

Season Four

Episode Eight: Family Album

By *irismay42*

Part One

Lynchburg, TN

The house was in darkness.

As houses went, it was fairly unremarkable: white clapboard walls, brightly colored porch, welcome mat laid out on the doorstep and a guttering porch light that finally spluttered and died in silence.

The inside of the house was no different: a welcoming foyer, thickly carpeted and warm despite the late hour, coat stand and shoe rack, photographs on the walls.

A lounge off to the right had pictures on the mantel of a handsome man, broad shouldered, dark haired and dark eyed, his attractive wife, blonde and demur, and their two small children, a boy and a girl, smiling out of their picture frames into the darkened room as a shadow fell across their adorable, cherubic faces.

The shadow, barely substantial, barely there, nevertheless paused in front of the photographs, long dark fingers gently caressing each picture before moving on, deeper into the house.

It hadn't found what it was looking for yet.

With a creak scarcely perceptible to human ears, the basement door slid open and the shadow slipped noiselessly inside, gliding down solid stone steps until it reached the concrete floor.

There was no light in the basement, but the shadow didn't need it to find what it was looking for, seemingly insensible to the skylight set high into the wall offering meager moonlight to illuminate its way. It turned slightly, the cold light of the full moon glancing briefly off jet black eyes, and the shadow creature blinked, following the slanting beam of pale white light to a trunk nestled in the corner of the room.

Shadowy fingers fumbled for a second with the metal catch, finally flipping open the lid and peering inside.

The trunk was full of knickknacks and keepsakes, almost as if someone's entire life—or the parts of it they wanted to remember—had been stored inside for many years, often forgotten, more often regarded with sadness and longing for a life left far behind, moments in time that could never be recaptured.

Barely substantial fingers caressed a well-worn baseball mitt in a child's size; a Father's Day card with the word "Daddy" scrawled across it in brightly colored

crayon; a dog-eared copy of Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham*; a silver charm bracelet; a school report card littered with "A"s.

Each trinket was regarded and discarded with disinterest until the shadow lit upon the item it was looking for.

At the bottom of the trunk was a large book covered with peacock blue satin, the words "Family Album" embossed in gold letters across the front.

The shadow creature flipped it open to the first page, running its fingers over pictures displayed in monochrome beneath the plastic: A young boy in short trousers beaming up at a tall, dark haired man in front of a car; the same boy, older, in uniform, standing proudly to attention; a group of soldiers smiling for the camera, a snapshot of doomed youth in a jungle destined to be their final resting place.

The shadow turned the page.

Yes. This is what it came for.

Softly, it began to mumble an incantation, strange words in an ancient language that gradually built in volume and intensity.

The edges of the photographs began to glow as the intruder continued its chant, fingers caressing the pictures as if they were long-lost friends, and as the words finally reached a crescendo, the shadow itself began to glow like the photographs at its fingertips, obsidian eyes reflecting the blinding light emanating from the pages of the album.

As the light increased in intensity, the entire basement seemed to bleach out to a blinding whiteness, a whooshing sound reverberating around the brick walls causing the items on the various shelves around the room to rattle and shake.

Then the light was gone.

And so was the shadow.

A faint glow lingered on one of the photographs: another handsome, dark-haired man, his beautiful blonde wife, a small boy and a baby, standing outside a house with a large tree behind them.

As the glow faded, a shadow passed behind the tree...

***Red Roof Inn,
Greenwood, IN***

"Hey, Cinderella, how about you curl your eyelashes *after* we've hunted this black shuck, huh?" Sam Winchester yelled through the flimsy plywood bathroom door as he carefully packed his belongings into the duffel his brother had slung onto the bed.

Dean made no reply, but the shower abruptly shut off and Sam snickered to himself.

Yeah, payback was such a *bitch*. Dean would think twice before calling him "Princess" again.

"Hold your horses, Princess, I'll be right out!" Dean summarily yelled back through the door, causing Sam to grunt as he resumed his packing.

He wasn't even sure they should be going on this hunt. It was only two weeks to the spring equinox after all, and they still had no clue how they were supposed to get their dad out of Stull when the gateway finally reopened. But while Dean was more than capable of research when he put his mind to it, right now Sam sensed his brother needed a distraction, anything to take his mind off what the hell they were going to do come March 20th.

The last time they'd heard from Bobby he'd assured them he was working on it, and Sam's own pile of hurriedly scribbled notes grew larger by the day. But they still didn't have the answer, and Sam figured if he didn't find a way to stop his big brother dwelling on that, Dean's head might just explode.

So a black shuck in Huntington, West Virginia would have to do.

"Dean!" Sam called again as his brother's cellphone began to belt out the chorus of Rainbow's *I Surrender*.

Getting no further response from his brother, Sam cast his eyes about the room and finally located his brother's cell on the opposite bed, partially submerged beneath a pile of randomly scrambled clothing. Reaching over, he snatched up the vibrating device, glancing a little furtively at the caller I.D. He generally avoided answering Dean's phone just in case he picked up one of those angry boyfriend or husband calls his brother seemed to receive so often.

However, instead of reading "Stacie" or "Candi" or "Trixee" or some other name Dean could barely remember programming into his cell, the caller I.D. came up "Unknown," and that was enough to pique Sam's interest.

Cautiously sliding open the cell, Sam offered a wary, "Hello?" as he steeled himself for an explosion of vitriol from the cuckolded partner of Dean's latest conquest.

However, considering how long it had been since Dean had actually shown any interest in extracurricular activities of that nature, Sam shouldn't have been surprised to hear a perfectly sane-sounding woman on the other end of the line. A woman who certainly seemed a little more *mature* than Dean's usual type.

"Is this Dean?" the woman asked a little hesitantly. "Dean Winchester?"

Sam froze.

Although he knew Detective Guevara had fixed Dean's police record months ago, Sam still couldn't get past cringing every time someone addressed either of them by their real name. Dean had been officially dead for a lot of years, and Sam guessed old habits died hard.

"Uh, no," he answered at length, glancing over at the still-closed bathroom door. "Dean can't come to the phone right now."

There was a pause and a tiny exhalation of breath on the other end of the line. "Sam?" the woman hazarded. "Sam, is that—is that you?"

Sam had to admit, he was a little thrown.

Someone neither Sam nor Dean knew but who appeared to know them, know their real names, knew Dean's cellphone number, calling them up out of the blue like this?

This *so* couldn't be good news.

"Who is this?" Sam asked slowly, trying to sound as unthreatening as possible but not entirely succeeding.

"My name—my name's Bonnie," the woman explained softly. "Reynolds. Bonnie Reynolds. I'm—I'm a friend of John's." She paused for a second, before adding, "Winchester. John Winchester."

The room seemed to slide sideways, and Sam had to grab hold of the bed to stop himself collapsing onto it. "How do you—how do you know John?" he asked, attempting to sound calm and composed, but pretty much sucking at that too.

There was another pause that seemed to last a little longer than the previous one.

"Are you Sam?" the woman asked again.

Sam hesitated, looking up as Dean finally emerged from the bathroom, a threadbare off-white towel slung around his hips, short hair sticking up in spikes as he rubbed at it with another towel which seemed in even worse shape than the first.

"Who you talking to?" Dean asked distractedly, stirring the discarded clothes around on his bed as if he was searching for something specific before suddenly looking up at Sam and blinking. "Who you talking to on *my phone*?" he added, apparently more than a little perturbed by the idea of Sam answering his phone, or talking on his phone, or, God forbid, calling a number stored in his phone.

Sam rolled his eyes at him. "Shhh!"

Dean rolled his eyes right on back. "Gimme," he insisted, holding out his hand for the cell.

Sam waved him into silence before returning his attention to the woman on the other end of the phone. "Yes," he admitted at length, finally replying to her question. "Yes, this is Sam."

Dean raised an inquisitive eyebrow, and the woman on the phone released what appeared to have been a long-held breath.

"Can I ask who you are exactly?" Sam continued.

"Bonnie," the woman repeated. "Call me Bonnie. Your dad and I—well, we're old friends. John gave me this number and told me to call his son Dean if I was ever

in any trouble and—and couldn't get hold of him." She paused again, drawing in a short breath. "Is—is he okay?" she asked hesitantly. "John? Your dad? Is he okay? I—I've been calling his number for a couple of days now and I—I was getting a little worried that he hasn't picked up."

The woman—Bonnie—sounded a whole lot more than "a little worried" to Sam, and Sam wasn't sure he wanted to dwell on that too much.

Instead, he distracted himself by idly wondering where John's cell might actually be right now, figuring his dad probably had it on him when...well. At Stull.

"He's—he's out of cell contact right now," he managed to reply, trying to be as vague as possible while not exactly lying to the woman. After all, if she really *was* a friend of Dad's, didn't she deserve some version of the truth? Even a sugar-coated version? "Can—can we help you?"

There was another pause, then an uncertain, "Is Dean with you?"

Sam's pause was even longer and more uncertain than Bonnie's had been. "Uh. Yeah, Dean's with me." His eyes locked with his brother's, and Dean frowned at him.

"Who is it?" Dean mouthed, a frown crinkling his forehead.

Sam shrugged, half expecting the woman on the end of the phone to hang up.

Instead, there was the tiniest of resigned sighs. "I think I have something you and your brother might want to see." Sam had no clue what Bonnie looked like, but right then he imagined her running a tired hand across a furrowed brow. "Can you—do you think you and your brother could come to Lynchburg? Right away?"

"Lynchburg?" Sam echoed. "Tennessee?" He glanced sideways at Dean, whose face had suddenly lit up like the night sky on the 4th of July.

"Home of my best buddy, Jack!" he burst out with a massive grin.

Sam frowned and put his hand over the phone's mouthpiece. "Jack?" he mouthed uncertainly.

Dean's grin widened. "Daniels, Sammy!" he burst out. "Jack Daniels!"

Sam shook his head. Looked liked the black shuck might have to wait.

"Uh, yeah, okay," he said into the phone. "You—uh—wanna give me your address, ma'am?"

"Bonnie. It's Bonnie," the woman corrected him, before proceeding to give Sam her street address. "And Sam?" she added, when Sam had taken down the details and assured her he and Dean would be with her asap. "Thank you. Thank you both."

Sam wasn't sure what to say to that. "Yeah. Yeah, that's okay. We'll see you soon, okay?"

"Thank you, Sam."

Bonnie sounded ridiculously grateful. And nervous. Grateful and nervous. And when she disconnected the call, Sam couldn't help thinking that wasn't the greatest of combinations. This could be a trap. She could be a demon. She could be one of Lucifer's flunkies... But she sounded scared, and she said she was a friend of Dad's...

"You know a Bonnie Reynolds?" Sam immediately asked Dean, tapping the notepad he'd used to scribble down the woman's address against his thigh in an uneasy tattoo.

Dean shook his head. "Nope. That the chick on the phone?"

Sam nodded. "Said she's a friend of Dad's."

"That how she got my number?"

"He told her to call you if—if she needed some help and couldn't get a hold of him."

"Huh." Dean pulled a vaguely cleanish t-shirt over his head. "Always the bridesmaid, never the bride."

"Dean."

"Yeah, okay," Dean conceded. "So what kind of 'friend' are we talkin' here?"

Sam sighed heavily, sinking down on his bed and running an uncertain hand through his hair. "Dad's not a monk, Dean," he pointed out, knowing he was stumbling right on into a minefield without any kind of exit strategy in place. "Even if he does still wear his wedding band."

"Sam." Dean just looked at him, his expression for a moment completely unreadable. "Look, as far as I know, Dad really *has* lived the life of a monk. Has done since the day Mom died."

"C'mon, Dean. You can't honestly believe he's not had other...liaisons."

Dean snorted. "No way, dude. He had a chick stashed in every port, I'd o' known about it."

"Look," Sam argued. "I'm just being realistic here, man. Just 'cause Dad never paraded any 'female company' around while we were growing up doesn't mean he never had any. Just means he was careful."

Dean shook his head and turned away, making a show of searching out clean jeans and underwear.

"Dean," Sam tried to regain the older man's attention, but Dean seemed to be finding his laundry pile a hell of a lot more fascinating than his little brother right about then. "Dean!" Sam repeated a little more forcefully, and Dean grudgingly looked back up at him. Sam sighed and shrugged his shoulders a little helplessly. "Dad has a lot of secrets, man."

Dean made no immediate reply, just returned to his inspection of his dirty clothes for a few long seconds. "He'd have told us," he finally said at length, his voice so low Sam barely heard him. "He'd have told us, Sammy."

Sam nodded silently, not wishing to shatter Dean's illusions regarding their father—or his devotion to their mother—with idle speculation. Bonnie could just be a friend after all.

"So we're going to Lynchburg?" he asked at last, looking up expectantly as Dean finally located an almost clean pair of jeans at the bottom of the laundry pile and pulled them free with a triumphant flourish.

"Home of Jack Daniels, man," Dean repeated with a grin that didn't quite make it all the way to his eyes. "God's own distillery."

Sam smiled weakly. Well at least it was better than Dean insisting they camp out at Stull cemetery for the next two weeks.

Taking that as an answer, he shrugged neutrally. "Okay then," he said, throwing the last of his clothes into his duffel. "I guess we're going to Lynchburg."

Lynchburg, TN

As drives went, this one had been pretty uneventful, Dean blasting out AC/DC at full volume all the way down the I-65, studiously refusing to discuss anything but bacon cheeseburgers and the weather, while Sam repeatedly threw him his standard emo *please can we talk about this?* bitchface every couple of miles, just in case he'd forgotten they were on their way to visit some chick who may or may not be Dad's girlfriend.

Wow. *Girlfriend*. That made Dad sound all of sixteen.

Dean had a hard time trying to imagine his dad as a teenager, so trying to imagine a sixteen-year-old Johnny Winchester engaged in extracurricular activity with a member of the opposite sex was damn near impossible. Not to mention, ew. It fair made his toes curl.

"Huh," he chuckled to himself, glancing at the street sign as he swung the Impala around onto Bonnie Reynolds' street. "Elm Street. Just as I was beginning to think this was all one doozie of a nightmare. Guess I was right."

"Dean," Sam said quietly, switching off his cellphone's GPS map locator which he'd insisted on using, even though Dean had assured him he wouldn't need it. "We don't even know who—what—we're dealing with here. Be nice."

Nice. Yeah, that pretty much summed up the neighborhood: the unremarkable little clapboard houses in their unremarkable little gardens full of unremarkable people. *Nice*. Yeah, the area was *nice*.

Dean shuddered as he pulled the Impala to a stop outside the address Bonnie had given Sam. This was all a little sitcom suburbia for him. Any minute now he expected to see the Cosby family come strolling down the street in matching sweaters, or one of the Cunningham kids heading off to feed the jukebox at Al's Diner.

He tried not to think about how much this house reminded him of their house back in Lawrence. Or, at least, the house back in Lawrence that still existed in the memory of a four-year-old kid.

He also tried not to think about the possibility his dad may have had a whole other family tucked away nice and safe out here in the 'burbs.

A whole other family neither Dean nor Sam knew about.

Dean shook his head decisively. *No*. Sam was being ridiculous.

Dad would have told them.

Dad would have told *him*.

This Bonnie was just a friend of John's. Nothing more. Just a friend. Just a friend who needed some help.

Just a friend whose existence John had kept hidden from his sons, possibly for years.

Although, the rational part of Dean's brain interjected, keeping Bonnie's existence on a need-to-know basis—and John obviously didn't think even his sons needed to know about her—had probably also kept her off the radar of all the vindictive creatures of the night who would have liked nothing better than to see the entire Winchester family—and anyone connected to them—dead.

Maybe that's why Dad didn't tell them? To protect Bonnie and her family?

Dean made a conscious effort to swallow the hard lump in his throat as he swung his legs out of the car and stepped onto the sidewalk outside Bonnie's picture perfect suburban house.

"It's nice," Sam muttered as he drew up to his shoulder, and Dean grunted dismissively.

"Sure, if you're one of the Bradys," he returned.

"Dean."

"Nice, nice, yeah I'll be nice, just like the house," he assured his brother, stepping onto Bonnie's driveway and faltering a little when he spotted the pristine 1966 Pontiac GTO parked on the red paving stones. While ordinarily he would have been drooling over such a fine example of American automotive artistry, the memory of the haunted Pontiac factory in Michigan was still a little bit too fresh in his mind for comfort.

He took a hesitant step backwards before giving the Pontiac a wide berth, Sam sniggering softly in his ear.

"Shut up, Sam," he muttered, casting his gaze over the slightly dented mailbox with the name "Reynolds" painted on the side in bright orange and the old basketball hoop rusting over the garage door. Huh. He guessed kids used to live here once.

Dad's kids?

Dean's jaw tightened, fists balling at his sides.

No way. No freakin' way.

Dad would have *told* them.

He was knocking on the front door of the Reynolds house before he even realized he'd reached the top of the drive, and when the door opened it suddenly occurred to him he had absolutely no idea what to say to the woman standing on the doorstep, a slightly nervous smile on her face.

She was in her late forties maybe, long blonde hair tied in a braid down her back, twinkling hazel green eyes and fair skin, and Dean had to look away from her for a second, swallowing hard and breathing a little too quickly while his heart did a mad tango in his chest.

He'd spent more time than he'd ever care to admit over the last twenty-six years trying to imagine what his mom would look like now if she was still alive. And the second he clapped eyes on Bonnie Reynolds he figured she must have popped right out of his subconscious and onto this doorstep in the middle of Elm Street, Lynchburg, Tennessee, the home of Jack Daniels.

Because if Mary Winchester were still alive? Dean was pretty damn sure she'd look a hell of a lot like this.

"You—you must be John's boys," the woman hazarded. She was looking at Sam as she spoke, but Dean was pretty sure she was including him in that statement too.

Sam cleared his throat, managing to find his voice before Dean had even thought of a coherent sentence. "Bonnie?" he said, holding out his hand, which Bonnie took gently between both of hers. "Hi, I'm Sam, this is my brother, Dean."

Bonnie smiled a little awkwardly, wrapping her hands around Sam's and nodding briefly at Dean before turning her attention back to the younger brother.

"I would have known you were John's, even if I just bumped into you in the street," she insisted, still not quite looking at Dean as she spoke.

What the hell *was* this strange effect Sam seemed to have on older women?

"Yes ma'am," Dean put in, finally finding his voice. "We're real chips off the old block."

Bonnie actually seemed to look at him for the first time then.

"You have your mom's eyes," she observed wistfully, which shut Dean right the hell up. "Your dad had—pictures..." she trailed off, glancing behind her before beckoning them into the house. "Where are my manners?" she said, her voice a little high-pitched. "Come on in now. Can't have you both standing out there on the porch all day!"

Sam immediately followed Bonnie into the house, Dean following Sam after a last wary look at the GTO.

The house was pretty much as Dean would have expected it to be from the looks of the outside: plain, pastel walls and simple furniture, a few mismatched ornaments scattered here and there.

What he hadn't expected was the salt line he and Sam had to step across to get inside, or the wards carved inconspicuously into the door frame.

Looked like Dad had done a pretty good job of teaching these folks how to protect themselves.

Following Sam into a moderately sized but comfortable living room, Dean felt his footsteps falter as he caught sight of the young man and woman sitting on one of the sofas, their expressions a little bit too unreadable for Dean's liking.

They were both about Sam's age, maybe a bit younger, the girl blonde haired with hazel green eyes like her mother, the boy darker with brown eyes that kind of reminded Dean of... *Oh hell no!*

"Sam, Dean, this is my son Chris and my daughter Amie."

Dean blinked a little uncertainly at the guy, who merely nodded his head in acknowledgement.

"Nice to meet you," he heard Sam say from somewhere a million miles off to his right as his vision tunneled and his chest constricted painfully.

Taking a breath, his attention skittered to the photographs on the mantel, a handsome, dark haired man with a woman who was clearly Bonnie a couple of decades earlier, and two little kids, a blonde girl and a dark haired boy whose brown eyes were the mirror of...his father's?

Dean sucked in a relieved breath.

If Dad had a type, then so, apparently, did Bonnie.

"Please sit." Bonnie's voice drifted back up to him, and Dean felt an insistent tug on his sleeve, looking down to see Sam making a face at him as if he was a space alien, or nuts, or both, as he pulled him down next to him on the sofa.

Dean favored his brother with a disgruntled scowl before turning a not-entirely-fake smile at Bonnie, who had perched herself on the edge of the opposite sofa, next to her daughter.

For a second no one spoke, the Winchesters just looking at the Reynolds, who just looked right on back.

Awkward.

"So how did you know our dad?" Dean's voice broke the uneasy silence, Dean himself not entirely sure where it had come from.

He felt rather than saw Sam wince next to him, but Bonnie just smiled fondly, obviously not taking Dean's question the same way Sam had.

"My husband," she said, twisting a gold wedding band around her finger before inclining her head toward the photographs on the mantel. "Andy. He was killed getting on for twenty years ago now. Thought it was an accident at the time—fell off the roof fixing a couple of loose tiles." She blinked a couple of times before smiling weakly. "You know to be honest I think I'd rather have stuck with the leaky roof." She was back to twisting her ring again, and Amie gently took her hand to still the movement.

Looking back up at the Winchesters, Bonnie continued her explanation. "It was a couple weeks after Andy passed that John—your dad—showed up on the doorstep asking some weird questions that honestly made me think he was a bit of a nut!"

