

Punxsutawney Sucks **by Big Pink**

Summary: Six weeks after Punxsutawney Phil sees his shadow, people are mysteriously bursting into flame. Dean lets his guard down at the wrong moment, Sam feels awkward around girls, and everyone gets what's coming to them. Especially the groundhog.

Rated: Gen-o-riffic. Fun, funny, moderate amounts of angst, but mostly a romp.

A/N: Profound apologies to all the good folks of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. I'm sure Phil is a great groundhog and not at all evil. And that's why we call this 'fiction'.

The Small Print: Bad language, episode spoilers, almost-adult situations. I own no part of Supernatural, not the car, not the monsters, not the boys - not a hair on their pretty heads. Let me just think about their pretty heads for a moment... Excellent, thanks. That was nice. Moving right along...

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Chapter One

Posted June 14th, 2006

He unclipped her bra, and Rebecca reckoned enough was enough. She sat up fast, hit her knee against the stick shift, yelped, and drew back just an inch too much for him to mistake it for anything but what it was. Full stop. Austin made a low, weird yowl, the same noise her cats would make when they were wrestling. Play fighting. Could get serious if one of them got pissed off.

"Give me a minute," she said, but she was already struggling with the clasp, pulling down her top, wondering if she really wanted to lose her virginity in the cab of Austin Boorsma's pickup truck. It was kinda...lame. Austin's jaw worked a little, but he straightened himself to a sit without complaint, his face flushed. He was very fair and coloured easily; the moon was almost full and blue light filled the cab, so she could see the expression on his grain-fed face.

She looked at the dashboard clock, just as the deejay announced that it was eleven o'clock and a commercial for a mattress factory sale kicked in. This evening was such a fucking write-off. "My dad's going to kill me."

Austin nodded. "Cold?" he asked, almost gentlemanly, turning the key in the ignition. There was click, a whirr, then nothing. He tried again. Rebecca grimaced. Oh, great. Stuck up here at Gobbler's Knob, with Austin Boorsma, an almost-full moon, and a dead battery.

Austin didn't swear; it wasn't his style. Without a word, he slid out of the truck, letting in a blast of cold, a swirl of loose snow, and Rebecca realized that she wasn't as cold as she could be. The hood creaked open, a big Ford product the size of a queen sized bed, and Austin tinkered away, doing whatever boys did when they leaned into the engine like they were coming in for a kiss. Rebecca's dad was on the force, and Austin really wouldn't have done this on purpose. He was *trying*.

After a minute, he jumped back in, fast, and his face was set in a weird way, still and frozen.

“Austin?” she asked, uncertain.

“Something’s out there,” he said, not wanting to tell her more. He turned the key again, and the engine roared, the result of his foot jammed against the accelerator. He threw it into reverse, and the truck bounced down the parkland road and Rebecca could see the lights of Punxsutawney in the distance, sparkling like tears.

Halfway down the hill, the engine died again. This time, Austin muttered under his breath, and it sounded like swearing, even if it wasn’t. The truck coasted to a stop, and Austin zipped up his down jacket, knowing this might take longer than a minute in the cold night air. He reached across Rebecca like she was the family dog, pulled a pair of gloves from the dash in front of her.

She could see him for a minute in the headlights, young, blond, good-looking in the way that strapping sons of Dutch immigrant stock tended to be. Then, he wasn’t a young man anymore, he was a column of flame, burning up in front of her eyes rocket-fuel white and hot enough to melt the pavement on which he stood.

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“This is the fucking lamest idea yet,” Dean probably said. Sam was guessing, though. It was difficult to actually know what he was saying: his mouth was overflowing with hamburger. To Sam, it sounded remarkably like: ‘Desperado clucking vet’, which he was pretty sure his brother wouldn’t say. He tried to keep a straight face. It didn’t help that Dean had a glob of mayo on his chin.

Sam passed him a napkin, gestured to his chin, spun his plate of fries around, so sick of fast food he thought he might abandon Dean to run across the street to the supermarket and plant himself face-first into the first bin of broccoli he saw. And now Dean was giving him the look. Deservedly.

“Three kids going up in flames in the last week alone? Official police story about ‘accidental gasoline immolation’? Really? This doesn’t interest you?” Too many questions all at once guaranteed Dean’s complete non-compliance. Mulish. That’s one word to describe it. Just one.

Dean chewed, swallowed, then opened his mouth to speak, marginally mindful of table manners. A learned response to hanging out with Sam. It didn’t bear thinking about, what his manners might be like when he was alone. “Two words for you, Sammy: Groundhog Day.” Shrugged, those expressive brows mamboing around. “That’s how lame this idea of yours is.”

“Dean – I can’t believe I’m getting this from you. Just because these kids live in a town with the world’s most inane tourist attraction, you’re going to give the whole thing a pass?”

Dean smiled up at the waitress as she swung by, attentive and right to be so: Dean was dialing up the charm-o-meter. Sam waited patiently for the moment to pass. She asked if everything was all right, and Sam found himself wanting to be elsewhere, exposed to Dean’s unabashed prowl. Get a room, man. If Dean asked for her number, Sam swore he would scream. “You ever go over to Punxsutawney?” Dean asked, full of surprises.

The waitress adjusted her bangles, all white teeth and manufactured tan. “Of course. Only an hour away. My kids,” and stopped on that, as though something like kids would factor when Dean set his sights on a female target, “they love Phil. Bit of a gong show, tell you the truth.” She gestured with the coffee carafe; Dean nodded, still smiling. Sam had to actually pick up his mug to get seconds, move it around a little, like he was asking for change on the corner. “You’re late, though. Groundhog Day was, like, weeks ago.” She poured, one hand on her hip, angling in a way Sam had seen Jessica do a million times in front of a mirror. In front of him. “Saw his shadow. Wicked bad weather they’re getting now, in Punxsy. Just plain weird.”

It was so hard sometimes, keeping a straight face when Dean got his comeuppance. Something weird in Punxsutawney, Dean. Toldyouso, toldyouso. “Bad?” Dean said, recovering in a second.

“Yeah, freezing cold and snow.” They all looked outside the big plate glass window, to the parking lot and the park beyond that, next to the supermarket. Kids were playing on the slides and swings in hoodies and sneakers. No hats, no mittens.

That morning, Sam recalled, he had actually been able to talk Dean into throwing the ball around, fished out a pair of well-worn baseball gloves from the back of the trunk, a ball nestled in each one, keeping the shape over the winter. Portable in a way football and hockey gear had never been, smaller than a soccer ball. The easy back and forth of catch, the sound of the ball slamming into the glove, the sort of thing you’d do until evening made it impossible to see anymore, a thousand evenings in a thousand shitty towns, the only redeeming factors a stretch of grass, a dusty diamond, and his brother with a mitt and a ball. Dad coming to fetch them as dusk fell, ready for an evening’s work, that grim expression on his face, as though he’d never played catch in his life. Sam had always found it harder to put away the gloves than Dean had.

“That gopher got some ‘splainin’ to do,” the waitress deadpanned, hoping for a smile that wasn’t coming. Dean had moved on, oblivious. And, after a moment, so did she.

“So, we going?” Sam picked at the fries, considered the innocuous sprig of parsley on the plate, masquerading as a vegetable. Ate it, hoping Dean wouldn’t notice and hand him his ass.

“Might as well,” Dean replied. “Been waiting a long time to make a bunch of groundhog jokes.” He got up, grabbed his leather coat, didn’t even appear to be looking at his brother when he said, “You got something stuck between your teeth. Green.” And under his breath, “Freak,” before going to the till to pay.

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They approached town from the north, saw the signs when they were still a fair distance out. Shit, how could you miss them? *I am so going to have a field day with this*, Dean thought, glancing at Sam in the passenger seat. “You’re only 10 miles from Punxsutawney, home of Phil!” he read softly, like he had children’s stories when Sam was little. And in the middle of the billboard, a painted image of a big bulky rodent on his hind legs, little forelegs held out almost zombie-like. Dean bit the inside of his mouth, hard. Poor Sammy. It’s like shooting fish in a barrel.

“Don’t,” Sam warned, as though Dean had subtitles. A little unnerving, that habit, actually. To cover his chagrin, Dean bent forward and turned up the volume on the radio. A classic rock station was playing, it was always a classic rock station, unless he had a tape in. These kinds of

stations were ridiculously easy to find, especially some distance from a big city, as they were now. Dean liked hearing the local news from the town; knowing details made him feel as though he could start a conversation. And classic rock was better than country or a barnyard preacher, any day of the week.

The hills in this part of western Pennsylvania were turning green, pretty as a collector's plate, dipping into valleys cut by streams, the roads following old railroad tracks leftover from when coal mining had ruled this part of the country. They passed through a factory town, the workers changing shifts, swinging metal lunch boxes like kids – serious fucking lunch boxes, aluminum grey, big enough to hold a side of beef. The men looked like kings, the few that still had jobs in the steel industry. And Dean did not envy them one little bit.

Dean counted six deer carcasses during the drive to Punxsutawney, road kill, in various stages of decomposition, hit by drunks, or shot by idiots, or maybe just dropped dead by the side of the road. They're sleeping, Sammy. Shh. Don't wake 'em up.

The billboards were getting more frequent. At first, because he'd taken a less-traveled route, the signage had all been complaints to Jesus, out-of-date notices for the local hockey tournament, or advertisements for gun stores. They'd rolled past a wooded lot with a faded Quonset hut, a spray-painted sandwich board near the road, 'Home made porn. \$5'. Dean had turned to Sam, who was so squee'ed he looked as though he might shriek like a six-year-old girl.

"Don't even fucking think about it," Sam had breathed, horrified.

Actually, the whole idea had made Dean's skin crawl, but he had eased into the smile that he knew made Sam want to hit him. Recalling that, he could now afford to be magnanimous about the Zombie Groundhog.

"Looks nice," Dean offered, biting his lip this time. He kept biting it until they passed the billboard.

The car labored a bit going up one big hill, and then they were over the ridge and the valley cut by Mahoning Stream laid out before them, a fair sized town nestled in its elbow, surrounded by fields giving way to industrial parks, bare-limbed trees taking over when field stopped. And all of it was covered in a thick blanket of white, pristine snow.

Dean was so shocked he pulled the car to the verge, tapped his hands against the wheel. They had driven from one season to the other in the space of a hundred yards. He could see the line between the two on the field beside him: green, and white. The radio was blaring a CCR tune and he turned it down, forced himself to look at Sam.

Graciously, under the circumstances, Sam said, "Do we still have winter coats?"

By way of reply, Dean slid the Impala's chrome lever to the heat setting, and pulled back onto the road, hoping the all season radials would be enough.

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Dean recovered his equilibrium by the time they'd arrived downtown, was getting his own back by pointing out every fucking fiberglass groundhog he could see. There must be dozens of them,

all about four foot high, each one painted differently, some Chamber of Commerce venture, strategically placed in front of various sponsoring businesses. *Oh god*, Sam thought, watching Dean fighting really, really hard not to say anything truly antagonistic, *this is going to be excruciating*.

They parked in front of one fiberglass groundhog painted as an Italian pizza chef; Dean looked up the street, staring at something across the road. Sam followed his line of vision, and saw a whole storefront devoted to souvenirs: *Git your Groundhog Gear Here!* On the side of the building – a 1970s cinderblock construction – was a huge and alarmingly bright mural, executed by schoolchildren. Rainbow waves emanating from the sky, a hollow tree, and a really, really happy looking groundhog in a top hat.

“Shoot me now,” Dean murmured, flashing a quick disgruntled stare at Sam before slamming the car door and heading for the trunk. He pulled out two parkas, one down filled, the other polyfibre, and scrounged around looking for something warmer. He found a scarf, which he wrapped around his neck, but nothing else remotely useful. The snow had been cleared on the streets, was shoveled onto the strip between the road and the sidewalk, but the road wasn’t wet, it was that crisp lacy white that came when the temperature dipped below freezing.

It was biblically cold, the sort of deep-freeze old people talked about. Something out of Laplander legend. Nunavut cold. Sam hoped the Impala would start again; they should probably try to find a motel with a plug-in for overnight, like they had when they’d wintered in North Dakota one year. Dean had supreme confidence in the old car, and usually it was well-founded, but this wasn’t *normal*.

They passed a patch of graffiti marking up the alleyway between the souvenir shop and Dean’s destination, which seemed to be the pizza parlour. Scrawled in red paint was a groundhog identified as ‘Phil’, and he was doing something that groundhogs probably did all the time, in this particular instance with ‘Mrs. Phil’. Beside that, in large black letters, dripping with an inexperienced tagger’s hand: “Punxsy Sux!” Sam believed it, knew that particular brand of small-town boredom and feral captivity. Get me outta here, it practically shouted.

Actually, Dean wasn’t headed for the pizzeria; the tourism office was located directly beside the restaurant. Sam hadn’t immediately identified it as such, since he was distracted by yet another large toothy fiberglass Phil, this one dressed as a fireman. Despite the biting cold, Dean stopped in front of the groundhog, looked as though he was contemplating doing something unnatural to it. It was hard to come up with anything more unnatural than what the artist had already done, however. Dean turned to his brother, and Sam noticed that his breath was crystallizing on the scarf, his hands jammed deep into pockets. The tips of Dean’s ears and nose were bright pink. Why the hell hadn’t they brought toques? For god’s sake, he reminded himself, this morning they had played *baseball*.

“Want a picture?” Dean asked, his breath pluming out, gesturing to the groundhog with his nose. Under their feet, the snow made the faint creaking noise it did only when the relative humidity plunged into negative digits. All Sam wanted to do was to get inside; the hairs in his nostrils were freezing, and it hurt to take a deep breath.

“I’m sure they’ve got postcards, if you’re interested.” And he kept walking, not missing a beat, wondering which was potentially weirder: the cold, or the three young people who had caught on fire. Right now, his money was on the freeze, but he’d be willing to admit the two might be connected.

Chapter Two

Posted June 14th, 2006

And here's the next bit...one particularly famous groundhog, a teen hockey star, and more fraternal ribbing. Dean gets into trouble at the library. Again, contain your excitement.

