

Episode Eighteen: Caught in the Riddle

By irismay42

Clarksville, TN

“So what, it’s Evil’s day off or something?” Dean arched an eyebrow as he methodically stuffed clothes into his duffel. He’d started out rolling everything, but had soon lost patience with that and was now just screwing each item up into a ball and shoving it in anyhow.

Sam looked up from the laptop, biting his lip distractedly. “Huh?”

“You’ve still not found us a hunt,” Dean clarified with what he believed was a well-deserved eye roll. “Dude, we been here five days without even a whiff of a new gig! I’m gettin’ stir crazy here! I need to kill something!” He looked pointedly at his younger brother, who deftly ignored the implication. Threat. Whatever.

“Which is why I suggested we get back on the road,” Sam reminded him. “Before you decide to take out your frustration on something – or *someone* – that doesn’t deserve it.”

“I know *someone* who deserves it,” Dean muttered under his breath, continuing his haphazard packing with little thought for creases or wrinkles. He figured if he looked rumpled enough, Sam wouldn’t be able to help himself, he’d just be *compelled* to iron Dean’s clothes for him. Yeah, Sammy was so the bitch in this relationship.... He frowned, considering. Did that make him the jerk? “So why are we heading for Minnesota?” he asked, trying to distract himself from his own abstract thought processes.

Sam sighed again. “Could be a water wraith up there,” he said, a shrug turning into a slump to his shoulders. “But more likely it’s just a couple of weekend sailors in a leaky inflatable.”

Dean nodded. “Sounds boring.”

“Every hunt can’t be bodysnatching tattoos or Egyptian cat goddesses, Dean.”

Dean shuddered, absently massaging his shoulder where that feline bitch had put an arrow through it, while Sam unconsciously rubbed at his back where the warlock’s tattoo had covered him. “I guess occasionally ‘boring’ can be a good thing.”

“And we’re probably due a vacation,” Sam agreed. “Or at least a little downtime, or maybe a couple of easy hunts –”

“Last vacation we took we got attacked by a voodoo god and – oh yeah – nearly drowned,” Dean reminded him.

Sam smiled mirthlessly. “Our luck sucks, man,” he declared. “But after everything – after Mia...” He trailed off, and Dean ducked his head slightly, silently returning to his packing.

The awkward atmosphere was mercifully shattered by the opening riff of Focus’ *Hocus Pocus* blaring from Dean’s cellphone, and he tugged the little hunk of plastic from his pocket gratefully. He grinned brightly when he checked the caller ID, flipping open the phone with a cheerful, “Hey Bobby! Please tell me you got somethin’ we can kill?”

“Dean.” Bobby’s voice sounded strained and oddly controlled, but Dean put that down to the hours the older hunter had recently been putting in researching ways to end a human-demon hybrid; Bobby hadn’t taken the consequences of John’s need-to-know bullcrap any better than the man’s sons had. “You and Sam need to get to Springfield, Illinois,” Singer continued. “As soon as you can, son.”

His grin faltered a little, but Dean still managed to snark back, “Springfield? Poltergeist at the Kwik-E-Mart? Vampire at Moe’s place?” When Bobby made no reply, just sighed heavily, Dean sobered immediately. “Bobby, what’s wrong?”

Responding to the suddenly serious tone in Dean's voice, Sam discarded the computer, rising to his feet and taking a step toward his brother.

Dean looked up at him with something approaching fear in his eyes, despite his best efforts to remain calmly detached. "Bobby?"

Bobby sighed again. "You need to get here, Dean. St. John's Hospital, Springfield Illinois."

Dean felt like the whole world suddenly lurched on its axis, his knees unaccountably turning to rubber. "Why – what's...?"

"It's your dad, son," Bobby replied reluctantly. "He's in bad shape. You and Sam need to get here..."

St. John's Hospital, Springfield, IL

It took four and a half hours to get to Springfield, Dean's foot pressed almost to the floor of the Impala the whole way. An unusual silence filled the car's interior throughout the journey; Dean wasn't saying much, and neither was Sam, both lost in their own fears and worries while the Chevy's cassette deck remained uncharacteristically mute.

It was one of the longest drives of Dean's life.

He wasn't entirely sure how they made it in one piece to the hospital parking lot, muscles and brain on autopilot the entire time since Bobby had uttered those words, "*It's your dad...*"

Neither was he really aware of Sam ushering him into the cool interior of the lobby, Sam asking at the reception desk for directions, Sam guiding them to the bank of elevators, Sam telling him which floor they needed to get off at.

When the elevator doors parted onto a well-lit, bright and spotlessly clean hallway stretching off into the distance, he followed Sam almost reluctantly, a ball of dread heavy in the pit of his stomach. For a moment the light and the scene around him seemed to gutter and shift and suddenly he could swear he was walking along another hallway, dark and dingy, paint peeling from moldy walls, apartment doors secured with numerous bolts and locks hiding dark and dingy people behind them.

He was twelve years old and school had just let out....

Griffin, GA January 1992

"You know, you and Dad could have told me sooner. I'm not a little kid."

Sam had been bouncing on up ahead as he had a habit of doing back then, and Dean remembered how difficult it had been to try and get him to stay close, to stop running off; Sam had never been one to take orders easily, even at that age.

"Keep your brother in your sights whenever possible, Dean," Dad had always instructed him, and Dean had always done his best to follow Dad's orders.

He had glanced at each apartment door as they passed by, always on the lookout, always half-expecting someone – or something – to come flying out at them, to try and grab Sammy. Always on the alert. Always waiting.

"What good would it have done?" He'd asked Sam that question over and over since Christmas Eve, since his baby brother had confronted him with Dad's journal and the question he'd never wanted to hear him ask: "Are monsters real?"

He'd hated that he'd helped Dad keep the truth from Sammy for so long, but he'd just been a kid and Dean had wanted to protect him from the dark and dangerous world into which he'd been born, if only for a little longer.

Even at that age, Dean had realized the cruel inevitability of it all: no matter what Dean did, that dark and dangerous world was out there, just waiting for Sam, and nothing was going to keep him safe from it forever.

“So what’s he hunting now?” Sam had asked, slowing his Tigger-like gait for a second so that he could walk alongside his brother, their shoulders brushing the walls of the narrow hallway. “I mean, we’ve been here two weeks, right? He must have found what he came here for by now.”

“I don’t know,” Dean had replied, fairly truthfully at the time, a little distracted by the two dark figures up ahead at the end of the hallway.

“You better not be keeping any more secrets from me, Dean,” Sam had insisted petulantly. “You promised you’d treat me like a grown-up from now on...”

“You’re too short and too dumb to be a grown-up,” Dean had replied in typical big brother fashion, but even though he was talking, he wasn’t really paying attention, eyes fixed on the smartly-dressed man and woman standing at the end of the hall.

Outside their apartment door.

Their open apartment door.

Dad had said he wouldn’t be home that night....

Dean had hesitated mid-step, grabbing hold of the back of Sam’s jacket and pulling his little brother behind him.

“Dean, what the hell...?”

He should have turned and run. Right then, he should have turned and run. He’d known it then just like he knew it now.

“Dean and Sam Winchester?” the man had said, his voice calm but insistent as he took a step toward them. “You’re going to have to come with us...”

St. John’s Hospital, Springfield, IL

He should run.

He should just turn around, grab hold of Sam, and run. Right out of this hospital, right out of this town, right out of this state.

He couldn’t do this. He *couldn’t*. Not again.

“Dean?”

Dean blinked, unaware he’d stopped in the middle of the long, brightly-lit, spotlessly clean hallway, his hand fisted in the back of Sam’s jacket.

“Dean, it’s gonna be okay,” Sam said quietly, catching hold of his brother’s wrist and patting his upper arm reassuringly. “Dad’s gonna be okay.”

Dean just looked at him, wondering when Sam had become a grown-up, when Sam had become the big brother.

Since Mia, he thought to himself. *He’s been picking up the slack since Mia.*

He blinked again, almost surprised to find himself in a shiny hospital in Illinois instead of a dingy run-down apartment building in Georgia.

He took a breath, mentally collecting himself before nodding firmly. He could do this. Dad needed him to do this.

Sam seemed to hesitate for just a second before indicating a room to their left. “In here.”

Dean swallowed before following Sam through the open doorway, his eyes first straying to Bobby, who was sitting in an uncomfortable-looking plastic chair on the far side of the bed, fingers running around and around the rim of his ball cap.

He stood when they entered, ducking his head slightly as if he felt responsible for the condition of the figure stretched out on the bed between them.

“Boys,” he mumbled uncomfortably. “Good you could get here so fast.”

Dean followed Sam’s gaze as the two of them turned their attention to the pale form of their father laid out on the bed, eyes firmly closed, tubes in both arms. There were dark smudges beneath his eyes and a couple of days’ growth of dark stubble on his chin that made his pallor appear all the worse, but apart from that, no visible signs of what might have caused this. There were certainly no marks of violence on the exposed skin of his face and arms; no bruises, no cuts, nothing.

Dean had never seen his father look so small.

“What the hell happened, Bobby?” Dean asked when he was finally able to recover his voice, Sam adding,

“What’s wrong with him?” before Bobby even had a chance to answer Dean’s question.

Singer shook his head, scratching a hand through his hair. “I wish I could tell ya,” he said. “I don’t even know what your daddy was huntin’. It was just dumb random coincidence I was even in the neighborhood – demonic omens addin’ up to a big stinkin’ pile o’ nothin’ couple towns over.”

“Then how come the hospital called you?” Sam asked.

Bobby shrugged. “Docs didn’t find no I.D. on your daddy when they brung him in here. All he had on him was a Singer Salvage business card I’d stuck my cell number on about a hundred years ago. They called me, described John to me, and I high-tailed it over here fast as I could.”

“Why didn’t you call us right away?” Dean demanded, a little of his usual fire returning to his eyes.

Bobby raised his chin a little defensively. “Son, how pissed would you have been if I dragged you boys all the way up here to look at some unconscious hobo?” Dean’s expression mellowed slightly as he exchanged a sideways glance with Sam. “I wasn’t gonna call ya ’til I was sure it actually was your daddy they had here.”

“Where’d they find him?” Sam asked.

“Cops found him slumped over in his truck out on the side of the highway someplace.” He chuckled softly. “Course his truck’s registered to a Mr. E. Clapton at some trailer park in Nebraska, so that didn’t help ’em I.D. him much either.”

“So what’s wrong with him?” Sam asked again, as if Bobby hadn’t heard him the first time.

Once more, Bobby began to fidget with his ball cap. “Maybe I oughta let the docs...”

“Bobby,” Dean said quietly, a note of pleading in his voice.

Bobby sighed resignedly. “He’s in a coma,” he explained. “Docs can’t find no injuries on him, nothing obviously wrong with him. He just won’t wake up. They got him on some whaddyamacallits – broad-spectrum antibiotics or somethin’. You know, in case it’s –”

“A virus?” Sam offered.

“Yeah –” Bobby began to agree, but was quickly cut off by Dean’s suddenly barked,

“No.” He shook his head vehemently, eyes never leaving his dad’s still form. “It’s Mia.” He looked up then, expression rigid with a certainty that couldn’t hide the desperation in his eyes. “She’s gotten to him – whammied him somehow...”

Sam and Bobby exchanged a glance.

“Dean –” Sam began.

“No, Sammy,” Dean interrupted him, suddenly fixing his younger brother with a determined glare. “What else could put someone in a coma without leaving a trace?”

Bobby inclined his head to one side, thinking. “I guess it’s possible,” he said, scratching his earlobe. “We know she’s still out there. And she has a major axe to grind with you boys.”

Sam puckered his lips. “I dunno, Bobby... Why put Dad in a coma? Why not drag him off to torture him some more? Or just eviscerate him and have done with it?”

Bobby sank back down onto his plastic chair, and Sam pulled out another couple of seats from the neat stack against the wall, placing one meaningfully in front of Dean and indicating his brother should sit.

Dean reluctantly obeyed, sinking down on the chair, eyes never straying from his dad. “So what do we do?” he asked no one in particular.

“How much you wanna bet this is related to whatever Dad was hunting?” Sam suggested.

Dean nodded, that intense feeling of déjà vu that had assaulted him out in the hallway tickling again at that same memory. "Like in Georgia," he agreed, looking up at Bobby rather than at Sam. "In '92."

Bobby shifted awkwardly in his seat, his eyes falling from Dean's, almost as if he were ashamed. "I don't think it's like what happened in '92, son," he said quietly. "Far as I know, there's no other victims here, no localized pattern like the one John found in Georgia..."

Sam's brow knitted in confusion, gaze darting back and forth between Bobby and his brother. "Gimme a clue here, guys," he said. "What happened in '92?"

**Winchesters' apartment,
Griffin, GA
January 1992**

"Yeah Bobby, okay," John Winchester rumbled into the telephone receiver, voice low as if he didn't want his boys to hear him.

Good luck with that, Dean thought to himself, glancing around the pokey little closet they laughingly referred to as an apartment.

Sam was sprawled across the ancient sofa, eyes glued to the cartoons flicking across the crappy black and white TV lurking in the corner of the living area while he simultaneously finished off a slice of toast and eavesdropped on John's conversation in the little kitchenette barely six feet away.

No one multi-tasked like Sammy, Dean reflected.

He began clearing the breakfast dishes away noisily in an effort to give Dad some privacy, but only succeeded in garnering scowls from both his little brother *and* his father.

"Dean, I'm on the phone here," John hissed, covering the receiver for a second before turning his attention back to Bobby with a frown. "Okay, Bobby, well you boys have fun up there." His attention drifted away from Dean and back to the journal open on the kitchen table in front of him, his son turning to the sink with a hugely exaggerated sigh. "And good hunting," John added, replacing the receiver in the cradle mounted on the wall and proceeding to scribble something in the margin of the page in front of him. Even the right way up, Dean wouldn't have been able to make heads nor tails of it, but upside down? His dad's writing was worse than a spider on crack that'd fallen in an ink well.

"What's Uncle Bobby hunting, Dad?" Sam asked, finishing his toast and losing interest in the TV when the cartoon he was watching ended and was replaced by that weird-ass *Smells Like Teen Spirit* video – the one with the indecipherable lyrics and possessed cheerleaders. Sam switched off the set with a shrug, swinging his legs back over the edge of the couch, while Dean tried to remember the name of the band. Nirvana, maybe? Something like that. Next big thing, apparently.

"Sam," Dean warned his brother, not entirely sure the three weeks that had passed since Sammy's introduction to the "family business" had allowed Dad time to cool off about Dean having spilled his guts to his baby brother. *We do what we do and we shut up about it. Even to your brother.*

John cast his younger son an appraising glance, and Dean reflected on the injustice of it: His dad hadn't been mad at *Sam* at all, and it was *Sam* who'd been the one sneaking a look at his journal. "Demons," Dad replied at length, his eyes never straying from his youngest son, as if carefully measuring the boy's reaction.

"Oh." Sam did his best not to flinch a little, which Dean found kind of endearing in the little twerp. "On his own?" The younger boy's voice was an oddly strangled mix of awe and apprehension.

John shook his head. "He took backup. Jim Murphy went with him."

Sam's eyes widened. "Pastor Jim's a hunter too?"

John's lips twitched into a smile. "Occasionally. When his parishioners aren't paying too much attention. They're up in Alaska," he added without prompting, which surprised Dean a little because usually getting information out of his dad was like getting blood out of the stoniest of stones. "Multiple possessions. Damn demons taking advantage of the long hours of darkness up there this time of year."

"Demons are like vampires?" Sam asked, eyes widening still further. "Only come out at night?"

"No such thing as vampires, son," John informed his youngest. "And demons aren't afraid of the light – they just prefer to take advantage of people's fear of the dark, that's all."

Sam sat forward a little. "Is that what you're hunting here, Dad?" he asked tentatively. "Demons?"

Dean's ears pricked up at that, and he did his best not to suddenly look too interested.

John straightened, pursing his lips as he closed the journal in front of him with a snap that effectively ended the conversation. "You boys are going to be late for school –"

"C'mon, Dad," Dean put in. "What *are* we doing her? In this town? There's got be a reason you brought us here."

Sam glanced over at his brother, a small smile of gratitude flickering at the corners of his mouth. "It's okay, Dad," he added. "I'm old enough. You know I know what you do now. I'm not scared."

John gritted his teeth, a disapproving glance thrown in Dean's direction. Dean swallowed as his dad sighed heavily. "There's people in hospital," he said at length. "In comas. Doctors don't know what put 'em there."

"But you do?" Sam blinked owlshly at his father, as if for a moment he truly believed what Dean had told him on Christmas Eve, about their dad being some kind of superhero.

John shrugged noncommittally. "I got ideas," he said cryptically. "These people – the ones in comas? They all got kids just like you two, and all those kids are gonna be in big trouble if their parents don't wake up pretty soon."

"Trouble how?" Sam asked.

Neither Dad nor Dean answered, Dean just glancing at his father as his fingers gripped the edge of the table a little too tightly.

"And what could put people into comas?" Sam continued, the wheels in that big brain of his clearly spinning too fast to notice the suddenly tense silence between his father and brother.

John shrugged again, his gaze dipping away from Dean's a little guiltily. "Could be a lot of things," he said. "I need to do more digging." He shook his head, glancing at his wristwatch. "Now look alive, you two – you're gonna be late."

John glanced hesitantly back at Dean, who held his gaze for a second before his father looked away again. *He knows somethin'*, Dean thought to himself. *He's just not tellin'.*

Sam hauled himself up from the sofa, retrieving his book bag on his way into the kitchenette. "So you're gonna be there this afternoon, right Dad?" he asked tentatively, affecting his best puppy dog blink as his father gazed at him levelly. "Right?"

John winked slightly in Dean's direction before schooling his features into a frown. "What's this afternoon?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "*Dad –!*"

"I know, I know," John teased, grinning. "Open house, right? I finally get to meet the awesome Ms. Curtis?"

Sam frowned. "You're not going to embarrass me, right?" he insisted. "With my new teacher? 'Cause I've only been at this school a couple of weeks and I'm still trying to make a good impression –"

“And I *love* Ms. Curtis soooooo much!” Dean added in his best Whiny Sam voice, making kissy faces in his brother’s direction as he hefted his own bag onto his shoulder.

“Shut up, jerk!”

“Teacher’s pet!”

“Juvenile delinquent!”

“Ms. Curtis’ *bitch!*”

“Don’t call your brother a bitch, Dean.”

“Sorry Dad.”

**Taylor Street Middle School,
Griffin, GA
Later that day**

“So you think Sam’s open house is gonna go a little better than yours, buddy?” John asked, smiling slyly as Dean showed him the way to Sam’s classroom.

Dean scowled up at him. “It went just fine, Dad,” he gritted out through clenched teeth. “You *said* we were supposed to be keeping a low profile in this town, right?”

“Well yeah,” John agreed. “But you didn’t have to go quite this far. What was that your teacher said? She’d barely noticed you were in her class?”

“Dad you *said* –”

“And that you weren’t mixing with the other kids?”

“Low *profile*, Dad –”

“And that the first year of high school could be tough,” John barely stifled a snigger, “especially on *shy* kids...”

“I am *not* shy!” Dean snapped, yanking open the main door into the middle school and belatedly remembering to hold it open for his dad.

John ruffled his boy’s hair as he breezed past. “Never had you down as the shrinking violet type, son.”

“Dad –” Dean was close to whining now, sounding uncomfortably like Sammy when he had his bitchface on.

John grinned wide, clapping Dean on the shoulder affectionately. “I’m just teasing, kiddo!” he said. “You’re right, I told you to keep your head down and stay off the radar, and you’re doing just that. You’re following orders. I’m really proud of you for that.”

Dean faltered some, a tiny flicker of a smile chasing away the pouty grimace. “Yeah?” He glanced up at his father through lowered lashes.

John nodded. “You guys *need* to fade into the background in this town.”

Dean’s brow creased as he took the lead, directing his dad down the long hallway toward Sammy’s classroom. “Only us?” he asked. “What about you?” When John made no attempt to answer, Dean continued, “Why, Dad? What’s going on in this town?”

John shrugged noncommittally, and even though they’d reached Sam’s classroom, Dean was pretty damn sure he hadn’t been about to tell him anything else.

Even in the hallway, Dean could hear his little brother’s voice clearly audible through the open classroom door.

John’s lips twitched into a wry smile. “Not sure your brother got the memo about keeping a low profile,” he observed, striding on into the classroom as if he owned it, which Dad had a habit of doing wherever they went. Dean tagged along behind him in his wake. Which he also had a habit of doing wherever they went.

“Stupid open house,” he grumbled under his breath. “Only good for getting us out of class early.”

He followed his dad into the classroom, where Sammy was in the middle of regaling his teacher Ms. Curtis and several hovering parents with a long and animated discussion about saber-toothed tigers.

Low profile my ass...