Dean's smile was almost as sad as Bonnie's. "Yeah, that's the first impression he tends to give most people. Last impression usually involves firearms or the cops."

Bonnie's smile widened a little bit and she nodded. "I kinda sensed that about him," she agreed, nodding affectionately. "Anyway, he told me that Andy's was the fourth 'accidental' death in a two square mile area in as many weeks. Figured there was something in the neighborhood, maybe even something in this house—" she looked around herself wistfully. "Something that wanted us out. Or wanted us dead."

"Did Dad figure out what it was?" Sam asked, sitting forward slightly, his hands clasped together between his knees.

Bonnie nodded. "You know I never was much of a believer in ghosts and such like, but after meeting your dad?" She chuckled. "Well, he could make a believer out of anybody!"

"He can be pretty persuasive when he wants to be," Sam agreed with a wan smile, glancing sideways at Dean.

"And pretty charming," Bonnie added. "I was skeptical at first. He told me it was the spirit of William Richardson, a Confederate soldier who died up at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862. His brother Thomas was a Unionist, owned the house and the land that stood here back then. The spirit had apparently returned in search of his brother, somehow realized Thomas was long dead, and instead decided to find and kill his heirs, effectively erasing his brother's bloodline from history.

"None of the four men he killed—including Andy—was related in any way to Thomas Richardson. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. William was just systematically working his way through all the men living in the two mile plot of land that had been his brother's, just in case any of them were his heirs."

"Creepy, yet methodical," Dean commented. "Kinda like Sammy here."

"Hey!" Sam protested, and Dean grinned at him.

"Your dad put the soldier's spirit to rest," Bonnie continued. "Not sure how. Had something to do with his remains—"

"I thought at that time the remains of Confederate soldiers who died in battle were just left where they fell on the battlefield?" Sam put in.

Bonnie nodded. "Yes. That's why it took your dad a while to put him to rest."

"He salted and burned a whole battlefield?" Dean asked a little incredulously.

Bonnie shook her head. "Your dad performed some kind of cleansing ritual around the circumference of the land Thomas Richardson owned and the circumference of the battlefield. He said that was enough to lay the brother's spirit to rest."

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I've read about rituals like that. Never actually tried one though."

"Your dad—" Bonnie hesitated. "Well he told me he'd brought you boys up to know about all this supernatural stuff. Said you both helped out with the 'family business.'"

"Only way he could think of to keep us alive," Dean explained.

"I suppose," Bonnie agreed. "I think he had the same idea about us. Stayed in touch with me and my kids, tried to make sure we could protect ourselves."

Dean breathed out a mental sigh of relief. Bonnie had her kids *before* she met Dad. Dean knew the guy had his secrets, but no way would he keep something *that* big from him and Sam.

"Your dad was so good to us," Bonnie continued. "Looked out for us, came to visit whenever he could. Taught all three of us how to shoot. Taught Chris about cars."

"That your GTO out front?" Dean asked, his voice constricting a little in his throat.

Chris virtually beamed with pride. "Uh-huh. Used to be my dad's. John helped me fix it up. Showed me how to take care of it till I was old enough to actually drive it. Showed me *how* to actually drive it!" he laughed softly, and Dean didn't fail to notice the tiny crease that crinkled Sam's brow.

"Dad taught you to drive?"

"Mm-hmm," Chris confirmed. "Amie too."

Sam nodded stiffly, his mouth compressing into a line, and Dean wanted to make a joke of it, tell Sam he'd taught him to drive way better than Dad ever would have. He kinda sucked when he taught Dean.

But instead he just leaned slightly in Sam's direction, lightly brushing his shoulder with his own.

The obvious hurt in Sam's eyes dimmed a little. "Yeah," he said softly, only loud enough for Dean to hear. "I know."

"He taught us how to protect ourselves when he wasn't here," Bonnie continued. "Showed us how to lay salt lines. Draw wards to keep stuff out. Gave us the tools

to deal with whatever was out there in case it ever came knocking at our door again."

Dean cleared his throat as Bonnie trailed off, her eyes misting up. "He—he spend a lot of time here?" he asked as casually as he was able, and this time it was Sam's shoulder that bumped up against his.

Bonnie shrugged. "Whenever he could. Sometimes he'd show up for a couple of days, sometimes for a couple of weeks. Sometimes it'd be weeks between visits, sometimes longer. He always used to say we'd be surprised how much there was for him to hunt around here."

"Yeah," Dean agreed weakly, smile never faltering as he tried to remember how many times dad had brought him and Sam with him to Tennessee. Off the top of his head, he could only think of maybe two occasions, and one of those might have been when Dad first came here to deal with William Richardson's spirit.

Before Dean realized she'd moved, Amie had pulled a photograph from the mantel, one that had been tucked in a corner where Dean hadn't seen it.

"Here," she said, holding it out so the Winchesters could look. "I guess I was maybe nine or ten when this was taken."

Dean swallowed.

He didn't think he could remember Dad ever looking so happy. Except maybe in those photographs with Mom... There he was, arm slung around Bonnie's shoulder, the two kids in front. Just like the other pictures on the mantel, the ones with Bonnie's husband in them. Portraits. *Posed* portraits. Like Dad had gotten himself all cleaned up and actually gone to a photographer's studio with his surrogate family.

Dad should have *told* them, dammit...

"How long have you known him?" Sam suddenly asked, breaking in on his thoughts. "Our dad. I know you said your husband passed getting on for twenty years ago—"

"Andy died in 1994," Bonnie replied promptly. "Chris was ten and Amie was only seven." The wistful smile returned and she gently tucked a strand of her daughter's hair behind her ear. "In some ways, John's been more of a father to my kids than their own dad ever got the chance to be."

1994? John had been seeing this woman since 1994? *Sixteen years?* Since Dean was fifteen? When he was cutting class and flunking school because he was too busy taking care of Sam while Dad was off playing house with this woman and her two *normal* kids. All the Christmases he'd missed. All the birthdays. Was Dad *here* while his sons were taking care of each other because their dad had more important things to take care of? He'd always thought it was the job—the job always came first, before everything. But maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe it hadn't been the job that had kept Dad away all those times.

For a second he was so angry he wanted to smash something.

He took a breath, tried to look at Sam but couldn't.

So he'd been fifteen. Not like he'd been a little kid. He'd been more than capable of taking care of Sammy by that age—had been for years—and he and Sam got to do a hell of a lot of cool stuff John would never have allowed had he been around all the time. And it wasn't like John had taken off and forgotten about them. Sure, he'd had this second family he'd never told them about, but it's not like they were *blood* or anything. Not like Dean and Sammy.

He was rationalizing and he knew it. And when he finally plucked up the courage to steal a glance in Sam's direction, he could tell from the expression on his brother's face that Sam knew it too. And he'd not even said anything.

"Why didn't Dad tell us about you?" Sam finally asked the question Dean had been wanting to ask but hadn't had the stones to string the words into a sentence. "Why did he never bring us by here? Introduce us? Why the big secret?"

Bonnie shrugged. "Lord knows I asked him enough times," she said softly. "I mean, he talked about you boys all the time, showed me pictures, but—but whenever I asked him to bring you here he always made some excuse—you were in school, you had places to be. I couldn't understand it at first, but after a while, when I learned about what happened to your mom, what you'd all been through, I began to figure that maybe he wanted to keep the different parts of his life separate, compartmentalized. So that if anything happened to you boys, he'd still have us, and vice versa. As if he didn't dare have us all in one place just in case something happened to all of us and destroyed everything he had left. Like it did when he lost your mother."

Sam shook his head, his shoulders tense. "He still should have told us about you."

"Maybe," Bonnie agreed. "But I think he thought he was protecting you boys. You know? He always said you wanted a mom so bad, Sam, maybe he thought you might want to come here and then...then...I don't know. Something would happen to us. He's terrified of losing anyone else. Terrified."

Dean fleetingly wondered whether Dad had told Bonnie about the Curse, about Haris. About what Sam could do.

"Look," Bonnie ran a tired hand over her forehead. "I can't speak for your dad's motives. He plays things pretty close to his chest, always has. But—" she looked up suddenly, clearly upset and worried and scared out of her mind. "I just need you to tell me where he is; whether he's okay. Please. Just—just tell me. Even if it's bad. Please. Just tell me."

Bonnie obviously knew what John's "work" involved. She knew what he dealt with every day. But how to explain something like Stull to her?

"He's trapped," Dean began with a resigned sigh. "In a—well, it's a little like a doorway between—uh—"

"Different planes of existence," Sam offered. "Alternate universes? You know, there's this theory that there are an infinite amount of realities coexisting together and—and Dad—"

"Fell through a doorway into one of 'em," Dean finished.

Bonnie's expression remained stoically neutral, although Chris and Amie both fidgeted a little on the sofa. "Can you—can he get home?" she asked hesitantly, looking first to Sam and then to Dean. "Can you get him out?"

"We think so," Sam said, doing a pretty good job of sounding reassuring. "We hope so."

"The doorway opens again on March 20th," Dean added.

"Spring equinox."

"We think we'll be able to get him out then."

"How?" Chris asked, causing the boys to glance sideways at each other.

"Don't worry," Dean offered, smiling. "We'll figure something out. We always do. We'll get him back. Don't worry."

Bonnie laughed mirthlessly. "Don't worry?" she echoed. "The way you boys aren't worrying?"

Dean straightened. Was he that transparent? "We'll get him back," he asserted a little more forcefully. "We *will*. Only way this ends."

Bonnie seemed to take some comfort from that. "I believe you," she said earnestly.

Dean quirked an eyebrow. "You do?"

"I do," Bonnie confirmed. "'Cause you sounded just like your dad when you said it."

Dean's expression lightened a little. "I think I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was meant as one," Bonnie confirmed. "When your dad sets his mind to something, you better get out of his way and let him get on with it."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "Story of our lives."

Bonnie gently took the picture of John Amie still held, gazing at it briefly. "And his."

Sam broke the silence that followed. "So you were trying to get a hold of Dad?" he said, deftly changing the subject. "You said on the phone there was something we needed to see...?"

Bonnie nodded, rising slowly to her feet. "This way," she said, heading for the door.

Dean and Sam followed, Amie and Chris remaining in the living room.

They followed her into a homely kitchen, a big wooden dining table with a vase of daffodils in the center; more photographs of John and Bonnie and the kids scattered on the dresser.

She opened the kitchen door leading out onto a modestly-sized garden, indicating the unbroken salt line lacing the threshold. "I take all the precautions," she informed them. "Always keep the doors and the windows salted." She put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "I don't know how it got in."

Dean frowned. "How *what* got in?"

Bonnie turned to close the door without answering, showing them instead to another door which appeared to lead down into the basement. "This way."

It was like any other basement Dean had ever been in—stone steps, slightly uneven, leading down to a concrete floor and a room full of crap. Older crap, newer crap. The kind of crap people kept in their basements. A washer and a dryer.

And a trunk thrown open in the far corner, US Marine Corps issue.

"John asked if he could leave some of his things here," Bonnie was saying, heading straight for the trunk. "Clothes, books. Some other little knickknacks. And this wooden box full of photographs that he kept in the back of his truck."

"I remember that," Dean told her. "Jenny, the lady that—that used to live in the house in Lawrence where our mom died, found it in her basement."

"That's the one," Bonnie confirmed. "For John's birthday a couple of years ago I decided to make a photograph album for him," she said. "Put in the pictures from that box, some others he had in this trunk of his—pictures from when he was a kid, his mom and dad, his buddies from the Corps, Mary." She laughed softly. "He had a lot of pictures of you boys. From before the fire and after."

"He told you about the fire?" Sam asked.

"Mm-hmm," Bonnie said. "Not sure he told me everything, but he told me the basics. About how he found your mom..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "Twenty years later, he still could barely talk about it. Talked about you two instead. Showed me these pictures—" she turned her attention to Dean, "—of you driving that big old Impala of his when you were about ten. Sam's graduation."

Sam seemed surprised. "He kept my graduation picture?"

"A couple of different ones, yeah," Bonnie said. "He was so proud of you boys."

Sam sniffed and rubbed at his eyes a little, and Dean shoulder-checked him.

"Girl."

"Ass," Sam returned wetly.

Dean grinned before turning back to Bonnie. "Always wondered what he did with all that stuff. Figured he must be stashing it someplace."

"I think he has other hidey-holes," Bonnie commented wryly. "But he kept some of his most precious things here." She indicated the open trunk.

And the open photograph album lying in front of it.

Dean squinted.

The *glowing* photograph album.

“What the...?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Bonnie agreed, finally coming to a stop a couple of feet away from the thing. “Can’t explain it. John always kept it at the bottom of his trunk. Last time he looked at it was probably the last time he was here—last March or April maybe. Yesterday morning, I woke up to find the basement door open and the album lying on the floor like this, glowing. At first I thought I’d been burgled, but there’s no sign of forced entry, the salt lines are all intact, nothing’s missing and this seems to be the only thing that’s been touched.”

Dean took a step toward the album, but Bonnie caught his arm. “Careful,” she said urgently. “Anything happened to you boys in my house I’d never be able to live with myself.”

Dean smiled reassuringly at her. “Family business, remember?” he reminded her.

“Then you’ve seen something like this before?”

Sam coughed. “Not exactly.”

Taking another step forward, Dean bent over to examine the album a little more closely, immediately recognizing one of the photographs staring up at him from the open page: Mom, Dad, Dean when he was a little kid and Sammy when he was a baby. He swallowed. Part of him hated that photo. Remembered Dad just staring at it for hours on end in the months after the fire. It had been stuck in the cover of his journal until Sam had that weirdo vision that had led them back to Lawrence, to their old house, to Jenny and her kids and Missouri.

He didn’t really remember the photograph being taken, but he’d looked at it enough times since Jenny gave that other copy back to them to know every last detail of it by heart.

Bending a little lower, he frowned at the dark shape lurking behind the big tree in the background. That wasn’t there last time he—

“Dean, I don’t think—”

Dean reached out toward the faintly glowing pages.

“Dean, wait, don’t touch it!”

But Sam’s warning came too late, Dean’s fingers already having grazed the plastic.

There was a blinding flash, and Dean felt Sam’s fingers gripping his arm, trying to pull him back, so tight it hurt, and it was as if he was teetering on the edge of a canyon, Sam pulling him one way while gravity pulled him the other.

Gravity won.

He was falling, and it was dark and the wind was rushing past his ears, and then there was something solid at his back, something solid and hard, and he was pretty sure he banged his head.

Then he was lying on something soft.

Taking a breath as his heart tried to tango right on out of his chest, he gingerly opened one eye. Then the other. Only to find himself staring up at the roof of the Impala.

What the hell? Did he fall asleep in the car? Did he dream Bonnie and her kids and their suburban house with their suburban garden and their GTO and their freaky photo album?

"Dean?"

Sam's voice.

"Sammy?"

Dean bolted upright, his head swimming a little as he attempted to follow the direction of his brother's voice.

Sam was lying on the backseat of the old Chevy, one arm slung over his eyes. "Oh man, got any Dramamine?" he asked mirthlessly, and Dean had to admit, he did look a little green around the gills.

"Okay, I think I just had the trippiest dream ever," Dean confessed, casting his eyes around the car nervously. "I dreamt we were in some woman's basement and she showed us a photo of Mom and Dad and it was glowing, and...and...now we're in the Impala."

"We're in the Impala?"

Sam finally removed the crook of his elbow from his eyes, looking up at Dean uncertainly.

"We're in the Impala."

"Dean, I remember Bonnie's basement too. You weren't dreaming, man. You reached down to touch the photo album, and I tried to grab you, and...and..."

"We're in the Impala."

Dean rubbed at his eyes, half expecting his car to disappear only to be replaced once again by Bonnie's basement. But as he looked around, he realized he was still in the old Chevy, which looked exactly the same as it always did.

Apart from the old radio cassette player in the dashboard.

Sam replaced that with a CD player years ago, right? After they got turned into a pretzel by the semi? And he would swear a couple months ago he remembered Sam adding that fancy gizmo for plugging in his MP3 player.

He scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Sammy?" he asked, fishing around under the seat for his box of beloved cassette tapes, which also appeared to be missing. "I didn't dream you putting a CD player in my car either, did I?"

Sam's head and torso suddenly sprang up from the backseat, and he was squinting uncertainly at him. "Huh? Man, did we *both* hit our heads or something?"

"Look at this." Dean waved in the general direction of the dashboard. "And my cassettes are gone."

"Well don't look at me. I know I've been *telling* you to get rid of them since we got the CD player, but I value my life too much to mess with your Metallica."

Dean popped open the glovebox, peering inside a little apprehensively. "Dude, my IDs are gone too," he told his brother, feeling around for the cigar box in which he kept the laminated cards. "All that's left in here's a flashlight, a roll of Life Savers and a pacifier."

"A what?" Sam blinked at the bright blue rubber and plastic item Dean was holding.

"There's a pacifier in my car, Sam." Dean threw the offensive item back into the glovebox disgustedly. "Why's there a pacifier in my car?"

Sam grimaced uncomfortably, reaching underneath himself and pulling out an obviously well-loved teddy bear, one eye missing and mostly pretty threadbare. "Man, you have a kid while I wasn't lookin'?"

Dean drew in a sharp breath. "Mr. Teddy?" he murmured, snatching the bear out of Sam's hand and examining it incredulously.

"Mr. Teddy?" Sam snorted.

Dean scowled at him. "Sam, I remember this thing. This was *my* teddy bear!"

"When, last week?"

"No, dumbass, when I was a kid. Y'know. Before. Took it to bed with me every night until...until the fire. Used to pretend he was one of those 'angels watching over me' Mom always insisted were hanging around someplace."

Sam didn't even try to hide the smirk breaking out on his face. "You had a teddy bear? Aw, Dean, that's adorable."

"Sam, listen to me!" Dean said, barely keeping the panic out of his voice. "That thing burned up in the fire! Understand? It *burned* Sam! I left it in my room when

I heard—when I heard Mom—when I heard—when I got you out of the house, and when Dad went back a couple days later, he said it was gone.”

Sam instantly sobered. “Seriously?”

“Seriously, Sam.”

“Man, what the hell’s going on here?”

“You got me.”

Dean cast his gaze out of the front windshield, desperately trying to figure out where—when?—they were.

It was autumn beyond the Impala’s windows, the leaves were a golden brown and gently falling from the trees. The Chevy was parked on a suburban street, not unlike the one where Bonnie lived, and Dean got the distinct impression he’d been here before.

Wait.

Dean remembered this street. He remembered parking in this exact spot four years earlier, that first time he and Sam visited Jenny and her family after Sam dreamed about the tree and the house...

The house.

It took him several seconds, but he finally managed to screw up the courage to look at the house.

It was their house.

The one he’d lived in until he was four. The one Jenny had lived in until last year, when Mia finally razed it to the ground.

It looked perfect. The way it looked in his memory. Not his memory of four years ago, but his memory of *before*. When he was a kid. Just like it had looked in that photo, the one he’d been looking at when...

“Sam,” he said quietly. “I think we’re home.”

“What?”

“Home, Sam. Lawrence. We’re home.”

“How can we be in Lawrence, Dean? We were in Tennessee a couple of minutes ago!”

Dean shook his head, finally tearing his eyes away from the house, and for the first time noticing the people standing on the lawn out front. The lawn where he’d stood with baby Sammy in his arms all those years ago as his mom burned up in the nursery.

“That’s Mike Guenther.”

Dean wasn't sure why he recognized Dad's former business partner and best friend first. He was slimmer and a whole lot younger than he had been four years ago when he and Sam had spoken to him at the garage he and Dad used to run together.

"Get in a little closer will you?" the mechanic said, squinting through the viewfinder of an ancient-looking camera at the family of four arranged on the lawn in front of the tree.

"Any closer and I'll have to marry her!" the guy on the lawn said, turning to the woman and grinning. "Oh wait, I already did that!"

"John, just do like Mike tells you for once, huh?" the woman chided him playfully. "Sammy's getting heavy. Not sure I can hold him up here much longer!"

"Holy crap," both Dean and Sam managed to mutter in unison.

"Dean..." Sam whispered. "Dean, that's *us*. That's Dad and—and *Mom*, Dean!"

Dean nodded dumbly, taking in the sight of his parents, his baby brother and *himself* standing right there on the lawn, not twenty feet from where they were sitting, posing for the very photograph Dean had just been looking at in Bonnie's basement, the one in John's journal, the one Jenny had found: "The Winchesters. John, Mary, Dean and little Sammy..."

And he began to wonder whether they'd fallen back through Stull's revolving door into unreality.

Reynolds House Lynchburg, TN

"They *what*?"

Bonnie wasn't entirely sure Chris believed her.

"I'm not making this up, Christopher," she insisted a little haughtily, pulling out her cellphone and frantically scrolling through her contact numbers.

"You're *serious*?" Amie burst out. "They fell *into* the photo album?"

She and Chris were standing staring down at the still-glowing photo album, both seeming to be keeping a safe distance despite their obvious skepticism.

"Yes, Amie. John's boys fell into the photo album. One minute they were here, the next minute they weren't."

For a second, she turned her attention away from her cell and back to the album, squinting down at the photograph of the Winchester family in front of that big spooky-looking tree.

Something dark seemed to move to the left of the frame, and she blinked. When she opened her eyes again, the shadow she would swear she had seen was gone,

and she was left looking down at a picture of John and his dead wife smiling into the camera.

