If Dreams Could Make Wishes Come True
by AmyPond45

Summary

On the night of November 2, 1983, the Yellow-Eyed Demon killed Mary Winchester and baby Sam. Or did he? Little Sam Smith grows up in foster care, lonely and unloved, comforted and sustained by vivid, recurring dreams of a normal life growing up in a happy, middle-class home in Lawrence, Kansas with his mom, dad, and big brother. When a shadowy government agency takes an interest in Sam's nascent psychic abilities, Sam suddenly finds himself in training to be a kind of psychic superhero, and things start looking up. Until the day he runs into a tall, freckled teenager on an old country road, and Sam wonders if dreams can make wishes come true after all. A coming-of-age AU where the boys are raised separately.

Notes

Written for the 2015 spn_j2_big bang. Go to celtic_forest's art post and give her some love for her beautiful art-work for this story! And many thanks to smalltrolven for her beta work.
Chapter 1

Sam couldn't remember the first time he dreamed about Dean.

Sam's earliest memories were of a woman with soft arms and a tired voice. She smelled like onions and soap, and when she rocked him to sleep she sang to him, country songs and old Irish ballads, sad and lonely and only a little off-key. Sam could remember sleeping on the rough carpeted floor in front of the t.v., where he spent a lot of the day while she was at work, watching Scooby Doo and Tom & Jerry cartoons. Sometimes he got so hungry he fell asleep sucking his fingers, unconsciously seeking the dream-world that hovered just past the edge of his consciousness.

Sam's other earliest memories were dreams of a boy who cuddled with him in his crib, whispering to him to help him fall asleep, pressing soft kisses against his cheeks and forehead. He and the boy played together on a thick carpet in a sunny playroom, pushing a popcorn-popper lawn-mower and riding on a yellow plastic push toy with a seat that raised up so Sam could store his blocks inside. Sam's first words were "ball" and "Beam." As he grew and his pronunciation improved, his favorite word turned from "Beam" to "Bean," and by the time he was three it came out right every time.

Sam's dreams were always the same. He was a normal little boy growing up in a normal family with a mom and a dad and an older brother. In his dreams Dean was always there, playing cars with him, sharing his snacks, teaching him to throw a ball in the yard. Sometimes they sat together on the couch and watched t.v. and then Dean got bored and started to tickle Sam until he was gasping for breath, rolling around on the couch and the floor with Dean like puppies. Sometimes they
played so hard Sam would fall asleep against the older boy, curled up with him on the floor or the couch, sometimes in the bed they shared.

When he woke up back in the real world he was alone, always in the same tiny one-room apartment. Sometimes the woman was there, sometimes she was already gone to work and he waited, watching t.v. and eating the scraps of food she left for him, mostly left-overs from the restaurant where she waited tables. Sometimes he drifted back to sleep, spent a couple of hours playing with Dean in his dream-world, eating real home-cooked food, feeling safe and protected and loved.

One night the woman didn't come home. Sam waited, slept off and on, dreamed a whole day with Dean, then woke up and waited some more. When the door opened and two policemen came into the apartment, Sam was half-asleep, so hungry and dehydrated he couldn't even answer their questions. He just let them lead him out to their squad-car, belt him in with his blanket and a bottle of water and take him away.

He never saw the woman again, never called her mother or mom or mama, even in his memories, even though he later decided that's who she must have been.

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For several years, Sam's dream world with Dean was the only stable thing in Sam's life. In his waking life he moved from foster-home to foster-home, never staying more than a few months at each place.

"He's a little freak," one foster-mother complained to her husband. "All he does is sit in a corner by himself and stare into space. He creeps me out, and I want him gone."

The children in these "homes" were cruel, pinching and hitting, pushing and biting, hissing "freak" and "creep" at him until Sam folded so far into himself he had to be relocated with a new family. In between foster homes there were extended stays at a clinic, a shadowy, frightening place where Sam underwent treatment for some kind of ailment that no one ever explained to him. Those visits were terrifying and often painful, and Sam's confusion and lack of understanding sometimes drove him even further into himself, so that later he would forget how long he was there. Those horrifying experiences fading into a foggy half-remembered nightmare from which Sam learned to wake himself at will.

In fact, later on Sam would swear he had spent most of those four years with Dean, in their house in a nice suburban neighborhood where he had a mom and a dad and a shiny black classic car to ride back and forth to Little League practices and family picnics. He and Dean took swimming lessons, learned to roller-skate and ride a skateboard, and on his fifth birthday their parents gave Sam a new bicycle. Dean taught him how to ride it. He went to school and excelled and had friends to play tag with him in the schoolyard, and if anyone ever bullied him for being smallest in his class, Dean would make the bully apologize, sometimes by just standing there glaring at the kid until he turned into a blubbering mess and begged Sam to forgive him.

In the shadowy world full of pain and fear that Sam knew of as "reality," Sam's treatments included daily sessions with a young clinician named Jennifer, who had him lie on an examining table while she attached electrodes to his forehead, then injected him with something that put him to sleep. In these medically-induced dreams Dean was different, agitated and tense, looking over his shoulder all the time like something or someone was watching them.

"Don't tell them about me," he told Sam. They were on the street, walking toward the University of Kansas, and the sky was overcast and threatening, the air heavy with the promise of rain, crackling
with electricity. A storm was coming. "They're trying to make you do things you don't want to do, Sam. You have to fight them, okay? Promise me you'll fight them."

"Okay," Sam agreed because he couldn't ever say no to Dean, no matter what it was his brother wanted.

When Sam was eight, Jennifer took him upstairs, into an office where a stern, grey-haired man sat behind a desk, rifling through the papers in a file. He looked up when Sam entered, motioned him into the chair opposite, then waited until the clinician left the room, shutting the door behind her. Sam recognized him vaguely as one of the doctors who provided his treatment, although he hadn't seen him for some time.

"So you're Sam," the doctor pulled his glasses off and peered at Sam grimly.

"Yes, sir," Sam answered, falling back on the manners that had been grilled in him over the past four years, fighting to keep the fear and uncertainty out of his voice.

"I understand you've made good progress here," the doctor – Dr. Clausen, the name-tag on his desk read – stared at him appraisingly. "You have real promise."

Sam was silent, not sure what to say to that. He sensed that Dr. Clausen wasn't going to be honest with him, and Sam was wary and suspicious.

"Your abilities could use some training, Sam, and I'm willing to invest considerable resources in doing that. Out of all the kids we've had in here over the past several years, you seem to be the most talented." Dr. Clausen reached for a single sheet of paper on the edge of his desk, scribbled something on it. "You've reached the age of reason, and I think you're old enough to understand the difference between fiction and reality, isn't that right?"

Sam frowned uncertainly. "I think so, sir," he answered, and Dr. Clausen nodded.

"For example, you know Santa Claus isn't real, right?"

Sam nodded. He'd never received a Christmas present in his real life, or a birthday present, for that matter, so it wasn't hard to imagine that the idea of a benevolent fat man who delivered presents on Christmas didn't really exist, except in his dreams.

"And you know the difference between dreams and real life, right?" Dr. Clausen went on, his voice suddenly wheedling and conspiratorial, as if he was letting Sam know that he understood Sam's darkest secrets and was encouraging him to share his most intimate beliefs. It made Sam flush with anger, made him instantly defensive. Sam's dreams were nobody's business but Sam's, and he was darn sure not gonna talk about them with this mean old man who poked him with needles when he was tied to an operating table.

Dr. Clausen could see the stubborn set to Sam's jaw, the flash of anger in his eyes, and it made him smile and sit back in his chair with a satisfied nod. "I thought so," he said smugly. "Jennifer's told me about your little fantasy world, how you talk to your imaginary brother in your sleep. You've told her all about that charming little suburban life, under hypnosis, haven't you, Sam?"

Sam clamped his mouth shut, staring at Dr. Clausen in shock and disbelief. Nobody was supposed to know about Dean or his other life, that other place. Sam had been so careful never to mention it to anyone, to keep it safe and hidden and private so they couldn't take it away from him, so they couldn't force him to give it up.

"It's all right, Sam," Dr. Clausen was nodding, but Sam wasn't fooled. "No harm done. Except that
imaginary brother is getting in the way now, isn't he? He's telling you not to cooperate with us. I think we may have to do something about that."

Dr. Clausen shook his head, and Sam tried not to panic. There was no way he was giving Dean up. And he was almost a hundred percent sure there was nothing Dr. Clausen could do to force him to do something he didn't want to do if Sam set his mind to it. That was what this was all about, wasn't it? Sam's special mind-powers? At least that's what he thought he remembered, among the jumbled recollections of his fractured young mind. He was here for some kind of special treatment designed to help him focus his natural psychic abilities.

"Dean's just trying to protect me," Sam explained. "He thinks it's his job."

"Of course he does," Dr. Clausen said, smiling, and it was the creepiest thing Sam had ever seen, hands down. "But he's a little misguided, don't you think? You don't need protection, Sam. You're perfectly safe here. You don't need anyone interfering with the development of your talents. You're a big boy now. You can take care of yourself. We're just trying to help you along, make sure you realize your highest potential. Nobody's trying to make you do anything you don't want to do."

Dr. Clausen went on and on, soothing and calming, until Sam wasn't even aware of hearing his voice anymore, just knew that he felt relaxed and safe and hopeful, sure of himself.

When Sam woke up later in his cold little bed in the clinic dormitory, he wasn't sure why he was there. He couldn't remember falling asleep, but that wasn't unusual. Time played tricks on him in this place underground where there were no windows and they kept giving him medicine to make him sleepy. There was an itch at the back of his brain, like something important he should try to remember, but the more Sam concentrated, the harder it was to focus. He felt sad and lonely, but that was nothing new, and when he hugged his pillow in his arms and curled himself around it, pretending it was his imaginary brother, he could almost hear Dean's voice, soothing and comforting him, reassuring him that everything would be all right, nothing bad could happen as long as Dean was there.

But when he finally drifted off again, his sleep was dreamless, empty, as if something had been blocked or pried loose and torn out. And no matter what Sam did after that, no matter how he concentrated as he fell asleep, telling himself that this time he would go to that special dream place where he felt safe and loved and cared about, where his older brother was always there, Sam never dreamed about Dean again.

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Within a week Sam was settled into a new foster-home, this time on a farm near Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with an older woman who ran a shelter for injured and abandoned animals. Sam shared a room at the back of the house with two boys who were both older than he was and had both been there for awhile. They were orphans, like Sam, and had also been in foster care most of their lives. Karen Richards, the woman who ran the place, had never had children of her own; foster children and shelter animals were her kids, she explained to Sam as she set him up with his own bed and laid out a new toothbrush for him in the bathroom.

"We run a tight ship here, Sam," she told him, brusque and efficient. "Each of you has chores to do every morning and after school, after homework. Rules are posted on the doors and in the kitchen, and I expect them to be followed precisely, am I clear?"

Sam nodded. "Yes, ma'am," he agreed, and Karen smiled kindly.

"We're gonna get along fine, Sam," she assured him. "You'll go to school, get a good education,
learn to be responsible and work hard, you'll do well here."

And Sam surprised himself by fitting in better than he could have expected. It only took a week or two for Sam to fall into the routine, to get with the program, and overall it was a decent, stable home for Sam, the first one he'd ever really had. It almost made up for the cessation of his dreams, although the constant ache in his chest reminded him of his loss on a daily basis, especially at night. He couldn't help feeling Dean was there, just beyond reach, every time he fell asleep, and it left him aching and empty in the morning, missing a part of himself he never knew existed until it was gone. Sam filled the void by following a daily routine of chores and school and homework and more chores. On Saturdays, a man named Carl picked him up in a pick-up truck and took him to a warehouse where he took wrestling and martial arts lessons in the morning, then worked upstairs with a man named George in the afternoon. George introduced him to The Project, as he called it, a special unit of the FBI that did research on paranormal activity.

"We seek out kids like you, Sam," George explained. "Kids with special abilities. Telepathy, telekinesis, other mental talents. The Clausen Clinic tested you, found that you have real potential in that area. They sent you to us, and from now on you'll work with us once a week."

George went on to explain that he would teach Sam to control his abilities, to use them to help people. He could practice using his gifts in the safety of the Project's warehouse training facility, where no one would know, and George would give him brief homework assignments, easy tasks to complete out in the world of his everyday life each week, to help him practice.

"You have a gift for empathy that's stronger than anything we've ever measured before, Sam," George went on. "We believe your gifts could help people with terminal illness, disease, even mental illness. With practice, you can learn to reach into a person's mind, persuade them to heal themselves. You can do great good in the world, Sam. Would you like that?"

Sam nodded, bewildered and uncertain but willing to go along with what George was telling him. It was the first time anyone in the real world had talked about a mission, or a purpose, for what he could do. Until that moment, Sam had always kept his psychic abilities to himself, hidden deep inside like a dirty little secret he felt he should be ashamed of. Early on, Sam had learned to keep silent, keep his eyes down, avoid responding when the whispery voices talked to him because he knew they weren't real, they were somebody's thoughts, not the words they spoke out loud, and they weren't really meant for him to hear. His abilities made others fear and revile him, and after years of teasing and abuse from children and adults alike for being a "weird-o," Sam had become sullen and withdrawn, unwilling to speak unless spoken to, and only then in short, cryptic responses when he could be sure he was really hearing the person speak and not just imagining the voice in his head.

The idea that he could use his despised secret talent to help people gave Sam hope. For the first time in his young life, someone appreciated what Sam could do, instead of fearing and despising him for it. George and Carl and the others at the Project showed Sam how he could use his talents in a positive way, to do good things, and Sam was primed to accept and feel inspired by what they told him. The misery of Sam's life up to this point had prepared him perfectly to take George's word for it, that Sam was special, that he could do good in the world. It was almost as if Sam had been groomed for it.

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The next four years passed comfortably for Sam. He did well in school, even if he was too shy and withdrawn to make friends. Caring for the rescue animals on the farm was a solace he didn't fully understand, and Sam's emotional development revolved around the various dogs and cats. An old
mare someone had abandoned became a special companion for over a year, and Sam taught himself to ride her bareback through the fields surrounding the farm, relating long, rambling monologues out loud about his life growing up with Dean, making it real in his mind by bringing it to life with language.

When the old mare contracted hoof-rot and had to be put down, Sam cried alone in the barn for a week. He buried his face in the fur of his favorite dog, a golden retriever named Zoe, who became his constant companion thereafter.

Saturdays at the Project were like entering another world, one where Sam was in training to become a super-hero, where he felt important and useful. George reiterated how essential it was for Sam to keep the Project a secret, but that was easy for a boy who rarely talked to anyone human anyway. Sam had a natural talent for computers, and as soon as George showed him the basics of coding Sam was soon hacking into databases all over the country, determined to prove his usefulness in ways the Project hadn't foreseen. His psychic abilities were reserved for use only on the Saturdays in the warehouse, with outside homework assignments in which he practiced controlled mind-reading. His subjects were his foster brothers, whose teen-aged thoughts were consumed with cheerleaders, sports, and beer.

One day while he was researching his own talents, he discovered that people with psychic abilities weren't the only "freaks" in the world. At first, when he clicked into chat rooms and message boards about vampires and werewolves, he assumed it was all a joke. But when he found an online community of "hunters," full of tips on killing various kinds of monsters, some claiming first-hand experience, Sam couldn't resist checking it out.

"Monsters are real?" he asked George, who narrowed his eyes at Sam and studied him for a moment too long before answering.

"The thing you should understand, Sam, is that hunters are real," he said. "There are people out there who would hunt and kill you, just because you're different. Just because they think that what you do is evil. They're crazy, sure, but they're very deadly."

Sam could feel his heart pounding dangerously in his chest; he could feel his palms start to sweat. "But werewolves? Vampires? Those things are real?" he persisted.

George shook his head. "I've never seen one," he said. "Hunters think they're real, though, which is what makes them so dangerous."

"But would they kill me if they found me?" Sam's voice rose; he was starting to shake.

George put a reassuring hand on his arm. "We're safe here, Sam," he said. "Nothing's going to come after us here. Nobody knows about us, about what we're doing here, except you and me and Carl, and maybe one or two of the others. We're completely safe."

"But the monsters," Sam persisted. "What about them?"

George sighed, shaking his head. "Maybe there are monsters in the world, Sam, but they're extremely rare. The hunters are the real monsters. These guys who devote their lives to finding so-called monsters and killing them are a threat to all of us who research paranormal activity. They would destroy us if they found us. That's one of the reasons we keep what we're doing here so secret. Do you understand?"

Sam nodded solemnly, and George smiled, got Sam refocused on his task, and the crisis passed. But Sam couldn't help researching hunters and monsters; as much as it scared him, the idea of a
secret world of supernatural activity operating just under the surface of every-day reality held too much appeal for Sam to resist. It felt familiar, like the way reality and fantasy had always existed side-by-side for Sam, sometimes blending, sometimes clearly separated.

Sundays after church and chores, Sam took Zoe for walks on the country roads around the farm, sometimes exploring deep into the corn fields, pretending to be lost. And it was one such Sunday in mid-summer, just after Sam's twelfth birthday, that everything changed.

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The sun was already doing its shimmery late-afternoon light thing, making the dusty road look like it ended on the edge of a lake. Sam walked slowly, letting the sun's heat make him feel lazy and sleepy, so that when he saw the pick-up truck parked at the side of the road and the figure bending over its engine in the distance, he almost thought it was a mirage. As Sam drew closer, he could see that the figure was a young man, not much older than Sam, but fully grown, muscles strong and solid in his tight black tee-shirt, his back soaked with sweat, leaning in under the raised hood of the truck so that the hem of his tee-shirt pulled up, exposing a strip of pale skin above the waist of his jeans.

Zoe trotted up to the boy, panting and sniffing, and the boy straightened up and turned toward Sam just as Sam felt a jolt of recognition that set the blood pounding in his ears. Sam had been ready to ask if the boy needed some help, but when the boy turned the full force of his attention on Sam it was as if the world fell away beneath his feet and suddenly Sam was falling, blackness swirling around him in a dark cloud that made his skin buzz and his head spin. The next minute Sam was on the ground, opening his eyes to find green eyes gazing worriedly from a handsome, freckled face that was at once intensely familiar and different at the same time. Older, Sam realized as he blinked at the boy bending over him, but still the boy from his dreams. Dean.

"Hey there," Dean murmured in a voice at once deeper and rougher than Sam remembered. Older. "You okay, buddy?"

"What happened?" Sam asked stupidly, pretty sure he knew exactly what had happened.

"You fainted, I think," Dean said. "Just collapsed. Must be the heat, huh? Here, let me get you some water."

It took all of Sam's willpower to avoid reaching up to grab hold of Dean as the older boy stood up, went back to his truck for a water bottle. Zoe circled in, panting and licking his face, wagging her tail and whimpering a little.

"I'm okay, girl, I'm okay," Sam assured her, rubbing the back of his head, which hurt like the dickens from hitting the hard paved shoulder of the road. He pushed himself up to sitting, and would have climbed to his feet on his own if Dean hadn't come back with the water, squatting down beside Sam so it suddenly felt like a better idea to stay right where he was. He took the bottle, fingers brushing Dean's, and the electric shiver that went through him surprised Sam, almost made the world spin again.

"Whoa there, buddy, don't pass out on me again," Dean's hands were suddenly on Sam's shoulder, on the back of his head, holding him up, and Sam felt every touch like bolts of electrical current, overwhelming but keeping him conscious. "Come on, now, just a little water and you'll be right as rain. That's it, I've got you now, little buddy. You're okay."

Sam gulped the water, ignoring its warmth from sitting in the hot truck. He focused instead on swallowing, on getting himself back under control.
"You live around here? Is there somebody I can call?" Dean's voice was warm and soothing, pushing all the right buttons, making Sam flush with pleasure and relief.

Sam shook his head. "I live right up the road," he said, letting Dean help him up, holding onto his arm until Sam was steady enough to stand on his own. "I'm okay. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Dean said. He stood aside, rubbing the back of his neck, his other hand on his hip. "I'd give you a lift, but as you can see, my truck's busted."

Sam nodded, handing the water bottle back to him, empty now. "What's wrong with it?" he asked.

Dean shrugged. "Battery's dead," he said. "Stupid thing's a piece of junk, but it's mine, at least for the summer, as long as I can keep it running."

"If you want, my foster-brother can probably give you a jump," Sam offered.

"That'd be awesome. Thanks." Dean stuck out his hand. "I'm Dean Winchester, by the way."

"Sam," Sam choked out as he shook Dean's hand, fighting the tears stinging the back of his throat. Having the older boy say it, even though Sam had already been calling him "Dean" in his head, was more emotional for Sam than he cared to admit, although he never doubted for a moment it was really the boy from his dreams.

So Sam and Dean walked back to the farm together, Zoe circling their legs and panting in the heat, and Sam tried not to blush when the boy's arm brushed his, or when he turned that dazzling smile on Sam as they small-talked.

"You lived here long?" Dean asked, and Sam shrugged.

"Four years," he answered. "How about you?" Sam felt his hopes soar; maybe he'd see Dean again. Maybe they were neighbors.

"Me? Nah," Dean shook his head, pushing his lips out in a tough-guy pout. "I'm just passing through. My uncle runs Singer Salvage, on the other side of town. My dad dropped me off with him yesterday while he does a job in Boise. He'll be back in a week or two, then we'll hit the road again."

"Don't you have a home someplace?" Sam asked, already amazed by the differences between this boy and Sam's dream-brother. "Don't you go to school?"

"Nope, I'm done with school," Dean insisted. "My home is the open road, kid, going wherever the jobs are, helping my dad with his work."


"Well, that's cuz you're still young," Dean admonished. "You're what, nine? Ten?"

"I'm twelve," Sam said. "Just finished sixth grade."

Dean raised an eyebrow, gaze sweeping over Sam, making him blush. That was when it hit Sam that he couldn't read Dean's thoughts; the older boy was a silent, blank space in his mind. It was a relief, definitely, but also a little disconcerting.

"Huh," Dean seemed a little dubious, a concerned frown creasing his handsome brow. "Your folks feeding you?" he asked.
"My folks are dead," Sam answered, more bluntly than he intended, knowing how creepy it sounded. "I've been living in foster care since I was four."

"Huh," Dean nodded, like he'd figured it out, and Sam remembered he'd already mentioned he had a foster-brother. "I think I know a little bit about that. My mom died when I was little. It's just me and my dad now."

Sam felt tears smart in the back of his eyes and his chest pulled tight; Dean's confession and his empathy were like an offering. It felt like Dean was extending the hand of friendship through their perceived shared grief. It made Sam feel a little guilty for not mourning the woman who cared for him when he was little, the woman he knew must've been his mother, even if his memories of her didn't have the emotional impact that Dean's memories of his own mother obviously did. Sam had the distinct feeling that Dean rarely opened up about his personal life, that he didn't get close to people as a kind of unspoken rule, and Sam was flattered and charmed, grateful for Dean's attention and completely overwhelmed by it.

They walked slowly, partly because of the heat, but mostly because Sam didn't want their time together to end, this golden, magical reunion which wasn't really a reunion at all but a meeting, a beginning. And he was just brazen enough to hope that Dean was feeling it too, brushing his arm against Sam's shoulder as they walked, looking down at Sam with a look of fond surprise, like he was learning something new about himself, like Sam was giving Dean the gift of a new self-awareness, showing him a side of himself he'd never known existed. And despite his shyness and his furious blushing, Sam couldn't stop grinning, couldn't stop sneaking glances up at Dean through his bangs, catching those clear green eyes smiling back at him. The air itself felt brighter, sparkling with an almost electric chemical reaction each time they touched, each time their eyes met. Sam hoped Dean felt it too, was in fact pretty sure he did, from the way the older boy slowed his steps, dragged out the walk as much as Sam was doing.

Eventually they reached the farm, where Sam's oldest foster brother, Jack, was working on his own truck. Jack shook Dean's hand and agreed to drive him back to his truck with jumper cables right away, any excuse to get off the farm for a few minutes a no-brainer for the restless teenager. After Dean climbed into the passenger seat of Jack's truck he leaned his arm on the open window and looked back at Sam with a little wave.

"See ya around, kid," he said. "Maybe we can go see a game or go fishing or something."

"That'd be great," Sam grinned so wide it hurt, and Dean winked at him, returning Sam's smile with one of his own. The sun made his eyes sparkle, overwhelming Sam with the renewed conviction that something miraculous had happened this day.

Sam went to bed that night half-expecting to be transported to the dream world where he had spent almost every night until he was eight years old, but instead he had a dream of the young man on the road, his wide smile and sparkling eyes, the feel of his calloused hands gentle and soothing on Sam's back, helping him get up after his fall.
Sam spent three days a week that summer at the Project, training relentlessly. He spent the time when he wasn't there (or doing chores at the farm) with Dean. Dean showed up the following Tuesday, and thereafter whenever Sam was free, picking him up in his battered pick-up to take him to the lake to go fishing, to the ballpark, to the movies. Karen, Sam's foster-mother, was genuinely charmed, if a little skeptical at first. She seemed relieved that Sam had finally found a friend who didn't walk on four legs. Sam didn't question why the handsome young man seemed to prefer spending time with Sam to anybody his own age; he was too grateful for the attention, too afraid that it would stop, that Dean would suddenly decide he was wasting his time and move on.

Of course, Sam wondered why he had dreamed about Dean for most of his life, but for a while he was so amazed and relieved that Dean was real, all he could do was bask in the general pleasure of his company. From what he learned about Dean, the boy's life had been nothing like Sam's dream
of him. Dean Winchester had grown up on the road with his dad, who was some kind of traveling salesman, since the fire that took his mother's life when he was four. It was a sad, if unremarkable, life, and Sam knew better than to pry once he'd determined that Dean had nothing in common with Sam's dream-brother. Which begged the question of how and why Sam had dreamed about the boy in the nice suburban home in the first place. It was a mystery that Sam would ordinarily have tried to solve with research at the library, or on the computers at the Project, until he could satisfy himself that there really was no connection.

But Sam had already lost Dean once, and this coincidental reappearance felt too much like magic, and Sam was loathe to break the spell, to do anything that might make Dean disappear again. He kept Dean's presence secret from the Project on instinct; they had disapproved of Sam's dreams, so Sam couldn't trust that they wouldn't do something to get rid of the real Dean, if they knew he existed. Then there was the miracle of Dean's obvious interest in him, which made no sense, and Sam couldn't bear to do anything that might shake Dean loose or turn off his interest in Sam. He wondered if Dean had ever had a dream of him, if he recognized Sam somehow, the way Sam recognized Dean. He decided quickly not to push it, though, rather to just accept it for as long as he could and call it incredibly good luck, outrageous coincidence, miracle, magic, anything that kept it happening.

Dean knew a lot about having fun without any money. He showed Sam how to climb the fence and get in for free at ball games, how to wait outside the movie-house exit doors until someone came out, then sneak in and spend the day watching Apollo 13, Batman Forever, and Jumanji in air-conditioned comfort. Dean knew how to pick locks so they could get into Sam's school to play basketball in the gym after the custodial staff went home for the night. He knew how to jimmy the coke machine so it would give up free pop. He could lie with such ease and charm it took Sam's breath away, convincing the dumpy, bored girl at the candy store that he had given her a ten-dollar bill when he'd only given her a five, so they could get extra candy before their trip to the movie theatre. Dean could convince the gas-station attendant that the pump was malfunctioning so they could get free gas. Sam was startled and impressed the first time Dean used a credit card with a fake name on it, buying them a delicious dinner at the local all-you-can-eat buffet.

"I have to be careful, because Uncle Bobby lives here," he explained to Sam when he signed the credit card receipt. "If somebody figures out I'm scamming them, it could be bad for him. So I'm careful where I use this card. Only places where I know the staff is too bored and underpaid to pay any attention. 'Course, the food's lousy, but hey, it's all-you-can-eat, right?"

Sam had to agree with him there. He vividly remembered times in his childhood when his stomach was so empty if felt like it was ready to start eating itself. Finding a way to eat double his normal portion seemed like a good idea to Sam, and he wholeheartedly approved of Dean's strategies, even if it did upset his stomach.

"Jesus, Sammy, you've got an iffy gut," Dean commented on more than one occasion after Sam had managed to barf up most of their meal, or fart so much in the pick-up that Dean decided they should just park the truck and walk. "You got food allergies or something, little dude?"

Sam had to shrug because he really didn't know. No one had ever taken the time to have him tested, and his trips to doctors had been few and far between outside of his residential time at the clinic. His meals at the farm were wholesome and nutritious, Karen's old hippy tendencies guaranteeing that the boys ate a lot of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Sam had an instinctual aversion to a lot of the processed and fried foods that Dean seemed to favor, but he valiantly ate whatever Dean put in front of him, too dazzled by Dean's attention to complain.

Being with Dean felt unreal, and there were times when Sam doubted it was actually happening.
He considered the idea that his brain had short-circuited and somehow flipped him temporarily back into the dream-world of his childhood, managing to give him this more grown-up version of his dream-brother as compensation for all those years without him. He loved this fantasy, but at the same time it terrified him because it suggested that Dean could just disappear at any moment and he might never see him again. The possibility that his dream-world had never happened, that all those years of dreaming about Dean and the life he led in that comfortable little Midwestern university town were an illusion devised by his own misery and loneliness, made Sam so sad he could barely stand to think about it.

The fact was, reality and fantasy blended dangerously in Sam's mind, always had, so that there were times when he was with Dean that reminded him of other times, until he remembered that those other times had happened in his dreams, that they weren't real. Like the time they climbed the monkey bars in the playground and Sam fell off, hit his face on one of the bars on the way down and gave himself a black eye, for example. Or the time they climbed onto the equipment shed behind the baseball diamond and jumped off, only Sam landed wrong and broke his arm, so that Dean had to ride him to the emergency room on the handlebars of his bike.

Then came the day Dean took Sam to the lake to go fishing. When they got there it was too hot so Dean yanked off his tee-shirt and jeans, barely giving Sam time to recover from the shock of all that pale skin and toned muscle before he dove off the end of the dock.

"Come on in, Sammy," Dean called when he surfaced, shaking the water off his head and treading water easily. "The water's fine."

Dean's exuberance was infectious, and besides, it was damn hot. Sam tried to ignore his own self-consciousness as he pulled his tee-shirt off, dropped it to the dock, then kicked off his rubber-toed sneakers and reached for the button on his jeans. He was keenly aware of Dean watching him as he pushed the denim down his skinny legs and stepped out of the jeans, leaving himself clad only in his tighty-whities. It was tempting to cover himself with his hands, but he knew how useless that was, so he backed up a few steps and took a running leap off the end of the dock, pulling his knees up to his chest as he jumped, cannon-balling into the water, going for goofy to counter Dean's graceful dive.

The water was cold. It closed over Sam's head as his body sank, black and deep and relentless, rushing into his mouth and his nose and ears, pulling him down. He let his instincts kick in at a certain point, uncurling his body so he could kick his legs, pump his arms, turning his face up to the watery light of the surface, taking huge gulps of air when he finally broke through. He could see Dean's laughing face only a few feet away, watching, treading water with strong arms, bare shoulders tensing as they moved. He had a moment of clarity as he realized he didn't know how to swim, had never been in water over his head in his life. Then the water closed over Sam's head again as he sank, the familiar feeling of unreality making his head spin.

