Sacrifice

by JadeyKins

Summary

Life in Sunnydale has gotten a little quiet lately. Buffy's biggest problems are her annoying sister Dawn and navigating the troubled waters of her relationship with post-super-soldier Riley. Then the Winchesters roll into town. Evil crops up again, but what is it after? Buffy's only chance of saving Sunnydale is to solve this mystery fast.

It'd be a whole lot easier to concentrate if Dean wasn't a bad boy with a chip on his shoulder and a good heart.

Dean's family has hunted Yellow-Eyes for over a decade. Seems like every time they get close, the demon moves on. This time they trail it to Sunnydale--hardly a surprise considering the Hellmouth. Instead, Dean's caught off guard when Sam wants to stay and finish high school. Dean can't blame his brother for dreaming big. Besides, there are worse places to train than vampire-infested Southern California.

Doesn't hurt that the Slayer is easy on the eyes. Dean's not sure he's got a shot with her, but he's good in a fight.

And there's plenty of battles to win.

(My goal is to write this so that you don't need to be familiar with either show. Knowing the cannon could help you predict what might happen).
Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“It’s seriously dead out here, isn’t it?” Buffy idly played with the stake between her hands. She needed it to be out and ready, but so far tonight, the patrol had been a bust. Apparently all the vampires were back to understanding the Slayer resided in Sunnydale.

Riley had the superior height—practically a foot taller than Buffy, he was well over six feet, which was great for looking over the tombstones in the cemetery and getting a bigger perspective on their nearby situation—and she hoped for a second that she was wrong. But Riley smiled at her in that carefree way. Damn, no monsters. Riley’s military training never let him relax if there was an actual problem to face. “Guess it’s just us.”

Buffy pouted playfully, having to carefully watch her step around this particular spot. Penelope Mathers’s headstone always tried to trip her and it was around here somewhere. She could walk just about anywhere else in this graveyard with a blindfold, but that one kept trying to take her down.

“You wanted a fight?” Riley said.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Things have been a little quiet lately. Okay, maybe not quiet. Dawn has been playing boy bands on repeat and we’ve been getting into it. Mom was threatening to send her to Dad’s for the rest of vacation which while I would love, really isn’t fair to her. I mean, I’m not saying that I’m the one starting all the fights. I’m so not. But—”

“But you’re the one starting all the fights.” Riley chuckled.

“Yeah. Kinda.” Buffy twirled the stake between her hands again.

“You could come over to my place. My roommate’s gone for the weekend. Give you some breathing room.”

A perfect suggestion. Buffy smiled up at him. “That sounds—”

And just when she thought they’d be leaving, she heard the distinct sounds of a fight. Nothing quite sounded like fists meeting flesh. Buffy’s smile turned into a scowl. “Like trouble.”

Riley apparently didn’t hear it, because he was frowning and then confused when she ran away. She didn’t have to tell him to follow, he did so automatically. Her Slayer speed gave her the advantage, so even though he had the longer legs, she pulled away. Leaping over a headstone, she had her stake at the ready as she neared the fray.

Four guys on one. Little more standard to see over by Sunnydale’s only good club, The Bronze, but she’d encountered hapless victims in the graveyard before. Only this guy was not the typical victim fare. Not even the usual macho victim who only thought he had a chance against three vampires. No, this guy was moving like he’d done this a lot. He staked one of the attackers with a sloppy version of Riley’s military professionalism.

He was still vastly outnumbered and way out of his depth. Even as Buffy closed in on the fight, one of the vamps grabbed the guy by his brown leather jacket and pulled him in for a bite.

The other two vamps were smarter and saw her coming. She blocked one blow and countered with the stake. Screeching noise and pile of dust barely registered in Buffy’s peripherals as she engaged the next vamp. One strike, two, counter, kick, stake. More dust. Mere seconds had passed, but she turned and hoped she wasn’t too late. Vamps could feed fast.
This one was still mid-drink, thank God, and Buffy easily staked him. The not-so-incompetent victim swayed and Buffy immediately moved to catch him. “Whoa there. You’re okay.”

Up close, the man was gorgeous. Like cover-of-a-magazine-model handsome. A light dash of freckles went across his cheeks and nose. His jawline was sharp, his lips plump. Moonlight washed him out pale, though his green eyes shined. Buffy was so drawn into them she didn’t quite hear his first words. “Thanks, sweetheart. But I could have gotten it.”

He was moving to stand on his own and she resisted the urge to shove him so he’d lose his balance. She hated saving guys who got condescending afterwards, but he was bleeding. “I take it being snack chow was on your agenda for the evening,” she replied as she crossed her arms.

He laughed and Buffy wasn’t sure if his amusement was endearing or annoying. His smile was too cute. If he hadn’t have such a cute smile, she would definitely find that laugh annoying. He clamped a hand over his neck wound. “Come on, I at least rate dinner. Maybe not five-star, but more of a burger joint feel. I eat enough of ‘em.”

So he had a sense of humor. Buffy snorted. “Okay, big guy. But four vamps will make anyone into snack size.”

Riley caught up and from the look on his face, she knew he was feeling a small pang of jealousy. Buffy refused to look guilty though. Giving in to that would only make Riley feel justified about his jealousy. She hadn’t been flirting with Angel when he came to town months ago and even if she was flirting with the handsome stranger-victim, she wasn’t going to run away with him. Keeping her voice flat, she said, “Got any bandages on you?”

“Yeah, a couple.” Riley pulled out some gauze. “Let me see it.”

The man winced as he took his hand off the wound. Craning his neck some so Riley had better access, he asked, “So girl who happens to be in a graveyard with a stake. You the Slayer I keep hearing about?”

“One and well, technically not only, but that’s a long story. I’m Buffy Summers.”

“Dean Winchester.”

Buffy caught the nanosecond hesitation in Riley, the bunch in his shoulders that read warning tension, before he finished bandaging Dean’s neck. The other man didn’t notice, probably because vamp bites stung after the niceness wore off and pain was always a massive distractor. Assuming Dean had even gotten the warm fuzzy part of a vamp bite that kept people immobilized. Sometimes newer vamps just didn’t have it in them to lessen the blow.

But he was going to catch on to Riley’s silence. Buffy waved a hand and said, “And this is Riley Finn. My boyfriend.”

Dean actually shot her a ‘boyfriend? damn’ look right in front of Riley. This time his hotness didn’t win her over. She scowled back at him, which surprisingly made him look apologetic. She couldn’t count on his expression being genuine, but he seemed decent enough. “Dating the Slayer, huh? Man’s got to be secure in his masculinity for that.” He shot Riley a just-us-boys-understand grin, though Riley wasn’t amused by it.

And back to glaring. Buffy steadied one on him that made even her sister Dawn think twice about messing with her.

Dean dropped his gaze downwards, his body language switching to a kind of passiveness that put
Willow’s former shyness to shame. He shoved his hands in his pockets, wincing again. When he brought his eyes up again, all that macho crap had left him. He looked sort of sweet and a little too innocent for a guy who had apparently chosen to go wandering out into a graveyard. “Sorry, I’m screwing this all up. Honestly I was kind of hoping to run into you tonight. My dad thinks there’s a demon running around in your town and we could use your help tracking it.”

“Demon, huh? Well, it is the Hellmouth, so it’s likely. What’s your guy look like?”

“Last meatsuit he was wearing was an older guy, maybe forties. He’s got yellow eyes.”

Buffy glanced up to Riley, but he shook his head. Neither of them had heard about a new player in town. “Don’t know anything at the moment. When did your guy get here?”

“Not exactly sure he’s even here. Just our best guess,” Dean said.

“All right, well, why don’t you come by the Magic Box tomorrow during business hours. It’s on Main Street. Can’t miss it.”

“Can I bring my dad and brother?”

There was that shoulder tic in Riley again. Something was bugging him, bad enough to make him go blank face. That either meant danger or he didn’t believe it was dangerous enough to warn her. Keeping the Winchesters close might be a good idea, especially if one of them was stupid enough to go cemetery hunting without backup. “Yeah, no problem.”

“Thanks,” Dean said, relaxing and smiling again. “And thanks, you know, for saving my ass.”

“You’re welcome. Just don’t become anyone’s dinner.”

Dean laughed and headed off.

Riley gave Dean a good head start and then slowly strode the same way. Buffy walked along behind him. “So, going to tell me what’s got you on red alert?”

“I might have it wrong,” Riley said.

“You were practically freaking out about him, twice. I know you. I know your ‘time to watch our six’ shoulders.”

Riley sighed heavily and glanced down at her. “Okay. I might have heard the name Winchester before.”

“Is this really how you’re going to be right now?” he said shortly.


“The Initiative had intel beyond Sunnydale, we were all over the world. And we recruited. John Winchester was a Marine. Something happened in his personal life, but I never got those details. Dean though—” Riley sighed again. “—I had a file on him. Possible for recruitment. Deemed unfit by Walsh. She said he’d never pass the psych eval. I don’t know why. I was putting together a team. Thought it was weird that they’d even consider him. I was already in the military before I signed on. So was everyone else in my unit.”

“But someone in the upper ranks thought about passing Dean through all the red tape,” Buffy said.
She played back the fight in her head and shrugged. “I could see it. Clean up his moves a little and he’d be a much better fighter. And he obviously knows about demons, so there’s that hurdle jumped. But why wouldn’t he pass an eval? Most of the Initiative was already Looney Toons.”

Riley scowled at her, which she didn’t get mad about. Her derisive comments about the Initiative were allowed only so long as they didn’t argue about it. That was one week of fighting Buffy didn’t want to relive. “I don’t know,” he said tightly. “I’ll put a call in and see if anyone gets back to me. No promises.”

They reached the edge of the cemetery. A long black Impala rumbled down the street, with Dean behind the wheel. Buffy squinted after the car as if that would help her see him better. “Guess we’ll need to keep an eye on them.”
Chapter 2

Dean parked the car, hoping that for once Dad was asleep so he wouldn’t hear the Impala’s engine. He loved his car, but damn did it have a distinct noise. Made it hard to sneak in and out of motel rooms. Especially since no matter how hard he tried, the doors squeaked. He shut it with the softest thud and slipped into the motel room.

All the worrying was for nothing. John Winchester was not in the room.

Sam was fast asleep in their bed and the kid was the kind of deep sleeper that Dean worried about. In their line of work, being caught off guard would get them killed. Course Sammy was a little young for the work part of the lifestyle. And if he was getting his way, he’d be enrolling at Sunnydale High. Just their luck they’d buzzed into a town where school had no problem accepting stragglers. And just Sam’s luck that they’d be rolling back out again. If Yellow-Eyes wasn’t here, they were gone. Which meant that the next round of ‘I’m not dropping out, I’m getting a freaking education’ fights were about to start between Dad and Sam.

Dean shrugged out of the leather jacket and laid it over one of the chairs. He waited until he had the bathroom door shut before turning on the light. That tall guy—Riley—had done a pretty decent job of bandaging the wound considering they were out in a dark cemetery, but it’d need a real cleaning. Dean stripped off his t-shirt and yanked off the bandage.

The vampire bite was nasty. The edges were ragged and the flesh around it swollen already. Thinking twice about it, Dean picked the t-shirt up and shoved it in his mouth. It muffled his screams as he doused the mess in alcohol. He banged a fist against his leg and leaned forward on the counter. Son of a bitch, that’d hurt. But the wound was cleaner now. He dragged the cloth out of his mouth, took a few shaky breaths, and got to putting a fresh bandage on the wound. Bound to be a new scar to add onto the four other serious ones he already had. Unfortunately this one was going to be harder to hide.

The outside door creaked open. Dean cleaned up the bathroom mess as quick as he could. Damn it, he didn’t have a clean shirt in here and the other one had blood. No way to hide the bandage from Dad tonight. Shit. He opened the door and stepped out into the main room.

Dad dropped his keys on the table loudly, keeping his eye on Sammy as he did so. When Sam didn’t budge, Dad went to do it again.

“Hey,” Dean hissed. “Been a freaking long ass car ride, let him sleep.”

Dad shot him a dirty look and Dean swallowed. Standing up to John wasn’t something he did often, but this was about Sammy and since the kid was bound to be sad again once the details got sorted, Dean wanted to let him have something decent. Even if it was just one night’s rest. So he lifted his chin and stared Dad down.

Dad placed the keys on the table this time. As he took off his coat, he asked, “What got you?”

Dean wished his dad would lower his volume, but he didn’t think he stood much of a chance of winning two battles tonight. He dropped the bloody shirt into the dirty clothes pile Sam had started. “Vamp. Town’s lousy with them.”

“Yeah. You’d think with a Slayer, there’d be less,” Dad griped. He dragged out one of the chairs, again making too much noise for Dean’s liking, and plopped down in it. “Get me something to
drink.”

Dean ducked back into the kitchenette. He pulled out a beer, and then because his nerves were already frying so fast, he grabbed another one for himself. John raised an eyebrow at seeing the second beer, but said nothing as Dean opened both of them expertly with his ring. He was twenty-one, so technically he was legal. He just didn’t do a lot of drinking with the old man. “I, uh, met her.”

“Her?” Dad echoed, still not lowering his damn voice.

“The Slayer. Heard a rumor she likes to patrol the cemetery, so I went out that way. Got into a fight and she saved my ass. We need to be more careful here. Vamps move in bigger packs.”

Dad nodded. “Been hearing the same thing. Remind me to tell Sam he’s not allowed out after dark around here.”

Dean fussed with the bottle, but nodded along. ‘Remind me’ often translated to ‘he better know and if I don’t get around to it, you’re responsible for mentioning it.’ He cleared his throat. “Buffy—”

“Buffy?”

“That’s the Slayer’s name, Dad.”

John rolled his eyes and muttered something as he took a swig of the beer. This close, Dean could smell the booze clinging to his jacket and clothes, the smell of cigarettes running a close second. He’d been in another dive bar for most of the night. Awesome.

“Uh, anyway, she hasn’t heard anything about Yellow-Eyes. She offered to help look though. Said the three of us should stop by the Magic Box on Main anytime tomorrow. Long as it’s regular business hours.”

“We can find this demon on our own.”

Dean wanted to point out that it’d been almost seventeen years since the demon had killed his mother, so maybe they couldn’t, but that kind of talk wasn’t a good idea when John was already in this mood. Shouting would definitely wake Sammy up. “She might have another idea on how to track it. Slayers come with Watchers, right? Bet the store is full of magic goodies. Might even know a way to kill this thing once we find it.”

Dad spun the beer slowly. “All right. It’s worth a look.”

Dean relaxed. That was the hard part. He downed the rest of his beer. Now all he had to do was pray Dad didn’t screw up meeting the Slayer’s people and hope something out there was listening to the wish of a non-believer.

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“I don’t know why I can’t go to school,” Sam said.

“Because I said so,” Dad replied.

“Come on, you said I could.”

“We’re not having this discussion again.”

“Fine. But I’m going to school. If it’s not here, it’ll be somewhere.”
Dean tried not to roll his eyes, but he did, somehow earning a scowl from John for that. He leaned against the door. Pick a side and no doubt it’d be the wrong one. He itched to find this demon so maybe he could finally get out on his own. Not that Dad had made that seem possible. Subtle comments all day let Dean know just what Dad thought about last night’s injury. Never mind that Dean had found a potential ally. Nooooo, he shouldn’t have needed saving in the first place.

They parked in a spot right on Main Street. Dean swung the door close. Small towns all seemed the same, all had that crappy fake feeling. Like everything was happy and calm. Too many people kept their heads in ignorance. Town like Sunnydale, people had to be twice as stupid to be unaware of the supernatural threat living with them. Anyone with a lick of sense knew the place was a frigging Hellmouth.

And yet, the sun was shining. The town’s streets were clean to the point of seeming somehow perky. A couple of moms pushed strollers while chatting about the latest gossip and their kids were happily kicking away at blankets. Everything was so damn normal. It was the kind of place that—if there weren’t demons lurking in every corner—he could see Sam growing up and settling in.

Dad walked into the Magic Box first with Sam behind him and Dean coming in last. The place was well lit and managed an open feeling despite the amount of crap piled up on the wooden shelves. Dean thunked his way down the few steps so caught up in the way one glass ball refracted the light that he nearly ran into a blonde woman. She plastered a fake grin on her face, sized up him and his family in two seconds, and said, “Hi. How can I help you today?”

“Uh, we’re here to see Buffy,” Dean said.

“But here to buy anything?”

“Anya,” a man said. He was behind the counter and far as Dean could tell, he looked to be around Dad’s age. His hair was beginning to gray and glasses were perched on his nose. “Don’t antagonize guests.”

“I just think that if—”

“There’s no need to be rude,” the man said. His British accent was one of the educated sounding ones.

Anya huffed, the fake smile fleeing. “Don’t steal anything. We have a security camera. And you’d probably pick up something cursed.” And with that warning, Anya went behind the counter.

The man shot her an annoyed look before walking out to greet them. He held his hand out to Dad. “I’m Rupert Giles. Buffy mentioned you were coming. She’s on her way.”

Dad shook the British guy’s hand. “I’m John. These are my sons, Sam and Dean.”

Sam was staring at the bookshelves. “Are these all about magic?”

“Some are. Some are about demons, parallel dimensions, alternate universes. Basically anything occult.”

“Cool.”

“Beats the hell out of Bobby’s collection,” Dean muttered as he walked over to Sam.

“You’re welcome to look through any of them here,” Giles said. He motioned at a loft section above a ladder. “Except for those. Those aren’t for general browsing.”
“Then why have them in the shop at all?” Dad asked.

“Most of them came with the store, and occasionally we have need of them in our research.” Giles had that sort of stiff upper lip British vibe going. Dean smirked as he plucked a book of the shelf. Sort of stereotypical shopkeeper.

“I thought a Watcher would be more careful.” Dad was still evaluating the shop.

Giles managed to stiffen even more. “Well, if I were with the Council, they might have issues. However, both Buffy and I are no longer working with them.”

“That’s a really vague way to put it,” Anya said. When the Winchesters glanced at her, she added, “He was fired.”

“Thank you, Anya, for telling details that aren’t important.”

“Here!” Buffy said as she came through the door. She wasn’t alone. A dark haired sulking girl followed her in. The girl had to be a couple years younger than Sam and as soon as she got a glimpse of the Winchester boys, she suddenly went from sulking to bashful. Her eyes were definitely focused more on Sammy. Dean grinned, though tried to stow that before Buffy caught on. She hadn’t approved of some of his usual technique last night. Wouldn’t do to get on her bad side again when they wanted help.

Buffy came down the steps. “Sorry. Had to get Dawn from school which is a lot longer without a car.”

“Should give you my number so next time we can pick you up,” Dean said.

The words had been honest ones. He hadn’t meant to hit on her or anything, but damn if everyone in the joint wasn’t suddenly looking at him as if he’d grown a second head. John was the first to break the silence. “We’re not going to be here that long. Dean says you haven’t seen the demon around town after all.”

“Haven’t hit all the hot spots yet,” Buffy said. “Planned on hitting them tonight, specially if you guys are game.”

“Might as well,” Dean said. Dad gave him a warning look, which faded Dean’s smile. But he tried to shrug off Dad’s disapproval. “We’re here for at least the night anyway. Getting a closer look couldn’t hurt. Sunnydale’s a hotspot. Maybe we’ll find a demon that knows the demon. Won’t know until we look.”

“Speaking of which, we don’t know much about the demon you’re hunting. I was hoping you’d have a few more details than Yellow-Eyes,” Giles said.

“First though, I think the kids need to get to their homework.” Buffy gave a pointed look to Dawn and then to Sam.

Sam shoved his hands in his pockets. “I don’t have any.”

Giles lifted an eyebrow, though he quickly hid the expression before John caught it. Dawn blurted out, “You can do some of mine.” She blushed, hanging onto her backpack straps. “I mean help. If you want to. Math is really hard this year.”

“Sure. I guess. Maybe after the grown ups will let us do the real research,” Sam said.
“Fat chance. They’re really strict about not letting me see any of the really cool stuff.”

“Because you don’t need to see it,” Buffy said. “It’s not cool. It’s gross and disgusting. And violent. And not for young minds to absorb. You’re supposed to be focusing on happy stuff. Kittens and rainbows.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” John said.

And the room went still for a second time. Dean held his breath. This was it. Dad was going to ruin it all. No matter how much Sammy wanted to stay, they’d have to leave town in a couple of days. The Slayer would run them out if she had to. Buffy crossed her arms over her chest. “No. I’m not. Kids should get to be kids.”

John puffed up. “That’s what you’re raising her to think? You live on a Hellmouth. Bet your house gets attacked every other week—”

“Dad, stop,” Dean said.

“No. If you boys had been raised with that mentality, you’d be dead. She’s not doing her sister any favors treating her like a baby. She should be training just as much as anyone else,” John said. “Maybe even more since she lives in the same house.”

“How about I don’t judge how you raised them and you don’t talk about how my mom and I raise Dawn,” Buffy said.

“All I’m saying is, you should prepare her,” Dad said.

“Your son was stupid enough to get into a fight with four vampires last night in a town full of them. I think you really need to consider what that says about your parenting skills.” Challenge was hardwired into Buffy’s body language. She could beat the crap out of John in only a few blows, Dean was sure of it. He was less certain if his dad realized the tiny blond was that powerful.

Dean winced. She’d thrown him under the bus without a second thought. Nice to know how strangers rated when it came to matters of family. He couldn’t blame her though, he’d do the same thing if their situations were reversed. “Can we please get to the research?”

“Ain’t anything in a book I don’t already know about this thing,” Dad said.

“How about a real name? Do you have that?” Buffy asked.

Dad glared at her. She glared back. Yup. Life in Sunnydale had an expiration date of a few hours. So much for getting used to the place. Dean focused his attention on the tile flooring. Given enough time, he’d figure out how many flecks were in the green.

“Let’s go boys,” Dad ordered. He practically marched them out of there.

Sam barely waited for the shop door to shut before rounding on their father. “Why do you always have to be such an asshole?”

For a happy small town, the sidewalk pavement in Sunnydale had a lot of cracks. Dean counted at least five between them and where the Impala was parked.

“These people are weak. I’m surprised her sister’s still alive.”

“Slayers aren’t slayers from birth,” Sam said. “I bet Buffy’s only been one for a few years—”
“Long enough to know that the world’s dangerous. Besides, the demon’s not here. We’re wasting time. This town’s got her for protection. We’ll find a case somewhere else,” Dad replied.

“I want to check the bars,” Dean said suddenly.

Both Dad and Sam stopped. Sam’s eyes went wide. Dad turned a shade of red. “You follow her and you’re going to get yourself killed.”

“Come on, she actually saved my life last night. I’m safer with her than—” Dean clamped his jaw shut.

“Than what?” Dad demanded.

“Than you, okay? You go off half-cocked, leave us on our own most of the time. Why can’t we stay here for one more freaking night and see if her way doesn’t turn something up, huh? Or do you want to keep chasing our tails instead of hunting this demon down?”

Dad seethed. He stayed in place, not daring to near Dean but too outraged to stalk away. After a long moment that was an eternity to the fearful Dean, John barked out, “One night.”

Dean released the breath he hadn’t known was caught up in his lungs. Two battles in under eighteen hours. Had to be some kind of record. “Yes, sir.”

“And you’re walking. I’m taking the Impala.”

“Yes, sir,” Dean said, though inwardly he cursed. The Impala was great for impressing people. Not that he was thinking of impressing the Slayer. She had that tall military issue guy for a boyfriend.

“Can I stick around too?” Sam asked.

“No,” both of them replied. Sam slumped in defeat, but Dean would feel better with Sammy chilling in the motel room.

Dad and Sam climbed into the Impala, leaving Dean out on the street solo. He turned back to face the Magic Box’s door. Hopefully his father hadn’t completely ruined chances to work with the Slayer. After all, how many other hunters had the chance to work with a legend? Dean grabbed the door handle and pulled.
“Okay, so Dean is not that much of a jackass,” Buffy said. “I swear. Last night he seemed totally fine. A bit of a playboy, but hey, we’ve had Spike in here.”

“Sam was cute,” Dawn said, thus confirming Buffy’s theory that her younger sister had fallen for the youngest Winchester already. Dawn crushing was sort of adorable when directed at someone in her own age bracket. Her thing for Xander was just odd.

And not a priority at the moment. Buffy plopped into one of the chairs at the table. “You know, their dad kinda makes me miss ours. A little.”

“At least ours buys us stuff.” Dawn dropped her backpack onto the table, sat down, and pulled out her homework.

Giles was wiping his glasses, scowling at the door. “He certainly is abrasive. Makes me glad that more hunters don’t come through here.”

“Hunters were some of D’Hoffryn’s best clients,” Anya finished going through whatever accounting book she’d been working on and folded it shut. With a heavy sigh, she leaned against the counter. “Usually it’s not a good thing to curse other demons, but some of them were deserving. I didn’t actually encounter many myself. It’s always a risky job getting them to wish. They’re some of the first people to figure it out.”

“Really,” Buffy said flatly. “I had no idea.”

“Hey, I had no idea Cordelia was one of your friends.”

“She wasn’t. Well, not exactly.”

Dawn lowered her pencil. “You know, it’s really hard to concentrate with everybody talking. I mean, it’s one thing if it’s demons, but this isn’t even interesting.”

“Hey, I was talking about demons,” Anya said defensively.

“We should get to training, Buffy,” Giles said.

“You’re just bummed that researching is out,” Buffy said. “I’m sure we can think of some dusty old topic for you to read about.”

Giles scoffed and rolled his eyes. He finished up swiping his glasses and set them back on his nose. “Right then, shall we go?”

Before Buffy could agree, the door to the Magic Box swung open and Dean walked back in. The arrogance was completely gone this time. Being around his dad had totally cowed him and Buffy wasn’t sure she liked that. Sure, Dean could be annoying, but he wasn’t that bad of a guy. Dean cleared his throat as he stepped down the stairs. He flicked his tongue over his bottom lip. “I, uh, I’m sorry about my dad. He can be a real…”

“Jackass?” Anya suggested.

Buffy and the rest shot Anya a quick glare, but Buffy didn’t really mean hers. John Winchester had been way not impressive, but calling out a guy in front of his son was rude—though really not as bad
as Anya’s usual level of rudeness.

Dean nodded. “Yeah, he can be that. He’s decided not to look around town, but I think it’s worth a shot. You still up for it?”

“Yeah, sure,” Buffy said.

“I would suggest filling us in on the details more,” Giles said.

Dean hesitantly walked over towards the table. “Of course. I mean, as much as I know, which sadly isn’t enough.”

“How long have you been after this thing?” Buffy asked.

“Since it killed my mom about seventeen years ago.”

Both of Buffy’s eyebrows shot up. Before she could say anything, Anya piped in again. “You must have been an infant.”

Dean shook his head. “Sammy was. I was about four. Dad obviously a lot older than that.”

“That’s quite a long time with no result,” Giles said.

“Been a little hard tracking it. In between, we’ve been taking out whatever evil we come across. Hence the whole ‘train ‘em while they’re young’ philosophy of Dad’s.”

And something about that was just sad. Buffy knew that some potential Slayers were trained from birth—Kendra had been—but she’d gotten to have a normal childhood. She was doing everything in her power to keep Dawn’s out of the supernatural. Dean had never stood a chance. She leaned back in her seat and folded her hands together. Of course the Initiative would want to snatch up a kid trained like that and just as easily dismiss him for being on his father’s crusade.

“All right, let’s go over everything you’ve gathered. We might be able to turn up something after all,” Giles said.

“Not the bars?” Dean asked.

“They don’t really get hopping until after dark. Until then, Giles’s favorite pastime. Reading,” Buffy said.

Giles gave her annoyed look, but he didn’t say anything. Point Buffy.

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Willy’s Place was still the hottest spot in town for casual demon activity. Walking in with Dean definitely told all the demons in town that he was friends with the Slayer, which Buffy knew. Wasn’t exactly a bad thing to make sure the bad guys knew there would be repercussions for trying to kill him. It wouldn’t stop serious attempts, but the sporadic fights ought to lessen. She strode up to the bar and leaned on the counter.

Willy, a pasty guy with a weasely face, threw down his rag and used his hands to lean against the bar across from her. “What are you doin’ bringing him in here?”
Buffy widened her eyes in feigned confusion that bordered on actual confusion as she glanced over at Dean. “Him? What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s a freaking Winchester. Got a freaking mark on him the size of Texas.”

Dean leaned his whole body against the bar and smirked. With a nod, he said, “So you’ve heard of me?”

“And your crazy ass father. Let me guess, you’re here to ask about Yellow-Eyes?”

“Yeah, actually,” Buffy said. “Heard anything?”

Willy shook his head. “You have any idea how many freaking demons have yellow eyes? About a hundred different ones. And those are the ones I know about. Sure there’s some I don’t.”

“But if you’ve heard of me, then you know which one I’m after,” Dean said.

“Tch, not likely. Just heard the rep that you’re always running around asking about him. And if I did, even less likely I’d tell you anything.” Willy waved a hand at his clientele. Various demons were sitting at the different tables. Some had horns, some scales. A few looked human, but they were probably vampires.

Buffy propped her elbow up on the bar, resting her chin on her hand. “Is this the part where I introduce your face to the wood a couple of times so you don’t feel bad telling us the truth?”

“No. Uh uh. At some point, people are going to stop buying that,” Willy said.

Dean eyed the crowd in the bar. His smile faded away into a much more dangerous look. “Right. People.”

Willy glowered at him. “Hey, they’re my customers. Shove it where the sun don’t shi—”

Dean reached forward, grabbed Willy by the back of the head, and slammed him into the bar. Buffy jumped back a fraction of an inch. She hadn’t really intended violence and Dean had done a number on Willy’s face. She muttered, “He’s human. Be careful.”

“He’s allied with demons. He’s scum,” Dean replied.

This so wasn’t the time or place to tell Dean that not all demons were bad. Buffy needed to roll with what was happening here. “Okay, so, do we need to get more descriptive with our Yellow-Eyes or do you have an idea of who we’re talking about?”

Willy rubbed at his nose. “I could use a reminder.”

“He’s a possessing demon. Likes to kill moms and burn ‘em,” Dean said. If Buffy hadn’t spent the afternoon with him, she would have thought he was being casual. But there was an undercurrent of tension as he gave out that detail.

“Never heard of him,” Willy said.

Dean reached out a second time, but Buffy grabbed his hand. She said, “You’re sure?”

“You know how many demons go through here? We’re not just a big population here, Slayer. There’s transients. I don’t know the M.O. of everyone who stops by. It’s strictly a no-names kinda business.”
“Riiiiight.”

A Lerassick demon shifted her weight on the barstool to face them. Her voice was gruff, which was due to the fact that her throat was seriously thick. “This demon you’re after—you looking to put him down?”

“Yeah,” Dean said with a bit too much eagerness and force.

“He came through town a few weeks back. Did one of his newborn stops.”

“Newborn?” Buffy asked.

“There’s a sweet spot when a human baby is six months old. Before that, they hurt your teeth, too long after and they begin to sour. Catch one right at six months and bam, golden.” The demon laughed. Dean clenched his fist and Buffy put a hand on his arm as warning, even though she didn’t take her eyes off the demon. “My mate went after this kid a couple of weeks ago. Managed to get into the nursery and everything. Except he finds a lot more than what he wanted. This other guy is already there. Says the baby’s one of his ‘special’ cases, not to be touched. My mate’s still recovering from getting the crap kicked out of him.”

“That’s all you got?” Dean demanded.

Buffy tightened her grip on his arm. “Any idea where he went?”

“No clue. But if you see him, gladly kick his ass for me.” The demon chortled. “Send him back to Hell if you get the chance.”

“You don’t know anything else about him?” Buffy asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve heard a name a couple of times, over the years. Not exactly the first time one of my kind’s run across him. I think I’ve heard him called Azriel.”

“Azazel,” the demon beside her said, though he didn’t look up from his cup. “Azriel’s a death demon.”

“That’s right. But I said Azazel.”

“Thank you,” Buffy said with a strong emphasis. She headed towards the door.

Dean was sticking around though. She went back and grabbed his arm again, practically dragging him out. He insisted, “They could’ve known something more.”

“No one else was going to talk.” Buffy double checked over her shoulder as they went. On the rare occasion, someone from Willy’s wanted to pick a fight afterwards. Luckily for them, no one was following. “You can’t push your luck too fast in this town. You’ll get yourself killed.”

Dean snorted. “Is that so?”

“Hey, this is my hunting grounds. You’re just a visitor. Remember that.”

Dean glared back at the bar’s door, but kept an easy stride with her. “You actually do any hunting, or do you just let them all run free?”

Buffy slammed him up against the nearest brick wall. “Okay, I will take that kind of attitude from your dad because he is a massive asshole. But you don’t get to come into my town and second guess how I run things. This is a Hellmouth. Demons are drawn here by the dozens. So no, I don’t pick a
fight with absolutely everything I come across, because if I did, I’d be dead. But those demons in there know I’m the sheriff in town. They step out of line and I kill them. So for the most part, they behave. Assuming jackasses don’t walk in there thinking they know better. If you want to stay alive, you follow that idea, got it?"

Dean looked flabbergasted that he’d been basically pinned by a woman a whole seven inches shorter than him. He stared at her for a long moment and apparently decided she was serious. “Yes, ma’am. Understood. Don’t fuck with the basic demon unless caught in the act.”

“Well,” Buffy said, releasing her hold on him, “they don’t have to be actually killing somebody. If you’ve got enough proof that they’re up to evil, that works.”

“Right, got to have standards.”

And there was that frustratingly cute and annoying look on his face again. Buffy narrowed her eyes at him, unsure what to make out of this latest moment.

“Did I miss it? Threatening Willy with physical violence is kind of one of my favorite parts,” Riley said.

Buffy spun, blond hair flowing in that perfect arc even tied back in a ponytail. She hadn’t expected Riley to catch up to them, even if she had called him and said where they were going to be. “Yeah. Sorry. Dean was a little eager to get going.”

“Bet he was.” Tension was back in Riley’s body language, this time clear as day.

Dean picked up on it and yup, there was the playboy-wannabe smile. “Well, we’re not finished yet. I figure it’s going to be a long night. Think you can keep up?”

Riley put his arm around Buffy’s shoulders. “Oh, I’m sure my stamina’s a lot better than yours.”

“If you two keep posturing, I’m sending you both home,” Buffy said.

“That would imply actually having one, wouldn’t it?” Riley said.

Pain flashed through Dean’s features so sharply that Riley had the decency to look guilty. Dean shoved his hands in his pockets and smiled, though the sadness didn’t clear from his green eyes. “Hell, just means I don’t have a reason to give up.” He took a few steps away.

Buffy grabbed Riley’s arm when he tried to follow Dean. “Go home,” she whispered.

“What?”

“I’m not going to deal with demons all night and the two of you play fighting over me. Go. Home.”

Riley frowned at Dean’s back and then down at her. “He clearly likes you.”

“He clearly likes anyone cute. Aren’t you happy you’re dating someone cute?”

Riley sighed. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be alone with him.”

“Well, you should have thought of that before you got so jealously defensive. I can’t be umpire with you two and do my job. This is his demon we’re chasing, so that means you’re benched.”

Another long, loud, patented Riley sigh. “All right, but you’ll call me if you need backup?”
“Yes. And I’ll be over later to tell you how it went.”

“Okay.” Riley gave her a quick kiss and put his hands on her shoulders. “Just be careful.”

“Always am.” Buffy stole another kiss. They parted ways and Buffy caught up with Dean. He looked sort of miserable, but instead of wallowing in it with him, Buffy went for the ignore it tactic. Worked better with too-macho-for-their-own-good peeps like him. “So there’s three more joints in town we can hit. You wanna try the one down the dark alley, behind the mall, or in the warehouse district?”

“This town has a warehouse district?”

“Okay, it’s about six warehouses big, but yeah, we do.”

Dean snorted. “Let’s go with that then. Any chance we can hit the books after?”

Buffy’s shoulders sagged. She should have guessed he’d want to research after getting a name. Just as she opened her mouth, he suddenly became way more preoccupied with the concrete than her face. “Forget it,” he said. “I’ll get some books on him later.”

“We’ll stop by a payphone and give Giles a call. He loves a good research party. He might even have a whole bunch of stuff before we get back to the Magic Box.”

“Works for me.” They walked on in silence for about half a block before he said, “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Buffy was on alert as they walked. Natural default for being outside in Sunnydale after dark. “So what you said back there, about the demon’s M.O., is that what happened to your mom?”

“Yeah.” They lapsed into another uncomfortable silence for a few steps until Dean was ready to talk. “I can still kind of remember her. Bits and pieces. And I remember taking Sammy outside when our house was on fire. That’s about it. Dad’s been hunting Yellow-Eyes ever since.” Dean lifted his head, a stressed expression stealing over his features. “Man, where’s a freaking vampire when you need to beat the crap out of something?”

“They have a real strong tendency to vanish just when you need a good workout. It’s like they know you’re ready to kick some ass,” Buffy joked. She got a laugh out of Dean, which was an improvement on his mood. “Ooo, payphone. Just so you know, it’s a tradition to bring late night sugar snacks if you’re joining the research party late. There’s a twenty-four hour donut shop we practically keep in business.”

“Works for me.”

Buffy put in the phone calls. Giles didn’t sound exactly thrilled to start researching at nine o’clock at night, but he didn’t sound exactly not-thrilled either. They hadn’t really put the new library of books to work for them yet, so he was probably eager to have an excuse to dig through them all night. She’d have to call Riley later and tell him about the change in plans. For now, she was heading out demon hunting with Dean.
Dean carried a box of a dozen donuts, thinking that they had gone a little overboard at the shop. Whatever extras they had, he could take back to Dad and Sam in the morning. However, when they walked into the Magic Box, Dean realized that they might not have brought enough. Besides the British guy Giles, there were two women about his age reading through the books. One had vibrant red hair while the other had dark blond hair. Giles was handing a cup of coffee to the red-head, who didn’t even bother looking up from her book to take it.

“You didn’t have to call anybody in,” Dean said.

“Tara and I were already here,” the red-head said. She smiled at Dean. “Can never turn down a good research hunt. You must be Dean?”

“Yeah.” Dean stood there awkwardly in the center of the room with the donuts in his hands. He felt like a freaking moron.

“Just set them on the counter by the register,” Giles said. “Do you want coffee?”

“Thanks.” Dean put the donut box down and then shrugged out of his coat. Buffy had already taken a seat at the table. There was a seat between her and Tara, so Dean dropped into that. He was getting tired from all the walking around and the fact that he hadn’t slept well the night before.

Tara leaned closer. Her voice was so soft Dean had troubles hearing her. “Willow forgot to tell you that she’s, well, Willow.”

“Oh? I did?” Willow looked up from her book again. “Sorry. Reading makes me forget to be polite sometimes.”

“It’s all right,” Dean said.

“Find anything good yet?” Buffy asked.

“I’m afraid not a lot,” Giles replied as he handed a coffee mug over to Dean. “I think we’ve narrowed our search down to demons that inspired Christian myths, but that still leaves scores of books to go through. Dean, do you read any foreign languages?”

“You kidding me? I didn’t even make it through English classes,” Dean replied.

“No?” Buffy said.

“Yeah.” Dean leaned forward and grabbed a book off a pile. He flipped it open. Good, he’d gotten hold of an English one. “We move around so much, I didn’t see the point in finishing high school.”

“Seriously?”

Dean felt his cheeks heat up. He kept his focus right on the pages. “Yeah.”

Giles cleared his throat, glancing at Dean over the top of his coffee mug. “Is that why Sam doesn’t have any homework? He’s dropped out as well?”

“Not exactly. He wants back in. We were supposed to stop by the school today, but Dad’s intent on taking us out of town in the morning.”
“You don’t have other relatives you could stay with?”

Dean slammed the book shut. “Can we not make this an inquisition about my family?”

“I apologize,” Giles said. “It wasn’t my intention to upset you, just satisfy a few curiosities.”

This was why talking to people sucked. The more he did it, the more he had to face up to the fact that Dad royally screwed up their lives. Wasn’t anything he could do to change that, except kill Yellow-Eyes. Once the hunt was over, they’d have to be a normal family. Sure, he’d never give up hunting. He was too good at it. But once Yellow-Eyes was gone, it didn’t have to be the only thing in his life anymore.

Which was what kept him in that seat. If the books hadn’t held promise of information, he’d clear out of here and tell Dad they should hit the road at dawn. Instead, he forced his focus on to the books and ignored the small part of him that wanted to tear up. Just exhaustion kicking in, nothing more. After a good night’s rest, he’d feel fine. Not like a dropout loser without a future.

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Dean tossed the book down onto the table in front of John. “His name is Azazel.”

John read over the page before him. The crappy motel room was even crappier in the just-post-dawn glow, but Dean wanted nothing more than to collapse onto one of the beds and grab a little shuteye. Dad wasn’t likely to like that, so he sipped on the terrible coffee he’d picked up when he’d gotten a second round of donuts for his family. He could manage a little longer before falling asleep.

Since John wasn’t speaking, Dean did the talking. “He’s one of Hell’s Generals. Been working on bringing up tons of demons for his armies for the last two millennia. Some reason, he’s been interested in kids since 1983. No one knows why and no one knows how to kill him. He’s killed three Slayers, all in Europe, all between 1400 and 1700. Doesn’t stick around very long in any place.”

“There’s signs,” John grumbled. “Weather can’t help acting strange around him.”

“Great, but you haven’t found a way of predicting where he’s gonna be, just where he’s at or where he’s been. We’re never going to catch up to him that way. And you don’t have a way of killing it.”

Dean sank into the seat across from Dad. “Maybe if we spend a few more days here, Giles can help us figure out a way to predict where this demon’s going to show up. Or at least find a weapon we can use.”

“We’re still heading out.” Dad flopped a newspaper in front of Dean. “There’s a case in Oregon.”

Dean shoved the paper away. “There’s a whole town full of demons you could hunt right here.”

“Hunting on a Hellmouth is a Slayer’s business. We stick around here and we’re going to be targets in no time.”

“So we buddy up with Buffy. Work with her instead of being assholes. They’ve got books, supplies, hell, more experience than the two of us combined,” Dean said. “We could learn so much—”

John glared at him. “We’re leaving. Pack your bag. You can drop this book off at that store on the
way out of town.”

Dean tightened his jaw. “You won’t even give it a shot.”

“No, Dean, because one of the only things keeping this family safe is staying moving. You think the things we’ve hunted over the years haven’t had friends? You think nothing’s wanting a little payback on us? We don’t get to settle down, especially not when the monster that murdered your mother is still roaming the country. Or do you want more families to wind up like ours?”

“I just think—”

“Don’t think, damn it. I give the orders. You follow them.”

“What about what I want?” Sam asked. He sat up on the bed, finally dropping the act that he was asleep. The kid had probably heard the whole argument. Though he wasn’t that much of a kid anymore. He was seventeen. He should be going to school dances and flirting with girls and getting ready for college. Yeah, Sammy ought to get as much education as he wanted.

Dad glowered at both of them. “Ganging up on me now?”

“That’s not what this is,” Dean said.

“No?” Dad rose and swiped the paper off the table. He tossed it at Sam. “Other people are in danger and they don’t have a Slayer coming to their rescue.”

“So hand it off. Call another hunter. Bobby probably knows somebody out that way,” Dean replied.

“We have a responsibility—”

“What about our responsibility to him?” Dean slammed his hand on the table as he stood and waved his other hand at Sam. “You’re always telling me to look out for him. What if sticking around here is the best thing we can do for him?”

John stopped and Dean held his breath. Their old man was thinking things over, but judging from his expression, he was not happy with what he saw as a mutiny. “You’re together on this?”

“I want to stay,” Sam said. “I’m tired of moving around all the time. I want to finish high school.”

“Fine. You two think you can handle this, you can stay.”

Dean’s jaw dropped. He hadn’t thought—he’d meant for them to stay as a family. But Dad was grabbing one of the duffles and separating out the guns already. “You’re going to leave us?”

“I’ve got a demon to hunt, Dean. Job’s not going to get done sitting around in sunny California. You boys want to tough it out here for a while, fine. You’ve been on your own before.”

“Are you—I mean, the car’s still mine, right?”

“Yes, Dean. The Impala stays with you.” Dad zipped up the duffle and swung it over his shoulder. “Everything in the back is still yours. I don’t have any cash to spare, but the card on the room should get you through the week.”

“I’ve got money. From that pool game in Omaha.”

Dad nodded.
This was happening. Dad was leaving them, again. He’d done this more than a few times—left them in a motel room while he went out to hunt something—but this felt different. Dean was always in charge, always responsible. Only, this time, it was more real somehow. Like all the other times had been minor little tests for today.

“Call me if you get into trouble,” John said with the kind of tone that meant ‘you better not get into any in the first place.’

“Keep us updated where you are,” Dean said, though he knew John wouldn’t bother.

“Be good. Look after each other. And don’t let that Slayer twist your head around too much. You’ve got more common sense than her.”

Yeah, Dean wasn’t so sure about that. He wished his heart would stop racing, but Dad was leaving. Dad was really going. He kept staring like a fool at him, even as John opened the motel door and stepped out into the pinkish dawn.

“So, we really get to stay?” Sam asked. The note of hope in his voice was almost enough to break Dean’s heart. The kid wanted this so bad.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess we are.” Crap, Dean needed to come up with a plan. They’d need food and more money by the end of the week. Preferably a place to stay that didn’t reek of strangers’ sweat with a shower that could get at least hot, if not have actual water pressure. And it was up to him to provide all this stuff. He scratched the back of his neck. “First things first. Dad blew off that appointment with the principal yesterday. I’m going to try to get him to talk to us. Hopefully they’ll still take you. If not, this big old experiment of ours might die before we get started.”

“We could always go back to Bobby’s.”

“Yeah, but the school’s not as good I bet.” Dean sat back down in the chair. “We better clean up, make ourselves presentable. No holes in the clothes or anything.”

Sam snorted. “Duh.”

“Right, duh.”

“I’m going to take a shower first, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” Dean’s head was filling up with lists of things they needed. New clothes for Sam would be nice, but that wasn’t happening for a while. If they were really going to stick around, he’d have to find a job.

Sam paused at the bathroom door. “Hey, Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. I’m really happy you stuck up for us.”

“Yeah, well, you better get straight A’s.” Dean leaned against the table, thought the last comment sounded too much like Dad, and added, “Sammy, I’m sorry. I’m glad you’re happy.”

“We’ll be okay. I know we will.” Sam stepped into the bathroom and closed the door.

It was great that Sam was so confident. Dean put his head in his hands. He was torn between thinking this was the greatest thing after all and believing that he’d really screwed everything up. He
could do this. He *had* to. For Sam’s sake.
“Buffy!” Joyce, her mother, called. “Phone’s for you!”

“I’ll be right there!” Buffy finished fixing her hair and picked up the phone in her room. “Hello?”

“You didn’t call last night,” Riley said.

Oh drats. She had gotten caught up in the excitement of bouncing between the demon bars and getting suckered into late night researching with the others. “I’m sorry. We got a name from one of the demons and spent the night with the books.”

“I could’ve helped with that.” Riley sounded annoyed, which was more than a little frustrating. He’d been like this a lot lately and she couldn’t blame him. Since the Initiative had given up their Sunnydale outpost, Riley had gone from being super soldier to regular guy. Only a few months ago, he’d been respected and giving orders and now, she was forgetting to call him on the basic stuff.

Buffy pressed a hand against her forehead. “Look, I’m really sorry. I got caught up in the moment.”

“The moment with him?” Great, now he was annoyed and jealous.

“Don’t get upset with me.”

“What’s there to get upset about? My girlfriend told me to go home so she could spend the night cruising demon bars with some mysterious hot stranger with perfect teeth and a cool leather jacket.”

“It’s not like that, though I’m beginning to wonder if you’ve got a thing for him,” Buffy said.

“Please, like you don’t find him the least bit attractive.”

“That’s not a no.”

“Buffy, I’m trying to be serious here.”

“So am I. I apologized, Riley. What more do you expect out of me? Dean needs help. His family has been after this thing for over a decade—”

“I’m aware of how long the Winchesters have been hunting this thing.”

“You are? How?”

“I told you,” Riley said sharply. “I had a file on Dean during Walsh’s days.”

Buffy frowned. “You made it sound like you barely remembered the file.”

“Yeah, well, I called up an old favor and got someone to send it to me again. I told you I was going to do that.”

“Oh my God, you did a background check on him?”

“Did I do research on a guy the Initiative had their eyes on but rejected? Someone who suddenly came into town and started spending nights with my girlfriend? Yes.”

Buffy clenched her jaw and struggled to keep her calm with Riley. That jealous note in his voice was
pissing him off. Dean hadn’t even flirted with her last night, not that she’d let Riley stick around long enough to see that. “It was one night.”

“Look, Buffy, this family is dangerous. People who get too close to John Winchester end up dead.”

“Well, good for me that I don’t give a crap about John.”

“It’s only that we don’t have enough details on Dean yet. The whole family is obsessed with this demon, Yellow-Eyes.”

“Because it killed Sam and Dean’s mom,” Buffy said.

“You sure about that?”

“It’s what Dean said.” Buffy leaned against the wall and frowned again. “Why? Is there something else that could have done it?”

“Possibly.”

Buffy waited, but Riley was staying eerily silent on his end of the phone. “Well?”

“John could have done it. Made the whole thing up.”

Apparently Riley’s jealousy had gotten so bad that he was willing to make crap up. She wished they were face to face so he could see the annoyance as she pursed her lips. “Oh come on! We found actual details out about this demon. And Dean said—”

“Because parents have never convinced their children of lies to cover up horrible crimes?”

“You don’t have any proof or you would have led with it,” Buffy replied.

“I just think it’s better if you don’t go anywhere near this family.”

“Got it.” Buffy dumped the phone back onto the receiver and immediately regretted it. She should have at least told Riley that she’d see him later or goodbye, but this new jealousy thing was bothering her. Besides, seemed to her the best thing that could happen for Dean—and Sam—was to kill this demon or get them away from their dad. She agreed that there was something just off about the situation, but she didn’t have the right to just walk up and tell Dean to fix his life.

And Riley didn’t have the right to tell her what to do with hers. However, she didn’t have any contact information for Dean. She decided to drop by the Magic Box on her long break in classes and fill in Giles. With any luck, he’d remember some detail Dean had given them and she could swing by Dean’s place and see how he was. Assuming he was still in town, anyway. She sort of hoped he was.

Totally because hunting for a demon without enough information was only going to get him or his dad or brother killed. Not because she’d kind of gotten used to that playboy smile he flashed around or the fact that he’d managed to pick out her favorite kind of donut. Totally.

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“When are you planning to do another order?” Anya said.

Giles took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. Reading over the inventory was quickly becoming one of his least favorite tasks, and while Anya had been very thorough, there was an awfully lot more thinking involved with running this shop than he had expected. Honestly, he had thought there
would be a few dedicated customers and a struggle from month to month on making the bills. They’d made a good deal of profit these first few weeks, and while business might eventually slow, Giles wondered if making the shop bright and attractive had been the wrong idea. All the other magic stores in town had been dark, mysterious places. Of course, many other shopkeepers in town had been murdered, so the lighting hadn’t been entirely for the customers. He’d like to have a decent shot at something trying to kill him.

Though he had never expected exhaustion to be on top of the potential murderer list. If business kept up this way, he ought to consider hiring some part time help so he could focus on things like orders and inventory.

Anya rounded the glass counter and stared up at him. “Well? When? Somnatic orbs don’t just make themselves. Actually, they do if you leave them together too long, but we’re not having that problem. Although maybe we should consider wrapping them separately when they come in, in case things slow down. Mind you that’ll leave a—”

The bell over the door tinkled. A small smile of relief broke over Giles. “Ah, customer. Go help them, Anya.”

Anya scowled at him. “Put your glasses back on. It’s Sam and Dean.”

Giles did so, hoping she was wrong and he could send her off to work. Of course she wasn’t, but hope never hurt. The Winchester boys were lurking near the door, with Sam seemingly excited and Dean apprehensive about something. No John Winchester this time, which was a blessing. “They might still want something,” he said quietly.

Anya leaned on the counter and asked quite loudly, “Hey, do you need anything?”

Giles bit back a sigh. He’d known she was direct when he hired her. She was also experienced with magic, fantastic with numbers, and surprisingly good with convincing people to part with their money. However, once in a while, he wished she’d be a bit more tactful.

“I, uh, was kind of hoping to talk to Giles for a minute,” Dean said.

“Well, he’s right here,” Anya said with a flourish of her hand.

This time Giles did sigh. Dean and Sam slowly crossed the main room towards the counter. As they got closer, Dean cleared his throat. “I kind of mean just the two of us.”

“There’s a room in the back,” Giles said.

“Can I look around?” Sam asked, the eagerness as he glanced at the piles of books out on the center table obvious.

“Sure,” Dean said.

“You can help me put those away,” Anya told Sam. “Your brother and the others left them out last night and I’ve been trying to get to them all day, but we’ve been too busy.”

That was a bit too much. Giles said, “Anya—”

“I don’t mind,” Sam replied.

“All right then. Dean, this way.” Giles led the way from the main shop into the back room.
Originally, the Magic Box’s back room had been another storeroom, but the building also had basement space and since Giles never foresaw the need to hold this much extra stock, he converted the space into a training room. Weapons hung on the brick wall, blue mats were spread out underneath a dummy and other training apparatus. Dean’s eyes went wide as he took in the room. “This is yours?”

“Buffy’s, really.” Giles closed the door to ensure their privacy.

Dean was doing his best, but that apprehension was obvious in his tight body language. Didn’t help that the young man was wearing a tie tight around his neck. Considering he normally wore jeans and henleys—at least so far as Giles had seen—he wondered why Dean had on slacks and a dress shirt now.

But Dean wasn’t coming forward with details despite asking for a chance to talk. Years of working in the school library, with Buffy and the others, had given Giles a lot more patience in dealing with young people. Still, sometimes a little prompting was called for. “You wanted to talk?”

“Dad left.”

Well, that statement rivaled Anya for bluntness. Unfortunately, it didn’t leave Giles with anything to say. He didn’t know the boy well enough yet, and he believed a congratulations was not the best of phrases at the moment.

The first words were apparently the blockage in the preverbal dam, however. Dean took in a deep breath and more rushed out of him. “I showed him what we found last night and he still wanted to take off and it just wasn’t fair. We don’t have any leads. We don’t know where to go next. And Sam needs an education. He’s a good kid. Smart, way smarter than me. And he wants to finish high school. Dad blew off a meeting with the principal yesterday, but I managed to get it rescheduled. We’re on our way there now and I was kind of hoping you might have some advice on how to get through this because I don’t have a freaking clue. I don’t want to screw this up for him.”

That was a lot of information. Giles took off his glasses and wiped them off again, an old habit to buy himself more thinking time. What sounded as if Dean wanted to do for the best for his brother would also put them in Sunnydale for an extended period of time. Hunters in Sunnydale weren’t the best at staying alive. “And you’ve chosen here as the right place?”

Immediately, Dean’s shoulders sagged. Any confidence in the boy had fled at that point. Darn, that hadn’t been his intention. Giles put his glasses back on and stowed the handkerchief. “I simply mean, Sunnydale is a dangerous place, especially for the young.”

“I know it’s not the best, but we don’t exactly got a lot of places to go. Only other place I can think of is Bobby’s, but that’s out in South Dakota and the school in the region’s not the best. ‘Sides, if we’re here, then if Sam wants to get into college we might be around long enough for him to get in-state tuition instead of out-of-state. It’d be cheaper.”

Dean had thought about the long run. Giles nodded at that logic. “All right. You’ve done well dressing for the meeting, but I recommend taking the tie off.”

“Really?” Dean tugged at the knot and stashed it in a pocket. As he unbuttoned the top two buttons of his dress shirt, he asked, “Why?”

“Honestly, it made you look like a high schooler.”

“Shit.” Dean waved a hand at the clean white bandage peeking out from under his collar. “What
“Wounds, particularly neck wounds, are not uncommon in Sunnydale. I wouldn’t be surprised if the principal didn’t even notice it.”

“Oh. Okay. Any other tips?”

“So long as Sam doesn’t have any disciplinary marks against him, you shouldn’t have any problems,” Giles replied.

Dean heaved out a sigh of relief. “Kid’s record’s damn near perfect.”

“Then you shouldn’t have a problem.”

“Good. Thanks.” Dean scratched the back of his neck. “Though, uh, if it comes up, can I use you as a reference? I know it’s kind of imposing on you, and if it was for anything other than Sam, I wouldn’t ask—”

“It’s fine.” Giles rooted around in one of his pockets, then another. He had thought this was a bit of foolish pride, but now the business card was actually useful. He found one in the inner pocket and handed it over to Dean. “In case they need a number to reach me by.”

Dean slipped the card into his pocket. “Thanks.”

“Anything else you want to discuss?”

Dean shook his head, but that nervous tension was back in his body language. It wasn’t as obvious as before. Still, stress was weighing on the young man. He reminded Giles a lot of Buffy in that respect. Silently trying to carry the weight of the world.

“I don’t know the details of your family history,” Giles said. “But it’s clear to me that you love your family. Buffy seems to trust you, as do I. You’re not completely alone here and I’d like to believe you’re more than capable of taking care of Sam and yourself.”

A small, relieved grin appeared on Dean’s lips. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem. Feel free to drop by anytime.”

Dean nodded and then they left the back room.

Buffy was coming through the front door at the same time. She hesitated at the bottom step, then forced a casual attitude. “Hey Dean, Sam. Wasn’t expecting to see you in here.”

“Yeah, just stopped in to ask the former librarian for some advice,” Dean said. “Cool training room. Maybe we could spar some time?”

“You’re sticking around?” Buffy asked. She and Dean met up in the middle of the room while Giles went back behind the glass counter. There was definitely something going on there, even Anya was watching them closely. Giles pretended he was busy reading the inventory lists. Buffy drew up her full height, though even in her ridiculously tall sandals, she was a good four inches shorter than Dean. “I thought your dad was dragging you out of town.”

“Sam and I decided to stay,” Dean replied.

Buffy frowned. “No dad?”
Dean shrugged. “I’m sure he’ll check in sometime soon, but just us for now.”

“Dean,” Sam said and pointed at his watch.

“Right, we gotta go,” Dean said. “Thanks again, Giles.”

“Not a problem,” Giles replied without looking up from the clipboard.

Buffy waited until the bell tinkled from the Winchesters’ departure before she made her way over to the counter. She leaned on it as if Giles wasn’t in the middle of busywork, which he technically wasn’t. Illusions mattered, though, and he huffed slightly at her. She shot him a sheepish look and backed up a couple inches. But then concern and worry cropped up in her frown. “So, they’re staying.”

“Yes. I didn’t anticipate this being a problem. It seemed as if you liked Dean.”

“I don’t!” Buffy said quickly. She blushed when Giles shot her a quizzical look. “Oh, you didn’t mean like that. Sure, he’s a decent guy, but he’s kind of a loose cannon.”

“Training with him could be good for both of you. He would be a fresh challenge.”

“Yeah. And he’s way more bound to fight like a vamp than Riley does. But Riley’s kind of the problem.”

“Oh?”

“He is getting super jealous already,” Buffy said.

Ah, the problems of relationships. “Well, it’s not as if you’ve even been flirting with Dean.”

“That’s what I think, but Riley’s already running around doing background checks on Dean’s family.”

That was certainly newsworthy. Riley’s connections tended to be military in nature, which meant there was far more to the Winchesters than Giles had suspected. Anya surreptitiously paused in her work to listen better. “What has he uncovered?”

“Apparently the Initiative thought about recruiting Dean, but evil Professor Walsh thought he’d never pass the psych eval. And now Riley’s ready to accuse Dean’s dad of murdering Dean’s mother and brainwashing his kids into hunting Azazel.”

Giles stiffened at the mention of Professor Walsh. His memories of the woman weren’t pleasant in the least bit. She’d been rather obvious in making him feel like a complete moron and bad influence for Buffy—of which he very much wasn’t. Considering the woman’s own brainwashing of the young men under her command, Giles didn’t consider her opinion a very good one. “Is there any evidence to suggest this?”

“Nope. Riley’s just pissed I made him go home and didn’t call him last night. But maybe keeping an eye on Sam and Dean wouldn’t be a bad thing. I mean, they aren’t giving off a hinky vibe, but just in case.”

“I think it’s a wise decision,” Giles said, though for other reasons. It sounded more like the two young men might become very lost without a bit of guidance. Sunnydale often chewed up the lost and spat out corpses.
“I should be getting back to class. We’re still on for training tonight, right?”

“Yes, that’ll be fine.”

“Great. See ya.” Buffy headed back out the door.

Not five seconds after Buffy’s departure, Anya took her place at the counter. “If Dean’s going to be training here, we should charge him.”

“We don’t charge Buffy.”

“Buffy’s the Slayer. And maybe we should.”

Giles took off his glasses and scratched the bridge of his nose. “We’re not charging them.”

“I just think—”

And blessedly this time they were rescued from the conversation by an actual paying customer.
Okay, so Dean hadn’t been expecting the school’s address to lead him to an older brick building on the edge of town. Or that the faded logo of an old business would stick out from underneath a very new sign saying ‘Sunnydale High.’ “This is where you want to go to school?” Dean asked Sam as they stepped out of the Impala.

“They’re building a new one. The last one got blown up on a Graduation Day,” Sam said. He led the charge towards the building, and Dean was fine with that. Sam was all barely contained eagerness. It made it possible for Dean to force himself into doing this, into being the adult. “We should probably ask Buffy and the others about it. I bet they know what happened.”

“Yeah,” Dean said slowly.

“Do you like her?” Sam asked.

“Can we not think about the Slayer on our way to do this? I’m nervous enough already,” Dean griped.

“Sorry.”

And now Sam’s happiness was drooping. Dean sighed heavily and put a hand on his kid brother’s shoulder. “It’s all right. I just want you to get what you want.”

They entered the building, following the makeshift signs up a flight of stairs to the second floor.

“Thanks. This means a lot.”

“I know, kid.”

“You’re only four years older than me.”

“Difference between a man and a child, Sammy,” Dean teased.

“Whatever, jerk.”

Dean held off from his usual playful comeback because they’d arrived at the principal’s office and the door was wide open. A plaque read ‘Principal Wood’ and the man behind the desk certainly exuded the kind of intelligent, confident air of a guy in charge. Dean rapped lightly on the open door and Wood looked up from the papers on his desk. With a bright smile, Wood said, “You must be the Winchesters.”

“That’s us,” Dean replied.

“Come in and shut the door, please.”

Sam went in first and Dean closed the door behind them. The chairs they sat in seemed as rickety as the building was sketchy. Dean was half-afraid the thing was going to break under his weight.

“I was expecting your father as well,” Wood said.

“He, uh, had to leave town on business.” Dean wished the tightness in his throat would disappear. He pulled a piece of paper out of his back pocket and unfolded it, regretting that it looked like shit. “I’ve got power of attorney over Sam when that happens though.”
Wood took the paper, barely flicking a glance down at it. “All right.” He dragged a folder down from the top of a pile and opened it. “I received Sam’s transcripts this morning. You’ve been to a lot of different schools.”

“We move around a lot,” Sam said, going a bit still. Dean was feeling it too. This part of enrolling always sucked. When the school principal—assuming a meeting like this ever happened in the first place—started to question why they switched so much, what had gone wrong before. It was like running a rake down Dean’s back until it felt raw. Sammy had always been more keenly concerned at just how different their family was.

“And you’ve managed to maintain straight A’s despite that. You’re obviously a smart boy, Sam.” Wood closed the folder. “I have a couple of questions before we can get you in classes.”

“Shoot,” Dean said.

Wood patted the folder. “The first is, what are your educational goals, Sam?”

“I want to go to college.”

“Any particular one? Major?”

Sam fidgeted, decidedly not looking at Dean. “I’m not sure.”

“Come on, Sam. What’s the big dream?” Wood asked.

Now, Sam did shoot Dean a guilty look before focusing back on the principal. “Stanford. And law school there too.”

“Really?” Dean blurted out. Both Sam and Wood gave him dirty looks. “I didn’t mean like you couldn’t do it. It’s just, this is the first I’m hearing of it.”

“You never asked,” Sam said.

Before they could devolve into bickering, Wood took the conversation back. “I think, then, I have some good and bad news for you.” As Dean held his breath, Wood took his damn time giving out the details. “You’re a bright young man and I think your dream could be possible, but unfortunately not all of your credits will make it past our school’s standards. You’re going to be set back almost a whole year.”

Which was a fucking joke considering the school’s standards of a building. Dean ramped up to tell Wood where he could shove this idea—Sammy was smart enough to have graduated by now if they hadn’t been moving around like this—but Wood raised a hand and stopped him. The principal continued. “I think we can offset this though. You can take classes over the summer and we offer several courses which provide advanced placement credit. If you test into them and pass the final examinations, you’ll be able to take tests which will count for college credit. I think we can turn almost a whole semester into double duty for your high school and college credits. You should be able to graduate next December, which would only make you a semester late.”

“Really?” Sam asked. His excitement was damn infectious and Dean was smiling too. That didn’t sound so bad in the end.

Even Wood grinned. With a chuckle, he said, “I think so.”

“So I’m in?”
“We’d be pleased to have you here. Why don’t you go next door to my secretary and she can help you sign up for classes? I need to talk to Dean for a minute.”

“Okay.” Sam jumped up from his seat. He shut the door after himself.

Dean squirmed slightly in the chair, which made it creak and groan. Being alone in a principal’s office had never been a good thing for him and that age-old impulse of shame wasn’t out of his system yet. Wood dropped his eyes down to the folders and was thinking for a long moment here, which wasn’t helping Dean’s nerves in the least. He leaned forward, cracked a joker’s smile, and said, “Someone tattle on me?”

The seriousness in Wood’s gaze as he raised his eyes turned Dean’s attempt at humor into a withered husk. Dean dropped back in the seat again and lost his smile. Wood said levelly, “There are some concerns.”

Dean fussed with the knee of his slacks. “Like what?”

“Did you know on two separate occasions your father moved you out of town before DCFS could close their investigations on him?”

“I knew about once,” Dean said.

“And I’m guessing that moving around this much is the reason why you failed to finish high school.”

Dean cleared his throat, flicked his tongue over his bottom lip. “Yeah. Didn’t really need it.”

“That dream Sam talked about? This is his last good chance at it. If he moves again, if he has to start all over again, the chances he’ll be able to get what he wants are going to drop significantly. If your father—”

“Dad’s not going to be moving us this time,” Dean said sternly.

Wood nodded. “That’s a relief to hear, Dean. But technically, I should call DCFS and have this situation evaluated.”

Dean practically jumped to the edge of the chair. “Look, my dad’s not really part of the picture at the moment.” Shit, that wasn’t going to help his case. “I mean, he’ll be supporting us sure. But it’s me and Sammy right now. And I want what’s best for him. I’ll jump through whatever hoops I’ve got to.”

Wood considered this for a long, agonizing moment. Dean wasn’t sure what was taking the guy so long to talk, but it was driving him nuts. And he was getting pissed. If he’d dangled the possibility of this dream in front of Sam and then called the authorities on their family, then Sam was going to be crushed. Dean wouldn’t be able to let them stay in a town where someone would come along and separate them. Finally, Wood said, “How did you get injured?”

Dean’s hand immediately clapped over the bandage on his neck. So much for Giles’s theory that the principal wouldn’t care. “Overzealous hook up.”

“Really? Because that’s the perfect place for a vampire bite.”

Dean’s eyes widened.

Wood gestured at the folders again. “Something about your records was a little suspicious, so I did some discreet checking on my own. You and your father are hunters. Proficient ones, from what I
“Well, uh, yeah. You believe in monsters?” Dean couldn’t keep the surprise out of his voice.

“The last two men in my post were literally eaten. I’d be a fool to ignore the supernatural,” Wood replied. “Rumor has it your father is hunting a particular demon.”

“And he still is. That’s why he’s out of town,” Dean said. The relief of being able to spill the truth for once was making it too easy to talk, but Wood was nodding along. “We kind of butted heads on the topic, but Sam wants to finish school and I want him to have that.”

“I hope he can have it as well, but if any of my staff catches wind of the former accusations, there could be trouble,” Wood said. “The only other person who might see these records is the guidance counselor and he’s so swamped at the moment that there’s little chance he’ll do more than gloss over Sam’s folder. We shouldn’t have a problem if you agree to my conditions.”

Dean really didn’t like the sound of that. He hated getting boxed into rules, but this was for Sam. “Which are?”

“Sam comes to school on time every day. He’s clothed, healthy, and as happy as a teenager can manage to be. And he stops hunting. The former allegations have always been about neglect. So long as he doesn’t show a single sign, I don’t see any reason for myself or the counselor to take a special interest in his home life.”

Dean nearly passed out from relief. “That’s easy.”

“I’m glad you think so, but if I do see any problems, I will put in that call.”

“Got it.”

“And it means that you need to show an interest in Sam’s education. I want to see you here for Parents’ Night in January. Maybe even volunteer to chaperone the occasional event.”

Dean nodded again.

Wood gathered up the folders and dropped them back onto his pile. “Then I think that’s everything I have to say. Do you have any questions for me?”

“The last two guys in your job got eaten?”

“Yes.”

“And you still took the job?” Dean said.

“Someone has to.”

“Do you come from a hunter family?”

Wood grinned. “Something like that.”

Dean fussed with the knee of his slacks a little more before admitting, “I think that’s all.”

Wood stood and offered his hand. “Then welcome to the Sunnydale High family.”

Dean rose, they shook hands, and then Dean was stepping out into the hallway. The shock of the near-DCFS miss was rising up through him. Once, he’d known that they were leaving in the middle
of the night ‘cause of the authorities and not some demon on their tail. But he hadn’t known about
the second. He wanted to ask Dad, but that conversation was only going to cause more problems,
especially since if they got to talk about Sam’s schooling there was going to be a major blow out.
John Winchester was not going to like his sons staying in the same damn town for over a year. So
he’d avoid it. Maybe if they were already settled into a routine, there’d be nothing John could do
about it.

Yeah, that was about as likely to work as clearing out Sunnydale of vampires.

Sam emerged from the office next door with a slip of paper in his hand and a smile so bright it could
light up half the Las Vegas strip. He waved the paper at Dean. “She’s going to have a stack of
textbooks for me on Monday. Do you think it’s too late to get started today?”

“I think you should give the administration a chance to tell your teachers you’re supposed to be there.
You can wait the weekend.”

“Oh, right.” Sam held up the paper again. “Do you want to see what I’ve got?”

Dean really didn’t, but Sam was so happy, he nodded and took the paper over. All the standards and
then one extra. “Drama?”

“It was the only thing with spots left I could take.” Sam snatched the paper back. While he’d said
one thing, Dean was pretty sure that Sammy really wanted to be in the drama class anyway. So he
was going to stow it on teasing his brother about it—for now anyway. Sam stashed the paper in his
jacket pocket. “What did Principal Wood want to talk to you about?”

Dean put a hand on Sam’s shoulder and steered him back towards the staircase. “Don’t worry about
that.”

A freaking buzzer went off and kids poured into the hallway. Wasn’t much in the way of a school
bell, but worked all the same. Dean was just glad he wouldn’t have to hear it every day. They
dodged their way around the students to the front door and had almost made it when a chipper girl’s
voice said, “Sam? Dean?”

They turned together and a very happy, bouncy Dawn nearly collided into them. “You guys are still
in town?”

“Yeah. Going to be for a while too.” Sam took out the school schedule and showed it to her.

