Take the Long Way Home
by LolaAnn

Summary

Sequel to Grand Canyon, although you don’t absolutely have to read that to follow the story. The Winchesters and Buffy meet up once again. This is an alternate version of SPN S6. The Slayers will be central to the plot to open Purgatory. The story will have a big focus on Buffy/Dean and also features Sam/Faith. **Now Complete**

Notes

As promised, this is the sequel to Grand Canyon. It's not absolutely necessary to read that first to follow the story, but hope you will. I'm including an unusually long note this time because I want to make sure and catch everyone up on the timeline and give *spoiler warnings*. If you haven't seen all of s6 of Supernatural and you don't want to be spoiled, stop reading now. I intend to finish out s6 in my crossover universe, but I will still be using some of the major plot points from the show. This story will contain Buffy/Dean and possibly some other pairings, however, the main focus will be on their romance (yay!).

Timeline: In the Buffy universe, we are approximately 2 yrs post s7. Buffy is in her mid-twenties and Dawn is 18 and just starting college. In the Supernatural universe, we are still in s6. Grand Canyon took place shortly after episode 6.14 – Mannequin 3: The Reckoning. This story will skip ahead a couple of months and pick up after episode 6.17 – My Heart Will Go On. So, at this point, the guys really don't know much more about 'The Mother of All'
than they did in the last story. They are also not hip to anything having to do with Cas and the souls.

Disclaimers & Credits: I don't own any of the characters and don't expect to make any money from this story. I am only writing this for my entertainment (and hopefully yours). Buffy and her universe belong to Joss Whedon and Supernatural belongs to Eric Kripke. The main title for the story: 'Take the Long Way Home' is a song by Supertramp (Breakfast in America, 1984). The chapter title 'Don't Look Back' is a Boston song from the album of the same name (1978).

That oughta do it, I'll stop rambling now. This chapter is mostly about setting the stage for things to come, so there's not a great deal of action. Anyway, I hope everyone enjoys. Reviews are very much appreciated. If you feel like one of the characters is acting 'out of character' please let me know.
Don't Look Back

Sam sat at a cluttered table in front of his laptop. He'd barely managed to clear out a spot that was free from dusty old books and empty beer bottles. A few feet away, Bobby lay snoring on his couch. He'd finally passed out after days of little sleep, heavy research, and even heavier drinking (none of which had increased their knowledge of the Mother). Essentially, the only new thing they'd learned was that 'The Mother of All' sometimes went by 'Eve' (at least that was less of a mouthful). Sam was just happy to see that Bobby was finally sleeping, alcohol induced or not. His friend had been in bad shape since killing Rufus while possessed by Eve's newest baby, or as Dean called it, the 'Kahn Worm'. Sam had actually kept the deceased, slug-like creature by preserving it in a mason jar filled with rubbing alcohol. Both Bobby and Dean had been in favor of burning it, but Sam had insisted on holding on to it. It was, he felt, the only solid link they had to their enemy.

Sam was currently surfing the net, half-heartedly, looking for anything he may have missed in his previous ten-thousand Google searches. His mind kept drifting back to the alternate reality in which Ellen and Jo were alive. Bobby had actually been married to Ellen in that reality. *That Bobby* had still been drunk and ill-tempered, but he'd also possessed a sense of hope and happiness that was absent in the Bobby he knew. A small part of him wished that Cas had erased his memories of that world, the way it had been erased from the minds of everyone but himself and his brother. It was painful to see someone he loved so lonely and broken, and to know that one seemingly unrelated change in history could've made things very different. If given the choice, however, Sam would still hold onto that memory. He'd had enough of missing memories, painful or not.

The year he'd run around soulless was still, for the most part, an unknown. The few memories he'd managed to regain had caused him to collapse in something resembling a severe seizure. The real danger came not in recalling what his soulless body had done during that year, but in remembering what his missing soul had endured while locked in the pit with Lucifer. Apparently, he couldn't regain one set of memories without getting the other. So, he'd stopped trying to remember that time (at least for now). Their lives were too hectic for him to risk a complete breakdown. Dean needed him and Sam was determined not to let him down.

There was, however, a more recent missing memory that had been on his mind a lot in the past few days. The night he and Dean had left the Grand Canyon was largely a blur. He remembered waking up in the car (very sore, stiff, and disoriented) after his brother had pulled into a seedy roadside motel somewhere off of U.S. Highway 54 in Oklahoma. It was morning; Dean had driven all night through Arizona, New Mexico, and a small part of the northern tip of Texas. His brother was tired and, as usual, not in the mood for lengthy explanations. Sam had gathered that they were less than halfway through a thirty-two hour drive to Pittsburgh, PA and that they were going there to help Bobby and Rufus put down a horde of zombies. Sam did vaguely remember having a phone conversation with Bobby about zombies the night before, but other than that and a few random flashes, he had very little memory of anything that had happened after leaving the parking lot of the Mexican restaurant where he, Dean, Buffy, and Dawn had been thrown out for fighting. His brother had offered very few details about anything that had happened afterwards. In fact, Dean seemed prepared to go to any lengths to avoid the entire subject.

The two months since they'd left the Grand Canyon had been rough ones for both of them. The frequency of supernatural occurrences had increased, leaving them with very little down time between all the hunting and researching. Dean had been spending the majority of his free time drinking and womanizing, although neither of those pursuits seemed to bring him much happiness. Sam hadn't seen his brother on a binge like this since the year he made his crossroads deal. But in spite of Dean's recent behavior, he did know that his brother had not forgotten the Slayer, Buffy.
During their last night in Arizona, Sam had used his cell to take a photo of his brother. He'd intended it to be a blackmail shot. At the time, Dean had a girl-drink in his hand and whipped cream all over his nose. Sam had managed to snap the photo just as his brother had blinked and opened his mouth to speak. It was literally one of the most hilarious pictures he'd ever seen. Buffy had been caught in the shot as well, but her photo was excellent. She was looking at Dean with her head slightly turned and had a bright smile on her face (the girl was highly photogenic). Several days after they'd cleared up the mess in Pittsburgh, Sam noticed that a pix message had been sent from his phone to his brother's. He knew he hadn't sent it and he also knew that often when Dean appeared to be checking his phone for messages, he was actually looking at that photograph. Dean also spent a great deal of 'research time' looking into Slayer lore and reading the Cleveland Sun-Times online (big bro had never learned to properly erase his browser history). Sam hadn't mentioned his knowledge of any of these things. Even though they both enjoyed razzing one another, this subject seemed to veer out of the land of brotherly hazing and into the territory of unnecessary cruelty. Something had happened that night in Arizona to render this subject taboo; Sam just wished he remembered what it was. Luckily, he'd just realized that he did have a way of retrieving those memories. His plan had one huge bonus as well; it didn't involve the impossible task of trying to get his brother to open up.

Shortly after leaving the Canyon, Sam had been doing his laundry and found a slip of paper with Dawn Summer's phone number written on it. The Winchesters were in the habit of checking their pockets before tossing anything into the wash. Hard experience had taught them that certain items (such as a marker used to draw a devil's trap) were likely to ruin the few clothes they had. He had put the slip of paper in his wallet, reasoning that it may come in handy in the future. Since then, he'd pretty much forgotten about it amidst the chaos that made up their daily lives. But today, he decided he was going to use that number to fill in some gaps. His brother was currently away, having left to get them something to eat that wasn't frozen pizza or canned ravioli. He wouldn't be back for, at least, another half-hour, which left Sam with plenty of time to make the call.

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Dawn was enjoying her first few weeks of college. She was a little homesick (something she'd never admit to Buffy), but she was also reveling in all of the new experiences. She was free from her overprotective sister and living off of a Hellmouth for the first time since she was very young. The lack of frequent vampire sightings actually took some getting used to, but she was up to challenge.

She'd lucked out and gotten a good roommate. Her name was Alexandria, but she went by Alex. She had grown up in a town only about an hour away from campus, which meant she already knew a few people. A big bonus was the fact that Alex had a car, something Buffy was going to make Dawn wait until the next year to get. Her roommate was pretty, likeable, and easy going (although Dawn had to admit that her East Tennessee accent took some getting used to). She quickly discovered that having a roommate with connections had its advantages, especially after getting to tag along to a beginning-of-semester frat party that Alex had been invited to. Dawn had met a very cute guy there and they'd already gone out a couple of times. He was a junior and, so far, they were hitting it off really well. Dawn was almost entirely convinced that neither he nor his fraternity brothers were involved in any type of demon worshipping cult.

Despite all the fun she was having, Dawn did feel guilty about leaving Cleveland behind. The last few months had been extremely stressful for everyone. Between the large increase in bad things that want to eat you and all the drama involved in dealing with two dozen very powerful teenagers (a few of whom were serious bitches), life in Cleveland had sucked pretty hard. Because of these things, she'd offered to stay behind a semester and commute to a nearby college. However, Buffy had insisted that she go as planned, telling her that she'd never leave if she waited for a time when there
nothing apocalypt-y on the horizon. She knew it had been extremely hard for her sister to let her go, but, to her credit, Buffy had maintained her composure well. Amazingly enough, Dawn had been able to live her life without constant interference. Of course, her sister did call frequently and had insisted that Dawn always wear her new silver cross necklace (even in the shower). Willow had also made sure that she was well stocked with protection charms and hex bags. The witch had perfected her recipe for fresh-smelling hex bags to the point that Dawn was actually able to pretend that they were simply potpourri, which helped her to avoid a lot of uncomfortable questions from her roommate.

Overall, Dawn had to say she was a happy person. Her classes weren't too terrible, her social life was promising, and she was currently getting ready to go meet up with her new love interest. Lots of goodness all around. Her most immediate worry was finding the right pair of shoes to go with the outfit she planned to wear.

Dawn was putting the finishing touches on her makeup when her cell phone went off. She didn't recognize the number, but there was something familiar about the area code so she went ahead and answered.

"Hello."

"Hi, Dawn," a familiar male voice replied. "This is Sam, Sam Winchester, we met a few months back at the Grand Canyon. How are you?"

"Sam!" she exclaimed, "Wow, it's been a while. How are you?"

"I'm okay. Listen, I hope this isn't a bad time. I really need to talk to you about something if you've got a few minutes."

"Sure," Dawn replied, her curiosity peaked. "What's up?"

"Um, well, it's kind of awkward," Sam began hesitantly. "I was hoping you could tell me what happened that night after I took those painkillers." He paused for a moment adding, "I really hope I didn't get out of line."

"Seriously? You don't remember? Well, I guess that explains why you never called after you ravished me on the hood of Buffy's car that night. I knew you were trashed, but I didn't think it was possible to forget that. I'm not entirely sure all of it was legal."

Dawn let Sam stew in uncomfortable silence for a moment or two before letting him off the hook. "I'm only messing with you," she teased. "Nothing happened. You were pretty goofy, but you didn't do anything bad. Promise."

"You really had me going," Sam replied, still sounding stunned.

"I know. It's a gift. So, what brought this up all of a sudden? All that happened over two months ago."

"I don't know. I was just thinking about some things… Like how sometimes insignificant events can change the world."

"Okay, that's deep," Dawn replied with a giggle. "But you don't have to worry, there was no world changing. I won't be popping out a little Sam in seven months or anything."

"Believe me, you really lucked out there," Sam stated half-jokingly. "Anyway," he continued uncertainly, "I was kinda hoping you could tell me what happened between Dean and your sister."
Dawn was a little surprised at this turn in the conversation. "Really?" she asked curiously. "Dean didn't tell you anything?"

"Dean doesn't tell anybody anything."

"Well, I'm not really sure what you want to know… Do you remember Willow?"

"A little," Sam admitted. "She had red hair I think. Dean said she was a witch… I believe he meant that literally."

"Yes," Dawn laughed, "she's a witch, a super powerful one too. So I guess you don't know about her apparating, I mean teleporting, into Buffy's room that night?"

"No, that's news to me."

"She popped-in at a very bad time," Dawn explained in a conspiratorial tone. "From what I gathered, they weren't in the act, but they were definitely on the way. I'm surprised Buffy didn't spontaneously combust."

"No shit?"

"No shit. Willow was so wigged, she hasn't teleported since and she loves to teleport. So yeah, that's the big news," Dawn added. "I guess Dean was too embarrassed to tell you."

"That would suck," Sam stated, pausing for a moment to gather his thoughts. (Yes, that would suck, but it didn't quite explain his brother's behavior.)

"So, do you guys know anything useful about that 'Mother' thing yet?" Dawn asked, after it seemed Sam didn't have anything else to say.

"How do you know about her?" he asked in surprise.

"Wow! You really don't remember anything do you? That was the major topic of conversation that night. You know, how everything's all loony tunes because of her. Anyway, we agreed to give each other the 411. Buffy even gave your brother her dorky little business card."

Sam had no idea that Dean even had Buffy's contact info. "I'm totally lost," he admitted. "But, truth is, it's safe to say that we don't know anything useful."

"I hear ya. All we've been able to find out is that she's definitely of the bad."

"Dawn, is there anything else you can tell me that might explain why my brother… Well, he just acts weird about the whole subject. Did something else happen? Did I do something?"

"He did get kinda aggravated with you before you guys left," Dawn said thoughtfully. "No major fight or anything. It's just… well, you were kind of being a whiny drunk there at the end."

"Whiny? Wow, that's horribly embarrassing," he replied with an uncomfortable laugh. "What did I say?"

"You were going on about how everybody hates you guys… especially you."

"Please tell me you're kidding again," Sam interrupted with a groan.

"Nope, sorry. After that, you started telling Buffy something about Dean going somewhere or… maybe doing something a few years ago. I can't remember exactly what you said, but he yelled at
you to shut up. He up and bailed shortly after that." Dawn paused for a moment before continuing hesitantly, "Buffy was hurt. She thought Dean was pissed about Willow showing up and… uh… about me getting you all messed up. Anyway, it wouldn't be the first time. A lot of guys can't deal with all the freakiness that surrounds her."

Sam laughed a little (he couldn't help it). The idea that Dean could be that easily freaked was pretty absurd. Dammit, he thought, it was me! After all the pep talks he'd been giving his brother about not letting their past hold them back, he'd gotten trashed and brought up that very subject right in front of the woman Dean was so interested in. No wonder he bailed, he'd panicked. It was obvious… basic Dean 101.

"That wasn't your fault," Sam assured her. "I should've known better than to mix narcotics and alcohol. I've seen Dean do it and it's not a pretty sight. Anyway, what exactly did I say about my brother?"

"Like I said, I can't really remember. Whatever it was, you didn't get to finish… and I guess you're not going to tell me, are you?"

"I don't know what to tell you," Sam lied. "That's why I was asking. Listen Dawn," he added in a rushed and distracted tone, "I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me. I have to go now, but I do hope things are going well for you at school."

"They're going great," Dawn replied, sounding a little confused. She was damn curious about the deep secrets the Winchesters were obviously hiding, but she wasn't going to push, because she had about five minutes before she had to leave to meet her date. "Well, bye Sam. It was nice to talk to you," she added sincerely.

"So what's the plan?" Dean asked his brother around a bite full of cheeseburger. "You find us a new hunt?"

Sam, who was still sitting in front of his laptop as he picked at his chef salad, shrugged noncommittally. He had a plan, but he wasn't sure how best to approach it. He'd finally found a use for the Kahn Worm (apparently he had kept it for a reason).

"I was thinking we'd go to Cleveland," he finally said. "Take that worm thing… maybe Buffy and her people could make something of it. The Slayer's Council probably has a lot of resources we don't. They could study it."

The expression on Dean's face was unreadable. He stared at his brother silently for a moment before speaking.

"That's stupid, Sam," he scoffed. "It's a giant, dead slug. Buffy doesn't have time for crap like that. I don't know why you even kept the nasty thing to begin with."

"It couldn't hurt," Sam argued. "Seriously, if she doesn't think it's worth a look, she can tell us. Dude, we can't afford to drop any leads right now… seeing as how we don't have any leads right now."

"I'm sure there are plenty of hunts we could go on," his brother countered. "Cleveland is at least eighteen hours away. That's a lot of time to waste on a maybe."

"Then call Buffy and ask her."

"Sam, I told you, it's a stupid waste of time," Dean replied a little gruffly.
"Then I'll go," Sam said, trying to keep his tone casual. "I'm sure Bobby will let me borrow one of the junkers around here. That way, you two can keep hunting until I get back."

"No," Dean stated firmly.

"Why not? Are you afraid I'm gonna make a move on her? I don't see why you'd care if I did, you haven't shown any interest in talking to her."

Sam knew he had his brother where he wanted him when he slammed down his burger and his eyes flashed angrily.

"So is that it? You wanna get laid?"

"It's been a while," Sam stated with a shrug, noting that Dean seriously looked like he wanted to hit him.

"Then find some chick in a bar!" Dean growled. "Buffy doesn't need our bullshit. She has a job to do. The last thing she deserves is to catch a giant dose of Winchester luck. So, stay the hell away from her," he warned icily.

"Just what I thought," Sam replied calmly. "You're scared of her."

"That's ridiculous. I'm not scared of her. Yeah sure, the girl can kick my ass, but when has that ever made a difference?"

"Not what I'm talking about Dean and you know it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Dean snapped. "You're not making any sense."

"Fine Dean," Sam replied, in the same calm tone, "but, I'm going to Cleveland. It's our only lead and I'm not letting it drop just because you can't face a girl. You can either go with me or stay here. I don't care."

"Okay Sam," Dean agreed tightly, "we'll go to Cleveland. I'll face big, scary Buffy and then maybe you can let go of these delusions of yours and get your mind back on the job."

"Whatever," Sam replied, trying not to smile, "but one of us needs to call her and let her know we're coming. I can do it if you're scared, you'll just have to give me her number."

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Buffy was catching up on some very important paperwork (at least that was her cover story). In reality, she was hiding out in her office playing Plants vs. Zombies on her PC. Andrew had turned her onto it a few weeks before and she was addicted. It provided a nice, mindless distraction from her life. Besides, the zombies were actually kind of cute in an ugly sort of way.

She was tired, so extremely tired. That was the one thing the voices in her poor overworked brain could agree on these days. She had spent most of the previous night clearing out a nest of Hobo Demons (at least that's what their name sounded like to her). Judging from their living arrangements, 'hobo' was a pretty accurate term for them. It seemed that almost every night brought some new and different badness, so at least there was variety. Giles had been trying to get her to take a night off and get some rest, but she found that she'd rather keep working. Her job, at least the slaying part of it, was something she understood. If she let herself have too much free time, she tended to get broody and Broody-Buffy was no fun for anyone.
Buffy had blessings and she should be counting them. Things had looked much grimmer in the past. She wasn't the only Slayer anymore, she had help. Granted, in some instances that help was in the form of an uber-brat named Carrie and her hormonal band of minions, but it was still help. There were other positives too. She and Willow, for instance, had gotten really close again. That was a big 'yay'. Sometimes it seemed like they were back in high school. After Willow had brought her back, there had been a lot of resentment on both sides. Between her depression and Will's descent into dark magic, their relationship became extremely strained. And then there was Kennedy, who did anything and everything she could to drive a deeper wedge between them. She and Willow had broken up the year before and Kennedy had gone to Scotland to lord it over the Slayers there. Buffy tried to be gracious, but she couldn't have been happier. For one thing, she never felt they were right for each other, mainly because - in her completely unbiased opinion - Kennedy was secretly a hell-bitch, sent to suck the happiness from the world. Needless to say, Willow could do much better.

To be honest, the reason she got mopey when she had too much down time was loneliness. Dawn was gone now and she was living by herself for the first time ever. Even though she and Dawn had bickered constantly, she missed her terribly. She wished Willow could live with her, but she was rooming with Andrew, who had moved in after Kennedy left. Buffy really did love Andrew, but she didn't think she could take living under the same roof with him.

She realized she had been lonely for a quite a while actually, but meeting Dean Winchester had made her loneliness more obvious to her. She felt pretty silly about it truthfully. After all, she had only known him for a day. It was just that it had been so long since she'd imagined sharing her life with a man. She'd nearly forgotten what that feeling was like. The thing that made Buffy feel even more foolish was the highly pathetic secret that, thankfully, only Willow knew about. She had kept Dean's t-shirt, the one he'd used to patch up her wound that day at the Grand Canyon. The only reason Willow knew was because Buffy had asked her to do a spell to remove all of the blood and bug guts (Tide simply wasn't up to the job). It was just a plain gray T, with a rip in one of the side seams, which probably also came from their adventure in the Canyon. She slept in it a lot since it was big enough on her to double as a nightgown. The idea of being close to him was comforting. However, by this point, she was beginning to give up hope of ever seeing or hearing from him again. It had been two months and he still hadn't called. She'd been tempted to call him herself, but always chickened out. The only way she would call would be if they came up with some actual useable information regarding 'Mommy'.

After returning from vacation, she'd spent the first few weeks presssing Giles for information on this new threat. In all honesty, she mainly just wanted an excuse to call Dean. She found that her efforts inevitably caused Giles to go into a ramble about the 'many valuable and irreplaceable books' that were lost during the destruction of Sunnydale High, the explosion at the old Watcher's headquarters, and the final complete implosion of Sunnydale itself. Once, Willow had been around and the two had gotten into an argument about making offsite, digital records of all of their remaining rare books on the occult. Giles found the idea 'unwise and distasteful', although Buffy felt that had more to do with his aversion to technology than anything. In any case, she had quit pestering the man because it only made him agitated. If he found out anything, she knew he would tell her immediately anyway.

"Shoot!" she exclaimed aloud, banging a fist on her desk. All of this thinking had distracted her, allowing the zombies to break through her line of peashooters and now she didn't have enough sunflowers to buy more. She may as well just quit. She needed to see what the girls were up to anyway. Unfortunately, rather than brooding, many of them seemed to spend their free time gossiping (which Buffy never did), backbiting, and plotting ways to sneak out and get into trouble. Surely, she hadn't been this obnoxious as a teen. With a deep sigh and an internal recitation of the Serenity Prayer, she rose from her seat and prepared to jump into the fray once again. Then her phone started ringing and she nearly had a heart attack when she saw who was calling. Dean Winchester, speak of the devil. She knew because she'd programmed in his number practically the
moment she'd gotten her new phone, so the name 'Dean' was now showing in flashing lights on her display, but she had to answer as if she didn't know who was calling. Casual Buffy, casual, nothing unusual here.

"Hello, this is Buffy," she answered, in what she hoped was an extremely neutral tone.

"Hey Buffy," replied the hunter's deep voice. "This is Dean. What's up?"

Buffy just managed to squelch the urge to ask 'Dean who?' Apparently the arrogant jerk thought he was extremely memorable.

"Not much," she answered instead. "Just sitting here in my office, doing some paperwork."

"Paperwork huh? That sounds exciting…uh… anyway, the reason I'm calling is that Sam and I might have a lead on that whole 'Mother of All' business."

"Really?" she asked curiously. "What did you find out?"

"Actually, we were hoping you could tell us. It's a thing really… a dead thing… it basically told us it was one of the old bitch's kids. We were hoping your people could dissect it or something, maybe give us a lead." He cleared his throat and paused for a moment before continuing. "We could bring it to Cleveland… if that's okay with you."

"You're bringing me a corpse!" Buffy asked. She was so nervous and excited that the question came out sounding a little harsh.

"Only a small corpse," Dean replied uncertainly (Dammit Sam, he thought, I told you this was a stupid idea). "It's like a worm, or a slug… or I don't know… It fits in a mason jar. If you think it's a waste of time then no problem… I'm sure you've got a lot going on."

The fact that Dean now sounded unsure of himself gave Buffy more confidence.

"No, seriously, bring it by," she replied, in a positive yet not overly excited tone. "We don't know anything, so I'm sure Giles would be thrilled. Besides, Willow loves any excuse to get down with the beakers and the Petri dishes and stuff. When do you think you'll get here?" she asked casually.

"Well, we're in South Dakota right now. It's a good eighteen hours drive. If we leave in the next hour or two, we should be there by tomorrow evening."

"Ok," she said, still going for a neutral tone. "Do you need directions?"

"I've got it," Dean replied, with a small chuckle. "I don't wanna get lost."

"I forgot you were so funny," she said sarcastically, although she was sure he could tell she had a smile on her face.

"Well anyway," Dean said after a slightly awkward pause. "I guess we'll call ya when we get into town."

"Sounds good," Buffy replied, unsure of how to end the call. "We'll… uh… see ya when ya get here."

"Later then."

"Bye," Buffy said simply, before hanging up the phone and proceeding to jump up and down in excitement. She needed to talk to Willow, she needed to go shopping, and she sure as hell needed to
take Giles up on his offer of a night off. She absolutely had to get some sleep, she was afraid she was starting to look a little like the demons she'd been fighting.
Don't Look Back

Chapter Notes

A/N: I need to give a big thanks to my loyal beta reader isugirl, I forgot to do that last chapter (bad me). The chapter is named after the title of a Queen song from the album Jazz (1978). I don't know if I mentioned this before, but as a salute to the Supernatural verse, I plan on naming each chapter after a classic rock song or album. I don't picture the Winchesters as being particularly big Queen fans (especially Dean), although I myself enjoy them. You'll see later in the chapter why I felt it would be fitting to name this installment after one of their songs. Hope you enjoy!

Sam was seriously contemplating murder. He'd miss his brother (eventually), but it was quickly becoming a matter of self-preservation. The past eight hours in the car with the man had been some of the most miserable he'd ever had to endure, which was saying a lot. Currently, Sam was suffering through the third ear-piercing rendition of the chorus to Bad Company's Shooting Star (the 'nah, nah, nah, nah…' portion was particularly painful). Amazingly, Dean's ability to carry a tune didn't seem to be improving with practice and he'd had plenty of practice. He'd already worked his way through most of his tape collection and had now moved on to singing loudly and obnoxiously to whatever was playing on the local classic rock station. Sam had tried several times to turn down the volume, but it only made his brother more determined. Each time, Dean would crank the stereo even louder and his singing would somehow manage to go even further off-key. Sam had gotten one small break from the assault on his hearing, but he wasn't sure it had been an improvement.

A few hours earlier they'd stopped at a gas station that was attached to a greasy-spoon type diner. Dean had insisted on getting their food to go and Sam soon learned why. Instead of his usual cheeseburger, his brother had ordered a tuna melt with extra onions and a ginormous order of onion rings. Hours later, the car still smelt strongly of tuna fish and raw onion, and every few minutes Dean would pick up his empty soft drink cup and make a sucking noise that was worse than nails on a chalkboard. His big brother was obviously being annoying on purpose and he was damn good at it. Sam knew that Dean preferred to be the boss and didn't like being coerced into things, but still, dude was just being childish. After all, it wasn't like Sam was forcing him to go to Lilith Fest or to a taping of The View. They were going to Cleveland to meet with the woman Dean was secretly pining after for God's sake. Sam was doing this for him and while he didn't expect gratitude, he certainly hadn't expected his brother to behave like such a jackass. Apparently, the old saying about 'good deeds never going unpunished' was more accurate than he thought.

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Buffy's apartment was only a couple of blocks away from Council headquarters, so she decided to drop by on her way back from the mall. It was around 8 p.m. and fully dark out, but she thought she may still be able to catch Giles before he left for the day. He often stayed late reading, researching, and answering voice mails and emails. He could do that at home, but he always claimed he'd be too tempted to watch television or, God forbid, get some actual sleep. To tell the truth, Giles probably needed a day off worse than she did. He'd been going nonstop, seven days a week ever since they'd left Sunnydale. Being head of the Council had turned out to be much less glamorous than Buffy would've imagined. So, it was with little surprise that she saw his car was still parked in front of the main entrance. She pulled in beside him and made her way inside.
Buffy stood for a minute, leaning against the doorway to her Watcher's office. He hadn't noticed her standing there because he appeared to be absorbed with pounding on his keyboard and muttering under his breath. Buffy cleared her throat and he finally looked up at her. She noted that the dark circles under his eyes appeared heavier than usual and his brow was crinkled. He looked surprised to see her, but gave her a warm smile and ushered her inside with a wave of his hand.

"So, what did the keyboard do?" she asked. "Should I introduce it to Mr. Pointy?"

"Kennedy," he replied with a sigh. "She's continually pushing for some outrageous expenditure and griping about every bit of policy." He removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose before continuing. "And of course, she has an abundance of helpful suggestions," he added bitterly. "She's grown quite tiresome."

"I find that hard to believe," Buffy replied with a clearly implied 'I told you so'.

"I suppose I could always relieve her of her position in Scotland and call her back to the States."

Buffy smiled, she knew Giles was teasing her. "Sounds like a great idea," she stated. "Of course, I'll be retiring to a secret desert island."

"As will I," he agreed dryly. "So tell me," he continued, changing the subject, "what brings you by on your night off?"

"Just checking in," she replied, taking a seat in one of the chairs sitting in front of his desk. "Wanted to make sure there were no new fires in need of my stompy foot."

"Only the usual, there's no need to worry. You should be out enjoying your night off."

"I'm not the only one who needs a night off," Buffy observed, noting the lines of fatigue on Giles' face.

"That will happen only in the event that the Council becomes fully staffed again," he replied tiredly. "So mark your calendar, because I'm planning a delightful Holiday in the year 2050… of course, I'll likely be too dead to fully appreciate it."

Buffy frowned in sympathy. The old Council had been a bunch of stuffy old jerk-faces, but it turned out that they weren't so easily replaceable. Surprisingly, you couldn't just put an ad in the paper and expect to find qualified candidates with an extensive knowledge of the supernatural. The few people who applied had been good for nothing more than a few laughs. In fact, they were all completely and utterly insane, but at least it had been entertaining.

"I did have a question for you," she began hesitantly (Buffy felt guilty asking Giles for anything while he was so obviously stressed).

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"Well, remember I told you about those hunters, the Winchesters, coming in tomorrow night. I was thinking maybe the Council could pay for their stay while they're here. I mean, they are coming to help us out and it's a really long drive…"

"That's...," Giles said, attempting to interrupt.

"AND," she continued quickly, cutting off her Watcher, "the car they drive is like a hundred-years-old. It probably only gets two miles to the gallon."
"Buffy," he attempted again.

She cut him off again, her voice taking on a pleading tone. "Please Giles. I remember what it was like not to get paid for this job and you know I'm still just a tiny little bit bitter about it. I just thought it would be nice if the Council showed them some appreciation is all."

"If you'd allow me to get a word in, I would tell you to make the reservations."

"Really!"

"Yes, of course. Just put them up at our usual place. As you said, they are trying to help us."

"Thank you," Buffy beamed. "You're the best king of the Council ever. I'd even wear it on a t-shirt."

Giles smiled at his Slayer and shook his head fondly.

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"I just find it a bit odd that you're so excited over a couple of hunters coming to town. Honestly, they're normally a fairly crude lot. In fact, the last time you met one, I seem to remember you turning the barrel of his rifle into a pretzel."

"Well, I didn't like that guy," she replied with a shrug. "He was a stupid jerk… but, I like the Winchesters, so this is different."

"You'll have to tell me which one it is you fancy," he said, still smiling. "That way I'll be sure not to embarrass you too badly in front of him."

"What did Willow tell you?" Buffy asked anxiously. "She didn't say anything about what she saw in Arizona did she? Because nothing really happened there… really." The Slayer paused, her eyes narrowing. "I'm going to kill her," she stressed.

"No one's told me anything," he said, raising his brows curiously. "However, it is a bit obvious from the way you've been behaving that something is going on. You don't normally rush out to buy a new outfit every time we receive a lead."

"I actually bought three," Buffy admitted sheepishly, "and a new pair of shoes. Willow's coming over tonight to help me decide which one I should wear tomorrow."

"I see," he stated, one brow still raised. "My apologies then, obviously you're just terribly dedicated to your research."

"You're forgiven," she replied smiling. "And his name is Dean. Just remember, you said you wouldn't embarrass me."

"I'll try very hard not to seem overly British," Giles stated with a smirk.

"Good," Buffy chirped happily as she rose from the chair. "I'll leave you to your hate mail then. I need to go call Dean and tell him not to make any reservations." Before she walked out the door, she added sternly, "Don't stay here too late."

The fact that the radio station they were listening to was playing *Bohemian Rhapsody* was simply more proof that the world hated Sam Winchester. Dean had never been a fan of Queen, but apparently he was willing to overlook that fact, due to the potential for maximum annoyance that
particular song provided. Between the volume of the stereo and Dean's 'singing', it took a few moments for it to register with Sam that someone was trying to call his brother's cell. He tried to get Dean's attention, but the man was purposefully pretending not to hear anything he had to say. Finally, he gave up, turned off the radio, and answered his brother's phone without even bothering to check the caller id (more than likely it was just Bobby anyway).

"What?" he asked, snapping irritably into the phone. "Oh, hi Buffy," he said politely, once he realized who was calling. "No, this is Sam, actually. Sorry about the way I answered… it's been a long drive."

"Give me my phone," Dean demanded beside him.

Sam just ignored his brother. He'd been a huge pain in the ass all day. He wasn't in the mood for his orders right now.

"I'm good," he continued. "How about you?"

"I said give me the phone Sam," his brother repeated tightly.

Sam just shook his head, smirked, and gave Dean the finger.

"Ow!" he exclaimed in surprise when his brother socked him in the arm and then roughly snatched the phone out of his hand. "What the hell is your problem?"

Dean just returned the rude hand gesture and put the phone to his ear.

"Hey Buffy," he said (trying to keep his anger at Sam out of his voice). "Nothing," he replied in answer to a question on the other end of the line. "Sam's just being a dick." Dean then listened quietly for a moment. "No, you don't need to do that," he replied. "I've got it covered… I'm sure," he added firmly after another pause. "Listen, I'll talk to you later okay? I need to find a place for us to hole up for the night. Yeah," he said, turning to give his brother a glare, "it's been a really long drive. I'll get up with you tomorrow… Yeah, you too… See ya."

"I'm a dick!" Sam exclaimed after his brother had hung up the call. "Me? Seriously? Dude, I'm not the one who's been yowling like a tortured cat for almost nine hours straight."

Dean checked his rearview mirror and when he saw that no one was behind him, he slammed on the brake, turned the wheel sharply to the right, and skidded to a stop on the gravel shoulder.

"Get out Sam!" he growled as he climbed out of the driver's seat and slammed the door. "We'll go ahead and settle this right here."

Sam climbed out and followed his brother toward the back of the car. "What the hell is your deal?" he demanded. "You've acted like a complete jackass all day and now you wanna… what? Throw down on the side of the road?"

Dean stood with his fists clenched at his sides, his jaw set tightly. "I can't believe you'd do this to me," he stated.

"Do what? I don't know what you're talking about." Sam was confused as hell, his brother was seriously pissed off at him and, on top of that, he actually looked hurt.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. There are billions of girls out there Sam, if you're that horny, pick one!"
"Oh man, is that what this is about? You really think I'm trying to get with Buffy?" Sam started laughing a little, he couldn't help it. His brother had never accused him of trying to take a girl away from him before. This whole situation was just weird and almost comical, but even so, he made sure to keep a wary eye on his brother's fists.

"You're the one who said you wanted to go to Cleveland and get laid," his brother accused angrily. "Buffy is pretty much the only chick we know there, so it doesn't take a genius."

"I never said I wanted to go there and get laid. YOU said that. Okay," he conceded, "I did mess with you a little, but I was just trying to get you to stop acting like such a dumbass and admit you want to see her. Damn Dean! I can't believe you'd even accuse me of something like that!"

"Sorry," Dean mumbled, looking down at the gravel in embarrassment.

"I'm not gonna pretend it doesn't sting a little that you don't seem to trust me," Sam began, "but I'd take it a whole lot more personally if you'd done anything in the past two months that even approached rational behavior."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sam sighed and leaned against the trunk of the Impala. His brother no longer looked like he wanted to tear his head off, so he felt it was safe to let down his guard. "Dude, you've been on an epic binge ever since we got back from Arizona. You've been drinking like a fish and screwing any girl that can even claim to be attractive… and then, when you think nobody's looking, you sit around and stare at that picture of Buffy. What part of that makes sense?"

Dean wished he could just disappear. "What the hell are you doing going through my stuff?" he countered accusingly. He was both pissed off at Sam for spying on him and desperately hoping he could deflect this conversation with a show of anger.

"I haven't been going through your stuff. You sent that picture from my phone, remember? I'm not trying to bust your balls here man. I'm actually worried about you."

"Sam, please don't start," Dean said almost pleadingly. He was staring at the ground again, refusing to meet his brother's eyes. "I'm sorry," he continued, "I shouldn't have accused you. I'm an asshole, okay? Can't we just agree on that and drop this already."

"No Dean, we can't drop it. This isn't about you being an asshole, because obviously that's a given. I'm talking about the fact that every day that goes by you get more and more like Bobby. I love the guy, you know I do, but I don't want to end up like him and I sure as hell don't want you to either."

"I'm not gonna end up like Bobby," his brother scoffed.

"Really? Because it seems like you're well on your way." Sam paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "No matter what you say, I know that thing with him and Ellen bothered you just as much as it did me, but that should make you realize that you can't afford to piss away your chances."

"My chances with Buffy you mean?" Dean asked bitterly. "Dude, I don't have a chance with her. I haven't seen her in months. She's probably seeing somebody, plus what do I have other than a car and a few hundred bucks I won in a poker game? Besides…"

"Besides what?" Sam interrupted. "You're scared of getting hurt? She's not Lisa. I don't know exactly what happened there, but I think it's a safe bet that it had something to do with you being a hunter."
"That didn't help," Dean admitted, "and she wasn't wrong. It's not fair to risk someone's life like that. She has a kid to think about. Anyway, this has nothing to do with Lisa. Why do you always have to over-analyze everything?"

Sam ignored the question and continued on with what he wanted to say. "This is a totally different situation Dean. Buffy's a Slayer. She risks her life every day doing pretty much the same thing we do. I don't see how you'd have the same problems."

"Sam."

"Dean," his brother echoed back in the same tone. "It's okay to want something for yourself," he continued. "I know you've never believed that, but it's true."

"You don't get it," Dean replied, gritting his teeth in frustration.

"I do get it," Sam disagreed. "You're not as mysterious as you think you are. You still believe you don't deserve to be happy because of what happened in hell. Am I right?"

"That's not a little thing Sam. I was a monster! You don't know the half of it. I can't just pretend it never happened."

"I know you can't," his brother agreed sincerely, "but you can forgive yourself. God knows you can forgive other people. Look at what I've done and you forgave me. It doesn't get much worse than setting Satan loose on the world. Would you say you don't think I deserve to be happy again?"

Dean sighed. "You know I'd never say that."

"Of course you wouldn't," Sam stated. "Come on man, give yourself a chance. That's all I'm asking. I went to all this trouble to setup this flimsy excuse to go to Cleveland. The least you can do is try and make something of it."

Dean smiled a little. "So you do know bringing them that ugly little bastard is a waste of time?"

"It might not be a total waste of time," his brother shrugged. "I guess there's always a chance they could get something out of it. But yeah, I was reaching. I totally pulled that one out of my ass."

"Not bad Sammy. You might actually be able to run a decent con one day."

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"Yay," Buffy declared as she flopped down on her couch wearing a pair of sweats and a tank. "The fashion crisis has been averted."

"Chalk up another one for the good guys," Willow agreed. "We can fight evil and make sure you're the best dressed Slayer in town. Nothing can defeat us."

"Thank you Will," Buffy replied with a sincere smile. "I really do appreciate you putting up with my spaz-fest. I know you think I'm a complete idiot."

"You're not an idiot. You're just excited and I happen to think it's cute."

"Does 'cute' mean delusionally desperate in your world?"

"You're not delusional," Willow stressed. "We've been over this and I remain firmly convinced that Dean's only coming here to see you... and if you persist in disagreeing I may have to curse you," she scolded, shaking her finger in a show of false sternness. "Seriously Buffy, when was the last time
you brought one of your kills home to study?"

"Never," she admitted, "but that doesn't mean this isn't a real lead. Maybe they're just as desperate as we are?"

"I might buy that if it weren't for the whole 'I'm too proud to let the Council pay for my stay' thing. Please," she said with an eye-roll, "that's just male posturing at its most obvious. Add that to the fact that his brother just happened to call Dawn today - out of the clear blue - and ask all kinds of questions about you two." Willow stopped talking and shook her head in disbelief. "That totally equals the fact that they're running a con on us Buffy… and a very poorly executed one too. Men can be ridiculously simple," she observed. "It almost makes me consider switching teams."

"Maybe," she agreed. "But I still wonder. I mean, if he couldn't deal with the weirdness that surrounded me in Arizona, what's he gonna do when he sees the Hellmouth? This place is pretty much the pinnacle of weird."

"Once again, we've already been over this. I don't think his freak-and-flee that night had as much to do with you as you think. There's some big secret-keeping going on between him and his brother. Plus, I told you that mark on his shoulder meant he'd been touched by some major mojo. I'm convinced there are extenuating circumstances."

"Yeah, I guess so," the Slayer said thoughtfully. "I told you he knew something about the non-pocalypse didn't I?"

"No!" Willow exclaimed with a hard push to her friend's shoulder. "How could you keep this from me? You have to tell me now. I don't care if it takes all night."

"Well you better make a pot of coffee then, because this entire story may take an entire two seconds. "Let's see, it went something like this," she began, taking a dramatic pause before adding, "there were a bunch of douche bags and it sucked."

"That's it?" Willow asked in disappointment. "Douche bags? Wow, that's just incredibly eloquent… and even worse, so not informative."

"That's Dean, Mr. Silver Tongue. Short on details, long on eloquence."

"Sounds like it."

"Anyway," Buffy said, "If you're right and this is all a devious plot and not a legitimate business trip, we need to come up with our own underhanded plan."

"Like what?" her friend asked excitedly. "Does it involve code words?"

"I was thinking something more simple… dinner actually. But I do want to plan ahead. I want it to be a group thing. You know, just in case I'm wrong and Dean has absolutely no interest in me. If I've got some backup, I won't feel so loser-y." Buffy paused for a moment before continuing uncertainly. "I was thinking you could go with us… with Sam actually. Not as a date," she added hurriedly, "just as a friend. I don't want him to feel like a third wheel. He's really nice Willow, I know he was acting a little funny when you met him, but I think you'd like him. He's super polite and I'm sure he wouldn't try anything."

"I don't think that's such a good idea… It's not Sam," she stressed. "It's… well... I just don't think Dean is my biggest fan… because of, you know. Anyway, I think it would be better if you took somebody else." Willow paused for a moment to think before adding, "Hey, Faith is supposed to be coming to town tonight, she's always up for a good time. Plus, I'm sure Xander and Allie would go
with you guys too. That way you’d have extra support."

"I don't want Faith to go," Buffy replied with a pout.

"You still don't trust her?"

"No, it's not that. It's just… she's walking sex Will. You know that. I'm afraid Dean will take one look at her and forget I'm alive."

"You're sexy too," Willow stressed. "If I had to choose, I'd pick you… Wait a minute," she said with a cringe. "That sounds kind of bad. I don't mean… Well you know, that would just be too ick… like incest."

"It's okay," Buffy smiled, "I get it."

"I'm just trying to say you shouldn't feel threatened by Faith. You two are different, but that doesn't mean you're not just as attractive. If Dean doesn't flip out when he sees you in that outfit, he's just not Buffy-worthy. Besides, I'm sure his brother would have a lot more fun with Faith," Willow added suggestively.

"Yeah, Faith probably would enjoy getting her hooks into Sam. Of course, Dawn did have a major crush on him… Oh well," Buffy shrugged, "she does seem really into that new guy of hers. Oh I don't know what to do… Are you sure you won't go?" she asked her friend again. "Pretty please with little chocolate sprinkles on top."

"No Buffy. I seriously believe Dean would feel a whole lot more comfortable if I wasn't around."

"He just needs to get to know you. I'm sure he'll love you. Everybody loves Willow."

"I have a feeling he might be an exception to that rule. Amazing as that sounds. But you don't need to worry about that now. You just need to trust me. Like I said before, I'm sure Xander will go. He can wear the Willow-hat. He has full Scooby credentials, plus he's a guy. Guys like to have other guys around. I think it's a sports thing. Anyway, I'm doing this with your best interests in mind. Again, you need to stop with the arguing and heed my wisdom."

"What if I gave you a kitten?" Buffy offered while trying to look as pitiful as possible.

"No," Willow stated firmly. "And stop looking at me that way. I'm completely impervious to sulky, lost puppy-dog-face."
Hot for Teacher

Chapter Notes

The chapter title is from the Van Halen album 1984, released in (you guessed it) 1984.

It was almost 5 p.m. by the time Buffy got the call she'd been waiting for. The Winchesters were on the outskirts of Cleveland and should arrive at Council Headquarters in about an hour. It seemed the brothers were no longer fighting, because Dean was much less moody than he'd been the night before. In fact, he actually sounded more like the flirt she remembered. Maybe Willow was right about their trip being less about business and more about other stuff.

When she'd arrived at work that morning, she found that her best friend had already talked to Xander. He and his girlfriend were all set to play the role of supportive chaperones by going out on the town with her and the Winchesters. Buffy tried one last time to convince Will to come along, but she was still resolve-girl and wasn't budging. So, she went ahead and invited Faith, hoping she wouldn't live to regret it. The brunette Slayer had reluctantly agreed to take one for the team, but emphasized that her 'date' better watch himself or suffer the painful and bone-breaking consequences. For some reason, Faith seemed utterly convinced that she was being setup with a former Lynyrd Skynyrd roadie. Apparently, she'd met quite a few hunters on her travels and had, so far, not managed to find one worth gettin' sweaty for.

At the moment, Buffy was critically appraising herself in the bathroom mirror. She'd ended up bringing her new outfit with her to work and waited until the last minute to get dressed (hoping to ensure it didn't get wrinkly or stained). She was now perfectly coifed with her hair in a loose up-do, but she was beginning to second-guess her fashion choices. The unanimous wardrobe decision of the night before had been in favor of the all-black outfit, which consisted of a pair of snug fitting capri-pants that ended just below the knee, a low-cut silk top that was tapered at the waist, and a pair of peep-toe heels. Under the bright fluorescent lights of the bathroom, the top looked much more revealing than it had last night. Of course, the medieval torture device commonly known as a push-up bra was partly to blame. The rest of the blame fell on the pendant Willow had brought her that morning. It was a large, deep-red garnet on a silver chain. Her friend had told her that the stone was supposed to instill self-confidence, but Buffy liked it because she felt the color would provide a nice contrast against the black clothing. Now that she was wearing it, however, she found that the length of the chain meant the pendant would lie just barely at the top of her cleavage. It was like a flashing red neon sign that screamed 'look at the boobies'. She didn't want to hurt Will's feelings by refusing to wear the necklace, so she decided she'd go show her the final results - confident she'd make the call that it would have to go.

Rush hour traffic hadn't been as thick as the Winchesters had assumed it would be, meaning they were almost twenty-minutes ahead of schedule when they pulled into Council Headquarters. The lack of heavy traffic, along with the fact that Dean had refrained from singing for the entire day, had made the last half of the trip much more pleasant than the first. The complete absence of singing was unusual since the older Winchester was famous for his vocal stylings, however, Sam wasn't about to complain. It was obviously Dean's way of making up for the way he'd behaved the day before.
Even without considering the whole 'singing' thing, Sam noted that his brother's attitude had vastly improved. He was hopeful that, for once, Dean may have actually listened to what he had to say. Of course, it wasn't like his brother was openly talking about Buffy or his desire to see her. That sort of behavior would've only convinced Sam that he was dealing with Shapeshifter-Dean. No, the real Dean was more subtle, but if you knew him the way his younger brother did, it was obvious that he was looking forward to arriving in Cleveland. For one thing, they'd eaten breakfast and were packed up and on the road by 8 a.m., which was unusual unless they had pressing business. Another dead giveaway was that Dean's cocky swagger was firmly in place. It was a known fact that his brother's level of bravado usually tended to be in direct proportion to how nervous or frightened he secretly was.

Dean pulled the Impala into the empty space beside Buffy's Camaro, killed the engine, and in a very un-Dean-like move he actually appeared to give a quick check to his hair in the rearview mirror. On their way into the building, he insisted that Sam carry the jar containing the Kahn Worm, saying it looked way too much like a lame science experiment (obviously, that meant his geeky little brother needed to be the one to hold it). Sam went along with that plan, silently enjoying his big brother's sudden descent into teenage-male courtship behavior, although truthfully, he'd never seen Dean act this way even when he was an actual teenager.

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Just as Buffy stepped out of the bathroom to complete her mission of finding Willow and ditching the pendant, she nearly ran right into Faith and Xander. Her sister Slayer was engrossed in giving the down and dirty details of her recent encounter with five redneck vamps she'd taken on in Alabama. According to her, those vampires were some sort of mutants who could go out in sunlight and were immune to stakes. Buffy was hoping they would both be so engrossed in the story that they would fail to notice her, but she wasn't that lucky. The click, click of her heels against the wooden floor gave her away and they turned to see her.

Immediately, Xander's eyes bugged and his mouth fell open. All he managed to squeak out was a weak, "Buff?"

Faith strode forward with her signature slinky strut and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Damn B," she exclaimed, "you look hot! Seriously girl, you've got a whole classy but trashy thing goin' on."

"Trashy?" Buffy groaned. "Trashy wasn't in the plan. I was supposed to be pretty with a tiny hint of danger. You really think I look trashy?"

"I think you look sexy as hell... and yeah there's a touch of bad girl, but like I said - still classy. It suits you. You're sorta like a naughty school teacher. How much did you pay for all this anyway?"

She asked as she rubbed the silky material of Buffy's top. "I bet it was wicked expensive."

"Put it this way, I'll probably be living off of peanut butter and Ramen Noodles for the next two weeks."

Faith peered past Buffy and broke out in a smile. "Those Ramen Noodles are gonna taste like prime-cut steak if the look on that guy's face is what you were goin' for."

Buffy turned her head to see the Winchester brothers walking up the hall towards her. She caught Dean with his mouth open in an uncanny imitation of Xander, but he quickly recovered and gave her one of those confident smiles she recalled so well. Damn, he was even better looking than she remembered.
"Those are the hunters?" Faith asked under her breath. "No friggin way!" she replied to her friend's affirmative nod. "They sure as hell don't look like hunters."

Xander, who had finally recovered from his shock, nodded his head toward Dean and whispered. "Was he raised on a horse?"

"Xander!" Buffy whispered back, giving him a sharp elbow to the ribs.

"What?" he replied innocently as he rubbed his side. "Don't tell me I'm the only person who's ever noticed how bow-legged that guy is."

"I don't think our girl was lookin' that low," Faith grinned. "I'm thinkin' she was focused just a little bit further north. Weren't ya B?"

Buffy answered her friend's question with a wide-eyed, but silent plea for mercy. Of all the people who could've been standing here when Dean showed up, it just had to be Faith and Xander. One, she would have been able to handle, but both? This was going to be an interesting night.

She made the introductions and was very pleased that Dean didn't linger too long on Faith. He did quirk an eyebrow and gave an appreciative nod to her red leather pants and matching bustier, but quickly returned his attention to her.

"You look awesome!" he praised enthusiastically, while not even bothering to hide the fact that he was ogling her chest.

Faith seemed almost as pleased as Dean was, and like him, she wasn't shy about openly appraising the goods (which, in her case, happened to be Sam). She reached out and tested one of his biceps by giving it a firm squeeze. "Nice," she nodded, "very nice. I'll have to take you out on patrol so I can get a taste of your skills. You ever hunt on a Hellmouth before?"

"Uh… no," Sam answered absently (he was still too focused on all the leather to fully participate in the conversation).

Meanwhile, Xander was squirming uncomfortably beneath the cloud of hormones that had suddenly filled the hallway. "Ladies," he interrupted loudly, "Invisi-guy here thinks we should move this little party into Giles' office. Remember Giles?" he asked as he lifted his hand in the air to indicate height, "Yay tall, English, loves to make with the research?"

"Sorry Xander," Buffy replied, feeling her face growing a little hot. "You're right, we should go check-in with him," she said as she reluctantly tore her eyes away from Dean. "He's probably waiting for us."

As soon as the group entered the Watcher's office, Buffy came face-to-face with Willow, who had been standing in front of Giles' desk chatting. Willow's eyes immediately went wide when they fell on her friend's chest.

"Whoa, look at those!" she remarked automatically before catching herself and diverting her gaze to a pile of books on Giles' desk. "Books," She added awkwardly. "L-look at those books. Giles, you know how I feel about books lying around all willy-nilly," she scolded. "You should put them back on the shelf when you're done, otherwise no one will be able to find them." She scooped up the stack of books, ignoring the puzzled expression on the Watcher's face, and grabbed Buffy by the arm.

"Come over here and help me make sure these are shelved correctly," she urged. "Somebody has to respect the good ole Dewey Decimal System."

"I was a librarian you know," Giles remarked to Willow's back. "I'm perfectly aware of where my
"Where did those come from?" Willow asked quietly, once she'd pulled Buffy aside. "They weren't there last night. I'd have noticed."

"I'm wearing a different bra," Buffy explained softly. "I wanted to have a little 'pop', so I went with a push-up."

"Well you've got 'pop'," her friend confirmed, "and, oh Buffy, that pendant. . . I'm so sorry. I didn't realize it would be a flashy booby-beacon."

"I know," she pouted. "Faith said I look like a naughty school teacher."

"No, that's not..." Willow began before shrugging and admitting hesitantly, "Well yeah, she kinda has a point."

"Wonderful."

"On the plus side, I'm pretty sure Dean appreciates it," Willow added encouragingly. "He's certainly not listening to anything Giles is saying."

Buffy glanced up to see the hunter looking at her. When he realized he'd been caught staring, he gave her a sly grin and winked.

Willow quickly shoved the stack of books into the bookshelf in no particular order. "Let's get back over there," she whispered. "Just hold your head up and pretend it's normal for your boobs to be hanging out. He'll never know the difference."

When Buffy and Willow returned to the group, Giles was holding up the jar Sam had handed him and gazing at the contents with a critical eye.

"Buffy indicated that this creature spoke to you," he said in a voice that was almost doubtful. Before answering, Sam glanced at his brother for support, but Dean didn't seem at all interested in the conversation. He was too busy leering at Buffy, who had just stepped up beside him.

"It didn't really speak on its own," he began, suddenly feeling very foolish. "First, it had to crawl into a person's ear... after that, it could make them do or say anything it wanted. I'm guessing it would somehow tap into the brain of its human host."

Xander gasped excitedly. "It's a Kahn Worm, like in Star Trek II! Man, that one was my favorite."

"I prefer the one with the whales myself," Giles remarked absently as he continued to examine the jar.

"See," Dean said to his brother as he joined the conversation. "Some people get my Star Trek references."

Sam shook his head. "Dude, the fact that you even have Star Trek references is just disturbing."

"Hey, there were some hot chicks in those movies. Kirstie Alley looked pretty damn fine in that one."

"I'll have to back you up there," Xander stated. "Back in the day, old Kirstie could really pull off some Vulcan ears."
Faith rolled her eyes. "So what was slug-guy's big news bulletin?" she asked, hoping to head off the Star Trek Convention before it was too late.

"Apparently Big Mama prefers to go by 'Eve'," Dean replied, "and, oh yeah, she's pissed and we're all gonna die."

"How terribly original," Giles sighed. "Whatever happened to riddles and cryptic warnings?"

"Sorry Giles," Buffy said sympathetically. "I guess it's just another sign of the inevitable decline of Western civilization."

"Indeed," he agreed, glancing up at his Slayer and then quickly averting his eyes from her rather startling display of cleavage. "In any case, perhaps our search will be more fruitful if we look for information under the name of 'Eve'." He then took off his glasses and gave them a clean with the napkin inside his trouser pocket, hoping to avoid looking at Buffy's top, or lack thereof.

"That's what we were thinking," Sam replied, "but truth is, three of us have been on it for a solid week and we've got nothin'. So, I'm hoping you have some sources we don't."

Giles put his glasses back on. "Several years ago, I would have been extremely confident that we did. However, that was before we lost so many priceless volumes," he sighed sadly.

"That's awful," Sam commented sympathetically.

Buffy cringed when she heard Sam give Giles an opening to start ranting and raving about lost books again. They'd be here all night if he really got going. She tried, without luck, to catch Sam's eye, but he was on the other side of Dean and his eye level was much higher up than hers. She'd have to try the less subtle approach.

"Sam," she whispered as quietly as possible while reaching behind his brother to tug on his shirt tail.

The Watcher cut off mid-rant, having just begun to relate the meatier details of the destruction of Sunnydale High's library. "I can hear you Buffy," he said. "You may believe I'm, as you say, a thousand years old, but my hearing is still on top form."

Buffy shuffled her feet in embarrassment. "I just didn't want Sam to bring up painful memories," she offered weakly.

"Thank you for your concern," he replied dryly before clearing his throat, "Well then, now that we have some direction, Willow and I will get to work on sorting out whom, in fact, this 'Eve' is. Buffy," he said, addressing her without looking up. "Why don't you take Faith and Xander and show these two gentlemen a night on the town? Honestly, I think myself and Willow can get more done if we have fewer distractions around."

"Sounds like a plan to me boss," Faith replied with a sultry smile and a sideways glance at Sam. "I'm sure we can find something interesting to show 'em."

"Yeah," Xander added, realizing Giles was in on the game. "I bet Allie wouldn't mind grabbing a bite to eat, she's probably ready to get out of here for the day anyway. We could go to the fake Bronze."

"Are you sure you don't need a hand with the research?" Sam asked politely. "We'd be glad to help." Unfortunately, the word 'help' came out sounding more like 'yelp' because Faith had reached out and grabbed a handful of his ass at the same time that Dean brought his boot down on one of his feet. Xander, who was standing with Willow behind the group, thought this was all hilarious.
"Thank you for the offer," Giles replied graciously, pretending he hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary. "However, it is Friday night and I'm sure the past few days on the road have been extremely long for both of you."

"Extremely," Sam agreed tightly while giving his brother a nasty glare (it felt like his foot was broken).

"Then it's settled. Enjoy your evening. We'll call if we find anything that requires immediate attention… And Buffy," he continued, "don't feel obligated to patrol tonight. The older girls can take the lead out there, it will do them good to get out on their own every now and then."

"Are you sure?" she asked hopefully.

"I'm sure," Giles replied with a smile, making sure his eyes didn't drop below her face.

"Thank you Giles," Buffy gushed happily. "I'm really gonna look into ordering those King of Council t-shirts."

The two Slayers accompanied the Winchesters to the parking lot. Xander had gone to the clinic to meet his girlfriend, indicating they would catch up with them at the 'fake Bronze'. Buffy explained that Xander's girlfriend was the school nurse. Sam was extremely impressed by this and so was Dean, but for a different reason.

"Does the nurse have a sexy little outfit too?" he asked hopefully.

"No," Faith replied, jumping in before Buffy had a chance. "The Council's pretty old fashioned actually. They're afraid having naughty teachers AND naughty nurses would make this place too exciting. Sorry stud," she shrugged, "looks like you'll have to make-do with Buffy here… but I hear she's a helluva teacher… real big on discipline."

"I'm down with that," Dean replied as he met Buffy's eyes and grinned.

Buffy turned red, self-consciously averted her eyes from Dean, and seriously considered smacking Faith. She was already regretting the decision to bring her along.

Sam took pity on her and changed the subject. He had already experienced the fun of being the target of his brother and the brunette Slayer, who was apparently his female equivalent.

"So what's a 'fake Bronze'?" he asked. "What's wrong with the real one?"

Buffy shot Sam a grateful look. "The 'fake Bronze' is actually a club called 'The Hanger'," she explained. "It's close to the airport, hence the highly original name 'hanger'. The real Bronze currently resides at the bottom of a crater we once called Sunnydale. It used to be our favorite hangout, but obviously, we had to pick a new one."

"What kind of club?" Dean asked suspiciously, "Cause I don't dance."

Buffy grinned and patted the hunter on the arm. "It's okay, you don't have to dance," she soothed. "They have plenty of manly things, like beer and pool tables. I hear you can even play this game where you throw little pointy missiles at a target. If you miss, you just might be able to put someone's eye out."

"That sounds more like it," he agreed, feeling a tingle on his arm where Buffy had touched him. "But
trust me," he added, "I never miss a shot."

"That reminds me," Buffy said as she reached beneath Dean's shirt and pulled out his pistol, holding it up between her thumb and forefinger like it was some type of vermin. "You can leave this in your car."

He startled a little when he felt her hand reach into his waistband, only to protest when he realized what she was doing. "Hey, I need that!"

"No you don't," Buffy replied firmly. "This way, if you decide to start a fight again, we might not get kicked out at gunpoint."

"I can go to a bar without starting a fight," he said defensively.

"You'll have to prove that," she said, moving the gun farther away as he reached out for it.

"Come on B," Faith interrupted, "You can't leave the poor guy defenseless."

"He's not defenseless," she replied, causing Dean to smirk in smug satisfaction. "Plus, I'm almost 100% sure this isn't the only weapon he has on him. Yep," Buffy said as she pulled up his pant leg to reveal a large knife strapped around his calf. "What a surprise."

Faith barked a laugh. "Dude, you're blinding me. Have those legs of yours ever seen the light of day?"

Sam thought this was pretty funny as well, until his brother jerked the leg of his jeans back down and turned the tables on him.

"Sorry Padalecki. Unlike you, I don't have time to lie around in my tanning bed all day. Guess you get the title of sexy, bronzed Coppertone boy. Just wait 'till all the chicks see you rockin' the banana hammock."

Both Slayers thought this was an interesting revelation and turned to look at Sam curiously.

"It was a bizarre alternate reality," the younger Winchester replied in his defense. "I don't really have a tanning bed… or a banana hammock, really… and my name was Padalecki, not Padaleski," he emphasized to his brother.

"Whatever Jared," Dean smirked happily. "I'm sure Faith will be glad to let us know if you have any visible tan lines."

"Oh, trust me," she replied with a nod. "I'm all over it."

Sam didn't seem to know how to reply. He was actually wondering if he would even have a choice in the matter. It wasn't that Faith wasn't extremely hot, it was just damn – talk about aggressive.

The four had arrived at their cars and Dean went to open the Impala's trunk so he could stow the pistol away.

"This is your car?" Faith asked Sam. "It's hot! What is it a '67, '68?"

"A '67 and actually it's mostly Dean's. He's the one that's unnaturally obsessed with it anyway."

His brother ignored him as he propped up the trunk's false bottom with a sawed-off and shifted some weapons around.
"You ever try out the backseat?" Faith asked while giving Sam a suggestive grin.

"Oh, hell no!" Dean interrupted from the background. "Get a room. I'm not letting Gigantor mess up my baby's upholstery. *She'd be traumatized!* No amount of detailing can fix somethin' like that."

Buffy smiled at the realization that Dean hadn't changed his favorite hobby. He still, almost reflexively, cracked on his younger brother at every opportunity. She stepped closer to him and leaned over his shoulder, gazing curiously into the trunk as she handed him the confiscated pistol.

"I hope you don't ever get pulled over," she commented with a worried frown, "because Homeland Security would lock you guys up for life. *Ooh neat, is that a flamethrower?*" she asked excitedly, pointing to a bundle lying towards the back.

"Oh yeah," he grinned proudly. "We've got at least one of everything and two of most. I believe in being prepared."

"Damn!" Faith exclaimed, joining Buffy in admiring the contents of the Impala's trunk. "You boys are packin' some serious heat," she remarked, reaching out to touch a crossbow.

"Hey," Dean snapped. "No touching. You'll mess with my system."

"You're right," Faith remarked to Sam as she drew her hand back, "he is unnaturally obsessed."

"Told ya."

"So, what's the plan?" Dean asked as he closed and locked the trunk again. "You ladies wanna ride with us?"

"That sounds good," Buffy agreed. "I'll sit in the back with Faith. I'm sure Sam would appreciate not being all cramped-up back there. Car makers unfairly discriminate against the tall. You should write a letter."

"You sure?" Sam asked, noting the expression of disappointment on both Dean and Faith's faces.

"I'm sure," Buffy replied cheerfully - she had her back turned and didn't see how unpopular her decision was. "It's my duty as a short person."

"Okay," Sam shrugged. He would have more room in the front and - call him a prude - but he'd at least like to catch Faith's last name before he was completely tossed into the lion's den.

The parking lot of *The Hanger* was packed when the four arrived, but Buffy had spotted Xander's Corolla and was hopeful he'd gone ahead and found them a table. Fortunately, her old friend didn't disappoint. As they entered, she saw him waving from the back of the club, where he and his girlfriend were waiting at a large table. Once they'd wound their way through the crowd, Buffy introduced the Winchesters to Allie, who greeted them both warmly. She greeted Faith warily, however, looking both suspicious and intimidated at the same time. The two had only met a few times and Allie didn't seem to know how to take Faith. Buffy thought that was a little silly since Xander was obviously crazy about his girlfriend, who was the definition of cute. Allie wasn't any taller than Buffy, but she was curvier and had amazing blue eyes and really unruly, curly, brown hair. In contrast to the other two girls, she was still wearing her work scrubs, which were decorated with little dancing Snoopies. As always, she looked adorable, leaving Buffy to wonder why she found Faith so threatening. But then again, Buffy had been guilty of similar feelings herself. It seemed that the other Slayer's sultry good looks and over-the-top sexuality naturally placed her high
on most women's threat-radar.

"Does beer work for you guys?" Xander asked, addressing the Winchesters. "I'll get the first round, since I'm the man with the shiny new paycheck. I'm sure the Buffster would chip in too, but she spent her entire paycheck on that outfit," he teased.

"Good choice," Dean commented with a pleased and surprised smile, as he once again admired the view offered by Buffy's blouse.

Buffy wanted to disappear. After all the years Xander had spent surrounded by women, you'd think he'd stop making these epic blunders. Hadn't he learned that all outfits worn by women to impress men were theoretically just old rags salvaged from the back of the closet? At least Allie had quickly recognized the faux pas and Buffy was pretty sure (judging from the confused look on Xander's face) that she'd given him a good kick under the table for it.

"So," Xander continued, shrugging off the puzzling kick to his shin, "Do you two have a preferred flavor? I was just gonna get a pitcher of whatever's on tap, but I aim to please."

"Whatever's fine," Dean assured him. "As long as it's cold."

"What about you Buff? I'm guessing you're still voting 'no' on the beer."

"I'll have a white wine spritzer," she replied. "I'm feeling rebellious."

Dean teased Buffy. "Come on! What kind of a chick drink is that?"

"It's wine with club soda mixed in. The club soda gives it a fizzy little kick."

"You mean it waters it down?" he smiled.

"Yes, but in a fizzy, kicky way."

"You sure you won't have a beer with us?" Xander asked. "Beer good... foamy."

Buffy smirked at her friend. "That joke just never gets old with you does it?"

"Never," he agreed before looking up to greet the waitress who'd just arrived. He ordered Buffy her spritzer, a pitcher of beer with five mugs, an order of nachos supreme, and some hot wings.

Allie raised her hand to catch the waitress's attention before she walked away. "Actually, make that four mugs," she said. "I'll just have a glass of ginger ale."

"I can't believe my girl is making me drink alone," Xander remarked in a tone of false outrage. "You know that's the first sign of alcoholism."

"You're not alone," she smiled. "Plus, look at it this way – you won't have to worry about having too much, because I'll be the DD."

"So, you're saying I can get stinking drunk?"

"Don't push it," she warned.

The evening was going pretty well by Buffy's estimation. The only drawback was that, with all the company around, she wasn't able to talk to Dean about anything more substantial than the weather or
the best method for killing a wraith. However, the group thing had been Buffy's idea, so she didn't feel like she had the right to complain. At least Faith hadn't tried to move in on her territory, she seemed fully satisfied with saving her moves for Sam. The younger hunter looked like he was interested, flattered, and little scared all at once. Buffy was afraid the poor guy was going to be eaten alive.

Buffy's thoughts were interrupted by Allie's exclamation of disgust. It appeared Xander had sandwiched a couple of french fries between two cheese and chili covered nachos, drenched the whole thing in ketchup, sour cream and salsa, and then topped it all off with a jalapeno pepper.

"That looks appetizing Xan," Buffy remarked.

"I learned it from Dawn," he replied with his mouth full. "She calls it chili-cheese-fries-nachos-extraordinaire."

"That sounds like Dawn," she agreed.

"So, what's up with little sis?" Dean asked. "I guess she's givin' it the old college try."

"Oh yeah," Buffy confirmed. "It sounds like she's having big fun. I just hope she's actually been able to squeeze in a few classes between all the parties and the new boyfriend."

Allie giggled. "You mean her new evil-dark-wizard boyfriend?"

Both of the Winchesters frowned and looked critically at Buffy, obviously disappointed that she had allowed her baby sister to fall in with the wrong crowd.

"He's not a dark wizard," Buffy explained in an exasperated tone. "That's just Willow being Willow. She's convinced he looks too much like this guy from Harry Potter. What's his name?"

"Draco Malfoy," Xander answered. "And I have to admit, she has a point. He's way too blond and pale to be just a regular college guy. Maybe he's a vampire?"

"So you've met this guy?" Sam asked.

"No," Buffy replied, "but she's sent us some pictures. He's actually pretty cute and he's not a vampire," she added, scolding Xander. "I'm pretty sure Dawn would've picked up on a little detail like that."

"I don't know," he shrugged, "she may just be following in…"

Luckily Xander didn't get to finish this sentence because Allie had most definitely kicked him again… and hard.

"So what's her boyfriend's name again?" Allie asked, hoping to quickly get past Xander's near over-share.

Buffy smiled happily at the other girl, she was always so on top of things. "Frederick Russell Chamberlain, the third. They call him Russ."

"What the hell kind of name is that?" Dean asked. "That doesn't sound like somebody you'd meet in the hills of Tennessee."

"Sounds like some sort of yuppie spawn from Yale," Sam agreed.

Buffy shrugged. "Don't ask me. I stopped trying to find logic in the world years ago."
"It does lend some weight to Will's theory though," Xander remarked. "Just what is a guy like that doing at UT, huh? I think some shenanigans are afoot."

"Right," Buffy said with an eye-roll. "He's an evil-dark-wizard-vampire who got kicked out of Hogswaddle and had to find shelter among moonshiners. I think you're getting too wrapped up in Willow's delusions."

"Buff," Xander replied, "you really should take the time to educate yourself on Will's world. I recommend the movies. You probably don't learn everything — they're more like Cliff's Notes — but it's not as big of a commitment. Plus, as far as I'm concerned, the movies are a better value. There are only seven books, but they made eight movies."

Dean snorted a laugh and took another drink of his beer. "Yeah, let's all leave right now and go have a Harry Potter geek-fest," he said sarcastically.

"Don't knock it. If it weren't for those movies I'd have a magical eye right now instead of this fashionable accessory," Xander said with a point to his eye patch.


"See, that's exactly what I'm talking about. Ignorance is dangerous my friends. If you'd actually seen the movies, you'd understand why that's a very bad idea… very bad."

"What happened to your eye anyway?" Dean asked (missing his brother's shocked expression).

Xander didn't seem offended by the question, however. "Religious fanatic on steroids," he replied nonchalantly.

"Son of a bitch… that sucks. I hate those guys."

"He's not on my Christmas list and that's not only because Buffy cut him in half. I'll have to say religious-nutcase guys have edged ahead of bug people in my hierarchy of evil that must be avoided."

"These guys like bugs too," Buffy added cheerily. "When I met them they were hanging with the ant people and today they brought me a cute little worm."

"It's been a strange year," Sam offered with a shrug.

Buffy suddenly felt a slightly evil impulse to give Xander some payback for his big mouth (the two wine spritzers she'd had may have contributed to this desire).

"Xander almost lost his virginity to a giant praying mantis that was masquerading as our 10th grade Biology teacher," she stated with a mischievous grin.

"Dude!" Dean exclaimed in disgust.

"She didn't look like a praying mantis when she invited me to her house," Xander stressed, bristling a little at the girls' giggling.

"Mary Kay Letourneau type?" Dean asked with a knowing nod.

"Oh man, she was way hotter. Trust me, any red-blooded teenage male would've answered the call."

Faith smirked and put her hand on Xander's shoulder. "Well, you lucked out and got an even better
teacher for your first time around. Didn't ya?" she asked with a wink.

Buffy wanted to smack herself. She really hadn't meant to drag out this particular subject. Now Allie looked like she'd been punched in the gut and, to make matters worse, Dean actually raised his glass in a toast (which Buffy kicked him under the table for – it was apparently going around). Faith's revelation had quickly turned a very pleasant night out into an excruciatingly awkward situation. What made it so amazing was that Faith seemed puzzled over Allie's reaction. She apparently took it for granted that everyone shared the same casual attitude toward sex.

"How 'bout a game of pool?" Sam asked Faith in an obvious attempt to diffuse the situation.

Faith, who appeared to be confused and little embarrassed, quickly took him up on the offer and hurried away from the table with a very uncharacteristically awkward wave. This left Buffy and Dean alone with the other couple. Dean seemed really fascinated by the prospect of finishing off the last few bites of his burger, leaving Buffy to struggle to find something witty to say. Obviously, Allie hadn't known about this piece of Xander's past and she wasn't taking it well. She actually had tears in her eyes and Buffy had noticed earlier that she'd only picked at her dinner, which made her suspect there was something else going on as well. Xander attempted to put his arm around her shoulder, but she angrily shrugged him off and fled the table.

"I think we better call it a night," Xander said sheepishly as he watched his girlfriend hurry toward the exit.

"Oh God Xander…" Buffy began with a sympathetic frown on her face.

"It's okay," he said. "I should've told her about Faith a long time ago. It's just… well, there really isn't much to tell. Anyway… you two crazy kids have fun. I'll catch up with ya later. It was good to meet you man," he added, raising a hand to Dean.

"Yeah you too," he replied with a nod. "Take care dude… and thanks for the beer."

"Any time," Xander replied as he threw a couple of twenties on the table and then hurried off after Allie.

Sam was impressed with Faith's pool skills. He had beat her, but felt that had a lot to do with the fact that she often used too much force when she took a shot. With a little more practice and control, she just might give him a run for his money. In any event, she was definitely an interesting opponent. Each time it was her turn, she'd lean over the table seductively and provide him with a very intriguing view.

He was preparing to take the break shot for their second game when Faith nodded toward the table where his brother and Buffy sat alone talking.

"Those two are awfully pretty together," she remarked.

"I guess," Sam replied.

"No seriously, they remind me of a soap opera couple. Ya know… he's the bad boy with a deep, dark secret and she's the goody-two-shoes daughter of the local big cheese - who just happens to have an undercover jones for bad boys."

Sam laughed in surprise. "You sure know your soap plots."
"Hell yeah. I was lucky my mom kept a roof over my head as a kid, I wasn't about to push for cable. So, it was soaps or PBS… and I grew out of my Sesame Street phase pretty damn quick."

"Yeah, I guess that is one advantage of growing up in motel rooms. Even the really shitty ones usually have cable, but our dad did rent this crappy old house in Minnesota one winter. No cable and it was way too damn cold to do anything outside. My brother would never admit it, but he got totally addicted to General Hospital."

"I always kinda wanted a brother," Faith commented.

"You can borrow mine. Believe me, the charm will wear off really fast," he joked.

"I don't know, I always thought it would be nice to have somebody around. Anyway," she shrugged, "just ignore me, I'm being stupid."

"That's not stupid," Sam replied sincerely. "Honestly, I don't know what would've happened to me if I'd been an only child. Dean's a pain in my ass, but we have each other's back."

Faith looked away, feeling extremely uncomfortable with the serious turn in the conversation. "You know what I think?" she asked in a husky voice as she sidled up against Sam.

"No," Sam replied with a raised eyebrow. He was definitely interested in finding out though.

"I don't think a guy should be as pretty as your brother."

Sam laughed self-consciously. "I wouldn't tell him that, he'd be traumatized for life."

"I'm serious," Faith continued, pressing her body closer against him. "I like my men to look a little less perfect. Pretty just ain't my thing."

"What's your last name?" Sam asked with a smile.

"Lehane," she answered cautiously. "Why do you wanna know anyway?"

"Just curious."

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"So you and Xander…?" Dean asked in what he hoped was a casual tone.

"Never," Buffy replied, seeing this possible sign of jealousy as a positive sign. "We've always just been really good friends. I've known him since I was sixteen."

"That's cool," Dean replied in an off-hand manner.

"So what were you up to all summer?" Buffy asked curiously. She was pretty convinced by this point that he was interested, so she decided to be bold and push a little further. "I kinda thought you might call."

"Just busy with the job," he replied uncomfortably, not wanting to get into the grittier details. "You coulda called me you know... You had my number."

"Yeah right," she snorted. "After the great Buffy freak show that night, I wasn't pushing my luck. I was afraid you might take out a restraining order."

"What?" Dean exclaimed with a surprised laugh.
Buffy smirked and rolled her eyes. "Sure, like that was just average run-of-the-mill excitement for you. Remember Willow… and Dawn corrupting your brother?"

"Believe me sweetheart, that don't even begin to touch the level of crazy shit I'm used to. Remember Cas? He still likes to make his grand entrances and now we've got an even douchier angel that keeps popping up. This entire summer has been beyond sideshow freaky - alternate realities are just disturbing. Besides, the thing with Sam was actually kinda funny, in a really pathetic sorta way."

"So why didn't you call?" Buffy pushed cautiously.

"Dunno… I guess I thought you had enough going on without having to deal with some shady hunter and his problems. Anyway, I kinda figured you were seeing somebody by now."

"No, people don't set me up anymore," she admitted with an embarrassed laugh. "Xander tried bringing a guy to my birthday party a few years ago, but a demon stuck a sword through him. He survived… thank God, but that was pretty much the end of anybody trying to find a date for Buffy. I'm a liability."

"That guy was a wuss," Dean replied with a seductive half-smile as he leaned in closer. "It would take a whole hell-of-a-lot more than one lame-ass demon to scare me away."

"Oh really?" Buffy questioned as she also leaned in closer.

The pair had just begun kissing when they heard Faith give a whistling cat call from behind them.

"Would it be wrong to kill all of our friends and family?" Buffy asked in frustration.

"I'll gladly beat Sam's ass if it'll make you feel better," Dean offered while shooting a furious glare at his little brother.

Sam shrugged sheepishly and mouthed the word 'sorry'. Faith was less ashamed, however, and stood proudly waving a wad of money in the air.

"What's that?" Buffy asked with a puzzled expression on her face.

"Oh, about five hundred bucks," she replied as she inhaled the scent of the cash.

"So what was the con?" Dean asked with a smirk.

Faith hooked an arm around the younger hunter's waist. "Sam was my poor drunk boyfriend who just couldn't win a game of pool to save his life… at first, anyway. You know for such a big guy your brother really has the sweet and harmless act nailed."

"Yeah, that's his specialty."

Faith shot Sam a sultry grin and split the wad of bills in two, stuffed half in her cleavage and held the other half up for him to take.

"Hey, I'm the one who actually won the game," he protested half-heartedly. "I should get more than half."

"Then come and get it," she challenged.

"I'd be careful Sammy," his brother warned. "I'm pretty sure she can take you."

"Only in a good way," Faith promised, practically purring, before turning her attention to her sister
Slayer. "So B, what do ya say we take these two out and give 'em a tour of the Hellmouth - Slayer style. You know… warm 'em up for the main course."

Buffy blushed at Faith's bluntness. "Uh… I guess we could," she replied, giving Dean a questioning glance.

"Oh hell yeah," Dean agreed enthusiastically. "Good times. What are we hunting?"
"So, what's the lead?" Dean asked as he rifled through the Impala's trunk, pausing to pass a pistol and extra clip to his brother.

"Lead?" Buffy asked in a puzzled voice.

"Yeah," Dean replied, tucking his pistol back in his waistband before turning to face her. "If we're hunting vamps, don't we need a lead? Mysterious deaths? Freaky accounts of people being attacked by their own barbeque forks? A general idea of where the hell we're going?"

The Slayers exchanged glances and Faith barked a laugh. "You've obviously never hunted on a Hellmouth before champ," she said sarcastically.

Buffy met the hunter's irritated gaze and linked her arm through his attempting to smooth over Faith's harsh approach. "I was thinking we'd take a walk around the block," she said, smiling up at him.

"Nice try, beautiful," Dean nodded, "but your sweet and innocent act ain't gonna cut it this time. I know a snipe hunt when I see one."

Sam nodded as well, clearly backing his brother's play.

"We don't have snipe demons," Buffy replied with a crinkled brow. "At least I don't think we do… Faith?"

Faith snorted. "There's no such thing as a snipe, B. Your boy here thinks we're yankin' his chain. Ya know – sending 'em on a wild goose chase?"

"We're really not," she promised. "No geese… cross my heart."

Dean cocked his head and looked down at Buffy with a smug smirk on his features; he didn't appear at all convinced. "So you expect us to believe that we can just take a random stroll around the block and run into some fangs? I know there are more of them these days, but not that many more."

"Vampires are like the cockroaches of the Hellmouth," Buffy explained. "You can't flip on a light switch without them scurrying everywhere. Things are really different here. You'll just have to trust me."

"Okay," he replied, obviously still doubtful, "Vamp hunt it is." He then pulled two large machetes out of the trunk and handed one to Sam. "You ladies set for weapons?" he asked.

"I've got Mr. Pointy," Buffy said, holding up a stake she'd pulled out of her purse. "What about you, Faith?"
"Nah, I don't exactly have anywhere to keep one," she said, holding out her arms to emphasize the lack of hiding places on her tight leather outfit. "I'll improvise… unless you've got an extra in there?" she asked with a point to the Impala's trunk.

"Yeah right," Dean snorted as he shared an eye-roll with his brother. "I'm fresh out of stakes. Meant to pick some up last time I went on a garlic run, but Wal-Mart just can't keep 'em in stock."

"Fine by me," Faith stated, throwing up her hands in a 'so what' gesture. "Stakes just aren't macho enough for ya, huh? Guess you feel more comfortable with those giant phallic symbols you've got there," she remarked, pointing to the machetes the brothers were holding. "That's cool, whatever stokes your fire."

The Winchester's smiled at each other before turning their attention back to the women. "Fine," Dean said, speaking for the both of them, "We'll play along. We're always up for a good laugh." He raised his brow, his lips curving in a mischievous smirk. "Are you going hunting in that outfit?" he asked Buffy.

"I was planning on it," she replied. "I mean, it's not like this is the most slay-ee thing I own, but I thought it would be too much trouble to go home and change. Why? Do you think I should?"

"Oh God no," he replied quickly. "Please don't. If I'm going on a snipe hunt, I at least want to enjoy the view."

"Oh, you will," Buffy promised with a wink and a grin, pulling Dean along with her by the hand. It sounded like the Winchester brothers were in for a surprise. She couldn't wait to say a big fat 'I told you so'.

The four strolled around to the back of the club where Faith found a few wooden loading pallets. She smashed one with her boot and picked out a stake-sized splinter, which she began twirling in her hand. Sam watched with amusement, enjoying Faith's impressive display. These girls were really playing this con to the hilt.

They walked silently for about a minute, giving Dean a chance to enjoy the 'view'. There was no doubt it was a good one, but he was beginning to wonder just how much further they were going to push this little charade. He was starting to get a little anxious, because he had other plans for the night that didn't include Sam and Faith. Then he spotted a couple ducking into an alley a few yards ahead. The twenty-something blond girl was unsteady on her feet, most likely drunk off her ass. The guy she had with her, however, didn't appear to have the same issue and there was definitely something predatory about the way he was carrying himself. He was probably human, but Dean still thought it was best to make sure the girl was willingly going along with him. Just because the guy wasn't a monster, it didn't mean he wasn't dangerous.

"Looks like we have a winner," Buffy remarked cheerily beside him.

"You take this one," Faith offered. "I'll get the next."

The four followed the couple into the alleyway to see them apparently making out against the side of a building. Buffy walked up behind the two and casually pecked on the guy's shoulder. He turned with a savage growl, his full game-face illuminated by a nearby streetlamp.

"Eww," Buffy said, wrinkling her nose in disgust before switching her focus to the vamp's prey. "You are seriously wearing the beer goggles tonight," she remarked to the terrified girl.

The vampire roughly pushed the girl away and turned to fully face the Slayer. He lashed out with a
sweeping kick, which Buffy simply jumped up to avoid. The moment she landed back on her feet, she quickly thrust her stake into the vamp's chest and then took a couple of steps backward to avoid the shower of dust.

"See," she said, beaming a gloating smile at Dean. "I told ya so."

He didn't reply, but instead rushed forward with his brother to check on the drunk girl. She appeared to be unharmed aside from a small bleeding graze on her neck where the creature had apparently attempted to bite her.

"Did you come from The Hanger?" Sam asked her.

She nodded mutely, too shocked for a verbal reply.

"Do you have friends in there?" Buffy asked, pressing for more information.

The girl nodded again, she was trembling violently, her eyes jumping back and forth between the men who were carrying what looked like huge knives. "I think that joint I smoked earlier had something else in it," she remarked, her voice shaking with panic. "I'm seeing things."

"I don't know about that, but I can assure you that you're not seeing things," Buffy stated, placing a comforting arm around the girl's shoulder and beginning to steer her back towards the club. "A little tip - don't let any strange guys take you outside… especially if their wardrobe is ten years out-of-date, and it wouldn't hurt to invest in a nice crucifix. They're more than just a fashion statement."

The Winchesters remained quiet during the short walk back to the club, where Buffy dropped the girl off at the entrance with a stern warning not to leave with anyone other than the people she'd arrived with.

"What the hell was that?" Dean asked after the girl had re-entered the bar.

"I was making sure she got back inside safely," Buffy replied, obviously confused by the question. "Not that... I mean that freak you turned into dust back there."

Now both of the Slayers looked puzzled.

"You're kidding, right?" Faith asked with a half laugh.

"No," Sam began, "not kidding. That thing was a first for us."

"So, you two have never actually hunted a vampire before?" Buffy asked in disbelief.

"We've hunted plenty of vampires," Dean corrected her, "but that wasn't a vampire."

Buffy frowned. "Okay, confused now. Just what exactly do you think that was if it wasn't a vampire?"

Dean started laughing. This whole thing was obviously part of the con. Whatever Buffy had killed was apparently some sort of rare monster that only hung out on the Hellmouth. For some reason, she and Faith thought it was funny to pretend it was a vampire. This must be hazing for Hellmouth virgins.

"Good one," he said. "So, what was it really? Some sorta freaky Hellmouth demon? Me and Sam might be in unknown territory, but we sure as hell know you can't kill a real vampire with a wooden stake."
"Wait a minute," Faith said, a look of realization suddenly dawning on her face. "The vamps you guys are used to - can they go out in the sun?"

"Well, yeah, obviously," Sam answered. "There's no such thing as Dracula."

"Not anymore," Buffy agreed.

"Those are the vamps I went up against a few weeks ago!" Faith exclaimed. "According to Giles they're super freakin' rare. He didn't think they existed anymore, actually."

"Oh yeah," Buffy replied, "I heard you telling Xander about that. Weird."

Dean was still gazing at the two Slayers suspiciously. "So, you're telling me there's a type of vampire that can actually be killed with a wooden stake and is allergic to sunlight... all the standard B-movie crap."

Buffy nodded in an exaggerated manner. "Yep, I just staked one."

Dean shrugged. Clearly, these things were some sort of monster that got off on biting people. As far as he was concerned, the girls could call them whatever they felt like calling them. It didn't make much difference because, obviously, they deserved to get ganked.

"Will beheading do the trick?" he asked, holding up his machete.

"It's a time honored method," Buffy confirmed with a smile.

"Then, what the hell, let's see if we can find some more. I'd like to get a crack at one."

"That was the general idea," Faith agreed dryly.

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The Winchesters were standing back watching Buffy and Faith take on two creatures at once. So far, they'd come across a half-dozen more of these things. Buffy was right, they were definitely the cockroaches of the Hellmouth. Both of the brothers had gotten their chance to dust one and had fought with the two that the Slayers had ended up staking. These 'vampires' were uglier and stronger than the ones they were used to, but they'd both managed to get the job done with only a few minor cuts and bruises. Sam had a large knot coming up on his cheekbone and the skin above Dean's right eye had been split open. Unfortunately, Dean didn't get the pleasure of cutting off that particular bastard's head, because Buffy had quickly staked it after cursing it for trying to mess up his face. Sam had rolled his eyes at that one, remarking that his brother didn't need to be encouraged in his delusional dreams of becoming a male model.

While watching the scene in front of him, Dean couldn't think of words to express how hot Buffy looked fighting in that outfit. What made it even better was the fact that he was starting to feel very confident that he was going to get to help her out of it before the night was over. It was simply amazing how she managed to be so athletic in those high heel shoes. With all the jumping around, there were several times when he was convinced that she was on the verge of a major Janet Jackson-esque wardrobe malfunction. Part of him was hoping for it, but that new jealous part of him didn't want her displayed in front of Sam. It wasn't that he didn't trust his brother. Truth was, he still felt like a giant ass for the way he'd treated him the day before, but he was jealous, that much he had to admit. He didn't like the thought of any another man touching her or even seeing too much of her. It was a weird feeling since he'd never considered himself to be the jealous type. At the moment, he was hoping this fight would be over soon, because as much as he enjoyed a good hunt, he was more than ready to move things indoors for the rest of the evening.
The girls finished off the two remaining vamps almost simultaneously. Faith dusted off her hands and rolled her shoulders, making a cracking sound before strolling silkily over to where Sam was standing. She grabbed a handful of the front of his shirt in one fist and pulled him against her.

"I don't know about you two," she said, "but I think we're calling it a night."

"You think you can handle that Sam?" his brother asked in an amused tone.

Sam ignored his brother's teasing and kept his eyes focused on Faith, who seemed to be promising him all sorts of interesting things with her dark eyes.

"Where are you guys going?" Buffy asked as she watched Faith tugging Dean's brother along by the arm.

"I flew in this time, remember? My hotel's only a couple blocks from here," she replied, her tone clearly implying that the answer should have been obvious.

"Don't get too rough with him," Dean called after the retreating couple. "He's kinda delicate. Make sure she knows your safe-word Sammy."

"Bite me," his brother called back.

Faith laughed as she continued to lead Sam away. "Don't worry big bro," she replied. "I won't leave any visible bruises… not unless he asks me to."

Somehow, Buffy finally managed to get her key to unlock the door to her apartment (well, technically, it was a townhouse, but she'd never been entirely clear on what the difference was and right now she didn't care). Both of them had trouble keeping their hands off of one another long enough for her to get the door open. The drive over had been filled with similar distractions. Buffy was very impressed with Dean's ability to kiss, grope, and drive simultaneously.

The pair almost fell through the front door, neither of them paying much attention to where they were walking. Buffy quickly pushed Dean down on the sofa, which was the nearest soft surface available. She straddled his hips and immediately began pushing his button-down shirt off his shoulders.

"You expecting company?" he asked her between kisses.

Buffy smiled and tugged his t-shirt out of his jeans. "No," she answered, as she nibbled on the base of his neck. "I'm my own roomie and you don't have to worry about Willow, because she wouldn't dare… not even if the entire world was on fire."

"Where's the bed?"

"It's all the way upstairs," she answered distractedly as she pulled off her blouse.

"All the way upstairs, huh?" Dean asked, admiring the sight of Buffy's lacy, black bra.

"Yeah," she said as she unhooked the bra and let it fall to the floor, "and you have to walk to the end of the hall once you get up there."

"We better get started then, it sounds like a freakin' hike," he teased.

Anxious as he was to get to the bedroom, Dean decided to take some time to savor this moment. She'd been killing him all night with that top she was wearing and now that it was all gone, he just
had to sample the goods.

"I'm happy here," Buffy said breathlessly, running her hands through his hair, pressing him against her breasts. "We don't need a bed."

Dean stopped what he was doing and looked up. "Oh, we need a bed," he replied, gripping her around the waist, easily lifting her and setting her back on her feet.

"Says who?" she protested, hands on her hips.

"Says me," Dean smiled, draping her over his shoulder as he stood. He quickly headed for the steps, ignoring her empty threats. "Don't argue," he said, giving her a playful swat on the rear. "I've thought about this every single night for over two solid months. We're gonna need a bed. We can do the couch later."

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Soon, Buffy was reclining on the mattress, her hair falling loosely across the pillows, with nothing between the two of them but Dean's boxer shorts. She gasped as she felt his hand move down her body and between her legs, rubbing very gently at first, then slipping first one and then two fingers inside of her as he increased the friction. It wasn't long before she felt a burst of pleasure and her muscles began clenching around his fingers. She felt the wave beginning to subside when the deep, gravelly sound of his voice caused her to peak once more. She was almost convinced that he didn't even need to touch her, that it was enough to just listen to the sound of his voice encouraging her and telling her how beautiful she was. She opened her eyes to find him watching her, his features unguarded, pupils dilated with desire.

"I want you inside of me," she half-whispered, reaching a hand behind his neck and drawing him closer to her.

He smiled a lazy, half-grin and kissed her. "Oh God baby, I will be," he promised thickly, "just as soon as you do that for me again… but this time, I want to taste you."

Buffy lost all sense of the world around her when she felt his mouth closing over her. Her entire being was focused on the moment and what Dean was doing to her. A part of her was vaguely aware that she had lost control of herself and had begun thrashing and moaning beneath him. This time the peak hit her even stronger than before and seemed to last indefinitely. When she finally felt herself returning to earth, she found him leaning over her, looking extremely satisfied with himself.

"How's it goin' up here?" he asked.

Buffy managed to force her lips into a semblance of a smile. She felt like her entire body had gone limp and the slightest movement seemed to take a great deal of effort. "My bones have melted," she replied. "I'm noodle-girl now."

"Noodle-girl, huh?" he asked, somehow managing to look even more pleased with himself.

"Yep, I'm completely useless," Buffy admitted as she lifted one of her arms in demonstration, allowing it to flop limply back onto the mattress.

"Oh please," he said. "You're supposed to be super-girl. You can't be finished yet."

She reached up and rubbed her fingers lightly across his cheekbone and through his hair. "I didn't say I was finished… I just said I was useless. You'll have to do all the work. Noodle-girl is not helpful," she added with a shake of her head.
"That's just disappointing," he replied with a grin as he kicked off his boxers. "I really expected you to have more stamina than that."

Buffy drew in a sharp breath when she felt him begin to slide into her. He did so slowly until he was fully within her and then held himself still, his breathing ragged against her throat. He remained that way for a few moments, as if silently willing himself to maintain control. Finally, his breathing became more even and he began to move above her. She quickly felt the tension begin to build inside of her once again and soon she was answering each thrust with one of her own.