Suddenly he was flashing back to memories of swimming with Dean, but they were dream-memories. Dean had taught him to swim at the town pool near their house; they had ridden their bikes there, and Dean had led him deeper and deeper into the water till his feet couldn't touch bottom anymore and he was floating, floating with Dean's steady hands on his back and shoulder, holding him up, Dean's encouraging voice telling him to relax, let the water keep him buoyed. The sun beating down was warm, soothing, like Dean's hands, now almost barely there as Sam floated free, ears filled with water so that all sound was muffled, making Dean's voice sound dim and rich and no longer comprehensible, growing dimmer as Dean moved away, letting him go, leaving him to float endlessly on a sea of sun-warmed water, forgotten and alone.

There was a pain in his chest; it was growing, getting sharper, then Sam's head cleared with a jolt.
of terror and he realized he was drowning, not floating, that he had been sinking the whole time, passed out or so deep inside his memories he might as well have been unconscious. Now Sam recognized the pain in his chest as his lungs fighting for air, struggling to avoid breathing in water, nearly bursting with the effort. Sam kicked frantically, disoriented, staring around him at nothing but darkness, unable to make sense of what was happening to him except that he was dying, completely immersed in water with no visible way out.

Then Dean was there, his face hovering close in the gloom, his hands grabbing Sam's flailing arms, pulling him close, then getting his arm around Sam's neck, pulling him back tight against Dean's chest. In Sam's panicked state he was sure they were going down, deeper into the water, and he fought, frantic, even as his oxygen-deprived brain assured him that Dean wouldn't hurt him, was trying to help. But Dean held him tight, using his free arm to pull them through the water, kicking in short, strong spurts till they broke the surface and Sam gasped, his body automatically sucking in air, almost passing out from the need to ventilate.

"It's okay, Sam, I got you," Dean breathed into his ear, and Sam stopped struggling, let Dean drag him toward shore, still keeping his choke hold on Sam's neck, keeping his head above the water, keeping him safe. When his feet touched the muddy bottom of the lake Dean let him go, turned him around so he could scramble up the beach on his own, Dean's hand a reassuring pressure on his back until they collapsed side by side on the shore, breathing hard.

"Dude, why didn't you tell me you couldn't swim?" Dean asked when they'd both caught their breath, pushing himself up on one elbow so he could look down at Sam.

Sam rubbed his sore throat, then ran his hand through his tangled hair. "I thought I could," he answered truthfully. "I remember taking swim lessons when I was little."

"Well, you must've had a helluva terrible teacher, then," Dean huffed out a sharp laugh.

Sam flushed and shook his head, feeling weirdly defensive of the dream-brother who had taught him more than just how to swim. "There's something wrong with my brain," he confessed, suddenly needing to confide in the older boy. "I mix up stuff that really happened with stuff I made up. I get confused sometimes."

Dean peered at him, reached over and pulled a wet twig out of Sam's hair, dropped it. "What are you talking about?" he asked, frowning. "You're the smartest kid I know. There's nothing wrong with your brain, far as I can tell."

Sam flushed with pleasure at the praise, suddenly overwhelmed by Dean's nearness, all that freckled bare skin just a few inches away.

"I'm a freak," Sam whispered, the words rushing out, needing Dean to know. "I see things that aren't there. Sometimes I hear voices."

"What, like a schizo?" Dean was still frowning, obviously making a real effort to understand.

Sam shook his head, biting his lower lip. "I'm psychic. I read people's minds. I have visions." The words spilled out of him before he could stop them, before he could control the urge to tell Dean everything, to spill his guts because he needed Dean to trust him, to know who he really was and to like him anyway. It was suddenly the most essential thing in Sam's existence, the thing he needed more than air.

Dean's reaction was classic; he raised his eyebrows in surprise, sat all the way up so that he was a few inches further away, just staring at Sam in silence for a full minute, considering. Sam could
swear he saw a fleeting look of suspicion and fear, wiped away almost instantly by anger and indignation, replaced just as fast by a self-satisfied nod of recognition, like Sam had suddenly confirmed something Dean had already suspected.

"Yeah, that makes sense, actually," Dean said finally, nodding. "I've heard about people like you."

"You have?" Now it was Sam's turn to be surprised.


"Those people aren't real," Sam noted, disappointed.

Dean shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe not, but I know about people like you in real life, too."

"You do?" Sam was skeptical.

"Sure," Dean repeated with another shrug. "My dad and me run into all kinds of people in the work we do." He hesitated, then asked, "So what, you can read my mind?"

Sam shook his head violently. "Not you," he said firmly, and was rewarded by Dean's visible relief. "I like being with you because I can't hear your thoughts at all." He blushed furiously, although he didn't understand why he should feel so embarrassed. He'd been sure Dean would understand, had sensed it since the moment he met him. "It's peaceful. I like to hang out with animals because they're peaceful too."

"And you have visions," Dean suggested. "What's that like?"

Sam sighed. "It's just confusing, mostly," he admitted. "I see things that turn out not to be real. Or I dream about something and then it happens in real life."

"Sounds a little creepy," Dean suggested, but Sam shook his head.

"Not really," he said. "Just confusing. I have a lot of false memories, like I remember learning to swim, but I guess I didn't really."

"Yeah, well, we can fix that, you know," Dean said. "If you want to. I could teach you."

"Yeah?" Sam sat up, flooded with hope. "You'd do that for me?"

"Sure," Dean shrugged. "How hard can it be, teaching a kid to swim? You just gotta get comfortable in the water, learn how to trust it. Once you can float and put your face in the water without panicking, you're over half-way there."

"When can we start?" Sam asked, all excitement and eagerness. He was just sure it would come back to him if Dean was there to guide him.

"Right now, if you're up to it," Dean smiled. "Dad always says, if something scares you, get right back in there and fight harder. Show it who's boss."

"Yeah," Sam nodded, getting up, looking dubiously at the water.

"And next time, we get you a decent pair of swim trunks," Dean grinned, and Sam flushed hot with embarrassment, which made Dean grin broader, made him reach out and ruffle Sam's almost-dry hair.
They spent nearly an hour letting Sam get used to the water again, staying in the shallows so Sam could feel the bottom, and just as Sam had suspected, the feeling of being in the water was more familiar than not to him, and he was floating face down as well as face up by the end of it, Dean's hands just a gentle pressure on his back, not even holding him up, just there.

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They came back to the lake almost every afternoon that week, and Sam was swimming in no time, making Dean proud of him for being such a quick learner, confirming Sam in the quality of his earlier lessons with his first teacher, even if those lessons had been dreams.

On the following Sunday it rained, so instead of swimming Dean took Sam out for ice-cream. They stood together against the wall of the little store, under the eaves. Dean finished Sam's ice cream when Sam complained of a sore stomach, scraping the bottom of the little styrofoam cup to get every last drop of the sweet cream as Sam tried hard not to watch Dean's obvious pleasure in every bite. Then Sam stuck his spoon out in front of him and closed his eyes, concentrating as he knew how to do, focusing his mental energy on the spoon in his mind. He was rewarded almost immediately by a gasp from Dean, and when he opened his eyes the little white plastic spoon was curled in on itself, like it had melted and reformed that way. Sam grinned despite himself as Dean took the gnarled thing in his hand, fingers brushing Sam's with that now-familiar electric tingle, and Sam wondered if Dean felt it too, although he never let on if he did.

"Now that could be useful," Dean commented as he turned the plastic over in his hand. "If you could do that with door-locks or alarm systems, you'd be all set for a life of crime."

Sam shook his head. "Nah," he said. "It's not something I can control very well. It comes and goes. I probably couldn't do it if I really had to."

"I'll bet you could," Dean insisted. "I bet you could do anything you set your mind to. You're a pretty amazing kid."

Sam blushed furiously, ducking his head and shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans, glancing up through his bangs at Dean with a grin he couldn't control. Dean's face broke into a smile when he caught Sam's look.

"Fuckin' adorable, too," Dean noted, reaching over to ruffle Sam's hair. Sam leaned into the touch, so Dean grabbed him around the neck in a headlock with the crook of his arm, pulling Sam against him and giving him noogies across the top of his head.

Sam struggled weakly, pretending to shove Dean away when really he was loving the closeness, the easy physical tussling, the warmth and firmness of Dean's body against his. He could smell Dean's cologne, the leather of his jacket, the faint spicy scent of after-shave, something sharp and smoky that Sam couldn't recognize, and the sweaty, musky smell that was all Dean. Sam had the wild thought that he could capture this, that he could hold it in his mind forever so that no matter what happened later, he could always return here, to this place in time when Dean had his arms wrapped around him, when Sam's face was pressed into Dean's chest and all of his experience was just pared down to these sense memories, this perfect moment, forever.

Then Dean released him after giving him a final squeeze, cuffing him lightly on the back of the head as he bumped Sam's shoulder with his arm.

"Come on," Dean said. "Rain's stopped. Let's get you home."

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Later that evening, Dean came back. It was already dark out, and when Sam ran out on the porch to greet him he could tell immediately that there was something wrong.

"My dad's back," Dean explained as he sidled awkwardly, scuffing his toe in the dirt. He had his hands in the pockets of his jeans, bow legs wide, and he kept shifting his weight and wouldn't look Sam in the eye. "We're leaving in the morning."

Sam's throat closed up and tears stung at the backs of his eyes.

"When will you be back?" he asked, hearing the squeak in his voice and hating himself for it.

"I don't know," Dean admitted, and damn if his voice didn't sound a little choked up too. "I don't know, Sam. It could be a while."

"But..." Sam's nose was running, so he sniffled, brushed the back of his arm over it, which only got snot on his sleeve and now there were tears sliding down his cheeks and he wiped angrily at those, making it worse. He was sure his face was an absolute mess, but he couldn't seem to stop it. "But you'll come back, right?"

Dean's eyes were full of tears when he finally looked at Sam and realized how upset he was.

"Of course, I will," he lied, and Sam could tell he was lying because he looked away again when he said it. "We always come back here. Bobby's here. He's the nearest thing to family we got. Well, him and Pastor Jim. So a-course we'll be back."

He said the last looking straight at Sam, huge green eyes intent and serious, stupid long lashes dark and wet against his freckled skin.

Sam wasn't sure how he did it, but when he suddenly threw himself at Dean, tucking himself against the older boy in a desperate, bone-crunching hug, Dean sank into it, wrapped his arms around Sam and laid his chin on the top of Sam's head.

"Thank you," Sam breathed as he pulled Dean's warm scent into his lungs, pressed his wet cheek against Dean's chest, memorized the feel of his body under his leather jacket, the lean muscle and smell of after-shave, sweat, and that sharp, smoky smell that Sam couldn't quite place.

"Okay," Dean soothed, allowing the hug for another minute before gently pulling Sam's arms loose, stepping back and holding him at arm's length for a minute. "Okay, Sam. It's okay."

He didn't say goodbye; at least he seemed to understand that saying goodbye would destroy Sam's fragile self-control, maybe his own as well. So Sam stood silently, trying not to cry as Dean walked away, got into his truck, and started the engine. He didn't wave though; the little wave he usually gave had been a promise he couldn't keep this time, and they both knew it.
Chapter 2

The next day dawned like any other; Sam got up, got dressed, ate breakfast and did his morning chores before Carl came to take him to the Project. And if his heart was heavy and his steps were slower than usual, nobody seemed to notice, because Sam had always been good at hiding his feelings, and nobody in his life had ever really seemed to care that much about him anyway. So if Sam suffered in silence because he missed Dean, then he bore his pain alone, just as he always had. Just as though he hadn't just lost the one person who mattered to him more than his own life.

Going through the motions that day – following the instructor's lessons in his martial arts class, then his wrestling class, having lunch, following George into the padded room where he practiced his telekinesis exercises – Sam didn't once acknowledge the crushing weight on his chest, the grief threatening to strangle his soul. When it was time for Sam to practice his computer skills, he hacked into the chat rooms and message boards where hunters usually posted their leads and discussed signs and omens in their areas, looking for and tracking supernatural activity.

What he found made Sam's heart race. Apparently something big was going on, very close by, and a lot of hunters were in on it. In fact, if Sam was reading the signs right, the Project was sitting smack in the middle of some serious shit. Sam had only a minute or two to absorb what he was reading, and to wonder whether he ought to warn someone that it looked like a large group of hunters was headed their way when he heard a loud bang, so loud it shook the entire building. Then the lights went out.

Sam had instinctively ducked his head with the initial concussion, which was a good thing, because another shuddering blast brought part of the ceiling down, slamming across the computer in front of him and totally obliterating it as Sam jumped back out of the way. There were shouts, running feet, screams, sounds of gunfire, and Sam could smell smoke, could see flames through the beveled glass of the door, gunshots getting closer, screaming and shouting on the stairs, then in the hallway right outside his door. Sam only had time to crawl under the desk, huddle there, hoping his smallness and the darkness would keep him safe, before the door was flung open and two men stormed into the room, guns raised, crouched in defensive postures. Or at least Sam imagined they were. He was huddled under the desk with his arms wrapped around his knees and his head down, trying to stay as small and quiet as possible as the men checked the room. He could read adrenaline-pumped fear masked by determined bravado coming off one of the men; the other was a complete blank.

"Clear!"

The familiar voice completely caught Sam off-guard, and the gasp escaped him before he could stop it; he clapped his hand over his mouth and froze, hoping against hope that the men hadn't heard him over all the yelling and screaming and banging. And for a minute or two it was so quiet Sam almost thought they hadn't heard. Then the men were there, crouched down with guns pointed and a flashlight shining right into his eyes, so fast it made Sam gasp again.

"Sam?"

The familiar voice, Dean's voice, coming from the shadowy figure shining the light in Sam's eyes, made Sam's heart leap, his terror dimming beside the sudden elation rushing through him.

"Dean!" Sam heard his own voice, choking out his favorite word, sounding small and desperate, terrified and relieved at the same time.
"This is Sam?" The other man – John Winchester, Dean's dad, he could read it in John's thoughts – raked his flashlight over Sam's slight form, and Sam could hear the doubt in his words, the dubious surprise in his thoughts.

"Yeah, Dad," Dean said. "This is Sam. Why?"

"Well, it's just..." John paused, eyebrows raised. "I thought Sam was a girl. I mean the way you were always out all the time when I called, with somebody named Sam, I figured..."

Dean frowned, shook his head a little, snapping the safety back on his gun as he reached for Sam.

"Hey, buddy, what are you doing here?"

But before Sam could answer, another blast shook the room, sending part of the ceiling down almost on top of them, this time bringing flames and fire into the room as well.

"Come on!" John shouted, grabbing Dean's shoulder. "We need to get out of here. The whole place is going down!"

Dean grabbed the front of Sam's shirt, hauling him up.

"Come on, Sammy, let's get you out of here."

But as Sam tried to walk they both realized he'd been injured; Sam's jeans were torn just above the knee where something had gouged his right thigh, probably a piece of jagged metal from the ceiling. Sam's jeans were soaked with blood and when he tried to walk a piercing pain forced him to fall to his knees and cry out.

Dean didn't hesitate. He gathered Sam's small body against him and easily lifted him into his arms, forcing Sam to cling to him as he swept the boy out of the room and into the inferno. The entire building was on fire, flames leaping up the walls and down the banister of the stairwell, moving so fast there wasn't even a lot of smoke yet. Dean moved quickly, sure-footed and determined, following John down the stairs. All Sam could do was hold on, watching in horror as the fire destroyed the rooms and offices where he had spent so much time over the past four years. On the ground floor there were bodies on the floor, and Sam had only a quick glimpse but he was shocked to see George and Carl, both sprawled on their stomachs, both obviously dead. Other familiar bodies dotted the floor, all people Sam had known, all dead and left to burn. Sam's head swam with confusion and shock; he buried his face in Dean's neck and squeezed his eyes shut as they ran toward the front entrance, away from the scene of carnage and brutality and destruction.

Sam had only a vague sense when they were clear of the building. The air was suddenly easy to breathe, and although it was a warm summer day it was cooler outside. Sam felt himself being laid gently into the backseat of a car; he kept his eyes closed because it helped dampen the voices in his head, the angry, brutal thoughts of hunters bent on death and destruction, grimly determined to "kill every monster in the place." They were all around him out here, at least a dozen of them, all focused on the Project and its immolation. He could see George's face in the mind of one of them, full of fear and surprise as the man bore down on him, drove a silver blade the size of a small sword into his chest.

Sam wasn't aware that he was whimpering and crying until Dean crowded into the car seat next to him, still holding Sam's body against him and murmuring softly.

"Hey, little buddy, it's okay. You're safe now. I've got you. You're safe."

Another thundering crash made Sam cower against the car door, Dean covering him with his body.
as if he could protect him from the destruction and death all around them.

"Come on, Dad, let's get him out of here," Dean said as John started the car and it roared to life, its rumbling vibration a sudden deep comfort to Sam. Half-remembered dreams crowded his mind, images of home, of family, of riding in this car with people who loved him. He was shaking violently now, tears still streaming down his cheeks, and Dean held him tighter, pressed his lips against Sam's temple.

"You're gonna be fine, Sam," he murmured. "Everything's gonna be all right."

Dean slid his hand up into Sam's hair, then down his neck, his shoulder, feeling and exploring every inch of Sam's body. It was soothing, and if Sam hadn't been in so much pain and shock he might have enjoyed it, although he understood Dean was just checking him for other injuries.

"What were you doing in there, huh?" Dean muttered, half to himself, as if he didn't expect Sam to be able to answer. "Did they kidnap you? Were you being held in there?"

Sam tried to answer, but his teeth were chattering badly, and he couldn't stop crying; it felt more like leaking, really, since he wasn't sobbing at all, just shaking.

"He's in shock," John said from the front seat, shooting a glance at them in the rearview mirror. "We should drop him off at Sioux Falls General."

"No way, Dad," Dean shook his head firmly. "He's just a little kid. We need to get him home. Someplace safe."

"Where's he live?" John asked, and Dean froze; Sam could feel him hesitate before he gave Sam's address, and Sam had the wild thought that Dean had meant to take him with them, to keep him. Sam wanted that so badly, to stay with Dean, it made his chest heave painfully, starting a fresh round of crying. Dean rubbed his back, then his arm, murmuring soothingly until they pulled up into Sam's driveway.

"Houston, we have a problem," John said, slowing the car to a crawl.

Dean looked up, out the front windshield, and Sam could feel his whole body tense.

"Jesus," Dean breathed, momentarily loosening his hold on Sam so he could take in what he was seeing.

Sam looked up too, saw what he thought was a stuffed animal on the front lawn, Jack lying beside it in an awkward position, unmoving...

Sam realized what he was seeing a moment before Dean pulled him close, slipped his hand over Sam's eyes. Sam's gasp was audible in the silence as John stopped the car, carefully drew his gun.

"Stay here," John commanded, slowly getting out of the car, on the alert.

Sam reached up and pulled Dean's hand away, stared at the body of his foster brother and his beloved Zoe on the grass, speechless with horror. He watched John Winchester cross the lawn at a crouch, keeping his gun cocked, whole body tense and alert.

Beside him, Dean was just as tense.

"I should go with him," he muttered darkly.
"He said to stay here," Sam almost whispered, his voice cracking. He kept hold of Dean's wrist, desperate to keep Dean with him, terrified of losing him too.

Dean's mouth set in a hard line and his jaw clenched, but he said nothing, stayed where he was as John climbed the steps to the porch, keeping his gun ready as he rapped on the screen door. None of the three expected an answer, and after a minute John pulled the screen door open and slipped into the house, out of view. Both boys sat in anxious silence for the five minutes it took for John to scope out the house. Dean apparently holding his breath, if the sigh he uttered when John finally came out was any indication. John shook his head once at Dean, then rounded the corner of the house to check the barn and shed.

When he came back, John's face was a mask of grim disgust.

"They even killed the animals," he announced as he slipped into the driver's seat, started the car, backing up so he could turn around in the driveway. "When we get to Bobby's I'll have him put in an anonymous call to 911. This isn't our kind of thing."

He looked in the rearview mirror at Sam, who had finally stopped shaking and crying or, in fact, moving at all. Sam could see the images in John's mind: his foster-mother, lying on the floor of the kitchen, his other foster-brother slumped over his lunch at the table, the cats and dogs and farm animals in the barn and out in the pasture behind, all dead. Sam could feel something cold and hard in the bottom of his stomach, creeping up through his chest and out to his arms and legs, tapping on the inside of his brain where the images replayed on an endless feedback loop, sending his mind deeper and deeper inside itself. He was vaguely aware of Dean waving a hand in front of his face, making him blink, and when Dean spoke his name Sam moved his head slightly, but somehow couldn't quite lift his eyes or focus on Dean's face, as compelling as it was. Sam felt like he wasn't all there, like his body was functioning without him; his mind was reading John's thoughts and his body was responding to Dean's closeness, but there was no connection. Sam just wasn't home.

"Shock," John announced, answering Dean's worried expression as he tried to get Sam to respond to him. "We'll figure it out when we get to Bobby's. I need that kid to give me some answers."

The ten-minute drive to Bobby Singer's place felt like hours, or just a minute or two. Sam couldn't remember later, and he definitely didn't want to think about it. His brain was trying to process the things he'd seen that day, but his soul was just checked out. He couldn't feel a thing. It was like being immersed in freezing water; in fact it felt a lot like that day in the lake when Sam had sunk like a stone and the water had closed in all around him and he had just given up, let it cover him and enter him and absorb his body like he didn't exist, like obliteration was the only reality.

"Sam?" Dean was speaking, had been speaking for awhile, had been trying to get his attention, and Sam tried, he really did, to focus on Dean's voice, his face. The car had stopped, and somehow Dean had gotten out, had pulled Sam's limp, unresponsive body across the back seat so he could gather him up, carry him into the cool, dark house. Sam was lying on a couch now, Dean hovering over him, John and another man – Sam guesses it's Bobby Singer – hovering behind him.

"Let's get that leg patched up first thing," Bobby was saying. Bobby's mind was full of death; he'd driven a silver blade into two or three "monsters," as he called the people who worked at the Project. Something called shapeshifters. He had presided over a demon exorcism in his basement the previous day; the demon had revealed the location of the Project, had sneered and taunted Bobby with his father's death before he gave up the information Bobby needed. Sam could see John in the memory, but not Dean.

Of course not. Yesterday was Sunday. Dean was with Sam. Dean was telling Sam he had to leave him.
The sudden pang of grief at the memory of Dean's parting words made Sam gasp; he could feel hot tears stinging his eyes so he closed them tight, felt moisture on his cheeks as tears slid down.

"He's crying again," Dean breathed. "That's good. That's good, isn't it?"

Sam could feel the hole in his jeans being ripped open, could feel Dean's gentle hands as he wiped away the blood, examined the wound.

"It's just superficial," Dean announced. "Just a scratch, really. You're gonna be okay."

Sam watched Dean's face as the older boy worked, cleaning the wound, pouring antiseptic on it, making Sam hiss and arch his back at the sting, but he didn't cry out. He was brave. Then Dean bandaged the wound and wrapped gauze around his leg to hold it, and Sam tried to give a shaky smile of thanks because he could see how concerned Dean was, how tense his face was as he worked and Sam felt like he needed to reassure him, to show him that Sam was gonna be fine.

"So this is Sam," Bobby muttered to John, and Sam was aware that they were standing off to the side, watching the boys speculatively. "I thought Sam was a...

"I know," John nodded. "Me too."

"This kid is what, eight? Nine?"

"He's twelve," Dean threw over his shoulder irritably, still wrapping Sam's leg. "He's just a little small for his age, is all."

"I'll say," Bobby grunted. "If the kid was much smaller he'd be invisible."

"Kid's just lost his whole family," Dean breathed. "Everything. He's probably feeling pretty small right now."

John tugged Bobby aside, just out of earshot, but Sam could hear what they were saying, knew John was recounting the scene at his foster-home. He could see the images in John's mind again, fresh and vivid. When Dean finished and started to get up to wash his hands Sam clung to him, stared up with his eyes full of tears.

"Please, don't go," Sam croaked out, knowing how pathetic he sounded.

Dean smiled a little, reassuring. "Not going very far," he said. "Just need to wash this off. I'll be right here."

And true to his word, Dean was back in a couple of minutes, let Sam pull him down on the couch next to him. Sam snuggled in under Dean's arm, tucked his head under Dean's chin, and held on for dear life, just needing the physical closeness he'd never had with anyone else, not since those early years with a mother he barely remembered. To his credit, Dean allowed the cuddling, slipping his arm around the boy and pulling him in, running his other hand through Sam's hair, pushing it back from his face in gentle strokes, soothing.

"You're gonna be okay, Sam," he murmured. "Everything's gonna be fine."

Bobby went off to make the anonymous call to 911, and John hovered close to the couch, looking down at the boys huddled together there.

"I need to know what he was doing in that warehouse," John growled, and Dean shook his head sharply.
"Not now, Dad," he pleaded. "Sam needs a little recovery time first. He'll tell us when he's ready."

John shook his head, hands on his hips as he shifted, scrubbed a hand over his face.

"Bobby and I need to go back over, do some clean up at the site," he said. "Make sure we've covered our tracks."

Dean nodded. "I'll stay here with Sam," he suggested, and John hesitated, casting a glance at Sam that was full of doubt and suspicion. Sam didn't need to be a mind-reader to know John Winchester didn't trust him, felt uncomfortable leaving him alone with his son.

Dean saw the look in John's eyes and tightened his hold on Sam, rubbing his thumb back and forth over Sam's bony shoulder.

"Dad, he's a little kid," Dean reminded him. "I think I can handle this."

John scrubbed his hand across his face again. "We don't know if he's even human, Dean," he reminded his son. "Considering where we found him...He could be one of them. You know the drill, Dean. We need to test him. Silver, holy water..."

"I'll do it, Dad, I promise," Dean insisted. "Just give him a little time to recover first."

"He might not even be your Sam," John grumbled. "Shapeshifters may be able to read minds. There's a lot we don't understand about them. Now, Sam's entire family was slaughtered today. We find this kid in the warehouse where the monsters are. You think that's a coincidence?"

"No, sir," Dean agreed. "But whatever went down, it's not his fault."

"Oh, you think so?" John shook his head. "How do we know he wasn't in on it? Huh? How do you know he didn't kill his own family before joining his pals at the warehouse, huh?"

"Dad, that's crazy," Dean protested, his voice rising dangerously. "I've been hanging out with him all summer. He's just an ordinary, regular human kid. Nothing freaky or monstery about him. If he was involved in this somehow – and I'm not saying he is, just if he was – he'd tell us. He'll tell me. We just need to give him a little space right now. Kid just lost his family, okay? Just had his world turned upside down. Seems like we owe him a little sympathy and understanding right now, don't you think?"

"Don't take that tone with me, soldier," John growled menacingly. "We'll do it your way for now, but when Bobby and I get back, that kid had better start giving us some answers. You got me?"

Bobby had finished his calls and was hovering behind John, frowning at Dean and shaking his head.

"Well, that foster family of his was human, all right," he said grimly. "Just checked with a buddy of mine on the force who was first on the scene. After you idjits, a-course. Police are gonna be looking for this kid. We need to figure out what we're doing pretty quick here, before somebody accuses us of kidnapping."

"We'll figure it out later," John told Bobby, then turned back to Dean. "Bobby and I will be back as soon as we can. You boys stay here. Don't go outside. Don't call anyone or answer the phone unless it's me. Y'hear?"

"Yes, sir," Dean agreed.
John nodded grimly, cast one more frowning glance at Sam, shaking his head again as if he knew he was doing something he shouldn't, leaving Dean alone and unprotected with a potential monster. But even John couldn't bring himself to kill a kid, at least not while Dean was wrapped around him like a mother bear protecting her cub. And as much as it worried him, he was confident in his ability to handle this, one step at a time. At least, that's what Sam heard John telling himself as he snuggled in closer against Dean's warm chest, closing his eyes so he couldn't see the distrust in John's, the way he looked at Sam like Sam was a problem to be solved, or better yet, eradicated.

After the men left Dean breathed a sigh of relief, loosening his hold on Sam and pushing him back a little so he could look into Sam's face.

"You're a dirty mess, you know that?" Dean grinned a little, swiping his thumb along Sam's cheek, watching it come away covered in soot and grime. All the crying had mixed with the smoke and dust and Sam could only imagine how awful he probably looked, but he was suddenly too tired to care. With John and Bobby gone so that it was just Dean here, Sam could feel the strain and tension of the last couple of hours bleeding away, leaving behind a deep exhaustion that rattled his bones and made his eyelids heavy.

"Hey, whoa, don't pass out on me," Dean admonished as he helped Sam recline comfortably on the couch, or as comfortably as he could with his leg throbbing painfully. "I'm gonna go get you a washcloth and a glass of water. You must be thirsty. Do you want something to eat? Are you hungry? I'll bet I can make you a sandwich or something."

Sam tried to shake his head, really he did, but it was so heavy, his neck felt like it had turned to stone, and he just couldn't keep his eyes open, even to watch Dean as he walked away into the kitchen.

He must've dozed off, because the next thing he knew Dean was there again, sitting him up and tipping the lip of a glass of cool water against his mouth.

"Come on, little man, drink a little of this," Dean commanded softly, and Sam curled his lips around the edge of the glass and drank, reaching up to hold the glass for himself, his fingers brushing Dean's as he did. "That's it."

Sam gulped the entire glass straight down, and Dean was getting up again to refill it when Sam grabbed his wrist, instinctively needing Dean to stay with him, not sure how to express it. Dean stopped and looked down at him, the fond smile in his eyes warming Sam's chest, calming him.

"It's okay, Sam," Dean assured him. "Not going anywhere. Just getting you some more water, okay?"

Sam closed his eyes, sank back into the couch again, dropping into sleep almost immediately, only to wake a few minutes later to the feel of a warm, damp washcloth wiping his face gently. It felt so good, he lay still and kept his eyes closed, letting Dean wash his face, then his hands, then check and re-dress the cut on his leg, all the while focusing on Dean's nearness, on the strength and confidence conveyed by his touch. Sam had never felt so cared for, even in his dreams, even when he was a small child.

"You just sleep now, little guy," Dean breathed softly when he finished, laying a gentle hand on Sam's forehead, checking for fever. "There'll be plenty of time to talk later. I'll be right here, I promise. Not going anywhere."

When sleep pulled Sam down this time it was into a dark, dreamless place where Dean's constant presence was a warm comfort, a sharp contrast to all the years of lonely, empty beds. Dean was
here, really here, even as Sam slept, keeping Sam safe, banishing the nightmares threatening to crowd his head and keep him from sleeping. Dean was here, with Sam, right where he belonged.

*//*

When Sam woke up he could smell bacon cooking. He'd slept for hours, he realized right away; it was dark out and his leg was stiff and sore. He stretched, pulled himself up to sitting, then twisted around toward the kitchen, where Dean was standing with his back to him at the stove, cooking.

For several minutes, Sam sat watching the muscles of Dean's broad back, his shoulders in the tight black tee-shirt, the smooth, almost hair-less skin of his strong arms as he moved the spatula and flipped the bacon, then finally turned to retrieve a plate from the table.

"Hey, look who's awake," he grinned as he caught Sam staring.

Sam blushed to the roots of his hair and looked down immediately, but he could tell that Dean knew he'd been looking at him, had been for some time. Dean knew and he didn't mind. Sam didn't really know how to feel about that. He didn't understand why his feelings for Dean were so intense, but it embarrassed him, made him worry there was something wrong with him. Something more wrong.

"You hungry?" Dean asked, as if he totally missed Sam's discomfort. Or as if he noticed but chose to ignore it. Or was totally okay with it. Sam dared to look up, met Dean's sparkling green eyes, got a wink and a smirk from Dean for his audacity. Sam shook his head, but his stomach gave him away, and Dean raised his eyebrows and tilted his head a little, as if to say, "Really?"