"Sammy, let someone else get a word in, huh?" John said, and Sam responded immediately at the sound of his father's voice, for the first time since Christmas Eve actually looking pleased to see him.

"We were talking about tigers —" Sam protested.

"No, *you* were talking about tigers," John corrected him. "These other folks would really like to be talking about their kids."

Ms. Curtis turned at the sound of John's voice, the pretty young teacher positively beaming at him. She held out her hand to him, and he shook it briskly. "Mr. Winchester," she simpered. "Your son's always a delight to talk to! I don't think I ever met such an animated boy!"

"Yeah, animated like Lisa friggin' Simpson," Dean muttered grumpily, scowling at Sam's teacher as she held on to John's hand a little longer than was strictly necessary in Dean's humble opinion.

Dean wasn't entirely sure why, but he wasn't overly fond of Ms. Curtis. Actually, he pretty much detested her with a passion, while Sam thought the sun shone out of her horrible purple glasses and long, painted fingernails.

The rational part of Dean's brain told him it was some kind of — what had Dad called it? — "separation anxiety." There was a mile of sidewalk between the high school and the middle school, and Dean didn't like Sam spending the entire day away from him in a completely different building one bit. Sam shouldn't be alone and defenseless. It wasn't right. It went against Dean's programming.

Dad told him to chill; that it was natural, that he couldn't be by his brother's side twenty-four seven. But that really didn't make Dean feel any better.

Obviously, the rational part of his brain told him, he was taking his anxiety out on Sam's teacher, demonizing the person entrusted with his little brother's care; the person doing his job.

Of course, the rational side of Dean's brain pretty much shorted out completely when he realized why Ms. Curtis kept reaching out to gently touch his dad's arm, simpering and giggling at him like a shy schoolgirl.

She was flirting.

Sam's teacher was flirting.

With his dad!

And what was worse, Dad was flirting back!

That settled it, Dean figured, hackles rising unaccountably. So much for demonizing Sam's teacher. The chick probably was a friggin' demon!

That must be it, right? Dad was just reeling her in for the kill. He wasn't *actually* flirting with her. It was all an act. A ruse.

Right?

John laughed suddenly, eyes twinkling as his hand brushed across Sammy's hair. Dean glanced at Sam, *willing* his brother to look at him.

You're seeing this, Sammy, right?

But Sam was too busy beaming up at Ms. Curtis to take much notice of Dean right then.

Goddamnit!

He wished a werewolf would burst into the classroom and start chowing down on Ms. Curtis' stupid, giggling face.

"So your wife," Sammy's teacher was saying, and Dean froze, all thoughts of the woman's spectacularly gruesome death immediately driven from his brain. "Sam tells me she passed away when he was very young?"

John's smile slipped a little, his hand coming to rest on Sam's shoulder which he squeezed lightly. He dipped his eyes down to his youngest son for a second. "Seven years now," he confirmed quietly.

Seven years, two months, nineteen days, Dean's brain automatically supplied.

Ms. Curtis nodded sympathetically. "That must be hard. Being all by yourself."

Dean virtually growled, even more hideously gruesome deaths for Ms. Curtis popping into his head. What was the stupid bat talking about? Dad was so obviously *not* by himself – especially not with Dean standing *right there!*

Maybe a gargoyle could come carry her off and drop her head first off the Empire State Building. Yeah, that'd be good. Or some unfriendly poltergeist could maybe smash her into a few walls until she stopped saying such ridiculous things to his father.

Yeah, she so wouldn't be flirting with his dad *then*, would she?

"Dad?" He tried to interrupt, stepping forward to remind his father of his presence. When his dad continued his conversation with Ms. Curtis as if he'd not even spoken, he tried a little harder. "Dad!"

John whirled on him, annoyance plainly etched in the line between his dark eyebrows. "Dean, *what?*" he demanded.

"I –" Dean shrugged and shook his head. "I just –" Suddenly he found his sneakers absolutely fascinating.

"Then stop interrupting!" John turned back to Ms. Curtis, but she had already been co-opted by another of the parents before he could regain her attention. "Now look what you did."

Dean smiled ever-so-slightly, but instantly sobered when he noticed Sam scowling at him.

"You are *such* a freak," the younger boy pronounced, sticking out his lower lip sulkily. "You didn't see me interrupting when Dad was talking to your *teacher!*"

"You weren't even *there*, brainiac!"

"Dean –"

"Well exactly, brainfart!"

"Sam –"

"I couldn't help overhearing..."

Dean's attention snapped away from Sammy as another female voice emanated from his dad's general vicinity.

God, the guy was a freakin' chick magnet this afternoon!

"Being on your own. It must be hard – you have two little boys don't you?"

The woman had her hand on Dad's forearm, all long spindly fingers and claw-like red nails, and Dean realized he vaguely recognized her from picking Sam up after school – she had a daughter in his little brother's class.

"I'm on my own too," the woman continued with little encouragement from Dean's dad, thin lips painted into a bright scarlet grimace that Dean figured was probably supposed to look like a smile, bright dark eyes set close together, hawk-like in their intensity, dark hair threaded with silver pulled back into a tight knot at the nape of her neck. "Just me and Flora."

"Yeah," Dad was saying, smiling warmly. "It's tough raising kids on your own."

Dean felt like stamping his foot. *You're not on your own, Dad!*

"Oh it is," the woman agreed. "So tough. Sometimes you just need another adult to talk to..."

Okay, that's it. Dean was pulling his dad out of this room full of crazy flirting women right now....

"You're Sam's big brother, right?"

The voice was right in his ear, and his focus shifted sideways, a little startled at the girl's proximity and the fact that she'd totally managed to sneak up on him.

He blinked at her for a second, recognizing her as Flora, the crazy hawk-eyed woman's daughter.

"Yeah," he confirmed warily. "So?"

He didn't bother to give the girl his name. It felt like most places they went he was just "Sam's brother" these days.

She blinked back at him, almost as if she'd got something in her eye, but Dean was pretty sure it was just because she couldn't bring herself to make eye contact with him.

Now this was a *real* shy kid, he observed. She was pretty though, as tall as he was despite being four years younger, masses of blonde curls floating down her back, wide clear blue eyes and freckles peppering her nose.

Her attention slid down to her feet at Dean's scrutiny, eyes downcast, lower lip trembling just a little bit.

"Get your dad out of town, Sam's brother," she whispered softly. "Right now."

Griffin, GA January 1992

Dean stared silently out of the Impala's window, unable to shake Flora's dire warning from his head.

"Get your dad out of town, Sam's brother."

Sam had called shotgun, and Dean had acquiesced for once, so distracted by the girl's words that he was almost oblivious to his dad's unexpected approval.

"Good boy, Dean. I think Sammy's earned a seat up front today."

"Get your dad out of town..."

What the hell had Flora meant by that? Was this related to whatever Dad was hunting? There had to be *something* going on in this town after all, or Dad wouldn't be here.

"Dad, there's more to this than people in comas, right?"

John glanced at him in the rearview mirror, but didn't respond, instead continuing to give Sam's incessant chatter his full attention.

"You like Ms. Curtis, right? She's the best! She says if I carry on like this, I might get to skip fifth grade altogether..."

"Dad?" Dean pressed. "What are we doing here? What are you hunting?"

John's dark gaze again flickered to the rearview, but then was almost immediately back on Sam. "That's good, Sammy. I'm really proud of you, son."

Dean huffed, folding his arms across his chest sullenly. "You can't have it both ways, Dad," he grouched. "Either you're proud of Sammy for being an oh-so-brilliant suck-up and drawing attention all over himself, or you're proud of me for keeping a low profile like you told us to."

Sam returned Dean's huff with added interest. "You're just jealous 'cause *your* teacher thinks you're a moron," he snapped.

"Shut up, suck-up!"

"Shut up yourself, moron!"

"Boys!" Dad cut in. "Both of you shut the hell up, you're giving me a headache." He sighed heavily. "Look, Dean," he said, again looking up into the rearview. "We'll talk about this when we get home."

Dean glared at him darkly.

"Okay?"

Dean considered that. "Okay."

Winchesters' apartment, Griffin, GA January 1992

The tinny sound of the shower spray hitting the ancient enamel bathtub filled the apartment, and Dean took that as his cue to head on over to the kitchen table, which

was currently littered with John's hastily handwritten notes, newspaper clippings, even what looked to Dean like copies of hospital records.

Dad had been a lot less secretive about his research since Christmas, often leaving it out on display where the boys could see it. Usually, it was Sam who eagerly sifted through the mountains of paper, intent on discovering information about Dad's latest hunt. Dean, typically, was content with Dad *telling* him what was going on, he didn't need any extra information. But on this occasion, Dad pretty much wasn't telling him anything, and he couldn't let that go. Not after what Flora had said to him.

Of course, Dean knew that Dad was probably just protecting him. The only hunts Dad didn't tell him everything he needed to know about were generally those where his father knew Dean would only worry.

And Dean was plenty worried now.

"She has *such* a crush on you, you know," Sam piped up suddenly from the direction of the sofa, where he had his nose stuck in a book on prehistoric creatures.

Dean blinked at the non-sequitur. "Huh?"

Sam looked over the top of his book at him, grinning wickedly. "Flora," he clarified. "I saw her talking to you in class."

Dean shifted, cheeks coloring. "Don't be ridiculous, she's just a little kid –"

"She's four months older than I am," Sam informed his brother. "And they say girls mature faster than boys, right?"

"At this rate, you'll be retiring before *you* mature," Dean commented.

Sam ignored that. "She's always asking about you. Keeps finding excuses to hang out with me – y'know, so she can ask me stuff? Don't you see her staring at you when you come pick me up after class?"

Sam was eight. Sam was *eight* and he'd noticed that. And Dean hadn't. Not once. "Uh –"

"I guess you're just not very observant," Sam teased.

Dean frowned at him. "Get your observant ass over here and observe Dad's notes," he barked. "I can't make heads or tails out of 'em. He has worse handwriting than you did when you were three."

Sam put down his book with a sigh, heading on over to Dean's position and casting a cursory glance over the mound of paperwork.

"It's all about the coma people," he pronounced after a couple of minutes of examination, pointing to one of the newspaper clippings. "*Ninth resident in coma: Doctors mystified.*"

"Well I know *that*," Dean snapped. "But is there a *reason* for them to be in comas? Is something causing it? Is Dad hunting the thing that's causing it?"

Sam glanced back down at the paperwork. "Bunch of people in comas," he repeated. "Probably a virus or something."

Dean shook his head. "Thank you for that outstanding diagnosis, Doctor, Sammy..."

St. John's Hospital, Springfield, IL Present day

Sam concentrated. Really hard. And that wasn't easy with his father lying unconscious in front of him and his big brother pacing the hospital room like some caged animal.

He could vaguely remember the hunt Dean had described – back in Griffin in '92 – but there had been so many hunts between then and now that sometimes the details all bled into one another.

"Was that the year I was in Ms. Curtis' class?" he asked at length, and Dean merely snorted at him.

"Figures you'd remember her. Suck-up."

Sam shook his head. "Dean –"

Bobby raked his fingers over the back of his head. "I was in Alaska. The one time you boys really needed me –"

"Bobby," Dean interrupted him. "Don't. It wasn't your fault. Not like you had an obligation or anything."

"But I should have been there," Bobby disagreed. "I could have –"

"No," Dean silenced him. "Don't do that, man. Things happen for a reason, and that all happened the way it was supposed to happen."

"But you boys could have been killed – or – or –"

"Worse?" Dean supplied with a wry laugh. "Yeah, well. We weren't."

"If John had just *told* me what he was hunting..."

Sam huffed. "Yeah, a lot of that going around lately," he observed.

Dean ignored him, although Sam could tell from the muscle bouncing around in his cheek that his big brother silently agreed. "Dad's unwillingness to share notwithstanding," he said, "he'd figured out way before we ever got to Griffin what the victims all had in common..."

**Outside Taylor Street Middle School,
Griffin, GA
January 1992**

Dean leaned against the wall impatiently, glancing at his watch before returning his attention to the steady stream of little kids exiting the school excitedly.

"C'mon, Sammy..." he muttered. "Is that a whole freakin' cart of apples you're givin' your teacher or what?"

He straightened as his eyes lit on Flora emerging into the cold January sunshine, dashing across to her and planting himself right in her path.

"Hey."

She looked up at him and almost swallowed her tongue, eyes widening as she jerked back a step in surprise.

"Remember me?" he added. "Sam's brother."

Flora nodded mutely.

Dean took a step toward her, and she flinched visibly. "What did you mean yesterday?" he asked. "When you told me to get my dad out of town?"

Her whole face seemed to freeze, and she glanced about herself fearfully, as if looking for someone.

"Flora?"

"I can't..." She tried to push past him, head down and eyes fixed on the path in front of her, not stopping until she walked right into another boy who grabbed her by her upper arms.

"Hey –" Dean tried to intercede, but the kid just scowled at him.

"Stay out of this, shortstuff," he growled, causing Dean to bristle and raise himself to his full height, which was admittedly a couple of inches shy of this asshole.

The kid got right up in Flora's face and she raised wet-looking eyes to him fearfully. "Please, Donny –"

"I hate your mom," Donny spat. "You know she's weird, right? She's a weirdo. Like you. You're both weird and I hate you. You know there's something not right about her, right? You know that, I know you do. You know she's weird. I hate her and I hate you and I don't want to live with you anymore!"

The words tumbled out of the boy's mouth in a mad rush, and Flora promptly burst into tears, shoving past him and running off down the path as fast as her feet would carry her.

"Dude, that was so not cool," Dean commented. "Why'd you have to make her cry like that?"

Donny just looked at him, anger and frustration and *fear* skimming across his face in a matter of seconds. “Her mom’s *weird*,” he repeated shortly.

“Yeah, I get that, but that’s not *her* fault –”

“I don’t wanna live there anymore.”

“So you live with Flora and her mom?” Dean clarified.

Donny nodded, shoulders slumping in resignation. “Two weeks now. Since my mom...” he trailed off and began to turn away.

“Wait!” Dean caught his arm. “Your mom what?”

Donny glanced back at him. “She’s sick,” he said at length. “In the hospital. She won’t wake up and no one can figure out what’s wrong with her.”

Dean’s heart began to quicken. “She’s in a coma?” he asked gently.

Donny nodded. “I don’t have anyone else and she won’t wake up. My dad left when I was a baby and – and – that’s why I got stuck with a freakin’ foster family.”

“Flora’s mom’s a foster mom?”

Donny nodded again. “She’s got quite a few of us living with her now.”

Dean frowned. ““Us?””

“Kids whose parents have gotten sick,” Donny clarified. He shook his head and wrapped his arms around himself protectively. “I don’t wanna stay with them no more.”

“Why? What’s wrong with them? Besides – y’know – being weird and everything.”

Donny bit his lip. “I heard stuff,” he said, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “The other kids...they talk and –”

“Dean!”

Dean whirled at the sound of Sam’s voice, the eight-year-old running toward him with the all the deadly accuracy of a cruise missile.

He turned back toward Donny, but the other boy had disappeared, obviously having thought better of unburdening himself to a complete stranger. “Dammit...”

Sam was waving over his shoulder to a little girl in pigtails who was climbing into a shiny minivan being driven by an elderly lady in a big fur hat.

“That your girlfriend?” Dean’s asked casually, causing Sam to glare at him.

“That’s Clara,” he informed his brother. “Her dad’s in the hospital. One of the coma people.”

Dean raised an approving eyebrow. “How d’you get that out of her?”

“We bonded,” Sam replied flatly. “She’s got no mom like us.”

Something cold and prickly began to squirm in the pit of Dean’s stomach. “And her dad’s sick?”

Sam nodded. “Good thing her grandma’s around. She’d have nowhere to go if she wasn’t.”

Dean bit his lip. Like Donny. *He* had nowhere to go....

He felt like the ground was tilting a little, his legs threatening to give right out from under him.

Was this it? Was this why dad was here? Was this thing going after single parents? Was Dad using *himself* as bait to draw whatever it was out into the open? Was it after the *kids*?

And what would happen to *them* if something happened to *Dad*?

Because *they* had nowhere to go either....

**St. John’s Hospital,
Springfield, IL
Present day**

“That was it, wasn’t it?” Sam said suddenly, memories rushing over him like a broken dam. “Dad was using himself as *bait*! And us too! Just like the Shtriga...” He trailed off, shaking his head angrily.

"He told us to keep a low profile, remember?" Dean insisted. "He was trying to protect us."

Sam shot him a disbelieving look. "You're kidding, right? Dean, he was offering himself up to that thing – what the hell did he think would happen to *us*?"

Dean shook his head. "Sam, just drop it, okay?" he said. "It's water under the bridge."

"But you think that's what's going on now, right? You think maybe he was using himself as bait and the thing he was hunting got to him first?"

Dean didn't answer, just turned his gaze to the prone form of his father, the sound of the heart monitor too loud as it echoed about the room.

What the hell were you hunting this time, Dad?

Griffin GA **January 1992**

"You know, you and Dad could have told me sooner. I'm not a little kid," Sam insisted, bouncing on up ahead while Dean tried in vain to get him to stay close.

"Sam, will you quit running off?" he said, glancing nervously at each apartment door as they passed by, always on the lookout, always half-expecting someone – or something – to come flying out at them, to try and grab Sammy. Always on the alert. Always waiting.

Sam glanced back at him, shrugging but not slowing down his canter.

Dean sighed. "What good would it have done?" he asked, as he had so many times since Christmas Eve, since his baby brother had confronted him with Dad's journal and the question he'd never wanted to hear him ask: "Are *monsters* real?"

He'd hated that he'd helped Dad keep the truth from Sammy for so long, but he'd just been a kid and Dean had wanted to protect him from the dark and dangerous world into which he'd been born, if only for a little longer.

Dean knew it was inevitable. He knew that no matter what he did, that dark and dangerous world was out there, just waiting for Sam, and nothing was going to keep him safe from it forever.

"So why won't he tell us what he's hunting?" Sam asked, slowing his Tigger-like gait for a second so that he could walk alongside his brother, their shoulders brushing the walls of the narrow hallway. "I mean, we've been here two weeks, right? He must have found what he came here for by now."

"I don't know," Dean had replied, a little distracted by the two dark figures up ahead at the end of the hallway. "I don't know what he's hunting. He won't tell me."

"You better not be keeping any *more* secrets from me, Dean," Sam insisted petulantly. "You promised you'd treat me like a grown-up from now on..."

"You're too short and too dumb to be a grown-up," Dean replied in typical big brother fashion. "And besides, you know as much as I do: it's something to do with all of these people falling into comas all over town."

Dean may have been talking, but Sam didn't have his full attention, eyes fixed on the smartly-dressed man and woman standing at the end of the hall.

Outside their apartment door.

Their *open* apartment door.

Dad said he wouldn't be home tonight....

Dean hesitated mid-step, grabbing hold of the back of Sam's jacket and pulling his little brother behind him roughly.

"Dean, what the hell...?" Sam began to protest, but the smartly-dressed man on their doorstep took a step forward, an I.D. card with his photograph on it held out for their inspection.

"Dean and Sam Winchester?" the man said, his voice calm but insistent as he took another step toward them. "You're going to have to come with us..."

Winchesters' apartment
Griffin, GA
January 1992

"Dean and Sam Winchester? You're going to have to come with us..."

Dean pushed Sam further behind him, and Sam, for once, let him, the older brother scowling ferociously at the guy holding out the little plastic I.D. card while the younger brother just looked on in scared silence.

"Where's our dad?" Dean demanded, glancing past the two strangers and into their apartment as if, if he wished hard enough, his dad would come striding through that door to stand in front of *him* the way *he* was trying to stand in front of Sammy.

"Honey –" The woman stepped forward then, hands outstretched placatingly. "It's okay. Everything's going to be okay. We're here to help –"

Who did she think she was talking to? A five-year-old?

"We don't need any help," Dean snapped stubbornly. "Where's our dad? What were you doing in our apartment?"

His thoughts drifted to the duffel full of munitions under Dad's bed; the shotgun propped up by his and Sam's bedroom door; the knife under his pillow; the 9mm in the drawer of the nightstand...

"Dean...?" Sam whispered from behind him. "What's going on?"

Dean squared his shoulders in some kind of Pavlovian response to his brother's fear, determined to show none of his own, even if he was freaked all to hell. "Who are you?" he demanded belligerently of the two strangers. "What have you done with our dad?"

"It's all right," the woman repeated, her tone soothing and measured. "My name's Kate, and this is Jerry. We're with Child Protective Services."

Dean felt his hand spasm where it gripped Sam's jacket, his brother sucking in a sharp intake of breath at the dreaded title.

Other kids may have imagined monsters as the boogeyman, but for Sam and Dean the boogeyman was most definitely CPS.

Run, run, run... Dad's voice in Dean's head chastised him over and over. *Dammit, boy, RUN!*

But Dean's feet wouldn't seem to co-operate and he just stood there, rooted to the spot, his fist tangled in Sam's jacket.

