before. The fear of that very real possibility, plus the very real threat of her being next…well. She liked to think she was handling it pretty damn well.

"I fucked up again." Her voice shook, and though she couldn't see his face, she felt the hand on her thigh squeeze the slightest bit in reaction. "I was standing right outside that damn door. If…if I'd just paid more attention to what was going on inside, you wouldn't be here."
Dean sighed.

"Elena…"

"We could've stopped Alastair," she said, and wiped and the few tears that fell. "He almost killed you, Cas, me…"

"Did he hurt you?" Dean asked. Elena shook her head.

"No, but…"

"But what?" he persisted, craning his head over to see her face.

"He…said a few things."

Dean's expression darkened, like he didn't want to ask but knew he had to.

"Like what?"

Elena shuddered at the memory.

"Hello again, doll face. I don't think we properly met last time." The demon started towards her slowly. "But I've seen that pretty face before…so many times."

She knew Dean wouldn't have asked if he didn't truly want (need) to know. That was the only reason why she told him.

"He talked to me almost like…like he knew me. Sort of." Her brows furrowed in thought. "He said he'd seen my face…do you know what he meant?"

She knew he did, but if he didn't want to talk about it she wouldn't press him.

And Dean was quiet for a long time.

Eventually though, he let out a deep breath.

"When I was on the rack," he started, and paused. Elena's thumb tracing patterns in his arm kept him grounded, allowed him to pull only enough of the memory to tell her what she needed to know.

"He dug into every piece of my soul, used everything he could get into," said Dean. "Taunted me with the memory of everyone I ever cared about."


"Dean."

Her voice, tremulous but calm.

"Hey," she sniffed, carded her fingers through his hair. He turned his head towards her, and she kissed him through tears.

"This isn't on you," he told her, swallowing past the shake in his voice. "It's on the bastards that set me up…got it?"
Dean waited until she nodded, until she understood, then leaned in to kiss her.

"He's gunna be all right, Bobby," she said into the receiver. "He just needs some time to take it easy."

"He sounds..."

"Peachy, I know," she lowered her voice, then sighed. "Can't blame him."

"Guess not...take care of him," the older man said gruffly. "And uh...you get some rest too. Got it?"

A slight smile curved her lips, but it fell when she saw Sam coming around the corner of the hallway.

"I'll try," Elena promised. "You take care too."

She hung up her cell phone and began heading to Dean's room, but Sam's gentle but firm grasp on her arm stopped her.

"Elena, wait," he started. His expression fell a little when she slipped out of the hold, crossing her arms in front of her.

"Okay, how long are you going to keep this up?"

She rolled her eyes, but remained quiet.

"Look, Dean's beginning to notice and...you have to talk to me sometime."

"I didn't think you cared all that much," she shrugged. "It's been five days already."

His brows furrowed, and he had both the nerve to look annoyed as well as the decency to seem the least bit guilty.

"I figured you wanted space."

"You're right," she said. "And maybe Dean should notice."

She began walking away from him again, but it didn't take him much effort to catch up to her and halt her steps with a touch to her shoulder.

"Look," he said, with earnest eyes. She sighed and looked up at him expectantly. "I know...I scared you. I...I didn't want to have to do it—"

"What, get help from Ruby? Fuel whatever psychic powers you've got going on?" she asked. "What your brother practically begged you not to do?"

Finally Sam got exasperated enough to raise his voice, though not loud enough to draw the attention of the daydreaming receptionist at the desk. The dinner carts had already swept through. And visiting hours were almost over, leaving the hallways relatively vacant, most doors closed.

"I had to, don't you get it? Without her help I wouldn't have been able to find you," he said. "I wouldn't have been able to stop Alastair, and Dean..."

Both of them quieted. Elena realized with brutal clarity that he was right. If Sam hadn't come when he did...it could've been a lot worse. For all of them.
"I did what I had to," said Sam. She stared at him, silently searching his gaze. He honestly believed that, that was for sure.

"Sam," her voice was quiet, but steady. "I watched you."

He stared back at her, blankly.

"And I couldn't recognize you."

His gaze went to the floor as his jaw worked, his weight somewhat shifting side to side.

"It's not something I plan on happening again."

She gave him a sardonic look.

"I'm serious," he pressed.

"I'm sure." Elena's expression became terse, her voice rising with her agitation. She barely reached his chest in height even standing as straight as she was now, but damn if he didn't lean back when her hand clenched at her side.

"And I'm sure you weren't enjoying yourself either," she said knowingly. In reality, she clenched her hands to stop them from trembling. There was a part of her—no matter how much she didn't want it to be—that was still wary of him. Not afraid per say, but wary. Sam still wasn't entirely himself, she could tell.

Sam's mouth fell open a bit, but he remained quiet.

"What about the next time, Sam?" she asked, more calmly. "Trouble is a constant state of being with you two. Shit's bound to happen. Whatever the fuck it is you're doing, are you going to look your brother in the eye and tell him the truth?"

The heavy weight of his gaze fell on her, and she met it. He shook his head.

"There won't be a next time."

Dean never asked about it, though she could tell he wanted to. When he'd healed enough to be discharged from the hospital they decided to make the long drive to Bobby's.

They never made it there.

Three weeks felt like a lifetime. Sam was Sam Wesson: one of thirty men and women in the IT department with a yellow shirt and a headset and, "Have you tried turning it on and off again?"

Dean was Dean Smith: Director of Sales & Marketing with his own office and a view of the city, paper weights, and "good things" in his future.

Elena was Elena Fields: secretary to the Director of Sales & Marketing, and fiancée.

The dream was broken by a workaholic ghost with a temper and another angel playing puppeteer—Castiel's ex-supervisor, Zachariah. But for three weeks it was routine and domestic, to Elena at least. The angel let them keep the fake memories. Not just the wake up and go to work from nine to five and salad for lunch (and secret stash of chocolate bars in the less used bottom drawer of Dean's desk), but the three weeks of sharing a spacious, one bedroom apartment.
Grocery shopping and arguing over what to buy for dessert (pie usually won against her resolve),
talking over dinner and relaxing on the couch with a movie or an episode of Dr. Sexy if Dean was
feeling generous. She had liked making breakfast for them in the morning and fighting over the radio
on the way to work. Now those would be things she wouldn't admit to missing, along with the ring
she sold to the closest secondhand shop.

It hadn't been given to her, so it didn't mean anything. Plus, she knew for a fact neither of them were
even close to ready for that. They'd barely even defined what exactly they were. But she could
admit, at least to herself, that it got her wondering about what would've happened, had they just been
normal people who met under arbitrary circumstances.

Not in the daycare service of her hunter uncle for supernatural-hunting parents.

But despite everything that had happened in the past month, Elena knew it hadn't been the same
without Sam. Even now she missed the way they used to bond over books and music that Dean
would scoff at. She missed just being able to talk to him, as her friend, and not being afraid of him.

The only good thing that came out of the whole ordeal was that Dean came to the realization, much
like both Sam and Elena did: that hunting was in their blood. They weren't meant to be normal, nor
would they ever be. And Zachariah had every reason to believe that Dean would do what he was
"destined" to do, though he still didn't get a definitive answer on what that was.

Only a few days after, they met the real author of a book entitled Supernatural, Chuck Shirley, who
according to Castiel was a prophet of the Lord who just happened to have written the brothers' life
story from the visions he had in his sleep. The entire thing was both frustrating and bizarre, especially
when Lilith came into play in one of Chuck's visions and ended up coming after Sam.

She got away after everything, to Sam's ever-mounting frustration.

