A Changing of the Guard

by Chrissel

Summary

When the PTB realize they have backed the wrong horse, a familiar face is sent to make things right.
A Higher Plane

“He has been cursed with a soul to show him the errors of his ways. He was sent to the Slayer to be her partner and protector, yet he forsakes his duty to cater to his own selfishness. We sent him a seer to direct him to those in need, yet he charges them money for his help. He refuses to see his own responsibility for his actions prior to his curse. By insisting he and his soulless self are different entities, he can never truly atone for his crimes and makes a mockery of his ‘Champion’ status. The time has come to choose a new champion.”

The assembled higher beings could do nothing but agree with their companion’s assessment, still one voiced his concern.

“He is the only vampire with a soul. Who else could possibly be considered as the Cursed One’s successor?”

“Leave that to me,” Joyce Summers told them. "I know exactly who to choose."

~*~*~*~

On a highway north of Los Angeles, a former watcher headed back to the Hellmouth.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Notes: Begins directly after the episode All the Way, with the exception of Willow using Lethe’s Bramble to erase her fight with Tara.

Anyá was blissfully rearranging leftover Halloween themed merchandise on the display tables near the front of the store when she noticed Xander hanging the sale sign on the picture window.

“Oh no, honey! That sign needs to be lower. We want it to be at eye level so it catches the attention of all the consumers walking past. If you hang it that high, no one will know what excellent deals we’re offering, and no one will want to come in to spend all their lovely money. I doubt we’ll be able to match yesterday’s profits but a girl’s gotta try, right?”

“Yes, dear,” he said, muttering “don’t want those poor consumers to have to look up”. Louder, he added, “I’m sure you’ll do great today. sweetie. I have faith in your dazzling saleswomanship and exceptional capitalism. But I’m going to have to leave for work in a few minutes, so is there anything else you need from me before I go?”

“Well, all the discount signs need to be set up on the display tables, and the shelf merchandise needs to be dusted but I suppose I can take care of that.” She beckoned him over. “How about just a kiss for your fiancée?” she asked, waving her left hand in the air.

“That one the Xan-man can handle!” He walked over and put action to words.

Halfway through their kiss, the bell over the shop door rang and Buffy and Giles entered the store.

"Okay, okay already. I'll talk to Dawn about the evils of dating vampires. But, I reserve the right to tell you I told you so when she throws the whole 'Angel thing' back in my face. I don't exactly have the high ground here, ya know."

"As long as you try, that's all I ask." Giles replaced his, now clean, glasses on his face as Buffy walked to the back of the store and entered the training room.

Giles watched Buffy leave the room with a frown on his face then turned to face Anya, who had begun dusting the shelves while he wrapped up his conversation with Buffy. "Good morning, Xander, Anya. How goes the post-holiday sales planning?"

"Oh Giles, I'm so glad you're here. I've finished cleaning up from yesterday and I've marked all the Halloween merchandise down for quick sales. Do you think it's too early to start promoting all the items people might consider for Christmas presents?"

"And on that note, I'm off to work." With a final kiss to his fiancee, Xander exited the store.

Giles and Anya spent the next several minutes discussing the pros and cons of advertisements, merchandise positioning and pricing until Buffy poked her head out the training room door.

“Hey, Giles! Do I have time to get a workout in before you want to start training?” Buffy had changed into a pair of stretchy yoga pants and a form fitting camisole in preparation for the plans she
and Giles had made for that morning.

“Ah yes, Buffy, please go ahead and commence without me. Anya and I have enough to go over out here for some time yet.”

Anya did not look happy with that information but put a bright smile on her face, nonetheless.

“Please do try to keep the crashing and loud noises down, Buffy. The last time you used the training room during business hours you scared away some of my best customers.”

“Hey – that wasn’t my fault! Those Shimmery Arnold demons came out of nowhere and were practically impossible to fight!”

"Shimarld demons. Honestly, how you manage to fight demons every night without ever learning something as simple as their names is beyond me,” Anya huffed.

Seeing the potential for ugliness, Giles quickly interrupted the conversation before it got out of hand.

“Please go ahead, Buffy. I’ll be with you presently.”

The next several hours passed without incident. Giles trained with Buffy while Anya manned - womaned - the store. At noon, Willow and Tara entered the shop just as Buffy and Giles finished up in the training room.

"Hi guys! What's up? Brains all full of collegiate knowledge?" Buffy asked.

"So full I think some of it's leaking out of my ears at this point," Tara joked. "I have a philosophy paper to work on, but I think I can get a good start on it here before I have to hit the library for some resource books."

Willow smiled lovingly at her girl and said, "I just need to reorganize my notes from this morning's classes. I have a test next week that won't study for itself."

They both took their seats at the research table and started unpacking their book bags. Just as they were digging into their homework, the shop door bell rang, catching everyone's attention.

"Good afternoon, everyone. I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

Buffy blinked. "Wes? What are you doing here? Not that it's not nice to see you — it is. Nice to see you, that is. But why are you here? Is there something wrong in LA? Is Angel OK?"

Willow got caught up in Buffy's panic. "Oh, my goddess, has Angel lost his soul again? You don't need the soul curse performed or anything do you, 'cause that would be of the majorly bad! Anya, do we have any Orbs of Thessula?"

Wesley quickly interceded in an attempt to stem the panic. "No, no! Nothing's wrong in LA, at least not to my knowledge. I, er, thought Giles might have mentioned something." He looked at Giles expectantly.

"Yes, well. That is, I haven't found the right opportunity to bring the subject up quite yet." The glasses once again came off for polishing. "And I rather thought you weren't planning on arriving for another week, Wesley?"

“I was able to wrap things up more quickly than expected and decided to head up here directly. I trust that won't be an issue? I had assumed the additional time would be beneficial…”
Giles cut him off before he could finish his sentence. “Yes, yes, quite, I hadn't actually broached the subject with anyone here but I suppose now is as good a time as any.” Gile’s hand twitched slightly upward. He frowned, shoved it in his pocket and jingled his keys briefly, frowned again, and then swept his hand back out to clasp his lapel firmly. “The thing is, I'm... ah, headed back to England and I plan to stay ... indefinitely. There are plans that were set in motion while I was there over the summer that need my attention and…”

While everyone else just stared at Giles in confusion, Anya was the first to react. “For real this time? ’Cause honest to Pete, a young shopkeeper's heart can only take so much ... I mean, not that I want you to go—”

Xander and Willow interrupted. “But we just got Buffy back!” “Who’s going to help us with the researching and, and, we don't want you to go!”

Giles had been watching Buffy through all this. She hadn't said a word, just stood there looking betrayed.

“You’re leaving me? Now? Why? What did I do wrong? I can fix it whatever it is; you don’t have to leave?”

He tried to soften the blow. “I'll only ever be a phone call away should you need me, but Wesley has graciously agreed to move to Sunnydale. He should be an invaluable resource for both research and patrolling. He's had extensive experience in LA, both with Angel’s endeavors and, more recently, on his own. I'm sure you'll find him more than capable of filling my shoes.”

“Sure,” Buffy said, unenthusiastically. “Welcome back to Sunnydale.”

Willow picked up on one part of Giles explanation. “So, wait — you left Angel Investigations?”

“Ah, yes, I did. We had a difference of opinion several months ago and I struck out on my own. However large Los Angeles may be, however, it's not big enough to comfortably support two supernatural investigation establishments. Giles contacted me over the summer and proposed I should move back here to help with the Hellmouth. After I heard of Buffy's resurrection, I spoke to Giles again and he confirmed I would still be needed, so…” Wesley shrugged as his explanation tapered off.

“Yes, well, since I knew my commitments in England would eventually necessitate my return, I felt having Wesley here would be a most welcome addition.” Giles continued.

Buffy seemed to have ignored everything after Wesley mentioned his disagreement with Angel. “So, what exactly did you do to make Angel fire you?”

Wesley stood taller, straightening his shoulders back and replied, “Absolutely nothing. Angel and I parted ways after I decided I could no longer condone certain actions of his.”

Buffy stood with her arms crossed in front of her and lifted a single brow, obviously waiting for a more detailed explanation.

Wesley sighed. “Some time ago, Wolfram and Hart, a law firm Angel has butted heads with more than once, decided to resurrect Darla. They had hoped to replicate the conditions which led to the lifting of Angel’s curse. She was resurrected as human; however, she was still dying of the same disease she had at the time of her original turning. Angel was unable to save her before Wolfram and Hart enlisted Drusilla to turn her again. This enraged Angel to the point where he locked Darla and Drusilla in a wine cellar with a dozen or so of the Wolfram and Hart lawyers. It was a bloodbath. I
understand Angel was grieving the fact that Drusilla killed and turned Darla, but I can't condone his actions or work with someone who would willingly facilitate such a massacre.”

A look of horror had slowly crept over Buffy's face as Wesley told his tale. As he finished, she ran out the front door of the shop without another word.
Chapter 3

Hyperion Hotel, Los Angeles

Angel and Gunn were covered in a thick, orange slime when they walked into the lobby of the hotel. Neither was particularly in the mood for chatting before getting cleaned up, but Cordelia didn’t leave them much of a choice.

“I’m guessing by your new looks, you were able to find and kill the giant slime monster I saw?”

Angel sighed as he watched Gunn head up the stairs to a hot shower. “Yes, Cordy. Of course, it might have helped if we’d known cutting its head off would cause it to explode.”

“Well if these visions keep up, it feels like it's going to be my head that explodes. It's not like this is any fun for me either, Broodypants!”

From a darkened corner of the lobby a nasal voice said, “No worries there then, doll. Neither you nor the big guy are gonna have to deal with any more visions or what comes with them.”

“Whistler!” Angel growled. “What are you doing here?” He hefted the sword he'd been cleaning demon guts from a moment earlier in a threatening manner.

“Easy, big guy! I'm just the messenger here.”

“Fine. What's the message?”

“Well, it seems the guys and gals upstairs are less than impressed with the way you're going about the whole champion gig. They've revoked your status, and since the cheerleader over there won't be getting anymore visions, you're both free to do what you like from here on out.”