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a/n: A reviewer asked if Punxsutawney actually looks like I'm describing it, what with all the groundhog stuff. I've taken some liberties, of course, but most of this crap I really couldn't make up if I tried. Visit the town's web site if you want to see the fiberglass Phils, or the "Official Site of the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club" to find out more about whole event. The dead deer at the side of the road, the 'home made porn' sign and the factory worker vignette from last chapter were all spotted on a road trip I made through rural Pennsylvania a couple of years back.

Disclaimer: I'm trying not to veer off into Libel Land, so all the characters that populate this story are totally, completely figments of my imagination (and bear no resemblance to people living or dead). Oh, except for all things Supernatural, which belong to media conglomerates.

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Sam was a little worried that Dean was going to get kicked out of the library. First off, they hadn't even made it to the card catalogue – and this was the sort of library that *had* a card catalogue – before Dean said, in a voice way louder than was necessary, "Shit! Would ya look at that?" Granted, the instigating factor happened to be yet another groundhog statue next to the checkout desk, but a class of kindergarten students were getting their picture taken in front of it, so that pretty much screwed him in the eyes of the library staff.

And, really, shouldn't Dean be getting inured to the furry bastard by now? They had booked a room at Phil's Daybreak Inn, had breakfasted at The Burrow, and just now bought toques at the Gopher Gear store. Dean had cut off the little groundhog patch on his with his Swiss army knife before they were even out of the store. In addition to the toques, they'd bought another scarf and some mittens. They'd had to settle for mittens, not gloves, because – as the shopkeeper had pointed out at least three times – she'd had a run on gloves. In the car, on the way to Barclay Square and the library, Dean had declared mittens better for cold, anyway, because for your fingers to remain warm, you had to 'keep your guys together'. Then Sam was told to shut his cakehole because what did some Stanford geek know about cold?

So Sam said nothing about swearing in front of little kids. They set up at a long table, Sam with his notebook, and a pile of microfilm boxes and one of those old readers that must have been made at the same factory and in the same year as the Impala, because it probably weighed as much and certainly sounded as loud. For the first hour or so, Dean pretended to take some interest, looking over Sam's shoulder, even attempting to loop one of the microfilms into a second reader to help out. That had earned him another reprimand from the librarian, for cursing at the machine.

Dean cast a long-suffering look to his brother, begging for release. Sam, who had just found a mention of an 'accidental' burning in a March 1955 edition of the *Punxsutawney Spirit*, waved

him off distractedly. Fine, he'd get more accomplished without Dean hovering, or provoking the library staff.

Even at Stanford, Sam had been labeled as particularly studious; he could easily – *happily* – spend hours at a piece of research, ruling out specious citations, hunting through arcane reference volumes, employing a fine academic instinct to leap from one source to another. His head was addled with dates and facts, and his notebook pages covered in his tight, almost indecipherable scrawl, and he thought he was seeing a pattern, when...a child's scream shredded his concentration.

His head snapped up, and he felt groggy for a second, not an unpleasant feeling, but as though he was swimming up through jello. The scream was more of a shriek, he decided, hearing it again from somewhere across the library, but it carried remarkably well. Sam got up, leaving his notes on the table, and their coats hung across the chair backs – this was Punxsutawney, after all, not the reading room at Stanford and who in their right minds would steal some crappy old parkas? – and headed toward the sounds of escalating chaos coming from the children's section.

Had Sam been a betting man, he'd have put money down that any commotion in a library would involve Dean. He wasn't wrong, though it took him a few minutes to put it all together.

He jumped back – not in fear, but in surprise – when a large creature the size of well-fed cocker spaniel came bolting out from between the stacks, bounced off an oversized atlas on the lower shelf, and wedged itself under the trophy case located between the drinking fountain and the handicapped elevator.

A split second later, a harried woman stormed around the same corner, cast wildly about before resting her eyes on Sam. He recognized her: the kindergarten teacher. And not one of those comely, wouldn't-teaching-little-kids-be-lovely-before-I-get-married? type of kindergarten teachers, either. This one looked as though kicking the little monsters into submission was more her style. So Sam maintained his composure and made her ask.

“Did you see...” and she trailed off, only to take a deep breath. “Did you see a groundhog?”

Sam knew what Dean would have said to that. Instead, he nodded. “It's, ah,” and waved his hand at the trophy case. At least ten little kids crowded behind her, followed by an older guy in a plaid shirt with a nametag that said, “Henry” underneath which read, “Handler”. It was unclear how these two words were related.

Leaving the teacher and the groundhog handler to manage the rescue, Sam sidled down the stacks in the direction from which the groundhog had come, instinctively knowing he'd find Dean there.

The row of books opened out into the children's section, colorful banners and large posters advertising the Raise-a-Reader program and the Mom n' Tots storytime series. A few large beanbag chairs littered the floor, as did a bunch of scattered cushions, but what really demanded Sam's attention was the fact that Dean was standing behind a plexiglass wall in a sea of wood shavings looking down at an enormous groundhog. Above the plexiglass enclosure, a sign read: “Groundhog Zoo – Home of Punxsutawney Phil”.

And Dean accused *him* of being a magnet for the weird.

Pressed up against the plexi, a dozen little kids – mostly boys, Sam noted with a stab of sudden understanding – watched Dean bend down to silently stare at the groundhog snuffling the tip of his boot. A young woman stood beside the latched gate, and she was wearing the same pattern of plaid shirt as Henry the Handler, albeit with considerably more style. Sam wondered what *her* nametag said.

Just as he came up, the little boys – the disruptive and rebellious remnants of the kindergarten class, the ones that wouldn't follow their teacher if she'd been guiding them into an all-you-can-eat chocolate factory – made a collective, appreciative sound, something between 'coooooool' and 'sweeeeeet'. Dean had taken out his knife and was cutting an apple to feed to the groundhog, but he did it with such flourish, such speed, that the apple skin flew off in one huge, single curl, a miracle of skill. He was such a fucking awful influence, Sam thought, raising his knuckle to tap on the glass.

Looking up, Dean smiled that hundred-watt grin of his, pocketed the knife and threw the remainder of the apple to the bottom of the pen. Hungrily, the groundhog waddled over to it. It looked like a cinderblock with fur and probably weighed as much. Nodding and saying something unintelligible to the girl ("Britni" Sam could now read, "Assistant"), Dean unlatched the door and came out of the Groundhog Zoo, trailing wood shavings across the carpet.

"Can you believe it?" he said as soon as he was out, ignoring the massed pod of boys who followed his every move with eyes round and adoring. "That's Phil in there. Only comes out on February 2nd. Rest of the time, he's kicking back in his climate-controlled pad being hand-fed by the blonde. Nice fucking life." And Sam grabbed his brother's shirt so fast and so hard he heard a tiny rip as he pulled Dean bodily out of the children's section.

Releasing him as they returned to their table, Sam managed to find the humour in it – nosing through old newspapers while Dean set wild animals free in the public library. "So, if the big guy was Phil, who was the escapee?"

Dean looked sincere, which wasn't comforting. "That so wasn't my fault, you know. Mrs. Phil has a mind of her own. Phyllis, I think they call her." And a grin spread way out to *there*. "Books like an Indy driver, doesn't she?"

Privately thinking that that was the only time Dean had ever uttered the word 'book' in a library, Sam drew his brother's attention to the newspaper article he'd deliberately left on the microfilm reader screen. The headline read: Fourth Teen Dies in Fire. The date was March, 1965.

"Okay, Mr. Free Willy, follow the bouncing ball, will you? We have a series of fire-related deaths over the years, always young men, always this time in March."

To his credit, Dean settled down, drew a chair over. "What else?"

Sam adjusted the screen, twirled the focus knob and pointed to the item on the corner of the same front page: 'Deep Freeze Continues'. Dean's eyebrows rose slightly. "And when does the deep freeze end?"

"Six weeks to the day after Groundhog Day," Sam said, knowing it sounded stupid. If it weren't for the dead bodies, it would *be* stupid.

“What did our friend Phil predict those years?” Dean asked, and Sam had the answer, because he’d followed the same line of reasoning.

“Six more weeks of winter, every time. But,” he continued, anticipating Dean’s protest, “Phil sees his shadow every few years, and that doesn’t necessarily mean deaths, or a deep freeze. Since he’s been doing the predicting, over a hundred and twenty years, it’s only happened five times that I can find. This latest spate makes it six.”

Dean nodded, and laughter writhed beneath his mock-serious façade. “Britni told me that the Inner Circle – those dudes in the top hats that run the prediction racket and look after Phil? – claim it’s the same fucking groundhog now as in 1886. They give him a sip of magic ‘groundhog punch’ every seven years that keeps him going.”

Dear god, Sam thought, I am going to be paying for this visit for *years*.

Despite the ridiculousness of the situation, there was the fact that in addition to being wacky, the whole gopher thing was also weird. Weird in their way, weird. Dean looked as though he could use a cup of coffee, rubbed his hand across his face. “So what’s the difference? Why some years and not others?”

Sam shrugged, shook his head lightly. “All young men. All out at night for one reason or another, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends. Just one at a time. In 1897, six people died. In 1936, only two, same as in 1943. 1955, three. 1965, four. No obvious pattern.”

Dean wasn’t listening. That’s because he was thinking in archetypes, not so much on statistics, but on mythology. “What’s the origin of Groundhog Day, anyway? The whole ‘sees his shadow’ thing sounds pretty, you know...dark.”

Candlemas, it turned out. St. Brigid and early Germanic settlers bringing their beliefs about surviving the last half of winter to this part of America. Early February was the turning point in the season, the time when things could go either way. Better have enough hay stored to last out the winter. Meteorologically speaking, if the sun was bright enough to cast a shadow, it meant the weather was clear, which probably meant cold; there was not enough cloud cover to trap heat. A cold, long winter meant offerings to those who brought warmth: St. Brigid was a hearth saint, one for whom sheaves of grain were braided and left.

Sam was guessing and he was skeptical. “Keep St. Brigid happy? You think a Christian saint is offing Punxsutawney’s boys?”

Dean sighed mightily. “We’ve seen stranger, Sam, god only knows. These Christian holidays are usually cover dates for older pagan rituals, though.”

“Sacrifices to help get the community through winter?” Sam started to rewind the microfilm. “Yeah, we’ve seen that before, but this is a huge, national event. Punxsutawney Phil’s been on *Oprah*, Dean. And I’m not even going to mention the movie. This is too high profile for an evil cabal to control, don’t you think?” They were running out of easy answers, running full into pure conjecture. “C’mon. I need something to eat. Let’s see if we can get through lunch without offending the locals, okay?”

“We should talk to some teenagers,” Dean muttered as Sam returned the film boxes to the reference counter.

“We could come back here after school lets out,” Sam suggested, smiling at the reference librarian, who was looking damn happy they were leaving. “Find a few then.”

Dean, who was already heading for the door, pulling on his mitts, turned briefly. “And that, Sammy, is why you never got lucky in high school.”

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There were actually a good number of reasons why Sam hadn't made past second base until college, but most of them involved moving a lot, having a conscience, and liking books more than sports. Oh, and Dean of course.

It was hard, especially around girls, especially in high school, having a brother like Dean. He was the type of guy little undomesticated boys and teenaged girls *loved*. Dean got into a lot of fights, knew his way around a compliment, and had that fucking smile. Most of the time, Sam didn't mind; it was easier than making idiotic small talk – a specialty of Dean's for which he was genetically programmed to excel – and trying to feign interest in whatever....zzzz.

And there, he'd just tuned out what they were saying again. Something about Spring Break and Daytona, maybe. He would have fallen asleep, except that Dean kicked him under the table. Hard. He caught Sam in his stare: Step up to the plate, Sammy.

“So, I've been hearing about some weird stuff going on,” Sam blurted out, earning a reprovng look from Dean as the table – three girls in camo pants and puffy down coats – shut completely up.

The hollow clatter of pins falling, the roll of a heavy ball against metal rails, and the smell of bowling shoes was perhaps one of the least palatable combinations of sounds and sensations Sam had encountered. Dean seemed utterly unfazed at how uncool this whole situation was: scamming sixteen-year-old girls in a bowling alley. Named Groundhog Lanes, of course.

But he'd been right: it was where the teens went after school, to bowl, or play pool, or just hang out with a coke and a basket of fries.

“Yeah,” Dean agreed, “one of the football team?”

“They're great,” one of the girls immediately gushed. The Punxsutawney Chucks were apparently one of the town's big attractions – the teens having no interest in groundhogs, of course – and now that the football season and Groundhog Day were well over, there wasn't much else to gossip about other than MTV. Sam knew the role football played in towns like this, how the boys would be just the same as gods, with the same adulation and the same responsibilities.

He had a brief pang of regret then, as he watched his brother work the table, the smile fixed on his face, a certain keen longing in his eyes. Dean had wanted to play football, had wanted it so much. Sam had been twelve, and Dean four years more than that, and the junior squad tryouts had gone well. Then a hunt had ended horrifically for them, and Dean had been in the hospital for weeks, it had seemed, and that was that. The next year, at a different school in a different state – Texas, of course – it was obvious that Dean just wasn't big enough for the first string, and if it wasn't first string for Dean, it was nothing. The baseball mitt had come out again.

There were so many things that were off limits as conversation starters with Dean, and this was one of them.

Sam noticed the slight shift in Dean's attitude, but the girls didn't; they were on a roll. "Oh, yeah, I mean, Austin was so cute and all. And Darrin," the girls were silent, like chickens at night, present, watchful, fearful.

"Ben," one of them sniffed.

"Don't forget Lyndon," a new voice broke in, almost harsh. A tall teen stood beside the table, hands deep into the large pockets of an army-issue winter parka, baseball hat too big for what was a small head, headphones resting on wide shoulders, disingenuous blue eyes roaming the table, daring any one of the girls there to say a word. "Lyndon died first. But he wasn't a Chuck, was he? So maybe he doesn't count."

The girls remained silent. Sam smiled awkwardly. "Who's counting?"

It was like they had some internal mode of communication, young girls. Dean had warned him about that, years ago, when Sam still took advice from Dean on these matters. Sam had been more like those kindergarten boys in the Groundhog Zoo than he cared to remember.