“Oh my God! You’re going to be going here! That’s so awesome.” Dawn read over it. “Wow. You
got all the cool teachers. Mine are totally lame. Although watch out for Mrs. Lambert. I heard her
tests can be super tough. I’d totally help you study but I’m not a junior. I could probably help you
anyway. Like I could totally ask loads of questions. And even though the Magic Box is kind of
stinky and Buffy hates it if you touch anything, it’s not that bad for studying. We could meet up there
like any time you want.”

Dean rolled his eyes, but Sam laughed good-naturedly. “I’ll remember that,” Sam said. “Thanks.”

“Do you need help finding your next class?”

“I don’t start until the Monday.”

Dawn pulled a pen out from her backpack and wrote on the back of Sam’s schedule. “Here. My
number, in case like you want to get like the skinny on the school or study or something.” She made
a face at Dean, which probably had to do with the fact he was holding in a not-so-kind laugh. The
kid was being more than a little obvious about liking Sam. “It’s also one of Buffy’s numbers, so if your stinky brother needs to call my stinky sister, he can try that.”

“Thanks,” Sam said again as he took the paper back. “Shouldn’t you get to class?”

“Yeah. But I’ll see you around.”

“Yup.”

Dawn headed down the hall and Dean escaped out of the high school into the early fall afternoon. Now that they were out of Dawn’s presence, Dean did laugh. “Holy crap, she’s got it bad for you.”

Sam flushed. “She’s just being nice.”

“Yeah, nice with a huge scooping of undeniable feelings. I bet she’s going to scrawl your name all over her notebooks,” Dean said.

“Don’t make fun of her.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. They reached the car and he paused at opening his door. “Wait, do you like her?”

Sam hesitated and leaned against the top of the car. He was getting taller these days. Soon he was going to be level with Dean, probably get even bigger than that. “She’s nice enough. And I’m not crushing on her. But it couldn’t hurt trying to be friends. I mean, you’re going to be spending a lot of time with Buffy, right? Dawn seems really normal despite being the Slayer’s sister. I know Dad thought she was shielded too much, but maybe being friends with her will be good. I won’t have to lie to her about what you and Dad do. Is that a bad thing?”

“Guess it makes sense.” Dean swung the door open and Sam did the same. They closed their doors at the same time, creating a resounding metallic thunk.

“What did Principal Wood have to say?”

Dean started the car. When Sam kept staring at him, he pursed his lips. “Look, I already told you, nothing for you to worry about.”

“Dean, come on. Just tell me.”

“It was about me, not you. You don’t need to stress about it.”

“Was it about your diploma?”

“Jesus, Sam. I said leave it alone.” Dean got them out onto the main street and headed back towards the motel.

“We’re in this together, right? Just tell me.”

With an exaggerated sigh, Dean said, “I got one chance at this. You show up late or underfed or hurt or something and Wood’ll call DCFS.”

Sam’s eyes went way wide and Dean regretted telling him. Now he was going to fuss and worry about it. “Holy shit, Dean! Should we even stay here? I mean—”

“We’re damn lucky we’re getting this shot, so no. We’re not going anywhere. Seems Wood comes from a hunter’s family. He gets it, but he’s not going to allow any more screw ups in the raising you
department.” Dean faked a smile at Sam. “Come on, I’ve been taking care of you for years. We can manage one more, right?”

“Yeah,” Sam said as he relaxed again. “Maybe I can get a part time—”

“Hell no. I will figure the money situation out. You are going to study your ass off so you can get into that fancy school you want,” Dean said.

“But Dean, I can—”

“No. Final word. And I’m in charge,” Dean said.

Sam sighed loudly. “Fine.”

And the whole drive back, Dean had to keep repeating to himself that he had a handle on this. They’d been in rougher spots. Yeah. Yeah, he could take care of Sam. It was just a little over a year. No problem.

Hopefully, he’d start believing that some time soon.
Late night patrolling through the warehouse district was not her favorite past time, but the demons and vamps had been dodging downtown lately. Buffy idly walked down the street, toying with the stake in her hands. It wasn’t like she wasn’t prepared for danger. She completely was. Extraordinary senses upped her alertness level without having to be too alert. And she wasn’t hearing anything right now. Maybe Sunnydale really was coming under control. That would be nice. Boring, but nice. Then she’d have more time for Riley and her mom. Unfortunately Dawn would have better chances at butting into her day to day as well, but there was nothing she could do about that. Except maybe shove Dawn into one of those crypts for a few hours. Just a little while. So Buffy could get some silence.

Because there certainly hadn’t been any in the Summers’ household earlier tonight. Dawn had spent all of dinner going on and on about Sam Winchester, saying everything except how she found him to be the cutest guy ever. Oh sure, his clothes were cool, his smile was amazing, he had the most perfect eyes ever. The only thing that seemed to be ‘wrong’ with Sam was his relation to Dean, of which Dawn had narrowly eyed Buffy and stated, “But it’s not like we get to choose our siblings.”

Which was why Buffy was out patrolling instead of sitting at home tonight, she realized. Crap. Maybe this boring town thing wasn’t such a great thing. Other than keeping more people alive. Buffy scowled. That was the problem. Boring town meant safe town, which was technically the goal.

Buffy headed down the street of the demon bar, expecting an all-quiet going on there, though hoping for a little action. Instead, she managed to see Dean getting thrown out of the bar. He was unhurt, but there was a definite vibe of ‘don’t come back here’ from the two demons that had shoved him through the door. Dean caught his breath and flashed a smile at Buffy. “Hey there.”

“What?” Buffy asked as she glanced at the door.

Dean chuckled. “They really don’t like it when you take their money.”

Buffy raised her eyebrows.

“Noticed they had a pool table in the back. I’m not half bad, so I thought I’d give it a try,” Dean replied.

“Did you hustle them?” Buffy said.

“They’re demons. It’s not like I’m taking the cash of the innocent.”

“Maybe not, but it’s really stupid.” Buffy waved her hand at the bar door. “You could get yourself killed that way in this town.”

“Thought you said most of these guys are docile.”

“Because they aren’t provoked. Scamming them falls way into the provoking spectrum. You’re lucky they only threw you out,” Buffy said.

“Well, they saw me in there with you last night, so I don’t think anyone was willing to lay a hand on me,” Dean replied.

That was so unfair. Buffy glared at Dean. “You used our connection for protection?”
“I let dumbasses assume what they wanted to,” Dean said. “I didn’t say shit about knowing you. And we were in there together. Is being seen with me some kind of problem?”

“Only if you’re using it to scare demons away.”

“Like I said, I didn’t tell them a thing.”

Technically, that wasn’t wrong, just unethical. If she could believe him. Buffy scrutinized him a second more and decided to drop it. After all, he was right. They had hit up all the hotspots last night. Demons loved to gossip almost more than high schoolers.

“What’re you doing out here?” Dean asked as he put his hands in his jacket pockets.

“Patrolling.”

“Mind if I tag along? I’m suddenly not busy.”

Riley would have a fit. He wanted to be out here tonight, but she’d said no. Mostly because she didn’t want to wind up arguing with him yet again, but also because he needed to recover. If he found out that she hooked up—met, met up with Dean, then the jealousy fit would get out of control.

On the other hand, she was going to be bored out of her mind alone and it wasn’t like she invited Dean. They ran into each other. Total accident. “Sure, why not.”

They headed down the street in silence for about a half block before Dean spoke up. “So, got Sammy registered at the school. What happened to the old one?”

“Had to blow it up. The mayor had turned into an evil snake thing bent on taking over the world. Pretty much unstoppable except by a volcano, which we did not have. Lots of fertilizer was the next best thing. Sort of turned it into rubble though. I heard they’re planning to rebuild it. Hopefully somewhere else because the Hellmouth is right under it.”

“You went to school over a Hellmouth?”

“Yup.”

“And you blew it up.”

“Yup again.”

“Man, wish I had been around to see that.”

They strolled along. Buffy glanced over at Dean. Okay, so the guy was handsome, even in the dark streetlight. Or maybe because of it. Or maybe because Buffy apparently had a thing for guys with dark, mysterious pasts. First Angel, then Riley. Parker had played that card too and it had worked. She so had a type. A bad type. She needed a new one. Like pronto. Before slightly broody, fake playboy Dean occupied any more of her spare thoughts. “I already knew about Sam and the school. Other than seeing you at the Magic Box, I mean. Dawn couldn’t shut up about Sam.”

“Oh yeah, she’s got it so bad for him. I bet NASA’s picking it up with satellites.”

Buffy chuckled and then a horrible realization struck her. “Oh God. Does Sam know?”

“Course he does. He’s the smart one.”

“If Dawn finds out he knows, she’s going to try and figure out if he likes her back and if he doesn’t
—he doesn’t, does he? I mean he is way too old for her.”

“Relax. He’ll figure it out. And he wants to be friends with her. I don’t think he’ll crush her heart on purpose.”

“Okay. That’s kind of a relief,” Buffy said. “Though, hold on, he wants to be friends with her? He’s met her, right? Like twice.”

Dean shrugged. “He thinks it’d be nice to have someone his age and normal he can talk to about all this weird stuff.”

“Dawn doesn’t really know that much about it. He can’t go filling her head with horror stories,” Buffy said.

“It’s not like he’s got that many bad ones to tell,” Dean replied. “And it’s just talking. Is there such a problem with that?”

“Only if Dawn gets into her head that she can be cool like Sam and go hunting evil by herself. She’s been begging me to take her on patrol forever. Up until Mom put her foot down, she even tried sneaking out of the house to follow me.”

“Sam doesn’t want anything to do with hunting really. He’s not going to encourage the solo-hunting thing.” Dean was a little sharp on that answer. Like he was offended about something. Buffy couldn’t tell if it was the idea that Sam hated the family business or the implication that he’d endanger an innocent person intentionally.

“Okay, got it,” Buffy said. “You can’t blame me for being crazy protective. Dawn’s my little sister.”

“Yeah. I understand.”

A few blocks later, when Buffy was about to call the patrol a total bust, they came across a vampire. Buffy could practically smell the blood on this guy, even though he was clean of evidence. But he snarled, his face twisting to show the demon inside. “Slayer.”

And then it was time to fight. Dean went left, she went straight into the fight. Though the guy easily had a hundred pounds on Dean—even more on Buffy, they didn’t have a problem bringing him down. In fact, they worked so well together it was almost freaky. Dean distracted the vampire enough that his guard was down for Buffy’s assault. When the vamp turned back towards her, Dean kicked in one of his knees. The vampire clocked Dean, sending him to the ground. Buffy threw the vamp up against the chainlink fence of an abandoned factory and slammed her stake right into his heart. She pulled it back before it turned to dust with the bad guy.

“Not too shabby.” Buffy held out her hand.

Thankfully, Dean wasn’t too macho to let a girl help him up. He wiped a small bit of blood off his lip. “Thanks.”

“You kids can’t be here,” a man said.

A light flashed into Buffy’s eyes and she shielded them with her hand. “Huh?”

The man, dressed in a grey security uniform, dropped his flashlight beam after running it over Dean. “Ran a whole bunch of you ravers off last night. Told your friends, you can’t party here. Wish I could let you, but it’s what I get paid to do.”
“We look like ravers?” Dean asked.

Buffy stepped in front, putting a hand on Dean’s arm. “Thanks, sir. Sorry about the whole confusion thing.”

The security guard shrugged. As Dean and Buffy went to walk away, he called out. “Hey, you’re leaving something behind.” They turned back and the guy tossed a glowing ball at Dean. “Some kind of new techno thing.”

“Something like that,” Dean murmured.

Buffy was caught up in the orb’s strange glow too. After they walked away, she snatched it out of Dean’s hands, unable to resist the urge of getting a closer look. It felt weird. Not like glass, but not entirely plasticky either. She rolled it back and forth, the steady yellow glow never changing.

“Any idea what it is?” Dean said.

“No clue.”

“Research time?”

“No tonight. Can’t call in Giles every night or he gets way too grumpy. I think he’s getting too old for all-nighters, though he won’t admit it. Just drinks more tea and coffee and gripes about ‘the youth of today.’ Doesn’t seem life or death, so should be safe enough to wait until morning. Probably should call it a night though. It’s getting late.”

Dean’s shoulders sagged in disappointment. “Yeah, ‘course.”

“You know, if you and Sam don’t have anything to do tomorrow, you could join the research party.” Buffy propped the ball up. “Cool mystical glowy thing to look up.”

“Sure, we’ll see about dropping by.” Dean stopped and nodded back the way they came. “My car’s that way. Want a ride home?”

That would mean prolonged solo time with Dean. When she was patrolling, she could justify it. And sure, a drive home was nothing big. “Naw. I’m good with walking.”

“Okay. Be careful out there.”

“Always am,” Buffy said as she walked away. She continued rolling the glowy orb back and forth in her hands. Weird. And so much for quiet little town with nothing happening.

“*******

“I don’t see why I had to come along to the Magic Box,” Dawn complained as they walked down the street.

Buffy had even treated her sister to coffee after dragging her out of the house and still this was the kind of behavior she was getting from her little sister. If Dawn could manage to get through a morning without disturbing their mother’s rest, then Buffy would have gladly left her behind. Joyce needed rest, lots of it, and blabbering, attention-needy Dawn just wouldn’t be able to help herself. “I thought you liked the Magic Box.”

“Sure, when I’m not getting ordered there like a little kid.”

Buffy rolled her eyes and then grinned. “Well, I guess you could go home if you want.”
“I can?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Dawn hesitated in mid-step before scowling at her sister and keeping up. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“Well, I might have told Dean to drop by. And to bring Sam with him.”

Dawn nearly squealed as she unleashed a giddy smile. “Really? He is so—”

“Cool. Yes, I know,” Buffy said in a lightly teasing manner. More seriously, she added, “You know the planet doesn’t rotate around guys, right?”

“State the absolute obvious. Can’t I just be excited that for once you liking a guy has an upside for me?”

“I do not like Dean,” Buffy said. “Not like that.”

“Oh huh. Sure. Because he doesn’t have like a perfect body and an awesome smile. Oh, and he totally gets the whole Slayer thing, I’m sure. Since he’s a hunter and everything.”

Buffy frowned at her sister. “I thought you hated him.”

“I don’t like Angel or Riley either, but that hasn’t stopped you from dating them. Or from them being objectively attractive. It’s not my fault they have bad personalities to go with their good looks.”

“Riley—they—don’t have bad personalities.”

“Okay, that’s just why you’ve been complaining about Riley constantly,” Dawn said.

“I have not!”

“Have so. It’s all ‘Riley’s being super jealous’ and ‘Riley shouldn’t be out on patrol, he’ll get hurt.’ Stuff like that over and over.”

Buffy clenched her jaw. “Those were private conversations with Mom.”

“Not my fault you don’t know how to close a door.”

“You little eavesdropper! You know, nobody likes a blabbermouth,” Buffy said.

“Is that why you’ve got so few friends?” Dawn asked.

Instead of answering, Buffy opened up the door to the Magic Box. Dawn got caught up in waving to somebody down the street, so she had a blessed moment of silence while stepping into the shop. Giles and Anya were already busy with customers and other businessy stuff. Buffy drifted over to the table and plopped down into a seat.

When Dawn finally did come in, she had Riley, Willow, and Tara with her. Not so random with the waving then. Riley had most of a smile, though it seemed kind of faked. “Didn’t you see us?” he asked as he swooped down to kiss the top of her head.
“No. I was avoiding something annoying.”

“I wish I could avoid you too,” Dawn said.

“You should be really careful about your phrasing in this town,” Anya replied. “You never know when things like that might actually happen.”

Dawn frowned for a second. Then she had to sit down right next to Buffy. So much for personal space. And while Buffy rolled her eyes, Dawn seemed completely satisfied to ignore her displeasure. “When’s Sam getting here?”

“Sam?” Riley said. “As in Winchester? I thought you were staying away from that family.”

“That’s what you think I should do. It’s not exactly what’s happened,” Buffy replied.

“Then what exactly has happened?” Riley had an edge in his voice, one that caused Tara and Willow to give them worried looks as they sat down across the table.

“Their dad left town. He was the bad element. I really think they’re okay,” Buffy said.

Before Riley had a chance to argue more, Sam and Dean walked into the shop. Dawn bounced in her seat and waved. Sam gave her a half smile and wave back. Dean had been right last night. At least Sam was going to try being nice to Dawn. That wasn’t so bad.

“Find anything yet?” Dean asked.

“About what?” Willow said.

“This security guard tossed me and Buffy this glowy orb thing.”

And all eyes spun back to Buffy. Everyone but Riley was curious. Her boyfriend was thinly hiding a new source of anger. Buffy chose the Dawn tactic—ignore the unpleasantness. She pulled the glowing ball out of her purse. “It’s sort of neat, but it doesn’t really do anything other than glow.”

“And it lit up your room like all night,” Dawn said.

“Did not.”

“Did so.”

“Dawn, it couldn’t have. It was in my purse like seconds after I went into my room.”

“Whatever.” Dawn thunked back against her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. She was nearly pouting about being wrong over the stupid orb.

Giles came over and plucked the orb when Buffy offered it up to him. “Seems mystical in origin.”

“You can tell that from looking at it?” Willow said.

“He’s right. Doesn’t have an off switch.” Dean sat down in the seat on Buffy’s free side.

And Riley wound up worse than a taut rubberband. “Think I’ll join the research party later. I’m feeling the need for a workout in the danger room.”

“That’ll be ten dollars for an hour,” Anya said cheerily.
“Anya!” Giles glared at her.

“I’m just testing out the concept,” she replied.

“We aren’t charging anyone for use of the room and that’s final,” Giles said.

Buffy sort of felt like she missed something with that, but the bigger concern was the way Riley strode out of the room. She frowned, and more at Willow than anyone else, said, “I should go talk to him.”

“You think?” Willow said.

As the others readied for a long research session, Buffy slipped into the training room. Riley had already stripped off his shirt and began a light punching routine with the weight bag. “Hey, can we talk for a second?”

“Sure.” Riley gave the bag a solid punch before pausing. Buffy thought he’d turn around, but he gritted his teeth and punched the bag a couple more times. “Got something on your mind?”

“I’m trying to figure out what’s on yours,” she said.

“I think I’ve been pretty obvious.”

“And I think I’ve been telling you that you have nothing to worry about.” Buffy crossed the room and stepped up beside him on the mat, which caused him to stop. She knew he would. He didn’t want to accidentally hit her during a training session. “It’s just Slayer-hunter business.”

“Right. So the fact that in three days’ time he’s with you almost twenty-four seven means nothing.” Buffy took Riley’s hand and that brought his gaze down to her. “Exactly.”

“And last night?”

“We bumped into each other in the warehouse district. He was coming out of that demon bar and we happened into a vampire outside this old factory while he walked to his car.” Not a total lie. Dean had been walking to his car, in a very long drawn out patrol type fashion, but Riley didn’t need to hear that part. Buffy slipped her arms around Riley and tilted her head back so they could keep eye contact. “I am your girl.”

“Really? Because you’re trusting him a lot like you used to trust me.”

“I trust you.”

“I have to practically beg to go on patrol and you’re suddenly spending every free moment with him.”

Buffy withdrew her touch. “I told you, I bumped into him. It wasn’t planned.”

“What was he doing in that bar anyway?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Buffy said. She knew the deflection was wrong, but Riley would lose his cool if he learned what Dean had really been up to. She didn’t want him poisoning the group against Dean. Their opinions mattered and if they distrusted the Winchesters, that would be the end of seeing them around like this.

“You didn’t ask?” Riley said.
Buffy shrugged. “He was getting tossed out. Maybe he was asking more questions.”

“It’s important to know what he’s doing.”

“Why? Because you’re jealous?”

“You know what? I am. Did you see the way he walked in here? Like he belonged here. He doesn’t know us or you. But he sure is cozying up fast. And he’s just as fragile as I am. More so because he hasn’t had the kind of training I have.”

“He’s not incompetent.”

“And now you’re defending him,” Riley said.

“Because you keep attacking him and he hasn’t done anything wrong! Why are you so afraid of giving him a chance?”

Riley sighed and with the exhalation, the tension ran out of his body. He was tired and weary all of a sudden and Buffy didn’t like this change one bit. He put his hands on her shoulders. “Because I feel like I’m losing you more and more every day. Like I can’t keep up in your world. And here comes this practically perfect guy with a bad attitude and a chip on his shoulder, all mysterious and dangerous, while you keep leaving me out.”

“Well, you’re not losing me. I’m right here.” Buffy laced her arms back around him. “And I’m yours. Nobody else’s. Give it another couple of days and the new-shiny of Dean will wear off and you’ll see he’s just some hunter and that’s it. You’re my guy. I love you.”

Riley didn’t smile. She noticed that right away. But he did lean in and kiss her lightly, to which she poured in as much energy as possible. She wanted him to see that this fighting was ridiculous. And she convinced herself that she’d convinced him that everything was okay between them. They were a happy couple.
Chapter 8

The atmosphere when Riley stormed out of the room crackled with unspoken tension, and it didn’t get any better as Buffy ran after her boyfriend. Even Sam and Dawn were doing their best to be seen and not heard. Dean frowned, glancing over to Willow and Tara. “Did I do something?”

“Just relationship hiccups. I’m sure it’ll be no big deal in the end,” Willow said.

“Assuming you stop spending any time at all with Buffy,” Dawn replied. When the whole room stared at her, her eyes went wide. “What did I say this time?”

“He’s got an issue with us spending time together?” Dean asked.

“Well, duh. You’re so her type, like down to having a stupid coat—”

“This was my dad’s.”

Dawn rolled her eyes. “That is so only making things worse. And you totally have the hots for her.”

“Dawn,” Giles said, “I believe that’s enough talking for the moment.”

“What? He does? Right?” Dawn turned towards Dean. “Look me in the eye and say you’re not attracted to my sister.”

Of course Dean couldn’t say that. He was a guy interested in women and Buffy was hot. She wasn’t single, but she was still hot. Dean scoffed. “I’m a little old to be playing games with kids.”

Before Dawn could say whatever smart-aleck remark had spawned in her head, Giles dropped a book onto the table and gestured at the glowing orb Buffy had left behind. “Right. We have something to identify. Sam, do you happen to know any additional languages?”

“I’m kind of okay at Latin,” Sam said. Dean stowed that fact in his mental file of ‘things I didn’t realize about my brother.’ That one was less of a shock. Dad had been getting Sammy to help with the research for years. And the kid was probably trying to impress the Slayer’s group by coming off extra smart. Not that he had to try all that hard. Aw hell, if Sam said he knew Latin, he did.

Giles gathered books and began handing them out to the group. Anya cheerfully said, “Oh great. Another day of work around the giant reading circle.”

“Anya,” Giles said flatly.

“What? It does mess with the energy of the place, Giles. People come in here and see a group of people sitting around and they get all lethargic.”

“We’ll try to sing a peppy tune while we work then,” Dean said.

“Please do.”

Willow and Tara had smiles about that remark, so Dean was feeling smugly clever. A few minutes later, Buffy emerged from the training room. “I’m sorry, but Dawn and I really need to get going. I forgot that I have a prescription to pick up for Mom.”

“How’s she doing?” Willow asked.
Buffy groaned in a frustrated not-great-let’s-not-talk-about-it way. “Be better once the doctors actually figure out what’s wrong with her. Come on, Dawn.”

Dawn purposefully looked at Sam, eyes twinkling in sheer giddiness. “See you around.”

“Yeah,” Sam said.

The Summers girls took off and it was back to reading. Which was boring as hell. Dean went over this page three times and it still didn’t make any sense. And it was just some monk rambling on about the lights in the garden. Didn’t help that he couldn’t get Riley’s jealousy off his mind. Dean hadn’t been obvious with the Slayer. Sure, a few flirts when they first met, but she wasn’t into that kind of playboy. Because glaring was not a sign of approval, not in Dean’s book. And if it was in Buffy’s, then that was a little twisted and he didn’t want to go near her with a twenty foot pole.

Naw, her causal attitude last night had been about camaraderie with him. They could be just friends. Even if she was cute, strong, practically pocket-sized. She’d easily fit on his lap. Her thighs—

Dean snapped the book shut and wiped at his mouth. So he might just have a thing for her, but that didn’t mean he was going to act on it. He needed to talk to Riley. Clear this whole thing up once and for all. He cleared his throat. “Think I could use a workout too.”

“Oh, sure. Try not to kill each other. Or bleed too much. Blood is harder to get out than you’d think,” Anya said.

“You haven’t had to clean it,” Giles said.

“No, but I have to listen to you complain every time you do.”

“Promise, I’ll clean up any blood that gets spilled,” Dean said.

“See that you do.” Anya had a matter of a fact attitude about the damn situation that Dean was grinning and almost laughing as he stepped through the door.

A kind of merriment that instantly dropped away when he got a glimpse of Riley. Man was on a mission to destroy that weight bag. He lifted his head and turned minutely towards Dean. The angry expression on his face only deepened. “Something you want?”

Dean stripped off his jacket. “Could use a sparring match.”

“Don’t you want to do that with Buffy?”

“Sure she’s great at it, but most of the things I’ve ran across in this town are more your size. ‘Sides, I figure you want to take a shot at me,” Dean said.

Riley raised an eyebrow and finally turned to face him. “That so. Why would I want to do a thing like that?”

“Your, uh, friends out there, are real bad at gossiping. Well, guess it was more Dawn’s fault, but she let it slip that you got an issue with me hanging out with your girl. Makes sense, getting jealous.” Dean gave Riley a broad, show-off grin. He waved up at his own face as he stepped towards the blue practice mats. “I mean, look at this. Definitely too pretty to be left alone with attractive people. Specially if you don’t trust ‘em.”

Riley clenched his fist, tightened his jaw before talking in a halting breath. “You don’t know Buffy, so I’ll put this plainly. She’s the best woman I’ve ever known. I don’t have to worry about some
punk rolling through town because she’s good. She’s not going to cheat on me.”

“If that’s what you really think, how come you’re about to grind your teeth into bits?”

“I’m thinking this is a real bad idea.” Riley stalked over to where he’d left his coat and shirt on a couch.

“Why?”

“Temper’s a little too hot.”

Dean scoffed. “Sure I could take you.”

Riley finished putting on his jacket. “Some other time.”

“Course.”

Riley left the room and Dean tried not to think about the clipped way he walked or the rigid stance. Hey, he’d tried to push the guy past the limit so he’d blow off some steam, but that hadn’t happened. Dean swung at the practice bag a few times. Here he was with actual training equipment and he didn’t know how to use a damn piece of it. Bobby didn’t have this nice of a set-up, and Dad had rarely slowed down long enough for them to like a place, much less find a training spot to use more than once. On the very rare occasion, he’d taken them to shooting ranges instead. Which, looking around this place, there wasn’t one. Assuming Riley would ever give him time of day, Dean would have to ask him about the closest one. Something told him the Slayer wasn’t big on firearms.

After a few more minutes, he gave up on the ‘workout,’ grabbed his jacket, and headed back into the main room. Sam was deep into reading some book, as were Willow and Tara, while Giles and Anya were running the store. Books. Not Dean’s favorite part of hunting. He picked up the orb from the table and spun it around a few times, tossing it between his hands as he sat down.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Tara said. Her voice was so soft Dean had to practically stop what he was doing so he could hear her.

“Oh?”

“We don’t know what it does. You might release the pent up energy or accidentally curse yourself.”

Dean gently put the ball back down. “Right.”

Tara gave him a small, encouraging smile and handed off a book. “Here. It’s not as dense as the one Giles gave you.”

“I could read that one fine,” Dean muttered.

“Oh, sure. I-I just mean, well, this one’s not as boring. Even Willow has trouble reading that other volume. I think Giles is the only one who likes it.”

Dean thought about arguing more about it to prove that he wasn’t a loser at research, but Tara had a quiet, reassuring way about her. She genuinely didn’t mean anything rude, and if he took it that way, Sam would never let him hear the end of it. Neither would the small guilty voice in the back of Dean’s head. He cracked open the book. “Thanks.”

Tara was right. This thing was a lot easier to read. Not just the style of handwriting, but the damn pages themselves were fascinating. She’d given him a book about a knight’s adventures in western
Europe. It’d been translated out of the Latin and Middle English by some Watcher in the late 1700’s—so there were ‘updated’ snippets along the way. Dean wasn’t sure that it was going to help in the hunt for intel on the glowy orb thing, but this was way better than anything he’d read through lately. He was so absorbed that the tinkling of the shop bell became part of the background and he wound up getting so comfortable that he had his chair balanced back on two legs while propping his feet up on the edge of the table.

A man loomed over him, crowding out a bulk of Dean’s reading light. The interruption was so sudden Dean would’ve tumbled backwards if the stranger hadn’t been there to catch the chair. “Hey there. Get sucked into something good?”

“Story of Sir Tristan the Hunter, not the one out of King Arthur’s court.” Dean found his balance again, bringing the chair back to its proper four feet.

The stranger had a fast food bag in one hand, which made Dean’s mouth water. He’d forgotten all about food. Jealous, his stomach growled. Before Dean could ask Sammy what he wanted, the stranger put the paper sack between them. Tara and Willow already had their own paper sack and were dividing up goodies. Sam dove into their bag and said, “You were really sucked into that, huh? I guessed at what you wanted.”

Dean frowned, trying to put all the pieces together. He glanced at the guy again. “Friend of Buffy’s?”

“I’m Xander.” He held out his hand and Dean shook it. “Nice to have some more testosterone around here.”

Willow snorted, but Dean grinned. “Come on, being surrounded by this many beautiful women isn’t a hardship.”

“Wait until they turn on you,” Xander replied.

“We don’t turn on you,” Willow said.

“At least once a month, without fail, there is a day I can’t talk to you,” Xander replied.

“That’s because you insist on making stupid jokes on the worst days,” Anya said.

“Hey, my jokes are all comedy gold.”

Dean grabbed out his wallet. “How much do I owe you?”

Drawn out of the bickering, Xander blinked at him. “Oh. Thirteen covers it.”

Last night’s pool hustle hadn’t been a resounding success. After paying off the motel room this morning for another week, Dean was left with precious little cash. Credit card scam was only going to get them so far when they were trying to establish themselves in a place. More cash would be needed, probably an actual job if he wanted to do this right. He hid the gnawing worry as fast as he could, but he wasn’t sure Sam didn’t see the flicker of doubt cross through him. He had to clear his throat as he took a couple of bills out to pay Xander, which felt like dragging a spotlight onto him. “Here.”

Xander took the cash and went back to light banter with Anya without even missing a beat. Felt like he’d picked up on some of that hesitation too, like the whole damn room did, but they were all content to ignore the elephant and carry on like nothing had happened. Fine by Dean.
Hours later, Xander waved a frustrated hand at the orb. “It’s a glow thing. It glows and is a thing. I move to call it ‘the Thing that Glows.’ I mean, maybe it’s not even magical.”

“Impending Xander breakdown. Happens a lot in long research sessions,” Tara whispered.

Dean snorted and flipped to the next page. He was still wrapped up in the tales of Tristan, which he wasn’t sure would be useful. On the edge of closing the book, Dean decided to give it one last page.

And stumbled right into a useful block of text. He dropped his feet off the edge of the table again and the front feet of his chair clacked down on the tile. “Got something.” The entire table perked up. Giles stopped what he was doing and wandered over to the table. Dean put the book on the table, making it easier for anyone else to read as he talked. “So this knight’s been questing a long time for a way to stop this constant invasion of a smaller village. Looking for a way to run the monsters out of town. He comes across this monastery in Italy where the monks practice magic and asks them for something that’ll help. They give him this ball of light.”

“Not big on the description,” Xander said.

“And spells like that probably wouldn’t last centuries,” Willow said. “I doubt this is the same one from the story.”

“The important part of this whole thing is that the Watcher translating this story put in a note about an enchantment spell. Cromwell—the Watcher—thought that the sphere spell existed. He’s got a handful of possibilities.”

Giles leaned over Dean’s shoulder and read through the paragraph Dean pointed at. “Worth following through.” He went to the shelves to pull a few more books.

“Good find,” Xander said.

Dean waved a hand at Tara. “Thank her. She got me into this one.”

Buffy came back into the Magic Box as Giles was handing out the fresh round of books. Dean caught snippets of her conversation with Anya. Sounded like her mom was really sick.

“I’m sure it’s something magical,” Buffy said. “If I could just see what was happening to her, I could do something about it.”

“Oh, there’s a trance you can do,” Anya told her. Dean’s attention got sucked into the book. Messing with magic was bad business, but Dean wasn’t about to tell the Slayer that. Instead, he wanted to prove he could behave himself and not stare after her every time she came in the room.

Which was a lot harder when she headed straight for the table and made eye contact with him. “If I’m going to do this I need total concentration, and Dawn’s so not going to let me have it. Can I borrow Sam?”

Dean’s eyebrows shot up, but Xander got a word in first. “Dawnie’s got a new crush? Have I been replaced?”

Sam fidgeted with the edge of the book he was reading. Dean set his down and leaned in. “You want to use my brother as interference? During a spell?”

“It’s a trance.”

“It’s magic. Any chance this blows up in your face and takes the whole house out?”
“None,” Giles said. “Either the trance will work or it won’t. Sam isn’t in any danger.”

Letting Sammy out of sight went against rule number one. Letting him go where something magical was about to happen violated a score of other rules. But the Slayer was asking for a favor, which would put her squarely in Dean’s debt. She’d also been more than willing to help him out. Dean wiped at his mouth and glanced over at Sam. “You got a mind of your own. You want to hang out with Dawn while Buffy does this whatever?”

And there was a spark in Sam’s eyes. He’d always been too curious about magic. Dad hated it, Dean tried to mitigate it. Oh, Dad would be pissed and Dean should shut this down. Too late though, he wasn’t about to go back on his word of letting Sammy decide. Trying not to show how eager he was and totally failing, Sam shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind a break.”

Dean grabbed his jacket. “I’ll drive you guys over there. I want to know where he is.”

“I’d appreciate the ride anyway. I want to get moving on this pronto,” Buffy said.

“Sure, no problem.”

They headed outside to the Impala and Dean did his best to quiet the panicking voice in the back of his head. Magic was tricky, dangerous. Not to be trusted in any circumstances, and yet everyone in the Magic Box was cool with it. Which shouldn’t have surprised Dean. He hadn’t thought about it really, but it was sitting right in front of his face. He’d been doing research in a freaking magic shop for the last two days. Of course they were going to be down with doing spells.

Dean took a steadying breath as he swung into the Impala’s driver seat. Giles had promised nothing bad could happen to Sam and Dean was inclined to believe the British guy. So he needed to stow this gnawing feeling in his gut, needed to ignore that voice shouting that Dad would have a cow if he knew what was happening.

But Dad wasn’t here. Decisions came down to Dean and he would just have to trust that he made the right one here. Because he sure in Hell couldn’t go back on it now.
“You know, I could stick around,” Dean said as he pulled the car over to the curb.

Buffy had wondered when he was going to make that suggestion. Ever since they left the Magic Box, Dean had been quiet and tense. For the first five minutes, she’d been too wrapped up in her own head to notice, but once she had, the silence was suffocating. Really, she was relieved it was something this easy and that Dean didn’t want to pull Sam out altogether. “My house is one of the safest in Sunnydale. You don’t have to worry about him.”

Dean shrugged and tried to give her a playboy smile. He wasn’t selling the laid-back vibe at all this time. “You’ll be all caught up in that trance. What if something happens, huh?”

“Dean, I’ll be fine,” Sam said.

“It’s practically dinner time, right? If you’ve got the stuff, I could make it. Hell, I could even go get the stuff and then cook.”

“You can cook?” Buffy asked.

“Course.”

Dean was adamant about sticking around and she couldn’t blame him. She didn’t necessarily see the point in the extreme caution he was suddenly showing, but she could understand it. In a way, she should be more cautious. She’d invited a practical stranger to hang out with her baby sister just because she didn’t want Dawn to annoy her. “We’ve got stuff,” she said. “You’re welcome to cook something up.”

“Great.” And this time Dean’s smile was real.

Buffy led the way into the house, pausing at the front staircase to shout through the whole house. “Mom? Dawn? I brought company.”

Instantly, Dawn ran to the top of the steps. Her smile was enormous as she got a peek at Sam. “Oh. Hey.” She tried to play it cool as she came down the stairs and Buffy had to muffle a snort. “What’re you guys doing here?”

“Buffy invited us over for dinner,” Sam said.

A smooth lie. Almost too smooth. Buffy decided not to call Sam out on it since it covered up any potential questions from Dawn, but she wasn’t sure that she was comfortable with Sam’s easy falsehood. She edged past Dawn on the staircase. “Show them where everything is? I’ve got to do a Slayer thing for a few minutes.”

“Yeah, sure,” Dawn said.

“Where’s Mom?”

“Shower. I think she plans on going out tonight.”

“Okay.” Buffy headed upstairs to her room, ignoring the rude way Dawn was talking to Dean.

The ritual took mere moments to set up without any distractions. Buffy spread the sand in a circle around her, lit the incense, and settled on the carpet cross-legged. The brief instructions for the trance
called for a complete blankness in the mind, then to see past the thinnest layer of reality. Magic existed as something else, something not natural to the order. Becoming hyper aware of reality would allow one to see the concrete aspects of the world and make anything bending against the rules stick out like a sore thumb. According to the book she’d skimmed, she would just know when the trance worked.

A breath in, a breath out. She was light, she was empty. Buffy opened her eyes. Colors felt muted and too much at the same time. Sounds softened like wool pulled over her head, yet so many ticks happened around her that she had trouble differentiating between everything. Slowly, she stood up and went to her bedroom door.

The hallway was the same. She drifted towards her mother’s room, but the door was wide open. The room was empty. Buffy headed downstairs.

Joyce nearly ran into her in the foyer. “Oh, Buffy. There you are. I just met the boys. I wish I could stick around for dinner. Dean’s cooking smells great.”

Buffy scowled slightly and glanced around her mother. Everything about her was painfully normal. There were no hands clutching at her, no signs of a spell at all. Magic wasn’t touching her. “There’s nothing.”

“Huh? Honey, are you okay?” Joyce put a hand against Buffy’s forehead. “You feel all right. Are you going to be okay here? Should I stay home?”

The words were muffled and it took a moment for Buffy to process her mother’s meaning. She shook her head slowly. “I’m fine. Go. Have fun.”

“Okay. I’ll be home around nine, I think.” Joyce kissed her on her cheek and then headed out the door.

There had been nothing. This trance had been nothing. Buffy took a shaky breath.

And realized something weird was happening in the photo of her and Dawn. She put a hand on the frame and stared at it. Dawn, she kept flickering in and out. That didn’t make any sense. Buffy frowned. Slowly, she walked into the dining room.

Dawn sat across from Sam at the table. She flashed in and out, even as she glared at Buffy. “What do you want?”

Buffy shook her head. Dawn wasn’t her sister. She wasn’t real.

“Buffy?” Sam asked.

A shadow-man had his arm around Sam’s shoulders. He grinned over at Buffy, his yellow eyes burning bright through the muted colors of the world around him. As she continued staring at Sam, the shadow-man laughed and then leaned into Sam’s ear. The faintest of whispers brushed across the air, but Buffy couldn’t make sense of the words.

“Get out of my house,” Buffy said.

Sam blinked. The shadow man whispered.

Patience gone, Buffy crossed the room and grabbed Sam by his shirt. She effortlessly hauled him to his feet. “Get out!”
“Buffy!” Dawn’s voice faded in and out even as she screamed.

Dean swept into the room. He grabbed Buffy roughly and shoved her back, breaking her hold on Sam. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

The last thing Buffy got from the trance was that Dean was perfectly normal. Between blinks, the world snapped back into its regular focus, but it was like riding a rubberband. Her brain smarted. She frowned more. “Dean—”

“You want him gone, we’re gone,” Dean said. He grabbed Sam’s coat off the back of his chair and shoved it at him.

“Way to go Buffy.” Dawn crossed her arms over her chest.

The world was spinning too fast. That yellow-eyed monster had been hanging around Sam. Worse, Dawn didn’t really exist. None of this made any sense. She needed to talk to Giles. More immediate, she needed to catch Dean before the Winchesters ran out of Sunnydale. She rushed to the door, but Dean was crossing towards the driver’s door of the Impala. “Wait!”

Dean hesitated, though his expression was still clouded with anger. “What?”

“I—we need to talk,” Buffy said. She was aware that Dawn was at her back and Sam was sitting right there in the car. “Not now, but later.”

“Gonna have something to do with you tossing Sam out?” Dean demanded.

“Yes.”

“Fine. When are we going to do this?”

“Can you drop Sam off and come back for me?”

“You’re leaving me home alone?” Dawn asked.

“You won’t even get in the car with him?” Dean said.

“I need to call Giles and get an update.” Buffy hoped that the desperation wasn’t that obvious in her voice. The world kept spinning relentlessly and she was finally getting her feet back under her. “Then I’ll be ready.”

“Sure.” Dean got behind the wheel and the Impala roared down the street.

Buffy slammed the door shut to the house. That shadow had to be the yellow-eyed demon that Dean and his dad were hunting. But it had been hovering around Sam without a sign of anything being wrong with Dean. Maybe Dean had no idea what was happening to his brother. But that wasn’t her only problem.

“You know, that was completely uncool,” Dawn said. “Sam’s going to hate me now.”

That so didn’t matter. And what kind of monster cared about what a human thought? Other than Harmony. Buffy resisted the urge to shove Dawn up against the wall and shout at her. If Dawn was something powerful, she needed to figure out what kind before engaging in a fight. She pushed past Dawn for the phone.

“And now you’re ignoring me? Fine. I can ignore you too!” Dawn ran up the stairs. The slam of her door shattered the otherwise silence of the house.
Buffy dialed the Magic Box’s number. Four long rings later, Giles answered. She said, “Giles, it’s me. Have you found anything?”

“Yes. Looks like the ball is called the Dagon’s Sphere. It’s meant to be a protective ward against evil. Something unnamed, so be cautious about this. Unnamed things are never a good sign in occult studies.” Giles gave a few orders to Anya or maybe Willow before coming back to the conversation. “Did you have any luck with the trance?”

“Nothing around my mom.” Buffy poked her head out in the hallway, but she had no way of knowing if Dawn was eavesdropping. It was a fifty-fifty shot, even if Dawn had made a big display of sealing herself in her room. “I want to talk about something else later though. But you’re sure this sphere is supposed to be a good thing?”

“Yes.”

“Then maybe I should check around the factory some more. Had to be a reason it was out there.”

“Are you going alone?”

“Possibly. Dean is—I’ll explain it later. This is simple recon, I’ll be fine.”

“All right, but be careful, Buffy.”

“Always am.” Buffy hung up the phone and grabbed her jacket. Any minute now the Impala would be roaring back and she’d have to deal with one angry Winchester. She might have just enough time to figure out what she was going to say about the vision. Maybe.

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“I think it’s pretty obvious that the trance was messing with her head,” Sam said.

Yeah, and that was what bothered Dean. If the trance was going right, then Buffy saw something and whatever she had seen around Sam was disturbing enough that she wanted him out of the house. Didn’t make any sense. Sammy was a happy, intelligent, pretty well-adjusted kid all things considering. Dean would know if something was wrong with Sam. They’d spent practically every day together since Sammy was born. No way could someone lay a spell on his brother without Dean knowing.

But something was up. Dean pulled into the motel, taking the corner a little too fast, and went straight into the parking spot. “I’ll be back soon. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Got it,” Sam said. He paused as he got out of the car. “We’re not leaving, are we?”

Dean clenched his jaw. That urge was there, and Dad would definitely move them, but if they left that was it for Sammy’s future. “No. Some odd reason we’re not on the Slayer’s good side, we’ll just steer clear of her. Unless you want to go.”

“I don’t.”

Dean nodded. He waited while Sam shut the car door and went into the motel. Soon as the door was shut, Dean backed out of the parking spot. He sped the whole way back to the Summers’ house.
When he got there, he turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. Before he got the car door shut, Buffy was walking out the door.

His anger wasn’t staying in anymore. Didn’t bother holding it out of his voice. “What the hell?”

“I’m sorry.” Except she didn’t look entirely sorry. The Slayer definitely had a concerned expression, but hell if Dean knew what she was thinking.

“Yeah? Well, that doesn’t explain shit,” Dean said. “How far gone were you that Sam was suddenly a threat?”

Buffy gave out an exasperated sigh, like Dean was being the unreasonable one here. Or maybe that was just how she bought more time while she thought. “It isn’t Sam, exactly. It’s what’s hanging around him.”

“He’s clean.”

“No, he isn’t.”

Dean stopped and stared at her. Nope, none of that made sense. He scratched the back of his head. “Huh?”

“During the vision-trance-thing, a couple of weird things happen. When it came to Sam, I saw this thing, this entity hanging around him. A shadow with yellow eyes. And it was whispering to him.”

Dean leaned back against the Impala. Had to be the yellow-eyed demon, though that didn’t make any sense. “But there’s no spell on Sam.”

“There’s something going on with him. It’s what I saw.”

“And you wanted to throw him out over it?”

Buffy scowled at him. “That shadow was whispering to him, constantly. What if it’s affecting his behavior? I can’t have that anywhere near Dawn, especially since—”

Dean waited, but she didn’t say anything. “Since what?”

“Nothing. I just have a lot happening right now.”

“Naw, you don’t get to lay all this crap on me about Sam and hide whatever’s wrong with Dawn. She was near him.”

“She didn’t cause that thing to be around him,” Buffy said. She shook her head. “I have to get somewhere. Giles finally got something about the sphere and I’m going back to the factory to check it out. Do you want to come or not?”

“Oh, so I can still hunt with you?”

“Do you want answers or do you want to piss and moan about it?” Buffy demanded.

Dean reached over to open the car door for her. “So long as you’re not just using me for a ride. If so, I like getting something more out of it.”

“You wish.” Buffy slid into the seat.

Dean shut the car door before rounding back to the driver’s seat. If he’d been in a better mood, he’d
have teased her more. Instead, the silence between them was terse, worse than anything he’d had with Dad lately. And because he’d been there once, Buffy apparently didn’t feel the need to give him directions until he made a wrong turn. Unfortunately neither of their moods had improved by the time they got to the factory, but they still had decent enough sense to shut the Impala doors as quiet as possible. Dean didn’t care if anyone saw the car. He had a feeling that a fast exit strategy might be key here.

While popping open the trunk and its secret compartment, he asked, “You good on weapons?”

“I’m—” Buffy’s eyes went wide when she saw the amount of gear the Winchesters kept stashed. “That is a lot of guns.”

Dean grabbed out a sawed-off shotgun, loaded it with a couple salt rounds, and tucked more into his pocket. On top of that, he tucked his favorite handgun into the back of his jeans. “Not all of us get to have Slayer strength.”

“You’re a lot more likely to accidentally hit somebody with a gun than with a stake,” Buffy said, though she frowned afterwards. “Never mind.”

Dean held out a machete to her. For a second, he thought she was going to leave him hanging, but she grabbed the blade after all and headed towards an open door. He closed up the Impala and followed her, keeping the shotgun low for the time being.

The place was dark inside and the streetlights were hardly letting in enough light for him to see by. Old pieces of equipment were littering the first floor and both of them carefully tread through first floor. Buffy definitely had stealth down, and he was kind of proud that he was as silent as her. They finished their sweep and then Dean nodded at the door leading to a set of cement stairs off to the far side. Buffy took point again.

Tension was creeping up Dean’s back. Something was off about this place, but hell if he could put a finger on it. The second floor had a lot more windows than the first, thank God. Easier to see the damn near empty floor. There weren’t any old equipment pieces. But there was a damn huge hole in the wall. Buffy and Dean stepped around the broken fragments, cataloging it but not hesitating.

Buffy suddenly stopped, and Dean took a quick glance around. He didn’t see anything, but she wasn’t moving or explaining herself either. “What?” he hissed.

“I hear something.” She led the way through a few more rooms, taking them into a large one with huge glass windows. Then she rushed forward before Dean could assess the room.

He was about to yell at her when he caught sight of what drew her attention. Towards the far end of the room, a monk was tied down to a chair. Even at this distance, the cuts and bruises on the monk’s face were obvious. While Buffy quickly worked to unite and reassure him, Dean checked around the columns for any signs of the thing that had beat the guy up.

But he still wasn’t expecting the blonde in the red dress. He raised the shotgun, but the woman grabbed it, raised it higher, and butted him in the face with it. Stunned, Dean stumbled back a few steps. She backhanded him and he hit the ground, hard. Too hard to want to get up right away, but instinct took over and he rolled before her heel could come down into his skull.

“A shotgun? Really? What if I was like, some normal person? Wait, scratch that. I’m so beyond that, don’t even think of it,” the woman said. Which was fine, because all Dean was thinking about was getting away from the crazy chick. She was moving in again and he needed to get back on his damn feet before she came into range.
Buffy stepped in between them and went for a slash. The blonde sprang back and gave out a groan of disgust. When she hit Buffy, the Slayer went soaring through the air and smacked into a wall. “A machete? What is wrong with you two? You can’t go around shooting and stabbing people.”

Dean pulled out his second gun and fired off two shots. Both sank into her and she turned towards him with a kind of slow fury that made Dean instinctively back up. Didn’t stop her from storming at him anyway, and neither did the half-clip he put into her. When he tried to punch her, she grabbed his arm. Her other hand shot out and gripped him by the throat. He gasped, she tightened, and she pushed him down onto his knees. Her expression only darkened more. “You know, I’m totally going to kill you for that, but only because your kind is too big of a hassle to feed. Eye candy like you would be great to keep around, but all the crying and crapping just really isn’t worth the headache these days.”

His vision was starting to go, blood pounding away in his ears. Yet, he still heard Buffy say, “Hey.”

The woman turned, Buffy went for another machete swing. Sensing the bigger threat, the woman released Dean and he fell forward, gasping and coughing for air. When he could raise his eyes, he saw the fight wasn’t going that well for Buffy either. The woman said, “Oh, neat. You’ve got some extra punch in you. Wanna see mine?”

And with a single blow, the woman sent Buffy flying again. Buffy struggled up to her feet and Dean knew that look on her face. Abort mission. Question was, how? The woman was blocking the only exit. Buffy glanced at the big window behind the monk and Dean nodded. But man, this was going to hurt like hell.

“Come on, is that all you’ve got?” the woman demanded. She looked right at Dean.

So Buffy took the chance to run for the monk. That caught the woman’s attention and Dean bolted for the window, raising an arm up to cover his face. He twisted in the air and came down wrong on his shoulder. It popped and he gave out a half groan, half scream. Getting on his feet was priority one, which he did as Buffy and the monk hit the pavement near him. With his good arm, he helped Buffy get the monk up onto his feet, but even with the two of them, the monk was hardly moving. He muttered something to Buffy that Dean didn’t really hear. He was too busy paying attention to the factory behind them. Any second now, that crazy chick was going to come after them.

They got to the Impala and Dean held the door open for the two of them. Loud, cracking sounds came from the factory. A puff of dust blew out the now very broken window. Dean hopped into the driver’s seat and got going. His arm was protesting, but he had some limited movement, enough that he had no problems driving like a bat out of hell.

“Dean, hurry!” Buffy said, as if he wasn’t running a red light at the current moment. At least he did know where the hospital was—he’d memorized that part when the family rolled into town. “We’re going to get you help.”

“Too late,” the monk muttered. His accent was so thick Dean had troubles understanding him. “But I can rest now.”

“You just hold on,” Dean said.

“I found the Dagon’s sphere. That was yours, wasn’t it?” Buffy asked.

“For protection. For the Key,” the monk said.

“Key? What key?”
“W-we g-g-gave it to you. Made it from you, so you would protect it.” The monk’s voice was getting stronger, but not in the good way. In that rally-for-the-last-speech way. Dean floored it and willed the guy to shut up and save his strength, but he kept going. “You have to protect her.”

“Her? Her who? Dawn?” Buffy was crying. Dean could hear it in her words, caught a glimpse of the tears running down her cheeks in the rearview mirror. “She isn’t real, is she?”

“She is.”

“Then what is she?”

“Human. Sh-she had to be hu-human to protect her.”

“How long? How long as she actually been in my life?”

“Two months.”

“And everything before that?” Buffy demanded.

“We ha-had to make sure that the Slayer would protect the Key, so it had to become a sister.”

“You screwed up my memories, my mom’s. My friends!”

“There was no other way. Sh-she’s helpless. She knows nothing about what’s happening. Please, you have to protect her.” The monk sighed.

Dean blew through another red light. “We’re almost there!”

“Dean, stop the car,” Buffy said.

“One block left.”

“Stop the car.”

Dean shook his head.

“Dean!”

He slammed his foot down on the brake, controlling the Impala so that they went right up against the curb. He threw it into park. After all of that. The fight, the running, and the guy was dead in the back seat. They’d been freaking helpless against that woman and now they hadn’t even managed to save the guy. Dean struck the steering wheel. “Son of a bitch!”

A sob broke out of Buffy. She sniffed as she wiped at her nose with the back of her hand. For a second, the only sound was that of Buffy’s crying. Hot tears burned down Dean’s cheeks, but he cleared them off. Her broken voice damn near made him want to go back there and hold her. “What are we going to do?”

“Town’s full of mausoleums. No one’s going to mind an extra occupant,” Dean said. He looked back at her. “What are you going to do about Dawn?”

“I have to protect her. They might have made her, but she’s my sister now.” Their eyes met. Even through all those tears, Buffy had a resolve, a strength. She’d meant what she said. “Dean, you can’t tell anyone.”

He nodded. He’d had no intention of doing so, but he realized he was going to hate keeping this
from Sam. Maybe once they knew more about this whole ‘key’ idea, he’d be able to talk to his brother. On second thought, better that Sam stayed out of this level of supernatural crazy. That woman back there had meant business and if she could wipe the walls with the Slayer and Dean, Sam didn’t have a chance of surviving an encounter with her either. In fact, better not to mention anything from this whole night.

After they had a silent moment, Dean started the car again and pulled away from the curb. The soft rumble of the Impala was the only sound as they moved on towards a graveyard.
Buffy stepped out of the car, ignoring the shaking in her hands. When that didn’t work, she went to wipe them down her pants, but Dean caught one of her wrists. She frowned up at him. Those green eyes were captivating, even in the dark, so much that she almost didn’t hear him speak. Or maybe that was the shock setting in since the adrenaline was gone. His voice was gentle. “Don’t. The blood. Hold on a second.” He popped open the trunk and pulled out a rag. “Here.”

She caught the rag and wiped at the blood. Not too much had gotten on her, though the back seat was going to have a lot more. “Sorry. About the car.”

“Starters, it cleans up fine. And he’s not the first guy we’ve had in here,” Dean said. He was moving funny, but she wasn’t at the top of her mobility either. “Think you can carry him?”

“Once my hands stop shaking.” Buffy gave a dry chuckle and regretted it. But Dean had a half grin too. Apparently trying to find the emotional out of a situation with laughter wasn’t just a Scooby Gang coping mechanism. “How bad are you hurt?”

“Some bruises. Dislocated shoulder. Think I’ve got a cut from the glass.”

“You should get to the hospital.”

“Had a lot worse. Just going to need your help popping my arm back in place.”

Buffy frowned. “Not the first time you dislocated it?”

“More like the third.”

“What was the first?”

“State champion.”

“What?” Buffy asked.

Dean grinned at her. “I was on a wrestling team when I bothered to go to high school. Sort of didn’t tap out in time.”

“I could see that. What with the macho streak running a mile wide in your family.”

“And what do we have here?” Spike asked as he stepped out from the shadows. Dean spun, pulling his gun and aiming it at the blond British vamp. With a twisted smug smile, Spike raised his hands. “Now now, people come visiting my cemetery, I have the right to investigate.”

“Your cemetery?” Dean snarled.

“Relax,” Buffy said. “He’s harmless.”

“That wounds me, Slayer. How am I supposed to strike fear into anybody if you tell everyone about me?” Spike pointed his finger at Dean. “Which I am not harmless by the way. So don’t get any ideas.” His gaze slid towards the backseat. “Speaking of which, looks like the two of you have been up to something.”

“This wasn’t us.” Buffy held her arms tight against her body. All she wanted to do was curl up and go to sleep, but that was a long ways off. “But we obviously can’t just leave him in the back of
Dean’s car. We need to bury him, but I don’t know if we have the time.”

“No need,” Spike said. “I know an empty crypt or two.”

“Can you show us?”

“For a little dough.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “I don’t have any money.”

“Well, good luck digging a grave with Mr. Shoulder Injury then. Or, hold on, where’s Captain Cardboard?” Spike grinned and made a show of looking around. “Does he know you’re out and about with this guy or are you stepping out on him?”

“Dean’s just a friend,” Buffy said sharply.

But something about her expression made Spike light up even more. He was practically ready to jump up and down, which was so not good. She’d have to tell Riley about hunting with Dean before Spike had a chance to make it sound ridiculous. Spike reached down into the car and began to pull the monk out. “You know what Slayer? This one’s free after all.”

“Be careful with him.”

As Spike stood, he had a much more solemn look on his face. It was one of those rare times Buffy had trouble remembering he was soulless. “Will do.”

“I’m coming with you,” she said.

“Think I’m going to wipe down the seat,” Dean replied. “Last thing we need is a random patrol car spotting the blood.”

“Good thinking. I’ll be back in a minute.” Buffy went to walk away, but Dean pursed his lips. She hesitated for a second. When he didn’t add on anything, she hurried to catch up with Spike.

“So,” Spike drawled, “just how long have you been seeing Coverboy?”

“I told you, I’m not ‘seeing’ Dean.”

“Nothing going on with him?”

Oh, there might be something if she let it, but Buffy wasn’t about to spill that idea near Spike. She glared at him instead. “You’re carrying a dead man, so can we save the chitchat about my love life—which is so none of your business—until way, way after we’ve laid him to rest?”

“You’re right. Man of the cloth deserves a bit more respect,” Spike said. They continued on, and true to his word for once, Spike put the monk in an empty grave inside one of the mausoleums. “Want to say a few words?”

“I don’t really know what to say.” Buffy kept her eyes low, not quite able to take them off the stone Spike was putting back into place. “Sort of a failed rescue. Don’t really know him.”

“Ah, well, sad state of affairs for him then.” Spike finished putting the stone in place with a final grunt and made a show of dusting his hands off. “Poor sod’s put away. God rest his soul, or whatever.”

“Truly inspiring words.” Not wanting to be anywhere near Spike, preferably nowhere near anyone,
she turned and left the building. Of course, she wasn’t going to get away that easily, but at least outside had fresh, cool air. As Spike rushed up beside her, she said, “Look, I don’t know why you helped, but thanks.”

“You’ll have to owe me one,” Spike said.

“Owe you one? You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

“You can’t keep thinking that’s enough.”

Buffy glared at him. “You nearly got Riley killed because you kidnapped the doctor that was supposed to work on his heart. You’re lucky he didn’t take that chip out of your head or I would have dusted you.”

“Right.” Spike made that annoying sucking teeth click noise he always did when he was pissed. As if she cared if he was angry. The chip in his brain prevented him from physically harming any human. “Know what? You can count on me telling your boyfriend about this little field trip the next time I see him. And you can bet that he’s not going to be too happy about this.”

She wanted to argue with him, but Spike had a point. Damn it. She was really going to have to call Riley sooner rather than later. Before she could protest that Dean didn’t mean anything for the third time, Spike stormed off into the graveyard, black trenchcoat flapping around behind him. Maybe she should just stake him and be done with it. If he hadn’t saved their lives last spring, she would have. In a way, she kind of did owe him for that, for like, ever. Getting lost in her thoughts, she headed back to the Impala more on autopilot.

Dean was leaning against the car waiting for her. Once again, Spike was right—Dean easily belonged on magazine covers or television. He was so handsome he bordered on pretty. And that was not something she needed to be noticing right now. Not with everything she’d learned tonight. Too bad though, because suddenly she needed a hug and she bet Dean gave good ones. Seemed like he’d have a nice, warm embrace.

Whoa, so not where her mind needed to go. Buffy held her arms close to her chest again as she approached him. “You good to drive?”

“Helps that the streets are empty at this hour. Any chance I can clean up at your place? Don’t want Sam seeing me like this if I can help it.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Are you okay?” Dean asked.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, though her voice was still distant. She forced a smile. “Swear I will be. Just going to take a little time. Been a while since anything could beat me like that.”

“Unfortunately, hasn’t been that long for me. Thanks for saving my ass.”

Buffy’s smile turned a little more genuine. “You’re welcome. Good job distracting her.”

“Hey, all I had to do was stand there. Wouldn’t call whatever that was exceptionally bright.”

“Still, you tried. A lot of the other hunters who blow through here don’t like listening to me and they’re worse at trying to help.”

“You’re the one with the skills here. I’d be a moron not to follow your lead.”
They were staring at each other too long, Buffy realized. The smile on Dean’s lips was too nice, she was feeling too warm all of a sudden, and if they kept standing here, someone else was bound to notice the way they were talking to each other. Buffy rubbed her arms. “We should really get going.”

“Oh, right.”

They climbed into the Impala. The engine’s rumble was a soothing lull in their conversation. Buffy leaned against her window and stared out as they passed through Sunnydale’s streets towards her house. Dawn wasn’t her sister, but she had to protect her all the same. Everything had to change and no one could know about it.

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The Summers’ kitchen was once again a first-aid station, even though the lights were still low. Giles brought them up a fraction as he stepped into the room. Buffy scowled over at him. “I didn’t want to alarm Mom and Dawn. I had a hard enough time convincing them he was all right.”

Giles glanced at Dean. The young man had his shirt off to expose the several cuts along his torso, which left his scars on display as well. Something was wrong with his shoulder, too. He simply wasn’t holding himself right. “One of those is going to need stitches. You’ll need the light.”

“We know about the stitches. Needed some help putting the shoulder back in first,” Dean said.

“You shouldn’t have waited for me,” Giles said.

“I’ve never done it by myself,” Buffy replied. “I didn’t want to screw it up.”

Giles went looking for a few dishtowels. “The longer you wait, the more inflammation sets in.”

“It hasn’t been that long,” Dean said.

“Is this the first time?” Giles asked.

“No.”

Giles nodded and tried not to think about that. An injury like this was easily repeated and in someone as young as Dean, that meant a lifelong problem. Especially considering Dean’s line of work. He handed one of the dishtowels to Dean. “You’ll need to bite down on this.”

“I’m good,” Dean said.

“If you wake up my family, we’re going to have bigger problems than you needing stitches,” Buffy said.

Dean glowered at her, but he put a towel in his mouth all the same. So Dean wasn’t as stubborn as his father seemed to be. Good. Giles got Dean’s shoulder into position. “I’m going to count to three and then pop it back in. One. Two.”

Giles snapped the shoulder back into place on the second count and Dean screamed into the makeshift gag. A second later, Dean yanked the towel from his mouth and spun so he leaned forward against the counter. His breaths were sharp up until he groaned quietly. “Awesome Jeeves. Thanks.”
“Thank me by remembering my name,” Giles replied.

“Right. Sorry.”

“Onto the needle and thread part,” Buffy said. She picked up said items and immediately set them back down. “I’m sorry. I’m bad at it. Way bad. Part of the Slayer package is massive healing. I’ve never really needed to practice.”

“Lucky.” Dean stood up more. “I can do it.”

“It will be easier if I help with that too,” Giles said. “You can sit down and the two of you can finally explain what happened this evening.”

“We got our asses handed to us.”

“That is quite obvious. But how? What?”

As Giles prepped to stitch up Dean, Buffy launched into her long tale, starting with the meditation and continuing all the way to driving back to the Summers’ household with Dean. She left bits out, the only obvious lie of omission being something about the effects of the meditation. If she had wanted to conceal that she was hiding something, she shouldn’t have glanced at Dean in mid-sentence. Giles would have to ask when the hunter wasn’t around. He bandaged Dean’s stitches and then cleaned his hands at the sink. “Do you think Dawn has any clue that she’s this Key?”

“The monk said she didn’t and I believe it. As weird as it sounds, we know Dawn and she’s not very good at the secret keeping.”

“I could have Sam sniff around,” Dean said.

“No,” Buffy said sharply.

Giles expected an argument, but somehow the one word cowed Dean’s idea. Something had happened. He frowned, but pushed aside those questions again. “Is there anything else you can tell me about this threat?”

“She, uh, called me eye candy. Made a deal out of wanting to keep me if humans weren’t too much of a hassle to take care of. Oh, and she said ‘these days.’ Got the impression she was old,” Dean said.

Details, to be certain, but not anything that significantly reduced the possibilities right away. Giles wiped off his glasses while he thought.

“I should get going.” Dean carefully put his shirt back on. “Too much longer and Sammy’s going to think we have to take off.”

“Thanks for helping me tonight,” Buffy said.

“Pretty sure tonight was mutual ass saving. Giles, thanks for helping me patch up. Your stitches are way neater than mine.”

“Not a problem.” Giles waited as Buffy walked Dean out the front door. Patience, as always, would give him the opportunity to gather more information. A few whispered words at the door and then Buffy slowly walked back into the kitchen. Giles set his glasses back on his nose. “What weren’t you telling me before?”
Buffy frowned and folded her arms over her chest. She was deep in thought, probably thinking about whether or not she should betray Dean’s trust. But Dean Winchester was a new person in her life and her bond with Giles was much older. After a heavy sigh, she raised her eyes to meet Giles’s gaze. “It’s about Sam.”
“Dean. Dean!”

A pillow smacked straight into a bruised rib and Dean rolled over with a groan. Light was shining in his face. When he went to block it, someone grabbed his wrist and twisted. On auto-pilot, Dean countered the grab and got hold on the person in return.

“Ow!” Sam said.

Sam. Sammy. Dean let his brother go and rubbed at his eyes instead. “What?”

“I need you to drive me to—whoa, what happened to your face?”

Dean rose out of the bed. “Concrete. This is why you don’t jump out of a second story window."

“How did that happen?”

“None of your concern, Sammy. You are out of the hunting business until you graduate, got it?”

Dean stumbled towards the bathroom.

“I can’t ignore the fact that you got your ass handed to you by something. What if it comes looking for payback?”

Not a thing Dean wanted to think about. He leaned heavily on the crappy counter and glanced up at his reflection. Yeah, looked like he went a few rounds with a paper shredder and someone wielding a club last night. Good thing he’d already had that meeting with Principal Wood. Maybe that guy knew whatever that woman was. Or maybe he was just a principal who happened to be wise about the town he worked in. Dean splashed water on his face.

“You need to tell me, Dean."

“You said something about needing to drive you somewhere.”

“Dawn called. Buffy’s moving out of her dorm and asked if I could help.”

Dean wiped his face on a towel. “Not gonna happen."

“Come on. I thought you wanted me to be friends with her. Or is this about what happened last night?”

“We’re going to give Buffy a little space. She calls, and we’ll go.” And figure a few things out ourselves.

“Oh, so it has to be Buffy who calls us. It can’t be anyone else,” Sam said.

“Man, I so do not have the energy for this right now.”

“Because you went hunting last night? What beat you up?”

Dean slammed the door shut on Sam. Pesterling little brothers could wait until he had a chance to clean up and swallow down a few pain pills. His shoulder and bruises ached. And yeah, he really did look like crap. Thankfully Dad wasn’t around to see this. Explaining it to him would be hard.
However, knowing his next move would be easier. Dad would issue an order and he’d be able to follow it. Left out on their own like this, Dean was going to have to decide what the best course of action was. An uneasy feeling in his gut blossomed. Dad was right. They should be on the move, especially if some of those things in the night were going to come crawling after them. Like that blonde woman. She seemed like the kind that would hold a grudge.

No. They were done living Dad’s way for the time being. Chick last night got a good look at him, but not a name. So long as he didn’t poke his head too high, she wasn’t likely to spot him. No reason to move on and every reason to stay. Dean skipped shaving, did a quick clean up around the stitches, and put on a fresh set of clothes. Sam was stretched out on his bed reading a textbook, though didn’t take much to realize that this was a silent treatment tactic. Fine by Dean. He could use the rest.

If his mind would just let him get it instead of dragging out every horrible scenario that could happen to them. And then every horrible thing that could be happening to Dad. Oh, and they were running low on cash and he was going to have to do something about that.

His cellphone went off and both Winchesters dove for it. Dean grabbed hold of it first, swooping back out of Sammy’s grasp, and shoving him back towards his bed. “Dean.”

“Hi. It’s me.” Buffy.

Dean cleared his throat. He hadn’t thought the Slayer would be calling him up this soon. “What do you need?”

“Once we’re done moving my boxes into the house, a couple of us are going to do research about the woman from last night. I thought you might want in on it.”

What he wanted was to find out why Buffy sounded like she was hesitating on every word she was saying to him. “Yeah. Sure. Beats the hell out of what’s on television.”

Sam frowned at him. They hadn’t bothered turning on the tv.

“Great. Giles is opening up the shop now. I’ll probably get there in an hour or so.”

“Yeah, okay. We’ll see you there.”

“Okay.”

And now they were both hanging on the phone waiting for the other one to say something. Dean said, “Right. See you.”

Sam hardly waited for Dean to lower the phone. “Who was that?”

“Buffy. Research party.” Dean frowned. Crap, he had said ‘we,’ but if he took Sam along he had to explain what had happened. At the same time, he couldn’t keep ditching his brother in the motel room. He had to keep an eye on him.

“What is it?” Sam asked.

Dean gave an exhausted sigh. “Look, I’ll give you some details from last night, but you don’t ask any more and you don’t tell Dad about any of this.”

“You go out hunting and we have to keep it from Dad?”

“You want to finish school here or not?”
“All right, geesh. I get it. No telling Dad. What happened?”

So Dean jumped into the short version of the story, leaving out the part about Buffy’s vision. Sam had enough on his mind with high school and a new town. Yeah, that was a good reason not to tell him.

But that tiny voice in the back of Dean’s head whispered maybe he had other reasons. Like, maybe he couldn’t trust Sam after all. Not if he was under a demon’s influence. The guilty seed was planted in the back of his consciousness and sometime in the last twelve hours, it’d gained roots. Try as he might, Dean couldn’t shake that feeling. He’d just have to do something about that demon because there was no way in Hell he was ever giving up on Sam.

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When Sam and Dean walked into the Magic Box, Anya perked up and immediately deflated. “Welcome to—oh, it's you two again.”

“Be polite,” Giles said as he set a box down on the counter.

“Yeah,” Dean said. “Politeness is going to get you a lot farther in the retail business.”

“I’ll have you know I am perfectly polite to paying customers. You two are more like, research monkeys.” Anya waved a hand towards the table piled of books. “Fly, fly.”

“I show up twice for this and suddenly I’m a research monkey?” Dean asked.

“You do the bidding of the research taskmaster, don’t you?” Anya said.

“Yeah, okay. Point taken.” Dean headed over towards the table. The pile of books was sloppy and ginormous. Whatever lead Giles had been hunting must have lead him down a giant rabbit hole. Assuming, of course, Giles had a lead at all. Vain hope.

“Dean, I was hoping to have a minute to talk to you,” Giles said.

“Sure.” Talking got him out of staring at this giant stack. Sam might be diving into it like a normal chore, but man, all this reading was going to catch up to Dean at some point. Not that he minded learning stuff, but after an ass-kicking he always felt better getting back out in the field. Giles took him to the back training room.

And handed him another book. Dean frowned at it. “You keeping something from the others?”

“Buffy told me about the shadow lurking around Sam. I thought that might be something you don’t want the others to know.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure it was something I wanted you to know,” Dean said.

“You need help.”

“We’ve been doing fine for seventeen years.”

Giles sighed. “Would you like to keep doing ‘fine’ or would you like to finally end this?”

Well, shit, put that way Dean didn’t have a lot of choice. “End it.”
“Then accept a little more help from Buffy and I.” Giles held out a book. “I came across this last night. You know there’s a difference between demons, correct?”

“You got the monster things that like running around and you got the spirit things that come crawling out of Hell and possess people.” Dean took the book and scanned through a few pages. This was some serious demon lore shit happening. “Devil’s trap?”