"Dean?"

Dean pushed his brother back a step, slowly retreating himself, as if the social workers were rabid dogs and the boys needed to escape – slowly and carefully.

"What – what do you want?" Dean stammered over the hammering of his heart. "Where's our dad?"

Kate threw a quick glance in Jerry's direction. "He's been taken ill, honey," she told him, sympathy flooding her dark brown eyes. "He's in the hospital."

Dean wasn't sure he heard what the woman said next, the sound of his own blood pounding in his ears pretty much drowning out the rest of the world. He felt suddenly dizzy and nauseous, as if the bottom had just fallen out of his universe and he was free-falling off into oblivion.

It got him, some random thought sparked in his brain. *It got him first.*

"Is he sick like those other people?" he heard Sam ask from behind him, and wondered whether his kid brother had come to the same conclusion he had. "Is he in a coma?"

Jerry nodded. "I'm afraid so, son."

"We tried to pick you boys up at school," Kate explained apologetically, "so it would have been less frightening for you both. But by the time the hospital identified your father, you'd already left."

"So you tossed our apartment?" Dean accused them angrily, still concerned with what would happen if they saw the weaponry littered about the place.

"The super let us in," Kate explained. "We didn't know if you were in there and your dad had told you not to answer the door to strangers."

"He did," Sam confirmed, still not quite edging out from behind Dean.

"Well that's good," Kate nodded her head encouragingly. "But you see why we had to get inside your apartment now, huh?"

Dean just glowered at her, not giving an inch.

"Look, we know how frightening this must be for you," Kate continued, obviously trying her best to comfort the boys. "But everything's going to be okay, I promise. You'll be looked after until your dad gets better."

Dean gritted his teeth. "And what if he doesn't?" he demanded. "None of those other poor bastards in the hospital has gotten better."

Kate sighed. "Well we'll cross that bridge if we come to it, honey."

Flora had warned him. She'd *warned* him and he'd not done anything about it. How had she known? How *could* she have known?

And what if his dad *didn't* get better? He was all Dean and Sam had. They had nowhere to go....

Dean, get a grip, he told himself, taking a deep breath in an effort to stop himself hyperventilating. That wouldn't do anyone any good, least of all Sammy, whose insistent tugging on the back of Dean's jacket suggested he was getting more and more freaked out by the second. He had to get a handle on this situation, control his own fear, if only for Sam's sake. The CPS dudes weren't going to respond to him like an adult if he was screaming the place down like a spoiled brat. Although he really *really* felt like screaming right then.

Taking another deep breath and hooking an arm around Sam's shoulders, he managed to ask, "Can we go see our dad?" in a voice that sounded way calmer than it did in his head. "Can you take us to the hospital?"

"Of course we will," Jerry said kindly. "As soon as you're packed."

Packed?

Dean's hand tightened on Sam's shoulder and the younger boy didn't try to shrug him off.

"Where are we going?" Sam asked quietly.

"And why do we need to pack?" Dean added, alarm bells the size of the Liberty Bell going off in his head.

Kate again appeared sympathetic. "Well, we got your dad's emergency contact list from your school."

Dean nodded. *Okay...*

"And there were only two names on there – we've tried calling them both repeatedly, but got no reply from either. Your uncles, right? Robert Singer and James Murphy?"

Dammit. Bobby and Pastor Jim were working a job together in Alaska....

"Do you have any other relatives?" Kate asked hesitantly. "We couldn't find any listed in your files."

This was bad. This was *really* bad.

We've got nowhere to go....

Dean shook his head slowly. "No relatives," he confirmed, trying to sound stoic and failing miserably when his voice cracked on the last syllable.

Jerry was nodding. "Well, don't worry," he said, pretty unconvincingly in Dean's opinion. "All this means is that you're going to have to be taken to a place of safety as temporary wards of the county." He paused. "You know what I mean by that?"

Sam nodded mutely, even as Dean found himself getting more and more annoyed with this situation, his anger beginning to get the better of his fear at last. "We don't need no 'place of safety,'" he insisted stubbornly. "We can take care of ourselves."

"We don't doubt that, Dean," Jerry insisted, his voice just the wrong side of patronizing. "But you need adult supervision; you're too young to be left here by yourselves."

Sam glanced sideways at Dean, and Dean could read what he was thinking without him having to put it into words. *Dad's been leaving us on our own since you were my age, Dean...*

"So where are we going?" Sam asked tentatively, leaning in to Dean a bit more, like he used to when he was little.

"Foster home," Jerry replied succinctly, and Dean felt as if someone had decided to shove a bunch of rocks in his stomach.

Sam paled visibly and Dean pulled him a little closer.

"You should pack." Kate's suggestion wasn't really a suggestion and Dean knew it.

"How much?"

The social worker managed to keep the smile on her face, but there was a sigh in her eyes. "Enough for a few days," she said lightly. "We can always come back if you need more."

They don't think Dad's waking up.

Dean just looked at her for a second before slowly nodding. "C'mon, Sam."

Sam followed him as he pushed past the two social workers and into their strangely empty apartment.

"You think they looked through our stuff?" Sam asked when they were out of earshot, although Dean figured that wasn't really the question he wanted to ask.

Dean glanced into Dad's room as they passed the open doorway: there was nothing out of place, and certainly no sign of the weapons bag having been moved from under the bed. "I think we'd be looking at a more permanent stay in a foster home if they had," he commented.

"So this *isn't*?" Sam asked hopefully, following Dean into their bedroom.

"Permanent, I mean?" There was a slight tremor in his voice that he was trying manfully to disguise.

Dean smiled tightly as he pulled a couple of duffle bags from their closet. "Dad's gonna wake up," he insisted, hoping to hell he sounded more certain of that than he felt. "You'll see. You think he'd leave us in some friggin' foster home?"

"Dean." Sam could see straight through him and he knew it. "What if – what if he *doesn't* wake up? What happens to us then? What are we gonna do?"

Dean began stuffing clothes into the duffle bags with little regard for creases, or for rolling them as Dad had always instructed him, snagging a couple of their school books as an afterthought before his fingers crept under his pillow for his knife. Somehow he doubted he'd manage to sneak a 9mm past the social workers, but a knife was a definite possibility, and he quickly hid it at the bottom of the duffle underneath his clothes.

Sam made no comment, although his eyes widened slightly.

"Don't worry, Sammy," he said. "It's gonna be okay." He hauled his duffle bag up onto his shoulder before passing the lighter one to Sam.

"How is this going to be okay, Dean?" Sam asked plaintively. "*Nothing* about this is okay!"

"No it's not," Dean agreed, a new determination seizing control of his features. "It's not okay. But I'll tell you one thing," he gritted his teeth and squared his shoulders. "We ain't goin' to no foster home."

"Dean – what...?" Sam's brow crinkled in confusion as he tried to heft the duffle bag, while Dean strode purposefully over to the sash window and threw it open.

"C'mon, Sam," he said, gesturing urgently at the open window.

Sam hesitated for a second. "But we have nowhere to go."

"*Anywhere's* better than a foster home," Dean insisted, offering to give Sam a hand up onto the window ledge. "We go to one of those places, we're never gettin' out."

Sam nodded reluctantly, glancing back into the apartment one last time before allowing Dean to help him clamber up onto the sill.

“Going somewhere, boys?”

Both boys froze at the sound of Jerry’s voice drifting up from the street outside.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Busted,” he muttered, peering out through the open window to where the social worker was standing on the sidewalk, hands on his hips and a slightly less-than-surprised expression on his face.

A ridiculously sunny and obviously fake smile instantly replaced the irritated scowl that had previously flashed across Dean’s face, and he blinked large eyes innocently at Jerry, who continued to stare at him levelly. “Uh – the hospital?” he offered meekly.

“Uh-huh,” Jerry didn’t sound very convinced. “Sure you were.”

**Spalding Regional Medical Center
Griffin, GA
January 1992**

“He looks like he’s sleeping,” Sam observed, running one tremulous finger over the back of his father’s hand, careful to avoid the plastic tube protruding from his vein.

Dean blinked hard, acutely aware of the two CPS workers standing behind them and determined not to let one single tear past his eyelashes, however hard they tried to escape.

Sam hadn’t cried, not once, so *Dean* sure as hell wasn’t going to.

He considered his father’s insensible form thoughtfully – the placid set of his features, the smoothness of his brow; Dean didn’t think he’d ever seen his dad look so peaceful before.

He cast a brief glance over his shoulder, at the other comatose patients filling up the beds the length of the hospital ward, before putting a hand on Sam’s shoulder and squeezing gently.

“Yeah, Sammy,” he agreed quietly. “They all do.”

**St. John’s Hospital
Springfield, IL
Present day**

Bobby had gone for coffee, but Dean wasn’t even sure caffeine was going to do him much good right now.

His dad still wasn’t moving, stretched out on the bed like some barely-breathing statue, the miniscule rise and fall of his chest and the beeping of the heart monitor the only signal that John Winchester hadn’t left the building. Permanently.

The doctors had said it was a good sign he was breathing on his own, but Dean was struggling to see anything “good” about this situation.

“Dammit!”

He startled Sam out of his quiet reverie as he jumped to his feet, causing his chair to scrape noisily on the tiled floor.

“Dean –”

“We can’t just *sit* here, Sam!” he burst out, eating up the room in long, frantic strides. “We’ve got to *do* something!”

“There’s nothing we *can* do, Dean –”

“Yes there is! We can find out what the hell’s wrong with him, what’s *doing* this to him and – and *kill* the damn thing!”

Sam sighed heavily, running a tired hand over his face and through his hair. “Dean, we don’t know that *anything’s* doing this to him!” He turned his attention back to his father’s still form. “He – he just looks like he’s sleeping.”

Dean stopped his pacing. “Yeah,” he said darkly. “That’s what you said last time...”

Griffin, GA
January 1992

The social workers' car smelt like ass, Dean decided, arms folded sullenly across his chest as the Georgia landscape whipped past them, uncaring that his dad was unconscious in hospital and he and Sam were being driven to their doom by a nice black lady in a woolen suit.

Dean chided himself for being overly dramatic: they weren't really being driven to their doom at all, just to a foster home, which was no big deal; and the car didn't really smell like ass, it smelled like oranges.

Still, he was pissed and he was upset and he was damn near terrified out of his mind, so he could think any damn thing he liked in the privacy of his own head. At least his thoughts were his own, no one could take *them* away from him, not like they'd taken every other damn thing besides Sam.

Sam, for his part, had been eerily quiet since the hospital, scrunched up at Dean's side as if the two of them shared a couple of ribs.

Dean didn't remember Sam being this clingy since he was – like – five or something, and he was so wrong-footed by his kid brother's sudden neediness that he was tempted to yell "Christo!" at him just to be sure.

But he didn't think Kate and Jerry would appreciate his checking his brother out for demons, so instead he continued to sit in silence, the only sound the hum of the car's engine and the occasional hitch in Sam's breathing.

He felt his brother tense next to him as Kate pulled the car to a stop outside a big rambling farmhouse surrounded by birch trees. The farmhouse had certainly seen better days – paint peeling from doors and window frames, shutters hanging at crazy angles, tiles missing from the roof and the front garden looking like a jungle.

"Where are we?" Sam asked tentatively, but Dean was pretty sure the kid already knew the answer.

Kate twisted in her seat so that she was looking at the younger brother, her face still radiating kindness and sympathy. "You're going to be staying here for a while, Sam," she said softly.

Sam blinked. "Until Dad gets better?"

Kate and Jerry exchanged a loaded glance, but neither tried to answer.

Instead, Jerry exited the car, coming round to the passenger door nearest Sam and opening it, before bending his head to look back inside at Dean.

"Wait in the car, Dean," he said authoritatively, before smiling encouragingly at the younger boy. "C'mon, Sam. You're with me."

Dean tensed, instantly on the alert as Jerry caught Sam's arm and started pulling him from the car. "Wait – what's going on?" he demanded, catching hold of Sam's other arm and hanging on, as if the poor kid were the rope in a tug of war.

"Dean," Jerry sighed. "Please. Let's make this as easy as we can on your brother, huh?"

Dean straightened, his grip on Sam's arm tightening. "Make *what* easy?"

"Look, I'm sorry," Jerry said, and from the tone of his voice and the set of his shoulders, Dean was pretty sure he was telling the truth about that. "Mrs. Vasilyeva's is the last foster home in town with any space, but she's already taken in several of the kids whose parents have gotten sick..."

"Flora's mom?" Sam asked, and Dean shuddered as he remembered the woman with the scarlet nails who wouldn't leave Dad alone at Sam's open house.

Jerry nodded. "Her name's Natasha. She's a lovely lady – I'm sure you two will get on like a house on fire –"

"Two?" Dean echoed, spine suddenly ramrod straight. "Whaddya mean 'two,' dude?"

Jerry shifted awkwardly, his fingers still twisted in the arm of Sam's jacket and his eyes seemingly unable to make contact with Dean's. "Look, I'm really sorry, boys, but Mrs. Vasilyeva only has room for one more..."

"Wait, what?" It was Sam's turn to sound completely freaked, eyes so big they looked like they might pop right out of his head as it swiveled in Dean's direction. "They can't – I don't want to – Dean, don't let them –" He stopped suddenly, voice choked off in something approaching a sob, and for the first time since they'd arrived home from school that afternoon, Sam looked like he might actually cry.

Dean's voice was deceptively calm in response – surprisingly so, considering he felt like someone had just poured ice water down his back and was gouging out his chest with a rusty spoon. "Sam, you're not going anywhere," he said shortly, eyes never leaving Jerry.

"Dean," the social worker tried to placate him. "He'll be well cared for. Natasha has been looking after kids like you for several years now –"

"Kids like us?" Dean repeated. "What's *that* supposed to mean? We're not *orphans*, we got a dad and an apartment and a life and a *family* and we're not getting split up while we wait for our dad to wake up, not for you, not for anybody."

"Dean, I understand that –"

"No you don't! You *don't!* You couldn't..." His voice thickened slightly. "We're all we've got."

Jerry sighed heavily. "It's just temporary. Soon as another place opens up that can take you both –"

"Where are you taking Dean?" Sam suddenly demanded, obviously trying to match the steel in his big brother's voice with a little of his own mettle.

Jerry looked a little taken aback, but answered all the same. "Group home. For older kids. It's only a couple of miles from here –"

Dean's veneer of forced calm almost threatened to crack a little, but somehow he managed to keep his voice coolly insistent rather than screaming like some punk-ass bitch having a tantrum. "Look, sir?" he said, tone carefully respectful. "I get that you're trying to help us – I do – but I'm not going anywhere without my brother, and he's not going anywhere without me. Understand? That's just the way it's gotta be. He's not leaving my sight. Either find us somewhere we can go together, or take us back home and let us look after ourselves."

"You know we can't do that, Dean," Jerry said, sighing. "It's either this or a family shelter three towns over. You really want that? You'll have to change schools, and I doubt anyone would be willing to drive you over to the hospital to visit your dad..."

Dean set his jaw, reaffirmed his grip on Sam's arm and pulled him firmly back into the car next to him. "Then I guess we've got a drive ahead of us," he said flatly, not even looking at Jerry anymore.

He heard Jerry sigh again, and Kate had climbed out of the car and was standing slightly behind him, shaking her head. "There has to be another way..." she murmured, putting her hands on her hips and turning to look behind her at the dilapidated farmhouse.

Dean followed her gaze, to where Mrs. Vasilyeva was just emerging from the front door, Flora trailing behind her looking less than happy.

"Mrs. Bailey, Mr. Markham," Mrs. Vasilyeva greeted the two CPS workers. "Is everything all right out here?"

She beamed when she caught sight of Sam, still glued to Dean's side in the backseat of the car.

"Sam, right?" she said cheerfully. "I'm Natasha – I met your father at school yesterday didn't I?" Her eyes took on a faraway cast. "He was such a nice man –"

"He still is," Dean snapped, squinting at her as if this was all her fault. "He's not dead."

Mrs. Vasilyeva drew back as if slapped and raised her hands apologetically. "I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to upset you..." She trailed off, looking to Kate and Jerry for some sort of explanation as to what was going on.

"Sam and his brother Dean are refusing to be split up," Jerry informed her. "We told them you only have room for one –"

"Oh, you poor dears!" Mrs. Vasilyeva clapped her hands together, face crumpling in sympathy as she gently cupped a hand to Sam's cheek. "You know I'd take you both if I could," she cooed at him. "But I only have the one spare bed..."

Dean fought the urge to slap her hand away from his brother, but Sammy had got that whole puppy dog thing going on and he didn't want to distract the woman from its mysterious power.

"We could share," Sam suggested eagerly. "We wouldn't mind."

Mrs. Vasilyeva faltered. "Oh I know, sweetie, but my house is already quite crowded –"

"Please, Mrs. Vasilyeva," Sam pressed, not even stumbling over the woman's name. "We'll be really good – you won't even know we're here..."

Dean was distracted from the negotiations for a second by Flora, who was peering out from behind her mother, a look of sheer panic on her face as she shook her head at him urgently.

Dean blinked at her, a really bad feeling beginning to gnaw at his gut. "Sammy, maybe we shouldn't –" he began, but got no further as Mrs. Vasilyeva suddenly broke out into a toothy smile.

"You're a persuasive one, Sam Winchester," she said with a little shake of her head. "If you boys really don't mind sharing –"

"We don't!" Sam assured her, glancing up at Dean and positively beaming at him. "Really, we don't."

"All right then," the woman finally acquiesced, causing Kate and Jerry to heave twin sighs of relief. "I guess we can make room for a couple of little ones."

All too easy, Dean thought in his best Darth Vader voice. Sometimes his little brother's freakish Puppy Dog Power amazed him.

Mrs. Vasilyeva glanced behind her, up at the house, where Dean thought he caught sight of several pale faces pressed to the windows just for an instant; but they were gone again just as suddenly as they'd appeared.

"Besides," the woman continued, her smile slowly becoming something else entirely that Dean couldn't quite identify. "I have a feeling one or two of the other children won't be here much longer anyway..."

Dean wasn't sure what that meant. He wasn't sure he wanted to *know* what that meant.

And just like that, Mrs. Vasilyeva's beaming smile was back firmly in place and she was ushering both boys out of the car, Flora seeming almost on the verge of tears behind her.

"Come, come," Mrs. Vasilyeva said, shooing them up toward the house once they'd hefted their duffle bags up onto their shoulders. "You're just in time for dinner. I hope you boys like beets."

Sam wrinkled his nose and began to follow Mrs. Vasilyeva toward the house, but Dean caught hold of his jacket at the shoulder and pulled him back.

"Don't go running off," he ordered quietly.

For once, Sam obeyed.

* * * *

Mrs. Vasilyeva's house was pretty much the same inside as outside, Dean discovered: dark, low-ceilinged rooms in desperate need of a little paint, furniture old and worn, bare wooden floorboards scuffed and uneven.

Low beams criss-crossed the ceilings making the place seem even smaller and darker, and as the boys passed through the large dining room and on into the kitchen, Dean actually felt like he'd stepped back in time a good couple of centuries.

Mrs. Vasilyeva obviously liked to cook, Dean surmised from the various cooking utensils and copper-bottomed pans strewn around the room, jars full of herbs and spices lining up along every available work surface, and several large pots full of a suspicious-looking purple substance almost bubbling over onto the stove.

One wall of the kitchen was completely dominated by a huge old-fashioned cooking range and the biggest oven Dean had ever seen in his life.

A huge wooden spatula almost as big as he was leaned against one wall, and Dean fervently hoped Mrs. Vasilyeva used it to get bread in and out of the cavernous oven rather than for disciplining the children in her care.

Mrs. Vasilyeva tripped on ahead, leading them up a winding, narrow staircase and onto a many-doored landing which somehow seemed far too long to actually fit inside the house. Dean was reminded of those weird optical illusions where the hallway stretches off into infinity, and he shuddered, despite the overly-warm temperature.

Pale faces peered out at them as they approached each door, the same pale faces Dean had seen at the windows earlier. But as they passed by, each face abruptly disappeared from view, the door slamming shut soundlessly, and again Dean was left wondering whether he'd imagined the whole thing.

About halfway down the corridor, Dean noticed a couple of tiny rooms standing with their doors open, beds stripped down to bare mattresses, shelves bare and empty, empty closet doors hanging open.

Dean frowned. "I thought you only had room for one more kid?" he asked suspiciously, and Mrs. Vasilyeva merely laughed, pulling the two doors closed before bundling the boys into a third empty bedroom.

"Little boys shouldn't ask so many questions." Her voice tinkled merrily as she threw open dingy curtains, allowing what was left of the cold January sun to illuminate the boys' tiny new home.

Well, Dean figured, they'd stayed in worse places.