So they left, en masse, and on cue. One of them, though, bent down to Sam before she left, and he could see a floating heart pendant slide forward on her necklace as she came close, overpowering scent of vanilla and gum. "You are so cute. You should come to skating Friday night, you know." She balanced her weight between one hand on the table, and one on the bench back, face inches from Sam's. "Really. It gets really boring around here," and what she meant by it was so obvious, so literally in his face.

Words did not come. Sam sat there, pole axed, unable to cough up anything, knowing Dean was an arm's length away, hearing everything. He was so bad at this, so completely useless, even if he'd wanted to – which he, comprehensively, did not.

"For heaven's sake," the army-parka said, sliding into the booth as the girls shot venomous looks over their shoulders. "You'd think they didn't have a football team to choose from."

Difficult to determine many things about this newcomer. Sex, for example. Age. Whether or not he – she, Sam thought suddenly – was amused or angry. A little of both. Holy shit, this kid's life in small town America would not be an easy one.

"Kris," the teen identified herself, natural confidence expecting a response.

Dean introduced them as reporters for an online magazine, though it was difficult to tell if Kris was buying it. By the time Sam worked up the nerve to look at Dean, his brother was wholly concentrating on Kris, which was better than him concentrating on the girl's parting comments to Sam.

"Lyndon was president of the debating club," Kris said, picking at the abandoned fry basket. "He was a good guy, and he didn't deserve to burn up like that."

Who does? Sam thought. "You think you know what happened?" he said instead.

Kris shrugged. “No. First of all, I thought it might have been a Chuck prank gone wrong, but those guys don’t have it in them, really.” She wore a wry smile, displaying an intelligence, an observer’s dry wit. Older than her years, made to be by circumstance. “I used to play hockey with most of them, until I hit twelve and had to play for the girls team.” She shrugged. “Still, full ride to Penn State next year playing for the Women’s Varsity, which is more than I can say for any of the Chucks.”

“They give you a hard time, the guys?” Sam asked, mostly because Kris seemed so open for it.

She chewed thoughtfully on a cold fry, grinning. She’s more like Dean than I am, Sam thought with a smile. “Girls give me a worse time.”

“And Lyndon? A friend?”

Kris shrugged. “I look out for him.” Cleared her throat, looked around for a drink to finish. Sam remembered himself at that age, not so many years ago, eating anything that wasn’t nailed to the floor, drinking milk straight from the carton, devouring an entire package of hot dogs at once. “Looked out,” she corrected herself. “He’d stopped his car to get the family’s mail at the end of his farm’s drive. All they found was ash.” She snagged to a halt, suddenly, her voice catching on something hard. She took a minute, all angles and sharp edges. “He was a good guy.” Looked up, but there were no tears in her eyes. “They were all good guys. That what you’re wanting to hear?”

Rarely had Sam felt so shabby about their lies. This was real grief and though their intentions were good, their means were so spurious that he felt he had to say something.

“What’s going on here, Kris?”

For the first time, the kid looked uncomfortable. “You don’t mess with the groundhog in this town,” she said, serious. “You just don’t do it. What would we be without it? But there’s something fucked up with the whole thing, the weather, the dying, and Gobbler’s Knob. That fucking Phil’s at the center of it.”

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Chapter Three

Posted June 14th, 2006

And I'm afraid to tell you -- oooh, there's a world of hurt out there for Dean. Head's up.

Disclaimer: Ownership is such a loaded concept, don't you think? Punxsutawney is still a great place, with no evil marmots (as far as I know), but does possess a whole dang lot of really nasty fiberglass groundhogs and some fairly weird mythology. As for the boys? Well, I can complain till I'm hoarse, but they still belong to the Acronym.

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Friday night and every table was full. It was the kind of place with checkered tablecloths and faux brick, but the pizza was great. They didn't have a pretty waitress, however, which always dampened Dean's dining pleasure, but he supposed that Kris might give him a run for his money when it came to getting phone numbers from waitresses, anyway. This kid is fearless, he thought, engaging in a little hand dance with Sam as to who was going to get the last slice of meat lover's. Sam had the advantage of reach, though, and he scooped it first, a feline smile touching his lips as he met Dean's scowl. The waiter-owner-cook picked up the empty pizza tin with efficient speed, and whisked it away before Dean could grab a lingering crust. It had cheese on it, too. Damn.

When she'd taken off the baseball cap, turned out Kris had platinum blonde hair, cut close to her head, a small tattoo on the back of her neck, #45. Her jersey number, she'd said, when Sam had asked. The baseball cap had not seemed up for the weather, though Kris had a huge warm scarf that she'd pulled up to her nose when she'd taken them round to see the sights earlier that afternoon. The sights being where the burnings had taken place.

The latest one, Austin Boorsma's, was halfway up to Gobbler's Knob, where Phil did the prognosticating every February 2nd. They'd followed Kris in her beaten-up truck, the Impala fishtailing on the icy road. Dean had been having fun, when he'd had it under control. Once, though, the wheels had slewed without warning, and the car had gone sideways across the road before he'd been able to right it. You're enjoying this, aren't you? Sam had asked, peeved, at the only and exact moment when he *hadn't* been enjoying it. Trust Sam to ask the wrong question at the wrong time.

It wasn't difficult to miss the spot: the ice melted away in a radius the size of a big family's dinner table, a circle of black asphalt amidst ice three inches thick. When Dean had bent down to take a closer look, the pavement was warm to his touch. Three days and it was still hot as a summer sidewalk. He'd peered up at Kris then, but she was looking out across the fields at something Dean couldn't see, and didn't seem as though she wanted to talk about it.

Because they'd been halfway there and sundown was still an hour away, they had continued the climb up to the Knob, passing by the local rec center and a clutch of billboards advertising all manner of groundhog-related festivities: a pancake breakfast, a bonfire, a game of touch football with the Chucks. Lyndon, Kris's friend, had a weekend job cleaning the Knob, Kris had said. Since he'd died two weeks ago, not much had been done to tidy up the clearing on the hill: the garbage can had been overflowing, and the snow was deep enough that Dean had parked the Impala right on the road, didn't even try to pull off to the side. They'd walked in the last little bit, snow up to their knees.

The Knob itself hadn't been much to look at: a clearing of ridged snow on top of beaten ice, a fenced enclosure with a stage and an artificial stump in the middle of it. The stump had a latched flap, secured with a dinky-looking padlock. Kris had said that they literally stuffed Phil in there pre-dawn on February 2nd, and would haul him out an hour or so later, whether he wanted to be displayed in front of tens of thousands of screaming fans or not. Surprised he'd be paying any attention to his freakin' shadow, given the distractions. Look at all those TV cameras, and those wacky guys in the top hats, and the girls decked out as the Groundhoettes – wait a minute, is that my *shadow*?

“What’s so funny?” Sam asked, enjoying the last piece of pizza way too much.

Not only was his pizza gone, but so was his beer, so Dean crumpled his napkin onto his plate and shoved it to the middle of the table. Kris finished her coke, and both of them stared at Sam like he was the last cookie in the box at a slumber party. “What?” Sam’s face screwed up with the question. “Order more, if you want more.”

“I got plans,” Kris demurred, making to get up. “Thanks for the pizza. Hope that was helpful, this afternoon.”

“You know where we could talk to this Rebecca Shadlee? The one who was with Austin when he died?” Dean knew that she’d probably not be able to tell them much, but maybe there was something they’d kept out of the papers. If they could do it without her parents around, that would be best. The newspaper reports had said that her dad was a cop, which didn’t exactly have Dean beating a path to her front door.

“Friday night?” Kris grinned, pulling on the baseball cap. “Lace up, guys. Everyone’ll be at the rink.”

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Kris wasn't kidding. The place was lousy with teenagers. Not many were hanging outside, braving the cold for a smoke, or a pull on someone's mickey of rye, but enough were that Sam felt conspicuous when they pulled into the parking lot. The kids made way for them at the double doors of the rec center, whether due to Dean's imposing swagger, or Kris's immediate prickly presence.

A few of the boys – disguised by heavy coats and industrial-grade deerstalker caps that wouldn't have looked out of place on the Shackleton Expedition – grunted hello to Kris. Sam sensed a wary respect, doubtlessly earned. They didn't hang around to make conversation, however: even the short walk from the car to the doors froze Sam to his bones. It was cold enough that he didn't care about the groundhog toque or the mittens; the temperature made all notion of fashion completely ludicrous.

Rebecca Shadlee was startlingly pretty, long gangly legs, freckles, curly blonde hair, figure skates making her almost as tall as Dean when she stood up to Kris's low greeting. She eyed Kris, her friends seated around the benches, getting their skates on, conversation falling into silence. “This is Dean,” Kris said. “Works for Tar Zine,” and from the way she said it, Sam knew she didn't believe a word of their cover. “Writing a piece on the freeze, and what happened to the guys.”

“You’re a writer?” Rebecca asked, slightly disbelievingly. Sam bit back a laugh, but left Dean to it. He’d be better at this. Kris grabbed Sam’s arm, steered him around as Dean led Rebecca to the concession stand. Sam heard the words ‘hot chocolate’ and shook his head. Big time operator, my brother, *likethis* with the Swiss Miss.

“Your friends are here,” Kris said with a wickedly amused grin, gesturing with her nose to a gaggle of slightly younger teen girls, skates hung around their necks, just entering the lace up area. Floating Heart smiled and waved. “I leave you to it, Big Guy,” Kris clapped his shoulder, unhooking her own black Bauers from her shoulders and finding a spare spot on a nearby bench.

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It took all of five seconds to determine that Rebecca was a sweetheart, not one of those girls that traded her good looks for superiority or favour. She was decent, and truthful, and felt things deeply. She teared up when she told Dean what had happened, and she’d been raised by a father who obviously instilled in her a healthy respect for her own person. But she was also young and wanted so badly for Austin’s death to mean something. She was the one who suggested that they go to where Austin had gotten spooked three nights ago, to where he’d said, ‘Something’s out there,’ which in Dean’s experience, were three of the most alarming words in the English language.

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Sam was trying to explain that he couldn’t skate to save his life. California, he offered as an excuse, which was as true as anything. Lots of skaters come from Cali, Floating Heart replied. Cali, she called it, which made Sam stutter ineptly, and search the rink for some sort of relief. Across the ice, back by the double entrance doors, he saw Dean and Rebecca. And they were *leaving*.

Now was the time to panic, clearly. Floating Heart, whose name might have been Amber, or Tamara, Sam hadn’t quite caught it, was absolutely reveling in the fact that the tall college boy had come to see her, no matter how much he denied it. He was here, wasn’t he? He stood at the edge of the rink trying desperately to ignore her, leaning one arm on the boards, skaters zooming on and off the ice, that particular smell of cold and wet and the inside of skates permeating the entire sorry night.

Heart pounding unnecessarily hard, Sam was further surprised when a hand grabbed his shoulder. Kris, coming off the ice, a quick blur easily the best and fastest skater on the rink, hauled Sam toward the penalty box, a ridiculously tall presence in the skates, which added an additional three inches to her height.

“Get worried,” she said, dropping her voice and giving the Floating Heart crowd a laser beam stare.

“Why?” Sam asked, walking a few steps with Kris to the edge of the rubber mats. He followed Kris’s concerned stare. A group of five or six guys – big guys, solid as Scottish oatmeal – were huddled by the double doors across the rink. One of them looked pretty agitated.

“Heard them talking about Rebecca, how she’s not showing proper respect for Austin,” and Kris’s voice was so dry she might start growing cacti on her tongue. “Their fellow Chuck.”

“He’s pissed off the football team, hasn’t he?” Sam asked, after a minute of watching the boys. They moved as a group, a gang. Sam didn’t like the looks of it either. Still, it was Dean they were talking about, the guy who regularly gunned down zombies, demons and werewolves. Though he actually did the gunning down with a *gun*.

“So, I’m guessing a twelve,” and Floating Heart was by his elbow again, holding up a pair of rental skates for him. Glancing at Kris, Sam realized who needed Dean, when he had this fresh humiliation to endure?

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What had been missing, up to this point anyway, was a commonality. And Dean had just found it.

He parked the Impala a few hundred yards from the clearing at the top of Gobbler’s Knob and told Rebecca to wait in the car while he took a look. Though he wasn’t too sure what to expect, he didn’t take a gun, didn’t want a cop’s daughter to suddenly blurt *that* out at the dinner table. Every single boy that had burned up, both this winter and in winters past, had been under eighteen. Whatever was going on, it liked kids, not grownups, which was technically what he was, like it or not. According to his birth certificate anyway. It did not seem to attack girls, either, so he was fairly confident that Rebecca would be fine in the car.

But it was night and the piece of the puzzle that had just dropped into his lap, thanks to Rebecca rattling on about Punxsy teens and their stupid mating habits, was that every single boy who had been killed had been to Gobbler’s Knob in the half hour before their death, including Lyndon, who had only been doing his fucking job. So something was here, if he could find it.

He was really not scared, not by this, not by something that wasn’t going to hurt him. He was, however, fucking freezing because that stupid toque was a piece of shit, wouldn’t have kept Angelina Jolie hot. So he was cold, not afraid. His guard was down, then, though it was nighttime, and the moon full, and he heard it before he saw it, which ought to have given him some kind of advantage.

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When she’d suggested it, Rebecca didn’t think that leaving the rink with a complete stranger might be a problem. After all, this Dean guy seemed sincere, and she’d never known Kris to have a bad bone in her body, and Rebecca considered herself a pretty good judge of character. And Dean was so interested in the strangeness of it all, which no adult around her seemed willing to admit.

But when Brent Fallowfield’s Camaro came gunning up the rise to Gobber’s Knob, she had presence of mind enough to duck under the seat as they slowed and beamed a flashlight in. And she thought, as the car slowly passed by to go up to the Knob’s parking circle in the deeper snow, how it might look to Brent and his friends, who were grieving in their own Neanderthal way.

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It moved from behind the tree, in the darkest part of the night, and Dean found himself more irritated than scared. Would you just fucking come out? Don't make me come back there. Thought of their father, of the arm raised above the bench seats, ready to swipe whichever one of them was howling in the backseat. *This hand is coming back and it doesn't care who it hits.*

There.