“Laying one down could show us how much influence the demon has over Sam.”

“You mean, find out if he’s possessed by Azazel.” Dean snapped the book shut. This was ridiculous. “You really think my dad and I would be stupid enough to ride around with a demon for practically my whole life and not know the difference?”

“I think we should eliminate the possibilities,” Giles said.

“My brother isn’t some freaking experiment.”

“Dean, I—”

“Got to be something else we can do,” Dean said.

“This is simple. And harmless to the average person. It would be—well, it would be a smart addition to the shop actually.”

“Right. ‘Cause no one’s going to notice a huge freaking circle on the ground.”

“They won’t if it’s under a rug,” Giles replied.

Score another point for the old Brit. Sometimes Dean needed to think before he opened his mouth. He fingered the spine of the book. “And it’s not going to hurt anyone?”

“All it would do is stop a demon-possessed person from crossing out of it—actually those possessing demons out of a specific few realms. The individual isn’t actually harmed at all. We can see if Sam’s caught in it and decide what to do from there.”

“If you think he’s possessed, why don’t we just jump straight to the exorcism?” Dean said.

Giles put both hands in his pockets. “That’s an idea, of course, but if we’re wrong about the demon type and what’s happening to him, then we risk alerting whatever presence is affecting Sam. Our best weapon is always surprise and we’re fortunate enough to still have some in this case.”

“So just draw this thing on the ground and see if my brother can walk through it?” Dean wiped a hand over his mouth. Really, he needed to call Dad and tell him what was going on. Should have thought of that last night. Crap. Dad was going to hate this. Probably try to drag them out of Sunnydale kicking and screaming if he had to. And Sam would kick and holler this time.

“Is something else on your mind?” Giles asked.

“Naw. Nothing.” Winchester problems weren’t for discussing with strangers, even if the strangers came with huge libraries and years of experience with the supernatural. Dean scratched the back of his neck. No getting out of it, he was going to have to call Dad asap. Damn it. So much for Sam’s future, for getting to know the Slayer. For everything. But there wasn’t anything else he could do. “All right. When are you going to do this?”

“I imagine we could draw it after the shop closes tonight.”
“Perfect. I’ll make sure Sam and I drop by tomorrow after he gets out of school.”

“More than enough time.”

“Yeah. Great.”

“Dean, we will get to the bottom of Buffy’s vision,” Giles said. The guy was obviously trying to be sympathetic, but Dean just wasn’t feeling it. Maybe because all he could think about was what Dad was going to do when he heard. “If he is possessed, it’s a simple exorcism.”

“And if it’s something else?”

“Then we’ll figure it out. You’re not alone in this.”

“Yeah, I’m sure everyone’s going to be just fine with us if they find out,” Dean said.

“They might surprise you.”

Dean tried not to dismally think that they’d surprise him and Sam with a beheading. He sighed loudly. “Any chance I could train for a while? Got some energy to work out.”

“I’m not sure that’s wise. The stitches.”

“Oh. Right. Research it is.” Dean followed Giles back out into the main shop and took a seat at the table beside Sam. When Sam gave him that ‘well, what was that about?’ look, he ignored him and grabbed one of the bigger volumes from the pile Giles had laid out. Sam got fussy. He always did when Dean held back info, but that wasn’t going open him up on this one.

Honestly, getting knocked around by an unknown blond was a lot better than worrying about a demon infecting his brother. Dean grabbed another book and promptly ignored the rest of the room.
Chapter 12

“I hope you realize how rude this is,” Anya said as she trucked over the paint can. Her heels clicked loudly as she did so.

“I think it’s a good idea.” Willow gave Giles a bright, sunshiney smile.

Whatever was going on between the two of them—and Giles had a feeling it had something to do with competing for Xander’s attention as girlfriend and best friend—he wished they would stop creating this silent tension whenever they were both in a room. Something that magnified if one was left alone with them, which was unfortunately the case as the Magic Box had closed down for the night. Xander had gone off to take care of something, the Winchester boys naturally couldn’t be around, the Summer girls were with their mother. Right about now, Giles was praying that even Riley, melancholic as he was lately, would stop by. Or, *good Lord*, Spike.

Giles sat up from where he had been methodically drawing lines of the Devil’s Trap and took off his glasses. Spike? Had he really just wished that nuisance would disturb his evening? He thought about saying something to the two young women, but often delving into teenager or young adult interpersonal problems only wound up giving him a headache. No, what he really needed was friends his own age. Which might happen if he wasn’t solving crisis after crisis or researching every spare moment. Perhaps he’d call Olivia. Her last visit to town had been too eventful and he could hardly blame her for avoiding the Hellmouth, but he could drive down to Los Angeles for a day, certainly.

“I’m just saying, what are we going to do if it’s the middle of the day and someone is suddenly caught at the front door?” Anya said. “Customers will panic. Especially if Buffy has to slay someone.”

“This isn’t meant to catch that kind of demon,” Giles said.

“Right.” Willow took the paint can from Anya, still far too gleeful, and pried off the lid. “This is only going to catch possessing demons. We can exorcise those.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose that’s okay. Though that still doesn’t solve the problem of someone standing in the way of the door.” Anya huffed and put her hands on her hips. “And it’s not a very good measure. I mean, they could just come in the back door instead. And if you put salt around the windows, people are going to notice.”

Giles put on his glasses and frowned up at Anya. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“You’re wanting to demon-proof against them and you only thought about the front door?” Anya said.

“Not the usual level of Giles attention,” Willow said.

Because he had lied to them about the reason for this newest addition. He really only needed to test against one potential victim, but he had sold it to them as a larger measure. All so they wouldn’t ask who that potential victim was. “I hardly think demons are going to fly through the windows. Black smoke is a little conspicuous, even in a magic shop.”

“Because we’re going to be watching the windows at all times? Won’t that get in the way of business?”
“All right, Anya. We will find some sort of countermeasure for the windows.”

“Great. I’m going to go close out the cash register.” Anya walked away, heels chirping in practical delight.

Willow and Giles bent back to the task of painting the Devil’s Trap. While perhaps a bit gaudy in bright red, it would be easier to check on it and maintain it. If the circle was at all broken, the whole thing would be useless. Giles switched from outlining to painting. He hoped that having a task like this would distract Willow from her latest bad habit—mocking Anya when the other woman was out of earshot. Unfortunately, about a moment later, Willow was whispering. “You must get so tired from hearing about the money all day.”

“A great many things are tiring,” Giles replied, carefully keeping his tone—and painting—even. “Frankly, I appreciate how she keeps the books. She’s thorough and, I dare say, makes fewer errors than I would. And the bonus is that she enjoys it.”

“You make mistakes?” Willow joked.

“It has happened from time to time.”

“But doesn’t she drive you crazy?”

No crazier than this being Willow’s priority when a strange woman had beaten both Buffy and Dean and caused a building to collapse. Or that Dawn and Sam weren’t what they appeared to be, not that Willow was clued in on that information yet. Giles sighed. “I couldn’t run the shop without her.”

“Well, I could help,” Willow said sullenly.

“You have classes and as I said, Anya genuinely enjoys working here. She may be a bit—I suppose aggressive is a good word, but she’s a hard worker, resourceful, and very well experienced in the occult. I should have employed her before I opened the shop.”

Willow looked positively glum about that response, but Giles was tired of her attempt to drag him in the middle of this developing feud. He thought that would be the end of any discussion and once again, he was wrong. Willow painted along the carefully drawn lines for a few minutes in silence. “What do you really think about Sam and Dean? Buffy said their dad was rude and Riley won’t stop glaring at Dean.”

That was a good question. Giles paused in painting for a moment. So much had been going on and he hadn’t really stopped to consider them. “I think Dean is trying the best that he can.”

“So you like them?”

“Well, Buffy isn’t wrong about their father.” Though rude was far more polite than he would have used to describe John Winchester.

“Seems like they’ll be sticking around.”

“It does.”

“I get why Riley’s all worked up over them though,” Willow said as she went back to painting. “We don’t really know anything about them. Too bad there isn’t some kind of national hunter network we can call for all the juicy intel. Oh, maybe I could do a spell and see their auras. I’ve been working on one—”
Giles had already swept off his glasses again and pinched his brow. National hunter network. Of course. He sighed, finally cutting Willow off from her long explanation of recent magical theory, and said, “That won’t be necessary. You can finish this?”

“I can. What are you going to do?”

“I may not be a member of the Council, but I do still have a few friends.”

“Are you really going to check up on them? I thought they’re good people.”

But one of them might have more information on Sam, or on the demon Azazel. Giles rose from the floor. He hated the way everything felt stiff as he did so. Better to let Willow finish the painting anyway. At this rate, they would have had to help him stand back up and that was just discouraging. “A little more information never hurt us.”

Giles went down the three short steps and walked across the room. There wasn’t a lot of space behind the counter and Anya frowned at him as he stepped back there to grab his address book from under the register. “You said I could finish up the counting. I like counting.”

“You can. Just grabbing this.” Giles took the phone and the address book over to the large round table. He had to push aside a few of the research books they had left out. While Willow was right, there was no one ‘national hunters network,’ there was a series of places hunters tended to frequent. The Council had never encouraged such connections, but that had never stopped Giles from gathering the phone numbers. He started with a dive on the East Coast and planned on working his way west.

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The Bronze had some slow not-quite-pop not-fully-indie music playing over the speakers on this Sunday night. The crowd was down to the die hard high schoolers who refused to believe the weekend was over, a handful of locals who loitered every night, and a dozen or so college determined to make any night a party night in their short existence. As per usual, the lights were low, the beer cold, and Spike had claimed one of the stools up against the bar in the far corner.

Spike picked at the fried onion blossom. Normally, such a tasty treat made his evening, especially since he’d paid for it by ripping off a few of the local college brats. Nothing quite like rewarding himself for a good scam. But for tonight, for some reason, he just wasn’t getting into it. Not the drinks, not the pulling one over on unsuspecting morons, not the onion. All because he couldn’t get a certain blond out of his head.

He was bound and determined to stop thinking about the Slayer. With her perfect blond hair, fierce attitude. He had a bad habit of liking women who were awful for him. Look at him and Dru. A long time together, sure, but she’d ditched him soon as she got well enough. First for her sire Angelus, and then for that demon in South America. Harmony wasn’t much better. She was more than a little clingy and most nights Spike wished she would sod off for parts unknown. Not really a relationship there. Like he could expect one with Buffy? Naw, that would be all about sex. Good, glorious sex if she was even half what he envisioned and dear God did he wish he would stop thinking about her. Why was she even a thing in his brain?

And yet seeing her with that green-eyed, perfect teeth, chiseled jaw bastard who had an equally
impressive car had caused a jealous streak a mile wide to grow overnight. Riley was a known element. He was a pushover. He wasn’t monster enough to keep Buffy satisfied for long. Anyone with eyes could see that. But this new guy. This Dean—he was an unknown. A complete mystery.

Spike raised his gaze up long enough to catch the bartender’s and motioned for another beer. As the bartender dropped it off, he leaned in close and looked over Spike’s shoulder. “Looks like you’ve got some competition."

The bartender wandered off on his duty and Spike turned.

Son of a bitch. Apparently think of the green-eyed menace and he appeared. Dean had a pool cue in hand, playing against some of the very same boys Spike had ripped off earlier, and was chatting up said boys’ girlfriends. The birds were eating out of his hand too. Did the man have no sense of decency when it came to territory? Spoken-for girls, spoken-for town. Who did the little prick think he was? Rolling in here, swaggering about as if he belonged already. That loud laugh of his was making Spike wish he didn’t have this bloody chip in his head. He’d like for nothing more than to grab Dean by the back of the head and reopen that neck wound teasing under his collar. Boy that young and virile would run hot. Give a good fight too. Been a long time since Spike had drank from someone who kept fighting, who kept bucking and holding onto life until beyond that last heartbeat.

Unfortunately, even thinking about that visual for too long started the slight pain in the back of his head. He’d have to do something else. Spike swallowed half his beer down, abandoned the onion blossom, and stood. Right. How best to cut the legs out from underneath this kid? An idea came to him and Spike grinned. That would do. He slipped out of the black leather trenchcoat and hooked it on a finger, draping it over his shoulder. There, Dean was paying more attention to the girls than the game again. Easier to sneak up on him.

With his own swagger, Spike walked up beside Dean, threw an arm around his shoulders, and planted a big kiss on Dean’s cheek. “Been waiting for you to show up, sweetheart.”

That startled look in Dean’s eyes was priceless, but what came next would be the kicker. So many different ways to react and each of them would give Spike the insight he needed for the next move.

Dean brightened, leveling that charming smile at Spike while his eyes screamed murderous intent. It made that smile that much better and Spike tried not to get sucked into the little conartist’s fan club. But damn, that smile was good. Dean wrapped his arm around Spike a little too tight. “Heh, hey there sugar. Didn’t think you were making it out tonight?”

“You’re with him?” one of the girls asked.

Dean flicked his tongue over his lip and barked out a short laugh. “Well, I—”

“You’re with him?” one of the boys repeated. The other one made a face. “You’re going to rip us off too!”

“What? No, I’m not. It’s an honest game.”

“Bullshit.”

The amusement in Dean’s smile was dropping away into malice. Oh, Spike liked this boy. Had a proper monster in him after all. “Come on, we had a wager.”

Both boys slammed their pool cues down on the table. The angrier, taller boy picked up the few bills resting on the pool table’s edge and tucked them into his back pocket. “I’m not getting ripped off twice.”
“Hey, some of that’s mine,” Dean said.

“Get it out of your boyfriend.”

The boys and their girlfriends took off for the bar. Dean would have followed them, except Spike clamped down his arm with a little supernatural strength. More than a little irate, Dean shoved Spike away. “What the hell?”

Spike rolled with the motion, making sure to keep the beer perfectly fine, and leveled a glare at Dean. “Had the same thought when I saw you playing at my table. This is my territory and I don’t take kindly to poachers.”

“Your territory?”

“That’s right.”

Dean smugly leaned on the pool cue. “All right. How about we play for it?”

The gesture was just so damn human that Spike laughed. Funny little creatures sometimes still amused him like that. When Dean’s smile dimmed into a glower, Spike couldn’t help feeling even more mirth. “You really think it’s a good idea to play me?”

And suddenly, the boy was showing a different side. His green eyes—Dru had had a thing for eyes and now Spike couldn’t help concentrating on them everywhere he went—had a calm, calculating look. Muscles shifted subtly as he changed his stance from relaxed to poised. He had a knife in a sheath tucked into his belt. Probably at least one more hidden away somewhere else. Suddenly, he had an extra presence to him, a weight that Spike would be a fool to ignore. This boy, correction man, was a bloody hunter.

Oh, Dean’s blood would be good. The demon inside of Spike was itching to get to the surface and twist his features, make the fangs come out. It’d be content to wait long enough to get Dean outside. After all, it did have a sense of preservation. In fact, it’d be willing to wait long enough to tie the man down. Bleed him out slowly. If Harmony wasn’t likely to bullocks the whole thing, he’d call her and get her to kidnap him. But Harmony wasn’t much of a fighter and while she annoyed the crap out of him, he wasn’t longing to see Dean turn her into a pile of ash.

“You’re a vampire,” Dean snarled under his breath. His grip on the pool cue was different. Ready to use that as a weapon.

God, they could keep him tied up for days and he’d still fight them. He’d be a gasping, moaning, fist clenching, chain rattling mess up until the last breath. He was making Spike long for the very old days when he and Angelus got bored. Spike grinned. “That’s right.”

Dean clenched onto that pool cue some more. “And you’re friends with the Slayer?”

Ooooooo he did not seem fond of that idea! Spike was almost giddy with joy. He set the empty beer bottle down on the edge of the pool table. Wouldn’t be smart to underestimate the hunter. He better be at the ready in case this turned from friendly conversation to a bar brawl, though he wouldn’t be able to do much but counter and run away. “You could say that. Buffy and I have been known to help each other out.”

“So the cemetery we went to last night, that’s where you live. I thought vampires digging creepy places was a myth.”

“You obviously haven’t been in Sunnydale very long.”
“Yeah, well, I’m going to be here a while.” Dean narrowed the space between them. “I oughtta stake you.”

“And risk angering Buffy?”

“Somehow I don’t think she would get bent out of shape if I made a vampire ash.”

“Obviously you don’t know the Slayer very well either,” Spike said, unable to hide the glee in his voice. “You should ask her about Angel sometime.”

Dean frowned. Maybe this little conversation was going to be wedge enough between him and Buffy after all. Spike could only hope.

“How about this. You want somewhere to play pool? Hit up this little demon bar over on Eighth Street,” Spike suggested.

“Oh, so now I’m just supposed to go where you send me.”

“Well, you’re not going to make any money here. I’ve already played the worthwhile tables and it is a Sunday night.”

“Damn it,” Dean hissed under his breath. And once again, Spike longed to have the chip out of his head so he could sink his teeth into him. It was an ache so bad it was almost like activating the damn chip itself. Dean tossed down the pool cue and picked up his leather jacket. “Some other night, you and me are going to have a longer conversation about this.”

“If you really want to challenge me, we can do that right now.”

Dean judged the table once more, and then Spike. “Naw.” He flipped the collar of his jacket down into place. The leather was too big for him still, but not by much. If he made it another couple of years, he’d fill out that last bit. God, when was the last time Spike had—

Best to stop dwelling on this man and the desire to eat him or Spike was likely to get moody all night, which would cause him to snap at Harmony again and that would lead to her incessant complaining until he apologized. Hell, even if he did, she was likely to keep remonstrating him a few more hours. For peace of mind, he needed to move on already.

He waited until he heard the Bronze doors shut after Dean’s departure before pulling out a cellphone and making a call. If the hunter was stupid enough to listen to a vampire then it wasn’t going to be Spike’s fault something happened to him. At least, that was the argument he was preparing for the inevitable Buffy-smackdown that would come of this. Although if Dean left town—or died—this would be worth it. “Sully. ‘Bout time. Yeah, I know I owe you—will you listen for five bleeding seconds? There’s someone coming into the bar you should know about.”
Riley had his shoulders hunched in that pensive way that irritated the crap out of Buffy. Inviting him out was supposed to be good for them. They’d patrolled a lot during their relationship and usually this was some serious bonding time. But, like everything else lately, this only seemed to anger Riley more. She was doing the best she could, why couldn’t he get that? And why were the old tried and true ways of fixing their problems becoming less true and more tired? After another five minutes of painful silence, Buffy sighed. “Okay, I thought going out on patrol was going to improve your mood.”

Riley’s jaw clenched in that obvious way which meant he’d been thinking something unpleasant. “It’s good.”

“Wanna try that again? Maybe with a little more honesty this time.”

“Okay, I can’t help thinking that you’ve gone out with Dean twice this last week.”

“It really bothers you that he’s spent like any time at all with me?” Buffy said. The look on Riley’s face was more than enough proof. Yeah, he hated that idea. A lot. “God, what do I have to do to prove that he’s not even on my mind in that way? Tattoo your name to my arm? Because there’s some things that are a little too permanent.”

“And that’s the problem, isn’t it? You can’t see yourself with anyone permanently,” Riley snapped.

Buffy came to a stop. They were safe here on the sidewalk, but she didn’t quite feel that way anymore. Riley was throwing the world out of whack again and she didn’t realize that he had been thinking like that lately. “I’m the Slayer. We don’t exactly have ‘forevers’ to worry about.”

“Which means your time’s limited. Maybe I’m not the guy you really want to spend it with,” Riley said.

“I told you the other day, you’re my guy.”

“So you never think about him. Ever.”

She didn’t like that demanding/accusing tone in Riley’s voice. “We’re so not doing this again.”

She turned away from him and headed back down the street. Maybe patrolling the warehouse district again wasn’t the smartest thing since they hadn’t found a clue about the blonde woman who had kicked her and Dean’s asses, but she was kind of hoping for a fight. Well, a demon fight, not a fight with her boyfriend.

The problem of having a super tall boyfriend was that he could keep up with her—assuming she didn’t break out into a run with her Slayer strength. That would be too obvious of a giveaway, so she’d have to deal with his scowling face hanging over her as they quick-walked down the street. And he was determined to keep talking about this. “You took him on patrol. Twice.”

“Notice how he’s not here now. And one of those times it was his hunt, which you were invited along for and it isn’t my fault I had to send you home! You were like intentionally antagonizing him.”

“He’s unstable.”
“He’s been perfectly fine.”

“His family—”

“If we’re going to start judging families, I’m going to bring up insane-o Walsh again,” Buffy said. Riley’s expression darkened to a level Buffy had never seen before. Yeah, they were treading on some very dangerous ground right now, but she was getting tired of the judgmental attitude and the assumption that she couldn’t be faithful. She was. He had nothing to freaking worry about and he wasn’t getting that idea. They had stopped on the sidewalk again. Her head was craned up, he was looking down at her. Judging from the look on his face, he was dealing with a pretty intense internal battle—probably about whether or not he should back down. He did that a lot, she knew. And he better decide quick because she was only getting more pissed off at him.

“He has been around for like a week and you’re this jealous. What about all the cute guys I run into on a daily basis? You know, the ones on campus, the ones in my classes. Are you going to get this crazy about them?” Buffy demanded.

“They’re not your type.”

“I don’t have one.”

“You do too!”

Buffy folded her arms over her chest. “Pretty sure I have a guy right now, not a ‘type.’”

“You can’t tell me that you feel zero attraction to Dean. He’s a good looking bad boy with father issues a mile wide. And he fits into your world already.”

“Oh my God, you’re being insecure again!”

Riley’s face reddened. “Not exactly making me feel better.”

“I tried to make you feel better and you just keep working yourself up anyway!”

Whatever Riley was going to say next got caught off by the sound of something hitting a dumpster. Buffy spun, listening. Every once in a while, she got a false alarm, chasing after something that turned out to be a raccoon dumpster diving. But no. That was a second hard hit. Might be nothing, but she wasn’t willing to risk it. She took off across the street the same time Riley did. Definitely sounds of a fight—smacks and grunts.

They turned the corner of an alley to see three demons kicking someone who was down. Could be demon-on-demon problems, they were behind the demon bar on Eighth, but Buffy had to find out. She ran towards the fray.

One of the demons caught sight of her and backed off, grabbing his friend and encouraging him to do the same. Only the big guy stuck around to deliver a few more kicks. Buffy nailed him in the back of the knee with a well placed kick and then followed it up with a slam against his head. The demon tilted sideways and stumbled away a few steps. He was growling as he turned, but stopped when he saw her. Holding up his hands in surrender, he said, “Guy asked for it.”

“Pretty sure no one asks to have their asses kicked.” Buffy stood in an aggressive pose. “Unless this is you asking for more?”

“We don’t have a problem Slayer.” The demon pointed down to whoever was on the ground. “Just
keep him out of our bars and nothing more’ll happen to him.” Then he was backing away to join his
buddies. They all disappeared back into the bar.

Riley had already bent down to help up the victim, but Buffy had a pretty good feeling who it was
before she turned to look. Yup. Riley was supporting Dean and for once, her boyfriend’s face
seemed to genuinely soften around the guy.

That could’ve had something to do with the way Dean looked and even more with the way he was
moving. He was holding his side where Giles had stitched him up, fresh blood spreading across his t-
shirt. One eye was well on its way to swelling shut, even crossing the bridge of his nose to worsen
the other eye. His cheek was cut, his lip split, and he wasn’t standing straight. But he was forcing
himself to get up, making only the quietest of noises, so Buffy turned her reaction to steel. She’d go
back into that bar later and make sure no one else wanted to lay a hand on Dean.

“We should get him to a hospital,” Riley said.

“No way,” Dean said, his voice coming out rough and thick.

“You’re in bad shape,” Buffy said.

“Can’t afford it.”

Buffy had only gotten a glimpse of her mother’s medical bills and that had been more than enough to
worry her. “Then we’ll take you home.”

“No!” Dean groaned, apparently putting too much effort into his shout. He licked his lip and
grimaced. “Sammy can’t see me like this.”

Damn. Buffy could understand that too. She glanced to Riley.

“Can’t walk him into my dorm. Too many questions,” Riley said.

“And if Dawn sees you, she’ll blab to Sam immediately.” Buffy let out a deep breath. She hated
pulling this card, but they didn’t have any other choice. “We’ll have to go to Giles’s.”

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Dean had been forced to give up the keys to the Impala to Riley. Maybe he’d be able to make
himself drive there after they cleaned up the blood and did something about the swelling around his
eye, but for now, he had to agree. He wasn’t in any shape to drive. Not that he liked riding in the
back seat of his own car, but he was sort of grateful he didn’t have to manage this much injury on his
own. Hopefully that rib wasn’t broken because that would take forever to heal. And no way was he
calling Dad until some of this healed up. If he caught sight of Dean this roughed up and heard about
Sammy, he’d drag them all the way to freaking Maine to get them away from Sunnydale.

Giles lived in a pretty nice complex that even had a freaking courtyard for the couple conjoined
houses. Dean had to lean on Riley the whole way to the door. The inside was dark. Crap, either
Giles wasn’t here or they were about to wake him up.

Buffy rang the bell and a moment later a light flicked on. And then another. Guilt twisted up in
Dean’s stomach. This was all his fault. He wanted to turn back, but there was no way Buffy and
Riley were going to let him unless he chose to go to a hospital. Out of options, all he could do was hang onto Riley.

The door had only been open for a second before Giles was ushering them in. He spun the desk chair out for Dean to sit in and then took off for the bathroom. Same time, Riley was helping Dean out of the leather jacket—probably the only thing that had saved him from that one demon’s claws, though now the leather was scratched all to hell on the right side. Dad was going to be pissed.

“Sorry. We didn’t know where else to go,” Buffy said.

Giles had a full kit in his hands and handed it off to Riley. “You need to take his shirt off. No doubt the stitches I gave him last night need to be redone.”

“Any chance you’ve got something to drink?” Dean said.

“Bad idea if you’re going into shock,” Riley said.

“This wasn’t my first bar fight.” And he really needed it before the voice in the back of his head got louder. How could he have been so damn stupid? Maybe he should call Dad and get them pulled out. Obviously Dean wasn’t smart enough to handle this. He closed his good eye—he didn’t have any control over the other one right now—and sighed. When he opened it again, he looked up to Giles. “Please.”

And without anything more, Giles got him the drink, leaving the bottle beside the glass. He was drawing Buffy away towards the bathroom, but Dean was willing to bet that conversation be about him. Giles probably wanted the details on what happened and Buffy didn’t have those yet.

Riley was cleaning his wounds, and for once the guy didn’t look like he’d been forced to choke down a bunch of lemons. He worked in silence for the next few minutes, helping Dean with his shirt after getting the blood off his face. The grimace on his face wasn’t a good sign, worse that he poured Dean another glass of scotch. “You’re going to want that.”

“Handled it last night without the drink,” Dean said.

“I’m guessing last night it wasn’t covered in about four different bruises. We should probably get you an x-ray.”

“I know what a broken rib feels like. This ain’t it.”

Riley raised an eyebrow. “You broke a rib?”

“Yeah. Tavosh demon in Montana.”

Riley raised both brows. “You went up against a Tavosh? Took my whole team to bring one in.”

“Team?” Dean asked. If Riley was more than hip to the supernatural, that could explain the seething jealousy echoing off the man. “You a hunter?”

“Sort of. I was with the military until recently. Finish that up.” Riley gestured at the glass.

“I have to drive back.”

“Hell you do. I can get you back to the motel.”

Motel. The word alone was enough to restart all the worries in Dean’s mind. Tomorrow, that prickly bastard was going to demand payment for the week and Dean didn’t have it. Didn’t even have it for
the night. He wiped at his good eye before the tear became obvious and let out a shaky sigh.

“You doing all right?” Riley said.

“Been beat to hell and back two nights in a row. Not my best week.”

Riley nodded as he cleaned up the gash in Dean’s side. “Why were those demons pounding on you?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Buffy said as she came back into the room.

“Turns out they really don’t like it when you try to take their money.”

“I told you—”

“Yeah, I know,” Dean said sharply. A little too sharply. He downed the drink, poured another one, and downed that too. “You going to sew that any time soon?”

“It’s pretty badly swollen right now,” Riley said.

“Going to be that way at least a couple of days. Not all of us get Slayer healing.”

“Stay as still as possible.”

Riley sanitized the needle and thread, and then pushed it through Dean’s skin. Son of a bitch hurt, but Dean managed to clench down on the pain instead of screaming. And man, did he feel like screaming right then. Didn’t take Riley long to put a couple of stitches in, the knots neater than Giles’s. Wasn’t taking too long for the scotch to start working, but that could’ve been because Dean had had a few beers in the bar.

As Riley was cleaning up the first aid kit, Giles stepped out in front of Dean. He had his glasses in one hand while rubbing his thumb along the side of his nose. “Hustling pool is how you usually get by, isn’t it?”

Oh, Dean was wishing he was about three times drunker for this. “Not a lot of chances to make a buck on the road.”

“You could pick up jobs between hunts,” Riley said.

“Never stay anywhere long enough,” Dean replied.

“But you’re sticking around this time,” Buffy said. “There has to be something you’re good at.”

“Yeah, hunting demons. See a lot of money in doing that?”

Buffy shot Riley an odd look, both of them seeming to hold onto some secret between them, but Buffy frowned more. “Not anymore.”

The room was definitely measuring him up and down. Desperate to make a good impression, Dean sat up in the chair a little more, even though that caused him to wince. “Look, thing is, I can put out all the job applications I want, but it’s not going to bring it in soon enough. Sam and I are out of money already. Manager of the motel’s going to boot us. We can survive in the car for a while—”

Giles scratched his forehead, glasses still dangling in his hand. “That’s hardly a place for growing
boys.”

Dean clenched his jaw. “I don’t have a lot of other options here. I call Dad and we’re back out on the road in a heartbeat. ‘Sides, we’ve done worse before.”

“You can stay here,” Giles said as finally put his glasses back on. “At least until you get on your feet.”

“We don’t need any charity,” Dean said.

“Then you can put a few hours in at the Magic Box. I really only have one spare bed upstairs. But there’s a shower and a kitchen and you won’t have to do credit card scams or hustling pool for a few weeks.”

Dean squirmed in the chair. “We don’t—”

“Please, Dean. The hunters may not be very organized, but I do know how to use a telephone.”

Dean swirled the glass of scotch slowly. He wanted to ask what Giles had found out about them, but last thing he needed was for Riley to overhear something bad. That angry scowl had finally departed Riley’s mouth and Dean wasn’t in a hurry to see it back again. Mostly because he’d feel guilty if he was a wedge between him and Buffy.

As for Giles’s offer, well, his back was against a wall. And he’d been kicked into it, repeatedly. Dad would just take them away and he’d hit Bobby up for money just the other week. They were on their own and Dean couldn’t handle it. He was supposed to be able to take care of Sammy on his own. This was his responsibility. He’d made a promise. But the most responsible thing he could do for Sam was move them in with Giles. Wasn’t permanent. They’d be out in a few weeks easy. He downed the drink. “Yeah. Sure. I can work some at the Magic Box while we stay here.”

“Well, don’t sound grateful or anything,” Riley said.

Dean glared at him.

“Let’s get you back to Sam,” Buffy said.

“Come by the shop after you drop Sam off at school tomorrow,” Giles said. “We can go over a few things. I’m sure I can have a key made by the time he gets out of school.”

Which reminded Dean that they still needed to test Sam for possession. All this effort and goodwill might before nothing if Sam was possessed. What if they took the demon out and Sam wanted to go back to hunting? That’d be Dean’s luck lately, not that he wouldn’t mind hitting the road with Dad again. Last time he took a beating like this—other than that blond woman the night before—they’d at least put the monster down.

Dean managed to stand on his own. On his way out the door, he paused long enough to look at Giles. “Thanks for helping out.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Giles said.

Except that was all Dean was going to do for as long as they were getting a free ride off of a practical stranger. They got into the car and Dean was thinking he could relax in silence up until Buffy spun around in her seat. “You never mentioned exactly how those demons got mad at you.”

Dean closed his eyes. Man, he did not want to talk about this.
“Dean?”

“I’m fine. Just. Stupid. Really fucking stupid.” He sighed and looked back at her. “I tried the Bronze, okay? But that freaking blond vampire friend of yours wrecked my chances of cleaning up there. He told me to try the demon bar on Eighth.”

“He set you up,” Riley said.

“Yeah, thanks Captain Obvious. Hindsight’s kicking my ass enough for everyone else, so don’t mention it.”

Buffy had that steely look back in her eyes. Her ponytail arced as she spun forward again. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Don’t get my hopes up,” Riley said.

“If she doesn’t do it, I will,” Dean said.

“Maybe you’re not so bad after all, Winchester.”

Dean laughed. He never would have pegged getting the shit kicked out of him as what would finally soothe Riley’s jealous rages. Maybe the guy wasn’t so bad either.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Bronze had closed down about a half hour ago, and Spike was only just making it back to his graveyard with a brown bag tucked up under his arm. He’d received a couple of texts from Sully. Besides the threats about paying up—and soon—Sully had reported that the green-eyed hunter had gone into the bar and tried to hustle them. They’d taken him out back and beat the crap out of him, so success there. Not so good was the fact that Dean was still alive and Buffy had put a stop to the whole thing. Spike blew out a long train of smoke. He was bound to get a visit from the Slayer about this stunt. All depended on her schedule whether it was going to be a nighttime or daytime visit. God, he was actually hoping for tonight. It’d be a hell of a hard thing to explain to Harmony and he’d rather not hear her shrieking and whining the whole day about how the Slayer was after her.

Maybe, if he was so keen on seeing Buffy, he should have remembered to keep an eye out. Instead, he walked ‘round the corner of a mausoleum and straight into the Slayer’s fist. He dropped the sack, backed off, and put his hands to his nose. “Bollocks!”

Only Buffy wasn’t content with the one punch. Spike blocked the next incoming fists as quick as he could, but she landed another two before he managed to put a gravestone between them. “What the hell is your problem, Slayer!”

“You set Dean up!” Buffy came at him with a flying kick, propelling herself of the gravestone.

He dodged barely and nearly got his trench coat tangled up in his legs. Brilliant. “Look, not my fault if Coverboy listened to me. He’s a bloody hunter, isn’t he? If he’s dumb enough to do what I tell him, I’m doing him a favor.”

“Well, yeah,” Spike said. The logic was plain enough to him. Wasn’t his fault she couldn’t see it. “I mean, if he’s going to get himself killed this early in the game, at least Sully’ll make it a quick one. Better than someone like Angelus getting their hands on him.”

Well, that had been the wrong thing to say. Buffy was coming at him again with the stake and as far as he could tell, this time she really did mean to kill him. And he couldn’t hit back. Wasn’t a fair fight at all. Spike blocked and blocked. Loving how the fight was filling an old ache, he got caught up in it and took a swing at her.

Pain flared in his forehead so bright and intense that it dropped him to his knees. He held a hand to his head, as if pressing his brain back in would stop the way it felt like it was trying to expand out of his skull. No luck. The pain only went away as the urge did.

Buffy was standing a few feet away, stake still in hand. Her scowl had changed. Oh, the Slayer was still pissed, but she wasn’t righteous fury anymore. “You set him up because you couldn’t do anything to him.”

“Maybe he’ll learn a lesson about trust then,” Spike said. He forced himself up to his feet. Never good to let the enemy know just how much pain he was put through. If only he didn’t have this damn chip in his head, he could have killed Dean and Buffy by now.

“God, Spike, you’re pathetic. Some guy tries to hustle a little pool so you have to teach him a
Ah, the inevitable harping on Spike’s flaws. It was her usual wind down. Guess she wasn’t killing him after all. Spike wiped the blood off his nose. “Covering for him then? Never mind him being down right stupid, no, got to have a go at ol’ Spike because he pointed him in the wrong direction.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re an asshole.”

“But you stopped throwing punches. Know what that tells me?”

She gave him another pissed off glare, but she wasn’t saying anything.

His cue then. “You thought about it and you know I’m right. Dean plays a good game, but he shouldn’t be going up against demons. Something like this was bound to happen sooner or later. I just made it happen ahead of schedule. And I’m willing to bet, whatever shape he’s in, he’s better off than he would have been.”

“You don’t get to take the high road on this,” Buffy said.

“But I’m right.”

“You still set him up. You’re too pathetic for me to do anything about it, but that doesn’t mean he won’t look for payback. And I’m not going to stop him.”

And in usual righteous glory, Buffy began walking out of the graveyard. Spike scoffed and watched her go for a few seconds, then turned his back and grabbed his paper bag.

“Oh, and Spike?”

He glanced over his shoulder. She was stopped just far enough away to make him believe she wasn’t coming back to him. “You do that ever again and I will put a stake through you.”

This time he couldn’t help watching her until she was out of sight. It was the need to keep track of his enemy, or so he told himself. Wasn’t the fuel for another dozen or so fantasies. And that wasn’t jealousy creeping up his nerves, making him want to call a hit out on this Dean. First off, he couldn’t afford such a thing. Second, that wouldn’t bring the Slayer onto his side. He’d have to think of something else to get his way. “Damn it.”

“Damn it!” Glory shouted. She held her nails up towards the light and sure enough, one of them was broken. She hated breaking her damn nails. It never used to bother her, though in her true form, she was a sight to behold and broken nails helped with that image. But in this body, in this human shell that she had been forced into, perfection required perfect nails. Above all else, she would be perfect.

She would be closer to her home if that stupid monk had just told her where the stupid key was. She pouted at the vanity mirror in front of her. Two humans had actually fought with her. Humans! One of them had a little strength, but that smell was unmistakable. Glaring into the mirror, she said, “Time was, all humans would quake in fear at the sight of me.”

“We quake, your Glorificus,” one of those brown-robe dressed little minions said. They were ugly,
not merely by pathetic human standards, but because they intentionally marred themselves. For nothing could be as perfect as their Glory. The devotion was sweet and something she craved, but the demons’ long noses and pointy ears were the only redeeming physical features they had. Good thing she didn’t mention that, or they would have tortured what little beauty she had to look on.

Glory spun on her stool, regarding the minions with a harsh eye. “I was attacked. Do you have any idea how insulting that is? They tried to cut me. They had no clue who I was.”

“We, uh, haven’t had much, uh, chance, your Glorificus, to spread word of your magnificence,” the shorter of the two said.

The taller dared to actually look her in the eye as he said, “It’s these humans. Even if we were to spread your name, I don’t believe they would listen.”

“That they wouldn’t.”

Glory stood. That speaker was an unknown voice and she glared at the doorway to her bedroom, making a mental note to flay whoever was supposed to be on guard around the mansion. A man sauntered around the corner and leaned on the doorframe. Or so he appeared to be a man, but that only went skin-deep. Inside, he was a twisted, tortured thing, forged and remade long ago into a demon. He had yellow eyes and smelled of sulfur. She took another whiff. That was a very distinct sulfur. She rolled her eyes and glared at her minions. “You guys are useless. You can’t even keep something from the Pit out of my lair?”

The minions were making stammering noises at each other in an attempt to give her some lame excuse. Glory raised her hand to silence them. She so didn’t care what they had to say.

“To be fair, I had to see what was causing the ruckus around here,” the yellow-eyed demon said.

“I do not make a ‘ruckus.’ I am—”

“I know, darling.”

And that pissed her off even more. She would rip the demon out of its meatsack and shred it into confetti. She clenched her fists. “I deserve respect!”

That yellow eyed thing laughed at her. When she took a step forward, he held his hands up in mock surrender. “Hold on there, I’ve come to make a little deal with you.”

“Nothing from the Pit will satisfy me. Your hell dimension is barely worth mentioning in a thousand other worlds.”

“But it happens to matter here.” He waved his hand. “Never mind that. What if I could help you find this ‘key’ you’ve been looking for?”

“You know where it is?” Glory demanded.

“Not yet. But I’m willing to spend a few resources.”

Glory raised her head. This wasn’t the worst thing she’d heard all day. Another subordinate would quicken her search as well. “There’s always a catch with you Pit demons. What’s your cost?”

“Nothing big.” The demon shrugged. “Just, when you open your door to get back home, I get to make sure we open a few more.”
“To where?”

“Does it matter?”

Glory twirled a piece of her hair. This seemed like a good deal, but that was a fool’s way to approach business. “It will not interfere with my journey home? Or take me from it?”

“Only matters to this one and the Pit dimension, I swear it,” the yellow eyed demon said.

Glory sat back down on her stool, crossing one knee over the other. “You help me find my key—and procure it—and I will allow you to use my ritual when I open my way back home.”

“That’s the deal.”

“Fine. I accept. But if you don’t have a hand in returning my key, then I owe you nothing.”

“I can accept that.” The yellow eyed demon had the audacity to walk into her bedroom.

“What are you doing?” Glory demanded.

“Have to seal the deal.”

She rolled her eyes, glaring at him as he came close. “You Pit demons are vulgar.” But she allowed him to lean down and kiss her. She could taste the contract as it was woven between them. A small spark of power came from him, nothing she couldn’t break without a little effort. Nothing that would hold if she had her true form. And she would have that back.

The yellow-eyed demon backed away from her. Some of that arrogance was gone from his posturing. Good, he had gotten a measure of her too. He understood the power with which he had struck his bargain. Maybe now he would show her a little more respect. He bowed, putting on a show in front of her minions. His tone was mocking her when next he spoke. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

She glared as he walked out of her room. If he held up his end of the deal and helped, good. If he didn’t, she might just visit the Pit on her way home and lay waste to everything she saw.

He stopped in the doorway and half-turned back to see her. “Oh, and those humans you got in a fight with the other night? That was the Slayer and a hunter.”

Thoughts would not come to her for a few seconds. She was far above such pathetic creatures as that. She was Glory and she was perfection and she had been sullied by two dim creatures. Clenching her jaw, she said, “Run me a bath. Now.”

The minions scrambled to obey her order. She turned back to the vanity mirror. She would get home. She would be perfect and whole once more. But before that, she would find this Slayer and hunter and turn their bones into dust.

Chapter End Notes

In honor of Buffy’s 20th, have a chapter (and I may or may not be spending the day writing more updates....) (3/10/17)
“Holy shit, Dean!” Sam said.

“You’re supposed to be in bed.” Dean would have griped at him more, but talking was sort of making his jaw ache and really all he wanted to do was collapse on his bed and fall asleep. Outright collapsing was a bad idea, though, especially with his clothes still on. He got out of his leather jacket, but groaned as he got his boots off.

“What happened?”

“Bar fight.”

“Dude, I’ve seen you after bar fights. This is worse.”

“This is after a demon bar fight.”

“What are you doing getting into fights in a demon bar? Or even going into them? Dad’s going to flip—”

“Dad’s never going to know,” Dean growled out. “Or this little experiment of ours is going to be over before it begins.”

“But what were you doing in a demon bar?”

“Trying to find a place to get a little dough.” Dean sat down on the edge of the bed. Now this part was hard. He scratched along the stubble on his jaw before dropping his hand away. He really needed to tell Sammy about what was happening next, but that was going to be admitting he failed. Massively failed. He flicked his tongue over his bottom lip. “Look, Sam, about the money. We’re out. We’re not going to be able to stay in the motel past tonight.”

“But school—”

“Starts in the morning. I know. You’re going. We’re going to stay with Giles until I can scrounge up the cash for a place of our own, okay?”

“What about Bobby? Can’t we ask him for a loan?”

“Naw. Dad hit him up not too long ago. Bobby doesn’t have it to spare.”

“How come I never know anything until it’s too late to do anything about it?”

Dean laughed. “What were you going to do about this?”

“Help.”

“How, Sam?”

“I can hustle pool too, you know. I’m just as good as you are.”

“No way.”

“Why not?”
“Take one look at my face.” Dean pointed there to emphasize his point. “See this? This is not happening to you. Not on my watch.”

“Maybe if I was there watching your back it wouldn’t have happened to you either.”

“You didn’t see these guys—and look, doesn’t matter. Deal’s done. You want to go to school, we’re going to stay with Giles.”

“Dad’s not going to like us staying with a stranger.”

“Dad should’ve left us more money then.” Dean sighed at Sammy’s worried expression. He hated putting any of this stress on the kid. Was bad enough this weight was on Dean’s shoulders. Didn’t need to be on Sam’s too. “Don’t worry about Dad. Only thing that should be on your mind is getting through the next year in the same school as Dawn.”

“You’re my brother, Dean. I’m going to worry about you too.” Sam sat on the edge of his bed. That worried expression wasn’t going anywhere.

Dean huffed and said, “Keep your face like that and it’ll freeze that way. Don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything this stupid again.”

“You’re sure it’s a good idea? I like Giles, but we barely know him.”

“Remember that place outside Dalton? Dad said they were good buddies.”

“Yeah.”

“Practically strangers. Dad just didn’t have the cash to stash us anywhere.” Dean stood and went into the bathroom. Damn, he looked more than terrible. He washed his face and tried not to wince.

“You’re really going to try to get us our own place?”

“Soon as I’m able. Promise.”

Sam laid out on the bed and just under his breath said, “That would be so cool.”

Dean tried not to stare into the mirror, at the bruises on his face. Definitely not doing something as stupid as listening to a vampire again. Or telling Dad about this. And maybe, just maybe, he could convince the doubts twisting up his guts to go away. After all, they were safe. About to be a whole lot safer.

So why did Dean feel like he was standing on the edge of a veritable cliff?

*******

The Magic Box had opened a whole three minutes earlier, but Buffy needed to drop in before heading off to her classes. Okay, she was going to be super late for that history class, but Willow was in there and she took amazing notes. Better than Buffy notes and she wouldn’t have an issue sharing them once she found out about last night. Actually, she probably wouldn’t have a problem handing them over so long as Buffy asked nicely. Not that that made it cool to skip class, just easier on Buffy’s stress levels.
Because, honestly, she had enough to worry about lately. Strange glow-y thing, learning the truth about Dawn, Mom’s sickness, Dean and Sam. She needed a really long nap until it all went away, but she didn’t have the time.

She fussed with her shoulder bag as she walked down the steps into the Magic Box.

“Okay, but hiring another employee will not detract from my paychecks, right?” Anya followed close on Giles’s heels as they came out of the basement. Each had a box in their hands, surprisingly Anya’s was bigger than Giles’s. “I mean, he won’t be getting paid more than me, right? Because that is unethical.”

Giles sighed and set his box down on one of the many tables. “No, Anya. I wouldn’t think of paying him more, though what I pay him is not any of your business.”

“Of course it is. Hiding salaries from fellow coworkers is how The Man gets away with mistreating people.”

Buffy raised an eyebrow. “For once, I think she has a point, Giles.”

Anya gave Giles a sunny ‘ha ha!’ smile.

“I’m outnumbered again it seems.” Giles pushed his glasses farther up his nose. “If you must know, I was going to pay him a little less than I pay you.”

“That doesn’t seem far,” Buffy said. “Dean needs the money.”

“So do I,” Anya said.

“It’s not because the shop isn’t doing well, but Anya handles far more responsibilities than I intend to give Dean. And I know that she’s an expert in the field. So far, all we’ve really seen out of Dean is his ability to, well, fight things.”

Buffy folded her arms. “So someone shouldn’t get paid as much because they can fight?”

Giles got that funny look on his face, the one where he knew he’d screwed up but didn’t exactly have a better answer. He raised his chin up and went for the good old ‘I’m above the young people’ expression. “I’m not saying there aren’t practical job related skills to learn, but retail doesn’t involve as many punches, I’m afraid.”

“Whatever,” Buffy said. “I was hoping to talk to you a minute.”

“Of course. Anya, will you get the shelves restocked?”

“Sure.” Anya grinned. “Wait, am I going to be like in charge of Dean? Like his supervisor? Tell him what to do?”

“Somewhat, yes.”

“When is he coming in?”

“Anya, you can’t make him do all the manual labor.”

“Hey, I’m actually thinking that restocking the shelves is a fantastic way to become more familiar with our inventory and that on the first day he wouldn’t be able to do it by himself anyway.” Anya took her box over to the counter. “It’s a training exercise.”
“Oh. Well, then you can wait a little bit. I’m not exactly sure when he’s going to be here,” Giles said. “Some time soon I imagine.”

“Excellent,” Anya said.

Giles and Buffy headed to the training room. Buffy rubbed her arms. “Look, I really appreciate what you’re willing to do for Dean, but are you sure that’s the right play here? Sam still has that whatever looming over him.”

“Well, we devised a test of sorts. There’s something called a Devil’s Trap. It will tell us if he’s possessed.”

“But what if he’s not? What if he’s a demon that shape shifted into a human?”

“I think your vision would have told us that.”

“Maybe that’s what it—”

“Buffy, I think Sam is more likely the innocent victim here.”

Buffy nodded. “Right. Sorry. I’ve just been a little stressed with everything happening with my mom.”

“How is she?”

“Still not great.” She could complain about her boyfriend problems too, but that really didn’t seem in the realm of Giles’s concerns. Dean, though, well, Giles had made him his problem. She folded her arms over her chest. “You hear anything back from those hunters you called yesterday?”

“Not yet, but most roadhouses won’t be open for a few hours. I think we already have a pretty good idea what they’ll tell us about the Winchesters.”

Yeah, cocky, broke, reckless, rude, and really, really hot. Buffy nodded. At least that was one issue off her plate. “Turns out Spike set Dean up last night. We might be down one British vamp sometime soon.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t done something about him to be honest,” Giles said.

“If I had, we would’ve been screwed last year,” Buffy said. She really hated admitting that, but it was the truth. Without Spike, her friends would’ve died in their assault on the Initiative and Adam. “But he might’ve pushed too far this time.”

Giles got quiet and there was something unspoken about Spike, and something Buffy didn’t want to face about him. A lot she didn’t want to think about lately. Sometime soon that was going to catch up to her in epic levels of bad, but not today. “I should get to class.”

“And I should get back to the shop before Anya writes an employee code.”

“Come on, I don’t think she’d be that bad at it.”

“Probably not, but if I’m not careful, most people are going to believe that she owns the shop.”

Buffy smirked a little at that. She waved goodbye to him and Anya on her way out the front door and tried to banish the brooding thoughts threatening to cloud up her mind again. Too much more and everything would be about Dean or her mom. She needed one morning where she concentrated on classes. Just one.
She full-bodied ran into a man, all hard muscle and smelling of leather. Not like Spike or Angel’s leather either. This was something earthier, more worn and old. A lived-in human smell instead of the tiny bits of death. She liked it, but stepped back and glanced up. Gulp. She should’ve known.

“Dean.”

Dean tried to grin at her, but his face was half-swollen with bruises. His eye was definitely black and he wasn’t holding himself quite right. “Hey there.”

“You look like crap,” she said.

“Could’ve looked a lot worse. Thanks.”

“How do you feel?”

“Pretty bad.” And of course he should. He was covered in bruises, and the vampire bite on his neck still looked awful, though healing.

Buffy needed to get moving, only she was caught up in staring into those green eyes. Worrying about him. “Maybe you should reschedule your first day.”

“Naw. Need to be there when Sammy gets out of school anyway. I’m just happy I met with Wood before all this happened.”

“Wood?”

“Principal at the school.”

“Oh. Duh.”

Dean frowned at her. “You okay? You seem a little off?”

“Lot on my mind.” She frowned at him. “Are you sure you’re okay to work today?”

“Got to do what I got to for Sammy, you know?”

Which opened up the giant bag of worms that was the situation with Dawn. Despite everything, Dawn still felt like her sister. Had learning the truth about her change anything? Buffy scowled at the pavement.

“Buffy?” Dean said.

“I got to get to class,” she said. She took a few steps away. There was something awkward between them, like maybe Dean wanted to say something or maybe she would have if she wasn’t so distracted. She glanced over her shoulder as she walked down the street and caught Dean doing the same. Their gazes met. Those impossibly bright green eyes shined underneath the layers of pain, the bruises, like spring grass. Some of those bruises he got helping her. All the crap laid on his shoulders and deep down, he was just a big brother looking out for his family. A good man.

“Later, Slayer.” A tiny smile crept onto his lips and he was just gorgeous.

“Bye.” Buffy swiftly turned away and hurried down the street. No, she had way to much to think about already. Far too many problems. Liking Dean was so not an issue she needed. Not with Riley breathing down her neck, her mom sick, Dawn being whatever, that woman probably looking for a round two and they weren’t any closer to finding out what she was—just no. Whatever little flash she just had with Dean, that was just a thing. A moment. Nothing more.
She just couldn’t afford the distraction right now. Not even if he smelled amazing. Or was good in a fight. Or good to look at. *God,* what was wrong with her? She had Riley! And things with him were good again, right?

Right?
Chapter 16

Grabbing the phone and taking it into the training room felt like a rotten conspiracy since Dean was working with Anya in the front of the shop. Giles took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. Perhaps working ‘with’ was too generous. Every once in a while, he overheard their conversation. Anya definitely had control of the situation and he worried for a moment that she was overdoing it. But about an hour ago he had stuck his head out and not only did they seem to be working, he could swear they were getting along. That was fine enough for now.

He took a drink of tea, slipped his glasses back on, and dialed the next number he’d scrounged up so far.

“Roadhouse,” a gruff female voice said.

The quick pick up caught him off guard. Americans and their lack of introductions. He cleared his throat and said, “Ah, yes. Are you Ellen?”

“That depends. You the Brit who’s been calling around about the Winchesters?”

Damn, he had hoped the hunters wouldn’t blab to each other for another day. “Yes.”

“Why the interest?”

“Because they’re working on a case in my area and I need to know more about them,” Giles said. The lie was simple enough, and he’d spread it around so that if they did discover where he was, no one would assume the Winchesters had made Sunnydale their home. That course of action just seemed safer all around at the moment.

“They. So John’s dragged those boys along again,” Ellen said and she sounded not one bit amused at the prospect.

“Yes.”

“Dean must be what, nineteen now?”

“Twenty-one. And Sam is seventeen.”

“Sam should be in school then.”

“Yes, he should.”

“All right, English, what’s your name?” Ellen said.

“Rupert Giles.”

“Like the Watcher?”

Giles straightened up. She’d been the first one to know that. “I might be. Depends on how you heard that information.”

“I take it you got the number without the last name. It’s Harvelle.”

The name rang a clear bell in Giles’s memory. Another long series of phone calls overseas, while he’d been in London. “Good Lord, you’re Bill’s wife.”
"I was. He died a few years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Bill was a good hunter."

Ellen paused for a long moment and shouted something at someone else in the background before speaking again. "Yeah, well, if you think that, you should steer clear of John Winchester. It's his fault Bill's gone."

"How so?"

"They went out on a hunt. John came back. Bill didn't."

The edge to her voice made Giles wish he could end the questioning, but the Watcher training begged for every scrap of information. He took off his glasses and set them down again. "You hold him responsible."

"I do. John said it was his fault. A demon got Bill because he screwed up. So if I was you, I'd kick him to the curb as fast as you can. Get this hunt done and over with."

Not a glowing recommendation then, but that was becoming typical in the conversations revolving around John Winchester. "What do you know about the boys?"

"That they're boys. Dean's got a rep for hunting. No one really talks about Sam. John puts the fear of God into those who do. Why are you asking about them?"

"I find it unusual they're on the road with him."

"Well, their mother died. John's an ass. Where else are they going to be?" Ellen asked.

"I suppose that makes sense. Look, do you know if there's anyone to call if something happens to them? Any other family?"

Another long pause from Ellen's side of the conversation. "How do I know you're on the up and up? You could be some guy in the back of a van calling and planning on doing something to them."

"Let me give you my number. Certainly that's more than enough for a woman running a hunters' hideout to track someone with."

"All right."

Giles recited out the shop's number.

"That's California."

"It is."

"God damn it. You're in Sunnydale, aren't you? John brought them to the Hellmouth?"

"He has, yes."

"Bastard. I will give you a number, because if he doesn't know, he needs to. Name's Bobby Singer." Ellen gave out a number.

"Thank you."

"And Giles, do me a favor? I may not know the boys, but John does a crap job looking out for them."
If you’re half the man Bill told me about, watch out for them.”

“I’ll do my best.” Giles hung up the phone and stared at it for a moment. Bill Harvelle. That was a man he hadn’t thought about for a while. They’d only met once, but had a correspondence longer than that. Giles had made the case to the Watchers Council that with the number of American potential Slayers, they would be wise to make a few connections with hunters in the New World. Not that the Council had listened to that sage advice.

After a suitable moment of silence for a fallen friend, Giles forced himself to pick up the receiver and make the next call. The phone rang an inordinately long amount of time before a man demanded, “What?”

“Mr. Singer?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“My name’s Rupert Giles—”

The roughness in the voice flipped into sheer concern. “Something happen to the boys?”

“So you know that they’re out here,” Giles said.

“John called. They okay?”

“They’re fine. For the most part.”

“For the most part?” Anger was back in Singer’s voice.

“Dean has had a few run-ins with the local demon population, but he’s fine.”

“And Sam?”

Giles thought about mentioning the demonic specter Buffy had seen, but chose not to alert this stranger to the potential danger. After all, he didn’t need John Winchester on his doorstep before they knew what was wrong with Sam. “He’s in school.”

“Good. He’s smart as a whip. Deserves an education. Dean did too, though no one would listen to me on the subject.”

Giles leaned back in his chair. “You’ve known the boys for a while.”

“I tried to convince John to leave ‘em here more than a few times, but that only made the prick pick them up and move them again. Got longer between visits too. How’d you convince him to leave them there?”

“I didn’t. Dean demanded it for Sam’s behalf.”

“Good for him.”

Giles glanced at the door. Anya was reciting the dangers of stocking certain mystical items too close to each other. “I don’t have a number for John.”

“Neither do I. He goes through cellphones too fast to count. But he’s bound to call in some time.”

“I suppose someone should know a few of the relevant details.” Though trusting this stranger was about as smart as inviting two unknown boys into his home. A Watcher was supposed to be wise,
but Giles was opening up his doors at a frightening rate. He should lay a few more wards around his house. Perhaps convince Buffy or Riley to check in on him for the next week. Not that he believed Dean or Sam was truly a threat to him. Just old paranoias resurfacing. He wouldn’t tell Singer everything. If some of this information worked its way back to John, Giles didn’t doubt that the man would blaze back into town and remove the Winchester boys without a second thought. And Dean was working so hard to keep them there. “All right, here’s what you need to know about their current situation.”

********

The bell of the shop tinkled as the door swung wide and Dean ducked behind a row of shelves. A couple hours earlier, Anya had decreed that he needed to not be the first thing customers saw as they come in and honestly, he was glad he didn’t have to deal with customers today. His face hurt, his side ached, and all he wanted to do was lie down and sleep for about a hundred years. No such luck, though. Anya had given him enough breaks, but otherwise she kept him moving. Good in some respects—he didn’t have much time to dwell on how much life sucked right now—but not so great for letting these damn stitches heal.

Tara came around the end of the aisle and stopped abruptly. She dropped her gaze and pink flared through her cheeks. “Oh, um, hi.”

“Uh, hi,” Dean said.

“Did you come to research more?”

“I work here.”

“You do? I didn’t know Mr. Giles was hiring.” Tara brought her eyes up from the floor and they went wide from taking in his appearance. “Oh God, are you okay?”

Dean did his best to smile, but that made his face ache. “I’ve had worse.”

“What happened?”

“Got into a fight with a few demons. Little advice, don’t play pool where a vampire suggests.”

“Was it Spike?”

“Yeah.”

“No wonder.” Tara plucked a package of herbs off the shelf. “I think he likes her. He was probably jealous.”

“For the record, nothing is going on between Buffy and me,” Dean said.

“It’s okay if something does. I’m not going to judge. I don’t really have room to.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, Willow wasn’t exactly seeing Oz anymore when she decided she wanted me, but it was complicated. And Buffy and Riley haven’t exactly been meshing lately.”
A hundred little fantasies cropped up in Dean’s head and he had to work at squashing them. The Slayer wasn’t single yet, so he shouldn’t count on having a chance with her yet. That look they shared this morning though—well, he’d been sure she was going to say something to him. Instead, she’d taken off and he’d been in retail hell.

Tara went around the edge of the shelves and into the next aisle, continuing to pluck ingredients off the shelves. Dean followed her and got a look into the rest of the shop. Anya and Willow were bickering again, and Xander sat at the research table looking absolutely miserable. “What’re you doing?”

“I’m gathering a couple of things for a basic healing spell for you,” Tara said.

“You’re a witch?” The word, and condescension, blurted out of him.

Tara paused and stared at him, making Dean feel like a complete ass. “Willow is too.”

“Sorry, just, Dad always says that nothing ever qualifies as a good witch.”

“Magic isn’t good or evil. It’s what you do with it that matters. The same can be said about guns.”

“Fair enough. But guns can’t heal people. Magic can?”

“It’s not going to take everything away, but I think I can lessen the pain a little and speed it up maybe a day.”

“Works for me,” Dean said.

“You’re sure? I don’t want to do something you’re uncomfortable with.”

He knew what Dad would say about that. No way, no how should magic come near either of the Winchester boys. Dean scratched the back of his neck. “It’s not going to do something funky like mark me for life or something?”

“I promise, it’s just a bit of healing.”

“Then yeah. I’ll probably be a lot more comfortable after you get this mojo going.”

Tara grabbed a final package off the shelves. “Let’s get started.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

You're going to see more related to the Tara-centric episode of Buffy called "Family," meaning there's going to be more discussion and illustration of Tara's abusive family in upcoming chapters.

Tara leaned over the boiling potion and tried not to breathe it in. The mixture should be a healing potion, but if one ingredient was wrong, then the concoction could turn out lethal. She'd know it was right when it shifted color. For now, she'd have to watch the pot boil. Unfortunately, that left her with too much time to think.

The others were crowded around the research table once more. Willow smiled when they shared a momentary glance and Tara forced her lips to do the same. The ants crawling around in her stomach sped up. Not real ants, of course, but that funny sensation she got whenever she stressed out too much. She couldn’t help being worried. At any point now, her demon side would come out. She had no idea what it would do except make her evil. Hellspawn. She bit her lip to stop the tears and stared into the potion’s depths again. Almost there.

Willow got up from her seat at the table and sashayed her way over to the counter where Tara worked. The long skirt and boots definitely helped with the sexy walk, but Tara always felt warm when Willow smiled at her. No one had ever smiled like that at her before. Probably wouldn’t ever again after her demon half took over. Willow put her hands on the glass counter and leaned in.

“How’s it cooking?”

“Almost there, I think.”

“I can’t believe Anya made you pay for the ingredients.”

“I can hear you,” Anya said. She had her nose stuck in one of the bigger demonic lore tomes. “Stock doesn’t just replenish itself. Besides, Giles now has to pay me and Dean, so we can’t afford to give away good merchandise.”

“I don’t mind,” Tara said, even though she knew her voice was swallowed in the argument already. Willow wasn’t even looking at her, which meant she was being ignored. Which was okay. Getting between Anya and Willow didn’t seem like a good thing.

“Well, there should be a friends and family discount,” Willow said.

“So you can take advantage of the prices over and over again?” Anya demanded.

“Then since it’s for Dean, you should’ve used an employee discount.”

“I don’t think we get that. Giles, do we even get that?”

“Let’s stop using me for the argument,” Dean said with a finality that made Tara grin. He didn’t like the arguing either. She really didn’t mind putting in effort for someone who was nice.

“Well, I thought I’d be running the shop by myself, so I hadn’t really considered it,” Giles said as he
took off his glasses. He put one earpiece in his mouth and pinched his brows together in that ‘this isn’t really a puzzle I thought I’d be up against today,’ which was sort of fun. Giles was surprised by very little, in Tara’s experience. Solution apparently found, he cleaned his glasses and put them back on. “I suppose you ought to. I’ll have to think about it some more.”

“But that doesn’t get added retroactively,” Anya said. “It'll only be on future transactions.”

Willow rolled her eyes. Tara wished she wouldn’t do that all the time, but Willow really didn’t like Anya’s perpetual concern about money. “Of course not.”

“Just so long as we’re clear,” Anya said.

“We’re clear,” Willow said with an annoyed tone.

“I-i-t’s fine, really,” Tara said. She tossed in the last herb. “I don’t mind.”

“Well I do,” Willow muttered. She glared at Anya one last time, not that Anya noticed.

Dean came over to the counter. His face was swollen and far too many purple spots. Not only that, his movements were stiff. Over the course of making the potion, Tara had gleaned the important details of how he was injured. When people didn’t think anyone was listening, they said a lot more than they realized.

The door to the Magic Shop swung open and the bell chimed its cheery little ding. Dawn came down the three steps into the shop. “See, I told you I knew a shortcut.”

Sam laughed with the kind of carefree way of which Tara was vaguely jealous. She could never relax like that around people and Sam seemed so confident. He came across the threshold and down the steps without any problem.

Giles, Buffy, Willow, Dean, and Anya all relaxed. Giles and Dean practically sank into chairs. Willow had mentioned the Devil’s Trap on the landing in front of the door. If Sam had moved through it without any issue, then he wasn’t possessed.

Would the trap hold Tara when the transformation happen?

The potion shifted from roiling red to a deep orange. Tara turned off the heat and scooped a large helping into a waiting mug. “All done.”

Dean took the mug and tried to smile back at her. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Tara said with her own little grin. “I-i-it might not taste all that great.”

“What is it?” Sam asked.

Dean clenched his hand around the mug and hesitated drinking it. “Uh—”

“It’s a potion,” Anya said bluntly.

“Like magic?” Sam said.

“What else would it be like?”

Sam peeked over the edge of Dean’s mug and wrinkled his nose. “It smells awful. What’s it supposed to do?”
“Healing,” Tara said. “A little bit, anyway.”

“Magic can do that? Cool. Dad says that any magic’s bad.”

“Dean and I had that conversation.”

“So are you a witch?” Sam asked.

“She’s not the only one,” Willow replied.

“Slayer, witches, and a Watcher. Cool.”

Dean took a big gulp of the potion and then made a face. “You weren’t lying about the taste.”

“Sorry. The ingredients have to be precise.”

“Long as it does the trick, I don’t really care what it tastes like.” Dean finished the drink and set the mug down. “Thanks.”

“No problem. I’ll bottle the rest up, but you can’t drink it until tomorrow. Too much and it can have really bad side effects.”

“Like what?”

“Like a third eye in the middle of your forehead,” Anya said.

Dean’s eyes went wide. “Is she serious?”

Tara nodded.

Dean glanced at his watch. “How long has to pass?”

“Twenty four hours. The p-potion’ll be good for two days.” Tara grabbed a glass bottle from beneath the counter.

“You didn’t pay for that,” Anya said.

Giles sighed loudly. “Bring it back and it’ll be fine.”

“Will do,” Dean said.

“Break it and—”

“One, I am capable of figuring out what to do about broken glass,” Giles said.

“You’d never guess that by the state of your books.”

Okay, Tara could understand why Anya irritated Willow, but seeing someone so passionate was nice. As she scooped the remaining potion into the bottle, conversation turned back on Sam’s first day, homework, research, and business. Normal, every day conversation. Tara smiled to herself and treasured it. Not too many more days before her birthday and everything would change. She’d miss the camaraderie and new friends, especially the Winchesters. They seemed nice. Shame she wouldn’t get to know them more.
Dean pulled one of the heavier bags out from the back of the Impala and waited for the pain to kick in, only it was dulled out. Tara’s potion doing the trick, thank God. Dean wasn’t sure how many more boxes he could’ve lifted with the last round of bruises. Lifting the bag would’ve hurt pre-magic, but now he was feeling all right. He’d probably need to watch it. Pulling the stitches a second time would set him back, magic or not.

He headed into the house. After a short discussion with Sam, he’d forced his younger brother to take the freaking spare bedroom. Much as Sam wanted to be nice, Dean wasn’t the one who had class five days a week. ‘Sides, he might not know how to sleep in a real bed. That joke had landed pretty well with Sam, but there’d been something in Giles’s expression. Something far too close to pity for Dean’s liking. God he wished he could have a drink. Stealing the host’s booze on night one seemed a bad idea.

Giles came down the stairs. “Sam’s settling in. Do you have everything you need from the Impala?”

“How about I help anyway.”

Too tired to argue more, Dean led the way out to the Impala. He handed off one bag to Giles and grabbed up the other before slamming the trunk. He’d expected the other man to head straight for the house, only there Giles stood next to him. He slung the bag over his shoulder and cleared his throat. “Something up, English?”

“That’s the second time someone’s called me that today.”

“Would you prefer ‘Brit?’”

“That’s not really the important part. You should know, I’ve called around about you and your brother.”

Dean frowned. “You checked up on us.”

“I have a responsibility to Buffy.”

Dad would have them back in the car and on the highway in no time flat. Dean pursed his lips. This really wasn’t good. “Who the hell did you call?”

“Around.”

“Around where? Hunters don’t have any kind of organization.”

“Not exactly, no, but there are certain places one can call. During my investigation, I came across Bobby Singer.”

Holy shit, two days into this and Giles had somehow gotten in contact with Bobby? Dean tightened his grip on the duffle bag. Had a decent weight to it if he had to wield it, though he’d do better if he
could get one of the weapons out. Giles wasn’t acting like a guy ready to take a swing or turn them in. Information spread, didn’t have to be a bad thing, no matter what Dad said.

“You realize I had to make those calls,” Giles said. “You may be used to a certain level of secrecy, but I have myself and Buffy to protect, not to mention the others.”

“Right. Can’t let a bad influence near the precious Slayer.” Dean shifted the weight of the bag. “Guessing since we’re moving in, we’re ‘satisfactory.’”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t believe you’re a bad influence.” Giles’s expression was almost compassionate enough for Dean to believe him. “I think being in Sunnydale might be the best thing for you and Sam.”

“Think my face and side might have a different opinion.”

“Who knows if Buffy would have survived her encounter with that woman without your support?” Giles said.

Dean laughed. “Pretty sure I was just an extra punching bag.”

“Still, nothing to be dismissed lightly.” Giles hefted his bag up. “Which is why I thought you deserved to know I had checked up on you, and that Bobby knows where you are.”

That did settle Dean’s nerves a little. “Address and everything?”

“He was quite adamant that I provide the information. He offered to send gas money if you preferred heading to his home in South Dakota.”

Much as Dean would prefer the comfort of Bobby’s familiar house, the school wasn’t as good there and the likelihood that Dad would come in and wreck it was higher. Sam wanted college in California, and that would be cheaper if they could get deemed residents out here. “We’ve barely started. Would be a shame to toss it all in now.”

Giles had a quiet kind of smile as he nodded. “All right. Perhaps, while Sam is working on his high school diploma, you might work on obtaining your GED.”

Dean groaned. “Now I know you talked to Bobby.”

“I’m afraid you’ll find he and I agreed on many topics.”

“Yeah, but why the hell did my education have to be one of them?”

“Because, Dean, you’re far more clever than you let on.”

With that, Giles headed back towards the house and Dean felt his gut sink. Not really in a bad way, just a heavy kind of weight off his shoulders falling into his gut. Only Bobby had thrown a fit when he’d dropped out of school. Only Bobby had said that he needed to get that GED. But now he’d heard the same thing out of a man who barely knew him. Dean trekked into the house behind Giles. Between Tara’s potion and Giles’s compliment, Dean was actually feeling pretty good about himself.

Bobby must’ve given the okay for this because he hadn’t blown up Dean’s phone, meaning that for the time being, Sam and him were safe. He wondered how long that would last before the world came along and ruined it. Knowing his luck, he’d get a few hours peace tops. But hey, a few hours were a few hours and Giles’s neighbors seemed a lot less likely to bang the walls at night. They could’ve done worse than land on a Watcher’s doorstep.
Dean fell off into the best slumber he’d had in a long, long while.
Hitting the weight bag wasn’t as easy as it used to be. Riley threw another four punches, finishing off the last of a long routine he’d established years back and stepped away. Training usually worked out the aggression, but lately it failed to do the trick. No matter how many times he punched the bag, he couldn’t get the image of Buffy running to Dean’s side out of his head. Didn’t help that he had two of those memories to play back. When he wasn’t thinking about that, he kept replaying the conversation with Graham in his head.