"Okay," she muttered, dragging in a breath and trying to think for a minute. "Ordinarily, something this weird happened—"

"You'd call John," Chris finished for her, bending to look a little more closely at the photograph.

Amie caught his arm and pulled him back, smiling sheepishly. "Doesn't hurt to be cautious," she told him. "It may sound crazy, but a lot of what John's told us is pretty whacked too, right?"

"Mom, we need to get some help, here," Chris informed his mother a little redundantly. "Maybe we should call the cops?"

"And tell them what?" Amie demanded. "Our mom's boyfriend's sons just fell into a photo album?"

"I only meant—"

"Kids, be quiet," Bonnie hushed them suddenly, finally finding the number she'd been looking for in her contact list. "John gave me one other number to try in case of emergency. I think this qualifies as an emergency."

Winchester house Lawrence, KS

It was getting dark and Sam and Dean had nowhere to go.

They'd been skulking around their old house for a while now, hiding in the Impala until the family on the lawn—*their* family—had gone back into the house, before figuring they'd better shag ass out of there before someone saw them and called the cops.

Someone like Mike Guenther, who'd looked at them very strangely as he'd left their old house, crossing the street to avoid them, and then glancing over his shoulder every couple of feet as he'd made his way back to his own house a few blocks away.

"This is stupid," Dean growled, once again bashing his fist against the invisible barrier barring his and Sam's path.

They'd tried to do the sensible thing, tried to retreat to a safe distance while they regrouped to figure out what the hell was going on, but the universe seemed to have other ideas, and they couldn't get any further than a few feet along the sidewalk in either direction of their old house before they hit one of these stupid invisible barriers.

Dean smacked his fist against it one more time, and when it still didn't give, he virtually growled.

"Okay, let's think," Sam said, pacing backwards and forwards along the sidewalk. "We can get across the street to—"

"Old Mr. Russell's house," Dean supplied absently, dragging a hand through his hair.

"Right," Sam conceded. "But we can't get further than a few feet in either direction on this side of the street either, almost as if we're stuck in—"

"The photo," Dean said suddenly.

Sam looked up at his brother's apparent revelation. "The what?"

"The photo," Dean repeated, suddenly dropping down onto the curb outside the Russell house and staring across the street toward the place where he'd spent the first four years of his life. "Sammy, I think we're in the photo."

Sam sat down heavily by his side, saying nothing, but turning his gaze in the direction of his brother's, the two of them staring at the only childhood home they'd ever known as the lights came on in the living room, then in one of the upstairs rooms.

"That's your nursery," Dean murmured, resting his elbows on his knees while he cupped his chin in his hands. "Sammy—"

"What do you mean we're in the photo?" Sam interrupted, his voice soft, his eyes still focused on the house across the street.

"The photograph I was looking at—the one I touched before we wound up here," Dean explained, sighing lightly. "It was the one Jenny found—the one from Dad's journal. Mom and Dad and me as a kid and you as a baby standing in front of that tree, in front of that house. The picture we saw Mike Guenther take this afternoon. Sam, we can't go any further down the street because we can't go outside the photograph—a couple of feet to either side of the house."

"Wait," Sam held up a hand, his scrutiny shifting to his brother. "You're actually saying—you're saying we're *in the photograph*? As in—*really* in it?"

Dean shrugged, still not turning his gaze away from the house. "Stranger things have happened, man," he pointed out. "And someone—*something*—messed with Bonnie's photo album. *Dad's* photo album. Maybe they put a whammy on it—some kind of mojo that—"

"Pulled us into the picture?" Sam asked a little incredulously. "So...so you're saying this was a trap? Someone lured us to Bonnie's house with the express purpose of trapping us in her photograph album? C'mon, man! Not only is that—y'know—nuts, but how could anyone know Bonnie would call us?"

"With Dad missing?" Dean sighed again. "Who else would she call?" He shook his head. "I dunno, man. It's the best I got. This is our house. This is the house Mom died in. That was Mike Guenther taking that picture, the same picture Jenny found in Dad's box in the basement of the same house we're looking at right now. It's gotta mean something, Sam! Coincidence I get, but this? This is more than that. Plus..."

"Plus what?" Sam looked up sharply.

"Plus... When we were in Bonnie's basement I—I thought I saw something in the picture. A shadow. Something. Something moving. That's why I wanted to take a closer look."

"So you think something *else* is in here with us?"

Dean shrugged. "Maybe."

Sam drew in a long breath. "You know this makes no sense, right?"

"Sammy, when did our lives *ever* make sense?"

"True," Sam conceded. "So...not that I'm completely convinced by your theory," he said slowly. "If we *are* inside the photograph, how come we can get across the street? That wasn't in the picture either."

"Maybe because we're behind where Mike was standing when he took the photograph?" Dean hazarded. "The picture's only two dimensional, right? There's left and there's right, but there's not forward and backwards. So maybe as long as we're looking in the same direction the camera was looking, we can move in that direction."

Sam raised a skeptical eyebrow. "So can we go *behind* the house? That's the direction the camera was pointed."

"Good question," Dean conceded. "The camera couldn't see behind the house." He drew himself to his feet, having to look away and back to his brother when he noticed his mom drawing the curtains across the nursery window. "Maybe we should go check?"

Sam stood, nodding slightly. "Okay. Although we could get ourselves arrested if Dad catches us."

"Yeah we could," Dean agreed. "But where the hell are the cops gonna take us if we can't leave the photo?"

"True," Sam said. "Could make for an interesting experiment, actually."

"I don't recommend it," Dean returned, crossing the road and casually checking out the lay of the land before wandering up onto the Winchesters' front lawn as if he owned the place.

Sam followed him, hands in his jeans pockets as he rounded his shoulders, fairly ineffectually attempting to make himself look smaller.

Stealthily, they made their way around the back of the house, Dean pulling up short when he hit the back fence.

"Can't get any further," he informed Sam, pushing his hand against the air above the wooden slats only to find the same invisible resistance they'd encountered out on the street.

"And we definitely can't get around back of the house," Sam added, tugging on Dean's sleeve.

Dean followed the direction of his brother's gaze, sucking in a breath when he checked out the back of the house.

Or the big black hole of nothingness where the back of the house should have been.

"Holy crap," Dean muttered, taking a step toward the pool of blackness where the garden should have stood.

"Dean, don't," Sam warned, and for once Dean heeded his little brother's advice, drawing back from the area of darkness.

It was as if the rear of the house was composed of precisely nothing, or maybe more accurately, the absence of anything, a place devoid of definition because the camera hadn't been able to see what was back here simply because the house itself was in the way.

Yet in the far distance, on the other side of the house, the other side of the garden, fences and gardens and neighboring houses were clearly visible, the edges of the area caught in the camera's lens.

It was as freaky as all hell, and Dean shuddered.

"Let's get out of here," he suggested, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets and trying to pretend this didn't freak him the hell out.

He made a move toward the front of the house, but suddenly Sam grabbed his sleeve again.

"Dean, wait."

Dean glanced back at his brother, who was squinting into the patch of darkness where the back garden should have been.

"Sam?"

His brother frowned minutely. "I thought I saw something," he muttered. "Something moving. Almost like—like a shadow within a shadow. Like I could only see it when I wasn't actually looking at it."

Dean turned to scrutinize the spot Sam was staring at, but couldn't see a damn thing, and eventually Sam laughed hollowly and shook his head.

"Jumping at shadows," he said. "Literally. C'mon, let's go."

Dean continued to stare at the shadows for a couple more seconds, before reluctantly accompanying his brother back out onto the street.

Once there, they again assessed their surroundings, wondering what the hell they were going to do next.

"Man, someone's gonna call the cops if we hang around out here much longer," Sam pointed out, fidgeting nervously from foot to foot. He shoved his hands

under his armpits, and it was only then that Dean realized how cold it was getting out here.

"Just our luck we couldn't get sucked into a photograph of a tropical beach in summer," he grumbled, taking a few paces to the right, before returning to his starting position with a grunt. "Okay look, we wanna avoid getting arrested out here, I think our only option is the Impala. It's not locked. It's warmer in there than it is out here—barely. And if we keep our heads down, maybe we can hole up there till we work out how the hell to get out of this place..."

"And how long's that gonna take?" Sam asked. "Dean, we could be stuck here! I mean, *really* stuck here! What if we can't get back?"

"We'll burn that bridge when we come to it, Sammy," Dean said, making his way back to the Chevy, still sitting patiently by the side of the road. "But for right now? I call front seat."

* * * *

It wasn't like they'd never slept in the Impala before, Dean told himself, staring up at the vinyl ceiling and trying to slow his breathing to the tempo of Sam's soft snores emanating from the back.

Still, this was different. The Impala was different. For all Dean knew, history was different, just for them being here.

Was that even possible? Had they really travelled back in time? Could a photograph do that? Capture a moment, freeze it, enable someone with the right words, the right herbs, the right knowhow, to create a link to another time, another place? Deposit a person in any particular moment in history as long as that moment had been captured by the lens of a camera?

That was pretty wacky, even for them.

He tried to remember when that photograph had been taken: The Winchesters. John, Mary, Dean and little Sammy. He didn't think it was long before the fire, but he was just a little kid, and little kids had no real concept of time at that age.

He needed to sleep. Go to sleep. Don't think about it for a couple of hours. In the past, he'd come up with some of his best solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems while he was sleeping.

Just sleep. Listen to Sam breathing. Breathe with Sam. Go to sleep...

There was a noise.

Dean bolted upright, no idea how long he'd been out, if he'd actually been sleeping. Whether he'd dreamt the noise. Whether he was dreaming now.

Trying to get his bearings, he cast his gaze about himself, taking in the interior of the Impala, Sam still asleep on the backseat, all ungainly limbs and floppy hair.

The street outside was quiet, the streetlight casting a puddle of orange along the empty sidewalk.

It was dark.

Nothing was moving.

He took a breath and glanced at his watch: 11.25pm.

Rubbing at his eyes, he absently wondered to himself why that time sounded somehow familiar.

Trying to dislodge the fuzz of fatigue and worry from his brain, his attention wandered to the Winchester house, a light snapping on upstairs in the nursery, the flickering illumination of a TV bleeding out through the living room curtains.

The shadow lurking by the front door.

He sat up a little straighter, squinting into the darkness as he remembered the shadow he thought he'd seen when he'd been looking at the photograph in Bonnie's basement; at the shadow Sam thought he'd seen behind the house.

Something was there. Something was at the front door of the house.

And it was moving.

Dean's frigid fingers fumbled for the handle behind him, opening the car door as silently as he was able and sliding his feet out onto the asphalt.

"Dean?"

Sam was stirring in the backseat, and he turned to see his brother sit up, eyes muddled with sleep and bangs falling in his eyes, just as he heard a click from the direction of the house.

Attention snapping back to the front door, Dean's brain rapidly identified the sound he had just heard as he squinted into the darkness: it was the sound of a key turning in a lock.

The shadow on the doorstep moved very slightly and there was a glitter of something shiny, something small, maybe a key in long shadowy fingers.

Dean crouched lower as he moved around the front driver's side wing of the Impala, trying to keep the big Chevy between himself and whatever it was that was lurking outside his childhood home.

"Dean?" Sam said again, the back door opening with a creak just as a pair of jet black eyes turned in Dean's direction.

Dean froze, ducking his head as another sound reached his ears, chilling the blood in his veins and making his heart thud against his ribs.

His mother was screaming.

And he couldn't move. He couldn't move and that thing, the thing on the doorstep, was just looking at him.

"Mary!" John's terrified yell filtered out through the brick and the glass and the lawn was lit up orange and Dean could hear his dad's scream, desperate and horrified. "Mary!"

Just like before.

Just like the first time he'd heard it.

And somehow he was standing on the lawn with no idea how he got there, a part of him not daring to look up because he knew what he was going to see if he did.

Just like before.

He didn't need to look at his watch to know the time. It was 11.27pm. 11.27pm on November 2nd, 1983.

When he finally plucked up the courage to raise his eyes to the window of Sam's nursery, he could see flames licking their way across the ceiling, the curtains catching alight as his mother burned above his baby brother's crib.

He swallowed hard, trying to breathe, trying to move, to help, to run, to do *something*, but he couldn't, he couldn't move, his legs were Jell-o and he could sense Sam standing behind him yelling at him, but he couldn't seem to make out a word he was saying.

And the obsidian eyes blinked at him once before the shadow moved, quickly, rushing away toward the back of the house as Sam sprinted after it while Dean just stood there looking up at the nursery window, a horrible sense of *déjà vu* invading his senses.

Can't move. Can't think. *Can't be here*. Not again.

It was as if everything had stopped, time, space, sound, the flames in the window above his head, everything stopped until all he could hear was the hammering of his heart, echoed by an insistent hammering on the front door of the house and the terrified voice of a little boy screaming, "Daddy! Daddy!" at the top of his lungs.

Little boy's voice.

Dean's voice.

"Daddy!" the little boy screamed. "Daddy, it's locked, the door's locked and there's no key! Daddy! We can't get out!"

Dean heard his younger self screaming for his father from the other side of the door, heard his baby brother howling in terror, his dad yelling and glass breaking and a sickening realization suddenly hit him. What that shadow had been up to. What was happening here.

The shadow creature had locked the door. It had locked the door and taken the key.

Dean tried to think, tried to remember. The door had been unlocked. When he'd run downstairs with Sammy in his arms and the flames flickering above his head and his mom screaming while his dad yelled out her name. The door had been unlocked. The door had been unlocked and he'd taken his brother outside, just like his dad had told him to.

But that shadow creature... it had locked the door.

Locked Dean's younger self inside.

Dean couldn't get out of the burning house.

And if Dean couldn't get out, neither could Sam. Neither could Dad...

Part Two

Winchester house Lawrence, KS

Dean wondered whether this was how it felt when your brain melted.

He seemed completely incapable of rational thought, standing there on the lawn of his old house in Lawrence, looking up at the flames blackening the window of Sammy's nursery, hearing his mom's screams, his dad's screams...and the screams of his four-year-old self begging for someone to unlock the front door and let him and his baby brother out of their burning house.

He was pretty sure the universe would forgive him needing to take a minute.

"Please, Daddy—somebody—please, we can't get out!" he heard his younger self pleading, and suddenly a switch seemed to flip in his head, the paralysis that had gripped his body abruptly releasing him, and he found himself bolting for the front door of the house, rational thought and his own sense of mental wellbeing be damned.

"Kid, get back!" he yelled, praying the little boy—his four-year-old self—inside the house could hear him. "Get away from the door!"

Not waiting for an answer, he barreled into the door, ramming the wood with his shoulder and every ounce of bodyweight and inertia he could put behind it.

The door didn't budge and Dean took a breath, trying not to think about that night over four years ago when the poltergeist had trapped his little brother in Jenny's kitchen and he'd had to take an axe to the front door to get inside.

His eyes skittered to the Chevy parked on the street and he doubted very much there was an axe hidden in the trunk.

And this time, he reminded himself, not only did he need to save his little brother, he needed to save *himself* too.

If little Dean and baby Sammy died here tonight, Dean wasn't entirely sure what would happen: to him, to Sam. To history. If they were really here in 1983, if this really was the past, could whatever happened tonight affect their own future? Would they even have a future?

He shuddered, glancing longingly over his shoulder at the Impala before returning his determined gaze to the couple of inches of wood standing between himself and his family.

Okay, no axe. But that door was coming *down*.

Taking a few steps back, Dean made a run at it, bringing his foot up at the last minute and kicking out at the door with a heavily-booted heel.

A satisfying crack was followed by his foot going through the wood, which threw him off balance for a second before he could extract his foot and give it another try.

This time the door flew open with a *thunk* and the heat of the blaze almost knocked him flat on his back.

Dean dragged in a couple of gasps of air, the heat instantly searing his lungs while the thick smoke made his eyes water mercilessly.

Yeah, it was definitely the smoke making him tear up.

Blinking hard, he threw himself into the doorway, only to find himself repulsed by the same invisible barrier that had earlier denied him and Sam escape from the confines of the photograph.

"Dammit!" he swore, the smoke already getting into his airway and causing him to choke.

Had to get Sammy out. *Take your brother outside, Dean...*

"Kid!" he yelled, pressing himself right up against the barrier and trying to peer in through the smoke. "Kid, where are you?"

A tiny coughing sound caused his eyes to travel to an end table by the couch, polished surface already cracking, and a lamp Dean remembered his mother lighting every evening when the sun went to bed tipped over onto its side, the glass shade blackened and broken.

Beneath the table, his younger self huddled, small arms full of baby brother, eyes huge and terrified.

"It's okay, kid," he heard himself saying, his voice as rough as sandpaper. "It's okay. Don't be scared. I'm here to help you."

Four-year-old Dean just stared at him, green eyes so familiar and yet so completely alien, as if the things Dean Winchester had seen in the time that had passed between then and now had forever dulled the windows to his soul.

Or maybe it was his soul itself that had become tarnished.

Whatever the explanation, for the first time in a long time Dean could see innocence in his own eyes, innocence and guilelessness and a desperate need to trust a stranger.

Had he ever been this young? This childlike?

And yet still the kid didn't move.

Because the boy *didn't* trust him. And he didn't trust him because he didn't know him.

Even back then, even before the fire and the demon and the monsters in the closet, Dean's Prime Directive had been the same: *Look out for Sammy.*

And that was why the little boy hesitated, why his arms tightened around the baby clutched protectively to his chest. Why he wouldn't move when the stranger on the doorstep told him to.

Dean understood. He did. He *really* did. But right now, his own Big Brother Prime Directive was going to get his little brother killed. Not to mention *himself*.

He tried softening his tone, crouching down so he was at eye level with the kid—*me*, he reminded himself—trying to make himself look smaller, less intimidating.

"Kiddo, it's okay. I'm here to help you and your brother," he said, beckoning the boy toward him. "It's okay. Just come toward me, okay? I won't let anything hurt you, I promise."

The kid's eyes skittered behind him, to the stairs, to the sounds still coming from above.

"Mary!"

Dean heard his dad's anguished cry, and no matter how deeply he'd buried the memories of that terrible night, part of him realized he remembered hearing his father screaming his mother's name as if it was the last word he ever intended to say in this life or the next.

Shuddering despite the intense heat, Dean held out his hands toward the child. "C'mon, kiddo," he continued to cajole. "It's okay. Just come outside with me, then I can go help your dad, okay?"

The kid under the table continued to stare at him with those wide, frightened eyes, not moving, not exhibiting the slightest sign he'd even heard him.

This was getting him nowhere.

"Dean, you take your brother outside right now, you hear me?" Dean barked, sounding so much like John Winchester he almost turned around expecting to see his dad standing on the lawn behind him.

But it did the trick.

Four-year-old Dean was on his feet, scrambling out from under the table, his arms still wrapped protectively around his little brother as he tottered purposefully in Dean's direction.

Unsure of what else to do, the older version of Dean held out his hands toward his younger self, finally hauling the little boy over the threshold of the house and onto the porch, Sam slipping slightly in the kid's grasp.

"Here, lemme help—" Dean began, reaching out to take the baby.

But his younger self had other ideas, skittering back a couple of steps and shaking his head insistently as he clutched the baby tighter to his chest. "Daddy told *me* to take my brother outside," the kid informed Dean shortly, keeping Sam out of his reach with a steely resolve. "I'm s'posed to take care of him."

"Uh—" Dean stammered. "I—okay..."

"Have to get him away from the house," younger Dean added, before barreling right on past his older self, willfully determined to get his little brother to safety just as his dad had instructed him.

Blinking, Dean spun to follow him. "Hey kid! Wait!" he burst out, but little Dean just kept on going until he was sure he and his baby brother were safe, only then stopping to turn wide eyes up to the nursery window.

"It's okay, Sam," Dean heard the four-year-old cooing to the baby, his voice trembling a little as nervous fingers twisted in his brother's blanket. "Don't be scared. Daddy's coming."

And before Dean knew what had hit him, Daddy was *right there*, John Winchester bolting out of the house and almost knocking him off his feet in his urgency to get to his kids, grabbing the boys and scooping them both up into his arms protectively.

"I gotcha," he reassured his older boy, sprinting away from the house just as an explosion ripped through the air above their heads, glass raining down where they'd just been standing as the nursery window blew out and tendrils of flame clawed hungrily at the night sky.

Dean fell backwards, landing hard on the soft grass, his gaze stuttering between the window above his head and his younger self and his baby brother, now safe in their father's arms. He was unsure what to do next, his attention inevitably turning back up to his brother's nursery window as he climbed back to his feet and just stood there, unable to move any further, as the flames turning his mother to ash reflected yellow in his eyes.

Just as they had twenty-seven years earlier.

Could he save her? If he ran back into the house, could he save her? Like Sam had tried to save Jessica with the watch?

She was already gone, already dead, Dean knew that. Deep down, he knew that. But part of him wanted to try. Part of him wanted to run into that burning building and try to change the tragic course of his family's history.

And yet he knew he couldn't. Not just because there was an invisible barrier denying him entrance to his childhood home; but because he knew his mother was already gone.

If he'd learned anything from Sam's experience with the watch and with Jessica, it was that trying to alter the past to change the present could have dire—and often unpredictable—consequences.

He wasn't willing to risk what he had left trying to recapture something he lost a long time ago. All he'd done here tonight was put history back the way it was supposed to be. The way it had been before that shadow creature had intervened, had tried to kill him and Sammy and Dad.

He may not have been putting things right, but he was putting them as right as he could put them.