“Revoked my status… Less than impressed… What the hell are you talking about?” Angel rushed toward Whistler, intending to take him down, but met nothing but air.

Whistler popped back into the other side of the room just as Angel hit the wall. “Sorry bud, there won't be any killing of this messenger! As for the rest of it, let's just say you fumbled the ball one time too many when you let Darla and Dru eat those lawyers. They weren't thrilled with the rest of your screw ups, but up until the wine cellar incident they were willing to let things go in the hopes you'd wise up on your own. But between that and risking the curse by screwing Darla, you lost what little support you had left upstairs.”

“You did WHAT? I asked you if you slept with that diseased whore and you outright lied to me! How dare you?” Cordelia threw a nearby research book at Angel, narrowly missing his head.

“Cordy, can we please focus here?”

“I'll give you focus!” This time her aim was true and the heavy book hit Angel in the back, right between his shoulder blades.

Restfield Cemetery, Sunnydale

Buffy slammed open the crypt door and stormed inside the dimly lit room. Spike was nowhere to be
seen, at least on the upper level. As her eyes became accustomed to the low light, she thought about how he’d really made an effort to make this level pretty homey. Aside from the sarcophagus centerpiece, the rest of it was rather… nice, in a shabby chic way. He had a couch and an easy chair set up in front of a TV. Of course, the TV had all sorts of tangled looking wires hanging out the back of it, presumably how he got the electricity and cable hooked in. Then there were the candles placed strategically around the room. When lit, they provided a soft glow that brightened the room without creating a harsh glare.

Buffy was all too familiar with harsh glare. It seemed like everywhere she went, things were too bright or too loud or just too… much. It was only here, with Spike’s quiet company, in a dimly lit crypt, that Buffy felt truly comfortable anymore. She refused to think about what that said about her. It was hard enough getting up and actually living each day without trying to analyze things best left ignored. Things had only just started to become more bearable, and it should probably concern her more that that was due, in part at least, to Spike and their talks. But, lately he’d been more of a friend to her than her actual friends, and now she had to deal with this latest betrayal, from Giles, of all people.

As she sat there pondering the mess that was her life these days, Spike silently appeared. From where, she didn’t even know. She really was going to have to look into that bell. Knowing him, he might even wear it if it came with that collar he’d mentioned. Bad Buffy. Focus time.

“What’s happened? Is it the Bit?”

“Not this time, thank god.”

“Have you thought about wrapping her in bubble wrap and handcuffing her to your wrist? Swear she’s giving Harris a run for his money when it comes to being a demon magnet.”

When that didn’t even get a half a smile from her, he knew whatever it was, it was serious. He sat next to her on the couch and quietly asked, “What is it, love?”

To her utter mortification, Buffy started bawling. Spike awkwardly put his arm around her murmuring comforting nonsense, something he unfortunately had over a century of practice in. Just not usually with this woman.

When she was able to speak again, she explained everything that had happened at the Magic Box.

“So Giles is leaving me —with Wesley to babysit me of all people. And Angel apparently had no problem letting Dru and Darla eat a room full of lawyers. Not to mention the fact I must have missed the call that Darla was back among the unliving. I mean she did try to kill me; that’s the kind of information I’d like to have. At least, this is all according to what Wesley says. But Angel fired him or he left Angel or something. So… how much can I really believe of that, I don’t know.”

“Uh, well…” Spike scratched the back of his head and looked away.

“What?”

“Well, you know when Dru was here last year?”

“You mean do I remember you chaining us both up and threatening to kill one of us? Yeah, I think I have a vague memory of that.”

“While she was here, she, uh, might have mentioned some of that happening.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”
“Well, if you recall, you weren’t exactly in the mood to chat with yours truly after that incident! ‘Sides, you know Dru and her riddle-speak. It was all ‘Grandmum is my daughter now, and the Angel beast fed us some yummy treats. What was I supposed to tell you?’”

“Ugh! So… you think it’s true? Angel really did that? Darla’s really alive –unalive — whatever, again?”

“Yeah, love. Probably is.”

“But… how? His soul…? No, never mind. I don’t wanna deal with this right now. What I really can’t understand is Giles. How can he leave me now? I’m barely hanging on day to day. I need him.”

“Have you told him, yet?” Spike asked.

“Told him what, that I need him? He should know that!”

“Told him WHY you need him, love. Told him where you were when those so-called friends of yours pulled you back?”

“No! I don’t want anyone to know. It’s not their fault. They didn’t know.”

“Maybe not, love, but until they do, they’re not going to know what you’re going through. And that includes Rupert.”

“But, I just don’t understand, why does he want to leave? I’m back now. How can he move back to England?”

“Cause he’s a pillock!”

“Spike…”

“Listen, love, I’m not excusing him, but, you weren’t really there that morning. Seeing your broken body lying there at the bottom of that tower…” He broke off, not able to finish.

She looked away.

He cleared his throat. “Anyway, it was hard on him — on all of us. I think maybe he feels like he can’t go through that again. He knows, better than most, what a slayer’s life expectancy is likely to be, and he’s just too big a coward to face it, is all.”

When she looked back at him, there were silent tears running down her cheeks. He pulled her back into his arms and let her cry it out on his shoulder once again.

Hyperion Hotel, Los Angeles

By the time Angel had reduced Cordelia’s anger down to a simmer, Whistler was tapping his foot and checking his watch. “Can we get on with this folks? I’m on a timetable here.”

“Fine,” Angel growled, menacingly. “Why don’t you explain to me what exactly I need to do to get the Powers to make me a champion again. I suppose they want me to dust Darla and Dru? I don’t even know where they’ve gone, but I suppose I could track them down if I had to.”

“Well, yeah brain trust, that might be a bright idea, but only because of the thousands of humans you’d save from becoming their dinner. ‘Course it won’t make a difference to your status with the PTB.”
“What do they want, then? What am I supposed to do?”

“Nothing, big guy. Nothing at all. You’re done as far as they’re concerned. No more champion, no more road to redemption. You failed the test. That whole revoking thing? It’s irrevocable. The new champion and his seer have already been chosen. They’ve even got a new liaison to the Powers. Notifying you is my last job before I retire. And since that’s done, Sayonara buddy!”

With that last bit of information, Whistler disappeared from the hotel, leaving Angel and Cordelia gaping in shock.

Freshly showered, Gunn came down the stairs, took one look at his coworkers and asked, “So, what did I miss?”

**Magic Box, Sunnydale**

“I must apologize, Wesley, I should have prepared for your arrival more thoroughly.” Giles stood uncomfortably watching the door Buffy had just stormed through.

“Apologies aren’t necessary, it seems to be my early arrival that set things off the way they did. If I had given you advance notice of my change in plans, things may have gone more smoothly,” Wesley offered.

The others were still having trouble adjusting to Giles’ news.

Willow was the first to speak, “Giles, I don’t understand! Buffy’s back now! How can you leave?”

Giles had just started to formulate a response when Anya cried out, falling to her knees and bringing her hands up to her head.

“Anya, are you quite all right?” Giles asked, starting towards her.

Wesley stopped him. “Wait just a moment, I think…”

He didn’t have a chance to finish his thought before Anya came back to herself and stood up again. “Well, THAT was unpleasant,” she announced, smoothing her dress down from where it had ridden up as she fell. “I certainly hope they’ll give me more warning in the future. What if I’d been up on the ladder adjusting merchandise or walking down the street? Anything could have happened!”

While everyone just stared at her in confusion, Tara was the one to speak up and ask the question on all of their minds. “Anya, what just happened? Are you okay?”

“Oh yes, thank you, I’m fine! I just wasn’t expecting it and it knocked me down for a minute.”

“What did? What was it?” Willow asked.

“A vision,” Wesley answered for Anya. “That’s was it was, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Anya replied. “And we need to get everyone here as soon as possible. An emissary from the Powers That Be will be arriving soon to make an announcement, and Buffy and Dawn would be very upset if they miss her!”

“If they miss the emissary?” Giles asked. “Who is this emissary?”

“Joyce!” Anya replied happily.
Chapter 4

Magic Box, Sunnydale

Giles asked. “Who is this emissary?”

“Joyce!” Anya replied happily.

Willow was incensed. “Anya, you can NOT go telling Buffy and Dawn that their mom is coming back! She’s dead! Trust me, that’s not something easily reversed!”

“Much as we’d all like things to be different,” Giles said, “Willow is correct. Joyce is gone and, recent experiences excepted, that is generally irreversible.”

“Oh! Unless I’m supposed to do the spell again to resurrect…”

A loud chorus of “No!” broke out among all the rest of the group gathered in the Magic Box. Tara, in particular looked ill at Willow’s abortive suggestion.

“If I may,” Wesley began, interrupting the chaos in the room, “Anya, would you mind fully describing the content of your vision so we may have a better understanding of what exactly you saw?”

“Well, first I saw Angel and Cordelia talking with a strange looking man in a fedora—men don’t really wear fedoras anymore you know. I used to think them quite fashionable back in the day, but on this little man it just looked odd—”

“Anya, focus, please.” Giles asked. “Could you tell what they were talking about? Or hear what they were saying?”

“No,” she said sadly, “there was no sound. But, it was clear they weren’t pleased with what he was saying.”

“How could you tell?” asked Wesley, familiar with Angel’s customary lack of facial expressions.

“Well, Angel tried to attack the little man and Cordelia was throwing books at Angel. That made me assume it wasn’t a happy chat. Unless that’s how they normally behave?” she asked Wesley innocently.

“Er, no. That would seem to indicate you’re correct about the tone of their conversation,” Wesley agreed.

“Is that when Joyce showed up?” asked Willow.

“No, not there. The scene changed from Angel and Cordelia to the Magic Box. It was nighttime, I remember because Spike was here—not that he doesn’t show up during daylight sometimes too, but it was definitely nighttime at this point. We were all here, even Xander, which also means it’s nighttime since if it was during the day he’d be at work—”
“Anya, please! Concentrate.” Giles’ interruption was clearly evidence that his frustration was boiling over at this point. “We’ve ascertained to my satisfaction that whatever it is happened in the evening. Can we move on, please?”