“Pulled the files you wanted. Wasn’t easy to get my hands on. After Walsh, they buried her recruits,” Graham had said. “Wasn’t really Dean she had her eyes on.”

“Then John?”

“Sam. Something about him being a perfect commander. Her eval says that Dean’s too much of a follower. Listens to his dad. And John, well, PTSD is the polite term for what’s going on in that man’s head.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that John’s a former Marine who may or may not have killed his wife and blamed a demon.”

Riley’s gut had turned at that. After all, Dean had been so sure that this Yellow-Eyed demon was his mother’s killer. Riley had clenched his jaw, held onto the phone, and asked, “No one checked it out?”

“Murder happened in the early 80’s. Initiative barely existed back then. If there’s an X-File on this crap, I can’t find it.”

“Graham, there’s no such thing as the X-files.”

“Working in the field like this, I’d be more surprised if there isn’t.”

Riley had pondered that.

“So, when are you coming back?” Graham had asked.

“Told you before, I’m out.”

“Watching the Slayer guard the Hellmouth’s going to get boring. You could do some real good with us, Riley.”

“I’m doing good here.”

“Uh huh.”

Graham hadn’t sounded convinced. Riley wasn’t so sure he had convinced himself. After all, Buffy kept spending all this time with Dean, who was a hunter. She didn’t look at him with the same pity that had crept into her gaze since Riley had gotten the Initiative’s drugs out of his system. The heart repair had changed her opinion of him. Riley was no longer field capable while Dean, despite the beatings he’d taken, was up and moving. Tara had even made him a potion to hasten his recovery. She’d never asked to make something like that for him.
Riley grabbed his sweat towel and wiped off. Wasn’t fair to be pissed at the guy when everyone else was the problem. Enough of this damn room. He picked up his water bottle and jacket and opened the door to the main room of the Magic Box.

And there was Dean, again. Tara’s healing spell had done a pretty good trick of turning Dean’s injuries into bearable splotches on his skin. Riley clenched his jaw tight. Not once had such a thing been offered to him. Dean hadn’t been around for a week and he was already getting this kind of help.

Dean couldn’t help it if people were being nice to him. Far as Riley could tell, he wasn’t drawing this in on himself on purpose. Something about him was just charming the people around him. Somehow, that pissed Riley off more. If Dean was running a con that the others just hadn’t seen through, Riley could chalk Dean up to being a bad guy. Instead, Dean was just scraping by for his brother’s benefit and slaying evil because that’s what he had been raised to do. In some ways, he wasn’t that different from Riley. Again, infuriating.

“Is there something you need?” Anya asked.

Riley blinked. “I’m fine.”

“So the staring into the distance is a normal human thing you do?”

“Yes. Sometimes.” Riley headed for the door.

Buffy came in the same time he was leaving. They crashed into each other and she grinned at him. For a second there, Riley was transported years back to their meeting in the bookstore—minus the headache from the stack that had crashed onto his head. He smiled back at her, happy to have her in his space. Then she stepped away, her eyes fell on Dean, and a whole range of emotion flickered over her face. She might be Riley’s girl, but she definitely had a few thoughts for Dean. That shouldn’t bug a reasonable person and Riley repeated that to himself a couple of times. Buffy didn’t deserve any anger for making a new friend.

Even if that friend was an attractive disaster and she had a history of dating the wrong kind of guy.

Buffy glanced back up at him and she had a ghost of a grin for him. “Hey there.”

A kiss that was almost obligatory, but he tried to put some feeling into it. “Hey.”

“Were you training?”

“Just got done, unless you want to go a few rounds?”

“Think it’s going to be research time first.”

At least she couldn’t train with Dean. If he did anything like that, he’d break open the stitches. Riley nodded and stepped through the door. “Maybe I’ll swing by later.”

“Okay. I’ll call you.”

She’d probably forget again. Riley forced a grin and stepped out into the California sun. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah. Later. Love you.”

“Love you too,” Riley said, though the feeling wasn’t in the words like it used to be.
Graham’s words kept echoing as he walked down the street. *Anytime you’re ready, Finn, there’s a place for you here. Just call and we’ll pick you up.* Would Buffy miss him if he left? A pondering he didn’t need to add to the current mix of distress in his head. Riley frowned and kept walking. If she kept benching him, what was he going to do but think?

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Buffy walked down the steps into the shop. Something had been up with Riley again and she really didn’t want to think about it. Her mom had had another bad morning and Dawn had been no help whatsoever. They still didn’t have a clue about the key or the blonde woman she and Dean had fought. Oh, and she was falling behind in her classes. She frowned.

“Hey Buffy,” Dean said.

She brought her eyes up from the floor and had to do a double-take. “You look way better this morning.”

Dean smiled. He could actually smile this morning. “Combo of Tara’s spell and a good night’s rest.”

“So staying with Giles is going to work out.”

“Yeah, if I can convince him to buy some actual groceries. Had a hard time fixing breakfast this morning.”

“You cook?”

“Don’t sound so surprised, Slayer,” Dean said. “I’m a man of many talents.”

Oh, Buffy was just willing to bet he was. She so didn’t need to think about the other ones. “Find any good books?”

“Been too busy learning the inventory this morning.”

“Right. The whole job thing.” Buffy slung her bag off her shoulder and into one of the chairs. The pile had changed in the last day. She’d never understand where Giles kept all these tomes stashed. “Someone’s been busy.”

“Giles as usual,” Anya said. “I really wish you had been more considerate.”

“Me?”

“You brought him this research thing and that’s all he does. There is a shop to run, you know.”

Buffy was all for Anya’s new role, but this was pushing too far. She took in a deep breath, prepared something witty to say.

Only Dean grinned, leaned on the counter, and turned towards Anya. “Come on, if he had more time, then he’d be the one at the register and you would have to help me with the shelves. Or with the customers.”

Anya paused in whatever book-keeping task she was working on now. “You make an excellent point. All right, Giles can keep researching.”
“I’m so glad I have your permission,” Giles said as he came in from the back. He had a book in hand already. “Honestly, if I can’t find something today, I’m afraid our intense research should be put on hold.”

“Maybe we can hit up the demon bars,” Dean said.

“You are so not ready to get back in the field,” Buffy said.

“I’m feeling better.”

“Maybe once the stitches are healed, we’ll talk about it.”

“You going to put me on the bench for a week?”

“For as long as it takes. You got a problem with that?” Buffy crossed her arms.

Dean shook his head. “Hell, I could use the break. But you need me out there, I can play through the pain.”

From what she’d seen of John Winchester, that really didn’t surprise Buffy. Instead, she couldn’t help feeling for Dean. His dad had put a lot of weight on him. She hadn’t had a lot of choice because she was the Slayer. Dean had just drawn a rough hand.

Dean’s smile went away, replaced with a scowl. Without a word, he grabbed a box from the counter and sulked off into the shelves.

He must’ve seen the look in her eyes. Must’ve thought she pitied him, which honestly she kind of did right there and that would have upset her if their positions were reversed. Buffy took a seat at the research table. Focus on the demonic badass, not the interpersonal problems. Yeah, she could do that. Anything that wasn’t worrying over upsetting Dean so much. He was a big boy and he wasn’t her boyfriend. He’d get over it or she’d figure out how to apologize. Because apologizing for a little empathy was what was needed here. She sighed and frowned. That didn’t make any sense. She shouldn’t have to feel guilty for caring about him. Dean had been beaten up three times since he’d come to Sunnydale and instead of sticking around, his father had taken off and left Sam in Dean’s care. So yeah, a little pity wasn’t a bad thing here. She shut the book in front of her hard enough to startle Giles. Whoops. “Excuse me a second.”

Buffy sought Dean out and found him stocking one of the back shelves. His shoulders were tense and that scowl had only deepened. She should leave him alone after all. Obviously, he had plenty to think about. He placed a candle on the shelf. “If you’ve got something to say, say it.”

“Wow, is there a reason you’re pissed off or is being a dick a Winchester trait?” That hadn’t been what she wanted to say and definitely not the lead-in she needed here. She meant to put Dean at ease, not on the offense.

Because offended he was. Dean turned and the anger in his eyes only caused Buffy to bristle. “I don’t need to be treated like some charity case.”

“A little charity’s not a bad thing, especially when your dad just dumps you.”

“He didn’t ‘dump’ us, okay? He’s out there tracking that thing,” Dean said. “I’d be with him, but Sam needs me.”

She had to fight not to give him that pitying look. “And what about what you need, huh? Who cares about making sure you’re okay?”
“Anyone been doing that for you lately, Slayer?”

The comeback took Buffy off-guard. She had her mom, her friends, and Riley. Except her mom was sick and her friends were caught up in their own lives and every time she turned around, Riley was jealous or upset. Buffy pouted. “You might have a point.”

Dean blinked. “So, I’m right?”

“Yeah, don’t be so surprised.”

“I guess I thought, with so many people around, you’d never feel alone.”

Buffy frowned. She hadn’t really thought about it like that, but now that Dean had labeled it, lonely did describe it. Stressed was another word. Better not to dwell. She shrugged. “Gotta do what I gotta do. Can’t really blame them for getting caught up in their own lives. Willow and Tara are still in a honeymoon phase. Anya and Xander are busy figuring themselves out. Giles has the store and Riley, well, you’ve seen him.”

“Got a jealous streak a mile wide?” Dean asked.

“Yeah. Unfortunately.”

“You consider dumping him?”

Oh, so tempting to keep looking in Dean’s green eyes. Buffy flustered and looked away. She was Riley’s girl. Hiding away in the back corner of the store with Dean was a little intimate. She had to tell herself that confiding in him wasn’t cheating. After all, she could talk about her relationship with Xander. But Dean might have other reasons for wanting Riley out of the picture and she’d be an idiot if she didn’t consider that. “Riley and I are just going through a rough patch. A really long, rough patch. He used to be part of this military outfit and that came with a whole super soldier thing. That only ended a little while ago, so he’s still getting used to the average mortal thing.”

“The military has super soldiers,” Dean said slowly.

“Not anymore. Not exactly.” Ho boy, this would sound crazy from the outside. Buffy grinned and tried to play off the strangeness. “Weird things happen on the Hellmouth. You get used to it.”

“Like a chick bringing a building down.”

“Like that.”

“Going to high school here must’ve been crazy.”

“Oh, I’m sure Sam’s going to come home with his fair share of stories.”

“Guess it’s a good thing he’s got some training.”

Something Dawn didn’t have and thinking back to all the dangerous adventures of her own high school career suddenly made Buffy wish that the monks who had made Dawn had put a few more self-preservation skills in there. She could try to teach Dawn, though that would probably go as well as Buffy’s last attempt to drive a car. Her mom’s insurance still hadn’t recovered.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” Buffy said. “Just worried about Dawn in high school.”
“Hey, no worries for the next year about that. Sam can help keep an eye on her.”

“I would think Sam should only have to worry about himself. Thought that was kind of the whole point of you looking out for him.”

“I walked into that one,” Dean said with a chuckle. He scratched his eyebrow. “Knock it all you want, but Sam’s a Winchester. He sees something going on, he’ll help. Won’t be able to stop himself.”

“That go for you too?”

“Soon as these stitches close up a little more, though honestly, if I’ve got a shot at taking out that Spike guy, I might go for it, stitches or not.”

“I kind of thrashed him last night.”

“But you didn’t kill him.”

The disappointment in Dean’s voice was obvious. “My history with Spike’s complicated.”

“Vampire’s a vampire,” Dean said.

“See, but Spike can’t actually hurt people. He has this chip in his head—courtesy of that same government group that changed Riley—so hurting people hurts him so badly he can’t. But he can hurt demons. He’s been helpful this last year.”

Dean glowered. “Sorry if my face doesn’t feel the same.”

Buffy looked away. She couldn’t blame him for being pissed. “Go after him if you want to, but he won’t be able to fight back. It won’t be a hunt, it’ll be a murder.”

“Murdering a murderer’s all right with me.”

“We’ll see,” Buffy said quietly. She stepped away and Dean went back to stocking the shelves. She couldn’t help watching him for a moment. Last night she had fully intended to kill Spike for what he’d done, but like every time in the last year, she hadn’t been able to drive the stake through his heart. And that all boiled down to Spike being unable to defend himself. Somehow, every time she went after him, the act felt wrong and all she could see was Faith plunging the stake into a helpless man because she’d been too caught up in a fight to stop and think. And Faith not caring. She couldn’t be anything like Faith and survive.

Maybe Dean really wouldn’t think of his payback as a revenge murder. If he did or didn’t go through with the threat, at least Buffy would know what kind of man he was. If he chose the wrong path, this pesky crush would be over. Buffy couldn’t go back to being around anyone like Faith again.

She really hoped Dean would turn out to be one of the good guys.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

This takes a lot from the BtVS episode "Family." The plot diverges, but if you're familiar, you're going to see a lot of it.

Buffy had let Spike go. Dean tried not to be pissed about it. After all, if she’d done the deed, he wouldn’t have the chance to put a stake through the bastard’s heart himself. However, he couldn’t stop thinking about it. Sometime in the last day or so, she’d confronted Spike and let him live again.

Dad’s training ran a constant track in the back of Dean’s head on a good day. Day like this, it was practically chanting that Buffy was weak and Dean needed to step up and end the problem. By the time he got done with his shift at the Magic Box, Dean was craving a good fight. Tara’s spell had helped, but he wasn’t strong yet. He downed the second dose, hoping it’d magically kick in faster, and grabbed a few things from his bags at Giles’s. A quick phone call with Sam was more check-in than Dad had ever done and Sam actually sounded happy about having homework to do at the store. Good. He’d be busy for a little while.

The graveyards in Sunnydale were huge, bigger than they should be for a town this size, and Dean went back to the one on the north side. This was where they’d buried the monk and ran into Spike. Only problem was this place was almost as big as a small town itself. With various crypts and mausoleums, Dean wasn’t sure that the daytime was enough protection for a hunt, especially since the sun would be going down soon. He’d have to catch Spike in his lair and slip back out again before darkness fell.

A bigger problem came to mind. Which of these damn graves was Spike’s hiding spot?

Time to think like the prey. If Dean were a vamp who couldn’t eat people and went after other demons instead, he’d choose something above ground with multiple exits. He’d want to stay closer to the cemetery’s edge to avoid nests and pockets of other baddies in the area. A place that seemed vulnerable, but he’d be able to hear anyone or anything coming for a distance.

He started his hunt near where he and Buffy had parked the Impala the other night. Spike had practically run into them on his way back from wherever, so seemed like the best area to begin. After that, he kept a steady walk and his eyes peeled for anything that matched the description of what he’d conjured up in his head.

Twenty minutes into his hunt, he was rewarded with the sight of a small mausoleum. At appearances, it was just like all the other crypts. However, this one had a television blaring. Sunnydale might be weird, but Dean seriously doubted the local population thought the dead needed entertainment. Seemed like the dead didn’t really stay in their graves anyway.

Dean checked that he had stake in hand and a good grip on it and then sauntered up to the door. He shoved at it, expecting to run into a lock at least, and the damn thing swung open with a loud creak. Spike sat sprawled in a chair in front of the blaring television with a giant grin. Different setting and Dean would’ve seen what the guy was having such a good time with, maybe tried to be his friend.

Spike glanced up from the tv and all that merriment fell away into a scowl. He stood, kicking the
chair back a few inches. Dean swept in.

Fights were fast paced beasts of their own. They tunneled rage and hurt until everything fell away to movement, to precision. Until the opponent was beaten or Dean couldn’t take anymore.

This was not a fight.

Spike did his best to block, but that was all he did. Even in his shitty state, Dean got through Spike’s defenses and landed several hard blows. He knocked Spike’s legs out from under him, grabbed him by the shirt, and raised the stake to plunge in the heart.

The fear in Spike’s eyes stopped him. The guy’s inability to hit back registered too. Taking out Spike like this, even if he was a vampire, was just wrong. Dad’s training yelled at him. Told him to do it. But Dean heard Buffy’s voice too. Murder. He ground his teeth. This vamp had set him up for a beating. A bad one. He didn’t deserve to get off easy. Dean growled and connected two more punches to Spike’s head, slammed him against the ground once for good measure, and let him go.

Spike wiped at the blood coming out of his nose and from the cut on his cheekbone. “Slayer rat me out?”

“Oh, I knew you set me up,” Dean said. “I’m not that much of an idiot.”

“Looks like the beating was exaggerated.”

No need to let Spike know he’d had a supercharge for his heal. “Apparently your friends suck as much as you. Which, by the way, any of them lay a hand on me again, I will stake you.”

Spike snorted and then winced and held his nose. “Slayer’s said as much.”

So Buffy was only willing to tolerate so much of this loser’s bullshit. Dean tried not to smile—that’d ruin the no-nonsense demeanor he was working on here. “Well, then it’d be a race to see who gets to you first.”

Spike rolled his eyes.

“Oh, and I can play as much pool at the Bronze as I want.”

“Hey, that’s my place.”

“Yeah, well, you shouldn’t have gotten me kicked out of the demon bars.”

“It was one.”

“Like the demons in this town don’t freaking talk?” Dean said. “You know that guy’s going to tell the rest of them and I’m going to have an issue if I try to do anything.”

Spike gave Dean a sullen look.

“Yeah, thought so.” Dean stormed back out of the crypt and headed for the Impala, trying not to think about the fear he’d seen in Spike’s very human looking eyes. Dad would’ve been pissed that he balked at the last moment. Spike was a vamp that needed slaying, but Dean couldn’t make himself go back into the mausoleum.

Buffy was the Slayer. She was the master hunter. Screw Dad’s training where it conflicted with hers. Or, at least, long as he was in Sunnydale, he needed to play by her rules. Not because he wanted to get with her or be her friend, but because getting along with her would make life a hell of a lot easier
on him. Wanting to be the kind of man she could admire was not why he’d held off, or so he told himself for the fourth time.

But hell, it couldn’t hurt being the type of guy she might like, especially since he didn’t seem capable of getting her out of his thoughts.

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Despite all the anxieties buzzing in Tara’s brain over her upcoming birthday, she had to admit that so far she was having a pretty good day. She’d actually spoken up in class during a discussion—earning much needed participation points—and had only stumbled over her words once. Then at lunch, the sun had been shining and Willow had been in so good a mood that Tara’s spirits had been raised even higher. They had an afternoon class together, grabbed coffee, stole a few moments for kisses on the walk to the Magic Box, and overall, Tara was smiling inside and out right up until they opened the door to the shop and she saw her brother leaning over the research table. Judging from Sam’s, Giles’s, Dawn’s, Buffy’s, Xander’s, and Anya’s annoyed expressions, her brother had said something really ignorant again.

Oh, it had been such a good day! This wasn’t fair, but she should have expected it. She’d been ducking her family’s calls for the last three months, only answering when her father had been too insistent and then blaming classes and homework for her forgetfulness to call him back. Of course Donny would come to town. Her father had to be around somewhere too. Tara folded her arms up against her chest. Maybe if she was small enough, no one would see her.

Only Donny spun around and grinned without a trace of all the anger he’d had the last time they’d spoken. Donny was like that—like their father that way. One second angry, the next minute concealing it. “There you are! Come give your big brother a hug.”

“Brother?” Willow said and she sounded so hopeful about it too. Tara wasn’t mad about that. Willow was a witch because she liked puzzles and one of the things she liked about Tara was her ‘mysterious’ past. To Willow, this encounter was just finding another piece of information.

But Tara’s heart was only sinking further and further. Pretty soon it’d be all the way down in Hell. “D-D-Donny, this is Willow. And my friends.”

“Friends?” Donny said and he took another look around the room. His grin turned into a laugh. “Who’d’ve thought you’d ever have even this many? Where’d you get them all?”

“I have more,” Tara said, though her words felt tiny. She doubted anyone really heard her because the shop door was opening.

Her father strode in and he was not hiding the sternness this time. Cousin Beth was behind him, which was a little more of a surprise. Beth was always the pretty one of the group. Her mother had been a pastor’s daughter, there was no chance she was part demon. But Tara was. As her birthday drew nearer, she was going to show more signs. She clutched at her arms more even though her father held his arms out for a hug. “Come here, girl.”

She didn’t want to put her arms around him and didn’t want his embrace either, but making him angry in front of the rest of the gang would only provoke him more. So she stepped in and let him. The scent of bleach and hot dogs clung to him, like always. She suppressed the urge to wrinkle her
“Tara, we need to speak. Alone,” her father said.

“S-sure, sir.” Tara thought about using the training room. That didn’t seem like a smart idea.

“Outside?”

“Where else?” he snapped.

Tara did her best to smile at Willow. “I’ll b-b-be back in a minute.”

“Sure,” Willow said.

Tara followed her family out to the sidewalk. The hideous winnebago was double-parked in the middle of the street. Tara blanched. People were going to see that. See them standing next to it. Her feet turned to lead and she couldn’t move.

Her father stopped with her while Beth and Donny climbed into the camper. The sun had set a little while ago which Tara was glad for. She didn’t want her father to see her shiver, though she wished she was far less close to shivering. He was angrier than when she’d asked for money to submit college applications. “I thought we’d had a discussion about this.”

“Th-this?”

“Magic, Tara. You know it’s bad for you.”

Oh that ‘discussion.’ That had been less of a conversation and more five long months of hearing her father curse about her mother’s gifts and Tara’s natural abilities. Tara dropped her gaze.

“It’s only going to bring the demon side out sooner. That’s what happened to your mother.”

Tara wished she’d gone to school in London or Paris or Mumbai. Certainly her father wouldn’t have flown across the globe to find her. “M-m-maybe nothing’ll happen.”

Her father sighed as if that was the dumbest idea of the century. “I am only trying to protect you.”

“It doesn’t feel much like protection,” Tara mumbled.

“What was that?” he demanded.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“You better be.” He stepped closer to her and that terrible scent flooded her nostrils again. “I should not have needed to hunt you down, Tara. You should have stayed at home, but I let you out to have what little normal life you could get. I should not have to tolerate a smart mouth as well.”

Tears burned at Tara’s eyes.

“Hey asshole, you want to back up?” Dean said. He came down the street with a swagger like he owned the whole town and an expression like he’d have no problem throwing her father into the camper.

Oh, this was worse. Tara backed away from her father. “D-D-Dean, it’s okay.”

Dean frowned at her and glanced at her father. “You sure?”
“Yeah. This is my dad.”

Dean’s eyes went wide, which thankfully her father didn’t see from their current angles. He wiped his mouth and dialed back the frown, but he was still worried about her. That was causing bees in Tara’s stomach because while she wanted to have Dean’s support, she wasn’t sure how things with her father were going.

“Tara, who is this man?” her father asked.

“This is D-Dean.”

“Well, Dean, I wish I could say it was a pleasure to meet you, but considering how rude you are to strangers on the street, I wonder what kind of influence you’d have on my daughter.”

Dean clenched his jaw, but as he spun around towards her father, that melted away into a perfect smooth guy act. “Sorry about that, sir. Can’t help being a bit protective. Streets at night, you know? Not always safe for young women.”

There was an irony in those words and Tara had to stare at the ground from keeping an inappropriate giggle. Her father wanted to protect her. Dean wanted to protect her from him. It was all so weird. She held on tight to her arms.

Dean’s speech mollified her father so much that his scowl actually broke. He squared off his shoulders and though he was about Dean’s height, he didn’t have any of Dean’s presence or weight. Dean would definitely win in a fight, though Willow could wipe the walls with him using magic. She really wanted to get back to Willow. Once they got back to the dorm room they shared, she could ignore everything.

Or try to, anyway. Her birthday was coming up. She wouldn’t be able to ignore the demon signs when they came. Oh, it had been such a good day. Why did the world have to come crashing back around her? Why did her father have to find her?

“Tara. You’ll call me? You need something?” Dean said.

She’d checked out on the conversation. Whoops. “Uh, yeah. Sure I will.” Only she didn’t have his number. She supposed Willow did, or that Giles’s phone number would work since Dean was staying with them. Her gaze went back to the ground. That wasn’t going to be a very good way to get in contact with him and she couldn’t ask for his number in front of her father.

“Oh, crap. I got a new phone. Give me your number. I’ll text you so you have it.”

“What happened to your last one?” her father asked.

“Dropped it in a toilet,” Dean replied. He didn’t miss a beat and Tara wondered if he was lying as they exchanged numbers.

“Not very responsible of you. Your parents shouldn’t have gotten you a new one so soon.”

“They didn’t buy either of them, sir.” Dean had an odd sort of smile. He was hiding something. When he turned towards Tara, he seemed more genuine. “Don’t worry ‘bout time of day or night. I’m an insomniac lately.”

Tara nodded and clutched her phone tightly. She and her father watched Dean walk into the magic shop. He gave them a little wave and she waved back.
“Is he another one of your ‘friends,’ Tara?” her father said.

He was certainly acting that way. Maybe he was trying to pay her back for the spell. She hoped he really did care that much. It’d be nice to have another friend in the Scooby gang. Someone she could talk to besides Willow about magic and other stuff. Maybe Dean would even want to swap advice about girls or something. Too bad she wouldn’t get to stay much longer. And Dean was a hunter. When he found out she was a demon, he wouldn’t have any choice. She wanted to cry.

Tara realized she hadn’t said anything and her father was expecting an answer. She nodded. Today had been too good of a day. She should’ve expected it end this way.
“So Tara’s father’s a breath of vile air,” Dean said as he came down the steps into the Magic Box.

At the table, Sam snorted while he wrote in a notebook. “You should’ve seen her brother. Makes us look like the Bradys.”

Dean was tempted to tell Sam that there was nothing wrong with their family, but Sam hadn’t exactly badmouthed their family unit. Besides, the others were slightly off in their moods too. Made sense if Tara’s family had been in there. Dean wasn’t quite sure what to say about them either. He checked over his shoulder. Tara was still outside. “Hey Willow, Anya mentioned that there’s a party for Tara tomorrow night.”

“You told him?” Willow asked as she turned to Anya.

Oh great, he’d kicked up their little feud again. He took in a deep breath and held onto the back of a chair.

Anya shrugged and motioned at Dean. “She gave him a spell and I don’t know. It seemed like they were talking. It is her birthday party, right? Aren’t people who like her supposed to come?”

“Well, yeah.”

“So I told Dean about the party. I didn’t think it would be a problem.”

“It’s not,” Willow said defensively.

Before that started round one thousand, Dean cut in. “Sam’s allowed too, right?”

“I’m going!” Dawn said.

“Who said you could go?” Buffy demanded.

“I like Tara too! She’s cool!”

“Suffice to say I think we’re all going,” Giles said.

“A party, cool,” Sam said.

“Okay, but what do we get her?” Xander said.

“We still haven’t solved that, huh?” Buffy said and she pouted. And it was something about that lower lip, the attitude around her, that made Dean want to smile. Except he shouldn’t smile because she was a taken woman.

Honestly though, everyone in the gang was here but Riley and Tara and Tara had a perfectly legitimate reason to be out. Dean couldn’t help wondering what was soaking up so much of the guy’s time that he wasn’t even trying to hang out with his girlfriend anymore. The conversation was rolling around the idea of presents and while Dean had initiated it with the intent on figuring one out, he couldn’t help wanting a moment alone with Buffy.

Oh, screw Riley. If he wanted to get in a pissing contest about Buffy’s affections, they’d get into one. Wouldn’t hurt to just talk to her for a few minutes. After all, he wanted to thank her for threatening Spike. Yeah, that was as good an excuse as any to get some alone time with her. The
others were grilling Tara and Sam was bound to pick up an idea. He was smart like that. Dean went around the table and lightly touched Buffy on the shoulder before leaning in. Her shampoo or body wash—or both—smelled good, like sunshine and flowers. He definitely didn’t need to think about that. He whispered low in her ear, “Can I talk to you a minute?”

She jumped, something he felt more in her shoulder than saw, and spun towards him, glossy ponytail arcing out. Not a good time to wonder what her hair would feel like. Dean’s throat was drying up, though the look of worry on Buffy’s face helped him stow some of the anticipation of getting her alone. God, he shouldn’t care so much and he shouldn’t be trying anything. But he wasn’t going to flirt with her. Just talk. Just thank her. If she moved anyway. She was looking up at him with those wide eyes and he couldn’t help wondering what was going on in her head. She murmured, “Sure.”

They slipped into the training room without anyone the wiser. When the door shut, the conversation died away too and they were left with the dark and the silence of the weight bags and mannequins. Dean’s throat closed up. They were too close for comfort unless they were something more to each other. Since they weren’t that, and Dean wasn’t about to think that they were, no way—could he lie to himself too much more?—he stepped away. Breathing room back, he cleared his throat. Damn, she was so much shorter than him. Probably pretty light too. He wouldn’t have a problem picking her up and—

Right. He didn’t invite her back her to flirt, he certainly shouldn’t let his mind wander that far.

Buffy folded her arms over her chest. “So how’d it go with Spike?”

That was the bucket of cold water he needed on his groin. “Prick’s alive.”

Buffy actually seemed relieved about that. “Prick’s alive.”

Joking or lying about it would be easy. But here in the dark, still close enough to reach, Dean felt more like a confessional than he ever had before. “He was frightened of me.”

“Spike?” Buffy raised her eyebrows. “Scared? Of you?”

“Not before. Not after. And he’ll never fess up to it. But I had him down and I had the stake and there was just something human about him right then. He hadn’t fought back. Couldn’t, I guess, with that chip, but yeah, for a second there, he was terrified of me.” Dean scratched the back of his head and dropped his gaze, using his peripheral to keep an eye on her reaction. “Just didn’t feel right.”

That seemed to relieve her more. “So you stopped because he seemed human?”

“What usually stops you?”

“Something like that,” Buffy said. “You could’ve mentioned this in the other room. We didn’t have to get away.”

“I, uh, it’s not really the kind of thing I want the others knowing.”

“Got your badass reputation to protect?”

“Sam finds out that the vamp responsible for me looking like this is still kicking, he might go after him. Or worse, tell Dad.”

“Him knowing would be that bad?”

“He’d be pissed I hadn’t taken care of him. Use it as an excuse to move us out.”
“All this talk of fathers, I’m having a swell of pride in my deadbeat dad.”

Dean could take that kind of talk from Sam, but Buffy didn’t know his family. “Look, he may not be perfect, but he’s all Sam and I’ve got for family.”

“Family doesn’t have to be about blood,” Buffy said. “Dawn’s family and she’s not even real.” Her eyes went wide in realization at what she said. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant—”

“That you care about her, no matter what,” Dean finished.

“Exactly. I care about Xander and Willow and Giles too.”

“And me?” Dean grinned a little too much. He wasn’t supposed to be flirting, damn it. “Sam and Tara?”

“Yes. Everybody.”

Dawn threw open the door to the training room, nearly whacking it into both of them. “Oh my God, Buffy, I thought of the perfect present. I want to get Tara one of those black pointy hats. It’s going to be so awesome.”

“I’m not sure it’s what she’ll want,” Buffy said slowly.

“She’ll think it’s funny. Unlike some people, Tara has a sense of humor.” Dawn’s gaze swiveled to Dean and back to Buffy. “Hey, what are you two doing in the dark?”

“Nothing,” Dean and Buffy said in unison, with matching siblings-are-annoying tones.

“Wow, just asking a question.”

Buffy sighed and walked past her sister. Dean followed in, shutting the door and heading for Sam. He leaned in. With everyone else still talking, they could practically have a private conversation in public. “You get a good idea?”

“I think so,” Sam said.

“Tell me it’s not a pointed hat.”

Sam snorted. “No.”

“Okay good. We’ll talk later. You eat?”

“Nobody has,” Xander said, cutting in on brotherly quiet talk with a loud voice. “Food run?”

Dean’s throat seized up. He didn’t have the cash to sponsor a food run or the nerve to get the money beforehand. But Xander was already on his feet and grabbing his jacket. “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

“Usual for you folks?” Xander said.

“No mustard. Makes my breath smell,” Willow said.

“Got it. Anya?”

“I think I want to try the bacon cheeseburger.”

“Excellent choice.” Xander kissed Anya’s cheek and she grinned.
“Where are you guys going?” Sam asked.

“Doublemeat Palace.”

Sam actually made a face and Dean rolled his eyes. “Come on, there’s no Biggerson’s around here.”

“I don’t like that place either.”

“Sorry that fast food hasn’t developed rabbit food for you, Sammy.” Dean shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and headed towards the door. “I’ll get you something green.”

“ Weird colored ketchup doesn’t count!” Sam shouted as they went out the door.

Xander was right on Dean’s heels as they went out. No sign of Tara or her father. Dean wasn’t sure that was a good thing. He turned towards Xander. “My car?”

“Let’s use mine. It’s a little bit of a walk.”

Dean got the sense this wasn’t some normal food run anymore. Xander was walking too rigidly. He frowned and fell in step with the guy. “What’s eating you?”

“What exactly are your motives with Buffy?”

“Jesus, it’s not like that.”

“It’s not,” Xander said, like he didn’t believe a word coming out of Dean’s mouth.

That pissed Dean off a little. Xander didn’t know him and certainly didn’t have the right to judge him like this. He straightened his shoulders and scowled. “That’s right. Buffy and I are colleagues. Friends. Nothing more.”

“And that’s all there is. You’re not taking advantage of her.”

“Advantage? She’s the Slayer.”

“It’s happened before with guys like you.”

“Like me?”

Xander waved a hand at Dean. “Good looking brooding types with a thousand problems. You’re what she normally goes for, long eyelashes and everything.”

“And let me guess, you usually have a problem with them,” Dean said.

“Considering they turn one of my best friends into a sobbing mess when they break her heart, yes, I have issues with them,” Xander replied hotly.

Dean considered going back to the Magic Box and grabbing Sammy, but then he’d probably have to deal with a round of ‘what happened’ that he didn’t want to wade through. Instead, Dean glowered some more and a rough tone took over his voice. “She can make her own decisions about who she wants in her life and how.”

“Of course, but she’s dating Riley and she doesn’t need you swooping in and confusing things.”

Okay, there was only so much entitled bullshit Dean could take. He grabbed Xander roughly by the arm and spun him to a stop. Facing each other, they were about the same height and Xander puffed
up. Hitting one of Buffy’s near and dears was not in Dean’s game plan though. “If I’m ‘confusing’ things, then maybe there’s something wrong between the two of them and they shouldn’t be together. I’m not throwing some spell on her. Hell, I’m hardly spending any time alone with her unless we’re on a hunt, and when I say hunt, I mean hunt. We didn’t go down the street holding hands or making eyes at each other. We were looking for sons of bitches to put in the freaking ground. So take her off your goddamn pedestal already and see that she’s just as human as the rest of us. Something happens between Buffy and me? That’s our business. Not yours. Riley wants whatever’s between them to last? That’s between the two of them. But I don’t see him fighting for her, do you?”

Xander pursed his lips, and wisely said nothing.

Dean took a deep breath and a step back. He hadn’t meant to get in Xander’s space. With a nod, he said, “So Buffy’s love life’s Buffy’s love life and only thing you need to worry about is if someone’s actively hurting her. We got that settled between the two of us now?”

“Yes.” Xander waited a whole heartbeat before saying. “Do I need to have a talk to Sam about Dawn?”

Dean wanted to put his fist through the guy’s teeth. Instead, he grinned broadly. “I know exactly what Sam would have to say to you.”

“What?”

“Shove it up your ass.”

Xander chuckled. “Isn’t that what you just said?”

“Pretty much.” Dean turned back towards the street. Getting all the anger out in a rant at Xander had helped cool him out some. “Don’t worry about them though. Dawn’s too young for him and Sam’s gentle. She pushes and he’ll do his best to let her down easy. Hopefully she doesn’t do more than bat her eyes at him.”

“She’ll probably doodle on notebooks. She’s always done that. She’s had a crush on me since she was ten.”

For the last two months, maybe. She didn’t exist before that. Dean frowned a little. Xander was talking like he didn’t know. So Buffy had kept that a secret from the rest of her friends—those people that she considered family. This was big. Her trust in him was big.

As Dean climbed into Xander’s car, he realized something else. When they’d been talking about family, Buffy hadn’t mentioned Riley. He sunk into his seat and pondered that over. She cared about him and Sam, about Tara and the others, but Riley hadn’t been brought up. Maybe she assumed he knew she included him, or maybe she really was having more problems with him than she was letting on. No wonder Xander had gone on the offense. There was a real chance that Riley and Buffy were a doomed item.

Dean couldn’t help feeling a tiny bit of glee about that. God, he was an awful human being.
“I’m sorry, your Gloriness, but we haven’t discovered the identity of the man or woman who attacked your holy personage the other night,” the minion said, and it at least had the decency to grovel and bow as it delivered the bad news.

Glory’s righteous fury came anyway. She would’ve stomped her foot if she wasn’t likely to bring this terrible mansion down around her. As much as she hated it, she liked the building’s place on top of the hill and even this pathetic ‘living room’ that lacked the proper furniture for someone of her worthiness. She grabbed the minion by the ear and pulled hard, getting a yelp from the little toadie. “Say that again, but this time, give me better news.”

“I-I-I can’t, your Glorificus! We have searched through the town, but no one would tell us where the Slayer or her mate were.”

“That isn’t exactly true,” another minion said.

The first minion glared and Glory yanked harder on its ear. Honestly, she’d tear the thing off, but then it would go around gloating how the Glorificus hurt it in her anger. She didn’t want to reward the little pest. “What is true?”

“There is plenty of talk about the Slayer in town, your holiness, but no one wanted to share the details with us. They say that ‘ratting’ her out is not, uh, beneficial to them, your Gloriness.” The minion bowed.

The toadie squirmed, but Glory kept a firm grip. “And the man? Her ‘mate?’”

“Oh, the Slayer has a ‘mate,’ sugar, but not the boy you saw,” the yellow eyed demon said. He was lurking in the door way between the living room and the sun room. His smug smile was more than annoying, and it only broadened as she glared at him. He leaned against the frame and folded his arms over his chest. That smile threatened to turn into a laugh. “You really don’t know who they are?”

“Let me guess, you do.”

“I have my sources.”

Glory released the toadie and wiped her hand on its robe before shoving it away. “Leave us.” Both minions bowed and raced from the room. When they were gone, she drew in a deep breath, loving and hating the smell of sulfur in the air. “I didn’t expect that you would want to help me.”

“I was hoping you’d wind up helping me a lot sooner than this.” The yellow eyed demon walked farther into the room. “See, I need that hunter gone and I thought you’d take care of the problem.”

“You’re supposed to be finding my key, not playing with humans,” Glory snapped. She could break this demon in two.

“Rituals take time and space. I don’t think you can whip it up any time you want, can you? Or you would’ve done it already.”

“The timing won’t matter if I don’t have the key!”

“Calm down, princess. We’ll find it. I’m very good at finding things.”

“Doesn’t seem like it so far.” Glory threw herself onto the sofa and glared at the demon. “You know who the Slayer is. And the hunter.”
“I do.”

“Tell me.”

“I need something from you in return.”

“What is it with you Pit demons and deals? How do you ever get anything done?”

“Honestly, the riffraff never does.” The yellow eyed demon’s eyes sparkled with interest. “We have a deal?”

“I don’t know what you want.”

“Just to borrow a set of eyes or two. I need some surveillance done. Your little servants crawl through town far more effectively.”

“Don’t you have your own minions?” Glory asked.

“Another set would be useful. Besides, your guy could learn something useful for you while he’s doing my job.”

Glory played with a strand of her hair. She didn’t like owing the yellow eyed thing and she certainly didn’t want to actually work with something from the Pit. She was far more important than that. On the other hand, she wanted out of this body and back to her full power before she gained those hideous wrinkles on this planet. With a sigh, she dropped the curl of hair. “Oh fine. But we’re not kissing about it. Tell me about the Slayer and the hunter.”

“I can do you one better. I’ll send a little goodbye party their way. Get them taken care of.”

“And I’m just supposed to take your word on that?” Glory said flatly.

“That’s the beauty of my part of the deal. The eyes I want to borrow? I want to put them on the hunter’s brother. You’ll know if my team succeeds.”

Not the worst thing. And she wouldn’t have to dirty her hands on such filth again and even if he failed, she’d have the identity of her enemies. She could still see the hunter’s green eyes. Smiling, she leaned forward. “I have one addendum.”

“What?”

“I want his eyes.”

The yellow eyed demon laughed. “All right. Green eyes for the princess.”

“You know I am more than that.”

“I know.”

Glory nodded and relaxed again. “We’re not kissing on this deal.”

“That’s the seal. The promise.”

“I promise you that if you break it, I will flay you into pieces small enough that the Hellhounds will never scent you.”

“Fair enough,” the yellow eyed demon said. “As always, a pleasure, your ‘Gloriness.’” He left with
Once he was gone, Glory called in two of her minions. “Follow the yellow eyed demon. One of you needs to present yourself. He has a task for you. The other one, watch him. I want to know everything he’s doing.”

The two minions made a whole list of compliments and grovels before bowing and getting out of her sight. She hated not knowing what the yellow eyed demon’s plan was, or who he was. She’d figure this out and if she didn’t like it, she’d make due on her threat. Scratch that. Once the ritual was done and the deal completed, she’d reach back just long enough to burn that demon to ash. No one talked to her that way.
Chapter 21

Tara shoved another magic book into her backpack. She had packed a few things, as her father wished it, but she hated the idea of pulling out the boxes and putting away her clothes. Why did she have to become part demon? Why couldn’t she have been a normal girl going to school and meeting a girlfriend and having friends? She finally had friends!

The demon parts were what her friends wouldn’t like. If no one saw her becoming a demon, then no one would want to take her away from them. Come to think of it, if her father never saw the demon parts, then he wouldn’t need her to come home. He wouldn’t have to protect her. So all she needed to do was find some way to hide, but she didn’t know what kind of parts she would be growing. She couldn’t prepare in time either, her birthday was the following day. At the stroke of midnight, she’d turn into a freak.

Tara wiped away the tears. She had a spell book open on the desk. She’d had this idea before, but it had seemed too cruel and radical. However, she had no other answers. Nothing else would work. She scooped the magic book and ingredients off the desk. Hopefully everyone would still be at the magic shop. Otherwise, she’d have to do multiple castings of the spell and she’d be better off with fewer. One for her friends and one for her family. That’s all she’d need. Tara nodded and loaded up her bag.

Gaia and everyone would have to forgive her for being terrible. She didn’t have a choice. Once she explained, they’d all understand.

Tara went out into the night with her head raised high. She had a solution and it would work because she’d make it work.

Going through the front door of the Magic Box was out of the question. The others couldn’t know about the spell she was performing, not right away. When they knew that nothing about her had changed, she’d drop the spell and everyone could be happy. Better than that. Everyone would be happy. Tonight was looking up until she turned down the alley that led to the back of the shop.

A couple of large men were fiddling with the door. “Screw this, I’m going in the window,” one of them complained. A black smoke whipped out from the man’s body and flung itself at a window only to bounce back.

Giles had mentioned something about spreading salt along the windows. These were demons. And Tara wasn’t a demon yet. She didn’t have any kind of power and if she tried to perform an exorcism, the demons would turn on her. She couldn’t make this fight alone and she didn’t have the time to get around to the front door before the demons found a way through the back. One of them might get stuck on a Devil’s Trap—if they had gotten around to putting it on the floor—but not both of them. More could be lurking nearby too.

The demon went back into the man and the two demons bickered about how close they were with the door. Tara was running out of time, so she pulled back to the corner and took out her cellphone. She dialed Dean’s number. “Please pick up.”

“What’re you doing there, sweetheart?” a man said.

Tara froze. On her phone, Dean’s voice came through. “Tara? Tara, what’s wrong?”

Tara turned slowly. The man behind her had yellow eyes and a toothy grin. “D-d-d-d-d-d—”
“D-d-d, get the word out, darling,” the yellow eyed demon said.

“Tara?” Dean shouted through the phone.

Tara took in a deep breath and screamed at the top of her lungs.

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The random, loud ringtone had shaken the group out of their research stupor. Dean frowned at his phone. Tara was already calling him. That couldn’t be good. He flipped open the phone. “Tara?” No answer, just heavy breathing. “Tara, what’s wrong?”

“D-d-d-d-d—”

Someone else spoke and the voice crackled over the phone. Damn it, someone was threatening her. “Tara?”

Worry was spreading around the table fast. Willow’s brow furrowed as she stood. “What’s happening?”

The scream came next and they could hear it more than just his phone. Dean snapped the phone shut and ran for the training room door. Buffy beat him to it and got through it before him. She yanked the back door open and a man spilled out onto the floor in front of her.

The man looked up with black eyes. Not a man. A demon. Same as the guy still standing in the alley behind the shop. Buffy launched herself at him and Dean grabbed the guy of the ground, shoving him back outside too.

Willow brought up their rear and the door slammed shut all by itself behind her. The smell of burning ozone caked the air and Dean swore her eyes were going black too. He had one second to worry if she was a demon too before his demon slammed him back against the wall and he had a fight on his hand. Buffy had one too, though she was naturally besting the brute.

Tara was at the far end of the alley and Dean could barely hear her sobs over the sounds of thuds and the pulse racing away in his ears. He needed to concentrate on the demon in front of him, but he couldn’t help seeing the one that had Tara pinned up against the wall. When the demon turned his head and glanced back, Dean’s whole mind went into overload. Yellow eyes. Azazel. The demon Dad was hunting was here. The demon that had killed Mom was right down that alley.

The demon right in front of Dean hit him square in the solar plexus and drove his head towards the brick wall. He would’ve taken a second smash to the head if Buffy hadn’t sailed in and sent the demon flying with a single punch. Still, he was dazed and clinging to the wall.

Willow advanced on the demon with both arms stretched out. “Get away from her!”

Azazel grinned. “More tender treats for me. Goody.”

Willow raised a hand, two fingers extended with the rest curled in, and made a quick motion. Azazel flew against the wall, but Willow’s onslaught continued. She whipped him back and forth, cracking the demon’s head against the brick. One of the demons near Dean rose and he tried to grab at it, but the demon was running at Willow. He raised his voice, shouted, “Watch out!”
Willow spun and used her magic to smack the other demon into the pavement. The demon spewed out in a black cloud and the one fighting Buffy did the same. She was safe, Tara and Willow were safe.

Dean was still dazed, but he saw the grin on Azazel’s face. He forced his feet down the alley and the demon’s voice seemed to be right next to him. “Maybe next time, Dean-o.”

The world spun again and suddenly Buffy was under his arm and steering him back into the Magic Box. “It was him,” Dean stammered. “The demon.” He fought her, but on a good day was stronger, in his current condition, Buffy was a giant and he was an ant. “We have to go after him!”

They were already through the training room and back into the brightly lit shop. The others were pale with fear and Dean tried to push Buffy away and head for the door, only she shoved him into a chair. “We need an ice pack. Something!”

“Tara?” Xander asked.

“I-I-I’m fine,” Tara said. She sat in a chair across the table from Dean with Willow fussing over her.

Buffy was still trying to worry over him and Sam was in his way too. Dean swatted at the both of them, but they only moved for Giles, who suddenly had to be in his face. Giles held up a finger. “Dean, I need you to focus here.”

“I’m fine. Damn it, he’s getting away!” Dean glared at Buffy.

“What’s he talking about?” Sam asked.

“Azazel!” Dean pushed up on the chair and Buffy slammed him back into it. “You’re letting him go!”

“We don’t know how to fight him,” Buffy replied.

“Knife through the heart’s a good place to start,” Dean snapped.

“It’s the worst place,” Giles said softly. “Whoever that man is, he is possessed by Azazel. There is an innocent trapped inside.”

Dean’s stomach turned. Willow had sent Azazel flying more than once. She’d done some real damage to some poor guy. Thinking about that made Dean remember how hard he’d hit the guy that he’d been fighting. “The other guys we fought?”

“Bruised. Assuming the demons have skedaddled, they’ll be fine,” Buffy said.

“There has to be a better way to fight them,” Xander said.

“I’m sure we’ll think of it soon. I’m more worried about Dean’s potential concussion,” Giles said.

“I’m fine,” Dean said.

“Can I be more curious about how Tara was approaching the shop from the wrong direction?” Anya asked.

Dean frowned. He’d checked out the layout of town during one of his breaks, but he hadn’t thought about the relation of buildings to each other. Without knowing where she was coming from, he had no way of judging Anya’s statement. However, everyone else seemed to be more confused than him.
Willow most of all. Her brows knitted together as she swept back a lock of Tara’s hair. “Honey, what were you doing in the alley?”

“I didn’t want you to see,” Tara mumbled so quietly that Dean hardly heard her.

“See what?”

“What I’ll become.”

“What are you becoming?” Buffy asked.

Tara shook her head and leaned into Willow for a hug. Something about her whole demeanor bugged Dean and he couldn’t help thinking of the way her father had been a total asshole.

Think of the Devil and apparently he appeared. Tara’s father walked through the shop door with another man and woman—Tara’s siblings if Dean had to guess. Tara folded in on herself and Dean clenched his jaw. He had the same reaction around Dad sometimes and he knew how it felt. He was a genuine screw up from time to time while Tara was nothing but sweet as far as Dean could tell.

“What’s going on here?” Tara’s father demanded.

“I’m not sure that’s exactly any of your business,” Buffy said as she spun towards the man with her hands on her hips.

Giles was far more diplomatic. “Is there something we can help you with?”

“We came to collect Tara.”

The statement was so final. Dean tightened his fist and he could see Sammy stick his chin up stubbornly. So he’d picked up on the weird vibe too. Good. Dean would’ve hated to have Sam against him.

“Collect her?” Willow asked.

“That’s right. Come along, Tara. I won’t ask again.”

Tara sniffled and stood up.

Dean’s head spun. He couldn’t tell exactly what was going on here, only that somehow Tara was upset. Maybe he had a concussion after all. In a loud voice, he asked, “Becoming what?”

The whole room froze. Let it. He couldn’t stand seeing the hurt in the way Tara stood, like a distant echo of his own pain. Her father said, “A demon.”

Dean’s eyes went wide and Tara’s filled with tears. Holy shit, becoming a demon. Only that didn’t make any sense. There were possessing demons and natural born demons, but no in betweens. People could become vampires or victims of possession. Becoming a demon just wasn’t a thing. He frowned and looked back at her father. “Huh?”

“It can be hard for someone outside of the family to understand,” her father said.

“Actually, it’s not that difficult,” Anya replied. “What kind of demon will she be?”

Tara’s father blinked a few times. “What?”

“Well, there’s lots of demons. Some are useful members of society these days. So, what kind will she
be? Do we need to invest in some charms? Make up? I’ve read that humans can do amazing things with layers of foundation these days.”

“Honey, talking too much,” Xander whispered.

“No,” Willow said and she stood straight and tall. “She’s got a good point. Demon doesn’t necessarily mean evil. Tara doesn’t have to go anywhere.”

“All demons are evil,” Tara’s father said.

“Bullshit,” Sam said and that shocked the crap out of Dean. Dad had raised them to believe in the evil of demons, not have any sympathy for them. Yet Dean couldn’t help feeling a smidge of worry about Tara. She had only been nice. Dad would say that was how demons hunted on people, but Sam and Anya had pretty good points. If Sunnydale had taught him anything so far, it was that nothing was as it seemed.

“None of that matters because Tara’s coming home with us,” the asshole said.

Willow turned to Tara, who was openly weeping now. “Do you want to go?”

Tara shook her head and she looked so broken Dean couldn’t help vowing to protect her. Concussion, stitches, and every other injury wouldn’t stop him.

“Okay, so she stays,” Buffy said.

“You don’t know what you’re dealing with,” Tara’s father said. “We do.”

“Oh bullshit,” Dean said. Now the room looked to him. He waved a hand at the books strewn across the table. “I think we’re more than capable on figuring out how to protect her.”

“You’re the ones who need protecting.”

“But what kind of demon is she becoming?” Sam said.

“That doesn’t matter,” her father said.

“You keep saying that, but it kind of does,” Dawn said.

“Right.” Sam nodded. “If you’re not a demon, then your wife had to be the one, right? So what was she? A rugaru? Lashick? Changeling?”

Tara’s father sputtered and turned a bright shade of red.

A sudden impossible thought crossed Dean’s mind and he laughed. “Oh you have got to be kidding me.”

“What?” Sam asked.

“It’s freaking Memphis,” Dean replied.

“Oh my God. You’re right.”

“Oh of course I am.”

“Uh, and for those of us who don’t speak Winchester?” Xander said.
“We ran into this twisted little cult,” Sam explained. “The leader had convinced the women he married that all their children were spawn of Satan, blessed to have great power.”

“Except there was nothing special about the kids. No powers. No extra brain. Nothing. They were just kids led to believe that they would bring Satan back to Earth to begin Armageddon. They thought they had these extra abilities,” Dean said. “Dad called social services on them.”

“But they weren’t demons,” Xander repeated.

“They weren’t anything different than a normal human.” Dean fixed Tara’s father with a mean glare. “And you’re pulling the same shit on your daughter.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” her father said.

“Then name the type of demon she’ll become,” Sam challenged.

And once again they were in a silent stalemate. Willow took Tara’s hand. “You don’t have to go anywhere, baby.”

“She has to come with us,” her father said.

“If you think you’re taking her out of here against her will, you’re sadly mistaken,” Buffy said. She put her hands on her hips and sweet Jesus, Dean wished she’d consider him family for just a moment. He could use someone in his corner like this when Dad showed up.

But this moment was about Tara. Dawn stepped up beside Buffy and crossed her arms over her chest, drawing her full height up. “Yeah. Tara only goes where she wants to.”

“You don’t scare us,” Tara’s brother said. “Two little girls?”

“You’re not dealing with just them,” Giles said.

“Yeah,” Sam said as he stood tall. Dean couldn’t have been prouder.

“I think it’s fair to say you’d have to go through all of us,” Xander said.

“And I’d be careful going through him if I were you,” Anya said. “He pulls hair.”

“That I do.”

“Tara, honey, this is your last chance to come with us,” her father said.

When Tara didn’t budge, her brother sputtered, “But we’re her family.”

“No, we’re her family and if you don’t get out of here, you’re going to find yourselves really unwelcome,” Buffy said.

“If that’s how it’s going to be, fine. I hope you’re happy for tearing your real family apart.” Her father and the other two left the Magic Box.

The last words had a sharp edge to them and Dean heard them in the echo of Dad’s voice. Better to blame any pain on getting his head smacked against a brick wall. He should be happy for Tara and he was, even if she was showing a whole range of emotions in her eyes. Everyone else seemed blindly happy or dismissive of her father. That could hurt in a whole other way.

Then life was sweeping forward. Willow wanted to take Tara back to her dorm room and the room
was full of loud fussy people again offering their best advice for the rest of the night. Tara stopped by
Dean and whispered, “Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dean said.

Soon they were all trooping out of the Magic Box and Sam and Dean were alone in the Impala
following Giles’s car back towards his house. After all that noise, the silence was a different kind of
deafening, but Dean didn’t have a clue what to say next.

“You’re going to call Dad, aren’t you?” Sam said.

Dean tightened his grip on the wheel. The thought hadn’t crossed his mind yet, but it should have.
He was slipping. “I’ve got to. I know what I saw.”

“He’ll want to move us.”

“Azazel was here. Doesn’t make any sense to make us leave.”

“Since when does Dad do anything that makes sense?” Sam demanded and the heat in his voice was
causing another headache.

Dean didn’t want to fight with Sammy. Didn’t want to fight with Dad either. Didn’t want to start life
all over again if they kept moving. He sighed. “Dad’s not taking us anywhere we don’t want to go.”

Genuine shock in Sam’s voice as he said, “You mean that?”

“I stuck our necks out this far. No sense pulling them back yet.”

“Even though you saw Azazel?”

“If Azazel’s sticking around in town, then he’s got to have some kind of plan and we need to stop
him. If he’s just leaving and coming back a lot, that means we’ll have a better shot knowing where
he’s going to show up if we sit still. The hunt’s here, whether Dad admits it or not,” Dean said. He
sounded pretty convinced to himself. Maybe Dad would see it that way too. “Either way, we’re not
leaving if you don’t want to, Sammy. I made you a promise and I plan on keeping it.”

At the next red light, Sam threw his arms around Dean in a weird, confined hug. Winchesters didn’t
really do hugs. Or gratitude. Dean cleared his throat. “Dude, don’t turn this into a chick flick
moment.”

“Like you haven’t watched Pretty Woman about a hundred times?”

Dean had, and loved it every time, but he scoffed anyway. “It was the only thing on.”

Sam laughed and finally let Dean go as the light turned green. “Sure.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Dean went back to driving.

God, he hoped telling Dad wouldn’t screw this up.
A small threat of guilt tried to battle with Giles’s practicality and lost. While he should retire to his bedroom upstairs, he’d decided on staying in the living room and reading. He was in one of the chairs, so technically Dean could sprawl out on the couch and fall asleep if he needed to, but Giles was a little afraid of leaving the poor boy alone. After all, Dean had suffered yet another injury. Besides, the demon attacked had rattled both of them, though Dean more obviously.

Giles should have stuck around and painted the Devil’s Trap at the back door of the shop. Hopefully the place wouldn’t be raided or vandalized when he arrived in the morning. He’d go in early just to make certain and then rectify the lapse.

Dean came out from the bathroom and snapped his cellphone shut. He tossed it onto the coffee table in front of the couch and then eased down. Judging from his conflicted facial expression, Giles was willing to bet he’d forgotten anyone else was in the room. Whatever had happened in that phone call had upset him, but Giles didn’t want to pry.

Dear Lord, at Dean’s age, Giles had been a prat in a bad band playing with magic to spite his family’s history of being a Watcher. At the time, that had seemed so important, so adult. In a way, Dean and Buffy both dealt with more than he’d ever had to consider at their age and there was no giving them back a childhood. No childhood for Tara either.

“If my reading bothers you, I can go upstairs,” Giles said.

“What? Oh. Naw. Sort of used to falling asleep when I can, just not in the mood yet.”

“I’ve got a few books if you wanted to help in the research.”

Dean paused for a long enough moment that Giles wasn’t sure he had heard the question. Then he swung his feet down and took the top book out of the stack. “Is this even English?”

“That one’s German.”

Dean took the next one out of the stack before Giles could tell him that one was in Latin. Dean sighed and rolled his eyes, tossing it off to the side too. “Maybe I’ll go for a drive.”

“I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“I can’t just sit here when the demon’s out there. What if he kills someone in town while I’m wasting time on books I can’t read?”

“I understand your need for action, but you’re not in much of a fighting condition.”

Dean scowled. “Tara’s potion helped a lot.”

“Helped, but it didn’t solve the problem. There will be plenty of monsters to fight once you’ve regained your strength.”

“So what? Stay in with you and do research?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, you should,” Giles said primly. “Knowledge has helped Buffy win as many fights as brute strength has.”

“And how do I know that isn’t some line you give people so you get more help?” Dean asked.
“You can’t persuade me that you have never done research into the demons that you hunt.”

Dean sighed and rolled his eyes. “All right. You’ve got a point there.”

Giles had had the same point earlier, but he didn’t see the need to stress that with the boy now. They settled into their respective stacks of books and quite a few hours passed with no further clues about Azazel or the blond woman Dean and Buffy had fought a few nights previous. Other than ensuring Dean didn’t slip into a coma, the night wound up being an endeavor into the tedious. Giles took a moment on the stair landing to glance back at Dean. So far, Dean had taken as much of the couch as possible, but tonight he had hunkered into the cushions.

With any luck, they would solve the mysteries of Azazel and the blond woman soon. Maybe then they would all find a few nights’ peace before the inevitable next disaster.

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Riley slammed the stake into the vampire and yanked it back out again, but the resulting ash didn’t satisfy his needs. A big gaping hole had opened up in his soul, the one that killing monsters used to fill. Tonight, he still felt shallow and unreal. Unwanted. Needing to walk off his anger, he stalked through the cemetery with his stake in hand. Had to be another couple pieces of undead trash he could get rid of.

“Soldier boy’s on his own, I see.”

Even as Riley spun, ready to attack, he realized that Spike was the speaker. The blond British vamp had a smug grin on his face and stood just far enough away that he couldn’t get accidentally staked. Apparently his intention had been to spook Riley.

Riley gave a disgusted sigh. “Go away, Spike.”

“Don’t you need back up? Not as strong as you used to be.”

“And you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” Riley snapped back.

Spike glared at him. “Least I know where my girl is.”

“As if you really care about Harmony.” Riley continued on through the graves.

For some mysterious reason, Spike followed him. “Fair enough. But she’s not threatening people on behalf of some better looking bloke.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Had a visit from the Slayer. Seems she didn’t take kindly to the prank I pulled on Cover Boy.”

Spike came up alongside Riley. “Funny. She didn’t come and threaten me after I kidnapped the doctor who came to town to save your life.”

Spike was a waste of space who got his rocks off verbally torturing people now that the government-placed chip in his head wouldn’t let him physically hurt anyone. Riley ran over that fact a few times in his head, but Spike’s words were digging in deep. Buffy had cared about getting him rested and well, but she hadn’t shown any concern about Spike’s interference. In fact, Riley had almost died.
Way closer than Dean had gotten. He ground his teeth. He couldn’t let Spike win this little war.

Except, judging by the broad grin on Spike’s lips, Riley failed spectacularly at hiding his anger. He broke off from the graveyard patrol and headed towards Revello Drive. A few lights in the Summers’ household were still on despite the late hour, so he gently knocked on the door.

Joyce answered it. The bags under her eyes had darkened and she was paler than she should be. Buffy had mentioned moving back in for her mom’s health, but up until now, Riley had thought that was a convenient excuse. Just another reason to put a little distance between them.

“Sorry, Mrs. Summers, I didn’t mean to wake you,” Riley said.

“I wasn’t asleep.” Joyce brushed her fingers against her temple. “Silly head keeps hurting and all the aspirin in the world isn’t making it stop.”

That sounded bad. Riley’s temper cooled. Buffy had enough on her plate without having him complain at her about Spike and Dean Winchester. Before he could apologize again and leave without disturbing anyone, Joyce held the door open further and waved him inside. He cautiously entered and closed the door behind him.

Joyce went into the dining room and Dawn’s voice floated out into the hallway. “So then Sam was like interrogating Tara’s dad and demanding to know what kind of demon she was supposed to be. I wish I had thought of that, but it’s not surprising that he did. I mean, Sam is obviously the smarter Winchester. Dean was just sitting there with this dumb look on his face—”

“Oh he was not,” Buffy said.

Riley came to the archway of the dining room. The Summers had grabbed mugs of tea or hot chocolate and they sat around one end of the table. They made for a neat family unit and he cursed himself that he was interrupting this because Spike had stirred up ideas in his head. Once again, he hesitated too long. Buffy rose from her seat with tea in hand and came up to him for a light peck on the lips. “This is a nice surprise.”

“Yeah. Thought I’d drop in. I was in the neighborhood,” Riley said.

“Doing what?” Dawn asked from the table.

Joyce stood and touched Dawn’s shoulder. “Honey, why don’t we get more marshmallows?”

“Oh okay.”

They went into the kitchen, which was the next best thing to being left alone in this house. Riley kissed Buffy again, but she wasn’t putting much into it. He couldn’t manage up the energy either. “You seem extra scowly tonight,” she said.

“Ran into Spike.”

“Oh God. What did he say now?”

“That you went to threaten him after what he did to Dean.”

“Oh. Well. Yeah. So did Dean.”

Riley clenched his jaw and went still. Clamping down on the anger was smarter than letting it explode. “I don’t remember you doing that for me.”
“I’m sure I did,” Buffy said with a scowl. Her expression deepened. “I mean, I had to have.”

No sense bringing up that Spike claimed she hadn’t. He could’ve been lying and that’s exactly what Buffy would point out. However, her uncertainty wasn’t reassuring. “What was Dawn talking about?”

“Oh boy. Do you have a few minutes? Something big happened with Tara’s family.”

“They’re in town?” Riley asked.

“Guess you really have missed stuff lately. Let’s head up to my room and we can catch up.” Buffy leaned into him. “Maybe get rid of a little tension too.”

Surprising even to him, Riley didn’t feel up for a long cuddle session with her, especially not if it meant hearing about Dean freaking Winchester at all. “Maybe some other time. I was just stopping by for a moment.”

“Okay,” Buffy said slowly. She put distance between them again.

The problem was he didn’t know how to fix them. He wasn’t even sure he could label what was wrong with them. Riley forced a soft smile and it stretched across his lips. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Don’t forget about Tara’s party at the Bronze.”

“Right. I’ll be there.” He gave her another quick kiss and left.

That angry energy was still built up in his system and obviously walking a graveyard wasn’t going to settle it. Riley decided to head to Willy’s. In a demon bar, he might pick up valuable intel on some of the local evil. Even if he didn’t, at least he wouldn’t be alone in his room waiting on standby for the next crisis.

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“Can I please borrow some of your lipstick?” Dawn asked for the third time. She stood with both hands clasped just outside Buffy’s doorway—this was technically the hall because she’d been banished from her sister’s room once again—and did her best puppy dog eyes. Mom wouldn’t let her have much make up in general, even though Buffy had totally had tons of make up at her age. So unfair. The least Buffy could do was give her a little. “Please?”

“No.” Buffy didn’t look Dawn’s way.

Dawn could burst into tears. “Oh come on! It’s a party!”

“For one of my friends. You’re lucky you get to go.”

“Sam’s going!”

Buffy smirked and Dawn regretted asking her for anything. “So that’s what this is about?”

Dawn folded her arms over her chest. “No.”

“Uh huh.”
“It’s not. I just want to look nice for the party.”

“You don’t need make up to look nice.”

“Then why are you putting it on?”

Buffy sighed in the shut-up-Dawn way, which meant an end to the argument in some way or another. Dawn steeled herself for the worst answer and prepared a comeback, but when Buffy looked her way again something weird crossed her face and she softened her frown. “Okay. You can wear some of mine, but I get to decide what and you have to change that skirt.”

“What’s wrong with my skirt?”

“It’s way too short.”

“You’ve worn shorter.”

“It was in style then. That’s not. And besides, it’s my make up. It’s my rules.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll be right back.” Dawn raced back to her room. She knew the perfect back up outfit—a dress she’d bought last week and a pair of heels—and she hurried into it. It only came down another half inch, but she was ready to fight for it. She so looked like at least a sophomore in this outfit. A little make up and she could pass for a junior. She rushed back to Buffy’s door. “How’s this?”

Buffy smirked. “That’s fine. You’ve got foundation on?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Close your eyes.”

Dawn did so, making sure not to scrunch them shut, and to stand still. She’d learned that much about getting make up done with Mom the couple of times she’d gotten to try it out. One day she’d get to own all these fun colors and do this herself.

Buffy put on a little lipstick and eyeshadow on her and it was over so quick and took so long. “Go ahead and look.”

Praying that her big sister hadn’t turned her into a lump of undateable mass, Dawn ran over to Buffy’s mirror. The make up was subtle, just enough eyeshadow to draw attention there, but not so much that she looked like she was wearing a mask. The lipstick was practically the same color as her lips, but it was there and it wasn’t lipgloss, so she’d take the win. Actually, the more she looked at the make up, the better it seemed. Buffy stank at a lot of stuff—like sharing the last bowl of Fruit Loops—but she knew her fashion.

“Thank you thank you thank you!” Dawn squealed and looped her arms around her big sister.

“Oof!” Buffy gently wrapped her arms around Dawn for a hug and then ended the embrace by combing her fingers through Dawn’s hair. No doubt a couple of tangles were threatening to appear. Another one of Buffy’s good traits. She liked making sure Dawn’s hair looked good. Too bad that only happened when she was feeling a sisterly impulse.

“Look at my grown up girls,” Mom said, taking up Dawn’s old place in the hallway.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Buffy said.
“It suits her. Maybe we’ll get you a little of your own, Dawn.”

Oh, this was turning into the best night ever. All she needed to do was work up the courage to ask Sam to dance. Or maybe he would see her all dressed up and he would ask her. That would be so cool. She grinned.

“Presents,” Buffy said.

“What? Oh! Right!” Dawn went back to her room and grabbed the broom. Finding a black pointy hat turned into a bust, so she’d had to go with her back up present. She’d adorned it with a large red bow. Buffy had said that it wasn’t very funny but she didn’t have Tara’s sense of humor. Tara would get it. She was cool like that.

“Do you need me to drop you off?” Mom asked.

“Giles is coming.”

“Okay then. The two of you promise to have fun.”

“We so will,” Dawn said. She hugged Mom and accidentally knocked the straw part of the broom into her hair. “Whoops.”

“Be careful, Dawn,” Buffy said with that absolutely annoying you-know-better tone in her stupid voice. Then she took her time hugging Mom.

They had barely gotten downstairs when the doorbell rang. Dawn totally would’ve made it to the door first if she wasn’t carrying the broom. Buffy opened the door and instead of Giles, Dean stood there. The bruising on his face had gone down some and he wasn’t wearing a bandage on his neck wound anymore, which made him look like some guy who had definitely been in too many fights.

“Oh hey,” Buffy said. “I thought Giles was—”

“He realized, you know, since we were coming from the same place, there was no reason to drive separate. Impala’s got enough space for everyone,” Dean said. Something was funny about his voice. He so had the hots for Buffy. Like, obviously wanted to hook up with her and now he couldn’t keep his voice normal around her. Geesh. “You look nice. You too, Dawn.”

“Thanks!” Dawn blurted. “Can we get going? We’re going to be late.”

“Calm down,” Buffy said as she slipped into a jacket.

“Everyone else—”

“Come on, Dawn, first rule of partying, never be the first people there,” Dean said.

“He’s not wrong,” Buffy said.

Dawn wished they’d make out already and get it over with. There was no point making everyone else watch them attempt to not flirt with each other while totally wanting to flirt with each other. She rolled her eyes and went out the door. “Whatever.”

The broom was stashed in the trunk and then Dawn and Buffy climbed into the backseat. And there was Sam. Gorgeous, perfect Sam. He smiled as she buckled up and then fumbled with his own seatbelt. Their hands accidentally brushed against each other and Dawn was so glad it was dark and she had make up on because maybe he wouldn’t see the blush on her cheeks. She had to be cool.
Like Buffy, but not totally like Buffy because she needed to be herself, but Buffy always had boyfriends. It occurred to Dawn that she probably always had boyfriends because she was somehow cool and relaxed around guys. That had happened before the Slayer part kicked in, so that had to be naturally Buffy. She and Buffy had the same parents, so she must have inherited some of the cool gene too. Maybe even more because she was way cooler than Buffy.

The Impala’s engine was loud. The backseat was roomy, even with Buffy in there with her and Sam. Giles got to have the front seat, no surprise there. Thankfully the drive was really short and Dean found a parking spot in no time. Dawn slid across the seat towards Sam’s door—because Buffy was taking way too long getting out of the car—and Sam actually held his hand out for her. Such a gentleman. She took his hand even though she so didn’t need the help. She got to hold Sam’s hand for a second.

IDs were checked at the Bronze door and since she and Sam were the only ones underage, they were the only ones who had to wear the red bracelets. Like she wanted to sneak in and get alcohol. Alcohol made people do stupid stuff. The bouncer did a double-take at Dawn’s present, then glanced inside the club, and then back to them. “Not the weirdest thing I’ve seen.”

She was in the Bronze. With Sam. For a birthday party for one of her favorite people. Dawn could barely suppress the urge to squeal.

They dropped presents off at a table where Willow was waiting. Willow smiled big at Dawn. “Aw, Dawnie, look at you all grown up.”