At least now, Dean, Sam and Dad would live to see another day.

Except this dad, the one from 1983, had just deposited little Dean and Sam on the hood of the Impala and was running back toward the doorway of his burning house.

That hadn't happened. That hadn't happened before.

Dean opened his mouth, but no words would come out.

Had to warn him. Had to *stop* him.

And yet his feet still didn't seem to want to move, and Dean could only watch in mute horror as his father charged toward him, back toward the fire, back toward his mother, while somewhere in the distance he could hear the voices of the neighbors huddled in the street in their nightclothes. Were they all out of the house? Had anyone called the Fire Department? Someone said they had, and a woman with a high-pitched voice prayed to God they'd get here soon. They had little kids, right? How many did they have? Wasn't there a baby?

"Daddy!"

His own voice. His own four-year-old voice. Calling out to his father from the hood of the Impala, where once again Sammy was cradled against the little boy's chest.

"Don't they have three kids?"

"Where's the baby?"

"Did someone call the Fire Department?"

"His name's Jack, right?"

"John. I think it's John."

"Someone called the Fire Department, right?"

"Is it three kids or two?"

"Daddy!"

"Stay right there, Dean. Stay right there and look after your brother."

"Daddy?"

"Mary! I'm coming, Mary..."

"You—you can't go in there."

Dean's own voice—his adult voice—sounded strangely different in his ears, his hand heavy and sluggish pressed against his father's shoulder.

John's eyes were dark pools of despair as they turned in his direction, not looking at him, not seeing him, seeing only Mary, seeing only Dean's mother pinned to the ceiling and on fire.

"You can't go in there," Dean repeated, his voice a little stronger, his posture a little more set, his hands on each of John's shoulders now, restraining him, blocking his suicidal trajectory. "She's gone, Da—John. She's gone."

If John heard him the only acknowledgement he gave was the pressure against Dean's restraining hands lessening slightly.

"Think about your kids, John. You want them to be orphans?"

He said the words as if he was reciting a script, as if he'd heard them before—somewhere. Pushing John back from the burning house, his burning wife, the love of his life dead on the ceiling. Pushing him back to his kids...like that guy. That guy he remembered from the night of the fire. There were two of them. Youngish. One had helped him get out of the house and then stopped Dad going back in until the firemen and the police came. The other had run across the lawn toward the first guy as if he needed to tell him something urgent, taller guy, darker hair, and the firemen and the cops had had to restrain them both, push them away from the house, back behind the sawhorses and the yellow tape.

Two young guys that Dean suddenly remembered as clear as day, even if he couldn't quite picture their faces.

"Sir? Sir, please come with us."

There was a cop at John's elbow, but John wasn't hearing him, wasn't seeing him, only had eyes for his burning house, his burning love. His burning life.

"Sir?"

"Please," Dean said softly. "Please. For them. You're all they've got now."

He looked over toward the Impala, and for the first time his father seemed to hear him, his own focus shifting to the terrified little boy with his arms full of baby brother, almost too heavy for him to hold.

"You're all they've got."

John looked at him then. *Really* looked at him. And something seemed to break inside.

He wasn't pushing anymore, wasn't trying to get back into the house. He looked at Dean—his grown up son—and nodded, just once, before meekly turning and letting the police officer lead him away.

"Sir, what happened? Is anyone left inside?" the cop was asking.

"My wife. My wife's inside. My wife."

There was a fire truck parked outside the house, firefighters jumping out, pulling out lengths of hose, shouting orders to one another. Dean wondered when they got there. He hadn't seen them arrive. Hadn't seen the lights flashing. Hadn't heard the sirens.

Yet here they were.

The neighbors had called the Fire Department.

"Are the kids okay?"

Dean was four years old, sitting by himself on the hood of his father's car with his six-month-old baby brother cradled in his lap and his house burning.

And Mommy hadn't come outside with Daddy.

Dean remembered how completely alone he'd felt right then. Just him and Sammy in the whole wide world while all the grown-ups raced around them yelling at each other.

Maybe he was invisible.

Maybe only Sammy could see him now.

Maybe Mommy was coming out soon.

But deep down inside, he'd known that wasn't going to happen.

He'd seen...something...through the door of Sammy's nursery, when Daddy had put the baby in his arms and told him to take him outside as fast as he could.

He hadn't really known what was going on, but he'd known it was bad. *Really* bad.

Mommy hadn't come out of the house with Daddy because she was still in Sammy's nursery where the fire was.

He'd wondered whether she was an angel watching over him, like Grandma and Grandpa. He'd wanted to believe that. Then, and in the days, weeks, months that followed. He'd wanted to believe. If Mommy wasn't coming out of the house, he'd wanted her to be an angel watching over him and Sammy.

He took in a breath and swallowed the hard lump suddenly lodged in his throat.

The kid was all alone.

And he was holding the baby all wrong.

"Kid, you okay?" he found himself asking, legs seemingly moving of their own accord toward the kid sitting on the Impala, and even as he said it, he flashed back once again to the guy who helped him out of the house, who came and talked to him when no one else seemed to remember he was there.

The little boy looked up at him, eyes wide and blank, jaw clamped tightly shut in an effort, Dean suspected, Dean *remembered*, to keep himself from crying.

"Y'know, you're gonna hurt your little brother if you keep holding him like that," he told the boy, casually leaning his hip against the Impala's hood by the kid's knee.

That got the four-year-old's attention, the blank look in his eyes clearing, and a little bit of clarity and focus returning to the cloudy green depths. For a second, he seemed to reconnect with the world as he eyed his older self uncertainly.

"Here."

Very gently, Dean slid his younger self's small hand so it was correctly supporting Sammy's head, the little boy watching intently, as if storing the information away for later use.

"You're gonna need to take care of him now," Dean added quietly. "Dean? Ya hear me?"

The kid looked up at him and blinked, and Dean took that as an affirmative.

"Your dad's gonna need you to be brave, right? Like your mom would want? Huh? Your mom would want you to be brave, Dean. For Sammy. You've gotta be brave for him, Dean."

Younger Dean was still gazing at him, hardly seeming to breathe, but after a moment's hesitation he nodded his head, just once.

A brief smile skittered across Dean's face. "That's my boy," he mumbled, suddenly frowning. "Or that's my—my—uh... self?" He scratched his head in confusion, just as a lady cop rounded the Impala with a thunderous expression on her face.

Dean resisted the impulse to back away, merely smiled easily as the woman squinted at him suspiciously.

"You a relative, son?" she asked, her hand moving reflexively to her hip and the holster nestled there.

Dean wasn't sure how to answer that one.

And he really didn't appreciate being addressed as "son" by someone younger than he was.

"Neighbor," he lied smoothly, turning up the wattage on his most brilliant smile. "Just checking the kids are okay."

The cop nodded. "Uh-huh," she said, still sounding a little dubious, her arm looping around younger Dean's shoulders protectively. "Well thanks, sir, but I think I can take it from here."

Dean didn't offer to move, just continued to lean against the Impala, not breaking eye contact with the cop, who shifted, her posture stiffening as she narrowed her gaze.

Staring match it was then.

"Sir," the cop began, her hand again shifting to her hip, "I really think..."

But Dean never got to find out what she really thought, John Winchester suddenly interposing himself between the two of them, scooping Sammy out of little Dean's arms and sitting himself down on the hood of the Impala next to his eldest.

The cop took a step back as Dean's younger self leaned against his father's shoulder, his eyes shifting once again to the burning house, John's own gaze soon following.

Taking his lead from the police officer, Dean respectfully backed off in order to give the remaining Winchesters their privacy, but somehow he just couldn't bring himself to look away from them.

He couldn't bring himself to look away from *Dad*.

John's expression was unreadable, the color draining from his face as he clamped his jaw shut tightly, a mirror of his eldest son.

Maybe John was trying not to cry too, Dean figured, wondering what his dad was thinking right then.

Maybe he wasn't thinking anything at all.

Maybe he was thinking too much.

"Dean."

The voice in his ear was familiar, insistent, a hand tugging urgently at his jacket.

"Dean?"

Dean turned slowly, reluctantly tearing his gaze away from the devastated family—his family—sitting on the hood of the Impala.

Sammy.

"Dean, we need to go."

Sam's face was ashen, and although Dean knew his little brother couldn't remember anything of this night, he obviously knew what date this was, what was happening, even if he appeared to be doing his level best to avoid actually interacting with anyone here, his eyes darting everywhere but in the direction of the Winchesters sitting on the Chevy, the exact opposite of his older brother.

"Sam?" Dean murmured, finally dragging his attention away from the shattered family of his past to focus on the only family he had in his present.

Sam's eyes flitted just once to the man and the boy watching life as they knew it come to an abrupt and fiery end, before clearing his throat and pulling once more on Dean's arm.

"Dean, come on," he said, his voice thick with something other than smoke inhalation. "You need to see this."

Reynolds house Lynchburg, TN

Maybe this was a bad idea.

Bonnie folded her arms across her chest as she nervously paced the living room floor, glancing every now and then out the window above where Chris and Amie were sitting on the sofa, waiting, watching. Wondering.

"Maybe this was a bad idea," Chris echoed his mother's thoughts, fidgeting slightly and twisting his head to follow his mother's gaze out the window onto the street. "You don't even know this guy."

"No, I don't," Bonnie agreed. "But John did."

In fact, John had spoken about him with almost as much affection as he spoke about his boys. And that said a lot. Considering.

"And that's a recommendation?" Amie asked uncertainly, brow furrowing as her gaze slid to the photo of John Winchester on the mantelpiece.

Bonnie stopped her pacing briefly, fixing her daughter with a determined stare. "We need some help," she pointed out resolutely. "*John's* kind of help. And from what he told me, this guy might be the only other person besides John's boys who might know what to do."

Chris snorted. "Because John's boys were *so* much help, weren't they?" he observed sarcastically.

Bonnie huffed. "This isn't their fault. At least they tried. At least they came when I asked them. They came when I told them I needed their help. Now *they* need *my* help, and I'm not gonna let them down. I'm not gonna let their dad down."

Her attention shifted back to the window as a decrepit Oldsmobile pulled up in front of the house, the hood and the trunk a vibrant orange while the rest of the car was a weathered, nondescript gray.

Bonnie wasn't sure what she'd been expecting when she called the number John had given her years ago, but when the driver's door opened and a guy in a trucker cap and a grease-stained t-shirt who looked a little bit too much like Uncle Jesse from *The Dukes of Hazzard* for comfort stepped out, she realized he wasn't it.

Okay, maybe inviting this guy into her house was an even worse idea than calling him up in the first place had been. It wasn't like he had "axe murderer" tattooed on his forehead, but still. The word "crusty" sprang immediately to mind.

Drawing in a breath, she hesitated for only a second before opening the front door when the guy knocked, her fears waning somewhat when "Uncle Jesse" smiled warmly at her and held out a callused hand.

"Bobby Singer," he announced. "You must be Bonnie?"

Bonnie nodded, taking the guy's hand a little less hesitantly than she'd opened the door. "Reynolds. Bonnie Reynolds," she confirmed, returning the his smile.

Bobby looked her up and down for a second before letting out a soft whistle. "Boy, that John Winchester," he said with an affectionate laugh. "'Dark horse' doesn't even begin to cut it."

Bonnie's face fell a little. "He never told you about me either?" she asked. "I thought he said you were his best friend?"

Bobby seemed quite taken aback by that, his smile widening still further. "John Winchester said that about me?" he queried. "Must o' had some kind o' head injury or somethin'," he noted. "Never known John to say nice things about nobody."

Bobby's smile and easy disposition quickly put Bonnie at ease, the tension running from her back and shoulders, her grip on the door handle loosening. "That sounds like John," she agreed, throwing open the door and motioning Bobby inside. "He certainly has a way with people."

"Like a pit bull with a migraine," Bobby agreed, taking off his hat politely as he crossed the threshold into Bonnie's house.

Bonnie led him into the living room, introducing him to her kids before indicating he should sit.

It was Bobby's turn to hesitate, wiping his hands on the backs of his jeans before perching himself gingerly on the edge of the spotless armchair.

"Can I get you a drink?" Bonnie asked, twisting her fingers together a little nervously.

Bobby shook his head. "Best get down to business, ma'am," he said, his tone soft but insistent. "What have John's idjit boys gone and gotten themselves into this time?"

"It really wasn't their fault," Bonnie assured him. "John said if I ever needed help—*his* kind of help—I should call them. Or you." She shrugged. "They were trying to help me. I'm sure they never expected—"

"To get pulled into a photograph album?" Bobby offered.

Bonnie nodded. "I mean, it's not exactly something you go around expecting to happen, right?"

Bobby shrugged dismissively. "In our line of work?" he said. "You can't afford to be surprised by anything. Even getting sucked into a photograph."

Bonnie shook her head, running her fingers across her furrowed brow. "It's my fault. I never should have—"

"Nonsense." Bobby was on his feet, his hand gentle on her shoulder. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, you're an innocent bystander in all of this. I think someone—something—might have been using you to get to John's boys."

Bonnie looked up sharply. "You think this was a trap?" she asked, her mouth falling open a little. "For them?"

Bobby shrugged again. "Won't know for sure till I see the damn thing."

Bonnie nodded. "Sure," she agreed, leading Bobby out into the kitchen. "It's still in the basement. I haven't been near it since—well. You know."

"Yeah, I think I do," Bobby agreed, following Bonnie as she led the way downstairs. "These things have a tendency to follow those boys around like a bad smell."

"Like father like sons," Bonnie commented, leading Bobby through the maze of half-empty paint cans and boxes of old toys until they reached John's trunk in the corner, and the still-glowing photo album laid out on the concrete floor in front of it. "Here."

Bobby approached the album cautiously, crouching down while still a good couple of feet away and inspecting the photographs laid out in the album's plastic-covered pages.

"The pictures don't look any different," Bonnie told him. "I've looked at them before—when John's not been around. Guess I'm just nosy that way." She laughed nervously. "But how those boys—where they could be..." She trailed off, shaking her head and once again running a hand across her brow. "John told me he dealt with some pretty weird stuff, but this...?"

Bobby surprised her then by snorting a little derisively. "This?" he said, gesturing at the photo album as he slowly rose to his feet. "This is a stroll in the park compared to some of the things that man—and his boys—have hunted."

Bonnie tilted her head to one side. "Then you know what this is? What happened? Where John's boys are?"

"Think so," Bobby confirmed, again wiping his hands on his jeans. "It's enchanted somehow. Not quite worked out the specifics yet. But from what I can figure, the album's become a doorway. A conduit. To another time, another place." He shrugged. "To wherever and *whenever* these pictures were taken."

Bonnie blinked at him. "Wait. You're saying—you're saying John's boys have *gone back in time*?" she burst out incredulously.

Bobby shrugged, sticking his hands in his jeans pockets. "Looks that way. Not just traveled in time, either. Pretty much a lock they've moved through space too."

"So...So they've gone back to their childhood home? In Lawrence? Where their mom died?"

"Maybe," Bobby said, sighing a little. "Not beyond the realms of possibility. Some o' these demons can get real creative given the right motivation."

Bonnie blinked again. "Demons?"

"Looks like a demon's handiwork," he confirmed, disturbingly matter-of-fact about this whole thing. "'Course I won't know until I can figure out what charm they used."

"Then you'll be able to fix it? Get the boys back?"

"Hopefully. Gotta figure out the charm before I can remove it, make this thing safe again so's nobody else gets pulled through. Looks like whatever did this designed the charm so's it could get back out again."

"That's why it's still glowing like that?"

"Uh-huh."

Bonnie scratched her head thoughtfully. *Demons...* "So won't removing the charm trap Dean and Sam in the album, along with the thing that did this?"

Bobby nodded solemnly, a little smile ticking up the corners of his mouth. "That's the plan, ma'am."

Winchester house Lawrence, KS

Chaos still reigned outside the Winchesters' childhood home, and although the fire was pretty much under control now, John was still huddled on the hood of the Impala with his kids, Dean looking pale and shell-shocked, his dad barely aware he was there, much less of anything else that was going on around him.

They were both in shock, Sam could see that, and he was pretty sure the same could be said for the adult version of Dean, who was stumbling after his little brother way too obediently for Sam's liking.

Sam stopped for a second, his hands on his brother's shoulders as he turned him around to face him, momentarily dragging his attention away from the fire and the family on the Chevy.

"You okay, man?" he asked pretty redundantly, Dean's gaze skittering straight back to the Impala and the smoldering remains of their former home.

"Pretty much no," Dean replied, a tremor in his voice that set Sam's teeth on edge.

"Look," Sam said quietly, calmly, fingers gentle where they touched his brother. "I can't pretend to understand what this is like for you—I mean—reliving all of this—"

"Sam—"

"But right now, you gotta focus, man. We got more important things to think about."

Dean looked back at him sharply. "More important?" he echoed. "More important than what? Our mom dying? Our home burning?"

"Dean. That was twenty-seven years ago!"

"But it's *right now*, Sammy! It's happening right now!"

"No," Sam insisted. "Dean. I don't know if we're really in the past or—or what, but we can't change anything. Ya hear me? We can't. The watch. It—it just made me realize that—"

Dean nodded. "I know, Sammy." He sounded defeated, shoulders slumping and eyes downcast. "I know."

"And you need to see this."

Sam began to lead his brother toward the bushes at the rear of the house, to the place where earlier he thought he'd seen a shadow moving within the shadow that should have been the garden.

"Hey, stay back."

A cop was suddenly in Sam's face, pushing him and Dean away from the house, back toward the street.

"You have to stay back. C'mon, guys."

Neither Sam nor Dean protested, allowing the police officer to herd them back toward the sidewalk, back to the crowd of onlookers huddled together in their nightclothes.

Once the cop was satisfied the boys were back where they were supposed to be, he turned away and headed off toward one of the fire trucks, and Sam took that as his cue.

"C'mon," he said, once again tugging on Dean's sleeve. "We gotta get back there."

Dean nodded, following Sam mutely as he looped around the back of the large gathering of neighbors on the sidewalk, ducking down behind a patrol car before signaling Dean to make a run for the back of the house.

The two of them slipped unnoticed up the lawn, Sam's shoulder brushing the invisible barrier keeping them trapped in the vicinity of the house, before finally pulling up near the fence at the back of the property, helpfully hidden from view by that big old tree, the one he'd seen in his dream all those years ago, the one that had led them back here to Jenny and her kids.

Sam stopped and took a breath before indicating what it was he was so intent on Dean seeing. "Look at this."

Dean looked. And frowned. "What am I lookin' at?" he asked. "The roses or the green stuff?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "It's called shrubbery, Dean," he pointed out. "And that's not what you're supposed to be looking at."

Dean looked again. Squinted. Looked again. "Holy crap."

"Exactly." Sam nodded triumphantly.

"What the hell *is* that?"

"It's a hole," Sam pointed out a little obviously.

It was Dean's turn to roll his eyes. "I can see that," he said, bending a little so he could get a better look at the phenomenon in question. "But a hole in what?"

Sam considered the ragged black circle hovering at waist height in the bushes thoughtfully. It was about twelve inches in diameter, no more, the edges shimmering and sparkling where the color of the surrounding objects seemed to bleed into it. At its very center it was just emptiness, darkness, the complete absence of anything. Like someone had ripped a hole in the fabric of space.

"I think it's a tear in reality," he hazarded, and to his credit, Dean didn't seem at all surprised.

"Of course it is," he said on a sigh. "What else would it be?"

"Dean," Sam returned. "I know it sounds—"

"Crazy?"

"Yeah. That. But I followed that—that shadow creature here when you were trying to get into the house and I saw him make this hole and—and he went through. To whatever's on the other side."

Dean frowned. "What's on the other side?"

Sam shrugged. "I have no idea," he admitted. "But I think—I think this might be our only way out."

Dean considered that. "It's getting smaller," he observed, pointing at the hole, which seemed to be pulsing and contracting even as they stood looking at it.

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "That's why I came to get you."

Dean hesitated for a second. "What if this is like a Stull deal?" he asked a little uncertainly. "What if we find ourselves in some whacked out alternate reality again?"

Sam glanced around them. "What, like this one?"

Dean shook his head. "Nothin' alternate about this, Sam," he said quietly. "This is it. This is what happened."

"That shadow creature didn't lock us in the house back in 1983," Sam pointed out.

"No," Dean agreed. "It didn't. But if it hadn't come back here tonight, through that—that photograph, then history wouldn't have changed. That thing changed reality, *our* reality, Sam."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "To kill us?"

Dean shrugged. "I dunno," he admitted. "We don't even know what it is."

Sam ran a hand through his hair thoughtfully. "Closest thing I can think of is the Daevas back in Chicago."

"Shadow demon," Dean nodded. "Yeah, that fits. But Daevas are usually controlled by other demons, right? The way Meg controlled them in Chicago?"

"Yeah, I guess," Sam agreed. "What did you call them? Demonic pit bulls? I guess they gotta have a master, someone pulling the strings."

"So if it was a Daeva," Dean continued. "It's gotta be someone's bitch, right?"

"This seems like a lot of trouble for someone to go to just to gank us," Sam observed.

Dean seemed to think about that for a second, before a light suddenly snapped on behind his eyes, signaling the proverbial light bulb moment. "*Terminator!*" he burst out. "Maybe it's a *Terminator* deal."

"Okay," Sam said hesitantly. "A cyborg from the future gets sent back in time to kill the mother of its enemy before he's even born, erasing him from history before he can even exist."