Anya frowned, annoyed at being interrupted yet again. “Fine. It was dark out. Everyone was here. Joyce appeared out of thin air, talked for a few minutes, then left the same way she came. The end. Happy?” She grabbed her feather duster and angrily began dusting the shelves.

Giles took a deep breath, in preparation for placating Anya enough to get more information out of her, but Wesley beat him to it.

“Anya, I’m sorry if you feel we are rushing you through your description of your vision. I’m curious about something though, maybe you can help me understand? When Cordelia receives visions, they come with quite debilitating headaches. Are you not suffering the same after-effects?”

“Huh, no, I’m really not. Maybe it’s because I used to be a vengeance demon? The few human seers I knew never lived very long, you know. The headaches eventually got so bad it killed them, usually by violently blowing out the back of their head. Demon seers, even if they were only halfies, never seemed to have that problem.” Anya’s explanation was characteristically blunt, but Giles picked up on one part of what she said.

“Halfies?”

“Yes, Giles, you know. People who are half human and half demon.”

“How —”

“The usual way of course, one parent is human and the other is a demon. Honestly, what do they teach you at that Council of yours? The demon half usually makes the person stronger, strong enough to handle visions anyway. Can we not talk about this when Xander gets here? I really don’t want him believing I’m anything other than entirely human. I think I’m all human now but with the way I was able to handle that vision…” She trailed off uncertainly.

“I fail to see any need to bring the subject up, Anya. I’m sure it’s just a result of your former demon status.” Wesley reassured her. “Would it be possible for you to provide us any additional details from your vision? Particularly related to what is to happen here, in the Magic Box, with Joyce?”

“Well, there really isn’t that much more to tell. She seemed to be bringing news of some sort and everyone was kind of confused and then the vision ended. I didn’t see anything past that,” Anya relented.

"Wesley, you have experience with this type of vision through Cordelia, is that correct?" Giles asked. "How reliable would you consider the contents of these visions to be?"

"In all my history with Cordelia's visions, none has provided false information. Frequently, we have trouble interpreting them and they can sometimes be vague with respect to details. But, the events they do detail have never failed to come to pass." Wesley had no qualms about confirming the veracity of the contents of the visions.

"Well, I agree we need to try and make sure Buffy and Dawn are here this evening. Under the circumstances, however, I believe it would be best if we omitted any mention of the possibility that Joyce may be making an appearance. Even if the vision does prove to be accurate, there is no
guarantee that the events portrayed will be occurring tonight," Giles said, concern for the girls’ feelings evident.

Willow spoke up, then, "Well, Dawn is supposed to meet Buffy here after school, so we'll just need to come up with a reason to keep them both here as long as we can."

**Restfield Cemetery, Sunnydale**

"Feeling any better yet, love?" Spike asked.

"I suppose," Buffy answered sullenly. "There's not an awful lot I can do about any of this right now anyway. If Giles wants to leave, I can't exactly stop him. At least, we'll have Wesley available for research. He seems a lot different now than he did when I was in high school."

"How's that then, love?"

"Well, for one, it looks like he's grown a backbone! He was a wimpy wuss back in high school, but, today, when I accused him of having been fired by Angel, he had no trouble telling me off and explaining exactly why HE was the one who left Angel, not the other way around. I don't know, something about the way he holds himself makes him look like he might even be good to have in a fight."

"That'll make a nice change from Rupert and his concussive habits, won’t it?" Spike joked.

Buffy managed to crack a smile, "Maybe I can blame him leaving on brain damage from all the times he was knocked unconscious? What do you think?"

"Makes about as much sense as anything else I've heard," Spike replied.

"Well, I better go. I'm meeting up with Dawn at the Magic Box after school. If I'm not there, she'll never get started on her homework. Will I see you there later for patrol?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world. I'll be there just after sunset."

Buffy smiled and then shocked Spike down to his docs by walking over and giving him a brief hug. "Thanks," she said. "I don't know how I would've gotten through the past few weeks without you." She ducked her head, "I just thought you should know that." And she was out the door before Spike had a chance to respond.

**Magic Box, Sunnydale**

It hadn't been too hard to convince Buffy to stay around the Magic Box until nightfall. Giles offered to order dinner in as a Welcome to Sunnydale gesture to Wesley, and everyone hurriedly agreed that that was an excellent idea. If Buffy or Dawn noticed anything off about their friends, they didn't remark on it.

Dinner had just been cleared up, when Spike entered the shop. "Ready for patrol, Slayer?"

"Yup, just let me load up on stakes before we leave," she said, standing up.

Pandemonium broke out as everyone but Spike and Dawn simultaneously tried to convince Buffy not to leave.
"Quiet!" She yelled. "What is going on? Why shouldn't I go on patrol?"

"I think they were trying to get you to wait for me, sweetie," Joyce said, shocking the room into silence.

"Mommy?" Dawn asked, awestruck.

“Hi Pumpkinbelly.” Joyce opened her arms as Dawn launched herself at her mother. “Buffy?” Joyce looked at her oldest daughter.


“As real as an emissary from the Powers That Be can… be, I guess.” Joyce answered.

Buffy slowly made her way across the room to where Dawn was still crying in her mother’s arms. As she reached Joyce, she lightly touched her shoulder, as if confirming her physical presence. Then she burst into tears, wrapping her arms around both mother and sister. The others in the room looked on in varying degrees of shock, awe or, in Anya’s case, blithe acceptance. After several minutes, the Summers women separated and Buffy took the lead in questioning her mysteriously returned mother.

“I’m SO glad to see you, Mom, but what..how are you here?” Buffy asked as she tried to discreetly wipe the tears from her face.

“I don’t care how. You are staying, right? You don’t have to go back to heaven or wherever?” Dawn asked as she continued to hold onto her mother’s hand. “Nothing’s been the same since you died. I missed you so much!”

“Shh now, girls. Everything’s going to be all right, but no, Dawn, I’m sorry. I can’t stay on this plane permanently. I will be able to visit you now and then when the Powers feel that guidance is needed. But, I’m here right now to give you information they felt you all needed and to provide hope and encouragement to someone very special.” She took a long look around the room and knew the rest of what she had to say was not going to go over well with some of them.

“First, Anya, dear. As you have already experienced, the Powers have recognized your unique knowledge and perspective are an asset to everyone here. They have gifted you with the ability to further help the group by sending you visions; most of these will be of demons or people in need of help. Your former vengeance demon status will ensure you are not harmed by the visions, and you will be singularly capable of recognizing many of demons, saving Buffy and her champion valuable time.”

“Thank you, Joyce.” Anya was slightly choked up with emotion. “I’ve wanted to help more, but this human form is so easily damaged, and I really don’t have much in the way of fighting skills. These visions will allow me to provide timely and useful information without putting myself in undue risk.” She continued, shyly, “I’m also really glad to see you. I was very sad when you died.”

Joyce smiled at her. “It’s very good to see you too, dear. I know you’ll make a magnificent seer and be a true asset to Buffy and her champion.”

“Mom, that’s the second time you’ve mentioned my ‘champion’,” Buffy said. “Angel’s supposedly the PTB champion and he’s in LA. Is she going to have visions of LA or is Angel moving back? What’s the deal?”

“Angel has had his champion status revoked by the Powers. His long list of mistakes, questionable
morals, and, most importantly, his refusal to accept that Angel and Angelus are one in the same person, have led the Powers to choose a more suitable champion. Luckily, he’s already here in Sunnydale, working alongside you.”

“I beg your pardon, Joyce, but, who could you possibly be referring to? The only male members of our team are human and would not be suitable candidates for a champion of the Powers That Be!” Giles pointedly looked at Xander and Wesley.

“They’re not ALL human, Mr. Giles.” Joyce smiled. She knew the uproar she was about to cause. “The Powers have selected Spike as their new champion.”

The Magic Box erupted into chaos at her announcement.
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Many voices competed to be heard over the cacophony. The most frequently heard phrases ran along the lines of, “He’s evil,” and, "But he has no soul.” Giles, Xander, and Willow were most vocal among the protesters.

After allowing them a few moments to vent their frustration and confusion, a slight lull provided Joyce with the opportunity to interrupt.

"If you'll give me the chance, I may be able to answer your concerns," Joyce began. Looking at the three main objectors, she said, "If I understand what you are saying, you believe it's impossible that a soulless being who has committed evil acts in the past is worthy of the title of champion. Is that correct?"

"I believe it's an absolute fact, proven over centuries of recorded history," Giles pontificated.

"Well, just to be thorough, let’s take the two issues separately. I assume no one here would disagree that Angelus committed horrific evil without his soul? In fact, from what the Powers have made me aware of, he could have been considered evil before he was turned, even with a perfectly intact human soul. He was a lazy, drunken womanizer who didn't care if the women—young girls, really —were willing or not. The gypsy curse which restored his soul was specifically designed to ensure he would feel guilt for all his past and future actions. Even with his history of being evil, the Powers were willing to give him the chance to be a champion. That should take care of that objection, should it not?" Joyce looked at Giles.

"But, as you say yourself, Angelus was cursed with a soul. It is that soul that prevents him killing, and motivates him to work for the forces of good," Giles replied smugly.

"That curse may have curtailed his killing, but it never stopped it entirely," Joyce retorted pointedly, annoyed at his closed mindedness.

"Are you referring to the Wolfram and Hart lawyers he locked Darla and Drusilla in with last year?" Wesley asked.

"He is being held responsible for that situation, but, he has far more blood on his hands due to more direct actions over the past century. Spike," she addressed him directly for the first time. "How long did Angel stay with the three of you after leaving Romania when he was cursed?"

Still sceptical about Joyce’s pronouncement, Spike glanced briefly at Buffy, knowing she wouldn't like hearing what he had to say. "Guess it was about two years or so. Darla finally chased him off when we were in China during the Boxer Rebellion. Said he wasn't being evil enough for her."

"And in those two years, was he drinking animal blood?" Joyce continued.

Spike watched Buffy blanch, but he went on. "Er… not as such, no. Tended to go for more of the criminal element generally, unless Darla was watching him."