Black against black. Too fucking big to be a groundhog, he thought with a wide grin. Felt it move again, cautious, maybe scared. Maybe waiting for him to come in. A little, tiny insignificant warning bell tinkled away in the back of his head with all the urgency of wind chimes. You don't have any weapon except your knife, the bells converged enough to tell him.

Then, behind him, headlights swept across the clearing, and he was caught in them. Dean turned immediately back to the forest, but all he saw were trees.

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She huddled down in the space between the seat and the glove compartment, and waited there for a long time, until her legs began to cramp. Shit, she thought. This is stupid, and I'm cold. When the hell is he coming back? She peeked over the dash, could see the glow of the Camaro's headlights through the trees at the top, stationary. Hope Dean's okay. Those guys probably just want to scare him.

But she knew in her heart of hearts that this Dean wouldn't scare easily, and she hoped that the Chucks were just going to talk.

Like an incendiary bomb, something she'd seen on CNN's Iraq coverage, a huge white light overcame the puny headlights. She'd seen this before, knew what it was, and oh, shitshitshitshit. Rebecca climbed into the driver's seat, turned the key in the Impala's ignition, and headed hell bent for leather to the rink, where some kind of help would surely be found.

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What he knew about fighting was enough to fill a thick book. A whole lot of thick books. With weapons, without. Bare hands, pool cues, broken bottles, knives. Even cans of Spaghetti-Os in a pillowcase made an effective weapon when used correctly. Tonight, with six guys, big guys, his best weapon was going to be his mouth.

"Hey," he started, as they got out of the car. Silly car, he thought, dismissing the pinstriping and the fuzzy dice as excessive. He held his hands away from his sides. These are boys, he reminded himself magnanimously.

They were in no mood to talk. And even though they were boys, in the same technical sense that Dean was an adult, they were also large, and they were angry. Angry at him, angry at losing their friends in an inexplicable and irrational way, angry that they couldn't stop it.

“What the fuck you doing with Rebecca?” The tall one in front, neck as thick as Dean’s thigh, came forward, his words turned to mist by the devastating cold, difficult to tell anything about him other than his size, silhouetted against the headlights as he was. The lights shone into Dean’s eyes and he circled a little to the side, hoping to draw them off, get into a better position.

“Wanted to know more about how your friend Austin died,” he said, truthfully. He kept moving, but it was hard not to be obvious about it, the snow was so deep.

“Don’t fucking talk about Austin,” one of the others slurred and Dean smelled alcohol over the metallic tang of snow. “He was a fucking Punxsy Chuck. What the fuck are you?”

A thin sense of self-preservation kept Dean from rolling his eyes at that. “Listen, I’m...”

“You know who you’re dealing with, man? Do you? Fucking Punxsy Chucks, that’s who. I’m through talking,” he heard one of them say, and the first tendril of dread crept up Dean’s spine, gave him a little shake. Wake up, boy.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you,” Dean replied, feeling around in his parka’s pocket for his knife before realizing it was in his jeans. He was repeating *these are just boys*, over and over again, though it was so definitely not helping. “Who are you guys again? Dixie Chicks?”

As he suspected, that brought it on, but at least he was the one who rang the dinner bell.

For the first maybe five seconds it went quite well. He was stone cold sober, and had a vast, stupid amount of experience in this sort of thing. Enough to know that after the first five seconds, experience would count for exactly shit, and combined body weight would take precedence. So he enjoyed the three connective shots he got in: one to the biggest guy’s head, one to the solar plexus of the slow drunk guy, and a neat kick to the balls of the little mouthy guy who was likely to give him the most trouble.

After that, it was a matter of endurance, hoping he could outlast their fury until they stumbled into shame. Two quick blows to his head were not promising, and when one of the bigger boys grabbed his arms from behind, Dean turned neatly to elbow him in the jaw, but that just allowed one of the others to connect a hell of a right hook across his face, a blow that probably broke the guy’s knuckles. Dean hoped it did, anyway. As the brightly lit snow rushed up to meet his falling body, he watched, as though in bizarre slow motion, his own blood spray across the white, contrasting and strangely beautiful. None of it hurt.

Yet.

Once he was down – which was such a very bad place to be in a fight like this, was the point when it turned from a fight into a beating – they began to kick him. He rolled an arm around his head to protect it, but one of them had big bad-ass construction boots, and those mothers inflicted damage. Dean felt something break inside him, a harsh cough and hiccup of organ and bone, and the sound that hissed from his suddenly liquid lungs felt as though it might be the last one he would ever make.

His world exploded in a flash of white light, everything bleached, sand-blasted to oblivion. The curl his body had protected itself with tightened further, and he felt a hot hand on him, and it burned like a *sonofabitch*. With that, he heard screaming, and he had no idea who was making such a god-awful sound, but he had his suspicions.

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One look at her face and a scrambled fear clutched Sam's heart. Rebecca had no color to her whatsoever, and she searched the cavernous rink for a particular face. His. No, Kris's, who was sitting by his knees, undoing the laces of her skates, getting ready to go. Dean hadn't come back, had been gone for at least forty-five minutes and that was enough for Sam. Kris said they could use her truck to look around but, no she was not going to hand over the keys to a virtual stranger.

As Kris straightened to a stand, weirdly shorter, but not precisely short, Rebecca rushed up to them, grabbed both of Kris's shoulders.

"Shit, Kris," and Sam thought he might dissolve like a sandcastle in surf as she said what he knew she was going to say, "Up on the Knob. It's happened again. Your friend," she turned to Sam. "They..."

Sam was already moving, had grabbed the keys from Kris's slack fingers and was going. "Phone the police," he shouted over his shoulder, and Kris was running up behind him, her bulky big sneakers untied, holding her hand out for her keys with a stern expression on her face.

In the parking lot, they were almost run over by a Camaro, which veered off the road and into the lot as though it was participating in a high-speed chase minus the cop car. It slid to a stop, and the driver climbed out, his face bloody, his nose most certainly broken, shouted, "Get an ambulance! We need an ambulance on the Knob!"

And though he scanned the Camaro, Sam did not see his brother. But before he could shove Kris towards her truck, Sam spotted the Impala parked sideways in front of the snow pile, and he felt almost faint. "C'mon, Kris," he murmured, realizing his breath was too shallow and too fast, "C'mon."

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Chapter Four

Posted June 14th, 2006

Yep, so we left Dean a little messed up. So you better find out what happens, eh?

Your average disclaimer: I'm going to see if I can write a curse-free chapter! With pixies and puppies! And the boys will eat frozen cookie dough ice cream from the tub and everything will be so dreamy and...oh, fuck it.

The suits own everything, doesn't mean you can't play with your food.

File under "BigPink's Eensy-Weensy Case of OCD": I have now entered into an email relationship with the happy volunteers at the Punxsutawney Historical Society, none of whom resemble anyone in this story. I thank them for their enthusiasm and help, but any mistakes in local lore are mine own. The things I do for veracity, I tell you.

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Three feet in front of his nose. Three lousy feet. Somehow, the cell phone had bounced out of his pocket. The phone was majorly fucked up; it was melted, twisted beyond recognition. Shit. Even if he could reach it, which he couldn't, even if he could move, *which he couldn't*, it was no good. No good.

With one eye open, he could see the phone. His other eye...it wasn't working. For whatever reason. Okay.

I'm too warm. Damn, it's hot. I'm burning. Pain was abstract, was pretty far away, somewhere swimming above him, present but prickling outside his immediate concern. Which was. *Two* feet in front of his nose.

Black on white. Shadow against ice, against mud. Against melted rock. Damn, should it be this hot? Flicker of black. And flecks of grey, falling onto his face. The smell of sulfur. Hot.

One foot. A foot, an actual *foot*, belonging to someone, *something*, out of his range of vision. He probably should have looked up, but that would have involved a message-brain-nerve-muscle-feedback loop. It wore him out, just thinking about it. Foot, smoke, fire, ash. In front of his nose. Sulfur. He couldn't move, and he couldn't breathe. All that was holding him together was a sense of humor and the idea of pain. Ash, falling from the moonlit sky.

A foot in front of his nose, black, the rasping noise of death, breathing over him. Ash, turning to snow, lightly landing on the part of his face turned to the sky, cold kisses. Kinda nice. Hissing as they hit the ground on which he lay, disappearing instantly in a little pfst of steam.

Sensed the pain coming, a good-looking girl heading towards him with a beer in either hand. Wasn't quite here yet, but was taking a second look at him, thinking, yeah, maybe he'll do. The foot was gone. Here she comes. White and moon and snow and *fuck* where was Sam?

--

Standard operating procedure, number eleven: in case of extreme medical emergency, use one of the blue cards in the envelope marked with a cross. Use only if it looks like something you can't handle on your own. While other kids were learning what a ground-rule double was, the Winchester boys could set a compound fracture using a magazine as a splint; perform a tracheotomy with a ballpoint pen; and apply a plastic grocery bag to temporarily seal a sucking chest wound. And if in doubt, amputate. Sammy: I have a headache. Dean: Looks like we'll have to amputate. The only thing their dad didn't teach them was trepanning, probably for a very good reason: C'mon, Sammy, just a little hole, won't hurt a bit.

So, one of the blue cards.

No rules for waiting, of course. Distractions aplenty in the form of Officer Shadlee and several worked up Punxsy Chuck parents pacing the same waiting area, anxious to hear about their boys. Five boys, not six. One left at the Knob under a tarp, a twisted wreckage of bone and sinew, burned beyond recognition, wind stealing the boy's ashes and delivering them to the sky. In the same circle of obliterated grass and melted earth, Dean, one side of him, the one against the ground, charred. An arm of his parka, completely black. One cheekbone, red with burn. The toque a smoldering mess, after taking the brunt of the heat.

Kris ran interference, talked to Officer Shadlee. Sam could hear her steady voice, saying that Sam was pretty 'shaken up' and maybe Office Shadlee wanted to take his statement later. Rebecca Shadlee was already at home, Kris said when she came back to sit beside Sam, who knew she had used that for leverage in staring down the cop.

A doctor had already talked to Sam: several broken ribs, a punctured lung. A cracked orbital socket. Second degree burn on his cheekbone. Two broken fingers on his right hand. We've sedated him so he'll rest. He'd be pretty uncomfortable otherwise. You should get some rest yourself, son. Nothing you can do here.

Except wait.

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Huh, Sam thought. That's a first.

His brother had just willingly taken pain medication. Of course, the nurse had administered it directly to Dean's IV, otherwise Sam would have advised her to check under the big fat martyr's tongue. Dean was so doped up he was seeing tree frogs on the ceiling. At least, he'd asked about them the last time he'd said anything. Sam sipped his coffee and rested 'A Short History of Punxsutawney' face down on his bent knee.

The room had twenty-seven ceiling tiles, seventeen blue things (including the button above Dean's bed that would go off if his heart stopped), and eight plug outlets. The admitting staff had very wisely not put one of the hospitalized Punxsy Chucks in the second bed. That was occupied by an elderly gentleman who spent an inordinate amount of time doing crossword puzzles and sleeping, usually alternating between the two. Sam had answered all the pop culture-related questions when the old man was awake, had counted ceiling tiles and blue things when he was not.

Dean's bandaged hand came up for a wavery moment, then fell to the cotton blanket. Sam leaned forward, set a warm hand on his brother's forearm, testing to see how awake he was. Immediately, Dean turned his head, met Sam's stare with one good eye, one filled with blood. The bruises to that side of his face were spectacular.

"How are the frogs?" Sam asked.

"You are so fucking weird." Quietly, like he didn't want to be heard. Another first. He licked his cracked lips, was taking shallow breaths. "What happened to the kid?"

Sam needed to steady himself, had some idea how badly Dean might take this. "One of them has a broken nose. He's been sent home. They thought another one might have bruised a kidney, but doesn't look that way now. A few stitches to one of the others. One guy with a broken hand." Not really answering.

Dean swore, mentioned something about idiot kids. Was the girl okay?

"Yeah, she's fine, Dean," and waited the couple of moments it took for his brother to put all of these people in sequence, which would lead him momentarily to –

"Aw, shit." Dean looked away. "*Shit.*" A strange noise came from him, a queasy almost-whimper as he moved the wrong way, got cosy with the fact that he had broken ribs.

"Stepped right over you, to get to the kid," Sam said, after a minute of staring at the back of Dean's head. "Whatever it was."

Dean looked back, but his eyes weren't right, were glossy and black-velvet-painting-of-waifs big. "Human form. Barefoot, maybe. Thought about torching me, I could tell."

"Thought you were too much of a bad ass?" With a soft laugh, because right then, Dean needed it.

Needed it, but wouldn't take it. "My bad ass had just been kicked to next week. It wanted younger meat. It's not satisfied."

Sam shut up, didn't ask how Dean felt, or if he needed anything; he'd just have been swatted away. Besides, Dean was drifting in and out of coherent thought, and the old guy in the other bed was rustling around for a pencil. Time to be elsewhere.

"Snow," he thought he heard Dean whisper. His eyes were shut, the medication taking full effect.

"Dean?" he asked, bending over him, smelling the faint whiff of sulfur and charred flesh. His nose wrinkled. Dean's eyes remained closed, but he was frowning slightly.

"The ash. It turned to snow." And that, apparently, was that. After a few minutes of watching Dean sleep, which Sam had done for so many hours in his life he wished he'd developed some kind of associated drinking game to make it even remotely fun, Sam put his book into his backpack. It was put out by the Punxsutawney Art and Historical Club, and their resource center was just down the street.

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Bob Shadlee looked as though he'd rather be clapping on leg irons; unfortunately for his law and order ways, Dean was going the restorative justice route. Dean didn't have a fucking clue what that was, really, just that it involved not pressing charges, not going to court, and not having a criminal record check, all of which suited him just fine. It was hard enough, lying here in a hard hospital bed, in really pretty amazing pain, slightly scrambled from the drugs, and having to figure out just which lie would land him in jail the fastest.