She couldn't recall ever being so aware of the simple details that marked a man as mortal. Ordinary things like the sheen of sweat on his body, the pounding of his heart, and the sound of his breathing suddenly seemed highly erotic and almost painfully intimate. It was as if she'd never noticed these things before with a human lover. She felt an almost primal need to get even closer to him.

She gripped his hips tightly with her thigh muscles and switched their positions without allowing them to break contact. Grabbing onto the headboard with both hands she used the leverage to slam her body into his. When he reached between her legs to caress her with his thumb, she felt a burst of intense pleasure as she climaxed with him deep inside of her. After a long moment, she finally collapsed against his chest, struggling to catch her breath. He pressed kisses into her hair, mumbling things that were unintelligible to Buffy's fogged brain. She felt nearly hypnotized by the rumble of his chest as he spoke. She had once again lost all ability to be helpful. Dean didn't seem to mind though; he wrapped his arms around her and gently rolled her until she was beneath him again. After several hard thrusts, she felt him stiffen above her, his breath catching in his throat. He softly moaned her name as he finally allowed himself to let go.

In the back of his mind, Dean was wondering why he was so comfortable. He sure as hell wasn't in a cheap motel bed and this wasn't Bobby's saggy old couch either. As he became more fully awake, he remembered where he was and opened his eyes to see the clock on the bedside table showing him that it was almost ten in the morning. He was pretty sure he'd slept for at least seven hours straight (a definite post-hell record), of course, he'd been absolutely exhausted. In fact, after round three he may have technically passed out, although he'd deny that until his dying day.

He rolled over to see Buffy still asleep beside him. She was lying on her side facing him, looking tiny and defenseless. He couldn't help but find it comically bizarre that she could easily snap his neck with the small, perfectly-manicured hand lying on the pillow beside her. This girl was going to be the death of him. He was either going to die in the sack of a massive cardiac implosion or he was going to worry himself to death (obviously, he preferred door number one). After seeing how crazy the Hellmouth really is, he knew that not a night would go by that he wouldn't be scared shitless, thinking something horrible was going to happen to her. According to all of the Slayer lore he'd read, she shouldn't even be alive now. If a Slayer made it past eighteen, it was almost a miracle, especially since it sounded like the Watcher's Council pretty much tried to kill off any that did manage to live that long. He wondered if she'd been through that twisted eighteenth-birthday ritual and if Mr. Giles, the man she seemed to trust so much, had played his role in it. The idea made him sick to his stomach.

He knew that Buffy would probably find his overprotective streak to be extremely annoying. That was too bad really, because there wasn't much of a chance he could do anything to stop himself. He figured that once a man got past thirty, he was pretty well set in his ways and worrying about people he cared about was one of his most deeply ingrained habits. He definitely cared about this girl, that much he was certain of. It was strange because he'd never felt exactly this way about any other woman and he wasn't really sure what to make of it. He'd loved Lisa and he still cared about her
deeply. Without her, he probably would've never survived the past year. She'd taken him in when he was totally broken and he would always be grateful to her for that. However, he knew his feelings for Lisa had been completely tied up in grief and in his need for comfort and a sense of peace and normalcy. He'd never actually been happy when he was with her, not that it was her fault. He knew she had tried, but doubted there was anything she or anyone else could've done to make things better for him. All he could think about during that year with her was that his brother was in hell and he'd, once again, failed to protect him. In fact, he'd given Sam his blessing to throw himself into the pit.

With Buffy, however, he felt a sense of hope and just being beside her made him happy. He desperately wanted to believe that Sam was right about it being okay for him to want this, that he wasn't just bringing more danger into her already extremely dangerous life. The only thing he could imagine being worse than something happening to her, was the idea that he could end up being the cause for it. He and Sam knew way more people who were below ground than above it and that was an undisputable fact. It was also a fact that they had been to blame for more than a couple of those deaths. Ellen and Jo stood out foremost in his mind. Looking back, he couldn't remember ever doing anything more stupid than making that raid on Satan, unless it was taking those two along for the ride. That entire mess was just an epic fail and he should have known better. He just hoped that the blast killed them before the hellhounds could. He didn't know if being killed by a hellhound automatically damned you to hell, but it was a fear that had kept him awake at night. He was determined not to make the same mistakes where Buffy was concerned. If he was in trouble, no matter how desperate the situation seemed, he vowed to keep her out of it. That was the best he could do, because after last night, he didn't see himself having the strength of character to stay away from her.

Buffy had the sense that she was being watched and as she came awake, she remembered that she wasn't alone. Still, she was almost afraid to open her eyes. She'd had some rather memorable experiences with 'the morning after' and she wasn't anxious to repeat any of them. Realizing that she couldn't lie there forever, pretending to sleep, she went ahead and took a cautious peek.

She found that Dean was indeed watching her and he appeared to have a concerned expression on his face, but when he saw that she was awake he smiled at her.

"So," she began, returning his smile shyly, "What is it that has you so fascinated? The smudgy raccoon eyes or the dead cat on my head?"

"Don't be stupid," he replied, leaning over to kiss her on the forehead. "It's obviously the giant puddle of drool you've got goin' there. I think you may have broken a world record with that one."

"Yay," she said while self-consciously wiping the corner of her mouth, "that's attractive. I always suspected that deep-down you were highly romantic."

"Of course I am."

Buffy slid in closer to him and laid her head on his chest so that she could listen to the steady sound of his heart beating. That was her new second favorite sound, his voice being the first.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Definitely," he replied, but neither of them made a move to actually do anything about trying to obtain some.

After a few minutes of lying there, just enjoying the feeling of being wrapped in his arms, Buffy
reached out and curiously traced the tattoo on his chest with her fingernail.

"What does this symbol mean?" she asked.

"It's an anti-possession charm," he replied, sounding a little alarmed at her ignorance. "I can't believe you don't have one."

"I'm afraid tattoos aren't really my thing."

"But you own a tattoo parlor," he teased.

"I had to give it up. Too many sexy, bearded Harley-men. I was having a hard time controlling myself."

"I bet. One of those beer-bellied bastards wouldn't last two minutes with you before they keeled over of a massive heart attack. Giving it up was probably the decent thing to do."

"I'm a humanitarian," Buffy agreed.

"Seriously though," he continued. "I'm really surprised you don't have any protection against demon possession. I woulda thought this place would be crawling with those douche bags."

"Well yeah, we do have more than our share of demons, but all of them have really disgusting puss-filled bodies of their own. They don't need to possess anyone."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, it's never really been an issue. There was this one time… but that was years ago, when I still lived in Sunnydale. Other than that, I think demon possession is probably the one and only problem the Hellmouth doesn't have."

"But I still think you should get a tattoo, just in case," he said, grabbing a handful of her ass and squeezing. "You could get it here, nobody would see it… almost nobody anyway."

"I'll think about it," she replied, not sounding very convincing. "Anyway, if I can ever manage to get up and make us a pot of coffee, what do you think we should do today?"

"Well, I guess I need to check-in on Sam - make sure he's still breathing air. Then food, cause I'm starving. After that, I think it'll be about time to go back to bed… or the couch, if you're still dyin' to go that route," he added with a grin.

Buffy frowned in disappointment. "Unfortunately, that may have to wait until later this evening. I have to work. I've been off for two nights already. I really need to run the patrol tonight."

"That's cool," Dean replied. "I'll go with you. I could go in for killing a few more fake vampires."

"What makes you so sure that my vampires are fake? Maybe the ones you're used to are actually the posers. Did you ever think of that?"

"No, not really," he replied smugly. "The way I see it, I'm older and I've been on the job longer. That makes me the expert."

She lifted her head to look at him. "You're really going to pull that card with me? You do realize that my more formal title is 'Vampire Slayer'. Obviously, that makes me the expert and you the guy who runs his mouth too much. You're unbelievable."
"You're not bad yourself," he teased, hugging her closer.

"We'll ask Giles then," she replied, ignoring his not-so-subtle sex reference.

"Please. What makes him the expert?"

"He's the head of the International Watcher's Council AND he's British, which makes everything he says sound much more official. There's a reason advertisers go for British spokespeople, they sound a whole lot smarter than we do. We must accept their authority on everything from laundry detergent to demon identification. Plus, he's older and he's been on the job way longer than you… So there."

"Yeah, well I can call my friend Bobby. He knows pretty much everything there is to know about demons. He's just as old, he's been on the job for years, AND he's a cranky old bastard. That tops British-guy any day."
"I need to go get Sam," Dean announced as he laid his phone down on the table of the diner booth he was sharing with Buffy. "If you want, I can drop you off at your Headquarters and meet you back there later. That way, you can fill us both in on the big news."

"What about Faith?" she asked curiously. "Isn't she with him?"

"Apparently, she ditched out on him before he woke up," he replied with raised eyebrows. "But that was her hotel room. Don't you think that's kind of strange?"

"Don't ask me," he replied, stuffing a last bite of sausage into his mouth. "She's your friend. You gonna finish that?" he asked, pointing to a slice of bacon on Buffy's otherwise empty plate. When she pushed the plate away from her, he took that as a 'no' and crammed the bacon in his mouth as well. "Man, I love places that serve breakfast all day," he rejoiced happily, his voice muffled due to his mouth being full.

Buffy shook her head at Dean's lack of table manners and took another sip of her coffee. "Faith is the love 'em and leave 'em type," she remarked thoughtfully, "but this seems weird - even for her. I mean, I wouldn't expect her to leave her own place. Kick him out, maybe…" She paused, a troubled expression crossing her features. "I'm sorry Dean, I should've thought."

"Thought about what?" he asked with a laugh. "I'm proud of Sam. He finally got used for that freakishly huge body of his. He can wear big boy pants now. Who knows, maybe she's disappointed because he got stage fright?" he added with a mischievous grin.

"Be nice," Buffy urged, trying her best not to look amused. "That's a terrible way to wake up. Poor Sam."

"Oh, he'll be fine," he replied with a wave of his hand. "It's different for guys. Every man dreams of being used and abused by a super-hot chick. He just lived the perfect Penthouse Forum experience."

Buffy turned a disappointed frown on her companion. "Seriously? So, you're basically telling me that you would've preferred to wake up to an empty bed this morning?"

"Hell no!" he exclaimed strongly, immediately looking a little embarrassed by his stringent denial. "That's a different situation," he added, attempting to sound nonchalant.

Buffy smiled inwardly as she watched Dean quickly turn his attention to reading the warning on a packet of Sweet-n-Low, apparently with great interest.

"This crap should be illegal," he remarked as he tossed the packet onto the table top and grabbed the check. "So, you about ready to get outta here?" he asked, turning his most innocent boyish grin on Buffy, obviously hoping to persuade her into believing he wasn't a total pig.
"I'm ready," she agreed, with a smirk.

Dean pulled into the parking lot of Faith's hotel, where he spotted his brother standing out front, shooting the breeze with a bellhop. Sam looked up when he heard the distinct rumbling sound of the Impala's engine. He quickly said goodbye to the guy he was talking to and headed toward the car.

"Walk of shame, huh Sammy?" Dean asked as his unshaven, rumpled looking brother slid into the passenger's seat. "Well, at least you're doing it in style. This place sure beats the no-tell-motel."

His brother just shook his head and pulled down the visor, hoping to keep the sun out of his tired eyes.

"So what happened? Weren't too kinky for her were ya? Gotta say that would be a shocker. I had that chick pegged for a super freak."

"Well," Sam began hesitantly, "let's just say she's extremely athletic… and uh… imaginative. I thought we hit it off pretty well actually. This whole thing's kinda weird. I must've done something to offend her… Just don't know what."

"Failure to launch?" Dean asked, trying to sound serious when he was obviously highly amused. "They have medicine for that these days. I wouldn't know anything about it myself, but I saw the commercial with the old people in the hot tub. We could make you an appointment."

"Hilarious," Sam replied dryly. "Anyway, how did your night go? You seem to be in an awfully good mood."

Dean smiled happily before replying, "A gentleman never talks."

"And what exactly does that have to do with you?"

"Oh, eat me."

Sam laughed. "Sorry Dean, with smooth language like yours, how could I ever doubt your credentials?"

Dean just shrugged and kept driving. It was kind of hard to argue with that logic.

Once he'd determined that his brother really wasn't going to spill any details about his night with Buffy, Sam decided to change the subject to his desperate need for a shower.

"I don't suppose you've had time to find us a room yet?" he asked. "I could really use a shower and a change of clothes."

"No, but I was thinking maybe we'd stay someplace a little less skeevy this time. I passed a Days Inn on the way over here," he offered, obviously looking for Sam's opinion.

"Works for me," he stated simply.

Sam decided not to tease his brother about the obvious reason for this step-up from their usual sleazy, just barely above by-the-hour accommodations. The Days Inn sure as hell wouldn't be anything like the fancy place Faith was staying at, but he was reasonably sure that the towels would be fresh and the sheets would be washed. There was no use risking this improvement by taking a crack at Dean. He had a feeling he was going to get plenty of opportunities for that anyway. As it turned out, he
only had to wait about two minutes.

"Hey Sam, you ever try that turkey sausage?" his brother asked, seemingly out of the blue. "Is it really as gross as it sounds?"

"It's not bad," he replied, raising his eyebrows in surprise. "You kinda have to get used to it. Guess you could say it's an acquired taste. Why? Are you actually worried about cholesterol?"

"Is that a crime?" Dean replied defensively.

"No, but it does make me wonder if you're having your own 'performance issues'. Are you afraid you can't keep up with Buffy?" he prodded, barely keeping himself from laughing. "I guess it would suck for her if you got hit by the widow-maker before you even got the chance to put a ring on her finger. Have you thought about making the switch to tofu burgers?"

"Eat me, Sam."

"You're slipping Dean. You already used that insult less than five minutes ago. I think this girl has you distracted, cause I'm running circles around you."

"Right, like that would ever happen. Let's see…how about you shut up - bitch. Pretty sure I haven't used that today," he added with a satisfied smirk.

"No - jerk. Not today," Sam replied happily (torturing his brother was just too much fun). "Very original too. I can tell you put a lot of thought into it."

Giles was on the phone when Buffy poked her head into his office. From her end, it sounded like he was on an international call, because he seemed flustered by his attempts to overcome some sort of language barrier. She pointed to her left and mouthed the words 'break room', to which he wearily nodded his acknowledgement. He looked like he'd had even less sleep than usual, which likely meant he'd gotten none at all. The clothes he had on looked suspiciously like the same ones he'd worn yesterday. She felt a twinge of guilt, seeing as how she'd just gotten the best night's sleep she'd had in forever. All night research sessions were never a good thing. Whatever news Giles had for her, she doubted it was of the nice and fluffy variety.

Since it was Saturday afternoon, she expected to find the break room empty. She figured she'd duck in there, grab a Diet Coke, and read the paper while she waited for Giles to finish with his call. Instead, she found Faith sitting at the table, having already claimed the paper. Her hair looked a little damp, leaving Buffy to suspect that she'd just taken a shower in the girls' dormitory.

"Hey B," she greeted, without really looking up from the paper. "Did you hear Giles has all the girls on full lockdown? They're not even allowed out on the grounds. It's a major bitch-fest over in the dorms. I'd steer clear if I were you."

Buffy was definitely surprised by this piece of news. "No kidding? That must be why he asked me to come in. Do you know what the story is?"

"No," Faith shrugged. "Haven't heard yet. He's been on the phone for freakin' ever. I think he's locking down all the mini-Slayers, even the ones in Asia and crazy, far-away places like that."

"Hmm… guess that explains why he's having a lost in translation moment in there."

"Yeah, it's somethin' big. I'm sure Willow knows what's up, but she bailed before I got here. Think
she went home to grab a shower and a change of clothes. Anyway, she should be back soon. If Giles
doesn't get off the phone by then, she'll give us the lowdown."

"Guess we'll just have to wait then," Buffy replied, taking a seat at the break table. She looked over
at Faith, who appeared to be studiously reading an article about unemployment and its effect on the
stock market. Not exactly a subject she would expect her to have much interest in.

"So, how'd it go with Sam last night?" she asked curiously.

Faith looked momentarily taken aback by the question, but quickly regained her usual nonchalant
posture. "It was fun," she stated simply. "Why? Did he say somethin'?" she asked, her tone a bit
suspicious.

"I haven't talked to him," Buffy replied, observing Faith curiously. "He called Dean to come and
pick him up a little while ago. Both of them should be getting here fairly soon."

"That's cool," Faith remarked casually, her face still buried in the paper.

Faith was definitely acting strange. As far as Buffy could remember, the girl had never missed an
opportunity to dish about one of her conquests. In fact, she usually provided way more down and
dirty detail than she wanted to hear. She couldn't imagine that Sam had tried anything offensive.
Honestly, she wasn't sure Faith could be offended in that way. The secret gossip-girl inside of her
was dying to grill Dean about what his brother had told him on the subject – just as soon as they'd
dealt with this pesky new Slayer emergency.

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After fifteen extremely dull minutes spent watching Faith pretend to read every single article in the
business section of the paper, Buffy was relieved to see Xander entering the room.

"Hey," she greeted, giving her friend's arm a concerned squeeze as he sat down beside her. "Is
everything good with you and Allie now?"

"Yeah, yeah, we're fine," he replied distractedly, reaching across the table to snatch the Sports
section of the newspaper from the pile Faith had in front of her.

"Sorry about all that Xan," Faith remarked, sounding rather uncomfortable (apologies weren't exactly
her strong suite). "I didn't mean to, ya know, mess anything up."

"It's all good," he replied politely, not looking up from the baseball stats he was apparently busy
memorizing. "No worries."

Buffy decided that Faith wasn't the only friend of hers behaving strangely today. Xander was
definitely not his usual jokey, talky self. Instead, he was jumpy and pale, acting like someone who'd
seen a ghost. Apparently the entire balance of the universe was thrown off if she managed to have a
good night. She may as well just join the crowd and pretend to be fascinated by the literary marvel
that is the Cleveland Sun Times. Lucky for her, the obit section was up for grabs; that should take her
a few hours to get through.

She'd barely started on the B's when Giles entered the room accompanied by Willow, Vi, and Rona.
Willow smiled brightly at Buffy, silently questioning her about the events of the night before. She
returned her smile and nodded slightly in reply.

"So where's Andrew?" Xander asked suspiciously. "If we all had to come in on a Saturday, I don't
see why he doesn't have to suffer."
"Believe me, he'll be here," Willow replied. "He's beyond giddy about the girls being incarcerated." She emphasized the last word loudly, apparently for Giles' benefit.

"No one is incarcerated," he remarked in an irritated tone.

"Anyway," she continued after rolling her eyes at the Watcher. "Andrew has declared himself the official entertainment… the emcee of the new Cleveland branch of the USO. He's gathered his limited edition Star Wars DVDs and now he's out on a snack run. He said something about buying a footbath and a karaoke machine too. He's pulling out all the stops."

"Impressive," Xander remarked.

"So what's the scoop?" Vi asked as she pulled out a chair from the table. "I think those girls are going to riot if we don't tell them something soon. No offense to Andrew, but I don't think Star Wars and popcorn is gonna cut it."

"No doubt," Rona agreed. "Carrie has a hot date tonight and she's acting the bitch even more than usual."

"I suspect Carrie will be one that will not have to remain confined for much longer," Giles replied, causing everyone but Willow to turn a questioning gaze upon him. Instead, she glared at him with a sour expression on her face. He started to elaborate, but was interrupted when Buffy's phone began ringing.

"It's Dean," she beamed happily before pressing the answer button and stepping across the room for some privacy. She returned to the table a moment later.

"I'm going to meet him and Sam out front. Be back a minute," she announced before practically bouncing out of the room.

"Are you guys sure that's the real Buffy?" Rona asked curiously. "I've never seen her that excited about anything."

"She's real," Willow confirmed, "You've just never seen that version before. She's kinda been stuffed in the back of a closet for a few years."

"At least five," Xander added.

When she returned with the Winchesters, Buffy found that she'd lost her spot at the small table. Everyone but Giles was now sitting. She introduced the guys to Rona and Vi, telling them they were the demon hunters who'd made them aware of the situation with The Mother of All/Eve. The two girls offered their hands for the brothers to shake. Vi explained that they were the live-in 'den mothers' for the Slayer school. While this was going on, Faith appeared to be trying to melt into the background. She seemed extremely uncomfortable now that Sam had arrived. She flashed him an awkward peace sign before quickly turning her attention to Willow who was now sitting beside her.

Since there was no more room at the table, the three stood against the counter of the small kitchen that made up a part of the room. Dean leaned back, one boot propped against the cabinet door and an arm crooked casually on the counter behind him, playing absently with the end of Buffy's long braid. It was obvious to anyone watching that the two were more than just professional acquaintances.

Giles, who was standing at the front of the room holding a very ancient looking book, cleared his throat loudly in an effort to call the room back to attention.
"I'm sure you're all curious to learn why I called you in," he began. "It seems that we were able to find some information regarding Eve and naturally the news is not encouraging. Late last night - or rather, very early this morning - I stumbled upon a passage in this book on Slayer lore. Honestly, I was so exhausted I believed I had picked up the Treatise of R'lyeh… but that's neither here nor there," he added with a wave of his hand. "The important thing is the bit of prophecy I've uncovered." He opened the book he was holding to a page he had bookmarked and began to read.

"And in these days, Eve shall find the chosen one who has not yet known the touch of man. Upon her possession of the pure vessel, her power shall be that of legions. Her descendants shall rise and take their places at her side, the waters shall run red with the blood of God's children, both the righteous and the wicked shall fall…" Giles paused, removing his glasses to rub at his bloodshot eyes. "It goes on and on," he continued tiredly. "The usual apocalyptic prattle. Honestly, I sometimes wonder if all of these creatures don't employ the same ghost writer."

"Now that would be one hell of a gig," Xander commented jokingly (it seemed the news of impending doom had brought him back to himself). "Talk about job security. There must be millions of those wacko prophecies out there just waiting to be written and it sounds like you can get by on cutting and pasting. You could raise a family on that kind of income."

"So," Buffy began haltingly, "this 'pure vessel' thingie… are we talking about a… uh, virgin? Do you think Eve wants to possess a Slayer who's… inexperienced?"

Giles nodded. "That seems to be the obvious conclusion, which is why I have temporarily confined all of the girls to quarters - both here and internationally. Until we can find some method of…" he paused, looking distinctly uncomfortable with the topic. "Some method of sorting them," he continued. "Until that time, we need to ensure that all of the young Slayers are kept safely out of her reach. At the moment, we have no way of knowing where Eve may be conducting her search."

"Well, I'm pretty damn sure she's looking here," Dean remarked confidently. "It's actually freakin' obvious," he gritted out, sounding frustrated with himself. "I should've seen it."

"What do you mean?" Giles asked. Buffy and Sam also turned questioning gazes on him.

"In the last couple of weeks, three girls have disappeared here in Cleveland. All around sixteen, seventeen-years-old and according to the paper, all 'churchy types'. Didn't think much of it at the time, but now I'd be willing to bet my left nut that all the disappearances happened within blocks of this place. The bitch is circling her prey."

Buffy didn't stop to consider the significance of this revelation; she was more interested in how he knew about those disappearances in the first place. Had he been keeping tabs on the Hellmouth? Did that mean he had thought about her over these past few months? She was starting to see that what Dean did was way more informative than anything he might say.

"I'm sorry," Giles began, "but I'm not sure I see the relevance of this information. Many young ladies disappear on the Hellmouth. That's not an unusual occurrence, unfortunately."

"That's not all," Dean said as he walked over to the break table and scooped up the pile of newspapers. He rifled through them for a moment until he found what he was looking for and then held up the article for everyone to see.

*Police Still Searching for So-Called 'Flaming Bandits'*

"I noticed this stuff started-up a few weeks ago too," Dean explained. "Somebody's been knocking over pawn shops all over town. Funny thing is, whoever's behind it doesn't bother taking the guns or
the high-end electronic equipment. They don't even try to crack the safe… Only thing they give a
crap about is the gold and when they're done, they torch the place."

Everyone except Giles and Sam look very perplexed by this additional information.

"Let me guess," Xander said. "It's a leprechaun with some pervy thing for underage girls? Ye can't
have me gold or me Lucky Charms," he added in a bad imitation of an Irish accent.

"You think?" Sam asked his brother, ignoring Xander's joking around. "No way. Dude, how many
of those things can there be?"

"Can somebody fill us in?" Faith asked impatiently.

Giles rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I believe that Dean is – very colorfully - trying to tell us that we
have a dragon in Cleveland. However," he added with a smile, "fortunately for us, that is quite
unlikely. No one has seen an actual dragon in this dimension in over seven centuries."

Sam held his hand up. "Uh, that's not exactly true. We saw one about six months ago."

Giles almost dropped the book he was holding and had to fumble clumsily to keep his grip on it. He
seemed very disturbed and astonished by this piece of news; he started to ask for more information,
but was cut off by Buffy.

"I'm completely lost," she admitted. "What does a dragon have to do with somebody robbing pawn
shops… or virgins… or with anything really? I mean a dragon… seriously? Do I need to keep an
eye out for Hobbits when I'm on patrol too? Sorry," she added, offering Dean an apologetic shrug.
"That's just majorly weird… even for the Cleveland."

"Traditionally," Giles explained, jumping in before Dean could reply. "Dragons are known to abduct
virgins and to harbor an obsession for hoarding gold. One would be perfectly suited to aiding Eve in
her search."

Dean nodded. "And believe me, they know if a chick's been de-hymenated. It takes more than a
promise ring to fool one of those bastards."

Willow frowned at this observation. "That's just rude," she snapped.

"What?" Dean asked defensively. "It's true. I'm just sayin'"

"Well you could be more respectful," Willow grumbled.

"Setting the matter of taste aside," Giles began, "he does bring up a very valid point. If Eve is
employing a dragon to find her vessel, we must be doubly sure that we know which of the girls is
and is not…" he paused, searching for a word. "Let's say - intact."

"Intact?" Willow exploded. "Well, that's it. I'm not going to sit here any longer and pretend that this
whole business of who is and who's not a virgin isn't just completely gross and inappropriate. We've
been over this Giles and you know how I feel. Intact? Seriously? You're actually going to use that
word? So, I guess if a girl has a little experience then she's not whole, she's broken or something. I
can't believe you! For the entire span of human history, societies have used the concept of virginity to
oppress women… a-and you honestly have the nerve to ask me if I can do some kind of spell to
separate the pure ones from the whores?" she stammered in fury. "I guess the idea of just asking the
girls is entirely out of the question. We all know the word of a potential whore isn't reliable. Well, I
told you earlier and I stand by my conviction – No way in hell!"
Giles' face had turned red with frustration. "For heaven's sake, Willow," he groaned impatiently. "No one here is calling anyone a whore. I don't know why you refuse to listen to reason. We've been over this again and again. Many teenagers - both male and female - tend to be untruthful about their level of sexual experience. *You know this!* We simply cannot afford to take any chances where this issue is concerned. If Eve gets her hand on the proper vessel, it could very well be the end for all of us… *whores included,*" he added in a tone of biting sarcasm.

Willow stood up and narrowed her eyes on Giles. She looked like she was seriously considering turning him into a toad. "Y-You…"

"Whoa," Buffy said, stepping between the pair. "Take it down a notch, you two. This conversation is getting way too fighty. How long has it been since either of you have had any sleep?"

"Almost exactly thirty-two hours," Giles replied. "I've begun keeping track."

Willow grudgingly nodded her agreement, still angrily glaring at the man.

"That means both of you left the land of reason at least twelve hours ago," Buffy stated firmly. "You need to go home, get some sleep, and we'll take care of things here. I don't want to see either of you in this building for at least eight hours. If we have to, we'll just keep all the girls in for tonight. We can revisit this extremely disturbing 'sorting' question tomorrow. Until then, nothing - no matter how big and scaly - is getting past all the protective charms Will's put on this place."

Dean grinned at Buffy in admiration. "I like it when you take charge," he said. "Very hot."

"It's not that simple Buffy," Giles disagreed, touching her on the arm to draw her attention away from the hunter for a moment. "There's another very urgent matter to address. We don't have a proper weapon. If we are indeed dealing with a dragon, we must use a sword that was forged with dragon's blood. We could try the scythe, but I don't believe it will be effective."

"Well, that's a classic catch-22," she commented dryly.

Giles sighed. "Yes it is. Such weapons are incredibly difficult to obtain. There are maybe five left in the entire world. I need to get in touch with some of my European contacts immediately. The Council used to possess Excalibur," he added bitterly, "but unfortunately that was incinerated along with practically everything else the Council possessed."

"Keep your pants on Simon Cowell," Dean interrupted smugly. "I have one in the trunk of my car."

Giles gazed at the hunter with a mixture of surprise and disbelief. "You're telling me that you're carrying around a priceless dragon sword in the boot of that ancient vehicle of yours?"

"She's not ancient," he declared gruffly. "She happens to be a classic example of fine Detroit steel. You English guys are just jealous because you have to drive around in sissy little wind-up toys."

"Give me the keys," Sam said, shaking his head at his brother. "I'll go get the sword."

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A few minutes later, Sam re-entered the room carrying the sword, which was wrapped in what appeared to be several shop towels. He set the bundle down on the table where everyone gathered around to stare at it expectantly.

"I say. This is rather exciting," Giles commented. "I feel as if we should have an orchestra playing for the unveiling." He leaned in closer to examine the wrappings. "Is that axle grease?" he asked
"Probably," Sam shrugged as he unceremoniously pulled off the rags to reveal the jagged remains of the sword.

"Where's the rest of it?" Rona asked, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room.

"Who knows?" Dean replied evasively. "That thing's at least a zillion years old. Stuff gets broken over the years."

Giles, who looked like he was very close to being sick, gingerly picked up the sword and began examining the markings on the hilt. "This is... or I should say was the actual Sword of Brunswick," he announced mournfully. He looked up from the weapon and gazed at the Winchesters with fury in his eyes. "You bloody prats blasted it out of its enchanted stone!" he spat accusingly.

"Why the hell would you try to pin that on us?" Dean asked, attempting to sound genuinely insulted.

"Yeah right," Sam laughed sarcastically, "the sword in the stone. Hilarious. Stuff like that only happens in fairy tales. Hold on a minute..." he said, easily recognizing Dean's 'avoidance face'. He gaped at his brother in amazement. "Dude, you didn't? Did you?"

"I had to," Dean defended. "That son of a bitch was really stuck. There was no other way to get it out of that stupid-ass rock."

Giles appeared to be on the verge of having a stroke. "You were supposed to find a worthy champion to pull it free, not blow it to bits with dynamite!"

"It was C4 actually," Dean corrected. "And yeah, maybe I used a little too much," he admitted, "but it still works. That's what matters."

Giles removed his glasses and gripped the bridge of his nose tightly. He seemed to be attempting to prevent his head from actually exploding.

"Hey," Dean remarked to the room in general. "Who else here has a dragon sword handy? That's right, nobody. So, how about some thanks?"

The Watcher looked at Dean and opened his mouth several times to reply, then gave up and hung his head in defeat.

Buffy retrieved the sword from her Watcher's lax hand and held it up in front of her for inspection. "I like it," she announced, turning an extremely charming smile on Dean. "The average sword isn't big on stealth, but this one's nice and portable. I bet I could fit it in one of my oversized purses." She then stood on her tiptoes and looped her free hand behind his neck, drawing him into a kiss.

"Dear Lord," Giles grumbled, turning his head away from the pair. "We're all doomed. We may as well just trot all of the girls out into the courtyard and let Eve have her pick. Stupid Americans," he ranted to no one in particular. "Here's a priceless relic of the ancient world, let's blow it up so that it fits in a fashionable handbag. Then we can take it to McDonalds and all have a nice cheeseburger. After, we've finished snogging in public of course."

"Okay," Vi said as she rose from the table. "I think it's time for me and Rona to drive Giles and Willow home so they can get some sleep... Especially Giles, he's had enough excitement for one day and neither one of them are in any shape to drive"

"I'll go with you," Faith volunteered. "This may be our only chance to see daylight for a while."
"I don't want to ride with Giles," Willow announced. "I can get home on my own... magically," she added, childishly sticking out her tongue at the Watcher. Closing her eyes, she held out her arms dramatically, however, nothing seemed to happen. After a few moments, she finally gave up.

"I'm still here," she said sullenly.

"Yep," Xander agreed, rising from his chair and guiding his friend toward the door. "It's sleepy-time for little Will... her batteries have gone bye-bye. Now be good and let the nice Slayers give you a ride home."

"Fine," she said, "but I get the front seat. Giles deserves to be squished in the back."

"Yes of course," he snapped. "I am the great oppressor of all womankind and I should be grateful you lot aren't strapping me to the roof."

"You said it," Willow agreed as the two followed Vi and Rona out of the room.

Before leaving, Faith paused and briefly looked back at Sam, but quickly averted her gaze when she saw him watching her. Sam stared after her, his brow crinkled in confusion. He still had no idea what the hell was going on and he'd had no opportunity to speak to her alone about it.

Meanwhile, Buffy had carelessly placed the dragon sword on the edge of the kitchen sink and was now standing on her toes, both arms looped around Dean's neck.

"I'm sorry about Giles," she said with a sympathetic frown. "He's really overworked these days. I'm seriously worried about him actually. This meltdown has been coming on for a while. Guess we'll have to wait 'till later to ask him about vampires."

"Whatever," Dean replied with a shrug. He was much more interested in the woman in his arms than in fake vampires or the limey with the stick up his ass. "He kinda reminds me of a stuck-up British version of Bobby," he remarked, "without all the flannel and the smell of rot-gut whiskey. What's a 'prat' anyway?"

"I think it means 'moron'," his brother replied.

"Oh yeah? That's new. So, he pretty much just called us 'idjits' in a different language?"

Sam slapped his brother on the back and grinned. "Exactly Dean, but it's the same language. You know - English?"

"Oh, shut up," Dean replied irritably before returning his attention to kissing Buffy. He had a feeling both of them would be working well into the night, so in the meantime he was determined to enjoy whatever fun he could squeeze in.

Xander, who seemed much happier than he had earlier, stepped forward and reached around the couple to rescue the Sword of Brunswick from the edge of the sink.

"I better get this before it falls in that leftover bowl of Fruit Loops," he remarked to Sam, pointing to the half-empty cereal bowl sitting at the bottom of the sink. "I think something like that just might break Giles permanently."

Sam nodded his agreement. "Yeah, he seems to be wound pretty tight."

"You know," Xander continued, "I have to say, I think I'm a fan of your brother. I mean it. Buffy should keep him around. He's less than a century old for one thing. And big bonus - as long as he's..."
making priceless artifacts go *boom*, I don't think Giles is gonna find me half as annoying as he usually does. This could really be good for my career," he added thoughtfully. "Seriously man, I've got some major responsibilities to think about. I can use all the help I can get."

Sam raised a curious eyebrow at the other man, this guy was quite a character and it sounded like he'd just implied that Buffy had a thing for much older men. *Weird. Guess you just never know.*

"Okay," he replied. "This just might work out for you then. You can always count on Dean to be annoying. That's pretty much his specialty."
Sam was awakened by the sound of someone knocking on the door to his motel room. Without thinking, he automatically reached out for the knife that was lying on the bedside table. He noticed that the clock was reading 4:32 A.M. and decided he was likely just dealing with some guy who'd been out drinking all night and was now too wasted to remember his own room number. He still kept a tight grip on the blade though, life as a hunter tended to make a person paranoid. Without flipping on a light, he crept silently to the window and peered through the opening in the curtains, hoping to get an idea of what he was dealing with. He was shocked to see that it was Faith. She was pretty much the last person he expected. He watched her raise her fist to knock again, but then she appeared to change her mind and turned to go. Her unexpected appearance had definitely made him curious, so he opened the door enough to pop his head out and called her by name. She had already made it halfway to the stairs, but turned back at the sound of his voice. Sam was struck by how sexy she looked with her hair all messy and a large tear in the tight t-shirt she was wearing.

"Hey you," she greeted with a sultry smile. "I gave up. Thought you were dead to the world in there."

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Nah, I was just coming off patrol when I saw your car parked here. That thing's pretty damn obvious, but guess you already know that. Anyways, I decided to pop in and see what you were up to. Guess your brother's at Buffy's place?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah," he answered, sounding a little confused by her friendly tone. "Give me a second," he said while holding up a finger.

Sam closed the door and quickly pulled a clean pair of jeans over his boxers. He caught his reflection in the dresser mirror and realized that his hair was sticking straight out on the left side of his head. He tried to flatten it with his hand, but wasn't having any luck. He decided that there wasn't much hope for it. Besides, Faith shouldn't expect him to be perfectly groomed this early in the morning. He couldn't imagine what had brought her here. If there was an emergency, Dean would've called and this seemed like a very odd time to talk about whatever he'd done to piss her off.

"Come on in," he offered, holding the door open for her to pass.

She strolled in and immediately flopped down on the unoccupied bed that would normally have been claimed by his brother. She made herself completely at home by propping her booted feet up on the bedspread.

"Man, it's been a long night," she said as she slowly stretched and then rolled onto her side, providing Sam with a very deliberate and very excellent view of her curves. "It's friggin crazy out there."

Sam remained standing by the doorway, appearing very unsure of the situation. "Yeah," he agreed.
haltingly, "long night. We spent at least five hours looking for that dragon in the sewer tunnels. Unfortunately, I've gotta feeling we haven't even scratched the surface. This town has miles and miles of sewers."

"Fascinating," she remarked, her tone indicating that she had little interest in the subject. "Are you just gonna stand there?" she asked. She slid over a little and patted the mattress beside her in a clear invitation.

Instead of joining her, Sam paused for a moment, his brows drawn together in confusion. "Sorry," he finally said, "maybe it's the whole one hour of sleep I've gotten, but I'm not sure I get what's going on here."

A hurt expression crossed Faith's features, but she hid it quickly. "What's to get?" she asked, a hint of uncertainty creeping into her voice. "I figured we could both use a good toss in the sack before we turned in for the day. It'll help us sleep. Ya know," she added, licking her lips sensuously, "pick up where we left off? There's definitely some stuff on the menu we haven't tried yet."

Sam let out a surprised laugh. "Wow," he said, "you're serious. I really don't know what to say. I thought you hated my guts."

"Why would you think that?"

"Let's see," he began, shaking his head in amazement, "first you bail on me - no goodbye, not even a screw you. Then when I see you later, you don't even bother to say 'hi'. Maybe I'm weird, but that doesn't exactly scream 'I like you'. So, sorry… I'm just not itching to jump back into bed with you."

The last part was a huge lie and it had also come out sounding a lot harsher than he'd intended, but the way she'd ditched him earlier had seriously stung.

Faith sat up and stared at Sam for a moment, clearly shocked by his rejection. "What's your deal? Did you think we were engaged or somethin'?" she asked as she hopped fluidly to her feet. "Newsflash dude - I don't owe you crap. So, excuse the hell outta me if I thought you were man enough to handle a little 'friends with benefits' action. Your loss," she added with an indifferent shrug, although her tone betrayed her anger.

"Friends with benefits?" he echoed back at her incredulously. This girl was really starting to piss him off. "I'm not sure you know what the word 'friend' means. Maybe you should look it up."

Faith stalked toward Sam, not stopping until there was less than an inch of space between them. She looked up at him with her most intimidating expression firmly in place. "You should watch that smart mouth with me," she stated coldly as she pointed a finger at him. "I've got no problem kickin' your ass and you better believe I can do it. Won't even break a sweat."

Sam returned her glare, showing no indication of backing down. "Go for it," he replied simply. "I've had my ass kicked plenty of times. I'm sure you'll enjoy it since that sorta thing gets you off."

Faith placed her hands on his shoulders and gave him a shove, causing him to stumble into the wall behind him. "Go to hell!" she practically yelled as she snatched open the door to leave. "That whole nice guy act you've got goin' - Trust me, I'm onto you now. You're just as big an asshole as the rest of 'em."

She punctuated her words by slamming the door so hard behind her that Sam wondered if he'd end up paying to have it replaced. He had to force himself not to open it up again just so he could yell back and tell her what a royal bitch she was, but he decided they'd probably already woken up half the guests and besides he wouldn't give her the satisfaction.
After waiting a few minutes, he tested the door to see if she'd broken anything. It seemed to be in working order, so he closed it back and gave it an angry kick before sitting down on the foot of his bed. He could practically hear Dean's voice telling him what a dumbass he was. His brother would say he should never let his pride come between him and a hot piece of ass. Of course, Dean was completely full of shit more than half the time. Even so, he decided not to mention this little episode to him. He wouldn't get it or if he did, he'd claim the conversation was way too chick-flick oriented. The fact that Dean was the current reigning king of chick-flick moments would obviously be completely irrelevant. Besides, maybe imaginary-Dean was right, it's not like he was looking for a relationship right now. There were way too many unresolved issues regarding what happened over that missing year and what might happen if the wall in his head didn't stay put. He probably should've just played along with Faith's game and refused to let her indifference get to him. He realized that he'd always been way too stubborn for his own good. So instead of enjoying a nice, mindless post-sex coma, he got to sit here all pissed off, listening to traffic go by on the freeway. But who was he kidding anyway? He could never take that bargain. It was one thing when he thought he'd inadvertently done something to offend her. Then he found out that she was just a cold bitch who expected him to perform like a trained dog, even though she couldn't be bothered to acknowledge his existence in the morning. To hell with her, he decided and to hell with imaginary-Dean too. He'd keep his pride. They could both kiss his ass.

Buffy found herself standing in the auditorium of the original Sunnydale High. She looked down and noticed that she was wearing a gauzy dress in a beautiful deep-orange shade. She liked it; it reminded her of the color of the leaves in fall. As she took in her surroundings, she saw that the back row of the audience was filled with china dolls. This immediately brought up a mental picture of that homicidal nutcase Drusilla. The dolls were creepy enough by themselves, but when she looked closer, she saw that all of their eyes had been painted a solid black. With a shiver, she turned away from the sight and made a mental note to stake Drusilla at the first opportunity. She didn't care if Angel and Spike felt sorry for her, she was dangerous and those dolls were way too freaky for her to go on living (or unliving).

She walked up the center aisle toward the stage where she spotted at least a dozen of the young Slayers, several of them on ladders, busily hanging decorations. They appeared to be creating a night sky, but instead of one moon there were three, each in different phases. All of the girls were barefoot and wore simple, white dresses that fell just below their knees. One figure stood out in the group because she alone was wearing black. As she climbed onto the stage, Buffy realized that the lone figure was Willow and that she was dressed in a cheaply made witch's costume, similar to one a child would wear on Halloween. Her black dress had a ragged hem and she wore a pointy hat. The look was completed with a fake hooked-nose.

"Hi Buffy," her best friend said, "I look ridiculous don't I? I'm the crone," she stated with an eye-roll. "It's a stupid stereotype, but somebody has to do it. Besides, it's actually not a bad thing. They've just made it seem that way. They're scared."

"What's going on here Will?" she asked.

"We're getting ready for the curtains to open," she stated, her tone implying this should be obvious. "But I think we need more shiny stars," she commented thoughtfully as she looked up at the cardboard, glitter-covered stars hanging from the ceiling.

"Definitely," Dawn's voice agreed. Buffy turned to see her sister sitting in the front row of the audience. Although she was blindfolded, she appeared to be reading a freshman humanities text titled *The Ancient World*. "The stars represent the souls," she continued with an air of authority, "it's all
about the souls. You should put up as many as you can. They're the stars of the show you know," she said as she raised her head from the book and smiled brightly. "Get it?" she asked. "The stars of the show."

"Good one Dawnie," Willow replied with a giggle before returning her attention to Buffy. "I think we have some extras in the basement. Will you go get them?" she asked hopefully.

Buffy was now in a damp, seemingly abandoned basement that smelled strongly of death. She watched in morbid fascination as blood dripped slowly into a drain in the middle of the concrete floor. The room was dark, illuminated only by one filthy, yellow florescent light which buzzed and flickered constantly overhead. In a shadowy corner, she saw the silhouette of a man sitting in a plain wooden chair, a large blade dangling loosely from one hand. As she moved cautiously forward, she was shocked to see Dean's features coming into focus in the flickering light. He was covered in blood and staring at the blade in his hand with a blank expression. Her heart constricted painfully in her chest as she came to a stop in front of him. She didn't want to see this. It was all wrong. Everything was wrong. A feeling of darkness and hopelessness like she hadn't felt in years began to wash over her.

"They shouldn't be here," he said, shocking her with the rough, pained sound of his voice. He didn't meet her eyes, but continued staring at the blade as he spoke. "I never meant for them to come. None of this should be happening… not here." He finally looked up at her and she was struck by how intensely green his eyes looked in contrast to the blood that almost completely covered his face. "I'm sorry," he nearly whispered. "There used to be a natural order and we broke it. Don't you see?" he implored, his voice taking on a desperate edge, "I'm a killer. I break things. It doesn't matter what I want, it's all I can do."

Buffy reached out, wanting to touch him, to tell him everything was okay, that it didn't matter to her. However, the room in front of her faded and became her bedroom. She found that instead of Dean, she was reaching out toward Faith, who was holding three small kittens in her arms (one black, one orange, and one white). They mewed constantly and squirmed around, trying to climb up her shirt.

"Cute as hell, aren't they?" she asked.

"Yeah, but how did they get here?" Buffy asked curiously.

Faith laughed. "Come on B, you know how it works. You don't need me to draw a picture," she said, shaking her head.

"I think you might have to," she replied, completely perplexed by the entire situation.

Faith didn't respond, but instead looked up toward the ceiling. "Have you seen the moon tonight?" she asked. "It's wicked cool."

She followed the other Slayer's gaze and instead of her bedroom ceiling, she saw the night sky above her and there were three moons.

"You wanna hold one?" Faith asked, drawing her attention away from the sky. She started to reply, but Faith was no longer standing in front of her. Xander's girlfriend, Allie, had taken her place. She is very obviously pregnant and holding one kitten that appeared to be a perfect combination of the three Faith had been holding the moment before. Buffy noticed that its eyes were the same intense shade of green that Dean's had been.

"It's a calico," Allie explained, happily rubbing her nose in its fur. "They're always girls. Here, you can hold her," she said, placing the tiny kitten in Buffy's hands. "Just watch out for the mother. You
Buffy followed Allie's gaze to see a large, powerful lioness standing several feet away. She seemed to look through them as if she was indifferent to their presence.

"It's almost reaping time," Allie continued nonchalantly, seemingly unconcerned by the appearance of the large cat. "I grew up on a farm you know. Years ago, they used to sacrifice virgins to ensure a good harvest," she added conversationally.

"Sounds like a good time," Buffy replied dryly.

"Actually, I think they did make a big party out of it," she shrugged, "but that was way before my time. Anyway, there's a really good crop this year. You should see the fields," she said brightly, pointing to a field of wheat which had mysteriously appeared around them.

Buffy was now alone, walking slowly between endless towering rows of wheat, which stretched in every direction as far as the eye could see. Dean appeared a few yards ahead of her. He was no longer covered in blood, but appeared to be extremely frustrated. He stomped around, turning in circles and craning his neck in an attempt to see past the grain.

"This blows," he said to her through gritted teeth. "You can't see a damn thing in here. I think they're trying to hide something from us. It's a freakin' shell game."

"Who cares?" she replied, slipping her arms around his neck and pressing her body against his. "We don't need to see. We can always feel our way around."

His angry expression softened and he smiled as he wrapped his arms around her. "I can work with that," he agreed.

Suddenly, they were making love in Buffy's bed, which now sat in the middle of the wheat field. Everything was in slow motion, allowing her to concentrate on each detail, every feeling. For a long moment she focused on the slightly scratchy feel of his stubble when he kissed her. She ran her hands across his back and down his arms, feeling the muscles working beneath his warm skin. She traced the deep scar on his shoulder and pressed a kiss against it, knowing without being told that this was the key, the secret to truly understanding him.

The world seemed right for the first time in what felt like forever. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the lioness. It blended in almost perfectly with the golden stalks of wheat as it moved gracefully in rhythm with the softly swaying grain. She knew that the beautiful animal was a predator. She meant death, but the fact didn't alarm her, because she meant other things too. She belonged here. She was part of the cycle.

In the background, a very intrusive wailing noise began to invade the balance of the world, as the sound grew louder and closer it started to melt away. As the scene slipped away from her, Buffy was relieved that she could still sense Dean's presence beside her. At least that much had been real. She could feel him lying on his side behind her, one arm draped across her waist. She opened her eyes to see the wall of her bedroom and immediately recognized the sound of an emergency siren that was already beginning to fade as the vehicle moved up the road. The sound didn't seem to disturb Dean. He was still sleeping. She could tell by the steady, even sound of his breathing. She lay still, not wishing to disturb him. A bad dream had caused him to lie awake for much of the night. He didn't admit to it, instead he claimed that their late dinner of greasy, delivery pizza had given him indigestion. Buffy didn't buy his excuse, because she was intimately familiar with the signs of a nightmare. She'd had enough of her own to be an expert on the subject. He'd displayed at least three of the classic symptoms - disorientation, a cold sweat, and pupils dilated with fear. Still, she didn't
challenge him. Whatever the dream had contained, it had shaken him and she had an instinctual feeling that she shouldn't push. Not yet anyway, not while things were still so new between them.

She tried to remember the details of her dream. It hadn't been a nightmare, at least the end of it wasn't, but it did seem that there was something ominous about parts of it. However, the more she tried to recall it, the faster it seemed to slip away from her. Her gut told her that the dream was an omen, but her head said that she was only being paranoid, reasoning that she'd be able to remember it if it was really that important. She had always been able to recall a prophetic Slayer-dream in almost perfect detail. Only regular, meaningless dreams seemed to fade this quickly. It made sense. After all, what good was a prophetic dream that couldn't be remembered? It would defeat the entire purpose. She decided that she was only concerned about it because of Dean's nightmare. Empathy was making her anxious, causing her to see meaning where there was none. Since it was still early, she curled her fingers into his hand and allowed herself to drift back to sleep.

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Buffy struggled to keep a straight face as she watched Dean spit out another piece of egg shell. She wondered how long he would keep pretending that his omelet was edible. She'd definitely botched breakfast. Actually, she didn't consider herself a bad cook. After the move to Cleveland, she suddenly found herself chiefly responsible for ensuring that Dawn was fed. Before that, there had always been someone around to take up the slack. Once all of her friends had gotten their own apartments, she quickly learned that take-out gets old fast. Normally, omelets were one of her specialties, but she did have issues with the egg cracking thing. There was a very fine line between a perfectly cracked egg and one that had been shattered into a million tiny bits by her Slayer strength. Unfortunately, this morning she crossed that line and obviously she was mistaken in believing that she'd managed to retrieve all the pieces. It was a tragedy - with orange juice and toast. At least she hadn't burned the toast.

She finally lost it at the expression on Dean's face when he cringed as he bit down on another piece of shell. She had to spit a mouthful of coffee back into her cup to keep from choking on it.

"I'm sorry," she said through her giggles. "You really don't have to eat that."

"Oh well," he shrugged good naturedly, "It doesn't matter. Anything we eat is just gonna come back up the minute we step into the sewer."

"Ugh," Buffy replied as she shoved her coffee away from her in disgust. "You had to bring that up, didn't you? It's too bad I can't assign smelly sewer duty to some of the younger girls. I'd try to push it off on Faith, but she'd never buy into it. She's way too street smart. I don't want to be head Slayer anymore," she added with a pout.

"Sorry babe, maybe we'll hit it lucky out there today."

"Have you ever hit it lucky?" she asked. "If so, it's all on you, because luck and Buffy are very non-mixy things."

"We're screwed then," he replied with a laugh. "Cause, I'm fairly sure that me and Sam are cursed."

"Yay," she sighed, "more sewers for us. So, do you wanna hit the shower first? We should be squeaky clean when we walk through all that crap."

"You sure? It doesn't matter to me. I don't need three hours to get ready," he teased.

"It doesn't take me three hours," she replied with an eye-roll. "And yeah, I'll go after you. I need to
suck it up and call Giles. It's time to find out what the damage is. I'm sure Willow's already worked some sort of spell to figure out which of the girls we have to keep under wraps. Personally, I'm keeping my fingers crossed and hoping that the abstinence movement was a complete failure."

"I never saw the appeal," Dean joked lightly. He started to leave the room, but paused and turned around like he wanted to say something.

"What is it?" she questioned curiously.

"So, you think the witch will really work a spell?" he asked.

"Yeah," Buffy replied, shaking her head fondly at the memory of Willow's meltdown. "She'll do it. She won't like it, but she knows it has to be done. Heck, none of us like it. It's kind of a… I don't know… it just feels like a taboo subject. It seems majorly creepy that a bunch of adults are so obsessed with underage girls' sex lives."

"Tell me about it. I keep expecting Chris Hanson to pop out from around a corner and stick a microphone in my face."

Buffy could tell that Dean still had something on his mind, but he seemed reluctant to come out with it. "Why do you ask?" she questioned.

He massaged the back of his neck with one hand and regarded her seriously for a moment before speaking. "Do you really think it's a good idea to let her work spells on a bunch of kids?"

"You don't trust Willow," she concluded with some surprise. "This is about more than her interrupting us that night. Isn't it?"

"It's nothin' personal. Truth is, she seems pretty harmless, but I don't trust witches. Never have. I've never met one that didn't try to bend me over."

"Well that's too bad," Buffy stated simply, "because I trust her completely. She's family. Besides, do you really think I have no concern for those girls?" she asked, a note of indignation seeping into her voice.

"Of course not," he replied with a sigh. "I just… I had to put it out there. Okay? I'm not good at pretending when it comes to crap like that. So, now you know how I feel."

"Fine," she replied flatly. "Now I know."

Dean took a couple of steps forward. "Look Buffy," he began.

"No," she said, holding up her hand. "I don't wanna hear it. I can't force you to like her and you can't convince me not to trust her." She paused for a moment and then added, "But if you care anything about the way I feel, you'll try to treat her with respect."

"I'll give it my best shot," he offered. "I'll try not to be a bigger dick than I usually am," he added with a smile.

Buffy gave him a small smile in return. "Well, I guess that's the best anyone can hope for," she stated with a smirk.

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Dean came down the stairs wearing only his boxers. He was freshly showered and shaved, and had a
damp towel draped across his shoulders.

"I'm done in there," he announced as he poked his head into the living room.

"Okay," Buffy murmured absently without looking up. She was sitting on the couch, her hands wrapped tightly around a cold cup of coffee.

The tone of her voice convinced Dean that she was still angry about the thing with the witch. He sat down beside her and kneaded his forehead as he tried to think of something to say that would smooth things over. Angry women always baffled him; he was never sure how to deal with them. It was one of the few situations where he felt completely helpless.

"I'm sorry," he began awkwardly. "It's like I said before, I just don't trust witches. But, I promise I'll try my best to get along with her. Besides, if I piss her off, she might turn me into a toad," he added jokingly in the hope that a little humor might lighten the mood.

"It's not that," she replied. She had to smile a little at Dean's lame attempt at a joke. She was completely convinced that he believed his frequent inappropriate remarks were helpful to his case.

"I talked to Giles," she continued, her expression once again serious. "It's not good."

"What's the story?"

"Well, over half of the girls failed the test… or is it they passed the test? I don't know," she groaned as she sat her cup on the coffee table and began rubbing at her temples. "I just know that it means that out of twenty-two girls, I now have seven that don't have to be kept under lock and key. It's not a surprise really. We have a lot of fifteen-year-olds right now. Two of them are only fourteen. I can't believe I'm saying this, but seven isn't enough. Twenty-two isn't enough! This place is a powder keg and it just keeps getting worse. I've never seen anything like it. Something is seriously rattling this Eve lady's cage. Get this. Last night, Faith took on some kind of demon that supposedly only hangs out in New Zealand. New Zealand. I never took geography, but I'm pretty sure that's about as far away as you can get and still be on earth. What the hell is going on?"

"I'm not sure," Dean replied somberly. "We've seen the same kinda crap. Things have been crawling out of the woodwork that I didn't even know existed. Fairies, of all things. I mean, God Damn that was freaky."

"I'm going to have to do it," Buffy continued. "I'm going to have to split the girls up and send them out on their own. This town's too big to send them out in groups. We can't cover enough ground. We have almost 400,000 people to protect. I've needed to do this for a long time… but it scares me," she admitted quietly, sounding like she was ashamed of herself. "It's just… I can risk my own life. That's a given. I'm really not afraid to die. But, risking theirs is a whole other story. Did you know I haven't lost one girl since we moved to Cleveland? Not one. I always send them out in groups. Make sure the newer ones are with the more experienced ones. Faith says I baby them. She says I'm not preparing them for the real world… and what if she's right? Now it's too late. The shit has hit the fan and they'll have to go right out in the middle of it. Their very first time on their own and they'll be working under circumstances that are way out of control, even for the Hellmouth. I just didn't want them to go through what I went through." She paused and shook her head sadly. "I had a false sense of security. I thought the fact that we have so many Slayers meant that the world was safer… that we didn't have to take as many risks. I'm some leader, aren't I?" she asked with a bitter laugh. "Guess you think I'm a big joke."

"God no," Dean stressed. "Being that responsible for that many people… hell, that many kids. I'd wonder about you if you weren't freaked. You just want to protect them, there's nothing wrong with
Dean felt sick to his stomach as he watched Buffy sitting beside him staring silently at her hands. She was obviously making a huge effort just to keep it together. He could hear Balthazar's snotty little voice saying, ‘There's no more rules, boys’. No more rules - because he and his brother derailed the apocalypse. He still believed it was the right decision, but wondered when the fallout was going to end. If there would ever be a time when he didn't have to watch the aftereffects harm the people he cared about. To make things worse, he wasn't sure how to make Buffy feel better about the situation. He'd decided that he sucked when it came to dealing with anything that happened outside of the bedroom. He felt completely clueless. He wished he could tap into his brother's mind. Sam would know what to do, he'd always been better at the supportive/feeling thing. Sadly, Dean's idea of helping usually involved killing something. Of course, in this case, that just might apply.

He placed a hand on her shoulder in what he felt was a lousy attempt at being comforting, but hell he was trying. "We'll figure it out," he promised her, hoping desperately that he didn't end up disappointing her. "We'll find that lame-ass dragon and send its ass back to Middle Earth or wherever the hell the stupid thing comes from. Then we'll take on anything else Eve wants to send our way. She's toast," he added confidently. "Her kids'll have to ship her back to Purgatory in tiny little pieces."

Buffy couldn't help but smile, Dean really knew how to talk a good game. Although she knew it was mostly a bunch of macho bullshit, she still found it reassuring. Even if he couldn't manage to pull it all off, she knew he'd try. In that way, they were a lot alike. He wouldn't go down without a fight. She figured that out the first time she met him.

"You're getting ahead of yourself Rambo," she teased him. "We'll have to find her first. Then we can make with the tiny little pieces."

"Oh, we'll find her," he assured her with a cocky grin. "The bitch can't hide forever. She'll have to come out and fight sometime. The only reason she hasn't is because she's scared."

"I'm sure she is," Buffy agreed as she climbed onto his lap. She had just remembered that they hadn't tried out the couch yet and decided that the sewers could wait.
Buffy was hanging out in the dorm's common room while she waited for the girls to get out of Willow's 'Defense Against the DarkArts' class. She wished she knew why people (especially Xander people) always giggled whenever that class was mentioned. The title was kinda weird and way too wordy, but it was a good idea. Willow was teaching the girls how to recognize the various types of baddies and what their weaknesses were. It was a solid concept, so obviously there was some inside joke she was missing out on.

While she waited, Buffy looked out of the window. She could see the Council's parking lot where Dean's legs were currently sticking out from underneath her Camaro. He was changing the oil down there since there wasn't much space for that sort of thing where she lived. He'd been horrified when he'd discovered that the oil had never been changed in the six months that she'd owned the car. Personally, she thought he was overreacting. The car was still practically brand new, so it seemed pretty early to start replacing things. Of course, this was the first car she'd ever bought, so there was a tiny chance she was mistaken.

"Hi ya Buff," Xander's voice greeted from behind her. "Whatcha lookin' at? Ah, I see," he concluded as he stood behind her and peered out the window. "Ogling your boyfriend again."

"Only the boots part," Buffy admitted, "because that's pretty much all I can see."

"Car trouble?"

"Nope, just an oil change. It's never been changed and he sees that as a bad."

"Never been changed?" he asked in surprise. "Not once? Wow. You better get out while you can Buff, that man is obviously dangerously irrational."

She rolled her eyes at her old friend - like she had the time or the desire to learn car stuff. They should start when you turn the key. That was pretty much all she cared to know about the subject.

"So, how's it going with clan Harris?" she asked with a mischievous grin. "Have they made it into town yet?"

"Unfortunately," he grumbled. "I picked them up at the airport this morning. Uncle Rory's afraid to fly, so he got drunker than usual and hurled on a stewardess."

"Ewww."

"Yeah," he agreed, "oddly, that was my take on it too. I'm continually amazed that I'm actually kin to those people."

"What amazes me is how you managed to throw together a full-fledged formal wedding in one
month. That's no small feat. I should know. I watched the entire last season of that *Bridezilla* show."

"Well, Allie was determined to do this before she started showing. Besides, her mom did most of the work. I think she's been planning this since Allie was in diapers. Eloping is completely out of the question when you're the only girl in a family of six kids."

"But her family still doesn't know the reason for the big rush?" Buffy asked almost in a whisper, even though she knew there was no one around to overhear.

"I don't think so," he replied hopefully, "and that reminds me. Will Dean be bringing a gun to the wedding?"

"God, I hope not. Tell ya what though, I promise to pat him down before the ceremony."

"Actually, I was looking for a big fat 'yes'. I'm afraid some of Allie's brothers suspect me. Trust me, five strapping farm boys who think you've defiled their baby sister – *scary stuff*."

"So you want Dean to shoot them?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Only if they try to shoot me first. I'm a reasonable man."

"Duly noted," she replied with a nod, "and if we're lucky, that will be the only bloodbath on the program."

"If we're lucky," Xander agreed. "Hellmouths and formal occasions are famously incompatible."

"Willow has it covered," Buffy assured him. "She's amped up the protective spells on all the buildings and she's invented some handy-dandy little charms that are bound to scramble any virgin-seeking radar. As long as the weather holds, I predict the outdoor reception will be a big hit."

"Here's hopin'," he replied with his fingers crossed. "If nothing else, this will be a good dry run for your wedding," he teased.

She snorted a laugh. "Yeah right. We've only been together a month. I'm not even sure how Dean feels about me yet."

"Trust me, he's hooked," her friend said confidently. "He's changing your oil isn't he?"

Buffy shot Xander a puzzled look. "Is that some sort of secret guy-code for commitment? If so, you must teach me the mysterious ways of your people."

"See, that's where you ladies get tripped up. You give us guys way too much credit. Mostly, we're a simple folk. We show our devotion through the ritual acts of changing oil and mowing the lawn."

"I don't have a lawn, but he does take out the trash," she stated hopefully. "Ooh, and he fixed my leaky sink."

"And both are highly symbolic acts," he assured her. "And on a totally unrelated subject," he added, "You better hurry up and hide that Wal-Mart bag you're holding before Will shows up. Must she remind you that you'll pay for those low prices with your immortal soul?"

"Uh oh," Buffy said as she looked down at the bag in her hand. "Close call. I totally forgot. I so do not want to sit through that boring documentary again."

"No one does," he agreed. "So tell me. What did you sell your soul for this time?"
Buffy reached into the bag, which was filled with miniature spiral-bound notebooks. "These," she said as she held one up, "and they were two for a dollar," she added proudly. "I'm going to ask all the Slayers to keep one by their bed. Just as soon as they wake up, I want them to write down everything they can remember about their dreams, even if it's only one word."

"Still on the dream kick, huh?" Xander asked with a slightly patronizing smile.

"I'm telling you there's something to it," she stated firmly. "Every morning I wake up with déjà vu... and", she added quickly, "it's not because I get the feeling that I've woken up thousands of times before. Giles already used that one, so don't waste your time."

"Darn," he said with a snap of his fingers. "I thought I had some original snark."

"Sorry to disappoint. Plus," she continued on, "I talked to Faith and it's the same deal. Both of us are having weird dreams that magically fade away the minute we wake up. For instance. Yesterday, we both remembered dreaming something about kittens. Fishy huh? What's the chance that's just a coincidence?"

"Evil kittens?"

"Yes, vampire kittens. It was horrible. All of them were drinking from tiny little blood-filled saucers."

"Seriously? That would actually be pretty darn unsettling."

"No," Buffy smiled, "I'm joking...I hope. But there is something disturbing about the whole thing. It's almost like someone is deliberately preventing us from remembering these dreams."

"That Eve chick?"

"No," she replied thoughtfully, "For some reason I don't think so. It's something else. I'm not even sure why I think that. It's just, I have a gut feeling. That's why I want to try the dream journals. Maybe if we can all remember one or two things, we can piece this thing together."

"Guess it couldn't hurt," Xander agreed. "Besides, I shouldn't doubt your spidey-sense. It's proven itself worthy many times," he added sincerely.

"Thank you."

"No, thank you for lending credence to my 'I have to go to work and talk about important work stuff' excuse. Now it's not a complete lie."

"I see," Buffy replied knowingly. "You're just using us an excuse to hide out from your family."

"Guilty as charged," he admitted. "Actually, I really do have some official wedding business to go take care of. I still need to pick up my tux. If I drive super slow, I think I can manage to kill a few more hours. Maybe I'll walk," he added thoughtfully.

"Good luck with that."

Xander started to leave, but paused at the door. "I almost forgot. Please tell me that Dean and Sam are coming to the fake-Bronze tonight to do the bachelor party thing. I'd like to have at least a couple of real guys there. No offense to Giles and Andrew, of course."

"Of course," Buffy agreed with a nod. "Don't sweat it. I'm sure they'll be there. I predict that tonight
will be rather light on the slayage. Dean won't mind spending a night away from Cleveland's great underground labyrinth, plus me and all the girls will be at Allie's shower tonight. The magnificent seven will have to survive one night without Sam."

"They won't like that. You do realize that a lot of their distress calls aren't entirely on the up-and-up. If they were, then they'd call Faith, Vi, or Rona. But nooo, they always call Sam for some strange reason. It's so not fair," he emphasized. "I was supposed to be the crush-worthy older guy. Oh well," he said as he stood up straight and squared his shoulders. "I'm going to be a father soon, so I suppose it would be appropriate for me to pass the torch. I'll transition into being the wise and dignified paternal figure. Wait a minute," he paused, his face falling in disappointment. "Giles already has that title. What am I supposed to be now?"

"We'll figure something out," Buffy promised. "Just remember that the quality of your new title is contingent upon you not taking my boyfriend to a strip club tonight."

"I don't think you have to worry," he assured her. "The best man plans these things and seeing as how that's Giles, I'm not expecting anything much more exciting than a few beers and maybe a game of pool."

"Good." Buffy replied happily.

Buffy got home from Allie's bridal shower around ten and watched TV with Dawn for a couple of hours before heading off to bed. It was nice to get to spend some time with her sister again. Her boyfriend, Russ, had driven her in for the wedding and had ended up tagging along to Xander's bachelor party. As far as she could tell, he seemed pretty nice, but she still felt weird about allowing him to share Dawn's room. However, she had a feeling that despite anything she'd said, he'd still head straight to Dawn's bedroom when he got in. Her sister was technically an adult and Buffy wasn't their mom, so there was only so much she could actually do about it. Still, she didn't have to like it. Dawn would probably always be a little girl in her book.

Once she laid down, she quickly realized that she'd grown so accustomed to Dean being there that she was now having trouble going to sleep without him. That idea scared her. She was serious when she'd told Xander that she didn't know how he felt about her. He never talked about anything like that. He was almost always around and was very affectionate, but he never made any grand declarations. If she used Xander's yardstick, it did seem that he cared about her. Aside from taking on the so-called 'manly household tasks', he had completely devoted himself to helping her solve the Eve crisis. His first act was to assign his brother to mini-Slayer duty. The first week or two, Sam had gone out with a different one of the seven each night. It had really helped to ease them into the idea of being on their own and had also given her some serious peace of mind. Since then, he'd been spending most of his time accompanying the less experienced girls on patrol and answering multiple requests for help each night. Many of these 'emergencies' were just obvious ploys to get his attention. She thought it was funny, but it infuriated Faith, who sometimes claimed that he was secretly messing around with some of the underage girls. Buffy really didn't think so and Dean thought the idea was absurd. Since he knew Sam better than anybody, she'd decided to trust his judgment. Faith had a very low opinion of men in general, which tended to skew her judgment toward the highly negative. Buffy often wondered what had happened to her to make her so suspicious. She was afraid it was something horrible, but Faith had never opened up to her about it. It was sad actually. She'd begun to suspect that Faith had an interest in Sam that went beyond her typical 'use 'em and lose 'em' agenda. The lady most definitely did protest too much.

Buffy flipped her pillow over again and continued on with her attempt to define her relationship with
Dean. She tried not to delve too deeply into her own feelings and instead concentrated on what his might be. Her feelings were way too intense for her to linger over, mainly because she was afraid he might not share them. She was ashamed to admit that a small part of her was glad that they hadn't managed to kill that stupid dragon yet. That part of her feared that he'd move on once the job was done. Of course, killing the dragon didn't automatically end their problems with Eve and aside from that, they weren't much closer to killing it than they'd been when they started. It had turned out to be much wiler than she'd given it credit for. It seemed to know they were onto it and had started moving its lair around. They'd found several piles of scorched bones and some gold that had been dropped and left behind. The bones answered her question about what had happened to the non-Slayer virgins it captured. Apparently, they were barbequed and eaten for lunch. This discovery made her feel like a horrible person for harboring any secret, self-centered motives. But still, it wasn't like they hadn't tried to get rid of it. In fact, they may even be close to a breakthrough. In the past week, there'd been a rash of attacks on young women near Council headquarters. The dragon had apparently decided that those girls hadn't fit the profile, but they'd still ended up clawed and traumatized. The girls hadn't been able to give any reliable descriptions of what had happened, but it seemed pretty clear that the creature was getting desperate. It knew that its targets were close by, but yet it couldn't seem to get to them. The hope was that its frustration would soon cause it to slip up and come out into the open.

It was around 2:30 A.M. when Buffy finally heard the Impala's engine and Sam's voice saying good night to Dean and Russ. Dean's boots sounded stomplier than usual on the stairs, so she figured he'd done quite a bit of drinking. As it turned out, she was correct. She just hoped that his brother had been in better shape since he'd been the one driving. This was the first time that she'd ever seen alcohol have much of an effect on Dean. He always drank a few beers with dinner, but he never seemed to have much of a buzz. His tolerance was obviously way higher than hers.

After making such a racket coming up the stairs, he opened the bedroom door very slowly and carefully. He then tried his best to move stealthily across the floor in the dark. He ended up slamming his shin against the nightstand and proceeded to curse loudly. Buffy decided it was time to give up the sleeping act and flipped on the lamp.

"You okay?" she asked with amusement in her voice.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he answered sheepishly. "I'm a little drunk," he added with a goofy smile as he half-fell/half-sat on the edge of the bed and started trying to take off his boots.

"You don't say," she commented as she leaned over his shoulder and watched him struggle with his laces. "Do you need help with those?"

"Nope, 'm good."

"What shape is the groom in?" she asked curiously. "Xander doesn't need to end up missing another one of his weddings."

"Blitzed. Dude puked in the parking lot."

"Great. You guys do realize that the ceremony is at one o'clock tomorrow?"

"He'll be fine," Dean stated with a sloppy wave of his hand. "Just needs to sleep it off. But man, squirrelly-dude really made me nervous tonight."

"His name is Andrew, remember? His feelings will be hurt if you slip up and call him squirrelly-dude to his face."
"Yeah whatever," he slurred. "The way he looks at me and Sam… I'm serious, it's like we're both just a piece of meat," he declared in an honestly offended tone.

Buffy burst out laughing. "I'm sure the both of you can manage to fend him off."

"I hope so," Dean said earnestly. "I'd hate to have to sic the Slayer on his ass."

He finally managed to rid himself of his boots and swung his legs up on the bed. He propped himself up against the headboard before reaching into his back pocket and pulling out his wallet.

"Here," he said as he attempted to push a wad of bills into her hand. She judged that there was at least five hundred dollars there, maybe more.

"This isn't a strip club," Buffy said dryly. She wasn't quite sure what he was up to.

"Too bad," he joked as he continued to try to get Buffy to accept the cash. "Take it. It's for bills and stuff, but if you feel like you need to strip for it, I won't complain," he added with a drunken leer.

"Dean, where did you get this?"

"I hustled pool. What do you think?" he asked a little defensively. "I sure as hell didn't sell my body to squirrelly-dude."

"Well that's a relief," she replied sarcastically.

Buffy took the wad of cash from him and dropped it on the nightstand. She didn't intend on keeping it, but she wasn't about to waste her time arguing with a drunk man. She tried to tamp down her irritation with him by reminding herself that she had no chance of having an intelligent conversation with him tonight. It was just that this issue was so damn ridiculous and frustrating. Dean refused to take any money from the Council, even though Giles had made it clear to him - on more than one occasion - that he would be more than happy to pay his expenses. He and Sam had even argued about it. Sam felt that they were working a job and deserved to be paid, but Dean wouldn't even discuss it. What he didn't know was that Sam had decided to go ahead and take Giles up on the offer. She was glad because Sam was working his ass off, but she was afraid that it might end up causing a big fight between the two brothers. Speaking of fights, she'd finally decided that she was way too aggravated with Dean to let this drop until tomorrow. She had to say something.

"Dean, this is stupid." she snapped. "I don't understand why you won't let Giles put you on the payroll. You don't have to gamble and hustle pool to pay the bills. You are working, you know? I realize you don't normally get paid for it, but that's the way we do it around here."

Buffy had expected an argument, but it appeared that he was too far gone to rise to the bait. In fact, he'd passed out on top of the covers with all of his clothes on. She decided to leave him that way, but did make sure that the pillow was behind his head since it was propped against the headboard at an odd angle. Hopefully he'd wake up soon and realize that he was in an uncomfortable position. The argument would have to wait, but at least now that he was here she'd be able to get some sleep.

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The next morning, Buffy made a big breakfast. She'd decided to go all out since Dawn was visiting. Thankfully, there had been no egg-based disasters this time. To her surprise, Dean ate just as much as usual. She'd assumed he might be too hung over, but he seemed to be holding up pretty well. He was a little grumbly though and he kept rubbing at his temples.

When Dawn entered the kitchen, she placed her hands on Dean's shoulders, leaned in close to his
ear, and practically yelled 'good morning'. She was just torturing the injured and helpless, it was one of her favorite pastimes. He growled and swatted at her, but she just smiled and patted him on the top of the head before taking her seat. What bothered Buffy about this little scene was Russ' reaction to it. She didn't think that Dean or her sister had noticed, but the expression on his face had been close to fury. He seemed to hide it quickly and was polite throughout breakfast, but she noticed that he kept shooting suspicious glances at Dean when he wasn't looking. A little jealousy was normal, but this seemed extreme and had set off an alarm in Buffy's head. She decided that she was no longer so sure that she liked Dawn's new boyfriend. She'd have to keep an eye on him.

The ceremony went off practically without a hitch. Something Buffy was sure fate would eventually make them all pay for. She hadn't attended many weddings, but the ones she'd been to had all been traditional spring affairs. Since it was early October, Allie and Xander had used a fall theme. The colors were gold and a burnt-orange. Everything had turned out really pretty. Actually, Council Headquarters was a great location for a wedding. The campus had originally been a small Catholic boarding school, so it had come pre-equipped with a chapel. All they'd had to do was clear out the cobwebs and add some decorations. The Slayerettes had thrown themselves into helping Allie's mom, sisters-in-law, and cousins decorate. The fifteen 'shut-ins' were especially enthusiastic because they were understandably bored with the day-to-day routine. Buffy had initially been against the idea of holding the ceremony there, it seemed like the risk of an incident was just too great. For one thing, the bride's family and friends had no knowledge of the real purpose for the school. They believed it was a private, church supported girl's academy. But Allie had ended up insisting on holding the ceremony there, because she wanted all of the girls to be able to attend. Xander's new wife had always been very maternal, which was probably why she'd been drawn to nursing. She wanted everyone to feel included. This aspect of her personality reminded Buffy a little of Tara and she felt a stab of sadness. She felt like Tara had never been properly mourned. When Willow had gone off the deep end, Buffy had forced her death to the back of her mind. There had simply been too many other issues to deal with. Since then, she had mourned her in bits and pieces, usually when some small detail caused her to remember.

The reception was held outside beneath a large rented tent. Thankfully, the weather had been nice so they'd been able to pin up the sides and let the breeze blow through. Buffy had been chatting with Trish, a shy, sixteen-year-old member of 'the fifteen'. She'd been sitting alone, unlike the other girls who were taking the opportunity to socialize and flirt with some of Allie's cute nephews and cousins. Trish was a skinny African-American girl, who seemed ill at ease with her nearly six-foot-tall frame. Buffy knew that once she stopped being so self-conscious and learned how to carry herself that she'd be absolutely stunning. Her features were striking in a way that reminded her of a contestant on America's Next Top Model. Of course, none of that was in this girl's future. She'd been chosen and Buffy could understand why. When she fought she immediately transformed into the perfect picture of confidence and grace. The Powers didn't hand out Slayer skills evenly, some of the girls had more than others and Trish probably had the most. She'd been really sorry to lose her in the field. She was currently telling Buffy about a disturbing dream she'd had the night before. The only thing she'd been able to remember was that someone or something had creepy, black eyes. Buffy immediately got that déjà vu-y feeling and became even more convinced that these dreams had a deeper meaning.

Faith was another person who appeared to be uncomfortable in her own skin. She had on a simple and rather conservative looking blue dress. It was so not her style. She was sitting at the end of the table, looking fidgety and anxious. Buffy excused herself from Trish and went over to say hello.

"I feel like an idiot," she grumbled as she tugged at her clothing. "I can't wait till this thing is over."

"You sound like Dean," Buffy said with a laugh. "I had to convince him that jeans and a t-shirt were
not appropriate wedding attire." She looked over at him as she spoke. He was standing with his brother and drinking a beer of all things. He called it 'hair of the dog'. She smiled when she noticed that he'd already managed to get rid of his tie. She also noticed that Faith was looking in that direction as well, but her eyes weren't on Dean.

"You two are silly," Buffy stated. "You look at him when he's not looking and he looks at you when you're not looking. It's like a high school flashback."

"Sam looks at me?" Faith asked. She'd attempted to sound casual but it was obvious that she was surprised. "Huh," she shrugged, "guess that horn-dog can't keep his eyes off any of the women."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "That's not true Faith and I think you know it. Are you ever gonna spill the beans and tell me what happened between you two?"

"What do you think happened? Do I need to draw a picture?"

"I'd rather you didn't," she replied sincerely. Strangely, Faith's words had given her another whopping sense of déjà vu.

"I saw Dean changing your oil yesterday," Faith remarked in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"Yeah, I think he's deflecting his vehicle-angst onto my Camaro since Sam almost always has his. I've never seen anybody so attached to a car before. You'd think it was human."

"It was the family car," Faith told her. "Their mom and dad had it before they were even born and – ya know – they're both dead now. That's why he's such a spaz about it."

This revelation explained a lot. Buffy hadn't realized that the car had such history. She'd always just assumed that Dean's obsession was simply some weird car-guy thing, but what really surprised her was the fact that Faith had this information.

"How did you know that?" she asked curiously.

"Sam," she replied simply.

"But you can barely manage to be in the same room with him," Buffy argued.

"He told me that night," Faith replied a little irritably. Obviously, she was uncomfortable with the subject.

Shock and awe weren't strong enough words for Buffy's reaction. "Don't take this the wrong way Faith," she began cautiously, "but if I were to imagine what happened that night, talking would've been at the very bottom of the list. Actually, it wouldn't have even made the list."

"Thanks B," Faith said defensively. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Sorry," she said sincerely. "It's just… you don't talk to men. I'm really not trying to be harsh here. I thought you were pretty open about the fact that you only have one use for them."

Faith refused to look her in the eye. "Well, he was pretty easy to talk to. I actually kinda liked him," she admitted hesitantly.

"Then go talk to him," Buffy encouraged her.

"What am I supposed to say? Our last conversation ended with me threatening to kick his ass."
"Did he deserve it?"

"Yeah… No… I don’t know," she replied in frustration. "I just don’t get him. I can’t seem to figure out his game."

"Maybe he doesn’t have one," Buffy said.

"They all have a game B. If you’re nice enough and give ‘em what they want, they’ll take care of you. Maybe give you a place to stay, somethin’ to eat… at least until they get tired of you. But if you’re strong enough,” she added with a somewhat bitter smile, "you get to make your own rules.”

Buffy wasn’t sure how to reply to this. She felt incredibly sad for Faith, but she knew pity was the last thing she would want. Faith would rather die than be painted as a victim and she respected that.

"Just go talk to him," Buffy finally said. "Ask him how he is. You can even discuss slaying. It doesn’t have to be anything deep or complicated and it doesn’t have to be about sex. Just try and be his friend."

"Nah, he's busy talking to Dawn right now. She had a big crush on him, didn't she?"

Buffy looked up and saw that her sister was indeed chatting with Sam. Dean wasn’t with them. If she had to guess, she'd say he'd gone back for more food.

"Yes Faith," she answered in a slightly exasperated tone. "But nothing happened. Regardless of what you may think, Sam actually seems to prefer his women to be out of their teens. Besides, Dawn's all wrapped up in that Russ guy," she added sourly.

"So, we don't like him?" Faith asked.

"Look at him," Buffy replied as she attempted to subtly incline her head and roll her eyes in his direction. "Doesn't he look like jealous psycho-boy? It's like he's trying to fry Sam's face off with his laser eyes. He did the same thing to Dean and for no good reason. I need to talk to Dawn about this, but I know she won't listen to me."

Faith rose from her seat. "Maybe I should go introduce myself," she said with a sly grin.

"What are you going to do?" Buffy asked suspiciously.

"Nothin' bad. I'm just gonna say hello… maybe give him a nice bone-crushing handshake. Ya know, subtly remind him that Dawn has friends who can stomp his ass into a mud puddle."

Buffy actually kind of liked that plan. The more she was around the guy, the less she liked him.

"Just don't take it too far," she reminded Faith.

"It's all good," she replied with a wink.

It wasn't long before Dean joined Buffy at the table. He had, as she'd suspected, once again loaded up his plate.

"You should try these sausage balls," he said as he held one out to her. "They're awesome."

"I'm good," she assured him. "I usually try to stick to the one plate. The drawback to being this short is that the calories have nowhere to go but out."

Dean shook his head. "That's ridiculous. You should eat what you want."
"I'm sure that's what you'll think when I weigh three-hundred pounds."

"A three-hundred pound Slayer would be bad ass," he joked. "Nothing would mess with you."

"Yeah, nothing. Not even you," she replied dryly.

Before Dean had a chance to say something that was undoubtedly going to be crude and inappropriate, Xander and Allie interrupted them. They were making the required rounds among their guests.

Buffy stood up and gave each of them a big hug. "You look so beautiful Allie," she gushed.

"She does," Xander agreed proudly. "But hey, what about me?" he added in a fake injured tone. "I didn't put on this monkey suit for nothin'."

"Actually Xander," Buffy began, "you look a whole lot better than I imagined you would after hearing about your parking lot adventures."

Xander nodded in agreement. "Yeah, well, remind me that I should never try to go shot-for-shot against your boyfriend. Never," he emphasized.

"Sorry Allie," Buffy apologized. "I didn't realize Dean would be such a bad influence."

"Xander's a big boy," she said with a smile, "and hopefully now he's gotten all the wildness out of his system."

"Believe me," he said, "I got everything out of my system in that parking lot last night. The good, the bad, the indifferent… I think I might've lost some things I actually need."

Dean laughed. "Yeah man, you had some problems holding your liquor."

"That reminds me," Xander said excitedly. "Buff, you missed it! You'll never guess who can drink as much as Dean and still stay on his feet."

"Who?"

"Giles! He was completely off the hook. I'll never look at him the same way again."

"The old limey can put away some booze," Dean agreed.

"I really didn't need to know that," Buffy said honestly.

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Buffy was once again feeling that she was deeply in fate's debt. Somehow, they'd managed to see Xander and Allie off and get all of the guests safely back to their hotel rooms before sunset. Aside from Xander's drunk uncle Rory getting a little too friendly with the bridesmaids, there hadn't been any notable incidents. Most importantly, there were zero incidents of the freaky and supernatural variety.

She was in the chapel with Giles, helping him to roll up yards and yards of ribbon and lace. Everyone else was outside either standing around talking or working to clean up the remains of the reception.

"So," she said to Giles. "I hear you got to see Dean's Paul Newman impersonation last night."

"I think it's stupid," Buffy stated.

"I rather enjoyed it," he replied. "I realize you're not much of a classic film connoisseur, but I think that one really stands the test of time."

"Not the movie," she said in exasperation. "Dean hustling pool. That's what's stupid."

"Well he is quite good at it."

"Not what I'm getting at Giles. I mean it's ridiculous that he thinks he needs to do that, when you're offering to pay him good money. It makes no sense. Do you know he tried to give me his winnings? He thinks I took it, but I didn't really. I'm making him take it back just as soon as we get home."

"I don't think you should do that," he said seriously. "You should keep the money."

"You don't get my point."

"I do get your point," he disagreed. He stopped what he was doing and took off his glasses, something he tended to do when he was about to get serious. "Would you like me to be completely honest with you?" he asked.

"I guess," she replied hesitantly.

"Well here goes. I believe you are being deliberately obtuse."

"Uh," she protested. "Maybe you're the obtuse one. Did you ever consider that?"

"Yes, very mature. What I'm trying to say, is that you must know why he refuses to let me pay him."

Buffy shrugged innocently and Giles shook his head before continuing. "He associates you with the Council and he doesn't want you to pay him for helping you."

"But I'm not paying him. It's the Council's money, not mine! Plus, he's not just helping me. He's helping everyone. Hello - the entire world that might get roasted if Eve manages to succeed with her plans."

"I don't believe he sees it that way. You're his primary interest in this matter. I say you should take the money and leave this be. He'll come around eventually."

"One night of drinking and you're taking his side," she accused. "I can't believe this."

"I'm not taking his side Buffy," Giles replied irritably. "I'm taking your side. This is the first time that I've seen you truly happy in years and I don't wish to see you sabotage things. That young man is here because of you, it should be obvious."

"Then why doesn't he just say that?" she pouted.

"And so we've arrived at the root of your argument," he sighed. "You need to have patience. Dean's not the sort to read you poetry. I've no doubt that he'll eventually tell you what you wish to hear, but until that time, you need to not get so caught up in what he's not saying. Open your eyes. That's the best advice I can give you."

"Well I'm glad all that doesn't make me sound like a huge bitch," she said. "I'm really not trying to be all pushy. I just..."
"Don't want to get hurt," he finished for her. "I see that and I also realize you have an awful lot of baggage. I'm just telling you that you need to try and see past it. I'm certainly not accusing you of being a 'pushy bitch'."

"Good," she said with a small smile. "Because that's kinda mean."

Giles' reply was cut off when the topic of their conversation came tearing into the chapel at a full run.

"It's a giant freakin' lizard!" he exclaimed as he tried to catch his breath.

"What?" Giles asked, obviously confused by this statement.

"The dragon. It's actually a ginormous fire-breathing lizard. It's a flying Godzilla. The bastard burned the damn tent to a crisp!"

"Does this mean I've lost my deposit?" Giles asked in alarm.

Buffy was already on her way toward the door, she could hear yelling and what sounded like gunfire coming from outside.

"Hide the virgins!" she yelled before turning and asking in amazement, "Did I actually say that? Because that's just weird."

"They made it inside," Dean answered her as he caught up. "The witch threw up this shield thing. It lasted long enough for them to get into the main building. It was pretty damn impressive actually," he admitted.

"Good," Buffy sighed in relief. "Where's the sword?"

"As far as I know it's still in the trunk of your car."

"Oh no, my purse!" she said in a panic. "I need the keys." She ran back inside and to the back of the chapel where she'd remembered stashing it.

"Cover me," she yelled as she flew out of the door with her keys in hand.

"With what?" he called after her.

Dean ran out into the courtyard, looking around desperately for anything that could be considered a weapon. Thankfully, the dragon was currently occupied with throwing itself against the main building, so it hadn't noticed Buffy. Every time it touched the brick, you could hear a loud sizzling sound that must've been the effect of the magical charms Willow had placed on the structure. This enraged the creature further, causing it to roar and launch a stream of fire at the building. This too was repelled by the barrier and blew back into the dragon's face. Dean felt safe in thinking that he had now seen everything.

He called out for his brother. He was hoping to get the Impala's keys and get some weapons from the trunk. It was hard to see because the fumes from the burned tent and a few trees that had caught on fire were clogging the air. He finally saw his brother running toward him with a handful of weapons and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good job, Sam. What did you get?"

"Whatever I could grab," he replied as he coughed and gasped for air. He dropped a bundle of weapons on the ground and Dean immediately grabbed a crossbow.
"You actually brought the flamethrower?" he asked. "Don't you think we have enough fire?"

"Bite me," his brother snapped. "I wasn't exactly being choosy."

Dean shrugged. "I think this is the most messed up thing we've ever seen," he commented. "What happened to the lame goth-guy dragon?"

"Weird Hellmouth energy," Sam replied. "I think it makes monsters more monstrous."

At about that time, Buffy came running up beside them holding the dragon sword.

"You okay?" Dean asked her immediately.

"Fine," she replied quickly. "But we need to get that thing away from the building. Will's protection charms are super strong, but I don't know how much abuse they can take. Plus, we need to get it down here where I can stab it."

Dean lifted the crossbow and fired a shot at the creature. The arrow bounced off, but it did turn around and growl, which meant he'd caught its attention. Through the smoke he could see Faith and the other Slayers (the non-virgin ones anyway) and they had apparently gone inside and taken every single crossbow from the weapons room. Thankfully, there were more than enough to go around. They launched volley after volley of arrows at the dragon and every third or fourth one would actually stick into its hide. They didn't appear to be causing it injury, but it was definitely angry and distracted. It abandoned its attempts to get into the building and swooped down over the courtyard breathing giant streams of fire and causing everyone to scatter across the grounds to avoid it. The jacket of Dean's suit caught ablaze and he had to take a break from shooting arrows in order to rip it off. Now that they had the dragon's attention they'd discovered a huge flaw in their plan. It didn't need to get very close to the ground to incinerate them with its breath. It could stay twenty to thirty feet up and still easily manage to roast them all alive, meaning Buffy had no chance of sticking it with the sword.

Buffy grabbed Dean by the hand and pulled him toward the foot of a large cross that stood on the grounds. It had obviously been placed there by the previous owners. It was at least sixty feet tall and had at one time been lit up with lights. Because of this, there was a built-in maintenance ladder on the back of the structure. The rungs didn't start until you got about ten feet off the ground, which probably had something to do with deterring curious children from climbing it.

"Lift me up," Buffy said as she kicked off her high heels.

"Hell no," Dean replied. "Are you crazy?"

"I have to," she argued. "That thing won't come down here, so I'll have to go up there."

"I'll do it," he stated.

"No," she said firmly. "Lift me up or I'll find someone who will."

"Goddammit," he cursed in frustration, but he did boost her up. He knew she'd do it anyway; she had that look in her eye.

She paused on the bottom rung and looked down at him. "Get everybody to chase that thing this way," she ordered sternly, "and please be careful," she added more gently.

Dean stood for a moment and watched as she swiftly climbed the ladder one-handed since she had to use the other to hold on to the sword.
"Goddammit!" he cursed again before going to inform the group of her plan. They did manage to steer the dragon toward the cross, but it still wasn't cooperating with the slaying plan. It just wouldn't get close enough to Buffy to allow her to stab it. She was standing balanced on the 't' of the cross when it swooped by just feet below her. As it turned around and came back for another pass (shooting fire at the ground as it flew) she made the snap decision to jump onto its back. The moment it detected her presence it did a barrel roll in the air in an attempt to dislodge her. She barely managed to keep hold of the sword and prevent herself from flying off by grabbing onto one of the pointy spines that protruded from its back. When it came out of the roll, she realized with horror that it was starting to gain altitude. That wasn't good. She'd been hoping to wait until it got a little closer to the ground before stabbing it, but after a second barrel roll, she decided that this may be her only chance. She slammed the sword into the side of the creature's neck with all of her strength. It sunk in to the hilt and the dragon let out a horrible shrieking roar that could probably be heard for miles around. It then fell silent and immediately began to sink like a stone through the air. Buffy had judged that they were probably at least eighty feet up when she'd stabbed it. This fall was going to hurt. She waited until they were probably ten to twenty feet from the ground and then jumped clear. She had no desire to be impaled on one of those spiny spikes when the thing crashed landed.

She must have been temporarily knocked out, because the next thing she knew, she was lying on the ground and Dean was kneeling over her. She could see his lips moving and feel his hand brushing against her face, but the ringing in her ears prevented her from understanding him. His face, she noticed, was white with panic and fear. She wanted to assure him that she was alive and sorta well, but the breath had been knocked out of her. After a minute or two, she felt like she was getting her bearings a little, so she grabbed onto his arm and pulled herself into a sitting position.

"No more sewers," she announced with a smile.

He stared at her for a moment with the same terrified expression on his face and then pulled her into a tight embrace. "I thought you were dead," he said in a gravelly voice. "I knew you were." He paused for a moment as he took deep steadying breaths in an effort to compose himself. "You're completely batshit insane," he finally added as he squeezed her tighter. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Buffy would've laughed if her ribs hadn't hurt so much. "Dean," she groaned, "I think I broke some ribs in that fall."

"Oh God," he said as he released his grip on her pulled away. "I'm sorry."

Buffy took both of his hands in hers and looked into his eyes. His features showed a variety of emotions that were seemingly at war with one another. He somehow appeared both worried and desperately hopeful at the same time. Immediately, she remembered Giles' advice about opening her eyes. Maybe she didn't have to hear any grand declarations of love just yet. Right now she was pretty damn happy with 'batshit insane'.

Stormy Monday

Chapter Notes

A/N: A Few things this time.

I realize there was a scene in Like A Virgin where Dean says (in front of a newly-souled Sam): "Door to Purgatory. Well, I know a demon who would have loved to have known about that." This statement makes it quite conceivable that souled-Sam was told all about Crowley's plot to find Purgatory, however, in my world Dean never made this statement. Strike it from the record. Sam is completely clueless about Crowley/Purgatory for the purposes of this story.