"After China, when did you see him next?" asked Joyce.
"That'd be in a Nazi submarine in the Forties," replied Spike.

"You know what I'm going to ask you next, don't you, Spike? prodded Joyce.

"Suppose I do." He sighed. "That'd be when Peaches turned that American sailor, Lawson. Needed him to fix something technical in an area of the sub that was flooded. Bastard turned him, had him make the repairs, then tossed the two of us off the bloody thing so we had to swim for shore."

"Another death he was responsible for, all with his soul. There were others over the century, but I think I've made my point. As far as working on the side of good for the duration of that time, I can tell you for a fact, that he made no efforts toward redemption until he first saw my barely fifteen-year-old daughter, on the steps of her school." While everyone else looked confused at her revelation, Buffy’s eyes went wide at her mother’s knowledge of Angel’s history, and Giles grimaced at the insinuation.

“He was told that helping her could lead him on the path to redemption. But instead of helping her, standing at her side, supporting her as she was forced to go out every night to oppose the forces of darkness, he stalked her, provided minimal cryptic advice on topics he had much more information on, and then groomed her to be some sort of prize he’d get for being a champion. Finally, when it became clear he wouldn’t be able to have a physical relationship with her, rather than staying and fighting at her side, he left.

“The Powers have given him more than six years as their Champion, during which time he has proven he prefers determining his own path and trusting in his own opinions above all others.” Joyce’s face flushed with anger.

Spike looked over at Buffy and could tell she was not taking Joyce's words well. Her face reflected the tangle of emotions she was experiencing: disbelief, betrayal, the destruction of what had been her childhood ideal and hero. He wanted to move closer to her, to take her hand or put an arm around her shoulder, but now was neither the time nor the place. She needed to work through these feelings on her own and many of the people in this room would not take it well if he comforted Buffy. So far, the focus had been taken off him after Joyce's initial announcement, and he wanted to keep it that way as long as possible. He didn't want to hear these people's opinions on why he'd make a piss poor excuse of a champion. Especially since a large part of himself would agree with them.

“Also, he persists in the mistaken belief that he and Angelus are separate beings, rather than pursuing true redemption by accepting guilt for ALL his crimes, with and without a soul.” Joyce released a huff of breath in an attempt to calm herself before she continued. “All that aside, there is more than enough evil in humanity, souled humanity, to demonstrate that simply having a soul does not automatically ensure inherent ‘goodness’.”

“Perhaps not,” Giles reluctantly concurred. “But surely the lack of one precludes it.”

“On what basis?” Joyce asked. “Your Council’s doctrine?” She turned to Wesley, “Wesley, in LA you worked with a soulless demon named Lorne. Would you consider him evil, based only on the lack of a soul?”

“Certainly not,” Wesley retorted. “He is one of the most gentle, compassionate creatures I’ve ever met. His empathic readings alone are responsible for the improvement of more lives than I can count. Moreover, from what I’ve heard, Spike has done more good without a soul in the last couple of years than Angel’s done during the century he’s had his.”

“Any, what about you? You’ve been alive more than eleven hundred years, have you ever met any demons that aren’t evil?” Joyce asked.
“Of course! I mean it depends on the species usually. Some are more likely to be pleasant and quite kind, while others lean more toward ‘Grr Argh!’ but there’s a variety within each species really, just like humans. Vampires are one of those species where it’s harder to find individuals who are nonviolent, but that’s probably because they see humans as food. It’s not like humans are kind to cows, you know? But every now and then over the years I’ve come across a vegan vampire. One who, like Spike, has made a choice to change his way of life and drinks animal blood. Some of them just drink from humans without killing them. Like the ones in the bite houses Riley went to.”

“If these first-hand accounts aren’t enough to convince you, Mr. Giles, I can tell you as a direct messenger of the Powers That Be that a soul is not required to be a good being nor is it required in their champion, not even in a vampire, and they evaluate an individual by their actions rather than their empty words.”

Tara wasn’t entirely sure it was her place, but felt she had to speak up. “Spike has done a lot of good recently. I’m not sure what we would have done without him this summer, either with patrolling or helping with Dawnie. And no one can say he had anything to gain with that. We stopped paying him for his help a long time ago and Buffy was…gone.” She felt uncomfortable referring to Buffy’s death, but confident in her support of Spike. She didn’t agree with the way the group had always treated Spike. She felt he needed their encouragement rather than the constant disparagement he received, and was one of the few people gathered who was glad to hear Joyce’s message.

Joyce looked around the room and saw that she had given them all some things to think about, but, that they still had far to go before they could begin to accept what she had told them.

She met Spike’s eyes and said, “I don’t have much time left in this visit, we’ve spent far too much of it on things that should have been known by now. But, Spike, this must all come as a shock to you and I know you’ll need time to process it. Do you have any questions for me before I have to go?”

“Just one, Joyce. Why me?” Spike couldn’t hide the confusion in his voice or on his face as he tried to take everything she had said in.

Her eyes softened at the question. “You should be asking yourself that question. Don’t you see? You chose to become a champion every time you helped me or one of my daughters. When you withstood torture rather than give up Dawnie as the key, when you fought at Buffy’s side instead of gathering a bunch of minions to fight against her, every time you made a choice like that, you chose to be a champion. The Powers are just recognizing what you already are, and giving you tools to help you continue to make choices like those.”

As she spoke, she crossed the room to where Spike was standing. “Thank you, for being there for me and my family. For being who you are.” She placed a hand on the back of his head and kissed his cheek. As her lips left his cheekbone, Spike felt a kind of pressure inside his head release. He looked at her in awe as she added, “I believe in you, Spike. I trust you. And I am looking forward to seeing all the good you will do.”

She turned from Spike and beckoned Buffy and Dawn. “Come give me a hug, girls. I have to leave for now.” They ran to do as she asked. “I’ll always be watching out for you, and hopefully, I can come back and see you soon.”

With one last squeeze, she took a step away from her daughters, and disappeared.
Chapter 6

Revello Drive, Sunnydale

It was getting close to ten o’clock when Willow, Tara and Dawn walked home from the Magic Box. After Joyce had left, little progress had been made in coming to a consensus on Spike’s status as a champion. Willow and Xander were firmly in the “soulless vampire equals evil” camp, believing the only thing holding Spike back from a bloody killing spree was the chip in his head.

Tara, Anya, Dawn and Wesley were of the opinion that, as a representative from the PTB, Joyce’s proclamation should be accepted as true unless proven otherwise. Of the last two present, Giles was on the fence and Buffy was keeping her cards close to her vest for the moment, not stating an opinion one way or the other.

Willow couldn’t understand how everyone but Xander and her seemed to be willing to give Spike the benefit of the doubt. Didn’t they remember all the times Spike had tried to kill them, kill Buffy? Not even that long ago he’d betrayed them to Adam, and after they’d helped him too! Sure, he’d been helpful recently but that didn’t change his inherent nature. Given the choice between being a champion and going back to his killing ways, Willow knew which one he’d choose.

She’d tried to explain all this to Tara, but Tara was all aboard team Spike now, Willow thought resentfully. She said his aura showed that he’d changed, that he could be trusted, but Tara hadn’t known Spike before the chip. Willow still remembered how terrified of him she’d been on Parent-Teacher night, and the night he’d kidnapped her and Xander to do that love spell. A broken bottle to the face was not something a person ever forgets!

Willow supposed Tara being willing to give Spike a chance was to be expected; she had a habit of always trying to see the best in people. And with Dawn’s hero worship of Spike, her allegiance would have been guaranteed even if it wasn’t Joyce bringing the message. But Giles seemed to be wavering on the whole idea. Giles! If anyone should know the dangers of trusting an unsouled vampire it ought to be him! Did he not remember Ms. Calendar? Willow just didn’t understand what he was thinking.

Speaking of what people were thinking, Buffy was not reacting as Willow expected either. Like Giles, she had first hand experience with vampires that should have had her loudly objecting to anyone calling Spike a champion. Instead, she stayed quiet and looked thoughtful while the others argued their points. The only time she spoke up was to ask Willow and Tara to walk Dawn home while she and a Spike patrolled.

The three of them had barely walked through door of the house on Revello Drive when the phone rang. Willow picked it up before it had a chance to go to voicemail, “Hello?”

“Hello, Willow? It’s Angel.”

“Oh, uh, hi Angel,” Willow chirped, uncomfortable talking to him after all they heard earlier that evening. “Buffy’s not home, so…”

“I’m actually looking for Giles. There’s, uh, something’s happened and I need help researching. I was hoping Giles was available to give me a hand.”

“Oh. Oh! Does that mean you’ve heard from the Powers too?” Willow asked. Angel may have made
mistakes in his long life, but she was still more comfortable with the souled vampire as the PTB champion than Spike. If he was looking to get his status renewed, maybe she could help.

“What do you mean? Did Whistler visit you guys too? Did some kind of memo go out that I’m not the champion anymore?” Angel asked petulantly.

“We got a visit, but it was from Joyce, not a Whistler, whatever that is. She told us about you, then told us Anya would be receiving visions and, uh, that there was a new champion.”

“Joyce? Wait, why would she tell you guys there’s a new champion already? Why is Anya the one to receive visions? Is Buffy the new champion? I mean, I guess that would make sense if Joyce is going to be the new liaison.”

“Er, no, no. Not Buffy. Apparently, the PTB think Spike is going to be their new champion.”

*Morningside Cemetery, Sunnydale*

Neither Buffy nor Spike had spoken during the first three cemeteries they patrolled, beyond the necessary shouts and warnings that come with slaying their prey. Finally, after dusting a fledgling and the two minions waiting for him to rise, Buffy sat down on a tombstone. She turned to Spike with an odd look on her face, “So, a champion, huh?”

“Yeah, well. If it wasn’t Joyce who told us, I’m not real sure I’d believe it. Still not sure, truth be told.” She watched as he scanned the cemetery for nonexistent threats, then looked down at the ground, avoiding eye contact with Buffy. “I know I don’t feel like any kind of champion,” he added.