"What if that's what's happening here?" Dean suggested excitedly. "The shadow demon locks us in our burning house so that—uh—Mini-Me couldn't get Baby-You out. And me, you and Dad die in the fire with Mom."

"Get rid of his enemy," Sam agreed.

"Before we're even his enemy."

"So someone's trying to kill us before we're old enough to protect ourselves?"

"Maybe. Or maybe they're after Dad. Or maybe they wanted us to follow them in here so they could kill us twice, as us, and as kids. Who knows what sick twisted crap goes through a demon's noggin."

"Okay, so we have to find it," Sam insisted. "The shadow demon. We have to find it before it kills us. Or past us."

"But we don't know where the hell it's gone," Dean said, pointing at the rapidly receding rip in reality. "If we follow it through, we could wind up anywhere."

"If we can follow it through," Sam added. "No way we're gonna fit through there."

The rupture was now only a few inches across.

Dean took a step back, reaching behind him and pulling out his Colt.

Sam's eyes widened as his brother aimed the weapon at the hole. "Wait! No!" he burst out, grabbing Dean's arm and pushing it down. "No, we can't just shoot it!"

"Why the hell not?" Dean demanded, squaring up to his brother.

"Because we don't know what that would do!" Sam pointed out in exasperation. "You could accidentally shoot Kid You—or Kid Me—on the other side of that hole."

"We don't even *know* what's on the other side of that hole!"

"Exactly!" Sam concurred. "No, listen, Dean. I think there's another way."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "What way? You got a bulldozer in your pocket you forgot to tell me about? Wait, don't answer that."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Sam returned. "Hate to make you feel inferior there, shortstuff."

"Shut up, Sasquatch."

"Shut up yourself, I need to concentrate."

Dean paused. "On what?"

"On the residual energy hanging around from whatever that shadow demon did to open this hole in the first place."

Dean blinked at him. "You think you can mirror it?" he asked, a tiny spark of awe in his voice.

Sam set his shoulders and closed his eyes. "Dunno yet," he admitted. "Gimme a minute."

Concentrating, Sam tried to get a sense of the power still echoing around the rim of the rupture, trying to feel its outline like a living thing, like something he could grab hold of and use in whatever way he desired.

He thought about how it had felt when he'd faced Lucifer in Leicester, or Alyssa in Phoenix. When he'd faced that yellow-eyed version of himself through the looking glass at Stull.

He tried to remember that feeling, what he'd had to do to make that power obey his whim, not the person he was mirroring.

Well, firstly, Dean had been in mortal danger. Which, at a stretch, Sam could say was the case right now.

But the threat wasn't immediate. No one had Dean dangling by his throat over a Hell Gate. No one was trying to lobotomize him with the power of their mind.

And yet Sam could feel the edges of it, the tingling in his fingertips, the buzzing in his brain, he was so close, so close, he just had to catch hold and...and...*push*.

"Holy crap, dude!" Dean burst out, his voice strangely distant, as if he was standing at the end of a long corridor. "And no one even had to threaten to eviscerate me or anything."

Sam opened one eye, then the other.

The hole had widened considerably, quite possibly enough for them to get through.

"Holy crap," he echoed his brother's sentiment, blinking in surprise. "I did that?"

"You're gettin' good at this, Sammy!" Dean told him, clapping him on the shoulder, before glancing just once behind him at the scene outside their childhood home. A shadow passed briefly over his features before the shutters slammed down and once again he was giving Sam that familiar grin. "So whaddya say we blow this popsicle stand, little brother?"

Sam nodded. "Not a minute too soon."

Taking a breath, he closed his eyes and followed his brother into nothingness...

* * * *

"Aw man, I *hate* camping!"

Sam blinked, opening his eyes to a bright blue, cloudless sky reflecting off an equally bright blue lake that seemed to roll on forever in each direction.

It was a beautiful sunny day, and he was standing on the shoreline, the water calm and glassy, snowcapped mountains rising up in the distance, trees green and fragrant all around them, birds singing.

It was perfect, and beautiful. And familiar.

"Where the hell are we?" Dean grumbled at his side, and Sam reluctantly tore his gaze away from the stunning vista, his brother frowning discontentedly at his sudden surroundings. "*When* the hell are we?"

"Heck if I know," Sam returned, considering. "But there's something familiar about it. Like we've been here before."

Dean shrugged. "I dunno, Sammy," he said, shucking out of his jacket in the warm sunshine. "Dad took us on a hell of a lot of camping trips growing up. They all kinda merged into one." He grunted as he stepped in something squishy and grimaced. "Freakin' nature."

"Maybe this wasn't a camping trip," Sam suggested. "Maybe it was a hunting trip."

"Yeah, but could be any one of hundred," Dean observed, scanning the terrain thoughtfully before suddenly glancing sideways at his brother. "You think we're in another photo?"

Sam took a breath, deciding to see if they could make it as far as the waterline. "Maybe," he said, walking slowly just in case he should suddenly find himself slamming against another of those invisible barriers. "But I don't remember Dad taking many happy family snapshots when we were on hunting trips."

Dean grunted his agreement as he reluctantly followed Sam down toward the pebbly shoreline.

There was no one around for miles as far as Sam could see, and there was definitely no sign of any shadow demon.

"That thing's gonna find it a whole lot harder to hide out here in the daylight," Dean pointed out, toeing at a couple of pebbles with his boot. "If we can find it—"

"Maybe we can exorcise it," Sam completed his thought for him, his attention shifting out into the distance, to the water and mountains, that prickly sense of *déjà vu* playing a concerto up and down his spine.

He took in a deep breath, almost tasting the ozone, the sweetness of the air.

If Dad *had* brought them here as kids, Sam doubted either one of them had appreciated the beauty, the calmness, the *stillness* of the place.

"There was that water wraith that time," Dean said suddenly, his brow scrunching in concentration. "Montana, maybe?" His eyes cleared, and he snapped his fingers. "Bowman Lake! Remember? You'd be, I dunno, eight? Dad met Jefferson out here and he took that picture of us sitting on the Impala."

Sam nodded, the memory hazy, although he vividly remembered the photograph. "The one we found in Dad's motel room in Jericho," he agreed. "Yeah, maybe. Can't really remember much about it though."

Dean shrugged. "Pretty run-of-the-mill job I think," he said, the expression on his face suggesting he either had a bitch of a headache or was trying really hard to remember. "Don't remember no shadow demon showin' up."

Sam shook his head, his hands going to his hips as he cast his gaze about himself, trying to figure out what the hell they were doing here.

"Sam."

Suddenly Dean's hand was on his arm and he was pointing out toward the middle of the lake.

"Sam, there's someone out there."

Sam followed the direction of Dean's finger, squinting into the bright blueness of the water and just barely making out what looked like a dark blur of something floating on the surface.

"How do you know it's a person?" Sam started to ask, but got no further, as Dean was already running down to the water's edge, losing his overshirt as he went. "Dean!"

Sam had no option but to follow, his own jacket and overshirt strewn on the pebbly beach as he waded into the chilly water after his brother.

Dean had been right. That was definitely a body floating on the lake.

Despite the warm sunshine overhead, the water was cold and Sam had to grit his teeth as he swam out into the depths, his brother a blur in front of him.

As they closed in on the body, Sam could see it was that of a man and he was floating face down, obviously not breathing.

Dean reached him first, grabbing him by the collar of his jacket and making a valiant attempt to drag him back to the shore. But the guy was obviously heavy and Dean was struggling, and it took both of them a good minute to manhandle the body back up out of the water.

Finally reaching dry land, Sam collapsed onto his knees on the pebbly beach as Dean turned the guy over onto his back, intent on administering CPR.

It was only then that Sam finally caught sight of the man's face.

"Dad?"

Dean sucked in a startled breath.

It was John Winchester, younger, sure, but undoubtedly him.

His lips were blue and he wasn't breathing.

"Dean?" Sam burst out.

Dean looked at him, seemingly frozen, before suddenly coming back to himself and falling on his knees, pinching his father's nose as he bent over and breathed into his mouth.

Nothing.

Sam began chest compressions, trying to remember everything Dad had ever taught them about basic first aid but unable to focus on a single memory, only seeing his dad's unresponsive, waxy face, eyes closed, mouth lax as Dean tried to breathe for him.

How did he get out here? There was nothing there, no people, no car, and certainly no demon.

John looked to be in his late thirties, early forties maybe, and Sam's brain, numbed by what was going on on the beach in front of him, tried to distract itself by concentrating on the math. Bowman Lake. 1990? 1991? Dad would be thirty-eight or thirty-nine? Did that fit?

But this hadn't happened. Sam didn't remember this happening. And he would have remembered. Eight years old or not, he would have remembered *this*.

His hands were still performing chest compressions without him really being aware of what he was doing, and Dean had just pulled his mouth away from his dad's when John suddenly started spluttering water, dragging in air like it was going out of fashion and scrabbling about himself with desperate hands.

Sam was fairly sure that was the first breath *he'd* taken in a while too.

"Dad!" Dean burst out, before mentally checking himself. "John? It's gonna be okay, just relax, okay? Just relax, you're alright, just breathe. Just breathe for me, okay?" Dean was pressing his father's shoulders back against the beach, trying to calm the older man.

But John was fighting him, trying to push him away, trying to get up, wheezing and spluttering and still coughing up water as he made it into a sitting position, one hand grabbing hold of Dean's shoulder for support.

"It's okay, just relax—" Dean was saying, as John swayed slightly, shaking his head desperately.

"Please, please!" he managed to rasp out, choking on the last syllable and gulping in another huge lungful of air. "No, please, I have to—I have to—"

He started to fall backwards, and both Sam and Dean moved to support him, keeping him upright between them as he hacked up still more of the lake.

"It's okay—" Sam tried to reassure him, but was quickly cut off by John grabbing a handful of his t-shirt and pulling him down to eye level.

"My kids!" he cried out, eyes wild and terrified. "My kids! They're trapped! They're trapped! Please, please, you have to help me! You have to get my kids!"

Part Three

Bowman Lake, MT

"My kids! You have to get my kids!"

John Winchester's voice was desperate, his eyes wild as he lay on the shoreline, one hand gripping Dean's shoulder, the other fisted in Sam's t-shirt.

His grip was weak, and he was still coughing and hacking, and Sam could tell from the deathly pallor of his face that sooner or later he was going to crash completely.

Dean was looking out over the lake, his own color draining visibly.

"No way," he muttered. "This never happened."

Sam followed the direction of his brother's gaze, just about able to make out another dark shape barely visible above the calm surface of the water.

It was bigger than a person.

It was bigger than an average car.

The Impala.

The Impala was in the water, and it was sinking fast.

How the hell...?

"It was—demon—" John was barely coherent, obviously fighting to stay conscious just long enough to get help for his boys. "Attacked us. Tried to—to strangle me. In the car. Got in the car. Don't know how it got in the car. Charms. Wards. Don't know how..."

"It's okay," Sam tried to reassure him. "It's okay, just breathe—"

"I—strangling me. It was—strangling me. Lost—lost consciousness. Dean in the back with—with Sammy or—or he'd have grabbed the wheel. Know he would. Couldn't—couldn't get up front to help me and all the weapons in the trunk. Couldn't..."

He trailed off for a second, and the brothers' eyes met uncertainly.

"Passed out I think," their dad continued breathlessly. "Guess the car went—went off the road and—and into the lake. I—I came to and I was in the water and I—I tried to get back to my kids but—passed out and—please! Please, my kids! You have to find my kids!"

Crap.

"We're gonna get your kids," Dean announced decisively, gently lowering his father towards the beach. "Just stay here. We're gonna get your kids."

Their gazes meeting once more, Sam instantly knew what he had to do.

Leaving their father barely conscious at the shoreline, the boys dove once again into the freezing depths of Lake Bowman, swimming as fast as they were able toward the dark shape that Sam was gradually becoming more and more convinced was the Impala.

It wasn't much further out than where they'd found their dad floating, but it was mostly submerged, the whole car tipped at a crazy angle with just a few inches of the roof and the trunk on the driver's side still visible above the water.

Taking a deep breath, Sam cast one more look in his brother's direction before diving down beneath the surface of the painfully blue water, trying to keep his eyes open in order to assess his best course of action.

Both the front and the rear passenger side doors were crumpled completely out of shape, presumably from the impact with the rocks reaching up from the lake bottom like eerie claws trying to pull the big Chevy down to a watery grave.

Swimming around to the other side of the car, Sam could see that the driver's door was open, and he figured that must have been how Dad got out of the car, presumably with the intention of trying to get his kids out through the rear driver's side. Sam could see red staining on the corner of the driver's door, and figured maybe his dad hit his head as he tried to scramble out of the car and that's what had caused him to pass out.

Either that, or there was a shadow demon lurking down here somewhere.

Shoving his way into the car through the open door, Sam dragged in a lungful of much-needed oxygen as his head broke the surface of the water. The car was filling rapidly, only a few inches remaining between the rising flood and the roof, and he quickly took stock of the situation, trying to see whether the kids—*John's* kids—were still in the car or had gotten out somehow.

Dean was struggling with the rear driver's side door, trying to force it open, but it was stuck fast and Sam quickly realized no one was getting in—or out—that way.

Dean must have come to the same conclusion, finally giving up on the rear door and dragging himself in through the driver's door behind Sam.

Sam felt the top of his head hit the Chevy's metal roof as he tried to haul his brother into the little pocket of air still remaining in the front seat.

"Sammy, I swear this never happened!" Dean spluttered as he grabbed hold of the back of the seat and tried to pull himself further up out of the water, the front of the car filling faster than the back, which was still raised that little bit higher.

"The demon," Sam said. "The demon caused the car to go off the road!"

"So where the hell are—are *we*?"

As if in answer to Dean's question, both boys suddenly became aware of a small hand gripping the back of the front seat, not far from where Dean was hanging on for dear life, and they peered over into the back of the car, Sam almost dreading what he was going to see there.

A pale face peered back up at them.

It was a small boy, almond-shaped hazel eyes and dark brown curls plastered to pasty skin and Sam got a chill the length of his spine that had absolutely nothing to do with the temperature of the water.

It was kind of odd finding yourself looking at...yourself.

The little boy in the back seat was maybe eight years old, which fitted with Dean's theory that this was Bowman Lake and the hunt for the water wraith John

had taken them on with his old friend Jefferson. The kid was looking up at Sam as if he was the eighth wonder of the world, his face wet and pinched-looking, and although it was hard to tell for certain, the redness of his eyes suggested he'd been crying.

"Please," he said in a small, insistent voice. "Please, you have to help him!"

Sam followed the direction of his younger self's urgently gesturing hand, down to the opposite end of the rear seat, on the driver's side of the Impala. The angle the car was currently listing at meant that side of the big Chevy was almost entirely under water now, but with the back end sticking up further out of the lake than the front, there was still a small pocket of air between the water's surface and the roof of the car, and in that small pocket of air, Sam could see another face poking up out of the water.

It was unmistakably Dean, freckles stark against white skin as the boy, who Sam figured for maybe twelve years old, tried manfully to keep his head above water, scowling at the younger version of Sammy even as his eyes betrayed complete terror.

"Sammy, just *go!*" the kid said, choking as water flooded his mouth.

"No!" Sammy insisted, grabbing onto Dean's sleeve and tugging at his arm. "I'm not going anywhere without you!"

Sam glanced over his shoulder at the older version of Dean, who was doing a pretty credible imitation of a goldfish, his mouth opening and closing mutely.

The younger version of Dean suddenly turned to look at him, his scowl turning to desperation. "Please, please get Sammy out of here!" he begged. "He won't go!"

Younger Sam was shaking his head, mouth set into a determined line. "I told you, I'm not leaving you here, Dean!" he cried. "We stick together, right?" It was younger Sam's turn to shift his attention to the two men in the front seat. "Please, he's stuck on something! He can't get out, and I'm not going without him!"

"Dammit, Sammy..." both younger and older Dean managed to curse in unison, but the rest of the younger version's sentence was choked off as he went under the water again, older Dean reaching over the seatback and grabbing him by the collar of his jacket, pulling his head above the water once more and holding him there.

"What are you stuck on?" Sam asked, trying to help his brother keep the kid above water, suddenly aware of his younger self's fingers tightening on his arm.

"I don't know," the older boy spluttered through a mouthful of water. "It's my ankle. My ankle's trapped."

"Please!" younger Sam's grip on the adult version tightened, wide, frightened eyes turned up to him imploringly. "Please, you *have* to get him out! *Please!*"

Sam exchanged a loaded glance with his brother, who was doing his best to keep his younger self's head above the rising water, but there was no room and no time and the car was filling too darn fast.

"Okay," Sam said finally, ducking his head toward his younger self. "Sam—Sammy?" he stumbled over the diminutive name, grimacing at the brief grin splitting his brother's face. "You need to come with us now."

"No!" younger Sam began to protest. "No way. I'm not leaving Dean!"

"Sammy, listen," Sam said. "Look, we're running out of time here. We're going to get your brother out, but right now you're in the way. You get me? You need to come out of there so we can see how to get your brother out, okay?"

Sammy's face tightened, and he squinted at his older self suspiciously, reaffirming his grip on his brother's sleeve and shaking his head resolutely. "Not leaving without him," he once again insisted.

Sam gritted his teeth in frustration and, despite the dire circumstances, Dean snorted.

"Payback's a bitch, ain't it?" he observed. "Now you know what *I've* had to put up with for the past twenty-seven years."

Sam threw a thunderous scowl in his brother's direction before turning his attention back to the younger kid in the backseat and taking a calming breath. "Listen to me, Sammy," he said, "if you don't come out of there *right now* your brother's going to drown. Understand me? You want us to help him, you gotta get outta the way. It's that simple."

Sammy returned Sam's earlier scowl threefold before finally nodding his head.

"Alright," he acquiesced dubiously. "But you'd better get my brother outta here or I'll kick your ass."

Dean snorted again and Sam studiously avoided looking at him.

"Deal," he said instead, reaching into the backseat and grabbing hold of the boy, pulling him over the seat back and into the front, where he finally landed with a splash between Sam and Dean. "Okay," Sam continued, pushing the boy to his brother before somehow managing to get his huge frame over into the backseat with the younger version of his big brother. "Get him to the shore and to—to his dad while I get his brother out of here."

Both older Dean and Sammy turned twin grimaces of protest in his direction.

"No way, Sam. I'm not leaving you here."

"I'm not leaving Dean. You can't make me."

Dean's attention shifted to the kid at his side and he drew a tired hand through the wet spikes of his hair. "Man, this is so messed up."

"Dean," Sam insisted. "Go. *Now.*"

"Sammy, please, just *go!*" younger Dean weighed in.

"I *told* you, I'm *not* leaving!" Sammy insisted, and older Dean just sighed helplessly.

"Sam, I guess I was right. You've always been a stubborn little bitch."

"And *you've* always been a self-sacrificing jerk," Sam returned easily, no fire in his words, but a gritty determination in the set of his jaw. "Now *go*, both of you!" he admonished them, gulping in a deep breath before diving beneath the surface of the water in an attempt to figure out a way to get his little-big brother loose.

Taking a closer look, Sam realized Dean's ankle was trapped between the crushed-in door and the seat back, but before he could try and remedy the situation, the kid was sliding back down into the water, and Sam had to grab hold of him and push him back up, surprised to see his older brother's fingers still wrapped in the collar of younger Dean's jacket when his head once again broke the surface.

"Dean, what didn't you understand about 'go now'?" Sam demanded, trying to keep the twelve-year-old's head out of the water.

Grown-up Dean just looked at him, that tiny tension line between his eyes deepening.

"Dean," Sam tried again. "If you don't get Kid Me to safety, I'm not gonna be here to save Kid You and then neither one of us is going to be here at all, alright?"

Dean's face twisted into something simultaneously pained and confused, as if he was trying to work out what the hell Sam just said. Then, as if finally figuring out what Sam was trying to tell him, he glanced at the kid at his side before reaching a decision. "C'mon, squirt," he said with a sigh. "Time to go."

Sammy's eyes widened. "Wait—no! I'm not going anywhere without my brother, I'm not."

"Well you're a kid and I'm a grown-up, and you don't get a vote," Dean informed him shortly, grabbing hold of him and propelling him toward the open driver's door. "Now take a deep breath."

Sammy's scowl could have melted iron, but he eventually relented. "Dean, I'll see you soon!" he yelled back to his brother, before drawing in a breath and diving down under the water.

Dean glanced just once over his shoulder at his brother. "You die on me I'll kill you," he informed him, before adding, "And you let *me* die, I'll kill you twice."

Then he was gone, and Sam could finally concentrate on trying to get the trapped kid out of the backseat of the car.

Dean seemed a lot calmer now his little brother had at last been taken to safety, tilting back his head so his face stayed above the water and just breathing as slowly as he was able.

Sam reflected that had been one of the things he'd so admired about his big brother when they were kids. Dean had always seemed to keep his head in a

crisis, and even if it was only an act, Sam had appreciated it, appreciated the illusion that his big brother always knew exactly what to do and would never let anything bad happen to him.

But now it was Sam's turn.

Dean needed his help right now, and if Sam didn't save this version of his brother, he wasn't entirely sure what would happen to the adult version currently swimming back to the shore with Sam's younger self.

Dean was right. This *was* messed up.

"Okay, just try to stay above the water, Dean," he instructed the kid, who was clearly struggling to do just that, his lips having turned a little blue with the cold and the lack of oxygen. "Just hang on in there, kiddo," Sam added, gently running his fingers through the boy's hair. "I'm not gonna let you die, okay? Nothing bad's going to happen to you while I'm here."