"Well, you sure sound hungry," Dean noted. He turned away again, cracking eggs into the hot pan, and Sam deliberately avoided staring, twisting the blanket that someone – Dean, obviously – had laid over him while he slept. "Bacon and eggs coming right up."

Dean sat with him while he ate, washed it down with another glass of water because apparently Bobby Singer didn't keep milk or juice in his fridge, and the only other beverage on offer was beer. Dean helped himself to a bottle after he cleaned up Sam's dishes, sat down in the chair next to the couch, and laid a small silver blade on the table beside him.

"Now Sam, I told my dad I'd run some tests on you before he gets back," Dean said solemnly. "I know you're not one of those – those things we killed back at the warehouse, but he wants me to prove it to him. Are you okay with that?"

Sam nodded, glancing at the blade, then back up at Dean's face, feeling his heart speed up and his palms start to sweat.

"What do I have to do?" he asked, voice shaking a little.

"Well, you've already been drinking holy water, so that's done," Dean gave a little reassuring smile, and Sam relaxed. "Now I need you to give me your hand. Palm up."

"Wh – what are you going to do?" Sam stammered, his shaking becoming suddenly more violent, head pounding. He put his hand out as Dean requested, and Dean took it in both of his large ones, uncurling Sam's fingers and running his thumb along the lifeline there.

"Hey, it's okay, it won't hurt," Dean assured him, rubbing at the lifeline. "Well, not much anyway. And just for a minute. Look, I'll do it first, so you can see."

Dean picked up the knife and ran the sharp edge along the meat of his own palm, and Sam watched
in fascination as the skin split open and red blood welled to the surface.

"See? Nothing to it," Dean said, holding up his palm for Sam to see before reaching for a handkerchief to bind it with. "Now you, okay?"

Sam nodded, trying to control his shaking, keeping his hand in Dean's as Dean wiped the blade clean, then drew it carefully along Sam's palm. It was so sharp there was barely a sting as Sam's skin broke open and blood welled forth; they both watched for a minute, then Dean nodded, satisfied, and grabbed a clean handkerchief to wrap around Sam's hand.

"Good, Sam, you did good," Dean smiled his reassurance, closing Sam's small hand around the kerchief and tucking it against his chest. "Just hold it like that till the blood stops. You'll be fine."

"Those – those monsters were my friends," Sam blurted out, his voice small and scared. "They weren't hurting anybody. Why – why did you kill them, Dean?"

Dean looked shocked for a minute, his eyes wide, face pale. Then he shook his head, lowered his eyes, busied himself checking the cut on Sam's leg, re-dressing it.

"You don't know what you're saying, Sam," Dean's voice shook a little. "They must've drugged you or something. You were being held against your will. You're traumatized, is all."

"That was my summer school," Sam explained, too late to stop now. "They were training me. Showing me how to do stuff. I was learning how to be a super-hero."

"Is that what they told you?" Dean looked up, eyebrows raised skeptically.

Sam nodded. "They were helping me control my abilities, teaching me how to use them to help people."

"Using you, more like," Dean frowned, his voice low and rough. "Manipulating you. Sam, those things weren't people. They were monsters. They were using you and your – your abilities – to hurt people. Real people. People who aren't monsters, or hunters. Just regular, innocent people, who don't even know we exist."

"You hunt monsters," Sam suggested, nodding. "You're a hunter."

"That's right," Dean nodded. "Me, my dad, Bobby...It's what we do."

"George said hunters are bad," Sam's voice sounded small, and he wasn't trying to whisper, but that's how it sounded. "George said hunters would want to kill us. Just because we're different."

Dean huffed out a breath, clearly irritated. "Well, George was wrong, okay? We don't kill innocent people. You are not a monster. None of those kids we rescued today are monsters. The monsters were those things who were brainwashing you. You were being conditioned for something. They were training you up for something, but you were not one of them, you understand me, Sam? I just tested you. That's what this was for. And you passed, okay? You're human. You're just a kid. Just a regular, ordinary kid."

Dean had worked himself up, and his righteous anger on Sam's behalf was making Sam's chest ache, making his cheeks hot.

"My foster family..." Sam's voice trailed off, his eyes burning with fresh tears as the memories flooded in. "They're not monsters either, Dean. Why did somebody kill them?"
Dean took a deep breath, scrubbed his good hand over his face, shaking his head.

"You got me, Sam, you got me," he sighed. "That, I don't get. Your family was human. That much we know. But they let you go to that...that summer school." He looked up at Sam, biting his lower lip absently. "For how long, Sam? How long were you going to the warehouse and training with those things?"

"Four years," Sam whispered, still shaking under the shock of Dean's revelations. In all that time, it had never occurred to Sam that his handlers weren't human. It just didn't. He accepted everything they told him at face value, so that now, hearing Dean referring to them as monsters, Sam simply couldn't take it in. Wouldn't he have known? Shouldn't he have known?

Dean was shaking his head, brow furrowed and lips pursed. "They had long-term plans, I guess," Dean said, glancing up at Sam, then away again as if he couldn't bear to look at him, as if this new information was making Dean see Sam differently.

Which was just not okay with Sam at all.

"You tried to warn me, Dean," Sam told him, desperate to regain Dean's trust. "I used to dream about you all the time, and you warned me about them. Well, not about George and Carl and the other guys, but about Dr. Clausen, and Jennifer. All of them at the clinic. You hated them. Then when Dr. Clausen made you go away...when I forgot you...but I remembered everything when I saw you here on the road that day, Dean. I remembered everything then."

Dean was staring, eyes wide, mouth open, uncomprehending and clearly freaked out.

"Wha..what are you talking about, Sammy?" he stammered. "You used to dream about me? About me?"

Sam nodded. "All my life," he said. "You and me, growing up in our house, riding in the backseat of the car. We're brothers. In my dream, you and me are brothers, Dean."

There. He said it. He finally told Dean his biggest secret, the one he feared the most because it made him sound so freaky, like some kind of stalker or something.

Dean was shaking his head, jaw clenched, lips tight. "That's impossible, Sam," he said. "That's just your weird psychic thing. My brother..." He hesitated, biting back some strong emotions. "My brother's dead," he said finally. "He died when he was a baby. In the fire that killed my mom."

Now it was Sam's turn to be stunned. That just didn't make sense. If he was supposed to be dead...But then Sam realized that he'd been holding out hope the entire time that it was true, that he really was Dean's brother, and the truth – yes, Dean had a brother, but he died – the truth shattered all of Sam's illusions in a single moment.

"Are – are you sure?" he heard himself asking, then cringed because it made him sound so needy.

"Yes, I'm sure," Dean barked, angry now, which made Sam feel even worse. He shouldn't be pushing this; it was obviously a horrible memory for Dean, probably the defining tragedy of his life, and he sure as hell didn't need Sam dredging it up again.

But Dean was riled up and seemed to need to go on, to make Sam understand. "I heard him screaming, okay? I remember my baby brother crying and crying, but I couldn't save him. The fire was too hot. Dad burned himself pretty badly trying to get into the nursery, but the flames drove him back. I let my baby brother die, Sam. I was supposed to protect him, look after him. That's what Mom always said. And I failed. You get me, Sam? I failed."
Dean was on his feet, pacing, his entire body crackling with frustrated energy, with the urge to do something – anything – to change what had happened that night. Sam didn't have to be a mind-reader to see how fresh the memory was for Dean, how even after twelve years he still beat himself up over something that happened when he was only four years old.

"His name was Sam, wasn't it?" Sam whispered, and Dean stopped, stared at him, clenching and un-clenching his fists, like he was wishing he could hit something. "He'd be my age exactly if he survived, wouldn't he?"

"Sam, you're not him," Dean shook his head. "You can't be him. The firefighters recovered the bodies. We buried them. I remember the funeral."

Sam felt a tear slide down his cheek, felt his chest tighten with grief. It shouldn't hit him so hard, finding out he wasn't Dean's brother after all, but he had been hoping it could be true since the day he'd seen Dean on that dusty road, and it was the hardest reality he'd ever had to face. He wiped angrily at his leaking face with his good hand, swiped the back of his handkerchief-covered hand across his sniffling nose.

"Hey, come on, it's not that bad," Dean slid to his knees in front of Sam, his hands on the couch, on either side of Sam's knees, leaned in so Sam was forced to look up at him. "It happened a long time ago. I'm pretty much over it."

No you're not, Sam thought but didn't say.

"How – how did it start?" Sam asked instead, pulling himself together so he could focus on Dean, get off his own wretched self-pitying head-trip. "The fire, I mean. Do they know what happened?"

Dean sat back on his heels, turned his face away and clenched his jaw, and for a moment Sam was afraid he wouldn't answer.

"Dad thinks it was a demon," Dean said finally, still looking off toward the window, giving Sam his profile. He was so close, Sam could see every freckle, every eyelash; he could smell the spicy scent of the gel in Dean's hair. "Dad saw the thing, in the nursery, hovering over the crib. It had yellow eyes and it was grinning at him. Mom was – the thing had pinned Mom to the ceiling somehow, and she was bleeding and burning. Dad thinks she was already dead, but he's not sure. He yelled at it – 'Get away from my son, you son-of-a-bitch!' – but the thing just laughed at him, just threw him backwards against the wall with a flick of its wrist – with his mind. Stunned him. When Dad came to, flames were everywhere. He tried to go back in, but..."

"So he didn't actually see the baby die," Sam clarified, hope rising in his chest again. "Maybe the demon took him. Maybe it left him with a foster-family, and he grew up and...and maybe I'm him, Dean, maybe I am your brother."

Dean looked back at Sam, his eyes glistening like two pools of warm sea water. "If you heard that baby crying like I did..." Dean lowered his head, squeezed his eyes shut, and Sam could tell he was fighting back tears. "No, Sam. Don't you think if I thought for one minute...Don't you think if I could have my brother back, if I thought there was a chance in hell he survived that fire, don't you think I want that? Don't you think I wish you were him? But you're not, little buddy, okay? You're not. Dad saw my brother die. I heard him. We buried him. This is all just some weird, freaky coincidence, that's all."

"But my dreams..." Sam tried again, one last time, because he couldn't not hope. He couldn't not wish it were true, despite everything Dean was saying.
Dean put his hands on Sam's knees, raised his eyebrows in a stern look that demanded Sam take him seriously. "When Dad gets back, we're gonna tell him everything you just told me, okay? Except the dreams. You got me? Your psychic stuff is creepy enough, and we don't want to give him more reasons to turn you back over to the system, you got me? If he thinks you're a monster-in-training, and then he starts thinking I'm your target or something...Well, let's just keep that part to ourselves. Okay?"

Sam nodded, suddenly terrified of John's return, of his final judgment on Sam's future.

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It was already early morning when John and Bobby finally returned. Sam woke with a start when he heard the rumble of the Impala, the creaking and slamming of its doors. Dean was sprawled on the chair next to the couch, three empty beer bottles on the table next to him, snoring lightly, and he didn't stir as the front door opened and Bobby and John walked in. They were covered in soot, dirt, and grime, and they were both exhausted.

"Shower, then bed for me," Bobby declared, kicking off his boots and moving heavily up the stairs to the second floor.

John staggered into the living room, stared down at Sam for a moment, then took a step closer and laid his hand on Dean's head, stroking the soft, gel-spiked hair, then letting the back of his hand rest gently against Dean's temple. Dean shifted restlessly, muttered something indecipherable in his sleep, but didn't wake up. John looked up at Sam again, and his gaze was softer, full of his fondness for Dean.

"I want your side of this story, son," he said quietly, his deep voice low so as not to wake Dean. "But it can wait a little while longer. This has been a helluva day, and I think we've all earned a little rest, don't you?"

Sam nodded solemnly, grateful for the first show of real kindness from the big hunter. It was reassuring in a way Sam couldn't quite put his finger on, and it made Sam feel safe for the first time since yesterday morning, despite the horrible, graphic images of shallow graves full of salt and flame in John's head. It made Sam feel reassured and protected. John Winchester was not a man to cross, Sam could sense that easily, but he was also a good man to have on your side, if you could get him, and Sam decided right then and there that he would convince John to let him stay with them if it was the last thing he did.

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"So the shapeshifters were training you," John clarified later that day, after everyone was awake and rested and showered and Dean had checked Sam's wound again. "Looks clean," he told Sam. "No infection." He was still on the couch, Dean next to him, watching John pace in front of them as he interrogated Sam. Bobby had just gone into the kitchen to get more coffee.

"That's what it looks like," Dean agreed. He'd repeated Sam's story to his father, almost verbatim, minus the dream stuff and light on the psychic stuff, which clearly worried John enough as it was.

"But you don't have any idea what they had in mind for you," John looked hard at Sam. "What their long-term plan was."
"He figured they were teaching him to be a super-hero," Dean stepped in to answer for Sam, shooting him a warning glance. "He thought he was learning to be one of the good guys."

"And your psychic mojo," John ignored Dean, kept his intense gaze focused on Sam, who tried not to squirm or look away. "Did you read anything in their minds about what they were planning? Anything at all?"

"Carl didn't know anything," Sam almost whispered, his voice shaking, and he cleared it before he tried again. "George had some kind of trick he used to keep me from reading him. I could catch glimpses of his thoughts, once in awhile, but it was...he...mostly he was thinking about sex."

Dean frowned at that, immediately interrupting again. "Did he bad-touch you, Sam? Ever?"

Sam shook his head. "He had the hots for Carl," Sam blushed at the memory of George's thoughts, not because they were particularly embarrassing, but because thinking about George's lust for Carl made him think of Dean, and that was...weird.

"And the rest of the shapeshifters...Could you read their thoughts?" John went on, and Sam shook his head again.

"George told me not to. He said it was important that I learn to control it, and he was trusting me. I never...Most of the time, even when I caught glimpses of other people's thoughts, it was just boring stuff: 'What am I gonna make for supper?' 'I hate my boyfriend.' 'The boss is a jerk.' Stuff like that. The martial arts teacher was a closet knitter. He had a big box full of hand-knitted scarves at home and he was very proud of them. The guy who taught wrestling liked to wear women's underwear."

"Okay, that's enough," John put up a hand, and Sam closed his mouth. He wished now that he'd disobeyed George and listened more closely to the thoughts around him during his time in the warehouse. He might have figured out a way to prevent all of this from happening.

But then he wouldn't be sitting here with John and Dean, interviewing for a place in the Winchester family, hoping against all odds they'd let him in.

"And you never suspected they were shifters," John clarified. "Nothing about them ever seemed off to you?"

Sam shook his head, trying to remember anything about George or Carl or his teachers that might have tipped him off that they were monsters, but there wasn't anything. They'd been kind to him, in a detached way, and he'd felt like he belonged, like his future as one of them was guaranteed, as long as he made progress and worked hard. He'd never questioned it.

"It's like I said, Dad," Dean stepped in again. "They had him really well brainwashed. He believed they were helping him."

"Yeah, I get that," John nodded grimly. "I just want to be sure they never had him do something evil with those powers of his."

Sam felt a stab of fear and he shook his head violently. "I never...never...They made me promise not to do what I did with them out in the real world. They didn't want anybody to know what I could do. They wanted everything to stay a big secret."

John's mouth tightened into a grim line, and he narrowed his eyes as he considered this for a moment, then shook his head.

"There were other kids in your classes, Sam," he said. "Did those kids have psychic powers too?"
"I don't know," Sam answered honestly. He thought back to his martial arts and wrestling classes, to the fleeting glimpses of the thoughts from the other kids' minds. "I don't think so. They were just there for the classes."

"The shifters ran a legitimate business," Bobby weighed in, stepping in behind John so that there were now three pairs of eyes trained on Sam. "Well, under-the-table income-wise, but basically the martial arts and wrestling classes were offered to the general public as a front for the behind-the-scenes stuff they were doing upstairs. They were running a pretty complex operation. All those other kids were just regular customers. Apparently, Sam here was the only 'special' student."

The three hunters stared at Sam for a moment, then John lowered his eyes, turned toward Bobby with a sigh. "Anything more about his family? What happened to them?"

Bobby shook his head. "Every living thing on that farm was killed, execution style mostly. Single gun-shot wounds, straight to the head. Must've happened fast, must've been more than one shooter. The police are calling it a multiple homicide, leaving the animals out of it. They're looking for little Sam here for questioning, but nobody's trying very hard. Right now the theory is, kid's dead too, body's in the woods or in a ditch or something.

"And here's the weird part," Bobby went on, hesitating for a beat to glance at John, then back at Sam and Dean. "There's no record of this kid in the foster care system. They know he lived at that farm because he was enrolled in school and the neighbors remember him walking the dog. But Child Protective Services's got nothin'. As far as they're concerned, he doesn't even exist."

"So, that's a good thing, isn't it?" Dean pressed. "They can't charge us with kidnapping a kid that doesn't exist, can they? And if they think he's dead they won't come looking for him."

Bobby glanced at John, who shook his head but wouldn't look at the boys.

"It's not the police I'm worried about," John said darkly. "Somebody somewhere thinks this kid is pretty important, and they don't assume he's lying dead in a ditch somewhere."

"You think whoever killed his foster family knows he's still alive," Bobby suggested.

"They know he wasn't at the farm," John nodded. "Now maybe, if we're lucky, they'll figure he died in the fire. All I know is, they've gone to a helluva lot of trouble to keep his entire existence a secret, and people who go to that kind of trouble don't give up easy."

"We can keep him safe, Dad," Dean insisted. "We know how to live under the radar. Sam's safer with us than he would be anywhere else, especially CPS. We can't give him up to them, Dad. They'd find him easy that way, and then...well, what if they've decided he really is too much trouble? What if they just want to find him so they can be sure he's dead? We can't let that happen, Dad. If we turn him in and he got killed, that'd be on us. You gotta see that."

"All right, Dean, that's enough," John put his hand up and Dean shut his mouth. Then John turned away from the boys, scrubbing one hand over his face, the other hand on his hip. Sam waited, soaking in Dean's nearness, daring to hope against hope that John would decide to keep him, trying not to listen too closely as the big hunter silently debated with himself. "Okay, here's what we'll do. We need to know everything we can about that organization. Sam, I know you were pretty little when you moved here. Is there anything else you can tell us about these people? Where's that clinic you mentioned? How far away is it? Then we need to try to track them down, stop them doing whatever it is they're doing. Bobby, see what you can dig up on our boy here. Birth records, school records. Don't kids have to have shots before they start school? Find out where Sam got his. Hit the public library, go back to the farm, poke around, see what you can find. I'll go back to the
warehouse site, give it another look, call some buddies of mine to see if they can give us any leads
on an organization of shifters. Dean, stay here and take care of the kid for now, pick up the phone
only if it's one of us, ya got me?"

"Yes, sir," Dean agreed. "So...Sam stays? We're keeping him?"

John looked from his son to the small boy huddled next to him, shaking his head. "For now," he
said. "At least until we can figure this out. If those things are trying to find him, he's safer with us
than some civilian foster-home, no doubt about that."

Sam could barely answer John's remaining questions after that; his heart was pumping so loudly in
his ears and his palms were sweating so badly that Dean finally put an arm around him, offering
his steady reassurance so Sam could control his trembling excitement. They were keeping him! He
could stay! He and Dean could be brothers for real! It was almost too much, after all he'd been
through over the past twenty-four hours, to go from thinking he'd never see Dean again to suddenly
being the center of the case he was working on.

And Sam was determined to show them they wouldn't regret it. He had skills and talents he could
offer that would help them. Cranking up Bobby's old IBM desktop computer, he spent the rest of
the day showing Dean how he could hack into databases in hospitals and universities, logging in as
a student so he could access Lexis Nexis, as well as state and federal records databases.

Dean's eyes glazed over as Sam tried to interest him in the computer hacking, but when Bobby got
back later that day he seemed to understand what Sam could do, and how much it could help them.

"You're a genius, kid," Bobby declared when Sam's research pulled up links between the Project's
work in Sioux Falls with a university research facility in Lawrence, Kansas. But when John and
Dean drove down, with Sam in the backseat, to check it out, the research assistants there told them
the project had been shut down four years previously.

"They were using kids as test subjects," John explained in the car later, after he'd gone in posing as
a representative from the state Board of Medical Examiners to question witnesses while the boys
waited in the car. "The project had to shut down when someone reported them to CPS. The kids
were apparently living at the clinic, bedding down in the basement somewhere. Not exactly above-
board."

"Creepy fuckers," Dean muttered under his breath, glancing at Sam in the rearview mirror.

Sam was staring out the window, watching the familiar landscape slip by; the lawns and well-
manicured streets of the University of Kansas campus giving way to comfortable, middle-class
neighborhoods where he and Dean had walked and played in his dreams. Seeing it in real life, in
real time, was disorienting and surreal. There was the park where Dean had pushed him on the
swings. There were the monkey-bars they climbed and jumped off, daring each other to climb
higher and higher until...Sam could still remember how it felt when he'd fallen, hit his face and
passed out, given himself a concussion and a black eye. Dean had gathered him up, would've
carried him to the hospital if people hadn't come running...Sam couldn't remember the rest of that
dream; the pain probably woke him up.

John turned the car down another side-street, and that's when Sam saw it. Their old house, the one
where he and Dean grew up. Still standing, not burned to the ground the way he had imagined
based on what Dean had told him. Still there. Memories flooded Sam's mind: playing ball in the
back yard, he and Dean riding their bikes up and down the street in front of the house, Dean
shooting baskets in the driveway.
"You okay?" Dean had turned around in the front seat, was looking intently at Sam with those big green eyes of his, and Sam felt himself blush all over because he was so close, so present, not a dream at all.

Sam nodded. "Yeah," he breathed. "Everything's fine."

Dean gazed at him intently for another moment, then gave a brief nod, turning back to stare out at the landscape, his jaw moving almost imperceptibly. Sam understood with a start that for Dean, for Real!Dean, the memories here were not happy ones. This was a place of horror and tragedy for Real!Dean, who shared none of Sam's dream-memories of growing up with a brother and parents who loved him and all the warm, comfortable trappings of a normal, middle-class life. It saddened Sam, made him wish he and Dean were alone so he could hug him, crawl onto his lap and bury his face in Dean's neck and just cuddle there. But Sam was pretty sure Dean wouldn't allow that. Not now. Dean was staring stoically out the front windshield, jaw working as he ground his teeth, glaring at the peaceful suburban setting, and Sam was struck again by how well he could read Dean's expressions, even without hearing his thoughts.

John pulled the car into the parking lot of a small, nondescript building on the eastern edge of the university campus, and cut the motor. The building looked abandoned, or at least long unused, doors closed and padlocked, paint that must once have been white chipping and faded over the door where a sign must once have hung. John slid his arm along the back of the bench seat and turned to look at Sam.

"Look familiar?" he asked, and Sam looked around, squinting, trying to imagine the building when it looked freshly painted, when some kind of signage indicating that it was a clinic hung over the door, when the lot was full of cars and people were going in and out of the now cracked and padlocked front door.

Nothing.

"I think I was sleeping when I came here," he suggested, remembering the disorienting feeling of waking up in a strange bed, realizing someone had carried him in and put him there while he was unconscious.

John nodded. "Let's take a look around," he suggested. "See if the place jogs any memories."

Sam wasn't sure how that could be possible, given the lock on the door; then he noticed Dean pull out a small flat case of locksmith tools from the glovebox, slipping it into the pocket of his jacket. He winked at Sam as he got out of the car, and Sam felt himself flush.

"Just need the right tools, Sammy," he said with a smirk, "and any door can be opened."

"Plus a helluva lot of practice," John reminded him as he led the way around the side of the building, looking for easier access. "Don't get cocky now, son."

"Yes, sir," Dean murmured obediently, falling into step just behind his father. Sam tagged along last, looking around nervously, worried someone would wonder what they were doing. The former clinic was located in an area of the campus that seemed to have several buildings that were no longer used, and no one had driven up or down the street for some time. Sam guessed they couldn't be seen from the road or from the other buildings, and it occurred to him that this might be the perfect place to conduct secret tests on orphaned or abandoned kids. Who would notice? Especially if the kids were being brought in and out at night.

John knew what he was doing; it didn't take long to find a side door which was easily opened, and
when they got inside, darkness and an old musty smell of long disuse accosted their senses. After
uselessly flipping a light switch, Dean and John both pulled out flashlights and started a slow,
methodical search. Sam followed closely, bumping into Dean whenever he stopped, trying to
pretend he wasn't terrified. The first floor contained offices, a reception area, and a couple of
examining rooms, all empty and obviously unused for a very long time. None of it was familiar to
Sam, and he kept shaking his head whenever John asked. When they found a stairway into the
basement, however, then started to descend into inky darkness that felt even more oppressive for
being underground, Sam balked. He could feel something down there, something dark and sinister;
it curled up the steps toward him and wrapped itself around his body, cold and coiling and weirdly
familiar, and Sam stopped dead on the stairs, halfway down, unable to take another step.

"What is it?" Dean asked, turned to look at him, shining his light just below Sam's face so he could
see his expression. "What's wrong? You remember something?"

"Why'd you stop?" John called from the bottom of the stairs, turning to shine his own light back up
at Dean and Sam.

"I think Sam's remembering something," Dean answered, his face softening as he reached for Sam,
took a step back up toward him so he could put his hand on Sam's shoulder. "What is it, Sam? Can
you tell us what you remember?"

Sam was trembling, the icy tendrils of the malevolent presence slithering around him, making a
small rustling sound that was just beyond normal hearing, making him cold, making the sweat
break out on the back of his neck.

"There's something here..." he stammered. "No, there was something here. It's gone now, but...It
was something bad."

"Okay," Dean nodded encouragingly. "Can you come down a little more? Tell us what else you
remember? What else you can...sense?"

And with Dean's reassuring presence at his back, Sam did. He moved slowly, grasping at the
slithering wisps of evil, the imprint of something really bad but gone now, long removed. The
rooms in the basement were all empty, not even a chair or a table or a bed, but Sam could still feel
the echoes of terror and grief here, and he could almost hear children crying, the voices ragged
with fear and overuse. When Sam entered the last room at the end of the hall he was hit with such a
wall of invisible psychic pain it made him collapse in on himself, double up and fall to the floor,
gasping. Dean was there instantly, warm, strong hands stroking his back, clasping his shoulder, his
arms, murmuring to him until the moment passed, until Sam could get a handle on the pain in his
head and push back, force it to let him go.

"I was here," he gasped, blinking up at Dean from his curled up position on the dusty floor. "This
is where Dr. Clausen fixed me." It's where he made me forget you, he thinks but doesn't say.
"Doctor Clausen was a bad man. He...there was something different about him, like he wasn't
real."

"You mean like he was a ghost?" Dean asked, and Sam shook his head.

"No, but he wasn't right somehow," Sam struggled to make sense of his memories, of his younger
self trying to read Doctor Clausen and finding something dark and ugly inside him. He looked up
at Dean with a start as it hit him. "Dean, I don't think he was human."

"So he was some kind of monster," John suggested. "Another shifter, maybe."
Sam shook his head. "No. Something really, really bad. Not like George and Carl."

"Well, whatever he was, whatever this place was, it's all long gone now," John said. "My EMF reader doesn't even pick up any spectral activity at all, so what you're sensing isn't really here. It's just echoes."

"Had to be something pretty powerful to leave echoes that are still here four years later," Dean commented.

Sam was shivering so hard his teeth clattered in his head, and Dean put his arm around him, helped him to his feet, steered him out the door and back down the hall to the stairs.

"Let's get you out of here, little man," Dean murmured. "Too many bad memories here."

And Sam had to agree with him there.
They made one last stop before leaving Lawrence. Missouri Moseley lived and plied her trade as a psychic on a street not that different from the one where the Winchesters had lived, all those years ago. She shook her head when John walked in, followed by Dean, Sam so close behind he bumped into Dean's back when he stopped.

"Knew you were comin' the minute I woke up this morning," Missouri said. "Had to bake my special apple-blueberry pie because I know it's your favorite."

John smiled warmly as he hugged the plump woman.

"You remembered," he breathed, clearly pleased.

"You haven't changed, John Winchester," Missouri shook her head again. "Same big handsome barn of a man you always were on the outside. Same vengeful jack-ass on the inside." She glanced at Dean, and John nodded.

"My son, Dean," he said. "And this is Sam."

Missouri's eyebrows went up when she looked at Dean. "Well, didn't you grow up pretty," she commented. "Not so funny-looking after all." Then her gaze fell on Sam and her eyebrows stayed permanently raised, her mouth falling open a little.

"Well, this, I did not expect," she said, and Sam's skin tingled, the hair on the back of his neck raised. "Mm, mm, mm. I did not see this comin'."

It took Sam a minute to realize she hadn't spoken out loud. His eyes widened, and Missouri smiled a little knowing smile, and Sam tried not to freak out because he could see she knew he heard her.

"Sam's a psychic too," John explained, and Missouri nodded.

"You don't say," she pressed her lips together, put her hands on her hips, and nodded toward her sitting room. "Y'all can come in and sit down while I get your pie," she said. "Then you can tell me why you think you're here."

"What does she mean, 'why we think we're here?'" Dean groused when they were seated and Missouri had left the room. "Why are we here, Dad?"

"Missouri Moseley is the psychic who helped me figure out what had happened to your mother and your brother," John explained, his jaw set in a way that belied the strong emotions Sam could sense, the memories of fire and heat in his head. "She introduced me to the supernatural world, helped me connect with other hunters. If anybody can help us figure out what happened to Sam in that clinic, it'll be her."

"Here we are," Missouri said as she returned with two plates, each bearing a steaming slice of freshly-baked pie. "Just out of the oven. Sam, you can come help me in the kitchen."

Sam obeyed before he even realized what he was doing, giving a surprised shrug to Dean as he left the room, finding a look of doubt and confusion on Dean's face as the older boy's attention was clearly torn between Sam and the plate of pie in his hands.

Missouri closed the door to the kitchen when they were inside and gestured to a chair at the small
table against the wall, where a glass of soy milk and a piece of pie sat waiting.

"You can eat yours in here," she said brusquely. "I've got more trouble comin', and I've got baking to do."

Sam sat down, watched as Missouri turned her back and busied herself stirring and mixing. His heart was pounding and his palms were sweating and the hair on the back of his neck was standing up even taller. He deliberately made his mind as blank as possible, trying not to read Missouri's at the same time, but he knew she was reading him like a book, and it made him more nervous than he would admit, even to himself. He ate his pie and waited, and after a couple of minutes she turned and looked down at him with narrowed eyes.

"You and Dean have a special bond," she announced abruptly. "You both sense it. He's psychic too. He don't know it, but he is, and you can't tell him because he couldn't handle it. You hear what I'm sayin'?"

Sam nodded, closing his mouth because it had dropped all the way open when she said the word "psychic" and shock flooded his veins like ice water.

"Is that why I can't read him?" Sam asked, and Missouri gave a short nod.

"He's shielding hisself," she said. "He does it without even knowin' he's doin' it. I can read him 'cause he don't care about me. I ain't important to him. But you... You're everything he never knew he wanted. You two boys were made for each other."

Sam felt the flush rise in his cheeks, up his neck, across his chest. He knew what she was saying was true, he'd always known it. But it was the first time he'd heard someone else acknowledge it, and finding out how Dean felt about him was almost more than Sam could stand.