“I can see it,” she said softly. “Everything Mom said about you, it’s all true. You’ve always been different, even going back to our first truce against Angelus. What other evil vampire would be willing to work with the Slayer, save the world, just to get back his girl?”

He finally looked up into her eyes and was visibly surprised by what he saw there. Maybe he thought she would have been the first to jump to Angel’s defense, decrying any claim Spike might have to hero status, but she made sure that all he saw was acceptance.

“I know I haven’t always been your biggest supporter and I haven’t encouraged you like I probably should have…” she started.

“Pretty sure that’s as much my fault as yours. I can be a bit difficult when I want to be.” He smiled.

“Well, yes, but so can I. Maybe we can try and start over? If you want, that is. I mean, maybe you’d want to go to LA and do the champion gig there like Angel did, and I kinda have to stay here for the hellmouth and everything so…” She realized she was babbling now and abruptly stopped and shut her mouth.

“Mayn’t have said it recently—didn’t think you’d want to hear it and you have enough going on right now—but, I’m hopelessly in love with you. That hasn’t changed. And I promised to take care of the Bit. End of the world hasn’t happened yet, so I’m still on the hook for that. Safe to say, I’m not going anywhere anytime soon, love.”

“Oh…well. Good, that’s good. So, anyway, maybe I can help. With the champion thing. If you need it, I mean. Like I said earlier, you’ve been the one thing that’s kept me sane the past few weeks. I’d like to return the favor if you’d let me. If you—you know—need it, that is.” Buffy had trouble looking him in the eyes through all the babbling. She didn’t think he’d reject her offer, but past experiences had left her feeling vulnerable when it came to opening up to someone in this way. She
refused to think about why she was comparing this to her disaster of a past love life. She and Spike were just friends, she thought firmly. He may want more from her, but she couldn’t afford to think of him that way. Nothing good ever came from any of her relationships, especially not relationships with vampire champions. Friends. She was good at friends, at least she used to be. Great. Now the babbling had infected her thoughts, too.

“Let’s move on to Shady Rest. There’s nothing happening here,” she said.

**Hyperion Hotel, Los Angeles**

Angel hung up the phone in shock. Spike. Spike? Spike was the new champion? It just wasn’t possible. Spike was an idiot. Incompetent. But most of all, Spike was evil. He should know; Angelus had made sure of it over a century ago. Any playing nice he was doing now, was solely due to that government chip in his head. No, this had to be a trick. It had all the hallmarks of some kind of stupid plan Spike came up with in order to further ingratiate himself with Buffy and her friends.

No, Angel didn’t know how, or even really why Spike was doing this, but there was no way the Powers That Be had chosen Spike over Angel as a champion. He wouldn’t even put it past Spike to be responsible for Angel’s visit from Whistler earlier. And if Spike was responsible, then Angel was still the champion. He needed to expose Spike’s plans before he had a chance to cause even more mayhem and confusion. Using a likeness of Buffy’s dead mother would have left the poor girl vulnerable to whatever Spike was planning.

All of which meant that Angel needed to get to Sunnydale. As soon as possible.
Chapter 7

Magic Box, Sunnydale

“I’m just saying, how do we know that was really Joyce? Cause Spike, as a champion, it just makes
the kind of sense that’s not. You know? That chip’s not going to last forever and once it goes, it’s
bye bye Mr Nice Vamp and hello to the bloody torture.” Xander had been saying variations on the
same theme to Anya since Joyce’s appearance the night before.

Anya’s patience had frayed considerably. “No one knows what the future holds, Xander. Spike
could go on a murderous killing spree or he could fight his nature to remain the Powers’ champion.
It’s called free will. Something all sentient beings have. But, by encouraging him to do the right
thing, we can help him choose to continue being good when the chip inevitably fails, thereby
preventing our own horrible deaths.” It was clear that Anya could not understand why Xander did
not comprehend this most basic logic.

Wesley had been reading through books, researching any references of vampires tapped by the
Powers That Be without success. He had tried to tune out Xander’s anti-vampire rant but now felt
compelled to speak up.

“Xander, Anya makes a very good point. If you are so sure that Spike will eventually ‘slip his leash’,
being aggressive to him now is not a smart idea.” Wesley held back a grin as Xander paled.
“However, I happen to believe this change in him is a sign of greater things to come. I don’t believe
Spike’s recent helpful actions can be attributed solely to the government behavioral chip, but, of
course, we can’t know for sure until the chip stops working. For now, I suggest we proceed with
Anya’s suggestion of providing support to Spike, rather than hostility.”

Before Xander could answer, Willow, Tara and Dawn entered the shop. Willow was in the middle
of trying, once again, to make the other two understand her viewpoint. “I just don’t think it’s a smart
idea to be all with the trusting of Spike, that’s all. You can’t tell me after everything we’ve seen with
vampires in this town, hello Angel versus Angelus, that the soul isn’t important. It just doesn’t make
sense that Spike can be some warrior for good and not have a soul!”

Xander slapped both hands down on the counter as he heard this and said, “Thank you! Finally, a
voice of reason. I’ve been trying to explain all this to Anya and Wes all afternoon!”

Before the debate could get underway, yet again, Wesley interrupted with, “I believe everyone’s
opinion on the subject is well understood at this point. In any case, I don’t foresee any of us being
persuaded to change our minds barring further developments. Perhaps, we can all shelve our
arguments until additional information is available.”

“Arguments? There’s arguments now?” Buffy and Spike entered the shop at that moment and had
heard only the last bit of the conversation.

“Nothing worth rehashing right at this moment. Good evening Buffy, Spike. How are you both
doing today?” Wesley changed the subject, effectively squashing the previous discussion.

“Good,” Buffy replied. “We’re just getting ready to head out on patrol. Will, Tara, can you guys
make sure Dawn gets home at a decent hour?”

“Sure, Buffy. We’ll even make sure she gets her homework done,” said Tara.
“No fair!” Dawn whined. “It’s Friday. I have all weekend before I have to get it done.”

“But, if you do it tonight, you have the weekend to relax. Maybe if things are quiet again tonight on patrol, we could go to the Bronze for a while tomorrow night. You can even invite Janice if you want.” It appeared that Buffy wasn’t above a little bribery to get what she wanted out of Dawn, and that she realized she needed to spend some more quality time with her teenage sister. Wesley thought that perhaps seeing her mother the previous night had reminded Buffy of how hard the past year had been on Dawn.

“Really? That would be so great! The Bronze on a Saturday night!” Dawn squealed.

“Only if your homework gets done tonight, otherwise you are housebound tomorrow night.” Buffy answered.

“Not a problem, consider it done!” Dawn flounced over to the corner where she had stowed her school bag and flopped it none too gently on the research table. “I bet I can have it done even before Tara and Willow are ready to leave. It’s only a little history and geometry.”

“On that note, Spike and I are off. We did the Eastside cemeteries yesterday, so I guess we’ll start on the Westside tonight. Wish us luck!”

A chorus of “good lucks” and “be safes” followed them out the door.

They had only been gone a couple minutes when Anya’s eyes rolled back in her head and she gripped the counter tightly. It was clear she was in the midst of a vision. As soon as it was clear it had ended, Wesley put his arm around her and led her gently over to a chair.

“The vision?” Wesley prompted.

“Spike and Buffy need to get over to the Natural History Museum,” she said. “There’s going to be a robbery that leaves a security guard encased in ice. I don’t know if he’ll be able to survive it if they don’t get there in time.”

“Does either of them have a mobile phone we can contact them on?” Wesley asked.

“No,” Dawn answered. “I told Buffy she needed to get one but she said they’re just too expensive.”

“Very well, I’ll just have to try and catch up to them. At least we know where they planned to patrol tonight.” Wesley grabbed his coat and scribbled something on a slip of paper he then handed to Anya. “This is my mobile number, in case I miss them, please call me.” He hurried out the door in the direction Spike and Buffy had taken just minutes before.

Wesley caught up to the blonde super couple just before they had entered their first Cemetery of the night. After quickly bringing them up to speed with Anya’s vision, it was agreed that the three of them would proceed immediately to the museum to see what they could find.

**Sunnydale Natural History Museum**

They found the front door to the museum was locked and apparently intact.

“Better check around the back. If anything’s going on here, that’ll be where we’ll find them,” Spike announced.

As they made their way to the back of the building, Buffy could hear a commotion. She entered first and saw three familiar looking men holding a strange looking gun on the security guard. Without
thinking twice, she executed a perfect spin kick that knocked the gun out of the way of the guard. Unfortunately, the gun went off just as Spike stepped up to help her. He ended up catching a glancing blow from the gun, leaving one arm and part of one leg encased in ice.

In the confusion, one of the three men grabbed a large diamond from the display in the middle of the room, and all three made a break for the door. Spike knocked his frozen arm against the wall and stomped his frozen leg forcefully on the marble floor. The ice on both his arm and leg shattered, leaving him free to chase after the three thieves. Buffy and Wesley followed quickly behind him.

It didn’t take them long to catch up with the men. They were standing by a black van, waiting for one of them to find the right key to unlock it so they could make their escape. Buffy knocked the heads of the taller two together, rendering them both unconscious. The third, shorter man immediately fell to his knees begging for mercy.

“Jonathan?” Buffy asked. “What are you doing here with these guys? Haven’t you learned your lesson yet?”

“It was all Warren’s idea!” Jonathan cried. “I just went along with it.”

“Well, it looks like you’re going to get your chance to try that excuse with the proper authorities,” Wesley announced, just as Sunnydale’s finest arrived on the scene.

The security guard backed up their story of passing by, finding the back door open and foiling the robbery. Locating the missing diamond in Warren’s pocket the police had all they needed to arrest the three for robbery, though they didn’t know what to do with the strange looking weapon the trio had been found carrying. With confused, but genuine gratitude, the police took statements from Buffy, Spike and Wesley, before letting them return to their evening.

Hyperion Hotel, Los Angeles

“I just don’t see what the big deal is here, Angel. Maybe Cordy won’t be getting visions to direct us right to people that need our help, but that doesn’t mean we can’t still go out every night a do our thing, thinning the vamp and demon herd, making the city a little safer one vamp at a time. What’s the big deal if these PTB are pissed at you? They can’t stop you from doing what we been doing.”