Their luck didn't get any better in Windom, Minnesota with who they thought was the Winchesters'
half-brother Adam, but what was actually a ghoul impersonating him. Elena had watched while Sam
and Dean argued, knowing it wasn't her place to interject where involving their brother in hunting
was concerned. But she tried to ease tensions as much as she could (which wasn't much). It hadn't
mattered in the end. Adam and his mom were already dead, but they got the funeral they deserved.

Things calmed down when they took a case in Chicago, a big city for a change. The streets, paved
with snow, were also decorated with flashing multi-colored lights and other festive ornaments that
marked the Christmas season. But as Dean reminded them,

"We're not here to sightsee. We're here because we've got a job to do."

The haunting Sam found got a little dodgy (as per usual). The apartment complex the ghost was
haunting was falling apart to begin with. It had recently been built over a man's family home after
him and his parents died in a fire, which was started by snapped electrical wire hitting the roof after a
storm. His spirit was angered by the new apartments and started taking it out on the tenants.

After the ghost shook the top floor enough to bring the ceiling down…well, the hunters were on their
way to the motel before the landlord found out the entire building was already due for renovation.

On the bright side, they burnt the remains of the ghost's corpse before it could kill its second victim,
and they called that a good day. Albeit a long and tiring one. The brothers were generous enough to
let Elena take the first shower since she was covered in plaster dust. Nearly getting squashed from
the ceiling falling tended to be messy, but in all fairness, Sam had warned her not to trip.
At least now she felt clean. Her tunnel vision led her to one of the beds.

When it came to sleeping arrangements, Dean always got the bed closest to the window. Elena knew, even if he didn't say why, that it was his way of protecting them, however slight it may be. But that hadn't been on her mind when she let her sore and beaten muscles relax against the mattress. It was a softer one for a motel, dare she say as good as a hotel mattress.

She heard the springs creak when she shifted.

*Well, maybe a bed and breakfast.*

"You're on my side," he said as he towel dried his hair. He then threw it on top of his bag that lay on the floor. She rolled her eyes and scooted over to the left.

"Are we actually *using* the covers tonight?" she asked dryly. He had a tendency to fall asleep on top of everything, fully clothed. While it didn't exactly bother her, she knew he didn't sleep as well like that.

"If you're wearing those ass-hugging shorts to bed again, then yes," he tossed back, and sat down on the creaky mattress. "Last thing I need is you parading around in front of Sammy practically in your underwear."

"Last I checked, you liked the 'ass-hugging' shorts," she remarked, then with a teasing smirk, "What, you think Sam and I are gunna sneak out back while you're asleep?"

If he really cared all that much he could've gotten them two rooms.

Dean gave her a longsuffering look.

"It's the principle."

"But I get hot at night," she whined. He sighed.

"Then how come your feet are always freezing as hell?" Elena tended to shove her ice-cold feet between his calves to warm them, and then throw off the rest of the blankets over to his side when the rest of her got too hot. And she wondered why he woke up sweating.

"How should I know?" But then she smiled and folded hands over his shoulder, resting her chin on top. "You do a great job of warming them up, though."

Dean looked over at her with a fake smile. She didn't notice his hand that crept up and began dancing over her ribs, making her squawk in protest.

"Yeah, meanwhile," he said, and found great satisfaction in her keening giggles. Elena coiled away from him on the bed and he followed her. "I get to wake up sweating. Now how's that fair?"

Dean rolled her back to him and found the sensitive flesh of her sides and stomach, despite how tightly she curled herself into a ball. The girlish laughter she rarely let out had him grinning.

"Never said it was!" she choked out.

"I think," said Dean, his fingers more persistent around her flailing arms. "We needa rethink these sleeping arrangements."

Elena's eyes widened with hope when Sam finally came out of the bathroom, a cloud of steam in his wake.
"Saaaaam!" The younger Winchester surveyed the room, eyebrow raising, shook his head and headed for the book he left on the plush chair near the TV. Flipping to where he'd bookmarked his place, the hint of a smile on his face deepened as he heard his brother cackle maniacally, "No one can save you now!"

But eventually, laughter quieted and turned suspiciously silent. When a different sound floated to his ears, Sam rolled his eyes and didn't bother looking up. Though he did lift his book a bit higher in front of his face.

"I'm still in the room," he reminded them. "Nothing pre-Discovery Channel."

He heard Dean's sigh and muttering and Elena's faint chuckle. Sam supposed this is what he got for encouraging their relationship, but it was only in times like these where he felt like the proverbial third wheel.

_Oh well, Sam thought. At least we don't have to take turns for the beds anymore._
Lay It Down

XXVI: Lay It Down

After an abundance of not so subtle hinting and a wee bit of complaining that it was Christmas, even if it was technically only the twenty-fourth, Elena convinced Dean to do at least one touristy thing before they left the city.

So they went on the Chicago Favorites Food Tour in the name of the season. It included the best of their hot dogs, pizza, beers, and confections (which was the only reason Elena and Sam got Dean to go), as well as, among other things, a sight of Millennium Park.

This was the main reason she wanted to go on the tour. The brothers enjoyed the band playing on the stage of the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, and she was happy to see them both looking relaxed for once. Content even. She really knew it was a good idea by the smile Dean gave her as they walked away from the band's finished set. He slipped his hand into hers and surprised her with a kiss on the corner of her mouth.

He normally wasn't big on public displays of affection (something she found mildly surprising, considering it was Dean), so she smiled through her blush. Unknown to both of them was Sam's discreet smile. If for just a little while, his brother and his best friend had the time to be happy.

I wonder how Sarah's doing.

The thought came randomly, but also brought a pang of guilt. He hadn't called her in nearly a month (though he did make the promised call a couple days after their…sort of date). And then more guilt, because thinking of Sarah also made him think of Ruby.

That's different, he told himself. That was different.

What they were doing, it wasn't for romance or anything close. It was for the power. His power.

But the guilt remained.

So he let the couple walk ahead of him toward the center of Lurie Garden, and he lingered by the tall trees, suddenly feeling just as large and somewhat misplaced amongst all the flowerbeds.

Dean watched Elena tuck her scarf more securely around her neck as she stooped in front of a patch of purple flowers. They grew on long stems and looked a bit like reed grass. Hell if he knew anything about plants, but she seemed to be enjoying herself, at least.

She glanced around before picking a stalk out of the ground.

"I'm pretty sure that's not allowed."

Elena jumped at Dean's smooth voice in her ear. He took advantage of her surprise by sliding his arms around her waist and pulling her warmly against his chest, his broad shoulders shielding her from the winter wind.

"Pretty sure we weren't allowed to sneak into the tour without paying either," she pointed out with a grin, and twirled the flower stem between her fingers as she admired the deep purple hues in the petals.
"True," he said in agreement and laid his chin on her shoulder.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Sam staring up at the beech trees with a pensive look on his face, hands in his pockets. And then there was something being teased under Dean's nose and he nearly sneezed while jerking his head away from it.

He met the laughter in Elena's eyes with a raised brow, and finally she couldn't hold it in anymore. The disgruntled look on his face was priceless.

"What're you thinking about?" she asked when she calmed down. He'd just passed up a perfect opportunity for retaliation.

"Nothing."

Just that his brother was hiding something, as usual. And maybe Elena knew something that had to do with what Castiel told him before the whole Chuck thing. Right now wasn't the time to bring it up though.

She scoffed a little.

"Yeah, okay."

Elena had a feeling she knew what he was thinking about, so she didn't press it. That wasn't a conversation she felt like having either.

"Listen, uh…I've been thinking." He started to shift them from side to side a little as the wind began to kick up again.

"Yeah?"

"Why don't we go to Bobby's for Christmas?"

Elena hand to lean back slightly to look over at him, and met his gaze with a hesitant (hopeful) smile.