The bed was low and narrow, and Dean knew he'd probably end up on the floor by morning. Sam had a tendency to starfish, especially when required to share, bony limbs sticking out at ridiculous and unnatural angles until he managed to occupy as much space as was humanly possible for an eight-year-old boy.

The bed linen at least looked clean, unlike many a motel room Dad had ditched them in, and the bare wooden floorboards had a brightly-colored rug thrown over them which detracted a little from the dingy off-white walls and the single bare light bulb dangling from the cracked ceiling.

There was barely space for the bed, let alone the lopsided closet squeezed into the far end of the tiny room, but when Dean considered the alternative he figured they should really count themselves lucky. This or a shelter? Yeah, he knew which he'd choose.

"Dinner's at six sharp," Mrs. Vasilyeva told them briskly, "so you'll have a few minutes to settle in." She patted Sam on the head as she made for the door, and the younger boy didn't push her away despite everything in his body language screaming out that he wanted to.

Grasping the door handle, she turned back suddenly. "I'm sure you'll both like it here," she told them. "I don't insist on many rules..."

Here we go... Dean thought.

She flashed them that simpering smile again before continuing. "All I ask is that you stay out of the kitchen when I'm cooking – don't want little fingers getting burnt or scalded, do we?"

Dean narrowly avoided rolling his eyes.

"And stay away from the basement."

Both boys' ears pricked up, a meaningful glance shooting between them.

"It's a little spooky down there and the light doesn't work too well."

Telling Winchesters to keep away from a scary basement was like telling a flabby cop to lay off the donuts, Dean instantly adding the basement to his "Things To Do" list even as he and Sam chorused, "Yes ma'am," obediently.

"Oh, aren't you boys just adorable?" Mrs. Vasilyeva simpered, pinching both their cheeks, before finally leaving them alone in the room.

Dean grimaced, as soon as the door had closed behind her growling, "Last person who called me 'adorable' got a busted nose. And if she pinches my cheek again she loses a finger."

Sam shrugged, flopping down onto the bed with a sigh as the springs squealed in protest. "She seems okay," he commented, lying back on the bed and staring up at the cobwebs decorating the ceiling.

"I bet that's what they said about Jack the Ripper," Dean returned. "And the Boston Strangler; and Son of Sam..."

"Dean." Sam sat up. "Don't be such a drama queen."

Dean blinked at him. "Says the kid who said we could share a bed so he wouldn't have to be alone in here."

"They were gonna put you in a *group* home, Dean."

Dean had no response for that.

Sam snorted. "Yeah. You can thank me later."

"Fruit basket's in the mail."

"Fruit basket's being a drama queen."

"Shut up, Sam."

* * * *

Dean could count on the fingers of one hand the times he'd sat down for a family meal at an actual dinner table with his dad and Sam.

So this situation seemed all the more surreal, five subdued, nervous-looking, twitchy kids all staring at the two new arrivals as if they'd landed there fresh off the UFO from Planet Zorg.

Flora, conversely, couldn't even seem to look at them as her mother bustled about with plates and bowls and cutlery and pots full of more of that weird-looking purple concoction that had been boiling over on the stove earlier.

The chair at the head of the big wooden table was empty, obviously the place where Mrs. Vasilyeva sat, but there were two other empty chairs at the table, place settings not filled, and Dean noticed the way all of the other kids studiously avoided looking in that direction.

Of the five other kids, only one seemed older than Dean, a tall blonde girl with striking blue eyes he vaguely recognized from the grade above him in school. A younger girl of a similar appearance sat very close to her, leaning in to her in the same way Sam was unconsciously leaning in to Dean, and he figured them straight off for sisters.

Another little girl sat next to them, she was maybe six or seven, pale and twitchy, eyes looking rheumy, as if she was permanently on the verge of tears, and Dean's Big Brother Instinct kicked in forcefully as soon as he laid eyes on her.

The two boys to her left just stared at him as he smiled a little at her and asked, "Hey kiddo, you okay?"

The girl nodded mutely, seemingly even more surprised at Dean speaking to her than the two boys had been.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" he pressed. When she didn't reply, merely continued to stare at him uncertainly, he winked at her conspiratorially. "Secret identity to protect, huh?" he said, causing her to blink back owlishly at him. "I get it."

"She doesn't talk —" one of the boys began, but was quickly cut off when the little girl suddenly whispered,

“April.”

Dean continued to smile encouragingly at her. “Hey April,” he said softly. “I’m Dean. This pain in the ass is my little brother Sammy.”

“Sam,” Sam instantly corrected.

“Short for Samantha,” Dean added. “But don’t tell anyone I told you that. He’s kinda touchy about it.”

Sam scowled at him, but April smiled a little shyly.

Dean took a breath before continuing. “So we’re here ’cause our dad got sick,” he informed no one in particular. “What about you guys?”

Every one of the kids glanced toward the kitchen nervously, the sound of Mrs. Vasilyeva rattling pots and pans seeming to give them the courage to speak.

“My daddy’s sick too,” April said quietly. “I don’t have a mommy.”

Dean’s chest tightened a little. “No, we don’t either,” he offered, smiling sympathetically.

“Our mom,” the older girl chimed in. “She was one of the first to get sick.”

“And your dad...?”

She shrugged and ducked her head. “Just me, Mom and Fliss.”

“Fliss?” Sam echoed.

“Felicity,” the younger of the two girls corrected her sister, much as Sam had corrected Dean earlier. “Shannon’s the only one who calls me ‘Fliss.’”

“That’s what big sisters are for,” the older girl pronounced, grinning. “To make your life miserable.”

“What about you two?” Dean asked the two boys at the end of the table.

“Mikey,” the older of the two, a stocky black kid with short dreadlocks, introduced himself. “My mom –”

“Mine too,” the younger boy interrupted, pushing bright red curls out of his eyes. “I’m Cooper.”

“Hey Cooper.”

Dean glanced around the table a little distractedly before his eyes came to rest on Sam, who was looking back at him, quite obviously having had exactly the same thought as he had: there was a pattern here. An obvious pattern. And it was looking more and more likely that Dad had been putting himself out there as bait for whatever this thing was, clearly hoping to catch it in the act and off it before it could hurt anyone else.

Suddenly a thought struck him. “Hey, Flora?”

The girl looked up for the first time since the Winchesters had come to sit at the table.

“Where’s Donny? That jerk who was hassling you at school. I thought he lived here too?”

Six pairs of eyes turned instantly downward before April glanced furtively at one of the empty chairs.

Flora shrugged and shook her head, lips clamped together tightly.

“So – what?” Dean continued to press, despite the fear he could sense coming off these kids in waves. “He don’t live here anymore?”

Shannon risked a quick glance at him, opening her mouth as if to reply but clamping it tightly shut again when her focus shifted beyond his shoulder, her eyes widening. She shook her head at him minutely, and he turned to look behind him, back toward the kitchen, from where Mrs. Vasilyeva was emerging with baskets piled high with what smelled like freshly baked bread.

She placed the baskets down in front of the children and nodded at the purple stuff already congealing in two big bowls in the middle of the table. “All right, children, eat.”

Sam blinked at her and wrinkled his nose as she ladled some of the foul-smelling stuff into the bowl in front of him. “What is it?” he asked uncertainly.

“Borsht,” Mrs. Vasilyeva replied encouragingly. “Beet soup. Just like my mama used to make when I was your age.”

Hesitantly, Sam raised a spoonful to his lips, making such a face at the taste of it that Dean thought the kid might actually hurl.

As the other children began to help themselves quietly to dinner, Mrs. Vasilyeva turned slightly from the table, one hand suddenly digging into Dean’s shoulder hard enough to cause him to wince as she bent down toward him, her mouth right next to his ear.

He fought the urge to flinch, even as her breath clung to his neck hotly.

“I was kind to you,” she whispered right into his ear. “I let you stay here with your brother even though I *knew* you were going to be trouble.”

Dean tried to turn a little, blinking innocently at her. “I didn’t do anything –” he began to protest, but she silenced him with another painful squeeze of his shoulder.

“Make sure it stays that way,” she warned him, Dean nodding mutely as her voice slipped even lower. “Don’t make me regret my kindness, Dean Winchester.”

Dean swallowed, looking up at her as she pulled away from him, and when she opened her mouth to smile sweetly at him, he swore he saw a metallic glint to her teeth...

* * * *

“Sammy, are you *ever* going to sleep?”

“I guess not, Dean, how about you?”

“Not with your bony elbow in my face I’m not.”

Dean huffed a deep sigh, tracing one delicate cobweb across the ceiling in the moonlight slanting through the gap in the curtains.

Sam turned over onto his back, eyes straying to the same cobweb. “You think Dad’s okay?” he asked at length, voice sounding tiny and far away.

Dean made sure his own voice was rock steady when he confidently replied, “Sure he is. No friggin’ coma’s gonna keep John Winchester out of the fight for long.”

“I hope you’re right,” Sam said. “I don’t like it here – Flora’s mom gives me the creeps.”

Dean hadn’t shared with Sam what he’d seen – what he *thought* he’d seen – at dinner, not wanting to freak the kid out any more than he was already freaked. “Me too,” he agreed at length, pausing before adding, “We wouldn’t even have to *be* here if Bobby and Pastor Jim weren’t both in Alaska right now.”

Sam drew a slow breath. “We don’t have anywhere to go.”

The truth of that statement had never been more terrifying. To either of them.

Dad had few friends – even fewer he’d trust with his boys, and Dean trusted even fewer of those with Sam.

“Dad’s gonna wake up soon,” he promised his brother. “You’ll see. Then he’ll bust us out of here, smoke whatever freaky-ass thing’s doing this, and we’ll be out of this town before you can say ‘chupacabra.’”

Sam sighed. “Yeah. I know...”

Before either of them could add anything further, the midnight quiet was suddenly ripped asunder by a terrified scream, both of them sitting bolt upright as they listened intently to the sound of heavy footsteps on the landing outside, then a loud thud followed by an eerie silence.

Jumping out of bed, Sam on his heels, Dean darted for the door, pulling it open and looking carefully out into the hallway.

April was peering out through the doorjamb of her room opposite, wide-eyed and petrified, and further up the hall Dean could see doors hesitantly cracking open, but closing again almost immediately.

Taking a breath, he stepped out onto the landing, heart pounding wildly as he carefully checked out each of the bedroom doors in turn.

Fliss was standing in the middle of the hallway, shaking and staring at the open door to her sister's bedroom.

Dean approached her carefully from behind, gently putting a hand on her shoulder as he followed her gaze into Shannon's empty room. "Fliss?" he said quietly, eyes drifting to the unmade bed. "Where's your sister?"

Fliss was trembling violently, whole body wracked with sobs. She turned her tear-streaked face up to Dean and shook her head. "She's gone," she managed to jerk out. "She's gone."

Dean's eyes slid to the stairwell, and he gently maneuvered Fliss toward her bedroom. "Go back to your room, sweetheart," he told her. "Close your door and don't come out till I say it's okay. Okay?"

Fliss continued to gaze up at him, nodding as he pushed her into the room. She closed the door just as he'd instructed her, and his eyes locked with Sam's, who was standing on the threshold of their room, just watching him.

Dean inclined his head toward the stairs, and Sam nodded, following behind him closely.

They made their way downstairs slowly and carefully, Dean wishing he'd thought to dig his knife out of his duffle bag as his bare feet hit the cold boards of the kitchen.

A door opened opposite them, a weak light emanating from within, and Dean caught a brief glimpse of lime-covered brick walls and rickety stairs going down to the basement as Mrs. Vasilyeva emerged distractedly.

He pulled Sam back into the stairwell, hoping to hide them both in the shadows as the woman turned to lock the door behind her.

Relieved that she appeared not to have seen them, Dean took a tentative step toward her, trying to work out what she'd done with the key.

Suddenly she paused, back tense and straight, as if sensing the presence behind her.

And then she spun in his direction, growling inhumanly and baring her teeth.

Her *iron* teeth.

Dean grabbed Sam's hand and ran.

St. John's Hospital Springfield, IL Present day

If Dean paced around the room one more time, Sam was pretty sure he was going to deck him then tie him to a chair.

It was a wonder there weren't little grooves worn into the tile floor where Dean had been pacing round and round, backwards and forwards, like some caged animal desperate to find a way out.

Any way out.

"Dean, will you sit down?" Sam grit out through clenched teeth. "You're making me dizzy."

And you're makin' *me* seasick," Bobby added, grunting from the corner nearest the door. "Boy, wearing out your shoe leather ain't gonna get you your daddy better."

Dean halted abruptly right in front of him. "Then what *will*, Bobby?" he demanded. "Cause sitting here doin' abso-friggin'-lutely squat ain't exactly gettin' us anywhere either!"

"Dean –"

"*What*, Sam?" Dean rounded on his brother, barely restrained fury in his dark and stormy eyes. "*What*? We just wait here till he *dies*?"

"No," Sam said calmly. "We wait here till he wakes up –"

"*If* he wakes up, Sam! You heard what the doctors said – they have no freakin' clue what's wrong with him!"

"And neither do we!"

"And you don't have a problem with that?" Dean took a step back, shaking his head angrily. "We need to find out what did this to him, Sam!"

"And how do we do that, Dean?"

Dean squared up to his brother, shoulders set and chin raised. "By figuring out what Dad was hunting, that's how!" His eyes cut immediately to Bobby, his tone lowering slightly. "If it's like last time," he said, a note of pleading in his voice, "If it's like it was in Georgia. If it's the thing he's hunting that did this to him, then –"

"Son." Bobby sighed heavily. "This ain't like last time."

Dean blinked at him. "How do you know that?" he asked, voice cracking slightly. "Bobby..." He broke off, his tone imploring, and Sam heard the words Dean couldn't add: *Please help me....*

Bobby tugged off his ball cap and scraped a hand through his hair. "All I know is your daddy was lookin' into some local coven. Seems they got a rogue witch on their hands. Went a little haywire when her boyfriend ditched her for someone less – uh – wiccan. Started hangin' out at the local Lovers' Lane hexing any guy showed up with a girl in his car."

"So it's a hex?" Dean seized on Bobby's words. "Dad got hexed? Then we need to look for a hex bag –"

"Dean," Sam interrupted, rising to his feet and putting a hand on his brother's arm to still his increasingly agitated movements. "Think for a second. Can you *really* see Dad – our dad – showing up at Make Out Point with some random girl in tow? *Our* dad?"

Dean rolled his eyes in what Sam was pretty sure he thought was a perfect imitation of his younger sibling. "No, dummy, I don't mean maybe they hexed him for necking! I mean maybe they hexed him because he was onto them. Or onto their rogue sister anyway. Witches look out for the rest of the coven, right? What if they thought they were protecting her by hexing him?"

Sam inclined his head slightly. He had to admit, Dean had a point there. "Makes more sense than Mia being behind this," he admitted at length. "Okay, so we need to find the coven."

Dean sighed heavily. "*Finally!*" he burst out, making for the door without any further discussion.

"Wait! Dean – we can't just walk straight into this without a little preparation first! We need to plan our attack – strategize a little! At least sit and think about it for longer than five seconds!"

Dean turned abruptly, the impatience evident in his scowl. "The hell we can't!" he snapped. "These witchy bitches did this to Dad and we're gonna put a stop to it. Right now."

With that, Dean turned and stormed from the room, Sam calling after him before glancing back at Bobby who merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Better get after him, son," the older hunter said. "You want him facin' down a whole coven o' witches the mood he's in?"

"Not really," Sam agreed. "I could do without him getting himself turned into a hamster right now..."

**Vasilyeva house
Griffin, GA
January 1992**

He wasn't being a girl.

He *wasn't*.

No matter what Dean said.

Just because he'd pulled his chair a little closer to his brother's so that his shoulder was in constant contact with Dean's bicep, that didn't make him a girl. And

just because he jumped almost a foot in the air every time he heard a sound from the direction of the kitchen, that didn't make him a girl either. Neither did the fact that he'd not strayed further than five inches from his big brother's side since last night. Not once. He'd even followed Dean to the bathroom and waited right outside the door with his fingers gripping the handle. Just in case. Just in case he caught another glimpse of...

He shuddered, trying not to think too much about it as a loud crash emanated from the kitchen. Every kid at the table started, even Dean; Sam noting his brother's eyes skittering to the open doorway as a string of what sounded like Russian curse words turned the air a distinct shade of blue.

When the noise abated, the kids crowded around the table all turned their attention back to their place settings, each and every one of them doing their level best to avoid looking at Shannon's empty chair.

Fliss seemed to sway a little, like a young tree suddenly bereft of support, her eyes red and puffy, and her hands beginning to shake when Mrs. Vasilyeva emerged from the kitchen with a huge pot of oatmeal.

"Eat up, children!" the woman sang brightly, all traces of the bad humor that had apparently afflicted her in the kitchen having lifted the second she entered the dining room. "Eat, eat!"

She smiled sunnily in Sam's direction, causing him to flinch involuntarily as Dean's whole body went rigid at his side.

But her teeth were perfectly normal, no trace of anything metallic there, not even braces, and Sam began to wonder whether he'd imagined the whole thing.

But Dean had seen it too, hadn't he? Or else why would he have spent the rest of last night sitting on the floor with his back jammed against their bedroom door and his bowie knife clutched in his shaking hands? And Sam was pretty certain he'd been there all night too, because when he woke after the couple of hours' sleep he'd finally managed to grab, Dean had still been in exactly the same position, knuckles white around the handle of the knife, as if he was keeping sentry.

Right now he was watching Mrs. Vasilyeva's every movement like a hawk, one hand jammed in his jeans pocket where Sam was pretty sure he'd secreted his pocket knife before they'd left their room to come down to breakfast.

The woman gave Dean an extra big smile, one hand squeezing his shoulder as she ladled oatmeal into the bowl in front of him. "Eat," she instructed him. "You're too thin," she added, before spinning on her heel and heading back to the kitchen.

Dean's eyes followed her before tracking back to his oatmeal unenthusiastically.

Dean hated oatmeal.

No way he'll eat that, Sam thought, before checking Mrs. Vasilyeva was out of earshot. "Dean?" he whispered urgently, ducking his head so only his brother could hear him. "What are we gonna do?"

"Sam –"

"She had metal *teeth*, Dean!"

"Well she doesn't anymore," Dean observed, eyes still fixed on his oatmeal. He sounded tired and there were dark circles under his eyes. "Eat something, Sammy," he muttered, glancing sideways at his brother. "Need to keep your strength up."

Sam turned his attention to his own breakfast, stirring the stuff lethargically before bringing a hesitant spoonful to his mouth and swallowing uncertainly. As oatmeal went, it wasn't half bad.

Dean took a breath, voice lowered still further. "But you're right," he admitted carefully. "We have to get outta here. We can't just wait for her to pick us off like Shannon – and probably that Donny kid."

Sam considered that. "You think –" he began tentatively. "You think she's the one put Dad in a coma?"

Dean returned his little brother's worried gaze levelly. "I don't know, Sammy," he admitted. "But I know someone who will know. No way we're coming back here once

we're out. I say we ditch school and go to Bobby's. South Dakota's not that far from here. We go there, we wait for him to get back from Alaska. He'll know what to do to fix Dad."

Sam nodded his agreement. "You think you can get us into his house?"

Dean shrugged. "The dogs love us. They won't have a problem. And he keeps a spare house key in that rusted up old Buick out back – for emergencies."

"I'd say this is an emergency."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "Pretty much."

Sam glanced around the table at the other kids, pretty sure Mikey at least had heard what they were talking about. "What about everyone else?" he asked at length.

Dean swallowed, and from the pinched expression on his face, Sam was pretty sure that was a question his brother had been wrestling with himself for a while. He lowered his eyes and made a pretence of stirring his breakfast. "We'll send back help," he said eventually. "When we can. We can't take 'em all."

Sam chewed on his lower lip, but nodded. He and Dean had hitched to Bobby's once before, a couple of years earlier – when Dad had been missing for over a week – and it hadn't been easy, even with only the two of them.

Movement in the corner of his eye made Sam look up suddenly, Mrs. Vasilyeva unaccountably standing right behind them.

He sucked in a breath as her hand again went to Dean's shoulder, squeezing so hard this time he let out a sudden hiss of surprised pain.

Had she heard them?

Sam searched her face for any clue that she had, but her expression remained artfully neutral. She smiled again, teeth white and even, merely repeating the word, "Eat," before adding, "You need to get some meat on your bones, boy."

Dean scowled at her, and Sam didn't even want to think about why a woman with iron teeth would be trying to fatten up his brother.

When Dean hesitated, reluctant spoon halfway between his bowl and his mouth, Mrs. Vasilyeva's thin lips widened into a grin, but the smile didn't seem to reach her eyes. "Come now," she chided him. "It's not so bad. Eat."

Dean's gaze slid up to hers, the first inklings of defiance beginning to sparkle in his eyes.

"Eat," the woman commanded icily, all traces of patient indulgence gone. "Or you're not leaving this house." Her eyes hardened along with her voice before she added, "And neither is your brother."