Not the kind of way she wanted people to talk to her around Sam, but Buffy’s friends were always going to treat her like a little girl. Willow could be totally cool sometimes and besides, soon she’d be busy with Tara and hosting the party and she wouldn’t have to worry about embarrassing stories coming out of Willow’s mouth. No, that was far more likely to be an Anya or Buffy thing.

“She got to hold Sam’s hand for a second.”

“Presents delivered. Now what?” Sam said.

“I see a few tables. We could chill,” Dawn said.

“Sounds good to me,” Giles said.

Crap. She had wanted alone time with Sam. Instead, she wound up sitting with Giles and Buffy with Dean hovering close by and okay, things could be worse because she did get to sit next to Sam. Tara arrived and was so happy about all the presents and people that she teared up a little. And she loved Dawn’s present. Then more people arrived and soon the group was rotating, though Sam stayed seated too. Dancing started and Dawn really wished she had the nerve to ask Sam, but what if he said no? Worse, what if he only said yes to mollify the Slayer’s kid sister? Dawn tried not to let the thoughts bum her out. So far, tonight was working out pretty well. Sam was talking to her like she was another human being and not some mutant from outer space. Achievements had been reached. He even asked her if she wanted something to drink, which, while not a dance invitation, was definitely progress. Eventually, Buffy and the others went out to the dance floor and she was alone with Sam.

Now she had to stay totally cool and prove that she wasn’t a kid or a dork or anything. “So how’s living with Giles?”

“Kind of nice, actually. I got the spare bedroom. It’s been a really long time since I had a room to myself.”

“Does he make you read books all night?”
“I kind of like that,” Sam said. “But he hasn’t ‘made’ me do anything.”

“Not even clean your room?”

“Well, I don’t think he’s looked in there yet.”

“I so hate cleaning mine, but this one time, there was this egg thing that crawled underneath my bed.” Dawn imitated the chicken egg and the tentacles that had come crawling out from it. “I saw it skittering all over my stuff. And then it went back under my bed. I tried finding it, but it hid really well. So kind of keep my room clean since then.”

“That would be a pretty good reason. I should probably clean mine tomorrow.” Sam straightened and wow, he was so tall and cute. He frowned though. “Uh oh.”

Dawn glanced over her shoulder. Riley had finally decided to show up and he was making a beeline for the dance floor. When she followed his projected path, she saw what was making the other man scowl. Dean and Buffy were dancing. Not like grinding or anything. In fact, Dawn had seen Xander and Buffy dancing closer than that earlier tonight. Riley looked extra pissed off though. Not good.

Sam was already sliding off his chair and Dawn followed suit. Well, there went the perfect night thanks to Buffy’s boyfriend drama. Shouting was bound to ruin Tara’s birthday and she wanted to be ready to tell them to knock it off. Because this was Tara’s night. And well, in a way, Dawn’s. But still, Tara deserved some respect.

Only Riley didn’t say anything when he reached Buffy and Dean. He came up behind Dean, spun him around by the shoulder, and then hit Dean so hard he stumbled.

Holy crap!
The only warning Dean had that something might go wrong was the wide-eyed look Buffy got just before he felt a hand on his shoulder. He twisted with the surprise force and got a bigger surprise, Riley’s fist in his face. He saw the fist coming at him a second time, only Buffy got in the way and pushed Riley back. His head swarmed, not with a concussion, but with the simple unfairness. So far tonight, he’d behaved himself. Dancing with Buffy had been accidental since they’d been in a bigger group. They’d gravitated towards each other because everyone else was part of a couple and yeah, okay, she was hot and he liked seeing her on the dance floor, but that didn’t constitute action, especially since he hadn’t actually touched her.

And he was God damn tired of Riley assuming that he was trying to make a move on Buffy.

Buffy was walking Riley back out of the Bronze and judging by the glare she had going, Riley was about to get told off. Asshole had just walked up to Dean and hit him, full well knowing that Dean had more than enough bruises and injuries already, and all that was going to happen was a freaking tongue lashing for being a prick.

“Dean,” Sam said.

“I’m fine,” Dean spat out as he headed towards the same door Buffy and Riley had left through.

Xander stepped into his way. “Whoa, better let them work it out.”

Dean shoved Xander out of his way. He was tired of being Sunnydale’s resident punching bag. If Riley or anyone thought he was going to sit back and keep taking it, they were freaking wrong. He stormed out of the Bronze.

Buffy and Riley turned down an alley. Dean caught up to them easily and flat out ignored whatever the conversation was. Didn’t matter since it ended soon as they saw him. Buffy stepped between them again. “Dean, calm down.”

Screw that. He stepped around her and slammed his fist into Riley. That spawned a fight. All the anger and frustration built up over the last week from shitty prospects and shittier assumptions powered every slam and block of Dean’s style. He let go and fell into the precision, the tempo, only watching that he didn’t hit too soft a target. His muscles ached and he took a few hits, but Riley was getting winded and bruised.

“Stop it!” Buffy shouted.

But Dean was on as much defense as offense. Riley was getting sloppy, becoming more of an onslaught. Meaner blows were coming in and Dean could only protect himself so much. Guarding his head cost him the open spot on his ribs. Riley slammed his fist right into the stitches. Buffy grabbed his arm and Riley shoved her hard enough to send her crashing to the ground. Even in his shitty position, Dean could see the hurt on Buffy’s face, the tears threatening. Oh, screw holding back with this prick. Riley had asked for it. Dean countered the next punch, landed one, and when Riley stumbled back a step, roundhouse kicked him square in the chest. That set Riley on his ass, though Dean stood ready.

He didn’t realize that he’d put himself between Riley and the still fallen Buffy until he had the
chance to breathe and think again. Thankfully Riley wasn’t standing up and didn’t seem hurt too bad. Dean twisted towards Buffy and held out his hand. "You okay?"

“Yeah.” Buffy took his hand and let him help her up. “I should be asking you that.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding.”

Dean reached up to his lip, but Buffy invaded his space and tried checking the wound through his shirt. Hold on, she was checking the blood on his shirt. Dean scoffed. “Told you, I’m fine.”

Riley got up on his own and Buffy didn’t even look his way. Instead, Dean got the pleading look from him, which made Dean scowl. No way was he going to forgive the guy this quick. Riley reached out for her and Buffy stepped out of his grasp. Unfortunately that meant she stepped away from Dean too. Without the energy from the fight to dull the pain, all the bruises were making themselves known. His side massively hurt and he gingerly reached up to touch it.

“I think we need to take you to the hospital,” Buffy said.

“Just need to get it restitched.”

“No, what you need is a doctor. You’re going.”

“Got to get Sam and Dawn first.”

“I will,” Riley offered.

“You won’t go anywhere near them,” Buffy snapped. “Besides, I think pretty much everyone from the party is out here now.”

“Awesome.” Dean groaned and held his side. Buffy slipped up beside him again and he would’ve appreciated their closeness more if he wasn’t in so much pain. As they walked towards the Impala, he caught sight of the others. He tried to walk more on his own, but his damn side hurt too much. His smile was fake. “Happy birthday, Tara. Sorry I can’t stick around.”

“Save your breath,” Buffy said.

“Dawn, Sam, car,” Giles said.

“It was a nice party,” Sam said to Willow and Tara. He hugged Tara. “See you guys soon.”

“See you,” Tara said.

Sam caught up to them and was a little too close to Dean’s side. “Did you get your ass kicked again?”

“Technically he won,” Buffy replied.

“Riley looked fine,” Dawn said.

“Riley didn’t have a few pieces of thread keeping a wound closed,” Giles said. “Give me the keys. I’ll drive.”

“Haven’t you been drinking?” Sam asked.
“Since Dawn made that remark about ‘losers’ and booze, no I decided not to continue partaking tonight. And I only had a beer before that.”

“Yeah, okay. Don’t ruin her.” Dean fumbled the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to Giles. “Though seriously, we could just head back.”


“What about Riley?” Dawn asked.

“Let him be someone else’s problem.”

The slam of the Impala’s doors never sounded so final as that.

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Buffy paced the waiting room. She had been doing this same routine near Dean’s bedside in the ER, except there hadn’t been a lot of space and the four them couldn’t cram around him. Giles had sent her, Sam, and Dawn out to the lobby and Sam had only gone along because Giles had insisted that he’d give them any updates and Dean had made it pretty clear he didn’t want his brother hanging around. He probably didn’t want Sam to see or know how injured he really was. Buffy would’ve kept Dawn at the same distance. Stupid Riley and his stupid jealousy. And what had Dean been thinking charging down the alley? Riley had training. Lots of training. But so apparently had Dean because he went from the losing side of that battle to the winning in a few moves. A few very impressive, limber reminding moves. Oh God, this was not the time for her to get all fantasy-thinking about Dean! He had messed up too. He was not deserving of horny admiration. Except, great, now she was playing back the fight in her head again and Dean looked a little too great. After all, he had started out injured and everything.

Riley walked through the lobby doors and Buffy came to a halt a few feet away. He was shrinking down as much as possible for a man of his height, which still made him way taller than her. Soon as Sam saw him, he jumped up to his feet and damn if he wasn’t close to Riley height himself.

Once again, Buffy stepped between Riley and a Winchester, though she had her back to Sam. “Sam. Sit.” She sensed rather than saw that Sam obeyed her. Good. At least someone was listening tonight. She folded her arms over her chest. “Not exactly a smart idea showing up here.”

“I came to apologize,” Riley said.

“For being a jealous jerk or for hitting Dean in his stitches?”

“Could we do this somewhere else?”

Buffy mulled that over for a second. She should just tell Riley to go away. If she wanted to tell him to go away for a lot longer than one night, she should probably step outside with him. Or she could go for the public break up. She’d never really done that before. Riley gave her that puppy dog look, one of the ones that had won her over in the first place. She did kind of owe him a moment of privacy. “Outside. You have five minutes.” With a quick turn, she told Sam and Dawn, “And you two don’t go anywhere.”
The ambulance pulled up in front of the ER doors was quieter than usual. Had to be a slow night for monsters, which was good because they didn’t have to go far for the desired privacy. Only without the extra time, she had no idea what to say to him.

“I’m sorry,” Riley said and she could see the sincerity in his eyes.

She didn’t feel like forgiving him though. “You got jealous. Again.”

“I don’t know what came over me. I saw you dancing with him and I just—”

“Thought blindsiding him was a good idea?”

“Hey, he did the same at me.”

“No, you got the chance to prepare. Dean didn’t. You punched him for literally no reason.”

“So me punching him, that justifies what happened?” Riley said.

“You can’t go from apologizing to trying to weasel out of your responsibility. You and your insane jealousy started this.”

“Maybe if you weren’t keeping me at arm’s length all the time, I wouldn’t get that way.”

“So now it’s my fault?” Buffy snapped. She could reach out and strangle him. “God, this is a great apology, Riley. Do you want to maybe heap some blame on Willow? After all the party was her idea. Or, ooo! I know. It’s Tara’s fault. That whole being born thing, if only we hadn’t been celebrating that.”

“Can you cut the sarcasm out? I genuinely am sorry that I hurt him. But I wouldn’t have gotten this way if I could trust that you and me were still you and me.” Riley sighed. “I think we’ve got to face a truth here. Something’s been wrong with us since my surgery. You’re treating me with these kid gloves. I’m more than capable of getting out in the field.”

How had they gotten such different ideas without her noticing? “I think our real problem has been that you keep insisting like you’re at the peak of your Initiative days and worse, that you seem to think that’s the only thing I’ve ever seen in you.”

Riley waved a hand at the hospital doors. “Like Dean isn’t that much hotter because he can handle himself?”

“That’s the other thing! You have always compared yourself to every other guy I’ve been remotely interested in. Why can’t you just be happy being you!”

“Because you’re not happy with it! I’m not good enough. Or maybe I’m too good. I’m not all dark and moody like Angel or seductive like that asshole Parker. I don’t have a tragic background like Dean.”

“There you go again!” Buffy threw up her hands.

“You haven’t given me the time of day since he rolled into town in that junk heap.”

“The Impala is not garbage. Besides, you haven’t exactly been around, have you? You just make these assumptions and go around punching people.”

“You are spending every free moment with him.”
“Stop making this about him! This is about us!”

“He’s one of our problems,” Riley said. He had that firm scowl on his face, like his mind had been totally made up and he wasn’t going to budge for any argument.

“No. He’s not. Your need to be the most special thing in my life is. I’m the Slayer, Riley. My life is always going to be filled with weird and strange crap.”

“And that’s always going to beat the hell out of whatever I become.”

That had sounded bitter and Buffy closed her lips tight. No pleasant thoughts were coming to mind and she didn’t want to smash his heart into pieces, but suddenly she didn’t care if they patched this up. She’d survived worse break ups. She didn’t want to say those final words though, the ones that would end things for good.

Sam came out into the ambulance bay. “Uh, Buffy? Giles is asking for you. Something about making sure Dean stays put?”

“I’ll be right there,” Buffy said.

When she had half-turned back towards the doors, Riley said, “If you go in there right now, I’m not going to be here when you get back.”

The anger in his voice, the assumption that she’d give a damn, God even the way he was challenging her in that stance and with that glare—Buffy had loved Riley. She really had. But right now a graveyard had more life in it than their relationship. “Who said I was coming back?”

The shocked and angry look on his face should have hurt her somehow. Instead, a weight was shrugged off Buffy’s shoulders and left out in the night air.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the lovely comments :D
“I don’t need x-rays,” Dean said.


“Screw that.”

“Dean, you’re going to stay put and get these medical examinations.”

“Hell I am.” Dean swung his feet off the side of the hospital bed. They couldn’t afford all these tests or medical care and if he was going to stay here with Sam, they couldn’t use one of the credit fraud schemes to pay for it either. All his fault for letting them bring him here in the first place. At least nothing too expensive had happened yet.

“The doctor will be back any moment,” Giles said.

“Then we should get moving.” Dean leaned forward, intending to stand, only he lost his balance and tipped too far forward. He would’ve crashed to the floor, except miraculously Buffy was there. Being held up by such a tiny woman should’ve been an embarrassment, yet Dean couldn’t help being floored by her. He had almost a foot on her and she was helping him up without any sign of strain. What else could she do?

“Bed,” Buffy said as she guided him back to it.

“Do you know how much an hour in the ER costs?”

“You’re more worried about money than health?”

“We’ll get Tara to make one of those potions again and I’ll be better in no time.”

“If you’re bleeding internally, you’ll die before it can take effect,” Giles said.

“I’m fine,” Dean said. He went to stand again.

Buffy pushed him back. “Wow, so when you said make sure he stays put, you meant literally.”

“I’m afraid so,” Giles said.

Dean scowled at both of them. “It’s not right making me stay where I don’t want to.”

“What if we talked for a minute?” Buffy tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and he could swear she was distracted. If she wasn’t so quick, Dean was sure he had a chance of getting out of here without getting stopped. Only she had Slayer speed along with strength. “Alone?”

“All right,” Giles said. “I have a few phone calls to make.”

Dean frowned after Giles and then up at Buffy. Something was definitely off in her body language. He could hardly blame her. Everyone had been having a good time and then Riley had come in out of nowhere and well, he was hoping Tara’s night wasn’t blown to Hell. She deserved better. Yet, his and Buffy’s night had taken a dramatic turn. “What’s up?”
“Why did you get into that fight with Riley?”

“He punched me.”

“But I took him out of the Bronze. You didn’t have to follow.”

Dean scratched the back of his head, about the only place that didn’t hurt. Speaking the truth would show off an ugly side and lying would only tick her off. He sighed loudly. “I’m tired of being Sunnydale’s whipping boy. It’s not like we were grinding on each other or hell, even touching and he was freaking wrong. I just had enough.”

“So revenge?” Buffy demanded, judgment clear in her voice.

Dean glared back at her. “He came at me because he thought you were being disloyal, that I’d somehow taken something from him. He was taking what little shred of dignity I had in front of the closest things I’ve got to friends out here. So yeah, I wanted some payback against the asshole who thought hitting me for literally nothing was a good idea. Notice how he’s not the one in the hospital. Bet he’s not even moving funny.”

Buffy went quiet and then still. “And it had nothing to do with me. You weren’t in some macho contest over me.”

“I was fighting for me. Only time you entered my thoughts was when he pushed you. I’ll admit, that made me want to put him on his ass for hurting you, but did I meant to defend your honor or something? No.” Dean pushed up onto his feet again. “Now, how about helping me get out of here before they get my name?”

“Dean, we will figure something out.”

“Money doesn’t fall out of trees.”

“Maybe we can find a loan or something. Maybe you don’t even have to pay it all back at once.”

“Jesus, how insulated is your world Slayer?”

Buffy glared at him and he’d obviously wounded some matter of pride. He didn’t care. Wasn’t his fault that she didn’t understand how the real world worked. He glowered back at her.

“We’ll be fine,” Giles said as he came back into the room.

“What?”

“I wanted to make a call before I could promise anything. Buying the shop took a bit of finance after all.”

Realization struck Dean and he tried to get out of the bed again only to have Buffy push him back. “I’m not going to be able to pay it back any time soon.”

“I understand that,” Giles said. “But we don’t know what the diagnosis is. You may need surgery.”

Dean’s eyes went wide. Here he was thinking he knew the game and he hadn’t thought about the worst case scenario. They definitely couldn’t afford him on a bench that long, but he wouldn’t have much of a choice. If came to surgery, it’d be that or die and he didn’t have a death wish. All because an ex-soldier had to get his jealousy out. “That bastard.” Buffy was still standing next to him. He sighed. Manners. Right. “Sorry. But—”
“He’s not my boyfriend anymore,” Buffy said.

Oh he so needed to ignore the surge of joy in his heart over that. “Hopefully not my fault.”

“He seems to think it was, but it was other stuff. Not you. Not really.”

“Oh.” Dean laid back on the bed.

Buffy folded her arms. “Yeah. I think it was a long time coming.”

“I’m sorry to hear that Buffy. I know you cared for him deeply,” Giles said.

Buffy shrugged.

Dean had to school his face into behaving because, damn, that the best news he’d gotten all day. However, the info was leaving them in a weird conversational spot. He was happy when the doctor swooped back in before that could get more awkward. “Good news,” the doctor said after Buffy excused herself. “Nothing’s broken.”

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When they got back to the house, Sam wanted to help Dean walk inside, but his older brother was being stubborn. He had freaking stitches in his side again and the doc had prescribed painkillers on top of the antibiotics. Giles had needed to drive them home. Now all three of them were slowly walking because they didn’t want to push Dean into doing more than he should.

“I’ll take the couch. You should have the bed,” Sam said.

“No, Sammy. You’ve got—”

“You’ll take either his bed or mine for at least tonight,” Giles said with clear authority.

Dean glared back and forth between the two of them. “I’m going to wind up taking my time to recover whether I want to or not, huh?”

“Yes,” Sam and Giles said.

Sam actually had an ally. He’d known Mr. Giles was cool—after all, he’d offered to house them when he barely knew them—but this wasn’t like one of Dad’s crappy friends that put up with them. This was more like being out at Bobby’s, only better because he actually got to stay in school and Dean was making real friends like Tara and Anya and the others. He was getting to know people at school. He really needed Dean not to screw this up by being like Dad.

Dean pursed his lips. “Fine.”

A victory and for once Dean was going to get the help he needed instead of forcing himself to be okay. Sam grinned. A weird end to a weird night, but that was okay.

Giles frowned as he went to unlock the door. “Could’ve sworn I locked this.”

“Should we call Buffy?” Dean asked.

“Sam. Impala.”

Sam nodded. While they’d brought most of the guns in from the car, they’d left a couple spare out there for the sake of emergencies. He ran back to the car, dug out two as well as their clips, and dashed back to the house. Giles and Dean were still waiting and when Sam held out a gun to Dean, Giles grabbed it and loaded it like he’d done so about a thousand times. Dean shrugged and took the other one, leaving Sam defenseless. He didn’t have time to run back for the sawed off shotgun because Giles opened the door.

Dad sat on a barstool by the counter, his own gun in his hand. “About damn time you showed up.”

The three of them moved into the house in stunned silence. This was it. Sam was never going to graduate high school. Never have a normal life. Dad was going to keep ripping them away from everything forever and ever all because he was too stupid to get help from somebody else. And he was going to keep expecting them to forfeit everything to be like him. He didn’t want to even look like his father. On the run on some mad quest? No. Not again. Sam snapped, “What are you doing here?”

“I called him,” Dean said.

Sam whirled, not bothering to hide the betrayal in his eyes. Dean wouldn’t even look at him. He stayed slumped against the doorframe. Dean had promised they weren’t going anywhere. “Why?”

“I had to Sammy. That was Azazel last night.”

“That who put you in this kind of state?” Dad demanded.

“His. That was Azazel last night.”

“How’re you supposed to protect your brother if you’re picking fights?”

The accusation in his father’s voice made Sam want to hit him. He stepped between his brother, who was slumping even more, and his father. “Dean didn’t start them.”

“And he’s hardly the only one protecting Sam at the moment,” Giles said. He had that same tone as when he’d stood up for Tara and Sam had to fight a smile.

“Unfortunately, this little experiment’s over,” Dad said. “Get your bags.”

“No,” Sam replied.

“What was that?” Dad said as he stood.

Sam squared his shoulders. He was practically as tall as Dad. “We’re not going anywhere. I have school. Dean has to get better.”

“Azazel’s trail is still hot. We need to move.”

“You thought he’d left town before, but he hadn’t. It seems way more likely that he’ll come back sooner or later. Our chances are better here.”

“Our chances are where I say they are,” Dad said angrily. “Get. Your. Bags.”

“No,” Dean said. “Sam’s right, we got too much to do here still. We’re not running.”
“I didn’t ask a question, boys. I gave an order.”

“And we’re not following it.” Dean stood as straight as he was able, though his fist was clenched and his face and knuckles were white. Dean wasn’t the one who fought with Dad all the time. If anything, he was the one who obeyed without question every single time. Sam had hated his brother on a couple of occasions, but this wasn’t one of them.

“I said get in the car!” Dad roared as he closed in on them.

Giles stepped so smoothly between Sam and his father that Sam wasn’t entirely sure he didn’t just teleport there. “I’m afraid we have a policy here in Sunnydale. No one is forced to go anywhere against their will.”

“I suggest you stay out of this,” Dad said slowly.

A guy in Kansas City had pissed himself when Dad used that tone. Giles only half turned to Sam and in a low, quiet voice said, “Sam, take your brother upstairs. Now.”

Dad pointed a finger at Sam and snarled. “If you don’t get him outside this second—”

Giles took Dad’s hand and twisted, the whole motion changing their positions so that Dad had his arm pinned behind his back. “Sam, now please.”

Sam ducked under Dean’s good side and hurried them across the room and up the staircase. Giles was defending them. Dean had stood up to Dad. As terrible as having him show up was, Sam couldn’t help feeling vindicated and supported. A wide smile was only natural. Then he realized that Dean was shaking. He leaned his brother against the wall and frowned as he went to lift Dean’s shirt. “Are your stitches okay?”

“Fine,” Dean gasped as he pushed Sam’s hand away. “Knock that off. I can manage on my own.”

“Dean, you’re pale and sweating and—”

A crash downstairs took both of their attention. Definitely a fight going on. Sam itched to sneak a peek and see who was winning, but Dean was only getting paler and more tense. Sam didn’t care if he had to fight Dad next. They weren’t getting in that car, especially if Dean was sick.

“Shit, the bathroom’s downstairs,” Dean mumbled.

“There’s another one in Giles’s room. If you’re going to vomit, we have to get you back to the hospital.”

“I don’t need the freaking hospital.”

“But there could be something wrong with you.”

“Just the meds on an empty stomach.”

“You really need to go back if this is a drug reaction.”

Tight-lipped, Dean grunted, “Shut up, Sam.”

The crashes and curses were farther away, but still going on. Sam leaned out towards the staircase a little. A few steps down and he’d have a perfect view of the living room.

Dean suddenly ran into Giles room and into the adjoined bathroom. Before Sam could follow, he
slammed the door shut, but the sounds of retching were too loud to hide. Sam rattled the doorknob. Dean had managed to lock the stupid thing. This was so not good. Sam ran downstairs.

The fight had wrecked one of Giles’s chairs and the door hung wide open. They were still fighting outside, so Sam rushed out there. Dad and Giles were both standing, though Dad had a pretty bad gash over one eyebrow and Giles panted loudly. When Dad lunged, Giles sidestepped and used the momentum to drive Dad into the ivy covered wall. There was something vicious in Giles’s moves and he dropped Dad to the pavement. Dad was still moving, though slow to get up.

“Dean’s throwing up!” Sam said. He tried to hide the alarm in his voice, but the sense of panic was building. Dean always soldiered on through injuries. He was always okay. If he died from a drug allergy, Sam wouldn’t know what to do. If he died at all, Sam would be lost. He bounced on his feet, ready to shout again.

Giles moved first, taking Sam by the arm and ushering him back into the house. He shut the door, and after a second’s consideration, grabbed the edge of the nearby desk. “Help me move this.”

“But what if we need to get out. Dean’s—”

“I have a feeling I know what’s wrong with Dean. Help me put this in front of the door.”

“You think Dad’s going to break through the door?”

“I think the lock may be broken and Sunnydale is dangerous at night.” Giles nodded at the desk.

They moved it. Sam stared at the door and wondered when Dad would start pounding on it, but nothing came. He glanced upstairs. “Giles—”

“I’m on it,” Giles said as he headed for the staircase. When Sam moved to follow, Giles motioned at him to stay put. “I think it’s better if you’re down here.”

“But Dean—”

“Just stay down here,” Giles repeated.

After a few moments, Sam’s heart slowed back towards normal. He sat on the couch, though he had trouble sitting still. Dean just had to be okay. He had to be.

******

Dean couldn’t afford to be this much of a coward, but that didn’t stop the wave of vomit pulsing out from his lips. He spat a few times in hopes to get the bile out of his mouth before flushing. The reek of it was making him sicker, so he got rid of this second mess. His sides ached and his hands shook. He wondered if Tara had thrown up when they kicked her father out of town. Hopefully not. This sucked.

A firm knock on the door caused Dean’s gut to clench again. “Go away, Sam.”

“It’s me,” Giles replied.

Dean wiped the sweat from his forehead. He couldn’t exactly tell the guy no. This was his house and bathroom and goddamn it he owed the guy so much already. Moving made him aware of how cold
he felt and how sweaty he’d gotten. He got the door unlocked and sank back onto the floor.

Thankfully, Giles only opened the door and sat down in the doorway. He looked all right for an older guy who’d gotten in a fight with a hunter. No obvious injuries, which was hopefully a good sign.

“I don’t know what’s wrong. Been on all those drugs before. Never mattered.” Dean closed his eyes. The world continued to spin anyway.

“How are you feeling?”

“Nauseous.”

“I meant emotionally.”

“I’m fine,” Dean lied.

“Then perhaps Sam is right and this is a drug interaction and we should take you back to the hospital,” Giles said in a tone which made Dean believe that he didn’t think Sam was right at all.

Dean leaned back against the wall and tipped his head up towards the ceiling. Life had gotten seriously messed up if he was defying Dad like this. A wry laugh came out of him and whispered, “I didn’t even tell him.”

“Tell him what?” Giles said carefully.

“About what Buffy saw. I don’t know why. I just didn’t. Think that demon’s got an influence on me too, to keep something like that from him?”

“I think that you are worried about your brother’s happiness as well as his safety. Perhaps worried about what your father would do if he knew.”

Because Dad would pull them from Sunnydale so fast their heads would spin with or without Giles’s interference. “Leaving wouldn’t solve Sam’s problem. Giles, we have to figure out what that was.”

“We will, Dean. But for the moment, you need rest.”

“Stomach’s threatening to riot again.” Dean closed his eyes. “Don’t know why.”

“That would be nerves.”

“I was really hoping you wouldn’t say that. I’m not weak.”

“There is no shame in an emotional reaction.”

The complete opposite of what Dad would say. Dean laughed and the sound was hollow and harsh. He deepened his voice to an imitation of his father. “A man can’t give in to fear.”

A long quiet moment passed and Dean’s stomach threatened another riot. Just when he was afraid chunks were going to spew again, Giles said softly, “Dean, it’s a miracle you’re in one piece at all, given everything that’s happened lately. This is momentary and may never happen again. What you need is sleep. Leave the thinking for the morning.”

“Never thought I’d hear you say ‘don’t think.’”

“A temporary philosophy, to be sure.” Giles stood and offered his hand down. “You’ve been strong
enough for one night.”

Dean accepted Giles’s help up and Sam’s bed for the night. The other two were still downstairs while he was lying in bed and he couldn’t help worrying that they were talking about how stupid he was. Dean shut his eyes tight. They weren’t like that. He’d had a bad night. That was it. Just needed some sleep, like Giles said.

If only there was someone to throw his arms around and forget about this terrible night. He ran his mind through the usual fantasies, but wound up settling on a new one. Didn’t even get all that sexual with it. He just wanted to cuddle up with Buffy and ignore the pain. How lame was that? First fantasy he had of her as a single chick and he hoped she was the kind of gal who’d lay next to him and just, well, be there with him.

Because, oh God, he’d stood up to Dad. There’d be no walking that back. Dad was never going to forgive that kind of betrayal.

Between the pain, the stress, and the drugs, Dean thought he was too worn out to cry. He was wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one's a bit late. At least it's long?
Chapter 25

Mornings in Sunnydale always seemed extra bright after hard nights. Buffy had slept, though not well. She needed to see Riley and see if everything they said last night held up. So she dragged herself to his room.

The door was wide open. Buffy frowned and peeked around inside, going so far as to double check the closet, but the signs were obvious from the start. The room was bare except for a single small box at the end of the bed. Her name was written across the cardboard. Riley had left without another word.

Frowning more, Buffy took the box and gazed around the room one last time before shutting the door. She trudged her way towards her first class. Riley had had an exit plan this whole time. Somehow that didn’t surprise her and yet she couldn’t quite believe he was just gone.

Willow was waiting outside her class’s building with two cups of coffee and a I-will-cheer-my-friends-into-good-moods fake smile that got smaller when she saw the expression on Buffy’s face. Her gaze dropped to the box in her hands. “So, I think we need to catch up. Want to blow off class?”

“Have you been replaced by another doppelganger?” Buffy asked.

“I’m ahead in my class and you look like you can’t concentrate.”

Buffy took the offered coffee. “Fair point.”

They headed to the student lounge and Buffy caught Willow up on all the details of the last couple of weeks—except for the Dawn and Sam part of the magical trance. That was a conversation for a different time. When she got to the end, she slouched against the sofa. “And this morning he was just gone.”

“Oh Buffy, I’m so sorry,” Willow said.

“I’m not sure you should be. I don’t think I feel all that bad about it.”

“Well, did you want him to go?”

“Not go, exactly, but I didn’t want to date him anymore. It’s not even about Dean, as much as he said it was. I think we were just going through the motions lately. And last night, he made it so easy to walk away from him that I wanted to say something about breaking up but not actually say it myself, you know?”

“But you’re sure you don’t have feelings for Dean?” Willow said carefully.

“I didn’t say that, but it’s not like I was cheating on Riley. He didn’t even think I was exactly cheating, just that I was going to. I mean, Dean and I weren’t even touching last night and he lost his mind.” Buffy huffed. “Or have Dean and I been throwing that many signals at each other?”

“From what I’ve seen, he’s been careful not to. But more like a respectful, not wanting to interrupt way. He definitely likes you though. And he had to get more stitches for your honor.” Willow smirked at her.

“That’s the thing. He didn’t come outside to kick Riley’s ass for my sake. He did it to make himself feel better. And you should have seen him, Will. He was holding back up until Riley shoved me.”
And then he’s bleeding and barely standing, and the first thing he does is turn around and ask if I’m okay.” Buffy scowled, saying her thoughts aloud. “That has to be a good thing, right? He wasn’t acting for me and he still cared about what happened to me?”

“It’s not the worst thing.”

“I sense a but coming on.”

Willow frowned slightly and twisted in her seat more to face Buffy. “Are you already considering dating this guy?”

“I don’t know. I like him, sure. And I don’t want to see him hurt. But Riley and I only just ended and I’m sure there’s going to be fallout from that.”

“I think you’re still in shock about Riley. It only just happened. Make sure you take a few days before spending any alone time with Dean.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Buffy said with a glare.

“I just want to be sure you’re not jumping into things with him before you’re ready.”

“Way to have confidence in me, Will.”

“I don’t mean you’re a floozy or anything. Just, we don’t even know if Dean’s really going to stick around, do we?”

So far, Dean had seemed very much like he was going to stick around and hold up his promise to Sam. That didn’t mean he couldn’t get ripped away though. Buffy sighed. “I guess not. I’ll be careful. How did the rest of the night with Tara go?”

“Oh, great,” Willow said with a broad genuine smile. “She was worried about Dean, but overall, she had a great party which after what happened with her family was extra important. Which thank you for the other night. It’s really important to Tara that she felt so included with you guys.”

“No problem. I couldn’t stand the way her dad was talking to her. She deserves so much better.”

“Agreed.” Willow then launched into all of her latest with Tara and her developing feud with Anya. Buffy couldn’t help spacing on the Anya bit a little since it was some of the same old same old. At some point in the future, those two would have to sit down together and get over their issues.

For now, Buffy was going to chill with her best friend and try not to daydream about Dean too much. Because, wow, that was so much easier when she just let herself picture him. He had to have muscles and a few scars and maybe even a tattoo. He seemed like the kind of guy who might have a couple. Then again, maybe not. Either way, he was tall and strong and had those perfect green eyes. And those hands.

“Buffy!” Willow said.

Buffy jolted back out of fantasy land. “I’m listening.”

“Sure you are.” Willow smirked knowingly and tapped a finger to her temple. “How long has he been naked up there?”

Buffy blushed. “Like a minute.”

“You got it bad, huh?”
“I’m not rushing it. Like you said, I could be in shock. Riley and I literally just ended things.”

“But if he invites you to say, coffee.”

“It’d be rude to say no. We could have hunter and slayer things to talk about.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Oh geez, Buffy. It’s not even been a day!”

“He, these things happen as they happen. Besides, he’s still recovering. None of that can happen when he’s got stitches across his ribs.”

“I see I interrupted fantasy time too early if you think that.” Willow sipped her coffee.

“You’re the one who just told me not to think too much about him too soon.”

“Okay, fair, but if you’re going to do it anyway, get creative.”

“Oh I can get way creative.” Buffy made a face. “I got too much into the detail there, huh?”

“Only a little,” Willow teased. “Come on. We could still make most of our classes if we go now.”

“See, I knew you couldn’t skip a class.”

“I totally could, but I don’t want.”

Buffy chuckled as they stood. She grabbed the box from Riley’s room and wished she could ask to stick it in Willow’s dorm for the time being, but honestly she’d just forget it there and leave it for too long. So she was stuck walking around with this reminder that she and Riley were over.

A tiny smidge of the shock lessened in that moment and she still didn’t feel terrible. Instead, she felt relieved. That had to be a be a sign, though she wasn’t sure if it was good or bad.

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Glory lounged on her couch as the minion made his way in, groveling and praising. She missed the praising of thousands at a time, but she would get that back. With a flick of her hand, she motioned for silence. “So, what have you figured out?”

“Well, your Glorificus, the demon’s attack on the Slayer and her mate failed. Both still live.”

“Good to know he has crappier luck than me. What else?”

“There seems to be nothing remarkable at first glance about the boy he wants us to follow, your Gloriness. He is merely a teenage boy, although, a very tall one?”

“I don’t think height is playing into this demon’s plan.” Usually her minions were better at information than this. What was the deal with this dimension and making everyone so freaking useless? “Did you find out anything interesting? Names?”

“The Slayer is called Buffy and her mate is Dean, the boy Sam. They spend a lot of time in the magic shop, your Glorificus. He seems to work there.”
“So he’ll be easy to find.” That information wasn’t so bad. At least now she had a fairly good idea of where to go for a set of astonishingly green eyes. “What about the demon?”

“He does not share his name easily, but we believe he is Azazel of the Pit, your Glorificus.”

_Azazel._ Glory smiled brightly and leaned forward. “Really?”

Her excitement frightened the poor little guy. “Y-yes, your holiness.”

“That’s very good news. Thank you.”

“You’re happy, your Glorificus?”

“Very. See, now I know why he wants in on my homecoming ritual,” Glory said. “Good work. Keep an eye on him and this Sam and Dean.”

The minion bowed and made another round of platitudes until she gave a disgusted sigh and waved him off.

_Azazel of the Pit, loyal to Lucifer the Lightbringer._ Oh it had been an age since she spoke to Lucifer. Legend was true after all. Glory may have her cage of human flesh, but Lucifer was trapped deep within his own realm. She laughed. The archangel totally deserved to rot for the rest of eternity. She wouldn’t get in the way of his minion though. After all, she had made a deal. At least she would be entertained while hunting for her Key. “Minions! I want a bubble bath. Now!”
Chapter 26

The sun was bright with hardly a cloud in the sky. Morning chill clung to Sam and he was grateful for remembering to snag his jacket. He waved hi to a few of his fellow students as he headed towards the building. Brady caught up to him, slamming into his shoulder and laughing. Sam laughed back as best he could, but he wasn’t really feeling like laughing. Something felt off. Brady threw his arm around Sam’s shoulders and pointed up the block towards the front entrance. “Look, Winchester, it’s your stalker.”

Sam frowned and saw Dawn. He sighed. “Dude, don’t call her that.”

“If she was a junior, it wouldn’t be so bad, but she’s such a kid.”

Sam pushed of Brady’s arm. “She’s a friend, okay? Leave her alone.”

“Winchester says she’s all right, who am I to argue?” Brady grinned. “Let me introduce you to some real women.”

Sam snorted.

To make matters worse, Dawn saw him and stared closing the distance. Brady had a ridiculously huge grin on his face. He seemed like an okay guy so far, but he had a bad habit on picking on underclassmen. Dawn clutched her books to her chest and for a second, seemed to think twice about meeting them. But then she raised her head and hurried out anyway. “How’s your brother?”

“He’s—” Sam stopped and frowned.

A kid—one of the guys from his Chem class maybe—was on the sidewalk and then he suddenly fell into the street as if he’d been shoved. When he stood up, he was pushed farther by the same invisible force. Brady was laughing and Sam’s mouth went dry. He tried to say something, tried to move, but the car blazed down the street and smashed into the student. The driver didn’t even stop, zooming past Sam and around the corner.

A girl went to check on the boy and she screamed and screamed.

A heavy weight dropped into Sam’s stomach and he woke with an ‘oof’ and a groan. Dean was standing over him, looking pretty bruised still but at least alert, and said, “Wake up. You still got school.”

Sam dumped his backpack onto the floor and grabbed his watch off the coffee table. He was running late. He pushed the weird dream out of his head, because while it had been vivid and lifelike, it had just been too weird to be anything other than a dream. By the time he was showered and dressed, Giles and Dean were in a full argument.

“I need to pull my weight,” Dean said. “I can’t let you pay for the hospital bills and our housing and not do anything about it.”

“You will do plenty, I’m sure, but until those stitches have a few more days to heal, you’d be next to useless at the shop anyway. Sit. Do research. Watch television. I simply don’t care, Dean, but you have to take care of your injuries before they become a bigger problem,” Giles said.

“He’s right,” Sam said.
“Oh, don’t you start,” Dean replied.

“I could help out at the Magic Box.”

“No.” The chorus of Dean and Giles’s voices was so final it was a little spooky. Giles sighed and added, “I appreciate that you want to help out, Sam, but your studies come first.”

“Well, after school and after my homework.”

“You’re not supposed to worry about it,” Dean said.

“Dean, I want to help out.”

Dean was giving him that older brother glare again though. Sam wasn’t a kid anymore and he could be useful. Not everything had to be on his older brother. He took in a deep breath.

“Why don’t you come by the Magic Box after school and we’ll see?” Giles said suddenly. “You can do your homework there and perhaps help with some research.”

Sam lifted his chin. “All right. Yeah.”

“Swear to God, you lie about getting your homework done and I’m never going to let you hear the end of it.” Dean grabbed his keys.

“What are you doing?” Giles asked.

“He’s got to get to school.”

“I’ll drive him. I’m on my way out as it is.”

Dean narrowly eyed Giles. “You’re intent on this whole recuperate thing, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Giles half-smiled. “And I know exactly who to call if you won’t listen.”

Sam and Dean went still. Sam wasn’t sure he could breathe. After all, Giles had tossed Dad out of his house. Calling him back in just seemed wrong.

Giles picked up on their distress and shook his head, frown replacing the part smile. “I didn’t mean to alarm you. I meant Bobby.”

Sam laughed. “Bobby would tie you down to a bed if he had to.”

Dean grumbled something about being man enough to take the pain, but he sat down on the couch and flipped through channels anyway. Sam made sure to leave him a bagel and a glass of juice on his way out the door. Dean made a face at the juice, but he sipped at it anyway.

“Your brother does not understand the need to mend,” Giles said as they climbed into his car.

“That’s Dad’s fault.” Sam sat down in the front seat, which was a unique special treat. Giles’s red sports car was cool and he couldn’t help thinking that this was going to score him a few more points with the local high schoolers. They already thought he was pretty cool for not having to live with his own parents and that his brother was old enough to buy them beer (not that Dean was going to let Sam do that any time during a school semester). Knowing he was in proximity of borrowing a red sports car was just going to push him over the top.

“Admittedly, your father doesn’t seem the type to take rest either.”
“He does between hunts. When he bothers sticking around.” Sam clenched his jaw.

Giles frowned. “I knew your relationship was strained—”

“DCFS wanted to take us.” Sam bit back from saying that he wished they’d been successful. He loved his brother, but the way they were living was hardly living at all. He stared out into the beautiful morning and watched the houses going past. “Dad’s obsessed and a drunk and Dean has been covering his ass way too long. I can’t wait until I’m eighteen and can officially tell him I don’t need him.”

Ever the wise man, Giles let them lapse into silence.

When they neared the school, Giles got one look at the line dropping students off in front of the rundown building and decided to drop Sam off at the corner instead, which Sam was fine with because it was such a beautiful morning. He slung his backpack over his shoulder, waved goodbye to Giles, and headed for the front door.

That was when the deja vu kicked in. Each wave and smile was an echo of that weird dream, down to Brady slamming into him and wrapping an arm around his shoulders. Sam scowled because this was just too weird. Brady frowned at him. “What is it, Winchester?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh. Thought you saw your stalker already.” Brady made a show of glancing around and had a bright smile when he looked at the building doors. “Look, there she is.”

Sam glanced that direction and spotted Dawn. Cold clawed at his gut, even as he said the words anyway. “Dude, don’t call her that.”

“If she was a junior, it wouldn’t be so bad, but she’s such a kid.”

Sam broke free of Brady’s grip and ignored his protests. Somewhere up here was the kid. That guy from Chem class. Sam couldn’t remember his name. Tyler? Jason? He pushed through the throng of students and got more questions and glares and stares. Dawn caught up to him and grabbed his arm. “Sam, what’s wrong?”

“I have to find him,” Sam said.

“Yes?”

Sam groaned and pulled away from her. Somewhere in this mess was that guy. Somewhere near the curb. Finally, Sam spotted him getting off the bus and walking down the sidewalk with a friend. He rushed for the guy and felt a cold wave push through behind him. A ghost. Oh no. Sam fought his way through the crowd. “Hey, hey!”

The boy looked at him with confusion and then his eyes went wide as he fell backwards towards the street. Sam broke free from the crowd and onto the road, but stumbled right into the path of a parent who was pulling out from in front of the school. There was a loud honk.

The kid got up and was pushed again.

No. No. No. Sam raced around the end of the car and out into the street.

The black car blazing down the street swerved, but not before grazing the other boy. He rebounded, but stumbled farther out into the street, getting hit by a car coming the other way. The driver stopped.
The girl ran out.

And Sam stood there numbly until Dawn grabbed his arm. A jolt went up his arm, like a static charge. She was transfixed by the sight in the street.

Right. She was the Slayer’s younger sister, but she probably hadn’t seen much in the way of violence and definitely didn’t seem like the kind of girl who had seen a dead body before. That shook Sam out of his stupor and he led her back to the curb, back behind the bus. “Don’t think about it.”

“But the car—” Dawn’s lip trembled.

Sam took both her hands and a deep breath. He could hardly think to comfort someone else when his head was spinning so fast, but that’s what Dean would do. Dean would be brave and say whatever he needed to and worry about the rest later. “I think we can get away with skipping school. Let’s go to the Magic Box.”

“But class—”

A loud ruckus was being made already. Kids crying, parents getting out of their cars. Principal Wood was coming down the steps of the building and directing people. Everything was chaos and while Sam didn’t want to, he didn’t think they had a lot of choice. People had seen him making a scene beforehand. He barely knew what to think about it because how could a dream become real? But the only people who would know what to do were at the Magic Box. He held tight onto Dawn’s hand. “Come on. It’ll be okay. They’re probably going to cancel school anyway.”

Dawn clutched his hand back and nodded tightly. They hurried down the street together and Sam prayed that everyone else was too busy to see them run.

Because, somehow, there was a killer ghost and somehow, Sam had seen it all beforehand. Giles would know what to do. He had to know what it meant. He just had to.
Giles was juggling four rather large books when Anya shoved the phone at him. “It’s for you,” she said as she waggled it in his face.

As if he couldn’t have guessed that, considering it was the shop’s phone. However, she also wasn’t getting the hint that Giles had too much in his hands, so he shoved the books at her and took the phone. When she glared, he motioned at the research table and she huffed, but delivered the books anyway. “Magic Box, Mr. Giles speaking. How can I help you?”

“It’s Bobby Singer,” came the gruff voice on on the other end of the line.

Giles picked up the phone’s base and carried it towards the back of the shop. He needed to consider getting one of those cordless devices. “Which Winchester called you?”

“None,” Bobby said and the surprise in his voice was clear.

“Oh, I had assumed—”

“What happened?”

“We spotted Azazel in town the other night. Dean told his father and John showed up last night demanding the boys go with him.”

“So they’re on the road again?”

“No. Sam and Dean said they would rather stay here and I tossed John out of my home. Quite literally.”

“Kick his ass?”

“I’d like to think the fight was in my favor.” Giles had a couple of bruises that smarted, but he’d been thrashed worse by the local demon population on more than one occasion.

“Good,” Bobby said. “Man deserves it. Wished I’d’ve done it, but, well, I was afraid that I’d never see Sam and Dean again.”

“If you weren’t calling about the boys, why did you call?”

“Word is that you’re a Watcher.”

“Former.”

Bobby snorted. “Do former Watchers still hoard research?”

“Life on the Hellmouth makes that an imperative,” Giles replied. “What information do you need?”
“Got a couple of friends calling in about a wendigo up in Maine. Seems this one’s immune to fire. Need a back up plan.”

Giles frowned and thought for a moment. He cupped his hand over the receiver. “Anya, could you grab the tome on transmutation concerning indigenous religions over my desk? Top shelf, third from the right.”

“Now I’m grabbing the books?” Anya complained as she walked towards his desk.

“Should have an answer in a moment, I think,” Giles said.

“Any chance that you’d be willing to open up a hunter hotline? I’ve been digging through books for the better part of two days and you’ve got the lore just sitting around above your desk.”

Now why hadn’t he thought of that when he was bored last year. “I’ll have to consider it. Wouldn’t want the shop’s line to become riddled with calls all day.”

“Well, maybe it wouldn’t. Just the random call here and there.”

“I find it unlikely that my phone would do anything other than ring if hunters discovered that a Watcher on a Hellmouth was willing to answer questions.” Giles mouthed the words ‘thank you’ to Anya as he took the book from her. He flipped through pages. He had seen a passage in here not that long ago.

“Okay, that may be a fair point. Still, can’t be that bad of an idea.”

“It’s one I plan on revisiting. For the moment though, I have your answer.” Giles went through the relevant details and was more than a little thrilled when Bobby asked a few questions expanding on the discussion. Dear Lord, he needed to socialize with people his age more frequently.

When they concluded on the topic, Bobby said, “Well, thanks. I owe you one.”

“Actually, I have something you could research. Doesn’t have to be high priority for you—”

“Is it concerning the boys?”

“In a way. Buffy and Dean encountered a woman last week. Blonde. Superhuman strength. Naturally, it’s not a lot to go on, but if you find yourself with a spare moment—”

“A little research wouldn’t hurt,” Bobby finished. “Got anything other than strong blondie?”

“A Dagon’s Sphere was found near the same place they encountered her. It’s probably related.”

“This what you usually get lumped with?”

“It’s a little sparse on the detail, but typically.”

“Damn, Giles. No wonder you know so much. You’d have to have a whole library in your head just to get started.”

“I appreciate the compliment, but really, it’s just years of research and experience. I’m sure you’ve gained quite a bit of—”

Sam and Dawn burst through the Magic Box door looking out of breath and frightened. Giles frowned. Anya went for the obvious, almost shouting at them. “Shouldn’t you be in school? Isn’t that what human children do on weekdays?”
“There was this kid!” Dawn said. She hurried down the steps, hands and arms not quite seeming to know what to do with themselves. “I mean, he—he stepped out into the street and he—”

“He was pushed,” Sam said, and for a moment his tone was one of a boy far older than he actually was. Dear Lord, what had happened now?

“And I know we’re totally skipping class, but Sam thinks that we’re not going to have it today anyway because this kid got hit in front of the school. The driver didn’t even slow down, Giles,” Dawn continued. Her rapid speech put Buffy’s to shame, but thank God he’d had years of practice so he had a hope of keeping up. “Sam like, knew.”

Sam had a guilty expression now.

Giles clutched at the phone in his hand, schooling himself not to react. The teenagers would need someone of guidance in a moment like this and if he panicked, well, that would only cause them greater distress. Besides, fired though he may be, he was still a Watcher and still British. He had certain stereotypes to uphold.

Bobby, on the other end of the line, did not have to uphold them though. Giles could hear the note of fear in his voice as Bobby said, “Is that Sam? What’s going on?”

“I’ll call you back when I know more, Mr. Singer. I assure you we have it in hand.” Giles hung up the phone at that and held it out towards Anya.

Anya grabbed it, glanced between the teens and Giles, with a look that was half-fear, half-excitement. “Should I call Dean and Buffy?”

“Let’s wait a moment and catch our breath first.” Because, good Lord, the older siblings would only react instead of thinking through what had happened. Giles motioned at the table and then headed for the coffee pot. It would heat water fine and he had some tea around here somewhere. “I want you two to walk me through everything that happened, slowly, and then we’ll decide what to do.”
Chapter 28

Dean had been practically ordered to relax yet only a little into the afternoon and he was anxious and restless and hating this feeling of uselessness. He’d been pathetic last night when Dad had been in Giles’s home. Sitting alone in the silence was only reminding him more and more about how little he had done. A creeping fear was keeping him alert when he should have been sleeping. If Dad showed up again, Dean wasn’t exactly how sure he was that he could say no again. After all, Giles had proven he was good in a fight. And Buffy would look after Sam too, if he begged. No reason Dean had to stay in Sunnydale.

Except his father would never forgive him for walking out on Sam. Much as he might hate the boys’ plan to stick around, Dean knew his father wanted him to watch out for his little brother, no matter what. All of that would be a lot easier to handle if he had something else to occupy his mind. Going to the Magic Box just to sit and read there wouldn’t really be defying the rest orders. If he remembered right, there was a couch in the training room.

Besides, he told himself, that guy who looked so much like him on Days of Our Lives wasn’t on anymore and weirdly enough, he didn’t really feel like watching the show anymore. If he didn’t have something worthwhile distracting him, he was only going to keep obsessing over his father and that wasn’t restful either. Might as well do something productive. That would have to help him and everyone else.

So, despite the stitches and the warnings and the pain, Dean got up, struggled into a pair of worn jeans and a clean shirt, and drove over to the Magic Box. Judging by the looks people were giving him, he still looked like hell. At least he had a nice car.

“What are you doing?” Buffy demanded.

Dean turned, leaning on the Impala, and managed a grin. He hadn’t seen her when he was pulling in because he’d had to focus so damn much on the road. “Good afternoon to you too.”

“You should be lying down in bed.” Buffy had that cute seriously-are-you-an-idiot furrow to her brow. Somehow, he didn’t find it so intimidating. Probably the pain pills kicking in.

The meds were also a good excuse as to why he was thinking about curling up with Buffy. While she’d said she and Riley weren’t a thing anymore, Dean had been through the ‘oh no, we made up last night after all’ too many times. And he couldn’t possibly be attractive in his current messed up state. More excuses because he wasn’t willing to think about having a chance with her. He didn’t get chances to really get to know women—or anyone.

“What are you doing here?” Buffy said.

“You ever sit around when you know there’s work to be done?”

“And if you don’t, it’s because the boss is making you work even harder. Good thing I’m now the boss.”

“The boss is Sally. You’re the Watcher.”

“Sure there’s something. Seems like it’s one thing after another in this town.” God, he needed to limit his speech. Talking freaking hurt the bruises on his chest. “Would you sit at home?”

“Day after a bad fight I’m almost back to normal. Slayer healing.”

“Okay, now I’m officially jealous of you.”
Buffy smirked and then frowned at him. “Let’s get you inside before you fall down.”

“Not a bad plan,” Dean muttered. He was content to try on his own, but Buffy swept up under his arm and supported him anyway. She smelled so damn good. No, he was not about to sniff her hair. Getting her scent was an accident and the least he could do was try not to sweat all over her. He really needed to stop wearing so much black in Sunnydale.

They walked in the door and Dean was so busy trying not to stumble over her that he didn’t see who was there. He felt her stiffen though and worried about the others’ reactions, thinking of a few good excuses of why he’d made his way to the store. All those excuses and his half grin died away when he glanced up and saw Sam and Dawn sitting at the table with Anya and Giles. “You’re supposed to be in school!”

He was dimly aware that Buffy had made an outcry of about the same statement towards Dawn. He couldn’t help being pissed. After everything he’d done for Sam lately, he’d skipped freaking class. The one place he needed to be and instead he was playing hooky in the Magic Box. Dean could strangle him.

“School was cancelled,” Giles said simply.

Well, that took the anger out of Dean’s sails, and Buffy’s too if he was judging right. Instead, she left him on the staircase on his own and crossed the room towards the research table. “What happened?”

“A student was struck in a hit and run. He died,” Giles explained.

Sam was sitting a little too still. Hell, even Dawn seemed subdued. Dean grunted as he got to the bottom of the steps on his own, which made Buffy look back at him, furrow her brow, and cross back to help him after all. He asked, “You two see it?”

Dawn nodded. Sam was hiding something. He looked guilty. Damn it all, what could be wrong now?

“Sam saw the whole thing before it happened,” Anya said.

Dean and Buffy shared a look and he figured that she had to be wondering the same thing as him. Did this have anything to do with her vision? With the Azazel imprint hovering around Sam? They must have shared the look too long because when they looked back at the others, Sam had frowned in confusion and Dawn had gone back to staring at the top of the table.

And so much for keeping Sam from hunting until graduation. Judging from the seriousness in the room, there was no way to get Sammy to let this one go. Worse, something bigger was going on. Dean cleared his throat. “You had a vision of this kid?”

“It didn’t happen exactly like it was supposed to. I changed some stuff. But it happened.”

“You had that strong an image?” Buffy said.

“Yeah,” Sam said slowly.

“My Slayer dreams are always a massive ball of weird.” Buffy helped Dean sit down and then took a step away. “I get vague impressions of evil on the horizon. Maybe a couple of ideas about what kind, which no surprise is usually a vampire, but nothing where I can stop what’s coming.”

“I would wager that your dreams are more prophecy than vision, Buffy,” Giles said.
“Because defining this crap’s the important part right now?” Dean demanded. Sam flinched which caused him to reflexively flinch. Shit, he’d sounded too much like Dad just now.

“Definitions help with research,” Giles replied as he went back to his book.

“Find anything good?” Buffy said.

“I’m afraid not.” Giles didn’t look up as he said that. Dean got the impression that something was bothering the Brit. Obviously, he wasn’t in a sharing with the whole room mood.

“There’s something else,” Sam said. “I felt a ghost. I know I did.”

“Ghost is easy, once we figure out who it is,” Dean replied.

Buffy frowned. “Um, how so?”

Dean scowled back at her. “You never dealt with a ghost before?”

“A couple of times, but I wouldn’t call them ‘simple.’”

“All you do is salt and burn the bones.”

“Grave desecration?” Buffy turned towards Giles. “Is that actually a way to deal with ghosts?”

“Naw, I just love getting sweaty over nothing,” Dean said hotly.

Buffy swept her gaze over him and instead of getting pissy with him, she checked him out and then flustered and messed with her hair. Only after that, did she get that annoyed expression back. Might’ve only taken a second, but Dean saw it all clearly flicker over her face. Anything started with her right now would be strictly rebound territory. That would only wind up hurting everyone involved and if the last week had proven anything, he needed the Slayer on his side. So no no no, he could not encourage her to look at him like that, but damn if he could stop that small bit of smile.

“The ‘salt and burn’ method is a traditional way of purification. While not usually what the Council endorses, it’s a practical magic that’s easily performed.”

Sam’s eyes lit up and he nearly laughed. “It’s magic?”

“Sympathetic magic,” Anya said. “You act on one representation to affect the subject of the spell. It’s a matter of intent. If you just burn a body, that won’t prevent a ghost from rising. It’s the intention of purification that matters.”

Sam turned to Dean. “Wait until we tell Dad he’s been using magic all this time.”

Dean gave him a wry smile, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the shadow Buffy had seen and the implications that Sam was having visions. Something wasn’t right about his little brother and that bothered him.

“Any leads on who the ghost is?” Buffy asked.

“The building used to be, of all things, a pencil factory,” Giles said. “Sam found several reports of accidents but no deaths yet.”

“The local papers haven’t uploaded their whole archives yet,” Sam said. “It could be that the ghost is older than that. I think we need to go to the public library.”
“I can help,” Dawn said, though her usual enthusiasm was shaken. “Going through everything will take a super long time.”

“I’ll call Willow, see what she can narrow down for us.” Giles stood.

Dean was far too comfortable in this hard wooden chair to think about moving much. Not to mention, he was pretty sure he shouldn’t be driving anyway. “Please tell me the place is close.”

“About four blocks,” Buffy said. “And you’re not going.”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I am okay with that.” That got him a surprised look from her. Dean shrugged. “If Sammy’s not safe with the Slayer watching over him, I sure in Hell ain’t going to manage to defend him today.”

“I don’t need defending,” Sam said.

“I’ll be there too,” Dawn said, as if, somehow, the reed-thin teenager with no combat experience would make a difference. Then again, stranger things in this town had happened.

“Grab your bags then. Sooner we start, sooner we put murdering ghost to rest,” Buffy said. While Sam and Dawn were grabbing their backpacks, she turned towards Dean. Yeah, there was definitely something different in the way she was looking at him today. No wonder Riley had gotten pissed about losing her. If she was watching him like this and they hadn’t started anything yet, how intense would shared looks be later on?

Rebound territory. He was not going to be rebound. Dean went to grab one of the books on the table and barely stopped himself before straining his torso again. Damn, this getting seriously injured thing sucked.

Buffy pushed the book closer to him, though not all the way. “I’ll bring them back around dinner time. That’ll be a good time for a break.”

Dean nodded, not trusting his voice to be even. He did not want her or anyone else catching the note of pain he felt.

They didn’t take long to clear out and head to the library. Only once Sam and Buffy were gone did Dean feel like he could relax until he noticed Anya was staring at him. “What?”

“You should really be in bed,” Anya said.

“Obviously not going to happen.” Dean finished dragging the book to the place in front of him. All these damn books, well, there had to be something useful in them.

Giles finished his phone call and sat back down at the table with them. “Dean, I think at this point, we’d be wise to consult Anya about what Buffy saw in her trance.”

“She said that didn’t work,” Anya said. “I knew she was lying. Why wouldn’t you tell us about—oh, you’re asking him. So it has to do with Sam.”

“Well, apparently there’s no not telling her now,” Dean said sharply.

Giles didn’t look apologetic in the least. “Anya knows quite a bit about demons. She may be able to
tell us what direction to point our research.”

Better to solve this before Dad blew into town again. Dean sighed heavily. “Buffy said that there was a shadow man with yellow eyes—Azazel—whispering in Sammy’s ear.”

“Oh that’s not good,” Anya said. “Wait, is that why we had to paint the Devil’s Trap symbol? You were testing if he was possessed? The trance would have shown Sam having a pair of black eyes if that was the case. You really should have talked to me before now. I mean, we could have been getting somewhere this last week instead of getting buried under a pile of books.”

“You know what it means?” Dean asked.

“That Azazel has an influence over him, but the real question is why would he bother?” Anya rose and went straight into the component shelves.

“What are you doing?”

“I need to talk to Hallie. She’s been a little more flirty with other demons. I preferred to focus, but Hallie could never resist a party.”

“You know a demon? And focus on what?” Dean said.

“Work,” Anya replied.

Okay, he was pretty sure the Magic Box had only been opened like a month. Had they hired and gotten rid of someone else already? “Hold on. Who is Hallie?”

“A demon.”

“Maybe the pain pills have kicked in too much. You’re summoning a demon? Why?”

“She’s a friend of mine.” Anya walked over to the table and began pushing the books out of the way. “I’m guessing it’s all right to do magic in here. After all, Willow does it all the time.”

Giles sighed heavily. “I’ll lock the door. Wouldn’t want customers walking in on this.”

“Good plan.” Anya began mixing ingredients together.

Maybe he had fallen asleep on Giles’s couch after all and this was all a drug-induced dream, though if that were the case, then his brain could do him a favor and turn off the pain already. “Wait. Hold on. We can’t just tell some demon that there’s something on Sam.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll let you do the talking, but be careful. Sometimes Hallie can be a gossip.”

“And you want to—”

Anya threw in an ingredient and something popped and caught flame. Smoke billowed out and straight for the ground. “Halfrek, guardian of children, protector of—oh screw it all. Hallie, get over here. I want to chat.”

A rush of air, a burst of sulfur on the tongue and bammo, a chick with an extra veiny face was standing about three feet back from the table. She had curly brown hair and pretty nice clothes for a demon. “Who dares be so—oh, Anyanka! It’s you. Hi!”

Dean couldn’t breathe. A demon, right in front of them, and Anya was already chatting her up like a
long lost friend. So much worse than that, Dean was damn sure he had seen Halfrek’s face before.

Eventually, the women glanced his way and Halfrek frowned and leaned close to Anya. “What’s his problem?”

“He’s a hunter,” Anya said.

“Oh, I hadn’t thought about that.” Halfrek waved a hand and a human disguise snapped into place, smoothing out her features and leaving her a sweetheart face with a pointed chin and kind brown eyes.

She was supposed to have been a figment, not something real and out there. Dean clutched the chair’s armrest.

Anya scowled and snapped her fingers. “Hello, Dean, you’ve got questions, right?”

“Are you all right?” Giles said.

Halfrek’s eyes lit up in recognition as she stared into Dean’s. “Oh my goodness, is this little Dean Winchester? My you’ve grown up.”

Anya pivoted back towards her friend. “You know him?”

“Oh I had been following the Winchesters around for ages. Sammy was off limits, but no one cared if someone intervened on Dean’s behalf. Funny though, never could get him to wish against his father. He did wish for a box of cereal for him and his brother and I mean, I know we’re all about vengeance with D’Hoffryn, but I just couldn’t help myself. He was so sweet.” Halfrek motioned between Anya and Dean. “Did you dump Xander for him?”

“Xander and I are quite happy. We’re living together now.” Anya looked to Dean. “Are you going to be able to say anything?”

“Yeah. I, um, just. I thought I made you up,” Dean said.

“I know, honey. That’s one of the ways I work with my clients. The imaginary friend.” Halfrek winked.

Clients. A demon had been stalking him and he had been pretty sure the whole encounter had been in his imagination. Hours talking. Hours just sitting. Weeks actually missing her when he couldn’t conjure her image up as strongly anymore. All that time, he’d been talking to an actual demon.

“How long were you following him?” Anya said.

“Oh, a good eight months. The nice thing about that was they kept moving, so I could pick up other clients along the way. Just had to be careful. Hunter’s kid and all. Never quite knew when John was going to turn around and figure out I was there. Honestly, half the fun.”

“I think we’re straying from the point,” Giles said.

“Right,” Dean said, finally finding it in him to act like a person again. He would have to get past all this freezing up. So he really had made that box of cereal randomly appear, not just found it right when they got hungry. He wasn’t sure what was more disturbing—that Anya was friendly with a vengeance demon or that one had been following him around and causing chaos in his wake.

Bigger, more immediate, issues. Dean cleared his throat. “What’d you mean Sammy was off limits?”
“Well, I had one little conversation with him and this brute from the Pit shows up and tells me he’s off limits, which was a real shame. I’m certain I could have gotten Sam to wish.”

“Hallie, that is Dean’s family you’re talking about,” Anya said.

Halfrek shrugged. “It’s not my fault John Winchester is a lousy parent.”

“But this demon that showed up. He have yellow eyes?” Dean asked.

“Now that you mention it, he did.”

Dean clenched his jaw.

“Well, what do you know about him?” Anya said.

“Not much. He and I have had a few little spats over the last two decades. I think Sammy was the third child he told me to stay away from. The time after that was far less pleasant, so I’ve done my best to stay away from his little experiment.” Halfrek reached up and fussed with her hair as if fixing it.

“Experiment?” Giles repeated.

“I just assume that’s what he’s up to. After all, what else could it be? Different children, different homes, not wanting interference. They must be some kind of control group or something.”

“But you have no idea what he’s doing?” Anya said.

“My job is to help children get back at their negligent guardians. This yellow eyed demon is not a guardian, so I don’t go prying, especially since he’s incredibly rude and violent.” Halfrek heaved a great sigh. “Now, as much as I love gossiping with you Anyanka, I should get going. Too much time with the ‘good guys’ is going to damage my reputation.”

“That’s all you know about what Yellow Eyes is doing?” Dean asked.

“Like I said, honey, I don’t pry. Just isn’t polite.”

“All right. Thanks Hallie.”

“No problem, sugar. But next time you call me up, maybe girls’ night out instead. It’s been ages since we had a proper chat.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Halfrek winked at Dean. “Good seeing you all grown up. I really was worried there for a while.”

Then with the wave of her hand she was gone and they were left with nothing. If Dean had had the strength, he would have knocked the books off the table. His side hurt again. “That was pointless.”

“I found it quite the opposite,” Giles said as he leaned back in his chair. “We learned a few important things. For starters, we know there are other children.”

“How the hell are we supposed to find them?” Dean said.

“Well, if Hallie’s right and there’s a control group, that means he would have needed to set them up the same way, right?” Anya said.
“Son of a bitch. The demon that gave us Azazel’s name said he’d been here on one of his newborn stops. Maybe he did the same thing here that he did to us. Have their been any house fires lately?”

“There’s one down the street from Xander’s parents that happened maybe a month ago,” Anya said.

“We need to look into why that happened,” Dean said.

“I’ll call Xander. He can drive us over there.” Anya glanced over at him. “If you’re up for it. You really look like you should be lying down.”

“I just found out my imaginary friend is a demon and not so imaginary, so you know, not really feeling like sleeping any time soon.”

“And I’ll mind the shop I suppose,” Giles said.

“It is yours,” Anya replied. “Oh, this is going to cut into my pay, isn’t it?”

“If getting to the bottom of why a demon’s potentially torching houses and murdering women isn’t important enough for you, feel free to pass,” Dean said.

“I get it. You don’t have to be a jerk.” Anya grabbed the phone. “Should we call the others and tell them about what’s going on?”

“Buffy has her own case to solve and I wager it’s better to keep Sam occupied until we know more. This news would only distress him,” Giles replied.

The idea was a relief. Better that Sammy didn’t know what was going on with him until they knew how to fix it. Dean nodded. “Let’s get to work.”
Chapter 29

Research was one of the duller areas of slaying. Buffy had to fight to keep her eyes open as she moved from page to page of the old newspaper. With Willow along, they had narrowed down the time frame that the pencil factory had been open, but that didn’t close the gap by much. Forty years was still a lot of microfiche to go through and Sunnydale was home to a lot of murders and unexplained deaths.

“I should just create a database at this point,” Willow murmured. She was going through her material a lot faster, but she’d always been better at this than Buffy. “That way the next time something weird happens we can do a search and pop! There’s the recurring murder sprees.”

“Not a bad idea.” Buffy glazed past another two days of newspapers.

Willow nudged Buffy’s shoulder. “Isn’t that cute?”

Buffy leaned out from around her machine to see what Willow meant. Sam and Dawn were swapping out their microfiches. As ever, Dawn’s emotions were telegraphed to anyone in the nearby area. No way did Sam not know that the littlest Summer girl had a crush on him. Buffy frowned. “He’s a little old for her.”

“Says the girl who had a boyfriend two hundred and twenty years older than her.”

“That’s different,” Buffy said. “And I was sixteen. She’s only fifteen and he’s seventeen. That’s like, I mean, do you remember the senior boys when we were their age?”

“I remember you and Cordelia needing to be rescued from a frat boy party.”

“Okay, if you’re going to keep pointing out my older boy disasters, you’re really only strengthening my case.”

“Point taken.”

“Besides, Dawn’s different.”

“Because she’s your little sister?”

Because both she and Sam weren’t what they seemed to be. Buffy sighed. She really needed to fill Willow in, but now wasn’t the time, especially since Sam and Dawn were back at their machine. At first, Dawn was dragging, probably the shock from the incident this morning. Practically snuggling up to Sam and researching was improving her mood however, and Buffy had caught five smiles that she’d tried to suppress. Baby sister was trying to play cool.

Too bad she wasn’t human.

The thought churned Buffy’s gut and a wave of guilt chilled her. Dawn was real now, that was what was important. Buffy had a mission to protect her even though that mission had been thrust on her. No matter what Dawn had been before, she was a human girl. Her sister.

“Got something,” Sam said.

“Hey, you beat me?” Willow pouted.

“Maybe. I don’t know. But there was a kid in the ’70’s who died at the factory. Might be worth
“Looking into.”

“Better than what we had before,” Buffy said.

“Okay, but what do we do now?” Dawn asked. “Wait for him to try to kill someone else?”

“No,” Willow said. “Right?”

“Of course not,” Buffy said.

“Dad would say dig up the kid and burn the bones, just in case,” Sam said.

Dawn scrunched her nose. “That sounds gross.”

“He’s been dead for almost thirty years. He’s going to be bones.”

“Don’t you have a witchy thing you can do?” Buffy asked Willow.

“I could try to do a seance, but that means breaking into the school.”

“Like we haven’t done worse.”


Buffy shook her head. “Not cool. You’re not doing it. You two are going back to the Magic Box.”

“But I’m the one that had the vision,” Sam said.

“And Dean is going to kill me if I take you into a dangerous situation. You’re out of luck this time.”

Sam and Dawn were making faces at her, but she wasn’t about to drag them along. She’d spent enough of high school trying to keep teenagers out of harm’s way. She didn’t need to do that again right now. They packed up the microfiches and went back to the Magic Box.

Giles glanced up from a book as they came in and seemed utterly surprised that it was them. “Oh. Found something?”

“Think so,” Buffy said. She squinted at Giles. There was something up in his body language. The former librarian had always been a little crappy at hiding secrets. “Where’s Dean and Anya?”

“Any thought he might be more comfortable at her and Xander’s place than sticking around here. She hasn’t made it back yet,” Giles said and there was the tell-tale too-high note in his voice. Giles was lying. Buffy was ready to call him out on it.

Sam and Dawn were taking seats at the research table. If Giles was lying, maybe it didn’t have anything to do with her. Maybe he was trying to keep something from them and neither of them had caught on to the deception yet. Buffy frowned. What would Giles want to keep from them? Had they found something out about Dawn? Sam?