The second divided section of this chapter is pure, unadulterated smut. If you don't like that sort of thing, you can skip that section without missing any major plot points. Otherwise, consider yourself duly warned. I've given up on maintaining separate versions. I'm a lazy, lazy person.

The chapter title (Stormy Monday) is an Allman Brother's Band cover of an old T-Bone Walker blues song. It appears on their live album 'At Filmore East' (1971).

Enough babbling. On to the story. Thanks to my beta reader isugirl!

The silver lining Buffy had wished for, unfortunately, did not materialize. She'd hoped her sister's boyfriend would be so wigged-out by the dragon incident that he'd run screaming from Cleveland never to be seen again. But no, he thought it was the coolest thing ever. 'That guy' couldn't stop asking questions about Slayers and Hellmouths and all the requisite madness that goes along with those things. The only time he took a break from his newfound enthusiasm was when he sensed that another male had gotten within a mile of Dawn. When that happened, at least he'd shut his stupid mouth for a minute, but only because he was too busy sulking and glaring.

Buffy had decided 'that guy' didn't deserve an actual name. Honestly, she was beginning to think that two syllables were too generous. Maybe she'd just call him 'guy' or even just 'guh'. As far as she knew, he hadn't done anything horrible, but her instinct told her that he had the potential to be a controlling and jealous nutjob. She couldn't believe her sister didn't see this, but in all fairness, ole' guh did have some serious talent when it came to hiding his true colors. If he knew Dawn was looking, he'd immediately fall back into his pleasant and polite act. It was sickening and to make matters worse, they'd left for Tennessee before Buffy had the opportunity to talk to her sister about her concerns. The freak just wouldn't let Dawn out of his sight long enough for anyone to have a private conversation with her. Now Buffy would have to catch her on the phone, a conversation that would inevitably end with her sister screeching in her ear and then hanging up on her. She was really looking forward to it.

Buffy was taking a second night off in order to recuperate from her dragony free-fall. She was pretty sore when she woke up on Sunday morning, but she could've patrolled by the time night rolled around. She'd stayed in, however, because her sister and Dean had both been adamant about it. Dawn had been extremely shaken after witnessing her fall. The sight had brought up a lot of bad memories that neither of them cared to revisit. So, before she left, she'd made Buffy promise that she'd take it easy for one more night.
She stayed true to her word and stayed in for the evening. It was actually a nice break. Willow had come over to hang and they'd watched a movie and eaten a nutritious dinner of Chinese take-out with a side of brownies. After Will had gone home, Buffy fell asleep on the couch with the TV on as she waited for Dean to get in. He'd gone out patrolling with Sam since she'd had someone to keep her company. She also strongly suspected that he'd rather not watch *The Black Swan* or listen to a bunch of girl-talk all night.

It was around three in the morning when she was awakened by a strong skunky smell, the source of which was apparently her boyfriend. In her sleepy daze, she was able to make out something about him needing a shower and a string of various curse words. She wasn't worried though, because judging from the way he was taking the stairs two at a time, he wasn't hurt. In record time, she heard the shower running along with the occasional curse that the sound of the water couldn't manage to drown out. She considered going upstairs and crawling into bed, but she was just way too comfy where she was. It had been a while since she'd had some down time and her body seemed to be enjoying it

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Buffy must have fallen asleep again, because the next thing she knew, the TV had been switched off and Dean was squatting down on the floor in front of the couch, brushing her hair back from her face.

"Hey lazy ass," he said softly.

"Hi sweetie," she replied with a yawn and a smile. "What happened? I noticed you were kinda stinky when you got in."

Dean groaned. "We ran into some ugly bastard that likes to gleek this nasty-ass goo all over people. Have you ever tangled with that one?"

"Doesn't ring a bell," she mumbled sleepily. "Guess I've never had the pleasure."

"Well, too late now. Don't think he's in the meet 'n greet mood anymore. Didn't seem to take it too well when I chopped off his head."

"Shoot," Buffy replied with a fake pout, "he sounded fun."

"Yeah, he was a friggin riot. How's the ankle?" he asked, immediately switching to a concerned tone. "Think you can handle the stairs?"

Buffy's ankle was fine, but she was way too lazy to climb all those stairs. She had a feeling that if she appeared even slightly pitiful, she could score a ride. So, instead of flat out lying, she settled for sticking out her bottom lip and turning big round eyes on Dean. It worked like a charm. He teased her about being useless, but immediately scooped her up and carried her toward the bedroom. She looped her arms around his neck and happily nuzzled her nose against his bare chest.

"You smell good," she observed. "Very soapy."

"I should, cuz I used an entire bar. You know that scrubby thing you've got?"

"My loofah?"

"I guess," he replied. "Whatever it is, you'll have to burn it."

Buffy let out an evil giggle. "Wait till Sam hears about you using my girlie bath products."
"I'll smother you in your sleep," he threatened as he deposited her gently on the mattress.

Before he could walk around to his side of the bed, she grabbed one of his hands and ran his fingertips slowly across her lips, sucking and biting each of them lightly. "Thank you," she said sweetly.

Buffy smiled coyly when she noticed the lost and pitiful expression Dean was wearing. He was so adorable, kinda like a scolded puppy. She couldn't help herself, she had to tease him some more. She slowly wiggled out of the sweats she was wearing and kicked them onto the floor, before just as slowly ditching her t-shirt and bra.

"This is more comfy," she said innocently as she stretched and posed. "Guess it's sleepy time now," she announced with a huge fake yawn. "Good night, sweetie."

Dean gulped audibly and remained frozen as he stood by the bed. His gaze was laser-focused on her tiny, silky, black panties. He appeared to be hoping that they would remove themselves if he concentrated hard enough. Buffy smiled in triumph when she noted how large his erection was. He was always impressive in that department, but this time she was pretty sure he'd broken a few records. After all, it had been a few days. Friday night, he'd been drunk, passed-out guy and Saturday night she'd played the part of broken ribs, broken ankle, concussion girl. Seeing as how it was now officially Monday morning, she was more than ready to end this unplanned celibacy streak they had going. She always wanted him, but ever since Xander's wedding she'd been practically in heat. It was way past time to close the deal.

With that idea in mind, she reached out and gripped him tightly through his boxers. "Happy to see me?" she asked as she blew him a kiss and licked her lips.

Dean closed his eyes and groaned deep in his throat. "God baby, that's just cold hearted. Now I'm gonna have to go make a withdrawal from the spank bank. I'll never get to sleep in this condition." He then started to turn, clearly intent on heading to the bathroom and taking care of his 'transaction'.

"Dean!" Buffy gasped, partly in amusement and partly in shock. She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him down into a sitting posing on the bed. "Are you serious?" she asked with a blush.

"Hell yeah, I'm serious," he replied with a devilish grin. "Sometimes you just hafta whack it," he added with a waggle of his brows. Dean loved to make Buffy squirm. It was just way too easy and she was way too cute when she blushed. The lady wasn't a prude in the sack by any stretch of the imagination, but she was kinda shy about certain things. Tormenting her took so little effort and was so, so very satisfying. He'd never expected that his naturally crude tendencies would pay off so well.

"Wouldn't you prefer something a little more interactive?" she suggested.

"You wanna watch?" he teased. Then, just to aggravate her further, he held up a hand and demonstrated the world famous 'tossing-off' hand gesture.

She smacked at his hand. "Stop doing that! No, I don't wanna watch," she huffed in embarrassed frustration. "I was hoping to be a little more involved. You know, physically?"

"Sweetheart, you almost died not even two days ago," he remarked seriously. "You got five broken bones in that fall. I may be one seriously horny son-of-a-bitch right now, but I still have a few standards. You can't even walk up the steps!"

"I can walk up the steps just fine," she replied with a guilty smile. "I just didn't want to."

"You played me?"
Buffy nodded. "Yep, like a fiddle, a very hot fiddle… and I'm so not sorry," she added with a gloating smile.

Dean regarded her skeptically for a moment. He desperately wanted to pounce on her like a starved animal, but he had to be sure she was really okay first. "Are you sure?" he finally asked. "I know you have those freaky super-healing powers, but damn."

"I promise," she assured him. "Add my Slayer powers to Willow's yummy, healing herbal tea and voila – you get 100% grade A Buffy. I'll even do a couple of flippy back handsprings if it'll make you happy."

"Naked?" he asked hopefully.

Buffy reached out and ripped Dean's boxers off in one swift motion. Kneeling on the bed, she took him into her mouth and swirled her tongue around as she used one hand to pump his shaft. After a minute or two, she sat back on her heels and answered his question. "I will if you're nice and give me what I want," she promised seductively.

Dean was no longer sure what he'd even asked for, but he was still more than willing to go along for the ride. Buffy could ask him to jump off the nearest tall building at this point and he wouldn't be able to argue. In fact, he was pretty sure he'd do it with a big, shit-eating grin on his face. "What do you want?" he asked huskily.

Buffy smiled, peeled off her panties, and tossed them unceremoniously to the floor. She then pressed herself closely against his side and began alternating between licking and biting at the nape of his neck.

"I want you," she replied between nibbles. "Now and hard… very hard," she emphasized with a more forceful bite. "I don't have time for foreplay."

With a guttural moan, Dean quickly slid his feet back onto the floor. He grabbed Buffy by the waist and pulled her toward the edge of the bed. When he attempted to position himself between her thighs, she sat up and put a hand against the middle of his chest to halt his progress. She winked in answer to his expression of disappointment and then rolled onto her stomach and pushed herself up onto her knees so that he could enter her from behind. This was one of her favorite positions, because it allowed her to take in every inch of him and gave him plenty of leverage for thrusting.

Dean took a deep breath and willed himself to start out slowly. However, the moment he began to enter her, he realized that she hadn't been lying about not needing any foreplay. She was ready - more than ready - and that fact seriously inflated his ego. He slid in easily and completely. It was all the encouragement he needed in order to grant her wish for a serious hardcore pounding. He gripped her hips tightly and slammed himself into her again and again. Buffy immediately clenched her muscles tightly around him, something that always turned him into a mindless, drooling sex slave. Being inside of her felt so amazing, he simply had no words for it. It would be impossible for another woman to ever come close to her in any way.

He poured all of his energy and frustrations into the act. The crippling fear he'd felt when he thought he'd lost her, the unfamiliar and intense emotions that overtook him each time he held her – he put all of it into the moment. He couldn't remember ever having gone at it so hard before, but with each cry of pleasure and breathless word of encouragement, he lost more and more of his self-control until there was nothing left but the raw need to possess her over and over again. Finally, when he didn't believe he could hold off for much longer, he reached beneath her and caressed her most sensitive spot until she became completely undone. The idea that he could give her so much pleasure filled him with an emotion that was indescribable. Buffy was the most beautiful, most incredible woman
he'd ever met, and she was his. That thought alone was enough to push him over the edge. He pulled out just as he felt her body relax and it wasn't a moment too soon. Dean was definitely a gambling man, but this time he'd cut it really close. He knew he should be more careful, but being with Buffy tended to take away his ability to think rationally.

Once he was able to draw a somewhat steady breath and was reasonably sure that his heart wasn't going to explode, he flopped back onto the mattress and folded a very relaxed and sleepy Buffy into his arms. By this time, the sun was beginning to rise and light was filtering in through the blinds. He briefly considered getting up and pulling the curtains closed, but decided he was too content and satisfied to make the effort.

Dean awoke with a start from his least favorite and most frequent nightmare. Thankfully, since he'd been in Cleveland, it only happened one or two times a week (instead of every single freaking night). He glanced at the clock and noticed that he'd only gotten a couple hours of sleep. He rolled over with the intention of seeking some comfort in Buffy's presence. Often, if he took her in his arms, pulled her against him, and breathed in the lightly perfumed scent of her hair, he could manage to calm down and sometimes even get back to sleep. He was whipped in the most hardcore chick-flick sense of the word.

His plan was shot when he realized that Buffy was already awake. She was sitting propped up against her pillows holding her dream journal in front of her. The line between her brows made it obvious that she knew he'd been having a nightmare. He just hoped that he hadn't been whimpering or anything lame like that.

"You had another bad dream," she stated as she gazed at him searchingly. He could see an enormous amount of sympathy reflected in her eyes, sympathy he didn't deserve.

Dean looked away and forced a smirk onto his features. "Hazard of the job," he shrugged. "We see a lot of spooky stuff, you know." He hoped she wouldn't push him for details, because he would never spill the contents of that dream to anyone – especially not her. He'd make something up if he had to.

"Speaking of freaky nightmares," he said quickly, pointing to the journal in her hand. "Please tell me you didn't have any more naked Wheel of Fortune dreams. I may be twice Sajak's size, but I've still got no problem sticking my foot up his scrawny little ass. Vanna's too, if she gets in my way."

Buffy smiled sadly at his attempt to change the subject, but she went along. The expression on his face during and after those nightmares nearly broke her heart. Hopefully some day soon he'd finally open up.

"You can relax," she said. "I didn't buy any vowels this time. Plus, I'm pretty sure that was just the regular, non-prophecy kind of freaky dream. Slayer dreams aren't normally quite that gross and disturbing."

"Glad to hear it," he replied as he sat up and peered over her shoulder, "but just in case, I better check and make sure I don't need to add any more quasi-celebrities to the Winchester hit list."

"Don't bother getting out your pen," she said as she placed two stars by her most recent entry and held it up closer so that Dean could actually read it. "I only had genuine, non-sexy Slayer dreams this time. At least I think there was no sexy," she added thoughtfully.

Dean felt his stomach lurch when he read the three words Buffy had written on the page.
"What are the stars for?" he asked in a carefully controlled tone.

Buffy gazed at him curiously while she answered. "One of the girls mentioned that she'd dreamed about black eyes too, plus I have a really wiggy feeling about this one. That's usually a pretty good indicator."

"What else?" Dean asked urgently as he gripped her shoulder tightly. "Who had black eyes? Did you know them?"

"I don't know," she replied honestly, her features taking on a concerned expression. "I can't remember any details. That's the reason I'm keeping a journal in the first place."

Dean released his hold on her, rose from the bed, and immediately began rifling through the dresser drawer he used for his clothes. He quickly pulled on the first things he grabbed and then sat down on the edge of the bed and began lacing up his boots.

"Dean," Buffy said firmly, trying to draw his attention back to her. "What's going on? You need to come back to bed. You've hardly slept at all."

"I don't have time," he answered impatiently as he tugged at his laces. "I need to go talk to Sam. We have to get on this now."

"Slow down," she said calmly. "Please talk to me. Tell me what has you so upset. What exactly do we need to get on?"

Dean began to pace the room in obvious agitation. "Demons have black eyes," he ground out.

"Demon demons," he stressed urgently. "The ones that crawl out of hell."

Buffy's mind immediately flashed on Dean's tattoo. "You mean the possessing people kind?"

"Yes," he confirmed tightly. "Fucking black-eyed sons of bitches," he growled as he threw a punch that broke through the drywall. Judging from the solid thud, he'd managed to hit a stud.

Buffy jumped up and quickly caught him by the wrist before he could follow through with a second punch. "Calm down," she ordered slowly and evenly. "You're going to hurt yourself."

Dean looked curiously at the scraped and bleeding skin on his knuckles and at the large hole in the bedroom wall, as if he'd just registered what he'd done.

"I'm sorry," he said with shame in his eyes. "I'll fix it."

"Don't worry about the wall right now," she said gently. "Please, just tell me why you're so sure that we're dealing with that type of demon. Lots of evil things have black eyes," she explained calmly. "I've seen them."

Dean started pacing the room again, running his hands through his hair in agitation. "Crowley," he finally said.

"Who's Crowley?"

"A demon… real high up on the food chain. Used to call himself the 'King of Hell'. Dude had a
Buffy was speechless, she stared at Dean with her mouth hanging open. "Why didn't you tell me this?" she finally asked in astonishment. "We've spent all this time trying to make sure that the door to Purgatory stays shut and all along you've known that some demon was trying to pick the lock?"

"He's dead," he replied in a faraway tone, obviously wrapped up in his own thoughts. After a few moments of silence, he added, "I saw it with my own eyes. Cas roasted him. He's gone."

Buffy closed her eyes and tried to gain control of the hurt and rage that was overtaking her. When she spoke, her tone was even but filled with a clear undercurrent of anger. "Who cares if he's dead? Didn't it occur to you that if one of those demons is interested in Purgatory, there are probably others?"

"I-I don't know," he replied gruffly as he picked up his cell. "I just need to talk to Sam."

Sam was sitting in the Council's break room, sipping coffee and surfing the net on his laptop when he looked up and saw Faith standing in the doorway. She was wearing a pair of tight, black leather pants, a tiny midriff bearing t-shirt, and a biker jacket. As usual, she looked smokin' hot. It really wasn't fair for her to walk around looking like that. She made it very difficult for a man to keep his mind on his job or anything else non-sex related for that matter.

"Hey Sam," she said a bit hesitantly. "What's up?"

Faith was a little surprised when he gave her one of those adorable, dimpled smiles. This was the first time she'd attempted to speak to him since the night she'd shoved him into a wall. She wasn't entirely sure how he'd react.

"Not much," Sam replied in a friendly tone. "Just trying to figure out what kind of monster Dean and I ran into last night."

Faith hooked her thumbs in her belt loops and rocked back and forth on her boot heels. She was trying to do the small talk thing, but it was proving to be a whole lot harder than she'd imagined. What was she supposed to say next? Her mind was blank. It was so much easier to just skip this crap and go straight to the good stuff. Of course, last time she'd tried that approach it had ended in spectacular and humiliating failure.

"So… uh… was it something nasty?" she finally asked.

"Oh man," Sam laughed, "nasty is definitely the right word. It was this freaky looking blue thing that had these venom sacs under its tongue. It could use them to shoot a giant ten-foot stream of this foul smelling crap. Dean got drenched," he added with chuckle. "Dude smelled seriously rank. It was hilarious. He refused to ride home in the Impala because of it. He ended up walking for miles."

"Damn, that sucks," Faith remarked, returning Sam's smile. She turned the chair beside him around and straddled it, resting her arms and chin on the seat back. At about this time, Sam's cell started ringing. He barely managed to take his eyes off of her long enough to see who was calling.

"Speak of the devil," he said as he hit 'ignore'. "He probably just wants to bitch some more," he remarked with a shrug as he returned his full attention to Faith.

"So, how'd ya kill it?" she asked with a little more confidence in her voice. She had to give props to B. The girl was right about 'slaying' being a good conversation starter.
By the time they arrived at Council Headquarters, Buffy was ready to strangle Dean. He was behaving like a complete jerk. Sam hadn't answered his call, so he'd insisted that they immediately go and find him. He was so impatient that she'd barely managed to throw on some clothes and brush her teeth and hair. Then on the ride over he kept making snide comments about her driving and her 'plastic piece of crap' car. The only thing that kept her from breaking his nose was the fact that she was so wrapped up in her own feelings of hurt and confusion. She didn't understand why he would keep something like this a secret. What possible excuse could he have for keeping her in the dark about something that could be a matter of life and death? And why had he suddenly transformed into the world's biggest ass?

They met Willow in the hallway and judging from her uncomfortable expression, she could sense the tension in the air. In her typical manner, she began babbling to Buffy in a tone of forced cheer.

"Have you seen Sam?" Dean interrupted rudely.

"I think he's in the break room," Willow replied with a frown as she gave Buffy a questioning glance.

Buffy crinkled her brow and held up her palms in confusion after Dean had stalked ahead of them, intent on finding his brother.

"What the hell, Sam?" he snapped as he entered the break room. "Can't you answer a damn phone?"

"Good morning Dean," his brother smirked as he reluctantly turned away from his conversation with Faith. "Looks like your mood hasn't improved. You smell better though."

"We've got demons on the Hellmouth," he stated simply.

"No way," Faith replied sarcastically. "You better alert the media, dude. That's some pretty heavy news you've got there."

Dean didn't appear to even notice Faith or register her comments. He just stared intently at his brother, knowing he would understand.

"What happened?" Sam asked urgently. Naturally, he had immediately picked-up on what Dean was getting at and he could also sense that he was extremely on edge.

"The Slayer dreams," Buffy inserted coldly, "black eyes seem to be in fashion this season." She'd decided that she was also pretty damn pissed at Sam. If Dean knew about the demons, it was a sure bet that his brother did too. They were practically connected at the hip after all.

Faith sat up and flinched, rolling her shoulders in discomfort. "Eww," she said, "I can't really remember dreamin' about anything like that, but when you mentioned it… I seriously felt like somebody just walked over my grave."

Sam gazed at Faith with his brows drawn together. Apparently, something was up if this 'black eye' thing was setting off the Slayer-radar. This was definitely something that needed looking into.

"I can search for omens," he said, "but it might be kinda tough with all the paranormal activity around here. Sorta makes it hard to separate one evil omen from the next billion."

"Maybe I can do a spell," Willow offered helpfully. "If you can tell me what kind of demon we're looking for, I can probably zero in on its energy."
"That's a good idea," Sam agreed with a nod. "We'll get together and I'll fill you in."

"I want devil's traps at every entrance," Dean demanded before Willow had a chance to respond to his brother. "Salt all the windows and we have to get –"

"Stop giving orders," Buffy snapped at him. "You owe me an explanation for all of this. Willow has enough magic on this place to keep anything out… unless there's something else you aren't telling us," she added in accusing tone.

"Buffy, you're probably right," Sam interjected in his most reasonable voice, "I'm sure we're perfectly safe here, but I don't think it would hurt to take a few extra precautions." He then turned to address his obviously freaked-out brother. "Chill out man," he said evenly. "All we can do is ramp up our defenses and put out some feelers. Just let me get this straight though. Do we have any reason to think that these demons have anything to do with the Eve situation? Are they working together maybe?"

"I don't know," he growled. "Maybe? We need to find that bitch, Sam. We can't just sit here holding hands and talking about it. We have to do something."

"I realize that Dean," he replied in a voice that was thick with strained patience. "I'm just trying to get a handle on the situation."

Buffy looked back and forth between the two brothers. Either Sam was the world's best actor or he was just as much in the dark as she was. She was about to, once again, demand an explanation from Dean when Willow piped up.

"I think I might have a way to find Eve" she said. "It occurred to me in the shower this morning. Funny how that happens," she added with a nervous smile as she turned to address a scowling Dean. "Didn't you tell Buffy that worm-thing you brought us was one of Eve's children?" she asked.

"Yeah, but all the freaks are supposed to be her kids. That's why they call her mommy," he said with biting sarcasm.

Willow frowned at Dean's smart aleck remark. "What I was getting at," she continued firmly, "was what if this thing is first generation? I mean, most of the bad guys are probably hundreds, maybe even thousands of generations removed from Eve. If we had something that was first generation, I could probably use it to do a locator spell on mommy. It's kinda like the deal with mitochondrial DNA," she explained, ignoring Dean's narrowed eyes and skeptical expression. "Maybe one day, scientists will be able to link all humans back to one common female ancestor, but it's really hard to do because they have to work their way back through so many generations."

"You might be in luck then." Sam replied, sounding as if a light bulb had gone off in his head. "That thing did say it was something new."

"Then yay!" Willow exclaimed with an excited clap of her hands, "My spell has a shot."

"I don't think so," Dean interjected sourly. "I may not be a brain surgeon, but I know what an alpha is. Bigger fish than you have tried that route sister and they didn't come up with squat. I don't think rubbing your crystals over that thing or burning a bunch of nasty incense is gonna help."

Sam threw a warning glare at his brother. What the hell was wrong with him today? Dean had never trusted witches, but he could at least tone down the smart ass comments, seeing as how this witch happened to be Buffy's close personal friend.

"Dean," Buffy bit out, crossing her arms in front of her. "Stop being an ass! Will knows what she's
doing. If she thinks she can work a location spell, then I say she can work a location spell."

"Thanks Buffy," Willow smiled happily. It was nice to know that her best friend would still take up for her, even if she did have a huge thing for big, jerk-face hunter guy.

"Whatever," Dean shrugged. "I just don't think we can afford to waste time on a bunch of wavy-gravy hoodoo."

"Hey!" Willow snapped. "I'm trying to help here Mister Smarty Pants. I'll have you know that my wavy-gravy hoodoo is usually pretty doggone reliable."

"Hold on a second," Sam interrupted. "There's something familiar about the term 'alpha'. Where have I heard that before?"

"Who cares?" Dean snapped. "It's not important."

"What aren't you telling me?" Sam asked. He could always tell when his brother was being evasive. Dean noted how his younger brother (and everyone else) appeared to be eagerly expecting a reply. "Leave it Sam," he warned. "I said it wasn't important."

"Bullshit!" he spat back angrily. "Dude I know you and you're acting shady as hell. Buffy's right, you owe her an explanation. You owe all of us an explanation."

"Outside," his brother growled.

"Fine, lets go," Sam said as he rose to his feet. Buffy started to follow, but he held up his hand to stop her. "Just give me a few minutes alone with him first," he said under his breath.

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"Spill it Dean," Sam demanded once they'd exited the building. "What aren't you telling me? What's the deal with the alphas?"

"There's no deal with the alphas, not anymore. I'm asking you to leave this alone, Sam. Why can't you just trust me?"

Instead of arguing further, Sam closed his eyes and began clutching at the sides of his head. This action caused Dean to cringe with worry. It was obvious that his brother was being hit with a powerful memory. Why the hell did he have to say the word 'alpha'?

"Crowley," Sam said after a few moments. "Crowley wanted the alphas… he thought they could lead him to Purgatory," he added in shocked astonishment. "My God Dean! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's not important anymore! Crowley's dead. I told you about that already. Just please, drop this. I'm begging you. You know what happened the last time you started poking around in that head of yours."

"I actually worked for him," Sam stated in anger and disbelief. "Samuel and I hunted alphas for him and you didn't think I had a right to know?"

"You don't need to know about that. It wasn't you. These memories are dangerous," he stressed. "It's a two-for-one special, Sam. You can't get the soulless memories without getting the hell memories – and those will kill you! How many times do I have to go over that? This isn't a joke."
"Trust me, I'm not laughing," his brother replied coldly. "I swear Dean, one of these days…"

"Go ahead," Dean said as he held his hands out to his sides. "Take a swing. I won't even hit you back this time. Just don't expect me to apologize for trying to keep you alive."

"What about Buffy?" his brother asked accusingly. "Don't you think she deserved to know about this? This is bigger than me, Dean. She has a whole city to worry about."

"Sam…"

"Whatever," Sam said, cutting his brother off in disgust. "I'm done with this conversation, because if I hear one more lie from you… I am going to kick your ass."

Dean watched as his brother turned to walk away. "I need my keys," he said a bit hesitantly. "I wanna take a drive."

Sam reached into his pocket and tossed the Impala's keys over his shoulder without turning around.

Before Dean had a chance to ponder just how pissed his brother was, Buffy came storming through the door that Sam had just re-entered. She stepped close and glared up at him furiously.

"I'm tired of the cryptic-guy act," she snapped angrily. "Why didn't you tell me about the demons being after Purgatory? Why?"

"Buffy, I didn't know," he attempted to explain. "Crowley was dead, I thought that was over. I'm a stupid ass, okay?"

"Wrong answer," she replied through gritted teeth. "You can take a couple of missing church girls and a few robberies and know that we're dealing with a dragon. Now, you're going to stand there and tell me that this whole Purgatory/Linda Blair connection completely flew over your head? I'm not buying what you're selling, Dean. Not for one second. So, try again."

Dean didn't know what to tell her when he wasn't exactly sure of the reasons himself. He couldn't breath. He had to get away and think before somebody else came out here and started yelling at him, because he was dangerously close to saying or doing something he'd end up regretting.

"I need to take a drive," he said tightly as he turned to walk away. "We'll talk about this later."

"Dean! Don't you dare turn your back on me right now. You need to -"

"Just give me some Goddamned space!" he yelled as he spun back around to face her. "Jesus Christ, woman! Why don't you go back in there and bitch about me with Sam? Maybe that'll make you happy. I'm sure he'll be thrilled."

Buffy stood silently and watched him turn to go again. She told herself that she wasn't going to chase after him and she sure as hell wasn't going to start crying. She knew she'd eventually lose that last battle, but she'd be damned if she'd let him see.

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Dean drove for hours with no particular destination in mind. He just knew that he wanted to get out of the crowded city and far away from other people. He finally found himself in a small Ohio town where he saw signs pointing toward Wayne National Forest. You couldn't get much farther away from people than on a lonely forest access road, he decided. So, after stopping and buying a pint of cheap whiskey, he followed the signs until he found a dirt road that was marked 'No Trespassing:
For Use by Forestry Personnel Only'. Screw 'em, he thought, they could take him to jail if they didn't like it.

He drove up the dirt road for several miles before stopping and killing the engine. He rolled down both of the front windows to let the crisp, fall air in and then proceeded to unscrew the top from his bottle of rotgut. After taking one large swig, he stopped and held the bottle up in front of him in disgust. "Pathetic," he remarked out loud. "Man, you really screwed the pooch this time" he added before taking another swallow.

After the first few hours on the road, he'd finally decided that he had a giant cowardly streak in him. It was apparently so large that it prevented him from seeing what was right in front of his face. He should've told Buffy about the demon connection. It wasn't like he had to spill all the details to Sam. He could've lied. He could've made something up that would've told her what she needed to know and still kept his brother in the dark. But he didn't, because he was a coward who couldn't face the possibility that his demon problems weren't over.

He hadn't seen a demon in months, not since Crowley had been roasted. Since then, he'd convinced himself that it was over. The world may be a huge freakin' mess chock full of fake-vampires and all sorts of other crazy shit, and the angels might be at war with one another, but hallelujah because the demons had finally left the building. He was done with all that; they weren't going to take anything else away from him. He had Sam back and now he had Buffy. His stupid ass had been happily living in the land of denial and those black-eyed bastards had probably been right under his nose the entire time. If it hadn't been for Buffy's dreams, she might not have found out in time. She could've been killed or one of her girls could've been hurt. Dean would never have forgiven himself. There was no way he could ever live with something like that.

How was he supposed to explain himself to Buffy? He didn't want her to know that he was such a giant chicken. It was unbearable to even think about how disgusted she'd be with him. What the hell was he going to tell her? Regardless, he had to fix this. He had to find some way to figure this latest demon mess out and make sure they didn't get to her or anyone she cared about. Simply put, he had to get back in the game, whether he was strong enough for it or not. There was no other choice.

He started to tip the bottle again, but forced himself to stop and screw the lid back on. It was time to man-up and quit trying to drink all his problems away. Still, he wished he had someone he could talk to about this situation. Sam was out because he was royally pissed at him right now. He considered calling Bobby, but the guy wasn't exactly the spokesperson for dealing. The man hid in a bottle more often than he did. Cas, he decided, he wanted to talk to Cas.

"Castiel," he called out. "It's Dean. I'd really appreciate it if you brought your ass down here for a few minutes. Please. I really need to talk to you."

Dean almost jumped out of his skin when Cas materialized in the seat beside him. Even if he was expecting him, his sudden appearances still freaked him out.

"Good to see you Dean," Castiel said in his usual monotone. "It's been a while. I've been busy," he added apologetically.

"I know," he replied. "It's cool."

"Are you butt-faced?" the angel asked with a glance to the bottle Dean was holding.

Dean let out a genuine laugh. "Dude, you're hilarious. It's 'sh*t-faced'," he corrected, "and no, I'm not, but I've been seriously considering it."
"Where's Sam?"

"In Cleveland. I'm just out for a scenic drive."

"Sam's on the Hellmouth?" Castiel asked with some surprise.

"Yeah, we've been working with the Slayers on this whole 'mommy' issue."

Cas looked agitated, but Dean put this down to him needing to get back to his war.

"Guess I better get down to it," he began. "I wanted to ask you if you knew who the current 'King of Hell' was?"

"Why would you want to know that?"

"Because I'm thinking whoever replaced Crowley might be following in his footsteps. You know, jonesing for Purgatory?"

"That is unlikely," Castiel answered quickly. "Hell is in chaos now that Crowley is dead. They are too busy fighting amongst themselves to concern themselves with Purgatory."

"A civil war in hell too, huh? Good times."

"Why would you believe that demons are interested in Purgatory?" Castiel pressed.

"Buffy has these dreams," he replied. "She doesn't remember much. She thinks something's blocking them. That bitch Eve, I guess. Anyway, she's remembered one thing that points to demons – black eyes."

"So you know Buffy Summers?"

"Hell yeah I know her. Remember that time she sucker punched you? Damn, I figured angels had memories like elephants. Are you butt-faced Cas? Come on man, you can tell me. I won't judge."

"I meant do you know her in the biblical sense?" he replied impatiently.

"Oh yeah," Dean agreed with a dreamy grin. "Wait a minute," he added, suddenly serious. "That's kinda personal. Why do you wanna know about that?"

"I'm only curious," the angel replied.

"Well watch some porn, cause you're not getting any details out of me."

Castiel stared blankly into space for a few moments. Dean hated it when he did that. Dude didn't even blink, it wasn't natural.

"I'm sorry, but I need to be going soon," he said finally. "I can assure you that you don't need to be concerned with demons on the Hellmouth. The Hellmouth is not an opening to the hell you are familiar with. It is simply a place where the dimensional walls are thin. It is capable of opening a portal to many hellish worlds, but none of those are the theological plane you know as 'hell'. Demons normally prefer to stay away from the Hellmouth. Ironically, they find the chaos distracting. Their concern lies with corrupting human souls, not with vampires and legions of monsters from other dimensions. You must understand Dean, Slayer dreams are not literal. They are simply metaphors… symbolic representations of certain dangers. If a Slayer dreams about black eyes, it could mean many different things."
"Really?" Dean asked with a deep sigh of relief. "Damn Cas, I could almost kiss you right now. Thank you," he emphasized. "If you hadn't shown up, I'd probably be passed-out drunk and pissin' my pants about now."

"You're welcome," he replied quietly without meeting Dean's gaze.

Dean noticed that Cas appeared to be feeling guilty, so he hurried to reassure him.

"Listen Cas, I understand that you can't always drop everything and show up right when I call. I know I've been a dick about that in the past. I've realized that I seem to have an issue with that… especially today. But I want you to know that it's cool. I appreciate that you're ass-deep in a giant, steamy pile of crap these days. But trust me man, you don't even know how much you just helped me out right now. You don't even know."

"Thank you, Dean. I do appreciate your understanding. Things have been extremely difficult lately. I wish that I was able to explain." He paused for a moment and then added, "You don't need to worry. I am certain that there are no demons on the Hellmouth, but I assure you that I will look into this further. If I find any cause for concern, I'll let you know."

Before Dean had a chance to thank him again, the angel was gone. "Later Cas," he called out with a smile and a fond shake of his head. He then chucked the mostly full bottle of craptastic whiskey out of the car window and cranked up the engine. It felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, but he knew he wouldn't feel right again until he found Buffy and told her how sorry he was for being such a giant douche. He couldn't believe he'd actually yelled at her like that. She should've knocked his teeth out. He felt like the world's sorriest bastard and he needed to go face the music. He was afraid this was going to be one hell of an uncomfortable conversation, but maybe he'd get lucky and she'd decide to skip the talk and settle for breaking a few of his bones instead.

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"Ah, Castiel," Crowley greeted with a smirk. "It's so wonderful to see you. I'm glad you've come. I have something quite fascinating to show you."

Crowley gestured toward two stainless steel tables of the type used by funeral homes to embalm bodies. A seemingly ordinary young white woman was strapped to each of them, but the angel immediately recognized them as shapeshifters - identical twin shapeshifters.

"Check this out," the demon said with a cheeky grin. He held up a cattle prod and pressed it against the side of one of the women. Immediately both she and her twin began to shudder and shriek in pain as they morphed into identical Latino men. "Neat trick, don't you agree?"

In response to his audience's impassive expression, Crowley added, "But wait, there's more." He applied the cattle prod to one of the shifters again, but this time he held it in place. The shifters began to quickly morph into a variety of different genders and ethnicities, and each time they were identical to one another.

The demon finally tired of the display and removed the prod. "I thought about bringing Dr. Mengele topside for a personal demonstration," he said. "He'd be delighted, especially since these two have a rabbi in their repertoire. I do miss the days when humans weren't quite so uptight and politically correct," he remarked with a sigh of nostalgia. "Remember when a nice spot of anti-Semitism was just good, clean fun?"

"No, I don't," Castiel stated flatly.
Crowley rolled his eyes. "Oh right, angel. I forgot about that whole 'chosen people' claptrap you halos go on about. On to business then," he said as he laid the cattle prod aside. "What brings your charming presence to my neck of the woods? You obviously didn't come here to be entertained."

"I've acquired some information that leads me to suspect that you're not keeping to the terms our arrangement," the angel said tightly.

"I find that accusation quite hurtful," the demon replied with mock sincerity. "You should know that I take the deals I make quite seriously. I stake my reputation on them. What specifically are you accusing me of?"

"The Slayers suspect a demonic presence on the Hellmouth. We had agreed that you would not interfere there. You were to stay out of Cleveland until we obtain the specifics on opening the doorway. There is no reason to harm them. If we maintain a low profile we can accomplish our goal without them ever knowing we were there."

"Where did you come by this information, Castiel? Because it appears you need a more reliable source. I will have you know that neither I nor any of my people have been within a hundred miles of the Hellmouth. Believe me when I say that I have no desire to stir up trouble with that little blond bitch and her merry band of misfits. She's quite possibly the one human who might prove to be a bigger pain in the ass than your two adorable pet monkeys."

"The Slayers may be remembering parts of their dreams," the angel admitted reluctantly.

"Well then," Crowley stated smugly, "that sounds like a personal problem to me. I thought you were blocking their little prophecies?"

"I am, but I may have underestimated their power."

"We can always kill them," the demon stated nonchalantly. "They won't be having many dreams when they're dead. If you're feeling squeamish, we could likely get away with only snuffing-out little Muffy."

"It's Buffy and no," Castiel stated firmly, "the Slayers are off limits, especially her."

"What is it with you and humans Cas? I'm sure your precious little Slayers would all go upstairs. You could give them each a special cookie and a beachfront suite. Sometimes you do have to break a few eggs."

"The Slayers are non-negotiable. You will not harm them. If you do, the deal is off. I have already re-directed their suspicions. I will also ensure that they have no more dreams and you will ensure that no demons go near them."

"You have my word, no demons on the Hellmouth," Crowley promised as he held out his hand for Castiel to shake.

After the angel had disappeared, Crowley regarded the terrified shapeshifters for a long moment. Finally, he broke into a broad smile as he caught the eye of the one closest to him. "So tell me," he said in a personable tone, "What would you be willing to do to protect your darling sister? Or is it your brother? I've never been quite sure how that works with your sort."
"I brought ice cream," Willow said with a hopeful smile as she stood on Buffy's front stoop, holding up a gallon of 'Death by Chocolate'.

"Thanks Will," Buffy mumbled as she stood aside to let her friend enter. She did her best to return the smile, but she knew Willow could see right through her. She followed her into the kitchen where Willow immediately took two bowls from the cabinet and began scooping obscene amounts of ice cream into each. She placed a spoon in both bowls, handed one to Buffy, and gestured for her to sit at the kitchen table.

"Okay then," Willow began. "Now that we're properly armed with chocolate-y goodness, we can begin planning Captain Jerkface's untimely demise. Are you thinking quick and painless or slow and excruciatingly painful? I'm on board either way."

When Buffy didn't reply, but instead stared at the bowl of ice cream and played with her spoon, Willow sighed sadly and tried a different tactic.

"So, Faith told me you asked her to take over weapons training today," she remarked.

"Yeah," Buffy agreed, "it's probably unwise for me to be in a room full of snippy teenagers and sharp objects right now."

"Bad day, huh?" Willow asked sympathetically.

Buffy gave her friend a sad smile. "It was horrible, Will. After Dean took off, I came home and cried. Then I took a run around the block to make myself feel better, but it didn't work because I cried even harder went I got back. I forgot that men could make you so miserable."

"Women are pretty darn good at it too, if that helps."

"Good, because I want everyone to be equally miserable."

"That's the spirit," Willow cheered. "Any word from the big jerk?"

"He tried to call about an hour ago, but I didn't answer, mostly because I knew he'd be able to tell I'd been crying… Then, there's the part of me that wants to make him suffer. Maybe imagine that I'm not answering because I'm making out with some random guy in a seedy bar. Very mature, right?"

"Nope, but I've always said that maturity is highly overrated. In fact, when you do see him, stick your tongue out at him and give him a big fat raspberry. Like this," she said, providing a demonstration. "You can tell him I sent it."

Buffy laughed at that, but it made her heart hurt when she did. "I'm sorry he treated you that way, Will. You really didn't deserve it."
"True," she agreed, "but it wasn't exactly a huge shocker. I've always known he didn't like me."

Buffy looked up and regarded her friend with a hard gaze. "Has he ever talked to you like that before? Because if I find out that he's treating you like dirt behind my back, I'll break every one of his major bones. I'll do it," she promised.

"No, no he hasn't," Willow assured her quickly. "Really. He's always been polite and stuff… before today. The thing is, I'm gay, Jewish, and a witch – that's centuries of repression coming from all sides. My radar is probably a little more finely-tuned to negative energy than most. Call it self-preservation."

"If it makes you feel any better, I seriously doubt that he's anti-Semitic and he's a big fan of lesbians."

"Now that's a huge surprise," Willow replied with an eye-roll. "But, on the bright side, at least he's only one-third of a bigot."

"Apparently, he's had some pretty bad run-ins with other witches," Buffy explained. "It's his issue. You shouldn't take it personally."

"Well, unfortunately, I have to agree that some witches - including this one – have been known to get a little power happy and go all dark-side from time to time. They don't call it the dark arts for nuthin."

"Don't blame yourself, Willow. Dean's the one in the wrong here."

"I know. Believe me, I'm all on board with national 'Dean's a big, fat jerk' day. But I can't forget my past," she added seriously. "It's important for me to remember. Acceptance and humility are important tools in the fight against power-hungry insanity. Speaking of humility," she added with a pout, "my location spell went all kablooey."

"Really? Actual kablooey or metaphorical kablooey? Because you know how upset Giles gets when you burn down the lab."

"Metaphorical kablooey, thank the Goddess. According to the results of the spell, our friend Eve is currently on the North American continent… the entire North American continent. But at least that rules out the other six," she added cheerfully.

"You're a bright-side kinda girl," Buffy agreed. "So, what do you think went wrong?"

"I have some theories. One – that worm thing went and lied about being an alpha, which is entirely possible, because hello, unreliable, evil slug-guy… Or Two – And this is the depressing one. Eve is incredibly and terrifyingly powerful and was able to scramble my spell… or Three – the spell worked perfectly, meaning she's so huge that she actually takes up an entire continent."

"I think we'd have noticed her by now if it was 'three'."

"Maybe she's huge AND invisible," Willow added hopefully. "But I do have some good news, or I guess it's good news. Sam sure seems to think so, anyway… Why couldn't you have fallen for him, by the way?"

"Sorry Will," she said with a half-smile and a shrug. "Guess I prefer the cranky ones. Anyway, what does Sam think the good news is?"

"Well, it doesn't look like we're dealing with the Exorcist demons. I did a spell to search for demonic energy in the city and I found just about every kind imaginable, but I didn't find that kind. Then,
there were some specific omens that Sam was looking for – cattle deaths and freak lightning storms. He didn't find zip. Plus, Giles told me that type of demon doesn't like to hang on the Hellmouth. He seemed kinda surprised by all the hoopla actually. He said that real possessions are incredibly rare and most reports of them are 'merely the rantings of religious fanatics and the mentally ill'.

"I guess that's good news then," Buffy agreed half-heartedly. "The idea of being possessed is pretty creepy. But, on the other hand, it means we're back to square one on figuring out what the black-eyed menace is. I kinda prefer to know what I'm dealing with."

"That was my take on it too, but like I said, Sam thought it was the best news ever. You'd think Christmas had come early this year. He even called Dean and told him about it… and he was pretty perturbed with him this morning."

"Yeah, the whole thing was weird. Dean totally freaked. I've never seen him act that way and I've seen him go up against some pretty wicked stuff. I just don't get it."

"Well, personally, I think it's time for one of the Winchester boys to unload some of their deep, dark secrets, especially if they're going to be living under your roof and sleeping in your bed."

"I agree… but… I've kinda been keeping some secrets too. I've never mentioned anything about Angel or Spike yet. I've thought about telling him, but I always find some excuse to put it off. I don't think he's going to like the fact that I was with not just one, but two fake-vampires."

"He's still on that fake-vampire kick?"

"Oh yeah. That man gives new meaning to the word 'stubborn'."

"But you're the Vampire Slayer," Willow emphasized with air quotes. "Jeez, doesn't that carry any weight these days?"

"Sure it does, but he'll still never admit he was wrong. Besides, I think he just says most of that to aggravate me. He likes to be a pest… and I miss him already," Buffy choked out with a barely suppressed sob.

"It's okay Buffy," her friend said with a comforting pat to her shoulder. "He'll be back, then you'll make up and once again commence with the smoochies. You just have to promise me that the smoochies will come after he gives you a decent explanation for all of this. I don't care if it was a false alarm. What if it had been a real alarm? As far as I'm concerned, he better give you one heck of a darn good reason for keeping secrets from you… and don't you dare start that 'I've been keeping secrets too' baloney. That is so NOT the same thing. Your stuff is personal. His stuff could've gotten people hurt. Big difference."

"I guess so," she said with a sniff.

"No - you know so," Willow emphasized.

"I know," Buffy confirmed. "You're right. I have to play the part of tough-as-nails Buffy. I won't be swayed, no matter how sorry he says he is. If there's no explanation to go along with the sorry, then this girl's not listening. Besides, he was mean. There must be a reckoning," she added with much more conviction.

"Preach it sister!"
"Hey Buffy, it's me... uh... I really need to see you... I know I've been an ass.... Just call me, okay? I'm back in town.... So..... uh, call me back."

"That's right you've been an ass!" Buffy snapped as she hung up her voice mail after listening to his message for the third time. There was a hint of uncertainty and desperation in his voice that made listening to the recording so very satisfying.

It was still early and she was already making her way through her second graveyard of the night. Luckily, the days were much shorter in the fall, which meant she hadn't had to wait too long for the sun to go down. By the time Dean had made it back from wherever he was, she'd already headed out. She'd had enough of weepy-girl for one day. The bitch was back and she was taking no prisoners. In fact, she was so angry that she almost felt sorry for the evil undead who'd been meeting their brutal deaths at the end of her stake.

In all fairness (and she wasn't feeling particularly fair), she knew that Dean would never deliberately put her in danger. It just didn't mesh with the man she'd come to know. Still, that didn't mean he didn't owe her some answers. She was mad about the secret thing, no doubt about it, but she was mostly angry because he'd hurt her so badly. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt the crushing pain that came from being mistreated by someone you'd truly given your heart to. It definitely hadn't happened in this lifetime, meaning not since Willow had brought her back. Part of her had forgotten just how horribly rotten it felt and that part of her selfishly wanted Dean to get a little taste of his own medicine. So, she'd been ignoring his calls. He'd have to sweat it out for a while, because she wasn't cutting him a break any time soon.

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By the time Buffy arrived back home, it was technically Tuesday morning. She'd worked off mountains of aggression on the Hellmouth's vampire population and all the effort she'd expended had left her drained and a little banged up, and she was beginning to feel the sadness starting to seep back in. When she opened her door, the first thing she saw was Dean. He'd apparently been waiting for her to get in. He appeared very relieved to see her and she noted that there were dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep.

He got up from the couch and approached her cautiously. "I've been looking for you," he said. "I was afraid something had happened."

"Just doing my job," she stated coldly. "It's kind of hard to answer the phone when you're busy fighting off an entire nest of vamps. Besides, for some crazy reason, I didn't feel like getting yelled at again."

"Fair enough," he agreed. "I guess I deserved that."

Dean looked Buffy over. He was so relieved and happy to see her again, even though she, understandably, didn't appear to be too happy to see him. When his eyes fell on a nasty black and purple bruise that was beginning to bloom up on one of her cheekbones, he reached a hand out toward her. "You've been hurt," he remarked.

"Don't," she said as she backed away, "don't touch me." She knew it would all be over if he touched her. She'd melt into his arms and break the promise that she'd made to Willow and, more importantly, to herself. She couldn't allow that, he had some explaining to do first.

Dean lowered his hand and regarded her uncertainly for a moment. "I'm so sorry baby," he said with a deep sigh. "I've been the world's biggest dick."
"Yes, you have," she agreed tightly. She was beginning to feel the tears pricking at the back of her eyes again and was determined not to let them spill.

"I talked to Cas," he began hopefully. "He said I was wrong about the demon connection. So, I guess I made an ass out of myself for nothing," he remarked with a slight smile. "How many of my bones do you plan on breaking anyway? Could you at least leave me my right hand? I have a feeling I might be kind of lonely without her," he added with a ghost of his trademark lecherous grin.

Buffy ignored his latest masturbation joke. She wouldn't be sucked in by any of his antics tonight. "I already heard about the demon thing from Willow," she stated in a flat tone. "So, I guess you think that means you're off the hook now? You can just say you're sorry for being a complete jerk and I'll rip off all my clothes and fall back into bed with you. Am I close?"

"No," he said honestly, "I don't expect that. Truth is, I'd feel a whole lot better if you kicked my ass."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she spat angrily. "You'd rather be put in the hospital than be forced to open up and explain yourself. Well too bad Dean, because I'm not playing along. You're going to tell me why you held back information... and this better be good."

"Buffy..." he implored as he tried to close the distance between them again.

Once again she flinched from his touch and then all the hurt and rage inside of her just boiled over. "I told you not to touch me! Are you deaf? Why don't you back off and give me some Goddamned space?" she ground out through gritted teeth. Throwing his own words back in his face was such bittersweet revenge.

Dean stepped back and for a brief moment, Buffy thought he appeared completely crushed, but the expression passed quickly and was replaced by a blank mask.

"I'll go stay with Sam," he stated simply.

She felt like the knife in her heart had just been cruelly twisted. Was that it? He wasn't even going to stand and fight for her? Apparently, she'd been wrong when she'd decided he had deep feelings for her. If he did, he wouldn't give up so easily. He'd stay and fight it out with her, but instead he was just going to walk away. It shouldn't be surprising, they always left. Why should Dean be any different? She apparently wasn't worth the effort.

"You can call me when you're ready to talk," he remarked in a toneless voice as he headed toward the stairs. Presumably, he was going to the bedroom to pack up his things.

Now Buffy felt like her heart had been ripped completely out of her chest. She was about to have a serious breakdown and she wasn't going to let him witness it. She may not have her heart anymore, but she still had her pride and she was planning on keeping it.

"Leave the key," she managed to state without sobbing. She didn't trust herself to say anything further, so she left, slamming the front door behind her as she went. She'd go find a few more vampires to beat up on. She'd come back once she was sure he'd had enough time to get out, then she'd be able to cry alone in her empty bed.

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"You have gotta be kidding me," Sam stated when he came back to his room for the night. There - in living color - was his big brother, stretched out on his bed, and drinking straight from a fifth of whiskey.
"Hey Sammy," Dean greeted drunkenly. "Looks like you've got a roomie again."

"Dean…" he began as he shook his head, searching for words to express his disbelief. "You've gotta be kidding me," he finally repeated.

"Nope, I'm here. You wanna drink?" he asked as he grinned and held up the bottle.

"What the hell, Dean? No, I don't want a drink of that crap. Is that even a real brand? How drunk are you anyway?"

"You ever hear the term 'drunker than Cooter Brown' before? Cooter's a funny-ass name, ain't it? Who do you think he was anyway?"

"I don't know," Sam replied tiredly. "If I had to guess, I'd say he was some poor schmuck's annoying older brother. I can't believe you," he remarked with clear exasperation in his voice. "Did you even try to go and talk with Buffy, or have you been hiding out in here soaking your liver all night?"

"I tried Sammy, but she showed me the door," he replied with a defeated slump of his shoulders. "So, I'mma gettin' drunk," he slurred with a lopsided grin. "'s my plan B."

Sam sighed and sat down on the edge of the other bed, facing his brother. As angry as he'd been with him today, he was starting to feel kind of sorry for him. He didn't blame Buffy for feeling betrayed, but he knew Dean was absolutely devastated. He had a feeling that his brother didn't even fully realize how hopelessly in love he was. The sight of him took most of the steam out of Sam's rage.

"Did you tell her why you did it?" he asked earnestly.

"She wouldn't listen, besides s'not what you think."

"So, it wasn't because you desperately wanted to believe that the business with Crowley had nothing to do with what was going on around here?"

A bit of surprise could be seen in Dean's glazed eyes. "You got me," he admitted without meeting Sam's gaze. "I can't deal. I'm a friggin child."

Sam shook his head sadly. "Dean, you've lost everything to demons - everything. Maybe you weren't exactly looking at things objectively, but what the hell do you expect from yourself? It freaked me out too, man. I about shit when you said there were demons here in Cleveland. You have to explain this stuff to Buffy, I'm sure she'll understand."

"She doesn't wanna talk to me, Sam. Won't even let me get close to her. I think she's done."

"She's mad right now, but she'll come around," Sam replied confidently. "Then you can explain your sorry ass to her and get the hell out of my hair… and until then," he added as he kicked out a long leg and connected with his brother's boot, "get your dirty boots off my bed."

"This is my bed," he replied sullenly. "I always get the one by the door."

"No," Sam disagreed. "It's my bed. You're a guest here, a temporary guest. Now get your ass up before you spill whatever the hell it is you're drinking on my sheets. Come on dude," he added more gently, "you'll work it out and then you won't have to worry about sleeping on a crap hotel mattress anymore."

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"Hey girl," Faith greeted as she strolled into Buffy's office. "How's it hangin'?"

"Huh?" Buffy replied, cupping her hand against her ear. "Sorry, but I think Dawn's screeching has permanently damaged my hearing this time."

"So, you finally caught her on the phone without the creep standing over her shoulder? Went great didn't it?"

"It was a roaring success. Before she started screaming, I learned that I'm paranoid due to my undiagnosed PTSD and I have a nearly delusional obsession with danger that overrides my ability to make sound judgments about people's character. It's not really my fault though. I'm just a sick, sick puppy who's greatly in need of decades of therapy."

"Ouch! What the hell is all that crap?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Freshman psych. I just hope her teacher isn't a mad scientist who wants to create evil robot-demon-men… *Hold on a second*, maybe I am a little paranoid."

"No, you just live in the real world. All those so-called normal people are the delusional nutjobs and don't you forget it."

"Well that's a relief," she replied with a half-hearted smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"How ya holdin' up B?" Faith asked in a more serious tone. "No offense, but you're lookin' a little rough around the edges. Plus, I gotta tell ya. If you don't take that boy of yours back soon, I'm gonna hafta rearrange his pretty face. I've been tryin' to make time with his brother, but I can't get anywhere with that sad-sack constantly hovering around."

"He's sad?" Buffy asked with obvious hopefulness in her tone.

Faith smiled and shook her head at her friend. "Yeah, he's completely miserable. Lucky for him, he takes most of it out on the Hellmouth's demon population, otherwise I'd thrash his ass. He can really deliver a serious beat-down when he gets goin' though. Kinda hot for a pretty boy."

"I'll put you back in a coma."

Faith laughed, she knew Buffy was only joking… *sorta*. "Don't sweat it B, you know I've got my eyes on the other, hotter Winchester. So seriously, when are you gonna take Dean back? That dude is severely cramping my style."

"I don't think he wants to come back," she replied with a dejected frown. "I haven't seen or heard boo from him all week."

"Whatever," Faith stated with a long-suffering sigh. "Don't be stupid. I told you the guy was miserable. Just go talk to the idiot. Believe me, that's some sound advice. I got it off this cute little blond chick I know."

Buffy smiled at her friend, Faith didn't give out compliments very often. "*I don't know,*" she groaned. "I think he needs to come talk to me. He left me! *I'm the most miserable.* Look at me, I've hardly slept in days, I can't eat, even my hair's turned against me," she remarked as she pointed to her plain and rather limp looking ponytail. "He should make the first move. I'm not gonna run crying to him."

"Well, I can't argue with your logic. You know me – never let 'em see ya sweat, but most importantly *never, ever* let 'em see ya cry. But then again, who am I to give advice? You're the relationship girl."
"Yeah, well name one Buffy relationship that hasn't ended with the guy either dying or skipping town? In a few instances, they've even managed to do both. I'm amazing like that," she added bitterly.

"Well something's gotta stick eventually, don't it?" Faith asked hopefully.

"I guess I can always dream."

Faith didn't know what else to say. She wanted to be supportive, but this subject was way out of her depth. She could always kick Dean's ass for Buffy, but she didn't think that would qualify as helping and she was pretty damn sure Sam wouldn't appreciate it.

"Well, I just wanted to check in with ya," she finally said awkwardly. "I'm gonna go see if I can dig up something to eat. I'm starved! You hang in there B."

"Thanks Faith," Buffy said sincerely.

Faith turned suddenly when she reached the doorway. "Damn, I almost forgot," she said. "I actually had some Slayer business to discuss. You know that dream journal thing you wanted us to do?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I gotta admit that I haven't exactly been all Bookworm Betty about writing down my dreams."

"Color me surprised," Buffy replied dryly.

"Yeah, well," Faith said unapologetically, "I never was big on the homework, but after you mentioned that 'black eyes' thing the other day, I thought I might actually give it a shot. The thing is, I haven't had any dreams at all that I can remember this week. None. Not even the usual naked in class kind or that scary one where you feel like you're falling. I haven't even had the one where Tobey Maguire's going down on me."

"Spiderman?"

"Yeah, he's cute."

"Yeah, he's cute," Buffy agreed, "but he doesn't really seem like your type."

"I dunno. He's kinda got that sweet, innocent thing goin' for him. He has a really cute smile and I bet he'd have one hell of a technique. Goin' down's an important skill."

Buffy snorted a giggle, it was probably the first genuine laugh she'd had all week. "Wow, that is so much more information that I ever needed to know about you."

"Speaking of technique," Faith began with a wicked grin. "That night I spent with Sam—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Buffy said quickly, holding up both of her hands in front of her. "Back that train up! Please do not go any further with that sentence. I can't know about that. It's just… Trust me, it's not something I need to know."

Faith smirked and shook her head. "Fine, I won't corrupt your pure and virginal little ears," she remarked sarcastically. "But hey, at least I made ya laugh."

"True," Buffy smiled, "but then you ruined it by traumatizing me."

Faith shrugged. "The no dream thing's weird though, ain't it? What about you?"
"Well, I hadn't really thought about it," Buffy admitted. "I haven't written anything else down this week, but then again, I haven't been doing much sleeping either. I should probably ask the girls about it."

"I think you should."

"Hey Sam," Dean said as he gave up on the motel's crap cable selection and tossed the remote aside. "Would you mind spottin' me a couple hundred bucks for the weekend? I'll pay you back."

Sam stopped folding and putting away his freshly laundered clothes and regarded his brother suspiciously. "What for?" he asked.

"I'm going to Vegas for a few days."

"What?" Sam asked incredulously. "Vegas? Dude, I don't think so. Actually, let me rephrase that - hell no! There's no way I'm loaning you money so you can run off and self-destruct. This is stupid Dean! I can't believe you're actually going to give up and throw everything away. You should be trying to talk to Buffy right now, not running off to drink, gamble, and sleep around with showgirls. If you do this - you're screwed. I hope you realize that and don't you dare expect me to feel sorry for you."

"You done?" Dean asked with a smug smirk.

"Whatever," his brother replied with a disgusted wave of his hand. "You're not listening anyway."

"If you'll give me a chance Mr. Sunshine, I'll tell you why I'm going to Vegas."

"I'm listening," Sam replied curiously.

"You know those necklaces we used to wear before we got all tatted-up? Well, Bobby knows this guy in Vegas that specializes in occult jewelry. Apparently, the dude has those things mass-produced in China. He sells 'em to tourists for ten bucks a pop - as good luck charms or some shit. Anyway, I thought I'd go and see if I can score enough to outfit all the Slayers and their people. I know I'm being paranoid and we're not actually dealing with demons," he added sheepishly, "but I'd still sleep better at night. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Sam agreed, "I know. I think I'd sleep better myself. That's a really good idea, Dean. I'm sorry I said all that man," he added sincerely. "I shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"Course you shouldn't, because I've never been known to drink, gamble, or sleep around," he remarked with a wry smile.

"Are you gonna call Buffy and tell her you're leaving town? I think maybe you should."

"I was planning on getting up with her when I got back. Truth is, I don't think it'll hurt to have a little something on hand, to show her that I'm serious about making sure her and her girls are safe. I mean, I'm not saying that's the only reason I'm doing this..."

Sam nodded. "Believe me, I get it and I'm completely on board. In fact, you don't even have to pay me back. I want to chip in. I'll even go with you."

Dean smiled at the offer. "Nah, you stay. Buffy needs you here."
"I doubt that."

"No, she does, seriously. Having a giant babysitter takes a lot of stress off her shoulders. Besides, Lusty Busty's been sniffing around a lot lately. I'm pretty sure she'd like to get rid of my ass for a few days."

Sam rolled his eyes. "It's not like that Dean, we're just friends."

Dean raised a skeptical eyebrow at his brother. "Do we need to have the talk Sammy? Don't be so naïve. Trust me. I've gotten that look from plenty of chicks over the years. She wants another ride on the magic salami."

"Dude! You're so disgusting," Sam said, but he laughed anyway. "How much money do you need?"

"I've got a couple hundred myself. So, I figured if I could get another two from you, I'd have enough to make the trip and be able to earn the rest on the blackjack tables, or I could probably find a low-stakes poker game at one of the off-strip casinos."

"So, you're gambling after all," Sam remarked with a fond shake of his head.

"Well hell yeah, I'm gambling. I'm going to Vegas, dude."

Las Vegas was a good thirty-hour drive from Cleveland and that was in perfect conditions. Dean had pushed himself hard to get there in two days. He was tired of missing Buffy and he wanted to get this done and get back as soon as he could. She'd asked for some time and he'd done his best to give it to her, but it had been over a week since the blowout and she still hadn't called. He couldn't take it anymore. When he got back, she'd either have to hear him out or kill him, because he was done with the space thing. This situation was going to be resolved one way or the other. He didn't quite know what he'd do if things didn't turn out well, but he knew he couldn't stand the waiting.

Dean had a lot of experience with misery. It was the one subject he could claim to be a complete expert on… or so he'd thought. He'd found that this situation with Buffy was a whole new experience. Sure, there was the familiar grief and emptiness that he'd experienced each time someone close to him had died, but the fact that she was alive and well and currently just out of reach, actually seemed to make the anguish even worse. It was literally physically painful to think that right now she was probably just getting in to work, looking beautiful as always. He wondered what she was wearing and if she had her hair up or down today. Was she happy and laughing at her friend's jokes or was she miserable like he was? He didn't want her to be miserable, he really didn't, but he couldn't stand the thought of her being happy either, because that would mean he'd lost her.

He hated this feeling. For the first time in his life he was actually identifying with the lyrics to sappy break-up songs on the radio. In the past, he usually turned the dial because they were lame and now he was doing it because he actually understood what they were saying - it was seriously messing with his head. In the back of his mind, he was beginning to wonder if all of this misery might possibly mean that he was actually in love. If that's what it was, then man did it suck! Why would anyone in their right mind choose to do that to themselves? It was insane. Everything made him want to bang his head against the wall, even Vegas. He used to love Vegas. Sin city, baby - the place where the liquor ran free, the girls were all hot, and nothing ever closed. Now he hated all the happy tourists and the contrast between the tall, statuesque showgirls and short, petite, little Buffy only made him miss her more. He'd found that he was much happier in the seedy off-strip casinos. The people there were much less annoying because they were just as gloomy as he was. If it was possible, some of them might've even been worse.
The off-strip casinos were the places where the down-on-their-luck gambling addicts and alcoholics liked to congregate. The waitresses all looked pretty worn and the working ladies were way, way past their prime. It was absolutely perfect. The phrase 'misery loves company' had never seemed more appropriate. Plus, these bastards liked to gamble and you could buy into a poker game for way less than two hundred dollars. That had been the bare minimum at some casinos and wouldn't even buy you the time of day at many others. So, he'd found the skeeviest dive possible and actually managed to hit it lucky there. He was twelve-hundred bucks ahead when he'd decided that he better not push it. He couldn't afford to get greedy. He now had more than enough cash to get the charms, eat, put gas in the Impala, and get his ass back to Cleveland. He'd even be able to pay Sam back and have some cash left over.

It took Dean a while to find the place he was looking for. Apparently, the guy Bobby knew had moved his place of business since the last time Bobby had been there. He was relieved when he finally spotted the sign a few blocks over and back from the address he'd been given. The place was called 'The Highway' and Dean quickly realized that it was actually a head shop. The first thing he saw when he walked in the door was a giant three-foot glass bong with a bowl the size of his fist. Talk about flying high, anybody who managed to smoke an entire bowl through that thing would be able to eat their way through an entire grocery store full of Twinkies. Under different circumstances, he would've liked to have given that thing a whirl himself.

He made his way toward the back, unsure if he was even in the right place. Then, his eyes fell on the selection of necklaces and charms that were displayed near the register. There were the usual giant pot leaves and strings of hippie beads, but he also spotted some things that were definitely genuine occult paraphernalia. He approached a spacey looking chick that was sitting on a stool behind the counter, apparently oblivious to his presence. She had these really nasty looking, blond dreadlocks and he could smell the stench of patchouli a mile away. He had to stop himself from laughing in her face when he remembered that Rufus had once referred to white-people-dreads as 'matlocks'. It was a fitting name.

"Can I help you?" she finally said, after he'd cleared his throat loudly for the second time.

"Yeah," he replied, hesitating because of the words he'd have to say next. Bobby said the dude wouldn't even talk to you if you messed up his name. It was so ridiculous, he couldn't believe he was going to have to say this. "Can I speak to … uh… Rainbow Dave?" he finally asked. "You can tell him I'm a friend of Bobby Singer."

The chick looked Dean up and down suspiciously for a few moments before shrugging and sliding off of her stool. "Sure," she said unenthusiastically, "I'll go get him."

Rainbow Dave was pretty much what Dean would have expected. The dude was one of the original hippies. He was obviously up in his sixties, but he still wore his gray hair in a long, beaded ponytail and also had on the required uniform of tie-dye and Birkenstocks.

"So you must be a hunter," the old man stated curiously as he looked Dean over. With all the staring going on, Dean was beginning to feel like he was the freak. Of course, given the current surroundings, that was pretty much the case.

"Yep," he confirmed, deciding to get straight to business. "I'm looking to get at least thirty-five charms. Like this," he said as he tugged back his shirt collar to reveal his tattoo.

"Far out," Rainbow Dave remarked as he nodded his approval. "I think I can fix you up, man. Just wait here and let me go check my inventory."

As Dean waited, he absently looked over the guy's merchandise. It was a strange collection of
hippie-dippy crap and heavy-duty mysticism. Just as he heard the rattle of the beaded curtain that signaled Rainbow Dave's return, his eyes fell on a charm bracelet that was sitting in the display cabinet. It was silver and had a collection of protection charms on it. He remembered his mother wearing a similar one.

"You're in luck dude," the old hippie said as he held up a handful of charm necklaces. "I'm actually overstocked on this particular item. Folks are into Kokopelli necklaces this year. You never know what's gonna be hot."

"Cool," Dean remarked absently. "Hey man, can I take a look at that bracelet," he asked as he pointed to the case.

"Sure, I got that off of another hunter. Took it in trade. It's genuine handcrafted silver. Really old too. This ain't no made-in-China crap. You gotta lady hunter?" he asked with a knowing grin as he handed the bracelet over to Dean.

"Sorta," Dean replied as he carefully checked out the charms. They were the real deal, genuine protection charms and from a variety of different religions and cultures. Some of them he didn't even recognize. He had to admit that they were kinda pretty too. Whoever had made them had really paid attention to detail and some even had real gemstones in them as well. He knew Buffy would like it, she was all into pretty, girly things and he found that he really wanted her to have it. He'd never bought jewelry for a woman before, but there was a first time for everything.

"What do ya want for it?" he asked the guy with his best poker face.

"Oh man, that's a really nice piece. Handmade and everything."

Dean groaned inwardly. Dude was about to name a ridiculous price, otherwise he wouldn't be laying it on so thick.

"Tell ya what, I'll give it to you for a thousand. I should ask a whole lot more, but only a hunter or maybe a witch would recognize it for what it's worth. I don't see many of either in here, so I'll cut you a deal."

Dean sighed. The guy was right, a thousand was more than a fair price. He figured he could probably bargain with the hippie and knock a little more off, but probably not enough. At ten bucks a pop, the anti-possession charms were going to set him back three-fifty. He had almost thirteen in his pocket, but he'd have to stop for gas quite a few times on his way back. He just didn't see how he could swing it unless he hit the poker tables again. The truth was, he was afraid his luck was about to run out. Just as he was about to give up on the idea, an idea struck him.

"So you take trade?" he asked.

"If it's something I'm interested in," Rainbow Dave confirmed. "I'm not running a pawn shop."

Dean smiled. "Oh, I think I've got something you're gonna like. Just give me a few minutes."

Dean returned a few minutes later with a leather sheath. The sheath itself was decorated in occult symbols, but what was inside was what mattered. It was a silver dagger with a six-inch blade. He'd won the knife and the sheath in a poker game the last time he'd visited the Roadhouse. It really was a thing of beauty and very lethal too. One side was razor sharp and the other was serrated. It would really suck to get stabbed by something like that, but what really made it special was the elaborately carved ivory handle. Dean had meant to pawn the blade, because as cool as it was, it was a little too flashy for his tastes. For some reason, he'd never gotten around to it and it had sat buried in the trunk
for years. He was glad too, because the old hippie was obviously interested.

Dean had decided that he'd be willing to give the guy the knife plus seven-hundred bucks for both the necklaces and the bracelet, but he knew how this game was played, so he offered the guy five-hundred. Rainbow Dave countered at eight and they met in the middle at seven. The guy even threw in an extra five anti-possession necklaces to make it an even forty. Dude said it was good karma to stay on the hunting community's good side, because he just might need their help one day. Dean couldn't argue with that logic, so he gave the old freak his cellphone number just in case.

Dean was more than pleased with his haul for the day and he was itching to hit the road again. He knew Buffy wasn't the type of woman that could be bought off with shiny jewelry and hoped she'd realize that wasn't what he was trying to do….. or hell, maybe that was what he was trying to do. These were desperate times. He'd try almost anything at this point.

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A/N: Okay, I know I dropped the Cas/Crowley bomb in the last chapter and now I'm not giving you much more on that (ducks head). There was just so much relationship drama to deal with in this chapter. Forgive me? I promise we'll have more Cas/Crowley.
Buffy's face burned hot when she caught a glimpse of Sam through the dusty cloud left by her latest victim. She hoped he hadn't been standing there long, because she'd given the very confused vamp a lecture on the perils of being a big, secretive jerk who'd decided to skip town. Unfortunately for her, Sam looked pretty embarrassed himself, so she had the feeling that he'd heard enough to catch the drift.

"Sorry," he shrugged sheepishly. "I wasn't trying to lurk, I just didn't want to distract you from the fight."

"Hi Sam," she greeted with a sheepish smile of her own. "I don't guess there's any chance you'd believe I was just ranting about recent developments on my favorite soap?"

"Whatever you say," he replied with a smile. "I'm just glad I'm not that soap guy."

"So, what's the what?" she asked in a forcibly cheery tone, hoping to quickly get past this thoroughly mortifying situation.

"Same ole, same ole. I was actually just walking home for the night. So, I take it you heard Dean went to Vegas?"

Buffy groaned and kicked petulantly at the pile of dust by her feet. Sam wasn't going to let this awkward situation die a graceful death after all (damn him).

"I heard," she replied sullenly. "It's gone through the Slayer grapevine… one of the girls mentioned it."

"I told Dean to call you and tell you, but he never listens to anything I say. He said he wanted to wait and talk to you in person when he got back."

"Really?" Buffy asked, failing to conceal her hopefulness. "I mean," she shrugged, "okay, whatever."

Sam barely managed to suppress his grin. "You know, I would have told you about it myself if you hadn't been so hard to find these days. I'm sure Faith would've too."

"It's not what it looks like," Buffy began with a guilty expression.

"So, you're not really hiding out and avoiding all non-job-related texts and voice mails?"

"Well, maybe it is what it looks like," she admitted.

"Just so you know," Sam began gently. "He didn't go there to live the high life. He's on a job."
"Oh," Buffy replied. She couldn't think of a more intelligent response because she was so emotionally drained. The past week and a half had been a rollercoaster. A few days ago, she'd finally decided that maybe she'd overreacted when Dean had offered to go and stay with Sam. It was quite possible that the gazillion tons of relationship baggage she carried around had interfered with her judgment. She'd almost convinced herself that Dean may have only been trying to respect her space and that the situation had just gotten way out-of-hand. But just as soon as she'd made up her mind to call him and attempt to talk this mess out, she met mini-Cordelia (otherwise known as Carrie) in the lunchroom. The snotty little brat made a big show of faking support and sympathy for Buffy's 'situation' - all in front of a dozen other girls. That's when she learned that Dean had run off to Vegas and that Carrie was there for her if she needed a shoulder to cry on. It was utterly humiliating. Buffy felt like she was back in high school and she'd kind of acted that way too. She'd fled the lunchroom with very little dignity intact and since then, she'd been valiantly hiding from the world. Now she didn't know what to think anymore. Her mind was refusing to process any further data. She was pretty sure Will called that a fatal hard-drive failure. Apparently, she was ready to join the Buffybot on the scrapheap of life.

Buffy was brought back to awareness when she realized that Sam was trying to get her attention. She'd been too busy staring into space like a lunatic to remember she wasn't alone. "Sorry," she said as she refocused her brain on the present. "Looks like I'm bravely hiding out in my own head now. That's probably not a good sign," she added with a frown.

"At least you're not bravely hiding out in a fifth of cheap whiskey," Sam teased lightly.

"I would if it came in a yummy chocolate-y flavor," she replied. With a defeated sigh, she slid down the wall of a nearby crypt until she was sitting on the cold ground with her legs splayed out in front of her.

"What's going on, Sam?" she groaned as she looked up at him imploringly. "I know it's not fair to put you in the middle, but I'm too tired to worry about such petty concepts."

Sam joined her on the ground, propping his own back against the wall of the crypt. "You might hate me for this, but I'm afraid I can't tell you much."

"He swore you to silence, huh? You do realize I can beat it out of you. I'm stronger than I look," she remarked as she flexed her small arm in demonstration.

"No," he said with a shake of his head, "He didn't swear me to silence. I just know I wouldn't be doing him any favors if I tried to fix things for him."

"So, he wants things fixed?" Buffy asked tentatively.

"Of course he does," Sam stressed. "He's been a mess ever since you kicked him out."

"Since I kicked him out!" she exclaimed. "What planet is he living on? Because I live here on earth - the place where he announced that he was leaving."

Sam chuckled, earning himself a death-glare from Buffy. "I'm sorry," he said as he made himself stop laughing. "It's not funny… it's just… man, my brother is so clueless. So how'd it really go down?" he asked. "If you don't mind telling me, that is."

Buffy proceeded to give Sam the abridged version of the 'conversation'. When she was finished, she asked, "Don't you think he should have stayed and gave me his explanation no matter how much I yelled at him? After all, I was just giving him a taste of his own cranky, curse-y medicine. He was supposed to beg for my forgiveness and then force me to listen to his reasons while I glared, pouted,
and threatened to turn his skull into a soup bowl. You know - the usual stuff. That's how these things are done! I don't write the rules."

This time Sam completely lost it. He couldn't stop laughing no matter how irritated Buffy appeared to be with him. "Oh wow," he said as he tried to catch his breath. "That was good."

"I'm glad this is so entertaining," Buffy griped as she crossed her arms in front of her.

Sam managed to put on a semblance of a straight face before speaking again. "Buffy," he began, "Dean has no earthly idea what the rules are. I'm telling you the God's honest truth. Dude's like a bull in a china shop when it comes to stuff like this. He's had exactly one long-term girlfriend and, at that time, I doubt his head was on straight enough for him to pick up too many new relationship skills. I'm just saying you can't expect him to play the game when he doesn't even realize he's in one. If you expect something from him, you're gonna have to tell him."

Buffy's face fell, she felt like she was about two inches tall. Sam probably thought she was the world's shallowest person. "I'm not trying to play games," she replied quietly. "I just have a really disastrous track record. You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Even my baggage has baggage. It's this whole big thing... I'm a complete neurotic mess. Dawn says I need decades of therapy."

"Join the club," he said as he nudged her playfully with his elbow. "Dean and I are the original founding members, so I'm sure we can get you a good seat at the meetings. Newbies have to bring the donuts and make the coffee though."

Buffy giggled a little. Sam was actually making her feel like there might be some hope.

"So, I guess you're still not gonna tell me what started all this in the first place?" she asked. "I still think I have a right to be mad about that, by the way," she stressed in a serious tone. "Dean shouldn't keep potentially life-threatening secrets."

"Hell no, he shouldn't," Sam agreed firmly. "Believe me. You would've had to stand in line behind me to kick his ass that day. But no, I'm still not going to tell you why. Dean needs to do that. I'm not trying to be difficult," he explained. "The thing is, Dean has to learn to let somebody in. I may not always be here and I worry about what might happen to him."

"Are you planning on leaving?" Buffy asked in surprise.

"No," he assured her, "I'm not. Not at all. But there are some things..." Sam paused for a moment before deciding not to elaborate any further about the big question mark his 'hell wall' had placed over his future. He had a feeling Buffy was soon going to be hearing enough Winchester family drama to last her a lifetime. There was no point in dropping spoilers right before the big show.

"Well, you know how this life is," he finally said. "You never know what might happen."

"Yeah," she agreed solemnly. "There's always some wacky fun to be had. No doubt about that."

"Nope," he agreed, "No doubt. But believe me, no matter how badly I want to kill my brother at times, home will always be wherever he is. In the same town anyway," he added with a grin. "Truth is, I'd rather you be the one to get the honor of listening to his snoring and smelling his socks. So, do me a favor and hear him out. That's all I'm asking."

"Okay," Buffy promised. "I can do that. Those socks are pretty stinky and I wouldn't want to be held responsible for anyone else's suffering. I am the chosen one after all. I scoff in the face of evil and stinky feet."
Sam laughed. "Thanks, I seriously owe you one."

Buffy leaned over and kissed Sam on the cheek before pushing herself back up onto her feet. She smiled when she noticed how embarrassed he appeared to be. It was kinda hard to tell in the dark, but she was pretty sure he was blushing.

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "You're a really good brother and you're a pretty good friend too, but I'd like you a whole lot better if you learned how to be a gossip. It's no fun when you keep all the juicy details to yourself," she teased. "Anyway, I think it's time for Buffy to get her two-hours of nightly beauty sleep. You may not believe me, but it takes a lot of work to achieve dark circles like these," she remarked as she waved goodbye. "See ya around, Sam."

"Good night, Buffy," Sam said, returning her wave. "Tomorrow night," he added. "Dean should get back tomorrow night."

"I'll keep my phone on," Buffy assured him as she headed toward the graveyard's exit.

Faith knew that Sam was somewhere nearby, because of the chatter on her radio. Every once in a while Xander would have one of his flashbacks to the night he'd been a soldier. These would usually result in him coming up with a pretty cool tactical idea. Shortwave radios were his latest. When you were out on patrol, the radios were much more practical than dialing a number on a cell phone, plus you could put out a general distress call. Thanks to Willow, their designated channel was heavily encrypted, which meant they didn't have to worry about nosy civilians listening in either. The new system had worked extremely well, but as far as Faith was concerned, the biggest bonus was that she could usually pick up on Sam's whereabouts. After all, it was important for a girl to have her priorities.

So, with her priorities in mind, Faith was strolling through Forest Lawn Cemetery. In her opinion, it was the most poorly named cemetery of them all. How could you call it a 'forest' when there were no trees? What was even weirder was that every single town seemed to have at least one. It was almost like someone had created the most morbid franchise ever invented. It was McDonald's for dead people.

She slowed her walk when her extra-sensitive hearing picked up on the sound of voices nearby. As she crept closer, she realized that she recognized those voices. Normally, that would cause her to drop her guard a little. Voices she recognized usually signaled that she wasn't dealing with anything that needed slaying. However, these voices put her on guard for a different reason, because they belonged to Buffy and Sam. It was stupid really, but every now and then, she'd have one of her old jealous twinges when it came to Buffy. She loved Buffy and she knew that she'd gone to bat for her on more than one occasion, however, deep-down there was still a tiny bit of the old Faith. The old Faith that believed pretty, perfect Buffy had been put on earth to outshine her and to take everything that should be rightfully hers. She hated that Faith, but unfortunately, right now she was rearing her ugly head.

Buffy was sitting on the ground beside Sam. They seemed comfortable with one another as they talked and that in itself bothered her a little. When it came to Sam, she'd had to struggle to come up with something witty to say, but Buffy was sitting there chatting away like it was the easiest thing on earth. Then the real clincher came when Buffy kissed him on the cheek. Reasonable-Faith said this meant nothing. Buffy wouldn't do that to her and besides this was Dean's brother. Sam may be just another untrustworthy man, but she knew he was very loyal to Dean. Plus, it wasn't like Buffy had her tongue down his throat or anything. Regardless, Not-So-Reasonable-Faith was seeing red. The two of them were busy duking it out when she realized that Buffy was headed straight for her. She
froze. It was too late to duck out and head the other way.

"Faith," Buffy exclaimed in surprise. "How'd you get here so fast? Did somebody give you a ride?"

"Huh?" Faith remarked as she gave the other Slayer a thoroughly confused expression.

"Vi said you were all the way over on the North side of town," Buffy remarked. "She's kinda upset because she thinks you snubbed her."

"I don't know what the hell she's talkin' about," she replied a little defensively. "I haven't been anywhere near the North end tonight."

"Huh," Buffy shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. "Oh well, you might want to tell her that when you see her, because you know how she gets. I love the girl, but she can be a little sensitive and nervy sometimes."

"Sure, whatever. I'll try to remember."

Buffy gave her friend a grin and stepped up closer. "You're looking for Sam aren't you?" she whispered.

"No," Faith denied as she crossed her arms and looked at Buffy irritably.

Buffy just kept grinning and then she pulled Faith into a hug. "You better go for it," she whispered into her ear. "Don't be a big fraidy cat."

"Get off me," Faith said good-naturedly as she pushed the other girl away. She grinned at Buffy and shook her head (Reasonable-Faith had won out this time). "What's up with you?" she asked. "You're actually smiling. Maybe I should take a picture."

Buffy shrugged. "Sam's good with the cheering," she replied quietly. "He said Dean's going to come talk to me tomorrow night."

"That's good B," she replied sincerely. "I'm happy for you. I'm sure it'll all work out."

Buffy smiled in reply and then announced way too loudly, "I'll see you tomorrow Faith, have a good night."

Faith rolled her eyes. Buffy had deliberately given her presence away so that she'd be forced to go and say 'hello' to Sam. It was so juvenile, but she kinda loved the girl for it.

Her friend lowered her voice to a whisper once again. "You have the Buffy seal of approval," she said with a nod and a thumbs-up. Then she winked and hurried on her way home.

"That chick is a strange one," Faith said as she walked toward Sam, who was in the process of standing up and dusting off the seat of his pants.

"Aren't we all," Sam replied with a smile, holding his hand out to indicate their surroundings. "Who else is crazy enough to spend so much time in graveyards?"

"Good point," she agreed and then stood there for a moment trying to find something brilliant to say.

"So, what's up?" both of them asked, nearly in unison.

Sam laughed a little and then replied, "Not much. You know, just the usual."
Faith noticed that Sam's voice sounded a little distracted and she could tell by the subtle shift in his
gaze that he was alerting her to something behind her. She spun around quickly with her stake raised.
She didn't follow through, however, because she was stunned by how utterly lame this vamp was. He
was obviously newly risen, judging from the dirt clinging to his cheap suit and the guy looked like
the most unlikely vampire ever. In fact, he looked like a paunchy, middle-aged, supermarket
manager. He even had a receding hairline and a bad comb-over.

"What's up with that?" Faith asked as she nonchalantly turned her back on the creature and pointed
over her shoulder with her stake.

Sam just shook his head. He was also obviously baffled.

Faith turned her attention back to the vampire. "Buddy, I've gotta know… Who in the hell thought it
was a good idea for you to live forever?"

The vamp stared at Faith, seemingly unsure of what to do next. This clearly was not how he'd
pictured his first kill.

"What do ya think?" Faith asked, once again addressing Sam.

"Mercy kill."

Faith nodded and turned around to face the creature again. To his credit, the vampire did manage to
get out one fairly ferocious growl before turning to dust.

"That sucked," Faith said irritably. "What the hell was that about? Remember when they only turned
the sexy people? I mean, sure, there were always a few creepy, bug-eater types around, but the
vamps need their minions. That guy would even make a crappy minion."

"I think they're more interested in quantity than quality these days," Sam replied sympathetically.

"Well, it sucks. Kills like that are no fun at all," she said sullenly.

Sam smiled when he saw a group of three more vampires approaching them from about a hundred
yards away. "What about those guys?" he asked.

Faith studied the group for a moment as they walked slowly toward them. "Meh," she shrugged,
unimpressed. "At least they don't look like fledglings, I guess."

"No, definitely not fledglings. In fact, I think these guys died on the set of Michael Jackson's Beat It
video."

Faith laughed. "Hey, you're right! That one's even wearing the zippered jacket. Well hell," she said,
her face brightening, "let's do this."

Faith loved to watch the Winchester boys in a fight (especially Sam, of course). She'd decided that
Dean was good to have around simply because he tended to get his brother all riled-up. Faith could
always appreciate a troublemaker, especially when it resulted in her getting to see Sam open up on
one of the bad guys. The Winchester fighting style was more about brute force than any specific
technique. They fought dirty too. There were no holds barred and both of them knew how to take a
hit. It was so damn hot!

Faith had been itching for a good fight and despite their 1980's flashback clothing, these guys didn't
disappoint. She'd taken her time with the first one and then staked the second fairly quickly just so she could stand back and watch Sam wail on the third. The third one (aka Michael Jackson) was a pretty savvy fighter. He knew he needed to keep his chest protected, so he was doing a decent job of keeping Sam at a distance. Unfortunately for him, Sam had a pretty long reach. Eventually, he managed to kick the vamp's legs out from under him, deliver a couple of nasty, stunning blows to its face, and then finally plunge a stake into its heart.

Faith was wired now. A good fight always boosted her confidence. Buffy was right, she needed to go for it. When Sam stood up, breathing heavily and trying to shake the dust out of his clothing, she made her move. He was a few yards away, so she got a running start and then jumped up and wrapped her legs around his waist. For a moment, he looked completely shocked, but quickly recovered, pulled her in close, and began kissing her fiercely. It was exactly the reaction Faith was aiming for.

Once the tension had reached its boiling point, Faith reached down, unzipped his fly, and stroked him roughly. Sam practically growled in response and took a few steps with her so that her back was now pressed against the side of the crypt he'd been sitting against earlier. It was go time. Faith unhooked her legs from around him and put her feet back on the ground, so that she could get rid of her pants. She'd begun on her own zipper when she felt the stiffness leaving his body as he pulled away from her. Technically, not all of the stiffness left (there was still one very important part that was still ready to go), but the rest of him was clearly backing off.

"What the hell is your problem, dude?" Faith asked angrily. She couldn't believe he was rejecting her again. It was so humiliating and she didn't get it, because it seemed obvious that he wanted her.

"Faith, I can't," Sam sighed in a defeated tone. He appeared to be struggling with himself.

"What do you mean, you can't?" she snapped. "It sure looks like you can to me," she stated with a pointed glance toward his fly. "You know what? Forget it! I don't need this shit!"

Faith started to walk away, but Sam grabbed her by the shoulders and held her in place against the wall of the crypt. "Just listen —" he began. He didn't get to finish his sentence because Faith roughly shoved him backwards. He would have fallen on his ass, but he was able to grab ahold of a tall statue of an angel that was standing over one of the graves. When he looked over at Faith, he saw something he never expected to see. She was angry of course, that he'd expected, but he could swear that he also saw fear in her eyes. In fact, she looked a little panicky. He was totally thrown. Was she actually afraid of him? It made no sense. They both knew that she could crack his skull open without breaking a sweat.

Sam stepped forward when she began to bolt. He momentarily considered reaching out to halt her, but decided that he valued his arm too much.

"Faith!" he called out as he followed after her. "Please stop," he requested more calmly when he'd caught up.

She did stop, but she didn't immediately turn around to face him. She stood for a moment with her back rigid before spinning around.

"What's your game?" she demanded. "What kind of sick, twisted, head-trips are you selling?"

"There's no game," Sam assured her gently. "I swear… just, please listen to me for a minute."

"I'm listening," she said flatly, but judging by her posture, she wasn't very open to the experience.
Sam sighed and tried to gather his thoughts. "I just don't think this is a very good idea," he finally said.

"Why?" she asked tightly.

"Look what happened last time," he explained in a reasonable tone.

"Which last time? The one where you threw my offer back in my face or the one where I didn't stay around to hold your hand in the morning? I've gotta say, you're an awfully big guy to be such a whiny little bitch!" she spat. "What the hell do you want from me?"

Sam felt his anger beginning to rise. He was sexually frustrated, he was tired, he was sore from the fight, and now he was getting shoved around and cursed at. It was all a little too much.

"I can't have what I want from you!" he yelled back at her.

Faith just stared back at him looking stunned. When she didn't reply, Sam kept going.

"Let's count the ways I'm screwed," he said bitterly. "Number one, we do this, it's great, then you take off the minute you wake up… or even if you do stick around and take me for a few more spins, you'll blow town the minute this crisis is over. I know you don't live here full time. You're only here because boatloads of shit have hit the fan."

"Sam –" Faith said, sounding a little less angry.

"No," he cut her off sharply. "I'm not even close to being done."

"Okaaay"

"On the other hand," he continued, "I guess it's always possible that we could actually have a real relationship, but then - BOOM - my head explodes, out of the blue, and you're left with either a dead man or a drooling invalid. I've caused enough destruction in this world; I'm not signing on for more."

"Huh?"

"Haven't you heard? I'm the antichrist!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Faith asked with her brows drawn together in confusion.

"You remember all that freaky weather and the mass extinctions about a year and a half ago? That was courtesy of yours truly. I decided it would be fun to let Satan out of his cage to play. I managed to put him back, but unfortunately that required me tossing myself into the pit. So fine, I got what I deserved," he shrugged. "Then that demon dickhead Crowley pulls me out of hell, but he decides it would be a little more convenient for him if I didn't have my pesky soul. A hunter without a soul makes a damn good employee if you're a homicidal sadist, by the way." He paused for a minute before finishing. "I finally got my soul back, thanks to another one of Dean's crazy, kamikaze stunts, but now I don't remember anything about the year I spent running around soulless or the year my soul spent being Lucifer's personal bitch! If I remember that part, my brain will probably melt. So yeah, I'm a little pissed off!"

"Bullshit," Faith said. It was the only word she could come up with at the moment.

"Oh yeah? You think so? Well, why don't you go ask Dean? He might tell you if you beat on him for a while. But then again, I'm sure you'll get the heavily edited, safe-for-TV version. The one where poor little Sammy gets his head spun and doesn't know what he's doing. That's partly true, but
I'll let you in on a little secret – I was also a power-hungry dick! So no, I can't have mind-blowing sex with you. I can't have anything. So lay off me!

Faith stared at him for a moment with her mouth open. She didn't know where to begin. She knew what it was like to be the cause of other people's misery. That was some guilt she could identify with. But this was Sam for God's sake! And this entire story was absolutely insane. It just didn't make sense. There was no way that she could picture him being the monster he was selling himself to be and she was one suspicious bitch.

"Sam, this is crazy," she began.

"You're right," he said. "It's complete bullshit. I made up this entire story so I could fuck with your head. I know it seems a little overly complex, but I'm an evil genius. That's what we do. We come up with ridiculously intricate plots when there are much simpler solutions."

Sam started to walk away and Faith called after him, "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to bed," he snapped. "Evil geniuses need sleep too. I need to be freshly rested if I plan to take over the world tomorrow. I might watch some porn too," he added. "I'm pretty sure us evil guys like porn."

Faith let him go. Her head was spinning a little too much at the moment. Man, did this not turn out like she'd planned. She needed to think. Everything he'd dropped on her was a lot to digest, but even so, the fact that he was apparently that into her was what had her thrown the most. It kind of made her happy, but it also scared the living hell out of her. Things had just gotten a whole lot more complicated.

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Buffy had spent the past hour or more anxiously listening for the sound of the Impala's engine. Dean had called earlier that afternoon and asked if he could see her. The conversation had been a little awkward on both sides, but there had been no yelling or cross words, so she was considering it a success. He'd told her he'd probably be at her house around six that evening, so she'd been at home and waiting on the edge of her seat since four-thirty. Thankfully, he was right on time, because she wasn't sure her nerves could've taken much more waiting. Despite her excitement, she forced herself to sit still when she heard the rumble of the engine idling out front. She was hoping this was going to turn out well, but she knew that her disappointment would be even greater if she allowed herself to get too optimistic.

When she answered the door, she was struck by how exhausted Dean looked. He had a five o'clock shadow and dark circles under his eyes, but he was still the best looking man she'd ever seen. He smiled at her and she felt her heart skip a beat. He didn't attempt to touch her though and when she offered him a seat, he chose the recliner rather than sitting beside her on the couch. She tried not to take that too personally since this was an awkward situation for both of them. When she noticed he was holding a plastic shopping bag that had a drawing of a colorful psychedelic mushroom on one side and a marijuana leaf on the other, she decided to try and lighten the mood with a little joking.

"Did you bring me drugs?" she asked.

"No," he said as he held up the bag, "unfortunately, what's in here isn't that much fun." The bag made a solid thud as he dropped it on the coffee table and Buffy leaned forward to curiously peer inside.

"What is it?" she asked as she cautiously reached into the bag.
"Proof of my extreme paranoia."

Buffy pulled out a handful of identical necklaces and held them up in front of her. Each had a pendant suspended from a plain, black, leather cord. When she examined the pendant more closely, she realized that she recognized the symbol.

"This is your tattoo," she observed in a surprised tone. "They're anti-possession charms… lots of anti-possession charms. Are these the reason you went to Vegas?" she asked curiously.