Missouri put her mixing bowl down on the table and sat down heavily in the chair next to him, laying her soft warm hand on his arm. "And those dreams? They started when you were suffering somethin' awful." Missouri's face clouded, and she frowned deeply. "Your dreams kept you sane. Kept you from goin' over the edge into darkness. They were your mind's way of coping with what your body was going through."

"But how could I do that?" Sam asked. "How did I know about Dean before I met him?"

Missouri smiled, reached over and touched his cheek. "Ah, child, you's such a baby. Those people at that Project didn't teach you nothin', did they?" She sighed, sat back in her chair and reached for the mixing bowl, starting to stir as she spoke. "Dean's your soul-mate. Your soul knows his 'cuz that's the way it works."

"But the house," Sam went on. "The car. It was like I was living my life with him, growing up with him."

Missouri sighed again, watching her mixture turn and turn in the bowl. "Your mind made up a way for you to be together," she shrugged. "You built up a story for yourself in the only way you could. Being brothers was safe and comforting. It's your soul's way of being close to Dean: growing up together, sharing your lives from the start that way."

"But Dean didn't dream about me," Sam protested. "He doesn't have those memories of being brothers like I do."

Missouri shook her head, raised her eyes, and gave him a look that was something between a warning and a smirk. "You've got that boy wrapped around your little finger and you know it," she
"You just go easy on him, y'hear? He breaks easier than you do."

Sam lowered his eyes to his plate, blushing furiously for reasons he didn't fully understand.

"'Sides," Missouri went on. "It's just as well you're not brothers."

"What do you mean?" Sam looked up sharply, and Missouri shook her head, pushing herself to her feet and wiping her hands on her apron.

"You'll see in a couple of years or so," she answered inscrutably. "Come on, let's hear those Winchester boys lie about what they're doing here."

She winked at Sam as she headed out the door and he followed, flushed with Missouri's revelations about Dean, feeling a little guilty about that because he was pretty sure Dean wasn't going to get the same personal interview, wouldn't find out about their being "soul-mates" unless Sam told him.

Which was an utterly terrifying thought that pre-occupied Sam's thoughts for the rest of the visit, completely obscuring John's questions about Sam's psychic abilities and any memories he might have about the creepy clinic on the university campus. But he heard it when Missouri assured John that Sam had 'a heart of gold,' and his soul was 'pure.'

"There's no more evil in this boy here than there is in you," she admonished John, then glanced at Dean. "You neither. This boy's had some twisted things happen to him, that's for sure, but he's strong. He's a survivor, like yourselves. You'd be lucky to have him on your team, and stupid not to." She pointed her forefinger at John. "Don't be a damn fool, John Winchester."

John smiled and looked down, dimples showing.

"I won't," John assured her, glancing up at Sam, nodding once, and Sam could sense John's acquiescence, the beginnings of trust.

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"County records have him born Samuel J. Smith, mother Cheryl Smith, father unknown, July 19, 1983, in Duluth," Bobby told them the next evening, when they were back in Sioux Falls going over the case. The case at the moment being Sam. Sam could read Bobby's determination, his concern for John and especially for Dean, and his growing fondness for Sam, and Sam had decided he liked the gruff-mannered hunter. He listened patiently as Bobby recounted the only "official" record of his short existence. "The hospital pediatrician gave him his first shots, then there's nothing until he enrolled in school here in 1991. Foster-mother Karen Richards enrolled him at Sioux Falls Elementary, using that birth certificate, a forged certificate of guardianship, and a forged immunization record showing Sam's shots from a county clinic in Duluth that doesn't even exist."

"In other words, we got squat," John muttered grimly.

"Well, I've also got the mother's death certificate," Bobby says, looking even more grim. "Drug overdose, New Year's Eve, 1987."

"Kid was four years old," John breathed, glancing at Sam, who was squeezed between Dean and the arm of the couch. Same as Dean, Sam could hear John think to himself, as clearly as if he'd said it out loud. Same as me when my dad left.

"Then we got nothing on him between the ages of four and eight, when he enrolled in the third grade here," Bobby went on. "He just finished the sixth grade. He's a good student, described by
teachers as shy and aloof, but apparently he can hold his own in a fight cuz he's been in a few and mostly comes out on top, according to the principal. This is all in his school records. I can't exactly go around interviewing teachers in the summer. Everybody knows me around here, and not in a good way, if you know what I mean."

Sam could read bits and pieces of Bobby's past in the hunter's mind, could sense the tragedy and alcoholism, the violence of his childhood and the fairly recent violent death of his wife. It was all sadder than he could handle, like John Winchester's life, and Sam was beginning to get the sense that hunters were not happy people, in general.

"No, that's all right," John shook his head. "We've got enough. This whole thing is just one big, ugly, stinking dead end."

"What do we do now, Dad?" Dean asked, and Sam could feel the tension in his body where Dean was pressed against him. Sam had woken up after a nightmare the night before and Dean had been right there, soothing him and whispering away the memory of fire, of George dead on the floor and Zoe's soft fur soaked in blood.

"We get back to work," John answered brusquely. "I've got a lead on a possible demon-possession two states over. You've got a month before school starts...We leave today."

"What about Sam? We bring him with us, right?"

Now it was Sam's turn to tense, holding his body as still and stiff as a board as he waited for John Winchester to pronounce judgment on his future. John glanced at Sam, and Sam could read the doubt and uncertainty, could see himself through John's eyes, how small and helpless he looked.

"We can't take a kid on the road," John protested gruffly. "It's not safe."

"You took me on the road when I was only four years old," Dean reminded him.

"That's different," John shook his head. "You're my son. I needed to keep you safe. Teach you to protect yourself. After what happened to your mother and your brother, you were all I had."

"Sam's family is dead," Dean reminded his father. "We had a hand in that. We're responsible for his being alone in the world, unprotected. We owe it to him to take him in, try to give him a home. We...we're all he has."

John shook his head. "He's not a hunter."

"We can train him," Dean insisted. "We can teach him how to protect himself. And he's not completely defenseless, I can vouch for that. He knows a lot of wrestling moves, and he's a black belt in karate. Plus, he can help us. You saw what he can do back at that clinic. He's got real mojo. He's like Zelda Rubenstein and the Karate Kid in one package, plus Matthew Broderick in War Games. I'll bet he can hack anything."

John scrubbed his hand over his face, other hand on his hip. Sam held his breath, tried to make himself small, huddling a little against Dean's side, hands clenched between his knees, shoulders hunched, waiting, trying not to read all the doubts in John's mind. John glanced at Bobby, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"Dean's got a point," Bobby offered. "Kid's got a real talent for computers. He'd be pretty useful to have around, on a job."

John threw his hands up, blew out a breath. "All right!" he growled. "All right. He's in. But you're
in charge of him, Dean. He's your responsibility, y'hear? I'm done raising kids. Done."

"Yes, sir," Dean agreed, relief smoothing the tension from his familiar face, making Sam's chest fill with warmth.

"He'll need to go to school," John said. "You're in charge of getting him enrolled wherever, getting him back and forth each day, keeping track of all his homework and shit. I already did all that once, with you. I'm not raising another kid."

"Yes, sir," Dean agreed, nodding vigorously, obviously trying and failing to hide how delighted he was.

And just like that, Sam Smith became Sam Winchester.

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That night, Sam woke up screaming, images of dead George staring wide-eyed at him, Jack and Zoe lying on the green lawn in front of his house, and the house was burning. Always burning. Dean was there, as he would be from now on, Sam knew, holding him, keeping him sane. Dean was there like his dream-brother had always been, but more alive and vital. More defined. And although Sam couldn't read his mind, he knew that this Dean felt the same way. Sam and Dean had found each other again, despite everything, just like Missouri said. It was just the way it was supposed to be.

"You know what this is, don't you?" Bobby said later that night, when he and John stood over the sleeping boys, Sam still awake enough to hear them. "It's like he's got his brother back, after all these years. The brother he was meant to grow up with."

"Yeah, I get that," John agreed grimly.

"It's a good thing," Bobby prompted.

"Yeah, maybe." John sounded reluctant, but Sam could hear the relief in his voice too, and he could hear it in his head: *When I'm gone, at least he'll have this kid.*

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Three years passed in the relative security of the Winchester family unit. Once John accepted Sam into the extended family he was allowed access to the family secrets, which mostly amounted to meeting a lot of back-woods survivalist types who happened to be hunters because it already fit their nobody-tells-me-what-to-do lifestyles. Somebody named Caleb provided all the weapons, mostly black-market and mostly untraceable.

Under the radar, Sam continued his training. He'd already had top-notch wrestling and martial arts classes; now he focused on weapons and monster anatomy. How to kill it, how to bring it down so it could be killed. Dean stepped into the role of mentor, teaching Sam everything he knew about loading, shooting, and caring for various firearms, starting with a small rifle, then moving on to shotguns and handguns. Dean taught Sam to fight dirty, which was his only recourse in certain situations, given his size. The boys spent whole afternoons rolling around in the dirt behind whatever motel or abandoned house they were squatting in, sparring and wrestling, getting the one-on-one moves down until Dean was convinced Sam could protect himself in a fight.

"But if you can, you run," Dean warned him on more than one occasion, no matter how well Sam was able to pin the larger boy. "You get away. Most monsters, they're after blood. They're more powerful than they look, stronger than they are big. So you just get away, use what I showed you.
And Sam nodded, sweat dripping into his eyes, his body sore and pumped with adrenaline from scuffling with Dean, his skin hot and tight from Dean's touch. It felt good to be bruised and exhausted, felt like a kind of relief he couldn't get any other way, and he welcomed it as often as he could get it. After a year or two of living with Dean, sharing the same sleeping space, often the same bed, spending every hour together except the ones when Sam was in school and his whole body tingled with the need to be close to Dean again, Sam finally faced the reality that he had an addiction problem, and his drug was Dean. He had always loved Dean, even when he'd only been a dream, but now, with the added hormonal chaos of adolescence, Sam's love had turned into a serious craving. He was consumed, obsessed with constant thoughts of Dean's hands, his ass, his broad back and shoulders, his chest and strong, muscled legs.

By the time Sam was fourteen he understood that he was in love with Dean, and it was more than just a little boy crush. He watched Dean all the time, even when Dean didn't notice. Especially then, and when Dean was sleeping. Sam was hard just thinking about Dean, and it wasn't easy to hide. It made him blush, shift himself uncomfortably, and Dean noticed. Of course he noticed, and his teasing responses just made it worse.

"I'm awesome," Dean would say when he caught Sam staring. Or, "I know, I'm adorable." And his grin would light up his face, make his freckles stand out on his nose, his green eyes sparkle mischievously. Sam fantasized about grabbing Dean and shoving him up against the wall and just laying one on him, just to see those beautiful long-lashed eyes widen in surprise, just to feel Dean's plump lips against his, if only once. Sam knew it would only be that one time because Dean was clearly not into guys, seemed only interested in girls that way, although he was warm and affectionate with Sam, never seemed to hesitate to sling an arm around his shoulders and pull him in for a quick hug, or to ruffle his hair and plant a smacking kiss on the top of his head. Even the time Dean walked in on Sam while he was jerking off in the motel bathroom, moaning Dean's name because he thought Dean and John had left for the diner for breakfast already. Dean just raised his eyebrows and smirked, "Better remember to lock the door from now on, Sammy." But of course Sam jerked off later to the memory of Dean coming in and finding him with his pants down, fantasized that Dean's passing glance at Sam's dick had been something longer and more meaningful.

Sam could swear Dean knew how he felt. He was sure Dean heard Sam moaning his name that time, and those times Dean caught him staring, Dean seemed pleased with the attention. He seemed to like being the center of Sam's world, the object of his devotion.

At night, with John passed out after a hunt and a bottle of Jack, snoring hard on the other bed, Dean spooned Sam against his chest, buried his face in Sam's hair, breathing deeply while Sam lay as still as he could, hoping Dean wouldn't notice how turned on he was. He was pretty sure this was a comfort thing for Dean, that Sam's small body was like a substitute teddy bear for the boy who had sucked his thumb until he was almost nine years old, according to John's memories. John seemed to appreciate Sam's presence because it gave Dean a companion, someone besides John to focus on, and John was grateful for that because it had always been such a heavy responsibility, raising Dean, filling all the emptiness in his young life all by himself. Finally sharing that hole with somebody else made John grateful to Sam, took the pressure off a little. John had always felt Dean was too clingy, too needy. By the time Dean was eighteen, John was done. His job raising Dean was over. John was only too glad to abdicate responsibility for Dean's emotional life, to let Sam take over the role of Dean's anchor.

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The summer Sam turned fifteen, he made his first kill. He'd already been on hunts with John and Dean, but he'd stayed in the car, provided back-up only if absolutely necessary. He'd learned a lot about triage, how to clean and bandage various wounds, how to treat them so they didn't get infected. He'd had an eyeful and a handful of more of Dean's body than he could have imagined, just patching him up after a hunt, and he'd learned how to touch Dean without losing it, how to focus on what needed doing to avoid falling apart.

But the moment he looked the werewolf in the eyes and pulled his trigger, sending his silver bullet straight into the creature's heart, watched the startled look on its face as it crumpled to the ground, letting Dean go just a moment before it sank its teeth into Dean's neck...that was a defining moment for Sam, the moment he crossed the line and became a hunter.

Dean was ecstatic, wanted to celebrate Sam's first kill with a six-pack of beer and some porn back at the motel immediately. John thumped Sam on the back and smiled, gave him a look of genuine warmth for the first time.

"Congratulations, son," John said, emphasizing the family bond in a way he hadn't done before.

And Sam's chest should've swollen with pride; he should've been basking under Dean's praise, gloating about his first kill like an old pro. He should've been feeling grateful to finally be in the club, the one full of monster-killing hunters who were dedicated to making the world a little safer, one kill at a time.

But all Sam could think about was George and Carl and the others, lying dead in that burning warehouse three years back. They hadn't been attacking anyone, hadn't been trying to bite Dean's neck off or eat his heart out. Yeah, they'd apparently killed people and assumed their identities, and no, they shouldn't have done that. But their monstrousness hadn't been evident to Sam, nor had it been an immediate threat to the community, other than the possibility that some of them had been assuming other identities in order to acquire wealth and intel. The fact that the hunters had been tipped off that a nest of shifters was living at the warehouse was a complete fluke. The shifters could've gone on indefinitely if that hadn't happened. They weren't hurting anyone, at least not directly.

This was different. Something was threatening Dean, Sam knew what to do, and he did it. Pretty straight-forward. Silver bullet to the heart. Sam didn't feel he deserved to be congratulated for something that had to be done, but here Dean was, going on and on in the car on the drive back to the motel, acting like Sam had just made the winning basket in a ball game or something.

"I was fourteen, first time I killed something like that," Dean was telling him. "Werewolf, same as you. Those mothers can be vicious. This one was fully changed, teeth bared, the whole nine yards, just coming at me. Wasn't sure I could hold my gun steady, and it took two shots, but that mother was on the ground. I shot him one more time for good measure. Then he was dead, all right. Son-of-a-bitch was deader than a doornail. Burned the corpse all by myself."

"Threw up all over my tools doing it," John commented dryly.

"You were alone?" Sam gaped.

Dean nodded. "It was part of a pack, and Dad had killed the rest of them, then took off to follow another lead. I was supposed to stay behind and clean up, but then this hairy fucker showed up. Must've been out eating hearts and come back to find his family dead. Pissed him off pretty bad."

Sam read the guilt in John's mind, saw him flinch a little.
"You did good, Dean," John praised. "You did the job the way I taught you."

Dean nodded, clearly soaking up the praise.

"Except for the throwing up part," John added, and Dean's face fell a little. "You were always hurling, on those early hunts. It was a problem."

"Not any more," Dean insisted. "I just needed more practice. Fifteen kills later, guts of steel." He pounded his abs for emphasis, and John shook his head.

"Too cocky, Dean," he reprimanded. "Always too cocky. You shouldn't have let that thing grab you back there. You knew it was in there, you knew you needed to stay alert, yet it managed to grab you from behind. From behind, Dean. That means you were moving too fast, hadn't checked the room before you went in."

"Sam had my back," Dean protested.

"Yeah, well you're just lucky he did, is all I'm saying," John groused. "You let your guard down. Next time, Sam might not be there."

_I'll always be there_, Sam thought fiercely. _I'll always have Dean's back, if he needs me._ Sam felt very protective of Dean when John grilled him like this. It made Sam angrier than he liked to admit. Dean was a good hunter, a superb teacher, and Sam resented the way John was constantly taking him down a peg, meting out just enough praise to keep Dean coming back for more, then laying on the criticism. It felt deeply unfair.

Later, after showers in the motel and injuries tended and patched, John left for the bar and the boys collapsed together on the other bed, too exhausted to talk. Dean flung his arm over Sam as he always did, pulling him in, holding his smaller body tucked against Dean's, pushing his face into the crook of Sam's shoulder, just keeping him safe and close. Sam willed himself to relax, to tolerate Dean's closeness, taking it for the sexless affection he was sure it was intended to be, grasping at images of dead fish and old men's butts to keep his dick from fattening too obviously. When Dean snuggled closer, pushing his crotch into Sam's hip and pressing his lips against Sam's shoulder, Sam held his breath, counted to one hundred, and waited for Dean to fall asleep, waited for the inevitable evening of his breath and the subtle release of his hold on Sam. When Sam was convinced that Dean had fallen asleep, he shifted carefully away from him, knowing there was no way in hell he could find sleep with Dean's dick pressed against him, even with two layers of cotton in between.

And it took awhile, but Sam finally drifted into an uneasy doze, aware of Dean's every move, his every breath, needing it to help him counter the memory of fear and rage in that werewolf's eyes the moment before Sam killed it.

*//*

A couple of days later, John handed over the keys to the Impala to his son, admonished him to "take care of her," and turned to climb into his new used GMC pick-up truck. Sam could read the goodbyes in John's every gesture, didn't even need to read his mind, to hear him say, "Well, that's done."

"See ya around, boys," John waved to them from the cab, then drove off in a smoky roar of exhaust.

Dean looked down at the keys, then back up at the road where John had gone, his mouth slack with
shock.

"Did he just – ?" Dean stuttered, and Sam nodded.

"I think so," he answered, and Dean turned to stare at him sharply.

"Did he say anything else?" Dean asked. "In his mind, I mean." What the hell? Sam could hear the confusion in Dean's words, even if he couldn't read his mind.

Sam shook his head. "He's got some idea he's done with parenting," Sam said. "He figures you're grown now, graduated from high school, on your own. He – he feels free."

The last part made Sam wince, because he knew it would hurt, and he almost wished he could take it back because Dean's face fell immediately, then the shuttered look came into his eyes and his jaw clenched.

"Yeah, okay," Dean nodded tightly. "I'm nineteen now. And a half. I'm an adult."

He looked down at Sam, assessing and thoughtful for a moment, then he shook his head and the little smirk returned to the edges of his mouth, he reached up and slung a loose arm around Sam's shoulders and pulled him in.

"Guess it's just you and me now, kid," Dean said as Sam slid his arm around Dean's waist because it felt like the right thing to do, even if it made every inch of Sam's skin feel hot and tight, made his dick harden painfully. "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

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Dean was quiet over breakfast, and Sam watched him, as he always did when Dean was too preoccupied to notice. When Dean glanced at him, he seemed startled that Sam was still there, that Dean wasn't alone.

"Did he..." Dean started to ask finally, then shook his head as if to clear it. "Is he coming back?"

Sam took a deep breath, willing the tears burning the backs of his eyes not to fall. He was angry at John, mad at him for hurting Dean this way, for leaving Sam to be his defender.

"He figures you and he can team up sometimes," Sam nodded. "He knows he can always come to you when he needs help with a job. He trusts and respects you as a hunter, Dean. He's...he's proud of you. Feels he did right by you." Sam deliberately left out the other things John was thinking when he left: his relief, his gratitude that Sam could take over as Dean's companion, the fact that he'd been thinking about leaving for awhile now, since Dean turned eighteen, but he had waited till Sam made his first kill so he could be confident of Sam's ability to protect Dean, if necessary. John was convinced of Sam's devotion; he'd obviously noticed Sam's embarrassing crush on his son and decided that was enough to keep Sam by Dean's side, to keep him safe.

John was also more determined than ever to find the thing that had killed his wife and son, and he didn't need anything, or anyone, holding him back. He knew he was getting older, his reflexes already weren't what they were, and he would need every ounce of strength and stamina to go after that yellow-eyed thing. Sam had seen it, in John's memories. He'd seen the beautiful blond woman pinned to the ceiling and burning, the monster leaning over the baby's crib. He'd felt John's fear and frustration, his sense of failure at not being able to save them.

"Well, he did," Dean agreed thoughtfully now, bravely tamping down on his obvious grief and shock. "I just thought I'd have him around a little longer. Figured once I turned eighteen and
became a man, you know, that he'd...that we'd be a real team."

Sam lowered his head to hide his anger and frustration at John. He couldn't tell Dean that John had just been biding his time over the past year, waiting for the opportunity to abandon ship and high-tail it out of Dodge. It was so unfair! He knew Dean had been hoping for a partnership of equals, and all the time it had been John's intention to shed the parenting trap at the first opportunity.

"Well, now I know why he dumped us here," Dean continued after taking another bite of his pancakes, staring out the window at the cornfield across the road, shimmering in the August heat. "Bumfuck, Iowa has got to be about the safest, most boring place on the planet." He glanced up at Sam, who was frowning, still feeling mad as hell at John. "What?" Dean demanded. "It was good enough for James T. Kirk, it's good enough for us. Maybe you'll grow up to be a starship captain, Sam."

Sam sighed, trying not to blush, as he always did when Dean turned the full force of his attention on Sam. Dean seemed to have this idea that Sam was smart and had real promise, could do things with his life that Dean had never dared to dream about. Dean was proud of Sam's talents, his academic success, his increasingly obvious athleticism. Dean had even gotten used to the psychic stuff, boasted to John about their "human EMF reader." Sam had made himself very useful in the past couple of years on cases, reading witnesses's minds, helping them get to the heart of a case in half the time.

Sam sensed that it bothered John that Sam could read his mind, when he thought about it, but John rarely said anything. And for the most part, Sam was so careful to avoid John's thoughts, trying to respect his privacy, that it surprised him when John referred to it, expected Sam to know what he was planning ahead of time. And no matter how Sam assured John that he didn't 't pry into John's mind, he could tell it made John uneasy to think that he could. Sam suspected the mind-reading was part of John's reason for leaving, but there was no way in hell he would tell that to Dean.

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Life without John Winchester was...different. The house John had left them in had belonged to an old hunter who had left it to Bill Harvelle when he died. Bill had originally planned to raise his own family there, but his wife had nixed that plan in favor of opening a business in Nebraska, and there was no arguing with Ellen Harvelle when she set her mind to something. So the largely ramshackle old place had been mostly abandoned, stocked with survivalist gear and left for hunters to use as a safe-house.

Dean enrolled Sam in school as a high-school sophomore, got himself a job at the local Quik-Lube, and found a girl-friend, all in the space of a week. Once he put his mind to it, Dean was good at 'settling down,' or at least that's the way it looked from Sam's point of view. On the inside, Dean was obviously in denial. He seemed angry all the time, slamming plates around when he prepared meals, slamming the washing machine and dryer doors shut when he did laundry. He was often gone when Sam came home from school, although there was always a note, mostly cryptic, just a scrawl to let Sam know he was, "Out with Tracy. Don't wait up. D."

Sam tried out for soccer that fall, made the team and played hard. He tried out for the school play in the winter, since he was too short for basketball; he got cast and stayed after school for practices every day. During school vacations, while Dean was at work or with Tracy (or Suzie or Stacie or Erin), Sam wrote stories, poems, book and theatre reviews, hung out at the local newspaper until somebody took pity on him and gave him a part-time job as a copy boy.

Sam didn't let on how badly he missed Dean, missed the closeness they'd had before, when Dean was confident enough of his dad's love to give some to Sam. He didn't let on how much it hurt,
watching Dean going out with girls, sometimes staying out all night, coming home stinking of perfume and alcohol and sex, barely glancing at Sam as he climbed the stairs to his own room and slammed the door. On Dean's twentieth birthday, when Sam bought a cake mix and baked a lumpy, lopsided cake and left it on the table for Dean with a big "Happy Birthday!" card next to it, Sam didn't even cry when he came downstairs the next morning to find it still on the table where he left it, Dean still out, possibly "celebrating" without him.

Late that spring, just over nine months after he left, John Winchester showed up on their doorstep.

"Got a case," he told Sam. "Need you boys to come along, give me some back-up."

Of course, Dean was out, and getting ahold of him wasn't easy, so that by the time he finally staggered home late that night, drunk and covered in lipstick, John wasn't exactly happy to see him.

"You were supposed to be training, not partying," John scolded angrily. "I need you boys sharp, ready to step in when there's a job to do."

"Yes, sir," Dean tried to pull himself together, tried to look like he hadn't been out all night screwing around, and Sam almost felt sorry for him, standing there swaying on his feet, fighting back tears at the sight of the father he hadn't seen for the good part of a year.

"Go on," John waved a hand at him, shaking his head. "Go take a shower. Get some rest. We head out in the morning."

Dean nodded, turned to obey his dad's order, stumbled and almost fell on the stairs, and Sam was right there, instinct just kicking in, ducking under Dean's arm so the older boy could lean on him, let Sam help him up the stairs.

"He's back," Dean muttered as they reached Dean's bedroom door and Sam opened it, pulled the other boy inside, shut it behind them. "He came back."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, trying to dampen his annoyance as he dumped Dean on the bed and pulled his legs up so Sam could remove his boots for him.

"He needs my help," Dean slurred, watching Sam with a look of wonder in his eyes that nearly broke Sam's heart. "Wants us to help him with a case."

"That's what it looks like," Sam agreed, pulling the unlaced boots off Dean's feet and reaching down to pull the blanket up, meaning to cover Dean and leave him to sleep it off.

But Dean grabbed Sam's wrists as Sam started to pull away, and when Sam raised his eyes questioningly, Dean was looking at him with such naked hope, such relief, that all Sam could do was huff out a breath and shake his head.

"Sam, I'm all he has," Dean choked out, his eyes filling with tears, making him seem even more desperate and vulnerable. "He needs me."

Sam didn't have the heart to tell Dean that John Winchester didn't need anybody, least of all the son he had dumped unceremoniously nine months before. Sam couldn't say what he knew to be true, that John was back only temporarily because he'd burned so many bridges with so many other hunters that Dean was his last resort when he needed back-up, not the first person he thought of. Sam couldn't stand it, watching Dean get his hopes up, believing his dad had come back for him, would finally make good on his promise to make Dean his partner. Dean had never felt adequate, first because he'd been too young and too small, and later because he just couldn't measure up to his dad's expectations, no matter how hard he tried. This was all painfully obvious to Sam, and he...
didn't need to read Dean's mind to see it.

It was hard enough reading John's mind, knowing John didn't need Dean at all, was just using him because he could, because he didn't have anybody else and this was a two-man job. He definitely didn't plan to stay. In fact, John had already built a life away from Dean, had a woman and a little boy he pretended to have a "normal" life with, people who knew nothing about his secret life as a hunter. It turned Sam's stomach, knowing these things about John and feeling guilty for not telling Dean. But he couldn't tell Dean. Sam felt sure it would break him, and Dean had been barely holding on these past few months as it was, had become such a shell of his former self Sam barely recognized him in the self-destructive, reckless young man Dean had become since his dad left.

So Sam nodded, his eyes skittering away from Dean's, unable to look at the blind faith there. Dean kept hold of Sam's wrists, though, and when Dean coaxed, "Hey, Sam," in that quiet way that made Sam's whole body shiver with need, he dared to look up, met Dean's look of hope with one of his own.

"I haven't been fair to you these past months, kid," Dean said, his voice still slurred with drink. "It's supposed to be you and me against the world, remember? And I kinda let that slide a little."

Sam felt his cheeks grow hot, suddenly hyper-aware of Dean's hands on his wrists, of the way he was half kneeling over Dean's prone form, one foot still on the floor.

"Gonna make it up to you, Sammy," Dean promised, his voice low, almost purring, and Sam raised his eyes, hoping beyond hope that Dean meant what Sam wanted more than anything in the world. Dean's look was fond, his eyes soft, and Sam's gaze dropped to Dean's mouth without his control, imagining for about the billionth time what it would feel like to suck on that plush bottom lip. "Gonna drive up to Chicago for a Cubs game," Dean murmured, and Sam could hardly understand the words because he was so fascinated by the movement of those mesmerizing lips. "Maybe go see Ozzy."

Sam swallowed, breathing out slowly and licking his lips as he raised his eyes to Dean's again, calculating the distance between their mouths, factoring in Dean's diminished reflexes in his inebriated state, trying to decide whether he had time to steal the kiss he'd been wanting for over two years now.

"What d'ya say, Sammy?" Dean's mouth was saying, still slurring, sleepy now, eyes starting to droop shut. "Just you and me. Sound good?"

"Sounds good, Dean," Sam murmured quietly as Dean's eyes slid shut for good and he started to snore almost immediately. "Sounds real good."

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In the morning Dean was a new man. He was up ahead of Sam, ahead of John, making coffee, scrambling eggs, packed duffel ready and waiting at the door. Sam stood in the doorway of the kitchen, blinking in the early morning light, running his hand through his hair, bare feet shuffling along the floor as he took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Your dad up yet?" he asked as Dean set a plate of eggs and a steaming mug of black coffee in front of him.

"He's doing a weapons check," Dean nodded, looking chipper and somehow happier than Sam had
seem him for some time. He'd showered, and his hair was still damp, making it seem darker against his pale skin, making his freckles stand out and his eyes seem bigger, brighter.

Dean was too beautiful to look at, Sam decided as he lowered his eyes to his coffee. Especially this early in the morning.

"So Bobby's got a lead on another demon," Sam offered conversationally, and Dean nodded, piling eggs onto another plate and sliding into the seat across the table, dumping salt and pepper and catsup onto the eggs while Sam tried not to flinch.

"Looks like," Dean agreed, shoveling a forkful of bloody-colored eggs into his mouth, grinning as he noted the look of disgust on Sam's face. "Freak storms, crop failures, all the omens." He opened his mouth so Sam could get a view of the mess inside, and Sam cringed, pushed his own plate away.

"Yuck, Dean," Sam complained. "How am I supposed to eat with you doing that?"

Dean grinned wider and seemed so pleased with himself that it was hard for Sam not to smile too. Being visibly gross was a coping mechanism for Dean; it was such a contrast to his natural perfection that Dean seemed to do it on purpose, to remind anyone watching (and everyone was always watching) that he wasn't just a pretty face, that there was a person behind all that gorgeousness. It always made Sam blush because it was yet more proof that Dean understood his effect on Sam, was dealing with it by momentarily shattering the illusion, daring Sam to crush on this goofy guy who chewed his food with his mouth open.

But of course Sam was so far gone down that road that he was pretty sure it wouldn't matter if Dean's pores started oozing black goo and his mouth became a permanent garbage disposal. Being in love with Dean was apparently something Sam didn't have much say over; it seemed to be something that was a permanent state of being for Sam, and no amount of revolting displays of hideousness was going to undermine that.

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Bobby Singer had another demon trapped in his basement.

This time the demon was possessing a deputy from the Sheriff's department who had come to Bobby's house to kill him, or maybe possess him, Bobby wasn't sure which. Bobby had managed to lure the demon downstairs, into his trap, then subdue it with holy water while he called John Winchester, who immediately dropped everything to head back to Sioux Falls, stopping overnight only long enough to collect his son and almost-sixteen-year-old Sam.