"Mr Evans?" the cop had said when he'd entered the room, his Arctic explorer cap in his hand. Dean had seen Rebecca's chin, immediately, knew who this was. Though the movement had caused him to absolutely radiate with pain, he had lifted his hand to scratch the bandage on his cheek – and that hurt like a mother, too – and had surreptitiously checked the name on his hospital bracelet: Matthew Evans. He felt a little like that English bear in the train station. Please take care of this bear. Where the hell was Sam to run interference?

"Yeah?" he was able to answer. The drugs were wearing off, which was a good thing, faced with this. He could always use the pain to end an interview. It soon became apparent that this wasn't going to go like that, though.

"The kids," the cop had said. "They'd like to apologize. They were out of line."

Oh, okay. Beating a man half to death. Out of line, just a little. Apologies accepted. But not with Shadlee there. If these football grunts were feeling guilty, Dean sure as hell was going to use it. So he'd asked for some privacy, and got it. Other than the old guy with the crossword puzzle book, they'd be alone. Dean didn't try to move, just lay quietly, hoping he wouldn't blow this.

There were two of them: the mouthy little guy, and the huge blond linebacker. Except he wasn't a linebacker, he was the captain. And he had a beautiful double shiner, a taped nose; he was the one Dean had broken his hand on. He wondered, briefly, if he'd had the steel-toed boots.

"Hey," the Captain muttered, and in the glare of the fluorescent lights, he seemed about fourteen.

Dean nodded slightly, knew he probably looked like shit, which would work with this one. Mouthy, he was less sure of. "What were you *thinking*?" he demanded.

Mouthy shrugged. He didn't look any worse for wear and Dean fought the sudden urge to get up and smack him. Which he probably wouldn't have been able to do, but it was a cheerful, sustaining thought. "Austin was our friend. And he was so crazy for Rebecca. Just made us mad, is all."

"What do I look like? A molester? Jesus," and looked away, trying not to breathe too deeply. He changed speeds – ball in his court. "What happened?"

Mouthy brightened up. "Man, you were wicked fast. Clocked Jason here," and grinned at the Captain, "but that'll only take you so far. And the Dixie Chicks comment...well, that gets our Irish up."

"Yeah, I can imagine. What happened next, I mean?"

Mouthy didn't answer, leaned against the wall, content to let his friend answer. *He ran*, Dean thought. *That's why he doesn't know*. The Captain, Jason, was staring at his feet, hands on his hips, pushing away two sides of his brown parka. He didn't move from that position. "Something was up there, in the bushes. Waited until you were down. Hoegarten was kicking you – and I was yelling at him – when..." and he stopped, snagged on disbelief and horror. "The lights were on you guys the whole time. There's no way I coulda made this up." His eyes beneath the bruises were round and his voice shook.

"What did it look like?" Dean prompted softly.

"Big, black. See through," those two words very quietly, the whisper of a child woken up in the middle of the night. "Shaped like a person. Just touched Hoegarten on the forehead. And up he went."

After a moment, because he could, Dean snapped at Mouthy, "And what did you see?"

"Same," Mouthy came back, but with a new awareness: Dean knew he'd been in the car, cowering under the dash.

They didn't stick around, but Jason thanked Dean for letting them apologize, and Dean tried to shrug, but that was really too much effort, so he just grimaced instead. "Hey," he called out after them, and they stopped in the doorway. "Don't go back to the Knob," he warned. "Not until this cold snap has passed. Okay?" Not a hard sell. Then, more quietly, because he'd had time to kill, lying flat on his back, trying not to breathe: "Funky Chunks. Poxy Fucks. Monkey Ducks."

If Mouthy heard him, he showed restraint, but Dean saw his shoulders contract, and knew a hit when he saw one.

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The Bennis building was made from stone and Sam at first thought it was closed. Local history museums and archives often kept eccentric hours, but Sam had actually phoned ahead. But when he walked up to the door, it had opened and an older woman greeted him: Alma Davis, the town archivist and genealogist. He'd given the same story that he had a hundred times before: university student working on a folklore project, mix your primary and secondary sources, please. And as usual, was sat in front of a pile of old books, bound newspapers, and diaries. Sometimes they made him put on white cotton gloves.

He was worried about leaving Dean alone for any length of time, especially if there were women and groundhogs around. On the other hand, there was nothing like the smell of old books, and the act of turning pages with the glove on, scanning the spidery handwriting, exploring details of hops shipments and cases of ague, all of it was like tiger balm to a burn for him. They had never understood this, Dean and their father, never got how it was, to walk into another world.

After a few hours of this, he took off the gloves and rubbed his eyes. He'd had no sleep the night before and felt his gaze finally slip and slide around the page. Clicking the laptop shut, he leaned back on the chair.

“Pretty worn out, looks like,” Alma said, coming up behind him and removing the books from the table. “I brought you this,” and placed a cup of tea on the table. Great, first the white gloves, then tea. He felt like he’d just arrived at the queen’s slightly daffy younger sister’s place.

Smiling, he took a sip of the hot tea, considered Alma through the steam. “Why do they call it Punxsutawney?”

Alma smiled. “Oh, that one’s *easy*,” apparently hoping for something really difficult. “Ponksad, or ponxies, is the Delaware Indian name for sandflies. This whole place used to be crawling with them. Ponksaduwtene. There’s an old legend,” oh and here it comes, Sam thought. Three hours staring at newspapers and diaries. When would he learn to just *ask*?

“The Delaware say that the first people of this area were descendants of Wojek, the groundhog. Just before the white folks started to push them out, there was an evil sorcerer, caused a lot of trouble for the Delawares, might have been a Seneca, or an Iroquois. Finally, a young Delaware chief stood up to him and killed him. When they burned the sorcerer’s body, the ashes turned to ponxies and plagued the area. The Europeans drained the swamps, and the sandflies disappeared. So did the legend. But they held on to the groundhog, didn’t they? White people never do things in half measures. No, they have to create a big publicity event.”

Sam took another careful sip of his tea. “You think Punxsutawney Phil’s a bad idea?”

“Hey, it does wonders for the town, don’t get me wrong. But it covers up the other history,” and she waved her hand around at the shelves of books. “And when we lose history, we are in *trouble*.”

He drained his cup, suddenly anxious to be back at the hospital. Dean would be wondering where he’d been. And that cop might be sniffing around for a statement. Alma asked if he wanted another cup; Sam declined, picking up his laptop and stuffing it into his backpack along with his notes.

“Not many young folks interested in this stuff nowadays,” Alma said, passing him his pencil and eraser. “You and Kris Wieland, that’s about it.”

“Kris? The hockey player Kris?” Sam couldn’t even imagine the gangly teen in the cramped room.

“Oh, yes. Strange girl, but plenty bright. *And* polite. Last week. Wanted to know about why they called it Gobbler’s Knob.”

Sam paused, uncomfortably hot in his winter coat, his woolen mittens itching. Not the only thing itching, was like an intellectual mosquito bite. “What did you tell her?”

“That I didn’t know. Thought it probably had something to do with turkeys. But I have no way of proving it. We went back into the records, far back as the 1820s, and couldn’t find anything. Always been called Gobbler’s Knob, as far as I know.”

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“Dude, wait’ll you hear,” and choked to a halt, almost dropped his knapsack in surprise. Was that a crossword? In his brother’s hands? Dean was propped up in the bed, which was an encouraging sign, but his color was awful and made the bruises and burns on his cheek look even more livid.

“Archie here,” Dean gestured a free thumb at his sleeping roommate, “is fucking psycho for this shit.” He threw the book aside. “Crazy old fart. You should hear the stuff he’s telling me.” With a glimmer, that known sardonic glimmer, in his eyes. Would have been reassuring, a return to form, except that one eye was a bloody mess, so he ended up appearing more grotesque than amusing.

“What’s he been telling you?” Sam shoved Dean’s legs over and sat on the edge of the bed, retrieved the crossword book. Dean wouldn’t even have been able to hold a pencil, for God’s sake, let alone do a freakin’ cryptic crossword. He must be bored sideways.

“Former member of the Inner Circle,” Dean replied, looking cheerful. “And the Funky Bunch came by to apologize, I’m not being charged with anything, and there’s one nurse...

Sam tossed the crossword book onto Dean’s chest, causing him to hiss in pain. “What next, Sammy? Legs off a spider?” Sam grinned. If Dean was joking about nurses, he was feeling a little better. At least he wasn’t yammering on about amphibians on the ceiling. He told him about his visit to the Art and Historical Society, about Kris’s interest in Gobbler’s Knob, and the legend of the sorcerer.

“The thing on the hill, the thing that’s been offing the kids – young men, all of them – is the ghost of the sorcerer? The Gobbler?” Dean double checked Sam’s logic; it was his job. Sam nodded. “And the groundhog has nothing to do with it?”

“I don’t know about that, Dean. Maybe he’s the Gobbler’s familiar. Or the sorcerer incarnate?” He was guessing, and he knew it.

“Fuck, Sam, listen to what comes out of your mouth. Repeat after me: The groundhog is not evil. Move on.” If he hadn’t known better, Sam would have said Dean was developing a soft spot for Phil. He’d always been the one who’d wanted a dog when they were kids, an idea so ludicrous Sam hadn’t even bothered to mock it.

Maybe it was the old man, putting ideas into Dean’s doped up, impressionable head. “So, what’s Methuselah saying about the Inner Circle? When’s the last time your meds were topped up?” Sam examined the surface of the rolling table next to Dean’s bedside, looked under the steamed lid of a cold dinner. “Have you eaten, like, anything?”

Dean stared at him. Too many questions, again. It shut him up in a way few things could. Sam replaced the lid onto what might have been pork chops and gravy. “Sorry. Inner Circle, first.”

“Wouldn’t say a word about it, just mentioned it in passing.” He gestured to the crossword puzzle book. “I’m trying to butter him up.”

“With your amazing crossword prowess?” Sam lifted his brows.

“Either that, or slip him some of my morphine.”

It was an established tactic, to pretend to be doing something else while asking personal questions. Maybe Dean would think he wasn’t actually listening. So Sam was purposefully

unpacking a bag of potato chips and a can of orange juice when he asked, “So, you don’t need it?”

“I’m doing okay,” Dean replied, but quietly. “They want to keep me a few days, but I’m out of here, just as soon as I can get Archie to rat out his Inner Circle comrades.”

And *his* tactic, clumsy and obvious and, unfortunately, efficacious: change the subject.

“That girl get my car back in one piece?”

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Chapter Five

Posted June 14th, 2006

Just hitting the apex now...here it comes...wait for it...

a/n: You know that part of the episode when you check the clock to see how much story is left? It's 9:42.

Disclaim away! God, this is tiresome... Here's the deal: In my world, the boys talk the way I do, so they cuss, especially that Dean. He's earned the right. Also, there might be some fairly violent stuff, but nothing too graphic, because I'm just way too concerned about screwing up the kids beyond a therapist's ability to fix. I own nothing, no one's based on anyone. Okay? Good to go? All right, where were we? Oh yes...

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Anyone watching would probably acknowledge that the kid had guts. Not much else, especially in the way of common sense: traipsing around a death scene when the perpetrator was still at large was an idea beyond stupid. Kris would be the first to admit it, really, if she'd been thinking at all. Enough was enough, though. Five kids dead, her friends, some of them. Even if they weren't her friends, even if some of them had actually made sly comments about her when they thought she couldn't hear, none of them deserved to die. Kris Wieland was pissed off, and nobody wanted to mess with her when she got going.

She had a theory and was going to put it to the test tonight, this the sixth week of brutal winter weather, no end in sight. A theory, she reminded herself, that could get her killed. She never shied away from things that could hurt her: a crosscheck into the boards, homophobic assholes, eggs swallowed raw for breakfast. The Gobbler. Thought about that as she engaged the emergency brake of the truck and peered through the windshield at the Knob.

The radio didn't work anymore, so she sat in the cab, listening to the wind in the bare branched trees, fingering the cell phone in her hand. The night was clear and silent and bright. Her heart sounded the same as when she received a breakaway pass with a profoundly inept goalie in front of her: kettledrums reverberating over ice. Careful, she cautioned herself. This guy hasn't been hanging around for a gazillion years because he's dense. He'll fucking kill you, given half a chance. She set the text message to go to her dad's cell: M/D Knob NOW DANGER. Dont 4get truck pls. Her finger hovered over the send button.

Keeping the phone in her hand, she gingerly picked up the box on the seat beside her. Her dad had brought the cat home in it the last time it had swallowed tinsel off the tree and cost them five hundred dollars in vet's bills. The animal inside was heavier than Bobo, and Kris hoped it wouldn't break through the bottom of the box. Actually, she was feeling a little sorry for the groundhog.

The snow had frozen solid and Kris wished she'd brought snowshoes: it was hard going, smashing through the chunks of ice to sink knee-deep into snow so hard it cut. Her boots were felt-lined and she wore long johns under her jeans, a pair of ski pants over them. She didn't care how goofy the outfit looked: she was moderately warm. She had a balaclava pulled over her head, and could feel her breath hardening into ice on the outside as she huffed her way up the hill

through the treacherous snow. She'd pulled her bare hand with the phone inside the sleeve of her down parka for protection. Against what, she didn't like to suppose.

At the top, she waited, put down the box, which lurched a little as the groundhog inside bashed itself against the walls. Kris stopped feeling sorry for its stupid ass. In her experience, groundhogs were dumb as stumps and easy enough to catch – her uncle always kept a couple in the old chicken coop alongside the guinea pigs and the rabbits, ran the town petting zoo in the summer. She was thankful for that: she thought that the Gobbler might not accept a guinea pig in place of a groundhog, if her theory was right.

A movement in the bush startled her badly. Shit, she had time to think before the blackness rushed up to her all at once, breathing like it had lung disease, rattling worse than space shuttle tiles on re-entry. Funny, thinking that. A fiery re-entry. She jammed her finger into the send button. Almost funny.

Almost painless.