"Really?" she asked. "…You mean it?"

"Yeah," he smiled back. "Who says we have to work holidays?"

Her smile broadened, lightening her eyes.

"I like that idea."

"Yeah. Figured you would," Dean nodded, and gave into the temptation to kiss her. He felt her chilled hand on his cheek and noticed the coldness of her lips.

"Why don't we get back to Streeterville and get somethin' to warm up," he said. "I'm freezing my ass off out here."

"Need a little hot chocolate?" she teased, and brushed his cheek with the flower as her hand came to rest over his. He gave her a mocking look, to which she grinned and kissed his cheek.

"'S that your way of saying I'm 'cold as ice?'" she grinned.

"If you start singing Foreigner, I'm dumping your ass here."

"Aw, come on. What'cha got against Foreigner?"
"Another pop-rock wannabe, that's what."

Elena sighed and shook her head.

"I swear to God, Dean. We need to broaden your tape collection."

"Don't even joke."

"I will make you a mix tape," she threatened. He rolled his eyes.

"I'll toss it out the window."

She scoffed.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Wanna bet?"

"Do I really have to remind you about the pie incident?"

"Funny, I remember winning that in the end."

Elena paused, remembering, until her eyes slid up to his. Seeing the grin on his face, she resisted the urge to roll her own eyes and tried in vain to disentangle herself from his arms.

"Aw, you still sore about that?" Dean laughed, and turned her around in his arms to keep her from getting very far. The decidedly irritated look on her face only made his cheeks start to hurt from smiling.

With a huff, Elena gave up on pushing against his arms and held onto his jacket instead.

"You still owe me a new lipstick!" she griped, leaning back as his face neared hers.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, and kissed her, if only to shut her up and warm him.

"I'm sorry I can't come down with Matt...my mom would have a fit if I didn't stay at home for Christmas. My dad's been pretty much MIA since she finished signing the legal shit."

"No, I understand," Elena said. She ran a hand through her unruly hair and leaned against the Impala's passenger door as she watched the numbers climb on the fuel meter. "I'll see if we can stop by when we leave Souix Falls, take the scenic route through Hill City."

"Give me a heads up when you do. We'll have some shots on me."

She laughed.

"Be ready to empty your wallet then. I don't think you've ever seen these guys drink."

"A couple heavyweights, huh?"

Elena distinctly recalled a night she only half remembered. But the next morning in the motel there were empty bottles littered over the table, and neither of the brothers looked like their hangovers were all that bad compared to the near migraine she'd suffered.

"They'd drink you under the table," she replied wryly, and removed the nozzle from the car's tank when it was full.
"We'll see about that."

Elena smiled ruefully and closed the tank lid, just as Sam and Dean walked out of the Seven Eleven.

"Listen, I gotta go. I'll talk to you later."

"Oh fine," Val sighed, and then more genuinely, "Give those boys of yours a holiday hug for me."

"Give Mattie one for me," she said, and pocketed her phone. Dean handed her a cup of coffee and a sandwich, though he looked significantly grumpier than before he went in the store.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he said, and went to unlock the car. Sam gave her a half amused, half exasperated look.

"They didn't have donuts," he answered for his brother. Elena frowned.

"Not even the frosted ones that come in the little packages?"

"They were out of the powdered ones."

"…Oh."

"Yeah."

The powdered were his favorite if it had to be donuts wrapped in plastic instead of freshly made.

"Let's just get going, all right?" Dean said tiredly and sat behind the wheel. "I told Bobby we'd be there by tonight."

It was only about four in the afternoon, but Elena could tell he just wanted to get on the road. They hadn't seen Bobby in a while, and she knew she wasn't the only one who wanted to see him. It hadn't taken long for Elena to realize that her uncle had been more of a father to the boys than anyone.

_Even John Winchester_, her thoughts finished for her. But that resurfaced other things she'd rather not think about on Christmas Eve, that she usually tried to block out every time December came around. Like her parents. More specifically, Jack. And thinking about her dad couldn't have been a better way to ruin such a great day.

Bobby debated with himself for nearly an hour before he broke down and bought a tree. The guy selling them under a large tent down the road called it tree—looked more like a bush to the hunter. It was the cheapest thing they had at fifteen dollars; three feet tall of skinny branches and a measly stub that was barely big enough to fit in the stand he fished out from the attic.

In short, pitiful.

But he didn't exactly have the cash for a sixty-dollar five-foot tree, nor did he have the patience to bring a heavy pain in the ass like that into the house and set it up. And while in the attic, the problem of decorations came to mind. Was he _really_ going to sit here and put up jingle balls that were probably just going to roll right off the branches?

So he left the bin next to the fireplace until the boys and his niece got there.

_Presents...shit_, he thought. Were they doing that? He was willing to bet on no, since it was so last
minute. All he really knew was they were bringing the food if he supplied the beer.

But they didn't have any grocery bags when they came through his front door around midnight.

"We'll go to the store tomorrow, Bobby," Elena promised with a tired smile. "It was a long drive."

She set down her bag on the couch and took in her surroundings with her hands on her hips. For once she didn't see a trail of beer bottles, but her eyes did catch on something.

"Is that a...Christmas tree?" she asked in amusement. Bobby rubbed the back of his neck. "And a box of decorations?"

"Getting a little festive in your old age?" Dean teased as he plopped down on the couch next to Sam, who was already kicking his shoes off.

"Don't get too comfortable," Bobby said on his way to his bedroom. "'Cause you're the ones putting 'em up."

"Aw, come on, Bobby. We just drove eight hours," Dean complained. Bobby paused before the hallway.

"You want to do Christmas? I got you a tree. Now you decorate it. Sound fair?"

He made his way down the hall with a contented smile on his face, and didn't even turn around at Dean's muttered, "Scrooge."

He should've known better.

In the morning Bobby woke to the radio being played at an obnoxious volume level. When it became too loud to ignore he dragged himself out of bed an hour earlier than he wanted to (eight in the fucking morning according to the clock on his nightstand).

He trudged into the living room half awake and found it covered in tinsel. It wasn't just on the tree, but was strewn over his desk, the shelves, over the fireplace, and draped from what little hung on the walls. There weren't any presents under the tree, confirming his guess the day before that they weren't exchanging gifts. At least he didn't have to go out and spend more than fifteen dollars.

He then found the perpetrators in his kitchen, drinking his coffee, listening to his radio. Each of them called out their "Merry Christmases" over the holiday music.

"Hmph." He made his way over to the coffee machine and ignored their shared muffled laughter as he turned the volume down.

"He really is Scrooge."

He knew that was Dean.

"You chuckleheads are cleaning my house before you leave," he remarked while pouring the last of the coffee into his mug. But in truth, Bobby knew he brought it on himself.

"Shit, this was such a bad idea," Elena muttered when she steered Bobby's car into the supermarket parking lot. You'd think it wouldn't be so packed on Christmas Day.

"We could just go to Boston Market," Sam suggested.
"That would defeat the purpose of buying ingredients," she reminded him. Dean started helping Bobby on a Camaro older than Elena’s, so she and Sam left them to it while they went to get Christmas dinner.

"Yeah but, how long does it take to make all that stuff?"

"You mean cranberries from a bag?" she said dryly. "We're buying the hard stuff already made. But we're out here because we've got the time to make an actual meal."

They could buy a ham and stuffing easily enough, but she could make things like mashed potatoes, gravy, and she knew Bobby would appreciate some cornbread. The only problem she didn't foresee was parking.

"Over there! Someone's getting out," Sam pointed, but squeezed the inside door handle when she sped up. "But don't hit the—"

"Watch it, lady!"