Dean paled visibly, but he managed somehow to keep his gameface on and his hand steady, scowling at Mrs. Vasilyeva as he brought the spoon up to his mouth. He grimaced as he swallowed, Mrs. Vasilyeva positively beaming at him before finally letting go of his shoulder and patting him on the head.

Dean's scowl deepened and Sam had to admire his brother's self control for resisting the obvious urge to shove her hand away.

"I want to see that bowl empty before you go to school," the woman tossed over her shoulder as she headed back to the kitchen.

"And I want to win the Lottery," Dean muttered under his breath. "Guess we're both gonna be disappointed."

He made a face as he took another spoonful of the oatmeal, causing Sam to roll his eyes.

"Don't be such a baby," the younger brother said. "It's not *that* bad."

"Ugh," Dean commented. "It's bitter as hell."

Sam frowned, swallowing another mouthful. "Tastes okay to me."

"That's because you're a freak who likes *broccoli*," Dean returned, managing to down another mouthful.

He was almost done by the time the other kids had mostly finished eating, and Mrs. Vasilyeva breezed back into the room, handing out brown paper bags full of sandwiches to each of them in turn.

“Very good, Dean,” she cooed over Dean’s shoulder as she glanced down at his nearly-empty bowl. “Make you big and strong, huh?”

Dean’s glower never faltered. “Quit talking to me like I’m *four*, lady,” he muttered, although only loud enough for Sam to hear.

Mrs. Vasilyeva pinched at his upper arm suddenly, and he yanked it away from her, hand going straight for the knife in his pocket.

She tutted at him and shook her head. “All skin and bone,” she said. “Anyone would think your father never fed you.”

Dean looked as if he was about to launch into a suitable retort, but before he could get started his eyes seemed to slide out of focus and he began to sway a little in his seat.

“Dean?” Sam queried, alarm seeping into his gut. “You okay?”

“Come, come, children!” Mrs. Vasilyeva clapped her hands together, turning her attention away from Dean as if nothing was happening. “Let’s go. You’ll miss the school bus!”

The children began to rise from the table, chairs scraping back noisily, dirty dishes clattering as the table was cleared.

But Dean didn’t move, all color draining completely from his face as a cold sheen of sweat gathered on his forehead.

“Dean?” Sam repeated a little more urgently, his hand on his brother’s shoulder as tremors began to wrack the older boy’s body. “Dean, what’s wrong?”

“Don’t – feel – so – good,” Dean managed to rasp out, before his eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out altogether, despite Sam’s best efforts toppling off his chair and landing in a heap on the dining room floor.

“Dean!” Sam was instantly on his knees at his brother’s side, desperately trying to remember everything Dad had ever taught them about first aid – pulse, breathing, airway – all seemed okay, but Dean wasn’t waking up, his eyes screwed shut as he lay insensible on the floor.

Sam looked up, panicked, unsure what to do, finding himself looking up at Flora, whose face was pale and pinched, tears welling in her big blue eyes.

“Now now, let’s see, let’s see.” Mrs. Vasilyeva strode briskly through the little knot of nervous children who had all frozen in place, eyes locked on Dean’s unconscious form. She crouched down next to Sam and placed her hand on Dean’s forehead calmly, as if this was an everyday occurrence in her household. She “tsked” to herself a couple of times before smiling encouragingly at Sam. “His temperature’s a little high,” she told him. “But I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. He’s probably just coming down with something.” She patted Sam’s arm gently. “I told him he was too thin. No resistance to coughs and colds.”

Sam blinked wide, frightened eyes at her, desperate for some reassurance, if only from her. “He’s gonna be okay though, right?”

“Of course!” Mrs. Vasilyeva assured him confidently. “Don’t worry, little one. I’ll take good care of him – keep him home with me for the day. He’ll be fine here while you get yourself to school.”

If it was possible, Sam’s eyes widened still further. “What? No!” he protested. “I’m not leaving him!” *I’m not leaving him with you...* “Please, can I stay home too?” Sam wasn’t above begging. “Please? That way I – I can take care of him and you won’t have to bother –”

“Oh, it’s no bother!” Mrs. Vasilyeva assured him, abruptly scooping Dean up off the floor as if he weighed next to nothing, one arm under his knees, the other supporting his back so that his head lolled against her shoulder. “We can’t have you missing school, now can we?” she added. “Wouldn’t want you getting yourself into trouble.”

Sam tried to think of a suitable protest as he followed her into the living room, where she deposited Dean on a big square couch with patches sewn all over the

threadbare covering. She made a show of making him comfortable, stroking his hair before turning back to Sam, her expression completely unruffled.

"Look alive, little one!" she instructed him. "Don't want to miss your bus."

Sam just stood there looking at her, trembling a little bit, some from anger but mostly from fear. He didn't want to leave Dean, but he wasn't sure what else he could do, especially as Mrs. Vasilyeva seemed insistent he go to school. "Please," he managed to beg eventually, tears threatening to well up and blind him. "Please let me stay with him. I'll be good – you won't even know I'm here –"

"Sam."

There was iron in her voice, even if Sam could no longer see any in her mouth.

He nodded reluctantly, a thousand uncomfortable thoughts clamoring for attention in his freaked out brain, not least of which was the admonishment, "*Dean would never leave you.*"

He leaned down and laid a hand against Dean's burning cheek. "Don't go anywhere without me," he whispered in his brother's ear. "I'll be back before you know it. I promise."

He backed away from his brother, eyes locked on Mrs. Vasilyeva until he found his way back into the dining room, snagging his book bag and taking a deep shuddering breath before unwillingly following the other kids out into the cold January morning.

April nudged up against his arm as they navigated the overgrown garden, her eyes almost as wide as Sam's and her voice laced with fear. "He's gonna be okay, isn't he?" she asked tremulously, biting her lower lip as a single tear tracked down her cheek.

Sam took a breath. "Sure he is," he said, sounding a lot more certain than he felt; sounding a lot more like *Dean* than he felt. He remembered all the times he'd asked his brother the same question – when Dad came back injured from a hunt – even before Sam had known that's how he'd been injured – and he remembered Dean's constant reassurances that everything was going to be okay, even when Dad's clothes were soaked through with blood and he could hardly stand. He inclined his head down toward April and gave her his best approximation of Dean's encouraging smirk. "No stupid cold's gonna keep Dean Winchester out of the fight for long."

Cooper was suddenly at his other shoulder. "Did she do something to him?" he asked, voicing the question Sam had been pondering himself since Dean collapsed.

"He said his oatmeal tasted funny..." Sam trailed off. Maybe she *had* heard them. Maybe she'd heard Dean say they weren't coming back... Maybe she'd put something in his oatmeal....

"It's not her usual style, man," Mikey observed, and Sam looked up at him sharply.

"What d'you mean?" he asked urgently. "Mikey? What *is* her usual style?"

Flora bumped past them before the older boy could answer, and when he looked over at her he realized she was wiping tears from her cheek.

"Flora...?"

But she was already running for the school bus, and didn't look back.

Springfield, IL

Present day

"Hunters," the young woman said it as if it were a curse word.

"Witches," Dean returned, squaring up to her and doing his damndest to stare her down – despite her being about a foot shorter than he was.

"So now we've got the introductions out of the way," Sam interjected, nodding his head beyond the young woman's shoulder and into the small trailer upon whose threshold they were standing. "Mind if we come in?"

The girl considered them cautiously, wary of Sam's size and Dean's scowl and not seeming entirely sure what to make of Bobby. She ran her fingers through her short spiky hair before finally throwing open the door with a huff. "Your funeral."

The smell of vanilla and cinnamon and – was that *pot?* – drifted toward them as they entered the room, cloying and sickly, and Dean was pretty sure he was going to have a killer headache by the time he got out of the place.

There were four of them in all, the short one joining her sisters to sit in a tiny circle in the center of the trailer. Each of them was in her mid-twenties, and they all looked perfectly normal – not a wart or a black fingernail in sight; a couple of them were even vaguely hot, Dean observed – for freakin' witches.

"So what the hell did you do to our dad?" he demanded without preamble, hands on his hips as the witch who had initially allowed them into the trailer screwed her face into a hostile frown.

"Give us a clue, buddy," she growled. "Who's your freakin' dad? We're not freakin' mind readers!"

Dean blinked at her, slightly taken aback by the sound of something suspiciously similar to his own voice coming out of a woman's mouth. "Just *freakin'* witches," he managed, matching the girl's growl.

"John Winchester," Sam interceded before there could be bloodshed. Or before the witch bitch turned Dean into a toad or something.

I'd be a friggin' smokin' hot toad, Dean found himself thinking, if only to keep from punching the tiny woman's lights out.

"Who the hell is John Winchester?" she demanded, just as one of the other witches – one of the hot ones, Dean noted approvingly – suddenly began to nod her head in recognition.

"That other hunter," she said, sharing a dark look with her sisters. "Tall, dark and scary as crap, right?"

"Looked like a bug crawled up his butt and died there," the first witch nodded, remembering.

"That's the fella," Bobby agreed, garnering a "*Dude!*" look from Dean. Bobby shrugged. "Pretty accurate description if ya ask me."

"Well no one asked you," Dean pointed out shortly, turning back to the coven. "And you guys still haven't told me what the hell you did to him."

"Look, pretty boy –" the smaller witch got to her feet menacingly – well as menacingly as a five foot nothing girl in a Whitesnake t-shirt could possibly be – but the third witch silenced her with a hand on her arm.

"Deanna –" she warned, causing Sam to snort loudly and very unsubtly.

Dean's jaw tightened. "Shut up, Samantha," he snapped, not even looking at his brother.

"But Angie –" Deanna began to protest, but Angie had risen to her feet too and was making a shushing gesture with her hand.

"This is all about Lisa, right?" She addressed her question to the hunters before drawing her hand over her forehead in exasperation. "Bad enough she draws attention to us from the cops – *them* we can deal with – but then she has to bring hunters down on us too. It's just not the kind of advertizing we need, okay?"

"We've got her back under control now," the second witch assured them. "No more running off to hex horny young men, we promise."

"Jeannie's telling you the truth," the fourth woman added. "We know how to keep each other in line. It would help if you reminded the rest of your hunter friends of that." She pushed a lock of bright red hair out of her eyes. "So we don't get any more of your kind nosing around."

"And we should help you *why?*" Dean demanded.

Deanna lunged forward again. "So's I don't turn that pretty face of yours into one big ol' bucket of puss, that's why!"

"Dee!" The fourth woman rose to her feet.

"Izzy?" Deanna returned, grimacing, before turning back to Dean who was suddenly in her face, looming over her like he wanted to do her imminent and extensive damage.

"Bring it on, sister!" he taunted the diminutive witch, and this time Sam had to physically interpose himself between the two of them.

"Dean! Enough!"

Dean narrowed his eyes, but backed off, his female counterpart doing the same reluctantly.

"Look, believe us or don't believe us," Jeannie said. "Whatever's wrong with your dad, it's nothing to do with us. By the time he got here, we'd – uh – already shown Lisa the error of her ways."

She inclined her head toward a silver cage in the corner of the trailer, where a green and yellow parrot suddenly cawed, "Sorry. Sorry. Error of my ways."

Dean froze, Sam raising his eyebrows as Bobby began to chuckle softly.

"You ladies are gonna turn her back though, right?"

"Turn me back, turn me back," Lisa the parrot agreed.

Izzy humphed. "Eventually," she said. "When she's learned her lesson."

"Learned my lesson," Lisa cawed.

"This is how we stay under the radar," Angie said. "By keeping a low profile. By not drawing attention to ourselves. Bad enough Lisa brought hunters down on us in the first place, so why the hell would we want to antagonize you guys any further by hurting one of your own?"

Dean had to admit, albeit grudgingly, that that kind of made a sense.

Sam sighed heavily. "So if it wasn't you guys, what the hell put our dad into a coma?"

"He's in a coma?" Jeannie queried.

Sam nodded. "And now we have even less of an idea what put him there."

Jeannie shrugged. "Hell, if he's only in a coma, why don't you ask him?"

Dean blinked at her. "What part of 'coma' don't you understand, lady?"

"No, wait a second," Bobby hushed him, nodding. "Now why the hell didn't I think o' that?"

"Bobby?" Sam frowned at him, which was a relief, because Dean was seriously beginning to wonder whether his I.Q. had dropped a couple of points during this conversation.

"We'd offer to help," Izzy added, jerking her thumb toward the parrot. "But Lisa's kinda our go-to girl for this sort of thing."

"Go-to, go-to," Lisa agreed.

"*What* sort of thing?" Dean demanded, losing what little patience he had left.

"Don't worry," Bobby winked at the witches, ignoring Dean completely. "I know someone else who can help us..."

**Vasilyeva house
Griffin, GA
January 1992**

Sam couldn't ever remember moving as fast as he did when the school bus finally pulled to a stop and he jumped out, running for Mrs. Vasilyeva's house as if the Devil himself was on his tail.

"Dean?" he yelled the second he was through the front door, pausing only briefly before darting into the living room, where he'd last seen his brother laid out on the couch. "Dean!"

The couch was empty, no sign that Dean had ever been there, and Sam spun on his heel, sneakers squeaking on the wooden floor as he raced for the stairs.

"Sam?" he heard Mrs. Vasilyeva's voice from the kitchen, but ignored her, taking the stairs two at a time and skidding out onto the landing before making a headlong dash for his and Dean's room.

"Dean!"

He shoved open the door, pretty much insensible to the fact that his big brother might be sleeping, just desperate to hear Dean's voice, to know he was okay.

"Dean?"

The bed was empty, and panic began to gnaw at Sam's insides as he swept his gaze wildly about the room. Dean's duffle was gone. And his jacket. And the few school books and clothes he'd unpacked. All of it was gone, Sam's duffle sitting by itself on the floor, only his clothes hanging in the closet.

"Dean?" His voice was smaller, his guts constricting. Dean had to be here. He *had* to be here....

Turning, he ran back down the hall to the stairs, again taking them two at a time and coming to a halt in the kitchen, where Mrs. Vasilyeva turned from her position over a big pot bubbling on the stove. She had a handful of weird-looking herbs which she threw into the pot before wiping her hands on her apron and approaching Sam.

"Where's Dean?" Sam demanded. "What did you do with him?"

Mrs. Vasilyeva bent down toward him, reaching out a hand to brush his cheek, but he stepped backwards, out of her range, almost crashing into Flora who was hovering behind him.

Mrs. Vasilyeva seemed genuinely distressed, wringing her hands together and biting her lip. "Sam, I'm so sorry," she began. "I tried to stop him –"

Sam remembered passing out once when he got bit by a stray dog on the way home from school and Dad had to take him to the hospital for a tetanus shot. He felt that same strange buzzing in his ears now, his vision tunneling until all he could see was Mrs. Vasilyeva, and his legs threatened to buckle right out from under him.

"Tried to stop him what?" he asked in a small voice, dreading the woman's answer.

"I was in the garden hanging out the laundry," Mrs. Vasilyeva told him sorrowfully. "Your brother – I took my eye off him for ten minutes, maybe. Ten minutes! And – and – when I came back inside he was gone – took everything he owned with him and just – just ran away." She put a gentle, steadying hand on Sam's shoulder as he began to sway slightly, much as Fliss had at breakfast. "He must have been faking getting sick this morning," she added. "It was just a distraction so I wouldn't send him to school. So he could run away. So he could run away from *us*."

She seemed to be including Sam in that pronoun, and his fear and panic quickly began to burn away into scandalized anger. "What do you mean, 'us?'" he burst out. "He'd *never* run away from *me*! And – and if he was going to run away, he'd take me with him! He wouldn't leave me! He *wouldn't!*" Sam's eyes began to brim over, hot tears running down his cheeks as he tried to figure out what had happened – where Dean had gone. Where Dean had gone *without him*.

Mrs. Vasilyeva ran a hand over his hair comfortingly. "Oh Sam," she said softly. "You can't expect a boy Dean's age to take care of you forever. He's not your dad, after all. He's just a kid. Kids are selfish. They do what's best for *them* and very rarely consider anybody else. Your brother's obviously been planning this since you two got here."

"No," Sam shook his head vehemently. "Dean wouldn't do that. He wouldn't leave without me. He fought to *stay* here with me when they tried to split us up! Why would he do that if he just wanted to *leave*?"

"Oh sweetie." Mrs. Vasilyeva wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into a hug, and although at first he resisted, eventually he just collapsed bonelessly into her embrace.

How could Dean do this? How could he *leave* him? Did he do something wrong? Did he do something to upset his brother? He felt his tears drip onto Mrs. Vasilyeva's

shoulder and watched them soak into her dress and for some reason he couldn't bring himself to pull away from her.

Dean had left him.

Dean had left him.

How could he *do* that? How could he be so *selfish*? Mrs. Vasilyeva was right – kids *were* selfish, and Dean had just proved it. He'd seen a way to get out of here and he'd taken it. Probably hadn't even considered *Sam*.

Well screw him. If that's the way he wanted it, screw him. Sam wasn't going to cry anymore. Dean shouldn't have left, and Dad would kick his ass from here to Jupiter when he found out. *Then* he'd be in trouble. When Dad woke up. *If* Dad woke up. If Dad could even *find* him.

What if Dad never woke up and Dean never came back? What would Sam do then? He'd never been alone before. Even when Dad had been gone for weeks at a time, Dean was always around. Dean was always there. What was Sam supposed to do without him?

Flora wiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater.

Why was she crying? Just because Dean had taken off? Just because Dean had taken off and left them behind?

Sam shook his head, finally pulling away from Mrs. Vasilyeva and considering her suspiciously. Last night, she'd had iron teeth. Sam was sure of it. And so was Dean. No way Dean would leave his little brother here on his own with her. In danger.

No. Freakin'. Way.

Sam was so stupid! How could he have even *considered* that? That Dean would leave him here. Hell, that Dean would leave him *anywhere*. It just wasn't in his big brother's programming. "Look out for Sammy," that was the one thing Dad always insisted upon, and Sam could never *ever* remember Dean not taking that responsibility seriously, sometimes ridiculously so.

No. Dean wouldn't have left without him. Not even to go get help. If he was so eager to ditch him then he wouldn't have held on so hard when the CPS guy had tried to split them up.

No. Something else was going on here. Something else had happened. Something had happened to *Dean*. He could be in danger. He could be... wherever the other kids were who'd gone missing from Mrs. Vasilyeva's house. He could be....

No. Don't think it don't think it don'tthinkitdon'tthinkit...

Sam had to find his brother.

Before it was too late.

* * * *

"Sammy?"

Dean's head hurt like a bitch.

Something cold and hard was pressing against his cheek and it was uncomfortable and almost painful but somehow he just couldn't bring himself to move.

His head was too heavy.

"Sammy?" He said the name a little louder, not entirely sure where he was or *when* he was or how he got here or what the hell had happened to him.

But worse than all that, he had no idea where his brother was.

He blinked, and his eyelids felt too heavy for his eyes, and even when he was pretty sure he had his eyes open he couldn't see a damned thing.

The something cold and hard pressing against his cheek was cold and hard against his hand too, and he pushed against it, somehow managing to lift his head so it was no longer pressed against the cold hard something. *Floor*, a distant part of his brain told him. *You're lying on the floor, numbnuts.*

“Sammy?” He said the name again, this time not really expecting an answer but praying to anybody listening that he might hear his little brother’s voice calling out for him.

Silence.

And cold hard floor.

It was stone, he realized, managing to lift his heavy, heavy head a little higher, blinking in the dingy half-light and putting his hand out in front of his face to push against the blur of grayness which seemed to be blocking his vision.

Another cold hard something.

But this time it was metal.

And it was vertical.

And it was bar-shaped.

Bars?

There were metal bars two feet from his face.

He remembered going with Pastor Jim to collect his dad from the county jail once. All a big misunderstanding. Unregistered handgun under the driver’s seat when he got pulled over for speeding. No concealed carry permit.

Dean was pretty sure he was too young to have been tossed into the county lock-up.

He blinked a couple more times, the gray blurs streaking vertically across his field of vision slowly coming into focus, and it didn’t take him too long to realize he was surrounded by the things. Gray blurs that were metal bars. All around him.

Cage.

Sonofabitch. He was in a freakin’ cage.

A *four feet square* freakin’ cage.

From somewhere, he found the strength to lift his eyes and look up.

Same story. Bars maybe a foot above his head. Not even high enough to allow him to stand.

Crap.

Dad was gonna *kill* him.

Dad. Sam. Coma.

Iron teeth...

Oh. Crap.

“Sammy?”

His panic level spiked as his eyes began to adjust to the dingy light around him. There was cold brick underneath him, brick walls surrounding him, lime covering the parts he could manage to focus on.

And other cages.

He was in a basement.

In a cage.

And he wasn’t alone.