"Okay," Dean replied weakly, his eyes threatening to droop closed even as he fought to keep them open.

"You stay awake for me, Dean," Sam admonished him, shaking him a little until he appeared to have his full attention. "I can't do this by myself."

Dean nodded ever-so-slightly, eyes widening in exhausted determination.

"Good boy," Sam told him. "Now I'm just gonna go see what's going on down there, okay? You stay awake for me."

"Wait, wait!" Dean reached out to catch Sam's arm, stopping him in his tracks. "You said my dad's okay, right? You found my dad?"

Sam nodded. Same Dean, no matter what the age. "Yeah, we found your dad. He's gonna be fine."

Dean drew in a relieved breath before nodding once again. "Okay then," he said softly, releasing his grip on Sam's arm.

Sam nodded. "No going to sleep, kiddo," he repeated, before diving once again into the water, determined that this time he was going to get the kid the hell out of here.

Taking a closer look at Dean's trapped ankle, Sam thought about trying to get the boy's sneaker off his foot, but he wasn't sure the thin layer of fabric would make much difference, and right now it might be the only thing protecting his brother from the twisted metal crumpled against his flesh.

Okay, Plan B then.

Maybe he could force the metal back into shape, take the pressure off Dean's ankle?

Figuring that might be his best option, Sam twisted himself until he was able to aim a kick at the door. The metal juddered beneath his foot, but otherwise remained unaffected, and Sam kicked at it a couple more times in frustration.

To his surprise, the crumpled metal began to buckle outwards just a tiny bit, and he continued kicking with renewed fervor until the metal gave and he was pretty sure Dean should be able to slide his foot free.

Problem was, Dean wasn't moving anymore, either too cold or too out of it to muster the strength to wriggle free.

Sam could see the kid was sagging, and, unsure whether he'd gone under the surface of the water again, he went back up for a lungful of air, trying to pull Dean up with him. When he reached the surface, however, to his dismay he discovered only an inch or so between the surface of the water and the roof of the Chevy, and Dean had gone right under and didn't seem to be able to get back up.

Dammit. If he didn't get Dean out *right now*, he wasn't getting out.

Grabbing Dean's jacket and trying to pull him up, Sam recommenced kicking at the door, this time the metal whining and buckling until finally Dean's ankle came free of its own accord, and the boy floated up to the surface of the water, his eyes closed and his lips an even more alarming shade of blue than they had been before.

"Dean, come on!" he instructed the kid, pulling him up into the miniscule pocket of air and tapping him lightly on both cheeks. "Wake up there, kiddo!"

Dean spluttered a little, his eyes finally fluttering open as Sam continued to call his name.

"Sammy?" the kid murmured, unfocused eyes looking right into Sam's. "That you?"

Sam swallowed, not entirely sure he had an answer for that one. "Sam's fine, Dean," he assured the kid finally. "Don't you worry about him, okay? Let's just worry about you right now."

"Have to worry about him," Dean replied, his words becoming a little slurred. "'S my job."

Sam smiled a little sadly, and pushed the kid's wet hair out of his eyes. "I know Dean," he said. "I know. Now you just take a deep breath for me, okay? 'Cause it's time you and I blew this popsicle stand."

* * * *

They should have been out by now.

Dean screwed up his eyes and tried to see out to where the Impala had finally gone under the surface of the lake, willing his brother to be there, to be safe.

Sammy, where the hell are you?

"Dean's gonna be okay, right?" eight-year-old Sam asked for the hundredth time since he and Dean had crawled up onto the pebbly shoreline. "He's gonna be okay?"

The little kid was clinging to Dean's arm in a way he found oddly familiar and disturbingly comforting, and that was something he really didn't want to analyze in further detail, knowing exactly what grown-up Sam would have to say about the matter.

"You can't keep me a kid forever, Dean," had been one of the last things Sam had said to him before he'd left for Stanford, and while Dean knew that was true, he also knew deep down in the most secret parts of himself that no matter what Sam did or where he went or how old he got, he would always be Dean's baby brother, would always be that eight-year-old kid clinging on to his arm and trusting him to make everything okay.

And although he'd never admit it to anyone, especially himself, sometimes Dean missed that.

"Dean's going to be fine, Sammy," he found himself telling the little boy by his side, as if it was some kind of reflex to stop his kid brother from worrying.

Dean was worried enough for the both of them.

It had been too long and Sam should be out by now.

"C'mon, Sammy," he muttered under his breath, the kid hanging onto his arm suddenly looking up at him quizzically.

"Your brother's called Sam too?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," Dean replied, nodding. "And he's a real worry-wart, just like you are."

"Dean always calls me that too," Sammy said, sighing. "He's gonna be alright isn't he?"

Dean nodded, forcing a smile onto his lips. "Sure he is," he assured the kid, almost convincing himself for a second. "My brother won't let anything happen to him, I promise."

But it had been too long and there was no denying Sam should be out by now.

He glanced behind him, at his father lying insensible on the beach, down at the little boy looking up at him as if he could solve all the ills of the world, and for a second he was torn. He had to stay here. Had to make sure Dad and Sammy were okay.

But the water was calling to him.

He had to make sure *his* Sammy was okay too.

"Listen, Sammy," he began, reluctantly crouching down in front of the boy. "I think maybe—"

"That's them!" Sammy suddenly burst out, looking beyond Dean's shoulder, out onto the lake. "Look, they're coming!"

Dean spun back toward the sunken Impala, his eyes roving the bright blue water until they locked on to what the kid had seen.

And he had never been so happy to see his little brother's messy mop of hair in his life.

* * * *

Finally breaking the surface of the lake, Sam gulped in a huge breath of air, his arms tightening around Dean's chest as he hauled the boy's head and shoulders up out of the water.

Dean's eyes fluttered a little, and although he was barely conscious, Sam could see he was hanging on in there, fighting the good fight until he was reunited with his dad and his brother. That was Dean's whole reason for being, after all.

He smiled softly to himself before beginning the swim back toward the shore, where he could see his own version of Dean, not to mention the eight-year-old version of himself, waiting anxiously at the shoreline, the little boy clinging to Sam's big brother's arm.

Some things never changed.

As they approached the waterline, Dean came wading out to meet them, helping Sam lift his younger self out of the water and carry him to the beach, where they laid him down within arm's reach of their dad.

The second Dean was on the ground, Sammy virtually launched himself at him, wrapping his arms around his neck and hanging on for dear life.

Choking on lake water and a mouthful of Sammy's hair, Dean ruffled the kid's unruly mop of curls before muttering, "One of these days I'm gonna teach you how to follow orders, Sammy."

"Good luck with that," older Dean muttered, causing Sam to elbow him in the ribs none-too-gently.

"C'mon, we better check you guys are in one piece," Sam insisted, crouching down next to twelve-year-old Dean and pulling up the leg of his sodden jeans to get a look at his ankle.

The kid hissed through his teeth as Sam prodded at the broken skin.

"Don't mind Nurse Sammy," older Dean commented, kneeling down next to the boys. "He never did get a handle on that whole 'bedside manner' thing."

Sam just looked at him, before turning his attention back to Dean's younger counterpart. "I don't think it's broken, but you're probably gonna need a tetanus shot, just to be safe."

"Not another one," Dean grumbled, rolling his eyes.

"Don't want your foot to fall off," Sammy told him with a grin.

"Sammy, your foot won't actually fall off if you don't get a tetanus shot," younger Dean told him. "That's just what Uncle Bobby told you when you started crying like a little girl when he said you had to have one."

"Did not," Sammy returned, sticking out his lower lip. "I don't cry like a girl."

"Do too," both Deans managed to chorus, causing both Sams to huff.

Younger Dean's eyes strayed to the motionless figure of his father at that point, all humor draining instantly from his face as he unconsciously reached out for his dad's fingers.

"He's not—he's not—" It was as if he couldn't bring himself to ask the question, and Dean quickly put him out of his misery.

"He's going to be fine," he assured him. "But we need to get him some help."

"Can you tell us what happened?" Sam asked casually, still wary of the shadow demon coming back for another try. Getting help was one thing. Getting these boys out of here in one piece was something else entirely.

"Dad brought us camping," Sammy began earnestly.

"Again," younger Dean interjected. "'Cause we've only been, like, three thousand other times this year."

Sammy grimaced at him to be quiet and continued. "He said he and Mr. Jefferson—"

"Jefferson's his *first* name, doofus!"

"He and *Jefferson*—" Sammy rolled his eyes, "—were hunting a water wraith at Bowman Lake in, um, Missouri—"

"Montana."

"And he said we could come with him because Dean said he was tired of being left behind in crap motel rooms—"

"Mouth, Sammy."

"You say 'crap' all the time, Dean!"

"Because I'm awesome and older."

"But Dean didn't want to go camping either—"

"Freakin' nature."

"But Dad said we could go anyway. And we were heading for the camping ground—"

"It's not far up the road."

"When there was this, like, black shadow in the car with us, and Dad was yelling—"

"We didn't have any holy water."

"And then he was *choking*, and Dean was sitting in the backseat with me—"

"Because you wouldn't stop whining that I always sit up front with Dad—"

"So he couldn't grab the wheel when Dad lost control, and then we went into the lake and there was water everywhere and—"

"I don't know how we got so far into the lake, we weren't goin' that fast."

"And Dad wasn't there anymore and Dean was stuck and we couldn't get out and there was more and more water and I thought Dean was gonna drown and I didn't know what to do and—"

"Sammy, take a breath, dude, your eyeballs are gonna explode."

Sammy took a breath, and looked up at the older version of the Winchesters, who were just staring at him patiently. "And then you came."

"Happy endings all around," his brother added.

Sam exchanged a quick look with the grown-up version of his brother, who was smirking at him. "Shut up."

"I didn't say nothin'."

"Well stop thinking so loudly." Sam shook his head, blowing out a long-suffering sigh. "Okay, so your dad told us pretty much the same story," he informed the boys, casting his gaze in the direction of where younger Dean had indicated the camping ground to be. Looking back at his brother, he lowered his voice before pointing out, "If we're right about which photograph we're in, we're not gonna be able to get that far, man."

Dean nodded his agreement, before indicating his younger self's injury. "And he's not going anywhere on that ankle."

Sam nodded, blowing out a breath before turning to his younger counterpart. "Okay, Sammy," he said carefully. "I think this is going to be down to you."

Sammy blinked at him. "What's going to be down to me?"

"We need you to go to the camping ground and get some help for your dad and your brother, okay?"

Sammy frowned uncertainly. "Can't I stay here with Dean while you go?"

“Uh—”

“Sorry, little dude,” older Dean put in. “We gotta stay here with your dad and your brother, just in case that shadow creature comes back.”

Sammy’s eyes widened. “It could come back?”

Sam shrugged. “We hope not,” he tried to reassure the boy.

“But it could?” Sammy appeared a little bit on the freaked out side. “But—but what if it tries to get *me* while I’m going for help?”

Sam glanced back at his brother, who frowned.

“That’s not gonna happen,” Dean pronounced with some authority. “But just in case, how about I walk with you as far as I can?”

Sammy thought about that for a second. “Mm. Okay. I guess.” He rose to his feet, briefly turning his attention back to Sam. “You’ll look after my brother and my dad, right?” he asked. “You won’t let the monster get ‘em?”

Sam drew a cross over his heart. “Cross my heart and hope to—well. Not die.”

Sammy nodded. “Okay then.”

The little boy grabbed hold of Dean’s arm as the older version of his big brother scrambled stiffly to his feet, and Dean rolled his eyes. But Sam could see there was genuine affection in the gesture.

“Okay, Sam, you watch out for—for Dean and his dad, I’ll take care of the munchkin.”

“I’m not a munchkin,” Sammy piped up as he began leading the way to the camping ground.

“Midget?”

“Not a midget either!”

“Smurf?”

“You know my big brother’ll kick your ass if you don’t stop calling me names.”

“Mouth, Sammy.”

Sam smiled softly at his brother’s retreating back, before his focus slid back to the lake, to the spot where the Impala was now completely submerged.

He kinda remembered something like this now. The Impala going into a lake. Dad had to get her towed out and they had to stay for months in this little town in Montana while he got her fixed up again. Which had been cool because he’d gotten to stay in the same school for a whole semester.

Huh.

How come he'd not remembered that until now?

"You know, you look kinda like my dad," younger Dean said suddenly, and Sam's attention screeched back to the boy struggling to sit up on the beach.

"I—that's—" Sam wasn't entirely sure how to respond to that. "Thanks. I think."

"He's gonna be okay, right?" Dean asked yet again.

"He's gonna be fine, Dean," Sam once again reassured him.

"Okay."

Reynolds house Lynchburg, TN

Okay, so Bonnie knew John's line of work meant more often than not he was dealing with the out and out *weird*, but this was so *beyond* weird she wasn't entirely sure she had a word for it.

Bobby Singer was currently circling the photograph album. He had an old book open in his left hand while he scattered something—something that smelt *really* bad—with his right, and he was chanting in a language Bonnie thought might be Latin, but only ever having heard Latin on TV she couldn't be a hundred percent certain of that.

"Look, I know you're a friend of John's, Mr. Singer—" she began.

"Bobby," Bobby corrected her, pausing for a second in his chanting.

"Bobby," Bonnie smiled awkwardly. "I'm sorry, it's just I—I don't understand why you want to trap John's boys in the book with the thing that put them in there in the first place."

"To be honest, ma'am—"

"Bonnie."

"Bonnie. Trapping those idjit boys of John's in there with that thing is the last thing I *want* to do. But I have to. It's the only way to get them out of this. It's just temporary, I promise."

Bonnie took a breath. "I'd hate for anything to happen to them. Especially with their father—well." She rubbed at her arms, a sudden chill overcoming her. "Couldn't they get stuck there?" she asked. "Couldn't they get hurt?"

Bobby nodded. "Yes they could," he told her honestly. "But that's just part of the job."

"It sounds like a crappy job to me."

"Most of the time, yeah it is. But those boys were raised to do this, they know the risks." He smiled softly at her. "And believe me, as far as I'm able, I ain't gonna let nothin' bad happen to either one of 'em. Because their Daddy'd kill me."

Bonnie returned his smile, nodding. "That he would."

Bobby bobbed his head just once, before returning to his chanting, circling the album twice more before a loud pop and a bright flare of light like an old fashioned camera flash going off caused Bonnie to jump back a step.

Blinking, she looked down at the photo album.

"It's not glowing anymore," she observed.

Bobby's grin widened. "That's the general idea," he said, crouching down and gingerly touching one of the plastic-covered pages.

"Wait—!"

But nothing happened, and Bobby's grin widened still further.

"So far so good," he commented, before suddenly adding, "You got a camera I could borrow?"

Bowman Lake, MT

"Goddammit!"

Dean beat his fist against the barrier standing between him and delivering the eight-year-old version of his kid brother to the camping ground safely.

"What's wrong?" Sammy asked, walking straight through the invisible wall without hesitation, and turning back to squint at Dean oddly.

Dean shrugged. "End of the line for me, kid," he said. "You'll have to go the rest of the way alone."

Sammy glanced over his shoulder at the camping ground, which was just visible in the distance.

"It's not far," Dean added. "I'll be able to see you the whole way."

Sammy let out a shuddering little breath. "Okay I guess."

"So you're gonna go straight to the campsite office, right?" Dean prodded. "There's bound to be someone there who can help—"

A ranger.

Sammy had come back with a park ranger, and they'd taken him and Dad to hospital and they'd told him his ankle wasn't broken but it hurt like a *bitch* for days and when Dad finally got the Impala up out of the lake it took him months

to get it roadworthy again. He'd had to stay in that same crappy school for a whole freakin' semester.

Dean scratched his head thoughtfully.

How come he'd only remembered this now?

Sammy was looking at him as if he was an escaped mental patient. "You okay, mister?" he asked.

Dean shrugged. "Sure I am," he assured the youngster. "Just wanna make sure you get where you're goin' in one piece is all."

Sammy nodded. "Okay, I can take a hint." He turned and began to head toward the camping ground, before suddenly stopping and turning back. "Thanks for saving me and my brother," he said. "I don't know what I'd have done if he'd died."

Dean swallowed. "Yeah," he agreed. "I know the feeling."

Sammy smiled weakly before turning back in the direction of the camping ground once more and beginning the short walk to get help for his dad and his brother.

Just like he'd promised, Dean stood and watched him all the way to the parking lot. Just because he suddenly remembered his kid brother bringing back a park ranger to help them didn't mean the shadow demon couldn't change history yet again.

Finally, reassured Sammy was safe, Dean turned and headed back to the lakeshore where he'd left Sam and the twelve-year-old version of himself, grumbling to himself all the way about how camping sucked ass as his feet squelched in his boots and his jeans stuck to him in places he really didn't want them sticking.

"Help! You gotta help!"

Dean looked up sharply at the hail, eyes widening as he caught sight of his younger self hobbling desperately in his direction, his face as waxy as it had been when he was trapped in the sinking Impala, an air of panic about him that immediately set Dean on edge.

"Dean?" Dean called out to his younger self. "What's goin' on? Where's Sam?" He broke into a run as the panic in the twelve-year-old's eyes blazed into full-on terror.

"Please!" the boy cried out, virtually falling into Dean's arms when the two of them finally collided. "You gotta come! You gotta come help!"

"Okay, okay, calm down," Dean instructed the kid, holding him gently but firmly by his upper arms. "Tell me what happened, Dean. What's wrong?"

"It's—it's the shadow monster!" Dean burst out, clearly freaking the hell out. "It came back!"

"It *what?*"

"It came back!" Dean repeated. "It came back and it—it took Sam!"

Part Four

Bowman Lake, MT

"The friggin' thing came *back?*" It was adult Dean's turn to freak out. "How the hell did it get Sam?"

The twelve-year-old version of Dean's eyes were like saucers, and Dean tried to fight his own rising sense of panic. Scaring the kid any more senseless than he already was wasn't going to help Sam.

"I—I dunno!" the boy burst out, gesticulating wildly with his arms. "There was just this—this rip in the air behind where Sam was standing, and the shadow monster just appeared right out of the hole and grabbed him and pulled him back through with him. And—and Sam was just—just *gone.*"

*Just like back in Lawrence. Okay, **think**, Dean, dammit...*

"Okay," he said, trying his damndest to stay calm but not making a very good job of it. "Show me. Show me where it happened."

Younger Dean nodded, turning to hobble back in the direction from where he'd just come, back to the beach and the place where Sam had vanished.

Unfortunately for his younger self, that just wasn't fast enough for Dean.

"Sorry about this, kid," he said, picking the boy up and starting to run with him tucked under his arm like a roll of carpet.

"No problem." Younger Dean's voice sounded kind of strangled, but he seemed to understand the urgency of the situation, clinging on to Dean's arm as if his life depended on it. Which it quite possibly did.

Reaching the beach, Dean could see his father still laid out unconscious, and part of him realized he'd been hoping it was all a big mistake and his kid brother would be standing there keeping watch over him.

No such luck.

There was no one around as far as Dean could see, and as he approached his father's stricken form, he realized there was also no longer any sign of the rift like there had been back in Lawrence.

Gently depositing his younger self on the beach next to his dad, Dean scanned the area all around them for any sign of another hole in reality, desperate gaze returning to the boy who was somehow managing to stay upright on just one foot.

"Where?" he asked shortly, and younger Dean pointed, right where Sam had been standing the last time Dean saw him. "Okay, kiddo, you take care of your dad. I'll get Sam."

"How?" the kid asked hesitantly. "He just disappeared into thin air!"

Dean shrugged. "I'll think of somethin'," he reassured his younger counterpart, more than a little aware he was probably trying to reassure himself as well.

"Okay," he muttered to himself. "What would Sammy do?"

Gingerly putting out his hand, Dean felt all around the area younger Dean had indicated for any residual disturbance, the only sign that anything out of the ordinary had happened here being an odd prickling sensation at the tips of his fingers in one particular spot.

"Gotcha," he said triumphantly, before his face fell a little in puzzlement. "Now, how to open it back up without my trusty psychic sidekick to work his freaky-ass mirroring mojo on the freakin' thing..."

"Can—can you get him back?" his twelve-year-old self put in a little nervously.

Dean scratched his head. "Yes," he insisted decisively. "But I'm gonna have to do it the old fashioned way."

No way some freakin' shadow demon was taking off with Sam. No way.

Taking a step back, he glanced down at the young boy watching his every move like he was committing each second to memory.

"Cover your ears," he instructed him, before yanking his Colt out of the back of his jeans and aiming it right where he figured the shadow demon had taken Sam.

"You're gonna shoot at it?"

"Uh-huh," he confirmed, ensuring the kid's hands were over his ears before turning back to the place where Sam had last been and emptying his clip into thin air.

As the last round shot out of the chamber, something shimmered in the air in front of him and Dean said a short prayer of thanks to any deity who happened to be listening.

"Silver or consecrated iron rounds?" a voice behind him suddenly asked, and Dean turned to see his younger self appraising the silver Colt appreciatively.

Dean hesitated a second before replying. "Silver," he said with a small smile. "Blessed with holy water."

Younger Dean didn't look at all surprised. "Yep, I guess that'd work on just about anything."

Dean nodded, looking from his now empty gun to the tiny hole sparkling in the air in front of him.