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Sam decided that if the blue light didn't actually go off, he couldn't count it as blue. Which brought his count down to sixteen, unless something untoward happened to Dean. He appeared pretty stable, though, if the drug-induced sleep of the happy dead was any indication. The doctor was optimistic about a complete recovery; Sam had been mildly surprised the medic was so worried, probably because he hadn't witnessed Dean bounce back from crap like this a million times before. Sam had nodded gravely to the doctor, had taken a prescription for painkillers that Dean would never fill.

He tapped his fingers against the tabletop, wishing that Dean was awake. Because if he was, then Sam would have an excuse for backing out of the idiot plan he'd come up with. He wanted Dean with him when they hunted; he sometimes wondered what it was like, doing this sort of thing on your own, like Dad did. Like Dean had, up until a few months ago. Well, tonight he would find out. He twirled the Impala's keys on his forefinger, then poked Dean gently on the arm.

Too gently. Man, if you want him to wake up, wake him up. Dangled the car keys, shaking them a little so they made a percussive metal jangle. If that didn't snap him out of it, nothing would. Like bloody Pavlov's dog with the car. Likely, Dean would chew him a new hole when he returned, but it would be in the knowledge that Sam had actually *done* something. And even if Dean had been awake, you know what? He wouldn't be doing any Gobbler-torching anytime soon – he was that banged up.

Sam had a can of gas and an idea. The idea was this: that he was just old enough to avoid the Gobbler's lethal attention, but young enough to get him out of hiding. Which would be the moment that Sam would set him on fire. It might unleash a snowstorm, or even sandflies, come to think of it, but it had to be better than allowing a town to bury its sons in frozen turf.

He turned to go, then remembered he had something for Dean, something that was his chicken's way out. He set the new cell phone beside another untouched plate of mashed something-or-others, and wrote on the napkin: Call if you need anything. That would placate him, wouldn't it?

Noticing that the old guy in the other bed was also asleep, Sam dimmed the lights as he left, but kept the door open: it was a rule that the hospital staff adhered to with demonic tenacity. As he turned, he almost bumped into a nurse, hurrying in the opposite direction, towards the emergency entrance.

“Oh,” she said. “I’m glad you’re still here. They’re just bringing in your friend now.”

“My friend?” Sam asked, realizing he sounded like the village idiot on a particularly difficult day. What friend did he have in Punxsutawney?

“Kris Wieland,” the nurse snapped back at him, but she was already down the hall, too far away to notice his confusion turn to acid resolve. “Got a bad scare up on the Knob, maybe an electrical shock.”

That settled it. Sam was going to end this sucker, right now, tonight.

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As the lights dimmed, Archie opened both eyes, peered at the shadow of the tall boy in the doorway. From the way he’d looked at his brother, the way he’d touched him with one tentative finger, fear and longing in his eyes, Archie had known what he was going to do. Archie might be old, might even be venerable, as one glowing retirement toast had put it, but he wasn’t *deaf*. That nurse had a loud voice, one of the harridans that kept him awake half the night with her inane chatter. He’d heard all right. Little Kristine Wieland. This was wrong, wrong, wrong.

He’d said many oaths over his years. A marriage. A couple of christenings. One was stronger than those, and it was *wrong*. He lay in the bed for a long time, deciding what to do.

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The blue light went off. Just a blinking at first, lighting the dim room with an intermittent glow, not anything that would alarm anyone.

The nurses and the ward doctors rushing in with a crash cart, flipping on the lights, yelling at each other, well, that was enough to wake Augustus Gloop from a sugar-induced coma. They broke open vials of adrenaline, and charged up the paddles, observed the clock. Charge. Clear. Did it all over again, the floor soon littered with syringe casings, paper and plastic wrappers of sterilized equipment, and the crossword puzzle book that had been dropped to the floor by a man in full cardiac arrest.

Dean awoke with a start and a curse. Fuck, that hurt, that deep breath thing. Blinked his eyes, tried desperately to figure out where he was. Right. Hospital. Groundhogs. Dead kids. Batshit freaky aboriginal sorcerer. Sounded about right.

He touched his eye socket with his left hand, the one that wasn’t splinted up. Around his eye was numb, actually. They’d pulled the curtain around Archie’s bed, and Dean knew that was never a good sign, was either the opening act for a sponge bath or a full-on myocardial infarction. Given the presence of the crash cart, he was assuming it was the latter. A classic recognizable sound, the noise of someone dying on a hospital bed. Beeeeeeeeeeep. Aural equivalent of a straight line.

Well, *that* blew his chance at finding out about the Inner Circle. Would have been nice, knowing what was in that groundhog punch. Hadn't kept Archie alive, though, had it?

Oh, he could imagine what Sam would have said to that observation. Jesus, when did you stop having a sense of decency, Dean? And then he would have shut up fast, because Sam was smart, and he'd have thought about what he'd just said.

They took an awful long time to wind things down, during which time Dean discovered the phone Sam had left him. Phone him if I need anything. Fuck you, Sam. Get me a BLT with a side of fries. Made him sick just thinking about it, but Sam would be expecting that kind of request. He wasn't going to give Sam the satisfaction, though, and they probably had rules about cell phone use when the guy next to you coded.

"You want this?" A nurse had come from behind the curtain, her face a little pinched, eyes dog tired. She held up the crossword book, pointed to the corner of one page. It was too far away and Dean couldn't make it out. He almost said no, but she brought it closer. For Matthew Evans, it said. Dean was suddenly, inexplicably, visited by his missing sense of decency. Sammy, you'd be proud of me, I actually feel...guilty.

He took it, and spent a few minutes trying to get comfortable, which was impossible. Every time he adjusted his position, he had to clench his teeth with the effort not to gasp or yelp. A nurse came in, offered to top up his pain medication, which he refused, much to her apparent surprise.

The crossword book was almost done. What a crappy present, Dean thought, about to toss it aside. Had the old coot thought he liked these things? Jeez. Then one page, with red ink instead of pencil, circling one clue: To make replete (4). Huh. He rested his pounding head against the pillow, tried not to think about his aching ribs. Little baby breaths, Dean.

Fuck. He picked up the phone and tried to remember Sam's number. Bastard hadn't programmed the phone. Damn. Tried one set of numbers, brow furrowing in frustration as he got hold of the California Chicken Shack. Tried again. Rang, rang, rang. Where is he? A panicky flush of fear dizzied him.

"Dean? You up?"

In relief, Dean snapped, "Where the hell are you?"

A laugh. "Miss me?"

"Okay, answer me this," ignoring Sam's jab completely. "What does 'replete' mean?"

"Seriously," Dean had the impression that Sam was not actually listening to him, because his comeback was so lame, "this is what you want to know? Maybe you should ask the tree frogs."

And in the silence that followed, Dean heard the unmistakable rumble of the Impala. "Where are you?"

"That's twice now. Third time lucky. Full."

“What?” It was like Sam was deliberately trying to confuse him. “Sammy...” The desperation in his own voice made him wince.

“It means full. Why do you want to know?”

“Uh, crossword puzzle,” if he’d been less medicated, he’d have found a way to avoid answering that, he was sure.

A long laugh followed that admission, but Dean caught the edge of it, understood that it was Sam’s slightly nervous, hysterical laugh, the one he made when he was saying, ‘look over there!’ while putting salt in Dean’s coffee.

“Does it fit?”

“What?” That was the second time he’d asked his brother for clarification; he was feeling so dopey. Fucking drugs. “Yeah, it fits. But it doesn’t help.”

“Oka-a-ay,” Sam answered slowly. “Has Archie given up on the crosswords?”

“Yeah, considering he’s dead.” Not that he was usually the epitome of tact, but Dean was setting a new low. “I inherited the book.”

“Oh,” Sam paused -- *stalling*. “Kris was just brought into the hospital from the Knob. Why don’t you find out if she’s okay?”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Wait a minute...Dean thought, then it was gone again, a scent of suspicion that disappeared in a hazy moment. Look over there, he remembered, then that too faded away.

“You’ll figure out something. Ask a nurse,” like he was explaining jump to a bunny. Man, he must sound out of it, for Sam to be so openly school-marmish. Next, Sam would be spelling out ‘bye-bye’.

Which was close.

“Gotta go, Dean. I’ll see you in the morning.” And before Dean could respond, Sam hung up. Dean lay in the bed, trying to put it all together. Hiding something, the bastard’s hiding something...and punched the little off button, not nearly as satisfying as slamming a heavy telephone receiver back onto the cradle of a land line.

Kris, up on the Knob. Sam had said that she’d been at the historical society, had wanted to know the Knob’s history. What had she been doing? Might as well find out. He glanced at the IV before finding the corner of the tape attaching the tube to the inside of his elbow. He ripped it off in one motion and didn’t stop to think through pulling out the tube itself before doing it. He’d done it before, knew that it would hurt. Not as much as his ribs, though, when he tried to sit up. Concentrate on something. Anything, get your mind off the...To make replete. To make replete. Stare at the four spaces, imagine the letters F-U-L-L there. Fuck, it didn’t fit after all, or the down clue was wrong, one of the two. The F and the two Ls fit, all right, but if the U was right, then the down word would be FLUCK, which even he knew wasn’t a real word.

Little baby breaths. His lungs were wet cardboard, ached as though a hand was squeezing them.

Damn. It's a verb, not an adjective. To *make* full.

A cold wave of dread passed over him, his heart suddenly pumping ice water. The word wasn't 'fluck', it was 'flick', which meant that 'full' wasn't right. Archie was shouting from the grave, and the word he was shouting was 'fill'.

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She was shivering, and the burn on her forehead hurt so much she wished that the nurse would just bring some more drugs damnit. Now would be okay, more than okay. Thank god her dad had finally gone home, even if it was just to spell off her mom, who was minding her sleeping baby brother. Her dad was always more of a freak about Kris getting hurt anyway, like when she'd broken her jaw during that game against...who the fuck was that?

Her heart jolted high in her chest, in a place that it hurt to just think about, but came down almost immediately. Dean, who might be Matthew Evans as well, but she'd come to think of him as Dean, and that's what his brother called him, so might as well stick with...and he looked worse than she felt, which was some kind of statement about hospital discharge rules.

"Hey," she said, surprised at how weak her voice sounded. "You okay?" She could see immediately that he wasn't the kind of guy who responded well to that question, but she had to beat him to the punch.

He nodded. Somehow, he'd gotten hold of his charred up parka. Kris wondered if her own coat looked half as bad. She'd liked that coat, damnit. Actually, he looked as though he might fall down, so she gestured with her nose to the chair beside her bed. Her dad had sat in it when they'd bandaged her burn, had held her hand. Big pussy.

Instead, Dean stood at the side of her bed, but there was something not quite right about him – freaky bloody eye and bandage on his cheekbone notwithstanding – he seemed ill at ease, ready to bolt. Worried, not quite afraid. She didn't like to think about what might make him afraid.

Thing on the Knob, maybe, because asking about what she'd seen was the first thing out of his mouth. She told what she remembered, which wasn't much. He asked about her visit to the historical society, what she thought was going on, his voice a little mechanical, tired – fighting against pain, she thought. I've broken ribs before; he shouldn't be up and walking around. The groundhog in the box, though, that made him look up with interest.

"Why'd you do that?" he asked, the second set of words he'd put together.

How to explain this without sounding like a drooling escapee from the big house? She shrugged, wishing that he'd sit down. That slight sway was making her nervous. "I think that's what's supposed to happen. Every seven years, when it's a six-weeks of winter prediction. They say they're giving him the 'groundhog punch'; they're *supposed* to give the groundhog to the Gobbler. But some years..."

"They don't," Dean finished, his voice and his gaze very far away. His fingers, the ones on his unbandaged left hand, were playing with the blackened fabric of his coat, picking out stray feathers. "The Inner Circle, right? One of them thinks, 'We can't kill the golden goose.'" Okay,

she was really glad he was saying it, because it sounded way more demented that she'd imagined. There were some things you were better off not saying out loud and this was one of them. "The Gobbler wants his groundhog, Wojek. The ancestor of the people he terrorized in life. And so, when it's not offered, the Gobbler gets the town's attention by freezing the joint? And if that doesn't work, by killing off boys? Why only young men?"

"Legend? The Delaware chief that killed him was young." It was a guess, but it was a good one.

Finally, a little bit of that gleam came back into his eyes. It made her feel suddenly so much better, as though she'd been holding something heavy that he'd taken from her. "I'm too old to be a chief?"

She wiped her eyes, realized that they were tearing up, but from some kind of weird stressy laughter. "Yeah, the chief was still alive when the first Europeans arrived, so if you do the math," and he didn't look like the type that would usually do the math, so she spelled it out, "he would have been about twenty-three or twenty-four years old. And definitely male. I think the Gobbler thought I was a boy at first. Tried to burn me, but realized – somehow, didn't exactly lift my skirt – that I didn't have the right parts. I was counting on that. But I brought a fucking groundhog, thought he would take it. It just wasn't the right one."

"Nope, not the right one. Archie was trying to tell me, ratted out his Inner Circle friends after all. Wait till Sam hears what job I've got in store for us." And he pulled out a phone, wrestled with the numbers, listened, and the gleam in his eyes changed to something else. "Oh, Sam," he groaned, just a little exhalation, but enough to make him grimace in pain. "Don't be doing what I think you're..." He looked right at her as he yelled into the phone. "Sammy," he warned, voice sharp. "Sammy, don't you dare be going up there. You're too young. Fucking idiot."

Nice message, Kris thought.

"Might be in bed," Dean murmured, putting the phone away in his inside pocket, but it sounded as though he was calming himself, like some mental patients rocked back and forth or laid things out in neat rows. "Might be in bed."

And stared at her again, so certain, so true, that she thought she could see his cogs and wheels whirring away. Obvious, in some essential and worthy sense of the word. Difficult to refuse him anything when he was like this. *He must be so lucky with the ladies; I should be taking notes.* "Give me your car keys. And don't tell me you don't know how to disable the alarm at the Groundhog Zoo."

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a/n ('What? Another one?' you're thinking): Shout out to my dad, who phones me every weekend to bombard me with crossword puzzle questions. Oh, and by the way? It's now 9:47.

Chapter Six

Posted June 14th, 2006

And here it is! The climax! Holy shit!

If you spell 'disclaimer' backwards it reads: *remialcsid*, and that sounds a little like "Read me all, Sid!" Which, if my name were Sid, would be really cool. Just saying.