"You've grown," Bobby noted when he greeted them at the door. He was staring at Sam warily, which he explained as soon as John and the two boys entered the house.

"The thing in my basement is asking for you, Sam," Bobby said. "It came here thinking I would know where to find you."

Cold terror rushed through Sam's system like ice water; he could read Bobby's consternation, his memories of the demon coming to his door, asking if he knew where he could find Sam, Bobby's immediate suspicion prompting him to answer in the affirmative, that Sam was downstairs in the basement, studying. Sam saw the moment the demon realized he'd been tricked, could see the rage and frustration in the deputy's face, his eyes turning coal black.

John was staring darkly at Sam, his earliest suspicions about the boy rekindled, and Sam could
read anger there too at the thought that maybe Sam had been tricking them all this time, that John had made a bad call letting Sam join the Winchesters three years ago.

Then Sam felt Dean move up behind him, almost pressing his chest against Sam's back, so that Sam could feel his heat, could feel his breath on the back of Sam's neck. It struck Sam that he had grown almost as tall as Dean over this past year, and now Dean no longer towered over him, no longer even had that head-and-shoulders advantage that made Sam feel so safe and cared-for. Instead, Dean's larger size was now evident more as bulk than height; Dean was a solid wall of hard, lean muscle, whereas Sam's body still retained the lithe, coltish promise of a teenager who hadn't yet reached his full height, and wasn't likely to do so for awhile yet.

"What does it want with Sam?" Dean asked, his voice going a step lower, growling protectively, sending shivers up Sam's spine.

"It says it has a message for him," Bobby answered, equal parts spooked and worried. "It'll only deliver the message in person. Wants to be sure Sam's really still alive. Won't take my word for it."

"So what are we waiting for?" Sam heard his own voice break, doing that shaky adolescent thing that it did sometimes when he was stressed, and he snapped his mouth shut, clenching his fists and trying to convey a toughness and bravado he didn't feel. He took a step forward, turned to look Dean in the eye, daring him to stop the younger boy. "Let's find out what it wants."

The thing was tied to a chair positioned carefully dead center over a painted sigil, 'a devil's trap,' Bobby explained to the boys, for whom this was a first demon encounter. The things were rare, Sam knew. He also knew Bobby's wife had been possessed by one, making Bobby a special kind of expert on demons.

The demon had its head down, its eyes closed, and Sam could see in Bobby's memories that Bobby had already been torturing it with holy water, trying to get it to answer his questions. The four hunters stood in a group just outside the devil's trap, Dean a step ahead of Sam, positioning himself between Sam and the demon, John and Bobby on his other side.

"We get what we need from it, then we exorcise it," John growled, taking command of the situation. "And don't forget: demons lie. Whatever it says, keep that in mind. Are we clear?"

Sam and Dean exchanged glances, then nodded, and Sam took a deep breath.

"Okay, here goes nothin'," Bobby grumbled, raising his vial of holy water.

The moment the water hit the demon, its body jerked. Steam rolled off wet sizzling skin and an inhuman moaning growl rose out of the demon's throat. It threw its head back, eyes squeezed shut, neck muscles strained, teeth clenched, and it pulled violently on its bindings. Sam had the impression of great strength, over and above what an average human should have. He also had the impression of fear, confusion, memories of killing a uniformed partner, someone cared for and mourned, something that had happened recently...

"He's alive in there," the words punched out of Sam with a shocked breath. "There's a person in there."


"We...we have to save him," Sam protested. "He's suffering."

"We're gonna do what we can, son," John agreed. "But first, we need the demon possessing him to give us some answers."
Sam wanted to protest, "To hell with the demon, there's a man in there. We have to help him." But he felt Dean's hand close around his wrist, steadying him, and he hesitated.

Then the demon opened its eyes and stared straight at him, and Sam froze, sheer terror replacing every other emotion. The demon's eyes were solid black and shiny like obsidian, but Sam could feel it staring at him, could feel its twisted rage focused purely on Sam.

"We've been looking for you, Sam Winchester," the demon snarled, its voice hoarse, wrecked, like it had been screaming for hours. "You've been a hard one to find."

"'We'," John repeated. "Who's 'we'? Why have you been looking for Sam?"

The demon's lips turned into a grin. Its teeth were streaked with blood, like it had been biting its tongue or the inside of its mouth. It turned its head just enough so that Sam could feel its focus shifting to John.

"And here's Daddy," it snarled, insidiously. It ran its tongue over its teeth slowly, licking the blood there. "We should have known you'd find him. You been sampling the goods, Johnny? Having a little taste of this tender veal? Huh? Hard to resist, isn't he? All that innocence and sweetness. No wonder you had to hit the road, get away, with this succulent treat right under your nose. Must've taken some real willpower to resist the temptation to hit that, eh, John-boy?"

"You're sick." It was Dean, stepping forward, fists clenched, shaking with rage of his own, spitting and shaking and looking for all the world like he meant to throw himself at the demon and choke the throat that produced the foul words, make it take them all back. Sam grabbed his arm at the last minute, and John put an arm out in front of both boys, a fence to keep them from getting too close.

"Dean," the demon hissed, its attention riveted to John's son now. "Ever the problem child. Always getting in the way of Daddy's plans. But you can't stay away, can you? You just won't stay gone. Why don't you tell him, Dean? Why don't you tell Sam how you really feel about him? Huh? Afraid he might leave you? Afraid he might see what a perverted, sick, twisted bastard you really are and just leave?"

"All right, that's enough!" John bellowed, shooting a warning glance at Dean, whose face was a mask of shock, all color drained from it so his freckles stood out in stark relief and his eyes seemed huge. "Now you listen to me, you sick fuck. Bobby said you had a message for Sam. So say what you have to say so we can send your evil ass right back to hell, where you belong."

"Don't you wanna know what happened to your wife and baby, John?" the demon taunted, turning its black eyes toward John again. "Don't you care about why we gutted and roasted pretty little Mary that night? Aren't you just dying to know the truth?"

John stiffened, and his jaw set dangerously. Sam could hear the agony in his mind as he relived the memories of that night, as he grasped the demon's words, confusion and desperation battling his former resolve.

"What do you know about that, you son-of-a-bitch?" John growled, his voice low and almost as hoarse as the demon's.

"Only what I've heard," the demon answered, grinning wider. "Only enough to know you're playing your part perfectly, Johnny. Playing right into our father's hands. You keep on this path, everything's gonna work out exactly the way it's supposed to. And it'll be all your fault, John-boy. It'll be all because of you and your beautiful, perfect little family."
"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" John demanded furiously. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough," the demon taunted. "Won't be long now."

The demon turned its head so that its black eyes were trained on Sam again. Sam felt the fear and confusion of the human inside, but the demon's mind itself was nothing but chaos, nothing Sam could read or hear clearly, just the sensation of evil and malicious intent.

"Now we know where to find you, Sammy," the demon said. "We won't lose you again, I can promise you that."

Then the demon threw its head back, opened its mouth, and roiling black smoke poured out, filling the area inside the devil's trap, shivering and expanding as if it were fighting to get out, shooting flickers of flame like lightning against the edges of the trap. The four hunters shrank back instinctively when the demon smoke poured forth, and Sam could hear moaning and distant screaming, as if the demon carried a part of hell with it wherever it went. A sensation of roaring fire and the smell of sulfur filled Sam's head, threatening to overwhelm him, and he grabbed onto Dean without even thinking about it, unsurprised to find Dean already clutching his arm.

When the demon was gone, the human sat slumped and unconscious in his chair, and it took a minute for the hunters to adjust to the sudden silence, the sudden emptiness in the room after such a display of power. Bobby took action first, stepping into the devil's trap to check for a pulse, muttering, "He's still alive," as he worked quickly to loosen the cords binding the now unpossessed human.

With Sam's help, Bobby lifted the unconscious man out of the chair and laid him gently on the floor, checking his body for injuries as John went upstairs to put in the anonymous call to 911.

"Roger and I go way back," Bobby said. "He was the first on the scene after your family died that day, Sam. The demon must've known that, must've possessed him to find out what happened to you." He shook his head. "This is big, Sam. Demons don't mess around. They'll be back."

Sam was already shivering, fighting the tears smarting in his eyes. He shook his head, looking down at the man on the floor, helplessness and fear threatening to overwhelm him again.

"I don't understand," he stammered. "Why me? What does it want with me?"

"Your crazy psychic mojo, maybe?" Bobby suggested. "Maybe it wants to possess you so it can use that power somehow? I don't know." Bobby put his hand into his vest pocket, pulled out a necklace with a charm hanging on it, handed it to Sam. "Here. Put this on."

Sam took the charm, saw that it was a little brass amulet in the shape of a horned bull's head, or possibly a human face wearing a horned helmet, hanging on a leather thong. It felt solid and cool in his hand, and it thrummed with power.

"What is it?" he asked as he slipped it on over his head, felt a strange sense of calm that was almost courage flow through him.

"It's a protection amulet," Bobby answered. "Figuring you might need it." He glanced over at Dean, still standing off to one side, unusually quiet and moody. "Plus, you've got Dean," Bobby went on. "Ain't that right, boy?"

Dean's head whipped up like he'd been slapped, and he blinked a couple of times as if to clear it. He frowned at Bobby for a moment before letting his gaze flick to Sam, then quickly away again,
as if he couldn't quite bring himself to look at the other boy.

"Hell yeah, that's right," he muttered in a shadow of his usual bravado. "You've got me."

But he didn't look at Sam when he said it, just pursed his lips and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, and Sam couldn't help the flush of shame that crept into his cheeks. He felt exposed, laid bare, confirmed in his own self-hatred and despair. The demon had said "they" had been looking for him, and now "they" had found him and weren't gonna lose him again. Sam felt his heart sinking, felt the horror of the truth creeping into his very bones. That Sam had the attention of a demon was proof enough that there was something wrong with him, that all that talk by George and Carl about how "special" he was, how he could help people, was a lie to keep him in line, to get him to cooperate so that "they" could get him to do what they wanted. And Sam didn't need to know what it was that "they" wanted to know that it was bad, that he was bad. He was a freak, devil's spawn, just as those taunting kids had always said. Missouri Moseley was wrong. His soul wasn't pure. There was something that drew evil to him, and that couldn't be good.

And Dean knew it.
Later, after dropping Deputy Mansfield at the emergency room of Sioux Falls General Hospital, John and Bobby took off in John's monster truck to find a bar, leaving Sam and Dean to pour over the books in Bobby's extensive library, looking up demon possessions and researching ways to recognize demon activity.

"It says here demons rarely leave their hosts voluntarily," Sam read out loud an hour later, his determination to learn everything he could about this new evil haunting his life, making Dean hate him, taking over every other thought. "Usually they cling to their hosts like parasites, feeding off their energy and memories to keep themselves strong." Sam glanced up at Dean, who was flopped on the couch with a beer in one hand, a car magazine in the other. "Usually they have to be exorcised, which sends them back to hell."

"My dad can do that," Dean commented, keeping his eyes on the magazine. "So can Bobby."

"Yeah, but I mean, the fact that the demon left voluntarily? Presumably to go back to hell of its own accord? That's– That's pretty unusual behavior. They hate being in hell, says here. They escape it every chance they get."

"I don't know, Sammy, maybe it was missing its girlfriend," Dean snarked, and Sam felt the flush rising in his cheeks.

"Maybe it had a message to deliver," Sam suggested miserably. "Maybe something called it back to hell so it could deliver its message."

Dean slammed the magazine down on the coffee table and stood up. "Okay, that's it," he pounded the beer down and reached into his pocket for his keys. "You know what? We're leaving."

"What?" Sam looked up, surprised. "But your dad said–"

"Yeah, well, I'm not sitting around here another minute," Dean had the keys out, glanced at Sam even though it still felt like Dean wouldn't really look at him. "It smells like rotten eggs in here, and I need to get out. You comin'?"

In the car they rode in silence, Sam sneaking quick glances at Dean's profile every couple of minutes, Dean keeping his eyes straight ahead, on the road, his jaw working as if he were grinding his teeth, and Sam knew that look. Dean had something on his mind, and he was determined to deal with it, the same way he dealt with any challenge. Straight on, without flinching, just getting the job done.

Sam had the wild thought that Dean was planning to dump him, was working up to telling him it was over between them before it had even started. Sam knew that was insane, that Dean couldn't possibly think of their relationship that way, but it made Sam's palms sweat and his heart pound, and his breath speed up till he was almost hyperventilating by the time they pulled up to the lake. Dean found a quiet place to park where they had a view of the water and turned off the engine, then sat back, still staring straight out through the windshield, silent and still except for the bobbing of his adam's apple as he swallowed.

"This is where I taught you to swim," Dean said finally, a small smile playing at the edges of his mouth.

"Yeah," Sam breathed out, realizing he had been holding his breath for awhile now.
"You were so little," Dean shook his head. "Like a little lost puppy who needed a friend."

Sam flushed at the memory, at the idea of Dean seeing him so small and helpless like that. It was such a contrast to how Sam wanted Dean to feel about him, it made him want to cry.

"When I pulled your bacon out of the fire that day, it was like I'd found my purpose in life," Dean went on, oblivious to Sam's distress, lost in his own memories. "You needed me, and I felt like I could take care of you, protect you, maybe take all the bad things that had happened to you and make it better. You know, like the song."

Dean smiled at his own joke, glancing at Sam for the first time since they got into the car at Bobby's. Sam frowned, raising his eyebrows in confusion, and Dean grinned wider. "You know, 'Take a sad song and make it better'? Dude, seriously? You don't know that song?"

Sam shook his head a little, shame making his cheeks flush hotter, and Dean shook his head, looked away at the lake again. "Man, that's pathetic," he mumbled. He took a deep breath. "Well, anyway, now you're bigger. You're growing up, and you're smart and talented and kind of amazing, really. You don't really need me anymore. And if you'd rather just strike out on your own or whatever, I don't want to hold you back, that's all I'm saying."

Sam stared, more flustered than he could admit by the turn in the conversation.

"Dean, you heard what that demon said back there," Sam protested, and Dean flinched, positively blanched. "Bobby heard it too. That thing was looking for me. I guess it's been looking for awhile. I'd probably already be a goner if it wasn't for you. Of course I need you, Dean, maybe more than ever now. I don't understand any of this, but I know I need to get to the bottom of it, I need to figure it out. And I need your help. I need you to have my back."

Sam drew in a breath, steeled himself, then continued. "But I totally understand if you don't want me around anymore," he went on, forcing the words out despite the thickness in his throat, the tears fighting to surface behind his eyes. "Maybe Missouri was wrong about me. Maybe I'm some kind of demon-spawn or something. Maybe that's where my abilities come from, and I'm just gonna turn dark-side one day and start destroying the world or something. Maybe I'm poisonous. Evil. Maybe it's just a matter of time before I turn into a monster."

Dean had started shaking his head four sentences ago, and by the time Sam stopped talking he was muttering, "No, no, no. No way," under his breath, had a hand up as if he meant to slap Sam or grab hold of him or put his hand over Sam's mouth to get him to stop. "No, you listen to me," he gestured firmly, right in front of Sam's face, turning on the bench to face Sam with a look that was stern and intense and took Sam's breath away. "You are not evil, okay? There's not an evil bone in your body. I know that, with everything I've got. You are not evil. Jesus, Sam, if anybody's evil here, it's me, okay? Thinking about you the way I do, the way that demon said. That's evil, Sam. Taking advantage of an innocent kid who depends on me, that's evil. That's the twisted, sick thing about all this. Jesus."

Dean leaned back, scrubbing a hand over his face, his handsome features flushed and contorted with his confession, with the sudden realization that he had put the words out there, in his rush to correct Sam, without thinking about what he was saying. Sam's mouth had fallen open; he could feel the air rushing in as he drew a sharp breath, almost a gasp, and stared at Dean, who was squirming on the bench like he wanted to climb out of his own skin, a wild look in his eyes that Sam recognized as sheer panic. Dean rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes flicking back and forth, glanced at Sam and flinched.

"Fuck," Dean breathed. "Gonna take a walk."
He was out of the car and heading toward the lake before Sam could fully recover, before his brain could fully process what he'd just heard. He watched Dean's back as he walked purposefully toward the shore, watched his sure-footed, bow-legged stride, waited until Dean pulled off his over-shirt, then started on his tee-shirt, before Sam got out of the car to follow. It was a warm June day, and although Sam knew the water would be freezing, the air was definitely warm enough for what Dean obviously had in mind. Dean had already pulled off his boots and socks and was unzipping his jeans when Sam moved up beside him, silently removing his own shirts, toeing off his sneakers, hopping on one foot to pull off his socks.

Dean glanced at him as he pushed down his jeans, exposing his pale legs and black boxer-briefs. Sam's hands shook as he pushed his own jeans down, grateful that at least this time he wasn't wearing tighty-whities, just a pair of Dean's boxers that had gotten a little too small for him. Before Sam was free of his jeans Dean took off at a dead run across the sandy beach and onto the dock, jackknifing into a perfect dive as soon as he got to the end, Sam on his heels. Sam's dive was a little sloppier, but he'd been practicing over the years in motel pools, had even tried out for the swim team freshman year, so he knew he looked better than he had when he was twelve.

The water was cold, as Sam knew it would be, but the experience of diving into it was nothing like that first time almost four years ago. This time there was no confusion, no blending of realities as the dark water closed around him, and when he surfaced it was controlled and instinctive at the same time. Dean had come up a few feet away, spitting water and swiping a hand over his face to clear his vision. When he saw Sam bobbing in the water, Dean's face broke into a shit-eating grin so genuine it made Sam's chest ache, and Sam couldn't help grinning back at him, giving into the sheer joy of doing something – anything – with Dean again.

And when Dean took off across the lake, taking long, powerful strokes through the water, Sam followed easily, matching the older boy stroke for stroke until they were side by side in an undeclared race for the bank on the other side. Sam's arms were sore and his lungs were aching by the time his feet touched the muddy bottom of the opposite shore. He scrambled up the beach, Dean right beside him, gasping with laughter and trying to push Sam out of the way, and they collapsed side by side, panting with exertion and gulping in lungfuls of air. They rolled onto their backs in the sand, arms barely brushing, and as soon as Sam caught his breath he was aware of the tingling of his skin where Dean's arm touched his. Dean didn't move, though, just lay still as his breathing evened out, staring up at the sky, and Sam stayed as still as he could after getting his breath back, soaking in the afternoon sun and Dean's closeness, wishing he could stop time right here, right now, and live here forever, with Dean warm and content beside him. When he finally felt Dean move beside him Sam grabbed his hand, the gesture so automatic he didn't have time to think about how needy and desperate it must seem. Dean went still again, letting Sam hold his hand, carefully lacing their fingers together.

"Sam," Dean's deep voice breathed softly beside him, and it sounded like a warning, almost like a plea, so Sam pulled Dean's hand up to his mouth and kissed it, letting his lips linger on the warm, smooth skin. Dean allowed it for a few seconds, then gently pulled away, murmuring, "Okay, Sam. Okay."

Sam turned his head slowly, watching as Dean disentangled their fingers, lay his hand flat on his own chest. Dean's face was still wet, his lashes dripping water, his lips parted and damp, his cheeks flushed with exertion. Sam watched as Dean slowly raised his eyes to Sam's, blinked but held his gaze, green eyes shining and huge.

"All my life, Dean," Sam whispered, staring straight into those beautiful eyes, willing Dean to get it. "For as long as I can remember. Always. I always wanted this with you."
For a moment, Dean's eyes softened; he seemed entranced, hypnotized, and Sam wondered if he could affect Dean psychically after all. Then he blinked, glanced down at Sam's mouth, then turned his head away quickly, as if he was dismissing an urge that Sam understood only too well.

"No, Sam," he said quietly. "You're too young. It's wrong. You look up to me. You trust me to look after you. And after all you've been through, all those bastards abusing you..."

"Nobody ever," Sam breathed, struggling with his own sudden need to reassure Dean, to force him to see how wrong he was. "Nobody ever did that, Dean, I swear. I'm okay. You're the first."

Dean looked sharply at him then, considering. "That the truth?" he demanded as he sat up, frowning down at Sam. "Nobody ever bad-touched you? All those foster homes and never once?"

Sam screwed up his face with the effort to recall those horrible years, years when he escaped into his dreams of Dean every chance he got to avoid the misery of his real life, the taunting, bullying children, the harried, unhappy foster-parents who seemed to care mostly for the money he made them.

"Nope," Sam shook his head. "Never. I was too much of a freak, I guess. I scared them."

Dean's expression changed from horrified fascination to fond admiration in the course of a couple of seconds.

"Of course you did," he murmured approvingly. "Read a couple of their pervy thoughts, kicked their trailer-trash asses. That's my boy."

"Am I?" Sam felt his heart surge with hope, pushing himself up on his elbows. "Am I your boy?"

Dean rolled his eyes, reached over and shoved Sam so he fell onto his side, catching himself on one hand. "Course you are, Sammy, what'd'ya think? Duh, Nerd-brain. Your ass is mine. Always will be, ya doofus. Now come on. Race ya back across."

"No way!" Sam yelled as he leapt to his feet, chasing Dean into the water again for their race back across the lake, swimming so hard he pulled a muscle in his shoulder. Back where they'd started, they pulled their jeans on, stealing grinning glances at each other, bumping shoulders as they raced back to the Impala side by side, laughing and gasping for breath as they collapsed into the car, wet clothes sticking to the vinyl bench.

"I win," Dean announced, rolling down the window to let some air into the stuffy passenger cabin.

"Like hell you do," Sam protested. "I matched you stroke for stroke, dude. Totally a tie."

Dean shook his head, still grinning ear to ear as he reached under the seat to retrieve his keys. Sam wasn't quite sure where he got the courage, but it suddenly felt absolutely necessary to get Dean to kiss him, right then and there, before another moment passed, before Dean started the car and drove them back to Bobby's where they could pretend all of this had never happened. But Sam had never kissed anyone before; he'd only been thinking about kissing Dean for the past three or four years, and nobody else could have possibly fit the bill. So when Sam reached for Dean's face and leaned in, it was so awkward that Dean elbowed him in the gut, started to protest loudly before he looked up and realized that Sam's face was right there, lips parted, eyes closed because he read in a book he should do that when he kissed someone.

"Oh for God's sake, Sammy," Dean huffed. His breath smelled vaguely of onions, this close, and Sam leaned closer, managed to smash his nose into Dean's cheek and plant a kiss on the edge of Dean's mouth before Dean took charge of the situation.
"Not that way, you idiot," he chastised, and Sam's eyes fluttered open as he felt Dean's hand carding through the hair on the back of his neck, the other sliding along his jaw. "Hold still," Dean commanded, and Sam had a close-up glimpse of Dean's face, his eyes closed, long lashes sweeping his freckled cheek as he angled in, lining their mouths up so their noses wouldn't mash together, and touched his lips to Sam's.

Dean's lips were soft, softer than Sam had imagined. The kiss wasn't just one little peck and done, either. It was a soft press, then a release, then another soft press, just to Sam's upper lip this time, then another one to his lower lip. Sam sat perfectly still, not sure what he should do but afraid to move for fear it would stop. His eyes were still open, and watching Dean's face this close sent a shock to his groin more intense even than the feel of his lips. He's kissing me, he's really fucking kissing me, goddamn it, Sam's brain screamed as his dick filled harder than it ever had before and he was suddenly ready for anything. Everything. Whatever he could get. Beyond ready. In fact, Sam had been more than ready for so long he couldn't remember a time before he was an aching, hungry, desperate mess for Dean.

It was over too soon. In fact, Sam was pretty sure any time before the end of the world would be too soon, but when Dean's tongue lightly caressed Sam's lower lip just before he leaned back and released his lips, Sam was certain it was about a million years too soon.

Sam's body followed Dean's as he leaned back, Sam's lips chasing Dean's, needing to maintain the contact. But Dean had his hand against Sam's chest and was pushing him firmly back, shaking his head as he slid his other hand along the back of the bench so he could brace himself.

"No, Sam," Dean warned, his voice low and rough, like he'd been running and hadn't quite caught his breath. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were so bright they almost seemed iridescent. "That's enough. We gotta get back to Bobby's."

Sam nodded, forcing himself to be content with the kiss, their first kiss, but now Sam was pretty confident it wouldn't be their last.

"You ever done that before?" Dean asked as he searched Sam's face, looking for something, although Sam couldn't imagine what it could be.

Sam shook his head, and Dean nodded, a smug smile turning up the edges of his mouth as he reached for the ignition, turned the key.

"That's what I thought," Dean said as the engine roared to life.

As he maneuvered the Impala out of the parking area and back to the main road, Sam watched Dean's profile, looking away only when Dean caught him staring and called him on it.

"Dude, I know I'm hot," he said with his trademark cocky grin. "But you can stow the creepy stalker shit, y'hear me? It's just me, Sam. Same as it's always been."

And Sam didn't even try to argue, just lowered his eyes, blushing furiously. He didn't bother reminding Dean that for Sam, it had indeed always been this way. Sam made a mental note to ask Dean when he first realized his own feelings for Sam were more than just friendly, but he was fairly sure Dean wouldn't answer that particular question right now, might be too embarrassed by the answer. So he tried to be content with sliding a little closer on the bench, splaying his fingers on the vinyl so that he was just touching Dean's leg, keeping the contact until they pulled into Bobby's salvage yard and a brand new chapter of Sam's life.

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In the days and weeks that followed, Sam went through the motions of researching demons and demon activity, helping John and Dean hunt down another werewolf, and teaching himself Latin and ancient Greek, since most of the texts containing the lore they needed were written in those languages. Being back on the road with John was both exciting and exhausting; although they couldn't come up with any more signs of demon activity, there were plenty of other supernatural creatures that needed hunting, and John had them moving all over the country that summer, helping him put down a half-dozen evil creatures before school started. When they collapsed into their motel room each night to sleep, shower, and patch each other up, Sam should have been too exhausted to keep a coherent thought in his head.

But the truth was, all Sam thought about that summer, all he really cared about, was Dean. He was so consumed with lust that it was sometimes impossible to keep his head in the game. Now that he knew how Dean felt about him, it was like a switch that had long been out of commission had suddenly been flipped on, and Sam was completely and utterly lost. It had been bad enough before, when he was overwhelmed by endless fantasies of touching, kissing, and doing things with Dean that Sam had no words for. But now, knowing Dean wanted him too, living day-to-day beside the boy of his dreams who had become the man who held his heart in his hands, it was almost unbearable. Because Dean insisted they do this the right way, the legal way, the morally correct way, so of course Sam had to wait, which was something he had never been good at, not when he really wanted something.

And Sam really, really wanted Dean.

"Legal age in Minnesota is sixteen, Dean," Sam whined the first time he demanded what Dean was refusing to give in to. "Even younger if the partner is only four years older."

"I'm four years and seven months older than you, Sam," Dean reminded him, "and you won't be sixteen for three more weeks."

"Fuck," Sam slammed his hands through his hair in frustration. "Since when do you care so much about the law, anyway? We live our lives outside the law. How can you be so randomly law-abiding about this?"

Dean sighed and pushed Sam away, for the fifth time that week, refusing to even so much as kiss him.

"No sense starting what we can't finish," Dean said, and Sam could've screamed.

"Sixteen is the age of consent in this state, Dean," Sam reminded him, a week after that, when John was out drinking and Sam had made a move on Dean in the motel, had just grabbed him and kissed him up against the wall. Dean allowed it for a minute or two before gently disentangling Sam's hands from the front of his shirt and pushing him away, holding him at arm's length firmly.

"Sixteen," Dean huffed. "Right. And I'm almost twenty-one. I should know better."

"Dean, I couldn't be more consenting if I was one of those dashboard bobblehead dogs," Sam protested, and Dean took that in, thought about that for a minute.

"I am so getting one of those," he muttered, pushing past Sam and into the bathroom.

On July nineteenth, Sam woke up early, tingling with anticipation.

Nix that. On July eighteenth, Sam never went to sleep. He lay tossing and turning in the little twin bed, which was getting smaller and smaller he could swear, trying not to jerk himself off before
midnight. He listened to Dean's deep breaths in the other bed, tried to ignore the glowing face of the clock on the bedside table between them, finally kicking off the sheet and palming himself through his boxers because it was hot and the air-conditioning didn't work very well and he was a sweaty, desperate mess, as usual. When the clock read 11:55 Sam's heart started to pound and he broke out in a fresh sweat, taking slow, deep breaths in an effort to keep himself from hyperventilating.

In an effort to keep his mind off the ticking clock, Sam thought back over the horror of their recent hunt. John had dumped them in this roach-infested Nebraska motel two days before, giving Dean time to recover from a particularly nasty clawing by a *katshituashku*, a bear-like creature that had eaten six people in three states. Dean had complained to no end about being forced to lay up for a few days while John took off after another lead, but Sam was secretly relieved to finally have Dean all to himself, even if it meant putting up with a continual diatribe of grumpiness.

"Goddamn cat-shit thing did a number on me, Sammy," Dean complained when Sam knelt next to him after stabbing the creature with an obsidian knife, the only thing that killed this particular creature, according to Cree legend. Sam didn't bother correcting Dean's pronunciation of the monster as he examined the wound, which had torn several long strips of skin off of Dean's thigh and shredded his jeans above the knee. Sam took his shirt off to wrap the leg and staunch the bleeding, but he had to carry Dean out of the woods bridal-style, much to Dean's humiliation and John's admiration.

"You're really growing, Sammy," John commented as they maneuvered Dean into the backseat of the Impala. "You're going to be taller than I am one of these days."

John already sensed the change in the relationship between the boys, and although he had mixed feelings about homosexuality in general – he'd seen too much bullying of gays and effeminate men in the marines to wish that kind of attention on his son – he felt grateful for yet another testament of Sam's devotion to Dean, yet another layer of the bond between the boys. Sam read John's renewed interest in Sam as it seemed to be intended, like he was a potential son-in-law being tested and interviewed for the job of life-time partner to John's son, and Sam decided he was perfectly okay with that. In fact, it felt kinda like being welcomed into the family all over again, in an oddly more legitimate way than just in the role of substitute little brother.

But the whole waiting thing was a serious drag. Sam supposed he had the demon to blame (or thank? how crazy was that?) for laying bare all the feelings that Dean had clearly been bottling inside for some time. Sam wondered if Dean would ever have revealed his feelings to Sam if not for the stark way they were laid out that day, in front of Sam, no less. Maybe Dean had told himself he would wait until Sam was at least sixteen, but Sam couldn't even be sure of that. He wondered if Dean had buried what he felt to be inappropriate feelings so deep he might never had admitted them. It made Sam's heart ache to think he might never have known, could have gone on for years thinking Dean didn't care about him like that, tearing himself apart inside over feelings he couldn't control and which he believed to be tragically unrequited.

In fact, if Sam really thought about it (and Sam did too much thinking, he knew that was one of his greatest flaws), he wondered if it might have been a little too easy, the way the demon just happened to be there at the right time and place to make Dean face his desire for Sam. "Love" was too strong a word; although Sam knew he loved Dean with all his heart and soul, he wasn't ready to entertain the idea that Dean might feel that way too. In fact, maybe that was at the core of Dean's moral dilemma; if he couldn't love Sam, then his lust was an empty expression of physical desire which he would've done better to have kept to himself.