Suddenly, he was completely alert, body taut and rigid as he fingers grasped at the metal bars all around him. He could see at least seven or eight other cages in the gloomy basement, and was suddenly aware of soft breathing noises around him that weren’t his own.

And someone crying.

It wasn’t him crying.

He was pretty sure it wasn’t him crying.

It was Shannon who was crying.

She was sitting in the cage opposite him, her knees pulled up to her chin, back pressed against the cold brick wall behind her, a weak shaft of light illuminating her pale face from a skylight set into the wall above Dean’s head. She was rocking, head on her knees, sobbing softly. He thought he caught the name “Fliss” but nothing else.

“Shannon?” he whispered, glancing further into the room, at the dark shapes inhabiting the other cages.

He recognized that kid Donny from the cage next to Shannon's; he looked okay, but his eyes were closed and he was leaning his head back against the wall behind him.

There was another little girl, maybe Sam's age, in the cage next to Dean. She was curled up on the floor asleep, face buried in her arms. Beyond her, he could just make out a couple of other kids, both either sleeping or unconscious, and a third who wasn't moving and was so pale Dean wasn't even sure he was alive. None of the kids looked particularly healthy, and Dean figured they'd probably been here a while judging by the state of them.

He began to mentally count the kids off on his fingers, trying to factor in the two empty rooms and wondering how long this had been going on and how many children were down here. How many children had *been* down here but weren't anymore.

Because he had no doubt where he was.

The basement. The one place Mrs. Vasilyeva had forbidden them to go.

He remembered the oatmeal. The funny taste. Passing out on the floor. Sam's face. He'd looked so scared... But at least he wasn't here. Sam wasn't here. Which meant maybe he was still safe somewhere. Still up in the house with... *her*.

He swallowed.

"Shannon!"

The girl looked up suddenly, as if she'd not heard him call her the first time.

"Dean?" she whispered shakily. "That you?"

Dean nodded. "Live and in person," he managed to croak, his throat feeling scratchy and sore. "I think the bitch poisoned me."

"Is Fliss okay?"

Dean nodded. "Last time I saw her. I hope she's with Sam someplace safe..." He trailed off, not wanting to go there. "What's going on?" he asked at length. "How'd you end up down here?"

Shannon sniffed loudly, wiping her face on her sleeve. "She –" she stammered. "Her teeth –"

"I know," Dean tried to comfort her. "It's okay."

"No it's not," Shannon disagreed vehemently. "She only brings you down here if she's going to – going to –" She broke off again, hiding her face on her knees, shoulders shaking with renewed sobbing.

"She brought you down here last night?" Dean tried to regain the girl's attention. "Shannon? Huh?"

She looked back up at him, nodding slightly. "I woke up and she was standing over my bed and her *teeth*." She shuddered. "She put something over my face. It smelled funny. And when I woke up, I was here. That's what she does. She brings them *all* down here."

"What for?" Dean asked.

"Supper," Donny's voice drifted from the darkness, and Dean froze.

He was saved from querying Donny's cryptic remark by the sudden sound of keys jangling and a door creaking open, and even the kids he'd thought to be sleeping or unconscious – or dead – scooted to the backs of their cages, cowering in the darkness, their arms thrown over their faces in terror.

"She's coming," the little girl in the cage next to Dean whispered.

Dean stiffened, fingers gripping the bars of his cage so tightly they began to turn numb.

Mrs. Vasilyeva entered through the open door, darkness seeming to follow her into the room like a cloak.

Maybe it was the odd lighting, Dean told himself, but her eyes looked different somehow, *wrong*; tiny, black and beady, too close together and too close to her long, beaked nose. Her skin seemed thin and pale like old paper, and her hair had come

loose from its tidy bun and now hung around her shoulders like a dark halo of wire wool.

And her teeth....

They glinted in the light from the skylight.

Glinted metal and cold.

Iron.

Her feet made no sound as she walked into the basement, the door closing behind her seemingly of its own volition, and she peered first into Shannon's cage and then into Dean's.

Finally, Dean let go of the bars, scooting backwards as she inserted a key into the lock in the door of his cage, pulling it open and reaching in toward him.

"Fresh meat," she hissed, her voice at least an octave deeper than the last time Dean had heard it. "Mmm, you're going to taste just lovely, aren't you my darling?"

Dean backed as far away from her as he could get, trying desperately to push her off of him as long bony fingers reached for his arms, her nails claw-like as one hand snagged the fabric of his shirt while the fingers of her other hand encircled his wrist and pulled.

With his free hand he managed to grab hold of the bars at the back of the cage, trying to hold on with every last bit of strength he had left in him.

But she was inhumanly strong, and even as Dean felt his fingers begin to lose their grip on the bars, he suddenly realized that "inhuman" was probably the right word.

Whatever Mrs. Vasilyeva was, human she most definitely was not.

"Get away from me you psycho bitch!" he yelled at the top of his voice, as Mrs. Vasilyeva gave a sudden sharp tug and his fingers slipped completely from the bars so that she was dragging him from the cage with both hands.

"You need to learn some manners, boy," Mrs. Vasilyeva hissed into his ear as she yanked him to his feet in front of her. "Need to learn some respect for your elders."

At first he thought she was grinning. Then he realized she was baring her teeth at him.

Her iron teeth.

Crap.

"Get your freaky hands off me right now you crazy-assed witch!" he screamed, clawing at her bony arms even as she yanked him closer to her. "Get off!"

Flesh came away in his hands, and he could only stare at it, Mrs. Vasilyeva's almost skeletal arms reaching around him, pulling him toward her before wedging him back against the cage so he couldn't move.

Oh crap oh crap oh crap....

He could feel her breath on his cheek as she lowered her face toward him.

This isn't happening. You're gonna wake up soon....

He screwed his eyes shut.

Then her teeth sank into his neck.

And everything went white.

It was like nothing he'd ever felt before in his life, all his strength ebbing from him in one mad rush, and he began to tremble, wobbling uncertainly on his feet even as she kept him upright, his back pressed against the cage, her claws digging into his upper arms as her teeth continued to gnaw at his neck.

"*Not a vampire,*" a tiny voice in the back of his head insisted. "*Vampires don't exist...*"

He wasn't entirely sure if he'd passed out again, but suddenly her eyes were inches from his own, the size of saucers and black as midnight, her teeth glinting coldly as his blood dripped from each sharp point.

"*Not a vampire,*" his head insisted. "*Don't exist. Something else.*"

From somewhere he remembered the Shtriga, bent over Sammy, sucking out his life force.

And then she was lifting him right off his feet and tossing him bonelessly back into his cage, slamming the door shut and grinding the key in the lock with an air of finality that made him tremble.

"Mmm, delicious," she said, smacking her lips as she gazed at him through the bars of his new prison. "So much sweeter than I would have imagined..."

Dean couldn't even get a snarky response out past his lips, his whole body feeling like it was in imminent danger of shutting down completely. All he could do was lie there in a heap on the floor, looking up at her as she slowly walked along the row of cages, peering in at each occupant in turn.

When she arrived at the cages furthest away from Dean, she made a tutting noise, as she had when she'd been admonishing Dean for being too thin at breakfast. Was that only this morning? It seemed days ago.

"Not much left in you two," she commented, poking her long fingers in through the bars of first the cage containing the little boy Dean had previously suspected might have expired, and then the one occupied by the older girl next to him, who had also barely moved since Dean had arrived. "I doubt I'd even squeeze a snack out of either of you. Still, not so hungry for juice now. In the mood for meat. Good thing I turned the oven on..."

She turned away from the two sick kids, ambling over to a long dark counter opposite, where she picked up a couple of huge butchers knives which she proceeded to sharpen noisily against each other.

Her eyes trailed back to the barely-conscious youngsters as her mouth twisted into a grin, once again revealing her cruel metal teeth.

"Roast or casserole?" she muttered to herself. "Maybe a nice pot pie..."

St. John's Hospital Springfield, IL Present day

"So that was a total waste of time."

Dean was back to pacing his father's hospital room, and Sam was back to wanting to throttle him.

"At least we know now that it wasn't the thing Dad was hunting caused this," the younger brother pointed out, gesturing at his father's too-still form.

Dean grunted. "If we believe those friggin' witches."

"No reason not to believe 'em," Bobby put in, scratching his earlobe as he considered his fallen comrade at arms. "I told you this wasn't like '92."

Dean sighed, raking a hand through his hair before slumping down in the chair next to Sam. "Then what, Bobby?" For a brief instant he sounded almost lost and more than a little afraid; and then the shutters came slamming back down and he retreated to his familiar comfort zone of "pissed off at the world in general." "He's still in a coma," he pointed out, clenching his teeth in an obvious attempt to rein in his anger. "And we still don't know what put him there. What the hell do we do now?"

"Quit your bellyachin' for one," Bobby chided him, his quota of patience obviously used up for the day. Both Dean and Sam cast surprised looks in his direction, and he merely smiled placidly at them, as if he was the only person in the room who was in on the joke. "Don't you boys worry, now," he said. "I got help on the way."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "What help?"

"Why me, of course." A familiar voice emanated from the direction of the doorway. "Who else d'you think Bobby Singer would drag across three states to give your hard-headed daddy a talking to?"

"Missouri?" Sam was on his feet so fast he knocked his chair over, Dean picking it up for him as the younger brother charged over to Lawrence's most renowned psychic and enveloped her stout frame in a heartfelt bear hug, a broad smile lighting up his face. "Oh my God, Missouri, it's so great to see you!"

Missouri Moseley returned the hug with added interest before pulling away from him slightly and peering up at him. "Sam Winchester, did you get another foot taller since the last time I saw you?"

Sam grinned at her sheepishly, cheeks dimpling. "I think I'm maybe done growing, Missouri," he assured her, and she patted his arm affectionately.

"I should hope so – any taller and you'd be a danger to low-flying aircraft!"

She returned his smile warmly before her gaze fell on Dean, who was hanging back a little way trying to be cool, especially after witnessing Sam making such a doofus out of himself.

Sure, Dean was as happy to see Missouri as his brother was, but it didn't mean he had to act like an over-excited six foot four inch Labrador puppy to prove it.

"Well there's the other one," Missouri said, letting go of Sam and approaching his brother. "Where one goes the other's sure to follow, huh?"

Dean shrugged nonchalantly. "Can't get rid of him no matter how hard I try."

Missouri put a hand to his cheek before wrapping her arms around him and pulling him into an embrace that threw him more than slightly off balance – both literally and figuratively.

He allowed her to hug him for a second, almost able to convince himself he wasn't hugging her back, although that pretty much wasn't the case. When that got to be too chick-flick for him he tried to pull away from her a little self-consciously, but she held him fast, looking up into his eyes for a moment before replacing her hand on his cheek and lowering her voice so only he could hear her. "He's gonna be okay, sugar. You just trust me on that. You gotta quit worrying yourself, all right?"

Dean blinked at her, unsure whether she was reading the expression on his face or – reading *him*. He fidgeted a little under her scrutiny before nodding ever-so-slightly.

"Okay then." Missouri released her hold on him before tilting her head to one side and squinting up at him, a frown crinkling her brow. "Boy, why you wanna go cut your hair so damn short?" she asked, only allowing Dean time to perform his best impersonation of a goldfish before adding, "Makes your ears stick out. Not that you're not still as ridiculously handsome as you ever were, mind you."

"Thought you said I was goofy-lookin'?"

"Baby, all snot-nosed four-year-olds are goofy-lookin' far's I'm concerned. You boys just lucky you got those damn fine Winchester genes workin' for ya! Speaking of which..." She turned to the still form on the bed before glancing up at Bobby. "What the hell he done got himself into this time, Bobby?" she asked, shaking her head like some disapproving aunt.

"Good to see you too, Missouri," Bobby returned with an arch of his eyebrow.

"Can you help him?" Dean interrupted, unconsciously making himself an anxious presence at Missouri's shoulder. "The witches said we had to ask *him* what was wrong with him –"

"Witches?" Missouri looked at each of the hunters in turn.

"Long story," Sam assured her.

"Crazy-ass pot-smoking witches," Dean clarified, as if Missouri had asked.

"Probably trying to give him monster-sized boils and wound up putting him into a coma instead."

"Dean, they said they had nothing to do with it –" Sam began to remonstrate.

"Since when do we believe a word that comes out of a *witch's* mouth, Sam?"

"You know, a couple hundred years ago, I'd have been considered as a witch and burnt at the stake," Missouri pointed out. "You wanna go tossing *me* out on my ass too?"

Dean took a breath, finally lowering his eyes and shaking his head like a naughty schoolboy. Which was the effect Missouri *always* seemed to have on him. "No, ma'am," he confessed meekly.

“Good,” Missouri said. “Cause you even tried it I’d kick your scrawny little behind from here to Hollywood – where you and that pretty face of yours belong.”

Dean could feel the tips of his ears burning. “You say the nicest things.”

“And almost half of ’em are true,” Missouri agreed. “I’ll leave you to figure out which half.”

She turned her attention to John then, moving to his bedside and taking one large hand in her own. “John Winchester,” she said, shaking her head. “Why we gotta always meet under crappy circumstances?”

“You can help him though?” Dean prodded once again. “Right? Missouri?”

Missouri nodded sagely. “I believe so,” she pronounced. “Just gonna take some time is all. But don’t you worry – I may have trouble getting though your daddy’s thick skull when he’s conscious, but comatose? Not a problem...”

Vasilyeva house – basement

Griffin, GA

January 1992

“Where’d she go?” Dean asked weakly, trying to draw himself up onto one elbow but failing pretty damn spectacularly. His eyes roved around the dingy basement, looking for the glint of metal teeth, listening for the rasp of metal blade on metal blade. But all he could hear was frightened breathing – and he was pretty sure that was just his own.

He blinked, trying to get a handle on Mrs. Vasilyeva’s whereabouts, trying to remember the last thing that happened to him and why there seemed to be a big gap between then and now.

She’d been at the far end of the room, about to... About to carve up the two kids in the cages further down the row.

He sat up suddenly, energy surging from some reserve he hadn’t previously realized he had. “Those kids! What did she do to those kids? I gotta – I can’t let them – I can’t let her –”

“They’re okay.” It was Donny’s voice, the older kid in the cage next to Shannon’s. “She didn’t do anything to them. Yet.”

Dean blinked into the darkness. “What’s she waiting for?”

“The oven to warm up.”

Dean swallowed. “The – *what?* Did I – why don’t I – what the hell just happened to me?”

“She was just tasting you,” Donny explained matter-of-factly, barely any emotion in his voice at all. “Snacking. Believe me, when you’re the main course, you’ll know.”

“Snacking?” Dean echoed. “Seriously? *Snacking?* You’re kidding, right?”

“She does that,” Donny continued. “Snacks on you. Until she sucks you dry. Sucks all the life out of you. Like those two poor kids down there.”

“Like the Shtriga,” Dean muttered, trying to wrap his brain around what Donny was telling him. Mrs. Vasilyeva was a Shtriga? Somehow that didn’t fit – the iron teeth – the biting. The Shtriga Dean remembered from Fort Douglas – and the image of that freak hovering over his baby brother would forever be tattooed onto his brain – hadn’t tried to bite Sam, it had just tried to *breathe* the life out of him... This was different. He rubbed at his neck where her teeth had sunk in, his hand coming away bloody. *Way* different. He shook himself mentally. “So what happens then?” he asked, not sure he really wanted to know the answer. “When you’re – when she’s finished snacking on you?”

Donny nodded toward the two unconscious kids in the cages nearest the counter and the third who looked in almost as bad shape. “She eats you,” he said flatly.

Dean blinked at him. “Huh?”

“She cooks you and *eats* you,” Donny repeated, eliciting a soft whimper from Shannon and the little girl in the cage next to Dean. The older boy’s voice took on a

flinty edge, as if he was trying really hard to sound casual and unruffled rather than completely terrified, like a kid telling a gory ghost story to a bunch of petrified brats sitting around a campfire. “See that big wooden spoon thing over there?” Dean followed the direction of Donny’s finger to where the huge spatula he’d seen in the kitchen yesterday leaned against the wall near the door. “That’s what she uses to put you in the oven. Pushes you inside with it. Knocks you out with it if you won’t go.” He leaned his head back against the wall once more, his face once again expressionless. “We’re all destined for the oven eventually,” he pronounced with an air of morbid finality. “All of us.”

Dean tried to swallow again, but his mouth had dried up completely. “You’ve – you’ve *seen* this?” he asked hesitantly. “You’ve seen her do this?”

Donny nodded slowly. “Waits till the kids are asleep upstairs. Then takes the sickest ones up to the kitchen...”

Dean couldn’t help glancing toward the two kids at the end of the row. “How – how many times...?”

“Twice,” Donny said. “And I’ve only been here a couple days.”

Two kids. Two dead kids in two days. How many before that?

“How long?” Dean asked quietly. “Donny? How long until she comes back here? For them?”

“Not long,” Donny’s voice wavered a little bit. “An hour maybe?”

Dean bit his lip. “Then we have an hour to figure a way out of here,” he said shortly. “I’m not letting her kill any more sick kids...”

Donny laughed caustically. “How you gonna stop her?” His voice was laced with burgeoning hysteria and Dean knew barely-disguised panic when he heard it. “No one can stop her. The oven. That’s the only way we’re getting out of this place. That’s the only way *any* of us are getting out. No one’s coming to help us. No one’s coming to save us. We’re on our own here!”

“Single parents,” Dean said suddenly, nodding slowly to himself. “That’s why she goes after single parents – gets the mom or dad out of the picture and gets the kids all to herself –”

“Helpless,” Donny nodded dejectedly. “Hopeless.”

Dean squared his shoulders defiantly. “Dude, don’t talk like that,” he snapped. “It ain’t over till the fat lady’s a-wailing and she ain’t even gotten the intro down yet.” When Donny continued to stare disconsolately at the floor of his cage, Dean added, “Listen, man, I got a kid brother upstairs depending on me and I’m sure as hell not gonna let that bitch get her hands on *him*. No way. He’s –” he faltered a little, blinking back moisture that had unaccountably sprung into his eyes. “He’s all I’ve got right now. And I’m all he’s got. If – if something happens to me, I don’t even wanna *think* about what happens to him – so I gotta get us out of this. You hear me?” Donny’s eyes tracked to Dean’s slowly. “I’m not givin’ up and neither should you. I’m gettin’ outta here and I’m gettin’ my brother outta here because no way in *hell* I’m leaving him here on his own with that witch. I’m not. I’m just not.”

He curled his fingers around the bars and pulled himself painfully to his knees, clenching his jaw determinedly and raising his chin a little.

“I’m just not.”

St. John’s Hospital Springfield, IL Present day

“Whew, is it ever dark in there!”

Missouri looked up from John’s pale face, the lines of deep concentration slowly ebbing from her warm features as she blinked languidly at the three men crowded around the hospital bed.

She relaxed the tight grip she had on John's wrist, her fingers slipping down his hand until they were curled in his own. Finally, she patted the back of his hand reassuringly and smiled.

"Is he okay?" Dean asked immediately.

"Are *you* okay?" Sam added.

Missouri continued to beam at them placidly, nodding her head slightly. "I'm fine thank you *Sam*," she said, squinting pointedly at Dean, who lowered his eyes and shrugged.

"I was gonna ask that too," he mumbled.

"Uh-huh," Missouri agreed. Then, "Dean?"

Dean looked up at her.

"He's gonna be fine, honey. You gotta start believin' me."

Dean swallowed. "You – you spoke to him? What – what did you see?"

A shadow seemed to pass across Missouri's face, gone in an instant, but leaving a ghostly echo behind.

"Missouri?" Sam prodded. "Did he talk to you?"

Missouri hesitated for a second before nodding slowly.

"What did he say?" Dean asked.

"Boys," the psychic said at length. "Your daddy's trapped and only one person can get him out of this."

The brothers exchanged a glance, and this time Bobby spoke for them.

"And who might that be?"

Missouri considered him thoughtfully. "Why, the person who knows him best of course."

Vasilyeva house

Griffin, GA

January 1992

They'd eaten dinner in silence, heads bowed over their food while Fliss and April cried silently and Sam did his best not to look at Dean's empty chair.

"Eat up, children, eat up!" Mrs. Vasilyeva had urged them as if nothing had happened; as if two of their number hadn't disappeared into thin air since this time yesterday.

It was almost as if they'd never even been here.

No. Dean had been here. And he wasn't gone. He *wasn't*. He couldn't be... No way Dean would just leave him here. Alone. No way. Dean wouldn't leave him. He *wouldn't*...

But what would happen to Sam if Dean didn't come back? With Dad sick, Dean was all Sam had....

Sam swallowed, clearing dishes from the table as Mrs. Vasilyeva ordered the children up to their rooms to finish their homework.

"Two more children coming to stay tomorrow," her voice tinkled merrily as she organized the dirty dishes in the kitchen, the oven a continuous monotone hum in the background even though she didn't seem to be cooking anything in it. "Need to make the place look nice for them, so I don't need you all under my feet."