Supernatural boys belong to others; all else is mine. As usual, colorful and descriptive language throughout. Oh, and swearing, too.

In terms of playing the 'if this was a real episode' game, now we're at the part between the penultimate commercial and the final commercial, the part where you don't pick up the ringing telephone no matter what poor soul is dying on the other end.

--

All around was white and moving.

The Impala's wiper blades scraped long liquid lines across the foggy screen, and even the heater going full blast wasn't enough to keep Sam's fingertips from going completely numb. He could barely see where he was going it was snowing so hard. Strange for it to be snowing like this when the temperature was so cold, but this was unnatural weather, was not meteorologically logical.

Meteorologically logical. Sam smiled at that combination of words, always having been the sort of kid who loved the way words fit in his mouth; he could turn them over, make them into shiny new things, bright as pennies. In the absence of Lego and Playskool Knight's Kingdom playsets, he had toyed with words in the backseat of many a long journey while Dean slept, or sang, or held his breath when they passed cemeteries. One long summer, back when they'd spent almost all of an August alone in a cabin high in the Rocky Mountains, Sam had nearly driven Dean nuts by making up his own language, which he practiced and refined until he was fairly certain Dean was going to string him up by his ankles and use him for target practice.

Words were not going to help him tonight, he thought, turning the Impala slightly so it wouldn't lose traction and slide sideways. Words were not going to help him with the fact that the Impala only had all-season radials when weather like this demanded snow tires and maybe chains or studs. And now he was nearly at the hill, which he'd been dreading – among other things. It had taken him a long time to get this far because no matter how well he did with the Gobbler tonight, Dean would feed him slowly to the worms if he put so much as a greasy fingerprint on the car. So Sam had driven carefully, without haste. At least, that's the reason he'd given himself.

He'd turned off the phone because he'd wanted to keep two hands on the wheel. Another dubious thing he'd told himself. Torn between wanting to do this and wanting to be prevented from doing this – stop me before I kill again! You're a complicated guy, Sam Winchester.

What if, he thought, then pushed the words down, smacked them like they were two of those plastic moles that popped up in an arcade game. What. If. *His bones have already been burned once.*

I know that, thank you very much.

I don't think ghosts burn very well. Not much to actually catch fire, is there?

It's not a ghost.

Why is it -- Sam thought while putting the Impala into low gear, hoping like hell that it wouldn't start to slide cause it was a really long walk to the Knob -- that the devil on my shoulder always sounds like Dean?

Well, if it's not a ghost, then what is it, geek-boy?

Even at Stanford, this had been the voice that kept him company.

Don't exactly know. But it lives on the Knob, and it's gotta be killed there.

Sure of that, are you?

Pretty sure. It gets stronger the closer it gets. And you said it yourself, asshole. You saw its foot. Did that look solid enough to you?

The voice was silent. For a moment, Sam congratulated himself. That shut you up, didn't it? Then realized that the only reason the devil on his shoulder wasn't answering that question was because Sam didn't know for sure if the foot Dean had seen was completely solid.

Maybe you should just wait until morning. You know, talk it over with someone who has a little more experience with --

No. This thing needs to go.

Feed it a groundhog and it'll go.

Yeah, but for how long? They've been feeding it groundhogs for over a hundred years, probably longer.

Hey, maybe we should just torch some of those fiberglass Phils in town. Reverse a curse, and make Punxsutawney a more beautiful place in one classy act.

Very funny. I need to get rid of the Gobbler once and for all, and I need to do it tonight, otherwise you're just going to do something stupid tomorrow.

And the devil that sounded like Dean had no real answer for that, so Sam concentrated on the road, the gas can sitting on the floorboards under the dash sloshing impatiently as the Impala struggled up the slope.

--

The groundhog looked sleepy, not scared, and not hungry. Dean had picked up a carrot from where he'd watched Britni store them under the entrance desk, but Phil wasn't putting up any kind of fight. Dean waved the carrot in front of the cubbyhole where Phil was curled up like a massive furry medicine ball, hoping to lure him out. The groundhog raised its nose and sniffed,

stretched a little, and shuffled from its ersatz burrow with all the enthusiasm of a shift worker punching in at the factory. Knowing that this would hurt, but not actually understanding quite how much until he did it, Dean cautiously grasped Phil under his belly with both hands and tried to stand up.

Sonofabitch.

If anybody had been in the library – from the circulation desk to the nether regions of the reshelving area – they would have known immediately that someone was being tortured in the Groundhog Zoo.

Dean shook uncontrollably, balanced on his hands and knees, fingers clutching the wood shavings, forcing his breath to come in little tiny gasps after the yell of pain he'd just given. That fucking groundhog must have eaten a cannonball for dinner. A sewing machine. A ride 'em mower. A droplet of sweat rolled off the tip of his nose into the soft curls of wood and sawdust between his fisted hands. There was no way he was going to make it. I'm sorry, Sammy, the groundhog's too heavy.

Then he started to laugh, which was also a bad idea.

Finally, he managed to sit back on his heels, hands resting slackly on his thighs. Phil, about twice the size of his lady-friend, who was still sleeping in the side-by-side cubby, raised himself on his hind legs, looked speculatively over at Dean.

Considering Dean was planning on taking him to a rather unpleasant death, Phil appeared unconditionally friendly, almost resigned to spending time with this unusual yelling man.

“Well,” Dean grumbled, once he'd brought his breathing under control. “What are we going to do, Phil?”

Phil settled back to the floor, waddled over to the gate. The zoo's gate was disarmed; Kris had known exactly what to do, had been scoping this out for the past two weeks, apparently. She'd given Dean the exterior door codes and told him how to bypass the zoo's alarm system. Britni was a good friend, Kris has said with a long, slow smile. Damn, Dean had thought. *Scooped.*

All of it would do him – would do Sam – absolutely no good unless he could somehow get Phil into the truck. And he thought he might pass out if he tried to pick him up again. Maybe he could herd him toward the truck – and the laughter bubbled again, and he felt the pain radiate across his chest. Dean Winchester, Groundhog Herder. Maybe he could get a flannel shirt and a nametag.

Fortunately, Phil seemed to have no intention of making a break for it. He waited patiently by the gate for Dean to stumble over, only turning his head once to focus his tiny glossy eyes on Dean's.

Dean swallowed, would have shrugged, had that been possible. *I am talking to a groundhog*, he thought. *I have done weirder things.*

“Okay, Phil, let's go for a drive.”

--

He walked the last bit, just parked the Impala in the middle of the road when it started slipping backwards. He didn't think he'd be blocking the way, *except for emergency vehicles coming to cart your sorry flamed ass away*. Shut up, Sam responded half-heartedly. I know what I'm doing. But the silence was empty. Empty, but not echoing, the snowfilled night softly absorbing all noise, the opposite of being in an empty room with smooth surfaces reflecting sound. An acoustic black hole, sucking in sound, not light.

Sam slipped several times on the treacherous ice. He'd lost track of time: was it three o'clock, maybe? Four? There must have been action up here earlier in the evening, when Kris had come, but the snow obliterated all signs of the activity, blanketed previous snow and ice with an inviting layer of soft powder. Knowing that Dean would be safely asleep now, he turned on his phone, saw he had a message, ignored it, knowing it would only be Dean, probably asking him for a greasy delivery of fast food.

Finally, he saw the raised stage, could barely make out the hollow stump where Kris had said they put the groundhog every February. He stumbled on something, an empty cardboard box with a picture of a cat on it, half buried in the snow. A circle in the snow, over to the south of the clearing, where he'd found Dean the night before, the dark spot perfect and warm. A scene of death.

Sam set down the gas can, held a rag-wrapped stick, dipped in tar, a staple from the Impala's trunk. They did this for a living, whatever that meant. He knew what he was doing. He unscrewed the cap of the can, picked it up in fingers numb and aching, tucking the butt end of the torch under his armpit. In his other hand, he held a lighter. A poster child for the self-immolation set. Come out, come out, wherever you are.

Do you really want to say that out loud?

Shut up, he repeated, but said it low in his throat because that was when the snowflakes parted, reassembled, became the negative space that defined what was there and moving toward him.

--

Despite the snowstorm – the fucking *blizzard* – Kris's truck flew through town, heading south, then slightly eastward. The heater was blowing furiously, but there was a huge blackened hole in the side of Dean's parka, and he was frozen. The truck bucketed across ice-bumpy roads, across windrows of heaped snow, making fast progress across a town shut down by weather and night and grief. He shifted into low as he came to the hill; although the truck had good snow tires, it couldn't climb a wall of ice. He'd see how far he could get.

A sudden pressure on his thigh caused him to jump, then yelp as his ribs protested. He risked a glance down to figure out what it was and was surprised to see that Phil had shuffled over on the bench seat and was now resting his head on Dean. More sweat ran down his face, but he was cold, and he knew that this couldn't be a good sign. Still, he had to do what he was going to do – *sorry, Phil* – and small considerations like fever, broken bones, and lacerated internal organs weren't things that generally slowed Dean down in a situation like this.

The headlights caught the flying snow as it pulled towards and around the truck's cab, mesmerizing, like a Stars at Warp Speed screensaver. Dean shook his head. Fuck me, but concentrate on the road. Kris said she'd kill me if I bruised her ride.

Then engaged with his worst nightmare ever as the rear end of the Impala appeared motionless in his headlights *right in front of him* and he slammed on the brakes, which is a dumb, dumb, dumb thing to do when it's snowing, he knew that. The truck slid across the road, only coming to a full stop when the tailgate kissed the rear quarter panel of the Impala. A peck, the kind of kiss you'd give to your best friend's kid sister when their dad was looking. Please, please, please let it be that kind of kiss.

As if in juxtaposition to this worry, Phil slipped off the smooth vinyl interior, dropped to the floor with a meaty thud, disappeared like a jumper from a high bridge.

Oh fuck. Sam is so screwed if I've killed the pig.

Now there were speckled dots in front of his vision, like flocks of dandelion seeds, coordinating themselves to become unspeakably distracting. Dean opened the door, didn't bother to check what damage he might have just done to his car, or Kris's truck, just peered into the black recess under the glove compartment, hoping that Phil wasn't stunned, or worse, because he didn't think he could climb under there to find out, no matter how much danger Sam was in.

While Dean tried to focus his tired eyes, Phil jumped up onto the bench seat, lightly, with the surprising grace of a big cat. I must be running a really high fever, Dean thought, his coat open, wind slicing inside, delivering snow like junk mail. He didn't have any gloves. He wasn't really all that prepared. Still, Phil ambled over, nose high in the air, testing the breeze like he was searching for something.

The cab of the truck was quite high and Phil was level with Dean's bellybutton. The groundhog came closer still, then nosed his head into Dean's open parka, and Dean was able to get his arms around him without lifting. That did not mean that thirty pounds of groundhog against his chest didn't hurt. Quite the reverse: it was excruciating. Given the options, Dean made it manageable.

He was shivering, but Phil was like a big hot water bottle snuggled against his sternum, his wide head stuck out by Dean's collar as he wrapped his coat around him. How far was it to the top? God, what time was it? How long had Sam been gone? He thought about sounding the horn to let Sam know he was here, but that would waste time and he'd have to negotiate reaching into the truck to do it, and he really wasn't that far, he could now see. The Impala was only covered in a thin layer of snow, so Sam couldn't have been here for that long.

Hefting Phil's weight and biting his lower lip to distract himself from the agony that his entire chest had become, Dean started to walk carefully toward the clearing.

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At first, the Gobbler looked a little like soot swirling in the night, snow getting out of its way. I am so not going to be able to burn that, Sam knew, his heart pounding. Come a little closer. See? I'm a young guy. Tasty, yum, yum.

The soot coalesced suddenly, forcefully, came together like black sand on a beach, shifting with wind and water. Sam tightened his grip on the lighter. *You've tested that lighter, right?* He couldn't actually remember.

Narrowing his eyes, wishing that the snow would part for him as easily as it was now doing for the Gobbler, Sam watched as the black sand became obsidian, shimmered with heat. About the length of the Impala away. The obsidian become something else, resolved into a blackened body, bones charred, skin hanging like the moldering pennants on an ancient battlefield. The skull was half-fleshed with skin that had become dark leather, hair down to where its waist had once been, defined now only by the thin curving sticks of rib.

Okay, buster, Sam thought, calling spark to lighter. Let's go. His right hand arced toward the torch head, catching it spectacularly. Watch it, that's a can of gaso –

And the Gobbler jumped, leapt like a deer above and over him, knocking the gas can away in a crazy circle, the torch ripped from Sam's hands, but not before it ignited the spilled gas and lit the whole clearing in a bright yellow haze.

The Gobbler had no eyes anymore, Sam knew that, standing there empty handed, his gas and his torch gone, the gas burning in a semi-circle behind him, the torch further away still. Sam still knew that the Gobbler was staring at him, in the same way he knew that the monster was smiling, even though it had no lips.

--

The fiery glow erupting through the screen of trees in front of him surprised Dean so badly that he almost lost his grip on Phil. The groundhog sensed his sudden slack embrace and dug his claws – the ones most groundhogs used to create tunnels under the earth – into Dean's shoulders and belly.

That had the immediate effect of forcing his host to his knees, nothing more vehement than a moan coming from him. Done, he was done, and the snow came up to meet him in the same instant that the groundhog moved like a bobsled down an Olympic track, emerging from the bottom of Dean's parka to skid to a halt several feet away.

With the hot water bottle's departure, the cold enveloped Dean, was like a blow, it was so harsh and unforgiving. He came to his elbows, trying and failing for more elevation. Dean glanced through the snow, trying to locate Phil. The groundhog shook ice pellets from itself like a wet dog. Phil was now more than twenty feet away, closer to the clearing than Dean. With one backward glance that conveyed all sorts of meaning, not the least of which was gratitude, Phil jumped through the snow toward the fire beyond the trees, leaving Dean stunned and immobile on the frozen ground.

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The skeletal hand reached out, hovering near Sam's forehead as he backed away. A shimmy of heat from the gasoline fire stopped him from retreating much further. Oh, great, trapped by my own weapon.