"Sorry, asshole!" she called. "I didn't realize you had the right of way with that stop sign right in front of you!"

The guy rolled his eyes and held up a choice finger as he drove his SUV around her. Sam shook his head.

"Dean's never going to let you drive the Impala."

She smirked at him.

"We'll see about that."

"Nearly got mauled, huh?" Dean asked.

"Last minute shoppers are vicious," Elena exclaimed. She was making space in the refrigerator for all the food they managed to buy. "I could barely find a parking space, let alone get out without someone almost hitting the car. Bobby would've killed me."

"Nah, he actually likes you."

"Oh, come on," she rolled her eyes. "He lets you get away with murder too. Don't even."

"Eh…yeah maybe." Dean nodded begrudgingly with a small grin.

Cranberries…eggs…milk…potatoes…ooh, stuffing.

He rummaged through each new grocery bag Sam was bringing in from the car, scanning over each item for something specific. Elena caught him snooping and raised an amused brow.

"I got you a Snickers to tide you over."

Dean perked up at that, temporarily forgetting his search.

"Where?"

"In my purse, over there on the counter." It didn't take him more than a few seconds to spot the black leather purse and start rifling through it.
"How long is it gunna take then?" he asked. His eyes lit up in success as he pulled out the candy bar. From the corner of his eye he saw Sam come in with the last two bags.

"Should only take an hour or two to get everything ready," said Sam, who handed Elena a white canister to stick in the freezer. "Ham is already made. We got a chicken too just in case."

"Awesome," said Dean. But thinking of food made him think of dessert, which brought him back to his search. "But uh…where's the pie?"

The other two paused, their eyes coincidentally meeting.

"Aw, Saaam," Dean groaned. "You forgot it again?"

"Dean—" the younger Winchester started, his expression guilty.

"That's all I asked for!"

"Dean, it wasn't his fault," Elena stepped in and set down the cornbread mix she was holding. "He reminded me when we got in, but I totally forgot."

She couldn't restrain a smile at his pouting expression. He would deny it later, but that was most definitely a Dean Winchester pout. She drew closer to him and grasped the folds of his plaid buttoned-down shirt. It was open, revealing the solid black shirt underneath that didn't quite mask the motor stains from working on the car's engine.

"I could go back and get one, with some whipped cream?" she offered. It looked like he was debating with himself until his hands came around her waist.

"It's okay. You're not going all the way back there," he said, and with a smirk, "You'd probably get Bobby's car smashed."

Elena rolled her eyes, but slid her arms under the plaid shirt and around his middle. On him she didn't mind the smell of sweat and motor fluid too much (at least, not as much as she used to).

"You sure?" she asked. "I feel bad now."

"It's okay." He bent close to her ear so his brother wouldn't hear. "You can make it up to me."

She was able to restrain a laugh and blushed knowing Sam was mere feet away, taking out the rest of the food from their plastic bags.

"Yeah?" she asked in a lowered voice. "Got any ideas?"

"A few." Dean kissed her neck and let her go. "But I'm gunna go take a shower."

"Yeah, you go do that," she teased, and made a show of brushing off her arms and clothes. He rolled his eyes and went up the stairs.

Elena turned to Sam and held out a hand expectantly. He sighed and slapped a twenty dollar bill onto it, but he still looked amused.

"That's almost not fair."

"Oh, Sam," she sighed. "You really don't want to know how easy your brother is."
Everything was…surprisingly good. Between the three men's appetite there was little left over. It had Dean remembering the last Christmas he and his brother shared.

It had been good; a little decorations, some gas station gifts, eggnog and watching the game with had probably been the best he'd ever had, even from when they were kids and their dad was still alive (which was a sad and hard thought to have). It had also almost been his last, and he thought so at the time.

"Something smells sweet," he noted, like cinnamon and bread.

"I lit a candle earlier," said Elena. "Cinnamon bun or something."

He snorted and shoveled more stuffing in his mouth.

Dean usually wrote off the holidays in general. It had never been Hallmark times when they were little, and didn't they really have time for them later on (besides last year). Sam would've killed for a Christmas like this when he was a kid. He'd complained about wanting the normality, the tree, the good food. But Dean could see that having their family here was what was putting a smile on Sam's face.

Bobby too was a little more smiley than usual. With a guilty pang, Dean realized he hadn't thought about what the old man did around this time of year. Hunt, probably. And Elena, she had probably gotten her dad home for Christmas somehow—

Shit.

This was her first Christmas since Jack died. Elena more or less looked fine, but when she smiled it didn't always reach her eyes. He thought she'd been quieter lately. Maybe that was also why she'd jumped on the chance to come to Bobby's.

He was confused when the oven started beeping.

"I'll get it," said Elena. She hastened to the kitchen, and he could pinpoint the moment she opened the oven by the smell rather than the sound.

"I thought you said the cinnamon-y smell was a candle," he said suspiciously. And then a freshly baked apple pie was placed in front of him. A hand slid smoothly around his shoulders, and he looked up at her bright smile with his own surprise.

"Merry Christmas," she teased, and he curled his arm around her waist.

"You made this?" he asked, a bit awed by the gesture. With her free hand she held up the white canister of whipped cream.

"On one condition." She set the whipped cream on the table and held up one finger in front of him. "You share."

Sam and Bobby chuckled and shared a look, while Dean smirked. He grabbed her closed hand and brought it to his lips.

"Eh, deal," he said.

They drank eggnog (spiked only a little with rum this time) and played cards until it was obvious none of them could stay awake for much longer. As much as Bobby didn't like it, he didn't say
anything when Dean went upstairs with Elena into her room. But he knew Sam would be glad to have his own, even if it was right across from them.

Dean sat on the bed and kicked off his shoes and his jeans, then started rummaging through his bag for comfortable shorts. When he looked up, he was greeted by the sight of Elena in only a loosely fitting shirt and underwear. She grabbed the shorts out of his hands and tossed them behind her, then used his shoulders as support to straddle comfortably on his lap. He braced her back and kissed her slowly, tasting rum and cinnamon.

"Thanks for this," said Elena. "I, uh…I haven't done Christmas in a long time."

"It's not like I would've said no if you'd asked me." He tightened his hold on her. "How're you doin'?"

After a moment, she sighed.

"Am I that obvious?"

"Just to me," he grinned a little. But it soon faded. "Past few months have been tough on you."

Her smile was tinged with melancholy—the only sign of sadness he knew she was hiding.

"Not as much as they've been on you," she said. Dean frowned.

"So you think you can't tell me when something's bothering you?" he said. Elena's gaze dropped to his chin, while her fingers plucked absently at the edge of his shirt collar.

"Dad never missed my birthday. Always missed Christmas because it's right around my mom's birthday," she said quietly. Her eyes blinked a few extra times and swallowed past the lump in her throat. "I always liked it though. We had nice ones when I was little."

"So this one was good then?" Dean asked. Her eyes finally met his again, and she smiled genuinely, if a bit watery.

"The best I can remember."

"Good," he said, and then his look was more serious. "When something's not right, you tell me, okay?"

He playfully jostled her when she tried to look away.

"Got it?" he pressed. It teased a smile out of her.

"Okay," she nodded, and leaned into him when he kissed her despite the very few tears she allowed to escape. The palm of his hand reached her cheek, his thumb wiping them away.

Despite herself, she wanted to smile against his lips. He tasted like a third slice of pie (even though it had been put away before they even broke out the eggnog). Her arms sliding around his neck and his hand pressing more heavily against her lower back had Elena sliding closer from her perch on his thighs. But their tempo gradually slowed, until Dean spoke lowly against her lips,

"All right." His expression turned sly, and he bowed his head near her ear. "Know if there's any whipped cream left?"