"Two more children?" Flora asked quietly, eyes widening as she looked up at her mother. "Won't – won't they be – y'know – because you said we had no more room...?"

Something dark flashed across Mrs. Vasilyeva's face as she bent down toward the girl. "We're always happy to help those less fortunate than ourselves, Flora," she said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Poor children – all alone in the world... It's such a shame when they take it into their heads to run away from the people who are trying to help them. I only hope whoever Dean and Shannon find themselves running to will be as kind to them as we were..."

Sam turned away, unable to listen anymore.

If two more children were arriving tomorrow then maybe someone else was going to disappear tonight... And if his suspicions were correct about Mrs. Vasilyeva... about what she was....

Well it wouldn't be him. It wouldn't be *any* of them. Because he was finding Dean – and Shannon – and they were getting the hell out of here. All of them. He had no idea where they'd go but Dean would think of something. He knew he would. He always did. He just had to find him. He'd find Dean and then it would be okay. Because Dean would know what to do.

So. Where to look?

If Dean was still alive, then he was in this house somewhere, Sam was sure of it. And Dean was still alive. He *had* to be. Sam would *know* if he wasn't.

The boys hadn't had much time to explore the house since their arrival, but Sam didn't think there were any hidden chambers or dark, forbidden passageways anywhere around. The only place Mrs. Vasilyeva had told them expressly not to enter was the basement... The basement. Last night, that's where she'd been coming from, when she'd turned around with those – those *teeth* and he and Dean had run back to their room without looking back, not once.

They'd heard Shannon scream before she disappeared and had been out in the hallway within seconds. But she was already gone. So Mrs. Vasilyeva couldn't have taken her far. And she'd been coming up from the basement.

Sam was standing considering the basement door before he even knew how he got there.

He could hear Mrs. Vasilyeva's low voice from the direction of the kitchen next door, and he knew that all she'd have to do was put her head through the door and she'd see him.

Still.

He had to try.

Reaching out one trembling hand, his fingers closed around the doorknob and he tugged, just once.

The door didn't budge, which didn't surprise him considering he'd seen the woman slipping a key into her apron when she left the basement last night.

Glancing over his shoulder, his eyes strayed to the door at the end of the hallway which led into the overgrown jungle of a garden.

He'd not been out there before and it was already dark outside, judging by the muted light slanting in through the frosted glass in the little window set high in the door. Shadows of trees and plants out in the garden were moving like living things across the wall as the wind blew softly against the house, rattling the windows and causing tree branches to scratch against the glass like fingernails.

Sam took a breath. He *could* do this. He could. He *had* to. If Dean was in trouble, then Sam had to help him. That was the way it worked. Dean had Sam's back, and Sam had Dean's; when he'd let him.

And he knew that this was exactly what Dean would do if it was Sam who was missing.

Casting a nervous glance back toward the kitchen, he made his way down the corridor, fingers sliding down the smooth wood of the rear door and twitching when they met the cold metal of the key jammed into the lock.

He twisted, the mechanism grinding softly, and then he pulled, the door opening smoothly onto the eerie early evening garden, birch trees whispering to each other off in the distance as the cold breeze caressed their bare branches.

He wished he'd thought to bring his coat.

Shivering a little, he closed the door behind him as quietly as he was able, stepping out into Mrs. Vasilyeva's extensive herb garden which covered the area from the doorway to the kitchen window.

A bird rustled through the trees to his right, startling him, and he could make out a nest high up in the leafless branches, illuminated by the moonlight which bathed the garden in soft white light as the moon waxed toward full overhead.

He considered the herb garden as he skirted around the house, wondering whether that was how Mrs. Vasilyeva had managed to make Dean sick this morning. Had she put something in his oatmeal? Some of these herbs? Because Sam had no doubt Dean hadn't been faking. She'd done something to him, he knew it. Because he wouldn't run away without *Sam*...

He cursed softly as his foot caught on something sticking up out of the ground, tripping him so that he fell to one knee on the hard, compacted soil. Rubbing at his knee, his eyes scanned the ground around him, trying to pick out what he'd tripped over in the bright moonlight.

After a brief search, he spied a small pile of disturbed earth, figuring some critter had been digging in the garden as he reached out toward something hard and white half-buried in the soil.

Fingers spreading over the vaguely spherical shape, he began to pull, the thing in his hand coming free of the ground with enough force to topple him backwards onto his behind.

Frowning, he raised the object in his hand in front of his face, angling it toward the moonlight in an attempt to better identify what he was holding.

Two empty eye sockets gazed back at him.

Somehow he managed to stifle a scream as the skull abruptly dropped to the ground with a dull thud.

Oh God oh God oh God...

Sam had never wanted to see Dean – or even his *Dad* – as much as he did right then.

The skull was sitting on the grass looking at him.

He knew it wasn't *actually* looking at him. Not having any eyes or anything. But that didn't make Sam feel any better as he completely failed in all his efforts to tear his gaze away from it, breathing quickening as he concentrated *really hard* on not throwing up on his shoes.

He needed to find Dean.

Right *now*.

Forcing himself to his feet shakily, he tried to breathe slowly, willing the world to stop spinning for a second so he could get his bearings again.

So there was a skull buried in Mrs. Vasilyeva's herb garden. Sam had no doubt Dad had seen far worse in his hunting career which, he reminded himself, he had been only too insistent Dad and Dean fill him in about in great detail as soon as he'd found out his dad didn't really travel the country "selling stuff," as Dean had always maintained.

But hearing about ghosts and black dogs and werewolves and shapeshifters hadn't prepared him for *this*. *This* had been a person once. An actual *person*. Who was now dead, probably killed and buried by Mrs. Vasilyeva, considering this was her garden.

Was this Donny? Or Shannon? Or...

He swallowed. No. It couldn't be Dean. Couldn't be.

Fighting down his fear, he bent back down toward the skull, pushing at it with his toe as he forced himself to examine it further.

He couldn't see any signs of trauma – no obvious gunshot wound or fracture. Just bleached white bone. Which suggested it had probably been here some time. If this was the skull of one of the kids who had disappeared recently, then there would still be flesh clinging to it.

He shuddered, wondering fleetingly who this skull had belonged to and how long ago they had died. And how many other skulls were buried in Mrs. Vasilyeva's garden.

That thought almost paralyzed him, his eyes scanning the ground all around him for other bone fragments, imagining whole skeletons under his feet waiting to drag him down into moldy mass graves.

He needed to find Dean. He *really* needed to find Dean.

Trying to ignore the ground – which he was now convinced was softly undulating beneath his feet – he looked back up at the house, trying to figure out where the basement would be in relation to where he was standing.

If that was the kitchen window – and he swore he could still hear the hum of the oven even out here – then the basement must be....

Skylight.

Set low in the wall, almost hidden by the wildly out of control undergrowth, was a tiny window, and Sam scooted over toward it, ignoring the little voice in his head telling him he was walking over people's graves.

Kneeling down next to the window, he bent his head low, trying to peer through the filthy glass and into the room beyond. But even with the moonlight at his back, he could see nothing, the window was too dirty and the room too dark.

Pulling the sleeve of his hoodie over his hand, he tried to clean away some of the grime, but only succeeded in turning his sleeve a delightful shade of moldy brown.

Glancing behind him, his eyes once again lit on the skull.

Screw it.

He tried not to think about the smoothness of the bone in his hand as he hefted the skull and launched it at the window, wincing at the crash as the glass shattered, the skull bouncing off the window frame and landing once again on the hard ground, jawbone detaching in a hideous approximation of a grin.

Careful of the broken glass, Sam crouched in front of the window, peering down into the darkened basement as his eyes tried to pick out details in the chalky moonlight.

Cages. There were rows of cages.

"Dean?"

"Sammy?"

The answer was immediate, the relief flooding through Sam's body at the sound of his brother's voice almost too much for him to handle as his knees threatened to buckle out from under him.

He pushed closer to the broken window, peering down into the darkness until a soft beam of moonlight picked out two green eyes looking up at him. "Dean!"

"Sammy, are you okay?"

Sam snorted softly, reaching a hand down through the window frame, fingers grazing against the cold bars of Dean's cage before finally finding the warm solidity of his brother's hand. "Am I okay?" he echoed incredulously. "Dean, *you're* the one locked in a cage with some hag from Hell wanting to chow down on you with her iron teeth!"

Dean swallowed audibly, and Sam suddenly realized his big brother's fingers were trembling. "Been there, done that," he managed weakly, moonlight glinting off teeth as he tried to toss Sam a cocky smile.

"She *bit* you?" Sam burst out.

He saw Dean nod just a little. "I don't know what happened – it was like she – she *took* something from me. But I don't really know what."

"Lifeforce," Sam replied knowledgeably. "Soon as I began to figure out what was going on I did some reading –"

"Soon as you *what*?" Dean almost laughed.

"Research," Sam said shortly. "You know? *Reading*? Dad's been teaching me since – well, since I found out about the *family business*. I spent my lunch break in the school library following up on some theories –"

"You are *such* a geek," Dean muttered, shaking his head but not loosening his hold on Sam's fingers.

“That witch has metal teeth for a reason, Dean,” Sam countered. “I figured maybe that was what was happening to the kids. Maybe she was –”

“Eating them,” Dean finished for him.

When Sam realized the expression on Dean’s face was completely serious, the horrible truth slowly began to dawn on him.

He’d been right.

“Closest thing I could find,” he managed to continue, despite feeling like the world had just tipped sideways and nothing now appeared as it was supposed to, “is the legend of the Baba Yaga – the Russian witch who eats children. Dean, she has *iron* teeth and lives in a cottage surrounded by birch trees and –”

“Vasilyeva’s a Russian name, right?” Dean put in. “And she makes that weird Russian beet soup stuff?”

“Borsht,” Sam supplied. “Yeah. Although I think she’s more a mixture of several legends actually – crones, hags, your garden variety witches.” He shrugged. “Maybe she’s how the legends got started – we’ve got no way of knowing how old she is. And if she’s stealing children’s lifeforces to prolong her life she could be *ancient*.”

Dean muttered a word that sound something like “Shtriga,” but Sam didn’t know what that meant. “Huh?”

Dean blinked up at him, eyes appearing huge in the moonlight. “Nothing,” he said quickly. “Just some legend Dad mentioned once.” He smiled lopsidedly. “You’re really getting into this whole geekboy sidekick research thing, huh, Sammy?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Well if you’d *told* me what was going on with Dad from the beginning, instead of treating me like some dumb kid you had to keep in the dark, I might have been able to help out with this stuff *ages* ago!”

Dean huffed. “Yeah, whatever Baby Einstein. Right now we’ve got other things to worry about – like that witch upstairs with her metal teeth and her big oven that she just started heating up. There are a couple of pretty sick kids down here she’s planning on turning into hamburger real soon. We have to get the hell outta Dodge, Sammy!”

Sam nodded. “I know, I know, Dean. But she’s locked the door and I don’t know how –”

Suddenly a shadow fell across him and he couldn’t see Dean’s face anymore.

He looked up, and the only thing he could make out amidst the dark silhouette looming above him was the glint of iron teeth.

“What are you doing, little boy?”

St. John’s Hospital Springfield, IL Present day

A tiny flicker of a frown began to pulse between Dean’s eyebrows and Sam was pretty sure his brother was going to explode as soon as his mouth caught up with his brain.

“So, what does that mean exactly, Missouri?” Sam asked quickly, hoping to head Dean off at the pass before he could say something to the psychic he might later regret. “The person Dad knows best is the only one who can wake him?”

“We could do without your riddles right now, Missouri,” Bobby weighed in, obviously sensing Dean’s building irritation just as Sam was.

But Dean remained uncharacteristically silent, simply gazing at Missouri uncertainly as she gazed right on back at him.

“It’s all right, boys,” she said softly, eyes never leaving Dean’s. “Everything’s going to be fine. Just trust me. Trust your father. Everything’s going to be fine...”

Vasilyeva house - basement
Griffin, GA
January 1992

“Sam? Sammy!”

Dean screamed his brother’s name, even as moonlight began to filter back into the room through the little skylight, Sam having been forcibly dragged away from the window by that Russian hag bitch.

Dean had held on to his brother’s hand for as long as he could, but eventually Sam had slipped through his fingers and all he was left with was this dark, cold cage and six scared children all looking at him for salvation. Even the two half-dead kids Mrs. Vasilyeva had been threatening to eat seemed to have perked up when Dean had vowed to get them all out and as if on cue Sam had showered them with broken glass.

“Sammy!” He yelled for his brother one more time, knowing that he wasn’t going to get a response.

Okay, that was it.

“If that bitch lays one freakin’ hand on my brother, I’m gonna *kill* her!” Dean vowed.

He had to get out of here. Right *now*.

Patting down his pockets, he pulled out a metal hairpin, held it up to the moonlight and smiled.

Vasilyeva house
Griffin, GA
January 1992

“Get *off!*” Sam screamed, kicking out at Mrs. Vasilyeva as she dragged him back into the house. “Get off of me!” He clawed at the hands encircling his wrists, hoping to draw blood but succeeding only in tearing his own nails.

He continued to kick at her as she bundled him down the hallway and into the kitchen, slamming the door behind her as she shoved him into the room.

He stumbled backwards, his shoulder blades hitting something hot and hard, and he felt the first stirrings of panic when he realized she had him cornered against the oven door.

“I was *nice* to you!” she hissed, eyes dark and beady like an angry hawk, wiry hair slipping free of the pins holding it in place as she inclined her long bony neck down toward him, nose inches from his, teeth... Sam didn’t want to look. “And *this* is how you repay me? *This*? By smashing my windows and trampling my garden and –”

“You have skulls buried in your garden!” Sam pointed out. “And my brother locked up in your basement!”

“Ingrate!” the woman snarled. “Snooping around my house after I invite you and that brother of yours into my *home*. Feed you. Give you a bed to sleep in –”

“My *brother’s* locked up in your *basement!*” Sam repeated, enunciating each word carefully.

“I was going to *save* you for a while,” Mrs. Vasilyeva continued as if he’d not spoken. “You showed *promise!* You could have been the one I’ve been looking for!”

Sam screwed up his face in confusion. “What are you talking about?” he demanded.

“Stupid brother. You had to have a stupid, nosy, pig-headed *brother!*”

“I – What?”

Mrs. Vasilyeva drew a breath, her face still unsettlingly close to Sam's. "Regardless of what the storybooks tell us," she said slowly, "not all witches are *female*, Sam."

Sam was no less confused by that comment. "So? What does that have to do with me and my brother?"

Mrs. Vasilyeva huffed. "It has *nothing* to do with your brother. I only let him stay because I thought he might taste nice. For a *boy*."

Sam flinched. "If you *touch* him I'll –"

"You'll do nothing. There's nothing you *can* do. You're powerless. And that's your tragedy, Sam." She shook her head sadly. "You could have so much power if you only reached out and took it."

Sam frowned at her uncertainly. "What are you –?"

"Sam, I need an heir!" Mrs. Vasilyeva burst out. "Someone to teach my craft! Someone who will absorb all my knowledge, my learning, my *wisdom*. Someone who will continue my *work*!"

"Eating defenseless *kids*?"

"Flora didn't take to it the way I'd hoped," Mrs. Vasilyeva continued, again ignoring Sam's protests. "Doesn't have the *stomach* for it. Should have left her with her *real* parents – I killed them for nothing. They don't even taste good when they reach *that* age..."

"You –" Sam stammered. "You *killed* Flora's parents? You – you're not her *mom*?"

"The parents only hold on until their children are gone... as if they can sense their absence from the world. I had to be creative with Flora's parents. Didn't eat her so they didn't die. But they succumbed to my herbs soon enough." She laughed darkly. "Once I've eaten you and your brother, your precious father will die too, Sam."

She grabbed a handful of his hoodie at each shoulder, flinging him back across the kitchen toward the door and baring her teeth at him. "Bet you're even sweeter than your brother, huh, little one?"

Sam flinched. "Wait!" he burst out as Mrs. Vasilyeva yanked open the kitchen door and bundled him out toward the basement. "Wait! I know the rules – I know how this works! If I ask you, you're supposed to give me the answer to one question!"

Mrs. Vasilyeva froze, one dark eyebrow raised above her beady bird-like eye. Her hand was on the key to the basement, turning it slowly in the door, and as it clicked open she turned back to face Sam. "What have you been reading, little one?"

Sam swallowed, Mrs. Vasilyeva's fingers still bunched up in the front of his shirt, his feet almost pulled right off the ground. "You can learn all kinds of things in the library," he managed to squeak. "All kinds of things. About crones. And witches. And Baba Yaga..."

For a moment, she just stared into his eyes, fingers tightening in the folds of his shirt as she pulled him even closer.

Then just like that she spluttered out a laugh, dropping him back to the floor and straightening, her face softening as it regained its more human aspect. "You see, little one?" she smirked. "So much promise. I knew you had it in you. You could be so much more if you'd only let me teach you."

"I have a question," Sam insisted stubbornly, balling his hands into fists at his sides and standing up as straight as he possibly could.

Mrs. Vasilyeva gazed at him levelly, as if trying to decide whether to play the game or just eat him and be done with it. "All right, little one," she said at length. "I'll answer your question." Her smirk widened, her pointy metal teeth once again visible as they glinted savagely. "But you must have read the rest of the stories about my kind? Or did you just skim read?"

Sam swallowed. "I don't skim read," he informed her.

"I didn't think so." Mrs. Vasilyeva laughed coldly. "Then you know before I answer your one question *you* have to answer my three riddles?"

Sam had wondered whether this might come up. "I suppose," he agreed reluctantly. "But when I answer your three riddles, you have to answer my question. That's the deal, right?"

Mrs. Vasilyeva nodded. "Of course," she said. "If you answer my three riddles *correctly*." She inclined her head down toward him again, teeth flashing. "Get one right, maybe I won't eat you, just because you showed me some initiative. Get two right? Maybe I won't eat your brother either."

Sam hesitated for a second. "And if I don't get any right?"

Mrs. Vasilyeva's smile became impossibly wide. "My oven should be just about up to temperature by now."

Sam's mouth was suddenly incredibly dry, eyes flickering beyond Mrs. Vasilyeva's shoulder to the living room where he could see Flora peering out from behind the doorjamb.

If Sam was right about this, it might not just be Dean he was saving.

"All right," he said finally, forcing down the slight quiver in his voice as he did his level best to sound just like his older brother. "Let's go."

Mrs. Vasilyeva's fingers loosened their grip on the basement door handle as she turned to fully face her adversary, face having once again shifted into something not entirely human.

She ran her pointy red tongue over her thin lips, baring her metal teeth joyously, small black eyes sparkling with over-confident glee.

"Maybe I'll go easy on you to begin with," she said, grinning hideously as she launched into her first riddle.

*"A spirited jig it dances bright,
Banishing all but darkest night.
Give it food and it will live;
Give it water and it will die.*

"What am I?"

Sam rolled his eyes and snorted sarcastically. "Too easy," he said, not even having to really think about it. "Fire," he answered, returning Mrs. Vasilyeva's grin with one of his own.

Mrs. Vasilyeva chuckled softly, taking a step closer to him. "All right, little one," she said. "Perhaps I won't eat you after all."

Sam swallowed. "Good to hear."

"You could still take me up on my offer," Mrs. Vasilyeva continued. "You've already shown me how smart you are –"

"And don't forget loyal," Sam interrupted. "Next one's for my brother, right?"

Mrs. Vasilyeva raised a dark eyebrow. "I only said 'maybe' I won't eat him."

Sam scowled at her. "You promised," he told her. "You have to keep your promise. Those are the rules."

"My, you *have* been doing some reading haven't you?" the woman leered at him. "So much potential. I could give you so much –"

"All I want's my brother."

Mrs. Vasilyeva shook her head. "So little ambition. Come, come, Sam. You could be great. You could rule the world if you only set your mind to it."

"I'm eight," Sam said shortly. "I don't want to rule the world, I just want to go home."

"To your father? You think *he* wants you to realize your full potential? Still treats you like a baby, doesn't he? Not like you brother. Dean he treats like a grown-up. His good little soldier."

Sam paled slightly. "How do you – you can't possibly –"

"You think I choose my victims at random, boy?" Mrs. Vasilyeva sneered. "I've been watching you. I've seen the way he treats you. And the way he treats Dean. He should have more respect for you. He should have more respect for what you can *be* –"

"Right now I just wanna be a kid," Sam insisted. "And I don't wanna get eaten. So can we hurry this up, I have homework."

Mrs. Vasilyeva continued to gaze at him appraisingly. "Such wasted potential." She sighed heavily. "We could have done great things, you and I."

"The riddle?" Sam all but stamped his foot.

"Patience, little one. All right, here is your second riddle.

*"I am the beginning of sorrow,
and the end of sickness.
You cannot express happiness without me,
yet I am in the midst of crosses.
I am always in risk,
yet never in danger.
You may find me in the sun,
but I am never out of darkness.*

"What am I?"