"Yeah, Bobby knows this old hippie guy that specializes in that sorta thing. Well, that and ginormous water bongs. Anyway, I know they're not the height of fashion, but I was hoping you and all the other ladies would wear one. You're friends too. There should be more than enough for everybody… even squirrely-dude," he added with a smirk. "That guy's twitchy enough when he's not possessed."

"Do you really think we need these?" she asked, gazing at him searchingly. "I thought we'd all agreed that exorcisms were out this year. Is there something I don't know?" she questioned, trying hard not to sound like she was making an accusation.

"No," he replied with a shake of his head, "as far as I know, all of that was just a figment of my twisted imagination. But still, I'd feel a whole lot better if everybody wore one just in case. I figured it might be kinda tough to convince you all to get tats, so this was the best I could come up with. You think you can get the gang to humor me?"

"I will," Buffy assured him. "I don't claim to understand what this is all about, but since you went all the way to Vegas, I think the least we can do is wear them. Anyways, I guess you can never overdo it with the protection stuff."

"Thanks," he said, sounding greatly relieved. He regarded her seriously for a moment before continuing. "Buffy, I want you to know that I'd never intentionally put you or anybody you care about in danger. I never would've forgiven myself if something had happened."

"Dean -" she began, intending to assure him that she realized that.

"Please," he said, cutting her off. "Just let me get this out. If I don't do it now, I might never get the nerve up again. So please, hear me out before you say anything. That's all I'm asking."

There was a hint of vulnerability in Dean's voice that Buffy had never heard before, so she quietly assured him that she was listening and then waited a long moment for him to begin speaking.

Once he finally got started, Dean told her almost everything. Well, technically he mostly told the wall and the coffee table in front of him. He spilled nearly the entire sordid tale of the Winchester family's history with demons. Starting with his mom and Yellow Eyes and ending with Sam getting his soul back. He laid out over a quarter century of the severely fucked-up saga that was his life. But, he did gloss over some of the less flattering aspects of Sam's part in all of it and he didn't tell her about his tour in hell. The stuff about Sam was between him and his brother and, as far as hell went, he knew there was no way he could tell her about the things he'd done down there. If he didn't tell her that part of it, she'd paint him as the victim and he couldn't play that charade. It was too big of a lie, even for the great con-man Dean Winchester.

Buffy listened quietly like he'd asked. The whole deal with the non-pocalypse and the angels made her head spin and the idea of a soulless Sam was just beyond comprehension - and she was one girl who had a lot of experience with that sort of thing. She kept all of her questions to herself, however. She didn't want to interrupt him since she was pretty sure that if she did, it would break the steely resolve he had going. The story itself was tragic enough, but the way he told it completely broke her
heart. It wasn't that he cried or anything, in fact he showed very little emotion at all. It was as if all of it had happened to someone else and he was just repeating it second hand. He even threw in quite a bit of gallows humor in some places. Buffy wasn't fooled for one second. She knew that all of it was enormously painful and that sharing this with her was probably one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

"So that's the gist of it," he said in conclusion. "I'm not gonna lie to you, there's some even uglier stuff that went down, but I just can't go there," he said earnestly, actually meeting her eyes for the first time since he'd begun telling the story. "Those are things I have to deal with on my own and I can't talk about it. Not to anyone. But I promise you I've told you everything I know about Crowley and Purgatory. I honestly don't know why he even cared about the place. Demons don't normally give a rat's ass about the rest of the supernatural world. Maybe the bastard was just running out of room in hell."

"Oh God, Dean," Buffy began, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"Just give me one more minute," he asked. "I need to finish this and then you can make your call one way or the other." Dean took a deep breath before continuing. "I know I didn't have a good excuse to keep you in the dark. The truth is, I only did it because I couldn't even admit to myself that I might have to deal with demons again. I know that's lame and I'm sure as hell not proud of it. Still, I promise you that if they do come, I'll fight them. No matter what happens between us, I wouldn't leave you to deal with that mess on your own." He paused for a moment before saying, "But I want us to be together if you'll still have me. You should know that I've never been happier anywhere in my life than I've been here with you. I know there's no way I could ever deserve you and I wouldn't blame you if you wanted me to get as far away from you as possible, especially after all the craziness I just laid on you. So," he shrugged, "I know it's probably not the best offer you'll ever get, but I had to take a shot. It's a damn good thing I'm so good looking," he added with a trace of his trademark cocky smile.

Buffy didn't know if Dean was finished or not, but she'd heard enough to make her decision. She launched herself into his arms and pulled him into a deep kiss before he could get another word out. In response, he held her so tightly that she could barely breathe, but she didn't care, because right now she couldn't get close enough to him.

Finally, she managed to pull herself away from his kiss long enough to speak. "Dean," she said as she drew back and looked into his eyes, "That stuff you said about not deserving me... I'm not perfect you know. I mean really not perfect. There've been some times when I didn't like myself very much and I've done some things I'm not proud of. And believe me, there are parts of my past that you're not going to like very much. In fact, you might completely wig."

"I'm not worried about it," he said seriously. "I'm not trying to play the one-up game here, but I'm sure there's nothing you've done or seen that can even come close to my crap. So, unless you're the real reason Zeppelin hasn't done a reunion tour, I think we're good."

"Then we're safe," Buffy grinned, "because I'm pretty sure I'm in the clear on that one. Especially since I'm not even sure I can name one of their songs."

"Oh, come on! You're kidding me. How about Stairway to Heaven? Even posers know that one."

"That's Zeppelin?"

Dean tightened his grip on her and pretended like he was about to rise from his seat with her. "That's it! I'm locking your little ass in the Impala and you're not getting out until you've listened to the entire collection. I can't believe you have no appreciation for classic rock."
"I do too," she disagreed. "I like ABBA. Have you ever seen *Mama Mia*?"

"We're done," he announced, "I have to draw a line somewhere."

"Too late," she giggled as she laid her head on his shoulder. "You already gave me a free pass. I can sing show tunes everywhere we go and you'll be completely powerless to stop me. In fact, I think I'll force you to give me a standing ovation."

Dean snorted his disagreement with that plan and then they both sat quietly for a while, just enjoying the feeling of being back in each other's company.

"Seriously." Buffy said, breaking the silence. "I feel like I should tell you some things. I don't want our pasts to cause any more drama between us. I can't go through this again."

"Why don't you tell me later? I've had enough of 'this is your jacked-up life' for one day. I'm honestly not worried about it anyway. Besides, I have other plans for the evening," he added as he grinned and squeezed her tighter.

"Can those other plans wait until we've slept for a few hours?" she asked hopefully. "I don't know about you, but I feel like I haven't had a decent night's sleep in years. I just want to crawl into bed with you and sink into a deep, deep coma. I'll make it worth your while… A freshly rested Slayer can do all sorts of neat tricks," she promised.

"Yeah, I guess we can do that," he relented with a heavy sigh of disappointment, although honestly he thought that sounded like a damn good plan. He hadn't slept more than a few hours a night since they'd had their falling out and those had been heavily alcohol induced. At the moment, he couldn't think of anything he'd rather do than just hold her while she slept. But still, he wasn't planning on admitting to anything like that out loud. He'd done enough sharing and caring today to put a severe ding in his dude status. Besides, he still had another massively un-Dean-like task to take care of - the one that involved him actually giving jewelry to a woman.

"I got you something else from old Rainbow Dave," he said casually as he reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out the small box the old hippie had hooked him with. He'd decided that the guy wasn't half-bad if you could get past the freaky name and the patchouli smell.

Buffy perked up curiously. She couldn't begin to imagine what Dean could've possibly gotten for her at a hippie store. She was more than surprised when he placed what was obviously a jewelry box in her hands. Almost cautiously, she opened the lid and then stopped and stared in awe at the contents. He'd actually gotten her jewelry. Jewelry that was both feminine and completely suited to her life. It was so thoughtful and such a perfect gift for her. Slayer bling usually came in the form of sharp, deadly objects, not delicate and beautiful works of art. She was stunned. She'd never dreamed he would give her anything like this.

Dean wasn't sure how to read her reaction. He couldn't tell if she was pleased or disappointed. "It's a bracelet," he said, immediately realizing that was just about the stupidest thing that had ever come out of his mouth. "A charm bracelet," he added quickly. "They're protection charms. I realize it's not new, but it's the genuine article. Since you're the head Slayer and obviously the hottest, I thought you deserved a little extra protection."

Buffy stared silently at her gift for a few more moments. When she finally looked up at Dean, she had tears streaming down her face.

"Oh damn," he said. "That wasn't how I pictured this going down. I'm so sorry baby, I didn't think… I mean… *Please, don't do that,*" he begged. He smoothed her hair back from her face and tried to
wipe some of her tears away with his hand. He looked completely lost.

Buffy started giggling through her tears and wiping at her wet cheeks with the hand that wasn't still busy clutching on to her gift. "It's okay," she assured him. "I love it. It's the most beautiful thing anyone's ever given me. Now put it on," she ordered, holding the box out toward him.

Dean lifted the bracelet out of the box and proceeded to attempt to fasten it around the wrist she'd held out to him. It took him a minute because the clasp was obviously not mean for a man's fingers, plus he was still pretty thrown by her reaction.

When he was done, Buffy held up her arm and inspected the charms for another long moment. "Thank you," she said as she gave him a rather salty kiss. "I'll never take it off."

"Good," he said, still sounding baffled. "Because, to tell you the truth, I'd planned on this getting me out of the dog house, not under it. You're kinda freaky."

"So are you," she replied with a smile. "Now let's go to bed."

The 'sleep first, sex later' plan didn't exactly pan out. Once they were in bed, one kiss had led to another and the nap had been postponed. It wasn't the most athletic or fiery encounter they'd ever had, but Buffy decided that it couldn't have been more perfect, and that wasn't just because she was tired and he was doing most of the work.

Dean had made love to her. There was simply no other term for it. It was slow and tender and his only goal seemed to be getting closer to her. It was the moment when everything clicked into place for her. This thing between them was right. She'd finally found something that fit. With Angel, his curse and the nature of his immortality had kept him from ever giving her what she really needed. It was the reason he'd left. She'd known that, but this was the first time she'd ever truly understood it. She'd thought she'd found it with Riley, but there had always been a wedge between them. For years, she'd blamed herself for that, but now she realized there was really no one to blame. They'd been from different worlds and they'd needed different things.

Dean wasn't threatened by her in the way Riley had been. She believed that was because he understood that this life wasn't about who was the strongest or who got the most kills. He teased her about that sort of thing, but in the end, they both knew that it wasn't a contest. The only goal was to survive and to try to hold on to the people you loved, even when it seemed like the world was determined to rip all of them away. Unlike her ex, Dean hadn't chosen this life. It had been chosen for him, just like it had been chosen for her. Both of them had lost everything to it and both of them loved it and hated it in equal parts. Most importantly, neither of them knew any other way to be. That was why she knew she'd be able to open herself up to him in a way that she'd never been able to do with Riley. She'd finally met her equal and she was finally able to admit to herself that she was deeply in love with him. She'd danced around that word, using every euphemism she could scrape up, mostly because she was scared of the implications. But she couldn't hide from it anymore and at that moment she was sure that he loved her too. Of course, she was Buffy, the girl of the massive baggage. She knew her insecurities would creep back up on her and she'd never be satisfied until he actually said those three words out loud, but at least for the moment she was secure.

A voice in the back of her head was telling her that something else was happening here, but she didn't know what that could possibly mean. It wasn't a scary voice, but it seemed to want her to recognize something - something significant, something she'd seen somewhere before. It was clearly just the crazy talk of a brain that had been way too overtaxed lately. She was tuning it out, the babbling Buffy-brain needed to hush. She was too busy concentrating on her perfect moment.
"So good of you to drop by," Crowley greeted sarcastically when he looked up from the male wraith he'd been interrogating to see a leather-clad brunette strolling into the room. "Faith is it? It seems you've been spending quite a lot of time in that skin," he remarked.

"I like it," the girl shrugged, "she has style."

"Yes, quite the tart, that one."

She didn't reply, but instead gazed down in distress at the mutilated body of the wraith that lay bound and gagged on Crowley's table. Unfortunately for him, he was still alive.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about him," the demon remarked with a dismissive wave of his hand. "As long as you keep to our arrangement, neither you nor your darling sibling need worry about such unpleasant things."

"Can I see her?" she asked hopefully.

"Of course," he agreed cheerfully. "After all, I pride myself on being a gracious host."

Crowley led the girl through a room filled with rows of cages holding various creatures, some of whom were in better shape than others. He paused halfway down the row and held out a hand to indicate their arrival.

The shapeshifter version of Faith that was in the cage cried in relief at the site of her twin. They clutched at one another through the bars, attempting to assure themselves that the other was well.

"See, I keep my word," Crowley remarked to the girl beside him. "Your sister's safe, sound, and warm as a fuzzy little kitten. I can't very well mistreat her if you're to be up to the job, after all. You're too connected to each other's pain."

The shifter didn't seem to hear what the demon was saying. Instead, she was focused on stroking her sister's hair and quietly reassuring her that they would both be okay.

Crowley cleared his throat. "As heartwarming as this reunion is, I'm afraid I must insist that you make your report. I'm a busy man."

Shapeshifter-Faith reluctantly turned to face the demon, but continued to hold her sister's hand through the bars. "I'm not sure what to tell ya," she replied hesitantly.

The demon rolled his eyes and sighed impatiently. "Why don't we start with darling Fluffy? What's the little bint been up to?"
"She had a fight with her boyfriend," the shifter shrugged. "He moved out for a week or two. Rumor was he went to Vegas and married Britney Spears, but she divorced him after like a day and he went back to Buffy after that."

"Really?" Crowley said dryly.

"Yeah," the girl nodded. "I don't believe that part though. If he'd really married Britney, it would be all over the TV."

"You think so?" the demon asked sarcastically. "For your sake, I hope you have something more revealing to share. Like, for instance, what's on the Slayer radar these days?"

The shifter chewed on her lip in worry before answering. "It's hard to tell," she began. "I can't get inside their headquarters, no matter who I look like. They've got some really heavy-duty mojo on that place. The best I can do is catch one or two of 'em when they're out patrollin' the streets at night."

"It's like pulling teeth," Crowley grumbled to himself. "What about the dreams?" he asked slowly, enunciating each word.

"They aren't having any dreams. None at all. It's kind of a big deal. They're all suspicious and stuff."

"Well, well, well, it appears Castiel can still get it up. Here I've been thinking he was the bottom of this relationship," he quipped before returning his attention back to the shifter. "So, the Slayers are suspicious are they? Tell me, what are they suspicious of?" Once again, he spoke like he was addressing someone who was extremely slow.

Shapeshifter-Faith averted her gaze to the concrete floor below her.

"I'm waiting," Crowley said impatiently.

"They think it's Mother," she replied reluctantly. "She's raised a wicked big army on the Hellmouth and they've been givin' the Slayers a bitch of a time... So, they're pretty sure she's behind everything that's goin' on around there."

The demon let out a short, self-satisfied laugh. "Excellent. I'm sure your dear mum would be delighted to know that she's been so helpful to my cause. I'd like to speak with her... thank her personally," he added menacingly. "You will let me know if the Slayers catch any real leads in that regard."

The shifter raised her chin and glared at Crowley. "I'm not betrayin' Mother," she snapped defiantly.

Crowley smiled benignly and reached through the bars to gently caress the cheek of the imprisoned shifter. "I can't force you, of course," he said genially. "Then again, you have to ask yourself who's more important. A mythical mother figure who you've never seen or your sweet sister here?" As he said the last part, he wrapped his hand in the girl's hair and wrenched her neck back cruelly.

"Okay, okay," the shifter standing beside him pleaded. "I'll do it. Just please don't hurt her."

The demon released his hold on the other girl. "I'm glad we can agree," he nodded as he casually dropped the chunk of hair he'd pulled loose. "Now tell me. What goes on in the brain of saucy, little Faith? I know you've been in that slut's skin long enough to work your psychic download. I can tell by that appalling accent you've picked up."

The shifter looked a bit sheepish. "Umm..." she began hesitantly. "She mostly thinks about this guy."
"More boyfriend troubles?" he bit out. He was beginning to get very irritated with this line of conversation.

"He's not exactly her boyfriend. She kinda wants him to be, but – ya know - she has these major intimacy issues. She mostly likes to stick to a sex only policy, but he's not playin' ball."

At Crowley's sour expression, Shapeshifter-Faith continued on hurriedly. "Honestly, I don't see why you're so worried about these chicks. All they think about is sex and man troubles. It's like Melrose Place with monsters."

"I'll tell you what to worry about you bloody little moron," he growled. "You'd be surprised how troublesome humans can be, especially the more daft ones. That sort doesn't have the sense to mind their own affairs."

"So, what do you want me to do?" she asked timidly.

"That's a good girl," he praised with a satisfied smirk. "What I want you to do is continue spying. If they start talking about black-eyed demons, possession, or anything else that might point to little old me - you tell me immediately. If they get any leads on your mummy, you tell me immediately. If they come up with any interesting theories that don't involve their fascinating sex lives, you tell me immediately. And I realize you've grown attached to that skin, but you're going to have to mix it up a bit. What I really want is the inner workings of Muffy's brain."

"I have to get close to her first," the shifter explained. "I'm not as powerful as my father was. I can't just change into anyone I've laid eyes on. I need to touch 'em. She's not been so easy to find these days," she added apologetically.

"Then look harder," Crowley demanded. "And while you're at it, have a bit of a laugh. Remember, these bitches are out for Mommy's blood. I, on the other hand, only fancy a nice chat. If she's reasonable, we may even be able to come to a mutually beneficial arrangement. So, create a little chaos if you get the chance. Use your imagination. You could even kill a few of them or you could kill their boy toys. That ought to knock them off their game. But don't show your hand," he warned. "Information is what I'm after. So, if you're going to snuff them, be certain you don't get caught. This is all just a shell game... some simple sleight of hand. I want them to keep their eyes on the worthless, little ball and completely ignore the man behind the curtain. Do you follow?"

"Yeah," she confirmed. "You want me to keep 'em busy... distracted."

"Very good," he replied with a smile. "Maybe you're not quite as thick as you look."

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"What do you think you're doing?" Buffy asked when she saw Dean sitting on the couch reading the newspaper with three open bags of candy in front of him.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he mumbled through a mouthful of Snickers bar.

"It looks like you're taking candy from babies," she replied as she snatched the bags away and directed a frown at the pile of empty wrappers lying on the coffee table. "You better hope there's enough left for the kids," she warned.

"Oh come on! I can't believe we're actually going through with this crap. I know civilians are pretty dense, but they can't be that stupid. They're really gonna take their kids out on Halloween night... here... on the Hellmouth? And you're encouraging this freak show by giving them candy? Seriously?"
"We've been over this," Buffy replied cheerfully. "The less savory Hellmouth residents take Halloween night off, so we're having a party and giving out candy. And you're getting the beer, because I have no idea what to get. It all tastes gross to me."

Dean sighed in defeat. "So how much beer should I buy?" he asked. "Who's coming?"

Buffy sat down beside him and paused thoughtfully before beginning to tick off names on her fingers. "Faith's coming. Xander and Allie will be here too, but no beer for Allie… Your brother, of course… and Megan from next door might drop by with her boyfriend. I asked Giles, but he said he was probably going home and going to bed. Oh," she said excitedly, "Will's bringing a date. She's only been out with this girl twice and she doesn't know what we do yet, so we have to pretend we're normal," she frowned. "We'll need cover stories in case she starts asking questions. I'm a teacher at a girl's school. What do you want to be?"

Dean shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose I can be a construction worker."

"No, that's Xander's cover."

"Well I refuse to be any of the other Village People," he grumbled. "I'll be a mechanic, I guess. So, who else is coming? What about -"

"Andrew's not coming," Buffy replied with a smirk before he could finish asking. "He's going to hang out at the school with Vi and Rona. They're entertaining the girls. Why do you let him get to you anyway?" she asked.

"Because he treats me like an object. You have no idea what that's like," he stressed.

Buffy grinned and shook her head. "You're right. I'll never understand your pain. Now stop being so grumpy," she ordered with a kiss to his cheek. "We're going to have big, wholesome, non-Hellmouthy fun tonight."

"Hey, I'm always up for some beer, but there's no way I'm wearing a costume. You can forget it, because it's not gonna happen," Dean emphasized.

"Fine, be a party pooper. See if I care. You'll just be a sad and lonely outcast. All the townsfolk will point and laugh at you and your strange clothing."

"Whatever," he shrugged. "And I still don't buy this 'evil takes a night off' crap. Fifty bucks says somethin' freaky goes down."

"You're on," Buffy said. "But when I win, I don't want the money. I want you to take me to the movies. Any movie I choose. I'm thinking a romantic comedy or one of those where the girl is dying and the selfish guy learns all about true love just before she croaks… or an ice skating movie," she added in excitement. "And there will be no mocking. You have to pretend to enjoy it. I may even require a few tears."

Dean snorted. "You mean you want to go to a chick flick? Good thing I'm not losing then," he grinned.

"We'll just see about that," she replied confidently. "So," she said, pointing to the newspaper in his hand, "What are you reading the paper for anyway? There's never any good news."

"I'm hunting," he said simply

"No offense honey, but you don't really have to do that. We can pretty much walk out the front door
and run right into something that needs killing. Homework is optional here. It's the beauty of the Hellmouth."

"Yeah, but you miss stuff that way," Dean replied with a cocky smirk as he flipped his fingers on an article in the paper. "Check this out."

"Veteran Cleveland Philharmonic Flutist Missing," Buffy read aloud. "Is that supposed to mean something?"

"Not really. But last week they lost their cello player and the week before that, this dude that plays fiddle for a traveling Bluegrass band just up and vanished into thin air. It looks like something's putting a band together."

"I know this one," Buffy exclaimed. "Eve wants her very own super-villain theme music."

Dean grinned. "Who knows? But I guarantee it's somethin' funky. Don't forget, you're talking to the world's greatest hunter."

"And the world's humblest."

Buffy paused before opening the bathroom door. She felt a little silly in her costume to be honest. She knew Dean loved westerns, so she'd decided to dress as an authentic, wild west, saloon girl. The girl at the costume shop had talked her into the emerald green and white dress she was wearing. It was a little overdone if you asked her, but she guessed that was the way they did it in those days. It had lots of lace, a tight, corseted waist, and a really low-cut bodice. The dress was nearly floor length, but it was slit high up on her left thigh and she wore a frilly garter on that leg. She'd put her hair in a loose up-do with lots of tight spirals hanging down. She decided she looked like the old timey equivalent of a hooker.

"Are you ready?" Buffy finally asked from behind the closed door.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Dean replied with amusement in his voice. This whole Halloween thing was so ridiculous. If Buffy came out of that bathroom dressed as a ghost or something cheesy like that, he was going to lose it. He'd probably get his ass kicked for it, but he wouldn't be able to control himself.

"Okay then, close your eyes and don't open them until I say."

Dean shook his head and grumbled before closing his eyes as requested. "They're closed," he said.

Buffy stepped cautiously into the hall and stepped in front of Dean. "Open your eyes," she said hesitantly.

With a smirk firmly in place, he opened his eyes, prepared to laugh his ass off.

"Holy shit," he breathed with wide eyes. "That's freakin' sexy as hell!"

"So, you like?" she asked with a happy smile.

"Yes ma'am," he answered enthusiastically.

"I'm supposed to be a saloon girl. I think that's fancy, wild west talk for a woman of ill repute."

"That's my favorite kind," Dean grinned. He pressed her against the wall and started kissing her as
he ran his hand inside the slit in her skirt.

"We can't," Buffy said breathlessly. "Everybody will be getting here soon and you have no idea how long it took me to get into this dress. If I take it off now, I'll never make it to the party and that would be kinda bad since I live here."

"Oh, I don't want you take it off. I'll just throw up your skirts," he said with a wink. "I'm pretty sure that's how they did it back then. I'm all about authenticity baby."

"You're kinda kinky," she said with a grin.

"You have no idea," he assured her as he reached further up her skirt, only to have his progress halted by the doorbell. "Son of a bitch," he grumbled.

"Sorry cowboy," Buffy said sympathetically before pressing a quick kiss on his lips. "Looks like you'll have to wait until the saloon closes, because our guests are arriving. Will you get the door?" she asked. "I want to put a few finishing touches on my makeup."

"Yeah," he griped. "I know who it is anyway. It has to be Sam. He's the only one lame enough to show up on time."

Dean was surprised when he opened the door to see Xander and Allie instead of his brother. Allie wore a blue dress, had her hair in pigtails, and was carrying a stuffed, toy dog. She was obviously Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. Xander was wearing camouflage pants and an olive green T with the words 'Army Ranger' stamped across his chest.

"Let me guess," Xander said. "You're the amazing flannel-guy."

Dean smirked and stood back to let the couple enter. "I don't do costumes," he said.

Before he shut the door, he saw his brother coming up the walkway. He'd almost been right about Sam being the first to arrive.

"Hey look!" Xander exclaimed. "It's the amazing flannel-guy's brother… the other flannel-guy. I can't believe you two are leaving me out in the cold. Please tell me Buffy has a costume."

"Oh yeah," Dean confirmed with a grin.

Once they'd taken a seat, Xander looked around cautiously before asking, "Where is the Buffster anyway?"

"Upstairs," Dean replied. "She should be down in a minute."

Xander leaned forward in his seat and spoke almost in a whisper. "I'm going to tell you guys something, but if you repeat it, I'll act like I've never met you. I swear man. I will throw you under the bus."

"Okay," Sam replied with an amused grin.

Xander looked around once again to confirm the coast was clear before speaking. "I just wanted to let you in on a little secret. This Halloween is evil free theory - it's a big bunch of hooey. Something always happens. It's usually a little out of the ordinary and a lot of times caused by a person working a spell or something, but don't be fooled. It's never the peaceful evening it's advertised to be."

"That's not true," Allie scoffed. "Nothing weird happened last year."
"That was just a freaky outlier," Xander replied. "The proverbial exception that proves the rule. It doesn't count."

"So, what should we look out for?" Dean asked.

"That's the problem. You never know till it happens. One year we all got turned into our costumes, which is why I'm army guy. But this time," he said as he pointed to his t-shirt, "I've given myself a promotion. Special Forces, baby. I'll pick up some mad skills. I just hope flannel-guy has some special powers too."

Dean lifted up his shirt to reveal a large knife sheath that was hooked to his belt.

"What about you?" Xander asked Sam.

"I've got one too," Sam confirmed. "Plus I've got a wooden stake. It's not a good idea to walk around here without one."

"Okay then," Xander nodded. "We might make it through the night. Just remember, you have to pretend like nothing's going to happen. Buffy and Willow have an irrational belief in the sanctity of Halloween. Trust me, they'll get all cranky if you contradict them. Even Giles is in on it and he's usually logic-guy. You don't know how dangerous that type of radical believer can be. So, don't cross them. Just be quiet and be ready."

"We're always ready," Dean stated nonchalantly. "Hunters are the most paranoid people outside of your average loony bin. Actually," he shrugged, "I know at least one that is in a loony bin. So, we're cool. We've got paranoia covered."

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Faith had decided that she really wanted to see Sam. She hadn't talked to him since he'd laid that crazy story on her and that had been several days ago. She still wasn't sure how she felt about this 'real relationship' thing he'd mentioned though. That massively freaked her out, but she still had an overwhelming desire just to see him. Plus, she really wanted to blow his mind with her costume.

She'd wanted to be something sexy. In that pursuit, she'd considered and discarded the French maid, the lady pirate, and the naughty nurse costumes. She hated dresses and skirts. The biker babe outfit had been cool, but it was too much like her usual style. She wanted something different from what she usually wore, something that would stand out. It was Halloween after all.

So, after tons of angst and many wardrobe changes, she'd finally settled on one of the pinup girl costumes. It was what she considered to be a one-piece, short shorts set, however, the lady at the costume shop said it was what passed for a swimsuit back in the day. Who knew? Anyway, at least it wasn't a skirt. It was black and white polka dots, however, and that was so not her style. She also had on red high heels and her hair was kind of big and done up in huge waves. The only thing she was comfortable with was the bright red lipstick. She was on the verge of changing into her standard leather uniform when Willow arrived to give her a ride. She considered hiding and pretending she wasn't there, but decided that would be pretty rude, especially since she knew Willow had brought a date and probably hadn't been looking for a tagalong anyway.

So, she put on her longest leather jacket and answered the door to her hotel suite. Willow waved happily at her when she opened the door. The redhead was wearing a bee suit with black letters attached randomly to the front and back.

"I'm a spelling bee," she announced. "What are you?"
Faith sighed and opened up her jacket so Willow could see her costume.

"Wow, Faith that's… Wow! I hardly recognize you."

Faith groaned. "I know. It's stupid. If you'll give me five, I'll go change."

"Why?" Willow asked. "You look great! You should totally go with it. You're not supposed to look like you on Halloween. That's the whole point. Besides, you're a total bombshell, like one of those old World War II pinup girls. I'm sure all the troops will be salutin'," she added and then blushed when she realized how that statement could be interpreted. "I didn't mean… well, you know…"

"Ya think?" Faith asked hopefully.

"If that's what you're goin' for," Willow confirmed.

"So I don't look like a big, sissy loser?"

"Nope. No sissies and losers here. Just strong and sexy."

Faith beamed a huge smile at Willow. "Very cool."

On the ride over, it took Faith about five minutes to decide she didn't like the chick Willow had brought. She was a know-it-all who liked to go on and on about crap like positive energies and organic foods in a really superior way. She clearly had no idea what the hell she was talking about. Hopefully, Willow wouldn't keep her around for long, because she made her nauseous.

When they arrived, Faith could feel her pulse pounding in her throat. Sam was already there and sitting on the couch beside his brother. He looked a little embarrassed to see her, probably because of their last meeting. In fact, his cheeks were actually a little flushed. She took a deep breath and pulled off her coat and passed it to Buffy, who gasped and told her how sexy she looked. Faith thanked her casually and forced herself to hold her shoulders back and pretend that she wasn't at all self-conscious. She took a peek at Sam out of the corner of her eye and he appeared to be highly focused on her, so that was a confidence booster.

"Check it out Sammy," Dean said with a sharp elbow to his brother's side. "She's pullin' out all the stops this time. I think she wants to take advantage of you dude. You better watch yourself."

"Damn her," Sam said under his breath. Faith seemed determined not to make things easy for him.

Dean shook his head at his brother. "What's wrong with you? Don't tell me you're saving it for marriage."

"Shut up, Dean," he replied tightly.

"Suit yourself," his brother replied.

Sam jumped up from his seat and offered the couch to Willow and her date. He then stood uncertainly in the middle of the living room floor trying to decide what the hell to do with himself. He finally sunk into the recliner and pretended to be studiously reading the label on his beer bottle. He was startled when he realized Faith had snuck up beside him and perched herself on the arm of the couch.

"So how's the plan for world domination goin'?" she asked.
Sam stared back curiously at her for a second as if he was trying to gauge her mood. He finally smiled.

"Still trying to work the kinks out," he replied with a short, self-conscious laugh.

Faith grinned back at him and winked. "Let me know when you do," she said. "I want in."

"You're signing on to be a minion?" he asked with a curiously raised brow. *Man, her legs looked good.*

"**Hell no.** I plan on stabbing you in the back and stealin' all the glory for myself. I'm the type of evil genius that likes to let other people do all the homework."

Sam smiled and shook his head in disbelief. He really hadn't expected Faith to ever want to talk to him again, much less joke around about that kind of thing.

"Thanks for the heads up," he replied.

Faith returned his smile. Sam had such a great smile. That was something she really liked in a man, even though most people would probably never believe that something like that was even on her radar.

Dean quirked an amused eyebrow at his younger brother and then vacated the couch himself. He had no idea what to say to Willow and that chick she'd brought with her, so he decided to play the host. It would make Buffy happy and give him something to do besides trying to make awkward conversation.

"So you ladies want a beer?" he asked the couple.

"Why not," Willow replied cheerfully. "It's a holiday. What about you?" she asked the other girl, who she'd recently introduced as Karma.

"Do you have anything organic?" Karma asked.

Dean paused for a moment and glanced down at the bottle of PBR he was holding. Was there even such a thing as organic beer?

"You know what," he said, putting on his con-man smile. "I sure do. I don't have a lot of it, because it's really expensive microbrew, but I'll be happy to pull some of my private stash out for you. I'm all about keeping the guests happy."

Willow groaned internally. What the hell was he trying to pull?

When Dean returned with both a bottle and a mug of beer, Willow immediately knew what he'd done. He'd poured PBR into a mug and was going to try and pass it off as some fancy microbrew. Surely Karma wasn't dumb enough to fall for it.

Willow's date accepted the mug and thanked Dean before taking a sip. "It's wonderful," she said with a sigh. "I can always tell the difference between organic microbrew and the mass-produced beers."

Dean managed to keep a straight face as he agreed that there was simply no substitution. Willow was just blown away.

"Uh, excuse me for a minute," she said. "I should see if Buffy needs a hand in the kitchen."
"Need some help?" Willow asked as she approached the stove where Buffy was working on making some popcorn.

"I've got it covered," she replied. "But you can keep me company while I wait for the popping. I require constant entertainment."

"I got a pretty entertaining apology from your boyfriend yesterday," Willow replied. "He said, 'Hey Willow, sorry I was such a douche nozzle'."

"I'm sorry Will," Buffy groaned. "I guess that's probably the grossest apology since... well, pretty much ever. But on the positive side, he did it on his own. I didn't tell him to. I mean, I wanted him to, but I didn't think it would mean much if I forced him."

"It's okay," she replied with a small smile. "Horribly disgusting and inappropriate or not, it was an apology. So, I'm going to be optimistic and see this as a turning point in our relationship. I predict that any day now, Dean will wake up and think 'wow, that Willow is one super cool girl'."

"He should," Buffy agreed with a nod, "because you are. You're the very best Willow there is. But if he does get smart again," she added sternly, "you better let me know, because the offer to break all of his bones still stands. I love him, but I won't let him be a big meanie."

Willow grinned and nudged her friend playfully. "Oh, so we're pulling out the big four-letter word now?"

"Shhh," she warned sharply. "It's the big, secret, four-letter word. He has to say it first."

"Gotcha," Willow nodded. "Consider these lips sealed." She paused for a moment and then asked quietly, "So, what do you think of Karma?"

"She's pretty," Buffy remarked. "She's supposed to be dressed as a gypsy I guess?"

"Actually no," Willow frowned. "She always dresses like that. She's real new age-y, but I haven't figured out if she's for real or just a wannabe. I'm starting to lean toward the wannabe," she admitted reluctantly. "She likes to talk about witchcraft and stuff, but I'm afraid she's the type that might flip if she actually saw any real magic. It's so hard to find a genuine person these days," she pouted.

"Yep," Buffy agreed sympathetically. "Us genuine weirdos are in short supply."

"You said it," Willow replied. She munched on a nearby bowl of chips for a moment as she watched Buffy pour the popped kernels into a large bowl. As she did so, the light caught on her charm bracelet.

"Ooh!" Willow exclaimed excitedly. "I didn't notice that one before," she said as she pointed to one of the dangling charms.

"Oh yeah," Buffy said as she gazed down at the charm her friend was pointing to. "I'm not sure what it means. I mean, obviously, its three moons, but I'm not sure why that's significant or what it's supposed to protect me from. Do you know?"

"Well, that one's not really a protection charm," Willow explained. "It's more of a symbol. It represents The Goddess. Whoever owned this bracelet before you must have been a fan."

"What Goddess?" Buffy asked curiously.
"Some people call her the Great Goddess or the Triple Moon Goddess. She's a big cheese in Wicca, but she's also important in a bunch of other neo-pagan religions too."

"Is she good?"

"Yes and no. Technically, she's neither good or bad. Basically, she just represents the natural order – the maiden, the mother, and the crone. Look," Willow said as she lifted Buffy's wrist and pointed to the charm. "This first moon is the waxing moon, it represents the virgin. She's the new and the pure and all that good stuff. It's the beginning of the cycle. The full moon in the middle represents life and obviously motherhood, because see – *big, round baby-bump*. The last one is the waning moon. It represents the crone, who's usually frowned upon. She stands for endings and death, but on the other hand she also means wisdom and even magic. Crones are depicted as ugly, mean, old witches in folklore, so they get a really bad rap, but if you look at it objectively, she's just the ending of a natural cycle," she shrugged. "It always starts over again. Just like the lunar cycle. Anyway, lots of folks believe that she's always been around and that she's gone by many different names all over the world. You could call her the original holy trinity." Willow paused for a breath before continuing, she was obviously excited about the topic. "Sometimes she's represented by three goddesses and other times there's just one that embodies the properties of the three, but it's the same concept. For example, the Greeks had three - Kore, Persephone, and Hecate. But the Hindus only have the one. They call her Shakta. Sorry for the ramble," she added self-consciously. "I get a little carried away about that sorta thing."

"No, it's actually really interesting," Buffy said seriously. "There's something familiar about all of that. It seems like I've seen this symbol before."

"I have a t-shirt," Willow offered.

"That might be it," she replied.

"Probably," Willow agreed. "Well, guess I better get back to the party before Dean starts feeding Karma organic, fair-trade Cheetos."

"Huh?"

Willow just shook her head. "Don't ask."

BUFFY

Buffy was really happy with the way the night had gone. A couple of days ago, she'd been lonely and miserable and now Dean was back and she was having a fun night off with her friends. It was a double bonus. Plus, Dean was being completely adorable. He'd really gotten into the job of giving out candy to the trick-or-treaters. She'd finally just let him take over. He seemed to get a big kick out of teasing the kids and giving them pointers on making their costumes more authentic. He'd even given a few to-go beers to some of the younger fathers.

"I can't believe Dean's so into this," she remarked to Sam when Dean had gone to answer the door again. "Earlier, he was acting like the Grinch."

Sam shrugged. "Yeah, you never know about him. I guess this whole scene's new to both of us. Halloween wasn't exactly a holiday we celebrated… Not that we really celebrated any holidays."

"That's terrible!" Buffy gasped in horror. "You mean you never went trick-or-treating?"

"You know," Sam said thoughtfully. "I'd almost forgotten, but Dean did take me one year. Dad was out of town, because he'd have killed Dean for it if he'd known. I was in first or second grade and he
put a motel sheet over my head and cut out eye holes. I got an entire pillowcase full of candy that night. It was actually really fun until I ate so much that I puked."

"That's sweet," Willow said. "Not the puking part, of course, but the fact that Dean took his little brother out on Halloween is really cute."

Sam grinned. "Well, we finished the night by smashing a bunch of jack-o-lanterns and egging the principal's house. Dean's idea, of course. I liked the principal."

"Nerd," Faith teased with a shove to his leg. She was sitting on the floor with her back resting against the edge of the recliner Sam was sitting in. He'd offered her his seat, but she'd said 'no' because she decided she'd rather force him to look down her top all night. It was working too, he was all wound up. He didn't seem to know what to do or where to direct his eyes. She'd eventually wear him down if it was the last thing she did. It was her new mission in life.

Dean returned to the living room with a mostly empty bowl of candy.

"It's nine thirty," he said. "All the kids need to be in bed. So, I'm eating the rest of the candy."

"Dean," Buffy scolded. "That's just mean! What are you gonna do if more show up?"

"You've got a bag of apples in the fridge. They can have those."

"Man that's just wrong," Xander remarked as he reached into the bowl and grabbed a handful of candy for himself. "I hated the apple givers. They were just asking for a big, flaming bag of dog poo."

Buffy shook her head at Xander, who was busy stuffing candy in his mouth. "You're one to judge," she said dryly.

"Well, Dean's right. It's too late for kids to be out. There was a thirty minute dry spell between the last two groups. So, I don't think anybody else will come... And if they do, they'll learn a valuable life lesson."

"I'm sorry Allie," Buffy remarked. "Your poor child."

Allie nodded her agreement. "Sad, isn't it?"

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Trick-or-Treating did appear to be over for the evening, because the door bell had stopped ringing. Xander declared it movie time since he'd brought an assortment of horror films with him. They watched the original Dawn of the Dead first. It was cheesy and the effects were dated, but it was still a fun choice. However, Buffy had to remind herself that they shouldn't be so technical in their commentary. Willow's date was starting to look at them like they were axe murderers.

When the zombie film was over, Xander decided to put in the remake of House of Wax. Dean had griped about that choice, saying that the originals were always best and he didn't want to watch a Paris Hilton movie. He was sort of pacified when Buffy told him that she was pretty sure Paris died a horrible, gruesome death.

"Dude!" Dean exclaimed as he pointed at the screen. "That's Sam."

"What are you talkin' about?" his brother asked. "That guy looks nothing like me."
Dean started laughing. "That's you! That's little Sammy. Maybe five, six years ago when you were still all skinny and gangly. You know, back when you were kinda cute and kinda ugly? Like a baby moose."

Sam gave his brother the finger. "Just shut up. You're talkin' out of your ass. He doesn't look like me."

Everyone in the room looked a little sheepish except Xander who declared the resemblance uncanny.

"Yeah right," Sam said with an eye roll. "What do you think Faith?"

"Looks nothin' like you," she stated quickly.

"See!" Sam said to his brother.

"Yeah, that's convincing," Dean replied sarcastically. "I just hope Paris gives you a pity lay before you get turned into a giant wax dummy. I don't want to see little Sammy die a virgin. Horror's one thing, but that's just tragic."

"Fine Dean. If that's how you wanna be, why don't we talk about the time Paris Hilton kicked your ass?"

Faith laughed. "Now this, I've gotta hear."

"Yeah sweetie," Buffy said. "I'm intrigued. Why don't you share with the class?"

Dean started to open his mouth, but caught a glimpse of Willow's date and realized he couldn't exactly tell the truth. "It wasn't really Paris," he grumbled, "and she didn't kick my ass anyway."

"Not how I remember it," Sam smirked.

"Why don't you bite me?"

"Is that the best you got?" Sam challenged with a grin.

Dean grinned back at his brother. "Trust me, little girl. You can't handle the hard stuff. I don't wanna make you cry in front of all these people." He glanced at Faith when he said the last part.

Sam started to respond, but the unmistakable sound of flapping wings made him pause.

Castiel was standing in the middle of the living room, seemingly oblivious to the scream of horror coming from Karma and the flying bowl of popcorn Xander had launched into the air. Once Karma's scream had died out, the room became completely silent as all eyes focused on the angel.

"Hello Dean," he said calmly before turning and nodding at his brother. "Sam," he added.

"Cas," Sam echoed back.

"Oh no, no, no!" Buffy exclaimed. "This doesn't count."

Both Castiel and Dean looked at Buffy curiously.

"Huh?" Dean asked.

"This doesn't count," Buffy repeated. "You cheated. You set this up so that something weird would happen on Halloween, but I'm way ahead of you. You're a schemer and a cheater, which makes you
a huge loser. Now you'll have to take me to see a chick flick every weekend until the end of time.”
She then turned her gaze on Castiel. "You should be ashamed," she scolded. "Don't you angels have
better things to do than go around helping sneaky guys play tricks on their girlfriends?"

"Angel?" Xander croaked out. "Does that mean Dean isn't going to stab it with the big, scary knife?"

"I don't understand," Castiel replied to Buffy, completely ignoring Xander's presence. "I am here to
speak with Dean."

"What's up Cas?" Dean questioned.

"Can we speak privately?"

The doorbell rang before Dean was able to reply. "What the hell?" he said. "It's almost midnight.
These little bitches are getting apples," he declared. "Just give me a minute," he said to Cas before
heading toward the kitchen.

"You know what buddy," Xander remarked. "I don't buy this angel story. If you really were an
angel, you wouldn't stand there and let Dean perpetrate one of the greatest evils a child could ever
experience. Do you know how disappointing it is to be expecting chocolate and get lame, healthy
fruit instead? Besides, they're always all mushy and bruised by the time you get home."

Castiel stared at Xander curiously for a moment. "You do not make sense," he finally stated.

Dean returned from the kitchen, triumphantly holding up the bag of apples and grinning
mischievously. As he was answering the door, Castiel's gaze fell on Faith.

"You are Faith," he remarked. "The last of the original Slayer line."

"Uh… yeah," she replied hesitantly.

"You reformed your ways. I commend you."

"Umm… thanks?"

Sam watched the exchange curiously, but jumped in after Castiel made his next comment.

"You're dressed like a harlot," the angel stated.

"Hey!" Faith snapped.

"Dude!" Sam exclaimed. "That is not cool! You can't say stuff like that."

"It was just an observation," he replied calmly.

"Well, keep it to yourself," Sam frowned as he gave Faith a sympathetic shrug.

"I do not understand this holiday," Castiel remarked after a few moments of silence, during which he
appeared completely immune to the evil eye Faith was sending his way.

"Me neither," Sam sighed.

"Why would parents allow their children to dress in costumes and go door-to-door so that they can
be beaten by grown men?"

"You got me," Sam shrugged. "Wait… What?"
"Dean is beating on the children."

Everyone had been so focused on Castiel's sudden appearance that they hadn't paid attention to what was going on between Dean and the trick-or-treaters. Buffy, Sam, and Faith immediately jumped up and hurried toward the front door.

There appeared to be about six children in the group. Dean had moved out onto the front stoop where he had one pinned down and was viciously pounding on it with his fists. Another was hanging onto his back, pulling his hair and beating on his head and shoulders. Another was sitting dazed at the foot of the stairs. The remaining three were kicking at Dean and trying to push past him to get into the house.

"Dean!" Buffy exclaimed.

"They're not kids," he replied between blows. "I think they're midget trolls! The apples were a bad idea," he admitted. "They're really pissed."

One of the 'children' pushed its way past Dean and crossed the threshold into the foyer. It looked up at Buffy and grinned maliciously, showing rows of tiny, pointed teeth.

"You're no a trick-or-treater," Buffy stated accusingly. Before she could hit it, the creature stomped down hard on one of her feet and pushed her back roughly. It was surprisingly strong for its size.

An all-out brawl broke out in the living room as the tiny, troll-like creatures stormed into the house. Both of the Slayers and the Winchesters had their hands full just trying to get a hold of them. They were fast, vicious, and very destructive. Buffy's coffee table was the first casualty, soon to be followed by a shelf of knickknacks and photos. Buffy was infuriated by this and started beating on them with one of the broken coffee table legs.

The rest of the guests sat in shock, still trying to recover from the angel's appearance. Castiel stood in the middle of the room watching the action casually.

"Shut your eyes," he announced loudly.

"Do it!" Sam ordered. "Everybody, close your eyes now!"

Dean grabbed Buffy and shielded her face against his chest while he squeezed his own eyes tightly shut.

The light was so strong that it could still be seen through closed eyelids. It seemed like only a second or two passed before the room went silent.

"It's done," the angel stated.

Everyone opened their eyes to see the bodies of six, tiny, troll-like creatures scattered throughout the wreckage of the room.

"Hell yeah," Dean remarked as he surveyed the results of Cas's wrath. "Go Smite-y!"

"What the hell were those things?" Sam asked.

"They are known as trows," the angel replied. "They are a type of faery, although they have the temperament and appearance of a troll."

"I hate freakin' faeries," Dean growled.
"What were they doing here?" Buffy asked.

"They have a sweet tooth."

Buffy huffed in disbelief. "So you're telling me these things just wanted to trick-or-treat? Are you saying that if we'd just given them candy, they wouldn't have completely destroyed my living room?"

"That is likely," Castiel confirmed.

Buffy glared at Dean who shrugged and gave her his most boyish grin.

"I can't believe this!" she exclaimed. "You turned perfectly harmless creatures into rampaging little delinquents just because you couldn't stay out of the candy!"

"They weren't harmless," the angel interjected. "They have a habit of abducting musicians and forcing them to play for them until they die of exhaustion."

"Ah ha!" Dean shouted as he pointed a finger at Buffy and beamed a gloating smile. "Who's the world's greatest hunter?"

"Oh no," she groaned. "I'll never hear the end of this."

Dean was practically rubbing his hands in glee. "Who's the big loser now? I'll give you a hint. She's cute and blond and she owes me fifty bucks."

"Can we speak now?" Castiel asked, interrupting Dean's gloating.

"Sure," he replied with slumped shoulders, obviously disappointed that he had to stop flaunting his win. "We can step outside." Dean winked at Buffy on his way out. "We'll get back to this," he promised.

Once they were outside, Dean sat down on one of the steps. "What's the deal?" he asked.

"I wanted to tell you that I can find no evidence of demons on the Hellmouth."

"Yeah, we kinda figured that. How'd you find me anyway? Are the sigils on my ribs pooping out?"

"No," Castiel replied. "I just looked for Buffy Summers. I assumed you would be with her."

Dean nodded. "Okay, but do me a favor dude. Next time you wanna talk to me, appear outside and ring the doorbell. It'll work out best for all of us. Otherwise, you might see something you shouldn't."

"Like what?"

"Never mind. Just trust me, okay?"

"Okay."

"So, is that it?" Dean asked. "No offense man, but you really tripped some people out tonight. Some folks aren't used to your level of freaky."

"I do have other concerns," the angel stated. "I was wondering if the Slayer dreams had provided any further information."

"Afraid not. Seems they aren't dreaming at all anymore. Weird, huh?"
"It is interesting," Castiel agreed.

"So, you think that Eve chick is strong enough to do this? You think she could actually be blocking their dreams?"

"She is very old and very powerful. You need to be careful, Dean. There are forces in play that you do not understand."

"Wouldn't be the first time," he remarked. "So, why don't you enlighten me?"

"I'm afraid I cannot. I don't have the time to explain properly. I just want you to promise me that you and the Slayers will tread very carefully where Eve is concerned. If you obtain any new information on her, please pray for me. Don't make any moves until you speak with me."

"You want in?" Dean grinned. "No problem man. As long as you bring the super smiting along, you're invited."

"Good." The angel paused for a moment and looked Dean in the eyes solemnly. "Be careful Dean," he repeated once again.

Dean chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Thanks Mama Cass. You be careful too. Watch out for those ham sandwiches."

"What ham sandwiches?"

Dean shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I'll catch you later man. I need to get in there and help clean up that damn faery mess. I hate those fugly little bastards. Just remember - appear outside, ring doorbell. Are we straight?"

"Yes. Goodbye Dean."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I think 'trow' is a pretty weak name for a monster, but it is from genuine folklore (just ask Google, it never lies). Anyway, I completely fabricated the part about them liking candy, but the kidnapping musicians thing is part of the legend.
The chapter title (Double Vision) is a Foreigner song from the album of the same name, 1978.

Buffy had brought Dean along with her while she shopped for a new coffee table to replace the one those ugly, midget trolls had demolished. She was afraid he'd end up being miserable, but he actually seemed reluctant to leave the retail excursion behind. Of course, that was only because he'd discovered the joys of the vibrating massage chair the furniture store sold. He was in heaven and by the time she'd finished paying for her new table and arranging for delivery, he was also sound asleep.

"You sure you're done?" Dean asked with a yawn, his eyes at half-mast. "Cause if you wanna shop some more 'm good."

Buffy's face fell in disappointment. "Just my luck. You're actually offering to hang while I shop and I can't take you up on it, because it's starting to get dark out," she whined. "Happy, fun, shopping time is over and I didn't even get a chance to look at anything good. Furniture is boring, I need a shiny shoe fix."

Dean groaned and stretched before slowly hauling himself to his feet. He decided it was probably wise not to comment on Buffy's alleged 'need' for more shoes.

"Please tell me you bought this chair?" he asked hopefully.

"Sorry sweetie," she replied with fake sympathy and a pat to his back. "I don't think there's room in our relationship for the both of us."

"Don't be jealous," he teased. "I still need you. She doesn't give happy endings."

Buffy shook her head. "And the fact that you've actually given the chair a gender doesn't give me pause at all."

"Well, I sure as hell don't wanna sit on some dude and have him vibrate and rub on me," he remarked with a grin as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. "So, what's the damage?" he asked.

Buffy glared at Dean and set her jaw stubbornly. She'd already told him she wasn't taking any more money from him unless he allowed Giles to pay him. She had tried to be patient with his bullheadedness, but recently Sam had clued her in on how dangerous hustling could be and how incredibly stupid it was to do it without backup. According to him, both of the Winchesters had been in more than a few scrapes with sore losers over the years. Her favorite highlight was the time Dean got jumped by a group of outlaw bikers and ended up severely beaten (as in multiple broken bones and contusions beaten) and then dumped unconscious at the ER by some random stranger. So, needless to say, she was done supporting this particular brand of lunacy. It wasn't like he didn't already have an extremely stressful job that placed his life in danger every single night; there was no need to invite rowdy drunks to the party.
"I'm not telling you," she stated flatly before opening the door to the sidewalk a little too forcefully, causing it to make a loud bang against its frame.

Dean shoved a stack of bills into Buffy's open purse. "Fine," he shrugged, "you're taking this anyway." He seemed completely undeterred by her obvious irritation. In fact, he looked a little smug and satisfied with himself.

Buffy crinkled her brow in anger and had opened her mouth to let him have it when she spotted Faith walking up the sidewalk toward them.

"Hey Buffy," she greeted enthusiastically as she hugged her tightly around the neck and kissed her on the side of the head.

Buffy was a little surprised by this. The other Slayer wasn't normally that openly affectionate. "Wow Faith," she remarked. "What's the occasion? You even called me by my given name."

The brunette looked self-conscious for a brief moment. "Just glad to see ya," she shrugged.

Buffy smiled and shook her head curiously at her friend. "Ok then. I'm glad to see you too. So, are you out shopping?" she asked.

Before Faith could reply, Buffy's cell started ringing.

"It's Giles," she groaned. "Guess I better answer. Give me a minute," she said to Faith as she stepped a few feet away to take the call.

After Buffy had walked away, Faith turned her attention to Dean and gave him a very friendly smile (a little too friendly if you asked him).

He raised an eyebrow at her. "So, have you seen my brother around lately?" he asked.

"Your brother..." she stated thoughtfully, sounding almost like this was news to her. "You mean Sam?"

Dean looked at her like she'd been drinking. "Uh, yeah."

"Sorry," she replied with an awkward laugh. "My mind's somewhere else today."

"Obviously."

Dean felt distinctly uncomfortable when Faith took a long moment to allow her eyes to leisurely and appreciatively travel up and down his frame. "It's funny you mentioned your brother," she remarked finally. "We had a little discussion about you and Buffy last night. We were thinkin' it would be pretty hot if the four of us got together. Ya know... privately," she added as she licked her lips.

Dean just stared at her with an open mouth, thinking he must be imagining things, because she couldn't be suggesting what he thought she was suggesting. Please God No! Unfortunately, all doubt was erased from his mind when she placed a hand on his shoulder, put her lips against his ear, and traumatized him for life with a graphic description of exactly what the four of them could do together. The parts Sam had supposedly added were particularly horrifying. He'd never, ever be able to get the picture of his brother in that particular position out of his mind...never. He felt like poring bleach in his ears.

"Think about it," she said as she pulled away from him. "Sam's obviously in. So, you two just say the word and it's on."
Dean was way beyond coherent speech at that point, so he didn't even bother trying to reply as she winked at him and patted him on the cheek before quickly disappearing down the street.

"Where did Faith go?" Buffy asked a minute later as she stepped up beside Dean.

"Places to go, I guess," he replied in a distracted tone.

Buffy studied Dean curiously. He didn't look right. His eyes were wide and his face was pale, causing his freckles to stand out more than usual. Something had definitely freaked him out, because he looked like he'd just seen a ghost. Since Buffy knew he wasn't particularly afraid of ghosts, she was guessing it was something else. So, between Giles' latest agitated phone call and Dean's spooked expression, she reluctantly decided to put aside their preempted money argument until later. She could always slip the money back in his wallet when he wasn't looking. If he could be childish, then so could she.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," he answered quickly.

"Right," she replied skeptically. "Because I've seen your nothing face and that's not it."

"Trust me," he said. "You don't wanna know."

"Was it Faith?"

"She—," he began before shaking his head. "Just, never mind. What did Giles want?"

Buffy gazed at him a moment with raised eyebrows before replying to his deliberately subject-changing question.

"You know how the girls have been freaking out lately? Well – buy your tickets - because apparently it's even zanier than ever and now they've added slapstick for that special kind of fun. It's a full scale mini-Slayer meltdown. They're all trying to scratch each other's eyes out. Even Vi and Rona are acting wiggy. I guess we better drop by there, because I might have to commit some murder before I go slaying."

"Can I watch?" he asked with a grin. "Cause cat fights are hot." Besides, he desperately needed some new imagery at the moment.

"Sorry, no lingerie-clad pillow fights," she replied dryly. "There will be no hotness, unless you're a fan of ugly, ugly death. I'm telling you, I'm so beyond tired of all of the schoolgirl drama. If I hear one more word about people spreading rumors or telling secrets or stealing favorite hair scrunchies or anything else earth shattering like that … I'm going to scalp someone… with a spoon. A dirty, rusty spoon."

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As Buffy and Dean walked through the main doors of the Council, Rona slammed right into Buffy. She obviously couldn't get out of the building fast enough and didn't care who she had to go through to do it.

"Rona?" Buffy asked with a surprised gasp.

"She can have them," she snapped, "because they don't pay me enough to put up with this crap!"
"Wait a second," Buffy pleaded, obviously trying hard to be patient. "What happened? Who can have what?"

"Vi happened," she stated venomously. "According to her, I don't pull my weight around here. 'I never help her with the girls'," she mimed in a whiny, nasally voice. "So you know what? I'll go on patrol, but I'm not lifting one pinky finger to help her with those brats. Then she'll see how lazy I am. They can shove their drama down her throat for a change!"

Buffy sighed in frustration. "Vi actually said that stuff to you?" she asked doubtfully.

Rona folded her arms in front of her and huffed. "She wasn't woman enough to say it to my face if that's what you're getting at. But, believe me, it came from a reliable source. So, don't try to put a spin on it," she added with a jab of her finger and then stormed away before Buffy could question her further.

"See?" she remarked to Dean in exasperation. "We're trapped in Bizarro World. Everybody's been replaced by their evil twin."

He just shook his head. He had no clue what to tell her to do with all those crazy-ass, super chicks. It might be time to consider calling in the National Guard. Maybe there really was some truth to that rumor about chicks that live together all going on the rag at the same time. The idea was downright terrifying.

"Sam," Buffy exclaimed when she saw the younger Winchester heading up the hall toward her. "What the hell's going on around here?"

Sam was clearly frustrated. He combed his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath before replying quickly. "Kellie supposedly told Ashley that Marci was a slut and Ashley borrowed Kim's iPod when they were out on patrol and didn't return it, but she swears she didn't. Should I go on?" he asked with a defeated sigh. "Or would you rather hear about the fist fight between Chelsea and Kaitlyn? Allie had to give them both stitches."

Buffy practically roared in rage. "Now I've heard enough! Those girls better be ready, because I'm headed their way just as soon as I find the right spoon."

Sam watched Buffy's furiously retreating form for a second. "What's up with the spoon?"

Dean didn't reply. "Sam, we need to talk," he said seriously.

"About?"

"Look dude," he began, obviously uncomfortable with what he was about to say. "I know that people get into different things, but some things are just … well, they're just too different. For me anyway. But you do what you gotta do. I'm not judging. Just don't expect me to get involved and please don't tell me about it. You get me?"

"No Dean," Sam said slowly. "I don't get you."

Dean ran a hand down his face before clenching his fists in frustration. "Sam… the thing is… okay, you know I've done the threesome thing before and I'm down with kinky—"

"Whoa! Hold up. I don't really need—"

"But," Dean said loudly, cutting off his brother's attempt to interrupt, "I don't want another dude in
the mix."

"Okaaay."

"I know some people do and fine, whatever, but that's just not my thing. Plus, Jesus Sam, I'm your brother! I know that Becky chick and some of those other whacked-out fan girls get off on..." he paused, he could not say the word 'incest' in this conversation. It was just too much. It would simply have to be implied. "Dude!" he finally exclaimed instead. "This is the real world, not the internet. You've got to draw a line somewhere."

"Dean, what the hell? Where did-"

Dean held up his hand. "I'm not talking about it," he stated firmly. "You'll always be my brother and I support you and all that other happy sappy crap, but no, I'm not going there. So, get your freak on whatever way you need to, but leave me out of it... and Buffy too," he added sternly.

"You know what?" Sam asked as he threw up his hands in exasperation. "That right there... whatever the hell that was... was the very last morsel of crazy I can swallow today. So, I'm leaving. In fact, I'm going to the most monster infested part of town I can find, because I'm pretty sure those guys will be more sane than anybody around here. Later!"

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If it weren't for the fact that that evil fuck, Crowley had her sister, the Shifter would be having fun. Messing with the Slayers was actually pretty entertaining. Humans were so pathetic and predictable. All of them were horribly insecure and easily manipulated. She only had to cherry pick a few secrets and half-truths out of their heads and then put a bug in the right ear. It was simple child's play and yet it caused so much hilarious discord and chaos. She'd even gotten the chance to practice her preferred craft, which was larceny. Of course, what she'd been doing could barely be considered more than petty theft. She'd been stealing gadgets and trinkets, baby stuff like that. She was a pro, but still, it was always a kick to go back and do the simple stuff for a change. Before this nightmare she'd found herself trapped in, she and her sister had been working high dollar jobs all over the continent for as far back as she could remember. Bank robbery was their favorite and most profitable gig. It was so ridiculously easy when you could look exactly like the bank president and be in two places at once.

Until now, she'd never considered herself a killer, not really. Sure, there had been some unavoidable incidents over the years, but it had never been her goal. Tonight it was more than a goal, it was a mission. She was furious that she'd been forced into this situation and someone was going to pay. Besides, as much as she hated and distrusted Crowley, the demon had been right about one thing – the Slayers were obsessed with killing Mother. Maybe she was working for the enemy, but she could, at least, get in a few good hits for her team. Besides, she may as well go all out because she knew Crowley wasn't going to let her and her sister live. She'd finally accepted that much. The best she could hope for was to go quickly and painlessly. So, she'd do what he wanted, get a little payback for Mother as a bonus, and more importantly, she'd get payback for her father. Her poor, sweet father, who she'd watched die a horrible death at the hands of that demon and it was all thanks to the sorry, lowlife hunters who'd handed them over to him.

All her life she'd feared hunters. She and her family were always trying to stay one step ahead of their silver bullets and blades. And who were they to judge her? It wasn't like she was any worse than a lot of human criminals. No, she was just better. Now, after what had happened to her father, she hated hunters even more than ever. She detested them almost as much as Crowley and she'd picked up enough from the Slayers' heads to realize that the 'boy toys' were hunters. Today, she'd found out that they were also brothers, which made her even more determined to make them pay. They would surely appreciate what it was like to watch a member of their own family suffer. If not,
she'd find a way to make them appreciate it, especially since she could now get into the skin of the older one. But, she'd have to bide her time on that front. Crowley had made it clear that he was interested in the Slayers, particularly the lead bitch. So, to keep him happy, she had to be Buffy first.

Now that she was in Buffy's skin, the Shifter was on a little hunt of her own. From her psychic link to the bodies she borrowed, she knew all of the basic patrol routes. All she had to do was find one of the precious little baby Slayers and then she'd make her first strike. She hit pay dirt when she happened upon cute, little Kellie Chu. It seemed Buffy liked this one especially. She decided it was probably because the older girl felt a kinship to her. The teen was tiny like Buffy (a little smaller even) and she was also a California girl, who was obsessed with nice clothes and cute boys. Another bonus was that Kellie was bubbly, friendly, and very well liked in general. This meant that killing her would be an especially hard blow to the little Slayer clan. No one ever expects the sweet, peppy ones to get it.

"Hi Buffy," the young girl chirped in her cheery Valley Girl accent. She hoped Buffy wasn't still angry about the rumors she'd been accused of spreading. She looked up to the older Slayer and didn't want to disappoint her. Nobody else on earth could kick that much ass and still manage to look so stylish.

"Hi Kellie," the Shifter greeted behind the Slayer's annoyingly bright smile. "I like that braid," she remarked.

"Thank you," Kellie beamed happily. "I learned how to do it on the internet. There's this whole site that like teaches you all about how to do the coolest braids and stuff. *It's so amazing!* I could do yours sometimes if you want," she offered excitedly.

Shifter-Buffy walked behind the girl on the pretense of checking out her hair more closely. Then, she jerked the teen's head back by her shiny, black braid and slit her throat before the little idiot even knew what hit her. It was just way too easy. If they were all like this, she'd be able to pick them all off in no time at all.

Once she was sure the girl was dead and she'd left the chief Slayer a special message, Shifter-Buffy pulled the girl's cell phone out of her pocket and found the real Buffy on the speed dial. She didn't want to risk sending a message out on the radio, not while all the other Slayers were listening. She wanted to make sure that Buffy and only Buffy found little Kellie. That way the message would sting more deeply. The hunter's whore needed to see this for herself to fully appreciate it.

"Buffy," she said desperately when the Slayer answered (even though she was still in Buffy's body her voice was a perfect imitation of Kellie's). "I need you to come quick. I'm in an alley off of Patton. Please hurry," she begged with a choked sob before cutting the connection and casually dropping the phone onto the girl's lifeless body.

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The more Dean thought about it, the more ridiculous the things Faith had said seemed to him. There was no way Sam would have gone along with any of that. She was obviously just messing with his head… and *damn* had it worked. If she hadn't been so thorough in her descriptions, it might not have freaked him out so much, but that chick had one messed up and detailed imagination. She was way too much for Sammy. They needed to talk about how he'd better leave that crazy broad alone. He had to nip that entire situation right in the bud. Somebody like Faith was likely to go Glen Close on a guy's ass and the fact that she was also an insanely strong Slayer just made it even more disturbing.

Now that he'd cleared his head with a drive across town accompanied by the always soothing tones of AC/DC, Dean was ready to make some quick cash before he hit the streets. Thanks to those
Oompa-Loompa Faerie bitches he was down to his last fifty bucks. So, he'd picked a rather rundown looking bar that had a half burned-out, neon sign advertising pool. The place didn't look too promising, but he hadn't hit it before so that made it attractive. He was secretly starting to consider the wisdom of allowing Giles to pay him. He couldn't hustle during the day for one thing; there wasn't any money to be made. The main problem with doing it at night, however, was that it cut into the job. The other problem was that there were only so many pool halls in Cleveland. He was going to run out of fresh blood eventually. Their dad had warned them to never use the same crapper twice (and no matter what Sam said, that saying made perfect sense).

He'd finally found out that his brother was taking the Council's money. Sam had told him during a particularly self-righteous lecture about Dean going out hustling alone. He'd apparently been prepared for him to go ape shit, but Dean hadn't. It was different for Sam, he wasn't living with the head Slayer and he put up with those whiny teenage girls all the time. Honestly though, Dean was finding himself getting more and more sucked into all of that drama and the reasonable part of him realized he didn't really have a good excuse anymore. Most importantly, he felt like he'd proved it to Buffy that he wasn't trying to get a free ride and he guessed she was right about the Council money not being her money. But the truth was, Dean Winchester was a very stubborn man and damn proud of it. The fact that Buffy and his brother had dared to team up on him to demand that he stop hustling, made him all the more determined to keep on doing it out of pure spite. Those two weren't going to force him to quit, even if it did make sense. *Especially Sam.* That kid was worse than any woman ever thought of being when it came to nagging. So, Dean would keep on hustling and gambling until he felt he'd made his point that the decision was his own. Of course, when he finally did end up getting outnumbered by a pissed-off mark's friends and got his ass handed to him, it was going to be pretty damn embarrassing. He could always blame a phantom gang of fake vampires though. They were everywhere, which made them convenient scapegoats in the case of any unexplained broken bones.

Dean was twenty dollars down and ready to make his move and start winning when his phone rang. It was Buffy, so he asked the guy he was playing to hold on a minute while he took the call.

When he answered, he immediately knew that something wasn't right. Buffy's voice was too flat and also undercut with a barely contained rage. Something had gone terribly wrong tonight.

"What happened?" he asked anxiously in response to her request to come meet her.

"One of the girls," she replied distantly. She then took such a long pause that he wondered if she was going to say anything else. "It's Kellie," she finally said. "She's… I didn't make it in time. Just come, please."

Dean didn't try to get many more details from her, he figured he'd get the story when he got there and that was what he was concentrating on. The guy he'd been trying to hustle was smug and remarked that it was Dean's good luck that his 'old lady' had called him home before he could lose any more of his money. Dean vowed silently that he would come back some night and take this mook for every dime he had. Right now, however, it just wasn't important.

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Dean parked on the street and took off on foot to find the alley Buffy was supposed to be in. He could smell the distinct odor of human blood before he even rounded the corner. Instinctively, he pulled his pistol and kept it pointed at the ground as he walked.

Buffy was standing at the dead end with her back to him and didn't turn at the sound of his footsteps. He knew he'd been trained to be stealthy, but even so, there was no way he could sneak up on Buffy on a normal day. He said her name quietly to alert her to his presence. She turned briefly and then
went back to apparently staring off into space. As he got closer, he saw the young girl's body lying on the pavement in the middle of a huge puddle of blood. He didn't have to see her lifeless eyes to know that there was no chance she was alive. The poor kid was gone. He quickly surveyed the scene, noting that this was no vamp kill or anything else that liked to feed on their victims. Her throat had been slit. It was deliberate and judging by the depth of the wound, it was overkill. To add insult to injury, the twisted freak that did this had also buried the kid's own stake in her heart.

When he looked up, Dean realized that Buffy wasn't staring into space after all. She was looking at the side of a dumpster where 'Hi Buffy' had been written in blood. The sick son of a bitch had even dotted the 'i' with a crudely drawn heart and added a smiley face. What the fuck?

Dean could tell by Buffy's stance that she was one wrong move away from flying into a violent rage. He'd been there enough times himself, hell he'd like to go there right now. He approached her cautiously, because he suspected that if he touched her, she'd punch him without even realizing what she was doing. That was fine if it made her feel better, but he couldn't risk getting knocked out right now. They needed to get the hell out of there. The smell of blood alone was liable to attract all sorts of nasty freaks, plus there was the fact that the incompetent shits at the Cleveland PD might haul them in for murder.

"Buffy," he said softly, trying to draw her attention.

"I guess we should have a plan for this sort of thing," she observed in an almost detached tone. "I mean," she shrugged, "I knew this would happen. After all, I signed their death warrants when I sent them out on their own."

"Don't stay stuff like that. It's not true," he said gently, holding out a hand out to her. "Just come with me. I'm going to get the car and then we'll get her out of here. Okay?"

Buffy shook her head. "No, she shouldn't be alone."

Dean stood uncertainly for a moment. He couldn't force her to come with him, but was hesitant to leave her here by herself, even if it was only for a minute or two. She was too distracted and he was afraid something could get the drop on her in this condition. He finally decided that the best course of action would be to hurry his ass up and go get the car, so he took off at a run.

He backed the Impala into the alley, so that he could make a quick escape if necessary. In the trunk, he knew there was a ratty old bedspread stolen from some fleabag motel he and Sam had once stayed at. So, he pulled it out and quickly spread it on the ground, careful to avoid the puddle of blood. He had to walk in in the puddle to retrieve the body, however. There was no getting around it, so he just did it and tried not to think about what was happening. Seeing a dead kid was always horrible, but when you'd seen that kid alive almost every day for months, he was discovering that it somehow managed to be even more horrible. So, he locked it all away and went on auto-pilot. Right now, he just had to do what he had to do and get them the hell out of there. He wouldn't allow his conscious mind to register the fact that she looked all of twelve, instead of the sixteen or seventeen he knew her to be and he completely ignored that her body felt like it weighed almost nothing and that he was about to wrap this little girl up in a threadbare blanket from a no-tell-motel. He just couldn't go there. He couldn't even acknowledge that she had a name.

Before folding the bedspread over her, he pulled out that obscene stake and closed the girl's vacant brown eyes. He mumbled a 'sorry kid' as he laid her shrouded body across the back seat.

Buffy observed the entire scene with a wide-eyed stare of disbelief. She then climbed into the passenger's seat and waited quietly for Dean to get in and get the engine started. As soon as he turned the key in the ignition, the classic radio station that was dialed-in started into the chorus of
Van Morrison's 'Brown Eyed Girl'. Of freaking course that was what was playing, he thought bitterly as he quickly snapped off the volume. Whenever something horrible happened, he'd noticed that the radio suddenly seemed to have a really sick and twisted sense of humor.

Once he'd assured himself that they were in the clear and not being followed, Dean picked up the phone and quickly punched his brother's name.

"Yeah," Sam answered with a long-suffering sigh. He was clearly still irritated and not looking forward to another bizarre and confusing sex talk, meaning he was perfectly fine.

Dean felt a surge of relief. "Sam, some bad shit's gone down," he said with an uncertain glance toward Buffy. "I need you to watch your ass out there. Check in with everybody. Make sure they're all accounted for and on their toes. But..." he paused, "you won't be able to get... Kellie... and Buffy's with me."

"What do you mean, I 'won't be able to get Kellie'?" his brother asked with a hint of panic in his voice.

"I can't get into that right now," Dean replied gruffly. "Just, make sure everybody else is okay. I'll catch you up later."

"But Dean—"

"I don't know what happened Sam," he replied in anticipation to his brother's question. He knew he was being a little short, but he had a really full plate at the moment. He also realized that this was going to be hard on Sam, because he'd spent a lot of time with these girls and he knew his brother felt responsible for them. "I'm sorry man," he added more gently. "I'll call you back," he promised before ending the call.

Dean looked back over at Buffy after finishing his call with Sam. She was just staring out the passenger side window. He wasn't sure how to help her. 'Sorry' just didn't seem like an adequate word right now. Also, he felt certain that the rest of the night was going to be extremely long. Everyone would be looking to Buffy for answers and leadership. They'd want orders, they'd expect a plan. Like either one of them knew what the hell had just happened. She seemed to be psyching herself up in anticipation for it. All of her walls were up and he was sure they would crumble if he touched her. So, he decided to handle what he could for her and respect that she needed to keep it together for a while longer. That's what he'd want someone to do for him.

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Buffy had called Giles before they'd arrived back at the Council. She was matter-of-fact, yet clearly angry during the conversation. Some of the numbness appeared to be wearing off.

The Watcher was already out front waiting when they pulled in. He looked ruffled and grim with his uncombed hair and lined face. Dean was extremely grateful when he noticed that the man had a stretcher from the infirmary with him. Carrying the body on a stretcher would allow him to be a little more detached than he'd be if he had to hold the girl in his arms. Detached was good right now.

When he and Giles carried the body in, the halls were lined with the solemn faces of the fifteen virgins who weren't allowed to patrol. Since the dragon was gone, they were allowed to go out during the day, but patrol was still considered to be too risky. Dean was amazed at how fast news spread around there. Of course, that probably had a lot to do with Andrew, who was visibly crying and being practically held up by two of the young Slayers.
One girl asked Buffy a question and it was like somebody had suddenly opened the floodgates. Everyone started shouting questions at the same time, tears and anger in their voices. Dean found it impossible to separate one inquiry from the next, but the name 'Buffy' must have been repeated at least a thousand times. It was a freakin' nightmare. He knew these girls were upset, but he was ready to start throwing punches if they didn't back off and stop badgering her. Jesus! It was like some twisted parody of a parade as they carried the body to the infirmary.

Once they'd laid the girl's body to rest on one of the beds and returned to the hall, Giles attempted to call everyone to attention. They weren't listening to him, however, and if Dean heard the name 'Buffy' come out of one more mouth, he was going to start shooting. He started to say only God knows what when Buffy suddenly spoke up.

All of the girls quickly quieted down and turned their full attention toward her. This wasn't Buffy they were looking at, it was the Slayer. The girl had been pushed down and replaced by a deadly calm confidence. She was suddenly a military commander, promising swift retribution to the creature that'd caused this. The details she gave were limited, but she told the girls what they needed to know, which was that something was out there and it was out to assassinate Slayers.

When Buffy was finished, everyone was much more subdued and they allowed Andrew to usher them back toward the dorms, where they would inevitably be up all night talking and mourning. Dean was so relieved that was over, although he'd been highly impressed with the way Buffy had handled the situation. He was sure it was better than the profanity filled tirade he would have probably delivered if she hadn't spoken up first. Of course, she'd just have to do it again when the rest of the girls got in from patrol. He so badly just wanted to take her home and get her away from all these people, but he knew it couldn't happen. He'd just have to attempt to hold his temper and back her up in any way possible. He wished he could go hunt and kill whatever had done this, but he wasn't going to leave her here to face all the questions alone. Unfortunately, they had to do the tedious part of the job, which meant going over the evidence, doing the research, and coming up with an actual plan before they could start smashing heads.

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Faith had been working her usual routine, which consisted of slaying everything she could find as she made her way toward the general direction of wherever Sam was most likely to be. It was just a typical night. Then, she'd heard him on the radio and his voice sounded especially tense. He was checking-in with everyone, basically doing a roll call across the airwaves. He warned each of them to be extra alert. It didn't take a genius to realize that something had gone south. So, she pulled out her phone and called him. It turned out they were only a few blocks away from one another. They decided to meet in the middle so he could fill her in.

She was surprised when Buffy appeared from one of the side streets in front of her. Faith thought she was working the other end of town that night. Of course, if something hairy had gone down, her plans could have changed.

"Faith," she greeted with a friendly smile. "I'm so glad I ran into you."

"What's up B?" she asked a little distractedly. The scene seemed off. Judging from the sound of Sam's voice, something bad had gone down, but Buffy didn't appear too concerned. Maybe she hadn't been told, but then again, surely Buffy would be in the know. The street they were on was particularly dark, so she didn't notice the blood on the other Slayer's hands and clothes until they were very close.

"Damn!" she exclaimed. "That's an awful lot of blood."
"Don't worry," she replied with a nonchalant shrug. "It's not mine. I just ran into a messy kill."

Faith observed Buffy suspiciously for a moment, but was thrown off when her friend's shoulders suddenly began trembling with sobs. Whatever had happened, she'd apparently been thrown by it, which explained the loopy behavior.

"Oh God, B," she said, taking a step toward the other girl so that she could place a hand on her shoulder. "What's happened?"

It took a second for Faith's brain to admit that a knife had just been plunged deep into her gut. She attempted to push away with the hand she still had on Buffy's shoulder, but the girl twisted the blade and the searing pain made her powerless. She stared into her friend's eyes in utter hurt and disbelief.

Buffy smiled back at her cruelly. "Come on Faith, don't look so shocked," she said scornfully. "You should've known I'd have to do it again. You don't deserve to be a Slayer. You're trash and it's way past time I took you out. So, enjoy hell," she added cheerfully with a kiss to her forehead.

The Shifter started to pull out the knife as the Slayer began sinking to her knees. She decided she might need to stab her again to finish her off, these chicks were tough. Then, she halted when she heard a male voice calling Faith's name. It was one of those bastard hunters.

In a blind panic, she bolted in the other direction, leaving the blade sticking in the girl's body. She ran as far and as fast as she could with no idea of where she was headed. The first kill had made her too over-confident. She should never have gone after the more experienced girl. Faith had almost made her and now there might be a Goddamn hunter on her trail.

She had to get away and hope that the Slayer was already dead and that the darkness had prevented the hunter from getting a good look at her. In her trips into the Slayers' minds, she hadn't found any info on Shapeshifters. Apparently, her kind didn't cross paths with their kind very often. However, even though she hadn't been in either of the hunters' skin yet, she knew without a doubt that they would quickly put things together and would also know exactly how to end her. She needed to find a safe place and get out of her current skin before anyone else spotted her.
Out of the corner of his eye, Sam caught a glimpse of someone running up the street away from him. Aside from the fact that it appeared to be a woman, he wasn't able to make out many details. This had a lot to do with the lack of lighting, but it was mostly because he was focused on Faith, who was kneeling on the pavement, clearly in distress.

"Faith!" he exclaimed as he quickly ran to kneel beside her and supported her swaying form by bracing his hands against her shoulders.

She was holding her stomach with one hand and using the other to hold up a large, blood covered blade, which she stared at in confusion.

"It looks like the one I used to have," she remarked in disbelief, her voice rough with pain.

Sam regarded her anxiously. He couldn't get a good look at the wound due to the darkness and her hand being in the way, but from the amount of blood that was on the blade and seeping through her fingers, he knew she was gravely injured.

"My God, Faith! What did this to you?"

"Buffy."

"She's okay," he said quickly, clearly misunderstanding her reply. "She's with my brother. *What did this?*" he asked again urgently, but he stopped her before she could answer. "Never mind. We need to get you some help. Just hold on. I'll go boost one of these cars." He nodded his head to indicate several cars that were parked on the curb nearby.

As he started to rise, Faith dropped the knife and grabbed him by the forearm with a surprising amount of strength for her condition. When he looked into her face he saw panic.

"No hospital," she said.

"You *have* to go to the hospital," he replied impatiently. "This is way too serious for Allie."

She clutched Sam's arm tighter. "You don't understand," she said before adding hesitantly, "I escaped from prison. They'll send me back."

Sam's face registered surprise for a brief second, but he quickly recovered and continued in his attempt to reason with her. "*It doesn't matter.* We'll give a fake name. I'll even get Dean to make you an ID. We've done it millions of times," he assured her as he peeled her fingers away and rose. "Don't even worry about that right now. We've got to get you some help."

"Don't leave," she said with a note of desperation in her voice. "I don't wanna die alone."

"*You're not dying,*" he stressed, "and I'll only be a few feet away." He started to go, but after taking
in Faith's lost and vulnerable expression, he just couldn't leave her side. So he stopped and cursed in frustration before pulling out his phone and quickly dialing 911. "These guys better have their shit together tonight," he remarked through gritted teeth as he anxiously waited for the operator to pick up.

When the 911 dispatcher answered, he quickly and efficiently gave her the details the ambulance crew would need to find them, but she still continued to ask him questions. "There's no time for this!" he snapped impatiently. "Just send the damn ambulance and tell them to hurry the hell up!" he ordered before disconnecting the call.

Sam quickly peeled off the lightweight, brown jacket he was wearing and knelt down beside Faith again. She was still sitting back on her heels and now had both hands clutched tightly against her middle. Her position was fairly unsteady and he was afraid she might tip over or pass out and end up cracking her head open. That was the last thing she needed. So he eased her into a lying down position and placed the folded jacket behind her head. She groaned a few times, but allowed him to help her.

"Let me see," he requested gently as he pulled her hands out of the way and attempted to lift up the tattered and soaked remains of the t-shirt she was wearing. As he did so, Faith sucked in her breath sharply and moaned in pain. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice wavering in empathy. "I just need to see how bad it is, okay?"

When Sam got a closer look at her injuries, he felt his heart clench painfully in his chest. It was much worse than he'd feared. She hadn't received a simple stab wound. The blade had obviously been twisted as well.

"She gutted me good this time, didn't she?" Faith asked in a strained voice.

"I've seen worse," he said, trying not to think about the fact that the 'worse' that he'd seen hadn't been on anyone that was actually still breathing.

"You're a bad liar," she gasped out, the sentence ending in a weak cough, which obviously greatly increased her agony. Sam was horrified to see specks of blood appearing around her mouth and chin.

"What did this to you?" he asked with barely controlled rage.

"Buffy," she replied quietly, somehow managing to reflect a tremendous amount of hurt and betrayal in that one single word.

"Buffy?" he repeated, obviously confused. "What do you mean it was Buffy?"

Faith let out a short and pained laugh. "I mean, it was Buffy."

"Listen Faith," Sam said, trying desperately to keep his voice calm and even. "It couldn't have been Buffy. She wouldn't do this to you. It's not that I don't believe you. I'm sure that it looked like her, but it wasn't her," he stressed. "There are things that can steal a person's body or take their form. It had to be one of those."

"It was her," she assured him. "She knew... stuff... and she's done it before."

Sam wasn't sure how to process this information. How could Buffy have done this before? He really wanted an explanation, but didn't want Faith to waste her energy right now. She seemed to be getting weaker with every second that ticked by. Where the hell was that damn ambulance anyway? It felt like they'd been waiting there for hours. He took one of her hands, hoping it might give her strength if he assured her of his presence.
She squeezed his hand weakly in response before asking, "Sam, do you think a person can ever really be forgiven for taking a life?"

He stared at her with a perplexed expression, unsure of where she was going with this. "What do you mean?" he asked.

She closed her eyes and turned her head away before replying. "I've killed people," she admitted shamefully. "One was an accident, but the other... it wasn't... and no matter how sorry I am, that guy's still dead."

Sam gripped Faith's hand tighter. "Look at me," he said as he cupped her face with his free hand. "No matter what you've done, you're not evil. You deserve to be forgiven."

She shook her head. "You don't know that."

"I do," he replied firmly. "I've seen plenty of evil. I've even been responsible for some of it. So, believe me, I know what evil is and you're not it. Not even close."

"Buffy said..." she began, her voice trailing off into another painful cough. "I'm scared, Sam," she admitted in a raspy whisper as tears began leaking out of the corners of her eyes. "I don't wanna go to hell."

"You're not going to hell," he exclaimed sharply, "and you're not dying! So stop talking like that!"

He was really beginning to panic now. Faith's breathing was getting shallower and each word she spoke took more and more effort. It was like she was fading away.

He squeezed her hand tightly and turned her head back toward him. "Faith, open your eyes," he ordered firmly. "You can't do this!"

She did manage to open her eyes, but only halfway and she didn't seem to be able to focus.

Sam was about to give up on the ambulance and go hotwire a car when he heard the siren.

"You hear that?" he asked her desperately. "That's the ambulance. They're almost here. So, you just have to hold on a little longer," he said encouragingly, although his voice was wavering. Faith tried to open her eyes again and mumbled something unintelligible.

"Hurry up, hurry up," Sam chanted as he began digging through her jacket pockets. He had to make this look like a mugging, which meant no cash and definitely no weapons. Most importantly, if she did happen to have any ID on her, he needed to get rid of it quickly.

When Buffy and Dean burst into the ER, they spotted Sam sitting on one of the waiting room chairs, tightly gripping what appeared to be a cup of coffee in both hands. He jumped up when his brother said his name and hurried toward them.

"How is she?" Buffy asked urgently.

"We need to talk," he replied tightly, "away from all these people."

The couple followed him out of the large sliding glass doors and into the empty ambulance bay outside. Buffy started to ask another question when Sam suddenly spun and drenched her with the contents of the cup he was holding.
She just stared in shock at the large wet spot that was now on her jacket and used her sleeves to wipe at the droplets that had splashed onto her face and hair. "Was that holy water?" she asked in wonder.

"What the hell?" Dean yelled.

Sam pulled out his silver knife and held it up in front of him with a hard and determined look in his eyes.

"Put that away, Sam," his brother ordered. "Have you lost your freakin' mind?"

"Faith said it was Buffy," he replied. "So, I'm sorry, but I've gotta test her," he insisted firmly.

"Oh God," Buffy said, looking like someone had just knocked the wind out of her. "Oh God."

"Sam," Dean warned.

Buffy gathered her composure a bit and held out a hand for the knife. "Okay," she said evenly. "Just give it to me and I'll prove to you that I'm me."

"Sorry," Sam said with a shake of his head. "I'm not handing a knife over to a potentially possessed Slayer. I'm not that stupid. So, hold out your arm."

"Goddammit," Dean ground out as he pulled out his own silver blade and turned to face Buffy. He uttered a deep, frustrated sigh, unable to believe he actually had to do this. "Give me your arm," he requested reluctantly.

She immediately rolled up her sleeve and held out her right hand to him. "Don't worry about it," she assured him sincerely. "It's okay. Just do it."

The hunter part of Dean knew that his brother was only trying to take the necessary precautions, but he knew this was Buffy and she'd been through enough for one night. Plus, Sam had a crazy look in his eyes. There was no way he was gonna let the Incredible Hulk take a knife to his girlfriend, even if she was the Slayer. He cursed again before making a shallow cut on her forearm. She didn't even flinch.

"Are you happy now?" he asked angrily. "Or do we need to perform a full on exorcism right here in the parking lot? Because I guess an anti-possession charm and a silver bracelet aren't enough for you these days. Jesus Christ."

"Dean," Buffy said calmly as she placed a steadying hand on his arm. "It's okay. I know he's just doing what he has to." She then turned her attention to Sam. "If you need to do more tests, I understand. Just please hurry, because I have to know how Faith is."

"I'm sorry Buffy," he said sincerely as he lowered the knife he'd been holding and relaxed his stance. "It's okay. I understand," she assured him again. "Just tell me how she is."

Sam sighed and ran a shaky hand through his hair. "She's in surgery. It'll probably be a while. She was cut up pretty bad… her heart stopped in the ambulance." The last part was obviously hard for him say. "I was sure it was over, but they finally got her back."

"Faith's tough. She'll pull through," Buffy stated confidently. "She has to. She can't die thinking I…" She paused for a moment, obviously horrified by the possibility. "You don't know how terrible that would be," she finally added. "This can't be happening again. It just can't."
Sam observed Buffy closely while she spoke. It seemed there was something behind the things Faith had said. The two apparently did have some dark history between them, but he could also tell that Buffy was genuinely concerned. Whatever had happened in the past, it was obvious that she did care about Faith. He'd have to get the full story later. Right now he was too overwhelmed to hold any more information and Faith's survival was the only thing that really seemed to matter. He needed to get back inside in case there was any news.

"I almost forgot," Sam exclaimed as they were about to walk through the main doors again. "I gave the hospital a fake name," he confided under his breath.

This didn't faze Dean, it was standard operating procedure as far as he was concerned, but Buffy looked a little puzzled for a moment.

"Oh," she gasped suddenly. "I completely forgot. I'm so glad you did that. It would be awful if…"

Buffy trailed off and Dean raised an inquiring eyebrow at her. It sounded like Faith might just have a Winchester's reputation where the authorities were concerned. He'd have to talk to her about the benefits of being considered legally dead.

"So, does she have a cover?" he asked.

Sam looked a little embarrassed. "Rhonda Van Zant," he mumbled. "I was under pressure. It was the best I could come up with."

Dean grinned. "That's awesome dude. I'm impressed."

"Ronnie Van Zant got killed, Dean," his brother stressed. "It probably wasn't the best choice in aliases."

"Ronnie died in a plane crash," Dean remarked with authority, "and Faith wasn't anywhere near a plane tonight. Besides, the 'Gods of Rock' wouldn't be that cruel. That kick ass name alone is gonna save her. You mark my words."

Sam actually smiled a little and rolled his eyes. "Okay then. I guess if anybody's got the inside track on what the 'Great Spirit of Mullet Rock' is thinking – it would be you. So, you think you can hook her up with some ID?" he asked hopefully.

"I've got it covered," Dean assured him. "No problem at all. It'll be my masterpiece."

Soon, the three were joined in the waiting room by Willow, Xander and Allie. Giles had stayed behind so that he could call Kellie's family and be there when the rest of the girls got in. Dean had informed him that they were probably dealing with a Shapeshifter and since the Slayers didn't routinely carry silver weapons, Giles had ordered them all to come in from patrol immediately.

After several hours with no further word, Sam announced that he was stepping outside for some fresh air. Dean joined him since Buffy had her friends to keep her company. His brother didn't need to be alone and he was more than relieved to get a break from the always pleasant sounds and smells that made up a hospital ER. These places always made him twitchy.

"So, do you think the same thing got Kellie?" Sam asked solemnly after they'd both sat on the curb in silence for a few minutes.

"Probably," Dean nodded. "The poor kid didn't have any defensive wounds that I could see. It was
like somebody just snuck right up behind her. She might've been young, but she was still a Slayer. Nothing would've gotten the drop on her like that if she didn't think she was safe. Buffy's the perfect disguise for this son of a bitch," he observed bitterly.

"Poor Buffy," Sam sighed. "I can just imagine how she must feel right now. I guess I was a little rough on her. She's had an awful night already."

"It's okay Sam," his brother assured him. "It's been a long night for all of us. Besides, we both know it's easy to get fooled by some of these bastards." He paused for a moment before continuing. "I'm pretty sure I saw it in Faith's skin earlier this evening," he confided in a voice heavy with regret. "I shoulda known Sammy. She wasn't acting right. I just… I didn't think. I'm sorry."

Sam shook his head. "Don't start that crap, man. This wasn't your fault. You can't just go around sticking people with a silver knife every time they act a little weird. They'd lock you up, Dean. Besides, we're both paranoid enough as it is."

"Yeah, I guess," he replied, although he didn't sound entirely convinced.

"I just wonder how we're supposed to hunt this thing down," Sam remarked. "With everything that goes on around here, it's pretty damn tough to find one specific monster. All the clues sorta blend together after a while."

"I'm not worried about that," Dean stated with certainty. "It'll come to us."

"You're probably right."

"I know I'm right. That bastard didn't do this on its own. It's taking its orders from the queen herself. The whore left Buffy a personal message," he added through gritted teeth.

"Seriously? What kind of message?" Sam asked cautiously, obviously dreading the answer.

He nearly exploded when his brother explained about the note written in Kellie's blood. "She's dead," he promised. "I'm gankin' that bitch personally."

"You'll have to get in line," Dean said. "If she ever gets the nerve to show her skanky-ass face that is. Seriously, what's up with that? Aside from her army of freaks, tonight was the first time she's made a move since the dragon thing and that was over a month ago."

"True," Sam agreed thoughtfully. "It doesn't seem like she's been making much of an effort to get to her 'new and improved vessel'. I realize Willow's got some powerful spells on the Council buildings and all those girls carry extra charms now, but still, it's almost like she's not even trying. What is up with that?"

"You got me. But you know it's nothin' good. That type only gets quiet when they're planning something big."

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After what seemed like days, the doctor finally came to tell the group that 'Rhonda' had made it through surgery. Unfortunately, however, he said that no one would be able to speak with her for at least another eight hours. The surgeon was planning to keep her heavily sedated to give her body a better chance at healing. Much to Buffy's dismay, he used the term 'drug-induced coma' to explain the process. It was bad enough that something had stolen her identity and done this to Faith, but the fact that it'd also managed to put her into a coma of sorts caused her to literally see red. It didn't seem possible, but her bloodlust for the Shifter and the puppet-master it called a mother had just managed
to triple. If Eve thought she was going to scare Buffy away, she had greatly underestimated her, because the events of the night had only increased her determination. As far as she was concerned, Eve's actions had only ensured that her defeat would be swifter and even more brutal.

The fact that Faith had made it through surgery convinced Buffy that she would pull through. That was how things worked. If a Slayer survived the initial trauma of an injury, she would bounce back and her body would manage to heal itself. She didn't know if it was a Slayer bond or just experience, but she felt a deep conviction that Faith had once again beaten death.