“Buffy?” Willow said.

“Maybe a few more hands would be useful on this whole ghost hunt thing,” Buffy said slowly. Dawn instantly perked up though Sam looked a little wary. She couldn’t blame him. After all, she had just suggested something she had been against.

Giles nodded the slightest fraction. So he did want the teens out of there. Weird. She would have to
get the whole story from him later.

“I could use a few things for the ritual, if that’s okay Giles,” Willow said.

“Take what you need,” Giles said.

Willow loaded up on supplies, weighing Sam and Dawn’s backpacks down with magical necessities.

Hopefully this wouldn’t be as dangerous as it felt. Buffy didn’t want to risk Sam or Dawn, especially not Sam if Dean didn’t know what he was up to. While, okay, she didn’t owe it to Dean to feel so responsible for Sam, she couldn’t help it. After the way Dean had cared about her when he was injured, the way he’d been helping her, she had to repay the favor. More than that, she wanted to.

But was it too much to hope that they wouldn’t find anything after all? Just to keep everyone on the safe side?

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“He’s the one that can barely walk,” Anya said with a pout as she folded her arms over her chest.

Xander motioned downwards. “Look at those shoes. You don’t want to mess them up. Besides, we could fall through a floor or something, honey. Do you want to take that risk?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. All right, fine. I’ll be look out, but don’t take forever. It’s getting dark.”

Dean was already making his way up the staircase. He stuck to the unburned side, which luckily for him still had a handrail. His ribs ached and he reflexively put a hand over his stitches. This had not been a smart idea, but once they’d gotten in front of the house, Dean couldn’t resist the need to see it for himself.

“Looks like they got to it pretty fast,” Xander said as they made it to the second floor.

The hallway had scorch marks at the far end, a few long streams of soot that ran across to other rooms. Most of the house must’ve been opened up and the smoke had taken any exit. Dean watched his step, but the wood here was solid until the end of the hall. Only when he reached the blackened boards did they creak and groan under his weight. He motioned for Xander to stay back.

The charred remains of a crib sat in the middle of the room. Bits here and there looked like they were once toys, maybe a chair in the corner. Changing table by the door. No sign of colors, no glimpse at happy memories. Just soot and ash.

Like Sammy’s room had been. Dean had wandered into his brother’s room hoping to find some toy since Dad had said they were never coming back, but there was nothing. And Dad had caught him and screamed. Shouted at him for being so stupid, that room was dangerous. Ranted about how he should’ve left Dean with the preacher after all. Dean had ran back to his room and packed as much as he could as quick as he could. The toy soldiers (one of which was still stuck in the Impala’s ashtray), the stuffed bear that Mom used to give him when he couldn’t sleep (which had gotten lost in some motel room ages back), the legos—all the important stuff. Hell, he had even remembered clothes. Practically all his clothes. And he’d been sad when he realized that Sam wasn’t going to be big enough for them for a long time and that the few of the toys he’d handed off to his brother were destroyed.
“Dean?” Xander said as he put his hand on Dean’s shoulder.

Dean jumped, spun, thankfully ran into one of the solid walls. There was a single tear crawling down his face. Crap. He brushed it aside, shoved down the old pains, and covered up the emotional scars before Xander got it in his head to ask. “Our house was the same. Nursery gone, firefighters keeping it from being totally wrecked. Know if anyone died?”

“Mr. Jacobson, I think.”

“On good terms with Mrs. Jacobson at all?” Dean asked.

“I have no idea where she is.”

“Dead end then.”

“Not completely. This proves he was here, right?”

“Yeah. And worse.” Dean waited for Xander to catch on, but the other man stared blankly back at him. “Azazel’s done this to more than Sam. God, how many kids has he done this to? Families ruined?” He slammed his fist against the wall. New pain flared through his hand, but beat the hell out of everything else he was feeling. His family had never been the same. All these people suffered for all these years and Azazel was going to keep on going until someone finally stopped him.

He was going to bring the bastard down if it was the last thing he ever did.

“But what’s the point?” Xander said. “What’s he doing? What’s he want?”

“Doesn’t freaking matter. Ending him does.”

“I thought that was why we were investigating this.”

Dean headed back for the staircase. “Bastard’s influence on Sam—and these others—will end when he’s in the goddamn ground. That’s all that matters.”

Xander caught Dean by the shoulder and Dean spun towards him too fast and lost his balance. Luckily, Xander made a grab for his arm and between the two of them, Dean got his footing back well enough that he didn’t topple down the stairs. When Dean glared more, Xander dropped his hands away and lowered his voice. “I get it. This demon messed up your family. But from what I can tell, your dad’s been dragging you around the country for pretty much your entire life and how far has he really gotten on this hunt?”

Dean didn’t have a good comeback. He hated that.

“You’re part of a team now. We’ll get the job done. Might take a little while, but we always get our bad guys. Promise.”

A team. The whole Sunnydale crew. Buffy had said that family didn’t have to mean blood and said she cared. Obviously she cared about him and Sam. Still, something was happening with the Slayer and while he’d been happy to hear the sentiment, he had chalked it up to flirting. Then here Xander was calling him a part of the team. Last night, Giles had defended him too. Dean rubbed his forehead, unable to meet Xander’s gaze. “Sorry. Seeing this. It’s bringing crap up.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing useful.”
“Anything could be useful, Dean.”

“It’s nothing, just—” Dean waved a hand down the hall. “The fire’s exactly the same. Ruined the nursery and not much else. Parent dying in the blaze is exactly the same. In fact, I’m willing to bet that he was at the center of it.”

“What if it has to be?” Xander said.

“What do you mean?”

“Halfrek said this was some kind of experiment, but what if it’s more than that? What if part of the experiment is a magical ritual?”

That made too many kinds of terrible sense. Dean sighed. “But what’s it doing?”

“That’s the part Giles is really good at.” Xander clapped his hand on Dean’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get back to the Magic Box.”
Chapter 30

Sunnydale High had been a pretty awesome campus and unfortunately it had gotten destroyed during Buffy’s graduation. Not like she’d had much of a choice. The Mayor had turned into a giant demon snake and was going to eat her whole class and then lay waste to the town and the rest of the planet. Most of the time that didn’t bug Buffy so much.

Staring up at the miserable building Dawn and Sam had to call school kind of made her feel more than a little guilty about wrecking the other one so badly. When was the town going to get around to fixing that up? Though, admittedly, the old building was directly on top of the Hellmouth. Maybe rundown pencil factory with one measly murdering ghost wasn’t so bad after all.

“So what’s the plan, Will?” Buffy asked. She was trying to ignore the fact that Dawn was getting a little paler, a little shakier. Once on the walk over she had hinted at taking Dawn home and both youngsters had gotten offended at that. But Dawn was obviously struggling being back at the school and that worried Buffy. A lot. Her sister shouldn’t have to deal with this kind of stuff. It was her job.

“Well, since we don’t know much about it, I’m not exactly sure breaking up into pairs is a smart idea. I mean, remember what happened when we tried to kick the spooks out of the old building?” Willow shivered. “I would rather not repeat that.”

“All four together then. Do we do it out here? By the curb?” Buffy glanced up and down the street. No one was coming at the moment. “Feels a little exposed.”

“I think if we’re just inside the building, we’ll be able to summon him to us. Sam, did the article say how the poor guy died?” Willow said.

“A fall from the second floor. People thought he jumped, but if he’s a vengeful spirit, I’m guessing the story’s wrong about that,” Sam replied.

“But that would put him closer to the building,” Dawn added.

“Inside the building it is.” Buffy led the way towards the front doors.

Little to no surprise, the main door to the building was locked. After testing it a second time, Buffy rolled a shoulder and grabbed the handle.

“Wait,” Sam said. He dug into the front pocket of his backpack. “Give me a chance first.”

Buffy stepped back to give him the space. Dawn was practically giddy as Sam began picking the lot. She nudged Buffy’s shoulder. “That is so cool. Can you teach me?”

“Dean’s the better teacher,” Sam said. “I still take too long, according to him.”

“So Dean’s good with his hands?” Willow joked.

Both Sam and Dawn glanced her way and said, “Ew.”

Buffy put a hand over mouth to cover the laugh as Willow feigned innocence and said, “What? Not like I’m curious. I’ve got a girlfriend.”

“I so don’t need to think about the two of them.” Dawn waved a hand at Buffy.

“Same,” Sam said.
“There’s not a ‘two of us,’” Buffy said.

“Yet.” Dawn crossed her arms and gave one of those really annoying ‘I so called it’ smiles. She hadn’t called anything yet. Nothing had happened. God, she could wipe that smart-ass look off her face any second now.

“Got it.” Sam yanked the door open.

“Look at that. All entering, no breaking,” Willow said with a smile as she walked past.

“Hey, my method would have worked fine,” Buffy complained.

The inside of the darkened building was definitely more school-like, complete with signs for administration offices and a long row of lockers. Willow led the way to a classroom around the corner. A little work and the four of them cleared the desks in a wide enough space that they could make a comfortable circle sitting down. “All right,” Willow said, “if you’re going to be part of the spell, you have to concentrate. Any breakage of the circle and we could have a loose ghostie on our hands. You guys saw what it did firsthand, so I shouldn’t have to tell you how dangerous it’s going to be.”

Dawn sat up straighter and nodded her head. “I can do this.”

“You’re sure?”

“I mean, that’s why you did the speech, right? Because I’m the new guy at this. But I promise, I am not going to let go unless you say so.” Dawn was trying so hard to seem like a badass and for a split second, she shared a look with Sam and Sam smiled, like he was proud of her or something.

Oh, Buffy was so going to have the ‘we don’t volunteer for dangerous stuff to impress boys’ speech later on. That was going to be the opposite of fun because Dawn so clearly liked Sam that it kind of hurt. Buffy had been that bad about Angel once upon a time—and Parker and even Riley. The need to impress was a huge sign of a crush. Yet, strangely, she didn’t feel that need around Dean. No need to be cool or extra amazing. He seemed impressed enough seeing her as she was.

She could so concentrate on him some other time. Right now, she needed to pay attention to this spell.

Willow set up the ingredients, had Sam pour the circle of salt in between them, and Dawn got the task of waving around some incense. When the three of them settled down again, Willow motioned for them to take each other’s hands. “Okay. Remember, the ghost is going to show up inside the salt. So long as we don’t break the line, he can’t hurt us.”

The room dropped a few degrees and suddenly Buffy could see her breath. “Uh, Will?”

“Haven’t done anything yet,” Willow said.

“Dawn, get inside the circle,” Sam said urgently.

“Why would I—”

“Now!” Sam and Buffy shouted together.

The air dropped another few degrees as Dawn got inside the circle. A boy appeared—he probably hadn’t been any older than Dawn—and his neck was twisted at an odd angle, his eyes hollow, and his hair messy. He twitched and came closer in the blink of an eye.
Sam grabbed the container of salt and sent an arc through the air. It splashed into the ghost, dissipating it.

“We need to get out of here,” Buffy said. “Move as a group and—”

The ghost slammed into Sam as it appeared, sending him back into the hall. Dawn screamed and Buffy grabbed the salt container Sam had dropped. Ghost boy slammed Sam against the lockers and picked him up to do it again. Buffy took a handful of salt and threw it at the ghost. It vanished again.

“Out, now!” Buffy called.

Willow grabbed Dawn by the arm and was tugging her along, not that Dawn needed much in the way of encouragement. Buffy was doing the same for Sam when a wave of cold splashed into her back. The ghost yanked Sam out of her grip and tossed him down the hallway. Dawn and Willow hesitated, but Buffy waved them on. “Go. I’ve got him!”

They ran and Buffy threw more salt at the ghost. She managed to reach Sam and help him get back on his feet before the ghost reappeared. He snarled and struck Buffy hard enough to send her reeling. The salt box flew out of her hands and skittered down the hall, so she struck out with a kick.

Which passed right through the spirit. Uh oh. Buffy tried again, but the ghost kept moving towards Sam. Sam was moving farther into the building. Damn it damn it damn it. No weapons, no protections, and the ghost was chasing Sam into its territory. This was becoming worst case scenario way too fast. Buffy went for the salt box.

The ghost vanished and popped next to Sam. He latched a hand around Sam’s throat.

Buffy ran up and poured more salt into her hand—only no salt came. The box was empty. She made a wild swing with the box and the ghost backhanded her, sending her several feet back.

It was choking Sam. Killing him.

From seemingly nowhere, a tall black man stepped into the fight and swung a fire poker through the ghost, sending it off again. He stayed on alert, even as he helped steady Sam. “Mr. Winchester, I believe I told your brother that you aren’t supposed to be hunting.”

“Principal Wood, I—he doesn’t know. Dean’s not in on this,” Sam managed. “I swear, he wouldn’t want me doing this. But after what happened this morning, I couldn’t not look into it.”

“I see.” The man, Wood, turned towards Buffy. “And that was Dawn Summers running out of here, which makes you her sister Buffy?”

“I am,” Buffy said uneasily.

“Well, I guess if you’re going to break the rules, having the Slayer at your back isn’t a bad idea,” Wood said.

“You know who I am?” Buffy said slowly.

“I hardly think that’s the priority at the moment.”

Their breathes were on the air. Buffy really wished she had brought another weapon. “It’s coming back.”

“We need to get Sam out of here.”
“Agreed.”

“But what about the ghost? We can’t just leave it,” Sam said.

“The Slayer and I will handle the ghost, soon as you’re safe,” Wood replied. He began escorting Sam towards the door.

The ghost appeared two more times before they reached the outside with Dawn and Willow, each time dispatched by Wood’s fire poker. Willow gave them the faintest smile. “See, Dawnie, I told you they’d be fine.”

“Willow, can you take them back to my place? Check on my mom?” Buffy said.

“We haven’t dealt with the ghost,” Dawn said.

“We’ll handle that,” Wood said.

“Buffy?” Willow said.

“We’re good. Promise,” Buffy replied. “Just get them home.”

Wood and Buffy waited until the other three were safely down the block before heading back inside. They slowly patrolled the halls. Only then did the total silence between them become awkward. Buffy had no idea where to start on the long list of questions forming in her mind. “How do you know who I am?”

“The last two principals were eaten. I figured the least I could do was research the town. Imagine my surprise at discovering a Hellmouth, though that explains the deaths. Researching that led to the discovery that the Class of ’99 named you Class Protector. Wasn’t very hard to figure out the rest.”

“And you’re not surprised, at all, about Slayers or ghosts wandering the school?”

“I grew up with it,” Wood replied.

“And you know about Sam and Dean?”

“Dean and I had a very frank conversation on the topic when he was enrolling Sam.”

“Concerning Sam not hunting?” Buffy asked.

“Under the threat of expulsion.”

Oh crap. Buffy’s eyes went wide. She hadn’t known that, but that had to be the real reason Dean was adamant about keeping his brother out of the supernatural. “It’s really not Dean’s fault. And Sam doesn’t usually show much interest. Just, they saw what happened this morning and—”

“I’m beginning to think they didn’t see everything,” Wood said.

“Uh, huh?”

Wood sighed. “Have you noticed anything about the last few minutes?”

“No ghost attack.” Buffy frowned. “But why no ghost attack?”

“Because Sam’s gone.” Wood turned towards her. “This morning, for a brief moment, I thought that was Sam in the road. The other boy looked like him.”
“So the ghost is targeting Sam.”

“That’s my hypothesis. One you proved with your blundering attempt to summon it.”

“We didn’t realize—”

“Which is how people get killed. I thought the Slayer would have been better prepared.”

Buffy put her hands on her hips and straightened. “It’s been a long day and I appreciate your help so far. You want the credit for saving Sam’s life, you’ve got it. But if you want him to finish out his education here, obviously something has to be done about this ghost. If we figure out its identity—”

“Andrew Miller,” Wood replied. “I dug up the bones earlier and torched them. He shouldn’t be here.”

“You’re a hunter,” Buffy said. “What is a hunter doing as a principal of a school?”

“I think the better question is, why weren’t the last two principals hunters?”

“Fair point.” Buffy glanced up and down the hall. Still no sign of the spirit. “Okay, if you torched the bones and the ghost is still here, then there has to be some other reason. A spell? Maybe that’s why it’s so attached to Sam too.”

“That’s what I was looking for. There has to be something in this building that’s keeping the ghost tied down, forcing it to do this. We destroy that and no more problem.”

Buffy motioned at the fire poker. “Wouldn’t happen to have another one of those, would you?”

Wood pulled a knife out from a sheath. It had runes along the blade. “In theory, this can damage anything supernatural, but I haven’t tested it out on spirits.”

Buffy took the blade and ran it through the air a couple of times. It had a good weight to it. “No time like the present. This place got a basement?”
Chapter 31

Having a smoke outside the Slayer’s residence was watching the enemy. Getting a feel for what she was up to. When Spike finished his third cigarette, he had to stop lying to himself. He was stalking and while a favorite past-time, eventually she was going to peek out a window and see him. Or worse, come home from a patrol and catch him out here because he wasn’t entirely sure she was home. Someone was in there, with Joyce’s car in the drive and bleeding lights on all over the house. Didn’t mean it was the Slayer though. He finished off the fourth cigarette and stamped it out on his growing pile. All he needed was a game plan.

“Spike?” Dawn called out. She was down the sidewalk and had definitely spotted him since she was crossing the yard. Her surprise was soon replaced with an angry face. “What are you doing here?”

Confessing that he couldn’t get the Slayer off his mind hardly seemed like the right thing to say. He lit another cigarette and eyed the boy following Dawn into the yard. He was tall, almost freakishly so for a teen his age, and something about the way he held his shoulders was familiar. Willow finished out the little party coming to greet him. Telling that one the truth was also a bad idea. “I was out walking. Who’s this?”

“Sam,” Dawn said, as if that name should mean something to Spike.

“Right. Bit young for the Scooby gang, aren’t you?” Spike said.

“He’s Dean’s brother.” Dawn crossed her arms over her chest.

Good ol’ Dawn, reliable fount of information. Spike slowly let out a draw of air and grinned. “That so? How’s Dean’s face? Heard he took a beating a few days back.”

Sam scowled. “How do you know about that?”

“Because the ones that did the punching happen to be friends of mine.” Spike broadened his smile. “And your idiot brother walked right into it.”

That turned out to be the wrong thing to say. Sam struck out with a hard right hook and the fight was all downhill from there. The boy was strong, almost Slayer-strong, definitely more than human. Add to that a fighter’s training and Spike was on his ass in a few quick moves. Sam slammed him into the ground a few times, dazing him, and he became aware just in time to see Sam holding a jagged branch in his hand.

This was it. This kid had bested him. Over a hundred years of life flushed down the drain because he had to antagonize some child on account of him being a relation to the Slayer’s latest boy toy. Thank God Angeles wasn’t here to see this because he’d be laughing his ass off.

The branch stayed in the air, though Sam slammed his fist down onto Spike’s chest. Both boy and vampire were surprised by that and Spike wiggled enough to see Willow holding out a hand and then flicking the branch away.

Sam stood up quickly. “What the hell was that about?”

“I’ll explain inside,” Willow said.

“But—”
“Inside.” Willow’s tone left no space for argument. She pointed at the front door.

Sam and Dawn hurried in like good children while Spike worked on picking himself up and dusting off his jacket. “Suppose you’ll be wanting a thank you.”

“Whatever creepy thing you’re doing out here, stop. That’ll be thanks enough, okay Spike?”

“Yeah, sure.” Spike sniffed. Always on the outside. Which was fine by him. Vampires weren’t supposed to be buddies with the bleeding Slayer or her crew. He rolled his shoulders so the coat would go back in place. “Pair of brothers for the Summers girls. How convenient.”

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous,” Willow said.

Of course he wouldn’t, though of course he was—in the case of Coverboy, anyway. Dawn was still a child in too many ways. “Nothing to be jealous about. Dean won’t keep her interest long. Not enough monster in him.”

“Really not your concern, is it?”

“Suppose not.” Spike began walking away, though backwards. He had one sting left to deliver. “Looks like some things run in the family though.”

Willow scowled at him. “How?”

“Dawn’s boy toy.” Spike grinned again. “Not all human now, is he?”

The look of pure confusion was worth the beating he’d taken. Oh, poking at Sam and Dean was just going to be too much fun, though far more dangerous than Captain Cardboard. He might need to move crypts sometime soon. At least unlife had gotten interesting again.

******

A weird night made only weirder by what Spike had said. Willow took a moment outside—telling herself that she had been watching to make sure Spike was really leaving—but more to process the information. The meaning was obvious, but what had made him say it? Humans could beat up Spike easily these days, he couldn’t fight back. And if Sam wasn’t all human, how was Dean not monster enough? As far as Willow knew, they had the same parents, though maybe she was assuming too much.

Giles must know something about all this. Maybe that was why he was acting so strange earlier when they had stopped by the Magic Box.

A bit of magic would reveal the truth. She had tarot cards in her bag. While telling the future wasn’t her best gift, she could coax the cards into a little information spilling. She needed the present or past anyway. Now, to do a reading without raising alarm in either teenager. Frightening them would be a bad idea and they had had plenty of scares so far.

Only, as she walked into the Summers’ house, Dawn was already shouting. “Mom? Mom!”

Willow rushed to the kitchen. “Joyce?”

Joyce was on the floor with Dawn next to her, shaking her shoulder. Sam was giving address
instructions on the phone. A brain in a crisis, always good to have another one of those around.
Willow went to Dawn’s side and gently put her hands on her shoulders in order to steer the youngest
Summers back. “Hold on, Dawnie. We don’t know how she’s hurt.” Once Dawn was slunk back
against a cabinet, Willow gently checked Joyce’s pulse. Still there and Joyce groaned a little. Good
signs. “She just passed out somehow.”

“Ambulance is on its way,” Sam said as he hung up the phone. “Does Buffy have a cell?”

“No,” Willow replied. “But call Giles. And Xander. One of them should be able to tell her.”

Sam nodded.

What Spike had said completely left Willow’s mind.

********

Dean dragged the take-out bag across the table. He preferred burgers over Chinese, but Xander had
been willing to pay and Anya was insistent on getting fortune cookies. They’d just gotten the table
cleared at the Magic Box when the phone rang. Since Xander didn’t find that a deterrent for digging
into his Kung Po chicken, Dean wasn’t about to put off filling his stomach either.

His mouth was full of egg roll when Giles put the receiver down and turned back towards them.
Expression on the Brit’s face was off. Last time he’d seen anyone look like that, Bobby had been
telling Dad about an old friend passing on. Dean swallowed down his food.

Anya and Xander, who up until then had been engaging in couple-banter, went silent and still too.
Xander spoke, even with food in his mouth. “What happened?”

“That was Sam.” Giles pulled out his keys. “Joyce is being taken to the hospital.”

“Oh God,” Anya said. “Is she all right?”

“Honey, if she needs to see a doctor, she’s not a hundred percent,” Xander said.

“Buffy’s still in the school, ghost hunting. One of us should go collect her,” Giles said. “Willow is
with Sam and Dawn. He plans on taking Joyce’s car to the hospital. Can he drive?”

Dean snorted. “We taught him when he was like, ten.”

“All right then. I’ll close up shop. Meet all of you there.”

“I can stay and mind the shop,” Anya said. “It’s not like all of us will be able to do anything.”

“It’s a show of support,” Xander said. “Waiting around in the waiting room.”

“I’d rather be here, searching the computer. We still have Sam’s case to work. And the rest of you
will probably need somewhere to be when you discover there’s nothing there for you to do. I could
have donuts or pizza. Coffee. Giant comforting research party,” Anya replied.

“That doesn’t sound like the worst of ideas,” Dean said as he stood.

“Yeah, not bad.” Xander kissed Anya’s forehead as he stood.
“Call Tara. She’ll want to know where Willow is,” Dean said.

“I’ll call if there’s updates,” Xander promised.

“Okay. Tell Buffy—I don’t know, whatever you’re supposed to tell Buffy and Dawn in situations like this.”

“Will do, hun.”

Giles, Dean, and Xander stepped out onto the sidewalk. Giles glanced up and down the road. “I guess the question is, which car?”

“The Impala,” Dean replied.

“Oh come on, I think the little red sports car is going to have more cheer,” Xander said.

“Yeah, but mine’s got the weapons.”

Xander nodded and motioned for the Dean to go first. “Weapons do usually cheer that girl up.”

********

“Well, basement’s a bust,” Buffy said. She took one last look under the stairs, but nothing. “Are you sure the anchor’s in the building?”

“It’s a far less terrifying prospect than if it’s somewhere in this town,” Wood said. “I doubt we’d find it then.”

“And the ghost will keep trying to kill Sam.” Buffy sighed. Sometimes slaying sucked. Okay, a lot of the time it did. Playing what-thing’s-the-magical-whatsit was going to be a long, slow process. “Going to be a whole world of fun if it’s something more than what’s inside these walls.”

“Even if we find it, someone needs to be looking out for Sam. After all, the binding didn’t happen by itself.”

Implications Buffy so didn’t want to think about right now. “He’s got his brother and me and, apparently, you. Do you look after all your students like this?”

“Hunters’ kids are like Slayers, they seem to attract evil without intending to.” Wood pursed his lips and continued. “Or maybe it’s that they notice it better. Either way, with Sam and a few others, I figured it wasn’t long until something like this happened, though I had hoped it’d be a little longer.”

“Wait, there are other hunters settled into Sunnydale?” Buffy asked.

“And I have no intention of giving you their names, just as I wouldn’t give them yours.”

At least the guy was fair.

“Buffy!” Dean’s voice echoed off the empty halls. “Buffy!”

“Dude, I thought your ghost hunting voice would be a lot softer,” Xander said, his voice only somewhat softer than Dean’s had been. “Do you want to let the spirit know we’re here?”
“We’re on its territory. It knows. Buffy!”

“Here!” Buffy called back. She and Wood hurried towards the front door.

Dean had a sawed-off shotgun in his hands while Giles and Xander had tire irons. He came to a sudden halt when he saw who was with her. “Principal Wood?”

“Dean,” Wood said. “You’re looking pretty rough.”

“Deal was that Sam couldn’t get injured.”

“And that he wouldn’t hunt.”

Buffy winced as Dean’s eyes went wide. He turned towards her and she took the advantage, “We will so talk about that later. We’ve got a bigger problem.”

“I’ll say. Buffy, your—” Xander said.

Dean cut in. “Let’s solve this ghost first. What’ve you got?”

Buffy filled him in on the few details that she had, including how Wood had already torched the bones and their theory that the anchor for a spell had to be in the building. “We just don’t know where it’s hiding or what it looks like. Could be anywhere.”

“We could try Willow’s idea of summoning the spirit, now that Sam is out of the equation,” Giles said.

“Doesn’t mean the ghost will know more than we do,” Wood replied.

“What’s this stuff usually look like?” Xander asked.

“I imagine it’ll have a picture or something of Sam’s involved if it’s coming after him. Since it attacked someone else first, my guess would be an image. Hair or nails is usually more precise,” Giles said.

“My research would back that up,” Wood said.

“So where do you go in a school to find an anchor point that’s crafted out of witch materials and concealing an image of somebody?” Buffy said.

“Stick it in a drawer,” Dean replied.

“Naw,” Xander said. “Art class.”

“That makes a terrible kind of sense,” Giles said.

“Then let’s shake a leg already. We’re wasting time,” Dean said.

Wood headed down the hall. “This way.”
This was not exactly the plan. Azazel chewed on the toothpick slowly and stared up at the darkened school. Little Sammy was supposed to have his supercharge. So far this little test seemed a bust in the primary area. However, it was giving him a real good example of the Slayer’s lack of tactics. Apparently adding the Winchesters to the mix were not improving her abilities to think ahead.

The brown robbed figure stepped out of the shadow, slight bend to his form. Nice thing about Glory’s goons, they showed the right amount of respect. He had trouble getting that from his own people. Oftentimes the ones that were loyal weren’t much help. These worshippers of Glorificus certainly had both loyalty and competency down. Azazel wasn’t jealous of much, but that he had to admire.

He took the toothpick out of his mouth. “Well, what did you see?”

“Sam Winchester has gone to the hospital with the Slayer’s sister, mother, and the red-headed witch.” The little guy did another bow.

Maybe their competency wasn’t so high. Azazel rolled his hand. “Come on. Whole day here.”

“Ah. Yes. Of course.” The minion took in a deep breath and began a complete recitation of Sam Winchester’s day.

By the end of it, Azazel grinned widely. “So he was moving through the crowd before the boy was in any real danger.”

“That would appear to be the case.”

Time to ramp up surveillance. He needed an inside man. “Do your best to get me a list of his friends.”

“Other than the Slayer’s sister?”

“Yeah.” Azazel was not going to risk putting one of his inside anyone close to a Slayer. He still needed to hide the cards he was playing. He stuck the end of the toothpick in his mouth. “Otherwise, dismissed.”

The minion bowed and ran off for the night. In the morning, he’d get a report of how Sammy spent his night. Not too shabby of work.

Pinpricks of power danced along his demon form. Azazel said, “She emerges from her mansion to dwell among the common.”

“Something that disgusts me,” Glory said as she finished her approach. “You promised me a set of eyes.”

“Slayer’s little group proved more capable than I knew. She’s got a pretty strong witch,” Azazel said.

“Ugh. The gross kind that does business with your people or the self-sufficient?”

“Research says the latter.”

“That doesn’t explain why you haven’t tried killing them again. What’s that stupid phrase they say in this dimension? If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again?”
“Impatience gets you nowhere,” Azazel said. “What brought you to Sunnydale?”

Glory crossed her arms over her chest. “My Key.”

“Why’d you think it was in this particular town?”

“One of the monks who stole it from me ran here.”

Azazel waved a hand at the school, where the Slayer was. No doubt Glory’s goons had told her that much, otherwise she had no reason to be harassing him. “Most likely he was on the way to the Slayer. Who better to trust it to?”

The sudden press of power against his unseen form almost choked him. Glory glared at the building. “I am going to break every bone in her pathetic body.”

“Or, you could wait.”

“Why?”

“Been through this already, sweetheart. Opening dimensions, especially to your home, ain’t easy. You want your key, you want to do it without raising the Slayer’s suspicions too hard and fast or she’ll double down on protecting it. And you still don’t know what it is, if she’s hiding it.”

Glory thrust out her bottom lip. “That doesn’t explain why I can’t have the hunter’s eyes.”

“In a few days’ time, he’s gone from being an outsider to staying with her mentor. Far as I can tell, they’re getting close. We keep Dean intact, for now.” Azazel grinned at her. “Wait a couple weeks and he’ll be excellent leverage.”

“Weeks?” Glory cried.

Damn he hated the impatient. Azazel held off from discourtesy—she could squash him with a thought—and went back to watching the school. “You’re immortal, princess. Time’s on our side. Something else they say around here. Measure twice, cut once.”

Glory sighed loudly. “Waiting only makes me more bored. I want to do something fun.”

“Now there’s something I can help with. Got a pair of demons who love a good possession. You should see the way they make a body dance.”

“It’s not the worst idea I’ve heard.”

Azazel offered her his arm and she took it, though she held her head high. Likely, his favorite pair wasn’t going to entertain her for long. There was no pleasing some evil.

*******

Buffy crept through the door to the art class with all four men behind her. She was most aware of Dean, right behind her, breath playing on her shoulder blade. Right now so wasn’t the time to think about how warm he was or how he smelled like leather. Nor was it the time to think about that look in his eyes the previous night when he turned to her and asked if she was okay. Ghost first. Fantasy later.
The art class was cold. Buffy shifted her grip on the knife and took a few more steps in. The men spread out, Giles and Wood instantly going for the hanging art projects, Dean keeping a watch on the room. Buffy frowned at the shotgun in his hands. “How is that supposed to help?” she whispered.

“Loaded with rock salt,” he said back. He nodded at her knife. “That won’t do a thing.”

“It’s Wood’s. And it might? Feels a little different than the standard.” Buffy went to the teacher’s desk and pulled open drawers. Nothing unusual.

The room dropped in temperature. She went on red alert, so did Wood and Dean. Hunter instincts. Good to know they were ready for a fight, but in this close of quarters they could wind up hitting each other.

Giles reached for one of the projects. “I think I—”

The ghost appeared in front of him and shoved, sending Giles flying across the room where he crashed into Xander. Dean spun and unloaded a round into the ghost, blasting a radius of rock salt at the ghost and a far cabinet. The ghost vanished with a scream.

“Where was it? Which one?” Wood demanded.

“Back left. Silver and green,” Giles said.

Wood plucked the piece down from the metal grate. The art was some kind of horrendous paper mache ball, but Buffy spotted the picture of Sam in the center along with a few small bones sticking out. Wood held it out and Dean stepped forward with the lighter.

As Dean sparked the lighter to life, the ghost appeared beside him. Buffy was vaulting over the desk and across the room. She was fast, but the ghost was faster. It knocked Dean down. Not Dean. Not again. It raised a desk over its head, ready to bring it down on him. Buffy slashed with the knife. The blade hissed its way through the ghost, causing an orange streak to run through it, but it didn’t dissipate. She heard the boys scrambling for the lighter and went after the ghost. It dodged the blade. She ducked under one swooping punch and side-stepped the next bad move. Slash, slice, duck.

Then the ghost screamed in agony as it burst into orange flames, disappearing into ashy flakes. Buffy checked over her shoulder. Giles and Wood had lit the paper mache ball on fire. Already the room was getting warmer.

Dean wasn’t moving.

“Dean!” Buffy dropped the knife and rushed to his side. She rolled him more onto his side. His eyes fluttered open. “Dean, can you hear me?”

“Still here, Slayer,” he mumbled. “Though, ow.”

Buffy smiled in relief. “Do all hunters get knocked around this much?”

“I’m thinking it’s my superpower,” Dean joked with a half-grin.

God that smile went straight to her heart. She reached up and brushed fingers through his hair, telling herself she was checking for a head injury. “Think you’re intact?”

“Important stuff seems to be working,” Dean replied.
Was he seriously thinking about *that* right now? Buffy shot a reflexive glance at his groin.

“I meant my head.” Dean flushed. “Not that one. I mean the other one.”

Buffy offered out a hand and helped him to his feet. He was so much taller than her. That was always kind of nice. Tall boyfriends never had a problem picking her up. If they were alone, this moment could’ve been something more. Looking up into his eyes, she wasn’t sure that they weren’t having a moment.

“They always like this?” Wood asked.

“New development,” Xander replied. Oh, and he could take that tone out of his voice already. She so didn’t need him judging a guy she wasn’t even seeing yet. “Buffy, I tried to tell you earlier, but your mom’s in the hospital.”

That killed whatever moment she was having with Dean. She glared at Xander. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Xander waved a hand at Dean. “He told me not to!”

Dean looked guilty, but Buffy glared at him anyway. She wouldn’t have kept something like this about Sam from him, why had he betrayed her? This was family. She had a right to know. “You thought the hunt was more important than my *mom*?”

“Didn’t want you distracted.”

“What kind of lame excuse is that?” Buffy said. Dean glared back at her, so she added, “What if it was your dad? What if I didn’t tell you he was in trouble?”

“I’d understand because there was a goddamn *job* to do.”

And he would. Buffy didn’t doubt that about him. The hunt always came first. Buffy closed her mouth. She wasn’t sure if she was impressed or just pissed off that killing was more important. No, she could make the distinction. Anger and outrage clouded over that budding nice feeling she was having towards him. “Are you sure it wasn’t because Sam was the ghost’s target?”

“For the record, I didn’t know that until *after* I told Xander to wait.”

“But you knew he was involved in the hunt!”

“Buffy,” Giles said quietly. “I believe this is an argument you can have in the car.”

Because she needed to get to the hospital where her mom was. She stepped back from Dean with a deep breath. “Where’s Dawn?”

“Sam’s supposed to take her and Willow, so she should already be there,” Dean said.

“At least one Winchester’s got his priorities right,” Buffy said.

“Are you freaking kidding me? That’s where you want to go right now?”

Buffy lifted her chin. If Dean wanted to be a jerk, she could stand her ground.

“Okay, fine. Sam might be doing the right thing, but he’s also not the one who brought freaking *children* on a ghost hunt!”
“He’s also not the one covered in bruises!”

“I got nearly all of these from jackasses connected to you!”

“I’m not the one that made you listen to Spike!”

Dean clenched his jaw. Buffy felt a slight moral victory, though that was quickly washed away when she remembered that she needed to get to the hospital. She picked up the knife and held it out to Wood. “Thanks.”

Wood took it carefully. “Thank you for the assist.”

“Sam being out here—”

“I get the distinct impression that won’t be happening again anytime soon. Am I correct, Mr. Winchester?”

“Damn right it won’t.” Dean headed for the classroom door.

Buffy rolled her eyes and followed after him. Being angry with Dean was a lot easier than being worried about her mom. That wasn’t exactly fair, but he had so started this latest round. He didn’t have the right to hide information from her like that. She could have handled the news and hunted the ghost. God, where did he get off making that kind of decision? He was infuriating. Gorgeous and absolutely annoying.

They left Wood behind in the school and the four of them climbed into the Impala, Giles taking the wheel. The rumble of the engine made it easy to not have a conversation since she rode in the back with Xander. She glared at the back of Dean’s head. The sheer, utter arrogance. Yeah, being pissed at him was easy, but it didn’t erase the knot of worry in her guts. Mom had to be okay. She just had to be.

*******

Dean couldn’t stop replaying what had happened in the school. A ghost sent after Sam. Buffy getting pissed at him for all the right reasons, though hell if he didn’t have a good reason to get mad right back at her. She had taken Sam on a freaking ghost hunt. Why on Earth would she do that? Dean glared out the window. That dig about Spike was down right rude. Right, but freaking mean. She let all these damn demons roam her town and suddenly it was his fault for listening to one of them. He was so pissed by the time they got to the hospital, he wondered how long he could get away with just not talking to her.

Soon as they got into the right waiting room, Dawn and Willow rushed to Buffy’s side. With Giles and Xander, the Slayer had a pretty solid group surrounding her. Dean walked over to Sam and took a seat beside him. For his part, Sam was keeping still, having a quiet reserved attitude. “You went hunting,” Dean drawled.

“You didn’t tell me that I couldn’t,” Sam said.

“Pretty sure I was clear on the whole ‘study your ass off’ concept.”

“But you didn’t say Principal Wood was going to expel me if I went hunting.”
“I told you he was going to call DCFS if you got hurt. What did you think was going to happen on a hunt?”

“I couldn’t not look into it, Dean. I had a vision. I had to do something!”

Dean motioned for him to keep it quiet and shot a look at the Summers girls. Buffy and Dawn had their hands full with Giles, Willow, and Xander hovering and trying to make them feel better. “Look, we got lucky this time. But there’s two things you should know. One, I really doubt Wood’s going to look away a second time. And two, that ghost was sent after you.”

“Holy crap, me? Why me?”

“I don’t know,” Dean said. He had his suspicions. Until he had proof, those were going to stay in his head. “Way this town works, could be someone you pissed off at school, could be someone pissed at me or Dad. Hell, someone could just think you’re an easy target. All I do know is that you need to watch your back.”

“And let me guess, you’re the only one I can trust to help me watch it,” Sam said gloomily.

Dean glanced over at the group. While he’d argued with Buffy, that hadn’t felt like a ‘everything’s over’ kind of argument. He gave a heavy sigh. “Not at all. Pretty sure they’ll be looking out for you too. Seems like we joined something.”

Sam frowned. “That’s a decidedly not-Dad approach to take.”

“Look at that, I can think for myself. Shocker.”

“Dean, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Of course he had, but Dean wasn’t going to hold it against him. “Yeah, yeah.”

A nurse came over, her voice aimed mostly at Buffy. “What patient are you here for?”

“I’m Buffy Summers. Joyce’s daughter.”

The nurse nodded. “I’m sorry, but you can’t have this many people here.”

“But we’re her friends,” Willow said.

“You’re welcome back in the morning. We need the space in case more families come in. Immediate family is welcome to stay. Otherwise everyone else should go.” The nurse waited until Buffy nodded in agreement before going.

“Maybe we should all clear out,” Giles suggested. “Any’s prepared for us to go back to the Magic Box. We could regroup there, continue our research.”

“More books,” Xander said. “Oh the fun.”

“Sam and Dawn should probably get some sleep, shouldn’t they?” Willow said. “They have school in the morning.”

“I’m so not going to sleep tonight. Can’t I stay and wait for Mom?” Dawn said.

“Of course,” Buffy replied.

“The rest of us should get going,” Giles said. He squeezed Buffy’s shoulder. “Call us if there are any
“Will do.”

And just like that, the group of them were trucking back out of the waiting room. Dean was bringing up the rear, trying not to be pissed that he’d struggled his way inside only to turn around after three whole minutes. His side ached. Late on his meds and too much activity. Tomorrow he might finally listen to all the advice about sitting still.

“Dean, wait,” Buffy said.

She caught up to him while the others made their way downstairs. Dawn was curling up in one of the chairs. Despite the movement of hospital staff, this was close to private for them. Dean bit back on his anger, reminding himself that Buffy wasn’t in the best of places either, and said, “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken Sam on that hunt, but Giles didn’t want him in the Magic Box for some reason, so I didn’t have a lot of choice.”

Damn it. He should’ve realized that. “Oh.”

Buffy waited a beat. “Oh? Is that all you’ve got?”

“If you’re expecting some kind of apology out of me, you can keep on waiting. I made a judgement call. Unless you were going to walk out on that ghost, you wouldn’t have gotten here any faster.”

“Wow. I thought the Watchers’ Council was bad about ‘mission first, life second.’”

“You telling me you would have abandoned the hunt?”

“No, but I had a right to know, Dean. You don’t get to decide when I should hear stuff,” Buffy snapped.

“Just like everyone knows about Dawn, right?” Dean hissed.

“Like they know about Sam?”

“Giles was running his mouth to Anya, so I’m sure the entire gang’ll know shortly.”

“Don’t get pissed at me about it,” Buffy said.

Dean squared his shoulders and she straightened in response. So much for that cozy feeling they were getting behind the desks. He was about to tell her where she could shove her hypocrisy when he caught sight of a nurse pointing a doctor in their direction. Once his gaze flicked up, Buffy turned. The doctor took that as a signal to come over to them, though Buffy went to meet him about half way. The conversation was too quiet and Buffy steadily had a slump in her shoulders.

The longer the doctor spoke, the bigger the knot in Dean’s stomach. He inched closer, catching a few of the words now. They were talking about procedures, treatment plans. Actually, the doctor was talking and Buffy was standing too still. Dean closed the gap. Buffy was on the verge of crying. All his anger was forgotten in seeing Buffy so fragile.

“There’s every possibility that your mother could make a full recovery,” the doctor said.

But that meant there were chances that she wouldn’t. Dean did his best to smile and said, “Doc, could we have a few?”
“Sure. I need to see to a few patients.”

Left alone with Buffy, Dean wasn’t sure what to do. She wasn’t really moving or acknowledging the outside world. Tears were threatening but not coming down. Oh screw it. He reached out and touched her shoulder. The small motion was like breaking the surface tension. As Buffy went to cry, she turned and buried her head in his chest. Wrapping an arm around her was reflex. God, she was so small.

Dean spotted Sam coming back up the hall and waved him off as discreetly as he could. He wasn’t planning on going anywhere now. Ever the smart one, Sam nodded and went back towards the exit. One teen dealt with. Dawn was getting more and more anxious. Dean stroked Buffy’s hair and leaned in close to her ear. “You got to pull it together, Buffy. Dawn needs you to talk to her.”

Buffy pulled away, nodding and wiping her eyes quickly. “You should get going. You’ll get left behind.”

“Naw, these chairs look positively comfortable. Think I’ll give Nurse Hatchet over there a real show by trying to make a fort.”

That got him a small smile. “Give me a second with her? Then you can join us.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

His earlier anger at Buffy wasn’t gone, but it no longer seemed all that important. Bigger picture wise, they had too much on their plates already and Joyce’s illness was about to dump a crap load more onto Buffy’s. Dean found himself wishing for the second time in as many days that he could curl up with her and ignore the world. As he watched the sisters talk, he thought about calling up the shop and having them bring Sam back, but taking care of Dawn was hardly his brother’s responsibility. Naw, banged up like he was, Dean was really only good for sitting around and comforting the Summers girls. He’d keep telling himself it didn’t have anything to do with how he felt about Buffy, but he wasn’t that good of a liar.
Chapter 33

The bunch of flowers had seemed like a good idea when Giles picked them up at the local florist’s, but as he stepped out of the elevator to Joyce’s floor, he wasn’t sure anymore. He had never seen too many flowers in the Summers’ home. Perhaps one of them was allergic and he was delivering a load of sniffles instead of the well-intentioned ‘make a quick recovery’ message. Well, he would just have to ask.

He double-checked again with a nurse before heading down the hallway to Joyce’s room. While he expected a certain amount of quiet, the room was far more silent than he anticipated. Joyce was alone in the room, though she gave him a strained smile as he entered. Giles cleared his throat. “Sorry to disturb you, I thought the others would be here.”

“Dean made the girls get breakfast. He insisted they wouldn’t keep their strength up if they ate hospital food,” Joyce replied. She chuckled. “He offered to smuggle something back for me. I’m not sure how successful he’ll be, but I’m keeping my hopes up for a bagel that isn’t stale.”

Giles smiled in relief. “Ah. How are you feeling?”

“Terrible with a side of headache. The doctors are doing a lot of talking that I’m having some trouble keeping track of.” Joyce straightened out the blanket on her lap. “Caught the important parts. Brain tumor. Operation.”

“Oh dear, Joyce. I’m so sorry.”

Joyce shrugged. “They say there’s a good chance of recovery and these stupid headaches will finally go away. It’s the waiting for the procedure that’s going to drive me crazy.”

“I would imagine so.” Giles held up the rather pathetic seeming flowers. He set them on the nearby table. “I brought these. Should cheer the room up.”

“Thank you.”

The awkward silence that filled the room was a new level of bizarre. After all, he and Joyce had never had a romantic entanglement, but there had been a wild night a few years back that he had never quite forgotten. Besides that, he had immense respect for the woman who single-handedly raised two daughters. One daughter, his mind corrected. Buffy. Dawn had only existed for a few months. Certainly, though, Joyce had been mother to her for that time frame. Giles put his hands in his pockets and tried not to display the brooding attitude brewing in his thoughts.

“So what’s going on with Buffy?” Joyce said.

“I-I’m sorry?”

“I know there has to be something big and bad going on in this town. There always is and she never tells me. To make matters worse, Riley’s suddenly gone and there are these new boys in my girls’ lives. Sam and Dean seem nice enough and I know Riley and Buffy were having issues lately, even if she wasn’t going to talk to me about it. I was hoping you knew a bit more.”

“Ah.” Giles replied. He had to stop and consider. More than once, he had told Joyce more details than Buffy would ever say, but he also refrained from giving too many. Information was often as big of a tool as a stake in a Slayer’s world. “Well, there is someone in town that might not have good intentions, but we honestly don’t know much ourselves. I’m sure Buffy’s mentioned that Sam and
Dean are staying with me?”

“There was a long rant about their father in the course of that. Can I ask? Do you know? What’s happened to Dean? Between the two of us, he’s the one that looks like he belongs in a hospital bed.”

“A few rough encounters.”

“On patrol?”

“Only the one,” Giles said. “Or perhaps, two? I honestly don’t have the details on his every wound.”

“I knew Buffy’s life could be violent but—well, I’ve never seen her so beat up.”

“Buffy has an advantage. Her abilities as a Slayer include a quick recovery rate.”

“So she could take a worse beating and still look better than him?” Joyce said.

“I’m afraid on a few occasions she has.”

Joyce went still and Giles was aware that he was not bringing any sort of comfort into the recovery room. He had an apology ready on his lips when Joyce took in a deep breath. “I think I knew that. Somehow. She’s kept to herself when she’s really injured. I wish she wouldn’t, but I suppose, in a lot of ways, I don’t have to worry about her as much. I know she can take care of herself and of Dawn. She shouldn’t have to, but she’s a smart, capable young woman.”

“Now, Joyce, you mustn’t—”

“There is a chance I won’t recover, Rupert. I think a little thinking about the future is not the worst idea. Now, if I get obsessive about it, you can tell me to stop.” Joyce waited for Giles to nod before she sighed and continued. “Honestly, I don’t know how to feel about this switch in boys. One minute Riley is part of her life and the next Dean is sleeping in the waiting room.”

“I’m not sure there’s anything going on between them.”

Joyce rolled her eyes. “I know my daughter and I know when she likes a boy. You should hear the way she says his name. She tries too hard to be nonchalant about him. That was before Riley left, anyway. There’s already this shift in the last day. And then I don’t even want to get started on Dawn’s crush on Sam.”

“That one is fairly obvious,” Giles said and he couldn’t help the small chuckle.

“But are they good boys? Their father abandoned them to go on a demon hunt? What kind of parent does that? What kind of children is he raising?”

“Well, I would think Dean’s character has been proven this last night alone for you. He stayed when he should have been resting at home.”

“Making other people the priority too far above yourself isn’t a desirable trait, Rupert. He can’t be any good to anyone if he doesn’t stop and heal,” Joyce said.

Giles sighed and scratched at his forehead. She had a very valid point. Unfortunately, he had unsuccessfully tried to convince Dean of that already. “I could try speaking to him again. Perhaps it’s best that he is sticking by Buffy’s side at the moment, if she’s staying by yours.”

“It’s the last thing either that would be good for either of them right now. Buffy will wind up leaning on him and using up what little strength he has left and from what I can tell, he’ll just accept that.”
Sometimes, Giles was amazed by Joyce’s perception. For so long, she had had no idea that her daughter was the Slayer, and yet, she seemed to understand the situation better than he who was in the thick of it. Giles frowned. He hadn’t considered Buffy’s tastes and relationships. Both Angel and Riley had provided a sense of guardianship, he supposed. While Dean wasn’t a physical match for her, his decision to stay last night, his decisions regarding Sam’s health and happiness, well, they did point to the pattern Joyce worried about. He put his hands in his pockets, taking a moment to choose his words carefully. When he raised his eyes to meet Joyce’s gaze, she was obviously concerned. “I think, maybe, you should have this conversation with him.”

Joyce’s eyes widened. “Me?”

“Sam conveyed a little more about their upbringing yesterday. As I’ve come to understand it, Dean has lacked any sort of guiding female figure. I would say Dean’s had a challenging youth, one that he considers in the large part, over. You may have more influence over him in this area than I would.”

“Well,” Joyce said with a weak smile, “wouldn’t that just be awkward? Being the mother figure to my daughter’s potential boyfriend?”

Giles laughed and Joyce chuckled. “I think this town has experienced far more bizarre circumstances.”

“I suppose you’re right about that. I’ll see what I can do, though I expect the girls will keep crowding the room today as well.” After a moment of silence, Joyce sucked in a deep breath. “Do they really live in their car?”

“At the moment, they live with me. Dean’s talked about gaining enough employment to afford an apartment.”

“At least he has goals then.”

“Yes.”

“I just don’t see why you’re all concerned about the re-releases,” Dawn said, her voice echoing down the hall despite the various hospital noises. “Aren’t they making them better? Putting in all the new technology?”

“Making them—you get that it’s like, crap, I don’t speak enough teenage girl to get this across to you,” Dean replied.

“Got to say, I was not expecting this level of nerd from you,” Buffy said. “Xander is going to be so happy when he finds out.”

“Hey, I’ve got a reputation to uphold.”

“So that’s a no go on telling everyone you’re a giant nerd?” Dawn said gleefully.

“Watch it or everyone’s going to know you snore like a freaking lumberjack.”

“I do not. Buffy, tell him I don’t!”

The three of them rounded the corner into Joyce’s room at that point of the conversation. They had joking, teasing smiles, except for Dawn who seemed mildly distressed—the social sort, not the-world-was-actually-ending sort. Buffy stopped short at seeing Giles, causing the others to do so as well for a moment, before they wound their way around him and further into the room.
“Hey,” Dawn said.

“What brings you by?” Buffy asked.

“I came to bring flowers, well wishes. The others are curious about a status update and wish to send their tidings as well. I expect you’ll have many visitors,” Giles said.

“I don’t know if that’s a great idea. We shouldn’t wear Mom out too badly.”

“I’m fine,” Joyce insisted. “Tell them they’re welcome to stop by.”

“I certainly will,” Giles said.

“How’s Sam?” Dean asked.

“Off to school this morning, though worried you didn’t sleep. Oh. I almost forgot.” Giles took the pill bottles from his pocket and handed them over to Dean. “You left these at the house.”

“Right, those. Thanks. Forgot ‘em all freaking day yesterday.”

“You forgot you were on medication?” Joyce said.

Dean took the bottles from Giles and popped one of the antibiotics in his mouth on the way over to a chair in the corner. “Wasn’t a big deal.”

“We’ll make sure he gets back on schedule,” Buffy said. “And that he takes naps.”

Giles wanted to be cheered by Buffy’s words, but something about her tone made him think on Joyce’s words. Buffy did so much protecting of the world that she did sort of relish being taken care of. He really couldn’t blame her, and was likely to indulge that habit from time to time as well. There were a great many things Giles couldn’t protect her from that he did overdo it when he could. Perhaps that wasn’t smart of him anymore. Buffy was a grown woman now, no longer a teenager he needed to shield from the adult world. “See that you do. I’ll need him back at the shop at some point.”

Dean struggled to stand back up. “I could—”

“No,” the room said in chorus, even Dawn.

“I figured no sooner than the weekend,” Giles replied.

Dean frowned more about that, which bothered Giles until a flash of realization hit. No hours meant no pay and Dean was still prideful about his contributions.

“I’m sure you’ll make up plenty of hours when you’re feeling better. Wouldn’t do for you to overdo it and wind up in a gown matching Joyce’s,” Giles said.

“I think it’d be kind of cute,” Dawn said. “You could get matching plates of Jello.”

“Okay, that really should be incentive enough,” Buffy said.

“Got it,” Dean replied. “I’ll crawl back to the couch at some point.”

“The couch?” Joyce shot an accusatory glare at Giles. “You’re making him sleep on a couch?”

“Well, Giles only has so many beds, Mom,” Buffy said.
Giles was grateful for her interference. Angry mothers were not his strong suit. He cleared his throat. “Dean is welcome to use my bed while he’s recovering. I made that clear the other night.”

“I’m fine with a couch,” Dean said. “Better than the motel beds.”

“You’ll do what Mr. Giles has offered,” Joyce said. “I’m sure everyone wants you back on your feet sooner rather than later.”

Both Buffy and Dean blinked at Joyce’s commanding tone, but neither brokered an argument with it either. Giles counted that as a small victory. “Well, I should get going. I’m afraid if I leave Anya and Willow alone in the shop too long, it may burn down. I hope you feel better soon.”

“Thank you,” Joyce said.

Giles nodded and left as the four of them began discussing what they had all ate for breakfast. A sense of worry clouded his mind, but there wasn’t much he could do for Joyce that he hadn’t already. Her medical treatment would be a long game of wait-and-see. He could only hope and pray. That hardly felt adequate at all.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eventually, a change of clothes was a necessity and since Dawn couldn’t stop talking to Mom, Buffy begged Dean to drop them back at the house around mid-morning. Not that this felt like morning. She’d pulled an all-nighter so the hour had that strange effect of seeming far too late and far too early at the same time. Thank God for Slayer endurance because she only felt a little rundown. Dean, on the other hand, looked like he could sleep for a decade. Buffy couldn’t help keeping an eye on him with her peripheral vision as they drove. He’d stayed without complaint, without reminding her that they’d been arguing seconds before learning her mom’s diagnosis. No underhanded comments, no ‘the world’s in jeopardy, Buffy, we have bigger problems,’ not even an impatient huff. It was like he had switched to boyfriend mode.

Boyfriend. So not a word she needed to throw his direction yet. They’d shared a handful of moments and most of them fantasies in Buffy’s head. Okay, not all of them. In the classroom, right after the fight, if they had been alone that might’ve ended differently. She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and stared out at the passing streets. All too soon they were pulling up to her house.

“I get first shower!” Dawn darted out of the car and up the lawn as if she expected Buffy to fight for the pleasure. Another morning and she might have. Dawn tended to hog the hot water.

This morning, Dawn’s need to be ‘first’ and therefore ‘better’ gave Buffy the spare few seconds she’d daydreamed about. Only now that she had them, she didn’t know what to do. She took in a deep breath and turned towards Dean. Apology or gratitude seemed to be the way to go.

The sight of him behind the wheel—relaxed in every way, long legs sprawled out since the Impala was idling in park, sunlight playing through the window—was one of those rare treasures Sunnydale seemed reluctant to give. He turned towards her and she must have had some kind of odd look on her face because he quirked an eyebrow and frowned at her. He wasn’t speaking either. The air between them was heavy now, expectant.

She should mutter something and get out of the car. Riley had been gone a day and she needed more time to process that. Willow had made a good point. With everything going on, she might not be thinking clearly. She should wait a few days, maybe a few weeks, and see how she really felt.

Dean sighed and rotated more towards her. He had the kind of look on his face that said he wanted to have serious words. Oh that could ruin every possibility. “Buffy—”

The tone in his voice, deep and low, had all the weight of change. She had no idea which way he was going to push them and she suddenly didn’t want to risk losing her chance with him. On desperate impulse, she leaned across the leather seat and kissed him.

His lips were soft and a perfect fit. She held onto him for support and the shoulders under her hands were firm. He stiffened at first. Just when Buffy was about to pull back and admit a mistake, Dean pulled her closer, sliding her across the seat. He deepened the kiss, managing to stay comforting and gentlemanly while holding her. She wrapped her arms around him and let herself have this. She tingled all the way down to her toes.

They withdrew that fraction of an inch at roughly the same time. Dean’s green eyes were bright. Definitely happy. Good, that was good. Buffy tried not to read too much into it, but God, she
couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen such utter joy when someone looked at her. They didn’t have baggage. Both Riley and Angel had been so full of secrets even when she thought she knew them. But Dean? Looking in his eyes, she realized that she’d already seen the kind of man he was. He’d been showing her since they met in the graveyard. She gently combed her fingers through his hair.

“Yeah, okay,” he murmured.

She smirked. “Okay?”

He grinned and he was beautiful. “Yeah.”

The kiss hadn’t changed the fact that there were words she should say. She stayed nestled beside him. “Look, about yesterday, I’m sorry. I wasn’t going to take Sam, but Giles wanted him out of the Magic Box and I didn’t know what else to do.”

“It’s all right. I was just afraid—Wood obviously means business. I can’t lose Sam.”

“I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Dean said in a low breath. “Shouldn’t have kept info on your mom a secret. It’s just how Dad trained us. Mission first.”

“I know a whole Watcher’s Council that would probably have agreed with you,” Buffy said. Bringing them up was quickly killing her mood. She ran her fingers along the collar of Dean’s leather jacket. “I should go.”

“I can stay. Drive you back.”

“I’ll call Xander. You need to get some sleep.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll manage. Though, crap, I could be missing a pop quiz in a lecture or something.”

“I’m sure under the circumstances you could get a pass on a couple of things.”

Like maybe one from her friends about how she was jumping into the arms of a guy she barely knew. Their potential reactions was not something she wanted to think about while Dean’s arm was around her. She had to get moving, especially before Dawn caught her, but she had no idea where this was going to leave them. If Dean went bragging to everyone, then this was going to complicate things. Were they a couple? Did she want to be? Buffy frowned. “I should go.”

Dean moved her arm so she could slide back across to her door. The lack of warmth was noticeable. Crawling into bed with him sounded like such a good idea. Just for a cuddle, nothing else. Not until he was healed. Buffy grabbed the door handle, hesitating because they hadn’t agreed to anything on the moment they just had. She glanced back at him.

For the first time in ages, he had a carefree smile.

Screw it. She’d have to trust he wasn’t an ass. And if he turned out to be a jerk, better to find out before they slept together. Buffy shot him a smile, murmured a thanks, and then made her way up to her house. She didn’t turn back to see when he left. With the Impala’s engine noise, she knew he stayed at the curb until she opened the door to the house.
Decided to go for a double update today because why not?
Chapter 35

Buffy had kissed him. Dean rolled that thought around his head for the thirtieth time as he pulled up to Giles’s house. He made his way inside. Getting out of his clothes was a freaking chore with the stitches on his chest, but he didn’t think falling into Giles’s bed in sweaty, messed up clothes was polite either.

What the hell had he been thinking, kissing her back like that? Short answer, he hadn’t been. But she had looked at him like he was a freaking person worth looking at. He pulled up his shirt and grunted when he strained the stitches too far. Damn it, he was going to have to take it slow for a few days. He could use it as an excuse not to see Buffy or the rest of the gang for a while. Except the one person he wished he could see was Buffy. Liking her, wanting to kiss her again, that was the one uncomplicated thing about his life.

His cellphone started ringing. Unfortunately, the damn thing was in his jacket on the floor. If he ignored it, it’d wind up being Dad on a very rare check up call. Dean sighed, and reached down for it, grunting as he answered, “What?”

“Sound just like your father when you do that,” Bobby replied. “Kind people tend to start with ‘hello.’”

“I’ll remember that when I don’t got stitches threatening to come out.” Dean managed to get upright, and hey, the stitches were holding. Lucky him. He sat on the edge of the bed. “What can I do for you, Bobby?”

“Well, I called and talked with Giles yesterday. Seemed something was happening when he was getting off the line. Promised to call me back, but I got the feeling he’s busy and since it’s about you and Sam, made more sense to call you and find out what happened.”

Dean rubbed his forehead. Last time they had seen Bobby was six months ago. A lot had happened on the in between. “Dad tell you anything?”

“Other than a drunk phone call saying you’re staying with a Brit, no. But I’ve talked to Giles a few times. I know you’ve gotten the crap kicked out of you plenty and that something’s up with Sam.”

“I’m fine,” Dean replied.

“Uh huh,” Bobby said in the same unconvinced tone he used any other time he caught Dean lying. “You taking it easy?”

“Yeah.”

“Stop lyin’ boy. What’d you do?”

“Well, it was an easy ghost hunt.”


Dean let it all fall out of his mouth, about the hunt anyway. He got talking about Sam and the principal, the blond woman, and the asshole Spike. Without realizing it, he was halfway through explaining his fight with Riley before he clamped his mouth shut.

“So,” Bobby said slowly, “what else?”
“Nothing else. Kicked a soldier boy’s ass.”

“Didn’t mean about him. I meant about Buffy.”

Dean shrugged and nearly slapped himself in the head when he remembered Bobby wouldn’t see that. “She’s the Slayer.”

“Yeah, and?”

“And nothing, Bobby!”

“Oh, bullshit, boy. You ask her out yet or not?”

“I don’t ask out every girl I meet.”

“You don’t, but it’s the way you’re saying her name, Dean. I know you and I know when you’re trying too hard not to bring someone up. So tell me more about her already.”

Dean held his breath. He had no one else to talk to this about and Bobby was good as a father in some cases. Closing his eyes, he just let himself say it all, from the save in the graveyard to the kiss in the Impala. Once he’d begun telling the story, it got easier to say. Feelings conversations weren’t a big thing in his family and that usually extended out to Bobby, but this whatever was happening with Buffy was different. He’d been close to feeling this way with a girl just before dropping out of high school, when he’d wound up in a boys’ home for a while, but even that had a different feel to it. Dean had never lied to Buffy. They trusted each other. Hell, they could manage to forgive each other. He pointed that out to Bobby. “That’s got to be a good sign, right?”

“It can be.”

“But?”

“But you said it yourself, Dean. She just got out of a relationship with this Riley guy a day ago. Her mom’s sick. You sure she’s thinking clearly?”

Dean laid back on the bed. “Of course she’s not. She likes me.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, boy.”

Yeah, that didn’t take away the impulsive jeer in his head. Dean swallowed hard and sighed. “Whatever.”

“Dean—”

“You’re right, Bobby. She’s probably all messed up and confused herself.”

“Oh stop twisting my words to hurt yourself,” Bobby said shortly.

Dean closed his trap. No point arguing over that anymore.

“Just, be careful about her. Considering how throughly you’ve gotten your ass kicked out there, it’d be best to keep her on your side.”

“And naturally dating me would end that. Understood.” Dean hated the way his voice threatened to crack.

Bobby sighed loudly. “I want you to look out for you. That make me the bad guy somehow?”
“No, sir.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Guess I can’t say anything.”

“Dean—”

“Look, Bobby, this has been great, but I need my sleep.”

“Boy, don’t make me come all the way out there to knock some sense into you.”

“Pretty sure if that worked this last week would’ve made me wiser than Giles.”

Bobby snorted. “Suppose that’s true. Still, take care of yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“And call me the next time something happens?”

The worry in Bobby’s voice was definitely going to haunt Dean for a while. He should have remembered to update him long before now. “Will do, sir.”

Dean snapped the phone shut and let it fall to the bed beside his head. Talking to Bobby should’ve helped, but he was more confused than ever. Sure, the kiss with Buffy seemed kind of fast in some regards. On the other hand, though, the whole moment had felt so right. Couldn’t be anything that bad behind it. Dean wrapped himself in the blankets and shut his eyes tight. He was too tired to think this through. It’d make sense later on, or it wouldn’t. For the moment, he needed to be more concerned with the insides of his eyelids.

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“There is no way Ryan Philipe is cuter than Freddie Prince,” Buffy said. She tossed a leg over the arm of the chair, hoping that a different position would be more comfortable. This was going to be an even longer day without at least a catnap.

“Is so,” Dawn said as she flashed the pictures in the magazine. She was sharing a Joyce’s bed, crowding their mom. “Look at those eyes. They’re dreamy.”

“They are both way too old for you.”

“Whatever. It’s just pretend.” Dawn sullenly flipped the magazine back around.

Joyce gave Buffy that look, the one that meant, ‘be nicer to your sister.’ Like Buffy had somehow been the meanest older sibling in the history of the universe by simply disagreeing. Time was, Buffy would go to her room and slam the door and ignore both of them. Except none of that had really happened. That was all a monk’s trick to make her feel like Dawn was her sister. Only Dawn was her sister now. Buffy rolled her eyes and sighed loudly. “I guess you could have a point.”

Dawn smiled smugly.

“Though,” Buffy continued, unable to help her own smirk, “I’m thinking they don’t have anything on Sam.”
“He’s mine,” Dawn blurted.

Buffy had to contain the laugh that threatened to slip out. Joyce was hiding equal amusement. The words caught up to Dawn and her cheeks turned a bright red. She sputtered, “Well—I—I mean—you’re too old for him anyway!”

“And he’s a little too old for you sweetie,” Joyce said quietly.

Dawn gave her mother a hurt look. “Buffy was dating a guy two hundred years older than her at practically my age. Sam’s not even a full twenty-four months. And it’s not like we’re dating or making out or anything. I’m sure Buffy’s going to manage to ruin any chance of that for me.”

“Hey! What do I have to do with it?” Buffy said.

“No guy is going to want to date his older brother’s girlfriend’s younger sister.”

Joyce raised an eyebrow.

“We’re not dating,” Buffy said defensively. When Dawn rolled her eyes, she repeated, “We’re not!”

“I saw you.”

“Saw me what?”

“Making out. In the Impala.”

Buffy felt her blush come on too fast. Her cheeks were hot, so was her neck and all the way down. “You did not.”

“Did so.”

“You were inside the house!”

Dawn snapped her magazine shut. “Ah ha! So you totally did!”

“You little liar! You said—”

“Girls, could you take it down a notch,” Joyce said as she winced and held her temple.

“Look, you gave mom a headache,” Dawn said.

Buffy clenched her teeth. She hadn’t done anything wrong. Dawn had poked and prodded and it wasn’t her fault if she’d gotten a little worked up. Never in a million years would she intentionally hurt their mother. To top it off, Dawn was sitting there with a broad smile like she’d won the battle. Not that there had been anything to win. Buffy crossed her arms over her chest and counted down from a hundred, which wasn’t going to be enough to calm down. She should have started from a thousand.

With a wane smile, Joyce nudged Dawn’s leg. “Why don’t you go get us a few candy bars from the vending machine?”

“But I’m comfy,” Dawn complained.

“You can have two.”

Dawn huffed. “Okay. But I don’t have any money.”
“My purse is in the drawer.”

After Dawn took a few bucks and shot Buffy a sullen glare, she left the room. Somehow, Buffy felt more exposed. She folded her legs underneath her and took a deep breath.

“I think he’s a wonderful young man,” Joyce said suddenly.

Her mother’s approval was never something Buffy had sought in her previous relationships. The unsolicited opinion gave her tummy a warm feeling, easing away the tension she hadn’t known was building. “You think?”

“From what I’ve seen so far. Though I’m worried about him.”

“You should have seen him when we stitched him up the first time.”

“Buffy, when someone needs stitches, you should take them to the hospital or a doctor.”

“Riley—” And the rest of the sentence died on her lips. There was a sort of hollow feeling there where she had felt so much before. An empty sort of loss. She took a deep breath. “Riley did it the second time. He had some medic training.”

“The second? Buffy, how many stitches has Dean needed?”

“Well, the third time was as much his and Riley’s fault,” Buffy said. She shrugged a shoulder. “It’s been the same spot?”

“That’s worse. No wonder he looks so terrible. He really needs to heal.”

“Which is why he’s not here. He offered to drive us back, but I told him to go sleep.”

“Promise me you won’t take him on patrol any time soon.”

“I didn’t exactly invite him the last time,” Buffy muttered.

Joyce sighed and gave her best worried frown. “You know what I mean.”

Buffy wanted to be angry and point out that she wasn’t responsible for the actions of a grown man. Dean knew his capabilities, knew the risks of going out into the field. However, she was sure that if she told him that she needed him out in the field, he’d be there in a heartbeat. “Hopefully everything stays calm. Getting him to sit still is hard.”

Whatever motherly advice Joyce might have given was cut short by Dawn’s arrival. She was chewing one candy bar and about half of it was gone. She tossed another one to Buffy. The little weasel had intentionally bought her least favorite. Not a real shocker, but Buffy wasn’t about to hand it back. Instead, she shoved it into her sweatshirt pocket. Maybe Dean would like it better.

Oh, God, it was too soon to be thinking of presents. And too soon to be worried about ‘too soon’s. They’d kissed. A real nice, real happy moment kiss, but just a kiss. That didn’t mean dating. That could mean nothing. Or everything. Buffy fidgeted in her seat until she was halfway comfortable and then closed her eyes in a mock attempt to sleep. Worrying about Dean, reliving that kiss, all of that was better than thinking about how her mom was too pale and waiting for a surgery in the hospital, about how Dawn was some magical whats-it, about the strange blond woman who had tried to kill her. Yes, Dean was the king of happy dean-ial land and she would gratefully reside her fantasies there for the time being. She deserved the break.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Research never seemed to go away which was fine with Tara. Books were giant secret holders and she loved curling up with them and discovering all the mysteries of the universe. They were easier than talking to people, which made her nervous, and far easier to decipher. There were other books that could help her figure out missing meanings if she did have a problem. The Magic Box had so many books that when the Scooby Gang didn’t have a problem to solve, she could wander through and learn new magic or histories or theories. Lately, though, they had one project after another.

Tara turned the old, weathered page and scowled at the text. She was pretty sure she knew her Latin well enough, but this particular writer seemed to make up half his words. Or maybe he was really terrible at spelling. A dyslexic Latin scholar. Oh, that made a lot more sense. Reading didn’t become magically easier, but she was fascinated by his calligraphy and it wasn’t the writer’s fault his spelling was quite like this. After all, a quill and velum page didn’t have spellcheck.

“Whatcha reading?” Willow asked as she took the seat beside her.

“Something Mr. Giles handed me. It’s about the Pit.”

“That’s one of the hell dimensions, right?”

“Yeah. Some pretty gory stuff.”