She burst out laughing and pulled back so she could see his face, until she realized he was mostly serious.
"There's about half a tub, but we'd have to be quiet going downstairs to get it."

"Don't worry, babe." Dean's smirk deepened. "I'm Batman."
XXVII: Rubicon

Castiel appeared to Dean in a dream with something "important" to tell him and gave coordinates to follow. Then the hunters knew the holiday was over. To Bobby's resigned exasperation, they didn't have time to clean his tinsel-covered house before they left.

On the drive out, Elena made a call to Val apologizing for not being able to visit Hill City as soon as she'd hoped, but she would call again when they could make it.

As far as they could tell, the coordinates had led them to an abandoned warehouse. The night made it difficult make out much in the dark; flashlights could only help so much. But they could hear electricity popping, sometimes sparking off remnants of machines that looked to have been crashed into one another. In short, the place was in shambles.

"It looks like a bomb went off here," Sam muttered. At that point it was obvious something had gone down. The problem was what, and by who. Dean eventually found a large collection of warding symbols painted in blood on one of the wall panels. It was the same as the one Anna used to banish Castiel and Uriel months ago.

"So what…Cas was fighting angels?" said Sam. Dean turned from the sight and continued his scrutiny on the rest of the room.

"I don't know."

That was until they found Castiel, lying flat on a wooden board. When they were able to wake him, he looked uncharacteristically flustered, even panicked.

"Whoa, Cas, you okay?" Dean asked. They helped the angel stand, and he patted himself down and backed away from them as he took in his surroundings.

"C-Castiel," he said. "I'm not Castiel…it's me."

"Me?" said Sam incredulously. "Who's me?"

"Jimmy," said the man, shaking his head. "My name's Jimmy."

"…And where the hell is Castiel?" Dean asked.

"Gone…he's gone."
Jimmy Novak from Pontiac, Illinois didn't remember much from the past year of being possessed by an angel, or even how said angel was suddenly ejected from his body. And he was hungry. Mostly for cheeseburgers. Understandable, but it also didn't help much. Jimmy didn't even remember what it was Cas was supposed to tell them. But he did know that he had a family, and he was ready to go back to them.

Dean was all for it, but Sam wasn't so sure.

"I say we get him to Bobby's," he said, secure in the fact that Jimmy was inside the motel still eating while the three of them talked outside, a safe distance from the door. "Maybe all he needs is hypnosis, or a psychic, or maybe Cas will just drop back into him."

"What," Elena interjected. "Like what Pam did for Anna?"

"Maybe."

Dean hesitated, then shook his head.

"I dunno, man."

"Dean, back there, that was angel-on-angel violence," said Sam. "Now, I don't know what's going on, but it's big. We can't just let the only lead we got just slip away."

Again, Dean shook his head.

"What?" Sam said.

"Remember when our job was helping people, like getting them back to their families?" he asked.

"You think I don't want to help him too?"

"Sam, he's got a wife and kid that probably think he's dead," said Elena. "Maybe they're even still looking for him."

"Look, we'd be doing him a favor," Sam said.

"How?" asked Dean.

"If we want to question the guy, you can damn well bet that the demons do too."

Of course, Jimmy didn't take too well with that idea. It was no surprise to Dean. Against his better judgment, he allowed his brother to stop the man from going to his wife and daughter and, for lack of a better term, Jimmy more or less became their prisoner.

In the morning, he was gone.

Dean wasn't in a rush to go after him. In fact he took plenty of amusement in his brother's prickly attitude and Elena's good mood. She was always more of a joy in the daylight hours when she got actual sleep. Though nearly having a heart attack by an angel appearing next to her in the backseat tends to put a monkey wrench in anyone's morning.

Anna was less than impressed by them losing Jimmy so quickly. She couldn't stay to chat, but by what she told about Cas getting dragged back to heaven, it didn't sound like a pleasant trip home.

Nor was it for Jimmy. They got there just in time before demons could take his family away from
him. Sam tried using his powers, though it looked as if he didn't have the same strength that so completely destroyed Alastair. The second demon fled from her body before Dean could stab her with Ruby's knife. But now wasn't the time to question Sam. They piled the Novaks into the Impala and sped away from the modest family home and drove as fast as the ice-slicked streets would allow.

"You were right," Jimmy told Dean.

"I'm sorry we were," he replied.

"Yeah but…I don't know anything."

"I don't think they're inclined to believe you."

"Even if they did," said Sam, "You're a vessel. They're still gunna want to know what makes you tick."

"Which means vivisection, if they're feeling generous," continued his brother. Elena remained quiet as each Winchester laid out the cold hard truth.

"I'm going to tell you once again," said Sam. "You're putting your family in danger. You have to come with us."

Jimmy looked back at Amelia and Claire huddled together in the backseat, wishing not for the first time that he hadn't been such a complete idiot.

"How long?" His voice was as dejected and pitiful as he looked to all three hunters. "And don't give me that whole, 'we'll cross that bridge when we get there' crap."

Sam rolled his eyes.

"Don't you get it? Forever. You can never be with your family," he said. "Demons are never going to stop. So you can either get as far away from them as you can, or you put a bullet in your head. And that's how you keep your family safe. But there's no getting out, and there's no going home."

Elena was shocked. Not as shocked as Jimmy, but enough. She glanced over at Dean, who hid his reaction well. He did look the least bit surprised at his brother, though it didn't look as if he disagreed.

"Well don't sugarcoat it, Sam," Dean muttered.

"I'm just telling him the truth. Someone has to."

Looking completely at a loss, Jimmy slowly turned away from them and walked back towards the car. Elena glared up at Sam.

"You didn't have to be a complete dick."

"I didn't see you setting him straight."

"Obviously you had it covered," she said tersely. "You're acting as if it's his fault demons are on his ass!"

"I'm not saying that."

Elena could see that he didn't entirely mean that. She turned to him incredulously.
"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"All right, the two of you cut it out," Dean said in exasperation. "Before someone throws a punch."

"If I do, he'll deserve it," Elena snapped, and walked away from them. Sam rolled his eyes.

"You just chill out," Dean told him. Sam's lips thinned into an annoyed line.

"I'll find the wife and daughter a car," he said, and left Dean standing in the middle of the sidewalk with his arms crossed. He didn't want to think about the headache was going to have when this was over.

Sam stayed in the Impala, but Dean and Elena watched as Jimmy parted with his daughter and his wife, lingering with his daughter Claire. He kissed her forehead and her hair as he hugged her close and told her he loved her, like a father was supposed to, and affectionately told her to "be good."

Elena could vaguely remember her dad when she was a little kid. He did the things a father was supposed to do too, until her mom was gone and she wasn't a kid anymore.

She watched Claire. The girl's fingers curled into her father's shirt in desperation, a scared face that was trying too hard to be strong in spite of tears rolling down a young face that couldn't be older than eleven or twelve years old.

It was like a punch to Elena's gut, but she forced herself to tear her eyes away.

Jimmy let her get into the Impala first and climbed in after. It wasn't until Dean began driving away that she had the courage to glance beside her and see the emotions Jimmy Novak was desperately trying to keep locked in by looking out the window. The guilt clawed at her, along with the sympathy.

This wasn't Castiel anymore. This was an ordinary guy who loved his family.

None of them deserve this.

When she couldn't take the inner struggle of her own indecisiveness any longer, she tentatively laid her hand on his arm. He looked over at her, blinking away his pain.

"For...for what it's worth," she said quietly, tentatively. "I'm sorry."

At first he looked like he didn't know what to say. She took her hand back and he marginally relaxed.

"You're right...it's not worth much," he said, his lips hinting at a sad smile before he turned his head back toward the window. "But thanks."