Her concern now lay with how the other girl would handle the emotional aspects of this experience. The nature of her wounds made it obvious that this act was calculated to be not only deadly, but to also send yet another very cruel message. She just hoped that this didn't drive a wedge between the two of them. Although they had both seemingly moved on from their past, Buffy suspected that Faith's psychic scars were still hiding just beneath the surface. She just hoped that she would see this for what it was - a blatant attempt at psychological warfare.

Since it would be a while until they could visit with Faith, Buffy reluctantly decided that it was best to go home and try to get a couple hours of sleep. Eve had just made it abundantly clear that she wanted to weaken the Slayers. If Buffy allowed herself to become too sleep deprived she would only be playing right into that plan and she wasn't making that mistake. All of their lives might very well depend on her staying on-mission and at the top of her game. So, she would get at least two hours of sleep if she had to slam her head against a wall to do it. Dear old Mommy wasn't going to see one ounce of weakness from her. She didn't know it yet, but she'd just created her own worst nightmare.

Dean seemed relieved by the prospect of escaping the hospital for a while. The entire environment appeared to place him on edge, something that Buffy could definitely relate to. However, he was obviously reluctant to leave his brother behind and Buffy was a little surprised when he asked her if she'd mind if Sam came home with them. As far as she was concerned, it was Dean's home too and his brother was always more than welcome. Sam refused, however, claiming he just wanted to go back to his motel room and pass out. Meaning he was actually planning on sleeping in the waiting room. Sam, she was learning, was every bit as stubborn as his older brother. Once it became clear that he wasn't going to respond to Dean's reasoning, orders, or threats, the two of them caught a ride home from Willow. Dean left the Impala behind for Sam since Buffy's car was still parked in front of their apartment.

Both were anxious to get home and get out of their blood-stained clothing and into the shower. When they arrived, however, Buffy felt like she needed to let out some aggression first. She was wound so tightly that she literally thought she might explode into a million tiny pieces if she didn't get some of it out. She told Dean to go ahead while she went a few rounds with the punching bag that hung in the extra bedroom she’d turned into a shoe closet/weapons cache. It was obvious he was worried about her, but he went ahead and left her alone to take out her rage on the large, sand filled, leather bag.

The more Buffy punched and kicked, the more enraged she became. Usually this sort of activity helped her to focus her aggression and clear her mind. However, at the moment, it only seemed to be bringing more and more pain to the surface - pain that she didn't seem to be able to beat down, no matter how hard she pounded. The resulting frustration made her feel helpless and that only served to make her more furious. She hated feeling helpless and, at the moment, it was the very last thing she could afford to feel. Pain and mourning would have to wait. She had too many people depending on her. Right now, she just needed to lose herself. She had to distract her mind from the disturbing thoughts and images that kept playing inside of her head.

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Dean wanted a shower, but he needed a drink first. The truth was, he'd like nothing more than to self-medicate himself into oblivion. The only thing that kept him from doing just that was the fact that Buffy's night had been at least ten times more horrible in his estimation. The least he could do was stay reasonably sober. However, he felt like her walls would thank him if he took the edge off with one good, stiff drink. Besides, he wasn't looking forward to patching drywall and painting again so soon.

So, he sat down at the kitchen table and poured himself a decent sized glass from the bottle of Johnnie Walker Red he'd been sipping on for the past few weeks. It wasn't quite as smooth as the Blue Label stuff that Rufus had been fond of, but it was still some damn good scotch and it wasn't as insanely expensive. He'd bought it because he didn't feel right about bringing cheap, rotgut whiskey home, although he doubted that Buffy would even know the difference. The idea of it just seemed obscene to him for some reason. Plus, he tended to drink for enjoyment rather than numbness these days. So taste was actually a consideration.

He'd made it about two thirds of the way through the glass when Buffy appeared in the kitchen. She was sweaty from her workout and had a feral look in her eyes that he'd never seen before. Without saying a word, she lifted him up by his shirt collar and slammed him into the wall. He was wondering what the hell he'd done to piss her off so badly when she pulled him into a bruising kiss. This was new.

They'd most definitely done wild and athletic, but this time, there was a rough edge that hadn't been present before. Buffy's demeanor was demanding and almost desperate. It was intoxicating and Dean soon found himself being swept along in the rawness of it all. For a while, he was able to put the harsh realities of the night behind him.

They remained half-dressed, only taking the time to remove what was absolutely necessary. He was lying on the hard tile of the kitchen floor with his eyes closed, completely lost in the moment when he felt Buffy reach her release. When she stopped moving on top of him, he opened his eyes, intent on rolling her beneath him and finding his own, but what he saw stopped him dead in his tracks. Her shoulders were slumped forward and she had her face buried in her hands as she cried silently. He immediately pulled her off of him and scooted backward so that he was sitting with his back resting against the wall and Buffy was draped across his lap. When he wrapped her in his arms, she completely lost her composer and began sobbing against his chest. Dean felt his own eyes burning as he held her against him. The things she'd seen and been through in the last few hours just tore him up inside. He'd give anything to take it all away.

"I can't fall apart," she finally said, completely out of breath from the sobbing. "I have too many people counting on me. I have to be strong."

"You are strong," he assured her. "This crap has to come out one way or the other. You'll be tough when it counts. You always are."

Buffy's tears had tapered off now, mostly because she was completely physically and emotionally drained.

"How do you do it?" she asked. "How do you keep from losing it?"

Dean huffed out a short laugh. "With a manageable drinking problem and really fucked up dreams. Plus it never hurts to beat some ass whenever I get the chance."

"I guess we're both screwed up then," Buffy stated solemnly.
"You're not screwed up," he told her firmly. "With everything that went down tonight, you'd be screwed up if you didn't freak out a little. But you make a crappy dominatrix," he added teasingly.

"What?"

"Baby, you're not supposed to cry. It ruins the entire 'mistress of pain' vibe. It's just not convincing. Don't get me wrong. You've got the potential, but you need to work on your delivery… A bullwhip and a latex thong wouldn't hurt either."

Buffy gasped in shock and delivered stinging slap to his bicep. "I can't believe you!"

Dean chuckled and rubbed his arm. "Good job. I totally bought into that. No mercy, that's how it's done."

"You're awful," she scolded, giggling a little despite herself. He was so horribly inappropriate sometimes.

"That's right," he nodded. "I've been bad. I should be punished."

"You should," she agreed. "In fact, I should totally kick your ass for that. You're not supposed to make me laugh right now. It's not right."

Dean smoothed her hair back and pressed a kiss on the top of her head. "Too bad," he replied in a much more serious tone, "because I can't stand to see you so miserable. You don't deserve it. Nothing that happened out there tonight was your fault. You have to believe that. You've done everything you can to make sure those girls are ready and sometimes horrible shit just happens. There's no way you could've seen this coming."

Buffy leaned back so that she could look Dean in the eyes. "Thank you," she said. "You were really there for me tonight and I appreciate it more than you know. Especially what you did for Kellie," she added quietly. "I froze. I didn't know what to do."

Dean averted his eyes, clearly uncomfortable with the moment. "You knew her better than I did," he said dismissively. "It was a lot easier for me."

"You always do that," she observed sadly. "You don't know how to accept gratitude."

He didn't reply. Maybe she was right. But then again, he never said he wasn't screwed up.

Buffy sat silently for a few minutes, just resting in Dean's arms. In spite of the feelings of anger and grief that she knew were just waiting to resurface, right now her mind was blissfully blank. Exhaustion had won out. Her eyes were starting to get heavy and the thought of being clean and in a soft bed seemed very appealing. "I guess we should get that shower and try to get some rest," she remarked finally.

"Sounds good," Dean agreed, "because my ass is freezing. I think this friggin floor is made of ice. So, you better look the other way when we get up. Consider this fair warning. Because a man's junk wasn't meant to get this cold. I don't think you could handle the disappointment."

Buffy rolled her eyes and gave him a quick kiss on the lips before rising and reaching down to pull him up with her. She couldn't help but find it cute that he always managed to find some way to make a joke following anything that could be considered 'chick ficky'. It was usually something kind of gross, but still oddly comforting.

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"How do you feel?" Sam asked softly as he pulled up a seat beside Faith's bed.

"Ya know," she replied with a lop-sided grin. "I'm pretty sure I'm in some wicked-ass pain right about now, but I just can't seem to care."

"That would be the magic of morphine," Sam informed her as he returned the smile.

Faith studied him through half-lidded eyes. He looked tired and he had quite a bit of stubble going on. She'd never seen him like that before. He was always clean shaven. Plus, there was sunlight coming in through the blinds. That couldn't be right. She was completely disoriented.

"How long have I been out?" she asked curiously.

"A while," he replied. "It's two in the afternoon right now."

"No way. You're kiddin' me?"

"Nope, not kidding," he assured her. "You were in surgery for almost four hours and then they kept you knocked out for a long time after that. Altogether, it's been about twelve hours."

"Wow," she remarked in disbelief. "Guess I was pretty messed up." She paused for a minute, trying to get up the courage to broach the next subject.

"Was it really Buffy?" she asked, appearing afraid of the answer.

"No. It wasn't Buffy. We're pretty sure it was a Shapeshifter. Don't know if you've ever ran into one of those before, but they're really nasty. They can read the thoughts of whoever they turn into. So that explains why you believed it was her."

She looked completely stricken for a moment, but quickly covered it up. "Her thoughts then," she remarked in a flat tone. "I figured."

"Faith," Sam began earnestly, "I just talked to Buffy about what you said last night. About how you said she'd done this before. She told me what happened –"

"What did she say?" she asked defensively.

"She didn't say much," he assured her gently. "She didn't really wanna talk about it. She's pretty freaked and really pissed about what that thing did to you. You need to know something about Shifters. They like to mess with people's heads. They twist the truth. You can't take anything they say at face value. Buffy's been really worried about you," he stressed.

Sam believed this, but he wasn't saying it to take Buffy's side. She had Dean for that. He was saying it because he knew that it was important to Faith. She seemed to have a hard time believing that people actually cared. He paused for a moment, considering if he should deliver more bad news while she was still so weak. Everyone had already decided not to mention Kellie just yet, but he felt like what he had to tell her might have a lot to do with what was bothering her.

"It knew your thoughts," he finally added. "It knew how to get at you because it was in your skin too."

Faith looked shocked and sickened by this and Sam couldn't say he blamed her. He truly hated to even bring it up.

"You sure?" she asked.
"Pretty sure. Unless you remember coming on to Dean yesterday and telling him that I wanted to uh… do things with him. Really kinky things too, apparently. Thank God he didn't give me any specifics."

"Huh?"

"That was pretty much my reaction," he replied.

"Wow," she remarked thoughtfully. "Some night, huh?"

Sam shook his head and sighed deeply. "You have no idea. You scared the hell out of me," he scolded lightly.

Faith reached out for the hand he had resting on the bed. She was high as a kite right now. That could be her excuse.

"You're just a sap," she remarked with a smile. "You oughta know I'm too tough to die."

"Looks like," Sam agreed as he squeezed her hand gently.

"You better believe it. And I can still kick your ass too. I can't believe you named me 'Rhonda'. Seriously? Couldn't you come up with somethin' better than that?"

Sam laughed. "Apparently not. But hey," he added, "that Rhonda chick's pretty popular." He lifted his free hand to indicate the flowers, balloons, and stuffed animals that were sitting around the room, all with little cards sticking out of them. "They bring in something else every few minutes. I think the nurses are starting to get cranky. I'm sure they'll be thrilled when all your visitors get here."

"Huh," Faith remarked in shock as she took in the scene. This certainly did seem different from the last time she was in this position.

"Hey Sam," she said hesitantly. "You know that stuff I told you… about the guy I murdered. I need you to understand that I was really messed up back then. I'd do anything to change it. You have to believe me," she implored with tears forming in her eyes.

Sam cut her off before she could say more. "Faith don't. You've been through too much to get into this right now. I believe you. I swear I do. And if you want to talk about this stuff when you get back on your feet, I'm all ears. I promise. And if you don't, then that's fine too… because I already know what I need to know about you," he stressed. "I know you better than you think I do. You risk your life every day to help people and you never complain and you never expect anything in return. That says a lot."

Faith looked away, embarrassed by the way she was behaving and unsure of what to think of Sam's reaction. The drugs definitely weren't helping. That was for sure. She was putting herself way out there and that wasn't something she'd ever been comfortable doing. But then again, this was Sam and he was different. It was just all so confusing. She needed to get her head around everything that had happened to her.

"I should go," Sam remarked in response to Faith's extended silence. "You need your rest."

"Nah, you can stay," she said. "I'll probably pass out on you, but I think they've got cable here."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure," she promised him.
During Faith's second day in the hospital, it became increasingly clear that they needed to get her out before she ended up being splashed all over the media as the miracle patient. Her rapid healing had caused the nurses and doctors to treat her with a combination of awe and even a little fear. One of the nurse's aides had even gone so far as to smuggle in her thousand-year-old, incontinent cat so that Faith could 'lay hands' on her. Needless to say, that bizarre episode was what convinced them that they needed to bust her out. Their little caper went off without a hitch too. They had her loaded in the car and out of there before anyone even realized she was gone, leading Buffy to suspect that the Winchesters had quite a bit of experience with that sort of thing.

Buffy had ended up insisting that Faith come home with her and stay in Dawn's room for a few days while she was still healing. She probably wouldn't have gone along had it not been for the fact that the hospital had been keeping her so drugged up. Things had been awkward between the two Slayers after recent events and Buffy had hoped some forced togetherness might put their relationship back on track. Plus, she really didn't think Faith should be staying by herself after having major surgery less than forty-eight hours before. So, she had moved in temporarily and Buffy's devious plan seemed to be working. The icy wall Faith had put up between them seemed to be beginning to melt away.

Now it was mostly a matter of trying to get Faith to follow doctor's orders (not that Buffy was exactly known for doing that herself). Regardless, it was obvious that Faith was stiff and very sore and going up and down the stairs every five minutes was just unnecessary in Buffy's opinion. She had a bed, a TV, and a bathroom upstairs, so there was no reason she shouldn't just stay put. It would only be for a couple of days after all. However, apparently that was too much to ask, because, once again, she heard Faith's slow footsteps coming down the stairs.

She hurried from the kitchen where she'd been brewing more of Willow's healing tea and popped her head into the stairwell.

"Damn B," Faith exclaimed. "Do you have to sneak around like that? You scared the hell out of me."

"Then you should stay off the stairs," she replied unapologetically.

"Make me," Faith replied with a challenging smirk.

When Buffy just stood there with her arms folded, Faith tried another angle. "It's boring up there. I like to be where the action is. Just not the action I heard from you and loverboy last night," she added with a wink. Actually, she hadn't heard anything. The pain pills and Willow's tea were keeping her pretty well knocked out, but she knew Buffy would be mortified by the suggestion. And judging from her suddenly red face, she was.

"Where is he anyway?" Faith asked as she took a seat on the couch and reached for the remote.
Buffy sighed in defeat and took a seat herself. "Sam came and got him so they could look at this truck he's thinking of buying. He wanted Dean to look under the hood and give the mechanic-y thumbs up and all that manly stuff. Can you believe I actually find that hot?"

Faith didn't answer, but instead gave Buffy a sour look. "You mean Sam was here and you didn't wake me up?" she asked.

"Relax, he'll be back. He accidentally left his phone on the coffee table," she added with an eye roll.

"So a guy can't forget his phone?" Faith asked a bit defensively.

"Not one of those guys. They live by those phones. *You know that.*"

Faith just shrugged and appeared to concentrate on finding something to watch.

Buffy had just gone back to the kitchen to finish making the tea when the doorbell rang. It turned out to be Sam. *What a surprise.*

"Hey, I think I forgot my phone," he said innocently.

Buffy opened the door to let him in and tried to keep a straight face as she informed him it was still lying on the coffee table (just where he'd left it).

"So where's Dean?" she asked. She assumed Sam had bought the truck, because Dean didn't appear to be with him and she hadn't heard the Impala.

"Out hustling pool somewhere," he said irritably as he took a seat on the couch beside Faith. "You do realize he's just being a stubborn ass, don't you? I could kill him. You should've seen his face when he opened up his wallet and saw that you'd slipped all that money back in. *Dude was pissed,*" Sam confided with a laugh. "It was great."

Buffy just shook her head. She was well aware that Dean had turned this into some ridiculous contest of wills. You'd think they were trying to get him to go to the Ice Capades or something.

"So did you get the truck?" Faith asked curiously.

"Yeah. Dean said it was pretty solid and the price was good, so I decided to go for it. It's an '86 GMC Sierra, but the body's in almost perfect condition. I know it's old and way bigger than what I need," he shrugged a little sheepishly, "but our dad had one. So, I kinda wanted it. Besides, I'm tired of sharing with Dean."

"Sounds hot to me," Faith said as she stood up. "I like big trucks. Let's go see it. Me and B need to sign off on it too."

"Okay, I've got to head out anyway," he said in a clearly disappointed tone. "I need to meet up with this dude that's supposed to hook me up with some silver bullets. Between the two of us, Dean and I might have half-a-clip right now. That's not a good thing when there's a psycho shifter running around. Anyway, this guy only works nights and I hear his customers are pretty unusual, so I'd really like to get in and out of there before it gets too late."

"You must be going to see Willy," Buffy said.

"Yeah, you know him?"

"*Oh yeah,*" Buffy confirmed with a mischievous grin. "He's a refugee from Sunnydale. Why don't
you take me along with? I haven't intimidated him for information in months. He probably misses me."

"I'm going too," Faith announced.

"Jeez," she remarked when she was met with disapproving stares. "I'm not plannin' on beating up Willy the snitch or anything. He's no fun. Dude caves if you look at him wrong. I just want out of the house for a minute. Come on, I feel like a prisoner here."

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Dean went back to the dive bar he'd been in on the night everything went to shit. He was happy to see that the guy he'd tried to hustle that night was there again too. He felt sure he wouldn't have any trouble getting him on the hook again. Since he'd taken Dean for twenty dollars last time, he'd likely be eager for another go. That was perfect, because he wouldn't have to waste a lot of time on the con. In fact, if he could get dude to put up a decent amount on the first game, he'd be able to go straight for the kill.

It went off pretty much as he predicted it would. His mark, Ronny, had enthusiastically taken the bait. He obviously thought Dean was a sucker and probably not too bright either, so he quickly offered to place fifty on the first game. The problem was that when Dean watched him open his wallet, the fifty appeared to be pretty much all the guy had on him. Meaning, there wasn't going to be a big score this time. It would be best to just run the table and move on. He'd still be pretty broke, but the fifty would be enough to tide him over for a day or two until he could find a better mark. He really didn't have time for this hustling crap, but after Sam's latest lecture and Buffy's sneaky little stunt, he wasn't about to give up now. It was a matter of principal. This was war.

They were just about to get the game started when his opponent spoke up.

"Looks like your brother's here," he said, pointing over towards the bar.

Dean shot Ronny a puzzled look. First of all, how did this guy know his brother? And second, he couldn't believe Sam had actually stooped to following him. He was going to kick his lanky ass for this.

He looked up with an annoyed scowl, however, it quickly dissolved into an expression of surprise when he saw not Sam, but himself, smirking back at him from a barstool. He'd expected the shifter to come to them, but this was ridiculous. What was that bastard up to?

Ronny looked back and forth between the two several times before commenting, "You know man, I always thought it'd be trippy to have an identical twin."

"You have no idea," Dean remarked absently as he placed his pool stick back on the wall rack, never taking his eyes off of his fake self. "Sorry dude," he told his disappointed looking opponent. "We'll have to do this some other time." Actually they'd have to do this never, because Dean wasn't coming back to this place. It was friggin cursed.

The shifter slid off the bar stool as Dean started heading that way. They stopped a few feet away from one another, each in nearly identical fight-ready stances.

"So what brings a looker like you to a crap joint like this?" Dean asked glibly.

The shifter shrugged and continued to smirk. "Just wanted to talk."

"I bet," he remarked skeptically. "So what's on the mind of mutant douche bags these days? Global
warming? The economy maybe? Or are you still looking for that perfect way to murder an innocent girl?"

Dean saw anger flash in the shifter's green eyes. It was freaky to see its reactions on his face.

"Yeah, it figures you'd be self-righteous," the creature observed contemptuously. "I'm not the only murderer here, you know. How many of my kind have you killed? You ever stop to think they might not've deserved it?"

Dean shook his head. "Not really," he replied nonchalantly.

"Then why don't we step outside and discuss things? You first," the shifter said as it held out a hand.

"Sure, I'd love to show my back to the knife-happy monster."

"Trust me, you will," it stated with certainty. "You didn't think I'd actually go against a hunter without a little insurance, did you? I have the advantage here. I know how you think, Dean. That means I know all your weaknesses."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" he asked suspiciously.

The shifter smiled cruelly and reached into its pocket to pull out a cellphone. "I got this off a kid," it said, closely watching Dean for a reaction. "It's a nice one too. Takes really clear video. You should take a look, it's riveting."

Dean tried to put on his best poker face, although he was dreading what this twisted bastard was about to show him. When it held the phone up in front of him, he could see a boy that was probably ten or eleven years old. The video quality was pretty damn good too. He could clearly make out that the kid had longish, skater-punk hair and was wearing a black Misfits T. He'd been tied with his hands behind his back and even though the volume was low, he could still hear the kid sobbing and begging to be let go.

"You look angry," the shifter observed, still smiling cruelly. "But don't worry. He's okay… for now. It's all up to you actually. As long as you come with me and behave yourself, he'll be fine. So it's your choice. You can lead the way or you can get cute and put a bullet in my heart. But if you do, that kid will never be found. If he's lucky, he'll die of dehydration before the rats start gnawing on him."

"Fine," Dean growled through clenched teeth, "but you should know that once I get to that kid, I'm gonna rip your ass apart. That's a promise."

"We'll see," it said as it revealed a gun that was tucked into its waistband. "But rest assured, I've got more insurance. So you go first, I insist."

Dean walked in front as they left the bar, his head spinning as he searched for options. If he could just get a hold of this freak, he could force it to tell him where the kid was, but he needed an opportunity first.

As soon as they were outside, the shifter warned him that it now had the gun trained on his back. Dean turned around cautiously with his hands held out to the sides and saw that it wasn't lying.

"Put your hands up against that car," it said as it gestured with the pistol. "You better keep still too or I'll blow a hole through your back and that's a promise," it growled in a perfect imitation of Dean's previous threat.
Dean gritted his teeth in frustration and did as he was ordered. The shifter came forward and hurriedly snatched the pistol from his waistband before stepping back quickly. The pistol was loaded with silver bullets, something the creature undoubtedly suspected. Judging by its reluctance to get close, it was also obviously wary of giving Dean any opportunity to get the upper hand.

"Now the silver knife," it said. "And don't bother lying, because I know you've got one. Just drop it on the ground and kick it as far away as possible."

Dean sighed and pulled the knife out from where it was sheathed at his waist and dropped it on the ground beside him before kicking it under the car he was leaning against. Under any other circumstances, he would have thrown it at the creature. But since he had his back turned and a gun trained on him, it didn't seem like such a hot prospect. At least he still had his bowie knife.

"Okay then," the shifter said with obvious relief in its voice. "Time to take a little walk. Put your hands where I can see 'em and head toward the fence on your right."

As he straightened up and turned, Dean saw that the shifter was herding him toward a chain link security fence that had been put up around a dilapidated building next door to the bar. It had a faded sign above it that showed the outline of a curvy woman, below that, the word 'girls' was still clearly visible.

When they made it to the fence, Shifter-Dean directed him toward a spot where the links had been cut and directed him to slide on through.

"This is your top-secret hiding place?" Dean exclaimed in irritation. "The abandoned titty bar next freakin' door! Seriously?" He couldn't believe he'd actually gone along with this sham.

The shifter chuckled. "Sure is. I knew it didn't have to be too elaborate. You were sucked in the minute I showed you my little movie. It was almost too easy," the creature gloated smugly. "You even led me to the perfect side of town too. Half the buildings are abandoned and nobody around here sees anything. Excellent choice."

"Nobody follows me," Dean replied with certainty. "You just got lucky."

"You are hard to follow," the shifter admitted. "I'll give you that. But, luckily for me, I have an extremely long criminal career under my belt. I've picked up some really neat tricks over the years. For instance, no matter how much you worship that car of yours, I knew you'd never notice a tiny transmitter attached to the frame underneath. I'm just that talented. It's a gift."

"Yeah, I'm sure you make your family real proud."

"Funny you should mention that," the shifter said angrily. "I don't have much family left these days thanks to hunters. Especially the ones like you. See, you've got some really interesting info in that head of yours. Imagine my surprise when I just happened to catch that you worked for Crowley. That's kinda hypocritical, don't you think?"

"Didn't have many options," Dean replied casually. He wasn't about to explain himself to this freak.

"Right. You had to save precious little Sammy again."

When he didn't reply, the shifter directed him through the old club's front door. The chain that had once held it shut had been severed with bolt cutters. He had to admit this thing had come prepared.

"Where's the kid?" Dean asked suspiciously as he looked around the empty barroom.
"He's around," the shifter assured him. "I'll introduce you just as soon as you're all safe and secure. It's all part of the plan."

"Bullshit! You'll show him to me now or I kill you where you stand. How's that for a plan?"

"Fine, we'll compromise," it said, rolling its eyes in exasperation. "Hey Chase!" the creature called out loudly. "How you doin' back there buddy?"

From somewhere in the back, Dean could clearly hear a child's panicked voice, pleading to be set free.

"Goddammit," he cursed under his breath.

"Looks like it's show time," the shifter announced with a triumphant smile. "Now get up on the stage."

Dean couldn't believe what was happening. The son of a bitch was actually going to tie him to the stripper pole. Of all the jacked up positions he'd found himself in over the years, this had to make the top five.

"Don't even try it," the shifter warned as he stepped behind Dean, who had his back pressed against the pole. "I'll put a bullet through the back of your head and then I'll leave that kid tied up back there to die. Nobody would ever find him. Not in time anyway. I didn't lie about that part."

Dean cursed when he felt the plastic zip ties being tightened around his wrists. He hated those things. They were a hell of a lot stronger than they looked and they always cut off his circulation. He cursed even louder when the shifter reached into his front pocket and took his cell.

"Sorry dude," Dean remarked. "I get the kink factor here and you may be the best looking man I've ever seen, but I still don't play for that team."

"Funny," the thing observed dryly, "but don't worry. I wouldn't bang one of you filthy hunters if my life depended on it. But," it added with a calculated smile, "If I can get to that whore of yours before she finds out that you're worm bait, I just might have a little fun with her. I promise to get her off before I slice her up though."

Dean struggled uselessly against his bonds and kicked back blindly. "She'll make you in a second," he spat out. "The only fun you'll have will be a knife through your heart."

"Keep telling yourself that," the shifter replied, showing little concern. It kept the gun aimed at Dean as it knelt down behind him and strapped his ankles together. When that was done, it moved around to the front and lifted up his right pant leg, revealing the bowie knife that was strapped there. "See Dean," it said as it removed the knife from its sheath, "I know all your tricks."

Dean's ankles were strapped together but they weren't affixed to the pole. The zip ties weren't long enough for that. So he bent his knees, brought up his feet, and kicked the shifter in the face before it could react. The position he was in made it hard to put much momentum behind the blow, but the creature still fell back on its ass, spitting blood from its mouth.

"Didn't know that trick, did ya?" Dean prodded. "Don't forget. I'm the real hunter here. You're just playing dress up."

Shifter-Dean sat stunned for a few moments before spitting out another mouthful of blood and regaining its feet. As soon as it rose, it immediately slammed its fist into Dean's stomach.
"Maybe you need something to help you remember your manners," it remarked angrily before disappearing behind the bar.

For the few moments he was left alone, Dean did his best to struggle against the restraints, but he wasn't having any luck. When the shifter returned, he had his arms hooked under the boy's arms and was dragging him along. Like Dean, his wrists and ankles were also tied together with the plastic ties. The creature roughly shoved the boy against a wall and pulled him into a sitting position facing Dean.

"Chase, this is Dean," the shifter said in a conversational tone. "Don't get too attached to him though. He won't be around much longer."

The boy looked horrified to see the exact double of his captor standing just a few feet away.

"Just let him go," Dean argued. "You've got what you want now."

The shifter shook its head. "Nope. Don't think so. Because if I do, we both know you'll try some crazy stunt. Remember, I know how your mind works. Now watch those feet," it ordered as it held up a couple lengths of rope. "Believe me when I say that little Chase here will pay for it if you try to kick me again."

Despite the threat, the shifter still kept a wide berth around Dean until it was safely behind him once again. Then it used the lengths of ropes to secure him to the pole, first around his ankles and then across his chest. When the thing was satisfied that the ropes were tight enough, it walked back around to face him.

"I ought to thank you," it said with a smile, "because all that crazy stuff in your head just might keep me and my sister alive. I can hardly wait to go and share... but, don't worry, it won't be until after I'm done with you and your brother. And if it makes you feel any better, you'll have it easy compared to what I have planned for him. From what I gather," it said as it tapped on the side of its head, "Sam was into Crowley's business much deeper than you were. You might've actually had a scruple or two, but that one was the real coldhearted monster."

Dean felt rage and a bit of panic beginning to well up inside of him. He had to get this thing, but now he was even more tied up, with no foreseeable plan for freeing himself. "You'll be dead before you ever lay eyes on him," he warned coldly.

"I hate to disappoint you," it said as it almost casually slammed its fist into Dean's stomach again, "but you won't be able to do jack about it, because you'll be kinda dead. But I'm sure your slut and your baby brother will be all torn up when they see what's left of your body." It held Dean's blade up in front of him menacingly. "I like this one," it remarked. "It'll make a good replacement for the one I left in Faith. How'd baby bro take her death by the way?"

Dean was still trying to catch his breath, but he managed a satisfied smile. "She ain't dead, dickhead. Guess you haven't bothered playing around in her skin anymore or you'd know that. I'm sure she misses you though. She sends her love."

The shifter appeared apprehensive for a moment, but quickly hid it. "I kinda figured that," it shrugged. "Otherwise you'd have been a little more surprised to see me."

"Yeah bitch, we're on to your ass."

"Not real worried," it replied with forced bravado. "I'll make sure to finish her off the next time. Think I'll try to get into Sam's skin first though. That'll really screw with her head. Too bad you'll
miss all the fun. Cause you know what? I'm getting a little tired of all this talking," it answered with a grin before punching Dean in the face.

Dean grunted a little, it was pretty much involuntary. He was fairly certain his nose had been broken and could feel blood dripping down his face. It was annoying as hell not to be able to wipe it away.

"Gotta say, you know how to take a punch," the shifter remarked. "Of course you've had a lot of practice with that sort of thing. The things you learned in hell are just brilliant by the way. I might have to try some of that stuff on you myself."

"Bring it bitch," Dean challenged. "You don't have what it takes to break me."

The shifter replied by delivering another, even more vicious punch to Dean's face. "You run your mouth too much," it scolded in an amused tone.

"It's been said," Dean replied before spitting a mouthful of blood into the shifter's face.

That may not have been his most brilliant move, because the next few minutes were decidedly unpleasant. However, he'd be damned if he'd give this bastard any more satisfaction than he had to. It was probably yet another stupid thing to do, but he also continued to make smart ass comments whenever he could. The enraged shifter responded by punching and kicking him until Dean was pretty sure he must look like roadkill. Through it all he could hear the boy screaming and crying for the shifter to stop. It couldn't have been a fun thing for a kid to watch.

By the time those agonizing minutes were over, Dean's weight was being almost completely supported by the ropes and he was having a hard time holding his head up. The shifter stopped punching and grabbed a handful of his hair, pulling his head back so that he could see the Impala's keys glittering in his hand.

"I think it's time we move this little party along," it stated, "if you'll give me a minute, I'm just gonna run out to my new car and grab a few supplies."

Dean dreaded to see what dickwad was going to bring back. There were all sorts of implements of pain in the Impala's trunk. Maybe he should learn to watch his mouth a little more, but then again, it probably wouldn't have made much difference to the sadistic bastard. The important thing was that he had at least a minute or two to try to come up with a plan. It was better than nothing.

"Hey kid," he called out, once he felt sure the shifter was gone. "I'm gonna get us out of here, but I need your help. You're the only one that can move around right now, so you need to find something I can use to cut these restraints off."

The boy didn't reply. Dean decided it was probably because he was completely traumatized and he sympathized, but the kid was also their only chance.

"Chase!" he managed to bark loudly even though it felt like his head might split open. "You have to hurry and pull it together dude," he continued. "You've got to find me something I can use to get loose. It can be anything. A nail, a piece of glass… anything. Just look around."

"I have a pocketknife," a shaky voice answered him.

Dean couldn't believe what he'd just heard. There was no way he'd actually caught that big of a break. It was utterly beyond belief. The shifter had been too damn stupid to pat down the kid.

"Please tell me you can get to it," he said hopefully.
"I think I can," the boy said, "it's in my back pocket. But it's just a piece of junk really," he added reluctantly. "It's a little tiny Swiss Army knife. My dad's trucking company gave them out to everybody last Christmas. Dad was pretty pissed about that. He expected a bonus."

"That's perfect," Dean assured him strongly. "Get it out and get it over here as fast as you can. We don't have much time."

The kid did manage to fish the knife out of his back pocket using the hands that were tied behind his back. That was the easy part though. He still had to make it over to where Dean was and pass it off to him without either of them dropping it. The minute that it took for Chase to hop across the room and pass the knife off to him was one of the longest Dean had ever experienced.

The wave of relief that washed over him when he gripped the small knife almost made him feel high. He had to remind himself that he still had a ways to go before they were free. He first ordered the boy to go back to where he'd been sitting and then began checking out the knife with his fingers. It was a delicate operation because his hands were getting numb from lack of circulation and if he dropped it, they were both screwed.

Chase managed to regain his previous position just as the shifter re-entered the room. They'd cut it awfully close.

The shifter, Dean noticed, was carrying the toolbox he kept in the car along with a blowtorch and a few other things he couldn't readily identify. One eye was swollen shut and blood kept running into the other, so he was lucky to make out anything at this point. The main thing was to keep the freak talking while he worked on the knife.

"Thought you said you didn't wanna get kinky with a hunter," he remarked.

"Still the comedian," the shifter remarked as it stepped forward with Dean's blade in hand. "Enjoy it, because I doubt you'll be funny for too much longer. But since you seem so uncomfortable with this body, maybe I should change into someone you find more appealing."

Dean startled when the shifter suddenly became Buffy. He'd only seen a quick change like that one other time.

"You're the alpha?" he asked in disbelief. From what he remembered, the alpha was a whole lot more badass than this thing. It certainly hadn't been afraid of hunters.

"My father was," Shifter-Buffy said. "Until your hunter friends served him up to Crowley that is. That's why you and I are going to have some fun," she purred.

Dean cringed as this obscene caricature of Buffy pulled open his flannel. There was a distinct ripping sound as the knife separated the material of his undershirt. Dean tried to hold still and not breathe, but he got a few nasty cuts just the same.

"I was thinkin' I'd leave another message," the shifter stated cheerfully as it pushed aside the remains of Dean's t-shirt, revealing his bare chest. "I think you'll make a nice canvas too. Just not sure what I should write though. Should I leave another note for Buffy or do you think I should personalize this one just for Sam?"

"I think you should go fuck yourself," Dean replied with a forced grin. He'd almost gotten the blade opened on the tiny knife. He just had to distract this freak for a little longer and his hands would be free.

"I'm sure you do," the shifter replied with a laugh. Then, to Dean's relief, the thing actually turned its
back and bent down to open his tool box. He took that opportunity to saw frantically at the restraints on his wrist. He cut himself a few times in the process, but he kept going. By the time the shifter returned, holding up a box cutter Dean kept in the toolbox, his hands were free.

"I think this will work better for the actual writing," it remarked. "I wanna make sure my message can be clearly read."

Dean steadied his breathing and forced himself to keep his hands behind his back. Since he was still tied up with the rope, he couldn't make his move until he was absolutely sure he could get a hold of this monster and disable it.

As soon as it stepped up close and pressed the box cutter against his chest in preparation for the cut, Dean swung his arms around and grabbed it by the shoulders. This clearly stunned the shifter, giving him the opportunity to deliver a vicious head butt, which sent it sprawling to the floor barely conscious.

"Is that the place?" Faith asked as she pointed toward a rundown dive bar.

"No," Sam replied, "but we're almost there. It's over on the next block."

"That's Dean's car though, ain't it?"

Both Buffy and Sam's heads immediately snapped to the right. Sure enough, there was the Impala parked right below a flashing neon sign that was advertising pool.

"Damnit," Sam snapped as he turned the wheel sharply so that he wouldn't miss the entrance to the bar's parking lot. The truck bed swayed a little as he did so. "Couldn't his stupid ass at least do this crap in a less dangerous part of town?"

"Well, he's busted this time," Buffy observed tightly.

Faith just laughed. This was going to be an interesting show.

Sam quickly parked his truck in the first empty spot he came to. "Stay here," he said to Faith. "We'll be back in a minute."

"Hell no. I'm not missin' this."

Sam sighed and shook his head, but jumped out and walked around to the passenger side so that he could help her down. Faith didn't like being treated like an invalid, but she went along since the truck was pretty far off the ground and she had to admit that it did hurt like hell to jar that injury. At least this way, she got to put her hands on him.

The three had just started to walk toward the bar's entrance when Buffy and Faith stopped suddenly.

"Did you hear that?" Faith asked.

"That's Dean," Buffy confirmed before she took off running in the direction of the abandoned building beside the bar. She'd heard some loud cursing coming from that direction. The voice was strained, but immediately recognizable as Dean's.

Sam stood frozen. He hadn't heard anything, but, then again, the Slayers did have better hearing than he did. After a split second of indecision, he quickly ran to catch up with Buffy, leaving Faith to
follow at her much slower pace.

Buffy skidded to a halt once she entered the building. She wasn't quite prepared for the sight in front of her. Dean had what appeared to be her exact double pinned to the floor with a gun against her chest. Then she noticed some unknown kid sitting against the wall a few feet away. This was definitely one of the crazier things she'd ever witnessed and that was saying a lot.

About that time, Faith caught up and stepped up beside Sam. "Damn," she breathed out. It was the only word she could come up with.

Dean looked over at the new arrivals before turning his attention back toward the shifter. He started to pull the trigger, but hesitated. The thing was terrified and it looked exactly like Buffy. It even had tears in its eyes. He felt like an idiot, but he was having a hard time following through now. That particular expression on Buffy's face was a little too much for him. They stayed in that position for a moment longer before he pulled the gun away and flicked the safety back on.

"Ladies first," he said as he pushed himself back onto his knees. Nobody needed to know he'd wussed out. Besides, Faith and Buffy definitely had their own bone to pick with this bitch. He shouldn't hog all the fun.

The shifter scrambled to its feet and glanced around wildly for a way out as both Slayers stalked toward it almost simultaneously.

"Faith," Buffy warned, "you need to sit this one out."

"Sure B," she replied. "I've just gotta do this first." She then proceeded to hit the shifter so hard that its body became airborne.

"Faith!" Sam exclaimed when she immediately hugged one arm against her stomach.

"It's not a problem. I'm five-by-five," she assured him with a groan and a pained smile. "I mean, it hurt like a bitch and all, but it was totally worth it."

Sam shook his head in exasperation and then turned to see Buffy slowly rounding on the dazed body of the shifter. That matter was basically a done deal, so he focused his attention on his brother who was sitting on the floor looking a little woozy.

"My God, Dean," he said sympathetically as he knelt down beside him. "What did that thing do to you?"

"Go get the kid," he replied as he pointed across the room.

Sam followed his brother's finger to see a terrified kid huddled against the wall. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed him. He'd been so focused on the scene between Dean and the shifter that he hadn't seen anything else in the room.

When his brother went over to check on Chase, Dean grabbed hold of the stripper pole and used it to haul himself to his feet. Faith tried to offer some assistance, but he brushed her off. She sure as hell didn't need to put any more strain on her stitches. Sam would just love that.

After a moment or two of struggling, he was finally able to stand up relatively straight, although he had to keep a tight grip on the pole. He turned just in time to see Buffy pull the creature up by the front of its shirt and then the twisted bitch turned back into him. The thing was still trying to play them and like a jackass, he'd fallen for it.
"You can't hurt me in this body," it said with more certainty than it felt.

"Don't be so sure about that," Buffy stated icily as she pointed toward the actual Dean standing a few feet away. "That's Dean. You're not even close. You're just a sick, pathetic phony. So what did you do?" she asked angrily. "Did you tell Dean you'd kill that kid if he didn't take a beating? Because that's the only way something like you could ever get the upper hand on him." Buffy was getting more enraged the longer she spoke. "You know what? I've spent every waking minute of the last few days dreaming about what I'd do to you and now that I've found you… you're not even worth it. You're just a coward, a disappointing, sniveling coward that can't even meet someone in a fair fight."

"But I didn't want to kill that girl," the shifter whined. "I had no choice."

"You always have a choice," Buffy replied coldly as she raised her silver blade. "And quit sniveling like that in Dean's body. It makes your disguise so totally not convincing."

Even though Buffy knew this thing was nothing more than a parody of Dean, she had to admit she was a little disturbed by the thought of sticking a blade in it. Aside from the pathetic and whiny expression, every single physical feature appeared to be identical. It was freaky. But then she turned to look at Dean, who was battered and bloody, and remembered what had done that to him. It was enough to cement her resolve. She slammed the blade into the imposter's heart and then quickly turned from the sight and headed toward the real thing.

As she stopped in front of Dean, she held her hands up to touch him, but was unsure what would be a safe place that wouldn't cause him further pain. "Oh Dean," she said sadly as she stared at him in horror.

"I'm fine," he said, playing down his injuries as usual.

"You're not fine," she said firmly, placing a gentle arm around his waist. "We need to get you looked at. And this is the last time you hustle. You almost got yourself killed this time."

"She's right Dean," his brother agreed as he and a very relieved looking Chase stepped in front of him.

Dean looked at them both like they were crazy people. "That doesn't even make sense," he said incredulously. "This had nothing to do with that. I wasn't trying to hustle fake Buffy or fake me. I think I woulda noticed a little detail like that."

When no one responded to his logic and Buffy continued to stare at him with a sad and worried expression, he decided these people were simply beyond reason.

"I'm fine," he stressed again. "I just need to take a few Vicodin, drink a beer, and take it easy for the rest of the night."

"Don't be stupid," his brother said. "You're at least gonna let Allie look at you."

"You do look like shit," Faith remarked with a nod, determined to put her own two cents in.

Dean sighed deeply. Everything hurt like hell and the whole world was ganging up on him. What else?

"Yeah mister," Chase piped up, finally finding his tongue after a prolonged period of silence. "When you were tied to that pole and that thing started hitting on you… I was sure it was gonna kill you. You better see a doctor."
Dean felt a sudden urge to throttle that damn kid. The fact that he'd been tied to a stripper pole and beaten all to hell wasn't something he wanted to make common knowledge.

"Fake Buffy tied you to the stripper pole?" Sam asked, sounding like he couldn't believe his ears. When his brother just stared back at him with a stony expression, Sam lost it and started laughing. The absurdity of that imagery combined with the relief he felt knowing the shifter was dead and Dean was standing and relatively okay, was just too overwhelming. He couldn't help it.

Faith joined in the laughter and also made a few wise cracks, but to Dean's relief, Buffy didn't seem to find any humor in that little scenario. She just glared at the pair disapprovingly.

"I'm sorry man," his brother said as he forced himself to stop laughing. "You've gotta admit. That's just messed up… and kinda kinky."

"Yeah, I get it. It's freakin hilarious. Now let's go before I have to kill one of you."

When Buffy sat down gingerly on the bed beside him, Dean looked away from his channel surfing and gave her a lopsided grin. Partly because his lip was swollen and partly because of the drugs Allie had pumped him full of. He'd been opposed to the clinic visit, but a few of the cuts on his chest had been a little deep and he had to admit that it was better to get stitches after being numbed. Besides, he'd also gotten a nice shot of morphine out of the deal.

Buffy gave him a small smile in return and patted his arm gently. She was still wearing the same solemn expression she'd had on since they left the abandoned bar. You'd have thought he was dying.

"I'm fine," he said for what was probably the thousandth time. "I've had my ass beat worse than this."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," she replied with a pout.

"Come on," he said encouragingly. "It's not so bad. I feel pretty damn good right now actually."

Buffy regarded him solemnly for another moment before asking softly, "You're not going to hustle anymore are you?"

Dean couldn't believe his ears. Somehow Sam and Buffy had turned this situation into the shining example of why hustling pool was the source of all evil. The logical explanation - which was that the shifter had slapped a LoJack on him and would've found him no matter where he was – didn't seem to compute with those two. They were either both completely insane or being willfully ignorant. The problem was that while he could ignore Sam's pinched bitchface until the end of time, he was quickly being worn down by the pitiful, sad pout that Buffy had adopted. He could've handled it if she'd just bitched at him, but this tiptoeing around like he was some poor invalid on his deathbed was more than he could stand, especially after the things she'd been through lately.

"Fine," he said with a defeated sigh. "No more hustling."

"You'll let the Council pay you?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, I'll let the Council pay me," he confirmed irritably. "I'm a broken man. I hope you're happy now."

Buffy smiled and kissed him on the one spot on his face that didn't look bruised. "Don't be so dramatic. You're not broken. You just don't like to think you lost to me and Sam."
"It's true and you know it," Buffy said teasingly. "And we're not trying to push you around. We just want you to have what you deserve." She paused to observe Dean's reaction and as she predicted, somewhere under all those bruises, he looked thoroughly annoyed. "I don't care about you having money," she assured him, "but you do. You're always worried about it. I can tell. And you shouldn't have to be. You work hard enough already, you shouldn't have to stress about that too. That's all I want for you. Okay?"

Dean's features softened a little and he smiled slightly. "Okay," he agreed.

"Good," Buffy smiled. "Now you get to relax and tell Nurse Buffy what you need. I'm at your service."

"Does Nurse Buffy have a naughty little costume?" he asked hopefully.

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"Come Cas," Crowley said jovially as he poured himself a drink. "Have a glass of bourbon with me. It's the best money can buy. Costs more than those poor third world bastards make in a year."

"No thank you," the angel replied impatiently.

Crowley rolled his eyes and took a sip of his drink before speaking. "You're loads of fun as always. Let me guess, you're terribly busy and you want me to get straight to business."

"Something like that."

"Fine then," the demon shrugged. "I've finally found a squealer. That's why I summoned you. It was a shtriga actually. They're nasty little buggers. Like to feed on the life force of helpless little children. I'm actually quite the fan."

"It told you how to open Purgatory?" Castiel asked with a slight hint of excitement in his voice.

"Not precisely actually, but we're much closer than we had been. The incantations are surprisingly common. It's little more than a basic dimension opening spell. The real trick is in the secret ingredients."

"Which are?" Castiel asked, his voice once again impatient.

"One is the blood of an alpha. Obviously, that won't be a problem. The shtriga was generous enough to provide me with more than we'll need. It's the second bit that's slightly more problematic. We need the blood of the 'stolen one' – whatever the bleeding hell that is - and it must be fresh. We'll need to capture it and keep it alive until curtain time. So, does that ring any bells for you?"

"No, it doesn't. Didn't the creature know?"

Crowley smiled cruelly. "Believe me. If he'd known, he'd have told me. His last few hours were a tad bit trying."

"I will investigate then," the angel said before disappearing.

The demon shook his head and stared at the empty spot where Castiel had stood. "Funny that I'm the one with the manners," he remarked under his breath before returning his attention to the expensive glass of bourbon.
"Boss," a voice interrupted from behind him.

Crowley turned around, clearly annoyed to see one of his demon henchmen standing in the doorway. The meat suit it was wearing was absurdly muscle bound and its neck was nearly non-existent.

"I asked you not to disturb me," he said tightly.

"Sorry, but you're gonna wanna see this."

Crowley groaned. Not only did this moron look appalling, it also had an equally appalling Jersey accent. The guy reminded him of an escapee from that hideous Jersey Shore program. That show, he was fairly certain, was responsible for breaking at least one of the sixty-six seals.

"See what?" he asked impatiently.

"That shifter. It's dead."

"Fascinating," Crowley remarked sarcastically. "I suppose her sister managed to go and get herself snuffed. Seems we've solved the mystery of what happens when one of them dies."

"Trust me. Ya need t' see the body."

Crowley sighed deeply and internally bemoaned the shortage of decent minions. He supposed he may as well go and see what this steroid filled nightmare was so excited about. Maybe then he could get back to celebrating in peace.

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If it were possible for a demon to have a stroke, Crowley was certain that he would be dead. The horror in front of him was simply beyond civilized words. The dead shifter looked exactly like Dean Winchester. Dean-Bloody-Sodding-Winchester! He couldn't imagine a worse scenario if he tried and he could imagine quite a lot.

"Castiel!" he bellowed in rage. "Get your sanctimonious ass down here! Now!"

The angel suddenly appeared beside him. He was clearly insulted by the manner in which he'd been summoned, but Crowley had no patience for coddling him at the moment.

"Explain that," he snapped as he pointed to the dead shifter's body.

Castiel gazed curiously at the body, a bit of surprise flashing across his features.

"That's not actually Dean," he informed Crowley.

"You don't say," the demon spat back.

"I don't understand," Castiel remarked. "Why are you showing me this?"

"Do you happen to remember the amazing shifter Doublemint Twins? Double your pleasure, double your fun?"

"Yes, but I don't see the point of –"

Crowley interrupted impatiently. "The other half of the matched set is currently on the Hellmouth. That's what the bloody point is!"
The demon thought he might want to get a handle on his rage when he took in the cold and furious expression on Castiel's face. It was sometimes easy to forget that this pompous stick-in-the-mud could easily obliterate him with a mere snap of his fingers.

"I was merely keeping an eye on my investment," Crowley explained in a much more subdued tone. "We agreed that it would be best if no demons went there, so I decided to employ the shifter. She was only asked to keep an eye on things and report back if the Slayers suspected anything."

Castiel glared at the demon angrily. "Sending a shapeshifter to the Hellmouth was not in the spirit of our agreement."

Crowley cleared his throat in an effort not to laugh. He couldn't believe that an angel would be so naïve as to think that the 'spirit' of a demon deal meant anything whatsoever. The only thing that mattered was what was written in black and white (or sometimes in blood).

"You're right of course," the demon replied, making a great effort to sound reasonably ashamed. "But I was only trying to ensure our success. You can't blame me for being concerned after you told me that the Slayers were remembering their dreams. Besides, you were conducting your very own sibling conspiracy with those idiot Winchesters. Fair is fair as they say."

"I didn't send them there," Castiel said tightly.

"And you aren't curious as to why those two would suddenly be playing in our sandbox?"

"It's not what you think. They are there for personal reasons."

"Ahh," Crowley remarked with a sly grin. "Dean is Fluffy's boy toy."

"That is not the reason," the angel said unconvincingly.

"Don't bother lying, you're terrible at it. Besides, I think they make an adorable couple. I'm sure their children will be unusually strong, unnaturally good looking, and possess the mental capacity of a fruit fly. How fortunate for humanity."

"It is none of your concern. As I said, they went to the Hellmouth on their own. They know nothing of our plan."

"That's the problem with those two, Castiel," Crowley remarked in a patronizing tone. "They're always doing something on their own. I realize they're your favorite pets, but I think its past time you put them down. I can't imagine anything worse than having the Winchesters aligned with the Slayers."

"I have it under control," the angel emphasized firmly.

"That's what Lucifer thought and you see where he is now. So if you won't get rid of them, I will," the demon stated angrily.

Castiel grabbed Crowley by his lapels and slammed him into the wall. "Do not forget that I can destroy you," he growled. "Sam and Dean are off limits. Leave them alone and leave the Slayers alone. Otherwise the deal is off and you die. Do you understand me?"

When Castiel released him, Crowley calmly smoothed his jacket before speaking. "Fine. You can have your precious lap dogs, but those boys are more pit bull than poodle and you'd do well to remember that. Just don't come crying when they start biting."
"They won't," the angel said confidently, "and they're going to lead us to Eve. She will know the identity of the 'stolen one'."

"I suppose that's one thing they might actually be good for," the demon admitted reluctantly.
The last couple of weeks had been even more stressful than usual. It seemed that Eve was finally tired of messing around. She was coming at them full force and her target was obviously the virgin Slayers. For almost a solid week, she'd sent her armies to attack the Council buildings, particularly the dormitories. At night she would send vampires and other creatures that had to hide in the darkness and during the day she would send her less solar-sensitive children. It had essentially been a suicide mission, because whatever did manage to make it past the Slayers on the ground and the Winchester's sniper rifles on the rooftops had pretty much been fried on contact with the buildings. Willow's spells were extremely powerful and, ironically, she had Eve to thank for part of her success. Dragon's blood was the big kahuna of spell ingredients and, thanks to her, they had gallons of it. It was disgusting and smelly, but very effective. So effective, that for the past several days, things had gone extremely quiet. Too quiet. There had been no further attacks on the Council and the action in the city seemed to have quieted down to pre-Mommy levels. It was almost worse than being under constant siege, because now everyone was on edge in anticipation of how and when Eve would strike next.

Given the crazy amount of pressure they were all under, it wasn't a surprise to Buffy that Dean was having one of his nightmares again and, as usual, she wasn't quite sure how to handle the situation. It was horrible to watch him suffer, but he seemed incredibly self-conscious if she woke him or tried to get him to talk about it. Sometimes the dreams were brief and he'd settle back into a quiet sleep, but, more often than not, he would wake up panicky and gasping for air. When that happened, he would usually pull her against him and hold her until his breathing evened out and his heart quit slamming inside of his chest. In those instances, Buffy found it was best to just pretend to be sleeping. It seemed like that was the only comfort he would allow her to give him, so she went along and if he suspected her deception, he never let on.

This time when he woke up, Buffy decided to try a new approach. She thought that maybe if she revealed some of her own traumatic history, it might draw him out and help him to talk about what was bothering him so much.

She turned on her side and propped her head up on her elbow facing him. "Hey," she said softly.

Dean, who'd been lying on his back attempting to catch his breath, startled a little when she spoke. "Sorry," he said, obviously embarrassed. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay," she said as she slid over so that she could lay her head on his chest. "You know," she began hesitantly, "for a long time I used to have the same nightmare every single night. I'd suddenly
come to in my coffin and then I'd have to claw my way out. It was awful and it was always the same. I thought those dreams would never stop, but they finally did."

"Did that actually happen?" he asked in surprise.

"Yep, it happened. I was dead and buried and six feet under for about four months. Then poof, I'm alive again, but, unfortunately, still buried and six feet under. Surprisingly, it's those minor details that can make or break a successful resurrection."

Her voice was light, but Dean could tell that this wasn't a very easy story for her to tell. It sure as hell wasn't an easy story for him to hear. One of his greatest fears was that this life would end up killing her and apparently, that had already happened at least once.

"What happened to you?" he asked, although he wasn't sure he even wanted to know.

"Hell God," she replied. "A really bitchy one too. She opened this portal to her super-fun hell world and the only way to close it was for one of the Summers girls to die. So, I kinda decided that should be me and took a swan dive into the portal. The rest is history."

Dean was quiet for a moment. "Did you go to hell?" he asked cautiously.

Buffy gave a forced laugh. She hated talking about this. "No. Jeez, am I that terrible to live with?" she teased, hoping to lighten this horribly dark subject.

"Of course not," he replied seriously. "I thought that maybe since you fell into that portal… I thought maybe you got sucked in. Never mind," he said, sounding irritated with himself. "I was just being stupid. You'd never end up in hell."

"Don't feel bad, that was the general consensus. It's why Willow brought me back. Everybody thought I was in hell, so I got sucked out of heaven and dropped back on the Hellmouth… right in the middle of a demon motorcycle rally too. I think you'd call that 'good times'. It might possibly be 'irony' too, but don't quote me on that because I'm never quite sure how to use that word. Anyway, I'm glad to be back now," she said sincerely, "I really am. There's a whole lot I would've missed out on."

"Willow brought you back?" he asked in amazement. "Damn, I knew she was pretty powerful, but something like that takes some serious chops."

"That's a whole other story," Buffy added dryly. "Let's just say she won't be working that spell again."

"Well, I guess I kinda owe her one."

"Yeah," she grinned, "I guess we both do. And you wouldn't even drink her healing tea. You'd have been back on your feet twice as fast, but no, you thought Willow was trying to poison you."

"I didn't think she was trying to poison me," he scoffed. "I'm just not a tea drinker. But maybe if she bottled her mojo in a beer…"


After a few moments, when it seemed that Dean wasn't going to say anything else, she added, "So… you're not gonna leave me here hanging, sounding like some crazy girl who likes to blurt out her life-slash-death story, are you? Cause that might make me feel kinda lame. Or are you just too freaked out by the fact that your girlfriend's a zombie?"
"Please, you're not a zombie. Trust me, I'm a hunter. I'm pretty damn good at picking up on little
details like that. Besides, you smell way too good."

"Does that mean you're not gonna tell me what your nightmare was about?"

"I don't even remember it. Some freaky-ass hunt probably," he said dismissively. "I just need to quit
eatin' junk before I go to bed." He rolled on his side and tucked her against him. "We should try to
get back to sleep," he said. "I have a feeling I'll need to be on my toes when I go and get Dawn
tomorrow."

Buffy sighed in disappointment. Her plan to draw him out had failed, but on the bright side, he didn't
seem too worried that she might want to snack on his brains while he slept. At least that was a bonus.

"You're a trooper to go pick up Dawn for Thanksgiving," she remarked. "I could tell Giles really
didn't want me to leave town. Just be warned, you don't know how annoying she can be on a long
car ride."

"It's only five hours. She can survive in the trunk for that long. Don't worry, I'll give her a bottle of
water and a bathroom break. She'll be fine."

Buffy snorted a giggle. "That ought to be loads of fun. I'm sorry I'll miss it."

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Dawn let out a blood curdling scream when she opened the door to her dorm room and saw some
strange guy looking under her bed.

"Dean!" she exclaimed angrily when she realized who it was. "What the hell do you think you're
doing?"

"The door was unlocked," he shrugged innocently, giving her his most charming smile.

Dawn folded her arms and stared at him critically. "Yeah right. So what are you looking for? I'm
pretty sure I don't have any vampires stashed under my bed."

"I dunno… hex bags maybe? You can never be too careful."

She crossed the room and grabbed the device Dean was holding out of his hand. "What is this
thing?"

"EMF detector."

"Seriously? Like those dorks on those ghost hunter shows? That's lame Dean," she stated with an
eyeroll. "No wonder you're perfect for my sister. You're both giant, socially-retarded weirdos."

Dean just grinned at her. "Good to see you too, Dawn. How's Rusty?"

"It was Russ and he's ancient history. We're not even dating anymore. Haven't been for like two
months."

"What the hell?" Dean asked irritably. "You mean your sister's spent all this time worrying that you
might get skinned by some psycho and you weren't even dating him?"

Dawn ducked her head in embarrassment. "I never told her we were still dating… I just kinda forgot
to tell her that we weren't. I didn't wanna hear an 'I told you so', okay?"
"So he was a psycho," Dean said as he watched Dawn carefully for a reaction.

"He was a little jealous and controlling," she admitted, "but don't worry, I got rid of him before he chained me to a wall or anything."

"Are you sure, because I –,"

Dawn cut him off in exasperation. "I'm sure Dean. I can take care of myself you know. It's completely over. I've moved on. But, unfortunately, I've moved on alone because now nobody will date me," she added bitterly.

"Why not?"

"Because I think they're scared of him. *It's so ridiculous.* Once we got back from Xander's wedding he got all obsessed with the supernatural and magic and stuff. He thinks he's some kind of dark wizard now. Like he'd even know a dark wizard if he saw one. What a wannabe."

"No shit? Man, don't tell Willow. She already has this cracked-out theory."

"Trust me," Dawn said. "I wouldn't tell her under torture. It would only make her fully embrace her delusions. Believe me, I don't wanna go there. Just please don't tell Buffy. *Please.* I swear I'll tell her we're not going out anymore, but she'll just worry if she knows about the other stuff. Besides, it's so embarrassing. I move off the Hellmouth to get away from all the crazy and I end up dating Draco Malfoy's half-wit, redneck cousin. I'm a freak magnet. I hate my life," she ended dramatically.

"Oh come on," Dean said, suddenly feeling like he'd been dropped inside the weirdest chick flick ever made. "You'll find somebody else," he said encouragingly. "It's not that dire."

"It is," Dawn disagreed. "I'm joining a nunnery. You just watch me."

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Sam spotted one of the young Slayers leaving Buffy's office, obviously in tears. It was Trish. He didn't know her very well since she was one of the fifteen on lockdown, but at six-feet tall, she was kind of hard to miss. He'd always felt sympathy for the girl, because she was obviously self-conscious. He knew what it was like to be skinny as a rail and way taller than the rest of your teenage peers. It had to be ten times worse for a girl.

He tried to get her attention by calling her name, but he immediately regretted it because she nearly jumped out of her skin.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you. Are you okay?"

She looked at him with wide, frightened eyes before shaking her head mutely and hurrying down the hall toward the dormitories. Sam stood in indecision for a moment, unsure if he should go after her. The girl was notoriously shy and might just prefer it if he left her alone. He decided he'd pop into Buffy's office and see if he could find out what was going on.

The door was open and Buffy was sitting behind her desk staring glumly at her computer screen. Sam knocked on the doorframe to alert her to his presence.

"Hey Sam," Buffy said as she looked up and smiled in greeting.

"Hey," he replied. "I was just wondering what was up with Trish?"
Buffy sighed. "She flew off the handle and punched Carrie during weapon's training. Knocked her out cold."

"And you're making her cry over that?" Sam asked half-jokingly. "I thought that would earn her a medal."

"I only shoved a couple of bamboo shoots under her fingernails," she said innocently. "I think I let her off easy. Believe me," she added more seriously, "I barely gave her a token scolding and I had a hard time keeping a straight face for that. I just don't think she's dealing with the new, heavy-duty lockdown situation."

"Yeah," Sam agreed sympathetically. "That has to be tough on those girls. It's hard to imagine not even being able to step outside and get some fresh air. I thought my dad was bad, but that just has to be brutal."

"Tell me about it," Buffy said. "And to make matters worse, she has no family coming in this week for Thanksgiving. Her parents are dead and her grandmother's too sick to travel. The poor girl's miserable and freaked and here I am playing the part of the evil prison warden. I suck."

"You do not," Sam assured her. "You don't have a choice. Besides, aren't we all about to crack?"

Before Buffy could reply, Andrew swept into the room clutching a paperback novel against his chest. "I've finally found a world to rival Star Wars," he announced dramatically.

"Speaking of cracked," Buffy replied in amusement. "What are you fan-boying over this week?"

"Oh I'm more than a fan-boy," Andrew assured her passionately. "I'm a disciple."

Sam shook his head in amazement. This dude was certainly enthusiastic. "Well, that sounds serious," he remarked.

Andrew spun around and stared at Sam for a moment with something very close to worship in his eyes.

"Are you Carver Edlund?" he asked. "Or is it Dean?"

Sam just stared at him in shocked horror. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. Even Winchester luck wasn't this bad.

Andrew continued, apparently oblivious to the fact that Sam had just turned several shades of green. "I just finished the latest book and it was a powerful experience. Completely epic. Although I still think the one where Dean gets dragged off to hell is the best. You're so lucky," he said as he turned to face Buffy. "Dean was so brave. He was just like Han Solo when he was about to be frozen in carbonite. But in this last book," he continued, spinning back around to face Sam. "When Dean told you about the things he had to do in hell... It was so moving." Andrew stopped and stared thoughtfully into the distance for a moment. "I shed a few tears myself," he said wistfully.

"Let me see that," Sam said tightly as he snatched the paperback from Andrew's hands.

He quickly confirmed that Chuck was publishing again, because he didn't remember seeing this particular volume, which was titled *Heaven and Hell*. He shook his head at the absurd Harlequin Romance figures on the cover before flipping the book over to read the summary on the back.

*In this exciting new installment to the Supernatural series, Sam and Dean are caught between the powerful forces of heaven and hell when, with the aide of the now-blind psychic Pamela, they...*
discover the shocking truth about beautiful and troubled young Anna Milton. With the assistance of the enigmatic demon Ruby, the heroic hunters must face the seemingly insurmountable task of fending off both angels and demons as they desperately search for a way to save her. Will the two brave brothers be able to deliver Anna from certain death and deal with devastating new revelations regarding Dean's true role in hell?

"Dammit!" he cursed loudly. "Couldn't that asshole throw in a few more adjectives?"

"I thought it was wonderful," Andrew disagreed, sounding rather insulted at this affront to his new favorite writer. "Carver's the new J.K. Rowling… or maybe the new Neil Gaiman. Of course these books are much more adult," he added. "The passion is intense. Oh Buffy, you are such a lucky woman."

Buffy observed the whole scene in a state of complete confusion. She had no clue what was happening here. Sam looked like he was going to be sick and Andrew sounded like he was having a religious experience. She hadn't seen him this wound up since they cancelled that Firefly show.

"Huh?" she said.

Then, Sam stood up suddenly, knocking over the chair he'd been sitting in. He had the paperback crushed in one fist and slowly advanced on Andrew with narrowed eyes.

"I swear," he ground out, "if you ever breathe one word of this to my brother, I will kill you. This," he said, holding the crumpled book in front of the smaller man's terrified face, "is none of your business. Do you get that?"

Buffy quickly stepped between Sam and an extremely pale Andrew. "Sam," she said sharply. "Do you care to explain the crazy? Because I can't just let you crush poor Andrew, even if he is insane," she added with a puzzled glance in the other man's direction.

Sam turned his attention to Buffy. "You don't understand," he began angrily. "These books –,"

"Let me see that," she said, reaching out a hand to take the paperback. She was shocked when he actually held his arm up over his head so that the book would be well out of her reach. This was getting almost comical. What the hell was going on here?

"Seriously?" she asked with her hands on her hips. "You're really going to make me climb you? Because you know I can."

Sam set his jaw and glared back stubbornly, keeping the book held high over his head. "You do what you have to, but I'm not handing over this book. Dean wouldn't want you to see it. It's an invasion of privacy."

She stared at Sam in amazement for a moment and then a look of horror slowly began to spread across her features. "Are you saying that what Andrew said is actually true? Dean really went to hell? The hell? And it's in that book?"

"He didn't tell you?" he asked, although it came out more like a statement than an actual question. The devastated expression on Buffy's face only confirmed his suspicions.

"Andrew," he said firmly. "Why don't you go get yourself a cup of coffee?"

"But I can't drink coffee this late in the day," he whined. "It makes me all edgy."

"Then brew some decaf!" Sam practically yelled.
"Okay," he agreed quietly, "but can I have my book back first?"

"NO!"

Once they were alone, Sam lowered his arm and sighed deeply. "I'm sorry Buffy," he said sincerely. "You shouldn't have found out this way."

When she remained standing speechless in front of him, he asked her to sit down. There was no avoiding it. He was going to have to tell her what he knew. It was better than her reading it in those God-awful books and if Dean found out about this little scene, he'd be humiliated. He'd have to have another (and hopefully calmer) conversation with Andrew where he would impress upon him the wisdom of keeping his big trap shut and making better choices in reading materials.

After taking a moment or two to collect his thoughts (and his temper) Sam reluctantly gave Buffy the lowdown on Carver Edlund, aka Chuck the Prophet, and his stupid ass, poorly written books. Then he told her about Dean's crossroads deal and the few details he knew about his time in hell. She just sat stunned and listened quietly through it all.

"Don't hold it against him," he said in conclusion. "He really wasn't responsible for doing those things. I don't know how he held out as long as he did."

"Do you really think I'd do that?" Buffy asked angrily as tears fell from her eyes. "Really? You think I could actually blame him?"

Sam shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry. No, I don't think that," he assured her. "But you have to understand that Dean can't forgive himself. I don't know if he ever will. That's why he hasn't told you. He doesn't want you to think he's a monster."

"That's what he dreams about isn't it?" she asked quietly.

"Pretty sure," Sam confirmed. "He won't talk about it, but he never had nightmares like that before he went. So yeah, I'd say that's a safe bet."

He grabbed a few tissues from the box on the desk and offered them to Buffy, who accepted them with a quiet "thank you".

"You can't tell him," he continued. "He'd be so humiliated if he thought you found out this way. Besides, he might actually kill Andrew," he added half-seriously. "And I know I can't stop you, but please don't read those books. They're just too personal. It's like reading someone's diary. Plus, they're the most horribly written pieces of crap I've ever read. Seriously, I can't believe people actually buy that trash."

"I'm not much of a reader," she mumbled absently.

There was no way to put into words how incredibly sad Buffy felt. Dean had clawed his way out of his grave too, but he'd been in hell not heaven. She couldn't believe she'd actually joked when he asked if she went to hell. How was she supposed to know? Dean was the last person who deserved to go to hell. She wanted to see him so badly. She suddenly had an irrational fear that he was dead and suffering in hell right now. It was horrible and terrifying and she couldn't get the image out of her head. She desperately needed to talk to him, just so she could hear his voice and assure herself that he was okay, but she'd have to try and compose herself first. Sam was right. He didn't need to know she'd found out this way. She'd have to wait until he finally opened up. Buffy wiped her eyes and stood up to excuse herself when Sam's phone started ringing.

"It's Dean," he said when he looked at the display.
Buffy felt her heart leap into her throat. It was probably nothing, but part of her was convinced that something horrible must have happened.

"Hey," Sam answered, trying to sound as casual as possible.

"Dude!" his brother's voice exclaimed across the line. "Willow was right. That Russ guy is a freakin' dark wizard. You've gotta help me find out how to reverse a curse."

"Dean, what are you talking about?" Sam asked, trying to keep his voice calm. Buffy looked completely panicked and it was rubbing off on him.

"He cursed me Sammy. It's the worst thing that's ever happened. Man you don't even know. I'm gonna shoot that bastard."

Sam held his hand up to halt Buffy, who looked ready to rip the phone from his ear. "Calm down," he said to his brother. "Just tell me what happened."

"I think he poisoned my beer, Sam. It's orange! It's bright, God dammed, UT Vols' orange. I'm gonna kill him!"

"The beer's orange?"

"No, man it's orange. I went to take a piss and suddenly it's orange. Really orange. The frank and the beans, Sam – all orange. I look like some deranged fan. Man we've gotta get this fixed, I'm freaking the hell out! But dude," he said more quietly, "don't tell Buffy and whatever you do, you can't tell Willow. If she finds out Dawn goes to Hillbilly Hogwarts, she'll drive us all friggin nuts."

"Dean, I'm pretty sure we have to tell Willow. She'll be able to –," Sam held the phone away from his ear when his brother's scream threatened to deafen him. "What the hell?"

"Holy fuck! I looked at it again. Sammy, it's horrible."

"Then don't loo-," Sam's sentence was cut off when Buffy snatched the phone away from him and held it to her ear.

"Honey you're scaring me," she said in a tearful voice. "I heard you scream. What's going on?"

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If Dawn thought her life sucked before, she was wrong, because now it truly sucked out loud. Why, she wondered, couldn't those monks have left out Buffy's bad luck gene when they made her? Sure, they made her out of Buffy, but they didn't have to be identical twins. They certainly didn't look alike. But no, apparently her sister's freaky cursed life was an essential ingredient.

She and Dean had gone out to get a bite to eat before heading back to Cleveland. Everything seemed normal enough, but then her lamo ex-boyfriend just happened to show up at the exact same pizza joint. He was being really nice too. He came over and said hello and he didn't even make any snide comments. She should've known he was up to something. At least now she knew why she couldn't get a date. Apparently Mister-Wannabe-Wizard had a few tricks up his sleeve after all. He'd somehow slipped something into Dean's beer and wound up cursing him in places that she really didn't want to think about. This was her older sister's even older boyfriend. She didn't want to think about him having those parts. It was just gross and disturbing.

Dean, like any man, was not coping well with this particular situation. The only thing that had kept him from committing armed homicide was the fact that Dawn had convinced him that they might
need Russ alive to break the curse. She'd hoped that her salvation would be the fact that Dean could
call on his brother to figure this thing out. She really didn't want her sister and Willow in on this one.
Without them involved, she could keep this embarrassing part of her dating history a deep, dark
secret. Because after what had just happened, she was damn sure Dean wasn't going to tell anybody.
But no, that one small favor was too much to ask of the petty gods that run the universe. Buffy had
found out and seeing as how Willow had just appeared in her dorm room, she was obviously in the
know too. Fabulous.

"Son of a bitch," Dean grumbled miserably when he saw Willow appear.

"Hi Dean," she said hesitantly before turning to Dawn. "Hi Dawnie. You know, I always suspected
-"\n
"Shut up," Dawn groaned before hiding her head under a pillow. Her independent college life was
over. She might as well just move back to the Hellmouth.

Dean rubbed a hand over his face before standing up and facing the very embarrassed looking witch.
"I don't have to show you, do I?" he asked hopefully.

"No," Willow said as she turned a little redder. "Please don't."

"Thank God."

Willow spent a few moments digging through the large bag she had with her before pulling out a
small vial and handing it to Dean. "I think this'll do it," she said. "It's an all purpose counter-curse. If
not, I'm sure I can find something that will… uh, you know, fix you."

Dean steeled himself to drink what he was pretty sure was going to taste like ass. He wasn't
disappointed either. It was actually even worse than ass. It was more like ass that had been left out in
the hot sun for a while. Plus, he almost choked on the crap when Willow informed him that his
brother and Buffy and possibly even Faith were all currently riding to the 'rescue'. Apparently it
drained Willow's batteries too much if she had to bring that many people along. Now the Hellmouth
was left largely unguarded just because some douche bag had turned his junk orange. What did those
three intend to do about it anyway? When this was over, he was gonna kill Sam.

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Dean watched in puzzled amazement as Dawn and Willow played with the white rat formerly
known as Russ. The little bastard was actually pretty friendly and it seemed to love having its belly
rubbed, although there was no way Dean was getting anywhere near the nasty little vermin. The two
girls seemed happy with it though. They had even named it 'Russel Scabbers'. Chicks were weird.

Willow said that she'd turn Russ back soon. She just wanted him to learn a lesson about messing
with 'the dark arts'. Honestly, Dean could give a rat's ass (pun definitely intended). He normally
wasn't a big fan of using magic against humans, but in this instance, he couldn't find it in himself to
give a crap. Dude could live out his life running on a tiny little wheel for all he cared. He really owed
the witch one. The potion had worked. She'd truly saved his life. He'd have to give her a pass on the
witchcraft thing from now on.

He still had to face his 'rescuers' though. That was bound to be fun, if 'fun' meant the most
humiliating moment of his life.

When the dreaded knock finally came, Dean braced himself for the inevitable ribbing. Sam and Faith
didn't disappoint. They looked amused as hell. He was sure he'd never hear the end of it from them.
Buffy, however, was a complete surprise.

She flew across the room and nearly tackled him. She was kissing him and hugging him and was practically in tears. Apparently, she was as upset about the thought of losing 'it' as he was (maybe even more). *Huh, he guessed he really was the man.* She kept asking him over and over again if he was okay. It was kind of embarrassing, but still completely awesome. Damn he loved this girl.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know that parts of that may have veered into the land of crackfic, but I felt the need to be a little silly. From here on out, things will probably get pretty bumpy since Eve's back, Crowley's Crowley, and Cas is still being a butt-head.
Mother's Daughter

Chapter Notes

The chapter title (Mother's Daughter) is a Santana song from the album Abraxas (1970).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sam had called Faith and asked her to meet him for lunch at a diner he often frequented. Faith wasn't surprised by the request because the two of them had been spending quite a bit of time together lately, especially since she'd been injured. She'd spent more time with Sam than she'd ever spent with a man she wasn't sleeping with. Actually, she'd never spent that much time with a man she had been sleeping with. It was really nice. She'd found the experience surprisingly enjoyable. However, that didn't mean she wasn't getting really tired of waiting for him to make a move.

After her last two attempts had ended in embarrassing rejection, she'd decided that the ball was in his court. That wasn't her normal MO. Usually, if she wanted a guy, she went for it. She didn't care if some men found that level of aggression intimidating. If they couldn't hack it, then it was their loss. But in this instance, she'd found herself playing an unfamiliar role. It was starting to drive her a little nuts too. She was horny as hell for one thing. She hadn't been laid in months and it wasn't because her problem was that she wanted one specific guy. A guy who seemed to like to be around her all the time, but never so much as kissed her. Something was going to have to give.

Her recent near death experience had given Faith a lot to think about. She'd realized that it was kind of lame for her to be so terrified of relationships. She was a survivor. The things she'd lived through, both before and after being called, would have destroyed many people, but she was still here and kicking ass. She realized that if she could make it through all of that, she shouldn't be afraid to put herself out there and live her life. And if being with Sam meant she had to go the 'real relationship' route, she was willing to give it a shot. She still found the idea scary as hell, but she'd decided it was better than not being with him at all. The problem was approaching him about it. She wasn't quite sure how to bring it up and she didn't think her pride could take the sting of getting turned down again. So, they'd remained in a strange holding pattern and she wasn't sure if or when Sam would try and take things to the next level.

When she entered the diner, she immediately spotted Sam sitting in a booth at the back of the restaurant. He had his laptop open in front of him and was so consumed by what he was looking at that he didn't see her coming in. He was probably researching something. She liked to give him hell about that whenever she got the chance. It seemed like he never quit working. So, she approached him stealthily and leaned in beside him so she could see what was on the screen.

"Who's Chuck Shurley?" she asked curiously after noticing his Google search parameters.

Sam shrugged and smiled at her a little sheepishly. "He's nobody. At least I can't find any evidence that he exists anymore. Dude's off the grid. Sold his house and everything."

"Should I ask?" she said, taking in his reluctant manner.

"You probably shouldn't. That way if the police find out I murdered him, you'll be able to claim complete ignorance."
"Seriously?"

Sam laughed a little. "Sorta. I owe him a good ass kicking anyways."

"Okay then," Faith said as she slid into the seat across from him. "So what's up besides Chuck?" she asked with a grin.

Sam immediately turned serious and snapped the cover closed on his laptop. "I wanted to tell you something."

Faith stared back at him expectantly. She was starting to feel a few butterflies flapping around in her stomach. She wondered if he might actually be about to discuss their relationship (or lack thereof).

"You know how I told you I was missing some memories?"

"Yeah."

"Well, every now and then something comes back to me. Usually it's nothing big. More of a déjà vu type of feeling. Half the time, I'm not even sure if it is a real memory. Anyway," he shrugged, "the other day, when Giles was bitching about his missing books again, I kinda had this flash and ever since then, more and more details keep coming back to me."

"About what?" Faith asked hesitantly.

"About books of all things," he replied with an embarrassed eye roll. "See, my grandfather was a hunter too and he came from a really long line of hunters, going back I don't know how far. Over the years that side of the family put together this huge library and I'm pretty sure I remember where it's hidden. I think the books are stashed in this bolt house in Kansas and, if I can find them, I'm sure they could help us out a lot."

"Okay," she said, not really sure where he was going with this. "So, I guess you're gonna go find 'em?"

"Yeah, I am," he confirmed. "And you know how I told you those memories were kinda dangerous? Well, they are… but I think this is too big of a lead to leave lying. I'm going. Dean will freak, but it's something I have to do. I'd never forgive myself if somebody else died or got hurt and I didn't do everything I could to prevent it." Sam took a breath before continuing. "Anyway, I don't think anything will happen to me. I'm not trying to push it, but just in case, I wanted to let you know… I wanted to let you know that I'm sorry that things couldn't be different between us."

"You asked me to come here so you could tell me goodbye?" Faith asked angrily. "Are you for real?"

"No," Sam replied quickly. "I'm not saying goodbye, not really. I just didn't want to take any chances. I wanted you to know how I felt about you… That I'd like to… to be with you, if things were different. If I didn't have this stupid death sentence hanging over my head. I just wanted you to know," he finished lamely.

Faith narrowed her eyes and shook her head in disgust. "You're a dumbass," she said.

"Gee thanks," Sam replied, sounding rather surprised. "I've gotta say, that's not the reaction I expected."

Faith shrugged unapologetically. "So, this thing with your memories. You really think it'll kill ya?" she asked bluntly.
"It could," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "But truth is, nobody knows for sure. Supposedly, I could live a lifetime without it coming back to bite me, or I could keel over tomorrow. *Who knows?* Maybe if I do remember there's even a chance I could find a way to deal... other people have. Then again, I might be a drooling vegetable. The thing is, the guy who put my soul back wasn't even sure himself and, trust me, that dude sees the big picture."

"So you're in the same boat as the rest of us. You might die today, you might live to be a hundred. Am I right?"

"I guess," Sam conceded, "but it's not that simple..."

"Why the hell not?" Faith snapped. "I almost died a few weeks ago. Actually, I was dead for a minute or two. If the queen bitch decides to show her face today, I might end up dead again, but you don't see me givin' up on life. That's just an excuse. Don't even waste my time with that bullshit. I'm not an idiot!"

Sam took in the rather surprised faces of some of the other patrons and purposefully lowered his voice before speaking. "Why does everything have to be some kind of conspiracy?" he whispered angrily. "Why the hell do you think I spend so much time hanging out with you? Do you think this is all an elaborate joke?"

"I don't know what the hell it is," Faith admitted tightly. "I just don't buy the 'I can't have a life because I might die' line. You're really gonna feel like a stupid ass when you wake up one day, ninety-years-old, and realize that you've let your entire life pass you by. It's friggin pathetic."

Sam breathed in through his nostrils a few times, trying to control his temper. Faith really knew how to push his buttons.

"Faith," he said through gritted teeth. "There's more to it than me maybe dying. I have no idea what I did for that year, okay? *No idea.* I've got the feeling that I did some horrible things. I worked for a demon, so I'm pretty sure I wasn't feeding the poor. I can't just go on with my life and pretend like none of that ever happened."

"So you're punishing yourself?" she asked, sounding less angry than before.

"Maybe... I don't know. I just don't think it's right for me to act like I don't have a care in the world when there are people out there whose lives I've destroyed. I'm going to have to face that stuff someday. You know, when we get a five minute breather before the next apocalypse."

"Sam, listen. I'm all about taking responsibility for the things you've done, but whatever happened during that year, it wasn't you. You didn't have a soul, you're not responsible." Faith took in Sam's skeptical expression before continuing. "I know this guy, okay. Well, actually he's not technically a guy... But, he saved my life, in more ways than one. I trust him and you know I don't trust too easily. Anyways, when this dude doesn't have a soul... Man, believe me, you don't wanna be on the same planet. He makes Hitler seem like a fun party buddy. But the thing is, that's not him. Not really. I don't hold that stuff against him.

"Maybe not," Sam conceded, "but I've got the feeling this guy doesn't just give himself a free pass. Am I right?"

Faith nodded her head reluctantly. "Yeah," she admitted, "but that doesn't mean he doesn't deserve to be happy... and it doesn't mean you don't deserve to be happy. Whatever happened to all that forgiveness stuff you were feeding me? Was it all a bunch of shit or does it just not apply to you?"
Sam sighed, but before he had a chance to argue further, the text message alert on both of their phones started going off.

"The Monday after a holiday is always the worst Monday ever," Buffy pouted as she and Dean walked toward the Council's main entrance. "Yeah, it does suck pretty hard," Dean agreed with a yawn. "I'm still trying to recover from our Turkey Day sexathon. Screw Christmas! Thanksgiving is definitely the best holiday ever. You're awesome! You bought me four different pies and showed me that nifty new trick with your tongue. Damn. If it'll get me this kinda treatment, I'm almost tempted to let rat-boy throw his whammy on me again."

Buffy smiled and wrapped her arms around Dean's waist. "You don't need to be cursed. You can have the special Buffy treatment any time. I just want you to be happy."

"Trust me," he grinned. "I'm one happy man."

Buffy started to draw Dean into a nice slow kiss, but was stopped when she felt a tingle on the back of her neck. She looked past him toward the east side of the building where the girls' dormitories were located. What looked like an ordinary young woman was just standing there, staring intently at the side of the building. That was weird enough, but she was also wearing a sleeveless dress and no shoes, which wasn't exactly appropriate attire for Ohio in late November.

"Somehow I don't see how that could be a good thing," she remarked as she drew Dean's attention to their visitor. "Hell no," he agreed as he pulled out his pistol. "That's definitely not a good thing. In fact, that might just be Big Mama herself."

"Guess we better say 'hello' then," Buffy remarked as she began to head across the lawn.

As they approached the figure, she turned and smiled, obviously unconcerned that she'd been spotted.

"Buffy," she greeted warmly, "it's so nice to finally get to meet you in person. I just had to come out here and see this so-called 'impenetrable fortress' for myself. You know, I really have to congratulate your witch. It might actually take a little effort to break through all these spells."

"Eve, I presume," Buffy said sourly as she stopped several feet away from the girl. "Yes," she smiled, "but that's a little informal. Most of my children address me as 'Mother'."

"I'm not one of your children," Buffy replied coldly.

Eve shook her head and continued to smile smugly. "I'm disappointed. Don't tell me you don't know your Slayer lore."

"Yeah, yeah," Dean spoke up. "We know the fairytale. The essence of the last pure demon to walk the earth was bound to the first Slayer. But Buffy's no demon," he stated firmly. "I know demons. So sell your crackpot theories somewhere else sister."

Buffy regarded Dean with some surprise. She wasn't aware that he knew that legend. It wasn't something she liked to think about much herself. The idea of walking around with extra demon parts
didn't exactly give her the warm and fuzzies.

Eve's attention had been drawn to Dean as well, almost as if she were just now bothering to notice his presence.

"You must be a hunter," she said as she stepped forward to examine him more closely, taking in the pistol with mild interest. "It's funny. I haven't been on earth for ten-thousand-years and yet I can still spot one of you guys from a mile away. Your kind hasn't changed much. You have fancier weapons, but it's still the same stance, same arrogant, holier-than-thou attitude. At least most of you smell a little better these days."

When she failed to get much of a reaction from a stone-faced Dean, she turned her attention back to Buffy.

"The hunter's sort of right. I'm not a demon," she stated with obvious distaste at the title. "You humans tend to use that word much too loosely. Demons can't create, they can only destroy. I, on the other hand, am creation. I am a Mother, a Goddess… and you," she said, regarding Buffy with distaste, "You're not fit to be my child. You reek of human frailty and mortality. But, unfortunately, we're still connected. Those men did steal some of my power when they made that first Slayer and I'm finally here to get it back."

Buffy shrugged, attempting to appear unruffled by this woman's words. "After ten-thousand-years, I say finders, keepers."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "Even if that is true, I think the statute of limitations on that little caper expired a long time ago. Sorry lady, you'll just have to buck-up and find a way to deal. Maybe you should call Oprah, cry it out with her."

Anger flashed briefly in the brunette's eyes, but she shrugged it off and smiled sweetly at the pair. "I'm not the monster you two make me out to be," she said in a conversational tone. "I just want what's rightfully mine. Just one girl." She reached out a hand to touch the side of the building, but drew it back when her flesh began to sizzle and smoke. "My true vessel's in there," she continued. "I can feel her. You give her to me and I'll let the rest of you live. I think that's a pretty fair trade."

"Well in that case," Buffy said drawing back a fist, "allow me to counter your offer with a lovely set of broken teeth."

Buffy immediately regretted delivering that blow. She drew back her hand and rubbed at her fist almost involuntarily. She'd punched brick walls that were softer than this woman's face. Going in blind, she decided, might have been a little hasty. In fact, it was definitely time for her and Dean to hold their heads high and bravely run like hell. Then, to her horror, Eve suddenly morphed into her real mother, Joyce Summers. She froze.

"How dare you," she breathed out, unable to quit staring at this perfect replica of her beloved mom.

Dean took in Buffy's hurt and horrified expression and immediately remembered the picture hanging in the living room that held this woman's likeness. This sick freak had turned into Buffy's dead mother. He was going to kill this whore. He held up his gun arm and aimed at the woman.

"You're a real bitch," he accused her angrily.

Eve didn't seem to notice or even hear Dean. Instead, she quickly snatched Buffy up by the front of her coat and held her with her feet dangling off the ground, so that they were eye-to-eye.

"You've always been an ungrateful little brat," she said in Joyce's voice. "Maybe you'd have turned
out better if I'd smacked you around some. You know what they say, *spare the rod, spoil the child.*"

After saying the last part, Eve slapped Buffy across the face with her free hand, then released her nonchalantly and dusted off her palms. Dean managed to catch her now-unconscious form before she hit the ground. From his kneeling position, he quickly fired off a shot, hitting Eve directly in the heart. It was purely out of anger, because he was damn sure it wouldn't do any real good.

"Consecrated iron," she observed flippantly. "It does kinda sting." She frowned at the hole in her dress for a moment before smoothing her hand over it and restoring the garment to perfect condition. She uttered a bored sigh before continuing. "Obviously a few millennia wasn't enough time for you two monkeys to develop a sense of reason. Oh well," she shrugged casually, "maybe the witch that worked these protection spells has a little more sense, but, if not, I can always skin her alive and incinerate you all," she added cheerfully.

Before Dean could tell Eve exactly where she could stick her reason, she was gone. She'd disappeared into thin air and he wasn't about to complain about that either. They obviously weren't ready to face her. Besides, he was more concerned with Buffy at the moment. He'd seen her take plenty of punches and never once get knocked out, but one slap from this bitch had put her out cold. He wasn't sure he wanted to ponder the implications of that. Any way you looked at it, it still spelled 'fucked'. Right now he had to concentrate on getting her inside and raising the alarm before Momma decided to make an encore appearance.

Buffy started to come around as Dean carried her into the infirmary. She groaned when the sound of him barking orders made it feel like someone was beating on the inside of her skull with a sledgehammer.

"I think she won that one," she moaned as he laid her on one of the beds. Allie immediately came over and brushed Dean aside as she began checking her over. Buffy decided that the evil penlight the girl shined in her eyes would definitely have to be destroyed… and she'd get right on that (just as soon as the room stopped spinning).

"We have to warn everybody," she murmured to the two or three very concerned looking Deans that were standing behind Allie.

"Xander's on it," he assured her. "I think most everybody's already here, but if they're not, they're on their way. Looks like the virgins aren't the only ones on lockdown."

"Oh no," Buffy managed to say before the nausea nearly overtook her. Allie was ready for this and quickly shoved a pan beneath her head.

"Dean, go away. I'm gonna be sick," she groaned miserably as she struggled for self control.

"Don't be stupid," he reasoned. "Baby, I'm sure you have a concussion. Puking's part of the package."

"I don't care," Buffy whined desperately. "It's gross."

"Sorry Dean," Allie said firmly as she pointed toward the door. "You heard the lady."

Dean reluctantly allowed himself to be evicted. He knew losing your lunch in front of people wasn't exactly fun, but right now it seemed like Buffy's vanity should be the least of her worries. But, then again, if she was still 'Buffy enough' to be worried about that sort of thing, she must be relatively okay. At least that was one good sign. Besides, it looked like there were quite a few people gathering around looking for answers and he guessed he'd have to fill everybody in.
Giles, Willow, and Xander had appeared along with quite a few of the Slayers and unfortunately that squirrely-assed Andrew too. If he wasn't sure he could crush that dude like a bug, Dean would be afraid of being stuck in a hole and forced to rub lotion on his skin. Jeez, that guy was making him even more uncomfortable lately. The way he stared at him reminded him of *Fatal Attraction*. He was glad he didn't have a pet rabbit.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted his brother and Faith hurrying toward him. He didn't think Eve was particularly gunning for Sam, but that didn't mean he wasn't glad to see that he'd made it safely inside the building.

"Did she say which girl she wanted?" Giles asked when Dean had finished recounting their encounter with Eve.

"No," he replied, "but it seemed like she had someone in mind."

"This could be good," Willow said, trying to sound positive. "If Eve really was the source of the Slayers' power, then we know she's already been banished from this dimension once. We'll just have to figure out how they did it and do it again."

"That should be easy," Giles replied sarcastically, "I'm sure I just overlooked that incantation when I was reading through my books for the one-billionth time."

Dean noted that lately, the Watcher had been looking even more frazzled and if the lingering smell of brandy was any indication, he figured he was well on his way to actually becoming the British version of Bobby.

"Actually," Sam said, "I think I might be able to help with that. I just need to talk to Dean first."

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"What?" Dean asked suspiciously after his brother had ushered him into the break room and shut the door behind him. Sam had that determined look on his face, the one that usually meant he was about to do something that Dean wasn't going to like.

"Dammit Sam," he ground out once his brother had confirmed his suspicions. "You're gonna get yourself killed."

"No I'm not," Sam argued in his most reasonable tone (the one that made Dean want to punch him). "Dean, you know we don't have another choice. We're sitting ducks here. This might be the only shot we have. I promise you, I'm not trying to dredge up a bunch of memories. I just want to find that library. That's it. Nothing else."

Dean cursed and wondered if Giles would be willing to share some of his brandy. He knew Sam was right, but that didn't mean the whole idea didn't freak him the hell out. Besides, he'd never felt so torn. He couldn't let Sam run off to Kansas by himself where he might have some sort of collapse and he couldn't leave Buffy or the Hellmouth just when the Queen Bitch from Hell had finally decided to show her face.

"Sam," he pleaded uselessly.

As he often did, Sam proved that he was extremely skilled at reading his older brother's thoughts.

"I'll get Bobby to meet me there, okay? You know he will. He's closer than we are anyway."

"You'll go meet him first," Dean said firmly. "I don't want you stepping one foot in Kansas by
yourself. Promise me or I tie your ass up. I don't care Sam. I mean it."

Sam sighed. "Dean, that's going to take me two days out of the way, we can't afford that. How about I meet him somewhere outside of Kansas? He can drive over into Missouri or I can meet up with him in Nebraska. I'll check in with you every hour," he added half-jokingly.

"Fine," Dean relented, desperately hoping this wasn't going to end in disaster.

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By the time Dean was allowed back in the infirmary, he was relieved to see that Buffy's color was much better and, aside from the large bruise across her cheek, she was sitting up and looking more like herself. She seemed embarrassed and even a little apprehensive to see him though. He couldn't believe she was being so silly about getting sick, chicks had weird priorities sometimes.

"We've all blown chunks before," he teased as he kissed her on the forehead. "I think I can get past it."

Buffy frowned in embarrassment. "Yeah, well I've gotta say that was a first for me. After being knocked out anyway. I don't know what's wrong with me. I must be getting old."

"Well, that was quite a blow," he said sympathetically.

"It was a bitch slap," she mumbled shamefully.