Gunn was getting a little tired of his boss’ obsession with losing some status that never really seemed to make that big a difference in his eyes. If anyone was going to bitch about things, he’d have thought it would be Cordy. But, apparently, those visions were causing her a whole boatload of hurt she hadn’t been up front with them about. She’d been perfectly fine with giving up the visions as long as it meant the crippling pain went with them.

Angel obviously had been talking while Gunn’s mind had been on other things, because Gunn came back into the conversation halfway through a sentence.

“…it was the Powers making me their champion that was responsible for setting me on the path to redemption. Once I’ve earned my redemption, they’ll have to secure my soul and I’ll be able to be with Buffy again. You have no idea how much both of us have suffered having to be apart all this time, but the temptation of being together was just too much for either of us. I can’t believe the Powers would punish us both like this. It has to be some sort of trick, and after talking to Willow, I know exactly who’s behind it.”

“Right, so this Spike guy has somehow arranged to have your liaison to the PTB tell you that you aren’t their champion anymore, then got someone who looks like the Slayer’s mother to tell her Spike is the new champion. And he did all this in the few weeks since the Slayer came back from the
dead, without anyone else catching on?” Gunn was beyond skeptical that anyone could have pulled something like this off, let alone the vamp Angel described as a screwup and an idiot.

“Gunn’s right Angel. The Spike we know would never have been able to pull this off,” Cordelia volunteered. “Have you tried singing for Lorne? Maybe he can give you some advice or tell you just what’s really going on with all this.”

“There’s no time for that. I have to get to Sunnydale before Spike can create even more chaos. I’m leaving in ten minutes; is either of you coming with me?”

“Nah, man. If you’re gone, someone’s gotta keep the vamp population down,” Gunn said.

“You can forget me too. I think you’re going on a wild goose chase and I have no intention of ever going back to Sunnydale, for any reason. Besides, I have no intention of reliving the angstathon that is your relationship with Buffy.” Cordelia snapped.

“Fine. I’ll go on my own, then. I can be in Sunnydale in two hours if traffic goes my way. I doubt it’ll take long to straighten out my idiot grandchild and get things back to the way they’re supposed to be.” Angel’s coat billowed around him as he turned quickly on his heel and stormed out the door to his car.
Chapter 8

Magic Box, Sunnydale

Buffy finished explaining the nerd takedown to the group assembled at the Magic Box. “So the security guard said there may actually be a reward for stopping them from getting away with the diamond. He has to check with the ‘home office’ first. If there is, that would be majorly of the good, because money is quickly becoming an issue at Casa Summers.”

“Well,” said Anya, “you’re just really lucky Wesley was able to catch up with the both of you. Otherwise we never would have gotten the message to you and Spike in time. I think you both need to have cell phones. That way, when I have a vision I can get in touch with you.”

“Did you miss the part where I said I’m out of money, Anya? I can’t afford a cell phone right now.” Buffy pouted.

“It’s not a problem Slayer, I can get money. More than enough for cell phones and to pay any outstanding bills you girls may have,” Spike said confidently.

“So much for being a champion,” Xander sneered. “I’m pretty sure theft is against the PTB’s rules.”

“Oh! No theft involved. You remember my pretty ring that let me fight you in the middle of the day?” He asked Buffy, ignoring Xander’s provocation.

“You mean the Gem of Amara?”

“That’s the one. It wasn’t alone in that cavern. Before my visit to Peaches to try and get the ring back, I made sure to clear out all the rest of the treasure. It was auctioned off, all legal like, and the proceeds deposited into a savings account. I put Dawn’s name on the account last summer to make sure she was taken care of. Had your name added a week or two after you came back. Neither of you needs to worry about money for a long time. There’s plenty there to pay off the mortgage and other bills, with enough left over for mobile phones for you me and the Bit.”

“Wow, me too?” Dawn cried. “Can I get one with one of those pink crystal cases?”

“Just wait a second, Dawn.” Buffy tried to calm her sister down but had a feeling it was too late for that. “You’re sure all the money is legitimate? It didn’t get mixed in with an account that held old blood money of some kind?” She directed her questioning to Spike.

“Cross my unbeating heart,” Spike said. “I kept all the paperwork showing I had legal right to the treasure under California scavenging law, and all the receipts from the auction house matched up with the bank deposit. The money is completely clean, and all yours whenever you need it.”

“Well, then…thank you Spike. I think for now, I’ll take you up on the cell phone offer because that’s really something we both need so Anya’ll be able to contact us when she gets a vision. As for the rest, that’s something I’m going to have to think on for a bit,” she said with a touch of apology in her eyes. “Only because I don’t like the idea of having to rely on someone else to support me and Dawn.”

“I can’t believe you’re even considering this Buffy,” Xander interjected, loudly. “You know you can’t trust him! Are you really going to take his blood money? Even if it did come from where he said it did—which I don’t really believe—he only got the money because he was after a ring that could KILL YOU! Am I the only one who has a problem with that?”
“As far as I’m concerned you are,” Buffy told him hotly. “Spike and I used to try and kill each other on a regular basis. I don’t hold that against him any more than he holds it against me. We’re in a different place right now. You need to learn how to accept Spike, Xander, because he’s going to be around a lot more often now with the champion stuff and all.”

Because all eyes were on the argument between Buffy and Spike, once again Wesley was the one to notice Anya having a vision. “Quiet all!” He spoke loudly enough to be heard over the angry voices. “Something is happening with Anya!”

Once the vision cleared and Wesley helped her to a chair, Tara brought Anya a cup of tea.

Wesley asked, “Was it another vision?”

“Yes. If I’d known they were going to happen this frequently, I would’ve asked Joyce about compensation! Twice in one night is more than I expected,” Anya said crankily.

“Cordelia rarely had more than one a day, but when she did, it was always important. Can you tell us about this one?” Wesley asked.

“The other vampire, the broody one—Angel? He’s on his way to Sunnydale, and he’s not happy. Though, I suppose that’s a good thing, right? If he was too happy, he’d be much more dangerous. As it is, I think he’s coming after Spike. I saw the two of them fighting in one of the cemeteries in town, but I couldn’t tell which one.”

“Great, that’s just what we need right now. Mr. Big and Broody coming to mess everything up. I thought Mom said he wasn’t the PTB champion anymore. What could he want here, and why Spike?” Dawn asked.

Willow cleared her throat. “He called the house last night looking for Giles. He wanted help researching the PTB and how to regain his champion status. I might have mentioned that your mom had appeared to all of us and told us Spike is the new champion. I think he thinks it’s all a fake now, and that Spike set it all up.”

“He thinks what? Is he nuts? Does he think I wouldn’t know my own mother? How the heck could Spike have set all this up?” Buffy’s patience was running thin.

“It made sense last night,” Willow pleaded. “I mean, come on! Spike doesn’t have a soul, just you and a chip. And as soon as that chip is gone, or he realizes you’re never gonna love him, he’s going to give up the whole champion thing and go back to trying to kill us all!”

“You’re wrong, Will. Spike is nothing like Angel OR Angelus and thank god for that! Your fish are safe from him, if nothing else. And after everything we heard from mom, I trust Spike without a soul more than Angel with a soul.”

“Buffy, listen to yourself! This is Spike we’re talking about. You can’t possibly trust him more than Angel! Angel was the love of your life!” Willow unsuccessfully tried another tactic to make her friend come around.

“That was before, Willow. Before I heard all that from mom. I was a kid when I fell in love with him and I don’t think I ever really knew him. How could I have really loved someone I never really knew? In any case, I’m totally over him now, and if he thinks he’s coming into my town and causing trouble, he’s in for a rude awakening.

General Buffy took control and started giving orders. “Spike, I want you staying at our house for the time being. There’s a cot in the basement you can use and it’ll keep you out of the sun.”
“Oi! I don’t need your protection from my bastard of a grandsire. Not a child here, Slayer,” Spike barked.

“I never said you were. But, I don’t want you having to fight him if we can get him to listen to reason.” Then she sidled up close to him and spoke softly enough that only he could hear. “Besides, how do you think he’s going to react when he figures out you’re living in my house?”

Spike grinned. “Right, then. First things first, I’m going to run out and pick up those mobile phones we talked about. I’ll meet you at your house as soon as I’m done and we can start setting them up and giving out the numbers to the necessary people. That work for you?”

“Perfect! I’ll see you at home in a bit. Dawn and I will get the cot ready in the basement.” As Spike left the shop, Buffy turned to Willow.

“I know you’re not happy about this but I want you to understand I decide who lives in my house and who doesn’t. Keep that in mind when deciding what you want to say to me right now.”

“Your house, your decision. I think I got it,” Willow grouched.

Tara voiced her own opinion, “H-having Spike on hand should be a good thing, don’t you think? Safer for him and safer for us to have another super strong being close by?”

“Good. Dawn, let’s get going and don’t forget your homework.”

Crawford Street, Sunnydale

It was dangerously close to dawn by the time Angel got into Sunnydale. He’d spent the entire drive brooding and trying to work out how Spike had arranged to pull the wool over the eyes of so many people. He hadn’t yet come up with an answer, but decided he’d be able to figure that part out once he got his hands on Spike. A little judicious torture from his grandsire and he’d be telling Angel all he knew, including how to fix it.

Buffy was going to be a separate problem. Whatever else Spike had done, using her dead mother’s likeness to trick her was going to leave her emotionally vulnerable for some time after Angel broke Spike’s spell over her. Angel was going to need to plan to stay in town for several extra days to console the poor girl. But, he could only stay in Sunnydale so long; he had important work in LA he needed to get back to as soon as possible.

Once again, he growled at all the trouble Spike had caused him. Family or not, Angel didn’t expect Spike to get out of this situation undusty. He’d gone too far this time.
Chapter 9

Revello Drive

It was nearly noon on Saturday when Spike emerged from the basement and wandered into the kitchen. Dawn was seated on a stool at the counter eating what appeared to be a peanut butter and fluff sandwich.