She wanted to sigh, but instead nodded and turned back toward the road. Her eyes briefly flicked to the rearview mirror and caught Dean's.

Another person's life we successfully ruined.

When Jimmy was asleep, Dean thought it safe enough to bring up Sam's power shortage back at the house. He was finally able to admit that Sam was scaring him, for which Elena was glad, because Sam needed to hear it. What she wanted to call bullshit on was how he claimed to be "scaring himself."
Obviously he wasn't scared enough if he broke his word to her about there "not being a next time."

He was saved by his cell phone ringing. The curious thing was that it was for Jimmy.

It was Amelia, or more accurately, the demon Sam couldn't exorcise wearing Amelia.

Jimmy gave them the play-by-play of the conversation after hanging up. Something about meeting in an abandoned warehouse about ten minutes from his house if he wanted to keep Claire breathing for another hour.

Dean went about thirty miles above the speed limit to get there in half an hour, and despite it obviously being a trap, he let Jimmy go in alone while the three of them went through the back, going along with Dean's "plan." It was just as well that they got jumped by four other demons and were dragged into the warehouse.

"Some plan," Sam muttered.

"No one bats a thousand," Dean shot back, looking over at him through a bruised eye. The blonde demon holding him in place held up Ruby's knife for Amelia to see.

"You know what's funny?" she said.

"You wearing a soccer mom?" Dean retorted.

"I was actually bummed to get this detail: picking up an empty vessel. Sorta like a milk run," she smiled. "Now look who landed in my lap?"

"Yeah, well you got us," said Sam, who smirked the slightest bit despite a cut lip. "Let these people go."

"Oh, Sam. It's easy to act chivalrous when your Wonder Girl powers aren't working, huh?" She chuckled and drew a gun from her pocket. "Now for the punch line. Everybody dies."

Dean tensed to dive for Sam if she pulled the trigger on him, but instead, she turned and shot Jimmy, who crumbled to his knees and tried in vain to stop the flow of blood from his midsection.

"Waste little orphan Annie," Amelia tossed over her shoulder at one of the demons holding Sam, and she started walking out from the room. The demon left Sam's side and passed Jimmy, sprawled on the floor and trying to breathe through pain as well as get to his feet. But before he could even touch an unconscious Claire strapped to a chair, she woke and her restraints burned off with a thought, the demon killed with a simple touch. Jimmy watched with horrified eyes as realization donned on him.

"Castiel…"

The distraction was enough to let the hunters catch the remaining demons off guard, with Sam tackling the blonde woman to the ground and Dean and Elena handling the other two after Claire, or more accurately, who was possessing her, smote the last. From Dean's eyes, most of everything was a blur of being punched repeatedly and flashes of light out of the corner of his eye, until suddenly the sinister face above him was burnt out and tossed away. The intense light blinded him for a few moments, but when it cleared Elena was helping him to a sitting position and he could see Sam straddling a demon.

Elena gasped, and Dean almost felt like he was going to be sick. By the time Sam pulled away from the demon's bloody neck to see Dean, Elena and Castiel staring at him, the wildness was back in his gaze. He stretched out a hand, and Dean's eyes widened with shock before he realized Amelia was
behind him, and he pulled both himself and Elena out of the way.

This time there was no power shortage, and the demon was sent straight to Hell.

In his dying breaths, Jimmy begged Castiel to take him as a vessel and leave his daughter alone. Castiel obliged, leaving the real Amelia to comfort her daughter through tears of both relief and grief for the husband she would never have again.

"Cas, before you go," said Dean. "What were you going to tell me?"

The angel turned slowly, now healed of all his vessel's previous injuries.

"I learned my lesson while I was away, Dean," he said. "I serve Heaven, I don't serve man. And I certainly don't serve you."

Sam wanted Dean to be mad. He'd rather have him screaming at him then...then "tired," or "done." Anything but the blankness he saw in his brother's face as he drove through the rain. Elena wouldn't look at him. He couldn't look at himself.

And then Bobby called, and they rerouted to Sioux Falls to deal with whatever it was that the old hunter had uncovered about the impending Apocalypse. He greeted them with his usual cheerfulness and led them down to the panic room in the basement.

"Go on in, I wanna show you somethin'," he told them. Sam walked in ahead.

"So what's your big demon problem?" he asked, then turned to see grim stares.

"You," said Bobby, and he closed the heavy door, locking it behind him.

"How long you think he's been on the stuff?"

Elena sighed and watched the half empty beer between her hands on the table.

"It's my fault, Bobby." He gave her a deadpan look, but she continued before he could reply.

"If I hadn't ditched him after...after Dean, he wouldn't have shacked up with Ruby. All that shit she was talking about helping him use his powers?" She shook her head and drank.

"You couldn't have known," he said, shaking his own head. She snorted.

"That's everyone's bullshit excuse."

"Dean's not blaming you," Bobby pointed out after a moment, taking a swig of his own beer. Elena looked up at him blankly. Dean had once, though he'd showed up on her porch to apologize for it. That didn't mean he didn't still feel that way, even on a subconscious level.

"And how do you know?"

Bobby's expression turned longsuffering, but before he could give her his two cents, Dean walked in from the basement, looking worse for wear. Then Sam's screams reached the living room. Bobby broke out the whiskey.

"How long is this gunna go on?" Dean asked, his gaze on the fireplace. Bobby sighed.
"Here, let me look it up in my demon detox manual…oh wait, no one ever wrote one."

"That's helpful, Bobby. Thanks," Elena said, sipping at her glass. She smoothed her hand down Dean's arm. His response was delayed, but he squeezed her hand when she slipped it into his.

"No telling how long it'll take," said Bobby. "Hell, or if Sam'll even live through it."

The couple looked up at him sharply, but when the old hunter's phone rang Dean turned away, slipping out of Elena's grasp.

"Suck dirt and die, Rufus. If you call here again, I'll kill ya."

Dean looked back over at Bobby with raised brows.

"What's wrong with Rufus?"

"He knows."

Elena sighed when the phone rang again.

"I'm busy you son of a bitch. What do ya want?" Bobby answered, but his face went slack at what he heard on the other line.

The seals were being broken, one after the other and much faster than they ever had been. It prompted Bobby to wonder out loud whether they should let Sam in on the fight, considering his abilities. Both Dean and Elena were pretty vocal on the rebuttal.

"Look, I know you hate me for suggesting it—I hate me for suggesting it," said Bobby. "I love that boy like a son. All I'm sayin' is, maybe he's here instead of the battle field…because we love him too much."

After an obvious inner struggle, Dean went outside to call on Cas. Elena gave him his space, staying inside with Bobby to pour through ancient text for anything that would give them an edge on Lilith. After an hour or so Sam's screams weren't dying down, and it was hard to restrain herself from going to help him, no matter how he'd disappointed her.

"Bobby," she said quietly, after another half hour of fruitless reading.

"Yeah."

"When uh…when I moved from Sioux Falls…I'm sorry I never called."

He looked up briefly at her, then to the last bit of whiskey in his glass before returning to the book on his desk.

"You were too little to know," he said. "Ain't your fault."

"I was taking care of Jamie by the time I was seven," she said. "Mom couldn't and Dad was barely home. If I could do that, I could've managed a phone call every now and then."

Bobby gave her a dubious look.

"You really wanna play this game?" he asked. "S' not like I was around much to take a call…but I coulda made time to make one."
She allowed herself a small smile.

"You're not exactly Bobby Hallmark."

He rolled his eyes.

"Did you have a point in all this, or are you just in a self-deprecating state of mind?"

"I dunno, it's just... with the end of the world being nigh and all that, I didn't want you to think I never cared."