Dean didn't comment. The fact that Mommy was that incredibly powerful was just a depressing subject. He reached out a hand and gently examined the bruises on Buffy's face. She looked like somebody had whacked her upside the head with a two-by-four. He seriously wanted to dismember that Eve bitch.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," she sighed. "I'm mostly just humiliated. Plus, I think I have whiplash. Maybe I should sue her."

"Probably wouldn't get much. Bitch doesn't even have any shoes."

Buffy smiled slightly and then stared at her hands for a moment before continuing. "What did you think about what she said out there?" she asked quietly.

"What that 'call me mommy' crap? Come on, that's ridiculous."

"My power came from somewhere. Why would she lie about that?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Evil things like to lie. I don't think they really need a good reason. Anyway, so what if that is where it came from? You're just using some of her mojo, doesn't mean you're like her."

"I hope not," Buffy replied solemnly. "She's not just a monster, Dean. She's the mother of all the monsters. She's Kate Gosselin from caveman times!"

Dean sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. "So this isn't about you tossing your cookies? You're actually letting that thing get to you?"

"Well yeah. I mean the puking was gross and all, but I'm a little more disturbed about the fact that I might be invited to the next annual Adam's Family Reunion. Can you imagine what's in their
covered dishes? I'm pretty sure the fried chicken won't actually be chicken."

Dean laughed a little despite the sour look Buffy shot him. She was actually serious about this crazy stuff. "Baby, listen to yourself. You're not a monster. If it makes you feel better, think about it this way. When people kick it, they either go to heaven or hell... depending on what they've done. But Eve's kids, whether they're good little monsters or bad little monsters, they all go to the same place. When you..." he paused, not wanting to say 'died'. "Well, you know what I'm saying. You didn't go to Purgatory, you went upstairs. You're not one of hers."

"You really don't think so?" she asked hopefully.

"No! Buffy, you're not like Eve. Trust me, I live with you. I know you," he stressed seriously. "I meant what I said out there. After thousands of years and God knows how many Slayers, that power's not hers anymore. It's yours and you use it to help people. Bitch just needs to learn to let go. Besides, you have way too many shoes to be her kid," he teased.

"I guess," she replied, smiling a little. "But I still don't like thinking I have anything in common with that thing. She's so cruel. I can't believe she turned into mom. I'm just glad Dawn wasn't here to see that. She would've freaked."

"Yeah, that sucked," he agreed as he reached out to pat her leg comfortingly.

"So, what are we going to do?" she asked with a wry smile. "I don't think brute force is gonna cut it this time. Usually that's my go-to plan."

"Mine too," Dean agreed. "I guess we could call up Cas. He said he wanted in on this one. Plus, we can hope Willow will be able to keep the bitch out for a few more days. Sam's going on a milk run to pickup the Campbell family archives. Surely there's something we can use in there. Cause if not..."

"We're all a bunch of fluffy, harmless, little marshmallows just waiting to be roasted?"

"Something like that."

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Sam patiently endured his brother's checking and re-checking of his stock of weapons and supplies. He knew it was taking a lot for Dean to let him go without tagging along, so he didn't allow his bitching and grousing about his packing skills to get under his skin. He didn't want Dean to go, to be honest. He felt like retrieving these books was one way of taking responsibility for that missing year and he needed to do that on his own. Mostly on his own anyway. Bobby would still be there, but that was still a whole lot different than having his well-meaning, yet often controlling older brother around. It wasn't that he felt like bringing the books back would even the score, but still, if he was able to make something good come out of that year, he was going to do it.

Dean had just finished checking Sam's oil and closing the hood of his truck when Faith appeared. He seemed to recognize that they probably wanted to be alone, so he reluctantly went back inside after giving his brother a few more 'helpful' suggestions and making him promise (once again) that he wouldn't make any moves without Bobby.

Faith smiled after him and shook her head. "Wow, dude's kinda overbearing sometimes, ain't he?"

"He has his moments," Sam admitted. "He's worried. That usually makes him a lot worse."

"I'm not worried," Faith said sincerely. "You'll be fine. Just try to hurry back. It's probably gonna get a little hot around here."
"Yeah, looks that way. You be careful," he said seriously.

Faith shrugged and grinned. "You know me. I'll be right in the thick of it, but I'll still make out okay. I thrive on this shit. Bitch don't know who she's dealing with."

Sam returned her smile. "You're probably right about that," he agreed.

Faith slapped him lightly on the arm before telling him to take care. She wasn't so great at goodbyes. She was completely taken aback when he stepped forward, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her long and passionately.

When he finally let her go, she found herself unable to respond to his 'goodbye' or whatever the hell it was he said. She wasn't really listening. For the first time in her life she'd actually been blown away by a guy and by a simple kiss of all things. She found herself standing there, staring into space like some dork as he drove away.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I don't think they ever told where the Campbell family library was hidden (as in what state). I'm assuming Kansas since that's where the Campbells were from, but I could be wrong. Let me know if you have evidence that suggests otherwise. I love little details.
"Andrew, get off your damn knees. You're embarrassing yourself." Dean said gruffly after the younger man had burst into Buffy's office to kneel at Castiel's feet.

"But he's an Angel of the Lord," he argued. "I must show my fealty."

"*Your what?* Dude, speak English."

"Dean is right," Castiel remarked. "Please rise. I have yet to prove myself worthy of Godly worship."

"What the hell, Cas?" Dean asked half-seriously. "You up for a promotion? Personally, I wouldn't recommend it. Probably just be longer hours for the same crap pay."

Before Castiel could reply, Buffy grabbed Andrew by his shirt collar and began to roughly drag him out of the room.

"Give me a second," she said tightly.

"Andrew," she whispered angrily as she pushed him up against the wall in the hallway outside. "What did I tell you about this obsessed fanboy act? Do you remember the things Sam said he would do to you?"

"I don't think those things are anatomically possible," Andrew argued.

"Try us."

"But Buffy," he implored petulantly, "that's Castiel."

"Yeah, I know. Thrilling stuff. The guy's a real blast at a party," she observed dryly.

"His gaze is even more piercing than Carver described it," he remarked dreamily. "I just —"

The Slayer pointed a silencing finger in his face. "We don't have time for this. You can ask for his autograph later."

"Really?"

"No!" she snapped back. "Go away, Andrew."

Buffy re-entered her office and shut the door behind her, shaking her head in exasperation. "Sorry about him," she said. "He's kind of excitable."

The angel nodded his head stoically, all the while intensely observing Buffy. His 'piercing gaze' was making her a little nervous. He'd never shown that much interest in her before and she wasn't sure she liked it.
"Anyway," she continued self-consciously. "Where were we? Oh yeah, supposedly we stole her power and now, after like a billion years, she's finally decided to get all snippy about it. So, blah, blah… she gets her 'true vessel' or we all die. You know, the usual threats."

"But, she did not want you?" Castiel asked for the second time, sounding like he was almost desperate for that confirmation.

"Look at me," Buffy remarked as she pointed to the large bruise on the side of her face. "If she'd wanted me, there wouldn't have been much to stop her."

"Chick's got some freaky thing for virgins," Dean added with a shrug. "Don't ask me. I don't get it."

"Virgins have historically been very important in ritual," Giles offered with a grin. He was proud of himself. It was the first intelligent thing that had come out of his mouth since the angel had appeared.

"Do you know the identity of the Slayer she is seeking?" Castiel asked.

"No dude," Dean said. "We told you that already. It doesn't matter anyway, because, whoever it is, she ain't getting anywhere near her."

The angel appeared to be deep in thought. "This turn of events was unexpected," he remarked, almost to himself.

"You're telling me," Buffy said. "This wasn't the way I wanted to start the week. I hate Mondays."

"If she returns, pray for me," Castiel said, disregarding Buffy's remarks. "It is not safe for you to face Eve without me."

"Fine with me," Dean replied. "Just don't take forever to answer the call. Otherwise, you might only get to face a giant pile of our charred bones. Just sayin'.

"I will come immediately," the angel assured him.

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Buffy frowned as she watched Dean checking the clip on his pistol before stowing it away in his waist band.

"I don't suppose there's any way you'll listen to me and not go out there?" she asked.

Dean brushed off her concern. "I'm just going to get us some supplies. We'll need some more clothes if we're stuck here for a while."

"And you want some beer?" she observed knowingly.

"Well yeah," he grinned. "A man's gotta have the basics. Besides, I need a breather from Giles for a few minutes. He's killing me with all this Campbell crap. Jeez, I don't know who's my bigger fan, him or Andrew. At least Giles doesn't seem to be rockin' the dirty thoughts."

"Giles is just excited about getting new books," she remarked, deciding to completely disregard Andrew for the moment. "Apparently you come from a very famous hunting family. It seems even Watchers are not immune to the perils of fanboydom."

Dean rolled his eyes. "I hate to disappoint the guy, but aside from Mom, I wasn't exactly the biggest fan of that side of the family."
"I'm going with you," Buffy announced suddenly, as if she'd just come to a decision.

"Nah," you need to stay here. "The girls need you. We never know when Eve might show up again and try to tear the building apart. Besides, it's safer for me out there. Bitch could give a rat's ass about me. As far as she's concerned, I'm just a caveman with a shower. Which is actually pretty damn nice," he observed with a nod. "It's about time we had an apocalypse where I get to be a regular working stiff."

"But –," Buffy began to argue.

"Please baby, just humor me?" he asked as he smoothed her hair back. "Stay here, okay? You've been knocked around enough for one day."

"Okay," she conceded. It was hard to say 'no' to protective-Dean, he was just too cute. Plus, she could usually get anything she wanted out of him when he was in one of these moods. She put on an extra-charming smile before adding.

"Since you're determined to go out anyway, will you run through Starbucks and get me a Salted Carmel Hot Chocolate? With extra whipped cream?" she asked hopefully.

"What? That sounds disgusting."

"No, they're totally amazing. I'm dying for one. Please."

"So, you're feeling better then?" he asked. He was concerned because Buffy had been struck by another round of nausea shortly after Cas had disappeared.

"Yeah, for now at least. I'm really starting to think that hag may have cursed me," she pouted. "If this isn't over by tomorrow, I'm getting Willow to give me some of her anti-curse potion."

"I'd definitely give it a day," Dean agreed. "It was probably just the blow to the head. Besides, trust me, you really don't wanna drink that crap if you don't have to. You think you feel sick now…"

Dean had just slipped back behind the wheel of the Impala when he was startled by the sudden appearance of an unfamiliar woman in the passenger seat beside him. He cursed after nearly spilling Buffy's pimped-out Starbucks' hot chocolate all over him. That really would've sucked, because he sure as hell wasn't going through the humiliation of ordering it twice.

"Hey there handsome, have you missed me?" the girl beside him asked with a wink and a sultry smile.

He stared at the pretty redheaded stranger in confusion for a few moments. "Eve?" he asked tentatively.

The girl smirked and then her blue eyes flashed black. "Guess again, dumbass."

"Meg."

"Yep, got it in two. Give the man a cigar," she said as she checked her lipstick in the Impala's rearview mirror. "Got myself a brand new meatsuit. You like? Personally, I'm kind of attached to this one. She's sexy. Reminds me of that chick from Mad Men."

"Yeah, guess she'd be pretty hot if there wasn't a gutter skank riding around in her. What do you
want bitch?" he asked irritably.

"Now Dean," Meg scolded with a fake pout. "That's no way to treat a girl who's just trying to help you out."

He snorted. "Yeah right. How stupid do you think I am?"

"Do you really want me to answer that question?" she asked smugly. "Where's sweet, little, doe-eyed Sammy by the way? I hear he's all souled-up again. Gotta say that was some disappointing news. The other version was damn sexy."

Dean scowled at the demon beside him. "Let's try this again," he said. "I'll say it nice and slow for ya. What - do - you - want - bitch?"

Meg rolled her eyes. "Fine. We'll skip the awkward small talk. I just wanted to let you in on some juicy gossip anyway. It seems our friend Crowley pulled a fast one on us. He's still kicking."

The demon smiled when Dean lost his poker face for a brief moment.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"I have my sources," she replied coyly. "Not all of Crowley's toadies are quite as loyal as he'd like to think. There's still a few of us left who aren't too happy with the way he turned on Lucifer."

"Cas roasted that bastard," Dean stated dismissively. "You saw it with your own eyes."

"True. But, like I said, I think he pulled a fast one on all of us. Your little guardian angel may be one hell of a kisser, but he's not exactly in Crowley's league when it comes to being sneaky. Tell him not to take it too personally though. The crafty devil even had me fooled for a while and I pride myself on being extra sneaky."

"Okay, so say it is true. Why are you telling me? What's your angle?" Dean asked suspiciously.

"Guess you're on to me," she shrugged. "I'm not telling you this for purely altruistic reasons. The thing is, you and the Giant Lumberjack are my favorite celebrity couple. I love to keep tabs on all your zany adventures. You boys should really have your own TV show."

"Is there a point to this monologue?" Dean asked impatiently.

"The point is that I just happen to know you have an entire army of Vampire Slayers on your side these days. Since my ranks have become extremely thin, I thought you selfless heroes might be willing to step up and give me a hand with our Crowley problem. Trust me. If he pops Purgatory, it's not going to be fun for any of us."

"So, you're saying Crowley's working with Eve?"

"Eve would never work with Crowley," she stated, clearly implying Dean was stupid for even suggesting it. "She's a little too pissed at him for practicing his vivisection skills on her precious little rugrats. I'd kinda like to see her get a hold of him myself, but, then again, if she wins out we're all screwed. Sadly, all of our fates are in the hands of you, your goofy brother, your braniac girlfriend, and the rest of the PowerPuff Girls… and oh yea, Clarence the amazing Angel who's still trying to earn his wings. Of course, I hear he's pretty tied up in that ugly mess going on upstairs," she added with an indifferent shrug. "Overall, I've gotta tell ya, I'm not too impressed with your lineup. Too bad you're the only game in town."
When Dean didn't comment, Meg continued.

"You look confused, Dean. Haven't you ever wondered why all the big players are so interested in humans?"

"Because they're a bunch of dickless control freaks with no other way to get their kicks?"

"Nope, wrong again. It's your soul, genius. The human soul is the purest, most powerful source of energy in the universe. It's the only reason why anyone has any interest in you meatsuits. Before you and Sammy-boy went and screwed up the natural order, things were fairly even. The halos got their share, we got ours, and Eve got hers. Now everything's up for grabs and Crowley thinks he can take a shortcut by cracking open Purgatory and stealing Eve's slice of the soul pie. Do you see where I'm going here, gorgeous? If Crowley opens Purgatory, he goes nuclear and he wins. If Mommy Dearest manages to turn all of you meat puppets first, she gets the biggest slice of the pie and _checkmate_, she wins. Either way it's game over for both of us. So, what do you say we call a truce?"

"I don't work with demons," Dean said flatly.

"You know, you keep sayin' that, but I'm just not feeling it. Why don't you save us all some time and can the macho posturing for once? You know you don't have a choice… _once again_. I'm your best shot at finding Crowley. I promise we can all go back to trying to kill each other once this is all over with. Tell ya what. I'll even throw in a gesture of good faith. You help me out and I'll knock off Angel for you."

"Which angel? You'll have to be a little more specific. Cause I'm a fan of so many,"

Meg gasped in pleased surprise. "_You're kidding me?_ You don't know? Oh sweetie, you are not going to like this," she said with obviously false sympathy in her voice. "I'm so glad I get to be the one to share the good news."

"What?" Dean asked sarcastically. "More juicy demon gossip?"

"Oh, it's the best kind of gossip," she replied, smiling happily. "It's the kind where that big, dumb, cocky Dean Winchester gets his tender little heart broken. You wanna hear it?"

"Do I have a choice?" he asked irritably. "I've got the feeling I'd have to blow my brains out to shut you up."

"Okay then, you asked for it," she said with barely contained glee. "Angel isn't an 'angel'. He's a vampire and he's almost as big of a pain-in-the-ass as you. He brought down Hell's entire law firm for one thing. Contracts have been a huge hassle ever since. Despite the rumors, there aren't as many lawyers willing to sell their soul as you'd think."

"Guess that sucks for you," Dean commented with an indifferent shrug. "So, okay, we've got a vampire named 'Angel'. Makes perfect sense so far. Real vampire or fake vampire?" he asked flippantly.

"You're such an annoying idiot," Meg remarked, ignoring his question and continuing on with her story. "Angel got his human soul returned to him because of this gypsy curse. Anyway, he spent the better part of a century being all boring and tortured and broody, but then, he saw a sweet, innocent, high school girl named Buffy and it was love at first sight," she said, swooning dramatically. "So, he decided to rise up out of the gutter and join her in the fight against naughty badness everywhere."

"Some ancient pervert tried to _Twilight_ Buffy?" Dean asked angrily.
"Oh he didn't try, champ. He went all the way to home base. But, unfortunately, they only got to have that one night of passion. Seems he loses that pesky soul of his if he gets too big of a happy. Guess that means your honey is one hot tramp in the sack," she prodded cruelly. "The whole mess broke poor little Buffy's heart too. She ended up having to put loverboy down like a rabid dog. But, like so many of you bad pennies, he turned right back up. Now he's off doing good and being broody again. All while managing to maintain his meticulously gelled hair. He's quite the inspiration."

Meg paused to take in Dean's carefully controlled features, noting with satisfaction his underlying pain. She hadn't had this much fun in years.

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked tightly.

"Because, it's funny as hell," the demon admitted with a grin. "But, aside from that obvious bonus, I'm telling you because I thought you might like to know that your status as Supergirl's favorite boy toy is rapidly expiring. See, Angel's her true love or something pathetic like that, but they can't be together because of his curse. But luckily for her, there's this ancient prophecy called 'Shanshu'. The gist is, if Angel keeps up his goody-two-shoes act, he gets to be a real boy again. Most of the big shots think that'll happen pretty soon… and when it does, guess where your ass is going, sugar? You ever heard that song 'Hit the Road Jack'? Well, I think that about sums it up."

"I don't believe anything that comes out of your mouth."

"Ask her then," Meg challenged. "Hell, ask your own 'angel'. I'm sure he knows about the prophecy. All the cool kids are talkin' about it."

"Get out of my sight," Dean growled angrily.

"Awww," the demon pouted as she reached out to pat him on the head. "It's upset. Poor baby. Why don't you let me fix it for you? All you have to do is convince the Slayers to help me go after Crowley and I'll put Angel where he'll never come back. Then, you'll get to keep your little blond bimbo all to yourself and she'll never be the wiser. Nobody's even asking for your soul this time. It's your lucky day."

"Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus Spiritus," Dean began. "Omnis satanica –."

"Real mature, Dean," Meg interrupted, sounding unimpressed. "Call me when you're ready to talk like an adult," she added before disappearing.

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"That doesn't make sense," Castiel stated emphatically. "The demon is certain that Crowley is alive?"

"She sounded pretty damn sure," Dean confirmed. "I know she's a lying skank, but I don't see what else her game might be. I think we should look into it anyway."

"I will. There must be some kind of mistake."

Dean shrugged. "Crowley is one tricky bastard. You don't get to be the King of Hell by playing it straight." He paused for a moment before asking hesitantly, "Hey Cas, you ever hear of this vampire with a soul named Angel?"

"Yes, I am aware of him," he answered in a distracted tone.

Dean sighed heavily. "Is he really some hero prophecy-guy? Is dude actually going to get to be a
"human again?"

"It is likely. He has worked tirelessly to regain his humanity." Castiel confirmed before adding, "I am sorry Dean, I don't have time to discuss this."

"But – Dammit Cas!" Dean cursed when realized the angel had already disappeared.

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Buffy was concerned about Dean. She'd only seen him this tense on one other occasion and that was because he thought the 'black-eyed hell demons' might be playing Cleveland. This time, however, it didn't appear to be a false alarm and Buffy had to admit she was feeling pretty freaked about it herself. It wasn't like they actually needed another big bad to deal with. One at a time - that's all she asked and she didn't think it was an unreasonable request.

They had already taken some extra precautions to keep that sort of demon out, but Dean was determined to re-check their defenses. He'd recruited Willow to help him and the two of them had gone over the entire building with a fine toothed comb. Andrew, surprisingly, had set aside his hero worship long enough to actually provide some genuine assistance. Apparently those stupid books did give some pretty good tips for dealing with this kind of thing and, thankfully, he was smart enough not to volunteer where he'd learned to draw a perfect devil's trap.

As if the newest threat wasn't enough, Buffy was also convinced that something else was up with Dean. He was avoiding her. It didn't take a genius to figure that much out. It was weird, because he didn't seem to be angry with her. He was just distant and kind of sad, almost like it hurt him to even look at her. She'd been having a hard time cornering him though. He'd suddenly turned into Mister Busy Bee. Finally, after she'd made her bedtime rounds and checked-in on all the girls, she found him sitting alone in the break room, drinking a beer and apparently intent upon cleaning every single gun he owned. Something she was pretty sure he'd done less than two days ago.

"Those guns must get dirty awfully fast," she remarked.

He smiled at her half-heartedly and shrugged. "It's habit. I was raised by a Marine."

Buffy decided to just come out with it. "Are you upset with me?" she asked.

"Why should I be?" he asked in return, keeping his eyes trained on the gun he was cleaning. He was obviously attempting to appear nonchalant, but failing miserably at it.

"I don't know," she replied, "but something's wrong here and don't even try to say it's nothing. I know you. Your 'nothing' usually means a whole lot of something."

Dean looked up at her. "Buffy, we've got a lot going on and I'm kind of stressed. It can wait. It's not important."

Now she knew it was serious. The phrase 'it's not important' was Dean-speak for 'I'm hiding something really important that I'd prefer to avoid'. She closed the door, pulled out a chair and turned it around so she'd be facing Dean.

"You might as well just tell me now," she said, "because I'm not going anywhere until you do."

"Buffy."

"Not going anywhere," she repeated firmly.
Dean sighed, shook his head, and then proceeded to pick up another gun and began dismantling it like she wasn't even in the room. Buffy was about to say something else when he finally spoke up.

"I know about Angel," he said flatly.

"Oh," she replied quietly and then paused to gather her thoughts. She was caught off guard. She certainly wasn't expecting this conversation right now. "So, you're pissed that I dated a vampire and you're shutting me out. Is that it?" she finally asked.

"I'm not pissed," he denied. "I sure as hell don't like it and I don't really understand it, but that's not it."

"Then what is it?" she asked expectantly.

"I don't want to get into this right now," he said tightly.

"Too bad."

"Fine," he said as he sat down the gun barrel he'd been swabbing out. "Buffy I..." he began hesitantly. "I can't stay here once this whole mess is over," he said. "I'm not leaving until that Eve bitch is dead and I'm sure Crowley is actually toast, but after that... I just can't be here."

Buffy felt like the rug had been pulled out from under her. She was speechless. She couldn't believe Dean was going to walk away after everything they'd been through together. She hadn't expected him to like learning about her ex, but she hadn't anticipated that he would completely reject her without even allowing her to give her side of the story.

"So that's it?" she asked angrily, once she'd finally found her voice again. "You don't approve of my high school boyfriend. So you're just going to walk away? Just like that?"

Dean clenched his hands a few times before banging a fist on the table. "What am I supposed to do?" he asked, raising his voice for the first time. "Do you expect me to just sit around here and wait until dude Shamu's and you show me the door? You really think I can do that?"

Buffy just stared at him with her mouth open, so he continued.

"The day he comes back for you, I'll probably kill his ass," he stated in a deadly serious tone. "Even if the man is human, I'm not sure I can trust myself and I don't want to hurt you like that. You deserve to be with someone who makes you happy. I can't take that away from you, but I can't wait around for it to happen either."

"Dean!" she exclaimed. "Are you serious? You really think I'm just using you until I can get Angel back? Really? That's what you think of me?"

"It's not like that," he attempted to explain. "I'm not accusing you of anything, okay? But you want what you want. It's as simple as that. Dude's your 'true love' or some shit," he added with bitter sarcasm. "I know when to step back."

"Did that demon woman tell you this?" she asked incredulously. "Is that what this is all about? A demon told you how I feel? And you believed her? You?"

"Demons lie," he agreed, "but they can also tell the truth if they know it's not what you want to hear."

Buffy shook her head. "I can't believe you. Dean, look at me," she said firmly, placing her hand on
his arm. "Angel is my past. Yes, I loved him and I still care about him and I hope he does get to be human again. I really do. He deserves it. But, if that happens tomorrow, I still don't want to be with him. To be honest, I'd be shocked if he was planning on being with me. We live separate lives. We have for a really long time." She paused and took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm in love with you. You're the one. You're the man I want to spend the rest of my life with and the idea scares the hell out of me, but I even think I want to have your children. So, don't ever let a demon or anybody else tell you how I feel."

Dean stared at her for a moment with a hopeful expression on his face, before shaking his head sadly.

"You don't know what you're saying," he said. "I'm not who you think I am. That other guy, he's earning his humanity back… but mine's probably gone for good. You have no idea what I've done."

"Dean –."

"Buffy just listen to me, okay?" he interrupted gruffly. "We're in this mess because I jacked up the natural order. If it weren't for me, this business with Eve wouldn't even be happening and you wouldn't have to worry about demons on the Hellmouth. They're not supposed to be here. They only came because I couldn't…" He paused and kneaded as his temples for a moment. He was obviously having a hard time discussing this subject. "Because I couldn't keep saying 'no','" he finally added. "There are things you don't know about me. I was –."

"I know about hell," Buffy said quickly. She couldn't stand to watch him struggle any longer. "I already know."

"Who told you?" he asked in surprise.

"That doesn't matter right now. You just need to believe that none of this is your fault," she told him with tears in her eyes.

"Don't do that," he said angrily. "Don't feel sorry for me. I don't deserve it. I'm not some innocent victim here. You know that nightmare I have all the time? Do you know what it's about?" he asked. "It's not about poor me being tortured in hell, if that's what you think. It's about me doing the torturing. If you knew the things I did down there… the things I enjoyed doing, you'd never want to lay eyes on me again."

Buffy shook her head and sighed. She didn't know how to convince him not to hate himself. It was tearing her apart.

"Dean, I know about the torture too," she said gently, "and I also know that you think you broke the world, because you couldn't keep saying 'no' after thirty years of constant torment."

Dean looked completely shocked and ashamed. "You knew about that?" he asked quietly.

"I knew," she confirmed. "And I'm not trying to belittle what you went through, but it doesn't matter to me. I don't blame you. I never did. Not even for one second."

"But, you don't know how bad it was," he argued. "I was a monster. I'll never forgive myself."

"You should," she said sadly. "You're asking things of yourself that you'd never ask of anyone else. Even if I did believe that you could possibly be single handedly responsible for all the misery in the world, no one else could've held up to that kind of torture for that long. If it was me, would you blame me for giving in and saying 'yes'? Would you blame Sam? I know you wouldn't," she answered for him. "Dean, you couldn't fail, because the game was fixed. There was no way to win.
Besides, it's all a lie! These things like to go on and on about their precious natural order, but they're the ones always looking for any excuse to break it. Apparently, I threw off the delicate balance when I came back from the dead. This big evil was so offended that it was just forced to try to destroy the world. It's ridiculous! And, oh yeah, I'll bet you everything I own that the next time we see Eve, she'll claim that we forced her into this when Willow used my scythe to activate all the potentials. I'm sure she doesn't really want to have to try and kill us all," she said sarcastically.

Dean was quiet. Buffy could tell he was struggling with himself and on the verge of losing his self-control. She was usually respectful of his desire to hide his emotions, but in this instance she didn't care. She wasn't letting him off the hook and she wasn't playing along this time. She took him by the hands and pulled him to his feet and then wrapped her arms around him tightly.

"You don't have to earn your humanity back," she said as she held him against her. "You have more than anybody I know. It's one of the reasons I love you so much."

He didn't reply, but he did return her embrace and she knew he'd lost the battle and shed a few tears. It seemed like they stayed that way forever, before he finally pulled back slightly so that he could look at her.

"I don't know if I'm doing the right thing," he said. "I still don't believe I deserve to be here with you, but I can't bring myself to walk away. I just want you to be happy. I want you to have what you deserve."

"If you really want me to be happy, then you'll have to stay, because you'll break my heart if you leave. Me and you, we are the right thing. I know that. I can feel it. I've never been more certain about anything in my life. So, tough, you'll just have to get over this self-sacrificing guilt trip you've got going on, because unless you can tell me that you don't love me, I'm not letting you go anywhere."

"Of course I love you," he replied. "You know that."

"I kinda thought so, but it's still nice for a girl to hear it sometimes. In fact," she added, suddenly looking extremely irritated. "You completely suck! You've ruined everything."

In response to Dean's expression of complete confusion, Buffy went on a rant.

"I've been waiting so long to hear that and you've completely screwed it up. You were supposed to tell me first and maybe even give me flowers or take me to a nice restaurant. I sure as hell wasn't supposed to be standing here in the stupid break room with no makeup on and my hair in a ponytail. You destroyed my entire fluffy, romantic fantasy!"

"Sorry," he shrugged kind of sheepishly. "I guess I kinda suck at the romantic boyfriend gig."

"Yes, you do. So, say it again," she demanded. "With no smirking or eye rolling."

"I love you," he said sincerely. "You're family."

Buffy smiled and kissed him. She decided she was pretty darn happy with that. It was a simple declaration, but this was Dean she was dealing with. Besides, she knew the word 'family' was sacred to him. She didn't believe there was any higher status in his book.

When the kiss finally ended Dean cupped her cheek in his hand. "I don't know what we're going to do," he admitted. "This whole situation is screwed seven ways to Sunday and I'm not sure how I'm going to fix it."
"We'll fix the natural order," Buffy announced confidently. "Consider it fully balanced and re-ordered."

"You're gonna fix the natural order?" Dean asked, with a slight grin.

"No, we're gonna fix the natural order. All of these idiots are going back in their corners and they'll be happy with whatever slice of the soul pie we give 'em. They're our souls anyway. They should be glad to get anything."

"And how do we plan on doing that? God's sure not going to help. He's too busy playing skee ball in Jersey."

"Seriously? Skee ball?"

"I don't know," Dean shrugged. "Nobody does. That's the problem."

"Fine then. We don't need his help. We'll do it ourselves. I've decided. The Buffy-foot has been firmly planted. I'm angry now."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Dean was finding himself becoming kind of amused. Buffy was dead serious about this and he'd just noticed that she was wearing these really goofy looking flannel pajamas that had pictures of pink kittens all over them. He'd never seen them before. He guessed she'd borrowed them from one of the girls.

"Baby, don't take this the wrong way, but your badass speech might be more convincing if you weren't covered in a bunch of pink kittens."

Buffy looked down at her pajamas and frowned slightly. "There's only one kitten actually. She's just doing different things in each picture." She pointed in demonstration. "In this one, she's playing with yarn and in this other one she's sleeping. You know, it's like a montage of all her different kitten moments."

"Okay," he nodded, obviously on the verge of bursting out laughing. "That's good to know."

"Go ahead and laugh," Buffy said as she raised her chin proudly, "because the kitten is pissed off too. In fact, she's completely full of kitten-y wrath. This natural order problem is interfering with her happy kitten fun. They'll have to deal with her too."

"Terrifying," Dean remarked. "Now I know those bitches don't stand a chance."

"They don't," Buffy agreed as she looped her arms back around his waist. "Now, clean up this gun mess of yours so that you can make love to me in my office in our comfy new sleeping bag. I require further proof of your devotion."

"Huh, sex in your office," he said thoughtfully, as if pondering the idea. "We've never done that before. Sounds kinda naughty. Count me in."

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"Well, well, well," Meg said when Castiel appeared in front of her. "Have you come to finish what we started? I'm more than happy to oblige. This angel/demon thing has the potential to be seriously nasty," she purred suggestively. "I definitely deserve a spanking... a hard one."

"Who told you that Crowley is alive?" he asked angrily. "You will tell me or I will destroy you."
Meg took in the rage and deadly power radiating from the angel and decided it was best to make a quick escape. She liked this meatsuit, but she was just going to have to find a new one. So, she opened her mouth to smoke out, but realized she was trapped when she felt her throat being crushed. She looked over at Castiel and he was holding his clenched fist in the air as he regarded her coldly. There was no way out this time. She was cornered.
A/N: I wanted to thank everyone who has hung in there with this story (especially my beta isugirl). I realize it's gotten really long and I honestly didn't set out to write the War and Peace of fanfic. According to my outline, this should be wrapped up by mid/late November. However, my outline keeps mysteriously growing on me. I'm not quite sure how that happens. So again, thanks for hanging in there and I hope I can keep your interest for a little while longer.

The chapter title (Friend of the Devil) is one of my all-time favorite Grateful Dead songs, so I've been dying to use it. It's from the album American Beauty (1970).

"I never thought I'd say this," Meg remarked as she panted through another wave of pain, "but you could really go places in hell. Maybe you should consider relocating. I'm impressed," she admitted, managing a pained laugh when Castiel seemed taken aback by that statement. "Seriously, color me shocked. Who'd have thought that the angel with the world's largest stick up his ass could've taught Alistair a few new tricks?"

"Do you have any more names?" Castiel asked angrily.

"No," she snapped back defiantly. "I've told you everything. You can go ahead and kill me now. I'm done with it all anyway. Once you've finished wiping out the few of us still loyal to our father, there's no point in sticking around this shithole. You won," she said bitterly. "Bravo. It's been a fantastic show. You should seriously be up for an Oscar, because your sanctimonious act even had me fooled. I never suspected you'd get in bed with Crowley and I'm guessing the Winchesters are even more gullible, especially Dean. That sentimental sap would never suspect the guardian angel who pulled him from the pit is actually the King of Hell's little bitch. Too bad I won't be around to see the fallout."

"You should show me some respect," he growled, "instead of speaking of things you do not understand. You're an abomination. I am an angel," he emphasized proudly.

Meg smirked. If she was going out, she was going out with the last word.

"So was Lucifer," she reminded him with a triumphant grin.

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"It's an abomination," Giles said as he gazed in distaste at the greasy, rectangular piece of pizza on his plate. He normally didn't dine in the cafeteria with the girls. Now he remembered why.

"You don't like school pizza?" Xander asked in surprise. "Call it nostalgia, but I kinda love it."

"Me too," Dean agreed enthusiastically as he took a bite. "It's good stuff. I never used to skip school on pizza day. Did you know they serve the same kind in prison?"

"Good to know," Xander nodded. "Now I'll have something to look forward to if my life of crime ever catches up with me."
Buffy slid into the seat beside Dean, wearing a sour expression on her face. Her lunch tray was basically empty, aside from a carton of skim milk and a lonely bowl of green Jell-O.

"That's all you're eating?" he asked her.

"Yeah," she replied as she half-heartedly poked at the jiggling cubes of Jell-O with her spoon. "I'm not in the mood for oddly shaped, institutional pizza today."

"Oh come on," he said as he held his half-eaten slice in front of her face. "Don't act like you're too good. You know you love it."

"Ewww," Buffy cringed as she crinkled her nose in disgust and pushed Dean's arm away from her. "I'm going to see Willow," she announced as she rose from her seat.

"You feeling sick again?"

Buffy swallowed hard and frowned. "Oh yeah," she confirmed. "I've definitely been cursed."

Dean started to rise to go with her, but she put a hand on his shoulder and shook her head.

"It's okay," she said. "You stay and enjoy your greasy goodness. I won't be long."

While Dean and Buffy were occupied with their conversation, Xander elbowed Giles and silently mouthed the word 'curse' with a negative shake of his head and raised eyebrows. The Watcher gazed at Xander with a perplexed expression on his face for a moment, before his eyes widened and he looked over at Buffy and then quickly returned his attention to his plate. There were things he'd just rather not know.

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"This is stupid Will," Buffy said sullenly as she sat on the edge of a bed in the infirmary. "I can't believe you won't just give me the anti-curse potion."

"Sorry Buffy, but we have to be sure. You did say you were late for the other kinda curse. You know, the monthly one. Besides, I really don't think you've been jinxed. I'm usually pretty good at sensing that sort of thing. Call it a witchy sixth sense. Plus, don't you think that's a majorly lightweight type of hex for something as powerful as Eve?"

"I dunno," she shrugged. "It seems majorly heavyweight to me. You're not the one yacking every few hours," she added accusingly.

Allie stepped up beside Willow and gazed at Buffy with a sheepish expression on face.

"The test was positive," she said hesitantly.


"Buffy," Allie said gently. "I don't think you're getting what I mean when I say the test was positive. Positive means you have elevated HCG levels." When the Slayer still appeared confused, she added, "It means you're pregnant."

"Damn," Faith exclaimed loudly from behind Allie and Willow. "I just came in here for a Band Aid. I sure as hell didn't expect to walk in on the juiciest gossip of the century."

Buffy regarded the other Slayer with wide eyes. "Oh no," she stressed firmly. "You didn't hear
There's no gossip," she emphasized by shaking her finger. "Because that's not possible! The test is broken. Allie, do it again."

"I can, but I'm sure the results will be the same. It's a fairly straightforward test," she explained.

"How did this happen?" Buffy asked desperately.

Faith laughed. "Come on B, you know how it works. You don't need me to draw a picture."

"But, that's not possible," Buffy repeated.

"Unless you two have been saving it for marriage," Allie remarked doubtfully, "it's entirely possible."

"But, we're careful."

The nurse shrugged and patted her rounded belly. "That's what I said."

"Let me guess," Faith grinned. "You used the good ole pull 'n pray method, didn't ya? You do realize that's how most of us got here."

"Faith!" Buffy exclaimed, sounding horrified. "I..." she trailed off. "I can't be. You don't understand. This isn't a good time. Willow," she said as she turned to her best friend with pleading eyes.

"Congratulations?" she replied with an uncertain smile.

"No. No congratulations. I mean yes - but no, not now. This is so not good. In fact it's bad. Very, very bad. The pinnacle of bad. We're having an apocalypse! The Powers know that, right? You can't have a pregnant Slayer in the middle of Armageddon. There must be a rule somewhere. It's probably in the handbook. It has to be," she stressed.

"Apparently not," Willow said sympathetically.

"We can't tell Dean," she said in a panicky voice.

"But Buffy, he's going to find out," Willow reasoned. "That's not exactly something you can hide for very long. Unless you were planning on... You know," she said hesitantly. "I mean, that would be understandable at a time like this... If-if that's what you're thinking."

Buffy shook her head and instinctively placed a protective hand against her stomach. "No," she said firmly. "That's not it. We just can't tell him yet. He'll freak. Knowing him, he'll probably try to lock me up somewhere and then I'd have to break both of his arms. I don't wanna do that. I like his arms. We're just going to have to save the world first," she said simply. "Then I'll tell him. I can hide it for a while. I hid being the Slayer from my family for years."

"Well, you better get on that saving the world thing," Allie remarked, "because short, petite women like us... We usually start showing fairly soon."

"Okay, then," Buffy said as she took a deep breath in an effort to calm her nerves. "I'm on it. I mean, I was on it before, but now I'm like really on it, on it. Consider me laser-focus girl. I wish Sam would hurry up and get his butt back," she added desperately. "We seriously need those books."

"Yeah," Faith agreed. "That boy needs to move his ass, because I'm bored as hell with being pent up in here. I need some entertainment," she added with a sly grin.
"Just use some protection," Allie suggested.

"No sweat. I'm on the pill."

"I can't take the pill," Buffy remarked with a pout. "It makes me all bloated."

Faith smirked, but didn't take the obvious opening provided by that comment. She decided to give the girl a break for once.

"Don't stress, B," she said encouragingly. "You've saved the world how many times now? What's one little pregnancy?"

Buffy gave the other Slayer a half-hearted smile. "Nuthin' to it," she agreed with a nod, although she sounded like she was trying to convince herself. "So, nobody's telling. Right?" she asked as she looked at the three women in front of her.

"Not me," Allie said. "I'm a nurse. Confidentiality goes with the job. I may illegally dispense narcotics and do all sorts of other stuff a nurse isn't supposed to do, but I have to draw a line somewhere."

Faith shook her head. "Not my place. Besides, I don't wanna be trapped in a building with a tripped out Daddy-Dean any more than you do. Dude would be one serious pain-in-the-ass."

"Will?" Buffy asked hopefully when she noticed her friend was looking reluctant.

"But, I can't lie to Dean. He finally likes me and you know that took months to accomplish. I can't suddenly start making with the deception now! I'm pretty sure that would set our relationship back."

"You're not lying," Buffy emphasized. "You're just not telling him. Trust me. It's a completely different vibe. You can do it. Just don't start any conversations with - 'Hey, did you hear that Buffy's knocked-up'."

"Okay, I'll try," Willow agreed before nearly jumping out of her skin when the topic of their conversation snuck right up behind her.

"There you are," Dean said to Buffy. "The potion made you sick didn't it?"

"You did say it tasted pretty raunchy," Buffy replied with what she hoped wasn't a guilty smile. She wasn't lying. Not really.

"Hell yeah, it was raunchy! No offense," he said to Willow, "because that shit did save my life. But still, I'm telling ya, that stuff's seriously nasty. What's in it anyway?"

"It-It's probably best if you don't know," she stammered nervously.

Dean shrugged. "You're probably right," he agreed.

"Hi Dean, how are you?" Allie asked a little too cheerfully.

"Fine," he replied as he took in the guilty faces of the four women in the room. "You ladies were just talkin' dirty weren't ya?" he asked with a mischievous grin. "I always knew you talked about sex just as much as guys."

"It was a related topic," Faith confirmed with a grin of her own. She could practically feel the daggers Buffy was shooting at her.
"That's cool," he said. "As long as I came out on top, I got no problems."

Buffy smiled sweetly. "Of course you did, honey."

"Yeah," Faith agreed as she slapped him roughly between the shoulder blades. "Trust me. You're the stud of the year."

Dean appeared to be a little confused, but shrugged it off with a satisfied grin. Apparently, he'd decided to take the odd exchange as a compliment.

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Buffy was huddled in her office with Willow, still trying to come to grips with the life-changing news that had just been dropped in her lap when Dean appeared in the doorway looking rather somber.

"Looks like Eve finally decided to break radio silence," he remarked. "I haven't been outside to check it out yet, but, from what I could see from an upstairs window, it looks like a body was left out on the lawn."

"A body," Willow stated with concern. "Whose?"

"I know who it is," answered a voice from behind Dean. The young Slayer, Trish, stepped past him and stood nervously in front of Buffy. She looked disheveled and thinner than usual. Her normally healthy, mocha-colored skin was now ashen and she had deep shadows under her eyes. "She's a witch. Her name was Isadora," she said as Willow gasped in horror. "It's a message from Mother," she continued quietly. "If I don't go out there, she'll kill every witch that helped to protect this place... and everyone inside too. You have to kill me," she pleaded with tears in her eyes. "I've tried so hard to fight her, but I can't take the voices anymore. She calls to me night and day. Can't you hear her?" she asked desperately.

"Guess we know who Eve's vessel is," Dean remarked, as he gazed at the distressed girl in sympathy.

"No," Willow said, shaking her head in disbelief. "It can't be Isadora. She's in England. I talked to her yesterday. It can't be her!"

"It is," Trish replied sadly. "Mother brought her here for you. She knows the coven helped you and she knows if she kills them all it will weaken the protection spells. She's given us a choice, either I go to her or you lift the barriers." She turned toward Buffy with a desperate expression on her face. "You have to kill me," she begged. "Please. I can't do it myself. Grandma says suicides go to hell."

Willow sat stunned, trying to recover from the shocking news. "I have to warn them," she said quietly.

"Trish," Buffy said gently as she rose from her chair to approach the agitated girl. "Nobody's going to kill you and you're not going to hurt yourself," she said in a firm, but soothing tone. "We'll keep you safe, okay? Eve won't be able to get anywhere near you. I promise."

"No!" she yelled. "You don't understand. I don't want to go to her, but I will. I can't take it anymore. I'm going crazy! I'll just have to make you kill me," she stated with a wild and determined look in her eyes before taking a swing at Buffy.

Because of the girl's fragile mental state, Buffy had been prepared for this and managed to dodge the blow. Dean tried to grab her from behind and pin her arms to her sides, but she easily twisted out of
his grasp and kicked him in the center of his chest, sending him crashing into the wall behind him and leaving him slumped, half-conscious on the floor. Trish then turned her attention back to Buffy, who was momentarily distracted by concern for Dean. This allowed her to land a punch to Buffy’s throat, which caused her to stumble backwards gasping for air.

"Oh no, Buffy!" Willow exclaimed as she regained her focus on the present. Normally she'd allow her friend to handle a situation like this on her own, but that was before receiving the day's big news. Willow held out a hand and chanted a few words in Latin before sending a beam of blue light at the younger Slayer. This caused her to immediately lose consciousness and crumple to the floor.

"You okay Will?" Buffy asked urgently as she rushed toward Dean.

"Yeah," her friend said as she slumped into a chair, panting heavily. "That spell just takes a lot out of a girl. I'll be fine in a few minutes… or maybe hours. It's been a rough couple of days."

"Dean," Buffy said sharply as she knelt down beside him and lifted up his chin. "Say something."

"I'm freakin' tired of being thrown into walls," he grumbled. "That's like the ten-millionth time. It's gettin' old."

Buffy sighed in relief and proceed to help him haul himself back onto his feet. "Sweetie, please don't take on a rogue Slayer again," she requested as she worriedly checked him over for injuries.

"Not a problem," he groaned as he pressed a hand against the spot on his chest where he'd been kicked. "I'm not exactly a big fan of having my ass handed to me by a teenage girl. Damn. I bet a mule doesn't kick that hard. So, what are we supposed to do with nutjob super-chick?" he asked as he pointed to the unconscious girl on the floor.

Buffy frowned. "Guess we'll have to find some way to restrain her. Maybe Allie can give her something to calm her down?"

"Like what?" Dean asked. "An elephant tranquilizer?"

Crowley scowled at the angel who'd just appeared in front of him.

"What's this nonsense I hear about you killing my hunters?" he snapped.

"They were disloyal," Castiel stated simply. "They had to be eliminated."

"Disloyal, you say? Whatever made you come to that conclusion?"

"They were passing information to Meg. They told her you were still alive."

Crowley smirked. "I wondered when that bitch would wise up and have another go at me. Please tell me I get to end her myself."

"She's been destroyed," Castiel stated flatly.

"Oh," the demon shrugged. "I have to say that's quite the letdown. So, tell me Cas, how did you uncover this startling bit of intrigue?"

"I'm an angel."

"Right. Mister All Knowing. My apologies, I nearly forgot," Crowley said as he rolled his eyes.
"Since you're so mighty, why don't you tell me exactly how we're supposed to find the bloody 'stolen one' now that we have no hunters to bring me new informants?" he asked angrily.

"We don't need them. Eve is about to make a move against the Slayers. When she does, I'll be there. She will tell us what we need to know."

"Well that all sounds nice and tidy," Crowley remarked sarcastically. "Why don't you let me loan you some reinforcements? Our friend Eve is extremely ancient. She'll no doubt have a few tricks up her sleeves."

"I can handle it," Castiel said confidently.

"Of course you can," the demon agreed with a fake smile as he reached up to pat the angel on the back. "Besides, we wouldn't want the dear Winchesters to find out you've been slumming on the wrong side of the tracks."

A symbol, which appeared to be drawn in blood, briefly appeared on the back of Castiel's trenchcoat where Crowley had touched him. It quickly faded as it was seemingly absorbed into the fabric.

"By the way," the demon remarked casually. "Do you care to share your theories on the big 'stolen one' question? Maybe you've got some inkling as to who or what we're looking for?" he asked expectantly.

"No," the angel replied a little too quickly. "I do not."

"Not even a theory then?" Crowley asked suspiciously. "A wild guess maybe?"

"I told you, no," the angel replied defensively.

Crowley turned on the television and sighed in boredom when he saw that Castiel was in the middle of briefing his lieutenants on some tedious battle strategy. Hopefully this show would get more interesting soon, because he was already tired of watching these stiffs. He'd need a few more bottles of good whiskey to get through this.

"Wow boss," his muscle bound henchman remarked in awe from behind him. "It takes some serious stones to slap a bug on an angel."

Crowley smiled in smug satisfaction. "Yes, I am quite proud of that particular move. It's a good thing that poncey bastard is too arrogant to believe I could pull something like that off."

"So, I'm guessin' you don't trust him anymore?"

"Never did," Crowley corrected. "But now that the Winchesters are in the picture, I trust him even less. He knows more than he's sharing. Besides, that whole business with Meg reeks of flannel and gunpowder," he added with disgust.

Buffy smiled as she watched Dean anxiously waiting for his brother to arrive. It was obvious that he was both relieved and excited about Sam's return. So was Faith, for that matter, although she was making quite a show of appearing indifferent. It was nice to have a bright spot after days of sitting around on edge, waiting for Eve to make her next move. The coven in England was now in hiding, but no one knew how long that would last. Eve was sure to find them and, when she did, she would
most certainly kill them all. However, for Buffy, the worst thing had been Trish. They had confined
the girl in a locked and guarded room and had also been keeping her dosed up with the same drug
cocktail that was once used to celebrate a Slayer's eighteenth birthday. It made Buffy sick with guilt
to think she had any part in that, but it didn't seem that they had much choice if they wanted to keep
her and everyone else safe.

The Campbell library had apparently been so large that it required both Sam and the other hunter,
Bobby, to haul it all back to Cleveland. That was good because they could use all the resources they
could get, but Buffy was also looking forward to meeting Bobby. She'd heard enough about him to
decide that he was as much of a surrogate father to Dean as Giles was to her. Despite all of the
anxiety and stress, she was finding herself growing excited about the child inside of her, who she
was secretly calling her little 'kitten'. She had an urge to meet the extended family and get a feel for
the people who'd be a part of her baby's life. It also made her incredibly sad to think that her mother
would miss out on meeting her first grandchild.

The two finally arrived late that afternoon. The bed of Sam's truck had been filled to the brim and
was covered with a tarp. The other man was driving an SUV that may have been an older Chevy
Blazer, but it was hard to tell because the vehicle was somewhat of a Frankenstein, made up of
various parts from salvaged vehicles. Each of the doors was a different color and the hood was
unpainted and covered in primer. Buffy was amazed that the thing could actually be driven, much
less make a journey of hundreds of miles.

She had gone outside to meet the new arrivals along with Dean, Giles, and Faith. Andrew was
currently somewhere sulking due to being forbidden to join the welcoming party. Buffy had decided
he was far too excited about meeting who he described as the 'gruff but loveable curmudgeon'. The
Andrew situation was due to hit the fan any day now. Hopefully, they wouldn't all still be trapped
inside the Council when it did, because it wasn't going to be pretty. She may end up having to break
Dean's arms after all.

As Bobby climbed out of his truck, Dean walked up to greet him and held out a hand for the older
man to shake. He looked a little embarrassed when Bobby decided to go for a hug rather than a
handshake. After a short embrace, he stepped back and held Dean by the shoulders as he looked him
over.

"Damn boy, it's good to see you."

"You too, Bobby," Dean grinned. "You know you were welcome to visit sooner. We can use all the
hunters we can get."

Bobby waved his hand in dismissal. "I'm too damn old to be on the Hellmouth," he grumbled.

"I can't believe you knew about it and didn't tell me."

"I didn't tell you because I was afraid your stupid ass would want to take a vacation here."

Dean shrugged. The man probably had a point. He started to introduce Buffy, who had just appeared
beside him, but Bobby had already put two and two together.

"You must be Buffy," he said as he observed her closely. "Well I'll be damned... It's good to meet
ya."

Buffy smiled. "Let me guess. You thought I'd be taller?"

Bobby returned her smile. "Nope. Already knew not to expect a bruiser. I'm just shocked that you're
actually prettier than Dean. I didn't think that was possible."

"Funny," Dean remarked. "We've been over this Bobby. I'm not pretty, I'm—."

"Yeah, yeah," Bobby interrupted. "You're *ruggedly handsome*. Keep tellin' yourself that, princess."

Buffy giggled and immediately decided she liked the older man. She noticed Giles drifting in their direction and started to introduce him.

"Good heavens," he remarked in awe as he observed the stacked boxes of books that could be seen through the SUV's windows.

Bobby narrowed his eyes at the Watcher. "I know she's a piece of junk, but you ain't gotta be so prissy and uptight about it."

"Oh no," Giles replied in surprise. "I wasn't referring to the vehicle. I'm just a bit overwhelmed by all the books. I expected an impressive collection, but this is simply beyond comprehension. Forgive me," he said as he offered his hand for Bobby to shake. "I've forgotten my manners. I'm Rupert Giles. I was fortunate enough to inherit what was left of the Watcher's Council."

"The rest of them kinda got blown up," Buffy offered helpfully. "But I always liked Giles best anyway," she said as she smiled brightly at her Watcher.

Bobby shook Giles' hand but continued to observe him warily. "I'm not much for bullshit," he said. "So, I'll go ahead and be up front with ya. I got no problem with the Slayer… or I guess it's Slayers these days. But, I've had a few run-ins with your Council over the years and I'm not exactly your number one fan. Just so you know."

Giles met the hunter's gaze steadily. "I understand Mister Singer. I'm the first to admit that the Council has had its shortcomings, but I assure you that its present incarnation is quite different from the one you're familiar with."

"I hope so," Bobby replied seriously. "Because I've got another thing I need to get off my chest. These books," he said as he gestured between the two trucks. "They're pretty much all these boys got as far as an inheritance goes. So, I'm not gonna stand for your Council robbin' them of that."

"Bobby," Dean interrupted. "I don't care—."

"Shut up, Dean," Bobby snapped gruffly. "I'm talkin'."

Dean shrugged and his eyes widened a little. "Yes sir," he said quickly.

Buffy was shocked. She needed to learn how the old guy had managed that.

"Are we straight?" Bobby asked, returning his attention back to Giles.

"Yes," he replied evenly. "I understand and I've no wish to rob the Winchesters of their heritage. I assure you that all of these items will be carefully cataloged and will remain their property, to do with as they wish."

Bobby nodded. He was impressed that the Watcher hadn't backed down or appeared frightened.

"Okay then," he remarked. "Glad we understand each other. Where can I get a drink around here?"

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Faith finally managed to catch Sam alone once they'd moved all the boxes inside and placed them in
the school's rather empty and dusty library.

"So," she said as she pressed herself against him. "I hope you've not gone back to that 'I'm dying'
kick of yours, because teasing a Slayer… not real smart. Just so ya know."

Sam smiled down at her. "Don't worry. I'm not suicidal."

"Glad to hear it," she said as she slipped her hands underneath his button-down and tugged his t-shirt
out of his jeans.

"But don't you think we should help with the research first?" he asked.

"Nah, you deserve a break," Faith replied with a wink before dragging him into the weapons room
and closing and locking the door behind them. "Don't be such a nerd. I can show you all kinds of
stuff that ain't in those boring old books," she promised.

Sam looked uncertainly at the door for a split second before pulling Faith into a passionate kiss.
Hopefully, nobody would miss them for an hour or two.

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"Where's Faith and Sam?" Xander asked as he nosed around in the stack of wooden boxes that were
sitting on a table at the back of the library. "I don't think it's fair that they don't have to be stuck in
here doing research too."

Dean just smirked and returned his attention to the book he was looking at. He was pretty damn sure
he knew what those two were up too. He just hoped his brother would live through it.

"Hey," Bobby snapped as he looked up at Xander. "Don't mess around in those boxes, you idjit.
Them things ain't toys. They're curse boxes. It's hard to tell what's hidden away in there."

"Yes Xander," Giles agreed strongly. "Please sit down. You're making me extremely nervous."

"Why'd you have to bring back the curse boxes?" Dean asked.

"We couldn't exactly leave 'em," Bobby reasoned. "What if somebody else found that place? Some
stupid kid mighta stumbled onto 'em… or even worse, some stupid hunter. Imagine the damage a
dipshit like Gordon Walker could do with a bunch of cursed objects."

"Good point," Dean agreed.

"Ooh," Xander remarked excitedly as he picked up what appeared to be a solid gold box. "I found
one that doesn't belong. I bet there's something more valuable than spare change in here."

"Xander," Willow cringed. "Please don't do that."

"What?" he said innocently. "I'm just looking at it. Give me some credit. It's not like I'm stupid
enough to try and open it."

"That is pretty cool," Dean remarked as he got up to take a closer look. "I think that's real gold. Do
you know what an ounce goes for these days? Too bad we can't just pawn it."

"Xander," Giles said tiredly as he shook his head at Dean. "What do I have to threaten you with to
keep you away from the cursed objects?"
"I don't think that one's a cursed object," Bobby remarked without looking up from the book he was reading. "Judging from the markings, I'm pretty sure it's a reliquary."

"Seriously," Giles said as he also arose to check out the small box. "I do believe you're right," he observed. "Fascinating."

"What's a reliquary?" Dean asked.

"It's a container that holds relics of religious significance," Giles replied. "Often items such as the bones of a saint or a scrap of cloth supposedly worn by Christ. Very few are actually authentic."

I guess we can open it then," Xander said happily.

Buffy decided she better speak up. "Not trying to rain on your parade here Xan, but remember *Raiders*? Item of great religious significance and melty faces?"

"Oh crap," Xander replied as he breathed a deep sigh of relief. "You have an excellent point there Buff, but, luckily for our faces, I already tried and the box is welded shut."

"Let me see that," Dean said as he took the box from Xander's hands. He tested the lid and it easily popped open. "Huh," he remarked, "either you need to work out more or this box just likes me better than you."

"There's no way you did that," Xander replied in awe. "Nobody could've opened that thing. I cry foul."

Dean smiled smugly. "Guess I'm just the man."

"Dammit Dean," Bobby cursed irritably. "Whatever's in that thing, for God's sake don't touch it! Don't you remember the ordeal with the damn rabbit's foot?"

"Yeah," he replied defensively. "Keep your panties on. I'm not touching anything."

Everyone gathered around the box to peer cautiously inside. The 'precious relic' appeared to be nothing more than a piece of an antler that had been sharpened to a point on one end.

"Well that sucks," Xander remarked in a tone of disappointment.

Bobby reached out and gingerly grabbed the remains of an ancient document that had been tucked in with the relic.

"Guess we better see if we can figure out what we just got ourselves into," he said as he directed a scowl at Dean. "Hopefully it's something we can translate, because I'm damn sure it won't be in plain English."

"Oh balls," Bobby remarked a few hours later as he frowned at the ancient scrap of parchment in his hands. "How's your archaic Latin?" he asked Giles.

"Honestly, it seems to improve quite a bit once I've had a few," he remarked as he pointed to the half empty glass of scotch in front of him.

"That does make it less painful," Bobby agreed. "Well take a look at this," he said as he slid the parchment in front of the Watcher. "Maybe you won't get what I'm gettin'."
After spending some time with the document, Giles finally felt that he'd made a fairly accurate translation.

"This is about Eve," he announced excitedly. "Although I'm not sure if this discovery can help us. Unless it doesn't matter who wields the weapon."

Bobby sighed, groaned, and finished off his drink in one large swallow. "Why don't you share with the kids? Tell 'em who wields the weapon."

Giles looked at the hunter curiously. "Well, part of the document is missing, but it appears to be claiming that this 'relic' was the dagger used to banish the Mother back to Purgatory. However, the odd part is that it was wielded by someone called the 'True Vessel of the Commander of the Army of God'."

"Nice one," Buffy remarked. "That's even wordy by moldy, ancient scroll standards. Why can't they just use normal names? It would save a lot of paper."

Giles gave Buffy a reproachful look before continuing. "Honestly, I've never been much of a biblical scholar, but I'm fairly certain that refers to -"

"The Archangel Michael," Dean finished for him before slapping his hand on the table in front of him. "Ain't that just fuckin' dandy?"

Giles noticed that Bobby, Buffy, and Sam (who'd recently joined the group along with Faith) were all observing Dean closely.

"Am I missing something?" he asked curiously.

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A/N: There is now an extended scene that covers what happened between Sam/Faith in the weapons room. It can be found here: Can't Get Enough
Giles removed his glasses and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. He was searching for a way to tactfully state his concerns regarding Dean's extraordinary revelation. The fact that Bobby was watching him closely, and appeared to be daring him to say the wrong thing, only made the task more difficult. However, oddly enough, the object of their discussion seemed much more interested in trading in his beer for a glass of scotch.

"Dean," he began hesitantly. "Forgive me, but I don't…" He paused, deciding he didn't like that particular phrasing. "You see, honestly I –"

"Don't see why a foul mouthed hunter with a GED and a criminal record is some big shot angel's most wanted meatsuit?" Dean finished for him, then shrugged nonchalantly and took a drink from his newly poured glass.

"Giles!" Buffy exclaimed angrily. "I can't believe you! That's not very nice." She pursed her lips and jabbed her finger at him for emphasis.

"Buffy, I didn't say that," Giles said defensively as he took a cautious glance in the direction of the older hunter. Bobby smirked at him and raised his glass to Buffy. Thankfully, he seemed content not to start throwing punches just yet. But Giles was convinced that it would only take a few more of the wrong words being placed in his mouth for him to get there. "I was merely…," he trailed off before Dean stepped in to save him.

"Dude, it's okay. I get it. I'm not rockin' the halo. I'm aware," he stated as he held his arms out to his sides. "Truth is, I don't know why Michael picked me. It's got something to do with having the right blood. Angels can't possess just any poor schmuck," he explained. "You have to be lucky enough to be the right match and some matches are better than others. That's all I can tell you. Besides, it ain't like winning the lottery. Trust me, you don't wanna get on an angel's short list."

Willow's face fell as she came to an unpleasant revelation. "So that angel guy you know… When we look at him, that's not really him we're seeing? He's actually possessing somebody? A 'person' somebody?"

"Yeah," Sam confirmed solemnly. "You're looking at a regular Joe named Jimmy Novak. At least I guess he's still in there somewhere."

"Poor bastard," Dean remarked. "If he is aware of anything, I'm sure he's kickin' his own ass right now for saying 'yes'."

"That's really sad," Willow observed with a frown.

"It's a bitch," Dean agreed. "Which is why I told Michael to shove it up his ass. I'm nobody's meat
"puppet."

"So, you can do that then?" Giles asked, sounding rather astonished. "You can refuse them entry?"

"They ain't like demons," Bobby replied. "They gotta get consent. Unfortunately, they don't take 'no' too gracefully."

Xander raised his hand, but quickly took it down. He decided it made him look way too much like a kid in school. "I've never been church-guy," he admitted as he turned to Dean. "But I thought angels were supposed to be the good guys. Sounds like you're saying 'not so much'."

"Mostly just giant dicks," Dean confirmed. "A lot of 'em think we're just a bunch of hairless monkeys and the rest want to see us all dead. They're not sitting on our shoulder 'guiding the way' if that's what you think. Cas is the only one I trust."

Dean noted that Sam and Bobby traded glances when he mentioned Cas, but Bobby spoke up before he had a chance to question them. That was fine, because Dean decided that was a conversation best kept 'in the family'.

"I think that's enough seminary school," Bobby announced gruffly. "We know what we need to do and who needs to do it. Now we just gotta find a way to get close enough to Eve to pull it off."

"I need another drink," Giles remarked tiredly as he regarded the empty crystal decanter in front him.

"Here," Bobby said as he pulled out his flask and poured some of its contents into Giles' glass. "Just take it slow. I don't want ya to shock your delicate system."

"Thank you," Giles said as he tasted the whiskey the hunter had just poured for him. He had to struggle not to make a face. It was the most god-awful concoction he'd ever tasted, but on a positive note, it obviously held an unusually high concentration of alcohol. That was the most important thing at the moment.

Buffy frowned at her Watcher. "I'm not sure this is the best time for more booze," she remarked sourly before giving a pointed glance to the glass in front of Dean.

"Never been a better time," Bobby disagreed. "Dean's at bat again. I'm sure he wants to celebrate."

"Hell yeah," Dean said. He raised his glass and uttered a sarcastic "Cheers" before taking another swallow.

Bobby stretched his arm across the table and held his flask toward Buffy. "Here girl, maybe you should just give in and join the party. It'll probably be a long night."

Before Buffy could politely decline, Sam reached out and roughly knocked Bobby's arm out of the way. The older man fumbled as he tried to keep a grip on the flask. Once he had it secured, he turned an angry scowl on Sam.

"Dammit kid. What the hell's gotten into you?" he questioned irritably.

Buffy regarded Dean's brother steadily. She was also very interested to hear what Sam had to say for himself.

"I uh..." Sam said as the color drained from his face. He quickly averted his gaze from Buffy's. "Sorry Bobby. Buffy's just not a drinker. I forgot you wouldn't know about that is all," he added with a sheepish shrug.
Bobby narrowed his eyes at the younger Winchester. He was obviously confused by Sam's actions. "I think maybe you've had a little too much," he grumbled. "You need to mind your manners."

"Sorry Bobby," Sam mumbled.

Buffy was grateful that Dean appeared lost in his own thoughts and didn't seem to notice anything strange about the conversation. Faith, on the other hand, was very studiously not looking in her direction. Also, the pained expression that briefly crossed Sam's features told her that Faith had definitely kicked him under the table. If she'd been sitting closer, Buffy would've kicked her. She couldn't believe the girl wasn't able to keep her big mouth shut for more than a few hours. Maybe she hadn't specifically told her not to tell Sam, but that should've been pretty damn obvious. She was going to bludgeon her to death.

"Okay, that's enough fun for me," Buffy announced as she smacked both hands on the tabletop, causing all eyes to turn toward her expectantly. "It's almost three in the morning and I'm going to bed. We can make a game plan tomorrow. Unless everybody thinks we should try to make a drunken raid on Mother Superior," she added sarcastically.

Dean grinned and held up the 'precious relic/broken piece of antler' he'd been playing with. "Why not? All I have to do is stick her with my bone. I can do that blind drunk," he said with a suggestive waggle of his brows.

Xander pointed at Dean and let out the beginnings of chuckle (because he appreciated crude humor as much as the next un-evolved man), but the look on Buffy's face almost caused him to swallow his tongue. The Slayer was not amused. Not even a little bit. He quickly put on a straight face.

"You're cut off," Buffy said sharply as she swiped the glass from in front of Dean.

"The hell?" he asked incredulously as he tried his best to avoid eye contact with Bobby (the old man would love to bust his balls for something like this). "I haven't even finished the one glass," he said in his defense. "I was just joking."

"Not funny," she replied flatly.

Willow quickly pushed her chair back and stood up. "I think Buffy's right," she announced a little too loudly. "I'm wiped. I need to take some time to absorb the 'angels are a bunch of unfluffy, prejudiced, people-possessors' bombshell. I mean, I never really thought about them very much before, but now I'm going to have to not think about them in an entirely different way."

"Well said," Xander agreed with a nod.

"Yes," Giles said as he finished off his drink in one swallow and somehow managed not to choke on it. "My world view has been skewed enough for one night. Maybe I'll wakeup to find that this was all an alcohol induced hallucination."

When the Council crowd began to filter out of the library, Dean caught up with Buffy in the hall.

"You okay?" he asked her as he put a hand on her elbow and smiled uncertainly. "I was just messin' around."

"I know," she sighed. "I'm just tired. Please come to bed," she said as she gazed up at him with a somber expression on her face.

"I will," he promised as he pressed a quick kiss against her lips. "I just need a few minutes to catch up with Sam and Bobby. Okay?"
"Okay, but don't take too long."

A line formed between Dean's eyes as he watched Buffy walk up the hall. She usually didn't allow herself to take his off-color remarks very seriously. If she did, he'd stay in trouble. Of course, she was probably really freaked about the 'Michael Sword' crap. It had certainly shocked the living hell out of him. He'd love to just go to bed and try to forget about it for a little while, but he needed to get to the bottom of Sam and Bobby's 'meaningful glances'.

He returned to the library to see the pair still sitting in their previous positions. Faith was there as well, stationed beside Sam with her boots propped up on the table.

"Faith, do you mind givin' me a few minutes with these two?" Dean asked.

The Slayer slid her feet off the table and hopped fluidly to her feet. "Sure thing," she shrugged. "I guess baby bro has been out of your clutches for a few days. Just don't take too long," she added with a wink and playful nudge to Sam's shoulder. "I might hafta start without ya."

"You think you can handle all that Sammy?" Dean asked with a grin once Faith had left the room. Predictably, his brother just rolled his eyes and shook his head at Dean disapprovingly, but he couldn't help but notice that Sam was trying to hide smile. The kid wasn't as innocent as he looked.

Bobby let out a chuckle, but seemed to be laughing at his own thoughts more than at the exchange between the two brothers.

"I don't think Rupert likes the idea of our fates bein' tied to some 'foul mouthed hunter'," he remarked with a satisfied smirk.

Dean shrugged and rubbed at his forehead. "The foul mouthed hunter ain't exactly thrilled himself."

"It's still damn poetic if you ask me," Bobby continued. "Those Watchers always were a bunch of stuck-up old buzzards."

"He's not so bad," Dean disagreed. "Dude's just British. I don't think he can help it. Besides, he does pay me pretty damn good and under the table too," he emphasized with a raised eyebrow. "Buffy trusts him, that's good enough for me."

Bobby smiled at Dean and took another drink. "Speakin' of pretty little Buffy, why aren't you off snuggled up with her instead of sittin' in here with an ugly old drunk and your goofy little brother?"

Dean looked at the pair seriously for moment before shaking his head at them. He was pissed that he even had to have this conversation. It was friggin ridiculous.

"Because, I'd like to know what the hell you two are thinking about Cas?" he asked gruffly. "I saw your little stolen glance. Don't try to bullshit me."

Bobby looked over at Sam and gestured toward Dean with his glass. "See? That's exactly why I dreaded bringin' this up with him."

"Bringing what up?" Dean asked tightly. He knew he wasn't going to like this, especially since Sam was in the process of putting on his most sincere 'puppy dog face'.

"Dean," Sam began evenly. "It's just that me and Bobby can't help but be a little concerned about the 'Crowley's not dead' news bulletin. We don't see how Cas could make a mistake like that. That's all we're saying. Nobody's accusing him of anything. We just don't understand. Okay?"
"Oh I get it," Dean said as he gestured angrily with his hands. "You two are suddenly perfect I guess? Neither one of you have ever made a mistake. Must be real freakin' nice."

"Watch your tone," Bobby snapped. "You know better than that. Cas is an angel and, King of Hell or not, Crowley's just a piss ant demon. Cas should be able to roast him with a thought and you know it. This ain't Lucifer we're talkin' about."

Dean clenched his fists and shook his head in disbelief. "Come on Bobby, this is Cas! I can't believe you're talking like that. Don't either of you have a shred of gratitude for the things he's done for us? He's literally been blown apart twice trying to save our sorry asses. We owe him the benefit of the doubt."

"And he has it," Sam stressed. "We're just concerned is all. You have to admit the news that Crowley might not be ashes kinda freaked you out a little."

"Yeah," Dean admitted. "It wasn't the best thing I've ever heard, but even if he is still kickin', you two are wrong about Cas having anything to do with it," he emphasized strongly. "He might be Mister Smitey, but he's still naïve as hell. You know that. Dude's never even been laid for God's sake! He actually looks for plot in a porno. Cut the guy some slack."

"I hope you're right," Bobby remarked tiredly. "Trust me. I do. I don't wanna believe Cas is capable of screwin' us over like that, but somethin' ain't right. Meg came here for a reason."

Dean nodded. "Yeah, she did. She's a bitch, Bobby. That's pretty much always her reason. So she's the one you should be pointin' fingers at. You know what?" he asked as he threw up his hands in frustration. "Never mind. This is the stupidest Goddamned conversation I've ever had. I'm going to bed."

Even though he was irritated as hell, Dean tried to open the door to Buffy's office as quietly as possible. He didn't want to wake her up if she was already asleep because she had looked really tired earlier. As the door swung open, he noticed that the desk lamp was on and sitting on the floor beside the 'bed', which was actually two unzipped sleeping bags (one to lie on and one to use as a blanket). Buffy was awake and had her head and shoulders propped up against the pillows Dean had snagged from home. She had the sleeping bag pulled up over her breasts, but her shoulders were bare, leading Dean to suspect that everything else was too. He felt the tension in his shoulders begin to relax a little. Her presence usually did that for him.

"Thought you were tired?" he asked with a smile and raised eyebrows.

"I was," she said. "I was completely tired of musty old books and stupid angels."

Dean pushed back a few of the picture frames sitting on the edge of Buffy's desk so that he could sit down and unlace his boots. "Yeah, me too," he said tightly.

"What's wrong?" Buffy asked as she drew her brows together. "I mean, aside from our impending doom and the vessel thing, of course," she added with a tiny bit of wry humor in her tone.

Dean kicked his boots off and stood back up to begin unbuttoning his shirt. "It's just Sam and Bobby," he replied as he roughly tugged at his clothes. "They're pissin' me off."

Buffy's eyes got wide as saucers and her mouth fell open. Surely Sam hadn't been running his mouth about what Faith had told him.
"Why?" she asked cautiously.

"It's ridiculous," Dean replied irritably as he paused before removing his jeans to run a hand down his face. "They're accusing Cas of having something to do with the Crowley thing."

"Oh," Buffy said, sounding relieved. "What do they think he's done?" she asked curiously.

"They don't know because there's nothing to know," he stated sarcastically. "It makes no freakin sense. Why the hell would Cas wanna save Crowley? The guy's a demon and a giant douche. It's the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard."

When Dean had finished stripping to his boxers he slid in beside Buffy. "You don't think that could be true, do you?" he asked curiously.

"I don't know," she answered honestly. When she noticed Dean's stricken expression she continued on hurriedly. "Dean, I don't know much about angels," she attempted to explain. "This is all new to me. I know I was in heaven, but I don't remember many details. So, Cas and all the rest of the winged-guys are still a big unknown for me." She put a hand on his shoulder and met his eyes. "But, I trust you and if you trust Cas, that's good enough for me."

Buffy's answer seemed to satisfy Dean. He visibly relaxed and pulled her against him.

"You're cold," he observed when he felt the chill on her skin. "Maybe you need some help getting warm?" he questioned as he swept her long hair aside and kissed the back of her neck.

Buffy turned in his embrace so that she could kiss him in return. "I was hoping you might offer to help a girl out."

Dean grinned at her. "Of course, I'm a helpful guy. It's what I do."

She smiled and gave him another deep kiss as she ran her hands over his arms and back. She didn't know if it was the pregnancy making her emotional or her Slayer senses, but she was suddenly very afraid that something bad was coming, something bad that they didn't yet fully see or understand. The feeling left her with a deep need to be close to Dean. She wanted to memorize everything about him, the feel of his skin, his smell, the way his kisses usually tasted of beer or whiskey, and the odd fact she didn't mind that at all. It was just another part of the package that made up the man she loved.

"I'm so sorry you have to deal with the Michael thing again," she said sadly as she held him tighter.

Dean pushed her away slightly so he could look her in the eyes. "Hey now, don't start that," he scolded lightly. "This ain't our last night on earth. We've both seen situations that were way more jacked than this one. Nobody's even askin' me to be an angel condom this time. I just have to."

"Stick Eve with your bone," Buffy finished for him with a smirk.

"Nah," Dean grinned as he pressed his erection against her thigh. "I save that for you. Bitch just gets that piece of crap old fossil."

Buffy frowned. "I'm just worried about what was on the missing part of the scroll. I kinda doubt somebody just ripped it off to make a grocery list."

"Don't worry about it," Dean said as he ran his lips across her jawline and to her ear. "Cas'll be there. He can whip out his Mighty Morphin Power Smite and we won't even have to break a sweat. You just need to relax."
"Make me," she challenged.

"Got no problem doin' that," he promised as he reached between her legs to caress her. "Feels like you're already halfway there," he observed in a deep baritone that was thick with desire.

Buffy pulled him into another kiss and positioned herself beneath him. She moaned when she felt him begin to enter her, but he only did so partially before withdrawing and partially entering her again. Despite his ragged breathing and rapid heartbeat, he seemed determined to hold back his passion just enough to tease her. Buffy knew how to put a stop to that game. She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him deep within her, then she began clenching and unclenching her muscles around him. That trick never failed to ensure the desired response. He groaned against her throat before pulling back to deliver the first of the long, hard strokes she was seeking.

"Open your eyes," she requested softly.

She wanted to see him watching her as they made love. The experience was extremely intimate, almost painfully so, but she was desperate to feel as close to him as possible. When she looked into his eyes, she could tell that he felt the same way. Despite his bravado, she knew he was just as worried as she was, maybe even more so. Both of them needed to forget the outside world for a while and lose themselves in the each other's arms.

When Dean watched Buffy's eyes squeeze shut as she arched her back and her breath caught in her throat, he knew he couldn't hold out any longer. He started to pull away, but she wrapped her legs around him even tighter.

"Stay inside me," she whispered.

Dean was in no position to argue. He was way past the point of exercising any self-control. He pressed himself as deeply inside of her as he could before letting himself go with a shudder. The feeling was miles beyond intense and he decided he could easily get used to it.

Dean wasn't quite sure how he'd suddenly ended up in a restaurant of some sort, but he was pretty sure something strange was going on. He was sitting alone in a back booth with a beer and a bowl of chips and salsa in front of him. As he looked around the half-full establishment, he was struck by a sense of familiarity. The place appeared to be a typical Mexican restaurant/cantina with piñatas hanging from the ceiling and desert-themed paintings on the walls, but he had a feeling he'd been there before. When he looked over at the bar and noticed a giant Latino dude in a cowboy hat - who he was pretty sure he'd last seen wielding a primed twelve gauge - he immediately realized where he was. This was the place where he'd had what you could call his first 'date' with Buffy. This was a dream. Damn, he was such a sap.

As he swung his head back around he noticed that he was no longer alone in the booth. Sitting in front of him with a glass of whiskey and a shot of tequila was a skinny, bearded man, who looked like he hadn't had a good night's sleep since sometime last century.

"Chuck?" Dean asked in a bewildered tone. "What the hell, dude?"

The man waved a hand in greeting before downing his shot of tequila. "Hi Dean," he said through the grimace on his face as he sucked on a slice of lime.

"Hi Chuck," Dean echoed back to him. "What the hell are you doin' in my dream?"

"It's not really your dream," he replied in a tired voice. "Well it is, but it's mine too. Guess you could
say it's a blended reality."

Dean crinkled his brow and gazed back at Chuck in confusion. Then something in the corner of his eye caught his attention. Across the room he spotted an extremely terrifying looking dominatrix. The black-haired and very muscular woman was decked out in shiny red leather and had to be six-feet tall, even without the stiletto heels she was wearing. She also had the most ginormous pair of knockers Dean had ever seen. There was no way those things were real. If all that wasn't freaky enough, she was also holding a cat-o-nine-tails in one hand and a dog chain in the other. The chain was attached to a much smaller 'person' wearing a full-body, black leather, gimp costume. What the fuck?

Chuck cleared his throat self-consciously in order to bring Dean's focus back to him. "Uh... that's my part of the reality," he admitted sheepishly.

"No shit," Dean stated. "Dude, that's messed up."

"Never said I didn't have issues," Chuck remarked with a shrug. "You try being me for a while and see if you don't get a little twisted."

"What is up with you?" Dean asked as he observed the smaller man more closely. He looked awful. His eyes were hollowed out and his skin was almost yellow. "Do you know you look like one of the Simpsons?" he asked.

"What? You mean the yellow skin?" he asked a bit sarcastically as he pointed to his face. "It's called jaundice, Dean. This is what happens when you drink your breakfast every day."

Dean shook his head. "Man, maybe you should consider switching to Fruit Loops."

Chuck sighed deeply and rubbed at his eyes. "I wish I could, but things have gotten way to flippin' batshit for plain breakfast cereal. Do you have any idea what it's like to have a dream that you're supposed to have a dream where you're having a dream with you in it? Man, I'm so confused that I don't know whether I'm awake or asleep right now. I haven't used the bathroom in over a week!"

"Dude!" Dean cringed. "Too much information. I really didn't need to know that."

"Well, too bad," Chuck said with a touch of bitterness. "I'm not real worried about being delicate right now. I'm mostly just hoping you can't actually kill me in a dream."

"Why would I want to kill you?"

"Never mind. Guess you don't know yet," he said as he relaxed in his seat. "See, it's hard for me to tell what's already happened and what hasn't. My prophetic dreams have been pretty hazy ever since you guys derailed the apocalypse."

When Chuck noticed Dean's guilty expression, he added, "Don't worry, it was the right thing to do. It just changed things with the visions is all. The future's not as solid as it used to be. There's a lot more freewill these days."

"Okay," Dean remarked uncertainly. "So what don't I know? What makes you think I'm gonna come gunning for you?"

Chuck uttered a resigned sigh. "I'm publishing again," he said hesitantly.

"You're what?" Dean thundered. "Dude, I thought we'd established that your book tour days were over. You're right, I am gonna kill your ass."

Chuck winced at the angry expression on Dean's face. "I didn't have much choice," he defended.
"The visions stopped for about a year after Lucifer got put back in his cage, but then they started up again. I couldn't exactly keep my job at Best Buy after I became drunken vision-guy again. I have to eat."

"You mean drink," Dean corrected irritably.

"Well, both I guess," he admitted. "Look Dean, I'm sorry, okay. This isn't exactly fun for me, you know."

Dean got quiet for a moment and then his eyes widened suddenly. "Oh crap," he breathed. "You're not sayin' Buffy read those books are you? That's not how she knows about…"

"No," Chuck said quickly. "As far as I know, she's never actually laid her hands on one. But she did kinda find out that way," he added reluctantly.

"Andrew," Dean said tightly. "It was that squirrely-assed, little fanboy Andrew, wasn't it?" When Chuck didn't reply, Dean took that as a 'yes'. "Perfect," he gritted out. "Just friggin perfect. Now I get to kill both of you."

"No, you won't," Chuck announced with some certainty.

"How do ya know? Did you see that too?" Dean asked as he leaned forward and tried to appear as menacing as possible.

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "But I know you won't actually kill us. You don't have it in you to kill an innocent man for no good reason…. Though I wouldn't put it past you to beat our asses," he added as he backed further into his seat.

"You're damn skippy," Dean agreed. "In fact, I think it's time for me to wake up now. I know at least one of you is sleeping right down the hall. I can get one good beatdown in before breakfast."

"Sorry Dean, but we've still got some things to discuss first. In fact, if things go right - and I hope they do - you won't even remember this dream."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dean asked suspiciously.

"It means there's something you need to know about defeating Eve. The thing that wasn't on the scroll."

"Yeah. I'm listening."

"All I can tell you is that it's your blood that's important. You'll remember that if you need to, but I'm hoping you won't have to. I'm praying someone will make the right choice."

"Come on Chuck! Don't give me that cryptic bullshit. Who the hell are you talking about? And what does my blood have to do with anything? Could you be any more vague?"

"I'm sorry, Dean," he replied. "I really am, but I'm not supposed to tell you much. That's how these things work."

"Great. Just fucking great. Thanks a lot. I'm sure you've helped me out a lot," Dean said sarcastically.

Chuck sighed. "Okay, fine. I'm not supposed to do this, but I guess I can tell you one thing." He paused in uncertainty before continuing. "Cas is being tested. In fact, right now the guy's struggling pretty damn hard," he said sadly. "I hope he'll make the right call, but, even if he does, I'm afraid that
might not matter much. He's in over his head, Dean. There are things that he thinks are under his control that are way the fuck out-of-control. It's worse than Congress. You don't even want to know how screwed it is."

"Tested?" Dean practically yelled, although he noticed none of the other patrons seemed to take note of it. Apparently they were just figments of his imagination. "What the hell do you mean 'he's being tested'?" he pressed. "Who's testing him?"

"Who do you think?" Chuck asked simply.

"You've got to be kidding me," he replied as he gripped the edge of the table tightly. "God is testing Cas? God? Dude hasn't given a shit about any of us for only he knows how long, and now he's coming out of retirement to give Cas his SATs? Are you shitting me?"

"You're wrong, Dean. He does care. He just doesn't think he should have to hold everybody's hand every second of the day. Most things are pretty simple actually. He shouldn't have to be so involved."

Dean shook his head angrily. "You mean simple little things like the friggin apocalypse? Is that what we're talking about? Seriously? Give me a break. That's bullshit!"

Chuck stared back silently for a few moments and Dean was almost sure he saw some anger in his gaze. That was a first.

"Dean, he was there during the apocalypse," Chuck stressed with strained patience. "He intervened plenty of times and you know that. He even saved your other brother from the pit."

Dean looked shocked by this. "You're saying he brought Adam back?" he asked cautiously.

"Not back to life, but his soul is in heaven now. It's not stuck in the cage with Michael and Lucifer. That's something, isn't it? Cas doesn't know," he added before Dean could ask. "You could say Adam's in the witness protection program. God doesn't want Raphael getting any ideas about turning him into a vessel again."

"That's good I guess," Dean admitted grudgingly. "But what's going on with Cas? Please tell me this doesn't have anything to do with Crowley?"

"I can't tell you that," Chuck said firmly. "You'll find out if you need to. And like I said, hopefully you won't ever need to. Trust me, you'll have enough on your plate without worrying about that crap," he added with a grin.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Sorry Dean. That's all I'm saying. Just know that if things do get out of control, there will be a way to fix it. You won't like it though. It'll require you to have some faith."
Buffy stared into her weapons trunk, trying to decide if she should take anything else with her when she went to the big face-off with Eve. She'd already retrieved the scythe and had it propped up against her desk while she pondered the rest of the trunk's contents. The scythe was an excellent all-purpose weapon, but she thought it would be a good idea to have some smaller ones for backup. It was hard to be over-prepared when you were about to go up against the Queen Mother of all monsters. So, she pulled out a wooden stake, two knives, a bottle of holy water, and a few other odds-and-ends and tucked them inside of her leather jacket.

Buffy was beyond ready for the Eve situation to be over and done with, especially after her recent conversation with Trish. The strain was obviously taking a toll on everyone, but Trish was just barely hanging on by a thread, a very thin thread. She'd gone to visit the girl that morning and what she saw convinced her that they had to move quickly. It had been less than a day since Buffy had last looked in on her and the change in her condition during that short time was dramatic. The girl now seemed to be having a hard time telling the difference between Eve's voice in her head and the voice of someone who was sitting right beside her. Plus, it was very hard to get her attention because she was so focused on drawing page after page of extremely graphic and disturbing pictures. Buffy guessed they were supposed to be scenes from Purgatory and it sure looked like one hell of a fun place. She was worried that Trish would be permanently damaged if Mommy wasn't taken care of soon.

She'd gone to see the young Slayer because she had a hunch that the girl could lead them to Eve. Once Buffy was able to get her to focus a little, her hunch seemed to pay off. There was a slight problem with that though. Trish seemed convinced that her psychic link to Eve went both ways. If that was true, it meant they'd lost the element of surprise. That sucked, but it was something they'd just have to deal with because there was no other alternative. Eve had managed to remain hidden from any spells Willow could cast and, apparently, even an angel wasn't capable of finding her. So, they had to take what they could get and make the best of it. At least they wouldn't have to go very far. According to Trish, Mommy was still in Cleveland. That info wasn't exactly shocking, but her precise location was a little surprising. Out of all the potential lairs in the city, Trish had identified the abandoned strip club they'd killed the shifter in, which seemed like a weird coincidence. Then again, maybe the shifter had just inherited her mother's taste in hideouts.

Buffy was closing and latching the lid on her trunk when she heard Willow say her name hesitantly from behind her. She turned to see her best friend standing with Faith and Sam just inside the doorway of her office. All three wore serious expressions on their faces.

"Why do I feel like I'm trapped in an intervention?" Buffy asked suspiciously.

Willow shrugged apologetically. "Maybe because this kinda is one?"

Buffy crossed her arms in front of her and steeled herself for the coming argument. She'd been expecting it, so she wasn't unprepared. "Save it," she said flatly. "I'm going."
"I don't think that's such a good idea," Willow disagreed gently. She was obviously trying to walk the fine line between being a supportive friend and a dealer of tough love.

"Sorry Will," Buffy replied as she raised her chin stubbornly. "It's not your decision. End of discussion."

"Buffy, be reasonable," Sam pleaded in his most persuasive tone. "You really don't need to go. Dean wouldn't want you to… not if he knew."

"But he doesn't know."

"I could tell him," Sam threatened with a raised eyebrow.

Buffy immediately decided she was going to have the most trouble with him (thanks to Faith's big mouth). He was quickly going all 'well-meaning, protective male' on her. He was definitely Dean's brother.

"You won't," Buffy replied with certainty. "You wouldn't do that to him. You know it would just stress him out more. So, save the empty threats."

Sam frowned and looked over at Faith. He was obviously hoping she could make an impact, but Faith looked a little unsure. As a fellow Slayer, Buffy felt certain that she understood her position more than anyone. She was probably on the fence.

"Come on, B," Faith reasoned. "Why don't you just stay here? I get that you don't wanna be stuck on the sidelines, but things are different now. You can tell Dean you're just staying behind with Willow to help guard the fort. He'll buy it."

Buffy sighed in frustration. "That's not the point. I'm not letting him go in there without me. Period. We're in this together. I promised him we'd fix this and I'm not going back on that."

"But things have changed Buffy," Sam argued. "You have to think about your baby now."

Buffy knew Sam was just concerned, but she couldn't help getting a little irritated with him. Especially since she had a feeling this was just a G-rated preview of what she'd be dealing with once Dean was 'in the know'. Maybe she could find a cave to hide in for the next eight months.

"I am thinking about my baby," she replied tightly. "My baby needs a father and I'm going to make sure it has one. You don't understand Sam. If anything happened to Dean and I didn't do everything I could to help him, I'd never forgive myself… and I'd never be able to look my child in the eyes. Everything depends on what happens out there today. Everything," she emphasized. "If we don't take out Eve, my baby won't have a life. Not one worth living anyway. I don't have a choice."

The expression on Sam's face made it obvious that he didn't agree with her arguments. He was losing his patience with her, but Buffy wasn't going to back down. She had to do this, even if it meant everyone thought she was a horrible person.

"I'm going," she said flatly. "My mind's made up. When we get all this settled, I promise you I'll be more than happy to hang up the stake for a few months and take it easy… but not until then. I'm sorry if you don't understand, but I have to do this."

Sam shook his head. "Fine," he stated, "but when Dean finds out and he's pissed as hell at you, don't say I didn't tell you so."

Buffy tried to hide her smile because Sam was giving her what Dean referred to as his 'full-on
bitchface'. It was inappropriate given the situation, but she had a sudden urge to giggle. He looked like an angry bull.

"Don't worry Sam," she said, managing to force herself to sound serious. "I'll deal with Dean when the time comes."

Crowley had decided that he was going to disembowel someone (slowly and painfully) if this surveillance plan of his didn't yield some results soon. He was on the verge of literally dying from boredom. For days on end, he'd done nothing but watch Castiel drone on and on about Raphael and battle strategy and more Raphael and more battle strategy. This was the most horrible and tedious television series ever aired, hands down. C-Span was more exciting than this travesty.

He'd become so desperate that he was on the verge of trusting one of his lackeys to watch for him until something interesting happened. Then, static flashed across the screen (something that always happened when the angel was flapping his wings as he went about on an errand). When the picture refocused, Crowley was actually grateful to see the face of Dean Winchester splashed across the screen in front of him. Granted, it was extremely annoying that the man looked like he belonged on television, but finally Crowley had hit pay dirt. He'd be able to find out what Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys knew about Eve (and about him) and if he was lucky, he'd also find out what Cas was hiding. It might not be another wasted day after all.

"Where is Eve?" Castiel asked Dean urgently almost the second he appeared in front of him.

Dean had his weapons laid out on the break room table and was busy giving them one last double check when he'd decided it was time to call Cas. He paused to look up at his friend and raised an eyebrow at his abrupt manner. "Keep your pants on. We'll see her soon enough."

"Where is she?" he asked again.

"An abandoned titty bar," Dean replied flippantly as he stuffed the weapons into his duffel. "Apparently those are real popular with monsters these days."

Castiel blinked at Dean in confusion. "I'm not sure I understand," he replied.

"You know... a strip club?"

"Why would she be at a strip club?" he asked earnestly.

"You got me," Dean shrugged. "She is a single mom with millions of kids. She probably needs the cash."

Castiel nodded as if he understood, although Dean doubted it.

"Are you ready to go?" the angel pressed impatiently.

"Jeez Cas," Dean replied a little irritably. "Give me a minute. We've gotta wait on a few people first. Everybody needs a chance to stock-up on weapons. Besides, don't you even want to know the plan?"

"Yes of course," he agreed, although he didn't sound very sincere. "What is the plan?"
Dean rolled his eyes and shook his head. Cas was one seriously impatient bastard these days. He reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out the 'sacred' piece of antler and held it out so the angel could look at it.

"I'm supposed to stick her with this magic bone," he said with a smirk. "Impressive, huh?"

The angel cocked his head and stared curiously at the weapon. He appeared very surprised to see it.

"Where did you find that?" he asked.

Dean shrugged. "Sam found it stashed away in the old Campbell compound. Why? Do you know what it is?"

"Yes, one of your predecessors used it to banish Eve to Purgatory," Cas replied simply.

"And you're just now telling me this?" Dean asked incredulously. "Didn't you think that was relevant? Damn Cas! We could've went lookin' for this thing months ago. What's up with the secrecy?"

"I'm sorry Dean," he answered sincerely. "I assumed that it no longer existed. It's nothing more than a fragment of organic material. It should be dust by now."

Dean frowned as he regarded the relic in his hand. "So, you're saying it's not magic?"

"It was used to banish Eve," Castiel said in reply.

"Okay... Got that. But, will it work?" Dean pressed.

"It worked last time."

"Well thank you Mister Information Guy," Dean said as he threw up his hands in frustration. "Dude, we're all about to put our asses on the line. I could use something more definite."

"You don't have to worry, Dean," he replied seriously. "If it does not work, I will deal with her."

Dean sighed in resignation and shoved the relic back in his pocket. Sometimes having a conversation with Cas was like pulling teeth. "Fine," he said. "Whatever. You can smite the nasty skank back to the Stone Ages for all I care. As long as she gets ganked, I'm not too picky. You can even send her ass to hell if it makes you happy."

"Why would you think I'd do that?" Castiel asked suspiciously.

Dean crinkled his brow and shot his friend a 'what the hell?' expression. "Dude, I don't know. Because she's a bitch, maybe? I'm just sayin', I don't care as long as it gets done."

"It will get done," the angel assured him.

"Wonderful," Dean stated in a voice thick with exasperation. "Glad that's settled." He paused for a minute before broaching the next subject. After his conversation with Sam and Bobby, he really didn't want to talk to Cas about Crowley. It made him feel like a traitor, but he decided it was better he do it himself than to let Bobby and Sam handle it. They'd probably turn it into the freakin' Inquisition. "Any word on Crowley?" he asked, trying to sound casual. "You think the bastard really gave you the slip?"