Willow made a face. “Am I going to be a bad girlfriend if I work on my project instead?”

“Bad friend, at the very least,” Anya said. She crossed behind them with a jar of chicken feet and plopped them onto the counter beside the register.

“I don’t see what a hell dimension has to do with Buffy’s mystery woman, unless we learned something I don’t know about?”

“Not Buffy, Sam and Dean,” Tara said softly.

“Oh. Are we counting them in the friends column?” Willow said.

“Xander certainly thinks so,” Anya said. “I’m not sure I’m supposed to. He is an underling after all.”

Giles sighed, finally looking up from his desk in the corner. “I told you, the two of you are equals.”

“Unless something comes up where one of us has to be in charge and then I am,” Anya said matter-of-factly. “Meaning, I am, in a way, superior to him.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s the important part of working,” Willow replied.

Anya glared at her. “Well, would you know?”

Willow’s cheeks pinked the slightest bit. Before she could find some insult, Tara interrupted. “I think he is. A friend, I mean. And Sam. They did help stand up to my family and they didn’t have to.”

“I guess that does give them major friend points.” Willow squeezed Tara’s hand. “Sorry I didn’t think about that.”
“It’s okay,” Tara said. It kind of wasn’t, but a lot had been going on. Maybe the whole thing with her family had slipped Willow’s mind. She turned the next page.

“So why are you reading about the Pit?” Willow asked.

“Mr. Giles thinks it could be useful? It has to do with Sam.”

“Maybe something that would make him, I don’t know, not entirely human?”

Anya and Giles stopped what they were doing to turn towards Willow. Giles took his glasses off.

“What do you know?”

“I don’t know anything, really. It’s just, something Spike said last night came back to me. He was lurking outside Buffy’s house, which is way gross and probably needs addressed,” Willow said.

“Anyway, he upset Sam and Sam knocked him down. Really easily. Spike got all weird about Dean not being ‘monster enough’ for Buffy and then said something about how liking monsters had to run in the family? That Sam wasn’t all human?”

“Those were his exact words?” Giles asked.

“Well, basically? But Spike didn’t try hitting Sam back. So, far as I know, this was just Spike being a pain in the ass again, you know?”

“But maybe—maybe it’s not,” Tara said. She laid out the book on the table and flipped back a few chapters. The page was around here, somewhere. All the eyes on the room seemed focused on her and she tried to ignore that. Talking to more than a couple of people at a time unnerved her. “Look, it’s not done all that fr-frequently? But demons from the Pit, I guess they can change a v-vessel’s bl-blood. Make it more demonic.”

“But Sam’s crossed over the Devil’s Trap several times,” Anya said.

“You think he was possessed before?” Willow asked.

“That’s a possibility we hadn’t considered,” Giles said.

“This guy went on for a long time about blood and changing people,” Tara said. “He was trying to figure out how Pit demons made more demons. I mean-mean, this isn’t how. But there was this demon who was giving his tainted blood to children and the scholar thought he wanted to create a new demon.”

“That isn’t an effective method at all,” Anya said. “That’s only a physical change, not a change to the soul.”

“But the body and soul are connected,” Willow argued. “One could affect the other. Chakra points, faith healing—that kind of stuff all comes out of soul interactions with a person’s body. People used to believe in maligned humors causing disease. So maybe demon tainted blood could have an effect?”

“A soul’s natural defenses should shake that off,” Giles said.

“Unless, say, maybe, it was a new soul not more than six months old?” Anya said.

The room went still. Giles went so quiet that he spooked Tara more than a little. Willow glanced back and forth between Anya and Giles after a few seconds of quiet and finally settled her gaze on Giles again. “Why do I have the feeling there’s more going on than we know about? Why do you
have us researching the Pit in the first place? What does it have to do with Sam and Dean?”

“Well, not Sam and Dean. Just Sam,” Anya replied.

“You think his precognition has something to do with demons?” Tara said. A flush of heat worked up her necks and into her cheeks. For the longest time, she’d assumed that her magic was because of her inherited demonness only to find out that was all a lie. Her abilities had nothing to do with demonic powers. Assuming this about Sam was just mean. “G-Giles, th-that’s—you can’t. Willow!”

“I think Tara means, just because he had a vision doesn’t mean he has anything *demonic* about him. Cordy has visions all the time,” Willow said.

Tara let out a breath. Willow so understood her sometimes.

“Didn’t Cordelia inherit that from a half-demon?” Anya said. “Xander told me—”

“Okay, but not the point!” Willow said.

“Other evidence has led to these suspicions,” Giles said. “Buffy had a result with her vision. She saw a figure looming over Sam. Azazel. Sam was only six months old when Azazel murdered his mother. However, the Winchesters are not the only ones who Azazel has committed this particular evil. He’s done so as recently as a few weeks here in town.”

“And then there’s Hallie,” Anya added. “She’s ran into this guy a few times now. He doesn’t like when she interferes with certain children.”

The book was making a horrible kind of sense. This was when knowing about the supernatural was less than fun. Tara ran her hand down the page she had read and bit her bottom lip. They were missing a few pieces, she was sure of it. “But what would be the point?”

“I’m sorry?” Giles said.

Tara took in a deep breath, realizing she must have muttered. “What would be the point in trying to turn so many?”

“Hallie made it sound like an experiment,” Anya said.

“But to what end?” Willow said. She could usually pick up on the same mental tangent Tara had. “Why would you need to experiment if you should know the results? Is he making demons? Or just more demonic vessels?”

“But why make a vessel and not possess it?” Tara said.

“I think this requires more research,” Giles said as he stood up.

Tara grinned as little as possible, happy for the moment of usual. Everything required more research. It was one of the top ten things Giles said.

“Okay, point me at the Pit books,” Willow said.

They were sorting out books and work assignments when the doorbell for the shop tinkled. At first, Tara thought nothing of it. Customers breezed in and out of the Magic Box all the time. But suddenly Anya was overly preoccupied with wiping the glass counter and Willow was doing her best to look studiously into the depths of her newest read. Tara looked up in time to see Sam sling his backpack off his shoulder and take a seat at the table with them.
They were bad at hiding that something was up and Sam frowned at them. “It’s okay to study here,
right? Dawn made it sound like she does it all the time and I didn’t want to bother Dean.”

“It’s fine,” Giles said with that too tight smile as he moved away.

Sam’s frown turned scowl. They were all so bad at hiding secrets. Tara took in a deep breath. If she
had to be, she could be the normal one. “W-what are you studying?”

“I’ve got Chem, Pre-Calc, and English homework.” Sam made a face as he pulled out the
homework. “A few too many parallels with Moby Dick.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dad’s Ahab, Azazel’s the whale. I’m Ishmael, trapped along for the ride.” Sam grimaced and set
the novel aside.

“Mrs. Deitrich still teaching that?” Willow asked.

“Uh, yeah, how’d you know?”

“The only class that read it was AP English, so I took a guess. Good news is, I still have my notes if
you want them,” Willow offered.

“You kept notes from high school?” Sam said.

“It wasn’t that long ago. Besides, you never know when a humanities class is going to make me read
it again.”

“Okay. I guess if I can’t get through it, maybe? I need to do the work myself.”

Willow straightened up in her chair. While Tara liked her academics, she never could keep pace with
Willow. So few people showed as much interest as her. “I totally get that and can definitely respect
the work ethic. I can help out instead of handing everything over if you get lost.”

“Do you know Chem? This chapter on moles and conversions is kicking my ass.”

With the brightest smile Tara had seen in a few hours, Willow shut her lore book and slid her chair
over to Sam. “Chemistry is just the slow version of magic.”

“Really?”

“Really, but since knowing how to make a ball of light isn’t going to get you an A in class, let’s go
through the hard way.”

“Okay, but could you teach me something cool about magic after?”

Willow hesitated for only a half-second. She brought that wholesome smile back. “Sure.”

The look she shot Tara right after was full of worry and concern. After all, what would teaching a
potentially part-demon kid magic do? Tara scowled and went back to reading her book. The sooner
they figured out what Azazel wanted, the better.
I know I disappeared for a long time without a word. Sorry about that. Work and holidays. I'm back to getting some work done on this fic! Pretty soon you might even see a surprise short story where a certain deadbeat dad and vampire with a soul meet. 2/6/18
The tiny ass mirror in the downstairs bathroom didn’t show Dean enough of his chest to see the stitches even when he stretched and leaned up. The wound had been too low for that. With a groan, he rocked back down and pulled the skin—slightly because damn it, he still hurt—to get a look at the wound. The doctor had said he should return in a week to get them taken out. Five days had passed and he felt fine. Not a hundred percent admittedly, but if he snipped them and there was a problem, well, he was going to be at the hospital this morning anyway. He needed to be better and he needed to get these out so Giles would finally let him take a damn shift.

Of course, if he was going to the damn hospital, he could see if one of those doctors could take them out. That would take him away from Buffy and this wasn’t the day he wanted to do that to her. Tomorrow. He could ride out having the stitches one more day.

Giles was fussing around the kitchen, but there was coffee and goddamn that was good enough this morning. Dean thought, extremely briefly, about having Giles double-check his stitches. That would be paranoia, and worse, admitting that he wanted to have someone worry about his health. While Sunnydale had settled down the last few days, he didn’t want to stir up trouble. Dean grabbed a cup of coffee and shoved a bagel in his mouth.

“I hate the thought of you sleeping on the couch into perpetuity. Perhaps we could find an alternative solution?” Giles suggested while stirring his mug of coffee or whatever.

Dean snorted. “Like what? A cot? Your couch is plenty comfy.”

“I doubt that.”

“Well, we’re not going to be here forever, are we?” Dean dumped far too much sugar into his drink, but he wasn’t about to admit that. He stirred it some more and choked down the first sip. “Just need to make enough to get by.”

Giles turned away a bit too fast, as if Dean couldn’t figure out why. Anya had done the math and tried to tell them both the other day. The Magic Box could support one manager, one full time staffer, and one part-timer. Anya had the seniority, so he wasn’t about to get mad at her. He’d keep the part time and figure out another job soon as he got these damn stitches out. A town like this with such a high mortality rate, there had to be something for him. Not that he wanted people to die, just that, well, there were jobs open. Surely something had to fit.

“Did you want any eggs or something?” Giles asked.

Weirdly dad-like of him, but then, in the last few days Giles had taken to asking them what cereal and other staples they liked. Dean wasn’t sure if he should be paranoid or freaked out about the level of interest. Since Bobby had talked to him, Dean was willing to risk being friendly. “I’ll be fine. Thanks.”

“We don’t know how long the procedure will take.”

And Dean’s stomach was already flipping over that. He had gotten the chance to talk to Joyce a few times over the last few days. She was nice. And she was Buffy’s mom. He hoped that nothing bad would happen to her, but that didn’t mean his wishes would come true. All too often, what he hoped
for was the exact opposite of reality. Except for that perfect kiss in the Impala. He hadn’t had a moment alone with Buffy since, but he hoped they could have a moment to recreate it. Or, better yet, create something better. Dean wiped a hand over his lips. Seemed wrong to want a gal who had such big problems in her life, but at the same time, she seemed happier with him around. Couldn’t just be his imagination.

“Got toast or a bagel?”

“Are you sure that’ll be enough?”

“Yeah.”

“Dean—”

“Don’t give me that ‘you’re a growing man’ speech,” Dean said. God, the coffee was hot and good today. “Bobby’s tried that plenty of times.”

“Understood,” Giles said.

“You going to let me drive today?”

“So long as you drop me off at the shop afterwards, I don’t see why not.”

“No problem.”

Getting behind the wheel of the Impala was a comfort Dean had missed over much of the last week. He had let Sam drive it once and nearly died from a heart attack. All right, that wasn’t the complete truth, but holy crap he was never handing the keys over to his brother any time in the near future. Dean clutched them in his hand, half afraid Giles would demand them back from him. He polished off the coffee and waited while Giles finished his.

Waiting in the goddamn ‘waiting’ room was worse somehow. Dean sat next to Buffy, doing his damnedest not to look at her, but halfway through she reached over and grabbed his hand. She was colder than she should be and he clamped his hand around hers automatically. He bounced a knee, tried to school it into behaving, and did his best to hold out for the results. Joyce would pull through. She was a Summers woman, a Slayer’s mother. She had to have something of Buffy’s stamina and strength, if nothing else her sheer freaking will should make her pull through.

Xander caught sight of them holding hands and the flicker of a frown crossed his lips before Willow nudged into him. They started whispering about something. Dawn was on their other side, so hopefully they weren’t gossiping. Somewhere over the course of the last week Dawn had gone from glaring at him constantly to pretending to be chill. Dean had no clue what he’d done to gain ‘cool enough I guess’ status with her, but she’d probably say something if Xander and Willow were trying to dig in about him.

Damn, he hated waiting. Hated taking time out for healing too. He hadn’t been in the field all week. Sunnydale needed a good sweep after this. Maybe he could get a little violence in tonight.

Finally, the doctor emerged. Buffy stood and Dean was caught by the strong lines of her back, her shoulders. Much as the world might think them children, they were dealing with crap far beyond what they were supposed to. Buffy more so than him. Dean did his best to watch without reaction, to stay bland in fear of failure and to refuse to rejoice before they had real news. His knee bounced again.

Buffy’s shoulders sagged, but without any tension in her spine. A good sign then. When she turned
around, her smile was small, but it existed and that was enough to raise Dean’s spirits. Dawn and Giles went to her first, then Xander and Willow with Dean bringing up the rear. “Doc says they got it all,” Buffy told them. “They’re going to run a few tests on it, see what it was kind of thing, but she’s in recovery. I’ll be able to go in soon. I know the rest of you—but other than Dawnie—"

“We totally understand,” Willow said.

Dean had to ignore the sudden ow in his gut. He must’ve given something away because Buffy looked straight at him and asked, “You’ll stick around though?”

“Yeah, long as you want,” Dean replied.

“I suppose I should get to the shop,” Giles said.

“Wouldn’t want Anya to gauge your customers,” Willow said.

“That is my girlfriend,” Xander replied shortly.

“Oh, you know she’d charge double if she thought she could get away with it.”

“If the suckers are paying for it, what’s the harm?” Dean asked.

Xander shot him a surprised look and Dean had the feeling he’d gone up a slight notch.

“Xander, can I ask a favor?” Buffy said. “Can Dawn stay with you tonight? I need a little alone time. If you’re okay with that, Dawn.”

Dawn glanced Dean’s way and then back to her sister. “Sure.”

Hell if that didn’t seem like some sort of permission. Dean didn’t want to put much hope in it though. Buffy had said ‘alone.’ Not ‘alone with Dean.’ He had it bad if he kept reading so much into stuff. Especially since they hadn’t snagged a moment since the kiss.

“Yeah, shouldn’t be a problem,” Xander said. “Anya’s been begging to play Monopoly again.”

“Joy,” Dawn said with a roll of her eyes.

“It’s not that bad.”

“She always wins.”

“But this time we can have a secret coalition.”

“You’ll cave. You always cave.”

Xander shrugged. “She is my girlfriend.”

Dawn rolled her eyes again.

Some more fussing around and waiting happened, with Xander offering to drop Giles off on his way to work. Having something to do would’ve helped ease these nerves building up, but since Giles leapt at Xander’s offer, Dean couldn’t insist. He, Dawn, and Buffy took their seats again. Time echoed on until Buffy was let back in to recovery to see Joyce.

The door had barely swung shut behind Buffy when Dawn sat straight up, turned towards Dean, and folded her arms over her chest. She was doing her best impression of intimidating, which was more
cute than scary. “Hurt my sister and you’ll regret it.”

“Think this town’s kicked my ass enough already,” Dean replied. “I’m not going to actively invite it to try killing me.”

“Yeah, well, I would do a spell. Something to make you way unattractive. Like burping every time you flirted.”

He had to hold in a laugh at that. Vengeance, teenage style. “Understood. But you heard her, she wants tonight alone.”

“Oh come on, getting me out of the house is totally so she can have space with you.”

“That’s not—”

“She’ll have Xander stop by the hospital and pick me up and then, after I’ve had enough of a head start, ask you to take her home. So, like I said, don’t hurt my sister.”

Dean didn’t know what to do with that. Dawn’s need to protect her sister was enduring, especially since Buffy was more than capable of kicking Dean’s ass herself. But it was a good sisterly bond. One so tight, that until this moment, he’d forgotten that she hadn’t been a human that long. She continued glaring at him, so he said, “I won’t hurt her. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“You’re such a dork.”

“Maybe.” But he was a dork that Buffy wanted to spend time with. That wasn’t such a bad thing.

Chapter End Notes

I am going to do my best to keep weekly updates going, but work has picked up again—more than I expected, but in a good way. Thanks to all of you who’re still checking in on this story :) 2/14/18
“Thanks again for doing this,” Buffy said as Dean pulled up to the curb in front of her house. Here they were, nearly a week after their kiss and finally alone again. Which was so not a problem. At all. Except somehow Buffy was nervous. At first, she told herself her nerves needed a chance to calm down. With everything that had happened, she didn’t have a lot of time to process. But by the time they were in front of her house, she was still worked up and beginning to get annoyed. Inviting Dean into the house wasn’t a massive scandal, and if anyone thought so, oh well. She had a life to live.

“I was thinking of ordering pizza. You in?” Buffy asked.

“Do you put mushrooms on it?”

Buffy scrunched her nose. “Uh, ew.”

“Then we’re good,” Dean said.

They climbed out of the car, and the thunk of the Impala’s doors was a comforting metal weight. Buffy missed when that became a familiar noise, but didn’t marvel at it as she approached the front door with Dean at her side. Empty house. No awkward encounters except for her inability to calm down about having a new boy over. A small twinge of guilt over Riley being right threatened to cloud the excitement, but things with him had progressed to a level of bad. Blaming herself for their collapse wasn’t fair. For not seeing it, sure. But she wasn’t the only one in the relationship so it couldn’t be all her fault.

And she could stop thinking about her last guy and concentrate on the one in the here and now. Buffy managed to get into the house and flip on the light switch without falling over herself, so bonus points there. “I’ll order. Meatlover’s okay?”

“Yeah.” Dean had his hands in his pockets like he wasn’t quite sure about touching anything inside the Summers’ home.

Oh, they were being ridiculous! Buffy waved at the living room. “Make yourself comfy. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Okay.” Dean headed for the couch. He had such a cute butt.

Which Buffy could obsess about later. For now, she went into the kitchen and dug out the menu. As she was calling, she heard the tv turn on in the other room. Nice normal sounds. They could have a nice normal night. Just a boy and a girl getting to know each other over pizza and movies.

Of course, most couples didn’t meet when one of them was under vampire attack or go through a lifetime of drama inside such a short time. But Dean was solid—not mysterious like Angel, or safe like Riley. Buffy got through ordering the pizza and finding the cash for it before joining Dean on the couch. “Shouldn’t be too long. They said half an hour.”

“Cool,” he said. “I have no idea what half these channels are.”

“I would have figured you for a tv buff.”

“Yeah, well, motels get about a third this amount and they all play crap.” He held the remote out to her.
“We pick up this channel that plays Bollywood movies sometimes.”

“Bollywood?”

“Movies from India,” Buffy said. “There’s singing and dancing too. Xander knows the specifics on what qualifies. Me, him, and Willow like to watch and make up plots.”

“You’re pretty tight with them. Must be nice.”

There was something sad in his tone, and Buffy wanted to avoid that at any cost. “You seem to be getting along with Anya. She doesn’t seem to like anyone.”

Dean snorted. “You’re joking, right? She acts tough, but she’s got such a soft center she makes marshmallows look like concrete. Only person she’s got a problem with is Willow, and that’s because Willow has a problem with her.”

“Willow’s got her reasons.”

“Is one of them that she likes being a bitch?” Dean asked.

“You don’t even know her,” Buffy replied.

“I know she nitpicks everything that comes out of Anya’s mouth. You should have heard her yesterday.”

“She’s worried about Xander.” When Dean looked like he didn’t believe her, Buffy turned towards him. “Xander and Willow have been best friends since forever. And Anya’s not a saint. She used to be a vengeance demon. She still would be if she hadn’t lost her amulet. Which she tried to get back by convincing Willow to do a spell that wound up causing this vampire Willow to come from this wish dimension. So Willow has her reasons for not wanting to trust Anya. Valid reasons.”

“Anya was a demon? How the hell is she human now?”

“She was human first, got noticed by a demon, became a demon, then like I said, lost her necklace and became human again. How have you missed that? She references it all the time.”

“I don’t know. I thought that whole ‘I don’t understand human customs thing’ was some sort of weird flirting with Xander or how she coped with learning stuff.”

Buffy raised an eyebrow.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Look, you spend enough time bouncing around our public education system and you meet a whole shit ton of kids who’re trying to get by. For a long time, I was the weird one. Talking about demons and shit. I finally caught on that, hey, not every parent sends their kid to bed with a nightmare story about the things that could kill you or your baby brother. So yeah, I wasn’t sure what Anya really meant. Figured it was a quirk.”

“I was the weird one. Back in LA and then here. It’s why we moved here, to give me a fresh start. Dawn was so angry because—” Buffy halted the thought. There was that nasty thought that Dawn wasn’t really her sister. She took a pillow from the couch and hugged it into her as she leaned back.

“How’re you coping with that?” Dean asked.

“With her being some random key? Peachy keen, thanks.”

“Wish we knew what it was all for. Her and Sam.”
“Have you told your dad anything?”

“Naw. Last thing I need right now is for him to swoop in and wreck it. Sam’s doing pretty well in school. He always does. And he likes you guys. I don’t want to see him ripped away from the first stability we’ve had in a long while.”

Buffy nodded. Apparently she was comfortable talking about everything but the kiss the other day. They weren’t going to get anywhere if they didn’t. At least, she didn’t think they could keep ignoring the consequences.

Enough with consequences. She lived with too many of those. She could have one night where she pretended nothing mattered except sitting on the couch with a cute guy. Dropping the pillow back onto the couch, she slid a little closer to Dean. He reflexively pulled his bottom lip between his teeth.

“I should tell you, Dawn threatened me earlier.”

Buffy froze. “What?”

“I don’t mean—not some supernatural scary way. Well, except for maybe cursing me. But she’s as protective of you as you are of her. Got to be some kind of sign, yeah?”

“She gave you the ‘don’t hurt my sister’ speech.”

“Yeah.”

“Considering she wasn’t glaring at you, I’m guessing you didn’t laugh?”

“Naw.”

“Thanks for that.”

And there they were, sitting close together on a couch and not quite sure how to transition to anything else. She wanted to climb onto Dean’s lap and kiss him. Forget about the world entirely. She met his gaze, and his green eyes were a startling deep color. Carefully, she reached over and brushed her fingers through his short hair. He shifted, she shifted. Kissing seemed inevitable and Buffy lost her breath at the hope.

A loud smack against the door made them both jump. Knocking. Right. Pizza. Buffy gave Dean a nervous, half-laughing smile. Wasn’t like her to get jumpy. “I’ll get it.”

Only the man at the door wasn’t a pizza delivery guy. It was Spike. He strode into the house as soon as she had the door open. “All right, Slayer. There’s this problem I think—”

Buffy frowned. Spike usually carried on when he had a full rant mode going, but he stopped a few feet into the house, glaring into the living room. Dean sat on the couch, though more alert than he had been. Oh, right. Spike had tried getting Dean killed.

Buffy crossed her arms over her chest and sat on the arm of the couch beside Dean. Dean had to lean back in order to keep eye contact, and he put his arm around her. Having him there felt nice, but that was definitely more of a ‘she’s on my side’ gesture. Which she was. But then she didn’t like being a pawn between boys. On the other hand, Spike had tried to kill him and Dean hadn’t exactly returned the favor. So he got this one without her losing her temper at him. Assuming he didn’t overdo it.

“You said there was a problem, Spike?” Buffy asked.
Spike held his chin up. “ Didn’t realize you were entertaining company. I’ll come back some other night.”

“If it’s dire enough for you to barge into my house, I’d like to know what it is.”

“Sure it’ll resolve itself. You two kids go back to having fun. The real work will be waiting.”

There was something off about Spike’s attitude. He had been full of bluster up until spotting Dean. Buffy wasn’t sure she cared enough to find out, only she didn’t want him to turn around and try to set Dean up again. She shrugged. “If you say so, but couldn’t hurt to have a hunter helping us.”

“Naw, princess. You have your fun. I’ll be around.” Spike turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

“What the hell was that about?” Buffy said as she went to lock the door.

“No clue.” Dean looked like he very much had an idea, but wasn’t willing to share it.

Whatever. Solving mysteries could wait. Buffy crossed the distance between them and eased her way onto Dean’s lap. He leaned back, making space for her. “I think we were somewhere about here before the interruption?” she teased.

“Uh, yeah. Something like that.”

God, she loved the way he tried to hold onto that tough guy shell. She laced her arms around his shoulders and leaned in for a long, amazing kiss.
“Okay, Winchester, why am I not surprised?” Brady said.

Sam grinned, though the tug on his lips felt false. Of course he was good at a zombie shooting arcade game. Between actual gun practice and the amount of time he’d spent in places like this while Dean was on a date, he knew the mechanics inside and out. “It’s called practice.”

Brady stepped up to the machine and slid his quarters into it. His last run had lasted a whole five minutes, so Sam was sure he’d have another chance soon. “You need a girlfriend.”

Sam shrugged and leaned against the game. “Dude, you don’t need to hold it like a real shotgun. It doesn’t have impact on it.”

“Way to avoid the topic.”

“If we were going to actually try to get with girls, we’re in the wrong place,” Sam said. “Unless, for some reason, they don’t hang out at the mall anymore?”

“This time of night, they’re at the Bronze. You ever been?”

“Couple of times. Doesn’t seem all that great.”

“Well, no one goes for the atmosphere. It’s in the bands, the girls, and the guy who has no problem serving people underage.”


“You’re a giant. I bet half the stores in town wouldn’t card you.”

“Yeah, well, if the only way you can get girls interested in you is to get them drunk, your game is sorely lacking.”

“Ouch, Winchester. I was just saying, there’s more to do in this town than shove your nose in a book or shoot at fake zombies. Let’s go somewhere more interesting.”

Sam checked his watch. “I promised Giles that I’d be home in an hour.”

“He’s not your dad or anything. Break curfew by half an hour and come with me to the Bronze.”

“Dude, you might think that living with Giles is this whole free-from-rules thing, but the guy used to be the school librarian. Blowing him off is not exactly the smart choice,” Sam said.

“I’m not saying all night.” Brady made a face at the zombie game as he lost his last life. He sank the controller back into its holder. “Just, let’s go where the girls actually are. Unless you got a thing for your stalker after all.”

“Stop calling her that.”

“She follows you around. Well, except for the last couple of days. She find someone new?”

“Her mom’s sick.”

Brady’s eyes went wide. “You do like the little freak, huh?”
“Don’t call her that either. And she’s a friend.” Sam sighed. “Besides, her sister and my brother kind of have a thing going.”

“They sleeping together?”

“I so don’t want to know,” Sam replied. He checked his watch again. The Bronze was a good fifteen minute walk to Giles’s, and that was going through the graveyard—a remarkably bad idea in Sunnydale. If they left the arcade now, he could squeeze in about half an hour before he had to leave. Wasting more quarters on digital baddies was boring. “Is there a phone nearby?”

“The one here’s busted,” Brady said.

“We’ll drop by the Magic Box and I’ll tell Giles I need a little longer. It’s Friday. Maybe he’ll be willing to extend the curfew.”

“Long as it gets us out of this dead zone, I’m cool.”

Sam and Brady headed out. California wasn’t as cold this time of year as it was in other places Sam had been. Walking down the street was kind of pleasant. More so was the realization that Sam knew exactly where he was going from experience. Not because Dad had made him stare at the town map before a hunt, not because he’d gotten bored in the car and memorized where they were going. Because he lived here. In Sunnydale. On a Hellmouth, going to school and studying in a magic shop. Dean had a rough start, but things were getting better for him too. Maybe Sam could get a summer job, enough so they could have their own place instead of relying on Giles.

But summer was months away. Maybe a job over winter break. Just a little something to help out.

They reached the Magic Box and Sam spotted Giles through the window. He opened the door.

“I think I see Michelle in the coffee shop,” Brady said. “See you in a minute?”

“Yeah, sure.” Sam stepped through the door.

Willow, Tara, and Giles were at the table again and they dropped into silence as soon as he walked in. This group of people never shut up, and somehow his appearance kept making them go quiet. They were taking Dean’s warning about protecting him too seriously, but then, Sam got to pretend to be normal for once. After the weird thing with the vision and the ghost, normal was good.

“Hey, guys,” he said as he came down the steps.

“Hey,” Tara replied.

“Hey,” Giles said.

“Giles, I was just stopping in—look, I know curfew’s at ten, but Brady wants to go to the Bronze and I was hoping I could get a little longer tonight. Since it’s Friday?”

“Dean’s the one who set your curfew,” Giles said.

“Oh.” Well, crap. There was no disturbing Dean tonight. “You’ll know right where I am.”

“Tara and I could go along,” Willow said.

Sam did not need his brother’s friends watching out for him while he tried to flirt. “It’s okay.”

“Nonsense. We’ll go and we’ll walk you home after. Totally not a thing,” Willow said.

“Really, you don’t have to.”
“It’d be nice to get out.”

Sam locked eyes with Tara, silently pleading with her to understand what the problem was. She chewed on her lip. “I don’t know, Willow,” she said. “Maybe we should just stay here.”

Willow frowned at her. “Last night you said it’d be nice if we went somewhere that wasn’t a hospital or research-related.”

“Well, I-I’m tired tonight.”

“Okay then.”

Minor victory. Sam needed that curfew extension. Dean would just take it and make some lame apology when he finally got in. However, Giles looked preoccupied with his books. Sam backed up towards the door. “So, I’ll see you around midnight.”

“I suppose we might still be here,” Giles muttered. “If I’m not at home, call here to let me know where you are.”

“Sure, sure,” Sam said. He ducked out of the Magic Box before Giles could realize that he’d agreed. 

Brady crossed the street from the coffee shop in a hurry. “That was not Michelle and she does not like me, so let’s get moving before we both wind up with hot coffee on us. Unless you’ve got to go home.”

“I’m good. Let’s go.”

Friday nights at the Bronze were usually live band night, and this one was too. The cover charge ate into Sam’s limited funds, but it was like he wanted to drink or anything. Brady pointed out the guy who hooked up the underage kids and Sam pretended to not hear him over the loud music. Between watching his father stumble around wasted and Dean having to get bailed out for drinking that one time, Sam really didn’t need to risk getting caught with beer. Besides, he’d had the stuff. Not worth it at the moment.

So when Brady tried to make his point again, Sam headed for the dance floor. There were girls to dance with and Sam did his best to dance along with the music, but the band was terrible. They were giving him a massive headache. After a half hour, the noise was unbearable. Sam staggered away from the dance floor with a hand pressed to his temple. Putting pressure there seemed to help.

Until suddenly it didn’t.

He saw a couple in the graveyard. The guy led the girl in deeper. They were kissing, making out. Having a good time. Totally wrapped up in each other, they didn’t see the group of vampires emerge from the shadows. They were ripped apart and then the vamps were feeding mercilessly.

Sam came back to himself, hunched over, in pain, and struggling to breathe.

“Buddy had too much to drink, that’s all!” Brady said to someone. He put his hand on Sam’s back. “Winchester, now would be a great time to get up.”

When was that supposed to take place? Days from now? Minutes? The moon. Had he seen the
moon? Sam rubbed his temple as he stood. The pain was going away fast. Damn it, there had to be some detail he missed that could point to time. He needed to get outside, find a phone, and call Buffy and Dean. Ah, there was the door. He thought he remembered a phone in the alley. Hopefully they wouldn’t get mad at the interruption, but rescuing innocents had to come before date night, right?

The couple from his vision was leaving the Bronze. If Sam got to them before they went to the graveyard, then he could avoid the whole vision. He pushed through the crowd.

Brady caught Sam’s arm and held on tightly. “Where are you going?”

Brady didn’t know about demons or vampires and thought the Magic Box was a weird gimmick that peddled to losers. He wouldn’t believe the vision or the circumstances and Sam would lose a friend for being a weirdo.

Sam broke free of Brady’s grip. “Fresh air. These guys suck too much.”

“I’ll come with.”

“Naw, man. Looked like that one girl was into you. Stay. I’ll be right back.”

Brady started to protest, but Sam pushed him back towards the dance floor and took off for the exit.

By the time he made it out there, the couple had vanished from sight. He should call Dean, but he didn’t have time for that. He knew where the couple was going. If he hurried, he might reach them in time to avoid the fight altogether. As he ran, he kept his eyes open for anything he could use as a weapon, just in case.

Sam reached the graveyard before finding a suitable stick. He was closing in on the site of the vision. He hadn’t seen the couple, but they were wearing the clothes from the vision. They had to be heading here. He came around the end of a mausoleum.

The couple was making out. No time left. Sam ran at them, waving his arms and shouting, “Go, get out of here. Go!”

They paused and stared at him like he was a madman. The first of the vampires emerged and the woman screamed.

The world descended into chaos as Sam ran at the couple, the couple tried to run away, and four vampires grabbed at their prey. The man managed to pull away and kept running, abandoning Sam and the girl. Sam surprised one vampire and landed the stake in his heart, but he forgot to let the stake go and it turned into ash along with the vampire. Crap. Double crap when an enraged vampire grabbed Sam by his shirt and threw him. The edge of a gravestone sliced through Sam’s jacket and shirt, cutting deep into his shoulder.

Sam began to push himself up, but froze when the vampire—face completely demonic, fangs bared—came at him. He froze. For a half second. Long enough for his mind to blank. The vampire was going to kill him.

A long black trench coat slapped Sam in the face. The vampire was slammed backwards by a blond man. Growling and fighting continued. Sam searched the ground and found another good-sized stick. He got back on his feet.

Just in time to watch Spike dust two vamps. The last one ran when Spike whirled towards him.

Fight was over. The girl was gone too, and no body which meant she must have ran for it. Mission
accomplished.

“Thought all you hunters were raised as families,” Spike said as he turned towards Sam. “Like a pack. You miss vamp hunting day? Where’s your brother. Oh right, getting his move on with the Slayer. Did he forget about your little hunting trip?”

“I wasn’t hunting,” Sam said.

Spike raised an eyebrow. “So, running into a graveyard with a stick was not your plan then.”

“Look, thanks for saving my ass, but you don’t know what I was doing.”

“Fair enough. I’m sure big brother and the Slayer will understand.”

“You can’t tell them!”

“And let my heroic deed go unsung?” Spike scoffed. “You don’t know me well enough, boy, but I tend to gloat. A lot. Sort of my thing.”

If Dean found out about this, he’d be mad about Sam taking off and then worried about the second vision. Now that he was out of the moment, Sam was beginning to worry about it too. One was a fluke. Two was a line. Three would be a pattern. He need to talk to Giles or Willow and somehow keep Dean from learning about it. Preferably Buffy if she and Dean were getting that close. And, oh crap, Dean might call Dad and then any chance of college was gone.

“Of course,” Spike drawled. “I could be convinced to keep my mouth shut.”

“How?”

“Cash usually works.”

Sam had a whole fifteen dollars on him. “I’m broke.”

“Tough luck then.”

“Isn’t there anything else you want?”

Spike seemed to be waiting for that phrase because he grinned, full-on monster type smile. He still wore his human face instead of the vamp one, but there was something evil about his expression. “You got wounded.”

Sam frowned, brows knitting together. “So?”

“I guess the Scooby gang doesn’t talk about me as much as they used to,” Spike said, his voice clipped like the truth of that stung him somehow. “Know why I didn’t fight back the other day, boy?”

“No.”

“Chip in my head makes it so I can’t hurt humans.”

Meaning Spike never got fresh blood from a victim. It sounded like bullshit, but it’d explain why Buffy hadn’t staked him and why Willow had stopped Sam from doing it. And suddenly Spike asking about the wound made sense. “You want my blood?”

“It’s free-flowing. Won’t hurt a bit.”
“And you swear, you’re not going to tell Buffy or Dean,” Sam said. “Or anyone else.”

Spike grinned some more. “Clever boy adding that in.”

“Well?”

“Won’t mention a peep to anyone, living or dead.”

Sam peeled off his jacket and pulled at the corner of his shirt. The wound was closing up, but there was a lot more blood going on then he’d realized. “Fine.”

Spike came over to him and prodded the damn cut until Sam winced. He glared over his shoulder, but Spike was already bending in and licking.

Way, way gross. Sam made a face and went back to facing front. Spike licked him again and tightened his hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Okay, I think that’s—”

Then Spike bit down.

The change happened so fast Sam missed his chance to pull away. Spike held onto him, tight, and buried fangs into his neck. And he was drinking deep. Sam started checking out from either the blood loss or the shock or both. Dean was going to be so pissed he died in a freaking graveyard.

Suddenly, Spike let him go and Sam crashed into the ground. Someone—oh, Brady. Brady brandished a tree branch and put the baseball skills he kept bragging about to work as he swung it at Spike.

“You lying bastard!” Sam clamped a hand over his new wound and steadied himself by leaning on a gravestone. “You said you couldn’t hurt me!”

“I believe I said, ‘humans.’” Spike flashed that evil smile again. “And ask Dawn or anyone else in that Scooby Gang. I can’t. Which means, my dear boy, you’re a monster like me.”

Brady took another swing at Spike and Spike finally ran for it. Brady turned his back on the direction Spike ran—something Dean would never do—and asked, “Are you okay?”

“I need to get cleaned up before Giles sees.”

“We can stop by my place.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks.” Sam frowned. “Wait, you just saw a vampire feeding on me. How are you not freaking out?”

“Dude, I go to high school in Sunnydale. Why do you think there’s barely any parties? Ever? People know something’s weird. We just don’t talk about it.” Brady helped Sam stand up more. “Besides, you assume that’s the worst thing I’ve seen.”

“Thanks for saving my ass.”

“No problem, but why was he saying that crap about Dawn? Does she know him or something?”

“I guess. I don’t know. Kind of?”

“She might be cooler than she lets on.”

“Yeah, because knowing murdering psychopaths is cool.”
It’s Sunnydale. Knowing one and not getting murdered by him? Yeah, kind of cool.”

Sam snorted, but was glad he had Brady to help him home. With any luck, he’d get this bandaged and avoid Giles and Dean long enough that it healed. Or at least long enough that he could figure out what the hell Spike meant and if he was telling the truth about the chip. Because he couldn’t be a monster, could he?

The Watcher had a nice house, by human standards. Azazel would admit that much to a casual observer. And there was a pretty good spot to watch most of the block from. He’d spend a few more minutes here before moving on to his next kid, unless, of course, the usual report took longer to reach him. Then he was going to make time to flay a demon.

A shift in the shadows behind him and the flicker of weak demonic energy. Stronger demons never quite obeyed as much as the bottom of the pile newbies who needed allies to protect them. Azazel had plucked this one from the Pit himself and so far things were working smoothly.

“There was a problem,” the underling said.

Well, nothing smooth lasted forever. “What happened?”

“I lost track of him for a little while. It took some work, but I got him to admit he had a vision. He chased it into the graveyard, wanting to stop this couple from getting hurt.” Brady, that was the meatsuit’s name anyway, stepped out of the shadows with his head bowed. Respectful and ready to flinch from punishment. “There was a vampire feeding on him. There was some kind of bargain struck before I got there, but somehow Sam didn’t think the vampire could bite him. He told Sam he was a monster.”

Rumors in the demon bars said that was William the Bloody, aka Spike. Vampire who turned his fangs against his own people and helped the Slayer. Azazel hated that guy. He and his mate Drusilla had ruined a perfectly good batch of kids in the late 70’s. It was the last time Azazel corralled a bunch of his experiments into an orphanage. Maybe it was time he stopped to have a talk with the pesky vampire.

“Sam say anything about that? The bit about being called a monster?”

“No. But he could’ve been in shock. I’m going to follow up.”

Maybe laying the seed of doubt wasn’t such a bad thing. Azazel would need distance between Sam and Dean if he was going to have a chance at his long term plans. “Do what you can to reassure him without over doing it. He wants to think he’s human, remind him vampires are lying pricks. He wants to chase down this monster angle, concoct some story about some relative with powers who was a good person underneath it all. Be his friend. Encourage him to take risks on his own, without his brother.”

“So there is something special about him,” Brady said. “Something other than being close to the Slayer.”

“We’ll have to wait and see about that.” Azazel clapped a hand onto Brady’s shoulder. “And try not to let him get hurt again. Anything else happens, and I take it out of your ass. Got it?”

Brady nodded, fear clear in his eyes.
Azazel walked away, a grin working its way over him. He had a feeling his goal wasn’t far off. For the first time in three decades, he had real hope of making this work.
“Are food hangovers a thing?” Buffy grumbled. Sunlight was bothering her eyes and she was cuddled up against Dean. Unwilling to move, she hung onto his arm more. They were on the couch still, she was aware of how dangerously close to falling off she was, but she hadn’t managed to during the night and Dean didn’t seem like the type to push her off. He was stirring a bunch and wrecking her sleep.

“Maybe.” Dean’s voice came out in a half-rasp and full groggy. “Sorry. Got to get up.”

“But comfy.”

“Nature’s calling.”

Damn, she wasn’t going to win against his bladder. They untangled and Dean lumbered off to the bathroom. In the relative quiet, she curled back up on the couch and pulled the blanket over her. Pizza, beer, hanging out. Somehow she’d thought something more might happen, but once the movie marathon got going, they’d cuddled up. Sure, there’d been some amazing kissing, but Dean hadn’t pushed, even when he’d been obviously turned on. And she hadn’t pushed either. They had just existed together in comfort. Surprisingly satisfying as it turned out.

“Does food hangover mean you’re not hungry?” Dean called out as he came back into the room. “I was thinking of making pancakes.”

“Ooo, pancakes.”

Dean laughed. “I’ll take that as a yes. Want to show me where everything is?”

Buffy tossed off the blanket and stood. More sleeping would have to wait. She led the way to the kitchen. “You assume I ever go into this strange and magical place.”

“You don’t help out?” Dean asked.

“What, because I’m a girl I should obviously know how all this stuff works?” Buffy managed to pull a large skillet out of a lower cabinet. She handed it off with a glare.

Dean took it. His lips were pursed, like he was fighting off a sarcastic comment. Whatever was on his mind, he swapped tactics. “Because you’re the older sibling.”

“The monks gave me a kid sister. Not additional cooking skills.”

“Oh, right.”

Buffy scowled at him more. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I forget she’s not—I mean, she is real. And I think it’s fair to say that she’s always been real, long as I’ve been in town.” Dean vaguely gestured at his head. “It’s weird that technically she hasn’t always been for you. Up there.”

“You should try dealing with it on this end.” Buffy hopped up onto the counter.
Dean scrounged in the fridge. “You tell anyone else yet?”

“Besides Giles? No. I don’t want to put them in danger.”

“Fair enough.”

Dean fell into a domestic routine and something about watching him make breakfast lulled Buffy into a drowsy state. They didn’t have to talk to be comfortable, which was a plus. A lot of the time with Riley, in the early days, she’d always been “on” in some way. But with Dean, they just were. She needed that.

And she needed not to lose her touch in her Slayer duties. They’d fallen to the wayside this last week and training a little longer than that. “Hey, do you think you’re healed up enough to spar?”

“With you?” Dean asked.

Buffy smirked. “Afraid?”

“I’m guessing you’re used to training with people squishier than you, but you’re going to wind up kicking my ass.”

“Maybe I can give you some pointers.”

“I should probably try to put in a shift at the Magic Box. If Giles will let me.”

Oh, right, Dean had a job too. Buffy was kind of hoping he’d help drive Mom home, but she’d have to figure that out. Xander would probably be willing to help. “So, see if you can do that today and then tonight we can do a little sparring.”

“Yeah, okay. We’ll see what I can swing.”

And she knew he meant it. Just simplicity. Every day ho hum with no dire threats and no big drama on what was going to happen. If being with a guy was this easy, she’d been doing it wrong for a while. She didn’t need to overthink the moment, but enjoy the morning.

After all, this was Sunnydale. The peace was never going to last.

Dawn didn’t understand why she needed to be at the Magic Box instead of at home with Buffy, but there was some excuse that she’d wind up exhausting Mom before they had a chance to get her home and a promise that if she behaved herself at the store, Willow would show her how to use one of the spells in the book she’d gotten recently. That didn’t exactly make up for not being there for Mom, but everyone was against her again, so Dawn hunkered down at the table and worked on the stupid math homework she’d ignored all week. While the teacher understood her circumstances, this stuff was already a week late and if she got any further behind, everyone was going to get pissed at her.

Sam came into the shop mid-morning. Dawn grinned at him, but Sam didn’t smile back. He checked over his shoulder, scanning the room until he found Giles over by the desk. Giles was busy with paperwork and Anya had a customer.
So Sam only had Dawn to talk to. Which was fine by Dawn. “Is Dean here?”

“Any’s got him doing inventory in the basement,” Dawn said.

Sam glanced around more. There was definitely something wrong. Like as wrong as it had been when he’d gotten that vision of the ghost and the kid getting hit by a car and Dawn so didn’t need to remember that with such clear detail but it was in her head now. Sam leaned in close to her. “Any chance we can get out of here and get a—are you old enough for coffee?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. She’d had exactly one cup, once, and wound up pinging for a good three hours after. But this was Sam inviting her. She’d just take it slow or something. “Giles, we’re getting coffee.”

“I think Dean and I would appreciate some as well,” Giles said. He handed Sam some cash from his wallet. “Anya?”

“Oh, I don’t need the caffeine. Besides, we have a machine right here,” Anya said, barely breaking her conversation with the customer.

“We’ll be back in a little bit,” Sam said.

Sam wanted to talk to her. Dawn tried to get the ridiculous smile off her face, but she couldn’t help it. Her sucky morning was becoming way better. They made their way across the street. The outdoor shop was doing pretty good business despite the cool morning and the pressure to choose the right drink and quickly made Dawn nervous. Did cool people order espresso or something else? What was a latte? Was that what she had last time? Because last time hadn’t been so bad, except for her inability to shut up for a good three hours and irritating Mom.

“Don’t know what you want?” Sam asked.

“Um, no, I’ve totally got it.”

Sam chuckled, just a little, and Dawn blushed out of embarrassment. So she was transparent this morning. “Do you like milk or sugar?”

“Both. Lots of.”

“I’ll bring you something. Can you find us seats?”

“Yeah!”

Oh God she was being such a dork. It wasn’t like this was a date or something, far from it since Sam seemed upset about something. Or if not upset, way too serious. She found a spot near the far edge, where they wouldn’t be disturbed by people getting coffee and so they could keep an eye on the Magic Box too. At any point, Buffy could come and try and get her from Giles.

After a few minutes, Sam came over with two cups of coffee. Hers was far lighter in color, but she didn’t mind. She took a sip too soon and hurt her mouth, though she did her best to cover that up. “So, um, did you want to talk or something?”

“I do, but Dawn, look, you can’t tell Buffy or Giles or anybody. Definitely not Dean. Are you okay with that?”

She wasn’t, exactly, but she would be if it was what Sam wanted. If it was really important, she could always tell them later. She nodded.
“It’s kind of hard to figure out where to start. Something happened last night. Two somethings. Both weird. I had another vision.” When Dawn took a deep breath in, Sam frowned and shook his head. “There’s no point in telling them. It happened last night. There was this couple and I managed to save them. Sort of. But not on my own. Spike showed up and saved my ass.”

“He is weirdly trying to be a hero these days. I’m not sure if he’s trying to impress Buffy or make it so she doesn’t want to kill him.”

“Yeah, setting my brother up for a beating is real heroic.”

“He is still a vampire.”

“And that’s the thing I don’t get. Why doesn’t Buffy just kill him?”

Dawn sipped her coffee. “Because he can’t hurt anybody, which I think is kind of stupid. I mean, the government put this chip in his head so he can’t physically hurt humans, but he causes a lot of problems, like what happened with Dean. And oh God, what wrong thing did I say? Because your face is getting all weird and I so didn’t mean to cause that.”

“I—uh, look, this is the part you really can’t tell.”

“Promise I won’t.”

“Spike bit me.”

Dawn’s eyes went wide. Sam looked so normal. Acted so completely normal. Well, normal assuming normal was human, but if Spike bit him then there was something not normal about him. “Do you think this has anything to do with why Buffy totally lost it? When she did the trance thing and started shouting at you to get out of the house.”

“So much has happened, I kind of forgot about that.”

“I didn’t. She was rude for like no reason, except maybe she did see something and maybe that has something to do with why Spike can bite you.”

“But how are we going to find out what happened? If we ask Buffy, she’ll want to know why we want to know about it and then she’ll definitely tell Dean and I don’t want him to worry about it until I know what’s wrong with me.”

“Sam, even if you’re not one hundred percent human, there’s nothing wrong with you. I mean, you’ve had two visions now and you only cared about helping people.”

“But if I’m a monster—”

“You can’t be. You’re too nice.”

Sam laughed. “That’s kind of how the monsters lure people into traps, Dawn.”

“Well, no matter what, I don’t think you’re a monster.”

“Thanks.” Sam smiled a little more. “That’s kind of reassuring.”

Dawn beamed a bright smile back at him and then flapped a hand in excitement when she realized she had an idea after all. “Buffy might not talk to us, but you know who totally knows? Giles.”

“Yeah, but we can’t ask him because he’ll turn around and tell Dean.”
That was a problem. But Dawn already had a solution. “But Giles is a Watcher. He writes down everything mystical in his journals, it’s like a requirement. You’ve got a key. We can sneak in and look for them.”

“I don’t know about rooting through his stuff.”

“It’s either take a peek at his private collections or talk to our siblings. Which would you rather do?”

“I guess the journals make more sense. Thanks Dawn.”

“Glad I could help.” Dawn took another sip of her coffee. She had to play this next part cool or Sam was going to wind up writing her off as some baby. “Can I keep helping? You seemed really stressed keeping this to yourself.”

“I’m not sure it’s a great idea.”

“Two people hunting is better than one.”

“And Giles probably won’t get pissed if it’s you instead of Brady,” Sam said. “Okay. You can help.”

Sweet, more alone time with Sam. Although Buffy was totally going to lose it when she found out about the thing with Spike. But Sam just couldn’t be a monster.

Could he?

Chapter End Notes

Looking for more to read? I posted the first chapter of the crossover fic. It's called "Fight the Good Fight." John Winchester meets the Angel Investigations team. Come on, you’re itching to know how that turns out, aren’t ya?
Dean landed on his back. He groaned as he accepted Buffy’s help up. Some men might’ve been too proud to let her, but he figured that if she kept knocking him on his ass, she could do him the favor. She had the most mischievous grin, which if it wasn’t so damn cute, he’d have lost his temper.

“What did you do wrong this time?” Giles said.

“Decided to step onto the mat?” Dean replied.

Buffy snorted.

“No,” Giles said, dragging out the vowel sound into a teacher’s scold. He stood at the edge of the mat with his arms crossed over his chest and his brow pinched in concentration. “Try again.”

Dean sighed loudly. “She’s fast. Super fast.”

“You’re an average human, Dean. Your targets are always going to be faster.”

“Yeah, but they’re not going to be so little.”

Buffy glared and attempted a three strike combo that for once Dean saw coming and blocked against. She kept moving and attempting to strike, though thank God she decided to slow down some. Though that was probably because Giles was talking.

“You need to be able to predict your opponents. Blindly going in and reacting to their actions will only carry you so far,” Giles lectured. “Tactics and adaptability are key to the survival of a hunter or Slayer.”

“So what, I should stalk anything I’m going to fight?”

“In an ideal world, yes.”

Dean wound up flat on his back again because he let that comment get to him too much. He got up on his feet. So much for Dad training them up right. In the real monster world, Dean didn’t stand a chance in hand-to-hand combat. He needed a gun. Or a stick. Or to pay attention because Buffy knocked him on his ass yet another time.

“I could go easier on you,” Buffy said. “Let you get back to full strength.”

“Dad would’ve had me at this days ago. Stitches or not.”

“I wouldn’t call that smart or tactical,” Giles said.

Dean let Buffy help him up and he rolled his sore shoulder a few times to try and clear the stress in it. Wasn’t working as well as he hoped. He winced and did it a few more times anyway. “Look, we don’t all have the luxury of holding up on a Hellmouth. Lot of us hunters move around. Do what we can where we can. Doesn’t always come with a lot of downtime.”

Or it came with too much. But Dean wasn’t about to tell them about those times, especially since Dad didn’t do much actual recovering then. Even then, Dad would’ve had him training again. Sam too. He’d be pissed if he found out how much they were letting Sam’s training slide in favor of school.
Dad had had his chance to stick around and make a home here with them. Instead he chose his goddamn vendetta again. Dean missed his mother too, and he wanted the demon dead, but for the first time in a long while, he was pretty sure there was more to life then killing monsters.

Buffy grinned at him as she stepped into a fighting stance again. “Ready?”

Dean couldn’t help the goofy reflexive smile he shot back in return. Yeah, there was a lot more to life than demons.

Giles had hit a dead end. He’d hit it days ago and called around to every source of knowledge he could think of. Bobby as well, and while Bobby was hunting down a suspicion of his own, he didn’t have any more information on the Pit or the blond woman and her key than Giles and the Sunnydale crew had come up with.

The shop was closed for the night. Dean had headed out on a quick patrol with Buffy. Hopefully they did patrol and hopefully they did keep their risks to a minimum. Dean was in much better shape, but Giles worried. Both about another fight’s damage so soon and about how obviously Dean and Buffy would much rather look at each other than keep an eye on what was going on around them. That had been during training and shouldn’t translate too much to the field. They both took their responsibilities too seriously to get caught up in each other.

Or at least Giles decided to believe that about them until proven otherwise.

“I could be staring at the books for you,” Anya said as she swept dirt into a pile.

“Not staring at the kind of book I’m afraid,” Giles murmured. He took off his glasses and dropped them next to the phone book. He had one more plea he could make, but he’d have to do it in person. “Do you think you could watch the shop for a few days?”

Anya stopped sweeping. Her pleasure at the idea was obvious, which was fine with Giles. Her initiative had saved him from running the establishment into the ground inside the first month. She had a much better head for business than he did. A much less distracted one as well. He was glad to have hired her.

“You want me in charge?” Anya said. “For how long?”

Flight there, flight back, and a couple of days at home. Giles weighed what he’d like versus what he needed to do and considered a course of action. “At most a week, though I imagine more like four or five days. You can close the shop for Sunday. And you’d have Dean.”

“But I would be in charge.”

“Yes,” Giles sighed. “Though I was sure you and Dean were getting along fine.”

“Oh we are. He is a great coworker and I don’t think he’d have problems with me in charge. But someone has to be able to make decisions.”

“Yes. And yes that would be you, though please consider the opinions of others if the occasion arises.”
“I will. But I will get to make the decision.”

Good Lord, maybe he could get away with three days being away and deal with the lack of sleep instead of jetlag.

“Please don’t get that look on your face, Giles. I’m trying to ensure your business will be in safe hands. My hands.”

He shouldn’t be so miffed that she wanted to do well. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. All this research had been taking its toll on him. “Yes. I imagine you’ll do a good job.”

“Does this good job come with a bonus?”

“We’ve been doing steady business, so if you keep that up, then yes. I suppose you could have a bonus. Don’t push me on how much. I have to see this week’s and next week’s profits to figure out what I can afford.”

“Because you have two teenage boys to feed at home,” Anya said. “And there’s only so much work here for Dean to do.”

“Don’t overdo, Anya.”

“I’m not. I was just talking to Xander the other night and, well, Sunnydale construction workers have a high turnover rate. Like a lot of other jobs in this town. I think Dean might be able to get work with him, which I told Xander but I think he was hesitating because he’s not sure how much he wants to like Dean. Some loyalty to Riley, which is silly because Riley also made a mess of his relationship—it takes two—and then ran away instead of trying to fix things.”

There was a certain practicality to Anya’s statements which made Giles feel much better about leaving the shop in her care. Perhaps he could spend as long as a week in England after all. “Well, there should be plenty of work for both of you while I’m gone. I’m not saying that Dean and Xander shouldn’t have the conversation, only to keep that in mind. No need to overextend anyone.”

“Oh yes. We’ll wait until we can do that under your watchful eye.”

Giles frowned. “Do you feel overworked?”

“Me? By you? Noooo.” Anya sighed as she came over to the counter. “It’s just, we have been doing this research for a long time and now you’re taking off for—”

“For the Watcher’s Council. I agree, Anya, that we should have yielded some results and could use their resources.”

Anya stopped and blinked. “Oh. So when you say you won’t be here you won’t be anywhere near here.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you going to tell them about Sam?”

“I hadn’t given it much thought. The woman Dean and Buffy faced, I think, is the larger threat.”

“Yes, because we certainly don’t know that Azazel has anymore babies out there,” Anya said sarcastically.

Another good point. But bringing up the case of Azazel would expose the Winchesters to the
Council’s scrutiny. They might even try to remove Sam. Giles didn’t want to do anything that would validate John Winchester’s paranoia. “We’ve been making plenty of headway on our own. I think we should leave them out of it.”

“All right,” Anya said with another sigh. “But considering we have no idea what Azazel wants with these children, I really don’t think that’s a smart idea.”

“We don’t even know if there are others who survived to Sam’s age or if they—they’ve shown any abilities,” Giles said.

“One vision doesn’t mean he has abilities,” Anya replied.

But one vision didn’t mean he was without them either. “All the same, keep a close eye on him, if you can. I would appreciate it.”

“I might try calling Hallie again too. See if she knows anything she wasn’t willing to say in front of the rest of you.”

“A smart idea.”

“If I have time while running the shop.” Anya grinned broadly.

Giles was torn between believing she could run it on her own and being frightened that he wouldn’t come back to much of an establishment. But she hadn’t given him a reason not to trust her and she did enjoy the employment. Besides that, the more they worked together, the more he realized she knew as much as he on many demonic and magical subjects. Dean was back to full strength as well. Buffy less distracted by her mother’s illness. Yes, if there was a time to slip away and plead for more help on the subject of the mysterious woman, this was it.

Giles slid the accounting and inventory books towards Anya. “I suppose we should go everything together.”
Chapter 42

Sam shoved the pile of books back onto the bookshelf in front of him. This search was pointless. Sure, there were plenty of books on demons and the occult, but he and Dawn hadn’t found a trace of evidence about anything written by Giles himself. There had been a stack of journals, but they were ancient ones, dating back to the 1800’s. Another Watcher by the name of Giles, but not one who had a Slayer. Just a plain old researcher.

Dawn thumped down the steps loudly, not bothering with silence since they were the only two in the place. Sam was kind of worried about Dean, but his brother had mentioned something about training with Buffy today. They were probably on patrol.

“Any luck?” Sam asked.

Dawn had a couple of books in her hands. “The only ones I could find were in his closet and I think they’re from when Buffy was in high school. Like way in high school. Like almost my age. And they might be kind of personal. I saw Angel get mentioned.”

“Who’s Angel?”

“This vampire my sister used to date.”

“She dated a vampire.”

Dawn settled onto the couch, dropping one of the journals on the cushion next to her and keeping one in her hands to read. “Angel’s not your typical vampire. He’s one of the good guys.”

“What, like Spike?”

Dawn giggled. “No. Angel has a soul. So he’s all broody about the murders and stuff he did commit. He killed a Romani girl and her tribe cursed him so that he’s got his soul unless he sleeps with someone who he really loves and then he winds up losing his soul again. Which is what happened with him and Buffy, though he didn’t know sleeping with her would make him a total monster. But then Willow put it back in him the second time and he and Buffy tried to make it work except, well, they couldn’t. Angel felt bad or something. Thought he was holding her back from the life she should have because, you know, vampire. So he moved to Los Angeles.”

Sam took a seat on the couch and picked up the journal. “Is she still in love with him?”

“Kind of? Maybe? They were this whole forbidden love thing and I think that was part of Riley’s hang up. Other than Riley being a total tool. I mean, he was a nice guy, kind of, but he always treated me like a kid. I’m not a kid anymore.”

Sure she wasn’t. But then Sam had said something similar to Dean a while back and gotten mocked for it, so he didn’t feel like pointing that out to her. “If Buffy’s still in love with him like that, then maybe she shouldn’t be dating Dean.”

“It’s not like ‘that’ between them,” Dawn said. “Buffy’s moved on. Besides, Dean’s like, old. He can figure it out for himself.”

“Yeah. I guess.” Sam opened up the journal. It was dated back to the fall of 1998—only two years old. “Are you sure we should be reading these? I mean, the whole point is to find out what Buffy saw a couple weeks ago, not to pry into Giles’s life.”
Dawn turned towards him and folded her legs up underneath her. “Look at it this way, the whole point of a Watcher is to record what happens so future generations know how to fight monsters and stuff. We’re the future, Sam. Future-Giles wants us to read these.”

“Present-Giles might have a different idea. You said these got personal.”

“Mostly when it comes to Angel. He killed Giles’s girlfriend and left her body here and then tortured Giles.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “And Buffy let him live?”

“Oh, she totally killed him because she had to close this portal to Hell that Angelus—that’s Angel’s name when he’s evil—anyway, Angelus opened up a portal and she pinned him to it.”

“Wait, so when Angel hurt Giles—”

“He was actually Angelus.”

Sam nodded. And he’d thought crossing the country back and forth with Dad and Dean had been melodramatic. This whole mess with Angel was a headache. “Okay, but we need the journal he’s working on now and short of actually pulling everything out and making a mess, I don’t think it’s here.”

“Maybe he’s hiding it at the Magic Box.”

Sam had reached that conclusion a half hour ago and hoped he was wrong. But it was the only place they hadn’t searched. “We’ll have to break in some time.”

“Wow, you really want to know what’s going on.”

“Don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Dawn smiled. “But usually I’m the only one who doesn’t get to know. It must suck for you, but I totally like having someone on the outside with me.”

“It happens more often to me than you think,” Sam said. “I swear, the only crap my dad tells me is the stuff I don’t want to know. I only have one picture of my mom.”

“Can I see?”

Sam pulled out his wallet and the small photo he kept tucked inside. He’d stolen it out of Dad’s journal years back, when Dad had been too drunk to notice. If he’d ever noticed it’s disappearance, he hadn’t said crap. Sam had laminated it at a friend’s place so it would hold up to being in his wallet, but it was still worn. His mother probably wasn’t too much older than him in the photo—maybe towards the end of college at most. If she’d gone to college. He didn’t even know that much.

Dawn reverently took the photo and stared as if she was memorizing every detail. “She looks nice. Was she nice?”

“I-I don’t know. Dad and Dean clam up anytime she comes up. If I hadn’t read Dad’s journal, I’m not sure I’d even know her name.”

“Wow, that is some serious repression.” Dawn held the photo towards him.

Sam took the photo back, not wanting to look back at Dawn and see if she was sympathetic or something. A girl in Missouri had thought Sam sharing his woeful past was his method of trying to
get into her pants—not that she’d had a problem with it. But that wasn’t what he wanted and she wasn’t too happy about getting rejected when she thought she was giving him what he wanted. Sam didn’t want to know if Dawn was thinking he wanted to score points with her.

“Since we moved to Sunnydale, Buffy and Mom haven’t exactly talked about Dad,” Dawn said. “He’s not dead. They’re divorced. But he’s got this whole new life with his secretary and, well, I mean, it’s almost like he’s dead. He barely ever calls and I haven’t seen him in like a year.”

It wasn’t the same, but she was trying for empathy, so Sam managed a weak smile for her.

A key in the door startled both of them. Dawn instantly put the journal she’d been reading into her backpack and Sam hurried to do the same. “Did you make a mess?” Sam asked.

“I have a Slayer for a sister. I know how to be sneaky,” Dawn replied hotly.

“Buffy, I have just gotten through the goddamn door,” Dean was saying into his phone as he stepped through. “Give me—yeah. Yeah, I get it, but there’s no reason to get this—” He glanced up, spotted Sam and Dawn and glared at Sam. Sam was pretty sure that didn’t have much to do with him, yet. “Buffy, calm down. I’ve got her. She’s with Sam at Giles’s. Told you she was fine. I’ll get her home.” Dean snapped his phone shut. “Well, thank you for that. Pretty sure my chances of getting laid dropped to nil for the week.”

“Is that all you care about?” Sam demanded.

“Hell no, but we were having a perfect evening until that phone call. Now she’s going to be pissed at me since she’s done worrying about you.” Dean motioned at Dawn.

“I told Mom where I was,” Dawn said.

“Your mom’s asleep and Buffy didn’t want to wake her. Get your crap, I’m driving you home.”

Dawn kept her chin lifted as she slung her backpack over her shoulder. “I was totally fine here with Sam. She didn’t need to worry about me.”

“Yeah, yeah. You can count on me not getting in the middle of a sister drama.” Dean held the door out for Dawn, glaring at Sam again. “And you. What the hell were you thinking keeping her out this late?”

“It’s not—” Sam checked his watch. Midnight. Crap. “Dude, I had no idea.”

“Dude, the next time you’re spending all night with the Slayer’s freaking sister, maybe look at your goddamn watch more, huh? I do not need this happening again.”

Sam wanted to give a smart-mouth response that they had been perfectly fine and safe, unlike Dean at his age. By now, Dean had been in a group home for shoplifting, dropped out of high school, and kept more than one girl out past her curfew. And the one time a father had tracked the Winchesters down because his daughter had been out late with Dean too often—well, Sam didn’t want to think about Dad’s reaction to that.

“Tell Buffy I’m sorry, okay? Or I’ll tell her. We were just caught up in hanging out.”

Dean glanced over his shoulder, probably checking to see how far Dawn was. “And that’s all the two of you were doing?”

Sam blushed. Jesus, did Dean think they were the same or something? “Yes.”
The glare eased out of Dean as he went back out the door.

Sam was just settled onto couch and reading an entry Giles wrote about the discovery of a werewolf named Oz when the door opened for the second time. Sam slipped the journal back into his backpack and turned.

Giles came through the door and pushed his glasses up his nose. “Oh, Sam. I didn’t expect that you were still awake.”

“Dawn and I were hanging out. Dean’s taking her home.”

“Oh. Good.” Giles shut the door and dropped his keys in the usual basket by the door. “I suppose there’s no reason not to tell you. I’m taking a week to go to England and see if the Watcher’s Council will help us find information about the strange woman who attacked Buffy and Dean.”

“What about the store?” Sam asked.

“I’m leaving Anya in charge and hoping Dean will pick up any slack.”

But that meant Giles wouldn’t be around to closely guard any hiding spots. Sam and Dawn might stand a better chance snooping through things and finding his journals. He had to play it cool, though, and not show how much that excited him. “All right. Cool. When do you plan on leaving?”

“Day after tomorrow, assuming I can finish the arrangements.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I have everything under control, but thank you, Sam.”

Sam picked up his backpack. “Guess I’ll just go to my room then. Night.”

“Goodnight.”

Sam raced up the steps and closed the door. He wasn’t exactly sure when this had become his room—and he kept it neat enough that it’d be hard for anyone to tell that someone was staying in the guest bedroom—but he’d said it. And it felt right. So why wasn’t reading Giles’s Watcher journal a bigger deal? Maybe he really was lacking a conscience.

Or maybe he wanted to know about this strange town and all the crap that had happened before he and Dean had gotten there. Sam took the journal out of his backpack and went back to reading.
Dean yawned, big and wide, and he hardly got his hand over his mouth because his sleepy brain wasn’t quite up on all the right reflexes. The last two nights had been long ones—training and then patrol—and Dean hadn’t realized how much he’d appreciated Giles taking Sam to school until Giles wasn’t able to Monday morning and Dean had to. To top it off, Dean had dropped Giles off at the airport before needing to take Sam, so his usual five-ish hours of sleep had been cut down to four. Something told him he’d probably have to get used to shorter nights of sleep like that, now that he was back to fighting strength, but damn if he didn’t want to curl into a ball and pull a blanket over his head.

He stumbled through the door to the Magic Box and down the steps into the store proper. He rubbed at his eyes and glared at the treacherous stairs that tried to take him out.

“Good morning,” Anya said with far too much cheer in her voice.

“Morning, boss,” Dean said.

Anya perked up more at that, which Dean figured she would. While Giles had been pretty clear that Dean didn’t have to be Anya’s brainless minion, she was in charge. And she deserved it. Dean wasn’t entirely sure the store could run without her. He didn’t know half the crap she did.

He went to the training room and tossed down his bag and coat onto the couch before coming back out into the shop. “Do we have coffee?”

“Giles left a pot just sitting there and I haven’t had time to scrub it clean.”

“Well, I can do that or go get some.”

Anya checked her watch. “That will take a little while and you look like you need the caffeine now. You can wash the pot out later.”

“All right. You want some too?”

“Yes, please. Though I think a small. I don’t want what happened the first time happening again and I’ve got plenty of energy this morning. I don’t need to scare the customers.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Dean said. “Back in a minute.”

Anya nodded as she counted the register. She’d have everything well in control the whole time Giles was gone, Dean was sure of it.

Dean stepped back out into the sunny morning, squinting and trying to block the sun for a moment. Mornings were the worst. He double-checked the traffic before crossing the street.

It was the movement in the corner of his eye that spiked Dean’s adrenaline hard enough to bring his hunter instincts online. He wasn’t quite sure what he saw, but something moved when he did. Was he being followed? By what? It was first thing in the bright shiny morning. Monsters, even Sunnydale monsters, tended to keep to nighttime activities. And there was every chance he hadn’t seen anything. Sleepy minds had been known to concoct up more than one paranoia.
All he could do was keep his eyes open. Coffee was going to help with that.

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If Buffy yawned anymore, the professor was probably going to toss her out of class. She didn’t want to, but curbing the urge was hard. Somehow she managed, though she let out a big one right after the professor announced dismissal.

Tara had a shy, teasing smile as she stood up from her seat. “L-late night with D-dean?”

“He is way farther behind in training than I expected,” Buffy said as she gathered her stuff. She stood and they worked their way out of the lecture hall. “I’m beginning to think beating Riley was a fluke.”

“You are a master at it and you’ve got enhanced abilities.”

Buffy made a face. “I know, not exactly a fair fight, huh? But he doesn’t complain about it.”

“Wel-well that’s a good sign, right?”

“Totally. And the post-patrol smoochies at the end of the night are pretty nice too.”

Tara blushed. “End of the night kisses are the best.”

Buffy grinned knowingly at Tara, which made her blush more. It was good seeing someone who loved Willow that much. Even sharing a class together, Buffy hadn’t learned too much about Willow’s girlfriend, but Tara seemed really nice. “I’m thinking about stopping by the Magic Box later. Before training, which is also at the Magic Box, I realize, but it’s different.”

“Maybe you can convince Anya to make Dean dust the upper shelves. Since he’s so tall.”

“I thought you were into girls,” Buffy said.

“I am. Just, he has a nice butt, and you like looking at it.”

“I do. I really do.”

“Willow has a nice butt too. And nice eyes. Nice everything.” Tara was a bright shade of red.

This was one of the first few times Tara had tried sharing to this degree. Buffy smiled more. “I know what you mean. Dean has a nice everything too.”

“Is he sweet? He seems swe-sweet.”

“He can be very sweet, when he wants to be,” Buffy said. “Every once in a while he makes a joke that’s not that funny.”

“Willow does that sometimes too. It-it’s my least favorite thing because she’s not really joking.”

Buffy came to a pause. They were almost outside and sunlight was streaming through the door. So were people, but they moved around Buffy and Tara easily enough that she didn’t feel like they were in the way. “Dean said something the other night about Willow. Do you think she’s mean to Anya?”
“I-I-I think she can b-be,” Tara said.

“But it’s for a good reason, right? Anya did try to use her to get her amulet back.”