Bobby looked up and this time met her eyes, but once again, Dean came back into the living room with the semi-unhelpful news he got from Castiel. It made neither Bobby nor Elena very enthused.

"Now correct me if I'm wrong, but you willingly signed up to be the angels' bitch?" asked Bobby. Dean gave him a long look. Meanwhile, Elena was trying to put a cap on her anger. After everything the angels had put them through, nearly killing them all and toying with them, he decided to join them?

"I'm sorry, you prefer 'sucker?' After everything you said about them, now you trust them?"

"Come on. Give me a little credit, Bobby. I've never trusted 'em less," said Dean. "I mean they come on like shady politicians from planet Vulcan!"

"Well then why in the hell did ya—"

"Because what other option do I have?" he exclaimed. "It's either trust the angels, or let Sammy trust a demon."

And then Elena's anger deflated. Bobby regarded Dean through calmer eyes as well.

"I see your point."

There was a pause in which the quiet was a bit too quiet. Elena realized she couldn't hear Sam shouting anymore.

"You hear that?" Dean asked. Bobby nodded.

"That's a little too much nothing."

Sam had to be physically restrained with the withdrawal of demon blood tossing him about the room and inducing a seizure. They wrapped his ankles and wrists with towels under the chains so it wouldn't chaff his skin, but it didn't make them feel any less awful.

"I'm gunna ask this one more time," Bobby said after a half hour of arguing. "Are you sure we're doing the right thing?"

"Bobby, you saw what it was doing to him down there. The demon blood is killing him!" said Dean.

"No, it isn't. We are."

"What?" Dean and Elena spoke at nearly the same time.

"I'm sorry, I can't bite my tongue any longer," said Bobby. "We're killing him, keeping him locked up down there. This cold turkey thing isn't workin'. If...If he doesn't get what he needs, soon, Sam's
not gunna last much longer."

Dean stared at Bobby for a moment, but eventually shook his head.

"No. No, I won't give him demon blood, I can't do it."

"And if he dies?"

"Then at least he dies human!" Dean ran a hand over his face, wiping away sweat while feeling the burn behind his eyelids. "I would die for him in a second...but I won't let him do this to himself. I can't."

He shook his head again.

"I guess I found my line. I won't let my brother turn into a monster."

Bobby couldn't say anything after that. Neither could Elena, even if she wanted to. They fell asleep together on the couch while Bobby dozed at his desk, head pillowed by his crossed arms. Come morning, though, Bobby was shaking the two awake and they were examining a very empty panic room with busted Devil's Traps. There was no way Sam could've gotten out alone, but he knocked Bobby out and hotwired his car.

Ruby was the unanimous culprit.

"How'd she even touch the door?" Dean asked.

"You think she's got the mojo?" said Bobby.

"I didn't think so...I dunno, man."

"What difference does it make? How he got gone isn't important as where he got gone to."

"Yeah well, at this point I hope he's with Ruby."

Elena gave him a curious look.

"Why's that?" she asked.

"'Cause killin' her is the next big item on my to-do list."

"I thought you were on call for angel-duty?" Bobby called after Dean, who was already on his way down the hall.

"I am on call—in my car on the way to kill the bitch."

"One thing," said Bobby, stopping Dean.

"What?"

"Sam don't wanna be found, which means he's gunna be damn near impossible to find."

"...Yeah, we'll see."

"So, you're saying he's taking the most conspicuous trail to be more inconspicuous?" said Elena. Dean didn't take his eyes off the road to answer,
"Basically, yeah."

"Okay…I guess that makes sense, if he's trying to throw you off."

"Yeah…apparently he's been doin' that for a while."

Elena looked over at him with both sympathy and concern, but she also knew Sam.

"You know, I don't think he was doing it just to kill Lilith," she said. This time he did look over at her, incredulously.

"Oh yeah? What else then, 'cause that's the big excuse I've been hearing every damn time."

"The whole thing with the angels having a 'plan' for you? Dean, he wanted to help you," she told him, and sighed. "When you were gone…Sam started on this whole thing because he wanted to save you."

Dean was quiet for a bit, his expression blank.

"Are you saying this was my fault?"

It was her turn to look at him incredulously.

"Damn it, Dean—of course not!" she exclaimed, then stopped to continue more calmly. "I'm trying to say that no matter how fucked up it is…he did it with the best intentions."

With everything Sam and Dean had been through, to get here, where Dean hardly knew his brother anymore…that just seemed like a piss poor excuse.

"That's not good enough, Lena."

They found him, found his room, and found Ruby. Dean was so close, so close to killing her with the satisfaction of seeing the fear in her eyes. But Sam. Sam stopped him. He told Ruby to run, and she did, while Dean couldn't believe his eyes. He shared a look with Elena and she slipped out of the room before Sam could stop her. He called after her, but she refused to listen to someone who refused to keep their word, knowing they would break it. Nor could she look at him knowing she had a hand in what he'd become.

Instead she took the stairs as fast as she could without rolling an ankle and followed the head of dark hair making a run for it, through the lobby and outside. It was a busy city, even at night. Several people on either side of the street, but she could pinpoint a shorter woman with a petite frame weaving in and out of sidewalk traffic.

The cold air in her lungs only boosted her adrenaline and kept her running. Belatedly she realized she didn't have the knife, or even the Colt to help her once she caught Ruby, but she figured following her into a dark alley was a smarter decision than letting her go.

"Demons, you're all alike aren't you?" she said. Her voice echoed on the walls. "Always duck and hide, come crawling out like cockroaches."

And then a knife was at her throat.

"At least I'm not dumb enough to follow one into the dark."

Ruby's voice was smooth in Elena's ear, the blade biting into her skin. Before Ruby could tense up,
Elena grabbed the woman's wrist and reeled her elbow back sharply. It connected with a loud crack, and she wasted no time in pulling the demon close and jabbing her elbow into Ruby's throat. She choked, but ripped her arm away to throw a succession of kicks and punches that finally caught Elena in the temple, then the stomach, then the jaw.

That last one had her backpedaling into the brick wall, and she sunk to the floor. The demon stood over her, knife in hand, until Elena swept her feet from under her and tackled her into the dirt. Though they were about the same build, the hunter had the advantage of being slightly taller and heavier and was able to pin her down by straddling her. They both reached for the knife, but after a few moments of both of them clawing and straining it finally made its way to Elena's finger tips.

"Won't kill you," she said, pushing down on the knife with all her might despite Ruby pushing against her wrists. "But it'll give me enough time to send your ass back to Hell."

Ruby's eyes flashed black.

"You first," she said, and kneed Elena hard in the ribs, following up with a swift punch to her cheek. Ruby was able to roll out from under her and land one more solid blow that had Elena's vision swimming. When it finally cleared and she could pick her head up from the ground, the demon was gone.

"Damn it!" she swore, and punched the ground so hard her hand ached afterwards.

Slowly she pushed herself up onto her feet and jogged back to the hotel. The room Sam paid for was completely trashed, but Sam wasn't in it. Just Dean lying in a pile of shattered glass trying to catch his breath.

"What the hell happened?" she asked, helping him sit up and brushing the glass out of his hair. He grabbed hold of her arm for support, but she could still see his eyes roaming over her bruised face and the lingering on the cut on her neck.

"You okay?" he wheezed.

"I'm fine," she snapped. "What. Happened?"

"He's gone, Lena," he said around a coughing fit, shaking his head. "...I told 'im to never come back."

She was shocked for a moment, but recovered enough to help him stand.

"Come on, let's get out of here," she said, making him lean on her as much as he needed. "We'll take the elevator this time."