"Problem is, I don't have any more with me," he admitted, "and I guess any your dad has are in the trunk?"

"At the bottom of the lake, yeah, pretty much," younger Dean replied.

"Okay," Dean said, appraising the tiny rift and setting his jaw in determination. "Brute force it is then."

Taking a run at the thing, Dean slammed his shoulder against it, just as he had the door back in Lawrence.

The hole, however, didn't seem to care that Dean was out of ammo, pissed off, and so desperate to get his brother back he had no compunction about repeatedly throwing himself against it, over and over, fear and blind determination numbing his shoulder and arm to the electric shock that jolted him every time he came into contact with it.

"Is it working?" younger Dean asked, when Dean finally stopped to catch his breath.

Dean considered his handiwork thoughtfully. "I might not have any psychic mojo but I can still get the job done," he said, smirking at the rip in reality, which was now a good few inches in diameter and expanding. "Just a little more."

Younger Dean winced as Dean made another run at it, but Dean kept on going until the opening was just about big enough for him to climb through...and he no longer had any feeling down the entire right side of his body.

Glancing back at the twelve-year-old version of himself, he smiled grimly at him. "Take care of Sammy and your dad, Dean," he told him.

The kid nodded. "I will." Then, "And take care of Sam and *your* dad, Dean," he added.

Dean blinked at him.

The kid knew.

He *knew*.

He smirked at the boy as he made a final run at the rift.

"Not as dumb as Sammy thinks we are, are we?"

And with that, he slammed through to the other side.

Reynolds house Lynchburg, TN

Today was just one of those days when Bobby felt his age. Or rather his knees felt his age. Or a couple centuries older.

Kneeling on the concrete floor of John's lady friend's basement trying to remove an evil charm that sucked people into photographs wasn't exactly how he'd planned on spending his day.

Still, the Winchesters were family, and John's boys... Well, if this was the closest Bobby ever got to being a father, he'd take it.

Hell knows, those boys had needed some kind of paternal figure in their lives, John always off hunting one thing or another since they were both knee-high to a grasshopper.

And Bonnie seemed real nice. God knows what she saw in Winchester, but if those boys of his ever needed a little bit of maternal influence too? He had a feeling she'd be more than happy to provide.

He smiled a little sadly to himself, knowing he was getting a tiny bit ahead of things. But his boys—and oftentimes he thought of them as his boys... Well, he just wanted them to be happy.

And being stuck in a photograph album with a shadow demon on their tails wasn't Bobby's idea of "happy."

Carefully peeling back the plastic page protector, Bobby inserted a photograph into a space at the bottom of the page, right next to a picture of Sam grinning like a loon in a blue and red cap and gown, his arm slung around Dean's shoulder.

Dean was smiling too, but his eyes glowed with an emotion other than just happiness.

Bobby had never seen Dean look as proud of anything as he did his little brother in that photo.

They were standing at the side of some kind of makeshift stage, Bobby guessed where the kids from Sam's class all went to pick up their diplomas. Bright red tarpaulin was draped clumsily over the front and the sides of the wooden platform, but it had somehow got all tucked up around the sides so you could see right under the stage and out to the other side.

Amateurs, Bobby thought to himself with a chuckle.

Sam himself was turned out better, hair neat and tidy for once, face scrubbed, cap straight. Bobby shook his head. How that boy ever managed to graduate school, Bobby would never know, what with how often his daddy was pulling the boys out of class and moving them around so's he could go chase one damn thing or another. Dean sure as hell never managed it, only finding the time to get his G.E.D. when John was laid up with a broken leg for three months.

Bobby remembered that year though. 2001. Remembered getting that call from Sam, all excited about his graduation ceremony, then finding out two days beforehand John was dragging them off to New York on some wild goose chase. That Cox guy. *'General' my ass.*

Bobby had wanted to intervene, wanted to call John and ask him—politely—to change his mind, let Sam go pick up his diploma. In the end he hadn't needed to,

John finally relenting and allowing the boys to head back just in time for the graduation ceremony. John had stayed in New York to finish up the hunt, and when Bobby had dared asked why he didn't want to see his son graduate school, the only answer he got was a terse, "Dean's handling it."

It'd been another nail in the coffin of Sam and John's relationship. Another reason Sam had packed up his stuff and bailed on the Winchester Family Crusade.

Bobby sighed heavily. He didn't think he'd ever understand John Winchester if he lived to be a hundred.

The age his knees felt right about now.

Relaxing back onto his heels as he carefully smoothed the plastic back over the photographs, Bobby smirked as he admired his handiwork.

Now if John's idjit boys could just figure out what he wanted them to do...

* * * *

Now where the hell was he?

Dean glanced about himself.

He was standing in the middle of a clump of trees, the hole through which he'd jumped rapidly receding so he could just make out his twelve-year-old self on the other side for a couple of seconds before it was gone completely.

There were raised voices in the distance, excited voices, yelling, laughing. Lots of people nearby.

So he wasn't in Montana anymore.

Taking a couple of steps toward the voices, he grit his teeth and covered his ears as a squeal of feedback ripped through the air, before the sound of someone clearing their throat played loud over a distant P.A. system.

"Welcome to Roosevelt High School, graduating class of 2001!"

Dean froze for a second, one foot poised a couple of inches off the ground as he began to push his way through the tangled undergrowth.

Roosevelt High? 2001?

Holy crap.

Sam's graduation!

"Sam?" he found himself shouting, redoubling his efforts to get himself out of the green stuff—shrubbery, he reminded himself—in order to find his brother. He *had* to find his brother. He was here somewhere. Had to be. "Sammy?"

Shoving his way through thick fronds of greenery, he was mildly surprised to find himself stepping out onto the touchline of a sports field, row upon row of chairs laid out neatly across the grass occupied by smiling parents and excited teenagers, all looking up at a makeshift stage erected at the far end of the field.

Dean was looking at the stage sideways on, scanning the distant crowd for any sign of his brother—*either* version of his brother—the geeky teenager just about to graduate or the geeky twenty-something he had been talking to a half hour earlier on the beach at Bowman Lake.

His eyes skittered back to the stage, to the way the red tarpaulin was pulled up out of place by bunches of trailing wires so you could see right underneath to the other side, and he remembered this photograph. He remembered it because he had a copy of it tucked away in his journal, hidden in the lining of the cover so Sam wouldn't find it and call him a girl.

Some friend of Sam's had taken it, promised to e-mail him a copy, and Dean had thought that would be the end of it. They didn't have a computer and no internet access, would be moving on in a couple of days when Dad met up with them, just the three of them and the open road. Or so Dean had thought at the time.

But Sam had swung by some library or other on their way to the next hunt in some godforsaken town Dean couldn't even remember the name of, and Sam's buddy, true to his word, had mailed him this picture.

Sam had made a copy for Dean, another for Dad. Dean didn't know what Dad had done with his copy, he and Sammy weren't getting along so good just then, and Dean was pretty sure Sam had only given it to him to make him feel guilty for not attending the ceremony.

Unsurprisingly, two weeks later Sam had announced he was leaving for Stanford, and this photograph was pretty much all he'd left Dean to remember him by.

Dean shook his head, recalling how happy Sam had looked in the picture.

But dredging up ancient history wasn't going to help Dean find him now.

He began to scan the faces in the crowd, not entirely sure what he was looking for until he spotted a familiar leather jacket and a young man leaning casually against a lighting rig to the rear of the seating area.

The ghost of a smile played across his lips as he marveled at how young he looked. He certainly didn't look twenty-two. He was kinda skinny at that age, tall frame still filling out, and Dad's jacket had pretty much buried him.

Okay, so if 2001 Dean was here, then 2001 Sammy had to be around someplace too.

His eyes travelled to the front of the seating area, to the teenagers in their geeky hats and gowns, all chattering excitedly to each other as they waited somewhat less-than-patiently for the ceremony get a move on.

One head stood several inches above the others and Dean smiled to himself. God, Sammy had been a dorky teenager.

Once again he found his gaze shifting to the spot where the photograph had been taken, where he'd stood with Sam's arm around his shoulders, Sam reveling in his recently-found height advantage, the red tarpaulin all messed up behind them and those two juniors apparently attempting their very own biology experiment right underneath where all the dorks—including Sammy—would be going to collect their diplomas and make speeches and all that stuff Dad should have been there to see but wasn't, all that stuff Dean should have gotten to do but didn't, all that stuff Sam finally got to do but with only Dean in the audience to see him do it.

Dean sighed heavily, remembering the photograph, remembering how proud he'd been of his brother that day, how pissed off he'd been at his dad. John should have been there. Sure, the hunt in New York had been important, but Dad should have been there for Sammy.

But as usual the hunt came before everything.

Or maybe not everything.

After all, he suddenly realized, John must have kept his copy of the photograph or Bonnie wouldn't have been able to put it in the album and he wouldn't be standing here, would he?

Still, it didn't excuse Dad putting the hunt before Sam back in 2001. A graduation ceremony might not have seemed important to him, but to Sam it meant a whole lot more. The kid had fought tooth and nail to finish school, and this had been his reward for all that hard work.

John should have been here.

Rubbing at his forehead right between his eyes, he squinted slightly as he felt an unwelcome headache beginning to form.

All this reminiscing wasn't getting him anywhere.

Anything could be happening to Sammy right now. Dean had to find him...

He tilted his head to the side as his eyes lit on a couple of dark shapes moving underneath the stage.

Someone was under there, and it wasn't the two horny juniors necking.

"Sammy?" he muttered.

* * * *

Sam wasn't sure where he was.

It was dark but warm, and when he looked up, there was a wooden ceiling a couple of feet above his head.

Wooden ceiling?

Last thing he remembered, he was standing at the shoreline of Bowman Lake with his dad unconscious at his feet and the twelve-year-old version of his brother looking at him as if he could somehow magically make everything alright again.

Sam wondered how many times *he'd* looked at Dean with that exact same expression on his face while they were growing up.

He grit his teeth and grimaced as a squeal of feedback above his head broke through the excited chattering of distant voices, and it was only then that he realized he couldn't move his arms, couldn't cover his ears to protect them from the horrible sound.

"Welcome to Roosevelt High School, graduating class of 2001!" a voice announced over a tinny P.A. system, and Sam froze.

Roosevelt High? 2001?

Holy crap.

My graduation!

He tried to move his arms again, but a sharp pain cut into his wrists and his biceps and he quickly realized that wasn't going to happen any time soon, his hands tightly secured behind his back, a length of thick rope looped several times around his chest and his upper arms.

Something had grabbed him.

At the lake, something had grabbed him from behind and *pulled* and the next thing he knew...the next thing he knew he was *here*.

Wherever here was.

Looking up, the back of his head hit something hard, and twisting his neck a little, he could just make out one of several wooden posts holding up the ceiling above him—or was it the stage? Was he under the stage? Was he tied to one of the wooden posts holding up the stage where he received his high school diploma back in 2001?

Sam was pretty disturbed by the fact that this idea didn't surprise him in the slightest.

Okay. He was tied up under the stage at Roosevelt High. He was sitting on damp grass with his legs stretched out in front of him, his ankles bound together and a nasty taste in his mouth signifying he was gagged.

Bleh. God, that was disgusting.

So where the hell was Dean?

Any version of Dean.

Thinking back, he remembered the huge fight he'd had with Dad about missing his graduation ceremony, how he'd finally been allowed to attend, but only if Dean went with him, how he and Dean had posed for that photograph...

He ducked his head futilely at the sound of footsteps above him, and he strained his eyes into the darkness surrounding him.

In his head, he tried to call Dean's name, but the only sound that came out was a muffled "Oomph!" and all he could think about was that his eighteen-year-old self would be walking up onto that stage above his head at any minute to collect his diploma.

Why was he here? *How* was he here?

His mind drifted once again to that photograph, the one Adey Ashmore had taken at his graduation, the one of him and Dean standing at the side of the stage.

The side of the stage.

His eyes flew off to his right and he realized with a sense of relief that he could see daylight, just a tiny patch of it off in the distance. He remembered the red tarpaulin, the one that was flung open by those two—what were they, freshmen?—intent on making out under the stage area just as Adey snapped the picture.

Dean had thought it was hilarious. Said he liked this photo *way* more than that official one Sam had had taken, the one where he was grinning like an assclown with that stupid hat on his head and the cape even Superman wouldn't have been seen dead in.

So if Sam was here, at this moment, tied up under the stage just as the ceremony was about to begin above him, where was Dean, and where was his teenaged self? Were they out there, in that distant patch of daylight, Sam's arm slung around Dean's shoulders as Adey Ashmore snapped their photograph? That had happened just before the ceremony started, if he was remembering right. Maybe it had already happened. Maybe they were already gone. Maybe...

He froze.

There was something moving just at the periphery of his vision, something dark and amorphous and...and *shadowy*.

It moved around him, very slowly, the consistency of smoke, of vapor, coming to a halt mere inches from his face, where it gradually began to resolve into something else, something solid, something corporeal.

Jet black eyes glinted at him from a shadowy visage and he smelt sulfur, smelt sulfur so strongly he almost gagged on it. Sulfur and...and gasoline.

Although the demon didn't have a face, Sam was pretty sure it was smiling at him.

He tried to demand to know what was going on, but all that came out was a muffled, "Mmmm mmff ummff um?" and suddenly something cold and damp was

touching his face, running over his cheekbones to the gag in his mouth, which was abruptly yanked down around his throat.

Sucking in a breath, Sam repeated what he'd been trying to say previously, barking, "Who are you and what the hell do you want with me?" into the darkness.

"Sam Winchester," a sibilant voice hissed into his left ear, and Sam flinched, just as the jet black eyes disappeared, suddenly reappearing to his right.

The thing was fast.

Once again he felt the sensation of cold against his face, almost like fingers softly stroking his skin, and he shuddered, despite his determination to show the thing no fear.

"Get away from me!" he spat, pulling his head away from the freezing cold touch before demanding, "Where's my brother? What have you done with my brother?"

"All in good time," the shadow rasped into his ear, its words like an icy breeze caressing Sam's neck. "Dean Winchester all in good time."

Sam wasn't sure what that meant. "If you hurt him..."

The demon made no response to the implied threat, instead pulling away a little and beginning to circle the post where Sam was tied, all the time whispering, maybe to itself, maybe to its captive. Maybe to someone—*something*—else entirely.

Something wet was trickling onto the floor in the demon's wake, and the smell of gasoline became even stronger, even stronger than the reek of sulfur making Sam's stomach churn.

"Master will be so proud," the demon was whispering, gas pitter-pattering onto the soft grass all around its prisoner. "Just said to keep Winchesters busy, keep away from Stull till after equinox. Master will be so proud of me. Doesn't matter which I kill—Winchesters then or Winchesters now—end result the same. Winchesters dead. No more Winchesters. No one to rescue Daddy from the Pit. Master will be happy. Make Lucifer happy. Make Lucifer love me..."

Sam's eyes opened wider at the revelations falling from the demon's mouth like the drops of gasoline it was sprinkling around Sam's restrained form, the demon continuing to ramble as it circled Sam again and again.

"Make Lucifer love me."

Lucifer.

Dammit, Sam should have guessed.

So this was all a ploy? To keep them from getting Dad out of Stull?

And it looked like it was working too, the demon beginning to splash gasoline all around him, over all the posts holding up the stage, over the underside of the stage itself.

Over the P.A. Sam could hear the principal—Principal Allison?— calling out the names of Sam's classmates—Johnson, Kemp, Leung, Mason, Miller—and above his head, he heard footsteps thumping up onto the stage as his school friends went up to collect their diplomas.

No. No, it can't do this—

Suddenly the reek of sulfur was almost overpowering and those obsidian eyes were right in Sam's face again, barely an inch away.

"End Winchesters. Make Lucifer love me."

"You're crazy if you think that Satanic sonofabitch is ever gonna—"

"Shh, quiet now, Sam Winchester," the demon said, replacing the gag in Sam's mouth and stroking his cheek almost tenderly before continuing to throw more gas around the area where Sam was held captive, mumbling to itself dreamily as Sam tried desperately to free his hands.

"Make Lucifer love me. End Winchesters. End everything."

There was the sound of a match striking, and Sam sucked in a terrified breath.

"Sheering, Somersby, Telford..."

"End Winchesters," the demon sneered, the guttering orange glow of the dancing flame reflecting eerily in its dull black eyes. "End Winchesters."

The demon laughed horribly and a bright light suddenly split the darkness behind it, a rift forming in reality even as Sam watched in horror as the demon opened a corridor to another photograph.

Or—or was it a corridor *home*?

"End Winchesters."

The demon touched the lit match to one of the gasoline-soaked wooden posts, and instantly fingers of flame began to reach up toward the stage, shooting across the wooden planks above Sam's head and creeping across the ground, toward the circle of gasoline the demon had spilled all around him.

"End Winchesters."

"Thompson, Vickers, Winchester..."

Sam was up onstage right now.

Sam's eighteen-year-old self was up on the stage above his head and there was fire everywhere.

"End Winchesters."

Sam started to choke as the gag combined with the smoke threatened to suffocate him before the flames could even reach him. And then he looked up, through the flames, through the burning boards above his head, the burning boards his younger self was stepping onto right now.

And the demon laughed.

"End Winchesters. Make Lucifer love me."

The demon laughed and jumped through the rift, which abruptly sealed itself behind him.

And Sam was left trussed up in the middle of a ring of fire.

He was going to die.

Sam was going to die. Burnt up, just like Mom, like Jess...

***Sports field
Roosevelt High School
Kent, OH***

What the hell?

Even as Dean set off at a run toward the stage, he saw the familiar guttering light of dancing flames shimmering beneath the wooden boards as a gaggle of excited teenagers began the slow procession up to collect their diplomas.

No way! Someone was setting fire to the stage!

The stage where he was starting to think the demon might have taken his brother.

The stage where his brother was just about to pick up his diploma.

Sam below and Sammy above and fire everywhere.

This didn't end pretty.

Dean's run turned into a bolt, and he prayed to anyone listening that he was remembering the right photo and he wasn't going to find himself bouncing off another invisible wall before he could get to his kid brother—either of them.

"Thompson, Vickers, Winchester..."

Dean skidded to a stop as the principal's voice echoed out of the P.A. system, eyes widening at the sight of his little brother trotting up onto the stage, completely oblivious to what was going on underneath him.

Not that Dean actually knew what was going on underneath him.

But whatever was happening, he had to stop Sam going up there...

As he drew closer, he could see that the fire was spreading rapidly through the maze of wooden posts holding up the platform, tendrils of flame beginning to lick the underside of the boards, and sure enough, there was Sam, tied up and surrounded by flames.

Dammit.

What the hell was he supposed to do now? He couldn't save *both* of them!

His first instinct was to run to *his* Sam, the one tied up and surrounded by fire, get him away from the flames, get him to safety. But if he did that, what if he couldn't get to the younger version of Sam too? If eighteen-year-old Sam burnt up on that stage, then wouldn't twenty-six year old Sam cease to exist?

Dammit. His head hurt. And he needed Sam to tell him what to do.

"Hey, old guy. You need some help?"

In between himself and the stage stood a familiar-looking twenty-two-year-old, hands stuffed into the pockets of his leather jacket, smirking at him as if the world owed him a favor.

Somehow, this Dean Winchester didn't seem at all surprised to see an older version of himself standing in the school sports field at Sam's graduation.

"I, uh—"

"Figured you might show up again after Bowman Lake," younger Dean added, grinning broadly.

For a second, Dean just looked at him. Then he *remembered*. Remembered seeing *himself*—or his older self—at Sam's graduation ceremony. Remembered it like it happened yesterday. Or. Y'know. Today.

So...so this was really happening? This *for real* was really happening? They weren't just in the photograph, they were in the friggin' past *for real*? They were actually changing history? Dean could suddenly remember his older self being at Sam's graduation ceremony because his being here had just created that memory in his head. Was that even possible? Was that even in *English*?

"Fire," he managed to blurt out, the only word he could manage to get onto his tongue. "There's—there's a fire."

The smirk slid from younger Dean's face, and he was instantly all business, following the direction of Dean's pointing finger and nodding calmly.

"I'll go get Sammy," he said. "You get...your Sammy."

"Sam," Dean corrected him automatically, before suddenly adding, "Wait! Dean, wait, I need you to go get something for me first!"

* * * *

Sam had to close his eyes.

It wasn't that he was scared of the fire, he just...he just didn't want to look at it, didn't want to think about it getting closer and closer to him while he sat here helpless, pulling and tugging at the ropes about his wrists and arms, feeling the unfriendly flames licking at his shoulders, his feet, his hair.

He didn't want to go out like this.

Not like this.

"Sammy!"

"Dean!" Sam was reflexively yelling his brother's name before he was even aware of doing it, his eyes snapping open and instantly closing again when it felt as if the heat would melt his eyeballs.

Although the gag in his mouth muffled his voice beyond Dean's understanding, he yelled his brother's name again regardless, blinking hard and trying to squint through the flames consuming everything around him.

And then suddenly the flames were gone.

In a prolonged whoosh of sound and an almost suffocating cloud of white vapor.

Blinking streaming eyes and choking on whatever the hell it was that was suddenly enveloping him, Sam could just about make out a dark shape as the smoke cleared, and for a second he flinched, convinced the shadow demon had returned to finish the job it had started.

But when he blinked again, the moisture finally clearing from his eyes, the dark shape resolved itself into a familiar outline, and suddenly there was Dean, standing grinning at him maniacally with a fire extinguisher clutched in his hands.