A grim expression fell over the angel's features and he no longer met Dean's gaze. "I'm still investigating," he replied shortly. "I'm not yet certain."
"Just askin'," Dean said. "You know we'll give you a hand with that as soon as Eve's in the ground. That black-eyed dick is next on my shitlist."

"That won't be necessary. If I made a mistake and Crowley is alive, I will deal with him myself."

"Wow, you're like the Lone Ranger these days," Dean observed. "Just don't be afraid to ask us for help, man. Remember, me and Sam are pretty damn good at hunting down demons. Besides, if Crowley did get one over on you, you shouldn't be so hard on yourself. He's one shifty son of a bitch. Nobody's perfect."

"But I'm an angel, Dean."

"Yeah, I know. No offense dude, but you guys haven't exactly proven yourselves perfect. I'm not tryin' to bust your balls here. I'm just sayin' we can help. We want to help," he emphasized seriously. "Believe me, I want Crowley gone just as much as you do."

The human branch of the hunting party (which consisted of Dean, Buffy, Sam, Faith, and Bobby) suddenly found themselves standing in the abandoned lot in front of the rundown old strip club Eve was supposedly hiding out in. They all looked at one another in surprise. It wasn't something they'd been expecting.

"Cas, what the hell?" Dean snapped. "Give a warning next time because I sure as hell wasn't planning on taking the angel express today. Jeez," he exclaimed irritably. "Don't you realize this place is only a twenty-minute drive across town? It's not worth the digestive problems. Plus, we were planning on bringing more Slayers along," he complained.

"This way seemed more expedient," he replied unapologetically. "We don't need anyone else."

Dean shook his head angrily. "Son of a bitch," he grumbled. "Dude, you better have your smite on, because I'm ready to get this shit over with. You're getting on my damn nerves today. You need to take a freakin' bottle of Valium or something. I think you've been spending way too much time with those dickheads upstairs. You're losing all your social skills."

"I don't have a lot of time, Dean. I needed to move things along."

"Whatever. Just remember that when this thing is over, the rest of us are walkin' back home. Hell, I'll boost a Goddamned car if I have to, but I'm not doing that twice in one day. Not if I don't have to. I hate that shit!"

"Okay," Castiel agreed calmly.

Bobby shook his head at the two. "I hate to interrupt your rant, Sunshine," he remarked to Dean, "but what's the plan? Do we just knock on the door? I don't think we ever got the chance to establish that," he added as he directed a pointed gaze toward Castiel.

"We might as well," Buffy said. "I'm pretty sure she already knows we're here. No use trying to be all sneaky."

"Guess not," Bobby agreed with a sigh. "Why don't you lead the way, Cas? Since you're so anxious to meet the bitch. We wouldn't wanna get in your way," he said sarcastically.

"That is fine," he replied stoically. "I will lead the way."
Bobby rolled his eyes and swept his hand toward the club's entrance. "Be my guest."

Before Castiel could touch the handle, the door swung open. Eve was standing just across the threshold, smiling calmly at the new arrivals. She was still wearing the same white dress with no shoes, but her innocent appearance was ruined by the fact that she had fresh blood stains on her dress and hands.

"Welcome," she said warmly. "I've been expecting you." She stepped back a few feet so that the group could enter. "Don't mind my children," she said as she nodded her head toward the twenty or so assorted monsters that were stationed around the barroom. "They won't hurt you unless I let them."

"That's comforting," Dean remarked as he followed behind Cas. He'd never seen so many different freaks in one place. It looked like Eve had picked out the biggest and ugliest of each litter and used them to assemble the world's most fucked-up personal guard. All the big players were there. She had vampires, both real and fake (he'd have to show Buffy the real one), a rugaru, a wraith, and almost anything else he could think of, including some really bizarre looking creatures he'd never seen before. The thing with the snot-covered antlers was just ridiculous. Why would she even bother making something like that? Just looking at it made him want to go take a shower. Hopefully he'd catch a break and be able to get out of here before he got too contaminated. If Eve stayed put, he might just get to take a stab at her on his way in the door. But, as usual, he wasn't catching any breaks. Just before he got close, she moved several yards away to stand across the room. She held out her hands to indicate several stools that still stood at the bar and the one table that remained in the otherwise empty club.

"Please, have a seat," she requested pleasantly.

"I think we'd rather stand," Buffy replied as she held the scythe up in front of her.

Eve smiled benignly and shook her head. "Now Buffy," she scolded lightly. "I'd hoped that your manners would've improved since our last meeting. Please try to behave yourself. As a mother, I really don't want to have to smack you around in your condition… but, I'll do what I have to," she added seriously.

Dean observed the exchange curiously, unsure of what to make of it. He tried to catch Buffy's eye, but she seemed reluctant to look at him.

"We can sit," Buffy said quickly before turning nervously toward the group. "Why don't we sit?" she asked a little too loudly.

"Why the hell not?" Bobby replied with a resigned sigh. "We may as well get good and comfy before we die."

Dean and Buffy slid backwards onto the two stools sitting at the bar and the rest of the group, aside from Castiel, sat cautiously at the table. The angel stood back. He appeared to be observing the scene with great intensity.

"Thank you," Eve said politely. "I'd hoped we could have a little chat because I'd like to give you one more chance to be reasonable. This doesn't have to be so hard. To be completely honest, I'd like to make it as painless as possible."

"That's awfully nice of you," Buffy replied sarcastically.

Eve continued to smile blandly at Buffy. "I know you think I'm evil," she said, "and I hate to
disappoint you, but I'm really not. Granted," she shrugged, "I guess it does sort of depend on your perspective. But the truth is, I'm just a part of nature."

"Oh please," Buffy said. "You're not gonna start with that natural order hoopla are you? Because – just so you know – I'm really tired of that tune."

"Believe what you want," she replied, "but I assure you that I used to be a great respecter of the natural order of things. I was happy with my slice of the pie. I was even at peace with the Slayer. I decided that her existence was more than fair. After all, what's one girl compared to all of my children?" she asked as she held out her arms to indicate the room filled with monsters. "But then everybody got greedy. You decided to activate all the potentials," she scolded as she pointed at Buffy and then turned toward Cas before continuing in a disgusted tone. "Then Castiel's cronies decided they just had to have an apocalypse. And what did it all accomplish? Nothing but chaos," she said in reply to her own question. "Now everything is completely out-of-control and I have to watch as my children are tortured by a filthy demon. You have no idea what that's like."

"What demon?" Dean demanded.

She looked at Dean impassively before replying. She seemed annoyed that he was daring to address her. "Crowley, of course," she said. "You should know that. Dean, is it?"

"Yeah. That's me."

"I've heard of you," she said, sounding unimpressed. "You've taken quite a few of mine. Which is fine. I can understand that. They kill some of you, turn some of you, and then you hunt them and send them back home to me. It's a nice little system. But, I also hear you worked for Crowley," she added in a much harder tone. "That I'm not so fine with."

"Sorry," Dean shrugged unapologetically.

"That's right," Eve said with a tight smile. "You don't think my children matter. They're just monsters to you."

Faith snorted. "Please lady, look around. It's pretty much a wall-to-wall monster movie in here. You're not getting the sympathy vote from any of us. So, don't waste your breath."

Eve shook her head and sighed. "Fine, I won't discuss philosophy with you simple creatures. I realize you don't have the mental capacity for it. But I am a mother," she added as she made a point to meet Buffy's gaze. "You know that a mother will do anything to protect her children. That's all I've been doing."

Buffy stared back defiantly. "So, that's your excuse for sneaking up behind a teenage girl and slitting her throat without even giving her a chance to fight back? You were just protecting your poor helpless little children? Real noble. I'm impressed."

"You're talking about the shifter," Eve observed. "As a matter of fact, I had nothing to do with that. That was all Crowley. Of course, I have to admit that I did benefit from it. If my girl hadn't killed Faith, I might still be searching for the Stolen One. That's why we're here," she said as she indicated the room around her. "We're here to honor her. This is where she sacrificed herself to the greater good."

"The greater good?" Faith asked incredulously. "Are you serious? Cause - if so - you're severely fucked in the head… and in case you didn't notice, I ain't dead."

"But you were," Eve stressed as she strolled toward the table where Faith was seated. "It may have
only been for a minute, but you were still dead. *That's what's important.* But, I have to admit that for a while there, I was very confused," she admitted with a frown. "I didn't understand why I couldn't sense her. I thought it was because there were so many Slayers now, but I was being foolish actually. I should have known."

"Should have known what?" Faith spat back angrily.

"You know the story," she replied patiently. "One Slayer dies, another one gets called… Even if you had a million Slayers, it would still work that way. No matter how much magic you throw at it, the natural order is still there, just waiting to be restored."

"Which means?" Buffy asked.

Eve looked away from Faith and turned her attention toward Buffy before replying in a patronizing tone. "It means that the core of my stolen power lies in a true chosen one, not in one of those imposters your witch created. They may have the power, but they weren't chosen. You Faith," she said as she reached out to stroke her hair gently. "You were chosen… and so was Buffy, but unfortunately, I couldn't use either of you. You've both been, shall I say… corrupted."

Faith cringed away from Eve's hand. "Give me a break. Please tell me you're not making this about lame-ass virginity. You've had what? A billion kids by now? How do you think you got knocked up all those times?"

"I'm a Goddess," she replied as she folded her arms and regarded Faith smugly. "I hold the power of creation. I don't need to debase myself."

Dean laughed. "Guess that explains why you're such a bitch then. You haven't been laid in a zillion years. No wonder. I'd be pissed too."

Eve stepped over toward where Dean was seated. She seemed to be losing her patience with his interruptions, which was fine with him. He needed her to get closer so he could end this thing and it looked like he was about to finally get his chance. He kept a tight grip on the antler hidden in his pocket as she stepped up close to him and regarded him with a hard stare. She started to open her mouth to say something when he decided it was time to make his move. He whipped out the makeshift dagger and stabbed it at her chest using every bit of force he had."

"Whoops," Dean said when he realized that the weapon hadn't even penetrated Eve's skin. He and Buffy traded wide-eyed glances before Eve calmly took the relic from his hand. She turned and gave a slight nod to several of the creatures standing nearby and then the entire club descended into complete chaos.

With a chorus of growls and snarls, every creature in the room advanced on Dean. They obviously weren't too happy that he'd tried to attack their Mommy. Dean was learning what it felt like to be completely screwed (once again). He blindly threw punches and tried to avoid teeth and claws as he struggled to whip out his knife. There was too much confusion to try to shoot a gun off at the moment. Even though the noise level was almost deafening, he could still hear Sam shouting and the whirring sound made by Buffy's scythe as she diced up as many monsters as she could. He caught a glimpse of Cas' trenchcoat through the melee and it was hard to get a good look at him, but it appeared that he was just standing there, staring off into space. It didn't look like he was going to open up a can of angelic wrath anytime soon. They were on their own.

Dean managed to free his bowie knife and used it to slash wildly at the creatures surrounding him. He could feel a thick stream of blood running down his chest and back where two different sets of claws had sliced completely through his jacket and both shirts. His arms and legs also burned with an
assortment of cuts and gouges, plus he'd been bitten a few times. He was royally fucked, but he was still determined to do as much damage as he could for as long as he could. He desperately hoped that some of the others would make it out. He knew Buffy and Faith had the best chance, but Sam and Bobby might be able to pull through too, simply because it was damn obvious that the freaks were mostly focused on getting to him. He was a popular guy.

Dean kicked, punched, and stabbed his way several feet across the room so that he could get his back against a wall. By this point, he was too occupied to be very aware of what was going on in the rest of the club. He just knew that he was currently being tag-teamed by one hell of a gigantic fake-vampire and what he swore was a Wendigo (even though this was definitely not their usual stomping grounds). He went for his pistol, thinking he was close enough to his target for it to be safe. A bullet wouldn't kill either one of these creatures, but it would still hurt like hell. He'd just pressed the barrel against the vamp's chest when its head disappeared from its shoulders and it turned to dust. He thanked God that he hadn't pulled the trigger, because Buffy was standing behind the cloud with her scythe raised. She quickly brought the stake end around and ran it completely through the Wendigo's back and chest. The creature gave one long, ear piercing shriek before slumping over limply. Dean didn't think you could kill one without fire, but the scythe was once again an exception to the usual rules. Buffy put a foot against the creature's torso and kicked its body free from her weapon, then spun around with it raised, ready to take on whatever else might be coming.

Dean kept his blade arm held out in front of him as he dropped the pistol and his body began sliding down the wall behind him. His legs had decided to quit on him, so he had no choice in the matter. His arms were pretty much done for as well, but luckily, it didn't seem that there were any more immediate threats. In fact, the entire club had gone almost deathly silent since the Wendigo had fallen. He gazed around cautiously and saw piles of dead monsters and body parts lying scattered around the barroom floor. Faith was standing in the middle of them holding a huge blade. She was breathing heavily, but appeared to be uninjured. Every single one of Eve's kids had been put down and, judging from the carnage, his money was on Buffy and Faith for the majority of the kills. He couldn't see Sam or Bobby from where he was sitting, but he heard them calling his name and hoped his jumbled brain wasn't imagining things. He couldn't believe they were both still alive. It almost qualified as a genuine miracle. Of course, on the flip side, he was bleeding to death from several different deep gashes. If that didn't kill him first, he was sure he'd been infected by the bite of at least one of the freaks. He knew for a fact that a werewolf had taken a good chunk out of his left shoulder.

After she'd confirmed that there were no more takers, Buffy spun back around to look at Dean. He'd never seen her so pissed off and focused before. She'd actually turned into the pure embodiment of the Slayer. The girl he knew as Buffy was almost unrecognizable underneath it all. It was amazing to see her like that, but more than anything, he was just so grateful that she was alive. She was better than that even, she actually seemed relatively unharmed. Sure, her hair was everywhere and there were a few gashes on her face, but otherwise she looked and moved like she was okay. That was more than he could've asked for. At least he hadn't had to watch Buffy die just because he'd failed again. That was not the last sight he wanted to see on this earth.

He realized that he must look every bit as bad as he felt when the fierce expression melted from Buffy's face and was replaced by a wide-eyed stare of horror. All the color drained from her cheeks and she knelt beside him, almost in a panic. She quickly ripped off a large section of his shirt that had already been pretty well shredded, wadded it up and then held it up uncertainly. She didn't seem to be able to decide which gushing wound needed to be tended to first. To be honest, it didn't matter.

She finally dropped the arm holding the cloth and put her other hand against his cheek. "Dean, please hold on," she pleaded. "We'll get you some help. You've just got to hang in there for a little while. I can't do this without you," she said desperately.
Dean tried to focus on Buffy, but she was swimming in and out of his vision. She was crying, which made him feel guilty and like a giant fuck-up. She seemed to be trying to tell him something. He thought he heard the word 'baby', but that couldn't be right. His eggs were scrambled. He tried to concentrate because he really wanted to understand. It was just so hard to hear her over the pounding in his head. He reached out to put a hand on her shoulder and tried to force himself to say something comforting, but his brain and his mouth were no longer cooperating with one another. The world around him had an unreal quality to it and the edges of his vision were beginning to get foggy. From where he was sitting, he could see Eve's bare legs and feet as she slowly walked up behind Buffy. He squeezed her shoulder, hoping she'd turn around in time to avoid whatever the bitch had planned. Buffy did turn to look up at Eve, but the creature didn't try to attack her. She just gazed down at the both of them with a smug smile on her features. She appeared completely unruffled by all the carnage. So much for the loving mother defense. She didn't even seem to notice the bodies. Instead, she just stood there calmly holding up the confiscated piece of antler.

"It's been a long time," she remarked thoughtfully as she examined the relic. "I'm surprised this thing is still around. Too bad it's completely useless," she said as she squeezed her hand tightly around it and the ancient piece of bone disintegrated into millions of tiny dust particles, which Eve casually dusted from her hands.

"Nice try," she said. "I don't suppose I can blame you for taking a shot at it. Too bad it's no good without the Michael Sword. I guess he's still in the pit with Lucifer," she added with an indifferent shrug. "At least that's what I've heard. The truth is, I lost my power of sight when those men made the Slayer. Since then, I can only see and hear through my children. It's the one thing I've really missed," she remarked wistfully. "I'll be glad to get it back."

Dean watched in confusion as the powdered remains of the 'sacred weapon' floated to the floor. What the hell had gone wrong? His blood stream was filled with poison and he wasn't sure he could add two and two anymore, but he was still pretty damn sure he was the Michael Sword. If he wasn't and the angels had just been jerking him around for kicks… he was gonna be pissed. He glanced over toward Cas and any shred of hope he may have had was shattered. The angel was still standing like a statue just inside the doorway. It didn't appear that he'd even moved a muscle since they'd entered the place. Castiel didn't say anything. He just gazed back at him mutely with eyes that were wide with confusion and something that looked very much like panic.

Eve smiled when she noticed that Dean was desperately focused on the angel. "Guess you're wondering about him?" she asked. "Don't worry. He's okay. I just turned him off for a while. Angels are so tiresome. I can't bear to listen to them."

"You turned him off?" Sam asked, sounding completely astounded.

"I see you're surprised," Eve observed. "It's not that hard actually. I was around way before he was. Let's just say, I know a few things he doesn't."

"Great," Bobby remarked under his breath. "Ain't this just friggin great."

Eve ignored him and took a couple of steps backward so that she could observe the entire group. "Is that it? Can we move along now?" she asked expectantly as she swept her gaze over them all. "Good," she said pleasantly after she was met with stunned silence. "Because, here's the deal… I need the Stolen One and you have her. She's sixteen, _pure_, very pretty. I'm fairly sure you call her Trish. Although it's hard to get much out of that one," she added with what sounded like pride. "The girl's tough. She's done an admiral job of trying to block me out. Of course, she is chosen, after all. The chosen ones will always be stronger," she emphasized. "Anyway," she shrugged, "you bring her to me and I'll let you all live. I'll even let the angel fix that one," she said as she flicked a hand.
toward Dean. "Don't get me wrong. I can get her myself. But, the thing is, it might take me a few more days and, honestly, I'm tired of all the waiting around. I've watched Crowley torture enough of my children already. Luckily for you, he's the one I really want. So last chance… What will it be?"

Dean was only half-listening to Eve's 'deal'. It was hard to pay attention to the crazy bitch's rambling when he was busy dying and/or going insane from monster venom. He was definitely going insane (that much was certain) because it was the only thing that explained why he could clearly hear Chuck Shurley's voice. His voice was so clear in fact, that it almost sounded like the guy was actually standing right beside him. What the hell? He had nothing against Chuck, but it wasn't exactly his dying wish to hear his voice one more time. But, regardless, the voice kept getting louder and more insistent, so Dean decided he may as well try and pay attention to it. The guy was supposedly a big-shot prophet. Maybe he had something important to tell him. So, he forced himself to focus and soon realized that Chuck was simply repeating the same phrase over and over again. 'It's your blood that's important… It's your blood that's important…' Okay, great… but what did that mean? He wished dude would shut up for a second so he could think about it. Then an image of Giles popped into his head. (Why couldn't he at least think about sex when he was dying?) Giles… Giles, Dean thought. What's up with Giles? Then he remembered. He'd told Giles that being the Michael Sword had 'something to do with having the right blood'. Blood again. That had to be important. As if in reply, Chuck suddenly went quiet. Either Dean was onto something or Imaginary-Chuck was just tired of fooling with him.

He craned his head around as he tried to take in his surroundings. He could see Buffy's lips moving and, judging from the expression on her face, she was probably telling Eve where she could stick her 'deal'. He was almost startled to see Sam's face just inches away from him. His brother was kneeling beside him and watching him worriedly. That was weird. He hadn't realized Sam was that close. He was really losing it. Then, he ran his gaze up the wall behind him and noticed that the previous owners had left their dartboard behind. That seemed extremely interesting for some reason. So, he kept staring at it, trying to figure out why it was so fascinating. It was just a standard dartboard. No different from the thousands he'd seen in other bars and clubs around the country. There were even two darts still sticking in the cork. Yahtzee. That was it. The darts. Dean knew what he had to do.

"Distract her," he whispered. At least he thought he'd managed a whisper. Buffy knitted her brows and stared back at him in confusion, so he tried again. Finally, she mouthed the words back to him with a questioning expression on her face. Dean nodded and stared into her eyes, hoping he could communicate his urgency that way. Even though she still looked extremely confused, she let go of his hand and stood up. He realized that she was trying to get Eve to grant her 'dying wish' by telling her which vampires were fake and which were real. She was on an epic ramble about it too. He wished he could afford to stop and listen. That had been bugging the hell out of him for months. But, he had other things to worry about. He needed to move his ass while he was still halfway able to.

He reached out and grabbed a handful of Sam's jacket and pulled him in as closely as he could. "Help me up," he groaned. But, just like Buffy had done moments before, Sam was giving him a wounded puppy/deer-in-the-headlights look. It sucked to have to struggle just to string a few syllables together. He took a deep breath and tried again. "Please," he ground out as he pulled on his brother's jacket as hard as he could for emphasis. Sam looked at him like he was crazy, but he finally started moving. He was probably just humoring the insane dying guy, because he didn't look very sure about his task. But, he did it. That was the important thing. Dean was now sort of standing with his back leaning against the wall and Sam supporting him on one side. The dartboard was only
inches from his hand. Thirty more seconds, that was all he needed. After that, he could blackout and
die or turn into some sort of freaky combination of all the different monsters that had taken a bite out
of him. What the hell would you even call a thing like that?

Dean tried to be stealthy as he pulled the darts from the board, but that wasn't his strong point at the
moment. He got them though. So, either Buffy was really good at causing a distraction or Eve didn't
give two shits about what he was up to. He decided it was probably a little of both. He gripped the
darts tightly so he wouldn't drop them and covered their tips in the blood that was seeping from one
of the deep gouges on his chest. Here goes, he thought as he transferred one of the darts to his left
hand and raised his right arm to throw. Hopefully his aim was still good. He'd certainly spent enough
time playing darts in crap bars for it to be an automatic response. It was now or never.

Only seconds had passed, but Dean felt like it had been years since he'd let the dart fly. He could
hear his brother asking "What the hell are you doing?" but he was focused on the amazing fact that
the dart was actually sticking in Eve's right shoulder. She stared down at it for a long moment with a
shocked look on her face and then doubled over, clutching herself in pain. Blood gushed from her
ears, mouth, nose, and eyes and her flesh appeared to be quickly decaying. The body of the
murdered girl she was wearing was withering around her.

"You," she gasped as she looked over at Dean with agony and disbelief on her features.

Dean really wanted to gloat. He really did. But, he was about to blackout for good. He was pretty
sure he did manage to give her the finger though. Not too bad as far as final words go. He even felt
strangely at peace as everything went black around him. For once, the people he loved had all
survived the big showdown. His death just didn't seem that important.

Chapter End Notes

I did want to say that I didn't include Lenoir because I didn't want to whump the crap
out of Willow and then not have the time or space to deal with it properly. That didn't
seem like a very nice thing to do.
Crazy Train

Chapter Notes

The chapter title (Crazy Train) is an Ozzy Osbourne song from the album *Blizzard of Ozz* (1980).

Buffy sat on the filthy floor of the abandoned barroom while she anxiously watched over Dean and waited for him to wake up. As she waited, she kept her fingers pressed tightly against the inside of his wrist. His strong and steady pulse helped to reassure her that he was actually alive and kept her from flying into a blind rage. A rage that would be aimed specifically at the angel who'd brought them into this fight severely undermanned.

As soon as Eve fell, Cas had immediately regained his powers. It wasn't a moment too soon, because Dean had already collapsed into unconsciousness and his breathing had become very shallow and irregular. The angel rushed to his side and simply touched him briefly on the forehead. Instantly, all of his wounds completely disappeared and his breathing evened out. Buffy had never felt so incredibly relieved and thankful. But now the angel was gone and Dean still wasn't conscious and that worried her.

"Why isn't he awake yet?" she asked with frustration and fear in her voice.

"He will be," Bobby answered from where he sat, squatted down on his haunches by Dean's legs. "Cas said it might take a few minutes. He's tough, he'll be okay," he encouraged her. "I know it seems like forever, but it's actually only been a minute or two. He was in pretty rough shape, probably just needs some time to reboot."

Buffy looked over at Sam who was kneeling by Dean's other side. "I don't see why he couldn't stay until he woke up," she said angrily.

Sam didn't say anything. He just nodded his head slightly in agreement. He appeared to be too furious for words at the moment. Buffy noticed that Faith looked extremely uncomfortable as she knelt by his side. It was obvious from the expression on her face that she wasn't quite sure how to comfort him, but she did reach over to rub his shoulder. Once she had a less stressful minute, Buffy was totally going to reflect on how adorable that was and then tease Faith unmercifully.

"Cas takin' off like that don't make sense," Bobby remarked, sounding extremely irritated himself. "Of course, half the shit that went on here today don't make sense."

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"I know how to kill an angel," Sam assured her tightly.

"Good, because I –," Buffy stopped midsentence when she saw Dean's eyelids fluttering open. "Dean, can you hear me?" she asked desperately. "Honey, please wake up. Tell us you're okay."
Dean blinked a few times and looked at the faces above him in confusion. "I'm alive?" he finally asked.

Sam sighed his relief and grasped his brother by the shoulder. "Yeah man, you're alive. Trust me, this ain't heaven."

"That's good, cause heaven's overrated," Dean remarked as he pushed himself up into a sitting position.

Buffy started to pull him into an embrace, but he grabbed her by the shoulders and held her away from him. Her eyes went wide, thinking he remembered her telling him about the baby. He'd been so out of it that she hadn't been sure if he'd understood anything she said. It looked like she was about to find out what his reaction was going to be.

"Wait a minute," he said suspiciously. "I'm not some freaky hybrid monster now am I?"

"No," Buffy laughed in relief as she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "I promise. No freaky hybrid monsters here. Just plain Dean."

"Good deal," he said as he returned her embrace. "Hey," he remarked with a grin as he pulled back to look at her. "Does this mean I get extra special treatment again?" he asked suggestively. "You know, like that time I was cursed. Cuz - just so ya know - this was way worse. I'm pretty damn traumatized. I'm actually really fragile right now," he added, trying to put on his best lost puppy dog face.

Buffy felt her face growing a little warm, but she still kissed him in reply. He'd pretty much earned a free pass from her for the day. They only stopped kissing when Faith suggested they "get a room".

Dean didn't seem bothered by it though. In fact, he looked pretty pleased with himself. He accepted a hand-up from Sam and stood looking at the carnage for a moment. His smile faded quickly.

"I'm guessing Cas fixed me, but where the hell is he?"

"Stuff to do," Bobby answered with obvious displeasure. "Didn't have time to hang around."

"Dean, what happened here?" Sam asked curiously. "I'm pretty damn lost. Why didn't that antler thing work?"

Dean looked at his brother curiously for a moment, almost as if he was unsure himself. However, it was obvious the moment that the realization hit him, because he suddenly looked furious.

"That so-called relic was a worthless piece of shit!" he exclaimed angrily. "That's what happened! It was my blood that killed her. It didn't matter how I got it in her. I'm sure the only reason that stupid ass thing worked the first time was because it was soaked in Caveman Michael Sword's blood. There wasn't anything special about it. Never was."

"So, that's what was on the missing part of the scroll," Bobby remarked. "Ain't that a kick in the ass?"

"But how did you know that?" Buffy asked. "How did you know to use your blood?"

Dean didn't reply. Instead, he started yelling for Cas and threatening him with various forms of bodily harm if he didn't show himself immediately. Once it became obvious that the angel wasn't going to appear, he picked up one of the wooden bar stools and smashed it against the wall.

"He knew!" Dean raged. "That son of a bitch knew and he still let us come in here and try it."
Sam approached his brother cautiously, his hands held out to his sides. "Dude, I get it," he said evenly. "You're pissed. We're all pissed. Just take a minute and tell us what the hell's going on."

Dean took a deep breath and rubbed at his temples for a moment while he tried to compose himself. "Chuck," he finally said. "Chuck told me."

Bobby crinkled his brow in surprise. "You mean the supposed prophet that writes those God-awful books?"

"Yeah," Dean confirmed, "the great Penthouse Forum Prophet. Dude came to me in this really weird-ass dream and told me he knew what else was on the scroll. He said it was my blood that was important. Apparently, I wasn't even supposed to remember that unless Cas fucked-up and didn't tell me. God's testing him or some shit. Guess he flunked," he added bitterly.

"Damn," Sam said. It was the only thing he could think to say. "Guess that means –"

"I know," Dean cut him off gruffly. "You guys were right. Cas is up to something and it probably involves Crowley. Go ahead and say 'I told you so'."

"Dean, I'm not exactly gloating here," Sam replied. "I was hoping we were wrong."

"You got that right," Bobby agreed. "The last thing we need is more angel problems."

Buffy frowned as she looked at Dean. Underneath his rage, he was obviously hurting. He'd trusted the angel even when people close to him were starting to have doubts and now he'd been totally betrayed. She added that to her new list titled 'Reasons Why Castiel is a Huge Feathered Ass'. She had a feeling it was going to be a long one.

"I guess we better get back," she suggested gently as she put a hand on Dean's shoulder. "Time to hit the books again and start planning for Apocalypse 2011 phase 2."

"Yeah," Dean agreed angrily. "That's the phase where angels are dicks. Thought I'd already done that one."

"Welcome to the crappy sequel," Bobby said with a tired sigh as he left the group and walked/limped across the room to what was left of Eve's body. He bent down and pulled the dart from the shriveled remains of her shoulder.

"What are you doing Bobby?" Sam asked curiously.

He held up the dart he'd just retrieved. "I'm puttin' this in that stupid-ass reliquary. That way, if Eve ever breaks out again, some poor son of a bitch will be just as confused as we were."

"So, you're not gonna leave a note?" Faith asked.

Bobby shrugged. "Not sure yet. Depends on what kinda mood I'm in. I'm a bitter old bastard today."

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Castiel wasn't sure what to say once he appeared in the Stolen One's room. He'd found the girl, who he now knew was called Trish, sitting on a cot in the corner of the small bedroom she'd been confined to. He was immediately struck by the power emanating from her. It was the same kind of power he felt in the presence of any of the Slayers, but this one was more pronounced, more focused. Like the power he felt when he was near Buffy or Faith.
The girl looked younger than he'd expected, which was something he found quite disturbing. He'd seen many sixteen-year-old girls who appeared to be fully grown women. He reasoned that her youthful appearance might be partly due to the fact that she was so extremely thin. It caused her eyes to be large and childlike and kept her from possessing the curves that usually marked a woman from a girl. The teen had obviously been under a great deal of stress. Aside from the fact that she was underweight, her hair was also messy and there were large dark circles under her eyes. And, unfortunately, it wasn't only her distressed and childish appearance that was making his task more difficult.

When he'd arrived, he was overcome by guilt when he noted that she had a copy of the Bible clutched tightly in her hands and her head bowed as if she'd been praying. He hadn't been prepared for that. Also, instead of being frightened, she barely flinched when he appeared and even though she had tears streaming down her face, it didn't appear that it was his presence that was causing her grief. The tears, he realized, were a combination of both relief and joy. She looked up at him with an expression of pure awe on her features.

"I've seen you before," she said quietly. "You're the angel. The one Buffy knows."

"Yes," he replied stoically. "I am Castiel."

"Thank you," she said reverently as she continued to clutch the Bible tightly and gazed at him in wonder.

He looked away from the girl. He couldn't bear to see the gratitude in her eyes, not when he knew he was about to take her to her death. He wished she would just be quiet. It would make things much easier.

"For what?" he asked almost cautiously. "Why are you thanking me?"

"For the Mother," she replied, sounding surprised by the question. "You answered my prayers… She's gone now. I can't feel her anymore. You did that, didn't you?"

Castiel didn't reply. He didn't know how to. He didn't know what this meant. Was the girl's faith a sign that he was on the wrong path or was he only being weak? Could it be possible that her faith was a positive sign? That it meant she would understand what he needed to do. She was just one life after all. One life compared to the billions that would be spared when he defeated Raphael. Perhaps she'd willingly sacrifice herself if he explained what was at stake. But, did he still believe in his mission? He'd been so sure of himself just hours before, but he'd also been certain that Eve was no match for him. He'd been mistaken about that and it had almost cost Dean his life. Now, he was also aware that Crowley was responsible for the death of one of the young Slayers and had nearly caused the death of Faith. Those actions had been unnecessary and something the demon knew he would not approve of. Was Crowley doing other things he wasn't aware of? The possibility made him wonder if he'd been wrong to go along with this plan, yet he knew of no other way to defeat Raphael.

He stood staring blankly at the obviously confused teen as he tried to decide what he should do. He looked up, praying that his father would give him a sign and, as expected, he was answered with nothing but silence. He could, however, hear Dean raging at him. He was demanding that he show himself or be subjected to some rather puzzling consequences. He didn't believe it was actually possible to rip someone's lungs out of their ass, but Dean sounded extremely confident in his ability to do so. The sound of Dean's voice was making him feel even less confident in his choices. Dean would never agree to sacrifice this girl. Of course, the man often seemed to have difficulty seeing the big picture. He tended to place what Castiel felt was an unreasonable emphasis on the welfare of individual persons. But, could he be right?
Buffy watched Dean with quiet concern as she sat in the passenger seat of the old Cadillac he'd hotwired. She couldn't believe she'd actually stood by and let him steal a car without even arguing. He was just so determined and, frankly, she wanted to get back to the Council as soon as possible (even if it was in a stolen car). Cab drivers were famously unwilling to venture to this part of town and that left waiting for a ride from one of her friends or boosting a car. The latter just seemed much quicker. Later, she'd make sure the car got dumped off somewhere and place an anonymous tip with the police. Hopefully they'd reunite the vehicle with its owner.

She was grateful that 'the prophet' had told Dean how to defeat Eve, but she was still pretty damn irritated that his info on Cas had been big on the vague and short on the actual info. What was up with all the cryptic? She wished that just once some prophet/messenger/spirit guide would give a straight answer that didn't involve riddles or infuriatingly confusing statements. Dean was already having a hard time with the situation. He'd been betrayed by a trusted friend and he was understandably furious about it. He didn't need a whopping dose of ambiguity as a side dish.

"Fuck me!" Dean exclaimed suddenly, startling everyone in the otherwise quiet vehicle. "I'm going to beat Andrew's scrawny little ass."

"Huh?" Buffy said, wondering where the hell that outburst had come from.

"Chuck's publishing again!" he declared. "Dude's a dead man. Because as soon as I'm finished giving Andrew his beat down, I'm shooting his drunk ass."

"Good luck," Sam replied from the backseat. "Cause I can't find him anywhere."

Dean whipped his head around and glared at his brother. "You knew about this?" he asked accusingly.

"Dean. Sweetie, please keep your eyes on the road," she requested anxiously.

Thankfully, he did as requested and turned back around, but he continued to glare at his brother through the rearview mirror. Sam immediately regretted making that remark. Now was probably not the best time to get into what he did and did not know about Chuck's latest series of books. If they didn't all die in a horrible, fiery crash, they were going to end up in jail. Why were they even letting Dean drive? It wasn't the wisest choice.

"He knew it would just upset you," Buffy said in Sam's defense. "He didn't want you to know that I found out about…" She trailed off, not knowing how much Faith knew about the 'hell' subject. "Well, you know," she finally added.

"You mean about hell?" Dean thundered. "You're telling me you found out about me going to hell from those books? I take it back," he remarked through gritted teeth. "I'm not gonna shoot Chuck. That would be too easy. I'm gonna beat his ass and then road-haul him behind the Impala first. If he lives through all that, then I'll shoot him."

"Dean," Buffy said evenly. "You need to calm down and listen. The only person you're going to kill will be one of us if you don't pay attention to the road. There was no reading," she assured him firmly. "I just heard about it from Andrew. I'm not going to read those books. Ever. I promise."

Buffy's words did seem to make Dean a little calmer, but he was definitely still far from a Zen state of mind. "Fine. I'm still killing Chuck though and I'm still kicking the living shit out of Andrew."
Don't bother trying to stop me."

Buffy didn't contradict him. Mainly because she doubted he would actually lay a finger on Andrew when it came down to it. He wouldn't do that to someone who obviously had no chance of holding their own in a fight against him. He probably would threaten him and if Andrew was stupid enough to run his mouth too much, he just might get himself punched, but Dean wasn't going to start beating him on sight. That much she was fairly sure of.

Giles had become incredibly anxious as he awaited the return of the raiding party. Earlier, he'd gone back to the break room where the group had been assembling and nobody was there. It was as if they'd just disappeared and without so much as a goodbye. It was puzzling because he'd thought more of the Slayers were going and, honestly, he had half-a-mind to go himself. He and the older hunter had entered into a juvenile pissing contest of sorts. So, if Bobby was going, then Giles had decided he might just have to go as well. He wasn't going to be accused of being too 'delicate' to go out in the field. He'd show that cranky old grease monkey that he was more than capable of going into battle. Buffy would've disagreed with such a decision, but who was she to say that a couple of middle aged men couldn't be absurdly childish on occasion. They'd both earned the right.

He was incredibly relieved when he finally received a call from Buffy, but she didn't give him many details beyond the fact that Eve had been defeated. She'd seemed a bit distracted, which left him wondering if more problems weren't on the horizon. That wouldn't be shocking, but he had been hoping for a short respite before the next crisis. However, on the bright side, he did feel it was safe to venture outside while he waited for the others to arrive. The day was bitterly cold, but it was still better than being cooped up inside the Council building. At least the sun was out.

The group arrived a few minutes earlier than he'd expected. They practically skidded into the parking lot in a huge white Cadillac that Dean was driving. Luckily for the occupants, the man obviously had experience in maneuvering a vehicle that large. However, Giles decided he'd rather not know where said vehicle had come from. When they came to a stop after sliding sideways into an empty parking spot, the occupants quickly piled out and made a beeline for the building. Giles noticed that Dean looked like someone had put his clothing through a shredder and was surprised when he couldn't spot a scratch on him.

"The relic worked then?" he asked as Dean barreled up the stairs to the main entrance, looking surprisingly unhappy for someone who'd supposedly just slain the beast.

"The relic was crap," he replied shortly.

Bobby, who appeared to be favoring his right leg, lagged behind at a much slower pace and, thankfully, stopped to give Giles somewhat of an explanation. Granted, it was a rather bizarre explanation, involving a prophetic dream and a bar dart that was slated to be enshrined in the reliquary. Of course, by Hellmouth standards, none of that was too terribly peculiar. What concerned Giles was the revelation that they may be dealing with a rogue angel who, in Bobby's opinion, had likely decided to align himself with the demon known as 'The King of Hell'. Hellmouth or not, Giles decided that scenario did qualify as peculiar… and extremely disturbing.

As they entered the building, Buffy was thrilled (but not shocked) that the first person they came across was Andrew. Of course it would be Andrew. Why wouldn't it be? She'd hoped Dean would have a little time to cool off before coming face-to-face with his number one fanboy, but she should've known better. Poor Dean just wasn't having a very good day. So, Buffy hovered close by
"You!" Dean exclaimed as he pointed at a surprised looking Andrew. "You're gonna bring me every single one of those crap Supernatural books."

"Why?" he asked cautiously. The request obviously made him nervous.

"Because, I wanna catch up on my reading," Dean snapped sarcastically. "Dude, I'm going to salt and burn them," he emphasized slowly and deliberately. "Then, I'm going to piss on the ashes. So, forget you ever read 'em. Get it?"

"Um… yeah… I guess," he replied sheepishly.

"Super," Dean grumbled.

"Just do it, dude," Sam advised Andrew seriously. "Trust me."

Buffy could tell that Andrew was trying to catch her eye throughout the entire conversation. He was obviously hoping for her help in saving his sacred book collection. But, she ignored him. She didn't have time to listen to him whine right now. If he had any sense, he'd take Sam's advice and let the subject drop. The Slayer's duties did not extend to rescuing poorly written fantasy novels from an angry hunter's bonfire, especially when the existence of those novels might actually cause Dean's head to explode.

"Dean," Buffy said as she made a point not to even look in Andrew's direction. "I think we should go check on Trish. I'm hoping she's doing better now."

Before Dean could open his mouth to reply, Cas appeared just inches away from him. The shock was obviously the final straw in a series of final straws, causing Dean to yell "Goddammit Cas!" loudly enough for anyone within the city limits to hear.

The angel didn't seem surprised by this reaction. But, instead of addressing Dean he turned toward Buffy and said, "The girl is okay. She's safe in her room."

"How the hell would you even know that?" Dean asked angrily. "Dude, you've got some major explaining to do here. Starting with, why the hell you almost let us all get our asses killed today?"

Cas gazed back solemnly for a moment, he was obviously unsure of himself. "It is difficult to explain," he finally said. "Dean, I never meant any harm to come to you. I needed some information from Eve… information that would help me to defeat Raphael. I was afraid you wouldn't understand and I couldn't allow you to kill her before I had a chance to speak with her. I'm sorry Dean," he said sincerely as he looked him in the eyes. "I am truly sorry. The situation got out of my control," he admitted reluctantly.

Dean threw up his hands and looked at Cas with his mouth hanging open in amazement. "Ya think?" he asked. "What the hell's wrong with you Cas? You're looking for war tips from monsters now and you're leaving your friends hanging out to dry? Please tell me Crowley's not involved in any of this. Tell me you're not trying to open Purgatory with him. Dude, please!"

When he refused to make eye contact, Dean knew. Cas was in league with Crowley. Crowley! He was completely speechless. It'd been a little while since he'd been screwed over that massively by someone he trusted. He'd almost forgotten what a giant knife to the back felt like. Sam, on the other hand, was not speechless. He was livid.

"You almost got my brother killed today," he spat accusingly. "And you may as well have killed
Kellie yourself. Or do you even know who I'm talking about?" he asked with contempt. "Do you even care what Crowley's been up to? Hell, maybe it was all your idea. I hope you're not too disappointed that Faith managed to pull through. She was in a shitload of pain if that helps."

Castiel gazed at the faces surrounding him. Sam, Bobby, and the two Slayers looked murderous, but the shocked look of betrayal on Dean's face was the worst. He wished he could make them understand. He shook his head slowly as he addressed the younger Winchester. "I had nothing to do with the girl's death, Sam. I assure you that I knew nothing about that before today. Crowley promised me he would not harm the Slayers. That was part of our deal. I would not have agreed to work with him otherwise."

Dean suddenly found his voice. "Crowley promised! What the fuck? You expect us to believe that you're surprised Crowley's a two-faced, murdering douche bag? Why Cas? What would possess you to work with Crowley in the first place? I thought we were on the same side. Haven't you seen anything to convince you not to make a deal with a demon? Did you forget how well that's worked out for the rest of us?"

"Dean, please listen to me," Castiel implored. "I've made mistakes. I see that now. I promise you that I will take care of Crowley. He won't have the opportunity to harm anyone else. Please believe me when I tell you that I never meant to betray you. I was doing this for you and for Sam... for all of you," he added as he looked around the room. "Raphael is much stronger than I am and I had very few options. If he wins, he will re-start the Apocalypse. Everything you sacrificed will mean nothing. Dean, I wanted you to have some peace. I was trying to ensure that you would be able to have the family I know you want. I wanted to give you a chance to see your daughter grow up."

"I'm having a girl?" Buffy asked in surprise as she looked down and placed both hands over her stomach.

Dean looked back and forth between Cas and Buffy for a moment. This just might qualify as the biggest 'what the hell?' of the day, which was really saying something. Surely he was hallucinating. He had to be hallucinating. Cas must be talking about some hypothetical future kid... but that didn't explain why Buffy seemed fixated on her belly and why Faith said, "Oh shit, looks like the cat's out of the bag". Then he noticed that Sam looked like he'd been caught with his hands in the cookie jar. It was official. This was 'National Keep Secrets from Dean Day'.

"Buffy?" he said as he looked at her with wide eyes and a suddenly very pale face. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

She smiled at him uncertainly. "Maybe," she shrugged.

Giles and Bobby said "Oh dear" and "Holy shit" almost in unison.

"Oh God," Dean said, sounding like someone who was very close to pure panic. "Oh my freaking God. This can't be happening." He was going to pass out. It was a chick flick thing to do, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to prevent it. A man could only be expected to take so much. "How the hell did this even happen?" he asked under his breath.

When it seemed no one else was going to offer an explanation, Castiel decided to step in. "I'm fairly certain –."

"Shut up, Cas," Dean warned icily as he held a hand up. "Don't say it. Not one word. I swear. I will flip the fuck out on you, dude. I'm not in the mood for it. Besides, what the hell? How long have you known about this?"
"I first got a sense of it when I attended your bizarre Halloween ritual, but it was very apparent the last time that I saw Buffy."

"And you didn't think that was something I might like to know about?" Dean asked incredulously.

Castiel looked extremely puzzled and unsure of himself. "I assumed that was one of those things I shouldn't talk about," he finally replied. "Like the movie about the pizza delivery man."

That was it. Dean could feel it. The little string that represented his grip on sanity had finally snapped. He was officially nuts. It was actually kind of liberating.

"Is there anything else I need to know?" he yelled to the room at large. "Any more big secrets? Cas," he said as he pointed to the angel. "Are you secretly sneaking off to the Pit to bang Lucifer?"

"No… I—, " he stammered in embarrassed confusion.

Dean ignored him and continued on with his rant. "What about you Andrew?" he thundered. "Is there an upcoming crappy Supernatural movie I should be aware of?"

Andrew shrugged and replied quietly. "I… well… there is a lot of hope in fandom for a TV series, but I don't think there's a wide enough audience for it yet."

Dean gaped at the younger man like he had three heads before turning back to Buffy. "Did you know you were pregnant?" he asked in a voice that was deceptively calm.

"Only since yesterday," she replied hesitantly.

"Right. Okay. So, that means you **knew about this** when you decided it was a good idea to take on a room full of monsters. Seriously? Are you a fucking idiot?" he yelled.

"Oh dear," Giles repeated. This was not going well.

"No Dean," she snapped back angrily. "I'm not a 'fucking idiot'. I'm also not sick or helpless and I haven't suddenly forgotten how to handle myself in a fight. Newsflash, I'm the Slayer. It was my job to go in there today. I wasn't going to stay behind and wring my hands while the life of my child and her father were both on the line. I could do something about it and I did. Deal with it! Maybe you should remember that this fragile little pregnant lady can knock your smartass into next week."

"Bullshit," Dean spat back at her. "I call bullshit. You shouldn't have gone in there and you know it."

"Oh really?" Buffy asked with her hands on her hips. "You know everything don't you? I forgot about that."

"NO!" he yelled back at her. "I don't know anything! Did you forget about the giant conspiracy to keep Dean in the dark?" He sat down heavily on a nearby chair and buried his face in his hands.

Buffy took a couple of deep breaths and reminded herself that Dean had been pushed to his limits and beyond. "Dean," she said much more calmly than she'd sounded the moment before. "I'm sorry you're angry, but I'm not sorry I went with you today. You'd never let me go into something like that without you. You can't expect me not to feel the same way."

"Are you trying to give me a stroke?" Dean asked in exasperation. "Don't you care how badly it freaks me out to think of you pregnant and getting ripped apart by monsters? You can't say I'd do the same thing. It's not fair, because it's totally freaking different. I'm not pregnant, Buffy! I'll never be
"Actually," Andrew interjected. "You do get pregnant in fanfic a lot. It's a pretty popular genre with certain fans. It's not really my thing though," he added hurriedly when he could actually feel the burning rage radiating from Dean.

"Jesus Christ," Sam breathed in horror, breaking the stunned silence in the room. "You have got to be kidding me right now. Just please tell me I'm not the father in any of these stories. Dude… Please … Dude!"

"Sometimes you are," Andrew confirmed sheepishly. "…and sometimes Castiel is the father. Then there are the demonic pregnancies, but those don't usually end well."

"Kid," Bobby said gruffly. "Two things… One, I'm not sure I even get what the hell you're talkin' about, but if I've ever managed to impregnate Dean, you better take that to your grave… and two," he added as he looked over at Dean, who (if it was possible) appeared to actually be frozen in a state of catatonic rage. "Boy, I'd run if I were you," he advised seriously. "Run. Far and fast. While you still can. Scare up as many Slayers as you can find and hide under 'em. It's the best advice I can offer."

Crowley stood up from his chair and clapped his hands together slowly. He felt obligated, because this episode truly deserved a standing ovation. He didn't think it was possible to be this entertained without actually getting blood under his nails. The show had action, betrayal, drama, angst, and a cast filled with so many mental defectives that comic relief was a virtual given. It was brilliant. He'd give it five stars even if it wasn't the most educational piece of theatre he'd ever witnessed.

So, the Stolen One was one of the precious little baby Slayers. That explained what Cas had been hiding. He must've suspected it and his angelic conscious had prevented him from mentioning it to the nasty demon. The angel had been on the fence between good and evil, but he'd finally decided to take the righteous path. It was inspiring, adorable even… and completely irrelevant. Because, while it was a shame that dear Cassie no longer wanted to play along, Crowley was a resourceful man. He never would've undertaken such an ambitious endeavor if he didn't have a solid contingency plan in place. He hadn't managed to claw his way to the top of the heap in the Pit on his looks alone. Castiel would be coming for him. That much was clear. Too bad he'd be more than ready for him when he arrived. Crowley did have a bit of work to do in preparation, but he also knew that he had some time. The angel would need at least a few more minutes to properly grovel for his boyfriend's forgiveness. He suddenly wished his surveillance spell had come equipped with a DVR, because he did hate to miss that portion of the program. He'd been entertained enough already though. It was time to put his plans in order.

Buffy lay and on the makeshift bed in her office as she watched Dean getting undressed. She'd never seen him looking so utterly defeated. It broke her heart to see him that way and even though she realized it wasn't fair, she was hurt that he didn't seem to be showing any excitement about the big news. Not that they'd had much time to celebrate anything today. She guessed she was being pretty unrealistic. It wasn't like this was happening at the most ideal time and she reminded herself that she'd had some serious wiggins at first. She couldn't blame him if he felt off balance.

"Are you still rage-y?" she asked him in a teasing tone when he lay down beside her and laced his hands behind his head.
"Nah, I'm all raged out," he replied with a sigh and then laid there staring silently at the ceiling.

"I was hoping we'd get to sleep in an actual bed tonight," she remarked, hoping to draw him into some semblance of a conversation.

"Can't do that until we're sure Cas is actually going to keep his word and take out Crowley," Dean replied bitterly.

"You don't think he will?" she asked cautiously. She was well aware that the entire subject was a landmine and she'd like Dean to stay rage free for the moment.

"I don't know," he said as he continued to gaze at the ceiling. "I never thought he'd hook up with Crowley in the first place. So don't ask me. I obviously don't know jack."

Buffy frowned. "He did seem sincere," she offered hopefully. "I still owe him a serious ass kicking, but he was all about the sorry. Plus, he did give us all the nitty gritty details on the master plan. He didn't have to do that, because it sure didn't put him in a very good light."

"Yeah, well… I kinda wish he hadn't. I can't believe he was the one blocking your dreams all this time. What a dick! And he actually considered bleeding a kid to death. I mean, what the hell? It's like I don't even know the guy anymore."

"I'm sorry Dean," Buffy said sincerely. "I really am… and I wish you hadn't had to find out about the baby in the middle of all of this. I guess you don't see it as very good news."

Dean rolled on his side so he could look at Buffy. He could tell by the sound of her voice that she was disappointed in his reaction. "Buffy, please don't try to make me feel like an ass. I'm trying here, okay? I'm sorry if I'm not jumping for joy that I knocked you up in the middle of a friggin apocalypse."

Deep breaths Buffy, she thought. There'd already been enough yelling for one day. "Don't you want the baby?" she asked, trying to sound as unemotional and non-judgmental as she could manage. It was hard though, because she was already so attached.

Dean reached out and put his arm around her and played with the hair that was falling across her shoulders. "Of course I do," he said seriously. "I've never wanted anything more than to be with you and have a home and an actual family. It's everything… the perfect package. But you don't understand," he continued with a haunted look in his eyes. "It doesn't matter what I want. It never has. My whole life has been one giant trail of death and destruction. The people I love always die and I'm scared as hell," he admitted, his voice shaky. "I don't think I'm strong enough to lose anyone else and I'm not sure what kind of a father I'll be. I don't want my child to be raised like I was. We were always looking behind our back, always on the run, and always afraid. No kid should have to live like that."

Buffy felt terrible for Dean. She already had a pretty clear picture of his childhood, but this was the first time that he'd actually admitted to the effect it had on him. "It doesn't have to be that way," she stressed. "I know you don't think it's possible, but I know we can do this. I'm scared too, but I truly believe this was meant to be. I promise you, we're going to get through this mess and I'm going to have this baby and she's going to be beautiful and perfect and she's going to have a chance… and you'll make a wonderful father," she assured him.

"You can't promise that," he said sadly.

"I'm promising you because I know it's true. I don't know how I know and I've never been a big
believer in fate, but I feel it."

Dean actually laughed a little. "So, you're saying I just need to have faith. You sound like Chuck. That's not a good thing, by the way. Dude's a raging alcoholic with some seriously twisted sexual fetishes."

"I'll keep that in mind," Buffy replied with a small smile before turning serious and meeting his gaze steadily. "Dean, I'm not asking you to have faith in God. I might just get struck by a big ole lightning bolt for saying this, but he's not my go-to guy. I'm asking you to have faith in us. Have faith in our ability to make it through situations that are beyond crazy and still manage to stay mostly sane... and extremely good looking," she added with a playful grin. "We're the type of people that can ride a dragon and kill the Queen of the Monsters by throwing a perfect bullseye. I think we can handle one tiny baby. A tiny baby who will have an actual home and be surrounded by a lot of very powerful people who love her," she emphasized. "She'll be more closely guarded than those little Obama girls. I swear, I think Will's already busy knitting tiny protection charms. It would not be wise for anything to piss off Auntie Willow."

"I hope you're right," Dean replied with a small, but hopeful smile. "I guess Willow could be pretty badass if she needed to be."

"Trust me -You have no idea."

Buffy was relieved to see that Dean looked a tiny bit less freaked. At least he didn't look like he was going to pass out or shoot himself any time soon. Sadly, that was progress. She felt so much better just knowing that he did want their child. She could definitely work with that. But, she wasn't expecting miracles. Dean was going to be extremely anxious (and probably a huge pain her the ass) until he was sure that the Crowley fiasco was over. Then, there was the minor issue of making sure that no angels were actively trying to end the world. It was definitely a tall order, but she knew it would all be resolved. She had a feeling her night would be filled with several months' worth of blocked prophetic dreams. There was bound to be something in there she could use.

"Are you going to spend the next few months trying to give me a heart attack?" he asked.

The question drew Buffy out of her thoughts and she had to try to force herself not to smile when she replied, because she knew he was dead serious. "Not if I don't have to," she promised. "Just know that I'm coming off the bench if I think it's necessary. You won't be able to stop me, so maybe you should talk to Willow. She can probably hook you up with some calming herbs or something," she said half-jokingly.

"Yeah right. Think I'll pass. The last time I smoked 'calming herbs' I ended up paranoid as hell. I was convinced that the Impala had a poltergeist living in her vents. Then, I tried to eat a package of dry Ramen Noodles. I wouldn't recommend it. I almost chipped a tooth."

Buffy laughed. "I think you're talking about a different kind of herb."

"I hope so," Dean said, "because I'm gonna need somethin'. I know you're gonna do all sorts of crazy-ass shit and cause me to lose what's left of my sanity. Then, I'm going to spend the next eighteen... no better make that thirty years trying to keep a bunch of horny dumbasses away from my daughter. Plus, I have no freaking clue how to take care of a little girl. I don't know anything about baby girls. So, you better enjoy this pregnancy," he said seriously, "because I don't think there'll be another one, even if I have to do something completely batshit like getting myself snipped."

"Uh huh," Buffy agreed as she snuggled up against him. Arguments about other pregnancies could
wait until after he'd survived this one.

"Guess I should make you an honest woman," he said thoughtfully as he pressed a soft kiss against her forehead.

Buffy leaned up on her elbows and glared at him in disbelief. "For your safety, I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," she said with her brows drawn tightly together. "You're not getting away with any more lame declarations, mister. At least one of Buffy's fluffy romantic fantasies is going to come true, even if it kills you. So, don't say anything else until you can do it right. If you find that confusing, then I suggest you go talk to your brother. He might actually be able to lend you a clue."

Dean smirked. "Yeah," he agreed. "cause he's a giant girl."
Welcome to My Nightmare

Chapter Notes

The chapter title is an Alice Cooper song from the album *Welcome to My Nightmare* (1975).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Buffy was trapped in the odd space between being fully asleep and fully awake. It was a space where the reality of the world around her often began to seep and blend into her dreams. The semi-conscious portion of her mind was busy trying to decide if the distant screams she was hearing were real or just another part of the dream she was having. Before she was able to put much thought into it, she was jerked completely out of her sleep by the sensation of a slight vibration coming from the floor beneath her. It was kind of like someone in the building was throwing something heavy around. The feeling was similar to one of the very minor earthquakes that were so common when she'd lived in California. It was subtle and probably wouldn't even wake most people, but it caused her Slayer senses to start screaming. The prophetic dream/nightmare she'd been having was coming true. She was sure of it. She had to move.

The slight jarring sensation woke Dean as well. He didn't have Slayer senses, but Buffy had discovered that a lifetime of hunting had instilled a heightened sense of awareness in him that was almost as good.

"What the hell was that?" he asked as he pushed himself up on his elbows.

By this time, Buffy was already on her feet and on her way towards the door. She was still wearing the pair of long-sleeved, silky pajamas she'd worn to bed, but she wasn't about to fool around with stopping to put on actual clothes.

"It's Crowley. He's here for Trish. I have to get to the dorms," she said urgently as she jerked the door open and took off down the hallway at a full run. The sound of Dean's voice echoed after her, but she didn't have time to stay and explain. He'd just have to catch up.

She met Faith halfway down the hallway. The other girl was obviously in a state of high alarm as well and, like her, she hadn't taken the time to get dressed. She was only wearing a t-shirt, but it was big enough to fall past her mid thighs (obviously it belonged to Sam). The two silently exchanged a brief glance before continuing toward the dorms. Words weren't necessary when it was obvious they both had the same goal in mind. The sounds of yelling and what sounded like furniture being thrown around became louder as they got closer and made both girls push themselves even harder to get there before it was too late.

When they entered the main dorm room, Buffy froze for a brief second. Even though she'd been a Slayer for nearly a decade, it was still shocking and surreal to see a prophetic dream come to life in such accurate detail.

The rows of bunk beds had been pushed to the sides of the room and some of the wooden frames lay splintered about the floor. Quite a few of the young Slayers were amid the wreckage nursing injuries or lying unconscious (at least Buffy hoped they were just unconscious). The rest appeared to be in a standoff with the group that stood in the middle of the room where two heavily muscled men held
At first glance, the men looked like ordinary humans who spent way too much time in the gym, but Buffy knew they were demons. Trish had a few bruises and scrapes on her face, but still looked defiant. Buffy noted with satisfaction that one of the demons had a black eye and the other was bleeding heavily from his nose. At least she'd gotten a few good shots in before they'd managed to subdue her. A third man stood beside the two demons. He was wearing an expensive looking, tailored suit and appeared unruffled and even slightly bored by the chaos around him. Buffy immediately recognized him from her dream. This was Crowley, King of Hell.

"If it isn't Fluffy and Faith," he greeted with a smirk. "I've been waiting. I wondered when you ladies would get around to joining us. Where's -?" he began to ask, but stopped when the Winchesters appeared in the doorway behind the two women. Both were bare-foot and bare-chested since they'd only taken the time to pull on their jeans before following after the Slayers.

"What a homoerotic nightmare you two are," Crowley remarked with a sneer. "Have you been working out, Sam?"

"Bite me," Sam replied tightly.

Crowley rolled his eyes. "Thank you, but I'll pass."

"How did you get in here, Crowley?" Dean asked.

Crowley smiled smugly at Dean before replying. "It's actually quite easy when you have some borrowed mojo from friends in high places. Seems your witch's nifty little protection spells don't work so well against those types."

The demon looked to the far side of the room as he said this. Buffy followed his gaze and gasped when she realized that Willow was pinned halfway up the wall. She appeared to be conscious, but looked extremely dazed and had blood dripping from her nose and mouth.

"Put her down and let Trish go," Buffy ordered angrily.

"Or what? Are you going to bore me to death with tales of you and your kept boy's thrilling sexual escapades?" he asked as he nodded toward Dean. "Granted, that is a frightening prospect, but I think I'll take my chances."

"No," Buffy replied calmly. "I was thinking I'd reach into your chest and rip out your rib cage instead."

"Oh really? Do give us a demonstration," Crowley said as he held his arms wide in invitation.

"Buffy don't," Dean warned from behind her.

Buffy heard the warning, but it wasn't helping because she wasn't going to the demon by choice. She was being pulled forward by an invisible force and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She tried to dig in and resist, but only succeeded in getting a nasty case of rug burn on her heels. When she finally came to a halt in front of him, she leveled a punch at the demon's infuriatingly smug face. Crowley barely flinched when the blow struck, then casually pulled out a handkerchief to wipe away the few drops of blood that had formed at the corner of his mouth.

"You've got quite the punch there kitten," he observed with an amused smirk. "It makes me tingly in some very naughty places."
Buffy frowned and drew back her fist again. She'd just have to hit harder this time. Before her fist made contact, Crowley grabbed her wrist in one of his hands and twisted her arm hard as he spun her around. Buffy gave an involuntary cry of pain when her shoulder popped out of its socket. She thrashed and kicked as he pinned her against him, but he didn't seem at all bothered by her struggles. He was easily able to hold her still with her back against his chest. Despite his appearance, he was apparently much stronger than the muscle bound minions he'd brought along with him.

"You son of a bitch," Dean spat angrily as he bolted forward. "I'll fucking kill you!"

"I'd suggest you watch that potty mouth of yours, Dean," Crowley said tightly. "You wouldn't want me to feel threatened now would you? I might accidentally snap your pretty little girlfriend's neck in all the excitement." Crowley clamped one hand around Buffy's throat and began squeezing. "Do you think if I squeeze hard enough her eyeballs will pop out?" he asked curiously. "I've always wanted to test that theory. Besides, I haven't had the pleasure of putting a Slayer on the rack before. I'm betting she'd last a bit longer than the average girl. Imagine the possibilities," he added with a grin.

Buffy felt panic welling up inside of her as her oxygen supply was cut off. Instinctively she tried to reach up and claw at the hand that was crushing her throat, but she couldn't move a muscle. It was like she was encased in concrete. She could only stare helplessly at Dean, whose gaze was desperately locked on hers. She'd never seen him looking so completely terrified before. He usually hid fear well, but this time it was written all over his face.

"Ahh, poor Dean," Crowley remarked almost gleefully. "What's wrong? You're looking a bit green around the gills. Perhaps you should have a seat before you pass out."

"Let her go, Crowley," Dean ordered. "If you hurt her - I promise you - I will dedicate my life to making sure you're a pile of ash. Trust me, you don't want me on your ass."

"Now there's the Dean I've come to know and detest," Crowley remarked with a cold smile. "I have to agree that you are right about that. I'd hoped you and your brother would stay out of my hair this time around. By the way," he said curiously when he noticed that Sam was no longer standing in the doorway. "Where is little Sammy? He wouldn't be trying to sneak up behind me with that pesky knife, would he?" he asked without bothering to turn his head.

With an exaggerated sigh of exasperation, the demon released his hold on Buffy's throat and snapped his fingers once. Sam yelled in pain and surprise as the sickening sound of his wrist breaking filled the room. The blade fell from his now useless hand and clattered to the floor behind Crowley, who briefly glanced behind him and raised his eyebrows in smug satisfaction.

"You just signed your death warrant," Faith promised angrily as she launched herself toward the demon. Crowley just rolled his eyes and flicked his hand casually. Faith's body hurtled backwards through the air and crashed into one of the bunks that were lined up against the walls. The back of her head connected with the bed's wooden railing with a loud thud before she fell to the floor in a limp pile.

Crowley chuckled when Sam cried out and rushed to Faith's side. He pulled the unresponsive Slayer's head onto his lap using his one good arm and clumsily attempted to assess her injuries.

"Are we done here?" the demon asked. "Any more valiant and useless displays of aggression? Because as fun as this little game is, I do have more pressing matters to attend to. Dean," he said, returning his gaze to the oldest Winchester. "I'm afraid I will have to bring little Muffy along with me. Consider her my anti-pest insurance policy. If you, your overgrown baby brother, and all of the mini-Slayers can behave yourselves, I won't harm one hair on her pretty, chemically processed head. Otherwise," he emphasized, "I do have some leftover inmates in my menagerie of monsters. They
haven't been fed in a while. So, I'm sure they'd enjoy snacking on your lady... and your precious little
spawn," he added cruelly. "I doubt there's enough meat on that one yet to account for more than a
bite, but I'm sure it would be quite the tender little morsel."

"Crowley!" Dean exclaimed with a clear edge of panic in his voice.

"What is it, Dean?" he asked. "Are you going to get down on your knees and beg me not to take
your woman away? You know, an offer like that is actually quite tempting," Crowley said as he
paused thoughtfully and then smiled at the mental picture he'd formed. "Little Fluffy and your brat in
exchange for watching you grovel and crawl... That bargain would be worth it, even if it didn't
include your soul. Too bad I have bigger fish to fry," he added, sounding almost disappointed.

"Then take me instead," Dean offered in a tone that was very close to being desperate. "Let her go
and take me... or you could just kill me right now and get it over with. You know you want to."

Buffy widened her eyes at Dean and silently pleaded for him to be quiet. She could kill him herself.
This falling on his sword act was so infuriating and so typical. She wasn't giving up yet. If Crowley
took her, she'd find some way of escaping. Of course she couldn't say any of this to Dean because
the demon had regained his crushing hold on her throat.

"Of course I want to kill you," Crowley agreed. "I'd like nothing more than to vaporize you and your
idiot brother where you stand. Actually, I'd like to vaporize the entire lot of you," he said as he swept
his gaze around the room in distaste. "Unfortunately, my new partner has plans for the Winchesters
and he seems to think that the rest of you supergirls will be of some use in the coming apocalypse.
He believes you'll even his odds or some nonsense," he remarked with a dismissive wave of his
hand. "You can blame your angelic best friend for all of this," he added as he returned his gaze to
Dean. "If he hadn't decided to spill our secrets and back out on his part of the deal, I'd have been
content to let you two simpletons continue playing house and breeding more morons. At least I
would've had the amusement of watching as the human gene pool rapidly deteriorated before my
very eyes. But now," he said as he paused to press a kiss against the top of Buffy's head and wink at
Dean, "I've been forced to make alternative arrangements."

"You bastard!" Dean yelled as he rushed Crowley, not caring that he had no chance against him. He
was way beyond rational thought. The uninjured Slayers decided to follow his lead, but they found
only empty space when they arrived at the spot where the five had been standing. The King of Hell
and his minions were gone and so were Buffy and Trish. They'd disappeared.

"Here you are ladies," Crowley said as he shoved Buffy into one of the empty cells that had once
held a few of his unfortunate 'informants'. "Home sweet home"

Buffy stumbled from the force of Crowley's shove, but Trish caught her and steadied her before she
fell. Buffy was grateful for that too, because the floor was not something she wanted much contact
with. She wasn't even going to think about her poor bare feet at the moment.

"I think you need to fire your cleaning crew," Buffy observed with a sneer as she watched Crowley
lock the door to her prison.

"My apologies," he replied. "The previous guests were practically animals. Absolutely no self-
respect. I haven't had a chance to tidy up."

"That's okay," Buffy said, forcing herself to sound cheerful despite the screaming pain in her
shoulder. "We won't be here long enough for it to matter."
"Is that so? I suppose you think Dean will come riding to the rescue on a big white horse," he remarked with a smirk. "Let me offer you some advice, princess. If you have any concern for yourself or that larva you're carrying, you'll hope that belligerent little thug stays put."

"He won't," Buffy said confidently. "But you should be more worried about me right now, because I'm the one who's going to rip you into tiny little bite-sized pieces. I'd tell you to ask the last wannabe Hell God that crossed me, but she's kinda dead."

"Yes of course," Crowley said in a condescending tone, "I forgot I was dealing with the great Muffy, all-powerful defender of the Hellmouth and collector of fine designer handbags. Maybe when you're gone one of those Kardashian tramps can step up and take your place. I'm certain they have a suitable shoe and handbag collection."

"It's Buffy," she reminded him with a smile, "and you'll remember that after I tear off your balding head and use it as my shiny new bowling ball."

The demon returned Buffy's smile. "Charming. I can see why you and Dean get on so well. You obviously both attended the same school of witty rejoinders." Crowley waved goodbye and started to walk away, but paused to take a parting shot. "Enjoy your stay ladies," he said pleasantly. "If you need fresh towels, just ask the Gak demon in the next cell."

As soon as the demon's footsteps faded away, Buffy turned to Trish in concern. The girl had been through a ridiculous amount of drama in the past few weeks and Buffy wasn't sure if she was still holding it together. "Are you okay?" she asked.

The girl gave her a small smile. "Would it be really weird if I said I was a whole lot better than I was yesterday? Anything beats having that crazy lady's voice in my head."

Buffy nodded. "Gotcha. I only had a short conversation with Mommy Dearest myself, but I could see how she'd get annoying pretty darn fast."

"What about you?" Trish asked with a frown as she pointed to the way Buffy's right arm was hanging at an unnatural angle. "You want me to fix that?"

"Yeah, that's a major owie," Buffy agreed with a nod. "Please fix me. I'd give you a cookie if I – OWWW!" she exclaimed when she felt her shoulder pop back into place. Trish's reflexes were as good as hers. She'd barely seen her coming. "Not trying to be ungrateful, but how about a warning!" Buffy snapped as she breathed through the pain.

Trish cringed and shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry, I just heard it was better if it was unexpected."

"From who?" Buffy asked a little irritably. Her shoulder was feeling a lot better, but the surprise first aid session had still hurt like hell and it made her kind of cranky.

"From Dean," the teen answered hesitantly. "He was hanging out when Allie gave us a class on treating injuries in the field… and that's what he said to do. I figured he had more personal experience with that kinda thing."

Buffy shook her head. "Why am I not surprised? Remind me to hurt him severely when this over."

"I don't think you should," Trish said seriously. "He's totally romantic. You're so lucky."

"Dean's romantic?" Buffy asked with a laugh. "Have you ever actually met Dean? I love him dearly, but he's so not romantic. You should've heard the pitiful excuse for a marriage proposal he gave me. Believe me, it was a whole lot of no-mantic."
"I don't know," the younger girl said shyly. "He did offer to take your place today. That's pretty romantic to me. I'd be blown away if a guy did that for me."

Buffy smiled as she pondered what Trish had just said. Chosen One or not, she was obviously still a teenage girl filled with romantic ideals. "I guess he has his moments," she admitted. "But I almost had to watch him die yesterday, so I wasn't exactly impressed when he played the self-sacrificing card. He needs to stop doing that kinda thing. I'd like to keep him around and I want my baby to actually have a father."

Trish frowned and she averted her eyes to the filthy concrete floor. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I feel like this is all my fault."

"No," Buffy said firmly. "It is not your fault. You're just the lucky chosen girl. If it wasn't you, it would've been somebody else… and if it had to be somebody, I'm glad it's you," she added sincerely. "Don't tell anybody I said this, but out of all the junior Slayers, you're the one I'd want fighting at my side."

Trish looked embarrassed, but she did smile slightly. "So what do we do now?" she asked.

"We bust out of here," Buffy replied simply, then began testing the bars of their prison. She quickly realized that the demon had made sure the cell was Slayer-proof. The strength of two Slayers couldn't even make the bars budge one tiny bit. "Maybe we better sit and come up with a plan," she said finally.

Trish drew her brows together as she gazed at the cot that sat in the corner. It was the only place to sit and she obviously wasn't looking forward to it. "Do we have to?" she asked.

Buffy wrinkled her nose as she drew closer to the cot. It was disgusting. She didn't want to know what some of those stains were. "Just sit on the edge and try not to think about it," she said, sounding like she was trying to convince herself. "I promise I'll buy us an entire vat of Purell and we can go for a swim in it… after the ritual burning of our clothes."

The pair gathered their courage and sat down gingerly on the very edge of the mattress. Buffy observed Trish's rigid stature and the thoroughly disgusted expression on her face for a moment and then she inexplicably began to giggle. She couldn't help it. It was either laugh or cry and laughter seemed like the safest option at the moment. Here they were, two very powerful Slayers sitting in God-knows-what, wearing PJs with no shoes. Trish even had a picture of a monkey in a pink tutu on her top - and oh yeah - Buffy was pregnant and Dean was definitely losing his mind with worry right now. She hadn't had this much zany fun in years.

Trish watched Buffy with a crinkled brow for a moment. "Are you okay?" she asked uncertainly.

Buffy took a few deep breaths and tried to compose herself. "Not really," she said through a burst of giggles. "I think my brain has finally given up on me. What about you? You seem like fully-functional girl. Any bright ideas?"

Trish gazed at the floor silently for a moment before speaking. "Well… uh… I did have this dream," she began hesitantly. "I think it was a Slayer dream, but I'm not so sure because it was kinda crazy."

"They always are," Buffy said as she managed to sober up a bit.

"Seriously, it was really weird," she warned again before getting into the details. "I'm not sure where we were, but there were all these flashes of the moon and that demon was there and a bunch of other people… but I didn't recognize all of them. You, me, and Willow were –."
"Holding hands and bringing forth a giant mushroom cloud of wrath?" Buffy interrupted. She was now completely serious. "Yep," she confirmed, "I had that one too."

"So, what do you think it means?"

"It means we might have to work some majorly heavy-duty mojo to get out of this one. Here," Buffy said as she held out her left wrist and pointed to three of the charms on her bracelet.

"That's it!" the other girl exclaimed excitedly. "I kept seeing three moons, just like those."

"These are the symbol of the Triple Moon Goddess," Buffy explained. "I think it's a pagan thing. They stand for the three phases of womanhood… or life… or something like that. Anyway, this one's the maiden," she said as she pointed to the symbol of the waxing moon. "The full one's the big pregnant mother and the last one's the waning moon. It represents the crone. Will's the big expert on this stuff," she added with a shrug, "but I can try to give you the abridged and possibly not entirely accurate Buffy-version."

"Guess you better do that," Trish said.

Dean sat behind Buffy's desk staring glumly at the various snapshots she had in frames on her desktop. Some were of her family and friends and some were pictures of the two of them together. His eyes kept coming back to one that Sam had taken the day he'd met Buffy. His brother had snapped it precisely because Dean looked like a giant dumbass in it. His eyes were closed, his mouth was hanging open, and he had a big blob of whipped cream on his nose. He could have killed Sam for passing the photo along to Buffy and had sworn several times that he was going to torch it, but he hadn't because Buffy looked so beautiful and happy in it. Besides, for months it had been the only memory he had of her and now he desperately hoped these photos weren't going to be all he was left with. The pain and frustration was unbearable and he realized that he finally understood his father's blind quest for vengeance. If Buffy didn't make it through this, he was going to be nothing but vengeance. It would be all that was left of him. For now, he could only hold tightly to his anger and try to keep it in the forefront of his mind. It was the only thing that could keep him going.

He looked up when he heard the door opening and saw that it was Bobby. He was carrying a bottle of whiskey and still limping from yesterday's festivities. His old friend wore the same pitying expression that everyone else had since Buffy had been taken. It was the reason he'd hidden away in her office. He didn't want sympathy or a shoulder to lean on. He wanted something he could hit.

"Hey kid," he said as he pulled up one of the chairs that sat in front of Buffy's desk. "How you holdin' up?"

"I'm fucking great, Bobby," Dean snapped with more venom than he'd intended. He knew the man didn't deserve his rage, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

"Stupid ass question," Bobby said with a sigh and then reached to place the bottle of whiskey in front of him. "Take a couple pulls off that. It might take some of the edge off."

Dean untwisted the cap from the bottle and took a long swig. He was on autopilot, so he didn't register the taste or the burn as the whiskey went down.

"Everybody seems to be more or less okay," Bobby said after Dean had sat the bottle back down. "The witch was probably the most banged up. She got a few broken ribs and a concussion, but she'll be fine. Sam's girl ended up with a few stitches and she's gonna have one bitch of a headache, but
she's okay too."

"What about Sammy? Did he get his wrist set?"

"The little nurse is doin' that now. It's been pretty backed-up down there."

"That's good," Dean remarked absently as he toyed with the cap on the whiskey bottle.

"Listen Dean," Bobby began hesitantly. "I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am about all this. I can imagine –."

"That's it, Bobby," Dean interrupted as he dragged a hand across his face. "You can 'imagine'… but I know. I know exactly what kinds of things Crowley is probably doing to her right now. I can't get the images out of my mind."

Bobby frowned in sympathy. "Maybe he's not," he said. "I'm not tryin' to blow sunshine up your ass, cause we both know Crowley's an evil bastard… but he does have quite a few irons in the fire right now. Maybe he is just holdin' her for insurance. You gotta try and hold onto that."

"Maybe," Dean agreed, not sounding very convinced. "But I don't know what he needs insurance against. We don't know anything. I have no idea where he even is."

"The witch is gonna work a tracking spell."

"It won't work," Dean said flatly. "Crowley's not that stupid. He'll make sure they're off the radar."

"You're probably right," Bobby agreed reluctantly. "But I did hear an awful lot of whispering goin' on between the Slayers. All I could pick up is that it had somethin' to do with their dreams. And last time I saw Faith, she had Willow cornered and seemed to be tellin' her somethin' pretty heavy. I think they're cooking somethin' up."

"Hope so, cause I got nothin'," Dean huffed in frustration before taking another turn with the bottle.

"Well look who it is," Bobby said when the office door swung open to reveal Castiel. "Where ya been, Cas?" he asked accusingly.

Castiel stepped across the threshold and stood uncertainly in the middle of the room. He looked fatigued and there appeared to be traces of dried blood around his nose and by one of his ears. "I had to drive here," he said. "I didn't make it in time," he stated with genuine regret.

"You drove?" Dean asked incredulously. "In a car? How many people did you kill on the way? Dude, what the hell?"

"Raphael," he replied. "He was waiting for me when I went to confront Crowley. I was lucky to escape, but now I've been weakened… and I'm cut off from grace," he added shamefully. "Raphael spread the word of my treachery."

"That makes sense," Bobby said sarcastically. "Seeing as how it's pretty damn obvious he's the one in bed with Crowley these days."

"Only his closest, most trusted lieutenants are aware. The rest of heaven believes him to be righteous."

"Great!" Dean exclaimed as he rose from his chair to confront the angel. "You finally decide to stop acting like the world's biggest dick and now you're completely useless. Friggin perfect."
"Dean, I am sorry," Cas said sincerely.

"You brought this down on us!" Dean thundered as he pointed an accusing finger. "You came into my home and you lied to me and you used me for information. You do realize that Crowley has both Trish and Buffy now? Thanks to you. I can't believe you told him about Trish."

"I didn't. I promise you," Castiel emphasized. "I don't know how he learned of Trish. Dean, I'm sor- ."

"Don't say it," Dean interrupted coldly. "Don't you dare say you're sorry, because if I hear those words come out of your mouth one more time..." he trailed off, letting the threat hang in the air.

"But, I am truly sorry," Castiel pressed.

Dean slammed his fist into the angel's face with everything he had. He didn't care if he broke every bone in his hand. Cas stumbled backwards from the force of the blow and blood gushed from his broken nose. Dude really had lost his groove. Dean was going to kick the living shit out of him. He stalked forward and delivered a follow-up blow to Cas' stomach and another under his chin. His only thought was to make him feel just as helpless and miserable as he did. After a few punches, he was barely aware of what he was doing anymore and the fact that Cas didn't even try to defend himself only enraged him further.

Dean heard Bobby calling his name, but he ignored it. He had Cas on the floor and was mindlessly pounding the angel anywhere he could land a blow. He felt a hand grab him by the shoulder and without thinking, swung around to throw a punch at whoever had dared to interfere. Dean distantly registered that he'd just slugged Bobby in the jaw. He was too focused on his rage to even think about stopping though. He turned back around and continued wailing on Cas.

The next thing he knew, someone incredibly strong had grabbed a handful of his shirt collar and jerked him to his feet. It was Faith and Dean threw a punch at her too. She dodged the blow and then shoved him backwards into his brother. Sam caught him in a bear hug and pinned his arms to his sides.

"Dean," Sam said loudly and evenly. "Cool down, man. You've done enough damage."

Dean wasn't ready to cool down. He struggled fiercely against Sam's freaky octopus arms and threw his head back violently. The back of his head connected sharply with Sam's chin. The exploding pain in his skull and Sam's cursing helped to bring him back to reality. He remembered that Sam had a newly casted arm that didn't need this abuse. He stopped struggling and breathed heavily as he tried to get a handle on himself. Sam wasn't loosening his grip though. "Sam," Dean said through tightly clenched teeth. "I'm done. Get off me."

His brother slowly released his hold. He was obviously unsure if Dean was actually done. Once Dean was free, Sam made sure to step between him and Cas. Dean looked over at Cas and saw he was still lying on the floor, looking back at him through the one eye that wasn't swollen shut. The angel was completely thrashed, Bobby was rubbing at his jaw, and Sam had a busted lip. He was also definitely going to have one hell of a bruise on his chin. Dean felt his rage begin to drain away.

"I'm sorry," Dean said as he looked at Sam and Bobby. Sam just grasped him by the shoulder and shook his head.

"Don't worry about it," Bobby said dismissively. "I shoulda known better. My mom always told me not to get in the middle of a dog fight."
"Sorry Faith," Dean said as he turned to the Slayer. "I shouldn't have… I wasn't thinking."

Faith just smiled slightly and shrugged. "Not a problem, champ. You didn't even come close to touchin' me. It's all good."

Her tone was light, but Dean could see the sadness and pity in her eyes. It was the same look that Sam and Bobby were giving him. Even the bloody pulp that used to be Cas looked sympathetic. Their expressions just made Dean feel worse. He stood there a moment longer, unsure of what to do with himself, then flopped heavily into a chair and stared at his bloody knuckles. All the rage had gone out of him for the moment and he missed it. Now he just felt helpless. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Sam and Bobby as they helped Cas get up and into a chair. An awkward silence now filled the room. He guessed that's what usually happened after you'd beat holy hell out of an angel.

"Dean," his brother said gently as he pulled up a chair beside him. "We need to talk… in private," he added as he inclined his head toward Cas and lowered his voice. "Faith and the rest of the Slayers had some pretty wild dreams last night and we think we might know how to fix this. You're not gonna like it though," he warned.

"That's what Chuck said," Dean remarked tiredly as he rose to go find someplace more private to talk. He didn't know what to think about Cas' motives anymore, but Sam was right. They didn't need to say anything else in front of him. He wasn't taking any more chances, not when everything was on the line. Crowley already knew way too much.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I agonized over how to handle the prophecy stuff now that I'm finally getting to the end stages. It's been months since I wrote the chapter with Buffy's prophetic dream and months since Willow told her about the Triple Moon Goddess. If your memory is anything like mine, you've completely forgotten what happened yesterday. However, I didn't think I should re-hash too much of what had already been said. There will be more about this subject, but just in case you are completely confused and wondering where the hell this all came from, your amateur author would like to lamely refer you back to 'Chapter 6: Dream On' and point out Buffy's dream sequence. Also, in 'Chapter 11-Where's the Party?' – Willow explains the meaning behind the symbol of the 3 moons. Parts of Buffy's dream have already been fulfilled (hint kitten).
Chapter Notes

Here we go! Part one of the finale. After part two there will be an epilogue and then the story will be complete (sniff). I'll be sad, but 'the time has come'.

The chapter title (The Time Has Come) is a Chambers Brothers album from 1966. Fun fact: The song Time Has Come Today from that album was played during the opening montage of SPN ep 2.02 – Everybody Loves a Clown.

Dean and his brother followed behind Willow as she slowly made her way toward Buffy's office. They'd been trying to find a private place to talk and had ended up getting distracted. The distraction was Willow. They'd found her walking around with a large crystal in one hand, a nasty smelling candle in the other, and chanting with her eyes closed. Dean just had to stop and ask her, "What the hell?" She explained that she was on the trail of some "uber dark magic" and apparently she didn't need her eyes because the light of the candle was "guiding her journey". Okaaay. Dean had grown fond of Willow, but the chick was still kinda freaky sometimes. The entire spectacle would've been hilarious under different circumstances.

"That was fast," Bobby remarked when the three entered the room.

"We got sidetracked," Sam said as he pointed to Willow, who was still chanting and waving her crystal around.

"Bingo!" Willow exclaimed when she came to a stop in front of Cas and opened her eyes. "Whoa," she gasped. "What happened to you?"

"Mostly Dean," he replied, "and I don't understand your bingo reference."

Dean threw his hands up and shook his head at Cas. "You gotta be kidding me! You're working dark magic now too? Is there any aspect of douche baggery you haven't signed up for?"

"I don't under-," Castiel began.

"He's not working dark magic," Willow interrupted, "he's had it worked on him." She held the crystal just inches from the angel as she walked slowly around the chair he was sitting in. When she spoke again she had deep frown lines on her face. "This isn't Malfoy level dark magic either. This spell is in full-on Dark Lord, unforgiveable curse territory. As in you need the blood of three newborns to even think about getting started. I haven't felt anything like it in years," she added with a shudder.

"I didn't get half of that," Dean admitted. "But whatever your sayin', my money's on Crowley. What the hell kind of spell is it anyway?"

Willow didn't reply immediately. She was too busy waving her crystal over Castiel. "Reveal," she shouted before taking a dramatic pause as the light of her candle seemed to extinguish itself. "Uh oh," she finally said as she drew her brows together in concern.

"What?" Sam asked. "Did Crowley curse him? Is this some sorta mind control thing? Cause…"
well… that would explain a lot."

Willow widened her eyes, turned her back on Castiel and whispered, "On'tday aysay Rowleycray." "I'm unfamiliar with that language," Castiel remarked from behind her.

"It's Pig Latin, you idjit," Bobby said with a shake of his head. "Sorry girl," he remarked to Willow. "I don't think that'll fool Rowleycray if that's what you're aimin' at."

"Sorry," Willow cringed as her face turned red. "I kinda panicked. It's a surveillance spell," she explained. "I think Rowleycray… I m-mean Crowley put it on him."

"And that's how he knows all our secrets," Dean said, finishing the thought for her. "Jesus Christ. We're on Crowley-cam? He's watching us right now?"

"He could be," Willow replied. Dean got in Cas' very confused looking face and extended his middle finger. "Fuck you, you black-eyed bastard," he yelled. "How's that for a show? Maybe I should drop my pants and show you my shiny white ass too. That should be pretty damn entertaining."

Sam raised an eyebrow at his brother before turning to Willow. "Can you break the spell?" he asked. "Give him the potion," Dean put in before Willow had a chance to reply. "Cas should get a taste of what sunbaked ass tastes like."

"Sorry Dean," Willow replied. "I think this spell goes a little beyond my standard anti-curse potion."

"I don't give a crap. Give it to him anyway."

Willow sighed and turned her attention to Castiel. "Can you walk?" she asked as she gave a pointed glance to his cuts and bruises. "Because I think we need to go to my office and work this out. All of my supplies are there… and maybe it's best if we keep Dean off camera," she added as an afterthought.

"I can walk," the angel answered, "but I don't see how this is possible."

"Trust me," Willow replied. "It's way possible. My witchy senses don't lie… and neither do my crystals."

"Oh hell no," Dean stated. "Find somebody else."

"I'm sorry, but we can't," Willow emphasized as she gave Dean a sympathetic frown. "This ritual requires three very specific women - three very powerful, very specific women. You can't just go to the corner store and find a pregnant superlady. It has to be Buffy."

Dean shook his head and breathed deeply as he tried to control his temper. "So, you three are just gonna hold hands and channel this Moon Goddess, then she's gonna fix the world? Is that the big plan? It'll be happily ever after for all of us, right? You do realize that you sound like Cas right now. He was gonna build a new world order too. You see how that turned out."
"No Dean," Willow stressed. "I'm not talking about happily ever after. I'm talking about a reset… about letting the natural order rule the world again. It's not like a fairy tale at all. We all know nature isn't always the nicest thing in the world. She can be cruelly indifferent and sometimes she can even be a real bitch."

"And this Great Moon Goddess chick controls that?"

"I don't think she's really a Goddess… not with a capital 'G' anyway. I'd say she's more of an archetype."

"A what?" Dean asked with obvious frustration.

"It's like a universally understood symbol," Willow explained. "In this case we're talking about natural forces like new life, creation, and death. Some people might call that Mother Nature and others have attributed those powers to various deities over the centuries… but in the end we're really all talking about the same thing. I guess 'natural order' is the best term for it. Elton John called it the Circle of Life," she added with a shrug.

"Good to know," Dean snapped. "Has anybody ever actually tried this ritual before?"

Willow averted her eyes. "I-I've found a few accounts. Mostly it ends with a whole lot of nothing."

"Mostly," Dean repeated. "What about the other times?"

"Well…," she hesitated. "There have been reports of some… uh… exploding heads."

"Exploding heads! Are you freakin' kidding me? You can't be serious about this. It's insane! You're gonna kill yourself and Trish… AND BUFFY," he shouted. "Not to mention our baby. Are you even thinking about that? Do you even care?"

"Yes Dean," Willow said in exasperation. "I do care. I care lots. This isn't something I want to do. It scares the heck out of me to be honest, but prophetic Slayer dreams are pretty reliable. If this is what they say is going to happen then we better be ready for it."

"Screw the prophecy," Dean stated flatly. "I don't believe in any of that crap. There has to be another way. You're crazy if you think I'm gonna just sit here with my thumbs up my ass while you kill Buffy."

"I don't believe it will kill her," Castiel interjected. "I am certain she was meant to do this. Even the child she carries is ideally suited. As the daughter of both a Chosen Slayer and the Michael Sword, her conception had to be fate. I can see no other explanation."

Faith snorted. "Yeah, 'no other explanation'. How about - those two screwed like bunnies for months without using birth control. There's fate for ya."

"Uh… thanks Faith," Dean replied. "I think."

"Any time."

"You must have faith, Dean," Castiel stressed. "These events were prophesized."

Dean turned an angry glare on the angel. "Who asked you, Cas? Hell, I'm not sure you should even be here right now. You might still be broadcasting on Crowley Central."

Willow buried her face in her hands. "He's clean," she emphasized slowly. "We've been over this at
least fifty times now. No more bad mojo on the premises. *I promise.* 

Dean stood up quickly and kicked his chair backwards. "Fine. I'm just a paranoid dickhead with no faith. Why don't you all just go ahead and make your little plans without me? Who gives a shit what I think!" he exclaimed before stalking out of the room.

"*Dean,* Willow called after him. "*Please don't...*" she trailed off when the door to Buffy's office slammed shut behind him. Her face fell in a combination of disappointment and frustration. "I don't know how to explain this to him," she said as she turned to Sam. "I don't want to hurt Buffy. I don't want to hurt anybody."

"I know," Sam assured her. "He just needs some time. I told you he wasn't gonna be very cool with this."

"I will speak with him," Castiel said as he rose.

Bobby raised an eyebrow at the angel. "You sure that's a good idea? You might be on your own this time, cause I'm not lookin' forward to another one of Dean's right hooks."

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Dean sat outside on the front steps of the Council and stared at the cloudy afternoon sky. At least the weather agreed with him (somebody sure as hell needed to). He startled a bit when he heard Castiel calling his name from behind him. He'd been too deep in his thoughts to realize anyone else was there.

"Son of a bitch," he grumbled as he craned his neck around. "Seriously Cas? Do you want me to beat your ass again?"

"I'd prefer it if you didn't," he replied in a monotone as he stood on the top step and also gazed out at the sky.

"Then what the hell do you want?"

"I'd like to speak with you."

Dean closed his eyes and summoned his last scrap of patience. "Then spit it out."

"May I sit?" the angel asked as he took a few steps down to stand beside Dean.

"It's a free country," Dean sighed as he held out a hand in invitation.

Castiel took a few moments to settle himself on the step before speaking. His slow movements made it obvious that he was stiff and sore and he didn't seem to be sure what to do with his legs.

"My initial hope was simply to restore the natural order," he said once he'd stopped fidgeting. "I just wanted heaven and hell to forget about the apocalypse and for things to go on as they had before."

"Don't we all," Dean agreed as he continued to stare straight ahead.

"I was proud," Cas continued. "I thought I'd been chosen to restore the balance." He paused for a long moment before continuing. "I'd like to say that it was Crowley who convinced me I was the one destined to do so... but he only preyed upon my own hubris. That is his job after all. I suppose I
didn't realize he was so skilled," he added with a trace of wry humor.

"The title 'King of the Crossroads' didn't give ya a hint?" Dean replied as he shook his head. "Of course, he's good at getting into your head."

"I was desperate, Dean. I didn't understand why God helped us… Why he brought me back or why he intervened on our behalf. Only to abandon us and allow Raphael to destroy everything we fought for. I chose to believe it was because he wanted me to take over. I suppose I should have had second thoughts when I discovered what I'd have to become in order to do so."

Dean sighed and rubbed at his temples. "Cas, I get it. You're sorry. I believe you… I'm not in the forgiving mood right now, but I believe you." He paused and shook his head sadly at Cas before looking away. "I can't do this right now, man. No offense, but I could give a rat's ass about your salvation at the moment. You'll have to do your penance on your own time."

"I am sorry for the pain I've caused you, but that is not my point."

Dean turned back to face the angel. "So what is the point, Cas? I'm listening, but I ain't got all day."

"I'm attempting to say that God didn't completely abandon us, he just had other plans. He intended for Buffy and the other two girls to set things right. He never intended for me to do it. He only brought me back so that I could help them. It has all become clear. Remember what The Prophet said to you. You must have faith."

Dean laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Great Cas. You've had an epiphany. I'm happy for you. But how exactly are you supposed to help Buffy, huh? I beat your ass not two hours ago… me," he said as he pointed to his chest. "A regular dude with no superpowers. You're sure as shit not up to facing Crowley and let's not even start on Raphael, because we all know where that ends."

"I still have the weapons of heaven," he said with a small smile. "Raphael does not know where they are hidden. No one does."