Elena came down Bobby's stairs from washing the blood off her face at hearing crashing noises, as well as both him and Dean raising their voices at one another. She was about halfway down the stairs when she heard Bobby say,

"You are a better man than your father ever was...so don't be him."

She watched Dean turn around, and then vanish by a touch from Castiel. Both Bobby and Elena's warning shouts were too late.

"Goddamn it!" he swore loudly, laying a heavy fist on his desk that was curiously bare of all his books and binders and notes. He looked up at her when he heard her feet hitting the bottom stair.
"We have to find a way to track Sam," she said quickly. "The angels are probably taking Dean to stop Lilith, and where she is, Sam will be too."

"If the angels knew where Lilith was, why didn't they help us get to her months ago?" Bobby pointed out. It gave Elena a queasy feeling.

"Unless that's not their plan," she said.

"But why wouldn't they want to stop the Apocalypse from happenin'?"

"…I don't know," Elena admitted. "But Castiel took Dean for something. Maybe they didn't know where she was until now."

Bobby gave her a dubious look.

"Regardless of what they're planning," she said with a shake of her head, "Dean's not going to let Sam take her on alone. He'll find a way to get to him."

"Sorry for rainin' on your wishful thinkin' parade, but Sam could be anywhere," Bobby said, "And now not even Dean knew where he went."

One of the phones started to ring, and he hesitated only for a moment before answering, his face down turning when he heard the voice on the other line.

"What do you want now, you son of a bitch?"

Elena sat down hard on the couch and wracked her brain. Who in the hell would know where to find Sam besides the angels?

"How many?"

She didn't have the time or the backup to start questioning demons for Ruby's whereabouts, nor would she come or tell her anything if Elena summoned her.

"You realize I'm almost six hours out."

Her eyes widened in realization.

"All right," Bobby sighed long-sufferingly into the phone. "I'll make it in five hours, maybe."

"Bobby," Elena said when he hung up the phone.

"What?"

"I need you to take me to Hill City."

"You're lucky this is on route to where I'm supposed to be headed," he said sourly. "I hope for your sake you've got an actual plan."

"You know, you could do with less snark in your life," she remarked. "Yes, I have a plan! I just need my car to get there."

After a mostly quiet few hours of speeding out of Sioux Falls and into Hill City, Bobby jerked to a stop at her driveway.
"You don't have Sam and Dean backing you up now. You know that, right?" he asked pointedly. "You're talking 'bout walking right into the Lion's Den with a non-magic knife to maybe stop the end of the world."

"I find Lilith, I find Sam. I find Sam, I probably find Dean," she reminded. "I won't be alone."

Elena got out of the car and unlocked the garage, revealing a midnight blue Chevy Camaro once she yanked the protective tarp off. Bobby pulled out of the driveway, but stopped short at the mailbox. Elena looked up in confusion when he killed the engine and went into his trunk, then pulled out something she couldn't quite make out until he was walking toward her.

"First piece I got. Take care of it an' it'll take care of you."

He placed the steel pistol in her slightly shaking hand. She looked down at it, then up at Bobby.

"Beretta 92?"

He nodded and started down the driveway toward his car with his hands in his pockets. At the driver's side he hesitated at her call, and looked back at her over his shoulder.

"Thanks, Uncle Bobby," she said with a small smile. Again he nodded.

"Fifteen silver rounds," he said. "Make 'em count."

Dean didn't think Cas had it in him… but he pulled through and decided to help him. What he didn't expect was interrupting Chuck in the middle of a special order.

"Th-Th-This isn't supposed to happen," Chuck stammered, then at whoever was on the other line with him, "No, lady, this is definitely supposed to happen, but I've gotta call you back."

He hung up the phone at stared at the hunter and angel helplessly.

"So the angels did get you," he half-whispered.

"What, you dream that too?" Dean asked.

"N-No," Chuck said, surprised. "Elena said…"

"Elena? She was here?"

"She was looking for Sam," Chuck said quickly as Dean stepped closer. "I told her where I… dreamed he'd be now."

"Well tell me."

Chuck scrambled to find his manuscript and flipped to the pages he knew Dean needed to see. He read them hastily, past what he already knew about Lilith's death being the final seal, and paused at finally seeing the location. Ilchester, Maryland.

"Where's that, a convent?" he asked.

"Yeah, but, you guys aren't supposed to be there. You're not in this story," said the prophet.

"Yeah well, we're making it up as we go," said Cas, earning a look from Dean, until the room began to shake and a whirring noise he was all too familiar with filled the room.
"Aw man, *not* again!" Chuck shouted, his hands going to his head. He and Dean ducked when the kitchen light blew out.

"It's the archangel," said Castiel. "I'll hold him off—I'll hold them all off, just stop Sam!"

Cas laid his hand on Dean's forehead and suddenly the noise was gone, replaced by eerie silence as he found himself in the middle of a hallway. It was dimly lit with candles hung along the walls. He ran down the long stretch of corridor and turned the corner, only to smack into a smaller frame and topple over to the ground. He would've drawn his knife if he hadn't recognized the pained groan that sounded under him.

His eyes widened in surprise.

"Lena," he then sighed in relief. She looked relatively unscathed, besides the cuts from her previous tussle with Ruby.

"Is this payback for me falling on you?"

Dean didn't answer as he got to his knees and hefted her by the waist to her feet, until they were both standing.

"We've gotta find Sam," he said quickly. She nodded and sprinted along with him around another corner and down the hall, where double wooden doors were open to a large room. Inside, Sam had Lilith pinned to the ground with a hand outstretched. Before either Dean or Elena could call out to him, Ruby smirked over her shoulder at them and closed the doors.

Dean ran forward and called out his brother's name while banging on the doors as loud as he could. Elena joined him, though their voices were being drowned out by Lilith's agonized screams.

"*Sam...Samyyyy!*"

The noise died down momentarily, but neither Dean nor Elena let up, despite Ruby goading Sam on from inside. And then Lilith's laughter, which cut off abruptly to her screams once again, long and painful to hear until there was nothing and Dean's throat was hoarse. He caught his breath and leaned against the door, resting his forehead against it.

"Dean, over there!" Elena grabbed his arm to pull him away from the door. She nodded toward the long candle stand down the hall. He caught her train of thought and ran over to grab it, not paying any mind to the candle he knocked over. She moved out of the way, allowing him to bulldoze straight through the doors. There was a trail of blood from Lilith's body on the floor and flowing into a circle, while Sam sat haphazardly to the side, his eyes wide and haunted.

"You're too late," Ruby said to Dean and Elena over her shoulder. Both glared.

"I don't care," Dean said, and stalked forward. She smirked, but before she could tense for a fight, Sam stood up and held her where she stood while Dean stabbed her between the ribs with her own knife, making sure to twist it for good measure. Her dead body fell to the floor, leaving Sam and Dean to stare at one another—one close to tears, one wary.

"I'm sorry," said Sam, and it was the most genuine thing Elena had heard come out of his mouth in a very long time.

The blood circle on the floor began to glow and the force of the cage unlocking had the entire room quaking.
"Sammy, let's go," Dean said, grabbing onto both Sam's jacket and Elena's arm. Dean's name fell from Sam's lips as he grabbed onto Dean's leather jacket, holding him in place for the briefest of moments.

"He's coming," Sam whispered.

Dean pulled him and Elena toward the doors that slammed shut. They pushed with everything they had and rattled the knobs that wouldn't turn. But a distant roaring was getting closer, and a whirring sound pierced painfully in their ears with a force that brought each of them to their knees. As the portal grew to the edge of the blood line Dean was sure they were going to be ripped apart by whatever came out if the noise didn't first. White hot light blinded him and made him shut his eyes, and the roaring grew.

And then there was nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned for the sequel.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!