Such was the way Sam's thinking went that night of July 18, waiting for the clock to tick out the
time to his birthday, when he was determined to confront Dean and at least get him to make good on that demon's word, even if love was something Sam couldn't begin to hope for. And that was okay, Sam decided. He was completely okay with taking whatever Dean would give him. Dean had grown up without the love of a mother, just as Sam had, and maybe Dean's ability to love someone like that had died in that nursery all those years ago, had just turned to ash and flame. Dean hadn't had a dream-life to sustain him, as Sam had; Dean hadn't had a brother who loved him more than life itself, who breathed every word he spoke like it was his own special brand of oxygen, who never left his side and mimicked his every move and followed him around like he was the second coming. Sam had loved dream-Dean with a passion that was beyond any normal brother-bond, and it had been easy for Sam to transfer all that love to the real Dean.

But Dean had only known Sam these past four years, hadn't grown up with his little shadow following him around everywhere, adoring and hopeful and showing him how great he was, what a hero Dean Winchester was, at least in the eyes of an adoring younger brother. Dean's only experience of love after his mother died was a bitter, alcoholic father who resented him, however unfairly, for surviving the night that took his beloved wife and baby. A father who demanded he grow up as soon as possible so he could help take on the burden of revenge for their deaths. Dean's existence until then was a constant reminder of John's failure to protect and save all of his family, not just this one small dependent boy who cried and woke up from nightmares needing comfort John couldn't provide because he was too consumed by his own grief to acknowledge Dean's suffering, much less to assuage it.

Sam was dying to make it up to Dean, dying to go back in time and just be there for him all those nights when he woke up sobbing, needing someone – anyone – to hold him and wipe away his tears and tell him, 'it's okay, Dean. I'm here. It's okay.' He would die for a chance to do just that. Seriously, Sam told himself with utter conviction, if he could go back in time and be there for Dean the way dream-Dean had been there for him – he would sell his soul.

Sam wasn't sure Dean would ever allow that comfort now, not from him, not from anyone. Dean had acquired a toughness, a shell to hide behind and protect himself with, a veneer of cocky bravado that no one would likely ever break through. Especially not Sam, the boy Dean had rescued from the fire and felt responsible for, the boy who had given Dean's life a kind of purpose for the first time, as he admitted to Sam that day by the lake.

"Dean," Sam whispered in the dark as the clock glowed 12:01. He stared across the space between their beds at the lump that was the love of his life and hissed his name again, louder this time, "Dean!"

Dean was on his stomach, covers kicked back as Sam's were on this warm night, arms tucked under the pillow where he kept his gun, probably touching it, calming himself with the feel of its cold metal against his fingers. When Sam punched out his name a third time, Dean stirred enough to turn his face toward Sam, eyes still closed, moving his mouth in that intoxicating way that made Sam think he was dreaming about sucking something, and God, that did things to Sam. That and the way Dean wiggled his ass as he settled into his new position, grinding his hips into the mattress so that he was probably feeling a little friction against his dick...

"Dean," this time the name came out on a moan, and Sam slid his hand down his chest, palmed his own dick as he imagined Dean's, and oh God all he ever did was think about Dean's body so it didn't exactly take any effort...

Dean's eyes slid open, sleepy and dark, and stared straight at Sam, catching him with his hand between his legs and his head thrown back, and Sam knew how depraved he must look and he almost lost it right there, feeling Dean's eyes on him while he touched himself...
"Happy birthday, Sam," Dean's mouth turned up in a tiny smirk as Sam squeezed the base of his cock and stifled another moan, closing his eyes tight in the effort to control his urge to come right then and there, just at the sight of Dean sprawled out and looking at him, just on the sound of Dean's voice alone.

"You want a little birthday present, Sam?" Dean's low, sleepy voice drawled, and Sam couldn't hold back the whimper that escaped his throat. Dean grinned wider and rolled lazily onto his side, patting the space beside him on the narrow bed. "Come on and see what I got for you, kiddo."

Sam didn't need to be asked twice. Slipping off his own bed, he climbed into Dean's and stretched out beside him, the sheet still warm from Dean's body. He lay on his side, one hand tucked under his head, the other laid carefully on the mattress between them, gazing at Dean expectantly, waiting, his whole body trembling with anticipation.

"You ever done this before?" Dean asked, his smirk turning fond, making his eyes shine in the dark.

Sam shook his head. He didn't trust himself to speak, afraid of scaring Dean or giving him any reason to decide this wasn't a good idea after all.

"Ever?" Dean clarified. "Even with a girl?"

Sam shook his head again, suddenly terrified that this might be too much for Dean, finding out that he was Sam's first. It might be too much responsibility. Sam held his breath, waiting for Dean to make a snarky comment about his inexperience, his damn stupid virginity.

"Okay," Dean breathed finally, sucking in another shaky breath as if to fortify himself. "Wow. No pressure there, huh? Well, you probably ought to know, nobody's first time is that great. I mean, it's just sex. It's not all fireworks and moonbeams, like in the movies."

A stab of lust speared through Sam's loins as Dean said the word 'sex,' the deep, gravelly voice just hitting every target in his already over-sensitized body.

"I know," Sam breathed, hating how young and shaky his voice sounded, grateful at least that it didn't squeak anymore, that it was pretty much done changing, as far as he could tell.

"Okay," Dean murmured. "So, you wanna?" he gestured at Sam's dick. "Or do you want me to?"

The idea of Dean giving him a hand-job was sending Sam's libido into overdrive, but when Dean's eyes flicked up and met his again and he saw the look of helplessness, contrasted with the determined set of his jaw, Sam was even more overwhelmed by a sudden tenderness, a need to soothe Dean's obvious panic.

Sam hand slid across the sheet and touched Dean's, nudged his fingers between Dean's so he could clasp his hand and pull it up to his mouth, pressing his lips against the bruised knuckles, the torn skin, barely kissing along each one, then the back of his freckled hand. Then he lay Dean's open palm against his cheek, kissing the fleshy pad before pushing Dean's hand along his jaw, curling his fingers around the back of Sam's neck, tangling them in Sam's hair. When he opened his eyes, Dean was gazing steadily at him, lips parted, eyes at half-mast, just watching as Sam made love to his hand.

"Kiss me," Sam whispered, eyes dropping to Dean's mouth, and damn it if Dean's lips didn't part just a little more, if his pink tongue didn't flick out and lick the dryness away so that now the damn things were glistening, looking stung and swollen.
Dean's breath huffed out in a short laugh that was nervous and sweet at the same time. "Bad breath," he muttered. "Been sleeping."

"I don't care," Sam persisted. "Kiss me. Please." He added the plea instinctively, sensing Dean's hesitance to give in to an order from Sam, but his inability to resist when Sam begged.

And maybe because it was something he knew how to do so well already, or because they'd already done it once so it lacked the pressure of a "first time" experience, Sam didn't really care because Dean was tugging on the back of his neck and leaning in at the same time, angling their noses just right, eyes flickering over Sam's features, lingering on his mouth before closing completely as his lips touched Sam's. This time Sam closed his eyes too, let the sensation of Dean's mouth moving against his overwhelm all other senses, unable to prevent a tiny moan from escaping his throat as he gave in to the kiss.

Dean's bottom lip had been split in the struggle with the *katshituashku*, so that the slight tang of hurt skin was the first thing Sam was aware of tasting. He sucked carefully, running his tongue over the lip as if he could heal it with his spit, before pushing into Dean's sleep-sour mouth, sliding his tongue along Dean's teeth, then the roof of his mouth, exploring, tasting, claiming. Sam had somehow managed to push Dean over, onto his back, or maybe Dean had just laid back and surrendered, so that Sam was suddenly in control of the kiss, holding Dean's jaw as he plundered his mouth, all his pent-up need and long-withheld desire for Dean just coalescing in this sudden connection, this moment of pure driving need.

He wanted to crawl inside Dean's mouth, inside Dean's body, and never leave, just crawl deeper and deeper inside him until he was a part of Dean, till every molecule and bead of blood was soaked in him, became threaded with his muscle and bone. The need was so consuming Sam was only peripherally aware that he was rubbing himself against Dean's hip, would probably have kept rutting until he came in his shorts if Dean hadn't whimpered and shuddered against him, shifting away a little so that Sam suddenly remembered his injury and pulled back with a start.

"Oh my God, I'm sorry," Sam mumbled, scooting back immediately to take the pressure off Dean's wound. "I forgot."

Dean's chest was heaving, short, panting breaths escaping his parted lips, swollen and shiny with spit, eyes glistening up at Sam with an animal intensity Sam had never seen in them before.

"It's okay," Dean breathed out, voice hoarse and ragged. "Don't stop."

Sam was ridiculously on board with that command. Kneeling eagerly next to Dean on the bed, he pulled his sweat-soaked tee-shirt off, then stood up to wiggle awkwardly out of his shorts, letting them drop on the floor, exposing his throbbing, swollen cock. He gave it two rough, quick strokes before clutching the base, holding back the orgasm that threatened to burst forth at the sight of Dean sprawled out beneath him, looking up at him with lust-blown eyes.

"Sam," Dean whispered, reaching out, brushing Sam's hip with his fingertips. "Look at you."

Sam watched Dean's face as he carefully straddled his hips, leaned down to capture his mouth again. Dean reached up, tangling one hand in Sam's hair as he let the other hand slide slowly down Sam's back, smoothing the sweat-slick skin. Sam pushed his painfully hard dick into Dean's stomach, then rocked back a little so his ass fit perfectly over Dean's still-clothed erection, moaning into Dean's mouth. Dean gasped at the friction, so Sam did it again, then began a steady rocking and rhythmic sliding, riding Dean's dick through his briefs, releasing Dean's mouth and sitting back to get a better angle, so that he could see Dean's face while he did it.
Dean's head was thrown back, exposing his throat, his lips parted and eyes almost completely shut, just a sliver glistening under his long lashes to tell him that Dean was watching Sam too, obviously liked what he saw. Dean reached up and ran his fingertips lightly over Sam's pecs, down his stomach, and Sam's gasped as Dean's fingers brushed over the tip of his cock, curled around the shaft. Sam fought back the urge to come yet again, squeezing his eyes shut and going utterly still as Dean took his dick firmly in hand, waited a beat as Sam adjusted, then started slowly jacking him as Sam went back to rocking on Dean's dick.

The feel of Dean's hand on his dick was too much; Sam leaned down to kiss Dean again just to stop his strokes, sucking Dean's luscious lips one at a time before pushing his tongue between them, wiggling his ass against Dean's erection, holding Dean's beautiful face between his hands, thumbing along his cheekbones. He released Dean's mouth so he could nuzzle along Dean's jaw, relishing the scrape of stubble against his own smooth, sensitive cheeks as he buried his face in Dean's neck and inhaled. He took Dean's earlobe between his teeth and chewed gently, then dipped his tongue into the shell of Dean's ear, feeling Dean shudder and cry out softly, felt Dean's dick throb against the cleft of his ass.

"Like that?" Sam whispered, licking along the tender skin of Dean's ear as he rubbed his ass against Dean's dick. He could feel the moment Dean tensed up, the moment he gasped in a breath and held it, grabbing Sam's biceps for leverage as his orgasm surged through him, and Sam only had long enough to raise his head, to watch Dean's face as his body came undone beneath him. Sam's body responded in kind, his orgasm hitting him, rushing through him like a log-dam breaking, building momentum until he whited out. The little stars at the back of his eyes sparked like electricity, making him feel like a live wire on the edge of an explosion. All the power focused on this moment, carrying him out of his brain until he was floating above the bed, looking down at his own naked body, crouched on top of Dean's, shaking and moaning his release as Dean held him, stroking his back and murmuring into his ear.

Sam knew he'd passed out for a few minutes, because the first thing he became aware of was sweat cooling on his back, making him shiver. He shifted a little, grateful for the warm body under him, and he snuggled instinctively into the warmth, turning his face into heated, damp skin. He fit so well here, collapsed limply on top of Dean, his cheek rasping against Dean's stubble, he could almost ignore the sticky mess slowly drying between them.

Then Dean squirmed a little beneath him, slid his hands along Sam's sides, and tickled him.

"Oh, man!" Sam jerked away, lifting his head and rolling off the older boy with a huff of breath, skittering away from the suddenly lethal fingers till he was on his feet, backing away from the bed, out of reach. He stared down at Dean, who lay grinning up at him, green eyes twinkling, tee-shirt a rumpled, sticky mess, not to mention the dark, damp stain on the front of his boxers. Dean pushed himself up on his elbows, ran a hand over his head, making his hair stand straight up, and looked down at himself with a grimace.

"Damn, that was way messier than girl-sex," he declared, then glanced up at Sam, letting his gaze sweep down over his body. "You need a shower, dude."

Sam flushed, lowered his eyes, hot with shame and embarrassment, wishing he could run and hide so Dean couldn't see how gross he was, how disgusting.

"Hey," Dean reached up and grabbed his wrist. "Hey, Sammy. Look at me." And Sam did because it was Dean, and he could never not do whatever Dean wanted him to. Dean was smiling, his eyes warm, reassuring. "You were great, okay? Best sex I ever had with a guy. Hands down."

"Dean, I'm pretty sure that was the only sex you ever had with a guy," Sam ventured, hesitant
because he honestly didn't know if that was true and he suddenly needed to know, like it was the most important thing in the world.

And damn it if he wasn't right. Dean lowered his eyes, smiling a little, almost shy, for God's sake, and it just about did Sam in right then to see that this was actually kind of a big deal for Dean, that it was a first for both of them.

"Yeah, well, don't get a big head about it or whatever," Dean muttered. "I still like girls. Like, pretty much only girls. Not like you turned me gay or anything."

Sam shook his head because Dean was right, there wasn't a normal way to explain why Sam's only sexual interest was Dean, and Dean's had apparently been pretty exclusively female until Sam, a fact that comforted Sam more than he wanted to admit.

"Shower with me," Sam offered, pulling against Dean's hold on his wrist.

Dean looked up, startled, like Sam had asked him to marry him, instead of just getting naked together and washing off. "Yeah, okay, sure," he hemmed and hawed, and Sam was amused at his obvious panic because really, they'd just rubbed off on each other so how could a shower be so scary?

Except yeah, it meant getting naked together. And this thing between them was still so new it felt like taking another step toward even greater intimacy, and Sam could understand why that might freak Dean out a little. It wasn't like Dean had had a lot of practice being close to somebody.

"It'll save water," Sam shrugged, trying for a nonchalance he didn't feel. "I mean, there'll be enough hot water for both of us that way."

"Right," Dean agreed, nodding without looking Sam in the eye, and Sam could tell he was nervous, but he let Sam help him into the bathroom, lean him up against the sink while Sam ran the water, test it until the temperature was just right, then turn back to help Dean undress.

Dean had already pulled his tee-shirt off, had gingerly pushed his boxers down over his injured thigh, grunting in pain as he yanked the sticky material off his pubes. Sam started to bend down to help, and it wasn't like he hadn't been helping Dean get dressed and undressed over the past couple of days since the injury, and it sure wasn't like they hadn't been naked in front of each other before. But now a line had been crossed. Now Sam's touches were interpreted by Dean as sexual. As if that hadn't been the case before, Sam sneered to himself; as if Sam wasn't thinking about sex every time he looked at Dean, much less touched him, since forever. But Dean pushed him away this time, insisting he could do it himself, pushing the soiled boxers down far enough that he could wiggle and step out of them, giving Sam a hard-on just watching his ass move as he did it, which of course in the small space of the bathroom meant that when Dean started to straighten up, Sam's swollen dick was almost right there in his face.

"God, Sam!" Dean complained, backing up against the sink. "Put that thing away! Jesus! Goddamn battering ram! Gonna take down Fort Knox with that thing, huh? Damn it!"

Sam couldn't help the grin that split his face, making him blush and look down and – Damn. There was Dean's dick, and even all flaccid and covered in jizz and surrounded by those dark, damp curls, all sticky with more jizz, it was magnificent. Dean in his glorious freckled nackedness was the most beautiful thing Sam had ever seen, hands down.

"Sam!" Dean's voice was full of warning, and when Sam looked up to meet his eyes, Dean's eyebrows were raised expectantly. "Water? Shower? Can we stick with the program here,
'Yeah,' Sam breathed out, moving to help Dean get into the shower, steeling himself against the tantalizing feel of skin against skin as he slid his arm around Dean's waist, letting Dean lean on him as he limped into position under the water. "Sorry."

Sam did the best he could to keep Dean's bandaged leg out of the direct flow of water, but it was awkward, and Sam wasn't getting any water, so Sam stood still and let Dean hold onto him as he washed himself, wishing he dared to do it himself. Dean had his eyes closed, head tipped back into the shower, letting the water flow over his head and down his chest, between his legs. He had the foot of his injured leg propped on the edge of the tub, thereby keeping the bandage mostly dry, but also keeping himself dangerously off balance, so that he leaned heavily on Sam as he handed the soap to Sam and rinsed himself off. Sam quickly soaped himself up, but before Dean could finish and get out of the shower, leaving Sam to rinse off, Sam dropped to his knees and took Dean's quickly hardening dick in his mouth, making Dean gasp.

"Sam!" Dean stumbled back, slamming one hand against the tile wall of the tub to brace himself, the other hand in Sam's hair as Sam sucked on the velvety head of his cock, keeping his teeth carefully tucked under his lips, letting his hand caress Dean's hip soothingly. He ran his tongue over the slit, then under the ridge of the head, exploring, tasting, before opening his jaw and taking down as much as he could of Dean's now fully erect dick.

"Jesus, Sam," Dean breathed, sliding his hand through Sam's hair before grabbing a handful, holding on tight. Sam had practiced this so often, although usually with an empty whiskey bottle, it was easier than he expected, despite the obvious difference in girth. His jaw unhinged naturally to accommodate Dean's dick, so that when it hit the back of his throat Sam didn't even gag, although it became impossible to breath and his eyes filled with tears. Dean gasped, thrusting reflexively, shallowly, kneading Sam's scalp as he grabbed more of his hair, and when Sam managed to look up, blinking tears, Dean was looking down with intense concentration, eyes blown completely dark, jaw clenched, lips pushed out in a tense pout. When their eyes met Dean squeezed his shut tight and Sam could feel Dean's dick twitch in his mouth, the skin feeling impossibly tight against his tongue.

Sam slipped his hand between Dean's legs and cupped his balls, and that was it. Sam got only a strangled "Oh shit!" as warning before Dean was releasing down his throat, pumping hot come as Sam swallowed, leaning back so he could suckle every last drop of the salty, bitter fluid, flicking his tongue over the silky smooth skin of Dean's slit one last time. He savored the taste and feel of it before letting it go and burying his face in the crease of Dean's trembling thigh; wrapping his arms around Dean's waist and sucking a mark into the tender skin as Dean stood shaking and panting a little, fingers carding through Sam's hair as he came down.

When Sam lifted his eyes again Dean was looking down, an expression of fond wonder in his eyes; he slipped his hand along Sam's cheek, swiping his thumb over Sam's bottom lip, shaking his head a little.

"Not even gonna ask where you learned to do that," he murmured, and Sam smiled a little, feeling warm and praised.

"It was okay?" he asked, not really wanting to think about all the blow-jobs Dean had already received, hating to imagine them or his ranking among them.

"Best damn head ever, Sam," Dean's voice shook a little, his eyes looked like they might tear over. "You – you're amazing, you know that?"
Sam grinned wider, lowered his eyes, flushed with the praise and the feel of Dean's gentle hand on his face, caressing his cheek, his lips.

He helped Dean out of the shower, then rinsed himself off in the rapidly cooling water while Dean towed off. They didn't speak again as Sam towed himself off, then bundled Dean back into the bedroom and into the unused bed, but when he started to pull away to go sleep on the floor or the chair, to give Dean some room, Dean grabbed his arm and pulled him down, let Sam spoon him on the bed.

"Injured player has to be little spoon," Dean mumbled as if he had to excuse his obvious desire to be cuddled, and Sam huffed out a breath and went with it, grateful for the contact, the soothing feel of Dean's back against his chest, his arm clutched to Dean's chest like a damn teddy bear while Sam curled the other one under Dean's pillow and pressed his face into the back of Dean's neck, leaving soft kisses against the skin as Dean settled into contented, blissed-out sleep.

Sam tried not to let his erection press too hard into Dean's backside, tried not to think about slipping it between Dean's ass cheeks and getting off that way, but it wasn't easy, and when Dean released his arm and reached behind to grasp Sam's hip, pulling their bodies flush and turning his face against Sam's arm, kissing and suckling and pushing back against Sam's straining cock, Sam was only too ready to comply with Dean's non-verbal invitation. And it only took a few thrusts before Sam was there, coming in long, hot spurts between Dean's legs, sinking his teeth into the meaty juncture of Dean's neck and shoulder, moaning loudly as he did. He lay breathing hard, dazed and content, until Dean reached back and swatted his ass, pushing against him so he got the message and climbed out of bed to get the warm washcloth to wipe Dean's ass and legs, in the course of which Dean became dangerously hard again and fuck it all anyway, who needs sleep?

The rest of the week passed pretty much in bed. In between mind-blowing sessions of increasingly better and better sex, Sam brought in food, using the last of Dean's money, then the last of what John had left them, then stealing what he could from local markets until he found a food pantry in the local church, where the kindly older women stuffed his arms full of bread and peanut butter and cans of soup.

Dean lay around watching t.v. and healing. He was surprisingly good-tempered, taking his incapacitation more mildly than Sam could have expected, allowing himself to be tended and fed and generally taken care of with a minimum of protest. It was so out of character that Sam was tempted to worry about him, if it hadn't been for his seemingly boundless interest in getting laid. By Sam. He finally decided that the sex was good for Dean, helped him relax and heal faster, and if it mellowed him a little at the same time, maybe that was okay too.

It took Dean a couple of days to get adjusted to the fact that he was having sex with a dude, though; he never seemed to get quite comfortable with the idea, even when Sam insisted he was obviously bi-sexual, just hadn't realized it before now.

"It's perfectly normal, Dean," Sam assured him, although all of Sam's research and reading on the topic hadn't fully prepared him for how challenging it was to be his lover's first confrontation with that aspect of his sexuality.

They were sitting on the bed, playing gin rummy with an old greasy card deck, both naked except for boxers; the room was hot and stuffy because the air-conditioning wasn't working very well and neither boy wanted to ask the motel manager to fix it because they were pretty sure John had only paid up through the end of the week, and that was yesterday.

"But you – you're just gay, right? Never so much as looked at a girl?" Dean was so earnest, seemed so determined to figure this out, damn it, that it made Sam ache for him.
"I guess," Sam answered. "I don't really know. I've only ever wanted you. Maybe if you were a girl –"

"Shut up," Dean growled, frowning, thinking about this for a minute. "That's not how this is supposed to work, is it? You either like boys or girls or both, those are the choices. Not girls and Sam but not boys. Not me but no girls or other boys."

Sam rolled his eyes, finally losing patience with the whole subject. "All I know is, it's what it is. Maybe it's not normal, or maybe there's something extra-normal about it. Missouri Moseley told me we were soul-mates. Maybe that's what this is."

"She said what?" Dean stared, eyebrows lifted so high they were practically touching his hairline. "She said we were what?"

"Soul-mates," Sam repeated. "Like twin souls. She thinks that's why I dreamed about you all the time when I was little. That was my soul reaching out to yours on some astral plane or something."

Dean shook his head, huffed out a laugh, then screwed his face up in disgust. "Oh, that's just fuckin' weird," he said. "That's just the weirdest fuckin' thing I ever heard."

Sam shrugged. "Yeah, she kinda said you'd feel that way about it. She sorta suggested I not tell you till after we were bonded. She said it would freak you out."

"Bonded, huh?" Dean's eyes were round and dark in the shadowy room; they had left the light on in the bathroom, but otherwise didn't want to draw attention to their presence in the room. Sam had been sneaking in and out through the bathroom window since the day before yesterday. "Sounds like a curse."

Sam's insides twisted sharply and he tried not to wince. "It's supposed to be a good thing, I think," he said, trying not to pout. "It means we're more aware of each other, like if something happens to one of us, the other one knows. Just senses it, or something."

Dean put his hands up, cards carefully facing away. "Hey, you're Haley Joel here, not me," he protested. "I've got about as much psychic sense as a beefsteak tomato."

"Actually, Missouri said you've got it too," Sam decided to go for broke, just spill all the beans at once, to hell with the consequences. A week of nearly constant sex could do that to a man, Sam decided; he was feeling reckless because he was more sure of Dean than he'd ever been before, and he needed him to see that. "You're psychic too. You just don't know it."

Dean stared, mouth dropping open adorably. Sam watched as his face changed color; even in the dim light Sam could see Dean's jaw clench and unclench, his frown deepening until his face seemed ghastly and contorted, fury and fear building in his body till he started to shake with it.

"Oh no," he sputtered, dropping the cards and pressing the heels of his hands against his temples. "You're fuckin' kidding me, right? That has to be wrong! Sam, I've never – I never – I can't do that. She must be wrong."

Sam shook his head. "She was pretty clear about it, actually," he said, feeling suddenly contrite for springing this on Dean so ruthlessly. It felt almost abusive, especially since Dean was taking it so badly. "You and I are more alike than you think. It's supposed to be a good thing, I think."

"You think," Dean repeated, still staring, equal parts horrified and furious. "You're telling me I can read minds? Do what you do? And it's a good thing? I don't know what you've been smoking, Sam, but me with psychic mojo is definitely not a good thing." He looked wildly around the room, as if
he was looking for a way out, as if escape suddenly felt like the best strategy. "Jesus. Dad's gonna kill me."

He was off the bed, limping around stuffing clothes into his duffel, moving like a man possessed, muttering to himself, "This isn't real. It can't be. There's no way I'm a goddamn psychic. No way. Fuck!"

"Dean," Sam cajoled, backing off the bed slowly, raising his hands in a placating gesture, moving carefully as one would approach a wild animal. "Dean, it's okay. I've been living with it all my life, and it's not a big deal. The fact that you haven't ever manifested – maybe you never will. Maybe your ability is dormant, maybe it's a really low-level thing that's just there on a subconscious level or something. Trust me, it's not like you're gonna start levitating suddenly, or starting fires with your mind when you get angry."

Dean stopped pacing and stared at Sam, half-full duffel grasped in one hand, dirty tee-shirt in the other. "Well, that's a relief, Sam," he said, eyes wide and accusing. "'Cuz here I was starting to think I could turn into Carrie on prom night and nobody bothered to tell me, goddamn it. How could you keep something like that from me? What's the matter with you?"

"I didn't want you to freak out," Sam sighed. "And it's not like that, I swear. Being psychic can feel like a curse at first, but after awhile you get used to it. It's just a part of you."

"Oh, like Peter Sellers. Now I'm Doctor Strangelove, learning to love the bomb. Love your reasoning, there, Sam. It's just peachy," Dean spat, thrusting the tee-shirt into his duffel and limping into the bathroom for his toothbrush.

"Dean," Sam waited till Dean came out of the bathroom, then moved quickly, right up into Dean's space, so that he had to stop, stare up at Sam, which is when Sam realized he was taller, that sometime in the past month or so he had grown over Dean's head, at least while Dean was stooped a little from keeping his weight off his injured leg. It was disconcerting to both of them, and for a minute all Dean could do is stare at him, breathing a little too hard. "I swear to you, this is not a terminal illness. It's not the end of the world, and it sure as hell isn't gonna take over your life. You're still you, the guy who stumbles through life without ever using his hidden talents. And I'm still the freak who does. Nothing's really changed, Dean, you have to see that."

And to his credit, whether it was Sam's nearness, his soothing tone, or a sudden insight of his own, Dean calmed down visibly, took a deep breath, and dropped the duffel, following its descent with his eyes as he nodded.

"Okay," Dean sighed, lifting his eyes to Sam's again. "I don't know why, and that sucks the big one, but I believe you." He laid the palm of his hand against Sam's chest, over his heart, and took another deep breath, letting it out slow. "I'm not gonna start second-guessing my own instincts here, and right now I trust you, Sam." He closed his eyes, hesitated a moment, let out another shaky breath as he slipped his hand down Sam's chest, grabbing his belt and yanking him in, so their bodies were almost flush. "It's like something I know in my gut. You're somebody I trust." He opened his eyes, gazing steadily into Sam's, serious and intent. "So if that's the mojo talking, then that's what it is. Don't know, don't care. You're still the kid who's got my back, Sam. And I'll always have yours. That's what I know."

Sam felt tearssmarting the backs of his eyes, felt his chest constricting painfully. He took the last step into Dean's space, so that they were pressed chest to chest. Dean's eyes fluttered closed as Sam cupped his cheek, gazed reverently at Dean's perfect features, ran his thumb over his soft bottom lip, trembling a little at Sam's touch.
"Always," Sam whispered his agreement as he took Dean's plush mouth in his, sealing the deal with a kiss as deep and meaningful as any they'd shared so far, maybe more so now that all the secrets were out, now that Sam didn't have to keep hiding anything.

And Sam decided then and there that he would never keep anything from Dean again, that keeping Dean's trust was too precious, too important, and he would never jeopardize that, no matter the circumstances. There was no situation that Sam could imagine in which he would ever willingly keep Dean in the dark, ever again.
Chapter 5

They left the next day, after checking in with Bobby and letting him know they'd run out of money and needed to move on and if John checked in with Bobby would he please let him know they were on their way back to Sioux Falls because of course he wasn't answering his cell. School was starting in a couple of weeks, and Sam needed to enroll, keep up his trajectory toward college and a normal life. Now that Sam had his heart's desire, he fantasized about leaving hunting, taking Dean with him, settling down somewhere safe, somewhere they could have the kind of regular, middle-class life he had dreamed about when he was small. Dean had been happy there, in that dream-world, and Sam knew instinctively that he could be again, without the constant threat of monsters and his father's relentless quest for revenge.

They took their time on the road, stopping in little road-side bars and restaurants where Dean hustled pool and made enough to feed them and pay for a room where they could tumble into bed together, their heat for each other an almost constant thirst that had to be quenched every chance they got.

"No butt-sex," Dean announced after the first few of weeks of nearly constant humping, rubbing, and sucking to get each other off. "I don't do anal."

"Okay," Sam agreed without hesitation. It hadn't come up, really, and although Sam had rubbed off between Dean's legs plenty of times, whenever he'd touched Dean's hole, Dean had bucked away, skittish and sometimes coherent enough to burst out with, "Hell, no!" so Sam had never pushed it.

Sam, on the other hand, had no such aversion, and he'd read enough and experimented with his own body enough to know he was definitely willing to try it if Dean wanted to. He couldn't deny feeling a little disappointed when Dean shut down the possibility completely, but he was so head-over-heels with things as they were that it just wasn't much of an issue. He was content to rub himself off on Dean for all eternity if that's all Dean wanted, and Dean seemed on board with letting Sam suck his dick as much as he wanted, so Sam was good.

And the first time Dean went down on Sam felt like every Christmas and birthday present he'd never had, so yeah, Sam was definitely good. Beyond good, he gasped as he looked down at Dean's gorgeous mouth wrapped around his dick, harder than he'd ever been in his life at the sight. They were six months into their physical relationship by that point, and Sam had decided it was never going to happen, like the butt-sex thing. But on the night of January 18, one week before Dean's twenty-first birthday, he lay Sam down on the bed, kissed down his chest and stomach, and while Sam held his breath, Dean looked up at him with those big green eyes all blown black with lust and just went to town on Sam's dick.

Sam figured he'd been thinking about it for awhile, maybe even researched it, had definitely been taking lessons from Sam and all those girls who'd given Dean all the head he never even had to ask for all those years before Sam. Who wouldn't? Sam asked himself when he was feeling jealous. And when Sam's orgasm coursed through him and he didn't have time to withdraw, Dean swallowed like a pro, licking every last drop out of Sam's slit, then licking his lips and crawling back up Sam's body to kiss him, letting Sam taste himself in Dean's mouth till he was breathless.