“Ha Spuck,” she mumbled, her mouth full of sticky sandwich.

“Wanna try that again Bit?” He asked.

After a big gulp of milk, she said once more, “Hi Spike! We got some blood in the fridge for you if you’re hungry.”

“Ta Bit, mighty nice of you.” He moved to the refrigerator and took out a pint of pig and set it to warm up in the microwave. While he waited, he asked, “Where did everybody go?”

“Willow’s at the school library working on a paper. Buffy and Tara went to the Magic Box for ingredients.”

“What kind of ingredients? Just what are they planning on doing?” Spike’s suspicion of magic ran deeply. If they were planning a spell, he wanted to at least know what and why.

Buffy and Tara took that moment to walk into the kitchen. “Nothing big, really. Tara’s just doing an uninvite on the house for Angel. If he’s in town gunning for you, we don’t want him to be able to get in once he finds out you’re staying here.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want, love?” Spike asked.

“For now, I think we have to. Anya’s vision was pretty clear that he’s coming after you. It’s one thing if he attacks while we’re out and about, but the least we can do is make sure you have a safe place to sleep. At least until we find out what he’s thinking and what his plans are.”

“Ok, then. Your place, your choice. But, I don’t need a babysitter every time I leave the house, either. If Angel comes after me, he’s the one who’s going to be in trouble. I’m not a fledge or a cripple like he’s used to.”

“I believe you,” Buffy said. “I’ve fought you both at your prime, and, one-on-one, you can totally take him.” She hurried on before Spike had too much time to preen at her words. “But he doesn’t like to go into a fight without stacking the odds in his favor. I don’t trust him not to try and drug you or enlist humans to try and take you down. We’ve got to be prepared for anything until we get a chance to talk to him and see just what he’s thinking.”

“Demon girl didn’t see anyone but me and the Poof fighting in her vision, you know.”

“I know. Just humor me this once, please? We’re friends now, right? That gets you extra protective Buffy.”

Spike hid the look of awe on his face by raising his mug of blood to his mouth and taking a big sip. “Whatever you say, love.”

While they had been talking, Tara had been setting up for the spell to revoke Angel’s invite. “Can I
ask everyone to please stay quiet while I do this?” Tara asked. “I’m going to need to concentrate to bar all the entrances.”

They all lapsed into silence as they watched Tara work. When she was finished, she said, “Ok, that should do it. Angel won’t be able to get back in without a fresh invitation.”

“Did anyone tell Willow we were doing this? She’s the one who talked to him on the phone and told him Spike’s the new champion. She probably wouldn’t hesitate to just go ahead and invite him in again,” Dawn asked.

“I spoke to her about it this morning, sweetie,” Tara told her. “She wasn’t happy about it, but agreed not to reinvite him in without talking to us first.”

“All right, that’s done then. Dawn will you bring the bag from the dining room table in here, please?” Spike asked.

When she did, Spike pulled out three boxes of cell phones and gave one each to Buffy and Dawn. “Sorry, Pidge. Didn’t think to get ones for you and Red, too.”

“Don’t worry about it Spike. These are for slaying-slash-champion emergencies. I hope that’s something Willow and I won’t really qualify for. We’re more likely to be near a phone in an emergency anyway.” She smiled as Dawn and Buffy tore into the boxes to get to the phones.

“I had the bloke at the shop program each of our numbers, plus the Magic Box, and the home phone here to start with. You can each put in whatever other numbers you think are important. Might want to talk to Demon girl and make sure she’s got the numbers, too.”

“Thanks, Spike. These will be a big help!” Buffy smiled up at Spike as she continued exploring the functionality of the phone.

“Yeah, thanks, Spike!” Dawn jumped up at gave him a big hug.

“No big deal, just something you both needed, is all,” Spike said with a bashful look on his face. “So, Bronzing tonight, yeah?” He changed the subject. “Best get these all charged up beforehand then. I’ll go plug mine in down in the basement.” With that announcement, Spike headed down the stairs, leaving the girls to their fun.

Magic Box

By the time Angel had arrived in Sunnydale, dawn was quickly approaching. He had been forced to take shelter at the Crawford Street mansion for the day, postponing his planned discussion with Buffy and confrontation with Spike. He hadn’t been able to get much sleep with everything weighing on his mind, so he’d spent the majority of the day brooding. By the time the sun had set, he had worked himself up into a full fledged snit. The idea that Spike dared to try to take over his destiny infuriated the brunet vampire.

He decided to save the pleasure of teaching his grandchild a lesson for later and start with the damage control he needed to perform with his soul mate, Buffy. After the sun had set, he’d tried first to catch her at home, but the house on Revello Drive was empty when he arrived. He could have tried to find her on her patrol, but decided that would take up too much valuable time. Giles should know where she was patrolling that night and may be able to give him information on what Spike was planning, so he opted for the Magic Box next.

When he entered the store, he was pleased to find Giles, along with Xander and his girlfriend. He knew Xander would be on his side when it came to Spike. Angelus had made sure that Xander
would never trust a vampire without a soul, regardless of any messages from the Slayer’s supposed
dead mother.

“Angel,” Giles said with surprise. “What are you doing in Sunnydale?”

“I’m here to find Buffy and help take care of whatever ridiculous plan Spike has going this time. I
spoke to Willow last night so I know Spike’s the one behind this charade. Clearly he’s hired demons
to impersonate Whistler and Joyce to try and discredit me and gain Buffy’s trust.”

“I…well…to be honest, Angel, that scenario never occurred to me. I’ll admit, I was beyond surprised
and certainly suspicious when Joyce visited us with her news, but it seemed to me that Spike was
equally as shocked by what she had to say. Frankly, I think you may be on the wrong track there.”

“You’re wrong, Giles. Spike has always been jealous of me. Trying to take my place and pull the
wool over all of your eyes is exactly the kind of thing he would do. Angelus trained him—you can’t
let yourself be fooled.”

“I think you’re giving the Bleached Wonder way too much credit there, Dead Boy. There’s no way
he’d be able to pull off the kind of scam you’re talking about, and even if he did, he wouldn’t bother
with including you in it. You’re the last person he’d want to get involved.”

“I have to agree with Xander, Angel. I can’t speak for your interaction with this Whistler fellow, but
I feel confident the being we were visited by was actually Joyce Summers, not an imposter. What’s
more, her statements have been proven true, in part at least, by the visions Anya has started
receiving. Interestingly, her most recent vision foresaw you, here in Sunnydale.”

“You’d be fools to ever trust Spike or believe he’s anything more than vicious killer, currently on a
leash due to his chip. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if getting the chip out wasn’t part of his actual
endgame in this whole thing.”

Giles’ expression conveyed his doubts as clearly as his next words. “You really aren’t being logical,
Angel. The sophistication and amount of effort that would be required to pull off the hoax you
propose—it would be mind boggling. If he could do this, he could have certainly managed to get the
chip out on his own. And again, I don’t see why he would get you involved.”

“It all seems pretty clear to me,” Anya piped in. “Angel’s trying to distract himself and others from
the fact that he’s been demoted by shifting the focus on to blaming Spike.” Anya shifted her attention
from Giles and Xander on to vampire in question. “Both Wesley and Joyce have told us what you’ve
done. Buffy looked just sick about it all when she heard. I really wouldn’t go looking to her for any
sympathy.”

Angel couldn’t believe that this girl he barely knew would have the nerve to speak to him this way.
“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” he told her coldly. “What Buffy and I have is beyond
anything you could possibly understand. There’s simply no way she would side against me once I
have the chance to talk to her and explain things to her.”

“Pffft! Your overinflated ego and misplaced self-importance is incredibly off putting. I’m baffled at
what Buffy ever could have seen in you to begin with. Spike would be much more suitable partner
for her. He cares for her family, helps with her slaying and, based on the obvious sexual tension
whenever they’re together, he would make an excellent orgasm partner for her. You can’t be any of
that for her. She gave you your perfect orgasm and now you can’t even trust yourself to live in the
same city. And where exactly were you when she was dead and we were trying to keep up the
slaying without her? I can tell you where Spike was! He was out patrolling every single night. I
shudder to think what could have happened without him.”
Anya let her rant wind own with one final piece of advice for Angel. “You should go back to Los Angeles. There’s nothing for you here.” She finished wiping the counter down, tucked the rag she was using out of sight, and walked quickly into the office with a slam of the door.

Angel wanted to follow her into the office and shake her until she admitted she was wrong, but with immense effort he managed to control himself. Still, he couldn’t prevent his eyes from flashing yellow briefly when he addressed Giles, “Tell me where can I find Buffy.”

“I believe they were going to be at the Bronze tonight before patrolling.” Giles couldn’t stop himself from adding, “I feel I must urge you to take Anya’s advice and go back to Los Angeles. Deal with your own issues. What’s happening here is not your concern.”

Angel didn’t even bother acknowledging him before storming out of the shop.
Chapter 10

The Bronze

Spike had been in the Bronze while the Scoobies were there many times in the past. This was the first time he had actually been invited. It felt different somehow, sitting at the table without expecting one of them to tell him to get lost. Until, that is, Tara and Red got up to dance and the Bit found her friends and went to join them. That left him alone at the table with Buffy.

Never before had he been so tongue tied. He’d love the chance to talk to her about what all this champion stuff was supposed to entail, how she felt about it, but the music was too loud for serious conversations. However, it was just low enough that he felt he should try and fill the silence with small talk. The problem was the last time he’d had to engage in small talk was over a century ago; he had no clue whatsoever on how to begin.

He was on the verge of despair when he was rescued by the Bit. Or rather, the sight of the Bit dancing far too suggestively with some pimply faced youth.

He growled reflexively. “Who the bloody hell is that and why is she dancing like that with him?”

“That would probably be Mark, the kid from school she told me about yesterday. She said he may be showing up tonight and to try not to embarrass her if he did. As for the dancing, if you’ll look around the room, you’ll see it’s pretty much the way everyone out there is doing it.” She smiled at him. “What’s the matter, the Big Bad worried about a teenage boy now?”