"Told you I always wanted to be a fireman when I grew up," the older Winchester declared, leaning down toward Sam and pulling the gag from his mouth before brushing a gentle thumb down his kid brother's soot smeared cheek. "You okay, kiddo?" he asked, apparently running an inventory of Sam's body parts before crouching down to check out the ropes securing him to the still-smoldering post.

"Dean..." Sam began, looking up at the blackened, but thankfully still intact underside of the stage. "How—how did you—where did you...?"

"How did I get here?" Dean asked, ditching the fire extinguisher it seemed to Sam almost reluctantly before whipping out his pocket knife. "You're not the only one can open rifts in the fabric of space and time, Sammy," he explained enigmatically, beginning to saw through the ropes around Sam's torso.

"Dean."

"Emptied a clip into the thing," Dean relented. "Brute force works sometimes too y'know."

Trying to take a breath, but almost coughing up a lung instead, Sam finally managed to ask, "And the fire extinguisher? Where the hell did you...?"

Dean paused to grin at him. "Not in the photo, right?" he said, before bending to continue the task at hand. "Got some help with that."

"From who?"

"Some kid called Dean Winchester," Dean explained, finally cutting through the rope and beginning to unravel it from around his brother. "Handsome devil. Sent him off to the equipment store. Knew I wouldn't be able to get there—stupid invisible walls—but I vaguely remembered someone—can't remember who—setting off a couple fire extinguishers in there during your last senior year track meet."

Sam almost choked, but not on the lingering smoke. "That was *you*?" he demanded. "You weren't even a *student* here!"

"I was bored," Dean explained with a shrug. "This was a pretty dull town, man. Had to make my own entertainment."

Sam shook his head as Dean went to work on the ropes around his wrists, glancing up at the commotion going on above his head.

Although the flames were out and the stage hadn't collapsed, Sam could hear yelling and the sound of several pairs of running feet as the stage was cleared of students, and then someone—quite possibly twenty-two-year-old Dean Winchester, Sam realized—was yelling for someone to call the goddamn Fire Department *right the hell now!*

"Dean, I remember this," Sam said suddenly, as Dean's knife finally sliced through the remaining fibers of the rope. "My graduation day. I remember smoke coming up from under the stage, and then you were there, clearing everyone out of the way and yelling for someone to call the Fire Department."

Dean nodded distantly, moving on to the ropes around Sam's ankles as his brother rubbed absently at his wrists. "Yeah, been happening to me all day," he agreed. "Suddenly remembering stuff that I didn't remember happening before."

Sam shook his head. "Everyone figured it was some student playing a prank," he added, grinning. "But I always thought it was you."

Dean paused to look up at him, a wounded expression on his face. "Dude, I am deeply hurt and offended that you should think such a thing of me!"

"Fire extinguishers in the equipment store?"

Dean's face broke into a grin. "Got me there, Sammy."

Sam sighed as Dean went back to sawing at the ropes. "Never figured it was a demon trying to set me on fire."

Finally hacking through the remainder of Sam's bindings, Dean looked up at him and shrugged. "Who'd o' thought eighteen-year-old Sammy Winchester was that important, huh?"

Sam nodded, allowing Dean to help him up, and wincing when his head struck the underside of the stage with a thud.

"You're too tall, dude," Dean commented, grabbing Sam's biceps and holding him at arm's length for a second as he checked him over. "You sure you're okay?"

A fit of coughing prevented Sam from answering, but he nodded in the affirmative, giving Dean the thumbs up.

"Okay," Dean said, breathing a sigh of obvious relief. "Then let's shag ass before Dave shows up with more matches."

Sam paused. "Dave?"

Dean blinked at him. "Dave," he said, shrugging dismissively. "The Daeva, or whatever the hell it is."

Sam snorted. "Yeah, come to think of it, it looked like a Dave," he agreed, allowing Dean to lead him through the blackened grass and smoldering support posts toward the patch of daylight he had been looking at so longingly only a few moments earlier.

"I think it was working for Lucifer," he added, Dean pausing to glance back at him. "The Daeva."

"While I'm not entirely surprised," Dean said, "what makes you say that?"

"It kept talking about wanting to make Lucifer love it by killing us," Sam explained. "'Kill Winchesters. Make Lucifer love me,'" he added, in a credible impersonation of the thing. "Dave wasn't the world's greatest conversationalist," he added. "Kind of had a one track mind."

"I guess it could have been working for Lucifer without Lucifer knowing," Dean hazarded, finally leading Sam out into daylight, where he blinked painfully in the bright sunlight.

Kids in caps and gowns were running around all over the place, parents and teachers attempting to round them up as sirens wailed in the distance.

"No," Sam said, shaking his head. "Sounded like Lucifer just wanted it to keep us away from Stull during the equinox. It was Dave's own bright idea to kill us too."

Dean straightened. "Keep us away from Stull?" he echoed, brow furrowing. "*That's* what this is about?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah. Sounds like the Devil doesn't want to dance with Dad."

"Can't blame him," Dean returned. "Guy has two left feet."

"Huh?" Sam frowned at him, and Dean merely shrugged.

"Let's just say you're lucky you had me to teach you to dance before your prom," Dean said, glancing over his shoulder to where a familiar young man in a beat up leather jacket was waving at him.

Dean waved back, and Sam did a double take at the sight of his brother's twenty-two-year-old self, his arm draped about a tall skinny kid in a slightly askew cap and gown.

"Aw man..."

Dean snorted. "Yeah, Peewee Herman had nothin' on you, Sammy," he said, before steering Sam off toward some bushes toward the edge of the sports field. "C'mon. We need to get outta here."

Sam glanced once again over his shoulder, back at his teenaged self, who was watching them intently.

"I don't remember..."

"Sure you don't, Sammy. I never told you."

"Then you knew?" Sam said. "You knew it was us? You remember us being here?"

Dean nodded. "Hell, twelve-year-old Dean knew it was us," he explained. "That's why twenty-two-year-old Dean wasn't at all surprised to see us here at his kid brother's graduation."

"Time travel, man," Sam said, shaking his head. "Gives me a headache."

"Gives me gas," Dean countered, shoving Sam into the cover of the shrubbery.

"Thanks for sharing," Sam commented, before adding, "So why are we standing in the bushes?"

"We're not in the bushes," Dean replied. "We're in the *shrubbery*."

"Potato, potahto," Sam countered.

"Chili cheese fries," Dean returned, frowning slightly. "What, we're not playing word association?"

"Dean."

"Okay, okay." Dean took a breath. "This is where I landed. When I bust through the rift. I figured, y'know, you might be able to do your whole mirroring thing and get us the hell outta here."

"Back to Bowman Lake?"

"I dunno, man, but anywhere's gotta be better than Kent, Ohio."

Sam grudgingly nodded his agreement, before turning wistful eyes back out onto the sports field. "Got a few good memories of this place though," he said quietly, thoughts returning to that photograph, to standing there with his arm around Dean's shoulders, an acceptance letter to Stanford in his pocket and his future laid out in front of him like a sun-drenched California highway.

"What was that chick's name again?" Dean agreed, nodding. "Rachel? Man, your prom night was awesome!"

"Shut up, Dean," Sam said, closing his eyes and holding out his hand. "Or I might just forget to take you with me when I get this rift open."

***Basement
Reynolds house
Lynchburg, TN***

"What the hell?"

Dean was pretty sure his eyes were open, but he had to be dreaming because he was just as sure he was standing in Bonnie's basement back in Lynchburg.

"Dean...?" Sam said quietly, as he exited the rift behind his brother. "Are we...back?"

"Don't ask me, man, I just work here," Dean replied, scanning the empty basement for...well not for *that*.

"Again. *What the hell?*"

The shadow demon was hovering not three feet away from them, an impossible expression of surprise on its non-face as its obsidian eyes examined the concrete floor beneath its non-feet.

And the devil's trap the three of them appeared to be standing in.

"How the hell did—" Dean never got to finish his sentence as Sam grabbed him roughly by the back of his collar and yanked him out of the devil's trap just as the demon made a sound something akin to a kettle boiling over and raked shadowy claws through the air where Dean's face had just been.

"Good save, man," Dean thanked his brother a little breathlessly, as the demon screeched in frustrated rage and began zooming backwards and forwards across the devil's trap, slamming into invisible walls as it attempted to break itself free. "But how the hell did we get here?"

Sam was scanning the basement when his eyes suddenly widened. "Bobby!" he burst out, pointing at a large, handwritten sign pinned to the wall behind the devil's trap.

"EXORCISM. *NOW, YA IDJITS!*"

"How the hell did Bobby...?"

"Exorcizámus te, omnis immúnde spíritus, omni satánica potéstas..." Sam immediately began to recite the exorcism, the demon's screeching increasing in volume and intensity as it continued to batter itself against the invisible prison holding it captive.

"Sam, get the lead out..." Dean began, but stopped abruptly when a shadowy demonic claw suddenly reached out and grabbed Sam about the throat—somehow reaching *outside* of the protective circle. "Sam!"

Sam was scrabbling at his throat and choking, his face reddening as he tried to pry the demon's fingers off his neck.

"Ab...insidiis...diaboli..." Sam croaked, the demon's grip tightening until speech became an impossibility.

Dean sucked in a sharp breath. "Uh," he stumbled. "...Ibera nos, Domine. Ut Ecclesiam tuam secura tibi facias..."

The demon's screeching reached fever pitch, claws suddenly releasing their grip on Sam as the shadowy fingers were snatched hastily back inside the protective circle, Dean repeating Sam's earlier maneuver, grabbing his brother by his collar and yanking him further away from the trap, out of the demon's reach.

Sam massaged his throat, doubling over as he tried to regain his breath as Dean continued with the exorcism.

"...Libertate servire, te rogamus, audi nos..."

Sam was looking at the older man as if he couldn't quite believe Dean had memorized the ritual by heart, and Dean merely shrugged, before stumbling over a particularly tricky line of Latin.

"...Ut inimicos sanctae Ecclesiae humiliare digneris, te rogamus, audi nos..." Sam took over for him, before Dean picked back up where he'd left off, the two of them completing the ritual together.

"...Ut inimicos sanctae Ecclesiae..."

"Lucifer...will make you pay...for this!" the demon suddenly spat, coming to an abrupt halt at the edge of the circle, jet black eyes flashing angrily as it hissed and screeched at them. "You will...never...see your father...again!"

"Whatever you need to tell yourself to help you sleep at night, Dave," Dean snarked, for a second leaving the Latin to his brother. "But I don't think you'll be gettin' much sleep where you're goin'!"

"...Humiliare digneris..." Sam continued, before Dean once again joined him.

"...Te rogamus, audi nos!"

With a bone-chilling wail, the shadow demon seemed to melt into the ground, the soulless black eyes pinning the boys in an accusatory scowl before finally dissipating into nothing.

Then there was just silence.

And the sound of the boys breathing heavily.

"Damn!" Dean finally managed to burst out when his heart rate had begun to approach normal once again. "How the hell did Bobby do that?"

Sam stepped cautiously across the devil's trap, carefully avoiding the oily residue splattered across the concrete—all that remained of their demonic adversary.

Approaching the wall opposite, he pulled Bobby's note down and turned it over, snickering softly to himself as he read the reverse.

"What?" Dean asked impatiently. "This week's lottery numbers?"

"Sit tight. I'm getting you outta there. Eventually. Bobby," Sam read the rear of the note, grinning fondly. "Always comes through when we need him the most," he commented, and Dean had to nod his agreement.

"But where's he tryin' to get us out of?" he asked, looking about himself in confusion. "We're in Bonnie's basement, right? Where we started from? Aren't we home already?"

Sam inclined his head slightly. "See if you can get up the stairs."

Dean hesitated for a second before complying with Sam's request, cursing a blue streak when he walked straight into yet another invisible barrier. "Goddammit!" he burst out, spinning back toward his brother. "We're in *another* photo?"

Sam nodded. "I think so. Yeah, it *looks* like we're in Bonnie's basement, but I'm pretty sure we're in a *photograph* of Bonnie's basement—one Bobby must have taken once he'd drawn the devil's trap."

Dean paused momentarily, face puckering as he tried to wrap his head around what the hell Sam just said. "Bobby took a photograph of a devil's trap...?"

"Which he must have put in the album. The shadow demon jumped into the next photograph..."

"...Right into the devil's trap!" Dean grinned brightly. "Gotta admire the old guy's ingenuity." He wandered over to the greasy stain where the demon had gone bye-bye and kicked it thoughtfully with the toe of his boot. "So how long...?"

He looked up at Sam, just as a bright flash lit up the basement, and when he finally managed to pry his eyes open again, Dean discovered he was still looking at Sam, still standing in Bonnie's basement, but now...he was also looking at Bobby. And Bonnie. And Chris and Amie, the latter three of whom were just staring at him with their mouths open.

"Welcome back, boys!" Bobby burst out, and Dean found himself mimicking the Reynolds' expression perfectly.

"Bobby?" he mumbled. "Y'know, unless you're H.G. Wells' great-grandson, I'm thinking you don't have a time machine..."

Bobby chuckled. "No time machine," he confirmed.

"Then how...?" Sam asked a little uncertainly, and for once, Dean noted with some satisfaction, he looked about as confused as Dean himself felt.

"Counter charm," Bobby explained. "Broke the demon's link to the present, his way back home, just long enough for you boys to exorcise it." He paused for a second, raising one eyebrow suspiciously. "You *did* exorcise it, right?"

Dean nodded. "Sure we did! You think we're—"

"Idjits? Yeah, pretty much."

"We love you too, man."

"Well, without me you boys would still be stuck—" he glanced at his wristwatch, "—about a half hour back in the past, in that photograph. Had to perform a pretty nifty ritual of my own to get you out—"

"Which smelt awful," Bonnie interjected, smiling softly.

"So—" Sam looked as confused as Dean had ever seen him. "How did you know when to do it?" he asked. "The ritual. How did you know when to perform the ritual?"

Bobby grinned a self-satisfied grin. "When the note I pinned to the wall wasn't pinned to the wall anymore."

Sam's confused frown gradually melted into a smile of understanding. "When I took it down to read it," he agreed, nodding his head. "I get it."

Dean's own frown remained a frown. "I'm glad *someone* does."

"That's how you knew we must have finished the exorcism, right?" Sam continued. "Because we'd had the time to read the other side of the note?"

"Yep," Bobby confirmed. "Figured you'd have your hands too full of demon up until that point."

Dean's head *really* hurt. "And *this* is why time travel's impossible!" he burst out. "How the hell does any of that make any sense?"

Sam patted him on the shoulder reassuringly. "Not impossible," he said. "We just proved that. You said yourself you were suddenly remembering all the stuff that we only saw happening to our younger selves today, right?"

"Like the fire at your graduation," Dean agreed. "Or the Impala going in the lake..."

"The what going in the what?" Bobby demanded, clearly alarmed.

"S okay," Dean assured him. "It was nineteen years ago."

Bobby removed his cap and scratched his head. "Well that's alright then," he said, a little sarcastically.

Dean nodded, breathing out a long sigh as he cast his gaze around the now demon-free basement and the faces of the Reynolds family, clearly concerned for the Winchesters' wellbeing. "Yeah," he said finally. "Yeah, I think it is."

***Reynolds house
Lynchburg, TN***

"I see you have your dad's appetite," Bonnie observed, as Dean tucked into his fourth helping of sweet potatoes.

Dean grinned up at her and added, "And he can sniff out a good home-cooked meal from ten miles away."

Bonnie smiled sweetly at him, motioning at the spread laid out across the dinner table. "I'll take that as a compliment," she said, handing a bowl of broccoli to Amie, who passed it on to Sam. "I'm afraid this is the only way we have of thanking you boys—and you, Mr. Singer—"

"Bobby," Bobby reminded her again.

"—Bobby," Bonnie nodded, "for what you did for us today."

Sam shrugged. "If it hadn't been for us, I'm not sure any of this would have happened to you," he admitted. "So really, it was our fault this mess landed at your door in the first place. Only right we should clean it up."

Bonnie pushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear and smiled wistfully. "One of your dad's greatest fears," she explained, tracing a pattern on the tablecloth with one finger. "His world colliding with ours. He tried to keep us innocent, tried not to bring it home with him, but it's his life. It's who he is. He can't hide that from us. He may have been able to keep us from meeting you boys, but we knew what he did, what he fought. It was a risk, inviting that into our home." Her smile broadened warmly. "But your dad was worth it."

Dean cleared his throat uncomfortably. "It's good to hear you say that."

"He's been like a father to us," Chris added. "He's always welcome here, whatever the risk of something following him."

"And he prepared us for that," Amie agreed. "Some of it anyway. And if there's anything we can't handle—"

"We call you," Bonnie finished with a smile. "Which I hope we might be doing a lot more of from now on."

"But not because you've got a demon problem, right?" Sam put in. "Social reasons only."

Bonnie laughed. "Naturally. You boys—well you're as welcome here as your dad," she told them. "Any time you want to stop by."

"Thanks for that," Dean said, his discomfort growing a little. "We're—" he glanced briefly at Sam before continuing. "We're glad Dad had—has someone like you."

"Me too," Bonnie agreed. "He means a lot to me. I just hope—I just hope you can get him back. From wherever his is."

"No shadow demon's keeping us away from getting our dad," Dean insisted. "Lucifer or no Lucifer."

"So that's what this whole thing was about?" Bobby queried. "Trying to keep you from rescuing John at spring equinox?"

Sam shrugged. "That's what the demon said," he agreed. "Kinda looks like Lucifer's running scared."

"Can you blame him?" Dean put in. "Dad's gonna be pissed as all hell when he gets out! I wouldn't wanna be in Lucifer's shoes!"

"If he has the time—" Bonnie began, looking down at her plate a little sheepishly. "I mean, I know, well, *Lucifer* and everything, but if your dad has the time to swing by when you've rescued him...?"

Dean snickered. "Bonnie and Johnny," he said with a smirk. "Y'know we gotta get Dad outta Stull, if only so's I can rag him about that one!"

"I think it's cute," Amie put in.

"'Cute' is not a word I usually associate with John Winchester," Bobby snorted.

"He should have told you boys about us," Bonnie said suddenly, causing the generally positive mood around the table to sober slightly. "I'm sorry about that."

Dean blew out a soft sigh. "Not your fault," he said. "Our dad's always been kinda secretive."

"Understatement," Sam put in.

"But yeah," Dean added. "He should have told us."

An uncomfortable silence followed, broken by Bobby clearing his throat.

"To absent friends," he said, raising his glass above his head, as the Reynolds and the Winchesters followed suit.

"Absent friends."

"Absent friends," Dean echoed softly.

* * * *

"Dean?"

The meal had broken up some time ago, and Sam had been so wrapped up in the simple domesticity of helping Bonnie clear away the dishes that he'd completely lost track of his brother.

He found him, sitting on the front porch contemplating Chris's GTO, a beer in his hand and a disturbingly blank expression on his face.

Quietly, Sam slipped down the steps to perch next to his brother, silent for a while, waiting for Dean to work through whatever he was working through before he could manage to speak to Sam about it.

"He should have told us."

Sam nodded slowly, the echo of Bonnie's words hanging in the air between them.

"He should have done a lot of things," he agreed softly.

Dean continued to gaze at the GTO. "Like show up for your graduation?"

The bitterness in Dean's tone surprised Sam. He'd forgiven their dad a long time ago for that particular misdemeanor, but it appeared as if Dean was still hanging on to his resentment. On Sam's behalf, he had no doubt.

"Remember the day after?" he reminded his brother casually. "When Dad finally showed up from that hunt in New York?"

Dean glanced sideways at him before taking another pull on his beer. "He had that fake I.D. in your name."

Sam nodded, smiling a little wistfully. "Took the two of us out drinking all night. Remember that? To celebrate my graduation."

The corners of Dean's lips curled upwards almost imperceptibly. "You got so sick next day. Thought you'd be barfing up a lung by lunch."

Sam snickered. "Me too," he agreed. "Dad called me a wuss but brought me painkillers and a cold compress and let me stay in bed all day."

"Yeah," Dean murmured. "Left me to clean up the toxic waste dump in the bathroom."

"That he did," Sam said. "But y'know, that's one of the last good memories I've got of the days before I left for Stanford—killer hangover and everything."

"Yeah," Dean sighed, shifting slightly on the step. "Sometimes Dad actually got things right."

"He always did his best for us, Dean. You know that. It was just hard for us to see that sometimes."

Dean sniffed, wiping at his eyes as if he totally had some dust in them or something. "She could have been your mom, Sam. Bonnie. You could have had a mom."

Sam checked Dean's shoulder softly. "I already had a mom, idiot. You were the one cleaned up that bathroom."

Dean squinted sideways at him. "You callin' me a chick?"

"Yeah, Dean. You're a total chick. Always were."

Dean sniffed again. "I'd kick your ass for sayin' that, but don't wanna upset Bonnie's neighbors."

"I know man. That's okay. You'd never take me anyway."

Dean snorted softly, bringing his beer once again to his lips before offering the bottle to Sam.

Sam took it, taking a pull before handing it back.

"Sam?" Dean said after a couple of minutes of companionable silence.

"Yeah?"

"We need to find Dad, Sam," Dean said, finally turning to look at his brother. "It's the only thing I can think about."

Sam nodded his understanding, leaning a bit closer to his brother. "We'll get him back, Dean," he said, resolutely. "I promise."

The End