"Happy sixth-month anniversary," Sam whispered when they were lying side by side, facing each other, Sam having just returned the favor so they were both sated and sleepy.

"Shut up," Dean frowned, rolling his eyes, as if it had never occurred to him. Sam reached up and brushed his fingertips along the perfect planes of Dean's face, over his lips, still slick with spit, and
Dean tolerated the touch, the tenderness he never allowed Sam to express verbally, keeping his eyes cast down, long lashes fanning his cheeks almost delicately. Sam was overwhelmed again by the strange juxtaposition of violence and beauty embodied in this man who could take down a pack of werewolves single-handedly but make love like he was creating a work of art, drawing out moans and whimpers from Sam like they were brush-strokes on a canvas.

"When did you know, Dean?" Sam asked quietly, fingers skimming down Dean's chin, his throat.

Dean's eyes opened, deep green pools in the dim light of the room. "Know what, Sammy?"

"When you first knew how you felt. About me."

Dean rolled his eyes, pulled away and sighed, rolled over onto his back. "Oh, God, not this again," he groaned, flinging his arm over his eyes dramatically.

"Not what again?" Sam demanded defensively, instantly full of self-doubt. "I was just curious. You don't have to tell me."

"What?" Dean peeked out at him from under his bent arm, frowning. "You want me to say it? You want to hear about how I lusted after a twelve-year-old? Is that what this is?"

"Did you?" Sam asked. "Did you know right away? When you first met me?"

"Jesus, Sam, what do you want from me?" Dean rolled his eyes again. "I felt sorry for you, okay? Figured you could use my help. You were so – you were this little kid, y'know? It seemed like you needed somebody to look after you, and I felt responsible."

"It was a good thing," Sam clarified, pushing up on his elbow so he could lean over Dean. "Not just a drag, not just an obligation. You liked me."

"Yeah, I liked you, Sam," Dean shook his head, still irritated. "Don't you remember? We had a good time. It was a good summer. I wasn't pretending, if that's what you're worried about. I really enjoyed myself."

"Me too," Sam breathed, more relieved than he wanted to admit. "It just seemed like we hit it off right away. Did it feel that way to you?"

Dean's face relaxed a little as he gazed at Sam, like he was remembering those golden days, before things got complicated. He reached up and pushed Sam's hair back from his face, tucking it behind his ear, a vague smile curling his lips. "Yeah. Yeah, it did. It felt like I'd known you all my life. Like I was just waiting for you to show up that day on that road."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, feeling his face relax into a grin of its own, lowering his eyes as his cheeks grew hot. "Same here."

He could feel Dean looking at him, his hand still curled around Sam's ear. Then he sat up and leaned forward, and Sam looked up just in time to catch the heat in Dean's gaze, to watch those green eyes lower to Sam's mouth as Dean's hand slid behind Sam's neck, tugging him forward.

"Come here, you adorable little shit," Dean murmured, and then his mouth was on Sam's and all of Sam's insecurities melted away, forgotten in the reality of the moment, in the here and now of Dean's warm, talented lips on his.

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The next year passed pretty much like the last one, partly on the road with John on various hunts, but mostly stationed somewhere semi-permanent so Sam could go to school. Dean took odd jobs, often working as a mechanic, fixing small engines, or mowing lawns, whatever he could get. He worked as a dishwasher, a delivery boy, a mover, even for awhile as a driver for an elderly woman who needed someone to take her to various doctor's appointments and on errands. Sam was amazed and impressed by Dean's patience and natural kindness with the old lady, his easy courtesy. She tipped generously, so Dean was excused for putting up with her frequent last-minute demands, but he also seemed to genuinely care, and his charm and good looks were certainly not lost on her.

"Your brother is a real looker," she commented to Sam, who didn't bother to correct her. "He's a real hit at my bridge club."

Sam couldn't help teasing Dean about his appeal to the old gals, and Dean shot him a warning look and shook his head.

"You better watch it, Sam," he warned. "If I took a dime from every girl that wanted me to take her out, we'd be living in Hollywood by now."

Which shut Sam up pretty quick. He understood that Dean had given up girls, was being utterly monogamous with Sam, but his insecurity got the better of him once in awhile, and he needed to be reminded that Dean had chosen Sam over all of the girls, young and old, who would have dropped everything to be with him. Because part of him just couldn't believe he deserved to be so lucky. It felt like there had to be a catch somewhere, something bad just around the corner ready and waiting to snatch it all away, make Dean hate him or leave him or just suddenly wake up and realize it had all been a dream, or a nightmare, that he'd never really loved Sam at all. The other shoe was just waiting to drop, like it always did for Sam, or at least always had before he met Dean, and he was living his life in constant dread of that horrible moment when it would all be over, when Dean would come to his senses and realize he'd been tricked, that Sam wasn't really the one he wanted after all.

The sense of foreboding got stronger the closer Sam came to putting his plans together for college. As he began his senior year, he started having nightmares in which he was leaving Dean, and he woke with such a grinding, gasping terror in the pit of his stomach it took him hours to get back to sleep, even when Dean woke up and gave him a late-night blow-job, then fell asleep again cradled between Sam's thighs, nuzzling his scruffy face against Sam's belly. Sam lay awake another hour, relishing the sand-paper feel of Dean's cheek against his skin, smoothing Dean's soft hair with his fingers, until utter exhaustion pulled him down into sleep again just as the early dawn began to lighten the sky outside the bedroom window.

They didn't talk much about Sam's plans for college; it was a given, Sam realized, that Sam would go, but whenever he tried to broach the subject, Dean changed it, raising other issues or leaving the room so subtly Sam didn't even realize he was doing it until it became impossible to avoid. On the surface, Dean seemed more than supportive of Sam's college plans; he drove him to the SAT testing site in October, came back to pick him up and took him out to their favorite restaurant to celebrate after.

"Here's to the guy who got the top score," Dean raised his beer, and Sam clinked bottle necks with him, grinning from ear to ear because he knew he'd done well, and he didn't have to use his psychic ability for an instant, and Dean knew that too.

Dean helped him complete the college applications, filled in all the cover forms with pertinent information so that Sam could concentrate on the more complicated essay questions. They agreed he would apply to five top schools only, with University of South Dakota as a fall-back.
claimed he was happy living wherever Sam got accepted, but Sam could tell he wasn't as excited about Yale and Harvard as he was about Stanford and Berkeley and the University of Chicago, so Sam couldn't help it if he put a little extra effort into those applications.

In the midst of finals that fall, John Winchester showed up with a case that needed their help. Sam stayed up all night doing research, so that he was exhausted and wrung out at school the next day, and when he got back to their little rented shack John and Dean were gone. The note on the refrigerator from Dean promised he'd be back within the week, but Sam immediately panicked, dialed Dean's cell and ranted and railed for fifteen minutes while Dean listened, grunting periodically to let him know he was still on the line.

"Get your homework done, senior boy," Dean admonished when Sam finally paused for air. "The colleges really look at your fall grades, and you need to keep giving them those straight A's. Dad and I are handling this one."

It didn't help that Sam dreamed about demons that night. Their eyes glistened black as night, and they taunted him with threats of taking Dean away from him permanently, hiding him somewhere Sam would never find him. He woke in a cold sweat, Dean's absence in the bed making the nightmare real for a few seconds too long, keeping Sam's heart pounding until he finally remembered why Dean was gone. Not being able to reach Dean that day did nothing to reassure him, though Dean had warned him they were going to be in the mountains, where cell service was sketchy at best.

Sam dreamed about demons almost every night that week, scaring himself shitless because the dreams brought back in vivid detail the last time he'd seen a demon, in Bobby Singer's basement. In the dreams Sam relived moments from his childhood, but this time there were demons in many of the pivotal roles. The two police officers who picked him up from the dingy little apartment where he'd been left by his mother while she went out and died of a drug overdose suddenly had black eyes in his memory-dreams. And Dr. Clausen, the creepy clinician who somehow excised his dreams of a home he'd never really had, had the same demonic black eyes, as had at least one of his temporary foster-mothers.

In his waking moments, Sam felt fairly confident that the dreams weren't real, that no demons had actually possessed the people from his messed-up childhood. But then he dreamed about the demon in Bobby's basement, the taunting way the demon claimed to know him, seemed to imply that demons had kept watch over Sam all his life, would continue to keep an eye on him now that they'd found him again. In his dream the demon stared straight at him, as if it could see into Sam's waking life, and Sam woke in a cold sweat again, didn't even try to go back to sleep because this time the dream had been too real.

When Dean came home later that day Sam didn't wait for him to come through the door. As soon as Sam heard the familiar rumble of the Impala's engine he was up and outside, grabbing a startled Dean and pulling him into his arms for a ferocious hug that went on and on, Sam's whole body shaking with raw emotion.

"Sammy?" Dean grunted, hugging back but mostly just allowing himself to be mauled.

"Don't ever do that again," Sam breathed as soon as he could control his voice. "Don't ever leave like that again."

"Okay," Dean agreed. "Just trying to give you some space, Sam. That's all. Finals, remember? Figured you needed to concentrate."

"Needed you, jerk," Sam pressed his face into Dean's neck, inhaling the scent of gunpowder and
leather and soap. " Couldn't sleep."

"Couldn't shower either, I'm guessin'," Dean commented dryly. "You reek, Sam."

"We gotta get outta here," Sam pulled back, shaking his head, willing Dean to take him seriously. "I think they found me again."

"Who?" Dean frowned, instantly on guard, glancing around furtively, as if the mysterious they" would suddenly appear out of nowhere.

Which Sam was not so sure they couldn't do.

"Demons," Sam shook his head. "Like before. They've been looking for me, since that time at Bobby's. And since you left I've been having these dreams – they're more like visions, I think – and it's like they can see me now. They know where I am, and they're coming for me."

Dean stared, reached up and pushed Sam's hair back from his brow, left his hand on his cheek, thumb tracing Sam's cheekbone, his other hand firmly on Sam's shoulder, holding him in place as he studied him. That's when Sam realized he probably looked awful. He hadn't shaved, he hadn't slept, and he certainly hadn't showered or washed his hair since Dean left. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd eaten or had anything to drink, for that matter.

"Winchesters don't run, remember, Sam?" Dean said, his voice low and gruff, belying the gentleness of his fingers.

Sam shook his head, freeing himself from Dean's grasp, backing away but grabbing Dean's arm so he could pull him into the house. "No, no, this isn't cowardice, Dean. You don't understand. They've been using me all my life, until I met you. I didn't see it before, but here's the thing: they can't see me when I'm with you. It's like you shield me from them somehow. I already called Missouri, and she agrees with me. Your psychic thing complements mine. That's the only thing that makes sense. As long as we're together we're okay, but when you're gone it's like I lose my shield. After we left Bobby's that time, they couldn't find me again, but now..."

Sam could hear himself rambling, but he was too keyed up to stop. The words poured out of him, out of the jumbled confusion of his mind, and everything got clearer as he talked, as if he was forging reality with language. He was stuffing clothes into his duffel as he talked, packing his books and papers into his backpack, stalking out the door to the car, dumping his stuff into the backseat. He flung himself into the passenger seat just as Dean slid in next to him, and their doors slammed exactly at the same moment, making them both jump, then stare at each other in silence for a moment before Dean turned away.

"Fuckin' weird shit, Sam," he muttered as he started the car, then eased out onto a quiet little side-street, passing a parked car with two men sitting inside. Sam frowned at them as the Impala slid past, and at the last moment one of them looked right at him and a little jolt went straight through his body, shooting ice through his veins. The man's eyes were solid black.

Sam gasped, turned around in his seat to stare at the car through the back window, but it just sat there, unmoving, as Dean turned the car down the next side-street, heading for the highway.

"Did you see that? They were in that car back there," Sam breathed out as Dean shot a questioning look at him.

"Who?" Dean glanced at his rearview mirror, but the car was already out of sight.

"Demons," Sam answered, shifting nervously in his seat. "I looked right at one of them, and his
eyes were black. They acted like they didn't even see us. Just sat there."

"Sam, you're scaring me," Dean growled, frowning. "Are you sure you're not just having some kind of break-down or something? I mean, you've been working pretty hard, and not eating or sleeping can make your mind play all kinds of tricks on you, make you see shit that's not there, that kind of thing."

"That's not what this is, Dean, I swear," Sam protested bleakly. "I wish to God it were. But I get it now. For the first time in my life, I can see the patterns."

"Oh, now you're sounding like Mel Gibson in that conspiracy movie..."

"Just drive," Sam demanded, knowing he sounded whiny and irritated. "Let's get as far away from here as fast as we can, okay? I promise I'll explain everything when we've put some distance between us and them."

Dean shook his head, clearly not convinced and obviously more worried about Sam's state of mind than demons or anything else, but he did as Sam asked, pulling onto I-80 going east just to give them a chance to haul ass.

When the sky began to darken, Dean pulled off at a truck-stop with a convenience store, a diner, and a shabby two-story motel, leaving Sam in the car while he checked in, in plain sight, answering Sam's panicky look with a reassuring wink.

"Not going anywhere, Sammy," he smirked. "Promise."

Once they unloaded the car, Dean marched Sam into the bathroom with strict orders to clean up while Dean got them some chow. It wasn't easy for Sam to let Dean go, but he did it, telling himself Dean went out for food all the time, had been doing so for years, and no demon had ever found them. Only when Dean was away for a period of time, and at a distance greater than just across the street, had the protective barrier slid aside so the demons could find them. After talking it over with Missouri Moseley and researching the hell out of psychic phenomena, Sam had come to the conclusion that the soul bond between he and Dean had created a kind of bubble around the two of them, keeping them both safe as long as they were together. It seemed a little hokey, and Sam wasn't entirely certain it was something that initiated with Dean; it could just as easily be Sam's power that triggered the bubble, but only when Dean was close by. Sam wondered about his recent fear of Dean leaving him, if that was somehow his subconscious warning him that he'd have more than a broken heart to worry about if Dean ever really left him. Which made him wonder if there was a protection charm he could wear that might have the same effect, make the demons not see him when they looked straight at him.

When Dean returned, Sam was on the phone with Bobby, picking his brain about demon protection charms. Turned out the amulet Bobby had given him could be spelled to have the effect Sam was hoping for, and once Sam explained what it was for Bobby was eager to help.

"You're a demon-magnet, Sam," he said. "For some reason, those bastards just love you, which should be creepy as fuck, except I know you, boy, and there's not an evil bone in your body."

"Thanks, Uncle Bobby," Sam breathed, grateful for the vote of confidence, which was more than he could muster for himself these days. "I can't put Dean in danger. I won't. If I can't find some way to deter them, at least until I can find out what they want from me, then..." Sam glanced at Dean, who was setting take-out containers on the table. He clenched his jaw, fighting back the sudden urge to cry.
"Listen to me, son," Bobby interrupted, clearly responding to the choked sound in Sam's voice. "We'll figure this out, y'hear? You're gonna be fine. Dean's gonna be fine. Just hang in there."

"You believe that?" Sam asked, sounding desperate even to his own ears, and he answered himself before the older man could lie to him. "Never mind. Just...thanks, Uncle Bobby. For everything."

After Sam hung up, Dean made him eat, sitting him down at the table with him and all but spoon-feeding him, forcing limp salad and turkey dinner with all the fixings down his gullet, making him drink glass after glass of water until he felt bloated. Stupidly grateful to Dean for taking care of him, letting him transfer all the strain and anxiety of the past few days onto Dean's broad shoulders.

"Gonna fix you up, Sam," Dean told him. "Gonna get you feeling right as rain again. Then we'll see what's what."

After supper Dean flipped on the t.v. and collapsed onto the bed next to Sam, who was out like a light before the first commercial break, his head sinking over onto Dean's shoulder, his last conscious thought how grateful he was to have Dean home. Sam slept dreamlessly that night for the first time in a week, Dean's warm body pressed against him from shoulder to ankle.

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It took Sam another week to recover from his time apart from Dean. After researching the hell out of soul-bonding, he decided on the theory that he had been suffering from a kind of separation sickness that affected soul-mated couples, except in their case Sam and Dean had the added problem of being targeted by demons, or at least Sam did, which made it Dean's problem as well, as Dean insisted.

"Dean, it's not your problem," Sam shook his head. "They've been after me my whole life. Uncle Bobby was probably right when he said they want to use my abilities. Dr. Clausen was obviously one of them. He was testing kids like me, finding the ones with the most potential, then sending them to training facilities run by paid shape-shifters. There were probably other training centers, maybe still are, full of psychic kids and shape-shifter trainers. The demons think they own me, Dean. They invested in me, and they want me back."

"Yeah, well, they can't have you, and that's final," Dean said. "And yes, it sure as hell is my problem, Sam. Anything and everything to do with you is my problem, y'hear? We're in this together, to the bitter end. No take-backs."

Sam loved Dean beyond reason when he got tough and protective like this, although he'd never admit it in a million years. It made him feel safe, and it felt so familiar it brought tears to his eyes. Dream-Dean had been like that, always fierce in his defense of Sam, even when they were little, and it made Sam want to curl up in bed with the real Dean and never get up again. But it also brought protective instincts out in Sam, who felt overwhelmed with guilt for bringing down the wrath of these horrible, possessive creatures on Dean. Sam was intensely determined to do everything in his power to keep them away from Dean, who had never done anything to deserve that kind of attention.

Although the fact that a demon had killed Dean's mother and baby brother bothered Sam, because it suggested that there was a connection, that there might indeed be something in Dean's past that had attracted demonic interest, besides just him. He wondered if Dean's psychic abilities had brought the demon that had killed his family, if that demon had intended to take Dean that night the way demons took Sam when his mother died. They had both been four years old when their mothers died; Sam wasn't so sure that was just a coincidence anymore. Maybe the yellow-eyed
demon had planned to take Dean that night, but his dad got in the way, managed to scare the thing off, thwart its plans.

Sam didn't dare discuss his theory with Dean, though; he knew how sensitive the subject was, even all these years later. Dean missed his mother with a vengeance, remembered her love like a painful reminder of how things could have been, how they should have been if the yellow-eyed demon hadn't visited his family that night.

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Sam and Dean spent several weeks moving from town to town, until Sam was confident that they'd shaken anything that might have been trying to follow them. By that time it was after Christmas, close to Dean's birthday, and when Sam suggested they settle in Champaign, Illinois for the rest of the school year, Dean was all over it. He found a townhouse a block off the university campus, where he and Sam could easily afford the top floor. The apartment was sparsely furnished, intended for students, and the landlord seemed laid-back and easy-going, not even bothering with their references or a deposit, assuming they were good renters because he'd been a student himself fairly recently and he believed in giving everyone a good start in life.

"You boys will love it here," he assured them as he handed them the keys to the door and the mailbox. "Lots of liberal types, plenty of acceptance for all lifestyles and orientations. It's a good neighborhood."

Dean's eyes widened until Sam had to stifle a laugh, slinging an arm around his shoulders and playfully patting his chest, earning an arched eyebrow that was almost a smirk from their landlord.

"I'm sure we'll love it here, won't we, honey?" Sam teased, and Dean's eyebrows went up even higher as he turned his comically shocked gaze on Sam, then back to the landlord.

"Oh, absolutely," he exclaimed, ever the trooper, and Sam was prouder of him in that moment than he could ever recall feeling. Dean thought on his feet, that was for sure, even when the topic was incredibly uncomfortable. "We'll be very happy here."

Then Sam felt Dean's hand on his ass, squeezing almost painfully, and he suppressed a yelp of surprise and near-pain as he jumped a little, then tried valiantly to recover, managing a weak smile as their landlord eased his way out the door, a look of uncertainty clouding his regular features.

"That dude needs to get laid," Dean announced as soon as the door was closed.

"He's not the only one," Sam muttered, grabbing the collar of Dean's jacket in one hand, palming his dick with the other as he pushed Dean up against the wall and kissed him, sloppy and hard and desperate, just the way Dean liked it.

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That spring was the happiest Sam and Dean had ever shared. Dean found a job right away, working for a millionaire who reconditioned classic cars and was thrilled to have a handsome young mechanic who was as talented with cars as he was easy on the eyes. Sam enrolled in the local public high school, ace-ing all his Advanced Placement classes, and finishing top of his class. When the letter arrived from Stanford offering him a full scholarship and living stipend, forwarded from Bobby's, it was already late May, the flowers were in bloom, and Sam and Dean celebrated by getting smashed and making out on the grass on the university campus, under the stars.

"Fuck me," Sam begged as Dean ground his hips against Sam's, mouthing the tender skin under his
jaw, his hands in Sam's hair, holding his head so he could get the angle he wanted.  

"Okay," Dean murmured against Sam's skin, nipping his adam's apple, licking and sucking along his neck to his ear.  

"Do it here," Sam gasped, turning his head to give Dean better access. "There's stuff in my backpack."  

Dean lifted his head, glanced over at the pack, then off across the lawn at the lights of the campus. "We're in kind of a public place here, Sammy."  

"So?" Sam challenged, thrusting his hips up provocatively. "It's kinda hot that way."  

"You're still under eighteen," Dean reminded him. "If we get caught, they'll put you in a boy's home."  

"So? It'd be worth it," Sam insisted breathlessly, spreading his legs so Dean could grind down between them. "Come on, Dean. Not gonna get caught."  

Sam could see the minute Dean got on board with the idea, the sudden glint in his eye, the little smirk as he pulled away so he could reach for the pack. Sam took the opportunity to toe his sneakers off, followed by his socks, jeans and underwear, then lay on his back with his knees pulled up to his chest, spreading himself open wantonly.  

"Jesus, Sam," Dean breathed as he knelt on the grass between Sam's legs, condom and lube in hand, just staring.  

"Come on, Dean, do it," Sam whined, wiggling down toward Dean, stroking down the skin beneath his balls so he could push at his own hole with the tips of his fingers. "Come on."  

Dean flipped the cap open on the little tube, poured the lube onto his fingers, replaced Sam's fingers with his own, gently at first, exploring the tight opening as he watched Sam's face. Sam gasped as he felt Dean's fingers circle his hole, then push gently against his opening; Sam rocked into it, and Dean's middle finger pushed inside, eliciting a deep moan.  

"Yeah, that's it, Dean," Sam encouraged, rocking against the strange intrusion, forcing Dean's finger further inside him. "Now move it around, stretch me open. Come on, Dean, that's it."  

Dean's face was a silent mask of concentration, watching Sam's reaction to every movement of his fingers with a look of rapt fascination, his determination to do this new thing the right way conflicting with his concern for Sam, for any sign that he was hurting him. But after the first penetration, Sam began to relax almost immediately, his body adjusting to the new sensations with almost no discomfort at all, so that when Dean added a second finger, then a third, Sam was more than ready, the tingling in his channel making him harder than he'd ever been before.  

"Okay, okay, I'm ready," he gasped, pushing down frantically on Dean's fingers, pulling his legs back so Dean was hitting that place inside that sent those incredible little tingly shockwaves straight to his dick. "Come on, Dean, fuck me. Come on. I'm ready for it."  

Dean withdrew his fingers with an audible sucking sound. "Jesus, Sam," he breathed. "Goddamn."  

Sam wiggled his hips and stripped his dick while Dean rustled around between his legs, pulling his dick out, unwrapping the condom, sliding it on and covering it liberally with lube.  

"I don't even know why we're bothering with this thing," he muttered to himself, "It's not like you
haven't been swallowing my jizz for over a year now."

"Just do it," Sam begged, grabbing his legs behind the knees, lifting his ass off the ground. "Please, Dean."

"Okay, okay," Dean murmured, taking his dick in one hand, holding onto Sam's thigh with the other. "Pushy little bitch. Just hold yer horses there."

Sam could feel the moment Dean's cock touched his hole, sending sparks through his system, threatening to overload his brain. His eyes slid shut and he squeezed his dick in an effort to restrain his building orgasm, chewing on his bottom lip to keep from moaning aloud. He couldn't contain the keening sound that escaped his throat as Dean pushed in, though.

"You okay? You okay there, Sammy?" Dean froze, waiting for Sam to nod, let out his breath, adjust to the sensation of fullness. Dean's dick was bigger than his fingers, and Sam realized a moment before he started pushing in again that this was going to be nothing like working himself open in the shower, as he'd been doing for some time now, getting off on imagining Dean's cock inside him.

"Sam?" Dean checked again, his voice rough, hoarse with need. Sam felt Dean's dick pulse a little in his ass and Sam's muscles squeezed back reflexively, wringing a stifled grunt from Dean as he held himself still, tension causing his arm to shake as he held Sam's thigh.

"Dean?" Sam opened his eyes, looked up at Dean's face, read the strain and effort there, the attempt to contain his own need to bottom out and thrust, the obvious pleasure of feeling Sam's tight heat around his dick. The sight of Dean struggling to be careful not to hurt Sam was almost too much to bear; in one sudden, hard movement, Sam rocked down on Dean's dick, burying it to the hilt, a sobbing moan tearing out of his throat as Dean hit that place inside where all Sam's nerve endings coalesced, sending sparks of pleasure-pain up his spine.

Dean's eyes flew open, wide with shock and wonder, but Sam couldn't keep his own eyes open; he needed to focus on the sensation of having Dean deep inside him, of being filled and owned and made complete, this sudden violent connection which was everything because it was Dean, his Dean, the love of his life.

"Sammy," Dean breathed, and Sam's eyes fell open a little, just enough to see the expression on Dean's lovely face, the tears in his beautiful eyes, before Sam squeezed his eyes shut again and rocked, thrusting down on Dean's dick, encouraging him to move.

And Dean did, moaning a little as he pulled back, not all the way out, just enough to feel the drag on Sam's tight channel, and Sam could tell it felt incredible because of the sounds Dean was making, the little breathless moan as he pushed back in, then started pumping, thrusting in and out in quick, short thrusts that told Sam he was close, that being buried in Sam's ass was the hottest thing Dean had ever experienced, and he couldn't last long. Sam reached up and wrapped his fingers around the back of Dean's neck, coaxing him down for a kiss, and Dean was gasping and moaning and trembling against Sam's mouth and it felt like he couldn't get any closer, couldn't go any deeper. When Dean stopped, held himself rigid and held his breath as he always did just before he came Sam kissed him deeply, keeping his tongue buried deep in Dean's open mouth as his body shook out its orgasm, licking lightly, kneading the back of Dean's neck with his fingers, rocking shallowly against him as he came down.

"Jesus fuck, Sam," Dean breathed as he finally pulled away, trembling with the effort to keep from collapsing on top of Sam. He sat back a little so he could look down between Sam's legs, where they were still joined, then at Sam's belly, streaked with white from Sam's own orgasm, almost
incidental in the scheme of what had just happened. Dean let out a harsh gasp as he pulled out, yanked off the condom and tied it off, tossed it easily into Sam's pack.

"Eww, Dean," Sam complained. "Gross!"

"Early birthday present, Sammy," Dean smirked, then shrugged off his over-shirt and pulled his own tee-shirt off, exposing his muscular chest, skin pale and almost glowing in the starlight. Sam watched silently as Dean cleaned him off, then stuffed the soiled shirt in Sam's pack and reached down to retrieve Sam's discarded clothing. Sam pulled on his jeans, stuffing his underwear and socks into his pack, while Dean tucked himself away in his own jeans and pulled his over-shirt back on, then turned to stare at Sam expectantly. Sam had the distinct feeling he should say something, help Dean deal with this new step down the road to gayness, reassure him that it was all perfectly normal or something, didn't mean they were any more gay than they had been before Dean had agreed to pile-drive Sam's ass.

But the truth was, Sam had sensed Dean in a way he never had before, as if in the act of physical union, the psychic barrier between them had finally been breached, if only temporarily, and Sam could swear he had seen inside Dean's soul, had felt Dean's love for him like a salve on his own insecurity, on the guilt Sam felt for bringing evil into Dean's life. And it made him want to do everything he could to assure Dean of his love and devotion, to make Dean see how important he was in Sam's life, how he had saved Sam and changed his life for the better, how grateful Sam was for that.

"Stay," Sam begged, reaching out and taking Dean's wrist, pulling him closer till Dean was right there, staring into Sam's eyes with those big green pools of emotion and reality and memory, the windows into Dean's soul. Sam could sense Dean's uncertainty, his need for reassurance, and giving him that was the least Sam could do.

"It's okay, Dean. It's okay. It's good," Sam nodded, pulling Dean back down with him on the grass so they lay side by side, staring up at the stars, Sam's fingers on Dean's wrist slipping down till they were entwined with Dean's, so they lay there holding hands like lovers on a first date, or like an old couple who had been together forever. "We used to do this, when we were kids, in my dream," Sam said quietly. "We used to slip outside after everybody was asleep and just lie on the grass in the backyard and watch the stars. I think we fell asleep there once. Woke up freezing and soaked with dew."

Sam could feel Dean turn his head and stare silently at him until Sam turned his own head, returning the gaze. "What?"

Dean shook his head, the corners of his mouth turning up a little. "Nothin'," he said. "It's just you, having dream memories of our childhood, like we grew up together. And now we're together like this. It must be weird for you, is all. Must feel a little..."

"Incestuous?" Sam offered, his own mouth relaxing into a grin. "Yeah, maybe. But mostly it just feels like wish-fulfillment. Like I dreamed you into existence. I have more memories of you, of growing up with you, than I do of my real life. I think I tried to forget a lot of the things that happened."

Dean squeezed Sam's hand sympathetically. "But you know that wasn't really me," he said softly. "My childhood was one lonely, miserable time, full of a lot of crap I wish I could forget. My dad drinking all the time, missing my mom; hell, sometimes I think he blamed me for surviving that night. Sometimes the heat was off and there was no food in the house and Dad was just gone. Being hungry and cold leaves its mark on a kid. I was no pampered, middle-class suburban Little Leaguer with birthday parties and picnics and family vacations, Sam. That ain't me."
"I know," Sam whispered, squeezing back. "I wish– I wish you could remember the dreams like I do. You were such a great big brother, teaching me stuff, holding my hand when we crossed the street, standing up for me on the playground, keeping me safe."

"And now I'm reaming your ass on the grass," Dean smirked. "Good thing I'm not your big brother. I'd have to kick my own ass for incest and child abuse."

"I'm not a child," Sam pouted just a little, and Dean's smirk grew into a lascivious grin.

"No, Sam, you definitely are not," he agreed, pushing himself up so he could look down at Sam, propping himself on one elbow. Sam watched the stars shining around Dean's head, thought he saw one glint in his eye for a second, decided it was either a trick of the light or possibly a tear. "You're the gorgeous stud who just let me fuck him into the ground."

Sam's face relaxed into a grin again as he felt his cheeks heat. "So much for the thing about 'no butt-sex,'" he commented dryly.

Dean cupped his cheek, slid his thumb over Sam's bottom lip, taking his time, just looking and smiling at Sam before he lowered his mouth and kissed Sam's lips, slow and careful, with just a hint of tongue. "That's why I love you," he murmured against Sam's mouth as he pulled back. "You get me. You get me, and you love me anyway."

"Yeah," Sam breathed, heart pounding, eyes filling with tears at Dean's unexpected admission, which felt so out of character on the one hand, and so very Dean on the other. "Yeah, I do." I do love you, he thought but couldn't say, was terrified of wrecking the moment. But Dean's eye-crinkling grin told him he'd heard him anyway.