“Tha-that was years ago, Buffy. Has Anya re-really done anything like that since?”

She really hadn’t. Buffy scowled. It wasn’t like Willow to hold a grudge for no reason—except it was totally like Willow to do that, especially about Xander’s girlfriends. When Cordelia dated Xander and changed, Willow hadn’t exactly ever accepted that either. Buffy’s scowl deepened. “Crap. She can be mean, huh?”

“We all have our faults.”

“Oh, God. Sorry. You’re her girlfriend and I’m like, dissing her, and I’m sorry. You know Willow’s my bestie. It’s just something I never thought about until Dean pointed it out.”

“I-i-it’s okay,” Tara said with a much smaller smile. “I like sharing. And I don’t know what to say to her.”

“I’m not sure there’s anything we can say. When Willow gets a certain way, well, I don’t know. This is really between her and Anya, isn’t it?”

“Ye-yeah.”

“I guess we’re just going to have to hope they can figure it out on their own,” Buffy said. She wished they’d figure it out sooner, rather than later. None of them needed the stress, especially not Xander. Best friend and girlfriend not getting along? That’d be terrible. Which suddenly made Buffy want to put Tara at ease again. “So, want to come to the Magic Box with me?”

“I don’t want to get in the way.”

“Nonsense. We can do that funny thing called reading for class or you could read for fun and I could pretend to read for class or—ooo, I could teach you how to throw a punch.”

“I-I-I’m not really a fan of violence.”

“Totally cool. But we could hang like we always do and if we’re bothersome, we can clear out,” Buffy said.

“Okay,” Tara said with a smile and a nod. “Works for me.”

*****

Dean was going to strangle someone by the end of the day. He could just feel it. His current candidates were Willow, Anya, or the man who was insisting that Dean magically lower the price on a totem. According to Anya, if the man kept asking, he was supposed to raise the price. That would go over real well.

Matters weren’t helped by the fact that Dean had a compulsion to check out the window every once in a while for the figure he’d seen that morning. He kept expecting it to show back up somehow. Too much paranoia ingrained him by his father. But that same alertness had saved his life a couple of times. Hello the fine edge of anxiety about being paranoid.
Anya and Willow were adding to his stress by arguing. Anya was in the right, for the most part. Dean had seen Willow treat the store like her personal cupboard a few times. However, sitting there and counting every penny Willow took from the shop just annoyed the crap out of everyone, especially since Willow seemed determined to keep going.

When “I want a bigger penis size” jackass finally gave up on his pursuit of a price in favor of checking Ebay, Dean sighed in relief. One problem down. One massive incoming headache from the other.

“Buffy’s not a very good Slayer if she needs help from a magic spell,” Anya said.

“Hello, that’s the only way she beat Adam,” Willow replied.

“Okay, but I mean in the day to day.”

“Well, this spell wouldn’t be just for her. I’m sure a hunter like Dean would find a magic ball of sunshine really useful.” Willow looked to Dean, challenge and validation clear in her eyes. “Isn’t that right?”

“Oh, you can leave me the hell out of whatever is going on between you two,” Dean said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Anya asked.

“Yeah,” Willow said.

Dean had committed one of the massive faults in dealing with arguing people—he’d given them a mutual target to get pissed at. He wondered if he backed away slowly whether they would chase after him or not.

Damn it, he was a Winchester, living in Sunnydale, and a hunter. He wasn’t going to let these two scare him into silence, not when it meant ages more suffering. He’d gotten beat enough already.

“Look, it’s clear you two have got some unresolved crap going on between you. And I do not need to be in the middle of it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Willow said.

“Oh bullshit,” Dean replied. “You two have been riling each other up on purpose all freaking afternoon. I know, because I’ve had to listen to this petty crap. Willow, you know Anya’s proud to be in charge of the shop this week and you’re trying to walk all over her like you act with Giles, except I saw him give you a freaking bill last week for all the crap you’ve been taking. So stop acting like he lets you do whatever.”

Anya grinned broadly.

“Oh bullshit,” Dean replied. “You two have been riling each other up on purpose all freaking afternoon. I know, because I’ve had to listen to this petty crap. Willow, you know Anya’s proud to be in charge of the shop this week and you’re trying to walk all over her like you act with Giles, except I saw him give you a freaking bill last week for all the crap you’ve been taking. So stop acting like he lets you do whatever.”

Anya grinned broadly.

“OH, you’re not much better. She gets to you in part because you let her. I get it—her opinion matters to Xander and you’re, what, afraid she’s going to do something to wreck you two?”

“She’s done it before,” Anya said.

“I have not,” Willow said defensively.

“Maybe not with me, but with Cordelia. You got all hormonal and made out with him and that was the end of that—which, by the way, granting her wish is what led me to losing my pendant and me being human. So thank you so much for that.”
“You also got a boyfriend and your humanity back because of me-and-therefore-Cordelia,” Willow said. “And you tried to use me to get your powers back.”

“But it’s only a matter of time until you try to take Xander back again. You two have history and while I’m trying to build it, you’re undermining everything I do!”

“Because you were a demon for a thousand years and I want to watch out for my best friend!”

“Well he’s my best friend too! And I love him! And I’m not going to let you take that away from me.”

“I’m not trying to,” Willow insisted.

Dean took a few steps back toward the front door slowly. Maybe, if he got away, they could work the whole damn thing out and he’d be free and clear of any future attacks on him.

“I hear the way you talk about me,” Anya said. “Even Dean has figured it out and he hasn’t been here that long. It’s obvious that you hate me.”

“I don’t hate you. But you have to admit it’s really hard for me to trust you. You spent your thousand years hurting men on purpose. Xander’s a man. How do I know you’re not going to get into an argument with him and turn him into a frog or something?”

“Because I learned from my mistakes. I don’t regret turning Olaf into a troll, but Xander’s nothing like him. He’s nothing like any of the countless men I’ve punished and that’s why I love him!”

Dean had reached the front door. He spotted the way Willow’s body language sloped towards calming down and let out a deep breath. They just needed a few minutes. Dean gently took hold of the bell and moved it as quietly as he could out of the way of the door, doing his best to shut the door quietly.

Man, all this sunshine in Sunnydale was going to unnerve him at some point. He wasn’t sure he’d been exposed to this much sunlight in years, yet nearly every day in California was bright and cheery. He debated going across the street for more coffee, but his paranoia was already up. He didn’t need to add more caffeine to it.

Hours had passed, but Dean could still do a check on the alley. See if whatever he’d seen before was still lurking, if anything had in the first place.

"Hey there, boyfriend, aren’t you supposed to be working?" Buffy said. She was walking down the sidewalk toward him with Tara at her side.

Dean smiled at hearing her voice, smiled more at seeing her. Boyfriend. It’d been a little while since he’d stuck around long enough to get called that. He welcomed the hug she offered and gave her a quick kiss. “Is that what I am?”

“Hmm, let me check.” Buffy kissed him again. “Yup. Distinct boyfriend flavor.”

“Maybe I should leave you guys alone,” Tara said. She reached for the Magic Box’s door handle.

“I wouldn’t go in there just yet,” Dean told her. “Anya and Willow are having it out.”

“They’re fighting?” Tara asked.

“They were starting too, and then they were turning on yours truly, so I pointed out what idiots they
were both being. A few more minutes and they might be more sociable.”

“Sociable,” Buffy repeated. “They’re not wild dogs.”

“I’m not saying they are, but you didn’t have to work all afternoon with their bickering as background noise.”

“True. I think Xander’s going to owe you like ten beers.”

“I’d take an Advil.”

Buffy frowned at him. “They couldn’t be that bad.”

Dean snorted. “You have no idea.”

“Watch it, those are my friends you’re talking about.”

“Hey, I care too. That’s why I gave them space to talk.”

“I think they’re done?” Tara said. “Maybe?”

“We could go see,” Buffy said.

“I suggest Tara goes in first.”

“G-gee, thanks Dean,” Tara said, though she had a small smile. She did open up the door first.

Just as Dean went to step inside, he could’ve sworn he saw the shape again. By the time he looked back, it was gone. He had to be making it up. Nerves built up from finally having enough energy or something. Yeah, right.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for my tardiness, but as summer arrives, we're probably going to see more gaps in my posting. Work deadlines mean they get first priority.
Chapter 44

Sam met Dawn on a corner not too far from her place and on the way between Giles’s and the Magic Box. He had a flashlight in one jacket pocket, a gun tucked into a discreet holster, a stake in another pocket, and his lockpick kit in his jeans’ back pocket. Dean would hate if he found out he was lying about being at Brady’s, but at least Sam was properly armed for being out in Sunnydale after dark.

Dawn was dressed in all black. Sam snorted. “Not exactly conspicuous,” he said.

“I thought this would be sneaky,” she said.

“The store’s on Main Street.”

“But the back door isn’t.”

Instead of pointing out how they still had to walk down Main Street to get to the back alley, Sam just started down the street. They made their way through town and up to the Magic Box’s back door without incident. Sam pulled out his lockpick kit. “This’ll just take a second.”

“Or, we could just use the key,” Dawn said. She held up a shiny key in her hand with a big grin on her face. “Buffy has one. I borrowed it, made the copy, and put it back without her ever knowing.”

“Maybe you are sneaky, Summers,” Sam said.

Dawn giggled a little, in an excited way, and Sam stepped out of her way to let her open the door. Her key worked and they stepped inside. She asked, “So where do you want to start?”

“Well, they’re not going to be mixed in with the merchandise. Which leaves back here, the counter, or his desk.”

“I vote behind the counter.”

It didn’t take much investigating behind the counter to find the journals. Sam was almost disappointed, but too eager to get his hands on them. Unfortunately, Dawn grabbed the most recent one first and she flipped through the pages quickly.

“Find anything?” Sam asked.

Dawn laid the journal out on the counter in front of them. “I think I’m at the right date. You and Dean only arrived like a day before. And by the way, Giles totally thinks you’re dad’s a deadbeat.”

That didn’t surprise Sam and it shouldn’t cause a knot in his throat, but it did. “What’s it say about Dean and me?”

“Not much, yet. Oh, look. Here’s where Buffy had her vision.”

Sam leaned in close to read along with Dawn. Buffy had completed the trance and she’d seen something. That was why she’d freaked out. She’d seen a man with yellow-eyes whispering in his ear. Sam was numb and growing more so by the second. He kept reading.

The monk Buffy and Dean encountered told her that he and his brethren had sought to protect the Key from the woman. That they had turned the Key from pure energy into something Buffy would be willing to protect. A sister. It boggles the mind that she has only been in our lives for a short time when we have memories of so much longer. Her whole life is a charade—
Dawn made a stifled noise. A kind of cry. “I’m not real.”

Sam flipped through to the next page. That was where Giles talked about him. About the vision he’d had and talking to some friend of Anya’s and something about Azazel and a house burning down. None of this was making any sense or it was making too much sense.

Dawn wiped at her eyes. “It’s wrong, right? He’s wrong? I’m real. I’m here.”

Sam snapped the book shut. His mind was reeling. Dawn might not be real. He was a monster. It baffled him. Threw him into shock. He had no clue what to say to her, because what did he say for himself? A demon whispering to him all the time, was it true? Was he evil? Another house burning, talk about more infants involved. Was the demon really after him? Did Azazel kill his mother because of him?

Was that why it felt like Dad did nothing but glare at him?

Dawn was saying something, mumbling and muttering and it was all too much sound to make it through Sam’s ears to his brain. He needed to do something, say something to her, because she was spiraling too. Her world was coming down too, but he didn’t have anything. Couldn’t make sense of the sounds coming out of her mouth. Was Azazel talking to him now?

Was he evil?

The world came back into focus as Dawn ran for the front door. Sam blinked and realized she meant to run. He shoved the journals back in their hiding spot and started after her.

Dawn could run. She had a head start and booked it down the street. Sam had no idea where she was going. Wasn’t sure if she knew what she was doing. But he got the door shut behind them—not locked, Dawn had the key—and he took off after her.

Dawn was the Key. Key to what?

Sam had longer legs than her, and he took laps in gym class seriously because running was the only part of hunting he got. He found that part Dad had instilled, the hunter part of his mind, where what mattered was getting down to business and saving someone. Taking out the monster mode.

He was the monster and Dawn wasn’t real.

No, bullshit. Bullshit! Sam ran hard, each footstep on pavement a jolt back into his body. He had a heart. He cared about people—about Dawn. And Dawn was real. She was a person and she was in pain.

And she clearly didn’t have a plan on where she was running. After who knew how many blocks, she bolted out into the street and came to a dead stop. Panting, crying, and gasping for breath, she seemed oblivious to the traffic around her.

Including the car coming at her full speed.

Sam wasn’t going to make it. He was going to be a few feet short. He couldn’t save her unless he could stop the car.

Something clicked. It was a sure as the crack of a baseball bat hitting a homerun. He roared, stretched his hand, and commanded the car to stop.

It halted. No screech of tires, no blasting of its horn. Just one moment it was going full speed. The
next, the front dipped like someone put their hands on it, stood between it and Dawn, and just made it stop.

There was noise and confusion and swearing from open car windows. Sam wrapped an arm around Dawn and pulled her out of the street.


“Hey,” Sam said softly. He turned Dawn so they were facing each other. “I don’t know what this is all about, but you’re real to me.”

“How did you do it though?”

Because he was a monster with a demon in his ear.

But monster didn’t have to mean evil. Giles’s journal from ’98 had mentioned Oz and Angel over and over. Sam had saved Dawn.

“Sam,” Dawn said. “Your nose.”

Sam felt the nosebleed as she mentioned it. All the crap he’d brought with him and he didn’t have anything for it. He wiped at his nose. It wasn’t a big bleeder, just the little bit. His blood. His not-quite-human blood.

“I don’t want to go home.”

“We should go lock up the shop.”

“I’m not going back there either.”

Sam couldn’t blame her, but he felt guilty that the shop was going to be open all night. Anyone could walk in. Maybe after they had a chance to process, they could go back and lock up. The Bronze and the coffeeshop were the only two places open this time of night, and Sam didn’t feel like either of them wanted to be around people.

“I thought I saw a park?” Sam said.

Dawn nodded. “It’s not far.”

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At long last, Dawn finally fulfilled her secret wish of sitting under a tree with a boy she liked. Sam had even wrapped his arm around her and let her snuggle up against him. Everything she’d ever wanted for years and years. Only none of those years were real years and she was only a couple months old. It hurt her head to think about. She hadn’t existed for more than a few months. But she remembered her tenth birthday and hearing her parents argue. Remembered having to pack her boxes in LA and move them here to Sunnydale. Remembered seeing Buffy ice skate in a program, but that was when they’d lived in LA. And she remembered LA too. Their old house. Her old room with the sky blue walls and puffy white clouds which had been Buffy’s room until she decided she didn’t like the “baby look” anymore. Buffy calling her a baby all the time.

Buffy coming to her thirteenth birthday party late because she was always late and she had been sad
and scared a lot and Dawn never knew what to say to her. But Buffy had come and instead of being mean, she’d given Dawn the best journal ever and hugged her. Hugged her and said she was so glad to have a little sister and that she was never ever going to let anyone or anything hurt her. It had been a tight hug. It had hurt.

Dawn pressed into Sam more. She was crying again, quietly wiping her face with her sleeve again and again, and she wanted to fold up and disappear like the not real thing she was. Sam stroked her hair slowly.

Sam had saved her. They were supposed to be uncovering his mysteries, not hers. She’d ruined that too.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry I messed it up.”

“What? You didn’t,” Sam said. “I saw a couple pages. I’m sorry I didn’t stop you sooner.”

“You found something out?” Dawn wiped her tears away as she sat up more so she could look at him.

Sam wasn’t looking at her. Probably because she wasn’t real and he didn’t know how not to be nice, not even to not real people.

Eventually, though, he looked at her. He was sad too. “There’s something wrong with me. And I think it had something to do with my mom dying.”

Dawn’s eyes went wide. “But you’re perfect.”

“Buffy saw Azazel whispering to me and these things I’ve been doing, I think it’s because I’m part monster. I just don’t know what kind. God, my dad probably isn’t even my dad. That’s why he hates me.”

“Nobody could hate you.”

Sam smiled, but in a broken-hearted way. Dawn wanted to wipe away his pain, but she didn’t know how. Whoever made her memories hadn’t made her useful and they could have. They could have made her anything and instead she was awkward and wrong and not real. She wiped at her eyes more. Was this moment even real or was it another fake-out? Sam felt real. He felt solid and real. He smelled faintly like aftershave and cheap fabric softener.

He had been crying too, Dawn realized. He had wet spots near his eyes and his shirt sleeve was wet and she hadn’t gotten tears near that cuff. She ran her fingers over his cuff, over the drying blood and tears.

“Well, I could never hate you,” Dawn said. “And I still don’t think you’re a monster.”

“You’re real to me,” Sam said.

Dawn felt as fragile as glass. She wasn’t sure she could talk about it. She plucked a piece of grass and held it up. “I can remember trying to make a sound with it. My dad showed me how and I tried doing it on my own over and over and over and I couldn’t get it quite right. And a friend having to show me a second time. But that friend moved away from California before I was eight. I remember crying about that. Only none of that ever really happened because I wasn’t real.”

“You remember it, so it’s real,” Sam said.
“I don’t think it works like that,” Dawn said.

“Your mom remembers you. Buffy does. I do. You’re real, Dawn. We’re all created somehow and we don’t exist before that. But we’re made and then we’re in the world and we’re real. You just came into the world differently.”

“Then how come I’m like this? How come they made me this? I’m always annoying everyone even when I don’t want to and I try, I try so hard to be cool like Buffy and I’m this. This not real thing who isn’t good at anything and shouldn’t be here.”

“Maybe it’s because you could still become anything,” Sam said slowly. “They gave you a big sister to protect you—the best big sister who could—and gave you a life you hadn’t figured out so you could make it yours.”

“Or maybe they weren’t thinking about me at all and only thinking that Buffy would have to protect a weak silly stupid girl.”

“Then don’t be that,” Sam said. “You can choose to be anything.”

“And you think that’s possible?”

“I have to,” he said quietly.

Of course he had to. He had to believe they had free choice or he was doomed to be a monster. But Dawn had memories of Sunnydale and what monsters really looked like, even the ones who pretended to be human. Sam was good and he could keep being good. He could be anything. She could too. Anything, like brave and courageous. Impulsive.

She leaned in and kissed Sam. Just a moment. Just a second where her lips touched his. It thrilled her, but she didn’t want to overdo it, so she pulled back. Sam blinked at her, but he didn’t look disgusted or angry and he didn’t push her away and call her a kid.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, “for choosing to be nice. And I won’t do that ever again if it was bad or wrong.”

“It wasn’t.”

Sam leaned toward her, slower. Or maybe the world just felt like it was in slow motion because Sam had his arm around her and he came toward her and pressed his lips against hers. Sam. Broken Sam like she was Hurt Dawn and somehow kissing did make it better. It made her feel not alone and not stupid and not awkward. Kissing didn’t fix everything. It didn’t fill the hole in her heart or the ache in her head, but Sam liked her and cared and kissed her. She mattered to someone, even if he was as lost as she was. Maybe because he was lost too and that was okay. Everything might turn out okay.

When Sam pulled back from the kiss, Dawn snuggled up against him again.

“I don’t want to tell Buffy and Dean that we know,” Sam said. “They didn’t want to tell us anything. We should figure this out on our own.”

“Giles went to the Watcher’s Council to figure stuff out. What if it’s about us?”

“So we break in again and read his journals.”

It wasn’t a perfect plan, but it would work. It’d have to work, because they got to decide what they were. No one else. She nodded. “Okay. That’s what we do.”
Dean had instigated a no-touching rule during patrols—the same kind of thing Riley had tried implementing when Buffy first went on patrol with him. However, unlike Riley, Dean kept to his hunting rules. Hands loose, ready to grab either the gun or stake. Head on a swivel, keeping as much open in his peripheral as possible. All in all, not a bad plan really. Buffy was used to relying on her heightened senses. Little extra hearing meant she didn’t have to keep glancing back over her shoulder to know whether or not they were being followed. Better vision meant she could see down the block and notice there were no monsters.

She was half tempted to grab Dean’s arm and tell him everything was quiet. Unnervingly quiet almost. Made her wonder what Dawn was up to. But Dawn should be safely tucked in bed and randomly grabbing Dean was a good way to start an argument. Since they’d had a discussion—and Buffy had done a mental exercise where she explained the fight to Giles and come up in the wrong still—she refrained from touching him. Even if she was pretty sure a kiss might go a long way in making Dean unwind from whatever was stressing him out.

When Dean looked over his shoulder for the fourth time in five minutes, Buffy sighed. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Dean replied.

Yeah, she wasn’t buying the nothing’s going on act. “You’ve been extra mindful of our backs all night. I know we’ve got great butts, but I’m guessing something’s got you on edge.”

“Fine, it might be nothing.” Dean almost reached for his gun. Almost. His words would be a lot more convincing if he wasn’t about to whip out a weapon two blocks from Main Street.

Buffy made a show of looking behind her. The normal street had the usual people types, but the hour was late and the crowd was thinning. “I’m not picking up on anything. Super slow night. Want to tell me what you think is happening?”

“I think someone’s been following me. All day.”

So much for a quiet night with the potential of snuggles in the near future. Buffy resisted the urge to double check over her shoulder, not wanting to tip the something that might be following them. She pay attention to what she could hear, and what her extra Slayer sense might pick up. Nothing out of the ordinary though. She scowled more. “Any idea what it is?

“Demon? Otherwise, I’m not sure,” Dean said. “Could be making the whole damn thing up.”

There, among the noises of the otherwise calm, normal street, Buffy picked up on a not-normal metal sound. Little metal bits clinking together. “Don’t think you are. How do you want to check it out?”

“Well, I’m the target. Makes sense to use me as the bait.”

“Makes me back up. Know the alleys well enough to lead it down a dead end?” she asked.

Dean smiled ruefully—which was too pretty—and said, “This town’s got too many of those. I’m more likely to lead it into one on accident.”

Buffy nudged him and took his arm, using it as cover to lean in close and whisper a plan. If the evil thing had only followed Dean for a day, they might not know she was the Slayer. Unless, of course, they were targeting him because of her. Paranoia could keep a girl alive, but it also created too many
horrible thoughts about what might happen. She hoped they’d solve this quick and not think about all
the ways either, or both, of them might wind up dead in a few minutes.

“There’s an alley on the next block. Take the left, when it ends hang a right, and then a left at that
intersection. I can close in from behind.” She leaned up and pecked his cheek.

Dean took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah. Got it. See you soon, babe.”

When they reached the alley, they split off. She waited until she reached the next alley entrance
before picking up her pace. The back alleyways of Sunnydale were a maze, but one she’d learned to
run a long time ago. She made the next turn to cut off whoever was following Dean.

Only to discover a figure in chain mail armor waiting to ambush Dean. Buffy snuck up on the lurker
and kicked at his knee, bringing him down before he heard her. When he went to stand, she grabbed
him by the head and smashed him into the brick wall beside them. His helmet protected him from too
much damage, but he was stunned enough to leave behind.

But there was the scraping sounds of more metal coming from nearby. Buffy ran to the alley she’d
told Dean about.

Four more armored figures circled Dean, though two broke away when they spotted her. Dean
grinned wolfishly at her, though she could see the slight bit of worry in his green eyes. One of the
fighters took the opportunity to knock Dean in the solar plexus while his attention was divided.
Which was so not good as the armored guys had swords or metal staves.

Buffy dove into the melee, falling into an easy rhythm with Dean. She countered one sword thrust,
spun the figure so he wound up going straight into Dean’s elbow blow. Then Dean ducked low and
she used him as a launching point to send a kick right into another fighter’s face. Dean disarmed one
guy with a stave and tossed it to Buffy. She twisted, brought the metal rod down onto a fighter’s
sword hand, and then kicked the sword over to Dean. One, two. Back, forth.

The armored figures never stood a chance, not even when their fifth rejoined the fray. Soon all but
one was knocked out on the ground.

And that one was crazy enough to take a swing at Buffy despite the odds being way out of his favor.
Buffy swept his feet out from under him with a stave and then tackled him to the ground. She got the
stave under the figure’s chin, but the guy only stopped wiggling when Dean disengaged the safety
on his pistol with a distinctive click.

“Let’s see what we’re dealing with.” Buffy pushed the figure’s chain mail helmet thing off.

The man underneath was kind of pretty, except for the angry scowl uglifying up his features. He had a
tattoo across his forehead, something Buffy would need to draw out for Giles later. If Buffy had met
him some other place, she might’ve entertained the idea flirting with him. But he and his fellow
fighters were definitely trying to kill Dean and/or her, so that marked him in the solid undesirable
category.

“And we’ve got human crazy,” Buffy said, her voice thick with sarcasm. “Gee, just my favorite.”

“And any reason why you decided to come after me, asshole?” Dean demanded.

The man glared up at Dean and said nothing.

Buffy leaned her weight down on the stave. “It’s not polite to ignore a reasonable question.”
“We know what he is and what must be done about him,” the man said.

That didn’t make any sense. Buffy let the guy up just a fraction so she could push him back down, a reminder as to who had exactly managed to accomplish anything in their current situation. “Oh yeah? And what is he?”

“The Key. And he must be destroyed. And so must you if you continue to protect him.”

Buffy refused to show the man any sign that he was wrong on the Key’s identity. Dawn’s life depended on it. “I thought Glory wanted the Key.”

“You think we work for the Beast?” The man laughed—well, he laughed as much as he could in the middle of a chokehold.

“Then who the hell are you?” Dean demanded.

“A soldier in a vast army.”

“Real tired of the twenty questions,” Buffy said. “What army?”

“The Knights of Byzantium, an ancient order.”

“Ancient order of pains in the ass?” Dean scoffed.

“Most ancient orders are,” Buffy grumbled. She let the man up a little only to pin him down one last time. “Tell your order to stay away if they know what’s good for them. The next time someone attacks him, we’re going to take it personally.”

“If it takes a thousand men to finish our mission, we will send a thousand men,” the man replied.

“And one pissed off girl will beat them back, got it? Stay out of my town.” Buffy stood. She walked slowly toward the exit of the alley, not daring to take her eyes off the incapacitated men. She decided to keep the metal stave, and was glad when Dean kept the sword as they walked away.

They were four blocks away before either of them took a deep breath and even still, Buffy had a knot of tension in her stomach.

Dean held the blade out and streetlight glinted off of it. After regarding it for a long moment, he let the tip dip down and he sighed heavily. “Got to say, Buffy, I’m a little over this town trying to murder me.”

“I am too,” Buffy said quietly. “Man, I really hope Giles is getting us some answers because otherwise, I have no idea what we’re going to do.”

Dean smirked. “Apparently kick ass and take names.”

Buffy chuckled, finally unwinding from the fight. She had the sinking feeling that moments of peace were going to be few and far between. If she focused on that, she’d waste the potentially good times she could have. So she took another deep breath and decided that she was definitely not going to deal with any of that crap.

“Let’s go back to my place. I’ve got a tub of rocky road ice cream and a way comfier couch,” she said.

Dean’s grin turned sly and Buffy’s stomach tingled in the good way. He looped his arm around her shoulders. “Sounds like a plan.”
Six whole days had passed since Sam snuck into the Magic Box with Dawn and in all that time they kept their secrets from Dean and Buffy. When Dean tried to pry into Sam’s bad mood, Sam made up excuses about homework and got extra pissy about it when Dean suggested Sam take some time off from studying to get in a good workout. Dean hadn’t meant it—Sam knew he only thought of it because Dad insisted on so much training. But that had been a segue into a bigger argument, one that had the Winchester boys still pissed at each other.

Though really, Sam was just using the argument as an excuse to get some distance from Dean. If he didn’t spend any time around his big brother, then Dean couldn’t guess that Sam had learned about the secrets Dean was keeping from him.

Research was slow going, only because he couldn’t risk anyone finding out what he knew. He still had Giles’s journal from '98 and it ran into the first half of 1999. He discovered Anya’s demon name, Anyaka, and the demon she used to work for, D’Hoffryn. That had led him to discovering more about vengeance demons, but he couldn’t figure out what any of that had to do with him. He’d never summoned up a demon like that, though there was one who interested him. If he’d known about Halfrek when he was twelve, he probably wouldn’t have a dad anymore.

Good thing he’d been ignorant. Kind of. Sort of. Sam really didn’t want to think about his father.

He grabbed onto the low branch of the tree outside the Summers’ house and hoisted himself up. Buffy, Dean, and Giles were setting up a meeting Sam and Dawn weren’t allowed to attend, which was complete bullshit since it had to be about them. So Sam and Dawn had every intention of using a spell to eavesdrop on the conversation. Certainly a monster and a not-real girl could work a little magic and figure out what the “grown ups” were saying about them.

Dawn waited at Buffy’s window for him, and she eagerly motioned at him to hurry up. With her help he was through the window and across the hall before anyone spotted him. She shut the door quietly behind them and locked it.

Dawn’s room looked exactly as he expected, only maybe a little neater. Pink bedspread with frills, boy band posters on the wall, and a vanity covered in lip gloss and nail polish. She was wearing a cheery parfait print pajama set, but her frown was serious as she reached under her bed and took out the giant spellbook they’d smuggled out of the Magic Box.

She was a mix of bright happiness and serious dedication. Sam was trying hard not to think about her strawberry flavored lip gloss or that kissing might be a better use of their time than failing at magic. They had their mission, though, and Sam wasn’t going to be the one to call it off.

But if Dean or Buffy caught him in Dawn’s room, they planned on pretending they were making out because that was a whole lot easier to explain than casting spells.

Sam sat on the rug and slung his backpack off his shoulders. “Got everything we need from the Magic Box. Made up a fake sale receipt and put the money in the register.”

“Good.” Dawn flipped open to a page in the spellbook and ran her hand over it. Sort of more a movie-inspired thing, but Sam wasn’t going to knock her ways of concentrating. If anything, Giles’s journals and his own life experience told him that screwing up a spell could have devastating consequences.
“Willow says magic is about focus,” Sam said. “That it’s easy to convince the universe to give you what it wants if you believe hard enough.”

“She also says the whole law of motion comes into play,” Dawn added. “Objects in motion stay in motion, objects at rest stay at rest. I’m not sure I get entirely how it applies, but I think it means that trying to hear through a floor is going to be really hard.”

“Think about it this way. The spell is going to amplify their voices through the floor. The sound is already happening, we just want the waves to keep going instead of getting stopped.” Sam emptied out the spell components onto the floor beside them. Most of it was general materials. Some sage, a little ash from a fire that burned all night. The most expensive part was a glass ball from an enchanted kingdom. Sam was hoping it wouldn’t get wrecked and he could slide it back into Giles’s inventory, because technically he’d outright stolen it.

Dawn consulted the book as she adjust the spell. As a last step she took the bag of salt and made a circle around them. Then she sat down and lit one bundle of sage. “We’re supposed to clear our minds and open ourselves to hearing as I say this next bit.”

Sam nodded. He was breathing quicker. Magic was forbidden in the Winchester household and maybe it always had been because of him. But he wasn’t going to be scared of it. Magic was just a tool. If Dean could learn how to carry a shotgun, then Sam would figure out how to wield magic. He might even excel at it.

He took deeper breaths and worked on clearing his mind. Meditation was the first step of magic, and Tara had been teaching him a few tricks. She thought it would be good for dealing with school stress, and Sam felt a little guilty that he and Dawn had tricked her into giving them a lesson on the subject.

Which he wasn’t following. Sam cleared away his emotions and pictured the long, endless road. Driving in the middle of the night, through fields of nothing. Laying in the back seat, watching the stars go by as the car kept going on, and on, and on.

Dawn spoke, and her voice seemed distant. “Hecate, we seek wisdom. Knowledge passed from one to another. Information given freely to others. Let us hear what they hear.”

The glass ball between them spun in a slow circle. As it completed its circuit, sound began emanating from it. “Don’t worry,” Joyce said. “I’m leaving you to your top secret meeting.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Buffy replied.

The spell was working. It was working. Sam and Dawn smiled at each other. Maybe they’d finally get some answers.

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Giles, Tara, Willow, Anya, and Xander had taken all the good seats in the living room. Dean dragged in a chair from the dining room, flipped it so it was backward, and straddled it. He needed something more to lean on. After keeping up with training, research, and shopkeeping, he was exhausted. Somehow he needed to work another job into the mix, so hopefully he’d gain some more stamina soon.
Buffy said goodnight to her mom, double-checked the stairs for potential Dawn interference, then came back to the living room. She stood next to Dean and put her arm around his shoulders. If they were alone, he’d wrap his arm around her and snuggle in close. He and Buffy were good in the cuddle department. He liked it. The kissing was amazing too.

But now wasn’t the time to think about what she was alike when they had a moment to themselves. Not with a room full of people.

“Okay Giles,” Buffy said. “You wanted the floor.”

“I did. Yes.” Giles took his glasses off and wiped at smudges on his glasses. He set them back on his face before speaking. “As you all know, I traveled to England to appeal for the Council’s help in discovering the identity of our mystery woman.”

“Yes, yes. We know that part. Get onto the good stuff,” Anya said.

Willow shot Anya an annoyed look.

“I was saying that they didn’t immediately have answers,” Giles replied. “However in the short time since I’ve arrived back, it seems they have discovered something of value. They arrive tomorrow.”

Buffy tensed. “Arrive? They couldn’t tell us over the phone?”

“I’m afraid not,” Giles replied. And boy did he not look happy about the prospect of visitors.

Dean frowned, and he caught that Anya and Tara looked just as confused as he did. Tara spoke up first, “But h-how can it be a bad thing? Aren’t the Watchers g-g-good guys?”

“Mm, if good guys drug you and lock you in a house with a psychotic vampire as a welcome-to-adulthood test, then sure,” Buffy said.

A new hatred for the Watchers flared through Dean. Since Giles had left, Buffy started giving Dean more details about the Watchers’ Council. There was a whole thing with another Slayer named Faith that sounded like an utter disaster. Not to mention, they were an organization holding onto the freaking mother lode of supernatural information and Dean had never met one before Giles. Hunters could use that information, but nope. The Council kept it to themselves.

And apparently on top of all that, they tried to kill Buffy.

Dean was looking forward to this visit. So he could give them the kind of Sunnydale greeting he’d gotten.

“Okay, so not good guys,” Anya said. “Then why go to them?”

“Because they produce results,” Giles said. “Between the woman and this mysterious cult that appeared, we know something is brewing in town. And we need to figure out what before anything else happens.”

“Has something else happened?” Xander said. “I noticed Sam and Dawn are getting extra weird. Did the woman attack them?”

Buffy stiffened again, and Dean was quite sure she’d make a terrible poker player. Nothing had happened between the woman and their siblings, but something had upset Sam and Dawn over the last week.
“Nothing to cause alarm,” Giles replied. “Most likely they are teenagers being teenagers.”

Even if one of them was technically only two months old. Not that Dean should think like that about her. Dawn couldn’t help how she came to exist, and better if he didn’t consider her a baby. While so far Dawn’s only huge flaw was immaturity of a teenager-y type, there was no telling when she might suddenly show herself as non-human. They had no idea what the Key did.

“What can we expect out of this visit?” Buffy asked. She leaned on Dean, and he marveled at how small she was. She never seemed small, especially when kicking his butt during training, but she was only over five feet tall by a couple of inches. He was almost a foot taller than her, and every once in a while she did something that accidentally reminded him.

“I can have a shotgun ready,” Dean offered.

“Oh my God!” Anya said, while Willow blurted, “We don’t kill people!”

“Yeah!” Xander added. “Especially not librarian types.”

Giles had a hint of a smile, like he didn’t mind Dean’s suggestion in the slightest.

“I think Dean meant it as a deterrent,” Buffy told her worried friends.

“Yes, of course,” Dean replied. “Unless they try the murdering someone again. I make no promises about their safety in cases of self defense or defense of others.”

“It really shouldn’t come to that,” Giles said.

“Oh, other than not getting ready to murder them, is there anything we should know about this visit?” Xander said.

“Nothing that I can think of,” Giles replied.

“So you dragged us over here to say something you could have told us at the Magic Box? Or over the phone?” Anya demanded.

“I liked seeing everyone,” Tara said. Willow squeezed her hand and Tara smiled shyly at her.

“We thought, in case there were questions, we should do it this way,” Buffy said.

“Well, I’ve got one. Can we go?” Anya said.

Dean rolled his eyes. He supposed he ought to be more fair. If Dad held this kind of meeting, he’d want to move on with his evening, too. However Dad tended to rush into situations with the bare minimum of data. There was never so much talking. Strangely enough, talking felt good. And Dean agreed with Tara. Getting everyone in the same room was nice.

Buffy drifted her fingers through his hair as the others started to say their goodbyes. They weren’t saying them to just Buffy, but him and Giles since they were sticking around. The goodbyes to him stuck out. Dean hadn’t made many friends, not for long. Too much moving. Too much looking out for Sammy. Dad always claimed that connections made a person weak.

Sitting there, seeing his friends leave, knowing Sam was safer than he ever had been—Dean didn’t feel weak. He leaned into Buffy more, angling up and nuzzling with the intent to kiss. She smirked and gave him a quick peck.

Yeah, yeah this feeling didn’t suck.
“I thought we were going to tell them,” Giles said. His voice lifted the happy cover off Dean’s thoughts and revealed the harsher realities facing them. “About Dawn. And fully about Sam.”

“Well, I was, but then you dropped the Watcher bomb on us.” Buffy snaked out of Dean’s hold, letting her hand linger on his shoulder as she moved away. She took a seat opposite Giles and gazed up at her Watcher. “The Council has a really narrow definition of what’s okay and what isn’t. I don’t want to wind up giving them too much information.”

“And as much as you may trust your friends, loose lips sink ships,” Dean replied.

“Exactly,” Buffy said. “There will be time to tell them. After we get the information out of the Council and send them packing.”

“I suppose I can’t disagree with that plan.” Giles took off his glasses and cleaned the lenses again. “If the Council should happen to mention it—”

“You didn’t tell them about Dawn did you?” Buffy said.

“Or Sam?” Dean added.

“No, no I didn’t. But the Council does, on occasion, work things out for themselves. It is in fact what we’re hoping they’d do in the case of the blond woman,” Giles replied. “If they should happen upon information—”

“But they won’t.” Buffy sounded worried with a side of building paranoia. “They can’t, right? I mean, we didn’t even know and she happened to us.”

“Let’s not borrow trouble,” Giles said.

“Right. Guys try to make a move on either of our sibs and we’ll reenact the Revolution,” Dean said.

“Just, not in the shop,” Giles said with a laugh.

Dean smirked, and chuckled. He wanted desperately to joke long enough for Buffy’s scowl to ease. Since the first mention of the Watchers impending visit, she’d been off, and she wasn’t relaxing any now. As he stood, Dean said, “Buffy, think it’s too late for a patrol?”

“Seems like a perfect time to me,” Buffy said. “I’ll see you at home, Dean. And in the morning, Buffy.”

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“That was pointless,” Dawn said as she held the sage outside of the circle. The meeting was totally over and there wasn’t any point in keeping the spell going. Besides, she was getting kind of tired and massively frustrated and just a little bit distracted by Sam’s lips. “They didn’t say anything all that useful.”

As frustrated as Dawn was, Sam had a look of wonder and determination in his eyes. He was leaning over the crystal ball, and Dawn had done her best to mimic that motion. She was more worried about getting her room back in order before her mom came to check on her or something. Though Mom hadn’t dropped by on her way to bed lately. Mom was always tired, and always had a
headache. Dawn frowned at the crystal ball. Maybe there was a spell that would help her fix Mom, or at least tell her what was wrong.

“We learned a lot,” Sam said. “You have to think about what they said. Break it down.”

“What did we learn?” Dawn asked, sort of excited that Sam was this interested in snooping. “I mean, other than the obvious. The Watchers are coming.”

“Yeah, about that. Did they really try to kill Buffy?”

Dawn could remember that. It seemed like forever ago, but it hadn’t been, but she also hadn’t been real when it happened, so did her memories of the event even count? She pushed her hair behind her ear. “They did. Like Buffy said, they did it as a sort of test. Did something to zap all her Slayer abilities. It was awful. Seeing her after was the worst thing. She looked so defeated.” Dawn couldn’t help staring at the crystal ball instead of at Sam. “I don’t know why they gave me that memory.”

“Because no one’s life is nothing but happiness. We’re all made up of good and bad things,” Sam said. “Just means you’re more real.”

Dawn smiled, though she was feeling way too sad for it to be a real smile. She wanted to, though, and wanted to be as cool as Sam made her feel. “Okay, well, we learned the Watchers are coming.”

“And we learned that Dean, Buffy, and Giles are the only ones who really know what’s going on.” Sam sat up. He still had that eager gleam in his eyes, like anything was possible.

“They don’t want anyone else to know. They still want to protect us,” Dawn said. “But they don’t want to tell us anything either.”

“We need to find out what the Council has to say.”

“That’s going to be a lot harder. We can’t skip school to keep spying on them. I mean, I’m totally down for getting into trouble, but I also don’t want to flunk anything. Though it’s weird that I still have to study. You’d think they could just give me all that knowledge.” Dawn stopped when Sam pursed his lips. Then a thought blossomed and she rolled her eyes at herself. “Right. The monks gave me a life. And life is about learning stuff too. But it would’ve been cool to be super smart.”

“I think you’re pretty smart,” Sam said.

“But not super smart,” Dawn teased.

Sam laughed. “Well, I mean, I would’ve said I was super smart and then I met Willow.”

“Okay, but Willow has had way more years to learn stuff than we have. We could be Willow level smart and just not achieved it yet.”

“I think I like that idea.”

Dawn really hoped they’d kiss again. Sam was right there, and really cute, and everything was kind of perfect.

Then suddenly Sam got terrified and grabbed his backpack. “I’ve got to get home before Giles!”

“And keep your voice down!” Dawn hissed. “If my mom hears you, I’m so dead!”

“Right,” Sam whispered. He gathered up most of the stuff he brought and shoved it into his backpack. “I’ll see you outside school tomorrow.”
“Before or after?” Dawn asked as she followed him to the window in Buffy's room.

“Before. And definitely after. We need to come up with a plan of what to do next.” Sam ducked out the window onto the tiny porch roof.

“Right. Action plans.” Dawn had no idea what they could do next, but she and Sam could think of something to keep their investigation going. Absent-mindedly, she put her hand on the windowsill.

Sam put his hand on top of hers, dragging her out of her thoughts. Well, her investigating thoughts. Other thoughts, like how kissing Sam under the tree had been perfect, popped up instead. He grinned at her and she couldn’t help the grinning back. Her stomach was fluttering again. Was she still cool if her stomach kept fluttering? Why hadn’t the monks made her cool?

She’d just learn to be cool. Not just so she could stand a chance at another kiss with Sam, but because cool people got the answers they wanted, and she wanted to know everything.

Yeah. She was going to learn everything.
Giles unwrapped the breakfast sandwich on the counter at the Magic Box, and decidedly ignored the way Anya stuck her nose up in the air. They’d made an agreement to only keep drinks behind the counter. There were plenty of other places to have food. However, Giles had thought that rule up when the shop had been just the two of them, and he hadn’t been feeding two growing boys. Now that they were comfortable in his home—which was fine. Giles still shuddered to think what would have came of them had they taken to living in their Impala instead—Sam and Dean ate plenty. Honestly, both boys had put on a couple of needed pounds.

But that meant Giles had run out of breakfast food. He broke from typical routine and bought the sandwich and a coffee at the cafe across the street. The store would open in a little under a half an hour, and he wanted to double-check a few things from Anya’s time in charge. Actually, the store was in really good shape. He wasn’t sure if he should be impressed or dismayed that they hadn’t needed him for the week he’d been away.

“I told you everything was fine,” Anya said. She came to the counter with a box in her arms and she nearly set it down on Giles’s sandwich.

He saw that coming, and subtly moved his food out of the way. Around a mouthful, he said, “Never hurts to check. Well done.”

Anya beamed a bright, sunny smile. “Keep that in mind when you do employee evaluations.”

Normal employers would do such a thing, but Giles had never given it much consideration. Mostly because he had naively thought he would run the shop alone, and he personally hated receiving criticism. In fact, the one bonus of getting canned from the Watchers’ Council was never having to hear another review. Though honestly Principal Snyder’s evaluations had always been worse.

Anya wasn’t demanding one at the moment, and with far more pressing concerns, Giles shoved the ideas of performance reviews very far away. Like scheduling a run to the grocery store somewhere between his duties as a shopkeeper and the Council’s arrival. He supposed he could take off after the morning rush of people—as it was a Tuesday, there would be the few stray people who had tried their spells over the weekend, failed, and demanded refunds on burnt sage and the whatnot. But then he had been relying on Anya to run the shop quite a lot lately. If Dean wouldn’t get offended, he could hand off the money or a credit card so he could make the purchases. And oh, dear. Payday was coming. If he didn’t procure food before then, Dean would likely take his hard-earned money, that Giles wanted him to save, on the necessary groceries.

Distracted by all these thoughts and the ledger in front of him, Giles didn’t bother to look up as the store bell rang. He had left the door open, since Dean was due in at some point soon. Occasionally a customer didn’t read the sign and came in just because the door was unlocked. This turned out to be one of those times as Anya loudly declared, “Good morning, customers!”

“We’re not customers, my dear,” a very familiar, very unwanted voice said.

Bloody hell. Giles should have figured the Watcher’s Council would have sent Travers, though these days Quentin Travers more decided where he wanted to go and went. Doing his best to stow his annoyance, Giles looked up from his work.

Dear Lord. Travers had brought a half dozen fellow Watchers with him. Young ones, from the look of them. Giles recognized a few from passing by them at headquarters during his trip, but he knew
none of them. Another tactic on Travers’s part. Whatever this was, he was determined to keep a firm upper hand.

The half dozen other Watchers fanned out and began to evaluate what Giles had on the shelves. Travers made his way toward the round table in the center of the room.

Giles ought to offer Travers and the others tea. Not that he had anything with which to serve so many people, or tea. He apparently had spent too much time in the States, given that the only thing he kept on hand was coffee.

“Not much of a greeting,” Travers said as he leveled his judgmental stare at Giles.

“Excuse me,” Giles said. There were two tactics in dealing with Travers: groveling and telling the man to piss off. The latter was what Giles wanted to do, but Travers had information they needed and he wasn’t above getting back on the plane and not saying a word. Better to play it safe, as much as it hurt Giles to think so. “Sorry, but I wasn’t expecting you so early in the day. Or in my shop, to be honest.”

“I can see that,” Travers said gruffly. “This how you normally keep the shop? I was expecting something tidier from you, Giles.”

“Excuse you! We keep an extremely clean store. Do you have any idea how hard it is to dust when you’ve got a cursed mummy’s hand in the basement?” Anya demanded. She moved to Giles’s side.

“And that’s an item available for purchase, is it?” Travers nodded to one of his men, who promptly headed for the door.

At the same moment that the man went to lock it, Dean arrived. The Watcher scowled at him and declared, “This shop is closed.”

“Yeah,” Dean drawled. “I work here. What the hell are you doing in here?”

“Let him through,” Travers said.

The illusion that Giles had any control over his shop flew out the window at Travers’s command. Giles took his glasses off and rubbed at his forehead with his thumb, glasses dangling from his loose grip. He should have expected this. However he had hoped that the Council might see his work and respect him for a change. No luck.

Dean strode into the room with more cocky American swagger than Giles had ever seen him use before. He scanned the room of men and women in suits, took a look at Travers sitting at the table, and swung his gaze and stance toward Giles. Disregarding everyone else in the room but Giles and Anya, Dean said, “Watchers?”

“Yes,” Giles said, unable to keep the exhaustion out of his voice.

“Huh.”

In that one syllable, Dean expressed such a sheer unimpressed attitude that even Travers balked for a heartbeat. Dean didn’t see Travers take a sharp breath in, or the way the other Watchers stiffened at the disrespect, but then, that only doubled the effect.

Giles had to try, very hard, not to laugh. He almost failed, and he couldn’t help the smile.

“And who might you be?” Travers puffed up, like a great bird needing to prove it was the greater
threat.

Dean turned, still not hiding his brash disregard, and said, “None of your damn business.”

And that was a step too far into putting Travers into his place. Giles came out from behind the counter. “This is Dean Winchester. He works for me.”

“Dean Winchester, son of John Winchester, grandson of Henry Winchester?” Travers asked.

Dean froze, and any hint of American rebellion vanished. He scowled at Travers. “How the hell do you know that?”

“We do our research, boy.” Travers folded his hands and rested them on his stomach. He flicked his gaze over Dean, no doubt taking in the boy’s usual work boots, jeans, and henley as inappropriate attire for working in a shop. “Now, you’re undercover as, what, a hunter? You can drop the act.”

Undercover? Act? Travers rarely threw out inaccurate accusations. Was Dean a member of the Initiative, planted by one of Riley’s superiors? But then, Travers wouldn’t have asked about Dean’s heritage because that wouldn’t matter to the secret order of soldiers. Giles frowned in confusion and turned toward Dean.

Dean had just as confused an expression.

Well, at least Travers was wrong about something. Giles wasn’t sure if he was mollified or annoyed. He turned back toward Travers, and Dean followed suit.

Travers took another critical look at them, and then sighed. “Dear Lord, the rumors are true. How disappointing.”

“What rumors?” Dean demanded, and though Giles didn’t know John Winchester well, he was quite sure Dean had pulled off more command than that man had—which was terrifying, really.

“All in due time, my boy,” Travers said.

And whether it was Travers reasserting control, withholding information, or perhaps his utter Britishness, Dean bristled. He closed in on Travers. “Now, see here you—”

One of the men near Travers apparently didn’t like that Dean was moving and speaking in a threatening manner. He put his hand on Dean’s shoulder.

Which was a mistake. Watchers received some training in martial combat, and many were better than Giles. The young man was probably close to Dean’s age. And yet, Dean grabbed onto the man’s wrist, and there was a flurry of movement ending with Dean slamming the young man onto the table an inch from Travers and using his arm to pin him down. Of the other five Watchers, two—one woman, one man—backed away in horror, while the other three—another woman and two more men—readied themselves. They stood in stiff, practiced martial arts poses.

Travers only raised a single eyebrow and turned his attention to Giles. “Would you do us a favor and call off your employee.”

“Dean, please, let the poor boy go,” Giles said.

Dean released him and stalked over to stand behind Giles, openly glaring at the other Watchers. One of them had the good sense to cower.
Well, well, Travers didn’t have a complete upper hand. Giles wiped off his glasses and set them back in place. “I think you should get to the purpose of your visit.”

“That shall come in time, too,” Travers said. “First, I would like to speak with you alone.”

“Dean, could you drive Anya home? I think the shop will be closed today,” Giles said.

“Sure,” Dean said slowly. “Soon as these assholes clear out.”

Travers ruffled again at that. Then he made a motion toward the door and the other Watchers slithered out.

Anya grabbed her purse, but as she and Dean headed for the door, Travers said, “Wait a moment. Dean take this.” Travers pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and held it out toward Dean. When Dean took it, he added, “Meet me there at noon. Bring the necessary tools.”

Dean frowned, looked at the paper, and frowned more. He shot Giles a look which asked Do I do what this guy is saying?

Some bigger game was at play, and they needed every scrap of information. Giles nodded, so Dean gave Travers a short nod. Then he left with Anya.

Travers sighed as if he’d discovered that his morning tea had gotten cold before he had a chance to drink it, and he shook his head. “Such a pity.”

“What is?” Giles said, not bothering to hide his defensiveness. They no longer needed to keep face for anyone.

“Someone has turned one of the Men of Letters into an attack dog,” Travers said.

Giles blinked, then stared off in the direction Dean had gone. The Men of Letters was an organization of sorcerers whose knowledge of the arcane and supernatural rivaled that of the Watchers’ Council, though each organization would claim that it was superior to the other. The American branch had supposedly vanished along with their vault of greatest treasures, which of course gave the Watchers’ Council boasting rights over them. Giles had gotten into a bar fight during his training with one of the British branch. He had a thin scar on his knuckle from that fight—or one like it. Back in those days, Giles had been a bit less well-starched proper Watcher and a bit more Ripper.

But like the Watchers’ Council, the Men of Letters preferred legacy members over new ones. Travers had asked about Dean’s father, and grandfather. Apparently the Winchester bloodline was supposed to belong to the rumored American remnants.

Sam was also a member of that bloodline. Sam, who Azazel had taken a great interest in. Giles was feeling rather inadequate that he hadn’t thought to look into the boys’ families. Perhaps there was more to them, in general, than appearances let on. He took off his glasses and wiped them again.

“Suppose we’ll have to do our best to figure out where things went wrong during the evaluation,” Travers grumbled.

“I’m sorry, what?” Giles asked.

Travers stood and gave Giles a disappointed look. “Really, Rupert. You didn’t think you could ask for information from the Council without one, did you? We have to determine if you and the Slayer are ready for this intelligence. You, the shop, her friends. We have to comb through everything for a
thorough examination.”

“And you’ve got your meds,” Buffy said. She had an ever-growing mental checklist before she left the house these days. Get Dawn ready for school, get her out the door, make sure she ate breakfast, make sure Mom ate breakfast. Then there was making sure Mom was okay and if she had everything she needed.

More and more, Buffy wished her mother would stay home from work. Some mornings Joyce didn’t look right, even though the surgery had been a success. Recovery took more than a minute, and Joyce wasn’t young anymore, and she’d never had Slayer healing abilities. Honestly, having watched Dean heal helped Buffy feel better about how long it was taking her mom to get well.

“Don’t you have something more important to do today,” Joyce said as she reentered the kitchen with her empty bowl and glass. She was wearing the awful bathrobe again, the one that Buffy was beginning to think was physically attached to her mother. When Buffy went to take the bowl and glass, Joyce handed them over without complaint or insistence she was strong enough. She leaned on the counter, trying to smile though definitely not feeling that great. But she was carrying on like everything was normal, so Buffy would have to pretend, too.

Joyce continued, “Like school. I have this fanciful notion that you attend this thing called class where they give you homework and grades.”

“You’re thinking high school,” Buffy said, in the same teasing tone. “I have less actual class time and more take-care-of-Mom time. And the homework’s optional.”

“I don’t think it’s that optional,” Joyce replied, leveling one of her patented Mom looks at her. And Buffy went for her patented innocent wide-eyed looks. When her mother wasn’t convinced, Buffy shrugged and put the dishes into the dishwasher. “Some things are more important than grades.”

“Buffy, we’re paying good money for that education.”

“I know, and I’m doing my best. Really, I am. But you need me. Some.”

“All the same, I don’t want you to wind up failing because of me,” Joyce said.

“It won’t be because of you, Mom. Promise.” Buffy kissed Joyce’s cheek.

Joyce sighed. “All right then.”

The front door opened, and Buffy immediately went into red alert mode. Either Dawn was home from school for an unknown, and probably terrible, reason, or they had an invader. The door slammed a little too hard, and Joyce flinched from the noise.

Okay, whoever accidentally hurt her mom was going to hear it. Buffy squared her shoulders and headed for the front hall.

“Buffy!” Dean called up the steps, his voice at barely acceptable levels and a rage held in at the seams. Buffy came around the corner and spotted him using the railing to lean up. He was tense and his position showed off how muscular his back was. And he had a great butt. And legs.

And he was clearly upset, even before he turned around and noticed her checking him out. Anger
burned in his green eyes, though he seemed to shift gears as he realized Buffy wasn’t full of vinegar. But then anger won out. “The freaking Council is here.”

Buffy blinked. No, the Council was supposed to arrive later in the day. But Dean had already seen them, and whatever happened had pissed him off. “Did they already say they don’t know anything?”

“No. They didn’t say shit about that,” Dean said.

“My mom’s in the other room. Watch your language.”

“Oh, believe me, I am watching it. I want to strangle them. Especially their freaking leader.”

“Let me guess. Older than Giles, kind of short and pudgy, likes to make super judgmental comments, somehow makes being an American an insult without saying anything?” Buffy said.

“Acts like he owns the goddamn room,” Dean added.

“Sounds like Travers. He’s here?”

“With a half dozen goons.”

That sounded like a lot more than what was needed to hand over a little information. Buffy held onto the doorframe of the dining room, all too aware of how close Dean was and her desire to hold onto him and wish the whole awful mess away. Wish away her mom’s illness, the need for the Council, the strange woman and the problem of Dawn being the key. But she kept her distance from him. She was Buffy, the Slayer. She could handle this. Probably.

“What pissed you off?” Buffy asked.

“Other than their whole freaking attitude?” Dean scoffed. “I’m being summoned.” He held up a piece of paper. “Travers wants me to show up with ‘the necessary tools’ at noon.”

Dean’s fake British accent was awful, but sounded enough like Travers. Buffy took the piece of paper and glanced at the business name and address. “He wants to see you at a gun range?”

“He knows I’m a hunter. And for hunters—”

“Guns are part of the trade.” Buffy didn’t like it, but she knew that. She pursed her lips. “But why does he want to meet you at a gun range? And to bring guns?”

“I don’t know.”

A sinking feeling was filling Buffy’s gut. “I should get to the Magic Box and check on Giles.”

“I can drive you,” Dean offered.

Buffy wanted to keep him from the Watcher’s Council as much as possible, but she also wanted the emotional back up of having someone on her side. Of course the others would be, but Dean comforted her in ways the others didn’t. The last few weeks had turned them into more of a duo, and she needed that today. “Let me tell my mom and we’ll get going.”

Dean nodded, and let some of his pent up anger out in a long breath.

After a quick goodbye, and a third check that Mom didn’t need anything, Buffy grabbed her jacket
and was out the door. One bonus of riding in the Impala was the roar of the engine. She’d never been big on cars, though she suspected her new boyfriend was very much up on them. She’d seen him tinkering with the Impala just the once, but there was a way he gripped the wheel, the way he didn’t settle down after a long patrol until he was back in his car, that made Buffy wonder which he loved more: Sam, or it. She didn’t dare think she qualified for the love category with him yet, no matter how she felt about him.

And she so wasn’t in love with him. Yet. But glancing over at him, seeing how worked up he was about the Council’s arrival, she couldn’t help feeling a little more warm fuzzy glow about him.

They arrived at the Magic Box in near record time, and the swing of the Impala’s doors drew the attention of the obvious Watcher standing in front of the door. Buffy scowled at the young man in the very tweed-ish suit and headed right for the door.

He stepped in front of her. When she glared him down, he backed up a step, but then stood straighter. Well, they certainly had brought along ones stronger than Wesley had been at the start. She narrowed her gaze at him. “Do you know who I am?”

The Watcher lifted his chin. “The Slayer.”

“Right. So, you want to get out of the way seeing as how Travers is here to talk to me?” Buffy demanded.

“I will get out of your way, of course, Ms. Summers,” the young man said. “But him, no.”

Dean clenched his jaw. He looked about ready to throw the Watcher through the window.

Buffy put her hand on Dean’s arm, near his shoulder. He glanced her way and she said quietly, “I’ll be fine. And you don’t have to go anywhere.” She nodded at the large window.

Dean’s gaze went past her to the indicated window and then he nodded. One great thing about Dean’s upbringing was that Buffy didn’t have to do much in the verbal discussion of tactics area. She waited until Dean took a step back before going through the door. At least if Travers was going to pull the same crap he had before, she had back up already on call.

“Seems as though you’re making a tidy profit, though not as large as you could be making,” Travers said as Buffy walked into the Magic Box. Other Watchers stood around the room, but Giles and Travers were at the table. Travers had Giles’s ledgers in front of him.

The taste of that awful birthday—the defeat, the bitter fear, the sheer exhaustion after it all ended—filled Buffy’s mouth again. The rage she felt after Faith’s body swap and subsequent arrest by the Council despite her pleas made her pulse jump. What she really wanted to do was tell Travers to hop back on his plane and get the hell out of her town.

But the Council wouldn’t show up like this unless they had the information she needed. So Buffy bit her cheek and stormed down the three steps into the shop.

“Ah, Ms. Summers,” Travers said, like he was some school teacher getting ready to hand out a test. She hated tests.

Buffy moved to Giles side and tried not to get upset over how dismayed and defeated he was. Travers couldn’t have been in town long, and he was pushing everyone around. She wasn’t going to bow down to him. Not until she had to. She folded her arms over her chest. “Travers. I hear you have some information for me. What I don’t get is why you want Dean to show up at a gun range.”
“That’s part of our larger examinations,” Travers said. “You have made it a point, in the past, to tell us that your friends are part of how you conduct business. As such, we have to determine if they are able to keep pace with you and this world you have sucked them into.”

“Examinations? Like, more than one?” Buffy asked.

“You’ll need to undergo a few, but to be honest, mostly we will be conducting interviews, to see how you’ve progressed since last we worked together,” Travers replied. “Your sister, and mother—”

“Are not part of my slaying life, and you’re going to leave them the hell alone,” Buffy said sharply. “Sam, too.”

“You don’t get to have a word about Sam.”

“No, but Dean and I do,” Giles said. “And you’ll find we agree. Sam is a high school student. Nothing more.”

How Giles managed to say that with a calm face, Buffy couldn’t guess. But she could keep her scowl going and not give away that Giles was bluffing when it came to Sam.

Travers nodded and waved a hand. “Fair enough, I suppose. We have our work cut out for us as it is. We can’t be here too long. Work to do in England.”

Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad then. Buffy tried to sound nonchalant. “How long do you think it’ll take?”

“A day, or two. Certainly no more than three.”

Scratch that. Travers meant to torture them. Buffy squared her shoulders. “Okay. So. What do we do first?”

“Rumor has it you’re still in college,” Travers said. “As education is important, you should see to that first. It will give us time to conduct a bit of business. But come back here after your classes are done.”

She really hated his condescending tone. “As long as Giles is okay with that.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Great. So she was going to go off to class as if there weren’t a whole bunch of Watchers gathered to get judgy with her friends. Buffy put her hand on Giles shoulder and squeezed. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Giles nodded and Buffy tried to feel bolstered by the opportunity to leave. But Giles was extra pensive and reserved. This was not looking good for them. If only the Watchers Council would just dump their info and go.

But no. They were going to drag it out, and Buffy had the glory of class before facing their torture. Yippee.
Dean crumpled the slip of paper in his hand and tossed it onto the Impala’s dashboard. But in case the Watchers got snooty about the way he kept his car, he couldn’t leave it there. So instead he grabbed it and shoved it back in his pocket.

Time to see what these British bastards wanted with him. Dean climbed out of the Impala. Before he had a chance to shut the door, Travers and another two Watchers emerged from the gun range and strode toward him.

“Mr. Winchester,” Travers said, looking at his pocket watch, “you’re running behind.”

“I’m on hunter time,” Dean replied.

“I suppose we should be glad you showed at all, then,” one of the men, a guy with a beaky nose, said.

Dean didn’t have a good comeback for that, and, not wanting to wind up feeling stupid in front of the British Invasion, shut his car door instead of speaking.

“You were told to bring equipment,” Travers said. “Care to show us what you brought?”

“Yeah, sure,” Dean drawled. He walked around to the back of the Impala and opened her trunk. Beaky Nose made a noise of derision when he saw what appeared to be an empty trunk. Meeting the nosy Watcher’s glare and holding it, Dean opened the secret panel and revealed the true trunk of the Impala. “Outfitted in what I like to call the Sunnydale Special.”

Travers and his two Watcher stepped closer and looked inside. There were the standard two shotguns, an iron fire poker, machete, the handguns, and a few types of ammo. Then, with Giles’s suggestions, Dean had filled the trunk with more goodies. Double the amount of holy water he used to carry, a good dozen stakes sharpened, a crossbow and bolts, six crosses of varying sizes, and a really sharp axe.

Travers picked up one of the canteens of holy water. “Blessed, I assume.”

“Damn straight,” Dean replied proudly.

Travers raised an eyebrow. “Catholic or Protestant?”

“Got a mix of both,” Dean said.

Travers made a hmph noise. “And how long have you been training to be a hunter?”

“Hard to pin it down, really,” Dean replied.

“Well, do try,” Travers said, making the implication that trying was, of course, the least effort Dean could do but he expected him to fail at even that.

Dean cleared his throat. Winchesters didn’t talk. Even when Dad took him to a hunter’s bar, which was rare, talking was the one thing they didn’t do. Boast about a kill. Pass on knowledge of a hunt. But get into the gritty details? Naw. And from the way Giles and the others reacted to his lack of a
typical education, these Watchers were only going to get more judgmental more quickly.

Then screw them. Dean raised his chin. He might not be what anyone wanted, but like hell was he going to let them see it dug under his skin. He put his hand on top of the trunk, and made his voice as casual as possible. “Some kids finger paint in kindergarten. Some learn how to field strip a Browning.”

Travers picked up the machete and inspected its edge. “I doubt you learned that in a class.”

“What do schools really teach worth knowing, anyway?” Dean attempted to joke.

“Grammar, for a start,” Beaky Nose said.

“Phillip,” Travers said, with a hint of disapproval in his voice. “Given the boy’s lineage, he was never going to have a normal education.”

“That Men of Letters thing no one’s explained to me yet,” Dean said.

“More than that. Your mother’s family,” Travers said. “In all honesty, it’s no surprise that you’ve wound up at the Slayer’s side. But it does make us wonder if there are bigger signs that we’re missing.”

Once the flash of shock passed, anger quickly took its place. Dean snapped the lid down of the Impala. “What the hell do you mean about my mother’s family?”

Travers raised an eyebrow, and then looked surprised himself. “You honestly don’t know? I would’ve thought, given the circles your family runs in—no one’s ever brought it up? Not once?”

“Can you ever answer a freaking question?” Dean demanded.

“All in due time,” Travers said as he straightened his shoulders. “Now, bring along the crossbow and one of the handguns.”

And just like that, Travers turned his back and walked toward the door of the gun range. Beaky Nose—Phillip—didn’t, but the other Watcher did the same.

Dean knew exactly what Dad would do. Get in the car and burn rubble into Sunnydale was far, far behind him. Hell, he had already. But then Dean wouldn’t know whatever the hell Travers knew. Memories rushed through, like pieces of microfiche. He kept them spinning, looking for the parts that should stand out. No one talked about his mother’s family. The most he’d gotten out of Dad when he was too young to stop asking questions was that his grandparents had died long before he was born. There’d been one guy, at one bar, who’d tried asking him about the Campbells, and gone away disappointed when Dean had no information.

Over the years, driving down so many roads, crashing with so many strangers, Dean never really questioned the lack of aunts and uncles. Dad hadn’t had any siblings. Grandma had passed a long time ago, and his grandfather gone when Dad was a kid. But his mother and father hadn’t sprung from nowhere. Somewhere out there, Dean might have more family. More than Sam, Dad, and, though he wasn’t blood, Bobby. And those families might have legacies.

The man with answers, Travers, was about as far from family as Dean could imagine, and he had more information than Dean had ever dared dream about. And now Dean had to impress him to get that information.

As Dean scrambled to unlock the trunk and grab the needed weapons, he muttered, “Son of a bitch.”
Glory dropped the last component into the giant bowl. A great puff of smoke roiled up and assaulted her nose. Everything on this plane of existence stunk, so she wasn’t surprised that the summoning spell did as well. She hated the smell, but she wasn’t surprised. After waving away the cloud of noxious odor, she put her hands on the table.

“Well? Where are you?” Glory demanded. She glanced around the large living room. Spacious couches, check. Minions hovering in the archway to the foyer, annoying check. But the demon she’d called on? Nowhere to be seen. Time was demons like Azazel would have begged for a moment in her magnificence. Begged. With offerings.

Now he wasn’t even answering her damn summons. The nerve!

Glory slammed her hands on the table again.

“Settle down, princess,” came the demon’s voice from behind her.

Because this demon loved to play the upper hand. She reigned in hell. And he had the audacity to treat her like a common Pit demon. Glory spun to face him. “Settle down. You come when I summon.”

“Yes, your highness.” Azazel laughed as he made a mock bow.

When she had her full power back, she was going to have a serious talk with Lucifer about how his demons lacked the proper respect for one as powerful as she. And then she was going to rip Lucifer’s head off and spit it at the Heavens just to prove she wasn’t a weakling anymore.

“My Key,” she said.

“Working on it,” Azazel replied dismissively.

Working on it no longer cut it for her. Her minions had made it clear that morning. She didn’t have years to play an extremely long game of hunting for the Key. Months, at most. Maybe. She sucked in a deep breath. “Well, Pitty my friend, I need my Key. And I need it now.”

Azazel’s face soured, and his teasing manner shifted to annoyed. “Those monks hid it too damn well.”

“But we know who has to know where it is. The Slayer,” Glory snapped. “So break a few skulls and get an answer out of her.”

“She is smack dab in the middle of my most promising experiment,” Azazel said. “Soon as I get a few more signs, I can move on her.”

“I want my Key.”

“And I want my Lord.” Azazel growled and took a step forward.

His Lord. Huh. Glory tilted her head. He was still using her minions to follow some kid. So the kid had something to do with Lucifer. Interesting.
Azazel must have realized he let loose a crucial detail, because suddenly his joker smile was back. He took on a placating tone. “Your worship, I understand the importance of ritual, more than you can imagine. And I hold up my end of a deal. I will find your key. I just need more time.”

“Time I may not have,” Glory said. “I can’t wait for you to finish this experiment, whatever it is.”

“Well, that’s a shame. Interfere with my plans and I’ll consider our deal null and void.”

“Then you’ll have to get your own demons to do your dirty work.”

Azazel flashed a grin. “Close to having everything in place on that front.”

Damn it. If he didn’t need her, then he would be less likely to deliver what he promised. Glory tightened her grip on the table, and the wood splintered under her fingers. “My ritual has to take place at a certain time. If it doesn’t work, then you don’t get what you want either.”

“You’re not the only way to complete my plans, sweetheart. Just the most expedient,” he replied.

Glory leveled her glare on him. In times past, the mere hint of anger sent most demons running for the hills. Predictably, Azazel did nothing. So she turned from glaring to smiling, and took pleasure at the hint of wariness that entered his expression. “My minions have been keeping a faithful watch on your little experiment. Experiments, I should say. And don’t think you’re the only one with friends. I’ve reached out to a few others, and they in turn have found more of your children. How complete would your plan get if I wiped out a generation?”

Azazel blanched. Then he growled and hissed, “You touch any of them and I will find your Key and break it into a million pieces in front of you.”

“Is that going to get your lord out of the Pit any faster? What do you think he’ll do for your failure? For taking so long to break him free? That you made a deal with me in the first place?” Glory wanted to laugh in his face, but that might be overkill. She did it anyway.

“Sweetheart, you don’t know who you’re trying to screw over.”

“Oh, I’m not screwing anyone over. You have my minions working for you when they should be helping me find my Key. So hold up your end of the bargain, or I’ll consider our deal null and void. And then I’ll use the ashes of your experiments to fertilize my lawn. Got it?”

Azazel snarled again, but he bowed, and faked a smile at her. “I live to serve.”

As Azazel left, Glory suppressed the urge to throw something at the back of his head. She knew exactly who he served, and it wasn’t her. Which was fine, so long as he held up his end of the bargain. But she also couldn’t afford to wait around on him to deliver. Not when he so clearly only cared about his own goals.

The Slayer and her friends likely had the answers she needed.

Glory could get them.
Just a little head's up, I'm going to do my best to stay on schedule, but I might wind up skipping next week's. Work deadline is pressing and I'm finally making headway there. But I'm really hoping to have it for you lot.

End Notes

I'm going to do the best I can to keep weekly updates going for a while, but I can't make promises. My day job includes my creative brain and I don't always have the energy to write. Hopefully my new tactics on time management will help.

I can tell you that there are miles and miles worth of words before I reach the end of this story (there is a sequel beeeeeeegging to happen). 5/29/19

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