The Gobbler lurched forward, not particularly graceful, despite the fact that his feet were intact. Weird how some bits of things burned, and others did not. Their dad had taught them how to get an even burn on a body – oh, shut up, Sam. Solid feet, an imperfect burn. This sucker is still in

play, as far as a good torching is concerned. Just how to get some flame to him when the torch is way over...

A blur, a blur of fur moving at an indescribable speed jumped toward Sam, came to a stop only a few inches from his foot. Despite the danger in ignoring the Gobbler less than an arm's length from him, Sam looked down to see an enormous groundhog on its hind legs, its attention fastened on the Gobbler.

Phil. It's Phil, Sam had time to think before the groundhog hopped away from Sam, sure of the Gobbler's attention. The burned wreck followed the groundhog's moves, stepped away from Sam aiming for the animal.

Then, Phil did the unthinkable.

Without apparent concern, without hesitation, the groundhog ran into the gasoline fire, emerging scant seconds later, engulfed in flame. At a run, Phil launched himself at the Gobbler, lodging deep in his ribcage, a living bomb.

For a brief moment, it appeared that nothing would happen, and Sam judged the distance between himself and the torch guttering on the snow. Then, a rushing, harsh wind filled his ears, coming from everywhere, and he was thrown across the clearing, blown to his back by a white hot light that shot up to the sky like a Hollywood premier's searchlights.

Dazzled, Sam tried to make sense of the scene: where the Gobbler had been, where Phil had been, there was nothing but light. As he watched, it dimmed infinitesimally, then snapped out like there'd been a fucking switch. Damn. He got to his feet, a little shaky, and walked to the blackened circle the heat had created. He smelled burned hair, suspected it might be his own. The gasoline fire was going out, an insignificant light beside what had just occurred. Sam picked up the dying torch, and it flared into light as it was released from the snow.

The snow.

Sam looked up into the sky, which was clear. The wind shifted.

He held the torch up to examine the circle. In the centre of it, a pile of dusty char that might have been the archeological remains of an ancient campfire. Sam knew better. He bent down to finger the ashes, kicked them around to make sure it was a good burn. He'd seen countless, enough to know that the job was done.

A tiny set of bones, amongst the embers, needle-thin, light as feathers. Sam licked his lips, and realized that he was not cold anymore.

By the time he'd scattered the remains, he was dog-tired. And that was when his phone rang.

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a/n: Whew! Bent some logic rules to get here, but here we are...*almost* at the end. I just couldn't make Phil evil in the end, big doofus groundhog.

Epilogue

Posted June 14th, 2006

Here's the last bit of it. Very end of it...phew! Man, it took me a long time to POST this thing. Imagine how long it took me to write it. And it's wintery. I'd forgotten that...brrr. I wrote this in March, I think, when Ottawa was still in a deep freeze.

Disclaimer: My thesaurus tells me than a synonym for 'disclaimer' is 'repudiation', which I actually like a whole lot better.

BigPink's Repudiation: Swearing herein. No spoilers, I don't think. No one is based on any real characters, so put down that phone before calling your lawyers, happy citizens of Punxsutawney. And I make no money from this, only the endless joy that comes from having a sympathetic forum where I can put the words 'Dean' and 'thigh' together as many times as I like. All things Supernatural belong to the suits, including Dean's thighs, alas.

--

Sam crossed his arms and tucked his bare hands under his armpits before spotting a familiar face in the sea of yelling Punxsutawnians. Punxsites. Punxsitawans. Hockey fans. Whatever.

As he approached, one of the Punxsy players must have scored, or a fight had broken out, or *something*, because the crowd stood as one and started cheering. This was one game Sam didn't understand. Loping up the cement steps, he raised a hand in a brief and slightly abashed wave to Floating Heart, who smiled ecstatically at him, mittened hand flapping like a flag at a parade. He bypassed her, went up a few more rows, and took a seat with the rest of the crowd, nestled onto the bench beside the pretty blonde girl he'd spotted from the boards.

Easy enough to mark her in a crowd, even without the flannel shirt.

Britni yipped hello, her eyes on the ice as the players circled around, waiting for the puck to be dropped after the goal, or the penalty call, or whatever had just happened. The tall, wide-shouldered center skated up to where the ice was emblazoned with a rather perky looking marmot mascot, alert, stick ready. And again the action started. It was hard to get Britni's attention, it was so fixed on the play. Bright youthful focus on the center forward, the team's captain. Kris, suited up and ready to go, absolutely no worse for wear from last week's 'accidental electrocution'. Maybe even better, if you factored in the three goals she'd scored this Sunday afternoon. Women's hockey in small town Pennsylvania. It didn't get more hicksville than this. And Sam thought he'd give his eye teeth to have a slice of it, to have someone watch him on a Sunday afternoon like Britni was watching Kris.

Sam followed the game for a few minutes, until regulation time was called. Since the score was tied, there would be a sudden death overtime period, but he doubted he'd stick it out. The players skated off the ice, into the change rooms for a bout of inspirational coach abuse, doubtlessly.

Released from the iron hold the game had, Britni turned to Sam, smiled again. But sadly, Sam realized. "What do you think?" she asked him, lifting her brows and sliding a glance to the empty ice as spectators and fans jostled around for drinks, or to the bathrooms, or simply to nip outside for a smoke.

Sam shrugged, not really willing to lie. “Not really my game,” he replied. “They hit harder than I expected.”

Britni nodded, looking to her hands. “It’s a good game,” she offered. “I guess you’re leaving, right? You wanted to say goodbye to Kris?”

Sort of, Sam thought. “Yeah. She’ll be busy, though.” The crowd was laughing, a new energy that hadn’t been there last week, back when it was winter, when kids were disappearing in columns of fire. Like a corner had been rounded, turned at speed, a whole new vista spread before them.

“You’ll have to wait until after the game, I think. She usually goes out with the team, after.” She paused. “She’ll be busy after today’s game, though.” And her eyes slid again, this time to a burly man sitting a few rows ahead of them, an enormous sheet of paper spread on his lap, a pencil marking up columns, a newspaper nearby, a Blackberry in one hand.

Sam looked questioningly at Britni.

“Scout from the University of Toronto,” Britni replied. “I think Kris has bigger things ahead of her than Penn State.” A whole new world of competitive sport that Sam didn’t understand. The sadness he understood, though. Someone you cared for going far away, following a dream. He was suddenly very glad that Dean hadn’t come with him.

“So,” he asked, breaking the mood. “How’s life at the Groundhog Zoo?”

Kris had insisted that they tell Britni nothing, that it would mean her job and so far, Sam had no idea what sense any of the citizens – any of the upstanding Inner Circle that managed the international career of the town’s biggest star – were making of Phil’s disappearance. Kris, they’d told. No one else.

Britni shrugged. “Same as ever. Phil’s lost a little weight, I think. He went into his burrow for a few days, but the Inner Circle called in their vet and now he seems fine. Phyllis is giving him the cold shoulder.”

Sam set his stare on the far side of the ice, tried for a calm expression. “Seem any different?” He knew what had happened; he’d picked up Phil’s skeleton and scattered it to the wind. Turned back to her when she remained silent.

Her eyes were calm, appraising, right on him, deep and brown. “You know what the average lifespan of a groundhog is, don’t you?”

“Not really,” Sam confessed.

“Well, it’s not a hundred and twenty-five years.”

And everything in her tone suggested that he let it go. Trouble was, it didn’t feel right to let it go, which was why Dean hadn’t come to the game today, even though he’d been out of the hospital for a few days now. Letting go of things wasn’t something that came easy to either of them. But what was the alternative?

“You should come back next February 2. It’s really fun, you know. This whole place is transformed. You’d never recognize it.” And somehow, Sam was pretty sure he would recognize it, that it was exactly the same.

Exactly the same, except for one, small, furry thing. He sighed.

“We’ll try. We gotta get going, sorry,” and stood, apologetic and lean. “Say bye to Kris for us.” He smiled, and it felt good, despite the singed eyebrows that he knew made him look a little odd. “I’ll look for her at the next Olympics.”

“You better,” Britni said, glancing warily over at the Canadian scout before smiling sunnily and waving goodbye.

Sam wandered out the back of the rink, to where the repaired Impala rested in the spring sunshine, the only indication of the harsh winter only a week past being the hardened grey ice still lingering in the deep shadows between the rink and the gymnasium. He paused as he came out into the bright light, lifted his face to the sun, felt the vitamin D course through him like a shot of tequila.

He approached the car quietly, not quite knowing what to expect. Dean had been unbearably moody the last few days, snapping at things he’d usually laugh off. We need a break, Sam thought, not knowing what that was, exactly. As he peered through the passenger side window, he realized that his brother had stretched himself out in the back seat, a couple of stolen hospital pillows cushioning the angles between door and seat. How he got comfortable in any position was beyond Sam’s understanding, but especially in the car. Dean had insisted that they leave, though, had not wanted to stay the length of time that they had. Repairs to the vintage Impala, though, had taken a little longer than anticipated, and was the only thing that kept Dean from going, short of tying him to a chair. Sam had paid the mechanic fifty dollars to take an extra three days.

Just because he was stretched out didn’t mean that he was sleeping. As Sam bent down to shade the glare on the window glass, Dean moved his arm from across his face, grimaced, and sat up slowly. Taking that as his cue to engage, Sam opened the passenger door, slid into the seat leaning an arm over its back, facing Dean as he came upright.

“You gotta find a better place to sleep, man,” he said with a quiet smile.

“I’m going to turn into Rip van Torn if I sleep much longer.” Looked confused for a minute, aware that he’d got the reference wrong. “What did you find out?”

Sam shrugged, feeling ridiculous. It was a *groundhog*, for god’s sake. “There’s a new Phil in town.”

“Standard operating procedure?” Dean asked, but it was no question. A strange combination: bitter, and angry, and sad, sad, sad. Fuck.

“I guess. They don’t live that long anyway. Apparently,” he added. A silence filled the car’s interior, lazy, but not comfortable. “I told Britni to say goodbye to Kris for us. The game went into overtime.”

Dean wasn’t paying attention, had clambered awkwardly out the car and was now standing on the bare pavement, his splinted right hand resting on the Impala’s roof, his eye returned to normal,

staring at a spot in the far distance, a pink scar that would fade on his cheekbone. Sam had seen his chest yesterday, had been permitted. It was ugly, but nothing they couldn't handle, given some downtime. He hoped Dean would allow them downtime. Trouble was, Sam knew this mood, knew that what Dean wanted to do right now, *right this minute*, was to kill something.

He'd been lying frozen in the ice, had done nothing to save his brother, break the Gobbler's icy hold on the town, done *nothing* – as ridiculous as it sounded – to save a suicidal rodent from its death wish. He'd been scooped by a teen hockey player and by a groundhog. Touchy didn't begin to describe Dean at the moment. Jesus, why couldn't they have *normal* problems?

Asked for perhaps the thousandth time in his life. Never, ever, answered.

The only way he gets to drive is if he doesn't ask. So he doesn't, just slides over, grabs the pillows from the back and tosses them into the passenger seat, starts the car with a roar. This is nothing that a few hundred miles of spring won't cure.

Although Dean was silent for the first fifty of those miles, by the time they were truly into the countryside, where trees were bursting into such outrageous greenery that Sam thought the mechanic had installed some kind of tinted windshield on the car, he finally spoke. Sam could tell he was trying. He appreciated the effort that took, what bridge Dean was attempting to build.

“So, what now, Sammy?” The only reason the music wasn't blaring was because Sam had strategically put the box of tapes on the floorboards, and he knew Dean still couldn't bend down that far without considerable pain. Maybe the radio. He might allow that in a few miles, if Dean behaved himself.

“I don't know. Haven't had any news or coordinates for a while. We could splurge, get a place with a pool.” He glanced over at Dean, who was pale, but alert and looking out the window. “Get you a physiotherapist.”

Dean chuckled, but didn't look over. If he says he's thinking about getting a dog, Sam thought, I'm going to honest-to-god bawl my eyes out.

“Now there's a thought. A nice strong Swedish blonde with hands that could crack my back in about a million different places...”

First road kill, coming up on the right, Dean's side. Smallish brown hump, too smooth to be a porcupine, too uniform to be a skunk. And it was exactly what he hoped it wouldn't be.

Sam didn't need to look at Dean; he couldn't look at him.

“I don't know,” Dean said at length, tapping his splint against the window in a way that would have Sam counting to ten before too long. A long silence followed.

“Use your words, Dean,” Sam prompted, not looking, never looking, doing that stupid guy thing where you didn't look at each other, just at the road, and had permission to say just about anything as long as that's where your eyes were.

“Maybe, given what we've just come up against, and the time of year...maybe. Yeah.” A short exhalation of breath, easier now than even yesterday. Sam took it upon himself to monitor such things.

“And?”

“The Easter Bunny. You know, I’ve got an affinity for the rodents, I think.” No looking permitted, though Sam felt the acid burn the not-looking caused him.

He shrugged instead. “Works for me. Where do you think we should start?”

“The tourist office in Punxsutawney had brochures for the Hershey Factory – must be around here somewhere.” It took a lot to ignore what was just underneath Dean’s words, all that would never be let out, that couldn’t be pointed out for fear of ruining everything.



“You know, we never torched those fiberglass Phils in town,” Sam observed, going along, acting normal, which would soon *be* normal, if he played it right.

A pause, and Sam risked a glance. Dean was staring at him, open-faced. Then he pulled his eyebrows up and to the side and smiled that slow way of his that meant everything was okay, or would be okay.

“That would involve going back to Punxsy. And I never want to go back there again. Ever.”

So Sam turned on the radio, and the classic rock station revealed that it was having a George Thorogood-a-thon, which had Dean singing along within a few miles, tapping a relentless whiskey-soaked beat against his thigh with the flat of his good hand, and the splint against his belt buckle with the other. Sam thought he might go mental. And everything was going to be just fine.

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a/n: And that’s a wrap, folks! Copious thanks to those who’ve stuck it through, and the grace and humour of the gang that reviews and especially my dear  [northface11](#) and  [lemmypie](#), who listen to me rant.