Or at least Dean knew him so well, he knew Sam was thinking it, even if he wasn't actually reading Sam's mind.
Dean made Sam attend his high school graduation, even though Sam wasn't really keen on going.

"No way, Sam," Dean shook his head firmly. "No way, after how hard you worked to get your diploma." After all I've done for you to be sure you graduate and get into college, Dean didn't say, but it was like Sam could hear it, even without being able to read Dean's mind. Although he knew Dean would never think that way, would never see himself as sacrificing for Sam. It was just who he was, Sam realized. Dean was the big brother who gave all of himself to the little brother he loved with everything he had. Sam was as convinced of that as he had ever been of anything, even though the rational part of his brain knew full well Dean's little brother had died all those years ago, before Dean had ever had a chance to be a big brother in the first place.

"After all you had to overcome to get here, no way you're gonna blow this off, y'hear me?" Dean went on. "Plus, Bobby's coming."

"Uncle Bobby's coming to my graduation?" Sam was shocked. He'd assumed John wouldn't come;
as far as he knew, John hadn't even attended Dean's, although Sam had been there, whining and pleading until Dean agreed to go through with the whole thing. Bobby hadn't even made it to Dean's graduation; he'd been on a hunt with Rufus in Omaha.

"Yeah," Dean nodded. "He's got a lead on some kind of voodoo thing that can fix your protection amulet so you and me don't have to be attached at the hip forever."

"Oh," Sam couldn't hide his disappointment. Being apart from Dean was never something he looked forward to, and he didn't like the idea that Dean felt any different. "I guess you miss hunting with your dad."

Dean shrugged, but Sam could see the way his face darkened, the haunted look that came into his eyes. "Dad doesn't need me," he said gruffly. "He never did. I was just extra baggage, holding him back. He's happier on his own."

"That's not true, Dean," Sam protested, even though it was, and they both knew it. "He loves you." At least that was totally true; Sam had felt John's love for Dean like a brand sometimes, like a deep, passionate conviction that John held onto with all his heart and soul. Dean was a symbol of everything John had lost, of his failure to keep his family safe, but he was also the source of John's strength, his determination to persevere in the face of that loss and failure. Dean was the rock that kept John sane, gave his life purpose. Sam just wished he could do a better job of conveying how much Dean meant to John. Dean needed to feel confident of his father's love, but Sam was just about the last person who could convince him of that. And Sam knew enough about the way John thought to understand that John would never tell Dean how much he loved him.

It was so sad and twisted, sometimes Sam just wanted to pull Dean into his arms and hold him for as long as it took to make up for the love John withheld from his son, not to mention all the painful, aching guilt over his survival after the night that tore his family apart.

"It's not your fault," Sam offered on more than one occasion, over completely unrelated events, and still Sam could see Dean's jaw clench every time, watched the way Dean's eyes flickered away and then refused to look back. Damn. So Dean had internalized all that guilt, and there was nothing, literally nothing, Sam could ever do to alleviate that.

Which meant, if he really wanted Dean's love, he would have to pretend he didn't see how guilty Dean felt. Not for the first time, Sam was grateful to have spent the last six months in the comfortable little college town. Although he'd be grateful to leave and reclaim some familiar anonymity, he was also glad to

So when it was Sam's turn to cross the stage at graduation from Champaign Central, there were four people watching with pride: Dean, Bobby Singer, Mr. Jackson the guidance counselor, who was thrilled to add Sam's college admission to his list of accomplishments, and Sam's English teacher, Mrs. Miller, who had written one of the letters of recommendation that had gotten him into Stanford in the first place.

"Congratulations, Sam," Mrs. Miller said kindly as she shook his hand afterwards. "You deserve all your future success. I look forward to seeing you again in ten years and hearing all about it."

"Yes, ma'am," Sam grinned bashfully, glancing over her shoulder at Dean and Bobby, who were waiting off to the side of the gymnasium where the graduates and their families had gathered after the ceremony. Sam was grateful to have spent the last six months in the comfortable little college town. Although he'd be grateful to leave and reclaim some familiar anonymity, he was also glad to
have had his final high school experience at a place where his academic performance didn't stand out too obviously, where there was an expectation of success that didn't make him seem too freakish.

"Damn, you got tall, son," Bobby exclaimed after congratulating him with a big, solid bear-hug. "You got time to let an old man take you out for burgers and pie? Help you celebrate?"

Sam nodded, suddenly too choked up to speak, ducking away to return his cap and gown so Bobby wouldn't see the tears in his eyes.

An hour later, sitting across the table from the older hunter, Sam and Dean rubbed shoulders and tried not to let on to Bobby how excited they were at the prospect of moving to California and starting their new life. But Sam could read Bobby's mind the moment he figured it out, sitting there watching them moving in synch, finishing each other's sentences, leaning into each other even though there was plenty of room on the bench.

"So you boys figure you can keep hunting during school breaks? Is that it?" Bobby asked.

Sam nodded eagerly. "That's right," he agreed, swallowing a bite of his burger. "You can send us anything you find. And during the school year we can handle local jobs on the weekends."

"You find any more evidence of demon activity?" Dean asked around a mouthful of fries.

Bobby shook his head. "Nothin'," he said. "But I did find a guy who can put that spell on a protection amulet for Sam. He just needs a little of Dean's DNA. Guy works in a lab that does police forensic work. He's the one who looked into Sam's case for us, back when we first found Sam. Apparently, he does the voodoo stuff on the side." Bobby shook his head. "The things you learn about people that you never thought to ask."

"Thanks, Bobby," Dean nodded. "I'll be good to get away from this overgrown puppy once in awhile." He nudged Sam's shoulder as he said it, smirking a little, and Sam nudged back, harder, making Dean grin wider.

Bobby glanced from one to the other of them, then shook his head. "Yeah, I can see you're just dying to get rid of him," he commented dryly. "You two look just about as desperate to get away from each other as two people can be."

Sam lowered his eyes to his plate, trying to hide the sudden heat in his cheeks and the shit-eating grin he couldn't stop from taking over his face. That they were that transparent was embarrassing, especially in front of Bobby, who was about as much of a father-figure as Sam had ever had.

"Is it that obvious?" Sam asked, glancing up shyly. Dean frowned, clearly not understanding, but Bobby just shook his head and sighed.

"I'll put it this way, son," he said. "It's a good thing you two are living in a liberal college town. And you'll fit right in at Stanford, too. Palo Alto's about as open-minded a town as you could ask for. Lots of gay-friendly folk out there."

Dean's face clouded over as he finally figured out what Bobby was talking about.

"Whoa, hang on just a minute. I'm not – we're not – " he started to protest, but Sam put a hand on his arm to stop him before he said what he knew would come out as another denial, and somehow Sam was relieved Bobby knew. Bobby knew about their relationship and he was okay with it, and that was comforting to Sam, and even if Dean wasn't quite on board with being public about sleeping with a seventeen-year-old boy, it normalized things.
"A psychic told us one time that we're soul mates, Dean and I," Sam said softly, shifting on the bench a little, so that his thigh rubbed against Dean's. "She said we found each other because that's what soul-twins do. They spend their lives looking for their other half."

Bobby frowned, looking deeply uncomfortable. "Well, if that's what some psychic told you, it must be true," he ventured, finally. "But I have to say, Sam, I could've told you that, first time I saw you two together. Didn't need some psychic telling you you're 'soul-mates' or nothin'. You two are like that pair of matching socks that eventually end up together, no matter how many loads of laundry get done in-between."

"Thanks, Bobby, I'll remember that one next time I'm doing my laundry," Dean snapped. "That's just perfect."

"Jus' tellin' it like I see it," Bobby muttered, tipping back a last swallow of his beer. "Now, I need some of that DNA, Dean. You got a hairbrush or a toothbrush or something I can take with me?"

And just like that, the crisis was past. But Sam remembered, later, when he was feeling down and depressed because he loved Dean so much but he couldn't help doubting himself for it; wondering if there was something wrong between them, worrying that his love was too suffocating, that Dean really did want to be free but felt too responsible for Sam to admit it.
Chapter 6

On Sam's eighteenth birthday, they were on the road, hunting their third vengeful spirit that summer. It felt good, moving around, spending the night in the car or some flea-bitten backwater motel. It felt normal in a way Sam couldn't quite understand, but tried not to think about too much because soon enough they'd be in Palo Alto, settling down again so Sam could go to school and Dean could find a regular job.

It wasn't necessary to read his mind to see that Dean was in his element, working their way across the country in the summer heat, taking cases wherever they could find them, putting down evil and saving lives. Sometimes when Sam glanced over at him, staring out at the landscape with that placid self-assurance that Sam knew as a mask for Dean's inner torment, Dean seemed so content it made Sam's chest ache, and he couldn't stop looking. Dean's profile was the most familiar thing in his life, often the last thing Sam saw before he fell asleep at night and the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes in the morning. It was something Sam felt he didn't deserve, the idea that he put that look on Dean's face, that Sam was the reason for Dean's happiness. It was too much, weighed like an especially sweet kind of terrible burden, a responsibility he couldn't possibly be worthy enough to handle. At times like that, Sam felt sure the other shoe was just about to drop, that something awful was right there on the edges of his consciousness, just waiting to crash in and destroy everything, just as it seemed to do whenever things were going half-way according to plan.

A week after Sam's birthday, the other shoe dropped. They were on the road, back-pedaling to Topeka after a job in Lincoln, Nebraska, when Bobby's call came in.

"Got something you boys need to see," he announced, sounding almost breathless, like he'd been running, which was so unlike Bobby it made Sam sit up straight on the bench.

"What is it?" Sam asked, and he could almost hear Bobby shaking his head.

"No, you gotta see this," he insisted. "It's not something I can tell you over the phone."

"Okay," Sam sucked in a breath, glanced at Dean, who was frowning deeply. "We're about three hours away."

"Good," Bobby hung up, and Sam sat staring at the phone for a full minute, wishing, not for the first time and definitely not for the last time, that he could read minds long-distance.

"No idea," he answered Dean's questioning look. "He says he needs to tell us in person."

When they arrived at Singer Salvage, John's GMC truck was already parked out front, and John was pacing the yard in front, obviously waiting for them, none too patiently.

"He says he won't tell me till you two arrive," he growled angrily, then took a step back as Sam unfolded himself from the front seat. "Jesus, Sam. What have you been eating? You've grown another foot at least."

"Y'all gonna just stand there, or are you gonna come in and let me show you what I got?" Bobby's voice boomed at them from inside the house, and they all filed in, Sam with his hands in his jeans pockets and his shoulders deliberately hunched so he didn't tower over the other men, at least not deliberately.

Bobby had photographs laid out on the kitchen table, and at first glance they looked identical, and completely nonsensical. Sam read excitement and trepidation in Bobby's manner, but his thoughts
were so confused and jumbled Sam couldn't make heads or tails out of them, so he turned off his
sensors and pushed up beside Dean at the table, brushing shoulders in a natural gesture of
solidarity.

"What've you got, Bobby?" John demanded. "What're we looking at?"

"DNA strands," Bobby answered, pointing at the first of three identical photos. "This is the sample
I took from Sam back when he first came to us, six years ago. This one, I took in May, just after
Sam's graduation. And this one," he pointed to the last of the three photographs, "this one's Dean's.
I took a sample from each of them so Jack could make that protection amulet for Sam. Jack said I
needed to give him a Dean sample and a not-Dean sample, so he could compare them and be sure
he was using the right one."

"They look alike," Sam noted. "I don't see the difference."

"Exactly," Bobby looked up, gazing at Sam, then at Dean, and finally at John, and Sam could feel
his heart start racing, sweat start to break out even though he was standing completely still. "That's
exactly what Jack said. He thought I'd given him two samples from the same person. Then he
compared them to the one I'd given him six years ago, and again – a complete match. That don't
happen in nature, Sam. It only happens when the subjects are closely related."

The silence in the room was suddenly so complete it was as if time had stopped. Sam was pretty
sure he was holding his breath, and probably his heart had stopped as well, frozen in the moment
as Bobby's words sunk in and Sam's mind raced, trying to make sense of what he was hearing.

John spoke first. "Are you saying Sam and Dean are related?" he demanded, confusion and
disbelief making him belligerent.

"I'm saying they're brothers, John," Bobby clarified, needlessly, since he'd already said it. "Same
mother, same father. Full siblings."

"But that's impossible," John shook his head. "Mary and I didn't have any other children. You'd
think I'd know if we had. This doesn't make sense."

"John, this is Sam," Bobby's voice was soft and careful, like he was speaking to a human grenade
who might explode any minute. "This is your son. I don't know how, but apparently he survived
that night after all. Somebody pulled him out of the fire and took him. Maybe the demon that set
the fire, I don't know, but that's what happened, because here he is, and this is scientific proof,
boys. I had my friend check and double check before I called you all. This kind of science is pretty
new, but it doesn't lie."

John turned to look at Sam, really look at him, and Sam could read the confusion and doubt in his
mind, could hear the moment it gave way to recognition, John's mind suddenly flooding with
memories of that night, of seeing the demon leaning over the baby's crib, picking up the baby, John
protesting with every bone in his body as the demon looked up at him, cradling the baby in one
demonic arm as he flung the other hand out toward John, sending him flying backwards out the
doors, into the hallway, crashing into the wall, John's head hitting hard, dazing him, knocking him
out so that when he came to the room was already fully engulfed in flames and smoke, the empty
crib only barely visible through the dark, roiling clouds.

Sam could feel the moment John realized how completely he had suppressed that memory, how he
had believed the firefighters who had told him the baby had probably died but the fire had been so
intense it had simply incinerated the small body, composed as it was mostly of soft cartilage. They
had buried an empty coffin, and John had told Dean the baby was dead along with his mother. It
had been deeply traumatizing for both of them, and John had never for one moment reconsidered his narrative of the events of that night. Until now.

The emotions flickering across John's face brought tears to Sam's eyes; he could feel the exact moment John knew, really knew, that what Bobby was telling him was true. From the moment he first met Sam, John had suspected, he had just repressed that suspicion because it didn't jibe with his made-up memories, and because he didn't want to set him or Dean up for another fall if it turned out he was wrong. But having it all be true after all confirmed John's judgment in adding Sam to the family in the first place, and he easily adjusted to the idea that this explained why he had trusted Sam from the start, why he had allowed Sam to get so close to Dean. It had been the right thing to do, and he had felt it in his bones, even without fully understanding why the boy filled the Sam-shaped hole in their lives so perfectly.

Now he did. Now John understood.

Sam was being hauled into a bone-crushing hug before he even knew what hit him. John's eyes were filmed with tears as he held the son he'd never known he'd found until now, the child he assumed he'd lost nearly eighteen years ago. John's big body shook with emotion and all Sam could do was hold on, hugging back as John murmured, "My boy," and "My little Sammy," into his shoulder in his rough, choked voice.

Sam became aware of a roaring in his ears, knew it for the feeling of emotional overload that precipitated one of his attacks, like that day on the road when he first met Dean. Reality was cracking again, doing that thing where Sam wasn't sure whether he was dreaming or not. Sam felt oddly detached, like he was watching the scene from a distance, through a blue-tinged lens, making everything seem grainy and almost black-and-white, drained of color. He was aware that he should feel happy to know the truth, to have his childhood dreams come true, to find out that he did indeed have a father and a brother who loved him and had somehow, miraculously, found him and claimed him without anyone even realizing who Sam really was. And being hugged tight by John, surrounded by John's powerful feelings of gratitude and the fierce, possessive loyalty and pride that John called love, Sam could almost believe those feelings were his own, too. Like father, like son, his brain reminded him. I'm just like my dad.

Then Sam looked up, over John's shoulder, and his eyes met Dean's, and the world fell away. Dean's face was a mask of shock, pale and drained of color, his mouth hanging open and slack, a sheen of sweat on his forehead and pooled in the hollow of his throat. His eyes seemed huge in his pale face, and his whole body seemed suddenly smaller, more fragile and delicate, younger. It was like the little boy who had suffered through the trauma of that night all those years ago had been hovering beneath the surface, hiding deep inside under years of denial and repression, and all the habits of survival and perseverance ingrained in Dean were suddenly scraped away so that scared little child was all that was left.

"Dean." Sam's instincts screamed at him to go to his lover – his brother – and offer comfort, to smooth the distress and panic and sheer terror from his beautiful, beloved face. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else was of the slightest importance, and Sam wasn't even aware of extricating himself from John and taking a step toward Dean until Dean blinked, momentarily startled out of his shock by Sam's movement. Then the look of shock was replaced by sheer horror; Dean's hands went up as though he would push Sam away if he got any closer, and he took a step back, toward the door.

"No," he breathed, his voice shaky and broken. "No, Sam. No."

Sam recognized the panic, realized Dean was ready to flee, took another step toward him out of
sheer instinct, only half aware of saying his name again. Then Dean turned and barreled out the
door, letting it slam behind him as he bolted for the car. Sam started right after him, might have
stopped him if John and Bobby hadn't both grabbed him and held him back.

"Let him go, son," John said firmly. "He needs to process this in his own way."

"No, you don't understand," Sam protested, struggling to push away from the older hunter. "He's
out of his mind right now. He'll drive off the road!"

The Impala roared to life just as Sam managed to break free, run pell mell out of the house, jumped
off the porch and into the driveway as the car peeled off, leaving Sam in a cloud of dust and with
only a quick glimpse of the back of Dean's head, the tense set of his shoulders.

"Dean!" Sam stomped his foot, grabbed his cell phone out of his pocket and punched in Dean's
number. "Listen to me," Sam said to Dean's voicemail, pacing in the driveway and running one
hand through his hair. "I know what you're thinking. I mean, I know you. We'll work this out. It'll
be okay, I promise. Just come back. Come back to me, Dean, all right?"

He hung up, feeling stupid and useless and wishing he could delete the message, so he dialed again
and left another one, trying not to sound so needy and desperate this time. "Hey, this is good news.
It really, really is. Turns out I've got a family after all, and you've got the little brother you always
wanted. It's weird, yeah, it's really weird, but it's good weird, Dean. For once, something good has
happened here. So call me."

After pacing for another minute or two, Sam made a third call, unable to fight the rising panic in
his chest, the fear that nagged at the inside of his head. "Hey, Dean. Please don't run from this. We
can work it out, okay? I'll do anything you want. If you don't wanna – if you need a break from us,
whatever – hey, it's okay, man. I get it. I do. Just please, call me, okay?"

Sam paced for a few more minutes, fighting with himself over the urge to call again, finally
throwing the phone angrily against the side of the house, watching it shatter with a satisfying
smattering of plastic pieces. Rage boiled up from Sam's gut, making him need to hit something,
someone, anything. It was just so unfair! All his life he'd wanted Dean to love him, and Dean did
love him, but that hadn't been enough. Sam had wanted more. He had pushed and pushed until
Dean had given in to Sam's ravenous hunger, his insatiable need for Dean in every way, despite
Dean's protests that he wasn't gay, that he was confused by their bond. And Sam had played that
for all it was worth, Sam had used the soul-bond as an excuse to bind Dean to him, to have him all
to himself and keep him close. And it was Sam's possessive, consuming love that had driven Dean
away, just as Sam had known it would.

Being brothers wasn't really the revelation for Sam that it was to Dean; Sam had grown up thinking
of Dean as his brother, wishing it with all his heart and soul, then when he was old enough,
wanting Dean physically as well. There wasn't anything bad or wrong or dirty about that, in Sam's
mind. Incest was just a word. Sam and Dean were special, an exception to every rule, and this was
just the way they were.

But Sam knew it was different for Dean. He hadn't grown up thinking of Sam as his brother, and he
certainly wasn't thinking of him as a brother when they began their physical relationship. Dean's
main concern had always been Sam's youth, their relative ages, fearing to take advantage of Sam
before he was old enough to give informed consent. After being so careful, after trying to do
everything the right way in his own mind, Dean would of course feel horrified to discover he'd
been fucking his own brother. It would feel like the ultimate screw-job, like no matter how hard
he'd tried to do right by Sam, he'd messed up in the worst way possible.
Sam sat down in the dirt, put his head in his hands, leaning his elbows on his bent knees. Fuck. This was beyond fucked-up, and the worst part was there wasn't anything Sam could do about it. He couldn't make Dean see it differently, couldn't convince Dean that it was okay to screw your brother since your brother had always thought of himself as your brother anyway, so if anyone had been committing incest here, it wasn't Dean. But Sam knew that wouldn't matter to Dean; the incest itself was repulsive to Dean, and he'd been just as engaged in it as Sam was, however unknowingly. Dean would accept just as much blame as he could for their relationship, probably managing to convince himself that Sam was totally innocent because he was younger and Dean should've known better, should've trusted his instincts and never started a sexual relationship with the younger boy in the first place. Instead, Dean would blame himself for giving in to his desires, desires he should have repressed. If he could have just held on like he knew he should have, until Sam was eighteen, they would've found out about the brother thing and saved themselves from a lot of depravity.

Because there was no way Dean Winchester would ever knowingly fuck his own brother.

Sam sunk his hands into his hair, grabbing fistfuls, yanking as hard as he could, relishing the pain. He would do that, he decided, inflict physical pain on himself, to atone for making Dean love him. Because Dean didn't deserve this shit; he was a good, moral person and Sam loved him for that, looked up to him and admired him for his strong, ethical sensibilities, his goodness. There was no separating the man from his moral code, and Sam knew in his bones that Dean would survive this, would come to see it as the mistake that it was, would put it behind him and eventually forgive Sam, if not himself.

And all Sam could do at this point was to make it as easy for Dean as he possibly could. He owed Dean that.

Sam heard the screen door slam, felt the vibration and the crunching gravel as John Winchester moved heavily down the steps and across the driveway, stopped next to Sam, touched the top of his head with the tips of his fingers. Ordinarily Sam would've leaned into the touch, would have accepted the comfort John was offering. But he was too deep in his own agony to so much as lift his head, couldn't even be bothered to read John's thoughts.

"You know, I think I was always hoping it was really you, Sam," John said finally, after a silence so long Sam thought he'd never speak. "I guess I sort of knew, ever since that day we pulled you out of that warehouse. Out of the fire. It felt like you'd come back to us, even then."

Sam lifted his head, stared down the road in the direction the Impala had gone. John stared too, still petting Sam's hair, fingers strong and gentle.

"He'll be back," he said after another minute. "He'll adjust. Family means everything to him, and you're family now, Sam, for real. No take-backs. No temporary foster-families. You're Dean's brother, and we're all he's got. He'll be back, mark my words, son. He's loyal to a fault, that boy. You never have to worry about him leaving, no matter what you do. No matter what you've done. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," Sam answered, nodding automatically, tamping down on his humiliation and guilt; he could sense that John knew about them, but was choosing to be pretty damn mature about it, not blaming him exactly, but also making it clear he expected it to stop.

"You and Dean are brothers in more ways than one, Sam," John said. "Brothers-in-arms make a tight, unbreakable bond. When you've fought side-by-side with someone, like you and Dean have, there's nothing stronger. Not even blood. You two make a great team, always will, once you get past this thing."
Sam nodded, his throat tight, fighting back the tears at the edge of his vision, the weight on his chest. "I have to go," he said, feeling suddenly ill, like he might throw up if he sat there one more minute, listening to John, letting the man dictate his future to him. He pulled himself up off the ground, weaving a little as he headed back into the house, trembling with the effort to contain his rage. Bobby was sitting at the kitchen table, studying a map and flipping through a book that looked like it was about five hundred years old. He looked up when Sam came in, looking around wildly for a minute before he realized he'd left his duffel in the car with Dean.

"You look like you could use a beer," Bobby noted, getting up to get one from the refrigerator. They both heard the roar of John's monster truck starting up outside, and Sam took the opened beer from Bobby without a word, chugging down several swallows as the sound of the truck receded into the distance. Bobby raised his eyebrows, gestured towards the other chair at the table as he sat back down, but Sam shook his head.

"I have to get out of here," Sam said, hating how his voice shook, taking another swallow of the beer, needing it to numb some of the ache in his chest. "Do you have a truck I can borrow?"

"Running's not gonna solve your problems, Sam," Bobby reminded him. "Things have a way of following you around, biting you in the ass. Someday you just have to turn around and kick back."

"Yeah, well, not today," Sam said, grimly. "I don't want to be here when Dean gets back, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to see me either."

"That boy loves you with everything he's got, kid," Bobby said flatly. "Don't ever think he don't. Now, you wanna leave, not face him right now cuz your feelings could get hurt, I get that. Life sucks sometimes. It throws you curve balls when you least expect 'em. Don't mean you gotta run away, stick yer head in the sand. You need to man up. Face yer fears. That's the only way to make sure they don't get the best of you."

Sam was shaking his head, slammed the empty beer bottle down on the table. "No! I can't do that to him. I won't! I've been stupid and selfish, Uncle Bobby, and it's not fair to Dean. He doesn't deserve this shit. I have to let him go while I still can, while I have the strength to do what I know I have to do." He paced back and forth in front of Bobby, clenching and unclenching his fists, agitated and restless. "I'm not running away, I'm giving Dean his freedom. Don't you see? If I don't go now, Dean might take me back, but it won't be on his terms; he'll be giving in to me because it's all he knows how to do, and he'll be hating himself for doing it. I can't let him do that. I have to be stronger than that."

"Jesus, Sam, you sure know how to beat yourself up, don't ya?" Bobby stared in disbelief, then shook his head. "That's the craziest, most mixed-up bunch of self-pitying horse crap I ever heard. Dean's a big boy. He's not gonna let anybody make him do something he doesn't wanna do, even you, ya idjit."

"Maybe," Sam groused doubtfully. "But I still need to give him some space right now. Do you have my amulet?"

"It's right here," Bobby opened a drawer in his desk, pulled out the leather-stringed little brass object, put it in Sam's hand. "But you don't really need it, y'know. Turns out, you've got Dean inside you, have had all this time. You and him share the same genetic material. You're literally wearing part of him."

"But the visions..." Sam frowned in confusion. "I don't understand."

Bobby shrugged. "Nobody knows how the whole twin-soul thing works," he said. "Maybe you
made yourself sick because you were missing him so much. Or maybe you're so tuned into him that you can sense when he's in danger, like when he's on a hunt, and it makes you literally sick with worry. Either way, it's not life-threatening, as far as I can tell. You can probably control it just by thinking yourself through it, or whatever you do when you have to control your psychic mojo. You know more about this stuff than I do. You two are the first sibling soul-mates I've ever heard of."

Sam looked down at the amulet, turned it over in his hand, then gave it back to Bobby.

"Give it to Dean when he gets back," Sam said softly. "If he wants it."

Bobby pursed his lips, squinting a little as he considered Sam. "You're really leaving," he said finally. "You got any idea what that'll do to Dean? You just leaving?"

Sam took a deep breath, let it out slow, shook his head. He needed to go now, before he lost his nerve. "Yeah, I think I do," Sam sighed. "But I can't stay. He'll be hurt, but not as much as if I stay."

"You sure about that? You absolutely sure leaving's the right thing to do?"

"No," Sam admitted. "But I know if I stay it'll be the most wrong thing I ever did, and I've done a lot of wrong."

"Sam, you're eighteen years old," Bobby reminded him. "You've got your whole life ahead of you."

"Yeah, well so does Dean," Sam sighed. "He deserves to start fresh, be his own man without his weirdo freak of a little brother hanging around his neck, holding him back."

Sam shoved one hand into the pocket of his jeans, comforted to find a few wadded up bills there, maybe even enough to buy a bus ticket. He stuck the other hand out to Bobby, who ignored it and pulled him into a hug instead.

"Take care of him for me, Uncle Bobby," Sam breathed into the older hunter's shoulder.

"You call him, you hear me?" Bobby shook him a little as he released him, clutching his biceps for emphasis. "You give it a couple of days, a week at most, but you call, y'hear?"

Sam hesitated, pretty sure he couldn't do that, believing he wouldn't be able to talk to Dean for a long time, convinced he just wasn't strong enough for that. But Bobby looked so intense, so serious and worried, that Sam finally nodded, albeit reluctantly.

"Promise?" Bobby pressed.

"Okay, yeah, I promise," Sam lied, feeling terrible, thinking of the shattered cell phone out in Bobby's driveway.

"John is gonna be as mad as hell, you think o' that?" Bobby shook his head. "He just found out his infant son was kidnapped by the demon that killed his wife. You're the best clue he's got to what happened to her. You think he's gonna just let you walk away?"

Sam sighed. "I know," he said. "He'll know where to find me if he needs to."

Bobby shook his head. "You're leaving me to deal with two pissed-off Winchesters," he muttered darkly. "I think I might just hafta come with you."
"Sorry," Sam mumbled helplessly. "I'm sorry, Uncle Bobby. I gotta go."

"All right then," Bobby nodded finally, after giving him another hard look. "Let me get my keys. I'll run you down to the bus station."

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An hour later Sam was on the bus, headed west, nothing but the clothes on his back and fifty bucks to his name. Bobby had insisted on buying the bus ticket, had given him a fake credit card to use in diners along the way, hopefully also for new clothes when he got to California. His scholarship included room and board, so all he had to do was get there, but he was nearly a month early, so there would be expenses.

Sam was four hours out of Sioux Falls before he fell asleep, dreamed of Dean, sitting in the seat next to him on the bus, watching him sleep. He woke up with a start, his cheeks wet with tears, glanced at the empty seat next to him as fresh tears flowed. He wiped them away furiously with the sleeve of his hoodie, sniffling uncontrollably until the middle-aged woman across the aisle reached over and handed him some tissues from her purse.

"Off to college?" she asked kindly, and when Sam nodded, blowing his nose, she nodded sympathetically. "Homesickness is a bitch, ain't it?"

She smiled, blinked, and her eyes flashed obsidian black.

Sam woke up with a start, cold sweat beading his brow and the back of his neck. He glanced at the empty seat next to him, then at the man sleeping in the seat across the aisle. No middle-aged woman, no Dean. Just Sam and his fucked-up brain playing tricks on him again, freaking him out with memories of the last time he and Dean were apart.

"I can do this," he murmured to himself, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, focusing as he knew how to do to calm himself, to control the whispering voices and hallucinogenic imaginings of his tortured mind.

It wouldn't be easy, and sometimes it would be damn hard, harder than anything Sam had ever tried to do in his life, but he would manage. He would go to college, get his degree, work in the summers waiting tables or washing dishes, maybe call Bobby once in awhile, just to keep his hand in the game, keep his hunting skills sharp. Maybe catch up on news in the hunting world, hear about how Dean and John were doing. Sam could do that, at some unspecified time in the future, he was sure he could. Eventually he'd be able to think about Dean without crying, without feeling like his heart was being slowly ripped into tiny strips of bloody, useless gristle and fed to him, piece by piece, while he choked and sobbed and begged to die because living without Dean was so much more painful than even the slowest and most wretched death.

The days and weeks and months would pass, Sam knew, until the pain became a dull ache, until he could think about Dean with a distant sadness, a deep, thick, solid thing like a rock in the pit of his soul, worn smooth by years of sorrow. And then, the day would come that Sam might be able to see Dean again, or even just talk to him on the phone, hear his voice without collapsing into an inconsolable puddle on the floor, sobbing for days afterwards. There would come a day when Dean might show up at his door, green eyes sparkling with mischief, leather jacket and gelled hair smelling like home and love and all the things Sam thought he would never know again.

That day might come, Sam knew, if he could just get past the now, the endless and forever now of pain and misery and horrible, wrenching grief. Someday he might be able to face Dean again, maybe even be his brother again, like they were all those years ago in Sam's dream. Maybe
someday. Maybe.

Someday.

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