Dean paused for a moment. He had to admit he was surprised by this news. "No shit? Damn. Guess that's somethin'. Well, where the hell are they?" he asked with a tiny bit of hope in his voice. "Pull those puppies out. I'm still not on board with all that batshit moon-ritual hoodoo, but I'd be glad to ram the Staff of Moses right up Crowley's ass."

"They are well hidden in an alternate dimension. I cannot get to them. But I -"

"Of course not," Dean interrupted in a bitter tone as his shoulders slumped in defeat. "Why did I even ask?"

"I was trying to tell you that I know someone who may still be willing to help me."

"Who?"

"Balthazar."

"Fuck."
Buffy knew she must be dreaming, but it wasn't like a normal dream because it lacked the usual surreal quality. Everything was solid and looked like it belonged and there were definitely no weird guys babbling about cheese. It all seemed very real.

She was standing in her kitchen. It was larger and the paint and décor were different, but she instinctively knew it was hers. A giggle drew her attention to a table in the corner. She recognized the table. It was the same one she had in her apartment. She could see Dean sitting there with his head bent in what appeared to be a state of deep concentration. He had a beer beside him. A little detail that definitely added to the realness vibe.

A blond toddler was sitting on top of the table in front of him, playing with a blob of red Play-Doh. The sight made Buffy's heart stop. She was beautiful, a perfect combination of herself and Dean. Absolutely the prettiest little girl Buffy had ever seen… and no, she wasn't biased. Not a bit. It was a completely scientific observation.

"Hurry," the little girl said as she bounced on the table top.

Dean groaned. "Baby Girl, I got no clue what I'm doing here. Daddy has no talent."

"Make kitten," she demanded.

"Jeez kid, I'm tryin'. Did anybody ever tell you you're kinda bossy. You get that from Mommy."

"Yeah right," said a voice from the other room. "You shouldn't lie to your child, Dean. It's very bad karma."

Buffy was startled, because the voice was obviously her own. She was even more shocked to see herself walk into the kitchen. Shocked and happy, because she looked good and was clearly back to fighting weight (not that she was worried about that).

"Whatcha makin', honey?" future Buffy asked as she leaned over Dean's shoulder. "I thought art wasn't exactly your thing," she teased.

"He try," their daughter said defensively as she wrinkled her brow at Buffy and reached out to pat Dean's hand. *Uh oh, it looked like she had a Daddy's Girl.*

"Here ya go," he said as he held out a pink Play-Doh kitten. It wasn't a terrible effort. At least it resembled an animal of some sort. Dean looked pretty proud of it.

"Awww cute," the little girl swooned as she reached out to take the 'kitten' in her tiny hands (although 'cute' came out sounding more like 'Q'). She took a moment to admire the creation and then smooshed the 'kitten' into an unrecognizable ball.

Buffy and her double began giggling simultaneously, because the look of shock and disappointment on Dean's face was just too much.

"You killed my kitten," he said incredulously. "I worked hard on that."

The little girl giggled too. She held out her hands and shrugged her little shoulders in an expression that looked so much like Dean it was scary. "Don't be sad," she said seriously as she reached out to pat his arm again. "It okay. Only dough. You make 'nother one," she suggested as she shoved the ball of Play-Doh back into his hands.
Buffy jerked into awareness when she felt herself beginning to fall forward. She stared around the filthy room for a moment while she tried to reorient herself. She and Trish were still sitting on the edge of the cot in Crowley's cell (too bad that wasn't just a dream). They were leaning against one another, shoulder to shoulder, so that neither of them had to touch more of the mattress than necessary. Buffy noticed that Trish looked a little disoriented herself.

"Did I fall asleep?" she asked Buffy.

"I think we both did," Buffy remarked as she rubbed at her stiff neck and yawned. "Guess we're really sleep deprived. I never thought I'd say this, but I miss the cold hard floor of my office. I can just imagine my warm and comfy sleeping bag. Compared to this place it's…" she trailed off and her eyes widened. "That's it!" she exclaimed. "That's how we get out of here."

"What's it?" Trish asked. She was obviously not following.

"A devil's trap," Buffy replied, speaking quickly in her excitement. "Dean drew one on the ceiling of my office - in red spray paint, which is going to be completely impossible to paint over by the way. Anyway, he's totally paranoid about those demon guys like Crowley. I mean, he hates them," she emphasized.

Trish shrugged, "Gotta say I'm feeling him right now."

"Very true," Buffy agreed with a nod. "And if this works, I'll owe him the best b… b-biggest kiss of his life," she finished with a blush.

"Right," Trish said as she raised her eyebrows at Buffy. "I may still be a virgin, but I did grow up with cable."

"Anyway," Buffy continued, desperate to change the subject. "This symbol is painted right above where we sleep. I have to stare at it every single time I lay down. So, I'm pretty sure I'd have no trouble drawing one."

"What does the symbol do?"

"It traps demons," Buffy announced with a smile. "If they get inside the circle, they can't get out. It's like a roach motel. Demons check in, but they can't check out."

"But how are we supposed to draw one? We don't exactly have a can of spray paint handy."

"We'll have to make our own paint," Buffy replied with a frown.

"You mean?" Trish asked as an expression of disgust settled over her features. "Gross. Are you talking about blood? Our blood?"

"Yep, afraid so," Buffy confirmed. "We'll have to work with what we've got. But, look at the bright side," she added with a half-smile. "Since you're so much taller, you get to hold me on your shoulders and I get to fingerpaint with the yucky blood."
Dean wasn't taking any unnecessary chances when it came to introducing more angels to the Slayers. So he and Cas hopped in the Impala and he drove them to an empty lot on the other side of town. He knew the Council's location wasn't exactly a big secret, but he still didn't want to summon an angel to their front yard - especially not a snarky, shady little thief like Balthazar.

"Splendid," Balthazar said as the ring of fire came to life around him. "Honestly Cas, have you gone that far around the bend?"

"The oil was Dean's idea."

Balthazar rolled his eyes and sighed deeply. "Of course it was. Hello Dean," he said with a curt nod. "Can't say I've missed you."

Dean sneered back at Balthazar. He couldn't stand that smug dick. "Yeah, right back atcha."

"So the rumors are true then," Balthazar stated as he turned his attention back to Castiel. "You're actually going after the souls in Purgatory… with Satan 2.0 no less. You do realize that plan is barking mad?"

"I have been made aware," Castiel replied as he averted his gaze from his old friend. "However, that is no longer my goal. Raphael has taken my place… and I'm seeking to stop him."

Dean noticed the surprise that momentarily flickered across Balthazar's features, but he quickly hid it behind his characteristically bored expression.

"You don't say," he remarked in a casual tone. "Uncle Raffy is shacking up with Crowley. Now that's a surprising plot twist. Can't say I ever imagined those two as a couple."

Dean groaned. He was getting impatient with all the small talk. "Yeah, they're freakin' adorable together. I hope those two crazy kids make it," he remarked in exasperation. "Can we move this along? Are you gonna help us out or not?"

Balthazar turned away from Castiel and favored Dean with a withering glance. "Thank you, Dean. I'd forgotten you were there. I'm so happy you reminded me. Of course I want to help you. You're always so pleasantly persuasive. Obviously, I'm positively aquiver with anticipation."

"Dean," Castiel began, "perhaps you should allow me to discuss this matter with Balthazar."

"Yes Dean," the other angel agreed. "Perhaps you should run along and give the adults a chance to speak. Why don't you go sit in that rusty hunk of steel you favor so much? I'm sure you can pass the time caressing the leather."

"She's not rusty," Dean spat back, but after a few moments of being treated to Cas' patented 'I don't find you amusing' stare, he finally added, "Fine. I'll lay low, but I'm not going anywhere. You winged bastards aren't making any more plans behind my back. I've got too much on the line here."

"Wow," Faith remarked as she laid her head on Sam's chest and tried to catch her breath. "That was fun."
"Always is," Sam agreed as he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and kissed her above her ear.

Faith lay silently for a moment, listening to Sam's heart pounding in his chest. She was still amazed that she wasn't only allowing the 'cuddling after sex' thing, but she was actually enjoying it too. In fact, every day she became more and more comfortable with the growing intimacy between the two of them. Sometimes that scared the hell out of her, but right now she was too freaked to question it. The world was spinning out of control (again) and she was desperate for an anchor. Hence the apocalypse eve 'hot and dirty sex break'. After the latest news bulletin, she had to do something to try and break the tension.

Sam's friend Bobby had brought along a disgusting document made from human skin when he'd come to the Hellmouth. It was supposedly written in some seriously old form of ancient Latin and it had taken the older hunter months to translate a few bits and pieces. However, once he and Giles had begun combining their efforts, they'd whipped through it pretty quickly. Those two made a damn good team when they weren't trying to one-up one another. It was a good thing too, because now they knew that the ritual to open Purgatory would only work on the first night of a new moon… and, of course, that was tonight. God forbid they actually have time to plan. On the other hand, at least they wouldn't have to wait around wringing their hands for long. Things would be settled tonight, for good or bad. They'd either pull off the ritual Willow had put together or Raphael and Crowley would win and the entire world would lose. No pressure.

"So that angel Dean summoned…do you think he can really be trusted?" Faith asked.

"Who, Balthazar? Not hardly."

"Gee thanks," Faith said as she playfully smacked Sam's chest with her palm. "You're a real ray of sunshine. Ya know that?"

Sam snorted. "Well, it's true. No point in lyin' about it. Balthazar is out for Balthazar. He's not gonna do crap for anybody else, especially not me and Dean. But," he added, "he's got everything to lose if Raphael wins. I doubt he'd let Balthazar exist for very long if he managed to become the new God and I'm betting Balthazar is smart enough to realize that. Besides, he's pretty much the only game in town."

"Okay then, Mr. Brightside. Let's go with the best case scenario. Say dude pulls through and gets us the big guns. Then say we find out exactly where the ritual is goin' down. I mean, that shouldn't be hard since we know it has to happen on the Hellmouth and Cleveland only has about eighty square miles to search."

"Jeez, I thought I was supposed to be the voice of doom and gloom," Sam said with a laugh.

Faith shrugged. "Well, like you said there's no point lyin' about it. It is what it is." She paused for a moment before continuing more somberly. "So we storm in there with our shiny new badass weapons and… and we use 'em on people. Right? I mean, in the end, that's what we'll be killin' is people. Just innocent people who have no say in any of this…” she trailed off.

Sam sighed and tightened his hold on Faith. "Yeah," he agreed. "That's the gist of it. If it makes you feel any better, very few actually survive an exorcism. The demon's the only thing keeping most possession victims alive… and I don't think there's a way to evict an angel."

"That doesn't make me feel any better," Faith replied quietly.

"I know," he said sympathetically. "I guess me and Dean have gotten used to it… at least we try not to think about it. We can't really afford to, to be honest. Not if we want to keep what's left our sanity.
"The truth is, in most cases it's them or us."

"I get it," Faith said. "I really do. I just never thought I'd be responsible for killing another human being again. I swore I wouldn't."

"Faith, you don't have to do this," Sam emphasized. "Seriously. No offense, but I don't see how one more Slayer will make a difference one way or the other."

Faith leaned up and shot Sam an annoyed expression. "Hey, I'm an extra badass Slayer," she protested. "I'd make two or three of some of those chicks."

"I know," Sam agreed with a smile. "I'm just sayin' I don't want you doing anything you're not comfortable with. You shouldn't have to."

Faith smiled. "You're just sayin' that cuz you got a wicked huge crush on me. I have to go," she said seriously. "I can't cop-out like that. Besides, I'm not leavin' B and Trish stranded. I just have to suck it up and deal."

Buffy was beginning to wonder if Crowley's diabolical plan was to let them sit in the cell until they both died of boredom. It had been hours and they hadn't heard a peep from him or any of his toadies. She was starting to get very frustrated… and very cold. From now on she wasn't going to bed without at least three layers on. You never knew when some ambitious demon was going to pop up and magically whisk you away to some crappy, unheated dungeon. Besides, she hadn't cut her arm open with a rusty nail just so she could draw a devil's trap that was never going to see any use. Thank God it hadn't been long since her last tetanus shot.

"Finally," Buffy said when the four 'men' appeared in front of her cell. "I was starting to think you guys forgot about us. I won't be staying here again, just so ya know."

"Sorry sweetheart," smirked one of the demons, who Buffy recognized from the scene at the Council. Crowley, however, wasn't in the group. She wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing. She'd love to catch him in the trap, but she wasn't sure if the trap would work on a demon that powerful.

The demon who'd just spoken unlocked the door and gestured for the two girls to come forward. "It's movin' day ladies. Time to take this show on the road."

Buffy just smiled and remained seated beside Trish. "Nope, I think I'm comfy here. What about you Trish?"

Trish shook her head silently and stared at the floor. She was obviously terrified and struggling to hide it. During their stay in the cell, Buffy had learned that Trish had spent quite a bit of time in church before becoming a Slayer. This type of demon was particularly frightening to her.

"Nope, she's not going either," Buffy said cheerily, speaking up for the younger girl. "If you want us, you'll just have to come and take us."

"You might wanna be a little more cooperative," the talkative demon suggested as he returned her smile. "We're under orders not to hurt that one," he said as he pointed to Trish, "but you're not so special. So, if you're smart, you'll do what we say and try not to show your pretty little ass."
Buffy shrugged. "Guess I'm not too smart then, because I can't picture myself being very cooperative."

The demon raised his eyebrows and grinned. "Sounds good to me, sweet thing. I'd love to take a Slayer for a spin… especially that bastard Winchester's Slayer."

"Then come and get me," Buffy challenged. "I haven't beaten anyone's ass all day. I'm starting to get a little antsy."

Buffy and Trish stood as the four entered the cell and began moving forward. Buffy forced herself not to look up at the ceiling or appear too anxious. They couldn't afford to show their hand. She grinned in relief and pointed when the demon in the lead suddenly stopped short, barely two feet from where she stood. He was trapped and it didn't take long for the other three to realize it as well and start cursing and making threats.

"We did some redecorating," Buffy said as she looked up at the ceiling. "I hope you don't mind. It was kinda gloomy in here. I thought the place could use a little color."

"You'll never make it out of here," the head demon promised her. "All you've done is make sure Dean will never see you in one piece again. Poor guy," he observed with a sadistic grin. "He'll be all torn up when he sees what's left of you."

Buffy grabbed Trish by the wrist and pulled the frightened girl along beside her as they skirted the edges of the trap. She wasn't sure if the demons still had power inside the trap or not and decided this wasn't the time to find out. She really needed to study up on these things.

"Later," Buffy said with a wave of her fingers when they made it through the cell door. "You ready to get the hell out of here?" she asked as she turned to Trish.

"You don't even know," the younger girl replied.

"Then let's go," Buffy said as she took off at a run toward the right. She had no idea where she was going, but that seemed like the safest choice. Earlier, Crowley had walked away to the left and she'd noticed that the demons had also come from that direction, so she decided to go the opposite way. She didn't want to run into any more obstacles, especially ones in the shape of Crowley.

It was obvious that they were in an old abandoned jail. As they ran, they passed cell after cell. Most of them were empty, but a few held various creatures, some of which appeared to be dead or very close to it. Buffy actually felt sorry for them, even though she recognized some pretty nasty varieties among the inmates. Still, she doubted they'd be much of a threat even if they weren't behind bars. Most were too weak to even give the two walking Happy Meals a second look.

Buffy should have known better, but she was starting to allow herself to feel a tiny bit victorious. She'd gotten past all the cells and was beginning to see some natural light up ahead. They were almost out. So, it was par for the course when the four demons who were supposed to be in the trap appeared in front of them and – yay – Crowley was with them.

"Where do you two think you're going?" he asked.

"Crap," Buffy said as she skidded to a halt. She realized the word came out a little whiny, but damn she was getting tired of this guy. He sucked.

"What's the matter Fluffy? Have you missed me?"

"Desperately," she deadpanned.
"How touching," Crowley replied as he crooked a finger toward Trish. The girl's eyes went wide with panic as she began sliding toward him. Buffy grabbed her around the waist and tried to hold her back, but ended up being pulled along too. When they stopped in front of the demon he grabbed Trish by the arms and held her in front of him as he looked down at Buffy.

"It's too bad we won't get to spend some quality time together," he remarked, "but I'm afraid this young lady and I have a date on the Hellmouth. I'd take you along, but sadly you've grown a bit tiresome. Don't worry though, I plan to leave you with some entertainment," he said as he nodded toward the four demons beside him. "You should have read the fine print, princess," he added with a smirk, "because you just broke one of the major sub-clauses. You were only safe as long as your baby-daddy stayed out of my way AND as long as you managed to keep your nose clean."

"Never been much of a reader," Buffy remarked as she folded her arms in front of her and looked at the demons with disinterest. "Gotta say, not real impressed," she shrugged.

"Well hopefully they won't be too terribly disappointing," Crowley replied with a smile. "I do aim to please. Kisses," he added with a wink before disappearing with Trish.

Buffy didn't waste time with small talk or quippy banter. She ran forward and delivered a spinning kick squarely to the center of the closest demon's chest. It flew backwards several feet and crashed into a wall. That one definitely wasn't as juiced up as Crowley (thank God). Demon #2 attempted to grab her from behind and she slammed an elbow into his face. He groaned and stumbled back. His nose was obviously broken, but it didn't do much to stop him. The demon she'd kicked also popped up quickly, looking more than ready for another round, which sucked because she was pretty occupied with dodging blows from demons number three and four. Buffy would have to kick it up a notch. These guys were going to give her a fairly tough fight after all.

The demons weren't quite as strong as the average vamp, but they had the advantage of being practically unkillable and completely unconcerned about the welfare of their bodies. Of course, these weren't their bodies – a fact that Buffy wasn't allowing herself to think about as she threw punch after punch at full Slayer strength. It was best not to even go there, especially since she'd determined that if she couldn't kill them, she'd have to severely disable them. Their borrowed bodies probably wouldn't work so well if all the bones were broken.

After a few minutes of flat out, no-holds-barred brawling, she felt like she should be starting to gain the upper hand. She'd certainly tossed the four into enough walls and broken enough of their bones by now. But, unfortunately, they just kept coming back for more. It was insane and really, really annoying. They reminded her of those cheesy horror movie zombies. Like them, these guys didn't seem especially smart and they didn't have any nifty powers, but they wouldn't stop and pain didn't seem to affect them much. A weapon was what she needed, preferably something really sharp.

Between dodging and delivering punches, she scanned the area around her for anything she could use. Since the building had long been abandoned, there was plenty of trash littered about, but most of it was useless junk - like empty beer and spray paint cans left behind by partying teens. She'd almost given up hope when she noticed something that looked like metal lying in a far corner. She threw a couple more kicks and punches at the demons surrounding her and then ducked and rolled so she could check out the possible weapon. Too bad it was only a crowbar. She wanted something slice-y, but then again, it wasn't too likely that someone would leave a battle axe lying around. A crowbar was better than nothing. At least it would be harder than her fists and bare feet.

She swung her new weapon at the head of one of the advancing demons and was pleasantly surprised when it screamed and clutched at its head in pain. That was interesting. She tested it out on another and got a similar reaction. Then the realization hit her.
"This is iron," she exclaimed happily as she held up the crowbar. "You guys don't like iron do you?" she gloated.

Having a useful weapon gave her a renewed burst of energy. She tore into the four and began bashing them wherever she could land a blow. Finally, she was able to get three of the demons to go down and stay down and the remaining one was looking very unsteady on his feet. One more good blow should put him down and allow her to make her escape. Buffy was about to do just that by landing a vicious kick to his throat, but he managed to catch her ankle and twist it. As he twisted, she brought her other leg up and over and kicked the demon on the side of his head. She landed face down on the concrete floor and quickly rolled to prevent him from attacking her from behind. Her right ankle was throbbing and she could almost swear she could feel it beginning to swell. That couldn't be good. She definitely needed her ankle.

"Ouch," the demon remarked with a cruel grin. "I bet that was painful."

Buffy replied by poking the straight end of the crowbar into the demon's eye and then began dragging herself backwards by her forearms. There was an open room a few feet away where she hoped she could get a minute or two to regroup. She was getting tired. Plus, the demons she thought she'd put down were getting back up and the one she'd just hit was coming for her again. It was ridiculous.

She managed to pull herself inside the room and kick the door shut behind her. Luckily, the room had a thick steel door that locked from the inside. Buffy guessed that was probably part of the old prison's safety measures. Steel doors that locked from the inside would certainly be helpful for the guards if the inmates ever escaped. Of course, the inmates the guards needed protection from probably weren't demon possessed. She didn't know how long the door would last against that type of threat. She'd have to pull it together and move. She scanned the mostly empty room and noticed a small window that was set about eight feet off the ground. That was exactly what she needed, but she had to assess her injuries first.

She pulled up her pant leg and determined that her ankle was either broken or severely sprained. Given the day she'd had, Buffy's money was on broken, but she'd have to try to stand on it to be certain. She pushed herself up onto her uninjured leg and then gingerly tested the other. It hurt, there was no doubt about that, but it held her weight. She was going to assume that meant 'not broken'. That was good, because she needed to get the hell out of there. The door still held, but it was rattling on its hinges with each blow the demons delivered. It wouldn't be secure for too much longer and she'd better be long gone before they broke through.

There was a heavy metal desk in the room and she slid it under the window, then climbed atop and used the crowbar to smash through the glass. She was careful to knock out the shards that remained attached to the frame, but resigned herself to getting a few cuts on the way out. At least she was on the first floor, so she wouldn't have far to fall.

On the way down, she tucked her legs in so that she'd land on her butt and not jar her ankle too badly. It still hurt like hell though and she briefly wondered if she'd broken her ass. She was out though. That was the important thing and that fact gave her an added boost of adrenaline which allowed her to push the pain and fatigue away. Adrenaline was definitely of the good, because she had to keep going and put as much distance between herself and the old prison as possible. She kept the dream/vision she'd had forefront in her mind as she forced herself into a run. She was seeing it as a promise. A promise that told her if she kept going she would earn that future.
The Time Has Come (Part 2)

A/N: I'm a liar, but a very unintentional one. I started writing the 'final chapter' and realized I just couldn't fit it into one reasonably sized chapter. So the finale is going to be a three-parter instead of a two. I just had to take a break and do some schmoop before the big battle. I caught up on S7 over the past weekend (couldn't resist any longer). Let's just say I SERIOUSLY need some schmoop. It's the only way I'm gonna get it. Thanks for humoring me.

This chapter wasn't beta'd, so I own all mistakes.

Dean cursed when the rock salt that was supposed to go into a shotgun shell ended up all over his lap instead. He was done with this bullshit. They had enough shells to supply an entire army unit and every gun he could find had been stripped and cleaned (some twice). He knew his task was just a distraction anyway – a distraction to keep him from driving everyone else nuts. And granted, 'everyone else' had a point. He had been a pain in the ass, especially to Willow. He knew her location spells didn't have a chance of finding Buffy, but he still kept badgering the shit out of her anyway. He was desperate and worried, and that usually resulted in him being a grade A asshole. He was aware, but he didn't know what else to do with himself. He'd even wasted a few hours aimlessly driving around the Hellmouth, looking for anything that looked like a lead. He only succeeded in accidentally interfering in a drug deal and cleaning out a nest of a half-dozen sleeping vampires. The vamp nest had been a near miss too. He'd almost ended up being lunch.

The terrifying truth was that Buffy's fate was in the hands of Balthazar. Actually, everyone's fate was in the hands of Balthazar, but right now he wasn't thinking too much about that. He just wanted Buffy back and if that wasn't possible, part of him was fine with the whole world going up in a giant ball of flames. He was tired of the bigger picture. The bigger picture always left him with the short end of the stick and he was through with it. He was also through with waiting on Balthazar. He'd go find Buffy himself if he had to search every building in the entire city. He dropped the partially-filled shell and pushed back his chair.

"Where you off to, Dean?" Bobby asked.

The question sounded casual, but Dean could hear the hint of suspicion in it. Bobby and Cas weren't really here to help him pack a bunch of shells. He wasn't that stupid. They were here to watch him and make sure he didn't make any more solo raids on the local vamp population. He was officially the crazy hunter that needed to be kept on a short chain.

"Going to see if there's another bag of rock salt in my trunk," he lied.

Bobby wiped his hands on a rag and set the gun he was oiling aside. "I'll go with ya," he said as he rose from his seat. "I could use a taste of fresh air."

"I don't need a babysitter."

Bobby pointed to the bloody bandage on Dean's neck where a vampire had tried to rip his throat out. "I'm thinkin' you do."
"Fine," Dean snapped. "Come with me then. Just don't expect me to sit here on my ass waiting on Balthazar. That dickwad probably took all the weapons and sold us out to Raphael."

"Dean, I don't believe -," Castiel began, but was interrupted by the sound of Dean's phone ringing.

That was a lucky break for Cas, because if he had to listen to another lecture about fate and having faith, Dean was going to kick his ass again.

Buffy needed to stop soon. Her lungs were on fire, her ankle was throbbing, and the stitch in her side was screaming and cursing at her. Plus, she had no idea where she was or where she was going. She wasn't in Cleveland. That was for certain. After two years spent patrolling the new Hellmouth, she knew every corner of that town and this wasn't it. She'd ask someone if there was someone around to ask, but it seemed that the entire town was pretty much deserted. All she'd seen were closed warehouses and factories. There had been one drunk guy, but she hadn't been able to get anything useful out of him. He was too busy being blacked out to be very helpful. She was just about to give up and break into an empty building to rest when she spotted a light on in a window up the street.

As she got closer, she realized it was a church, specifically All Saints Catholic Church. That could be a good thing. Maybe demons couldn't come inside of a church? Once again, she realized she really, really needed to study up on those guys and she'd make a point to do just that - if she ever managed to make it out of this mess.

She rushed up the front steps and bolted through the unlocked front door. It was so warm inside that she was tempted to curl up in a ball and take a nap on the floor, but comfort was going to have to wait a little longer. She could hear a voice nearby and followed the sound to find a priest giving Mass to one lone parishioner. It looked like the factories weren't the only things deserted around here.

"Excuse me," Buffy said as she limped up the aisle. "Sorry Father, can I…" she trailed off when the old lady receiving Mass turned around and gasped. The priest just stopped what he was doing and stared at her like he wasn't sure what he was seeing. Buffy guessed she probably looked pretty bad right now and kind of crazy too. For one thing, she was running around in pajamas and no shoes in December. Then there was the minor fact that she'd just finished fighting off four demons. Needless to say, she wasn't winning any beauty contests today. "Hi," she said as she waved at the priest with an awkward smile. Her greeting seemed to unfreeze him and he rushed up the aisle toward her.

"Are you okay?" he asked anxiously as he gestured toward one of the pews. "Please sit. I'll phone the police."

"That's okay. Trust me. The police can't help. If you could just let me use a phone, I can call for backup… I mean 'help' and then I'll let you get back to your uhh… church thingy."

"But you've obviously been attacked," the Father argued, "and you're barely dressed. You're barefoot!"

"I'm pregnant too," Buffy joked, but realized her attempt at humor was lost on the priest. In fact, he looked completely horrified. "Okay," she sighed. "I'll make you a deal. If you let me use a phone first, you can call the police right after. Promise," she added with a smile. She wasn't lying either. He could call the police. He could even call the National Guard for all she cared. That didn't mean she
was going to stick around until they got here.

The old lady came toward them, digging in her oversized purse as she walked. She finally pulled out a phone and held it out toward Buffy. Apparently even little old ladies carried cell phones these days.

"You can use my phone," she said.

"Thank you," Buffy replied happily as she reached to take the phone. Unfortunately, the woman pulled it away before she could get a hold of it.

The lady looked her in the eyes and spoke sternly. "But only if you promise me you're not going to be a fool and call the man that did this to you. Father Rainey can get you into a special convent for young girls who get themselves in trouble."

"A c-convent?" Buffy was taken aback for a moment. "Look, I think we have a misunderstanding. It's a really long story, but I promise you I'm not calling some evil, nasty batterer-guy. Anyway," she shrugged. "You should see the guys I did fight with. They look a whole lot worse than I do."

The lady finally handed over the phone, but she and the priest kept watching her intensely. She could only imagine what must be going through their minds right now. Buffy smiled nervously at the pair and punched in Dean's number.

He answered before the second ring. He sounded unusually gruff, probably because he was already freaked out and was getting a call from a number he didn't recognize.

"Hey sweetie," she replied. "It's me…uh… Buffy." Okay that was lame, but she didn't know what to say. It was so overwhelming to hear his voice. A long moment of silence answered her and she was beginning to wonder if she'd lost the connection when Dean finally replied with, "Buffy?"

"Yep, the one and only," she said as tears stung her eyes. He sounded so hopeful and so unsure. For the first time that day, she let her guard drop a little. She wanted to see him so badly.

"I-," she began, but he cut her off before she could say anything. He wanted to know where she was and that was a very good question. One she'd like an answer to herself. "I'm in a church, but pretty sure this isn't Cleveland. Hold on," she said as she pulled the phone away from her ear and looked over at the priest.

"Where am I?" she asked, but he just looked at her like she had three heads. The man probably thought she was on some heavy drugs. She clarified the question, hoping she'd get a better response. "What city is this?"

"Paradise, Ohio," he replied.

"Seriously? Wow. I'm so not a fan of the new devil, but he does have a good grasp of irony. I have to give points for that."

The priest frowned at Buffy. It seemed she was disturbing him again. She should really focus on the matter at hand, because this guy was not amused by her commentary.

"How close are we to Cleveland?" she asked.

"A few hours," the priest replied absently. He was no longer focused on their conversation. His attention was directed down the aisle.

Buffy had already felt her spidey senses tingling, so she was way ahead of him. They had visitors,
four severely bloody and beaten visitors. Obviously, they could come inside a church after all. These guys really had no sense of decency.

"Hi Slayer," one of the demons said with a bloody grin. "Thought you gave us the slip, didn't ya?"

Buffy groaned. Not these idiots again. "Don't you guys ever give up?" she asked. "Just so you know, this makes you look really desperate. You need to learn to take 'no' for an answer. Dean," she said as she placed the phone against her ear again, "I'll have to call you back." She ended the call over his protests and handed the phone back to its owner.

She knew Dean would be worried, but she needed to concentrate on the upcoming fight (once again). Plus, she needed to get the Father away from the demons before they hurt him. He was walking toward them, shaming them for their behavior, and threatening to call the police. They probably wouldn't like that.

She yelled a warning to the priest as she grabbed a stone basin filled with what she hoped was holy water. She ran forward, knocking the priest to the side with her shoulder before splashing the contents of the basin on the demons. The smoke and the screaming let her know that the holy water assumption had been a safe guess. She followed-up by throwing the basin itself at the head of the demon that seemed to be the strongest of the four.

"Father, please tell me you know how to do an exorcism."

"I… you…," he stammered. "What's going on here? That basin was pure marble. It had to weigh –"

"Yeah, it was kinda heavy," Buffy agreed, cutting off the priest's ramble. "Do you know how to do an exorcism ritual?" she repeated more urgently. "The holy water's not gonna stop those things for long."

"No," he said. His eyes were wide with panic as he stared at the smoking demons. "The modern church doesn't perform them very often… I've never… W-What are those things?"

Buffy grabbed the priest by the arm and pulled him along with her. Thankfully the older lady had already gotten the hint and was taking off toward the back of sanctuary. "Those are demons," Buffy replied as she hustled him along. "The annoying possessing-people kind of demon. If we survive this, we both need to look into memorizing that exorcism ritual."

She snatched one of the large candelabras from the altar as they passed by. It wasn't iron, but it would hopefully still do some damage. The demons were on the move again and she needed something to fight them with.

She released the priest's arm and pushed him on ahead of her. "Get in the back," she ordered. "I'll try and slow them down." Buffy raised the candelabra, took a deep breath and started to rush the demons when she felt the familiar sensation of static electricity that always preceded one of Will's grand entrances. "Please", she said aloud, "don't let this be my imagination."

As if in reply, Willow popped into view beside her with a loud snap. She gave Buffy a quick wave and a smile before turning her attention on the demons. Her sudden appearance had shocked them and they'd stopped briefly, however they were already beginning to move forward. Willow held out a hand and the four stopped once again, but this time it was obviously not their choice. They struggled against their invisible bonds while Willow recited an exorcism ritual in perfect Latin. As she spoke the last word, black smoke billowed from their mouths and the four bodies fell over dead.

"Yay Willow!" Buffy exclaimed as she threw her arms around her.
Her friend cringed and tried to wiggle out of Buffy's grasp. "Owww, Buffy. I'm glad to see you too, but kinda have a few broken ribs."

Buffy pulled away quickly. "Oh, sorry," she frowned. "You okay? Last time I saw you, Crowley had you…"

"Yeah, pinned like a bug," Willow pouted. "I remember. I'm fine now. Just a few broken ribs and a bad bump on my head. What about you?"

"Tired, cold, kinda sore. You know, the usual stuff. I'm okay," Buffy shrugged. "Hey, when did you learn to perform an exorcism?"

"Today," her friend announced proudly. "It's been a major cram session. Just like the good ole days. I've absorbed so much knowledge, I think my head might actually explode," she said happily.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love your huge brain? Because I do. I so seriously do," Buffy stressed. "By the way - not that I'm complaining - but how did you find me?"

"Dean sorta told me where you were. I was sitting in my office and he called my phone. When I looked up to answer, I noticed the location spell I had out on you was going off. All flashy lights and everything. Can't believe I missed it. Next time I'll add a really noisy alarm."

"Did you tell him you were coming to get me?" Buffy asked urgently.

"No," Willow replied with a guilty frown. "I didn't answer the phone because I had a hunch you might need me."

"I did. Believe me, I did. I'm completely burned out on fighting stupid things that won't die. But we better get moving, because I guarantee you he's got a major case of the wiggins about now."

"Excuse me," interrupted the priest from behind them. "Do you mind telling me-?"

"What the heck just happened?" Buffy finished for him. She'd just realized that she had completely forgotten about the other two people in the room. She and Willow had been yacking away as if they weren't even there. Understandably, the two were completely freaked, but Buffy was only going to be able to give them the quick and dirty version. She had to get back to Dean. "Like I said before," she continued, "demons happened. Luckily for us, Will studied up on exorcisms in her free time."

"Is she?" he began hesitantly before turning toward Willow and continuing in a reverent tone. "Are you an angel?"

"Heck no," Willow answered quickly, "and thank the Goddess for that."

"I strongly second," Buffy agreed. "Believe me. Angels are more trouble than they're worth. If one ever asks if they can move in, I suggest you point in the direction of the nearest lake and tell 'em to take a big ole flying jump… and if you really want to make one mad, tell them that Dean Winchester says 'hi'. Well," she added thoughtfully, "Actually he wouldn't really put it quite that way… but this is a church so we'll just go with 'hi'."

The priest stared at Buffy for a long moment. He looked even more confused now. "I'm not sure I follow," he finally said.

"Sorry Father," Buffy shrugged. "Can't stick around to explain. Just make sure you learn that exorcism ritual, 'kay?"
Buffy hurried down the hallway from Willow's office as she frantically searched for Dean. Her friend babbled along beside her as they walked/limped. She filled her in on Cas' curse and the fact that they had apparently teamed up with yet another angel (big sarcastic 'yay'). Most importantly, she learned that Willow was already on top of the Moon Goddess business. That was good, because if Crowley was breaking into Purgatory tonight, they didn't have a whole lot of time to waste, especially since they still had to figure out where Crowley and Raphael were planning on doing the deed. So far, that was the ten million dollar question that no one seemed to have the answer to.

When she turned a corner, Buffy came face-to-face with Dean. She forgot all about Crowley and Purgatory for the moment. All she could think about was how badly she wanted to be in his arms. He looked shocked and extremely pale, but she rushed toward him anyway… and was rewarded with a face full of holy water.

"Christo," Dean growled. His jaw was set and the expression on his face was one of pure, deadly fury. Buffy was extremely glad that she wasn't actually a demon. It was no wonder he was so unpopular with that crowd.

"Seriously?" she snapped. She knew it wasn't fair, but fair and balanced Buffy had left the building hours ago. "I just spent the entire day being locked in a stinky cell, fighting demons that won't die, and freezing my butt off…and that's the best you can come up with? A face full of holy water? Really? I'm wearing my anti-possession charm, you know."

Any other complaints Buffy had were lost when she was caught in a crushing embrace. She buried her face against his neck and breathed in his scent as he lifted her feet off the ground. All sorts of bumps and bruises were protesting the abuse, but she told them to hush. She was more than happy where she was.

"I never thought I'd see you again," he said against her hair. "I thought I'd lost you."

Buffy smiled and tightened her arms around him. She didn't get an unguarded Dean very often. "You're not getting rid of me that easily," she teased.

Dean gave her one more tight squeeze and then set her feet back down on the floor. Buffy could tell by the wrinkle between his eyes that he was now all business. It was time for her to submit to one of his patented injury checks. She stood patiently while he turned her head from side to side and cursed at the cuts and bruises. Then he knelt down to check out her right ankle. He must have noticed she was favoring it.

"You need to put some ice on this," he stated as he looked up at her and scowled. His tone was somewhere between exasperation and worry.

"Yes, Dean," she agreed.

Buffy was finding it hard to keep a straight face even though she knew this was a very serious affair in his book. She was just so happy to see him and felt so much safer now that she was with him again. He had a way of making her feel like everything was going to be taken care of. Actually, she'd noticed that he seemed to have that effect on a lot of people. Even a super-powerful Slayer wasn't immune to his caretaking skills.
"How's the shoulder?" he asked as he stood up and pulled the collar of her pajama top aside.

"Trish fixed it. She used you're surprise! first aid approach too. You should be proud. Thanks for that," she smirked.

Dean grinned a little. It was the first break in his mask of seriousness. "Worked didn't it?"

Buffy just snorted. She opened her mouth to disagree with his medical techniques, but stopped when she saw him staring intensely at her left arm. That was the arm she'd cut open to draw the devil's trap. Dean had pushed up her sleeve and was holding her arm by the wrist as he stared. Sweat had broken out on his brow and Buffy noticed that his breathing had become uneven. He appeared to be on the verge of a full-blown anxiety attack. She was confused for a moment. Sure, it was a jagged and ugly cut, but it definitely wasn't anywhere near the worst wound she'd ever received. She knew for a fact that Dean had seen and suffered much worse himself. Then she realized what he must be thinking. The gash must look like the results of torture to him and not just any torture, but demonic torture. No wonder he was freaking out. She looked over to where Willow had been standing, hoping her friend would understand that this was something they needed to deal with in private. Apparently, she'd already read the situation for herself, because she was nowhere to be seen.

"Dean," she said softly. "That's not what you think." He didn't respond, so she lifted his face with her free hand. "Look at me. Dean it's okay. I did this to myself. I needed the blood to draw a devil's trap. Nobody tortured me," she emphasized. "I promise."

She could read the doubt in his eyes and knew she wasn't getting through to him even before he spoke.

"Buffy don't... I know. I know what those bastards do."

She pulled her arm free of his grasp and folded her sleeve back down to hide the wound before taking his hands in hers. "Listen to me, Dean. That did not happen. I'm not lying to you and I'm not saying Crowley's not capable of it, because you know that he is. Honestly, I think he just had too many other things on his evil to-do list. He left me and Trish alone his smelly cage and then I drew a devil's trap so we could escape. Obviously, the escape was a little bumpy and a whole lot demony, but it was a straight fight. Trust me. Those demons drew the short straw. I beat them severely. It wasn't a pretty sight."

Dean gave her a small smile. "You drew a devil's trap?"

"I did," she confirmed with a grin, "and it worked too. Aren't you just bursting with pride?"

Buffy got a genuine smile and another tight hug in response. She was taking that as a 'yes'.

"Now you have some explaining to do," she said as she pointed to the bloody bandage on his neck and frowned. "And that better not be what I think it is."

Buffy almost felt 100% again. It was amazing what a shower could do for a girl. Washing away the germs from Crowley's cesspool was the best medicine ever. Of course, the fact that Dean had joined her was a huge bonus. She'd never known him to be so sweet before. He'd gently washed all of her wounds and even shampooed her hair, which was matted with tangles and dried blood. It was awesome. The experience was almost worth getting kidnapped for.
She turned in his arms and laid her head against his chest. She could easily fall asleep right where she stood. All she had to do was lean her weight against Dean and revel in the feel of the warm water and she'd be out. A smile spread across her face when she realized he was going to end up smelling like her cherry blossom shower gel. There was no way Bobby and Sam would let that one slip by unnoticed.

"Marry me," Dean said as he tightened his arms around her. It was more of a statement than a question.

His words shocked Buffy out of her daze. This wasn't exactly how she'd envisioned the 'new and improved' proposal, but she couldn't deny him.

"Of course I will," she replied. She closed her eyes again and pressed a kiss against his chest. "You're kind of hard to resist right now."

"I'm always hard to resist," he teased. Then he pulled away and held her by the shoulders so he could look at her. He was completely serious again. "Do something else for me…"

Buffy groaned internally. She had a feeling this was going to be the end of the special moment between them, because she knew what he was about to ask. Willow had already warned her about his attitude toward the magic ritual they would probably have to perform. There was about to be much yelling and probably some bonus weeping and gnashing of teeth too. No doubt about it.

"What?" she asked cautiously.

"If Balthazar doesn't screw us, I want you to promise me you'll stay here tonight. Even if you weren't pregnant, enough is enough. You're done for the day. You're not getting mixed up in this."

"Dean, why did you have to do this now?" she asked in frustration. "You've ruined yet another moment. Why do you always do that?"

Dean and Buffy's argument was interrupted by both of their phones going off. Apparently, they'd caught a break and everyone was meeting in the cafeteria. Dean struggled to keep stride with Buffy as they headed that way. It was annoying as hell. She shouldn't be able to outpace him with her short little legs and a gimp ankle. She was just trying to piss him off.

"Why you movin' so fast?" he asked as he jogged along beside her. "Afraid the truth might catch up with you?"

"Maybe I'm trying to get away from you," she said without turning her head. "Maybe you're a narrow-minded, controlling, jackass."

"A jackass, huh? Wow, that stings. I'm trying to keep you alive, princess. Sorry that bothers you so much. Guess you don't like it when people point out how freakin' insane your plans are. Guess you'd prefer it if I just towed the company line and grinned like a dumbass while your head explodes."

Buffy stopped and turned toward Dean. "I'd prefer it if you trusted me," she said through gritted teeth. "I backed you when you went after Eve with only a stupid piece of bone and half of an instruction manual. I knew you'd figure it out and I was ready to go down with you if you didn't. Guess I just want the same courtesy. So, excuse the hell out of me!"
Buffy glared at him silently for a moment and then her fury seemed to magically melt away. It was replaced by the wide eyed, lost little girl look she did so well. Damn her. She even had tears in her eyes and that quivery bottom lip. She had to know that was his weakness. How could she ask this of him? Did she even know what she was asking? He'd just gotten her back and it was probably the only time in his life that something good had happened and nobody had to die or sell their soul for it. He wasn't about to give his blessing to this insanity.

He was broken out of his thoughts when he barely managed to catch the door she'd just thrown open before it busted him in the nose. They'd finally arrived at the cafeteria and it looked like the entire freaking world was packed in there. It must be go time. This was probably his last chance to reason with her.

"Baby, please just listen to me," he said as he grabbed her by the elbow and aimed for a less angry tone. "This isn't about me not trusting you. It's about –.

Dean was interrupted by the sound of his name being whispered urgently. It was Sam. He looked up at his brother and glared, but the expression on Sam's face broke through his irritation. Jesus, what now? He turned toward the direction of his brother's frown and froze.

He was frozen in awe at how completely and utterly screwed they all were (again). It was all over, but the upside was that Buffy wouldn't be performing any batshit crazy rituals. No, that had been two hours' worth of yelling and arguing completely wasted. They should've spent the time in bed, because they weren't going to get another chance. Balthazar had shafted them in a truly spectacular fashion. He'd like to say "I told you so", but he wasn't feeling particularly smug at the moment. Mostly he was just waiting for a giant ball of wrath to melt them all where they stood.

Balthazar had finally shown, but he hadn't come alone. He'd brought a friend. A dark skinned, sour faced friend that Dean had last seen in fake Canada. It was Virgil, one of the more badass angels he'd ever had the displeasure of meeting. The guy probably hadn't forgotten that he and Sam were last seen beating his ass.

"Told you so," Dean said as he leaned toward Cas, who was looking a little shell shocked himself. (Maybe he did feel a tiny bit smug after all.)

"What?" Balthazar asked as he looked at the stunned faces around him. "No, 'hello'. No, 'thank you for being so selfless and saving our insignificant and ungrateful asses'?"

"Thanks Balthazar," Dean replied. "Thanks for bringing us the Tony Montana of Heaven. I'm sure he gives one hell of a smiting. Awesome."

Virgil didn't respond to the insult. He just stood with his hands laced behind his back and stared straight ahead. He looked as cheerful as ever.

Balthazar smirked that smart ass-y little smirk he was so good at. "Hate to disappoint you, Dean. Virgil's actually on our side." When Virgil cleared his throat, Balthazar clarified his point. "Well, let's just say he's not on Raphael's side. Fortunately for us, Virgil lacks imagination. He's a real stick in the mud, that one." Balthazar continued on, apparently indifferent to the glare he was getting from the other angel. "See, our dear friend Virgil doesn't see shades of grey. Therefore, cracking open Purgatory with Lucy Jr. - not a battle strategy he finds acceptable. Of course, I suspect that the fact he's been trapped in that ghastly alternate dimension hasn't done much to maintain his loyalty."

"No shit?" Dean remarked with a surprised gasp. "Dude's been trapped in fake Canada all this time? No wonder he's pissed. I hated that place. Hey," he said as he addressed Virgil. "Did the real fake us ever turn back up? Man, I'd love to see the looks on those clowns' faces when they found out we'd
quit their jobs and maxed out their credit cards. That would be…” Dean trailed off with a nervous laugh. Virgil was not looking very amused or very informative. Balthazar was right, dude was a giant stick in the mud.

"Are you finished, Dean?" Balthazar asked. "Or would you rather stand here and gossip all night. I have mentioned how much I dislike you, haven't I? It's embarrassing enough that I've been roped into one of the Winchester's self-righteous crusades. I shouldn't be forced to listen to your inane prattle as well."

"Hey!" Buffy yelled.

Dean turned his head in surprise. He was about to tear into Balthazar himself, but apparently Buffy was going to do it for him. Maybe she wasn't as pissed at him as he thought.

"Okay sure," she continued, "Dean's stubborn, bossy, and kind of a jackass sometimes… and he's nowhere near as funny as he'd like to think he is –"

"Gee thanks," Dean interrupted. "I thought you were helping."

"Shut up," she snapped back. "I am helping. Anyway," she shrugged as she turned back to Balthazar. "He's my stubborn and bossy jackass and you're not allowed to talk to him that way. Besides, none of this is his fault. Somebody has to clean up heaven's mess. You guys sure as hell don't seem to be able to do it yourselves. So, if you want him to help you pull your incompetent asses out of the fire again, I suggest you take a minute to stop being smug, hand over the weapons, and tell us where Crowley is."

Dean beamed a gloating grin at Balthazar. Buffy was still pissed at him, but she was also still his girl and she could do one hell of a stubborn and bossy act herself (and it was so much more entertaining when it wasn't directed at him).

Balthazar raised an eyebrow, but he didn't appear too ruffled.

"You must be Bunny," he said as he stepped closer to Buffy. "I thought you were one of our damsels in distress. How did you manage to escape Crowley's clutches?"

Buffy folded her arms and lifted her chin. "I have my ways."

"Well, you're certainly even less terrifying than I imagined," he said as he observed her closely. "You are rather cute though. Oh," he remarked with a frown as his eyes fell on her stomach. "Now that's a shame."

"Hey," Dean snapped. "Quit using your pervy angel x-ray vision on her."

Balthazar looked up at Dean and grinned mischievously. "Dean, Dean, Dean… considering our current situation, don't you agree that you've engaged in some piss poor family planning. Let me guess… pull and pray? Am I right?"

"I heard no prayers," Castiel remarked earnestly. "However, that was probably because I was not meant to interfere."

Dean had to give it to the guy. Balthazar had clearly won that round. He'd never been so embarrassed in his life and he wasn't easily embarrassed. Everyone they knew was now staring at him and Buffy. Everyone except Giles - that dude was too busy polishing the shit out of his glasses. Dean gaped at Cas in slack-jawed amazement for a second before chancing a glance in Buffy's direction. Yep, she was more embarrassed than he was. He was pretty sure 'mortified' was the right
word for her reaction. She actually looked like she was trying to melt through the floor. At least that was something. Balthazar, on the other hand, couldn't have been happier. He'd taken smug to a whole new level.

"Why don't we move this along then," he said as he gave Dean a patronizing pat on the shoulder. "We are on a schedule after all. If we're all going to die tonight, we should at least be on time for it."

Balthazar disappeared and then reappeared at the front of the room. He held both hands above his head and clapped them together once. A large, glittering pile of weapons materialized on the long cafeteria table in front of him.

"Viola," he said as he swept out an arm to indicate the bounty in front of him. "I give you the weapons of heaven. I will joyfully accept your undying gratitude now. Tears are optional, but I assure you they'll be greatly appreciated."
The Time Has Come (part 3)

Chapter Notes

A/N: On archangels, an endangered species if ever there was one. According to the great Internets there once were seven: Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, Uriel, Simiel, Oriphiel and Zachariah. However, there are alternate spellings/names in certain traditions (Eastern Orthodoxy vs. Jewish tradition and so forth). Anyway, as of s6, we know Gabriel is dead (sniff), Uriel is dead (go Anna), Zachariah is dead (go Dean), Michael is in the pit, and Raphael is a douche. That leaves us with Simiel and Oriphel. At least I don't remember them dying and the Superwiki doesn't mention them, so I'm assuming they are still around.

FYI: In this chapter, I borrowed from various Wiccan websites. I don't have any exact references listed because most seemed to have basically the same stuff and it was uncredited. I also borrowed from the Bible - and yes I got a little cracky with the 'weapons' (couldn't resist).

Thanks to my beta isugirl! I own all remaining mistakes, because I always continue to fiddle

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Buffy wrinkled her nose as she considered the 'weapon' in her hand. So what if David used it to kill Goliath? It was still just a stupid slingshot made out of goat hair and leather. It didn't even come equipped with its own ammo. She had to go outside and gather her own rocks. Rocks! It was so humiliating. It was the worst weapon of all… aside from the 'brick' from the Tower of Babel. Xander had been given that dubious honor. Not only was it made of dried ox dung, it also had the lamest power imaginable. She wasn't sure how making everyone speak a different language was going to accomplish anything. Then there was the stuff Giles had that could turn someone into a 'pillow of salt'. She had no clue what that was even about.

"I don't like my weapon," she pouted, again, although at this point she was pretty sure nobody was listening to her whining anymore. "Please Faith," she cajoled, trying to sound as pitiful as possible.

"Not gonna happen B," Faith replied as she held up the Scythe and deliberately twirled it. She was obviously doing her best to rub it in her face and it was working too. "You said – and I quote – 'I like seriously want one of those super-cool weapons of heaven. Faith, you can like totally take the Scythe.'

Buffy glared at the other Slayer, who'd just mocked her with a really obnoxious and really overdone imitation of a Valley Girl accent.

"I don't sound like that," she snapped as she crossed her arms and tried to think of a good comeback. She had nothing though. Her brain was too fried from all the fighting she and Dean had been doing. Besides, Faith was just trying to distract her so that she'd quit sulking. It was Faith's idea of helping. She finally gave up on a snappy comeback and settled for sticking her tongue out at the other girl.

Faith just winked and shot Buffy a wicked grin. "Love you too," she said.
Buffy sneered at Faith and made her way over to where Dean was busy playing with his weapon, which was, unfortunately, the coolest one of all. He'd gotten the flaming sword that was used to guard the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. It had been Michael's, which meant Dean was the only one who could turn it from a useless hilt into an awesome, flaming instrument of death. He was really getting off on it too and Andrew's hero worship hadn't helped. In fact, she'd decided to test out her sling on Andrew if he gushed about the 'heavenly lightsaber' one more time.

"Hey," she greeted hesitantly. She was hoping his fascination with his new toy had taken his mind off their disagreement. She really didn't want to go into battle when they were still at each other's throats.

Dean flicked his wrist and smirked in satisfaction when the flaming blade disappeared once again. "Hey," he repeated back to her, but he didn't look up from the inspection of his weapon.

"Gotta admit, you did get the best toy," she observed. It was an olive branch. She was trying.

Dean snorted and looked up at her briefly. "Well, maybe it's a sign," he said sarcastically.

"Dean."

"What? You're the one that's all into fate and reading the signs these days. I'm just sayin' that maybe your piece-of-shit weapon is a sign that your little knocked-up ass needs to stay home."

"Never mind," she ground out (she couldn't believe him). "I was hoping to have a civil conversation with you, but apparently I'm delusional."

"That's one word for it," he grumbled under his breath.

Buffy turned and stomped away. It was either that or punch him right in his foul mouth. She stood several feet away with her back turned to him, trying desperately to reel in her temper. She really didn't need this right now. She was torn between yelling at him some more and feeling extremely, horribly guilty. She wanted to yell at him because he was a big, smartass jerk who refused to believe that she knew what she was doing. She felt guilty because she knew he was extremely stressed out and worried – hence the jerkiness. It was a vicious cycle.

She stiffened when she sensed him walking up behind her. Apparently he wanted to fight some more. When she felt his hand touch her shoulder, she whirled around, ready for more yelling. But she relaxed a little when she noticed that Dean wasn't looking overly confrontational.

"What?" she asked coolly. "What should my 'little knocked-up ass' be doing now? Maybe I should be barefoot, in the kitchen, making you some pie?" She did her best to look innocent and helpless and fluttered her eyelashes dramatically. "Does that sound about right, honey?"

Dean sighed and scrubbed a hand across his face. He didn't rise to the bait and was obviously struggling to stay calm and find the right words. "Look," he began, "I know you think I'm just a giant ass who won't stay out of the way and let you do your job, but I do have a stake in this. I love you, okay? I probably don't say it often enough and I always jack-up your Hallmark moments, but I do love you… and I can't lose you. And you can't expect me to be okay with… with standing around and watching…" he trailed off, obviously unwilling to finish the sentence.

Buffy groaned. There it was again - the horrible, soul crushing guilt. Did he even realize how good he was at that?

"Dean, you have to have some faith in me," she pleaded. "I'm only doing this so that we have a chance, so that our child has a chance. I'd never deliberately do anything to hurt you – never – and it
hurts me to think you don't believe in me. You don't underst-"

"Save it," he interrupted. "We're never gonna agree on this and I can't make you stay out of it. So just give me one thing. That's all I'm asking. One thing."

"What 'one thing'?" she asked suspiciously.

"If we can stop Raphael and Crowley… If I can keep them from ever popping the lock on Purgatory… Promise me you won't do that ritual. Please. I'm begging you here. I know you don't give a shit what I think, but please."

Buffy felt her face growing hot with anger. It was like he hadn't listened to a single word she said.

"That's not fair, Dean," she spat back at him. "I do care what you think. You're the man I love and the father of my child and I sure as hell do care what you think. Why else would I try so hard to get your blessing on this? If you were just some guy to me, I wouldn't even bother. So stop trying to make me feel like the world's biggest bitch!"

Dean raged back at her. "You don't get it! These things never work out like you want them to. If you do this, you die, our baby dies… and I get left to pick up the pieces. I'll never give my blessing to this. You can forget it. So just answer my question. Yes or no?"

Buffy was aware that everyone was staring at the two of them, especially that snarky angel Balthazar. He was getting a big kick out of the free Dean and Buffy show, but she was too furious to care.

"Fine, Dean!" she yelled back. "I promise. If we can stop them from opening Purgatory, I won't do the ritual. I shouldn't have to promise you that, because you should know I'm not doing this for kicks. But since you don't seem to be listening to anything I say - I PROMISE. Happy now?"

"Guess I'll have to be," he said simply and then he walked away from her.

Buffy just let him go. He didn't understand. He refused to believe that anything good could come out of a prophecy. There was no point in continuing to argue.

"I knew it!" Xander exclaimed. "Didn't I say they'd be in an old abandoned factory? Evil things love old factories. You heard me, didn't you Will? Buff?"

"Sure Xander," Buffy replied absently. She and Willow were too busy contemplating the shuttered building in front of them to pay much attention to what he was saying. Both of them were suffering from a case of the butterflies. Going to war against angels was a nerve-wracking proposition, even without the prospect of performing heavy-duty magic.

"What are we looking at? How many?" Dean asked from behind her.

"There are nearly a hundred demons," Castiel replied, "and Raphael brought Simiel and Oriphiel with him."

"That's not so bad," Dean remarked, sounding relieved. "I was expecting a buttload more angels."
"Yeah," Xander agreed enthusiastically, he was obviously desperate to latch-on to any sign of hope. "We're good. What's a hundred demons when we've got two dozen Slayers, three angels, three hunters, the world's most badass wicca... *Oh, and a piece of Andrew's soul,*" he added as he looked over at the now healed and fully powered-up Cas. "Andrew wanted to make sure I mentioned that, since he's a little too wiped to join us... and after that horribly disturbing scene of unpleasantness, I think a little shout-out is the least we can do for him."

"I warned him," Dean remarked with a shrug.

"Aren't you forgetting someone, Xander?" Giles asked. He sounded a little put out. Buffy smiled to herself, knowing his reaction had a lot to do with the ongoing contest between him and Bobby.

"Oh, yeah. Me and my magic poo-brick and you and your salt pillow thingie," Xander added with a heavy dose of sarcasm. "We're the ace in the hole."

"It's a *pillar* not a *pillow,*" Giles clarified.

"Huh," Xander shrugged. "I always thought it was a pillow."

"Me too," Buffy agreed with a nod, "but *pillar* doesn't make much more sense."

Balthazar mumbled something under his breath about their impending doom. "You Rhodes Scholars obviously don't know who Simiel and Oriphiel are," he observed in an extremely patronizing tone.

"They're archangels, smartass," Bobby groused back at him. "Some of us have read entire books, ya know."

Buffy tilted her head back so that she could look up at Dean. "Is that worse than the regular kind?" she asked.

"Archangels are heaven's most fearsome warriors," Virgil replied in a monotone. It was the most words Buffy had heard him say at one time.

Dean didn't meet her eyes. "What Chuckles said," he remarked coldly.

Great, she thought as she pursed her lips and looked away from Dean. Obviously, they weren't going to call a truce before the big battle.

"So, what's the plan?" Bobby asked. "Do we stand out here all night and stare or do we go in there and get our asses kicked?"

"No," Castiel said with confidence. "We go in there and kick some asses."

Dean shot a surprised look in the angel's direction. "Damn. That little bastard's soul must've had more juice than I gave him credit for. Hope you got plenty of smite to backup that mouth, Cas."

"I do," he confirmed as he began to move forward. "Raphael dies tonight."

"Okay then," Bobby said as he hefted the double barrel shotgun he was holding. "Guess its game time."

Buffy started to move forward with the rest of the group, but Dean caught her by the arm. When she turned around he was silently dangling his car keys in front of her.

"I must be seeing things," she teased, trying to lighten the mood. "I can't believe you're actually offering to let me drive the Impala."

"You can have the damn thing if you'll just leave," he replied seriously.

Buffy smiled at him sadly. "Sorry honey," she said as she shook her head slowly. "You know I can't do that."

"Fine," he growled back at her, "but don't leave my side. I don't want you out of my sight."

Buffy cocked an eyebrow and started to remind Dean who he was talking to, but decided to let it slide in favor of concentrating on the demon army they were about to face. In the end, she settled for smirking and pushing past him. She checked her jeans' pocket to make sure the stupid slingshot was still there and then hefted the angel sword she'd been given. Thankfully there had been enough of those to go around, because she would've been pissed if she'd been stuck with only the lame old slingshot.

The group made a grand entrance when Castiel blasted off the factory's double doors, seemingly by the power of thought alone. Buffy was going to go out on a limb and say that was a promising sign.

The three angels easily blazed a path through the waiting demon hordes. They simply touched them or slashed them with a sword and the demon was burned out of its host body, leaving a smoking husk behind. Those that managed to slip by the three were fairly easily dealt with by the Slayers and their borrowed angel swords. Demons really weren't so bad if you had the right weapons.

Buffy gave a sigh of relief after she successfully ran her sword through the one Xander had bashed over the head with his brick. After the blow, it began raging at everyone in French and that was a Sunnydale High flashback she could live without. She sucked at French back then and she certainly didn't understand it any better now, especially since most of the words the demon was using weren't in any of her textbooks.

Two figures stood at the back of the horde, watching the battle with obvious disgust. One was a tall, pale blond woman and the other was a tall, equally pale blond guy. They looked like siblings – very pale, very creepy, semi-evil siblings. The hatred they were shooting Cas' way had her guessing the two were the mysterious archangels, Simiel and Oriphiel. The hard expression on Cas' face only confirmed her suspicions. There was no love lost between those guys.

Without taking his eyes off the two angels, Castiel stood still until Buffy and Dean caught up with him.

"Raphael and Crowley are in the basement," he said. "Take the witch and go. I'll hold them off."

Buffy looked around frantically for Willow and finally spotted her near the stairwell, which was convenient, but it was also near the archangels… and they clearly didn't want anyone going down those steps.

Buffy, Dean, and Cas slashed and stabbed their way through the crowd trying to get to Willow. Buffy was horrified when the female archangel held a hand out toward her friend, clearly intending to smite her.

Willow held up her left hand with her palm facing outwards and the blast of angelic wrath bounced off Willow's hand and right back into the face of the angel. She flew backwards and slammed into the wall behind her, leaving a large imprint where her body had collided.
"Damn, that Seal of Salmon ring she's wearing actually works," Dean remarked in awe.

"The ring is known as the Seal of the Great King Solomon," Castiel corrected him. He was clearly not amused by Dean's mangling of the divine weapon's proper name.

"Whatever," he shrugged. "I'm just sayin' it's pretty freakin' awesome. We might actually be able to stop this thing," he noted happily.

"Go," Castiel ordered as he lifted the staff he was holding into the air and began speaking in some unknown, Biblical-sounding language. Ancient Hebrew maybe?

Buffy didn't move as ordered though. "Oh God," she said as she froze and looked around at the sea of frogs that had suddenly materialized around her. "Oh God," she repeated as she noticed the horrified expression on Willow's face. "Willow has a frog phobia!"

"What? You're friggin kidding me? She's a witch. She can't be afraid of frogs. She's supposed to keep 'em as pets and stuff."

"It's weird," she agreed and then grabbed Dean by the arm and pulled him along with her as they continued in Willow's direction. The archangel that wasn't currently stunned was quickly advancing on Cas. This was probably their best opportunity to get downstairs.

Buffy cringed as she squished untold numbers of frogs beneath her feet as they ran. There was no way to avoid stepping on the creatures (poor froggies). She could only imagine what Dean's stompy boots were doing to them. At least now she'd finally have a good excuse to burn the smelly things.

Will was in a blind panic by the time they made it to her. She kept shrieking and jumping up and down, trying to avoid the frogs that were hopping across her feet. There was no getting through to her, so Dean draped her over his shoulder using his free arm and bolted toward the stairwell.

"How is this helping?" Buffy shouted in an attempt to be heard over the sounds of croaking frogs and shouting demons (many of whom were now cursing in various languages).

"Fuck if I know," Dean yelled back. "Cas is just getting happy with the Staff of Moses, I guess. I say we move our asses before we end up covered in locusts and boils."

Buffy groaned, when almost on cue, a loud buzzing sound began to drown out all the shouting and croaking. The building began to darken around them as the cloud of locusts spread throughout the room. At least it was locusts and not boils. She was personally going to kill Cas if she ended up covered in puss-filled boils.

They ended up having to stumble blindly in the direction of the stairwell, because there was no seeing through the swarm. Buffy would've screamed in frustration at the locusts' obvious lack of usefulness to their cause, but she kept her complaints to herself because she'd rather not accidentally swallow any of the disgusting insects.

Willow finally managed to pull herself together enough to conjure a glowy ball of some sort. Thank God for that, because it kept them from breaking their necks on the stairs.

By the time they made it to the first landing, the swarm had thinned out, allowing them to breathe more freely. They stopped to catch their breaths and Dean set a very embarrassed looking Willow on the floor.

"Sorry," she said as she shrugged bashfully. "I have frog fear."
"No shit."

"When this is over," Buffy grumbled, "I'm breaking the Staff of Moses into tiny little toothpicks."
She paused to frown at her gore-covered sneakers. The sight made her even angrier. "I don't care if they damn me to hell for it. It's too stupid and annoying to exist!"

Willow vigorously nodded her agreement, but Dean just looked annoyed.

"How 'bout we quit bitching and move our asses," he suggested gruffly. "I'd like to put a stop to this freakshow before you ladies decide it's time to light candles and recite poetry about the wonders of moon."

"Hey," Willow snapped, "there's a little more to it than that."

"Ignore him," Buffy said with false cheer. "He can't help it. He's suffering from a terminal case of ass-hattery. I'm just hoping it's not genetic."

"Yeah, well… bite me," Dean called out over his shoulder as he resumed his way down the stairwell.

Buffy grabbed Willow by the arm and followed him. "See what I mean?"

They followed the sound of Crowley chanting in some ancient form of Latin as they made their way through the damp basement. Buffy was actually comforted by the sound, because if the demon was still chanting, it probably meant he hadn't managed to open Purgatory yet. They still had time to put a stop to this whole mess. Despite what Dean seemed to believe, she wasn't exactly looking forward to summoning Mother Nature.

The three went through a doorless entryway and were frozen for a moment by the sight in front of them. A strange symbol had been drawn on the brick wall in what appeared to be blood. Below the symbol was a stone altar. Trish lay gagged and bound to the altar with a golden rope. Blood slowly trickled from dozens of shallow cuts on her body. The sight made Buffy feel like she was standing at the top of Glory's tower once again and she had to remind herself that this was not the same thing. She was going to make it through this one. She had to.

Crowley noticed the three visitors first and stopped mid-chant.

"Bloody. Fucking. Hell!" he exclaimed before turning his gaze on the smartly dressed woman standing on the other side of the altar. "I told you to let me kill the Slayers and the friggin' Winchesters. Why won't any of you sodding halos listen to reason? I don't know how they do it, but this band of idiot savants will somehow manage to cock-up the entire works. I hope you appreciate that!"

"Relax, Crowley," the woman ordered calmly, "or I'll strike you down like the abomination you are. There's nothing these three can do aside from enjoying the show." Her gaze moved to the flaming sword Dean was holding. "How dare you wield Michael's weapon when you've refused to do your duty as his vessel. You disgust me," she sneered.

"At least I'm not bangin' Crowley," he replied.
She smiled back at him tightly. "Unfortunately, I have been forced to stoop extremely low in order to clean up your mess."

Buffy was only half-listening to the exchange between Dean and who she guessed must be Raphael, although she was a little confused by 'his' appearance. She was too busy trying to load up her heavenly slingshot. She figured this was as good a time as any to test the weapon out. She loaded it up with her largest rock and started swinging it over her head. She'd discovered that Biblical slingshots didn't exactly work like the ones she'd played with as a child. It was more like a piece of string with a leather pocket in the middle to place the stone. There was no nifty elastic band to pull back and snap. The stone was simply flung once enough momentum was built up. Luckily she had enough momentum by the time it appeared that Raphael was about to let loose on Dean. She released one end of the string just as the angel held out her hand in what Buffy had come to recognize as the classic 'smiting pose'.

The stone hit Raphael directly in the center of her chest. The angel gasped in astonishment as a bright light began spilling out from the small hole it made. The sling wasn't quite as lame as Buffy had assumed.

Dean spared a second to blink at Buffy in astonishment before taking the opportunity to move in on Raphael. She held out her smiting hand once again, but this time Dean was ready. He brought his blade down and sliced off the hand before she could release any wrath from it.

Buffy desperately wanted to free Trish now, but it looked like Crowley had decided to join the fray. He smirked at Buffy and started to come toward her. She reached for another stone, but didn't have to use it. Willow looked down at the Seal of Solomon before using the ringed hand to fling Crowley backwards and pin him against the wall.

She looked over at Buffy and grinned cheerfully. "Payback's a bitch."

'Yes it is', Buffy silently agreed as she turned her attention back to Raphael. The angel had pulled out his/her own angel sword and was going at it with Dean. Surprisingly, Dean seemed to be holding his own against Raphael. Buffy thought that was kind of odd since Raphael was supposed to be an all-powerful archangel, but she didn't have much time to think about it. She decided to take the opportunity to try and free Trish.

Trish gasped and thanked Buffy profusely when she pulled the gag from her mouth. Buffy was just relieved that the girl still had the strength to speak. She struggled with the golden ropes for a minute. They wouldn't come loose no matter how much Slayer strength she used, but she discovered that the angel sword seemed to have no problem cutting through them.

"You think you can stand?" Buffy asked once she'd finally freed Trish from her restraints.

She nodded and desperately scrambled to get off the blood-slicked altar. Despite her enthusiasm, she'd obviously been weakened. Buffy had to catch her to keep her from falling face-forward onto the concrete floor. Trish was a little hard to hold onto due to the blood, but Buffy managed to steady her. The girl looped an arm over Buffy's shoulder and stood for a few moments trying to gather her strength.

"Let's go," she finally said as she forced herself to stand straight.

Buffy didn't have to be told twice. She wrapped an arm around Trish's waist and started heading toward the door. She had to smile at the look of elation that crossed Dean's face when he saw they were on the move. The sight energized him and he stabbed out at Raphael, striking her in the side. She stumbled backwards clutching the new wound, which spilled white light like the others.
Willow was still concentrating on keeping Crowley pinned, but Dean grabbed her by the elbow and yanked her out of her stance. He pushed her through the doorway and then turned back to look at Buffy. Buffy had frozen when she'd noticed that the altar was beginning to tremble and split down the middle.

Crowley pulled himself up off the floor, straightening his suit as he did so. He gazed at the altar for a moment and then turned to grin at her. "Looks like you're too late, kitten," he gloated. "It's curtain time. Stay. Enjoy the show."

"Oh crap," she groaned. She hurried through the doorway with Trish and started to tell Willow what was happening, but Dean grabbed her by the wrist and started pulling her along. She dug in her heels and tried to stand her ground, but it wasn't working.

"Dean stop! It's too late. The door to Purgatory's about to blow wide open."

He stopped, but kept a hand on her wrist. Buffy tried to pull away from his grasp but soon realized that she couldn't. His grip on her wrist was like a band of steel. She tried again; this time using all of her Slayer strength, but his hold on her still didn't loosen. Something was seriously wrong with this picture. This was not the time for her to be losing her mojo.

She looked over at the flaming sword that he held in his other hand and it dawned on her that this wasn't a case of her losing her powers. It was a case of him gaining some. The sword was obviously way more than a nifty looking weapon. It apparently gave the person wielding it a dose of an archangel's power too. No wonder he was able to hold his own in a fight with Raphael. He was super!Dean.

She noted that he didn't look cocky or appear to be gloating over his newfound powers. Normally, Dean would get a huge kick out of something like this, but he looked dead serious. In this instance, that was much worse.

"You have to let me go," she said urgently. "We have to do the ritual before it's too late."

He shook his head at her and tightened his grip. He wasn't hurting her, but he wasn't letting her go either. This was not good.

"I can't," he said simply. "I can't let you do it."

"You have to let me do it. Dean, look. Look at what's happening," she pleaded as she glanced over her shoulder toward the other room.

The building around them was beginning to shake and the altar in front of Raphael and Crowley was splitting even further down the middle. A bright red light had started to spill from the crack.

Dean looked at the sight for a moment before returning his gaze to Buffy. He stared at her for a long moment. His features showed a mixture of fear and stubborn anger. 'This is it', she thought. They'd lost. She wasn't getting through to him. Then he glanced over at the altar again and when he looked back at her, she saw a resigned sadness in his eyes. He let go of her wrist.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I tried, but I couldn't stop it."

Buffy felt all her irritation with him melting away. Underneath all of the bullheaded stubbornness and arrogant posturing, he was only trying to protect his family and he believed he'd failed.

She stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. He wrapped his free arm around her and pulled her against him and held her for a long moment before letting her go. Every muscle in his
body was rigid and Buffy could see tears shining in his eyes. He truly believed he was sending her to her death.

"Don't be sorry," she said softly. "You got me here and I couldn't have done it without you. It's not all on you, Dean," she stressed. "I have my part to do too. Don't worry. We're in this together and I'm not leaving you. I promise."

He didn't respond, but there was a tiny bit of hope reflected in his eyes. It wasn't much, but she knew it was taking everything he had just to hold on to it. That was a miracle in itself. This must have been what the prophet meant when he told Dean he'd have to have faith. Chuck must have known that ultimately, it would all come down to Dean's decision. He would either have to allow the ritual or prevent it from happening. It was in his hands and he'd decided to allow it, although Buffy was pretty sure that for Dean, this was more an act of sacrifice than faith. The poor stubborn idiot believed he was letting her die to save the world again. She wished she had time to reassure him, but decided she'd better go before he changed his mind and decided to stop her.

"I'll be right back," she assured him as she stepped out of his grasp. "I've already played the 'dying to save the world' gig. I've got too much to live for this time. So, you just make sure nothing gets through that door, okay?"

He nodded and tried to give her a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. Then he held the sword up and took up his station in the doorway. Crowley and a severely weakened Raphael were both standing in front of the altar. Crowley had resumed his chanting. The two didn't seem to notice or care that Dean was nearby. Obviously they thought they'd won.

Buffy ran to the corner of the adjoining room where Willow was busy frantically pulling supplies from the backpack she'd brought with her. Trish stood beside her on very unsteady feet. Buffy just hoped she wouldn't pass out before the ritual was over.

Willow poured oil into a wooden bowl with shaky hands, then shoved candles into the other two girl's hands.

"What do we do?" Buffy asked.

"Uh… well, we sorta light candles and I recite poetry about the moon. B-But it's a lot cooler than Dean made it sound," she added nervously. She started drawing a circle on the floor with a piece of chalk, speaking in a rush as she did so. "I-I chant. I light Trish's candle first, then you light yours from hers and I light mine from yours… then there's more chanting, then we put the candles in the middle of the circle. I chant some more and we hold hands. T-Then presto."

Willow was obviously a nervous wreck and it was catching. Buffy took a deep breath to clear her head. She hadn't absorbed much of Will's ramble, but there wasn't time to go over it again. They'd just have to wing it.

"We have to do this Will," she said loudly, hoping to snap her friend out of her panic. "It's now or never."

"Okay," Willow replied. "Get in the circle."

Once they were all in place inside the circle, Willow took a couple of deep breaths and closed her eyes. When she opened them, there was no trace of the nervous young woman she'd been the moment before. She emanated raw power. She held out her arms and looked up towards the ceiling and began the invocation in a strong, confident voice.
"Dark is the night of the new moon.  
Here is a time of death, yet a time of rebirth.  
Endings and beginnings,  
Ebbings and flowings  
A journey done and a journey yet to start.  
As the wheel turns, we see birth, death and rebirth  
and we know that every end is a beginning."

Willow stepped in front of Trish and dipped her fingers in the bowl of oil she was holding. She traced an invisible symbol on the girl's forehead and continued her chant.

"She is the maiden - she begins the eternal cycle. She is the innocence of youth, the first bloom of springtime, the lilt of the morning's first melody."

As she finished her sentence, she pointed to the candle Trish was holding and the wick flickered to life. She then moved on to Buffy and dipped her fingers in the oil once again.

"She is the mother - she is the peak of the cycle. She is the glory of ripe fields in summer, the bounty of the harvest, the patient hand of motherhood."

As instructed, Buffy lit her candle off of Trish's. She could feel her heart pounding in her throat, but stood straight as she waited for Willow to continue.

Willow paused to anoint herself and then set the oil aside and picked up her own candle before continuing.

"She is the crone - she ends the eternal cycle, she is the snow which calms the Earth in winter, the holder of the mysteries taught by moonlight, weaver of spells in the dark."

Willow lit her candle from Buffy's flame and then held it above her head. Trish and Buffy quickly followed her lead and raised their arms as well.

"She is as the Moon.  
She ever begins to wax and wane and to grow forth again,  
just as the seasons from one to the next flow in smooth rhythm,  
from sowing to reaping,  
to death and rebirth."

Willow lowered her arm and nodded. It was her way of signaling that it was time for the big show. All three set their candles in the middle of the circle and linked hands as Willow began chanting the final incantation over and over again in a voice that grew ever louder and stronger.

"By the powers of the steadfast Earth and the wheeling stars, I summon thee. By the darkness of death and the white light of birth, I summon thee, and by the terrible strength of the human soul, I summon thee."

Buffy wasn't sure how many times Willow repeated the chant. She was guessing four or five, but in her anxiety, she'd lost the ability to keep an accurate count. But after the phrase was repeated several more times with no apparent result, she began to wonder if anything was going to happen. Then the flames of the candles flared high and began twisting and intertwining like fiery serpents until one flame burned where there had once been three. It turned from an orange glow to a bright blue and then to an almost blinding white flame as it rose higher and higher. The flame was well over Buffy's head when it finally stopped its ascent. It flickered in the middle of the circle for a moment and as Willow finished one last rendition of the chant, it appeared to slowly shrink into itself until it was
almost nothing. Then, suddenly, the blinding light expanded up and outwards and burst all around
them. Buffy was briefly reminded of a film she'd once seen of a nuclear explosion.

When he saw the white light coming toward him, Dean braced himself for the inevitable impact. For
the second time in just two days, he saw his own end approaching and didn't expect to get lucky
twice.

The light slammed into him with the force of something solid. He was knocked out of the doorway
and into the room where Crowley and Raphael were performing their ritual. The sword went flying
across the room, its flame dying the moment it left his hands. He couldn't see anything because of the
blinding light. He lay on the dusty, concrete floor as it washed over him and waited… and waited…
and waited some more. After a while, he got tired of waiting to die and opened his eyes.

It was eerily quiet and still. Moments ago, it had been a war between Crowley's chanting in one
room and Willow's chanting in the other. Now everything was completely silent. He looked over at
what was left of the altar and saw Crowley and Raphael lying next to it.

He pushed himself to his feet and walked over to where they were lying. The sight was almost
unreal. The imprint of Raphael's wings was burned into the floor around him/her. Dean was pretty
sure that's what happened when an angel bought it. The demon just lay still, however. There were no
signs to indicate if he was dead or just knocked out. Dean decided he'd better perform some type of
test, so he kicked out at Crowley's ribs with his steel-toed boots. The bastard's body moved a little
from the force of the impact and Dean was pretty sure he heard some ribs crack, but he didn't stir.

He stared at the pair for a long moment as he listened for any sounds coming from the other room.
There were none. He didn't expect any. He finally managed to force himself to go peer through the
doorway and see what he knew he would see.

The three women were lying just as silently and still as Raphael and Crowley, but he found he
couldn't go near them. He couldn't go near Buffy, anyway. He'd already stood over the dead body of
almost every single person he'd ever loved. He wasn't going to do it again. He was done. He was too
tired. He sunk down in the doorway and sat with his back leaning against the frame. He wasn't sure
what he was even doing. Maybe he was waiting to see if his brother or anyone else had made it, but
he didn't really know. He was too numb to think that far ahead.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there just staring at the door frame when he finally registered the
sound of his name being called. It was Buffy's voice. At first he ignored it, thinking it was his mind
playing a cruel joke on him. However, the voice became more and more insistent and held a note of
concern that forced him to leave the safe, numb place he'd found in his mind.

When he looked up, Buffy was standing several feet away from him. Her brow was crinkled with
worry, but otherwise she looked beautiful. In fact, she looked perfect. Every trace of the fight she'd
had with Crowley's demons had been erased from her face. She was practically glowing. That's
when he realized that Buffy's voice wasn't the only one he heard. He could hear Trish and Willow
too. They were standing on the other side of the room, talking to one another in a very animated
fashion. Trish looked better than he'd seen her look in months. She also seemed to have lost her
shyness for the moment. She chatted happily as she pulled up her sleeves and pant legs to display her
now non-existent cuts to Willow.
He was glad the other two girls appeared to be okay, but he didn't waste too much time looking at them. His eyes were only for Buffy. He pushed himself up off the floor and continued to stare at her. He was definitely wary. Part of him was afraid he'd finally snapped and lost his grip on reality. She couldn't really be standing in front of him, alive and whole. It wasn't possible. Good things didn't happen in his life, especially not twice in one day.

"You okay?" his beautiful hallucination asked him. "Are you hurt?"

Somehow, he managed to force himself to shake his head.

"Good," the girl in front of him said as a bright smile spread across her face.

He opened his mouth to try and reply, but the breath was knocked out of him when his arms were suddenly full of a very solid, very real woman. She'd jumped up, wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him into a deep, slow kiss. The girl in his arms smelled like Buffy, tasted like her, felt like her… he so wanted to believe this was her. He put his hands on both sides of her head and broke the kiss so he could look at her face again. She slid her feet back down to the floor and leaned against him with her arms still looped around his neck.

"It's me," she said with a smile. "Genuine Buffy. Look, I can prove it."

He wondered what she was up to when she looked at him with a very mischievous glint in her eyes. She moved her right hand from where it rested around his neck and ran it slowly down his side. When she made it to the waistband of his jeans, he raised his eyebrows at her and grinned. He wasn't sure what kind of 'proof' she was going for, but he was on board.

Her fingers lingered there for a moment like she was teasing him, then he felt a sudden and very sharp, stinging pain in his side. She'd pinched him – hard - twisting the skin over his ribs in a way that was bound to leave a nasty black and purple bruise. It was the kind of thing he used to do to Sam when they were kids and no wonder he used to get so pissed about it. It hurt like hell!

"Ow! What the hell!?"

Buffy laughed. "What?" she asked innocently. "I'm just trying to show you you're not dreaming… and," she added with a smirk and a poke to his chest, "you can also consider that payback for being such a jerk. Be wary of pissing off the pregnant Slayer."

He rubbed his side and frowned at her for a brief moment. Damn, she was a vicious little thing… but more importantly she was real – very real. He forgot about the annoying, burning pain and crushed her against him.

Somewhere in the midst of his reunion with Buffy, they'd gained some company. The room around them had gotten much louder, but Dean didn't take his attention off of the woman in his arms. From the way the mostly young and female voices were chattering happily, it was obvious that there was, for once, no emergency to be dealt with. He felt Sam's large hand grasp him briefly on the shoulder and distantly heard Xander bitching at Cas about the itchy and 'oh so helpful' plague of lice. Thank God they'd made it downstairs before he cut loose with that one. Somebody really needed to take that staff away from Cas.

"Fuck!" Sam exclaimed, breaking both Dean and Buffy out of their deep focus on one another.

"Dude, what?" Dean asked irritably, but he answered his own question when he followed his brother's gaze to see Crowley - alive and well and trying extremely hard not to look terrified by the sight of a very angry Castiel. Dean didn't know how Crowley had managed to survive, but he wasn't
too worried about it. Judging from the look on Cas' face, the demon's miraculous survival was going
to be very short lived. But before the angel could get a hold of Crowley, something freaky happened.

A tall, pretty brunette woman that looked to be about Buffy's age materialized between the two
enemies.

"Take it easy, trench coat boy," she said as she held out a hand to halt Cas. "Sorry, but I can't let you
get your smite on."

"Who - ?" Castiel started to ask, but was interrupted by Xander's gasp of surprise.

"Cordy! Oh my God! But you're supposed to be –."

"Dead," the girl finished for him. "Yes, Xander, I'm aware. Not much gets by me." Her tone was full
of sarcasm, but she had a smile on her face as she paused to look around the room before speaking
again. When she did, her eyes were on Buffy. "You know… I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm
actually glad to see you guys. Weird, huh?"

"Uh… yeah," Buffy said. "Weird's one word for it."

The girl shrugged and switched her gaze to Dean. "Looks like you did alright for yourself," she said
as she looked him over and nodded. She returned her attention to Buffy and smiled in a way that
managed to be both sincere and incredibly patronizing at the same time. "Congratulations, by the
way. I'm sure your pregnancy will turn out a whole lot better than mine did… but I doubt you'll carry
it as well. You really don't have the build for it. You're a little too short. I'm thinking beach ball with
tiny toothpick legs."

"That proves it," Buffy announced. "She's Cordelia. I don't know why she's here or why she wants
to protect that thing," she said as she pointed and sneered at Crowley, "but that's Cordelia. No one
else can manage to say something nice and something insulting in the exact same breath."

Cordelia didn't disagree with Buffy. She just turned and gazed at Crowley for a moment before
wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"Guess I better do my job," she said as she clapped her hands together a few times. "Okay people,
eyes on me. Here's the deal. The Winchester's prophet is pretty hung over right now… which I so
don't get. I dealt with the visions and the headaches and you didn't see me turning into a hopeless
drinker," she observed with an annoyed sigh. "Anyway, Chuck's drunk again and big yay for me,
because I've been recruited to speak on behalf of 'The Powers That Be'- slash – 'God' – slash –
cetera." She held her hands out to her sides and shrugged. "Call it whatever you like, it's all the same.
Follow?"

"Not really," Buffy replied for the group.

Cordelia grinned. "Fabulous. Didn't think so. Anyway, to make a long story short… The Biblical
apocalypse is officially over, the natural order has been restored, and yada, yada, yada. You may
resume your freaky monster-filled lives. And oh yeah," she added as she raised an eyebrow at Virgil
and swirled a finger around regally. "Gather up all these weapons and put them someplace safe. The
world is not ready for that guy (she pointed at Dean) to have superpowers… plus his holy
accountant-ness is getting way too happy with the plagues of Egypt."

"Thank you," Willow, Xander, and Buffy replied simultaneously.

Dean frowned at Buffy for a second. He was pretty sure she was happier about him losing the
sword's mojo than she was about Cas losing the ability to spontaneously torture everyone with biblical vermin.

"Okay, fine," he grumbled. "You can all kiss my ass. I could give a shit about the superpowers... But answer the question," he said to the mysterious and kind of bitchy girl. "Why exactly can't Cas smite the shit out of Crowley?"

"Normally," Crowley interjected, "I'd rather be eviscerated than agree with Dean on anything, but I have to wonder the same thing myself. Not that I'm complaining," he added as he directed a leer at Cordelia.

She rolled her eyes. "Not even on my very worst day," she assured him. "You're only alive because supposedly there has to be a devil. Don't ask me. Guess you can call it a 'natural order thing'. It was either you or that guy in the cage. So congratulations – you're the lesser of two evils."

"I'm not sure how to take that," Crowley replied with a frown.

"Take it however you like," Cordelia said with an indifferent shrug. "Just stay away from the Winchesters."

Crowley looked back and forth between the two brothers and shuddered. "Gladly," he said with a sneer. "Nothing could please me more. Anything else, love?"

"Just one more thing," Cordelia replied with a very fake smile. "And this goes for you too, Castiel... The lock on Purgatory has been changed. So don't waste your time. Capish? Any questions?"

Dean had a few, but Cordelia disappeared before he or anyone else had a chance to actually ask a question. She'd obviously planned it that way.

Crowley looked decidedly nervous after his 'protector' was gone, so he took her departure as an opportune moment to make his own exit. He smirked at Cas and then disappeared with a sarcastic little wave.

The room fell silent as everyone tried to absorb what had just happened.

"That chick was a friend of yours?" Dean finally asked Buffy.

"Yes... no... I don't know," she replied. "We went to high school together. It's kinda weird."

"Yeah, no kidding," he said with a puzzled frown. "Really freakin' weird."

Buffy grinned and shrugged off the weirdness. "Who cares?" she asked as she wrapped her arms back around Dean. "I'm ready to go home now. I need to get busy doing nothing. I am pregnant, you know? I really shouldn't be on my feet doing stuff... or walking... or anything really. I think it's best if we go home so I can sit on the couch while you serve me yummy treats."

Dean looked down at Buffy's playful grin and decided to let the 'him serving her' thing slide (like that was ever gonna happen). Besides, the idea of going home was the best he'd heard in a long time. He was really damn tired of sleeping on the cold, hard floor. The fact that it actually was 'home' and not some place he was crashing, just made it that much better.
I plan to have an epilogue out before the end of the year. Many, many thanks to everyone who's stuck with this story. I hope you all have a wonderful holiday season.
Epilogue

Fourteen Months Later

"I like it," Dawn said as Buffy led her back into the living room after completing the 'tour'. "I really do, it gets the Dawn Summers' seal of approval. Very homey."

"I'll second that," Willow agreed. "This place has really good energy, it's almost like a witch picked it out."

"How about a paranoid hunter with an EMF detector?" Buffy suggested with a wry smile.

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Seriously? He actually waved that goofy thing around when you guys were looking at houses? Embarrassing much?"

"The realtor did think we were a little strange at first," Buffy admitted with a shrug, "but then Dean convinced her he was just making sure the air wasn't contaminated by radiation from nearby high-voltage power lines. Some people think that can cause kids to have leukemia. So, now she just thinks Dean's the best dad ever."

"Best con artist ever," Dawn amended.

Buffy's reply was cut-off by the sound of crying coming from the nursery. "Speaking of con artists, there's the baby one right now."

"Ohh, Buffy," Willow scolded as she crinkled her brow in sympathy. "She sounds pitiful. How can you say that about her?"

"Because it's true," Buffy defended. "I'm her mother. I know a real cry from a fake one and that one is uber-fake. She needs to get a little rest before everybody gets here or she'll be all cranky."

Dean appeared in the entryway between the kitchen and living room. He was wiping his hands with a shop towel, which was a good indication he'd been in his garage.

"Hey Dean," Willow greeted cheerfully. "Loving that garage, I guess?"

"It's awesome," he agreed with a nod, although he sounded distracted. "Aren't you gonna get her?"

Buffy just shook her head and began fighting what she knew was a losing battle. "No, I'm not going to get her, because there's nothing wrong with her. She needs a nap before Xander and Allie get here with Alex. She'll be all excited to see him and she'll turn into troll-baby if she doesn't get enough rest."

Dean obviously didn't agree with Buffy's reasoning and took off toward the nursery.

"Just wait 'til he gets back," Buffy confided quietly. "She won't have a tear in her eye and she won't even be wet, but she will be extremely happy with herself for managing to sucker her daddy… again."

When Dean reappeared with the six-month-old, she did look suspiciously dry-eyed and happy for a baby who'd supposedly been bawling her eyes out the moment before. She pointed one of her tiny fingers and beamed happily at everyone.
"She has a new tooth!" Dawn exclaimed. "It's so cute. She has two whole teeth now. They're both on the bottom though. That's kind of weird isn't it?"

"No," Dean replied a little irritably, "it's not weird."

"That's how they come in," Buffy explained. "Babies usually get their bottom teeth first."

"Huh," Dawn shrugged.

Willow stepped forward, held out her arms, and tried to charm the infant with her best baby-talk. "Come to Auntie Willow, little Mary Joyce… She'll give you snuggles."

Willow was favored with another happy grin that showed off the new tooth, and then the baby turned and buried her little face against Dean's chest.

Dean raised his eyebrows and managed to look extremely smug while Willow pouted.

"She's just teasing you, Will," Buffy said with a grin. "But, of course, none of us can hope to measure up to her precious Daddy. We have to face being second best… even poor Mommy," she added with a pout of her own.

The baby looked up at her mother, grinned and held out her arms. When Buffy stepped forward, she immediately withdrew her arms and with a happy squeal, buried her face back in Dean's chest.

"Traitor," Buffy said with a smile. "Mommy was in labor for fifteen hours," she scolded lightly. "Poor Mommy, she's very sad now. She might have to cry."

Mary Joyce held out her arms again and this time happily went to Buffy just as the doorbell rang.

"That's probably Faith and Uncle Sammy," Dean said, directing his words at his daughter. "Remember, we have to point and laugh at Uncle Sammy. He's a giant freak."

Buffy wrinkled her brow. "Dean that's terrible. You better not teach her to be mean to Sam. He has to put up with enough from you."

"He can take it," Dean replied with a shrug as he opened the front door. "He loves it."

However, it wasn't Sam on the other side of the door. It turned out to be a UPS delivery man instead.

"Who's it from?" Buffy asked excitedly when Dean carried in the package. "I love this housewarming thing. It's like Christmas all over again."

"It's from Cas," Dean said as he stared at the box in disbelief. It was clearly stamped with the Amazon.com logo. He had no clue that Cas even knew how to turn a computer on, much less order something online. The guy had been spending a lot more time on earth lately though. At the moment, he was in Nepal doing some spiritual journey thing.

Buffy peered down at the box as well, looking torn. "I know we should wait until everybody gets here, but I'm dying to know what's in there. Remember the ultimate collection of 'As Seen on TV' products we got for our wedding? He really got sucked into those commercials. The Slap Chop thing turned out to be pretty handy, but the Pajama Jeans… not so cool," she frowned.

"To hell with it," Dean announced. "I'm opening it. I've gotta see this."

"Awesome!" he exclaimed once he'd opened the box. "It's a whole kit full of car detailing supplies. Good job, Cas," he observed with a nod. "Here, there's a card for you," he said as he handed it back.
to Buffy, all the while checking out his new collection of washing and waxing supplies.

Buffy opened the card and read it aloud. "Dear Buffy, I believe it is customary to give household appliances for this type of occasion. However, since I already gave you the Slap Chop and the Ronco Rotisserie, I was afraid anything else I bought would seem disappointing in comparison. Therefore, I've included a gift certificate. Hopefully you will be able to find something suitable."

"Very cool," Buffy grinned, "an excuse to shop. My most favorite thing! Cas is definitely catching on to this human interaction thing. He gets five gold stars."

Chuck tipped the delivery man and even managed to chat with him a little in passable Thai. He was getting a lot more fluent. That was a good thing, because Southeast Asia was about as close as he wanted to be to the Winchesters, especially once it got back around to them that there was a rather popular Japanese anime series based on the Supernatural books.

Things had been much better for Chuck over the past year. He'd had no more visions and international translations of his books had really taken off. He was able to live very comfortably... and extremely anonymously. That last part was very important to his continued well-being, especially since he knew what was in the package he'd just received. It was the first official copy of *Grand Canyon*. Once that and the sequel hit the shelves, he wouldn't only have to worry about the Winchesters. He'd have to worry about the Slayers as well. Of course getting torn apart by hot, super-strong women may not be the worst way to go. In any event, he probably should look into getting some body guards or maybe even some plastic surgery? They might be able to make him look like George Clooney if he paid them enough. That certainly wouldn't hurt him with the ladies.

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