“I just think she’s too young to be doing that with the likes of him.”

“She’s fifteen now. Much as I don’t like it either, I don’t think we have a chance in hell of stopping her. And if we can’t stop her, I, at least, want to be watching what’s going on. Hence the group night at the Bronze tonight.”

He had to admit, she was watching them almost as closely as he was. And her idea had merit. The last time the Bit had been out on a “date” alone, her date had ended with her staking the bloke before the end of the night.

He scanned the rest of the dance floor, looking for potential threats. He didn’t feel the signature of any other vampires in the club, but that didn’t mean trouble couldn’t come from other sources. As his eyes passed over the room, he noticed Red and Tara were not looking as happy as they had earlier. He couldn’t make out the exact words between them, but he got enough to gather that Red was making another pitch to Tara about why he couldn’t be trusted.

He sighed. He’d already spent a long time trying to prove he was one of the team, that he could be trusted. Hell, he even had official approval from a higher power, and still it wasn’t enough to convince some people. Red and Harris, in particular. He thought Giles might be coming around, slowly, and the new watcher seemed to be a bit of alright. But he was beginning to think the other two original members of the Scoobies were a lost cause when it came to giving him the benefit of the doubt.

The witches were leaving the dance floor now and walking back to the table. From the look on their faces, very little had been settled. He could sense a blow up in their near future. He just hoped it didn’t end up making things harder on the Slayer.
Buffy didn’t seem to notice the pending storm on her friends’ faces. “All danced out?” She asked. Willow replied, sullenly, “I guess so.” Tara just looked away.

“Would you guys mind keeping an eye on Dawn while we go patrol? And taking her home, if we aren’t back by eleven?” Buffy pressed on.

“Sure, Buffy, we can do that,” Tara answered, shooting a meaningful look at Willow, who had been about to open her mouth.

“Sure,” Willow echoed. “Whatever you need.”

Spike wanted to get away from the tension at the table and told Buffy, “I’ll go let the Bit know the plan and meet you out front, Slayer.” He walked off into the crowd toward Dawn before Buffy could answer.

He tapped Dawn’s date on the shoulder and said, “Why don’t you go get the girl a drink, she looks thirsty.”

The boy seemed to want to argue until Dawn said, “Please, Mark? A Diet Coke? I’ll meet you back at the table with Janice.”

“You sure you’re okay with him?” Mark looked suspiciously at Spike, who returned his stare blandly.

“Positive, I promise.” Dawn smiled sweetly at her date before he shrugged and wandered off in the direction of the bar.

Spike watched him walk away, then turned to Dawn and said, “Big sis and I are heading out to patrol. You’ll be okay here with your friends and the witches ‘til it’s time to go home?”

“Sure, no prob.” She quickly changed the subject. “What do you think about Mark? Isn’t he amazing? He’s such a great dancer, too. I feel like a klutz next to him, but he’s really nice about it when I step on his toes and everything…”

“Breathe, Bit.” Spike interrupted. “Yeah, suppose he’s alright. Least this one has a pulse. You be careful with him though. Teenage boys aren’t exactly known for their self control. You remember what I told you to do if one of them gets fresh with you?”

“Yeah, yeah. Knees and thumbs. Groin and eyes. Trust me—gross—but I got it.”

“Alright, then. Have fun and we’ll see you back at the house.”

“Bye, Spike,” she called as she bounced her way back to the table where Mark was just joining Janice with their drinks.

Spike shook his head, turned and walked towards the exit. He wasn’t paying close attention to where he was going and before he could step away, he ran into a couple standing in the middle of the aisle, talking.

“Ow!” The woman called out as she fell to the floor, her four-inch heels not helping her balance.

“Yo, asshole! Watch where you’re walking!” Her date added as he bent down to help her up.

“Sorry,” Spike said. Then gave them a second look and a discreet sniff. Humans, both of them. His mind went back to the kiss on the cheek Joyce had given him and the unusual feeling in his head at
the time. His heart filled with trepidation. He made sure to ‘bump’ into another guy on his way out the door.

It was official. The chip was history.

**Restfield Cemetery**

Buffy thought Spike seemed unusually quiet on the walk to Restfield, the first cemetery on their docket for the night. But she was too caught up in her own thoughts at the time to ask him why he was so uncharacteristically moody.

Going over everything her mother and Spike had revealed about Angel left her deeply conflicted. She clearly remembered the overwhelming love and respect she had for Angel when he was still in Sunnydale, but the time apart, and her own growing up, had given her a sense of perspective on her feelings. She could now see his actions as they truly were: meant to seduce and manipulate the feelings of a naïve, teenage girl.

It was actually Dawn that had opened her eyes. Not intentionally, but as Buffy considered her sister’s exuberance for her date tonight, she realized Dawn was nearly the same age she’d been when Angel had supposedly fallen in love with her. The comparison was eye opening. The thought of an older man, let alone a 200 plus year old vampire, professing feelings for her baby sister made her sick to her stomach. She didn’t want to think of the word pedophile in relation to Angel, but it was hard not to make that connection.

She knew now that her own feelings were far from the everlasting, soulmate, true love she had thought they were at the time. But, what did that leave? Spike was right when he told them they’d never be friends. Her thoughts were muddled and she was more than ready to ‘Gone With the Wind’ them for the time being.

She focused her attention on Spike and realized he was just as deep in his own thoughts.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, Spike? You’ve been awfully quiet tonight,” she asked.

“Got to tell you something and I’m not sure how you’re going to react. But it’s not something I can keep to myself. Not if I want all of you to be able to trust me.”

“O-Kay…” she said. “Is it something bad?”

“Guess that depends on your point of view,” he said, chagrined. “I want you to know, it doesn’t make a difference. I’m not going to do anything about it. I only found out earlier tonight by accident. I didn’t go looking for it.”

“Whoa! Wait! Let’s start with whatever it is you’re talking about.”

“When we were at the Bronze tonight, I bumped into a couple different people,” he started.

“And…” Buffy didn’t see where this was going.

“And… Normally, those bumps would’ve caused my chip to fire. This time, I got nothing. I even deliberately bumped into this third bloke on the way out the door and zilch. When your mother gave me that kiss on the cheek the other night I felt something weird go on in my noggin. I think she might have removed or disabled the chip somehow.”

He looked earnestly at her. “You need to know that this makes no difference to me. I’m not about to
go out snacking on the populace or anything else that I would have done a couple of years ago. I’ve changed. I know it’s hard to believe and I don’t expect you and the rest of your lot to believe that, but I have. I wanna be a better man. I wanna justify the faith your mom and the Powers that like to bugger you have shown in me. So…I figured I needed to tell you right away. Let you decide whether you need to stake me or not.”

He had drifted off toward the end of his speech, and now Buffy saw him just standing there with his head down—like a prisoner waiting for his execution. She couldn’t deny that the thought that he was now chipless gave her pause. She thought back on all the damage and mayhem he had caused pre-chip, but realized it was never quite as bad as they had made it out to be. Yes, he had tried to kill her—multiple times—but, in all fairness, she was trying to kill him too. He kidnapped Willow and Xander—but never actually hurt them, and eventually even led her and Angel to them. The thing that bothered her most wasn’t the lame schemes he came up with, it was the nightly feeding and killing. So that’s what she addressed with him.

“So…no more chip, huh?” She looked at him thoughtfully. “Every time I’ve asked for your promise in the past, you’ve kept it. So, I want you to think really carefully right now and not make one you won’t be able to keep. Can you really, truly promise me you won’t feed on or hurt humans now that you don’t have the chip?”

Spike took her request seriously and didn’t automatically blurt out a ‘yes, of course’. “Feeding, yes, no problem. I’ve gone this long on the pig, continuing with it isn’t a problem when you know how to spice it up. Hurting humans…I just can’t make a blanket promise like that. If it’s a matter of protecting you, or Bit, or even someone else, I may have to hurt someone. Who knows, I may get a vision from Anya showing humans attacking an innocent. I’d have to act in that case. I can promise not to hurt anyone for anything other than self defense or defense of another. Can you live with that?”

“I think that’s fair. I can’t exactly ask you to live up to a standard I’m not willing to myself. And those nerds the other night pushed me to my limit!” She smiled and bumped shoulders with him. “How about we move on? I don’t see any fledglings rising or vamps attacking here tonight.”

“So sounds good to me.” After a minute, he asked slyly, “So where does Bit’s new beau fall on the hurting humans scale?”

Buffy laughed and punched him in the arm. “Right now, he’s off limits. But ask me again when he breaks her heart, and I might change my mind.”

Spike chuckled and fell into step beside her, neither of them noticing the shadow that had just started carefully stalking them from a distance.

**Crawford Street Mansion**

Angel threw a candle from an end table against the wall in a fit of rage. Nothing had gone the way he intended it to that night. First, he had to deal with Giles and that psychotic girlfriend of Xander’s treating him like he was the crazy one.

By the time Giles had bothered to direct him to the Bronze, when he’d gotten there, they had already left. Luckily their scent was still strong enough to follow, so he had finally caught up with them at Restfield, only to see them practically walking hand in hand. They were smiling little smiles at each other and when they finally did find a fledgling to dust, they moved like they’d been fighting together for years.

Angel could tell he wouldn’t be able to convince Buffy Spike was the threat and take him out while
they were together. He’d have to wait for a time when he could get Spike alone. He’d planned to follow him back to whatever underground lair he’d been crashing in, but then the two of them walked back to Revello and Spike never came back out. Angel had waited until almost sunrise with no sign of his quarry. He’d eventually made his way back to Crawford with minutes to spare. The only good thing was that, after all the lights had gone out, he’d climbed the tree outside Buffy’s bedroom window. Wherever Spike was sleeping, it wasn’t with her. Yet. He’d been able to watch her sleep again, like the old days, for nearly an hour before he had to leave.

As he sat with a glass of whiskey going over the night’s events, he realized a more detailed plan would be needed if he wanted to break the hold Spike had over Buffy and most of the other Scoobies.

For now, though, he needed to rest. Tomorrow he would begin putting his plans into motion.

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