This one was a little trickier, and Sam had to think about it. In fact, it took him all of five seconds to come up with an answer. "The letter 's'," he replied, smiling brightly at her.

Mrs. Vasilyeva pursed her narrow lips. "Hmm," she said. "Perhaps I won't eat your brother then." She took another step toward him, leaning down slightly so that they were at eye level. "And he tasted so good too."

Sam didn't rise to the bait. "You owe me another riddle," he reminded her.

"So I do, so I do. All right, here it is. Answer this one correctly and I'll answer your question –"

"And let me and my brother go."

"I said I'd answer your question, Sam. Those are the rules, remember?"

"And you said you wouldn't eat us."

"I never said I'd let you go."

Sam bristled. "You're a liar."

"And you should read the fine print, little one. Now. I owe you a riddle. You owe me an answer."

Sam clamped his teeth together and narrowed his eyes, face turning an angry shade of scarlet. "All right. Get on with it then."

*"The man who invented it,
Doesn't want it for himself.
The man who bought it,
Doesn't need it for himself.
The man who needs it,
Doesn't know it when he needs it.*

"What am I?"

Sam had to think about this one. He was pretty sure he knew the answer but... His eyes strayed to the basement door behind Mrs. Vasilyeva which had opened a crack and he had to concentrate really hard not to yell "Dean!" the second he saw his brother's face peering out at him.

Mrs. Vasilyeva shifted slightly, and Sam schooled his features, trying not to give anything away and resisting the urge to grin when Dean winked at him.

"You have an answer?" Mrs. Vasilyeva asked him, her impatience apparently getting the better of her.

"Coffin," Sam replied smoothly. "It's a coffin."

Mrs. Vasilyeva smiled toothily at him, but said nothing.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Sam insisted. "Now you have to give me my brother back."

Mrs. Vasilyeva's laugh was nothing short of a cackle. "You're a smart one, I'll give you that," she said. "All right. But everything in its own time. Don't you want to ask me your question first?"

The basement door opened a little further, and Sam could see Dean's hand clutching something large and wooden.

Sam smiled angelically. "All right," he said slowly. "Here's my question."

Mrs. Vasilyeva raised an eyebrow expectantly.

"How do I kill you?"

Mrs. Vasilyeva straightened abruptly, mouth drawn into a tight white line as she took a step away from him.

"You have to answer me," Sam insisted, closing the gap by taking a step forward. "Those are the rules."

The woman's cheeks paled, eyes becoming smaller and blacker, nose more hooked, teeth sharper and more metallic.

"You have to answer," Sam repeated, his voice as full of iron as her mouth. "You *have* to. How do I kill you?"

Mrs. Vasilyeva drew a very slow breath. "Fire," she said, voice low and stony. "Like most witches, I must be burnt."

Suddenly Dean was behind her, her enormous wooden spatula held aloft. "Thanks for the info, old crone," he said. "That'll sure come in handy."

He brought the spatula down onto the back of her head with a loud crack, and she crumpled to the floor as the other children crept from the basement in Dean's wake.

Donny was carrying the small boy who Dean had initially thought a goner, while Shannon and the little girl who had been in the cage next to Dean supported the other two sicker kids.

"Shannon!"

Fliss came flying down the stairs, Mikey, Cooper and lastly April behind her as she barreled into her big sister's arms.

"You're not dead!" Fliss exclaimed, hanging onto Shannon for dear life as tears streamed down her face. "I knew it! I knew you weren't dead! And I knew you wouldn't leave me all alone here!"

Sam glanced at Dean at that, the older brother returning the look but neither of them saying a word.

"We have to finish it," Dean said instead, inclining his head down toward the unconscious witch at his feet. "You heard what she said. We have to burn her."

Sam paled. "But –" he stammered. "But Dean... She's *human*. We can't kill a *human*!"

Dean shook his head vehemently. "Sammy, she ain't no human. We can't just run away and leave her to carry on killing people."

Sam bit his lip, uncertain.

"Sam. She's not human."

"Dean's right. She's not."

Suddenly Flora was at Dean's shoulder, her face even paler than Sam's. Her eyes shifted to rest upon the insensible form of her "mother" as a look of intense determination flooded her features. "She's killed dozens of kids – and their parents – over the years," she said. "She told me so. I – I've seen their bones." She looked up at Sam, unshed tears making her eyes sparkle. "She killed my parents too, Sam. She killed them and brought me here and said she'd never let me leave. She said I had to learn to become what she is and I – I couldn't do it. I *wouldn't* do it. So she said she'd find someone else – someone else to be her apprentice."

Sam shuddered, trying not to think what could have happened had he agreed to that.

"If we don't do as Dean says," Flora continued, "she'll just carry on until she finds a kid willing to become a... a monster. Like her. And then there'll be two of them and even more children and their parents will die. This might be our only chance to get rid of her. And if we do that, the spell she cast over all of your parents will be broken."

Sam blinked at her and Dean's head snapped up. "They'll wake up?" he asked hopefully, glancing briefly at Sam. "All of them?"

Flora nodded. "Yes. It's their connection to their children that keeps them sleeping – it's because their children are *here* near *her* that she's able to use that connection to maintain the spell."

Sam frowned. "So – so she puts the spell on the *kids* rather than on the parents?"

Flora nodded. "Open house," she explained. "That's when she cast her spell on you and Dean."

"Son of a –" Dean curbed the rest of his curse, instead motioning to Donny to help him. "C'mon," he said. "We're ending this. Now."

"How?" Donny asked uncertainly, settling the sick kid he still clutched in his arms into one of the chairs at the dining table.

Dean bent down and took a firm grip on Mrs. Vasilyeva's wrist before attempting to drag her toward the kitchen. He paused, looking up at the older boy. "Oven," he said firmly, causing Sam to suck in a surprised breath. Dean's attention shifted to his brother. "It's the only way, Sammy," he explained. "We've gotta end her."

Donny nodded his agreement. "It's what she deserves."

No one moved for a moment, all of the children's attention drawn down to the unconscious form of Mrs. Vasilyeva.

"Dean, I don't know –" Sam still wasn't convinced, and it was only when the witch suddenly started to groan that Dean was further galvanized into action.

"No choice, kiddo," he said, reaffirming his grip on the woman's wrists and pulling.

Donny and Shannon grabbed an arm each, helping Dean drag Mrs. Vasilyeva into the kitchen as Flora opened the oven door.

Heat blasted out into the darkened room, and Dean's eyes met Sam's, his complexion paling considerably, but determination still painted across his face.

Finally, Sam nodded, approaching Mrs. Vasilyeva and grabbing one of her ankles.

Fliss and Mikey grabbed the other one, Cooper assisting Sam as between them the children somehow managed to manhandle Mrs. Vasilyeva first onto the giant spatula which they then used to maneuver her into the oven.

A bloodcurdling scream issued deep from within the witch's throat as her eyes suddenly snapped open, blood red and wider than Sam had ever seen them.

Instinctively, the children all fell back a step. Except Dean and Flora, who was still hanging on to the oven door. She locked eyes with Mrs. Vasilyeva as the witch endeavored to push open the door, flames beginning to curl around her as her screams became louder and louder and her eyes brighter and redder.

Dean flew to Flora's side, grabbing the door and shoving his shoulder against it as hard as he could.

Hot air began to sear from the oven, swirling around the room and battering the children further backwards, the scream so piercing they had to cover their ears to avoid being deafened.

But the door wouldn't close.

"Donny!" Dean yelled, pushing with everything he had, but losing traction as his feet slid on the stone tile.

After a moment's shocked hesitation, Donny sprang forward to help, Sam and Shannon adding their weight as the children shoved hard at the oven door.

The gap narrowed slowly, and finally it closed with an anti-climactic clunk, Mrs. Vasilyeva's screams abruptly silenced as bright white light speared through the kitchen from the direction of oven and the floor began to tremble violently.

Dean took a breath before grabbing Sam's arm. "Everyone out!" he yelled. "Right now!"

No one argued, the able-bodied kids grabbing up the sicker ones as the whole group headed for the front door.

The floor began to shake intensely beneath their feet as the walls shuddered, pictures and mirrors crashing to the ground as the vibration made the whole house quake all around them.

A bookshelf toppled over in the living room with a crash as Shannon reached the front door and wrenched it open, ushering the younger kids out as quickly as they could move.

"Hurry!" she urged them, virtually pushing them out into the garden as the ceiling began to rain plaster onto their heads, one of the support beams cracking ominously.

Dean glanced behind him to make sure they were all out before shoving Sam out in front of him, the door wobbling on its hinges before it abruptly broke loose, narrowly missing the older brother as it collapsed into the hallway, wood splintering in all directions.

Sam didn't stop running until he and Dean were well away from the house, his brother's fingers still clamped around his arm tight enough to leave bruises.

They turned back in the direction of the building, which was now rumbling and groaning, the ground trembling violently beneath them as the windows shattered and the roof began to collapse in on itself.

Then with a loud crack the entire house reared up off its foundations, brick, wood and plaster exploding outwards as the structure flew at least ten feet up into the air, spun around several times before imploding with an ear-shattering crash like nothing Sam had ever heard in his life.

Before he knew how he got there he was on the ground, Dean's body thrown over him as debris rained down from the sky and a noise like a thousand freight trains gradually roared off into the distance.

As the ground began to stabilize and the noise to abate, Sam dared look up from under the crook of Dean's arm, a cloud of black dust whirling around like a tornado over the place where Mrs. Vasilyeva's house had stood before eventually coming to settle on the uneven mounds of rubble and debris that were all that was left of the structure.

"Holy crap," Dean muttered, pulling himself up off Sam and shakily helping him to his feet. "We destroyed a building!"

Sam shook his head. "At least it didn't have chicken legs," he mumbled, causing Dean to look at him as if he'd completely lost his mind. "Baba Yaga's house was on chicken legs," Sam explained. "So it could run off into the forest."

Dean continued to stare at him as if he'd gone completely mental. "You think us shoving a witch in her own oven and blowing up her house isn't disturbing enough with bringing giant chicken legs into the picture, Sammy?"

Sam shrugged. "I was just saying."

"Uh-huh."

Dean glanced around them, doing a mental inventory of the kids who were in various states of shock and awe, most of them still collapsed in a heap on the ground.

"Everyone okay?" he asked, eliciting stunned nods from the few kids capable of expressing anything right then, before Cooper suddenly burst out,

"Awwwwesome!"

"Is she gone?" Flora struggled to her feet, Dean offering her his hand as she tried to stabilize herself on her own.

He nodded. "I don't see how she can have survived that," he observed.

"We'll know once we get to the hospital," Sam pointed out. "If our parents are awake...?"

Flora's gaze slid to the floor. "I don't have anywhere to go," she whispered.

"You have grandparents?" Sam asked.

She looked up at him, tears streaking down her dust-covered cheeks. "In Iowa," she said. "I think. She – she told them I was dead."

"Then I think they'll be really happy to see you," Dean said, putting an arm around her shoulders and squeezing slightly. "Right?"

She turned her gaze up in his direction, nodding. "I – I guess."

Dean nodded. "Okay then. What d'you say we blow this popsicle stand huh?"

"Yeah, before the cops show up and arrest us for destroying someone's house," Sam agreed.

"Always lookin' at the downside, Sammy," Dean told him, shaking his head.

"Every cloud has a silver lining?" Sam offered.

Dean pulled him in to his side and held on. "You bet your ass, little brother," he said. "Now let's go find Dad."

It was going to be a long walk to the hospital, and as the children turned away from the remains of Mrs. Vasilyeva's house, a single black crow fluttered down, landing cautiously atop the pile of debris, watching them leave with beady black eyes.

**Spalding Regional Medical Center
Griffin, GA
January 1992**

John Winchester opened his eyes very slowly.

"Dad?" Dean tightened his grip on his dad's wrist, pulling Sam closer to the bed with his free hand. "You alive?"

His dad lifted his hand shakily, cupping the side of Dean's face and tracing his thumb through the dirt and grime smeared across the boy's cheekbone.

Blinking languidly, his attention shifted to Sam, motioning his boy forward with a wave of his hand.

Sam moved further up the bed, Dean pushing him slightly in front of him so that Dad could rest his hand on the back of his youngest boy's neck, pulling him forward and planting a rough kiss on the top of his head.

"You boys look like hell," Dad commented, releasing his grip on Sam, but dropping his fingers to the boy's hand.

"Back at ya," Dean returned, mouth turning up into a bright, relieved smile.

"You were in a coma, Dad," Sam told him.

"We saved your ass," Dean added.

John raised an eyebrow. "Oh you did, huh?"

Sam nodded eagerly. "We got rid of the witch and that released you from her spell."

John blinked, rubbing a hand over his forehead as if trying to remember the events of the last few days but not really succeeding. "Your teacher, right?" he offered. "Ms. Curtis? She was the witch?"

Dean snorted and Sam drew back, affronted. "You thought *Ms. Curtis* was the witch?" he burst out, scandalized.

"Why d'you think I was so eager to come to your open house, son?" he asked. "You know how I hate those things."

Sam's expression altered to something approaching crestfallen. "Oh," he said, bottom lip sticking out slightly. "I thought –"

"Sam, I'm kidding," John said, smirking slightly. "You know I love to hear what a brainiac my kid is, right?"

Sam relaxed a little. "Oh." He blinked. "Okay."

Dean elbowed him in the ribs. "You're such a dork," he said. "Seriously."

"So who was the witch?" John asked. "Figured she was going after single parents – but not much else –"

"So you *were* using yourself as bait," Dean said. "Dad, d'you know how stupid that was? She could have killed you!"

"And she nearly *ate* us!" Sam added.

John's attention skidded to a halt on Sam's face. "She – *what?*"

"Nearly ate us," Sam repeated. "That's what she was up to. Put the parents in a coma, fostered the kids and ate them."

"After snacking on them first," Dean added. "Like – y'know –" he lowered his eyes. "Fort Douglas."

John made no response to that, almost as if Dean hadn't spoken. "You boys are okay though?" When both of his sons nodded in the affirmative, he continued, "You know I'd never knowingly put you guys in danger, right? I – I thought the witch was feeding on the *parents* somehow. Never even occurred to me something might be going on with the kids –"

"It was Mrs. Vasilyeva," Dean explained. "You met her at Sam's open house. Flora's mom?" He shrugged. "Actually, she *wasn't* Flora's mom. Killed both her parents and took Flora to – to be her apprentice I guess."

"Flora wouldn't do it," Sam added. "So Mrs. Vasilyeva – she came after me."

"Cause he's such a 'brainiac,'" Dean added.

John's fingers tightened around Sam's hand. "Did she hurt you? Sammy? What happened?"

"I'm okay," Sam assured him. "Just say 'no' right?"

"How did she get anywhere *near* you? I mean – what happened to you guys after – after I got sick?"

"CPS came and got us," Dean explained, eyes shifting to study the blanket draped across his dad's legs. "Took us to stay with her." He looked back up then, pride written across his face despite the teasing lilt to his voice. "'Brainiac' here figured out what she was up to and played this riddle game with her – got her to tell him how to kill her."

"And you –" John swallowed. "You killed her?"

Dean nodded solemnly.

"We put her in the oven and her house exploded," Sam added matter-of-factly.

John's mouth fell open but no words came out.

"And then you woke up," Dean finished his brother's explanation. "And we all lived happily ever after."

"Except for Mrs. Vasilyeva," Sam pointed out.

"Good," Dean said. "She *bit* me, dude!"

"She *what*?" John put in.

"Yeah, how *did* you get out of that cage?" Sam asked, ignoring his father completely.

"Cage?" John interjected.

"Hairpin," Dean grinned at his brother. "Stole it off her when she was – snacking – on me. Used it to pick the lock."

"You *stole* her hairpin? You mean you touched her hair? Eww, gross."

"Dude, it was that or let her shove *me* in the oven. Besides, she had her teeth in my neck at the time."

"Wait, wait!" John held up his hands, finally silencing his boys. "I can see I'm gonna need a full debriefing here, boys."

"*After* you figure out how to ditch the CPS, dude," Dean added.

John glanced over to the doorway where a black woman in a smart suit and a skinny white guy with a notebook were talking to a couple of doctors.

His mouth ticked up ever-so-slightly. "What d'you boys say we get the hell outta here?"

St. John's Hospital Springfield, IL Present day

John Winchester opened his eyes very slowly.

"I told you," a familiar voice drifted across John's consciousness. "Only the person who knows your daddy best could convince him to wake up."

He blinked languidly, his boys' worried faces coming slowly into focus, followed by Bobby's grizzled visage and lastly –

“Missouri?”

“‘Bout time you woke your lazy ass up, John Winchester,” the psychic smiled broadly at him. “Guess you just needed a good talking with yourself.”

“*He's* the one who knows him best?” Dean burst out. “What the hell kind of riddle is *that*, Missouri?”

“Boy, ‘cryptic’ is part of the job. I gotta keep *some* mystery. Or hadn't you noticed?”

“You could have just *said* Dad was the only one who could kick himself out of his coma!”

“Wait – I was in a coma?”

Sam put a hand on his foot and squeezed. “They found you collapsed by the side of the road,” he explained sympathetically. “It was touch and go there for a while.”

“Docs found my card in your jacket,” Bobby explained. “I brought reinforcements.”

“So what the hell happened to you, Dad?” Dean demanded suddenly, the fear obvious in his eyes, and for a second John flashed back to another time he'd woken from a coma to find his eldest squeezing his hand and doing his best not to appear absolutely terrified, despite looking like he'd been dragged to Hell and back. Repeatedly.

Sam wasn't standing quite as close to Dean as he had been all those years ago back in – Georgia, was it? – but there was still only a couple of inches separating them, and when Dean moved around toward the head of the bed, Sam went with him.

“Did something get you?” Dean continued his interrogation. “Hex you? Whammy you? Was it Mia?”

“Dad?” Sam added. “Was it? Was it Mia?”

John opened his mouth to attempt a reply, but was interrupted by a young doctor walking into the room.

“Ah, Mr. Clapton, you're awake!” she burst out breezily, pushing the boys aside as she made her way to their father. “I'm Dr. Dawson. I've been keeping an eye on you for the past couple of days.”

She produced a penlight, forcing open John's eyes and shining in the tiny beam until he was pulling his head back into his pillows in an attempt to escape her ministrations.

Examining the various machines positioned around John's bed, the doctor made her way down to his chart, snatching it up and examining it carefully before beginning to scratch out barely legible notes.

“You had us pretty flummoxed there for a while, Mr. Clapton,” she said, smiling up at him as she pushed her glasses back up her nose with one long finger.

“Damnedest thing. Don't get too many cases around here, so it wasn't until we saw the mosquito bite on your neck that we figured it out.”

“Mosquito bite?” Sam echoed, glancing from the doctor to his father. “You got bitten by a mosquito?”

John shrugged. “Not that I remember...”

“Not everyone knows when they've been bitten,” the cheery doctor said, and for some reason Dean's fingers drifted up to his neck where John remembered it had taken weeks for those bite marks to heal – the ones left by that witch back in – yeah, Georgia. It was definitely Georgia. '91? '92? “We did a couple of blood tests, and after that it was pretty straightforward.”

“It was?” Dean said. “Then how come no one told *us* that?”

The doctor blinked at him. “We only diagnosed him this morning Mr. Clapton,” she said, and John in his confused state wondered why she was calling everyone by the name of one of his favorite guitarists.

“So what's wrong with him?” Sam asked, attempting to diffuse the situation.

“West Nile Virus,” the doctor said breezily. “There are always a few cases in the Illinois area every year.” She inclined her head and shrugged. “Only takes one infected mosquito. Usually the infected person heals by themselves, but occasionally, if the strain is strong enough, they can fall comatose for a while. As long as they’re kept hydrated, in most cases their body repairs itself and they come out of it in their own time.”

“After they’ve had a good talkin’ to,” Missouri added under her breath.

Dean squinted at his dad incredulously. “*Dude!*” he burst out. “You got taken down by a *mosquito?*”

Sam snorted. “I *told* you it was a virus.”

“All right, Dr. House,” Dean returned, slapping his little brother across the back of his head. “Such a goddamn brainiac.”

“So when can I get out of here, Doc?” John asked, returning the young doctor’s bright smile.

“You’ll probably be okay to leave in a couple of days,” she told him. “I want to keep an eye on you a while longer, just until I’m satisfied the virus has completely left your system.”

“Thanks, Doc,” John said as the doctor spun on her heel and headed for the door.

“I’ll check back in on you in a couple of hours,” she said, again smiling brightly as she nodded at each of the people gathered in John’s room. “Don’t go anywhere, Mr. Clapton!”

Once the door had closed behind her, John’s lips twitched up at the corners. “Oh, you can count on it, Doc,” he said, motioning Dean to help him up. “Boys, what d’you say you get me the hell outta here?”

The End